

The Virginian-Pilot

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Survey: 80 percent of Hampton Roads residents visited downtown Norfolk last year

- By Elisha Sauers
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- Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

"Arches of light" glow over Granby Street in downtown Norfolk for the first time since 1925 on Friday, April 1, 2016.



- Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

An aerial showing, from foreground to background, Scott's Creek, Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, downtown Norfolk and Town Center in Virginia Beach, photographed on Wednesday, April 16, 2014.



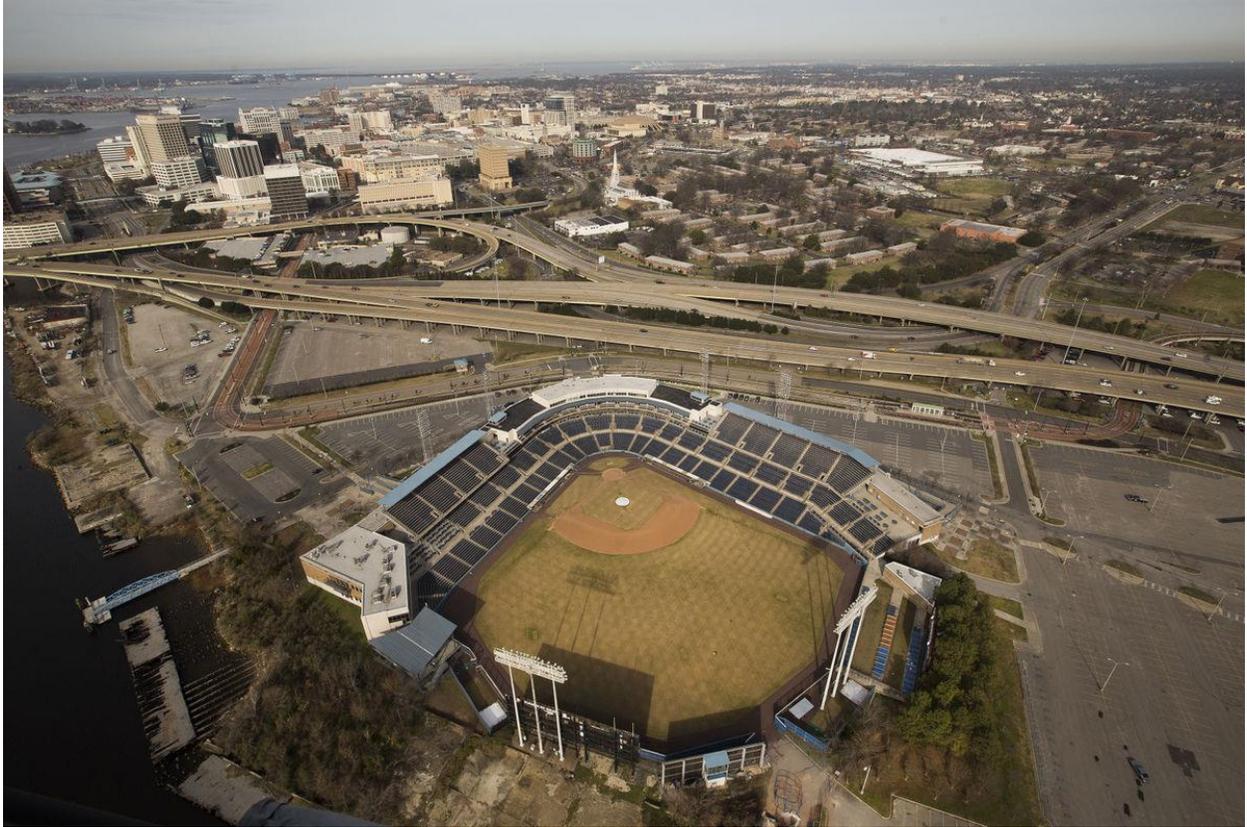
- Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot

The waterfront in downtown Norfolk, as photographed Jan. 15, 2016.



- Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot

A public housing community along St. Paul's Boulevard in downtown Norfolk, as photographed Jan. 15, 2016.



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Harbor Park in Norfolk



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Sentara Norfolk General Hospital, Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters and EVMS, as photographed Jan. 15, 2016.

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About 80 percent of Hampton Roads residents polled made a trip to downtown Norfolk in the past year, the highest rate recorded by a periodic survey.

The Downtown Norfolk Council hired the Southeastern Institute of Research to poll residents in the surrounding area on their views of downtown. John W. Martin, president and CEO of the institute, said the fact that visits are up from 78 percent is remarkable.

“Last time we did this survey in 2012, we thought, ‘We’re not going to be able to replicate this. We’re not going to go any higher,’” he said. “And sure enough, we did.”

The results follow a trend of growth spanning several years. In 2006, only 66 percent of residents responded they had gone downtown.

The company polled 651 people through a 15-minute online survey in January. About one-third of the participants live on the Peninsula, and the sample included mixed ages, from Generation Z to the Greatest Generation.

Researchers attribute the improvement to the recent transformation of Granby Street and nearby blocks.

Developers have added over 1,000 new apartments in the past three years, and some 40 new street-level businesses have opened in the past 18 months.

The biggest draw for visitors remains MacArthur Center, according to 73 percent of respondents, followed by other restaurants outside the mall and cultural event centers, such as Chrysler Hall.

Respondents were most likely to associate MacArthur Center, water and restaurants with downtown. The words “crime” and “traffic” also came to mind.

Not all of the findings were intuitive to the researchers. Though colleges whose campuses touch downtown have had no significant changes, approval ratings for higher-education options grew from 56 percent in 2012 to 61 percent.

“You might scratch your head and think, ‘Well, how could that be an increase,’” Martin said.

One response in particular perplexed Mary Miller, president and CEO of the Downtown Norfolk Council: Despite loads of new apartments that have brought the number of downtown residents to about 5,000, only 36 percent of respondents thought downtown offers quality housing options.

“It’s perception versus reality,” Miller said.

The survey asked the same set of questions used in previous studies, but researchers added a few others to gauge whether people outside the city are aware of recent or upcoming changes.

Those questions included whether they were aware of the Waterside District's reopening plans, the offerings at the high-tech Slover Library and the construction of The Main, a hotel and conference center that will become the city's tallest building in 2017.

The results were low, with 31 percent saying they hadn't heard about any of the projects.

"Either A, they're asleep," Martin said, "or B, we're not yelling loud enough."

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