

Economic forum at William and Mary explores uniting region



Virginia Secretary of Technology Karen Jackson was one of many speakers encouraging collaboration at William & Mary's Regional Economic Development Forum Tuesday.

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Hundreds of business leaders converged on Williamsburg Tuesday to hear about the mega-region that Hampton Roads may soon join, stretching from Richmond to the Virginia Beach oceanfront.

The majority of the College of William and Mary's first regional economic development forum focused on the creation of a single, defined market and how to get there.

The forum, hosted in conjunction with Virginia Commonwealth University and Old Dominion University, consisted of presentations on expanding transportation and Virginia ports, opportunities for collaboration within the region, and GO Virginia, an initiative on growth and opportunity.

"Getting such a group together is a rare but wonderful happening, but a whole lot of good could be done if we were able to ... work collaboratively to spur Virginia's economy, and Virginia's economy does need some spurring these days," William and Mary president W. Taylor Reveley said.

Tom Frantz, Hampton Roads Business Roundtable executive committee member, outlined how and why Hampton Roads should become a larger, globally competitive market.

"We can compete with other markets if we align," Frantz said. "That alignment does not mean merging any cities or counties — we all remain who we are, doing what we're doing."

For this to work, Frantz said, the region needs two growing metropolitan areas with potential for growth in between and transportation connections linking both areas.

Virginia Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne detailed plans for improved infrastructure including the Interstate 64 widening in progress, as well as ideas for upgrading the Hampton Roads and Monitor-Merrimack bridge-tunnels. He said connections between the bustling cities would need to include rail expansion as well.

Bob Crum, executive director of the Hampton Roads planning district commission, pointed out 10 areas where collaboration can move the mega-region concept forward.

In addition to transportation expansion — widening I-64 and increasing passenger rail options — he suggested lengthening the Virginia Capital Trail by another 50 miles. He also proposed branding the highway corridor connecting VCU, William and Mary, Christopher Newport University and ODU as an innovation corridor.

Chip Filer, ODU's economic department chairman, talked about clusters, a successful grow-your-own approach to economic development.

"The idea here is to take a look at any type of cluster that exists already in a regional economy that is a strength," Filer said. "Clusters are very incorporative, they exist because of regional advantages."

He said the region's strengths are where growth should be focused.

"Hampton Roads has a few unique assets that must drive any clusters you are thinking about — it has the water, it has the port, it has military and it has history," Filer said.

Filer argued that focusing resources around defined clusters would attract new firms to the area wanting to join the group and would cause existing firms to expand as the cluster grows.

GO Virginia, the Virginia initiative on growth and opportunity, took the spotlight for the last third of the forum. John "Dubby" Wynne, retired CEO of Landmark Communications, discussed how incentives provided by state funding can grow the state's economy, particularly focusing on jobs.

"Our goal is to incentivize collaboration for high paying jobs in every region," Wynne said. "We are about creating sustainable infrastructure."

The initiative was allotted \$35.95 million in federal funding for GO grants, said Chris Lloyd, director of infrastructure and economic development for McGuire Woods Consulting. Wynne said some areas the grants could target included scaling up existing businesses, commercializing research and development as well as collaborations between startups.

After the audience had a chance to ask about GO Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University rector delivered the closing remarks.

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