

Regionalist Paper No. 16

Is Hampton Roads Really One Region, or is this an Illusion?

When viewed from outside and as portrayed in scores of studies and data collection surveys, Hampton Roads does function as a single regional economic and cultural unit. However, the two questions above, posed by a newspaper reporter¹ in response to his sense of community attitudes, clearly suggest uncertainty about both the notion of ‘one region’ and of the levels of ‘mutual commitment’ that exist across the James River. This paper will describe the degree to which Hampton Roads has become a single region, the historic issues that have inhibited cooperation; analogies of other geographically split regions and how they managed these issues; landmark actions over the last thirty years that have forever bound the Peninsula with Southside; examples of enduring separatism that should be examined; and policy suggestions that could strengthen ‘one region’ and ‘cross-river commitments’ for the benefit of all citizens in the Hampton Roads metropolitan area.

While most citizens of the region recognize it as an economic whole with important common interests, and at least two-thirds recognize “Hampton Roads” as the regional name, the nature of the region and its institutions is not clearly understood, mostly because its creation is fairly recent. In addition, because of the historically separate development of Southside and the Peninsula, there is a cautious attitude among some citizens, especially on the Peninsula, about the desirability of further regionalization. In addition, while Hampton Roads is portrayed as a single region, this is not a strongly held concept either among municipal leaders or among the public at large. The concept is not yet mature in Hampton Roads. Concepts like this take time to develop. Historical views have to adapt, yet the continuities of history must be retained, even honored. This has happened in other metropolitan areas in the United States where a different solution has arisen in each case, yet always one that uniquely fit the needs, traditions and character of its respective metropolitan area. Locally, we need a better definition or description of Hampton Roads-style regionalism. This description must be straightforward, clear and frank. For public comprehension and support, it must include statements about the limits of oneness as well as the merits of certain regionalist approaches. The unique Hampton Roads process of developing mechanisms of regional governance for some government functions and not for others must yield a structural framework that is logical, well defined and compelling.

¹ Jessie Todd, *The Daily Press*, Newport News, 2005, in communications with the Future of Hampton Roads Regional Structure Project.

In Hampton Roads, we are not starting out afresh. Several landmark decisions in recent years have indelibly fostered the beginnings of a common regional agenda and have even launched certain ongoing activities. In 1983 the four separate port complexes on both sides of the river and in three cities were merged into a single regional Virginia Port Authority (VPA)². Since then, the ports of Hampton Roads have never lost ground to competing East Coast ports as was previously the case. They have served as an enormously important core economic enterprise for the region. Later in the 1980s and at the request of local governments, the federal government combined its two previous Tidewater and Peninsula Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) into a single Hampton Roads MSA³. On the national scene, our two MSAs, previously ranking 42nd and 82nd, became a new MSA that ranked 27th in productivity and RGP (regional gross product) in the nation. This sparked a much increased coast-to-coast marketing recognition with attendant positive results that endure today. Then in 1990, also at local request, the Virginia General Assembly authorized the merger of the Southeastern and Peninsula Planning Districts into today's highly effective single, regional Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC)⁴. Similarly, the two Southeastern Virginia and Peninsula Metropolitan Planning Organizations, mandated by federal transportation legislation, were consolidated in 1992 into a single Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (HRMPO). Later, and to advance its new Regional Competitiveness Act in 1996, the General Assembly authorized the formation of a single, regional public-private organization which locally became the still-active and productive Hampton Roads Partnership (HRP)⁵.

From an historical perspective, these five structural reforms are giant and irreversible examples of the trend toward regionalism and toward a clear-minded recognition of the need for regional approaches for certain government functions. Beyond these major examples, there have been scores of other government-inspired regionalist trends and actions, including the Mayors-and-Chairs regular meetings and state-established regional authorities, districts and commissions for public service matters. Just last year (2005), the Peninsula and Southside Economic Development Alliances were merged, another step forward, one that is certain to yield new efficiencies and to boost

² Virginia Port Authority, *History of the Virginia Port Authority*, (Norfolk: Updated, revision 1994), Inspired primarily by local leaders, the Robert's (1950), Breeden (1969) and Babalas (1981) state Commissions documented the compelling case for coordinating the tasks and resources of the four port complexes of Hampton Roads, a task that was formally completed with the formation of the VPA in 1983.

³ See Regionalist Paper No. 4, *Federal Support for Regionalism: Understanding Trends and Available Resources*, which explains the purposes of MSAs, and Regionalist Paper No. 2, *The Regional Structure: The History of Regional Cooperation in Hampton Roads*, for a discussion on how the merger occurred.

⁴ Organizational website at www.hrpdc.org

⁵ Organizational website at www.hrp.org

regional attractiveness on a national level. Many important private regional cultural, business and civic organizations have been created as well⁶.

Important structural examples of cross-river separatism, however, continue to exist. We have two prominent newspapers, one on each side of the river, a situation with its own pros and cons, but also one that so far has seriously dampened cross-river understanding and commitment. We have two work force development organizations⁷, but in reality our citizens and commuting employees adhere to no boundaries. This very topic is one warranting highest priority attention and investment, for in the global economy, knowledgeable work forces and quality local education and training resources, region-wide, are essential⁸. The Peninsula and Southside manage separate Chambers of Commerce and separate United Way organizations. We have separate regional jail authorities and separate waste management public service authorities, which may well be the best decisions for these particular government functions.

Historically, the James River has been quite a divide. During the nation's first hundred years, south of the James with the exception of Norfolk, was farmland; the northern shores of the James from Williamsburg through Richmond were more developed and were more readily connected to the educated domains of northern Virginia and Washington⁹. The historic difficulty of getting from one side of the James River to the other cannot be overemphasized. Ferries were the usual method. The James River Bridge was not built until 1928, and it lay at the far western edge of the region, connecting Newport News and Suffolk. Hampton and Norfolk were not connected by the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel until 1957. The river barrier bred a history of sharp competition for maritime trade and fostered a natural development of separate institutions. Based on these old patterns, after WWII the federal government created separate metropolitan statistical areas for Southside Tidewater and the Peninsula, and in the 1960s the Commonwealth established separate planning districts. On this framework, consolidated service organizations, public and private, naturally developed separately within each of these zones.

In more recent years, as the business community successively pressed for regional consolidations of the MSAs, planning districts, ports, and other institutions, the Peninsula felt it did not always get fairly treated.

⁶ See Regionalist Paper No. 3: *Understanding the Regional Organizations in Hampton Roads Today: Contemporary Regionalism and Where we Stand in the Process.*

⁷ The Hampton Roads Workforce Development Board (HRWDB) serves Southside and is staffed by the Opportunity, Inc. organization, and the Peninsula Workforce Development (PWD) organization serves the Peninsula and is managed by Thomas Nelson Community College.

⁸ See Regionalist Paper No. 7, *The Importance of Regionalism in the Global Economy: Why Must We Adjust?* for a discussion on the need for and process of being competitive in the global economy.

⁹ Parke Rouse, Jr., *Below the James Lies Dixie*, (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1968) provides abundant anecdotes of the old day cultures on both sides of the James River.

In the next century, Southside overtook the Peninsula in population and economic development, largely due to the significant expansion of the U.S Navy's presence in World Wars I and II which persisted through the Cold War. The commercial port also contributed to economic growth in the post-World War II era. The Southside also saw significant expansion in education, including the establishment of Old Dominion University, the arts and cultural activities. Yet, this progress did not serve to bring Southside closer to the Peninsula; indeed, in some respects it made Southside insular—able in the eyes of many to meet its needs and grow on its own.

A surge of tunnel building in the 1950s and 1960s transformed the region, bringing Southside and the Peninsula closer together than ever before and providing a measurable boost to the regional economy, benefiting both sides of the river. Much was lastingly achieved, but, unfortunately, the momentum was not sustained. The blessings of improved transportation and communications have given way to traffic delays, congestion, and frustration. Some sense a new insularity is emerging. Today, the divide is depicted by the Tunnels, intentionally capitalized, no small issues. Today also, there are the usual political questions of turf, all aggravated after World War II by the series of successful and unsuccessful annexation endeavors that transpired throughout Hampton Roads and whose effects still linger.

Another perspective on regional cooperation that I want to share with you is how this issue is generally viewed from the Peninsula. It is a fact that many of us see the Peninsula as a separate and distinct place from Southside Hampton Roads. This is true partly because of geography, partly because of living and working patterns, and is certainly reinforced by our separate institutions. The Peninsula has its own newspaper; it has its own Chamber of Commerce, its own business roundtable, and a distinctly identifiable economy.

Because of this separate identity that has been the experience of most Peninsula citizens, there remains a certain feeling of independence or separation from Southside Hampton Roads even though our common interests are recognized. Among the business community and individuals in leadership around the Peninsula, there is a perspective that could be described something like this: “Whenever a Peninsula and Southside institution merge, the good stuff ends up on the Southside.” For example, when the ports merged almost all of the port-related employment gravitated to Norfolk. When the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission was consolidated the main office went to Chesapeake. When the Hampton Roads Partnership was created the office went to Norfolk. And, yes, the same thing happened with the consolidated Economic Development Alliance.

While such developments are understandable given the weight of the population on the Southside, it is certainly not inaccurate for Peninsula leaders to have a certain amount of trepidation that consolidation equals loss. It also affects the willingness of people to travel and engage in meetings.

Nonetheless, and almost certainly, it is safe to say that the so-called cross-river divide today is terribly exaggerated. On close examination, you will find emotional differences between cities or counties within the Peninsula and within the Southside as well, but these receive less media attention. Closer examination will also find scores of emotional differences even between neighborhoods in any one city or county. Such differences are human and very normal until and unless they are politicized or become political pandering tools or mottos. Absent clear and compelling regional definitions and structures, it is safer to stay with the known of local governments. Building on the best of the past trends cited above, however, and improving public comprehension of a useful Hampton Roads-style regional approach, will do much to generate the will power among current leaders necessary to move past these inhibitors and into the next useful realm of regionalism for Hampton Roads.

After decades of effort, Twin Cities Metro (TCM)¹⁰ was formed to serve the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area. Not unlike Hampton Roads, the upper reaches of the Mississippi River divide these two center cities and their respective neighboring towns and counties. Like us, they have a two-hundred year history of differences, but they finally realized that some government functions were unquestionably regional in nature and beyond the ability of geographically-limited individual municipalities to handle. The statutorily state-established TCM Charter establishes the organization as a political subdivision, separate and distinct from existing city or county political bodies, and empowers the organization to carry out a short list of government functions, a regional governance list that is tailored to suit the real modern day, regional needs of the Twin Cities region. In particular, Twin Cities Metro has assumed decision making responsibilities and operational authority for regional transportation, regional land use, and regional environmental and sprawl management government functions.

There are other examples where cross-river, cross-state boundary, and cross-inner-outer-city stress lines have been managed to one degree or another and have achieved impressive regional coordination. Without political or legal underpinnings and thus less formal, but dramatically successful, are the twin Kansas City and Greater Austin regional solutions. With considerable public support amounting to an attitude of regional citizenship,¹¹ and with a hard working and determined team of business leaders, Kansas City, MO and Kansas City IL formed a cross-state regional compact that guided their metropolitan area's tourism and supporting industries to an organized and a many-fold

¹⁰ Myron Orfield, *American Metropolitanities: The New Suburban Reality*, (The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2002), discussed at length in this and other books, the Twin Cities Metro commission is a prominent case study of modern day regional structural arrangements.

¹¹ See Regionalist Paper No. 10, *Regional Citizenship: The Sine-Qua-Non, or Not?*

increase in activities. With similar public and business initiatives, Greater Austin built a dot.com consortium that in just a few years, re-captured a major IBM contract from Silicon Valley and captured the nation's Sematech Corporation, designed to save the U.S chip industry, and other major dot.com ventures. These were public-private partnership led regionalism activities that have become case studies because of their success in the business and economic development areas. These are two examples of regionalism, in one sense, on opposite poles of the spectrum, one politically established, thus with full legitimacy, and one public-privately established with exceptional leadership and full awareness of regional economic development, wage scale and quality of life needs. There may be a hundred other examples¹² where metropolitan or regional governance matters have been advanced across the United States. Portland, OR, with elected-at-large regional leaders; Louisville, KY, one of the nation's most recent cases of regionalizing; Nashville, TN, who counseled visiting Hampton Roads leaders on their just-completed regionalization process; Halifax, NS, an example of collectivizing the efforts of three cities that look almost like Norfolk, Chesapeake and Portsmouth; and Charlotte, NC, a certain competitor to our region, are a few of these examples. No two of these regional end results are the same, not even close. In every case, the result was unique to the traditions, history and level of existing public interest and political will that was available. Note that there is also a list of metropolitan areas around the country where regionalism efforts, some that have been ongoing for years, continue and others that have spent millions on the effort, but have failed.

As technology-driven opportunities arise and must be pursued, or as population and economic activities continue to grow year after year throughout Hampton Roads, new and usually larger scale challenges inevitably arise that require attention, increasingly beyond the capacity of individual local jurisdictions to manage. Such challenges need professional skills, broad vision and a regional perspective. We are in the same boat in so many ways. If as a region we are not vigorous, both the Peninsula and Southside risk becoming transportation cul-de-sacs, as major highways or potential high speed rail gets promoted and established along the eastern seaboard between New York, Washington, Richmond, Raleigh and Atlanta.

Region wide land use questions have taken on a new urgency to include managing sprawl, once a path to new homes, new ventures and exciting exurbs, but now a source of unexpected costs for the extent of spread-out public services required. The urgency of macro or regional land use issues is seen also in the need for collectively shared commitments, plans and policies to protect our most important economic and cultural

¹² See Regionalist Paper No. 8, *Regionalism as Advanced Elsewhere: the Spectrum of Regional Structures that have arisen in North America: What are Our Options?*

assets (port complexes, battlefields, military bases, museums) from irreversible encroachment. The combined strength of coordinated decisions and planning on these issues is overdue and unquestionably regional in nature. No one doubts the overdue need for a realistic and effective transportation plan, one that can honestly be funded and is not a chimera. New demands in homeland security, disaster preparedness and management, hurricane evacuation, and an improved work force development program will not decrease and are needs that have become more regional in scope than ever before. Cross-river issues do stand out, and they need to be acknowledged, addressed and managed.

To move regionalism forward and to get beyond the worries that underlie the two questions above, we need to stem the fear that is often associated with the concept of regionalism and even with the word regionalism itself. Regionalism is a natural process, a process that seeks to meet larger challenges with larger capacity governance and management methods to gain efficiencies, provide better services to the public, and to assuredly plan for the future. We need to realize also that regionalism for Hampton Roads must necessarily be unique for our region and one hundred percent sensitive to historic and current day realities that make up our public culture and future possibilities. Here, we are talking about the definitions and boundaries to oneness that will apply to Hampton Roads, and to the limits and character of any resulting regional governance body we may create – public-private only, or statutorily state-established – and with elected or appointed leadership, or with combinations of these features.

We already have a regional flag, a wonderful design, created in 1998 and amazingly, the only regional flag in the United States¹³. From a legal perspective, the authorities exist for the public and the leaders of Hampton Roads to design and to go through the referenda, charter writing or other processes necessary to legitimize our regional solution¹⁴. This cannot be the product alone of a top-down approach. Certainly, we will need top-down, enlightened leadership, but the process, where successful elsewhere, always required public comprehension (clear, simple regional model) and support. Neither can the product be arrived at in a local vacuum. Given the original constitutional power of state governments, it is essential, even obligatory, that state participation and promotion be central to the development and effectuation process that establishes mechanisms and structures of regional governance. No successful regionalism efforts throughout the country have ever happened without the involvement and support of state leadership.

¹³ See *Flags of the World* website, www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/us-va-hr.html, and also see Regionalist Paper No. 1, *Regionalism: What Is It? Why is it Important to Hampton Roads* for a description and history of the flag of Hampton Roads.

¹⁴ A finding of the Future of Hampton Roads' Regional Structure Project's *Law Committee Report*, 2005.

And lastly, where to start? For this, our suggestions include building on the most wide-ranging of regional structures that already exist, notably the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, the Hampton Roads Partnership and the visioning Future of Hampton Roads organizations. These organizations need to greatly increase their public relations¹⁵ output in ways that convey regional, cross-river oneness, where appropriate, and in ways that emphasize the mutual cross-river problems that need attention, thus the need for mutual cross-river commitments to solve these problems, and not just the near-term problems, but also the ten and twenty year from now problems that are predictable even today. These organizations need to collectively mature and articulate a practical, yet visionary, definition of regionalism in Hampton Roads and inform the regional public on these matters.

As for the absolutely essential coordination with state level leadership, we need to energize our relatively dormant Hampton Roads legislative caucus to act not as super city councilmen in Richmond, reinforcing the separatism of municipalities or groups of municipalities, but to act, where appropriate in support of a regional agenda. In this regard, we also need to create our own intergovernmental mechanisms that will permit us to provide this caucus with the voted-upon, collective decisions of all the municipal leaders in the defined region of Hampton Roads. In this area, we have multiple regional organizations where the membership includes elected representatives or the leaders themselves from all of the region's municipal governments. These organizations are authorized and empowered to act on assigned areas of responsibility when all municipalities agree, but we do not have mechanisms in place that will permit the collective group to act if there is one or more dissensions¹⁶. It will be hard to energize the caucus if we cannot transmit decisions, an ailment that must be addressed in designing a regional governance solution, and one that has stopped progress elsewhere.

There is sufficient evidence of the oneness of the region of Hampton Roads, and there is a sufficient record of constructive and landmark examples of cross-river cooperation to declare that regionalism could move forward in Hampton Roads. As a metropolitan area, Hampton Roads is already considered an above average region, but new regional demands are evident and require attention, or our regional competitiveness, wage scales, and quality of life will fall behind.

Edward E. Brickell and Ray Taylor, Board members, Future of Hampton Roads, Inc., February 2006

¹⁵ This is a major weakness with these major regional organizations either having no outreach program as a matter of policy, or doing the bare minimum to satisfy the words, but not the intent, of their Virginia Code establishment requirement, or having an outreach effort well below federal intent in the case of the MPO.

¹⁶ James Oliver *Virginians Need to Take a Bold Look at Their Governance*, (Charlottesville: The Virginia Newsletter, Volume 75, No. 9, 1999), p. 4, refers to an analysis of James F. Babcock, board member, Future of Hampton Roads, Inc.