



IMPROVING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF HAMPTON ROADS

The Hampton Roads Regional Structure Project

Report of the Study Group on Effective Public Participation:

Recommendation to create a

Center for Civic Engagement

Prepared by the Future of Hampton Roads, Inc.

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HAMPTON ROADS REGIONAL STRUCTURE PROJECT

REPORT OF STUDY GROUP 5
EFFECTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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1. Study Group Task

a. Study Group 5 was chartered by the Regional Structure Project to explore effective public participation – increasing the ability of individuals in the Hampton Roads community to get involved in the decision-making process. The Study Group researched a number of models of public participation, including *America Speaks* and *Voices and Choices*. The group familiarized itself with resources such as the International Association for Public Participation and the Kettering Foundation.

b. The Study Group worked to develop a framework, including Guiding Principles, specifically tailored to the Hampton Roads community. More about the study group and the principles are at:

<http://communitymediationcenter.wikispaces.com/Public+Participation+Principles>

2. Background

a. The power of an engaged public has an unrealized potential for constructive community change. Public participation practices vary based on the issue and the policy needs but include **Town Hall Meetings**, where small groups discuss the issue and present reports back to a larger group; **Strategic Planning**, where each group is encouraged to explore their ideas in terms of utility and practicality; and **Citizen Engagement Consulting**, where individuals are trained in public participation skills, facilitation, and ways of coaching others. It is an evolving professional field connected to progressive methods in public administration and government decision making.

b. Public participation offers a way to bring government leaders, interest groups and citizens together for discussions and dialogues in advance of important policy decisions. It is also a means to establish public support for a regional legislative agenda, as engagement creates accountability and commitment among groups of citizens. Harvard researchers have conducted numerous studies, which contend that communities with more civic connections and processes have a competitive advantage that flows from lowered “transactional costs” related to decision making and planning. Important and difficult things can be done faster when people from diverse views know each other from working on community issues together.

c. There are many differing civic engagement tools that can be used to customize public participation plans. It would be efficient, effective and smart to create a means by which to share the tools and the lessons and to build on successful approaches. The region need not wait for the varying governmental and private organizations to develop enhanced civic processes. The region can get smarter faster by building capacity centrally. That capacity can be used for process consultation or process management.

d. As Peter Block, a nationally-known organizational change consultant, says, the intent of civic engagement is to shift the context where traditional problem solving, investment, and social and community action occur. Communities that have acted effectively to gain greater control over their futures haven't just solved problems; they have changed fundamentally the way they conduct their collective business. They have put the public back into the public's business.

3. Proposed Principles of Public Participation

1. Encourage respect and appreciation for democratic values that include involving people from all age groups, income classes, political viewpoints, ethnic and racial groups.
2. Consult with the public early and often during the project.
3. Provide equal access to information for participants in the process.
4. Begin the project with an understandable description of the decision making process, well-articulated expectations for public involvement in that process, and clearly defined goals for the outcome of that process.
5. Provide the resources necessary – technical and financial – to support participants in the process and create a “level playing field” for diverse stakeholders.
6. Ensure that the decision making is open.
7. Document responses to comments and suggestions from stakeholders on key decisions and products.
8. Ensure that project schedules are realistic and sufficiently flexible to accommodate the complex dynamics of diverse public involvement.
9. Establish and demand clear accountability for the process.
10. Involve the public to monitor and insure that the public participation process is connected to implementing social, political and policy changes.

4. Recommendations

1. Embed public participation as an ongoing process in local and regional decision making.

Public engagement in community affairs is not just a means of getting support for projects; it is an end in itself. For democracy to operate as it should, the public has to act.

Action Steps:

- Establish Guiding Principles to support the public participation process.
- Solicit community-wide consensus to adopt the Guiding Principles through the use of Wikispaces, regional Web sites and other means of public communication.
- Articulate commitment of regional leadership to the utilization of the Guiding Principles.

2. Build regional institutional capacity for public participation and advocacy.

*Regional progress requires an engaged public, educated about issues affecting their community, who will take responsibility for what happens and who can make sound decisions about their future. A **Center for Civic Engagement** would provide the region's citizens the tools by which to become engaged and educated, consistently and effectively, in community decision making.*

Action Steps:

- Establish a **Center for Civic Engagement**
The Center would operate to support:
 - “think tank” activities,
 - a regional information repository,
 - a network of experts
 - a “news bureau” activity and
 - advanced public involvement processes.

These functions are all appropriate for a tax-deductible 501(c) 3 organization.

The Center would also operate to support a separately chartered operation with an associated mission, but different tax status (501(c) 4). The **PROGRESS PAC** would serve as a legislative advocate through a political action committee.

A-1

White Paper: The Center for Civic Awareness

The **Center for Civic Awareness** would serve as an umbrella entity over a 501(c)3 organization and a 501(c)4 organization, connecting several new and related functions identified through the work of the Regional Structure Project. Both organizations would demonstrate important commonly held principles through governance (i.e. bylaws) and operations. Both would place a high value on complete and accessible information. Both would be open to broad citizen involvement to model a productive alternative to “top-down” governance. Both would operate to strengthen and serve the larger community.

Why?

The Regional Structure Project brought together a large number of organizations and individuals ready to invest resources to increase the competitiveness of the region through service delivery consolidations, new efficiencies, media outreach and advancements in citizen involvement processes. The future of the region is what we collectively make it.

Governance

Although separate boards of directors for the Center and the PAC are required, the boards could have over-lapping or coterminous membership. This provides an opportunity for balance between filling the boards by traditional means and providing entry for new leadership and the ongoing connection to the larger community. Nominating committees with inherent responsibilities to protect the mission of the organizations would operate, but there may also be open seats where members or donors can self-nominate and stand for election.

Partnerships

The Center for Regional Progress will not replace existing organizations. The Center will create opportunities for partnerships with groups and individuals that share its mission and agendas. While there is no value added to the region by duplicating good work, there is value in adding to good efforts and pursuing new approaches. The Center can support collaborative efforts to expand the civic leadership pool and establish a venue for new ideas to be researched, written about and considered by the community – including the political community.

Operations

The regional “think tank” would:

- ✓ gather or produce white papers or other tools designed to both educate and provoke discussion on regional issues
- ✓ sponsor round-table discussions and study groups designed to make recommendations

The regional information repository would:

- ✓ receive and index information on issues of regional importance
- ✓ make information accessible

Outreach functions would:

- ✓ encourage and maintain networks of experts
- ✓ provide a “news bureau” with media outreach responsibilities
- ✓ maintain resource lists

Public participation would work:

- ✓ to be the internal advocate for good process principles
- ✓ to design, consult, train and advocate for innovative and effective public participation

The PROGRESS PAC would support:

- ✓ War chests
- ✓ Political intelligence
- ✓ Action plans

Connections

All the functions of the Center would be housed together to provide efficiencies and synergy. The PAC will need information and contacts. The civic engagement activities will build relationships, networks, lists and community organizational skills. The “think tank” function will attract civic-minded individuals and groups with new approaches that need testing in the public marketplace. The “news bureau” function will access the information and news-making activities.

Public Participation Sources and Resources

- America Speaks
www.americaspeaks.org
www.voiceschoices.org (Voices and Choices)
- Citizen Consensus Councils
www.agree.org (The Consensus Council, Inc.)
www.co-intelligence.org (The Co-intelligence Institute)
www.usconsensuscouncil.org (The U.S. Consensus Council)
www.sfcg.org (Search for Common Ground)
- International Association for Public Participation (iap2)
www.iap2.org
- The Kettering Foundation
www.kettering.org
- Study Circles
www.studycircles.org

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