Forward Thinking

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It's The Room Where It Happens

by Joel Rubin, Managing Editor

Hampton Roads comes together in a lot of places. Like Harbor Park, Busch Gardens, the VB Amphitheater, back-ups at the HRBT. But when it comes to government, it's usually around a big rectangular table on Woodlake Drive in Chesapeake.

Mayors, other elected officials, city administrators, transportation engineers, emergency services coordinators, transit authority managers, school superintendents, police chiefs, utility directors, "coastal resilience" planners, you name it, make tracks for the Regional Building, owned and operated for all of us by the indispensable Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC). "We represent 17 localities from Virginia Beach to Southampton County and from Norfolk to Hampton to James City County," says Bob Crum, who has been executive director of our PDC since 2015 when he moved here after running the Richmond area's for seven years.

And it's not Bob's only job. He also heads up our Transportation Planning Organization (TPO), a group of local elected, state and federal officials responsible for prioritizing regional transportation projects from highways to biking trails. "Our region has one of the highest number of commuters crossing locality lines to get to work in the country, and our communities understand that a road in Hampton or Suffolk is also good for citizens in Surry and Portsmouth."

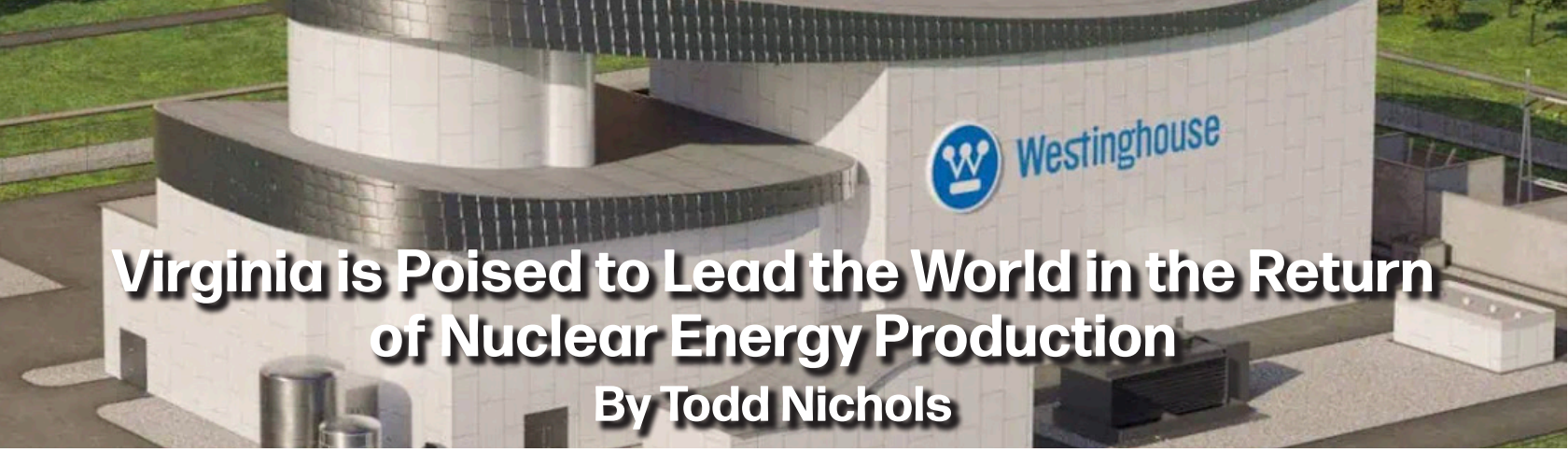
The relationships that emerge from the nearly 300 meetings that transpire annually in this conference room, the "epicenter" if you will of the region, are key. "When a department head from Poquoson (population 13,000) is at the same table as one from Virginia Beach (population 452,000), there is mutual respect and understanding that everyone's needs must be met." Crum is not naïve to believe an hour in his chamber once a month will produce constant regional revolutions in service and savings. "But you would be surprised," he says. "We have PDC and TPO meetings on the same day each month, with an overlap of attendees. We schedule an hour in between for a casual lunch. That 60 minutes of networking has built a lot of important relationships."

Bob invites me and my deputy editor Peter Shaw to these sessions, which are open to the public. Younger types attending a recent one about transit were outspoken about the need for more routes. "It is so important that we have the right mix of people in the room," says Crum. "And that often means not just local government employees but also ones from the offices of our Congressional representatives, US Senators, and state legislators." Indeed the money that flows to the region comes from more places than local taxes. "It helps for instance for Senator Kaine's legislative

"It's The Room Where It Happens", continued on Page 8

To suggest a topic and a writer, visit futureofhamptonroads.org/forwardthinking

LOOK WHAT'S INSIDE



Virginia is Poised to Lead the World in the Return of Nuclear Energy Production

By Todd Nichols

You can thank our military for some of today's commercial products. Microwave technology started as a radar to locate World War II enemies until a research engineer realized it could heat food when his candy bar melted during an experiment. The internet evolved from a remotely used information sharing system to conduct intelligence transfer detached from a physical command center. Today, yet another defense development is about to impact our lives - small modular nuclear reactors (SMR's).

With the advent of artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and sprawling data center growth, energy forecasters predict outsized power demand with only modest supply increases from existing generation options. Recognizing this and seeking more renewable sources, tech giants are scrambling. In solidarity, digital barons have recently thrown their weight behind nuclear power as a solution, specifically SMR's.

Last March, Amazon bought a nuclear-fueled data center with one of the U.S.'s largest nuclear plants providing dedicated power. In September, Microsoft struck a twenty-year deal to buy Three Mile Island's entire power output for its data center energy needs. Oracle followed suit by announcing a data center design requiring over a gigawatt of electricity powered by three SMR'Ss. In October, Google purchased power from a fleet of SMR's to meet its data centers' energy demands.

These investments place the Commonwealth in an enviable position. Having overcome many previous regulatory and cost barriers, Virginia now holds several competitive advantages. A leading one is the presence of military and commercial developers and manufacturers of reactor components supported by an established supply chain and logistics nexus. Being home to the world's largest US Navy installation, it hosts a fleet of SMR powered vessels. While Virginia is recognized as the globe's leading data center, it is also where more reactors have been built and safely operated too.

America's Nuclear Navy is the largest enduring organization of its kind anywhere, with an unmatched 75-year record of safe power generation. Their use is common, with sailors living, working, eating and sleeping for decades in close proximity to reactors. In fact, there has never been a single reactor accident, thanks to a resolute discipline to reactor safety. As a December 2019 Forbes article noted, our Navy is indeed ***'Masters of Modular Nuclear Reactors.'*** And today, Navy nuclear vets oversee Dominion facilities at Surry and North Anna.

SMR's acceptance and rapid expansion offer us a compelling carbon-free energy solution from a scalable power source immune to climate events or market fluctuations. And thanks to its military and industry experience, Virginia could become the nucleus of this game-changing transformation.

Todd Nichols is a retired US Navy Captain who served four decades in the US Navy's Nuclear Propulsion Program first as an enlisted operator, then as a Nuclear Power Officer where he supervised, operated and maintained seven different design nuclear power plants among nuclear training facilities, submarines and aircraft carriers. He serves as Deputy Executive Director of the Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance, a non-profit regional advocacy organization whose mission is to attract, retain and grow military and federal missions to the region.

HR Trivia

Name the 17 localities that comprise the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission.
—— Answer on page 8.

"Three of a Kind" Meet Three Come Here's who are Eager to Serve

Cash Green, Kitty Bryant and Jeremy McGee are all members of the Class of 2025, the newest crop of city council representatives in Hampton Roads. Each won last November in their first attempts at elected office, is not native to our region, and had never met one another until we brought them together at the Assembly co-working space on Granby Street for this feature. They have now, and thanks to their engaging personalities and dedication to public service, are likely friends for life.

And when you know someone in the same job as you, albeit it in a different locality, that can only help when you have an idea or advice to share about public safety, transportation, governance or even cost sharing.

Take Cash, elected to represent District 7 or Centerville on Virginia Beach Council. "One of my priorities will be to locate a rec center for the 46,000 residents in my community." Given the district's location abutting Chesapeake, we asked, 'could Virginia Beach and Chesapeake build one together?' "I will definitely look into that," said the San Diego native who has a certificate in theology and started out in ministry before a church elder suggested he investigate the oil and gas industry. "Before long I was overseeing health, safety and environmental matters for a company in Oklahoma."

That's where he met his current wife Kenika who is from Virginia Beach. "We decided to move here where I first worked in youth counseling and then switched to selling cars. I found I was good at it." Indeed, he became the top salesman at Perry Buick/Subaru in Norfolk and now is a showroom star at RK Subaru in Virginia Beach. "I like to meet new people and talk."

Kitty Bryant is also no wallflower. Growing up in New Jersey (her dad fought in Vietnam), she studied journalism at Rutgers and then followed her future husband (Hunter, now in the shipping industry) to Hampton Roads where Kitty reported for the Smithfield Times, learning the inner workings of local governments while also covering crime, including Michael Vick's dog fighting case in Surry County. Needing more income, she earned a masters in secondary education and taught history at Phoebus High in Hampton for five years but left teaching to spend more time with her family (two sons now 13 and 11 and a daughter age 7). "We live in Olde Towne and love it," she says. "I became a volunteer with CASA and our civic league and have had paid positions with the business association and the family and children ministry at my church."

A Lefcoe Leadership Program grad, Kitty wondered why there was just one woman on Portsmouth City Council. So in the fall, she was one of five among eleven candidates for three seats. Two, her plus Yolanda Thomas ("another working mom with kids in public

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Out Migration is a Hampton Roads Challenge

By Joel Rubin and Peter Shaw

Photos are of random participants in PDC session

"Net migration" is the difference between the number of people moving into an area and ones leaving. According to a UVA expert on the subject, Hampton Roads accounts for 25% of the negative net migration for all of Virginia. But some are supplanted by those who choose our region to live.

Call Emily Larimore a "come here." She grew up in Illinois, but since her military father was stationed in coastal Virginia, she was able to secure in state college tuition. "I picked ODU because it had the programs I wanted," says Emily, "and I'm happy I did."

She cherished her four years in Norfolk, so much that the now 21-year-old searched nowhere else for work. "It was frustrating though because many employers asked for a lot of experience but weren't offering the salaries that should come with it," she recalls. Emily finally landed a job she loves, in marketing with the Hampton Roads Chamber. Her experience though was not unique.

We heard other war stories during a gathering of young persons in the local workforce, coordinated by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, which is focused on the out-migration challenge. "The cost of living here is not as expensive as many larger communities, but it's not cheap," Abby Smith, who moved here from Annapolis, told her roundtable of fellow millennials and PDC members. "Affordable housing is hard to find, and there is not much public transportation so you must have a car."

Why is pay often not commensurate with job responsibilities or background? Blame it to some extent, on the military, says Greg Grootendorst, economist and HRPDC Deputy Executive Director. Their salaries and benefits drive pay levels, but he predicts supply and demand of talent at the end of the day should fix the problem.

Otherwise, the guests, many of whom are integrating themselves into the community through groups like THRIVe, 757 Connect and the Chambers, enjoy what they label our "diversity," from the people to the arts to the geography. "We enjoy having the mountains not far from the ocean," said one. "We have a lot of colleges here, social events and the pace of life is just right," said another. But they acknowledged that the water, our blessing and curse, creates transportation issues, and that despite efforts to achieve a unifying name or even theme, we are still brand challenged. In addition, several of the 20 and 30-year olds carped about a seeming lack of cooperation among the cities.

What the PDC heard this day added to what a consultant learned doing a Go Virginia funded study on outmigration in Hampton Roads.

- Young people without children are more likely to leave
- Ones who grew up or went to college here are more prone to stay or return
- Career opportunities (or lack of), cost of living and safety drive people away
- The more involved you become in the community, the more likely you will remain
- Entrepreneurial environment here is hampered by regional awareness, fragmented political geography, access to capital, cultural issues, and quality of life concerns

Many of our challenges are shared by other regions, but that's of little importance if you are an employer in search of quality candidates eager to plant roots here. The most obvious targets should be those who know Hampton Roads and just need financial incentives – like a well-paying job and an affordable cost of living– to come home.

FHR Board Member is Always Climbing

By Brandi Monsma

I work hard and play hard.

A Hickory High alum, I earned a full scholarship to ODU (BS in Business Administration), then graduate degrees in Real Estate Development at Auburn and Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Sydney. Yes, that's in Australia. I wasn't done traveling through.

I caught the climbing bug on a high wall in a sporting goods store here in Hampton Roads, returning every day for a month. That led to me scaling boulders and other challenging rock formations around the world, the 1,500-foot high El Potrero in Mexico one that other enthusiasts might recognize. I am also a certified Search and Rescue Diver and a Wilderness First Responder through NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School). Why do I go to such heights? It tests my limits and has frankly helped me succeed in business.

I have set sales records working for Hilton Grand Vacations, enticing groups into major resorts in Arizona, Las Vegas, Cabo San Lucas and here in Virginia. Thanks to climbing, I feel I can break through any mental plateau and operate at a peak level. I am also a day trader, another challenging but rewarding career. I have very strong discipline, some of which I owe to my grandmother who instilled a heavy dose of confidence in her little Brandi.

Because I enjoy learning about market trends, enhancing my financial knowledge and observing communities that I visit, I have great hopes for my own. It's why I have been involved for a couple decades in Future of Hampton Roads, which is focused on strengthening the region by connecting professionals who likewise care about its growth. I am always meeting new people, understanding how the community ticks and suggesting ways to help shape a vibrant, sustainable future for my home area.

At 41, I love having this region as my home base, vacation sales and stock dealing as my professional passions and sharing my worldly insights to make the 757 better. Now on to the next peak.

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Regional Maritime Training System Making Waves

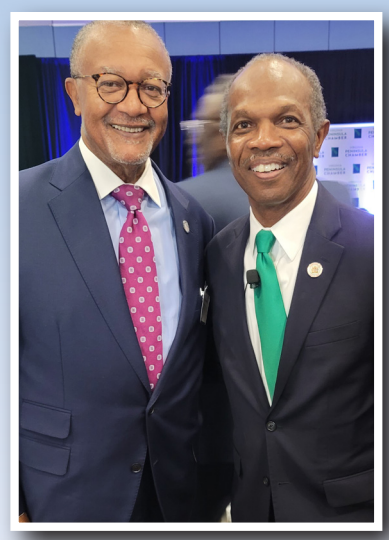
Kudos to the Hampton Roads Workforce Council that is conducting a comprehensive campaign to beef up the marketing and recruitment of talent for maritime, defense and advanced manufacturing industries. Shawn Avery's team is working with a host of academic partners in a hundred mile radius from Hyde County, NC to Mathews County, VA to spread the word about opportunity in these fields.

There are 20 "recruiters" embedded in the area, their efforts supported by $2.5-million in ads, social media, podcasts and such with catchy titles like "Where Passion Meets Purpose" and "Build Skills that Build Futures." So far:

- a thousand grads are in jobs or waiting for ones, average wage $22.15/hour
- 3,000 middle schoolers will attend World of Works (maritime exploration programs)
- there have been 75 educator industry tours

To learn more about the RMTS, visit www.maritimejobsva.com

Gray Succeeds Tuck, One Regional Leader for Another, Producing a Seamless Transition in Hampton



Jimmy Gray | Donnie Tuck

This month Hampton officially changed mayors, replacing one regional citizen with another.

After two terms, Donnie Tuck chose not to seek reelection. His vice mayor Jimmy Gray ran and won handily. A Durham native and Duke grad (with a master's in public administration from ODU), Tuck, once a TV news reporter, became one of the area's most industrious public servants during his 14 years on Hampton Council. He was chair of two regional transportation bodies (HRTPO and HRTAC) and its military advisory group (HRMFFA) and took the lead on regional approaches to attacking youth violence.

Jimmy Gray has been all over Hampton Roads. Born and raised in Portsmouth, he was a firefighter in Chesapeake for 26 years, rising to Division Chief, before moving to Hampton to become first its fire chief and then its deputy city manager. He retired in 2014 to run and win two terms on City Council. "I love doing regional work," says Gray, a TCC and HU grad who chairs the 200 + Men and Fort Monroe Foundations and partnered with Mayor Tuck on finding solutions to youth crime including recruiting "credible messengers" to interact with teens.

At FHR, we are pleased that Hampton, which saw a reduction in murders in 2024 and an increase in high school graduation rates and school accreditations, is on an upward trajectory with one Forward Thinker having earned a rest but a second one now in place to maintain continuity and progress.

The Noblemen Display True Regional Cooperation

The Noblemen were at it again this past holiday season and not just in Virginia Beach, their home city.

Noblemen Founder Al Midgett with Portsmouth residents

In a show of true regional awareness and love, volunteers came to the Parker Rec Center on Turnpike Road in Portsmouth and distributed donated books and toys to nearly 800 grateful children and parents.

Noblemen founder Al Midgett's motivation to "pay it forward" through philanthropy was the result of a "gift," as he calls it, of having a child in 1993 who was born so early that he was given a 2% chance of survival. Al had no health insurance at the time, so his "community" stepped up, covering over a half million dollars in medical expenses. His son, Matt Midgett, is alive and well as are the Noblemen, particularly during December when the group turns up in places like the Parker Center because "giving," says Al, "is what makes our hearts sing."

PCs for People Expands to Richmond-Hampton Roads Megaregion, Bringing Technology Access to Underserved Communities

By Gregory J. Gilligan, RVA757 Connects

PCs for People, the nation's largest nonprofit computer refurbisher, is bringing its mission to close the digital divide to the Richmond- Hampton Roads megaregion, a 120-mile-wide service area.

Begun in 1998 in Minnesota, PCs for People collects end of life computers – at no cost to the donating businesses and organizations – refurbishes them and installs the latest software, then provides the renewed desktop and laptop computers free or at low cost to underserved residents and families. Starting in spring 2025, the program, which operates in 10 major U.S. markets including Atlanta and Baltimore, will offer qualified individuals and families in the megaregion this transformative technology plus training and tech support.

The need for PCs for People is well documented. Over 40% of individuals living in poverty lack access to a computer, according to Pew Research. The average family receiving one and internet connection sees their income rise by 15% in the first year of ownership.

Chambers of Commerce across the megaregion and RVA757 Connects helped in introducing PCs for People to the local business communities and potential funders.

PCs for People so far has raised more than $800,000 as an initial base level start-up funding to go towards buying a building (on East Pembroke Avenue in Hampton) as well as a commercial truck plus hiring employees. Donations have come in, including $250,000 from Meta (parent company of Facebook), and from some local foundations and the Birdsong Health Literacy Center of Excellence.

Even before opening in Richmond and Hampton Roads, PCs for People has received outdated computers from nearly two dozen companies including Drucker + Falk, Birdsong Peanuts, Kemper Consulting, Hourigan, W.M. Jordan, Zel Technologies, and the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission. It will start more regular pickups from businesses in 2025.

Nationwide PCs for People has assisted some 825,000 people. Now needy residents in central and eastern Virginia, thanks to our status as a megaregion, will join them.

RVA757 Connects, a nonprofit organization, is a coalition of top business and organizational leaders in the Richmond area and Hampton Roads region, with a goal of advancing a bold vision to ignite the I-64 Innovation Corridor megaregion.

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director to hear from a York County supervisor and vice versa so we all know what might be funded and when."

The PDC has been front and center on offshore wind and the Hampton Roads Regional Broadband initiative, 3,000 miles of fiber that will provide us with some of the nation's fastest internet speeds. "Much of what our governments do is very technical and requires the expertise, not of mayors, but city and county staffers who know what's above and below the ground and the laws that we have to follow and physical obstacles we must overcome," says Bob Crum." And then there's the water, including not just rivers and bays that must be crossed but also the rising seas that impact land use. "We share best practices that they can take home to their communities."

At a recent PDC meeting, five members of Virginia Beach City Council were at the table, almost half that body to hear a presentation by the Navy on its economic impact. "That was important data, and I wanted to hear it," said councilman Joash Schulman. "The PDC does a great job of bringing us critical information but more importantly, putting us and our colleagues in the same room to hear it. It's time well spent."

HR Trivia Answer

Answer to HR TRIVIA on Page 2
The 17 localities in the HRPDC are Chesapeake, Franklin, Gloucester County, Hampton, Isle of Wight County, James City County, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Smithfield, Southampton County, Suffolk, Surry County, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, and York County.

"Three of a Kind", cont. from Page 3

school") won, bringing a new perspective to the needs of all citizens.

Jeremy McGee became a business entrepreneur at an early age. With two buddies, the South Carolina native started a tech firm while in high school, buying parts and constructing computers, earning good money, national recognition and a college scholarship for their zeal. "At the University of South Carolina, I began another company that created filtering technology to remove pornography and profanity from internet services." A Norfolk firm bought that outfit, and he moved here, buying a downtown condo with wife Malia. "I am now CEO of Radiant Digital with fifty employees spread across 17 states." The company stands up popular websites, like www.beliefnet.com, and secures ad support. And Malia? "We bought the old Freemason Inn off Brambleton Avenue six years ago and turned it into Four Eleven York, an upscale boutique inn and restaurant. My wife runs that."

Now Jeremy (42), Kitty (43) and Cash (51), all self-starters, are bringing new energy to their city governments, and are up to considering fresh, and regional, approaches, to problem solving. And thanks to our conversation, if they need an ear, they now have each other.

About "Forward Thinking"

Forward Thinking is published, printed and distributed quarterly by Future of Hampton Roads, a more than four-decade old organization of volunteers dedicated to the value of regional cooperation through the:

- promotion of individuals and groups working across regional lines,
- sharing of ideas and programs that are or could be available throughout Hampton Roads, and the
- advancement of the efforts of other like-minded organizations, including the Hampton Roads Alliance, Workforce Council, Planning District Commission, and Business Roundtable as well as the Chambers of Commerce of Hampton Roads and the Greater Peninsula. The preceding participate in the creation of content for Forward Thinking and/or its dissemination, including at community events.

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