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Urban expert touts Texas' growth potential

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BY STEVE CAMPBELL

sfcampbell@star-telegram.com

Demographer, futurist and urban observer Joel Kotkin has a surprisingly upbeat view of America in coming decades as it adds 100 million more people.

Under Kotkin's forecast, Fort Worth and Texas are well positioned both economically and geographically to ride the demographic wave as America's population tops 400 million by 2050.

"My sense is that the country's economic center is moving back into the central point of the country. And within the central part of the country, the center of gravity has moved from Chicago to Fort Worth and Houston," said Kotkin, who will be the keynote speaker today at the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce's sold-out 130th annual meeting at the Worthington Renaissance Hotel.

The migration toward the nation's midsection is essentially pragmatic, driven by a low cost of living, affordable housing and job creation, Kotkin says.

"If you take a look at where growth is going to occur in the U.S. in the next 30 years, you have the Gulf Coast, the Southern manufacturing belt, the Great Plains and the intermountain West. They are very energy rich, and they tend to be less expensive than the coasts and they are culturally oriented toward economic growth," he said.

"Really, I think if you want to see what American cities are going to evolve into, probably the place to go is Texas," said Kotkin, whose annual analysis of the best cities for jobs is routinely topped by the Lone Star State's five metropolitan areas..

Even more telling, he said, is a NewGeography.com analysis of job growth from 2002 to 2012 of the metropolitan areas with populations of at least 2.5 million.

Houston leads the way at 16.2 percent, followed by Washington (10.9 percent), Phoenix (10.2 percent) and Dallas-Fort Worth (9.1 percent). Taken alone, Fort Worth would rank second at 11.1 percent.

"The kind of growth you are seeing in Fort Worth is really quite marked in income growth and job growth," he said.

In his new book, *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050*, Kotkin goes against the urban grain and argues that while big-city downtowns will continue to increase modestly, the coming growth surge will be centered on self-sufficient suburban villages.

Those 100 million additional Americans will be an increasingly diverse group, fueled by the growth of racial minorities, particularly Asians, Hispanics and mixed-race populations, he says.

"Our experiment with creating what Walt Whitman described as 'the race of races' will continue to evolve. By midcentury the United States will be a 'white country' no longer but rather a staggering amalgam of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, all participants in the construction of a new civilization whose roots lie not in any one country or continent but across the entirety of human cultures and racial types. No other advanced, populous country will enjoy such ethnic diversity," Kotkin wrote.

All those people will require housing, and while Kotkin expects in-fill to accelerate in large cities, he foresees a more likely surge in the American Heartland where there's ample room for the creation of new suburban towns.

He's said that's already evident in North Texas, because migration "follows jobs."

"In Dallas-Fort Worth, the suburbs actually have jobs. Some of these towns themselves are creating town centers of their own. It's a new evolution of how cities look."

Affordable land with no natural barriers like mountains or coastlines gives Texas cities a leg up in developing suburban centers.

"The land is cheap and the NIMBY (not in my back yard) culture is not there. And you don't have the 'smart growth' people who think everyone should live in an apartment," he said.

Most people want to live in single-family homes and affordability is a huge factor in that lifestyle choice, he said, noting that the Millennial generation will be looking for places where they can afford to raise a family.

"Families, not singles, are what drive growth," he said.

The obstacles for Texas' already rapidly growing cities will be developing and maintaining a well-educated workforce as well as keeping up with infrastructure demands.

"Those will be great challenges but I see a positive trajectory for the foreseeable future."

Steve Campbell, 817-390-7981

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