

Boundaries to Urban Growth

By Dale Shannon, Senior Economist, CERC

Probably everyone recognizes an urban area when they see one. While the Census Bureau applies a specific methodology to identify an urban area, that definition¹ tends to match our common sense understanding. The population of a relatively small geographic area (Census calls these areas block groups) is classified as either urban or rural based on its density. As would be expected, and shown on the Map of the Month, three northeastern states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Jersey) have high urban population concentrations. However, the map also shows California and Nevada as the other two states in which 90 percent or more of each state's total population is concentrated in urban areas. This is interesting because our perceptions of California and especially Nevada include large areas of undeveloped and unsettled land. In 2000, 79 percent of the nation's population lived in urban areas as defined by the Census Bureau. The other 21 percent of the nation's population lived in rural areas. In Connecticut, nearly 3 million people lived in urban areas resulting in an urban population concentration of 87.8 percent, ranking the state 11th out of the 50 states. New York state ranked 12th, with 85.7 percent of its population in urban areas.

The fact that the western states of California, Nevada, Utah and Arizona all have higher concentrations of their populations in urban areas than Connecticut results in an interesting set of questions that relate to Connecticut's economic development challenges. What impacts do the history and geographies of the region have on the way the state's urban centers have developed? Did the western geography and environment create impediments that prevented the historic economic and political development in the areas away from city centers and have more recently allowed the western cities to expand by annexing the surrounding areas? Are many eastern cities "boxed-in" by neighboring communities with strong historical traditions and well-developed local governments? Connecticut has 169 towns and cities with strong local concerns and interests that can conflict with their neighbors, increasing fragmentation and reducing abilities to plan regionally. With these issues in mind, are there ways that Connecticut and other northeastern states with similar histories and political traditions can be more efficient? Understanding the relationships between cities and their neighboring municipalities and the effects these relationships have on regional development is important in determining appropriate steps toward addressing the challenges facing Connecticut's economic competitiveness. Building on CERC's 2006 *Benchmarking Connecticut* report, CERC's 2007 analysis will explore the impact of these relationships on Connecticut's sustainable economic growth.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau definition of urban areas: Urban areas generally consists of a large central place and adjacent densely settled census blocks that together have a total population of at least 2,500 for urban clusters, or at least 50,000 for urbanized areas. Urban classification cuts across other hierarchies and can be in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas