

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE BIT OF REALISM

Example: The Cultural Center was dreamed by a handful of Suffolk residents who sensed that their beloved downtown had become a dinosaur. The idea had merit and; alumni were the first to be solicited. They responded, some generously, others what they could. Then the "founders" realized the enormity of their dream and convinced city hall it could invigorate the city by offering an opportunity for the citizens to learn art like making pottery, oil and acrylic paintings, watercolors, photography, cooking skills, acting, shows, and etc. It's called "culture."

Council, on its own, agreed to foot the balance and handed the founders several million dollars to keep it from becoming a hundred year project. Then, without a word to us, they agreed to an annual million gift of our taxes. Dollars went to hire a high priced "Director" who now has an assistant. I have no idea what this dream has already cost me but I know there is no end to it. The skills they will teach are things I, and thousands of others, learned by ourselves. It boils down to crafts, small theater, meeting room, gift shop, and the Department of Recreation. Some of those millions would have restored the now useless bridge. But it will be a beautiful building.

Downtown is not "pulsing with excitement" as Tourist pamphlets describe it. There is a rush of auto and pedestrian traffic at noon when everyone breaks for lunch. There are plenty of eateries, (eating each other up: Pisces closed for lunch) a few upscale for "dining out"...and that's it. Of course there are the usual retail places every small town has but many of them have disappeared even with the Cultural Center looming on the horizon. The streets don't pulse at night.

Other dreamers have convinced Council that our Division Of Tourism, cart before the horse, should have a budget of \$460,000. (Equivalent to 153 property taxpayers paying \$3000 each) Why? No tourists stand in line to see the Railroad Station. Not all citizens of Suffolk have visited Riddicks Folly. Many suspect tourist counts at the Visitor's Center are padded; yet if 8400 is accurate that's 23 a day, no stampede warranting millions to restore the Courthouse. How many hotels, motels and eateries are actually doing better because of tourists? Our tourism staff of four is hard at work attempting to create a silk purse.

Is Historical Suffolk unique? What city in the south doesn't have a history? Mr. Hobb's book provides accurate information and is in print. I have visited too many cities listening to tour directors describe architecture and citizens of consequence...info immediately melting away, forgotten like water off a duck's back. I can pick up Mr. Hobb's book any time I need to see pictures similar to scenes I saw as a boy...I'd guess every city in America began exactly as did Suffolk, on a wide spot in a road or on the bank of a river...though probably minus Civil War generals and battlefields.

It's true that people get bored sitting at home, jump in the car and get away at least for a day. But, honestly, what's in Suffolk? A lunch and gas stop on the way to somewhere else...depending primarily on the gas gauge. I'd head for 16 choices of a movie in Harbor View, or an Imax in Hampton, or a beach at the ocean, a ballgame in Norfolk, taking an out of town guest to see the Wisconsin. We really try to do our shopping in Suffolk and believe that's how a town prospers and local taxes shrink. But, honestly, downtown is too far and not at all interesting...I spend more time in doctor's offices on Mead Parkway. The Tour Director says it is desirable that "Tourists come, buy gas, eat, and go home." The budget is \$460,000; so where are they?