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CONFRONTING THE GHOSTS OF GROWTH: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE \ VOTERS GRAPPLE WITH PRIORITIES AND EXPECTATIONS AS THEY PREPARE TO CHOOSE CITY AND SCHOOL LEADERS.

By MIKE KNEPLER, STAFF WRITER   April 14, 1996   Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA)   Page: A1   Word Count: 1251

Today, The Virginian-Pilot begins three weeks of special reporting leading up to municipal and school board elections on Tuesday, May 7. Never before have voters had so many choices for leadership on City Council and School Board. In Virginia Beach, alone, there are 45 school board candidates. Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth,

Suffolk and Virginia Beach voters will pick from 125 candidates. The election is unique for Portsmouth voters who, for the first time, elect school board members. This is only the second time for voters in Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Suffolk. Growth isn't on the ballot in the May 7 elections in South Hampton Roads, but for many citizens the issue could determine how they vote for mayors and members of city councils and school boards. In Virginia Beach, people are dealing with growth's consequences. In Chesapeake, one of the nation's fastest developing cities, residents are trying to live with it. And in once-rural Suffolk, citizens are gearing up for what seems an inevitable onslaught.

Even in Norfolk and Portsmouth, growth has become an issue as leaders struggle to find ways to rebuild economies and decaying downtowns.

Across the five cities, residents are grappling with whether their leaders should give priority to new growth - residential or business - or to existing neighborhoods.

They are finding the answers aren't simple.

Do you first need revenue from new development to pay for improvements in older neighborhoods?

Or should you improve existing neighborhoods to lure good-quality new development?

``You have to have growth,'' said Ed Blind, who has lived in Virginia Beach since 1988. ``You have to keep that going, but you've got to balance it.''

Norfolk and Portsmouth also are struggling with their priorities: Do they use limited resources to redevelop downtowns or stabilize older neighborhoods? Do they spend more money on schools, on fighting neighborhood crime or on economic development?

``I have no problem with increasing the tax base and doing projects that are going to bring more tourism and more dollars to the city, which I guess will help me to get the services,'' said Rodney Jordan of Norfolk. But, he said, ``I want to see . . . that I'm not going to wait another 30 years for streets to get paved.''

As federal and state aid to cities shrinks, local decisions are becoming tougher. Citizens who once expected it all now hesitate in explaining their preferences.

``Sometimes I think I'd really like to sit up there because I'd sure know how to run things,'' said Martha Ann Creecy of Portsmouth. ``Then there's another part of me who sits there and I'm also thinking, `It's such a balancing act to keep everything in place, to keep everybody happy, to keep everything afloat and still have a quality of life.' ''

Everybody wants a well-functioning community. The questions are: How do we get there, and what needs to be done next?

``First, it's safety in all aspects,'' Cecilia Jones said during a recent roundtable discussion

among Portsmouth residents. ``But I'm willing to trade off the schools to get economically developed, because being economically developed, that will enhance everything around - our schools, our shopping malls.''

Across the table, Je'Aime Powell, a high-school student, objected. ``I'm sorry. I can't support that,'' he said. ``My education can't wait.''

In struggling to make choices, many voters are looking beyond the boundaries of their own cities for examples.

``We don't want Suffolk to become another Chesapeake, and we don't want it to become another Virginia Beach,'' said Lin Callis, who has lived in Suffolk most of his life.

Chesapeake residents, in turn, often decry the rapid growth of Virginia Beach when they describe their concerns.

And in Virginia Beach, residents invoke comparisons with sprawling Northern Virginia. ``If you want to see this town five years from now, drive up to Fairfax County, Falls Church, that circus up there,'' said Ed Blind.

Voters throughout the region also refer to lessons from urban Norfolk and Portsmouth. They invoke bleak images of run-down housing but also warm feelings about well-preserved traditional neighborhoods such as Norfolk's Ghent.

There's an often-voiced desire for better enforcement of housing codes - not just in Norfolk and Portsmouth, but in the newer suburbs as well.

And a deeper concern frequently emerges: What are local governments doing to create a sense of community, not only in individual neighborhoods but also citywide?

``Everything has to be on the same level,'' said Angela Robertson of Portsmouth. ``I don't expect everybody to be rich or poor or whatever, but I expect the city to have some kind of glue that's bringing everybody together.''

In Virginia Beach, Jim Stancil talks about a similar need: ``At one time out there I could tell you everybody who lived on the street for several blocks. But we have got ourselves into a different lifestyle, and we don't much give a damn about our neighbor.''

Residents acknowledge they need to take more responsibility for finding solutions.

``We're not interested in the city as a whole, and maybe that's where we need to get,'' said Valora Baskerville of Portsmouth. ``We're just worried about what's going on our block, in our neighborhood and in our community.''

Citizens also are asking questions of themselves and neighbors.

``You can't have lots of houses generating $300 a year in taxes and top-notch schools. That's just inconsistent,'' said Joshua ``Pret'' Pretlow Jr. of Suffolk. ``That carries me to a pet complaint that I have. We fail sometimes to look at the evils that we need to have in our communities in order to have luxuries . . .

``Everybody wants business. Nobody says, `No business.' But everybody says `Not in my neighbor-hood.' ''

Still, residents want elected officials to listen harder to them.

Sure, the citizens say, they have many traditional requests: better schools and neighborhoods, safety from crime, more good-paying jobs, clean industries, encouragement to small-business owners, fair and efficient government.

But they also have expectations of things even more fundamental, such as better and more honest communication from city officials.

``Sometimes I get the impression . . . they're afraid to share whatever their vision of the city is, whatever the big picture is,'' said Rodney Jordan of Norfolk.

Creecy put it this way: ``I want to know what the compromises and the give-and-take are . . . not just during the budget meeting (but) consistently throughout the year.''

``Be more available to us,'' Myong Chong of Virginia Beach asks of her representatives. ``I don't know how often they need to do this, but they need more citizen interaction.''

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