The Star-News is in the midst of a five-part, in-depth series on leadership in the greater Wilmington area. Who's the most powerful? Who's the most effective? Who are the top civic, business and political leaders and institutions? Find out that, and much more, July 20-25.

STORIES

Part I (Saturday)
Who's in charge?
Among the unnerving qualities of modern life is a feeling that leaders today are not as strong or effective as they once were. The Star-News asked community leaders in the greater Wilmington area to grade themselves, and the great majority said the region needs better leadership.

The Star-News asked, you answered
The results of these twin surveys indicate many feel there are few truly effective community leaders in the region and are pessimistic that that group will ever find solutions to the region's most pressing problems.

Part 2 (Sunday)
Top government leader: Mike McIntyre
The Star-News survey found Rep. McIntyre is the most powerful and effective leader in the greater Wilmington region. The region's elite not only placed him atop a list of 45 leading government and political leaders, but first among all leaders. The achievement is perhaps even more significant given that Rep. McIntyre doesn't live here.

Top civic leader: Jim Leutze
That status, community leaders said, fits Dr. Leutze not only because of UNCW's growth into a major employer, lucrative economic engine and chief object of civic pride, but because the 66-year-old military historian defines his mission – and that of his institution – as extending far beyond the gates of the South College Road campus.

Top business leader: Dan Cameron
His legacy, many officials said, made Mr. Cameron's ranking as the Cape Fear Region's top businessman an easy choice. But the selection also has some wondering why the region is looking backward for leadership even as it tries to move forward.

Bob Warwick: Wilmington's hidden leader
Wilmington's leaders use mechanical metaphors for Bob Warwick: the link that makes relationships work, the hub that keeps networks together, the grease that gets projects through.

Public ranks UNCW No. 1 institution
Community outreach, a growing academic reputation, surging student base and an NCAA tournament-caliber basketball team that helped put the region on the national sports map helped UNCW secure the top spot in the Star-News survey.

Diversity may be improving, but it's limited at the top
The Star-News survey shows a growing presence of women and minorities in what, even just a few decades ago, was largely the domain of white males. But the presence of minorities and women appears weighted toward certain government boards and civic groups.

Star-News leadership surveys: How they were done
To measure the power and effectiveness of leaders in the greater Wilmington area, the Star-News conducted two surveys that reached more than 1,200 people.

Part 3 (Monday)
Mason Inlet: Leaders working together
Leaders had great success in moving Mason Inlet, but it was one of the few successes leaders can point to in the last five years. Both leaders and the public were profoundly pessimistic that
solutions will be found to community problems in the future.  

**Survey: Some leaders are more effective than powerful**  
Although many leaders, especially those who work in community-service and nonprofit agencies, have little real power, their perceived and actual influence makes them crucial to the region.  

**How much does the public care?**  
In recent parallel surveys, Wilmington-area residents said overwhelmingly that average people have a great interest in civic affairs. Leaders in business, government and civic institutions took a different view.  

**Part 4 (Tuesday)**  
**Outer loop: A vision not shared by all**  
The Cape Fear region is growing rapidly, but leaders and residents fear that ideas about how to handle the region’s growth are shrinking just as quickly. With so much development happening so quickly, there are deep divisions over how to manage the growth.  

**Leaders, residents agree: Improving education is top priority**  
While there is disagreement over what to do about it, there is no dissent as to the education system’s importance. In twin surveys of community leaders and everyday residents conducted this spring in the greater Wilmington region, improving public education was listed as the top civic priority.  

**Racial harmony high on public’s list**  
Wilmington-area residents said that improving racial harmony is a high priority. Local leaders, however, took a different view.  

**Leaders rank city/county merger No. 2**  
It would make sense for Wilmington and New Hanover county to share services -- and leaders have made it their No. 2 priority, behind only education. But leaders can't seem to agree on how or when to do so. .

**Part 5 (Wednesday)**  
**Looking to the future**  
Before they can serve a community, potential leaders have to know its parts and its people.
WHO’S IN CHARGE? The Star-News reveals what you had to say on the subject.

July 20, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

Among the unnerving qualities of modern life is a feeling that leaders today are not as strong or effective as they once were.

The Star-News asked community leaders and many other leaders in the greater Wilmington area to grade themselves, and the great majority said the region needs better leadership.

Everyday residents, answering a Star-News poll, agreed.

Leaders and residents also expressed mixtures of pessimism and optimism when asked to gauge how well our community identifies problems and sorts them out.

The surveys also revealed a belief that, slowly, the leadership ranks are growing more diverse. Many had messages of hope.

The Star-News contacted 1,200 people to find the answers. You told us.

Now, we report back to you.
More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

WASHINGTON | We are in the Adams and Jefferson rooms of the Willard Hotel, a block from the White House, where members of Congress are talking to the American Furniture Manufacturers Association convention.

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, the moderator says, is known as a hardworking member of Congress and as a Democrat whose "vote is sought by Republicans in close votes."

Among lines noting his support for abolishing rules that require the federal government to buy furniture from manufacturing programs in federal prisons and not support fast-track free trade authority for the president, there were weightier statements not usually heard at business conventions.

Mixed with practical political points was idealism and optimism.

In a speech was laced with references to pending legislation and regulations, there was also reference to tragedy of Sept. 11 and the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

Finishing, he implored the audience of executives and plant managers, to "be good corporate citizens" by volunteering in schools, giving blood or doing other civic work.

"You’re the busiest people in your towns, I know that," he said. "But if you want something done, find the busiest person you know."

Rep. McIntyre, the Lumberton Democrat who was first elected to represent North Carolina’s 7th District in 1996, has always considered himself one of the busy people.

A recent survey of nearly 360 community leaders found that Rep. McIntyre is the most powerful and effective leader in the greater Wilmington region.

The region’s elite not only placed him atop a list of 45 leading government and political leaders, but first among all leaders in the region.

"My philosophy is simple: Leadership is selflessness," he said.

The achievement is perhaps even more significant given that while Rep. McIntyre’s district includes New Hanover County and its adjacent suburban areas — the area considered for the Star-News survey — he does not live here.

His home is in Robeson County, the rural area 70 miles east of Wilmington, where the coastal plains meet the Sandhills.
But Rep. McIntyre manages to cover his vast and diverse district. He is in the district most weekends when Congress is in session. He made the furniture manufacturer’s meeting by driving to the convention hotel straight from the airport. The night before, he attended a family event in Lumberton.

A few days later, on Saturday, he was standing on the beach in Oak Island, helping Mayor Horace Collier celebrate the completion of the latest renourishment project, financed with help from the federal government.

“The emphasis is on the district, on the people who elected me here,” he said. “For one part of the district that means tobacco and peanuts, in another, supporting our military, and at the coast, it’s the health of our beaches.”

Family tradition

There have been McIntyres in Robeson County for more than two centuries. The family has a tradition of public service, and titanic leaders have seemed to surround Rep. McIntyre, or he has chosen to be around them.

The congressman’s father, the optometrist Dr. Douglas McIntyre, was a Lumberton city councilman. Earlier relatives were prominent members of the Robeson County bar.

In high school, he visited Washington, as “student body president-elect,” and met his region’s congressman, Rep. Charlie Rose, a Democrat from nearby Fayetteville then in his first term.

“I knew then that I was going to come back to Washington,” he said.

He was an all-expenses-paid Morehead Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He graduated as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and recipient of the Sullivan Award, which is granted to the UNC-CH student who best exemplifies “unselfish interest in the welfare of his fellow man.”

Rep. McIntyre, 45, is an idealist and a shrewd politician. Near his desk is a wooden sign imploring him to pray, something that he encourages most of the people he meets to do.

On his desk are legislative briefing papers that lay out his pragmatic approach: Support issues important to people in the district; bring home the proper share of federal spending; and stay clear of ideological entanglements.

He considers elements of the farm bill adopted this spring to be a major achievement. Rep. McIntyre was able to get items for agricultural interests in his district by working the committee room, aides said, and not through making speeches from the well or in floor debate.

The Almanac of American Politics, a Capitol Hill bible of sorts for lobbyists and journalists, reports that the McIntyre “voting record stands in the middle of the House.”

Taking advice

Another reason for the congressman’s popularity among the region’s business, civic and government leaders is that he has formed a network of committees that snares in many of greater Wilmington’s elite.

The advisory committees, many of them centered on topics important to the congressman — military, law enforcement, health care, education and business — include most of the people listed as top leaders in the Star-News survey.
UNCW Chancellor James Leutze, who taught the "U.S. Since 1865" class Rep. McIntyre took at Chapel Hill, is a member of the education advisory committee.

William Atkinson, CEO of New Hanover Regional Medical Center and the leader ranked second in the Star-News list of top government and political leaders, was recruited for Rep. McIntyre’s health care board.

“I know what some people think when they hear the words ‘advisory committee,’” Rep. McIntyre said. “These committees meet, they discuss, and then I learn from them what’s going on in the district.”

Always a friend

This spring, while members of Congress waited for leaders to work out details so they could vote on welfare reform reauthorization, Rep. McIntyre took office appointments in the Cannon House Office Building.

Several dozen representatives of electrical cooperatives in the 7th District are in the capital to lobby. The meet in small conference room with Rep. McIntyre.

After some introductory remarks, he speaks.

“Nine-eleven was a wake-up call for America,” he said. “What we value as Americans is what the rural areas have always valued.”

He tells them he just attended a luncheon and sat next to the secretary of agriculture.

“We talked about the tobacco buy-out bill,” he said. “We’ve got good support and we’re moving forward.”

He turns over the conversation to the crowd: “Do you all have any solutions?”

What he gets is questions – questions about high-speed rail development, finishing Interstate 74 and the tobacco buy-out.

He answers the questions and says that his staff is also available to help. The meeting is wrapping up.

“You’ve always got a friend in Mike McIntyre,” he says.

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387

mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
TOP CIVIC LEADER: Jim Leutze

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh Bureau Chief
July 21, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

When favorite son David Brinkley returned home to be enshrined in the city Walk of Fame, he caught a ride to the ceremony from Jim Leutze.

It wasn’t a gesture. Dr. Leutze was his host, and through much of the afternoon he filled a role that, in another community, a mayor might have occupied.

That day, he introduced the pioneering TV newsman to the crowd of several hundred who gathered in the parking lot of the Cotton Exchange on a hot May afternoon to witness the proceedings.

In his remarks, the stately, white-haired chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington made sure to recognize the Wilmington mayor and a New Hanover County commissioner, both standing in the audience in weekend attire.

When it was all over, honored guests ate hors d'oeuvres and sipped wine at Kenan House, the Market Street mansion that is the home of UNCW’s chancellors.

It was a simple ceremony, but it was example of the unique place the top leader of the region’s most respected institution occupies in the region.

Dr. Leutze and the institution he leads were host, organizer, presenter and cheerleader of the Walk of Fame, which is a program of the Celebrate Wilmington! arts event network he is credited in part with founding.

James R. Leutze, in recent twin polls of Wilmington area leaders and the general public, was ranked as the most powerful and effective civic leader in the region.

That status, community leaders said, fits Dr. Leutze not only because of UNCW’s growth into a major employer, lucrative economic engine and chief object of civic pride, but because the 66-year-old military historian defines his mission – and that of his institution – as extending far beyond the gates of the South College Road campus.

“My philosophy is a corollary of what Frank Porter Graham said when he was president of UNC,” Dr. Leutze said during an interview this spring. “The boundaries of the university are the borders of the state.”

By extension, he said, the borders of the UNCW campus are the five or so coastal counties that surround Wilmington and seemingly every issue of importance in them.

Over 12 years as head of UNCW, he has used the bully pulpit of the chancellorship to urge improvements in downtown development, urban planning, regionalism, rural economic revitalization and historic preservation.
Next year, the South College Road community of administrators, scholars and students will experience something that hasn’t existed in more than a decade: A UNCW without Jim Leutze.

On Friday, he said that he would retire next June.

Between 1990 and 2002, the university grew in numbers, reach and prestige “under the dynamic leadership” of the chancellor, as university brochures note.

On campus he is no mere administrator. Like any professor, he has posted office hours when students may meet and speak with him. As a manager, his attention focuses on the broad themes of his institution and on some of its tiniest details.

On the last business day before the May commencement, he squeezed a windshield tour of proposed parking lot sites on campus into a schedule busy with end-of-the-year tasks.

Timothy Jordan, vice chancellor for business, drove Dr. Leutze to green locations across the campus that had been nominated for coverage with asphalt to relieve the campus’ parking congestion.

At each site, Dr. Leutze argued for smaller lots and fewer cut trees. Mr. Jordan countered that the spaces were needed. The two men horse-traded for a few moments, and the deal was struck: More spots could go in, but Mr. Jordan would have to make sure large trees were preserved, green islands broke up the lots and screens of greenery would be planted to hide the view of “yet another parking lot.”

Strong links

In a Star-News survey of 357 community leaders, UNCW was rated the most powerful and effective institution in the region.

“Jim Leutze is the region’s best leader, no question about it,” said Bob Warwick, the accountant and civic volunteer who has sat on UNCW’s Board of Trustees and is member of the UNC Board of Governors.

Dr. Leutze enjoyed strong support across all social and demographic categories in a random telephone survey conducted in April. He was one of very few leaders who enjoyed strong and equal support in New Hanover County as well as the suburban parts of Pender and Brunswick counties that were surveyed.

Nearly 80 percent of the 357 respondents to a written survey of community leaders rated Dr. Leutze a 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale for power leadership. Seventy-five percent gave him similar ratings when asked to rank his positive effect on the community.

While popular with all groups, Dr. Leutze got particularly high marks from leaders who have lived in the region longer than 10 years, according to statistics compiled by Charlotte-based KPC Research, the company that collected and sorted the data for the Star-News.

While respondents said – and Dr. Leutze agreed – that there is no strong central leader in the Wilmington region, he operates at a prominent node in the network of the region’s leadership.

Dr. Leutze has strong links to the business and political leaders survey respondents also rated highly. U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre took history classes from Dr. Leutze when both were at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Dan Cameron, the retired executive rated as the region’s top business leader, was on the recruitment team that persuaded Dr. Leutze to leave the presidency of Hampden-Sydney College in 1990.
Off campus, he's head of a state board working with industry to wire the state, especially rural areas, with high-speed Internet lines. He sits on the N.C. Progress Board, a Gov. Hunt-era agency given the forward-looking task of measuring the quality of life in the state.

The chancellor said the recognition as a powerful leader is heartening, but that doesn't explain why some of his efforts at community leadership have fallen flat.

“I have a bad track record on civic projects,” he said. “It seems sometimes like the best way to stop something is to let it be known that I favor it.”

This year, he said, two ideas he presented in public failed.

Plans for a $30 million regional concert hall, which he said would have fit the university’s enlarged mission serve the community as well as students, evaporated as the economy worsened.

A consultant’s report on strategies for a fund-raising drive showed that potential donors had great respect for the institution and for Dr. Leutze, but had questions about how the concert hall would fit into the university’s goals and mission.

Dr. Leutze and UNCW trustees accepted the consultant’s recommendation to shelve the project.

At the chancellor’s direction, a fine arts classroom building, to be built with the university’s portion of the 2000 state higher education bond, will be designed to stand alone, for decades if necessary, but be architecturally ready to adjoin a public concert hall if the money is ever raised.

The chancellor was also stung by reaction this May to his open support of a mixed-use development in an established soundside neighborhood. Some affected residents noted that his neighborhood was on South College Road and near Kenan House, in Wilmington’s historic district.

“My support for Scott Stewart’s development in Middle Sound has generated some angry reactions – not on the merits of the case, but rather toward me for supporting it,” he wrote in a letter printed on the Star-News editorial page. “Why should the chancellor of UNCW be weighing in on a zoning issue? Well, first because I run an educational enterprise in this community and it seems this is an issue crying out for education. Next, the quality of life in this region is of great interest to me, and the faculty, the staff, and the students at UNCW.”

Dr. Leutze, who has been the host of hundreds of hours of public-affairs television, pointed out that he had worked for two years on a documentary on urban sprawl in the coastal South.

A few days later, the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners unanimously denied the necessary rezoning; the project’s third denial in three years. The chancellor may be recognized as one of the most powerful leaders in the region, but that power does not trump public sentiment, especially if it is negative and loud.

“I support Dr. Leutze and I support his ideas on planning and growth, but I didn’t support the project because I have to live there,” said New Hanover County Commissioner Julia Boseman, who lives in Middle Sound and is a UNCW graduate. “Most of my neighbors were very, very opposed to it. I cast my vote for those that voted for me.”

Those experiences, as well as the failure of civic efforts, mean that there is dynamic tension in the region between those seeking to change the community and those working to prevent change, Dr. Leutze said.

“Some project must be done, fully completed – and where all the people win – for there to be progress in this community,” he said. “Otherwise, we’ll have the same cycle of someone sticking their head up with an idea and then getting it knocked off.”

Others at the top
Those who took the Star-News surveys credited civic leaders – those involved in community institutions, charities, nonprofits and neighborhood activism – with being the region’s most successful leaders.

The civic category includes bedrock institutions, such as UNCW and Cape Fear Community College; and those leaders received great credit. The group also includes organizations that seek to improve the community through volunteer efforts funded by donations and grants from public and private sources.

Other leaders topping the civic list were Susan Dankel, general manager of the WHQR public radio station, and Tony Rivenbark, director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts.

Also included in the list were leaders who volunteered for public appointments, such as Lanny Wilson, who serves on the N.C. State Board of Transportation, and Louise McColl, who is co-chairman of the N.C. State Ports Authority.

An eclectic mind

In many ways, Dr. Leutze is still the probing history prof.

Over several interviews on community leadership, conversation wandered into asides on the quality of U.S. presidents since World War II, links between U.S. policy toward Iraq and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and comparisons of intelligence mistakes made before the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and those on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001.

But he is no cloistered academic. During breaks between heavier topics, he talked with equal ease about the canny wiles of Idaho pheasant and the best way to prepare wild duck for shipping.

Early professional experiences gave him lifelong interest in the military and progressive leadership. His served as an officer in the Air Force and was later an aide to Democratic U.S. Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota.

At Chapel Hill, he was the first Dowd Professor of War and Peace.

He is also the author of a biography that in part restored the reputation of naval commander Adm. Thomas C. Hart, who was dumped by political leaders at the opening of World War II. They had given him few resources and the impossible task of defending the unready Philippines from Japanese invasion.

Like Adm. Hart before his retirement, Dr. Leutze is held in high regard and is past retirement age.

“Don’t even think this announcement means that we’re slowing down; the pace continues,” he said on Friday. “There’s a lot of work do.”

In retirement, he said, Wilmington will be his home.

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387
mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
TOP BUSINESS LEADER: Dan Cameron

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 21, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

Dan Cameron couldn’t help but let a smile escape from his weathered face. “I am the one guy in New Hanover County who will never complain about the traffic,” he said with a chuckle.

Perhaps it’s because the semi-retired developer and businessman knows the future Wilmington was once staring at.

“You could’ve shot a cannon down Front Street and not hit anyone,” he said, explaining the economic situation he inherited in 1955 when he became mayor.

But what Mr. Cameron won’t mention, unless prodded, is his role in making sure the Port City didn’t continue down that path.

“The city was in dire straits, so it wasn’t hard to get people to work together, to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps,” he said.

Look closely, in some cases just below the surface, and Mr. Cameron’s fingerprints are on nearly every major development in New Hanover County in the last half-century – the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, New Hanover Regional Medical Center, General Electric, Figure Eight Island, WECT-TV, Corning and Wilmington Industrial Development Corp.

That list doesn’t include substantial civic and charitable contributions, including the recently completed Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum and more than 30 years of volunteer work with the Community Boys & Girls Club of Wilmington.

It is that legacy, numerous officials said, that made Mr. Cameron’s ranking as the Cape Fear Region’s top businessman in a survey of 357 government, civic and business leaders an easy choice.

But the selection also has some officials wondering why the region is looking backward for leadership even as it tries to move forward.

Still, today’s crop of top business leaders said they don’t find it surprising that Mr. Cameron was voted the region’s top business leader – even if he no longer occupies a front-row seat.

“If you look at the impact he’s had on this community, I think he stands head and shoulders ahead of anybody else,” said Fred Eshelman, chief executive officer of PPD Inc., a Port City-based pharmaceutical research company.

“Where are the negatives?” said Ted Davis Jr., chairman of the New Hanover County Commissioners. “There are none. This man has been everything this community could have asked of him.”

But Mr. Cameron, 80, downplays his role in the region’s development, something he claims was largely born out of desperation as much as anything else.
“We didn’t have a choice,” he said. “We had to diversify, develop.”

Others aren’t as dismissive of his leadership role in the region’s development.

“He was one of those people to see the roses in spite of the thorns,” said Bob Warwick, a longtime friend and business partner.

Bruce Cameron Jr., Dan’s older brother and longtime business partner, said he believes the two best men Wilmington has had in the past 50 years were his father, Bruce B. Cameron, who also served as mayor, and his younger brother.

“It might be a little prejudiced, but not by much,” he said. “Dan has always been a leader. When things needed to be done, Dan was there.”

Warning sign?

Mr. Cameron’s impact on Southeastern North Carolina is undeniable.

But several officials – while praising Mr. Cameron’s contributions to the region – said the survey result should set off warning bells.

“It’s not only a tribute to him, but a definite sign that this community is lacking someone to take charge,” said Wilbur Jones Jr., a local military historian and former assistant to President Gerald Ford. “I think it shows there’s a huge void out there.”

“It shows me that the community is looking back, not forward,” said City Councilwoman Laura Padgett.

Ken Svanum, publisher of the Wilmington Star-News, said he thought it was ironic that a man with “retired” pegged next to his name on the survey was selected the region’s top business leader.

“Are we saying as leaders that we want Dan to move back into a leadership role because there isn’t anyone else?” he said. “I don’t know.”

Mr. Svanum finished third in the survey, behind Mr. Cameron and EUE Screengems Studios President Frank Capra Jr.

Several business leaders said the Wilmington of today is too big and too diverse for a single individual to make the kind of impact Dan Cameron has had.

“Someone has to pick up that mantle,” said PPD’s Dr. Eschelman. “Whether it’s one person or several people is unimportant as long as it gets done.”

However, even they can’t dismiss the Cameron magic.

“I think we have a lot of good young people providing leadership,” Mr. Warwick said, “but people like Dan Cameron don’t come around every day.”

“You just don’t have people like Dan Cameron bubbling to the top any more,” said Connie Majure-Rhett, head of the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce.

Walt DeVries, executive director of the Institute of Political Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, said that while he might be classified as a business leader, it’s the whole Cameron package that people appreciated and are looking for in the current crop of leaders.

“He’s as close as you come in this area to a combination civic/business/political leader,” he said, “and we just don’t have any more of those.”
The industry hunter

Mr. Cameron paused momentarily when asked which of his numerous achievements he was most proud of.

Would it be getting the All-American City designation for the Port City in 1966 or donating 12 acres of land for the Lower Cape Fear Hospice in 1994?

It’s the Committee of 100, also known as the Wilmington Industrial Development Corp., said the World War II D-Day veteran after glancing around at some of the pictures that line his office at the Cameron Co.

While Mr. Cameron was serving as mayor in the mid-1950s, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad pulled out of the Port City, taking 1,800 jobs with it.

With Wilmington already in economic straits as the city’s war-years boom ground to a halt, Mr. Cameron came to the conclusion that the city could never again become reliant on one or just a handful of industries.

“We needed to diversify to survive,” he said.

So Mr. Cameron became the region’s top industry hunter, wining and dining company executives on the beach, offering them fresh fish and the promise of cheap land and low labor costs.

In the years that followed, he helped form the Committee of 100.

Scott Satterfield, chief executive officer of the Wilmington Industrial Development Corp., said this region would look a lot different – for the worse – if its leaders hadn’t moved quickly to fill the economic void left by the decline of its traditional industries.

“If it hadn’t been for Dan Cameron, our region wouldn’t have experienced and wouldn’t be experiencing the level of good fortune we’ve had,” he said. “It’s that simple.”

While he’s left the leadership role to the younger generations, Mr. Cameron is still involved in the community and the family business, where he spends most mornings.

“People kid me about when am I going to retire,” he said. “But I say I’ve already lived through that phase of my life.”

Ever an optimist, Mr. Cameron said he views the current economic downturn that has seen the region hemorrhaging jobs as simply a bump in the road.

“It might not be very bright right now,” he said, “but the sun is still shining on Wilmington.”

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
Bob Warwick: City’s hidden leader

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh bureau chief
July 21, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

Wilmington’s leaders use mechanical metaphors for Bob Warwick: the link that makes relationships work, the hub that keeps networks together, the grease that gets projects through.

In a recent set of surveys of community leaders and the general public conducted by the Star-News, Mr. Warwick, was recognized as perhaps the most powerful and influential figure in greater Wilmington who is, nonetheless, the most unknown to the average resident.

Mr. Warwick, in an interview this spring, chalked that up to his long activity with business and civic groups and the fact that he has never chosen to seek a higher profile through elected office.

The community’s leaders rated Mr. Warwick the fourth most powerful and effective civic leader, after UNCW’s James Leutze and CFCC’s Eric McKeithan, the top executives of important educational institutions, and Lanny Wilson, a businessman and appointee to the N.C. State Board of Transportation.

Former mayor Bill Schwartz said that Mr. Warwick, a local partner of the McGladrey & Pullen accounting firm, possesses a powerful combination of attributes for any civic leader: devotion to community and unparalleled access to greater Wilmington’s elite.

“His expertise is as a CPA, and he’s always been a good one,” said Mr. Schwartz, a longtime Wilmington furniture merchant. “That has always given him an inside view of a lot of businesses, a lot of big families.”

Mr. Warwick is also known for a quiet working style that aims at getting people to cooperate in group settings, and he is amicably honest in one-on-ones.

He doesn’t sit atop a leadership pyramid, Mr. Schwartz said, but rather is a well-connected node in a network of publicly-engaged people.

“If you want something done in Wilmington, you check through with Bob to see if it could work,” he said. “He is the key in Wilmington, the man with the knowledge.”

Mr. Schwartz and other leaders said Mr. Warwick forms a link between Wilmington’s past, dominated by the business dealings of a few large landholding families, and its present and future, in which leadership burdens are carried by large corporate employers and an increasingly diverse small business community.

“He has the ear of the Wilmington business world,” said Gerry McCants, president of Black Pages USA, the telephone guide publisher. “And he’s with us talking about one of the biggest issues in this community, the issue of diversity.”

Success in business, Mr. McCants said, also affords Mr. Warwick time to devote to civic causes. Mr. McCants and Mr. Warwick are on the leadership team of Partners for Economic Inclusion, a
cooperative project of the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce and the Black Chamber of Commerce.

The partnership, which grew from racial harmony talks during the centennial observance of the 1898 violence, seeks to improve access to the mainstream economy by minority entrepreneurs. In addition to that work, Mr. Warwick, 66, is the leader of the Community Growth Planning Task Force, a combination of about 75 government agencies, businesses and civic and charitable organizations.

The task force is a spidery network of “every group of any significance,” said Mr. Warwick.

“We’re working together to make things happen,” he said.

Among the things the group wished to make happen was the completion of several highway projects, including the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway.

The group, he said, is an effort to create what Wilmington has always needed: a flexible community-wide network of leaders that can plan for the future from the widest possible vantage.

Robert F. Warwick graduated in 1958 from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a business degree. He joined a Wilmington firm a month after graduation and worked at his profession, rising to lead the firm.

By the late 1970s, he was involved in a long list of community efforts: the Chamber of Commerce, the Committee of 100 economic development board, YMCA, Kiwanis and the United Way. He is a member of the UNC Board of Governors. He has also served as a trustee of UNCW, where he established a strong bond with Dr. Leutze, a man Mr. Warwick said without hesitation is the region’s most effective leader.

“I’ve always seen this civic work as an investment of my time,” said Mr. Warwick, now semi-retired. “I give a certain amount of my time to community things. I’ve always done that.”

The future of the community is not as secure as was its past, he said.

“Over the last 10 or 12 years we grew no matter what we did,” Mr. Warwick said. “The next 10 or 12 we’re going to have to work at.”

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387

mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

With the 100th anniversary of the 1898 Wilmington race riots rapidly approaching, several professors from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and community activists gathered in the mid-1990s to brainstorm.

While everyone agreed there was no way to go through the centennial of an event like that without some kind of commemoration, who would lead the effort?

Two decades ago, UNCW probably wouldn't have expressed an interest or even been approached about participating in such an event. The university had a reputation of being insular, standoffish and a bit snobby toward outsiders.

But things have changed under the stewardship of Chancellor James Leutze, who became UNCW's top administrator in 1990.

The university now promotes itself as a community resource, willing and able to help on subjects ranging from the water quality of New Hanover County's tidal creeks to supporting Wilmington's Walk of Fame.

Or helping acknowledge one of the darkest periods in the Port City's history.

"There had to be an addressing of this issue," said Melton McLaurin, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs and current co-chairman of the 1898 Foundation. "So the question became, 'Can this be done with positive repercussions instead of negative ones?'"

He said officials feared that if no one stepped forward, the commemoration could be hijacked by organizations with a specific agenda.

Or, potentially worse, the community could do nothing to commemorate the anniversary.

"That would have been seen by some as evidence that the majority population isn't interested in the impact of an important event on the city's minority population," Dr. McLaurin said.

Pulling it off

Violence erupted in November 1898 after an election in which blacks were kept from voting and white Democrats swept into office. Historians disagree on how many died during the rioting, with estimates ranging from six to 11.

When the unrest was over, the offices of a black-owned newspaper had been burned and many black residents, who represented about two-thirds of Wilmington’s population, had fled the city.
Of the series of events and programs the university helped facilitate to commemorate the riots, UNCW political science professor Earl Sheridan said: “I’m not sure if another institution in town had the credibility to pull it off.”

Dr. Sheridan also is past president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Outreach

One of Dr. Leutze’s favorite phrases is that the borders of the campus are now the boundaries of the state – or at least the cluster of counties that form Southeastern North Carolina.

“It’s self-serving,” Dr. Leutze said of UNCW’s community outreach efforts. “It makes this area a better community for faculty and students to live in, and so many of our professors have skills and expertise that can help improve the community’s quality of life.”

Community outreach, a growing academic reputation, surging student base and an NCAA tournament-caliber basketball team that helped put the region on the national sports map helped UNCW secure the top spot in a recent Star-News survey of leaders asked to rank regional institutions.

The ranking was based on combined scores rating an institution’s power and effectiveness. UNCW was rated as the most powerful and most effective institution in the region.

New Hanover Regional Medical Center came in second.

Cape Fear Community College was ranked third, followed by a trio of media outlets – WECT-TV, the Star-News and WWAY-TV.

The first industry on the list, General Electric Co., came in seventh, followed by the first political body, the New Hanover County Commissioners.

Walt DeVries, director of the N.C. Institute of Political Leadership at UNCW, said the survey results reflect the decision by the region’s business leaders to take a back seat in community affairs, allowing the void to be filled by the area’s educational institutions and media outlets.

But he said it was the relatively poor showing by the New Hanover County Commissioners and Wilmington City Council, which finished 14th in the survey, that really caught his attention.

“I don’t think you would have had that 15 or 20 years ago,” Dr. DeVries said.

But he added that the rankings were probably in part a reflection of recent changes on both boards and the general cynical malaise people feel for governmental institutions.

Based upon recent history, Wilmington City Councilwoman Laura Padgett said she wasn’t surprised to see the poor public perception of the local government boards.

“Government has the opportunity to move this community forward,” she said, “but I don’t see that happening right now, and I don’t think the public does either.”

Growing clout

When asked why UNCW did so well, several leaders stressed the importance of education in general for community development.

As reasons for the institution’s strong performance, several officials focused on UNCW’s growing economic and civic clout and a sense of local pride in seeing a locally funded school that started off in an abandoned elementary school make it.
“The ways it’s grown, what it’s become since its days as Wilmington College on Market Street, is simply amazing,” said Ted Davis Jr., chairman of the New Hanover County Commissioners.

Dr. Leutze said the university isn’t going out in the community to grab power or dominate the local agenda.

“It’s that we can all gain if we work together,” he said.

“In my view,” Dr. Leutze continued, “the university ought to be a forum where people of like or different minds can come together and discuss issues.”

But the push to reach out beyond the campus’s proverbial walls hasn’t been without a few bumps.

The university’s rapid expansion of both its student body — UNCW now has nearly 11,000 undergraduates compared with 7,000 when Dr. Leutze started — and facilities also has occasionally generated community opposition.

The university’s Center for Marine Science on Masonboro Loop Road left neighbors fuming after it grew from a proposed 18,000-square-foot facility to a complex five times that size.

The school also has run into opposition with some of its outreach programs, such as an arts alliance program in the early 1990s to help fund local art organizations.

“In some cases we’re not welcomed, looked upon with suspicion,” Dr. Leutze admitted.

But the chancellor said he sees few downsides for either UNCW or the region with the growing embrace.

“We want to continue to play a constructive role as a marketplace of ideas,” he said.

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
Diversity growing, but limited at top

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 21, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

When Gayle Van Velsor moved to Wilmington in 1978 and began her climb up Carolina Power & Light’s corporate ladder, there weren’t many female executives in Southeastern North Carolina.

While her position might get her in the door, she said the issue of her sex proved to be a double-edged sword.

Although being a woman in a man’s world meant she automatically attracted attention, Ms. Van Velsor – now vice president of CP&L’s Eastern Region – said it also placed her job performance under the microscope.

“I had to work hard for people to notice my work, not just me. It hasn’t gone away,” Ms. Van Velsor said of the increased scrutiny women in leadership roles sometimes face, “but it has certainly improved since I moved here.”

Maybe that’s because it’s something that can’t be ignored anymore.

A survey by the Star-News of leading government, business and civic leaders in the Cape Fear Region shows a growing presence of women and minorities in what, even just a few decades ago, was largely the domain of white males.

But the presence of minorities and women appears weighted toward certain government boards and civic groups.

“Perception is everything, and when people come to Wilmington and see limited diversity in certain sectors of our community, then there is obviously a perceived problem,” said Gerry McCants, owner of the minority business directory Black Pages USA.

He added that he views the absence of a substantial minority presence in the region’s business sector as a major impediment to improved race relations – a problem local business leaders aren’t doing enough to address, Mr. McCants said.

Even so, officials said the growing diversity in the leadership ranks represents an important stride forward.

The growing diversity also reflects the changing face of Wilmington, as the Port City’s population boom reduces the prominence of the handful of families that used to run many of the region’s institutions.

New Hanover County’s population increased 64 percent between 1980 and 2000 to 160,978, according to the U.S. Census. The population growth in Pender and Brunswick counties was even greater.

Still, many old habits linger on.
“I still think getting your voice heard in this community is a little bit more difficult for a woman than a man,” said City Councilwoman Laura Padgett, “but it’s getting better.”

Pender County Commissioner Carolyn Justice said she still sometimes runs into the old stereotypes of women as too emotional or too simple to make intelligent and effective decisions.

“It’s difficult,” she said. “There are men who are very open and supportive of women in leadership roles, and there are still some that are uncomfortable with it.

“I think a woman who steps into politics in the South has to expect that.”

Several minority leaders said while there are positive signs of change, local government leaders need to do more to promote diversity, to show that it’s something they consider important.

“I think a policy of exclusion is promoted by many institutions, and as long as that reputation prevails, then a lot of people that are willing aren’t going to serve,” said Peter Grear, a Wilmington lawyer and publisher of the Challenger, a weekly newspaper focused on the black community.

But echoing concerns raised by many leaders, although not a sentiment shared by the general public, according to survey results, Windell Daniels said community apathy is a major impediment to improving diversity.

It is a sentiment echoed by officials who appoint residents to local boards.

Ted Davis Jr., chairman of the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners, said he can only appoint those who apply – and who meet the position’s requirements.

“I’m going to choose someone who is qualified,” he said. “I’m not putting anyone on a board just because they’re a minority, a woman, a man or even because they are a Republican.”

Mr. Davis added that one trait he likes in applicants is if they’ve spent a lot of time in the county.

“I think that gives them a good perspective on local issues,” he said.

Mr. Daniels said the general public – but especially the minority community – can’t afford not to be engaged if they want things to change.

“You can’t just demand change,” said the president of United National Tours and member of the Wilmington Housing Authority board. “You’ve got to want to go and be a part of it.

“You can’t just sit at home.”

Mr. Daniels said he never saw his skin color as a handicap.

“I don’t think of it as hard,” he said of being a black businessman. “I think it’s a challenge.

“A lot of places, I’m the only black person,” Mr. Daniels continued, “but I don’t worry about it.

“I don’t look at color, or else I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
Star-News leadership surveys: How they were done

July 21, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

To measure the power and effectiveness of leaders in the greater Wilmington area, the Star-News conducted two surveys that reached more than 1,200 people.

The first effort was a written survey mailed to community leaders in New Hanover County and the adjacent suburban areas of Brunswick and Pender counties. The second survey was a telephone poll of randomly selected residents in the same area.

The surveys were designed by the Star-News in consultation with Bill Truett, director of research for the New York Times Regional Newspapers, and the market research firm retained by the Star-News, KPC Research of Charlotte.

Star-News Editor Allen Parsons, City Editor Rommyn Skipper and Deputy City Editor Tricia Vance supervised the project.

A Question of Leadership was supported by a grant from The New York Times Co., parent of the Wilmington Star-News Inc. The concept was based in part on a June 2001 study of leadership in Buffalo, N.Y., by Jerry Zremski of The Buffalo News.

On the mail survey:

The purpose of the mail survey was to gather opinions on the quality of Wilmington’s leaders from leaders themselves.

The survey form was a 12-page booklet that respondents returned in postage-paid envelopes. To encourage returns, receipt of the booklet was preceded and followed by reminder postcards.

Last fall, Mark Schreiner, then a Star-News assistant city editor, and research assistant John White developed the mailing list of 808 representative leaders.

To do this, Mr. Schreiner, now chief of the Star-News’ Raleigh bureau, assembled a list of more than 300 civic, business and government/political organizations based on research into telephone listings, Internet home pages, the Star-News archives, and directories of government, business and neighborhood organizations.

During November and December 2001, Mr. Schreiner and Mr. White asked those organizations to supply names and contact information for applicable executives, board members and leading officials.

Some of those contacts, in turn, suggested more names.

Questionnaires were sent to every countywide elected official, the mayors and municipal board members of communities in the survey area and to appointed government executives.
Similarly, survey forms were sent to top local executives of the region’s largest private employers, labor leaders, board members of chambers of commerce in the survey area and to several small-business owners.

Executive directors and leading board members of many of the region’s civic, charitable, institutional, nonprofit and neighborhood organizations also received questionnaires.

Copies of 12-page survey booklets were mailed Feb. 22 from Charlotte. Surveys were accepted until March 28.

As of the cut off date, 357 completed surveys were received, making a return rate of 44.2 percent, “considered very good, given the questionnaire length,” according to Gregory Chase, the KPC senior research analyst who worked on the project.

KPC estimates the maximum error to be plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

That means that the results are not expected to differ, 95 out of 100 times, by more than 3.6 percentage points from the results if every questionnaire sent had been completed and returned.

On the phone survey:

At about the same time, the Star-News commissioned a telephone survey to gather opinions about leaders from the general public.

The poll results are based on 405 confidential telephone interviews conducted by KPC Research from March 12 to 23 in New Hanover County and adjacent suburban areas in Brunswick and Pender counties.

Each interview took about 12 minutes.

Of 405 interviews, 276 were conducted in New Hanover, 78 in Brunswick ZIP codes 28451, 28461, 28465 and 28479; and 51 in Pender’s ZIP code 28443.

KPC interviewers used “random digit dialing,” which gave every household in each telephone exchange, even those with new or unlisted numbers, an equal chance of being called.

The data were weighted so as to balance it geographically and by race, age, sex and number of adults in the household.

The telephone survey results have an error rate of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points, according to KPC Research.

That means that the results in 19 of 20 similar samples would not vary more than 4.9 percentage points from the results if every adult in the greater Wilmington region were surveyed.
Mason Inlet: Leaders working together

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh Bureau Chief
July 22, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

The Mason Inlet project tested the effectiveness of greater Wilmington's leaders against the forces of the sea.

In April 2002, the leaders won. At least for now.

The Mason Inlet success may point to a better future, but recent surveys of community leaders and the public found widespread belief that leadership in the region got worse over the last five years. Both leaders and the public were profoundly pessimistic that solutions will be found to community problems.

Seven years of inquiry, design, speculation, depression and elation ended with the movement of thousands of yards of Atlantic beach sand and the saving of a condominium complex at the northern tip of Wrightsville Beach from an encroaching ocean.

Over the past five years, it is one of just a handful of projects that Wilmington-area leaders can point to as a completed success. The sand is moved, the buildings saved and, if the deal struck holds out, the public coffers replenished with private dollars.

Along the way, the project encountered many seemingly fatal bumps in the road. Debates over the use of tax dollars to help private landowners and objections from state and federal regulators, plus fears of damage to the adopted habitat of a teacup-sized shorebird, all threatened to doom the project.

"It only got completed because Bobby Greer and I stayed with it," said County Commissioner Bill Caster, sharing credit with a Republican colleague on the board. "We wouldn’t let it die."

Credit for success must be shared with local officials in Wrightsville Beach and organized landowners in that beach town and on nearby Figure Eight Island.

On the day earlier this year that organizers celebrated their success, Frank Pinkston, chairman of the group of the homeowners who will pay for the $6.5 million project, compared the feeling of completion to hitting a lucky number.

"This day has been a long day coming, but all those four years plus of work, this makes it worth it," he said then. "The payoff is fantastic, unbelievable."

The project has been hailed as a new way of doing business in Southeastern North Carolina, where public and private interests can be balanced. Mr. Greer has said the inlet relocation is a victory for people who are willing to pay to protect their property. Much of the criticism was aimed at the government, including elected as well as appointed officials.

Low scores
In the spring, the Star-News conducted twin surveys of community leaders and the public.

The topic was the quality of community leadership. Written survey forms were sent to more than 800 civic, business and governmental leaders in New Hanover County and the adjacent suburban areas in Brunswick and Pender counties.

The Star-News received 357 completed questionnaires.

At about the same time, 405 random telephone calls were made to homes in the greater Wilmington region. Asked to gauge the effectiveness of Wilmington’s leadership, the public gave leaders more credit than leaders gave themselves.

Sixty-eight percent of the public said leaders were in some way effective.

Slightly less, 66 percent of community leaders, rated the leadership the same way.

On a standard 5-point scale, with 5 the best score and 1 the worst, the public gave leaders an average effectiveness score of 3.61. The leaders gave themselves a 3.45.

“I am surprised by that,” said Wilmington Mayor Harper Peterson, who was elected in late 2001 on a platform of reforming and re-energizing city government. "I would expect leaders to feel empowered to make change, to believe that they can be effective."

Broken down further, both the public and leaders gave the government sector the lowest scores. Leaders scored government far lower than business or civic leaders.

Ronald A. Heifetz, director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, said government leaders receive the greatest criticism because they are often put in the position of forcing change in a community.

“People fight changes that involve loss,” he said. "It puts enormous pressure on officials to come up with solutions that are not costly."

That fact of human nature often results in government leaders applying “technical solutions to adaptive problems,” he said.

"It’s one thing to tell a person that you can redo the plumbing to the heart, as in cardiac surgery,” said Dr. Heifetz, who is also a medical doctor. "It’s harder, actually, to persuade a person to change their diet, for example."

One solution fixes the problem, but not its cause; the other solves the problem and allows the patient to adapt to a new and better level of health.

But, Dr. Heifetz said, all adaptive change involves loss. As in the example, the cardiac patient who changes his lifestyle improves his health, but he must break habits such as smoking, which are destructive but also are longstanding, familiar and comforting.

An unceasing rain of criticism from the public and the press also cuts into the effectiveness of government leaders, Mr. Caster said.

“Hey, it’s even on the comics page," he said. “Just read Shoe or B.C. To them we’re all just politicians."

Forty percent said that government leadership had declined over the past five years – the most of any leadership category – and 39 percent said it had stayed the same.

The softening of support for government leaders has created a leadership vacuum in the region, said Dr. Milan Dluhy, a UNCW political scientist who regularly polls the region’s residents.
Perceived indecision on the part of city and county boards and the belief that leaders don’t work together well has fractured the government leadership, he said.

“There is a bewilderment with fragmentation of governments in this region,” Dr. Dluhy said. “That’s why it’s hard to find a single, good government leader, other than the congressman, who doesn’t live in Wilmington.”

Mayor Peterson believes his administration is the kind that residents seek: active, inclusive and willing to force positive change.

And for that, he said, respondents to the written survey of community leaders nicked him by scoring his effectiveness more than a full point lower than his power.

“This is what happens when you challenge the status quo,” the mayor said. “They say you’re ineffective.”

'It takes time'

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-N.C., was named as the region’s most powerful and effective leader, but even he admitted that Wilmington is just part of a large and diverse district.

“I work well with the mayors and the county commissioners, and they work hard for their people,” he said. “But we need to continue recruiting good local government officials. If people with the right motivations stay out of politics, who’s left?”

The picture for business and civic leadership is better, but there are still concerns.

Asked to describe how things had changed over the last five years, 64 percent of community leaders said business leadership had stayed the same. Over the last 10 years, the population of the region has increased by more than a third and business activity and employment blossomed.

Fifty-nine percent said the quality of civic leadership, which includes the heads of institutional, volunteer and charitable organizations, had remained the same since 1997. What’s missing, said Chuck Odell, who took the Star-News telephone survey, are business people with the time and willingness to sit on organization boards and commit time to civic projects.

“It’s a problem everywhere, especially when it comes to civic groups,” said Mr. Odell, a retired American Airlines executive who lives on Oak Island. “When I was working, my wife and I tried to give at least one-and-a-half weeknights a week to civic work. Of course, you always end up giving more.”

Leaders were also asked what they thought about their relationships with each other. The results showed ambivalence and pessimism.

More than 70 percent of leaders believe that power sharing, cooperation and communication among leaders either stayed the same or declined over the last five years.

In the case of cooperation, 50 percent said it had declined since 1997.

“Wilmington is undergoing a very difficult growth period, occasioned by Interstate 40 being finished, and the popularity of beaches and relocation,” said Dick McGraw, who sat on the 2001 board that tried to build a new Wilmington convention center. “Huge demands were made on a physical and human infrastructure that was not prepared to handle it. The average Wilmington leader is fatigued.”

Mr. Caster agrees.
“It’s gotten so complicated. People don’t realize that,” he said. “They want instant solutions, but it takes time just to understand what the issues are.”

Uncertainty

When asked about the future, the public and leaders are skeptical.

The Star-News asked both groups to rate their level of confidence that “the community leadership will find solutions to the greater Wilmington region’s most chronic problems.”

This time, the leadership was a little more confident than the public.

Thirty-nine percent of leaders said they were confident in some way that solutions would be found. For the public, the figure was 30 percent. For the public survey, respondents were allowed to answer “neutral” to the question. Nearly a third, 33 percent, took the option.

“That is an extraordinary level of neutrality,” said Walter DeVries, director of the N.C. Institute of Political Leadership and a veteran pollster.

Public opinion on solutions is nearly split into thirds, he observed, with 30 percent confident that solutions will be found, 35 percent not confident and the last portion neutral.

“The people aren’t sure what to think.”

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387

mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
Survey: Some leaders are more effective than powerful

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 22, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

When Benjamin Quattlebaum II became executive director of the Wilmington Housing Authority in November, he inherited a mess.

The troubled agency was struggling with its budget and lingering bad blood from employee-pension plan changes that left taxpayers on the hook for $3.6 million.

It also had a horrible public perception, both among its residents and the public.

Eight months later, Mr. Quattlebaum appears to have the department headed in the right direction.

The Dove Meadows apartment complex, which the Housing Authority acquired from the federal government last year, is in the process of being razed. Public housing resident complaints and vacancy rates also are down dramatically, and – probably most surprisingly to many – new homes are going up on the grounds of Jervay Place, the long-troubled redevelopment project on Dawson Street.

“He’s really good,” said Gwen Griffin, who lives in the Creekwood public housing complex. “He’s really stepped in and done a lot to help us.”

Ms. Griffin, a former Jervay resident, is hoping to move into the redeveloped housing community soon – and she is vocal in her praise for Mr. Quattlebaum, for the possibility, after so many false starts.

“He’s the only person who’s getting anything done,” she said.

“Without him, I don’t think this project would be going anywhere.”

Wilmington’s new housing director was among a handful of leaders rated to be more effective than powerful by 357 leaders who responded to a Star-News leadership survey mailed out to them.

Others perceived to use their power effectively included Good Shepherd’s Cathy Dawson, Elderhaus’ Linda Pearce, Thalian Hall’s Tony Rivenbark and military historian/author Wilbur Jones Jr.

Those deemed effective by their peers all seem to share some common traits, including a passion for their job and a reputation of being up front and honest.

Ms. Pearce, executive director of Elderhaus, said her drive sometimes gets her in trouble.
“I’m straight up,” she said. “I call it the way I see it, and people appreciate that, although some people sometimes perceive me to be hard or confrontational, but I’m not.

“I just care deeply about what I do.”

Mr. Jones, a retired naval officer and former presidential aide, said he’s much the same way. He is working to preserve Wilmington’s military history.

“I don’t just have a passion for it, but there’s a need for it,” he said. If we don’t know where we’ve been, he said, “we can’t know where we’re going, and there’s no way we can plan for tomorrow.”

The leaders deemed effective by their peers also don’t shy from seeking community input or involvement in crafting decisions.

“I firmly believe that you’ve got to get a buy-in from the community to succeed,” Mr. Quattlebaum said. “I know of plenty of projects that were good projects, but were sometimes rejected because the community felt it wasn’t involved in the process.

“I’ve had to learn that lesson,” he continued with a wry smile.

Mr. Quattlebaum said that one of his first moves when he came to Wilmington was to immerse himself in the community, to get out and meet the town’s leaders and residents of the authority’s housing complexes. “I had a good baptism,” he said smiling, “and I think that feeling-out process has helped me move this department in the right direction and cut to the chase.”

But there also are other traits shared by many of the leaders deemed to be effective.

Call it the honeymoon effect, but in many cases they are relatively new to the area. And aside from Mr. Quattlebaum, nearly all the leaders viewed to use their power effectively work for civic, cultural or nonprofit entities that are perceived to have a positive public impact. That lack of faith – cynicism some would say – toward the region’s political and business leaders concerns Mr. Jones. “The average person who complains doesn’t want to take on a leadership role,” he said. “That seems to be part of the lethargy around here, and it scares the heck out of me.”

Ms. Dawson said the public seems preoccupied in pulling down those it elects to serve.

“Are we discouraging possibly good candidates?” she said. “I know personally I wouldn’t want to run and have to deal with the stuff they deal with.”

But Ms. Dawson added that at least some of the criticism heaped on local political leaders is probably self-inflicted. “It just seems here that if someone says something is white, someone else has to say it’s black,” she said of local political leaders. “You can’t read them. You just never know how they might act.”

Like Mr. Quattlebaum, Ms. Dawson is relatively new to the area.

She also is credited with making a big impression in a short space of time, particularly in raising public awareness about the city’s growing homeless problem. “I’m not going to say everyone loves us here,” she said of the role Good Shepherd plays in the community, “but I’m not about to run away from it.

“I really care. This is more than just a job to me.”

So does Ms. Dawson have any interest in ratcheting up her role in the community?

Maybe, she said.
“I plan on staying in Wilmington and growing professionally while I am here,” Ms. Dawson said, “whatever that means.”

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
How much does the public care?

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh Bureau Chief
July 22, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

While UNCW Chancellor James Leutze may use a reference to Homer's Odyssey and former Carolina Shores Mayor Teddy Altreuter uses sharper language, they make the same point: Unless an issue is in its front yard, the public doesn't care.

Dr. Leutze relates stories about trying to raise money for community projects, like a concert hall, or starting public discussions on issues like tree loss or mixed-use development.

He doesn’t encounter resistance, he said, but apathy.

“Sometimes, it's like Wilmington is the Land of the Lotus-Eaters,” he said, referring to the mythical place where the food was said to make visitors forget their worries.

Mrs. Altreuter, who now serves on the board of the Brunswick County Literacy Council, puts it this way: “It’s not easy to get people’s attention. If it’s going to cost them, then it’s a big issue, but basically it seems like everybody’s certain that everything is fine.”

You get a different answer when you ask the public.

In recent parallel surveys, Wilmington area residents said overwhelmingly that average people have a great interest in civic affairs. Leaders in business, government and civic institutions took a different view.

Results from 405 random telephone interviews with residents in New Hanover County and contiguous parts of Brunswick and Pender counties found that 75 percent believe the average citizen is “concerned” or “very concerned” with “issues that affect the well-being of the community.”

Perceptions were different for the 357 community leaders who returned a written survey asking the same question. A majority of leaders, 53 percent, said the average local citizen is “concerned” or “very concerned” with community issues.

But 46 percent said the average citizen is “not very concerned” or “not at all concerned.” Only 22 percent of residents answered the same way. Another way of looking at it: 29 percent of the public said the average citizen is "very concerned" with civic affairs; just 6 percent of leaders selected that answer.

Douglas Fritchey of Boiling Spring Lakes took the Star-News telephone survey this spring.

“I think people are beginning to take a real interest in things,” said Mr. Fritchey, 23 and a self-employed carpenter. “People now realize that they can be part of something and take more of an interest. You see it everywhere; people are getting involved in their communities.”

Kenneth Davis, active in efforts to mentor inner-city children and memorialize the 1898 racial violence, had a different take on the issue of civic engagement.
“The percentage that turns out to elect our officials is a disgrace,” said Mr. Davis, who returned
the Star-News survey mailed to community and neighborhood leaders.

“Being an African-American, it’s hard to realize that people fought, protested, ended up in jail so
we would have the right to vote, and now so many take it for granted.”

While voter turnout increased during the runoff election for Wilmington mayor in November 2001,
only 24 percent of registered voters cast ballots. About 57 percent of voters in the greater
Wilmington area turned out for the last presidential election.

“Even so, voter turnout isn’t the best indicator of civic involvement,” said Pamela Paxton, a
sociologist at Ohio State University. “Voting only shows the outcome of a behavior and doesn’t
describe what’s happening.”

Perhaps voting isn’t seen as the most effective way to influence the policy-making process.

People are more willing to confront their elected officials directly, at meetings and through
messages, than through party membership and voting, said Dr. Paxton, who received her
doctoral degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

What in previous generations was called public-mindedness or community interest is today called
“civic engagement” by sociologists.

There is disagreement whether the social connections that bind people together – from over-the-
fence relationships to memberships in civic organizations and political parties – are weakening.

In her research, Dr. Paxton has argued that the conclusions of Robert Putnam’s groundbreaking
1995 book, Bowling Alone, are not as bleak as they seem to be.

While there appears to be a decline in trust in people, she said, trust in institutions has remained
stable. “American society is changing,” she said, “but there is still bedrock there.”

Still, leaders in the Wilmington area say they struggle with a public that appears only to care
when issues have reached crisis stage.

Asked if apathy was the biggest hurdle to building effective community leadership, 61 percent of
leaders said they agreed.

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387

mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
Outer loop: A vision not shared by all

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 23, 2002

Construction crews work on the U.S. 17 Wilmington bypass bridge that will cross the Northeast Cape Fear River.

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

The dirt corridor that will eventually become the U.S. 17 Wilmington bypass snakes through the largely undeveloped midsection of New Hanover County, slicing through agricultural fields and forested areas as it meanders from Interstate 40 to the Northeast Cape Fear River.

A second leg of the highway, also known as the Northern Outer Loop, will run from I-40 to Scotts Hill in Pender County. Long-range plans call for the bypass to rejoin U.S. 17 north of Town Creek in Brunswick County.

When finished, the ribbon of asphalt promises to help ease traffic congestion on several roadways – particularly Market Street and the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge – by collecting cross-county traffic and travelers coming down I-40 bound for Brunswick County beaches. Many also see the roadway as an economic generator, opening wide swaths of the region to development on land that used to be considered marginally attractive due to limited accessibility or distance from business centers, especially if proposed interchanges at Blue Clay Road and Military Cutoff are built.

But what form should that development take?

The Cape Fear Region is on the move, with Census statistics showing that the populations of New Hanover, Pender and Brunswick counties all swelled by more than a third between 1990 and 2000. In northern New Hanover County, subdivisions are sprouting in areas that only forest fires and hunters used to visit, while beach towns in Brunswick County are rapidly turning into year-round communities – with the associated problems to boot.

With so much development happening so quickly, there are deep divisions over how to manage the growth. According to numerous interviews with local officials and residents, a shared vision for progress remains diluted by special interest groups, aggressive building tactics and segments of the community scared that one step forward will lead to two steps back.

“There’s no easy solution,” said James Leutze, chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, “but there’s obviously a bad way of doing it.”

Limiting growth

In parallel surveys by the Star-News of nearly 360 government, business and civic leaders and more than 400 residents of New Hanover and contiguous suburban areas of Pender and Brunswick counties, limiting residential/commercial development was rated by both groups as a more important priority than encouraging development.
Area leaders showed a decisive bent toward limiting growth, placing the goal nearly twice as high on their priority list as encouraging development.

Several leaders said they worry about rampant growth destroying the region’s quality of life, while others noted the effect unchecked growth has had on area schools and roads.

But area residents, selected at random and interviewed by phone, showed a deep split on the issue.

Limiting development ranked eighth out of 11 priorities, while promoting development finished two positions behind, in 10th place.

One of the problems in talking about development is trying to define a word that has become loaded with so many conflicting images, terms and connotations.

For many rural and long-term residents, it involves wooded areas turning into business parks and subdivisions and the associated toll on roads, schools and a community’s infrastructure that almost always lag behind the need.

Marianne Talbot, a stay-at-home mom from Hampstead, said officials seem to be reacting to instead of planning for the region’s development.

“Everything’s growing too fast and nobody seems to be able to do anything about it,” she said. “As for traffic problems, they waited too long. They’re trying now, but we should have been prepared for I-40. The area wasn’t ready, and we’re paying the price to get these new roads built.”

But for urban residents, development could mean more urban decay as newer shopping centers on the outskirts suck much of the commercial vitality out of inner-city neighborhoods, leaving commercial corridors like Market Street a collection of older, abandoned strip malls.

It’s not that they’re against development, just that it’s happening in the wrong place.

Gerry McCants, owner of Black Pages USA, said the local community needs to step up and make a commitment to inner city areas that were passed by as the Cape Fear region boomed.

“You can only let communities deteriorate for so long before you come up with some plan to rejuvenate those areas, and I think we’re at that point right now,” he said. “I don’t think we have an option as a city or a community.”

Mr. McCants cautioned, however, that any effort needs to be a comprehensive push involving local residents, government and the business sector. He said an effort by one group alone – or a half-hearted redevelopment push – could do more long-term damage than doing nothing at all.

“We can’t afford something like that,” Mr. McCants said.

But even as a chunk of residents expressed a desire to put the brakes on development, the public placed increasing the number of good jobs in the region as the third most important community priority – a goal several business leaders said requires development.

For thousands of families across the region, development puts food on the table.

Woody Hall, director of UNCW’s Center for Business & Economic Services, said 8 percent of New Hanover County’s work force – about 7,100 people – work in construction-related fields. That figure doesn’t include the hundreds of real estate brokers, bankers, mortgage brokers and suppliers that rely on the development and property markets.
The percentage of the work force in Pender and Brunswick counties in the construction segment is about the same as New Hanover, Dr. Hall said.

“It’s a major segment of the local economy, a major force, no doubt about that,” he said.

Residents also placed building better roads, air and sea connections as a key regional goal, something that invariably leads to new development.

**Mixed feelings**

The lack of consensus on the development issue reflects the love-hate relationship associated with development in general.

“The issues of growth are the key cluster of issues people in this region, particularly this county, think are important,” said Walt DeVries, director of the UNCW-based N.C. Institute of Political Leadership, “and it intensifies every year.”

Views on development also were colored by location, race, gender, age and income levels.

The older and richer respondents were, and the longer they’d lived in the region, the more they supported limits on development.

But respondents who were younger, male, a minority and lived in Brunswick or Pender said they wanted to see more growth.

Chris May, executive director of the Cape Fear Council of Governments, said the elected officials from Southeastern North Carolina that make up the group’s Growth Team show little division in their goals for the region.

“We embrace regional issues, transportation, tourism, water quality, economic development, so there’s nothing really to fight about,” he said.

“But what’s happening back home behind closed doors, I don’t know,” he said. “We don’t ask, and they don’t tell.”

**What’s good?**

It seems everyone knows bad development when they see it. But what constitutes good development?

“If they see it as providing good, clean jobs, that’s one thing,” Dr. DeVries said. “But if they see it as a proliferation of condominiums, that’s something else.”

Developer Scott Stewart thought he had an example of a good project with his proposed 24-acre Demarest Village mixed-use development in Middle Sound.

The 2-acre village square would have included a private swimming club and six three-story buildings with 30,000 square feet of space that would house neighborhood shops and professional offices – amenities unavailable in Middle Sound – mixed in with 59 houses.

But residents, fearing an influx of traffic and other commercial development on the store-free peninsula, and the New Hanover County Commissioners have united to derail the project three years running.

“You will never get people to buy into development if you can’t show it will attract good development and good jobs,” Dr. Leutze said. “Everybody wants good development.”
“The fact of the matter is good development begets more good development. Bad development begets bad development, slums and stagnation and high costs for schools and other infrastructure.”

But in study after study, Americans say they want smart growth, yet use their wallets to encourage sprawl.

A January 2002 survey of 2,000 households by the National Association of Home Builders and the National Association of Realtors indicated that price and home size are far more important considerations than proximity to work, urban areas or schools.

In other words, people will take a bigger house for less money even if it means a longer commute to work and encourages sprawl.

“Builders build for the market,” said Donna Girardot, spokeswoman for the Wilmington-Cape Fear Homebuilders Association and Wilmington Regional Association of Realtors. “They build what sells and what people want.”

New fee structures or initiatives to limit sprawl or help with its effects, such as additional impact fees or using tax money to protect open space, also have gone nowhere due to public, political and industry resistance.

New Hanover County Planning Director Dexter Hayes said the current system works while there’s strong growth and revenue flowing into local government coffers.

But when that growth tapers off, residents and governments are left trying to deal with the additional impact on schools, highways and other infrastructure from sprawl with only limited financial resources.

“It might be cheaper in the short term for the developer,” Mr. Hayes said of building on undeveloped land, “but the public costs are much higher.”

Looking ahead

Worried that future development in northern New Hanover County might look like past development in other parts of the county, county leaders have placed a Special Highway Overlay District along the U.S. 17 bypass.

The zoning classification limits signs and how close buildings can be to the roadway.

The Wilmington Regional Association of Realtors also proposes creating a task force to develop a vision for the highway corridor.

Officials said new zoning regulations, such as those in the unified development ordinance that city and county planners are hashing out, also should help create more community-friendly development.

But Dr. Leutze said regulations and management plans only go so far.

He said the whole approach to planning and development must be re-examined – including the concept that community interest should be considered in determining how private property is developed. Americans historically haven’t supported that idea because of fears that it might infringe upon individual property rights.

“If we develop intelligently, we will prosper much more than with sprawl,” Dr. Leutze said, “because the cost of bad development is incredibly high.”
Mr. Hayes said much of the community's hostility to growth might be from development fatigue, an indication the region has grown too fast, too quickly.

But he said careful planning – and then sticking to the components of the plan, such as controlling where new water and sewer lines are built – can lead to a better community.

“Development is a good thing,” Mr. Hayes said, “but too much of a good thing can be bad.”

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384 or gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
Leaders, residents agree: Improving education is top priority

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh Bureau Chief
July 23, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

It ought to be easy, said community leader Herb Harris.

“Everyone agrees that the public schools are priority No. 1,” said Mr. Harris, a founder of Wilmington’s Community Action Group neighborhood organization. “It’s the one thing that everybody can come to the table on.”

But there is perhaps no more controversial issue than the state and future of public education. From Castle Street to the U.S. Supreme Court, the questions of public education – how to improve it, how best to pay for it, how much it should be changed – seemingly top every agenda, every poll.

In North Carolina, the schools are the biggest slice of state and county government budgets. Gov. Mike Easley has proposed a statewide lottery to fund early education programs. President Bush, using the tagline “no child left behind,” has made federal oversight of public education, including standardized accountability testing, a hallmark of his administration.

While there is disagreement over what to do about it, there is no dissent as to the education system’s importance.

In twin surveys of community leaders and everyday residents conducted this spring in the greater Wilmington region, improving public education was listed as the top civic priority.

There was broad consensus, across the region and throughout all demographic categories.

In a telephone survey of residents in New Hanover County and adjacent suburban areas in Brunswick and Pender counties, 77 percent gave the civic priority “improving public education” the highest possible score.

“Times are tough,” said Sue Floyd of the Hood Creek neighborhood in northern Brunswick County. “Even with the college degree, it’s hard for someone starting out to even get a job. A lot of these kids are fighting to get to high school.”

The mother of grown children said she feels that students she meets don’t have a good enough grasp of reading and other essential skills. Schools should also step in where parents have failed and instill personal discipline and courtesy in students.

Community leaders, who were sent a written survey, answered the question of community priorities differently. From a list of civic goals, respondents selected their three favorites.

Nearly 44 percent of the 342 leaders who answered that portion of the survey picked public education, the most for any priority on the list.

That the schools were picked as the top priority is a reflection of a widely held value, said Tannis Nelson, president of the N.C. Parent-Teacher Association, and “it’s recognition that the schools are having so many difficulties.”
While there’s consensus when the question is what’s important, there’s no agreement on what the problem is. Recognizing that education is important is good, she said, but, “it’s not enough to care; you’ve got to be involved.”

Weakening social bonds and involvement by everyday people in the life of the community and institution is the biggest threat to the success of public schools, said John Morris, superintendent of the New Hanover County Schools.

“It’s been in vogue to say that it takes a village to raise a child,” he said, “but today, where’s the village? Decades ago, my father’s family lived within a block of each other in row houses in Philadelphia. The extended family lived together and that neighborhood took care of the children when they were out of school. Not every family today has access to something like that.”

While schooling methods, such as the standardized K-12 grades, have remained the same, he said, family structure and work life have changed, and research is hinting that no two children learn in exactly the same way.

“We’re given ever greater responsibility for what students learn and how they behave,” he said, “while the average student, from school age to age 18, only spends 10 percent of his time in school. There’s got to be a commitment from the people who are with those students the other 90 percent of the time.”

The answer, said Mr. Harris, is a comprehensive approach.

“All the parties need to come to the table,” he said. “It’s going to take the entire community.”

Mark Schreiner: 343-2387

mark.schreiner@wilmingtonstar.com
Racial harmony high on public’s list

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 23, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

Wilmington-area residents said improving race relations should be one of the region’s most important priorities.

But that message doesn’t seem to resonate with area leaders, who ranked the goal well down their priority list.

“That’s a significant disconnect between the leaders and the public, and maybe it shows there needs to be more lines of communication to get that message across,” said Earl Sheridan, a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and past president of the local chapter of the NAACP.

Improving race relations was near the top of the priority list for a majority of the 405 residents from New Hanover County and contiguous suburban areas of Brunswick and Pender counties who were interviewed by phone.

Only improving education, increasing jobs and reducing crime ranked higher.

The priority was rated as a significant community goal by both blacks and whites, with white residents rating the priority as slightly more important. It also proved to be a region-wide concern, drawing strong support from residents in all three counties.

The issue also resonated with the younger generation, with 18- to 34-year-olds placing more importance on improving race relations than residents 55 and over.

But perceptions from the 357 community leaders who returned a written survey to the Star-News were different. They placed the goal ninth out of 17, ranking it behind more tangible and economic priorities, such as consolidation and a convention center.

Wilmington’s history of racial problems is well documented, punctuated by the 1898 race riots when rampaging whites drove much of the city’s black population out of town.

While many people would agree that the situation has improved dramatically from several decades ago, flare-ups aren’t uncommon.

Race quickly became an issue in Wilmington Councilwoman Katherine Moore’s run-in with the city’s Police Department earlier this year, and some residents of Wilmington’s Northside claim race is playing a part in the state’s push to run passenger trains through their neighborhood.

Behind the scenes, some officials say further improvements in race relations are stymied by leaders in the black community who have staked their positions on protecting black interests, not on community-wide priorities.

Dr. Sheridan calls those accusations unfair.
“The inference is that white people are concerned about all areas, and black people are concerned just about black neighborhoods, and that’s just not true,” he said.

Dr. Sheridan added that any insular feeling by the black community could be a reaction to perceived exclusion from the region’s decision-making process.

“Maybe sometimes people feel their participation isn’t going to make that much of a difference in things,” he said. “Maybe they feel they are being alienated.”

Several black leaders said all it takes is a look at some of the region’s higher-profile public bodies for proof that inclusion isn’t a priority.

There are no black representatives on either the New Hanover County Board of Commissioners or Board of Education, both of which are elected bodies.

The situation is no better on several high-profile boards where members are appointed.

The county’s Airport Authority is all white, as is the Planning Board, and only one of the 17 appointed members of the New Hanover Health Network Board of Trustees is black.

The Wilmington Planning Commission and the city’s Board of Adjustment also have no minority members.

Officials with these organizations bristle at the notion that they aren’t inclusive, noting that often there aren’t any minority members running or asking to be appointed to these boards.

“The facts don’t substantiate such an allegation,” said Ed Higgins, chairman of the county Board of Education.

He said the board neither determines who runs nor who wins, and claims that a lack of diversity on the board leads to unfair treatment of black staffers and students also have been proven without merit by investigators with the federal Office for Civil Rights.

“There was no discrimination in how discipline was addressed or with respect to hiring minority administrators, teachers or other staff in our school system,” Mr. Higgins said.

But Peter Grear, a Wilmington attorney and publisher of The

Challenger weekly newspaper, said officials have to do more than just give lip service to the notion of diversity.

“The issue is whether or not you want public bodies to reflect the makeup of the community or if you want them to be exclusive,” he said. “The fact that it hasn’t happened is one of the factors that casts Wilmington-New Hanover County as a racially polarized area.”

Several officials also cited limited educational and economic opportunities in inner-city areas as impediments toward improving race relations.

Finding ways to become more inclusive is vital to moving the issue of racial harmony forward, said City Councilwoman Laura Padgett.

“When people have an opportunity, they feel they have a stake in the community,” she said. “Obviously many members of our community don’t feel those doors are open to them.”

But with no silver-bullet solution out there, several officials and area residents said the most effective way to improve race relations is to get people talking about it. 
“If we can create a better understanding, then you've got to have a more harmonious community,” said Amber Milliken, the YWCA's interracial dialogue coordinator, “and then we can work together on other things.”

The dialogue circles consist of eight to 15 people who meet for five consecutive weeks to discuss ways to eliminate racism.

Linda Pearce, executive director of Elderhaus, an adult day care center, said ridding the region of racism requires a united community effort and a willingness to change.

“No matter how hard or fast we paddle, there are some subjective things that we simply cannot overcome,” she said. “The laws of the land can't legislate a change in someone's heart.”

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384
gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com
Leaders rank city/county merger No. 2

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer
July 23, 2002

More on the series 'A Question of Leadership'

In theory, it makes sense.

Combining overlapping government functions, such as utilities, planning and law enforcement, should lead to a more streamlined, leaner bureaucracy that saves the public time and money.

But in meeting after meeting, study after study, New Hanover and Wilmington officials have been unable to agree on a path toward consolidation – or even how to start the process.

That lack of progress seems to have done little to dim officials’ interest in the concept.

In a recent Star-News survey of 357 government, civic and business leaders in the Cape Fear Region, combining the city and county governments continued to garner strong support.

When asked for their community priorities, the leaders ranked consolidation second only to improving public education.

“When you’re in a governmental position, I think you’re more aware of how it makes sense because you’re part of it, you see it every day,” said Ted Davis Jr., chairman of the New Hanover County Commissioners and a big proponent of consolidation.

But for 405 area residents chosen at random and interviewed by telephone, the concept barely broke into the top-10 list of community goals.

Interestingly, however, the public placed reducing taxes as an important community priority.

Consolidation holds that promise, several officials said.

“It offers us efficiencies, a way to be more effective that we don’t have now,” said Wilmington Mayor Harper Peterson.

But officials have had trouble getting that message across – or even being able to prove it with studies.

Talk of consolidating county and city governments surfaced many times over the past century, but no plan could please a majority of voters. New Hanover County voters have defeated three consolidation plans in the past three decades.

Over the last five years, the city government’s policy of annexation – bolstered by a state law that gives cities broad powers to take on adjacent developed areas without referendum – has changed the political equation.

Now that more and more county residents are also paying city taxes, consolidation has strong support among county commissioners and City Council members.
But last year, the politicians couldn’t agree on whether another feasibility study was needed.

The City Council supported the idea while the County Commissioners viewed the move as superfluous.

When the study was finished, it was so riddled with errors that it was deemed nearly worthless by many – just another in a long line of failures surrounding consolidation efforts.

Adding to the lack of public faith in any consolidation effort is the simmering tension between the City Council and the County Commissioners that seems to pervade every facet of their relationship.

Each side blames the other for

the lack of movement on consolidation.

“We can’t even agree on where to start,” Mr. Davis said, noting that the county wants to begin with water and sewer while the city is leaning toward law enforcement.

County Manager Allen O’Neal said there is basically no communication between the city and county on the consolidation issue right now.

While not specifically pointing fingers, Mr. Peterson said individual government bodies have a tendency to get bogged down in details.

“You need to look at it as a whole,” he said.

Mr. Peterson also said the press has a habit of focusing on the political squabbles instead of the issue itself, leaving the public often confused about the advantages of consolidation.

But other officials think there’s an obvious reason why the issue draws such a lukewarm response from residents.

City Councilwoman Laura Padgett said the recent trash talking about trash – with the county pushing to implement a countywide solid-waste plan that Wilmington and the three beach towns are firmly against – hasn’t helped improve the public’s image of their local politicians.

The very public squabbling and political infighting over the placement of a proposed transportation center has just reinforced the notion.

“I think people are just sick of seeing the dysfunction down here,” Mrs. Padgett said.

Gareth McGrath: 343-2384

gareth.mcgrath@wilmingtonstar.com