

# Advancing the Baltimore-Washington-Richmond region

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) December 29, 2016



As 2016 drew to a close, word came that a new regional marketing initiative was being launched. Named the Greater Washington Partnership, the “greater” in this case signified a region stretching from Baltimore to Washington and on to Richmond.

My first reaction was, in the immortal words of Yogi Berra, “It’s déjà vu all over again.” I say this because, going back several decades, I was involved in the early phase of a similar mega-regional marketing program. It started about 1974 when then- (Baltimore) Regional Planning Council chairman Milton H. “Mickey” Miller asked David W. Barton, Jr. to head a recently created Regional Economic Task Force, for which I was the lead staff person.

Barton, who had previously served as the chair of Baltimore City’s Planning Commission, headed his own institutional marketing and public relations consulting firm. He took on Miller’s assignment with a full burst of energy.

## **A ‘Common Market’**

There was much in the news at that time of Europe’s Common Market, with Great Britain, after years of reluctance, having finally agreed to join with Germany, France and other western European nations to fortify the European Economic Union (EEU). Barton reasoned that the same logic that was behind the newly strengthened EEU, could be applied to local and regional economic development efforts.

Indeed, Barton insisted, Baltimore’s appeal would be so much stronger if it were part of a “Baltimore-Washington Common Market.” With that as the premise, a campaign was underway to persuade leaders in both business and government in the Baltimore and Washington areas to come on board with the concept.

A number of leaders in the private sector were receptive to the general notion. However, resistance was soon evident in the public sector, particularly in Baltimore’s City Hall under the leadership of Mayor William Donald Schaefer. The argument against this “Common Market” was that the political and economic cultures of Washington and Baltimore were just too different and would not mesh well.

Nevertheless, Miller and Barton continued to push ahead with the initiative, and it gained enough traction that it led to the formation of a new entity, the Washington Baltimore Regional Association. The WBRA was, in the words of its executive director, David L. Winstead, “a

private-sector economic development alliance of real estate and financial interests in these two metropolitan areas.”

With his small staff, Winstead, who would later serve as Maryland’s secretary of transportation, issued well-researched reports on key sectors in the regional economy and pushed for wider recognition of the strengths of the bi-metropolitan area. Then, a few years after the 1980 U.S. Census had been concluded and analyzed, the federal Office of Management and Budget officially designated the Washington-Baltimore area as a consolidated metropolitan region. The WBRA promptly declared victory ... and inexplicably ... closed up shop.

### **Today’s challenges**

From the initial press reports, the Greater Washington Partnership is looking for more than symbolic victories. Growing out of the recent bid to host the 2024 Olympics games in the region, the current effort has brought together leading figures from the worlds of business, sports and academia to elevate the “economic brand” of this nationally significant swath of the Northeast Corridor. Leading the Partnership is Russ Ramsey, the head of Ramsey Asset Management, a hedge fund based in Reston, Virginia. Among the Baltimore area leaders who have aligned with the initiative are Johns Hopkins University president Ronald J. Daniels, Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank and T. Rowe Price Group President and CEO Bill Stromberg.

While the partnership is not ready to commit to specific plans or projects, the leadership is clearly focusing on such issues as strategic transportation investments (for example, high speed rail); innovative approaches to workforce development that will make the region more attractive to current and future employers; and marketing strategies that will raise the profile of the Baltimore-Washington-Richmond megaregion on a global platform. Perhaps, the partnership would also be willing to tackle an issue truly involving the economic vitality of the Maryland, D.C. and Virginia region: finding a viable long-term funding arrangement for Washington’s under resourced Metro system.

Now while all of these ideas are percolating, there is the reality that each of the component metropolitan regions have had their respective economic development marketing organizations, specifically, the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore, the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the Greater Richmond Partnership. Each of these groups has staked out its own priorities and strategies to advance its respective regions. How they will operate individually going forward and mesh collectively should be the subject of very interesting conversations in 2017 and beyond.

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