We're No. 1

City named best place to live

By John Yellig
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Charlottesville's lack of a U.S. 29 bypass and the jaw-dropping prices some of its houses fetch aren't enough to keep Jefferson Country from being named the best place to live in America, according to a new book being touted as the most comprehensive ranking of North American cities.

The Charlottesville "metropolitan statistical area," encompassing the city and Albemarle, Fluvanna and Greene counties, beat out 402 other metro areas in the United States and Canada to claim the title in "Cities Ranked and Rated" by Bert Sperling and Peter Sander.

"The city possesses a special mix of college town and historic amenities and is clean and heavily shaded," they write.

On the Web
www.bestplaces.net

In compiling their rankings, Sander, a business and personal finance consultant, and Sperling, creator of Money magazine's "Best Places to Live" list, examined 10 categories, including economy and jobs, cost of living, crime and arts and culture.

Other top 10 cities were Santa Fe, N.M.; San Luis Obispo, Calif.; Santa Maria-Lompoc, Calif.; Honolulu; Ann Arbor, Mich.; Atlanta; Asheville, N.C.; Reno, Nev.; and

See RANK on A7
Corvalis, Ore. Lynchburg was the second-highest ranked Virginia city, coming in at No. 15. Laredo, Texas, and Stockton-Lodi, Calif., tied for the least desirable place to live.

Charlottesville was commended for its low unemployment and crime rates, good health care, temperate climate and cultural amenities, but received poor marks for a high cost of living.

“Although housing options are excellent, median home prices of $177,000 are the only real negative and directly reflect the quality of the area and resistance to sprawl,” the book states.

The median U.S. home price is $160,000.

The book also cites distance to a major airport as a negative.

Mayor Maurice Cox said the rejuvenation of the Downtown Mall has been a key component in making Charlottesville a world-class town. He noted a couple areas leaders should focus on to keep the city heading in the right direction.

“West Main Street, I think, is clearly the next frontier,” he said. “I think a state-of-the-art urban transit system is the next area where we will go to try to decongest our city streets.”

Charlottesville’s average commute time, 22.8 minutes, is in line with the national average of 22.6 minutes, according to the book.

Advocates for the poor cautioned residents and officials not to let pride blind them to the plight of the less fortunate, who can be overlooked amidst the region’s prosperity.

“There’s a myth about Charlottesville that everyone’s doing just fine,” said Joe Szakos, executive director of the Virginia Organizing Project, an advocacy group. “Our research indicates that about one of four wage earners makes less than a poverty wage in the Charlottesville area. For these people who make $7.50 an hour, who can’t get affordable housing and can’t get decent medical and dental care, Charlottesville’s not a wonderful place.”

Jim Hart, director of volunteer programs at the Salvation Army and co-chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Area Coalition for the Homeless, noted a January census conducted by the group that found 33 homeless people in Charlottesville. Eight of them were children. An additional 123 people were living in shelters or transitional housing.

“I would simply note the irony of the fact that in this No. 1 city, we have a degree of suffering because of intense poverty,” Hart said.

Albemarle County Supervisor Lindsey S. Dorrier was pleased with the recognition but far from overwhelmed.

“I’m not surprised it’s been rated the best place to live, because I’ve known it for 60 years,” he said. “We better not brag too much though, because some more people might come here to live.”

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