Chapter IV

Working Waterfronts – State of the Commonwealth

Working waterfronts and waterways have long been an important component of the Virginia economy, and of its cultural and social heritage. The deep channels of its multiple rivers, combined with the colonial government’s grants of land, shaped the development of Virginia east of the Fall Line. The various rivers connecting to the Chesapeake Bay provided easy access for trans-Atlantic ships to collect cargo from the peninsulas and riverbank wharves in Tidewater. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, steamboats became central to Chesapeake commerce and communication. The wharves where these ships made landings offered freight service so that farmers, fishermen and manufacturers could sell their wares in Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia where demand for those goods was highest. At their peak, an estimated 600 boats serviced a dense network of 300 landings along riverbanks to the farthest points of navigation.

As history unfolded, the waterfront scenes of the steamboats have long fallen silent, although some of the properties associated with the landings remain in the public domain. In their absence the ports of Virginia have grown to contribute significantly to the economy of the Commonwealth. According to the Port of Virginia 2015 annual report, “A study published by the College of William & Mary’s Raymond A. Mason School of Business in December 2014 highlighted the economic importance of the port in fiscal year 2013. The study found the port generated $60 billion in in-state spending, accounting for 6.8 percent of Virginia’s 2013 gross state product (GSP). Moreover, the research shows that the port provided more than 374,000 jobs (direct, indirect and induced) amounting to 9.4 percent of the commonwealth’s resident employment that year: total compensation for that labor force was $17.5 billion.”

But the working waterfronts are not restricted to the ports alone. Their diversity includes ship and boat building, repair and maintenance – large and small, serving both the recreational and commercial markets, fishing and seafood processing, passenger vessel operations, marine technology, military operations, recreational boating, and numerous support industries which extend from Hampton Roads into the various tributaries throughout the tidewater. All of these waterfront entities contribute substantially to the economy of coastal Virginia.

In 2013, approximately 3,000 licensed commercial fisherman and aquaculture permit holders relied on access to Virginia’s working waterfronts. Virginia is the nation’s third largest producer of marine products with total landings of over 494,028,366 pounds in 2012 and out paced only by Alaska and Louisiana. The dockside value to watermen alone was $191,664,734. Continued growth of the shellfish aquaculture industry in Virginia has added significant value to the state’s seafood marketplace. Virginia’s watermen-farmers are providing consumers with a growing quantity of hard clams and oysters that represents $36.9 million dockside value.
Recreational boating is not only a part of the culture of the Commonwealth, it has a significant positive economic impact. While many think of yachts when recreational boating is mentioned, more than 90 percent of recreational boats are less than 30 feet, and many are sail and unpowered craft. The economic impact from recreational boating is created by spending throughout boat owners’ spending cycle. Boat building and repair creates jobs and economic activity for boat builders, designers, engineers, and component manufacturers. Sales have impacts on brokers, dealers, and financers. Ownership creates impacts in permanent moorage, maintenance and repair, insurance, parts, and accessories. Operation creates spending for fuel, guest moorage, and visited retail. Recent studies by the National Marine Manufacturers Association and the Marine Advisory Services at the VIMS have determined that the economic impact of the recreational boating industry in Virginia ranges between 1.2 and 2.9 billion dollars annually, providing 15,547 jobs.

However, many of these traditional industries are threatened as the coastal areas are experiencing dramatically increased demand for residential development. With the exception of Hampton Roads, the coastal area is surrounded by rural counties which, for the most part, have experienced the greatest impact from the pressures of this growth. The challenge then is to develop a set of strategies to help offset the impacts of this pressure, with an emphasis on assisting those areas most significantly affected.

To some degree all of the rural counties recognize that the balance between working waterfronts and residential development is trending to one that is predominantly residential. This demand often results in the need for services and resources that are not compatible with the nature and character of the community that attracted the development in the first place. As a result, historic industries that support the functionality of many waterfront communities become disadvantaged by impacts of new development. Localities with working waterfronts often lack sufficient information and/or organizational capacity to effectively respond to the changes presented by increased growth and development which are now threatened by accelerated real estate development of non-water dependent waterfront properties over recent decades. Loss of working waterfronts and waterways is negatively impacting coastal communities economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally. Some communities are proactively preserving and maintaining existing working waterfronts and waterways, using creative financial and organizational approaches. Nonetheless, piecemeal conversion of properties that previously supported water dependent commercial activities, such as fishing and shipping, to non-water dependent uses, has had unexpected cumulative impacts on communities. In many cases, the rate of loss and conversion outpace community action to address the issue. Raising the awareness and visibility of these industries is a high priority across all segments of the waterfront.

Managing coastal areas requires a concerted effort by government institutions at all levels, the private sector, and community groups, as well as sustained political support. Achieving a balance between top-down legislative authorities and bottom-up community involvement
requires understanding the issues and maintaining strong links with stakeholders in the area. Efforts to balance local interests with state and national legislation must consider the socioeconomic context of the coastal population and the role demographic patterns play in the region.

Any strategy should also include the public's right of access to the water when making development decisions. The public trust doctrine establishes that all navigable and historically navigable waters, including the lands beneath and resources within are held in trust by the state for the public's benefit and use. The doctrine protects a range of uses, including commerce, navigation, and fishing. This doctrine is a key factor affecting coastal and waterfront development and should be taken into consideration in all land use decisions involving the waterfront.

Future development of coastal communities will rely on the opportunities presented by the coastal environment and the level of public policy that governs such opportunities. The challenge is to devise a strategy that will promote compatibility between economic development and the long term environmental and socio-economic needs of the community. Compatible multiple-use objectives should favor long-term development and resource conservation strategies rather than short-term development objectives.

Nationally, coastal states and localities are using planning, zoning, land conservation, land acquisition, tax incentives, public improvements and state and local regulations to help preserve their working waterfronts. In many cases these initiatives are the result of a coalition of groups with similar interests including industry associations, nonprofit groups and government agencies working towards common goals.

The Virginia CZM Program funded a project conducted by VIMS – Sea Grant Marine Advisory Service and the Coastal PDC’s for stakeholder development of Virginia’s working waterfront public policy to protect and enhance working waterfronts. The first step in this process began with an exercise across the coastal zone among regions with a tradition of commercial fishing and other water dependent activities to derive their own definition of a working waterfront. Specifically, Accomack-Northampton, Hampton Roads, Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck planning districts started with the model definition developed by proposed legislation at the national level. Some PDCs adopted this definition while others tailored it to capture additional details of their region. Another step in the policy development process has been to conduct an inventory of existing working waterfront sites within these planning districts. The inventories captured the precise location (including digital maps and photos), specialized support services, unique site features, and, in some cases, planning efforts toward future transfer of site ownership for each site.

In 2007, Virginia hosted the first national Working Waterfronts Symposium in Norfolk, which was supported by the Virginia CZM Program. In February 2013 the CZM Program sponsored the Virginia Working Waterfronts Workshop which helped identify issues faced by rural working
waterfront communities in Virginia, and provided an opportunity for stakeholders to become directly involved in clarifying the issues and a challenge facing Virginia’s working waterfronts.

During the summer and fall of 2015, meetings were held with stakeholders across the Middle Peninsula, Northern Neck and Eastern Shore to discuss historic and current use of working waterfront space, the economic value of working waterfronts, and legal, policy, and financing tools that can be used to preserve, enhance, and protect these valuable areas. In total, well over 200 meetings with local Boards of Supervisors, individual Board of Supervisor members, local government administrators, and local working waterfront business leaders were held. Through these meetings, 12 working waterfront issue areas or “stressors” were consistently expressed in each region.

The intent of this Working Waterfront Master Plan is to address those stressors and frame a set of policies that will serve to assist in protecting, restoring and enhancing water-dependent commercial and recreational activities. The Plan will help communities with existing water-dependent commercial infrastructure better understand the long-term costs associated with the loss of working waterfronts, develop new policy tools to help them manage increasing growth pressures, and build capacity to develop working waterfronts as a thriving component of local economic development. Efforts have also been made to identify an innovative means to help preserve commercial fishing heritage/folklore as these vocations are intrinsically valuable and an inherent part of the landscape.