

“Jefferson Parish: Teetering on the Brink of Decline” [6]

“Today’s winners become tomorrow’s losers.” That’s the Iron Law of Urban Sprawl.

For decades Jefferson Parish was the big winner in the sprawl game. Now, in the 1990s, “tomorrow” has arrived for Jefferson Parish. St. Tammany Parish and, to a lesser degree, St. Charles Parish are the new winners. Jefferson Parish has become a loser.

Evidence of Jefferson Parish’s relative decline is everywhere for those willing to look. The Census Bureau estimates that, from 1990 through 1997, Jefferson Parish’s population increased less than 1%. By contrast, St. Charles’s population climbed by 12% and St. Tammany’s population boomed by 28%.

On Table 5 (previous page) we saw that during the 1990s – a period of great prosperity nationally – Jefferson Parish’s inflation-adjusted property wealth inched upward only 1% while St. Tammany and St. Charles’s property wealth exploded by 33% and 55%, respectively.

Table 6 offers another perspective on Jefferson Parish’s economic decline. It traces how average household income has changed as a percentage of the region’s average household income. In 1970, average household income in

Jefferson Parish as a whole was 21% above the regional average. By 1980, the parish-wide average had slipped to 13% above the regional average; by 1990, it had slid further to only 6% above the regional average. By the 2000 census, I predict that average household income in Jefferson Parish will be at or below the regional average.

Meanwhile, during the 1970s and 1980s, average household income in St. Charles rose to 8% above the regional average. And St. Tammany Parish has replaced Jefferson Parish as the community of choice for many higher-income households. From 1970 to 1990 average household incomes in St. Tammany rose from just 2% above the regional average to 19% above.

More ominous for Jefferson Parish than its parish-wide average is the fact that, during the 1980s, average income levels in every community in the parish – from Timberlane on the high end to Westwego on the low end – stagnated or lost ground relative to regional averages.

A very rough proxy for household income trends for the 1990s can be seen in recent trends in Jefferson Parish's public school enrollments. Table 7 lists the percent of low-income children in each public elementary school in Jefferson Parish for 1994 and 1998. Despite the region's near-record low unemployment, the percentage of low income children in the school district's elementary schools

has barely declined from 75.3% to 72.7% – an extraordinarily high level for a supposedly “suburban” school district. (In 1998 the New Orleans elementary schools had 81% low-income students.)

Admittedly, public school enrollments are an imperfect indicator of neighborhood income trends, particularly in the New Orleans area. In the 1990 census, only two-thirds of all of Jefferson Parish’s school age children (and only 55% of white school age children) attended public schools. That was the lowest proportion of the six parishes – and far below the 85-90% levels typical of most metropolitan areas. Since only 20% of Jefferson Parish’s children were poor, but around 70% of public school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches in 1990, thousands of middle-class students in Jefferson Parish were enrolled in private or parochial schools. Undoubtedly, some Jefferson Parish neighborhoods are better off economically than local public school enrollments suggest.

There are many reasons why household incomes in Jefferson Parish, an older suburb, are declining relative to the rest of the metro area. One is the natural aging of the community. Many Jefferson residents have reached retirement years, living on lower incomes than in previous decades. Formerly owner-occupied homes become rental properties. And many new households moving into Jefferson Parish are lower on the income scale than households in earlier decades.

As Table 8 shows, Jefferson Parish has experienced a dramatic increase in poverty-impacted neighborhoods (that is, census tracts with higher than 20% poverty rates). Between 1980 and 1990 the number of concentrated poverty tracts doubled from 16 to 32. Concentrated poverty creates “push” factors – higher crime rates, low school performance, slumping housing values, physical deterioration – that propel middle-class households out of the neighborhood.

Jefferson Parish has largely lost its capacity to compete successfully for younger, upwardly mobile, higher-income families. St. Tammany is the new Jefferson Parish. During the 1990s, 13,000 more people moved out of Jefferson Parish than moved in; meanwhile, 26,000 more people moved into St. Tammany Parish than moved out. Many were former Jefferson Parish residents.

Jefferson Parish cannot build its way out of decline through developing vacant land. According to UNO researchers, about 95% of Jefferson Parish’s buildable lands are already developed. Only 5,000 buildable acres on the West Bank are available for further development.

Thus, redevelopment is the key for Jefferson Parish, but that will be tough to achieve. Local neighborhood activists typically oppose new development initiatives, particularly anything proposing higher densities (almost a necessity for any investment that must recycle or clear away old buildings). Large scale

“brownfield” redevelopment will also not occur as long as it is easier and more profitable to sub-divide “greenfields” in St. Tammany, St. Charles, and St. John the Baptist parishes.

Thus, what happens *outside* Jefferson Parish will be more important to Jefferson Parish’s future than what is planned for *inside* the parish boundaries. More than the city of New Orleans itself, Jefferson Parish needs a strong, regional land use and transportation plan that can help re-direct market forces back into investing in Jefferson Parish.

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