

Making our community a more fun place to be

By Hampton Mayor George Wallace and Vice Mayor Linda Curtis

Hampton, like all cities and counties in our country, has both challenges and opportunities. Like most localities, we spend a great deal of our time working on our challenges. Problems draw the concerns of residents, the attention of the media, and the focus of elected leaders and city staff – as well they should.

It would be easy to focus exclusively on these critical issues. However, Hampton's City Council spent a recent afternoon beginning a conversation about what causes people to fall in love with their communities, what attributes Hampton already has that inspire passion in residents (and visitors), and ways we can build on those strengths.

It is not just the physical assets that inspire love and passion for a community. Research shows that people make true emotional connections with cities when they experience comfort, beauty, art and fun. Peter Kageyama, the author of "For the Love of Cities," notes that economic success of a city parallels the love and enthusiasm of the place. This should not be surprising: We know that when we care deeply for and invest our energy into our children, pets and homes, we see them flourish. The same principle applies to our cities: The more residents love their neighborhoods and city, the more time and energy they will invest in taking care of it and making it better.

So, following several strategic retreats about challenges and opportunities and master plans, the Hampton City Council set aside time for a strategic brainstorming session about how to make the city even more comfortable, convivial, fun and interesting. The context of the discussion had nothing to do with population or attracting new residents but was focused on better serving and inspiring the residents we have. (As an aside, as has been repeatedly documented and reported, Hampton is not experiencing a real population loss. The U.S. Census mistakenly counted 8,000 inmates in a prison at Langley Air Force Base in 2000 and removed them in 2010. Looking at all the city's residential Census tracts – minus the federal facilities and Hampton University campus – shows growth between 2000 and 2010.)

What will fun look like? The city will be actively engaging its residents to see what they want and encouraging them to be "co-creators." Author Kageyama highlighted many cities that have done this, often with little expense and high return. As an example, Hampton has already been lighting up its City Hall with themed colors to represent seasons, holidays and other charitable causes (look for pink lighting for breast cancer awareness on Oct. 22, and fall colors the rest of month, for example). City Hall lights can be seen from the interstate and across the community. The specialized lighting is very inexpensive since the building is already lit every night; yet, the emotions evoked – especially when we highlight a charitable cause or a high school's colors at graduation – are powerful. It follows on the city's long tradition of special holiday lighting at the Hampton Coliseum.

Some of Council's ideas include expanding creative lighting; adding rental boats to public waterways so more residents and tourists can enjoy our 124 miles of waterfront; fostering more neighborhood festivals like the wonderful Phoebus Fall Festival that was held last week; and,

bringing the crab, which was once proudly worn by many residents as a symbol of our city, back as a more visible mascot of our community.

That was just the beginning. In the coming months, residents will be invited to share their ideas as well. Sometimes, individuals and outside groups are better at creating “fun” than government. Part of government’s role may be to get out of the way by adjusting policies, regulations or permit requirements. Partner organizations like the Downtown Hampton Development Partnership, Phoebus Partnership and Coliseum Central Business Improvement District will be asked to be co-creators of the fun, as well as other neighborhood and civic organizations, like those in Buckroe. Passionate and creative members of our community are already stepping forward with ideas and a willingness to help. The Crawl-in’ Crab races, Freaky Ton Kiki raft contest, and the Rolling of the Bulls downtown are examples of such successes upon which we will build.

While we have these conversations and make ideas embraced by the community a reality, we will continue the critical work on our economic base, housing stock, safety and schools. Creating beauty, excitement and fun in our communities will not come at the expense of the functionality and safety of our city. These are not either/or choices. When we pull together for our places, we can do it all.