

Regionalist Paper No. 1

Regionalism

What Is It? - Why Is It Important to Hampton Roads?

“No man is an island, entire of itself....”

John Donne, 1573-1631, Meditation XVII

“The same goes for cities and counties.”

Byron Tobin, Thoughts on Regionalism, 2005

On a rainy Saturday morning in April, 1998, a diverse group of individuals gathered at Old Dominion University for the purpose of selecting the winner of a high school art contest. The twelve judges had been chosen by the region’s mayors. They had to be educated about the medium before they could be considered qualified to accomplish their task. The student entries numbered eighty-two, each done in colored ink, pencil, or crayon on an 8-1/2 by 11 inch entry blank. The students had been asked to design a flag.

The design of flags is an art form in itself. Flags have to be the right size and shape. Simple is good, busy is bad. Great flags have no more than three colors. There should be no writing; words on flags can generally not be read, and even if the words are readable on one side they will appear reversed on the other. It’s not enough just to look good hanging on a wall like a picture. Flags must wave, and drape, and be recognizable when hanging loosely from a pole. Most important of all, flags must have meaning; they must say something about that which they represent. No small task for a high school student or for the panel of judges assembled at ODU in the spring of 1998.

The flag was to represent the region of Hampton Roads. It would be the first of its kind. Nations have flags. Cities and counties have flags, as do armies, sports teams, businesses, and fraternal organizations. But America’s metropolitan regions, those ephemeral areas defined by geography, history, unity of thought and purpose, a shared vision, and an integrated economy that generally ignores political boundaries, had never had a flag.

On June 15, 1998, the contest winner, sixteen year-old Andrew J. Wall of Cox High School in Virginia Beach, raised the new regional flag for the first time on the mast of a ship moored in the harbor. As conceived by Andrew and embellished by the jury, his flag is highly symbolic:

The ring of sixteen white stars stands for the cities and counties that comprise the region of Hampton Roads. The blue upper panel refers to the sea and sky, recalling the first European settlers at Jamestown in 1607, the first battle between ironclad ships in 1862, the importance of shipbuilding and ship repair in the area, as well as maritime commerce, fishing, recreational boating, and the major military and government installations around the area's shores. Agriculture, the environment, tourism, industry, and a healthy quality of life are suggested by the lower panel of green. The wavy white central band with three crests suggests past, present, and future. The wave also recalls the surf and sand dunes of the area as seen from the sea. Water is the central theme. It touches all the components and binds them together.

The student clearly “got it.” Regions are not formed merely by geography. Instead, they evolve over time in the minds of their populace as the result of topography, history, economic activity, unity of thought and vision, and mutually recognized opportunities. Like it or not, regions are not founded by choice, but by fact and circumstance. And because their components—space, resources, commerce, ideas, vision, and energy—are synergistic, the region’s citizens are free to consider the possibilities of joint action. Such action, properly focused, may include:

- A shared regional agenda reflecting common interests
- A stronger political voice for advancing the shared agenda
- More efficient and less costly distribution of essential community services
- Increased ability of the region’s businesses to compete in the world market
- An improved quality of life for all citizens

Simply because business knows no boundaries, the private sector often leads the way in fostering forms of regional cooperation. Among local governments, attempts to corral regional thought and to focus regional energy generally fall into three broad models: consolidation of governments, consolidation of selected government functions, and inter-municipal cooperation.

Consolidationists argue that regional government is the best way to pursue a regional agenda. Although there have been several notable successes of this approach in the United States, local government constituents have usually been reluctant to yield political power to a broader authority. While often favoring inter-governmental cooperation, many voters feel their interests will not be properly represented if their own government is merged into a larger unit. They often fear the loss of their cherished historical identity. Nevertheless, a regional government with powers of decision-making, taxation, and enforcement is the strongest structure for implementing a regional agenda.

Success has also been achieved through the consolidation of selected government functions both here in Hampton Roads and elsewhere throughout the United States. Consolidation of trash disposal, water purification, and sewage treatment into regional authorities are the most typical examples. Other examples include regional transportation authorities and regional jails. Even when such arrangements do not encompass the entire region, the combined services generally enjoy stronger management, more efficient service, and a lower cost structure. In so doing they increase the overall efficiency of the region. Existing local governments are retained in this model. Various levels of authority and types of leadership are applied and tailored to fit the government functions to be performed. Practitioners sometimes refer to this structure as the federal or two-tier model.

Finally, inter-municipal cooperation can also be extremely effective. Here, success depends on the leadership of the participating communities, citizen support of the concept, and the hard work of the local civil servants who will carry out the inter-municipal agreements. A local non-profit organization has counted over 600 ongoing inter-municipal cooperative arrangements in place in Hampton Roads today, an impressive record by any measure.

“Regionalism” involves the active promotion of cooperation. It can be pursued under any form of structure where there is the requisite authority and the basic will among the participants to work together to achieve goals. One of Hampton Roads’ principal organizations for coordinating public and private regional action, the Hampton Roads Partnership, defines regionalism as “local governments doing together those things they cannot do as well individually” and “the coming together of leaders and resources in support of a shared agenda for improving the region’s economy and quality of life.”

Hampton Roads has good reason to consider all of these approaches as it seeks its place among the major regions of the United States. As an integrated maritime economy, we are all that our flag represents, and more. As a former mayor of one of our key municipalities has said, “If we cannot find the will to *be* a single entity, it is certainly in our interest and within our power to *act* as a single entity.”

Why is regionalism important to Hampton Roads?

The most basic answer is that regions—to the extent they operate as integrated economies—are the real units of competition in the world economy. Regional thinking will empower us to tackle problems that to date have defied solution within existing

political boundaries. It will cause us to devise ways to use scarce dollars more efficiently and to increase our collective net worth. An innovative political union will support processes that will ultimately give us greater economic and political influence in the Commonwealth. In dealing effectively with the regional agenda, we will increase our ability to compete in the global market, and we will enrich the quality of life for all our citizens.

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