



The Progress-Index

04/08/2007

More News

BY R.H. "BO" BOWDEN JR.

Many people in the area have a newfound optimism about Petersburg, stemming at least in part from the personnel and facilities growth planned for Fort Lee over the next 3-5 years. Indeed the number of people moving to the area will change, but this will not in itself transform Petersburg into what it could ultimately become.

It is a wonderful time to take inventory of some of Petersburg's principal assets, to make an honest assessment of its challenges and to determine if there is a plausible way to use the former to help solve the latter.

First, as compared to other cities in Virginia and the mid-Atlantic what does Petersburg have to offer?

A Central Virginia location with excellent access to interstate highways and close proximity to the growing metro areas of Greater Richmond, Northern Virginia, Hampton Roads and Raleigh/Durham. Increasingly the cost of living between Petersburg and those areas has become disparate, attracting the interest of new residents and outside investors.

A rich architectural history with several structures dating to the 18th century. Although many are in disrepair, most were never "over restored." Compared to Richmond, which lost much of its antebellum architecture during the Civil War and Williamsburg whose buildings were reconstructed and are not original, some parts of Petersburg may offer the best glimpse of original 18th century Virginia available today.

Due to some economic setbacks in the 20th century, many significant properties that became prohibitively expensive for their owners to maintain are now either owned by or under the control of the City of Petersburg. In the short-term this situation creates a financial burden on the City, but may offer an opportunity to put the properties to productive use in the longer term.

Recently a budding revitalization of historic Petersburg, first visible in the Old Town area and highlighted by businesses and events arising from the arts community.

The construction of a regional medical center, which will provide upgraded services to area residents, but also potentially creating a vacuum in the area surrounding the old hospital, because the next use of that complex is as yet undetermined.

Higher education institutions in Virginia State University and Richard Bland College that offer multiple programs and degrees.

A great example in the Appomattox Regional Governors School of a successful public-private partnership that has resulted in improved educational opportunity and the attraction of people outside the City of Petersburg.

Next, what are some of Petersburg's challenges?

An economic base that cannot easily support needed improvements and basic services, making new investment by the City fiscally challenging.

Over the last thirty years, like many Virginia cities, a demographic composition that lacks the socioeconomic diversity that it once had.

A slow but measurable decline in educational outcomes, inextricably linked to the demographic and economic trends noted above. This situation has resulted in a largely unskilled labor base that reduces the likelihood of new industrial and commercial investment.

Due to the lack of new investment in some areas of town, a run-down appearance that perpetuates a largely undeserved stigma that often precedes the inquiries of potential new residents and investors.

Is there an opportunity to take what is available and create something new that will build on Petersburg's unique advantages and offer a way to reverse the course of the negative trends? What is it that Petersburg could offer that isn't being offered anywhere else?

The Virginia School of Historic Restoration

Advertisement

**Tired of
Rising Heating
Co\$t??**

**Let us show you a
cleaner, safer way
to heat with wood.**

**25
YEAR
WARRANTY**

Here is the idea. There are many schools of architecture and engineering across the country. There are departments devoted to historic preservation at several colleges (Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg is a great example). And there are a few schools whose mission is to teach and preserve the building trades (notably the American College for the Building Arts in Charleston, SC).

What does not exist is a school that trains general contractors qualified to manage historic restoration projects. Today's contractors must apprentice under a dwindling few that have had the knowledge passed down from others. The ability to understand the materials and methods of the past, select and manage qualified tradesmen, and develop the critical ability to manage a building project from start to finish is an increasingly rare skill. It is also a profession in increasing demand across all areas of the country and in particular Virginia.

Petersburg has the vast majority of resources already in place to establish such a school. Because many properties exist in the City in more-or-less original condition, these properties make natural "laboratories" for students. The completed projects could either be retained as future administrative buildings, serve as dormitories, be opened as museums or simply be offered for sale, the proceeds from which would go back into the coffers to acquire additional properties or to offset ongoing costs of the School. Each property would bear a plaque designating it a project of The Virginia School of Historic Restoration. An excellent example worthy of study is Battersea, an 18th century Palladian design, whose restoration is being contemplated.

Principal Partners

It is essential to establish mission, foster credibility, develop curriculum and provide ongoing administration by forming a partnership made up of at least the following entities:

City of Petersburg – The City is uniquely qualified geographically, historically and architecturally to host the School. Whether it is in providing space, "loaning" City-owned properties or helping identify the most viable projects, the City must be involved in the School's direction.

Virginia Tech – The mission of the School will require faculty and administrative support of a college that can provide visiting faculty trained in architecture, engineering and urban planning. Virginia Tech is a natural partner because of its successful track record in establishing adjunct programs and its reputation in these disciplines - its Urban Affairs and Planning Center in Alexandria is noteworthy.

Virginia State University – VSU's proximity alone makes it a natural partner. One of its contributions to the school's curriculum may be training through its School of Business. A successful general contractor is a manager and therefore must have a keen grasp of leadership, staffing, accounting and finance. VSU may be able to provide the appropriate faculty and classroom space.

Richard Bland College / College of William and Mary – Also in close proximity, Richard Bland through its affiliation with William and Mary could provide visiting professors trained in historic preservation and archeology that is critical to overseeing the authenticity of a large restoration project. Classroom space at the Petersburg campus may be available.

General Contractors, Architects and Tradesmen – These are the people who have invaluable experience and the practical knowledge that the students need to learn. Their input is critical in the development of the curriculum.

Elected Officials – While the majority of the components are in place, the appropriation of existing resources must have the approval of the respective governing bodies. And as a practical matter, the School would need a small administrative body that would ideally be funded publicly.

Community and Corporate Partners – individuals, not-for-profits and corporations. There are natural affiliations with the School that may make sense including the Historic Petersburg Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce, Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Petersburg Urban Ministries and The Phoenix Project to name a few. These enterprises can decide for themselves whether an affiliation would be consistent with their own missions. Corporate leaders, philanthropists, locally-based building supply companies, and individuals interested in historic preservation can all play a role.

Curriculum and Desired Outcome

A proposed curriculum would consist of three parts, each of which conceivably could last one year:

Year One - History and Design This portion of the curriculum would be hosted by The City of Petersburg and could potentially be housed at Centre Hill Mansion in close proximity to downtown. Classes held at Richard Bland College could begin to provide the historical context to building design that has evolved over 400 years in Virginia. Visiting professors from Virginia Tech would introduce elements of design.

Year Two – Apprenticeship and Business Training. This year would consist of exposure to various trades and appointment to an actual project. Visiting faculty would focus on practical architectural and engineering aspects of construction. Year Two would also include business classes at Virginia State.

Year Three - Leadership Training and Project Management. Third Year students would be the appointed team leaders and project managers. The focus of visiting faculty is on the overall goals of community restoration, including urban planning and design.

While the graduates of the program would be neither historians, preservationists, architects, engineers nor urban planners, they would have exposure to each facet of historical restoration. After three years the desired outcomes for a graduate would be both a degree and the knowledge necessary to take and pass a Virginia General Contractor's license examination.

Clearly the selection of the right students is critical to the School's ability to deliver on its mission. Minimal qualifications would include high school graduation or the equivalent, past demonstration of interest and skill in construction. Other requirements may include some prior work experience in construction and at least one letter of recommendation from a licensed General Contractor. Prospective students could include college graduates, career changers and people involved in the construction industry who are looking to change or expand their focus.

Potential Long-Term Impact

Visitors strolling the sidewalks of Savannah, Georgia have no doubt noticed the restored edifices of buildings devoted to the Savannah College of Art and Design. Its sites interspersed among the various commercial, retail and residential structures of the city, SCAD is remarkable given its launch in 1978 with its first building a former armory. Today the school boasts over 7,000 students from all 50 states, satellite campuses in Atlanta and France and multiple bachelor and masters degree programs in design and architecture.

An example closer to home is Virginia Commonwealth University, whose programs in engineering, business and the arts have helped to transform the western portion of Richmond's downtown. Since the 1990s, VCU and the surrounding area have become a teeming sector where several buildings have been restored, property values have risen, new construction has begun and most importantly students from all over Virginia and other parts of the country have been attracted.

The Virginia School of Historic Restoration could in time grow into a multi-disciplined institution offering training not only in building restoration, but in the design and manufacture of historic building components and furniture. Potentially general contractors from around the state and country may come to Petersburg for continuing education on appropriate restoration techniques. After several historic properties have been restored (many of which could be available for public viewing), tourism will be enhanced, and visitors from outside the area will again take note of the history of Petersburg.

Why Would This Idea Work?

For many people a home is the largest investment they ever make. There is a pride in ownership that doesn't compare to any other asset. People interested in residential and public historic properties are knowledgeable and are willing to pay a premium price for qualified guidance, superior materials and workmanship. Take a look at the number of television programs and entire cable networks that are devoted to restoration projects, many of which are of historical significance. The number of websites and periodicals devoted to restoration has increased similarly. Finally, to loosely quote Mark Twain who recognized the value of investing in land, preserving historic property makes sense because "they've stopped making it."

An Exploratory Committee made up of representatives of each of the principal partners can form in short order. This body could appoint Curriculum, Legislative and Foundation committees and could ultimately form a Board of Trustees.

I would urge those who believe in such a vision of Petersburg to simply begin talking to others in Central Virginia about the concept of the Virginia School of Historic Restoration. Outlined here are some but certainly not all of the critical elements necessary to explore the project further. A wonderful advantage that Petersburg has over some other cities is its size. A relative few people can make a discernable difference quickly. Is it time to get out the blueprints and t-squares and start rebuilding Petersburg's future?

R.H. "Bo" Bowden Jr. is Senior Vice President and Southside Area Executive for BB&T covering Petersburg, Colonial Heights, Hopewell, Chester, Chesterfield, Amelia and vicinity. His professional background includes commercial real estate lending, municipal and education finance. He was an adjunct faculty member at Guilford College in North Carolina and worked in Career Planning and Placement at Wake Forest University.

Bowden can be reached at bbowden@BBandT.com

©The Progress-Index 2007