

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Tomahawk Chop

The departure of the R-Braves baseball team is no great loss to Richmond. Indeed, the region should take the tomahawk to other groups of marginal value and invest in institutions of knowledge creation.

By James A. Bacon

One of the big Richmond news stories in recent days has been the announced departure of the Richmond Braves, the city's AAA minor league baseball team. The old baseball stadium, the Diamond, is crumbling but regional leaders couldn't pull their act together to figure out where to build a new stadium or how to pay for it. So the Braves announced they're moving to Gwinnett County, Ga.

Yeah, we got the ol' tomahawk right between the eyes.

Many locals regard the loss of the Braves as the greatest disaster since the retreating Confederate army set the city ablaze in 1865. No question, the inability to organize a competitive offer is proof of dysfunctional leadership at some level. But is the departure of a minor league baseball team really such a catastrophe? Even in a metropolitan region approaching one million people, there are so many worthy civic causes to support and there's a limited reservoir of funding to pay for them all.

We've got museums out the wazoo -- the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Science Museum of Virginia foremost among them. The Virginia Historical Society has a museum

devoted to history, as does the Museum of the Confederacy and, don't forget, the Valentine Museum. We've got a symphony, a ballet, multiple performing arts locales, a speakers forum, a world affairs council, several amateur athletic leagues and more performing arts groups than I can count. Oh, we've also got the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and Maymount, a combination garden-petting zoo. And did I mention the six institutions of higher



education, including community colleges? Every one of them has grand plans.

Of course, there's also the United

Way and the multitude of organizations that serve the misfortunate: the poor, the homeless, the illiterate, the abused and the orphans.

Even after you've hit up your elected representatives for pork-barrel earmarks, and you've issued all the capital-funding bonds the rating agencies will let you get away with, and you've soaked the local philanthropists for all they can give, there's only so much money to go around. So, you have to make choices. And when push came to shove, Richmonders decided they really didn't care enough about minor league baseball to cough up the money for a stadium.

Throughout the R-Braves controversy, however, there's one set of questions that Richmonders have failed to ask themselves. If not a baseball stadium... what? Should we invest community dollars in different entertainment venues -- like a performing arts center? Or, to take a different tack, should we help the poor and afflicted? Or, to go another direction entirely, should we build our institutions of knowledge creation? Finally, and most important, whatever our choice, how does it fit into a larger vision of the kind of place we want Richmond to become?

Richmonders have fumed and fulminated about the R-Braves in a conceptual vacuum. The blinders may fall, however, when civic leaders assemble a 2015 Metro Future Task Force to establish a strategic vision. With a little prodding, the Task Force may do more than compile an undifferentiated wish list of community projects that appeal to a wide cross-section of the region. Hopefully, it will set priorities.

In a recent column, "[Vision Impaired](#)," I laid out a framework for analyzing regional issues affecting the Richmond metro area and setting priorities for collective action. Normally such discussions revolve around what government can do. But government can't do it all, and with this column I shift the focus to what the community can do through the use of not-for-profit enterprises -- what people commonly refer to as the civic realm.

The Richmond region, indeed every region, needs a strategic plan to guide investment in civic

projects. Such a plan should be flexible enough to incorporate new priorities, and it should not bind individual philanthropists in any way. But, by reflecting the carefully considered priorities of the community, such a plan would give donors, sponsors and elected officials with power over earmarks a dispassionate tool for sifting through the seemingly infinite choices.

Regions have four strategic alternatives for allocating their civic resources:

Knowledge creation. For the most part, contributions to knowledge creation equate to supporting institutions of higher education, although they also can mean underwriting research at institutes such as, to mention one in the Richmond region, the Massey Cancer Center. Ideally, philanthropists would not contribute to institutions of knowledge creation on the basis of idiosyncratic preference. Gifts should either fill a significant void, as when Richmond civic leaders helped finance the launch of the VCU engineering school -- Richmond had been the largest metro region in the country without an engineering school -- or to bolster knowledge creation in specific industries where the region has, or wants to have, a competitive advantage.

Quality of life. This is the catch-all category for hospitals, environmental organizations and cultural institutions -- museums, gardens, performing arts, etc. -- that contribute to regional quality of life. A sense of regional priorities should guide philanthropic investment in this realm as well. To refer back to my column, "[Brain Gain](#)," about building human capital, it would be helpful for a philanthropist to know, for instance, if the region was targeting a particular demo-

graphic for recruitment and retention. If the region were trying to attract scientists, perhaps it would be useful to support the Science Museum of Virginia. If the region were promoting itself as a "green" community, it might be desirable to invest in conserving valuable wildlife habitat view-sheds along the James River. If the region were hoping to induce more young creative-class professionals to immigrate, philanthropists could consider underwriting the Richmond Folk Festival or the preservation and revitalization of historic warehouse districts.

Humanitarian. There are numerous government programs to assist the poor and afflicted but they do not come close to helping everyone who needs a hand. Private efforts are an indispensable part of the social safety net, and helping the less fortunate is its own reward. Even so, philanthropists must make important choices. Do their gifts perpetuate a culture of dependency, or is philanthropy designed to equip the region's less fortunate citizens to participate more fully in the community? It's the old buy-a-fish or teach-a-man-to-fish dilemma.

Social activism. This category of philanthropy is far less common in Virginia than some other parts of the country. I describe "social justice" philanthropy as those efforts designed not to help the poor and downtrodden individually but to change social and economic institutions conditions that are supposedly responsible for their plight. For the most part, I regard such causes as counter-productive because they tend to get bogged down in rancorous scapegoating and blame gaming. Often, groups run by social activists magnify racial and class grievances rather than preach individual

self improvement that might actually ameliorate conditions. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that philanthropic investment in social activism typically generates a *negative* social return. Others will disagree, of course. But there's no denying the strategic significance of this alternative.

My sense of the Richmond region is this: Philanthropy provides adequate support for humanitarian causes. (Just take a look at all the organizations supported by the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg.) There appear to be few social activist organizations -- a good thing. But there is one critical imbalance: Support for "quality of life" institutions far outweighs support for institutions of knowledge creation.

The Richmond region may be above average in per capita income, but it is not a major center of scientific knowledge creation. We're making progress. The VCU School of Engineering is progressing nicely, and the Massey Cancer Center is growing, along with other life science research at VCU. With the construction of the Philip Morris corporate research center, the region has a second major private R&D center. (The Newmarket research center, which studies chemical additives, is the other.) So, we're moving in the right direction.

But Investment in knowledge creation is not a top-of-mind priority. For instance, proposals to launch a research center that would complement the advanced fibers industry cluster -- the region is home to the companies that manufacture Kevlar, Nomex, M5 and Spectra -- have failed to generate any enthusiasm. While the Richmond region has a solid economy based largely on professional services -

- law, insurance, investment banking, and advertising/marketing -- it is not creating many new technology-intensive industry clusters capable of moving the economy to the next level of wealth creation.

In contrast to the relative dearth of knowledge-creating institutions, the region is inundated with cultural institutions, which are expensive to maintain and soak up considerable philanthropic capacity. Do we really need three different major museums focused on regional history -- are we still so fixated on the past? Wouldn't it make sense to consolidate two or even three with the goal of creating a single institution that could create world-class historic exhibits at less expense? Do we really need a "world-class" performing arts center, supported largely at taxpayer expense, to host showings of "Cats" or "Mama Mia"? If we're serious about attracting the creative class to Richmond, shouldn't we be underwriting more experimental, street-level music, theater and art by starving artists?

Philanthropic resources are scarce. How we invest them defines our community. Surely it makes sense to develop criteria for setting strategic priorities and making the best choices.

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