

Lafayette: Diverse neighborhoods, stronger schools

Laura Lafayette, Richmond Times-Dispatch

I have a mantra: “People don’t buy a house until they’ve first bought into a community’s quality of life.” That’s a fairly apt saying, given that I work for 4,000 Realtors. Implicit in the mantra is the notion that metropolitan Richmond must pursue excellence in our quality of life, or we’ll lose out to regional competitors. Easier said than done ... and “excellence” is in the eye of the beholder.

So here’s my vision: To achieve excellence, we must create communities of opportunity. A community of opportunity boasts a variety of attractive, affordable housing. The children in these neighborhoods attend exceptional schools; and their parents hold good jobs with viable wages in proximity to their homes. Housing and jobs are connected by a transportation system that meets the needs of all, not just those citizens who own vehicles. We have some of these communities, but they are not accessible to all. Until everyone has the opportunity to flourish (not all will, but the opportunity must be there), we will not inhabit the most vibrant, talented and economically competitive region possible. As long as we fall short, we all lose — not just those who live with little, but even the most affluent, educated and privileged among us.

The good news is that thousands of Richmonders — through their vocations, avocations and volunteer efforts — strive to make our region a community in which all have equal opportunities. But despite progress, significant challenges remain; left unmet, these challenges will become ever more complex, ingrained and costly. One of our most daunting challenges is economic segregation. Make no mistake: This dynamic is not limited to the city. Economic segregation is well documented in Henrico and Chesterfield, and it exists in the less densely populated counties.

The negative consequences of this segregation are highly visible in our public schools. According to the Brookings Institution, the average Richmond area student from a middle- or high-income household attends a school that ranks 21 percentage points higher on state exams than a school attended by a child from a low-income household. According to Brookings, to create economically integrated schools, 44 percent of the low-income students in metropolitan Richmond would have to move into other ZIP codes in order to achieve an equal distribution across all school zones. If we truly believe that education represents one of the best pathways to opportunity, then we have a serious problem on our hands.

To solve this problem, we must either move children around or change the neighborhoods that feed into our schools. Of course, “move children around” is a polite phrase for busing. As a parent who could walk her elementary children to school and is now comforted by the fact that her teen driver has only a 2-mile commute to school, I have no interest in busing — not for my children or any others. Economically integrated neighborhoods make much more sense.

Here are some strategies for creating more economically diverse neighborhoods:

One, make the revitalization of our older neighborhoods a public policy priority — and put some money behind it. Much of our region's affordable housing is located in older neighborhoods on the brink of becoming blighted. Intervention strategies such as strict code enforcement and much-needed infrastructure improvements come with a significant price tag — but that pales in comparison to the millions it costs to bring neighborhoods back from blight.

Two, create financial incentives for the private sector to reinvest in these neighborhoods, both in terms of housing and along commercial corridors. Expansion of enterprise zones, partial tax abatements on improved properties and waiver of permitting fees are just a few examples of incentives.

Three, we need greater creativity and flexibility within our zoning codes. Mixed-used developments easily lend themselves to a variety of housing types at various price points. We need to build more mixed-use, mixed-income communities. Let's allow for auxiliary dwelling units — smaller units (often used for related family members) built on the same lot as a primary residence. We might even come around on the notion that density done right is not a detriment but an asset to a vibrant region such as ours.

The fact is that officials in Chesterfield, Hanover, Henrico and the city of Richmond are and have been focused on many of these strategies. I applaud them. But I often feel as if they're undertaking these efforts with trepidation, fearing the indifference of many and the noisy opposition of a few. That's too bad, because they need our support. And we need to recognize that wherever we live in metropolitan Richmond, investing in these strategies inures to the benefit of us all.

Creating more economically integrated neighborhoods and thus strengthening our public schools will be the topic of a community forum on Jan. 22 at Thomas Dale High School from 6:15–8:30 p.m. I invite you to join us.