

'Snapshot' to track regional social, economic indicators

ROBERT ZULLO, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

There's an oft-repeated joke about Richmonders changing a light bulb.

It takes four, you see, one to change the bulb and three to talk about how great the old one was.

That well-worn bit about the city, however, maybe losing its aptness, said John Martin, president and CEO of the Southeastern Institute of Research, and one of several speakers at Friday morning's rollout of the Capital Region Collaborative's "RVA Snapshot" at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College's Workforce Development and Conference Center on East Parham Road.

"I have seen Richmond transformed in the past two or three years," said Martin, also a member of the research council at Richmond's Future, a nonprofit think tank. "Our infatuation is not about the past, it's about the future."

The snapshot, which tracks key pieces of economic and social data for the region, is intended to allow the Richmond area to gauge itself against peer cities like Austin, Texas; Hartford, Conn.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Louisville, Ky.; Memphis, Tenn.; and Raleigh, N.C.; and track progress in areas such as education, job creation, workforce preparation, social stability, health, transportation and quality-of-life measures.

For comparison purposes, the project uses the Richmond Metropolitan Statistical Area to define the region, including the counties of Amelia, Caroline, Charles City, Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, King William, New Kent, Powhatan, Prince George and Sussex; the cities of Richmond, Hopewell, Petersburg and Colonial Heights; and the towns of Ashland and Bowling Green.

A sampling of the data points and comparisons:

- A little more than 45 percent of Richmond-area 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in public or private preschool, as compared with 40 percent in Memphis, 53 percent in Raleigh and 67 percent in Hartford.

- Average annual wages, adjusted for cost of living, in the Richmond area are \$51,229, compared with \$49,013 in Jacksonville and \$57,237 in Memphis.
- The Richmond region has 148 companies with 500 or more employees, just under Hartford, which has 150, and well above Raleigh, which has 98.
- About 15 percent of Richmond-area workers are employed in industries related to science, technology, engineering, math and health care, compared with the nearly 22 percent in Austin, 20 percent in Raleigh and nearly 14 percent in Memphis.
- There are nearly 180 deaths from heart disease per 100,000 people in the Richmond area, more than double Austin's rate, which is about 88 deaths per 100,000 people.
- Only 31 percent of working-age residents in the Richmond region are near a mass transit stop. In Louisville, 60 percent are near a stop.
- There are 232.2 incidents of violent crime in the Richmond area per 100,000 people, compared with 1,033.5 in Memphis.

"This is a very good snapshot of where we are right now," said Kim Scheeler, president and CEO of the Greater Richmond Chamber, speaking to a standing-room only crowd that included local elected officials, including several potential Richmond mayoral candidates, and representatives from nonprofits and businesses, among others. "The really important part is the action teams and the engagement that starts now."

The chamber created the Capital Region Collaborative in 2007 to develop a regional strategy to help what was seen as an underachieving Richmond area reach its potential. The Richmond Regional Planning District Commission later signed on as a partner.

Ashley Hall, the collaborative's manager, said the snapshot is the first stage of an "indicators project" that will become a tool to assist community organizations, government agencies and foundations in future decisions. Next up is an interactive website, followed by action teams in each priority area that will develop and implement "goals, policy options and projects to achieve our region's shared vision," the news release says.

“We don’t want this to sit on a shelf,” Hall said. “We want people to learn from this. We really want people to be using this on an ongoing basis.”