

Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance

Presentation to the James City County Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee

November 17, 2008

Chairman Fraley, other members of the Steering Committee, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the roughly 1,000 businesses that are members of the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance. That is a mouthful, so I will just refer to the organization as the Alliance. Most of our businesses are located in James City County and most of our employees live in the County. All of us appreciate the time you are devoting to this important process.

I am Jim Golden, I have a William and Mary office in the new Discovery II building in New Town, and I live in James City County. I am currently serving as Business Vice Chair of the Alliance and I chair the Alliance's Comprehensive Plan Task Force. Dick Schreiber, President of the Alliance, is here with me, along with several other members of our Task Force.

The Alliance would like to be an effective participant in the development of comprehensive plans for its three municipalities. We believe that coordination of comprehensive planning across the three jurisdictions is important, because we are in fact one integrated economic market. We applaud the adjustment in planning timelines that will permit the next round of comprehensive plans to be done simultaneously in 2012. We hope that those plans will not just be simultaneous but also similar in format and coordinated in content.

The Alliance has established a Comprehensive Plan Task Force to follow the progress of comprehensive plan discussions, share appropriate information within the Alliance, and communicate Alliance positions as appropriate to those involved in the Comprehensive Plan process.

Our Task Force includes leaders of businesses and other organizations who live or work in James City County. They were selected to represent various types of businesses in different areas of the County. Some of the members are here this afternoon. Many of them were active participants on earlier James City County Comprehensive Plan committees. The members are:

Nicholas Barrett, Prime Outlets at Williamsburg
Robin Carson, Kingsmill
Brien R. Craft, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.-Distribution Center
Paul W. Gerhardt , Kaufman and Canoles Attorneys at Law
Victoria Gussman, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Robert Hershberger, Chamber Alliance
Charles P. Martino, Cooke's Gardens
Gary M. Massie, Jack L. Massie Contractor
Joseph S. Mastaler, Jr., Witt Mares
Brian McNelis, Busch Brewery
Marc Sharp, Bush Construction
Michael A. Matthews, The Structures Group
Richard Schreiber, Chamber Alliance
Robert J. Singley, Sr., RJS & Associates, Inc.
Randy Smith, Prudential McCardle Real Estate
Marshall N. Warner, Chesapeake Bank

Members of the Task Force participated in each of the Community Participation Team community conversations held around the County, and we made a formal presentation to the Team at the end of July.

The Task Force commissioned a survey to learn about the views of its members concerning the future of James City County and the strategic direction that its Comprehensive Plan should establish. The Alliance retained *The Wessex Group, Ltd.* (TWG) to develop a survey that would identify the most pressing business issues that the Comprehensive Plan should address. Responses were received from 145, or almost 15 percent, of the Alliance members.

The respondents confirmed that the six issues identified by the steering committee – uniqueness of the area, business development, tourism, workforce development, transportation and master planning -- were all very important to the membership. Members were also asked to indicate how well the county was doing on each issue. The question did not refer directly to the performance of County government, but asked more generally how the county was doing in each area. The scale for responses was as follows: 5 – very well; 4 – somewhat well; 3 -- neither well nor poorly; 2 – somewhat badly; 1 – very badly. The evaluation for meeting workforce and transportation needs was at the edge of the “somewhat badly” and “very badly” range. Business development, county master planning, and tourism were in the middle to “somewhat badly” range, and maintenance of the uniqueness of the area scored in the “somewhat well” range.

The survey also asked members to indicate how much effort they would apply to each issue if they were in charge of managing the implementation of James City County's Comprehensive plan. Members were given 100 points to allocate across the different areas, so they had to make hard choices about where effort should be placed. Although they thought the county was already doing relatively well in preserving the uniqueness of the area, the members voted that as the area that should receive the greatest emphasis. Business development and diversification was a close second, followed by tourism and workforce needs.

We would like to emphasize the following main points that the Task Force has gleaned from following the Comprehensive Plan process, from its survey results and from its own discussions:

- 1) The international financial crisis occurred after the end of the Community Participation Team process. National unemployment rates are rising and the extent of the downturn in the national economy remains unclear. James City County may not be as heavily hit as other areas of the county, but the downturn in business is clear even here. The discussion of the economic climate should note those new realities. The Comprehensive Plan is appropriately focused on the future, but it should consider the change in the economic base from which that future will evolve.
- 2) The current economic situation underscores the vulnerability of the James City County economy to a few sectors and a few large employers. Business development efforts should focus on diversification of the local economy, particularly by attracting and growing knowledge-based businesses that are environmentally friendly and clean with relatively low impact on natural resources. The research and business-development programs at the College of William and Mary can help to attract and expand knowledge-based businesses. The current draft “Goals, Strategies and Actions” mention diversification, attracting clean and green development, and establishing research and technology areas. We welcome those sections.
- 3) The Comprehensive Plan process has given inadequate attention to tourism. Although diversifying the economy is important for the future, we must also shore up the tourism base. The Economic Climate Tech Report notes the importance of Bush Entertainment and the Jamestown Yorktown Foundation, but it does not aggregate the many smaller businesses that are tied to tourism into a comprehensive look at the importance of the sector to the County. The current draft “Goals, Strategies and Actions” includes tourism as an action under the strategy of diversifying James City County’s economic base. The draft action reads, “Promote tourism and associated industries as a year-round industry in the County.” That is welcome, but the preservation of our tourism industry should be a strategy in itself, at the same level as diversification. Extending the tourism season should be just one action under that broader strategy. Elsewhere the paper mentions expanding ecotourism. That action might also be moved under a broader strategy to promote and strengthen tourism as a core industry.
- 4) Our members recognize the importance of maintaining the uniqueness of our area. James City County’s quality of life is our key competitive advantage to attract businesses, residents, and visitors. We need a balanced economic portfolio that preserves the uniqueness of our historic area and attracts and maintains complementary businesses. Our members support environmentally positive policies and actions to protect and enhance County resources such as recreation, culture, arts and entertainment. One important part of achieving balance will be clear guidance in the plan concerning large tracts of land that are appropriate for development and those

that are not. The current draft "Goals, Strategies and Actions" covers many of these points in the strategies of encouraging balance and promoting in-fill development.

- 5) Our survey underscored the importance of workforce development and the perception that we need to do far more in that area. We need to increase the number and diversity of housing opportunities. We need to develop zoning and other incentives to attract and retain an appropriate workforce. We should support expansion of workforce training programs, especially in high schools, at Thomas Nelson Community College and at the College of William and Mary. The current draft "Goals, Strategies and Actions" section 1.3 on workforce development has several actions supporting training and education initiatives, and we applaud that emphasis.

In short, we recommend that the Comprehensive Plan (1) include coverage of the implications of the current economic situation, (2) emphasize the need for diversifying the economy in the direction of knowledge-based businesses, (3) raise the preservation and promotion of tourism from a minor action item to a central strategy, (4) stress the need for balanced development while maintaining the uniqueness of our area, and (5) reflect the key role that workforce education and training will play in the County's future. We also recommend that the three municipalities continue to move in the direction of developing simultaneous, coordinated comprehensive plans.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these thoughts. And thanks to all of you for the time you are devoting to this important process.