

**Viva the Vital**  
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## Viva the Volunteers!

By John W. Martin

These days, many people and reporters are pointing to Baby Boomers as the problem. They borrowed too much, precipitating the current economic calamity. And they saved too little, making a future crisis all but inevitable when Uncle Sam strains to fund the retirement of millions of seniors who want to live like King Midas while lasting as long as Methuselah.

But for others, older Boomers are seen as manna from heaven. Not-for-profit leaders across the county foresee older Boomers ushering in a golden age of volunteerism in America, a time when Boomers lend not only their time, but their considerable experience, technical and managerial skills to transform under-funded and understaffed organizations into powerful civic enterprises.

Our generational research suggests that not-for-profit leaders' vision is well placed. Boomers say they want to remain engaged with society and their communities, and see their volunteering increase in the future. Boomers see a completely different "retirement" lifestyle than their parents' practice. Having spent over a third of their lives being educated, Boomers say they have no intention of letting their work experiences and talents molder when they reach the age of 65; many are already talking about the day when they intend to trade money for fulfillment. They see their post full-time careers as a time to find purpose and maintain their vitality by helping others. If properly engaged, Boomers could transform the not-for-profit sector, just as they transformed business enterprises and so many social movements from civil rights to gay rights.

As not-for-profits wait for the golden age of volunteerism to arrive, the strategic question before us is what can communities do now to ensure this future? We may have found the answer right here in our home town of Richmond, Va.

Last month, the Older Dominion Partnership (ODP) and the Community Foundation of Greater Richmond and Petersburg held the *Symposium on Boomer Engagement: The Future Wave of Volunteerism*. National and local civic engagement experts kicked off the meeting, followed by a presentation of recent findings from an Older Dominion Partnership-sponsored research study on volunteering in the Richmond region.

The research findings were organized around a question asked by Jim Ukrop at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch's* Public Square held on March 11, 2009: "What would it take to make our region one of the top cities for volunteering? When you put a Boomer lens on this question, the answer is 23,000 more Boomers.

According to the Corporation for National & Community Service, Richmond-area Boomers have an average volunteer rate of 32.8%, a sliver ahead of the Boomer national average at 31.2%. Based on this current rate of volunteering, our region has roughly 100,000 Boomer volunteers. Increasing our average to 40% adds 23,000, making Richmond compare favorably to pace-setting cities like Portland, Austin

and Salt Lake City. The ODP research study yielded 10 key insights into what it would take to achieve this goal. These imperatives fall two broad categories: what individual not-for-profits must do and what the not-for-profit sector as a whole must consider.

Insert chart at end of article here - see below

For a community to reach Top Five status, not-for-profits must cater to Boomer sensibilities by appealing to their core generational traits. This includes designing jobs that meet Boomers' inner needs of reward and fulfillment, offering meaningful work that reinforces Boomers' sense of self, and offering extremely flexible volunteer time commitments that give Boomers control over their schedules.

The second set of imperatives center on building the not-for-profit sector into a unified industry. The problem in the Richmond region, as with many regions, is that people don't know where to look. The research identified lack of awareness of volunteer opportunities as the second highest reason, after a lack of time, for why some Boomers do not volunteer.

While there are excellent online matching services such as Hands On Greater Richmond and Connect Richmond, portals where people can match their talents and interests with not-for-profit groups looking for volunteers, most people have never heard of them. Even aided name awareness is abysmal. The challenge ahead is to aggressively promote the volunteering clearinghouses we already have in place. In addition, we need to organize industry-wide training through tremendous resources like Greater Richmond Association of Volunteer Administration and the Partnership for Non-profit Excellence.

While these 10 imperatives may the region increase Boomer volunteerism, the most profound insight came from one of the symposium attendees. Following the research presentation, audience members were invited to comment upon what they had heard in the morning plenary session. One of the first to do so was Karl Cureton, representing St. Paul's Church. Stepping up to the microphone, he said:

*"I thought I was invited to a learning forum. What I now realize is that I have come to the ground floor of an initiative – one that will change our community. I suggest we adopt these imperatives to drive our industry forward."*

Others supported Mr. Cureton. Then someone called for the question: "How many here want to adopt these ten strategic imperatives and get focused on making Richmond a national model on volunteering?" No one in the room raised their hand. Everyone in room stood up and shouted yes! Lesson learned: it also takes a leader to incite a revolution. With Mr. Cureton signed up already, all we need are 22,999 more Boomer volunteers.

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Sidebar #2 box: Next week, the US will celebrate National Volunteer Week, April 19-25. This year's theme is "Celebrating People in Action."

RANK	CITY	STATE	VOLUNTEER HOURS
1	Salt Lake City	Utah	55.9
2	San Antonio	Texas	47.7
3	Seattle	Washington	46.9
4	Indianapolis	Indiana	46.8
5	Portland	Oregon	46.7
6	Washington	District of Columbia	46.3
7	Baltimore	Maryland	46.2
8	Minneapolis-St. Paul	Minnesota	45.7
9	Buffalo	New York	45.2
9	Kansas City	Missouri	45.2
11	Denver	Colorado	44.6
12	Sacramento	California	44
13	Birmingham	Alabama	43.3
14	Columbus	Ohio	43.1
15	San Diego	California	42
16	Austin	Texas	41.9
17	Charlotte	North Carolina	40.7
17	Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	40.7
19	Richmond	Virginia	39.9
20	Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	38.7
21	Houston	Texas	38.2
22	Atlanta	Georgia	38.1
22	Louisville	Kentucky	38.1
24	Phoenix	Arizona	37.4
25	St. Louis	Missouri	37.1
26	Hartford	Connecticut	36.2
27	Milwaukee	Wisconsin	35.9
28	Virginia Beach	Virginia	35.4
29	Tampa	Florida	34.8
30	Nashville	Tennessee	34.4

National ranking of Boomer volunteer rates among MSAs.

Source: Corporation for National & Community Service