

## INTRODUCTION

### OVERVIEW

The Introduction includes the **Comprehensive Planning Process** as laid out by the state and the Town, and information about **Using the Comprehensive Plan**. It includes the **Town Overview and Demographic Trends**, summarizes results from the **Comprehensive Plan Community Survey**, and concludes with **Looking to the Future**.

### COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS

Section 15.2-2223 of the Code of Virginia states that *the local planning commission shall prepare and recommend a Comprehensive Plan for the physical development of the territory within its jurisdiction, and every governing body shall adopt a Comprehensive Plan for the territory under its jurisdiction.*

#### Five-Year Review

Section 15.2-2230 states that *at least once every five years the Comprehensive Plan shall be reviewed by the local planning commission to determine whether it is advisable to amend the plan.*

These reviews provide an opportunity to assess changes in the community and to update background data and action strategies. The following is an outline of the general process to be followed by the Planning Commission and Town staff when conducting the five-year review of the plan:

- Gather current population, income, employment, and other data to assess trends.
- Update existing land use maps and background data to reflect current information.
- Conduct a robust community engagement process that includes public education workshops, public outreach surveys, and review of draft chapters.
- Update goals, policies, and objectives; include new concepts, regulations, and requirements that have emerged through the review process.
- Prepare a recommended plan for review by the Planning Commission and adoption by Town Council after a formal public hearing process.

#### Annual Review

In addition to the required five-year review, the Town has instituted an annual amendment review process that allows the Plan to be a reflection of current trends and developments. The annual review process by Town staff consists of the following steps:

- Review and report progress towards the implementation of the *Blacksburg 2046* Comprehensive Plan objectives and policies.
- Update data and text to reflect changes in policies and programs.
- Include new issues that have occurred per Town Council direction or new state legislative requirements.

Citizens may request amendments to the Comprehensive Plan during the annual review. Staff will publicly advertise when amendment applications are being accepted for review, generally at the beginning of the calendar year. Council retains the ability to initiate amendments to the Comprehensive Plan at any time.

# DRAFT

Applicants should meet with Planning Department staff before submittal of an amendment request to review the proposed text or map amendment or a reclassification of a Future Land Use designation. In order for a private amendment to be approved, the applicant must first demonstrate that:

- A. The amendment will effectively aid in the implementation of goals, objectives and policies of the Comprehensive Plan.

Additionally, the applicant must prove that one or more of the following criteria have been met:

- B.1. The request must be a creative idea or concept that will benefit the community and that was unforeseen during the planning process for the Comprehensive Plan.
- B.2. The subject property or concept is misinterpreted in the Comprehensive Plan.
- B.3. Conditions have changed substantially since the last Comprehensive Plan update, necessitating a change, (e.g., significant changes in surrounding land use or economic conditions).

Amendment applications are considered based on the preceding qualifications which are analyzed by staff. Typically, the amendments are map requests for greater intensity of use. All amendment applications and staff analysis are forwarded to the Long Range Planning Committee for review and recommendation to the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission will conduct a public hearing on the application and provide its recommendation to Town Council. All amendments will be heard by Town Council in a public hearing. The Long Range Planning Committee, Planning Commission, and Town Council must determine the appropriateness of the request in meeting the criteria.

## **Using the Comprehensive Plan**

Listed below are some of the ways community members such as businesses and developers, Town staff, committees, and elected officials use the Comprehensive Plan.

*For the Town, the Comprehensive Plan is a guide to:*

- Town decision making
- Planning for Capital Improvement Projects
- Review development applications

*For the community, the Comprehensive Plan is a guide to:*

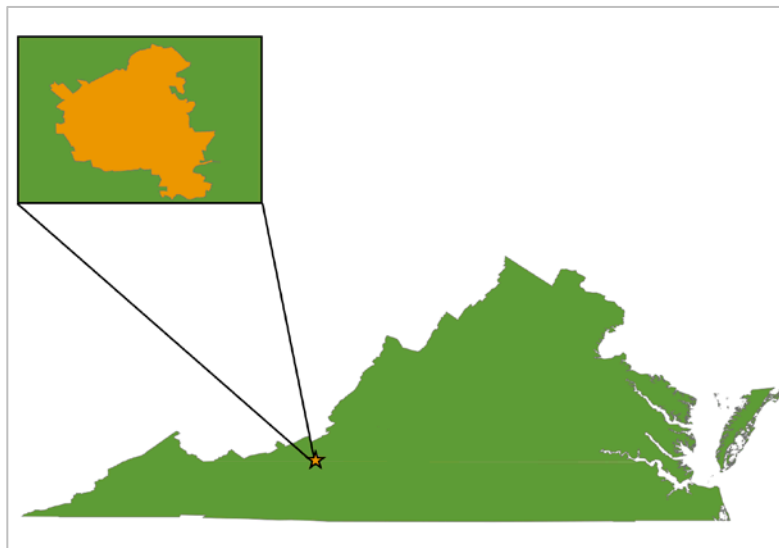
- Learn about the Town
- Learn how to become involved in Town committees and activities
- Research for the purchase of a home, business or property
- Illustrate the long-term land use pattern for the Town
- Understand the basis for Town review of development proposals
- Reference during public hearings on development applications
- Assist developers with project design that reflects Town goals

# DRAFT

## **Town Overview and Demographic Trends**

The Town of Blacksburg, located in southwest Virginia, was founded in 1798 with a 4 by 4 street grid that is now known as the 16 Squares. The Town of Blacksburg has grown from 38 acres (0.06 square miles) to its present day size of 19.8 square miles and is one of the largest towns in Virginia. In Virginia, cities are considered independent entities and have the same status as counties, whereas towns are considered part of the county in which they are located. The Town is located within Montgomery County, which means that Town residents are also residents of Montgomery County.

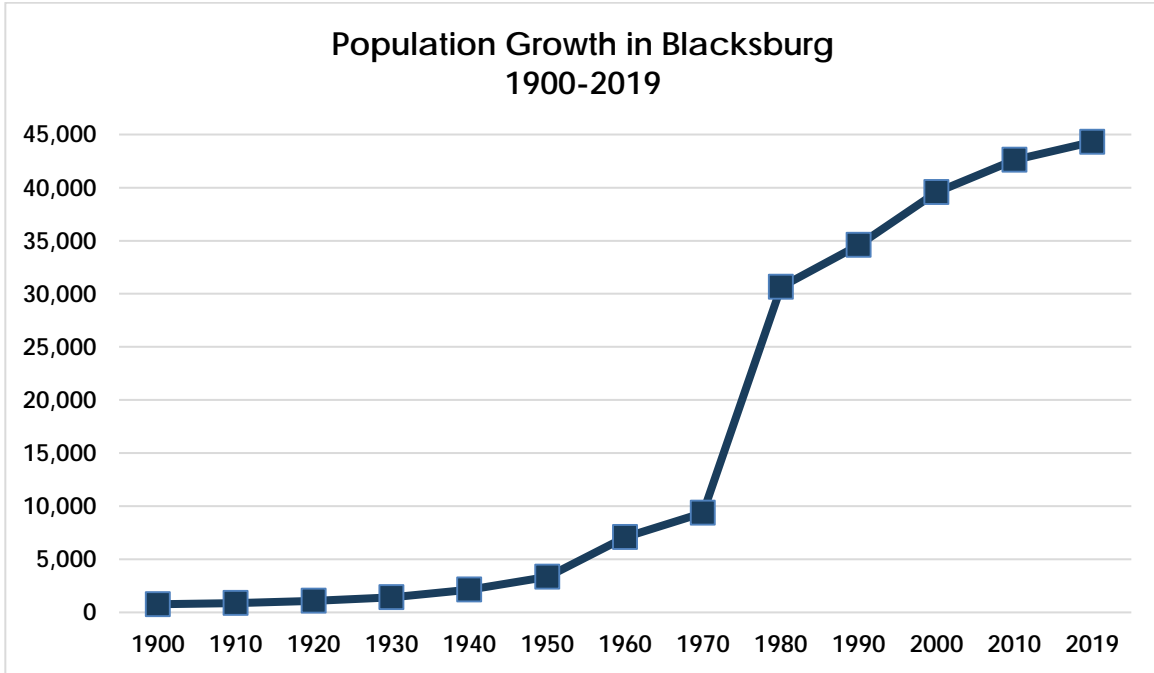
The following information on demographics is largely sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau. This agency completes a full count of the nation every 10 years, the decennial Census, and gathers information yearly on a variety of topics, through a sample of the population. The decennial Census was completed in 2020 but has not yet been published. According to the U.S. Census, Blacksburg's population is 44,303 residents (2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate) which includes Virginia Tech students living on-campus and in Town. Virginia Tech had a total enrollment of just over 37,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students in 2020.



*Location of Blacksburg in Southwest Virginia*

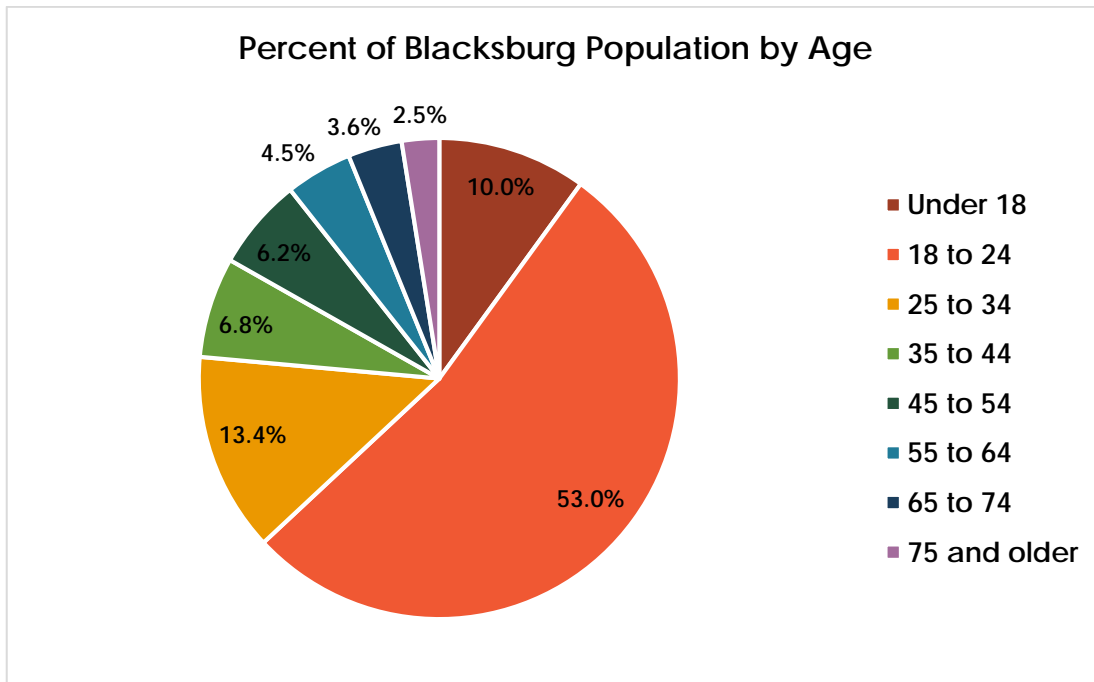
# DRAFT

The Town's population has gradually increased over time, with a significant increase in the 1970s when the Town's boundary lines were adjusted and student enrollment at Virginia Tech rapidly increased. Since 1980, the Town population has grown by approximately 45% as shown in the graph below.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey

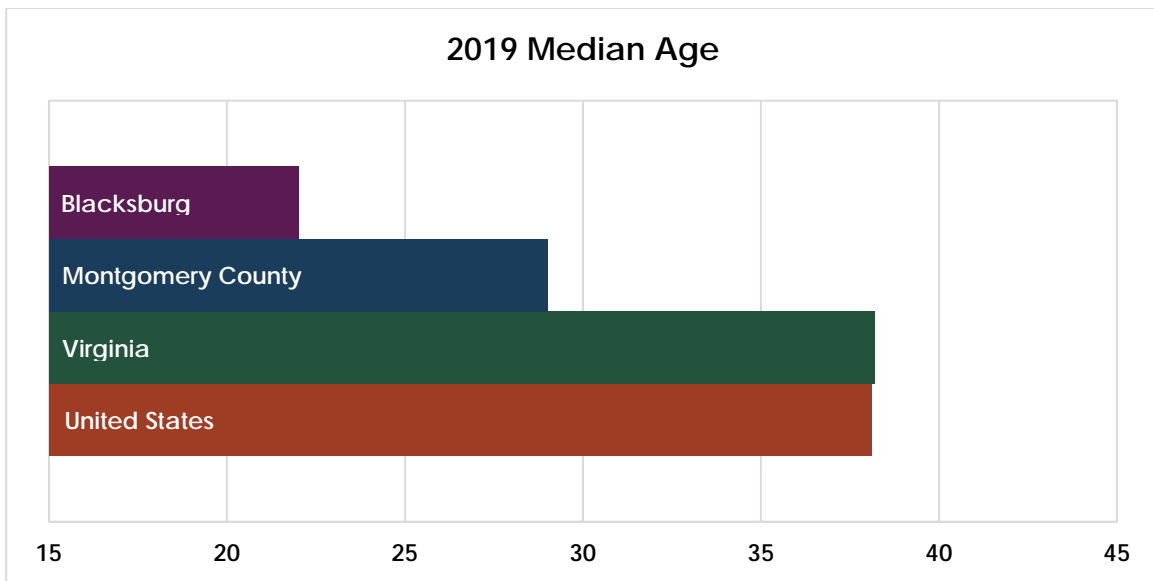
The graph below shows Blacksburg's population broken into age categories. The largest age category is those aged 18-24, making up 53% of the population. This is due to the large Virginia Tech student population.



Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

# DRAFT

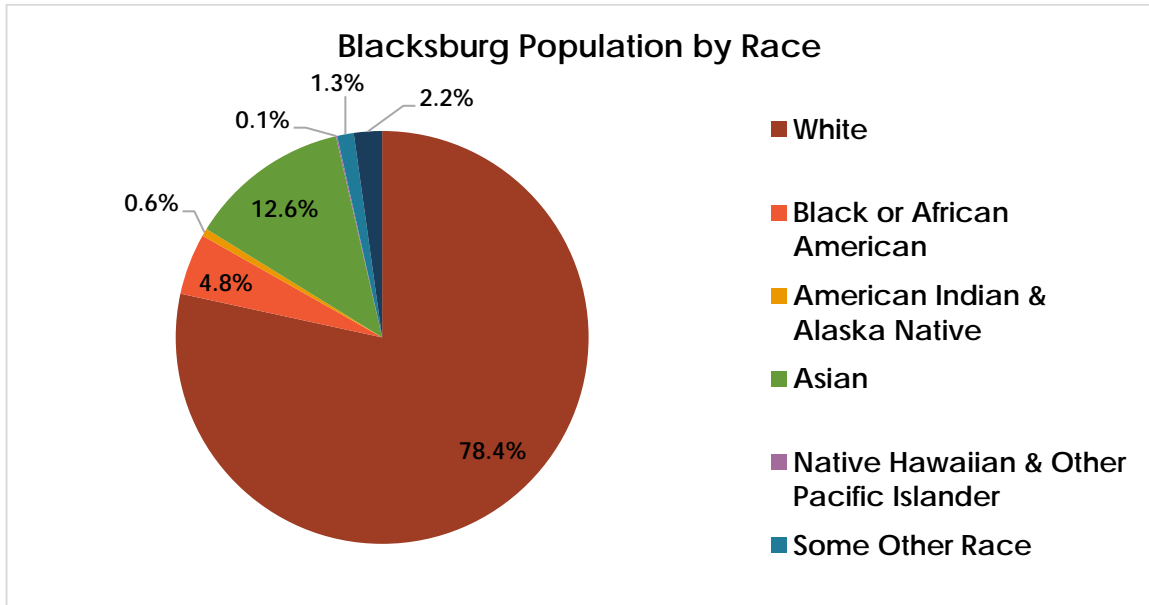
With 45% of the population between the ages of 18 and 24, Blacksburg has a median age of 22, well below the County, state, and country.



Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimate

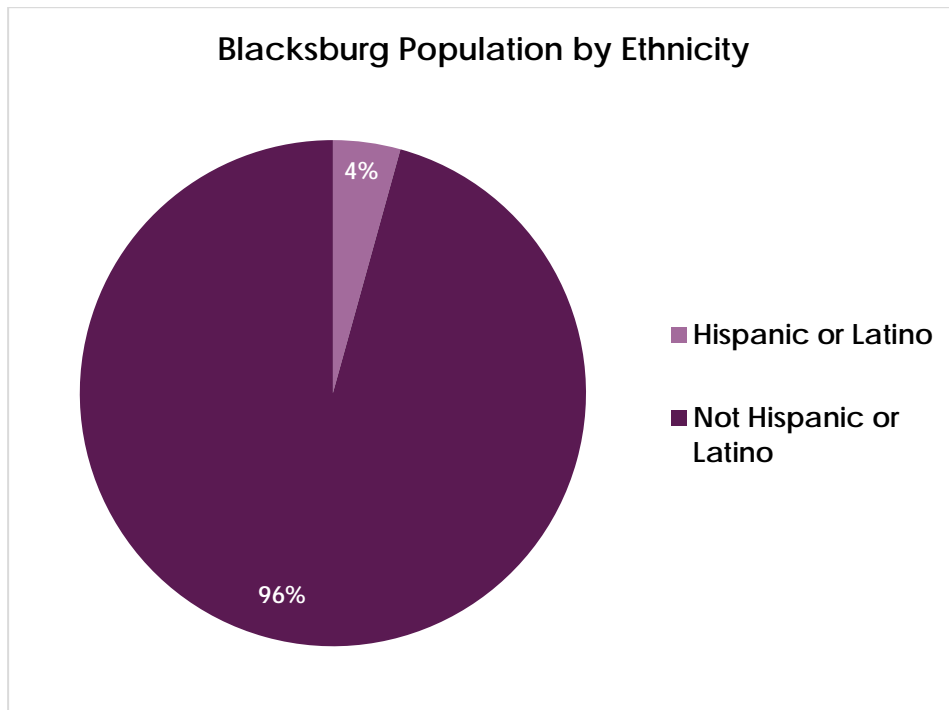
The Blacksburg population includes a majority of people who identify as White at 78%, the largest minority group being people who identify as Asian at 13%, followed by people who identify as Black or African American at 5%, and the remaining groups each making up less than 4%. In comparison, Montgomery County includes a majority of people who identify as White at 86%, the largest minority group being people who identify as Asian at 7%, followed by people who identify as Black or African American at 5%, and the remaining groups each making up less than 2%. In contrast, the U.S. includes a majority of people who identify as White at 73%, the largest minority group being people who identify as Black or African American at 13%, followed by people who identify as Asian at 6%, and the remaining groups each making up less than 6%.

# DRAFT



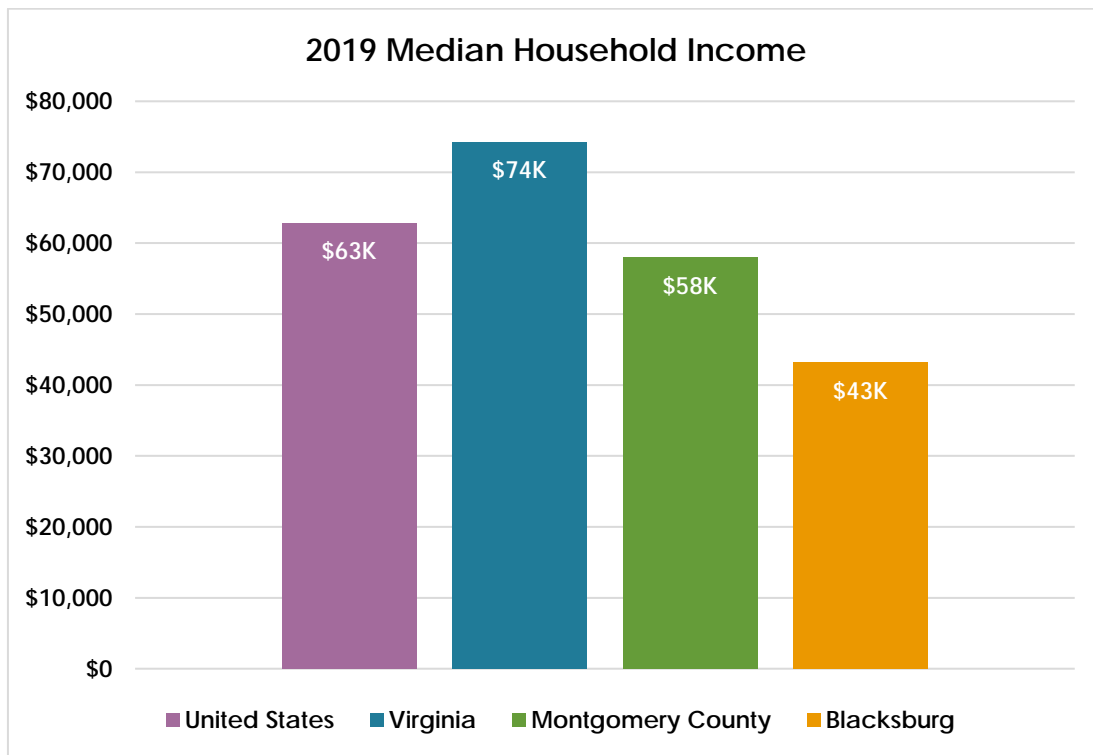
Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

The Blacksburg population that identify as Hispanic or Latino of any race is 4%, compared to 3% in Montgomery County and 18% nation-wide.

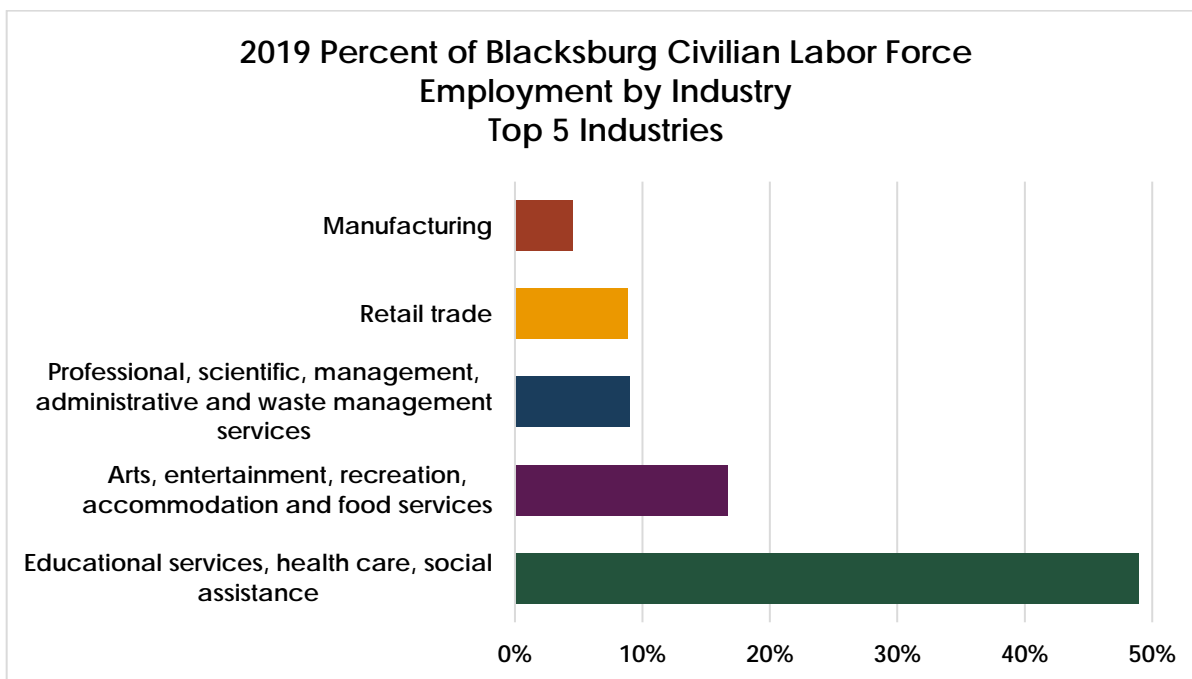


Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Household income is the total income of all people in a household that are 15 years or older, whether or not they are related. As seen in the chart below, the median household income in Blacksburg is approximately \$43,000, which is below the national, state and the County median. This lower median household income is due in part to the large proportion of full-time students in Blacksburg.

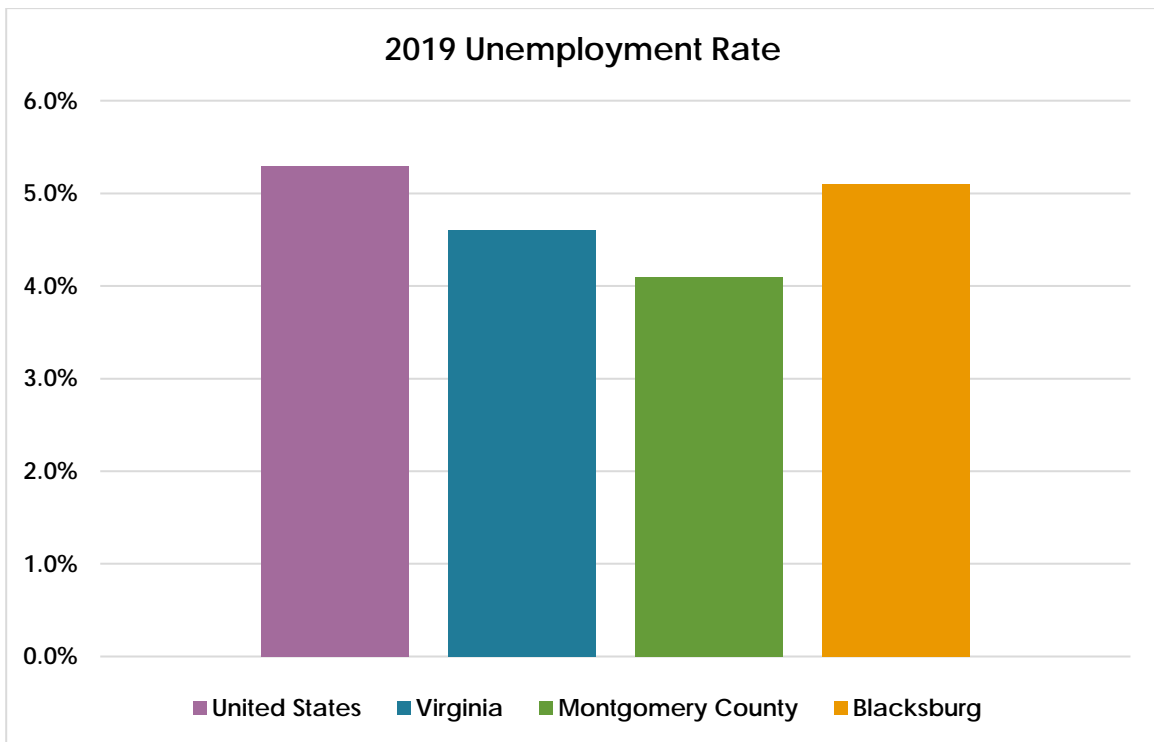


The five industries, detailed in the following chart, employing the highest percentage of civilian labor force are the same in Blacksburg and the nation. The highest employed industry in Blacksburg is educational services, healthcare, and social assistance, which accounts for almost half of the civilian labor force, compared to one quarter nation-wide. This difference is due in part to the large percentage of people in Blacksburg employed by Virginia Tech.



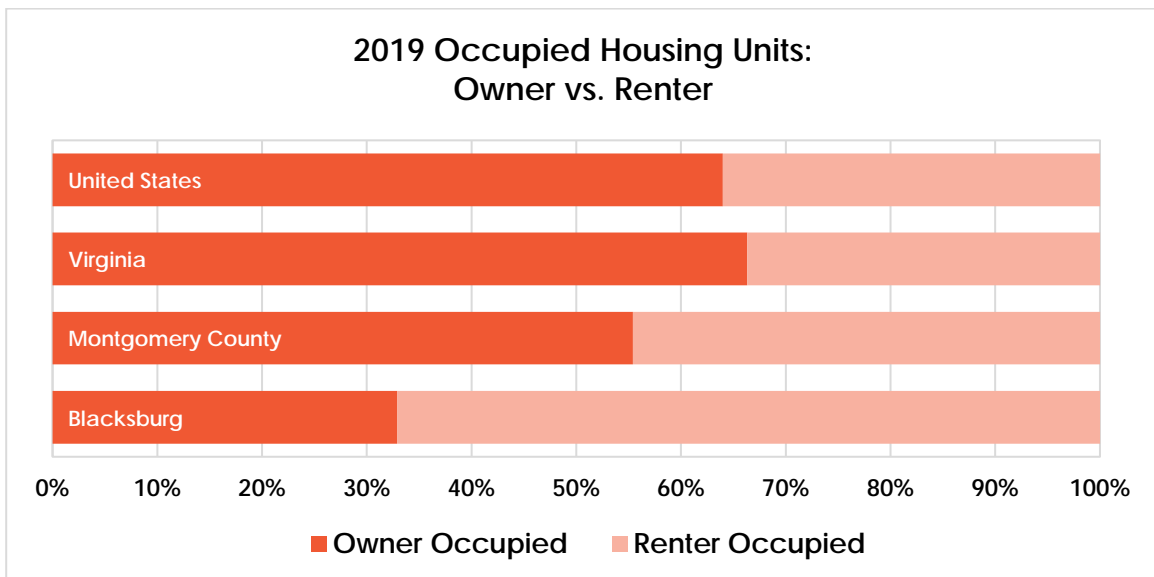
# DRAFT

The unemployment rate in Blacksburg 5.1%, just below the national average of 5.3% and 1% higher than the County.



Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Blacksburg has a significantly higher percentage of renter-occupied housing units than Montgomery County, Virginia and the nation. For comparison, Blacksburg housing units are 67% renter-occupied while Virginia housing units are 66% owner-occupied. This high renter occupancy is due in part to the large number of Virginia Tech students in Blacksburg. The proportion of rental occupancy varies by neighborhood and housing type. Rental occupancy of single-family houses is often higher for neighborhoods close to campus.

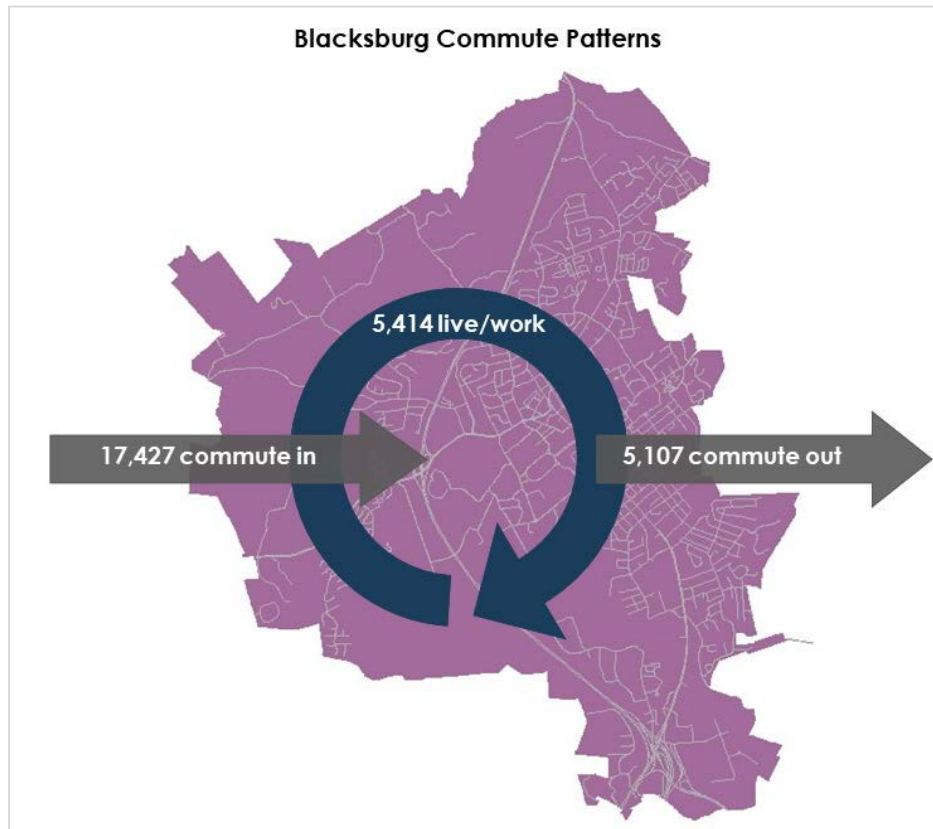


Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates



# DRAFT

The map below of commuting patterns for employment shows that over 75% of people working in Blacksburg commute in from elsewhere, and almost 50% of the labor force living in Blacksburg commute to other places for employment. Of the people who commute elsewhere for employment, approximately 16% commute to Christiansburg, 12% commute to Roanoke city and county, 8% commute to Radford, and 5% commute to Pulaski County.

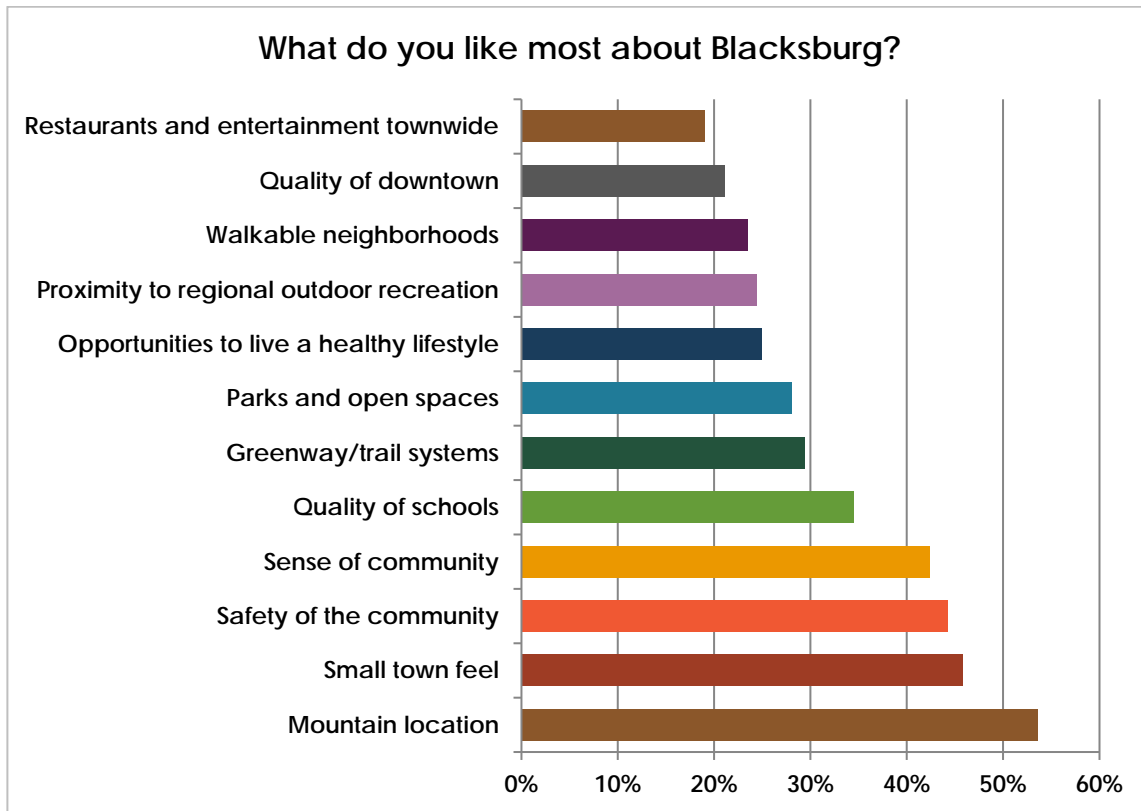


Source: 2017 Center for Economic Studies, U.S. Census Bureau

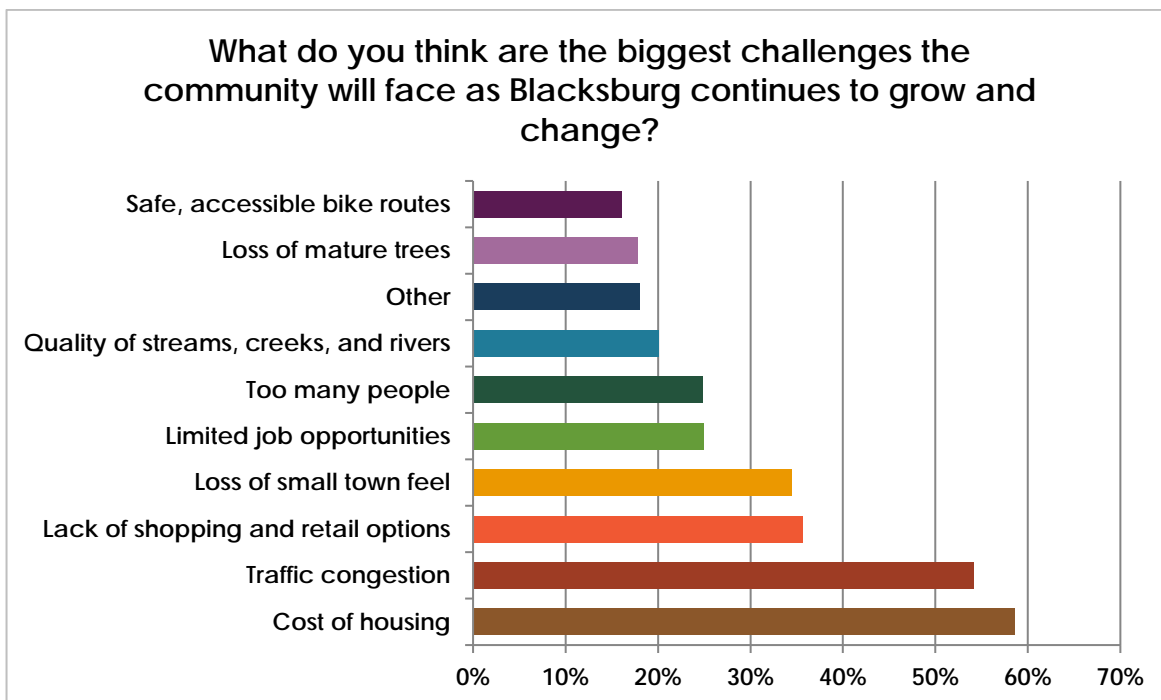
## Community Survey

For this 2021 update of the Comprehensive Plan, the Town conducted various methods of outreach, including a survey to gather community input on a number of topics. The survey was posted online and was publicized using social media, the Town website, and news articles. Surveys were also gathered at community events, and with the help of a Virginia Tech class that promoted the survey on campus. There were 1,435 surveys completed, with approximately 1,200 from people living in town. Almost 75% of survey respondents indicated that they shop, dine and/or play in Blacksburg, and approximately 65% work in Blacksburg.

For the following three charts, respondents were allowed to select up to five answers per question, and only responses that were selected by at least 15% of respondents are included. In order to help identify what the community values, one survey question asked respondents what they most like about Blacksburg. Response options were provided, and respondents were also given the opportunity to write-in their ideas. The majority of respondents, 54%, selected mountain location, with small town feel, safety of the community, and sense of community each getting over 40% of responses.

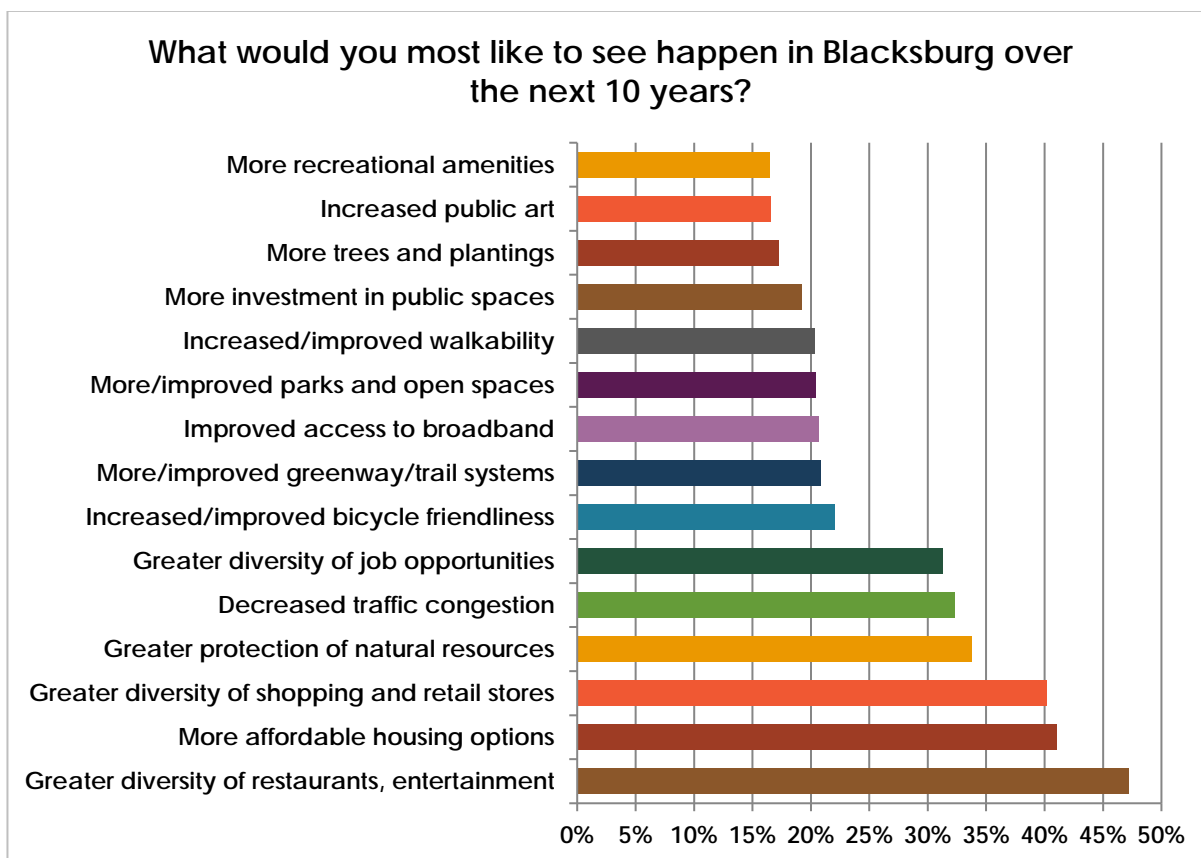


The majority of respondents, 59% and 54% respectively, selected cost of housing and traffic congestion as the biggest challenges that Blacksburg will face as it continues to grow. Many respondents also selected lack of shopping options and loss of small town feel. For people that selected the “other” category, some example responses included University growth, Town-Gown relations, and a lack of parking.



# DRAFT

Many respondents selected greater diversity of restaurants and entertainment, more affordable housing options, and greater diversity of shopping and retail stores as what they would most like to see happen in Blacksburg over the next ten years.



One of the concluding questions on the survey asked respondents what makes Blacksburg special, and common responses included small town, community, friendliness, family, Virginia Tech, love, hometown, and natural beauty. The results of this survey were used in the process of this Comprehensive Plan update to inform the text of the chapters, as well as for objectives and policies. Key themes inferred from the results include a desire for more affordable housing, greater diversity for shopping and dining, and retaining a sense of community and small town feel. The answers given by respondents indicated a concern for the impacts of growth to and planning for natural resources and the transportation network.

## Looking to the Future

Blacksburg is a college town, and therefore benefits from the resources and amenities that are developed as a result of a large university. While demographic trends show Blacksburg is growing, small town feel and sense of community were identified as community values. Balancing this growth and retaining these community values will continue to be a challenge for the Town in the coming years. Virginia Tech has a large impact on the Town as the majority of Blacksburg’s population is students and the University is the largest employer. Continuing to work with the University is essential to ensure that the values of the whole community are reflected in the Town as growth occurs. Census and survey data indicate that lack of affordability and access to resources may exclude people from the community. Strategies to address these

# DRAFT

barriers are detailed in several of the following chapters. In order to maintain a thriving community, the plan considers sustainability as a theme throughout all the chapters.

In the chapters that follow, detailed information is presented to assist in planning for the future of the Town, from housing to the economy, from the transportation network to utility infrastructure, and from parks and natural resources to arts and culture. The chapters include goals for Town regulations, programs and partnerships, as well as objectives and policies to implement the goals.