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EDUCATION

Private meeting spurs new collaboration between Virginia Tech and surrounding towns

Announcement comes after Blacksburg mayor says Tech needs to take more accountability for the pressure its growth is putting on the town

PAYTON WILLIAMS *The Roanoke Times*

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BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech is signaling its intentions to take a more active role in infrastructure planning for the New River Valley.

University representatives, as well as those from Blacksburg, Montgomery County, Christiansburg and the New River Valley Regional Commission, came together in a recent private meeting, and it was then announced that a new initiative to jointly plan for the future of the region is starting. The university says it is going to pay for a consultant through its private foundation, and it was the university that disclosed the initial information about the initiative in a statement issued to the press.



Pedestrians walk from the Virginia Tech campus toward downtown Blacksburg and College Avenue on Friday, MATT GENTRY, THE ROANOKE TIMES

The announcement comes after Blacksburg Mayor Leslie Hager-Smith said in January that the Virginia Tech needs to take more accountability for the pressure its growth is putting on the town.

“The student population in Blacksburg already outnumbered ordinary citizens by more than 2-to-1,” Hager-Smith said at the time. “Students pay less in taxes and require more in services than other demographic groups. They require more policing, more mental health services, even more hot water. The imbalance is simply unsustainable.”

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Now, to help with planning as part of the new collaboration, Virginia Tech is hiring LINK Strategic Partners, a Washington-based consulting firm that will act as a facilitator. The university has used the consulting firm on other matters.

So far, there has only been the one meeting, so details as to what the partnership will entail have not been worked out, but Hager-Smith said that it will go beyond just infrastructure concerns.

“The university collaborated with us before on Blacksburg Transit, but that was focused on a single issue,” Hager-Smith said. “This is the first time to my memory that the university has worked with the region on such a wide range of concerns.”

While housing has not been referred to explicitly as a major focus of the collaboration, Hager-Smith said she expects it will play a large role.

Virginia Tech administrators have indicated that lack of housing would be a major obstacle to the future growth of the university. President Tim Sands said that lack of available infrastructure and housing would “limit our growth in the short term,” during his State of the University speech earlier this year.

In the same speech, Sands announced his intention to work with the region on future planning.

“We’ve made progress and are ready for the university, towns, county and surrounding region to join and forge a path to improve our community for all,” Sands said. “I look forward to a productive dialogue that helps us better understand our needs and develop a plan to address our shared goals.”

Much of LINK Strategic Partners’ work has focused specifically on universities and their surrounding communities. The company had a similar role in assisting the University of the District of Columbia in formulating a strategic plan.

Hager-Smith said that the partnership was an unprecedented sign of the university’s willingness to participate in planning for the future of the New River Valley.

“It’s an encouraging sign of the university’s openness to work with its neighbors on major issues,” Hager-Smith said. “The intention is now for us to meet regularly.”

Mark Owczarski, Virginia Tech’s chief spokesman, said that he agrees with the view that this collaboration is unique.



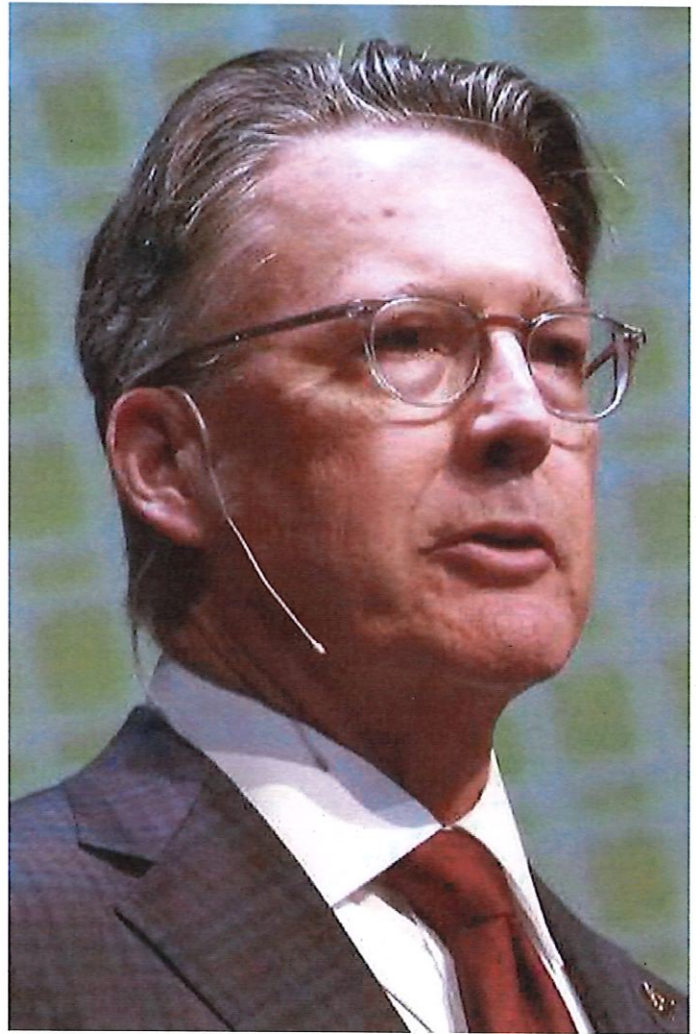
Hager-Smith

"The university has held long-standing partnerships and collaborations with all these partners for many, many years, but I do think it would be fair to say that this effort is unique in that it represents an intentional, guided and focused effort to bring these partners together to identify, discuss and move forward key issues and topics important to us all, in a focused period of time," Owczarski said.

The initiative would be funded entirely by the Virginia Tech Foundation, he said. What that will or is expected to cost was not released.

"No university or state funds are being used to engage the consultant," Owczarski said.

While the university has indicated that the current initiative will last one year, Hager-Smith said she believes this will be the beginning of a longer-term collaboration between Virginia Tech and the region.



Sands