

## EDITORIAL: FRED region should be distinct from NoVA

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Yesterday's morning light illuminates icy tree branches and the steeples of the Fredericksburg courthouse (left) and St. George's Episcopal Church (right). The downtown skyline is seen from Stafford's Chatham Manor, across the Rappahannock from the city. The view from Chatham Manor in Stafford overlooks the Fredericksburg courthouse, left, and St. George's Episcopal Church, right, in Fredericksburg as the morning light on Wednesday morning hits the steeples after two days of snow and ice covered the area.

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Suzanne Carr

ONE OF the main goals of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership is to add 75,000 more jobs in Virginia each year by 2025 so the commonwealth will once again place among the nation's top 10 states for economic growth instead of where it is now, in 28th place.

Current forecasts have Virginia adding 30,000 new jobs per year, so reaching VEDP's goal is a tall order, particularly since nearby states, such as Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and North and South Carolina are all competing with Virginia to attract companies with high-paying jobs to diversify their tax bases.

There's also fierce competition within states to land the next big employer. The 60,000-some commuters who leave the Fredericksburg region to go work each day in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., put a tremendous strain on the area's inadequate transportation system. Reducing that outflow while growing the local tax base would be a win-win for Fredericksburg.

However, one of the main obstacles to attracting employers to the Fredericksburg area is the lack of finished industrial space in the region, Curry Roberts, president of the Fredericksburg Regional Alliance at the University of Mary Washington, recently told the Free Lance-Star.

Over the last three years, VDEP and FRA have attracted 954 jobs and \$420 million in economic impact to the region, including 304 jobs and \$93 million in private sector capital investment in fiscal 2017 alone. They've also identified several parcels of land larger than 50,000 square feet in Stafford, Spotsylvania, Caroline and King George counties that would be ideal for a major data center.

But since the Great Recession, developers have been reluctant to take on the risk of prepping sites with the basic business-ready infrastructure—sewer, water, electricity, shell buildings—that 75 percent of companies are looking for when they decide to expand or relocate, Roberts noted.

And it's difficult for cash-strapped local governments to take on the challenge when there's no guarantee that the money invested will result in a return to taxpayers.

Another problem, Roberts says, is the fact that most of the Fredericksburg region, including the city of Fredericksburg and Culpeper, Fauquier, Stafford and Spotsylvania counties, is lumped together with Northern Virginia in the Washington–Arlington–Alexandria, DC–VA–MD–WV Metropolitan Statistical Area.

The Greater Fredericksburg Region has an educated, skilled workforce like Northern Virginia, but with a cost of living and quality of life closer to that of the Richmond and Roanoke areas, Roberts pointed out. However, many companies that would find Fredericksburg an attractive place to do business pass it by simply because they use MSA data to narrow down their options.

Re-classifying Fredericksburg as a subdivision of the larger MSA would help make that distinction clearer, he believes.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, "each micropolitan statistical area must have at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 but less than 50,000 population plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties."

After the 2010 Census, OMB adopted new standards for delineating the 536 micropolitan areas in the U.S. where 10 percent of the population currently lives. "The concept of a micropolitan statistical area closely parallels that of the metropolitan statistical area, but a micropolitan statistical area features a smaller nucleus," according to OMB's definition.

Under the current system, "adjacent metropolitan and/or micropolitan statistical areas combine automatically if they have an employment interchange measure of 25 or more," according to OMB. Employment interchange is defined by the Census Bureau as "the sum of the percentage of workers living in the smaller entity who work in the larger entity and the percentage of employment in the smaller entity that is accounted for by workers who reside in the larger entity."

Since most of the Fredericksburg region's daily commuters travel to the larger Northern Virginia/Washington D.C. area, the region is considered part of that MSA. OMB says that "in delineating metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, OMB does not attempt to anticipate or take into account any non-statistical uses that may be made of the delineations, nor will OMB modify the delineations to meet the requirements of any non-statistical program."

In other words, economic development is not considered a valid reason for changing the Fredericksburg region's current designation.

And since OMB does not consider "public opinion" in making its statistical determinations, things will likely not change until after the 2020 Census, when hopefully the number of micropolitan statistical areas will increase by at least one.

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