

By Jim Paxton, The Paducah Sun

Paducah's continuing loss of population is a painful subject. When Sun Executive Editor Steve Wilson first started raising the issue in columns last year, we were surprised by the intensity of the reactions from local officials past and present. Some accused Wilson of being a carpetbagger who was just seeking to accentuate the negative.

But it is the role of community newspapers to provoke discussion, sometimes on topics that are not to everyone's liking but important nonetheless. The local population trend is such a subject.

Paducah not that long ago was the state's fourth-largest city. In 1950, the city was home to 32,828 people. The boom that accompanied construction of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant pushed the population to 60,000 in August of 1953 and it still stood at 47,350 in 1956.

So it is noteworthy and troubling that the city's population now has dropped below 25,000 or almost 8,000 below where it stood before the atomic boom. New 2014 population estimates released by the U.S. Census Bureau last week showed Paducah's population at 24,978, a decline of nine people from the year before. It is the first time since 1920 the city's population has measured below 25,000. And it's not just a case of people in the city moving to growth areas of McCracken County. Countywide population dropped from 65,380 in 2013 to 65,316 in 2014, according to Census data. That means both city and county areas lost population.

The trend is at odds with what was observed with many of Kentucky's larger cities. Bowling Green, Elizabethtown, Henderson and Owensboro all posted gains in 2014, as did Mayfield and Murray.

In the end of course, population trends are all about jobs. Some of the Kentucky cities showing growth - Elizabethtown and Bowling Green, for example - have benefited for years from being on the hot I-65 corridor between Louisville and Nashville. It doesn't hurt to have auto plants in close proximity either. Elizabethtown is home to a number of suppliers to Toyota's plant near Lexington, and Bowling Green is home to a Corvette production plant.

Paducah on the flip side is dealing with the loss of one of its biggest employers with the phase-out of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant over the past year. There was also a population impact from the closure years earlier of the Continental Tire plant in Mayfield. Collectively those two plants employed more than 4,000 people in their heyday, many of whom resided in Paducah.

Local officials are looking for insight into ways to address the population problem. Mayor Gayle Kaler says her young professionals group will make a presentation to the city commission next month on how to make the city more attractive for millennials, for instance.

We think that's time well spent, but we also think the lesson of the recent past for Paducah is the importance of developing a more diversified economy. The days of the mega-plant are all but gone except for the fortunate few, and we think the city's sights should continue to be on recruiting smaller employers with growth potential that are perhaps overlooked in the big-city recruiting wars.

We had a recent spate of such activity with the rapid-fire location in the community of companies like Whitehall Industries, Southern Coal Handling, Genova Products and Teletech. Several of those companies brought new employment in the 50- to 150-jobs range with potential for growth and we think a continued seeding of that genre of employer could produce good long-term gains.

Paducah's real challenge, we think, is to recreate the job base to fit the realities of our location and the times. If we can be successful with that, population growth will naturally follow.