BABY BOOM

As the valley’s birth rate increases with the end of the recession, so do the options for expectant parents

BY MOLLY PRIDDEY
A newborn baby is a bundle of joy in itself, a tiny body holding untold potential and opportunity. And in the Flathead Valley, as so many of these little miracles are brought into the world, they herald changes in both the economy and the way people are giving birth.

In general, birth rates are important signifiers for economists and demographers, people intentionally having babies in socially a sign that parents feel comfortable enough financially to bring another life into the world.

According to a 2011 study from the Pew Research Center, a sharp decline that started in 2008 in the national birth rate is closely linked to the drop the economy experienced at the same time.

Before the recession, in 2007, the U.S. experienced a record-high birth rate, with 4,316,233. Since then, the rate has steadily declined; the only state with an increased number of births between 2008 and 2009 was North Dakota, which was still economically booming due to oil activity.

Nationally, the birth rate continued to decline until 2012, when it hit a steady number for the first time in five years. In the Flathead Valley, Kalispell Regional Medical Center saw a drop in births in its Birtthing Center during the recession, according to Kelli McMahon-Stras, a registered nurse and the obstetrics manager, until just last year.

There were 644 babies born at KRMC in 2013, a significant increase from the 629 born in 2012. There were 682 babies born in 2011, and 659 in 2010. At North Valley Hospital in Whitefish, the Birth Center saw 491 babies born in 2013, a slight increase from 482 in 2012. There were 463 babies born in 2011, but the hospital’s boom year for births was 2010, with 505 babies born into the world, according to Catherine Todd, senior director of business development and community relations.

There wasn’t a significant drop in births at North Valley during the recession, Todd said, and the Birth Center is constantly busy, having originally been built for 250 babies each year.

“We draw patients from not only the Flathead Valley, but we’ve had a number of patients who come from out of state and out of country,” Todd said.

One woman flew from Germany to have her second baby at North Valley, Todd said, after she had her first baby there during a trip to Montana.

Part of the reason the hospital is attracting so many births is the popularity of the midwives employed there. North Valley recently purchased Glacier Maternity and Women’s Center, and the midwives, who are certified nurse midwives, work out of four locations: three within the valley and one in Eureka.

Todd estimated that half the births in the hospital are midwife-assisted.

“Women love it,” she said. “They like to have more time with the provider than what they typically have in the clinic with a busy obstetrician. They are doing just a booming, booming business.”

Midwives are also popular at KRMC. The

“Women love it. They like to have more time with the provider than what they typically have in the clinic with a busy obstetrician.”

Catherine Todd, senior director of business development and community relations at North Valley Hospital

midwives from Family Born Maternity and Women’s Health are hospital employees, McMahon-Stras said, and they are running to keep up with their clients.

“They are tremendously popular and they are just growing and growing,” McMahon-Stras said. “A lot of people are choosing to have a more natural, more hands-on care, and they provide that.”

There are also many midwives practicing independently in the Flathead Valley, many who have been in business for years or decades. Those at Fern Creek Midwives are relatively new to the birth scene in Kalispell, having opened in 2012, but they started their business because they saw the midwifery trend rising in the valley.

Alice Bennett, Carrie Cobert and Heather Holman are all licensed midwives, with degrees in Midwifery Science from the Midwives College of Utah. They said one of their goals with their business is to dispel any pre-existing notions about midwifery, and that it is regulated and scientific in nature.

“It is important to have a practice that is really available and feels more mainstream,” Cobert said.

Their business is gaining popularity, and as of the end of 2013, they were delivering at least one baby per month, and sometimes up to three a month. Acceptance of midwives within the community is also changing for the better, they reported, though there is still work to be done.

“We just want to grow that here,” Holman said. “I feel like doctors are getting used to midwives.”

With so many babies being born in the valley, both hospitals noted that expanding the birthing options is beneficial, and they expect to bring in more parents from outside the valley hoping to have their children here.

KRMC spokesperson Nancy Kimball said the hospital’s options now include a water labor option, and the level-3 Neonatal Intensive Care Unit has brought other parents to Kalispell.

North Valley Hospital has started a capital campaign to fund expansions to its birthing center to account for the infant increase, Todd said, since the hospital doesn’t see the birth rate dropping any time soon.

“We are busting at the seams with babies,” Todd said.