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As the oldest continuous English-speaking settlement in the United States, the port city of Hampton, Virginia, is rich in history. In 1608, English captain John Smith pronounced the area a “little isle fit for a castle.” Today, it is a racially diverse, mid-sized city of about 140,000 with a deep natural harbor, good schools and universities, and a host of stable employers. Back in 1984, however, Mayor James Eason feared that Hampton was “dying in slow motion” because of economic stagnation and population loss. His shared concerns brought municipal leaders together to declare a community challenge: Hampton would reinvent itself as the “most livable city in Virginia.”

Hampton’s story of transformation has been studied and widely praised. The German publisher Bertelsmann Stiftung even honored the town in a worldwide competition for innovative and exemplary efforts supporting and strengthening democracy. Hampton is worthy of such note, but even residents must take all the praise with a grain of salt. After all, no place is perfect, and no story of community life is ever complete. They are all works-in-progress. And while Hampton’s efforts are worth noting, they are not perfectly replicable; no community-building effort is.

Stories like Hampton’s present research opportunities for Kettering because they allow us to learn more about the way key democratic practices, like naming problems in public terms and deliberating together, are employed when communities take on difficult problems. What we can take away from looking at Hampton are their intentions, their practices, and their insights.

Hampton’s transformation began with insightful leadership, but it is not a story of top-down changes alone. What makes the Hampton story interesting is their diffused, conscious effort to change both the way the community thought of itself and how it functioned. Instead of applying a one-time visioning process, they took the time to consider what would make their community “most livable.” Hampton understood that people would not “own” change without having decision-making power at the neighborhood level. People accustomed to griping about what the city should do had to learn to work together on issues where they could make a difference.

By all accounts, city manager Bob O’Neill had a huge impact on the nature of the transformation that began in 1984. But this is not a story of a great man working alone. As a proposed highway that would dissect Hampton became highly controversial, the city relinquished space for the public to come to agreement on what to do, even though it would slow economic development plans already in motion. The problem was not viewed as simple or technical, but rather a fundamental community question along the lines of, “What kind of city do we want to be?” Once the residents had worked through that big problem together, many more people saw themselves as being able to make a difference, and their government became ever-more inclined toward using collaborative problem solving.

Reinventing Hampton meant making the city leadership’s commitment to harnessing “the resources of business, neighborhoods, community groups, and
government” a full citywide commitment. The effort to do that is of research interest to Kettering because Hampton developed a practice of shared decision making. The city provided structure for conversations that needed to happen and kept up the momentum for comprehensive actions, while the neighborhoods gained strength by working through issues close to home. Neighborhoods, as defined by residents, became responsible for carrying mutually agreed upon initiatives forward.

One of those issues was the problem of disengaged youth. With help from a federal grant, the mayor pushed Hampton to take a collaborative approach to engaging young people in the life of the city. Five thousand young people and adults spent a year considering how to build the economy by fully realizing the latent potential of young residents. The coalition decided that 4 elements were necessary: strong families, healthy neighborhoods, youth as community resources, and greater investment in the development of human potential in the first 20 years of life.

Profound shifts in thinking were taking place in Hampton. As evidence, Alternatives, Inc., a local youth-development organization that had been working on problems of substance abuse, began to see its work in a new light. The organization changed its approach from a narrow problem focus to facilitating community work around the question, what does it take as a community to foster a drug-free climate? This more embracing approach is asset based, which recognizes what people have to offer rather than what they lack. It takes problems that could be narrowly defined into shared space and invites public decision making.

The residents of Hampton didn’t see the problem of young people abusing alcohol and getting expelled from school as a problem specifically related to substance abuse, schools, or youth; they saw it as a problem of community. Groups engaged in the problem made the effort to reach out further and widen community deliberation. They never fell into a complacent stasis, but kept broadening their horizons. “Good enough” was not trumpeted, “success” was never declared, and the issue of disengaged youth was never handed back to professional youth developers. Stories like Hampton’s present research opportunities for Kettering because they allow us to identify and understand more about the ways key democratic practices are employed when whole communities take on difficult issues.

While it may be typical for government officials to begin and end public engagement efforts with surveys gathering input for officials to ultimately make decisions, it is not how Hampton takes on challenges. They continue to make a real effort to share decision-making power. Alison Mathie of the Coady International Institute, who recently participated in a meeting at Kettering, described this as leadership “by stepping back.” Stepping back seems to prompt communities to harness more of their available resources.

The city of Hampton’s early 1980s effort to reinvent itself was the prompt for experiments with large-scale dialogues to address Hampton’s future. Efforts to make public decisions, decisions in which most people feel they have had time and opportunity for a good “give and take” on a problem, require our ability to learn from one another’s experiences. Whether such exchanges happen in formal settings like board rooms or informal ones like barbershops, they cumulatively make up what Kettering calls “public talk.” We assert that developing a habit of public talk is conscious work that leads to healthier civic environments, places where everyday people have a stake in what is going on around them and feel that they are able to make a difference.

Kettering has learned and recognized (along with John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute) that every community has resources, although sometimes they go untapped. Disengaged young people might be viewed as problems, but Hampton chooses to see them as resources. Government might be seen as key to acting on problems, but Hampton chooses to see it as one resource among many. How we interpret what we see when we look around us makes a difference in our political behavior.

In a democratically inclined community, such as Hampton, power generated by working on problems appears more diffuse and far less centrifugal than in other communities. The small city has gone a long way in 30 years to develop a habit of public talk that has helped it thrive through tough economic times. Hampton has become a place where residents are accustomed to being asked to take part in supporting their community, and that, alone, might be what makes it great. The Hampton Neighborhood Initiative is today a mature, hybridized system of support incorporating government, business, nonprofits, and neighbors working to be inclusive, collaborative, and effective. Hampton strives for a culture in which government and residents coproduce solutions to difficult challenges.

The habit of thoughtfully weighing the trade-offs inherent in all pathways toward action is apparent in the Hampton story. How does it get started in other communities? How is such work sustained? We would love to hear the story of how your community works its way through problems.

Connie Crockett is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at crockett@kettering.org.