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NFK Dreams: With ADP, a smart economic development bet paints a vision of a more complete downtown

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Jesse Scaccia

Jesse Scaccia is a columnist for The Virginian-Pilot and the Norfolk Compass. He also is the editor of AltDaily.com.



Vicki Cronis-Nohe | The Virginian-Pilot

ADP's new service and implementation center, on right, is located at 2 Commercial Place in downtown Norfolk.



Vicki Cronis-Nohe | The Virginian-Pilot

A tech bar is available for employees of ADP, which opened the doors to a new service and implementation center on Dec. 2.



L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot

New ADP signs on its building at 2 Commercial Place in downtown Norfolk as pictured last month.



Jesse Scaccia | The Virginian-Pilot

A ribbon-cutting was held recently for ADP's new offices.

Too often, Norfolk's big economic development bets have been made out of what felt like insecurity about the city's status as a serious metro.

Projects like the cruise terminal, the new hotel conference center and, to a degree, The Tide, have felt like cheats – city-building from the outside in. If we have a place for cruise ships to park, we must be a tourist destination, right? If

we have light rail, we must be big time, right?

That's not quite how it works. Great cities – particularly great small to medium-size cities like Norfolk – are built from the inside out. With great public schools, great local businesses passionately supported by locals and great neighborhoods, civic pride becomes the fuel of civic engagement and economic development.

So I was initially cynical about the deal to bring ADP, a Fortune 500 payroll and human resources company, to Norfolk, along with a reported 1,800 jobs.

Five million from the city's taxpayers, plus \$6.8 million from the state, and another \$13.5 million off ADP's bill to lease parking in city garages is a lot of cheese. Was this one last Paul Fraim ego play? Or is Norfolk finally starting to make the kind of big economic development bets that look good years after the bulbs stop flashing at the ribbon-cutting?

"We've never had a company that has made such an impact as ADP," said Buddy Gadams, who, among other projects, is developing a 275-unit luxury residential project called Icon in the former Bank of America building adjacent to ADP's gleaming new offices on Commercial Place. "We've never had a company where our seven universities can place their people in one of the best of the world. This will create our future entrepreneurs."

This is where the deal starts to feel like a clear winner to me. If we can build a pipeline from Norfolk Public Schools's STEM programs through local universities to the well-paying jobs at ADP, we've done something special here.

Low-income students who see the light streaming through this pipeline will be more motivated to stay in school and to work hard. When they start to see their older peers get jobs at ADP after graduation, the carrot grows even bigger.

Norfolk's cash investment of \$5 million translates to roughly \$2,778 a job. I'll happily put my share of tax dollars toward 1,800 pipelines of hope.

What will be critical is how Mayor Kenny Alexander, NPS administration, local colleges – particularly TCC – and ADP leadership work together to construct and maintain this pipeline. If they do, they will be building this city from the inside out in a beautiful way that grows the economy while lessening poverty. If they don't, it's still probably an okay deal, but it will look more like the public subsidizing jobs for the middle and upper classes, and we can do better than that.

No matter what, 1,800 jobs in a stable, tech-based company is a really, really big deal. That is 1,800 people paying admission taxes to shows, paying real estate taxes when they buy their homes in Norfolk, plus sales taxes on lunches and

after-work drinks in downtown Norfolk and potential donations to churches and local charities.

“It’s a wonderful place to work,” said Michelle Murphy, an ADP employee who said her peers regularly find their next career step at giants like New York Life and Morgan Stanley. “People hear that you work for ADP, it’s a huge benefit.”

The infusion of energy near the waterfront will be special. Commercial Place Plaza will become Hampton Road’s most big city feeling moment when ADP is fully staffed and Gadams’ developments are live.

Every day, thousands of people with money in their pockets to support food trucks, buskers, small businesses and attractions will pass through the lovely plaza, which is shared by Norfolk Southern. It looks out on the under-utilized Commercial Park and its running waters. The Main is within sight. The NEON and Town Point are both within blocks.

“It’s the jobs,” said Old Dominion University economist Larry “Chip” Filer in recently chastising the region for putting quality of life before nuts-and-bolts job-building. “Always the jobs.”

And these seem to be pretty good jobs. The ADP offices in Norfolk are big city beautiful, with a legitimate gym, a cafeteria that composts, a ping pong room and even an in-house doctor.

This feels like it could be more than a Band-Aid on a local economy losing defense jobs. Economic development bets like the cruise terminal are big and splashy – but investments in jobs like these are more important on a deeper level.

To see what jobs are available, go here: norfolkjobs.adp.com.

Jesse Scaccia, jesse@altdaily.com