

10-6-2003

Richmond Needs a 'Face of the City'

Thomas J. Shields

University of Richmond, tshields@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/spcs-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shields, Thomas J. "Richmond Needs a 'Face of the City'." Editorial. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 6, 2003.

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Professional and Continuing Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Professional and Continuing Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

ENOUGH STATUS QUO

Richmond Needs a 'Face of the City'

As Hurricane Isabel was bearing down on the City of Richmond on a recent Thursday morning, I was speaking to the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce. I had been asked to speak about my membership on the City Council-appointed Commission for Richmond's Government. As I spoke I could see the trees blowing wildly and the rain pelting the windows. Little did we know the damage to our City that would be caused by Ms. Isabel.



**TOM
SHIELDS**
* * *

After Isabel had passed, the leaders of states and localities affected by the storm were out in their respective communities "feeling the pain" of their constituents and trying to assist in the recovery. Mayors in the District of Columbia and Baltimore were in neighborhoods meeting with residents and showing compassion as only a mayor can. They visited communities in which homes were destroyed by fallen trees or where rising water had forced evacuations.

In response to his role as an empathizer, Mayor Anthony Williams of D.C. said, "You're the public face of the city's response. You're the chief official in the

city. You actually do have a lot of authority." As I scanned the Richmond newspaper and listened to the radio by candlelight, I wondered where was our "chief official" responding to our post-Isabel needs? More important, who was our "face of the city" that we could look to for help?

These are questions that have been at the heart of the discussion of the at-large Mayor issue. It was why some members of the Commission on Richmond's Government fought for a report that would include a proposal for an at-large Mayor elected by the people. Unfortunately, we were not successful in convincing others on the Commission to issue this type of a report. Instead, what was advocated in the report sent to City Council was a continuation of the *status quo*.

THIS *STATUS quo* is where constituents cannot look to a "face of the city" — the Mayor — for assistance or empathy. This *status quo* is a City Manager whom the people do not control. This *status quo* is a weak, ceremonial Mayor who is selected by members of the City Council, not by the people. This *status quo* is balkanization by city wards, where there is too much reliance on what is best for the city's wards rather than the for City as a whole. Finally, this *status quo* is a tendency to talk about what has occurred in the past instead of

The Wilder-Bliley Commission has proposed changes to the City Charter that would, among other things, allow for direct election of a mayor by the voters. Because this topic merits broad discussion, the Op/Ed Page is designating space for 500-word submissions — on all sides of the issue — between now and November.



opting for a progressive solution for the future of our City.

Richmonders are tired of looking at other cities where a chief executive officer duly elected by the people takes control of a situation and is accountable for his/her actions. If Richmonders were discouraged or distraught over any issue that affected the entire City — be it rising property taxes, increasing crime, or the aftermath of the worst storm in a century — whom could we look to for a response? Whom could we hold accountable, as the constituents in D.C. can hold Mayor Williams accountable and those in Baltimore can hold Martin O'Malley accountable? Who would be our "face of the city"?

■ *Thomas J. Shields is a professor at the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies.*