Friendly City Getting Crowded

Harrisonburg Fourth-Fastest Growing In State Since 2010

By VIC BRADSHAW

Daily News-Record

February 15, 2017

HARRISONBURG — If you've felt a bit more crowded in the city in recent years, there's a good reason for that.

Harrisonburg is Virginia's fourth-fastest growing city since the 2010 census, according to population estimates released Jan. 30 by the University of Virginia Weldon Cooper Center for Public Policy. Demographers estimated the city's population at 54,224 as of July 1, 2016, up 5,310 from the last census count, or 10.9 percent.

On average, Virginia cities have grown only 4.8 percent in the six-year period.

Over the same six years, Rockingham County's population is estimated to have grown by 3,421, or 4.5 percent, to 79,735. That's below the 5.3 percent average growth rate for Virginia counties.

When the jurisdictions' populations are combined, the Harrisonburg Metropolitan Statistical Area is estimated to have grown by 8,731 residents, or 7 percent, to 133,959. That's the second-highest growth rate out of Virginia's 11 metropolitan areas, trailing only Northern Virginia's 9.8 percent growth rate.

Adam Fletcher, Harrisonburg's planning and community development director, wasn't caught off-guard by the city's growth rate, which averages roughly 1.75 percent per year.

"I'm not surprised the way we've grown," Fletcher said. "Harrisonburg is a very desirable place to be.

"I'm not surprised at all that we remain at the top of the list in MSA growth and are the fourth-fastest growing city."

Rockingham County was below the state's growth rate of 5.1 percent and the 5.3 percent growth experienced by all Virginia counties. But Rhonda Cooper, Rockingham County's director of planning, said 4.5 percent growth is fine.

"Historically, we've grown at a very healthy level," she said. "Seeing that trend continue doesn't surprise me."

Straining Services?

While three of Virginia's 38 cities grew at a faster pace than Harrisonburg (Falls Church led the way at 14.5 percent), Fletcher said the population jump has been enough to strain the city's public services.

Fast growth in a short period of time boosts the school population, which leads to costly needs, and increases use of everything from public transportation to emergency services.

"There's demand all down the line where people are living," Fletcher said. "There's demand from people who come in to build new developments to meet the demand for housing."

As housing built for college students has aged and students have migrated to newer developments, Fletcher said families have filled complexes not built for their use. He said city officials once were told school buses never would be needed on Devon Lane, but they run there now.

Those residents want other services and amenities for which their areas weren't designed, he said. To enhance Harrisonburg's walkability, planners must try to find ways to allow businesses and other nonresidential uses in those areas.

"If we're going to be able to absorb the demand of more people living in the limits of the city of Harrisonburg," said Fletcher, "the city is going to have to accept more mixed use in areas where it once was viewed as not desirable."

Though the estimates are as of July 1, they account for the students who inhabit the city much of the year. Demographers built their models off 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, which captured students in the cities where they attend school.

Part of the growth is tied to college enrollments. James Madison University spokesman Bill Wyatt said the college counted 21,227 students in the 2015-16 school year, up from 18,971 in 2009-10.

Fletcher, however, noted that some of those students are moving into developments just outside the city limits. That increases pressure on the city to provide bus and other services in those areas, which brings the question of who will cover those costs into play.

With a strong local economy, low housing costs and a plethora of recreational opportunities in the region, Fletcher said Harrisonburg should remain a desirable place to live for some time. Providing services to all those residents is a chore city officials must tackle.

"It is the essential question of community planning," he said. "We're a living, breathing city, and that question is what we try to figure out on a grand scale."

Easier To Manage

Rockingham County's growth has been much slower than Harrisonburg's, averaging roughly 0.75 percent a year between 2010 and 2016.

That, Cooper said, is a rate county officials find manageable.

"We think it's a healthy level," she said, "and we know we have been very conscientious about guiding that development into our urban-growth areas, around the towns and the city."

The growth in Rockingham for the last decade or two, said Cooper, generally has allowed the county to keep up with the demand for school space, transportation infrastructure, public water and sewer service, and other needs.

Fire and rescue services are a critical part of the equation, she said, and the county's emergency leaders are sounding an alarm that they're getting stretched thin.

To support the cost of the extra services, Cooper said it's important for Rockingham to grow its tax base. Commercial developers tend to want to locate near housing, and much of the county's business growth is mixed in with residential development east and southeast of Harrisonburg.

Over time, Cooper theorized, Rockingham could see a drop in its population in rural areas and increases in residents of suburban areas or towns.

"What we're seeing is more people are interested in living closer to amenities than ever before," she said. "If that continues, it may be that our actual population numbers could stay the same, but the location these folks choose to live in may be different."

That factor, Cooper said, makes it important for county officials to engage residents in discussions about the comprehensive plan to find out what they want their community to look like so services and amenities can be provided in the proper areas.

Among neighboring counties in the Shenandoah Valley, Augusta was the only one to gain population over the last six years, according to the Weldon Cooper Center data. Its population is estimated at 73,750, up by 1,059 or 1.4 percent since 2010.

Shenandoah County is projected to have lost 55 residents over the past six years, with a population now estimated at 41,993. That's down 0.1 percent from 2010.

Population loss was pegged at 1.9 percent in Page County, with the 24,042 estimate below the 2010 census figure by 456.

Virginia's estimated growth in the period was 410,784 to 8,411,808, a 5.1 percent growth rate.

Contact Vic Bradshaw at 574-6279 or vbradshaw@dnronline.com