

The Face Of The Future

The First 50K

City Population Explosion Predicted

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HARRISONBURG — The city topped 50,000 residents for the first time this year and seems primed to push far past that number.

In the latest population projections for the state by the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, Harrisonburg is pegged to be one of the commonwealth's fastest-growing cities over the next 30 years, jumping almost 50 percent to 75,015 people by 2040.

Only Suffolk and Chesapeake are projected to grow at a higher rate, according to Weldon Cooper.

But Rebecca Tippett, a research associate at the center, cautions that the margin for error for 2040 projections can be as high as 40 percent.

"That puts it into perspective," she said.

Projections for 2020 contain much less uncertainty, Tippett said. The report projects that Harrisonburg will reach 57,114 residents by 2020, and 65,768 people by 2030.

Earlier this year, the center's annual estimates showed the city passed the 50,000 milestone — reaching 50,057 residents — for the first time.

Tippett said projections are based on a statistical model using past demographic trends, so pinpointing causes of growth is difficult. The presence of James Madison University is certainly a factor for Harrisonburg, she said, and will push numbers up for surrounding Rockingham County as students stay after graduation and raise families.

In a 2009 Weldon Cooper report, which sparked a local conference called Vision 2020, Harrisonburg and the county were expected to reach 135,000 people by 2020. In the latest report, released by the center in mid-November, the projection went up to 140,545.

The county's population, which reached 77,297 this year, is projected to be 83,431 in 2020, 90,341 in 2030 and 97,249 in 2040.

The center produced the population projections under contract with the Virginia Employment Commission. They are the first set of post-2010 predictions for the state.

Tippett said the numbers can lead some community leaders to "change course" with growth plans for their areas.

“It’s a ... ballpark picture of what the community might look like in the future,” she said. Still, Bill Jones, chairman of the Harrisonburg Planning Commission, said officials do not look decades ahead when making decisions. They update the city’s comprehensive plan every five years to address changing needs, he said.

“While we try to remain ever cognizant of 20, 30 years down the road,” Jones said, “we look at five-year windows.” But Harrisonburg is close to reaching its buildout potential, he said. By statute, it cannot annex additional property. That could make a jump to 75,000 residents worrisome.

“The obvious thing is, where’s the housing going to be for that additional 25,000 people?” Mayor Richard Baugh said.

While the Weldon Cooper report affirms what city officials knew of Harrisonburg’s likelihood to grow, the rapid rate of growth, especially up to 2040, may be off, he said.

“You don’t ignore them or read them as Scripture,” Baugh said of projections. “My plan is for us to keep doing things that make us an attractive place to live. Being able to keep doing well in the real world is more valuable.”

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