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What it means for the region to be first

TOM FRANTZ AND DEBORAH STEARNS

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Hampton Roads is the center of media and public attention as the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Godspeed, Discovery and Susan Constant at Cape Henry and establishment of the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown commences.

The Hampton Roads Partnership, which we are pleased to co-chair, encourages all of our residents to attend activities across the region that are associated with this celebration. We are building on this history ourselves through a new branding initiative that is based on the fact that Cape Henry in Virginia Beach and Jamestown in James City County are the boundaries of "Hampton Roads, America's First Region."

We do not quibble with Roanoke Island's right to honor its Lost Colony, which began and ended before Jamestown, or with the 442-year old heritage possessed by St. Augustine, Fla., the oldest "city" on the American mainland. The rationale for "America's First Region" is about our desire to remind our local citizens of our shared past and common destiny.

Today more than ever, our region needs to look at itself and determine how we will meet the challenges this unfolding century presents. Will we make wise decisions on transportation, public utility and educational infrastructure? Will we protect and expand industries that have kept our community's economy stable, as well as attract and develop new ones that will enable our children to be our next generation of productive workers? Will we continue to offer visitors the kind of quality natural, historic and manmade attractions that have made Hampton Roads a popular vacation destination? Will we groom political and civic leaders with the compassion to care for the least able among us while forging alliances with each other to grow the local economy, keep our taxes low and provide viable public services?

The opportunity to be involved with the partnership and its membership of dedicated elected officials, military commanders, university presidents, business executives and others has convinced us that we have much knowledge and insight to share with each other. Indeed the brainpower and entrepreneurial talent in this region, not to mention the organizational and technological acumen of our military community are formidable. We need to nurture, harness and unleash it for our mutual benefit.

Why can't the region that was the first to establish representative government become the first to coalesce behind a transportation plan to enhance mobility and the movement of goods and services? Why can't the region that gave birth to the space program and in-vitro fertilization in the United States

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become the first to erase homelessness and make our young people the most prepared for tomorrow's jobs? If we can deliver the first ironclad warship, we can model and simulate a way to pursue peace around the globe.

It's nice to be first as a region; but it's far better to be first in scientific research and disease prevention, fair housing, respect for other races and creeds, safe streets and environmental quality. This is the story behind our branding campaign. We believe our citizens are proud to live, do business, raise children and contribute to the general welfare of Hampton Roads and our corner of the commonwealth.

With the 400th anniversary festivities beginning, let's set a goal to create a future filled with firsts. In that way, we can say, with no debate, that Hampton Roads will always be "America's First Region."

Frantz and Stearns are co-chairs of Hampton Roads Partnership, a public-private nonprofit committed to pursuing regional competitiveness for Hampton Roads.

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