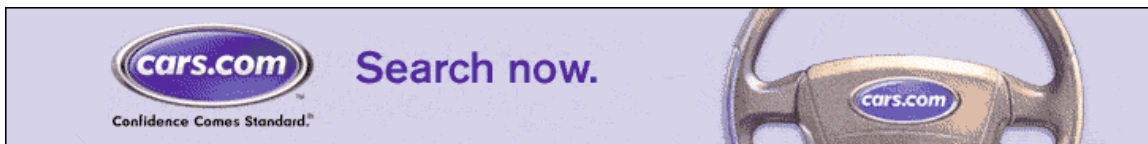




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Coming and going

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Cities and counties have a breather, a chance to shape their futures

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People are staying put. One of the side effects of the economic downturn, and the burst housing bubble, is that fewer people are buying houses, moving up — and moving out.

That means a little breathing room for cities and counties that have been feeling the effects of all the people filling up moving vans in the boom years. That's time localities that have been absorbing lots of newcomers — and those that have been losing residents — can use to decide what they want to look like when another population snapshot is taken a few years from now.

In this area, [James City County](#) and Suffolk have been on the receiving end of growth. If the pace seemed a little hectic to their residents, they were right, as confirmed by the latest counts from the number-keepers at the [Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia](#). Between 2000 and 2008, the population of James City County grew 29.6 percent — that's another 14,135 residents — and Suffolk grew 28.6 percent.

That's a lot of students to find seats for in schools, a lot of patrons wanting books from libraries, a lot of shoppers in the checkout line, and a lot of cars crowding the roads and parking lots. A little breather will be welcome, to absorb all these newcomers and plan for those who will follow when the economy and the housing market pick back up.

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In James City, breathing room couldn't come at a better time, as the county works on figuring out what it wants its future to look and feel like, a vision that will be spelled out in, and guided by, its updated comprehensive plan.

The county faces decisions about a number of tracts of land, some quite large, whose owners want rezoning in ways that will open their land to development. Understanding what that would mean, controlling the consequences, and making sure that the decisions are right add up to the biggest challenge facing the county.

Property owners have rights that must be balanced against concerns over sprawl, pollution and congestion. But once set free by

zoning changes, the development genie can't be shoved back into the bottle.

A lull gives the county some of the temporal space it needs to get citizens involved and ponder the implications of the growth prospects and the rezoning requests already on the table, and those likely to come. There's a lot to consider, from water supply to the effect on waterways, from how much new schools cost to how the county can accommodate more people without sacrificing the qualities that make the place so appealing.

In other places, including York and [Isle of Wight](#) counties, the growth has been considerable, even if the pace wasn't as extreme. Even landlocked Williamsburg added 1,356 residents, a gain of 11.3 percent.

The challenge is different down the road in Hampton and [Newport News](#). They're losing residents.

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In a stable city, people who move out would be replaced by people who move in, and the total wouldn't change much. But according to the Cooper Center, 14,705 more people moved out of Newport News than moved in. In Hampton, departures outnumbered arrivals by 9,550. Only a few of [Virginia's](#) large, old cities posted bigger percentage losses from such out-migration; even [Richmond](#) didn't lose as much as these Peninsula cities.

The only thing that kept both Newport News and Hampton from posting big population losses was the number of births. But babies don't pay taxes, and many of the babies in both cities are born to families who draw on expensive public services from the outset.

Cities have to analyze why so many people are voting, with their packing boxes, against them. And what it would take to hold onto those people.

These are critical questions, because losing taxpayers to the counties, while adding consumers of taxpayer-funded services, is an untenable model for urban health. Common but not sustainable. The issues are obvious: tax rate, schools, crime rates (real and perceived), housing stock, even the overall aesthetic of the place.

For now, the economy is applying the brakes on the flight to the suburbs. Cities need to use this pause to figure out how they can become places people want to move into, rather than away from.

How localities changed: 2000-2009

	Percent change in population	Natural increase*	Net migration**
Gloucester County	3.8%	706	623
Hampton	-1.5%	7,317	-9,550
Isle of Wight County	15.6%	515	4,131
James City County	29.4%	970	13,165
Mathews County	2.3%	-494	705
Middlesex County	3.5%	-507	853
Newport News	0.2%	14,986	-14,705
Suffolk	28.6%	3,845	14,385
Surry County	4.1%	32	245
Williamsburg	11.3%	-453	1,809
York County	14.6%	2,675	5,554

*Difference between births and deaths.

**Difference between the number of people who moved in and the number who moved out.

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