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## REGIONAL COOPERATION

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our current system for dealing with matters requiring tough decisions is wholly inadequate to the number and nature of the issues of regional consequence facing us.

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WHEN IT COMES to running Hampton Roads, we're between a rock and a hard place: the rock of the past and the hard place that is the future. The rock seems impregnable, our ties of sentiment and politics to each of the 16 cities and counties claiming sovereignty over that portion of the region's land and citizens within their boundaries. The hard place is that the most important decisions facing Hampton Roads will be at the scale of the metropolitan region, not the scale of individual local governments. Caught between the past and the future, we simply lack the means to govern ourselves well.

It's not that we haven't tried. Regional cooperation has been a staple of our mayors and managers for 40 years, resulting in many interlocal agreements and a few regional organizations. A telling fact, however, is common to all these interlocal and regional agreements: They are not examples of strong democracy; they are managerial initiatives, and though they may be businesslike, they are essentially elitist and nondemocratic. We've invented a system for regional decision-making that offers technical accountability to local elected officials, but in reality is governance by professional managers from which open citizen participation and the most essential values of democracy have quite literally been discouraged by design. It is the major flaw in our system and explains why we find it so hard to move ahead on the big issues in the region.

Our current system for dealing with matters requiring tough decisions is wholly inadequate to the number and nature of the issues of regional consequence facing us. There are many reasons for this, but one is paramount: We don't have a regional citizenry. We are citizens of our cities and counties, but we are not yet citizens of our region. Our system denies us the opportunity to fully participate as citizens in regional decision-making. The lack of a regional constituency allows narrow special interests to dominate and delay regional decision-making.

One modest proposal would be to vastly expand the opportunity for residents of Hampton Roads to participate in decisions of regional consequence. Without restructuring local government or creating an unwanted regional government, we can encourage the creation of a regional citizenry to participate in planning, evaluating and deciding issues of regional consequence in Hampton Roads. Consider transportation as an example. We have some \$12 billion in transportation needs and have proposed some \$4 billion in projects already identified. Because of the ongoing difficulties of developing consensus on priorities among the 16 jurisdictions, Hampton Roads' transportation projects have been delayed for years, costing hundreds of millions of dollars in inflationary adjustments.

Suppose a small fraction of 1 percent of the \$4 billion construction funds, \$10 million, had been devoted to engaging the region's citizens in education and discussion about regional transportation options, costs, plans and timelines. That would create opportunities to get beyond the limited perspectives of special interest groups and individual localities. Involving the public by offering easy access to a regional transportation conversation could not help but bring support for real action on the issues.

Democracy works.

Involving the public in public issues on a regional scale without creating another level of government truly is a 21st century problem. Three ideas may be helpful:

First, 21st century technology offers ways to connect people across the region face to face in small groups, large-scale meetings and networks with mediated content serving as common context for information sharing, debate and deliberation.

Second, the growing nonprofit sector and a number of corporate entities see the region as their territory and, in conjunction with local governments, can help enable regionwide discussions of important public issues in their special areas of expertise. Enabling people with direct personal interest in certain issues to participate from home in regionwide conversations will help create a regional citizenry with the ability to move policy.

Third, concern about an increasing disconnect between the public and government has led new organizations to develop technologies and techniques to engage citizens in public issues in new ways. Our region has one, The Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement. Such organizations, joining with government agencies and the nonprofit sector, help support the idea of regional citizenry, with the goal of enabling a broad, informed constituency for action on important regional issues. Democracy works.