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# The Start Of Something New

*From A Few Thousand People To Nearly Half A Million,  
Virginia Beach Has Grown Into A Thriving And Vibrant City.  
At Age 50, It's Flexing Its Ample Muscles  
Instead Of Showing Its Age*

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk



**M**any of us come from places that were officially cities hundreds of years ago, so it sounds strange when we learn that the city of Virginia Beach isn't that old. Well, the land is old, old, old, and we know the area played a role in our country's history. But the city itself, as it is today, is really just past "middle aged," having celebrated its 50th birthday in January.

Local historian Amy Waters Yarsinke writes about the "new city" in her book *Virginia Beach: A History of Virginia's Golden Shore*:

"Virginia Beach was a resort area of just 2 square miles and less than 8,000 residents in 1962; Princess Anne County, which enveloped it, had 256 square miles and was still part of rural Southeast Virginia. The merger one year later created what subsequently became the largest city in Virginia, and all those quaint front porches with their wicker chairs and stirring stories became warm memories of another time and place."

It wasn't that anyone wanted to give up quaintness and charm, and, in fact, touches of that old-fashioned appeal can still be seen in homes and businesses in Virginia Beach. It just seemed to be more of a concern that others—another city and/or city leaders from outside Virginia Beach—could have gobbled up all of the land of Princess Anne County if political leaders didn't act.

Land could equal power, and unfortunately, if one person is gaining power, another might be losing it.

### Kellam keeps on going

**I**n his book *Merger Politics: Local Government Consolidation in Tidewater Virginia*, author David G. Temple details the large role Sidney Severn Kellam played in the merger between Princess Anne County, formed in 1691, and Virginia Beach, which had become a town in 1906. He mentions the "Kellam organization" and that the "Kellam group had not been seriously challenged in an election since the turbulent early 1950s."

Could things change with power players in Tidewater if Norfolk, which was supplying larger and larger areas of Princess Anne County with water, obtained part of the County in the early '60s?

Temple writes: "Long before the proposed Virginia Beach merger was announced, the immediate problem confronting the Kellam organization was to

Signing documents to make the merger of Princess Anne County with the city of Virginia Beach official.

divert the City of Norfolk's attention from annexation of Princess Anne County. On January 1, 1959, Norfolk annexed 13.5 square miles of that county, along with approximately 38,000 county residents ... Princess Anne needed water, but on the other hand, the extension of municipal water service supported Norfolk's claim that the territory was urban and therefore subject to annexation."

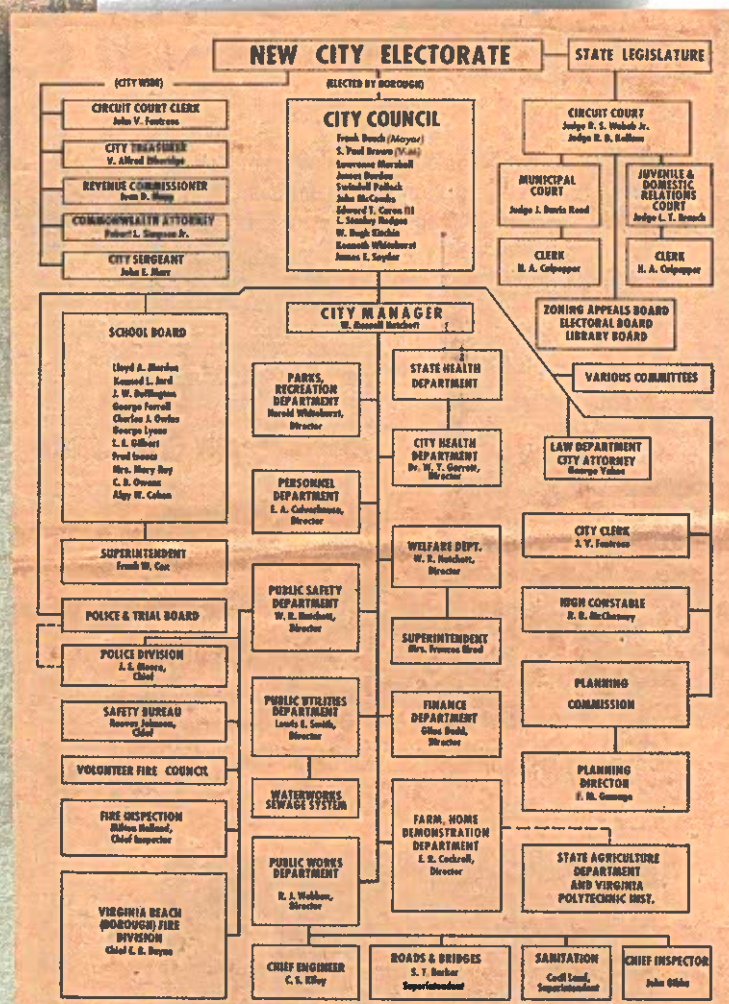
Temple explains that Kellam and other leaders asked the General Assembly to modify the state's annexation laws in 1960 so that the County could protect its land, despite receiving water from Norfolk. The City of Norfolk in turn allegedly temporarily stopped expansion of water services, even though the General Assembly had declined to change the law.

Kellam knew real estate developers needed water to continue building, so he asked Norfolk officials to continue providing it—in exchange for his support of a study looking at a "borough system of metropolitan government for the Norfolk area." Norfolk promised to stop annexing land for five years in turn.



Sidney Kellam

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## And the winner takes all

Yet, it seemed Kellam was stalling, and maybe had no real intent to study a borough system. Temple says that in 1961, "Kellam forces created a '1963 annexation' against which they campaigned." He quotes Kellam saying, "In 1963, we will be forced into a bitter annexation fight." ... "From this annexation struggle, Princess Anne County would lose Kempsville and Bayside magisterial districts. How is the rest of our county to

survive if someone carves us up and takes our assessed value? We have a right to live."

Norfolk Mayor W. Fred Duckworth and other Norfolk officials took the bait, publishing ads in the paper saying it could not be "prevented from attaining normal growth by annexing," although they didn't have a plan mapped out nor any efforts in the works to annex Princess Anne County. By saying they had the right to do so, it appeared that they were—and the battle for the County intensified.

At another point, Norfolk officials threatened to cut off water. They quickly backed away from that tactic, but the damage had been done. Kellam and other leaders were successfully pushing for Virginia Beach—and only Virginia Beach—to merge with Princess Anne County. New changes in state laws, which originally made such a merger more difficult, were opening the door further.

Voters in Virginia Beach and Princes Anne County approved a merger in separate votes, and the path was cleared for the two to join together on Jan. 1, 1963. The drama, however, continued with Norfolk once again threatening to take away water supplies, and then apologizing again, saying officials had been confused about the wording on votes regarding the water.

In the years immediately after the merger, some Norfolk officials continued to show an interest in merging as well. According to Yarsinke's book, Roy Martin, Norfolk councilman at the time of the merger and a one-time Norfolk mayor, received occasional encouragement from Kellam—but to no avail. Martin had long been a fan of Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Princess Anne County becoming one but had been unsuccessful in finding broad support. Whether or not Kellam truly shared Martin's desire isn't spelled out in the sources I consulted, but I venture to guess no.

One thing is for certain: Kellam helped make Virginia Beach what it is today. Appropriately, the Kellam name lives on in Virginia Beach, with a street, a school and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-

## Virginia Beach Quick Facts

On April 26, 1607, three British ships, captained by John Smith, weighed anchor near the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. The first permanent English settlers landed in what is now Cape Henry in Virginia Beach.

◆ This was the first time the explorers set foot on American

soil. The settlers later erected a cross and named the site **Cape Henry** in honor of Prince Henry of Wales, the son of King James. They sailed up the James River to settle what would later become Jamestown Island.

◆ At this same site in 1791, the **Cape Henry Lighthouse** was built—the first federally-funded lighthouse under the constitutional

government. The stone structure was operated until 1881, when its cast-iron replacement was built across the dune line.

◆ Located adjacent to Cape Henry, **First Landing State Park**, the most visited state park in Virginia, contains 2,700 acres of protected salt marsh habitat, bay and dune maritime forests and freshwater ponds. A registered Natural

Landmark, it fronts the Chesapeake Bay.

◆ In **False Cape State Park**, the state's least visited park located in Virginia Beach's southern region, the Wash Woods community was developed by shipwreck survivors in the 16th century.

◆ One of southeastern Virginia's first perma-

Tunnel named after the family, and Phillip Kellam, Sidney's nephew, serving as Virginia Beach's commissioner of revenue. And, of course, Virginia Beach has only continued to grow in terms of population since the merger, with about 450,000 residents now and ongoing challenges to contain development and services.

## Drawing the line

**H**ow wonderful it would be if everything went along perfectly for the young city of Virginia Beach. But, of course, growing pains occurred as more people were official "city" residents after the merger of tiny Virginia Beach and spacious Princess Anne County. Land was plentiful, but water and other services weren't, and parts of the new city, especially the most southern parts, faced challenges.

In 1979, the City introduced a "Green Line," roughly along Princess Anne Road and Sandbridge Road, which established a boundary between the southern, agricultural area of Virginia Beach and the more urban areas in the north.

Part of the reason behind the line was to preserve the area's agricultural origins—but practicality was a bigger concern.

"For anything south of the line," says Jeryl Rose Phillips, comprehensive planning coordinator for Virginia Beach, "the city couldn't reasonably provide services. It wasn't intended to be permanent."

Yet in many ways it has been. Phillips saw the Green Line first officially added to city plans in 1986.

Later came what is called the "transition area," just south of the Green Line. In this area, established in 1991, development is encouraged only "when it can pay for itself," notes Phillips. "It has to be 'cost neutral.'"

The area that is open for development is about 1,500 acres, and development should "not exceed one dwelling unit per acre." Everything south of those acres is known as the "rural area."



The city also has the Agricultural Reserve Program (ARP). It started in 1995 and allows for the purchase of development rights from owners, so that they benefit from financial reimbursement, and the city benefits from open areas and an ease on demand for services.

Some 8,800 acres have been purchased through the program.

"It's cheaper and more sustainable to purchase through ARP," says Phillips, "then pay for infrastructure."

## Moving on up

**A**ll of this—the Green Line, the transition area, the rural area and the ARP—ultimately point to the opposite direction: North.

"At a certain age, cities rethink what they've done," Phillips continues, "and you can revitalize what has been built or partially developed. We're directing people to these areas with our efforts."

She is currently advancing the "Strategic Growth Area" of Pembroke in central Virginia Beach. Eight total "strategic growth areas" are in the works, six of which are along Virginia Beach Boulevard, where we one day may see an extension of light rail from Norfolk. The other areas are Newtown, Rosemont, Lynnhaven, Hilltop and the Resort Area. North and west of Virginia Beach Boulevard is another growth area, Burton Station (near Northampton and the

ment residents was **Adam Thoroughgood**, a former indentured servant, who prospered as a result of his business sense. The Adam Thoroughgood House, (circa 1719 and probably constructed by his grandson), stands on property that was part of the original land grant. Other historic homes include the Lynnhaven House (1725), the Ferry Plantation House (1830)

and the Francis Land House (late 1700s).

◆ **Tourism began in Virginia Beach** with the construction of a rail system in 1883 that brought visitors from Norfolk and points north. A year later, the Virginia Beach Hotel opened, offering the first overnight accommodations. With such modern amenities as gas lighting and indoor lavato-

ries, the three-story luxury hotel attracted an affluent clientele.

◆ Improved roads and bridge construction made the beach even more accessible in the 1920s. A new grand hotel, **The Cavalier**, opened in 1927 and drew such national celebrities as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Will Rogers, Bette Davis, Jean Harlow, and seven U.S. presidents.

◆ First constructed in 1888, the **Virginia Beach Boardwalk** has received national acclaim in recent times as one of America's favorite boardwalks by the Discovery Channel, Coastal Living, Southern Living and National Geographic Traveler.

◆ As America entered World War II, Virginia Beach emerged as a strategic military presence. **Fort Story**, a coastal artillery

post since 1917, became headquarters for the Harbor Defense Command. Today, it is known as the Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek - Fort Story and is the country's leading installation for housing and training the nation's Expeditionary Forces.

◆ The State Rifle Range was renamed **Camp Pendleton** in 1940 as the federal government assumed operations. The U.S. Navy, based in nearby Norfolk, purchased property in Virginia Beach for Naval Air Station Oceana. This auxiliary airfield is now one of the U.S. Navy's largest master jet bases and hosts the F/A 18 Super Hornet fighter jets. The Navy Training Center at Dam Neck opened the same year.

◆ **Agriculture** contributes an average of \$114.2 million each year to Virginia Beach's economy, making it the city's third largest industry.

◆ In the mid-1800s, a local horticulturist brought the **progressive farming** concept to southeastern Virginia.

◆ In 1907, the Virginia Truck Experiment Station began operation on a 58-acre tract in the **Diamond Springs** section of Virginia Beach. This experimental station, dedicated to providing farmers with demonstration plots, soil testing and new developments in horticulture, was the first of its kind in the U.S.

◆ Today, there are more than **8,000 protected acres of farmland** in Virginia Beach with soybeans, corn and wheat farms, fruit farms, livestock farms, farm stands and equestrian operations.

source: VisitVirginiaBeach.com



Virginia Wesleyan College area); and south and west of Virginia Beach Boulevard is the eighth area, known as Centerville/Regent.

The city's comprehensive plan explains the big picture behind the eight strategic growth areas:

Provide opportunities for continued physical and economic growth

Help prevent urban sprawl

Protect established residential neighborhoods and rural areas from incompatible development due to growth pressures

Maximize infrastructure efficiency

Create unique and exciting urban destinations

The plan continues: "Most of these areas will integrate a diverse cluster of attractive, more compact but compatible uses of land, including office, retail, service and, where appropriate, residential and hotel, " which sounds exactly like Town Center.

## The Center of change

**T**own Center struck me as a crazy idea when I heard about it. Pembroke and its office buildings already existed in the same area; the mall was there, too; and businesses big and small filled the area on Virginia Beach Boulevard near Independence.

Lots of people and lots of traffic had to equal at least some money for the city. And of course, there was the Oceanfront with tons of hotels, restaurants and shops—and oh yeah, the ocean. Why was another "community" or "business center" needed?

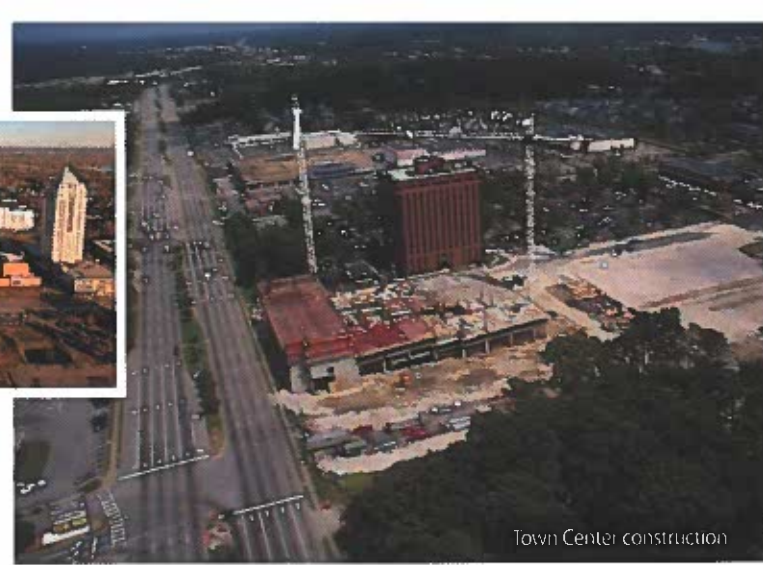
Don't "downtowns" happen naturally, at the beginning of a city's creation? Wouldn't the "city" part of the city feel "fake?"

The summer the project was announced to the public, I asked a tourist lying in the Oceanfront sand about it.

"That's odd," she said.

See, I thought, *I'm not the only one who doesn't get this concept.*

But, being a nobody and what some would consider a newbie to the area, no one had asked what I thought. They wouldn't have



Town Center construction

cared even if I had voiced my opinion more. I didn't live in Virginia Beach, and I certainly wasn't a city planner or business leader. The Green Line and its effect on development were not clear to me. Little did I know that in actuality Town Center was a carefully developed, long-sought goal.

While it all seemed new and random, and the words "mixed use" sounded so strange to me, the first scribbles of a blueprint that would eventually read "Town Center, Virginia Beach" had been in the works for decades.

## Not exactly an overnight success

**T**he Central Business District Association (CBDA) recently helped me understand this. The group's website explains that its origins are from 1973, when the Virginia Beach City Council saw Pembroke's potential as a commercial center and rezoned some of it as the Central Business District. The goal: grow a metropolitan center for financial, commercial, professional and cultural activities. At that time, some 78 percent of the residents lived within a five-mile radius, and it marks the halfway point between downtown Norfolk and the Oceanfront.

About 13 years later, business leaders formed the CBDA to coordinate ideas for the area's continued development. The Beach City Council later funded a Central Business District Commission and charged them with designing a master plan. In November 1995, the Virginia Beach City Council voted to create the Pembroke Central Business Core Zoning District, which would work toward adding sidewalks, parking, trees, landscaping and sidewalk cafes. Sounds like a big step toward Town Center, and it was—almost 18 years ago.

More votes and years passed, and residents heard of the creation of a "Tax Increment Financing District" to support creating roads,

parking and utilities. Officials held a ceremonial groundbreaking June 7, 2000. (Raise your hand if that feels like yesterday instead of nearly 13 years ago.)

### Step by step

**P**hase I of Town Center included the Armada Hoffer Tower, a Hilton Garden Inn, a Towne Bank office, a 1,284-space parking garage, and office and retail space. Phase I added 968,000 square feet and consisted of a \$75 million private investment and a \$25 million public investment.

Phase II was official Feb. 5, 2004. When construction concluded, four blocks were developed, with 341 residential luxury apartments in the Cosmopolitan building, 232,500 square feet of retail and office space, and two parking garages with a total of 1,430 parking spaces.

The next big push, Phase III, began in September 2005. Everything was coming together with this step. Two years later, we saw the opening of Virginia's tallest building—the Westin Hotel & Residences. It reaches 500 feet into the sky and features 236 rooms and 119 luxury condominiums. The Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, seating 1,300, and the Studio 56 Lofts also opened.

Hello upscale homes and world-class performances.

In 2008, the "Two Columbus" office building was added to One Columbus Center.

Plans for Phase IV, with two new buildings, have been in place for a while. The estimated cost was \$421.8 million in 2010. The less-than-stellar economy led to what was called a delay in groundbreaking. Gerald Divaris, chairman and CEO of the Divaris Group and a partner in Town Center, explains the pause:

"It's approved and on the drawing board, and we're looking for tenants. In what is block nine of Town Center, there will be an intensive amount of retail and home goods apparel. Success for those businesses depends on a strong economic market. We have to have the buildings preleased [before starting construction] in today's climate. In block two, where the old Beacon building was, we're talking about a 300,000-square-foot space with 23 or 24 floors. It's a lot of space, and we want tenants."



Divaris' outlook remains optimistic: "The New Year has brought more interest and an increase in calls. We're excited to see the possibilities."

He describes Phase V as "more consistent with what is possible today."

Early reported plans, announced last September, call for 174,000 square-feet in offices, 267 apartments, 18,000 square-feet in retail space, 875 parking spaces and more street-scaping.

A 14-story building is projected to cost \$89 million and be ready in the summer of 2014. Architecture and engineering firm Clark Nexsen said 350 of its 550 employees could setup office. Hampton University projected 350 of its students could attend their new College at Virginia Beach at Town Center, with some students attending classes in the Phase V area. Divaris says they'll now expand their space with classes in the Armada Hoffer Tower.

### Crazy idea turns crazy good

**O**ne visit to the Sandler a few years ago, and I was hooked on Town Center. OK, I didn't love the traffic I fought, but Virginia Beach could one day soon reach a half million residents. Traffic happens with those kinds of numbers.

Once I got to Town Center, I could park for free. Town Center and city officials seem understandably concerned with residents and tourists' desire for easy parking spaces. Part of Phase V includes the city spending \$75,000 and the developers another \$75,000 to help build a parking lot on green space. These spaces are to

relieve demand created when some 300 spaces are eliminated by the new construction—yet only 150 spaces might be created.

I hope parking won't be an issue, because it would be a shame for people to be scared away. When I've visited, I parked and walked through a gorgeous hotel and popped over a few more steps and was inside the Sandler, a welcoming facility without a bad seat, despite its decent capacity.

After the show, we had many choices for dinner—and didn't have to walk more than a block.

I'll keep going back, and when our kids are grown, it would be a tossup between Downtown Norfolk and Town Center for our next home. (Unless, of course, someone would like to give us an Oceanfront house.)

Many people are discovering the area, which Jeanne Evans-Cox, executive director of the Central Business District Association, calls "Uptown."

"We don't like to compete," she notes. "We like both Uptown Virginia Beach and Downtown Norfolk."

She is pleased with what Town Center has become, seeing it as a popular place for residents and tourists. I was surprised—and humbled—when she shared that 56 percent of tourists who visit both Virginia Beach and Norfolk spend time at Town Center. That makes it second only to the Oceanfront in popularity.

"It goes to show what a positive influence Town Center has on all visitors," says Evans-Cox. "We have a good draw of restaurants and retailers, and we'll continue with the plan to grow the life-work-play concept."