

# The Big “E”—Civic Engagement: Sustainable Growth in the Research Triangle Region

*Camille Cates Barnett*

There are reasons the Research Triangle Region is growing: it is beautiful and there is opportunity. Residents ask can we both sustain this growth and keep intact what makes this place so attractive?

For us, sustainable growth means having the four E's—a strong economy, a clean environment, social equity, and civic engagement. Civic engagement is the way to reach the other E's; it is the active and diverse involvement of people in making the trade off and creating synergy among economy, environment, and equity.

Our work is meant to enhance big E—civic engagement—in designing the future development of the region. We are doing this through conferences, a volunteer leadership group, a grassroots network and use of virtual reality to examine development choices for the future.

The Research Triangle Region just reached a population of over one million people. Over the next generation, the region is expected to grow by another 600,000—the equivalent of an entirely new city of Raleigh plus a new City of Durham, plus a new Town of Cary, plus a new Town of Chapel Hill. Much of the success of the region results from regional action—especially the creation of the Research Triangle Park. From 1980-1995, population growth in the United States was about 16 percent—in North Carolina it was 22 percent—in the Research

Triangle region it was 49 percent. Now we are becoming victims of our own success.

The Research Triangle Institute and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently sponsored a Sustainable Cities Symposium for the region. We explored trends and strategies, choices for sustainable growth. The key recommendations from that symposium of 150 leaders of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors were to develop alternatives for handling the growth of the region—and that we get more people involved in deciding among the alternatives.

The Research Triangle Regional Council, a volunteer group of regional civic entrepreneurs, had begun a Regional Development Choices project that symposium participants endorsed. Volunteers and the staff of the Triangle J Council of Governments identified three realistic scenarios for the future development of the region. Each scenario—ranging from a continuation of present development patterns to focusing on compact neighborhoods and preserved green space—requires a varying degree of regional coordination.

## **Three Ways to Engage**

Now, how can we get a broad range of people involved in discussing and deciding among the alternatives? We wanted some-

thing that would engage the people of the region in new ways. What we are trying is a grassroots network, a regional conference, and virtual reality.

Since the Sustainable Cities Symposium participants recommended that a citizens forum be established, a grassroots network has connected a new set of community organizations, businesses, academics, and other individuals interested in sustainable growth. The Sustainable Triangle Network is an all-volunteer effort and uses a list serve to supplement its meetings and mailings.

Research Triangle Institute is developing a virtual reality tool that will allow city and regional planners to depict graphically a range of detail from individual houses to larger areas like city blocks, woodlands, and hydrographic features. Virtual reality (VR) delivers an interactive, immersible, and three-dimensional learning experience through computer technology. Software tools create three-dimensional, fully-functional, realistic models. VR enables learners to become involved in a simulated environment to see relationships, trouble shoot problems, try different alternatives, and develop new approaches.

As a planning tool, VR can accept Graphical Information System (GIS) data and can illustrate a variety of information, including topography, water, sewer and power lines, drainage, and other data essential to the planning function. Since the model operates in VR, it will be possible to change rapidly the viewing perspective and interact with the object being observed. Virtual reality modeling allows the viewer to see objects inside existing or proposed structures, to "see" under ground, or to observe locations not subject to normal observation. Appropriate simulation and animation effects can be merged with the VR model to illustrate rates of flow, movement patterns, use of space, and other information important to the planning process.

The model will serve as an excellent tool to examine alternatives, such as dramatic increases in traffic flow, the construction of new facilities, the preservation of open space, and the expansion or contraction of hydrographic features. Finally, the model can be a powerful and dramatic tool to illustrate the impact of change over time for interested public officials and the constituents they serve.

## TV Joins In

The VR model will be combined with the expertise and broadcasting ability of a local television station, WRAL, with initial presentation at the April 1998 World Class Region Conference sponsored by the Greater Triangle Regional Council and the Triangle J Council of Governments. A documentary of the conference will be produced and broadcast by WRAL. From there we hope that many civic groups, public officials, and citizens will engage in a dialogue about our collective future, supported by a technology that makes the trade offs and options real.

A region that prides itself as being on the cutting edge, cannot succeed on the path of fragmentation, confrontation, and apathy. Our task is to create a sustainable region. The challenge for us all is to broaden civic engagement in order to make smart choices. ■

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