

Regionalist Paper No. 10

Regional Citizenship, the Sine-Qua-Non, or Not?

Area-wide public support of the region we call Hampton Roads and zealous community spirit thereto will not carry the day, and, alone, would not lead to regional efficiencies, effectiveness or to a successful regional competitiveness. Such a community view, however, and the more pervasive, the better, would provide considerable energy, in general, and sense of direction for leaders planning and implementing a regional agenda.

The short answer is Yes. Wide-ranging community spirit or proud feelings for a certain regional citizenship are essential. The risk of having 16 cities and counties in Hampton Roads narrow down to disparate and uncoordinated approaches to broad topics of land use management, transportation, affordable housing and on and on are very real. The reality is that no jurisdiction is an island, we impact each other, and if not coordinated, that is costly which ultimately lowers everyone's quality of life. Public regional citizenship is a strong antidote to otherwise narrow pursuits.

Basis of any metropolitan-wide community spirit – historical roots and current or potential dynamism. The heritages of ancient City-States such as Athens, Alexandria, Syracuse, or Rome still form the basis of pride and cooperation for these, now-existing, world-reputation metropolitan areas of today. Less ancient, yet equally profound, are the examples of local history, such as Yorktown, Norfolk, First Landing, the wet and dry docks of Portsmouth, the early American heritage of Williamsburg, and more, that contributed so much to the birth and development of our country. Few of the top 40 metropolitan areas in the United States are blessed with the collection of geographic resources and business capabilities that are found in Hampton Roads. These include one of the world's greatest harbors and greatest anchorages, near-endless tourism capabilities, the coastal attraction for international business, numerous top-echelon military bases and the human talent and intellect at hand to manage these resources. We have sufficient historical roots and grand geographic features to build upon, but these are not enough. While we have very measurable metropolitan strengths; do we have the metropolitan systems of governance and management to harness these resources?

Transmitting or developing the sense of regional citizenship. This is not easy. First of all, one needs to believe it is useful, and then move further along, and realize that it is essential. Further, it requires that citizens hold these views. It is not enough, in fact it is counter-productive, if only the leaders believe this to be the case. Leaders who trust not the public and its views (if those views are informed views) are a principle threat to real regional citizenship. The point is that citizens need to learn about, and need to believe in, the merits of regional or metropolitan cooperation, and the theme that all boats do rise or fall together during the ups and downs of fortune and opportunities, either claimed or lost. Bottom up efforts in this regard cannot be overlooked; they must parallel top down efforts. On the people side, Civic Leagues are players. On the media side, much win-win opportunity exists to advance regionalism. Educating the public is an important role of the media. They must be familiar with the local issues as well as with metropolitan trends and selected case examples ongoing around the country. Not surprisingly, the public may appreciate some reduced daily commitment to topics of local violence and the new commitment to the merits and steps needed for the promise of coherent governance over their lives.

When metropolitan Silicon Valley lost a major IBM contract to metropolitan Greater Austin, TX, the leaders of Silicon Valley declared it was the community spirit of Greater Austin that won the day.

Ray Taylor, Board member, Future of Hampton Roads, September 2005