

Texas Faces an Uncertain Future

By Bill Hobby

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It looks like a good year for Texas.

The economy is healthy, if not booming. We learned from our mistakes in the 1980's and pretty much got out of the oil business. Our new economy is diverse--semiconductors, software, biotechnology and aerospace

The state is growing, not as wildly as during the 1980's, but still at a rate about twice the national average.

Six of our metropolitan areas, more than any other state, made it into the top 27 fastest growing list for 1990-1994. Dallas lost its place as the nation's seventh largest city, but Plano is the fifth-fastest-growing big city in the country. Houston is still number four, and San Antonio is number 10.

A good year lies ahead, but the picture 20 years from now may not be bright if we take a longer look down the road. The trends are disturbing, maybe alarming.

Texas population expert Steve H. Murdock, director of the state data center at the Texas A&M University Department of Rural Sociology, has taken such a look. This is what he sees:

I. Texas' rate of growth is slowing. The state grew by 19.4 percent during the 1980's. The growth rate for the first half of the 1990's is 8.2 percent.

II. The population is aging. We're still the third youngest state in terms of median age, but Texas is hardly immune from the graying of the baby boomers.

III. The minority population is increasing. By 2005, the population will be more than half minority. Texas now has the second largest Hispanic population, the third largest African-American population and the fourth largest Asian population.

IV. The composition of households is changing. We're still building three-bedroom houses, but the ideal American family is disappearing. Only about 26 percent of households consist of Mom, Pop and two kids.

What does this mean? Texas as a state will be poorer and less able to meet the demands of the next century if the trend lines are not interrupted.

Texas has never been a wealthy state. In 1989, only California had more people living below the poverty line. We rank first in number of persons over 65 living in poverty.

People who are black, Hispanic, elderly and/or single heads of households are more apt to be below the poverty line. About 31 percent of blacks and 33 percent of Hispanics live in poverty, compared to 14 percent of white persons. About 24 percent of persons over 75, regardless of race, are below the poverty line. Only 10 percent of Texas' two-parent families fall below the poverty level, compared to 35 percent of families headed by a single female parent.

Follow the trend lines and you will see a state of old Anglos being taken care of by young minorities. The younger minority citizens, Murdock says, will be the caregivers in nursing homes and hospitals, and they will be the taxpayers who support Medicare and Medicaid.

Follow the trend lines and you will see an unskilled, uneducated labor force. A recent study of 250 North Texas manufacturers showed their biggest concern is lack of adequate workforce skills. Follow the trend lines, and you will see an even larger prison population and growing welfare rolls. You will see a much greater gap between the have's and the have-not's.

But we Texans haven't been much at meekly accepting our fate. If we were, Houston wouldn't be the nation's second largest seaport and many of us would still be gazing at idle oil rigs. We can change the future.

The best answer we have is education. Short of winning the lottery, it's still the best way we know to improve median income.

That means making some changes. We in education aren't yet meeting the challenge of our changing population. We are not doing a very good job of preparing those from low-income, minority and single-parent families for the high-paying jobs.

As a state, we have underinvested in education and we are underproducing educated people. Texas ranks 39th in percentage of high school graduates and 33rd in percentage of college graduates. We in higher education must change the way we do business. We must develop more partnerships with public schools, sharing our know-how. We must increase access and improve retention rates. We must make our product more available to those who must learn or retool while they work. That means distance learning technology as well as more classes convenient to students.

We have no time to waste. As Steve Murdock says, if we are going to fix what needs fixing in Texas, we better do it soon. As our population ages, our median income will decline. Older citizens on fixed incomes are not usually willing to make major investments.

We can do it. We built the Ship Channel.