

The New Century Council's Competitive Advantage

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The scene was a packed auditorium at Virginia Tech's Squires Student Center in Blacksburg. On the podium was a visionary named Henry Luke. He had just asked the assembled group of leaders, activists, destructionists, and other assorted people from the New River and Roanoke Valleys, "How many of you have ever plowed with a mule?" I knew instantly that this was someone that I was going to like. Plowing with a mule is challenging but about as down to earth as one can get. Much of my previous experience with this sort of visioning or strategic planning had been long on theory and short on practicality. I knew Luke would be different and he didn't let us down.

The idea for the New Century Council's visioning process arose because of the loss of several major industries, the general feeling that Virginia's Golden Crescent region was overshadowing this part of the state, and the recognition of the need for strategic planning. There

was a general feeling that the private sector should play a significant role in this planning and visioning process. Tom Robertson, president of Carillion Health System, and Virginia Tech President, Dr. Paul Torgersen were chosen as leaders. The late President of Virginia Tech, Dr. James McComas had been a key player in getting the process started. Bev Fitzpatrick, Jr. former economic developer for Dominion Bankshares and a person noted for his love of the area, was chosen as staff director. Ed Whitmore, also formerly of Dominion Bankshares, was selected by Virginia Tech as a research associate to work on the program.

Leaders were overwhelmed at the huge initial turnout and continued to be surprised throughout the process. The fun part was the visioning. The real work began after the ideas were generated and committees were established to flesh out, debate and detail the ideas which were generated.

INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS

Perhaps because I had expressed some skepticism about the difficulty of linking the infrastructures of the two regions, I was selected as chair of the infrastructure for competitive advantage committee. Rob Glenn, vice president of Roanoke Gas, was appointed as vice chair following the pattern of choosing one leader from each of the two valleys.

The attendees at the first meeting were allowed to chose their committee assignments. Our kickoff meeting of the infrastructure committee had more than 30 attendees, with a number of others expressing interest. We decided to break into subcommittees to study transportation, communications, utilities, and commerce parks. The entire infrastructure committee would get together at intervals of roughly 40 to 60 days. The subcommittees would meet as often as they felt necessary



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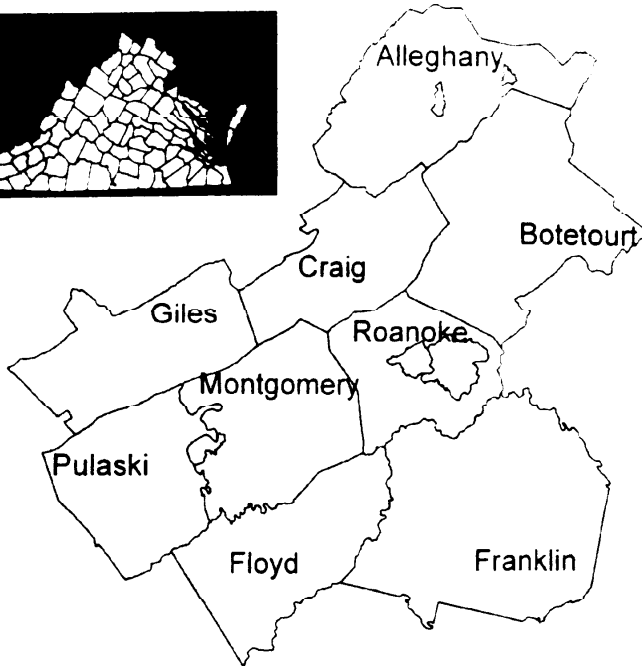
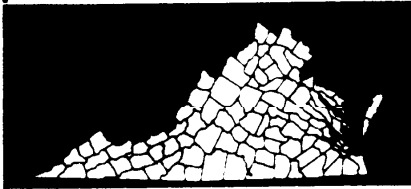
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New Century Council Region



With these varying perspectives, this was a lively and productive group.

One of the more significant recommendations of the transportation subcommittee was that the New River Valley Airport be developed into a heavy tonnage cargo airport which would supplement rail and highway connections to create a true intermodal facility. Also, while the word "interstate" raised the hackles of some of the transportation subcommittee members, it was generally recognized that unless through roads were made limited access, they would be as congested as the present roads in a few years. It was also recommended that the Roanoke-New River Valley area be organized as a multimodal transportation hub with connections to CSX and Norfolk Southern.

The communications subcommittee was much more unified. Those members recommended that some of the restrictions on the various communication media be lifted so that there could be more cooperation and coordination between, for example, the telephone companies.

to address issues brought up in the 18 month visioning process as well as other issues.

The transportation subcommittee quickly became the most active, followed closely by communications. The utilities and commerce park subcommittees were less active, but, nonetheless developed some significant ideas.

Many points were addressed from the visioning process. They included the controversial I-73 proposal. That became a heated topic in the transportation subcommittee. Ray Pethel, former Commissioner of Transportation for the Virginia Department of Transportation, served on this subcommittee and generally supported the state Transportation Board's stand on it and the Smart Road. Debbie Dull, an attorney who formerly worked for the Federal Highway Administration in Washington, opposed the Transportation Board's recommendation. Also on the subcommittee, were a former executive director for a highway users group, a former chair of the Commonwealth Aviation Board and the president of the Roanoke Valley Bikeway Group.

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the cable TV companies and the traditional broadcasting companies. In addition, they also recommended that the entire area be in the same local calling area.

The commerce park subcommittee recommended that their original name, industrial park subcommittee, be changed since they thought that the traditional industrial park should have mixed, rather than strictly industrial, uses. This committee also recommended that the region begin to set aside large blocks of land of up to 2,000 and 3,000 acres in anticipation of the demand for the large regional commerce parks that they envisioned. The recent announcement by Motorola about the selection of a site in a 3,000 plus acre park near Richmond seems to validate this recommendation. Advanced communication systems in these parks would be a drawing card for industries and


businesses.

The utilities subcommittee recommended that water and sewer systems in particular be operated on a regional basis. Where appropriate, especially in the case of gravity flow systems, they would be operated on a drainage basin basis. They also suggested that we have more interconnections between water systems so that systems could support each other during emergencies. The issue of privatization of water and sewer was discussed but not recommended by the subcommittee. However, the larger committee thought that privatization of all utilities should be considered. It was noted that while investor owned utilities such as electric, natural gas, or telephone systems seemed to be able to cross jurisdictional boundaries, publicly owned water and sewer systems seemed to have much more trouble extending across such artificial lines.

COMMITTEE CONCLUSIONS

In the final coordinating stage among the New Century Council's 11 committees, it became clear that the conclusion of almost every committee was that regionalization provided improved services at a lower cost. There was also desire to keep government as local as possible. This suggests that the responsibility for infrastructure be broader than just local governments. In Virginia, an example of this broader planning is the excellent state highway system, a much more integrated system than would be created if each local government built its own roads. This suggests that water and sewer should perhaps no longer be under the sole jurisdiction of local governments. Manipulating the development of water and sewer facilities to control growth or failing to plan for logical extension of water and sewer lines across jurisdictional boundaries can lead to additional costs for the public, and inequity of services for citizens of the region.

Our committee reports are now being considered by the New Century Council. Reconciling the many recommendations and summarizing them into action steps which can be understood and supported by the public is a daunting task for the council. It may be harder than plowing with a mule.

Our 1,050 people, all volunteers, have participated in this massive task to determine a positive future for the region. We are proud of the unusual creativity shown by the infrastructure volunteers. They were positive and always thinking ahead. That is the purpose of visioning and the New Century Council; to position this nine county, five city region to be competitive in the global marketplace. Our motto is "Global Strength, Quality Living Says It All!" 

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