GREEN LAKE — The Great Recession brought changes to Columbia County, and many of its surrounding counties, that will be long-lasting, maybe even permanent.

None of the representatives of the counties in the Intercounty Coordinating Committee (Columbia, Dodge, Green Lake, Jefferson, Marquette and Sauk) expressed surprise at Gary Green’s keynote presentation, when the ICC held its monthly meeting Monday in Green Lake County.

Green, professor of community and environmental sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said the six ICC counties experienced numerous changes what some scholars call “the Great Reset,” which started in about 2007 and is only now starting to show signs of waning.

“This was probably the deepest and longest recession we’ve had since the Great Depression,” he said.

Some of the changes that the recession wrought in rural areas include:

- Slower population growth.
- A lower ratio of adults age 16 and older who are working or seeking work.
- Loss, or significantly slower growth, of “middle-skill” jobs — occupations that require more than a high school education but less than a college degree, and which have historically paid well.
- Slower growth in the manufacturing sector — the sector that, in ICC counties, remains the dominant source of jobs.
- A shortage of labor — or more precisely, a disparity between the skills that employers seek and the skills that the available workforce actually has.

These trends have all kinds of implications for local governments, Green said.

Government bodies, especially school districts, may have to consolidate or regionalize as the population wanes, especially the population of younger people.
“More people are starting to look like me — with gray hair, or no hair at all,” he said.

Counties may be scrambling to maintain their property tax bases, as the number of people leaving the workforce starts to equal or exceed the number entering the workforce.

And businesses may pass up opportunities to locate in communities where they might not be able to find enough skilled employees.

Green noted that changes in the population of rural areas, upward or downward, are driven almost entirely by migration; the birth and death rates make almost no difference in rural population, but people moving in and out make all the difference.

Rural counties that are close to metropolitan areas — Columbia County is one of them — tend to have more stable or growing populations than rural counties — like Marquette County — that are not close to cities, Green said.

But even that is changing, he said, as people simply are not moving as often as they used to.

Manufacturers also are not as likely to relocate as they once were, Green said.

But if they do, it’s likely that the availability of skilled workers will be one of the principal drivers of their decision to locate in one community and not another.

Manufacturing businesses no longer employ masses of assembly line workers straight out of high school, he said. Rather, technology has resulted in manufacturers needing fewer workers, but the workers must have the skills to operate sophisticated technology.

Nancy Elsing, executive director of the Columbia County Economic Development Corporation, said a key to a county keeping its existing manufacturers is to work with high schools and technical colleges to ensure that the education that students receive match, as closely as possible, what the employers are looking for in workers.

Elsing said the CCEDC has worked with economic development officials in Sauk and Marquette counties to sponsor job fairs, where more than 1,100 high school students have met with the management of local companies and learned, from them, what classes they
need to take to land a job.

But it isn’t just math, science and technical skills that are needed, Green said.

“They also need communication and social skills, don’t they?” he said.

One attendee asked why manufacturers and other businesses don’t increase wages and benefits if they want to attract skilled workers.

Green said the costs of doing so — especially for fringe benefits like health insurance — can be daunting.

But while prospective employees are looking for workplaces that offer competitive compensation, he said, the main thing that many of them are looking for is “a nice place to work” — a clean, inviting friendly workplace.

Steve Grabow, community resource development agent for the University of Wisconsin-Extension Jefferson County, said communities, too, must think in terms of being inviting, in order to attract new residents and keep existing ones.

Small communities can do that, he said, largely by branding themselves as places that offer the benefits of small-town life with amenities that people seek, including access to recreation opportunities such as parks, bike trails and hiking areas.

“It’s small-town living meets outdoor recreation,” he said.


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