

By Philip Newswanger
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To decide how the region grows for the next 15 years, regional leaders and members of the public will get to move Legos around a board for a day.

Reality Check is a one-day event sponsored by the Urban Land Institute and its regional chapter.

The event is being billed as a one-day "visioning exercise" to set guiding land-use principles and suggest options for where residential and commercial growth should take place.

Most of the region's leading organizations, such as the Hampton Roads Partnership and the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, are lending their support to the event, to be held next May at Old Dominion University.

Details of this visioning exercise will be announced Nov. 10 at a news conference at the Innovation Research Park at Old Dominion University, 4211 Monarch Way, in Norfolk.

On its website, the Urban Land Institute says, "Over the past 15 years, regional visioning has emerged as a dynamic and important tool for building regional consensus related to growth issues.

"ULI's regional visioning program of work assists district councils and their partners as they plan, build upon and implement regional exercises and visions."

In one day, participants working in groups of eight to 10 will address land use issues using chips or Legos on large-scale regional maps.

Reality Checks have been staged in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Charleston and Jacksonville, among others.

About 300 people from across the region are expected to attend next May's event. The general public is encouraged to participate.

A possible issue to address in discussion of land use in Hampton Roads would be the rising sea level.

If current trends continue, then sea levels in Hampton Roads in 2020 will be at least another 2 inches higher than today, according to James Koch, an economist and former president of ODU, who included the topic in the "The 2009 State of the Region Report."

"We will see the ocean creep up into our backyards and witness increased flooding during rainstorms and at high tide," Koch said.

The region should be planning a system of dykes and levees unless localities want to forfeit large portions of land to the sea, he said.

According to the Woods Hole Science Center and the U.S. Geological Survey, the sea level in Hampton Roads rose higher than 10 other East Coast cities from 1922 to 1999.

Dwight Farmer, executive director of the HRPDC, is optimistic about the Reality Check event because he said there are examples of regional cooperation.

The possible extension of light rail from Norfolk to Virginia Beach is one, Farmer said.

"I think it's moving in the right direction," he said.

But he said the launch of the Hampton Roads Transportation Authority, created in 2007 by the Virginia legislature, was the pinnacle of regional cooperation.

"The HRTA said volumes about how the region came together," Farmer said.

The HRPTA was established to address funding for regional transportation issues. Northern Virginia established a similar authority.

The legislature granted power to these authorities to raise a host of taxes, including hikes in vehicle inspection fees, the car rental tax, vehicle registration fees, car repairs and gas taxes. But the Virginia Supreme Court ruled against the legality of the authorities, so funding was doomed.

"I think the Urban Land Institute's Reality Check will be a wake-up call," Farmer said, adding that many of the region's localities are facing the build-out of available land.

"Each locality has its own set of resources that could be shared to raise us to a higher level than if we utilized them individually."nib

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