

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Economy 4.0

Virginia needs fresh thinking about how to build more prosperous, livable and sustainable communities in a globally competitive economy. Economy 4.0 is a start.

By James A. Bacon

Bacon's Rebellion commenced publication five years ago – on July 22, 2002, to be exact -- as an electronic newsletter, or e-zine, billing itself as the "op-ed page for Virginia's new economy." In January 2005, we added a blog, which allowed e-zine columnists to comment daily on unfolding events. Soon thereafter, supported by a Piedmont Environmental Council sponsorship, we launched the Road for Ruin initiative, which allowed us to create original journalistic content on the topics of transportation, land use, energy and the environment.

Our mission has been to create a forum for thinking creatively about Virginia's critical issues. In my own columns, I have tried to probe beneath the conventional wisdom: Republicans vs. Democrats, liberals vs. conservatives. While I tend to the conservative, Republican end of the spectrum on national and foreign policy issues, I have argued that the traditional polarities are useless in understanding the major issues facing Virginia

at the level of state and local government.

In the early days of *Bacon's Rebellion*, I examined issues primarily through the prism of economic competitiveness. How can Virginia maintain its prosperity in a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy? The broad answer: by building a culture of productivity and innovation. Over time, I expanded the scope of my questions: How can Virginia maintain its prosperity and quality of life in an era characterized by rising energy costs and severe environmental constraints? The broad answer: by re-thinking the pattern and density of land use and the energy intensity of our economy.

Over the years, I have written about economic development, the state budget, transportation policy, education, urban design and energy restructuring. It may not be apparent to readers, but there is an underlying and interconnecting logic to the positions I have staked out on these topics. I have endeavored to apply throughout my writing a consistent set of principles, which I set to words in the

outline of a book I provisionally entitled, "Economy 4.0." Although I long ago concluded I would never have the time to complete the book, the principles I identified have continued to guide my thinking.

I had never given much thought to publish any version of the "Economy 4.0" online until a particularly animated dialogue took place on the *Bacon's Rebellion* blog last month. Surveying the politics that guided the Comprehensive Transportation Funding and Reform Act of 2007 – the financing portions of which I considered an abomination – I had concluded that no meaningful principles divided Virginia Republicans and Democrats on issues of governance. The only important differences between the political parties were the particular constituencies they favored with their ill-considered schemes for redistributing the wealth extracted from taxpayers.

A regular participant in the blog who goes by the pseudonym of Groveton responded enthusiastically that the time had come to create an independent party in Virginia. Groveton, a senior Northern Virginia technology executive, offered \$25,000 of his own money to fund a start-up if others would match it by the same amount and if I committed a signifi-

cant amount of time to the project. While I agreed that disenchantment with the two incumbent parties was endemic, the history of independent parties in the United States was none too encouraging. The effort would be worthwhile, I suggested, only if someone could articulate a core set of principles that appealed to a demographic constituency broad enough to potentially win a majority of votes. I had no interest in devoting my energies to creating a marginal party like the Libertarians or Greens. The effort would be worthwhile only if there were an opportunity to spark a fundamental realignment comparable to the origins of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Otherwise, it made sense to work within the existing two-party system.

Then it hit me: I had already outlined a set of internally consistent principles for thinking about Virginia's future. The principles were forward looking: how to build more prosperous and livable communities in a globally competitive and environmentally constrained world. For the most part, the ideas in "Economy 4.0" were mainstream. The strategies were based upon fiscal conservatism and environmental sustainability. They emphasized marketplace solutions to problems over bureaucratic, command-and-control solutions. They prioritized the creation of wealth and economic opportunity for all segments of society over the redistribution of wealth and

the cultivation of grievances by minorities and special interests.

(The principles avoided hot-button, culture-war issues. Like many, perhaps most, Virginians, I personally respect traditional values while acknowledging the need to accommodate evolutionary change in cultural norms. If Democrats and Republicans want to embrace the cause of the culture warriors on the left and right, then let them go right ahead. The rest of us just want to muddle through life as best we can.

Thus was born the new "Economy 4.0," as a 10-part series in *Bacon's Rebellion*. This series does not issue a clarion call for a new political party, however. Rather, it provides a framework for analyzing the challenges facing Virginia in the early 21st century. It provides a systematic way of looking at the crucial issues and appreciating how they are interconnected.

If "Economy 4.0" provides the philosophical underpinnings for a new, broad-based political party, then that would be wonderful. But it is important, even in this age of technological marvels, to put the proverbial horse before the cart. First, we must articulate a cohesive set of ideals, principles, goals and solutions. Only then does it make sense to organize a political party around them.

In future editions, I will adapt the outline for "Economy 4.0" into columns

for the *Bacon's Rebellion* e-zine. Then I will post them on the *Bacon's Rebellion* blog for commentary and feedback. I encourage the widest possible participation.

First, do you, as a *Bacon's Rebellion* reader, find that the principles and priorities make sense? And, second, if you do, do you think they could form the basis for a third political party? Or should we work within the current, two-party system to implement them?

-- Sept. 3, 2007

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