Memorandum

To: Directors of Hampton Roads District Planning Commission and Hampton Roads Partnership

CC: Professor Justin Hollander, Tufts University

From: Lydia Rainville

Date: 5/9/2011

Re: Hampton Roads Regional Vision Recommendations

1. Introduction

My name is Lydia Rainville and I am a graduate student at Tufts University in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. This memorandum is the result of a semester-long exploration of tools available to regional policy and planning practitioners and their application to the unique natural, economic, and cultural elements of the Hampton Roads region. Hampton Roads, located in southeastern Virginia, has a coastal geography and natural deepwater harbor that resulted in a region that remains prominent for its major ports, its role as host to a large number of military facilities, its cultural and historic significance dating back to colonial times, and high volumes of tourism to Virginia Beach and the historic triangle.

Despite the opportunities these unique features provide and a the forward-looking tone of current regional planning efforts in Hampton Roads, the approach taken by
the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC) and the Hampton Roads Partnership (HRP) in developing Vision Hampton Roads, the comprehensive economic development strategy released in 2010, has not been a progressive one. Rather, the approach is economic growth-centered and is anchored in decades old planning tradition not reflective of updated methods, ideologies, and tools available for public participation, citizen engagement, and communication.

Additionally, examining Vision Hampton Roads reveals a fragmented, rather than a comprehensive approach to planning in the region. This memorandum contains recommendations for how to improve future planning initiatives within the Hampton Roads, Virginia region for the future that represent both short-term and long-term changes to your planning approach.

2. Hampton Roads Location, Planning Institutions, Population, and Economy

My focus for this study is the area under the jurisdiction of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC), which is an area that includes most of the Virginia-Beach-Newport News, VA-NC Metropolitan area, with the exception of the counties located in North Carolina. Figures 1 and 2 show the Hampton Roads Region as defined by HRPDC.
Hampton Roads is made up of the ten cities (Chesapeake, Franklin, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, and Williamsburg) and six counties (Gloucester, Isle of Wight, James City, Southampton, Surry, and York.

*Regional Planning Institutions:*
To begin my examination I sought to understand the regional planning institutional context. A number of agencies are involved in the various components of the planning process in the Hampton Roads Region. The primary regional planning agency is the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, which represents the sixteen local government jurisdiction of the region. The HRPDC conducts regional planning studies related to economics, the environment, physical and environmental planning, and transportation, and also provides technical assistance to municipalities in the region.

The Hampton Roads Partnership, the organization responsible for *Vision Hampton Roads* and other economic planning within the region is a public-private organization, which is comprised of a Board of Directors that include the chief elected officials of the 17 local city and county governments within the region, as well as members of the business, academic, military, and labor communities. The
Executive Director of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission serves on the Executive Committee of the Hampton Roads Partnership.

Housing issues are dealt with separately from economic, physical, or environmental planning. Instead, they are addressed through a third organization, the Hampton Roads Housing Consortium, which includes public, private, non-profit, and individual members, with HRPDC as one of the public members.

Population: The United States 2010 Census places the population of the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) at approximately 1.67 million, making it the 39th largest MSA in the nation. The demographic breakdown of the region’s population is presented in Table 1. Information from the 2010 Hampton Roads Data Book indicates that between 2005 and 2009, the population grew at less than one percent per year (Hampton Roads Planning District Commission 2010).

<table>
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<th>Subject</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tr>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.
To get a better sense of variation within the region, I looked for information on distribution of population, as well as variation in income level within the region to get a sense of whether there are spatial or socioeconomic equity issues. I could not find this information available in the Hampton Roads Data Book, in Vision Hampton Roads itself, or anywhere readily accessible on the HRPDC website. An initial recommendation for HRPDC is to provide data that would enable your own organization and others to understand the state of the region beyond the high-level of regional and locality totals.

Economy: To make better recommendations, I also sought to understand the economic context of the Hampton Roads Region. The economic base analysis I conducted using the Bureau of Labor Statistics location quotient calculator for the Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, Virginia-North Carolina MSA reveals a 24% decrease in employment in the region.¹ The industries that have the largest location quotients for 2009 are: water transportation (4.1); transportation equipment manufacturing (3.55); museums, historical sites, zoos, and parks (3.26); and support activities for transportation (2.65). Not reflected in this analysis is the important role of the government and military sectors for which Vision Hampton Roads estimates the direct and indirect effect at nearly 45% of the total regional economy (Hampton Roads Partnership 2010, 26).

¹ Most of this is due to the recession, though unavailable data for certain sectors, make this difference appear greater than it is in reality.
These large, basic sectors create great economic opportunity for Hampton Roads, but also great vulnerability as the region is highly dependent on basic industries in a few sectors that are vulnerable to changes in defense spending, as well as to the predicted effects of climate change of increased coastal flooding and erosion. If the latter were coupled with a high-intensity hurricane, the potential effect to the economy could be quite large. In this scenario, the total employment in the amusements, gambling, and recreation sector, scenic and sightseeing transportation, real estate, and likely some of the retail sectors would experience a decrease in employment in the short-term, and potentially even long-term. Because the location quotient data I have do not include the largest sector, I hesitate to make my own projections, but encourage you to undertake the analysis so future plans will seek to mitigate the risks and build resiliency into planning efforts.

3. **Vision Hampton Roads**

The primary focus of my examination is the *Vision Hampton Roads*, the Region’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. I initially looked for some type of comprehensive plan for the region that approached regional planning through a holistic, interdisciplinary framework; however, the only references to extensive planning processes and documents I could find were conducted through organizations with an economic focus. *Vision Hampton Roads*, the most recent of the region’s economic planning initiatives, is a comprehensive economic development strategy that describes economic conditions for Hampton Roads and provides strategies and actions that will “position Hampton Roads as a leader in the global economy.”
Consistent with the economic base analysis results, in addition to the military sector, the three major sectors that the plan emphasizes are transportation, transportation services, and tourism. Based on an analysis of Vision Hampton Roads and its role within the context regional planning in Hampton Roads, I would like to make three overarching recommendations.

4. Recommendations

1. Improve public participation processes and citizen engagement

First and foremost, for a planning documents such as Vision Hampton Roads, or other future planning initiatives intended to represent the region’s outlook for the future and create an underlying framework for policy and planning decisions, there must be a public participation and citizen participation process whose outcome truly reflects the vision of the region. This outcome will only be achieved through a public participation process that is a “two-way learning process” (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001, 118) engaging a larger number of people within the region, and a more representative subset.

Vision Hampton Roads cites “the lack of a common metropolitan consciousness and citizenship (Hampton Roads Partnership, 18). Planning initiatives are the opportunity for planners and policy makers to create that consciousness. The Hampton Roads Partnership did not take advantage of that opportunity during the planning process. There is a disconnect between the desired outcome of the public participation process and the actual implementation. The plan states that, “at the end of the process, citizens should be able to spot their ‘fingerprints’ throughout the
document” (Hampton Roads Partnership 2010, 106). The public input and involvement strategy described in the plan, however, consisted almost entirely of a web-based survey, which the plan acknowledges had only 363 respondents who were not reflective of the composition of the region. The Vision notes, “—For a relatively young region (median age is 35.2), our respondents trended a bit older; 74.3% of respondents are aged 45 and over. With a higher than national average African American population (33%), much work needs to be done for future engagement; this public comment period only attracted 9.2% of African Americans to participate” (Hampton Roads Partnership 2010, 9).

The primary tools I recommend that you adopt for future planning initiatives are regional visioning processes and scenario process and concept plans. These tools have been used successfully for both regional growth and smart decline efforts in other regions and cities in the United States. I would especially direct you to look at the Envision Utah regional planning process conducted in Salt Lake City. The process started with identification of values and over a number of years included multiple types of surveys as well as over a hundred workshops, many interactive with maps, photographic alternatives, and development scenarios that allowed citizens to understand the implications of planning and policy decisions (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001). The process enabled residents to look at the “broader consequences and regional effects of development and policy decisions” rather than “focusing only on the piecemeal and local effects of projects and plans” (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001, 138).
For future undertakings, I would also encourage you to research grants that would allow you to use more advanced technologies to engage citizens. A recent example I can share with you was used for a transit line extension in Somerville, Massachusetts. Residents were encouraged to engage with the planning process in a more hands on way, including an interactive map of the proposed extension that enabled them to view proposed designs, and also through comparisons of design scenarios through virtual realities created in Second Life.

I understand that there are resource constraints, but there are also smaller actions that you can undertake that will also greatly strengthen that two-way dialogue between the government and its citizens. Because Vision Hampton Roads provides very little context with respect to current or future demographic or economic trends, I tried to use the HRPDC website to research this information. The data readily available online are very limited, as shown in the screenshot of part of the HRPDC website in Figure 3. For comparison, I went to the website for Portland Oregon’s planning organization, Metro – an organization in an MSA of comparable size, often cited in best practices. Metro provides regional economic, demographic, forecast, employment, income, and housing supply data, as well as an interactive mapping tool, MetroMap, that allows residents to view map layers such as land use, watershed, transit facilities, and zoning.
Figure 3: Screenshot of HRPDC Website Census Data Section

A key recommendation I would make would be to improve the quality of the HRPDC and HRP websites. As someone accustomed to planning processes structures, even I had difficulty finding basic information about the region, major planning initiatives, and ways that I as a resident could participate. I strongly encourage you to visit the websites of organizations such as Metro. For an example within Virginia that may be less resource-intensive, I encourage you to visit the website of the Charlottesville-area Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission as less expensive intermediate step towards better communication with your public.

2. Expand Focus of Regional Vision Beyond Growth

While *Vision Hampton Roads* is an Economic Development document and strategy, it is very important to recognize that attracting jobs is not alone a way to make a region an attractive place to live and work. The exclusive emphasis on economic development and growth has been discredited within the planning community, with an early warning voice coming from Harvey Molotch, who in the 1970s wrote, “I
speculate that the political and economic essence of virtually any given locality in the present American context, is growth.” He argues further, “that the desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized elites, however split they might be on other issues, and that a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality” (Molotch 1976, 310). His words seem very relevant to this economic development initiative 34 years later. The vision focuses optimistically on growth in the region and avoids any specific discussion about potentially contentious land use, housing, transportation, environmental, and other policy decisions that would need to underlie this growth.

The impression the plan provides, including through the stated goal “Hampton Roads will be recognized internationally as a region fueled by Innovation, Intellectual and Human Capital, Infrastructure, and a Sense of Place”, is that the Vision is more of a marketing tool directed to a business audience than an attempt to understand from the people of the region 1.) where the region is, 2.) what direction its residents want it to go in, and 3.) how it should get there in a sustainable, equitable manner (Hampton Roads Partnership 2010, 6). While the region may eventually need a tool that serves as a marketing tool, using this planning initiative and document as that tool seems premature given the lack of problem-definition or public involvement through a representative segment of the region, which could undermine future support for the strategies and actions included in the plan.

Another issue with the focus on growth is the inattention to the parts of the region that may be in decline. In my graduate studies, I have learned about the increasing
recognition for the need to embrace shrinkage within a region. *Vision Hampton Roads* acknowledges a wave of recent high-profile job losses, both in manufacturing and the military sectors. Rather than acknowledging these closures as something that might be indicative of the current trend towards population and economic stabilization (and decline within parts of the region), the *Vision* presents these as a temporary hiccup in what it optimistically views as a long-term growth trend. As a result, there is little talk about how to handle the potential decline. The plan also does not acknowledge how the proposed growth strategies and the recent closures affect regional equity.

As the *Vision* acknowledges that there are some parts of the region that are distressed, rather than glossing over that issue and exclusively focusing on growth, there should be an examination of how to plan for the distressed areas. In their paper “Planning Shrinking Cities”, Hollander et al. note that “cultural regeneration is another approach to planning shrinking cities” and the article highlights Glasgow’s strategy that includes tourism and recreation (Hollander et al. 2009, 13). Given the unique cultural and historical assets in the region, including the Historic Triangle (Jamestown, Williamsburg, Yorktown), as well as other tourist attractions in Virginia Beach, and the number of academic institutions, there may be an opportunity to think in the same strategic way about using decline to create targeted development opportunities.

3. **Develop a comprehensive, holistic approach to regional planning**
Finally, I recommend that before developing an "economic vision" should develop a regional vision document or plan that creates an underlying framework for all future planning efforts. I recognize that this may be a resource-intensive undertaking, so at a minimum, for future economic development strategies, would recommend that a comprehensive growth strategy be placed clearly within the current and future spatial, demographic, economic, and environmental context. Without that context, it is very difficult to determine whether the strategies and actions provided within the plan are consistent with the growth of the region.

The development of regional indicators in 2007 was a positive step forward toward understanding the current conditions and the direction the indicator is moving in; however, these are also marked by an economic focus. For example the economy indicators include business startups, employment growth, personal income, poverty, workforce quality, and research and technology. The poverty indicator benchmarks the poverty rate against other regions and past performance, but does not provide any data or maps about the distribution of poverty or changes in the level of inequity across the region (Council on Virginia's Future 2011).

Within your region, there is an excellent example of a comprehensive plan conducted at the city level. The Virginia Beach Comprehensive Plan, Our Future Virginia Beach, recognizes the breadth of issues and recommends the use of a number of tools available to regional planners. The approach in this plan aligns

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2 Available at http://www.ourfuturevb.com/planmaps/Pages/default.aspx
with division of a region into centers, districts, preserves, and corridors (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001). Within the centers and districts, the Virginia Beach plan targets investment in specific strategic growth areas to encourage higher-density development and also prioritizes specific areas within Virginia Beach for open space preservation (City of Virginia Beach 2010). Strategic investment and targeted growth are tools that Seattle used in its Urban Centers Strategy and that Maryland used in its Smart Growth strategy (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001).

*Our Future Virginia Beach* also brings together the environment, economy, and social elements of the city through plans addressing transportation, environmental stewardship, and housing and neighborhood issues. I would strongly encourage the Hampton Roads region to use *Our Future Virginia Beach* as a model to develop a regional comprehensive plan.

I do recognize that you have already undertaken some planning activities that can be incorporated into this more holistic approach. While researching HRPDC’s environmental and physical planning initiatives, I came across a plan on climate change impacts and stakeholders in the region, as well as a plan on green infrastructure. Both of these contain information relevant to the economic future of the region and should be incorporated into a larger comprehensive regional plan that then creates a framework within which economic development should occur. One way to shift from a more fragmented approach to planning and create this more comprehensive, regional vision in the longer term, may be for a restructuring of planning roles and responsibilities within the region, so that your organization, the
Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, is able to take more ownership of the process of creating a comprehensive regional vision, rather than leaving it largely to an organization that is primarily a political and economic body.

**Conclusion**

The regional planning efforts in your region to this point show a strong desire to create an identity for Hampton Roads as a whole. While some progress has been made towards this goal, significant work remains until the vision developed by the HRP and supported by the HRPDC is one that is 1.) reflective of and created by a larger group of residents who are more representative of the population as a whole 2.) does not only serve to fuel the “growth machine”, and 3.) represents the integration of the economic, social, and ecological regions as one. A new approach reflecting these changes will provide a strong foundation for future policy and planning decisions that will have the support from the public needed to move the vision forward as the region addresses complex economic, environmental, social, and transportation challenges.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to provide comments. I look forward to reading a comprehensive, compelling regional vision for Hampton Roads in the future.
References


