

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES:
RESILIENCE
*in Virginia's
Historic Triangle*

JUNE 2025

Prepared by Institute for Engagement & Negotiation
for the RAFT Process in the Historic Triangle

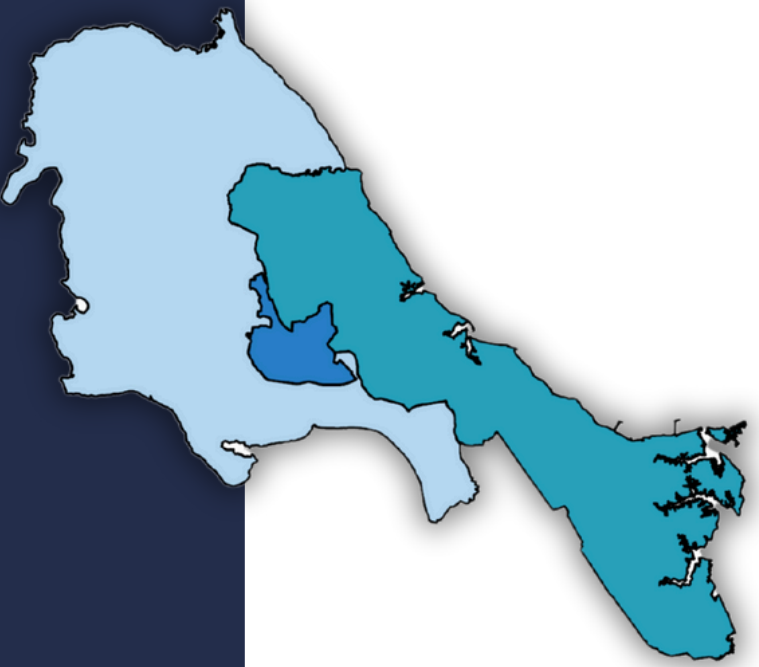


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, the Resilience Adaptation Feasibility Tool (RAFT) partnered with York County, James City County, and the City of Williamsburg—collectively known as the “Historic Triangle”—to assess regional resilience and support the advancement of high-priority resilience goals. This qualitative summary complements the RAFT Scorecard’s quantitative findings by capturing the lived experiences and insights of 52 community leaders, local government staff, nonprofit representatives, and service providers.



Through 27 interviews, one focus group, and 20 survey responses, participants shared their perspectives on the region’s capacity to anticipate threats, reduce vulnerabilities, and recover from both acute hazards and chronic stressors. These individuals represented 25 organizations and agencies that serve the Historic Triangle daily (see Appendix A).

This report synthesizes their input into four key resilience themes:



Service-Oriented Community

The region is characterized by strong collaboration among nonprofits, local governments, and community members. However, service providers are increasingly strained by funding cuts and growing community needs.



Economic Disparities

The region’s tourism-driven economy relies heavily on low-wage, hourly jobs, creating a stark divide between service workers and higher-income residents. Vulnerable neighborhoods face compounded challenges, including limited access to healthcare, food, and transportation.



Demographic Shifts

A growing retirement population brings both opportunities and challenges. While retirees contribute to volunteerism and philanthropy, many of them may eventually require services they can no longer afford.



Access and Affordability

Affordable housing remains a critical issue, particularly in rural areas lacking public infrastructure. Many residents struggle to access essential services due to limited public transit, language barriers, and geographic isolation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the Resilience Adaptation Feasibility Tool (RAFT) partnered with the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission and three localities - York County, James City County, and the City of Williamsburg, collectively known as the “Historic Triangle”- to assess regional resilience and support the advancement of high-priority resilience goals. The RAFT process includes an assessment of resilience through The RAFT Scorecard quantitative analysis and a qualitative evaluation of regional resilience from community leaders, local government staff, nonprofit representatives, and service providers representing diverse interests. This qualitative summary complements the RAFT Scorecard’s quantitative findings by capturing the the community perspectives on regional resilience.

Working closely with local governments, the Institute for Engagement & Negotiation (IEN) at the University of Virginia began the process by identifying key stakeholders for this assessment. The list expanded as each participant recommended others to be interviewed. With over 80 people invited to participate, the goal was to hear a broad representation of perspectives from organizations, community service groups, and local government staff knowledgeable about the region and providing essential services to residents.

Participants were asked a series of 10 questions (see Appendix C) related to their perception of the region’s capacity to anticipate threats, reduce vulnerabilities, and respond to and recover from hazardous events and chronic stresses. Overall, 27 interviews, one focus group with five participants, and 20 survey responses were conducted, totaling 52 participants (some participated in more than one format). These community leaders represented 25 departments, organizations, and institutions (see Participant Analysis). Their perspectives are offered here as an additional source of information to support community discussion, not as a definitive or conclusive resource.

Respondents were given the following definition of resilience:

“*A resilient community is one that can anticipate threats, reduce vulnerabilities, and respond to and recover from hazardous events and chronic stresses.*”

Key Resilience Theme 1: Service-Oriented Community



One of the overriding strengths highlighted by participants was the collaboration among nonprofits serving the region. The service-orientation of the community is a defining characteristic to many in the Historic Triangle. Nothing exemplified this strength more than the region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it was the partnership between local governments, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the Health District to distribute vaccines, or the food pantry deliveries made by the Arc of Greater Williamsburg's vans, participants repeatedly told stories about their community coming together to assist both local residents and others who had experienced tragedy, such as aid packages sent to Southwest Virginia after Hurricane Helene.

There is great pride in the investment that residents make in the community through volunteerism and philanthropic giving. Another aspect of this service orientation is how nonprofits often pool resources, valuing collaboration over individual credit, as demonstrated by the Greater Williamsburg Trauma-Informed Community Network.

“*There is also strong collaboration across sectors with minimal siloing of agencies, and a strong philanthropic spirit coupled with a commitment to volunteerism.*”

One organization pointed out that the extent of need within the region is a large part of why this service-orientation exists. And one motivating factor towards collaboration is that many service providers are overburdened, and with recent federal funding cuts

and rising inflation, there are significant concerns about losing already overstretched dollars. And as many respondents explained, while not all areas in need may see robust collaboration amongst their nonprofits, a creative and collaborative service provider ecosystem can indicate community needs that are far greater than the capacity of the nonprofits. This can become such a stretch on service providers that organizational and individual burnout exhausts the system.



Courtesy of York County

Key Resilience Theme 2: Economic Disparities



Participants repeatedly highlighted economic resilience as a major challenge in the region. Economic resilience is tenuous because the region's tourism-driven economy relies heavily on service-oriented, low-wage, and hourly jobs. A noticeable disparity exists between residents in these service roles and those in higher-paid, salaried positions. Over 50% of participants mentioned socioeconomic concerns, including wage work and tourism as well as language and social barriers.

Although many take pride in the region's cultural assets, such as Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown, several challenges have arisen from the tourism industry they contribute to:

- **Housing affordability:** Large wage disparities mean that much of the housing stock is vastly unaffordable for those in service industry positions.
- **Service deserts:** Neighborhoods that are more affordable for hourly workers are often underserved and lacking amenities and services such as grocery stores and medical care. One area repeatedly pointed to as a “service desert” was the Grove Neighborhood in James City County. Others included Chickahominy Road and Lackey.

Vulnerable Neighborhoods

Among the areas most highlighted by participants as the most vulnerable in the region were Chickahominy Road in upper James City County, the Grove Neighborhood in lower James City County, and Lackey, adjacent to the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station. Grove, in particular, was referenced as one of the most vulnerable in the region. The neighborhood has significant structural barriers such as aging and limited infrastructure, geographic isolation, and lack of medical services, green spaces, and access to groceries. According to one participant, more than 77% of mobile homes in the county are located in the Grove neighborhood. Participants frequently noted that vulnerable and underserved communities lack reliable access to healthcare, food, and other essential services, and many are isolated linguistically as well as physically due to unreliable and inconsistent public transit options.

MAP 1: VULNERABLE NEIGHBORHOODS HIGHLIGHTED BY PARTICIPANTS



Source: participant responses

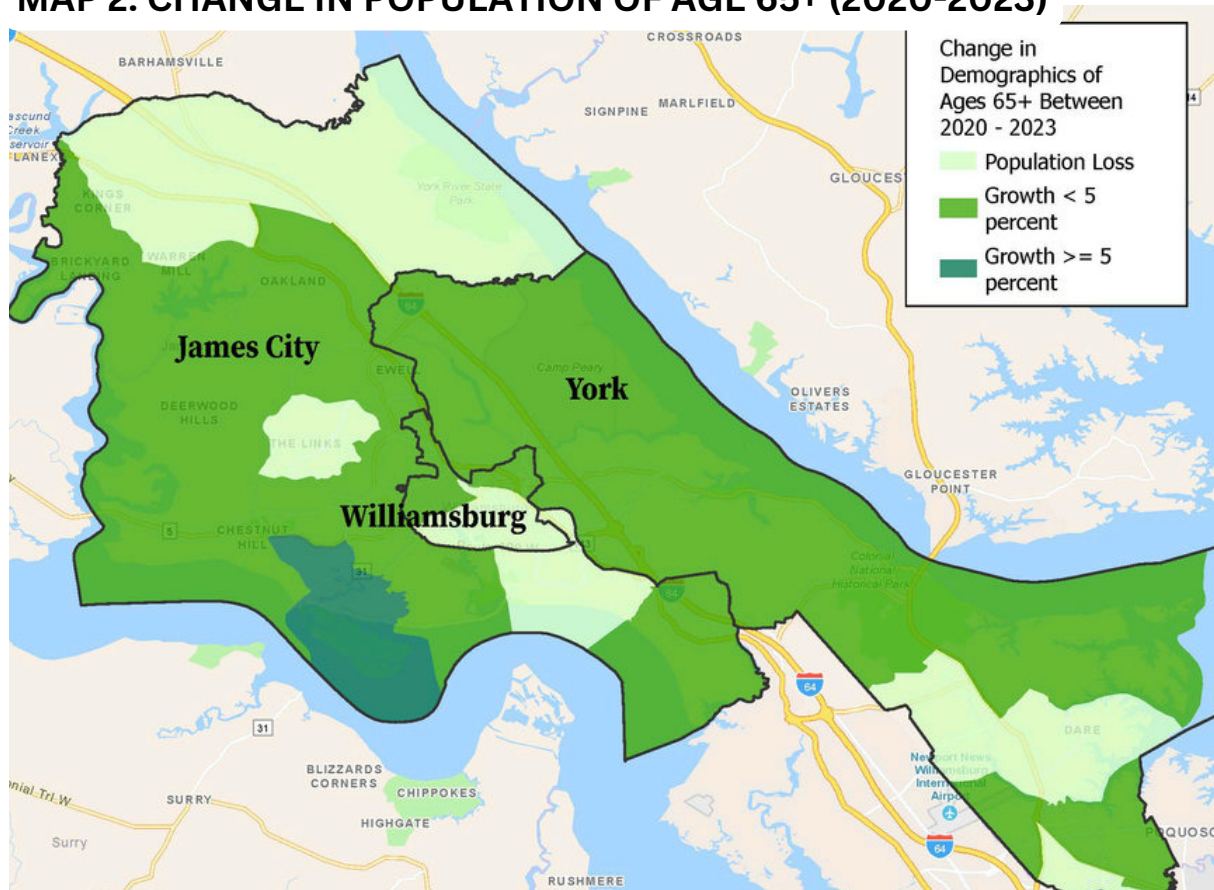
Key Resilience Theme 3: Demographic Shifts



Another theme that impacts the region’s resilience is the region’s shifting age demographics. One participant called the area a “retirement mecca.” This shift can create a robust community of engaged volunteers and philanthropists; however, others noted that those who may move to the region with wealth may also “outlive their money” and end up needing services.

Map 2 shows the pockets of the region that have quickly grown in their retirement populations. There also are pockets of the community that experienced a loss of retirement populations in the 2020 to 2023 timeframe. These changes are difficult to fully characterize, but some participants offered that there’s been a boom in retirement and assisted living facilities in James City County and that the region as a whole suffers from a lack of workforce for in-home care. These factors may be causing clustering of retirement age residents. Additionally, the lack of in-home care aids could contribute to elderly residents moving in with family – in and outside of the region.

MAP 2: CHANGE IN POPULATION OF AGE 65+ (2020-2023)



Source: American Community Survey Dataset

Key Resilience Theme 4: Access and Affordability



While many praised the work of service providers in the region, including their ability to cooperate for greater impact, many participants pointed to a need far greater than they could ever hope to fill. Two structural barriers were identified as key reasons why this need exists and why some have a harder time accessing services.

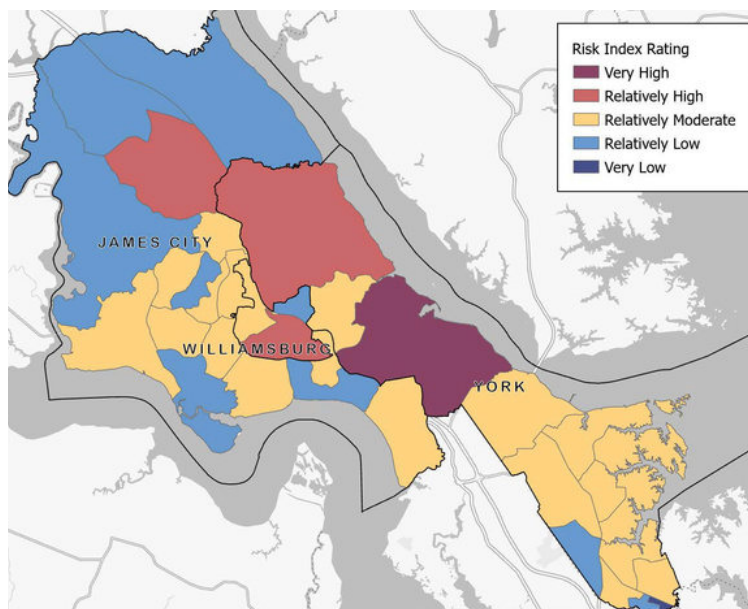
Affordability

Like many regions throughout the Commonwealth, the Historic Triangle is struggling with lack of affordable housing. In rural parts of the region, escalating housing costs may be particularly challenging where public water and sewer are not available and private wells and septic systems are the responsibility of the homeowners. For cost-burdened households, maintenance and repairs can be a prohibitive financial challenge. James City County has sought to provide some relief through a grant program to support septic pump-outs for qualified households as part of a larger effort to improve water quality. Unfortunately, the need for this program outweighs the availability of funds, and no funds are available to assist with the costs of replacement or maintenance of failing wells and septic systems.

According to participants, the affordability issue is twofold: (1) housing options throughout the Historic Triangle are not affordable relative to the low wage jobs offered by the service industry and (2) the housing stock has associated costs that exceed the ability of cost-burdened households. Affordability is greatly impacted as well by vulnerability to and frequency of hazards in the area. The costs associated

with rebuilding infrastructure and homes can raise insurance rates and make lenders more cautious, making homeownership all the more inaccessible for cost-burdened households.

MAP 3: RISK OF NATURAL HAZARDS



Source: FEMA (<https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/map#>)

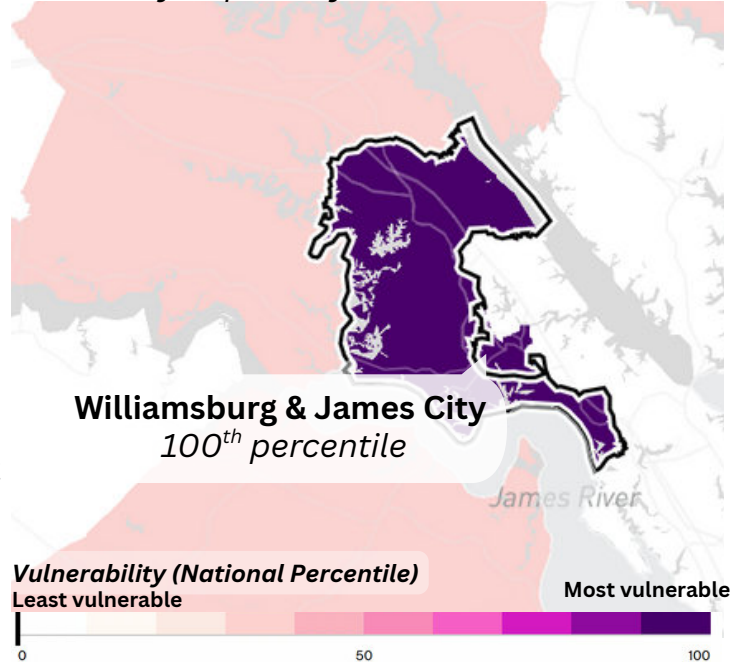
Map 3 note: FEMA calculates their national risk index (NRI) as a composite of a tract's social vulnerability, expected annual loss, and community resilience rating. You can learn more about their methodology at: <https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/determining-risk>

Access

A second structural barrier that compounds the region's vulnerability is lack of access to services. Many service providers spoke about residents who couldn't reach them due to limited public transit options. Some participants highlighted that they could not reach some communities because of linguistic barriers and fears around citizenship status. This access issue is not just about limited inter-regional transportation to existing services but also insufficient services, such as medical services, for the population needs within the region (see map 4).

MAP 4: MEDICALLY UNDERSERVED AREAS

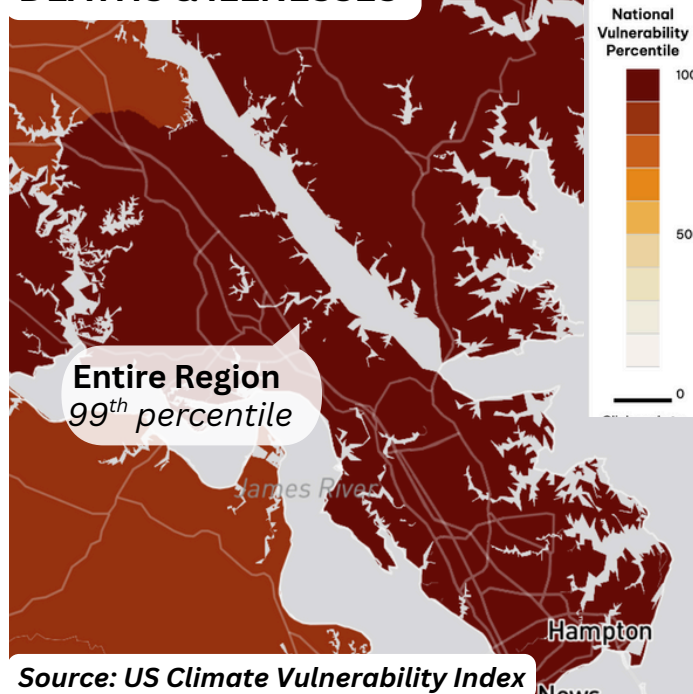
Availability of primary care / medical services.



Source: US Climate Vulnerability Index

Participants noted that some pockets within the region face significant barriers to reach existing resources such as grocery stores, food banks, medical offices, and jobs. This is in the context of the larger region, which, as a whole, also struggles to access key services.

MAP 5: AIR POLLUTION RELATED DEATHS & ILLNESSES



Source: US Climate Vulnerability Index

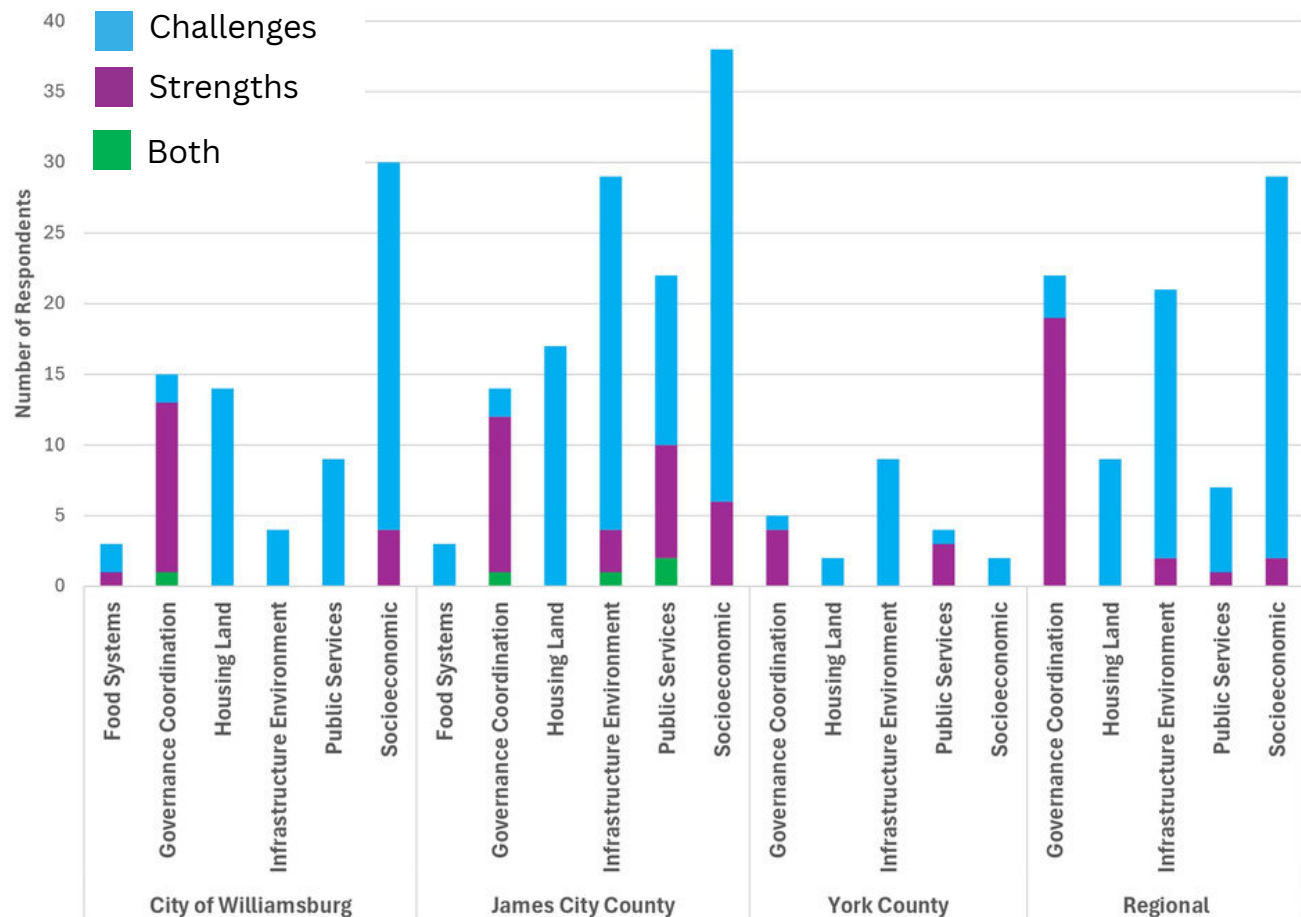
A related issue is heavy through traffic that contributes an unequal load of air pollution, increasing the need for medical services. Because the peninsula is a geographic chokepoint of traffic flows between the larger Hampton Roads and Richmond areas, data indicates the entire region is in the 99th percentile nationwide for air pollution related deaths and illnesses (U.S. Climate Vulnerability Index). Map 5 demonstrates that this issue is not isolated to the upper peninsula, but that the impacts (illness and death) are high throughout the region, compared to national averages.

Map 5 note: data is pulled for this map from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts*. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-21-003 (2021).

Resilience Themes By Locality

The final analysis of responses looked at what was most mentioned as strengths, challenges, or both by locality. Themes from each interview and focus group were coded into categories - food systems, governance and coordination, housing and land use, infrastructure and environment, public services, and socioeconomic - and participants were categorized by the localities they serve. Because the geographic spread of participants was uneven, coding was used to analyze responses by locality. What emerged was high levels of consensus across the localities of the top three challenges. To the left, counties are listed in no particular order, with their top three resilience challenges. To the right is a brief description of the category.

Figure 1: Categorized responses as strengths, challenges, or both by locality.



Resilience Challenges

By Locality



Courtesy of York County



Courtesy of City of Williamsburg



Courtesy of James City County

TOP 3 RESILIENCE CHALLENGES

James City County (JCC):

1. **Socioeconomic**
2. **Infrastructure & Environment**
3. **Housing & Land Use**

York County:

1. **Infrastructure & Environment**
2. **Socioeconomic**
3. **Housing & Land Use**

City of Williamsburg:

1. **Socioeconomic**
2. **Housing & Land Use**
3. **Public Services**

Socioeconomic

This category was predominated by responses about the tourism economy and the resulting wage gaps and job insecurity. There were conversations about how language barriers, cultural isolation, and skill gaps among the tourism workforce can create barriers to economic mobility.

Housing & Land Use

Housing affordability and options to address this challenge included mentions of growing rates of homelessness, an inadequate housing supply, and retirement communities being a predominant land use at the moment.

Infrastructure & Environment

Several respondents addressed the lack of green space and trail access as well as areas of selective flooding due to aging stormwater infrastructure or high water levels. There were several discussions around how the limited public transportation options did not adequately address the existing need.

Public Services

Although access to public services did not rise to regional top three resilience themes, it nevertheless was a frequent topic of discussion for Williamsburg participants. Participants noted challenges with access to behavioral health and disability services, as well as educational access.

“ We have a 7.9% poverty rate in James City County which has gone up 1% since last year. But [...] *currently one-third of JCC is economically vulnerable.* ”

PARTICIPANT ANALYSIS

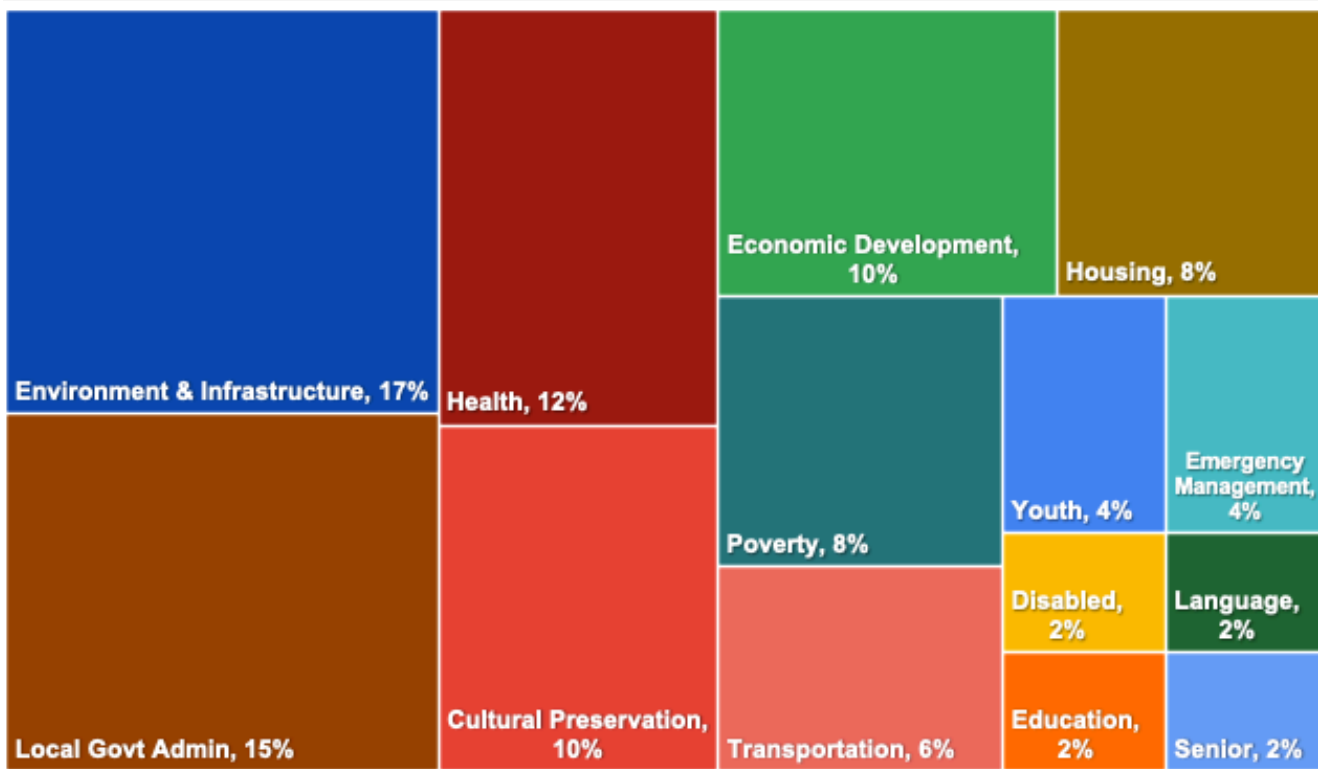


Figure 2: Participants represented a broad spectrum of interests

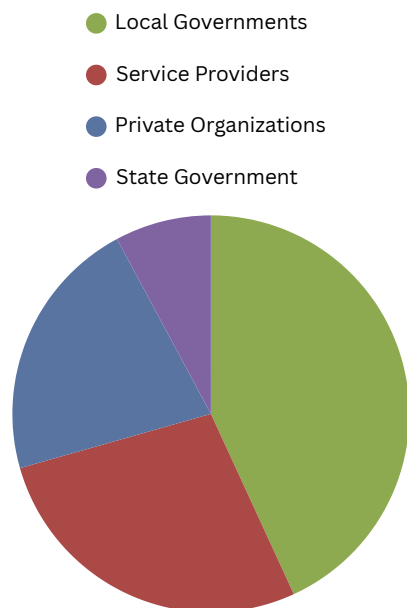


Figure 3: Participants by organizational type; 42% of participants were employees of one of the three local governments (green).

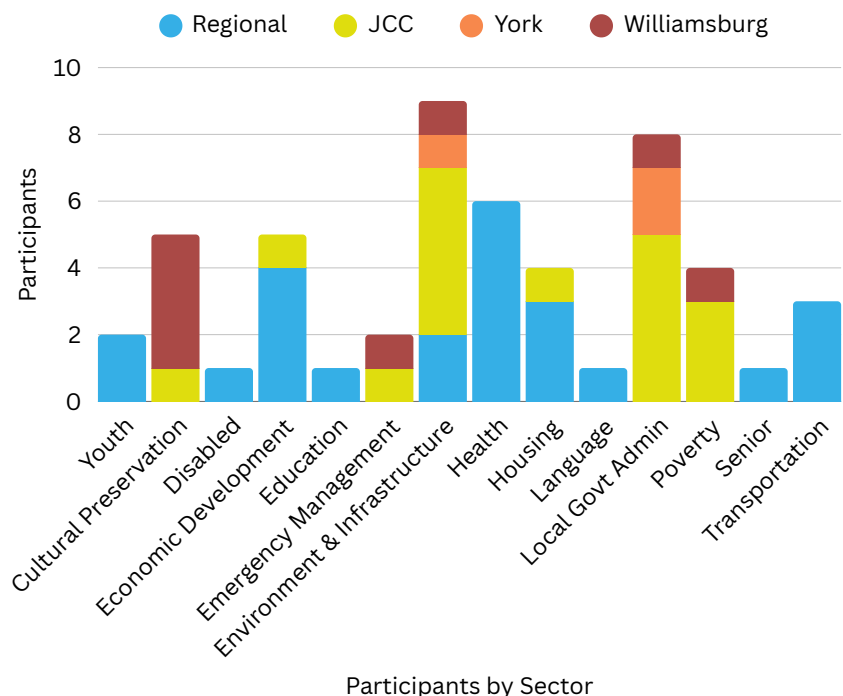


Figure 4: Participants by sector and by which locality their organization serves, with 46% serving the full region (blue).

Appendix A: Participant List

1. Tammy Rosario - James City County Community Development
2. Caitlin Aubut - York County Planning
3. Reed Nester - Tidewater Trails Association
4. Matt Scalia - Williamsburg Area Transit Authority
5. Toni Small - James City County Stormwater & Resource Protection
6. Mike Woolson - James City County Stormwater & Resource Protection
7. Ginny Gasik - Williamsburg Community Foundation
8. Patty Silence - Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
9. Thomas Wyson - City of Williamsburg Planning
10. Nancy Grden - HR Roundtable
11. Barb Watson - James City County Social Services
12. Lynette Diaz - James City County Social Services
13. Cat Anthony - Capitol Trails Foundation
14. John McGlennon - James City County Board of Supervisors
15. Megan Tierney - Williamsburg / York Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension
16. Luke Gladden - James City Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension
17. Will Glasco - Preservation Virginia
18. Ray Paige - FaithWalkers
19. Monty Mason - College of William & Mary
20. Katie Patrick - Grove Christian Outreach
21. Michelle Justiniano - York County Community Services
22. Kelley Herbert - James City County Parks & Recreation
23. Arlana Fauntleroy - James City County Parks & Recreation
24. Alister Perkinson - James City County Parks & Recreation
25. Vaughn Poller - James City County Neighborhood Development
26. Jack Haldeman - James City County Planning Commission
27. Wendy Satchell - Williamsburg Faith in Action
28. Pam McGregor - The Arc of Greater Williamsburg
29. Jason Thornton - Literacy For Life
30. Larry Snyder - City of Williamsburg Fire & Emergency Management
31. Scott Stevens - James City County Administrator
32. Brandie Weiler - Housing Partnerships
33. Kelly McCauley - Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
34. Olivia Bascale - Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
35. Kent Henkel - York County Public Works
36. Carla Javier - Child Development Resources
37. Donnie McDaniel - Community of Faith Mission
38. Wendy Evans - City of Williamsburg Human Services
39. Robbi Hutton - City of Williamsburg Parks & Recreation
40. Lauren Moore - Greater Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce
41. Fred Liggin - 3e Restoration
42. Kelly Metcalf-Meese - Williamsburg Health Foundation
43. Marsha Obremski - Colonial Behavioral Health
44. Sara Ruch - James City County Emergency Management
45. Christopher Johnson - James City County Economic Development
46. Tom Leininger - James City County Planning
47. Teresa Christin - Avalon Center
48. Cynthia Callaway - Network Peninsula
49. Kyra Cook - Colonial Behavioral Health
50. Kristy Wallace - Colonial Behavioral Health
51. Victoria Canady - Colonial CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates)
52. Jennifer Cherry - United Way of the Peninsula

Appendix B: Participant Themes

STRENGTHS

Collaboration

- James City County's (JCC) participation in the Lower Chickahominy Watershed Collaborative
- Strong inter-agency collaboration
 - Pandemic as example of that strength
 - Vaccines being distributed at Colonial Williamsburg
 - Buses from Arc that delivered for the food pantry
 - Churches that band together to provide rotating homeless shelter
 - Williamsburg examples: Preschool Taskforce, Housing Collaborative, Peninsula Elder Abuse Forensic Center, and the Consortium of Community Policy and Management Teams
 - Nonprofits that formed the Greater Williamsburg Trauma-Informed Community Network to cooperatively provide services
 - The network website serves as a comprehensive database of available resources in our service area.

Community Resources

- Strong spirit of volunteerism
 - Both from student population and retired population
- Philanthropic network
- Deeply rooted in history– provides tourism and sense of place
- College of William & Mary provides resources and expertise through faculty, research, and students

Local Governments

- JCC's Community Rating System (CRS) Class 5 status–the highest in the state (only 3 localities have achieved Class 5)
 - Commitment to stormwater improvements
- JCC applied for funding through Virginia's Community Flood Preparedness Fund to create a resilience plan
- Emergency management teams provide excellent services and good inter-jurisdictional cooperation
 - Example of services: community paramedicine with the mobile integrated healthcare service through EMS

CHALLENGES

Climate Vulnerabilities

- Need for adequate evacuation routes & planning that accounts for future climate scenarios
 - Especially transportation
 - Relatively high exposure to natural disasters and sea level rise
- Flooding & climate impacts
 - Powhatan Creek especially in James City County

Infrastructure

- All three regions have limited Public Service Areas (PSAs). Those outside the PSA are struggling to maintain septic and wells, either due to aging infrastructure or changing soil conditions (because of rising groundwater levels).
- Transportation is a key barrier to opportunities and accessing services
 - Many service providers try to provide transportation because public transit is inadequate

Education & Youth

- Study shows Williamsburg students have worse outcomes in joint JCC-Williamsburg school system
 - Williamsburg-JCC want to refocus on preschool / headstart programs
- Adults with disabilities age out of educational support services and have no other public services available to them
- Lack of mental health services, especially for youth
- Large number of families and children experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity
 - Many live in motels. Housing instability is a massive predictor of bad childhood outcomes.
- More children live in poverty by percentage in Williamsburg than in Newport News (potentially outdated statistic)

Poverty & Social Barriers

- High incarceration & recidivism rates
 - Regional jail nearby
- Language barrier / spanish speaking population
 - Spanish-speaking populations are unlikely to seek services, especially given ICE and recent political situation
 - Cultural perception barriers and bias; Latino community may be perceived as “lazy” or “uneducated”-- especially if the person is monolingual

- Under-resourced areas:
 - Merrimac Trail
 - Grove
 - Generational harm dates back to the displacement of a York County African American community to Grove when the naval station was built.
 - Food desert– except for the free pantry provided by Grove Christian Outreach.
 - Green space & park desert. Has been identified as such in JCC Park & Rec Master Plan; there is an effort underway to remedy the situation.
 - The majority of mobile homes in the county are within this neighborhood.
 - Lackey
 - Food desert– currently working with the College of William & Mary to try to remedy this. If fixed, York could be the first county in the state to eliminate all food deserts.
 - Chickahominy Road
 - Bad flooding along the road.
 - Carver Gardens

Economic

- Economic disparities due to tourist economy
 - Tourism is dependant on hourly wage work
 - Workforce shortages are due to mix of lack of access to mass transit AND lack of regional affordable housing
- Changing age demographics
 - Concerns about supporting growing elderly population

OPPORTUNITIES

Environmental

- There is a need to talk about and further address urban heat islands in the region
- Resilience plans; JCC applied for a grant to write one, and the rest of the region has an opportunity to follow suit. Could write a regional one. JCC should collaborate with other localities on the plans regardless given the interdependency of systems (like schools) within the region.
- Need to have more open discussions about climate change and changing climate conditions

Social

- Incorporate equity mapping into more than just Parks planning (JCC)
- JCC Capital Improvement Plan initiative to add a mini library and a new park to Grove
- Several needs exist that could benefit from community care centers
 - Homeless shelters
 - Youth services– including a place for CPS visitations.
 - Services for the formerly incarcerated to prevent recidivism and help with re-entry to productive society
 - Services for those in low-wage jobs (training, workforce development, language services, etc.)
 - Coordination center for non-profits (coworking & meeting space, workshops on finances and fundraising, etc.)
- Large need for more affordable housing
 - Idea for housing trust or community land trust
- Concern about aging population
 - Opportunity for youth leadership– need to improve retention of recent college graduates
 - Need for more in-home care providers & social workers to support the elderly. Worried about the burden on local government services.

Economic

- Funding needs for non-profits and service programs– especially given loss of federal funding. Without alternative financial support, many nonprofits and public services may end or become less cooperative & more competitive
 - Need more capacity building for service providers who are throwing all their money at programming; not able to support strategic planning & other operational components

Appendix C: Interview Questions

This definition of resilience was provided to participants to provide a context for the questions and discussion:

***Resilience** is the capacity to anticipate threats, reduce a community's vulnerability, and respond to and recover from hazardous events and chronic stresses.*

1. Given this framework for resilience, how does your organization support resilience in the Historic Triangle (City of Williamsburg, James City County, and York County)? What populations do you serve?
2. What resilience strengths and assets have you observed in the communities in which you work?
3. Given your organization's work in the Historic Triangle, what people, neighborhoods, and/or populations are identified by your organization as historically excluded and underserved?
4. How does your organization serve these populations? What underserved people are not being served by you or other groups?
5. What strengths, needs, and opportunities in your resilience have been exposed and for whom? These could range from planning and leadership to infrastructure and health, food, shelter, and wellness. They could be exposed by COVID and/or climate threats, such as storms, flooding, groundwater intrusion into septic tanks, saltwater intrusion into wells, or an extreme heat event that might impact access to critical services.
 - a. How do you learn about community strengths, needs and opportunities?
6. How does your organization work with others to address resilience more comprehensively?
7. What other opportunities has your organization identified for increasing the resilience of the people you serve? What ideas has your organization identified as ways to support increasing resilience?
8. How might we know this effort to increase resilience is successful, in terms of specific changes that might be visible or measurable? Are there ways of measuring success that would be helpful? In one year? In five years? In years?
9. What would your organization need for you to be able to continue to stay engaged in ongoing discussions and networking? Would you be interested in your current role/work in participating in the community workshop in August or the local Implementation Teams?

10. Do you have suggestions for others in the Historic Triangle region or your community who should be included in an interview/focus group or RAFT implementation team?

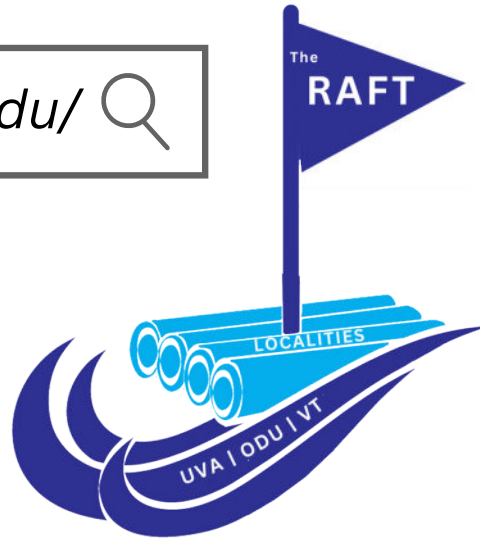
Learn more about the RAFT:

<https://raft.ienvirginia.edu/> 



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Virginia Coastal Zone
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

