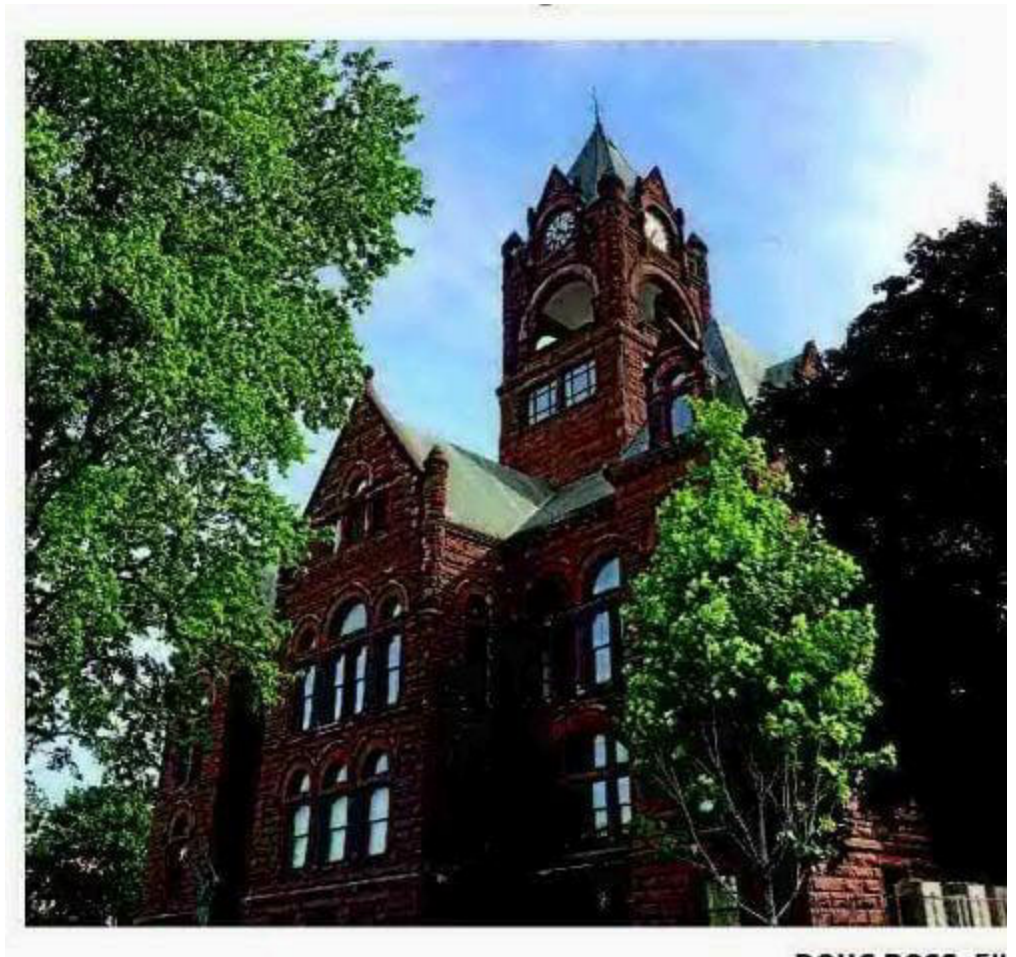


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MC eyes growth as LaPorte County shrinks

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The LaPorte County Courthouse is shown.

DOUG ROSS, FILE, THE TIMES

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LaPorte County suffered the most significant population drop in Indiana over the last five years, ranking last numerically among Indiana's 92 counties, but several new construction projects have officials optimistic that the trend will turn around soon.

The county on the south shore of Lake Michigan, bordering Southwest Michigan, has been declining in population for the last five years, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

LaPorte County's population has fallen by an estimated 0.8%, or 939 residents, since 2020, according to the Census Bureau. It lost more residents than any other county over that time period and had the seventh highest population drop by percentage. With 111,348 residents, it ranks 15th in the state in population. Last year, LaPorte County's population fell by 0.2% or about 238 residents, according to the Census Bureau. In 2024, it had the fourth highest population drop in the state numerically and the 10th highest decline percentage-wise.

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While LaPorte County's population has been gradually declining in recent years, its population has been generally stable across a longer period of time, Northwest Indiana Realtors Association CEO Pete Novak said.

"LaPorte County has historically seen very slow and moderate growth in population since the 1980s," Novak said. "According to the Census, this trend continued between 2010 and 2022, with LaPorte County growing by 0.2% during that time. It then showed a very minor decrease in population for 2023, which was -0.6%."

The county's population has barely budged over the last half-century. LaPorte County had about 108,000 people in 1980 and is home to about 112,000 people today.

"I'm not sure how much I read into this, as LaPorte County has had many years of slightly negative growth over the past four decades as well as many years of slightly positive growth," Novak said. "It hasn't seen any significant amount of population growth since the 1980s."

Part of the issue is that LaPorte County had benefited from migration out of Lake County but it no longer draws as many Lake County residents as it used to, Indiana University Northwest Associate Professor of Economics Micah Pollak said.

"With Lake County retaining population more effectively, this has created new challenges for other counties in the region," Pollak said. "With fewer residents leaving Lake County to move east, the population growth for Porter and LaPorte has slowed. In this last year, LaPorte county had the 4th largest population decline in the state."

But LaPorte County is positioned to start to grow again, due in part to the South Shore Line Double Track project shortening commutes to Chicago.

"These counties are now in a position of needing to find new and innovative ways of attracting and retaining population," Pollak said. "The double tracking of the South Shore Line, as well as expansion of new housing projects in downtown Michigan City, are important investments which will pay dividends in economic growth in the future."

Following the double tracking, which increases service frequency and reduces commute times to Chicago, downtown Michigan City has seen a flurry of housing development proposals, including 11th and Franklin, SoLa, Singing Sands and Fifth

and Pine.

The projects will collectively add thousands of new apartments and condos as Michigan City positions itself more as a lakefront resort community like neighboring New Buffalo in Southwest Michigan.

"You're going to start seeing population growth in LaPorte with the finishing of the double track," said Jennifer Parham, the CEO and owner of Lighthouse Realty.

"Michigan City is up and coming. The downtown area is getting new businesses and people who want to live in Michigan City and take the train to Chicago. It's going to draw people from Illinois and from across Northwest Indiana. It most definitely changes the perception of Michigan City."

Massive new projects in nearby New Carlisle, like an \$11 billion Amazon data center, will help drive demand for housing in LaPorte County, Parham said.

"You're going to see an increase coming to Michigan City in the next three to five years," she said. "There are more projects coming together. They're accentuating proximity to the lake. The infrastructure is coming up. You're seeing a growth in vacation homes."

The downtown housing developments coming to Michigan City could help draw and retain more young people, Novak said.

"With respect to housing developments in general, it's my opinion that the more diversified our housing stock is in Northwest Indiana, the better chance we have to attract and retain residents," he said. "For example, we lose many of our older residents to warmer climates. The more maintenance-free developments we have available to older residents, the better chance we have to entice them to stay here. The same could be true for attracting younger residents. The more affordable housing units we have that offer different lifestyles, the more likely we are to get young people to stay or move to Northwest Indiana."

Michigan City's population has been stagnant, but the new housing developments could bring 5,000 to 8,000 new residents in coming years, Mayor Angie Nelson Deutch said.

"Population is important for all of LaPorte County," Nelson Deutch said. "We want density in the downtown area so that businesses can thrive and downtown can sustain a grocery store. It also allows us to have more housing in other parts of the city, which is just as important. We need to build new neighborhoods and build up existing neighborhoods with infill housing. It's really like a domino effect, the housing piece of it."

Clarence Hulse, executive director of the Economic Development Corporation of Michigan City, Indiana, said it was crucial for Michigan City to bring in new residents to sustain the county's economic vitality.

"Talent drives business," Hulse said. "That's true nationally, statewide, regionally and locally. People want to live in cities. We have seen that and that's why we're trying to change our city and improve our city. People are leaving the county, but Michigan City is growing. The county numbers are going down, but the city numbers are going up. We're pushing for more housing with amenities and shops on the first floor where you can access services. We are doing a lot to attract people to our city."



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