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Jim Oliver's Remarks for
Hampton Roads Partnership Breakfast
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So, what are some of my thoughts about Hampton Roads and how we might excel as a region in the future?

I am strongly influenced by the thoughts of two people in addition to Mayor Vinroot: Some of you know that Wayne Gretsky, the great hockey player, once said his goal was not to skate after the puck but to the spot where he thought the puck was going to be. So I suggest that our first goal is to focus together on where the world is going and how Hampton Roads can skate or position itself to be where the puck will be as the most livable region in the United States.

The second person is Harlan Cleveland. The former educator and ambassador passed away in June but in recent years had been a scholar on how to lead in this modern world when no one is in charge. He thought the technological changes, coupled with the decentralization of information and knowledge, and the global economy had radically changed our model of leadership. I suggest a principal challenge for Hampton Roads is how can we move our region when no one is in charge?

With your permission I am going to avoid the blame game this morning: no criticism of the usual suspects---local government, the state or even the public.

Instead, I am going to focus on you. We cannot get the future job of moving the region done well without your personal help and commitment. I mean each of you must be involved and will be challenged to bring your best selves to the tasks. Above all it will take your best thinking. Much of what is in front of us requires new learning, changes of habits and tough, tough work.

Local elected officials must make time and effort available to understand and assist with regional thinking. Somehow, we each must learn better – together - how to make regional decisions in Hampton Roads. We must use new methods to discover and evaluate regional options and we must invent or expand structures that promote regional thinking and decision making and offset our natural, regular dependence on jurisdictional dominance. With all due respect, many of our complex questions that need to be faced do not lend themselves to only gut reactions or common sense.

Lastly, we must establish new and expanded public space for citizens to fully participate in regional decision making. That is a huge, but I think necessary challenge. We know we are a region where most residents do not think of themselves as regional residents. This is and will be a particularly tough task for local elected officials who have few constituents, if any, who are demanding regional cooperation or regional decision making.

However, one of the clear messages of Mayor Vinroot is that we as residents, and our local jurisdictions, are truly interdependent. As one example, many of you work in a jurisdiction other than the one you serve---so I am sure you get that part of this message. But you also know the Virginia systems of local governance---produces mostly win-lose choices in our regional political landscape. I personally call you and me to the higher duty to help citizens see beyond the dominant narrow and local focus which dominates conventional wisdom.

What I suggest to each of us is that we organize our personal thinking so that every day, I mean every day, we add regional thinking to who we are. So that when you go into a neighborhood---do all the things you do now---but add a little more to your conversations, asking people, for instance, what is their vision for the region, and what do they see as the role for their community in that vision. Also ask a personal question of them---that is: what kind of thinking are they doing to help make the region better? If we can increase our awareness, we can build new habits of the heart and mind and change our public culture. From a practical point of view, you will gain considerable insight about the regional context for future decision making. Such expanded conversations will re-enforce learning together as communities.

Regional leadership is different from traditional leadership which focuses on organizations. Leading successfully in a single organization or jurisdiction or sector is not sufficient for regional leadership. Today's regional challenges require new levels of problem-solving capability and the ability to work across political, sectoral and institutional boundaries.

Regional leadership is both an individual trait and regional capacity. Discussions about regional leadership often focus on individuals who are "leading" the region, such as Mayor Vinroot. But some regions continually demonstrate the capacity to innovate and outperform others, even as individual leaders come and go. These regions have the ability to sustain change over time. Their capacity goes beyond individuals---it lives in the collective spirit and practices of the region's people and organizations, in its culture and connections. Thus, regional leadership has both personal and institutional dimensions.

Our strategies in Hampton Roads need to develop in the context of action. We can best learn by doing. People will emerge and develop as leaders in the context of engaging and working on regional challenges and opportunities.

This practice-based leadership---in which participants gain skills through action---can drive our community and region building. As individuals work together and recruit others to their cause, more and more people increase their awareness of the region; relationships across boundaries develop as well as collaborative leadership skills. Strong personal commitments also develop to sustain the region. Teams of people develop to solve problems and transformative learning takes place.

Our region is at a crossroads about whether we can improve ourselves and how we go about it. But it is not all bad, just challenging. In some ways our differences with other regions---say our water features and clusters of independent jurisdictions are better matched to trends in the technologies that have decentralized bigness, broadly distributed information and focused on the creative class. Certainly, the scale of our communities and their sense of place give us environmental and quality of life advantages. However, there is evidence also that we are losing ground in other important areas such as transportation, education and job creation.

Again, my goal this morning is to keep asking you to personally answer the question---what can you do---as a local elected official---to help us figure what and how we do it.

I have suggested already that you start each day asking the question, “What can I personally do today to help my region?” Expand that to, “What can I do at work, play, in the neighborhood, church, city council or county board of supervisors--- everywhere.”

Another private question you might ask yourself this morning is, “Could I persuade my governing body to join all the others in the region for a quarterly meeting to discuss on-going regional matters?”

What about your jurisdictional neighbors? I am struck with the facts that many cities here have sister city relationships in other parts of the world. Could you develop a sister city or county relationship with one or more of your neighbors for the specific purpose of engaging the common issues you have that cross your boundaries and/or that impact the region?

Most of us say we believe others only when people walk their talk. I am suggesting regional issues will only have meaning for you and me when we elevate them for ourselves, so these issues are a regular part of our schedules and we help increase the awareness for your constituencies.

Ten years ago the Hampton Roads Partnership was started. It brings together leaders in local government, the military and business. They are a resource to you. I hope you will share your ideas about how they can help more.

One year ago, a group that I am a part of founded the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement. We believe that we will be more successful in the future if we make better public space for citizens to participate more fully in public and community decision making.

We will be doing an extensive survey of Hampton Roads citizens next month about civic engagement to establish a baseline of data and information about when and how citizens participate today and what issues are important to them. We will use the survey results to inform and guide us in preparing a regional summit. The summit will be held right in this facility and we plan to use some of the building's advanced technologies to establish a broad-based dialogue.

In addition, HRP and HRCCE will be collaborating with the Virginia Futures Commission in early January with the kick off of Hampton Roads Performs. This project will provide significant data about our region's economic, educational and social health. Soon, we will all have lots of hard data about our region to assist us to identify the right strategic questions to address with actions and pursue in the future.

We also are available to you to help you with civic or public engagement. I am providing you with our brochure. You probably know some of the people listed on the back who are on our Board of Directors.

It is my personal hope that all of us can then begin to design the public engagement process that will empower us to create our regional vision or, if you prefer, our desired future state. I would hope each of you will start today to begin your personal journey. Talk to the folks and ask them what they want for our region. Help us all make region the important reality that it is.

Thanks for listening.