

Virginia Beach's population has doubled in the past thirty years to almost half a million; however, astronomically expensive resort initiatives that serve the few have prevailed, while key areas beyond the reach of these attractive projects have been neglected. The past several years, rather than criticize these inequities from the outside, many resort resident and business stakeholders have chosen to help change this imbalance by getting more involved in the process of how things get done. **Almost four years ago, we started the Atlantic Avenue Association, with the sole purpose of unifying resort interests to help build a better community.** Here's what I've learned: The system is broken. Old ways and means have prevailed when it comes to Virginia Beach's resort and tourism policy. For good reason, Virginia Beach residents and resort stakeholders are frustrated, resulting in many beach residents' refusal to visit THEIR beachfront anymore. It's time for our young resort city to grow up.

Over the past twenty years, exclusive resort policy decisions and inaction rooted in old ways have served interests besides Virginia Beach residents. Without question, developers are an important part of any community. These talented people deserve political support; however, this should not be to the exclusion (and detriment) of almost everything else. For example, it's no secret AAA expressed dire concerns about the Dome/Atlantic Park project due to proposed massive publicly subsidized retail and restaurant competition siphoning customers, as well as the lack of available public parking once it's built and in full swing, and its prioritization over dire infrastructure needs. Now, three years later, imagine what could have been done to help build a better resort community with tax dollars earmarked for this project. That's \$30M in to help build the venue, plus \$95M for parking for the venue, plus a \$100M performance grant over 20 years, and now, recently passed by city council, an additional \$9.2M that was previously designated for public parking in order to cover increased costs to build the entertainment venue (Stacy Parker, March 17, 2021, VA Pilot). But that's water under the bridge, and **unfortunately there's little to no money left in the TIP fund for anything else.**

Furthermore, we have to ask in advance of Atlantic Park's opening – if it opens - what will be done to replace approximately 700 public parking spaces for beach goers and customers once this project breaks ground and is being built over several years. Essentially, when it comes to resort investment and progress, our bureaucratic and political way of doing business serves the few; it's as if Virginia Beach has become a "one trick pony" when it comes to investment at the Oceanfront.

Let's look at several things happening or planned along Atlantic Avenue: getting pole string lights installed along the street, fixing piped music along the sidewalk, building more public restrooms, upgrading entertainment, implementing Atlantic Avenue infrastructure improvements, creating a sense of closure, adding more police and upgrading public safety technology, and adding convenient off-season street parking. All of this has taken - or is taking - what seems like forever. For example, getting simple yet attractive string lights in the core resort has taken twenty years. And after begging many years for more public restrooms and even getting this in the city budget two years ago, we see no visible progress. Regarding free curbside parking on Atlantic Avenue in the off-season, policy is being discussed now in the Resort Area Mobility Plan Committee (RAMP) to replace street parking with a three block "pilot project" this fall. While the intent of the pilot to "activate" the area is laudable - and personally, I think we should make the sacrifice of these vital parking spaces to get a visual idea of this initiative (called Better Block) - only two west-side Atlantic Avenue operators sit on this committee of 25-30 people.

This kind of under-representation by core stakeholders on important committees and commissions is problematic and can result in poor policy. As far as free off-season curbside parking on Atlantic Avenue goes, it took over two decades of wrangling to get it. Why was this so hard? Any adjacent small business operator or customer will tell you they love it.

Bottom line: It shouldn't take decades and a pandemic crisis to get things done. It's not a stretch to hypothesize that the existing mechanism and process in which we presently operate in Virginia Beach, as it relates to the Resort Area, is broken. The Virginia Beach resort is a growing, diverse and increasingly urban area that will only become more-so as density of development progresses. **Unless this area adapts to this trend and becomes more nimble - with the community at the forefront - present issues will persist, and as time passes, likely worsen.**

Many resort stakeholders are disheartened and disillusioned, constantly trying to advance initiatives only to have them fall way short, go awry, take forever to get going, or never happen at all. While well-intended, a largely uninformed, detached city council decides the fate of the resort.

Unfortunately, poor decisions, such as prioritizing glamorous projects over dire resort infrastructure needs – compounded by many years of inaction and neglect - have done great damage to the image of Virginia Beach.

We must admit that it's also OUR fault as resort stakeholders that for many years we did not participate on important committees that decide our fate. This type of underrepresentation leads to neglect and speaks to the continuing critical need for an active/engaged Atlantic Avenue Association.

The time is ripe for change, and big changes are needed in the way things are decided and get done at the Virginia Beach resort. **If Virginia Beach residents and stakeholders don't seize this moment, there may not be another for a very long time.**

The good news is people are uniting – bar owners are working together with police, health, ABC and city officials to improve communication and technology and set better standards. This city is starting to act on pieces of the Resolution for Atlantic Avenue Infrastructure Improvements (Unfortunately, the TIP fund is fully committed – so funding anything scalable is not possible at this time.). And recently, on multiple occasions, I've heard top level city and public safety officials admit publicly that the core resort has been **neglected. The first step toward solutions is to acknowledge and accept the situation. It sounds like we're starting to do that.**

Along with our board and active AAA members, I look forward to working with city leadership not only to implement major, long overdue Atlantic Avenue infrastructure improvements, but to **help remake our way of doing business at the resort in a manner that is more balanced and benefits the resort business and residential community, as well as everyone in Virginia Beach and beyond.**

As always, united we stand!

George Kotarides
President Atlantic Avenue Association