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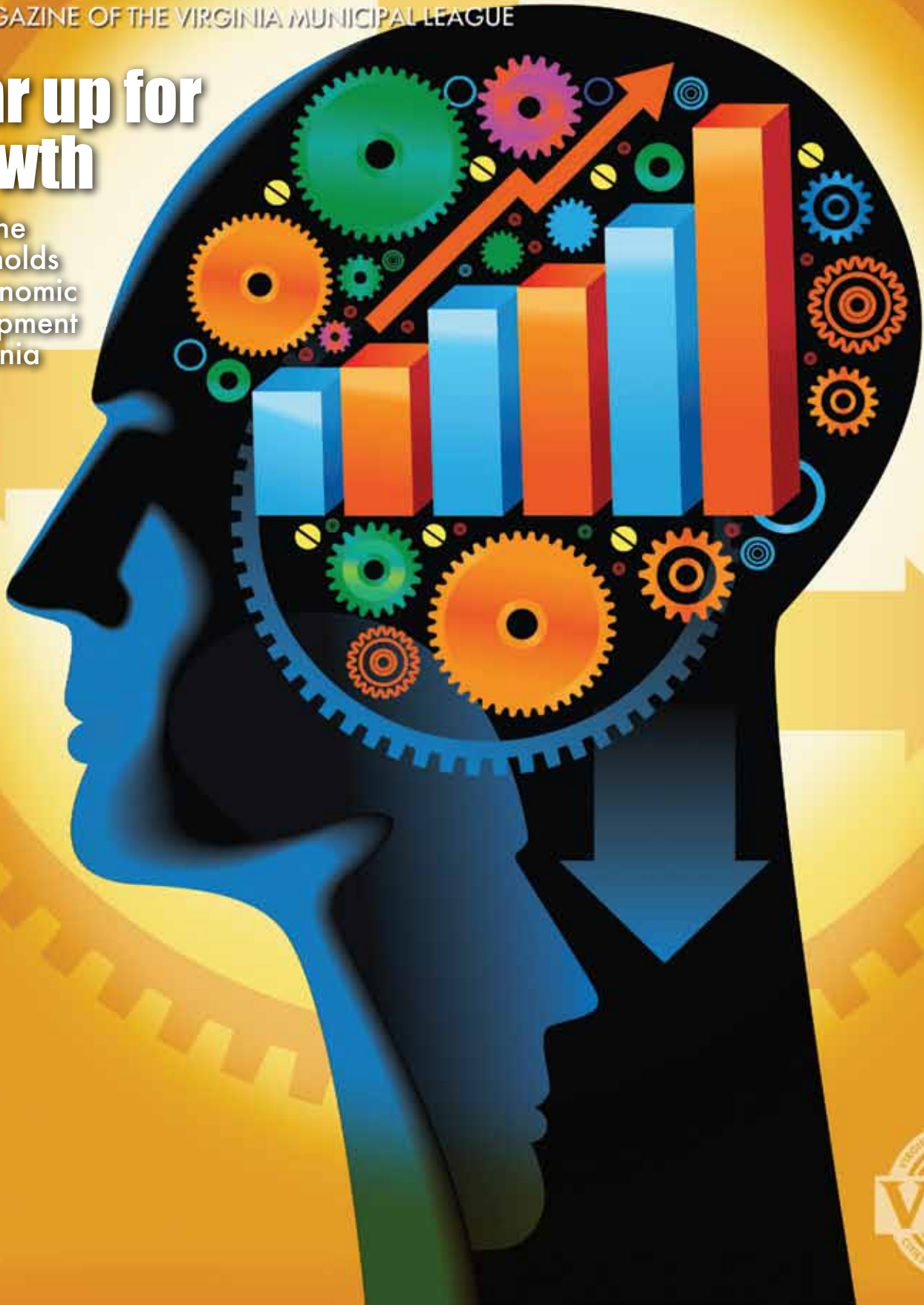
VIRGINIA
TOWN & CITY

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

Gear up for growth

What the
future holds
for Economic
Development
in Virginia





1980-2020

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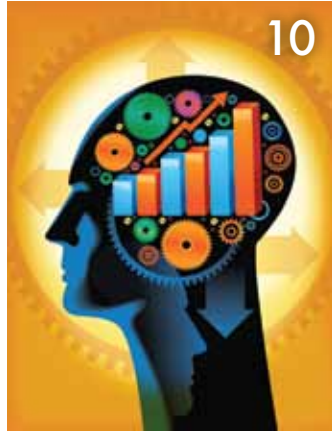
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ABOUT THE COVER

In 2019 Virginia was ranked #1 among states for business. That was news worth celebrating, but we won't keep that title without robust economic development initiatives in 2020 and beyond. In this issue, we check in with some state-level programs that are poised to take economic development in Virginia to new heights and what that means for localities across the Commonwealth. We also check in with a small town's economic development director and get some international relations advice from a protocol expert.

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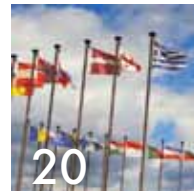
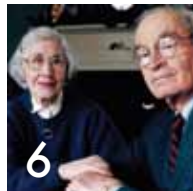
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A tough session calls for some hard work

FIRST, THANK YOU to everyone who attended our Local Government Legislative Day on February 6th. Of course, it had to be one of the worst weather days we've had in Richmond so far this winter, but I'll take rain over snow any day! Despite the rain and the new security measures at the Pocahontas building and the Capitol, it was great to see the enthusiasm and spirit of our members! We really appreciate everyone who takes the time to talk with the members of the General Assembly about the concerns of local government and the importance of our input in state decision-making.

In that vein, we appreciate that our *eNews Action Alerts* have been getting a lot of attention. I appreciate everyone who takes the time to read them and helps us fight the really bad legislation that has come before the General Assembly this session. Of course, there is bad legislation every year, but this year it feels like there is a lot more legislation with significant, negative implications for local governments. Perhaps it goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway – 2020 has been challenging at the General Assembly!

As I write this, we know that the big news in the coming days will be the budget. With so many new faces in the General Assembly, we are working to ensure that all the members fully appreciate how the state budget and unfunded mandates affect local governments. As you know, this is always a challenge, but




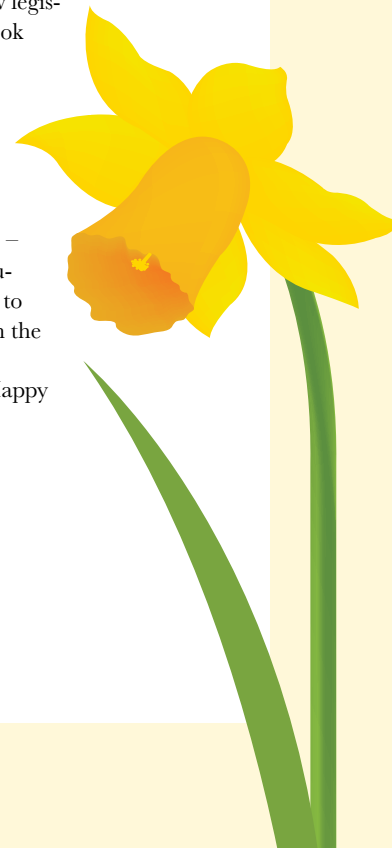
with the state having a larger surplus this year there are a lot more parties grabbing for the money. VML is working to make sure locals get their fair share (or at least as much of the share as possible). While

I'm confident that we are making a difference, how much of a difference remains to be seen since so much of the process is out of any one organization's control. So, we're keeping our fingers crossed too!

As soon as the General Assembly dust settles (and our staff catches up on lost sleep), VML will announce a series of regional events that we will be hosting to discuss the session and talk about the implications of the new legislation. Please look to our website and *eNews* for information as it becomes available.

In closing, thank you so much for everything you do – attending our events, reading our communications and making your voice heard – to keep the concerns of local government in the considerations of our state law makers.

And, if it's not too soon to say so, "Happy Spring!" It's just around the corner. 





VML connects you with a variety of networking and professional development events. Learn about these opportunities at vml.org/events.

- Mar. 29 - 30** **Virginia Building and Code Officials Association (VBCOA) – Board Meeting & Mid-Year Conference**
24 S. Market St., Staunton, VA
- May 20 - 22** **Municipal Electric Power Association of Virginia (MEPAV) – Board Meeting & Annual Meeting**
Hilton Garden Inn, 3315 Atlantic Ave., Virginia Beach, VA
- Sept. 13 - 15** **Virginia Building and Code Officials Association (VBCOA) – Annual Conference and School**
Williamsburg Lodge, 310 S. England St., Williamsburg, VA

PEOPLE

Graves and Parham elected to NLC leadership roles



- Graves -

Norfolk Council Member **Angelia Williams Graves** was elected second vice president of the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials (NBC-LEO), a constituency group in the National League of Cities, (NLC), at the recent NLC conference in San Antonio. Graves was elected to the council in Norfolk in 2010, representing the city's Super Ward 7.



- Parham -

Additionally, Petersburg Mayor **Samuel Parham** was elected as vice chair of the University Communities Council at the same NLC conference. University Communities Council is made up of local elected officials with an institution of higher education within their borders or within adjacent municipalities. University Communities Council chairs serve a one-year term. Parham was elected to council in Petersburg in 2014, representing the city's Ward 3. In 2017, he was elected mayor.

Glover, McClellan, Wood and Neil appointed to NLC committees

Portsmouth Council Member **Shannon E. Glover** has been appointed to the National League of Cities' (NLC) 2020 Community and Economic Development Federal Advocacy committee. This committee has the lead responsibility for developing NLC's federal policy positions on issues involving



- Glover -

housing, community and economic development, land use, recreation and parks, historic preservation and international competitiveness. Glover was first elected to the Portsmouth City Council in 2017.



- McClellan -

Norfolk Council Member **Andria McClellan** will serve on NLC's Energy, Environment and Natural Resources committee. This committee develops policy positions on issues involving air quality, water quality, energy policy, national wetlands policy, noise control, and solid and hazardous waste management. McClellan was elected in 2016 to represent the city's Super Ward 6 and is a member of the Chesapeake Bay Program's Local Government Advisory Committee.



- Wood -

Dumfries Mayor **Derrick Wood** and Portsmouth Intergovernmental Affairs Manager **Sherri Neil** will serve on NLC's Transportation and Infrastructure Services Committee. This committee develops policy positions on issues involving transportation, including the planning, funding, safety and security of public transit, streets and highways, aviation, railroads and ports. Wood was first elected to the Town of Dumfries council in



- Neil -

2012 and was elected mayor in 2018. Neil has worked for the City of Portsmouth since 2004, first as a senior legislative and management analyst and since 2012 as the director of governmental affairs.

Taliaferro tapped as Salem city manager



- Taliaferro -

Jay Taliaferro was appointed city manager in Salem in December 2019. He had been serving as the interim city manager since January.

Taliaferro began his career with Salem in 1991 as a GIS engineer. He was appointed first as assistant engineer and then as city engineer, followed by his appointment in 2000 as the assistant city manager.

Taliaferro has a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Clemson University and a master's degree in public administration from Virginia Tech.

Denslow elected as House clerk

Suzette Denslow was elected as clerk of the Virginia House of Delegates on January



- Denslow -

8. Denslow had been serving as the deputy chief of staff under Ralph Northam. She is the first woman to be elected to the House clerk position.

Denslow worked three different times for the Virginia Municipal League, once as director of research and twice as deputy director.

Look for an article on Denslow's experience in the 2020 General Assembly in a upcoming issue of *Virginia Town & City!*

PEOPLE

Roanoke County Board of Supervisors names county attorney



- Lubeck -

Peter S. Lubeck has been appointed county attorney in Roanoke County. After beginning his legal career in private practice in 2005, Lubeck served as an assistant commonwealth's attorney for the city of Roanoke from 2007 to 2013. He has served as an assistant county attorney and senior assistant county attorney for Roanoke County for the past seven years.

Lubeck has an undergraduate degree in political science from Brigham Young University, and a master's degree of business administration and law degree from the College of William & Mary.

Lubeck follows Ruth Ellen Kuhnelt who retired this month after serving as county attorney for four years. Lubeck assumed his new position on January 14.

Walton named deputy county administrator

Prince George County Administrator Percy Ashcraft has named **Julie Chevalier Walton**



- Walton -

as deputy county administrator, effective January 3. Walton was the director of community development and code compliance, a position she had held since 2012. She has worked with the county in various positions since 1994, including serving as the building and fire official.

Prior to working for Prince George, Walton was the vice president of design for Parker, Inc., a design and engineering consulting firm in Richmond.

Erford tapped as Fredericksburg budget manager

Brenna Erford has been hired as the budget manager in the City of Fredericksburg. Erford has more than 17 years of public and private sector leadership experience in commercial, nonprofit, and public sector organizations. Before joining the city, Erford



- Erford -

founded Intersect Strategic Consulting, which provided strategic planning, applied research, and legislative fiscal analysis. Prior to consulting, Erford managed the Laura and John Arnold Foundation's portfolio of philanthropic investments and was a manager in Alvarez & Marsal's Public Sector Services practice in Washington, D.C. She also was integral to the launch of The Pew Charitable Trusts' influential work on state budget policy, which helps states identify strategies to better manage fiscal pressures resulting from economic and revenue volatility.

Erford received a bachelor's degree in rhetoric from the University of Illinois and holds a master's degree in public administration from North Carolina State University.

Smedley named City of Alexandria's fire chief

Alexandria City Manager Mark B. Jinks has appointed **Corey A. Smedley** as fire chief for the city of Alexandria. Smedley has served as acting fire chief since June.

Smedley began his career in Alexan-

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- Smedley -

dria in 2015 as deputy fire chief of emergency management and homeland security, where he was responsible for improving community preparedness for major emergencies. Prior to his work in the city, Smedley was the deputy fire/EMS chief in Prince George's County, MD.

Smedley holds a bachelor's degree in mass media from the University of the District of Columbia and a master's degree in organizational management from Johns Hopkins University.

Tucker named City of Alexandria's race and social equity officer



- Tucker -

Alexandria City Manager Mark B. Jinks has announced the appointment of **Jaqueline N. Tucker** as the city's first race and social equity officer effective February 10. In this role, Tucker will direct the city government's race and social

equity programs, and work to build a framework to ensure policy decisions advance race and social equity for all Alexandria residents.

Tucker was the first east region project manager for the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, a national network of governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities. Prior to that she was Leadership for Educational Equity Fellow and interim senior federal relations associate for the Council of Chief State School Officers.

She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Butler University and a juris doctor from the Howard University School of Law.

Dame appointed as Leesburg emergency management coordinator



- Dame -

Leesburg Town Manager Kaj Dentler has announced that **Joseph Dame** has been hired as the town's first emergency management coordinator. The newly created position will oversee town-wide emergency preparedness and

incident response efforts.

Dame was the assistant coordinator of operations for the Loudoun County Office of Emergency Management. Prior to holding that position, he worked for Loudoun County Fire and Rescue, holding a variety of roles including firefighter, station officer, and department staffing officer.

Dame holds a bachelor's degree in management from Pennsylvania State University and a master's degree in public administration from George Mason University.

Freeman to leave City of Winchester



- Freeman -

Winchester City Manager **Edén E. Freeman** has resigned from her position effective March 16 to accept a position as deputy city manager in Greenville, SC in order to be closer to her aging parents.

Freeman began her work in Winchester in July 2014. She has a bachelor's degree from Georgia College and State University and a master's degree in business administration and management from Georgia State University.

NEWS & NOTES

Marion awards three new Pop-Up grants

THREE ENTREPRENEURS IN MARION received \$5000 checks from Pop-Up Marion, the town's business start-up training program. The money can be used to cover start-up expenses for their businesses.

Participants in Pop-Up Marion attended weekly classes from mid-October through late November, when they had to present their business plans. The recipients included proposals for a mobile veterinary practice, a vehicle detailing business and the expansion of an antique store to include a general store. The three grant recipients will also continue to receive business mentoring and advanced marketing training.

The idea for the program was developed by Ken Heath and other staff of the Marion Community and Economic Development Department. Funding comes from a grant from Wells Fargo and from the town. The next round of Pop Up Marion classes will be in the fall of 2020. [See page 10 for an interview with Ken Heath]



Smithfield attractions recognized in online publication

SMITHFIELD is perfect for those looking for a small-town getaway, according to an article in *Roulez Magazine*, an online publication.

Attractions cited in the article include Windsor Castle Park, the Smithfield Station, the Wharf Hill Brewing Company, Smithfield Ice Cream, the old Isle of Wight Courthouse, St. Luke's Church, the Isle of Wight Museum, and the Smithfield Inn.

The article concludes by saying that "Smithfield may have garnered a reputation for its ham and peanuts, but in this small and peaceful little town lies endless possibilities for fun, education, and relaxation."



Robinson bequest to fund Vienna sidewalks

FORMER COUNCIL MEMBER Maud Robinson, who passed away on March 2019 at the age of 96, left the bulk of her estate to the Town of Vienna for the specific purpose of building sidewalks over a five-year period in areas where they aren't already planned or likely to be funded through grants or new construction.

Most of Robinson's estate will endow the Maud Ferris Robinson Charitable Trust, which will fund the sidewalk projects. The estate is expected to exceed \$7 million.

The town currently has roughly 85 miles of sidewalk. The Robinson bequest is expected to provide up to 3.3 miles of additional sidewalks. The town will use contractors for this work. The town is identifying streets where curbs and gutters already exist, on which sidewalks may be installed. Residents on selected streets will be contacted by the town and given an opportunity to provide feedback. The first streets to be considered for sidewalks were considered by the Vienna town council at its January 27 meeting. Public Works Director Michael Gallagher notes that it could take up to two years from identification of a street to sidewalks being available for use.

Additionally, Robinson left \$50,000 to the town for beautification purposes. These funds will be used to plant trees and other similar projects.

Former Vienna Council Member Laurie Genevro Cole, executor of the estate and trustee of the trust, said that "She gave the bulk of her estate to the Town because she and Charlie [her late husband, former mayor of Vienna] were absolutely devoted to the Town of Vienna. They spent so much of their time and talents in making Vienna a well-governed community where people would want to live. They lived very simply, and they had no children. Vienna is their legacy." Cole observed that the sidewalk



Maud and Charlie Robinson

trust is a fitting gift from the couple because Maud and Charlie "probably walked every single street many times over" during his campaigns. "They realized how much sidewalks mean to making a place a community and a good place to live."

Maud Robinson served on numerous community and boards and commissions in Vienna. She served on council from 2000-2009. Charlie Robinson served as Vienna's mayor from 1976 until his death in 2000. He is a past president of VML and was the first chair of the supervisory board for what is now VRSA.

Third Project Imagine graduates honored

IN DECEMBER 2019, Danville's award-winning Project Imagine graduated its third class. Four class members received certificates for completing a nine-week work readiness program that gives gang-affiliated youth paid work experience and mentoring while on the job. The Danville Redevelopment and Housing Authority and a local auto detail shop provided jobs for the youths.

To supplement their work experience, the youths received training on managing money and information about furthering their education through classes and training programs.

Robert David, the gang violence prevention and youth

services coordinator for the city, said that "Project Imagine is not only an opportunity for these young men to find themselves, but to find out what life is about and how to transition from whatever situation they were in and the mistakes they had made to where they can imagine a better place."

The program is a partnership between the city, Virginia Workforce Center, and the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. Danville Community College, Telamon Corp., Valley Star Credit Union, and Danville Social Services presented programs and provided additional resources.



Manassas holds 5th annual “12 Days of Giving”

CITY OF MANASSAS employees helped brighten the holidays for many in the community during their 5th annual 12 Days of Giving service initiative.

The initiative encourages city staff to give the gift of time – rather than simply making a monetary donation – by taking a

hands-on role to improve the lives of those in need. This year city staff packed food bags and 24-hour emergency kits, sewed blankets for foster care children, and conducted a blood drive. In total, city staff gave more than 396 hours of service to the community and donated over 5,000 items.



The initiative has grown into a truly community-wide tradition with local businesses donating goods and non-profit community service organizations partnering with staff to suggest projects and deliver donations. Each year at the conclusion of the 12 Days of Giving, the employee who donated the most volunteer hours presents a \$500 check courtesy of Brown’s Manassas Hyundai/Kia/Subaru to a favorite charity.

Hampton adds sand to Buckroe Beach; saves tax dollars



A RECENT NEWS RELEASE from the city of Hampton explained how the city’s public works department devised a way to add sand to Buckroe Beach and save taxpayers more than \$100,000 at the same time!

According to the news release, staff on the stormwater team has been working on a project to retain more water and reduce flooding at Indian Creek. As part of that project, the public works department arranged to dredge the creek and then used the sand to replenish Buckroe Beach. Because there can be trash materials in the dredged sand, it was first deposited into a pile, sifted to remove debris and then spread onto the beach.

Virginia Beach, Chesapeake recognized as caring cities

A WALLETHUB STUDY recently recognized Virginia Beach as the #1 most caring city in America. Chesapeake came in at #8 in the study.

In order to identify the areas that care the most, WalletHub compared the 100 largest cities across 39 key indicators such as share of sheltered homeless persons, number of volunteering hours per capita and share of income donated to charity.



Williamsburg rolls out new public dashboard

THE CITY OF WILLIAMSBURG recently unveiled a new public dashboard designed to give an overview of the city’s performance through reports, data and news. Information is presented under 8 priorities, including community character; economic vitality; transportation; public safety; human services, health and education; recreation and culture; environmental sustainability; and citizen engagement.

As an example, the “economic vitality” priority presents information on the value of commercial construction, hotel occupancy rates, economic development grants, assistance to existing businesses, and more. Easy-to-understand graphs are included for each element of the dashboard.

The dashboard is available at <https://dashboards.mysidewalk.com/williamsburg-va>.



Virginia Beach StormSense project receives award

THE CITY OF VIRGINIA BEACH Information Technology Department has received a 2020 “FutureEdge 50” award from IDG, a leading technology media, data and marketing services company. The city won for its StormSense Project, a flood mitigation initiative that was recognized for its innovation, complexity, scale and business value.

StormSense is an integrated network of Internet of Things (IoT) sensors which use technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and cloud services to deliver real-time flood data every six minutes to citizens, first responders, researchers and others. The purpose of the project is to mitigate the effects of flooding and sea level rise while creating more resilient communities.



Newport News and Volunteers of America receive YouthBuild grant

VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA Chesapeake & Carolinas (VOACC), in partnership with the city of Newport News, has received a \$1.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. The YouthBuild grant will be used to create a new workforce development and education program for 90 young people in the city’s Southeast community, according to the city’s news release.



The YouthBuild program helps at-risk youth (ages 16-24) develop educational and occupational skills with the goal of obtaining employment in construction and other in-demand industries. Job readiness training, financial literacy classes and career exploration opportunities will be offered to participants at the Brooks Crossing Innovation and Opportunity Center and the Four Oaks Day Service Center Learning Lab. Participants will have the opportunity to earn their high school diploma or equivalency degree, if needed, and to attain at least one industry-recognized certification while preparing for postsecondary opportunities.

Youth will receive hands-on construction experience building homes with Habitat for Humanity Peninsula & Greater Williamsburg and the Newport News Redevelopment and Housing Authority. The program will also offer eligible participants the opportunity to earn a Class A Commercial Driver’s License.

Newport News and VOACC is the only public-private partnership in Virginia to receive this competitive grant. More information on the federal YouthBuild program is posted at www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/youth/youthbuild.

James City offers active shooter and Stop the Bleed training

JAMES CITY COUNTY’S FIRE and Police Departments held a CRASE (Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events) training session followed by a Stop the Bleed training session on February 15. There was no charge to attend the sessions, which were open to anyone age 14 or older.

CRASE provides training on surviving an active shooter event; Stop the Bleed includes training on handling trauma related bleeding.

The county news release notes that the courses can be modified to meet the specific needs of a business or organization and can be delivered anywhere upon request.



Portsmouth holds restaurant week City joins hospitality and business organizations in highlighting unique cuisine

*Contributed by Sharon Riddick Hoggard
with the Portsmouth Department of
Marketing & Communications.*

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, restaurant week events have grown in popularity across the country. After a ten-year hiatus, Portsmouth's restaurant week made a stellar comeback January 26 – February 1. The event gave local restaurants the opportunity to impress customers with their food and service. Restaurant week was a special time for the port city “to show off its wide variety of gourmet specialties,” said Danielle Babcheck, from Portsmouth Hospitality. “Our local chefs prepared menus that kept customers wanting more. More than 20 participating restaurants offered special menus with options for two-course lunches at \$10 or \$15, and three-course dinners at \$25 or \$35,” she added.

Judging by participation, the event was a rip-roaring success. Roger Brown's Restaurant and Sports Bar and Lobscouser Restaurant reported selling about 300 specials while Gosport Tavern and The Bier Garden sold more than 100 specials. Café Europa



had reservations all week. Fish & Slips and Stellar Wine Co. also said they had a great response.

Stay tuned for upcoming Portsmouth Restaurant Week activities. Visit www.portsVAevents.com for a variety of events throughout the year.



Dog yoga comes to Norfolk And the dog fashion show returns!

THERE'S GOAT YOGA and kitten yoga and now....dog yoga! The Norfolk Animal Care and Adoption Center held a full-length dog yoga (aka “DOGA”) session in late January followed by an opportunity for the human and canine participants who are up for adoption (the dogs, not the people) to interact afterward. The media release promised that the center “will be sure you are not mistaken for a real tree during tree pose. Dogs will sit and namaste.”

In cooperation with the MacArthur Center, the center is also sponsoring its second annual dog fashion show in early February. Contestants can participate in three categories: Best Owner/Dog Costume Combination for adults and children; Best Dog Fashion; and Celebrity Lookalike contest. Players from the Norfolk Admirals hockey team will be the fashion judges.

Hampton offers commercial driver training program

WORKONE CENTER in Hampton and Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) are offering “HRT DriveNOW,” a training program that allows eligible residents to earn a learner's commercial driver's license, a Career Readiness Certificate and customer service and workplace skills. Participants who complete the four-week program may receive the additional training required to earn a commercial Class B license and start as a bus operator trainee at HRT.

The Hampton WorkOne Resource Center offers job preparedness, training, skill building, college or vocational certification, career counseling, placement, job retention, and entrepreneurship opportunities to Hampton residents.

**WORKONE
CENTER**
FOR THE FUTURE

Richmond named 1 of 52 places to visit in the world in 2020

THE CITY OF RICHMOND has joined the likes of Salzburg, Austria; Tokyo, Japan; Krakow, Poland; and Jodhpur, India as one of the “52 places to visit in 2020” according to a *New York Times* article published in early January. The article says that Richmond “has morphed into a dynamic cultural center on the cutting edge of the arts, food and recreation.”

Among the attractions featured in the article are whitewater rafting on the James River; the outstanding collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (including the recently unveiled “Rumors of War” statue); and the allure of several area restaurants.



Gear up for growth

We present big programs, some expert advice and a small-town perspective

IN HIS REMARKS AT VML's Local Government Legislative Day on February 6, Governor Ralph Northam proudly cited Virginia's recent ranking as the top state for business. He then went on to tie the Commonwealth's ability to maintain that #1 ranking directly to its ability to offer a workforce with 21st century skills, which, the Governor asserted, means supporting education.

While the Governor is almost certainly correct that economic growth is made possible through a top-notch education system producing skilled workers to attract top-tier companies, it's also true that one of the tangible benefits of economic *development* is a top-notch education system. Which is to say, when a state has robust economic development, the benefits are felt not simply as economic growth, but also as improvements at the local level in areas such as health and education.

So, while economic *growth* is the fuel that helps some boats go faster and farther than others, economic *development* is the water that raises all boats.

For this issue, we've asked experts from the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) to outline two state-level initiatives geared to bring businesses to the Commonwealth: The Virginia Business Ready Sites Program (VBRSP) and The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program (VTAP). Jim Noel from the Virginia Economic Developers Association (VEDA) provides an update on his organization's activities. And for something completely different, Liz Bryant, a protocol expert, offers some sound advice for officials seeking to attract international businesses to their communities.

Before diving into these big ideas, however, let's take a minute to consider what economic development means to small towns by finding out what Ken Heath – the executive director of the Town of Marion's community and economic development department – has to say on the subject. When we spoke, he was traveling and, as you will see, had roads on his mind:

VTC: *Hi Ken, thanks for taking the time to help me today. If you don't mind, I'd like to start with a very, very basic question: What is economic development?*

Ken: Happy to be of assistance. For me, in Marion, economic development is what we do as government to stay out of the way of business and serve as a catalyst for growth.

VTC: *So, it's less about what you do and more about what you don't do?*

Ken: No, that's not quite right. We do a lot. We are ombudsman, a liaison between constituents. We open doors, solve problems and fulfill needs with what power we have. And then...we step out of the way!

VTC: *Gotcha. How has this changed over time in Marion?*

Ken: A lot! Economic development is a malleable world. In Southwest Virginia we must respond quickly and be able to see obstacles and opportunities as they present themselves. Otherwise, the obstacles defeat the opportunities and we get passed by.

Here's an example of how things have changed. When I first started working for Marion in 1994, I was the Director of the Main Street Program with the mission of revitalizing downtown. I kept hearing from citizens about how great things were in the 1940s, 50s and 60s – free theaters downtown, sidewalks full on the weekends, etc. The folks I talked to wanted to know what I was going to do to get that back. After beating my head against that wall a few times, I realized I would need a time machine!

I don't have a time machine, so I decided to accept that the world had changed and instead of trying to return Marion to its past, I would have more success making it the best for today and the future.

VTC: *Ruling out time travel as a solution was a smart move. So, what's the present and future of economic development for Marion?*

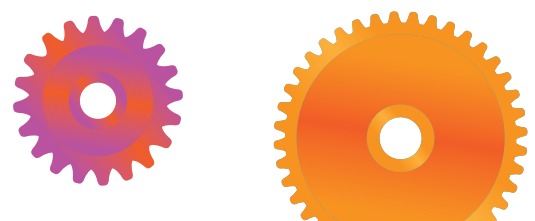
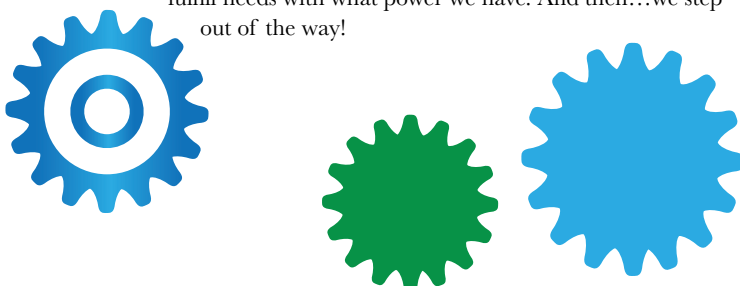
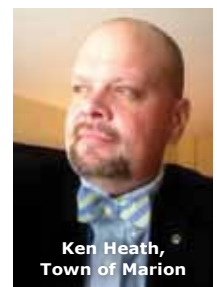
Ken: In Marion, tourism is the front door to economic development. We have industry in town and out of town, but with a healthy tourism component we can achieve the critical mass for a wide range of small businesses to succeed.

VTC: *What do you think are the most important things the state can do to assist economic development in localities?*

Ken: We need the state to listen to us! The biggest helpful thing the state can do is invest in infrastructure, specifically roads and broadband internet. I am flat out against the idea of tolls on Interstate 81. I know it needs work, I'm driving down it right now, but we have enough trouble getting people to come to Southwest Virginia without charging them just to get here. We need high speed broadband internet to be connected to the tools readily available in urban areas. We are five hours away from Richmond but there is a huge gap between our localities that is more than just those miles.

VTC: *What are important things the localities can do for themselves?*

Ken: Well, in Marion we use the revenue from the BPOL tax to reinvest in our community – libraries, theaters, etc. We've also had some great successes with our Pop-Up Business challenges [see page 5]. These "shark-tank" competitions are great at creating new businesses that adopt best practices and have measurable results. Best of all, the competitions can be scaled to work big and small. In either case they lead directly to economic development.

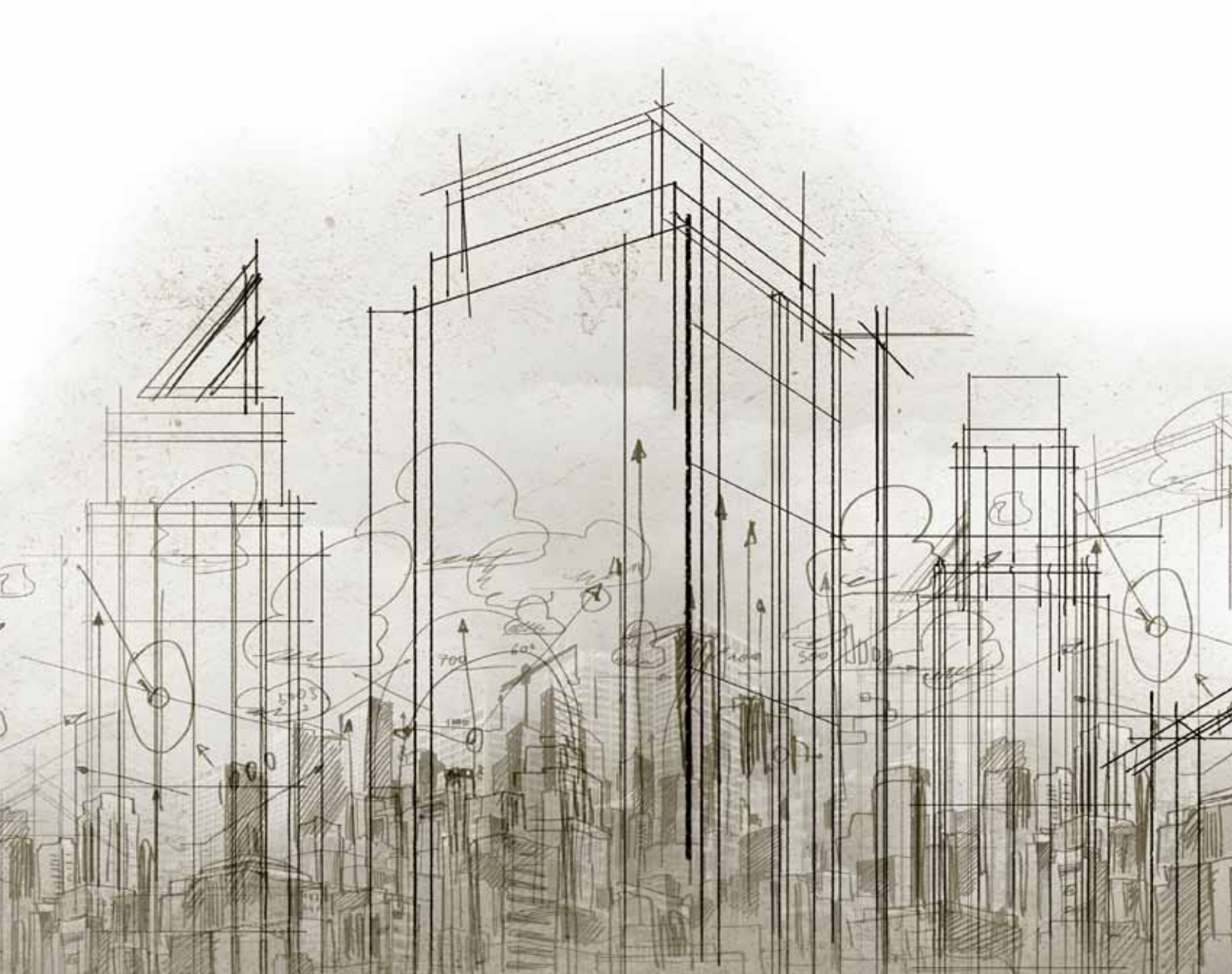


ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



The business of creating business-ready sites

The Virginia Business Ready Sites Program (VBRSP) is poised to benefit the whole Commonwealth



“A big thing we do at the local level is help prep these sites for companies to move in as quickly as possible. The more we can get done prior saves companies months and months of time.”

**- Michael Burnette,
director of economic development
for Franklin County**

IN RECENT YEARS, Virginia’s state and local economic developers saw that, here and there, projects that should have been “wins” were instead lost to other states with sites that were bigger, available faster, and already classified as “business-ready.” These leaders realized that the future of site selection is both a sprint and a marathon. The Commonwealth needed to embrace this dichotomy, simultaneously dialing up the speed at which it brings sites online and creating a turnkey process for certifying sites as business-ready and built for the long haul.

To this end, Virginia’s leaders rallied a cross-functional team of state agencies, utilities, localities and a host of other stakeholders. In 2015 their efforts bore fruit when Virginia’s General Assembly established the Virginia Business Ready Sites Program (VBRSP) with the objective of enhancing the Commonwealth’s infrastructure and promoting Virginia’s competitive business environment.

Now, with the phase of the program that evaluates or “characterizes” all the sites largely complete, and with a proposal for additional funding on the table, the Commonwealth has an inside track to get its business-ready sites online and in front of site development decision-makers.

Under VBRSP, Virginia looks to increase the availability of development-ready sites with a two-pronged approach:

- Site characterization to assess and designate a site’s current level of development.
- Site development to further develop a pool of potential sites across the Commonwealth that are well prepared and positioned for development.

Site characterization

The goal of this initial assessment work was to increase the number of business-ready sites. The first step was to assess what is needed for each site to reach a business-ready status and how attractive the location surrounding the site may be for different types of projects.

Leveraging a one-time appropriation from the General Assembly, a major bulk site characterization effort was recently completed. This effort was unique among peer states in its breadth, depth, and ambition. The initiative evaluated sites from two key perspectives: a physical development, or engineering perspective, and a location perspective that looked at workforce, cost of labor and other elements not directly related to the physical real estate.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2019, VEDP, working with third-party engineering firms and KPMG’s site selection team, evaluated more than 460 development sites of 25 acres or more in 103 localities.

The results of the assessment are clear: Virginia needs more project-ready sites to remain competitive. However, with over 70,000 data points collected through this effort, Virginia is extremely well positioned to make informed, strategic investments in site development.

To capitalize on this opportunity, Governor Northam has proposed an additional \$5 million in new funding for the Virginia Business Ready Sites Program in the biennium, with an additional \$10 million in one-time funding in the FY20 “caboose budget” bill (i.e. the bill that allows for adjustments to appropriations on the previous biennium budget).

What is “site-ready?”

It goes by different names, but whether you call it “site-ready,” “business-ready,” “development-ready,” or “shovel ready,” they all refer to the same thing: a location that has permits and infrastructure in place and is set to go when a company comes calling.



Site development

VBRSP goes to great lengths to define its “business-ready” classification, even seeking the input of third-party site consultants to ensure the classification is beyond reproach. Sites are classified by tiers as an indication of site’s preparedness (see accompanying figures). A site that reaches Tier 4 or Tier 5 status is considered “business ready.” This designation means that a motivated company can often move in within 12 – 18 months of making a commitment.

One of these certified business-ready sites is in Franklin County. The Summit View Business Park, spanning 550 acres, has already netted three top-flight enterprises, representing nearly \$20 million in capital investment, since achieving its critical Tier 4 business-ready certification. (The three enterprises are ValleyStar Credit Union, a multi-state administrative operation, Stik-Pak Solutions, a contract packaging firm, and Traditional Medicinals, a producer of wellness teas.)

Targeted investments are needed to bring sites from one readiness tier to the next. Funding partners may include entities such as the Virginia Department of Transportation, GO Virginia, and utility companies. The objective is to drive holistic investment rather than embracing a piecemeal financing approach.

For some localities, this can be a challenge.

Michelle Comerford, project director with the economic development consulting firm Biggins Lacy Shapiro & Co., acknowledges that she hears from some economic developers, especially those in rural communities, that they don’t always have the funds to invest in sites upfront. However, she advocates helping decision-makers connect the dots rather than failing to address the steps needed for development.

“The more you can do to save time for a prospective company to get up and running faster, the better,” Comerford observes. “If you don’t have permits in place but boast a fast-permitting process, demonstrate it. Or if a planned effort to extend a water and sewer line hasn’t yet been undertaken, share the steps that are needed. If you have a plan and the documentation, show that.”

Data means visibility

While VBRSP enables companies and consultants to make faster, better informed decisions, there’s also a big payoff for those at the other end of the database: knowledge. Economic developers are more aware than ever which characteristics the most sought-after sites possess – and how their sites measure up.

Part of being a business-ready site means that consultants can look at any of more than 100 data points at-a-glance to see if a site merits further consideration. When looking at utilities, for example, many consultants would much rather pore over an aerial or interactive map to see what exactly lies between an electric line and a site than simply read the distance between them in a static report.

For this reason, the goal of VBRSP goes beyond ramping up the availability of business-ready sites in Virginia, it includes evolving Virginia’s online site database to reach the peak of credibility and accessibility. When this goal is reached, decision-makers and influencers will be able to access more prepared sites and scan key features virtually.




Next steps

As the VBRSP team (which included more than 1,000 stakeholders and contributors who assisted with the initial characterization effort) deploys and assesses data collected from these initial assessments, they will also be watching how site selectors compare potential destinations within the state and, ultimately, across different states, since they will have more data to act on.

As Brad Migdal, senior managing director at Cushman & Wakefield, points out, “The availability of information is key to our business. The bigger challenge we run into is determining how good the information is.” He also notes that one can’t lose sight of the fact that it’s simply another piece of input to help a company solve their unique site selection math: aligning the human capital with real estate and cost.

In a similar vein Michelle Comerford observes, “This information is never going to replace the need for economic developers; it’s just helping us be more efficient. We’ll never be able to make final decisions off this data, but it’s an opportunity to get on our radar and show you’re qualified.”

VBRSP is working to ensure that Virginia’s localities can demonstrate to companies and site selectors why Virginia is such a great place to do business. If Virginia continues doing its homework right, that math adds up to more companies selecting the Commonwealth.

For more information on how VBRSP’s work can benefit your locality, contact: John Loftus (Sites and Buildings Manager) at jloftus@vedp.org. 

About VEDP: *The Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) was created by the Virginia General Assembly in 1995 to encourage, stimulate, and support development and expansion of the Commonwealth’s economy. To accomplish these objectives, the Partnership focuses on business recruitment, expansion, and international trade.*

Virginia looks to workforce development

Virginia Talent Accelerator Program set to deliver custom workforce solutions

A COMPANY LOOKING TO SET UP a new location needs to find the skilled employees that will contribute to its ultimate success or failure. Is it more likely to choose a location where it must create that workforce by investing in training OR one where that workforce is delivered by a team of instructional design and facility start-up experts on day one?

If you guessed the latter option, you're correct!

The reason: workforce development programs help mitigate a major cost on corporate balance sheets.

The 2018 Training Industry Report from Training magazine found that large companies spent an average of \$19.7 million on training in 2018, while the smallest companies spent \$355,731 on average. Moreover, the growing labor shortage amplifies the need for a full-service approach to recruiting and training. Manufacturing, for example, is projected to have 2.4 million jobs unfilled over the next 10 years, according to research from Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute. In these industries, companies often must create the skilled talent that is critical to stemming these shortages.

This is why regions and localities that want to pursue economic development must consider training support as a vital component to winning competitive site location searches. Evidence indicates that state-supported custom workforce training programs are a powerful way to fill skilled job positions, particularly in rural areas. For example, in rural Commerce, GA the state's Quick Start workforce

The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program and VCCS

The Talent Accelerator's customized solutions are purpose-built to address the start-up needs of eligible new and expanding businesses in Virginia. To ensure that the solutions developed for the facility start-ups are integrated into a long-term workforce development strategy, every Talent Accelerator project will be delivered in collaboration with the Virginia Community College System (VCCS).

"This collaboration is such an exciting opportunity for our colleges," says VCCS Chancellor Glenn DuBois. "Our institutions were created to address Virginia's unmet needs in higher education and workforce training, and we're always looking for new ways to fulfill our mission. This program will allow us to be part of important projects right from the beginning and to build lasting relationships to ensure businesses get the trained and skilled employees they need to succeed."

development program was a key factor in securing SK Battery America's \$1.7 billion lithium ion battery plant.

Now Virginia is ready to act with its own state-supported workforce training program. VEDP has launched a new world-class customized workforce training incentive: The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program.

What is workforce development?

Simply put, workforce development refers to any effort to bolster a region's economic stability and well-being by focusing on developing people. In recent years, this has come to include not just enhancing workers' skills but overcoming the region's inherent barriers to development and addressing its overall needs.



Meet the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program

VEDP's new custom workforce development program will:

- Accelerate new facility and expansion ramp-ups by shortening the new-hire learning curve.
- Provide customized training to support companies' unique processes, equipment, procedures, and culture.
- Make Virginia more appealing to businesses by providing recruitment and customized training down to the position level at no cost to the participating companies.
- Help to alleviate concerns a company may have about talent acquisition and development.

VEDP has tapped Mike Grundmann, a 20-year veteran of Georgia's top-ranked Quick Start program, as its senior vice president for workforce solutions. In Georgia, Grundmann led the development of more than 100 custom workforce solutions for a wide range of leading companies.

More options for training support

VEDP's new workforce development program will co-exist alongside the already successful Virginia Jobs Investment Program (VJIP) grant. The VJIP grant will remain an option for companies that want to execute their own workforce recruitment and training efforts.

Grundmann has hit the ground running. "In a few short months, we've assembled a team of highly talented instructional designers, videographers, graphic designers, 3D animators and organizational development experts. I'm proud to say that all are Virginians. They're already fully engaged developing and delivering services for the first two projects the Talent Accelerator helped to land in Virginia: Morgan Olson and GSK."

Morgan Olson, LLC, North America's leading manufacturer of all-aluminum walk-in step vans, is investing \$57.8 million to establish a new walk-in step van assembly operation in a 925,000-square-foot facility in Danville-Pittsylvania County formerly owned by IKEA. Virginia successfully competed against Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio for the project, which will create 703 new jobs.

Global healthcare giant GlaxoSmithKline plc (GSK) chose Richmond as one of three R&D laboratory hubs for its global Consumer Healthcare business and plans to invest \$16.7 million and add approximately 150 new jobs at the site.

More options for training support

VEDP's new workforce development program will co-exist alongside the already successful Virginia Jobs Investment Program (VJIP). The VJIP grant will remain an option for companies that want to execute their own workforce recruitment and training efforts.

Challenges and advantages

Creating a top-tier program like Georgia Quick Start and Louisiana FastStart is no easy feat. Jeff Lynn has supported custom workforce development as director of regional project operations for Quick Start, executive director of FastStart, and now as vice chancellor of workforce and economic development efforts for the Alabama Community College System. As such, Lynn has a unique perspective on the challenges to developing a customized training program.

"Typically, it ties to leadership, innovation, the ability to listen to clients, and over-delivery of sustainable results that impact the companies' return on investment," Lynn says.

In other words, state-driven workforce development training is most effective when it presents an array of flexible solutions to companies. To achieve this, successful programs must plan carefully by considering the true cost of the investment and budgeting accordingly. However, there are advantages to these programs that make them inherently more efficient than other approaches. For example, as Jackie Rohosky from Quick Start points out, these training programs only spend resources when full-time jobs are being created, so resources are not diverted to administering grants. This helps the state's bottom line. Moreover, the effectiveness of these programs can be more readily quantified. "The impact of that job creation can be measured in many various ways," Rohosky observes, "such as tax revenues and the multiplier effect of circulating payroll dollars."

Employing best practices: Custom solutions for rural areas


Economic development leaders in rural Virginia have repeatedly identified the need to create a custom workforce incentive program as a top priority. The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program is poised to meet that need.

Mike Grundmann explains the process like this: "In Georgia, there are many rural areas that go years without seeing an eligible job creation project, and they also don't have enough of an industrial base to support robust Technical College programs. So understandably, they are not well-equipped or practiced at addressing the unique needs of a modern plant start-up. When those communities finally do get a project opportunity, having Quick Start swoop in like a Navy Seal team, with its highly advanced capabilities, gives these areas instant capacity and credibility. I see it working the same in Virginia. The company wins because having the Talent Accelerator virtually eliminates the workforce risk of going to rural location. The community wins because they land a project they might not otherwise have landed. And taxpayers win because they pay once for these Navy Seal-like capabilities, which are designed to be rapidly deployed anywhere and everywhere needed across the state."

Regardless of the location, the key is to customize the training to the company's unique processes, equipment, standards, and culture. "While the highly customized job-specific technical training is what our manufacturing clients most value, they also seek expertise and support for building a high-performing collaborative culture at their new location. That's why we offer a full range of services to support them – from organization design consulting to training in leadership skills, teamwork, emotional intelligence, Lean and 5S." Grundmann shares.

How communities engage the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program

When a competitive job creation project is considering an area for a new or expanded location, its local and regional economic development officials leverage the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program through VEDP's Business Investment Division. These Project Managers serve as VEDP's lead contacts for all the economic development assistance and incentives available through the Commonwealth, including the Talent Accelerator and Virginia Jobs Investment Programs. Once a project locates in a community, the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program team will work directly with the company's operations, human resource and training leaders, along with their designated subject matter experts.

For more information about all the programs available through VEDP's Talent Solutions division, please contact your Regional Business Manager at www.vedp.org/businesses. 

About VEDP: *The Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) was created by the Virginia General Assembly in 1995 to encourage, stimulate, and support development and expansion of the Commonwealth's economy. To accomplish these objectives, the Partnership focuses on business recruitment, expansion, and international trade.*

"Custom workforce recruitment and training incentive programs typically serve as halo-like programs for their states. This customized support proves a particular draw in attracting companies to rural areas that have a smaller labor force than bigger metros."

- VEDP President & CEO Stephen Moret

What is the state of economic development?

VEDA provides the answers

AFTER DECADES OF WORKING as a professional economic developer, I have one key lesson to impart: If you have an opportunity to help a business open, expand, or relocate to your community, don't mess it up.

Seems simple enough, right? Unfortunately, it's not.

In fact, the economic development process can be extremely

complex, and success often requires the support of a wide network. And no matter how much you know about economic development; it starts with a foundational understanding of how this work impacts business growth and people's lives in every corner of the Commonwealth.

So, I'd like to take this opportunity to answer some basic questions about economic development.

What does economic development mean to Virginians?

At the end of the day, the goal of economic development is to enhance the well-being and prosperity of the citizens of Virginia. It does this by attracting new and expanding businesses as well as generating capital investment and revenue for Virginia's localities.

Economic development happens at all levels across the state, from the Capitol in Richmond to the main streets of Virginia's rural regions. At every level – state, regional and local – professional economic developers use their considerable talent to grow jobs and create economic prosperity.

State

The state's economic development agency – the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) – represents the Commonwealth across the country and internationally and works with regions and localities to meet the unique needs of their communities.

Region

Regional economic development organizations represent multiple localities, helping to attract business that will benefit a large area.

Local

Counties, cities, and towns work to administer local programs and ensure adequate local infrastructure that will lead to business creation, expansion, and relocation to their locality.

The Virginia Economic Developers Association (VEDA) is a professional association of economic developers and ally organizations, representing all corners of the Commonwealth. VEDA supports key economic development programs that assist in creating new jobs, investment and maintaining a pro-business climate, and our policy initiatives strive to create a skilled and available workforce, growth in all regions of Virginia and tools for competitiveness. Learn more at www.goveda.org.



BY THE NUMBERS

FROM FY14-19, VIRGINIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS RESULTED IN:

1,397

COMPANY ANNOUNCEMENTS

25 JOBS AND \$1 MILLION

INVESTMENT = MEDIAN (MID-POINT) PROJECT

\$35 BILLION IN CAPITAL INVESTMENT BY VIRGINIA COMPANIES

EXPANSIONS BY EXISTING BUSINESSES ACCOUNTED FOR:

75%

OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

131,503

NEW JOBS ANNOUNCED FOR VIRGINIANS

60%

OF JOBS

72%

OF CAPITAL INVESTMENT

\$685 MILLION

PER YEAR IN STATE TAX REVENUES

EACH DIRECT JOB CREATED

94 NEW JOBS AND

\$25 MILLION

INVESTMENT = AVERAGE (MEAN) PROJECT

BRINGS 1.2

ADDITIONAL JOBS IN OTHER SECTORS

It is important to note that economic development organizations are unique in their structure and operation, but each professional economic developer strives for the same result – to attract business, create jobs, grow the tax base and increase opportunities for its citizens.

What do economic development initiatives do for Virginia?

Virginia economic developers grow opportunities and attract businesses in various industry sectors throughout all regions of the Commonwealth in ways that are unique and personalized to their regions.

As experts in understanding the value of the unique assets of their region and/or locality, economic developers focus on place-making, revitalization, redevelopment, manufacturing, entrepreneurship and the up-scaling of small to mid-size businesses.

This translates into fostering growth in all targeted sectors, from agriculture to cyber security, tourism to technology, life sciences to food and beverage processing...and beyond.

From fiscal years 2014 through 2019, according to the VEDP Announcements Database, Virginia's economic development efforts resulted in 1,397 company announcements, \$35 billion in new capital investment by Virginia companies, 131,503 new jobs announced for Virginians, and \$685 million per year increase in state tax revenues.

What policies are most beneficial to economic development?

Underlying any successful economic development program – whether at a state or local level – are good public policies. Decisions made by government to invest in infrastructure such as site development, broadband, transportation, energy, and affordable housing for the workforce all impact a jurisdiction's ability to attract and grow companies, which leads to well-paying jobs and investment.

These public policy choices drive the business climate that makes a locality or region attractive to business prospects. Fostering a competitive business climate at all levels of government is essential to promote economic prosperity, broaden the tax base, and enhance the Commonwealth's economic stability and thus the quality of life for all our citizens.

How do economic developers create a skilled and available workforce?

The future of Virginia's economic development success is talent attraction, retention, and development. For the Commonwealth to be viewed as the top state for a skilled and available workforce, training programs must be in place and well-funded.

Virginia currently has two critical and complementary programs that provide economic development projects with critical workforce training support:

- The Virginia Jobs Investment Program (VJIP) provides services and funding to companies creating new jobs or implementing technological change to reduce human resource development costs for new companies, expanding companies, and companies retraining their employees. VJIP is the most frequently used economic development program, as it is accessible to companies of all sizes in every corner of the Commonwealth.

- The Virginia Talent Accelerator Program [Editor's note – see article on page 15] provides world-class training and recruitment solutions that are fully customized to a company's unique operations, equipment, standards, and culture.

How do economic developers enhance infrastructure?

In a global economy where businesses are making investment decisions between multiple counties, states, and countries, the quality of sustainable infrastructure is often a deciding factor. To maintain Virginia's competitiveness, economic developers work to ensure there is a fast, reliable way to move people, goods, energy, and information to every corner of the Commonwealth.

Creating that infrastructure brings together the following elements:

- **Site Development.** Site readiness is important to Virginia's economic development efforts. Funding for site characterization and development is an investment in the foundation of economic development. The Virginia Business Ready Sites Program (VBRSP) develops new sites for businesses looking to locate or expand in the Commonwealth. [Editor's note – see article on page 12]
- **Telecommunications.** Internet access for all parts of the Commonwealth is essential to the state's competitiveness. It drives job creation, promotes innovations, and expands markets for Virginia businesses.
- **Transportation.** Virginia's transportation network (air, highways, rail, and ports) is an essential component of the state's economic development success.
- **Energy.** A sustainable, reliable and cost-effective energy supply is critical to attract new companies and to retain existing businesses, particularly in the energy-intensive manufacturing and Information Technology sectors.
- **Regulatory Process.** A balanced regulatory process and competitive tax structure are vital to maintaining Virginia's competitive business climate.
- **Affordable Housing.** Having affordable housing for workers plays a substantial and reinforcing role in local economic development. Without a supply of affordable housing, employers – and entire regional economies – can be at a competitive disadvantage given the subsequent difficulty to attract and retain qualified workers.

What are essential economic development tools?

In addition to good infrastructure, economic developers must have the necessary tools to attract new business and spur growth. Virginia's economic development incentives are investments in assets that remain in the Commonwealth and do not accrue solely to the benefit of a specific business prospect.

Incentives designed to stimulate job creation and investment activities are to be found at all levels of government. These incentive-based tools include:

- The **Commonwealth Opportunity Fund (COF)** is Virginia's flagship economic development incentive program and the state's premier deal-closing fund.
- **Enterprise Zones** are a long-standing program that have helped both urban and rural communities revitalize distressed areas.


- The **Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund (AFID)** remains a critical tool for localities to support two of Virginia's largest industries: agriculture and forestry. This performance-based grant is available to companies that create jobs and investment, add value to Virginia-grown products, and commit to sourcing Virginia-grown agricultural and forest products – creating additional marketplaces for Virginia's farmers and forestland owners.
- **Data Center and Manufacturing Incentives** help support the availability of data center sales and use tax exemptions; these are among the top site-selection considerations for data centers and have been a major contributor to the Commonwealth's success in attracting data center locations.
- Even a great business climate and fully funded incentives are of limited use if the resources or the people to tell the Virginia Story are lacking. To this end, Virginia uses **marketing and lead generation funds** to engage business leaders globally to ensure top of mind awareness of the state as a great place to do business.
- The presence of **Economic / Industrial Development Authorities (EDAs/IDAs)** are one of the most important economic development tools a locality has. These entities were authorized decades ago by the Virginia General Assembly and exist to permit localities to have a flexible tool to support economic development in their communities. The structure and function of EDAs/IDAs are unique to each community and are found in most local governments across Virginia.
- Additionally, many localities offer **loan or grant programs and other locally specific incentive programs** that meet the unique needs of the community.

What is VEDA's role?

VEDA, with its diverse connections – state policy makers, local elected officials, academia, business leaders, tourism drivers and many more – seeks to inform and create a positive business environment in Virginia.

To bolster Virginia's economic development competitiveness in the global marketplace, VEDA works to connect with local and state elected leaders to develop policy and budgets that support efforts to create a skilled and available workforce, encourage growth for all regions of Virginia (urban to rural, coastal to mountain), and provide the tools for economic developers to be competitive when working to recruit businesses to the Commonwealth.

VEDA also encourages the state to continue to strengthen and grow the economic development toolbox including existing incentives, sound tax policies, a Virginia marketing program, and support for programs that revitalize communities.

Evidenced by Virginia's 2019 ranking as the #1 state for business, Virginia has done a lot to foster economic development. VEDA's mission now is to continue to build on that success by embracing the complexities of economic development in the Commonwealth. Most of all, VEDA works to build up the tools economic developers have at their disposal to create jobs, support businesses and enhance the tax base of this state we all love so much. 

About the author: *Jim Noel is the current President & Executive Committee Chair of the Virginia Economic Developers Association (VEDA). He has served as the Economic Development Director for York County since 1993.*

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A guide for municipalities doing business in the international arena

Nine basics to put your community on track for success

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE JUST FOUND out that a delegation from Sweden will be arriving in two months to discuss possible investments in your community. You want to make the best impression and ensure your guests feel welcome. You might feel a bit anxious about this. Not to worry. Whether receiving visitors from a foreign nation or travelling abroad to meet your business contacts, attention to detail will be your friend. And taking the time to properly prepare for the visit will not only make you and your foreign counterparts more comfortable, it will also increase the likelihood that you succeed in establishing a good business relationship to build upon.

Do your research. Learn as much as you can about the country with which you will be doing business. Go beyond the basics (i.e. the capital city, government leadership, their import/export products, and the like). Find out about their holidays, what sports are popular, what great tourist destinations do they have. Is there exceptional geography? Be genuinely interested and curious.

Learn about the business customs of the culture. How is time regarded? What are appropriate business gifts? In some Indian cultures, for example, appointment times can be fluid and being tardy is not necessarily considered a sign of disrespect. In Europe, flowers are considered good business gifts, but not white flowers or red roses for women. These details matter.

Make sure you are proficient in knowing how to properly greet and introduce people to each other. Lesser authority is always introduced to greater authority. Again, attention to detail will help you here. Plan ahead so that this is seamless. Clients outrank colleagues, for example. And remember that introductions can be different for different cultures. Know what's correct and practice ahead of time.

Have a great handshake. This is crucially important. Firm, but not crushing. Worse yet is the "dead fish." Don't be afraid to ask a friend for critique. You want to get this right.

Take the time to learn a few words or phrases in the language of the country from which you are receiving guests or going to visit. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it shows respect and genuine consideration for the relationship if you take the time to do this. There are many resources online to assist with proper pronunciation. Consider watching a movie in their language that has English subtitles. This can not only help with the language itself, but also observing some of how people interact.

Dress appropriately. We are familiar with the idea that a first impression is made within about 30 seconds of meeting someone. The Protocol School of Washington cites a statistic that further says that 55 percent of that first impression is determined by your appearance. So, before you open your mouth, before you say the first word, the majority of someone's opinion of you has already been made simply

by how you look. Fair? Maybe not, but it reinforces the importance of knowing what attire is acceptable for the occasion.


Know what conversation topics to avoid. We all know to steer clear of things like politics and religion, but you need dig a little deeper and determine any possible cultural sensitivities. For example, I would not ask someone from London their opinion of Meghan Markle. Also, be careful with humor. It generally doesn't translate well.

If receiving visitors, show off your community's cultural and culinary treasures. A museum highlighting the area's great art or history is good choice. Treat your guests to a restaurant experience with locally sourced food. Don't take visitors from Japan to a Japanese restaurant! Show them the beauty of your city's architecture. Share your enthusiasm for all that your community has to offer. On the flip side, if you are the guest in another country, be open to learning and trying new things.



Consider hiring a translator. If language is going to be a barrier, invest in a translator to be present during all interactions. You don't want all your hard work to be undermined by a communication snafu.

The bottom line is that cultures vary widely in their business and social practices. Preparation ahead of time will pay off in the long run. You may want to consider engaging someone with training in international etiquette to drill down into the more intricate specifics of how meetings are conducted, the role of women in business, and international styles of dining, among other things. This can be especially helpful if you will be routinely working with visitors from a few specific countries. Having country- or culture-specific experts on your team is also something to consider.

Learning about other countries and cultures can not only help you in business, it can also broaden your world view. And guess what – it can be fun, too. Enjoy your international knowledge journey! 



About the author: Liz Bryant is president and founder of Liz Bryant Business Etiquette, based in Richmond. She is trained and licensed as an intercultural etiquette and protocol trainer by The Protocol School of Washington. She may be reached at liz@lizbryantbusinessetiquette.com.

VRSA celebrates 40 years!

IN 2020, THE VIRGINIA RISK Sharing Association (VRSA) will celebrate 40 years of providing financial stability through risk management for Virginia political subdivisions.

What does that mean?

Forty years ago, finding coverage for the unique exposures faced by local governmental entities was difficult. Coverage available through commercial insurers was limited, and premiums were volatile, rising dramatically from year to year.

This trend was happening nationwide – and that’s when across the country a solution was developed: governmental entity risk sharing pools.

In the Commonwealth, the Virginia Municipal League (VML) successfully lobbied for legislation allowing local governments to self-insure under the Virginia Workers’ Compensation Act – leading to the creation of the Virginia Municipal Group Self Insurance Association (VMGSIA) on July 1, 1980.

Today, the VMGSIA is known as VRSA – and is the Commonwealth’s first and most financially secure self-insurance pool. What began with providing workers’ compensation coverage to ten charter members contributing \$730,000 annually now provides auto, property, liability, and workers’ compensation coverage to more than 460 members contributing in excess of \$54 million annually.

“Through pooling, our members work together to share and mitigate risks, and through this partnership we have built a strong balance sheet that provides us with leverage to ensure stable rates for our members,” said VRSA Managing Director Steve Craig.

Stable rates mean less financial volatility for Virginia’s local governments, providing an additional layer of financial stability for members when planning their annual budgets.

By the end of the first decade, VRSA began to focus on risk management as a means to lower losses and claims – and in turn, maintain stable premiums. The goal of risk management is to partner with members through education, training and consulting to empower them to reduce losses within their organizations.

“We began with regional workshops providing risk management training and loss prevention tools throughout the state,” said

Craig. “Today we provide consulting not only in the areas of safety, but we focus on other loss areas through our human resources, public safety, communications, and local government specialists as well.”

As losses in a particular area increase, or members express a need for assistance in a specific area, VRSA staff are there to provide increased training, policy guidance, support – and sometimes, additional coverage – to meet the changing needs of members.

For example, Virginia’s OSHA (VOSH) now has authority to cite state and local governments with monetary penalties exceeding \$126,000 for violations. In response, VRSA safety specialists have ramped up their training, conducting 54 OSHA trainings to more than 860 member employees in 2019 alone.

This is all in addition to online courses offered through the VRSA Online University and VRSA Public Safety Academy, as well as webinars and continued workshops throughout the Commonwealth.

“Our goal is to provide training and resources to empower members to reduce losses within their organizations,” said Craig.

Through train-the-trainer programs focused on OSHA or defensive driving, VRSA is empowering members to develop trainers within their organization, which in turn empowers them to train more of their employees.

One of the most innovative and award-winning campaigns VRSA took on was launched in 2010. The *Where the Rubber Meets the Road* (WTRMTR) campaign was developed to address the number one source of occupational fatalities – motor vehicle crashes. At the time, automobile losses accounted for nearly half of all VRSA claims.


The program began with 15 members whose designated trainers received “train-the-trainer” instruction from VRSA using the National Safety Council Defensive Driving products and who were responsible for providing this defensive driving instruction to 90 percent of their member-drivers within one year. Five years later, the program had 62 members enrolled and more than 33,000 local government drivers trained. Members who met initial and ongoing training requirements receive a five percent credit on their automobile liability premium.

In addition to training and consulting, VRSA provides \$300,000 each year in grant funds to members for the purchase of safety equipment and training aimed at assisting in their risk management efforts.

Coverages have expanded throughout the 40 years as well. Additional coverages including boiler and machinery, canine mortality and injury, earthquake, flood, employment practices liability, land use liability, no-fault property damage, pollution, public officials liability, school board legal liability, Line of Duty Act coverage and more have been added as needs arose.

In 2019, VRSA staff focused on promoting Cyber Liability Coverage, including Privacy Notification Costs, and on providing training and roundtables for members to discuss strategies for defending their systems from cyber-attacks and social engineering.

Staff also identified additional emerging risks that have the potential to impact local governments, including e-scooters and autonomous transportation.

“As the needs of local governments continue to change, so will we,” said Craig. “Our goal is to provide financial stability through risk management for our members so they can effectively serve their communities. We want to help them achieve their goals – and one way we can do that is by continuing to listen and partner with our members to help them excel in risk management.” 

About the authors: *The Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) is the first and most financially sound self-insurance pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia. For nearly 40 years VRSA has provided auto, property, liability, and workers’ compensation coverage to Virginia local political subdivisions.*



2020 Finance Forum highlights

VML'S ANNUAL FINANCE FORUM took place on Monday, Jan. 6 at the Delta Hotel in Richmond. Attendees from across the Commonwealth heard presentations about Governor Northam's proposed budget, new retirement rates for the upcoming biennium, the challenges of implementing broadband technology, elections security efforts in Virginia and the ins and outs of state politics in 2020. Presentations from the event are available at www.vml.org/education/finance-forum.







Pulaski doesn't give up

THE TOWN OF PULASKI has had its share of difficulties over the years, but fortunately it also has plenty of resilience. This is a town that just won't quit!

History counts

The town and county of Pulaski are named for Casimir Pulaski, a Polish military officer who fought and died for the United States during the Revolutionary War. Count Pulaski is one of only eight people who have been declared an honorary citizen of the United States, joining the likes of Winston Churchill, the Marquis de Lafayette and Mother Teresa in that honor.

During the nineteenth century, the region prospered thanks to the construction of a railroad station and the discovery of coal deposits. In fact, during this time Pulaski became something of an industrial and commercial center. But national and international economic changes in the latter part of the twentieth century led the town's industrial and economic base to decline. A fire in 2008 destroyed the town's train depot – which had been converted to a museum – and a tornado in 2011 damaged 10 percent of the town's housing.

Still, Pulaski persisted! The depot was rebuilt. For this effort, the town received a VML achievement award in 2014. And a new museum was built as well.

Welcome to Pulaski now

Today the Town of Pulaski is home to the New River Valley Fine Arts Center, the Pulaski Theatre, the New River Trail Extension and the aforementioned Raymond F. Ratcliffe Transportation Museum (named for one of the town's most beloved mayors who was also president of VML from 1981-1982).

Pulaski is a town that keeps moving forward. Consider the following areas in which the citizens of Pulaski are working to make their home the best it can be.

Public efforts

In November 2019, town officials posted to the town's website an update on a series of projects that the town has undertaken to jumpstart its economy. As outlined in the posting, the town has made several key investments over the past several years, including:

- Developed a plan to revitalize a two-block section of its downtown. The plan has guided the town's revitalization activities and interactions with private investors.
- Redesigned streets near downtown by building a new sidewalk and changed from parallel to diagonal parking downtown to increase capacity for the newly rejuvenated business community.

- Partnered with local organizations and businesses to sponsor a variety of activities to bring people downtown and build a sense of community.
- Worked with a citizens group to refurbish an old railroad bridge so it could be used for recreation. The citizens group and town financed the project, which included a new deck and handrails.

Private investment

Local investment in the town has made a big difference. Highlights include:

- A private development group renovated an old food warehouse and renamed it the Jackson Park Inn and Conference Center. During baseball season, the inn houses the Pulaski Yankees, a farm team for the New York Yankees. The inn is open to the public outside of baseball season and includes a custom cuisine restaurant, "Al's on First."
- Another group is pursuing the redevelopment of multiple buildings along West Main Street.
- The town is supporting a renewed interest as a Main Street Community with Pulaski on Main.
- Finally, the town has implemented a new branding program to excite the community by paying homage to its history as well as highlighting its bright future

All due credit to the town officials and residents of Pulaski who are doing the hard work needed to promote a better future for their community!

About the author: *Mary Jo Fields is an adjunct VML staff member and a contributing editor to Virginia Town & City.*





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