

# Horizons

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## Rural Virginia's Latent Capacity for Leadership

Alan Raflo

"This is essentially a people's contest...a struggle for maintaining [a government] whose leading object is to...clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all--to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." Abraham Lincoln, message to Congress, July 4, 1861.

"But you must act." Abraham Lincoln, letter to General George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862.

Vision and action--these two elements of leadership are emphasized in the above quotes from one of the United States' greatest leaders. Were the complex matter of leadership to be boiled down to a few key elements, these two features arguably might be the most important. Add in the *courage to act*, and one has described a powerful capacity for leadership.

The question then arises: whose vision, and whose action? As of this writing, Virginians have just chosen George Allen, Jr. as the state's most highly placed and visible leader. Certainly, Mr. Allen's leadership will greatly influence life in Virginia over the next four years, and possibly for years afterward. But the commonwealth's fate will not rest solely upon Mr. Allen or even entirely upon state government. Instead, much of the real work of moving Virginia forward will be "a people's contest"; in other words, *our job*. Prosperity and progress in Virginia, and especially in rural Virginia, depend not only on leadership from Richmond, but also--and perhaps

more so--on local, individual leaders and actions of leadership. As was stated in a 1990 report by a presidential council on rural development, "Finding new ways to tap into *local creative thinking* will be the prime challenge to rural development program administrators in the nineties" (emphasis added).

During the past two years, I have been a member of the fourth and final two-year class of the Virginia Rural Leadership Development Program (VRLDP), a joint endeavor of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. Through that program, the participants have seen ample evidence that local leadership is vital. Unfortunately, such leadership too often appears to be lacking. Indeed, rural Virginia is not exempt from the characterization of a 1992 report by the President's Council on Rural America, which stated that "local leadership capacity [in rural America] is limited...[and] many rural areas lack skilled or effective leaders."

In my view, however, local leadership may be lacking in some parts of rural Virginia, but the *capacity* for leadership is not limited in Virginia's rural citizens. A more accurate and constructive description is that local leadership capacity is *latent*: Rural people can be and will be leaders, if opportunities exist to enable and encourage them to develop and use their leadership abilities. VRLDP is one of a number of programs designed to assist and encourage rural citizens to be leaders, in this broad sense of that word: A leader is someone who helps others accomplish "real, intended change that meets people's enduring needs" (Tanner). From my experiences in VRLDP and from other sources, I see some bright signs of rural leadership capacity.

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## Signs of Rural Leadership Capacity

At a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) forum entitled "Rural America: Changes, Challenges, Opportunities," held in Washington, D.C. on October 8, 1993, the USDA chose to compose the discussion panel from "real" people from rural America. According to one account of the meeting, the participants ranged from a Texas migrant farmworker to an Oregon executive director of a local rural development project. The account noted that some "experts and government officials were invited to attend as part of the audience and ask questions of the panelists."

From Oregon to Washington, D.C., rural Americans are discovering and showing their capacity to understand issues, chart ways to respond, and act to help improve their communities--in short, to be leaders. In Virginia, participants of the 1992-93 class of VRLDP learned about many examples of rural leadership. Here is a sampling:

- In southwest Virginia, a summer institute for teachers sponsored by the Southwest Regional Council develops materials for teaching local history, thereby helping boost local identity and pride;
- In Nelson County, a 1990 conference on the county's future was initiated and organized locally and attended by nearly 200 local citizens;
- In Bedford County, the Society of St. Andrew's Potato Project has, since 1983, distributed millions of pounds of volunteer-gleaned potatoes from Eastern Shore farms to food banks and soup kitchens;
- In Northampton County, the Northampton Economic Forum includes over 100 citizens working to build "a diverse, prosperous, and self-reliant economy" while preserving the county's natural resources;
- On Tangier Island in Accomack County, the mayor exemplifies the blend of competence, dedication, and humor needed to lead a small, isolated community;
- In Winchester and Frederick County, local social service and education workers manage innovative educational programs dealing with health care, teen pregnancy, parenting, and other issues.
- And in many other localities, "real" people are performing everyday acts of leadership with competence and dedication.

These and other signs of rural leadership, shown to the 1992-93 VRLDP participants, have been instructive and encouraging. But I am just as encouraged by the leadership capacity shown by my VRLDP classmates themselves. These 19 people from

all regions of rural Virginia possess a broad range of experience, ability, and potential to accomplish positive change. If rural Virginia is home to such people, rural Virginia will be well-led indeed.

## Cultivating Rural Leadership Capacity

If, as it appears to me, great capacity exists in rural Virginia's citizens for the broad-based, forward-looking leadership that rural areas will need to prosper, how is that capacity to be better realized? Since 1985, VRLDP has provided an opportunity for rural Virginia citizens to increase their leadership capacity, but this program will end with the conclusion of the current class in November 1993. Other options, however, are available in Virginia for assistance in rural leadership development. The Institute for Leadership and Volunteer Development at Virginia Tech offers information, educational programs, and technical assistance to individuals or groups interested in leadership development; the Institute may be reached by calling (800) 572-2180. In addition, the familiar 4-H program of Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State provides leadership opportunities for participating youth and adult volunteers.

Local leadership-development programs exist in several rural areas, as shown in the table on page 3 (all information was verified for this article). Your local government, Cooperative Extension office, or chamber of commerce may know of other programs not listed here. For people currently organizing a local leadership program, the University of Virginia's Center for Public Service/Southwest Virginia Office, located at Clinch Valley College in Wise, is available for assistance. The center may be reached by calling (703) 328-0133; please ask for Mary Catherine Tanner.

A valuable resource for leadership development is the National Issues Forum (NIF) process, developed by the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio. The NIF process can help citizens lead public discussions of issues within their communities. Each forum, conducted on the basis of objective background information provided to the citizens participating in the forum, seeks to foster public "deliberation" about a given issue, with the goal of finding some "common ground" among the forum participants. This adaptable process has been used by over 4,000 civic and educational organizations. For more information about the NIF process, contact National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777; (800) 433-7834.

Table 1. Local leadership-development programs in rural Virginia, November 1993.

Program Location/Name	Contact Person and Phone Number
Allegheny County, Clifton Forge, Covington: Target 2000	Michelle Wright, Allegheny-Highlands Chamber of Commerce: (703) 962-2178
Carroll County, Grayson County, Galax: Twin County Leadership Development Program	Kathy Price, Galax-Carroll-Grayson Co. Chamber of Commerce: (703) 236-2184
Culpeper County Leadership Development Program	Norma Dunwody, Culpeper County Chamber of Commerce: (703) 825-8628
Cumberland County Leadership Development Program	Van Petty, Virginia Cooperative Extension: (804) 492-4390
Franklin County Leadership 2000	Russ Merritt, Franklin Co. Chamber of Commerce: (703) 483-9542
Giles County Leadership Development Program	Richard Townsend, Virginia Cooperative Extension: (703) 921-3455
Leadership Halifax County/South Boston	Nancy Pool, Halifax Co. Chamber of Commerce: (804) 572-3085
Henry County/Martinsville	Noel Chitwood, Piedmont Trust Bank: (703) 632-2971
James City County Leadership Development Program	Iris Lynch, James City Co. Office of Community Services: (804) 565-6822
James City County, York County, Williamsburg: Leadership Historic Triangle	Robert Hershberger, Williamsburg Area Chamber of Commerce: (804) 229-6511
Northampton County: Leadership Northampton	Julie Badger, Farmers & Merchants Bank: (804) 787-4111
Pittsylvania County, Danville: Leadership Southside	Laurie Moran, Pittsylvania Chamber of Commerce: (804) 432-1650; or Allan Libby, Danville Chamber of Commerce: (804) 793-5422
Prince Edward County Regional Leadership Development Program	George Stonikinis: (804) 395-2349
Rockbridge County, Lexington, Buena Vista: Rockbridge Area Leadership Program	Lorraine Ennis, Lexington/Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce: (703) 463-5375
Russell County Rural Leadership Development Program	Toby Jordan, Russell Co. Chamber of Commerce: (703) 889-8041
Washington County Leadership Development Program	Washington Co. Chamber of Commerce: (703) 628-8141
Forward Wise County Leadership Development Program	Diane Cornett, Wise Co. Chamber of Commerce: (703) 679-0961

Finally, many publications on leadership are available. A few useful ones are listed at the end of this article.

### Conclusion

In the September 1992 annual report of VRLDP, a former class member described the program's impact this way: "VRLDP gave me the confidence to apply for a position with a local one-county United Way [that] has expanded to five counties in three years...The courage [to do this] came from hearing about a...lady in Mississippi who had sold fish to build a child care center."

One rural person in Mississippi, one in Virginia: Both have found ways to be leaders. So can anyone who calls rural Virginia home. We in rural Virginia will have to lead ourselves, for no one else will do it for us. Much can be done, *but we must act.*

### References and Additional Reading on Leadership

- Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953.
- Burns, James MacGregor. *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.
- Dyer, Delwyn A. and Oscar M. Williams. *Developing Local Community Leaders*. Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 301-021, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, 1987.
- Gardner, John W. *On Leadership*. New York: Free Press, 1990.
- Tanner, Mary Catherine. "Shaping the Future: Developing Leadership in Rural Virginia." *Horizons* 3(6) (November/December 1991), pp. 1-3.

## The Virginia Agricultural Economic Summit

The Virginia Agricultural Economic Summit was held October 6 in Richmond. The conference was a joint effort of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia Tech, Virginia State, the Virginia Agribusiness Council, and the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation. Some 250 people attended, including government policy-makers and regulators; producers; representatives from agribusiness and commodity groups; university personnel; and Virginia Cooperative Extension personnel.

Conference planners had identified five primary goals: to provide current information on agricultural economic issues; to seek a "consensus about economic issues related to competitiveness"; to address environmental issues affecting agriculture "in a proactive manner"; to identify workable solutions on the issues; and to begin work toward a comprehensive agricultural policy agenda for Virginia. According to REAP Coordinator Wayne Purcell, "The conference made significant progress toward its goals, and the need now is to follow up and build on that progress."

*The Economic Position of Virginia Agriculture*, prepared by Purcell for the conference, examines the competitive position of over 30 Virginia agricultural commodities. A limited number of these booklets are available; to request a copy, please contact REAP.

## NOTICES

\*REAP Report #17, *Economic Impact of a Swine Complex in Southside Virginia*, by Suzanne Thornsbury et al., is now available. The report describes the potential impact of adding a 72,000-sow swine complex in Southside Virginia. The publication can be requested from Extension Distribution, 112 Landsdowne Street, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0512; (703) 231-6192. Request Publication 448-215/REAP R017.

\*The National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT) has produced *Tapping Your Own Resources: a decision-maker's guide for small town drinking water*. The guidebook offers information and techniques to help managers of small water systems. The publication is available for \$14.95 from NATaT, Suite 600, 1522 K Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005; (202) 737-5200.

For more information, please contact REAP at Hutcheson Hall, Rm. 216, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0401; telephone (703) 231-9443.

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From REAP and the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, thank you for reading *Horizons* this year, and have a safe and happy holiday season.

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