

HOT

Winchester area still fastest-growing in Virginia

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star

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This file photo shows a new home under construction in the Abrams Pointe community on Greenwood Road in Frederick County.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

The Winchester metro area remains the fastest-growing in Virginia based on 2025 numbers, according to data from University of Virginia's Weldon-Cooper Center for Public Service.

Between 2020 and 2025, the area's population grew by 6.5%.

The next-largest growth areas during that time period are Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, which grew by 3.3%, Harrisonburg, which grew by 3.5% and Staunton, which grew by 3.2%.

"When you look at the Winchester area, migration actually was accelerating going into the most recent data we have, which is through last year for the region, almost back up to the levels you had in 2021," said Weldon-Cooper demographer Hamilton Lombard.

Lombard noted that 2021 was when "interest rates were down below 3% and you know, you saw kind of the pandemic restrictions" such as remote work.

"So a lot of people were moving," he said.

While the area continues to grow, Lombard said that there's also a trend of people exiting the Winchester area and heading into Berkeley or Hampshire counties in West Virginia, "where prices have been more affordable."

"That certainly is an interesting part of the trend," he said. "The net number is almost as high as it's ever been. ... But there's this other data set, which they're drawing from the same source ... and that data shows at the same time a large amount of migration going up into places like Berkeley County."

Lombard said that when it comes to pinpointing what's driving migration both into and out of the Winchester area, "there's some limits on what you can kind of impute from that."

However, what we do know is that last decade, a lot of migration into Winchester tended to be driven by people who are older "or had built up equity in their home back in Fairfax and were moving over here," said Lombard.

"This decade," he continued, referring to the 2020s, "has become disproportionately younger adults. ... You can't tell who they are, but you can tell their income, and that says a couple of things."

The big thing is that people moving into Frederick County from places like Fairfax "tend to be considerably higher income than the people moving up north into, say, Berkeley County."

"Again, just kind of following where housing is affordable," Lombard said.

Nationally, housing prices have essentially doubled in the last decade, he said, and interest rates have risen.

"And the economy is strong and unemployment rates remain low," said Lombard, "so [people] have that financial ability to buy homes. It's just not necessarily where they're living, and that's really helping fuel some of these trends."

Affordability is one factor that, in general, drives migration. But it's not the only thing that might motivate somebody to make a move.

"Quality of life is a big one," said Lombard.

With a large percentage of the workforce being remote or hybrid, "people have flexibility."

"Affordability does matter, but when you have the flexibility, you're not necessarily stuck with a place that's in a short commuting distance the way you might have been before the pandemic," said Lombard.

"So affordability is an issue," he continued, "but are you attractive as well, I think, is a big factor."

Another area of interest among the data regards employment. The Winchester metro area has had the weakest wage growth in recent years, second only to the D.C. area.

"So it's an interesting contrast that, on one hand, the region is growing very rapidly," said Lombard. "On the other hand, maybe it's just the job composition, but you're not seeing that show up in strong wage growth at all."

Job growth in the area, he added, has been strong.

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