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By Jim Ellis

The Richmond region is the crossroads of the American story. Not just the Southern story or the slavery story or the Civil War story. Not just the canal era story or the Revolutionary War story or the story of modern representative democracy or the Founding Fathers. Not just the story of the seafarers and watermen, or the Native Americans. Not just the plantation story, or the Industrial Revolution story, or the railroad story, or the streetcar suburbs story, or the suburban sprawl story. Not just the Gilded Age story, or the Jim Crow story, or the westward expansion story. The American story.

Overall, no other place represents so many chapters of our national narrative so well in places we can still see and visit. A “market” for history has moved in the way of all free markets, preserving the historical resources we have today and failing to save many others. For a variety of reasons in a variety of circumstances, the preserved history of the region is the work of small groups, dedicated individuals, governments, capitalist imperative, serendipity and our tendency to linger. It is a rich legacy. And sixty miles to the east is the Historic Triangle of Jamestown, Williamsburg and Yorktown. Within seventy-five miles to the west is the Blue Ridge, Monticello and the University of Virginia’s Academical Village (a World Heritage site). If you understand the story of the Richmond region, you will understand the story of America.

Our embarrassment of historical riches makes it difficult to comprehend everything we have and present it coherently. But accelerating growth in the region demands that we take this effort to the next level immediately. The most recent Crupi report said it is past time to think big. So let’s think big by developing our regional identity as “the crossroads of the American story.” To do this we need a formally adopted, comprehensive plan built and sustained through regional cooperation. Without a formal plan, new development will not have to respect our history, localities will continue to see themselves as competitors instead of allies, and we will continue to rely on a patchwork market in which lost opportunities outnumber successes.

The plan should include a comprehensive regional green infrastructure analysis focused on historic resources but also including alternate transportation modes, habitats and recreational uses. It should promote walkability and a sense of place by recognizing efforts currently underway to establish greenways, parks and trails. Regional universities could be laboratories for developing materials and marketing plans. The costs – and the revenues derived from the project – could be shared among the local governments in the region.

Isn’t this a better path to regional cooperation and sustainable economic development than establishing new authorities to impose more taxes to build more roads that we will not be able to maintain? Or continuing to build retail space when we already exceed the national per capita average by 400%? We will develop more land in the next forty years than we did in the four hundred years since Jamestown was founded. We risk losing many historic resources. We are behind the curve on new approaches to creating sustainable, livable communities that will be the next layer of our history. All of these issues can be addressed through a regional historical resource plan.

The plan should be a supplement to the existing market and the myriad individuals and organizations dedicated to historic preservation. The process for making our regional plan should be cooperative. It should support collaborations with historical societies, preservation enthusiasts, conservationists, citizens, businesses, governments and universities in the region. It should emulate the recent Richmond master plan update led by Rachel Flynn. Citizens should provide brainstorming and help set priorities and goals. They should provide the reality check for the draft plans. Meanwhile, governments and universities, as well as companies and individuals who felt so inclined, could contribute the detailed information to help citizens in their role in the process, and the technical know-how to draw up and achieve those goals efficiently and legally.

The pieces are at hand. The need is now. The crossroads of the American story is here. To come back to the Crupi report – where is the leadership?