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## Caroline's growth rate among fastest in state

**Cathy Dyson**

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Caroline County is in that "middle ground" between urban areas of Fredericksburg and Richmond, which attracted more homebuyers for its affordability.

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Cathy Dyson

**C**aroline County's population grew by the fourth-fastest rate in the state between 2020 and 2024, perhaps because of the lack of affordable homes in places closer to Fredericksburg.

"That's really what's driving people down there," said Brandon Jones, land acquisition manager with Tricord Homes. "Firefighters and school teachers can't necessarily afford to live in (other localities) because the price is so high and there's a lack of supply. That plays a huge part."

Last year, the median home price in Caroline was \$366,900, the lowest of any locality in Planning District 16. It was \$153,100 less than the median home price in Stafford County, which was \$520,000 and the highest in PD-16.

Median prices for other localities in the district were \$447,450 for Fredericksburg, \$450,000 for Spotsylvania County and \$465,000 for King George County, according to the Fredericksburg Area Association of Realtors.

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Jeh Hicks, president of the Fredericksburg Area Builders Association, believes Caroline's population growth reflects another regional dynamic.

"We need to start recognizing Fredericksburg as the urban area it's becoming," he said, adding that Caroline is smack dab between it and the state capital.

“Caroline is in that middle ground like Fredericksburg used to be, between Richmond and Washington,” Hicks added.

According to the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center, Caroline’s population grew by 2,871 people, or 9.3%, from 2020 to 2024. Only New Kent, Goochland and Louisa counties, all part of the outer fringe of the Richmond area, increased by higher percentages.

Weldon Cooper officials took data from the 2020 U.S. Census and estimated population changes for Virginia’s cities and towns, effective July 1, 2024. The numbers were released late last month.

Caroline is part of a planning district that has regularly been among the fastest growing in Virginia, and the July 2024 numbers show the same trend.

There are 407,412 people in PD-16, and its population climbed at the fastest rate of any of the 21 planning districts in the state, according to Weldon Cooper. It showed the following population increases:

- Caroline: 30,887 to 33,758, up 2,871 people
- Fredericksburg: 27,982 to 28,029, up 47 people
- King George: 26,723 to 28,250, up 1,527 people
- Spotsylvania: 140,032 to 149,920, up 9,888 people
- Stafford: 156,927 to 167,455, up 10,528 people

Fredericksburg’s small increase is not a typo. The city’s population probably was undercounted in 2020 due to the pandemic, said Chip Boyles, executive director of the George Washington Regional Commission.

Students had been sent home because of COVID-19. When they filled out census reports, they listed their home localities — because instructions said to note your current place of residence, Boyles said. Subsequent estimates were built on that initial baseline.

It's not the only aspect of population estimates that may be pandemic-related. Boyles suggest Caroline's population started to climb when people set up home offices to avoid COVID-19. It didn't matter how far away from a brick-and-mortar office people lived, and that may be part of the reason people moved to the more rural county of Caroline.

When President Trump issued a directive last week, ordering federal workers back to their offices, the George Washington Regional Commission "had an enormous number of inquiry calls" about ride-sharing options, Boyles said.

"We're really interested to see how that plays into the housing demand and the population," Boyles said. "Will people try to move closer to their work, or will they commute, which then affects roadways and the rail?"

What's happening in Caroline may be one instance where it's more about price, price, price than location, location, location. Caroline County is 90 miles south of Washington, and the idea of spending that much time commuting might initially be a turnoff.

"Everybody's first try is to ignore Caroline for that reason and attempt to find affordable homes closer to the D.C. area," said Alex Rossie, a Realtor with Ascendancy Realty who lives and works in the Ladysmith area of Caroline. "But at the end of the day, with rising costs, inflation and interest rates, they cave."

He has a friend who spends two to three hours commuting daily to work at data centers in Northern Virginia. Coming home to Caroline, instead of getting off at one of the Fredericksburg exits, probably adds 40 minutes more, roundtrip.

Another friend is a firefighter in Northern Virginia, and he and his wife, who stays home with their baby, wanted to live closer to Fredericksburg, perhaps in Spotsylvania.

“There’s just no way he can make ends meet by living in Fredericksburg and still working in the fire department,” Rossie said. “They had to move to Caroline, that was the compromise as they were taking a step toward home ownership.”

Homebuyers aren’t the only ones looking for land in Caroline. So are national construction companies, Jones said.

His company, Tricord, bought the land for the Pendleton development, 3 miles from the interstate, at the turn of the century. And there it sat for decades until interest in the community of 3,500 houses and townhomes blew up about four years ago, he said.

“There’s a ton of national home builders building houses as fast as we can develop the lots in Pendleton,” he said. “They have a hard time getting developable lots in Stafford and the Spotsylvania area.”

It makes sense that Caroline has attracted attention and recorded the high level of growth, Jones said.

“When you think about, there’s not a lot of space left between Boston and Florida,” he said. “It’s all sort of growth and (Caroline) is sort of the middle.”



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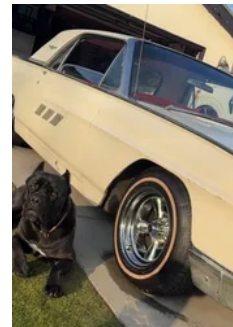
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