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Vibrant Cities Find One Thing Missing: Children

By TIMOTHY EGAN

PORTLAND, Ore. - The Pearl District in the heart of this perpetually self-improving city seems to have everything in new urban design and comfort, from the Whole Foods store where fresh-buffed bell peppers are displayed like runway models to the converted lofts that face sidewalk gardens.

Everything except children.

Crime is down. New homes and businesses are sprouting everywhere. But in what may be Portland's trendiest and fastest-growing neighborhood, the number of school-age children grew by only three between the census counts in 1990 and 2000, according to demographers at Portland State University.

"The neighborhood would love to have more kids, that's probably the top of our wish list," said Joan Pendergast of the Pearl Neighborhood Association. "We don't want to be a one-dimensional place."

It is a problem unlike the urban woes of cities like Detroit and Baltimore, where families have fled decaying neighborhoods, business areas and schools. Portland is one of the nation's top draws for the kind of educated, self-starting urbanites that midsize cities are competing to attract. But as these cities are remodeled to match the tastes of people living well in neighborhoods that were nearly abandoned a generation ago, they are struggling to hold on to enough children to keep schools running and parks alive with young voices.

San Francisco, where the median house price is now about $700,000, had the lowest percentage of people under 18 of any large city in the nation, 14.5 percent, compared with 25.7 percent nationwide, the 2000 census reported. Seattle, where there are more dogs than children, was a close second. Boston, Honolulu, Portland, Miami, Denver, Minneapolis, Austin and Atlanta, all considered, healthy, vibrant urban areas, were not far behind. The problem is not just that American women are having fewer children, reflected in the lowest birth rate ever recorded in the country.

Officials say that the very things that attract people who revitalize a city - dense vertical housing, fashionable restaurants and shops and mass transit that makes a car unnecessary - are driving out children by making the neighborhoods too expensive for young families.

Other cities have tried and failed to curb family flight. In Portland, the new mayor, Tom Potter, says demography does not have to be destiny. He has dedicated his term to trying to keep children in the city.

Every child a city loses, on average, can mean a loss of about $5,000 for the school district, officials say. Children also create a constituency for parks, trails and public safety improvements, Mr. Potter said, and their parents tend to favor upgrading those amenities through higher taxes. He has been bringing children in to speak to the City Council and has pushed for incentives for affordable housing with enough bedrooms to accommodate bigger families.

A former police chief who helped pioneer community patrolling, Mayor Potter has 14 grandchildren and says a city's health should be measured by its youngest citizens. "We can't let Portland become a retirement city or a city without neighborhood schools," he said.

New York and Los Angeles, because of their large immigrant populations, have maintained their base of children, but demographers, pointing to falling birth rates among Latinos and other ethnic groups, say the nation's biggest cities may soon follow the others.

In Portland, the trends are not in Mayor Potter's favor. From 1990 to 2003 the city added more than 90,000 people, growing to an estimated 529,121 residents, but Portland is now educating the fewest students in more than 80 years.

The problem is not that children are leaving for private schools, officials said. It is that new people attracted to the city tend to have higher incomes, having already raised a family; are retiring; or are single and unlikely to have children.

After interviewing 300 parents who had left the city, researchers at Portland State found that high housing costs and a desire for space were the top reasons.

Tina Ray lived in Portland for 12 years before moving to Gresham, where her 9-year-old daughter attends school. Her family left for a bigger house and more space, she said. "It's kid friendly, with a great sense of community, and lots of sports leagues," she said.

Many Portland families are relocating to the newest edge suburbs, where housing prices are cheapest, including Clark County across the Columbia River in Washington, Portland State demographers say.

After a drop of 10,000 students in the last decade, Portland officials called in March for the closing of six schools, prompting cries of grief from three generations of adults who say that nothing takes the heart out of a neighborhood like a shuttered school.

The pool of school-age children is shrinking so fast that Portland will have to close the equivalent of three or four elementary schools a year over the next decade, according to

school district projections.

"I don't think we're going to become a nearly childless city like San Francisco, but the age structure is really changing," said Barry Edmonston, an urban studies professor at Portland State, who does demographic projections for the school district. "People are not turning over the houses like they used to. They're aging in place, at the same time that prices are really going up, making it hard for young families to move into the city."

Nationally, the birthrate has been dropping while the overall population is aging as life expectancy increases. The problem is not just in cities. New figures released this month showed North Dakota losing more children than any other state.

Scottsdale, Ariz., a fast-growing Phoenix suburb, lost 571 students last year. San Jose closed three schools last year and expects to close three more soon.

Between 2003 and 2004, only six states had an increase in their elementary school population, the census bureau reported in March.

In that sense, the United States is following Europe and the rest of the industrial world, where birthrates now rarely exceed the rate needed to replace the population.

"If you took immigrants out of the equation, the United States would be like the rest of Europe," said Phillip Longman, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a public policy research organization in Washington. He is the author of "The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birth Rates Threaten World Prosperity and What To Do About It."

Mr. Longman said a decline in children not only takes away "human capital" needed to sustain an aging population, but "having fewer children really diminishes the quality of life in a city."

Most city leaders seem to agree. Even in San Francisco, where officials are preparing for another round of school closings amid a projected decline of 4,000 students in the next five years, city officials are aggressively marketing the city and its schools to young families.

But what they cannot do, especially after the failure last year of a ballot measure sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce to encourage affordable housing, is bring housing prices down.

"It's a real challenge trying to raise a kid in San Francisco," said Jim Armstrong, a father of two who is active in Little League in the city and rents a home. "It takes a degree of fortitude for a parent to stay with the city."

Other cities that have tried to reverse the family outflow have had mixed success. As mayor of Seattle for 12 years, until 1990, Charles Royer started an initiative called KidsPlace, which has been widely copied by other cities. It included marketing the city's

neighborhoods to young families, building a small mix of affordable housing, and zoning and policing changes to make urban parks more child-friendly.

Mr. Royer said he was ridiculed for signs placed around town proclaiming "Seattle is a KidsPlace" and took criticism from social service agencies who thought bringing in more families would only place more demands on the limited money they had. Mr. Royer said he was bucking historic changes, and Seattle now has some of the nation's highest-priced real estate and its lowest percentage of children.

"I said things like, 'We don't want to be like San Francisco,' but in the end, I don't think we were terribly effective at stemming that tide," Mr. Royer said. "It's not so much a social problem as it is a demographic and financial problem."

Here in Portland, the city is bemoaning the demographic cycle as it unfolds before their eyes. On the day of the announcement to close Kenton Elementary School, which has anchored a north Portland neighborhood for 91 years, some parents and residents reacted as if there had been a death in the family.

"I feel heartbroken," said Mary Krogh, who had planned to enroll her 4-year-old son, Chase, in the school. "It's just a terrible loss."

The school and a tightknit community were among the things that attracted Ms. Krogh and her husband to the neighborhood seven years ago, she said.

But now the school will be shuttered, and improvements from Portland's beloved light rail line have contributed to rising real estate prices, defeating the broad goals of the mayor's effort to bring and keep young families in the city.

"Portland is a great city that attracts a lot of educated people," she said. "But the real estate is becoming outrageously expensive. And then you get wealthy singles and wealthy retirees. What's missing are kids. And that feels really sterile to me."