

Introduction

Caroline County is submitting two projects from 2008 as a part of its CEDA nomination for exceptional Community Development, Community Involvement, and Business Recruitment:

- **The 1000 acre Thompson Rail Transit Oriented Development (TOD)** that has transformed a large tract adjacent to Interstate 95 from a wooded expanse to a federally and Commonwealth supported Commuter Rail project that the owners have made available to the County as a partnership for the benefit of the entire community. The Commonwealth granted VDOT \$100,000 for a feasibility study/bubble plan of the site; VDRPT, encouraged by the results, conducted its own study confirming the project's feasibility; and, Congress has made available \$490,000 for NEPA studies to be conducted this year to advance the project to construction. The owners have committed to make land available for the County to build the commuter rail station using Amtrak city to city service, and they have also offered a partnership to the County for the pursuit of the potential 1000 acre project development.
- **The \$2.8 Million Caroline County Visitor Center and Miocene Whale Display** is an exceptional facility opened November 22nd 2008 without benefit of any County General Fund expenditures except for staff time. The Visitor Center has been characterized by tourism professionals as the best community owned Visitor Center in Virginia, and the display of a 28' Miocene Whale Skeleton found in Caroline County by the Virginia Museum of Natural History is the most striking display in a community owned Visitor Center. The Center is 7000 square feet: 5000 square feet dedicated to visitor services and 2000 square feet house the offices of the Department of Economic Development & Tourism. The Center was funded by grants, gifts, donations, and revenues derived from its retail component. The \$118,000 whale display is also funded by donations from local businesses and corporations.

We show in this nomination document the commitment of 1000 acres toward a Transit Oriented Development that is supported by both Commonwealth and federal authorities; and, County involvement made possible by visionary local businessmen as an exceptional case of Business Recruitment and Community Involvement.

In addition, the Visitor Center and its exceptional displays made possible by many business donors will prove to be an outstanding case of Community Development and Community Involvement.

Innovativeness

Thompson Rail TOD, through a County staff driven concept, is based on a series of prior studies that point to the Carmel Church area as appropriate for a commuter rail station. From a 1960 National Capital Planning Commission (District of Columbia) Report to a VDRPT study conducted in 1991, the general area has been identified as appropriate for the location of a TOD. Staff, through its excellent relationship with the Thompsons, local businessmen, suggested pursuing not merely a rail station, but a vast build-out of a high density transit village to benefit from the station on the site. Staff has succeeded in obtaining grants that have allowed for the study of the site by VDOT and VDRPT that have verified the feasibility and advisability of the project. With the support of the United States Congress, additional monies have been made available to conduct the NEPA studies required for the federally funded construction phase of the project. Additionally, the site has been included in the Carmel Church sub area plan and in the County Comprehensive Plan. County staff has marshaled the resources that have transformed the raw concept to a massive project under development. From forest to 1000 acre rail project supported by Commonwealth and Congress and based on a partnership with the local land owners, the Thompson TOD project is composed of a series of notable innovations.

Caroline County Visitor Center and Miocene Whale Display has been a major innovation on two levels: first, create a visitor center like none other in the Commonwealth that has position, size, multimedia services, retail shopping opportunities; and second, create a natural history display only found in world class museums—all without General Fund expense. The structure was conceived in 2000. As tourism recruitment proved successful (State Fair of Virginia, Mattaponi Springs Golf Course, Virginia Sports Complex) the scope of the structure grew to meet the needs of the anticipated visitor base (250,000 annually to the center). The Center is

7000 square feet. Within the building, 2000 square feet are dedicated to the offices of economic development and tourism.

The content of the center compliments the scope of the building. Three multimedia screens display vital County information. One is to be dedicated to the culture and history of the County while a second provides important local marketing data (currently under development) that may result in revenue generation while the third screen will serve as an interactive mapping system (MapNetwork) for visitors and businesses (including industrial sites and buildings).

The building location is seven tenths of a mile from exit 104 of Interstate 95, effectively becoming a gateway to the greater Richmond area. Because it also straddles Rt. 207/301, the center is located to intercept traffic going to Baltimore and eastern Virginia. The center is professionally staffed.

The Funding for the Visitor Center project came from six successive successful years of TEA-21 grant applications (\$950,000), a proffer from a local developer who valued the Center's location and mission (\$1.1M), saved Transient Occupancy Tax over five years (\$350,000), and a small debt service to be paid for from Visitor Center Revenues (\$200,000)—marketing leases and gift shop profits.

The Gift Shop is operated by a 501 (c) 4 non-profit corporation created by the Department of Economic Development in 2003 to sell County imprint items. The shop also serves to highlight and promote local artisans, retailers and imprint items pertaining to Caroline such as whale and Secretariat items.

A major innovation in the Visitor Center that is in most high relief is the Miocene whale display of a 28' cast of a 15 million year old (MYO) whale skeleton discovered by the Virginia Museum of Natural History a mile west of U.S. Route 1 in 1991. Additionally, by utilizing the glass tower of the Visitor Center as the focal point of the display, staff suggested a diving vertical posture for the skeleton as though submerging. Dr. Dooley of the Virginia Museum of Natural History confirmed that the diving mounting was accurate for the shallow waters of Miocene I-95. As a result the VMNH states that the Caroline display is the most exciting whale mounting known to not only the Virginia Museum, but also the Smithsonian Institute. The whale display is supported by a railing of museum grade display panels that informs the public of the unique prehistoric life in Caroline and the perspective enhancing story of Interstate 95 as being the edge of the Miocene ocean. A major conceptual innovation for travelers is I-95 as a journey not only in miles but one of deep geological time.

The whale display has been paid for by donations from local businesses and firms that operate within Caroline (\$118,000); and all funding was as a result of in-house staff fund raising. The whale casting was performed by the internationally recognized leader in museum displays, Research International. The entire project was possible by a close partnership between Caroline County and the Virginia Museum of Natural History.

Transferability

The elements of the Caroline rail project that can be adopted by any community are relatively simple: Identify a project of large-scale potential; establish excellent working relationships with local land owners by demonstrating the benefits of participation; developing a large enough project that commands the attention of the Commonwealth and the Congress (scope, even for modestly funded communities is key); and establish with clarity the profitability of a project through independent studies.

As is obvious, no one element of the Caroline TOD development process is vastly complicated. However, small communities, or communities without substantial funding may benefit by contemplating large projects. (Caroline's Economic Development budget is a mere \$200,000 for salaries and operations). When working within tight limitations, it is understandable for programs to adopt a limited view of a community's potential. Yet, as all developers are marketing their communities beyond their borders, advancing a large or complex project may be one way to make a limited program internally become a large program externally to investors. The transferrable lesson of the Caroline TOD project is in conceptualizing the community as a development Goliath even if it is actually a financial David.

The transferable elements of the Caroline Visitor Center and whale display are again, simple: Aim for excellence and a unique perspective; make the project attractive enough to compel investment from outside sources; utilize the most compelling or unique feature of the community to focus attention; seek partnerships with like minded institutions or those with a compelling interest to help (VMNH, and funding sources); allow time sufficient to raise funds. This last concept is simple but often overlooked. Projects are not races and if

they require multiple years to complete, establish projects without inflexible time limits, but with identifiable process goals. It is easy for a delivery date to hinder a project's prospects of success.

Community Commitment and Leverage

Caroline's nominated projects could not have succeeded without massive community commitment and resource leverage.

Prior rail studies were used to compel additional studies that added more specificity and weight to the venture starting with the commuter rail studies conducted by the National Capital Planning Commission as early as 1960, VDRPT's 1991 study of the region identified the general location, while a study by Parsons-Brinkerhoff in 2005 identified the property for development as a TOD. These studies levered the two Commonwealth studies that in turn levered the \$490,000 funding from Congress for the pending NEPA study. This study, when completed, it is hoped, will lever engineering studies that will pave the way toward construction of the station and access roads. The construction, in turn, will lever the interest of additional private investment.

All of the above is only possible due to the commitment of the Thompsons to proceed with an exceptional project that advances the larger interest of the community and the Commonwealth. The Thompsons have offered land and partnership status to the County to advance the project.

Caroline County has also solidified the project in the community planning process by creating a large sub area study committee for the Carmel Church area that has codified the rail concept in the Comprehensive Plan. This broad community endeavor has built a large support base in Caroline for the rail concept.

The Visitor Center is also a model of community support and levered resources. The \$2.8 Million for the building was achieved through grants, gifts and donations starting with a gift of the land (value \$420,000 by Union Bankshares Corporation, a leading bank headquartered in Caroline. This in-kind donation provided the site for the Center and also an in-kind match worth nearly \$200,000 against \$950,000 of TEA-21 grants (VDOT) staff secured in multiple years. A local builder also proffered \$1.1 Million to the project. The Caroline Tourism Department also held back and rolled over nearly \$350,000 for the project, again, in multiple years.

The whale display costing \$118,000 has been paid for by direct gifts from Litt and Kath Thompson Foundation, VSE Corporation, Ennstone Corporation, Rappahannock Electric Cooperative, Herlong Associates, MC Dean, Inc., Luck Stone Corporation, NiSource/Columbia Natural Gas. In addition, vital services were donated, such as engineering for the display mounting by Herlong Associates, design work by Spangler-Erkert, and countless hours of consulting and advice and the use of the casting of the whale skeleton by the Virginia Museum of Natural History—this a value of \$250,000—donated.

Measured Objectives

Thompson Rail TOD has some very clear measurable impacts. Grant success alone in the last year was \$590,000 (VDOT, Congress); if the VDRPT study is valued the same as the VDOT study: \$690,000.

The land value that is to be brought to the TOD project and Caroline in partnership is \$50 Million. The VDRPT study also projected an 18 year development build-out to add Commercial investment value to Caroline County as \$58,553,730 and annual tax revenues as \$2.6 Million. This is projected as just under 1,000,000 sq. ft.

Retail construction has also been projected to be valued as \$67,833,298 generating tax revenue of \$3,103,002 annually.

Residential projections show value of over \$1 Billion and \$100 Million in County revenue. These investments still have to be realized. Yet, the current level of success of the Thompson TOD has advanced the development concept to the point where projections from independent analysis demonstrate a project with a large potential to benefit the Community.

This does not include the potential \$130 Million in additional federal investment to be sought.

Objectives for the Visitor Center realized have been the creation of the \$2.8 Million facility, the hiring of four staff to operate the facility; the ability to market directly to the traveling public the County's major tourism

venues and attractions. In addition, the facility offers a unique educational experience about the County prehistory that is valued at \$118,000. The Center also meets the program objective of providing the community with a facility to bring the traveling public (250,000 annually) in front of local retailers, and to a dramatically expanded array of tourism attractions—enhancing their potential for success.

Secondary Benefits

Thompson Rail TOD is providing additional benefits for the Community by allowing the potential for a lucrative development relationship to the County to be codified, the community to be viewed as proactive and more attractive to industrial, office and commercial investment; and the County can potentially receive of \$130,000,000 in federal funding for rail and roads, or private investment to achieve the same end.

Obviously, future funding is an intangible, however, having a project that can potentially lever massive outside investment from public and private sources is one of the fundamental goals of economic development. Without such a project, a community is working with a blank slate hoping to find investors with vision. The Thompson TOD has already succeeded in obtaining the interest and support of the critical entities that fund public investment. The funding path has been opened. The secondary benefit of knowing the potential development exists makes all future recruitments/investments more likely to succeed, and the TOD to receive investment.

On a tertiary level, when the TOD becomes a reality, the potential to reduce or at least not add traffic to the congested Interstate 95 corridor is expected. Addressing long term development that does not contribute to traffic congestion is a vital consideration for future business and residential expansion in central Virginia.

The Visitor Center has enjoyed an immediate secondary benefit: the location of an Arby's next to the Center. The choice of site and to invest is directly a result of the Center driving business in the direction of Rt. 207/652. As well, a hotel is submitting site plans 100 yards away from the Visitor Center. Again, the Center is a prime factor for the investment. There has not been a new restaurant or hotel investment at Exit 104 in over ten years. With the Center construction complete, two such investments have materialized within 100 yards of the facility. The combined investments will exceed \$1 Million and fifty jobs.

The Visitor Center will also drive a portion of the 70,000 vehicles that pass the 104 interchange into Caroline to increase overnight stay, sales to retailers, and greater participation in the County's tourism events, including the State Fair of Virginia in the Autumn of 2009. The Center provides a marketing venue for 550 County hotel rooms while also allowing Economic Development to work in a new facility located next to a major transportation corridor.

Also planned for the Center is a larger mission through its retail subsidiary to market products from a wider vendor list, and via its MapNetwork component, achieve a broader marketing and partnership relationship with regional participants such as the Richmond area, and communities east on Interstate 95 that now have less opportunity to reach out to the traveling public than in previous years (due to the closing of the King George Welcome Center).

These new relationships have the opportunity to serve several communities and private enterprises as has its FoundersofAmerica.org website, and it may allow for new streams of revenue to assist operations while driving the traveling public to a wider and more diverse tourism destination base.

The Visitor Center also has another benefit: creating a focal point for community pride. Many Caroline citizens have come to see their pre-historic past, their history, their place in the broader national story, and also to use the facility for after hours events. A number of citizens have brought visiting friends and families to the Center to show what Caroline is and has to offer. For this nomination it is impossible to place a dollar value on a new spirit of pride of place. We believe, however, that when it comes to community support for future development initiatives, and a for a community to have a greater sense of itself through the workings of its public institutions, the Visitor Center and what it inspires is priceless.