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Trani panel set to explore region's future

By Will Jones | TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Ex-VCU president said he's making a three-year commitment to start the privately funded think tank.

Retired Virginia Commonwealth University President Eugene P. Trani said he's making a three-year commitment to start a nonprofit, privately funded think tank that will explore critical issues for the future of the Richmond region.

The group, called Richmond's Future, was established last week in filings with the State Corporation Commission. Trani will serve as executive director and board chairman but will draw no salary.

So far, nearly 70 corporate and institutional leaders, including Richmond Times-Dispatch Publisher Thomas A. Silvestri, have agreed to serve as directors or members of the group's research and advisory panels.

"I have thought for a long time -- and I'm not alone, it turns out -- that a missing piece is a research organization that can concentrate on the opportunities and challenges of the Richmond metropolitan area," Trani said.

Richmond's Future is expected to conduct two or three studies per year, usually



Former VCU President Eugene P. Trani said more research is needed to plot the region's future.

drawing on local expertise, rather than out-of-town consultants.

The first project is expected to be launched this fall and could look at what infrastructure the region will need -- everything from professional expertise to roads to institutions -- in order to thrive in 20 years.

Trani cited a similar focused study done recently for the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina.

"This is where the competition is," he said.

Another possible study could consider the expansion of Fort Lee in Prince George County and what should be done to integrate the burgeoning Army logistics center into the region.

"I don't hear an awful lot of talk in Richmond about Fort Lee, and there should be, because that's a new city they're creating down there," Trani said.

Richmond's Future marks a re-emergence for Trani, who retired last July after leading VCU for 19 years -- a period marked by transformational growth and occasional controversy. He now serves the university as president emeritus and as a distinguished professor.

Trani said he has talked with leaders of region-focused groups, such as the Greater Richmond Chamber, Greater Richmond Partnership, Richmond Regional Planning District Commission, Capital Region Collaborative and Federal Reserve Bank, and confirmed a need for a forward-looking study group.

However, Trani's think tank already is getting its first test. Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones said the leaders of Richmond's Future should reflect the broader community.

"Bringing the regional institutions together is a commendable undertaking," Jones said in a statement.

"However, any vision development for the future should be well-balanced. It concerns me that there does not appear to be any representation that would provide the city's grass-roots perspective or its governmental perspective. I look forward to having the opportunity to provide some input."

Trani said he's committed to working closely with local officials but said they aren't being asked for funding and will be represented to a degree on the board of directors by Robert Crum, executive director of the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission.

"These things, where they're most successful, consult with government officials but do not have government officials on the board," he said.

Richmond's Future is expected to operate on a \$150,000 annual budget that will be funded by a dozen or so corporations and individuals and perhaps the Community Foundation. Trani declined to provide a breakdown of the funders.

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Richmond's Future: directors, advisers, research council

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Richmond's Future

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