

## WHERE THE NEWSPAPER STANDS

[FINAL Edition]

Daily Press - Newport News, Va.

Date: Jun 5, 2005

Start Page: H.2

Section: OUTLOOK

Text Word Count: 1126

### Document Text

*Copyright Chicago Tribune Co. Jun 5, 2005*

Changing place

In Oyster Point, a new view of Newport News is taking shape

If, when you looked at the large photo on the cover of today's Outlook section, you didn't think "Newport News," well then, you need to get on board. Because that's Newport News. "City Center at Oyster Point," to be precise.

Rather lovely, isn't it?

And while some pictures may be worth 1,000 words, the one on the cover is definitely valued in the millions of dollars.

According to the city, public and private investment in City Center now totals around \$220 million, with \$82 million being public, meaning tax dollars. Almost a third of the public money is going for a conference center associated with the Marriott Hotel now under construction.

Any mixing of public and private dollars in such large ventures is sure to find a critic somewhere. Yet that's a small cost to pay. Here's a big number: \$10.5 million.

That's about how much local tax revenue is now generated annually by the Oyster Point business park. Now that's the entire park, not the substantially smaller City Center. But how much more is the property in the rest of the park worth because of the development of City Center? How much more desirable -- and profitable -- is a location in Oyster Point because of the fountain, the public space, the restaurants and the residential units that are coming as part of the City Center development?

Hard, perhaps impossible, to say, but the dollars and cents equation must be considered within the context of a larger issue: the sense of place that defines Newport News. Which gets back to that picture on the cover.

Newport News is a long, stringy city, with an array of neighborhoods as sharply different as night from day. The East End defines Newport News as much as the old downtown, as Beaconsdale, as Hidenwood, as Denbigh, as Lee Hall. And if you take the sum of those parts, what do you get? A collection of neighborhoods. But no public space, no dominant core that serves the same function that the old downtown did before the heart and soul of the city moved to the suburbs.

Yet cities need downtowns. Centers of activity. Mixing bowls of public and private enterprise, helping to create a shared definition of a community and a sense of place.

What single picture would you have put on the cover of today's Outlook section to offer as a visual image capturing a sense of place that defines Newport News?

The intersection of Jefferson Avenue and Oyster Point Road?

Or the view up the James River from a vantage point at Huntington Park?

A deteriorating commercial strip in Denbigh?

Or a shot of The Mariners' Museum taken from one of the overlooks on Lake Maury?

One can imagine countless spots both lovely and depressing, but nothing that you would think of as defining the core of Newport News. Unless you already think of City Center as defining that core.

It's unlikely that many do, but that's going to change. Not as rapidly as the landscape of City Center, but change it will.

No doubt there are urban experts who can provide a list of cities that have literally changed the location of their downtown. The guess here is that it's a short list.

Newport News is -- has been -- rebuilding its downtown in a new place. The courts are still in the old downtown. So, too, are the City Hall and the City Council meeting space, although that makes less and less sense.

But in the real and practical sense, Oyster Point is the center of the city, a downtown in the center of the string bean. It has been for years, but a mishmash of a center with nothing distinctive to define it -- to give it a sense of place. City Center at Oyster Point is changing that, and in a very dramatic way.

More car tax

NN is poised to hike the tax Gilmore wanted to get rid of

Jim Gilmore made it sound simple in 1997, when the slogan "No car tax" got him elected governor. But here we are, eight years later, and there's still a car tax. And guess what? Newport News is thinking about raising it.

Here's where a little review is necessary: The car tax was a local tax paid directly to localities by car owners, with the amount of tax based on the value of the car and the rate imposed by that locality. Gilmore wasn't actually eliminating the tax. Instead, he was using state tax dollars to pay localities for what they would have gotten from residents. The amount the car owner paid was to be phased out, while the state payment was phased in. Gilmore's program applied only to the first \$20,000 in value of personal vehicles, and only at rates in effect at a certain date. Any higher tax resulting from an increase in the rate after that date would not qualify for relief. The assumption was that no locality would dare raise the rate after Gilmore got elected running against the tax.

So much for assumptions. Since 1997, two dozen counties, one city and 10 towns have hiked the tax rate on vehicles. By proposing to do the same, Newport News would only be adding its name to an already lengthy list.

And for good reason -- to more evenly balance the tax burden. Newport News proposes to raise the rate on cars while lowering the rate on real estate. Homeowners would have their burden eased somewhat; car owners would see a slight increase. Some might not like that approach, but it's a defensible position -- and the kind of decision that local elected officials are perfectly able to make based on the unique economic conditions facing their community.

All of this occurs with the phaseout of the car tax stuck at 70 percent, because the state, in assigning priorities to its obligations, decided it didn't have enough money to meet Gilmore's promise. And it occurs as the leading candidates for governor -- Republican Jerry Kilgore and Democrat Tim Kaine -- now propose messing with the tax on real estate, the backbone of local revenue.

It's laughable. Even as the state makes a hash of its effort to take away one local tax, the candidates now propose to attack another source of local revenue.

No, it's not laughable. It's foolish and, ultimately, dangerous because the implications can't be fully understood.

Candidates for governor ought to know better. They ought to focus on getting state government's house in order. Until that glorious day arrives, localities would be better off without the kind of "help" Kilgore and Kaine are offering. \*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

If, when you looked at the large photo on the cover of today's Outlook section, you didn't think "Newport News," well then, you need to get on board. Because that's Newport News. "City Center at Oyster Point," to be precise.

Newport News is a long, stringy city, with an array of neighborhoods as sharply different as night from day. The East End defines Newport News as much as the old downtown, as Beaconsdale, as Hidenwood, as Denbigh, as Lee Hall. And if you take the sum of those parts, what do you get? A collection of neighborhoods. But no public space, no dominant core that serves the same function that the old downtown did before the heart and soul of

the city moved to the suburbs.

Here's where a little review is necessary: The car tax was a local tax paid directly to localities by car owners, with the amount of tax based on the value of the car and the rate imposed by that locality. [Jim Gilmore] wasn't actually eliminating the tax. Instead, he was using state tax dollars to pay localities for what they would have gotten from residents. The amount the car owner paid was to be phased out, while the state payment was phased in. Gilmore's program applied only to the first \$20,000 in value of personal vehicles, and only at rates in effect at a certain date. Any higher tax resulting from an increase in the rate after that date would not qualify for relief. The assumption was that no locality would dare raise the rate after Gilmore got elected running against the tax.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.