

Regionalist Paper No. 17

If Hampton Roads is One Place, What are the First Priority Regional Topics to Address?

Just how regionalism can advance in Hampton Roads depends upon many factors. There are an infinite number of ways in which it could jump start, such as a natural disaster requiring wide geographic recovery, a loss of the Oceana Naval Air Station, or a sweeping loss of shipping contracts to a more modernized port, rail and roads infrastructure elsewhere requiring the management of wide-ranging regional unemployment, or some other grave event. All recognize that it would be best not to wait for such a jolt to begin addressing regional cooperation. In order to better and more systematically address the advance of regionalism, we need a few key ingredients including, not in order of priority, (1) a stronger and coherent regional voice, especially for initial efforts, (2) actions by current governments to further build upon the successes and efficiencies of existing regional entities, (3) a program or office that creates a strong regional benchmarking system of both economic and quality of life performance indicators and with such data, in turn markedly increases public awareness and understanding of the merits of regionalism, and (4) start with a short list of tangible topics, with probably regional transportation at the top of the list, topics for which the responsibility should clearly pass to some competent regional entity, whatever that organization may be.

1. Create a stronger and coherent political voice for the region, especially for initial efforts. Here, two different ideas come to mind. First, it is unfortunate, yet important to recognize that the Hampton Roads Legislative Council has not been requested to, and does not on a regular or studied basis, advance regional issues needing attention. Joining in what ever manner with citizens or local governments or regional organizations to create a practical and measured regional agenda would be most helpful. This is essential. Second, we need to identify, at least on an interim basis, an existing regional organization that is representative of the region as a whole, authoritative, legitimate, and with enough

influence or actual power to foster regional decisions on key issues. This need not be a regional government with full powers of decision, taxation, and enforcement. But it should be strong enough to embrace all aspects of the regional agenda and to be recognized as the preferred entity of resort for regional matters. At present, the Planning District Commission, recognized by statute, is the nearest entity to a regional government, but as a voluntary membership organization it must operate collegially and its membership consists solely of government officials. Alternatively, the Hampton Roads Partnership is a private organization that includes all the mayors, university presidents, top military officials, and selected business leaders plus representation from labor and civic organizations. Currently, the Partnership operates out of the public eye and deals only selectively with regional matters. This especially needs to change. Nevertheless, with a few other changes, the Hampton Roads Partnership might be the best interim organizational candidate to work together with a revived Hampton Roads Legislative Caucus to become the voice of Hampton Roads.

2. Seek further consolidations of local government functions and possible expansion of existing Regional Authorities to improve service for more citizens at lower cost. All local governments are experiencing fiscal stress - a shortage of revenue versus identified needs - but taxpayers are highly resistant to additional taxes. Consolidation of local governments into a full-blown regional government does not appear feasible or desirable, but the success of regional authorities like the trash disposal and sanitary district entities suggests that a thorough-going review of other government functions to identify similar opportunities would be worthwhile. The regional economic development alliances have recently merged. The two regional workforce development boards also might be combined. A regional marketing entity might produce stronger advertising impact for less cost. Several separate public service authorities for the Peninsula and Tidewater sections of Hampton Roads might be combined. Some Authorities serve 3, 4 or 5 cities, suggesting that expansion to serve additional cities and counties may be possible and may promote efficient uniformity. Many other functions should be examined. There would be pros and cons, and pressure for change always brings discomfort, but the tight fiscal

situation cries out for an honest effort. The question should be: Do we really need sixteen governments to perform this function?

3. Originate a strong regional benchmarking system for both economic and quality of life performance indicators, and using this data, in turn, markedly promote public awareness and understanding of regional issues and the merits of regional cooperation. The first step to beneficial achievement with respect to any important dimension of our region's comparative performance is to set up a measuring rod that tracks results over time. Periodic publication of the trends would help regional planners, public and private, set more ambitious goals. Perhaps with the help of the university research departments, the various partial systems that already exist can be pulled together into a complete set of crucial metrics. Our regional organizations have a tendency to seek focus on only a handful of issues, and this is a practical necessity when staff is limited. But we should not lose sight of the big picture, the potential for Hampton Roads to have a proud, brilliant and unique reputation, and a comprehensive set of regional performance indicators could do that.

4. A short list of tangible topics for which responsibility in the near term should clearly pass to some competent regional entity, whatever that entity or organization may be. Throughout the region, different persons would have different choices ranging from libraries to almost any topic. Nonetheless, some ideas follow: (1) Polls would indicate, however, that regional transportation issues head the list for both citizens and businesses. This topic is currently the responsibility of the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization, but it definitely further needs the coherent attention of the Hampton Roads Legislative Caucus and the Hampton Roads Partnership. Indeed, even in the short term, it may require an independent regional authority to do the planning, the managing of federal funds, and the execution of a long-term transportation plan. (2) Reviewing the issues initially undertaken by newly formed regional governance structures around the country (see Regionalist Paper No. 7), one could identify a few other macro topics warranting early attention. These include region-wide, long-term land use management policies that address, the management of space around key installations (military bases

such as Oceana, port facilities), the management of sprawl, the saving of green space, the creation or preservation of regional parks or large scale natural recreation facilities for future generations, the earmarking of space for a regional major league sports facility or a new university or for future high speed or light rail lines, and the reduction of wasteful competing malls, competing convention centers, etc., (3) Uniform, or at least coordinated region-wide building codes and zoning laws (with both inclusionary and exclusionary zoning tenets as warranted) that permit and provide for affordable housing, reduced sprawl, and public service efficiencies for citizens region-wide.

Other important changes besides these three would certainly be worth initiating, but these would certainly make for a good start on improving the mechanisms of regional cooperation as a basis for making progress on specific challenges and opportunities.

James F. Babcock and Ray Taylor, Future of Hampton Roads, Inc., September 2005