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A Legacy in Development

After nearly two decades as EDA chairman, renowned architect R. Anderson “Rick” Moberg is passing the torch

By Melissa James, York County Contributor Though he’s stepping down just shy of the 20-year mark as Economic Development Authority chairman, there’s nothing shy about Rick Moberg. He has determinedly pursued new business opportunities for the County, from persuading companies to locate here to revitalizing older commercial areas. Oh, and he also swims with sharks.

For this scuba enthusiast and former Eagle Scout, going to great lengths (and depths) is second nature. When Rick was first appointed to the EDA in 1996, he was already a successful architect and active in community organizations including The Rotary Club. He saw the EDA as a new opportunity to do something beyond himself. Five years later, he was elected chairman. With this position, though, came a greater demand on his time.

“It requires that you go to a large number of EDA activities—luncheons for education, public events, engaging with businesses in need. But it’s been a really fabulous role for me, and I’ve enjoyed it,” he said.

The balancing act became even more pronounced in 2004, when Rick decided to launch his own business, James River Architects. But once again, he rose to the challenge.

“We hit the ground running, with a tremendous workload,” he said. “My dream came true!”



Rick Moberg (center) chats with Mark Rinaldi (left) and Sam Stratton at the EDA's Distinguished Business Affair in 2019.



Rick's architectural expertise has been a valuable asset to the EDA over the years, as it worked to develop land for commercial use and repurpose aging structures. One of Rick's most treasured projects, he said, was the Yorktown Riverwalk. At the time, Water Street was run down, with few small businesses. One has been wiped out during Hurricane Isabel. The Board of Supervisors approved a plan to create a new village in that area. Not only did Rick help bring the project to life, but he ended up joining the team to design and build it (though, he points out, he recused himself from EDA votes regarding anything financial for the project).

"We worked with WM Jordan to build all the little shops. It's so nice to go down there now," he said. "The Riverwalk went through some transitions initially, but now it's near full occupancy and is a real hub. The Freight Shed is part of that, as a great venue for functions. It has really revitalized that entire waterfront."

He's also proud of the successful beautification project along Route 17, in which the EDA offered grants businesses that needed a facelift or repair.

"We've done studies to chart the potential building sites along the corridor. We have one site up on 17 that the County purchased, demolished rundown structures, and earmarked for a new restaurant. The restaurateur has done a design and has a great menu planned," he said. "And anytime a business comes into the area, we can quickly reference available land or land for sale that can be repurposed."

For his work on Riverwalk Landing, Rick won an Excellence in Development Design Award from The Hampton Roads Association for Commercial Real Estate in 2005.



York River Commerce Park was another important success—and was actually the impetus for Rick being asked to join the EDA. He explained how he had constructed the “commercial shell building” for the park, which in the architectural world means completing the basic elements of a building (roof, walls, some plumbing) but leaving the details untouched until a tenant is found.

“The purpose is to lure a business that wants to come into the jurisdiction. You’re offering a complete envelope for what they need, so it cuts out the normal process for clearing land, building, etc. They can occupy in extremely short order,” he said.

Unsurprisingly, Rick has been instrumental in the new data center set to be constructed at the park next year. He began working with the EDA on the site plan several years ago, skillfully negotiating the many necessary approvals involved for permits, EPA

regulations and other hurdles. The high-tech “cloud” facility will be an enormous revenue source for York County.

Rick says he is also encouraged to see the new Tradewins program getting off the ground. Created in partnership with York County School Division, Tradewins is a workforce development initiative Rick hopes will connect students with local businesses through mentorships and other career opportunities.

“A lot of these are more labor focused,” he said, “so students can look forward to a nice income. Everyone is so versed on college being the way to be successful.”

The USS Monitor Center at the Mariners’ Museum, which won Rick’s firm two architecture awards.



Speaking of success, while Rick was busy developing the County's business base, he was also working to grow his firm. James River Architects has gained a loyal following across the region, with many repeat contracts from its client base. Notable projects have included medical facilities (CHKD Health Center-Oyster Point, Hampton Roads Surgical Specialists), schools (An Achievable Dream, Hampton Roads Academy additions), six YMCA projects, two large rec centers for the City of Newport News, and most recently, aircraft hangars (Smithfield Foods, Orion Air Group).

His biggest architectural achievements, though, were the USS Monitor Center at the Mariners' Museum and the Ferguson Bath, Kitchen & Lighting Gallery, both of which picked up a stack of awards. James River Architects stays ahead of the competition not only for its design brilliance, but also its specialized process:

"We model all our projects in physical 3D, and now we're also adding BIM (Building Information Modeling), which gives you 3D electronic representation of your building. Very few firms build physical models anymore," he said. "So when I do a design, I start off in sketching, then put it in computer format, then we're able to create the building elevation, materials and colors, then assemble the model. Most companies do that later, but we start with it. I first present the model for the client when we meet, and it's successful because it's something they can visualize."

Rick's company currently has six employees—four of them architects. At home, though, it's down to only two: Rick and his wife, Jan. The kids are all grown now, leaving them plenty of time to travel and spend time on the water every chance they can. They live in the same house Rick built 40 years ago, on a 3.5-acre plot in Dare. Jan is a retired hospital chaplain, and she currently serves as a patient advocate at Mary Immaculate Hospital while working on two books about her experiences as a chaplain.

Rick and Jan are proud of their large, blended family, with a combined seven children and soon-to-be 12 grandchildren. Most of the grandkids live in Hampton Roads and love to come out on Gramps' boat. Rick and Jan frequently go to the Caribbean to scuba dive, and readily go down 60-70 feet to observe sharks.

Rick on one of his shark-diving excursions in the Caribbean.





Rick with wife Jan, a patient advocate and retired hospital chaplain.

This life of adventure and influence all stemmed from the hopes of a 6-year-old boy—when Rick first realized he wanted to become an architect.

“My dad was a NASA engineer and my uncle was an architect,” he said. “I was always fascinated with drawing, so when we’d visit my uncle each year at his mountain home, I would watch him drawing his plans. I also watched my dad drawing engineering plans.” He never wavered from that ambition. At age 16, Rick began a two-year stint as an office boy for an architecture firm. When he started at Virginia Tech, he continued working there during his summer breaks. Rick finished his degree, got his credentials and became licensed in seven states. He would go on to become president of that company, before breaking away to start his own.

While Rick’s architecture career shows no signs of slowing, he’ll soon have fewer EDA responsibilities as he steps down from the chairmanship. Rick will pass the torch to current vice chair Steve Meade—a business and transactional attorney with Patten Wornom Hatten & Diamonstein.

“I first met Steve when he was doing legal work for my company, which was during the same time he appointed to the EDA,” he said. “He was a logical next person in line for chairmanship. I think Steve’s legal background fostered him nicely to take on this position. The EDA is typically a blend of all types of businesses—we have an architect, lawyer, banker, electrical contractor, auto body shop owner, general contractor, and a retired assistant county administrator. It’s a diverse group.”

Rick remains devoted to the EDA and York County’s future.

“EDAs make it more expedient to approach potential projects and bring businesses in,” he said. “I think a lot of people misunderstand how EDAs work,” he said. “They don’t understand incentive projects and how they are proportional to bringing a business into the community ... the tax benefit goes straight to County resources! It also gives potential employment to citizens, who then go out and eat, drink and live in the County.”

“Being on the EDA has been a really good way to connect with people in the community and do things for them. Serving as chairman has been an honor.”