

## **'Living Towns' conference in Sperryville lays out challenges and opportunities for Rappahannock County's future**

---

By James P. Gannon

The "Living Towns" planning workshop attended by about 100 local and regional officials and citizens in Sperryville on Thursday was more than just a day-long seminar on issues facing Virginia's Piedmont region. It was also a combination road map, agenda, and motivating force for Rappahannock County as it searches for the right path to its future while holding on to its past, its heritage and its rural character.



In one sense, the gathering of officials, planners, business people, state bureaucrats and ordinary citizens was a day-long gabfest on such a wide variety of topics that it was nearly bewildering in its diversity and its non-stop pace. Sitting through it was like racing down the world's longest cafeteria line, where even the most hungry find much more offered than can be digested at one sitting, but much food for thought for return visits.

At another level, however, the diverse threads of thought offered by a dozen speakers seemed to weave together into something meaningful and challenging to a place like Rappahannock County. The topics discussed—ranging from preserving agriculture and rural character to promoting tourism, getting connected to the high-speed web-based world and providing affordable workforce housing—seemed perfectly tailored to the challenges and opportunities faced by a rural county that's more sure of its past than its future.

Under the title of "Sperryville: Gateway to

the New Economy,” this sixth annual “Living Towns” seminar sponsored by the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Planning Commission brought together mayors, town council members, county officials, planners and business people from six counties of the region. About one third of the audience of 100 or so people was composed of Rappahannock residents—both officials and interested citizens—who spent the day at the Schoolhouse in Sperryville, feasting on ideas and information as well as a catered lunch and a post-meeting reception at Long View Gallery where the Rappahannock-made wine flowed freely.

If nothing else, the gathering provided Rappahannock County, and especially the Sperryville area, a rare chance to show off its attractions and charms to an influential audience from nearby places, who, one suspects, may have gone away wishing they had so many virtues and so few vices to work with at home. Many of them took mid-day bus tours of the area, narrated by County Administrator John McCarthy, and some stayed in local lodging such as Sperryville’s Hopkins Ordinary for a taste of some Rappahannock hospitality, which went down well.

While it’s hoped the visitors went away with good impressions, what they left behind is more important. They left their ideas and their own experiences in working on the very issues that form the core of what is Rappahannock County’s central challenge: How to successfully evolve as a sustainable and economically viable rural community in the 21st Century without losing its roots, character and quality of life.

It is not possible, in one article of manageable length, to summarize all that was presented to the Sperryville gathering over a seven-hour period by a dozen speakers. What follows is a selective digest of ideas and observations that this reporter found most relevant and meaningful to a listener most concerned about what matters

to Rappahannock County.

A morning panel moderated by Rappahannock architect and Planning Commission member Tom Tepper focused on “Area Identity”—that elusive but important quality that gives a special “sense of place” to any community.

Claire Collins, City Manager of Covington, VA., and longtime county administrator of Bath County (which shares many qualities with Rappahannock) described strategies to preserve agriculture and rural character. Her checklist of attributes important to preserving rural character sounded like a description tailor-made for Rappahannock County: A place that provides a sense of going back in time, a timelessness, a feeling of being unspoiled, natural, bucolic and green.

Collins emphasized the importance of adaptive reuse of historic structures (think: Schoolhouse in Sperryville, the Sperryville Antique Market, the school-turned-apartments in Little Washington) as a way of preserving what’s old for needs that are new. She spoke of rehabilitating old houses, clearing blight, getting rid of junk cars and resisting the modern urge to scrap signature features that enhance the sense of time, such as an old steel girder bridge in her city. “Above all, retain the character of your community,” Collins urged.

For a county such as Rappahannock with several wineries and many vineyards, Ann Heidig, owner of Lake Anna Winery in Spotsylvania County, outlined ways for communities to capitalize on Virginia’s expanding wine industry—now an important asset in Rappahannock County.

Virginia, which as recently as 1980 had only an embryonic wine industry, now has over 120 wineries and at least 250 vineyards, said Heidig, who is also president of the Virginia Wineries Association. Wineries are magnets for tourists looking for a day in

the country and the romance associated with wine and wine-making, she noted. "Wineries enable families to start a business with a relatively small acreage....This is a way to make agriculture profitable and to maintain a rural ambiance," Heidig said.

Her winery, opened in 1990 in an old dairy barn, attracts 10,000 visitors a year, and Virginia attracts 500,000 wine tourists annually, she said. Heidig's description of the techniques she's promoted to attract wine tourists left this observer thinking that Rappahannock's wineries could profit by similar collaborative efforts. These include promotion of "Wine Trails" (there are seven such in Virginia now) which encourage visitors to hop from one winery to another in a given area by holding co-operative events and wine tastings.

Lake Anna Winery works with five other nearby wineries in hosting weekend events in which all six participate, with a wine "passport" program to encourage tourists to visit them all. Wine Tours demonstrate how wine is made, and special events such as Lake Anna's "Jazz in the Vineyard" programs draw tourists who come to picnic outdoors, sample her wines, and listen to jazz, Heidig said. Another winery partners with a local B&B to promote three-day stays for visitors interested in working as volunteer labor in the vineyards or winery to learn about growing grapes and making wine. Are these not ideas worth adopting in Rappahannock County?

Todd Christensen, an official with Virginia's Department of Housing and Community Development in Richmond, presented a case study of how communities can cooperate to build success in tourism. Creatively titled "The Crooked Road," this program links communities along a meandering, 253-mile route across southern Virginia—the common denominator being their history and current status as centers of traditional country music.

This “Virginia Heritage Music Trail” promotes communities along the “crooked road” that have musical heritage and assets—places like Galax and Floyd and Scott County that offer bluegrass music, museums of country music stars such as Ralph Stanley and the Carter family, and fiddler’s festivals. The program started as a state-sponsored economic development effort for a distressed area of Virginia, and has helped spur downtown revitalization in the towns along the “crooked road,” Christensen said.

He suggested a connect-the-dots concept that might apply to Rappahannock’s various villages and towns, and he gave it the catchy name of “string of pearls.” Don’t compete with the next community, he said, but rather work with it to benefit all the pearls in the string. To this observer, it sometimes appears that interests in Sperryville, Little Washington, Flint Hill and other parts of Rappahannock show little interest in promoting anything but their own little world, and are more competitive than collaborative with each other. A tourist effort that promotes all of the pearls on Rappahannock’s string of communities may be a concept worth exploring.

A second panel, moderated by The Rappahannock Voice’s editor, focused on Community Development. Sarah Cohen, president of Route 11 Potato Chip Company of Middletown, VA., passed out sample bags of her product to all in the audience before she began speaking, and thus created a unique accompaniment as background music—simultaneous munching and crunching of 100 bags of potato chips.

Cohen offered an interesting perspective on making a factory a tourist attraction. When she opened her small business in 1992, she said, “I started thinking of the chip factory as part of the tourism of the area.” People like to watch their food being made, she said, so the plant put in a big window for

tourists to watch the chip-making “and within six months we had tour buses coming in....it was pretty amazing.” Cohen’s company has grown so much it’s now in process of moving to a larger plant in an industrial park in Mt. Jackson, VA.

Shenandoah National Park has been one of Rappahannock County’s main tourist lures for 70 years, so the presentation on “Partnering with the Park” by Catherine Gilliam was especially relevant here. Gilliam, who is Virginia Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, discussed so-called “Gateway Communities”—places like Sperryville that lie at the gateway to national parks.

Some of these gateways—such as Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Whitefish, MT., and especially Gatlinburg, TN., have over-developed in ways that would not be welcomed in Rappahannock County. But Sperryville’s history is of the opposite—a decline in tourist amenities and traffic in the past 30 years, reflecting a steep drop in visitations to Shenandoah National Park.

The most striking feature of Gilliam’s presentation was a bar graph that had the shape of a mountain peak—steeply rising on one side, sharply declining on the opposite slope. This graph traced the annual number of visitors to the park, starting with about one million visitors in its opening year of 1937, peaking with about 2.8 million visitors in 1977, and then sliding back down steadily to about 1 million in 2006—back to the starting level of 70 years ago.

Those park-visitor figures help explain why the 1960s and 1970s were the golden age of tourism for the Sperryville area, and why so many of the properties between Sperryville and the park boundary—that once were thriving tourist businesses such as motels, restaurants and fruit stands—are today vacant or converted to other uses, or looking old and used up.

Gilliam stressed the importance of good communication and cooperation between the National Parks and the local communities at its gateways, but indicated that's been lacking here. "Shenandoah National Park as lagged behind the other national parks in terms of cooperation with local communities," she said. To some degree, that's due to the tensions that grew out of the creation of Shenandoah National Park (with its forced resettlement of the mountain people who once owned that land) and the resentment that still lingers today, she said.

All this suggests that it may be time for Rappahannock County to rethink its relationship with Shenandoah National Park with more of an eye on the future, rather than the past.

The final morning panelist discussed a critically important issue that is one major liability of Rappahannock County that needs attention. Chris Thompson, a policy analyst at the state's Department of Housing and Community Development, made the case that high-speed and reliable and affordable broadband Internet connections are crucial to the future success of Virginia's rural communities.

The many Internet users in this county who are stuck with slow, frustrating, dial-up connections to the web need no convincing on this issue. Much of the county lacks high-speed connectivity, which is becoming essential to small businesses, professionals who want to work at least part time from home, or any new businesses considering locating in the area.

"It's like water and sewer—you need it to compete" if a community wants to attract jobs, home-based businesses, professionals and young people, Thompson said. Having the right connections to the Internet improves the quality of life, creates entrepreneurial opportunities, improves communication within the community, and

makes a rural place like Rappahannock sustainable and competitive, he argued.

“It is really critical to have high-speed services so people can operate their businesses out of their homes,” Thompson said. (Case in point: The Rappahannock Voice would not exist, and you would not be reading this, if this reporter had not found a home near Flint Hill, VA, with one of the relatively rare cable connections to the web; that cable line opened the way for a new form of community journalism.)

Thompson described his department's efforts to work with and provide some funding for communities to create high-speed telecom projects, and many other communities have such requests pending—but Rappahannock is not one of them. With its poor cell-phone connections, poor Internet connections and relative lack of attention to this issue, Rappahannock may be in a poor position to attract entrepreneurs, small businesses, Internet-dependent professionals such as attorneys, consultants and writers, in the 21st Century world of global commerce.

An afternoon panel, moderated by Huntly resident Todd Benson, who is Fauquier County field officer for the Piedmont Environmental Council, was billed as a “Planner's Tool Box” and featured an eclectic mix of topics on Community Visioning, Next Generation (Internet) Marketing, Workforce Affordable Housing and birds—as in bird-watching as a tourist attraction.

These presentations focused on how-to advice for local officials, planners and businesses on these highly diverse topics, which may be explored in future articles.

The keynote speaker, author and Washington Post writer Joel Garreau, offered a historical perspective on the development of cities, suburbs, exurbs and what he sees as a next step—the rise of

more distant places that are becoming “urbane but not urban,” including rural areas such as Rappahannock County that are seeing an inflow of wealthier, highly-educated professionals and retirees who bring their appetites for art, culture, good restaurants, theater, expensive coffee and high-priced land.

This phenomenon, which Garreau called “The Santa Fe-ing of the Piedmont” and is more generally known as “gentrification,” is by now a well-established trend in Rappahannock County which poses its own set of benefits and problems, which also will be explored in future articles. In Garreau’s view, what this new gentry seek are “villages and vistas,” which this county has in some abundance, if it can figure out how to nourish and maintain them without messing up everything.

-- James P. Gannon

**Posted:** June 1st, 2007 under **News, Opinion.**  
**Comments:** **2**

## Comments

**Comment** from **unityworks**

**Time:** June 1, 2007, 11:06 pm

There’s no doubting high-speed internet access is rapidly becoming more than a luxury. It has become the backbone of growth and the ability of many communities to attract people and new businesses.

Millions of Americans, especially those in rural and low-income areas don’t have high-speed internet access because it does not yet pay for providers to invest in these areas.

Fortunately Rappahannock County is not alone in regards to the digital divide. The good news is there are successful public-private partnerships that are accomplishing the goal of providing high-speed internet

access to their rural areas. Check out the Speed Matters Campaign at <http://www.speedmatters.org> and read their policy paper. It has a lot of good recommendations regarding high-speed internet deployment.

**Comment** from **patsalt**

**Time:** June 2, 2007, 4:09 pm

One: The all-day workshop was as good as it gets. As a local resident with a jillion questions in her mind about Rappahannock County's future and especially her farms, I came away with three to four ideas or new arrangements of old ideas for my farm and land use, generally. It was provocative and fast-moving, acoustics hurdles notwithstanding.

Two: As a former journalist, I am totally impressed with the fast, deep coverage by Rappvoice of a complex, fact-filled seven-hour day.

Pat Saltonstall