

Is Richmond 'the city that fun forgot'?

BY BOB RAYNER
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER
Tuesday, June 22, 2004

Richmond has some work to do.

The region is no hot spot when it comes to luring those elusive twentysomethings and thirtysomethings who will be so important to economic growth in the coming decades.

A study sponsored by a half-dozen leading civic groups found that, by several measures, the Richmond area ranks near the bottom third of the nation's 50 largest metro areas when it comes to attracting people between 25 and 34 years old.

Richmond is "the city that fun forgot," said one young newcomer to the area.

Another complained that if Richmond were a car, it "would be an El Camino. It just doesn't know what it wants to be."

But even if some see the region as one part sedan and one part pickup truck, others see strengths.

About three-fourths of young adults here rate the quality of life as good or excellent. And they rank Richmond as the third "coolest city" in America, right behind Washington and New York and one place ahead of San Francisco.

Still, Richmond's allure to the 25- to 34-year-old set lags decidedly behind places such as Atlanta; Austin, Texas; and Raleigh, N.C.

A report accompanying the study, which included focus groups, an online survey and demographic analysis of census data, put the challenge in stark terms:

"As cities move increasingly into a knowledge-based economy, the kind of talented people each attracts will determine whether it wins or loses in the competition for future prosperity.

"For this reason, the seminal question for Richmond is: Will Richmond catch this wave and prosper or capsize and flounder in its undertow?"

From 1990 to 2000, the number of people ages 25 to 34 declined 12 percent in the Richmond area. The average metro area nationwide saw an 8 percent decrease, and 31 of the 50 largest regions turned in a stronger performance than Richmond.

Young workers tend to migrate to urban areas, but their numbers are shrinking nationwide, as baby boomers age and a smaller generation follows them.

In metro Richmond in 2000, about 14.3 percent of the population was between ages 25 and 34. That ranked 33rd among the top 50.

There are hopeful signs among the generally less-than-rosy findings.

Between 1995 and 2000, more young adults moved to Richmond than moved out. Still, for every six who came to town, five left.

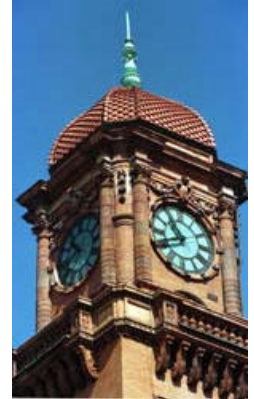
Also, 30 percent of blacks in the Richmond area are between 25 and 34, the fourth-highest proportion in the country. The region also saw big percentage increases in the number of Asian and Hispanic young adults from 1990 to 2000, although the total numbers remained fairly small.

The study found that this age group places a high value on a region's diversity.

During focus groups held in March, young adults who moved here in the past two years talked about what they liked and did not like.

"You have what most cities would kill for: distinctive mixed-use, close-in neighborhoods full of independent restaurants and merchants," said Carol Coletta, whose Memphis, Tenn., firm conducted the focus groups.

Richmond also earned high marks for "its beautiful, but underused, downtown



1999, BOB BROWN/RTD

Times-Dispatch NBC12 Poll

Do you think Richmond has enough attractive entertainment options for the young professional crowd?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

[Vote](#) [Reset](#)

[View Results](#)

What does Richmond need to make it more attractive to young professionals?

- More places to meet people
- Less emphasis on history
- Better nightlife
- Better sports teams
- Less crime
- Better public transportation
- Less sprawl
- Other

[Vote](#) [Reset](#)

[View Results](#)

Hot and cold

Percentage changes in the number of residents ages 25 to 34 from 1990 to 2000 and how each region ranked among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas:

- | | |
|------------------|-----|
| 1. Las Vegas | +56 |
| 2. Austin, Texas | +28 |
| 3. Phoenix | +24 |
| 4. Atlanta | +21 |

buildings," its affordability and its abundant outdoor activities, she said. It is also seen as a good place to raise a family.

"People see Richmond as a work in progress," Coletta said. "But they also think it's a little bit old, a little worn and conservative, reliable but a little blah."

Some complained about limited entertainment options and a lack of enthusiasm about diversity.

The study used census data to examine nationwide and local demographics for people between 25 and 34 years old, with a special emphasis on their migration patterns.

Next, focus groups from that age group met in each of six sponsoring metro areas. All had moved to town in the past two years, and they talked about why.

Six metropolitan areas - Richmond; Philadelphia; Tampa Bay, Fla.; Memphis, Tenn.; Portland, Ore.; and Providence, R.I. - contributed \$25,000 to the study and received individual reports about their regions.

Six Richmond organizations supplied money for the local phase: Richmond Renaissance, the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce, the Richmond Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, The Community Foundation, the Virginia Performing Arts Foundation and the Greater Richmond Partnership.

The organizations also teamed with the Southeastern Institute of Research for an expanded study, which used an online survey to draw a more detailed portrait of the Richmond area's 25-to-34 crowd.

"This is an opportunity to bring this age sector to the table," said Lucy Meade, director of business development for Richmond Renaissance. "We need to work to make Richmond an easier place to plug into."

Full results from the studies should be available this morning at www.grcc.com.

Contact Bob Rayner at (804) 649-6073 or brayner@timesdispatch.com

5. Raleigh-Durham, N.C. +20

32. Richmond -11.5

Richmond's young and restless

A portrait of the Richmond metro area's 25-to-34 crowd, based on 2000 U.S. Census numbers: They account for 14.3 percent of total population, 33rd highest among the top 50 metro areas in the United States. Among blacks, 30 percent are between ages 25 and 34, the fourth highest. The number of young adult Asians increased 98 percent from 1990 to 2000, the 19th-biggest increase. The number of young adult Hispanics increased 125 percent, the 16th-biggest increase. Among all the Richmond area's 25- to 34-year-olds, 34 percent have a college education, 13th highest among major metro areas. From 1995 to 2000, 37,600 people between ages 25 and 34 (as of 2000) moved to the Richmond area from other parts of the United States, while 31,200 moved out. Most newcomers came from New York or from other parts of Virginia. Most who left moved to larger cities in the South and the Southwest.

The bottom

Percentage changes in the number of people ages 25 to 34 from 1990 to 2000 and the lowest region rankings among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas:

46. Norfolk-Virginia Beach: -22

47. Rochester, N.Y.: -24

48. Pittsburgh: -25

49. Hartford, Conn.: -26

50. Buffalo, N.Y.: -27

This story can be found at:

http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RTD%2FMGArticle%2FRTD_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1031776180

[Go Back](#)