

Our View: Valley needs to plan for its next half a million people

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Half a million people.

Take a deep breath. Let it sink in. Then start thinking about the next half million.

Ada and Canyon counties have a combined population of 511,000, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates released Thursday. Some milestones are cause to celebrate. Some are calls to action. This one combines a serving of the former with a plateful of the latter.

Sitting No. 18 on the Census Bureau's list of fastest-growing metropolitan areas has advantages. Growth attracts new people with fresh ideas and energy. Growth, when driven by and accompanied by good jobs, enables bright young people to pursue their careers at home, rather than taking their talents elsewhere.

But if growth continues at this pace, half a million may soon seem a quaint memory. Ada and Canyon counties grew by 9.9 percent from 2000 to 2003, the Census Bureau says. At that rate, the counties' population would more than double, reaching 1,087,000, by 2027. If half a million sounds daunting, think about a million in 20 years.

Job one for local officials and state legislators is not just to plan for growth, but to make their plans work. As The Idaho Statesman reported Sunday, the Treasure Valley has plenty of thick land use and transportation plans, but five factors have conspired against results. Leaders change. There's no money to make change happen. Plans have no teeth. Goals are vague. Strategies are based on bad numbers.

Elected leaders also need to think regionally. The Census Bureau views Ada and Canyon County as one metropolitan area; we must as well. Traffic, air quality, sprawl and open space issues have no regard for the county line.

For example, it's encouraging that Ada County and its six cities are working together on the Blueprint for Good Growth — a study to help determine where and when growth should occur countywide. Unfortunately, the plan doesn't include Canyon County. Development that occurs in Canyon County affects Ada County, and vice versa.

Thinking regionally also means making tough votes, and standing behind decisions that may be unpopular with local constituents but best for the Valley.

"Making that jump, regardless of the size, gets more into the character of the individual, and the vision of the individual," said Matt Stoll, executive director of the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, a regional planning association for Ada and Canyon counties.

Citizens also need to think broadly. In the Treasure Valley, local activism often means neighborhood involvement, triggered by a nearby road project or subdivision plan. There's nothing wrong with that involvement, as far as it goes. But all growth has an effect, perhaps incremental and subtle, on how your tax dollars are spent on schools or fire protection, how long your commute takes or how clean your air is.

"I acknowledge it's a challenge," said Jon Barrett, co-executive director of Idaho Smart Growth, "but I think it's important to point out to people it's not just your street, your neighborhood." After more than a decade of rapid growth, passing the half million mark was inevitable.

It's up to elected officials and ordinary citizens to make sure growth-related problems aren't also inevitable.