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Civic engagement

Hampton Roads initiative attempts to breathe life into local democracy



James B. Oliver Jr.

Civic engagement

Movement afoot in Hampton Roads to breathe life into a sustainable, deliberative local democracy

By MIKE KNEPLER

Center looks to connect public decision making with civil dialogue, informed judgment of region's citizens

PORTSMOUTH community activist Terry Danaher wanted to learn how citizens can gain a more effective voice in local and regional issues. So, this spring, she attended a conference billed as "the first Hampton Roads Civic Engagement Summit."

There, Danaher and about 200 other Hampton Roads residents, elected officials, and governmental and business leaders heard Christopher T. Gates, a nationally known advocate of civic engagement, talk about the "need to reinvent the ways we practice democracy" and the responsibilities of governmental leaders and citizens alike in becoming informed on issues and working together to solve local and regional problems.

"It was great being in a room with a bunch of like-minded people who want to make a difference, who want to be involved and make good things happen. It was a powerful feeling," said Danaher, who owns a small business with her husband, Paul, and has served on several community committees.

Danaher grew even more excited when she heard Gates dismiss the notion that citizens are mostly too apathetic to get involved in public issues. Instead, Gates, executive director of the Denver-based Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, or PACE, suggested that many citizens turned off to getting involved because they believed that government did not welcome their interest.

"Chris Gates gave one of the best public messages I ever heard," Danaher said. "He said that a lot of people aren't participating because they don't think anything is ever going to happen. They see people putting together plans that always get put up on the shelf and they say, 'No, I'm not getting involved again.' Or, if something did happen, they weren't informed that the plans were acted upon."

Never shy about contacting local government leaders or fellow citizens, Danaher said the summit motivated her to step up her own activities even more. She said she will urge Portsmouth City Council members to become more active and visible in informing their constituents about their work, while she will increase her efforts to connect neighbors with opportunities for becoming more informed on local issues and more involved.

If only it were that easy to motivate all citizens and governmental leaders.

"What does it take to get people connected in meaningful ways? That's a fundamental problem," says James B. Oliver Jr., the retired city manager of Norfolk and Portsmouth and founding chairman of the fledgling Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement, or HRCCE, which organized this spring's civic-engagement summit.

And connecting people with public decision making, as Oliver sees it, is the fundamental job of the HRCCE, especially when it comes to major regional issues, such as transportation.

"The mission of the Center," proclaims an HRCCE brochure, "is to support sustainable deliberative democracy in Hampton Roads and to connect public decision making with civil dialogue and the informed judgment of the region's citizens."

Lofty ambitions for an organization barely a year old, whose leaders frequently remind any listeners that HRCCE-style civic engagement is still "an experiment."

"We have the twin problems that there is no traditional avenues to do civic engagement in Hampton Roads. You throw that in with today's society being so incredibly busy and pretty disconnected from a lot of civic endeavors. So then how do you get people to sit down and talk and invest themselves into getting to something that's meaningful?" said Oliver, who is currently serving as interim city manager of Hampton. "We're trying

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Terry Danaher – Portsmouth community activist.



to create a safe, neutral place where citizens feel invited to the table. And plenty of people want those conversations to occur."

Beginnings

The nonprofit HRCCE grew out of the 2007 "Hampton Roads Regional Structure Project" on improving the competitiveness of the region. The study project was sponsored by The Future of Hampton Roads, a nonprofit organization that encourages a greater sense of regionalism in southeastern Virginia. The project was managed by Virginia Beach resident James F. Babcock, vice chairman of the futures group.

"As the country has grown, it's become more difficult for people to know their representatives. Meanwhile, some people in government don't like to fool with the public while others want to poll public opinion on all decisions," said Babcock, who is also a board member of the HRCCE. "There's a certain art now of trying to assemble public opinion and the center is trying to bring to Hampton Roads some of the more sophisticated techniques. Engaging the public more actively in important issues, that's worthwhile. But it's not going to be easy."

Many of the project's recommendations dealt with the region's economic and governance structures, but organizers also saw a critical need to improve public participation in decision making to help forge a more unified voice on important region-wide issues. For some, the ability to tap a broad citizen base was a long-sought holy grail, especially on matters that needed approval from the General Assembly or Congress.

"Given the nature of Hampton Roads, with no dominant city, no unified government structure, and we don't have 10 Fortune 500 companies that anchor the leadership, how do we get solutions to some of the bigger

Why traditional models of participation are failing ...

CHRISTOPHER T. GATES, executive director of the Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, speaking at the Hampton Roads Civic Engagement Summit, cited four major reasons why traditional models of participation have lost their ability to connect with citizens:

• The information and technology revolution that has helped foster partial-truths about their communities' problems and potential solutions.

• A news media that has lost touch with real community life while accentuating conflict and encouraging disbelief.

• Greater diversity in a wide variety of demographic measures, while civic and business leaders have not kept pace with knowing how to interact across perceived differences.

• The tendency for power structures to blame citizens as apathetic instead of knowing how to reach out more effectively and convince citizens that their voices really matter.

Gates advised governmental leaders to develop new ways to gather citizen opinions on community issues. "Most conventional models not only don't work, but they can make things worse," he said, noting that standard public hearings often are held at times and in places that are inconvenient for most citizens.

New models of local governance, he said, include using power to empower others, mediation of problems and listening to everyone with respect.

In May, the Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, issued a 36-page report, *The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement*. For more information, visit www.pacefunders.org.

… Knepler

problems that cross jurisdictional boundaries, and get it socially and politically acceptable?" Oliver said. "Citizens need to get involved in these conversations."

But the public participation subcommittee had something in mind beyond improved regional cooperation when it proposed a "center for civic engagement." The panel declared that "public engagement in community affairs is not just a means of getting support for projects; it is an end in itself. For democracy to operate as it should, the public has to act."

The committee evolved into the founding board of directors and staff for the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement with Oliver as chairman and Betsy McBride as president and executive director. The center operates out of an office in Norfolk at WHRO, the region's public broadcasting organization.

"We wanted to be a support center for any of the localities or any organization in the region," said McBride, a former media and communications coordinator for the Virginia Beach city manager's office. "There's virtually nobody assigned full-time in any entity in the 16 or 17 localities whose job is to think about the civic-engagement loop ... Public administrators are extremely fine with this, but they're not spending any time thinking about sustainable democracy. They're trying to get their work done. And the people they have reporting to them haven't necessarily been trained in public involvement."

Virginia Beach City Manager James K. Spore agrees. "Not only here, but throughout the country, we need to do a better job of engaging the public in a meaningful way, more so than years ago. Trying to do that is a real trend. As issues become more complex and resources get tighter, the importance of good civic engagement becomes increasingly more important in how you operate a government," he said.

But making space for citizen involvement in public issues means much more than giving people a chance to talk at public hearings or similar official forums, say Oliver, McBride and other supporters of the HRCCE. Too often, citizens believe that such meetings are held merely to satisfy a legal requirement and that most important decisions already have been rendered.

"Public hearings often come after the important decisions already have been made and just seem to be a way of giving validation" to public officials, agreed HRCCE board member Vivian Paige, a Hampton native now living in Norfolk where she owns a CPA business. In her civic life, Paige has long sought a more inclusive citizen voice in local and regional issues and asserts that "it behooves those making decisions to have a better pulse of the citizens."

Civic engagement summit

The April 4 summit was planned not only as HRCCE's first public event but also as a "symbolic starting point with citizens" from across the region, Oliver said.

As such, creation of the HRCCE was part of a nationwide trend in involving more citizens in community problem solving. In May, PACE issued a report, *The New Laboratories of Democracy: How Local Government is Reinventing Civic Engagement,* in which Gates wrote that the "past 15 years have seen an amazing burst of fresh thinking and innovation from local governments as they foster a more active and meaningful role for citizens in planning and decision-making."

The report includes comments from Robert J. O'Neill Jr., executive director of the International City/County Management Association and former Hampton city manager and former Fairfax County executive. "The issues that really matter to citizens cross all kinds of boundaries," O'Neill says. "Getting more ownership, more commitment and more engagement in the processes themselves substantially increases the likelihood of a good decision and a successful outcome."

Gates, who also promoted local innovations in participatory democracy and community-based problem solving during his 11 years as president of the National Civic League, describes civic engagement as "a more empowered model of what some people call self-governance."

"Civic engagement is more than just attending a meeting or a public hearing," Gates said in a recent interview. "It's not a passive concept; it's an active concept. It's when people actively engage in their neighborhood or community either



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James B. Oliver Jr. – retired city manager.



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Betsy McBride – president and executive director, Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement.

by doing something or really engaging in the thinking around doing something that allows them to create some positive change. It's different than volunteering. It's just not the act of helping out. The concept of engagement is really an active verb. It means that you're really thinking it through. Different people call it different things. Part of it is thinking strategically about what needs to be done and (determining) what are the most pressing issues where can you best make a difference."

Gates elaborated about the need for civic engagement in his keynote speech at HRCCE's regional summit on April 4, held at Old Dominion University's Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center in Suffolk. He advised governmental leaders to develop new ways to gather citizen opinions on community issues.

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New models of local governance, he said, include using power to empower others, mediation of problems and listening to everyone with respect.

The April 4 HRCCE summit also featured the release of three public-opinion surveys that assessed the "civic capital" of Hampton Roads, which was defined as the "values, skills and infrastructure needed for citizens to work together to define and shape the region's quality of life." The survey work was spearheaded by Quentin Kidd, an associate professor of political science in at Christopher Newport University and director of CNU's Center for Public Policy. The HRCCE refers to this project as the "Batten Surveys" because they were funded by Jane P. Batten, a community leader and philanthropist whose family holdings include *The Virginian-Pilot* daily newspaper.

The largest part of the Batten Surveys was a March 2-9 telephone sampling of 1,997 adults among the 1.7 million people living in the 16 communities that make up Hampton Roads. The findings showed nearly 70 percent of citizens said they would be very interested or somewhat interested in working with others to find solutions to regional issues.

So what stops many citizens from getting involved?

Another part of the Batten Surveys attempted to find answers to that question. A series of focused interviews with about four dozen regional civic leaders and elected officials included the twin query: "What do officials misunderstand about engaging the citizens?" and "What do citizens misunderstand about civic engagement?"

The responses were striking in describing the gaps.

For example, one appointed official said this about misunderstanding on the part of many colleagues: "I believe most view civic engagement as a 'superficial task' rather than

As issues become more complex and resources get tighter, the importance of good civic engagement becomes increasingly more important in how you operate a government.

James K. Spore – city manager of Virginia Beach.





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Surveys shed light on region's 'civic capital'

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The largest part of the Batten Surveys was a March 2-9 telephone sampling of 1,997 adults among the 1.7 million people living in the 16 communities that make up Hampton Roads. The findings showed that the majority of residents "have been actively involved in their community during the past year" and "almost two-thirds of adults interviewed said they follow news about local government and public affairs either somewhat or very closely," while "only one-in-ten adults say they pay no attention to news about local government and public affairs."

At the same time, 62 percent of the adults surveyed said they believed that local government does not invite citizen input. Hampton Roads residents also were lukewarm when asked how much they trusted elected representatives on the local and state levels and the local news media. Local government employees fared the best on the trust scale, scoring 6.5 on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the highest.

When it came to assessing regional priorities 28 percent of adults surveyed mentioned the economy, followed by transportation at 21 percent, education at 10 percent, crime at 4 percent, military at 2 percent, environment at 1 percent, racial reconciliation at 1 percent, health care at 1 percent and growth/sprawl at 1 percent, with a smattering of other concerns.

While there was no clear consensus on one problem area as the region's top priority, nearly 70 percent of citizens said they would be very interested or somewhat interested in working with others to find solutions to regional issues.

… *Knepler*

a fundamental relationship. They also do not grasp what true civic engagement is and what it feels like. 'Hearing' what someone has to say is far different than engaging them in constructive dialogue in which it is clear that each party is seeking an effective outcome based upon all the views and ideas in the room."

On the other side of the equation, an appointed official had this to say about citizen perceptions: "The most common misunderstanding is their sense that civic engagement is showing up at a meeting and expressing their own opinions about an issue – and then expecting their opinion to 'win the day.' If it does not, they will contend that their opinions were ignored. The appreciation of hearing multiple opinions, discussing options, evaluating options and then reaching a preferred outcome is increasingly being lost."

The summit also gave evidence that the HRCCE also was feeling its way in reaching out, especially in making its programs known across the region. A poll taken at the event showed that 61.7 percent of attendees were white and 78 percent had household incomes of at least $75,000.

Although the HRCCE is not well known, its supporters say it holds great potential to help Hampton Roads citizens and local officials work together more productively to solve problems. HRCCE projects on the drawing boards include a year-long series of citizen-outreach efforts to help Virginia Beach better understand the transportation issues of its residents, establishment of a regional "citizens' academy" to help area residents learn about regional agencies and issues and develop skills related to civic engagement, and a civic-engagement initiative aimed at young people.

A recent focus group of Hampton Roads young leaders, ages 17 to 22, suggested that local governments are missing opportunities to reach out to teens and young adults on important issues, even on the regional level.

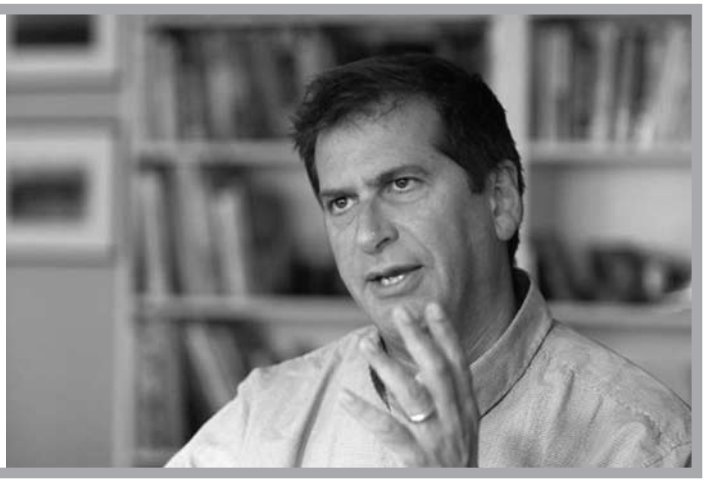
"Actually, my generation is starving for that," said 22-year-old Lauren Perry, a Virginia Beach resident and 2009 graduate of Virginia Wesleyan College who attended the HRCCE regional summit and participated in the focus group. "Most of my age group does not feel listened to ... But we're an untapped asset." And, Perry adds, "engaged conversations could be addictive."

Building credibility and consensus

The HRCCE's status as an independent, nonprofit organization will be one of the keys to its ability to help resolve issues, according to Oliver.

"One of the things we've done so far is not gone to cities for funding. Part of that is to deliberately try to build a safe place for citizens but with competence and capacity to do stuff," he said. "That's a big constraint we've put on ourselves, but we're doing that

"Most conventional models (of gathering citizen opinions) not only don't work, but they can make things worse."



Christopher T. Gates – nationally known advocate of civic engagement.

because we don't want to look like government. We don't want to ask citizens to come to us and then have them get all suspicious that we might be getting some funding from cities, so therefore we can't be trusted. That's a pretty tough challenge."

So far, much of the center's funding – $175,000 for three years – comes from the Norfolk Foundation. Other sources have included $50,000 from the Landmark Foundation, $35,000 from Jane P. Batten, $5,000 from the Future of Hampton Roads Inc., $1,000 from the Virginia Beach Foundation and donations from board members.

Angelica Light, president and CEO of the Norfolk Foundation, said she was impressed with the talents and experience of HRCCE board members and staff and saw the center as having an important role in injecting the voice of citizens into important regional decisions.

"Cities have long had the capacity to do community conversations. They do them all the time. But there is something about some issues that require there be a neutral broker, so there would be no hint of a predetermined agenda," she said. "We thought we really needed to have a process whereby citizens could come together and hear from other citizens ... on some regional issues by talking with each other directly, not through public relations campaigns."

"It's important to foster relationships that could be the foundation for building consensus on issues," Light added. "It's important to have a consensus because we have a limited amount of resources. We also are in a real critical point in this region's history. We need to come together to have regional positions on lots of different items so we could present an united front to others outside the region."

The HRCCE also is available to build consensus among governmental leaders. In February, the center facilitated a retreat for the Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization, or HRTPO, a public body whose board is made up mostly of

Operational principles of the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement

THE CENTER DOES NOT usurp or interfere with the decision-making authority of any entity.

The center provides transparent, fact-based processes that support and demonstrate a code of citizen involvement, which include:

- Respect and appreciation for democratic values
- Early, regular and timely consultation with the public
- Open and accessible information
- Published and realistic schedules
- Clear accountability

The center honors several key public participation principles. Public participation:

- Seeks out and facilitates the involvement of diverse stakeholders
- Seeks input from participants in designing how they participate
- Communicates to participants how their input affected the decision

The center supports implementation practices that:

- Begin the project with an understandable description of the decision-making process, well-articulated expectations for public involvement in that process, and clearly defined goals for the outcome
- Provide the necessary resources – technical and financial – to support participants in the process and create a "level playing field"



"Most of my age group does not feel listened to ... But we're an untapped asset."

Lauren Perry – 2009 Virginia Wesleyan College graduate.

elected officials from across southeastern Virginia. The agency has come under criticism over the years by those who say it has not provided a strong, united front needed to solve regional transportation problems.

Part of the problem, critics say, is that most board members felt caught in a paradox of whose interests must take priority – the city or county they represent – or the regional body responsible for broad transportation planning.

In his opening remarks at the retreat, Oliver challenged HRTPO board members to think more deeply about their role with a regional agency. "This room is full of local elected officials who are not thwarted or intimidated by excuses in building your cities and counties ... "Isn't it time we succeed in transportation in Hampton Roads the same way we have in our entrepreneurial localities and agencies?" he said. "This is clearly collaborative work that goes beyond the boundary lines of your localities ... For the good of each of your jurisdictions and for the region, this is very important work."

HRTPO Executive Director Dwight Farmer was pleased with the work and said one of the reasons the HRCCE was selected to facilitate the retreat was because it was a "home-grown" organization with leaders who know and care about Hampton Roads.

"It was the first time we've had facilitated retreat in 31 years I've been there," he said. "It allowed us to have discussions we probably would not have had."

Since February, several board members have referred back to the retreat to "remind themselves" that they can continue to improve their abilities to work together for the good of the entire region, Farmer said.

Farmer said he's also excited about the HRCCE's potential to educate and involve more citizens in issues facing the region.

"We need to get people to truly believe that this is their region ... and that they should appreciate that they have resources outside of their city's boundaries," Farmer said.

The long-range payoff, Farmer said, will be when citizens from across Hampton Roads speak with a more united voice in helping the region win funding from the General Assembly and Congress for major projects. "I think that state-and federal-elected officials really need do be hearing more of those messages from citizens, that this region has this problem that needs to get solved," he said.

The HRCCE also will be working to bring citizens and government officials together within a local municipality. The transportation visioning project in Virginia Beach will be its first. The effort, heralded by Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms in a May 15 speech about his first 100 days in office, will take about a year and include a wide range of stakeholders, including commuters, bicyclists, senior citizens, people with disabilities,

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Vivian Paige – HRCCE board member.



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Dwight Farmer – Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization executive director.



environmentalists, bus users, military, civic league representatives, the Tidewater Builders Association, historic preservationists, taxpayer groups, the Chamber of Commerce and other business groups.

"The mayor and the whole City Council ranked transportation as our number one issue," said City Manager James K. Spore. "With reductions in funding from state and federal sources, it's become more critical than ever to get our planning right."

The transportation project will be a community-wide visioning of problems and solutions, "everything from traffic to bike trails to neighborhood sidewalks to minor arterials, to transportation issues beyond Virginia Beach that still affect us, such as the port, the airport, the six major regional transportation projects, light rail and high-speed rail," Spore said.

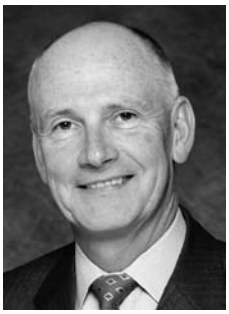
Public participation will be the keystone, Spore said, explaining that "we really wanted citizens involved and we want them in a way in which the city is not leading but in a way that the citizens are partners with us... It's a genuine effort to inform and engage the community and do it in a way to get a more authentic desire of the community than we usually can get through a City Council public hearing."

The hoped-for result, Spore said, would be a "higher level of ownership for some of the solutions and a broader support base that could make them possible."

The Virginia Beach project will add a new aspect to HRCCE's endeavors in another way. It would mark the first time that the center receives funding from a city government for a public project.

Getting more ownership, more commitment and more engagement in the processes themselves substantially increases the likelihood of a good decision and a successful outcome.

Robert J. O'Neill Jr., executive director of the International City/County Management Association.



"We're doing the project with Virginia Beach money," Oliver said, "so that's a test of whether we can do it in a way in which all the parties, in the end, will feel that it's been a neutral and credible exercise with integrity."

After all, Oliver said, the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement is an experiment in the essence of democracy, not just for the HRCCE but for the region's governmental leaders and citizens as well.

"None of us are quite sure how to do it," he said. "Let's just say it's a grand experiment and I do think it's an experiment worth trying to pursue." VTC

About the author

Michael Knepler is a freelance writer based in Norfolk, where he wrote and edited stories for The Virginian-Pilot about local government and grassroots, community problem-solving. He can be reached at knep@msn.com.

To find out more ...

The nonprofit Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement is located at 5200 Hampton Blvd., Norfolk, VA, 23508. For more information, call 757/889-9359 or visit www.hrcce.org.