

*Virginia Economic Developers Association
Cardinal Community Assistance Program*



*Essex County
Town of Tappahannock
Cardinal Visitation Team Report
June 8, 2015*

Background

At the request of the Essex County EDA, the Virginia Economic Developers Association (VEDA) through its Cardinal Community Assistance Program (CCAP) agreed to review the Town's and County's economic conditions, review past and current economic development strategies and suggest strategies for economic opportunities. The Cardinal Team (the Team) volunteers its time trying to identify approaches to help communities be successful in the activity of economic development. The VEDA Cardinals provide this service without compensation and the community only bears relevant expenses incurred during the review process. The Essex County and Town of Tappahannock CCAP Team consisted of Will Davis and Jay Langston.

Introduction and Observations

The Team expressly wishes to thank Trenton Funkhouser, Bill Croxton and Reese Peck for making arrangements and lining up a great team of local leaders from government, business and the community to meet with us. We were impressed with the honest and straightforward manner in which all of our comments and questions were addressed. We also extend a special thanks to all of the local business and civic leaders who met with us during our visit. Without the long-term commitment and enthusiasm shown, all planning will be for naught.

On May 19 and 20, 2015, the team spent a full day and a half meeting with various county staff, town political leaders, county and town civic leaders, business leaders, EDA members and engaged citizens. The team independently toured the communities, as well as visited the neighboring communities of Warsaw and Richmond County. With EDA staff, the Town Mayor, the Main Street founder, and others, we visited the old Airport property, the Town of Tappahannock, St. Margaret's School, Garret's Marina, Parker Marina, Riverside Hospital and the Riverside Condos, various neighborhoods, LaGrange Industrial Park, the new Airport, the DAW Theater and the ingress and egress points to the County. We thank again all the local leaders for helping with the logistics and making our visit informative and thorough.

The Team appreciated the open dialogue and passion expressed throughout the entire visit for improving the Town and County, (henceforth referred to as the Community because the Team believes they are inextricably linked). We want to commend the Community for seeking to develop a shared vision and setting realistic expectations. We especially want to commend the Community for the positive, proactive attitude. The team felt that this was not an incidence of showing best behavior to outsiders, but was truly the attitude of all the Community leaders. The Town and County have many positive assets for community and economic development, and the attitudes displayed will go a long way in accomplishing these goals. In the Team's view, given Essex County's large agriculture and forestry sector, we concur with the strategy of growing the agribusiness and forestry sectors. We also feel that there are significant opportunities for eco-tourism, conservation/outdoorsmen development, retail, retirement and health-related development. As one local leader paraphrased it, Essex and Tappahannock should be all about Retail, Recreation and Retirement. The Team concurs.

Assessment and Recommendations

There was consensus among Town, County, business and civic leaders on three major themes: the need to leverage the existing business sectors in the community; the need to support and grow the retail sector, and; the need to create destination-themed tourism opportunities. A notable feature of the tourism-related theme was the universal desire to have the Community develop this theme around conservation, outdoors/agri-/eco-/hunting/fishing and biking/hiking activities.

The ideas that follow are the Team's ideas, assessments and recommendations based upon our observations and interactions with the Community during our visit, as well as drawing upon best practices of analogous communities. The CCAP team's collective experience in local, regional, state and private economic development practice spans nearly 70 years across the Commonwealth and beyond. It is our hope that our observations and recommendations will be of assistance to the Community.

Assessments

- The Community admittedly does not have a robust economic development effort, although the Community is commended for coming together under the auspices of the Essex EDA to fund the new, current program. However, the Team only considers this effort a start. The current budget does not allow for the creation and implementation of programs, marketing initiatives, product development, project management follow-through, and taking on new initiatives with the confidence of successful completion.
- As noted in the Introduction, there are good relationships between business, civic, political and governmental leadership. Uniformly, the leadership expressed the desire to seek solutions and was forward-thinking, and possibly even more important, realistic and pragmatic about the near-term opportunities.
- The Community has a deep and robust history of agriculture and forestry and recognizes these sectors as vibrant and full of promise for the Community. The Team agrees and was impressed with the operations visited.
- The Community has a juxtaposition of location opportunities based upon business sectors. The old adage that the Community is the Gateway to the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula no longer holds true under close scrutiny when one considers the retail and business/professional service sectors. While the Community was once the commercial hub for both regions, the growth of Hanover County to the south, the growth of the Fredericksburg and NOVA regions to the north, dwindling population and changing demographics in the approximate nearby regions, along with the location of big-box retailers, have altered the purchasing habits of consumers. Although there are 22,000 vehicles a day passing through the Community, it is noted that most do not stop. This the Team believes presents an economic opportunity.

- The Community has a recognized issue with the school system. To the Community's credit, the local leadership was blunt about the challenges and underperformance of the school system. The Team cannot overemphasize the long-term negative impact this will have on the community if the school system is not improved. While it is beyond the scope of the CCAP Team to address educational issues or express particular expertise in educational reform, it is well understood that a good local education system is the foundation for community growth and new opportunities. Without it, a community faces long-term degradation of economic opportunities due to the inherent brain-drain that occurs.
- St. Margaret's is an asset in the Community. The Team believes there is an opportunity to leverage the domestic and international character of the school for the benefit of both economic opportunities for the Town and the leveraging of the school's reputation to promote the Community.
- The lack of citizen involvement in the Community, along with the lack of recreational amenities is an issue, and one that the Team feels is an opportunity to rally local support.

Recommendations

- First and foremost, the Team concurs with the Community about leveraging the existing agricultural and forestry sectors. These sectors are healthy, growing sectors, are basic employment that lead to increased direct and indirect employment and are targeted sectors for the Commonwealth. We strongly encourage strengthening dialogue with both the Virginia Department of Agriculture and the Department of Forestry to leverage the Commonwealth's programs to support and grow the Community's existing business.
- Given the Community's limited economic development resource capability, an existing business program offers the largest return on investment that the Community can achieve. But this too requires resources and focus. The Economic Development Director cannot continue to be tasked with the latest and greatest idea that takes him off mission and prevents the implementation of this program. With limited resources, one possible option is to recruit a few trusted individuals, perhaps EDA members, Chamber members, or recognized civic leaders, to be ambassadors for an existing business visitation program on behalf of the Community. Business must be engaged for the Community to be successful. The retail and commercial sectors should be visited and become an integral part of the community development effort.

In concert with the existing business program, the Team believes the Community should leverage its existing assets. The Community owns two industrial/business parks, neither of which appear to have a coherent development plan. These development plans, along with the overall strategic community development plan, must be developed before any strategic decisions are made about existing assets.

The Old Airport property is a legacy property that given its close proximity to two schools and adjacent neighborhoods, has limitations on the intensity of uses that can be realistically considered. This does not mean that it cannot be developed for light industrial or business uses, especially if a plan is developed for promoting it to existing business. However, the Teams is concerned about the limited ingress and egress to the Old Airport. Access must be improved, otherwise the property might best be used for school facilities or expansion of the existing wood pellet manufacturing operation.

The New Airport property holds more promise for development, but again the Team encourages the Community to establish a plan for the types of business desired along with the associated development standards. Otherwise, as seen in many communities, property will simply be sold to the first buyer that comes along because the Community wants a “success.” The first buyer will cast the future for the property, for better or worse.

- Community revitalization is a shared interest among all the parties that the Team met and represents an opportunity for expanded community involvement. Based upon direct and indirect feedback, Community citizens are not engaged. We can only speculate about reasons for the lack of involvement, but now is the time to initiate a dialogue. Referencing one of the local’s comments about the Community’s potential focus, maybe a rallying point could be around recreational activities. It was noted that in a community with such plentiful resources as water and conservation easements, there is a remarkable lack of access to both. The Team believes that increased community involvement can be stimulated through success, and small steps can lead to greater accomplishments. Involving the citizens in the development of a recreation vision for the Community can be such an endeavor. Water access, hiking and biking trails, hunting, water-based recreation and similar activities are legitimate issues for the quality of life for the Community.

Another potential community engagement activity could be façade revitalization and development standards for the town. Basic interest in improving appearances is present as evidenced by the new streetlights, redevelopment of the DAW Theater and the interest in improving pedestrian access. We encourage the Community to engage the citizens in a visioning process for the Town. Not only can the visioning process be a means of eliciting community engagement, but it can renew interest in “ownership” of the Town, and possibly generate increased local patronage. In combination, we would also encourage the Community to consider some nominal incentives to promote façade improvements. Many communities have adopted such programs and examples are plentiful.

- The Community needs to open a dialogue with the property owner next to the bridge to consolidate the waterfront property. This is a missing link for the Community. The Team heard various possible, but differing reasons why this had not been accomplished,

which leads us to believe no one really knows the true status. It is time to begin that dialogue. Whomever it should be, whatever assurances are needed, whatever legal mechanizations required, be it land-leases, options, easements, policing, etc., the Community must initiate the means to gain access to the water. Access can open up new opportunities for retail growth within the community including day-trippers as an example, who enjoy boating in for the day, sightseeing, dining and then returning home.

- Tourism is a must for the Community. As referenced previously, there are many opportunities for water-based, conservation-based, biking and hiking activities. Tourism was discussed at the conceptual and concrete levels during our visit. The Virginia Tourism Corporation has very good information on demographics and one of the overriding attributes of a growing segment of the population is the desire for adventure-based tourism. The Community has the basis of a robust outdoors/conservation-based, tourism economy. Located approximately 45 minutes from both the Richmond and Fredericksburg regions, there is a significant accessible population in close proximity. Moreover, the core ideologies of conservation and outdoors recreation are complimentary. Water recreation, biking, horseback riding, bird watching, hiking, botany, camping, hunting, fishing and many other outdoors activities are inherent given the natural resources and can be developed in the Community with low capital expenditures. In addition, community involvement can be leveraged to begin community engagement. Again community engagement is necessary for success, along with utilizing the Virginia Tourism Corporation asset development and promotion programs.
- The Community should reach out to St. Margaret's to explore the opportunities associated with the parents of the students. It was expressed to the Team that nearly fifty percent of the student body is international and the potential to lure both international tourism and investment dollars is something that should be explored. At a minimum, these statistics present potential marketing bullets for Community outreach.
- The Community needs to focus on some of the basics of economic development. At minimum, the budget needs to be increased and a long-term commitment made in order to effectively engage in today's world of community development. Also, a prospect team needs to be assembled, assigned tasks, coached, rehearsed and be made ready whenever a prospect comes to town. The captain and project manager of the team needs to be the Director of Economic Development, but the Community Pitch is best delivered by the team. The local team needs to consist of a subset of the leaders we met during our visit, or some derivation thereof. The team needs to tell the Community story; convey the Community vision and be consistent. This team also needs to make the pitch to as many existing businesses as possible, through the Chamber, Rotary, and any and all other civic and community organizations.
- Another basic economic development need is the updating of the sites and building database. The Team strongly recommends contacting the brokerage community

regarding both current representation and potential opportunities. We believe the Community should reach out to the brokerage community in both the Richmond and Fredericksburg region. The Community should also utilize MyVirginiaScan, provided free of charge by the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. This recently improved version hosts a number of new features and can be customized by the Community for their intended audience. VEDP will be happy to assist with this technology.

- Finally, the idea of hiring a retail consultant was voiced numerous times during the Team visit. The Team has reservations about the return on investment of such a move, vis-à-vis the current status of the community development program and vision. The Team strongly recommends that the Community develop a clear strategy for addressing immediate concerns and activities outlined in the Team's recommendation before commencing with hiring a retail consultant. At this stage, a retail consultant can likely provide input into only one aspect of the Community's needs.

Conclusions

In summary, the VEDA Cardinal Community Assistance Program appreciates the opportunity to provide community development recommendations to one of Virginia's historic communities. Essex County and the Town of Tappahannock have many outstanding attributes and advantages as noted in the report. Our recommendations for the Community are to be proactive with both existing business and tourism development, utilizing many of the suggestions above in order build upon these assets. The Team feels that if the County leadership accepts and implements a majority of the Committee's suggestions, the community's potential will be unlocked resulting in new capital investment, quality jobs, increased tourism and new revenue.

Respectfully submitted,

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