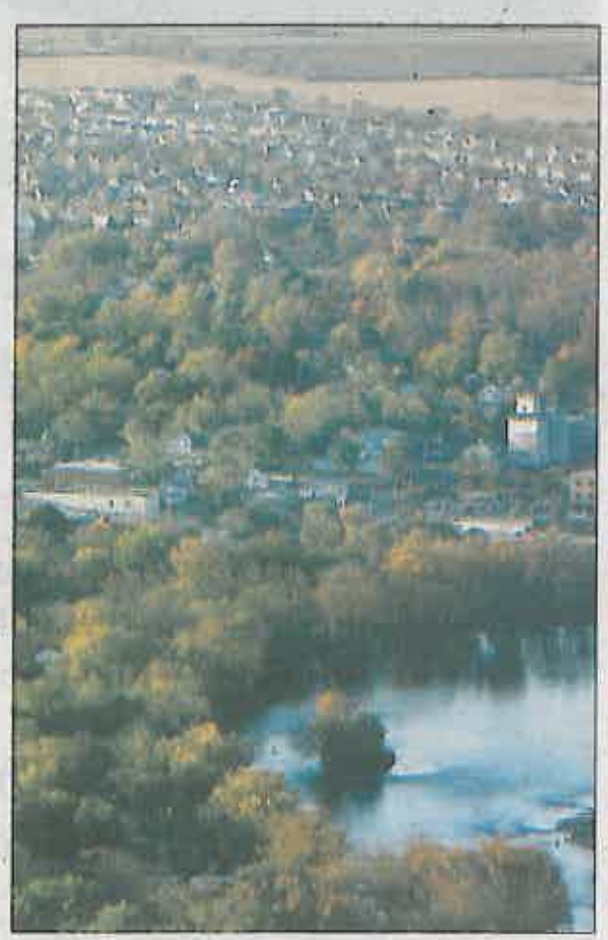
US growth of distant suburbs falls to historic low



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This 2010 file photo shows the Fox River as it flows into downtown Oswego, Ill., in Kendall County, with subdivisions and farmland to the southeast. The nation's No. 1 fastest-growing county from 2000 to 2010, Kendall was part of an ex-urban wave in the heady 2000s that more than doubled its population. But Census estimates as of July 2011 highlight a shift in population trends: Outlying suburbs are now seeing their growth fizzle to historic lows, halting American city dwellers' decades-long exodus to sprawling homes in distant towns.

BY HOPE YEN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Stung by high gasoline costs, outlying suburbs that sprouted in the heady 2000s are now seeing their growth fizzle to historic lows, halting American city dwellers' decades-long exodus to sprawling homes in distant towns.

New census estimates as of July 2011 highlight a shift in population trends following an extended housing bust and renewed spike in oil prices. Two years after the recession technically ended, and despite faint signs of a rebound, Americans again are shunning moves at record levels and staying put in big cities.

That is posing longer-term consequences for residential "exurbs" on the edge of metropolitan areas.

Construction of gleaming new schools and mega-malls built in anticipation of a continued population boom is cutting back. Spacious McMansions offering the promise of homeownership to middle-class families sit abandoned or half-built. Once an escape from urban problems, suburban regions hit by foreclosures are posting bigger jumps in poverty than cities.

The result: The annual rate of growth in American cities and surrounding urban areas has now surpassed that of exurbs for the first time in at least 20 years, spanning the modern era of sprawling suburban development.

"The heyday of exurbs may well be behind us," Yale University economist Robert J. Shiller said. Shiller, co-creator of a Standard & Poor's housing index, is perhaps best known for identifying the risks of a U.S. housing bubble before it actually burst in 2006-2007. Examining the current market, Shiller believes America is now at a turning point, shifting away from faraway suburbs in the long term amid persistently high gasoline prices.

Demographic changes also play a role: They include young singles increasingly delaying marriage and childbirth and thus more apt to rent and a graying population that in its golden years may prefer closer-in, walkable urban centers.

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