

Chris Bonney on:

Regional Envy or Regional Denial?

What We Miss by Not Believing in a Region

Is Hampton Roads really a *region*? Do we look like a region? Are we willing to act as a region?

There are few things as important in determining the destiny of our Hampton Roads communities as the answers to these questions.

Competition for everything from good jobs to healthcare resources to shopping to entertainment choices to federal tax dollars is based today on competition between regions, not individual cities or states. Indeed, if you talk to anyone involved in economic development you'll hear almost nothing but how we want to be the next Raleigh-Durham, San Jose, Austin, Indianapolis or any number of other regions that are outperforming us in these challenging economic times.

There are many reasons why these regions are doing better than Hampton Roads. A lot of them have to do with their diversity and the educational attainment, innovativeness and entrepreneurial natures of their populations. But a lot also has to do with how well the municipalities within these regions and their state and federal legislative delegations work together to seek and promote opportunity.

Unfortunately, unless we're mobilizing forces and resources to attract a professional sports team, it seems Hampton Roads' citizens and civic, business and elected leaders lack the will to cooperate regionally not only on critical issues like transportation, but on other important issues that impact our quality of life and economic vitality.

We *Are* a Region...

Whether we feel any affinity with other people throughout the Hampton Roads region or prefer to deny any connection, the one thing that is settled is that we *are* a region.

Regions are defined by the federal government based on the presence of a dominant urban center, or cluster of centers, surrounded by contiguous municipalities with high population density and a high level of commuting between these contiguous municipalities. We meet these guidelines, so much so that our region runs from James City County down the Peninsula through South Hampton Roads into Northeastern North Carolina. Every day we come and go across municipal boundaries and the state line without giving it a second thought. We go to work, shop, visit friends, worship and take part in social, recreational and entertainment activities without regard to locality.

The same is happening with businesses. A quick scan of the telephone directory will demonstrate to any doubter the hundreds of businesses that have either adopted or changed their names to include “Hampton Roads” to indicate their intention to serve the entire region.

...With Regional Challenges

Hampton Roads is saddled with a number of challenges to social cohesion, including large bodies of water, individual localities with proud histories and state law that is perceived to discourage cooperation.

Yet many of the nation’s regions are challenged by similarly divisive and isolating topography, distinct local identities, dialects and historically contentious social and political relationships. Are the features of Hampton Roads any more complex than those of San Diego, San Francisco or Seattle? We are certainly not the only metropolitan area in the country to cross state lines.

Moreover, there are many issues that Hampton Roads communities face that are regional in scope, not the least of which are transportation, Homeland Security planning and implementation, public water supplies, air and water quality and the management of public safety. To make each municipality—sixteen of them in all—address each of these issues individually is wasteful and inefficient.

Even more important, regions are the yardstick by which the federal government determines the level of funding that will be returned to taxpayers in the form of support for public services such as transportation that are required to be planned and coordinated on a regional rather than local basis. Regional needs and capacities are also the measures used by businesses, institutions and even state governments to determine the merit of everything from new stores to expansion of job opportunities to hospitals and licensing for advanced medical testing and treatment facilities.

Where Are We Now?

We have documented daily interaction. We have fifty years of success with WHRO, a regional partnership of Hampton Roads school systems that proves that we can work together effectively and efficiently when we have a shared purpose. Yet many Hampton Roads citizens continue to pride themselves on their contempt for the word “region.” Even some elected officials and long-time civic leaders privately express skepticism and disclaim genuine interest in working together with their peers “across the water.”

As a result of our inability to pull together to compete, other regions of the country get good paying jobs that could have come here. Federal support for transportation, education and safety goes elsewhere. Senior Defense Department officers who control the single largest segment of our regional economy are already on the record to say that they will not recommend any expansion of military employment or economic activity in Hampton Roads until the region does something about its transportation problems.

At the state level, our lack of regional citizen collaboration, and especially the lack of cohesion and collaboration among the members of our state legislative caucus, enables other parts of Virginia to use tax dollars paid by Hampton Roads residents that should have come back for use in Hampton Roads. Consequently, our roadways remain potholed and congested while Northern Virginia's get rebuilt. Rail service is expanded to small cities like Lynchburg and Charlottesville while a population of almost a million and a half in Hampton Roads is ignored or told to wait.

At the local level, Hampton Roads municipal governments and school systems are more expensive to operate because of limited collaboration, resulting in higher tax burdens for Hampton Roads taxpayers.

The Only Thing Holding Us Back is Our Own Will

How did we reach this position? The answer lies in a mixture of our own traditions and two myths.

Well into modern times, the bodies of water that define and unite our region also divided us. Separation between the Southside and the Peninsula and between Norfolk and Portsmouth was once reinforced by the absence of fixed transportation links and later by tolls, by long distance telephone charges and by separate newspapers that treated the opposite sides of the water like foreign countries. It was the harm done by this parochialism that led to the creation of "Hampton Roads" as our regional identifier.

The choice of "Hampton Roads" was not simply a gesture to our region's history, but rather a move to use a more geographically specific and differentiated term than "Tidewater" to draw together a region in much the way that "Twin Cities" and "Silicon Valley" give greater meaning and strength to the cities and counties in their respective regions.

Have you ever wondered why this area doesn't have some of the stores and businesses and employers that you would think our area is big enough to support? The answer lies in Virginia's recognition of independent cities and counties. This model is unique to our state and confounding to people outside of Virginia. When businesses outside the state begin their search for workforce population and buying power data for our region, they frequently look at the data for "Norfolk" or "Virginia Beach" or "Newport News," assuming that these names encompass all of the region. When they do this, however, they see only the data for these individual independent cities. When they look at "Williamsburg," for example, they don't see the booming James City County that is just steps away because they assume the county data is included in the city data, or vice versa.

Only in Virginia this is not the case. When outsiders think they're looking at us as a region they aren't seeing all of us. They don't see the strength of our region's diversity, its full labor force, its buying power or its growth potential. As a result, they bypass Hampton Roads.

Moreover, talk of regional cooperation and greater efficiency and collaboration in local governance has labored under a generally pessimistic cloud wherein two frequently cited myths have been repeated so often that many take it for granted that they are actually legitimate obstacles to action.

It is easy to conclude that Virginia’s model of independent cities and counties makes it necessary for each municipality within any region in the state to create its own independent, self-sustaining economy. It is an accepted belief among many that Hampton Roads’ communities are compelled to be competitors rather than partners, with elected officials and municipal workers obligated to address only that which falls within their municipal boundaries.

The truth is, Virginia law does not discourage, and in fact *encourages* municipalities to explore opportunities for collaboration in an increasing number of operational areas in order to achieve greater efficiency in the use of taxpayer dollars.

The second myth is that the “Dillon Rule”—named for the Iowa judge whose 1868 ruling established a precedent that gives state legislatures considerable power over localities—prevents collaboration and revenue sharing across municipal lines.

This, too, is untrue. The Dillon Rule requires localities to get permission from the General Assembly when any revenue issues are involved. However, the Dillon Rule has no bearing on operational partnerships, particularly those that result in the reduction of government costs and more competitive regional strength. Furthermore, Virginia’s General Assembly has established a precedent allowing adjacent municipalities that collaborate on economic development to share revenues from any development that occurs within their shared area.

What *is* true about the Dillon Rule is that its use as an excuse for avoiding any serious exploration of regional cooperation or government reform is so pervasive as to have risen to the point of perceived legitimacy.

If you take these two myths out of the conversation and take into account that state law encourages collaboration among neighboring municipalities it becomes clear that the greatest obstacle to greater governmental efficiency and reform in our region is our lack of genuine will to seek either efficiency or reform.

What’s So Bad About Being a Region?

The way regions are defined—e.g. by population density and commuting patterns—may seem irrelevant because it overlooks elements of affinity based on shared values, interests, traditions and other socially unifying factors. Some believe we don’t have those unifying elements. However, the documented extent to which Hampton Roads residents cross municipal boundaries on a daily basis tells us a lot about the extent to which we *do* share space and time and purpose with people from other parts of the region.

What does regional pride look like? Listen to how *Texas Monthly* editor Mimi Swartz recently described the pride of Texans:

“Texans love Texas in a way that can border on the pathological. That’s not the stuff of moth-eaten stereotypes, either.”

Have you ever heard anyone say that about Hampton Roads?

For some Hampton Roads residents—particularly the most politically and socially parochial—admitting that they have a connection to a region is first step on a slippery slope that they believe ends in a dystopian regional government. Yet while successful regions do tend to have effective coordinating bodies, there are simply no cases where the kinds of worst-case scenarios the skeptics tout have come to pass.

What are the advantages of being part of a region?

- A region acknowledges that we are connected and have shared destiny.
- Acknowledging that there are interconnected issues that impact all the residents of a region enables representatives of different municipalities to come together to address these issues in an efficient and orderly manner.
- It has been estimated that municipalities could reduce the cost of local government by as much as 15% by cooperating on the purchasing of goods and services.
- Adopting a regional presence *adds* to our identity and increases the opportunity to create a single umbrella identify for the region that increases pride, reduces confusion and enhances the value of each constituent municipality.
- A region grants its citizens the license to look up, to think bigger and to draw upon a larger pool of citizen and leadership talents.

What are some of the things a region *isn't*?

- A region *isn't* a government, but rather the formal acknowledgement that there are some issues that touch us all and that can be best solved by addressing them cooperatively.
- A region does *not* replace the individual identities of its component municipalities.
- A region does *not* deny the rights of citizens to choose their local elected officials or make local decisions.
- A region does not require giving up anything except self-centeredness.

Those who ignore the connections within regions are not just in denial, given the facts of our documented interconnectivity, but denying themselves the opportunity for a better quality of life. Former Virginia governor Jim Gilmore once bristled at *Washington Post* writer Neil Pierce's suggestion that the Metro rail line had brought suburban Northern Virginia into a modern metropolitan region. Yet today it is commonly acknowledged that the Metro set the stage for a more than 1,000% increase in the number of the kinds of livable neighborhoods Northern Virginia residents said they wanted.

What Is *Our* Common Thread?

If regional unity is defined based on shared values, interests, experiences, language or traditions, what are the common threads of Hampton Roads? In short, what is the personality of Hampton Roads?

Southside and Peninsula residents taking part in a 2010 study conducted by Christopher Newport University for the Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization identified four elements that citizens believe define and differentiate our region:

- Our local waters.
- Our affiliation with national defense.
- Our role in American history.
- Transportation gridlock.
- “Balkanized” localities and uncooperative elected officials.

Beyond these, however, study participants could not identify any unifying characteristics, ethics or cultural values aside from an undercurrent of political and social conservatism.

Attempts to identify a unifying geographic or visual icon for the region were likewise unsuccessful, with most study participants ultimately suggesting that if we have a regional touchstone, it is the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel, an aging facility that has become more of a chronic obstacle to mobility than a symbol of progress, connectivity and growth.

Study participants also agreed that:

- We value the water and our maritime assets.
- We’re proud of the military presence.
- We respect history, but also recognize that our region’s best-known moments occurred hundreds of years ago and, as such, distract us from creating moments of contemporary innovativeness.
- We’re embarrassed by our outdated transportation infrastructure and believe it puts our region at a competitive disadvantage.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Asked to describe what they believe our region might look like in twenty-five years, the participants in the 2010 Transportation Planning Organization study were not very positive in their outlook. They said they see no reason to not believe that:

- Transportation will only become a more crippling problem.
- Local elected officials will *not* care enough to work together to solve this and other problems of a regional nature.
- Hampton Roads will be a weak competitor in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.
- Hampton Roads leaders and citizens will be too slow and too focused on the past to be able to prevent the region from being left behind in the future.

Some have suggested that Hampton Roads suffers from an inferiority complex, that we don't believe we're worthy of better and that we set our expectations low so as not to be disappointed. They say we are conservative out of fear rather than confidence.

These observations are debatable. No matter what the actual case, though, it is clear that "Hampton Roads" is not only a name that has no institutional owners, but which has no agency or institution charged with giving this name meaning and creating greater awareness of it.

Most of America knows where the "Twin Cities" are. We know where "Silicon Valley" is. But does anyone know where "Hampton Roads" is?

When one travels into our region, it's possible that one might be greeted by a sign that announces, such as when coming east from Richmond on I-64, "James City County, A Hampton Roads Community." But how is anyone to know what "Hampton Roads" is? When you arrive in Hampton Roads, just where have you arrived? What *is* Hampton Roads?

Is Hampton Roads "America's Defense Coast"? Is it "Virginia's Trade Gateway to the World"? Is it, as one failed attempt at regional tourism marketing attempted to establish, "Virginia's Waterfront"?

For "Hampton Roads" to have meaning, we must give it meaning. Right now, no one has that responsibility¹. Consequently, the name is left adrift and subject to varying misperceptions.

How Can We Embrace the Future with Confidence Rather than Wait for it to Happen to Us?

If we want our region to work better, here are thirteen action steps we can take right now as citizens of Hampton Roads to achieve positive change:

Awareness & Identity:

1. Acknowledge that citizens of the region have the power to influence change in attitudes and in governance and elected representation, and that the only thing that stands in the way of progress is our will.
2. Embark upon a large-scale public project designed specifically to draw the region's citizens together. Two examples: 1) a major regional public works project such as a new signature bridge to replace the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel; and 2) the convening of year-long and widely inclusive citizen dialog about the future of the region.
3. Create a distinct, differentiated and, most importantly, *contemporary* marketing "position" for "Hampton Roads."

¹ The writer recognizes that a program was developed to brand Hampton Roads as "America's First Region." But what does that tell anyone about Hampton Roads other than that we were something to contend with four hundred years ago? A regional brand should be forward-looking and should give a clue to what a region is about today.

4. Develop signage and other communications materials that create awareness that one is in, or has arrived in Hampton Roads; for example, signs welcoming you to “Hampton Roads, Virginia’s Trade Gateway to the World.”
5. Insist that regional institutions—that is, everything from our community colleges to our international airport to our new semi-pro football team—be identified as “Hampton Roads” rather than as “Tidewater,” “Norfolk,” or “Virginia.”
6. Look within our own academic institutions and think tanks or retain outside consultants to provoke the region with a series of “What if?” scenarios that challenge Hampton Roads citizens and leaders to study, consider and reach for higher and more uplifting goals.

Cooperation and Collaboration:

7. Insist that local elected officials instruct city and county administrators to look for opportunities to collaborate with neighboring municipalities.
8. Insist that local elected officials study and consider models of revenue sharing that are already in place in other parts of the state as a means of encouraging collaboration and reducing economic competition between communities within our region.
9. Insist that local municipal representatives to regional bodies act with a regional perspective rather than from a defensive local stance.

Greater Legislative Support for the Region:

10. Insist that our state delegates work more closely together to represent our region’s interests and goals and to compete more aggressively with other regions within the state and beyond.
11. Insist that our state legislative delegation work with representatives from other Virginia regions and appropriate universities or public agencies to explore and ultimately create a more relevant, efficient and modern model of governance that reflects a contemporary understanding out how Virginia cities, counties and regions relate to one another.
12. Insist that our state legislative delegation act to restore adequate funding so that the region’s transportation needs get the respect they deserve and that Hampton Roads communities and citizens are not further fragmented and isolated by tolls.

Capacity for Change:

13. Look to Hampton Roads’ youth and young adult population to identify and nurture the individuals we believe will be best suited to assume roles of regional leadership in the years to come.

A *Daily Press* editorial recently described Hampton Roads as a region “on the brink.” The precipice it described was not a good one. The writer made frank observations about our region’s municipalities and our state legislators that many have felt for years but been reluctant to say out loud.

If our local and state elected representatives and civic leaders are not interested in or willing to address the real and serious issues that face our region, Hampton Roads citizens must step forward and insist that maintaining the status quo no longer be our default position. If not, our region stands a very good chance of being left not only off the rail line, but behind the times and behind in a variety of other ways that directly impact the economic vitality of the region, our cost of living and the quality of our life in Hampton Roads.

If, on the other hand, we choose to take a more proactive approach and bring citizens into the process throughout, the resolution of the region’s large issues and citizen consensus behind a preferred future will make resolution of smaller issues move much more quickly and efficiently, immediately enhance our quality of life, improve trust and citizen satisfaction, and make our region’s our future as noteworthy, groundbreaking and exciting as our past.

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