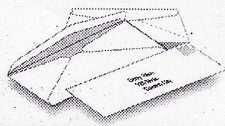


Letters to the Editor

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Opinions

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County of today poised where city once was

It's been nearly a year since renowned urban affairs scholar George Wendel died.

You might recall Wendel as an occasional political commentator on local media outlets during election time. A longtime professor at St. Louis University, Wendel possessed nearly a half century of knowledge and experience dealing with the St. Louis area, and his analysis of local trends was usually right on the money.

He was an old academic mentor and friend of mine, and I've been recalling lately the many times he used to say how much St. Louis County today was like the city of St. Louis 50 years earlier.

On a number of levels, Wendel was right, and new data from the U.S. Census bear it out.

But wait, you say, how can that be? Certainly the county of today doesn't look like the city a half century ago. Geographically, the county is eight times larger than the city, its housing is more generously spread out, and its twisting subdivisions don't resemble the city's often cramped square block layout in the least.

That's true. Another clear difference is political organization, with the city governed under a common charter and

the county subdivided into more than 90 cities and townships with disparities in everything from zoning codes to the number of pets you can own.

Despite these differences, there are a number of striking similarities between the city of yesterday and the county of today. In 1950, the city's population reached its all time peak of 856,796, nearly two and a half times the 348,189 in 2000. Only a few pockets of undeveloped land remained in the city at mid-century (such as parts of the St. Louis Hills area) and those were quickly filling up.

Today the county finds itself in a similar position, with a population that appears to be approaching a peak at 1,016,000 inhabitants, a modest 2.2 percent gain over the 1990 figure. Meanwhile, developers are rushing to fill in remaining pockets of land that are either not in a flood plain or part of the "untouchable" Forest 44 area.

In 1950, the bulk of the city's housing stock was between 25 and 50 or more years old, a period in the life cycle of a home which often calls for major repairs and renovation. Today the majority of those living in St. Louis County, especially within the I-270 ring, also live in housing at least 20 years old, if not upwards of 50 and 60.

It's no surprise that some county municipalities are following the city's lead in initiating home occupancy permit laws, designed to target presumably neglectful home owners.

Just as St. Louis had to contend with urban decay and population loss in residential areas near downtown and the city's central core at mid-century (anyone recall Mill Creek Valley?), today many of the county's older inner-ring suburbs are showing their age and losing population.

In the past decade communities within three miles of the city, including Lemay, Affton, Maplewood, Richmond Heights, Clayton (yes, Clayton), and University City, among others, lost a combined population of nearly 11,000 people.

Just as important, however, is where people are going. In 1950 St. Louis County's newly developed suburbs, like Crestwood and St. Ann, were already luring young families away from the city with promises of wide open spaces free from the congestion and the deterioration of aging homes and infrastructure. Today the population in these communities is either flat or shrinking, while high growth communities in the county like Chesterfield and Wildwood have helped off-

set population losses in the inner ring.

But today, booming communities in adjacent counties are the real story, enticing prospective home buyers with newer, larger housing that is more generously spread out. During the past decade, St. Charles, Franklin and Jefferson counties grew by more than 110,000 people. Where do you think most of those folks came from?

What we began to identify 50 years ago as the beginnings of massive flight from the city may now be starting to manifest itself in the county.

For many years planners, public officials, and academics have tried in vain to stem the tide of flight from the city. Organizations such as Metropolis have recently played an active role in creating the beginnings of a viable "back to the city" movement.

While such efforts are to be praised, if trends in population, housing, and demographic mobility are any indication, it may not long before we start seeing a new kind of marketing slogan: "Come back home, to St. Louis County."

Mike Tsichlis is a writer with interests in urban affairs, local history and pop-culture. He lives in Crestwood.