



Winners of 2026 VML Innovation Awards announced

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The Virginia Municipal League (VML) is pleased to announce the winners of its annual awards for excellence in local government. The statewide competition recognizes innovative problem-solving, excellence in management, citizen participation, and improved services to citizens.

Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy says: "We received more entries this year than ever. The judges remarked several times that their work was particularly difficult due to the sheer number of excellent projects submitted. All of which is to say: Great job VML members! Congratulations to the winners and thank you to everyone who made this a big year for innovation in Virginia!"

One of the category winners will also receive the President's Award for Innovation. This additional award will be announced at the Awards Banquet on Sunday, Oct. 11 at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott during the 2026 VML Annual Conference.

The winners of the 2026 Innovation Awards are:

- COMMUNICATIONS: CITY OF FREDERICKSBURG – Still Making History
- COMMUNITY HEALTH: CITY OF NEWPORT NEWS – Care Where You Are: Community Health Bus
- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: TOWN OF CULPEPER – Heritage Park
- ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY: CITY OF PORTSMOUTH – ROC the Block: Reclaiming our Community One Block at a Time
- PUBLIC SAFETY: JAMES CITY COUNTY – RESTORE-CARE
- RISK MANAGEMENT: CITY OF NORFOLK – Risk Management Day-Community Outreach
- WORKING WITH YOUTH: CITY OF COVINGTON – Discover STEM Hands on Student Education

CATEGORY: COMMUNICATIONS

WINNER: CITY OF FREDERICKSBURG

ENTRY: Fredericksburg: Still Making History

Fredericksburg has an incredible history to tell, but one of its challenges is finding new ways to make that history feel relevant and engaging to today's visitors and residents. With America's

250th anniversary this year, the City also wanted to stand out among the many communities sharing their Revolutionary-era stories.

The City of Fredericksburg Economic Development & Tourism Department created “Still Making History,” a tourism campaign built around a simple idea: What if George Washington returned to his hometown today?

Rather than only telling visitors about the Fredericksburg Washington knew, the team brought George back to experience the city it has become. Through a series of videos, photography, social media content, digital advertising, and public appearances, George revisited historic locations while discovering locally owned restaurants and shops, arts and culture, outdoor recreation and other modern-day Fredericksburg experiences.

Humor was an important part of the campaign. Seeing an 18th-century George Washington encounter modern Fredericksburg gave everyone an unexpected and approachable way to introduce history while showcasing the city as it exists today.

What began as a localized initiative, quickly grew into a statewide and national conversation, with the campaign going viral across multiple social media and digital platforms. Its strong visual identity, clear messaging, and engaging storytelling has generated millions of impressions and interactions from audiences across the country.

CATEGORY: COMMUNITY HEALTH

WINNER: CITY OF NEWPORT NEWS

ENTRY: Care Where You Are: Community Health Bus

For many people, the greatest barrier to better health is not the absence of health care, it is the difficulty of reaching it. Transportation, cost, mobility, housing instability, and navigating a complicated health-care system can prevent residents from receiving preventive care until a health concern becomes an emergency.

Newport News responded by expanding the traditional role of its Fire Department through the Community Health Bus, a mobile approach that brings health and wellness services directly into neighborhoods. The initiative grew from the City’s Mobile Integrated Health and Community Paramedicine efforts. Furthermore, the Fire Department works with partners including Riverside Health, Sentara Health, Bon Secours Mary Immaculate Hospital, and Newport News Human Services to extend the reach of the program.

The concept is straightforward: instead of waiting for a health crisis to come to 911, bring care to residents before the crisis occurs. Through the bus and community health events, residents can access services including preventive screenings, chronic-disease support, mental and

behavioral-health resources, health education, assistance navigating health care, and referrals to community services all at no cost.

CATEGORY: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

WINNER: TOWN OF CULPEPER

ENTRY: Heritage Park

Heritage Park transformed nearly seven acres of previously underutilized land adjacent to downtown Culpeper into a multi-functional public destination that addresses a critical infrastructure need while advancing recreation, tourism, connectivity, sustainability, arts and culture, and economic development.

The project emerged as Culpeper's continued growth increased demand for downtown parking, pedestrian connectivity, and public infrastructure. Following recommendations in the Town's 2017 Urban Development Area Master Plan, Culpeper evaluated construction of a multi-level parking garage estimated to exceed \$20 million. Rather than invest in a costly, single-purpose structure, Town leaders pursued a more innovative approach: strategically acquiring 6.928 acres and using placemaking to solve the parking challenge while creating broader public benefits.

Officially opened in Fall 2025, Heritage Park represents a \$6.311 million investment, less than one-third of the estimated cost of the parking garage. The project increased public parking capacity for Culpeper's historic district by approximately 22.8 percent while creating a new pedestrian connection to downtown via a signature bridge spanning the active Norfolk Southern rail corridor.

But rather than simply adding parking, Culpeper created a new civic destination with flexible recreation space, an earthen amphitheater, public art structures, an interactive tourism kiosk, EV charging stations, and an ADA-accessible pathway connecting to the Culpeper National Cemetery.

CATEGORY: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

WINNER: CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

ENTRY: ROC the Block: Reclaiming our Community One Block at a Time

Portsmouth's ROC The Block: Reclaiming Our Community initiative takes City services directly into neighborhoods and brings departments, residents and volunteers together to improve communities by recognizing that neighborhoods are rarely affected by one isolated issue. A clogged storm drain may sit near a pothole, damaged street sign, broken streetlight, code

violation or illegal trash pile. Instead of treating each concern independently, ROC The Block coordinates a concentrated neighborhood response.

Teams inspect and clean storm drains, identify standing water, inspect street signs, repair potholes, report damaged streetlights, address code concerns and remove bulk trash and litter. Residents are simultaneously invited to identify concerns and volunteer in neighborhood improvement activities.

The coordinated model of ROC The Block has reached neighborhoods throughout Portsmouth. Rather than asking residents to understand the organizational structure of City government, ROC the Block organizes City resources around the needs of a neighborhood.

CATEGORY: PUBLIC SAFETY

WINNER: JAMES CITY COUNTY

ENTRY: RESTORE-CARE

James City County is participating in a groundbreaking proof-of-concept project called RESTORE-CARE that has an ambitious goal: to demonstrate that an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) can be delivered by drone directly to a person experiencing an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest before traditional emergency responders arrive. Ultimately, the project seeks to help drive a national paradigm shift in how communities respond to sudden cardiac arrest.

The need is significant. Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States. More than 350,000 adults experience out-of-hospital cardiac arrest annually, with only 10.5% surviving to hospital discharge. In 2024, only 42% of adult OHCA victims received bystander CPR and only 12.6% received public-access AED use.

Because survival decreases rapidly as defibrillation is delayed, every minute matters. Traditional emergency responses require responders and lifesaving equipment to travel to the patient. RESTORE-CARE asks a fundamentally different question: What if the lifesaving equipment could reach the patient first?

JCC is uniquely positioned to test this concept because its Police Department operates an established Drone Team with nine FAA Part 107-certified remote pilots. RESTORE-CARE combines that aviation capability with Fire/EMS clinical expertise and community participation.

When a cardiac arrest occurs, a drone can potentially be dispatched simultaneously with Fire/EMS, travel directly to the incident, and deliver an AED while responders are still en route. The proof of concept is larger than a drone, an AED, or a single community. It is an effort to determine whether emergency response can evolve from simply bringing responders to patients to bringing lifesaving care to patients faster.

CATEGORY: RISK MANAGEMENT**WINNER: CITY OF NORFOLK****ENTRY: Risk Management Day-Community Outreach**

Norfolk's Risk Management Day (RMD) is an annual Citywide event combining live virtual sessions and in-person sessions for the benefit of residents and employees. This event fuses training with enhanced discussions, presentations, and demonstrations involving key stakeholders, designed to incrementally build and fortify a "risk aware" culture. RMD leverages actual data and highlights real loss examples and questionable performance trends that could impact health, safety, productivity and present preventable, manageable organizational exposures to risk. The event features up to nine sessions that are led by risk "owners", stakeholder leaders, and experts focusing on improving awareness around operations, customer interactions, and performance. These discussions cover key aspects of risk management knowledge, including concerning general risk, health, safety and security.

This year's RMD was held at a library that is highly accessible to the public and included two significant risks affecting City residents: The Blue Envelope Program – a tool that helps drivers with autism during traffic stops or accidents – and the proper handling and disposal of lithium-ion batteries.

Outreach through the Blue Envelope Program supports a specialized segment of the community by providing essential tools that help ensure their safe and effective communication in standby situations. Likewise, educating residents about the dangers associated with lithium-ion batteries reinforces personal safety and confidence in handling and disposing of them. Inviting citizens to learn about both topics promotes ongoing education, risk awareness, and informed participation.

CATEGORY: WORKING WITH YOUTH**WINNER: CITY OF COVINGTON****ENTRY: Discover STEM Hands on Student Education**

Three years ago, the City of Covington requested public input from those interested in a public/private business relationship on property owned by the City. The standout submission was greenhouse with hydroponics, aquaponics, and retail sales of plants.

Students at Covington's middle school, which was recently consolidated with the school systems of the various Alleghany Highlands communities (Alleghany, Clifton Forge, Covington, Iron Gate), took an immediate interest in the greenhouse project located across the street from their

school. Now students, some of whom struggled with classroom education, are now learning, working and understanding plants, controlling greenhouse environments via their cell phones, and raising vegetables for school cafeteria consumption.

This coincided with the introduction of a STEM curriculum with instructor training provided by the Virginia Tech Applied Research Corporation (VT-ARC) as well as the development of a Discovery Center for hands-on learning.

The City has not only provided financial support but also opportunities for STEM students to visit the water and wastewater plants. Many citizens, particularly retired engineers, have enjoyed working with students at the Discovery Center. Overall, the Discover STEM initiative in Covington has made learning interesting and fun for not only students but also for teachers who receive training through VT-ARC. High school students are now involved there has been great interest and participation by local industry and the public in Discovery Center programs such as 3-D printing and electrical and model construction.

To get to this point it took local government willing to work with a private business investment, it took a public/private business relationship to work with a consolidated school system, and it took all three to work with students to develop an exciting learning opportunity.