

Fox and Elswick: Regional data can spur progress

Jerry Fox and Steve Elswick, Richmond Times-Dispatch

The Richmond Region is an incredible place to call home. The list of accolades for our community is growing every day. The world is noticing us and we should be proud. But to continue our progress, we must continue to strive to take that next step.

The challenges we face are not new, nor are they surprising. Combating poverty, attracting new businesses, solving our education disparities, building and filling the talent pipeline, and creating safe neighborhoods are among the many areas where we focus time and money to improve our community. Though we certainly see progress being made, how can we truly measure our success?

Many regions throughout the country have begun measuring and tracking past and current trends to assist community leaders in future decision-making. These indicators assess what the community cares about and track whether it is moving in the right direction. They provide reliable information that enables funders and policy makers to make data-driven investments in the community. But mostly, these indicators help us answer key questions. Are we there yet? Is our effort working?

In our community, individual organizations have created indicators to track distinct sectors of the region. We've seen dashboards and report cards for issue areas like education, health, and the environment. These valuable tools have been essential in uniting organizations, prioritizing work, driving investments, and assessing and adapting programs.

While this is an important step forward, individual indicators don't have the capability to connect across broader focus areas. We know, for example, that when talking about workforce preparation, it's essential to look at skill deficiencies, transit, and childcare accessibility. And when working to improve our schools, it's impossible to take out the effects of poverty and health on the family. The Richmond Region needs a way to unite these metrics together to identify and address challenges that span multiple sectors.

Last year, a partnership among the myriad of data-tracking entities in the region evolved to make headway on this challenge. Facilitated by the Capital Region

Collaborative (CRC) and funded by a handful of generous foundations in our community, these regional data partners are sharing data with each other — and with the public.

On Friday, the CRC released the 2016 Snapshot: A Shared Vision for Our Region. The Snapshot highlights baseline indicators in each of eight priority areas that help us capture the current state of our region, compare ourselves to similar communities, and measure progress over time. It represents the most up-to-date information from subject-matter experts in a variety of issue areas and draws on best-practice examples from communities across the country. Most importantly, it's grounded in the belief that informed decision-making and collaboration — across our region and different sectors — is essential to realizing RVA's full potential.

The Snapshot was released on the heels of a final report from Richmond's Future, which shares an in-depth look at trends across the region and recommended paths to move forward. Throughout the report, which was published in last Sunday's Times-Dispatch, the reader is challenged to think of where our region could be if we tackle these issues together. The Snapshot is part of the next step, but the CRC and its data-sharing partners are going further.

To help leaders understand our community's strengths and challenges and to enable the people to move our community forward, we need to provide reliable data on an ongoing and up-to-date basis. So, we are developing a website to provide interactive ways to engage with the data and examine them at a more detailed, neighborhood level. Each year, we will release an updated report and use it to better understand if the policies and programs we're putting in place are having an impact.

In addition, the CRC is mobilizing action teams for each priority area who will use these community indicators, as well as feedback from the community and specific examples of success to develop and implement a strategy to achieve our region's shared vision.

We invite you to visit the CRC website at capitalregioncollaborative.com to review the Snapshot document. The website also provides information on how to get involved.

It can be easy to dismiss data — to see it as something talked about periodically and then put on a shelf to collect dust. But in thriving regions across the country,

indicator projects are being used not just to inform, but as a springboard for action.

Ultimately, the indicators are about much more than numbers. They tell the story of our community, from children growing up in challenged neighborhoods, to friends rafting down the James River, to parents struggling with mental health issues, to young people choosing where to start their career. This is our collective story — we must each be part of telling it. You are why data matters.

Jerry Fox and Steve Elswick are co-chairs of the Capital Region Collaborative, which engages government, business, and community stakeholders in a process of identifying, prioritizing, and implementing actions that will enhance the quality of life in the greater Richmond region. The CRC is a partnership of the Greater Richmond Chamber and the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission. To learn more, go to capitalregioncollaborative.com.