

shadowing norfolk

CITY HAS ITS MOMENTS AS HUB OF THE REGION

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There's no accurate way to determine how many people crammed into Norfolk last weekend to enjoy football, art and fine wine.

At least 50,000 visitors from out of town came to spend a few hours or a few days in the city, Mayor Paul Fraim estimated.

But no matter what the number, it was clearly a good weekend for Norfolk. This old port city was rocking.

The influx of people was apparent Saturday morning as my wife, Ellen, and I shopped at Wards Corner.

Dozens of people in Norfolk State, Old Dominion and Hampton University attire tramped through, purchasing chips, beer and soft drinks, bags of ice and containers full of sandwiches, fried chicken and potato salad for afternoon football tailgate parties.

It was a mixed bag for the home teams. ODU lost its homecoming game to Towson University at Foreman Field. NSU upended Hampton U. at Dick Price Stadium in the Battle of the Bay.

The real winners were local merchants. More than 40,000 people turned out for the games. Fans filled hotels, shops and restaurants all over the city.

And that was just the start.

Karen Scherberger, who heads Festevents, said more than 12,000 people crowded into Town Point Park on Saturday and Sunday for the city's Town Point Virginia Wine Festival. That's the most the festival has attracted since 2007, she said.

Just down the street in Ghent, the Stockley Gardens Arts Festival also drew thousands of people.

Sunday afternoon, the Virginia Zoo hosted a military appreciation day, and so many people were there that nearby Lafayette Park was packed with overflow parking. More than 10,200 people, a one-day record, came to spend the day with lions, tigers and bears, zoo officials said.

Sunday night, after most of the events ended, my wife and I took a tour of the Norfolk harbor on the American Rover, a masted sailing ship that departs nightly from Waterside.

I heartily recommend taking a cruise on the American Rover or any of the other downtown tour boats. You can't really know Norfolk until you've seen downtown, Fort Norfolk, the port facilities and the Norfolk Naval Station from the water.

On this night, especially, it was a treat. As we were preparing to depart, a cruise ship was leaving the cruise ship terminal.

Yes, the cruise ship terminal has seen business decline precipitously and is losing money. But watching the huge ship slowly turn just yards away from Waterside to make its way to the Chesapeake Bay was a majestic sight. More than 2,400 departed Norfolk for the Bahamas.

As we sailed up the harbor, all the progress the city has made was apparent, from the hundreds of condominiums and apartments along the waterfront to the office towers that now dominate downtown.

You can complain, as some do, that the city has spent too much money downtown. But it's hard to argue that the money failed to attract development.

As we pulled back into Waterside two hours later, the waterfront marketplace was not as vibrant as it once was. More than half of its commercial space is vacant. Once the jewel of downtown, Waterside needs help and is the next big project city officials plan to tackle.

Yet on this night, the old building had some life. Hooters and Outback Steakhouse were packed with revelers.

Pedestrians were all over Town Point Park, Main Street and Granby Street.

Fraim loves to say that Norfolk is the cultural, sports, business and entertainment hub of the Tidewater area.

Last weekend, it clearly was.

