

Green Bay's Population to Shrink? Not So Fast!

The recent draft of the *Go Big Green Bay 2050 Comprehensive Plan* seems to indicate that Green Bay's population may decrease in the next twenty-five years. Yet, what goes into forecasting this type of figure? Here are some insights into what makes a projection plausible.

Forecasting the population of a city like Green Bay isn't about predicting one fixed number — it's about understanding the forces that will shape who lives, works, and raises families here. City planners, businesses, and community leaders need these projections to guide investments in housing, schools, healthcare, and infrastructure. Here are the key methods — and emerging signals — that can help us anticipate what Green Bay might look like in 2040.

1. The Cohort-Component Method

The backbone of population forecasting is the **cohort-component method**, which projects how many people will be in each age group in the future. For Green Bay, this means:

- Tracking **births**, as Wisconsin has seen declining fertility rates.
- Estimating **deaths**, with an aging Baby Boomer population that will reshape the region's age structure.
- Monitoring **migration**, which may be the biggest wildcard — will young professionals move here for affordable housing, or will they leave for bigger metros?

2. Trend Extrapolation

Looking at past patterns can provide clues. Green Bay's steady but modest growth could be extended forward using census data and housing permits. But trend extrapolation alone may miss major shifts, like the impact of remote work allowing professionals to live in smaller cities, or economic downturns that push people away.

3. Economic-Demographic Models

Green Bay's economy will play a critical role in shaping its population. Projections need to account for:

- **Manufacturing shifts**, as automation changes the types of jobs available.
- **Healthcare growth**, driven by an aging population in northeast Wisconsin.
- **Sports and tourism**, especially tied to the Packers, which attract investment and seasonal migration.
- **Future industries**, such as renewable energy, logistics, and advanced manufacturing, which could draw in new workers.

If the region can create high-quality jobs and maintain affordability, Green Bay could see a stronger population surge than traditional trendlines predict.

4. Land Use and Housing Capacity

Forecasts also depend on **where people can live**. Green Bay and Brown County need to consider:

- **Zoning policies** that determine whether the city grows upward with denser housing or outward with suburban expansion.
- **Housing affordability**, which has been a growing concern in Wisconsin.
- **Infrastructure capacity**, from transportation to water systems.

If housing supply lags behind demand, population growth could stall, even if people want to move here.

5. Scenario Planning

Rather than one prediction, Green Bay should prepare for several possibilities:

- **High-Growth Scenario:** An influx of climate migrants from hotter regions, coupled with strong job creation in logistics, healthcare, and green energy.
- **Low-Growth Scenario:** Continued out-migration of young adults, with an aging population dominating by 2040.

- **Status-Quo Scenario:** Slow and steady growth, with small increases driven by regional births and modest in-migration.

These scenarios give policymakers flexibility when planning for schools, housing, and workforce needs.

6. Fringe Signals to Watch

Some of the biggest influences on Green Bay's 2040 population may come from today's **fringe signals**:

- **Climate migration:** Families leaving areas hit by drought, wildfires, or extreme heat may see northeast Wisconsin as a safer place to live.
- **Remote work:** Professionals may increasingly choose Green Bay for affordability and quality of life while working for employers based elsewhere.
- **Robotic caregivers and automation:** With an aging population, technology may reshape healthcare jobs and support services.
- **Changing family patterns:** Smaller family sizes and later childbearing may slow natural population growth.
- **Immigration policy:** Federal changes could significantly affect how many new residents move into the region.

Looking Ahead to 2040

Green Bay's population future is not set in stone. Instead, it depends on how the city balances housing, economic development, and livability — while also preparing for broader global shifts like climate migration and workforce automation. By combining demographic models, economic forecasts, and scenario planning, Green Bay can better anticipate what the community will need in 2040 and beyond.

The challenge — and opportunity — is to shape those futures so the city grows in ways that are sustainable, inclusive, and resilient.