

## **Regionalist Paper No. 13**

### **What is the Commitment of South Side to the Peninsula and Vice Versa?**

Many, if not most, informed residents of both the Peninsula and the Southside believe that the local governments on each side of Hampton Roads “could” and “should” cooperate more with each other. That being said, the kind and degree of cooperation often appears to be somewhat vague and rather non-specific in the minds of those same residents. How much the citizens of each city would be willing to sacrifice individually for the perceived overall good is questionable.

It would appear that more is talked about than is acted upon.

That the economic destinies of the two sides of the water are irrevocably tied together seems to be clear; that most citizens of either side understand this is less clear.

A number of existing collaborations offer hope for future efforts, but a paucity of regional information militates against the general diffusion of specific information about the level of current regional cooperation. The geographical separation of media outlets has something to do with this circumstance, but longtime observers can correctly point to progress, slow but positive, in efforts to narrow the separation by including more Peninsula news in the broad cast media at least.

Historical differences can be difficult to overcome, and other factors can appear to be obstacles to a full commitment and support of one side of the Roads to the other:

#### 1. The questions of turf and political will:

Preservation in office and protection of turf are natural to elected officials and the bureaucracies with whom they work, and thus, it is not to be expected that these officials or bureaucracies will voluntarily surrender power, real or imagined, for the benefit of another jurisdiction. In fact, bureaucracies, especially, often get in the way of meaningful change: as Admiral Hyman Rickover, never known for suffering fools gladly, once notably remarked, “Trying to make things work in government is sometimes like trying to sew a button on a custard pie.” Bureaucracies have more of a tendency to thwart than to expedite.

The very thought of sharing or giving up power is anathema to those holding elective office, and therefore it should not be expected that local governing bodies will initiate

cooperative actions absent a demonstrable mutuality or commonality of benefits. It is perhaps only natural that elected officials most often prefer to spend their political capital on those who elected them.

The notion of “what’s mine is mine” is pervasive, and without some overpowering movement to counter that notion, it is probably not realistic to look to local governing bodies for leadership in new efforts of cooperation and collaboration.

It should be noted, too, that there does not appear to be a loud public outcry for change in relations among cities in Hampton Roads, except for an expressed desire for “more cooperation”: in fact, in a recent ODU survey, most Hampton Roads residents indicated they were pleased with the quality of life in their community, possibly a sign to at least some political leaders that major change would not be especially welcome.

## 2. Absence of THE Political Leader:

In a sense, it is unfortunate for the regionalists, the planners, the futurists, that there exists no one single political leader in Hampton Roads, someone who has the credibility, the influence, the overall leadership ability to bring together the disparate interests of all to forge the strong ties necessary for a regional approach to issues.

In short, there is no political messiah in Hampton Roads, either now or on the horizon.

In our increasingly pluralistic society, different leaders seem to emerge on different issues and then fade back into non-leadership roles, leaving another individual to come forth when a different issue presents itself. In our ideal of a democratic nation, this has much to commend itself; from a practical, political point of view, however, it can be ineffective, ineffectual, and difficult to sustain. (Admittedly, it is highly doubtful that the directive and decisive so-called “power elite” of earlier times will be resurrected, so we must content ourselves to continue to work within the boundaries of what is.)

## 3. Follow the Money:

As might be said about practically any period of our history, these are parlous times. Particularly difficult for elected officials is the prospect of having to raise increasing amounts of money, through higher taxes, to meet the relentless demands of their constituents, and others, for more and more services.

This situation often compels local governing bodies to adopt a more parochial approach to the raising of money than might otherwise be considered. The very nature of economic development, for example, works against the sharing of information, the revealing of what businesses or organizations are being courted and under what conditions, what concessions are being made to them, etc.

Competition for the tax dollar is a serious business, and competition, as welcome as it is in most situations, does not necessarily breed trust and cooperation between or among the competitors.

Revenue-producing Activities are often shrouded in secrecy, understandably, and until and unless some acceptable form of revenue-sharing is in place, will no doubt remain so.

#### 4. The Harvest is Plentiful, but the Workers are Few:

Benefits of a more regional approach to the multitudinous issues facing Hampton Roads are not hard to discern; many persons can point them out on a moment's notice. Enlisting those same persons to engage themselves in the efforts necessary to bring about some of those benefits is a more challenging task. It is almost axiomatic that it is the caring few who effect positive change, and it has been noted that if a certain ten percent of the people in the world died tomorrow, the place would grow up in weeds in two weeks!

(It is the charge of the caring few that more need to be brought into the discussions and the activities, and it should be pointed out that this is now happening in a number of ways.)

There have been some successes: the removal of tunnel tolls, the elimination of long-distance telephone charges, the recent combining of the business alliances – all these were accomplished through concerted, long-term activity on the part of leaders and residents on both sides of the Roads.

One longtime observer remarked that “fifty years ago, the water was one hundred miles wide; now it is about ten miles wide.” Progress has been made in bringing the cities together, slowly, arduously, but successfully in several ways.

In furthering the progress of regionalism in Hampton Roads, it is probably not wise to depend solely on the actions of local governing bodies, as now constituted, by nature given more to reaction than to action. Rather, it would appear more productive to seek the aid of business, civic, and cultural leaders and organizations in moving forward.

The divide that currently exists between the Peninsula and the Southside can be narrowed, certainly, as past measures have shown. Building on past success, however, will require continued and persistent discussion on issues of mutual or common interest.

Edward Brickell, Future of Hampton Roads, October 2005