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Planners: Projected population growth could impact Wisconsin

By REGAN FOSTER - rfoster@nwherald.com

WOODSTOCK – Continued population growth in McHenry and Lake counties only would mean more residents leaving Northeast Illinois for Southeast Wisconsin, a group of Wisconsin planning professionals said Thursday.

Residency projections for McHenry and Lake counties show that more than 1.2 million people could be calling the counties home by 2030, putting direct pressure on Kenosha and Walworth counties in Wisconsin.

Planning experts from those counties met with members of the McHenry County Regional Planning Commission on Thursday to talk about, among other things, the impact rapid growth here will have on the areas to the north.

“If that’s where 1 to 2 million people are going to grow, to me it’s your county and the county to the East, but what’s the spin off?” Kenosha County Planning and Development Director George Melcher said. “The people who are coming up are from your neck of the woods.

“Whether they’re coming from the county to the east or the south, that’s just degrees.”

Kenosha County’s population hit 162,001 people in 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That was up from 149,577 residents in 2000; and although Melcher did not have immediate numbers Thursday night, he said the population numbers were expected to climb as more Illinois residents move north.

In Walworth County, the population topped 101,000 in 2006, census bureau numbers show. There were 93,759 people who called the county home in 2000, according to the census bureau. Michael Cotter, Walworth County director and deputy corporation counsel for land use and resource management said his county still could hit 105,000 to 110,000 residents by 2010.

With that growth comes some familiar worries, including open space, ground water preservation and protection, and drafting a development design that makes sense, the directors agreed.

“[Ground water] is the white gold of the next 20 or 30 years,” Cotter said. “It’s so vitally important.”

And that just makes it more important that neighboring counties kept one another's needs and pressures in mind, Regional Planning Commission chairman Charles Eldredge said.

His board is attempting to create in two years a land use plan that can guide growth and development decisions in the county for the next 20 years. The county is currently operating off of its 2010 plan, a vision that Planning Director SuzAnne Ehardt pointed out Thursday is nearing its life expectancy.

In Wisconsin, meanwhile, all counties are attempting to update their long-term strategic growth plans by 2010 – a move mandated in 1999 by the state legislature.

McHenry County's plan commission, which formed last November in the wake of the failed 2020 plan, spent its first months meeting with different county stakeholders to get their input on how they would like to see the county grown. In recent weeks the group expanded its reach to get feedback from neighboring counties.

And that's been very helpful as the commission prepared to put pen to paper and draft suggestions, Eldredge said.

"We're getting a series of different perspectives," he said. "We do fit into a larger hole. We're part of a larger region."