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## D. Patrick Jones: Spokane isn't quite booming anymore, but still needs to prepare for growth

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**D. Patrick Jones**

By D. Patrick Jones

“Boomtown Spokane”? Have you heard that expression over the past couple years? In light of recent population estimates from Washington’s Office of Financial Management OFM we may want to reconsider – at least for now. The county population didn’t grow that much between this and last year. OFM recently put the increase at 3,900.

In the prior comparison period, 2022 vs. 2021, the gain was at least twice that, at 8,600. That represented a 1.6% increase, handily beating the state average. For 2023 vs. 2022, the relationship reversed: Spokane County grew considerably slower than Washington.

What happened? It wasn’t a due to a plunge in births. They declined less than 100. Nor was it a surge in deaths. They actually fell by about 1,500 from the prior two (pandemic) years. The deceleration had everything to do with people moving to the county. Net migrants dipped from about 8,700 over the 2022-21 period to approximately 3,500.

For years, net in-migration has been the motor propelling population growth in the Inland Northwest. It’s difficult to know the specific reasons behind Spokane’s recent slowdown in attracting new residents. Perhaps rising mortgage rates have tied down would-be Spokaneites to their current homes – a widely reported phenomenon in the national housing market. Yet, recent net in-migration throughout Eastern Washington has been varied. It has fallen in the greater Wenatchee area and in Yakima County, but increased substantially in the Tri-Cities and Grant County.

Perhaps recent job creation – typically a key reason for in-migration – has dipped after two strong comparison years here. Due to data lags, we won’t know for a few more months. In any case, fewer people found their way to Spokane County.

To those who have touted “boomtown Spokane,” there are two further facts to confront. First, recent growth rates peaked in 2018, not 2022. Nearly 9,500 people moved, on a net basis, to the county between 2017 and 2018. In other words, COVID-19 did not let loose an unprecedented flood of refugees from larger metro areas to Spokane beyond pre-pandemic years.

Second, look east if we want to observe a boomtown. Kootenai County’s population growth has been on tear for years, with no signs of abating. No estimates are available for 2023, but consider the pandemic period, 2020-22. The county’s population surged by about 10,000, for a cumulative rate of over 6%. In contrast, Spokane County’s population grew by cumulative rate of 2.1%.

How large was Kootenai County’s surge in a national context? At the very top of all 386 metro areas in the country. The only metro outpacing the county in the period between 2019 and 2021 was St. George, Utah.

Within Spokane County, there were boom “townlets” for sure. Over the 2020-23 period, Deer Park’s population swelled a cumulative 12%, with Liberty Lake’s rate close behind, at 10%. Contrast that to the county’s overall cumulative growth of 2.8%. Mathematically, growth had to be lower in other cities of the county. In fact, the city of Spokane grew by a mere cumulative 1.6%.

What do recent population trends augur for the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene area's future? Take the latter first. If the growth rate of Kootenai County over the past dozen years were to continue, it can expect 222,000 within its borders by 2030 and 280,000 by 2040. That's quite a change from the county's count at the turn of the century – a little more than 100,000!

OFM recently provided an outlook for Spokane County over the same period. It assumed an annual growth rate of about one third of the recent Kootenai experience. The result of its "middle" outlook for Spokane: 587,000 expected residents in 2030 and 631,000 in 2040.

Imagine then, the population of the combined, four-county Spokane-Spokane Valley-Coeur d'Alene metro area in 2040. The two smaller counties in the official metro are Pend Oreille and Stevens. OFM anticipates that these two will be home to about 70,000 by then. Add in the outlooks for the two larger counties, and the total is 980,000. If Spokane County were to grow only slightly faster than OFM's assumptions, the million mark is easily breached.

A million human beings living on the land where a bit fewer than 800,000 were present last year. That prospect will be here sooner than we think. I hope our region will be ready.

*D. Patrick Jones, of Spokane, is executive director for the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis at Eastern Washington University.*

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