

Feeling the BOOM

Oil-drilling opportunities are bringing new citizens to Williston, ND, at a faster projected rate than that of any other American city. But growth requires new infrastructure – lots of it.

By Benjamin van Loon



The turnkey workforce lodging provided by Target Logistics near Williston features a 24-hour dining area, an Internet café with free Wi-Fi, housekeeping, a game/rec room, free self-service laundry, and 24-hour security.



With a projected population of more than 50,000 by 2017, Williston (its downtown area shown here) will be the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States.

In a time when much of the Midwestern urban landscape is shrinking (or disappearing altogether), the past five years have seen unprecedented growth in an area of Montana and the Dakotas that geologists call the Williston Basin. It's an oil-rich region that was first discovered as ripe for prospecting in the early 1950s, but the basin went relatively untapped until 2008, when a US Geological Survey report estimated that, through the use of new technology, the "Bakken formation" underlying the basin could yield 3–4.3 billion barrels of oil.

Thus began the new American oil rush, an advent offering lucrative opportunities for the un- and underemployed willing to make the trek to Middle America. The sudden influx of new jobs has thus led to rapid population growth in the Williston Basin—a quaint region with simple infrastructure—and city planners have been struggling to keep up with the simultaneously advantageous and anomalous boom.

Williston's growth in square miles	
1987	6.92 sq mi
2003	6.96 sq mi
2006	6.98 sq mi
2009	7.26 sq mi
2010	7.47 sq mi
2011	8.00 sq mi
2012	12.66 sq mi
2013	20.33 sq mi

The situation is especially apparent in Williston, North Dakota, the seat of Williston County and the city for which the basin is named (following the discovery of the basin's first field in nearby Charlson in 1952). Between 1950 and 1960, Williston's population grew from 7,398 to 11,866. Then, the 1970s saw a slight drop in growth, but Williston rebounded and averaged a population of roughly 13,000 until the mid-2000s. This allowed the city infrastructure to develop slowly and considerately, but it also left it unprepared for the growth that came between 2008 and 2012, when the population swelled an estimated 25.9 percent to 18,532. And, according to Monte Meiers, director of public works and chief engineer for Williston, this number is going to keep growing, keeping the city on its feet. "We've made plans knowing that things were going to ramp up here in Williston, but nobody knows what that looks like until it happens," Meiers says. "And when it does happen, you need to be able to modify and adjust, and we're doing that."

The 2013 Williston Impact Statement, released by the city, projects a population of more than 50,000 by 2017, which would make Williston the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States at 8.8 percent annually—nearly double the growth of the second-place contender, the Villages, Florida, which clocks in at 4.6 percent. In order to support this growth, Williston estimates that a total of \$625.4 million needs to be invested in infrastructural expansion. And nearly half of that amount—\$258.9 million—must be set aside for transportation infrastructure, followed by storm water, wastewater, and water systems, which together will cost \$213.6 million.



When workers flock to small towns to capitalize on oil discoveries, they need places to stay. Enter Target Logistics, who provided this 80-bed mobile camp near Williston, ND, to house crews from Michels Corporation.

These projected needs must be squared with Williston’s actual revenue—estimated at \$52 million for 2013, with \$81 million in expenditures budgeted for the same period—but Meiers wants to make sure the town is ready. “Our population has been on a type of cycle, and some locals say that the cycle will bust again,” he says. “But I believe [oil] is an industry that is going to be here a long time, and we are developing the infrastructure to support that.”

Because of the numerous recent additions to Williston’s footprint, road quality has become a major issue. In 2011, the city approved a \$10 million expenditure to create a temporary highway pass in order to decrease traffic and road fatalities in the region, but management of the area’s gravel roads is still a concern; the annexation of new land has increased gravel-road mileage without creating any of the services necessary for maintenance. “We have multiple streets that need it,” Meiers says.



The city’s rapid growth has inflated the cost of living; only those working in the oil industry can afford to move to Williston. “There’s such a huge need [for tradespeople] here,” Meiers says. “You could make a living—if you could afford the housing.” (Photo: Williston Economic Development) The difficulty of hiring maintenance crews has partly to do with available capital but also available manpower. Cost of living is inflated in the area because of the rapid growth, and the oil industry promises higher wages than the city, so there’s little to draw workers to civic labor. However, Meiers and the city have been working to engineer solutions. “As an example, the city entered into an agreement with an apartment developer, who is helping create housing subsidized by the city for these employees,” Meiers says. The city has also opted to contract out certain services, such as snow plowing and winter road maintenance.

Meiers also reports a serious need—and a serious opportunity—for building and mechanical tradespeople in the region. “There is such a lack of people available to do electrical, mechanical, plumbing, carpentry, and other handyman jobs,” Meiers says. “There is such a huge need here, and you could make a living—if you could afford the housing.”

Budgeting the Next Six Years: Williston’s

Infrastructural Funding Needs

Transportation: \$258.9 million

Storm water: \$102.2 million

Wastewater: \$87.7 million

Government facilities: \$74.5 million

Airport: \$60 million

Water: \$23.7 million

Solid-waste management: \$18.4 million

Total: \$625.4 million

Williston is also part of the Western Area Water Supply Authority, which supplies all water pipelines to the other cities in northwest North Dakota. To pay for the system, the authority installed water depots along the pipeline and sold the depots to the oil industry, which uses them for fracking and oil extraction (an average of four million gallons of water is necessary per fracking job). The sales from this system will eventually pay for a water-treatment-facility expansion in Williston, further supporting infrastructural growth.

“Public works is a huge business, and I think it’s something that people sometimes take for granted,” Meiers says. “When you expand from seven square miles to 20 square miles, things will be trying, but we have some great department heads and supervisors who are managing the operations, and we’re geared to grow.”

The growing pains continue for now, but with increased industry and state funding, Williston may soon serve as an example of how a 21st-century capitalist city grows—inside and out.