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The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Honoring Hallowed Ground

Cate Wyatt is reinventing the economy of Virginia's northern piedmont. The Journey Through Hallowed Ground weaves together heritage tourism, sustainable agriculture, landscape preservation and Main Street renewal.

By James A. Bacon

Cate Magennis Wyatt has a plan to save the land she loves, the farms and hamlets of Virginia's northern piedmont, from being overwhelmed by Northern Virginia population growth and development. Her strategy doesn't entail imposing curbs on property rights or restrictions on home builders. It starts, innocuously enough, with summer camps designed to connect 6th, 7th and 8th graders with the region's rich history.

Every day campers get an assignment to visit a historical site and reenact the history that took place there. Each child is assigned the name and background of a historical individual -- one of John Brown's raiders at Harper's Ferry, for instance, or a freed African-American slave at a one-room school house -- and told to reenact their role.

Instead of playing video games or hanging out at the mall, kids dress in period costume, walk across battlefields, kayak down the Potomac River and interact with historical interpreters. Armed with iPods, cameras and video cameras, they create documentaries of their experiences.

"They learn the complicating circumstances, the decisions

that were made," says Wyatt, who as president of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership, is the guiding force behind the program. "At the end of the day, they're asked, 'Would you have done the same thing?' They learn that common men and women made really difficult decisions, putting their lives and livelihood on the line. They learn that's part of what it means to be an American."

Not only does the summer camp counter the historical amnesia afflicting so many Americans today, it generates awareness of the historical and cultural treasures



that run like gold seams through a three-state region -- from Monticello through Gettysburg. In just a couple of years, the educational outreach has been so successful, says Wyatt, that it's being extended from students and school teachers to grown ups with a hankering for history.

Educational awareness is one element of a broader strategy to build the Journey Through Hallowed Ground into a nationally recognized tourist destination. Unlike a Disney World or Las Vegas built by giant corporations, though, the Journey is a grassroots movement encompassing local governments, main street communities, vineyard

owners, equestrians, organic farmers, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, B&B proprietors, and caretakers of historical sites as famous as James Madison's Montpelier estate and as obscure as the Goose Creek Bridge on a Civil War-era turnpike.

In Wyatt's estimation, heritage sites and historic downtowns coupled with a sustainable agricultural sector can create a high quality of life for local citizens, support local businesses and create the conditions to counter "unmindful" suburbanization from the Washington metropolitan area. If she's right, Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership could represent a novel approach -- underpinned by property rights and a market economy -- to landscape and historic conservation.

In Virginia, as elsewhere around the country, the typical reaction to the challenge of growth and development is to demonize developers as the bad guys, invent new restrictions on property rights and enact more growth controls. But Wyatt is a committed capitalist as well as a conservationist. As a work-out specialist for large properties owned by ITT, the Hartford Insurance Company and failed S&Ls in the 1980s, she had a hand in shaping development projects in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties in the 1980s. Later, she brought her skill at transforming underperforming assets to the job as Virginia's Secretary of Commerce and Trade in the Wilder administration, a period marked by recession and a downturn in Virginia's defense industry.

At the end of the Wilder administration in 1994, Wyatt married

husband Steve and moved with him to London, from where they ran an oil business in Kazakhstan and she shuttled back and forth to Moscow to build a retail enterprise there. After several eventful years, they moved back to Waterford, a village founded by 18th century Quakers in Loudoun County, to raise their two children.

Rather than block unwanted development through growth controls, Wyatt's vision is to create opportunity for existing inhabitants and enterprises. With a vibrant economy, she hopes, Hallowed Ground landowners can generate enough value from their property that they will spurn the temptation to convert it into suburban subdivisions and shopping centers, or, if it is of historic value, turn to the JTHG Partnership to purchase it at fair market value.

"The historic Main Street communities, the bucolic, undulating hills and vineyards, the equestrian industry ... are unparalleled attractions if you look nationally, even internationally," Wyatt says. "We want to ensure that these attractions remain viable. ... We can work collaboratively to support existing businesses and build a sustainable industry of heritage tourism."

The economic development strategy of Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership is based upon three principle interlocking parts: heritage tourism, sustainable agriculture and small, historic downtowns. Heritage tourism forms the basis of a regional brand, The Journey Through Hallowed Ground, as a region redolent with history: Civil War and Revolutionary War battlefields, presidential homes, historic buildings and homes and African-American heritage; Working farms and estates support postcard-perfect farmlands

as well as attractions ranging from vineyard tours to the Gold Cup steeple chase. And the Main Streets of small towns provide picturesque settings amidst historical architecture for boutiques, shops, spas and restaurants in a friendly walking environment.

This combination of elements creates a genuine synergy, says Lisa Capraro, downtown coordinator for the Town of Leesburg. "The people taking the Journey are already interested in history. They're also interested in the architecture of your downtown, your small shops. ... The Journey attracts the kind of visitor who appreciates the value of a Main Street instead of a fabricated version of it."

Likewise, the Journey positions the historic attractions of Loudoun County in a larger framework, notes Cheryl Kilday, president of the Loudoun Convention and Visitors Association. Loudoun can boast of numerous sites of historical interest -- the Balls Bluff battlefield park, the Oatlands plantation, the home where General George Marshall wrote the Marshall Plan -- but none has the critical mass by itself to draw large numbers of visitors. "We have wonderful stories to tell," Kilday says. "We can leverage our resources with our colleagues along the Journey."

As the region gains recognition for its special attributes, another positive dynamic kicks in: gentrification. Much as Yuppies rehab old homes in historic city neighborhoods, affluent households snap up old farmsteads and run-down Victorian houses in villages like Madison, Gordonsville and Purcellville. The newcomers have the financial means to renovate historic houses, maintain bed and breakfasts and open trendy, up-

scale shops that appeal to tourists as well off as themselves. In contrast to urban gentrifiers, who tend to stay aloof from the poor, inner-city residents they displace, newcomers to the countryside create jobs and opportunities for country residents.

Wyatt has developed a detailed strategic plan for the Journey. After three years of effort, she's worked roughly half way through her list of priorities.

Outreach. An early task for the JTHG Partnership was creating legitimacy for the very idea that there was such a thing as a Journey Through Hallowed Ground. A key initiative was underwriting a lush coffee-table book featuring work by National Geographic photographer Kenneth Garret and written by historian and Los Angeles Times veteran Rudy Abramson. In another project, the partnership published a tour guide, with a forward written by Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks, that travelers can use to plan excursions through the region. More recently, the JTHG Partnership has employed a full-time employee who packages heritage tours, lining up all the vendors and partners needed, as Wyatt puts it, to "create experiences people will never get elsewhere."

The inventory of historical sites and organized tour sites gives Wyatt credibility when she drums up national exposure in such media outlets as the *Smithsonian Magazine*, the *National Geographic Traveler* and Public Broadcasting.

Another goal is to create buy-in for the project locally. The indefatigable Wyatt has reached out to innumerable county boards, town councils, downtown boosters, tourism bureaus, Rotary clubs and other natural allies --

150 groups last year alone. Her message: "We see an economic opportunity here.... You're welcome to be a partner." The JTHG initiative has won endorsements from nearly every town, city and village between Charlottesville and Gettysburg, Pa.

Education. The JTHG Partnership has built on its local history by organizing education programs for school children. Peruse the Journey [website](#), and you'll find a series of field trip guides, training materials and teaching lessons geared to the Standards of Learning requirements of Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Around the Culpeper Museum and Burgandine House, just to take one random example, the Journey has organized four different tours and learning experiences. In one tour, "students will have an opportunity to visit with Civil War era soldiers and civilians, learning first hand the difficult times of camp life, home life and battle." In a hands-on study, "after hearing a presentation on the history of the cemetery, students are assigned a specific soldier, locate his grave, and record the information found on the gravestone."

Federal Designations. The outreach and educational components of Journey Through Hallowed Ground are far along. Now Wyatt's attention is focused on gaining federal recognition of the 175-mile corridor as a National Heritage Area. Although the designation is largely of symbolic importance, it does come with a modest amount of money, about \$1 million a year, to promote educational programs. The recognition, she says, would amount to a Congressional "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" that is critical for branding the region as a destination of national significance.

In a related initiative, Wyatt is seeking federal designation of U.S. 15 as a National Scenic Byway. The scenic byway status would provide modest additional funding for engineering and improvements -- things like wooden guardrails, roadside plantings and context-sensitive design materials.

Agriculture. The Journey is only beginning to focus its attention on the agricultural economy. Wyatt's ideas are still half-formed. But she envisions an economic base built on agricultural niches: raising horses, bottling wine, raising organic foods for local markets, creating locally branded fruits and cheeses. The United Kingdom has a program, [Eat the View](#), that could provide a model.

The goal of Eat the View, which concluded in 2006, was to improve the market for regional produce by helping consumers "understand the connections between the goods they buy and the countryside they value." The program had a heavy emphasis on food safety, sustainable land management and landscape preservation. If similar connections could be made between the Hallowed Ground region and the eight million inhabitants of the Baltimore-Washington metroplex, the market for local food products could expand exponentially.

In the Journey Through Hallowed Ground region, farms would function as an integral part of the tourism economy. Working farms would preserve scenic vistas that appeal to tourists. Vineyards would hold wine tastings, horse farms would support steeple chases and organic farmers would keep colorful farmer markets supplied with fresh produce. One hand washes the other.

Land Investment Trust. In what could prove to be her most revolutionary idea, Wyatt proposes to create a land investment trust that would acquire land and manage or develop it in a socially responsible manner. "If we're serious about keeping the landscape intact," she says, "we have to be prepared to pay fair market value for the land."

Wyatt isn't looking for any short cuts: no diminishment of property values through government takings. She's borrowing from a relatively new concept, socially responsible investing. Investors would buy shares in the trust knowing that its managers are not trying to maximize financial returns. But it's not a philanthropy either -- there *would* be financial returns in addition to the social benefits. The trust might acquire land to safeguard assets of special historical or cultural significance. It might purchase property, place conservation easements on it, and then put it back on the market. The trust might purchase timber lands in order to practice selective cutting rather than clear cutting. Or it might initiate a development project to meet the market demand for housing or commercial space in a manner that respects the historical heritage, the view sheds and the architectural tone of the community.

Such a trust, which would need some \$400 million to \$500 million in capitalization to have the kind of impact that Wyatt envisions, would be managed for long-term returns. Presumably, investors would be local inhabitants who would benefit first hand from the social benefits. The concept is very much in the idea stage, however, Wyatt says, and won't become a priority until the U.S. Congress passes the National Heritage

Area designation.

Virginia's northern piedmont is not alone. Large swaths of the state -- the Shenandoah Valley, the Tidewater country bordering the Chesapeake Bay, the counties on the periphery of the Richmond and Hampton Roads New Urban Regions -- face similar challenges. They are searching for new economic underpinnings to replace the evaporating agricultural/light industrial economy that has served them for decades. At the same time, they desperately want to preserve their down-home character in the face of leapfrog suburban development radiating from Washington, Richmond and Hampton Roads.

What works for Hallowed Ground country could work for other parts of the state. The Valley has an abundance of charming small towns. The counties bordering the James River arguably have more history per square mile than anywhere else in the country -- the Hallowed Ground not excluded. The Chesapeake Bay offers extraordinary coastline and recreational opportunities. What none of these regions have, however, is a shared vision of the future, a Cate Wyatt to articulate that vision or the dense skein of partnerships to make it real.

But nothing succeeds like success. If the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership manages to transform the economy of the northern piedmont while preserving its special character, it will have accomplished something rare and extraordinary. You can rest assured that many other regions throughout Virginia -- indeed, across the country -- will seek to replicate the experience.

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