

St. Bernard residents are urged to return for census - Representation hinges on number counted

Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - Saturday, January 2, 2010

Author: Bob Warren St. Bernard bureau

As the federal government prepares for the 2010 Census, St. Bernard Parish plans to make a push to get its residents counted, including those not back in their homes yet more than four years after Hurricane Katrina.

Parish President Craig Taffaro recently went as far as to advise people still rebuilding their homes to stay with friends or relatives in the parish on the eve of April 1, the official census day. That way, he said, residents could truthfully answer the question in the census that asks how many people were "living or staying" in a certain residence on April 1, 2010.

"If they're planning to be here (return to St. Bernard Parish), then show up and be counted," Taffaro said of residents who aren't quite ready yet to return to the parish. Federal census officials recently identified 20,106 parish addresses as eligible to receive census questionnaires in the spring. That's almost 6,700 fewer addresses than were counted in the parish during the last official census in 2000.

As in other areas hit hard by Katrina, St. Bernard officials are scrambling to make sure they don't get shortchanged in the count. Census numbers factor into things ranging from congressional representation to the distribution of federal dollars.

And in parishes hit hard by Katrina and Hurricane Rita, like St. Bernard, the census will be used a barometer on recovery.

St. Bernard Parish's official 2000 population, according to the Census Bureau, was 67,229. The bureau estimated the parish had a 2008 population of 37,722, about 56 percent of the pre-Hurricane Katrina count.

Taffaro said parish officials, basing their number on several factors including utility permits, estimate the parish's current population at about 41,000.

And with the Census Bureau pegging the number of housing units now at 20,106, Taffaro said he thinks the population might be even higher than that. He said a simple multiplier of 2.6 people per address would put the population at around 52,000. "And that multiplier is conservative," he said.

"We know we're not at pre-Katrina numbers," Taffaro said. "But we think we're in the 40s."

The Census Bureau has said it will take extraordinary measures to make sure there is an accurate population count in the areas hammered by Katrina and Rita. Census workers will deliver forms to every household in Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, and parts of Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes, as well as sections of southern Mississippi and eastern Texas.

The Census Bureau recently identified 204,096 addresses in Orleans Parish eligible to receive questionnaires, a decline of almost 11,000 from the 2000 Census; 193,854 in Jefferson Parish, up 5,947 from 2000; 100,049 in St. Tammany, up 24,651 from 2000; 21,365 in St. Charles Parish, up 3,935 from 2000; and 18,511 in St. John Parish, up 2,979 from 2000. A figure was not available for eligible addresses in Plaquemines Parish.

Ken Harris of the Census Bureau's Dallas office said the agency uses multiple sources, but particularly the U.S. Postal Service, to determine the numbers. But, he added, the numbers can change.

"It's in a constant state of flux," he said.

.....