

Friendly City One Of Safest Harrisonburg Area Ranks Among Top 10

By PETE DeLEA
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HARRISONBURG — For years, Harrisonburg city officials have dubbed the community “the Friendly City.” But now, they can also refer to it as one of the safest in the nation.

That’s according to CQ Press, which ranked the Harrisonburg metropolitan area ninth on the list of America’s safest cities. CQ Press is a subsidiary of Congressional Quarterly, a Washington, D.C.-based publisher.

The Harrisonburg metro area includes the city and Rockingham County. “I’m very proud of the designation and I think we owe it to the public safety personnel and the citizens that live here,” said Councilman Charles Chenault. “The public safety folks can’t do their jobs without the help of the citizens.”

Logan, Utah, topped the list. Other cities included in the top 10 are State College, Pa., Green Bay, Wis., and Edison, N.J.

Using 2011 FBI crime data, CQ Press performed a statistical analysis of the data. The study looked at violent crime, such as murder and rape, but excluded crimes such as larceny and arson because they often skew the statistics. The report notes that 60 percent of reported crimes are larcenies.

Harrisonburg Police Chief Stephen Monticelli said keeping the community safe is a team effort. He said it takes law enforcement and the community working together to keep crime in check.

“You have to have a partnership to have trust,” he said, adding that residents often help prevent crime from happening by tipping off police when they see suspicious activity. Crime was actually up slightly in 2011 from a year earlier in both the city and county, according to the Virginia State Police.

In Harrisonburg, police responded to 2,486 incidents, which compares to 2,411 incidents in 2010, based on VSP’s annual report. In Rockingham County, there were 601 incidents in 2011 and 582 the previous year.

There was one murder in Harrisonburg and one in the county in 2011.

In the Harrisonburg case, Greg Brown, 50, was shot on March 3, 2011, while trying to serve divorce papers to Weyers Cave businessman Ali Abid, police say. Abid fled the country and is believed to be hiding in Iraq.

Rockingham County’s only murder in 2011 came on April 23, when deputies say Lori Mitchell, 45, strangled her mother, Betty Lou Armstrong, 68, on Lincolnshire Drive. She was later found

not guilty by reason of insanity.

Rockingham County Sheriff Bryan Hutcheson echoed Monticelli's statements. He said police and the community must work together to maintain a safe area.

"Everybody has a stake," he said.

Chenault said being recognized for having one of the safest communities in America will likely have a positive impact on people and businesses looking to relocate.

"They look at things, such as the quality of our school system ... our public safety departments ... designations like this jump out at them," he said.

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