

VTC

VIRGINIA
TOWN & CITY

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE
VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

Get connected

Technology solutions that
localities can use





VRSA Training: Partners in Risk Management

The Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) offers a variety of no-cost training options statewide to provide continuing education and promote risk management. Upcoming training courses are listed below. VRSA members can register online.

March

- **Trenching Train-the-Trainer Course** - March 3, Verona
- **Arrest, Search and Seizure: Legal Issues Impacting Every Officer** - March 3, Warrenton; March 4, Waynesboro
- **Focus Four Hazards** - March 11, Winchester
- **OSHA At a Glance** - March 12, Fairfax
- **VRSA Safe Driver Train-the-Trainer Course** - March 19, Staunton
- **You're a Target, Protect Your Wallet: Securing Your Work Environment** - March 23, Williamsburg
- **Webinar: Documentation - "If it's not written down, it didn't happen"** - March 25
- **Trenching Train-the-Trainer Course** - March 26, Suffolk
- **Strategic Communications and Essential Writing Skills** - March 31, Franklin

April

- **Risk and Safety Program 101** - April 8, Glen Allen
- **OSHA At a Glance** - April 14, Farmville
- **Training: Supervisor Risk Management** - April 16, Fairfax
- **Webinar: LGBT in the Workplace** - April 29
- **Arrest, Search and Seizure: Legal Issues Impacting Every Officer** - April 29, Williamsburg; April 30, Glen Allen

May

- **VRSA Annual Meeting** - May 8, Glen Allen
- **OSHA 10-Hour Construction Course** - May 19 - 20, Glen Allen

June

- **Incident and Accident Investigation** - June 11, Glen Allen
- **VRSA Safe Driver Train-the-Trainer Course** - June 17, Fredericksburg

Member engagements, trainings and roundtables are continually being added to the training calendar. Visit: vrsa.us/events/ to see what is new!

To discuss training opportunities, contact Director of Education and Training Thomas Bullock at 800-963-6800.



www.vrsa.us | 800-963-6800



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ABOUT THE COVER

This month we look at some technology-driven services and products that are helping local governments work better, faster and smarter. Rather than presenting pie-in-the-sky ideas, however, we've tried to keep it real with affordable (if not free) solutions that any local government – big or small – can use.

DEPARTMENTS

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE	2	NEWS & NOTES	6
CALENDAR	3	MEMBER SPOTLIGHT	24
PEOPLE	3	PROFESSIONAL DIRECTORY	25

FEATURES

Introduction: Technology you can use

VTC editor Rob Bullington explains why technology isn't always a good thing (except when it is) **10**

Smarter solutions for a connected government

Oracle's Roger Keren wants you to know that cloud-based computing puts digital transformation of services and solutions within reach of all local governments **11**

Defining success through technology

Matt Fulton outlines how the powerful (and free!) citizen engagement and performance assessment platform from Polco and NRC can help any local government **14**

Take back the innovation narrative one story at a time

Meet James Alfano and learn more about his company GovLaunch – a free, private “innovation wiki” specifically designed for local government staff to share their projects **16**

Reaping the benefits of converting to VoIP

VML's Brendan Hogan describes the benefits (and challenges) of converting an office from a traditional PBX phone service to Voice Over Internet Protocol **19**

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Why the Astros mean you are a bigger target for cyber criminals

The VRSA staff reminds us that local government offices are especially vulnerable to cyber threats and offers helpful advice to keep data secure **21**

2020 Legislative Day highlights

A full spread of pics taken at the Thursday, Feb. 6 event **22**



In uncertain times, local governments make all the difference

I AM HOPEFUL THAT by the time this article is published the scare of “the virus” will have abated and we will all be on track to normalcy. However, it is during uncertain times like these that residents are reminded of something that local officials think about every day: there are people behind essential services like water, sewer, firefighting, policing and education. And the people that make these services possible are also affected by events. While the President and other world leaders talk, it is local governments that remain consistent in doing the actual work. So, thank you for making sure that people have water and sewer service and a hundred other essential things! And thank you for making sure that when help is needed most, it is available.

When I consider the possibility of being stuck at home for weeks or telecommuting for an unknown amount of time, one of my greatest frustrations is that we as individuals will miss out on talking to one another face-to-face. It's by taking the time to attend conferences, to meet new people and learn new things that we grow as local leaders. I was recently reminded of this after VML's Legislative Day event when one town council member told me that it was the first time he had really spoken with his locality's Board of Supervisors and found, to his surprise, that they actually agreed on more things than not. They had to drive to all the way to Richmond so they could have time to communicate, but what a valuable relationship to have begun!

I believe that VML's events are a core benefit to our members because they bring different people who share a passion for making local governments work better together to interact and learn from one another. As such, VML will continue to hold

events so long as it is safe to do so. VML staff are talking with the City of Norfolk about the 2020 Annual Conference and are extremely excited about both this and our summer events including the Legislative and Policy Committee meetings, the Newly Elected Officials conference and our regional dinners. Of course, we will make other plans if health safety becomes an issue. So, stay tuned to the website for updated information on these events and on COVID-19 as we continue to post the information that we receive.

One last word about the General Assembly (and hopefully I won't write about them again for a while). Thank you for everyone who acted and worked on legislation and the budget this year! It was an extremely difficult session for local governments as we fought to tamp down potentially significant local impacts from measures such as mandatory collective bargaining, preclearance for voting districts at the state level, public defender funding equal to that of commonwealth attorneys, waiver of stormwater fees, etc. Along the way, we were able to notch a few wins! This General Assembly did give localities the authority to regulate the carrying of firearms, remove monuments and tax plastic bags. More money was put into 599 funding and transportation, both of which will hopefully help localities. Please keep your eye out for the VML report after the veto session that will detail legislation affecting localities, including some of my favorite topics from this session: shopping carts, electric school buses and robots!

So, whether this finds you back to normal, or on your way there, remember: Local governments are the rock in these uncertain times and VML truly appreciates your ability to consistently provide necessary services for all! Happy Spring! 

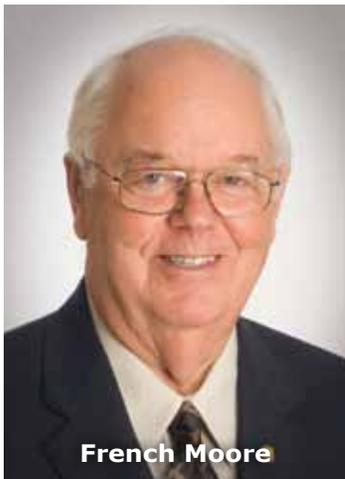




VML connects you with a variety of networking and professional development events. Learn about these opportunities at vml.org/events.

- May 17 - 18 (NEW DATE)** **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



French Moore

French Moore passes away

Dr. French H. Moore, Jr., former mayor of the Town of Abingdon and former president of the Virginia Municipal League, passed away on February 24. Moore served on the town council for 42 years, including 30 years as vice mayor and six years as mayor. He served as president of VML from 2005-2006 and he and his wife Mary Ann were well-known and loved for their congeniality and graciousness.

Moore was a leader in establishing Abingdon's Historic District, the first such district to be recognized in Southwest Virginia. Some of the projects that he championed while serving Abingdon include the Virginia Creeper Trail, the

Electronic Village of Abingdon, the Stone Mill Business and Technology Park, construction of the Harry L. Coomes Recreation Center, construction of the Abingdon Farmer's Market Pavilion and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center.

Moore served on numerous local, regional and state bodies, including serving eight years on the Board of Visitors for Virginia Commonwealth University. He was a past president of the Virginia Dental Association and the Virginia Board of Dentistry.

Moore was a graduate of the Medical College of Virginia School of Dentistry and he practiced dentistry in Abingdon for 38 years. He served in the United States Army during the Korean War.

The complete obituary is posted at <http://frostfuneralhome.com/obituaries/dr-french-hale-moore-jr/>.



- Hozey -

Charles, effective March 9. Hozey has over twenty-one years of experience working in local, state and federal government. He previously served as the deputy chief of staff for former Alaska Governor Bill Walker; city manager of the city of Valdez, Alaska; administrative director for Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska; and assistant borough manager of Ketchikan Gateway Borough. He also served in the U.S. Air Force in combat search and rescue as a rescue pilot and senior rescue controller, Pentagon program manager and flight commander in Okinawa, Japan, the District of Columbia and Alaska.

Hozey has a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and a master's degree in public administration from Central Michigan University.



- Stallings -

Stallings named Smithfield town manager

Michael Stallings has been appointed the new town manager for Smithfield, effective April 20. Stallings is currently the town manager for Windsor.

Davis tapped as Farmville manager



- Davis -

The Farmville Town Council has appointed **C. Scott Davis** as the next town manager. Davis had been serving as interim manager following the retirement of long-time manager Gerry Spates last August.

Davis began working for the town in 2017 as the assistant town manager. His previous experience includes serving as the director of planning and community development in the City of Colonial Heights and

as a police officer in the same city.

Davis has held two positions with the Richard Bland College of William and Mary in Petersburg, as police chief and as director of advancement and alumni relations. While employed by the college he served as a council member and then as mayor in the city.

Davis has a master's degree in public administration from Virginia Commonwealth University and a doctorate in law and policy from Northeastern University.

Hozey appointed as Cape Charles manager

John F. Hozey, III has been appointed as the town manager for the Town of Cape

Robertson appointed as Roanoke assistant city manager

W. Brent Robertson has been named the assistant city manager for community development for the City of Roanoke. Robertson currently is the accounting and systems manager in the city Finance Department.



He previously was the county administrator in Franklin and was the director of management and budget in Roanoke County prior to that.

Robertson has a bachelor's degree from Radford University and a master's degree in public administration from James Madison University. A Certified Public Accountant, Robertson also earned a certificate in local government management from Virginia Tech.

He will replace Brian Townsend who retires from the city at the end of June 2020.

DiBacco named as Norfolk fire-rescue chief



Norfolk City Manager Dr. Chip Filer recently announced the appointment of **John Edward DiBacco** as the next chief of Norfolk Fire-Rescue. DiBacco had been serving as the assistant fire chief in charge of paramedic services.

- DiBacco -

Bennett to assume new role with firefighters' foundation



Ian Bennett

Harrisonburg Fire Chief **Ian Bennett** announced recently that he would be leaving his position this April in order to work for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Bennett began working for the Harrisonburg Fire Department in 1987 and was appointed fire chief in 2016.

In his new position, Bennett will work with families and fire departments to help people heal following the deaths of firefighters in the line of duty. He will be a compassionate voice in his travels around the country, although he and his family plan to remain in Harrisonburg.

During his tenure as fire chief, Bennett became a familiar face to the members of the General Assembly, testifying frequently on the need for local governments to have the authority to control the placement of mulch in order to decrease the likelihood of catastrophic fires. At the local level, Bennett put in place a peer support program for the fire department and championed for measures to ensure the safety of fire personnel.

DiBacco has worked with the city since 1992 and has held positions in training, administration and operations. He is an adjunct instructor for the Virginia Department of Fire Programs. He has a bachelor's degree in human resource management from the University of Richmond and a master's degree in public safety and administration from Arizona State University.

Town of Kilmarnock administrative changes announced

Susan Cockrell has been appointed the town manager of Kilmarnock, the first woman to hold that position in the town's 90-year history! Cockrell began work for Kilmarnock in 2007 as the community de-

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- Cockrell -

velopment strategist. She was appointed deputy town manager in 2012 and acting manager in 2019, followed the retirement of Town Manager Tom Saunders. She has an undergraduate degree from the College of William and Mary and a master's degree in industrial marketing from Case Western Reserve University.

Nancyellen Keane has been appointed the town attorney in Kilmarnock. The current principal at Kean Law PLLCA, Keane has over 30 years' experience providing general counsel for both public and private sectors. She received her J.D. from the University of Richmond School of Law.



- Keane -

Chad Thomas has been appointed as the economic development and tourism coordinator. His prior experience includes work in business recruitment, administering the community and development block grant, and developing parks and recreation programs. He has an undergraduate degree in communications from Southern Utah University and a master's degree in public administration from Appalachian State University.



- Thomas -

Foley announces upcoming retirement



- Foley -

Stafford County Administrator **Tom Foley** announced recently that he plans to retire from his position effective July 1. He has served as county administrator since 2016. Prior to that, Foley worked in Albemarle County for more than 17 years, first as the deputy county executive and then the county executive. He formerly was the county administrator in Caroline County and in Cumberland County.

Foley has an undergraduate degree in business administration from Marshall University and a master's in public administration from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Stafford appoints new county administrator



- Presley -

Stafford County Board of Supervisors announced the appointment of **Frederick J. Presley** to the position of County Administrator. Presley has been serving as deputy county administrator of Stafford County since his appointment in 2017. He will take over as county administrator on July 1, 2020.

Before his appointment in 2017, he served as town manager in West Warwick, RI. His experience also includes four years running a private consulting firm and seven years as a director of planning and economic development. Presley has a master's degree in public administration from Norwich University. He holds a bachelor of sciences degree in resource development from the University of Rhode Island. He is also a veteran of the United States Army.

Northam announces appointments

Governor Ralph S. Northam has announced the following appointments and reappointments of local officials:

Newport News Commissioner of the Revenue **Tiffany M. Boyle** to the Board of the Virginia College Building Authority.

Winchester Fire and Rescue Chief **William A. Garrett** to the Board of Trustees of the Virginia Retirement System.

Wythe County Department of Social Services Director **Kimberly Ayers**, Region Ten Community Services Board Executive Director **Lisa Beitz**, and Lynchburg Police Chief **Ryan Zuidema** to the Child Fatality Review Team.

Norfolk Circuit Court Drug Court Coordinator **Marla H. Newby** to the Governor's Substance Abuse Services Council.

Charlottesville Sheriff **James Brown** and Bristol Firefighter **Bryan K. Boyd II** to the Maternal Mortality Review Team.

Prince William County Department of Economic Development Executive Director **Christina M. Winn** to the Virginia Economic Development Partnership Committee on Business Development and Marketing.

Siri Russell, the director of the Albemarle County Office of Equity and Inclusion, to the Board of Trustees of the Virginia Museum of Natural History.

Daphne Cunningham, Deputy

Executive Director of the Hampton-Newport News Community Services Board; Lisa Linthicum of Rustburg, Director of the Campbell County Department of Social Services and Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Colette McEachin to the Maternal Mortality Review Team.

In memoriam

Former Newport News Commissioner of the Revenue **Charles D. Crowson, Jr.**, passed away on February 27. After Crowson retired from the city in 2010, he worked as a lobbyist for various groups, including the Virginia Municipal League, on local government finance and budget issues.

While serving as commissioner, Crowson participated in several state task forces, including the Personal Property Tax Relief Act and Personal Property Tax Relief Compliance Audit System. He was instrumental in the development and implementation of the statewide Business, Professional and Occupational License statute. He was a past president of the Virginia Association of Commissioners of the Revenue and the Virginia Association of Locally Elected Constitutional Officers and a former member of the board of directors of the Virginia Association of Assessing Officers.

Crowson was well-known and respected in the legislative halls for his knowledge and his ability to work with others (as well as the peanut brittle that he made on weekends and brought to his many friends).

The full obituary is available on Legacy.com.

Clarence Bernard Diersing, Jr., the former director of code compliance in the City of Newport News, passed away February 6, 2020. Diersing retired from the city in 1993 and moved to Port Charlotte, FL.

Diersing was active at the local, regional and state level on code enforcement issues, including serving as president of the Virginia Building and Code Officials Association from 1983-84.

The full obituary is available on Legacy.com.

Movers and Shakers

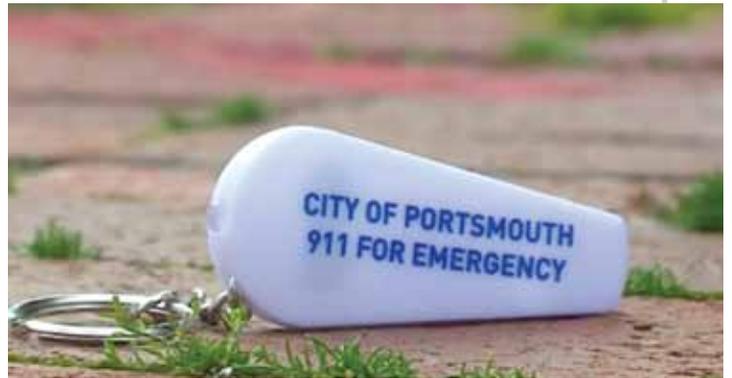
Do you know someone who's on the move? Send your announcements about new hires in local government, promotions, retirements, awards and honors to Rob Bullington at rbullington@vml.org.

Portsmouth launches personal safety initiative

THE PORTSMOUTH POLICE DEPARTMENT has begun implementing a personal safety program titled Whistle Your Way to Safety, which is designed to empower residents to be vigilant about personal safety, and to provide them with an effective means of safety – a whistle. The department is meeting with various groups and organizations to spread word about the initiative.

Citizens who feel threatened or want to alert others that they need help or police intervention can blow their whistle, thus attracting attention. Even if the noise doesn't deter the offender, someone may hear the whistle and call 9-1-1.

Fun fact: Nineteenth century British police used whistles to alert their fellow officers that backup was needed or that trouble was afoot (according to the city's media release).



Small scale manufacturing grants awarded

THE CITY OF BRISTOL, Town of Farmville and Prince Edward County, City of Norfolk, Page County, and the Middle Peninsula Alliance region were recently selected for a Small-scale Production Pilot program provided by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), through Virginia Main Street, and in partnership with the National Main Street Center.

The pilot program

will provide technical assistance to communities to determine the potential for small-scale production/manufacturing as an economic development and revitalization strategy. For example, Norfolk seeks to leverage the city's assets to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment through small scale, artisan manufacturing.

The DHCD website defines small scale manufacturing in this way: "Small-scale producers, or maker businesses, are defined as all types of small businesses producing tangible goods. This includes businesses producing goods in textile, hardware, wood, metal, 3D printing, and food. This also includes hardware prototyping, consumer product design and prototyping, breweries and distilleries, and local food production and packaging."

The pilot programs will conclude by June of this year.



Alexandria sponsors poetry contest

THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA OFFICE of the Arts and the Alexandria Transit Company have joined forces to host a poetry contest for residents 16 years or older called "DASHing Words in Motion." The goals of the contest are to encourage a broad range of ideas and subject matter, recognize writers, promote an appreciation of poetry, and provide inspiration to people using the Alexandria Transit Company's DASH buses and trolleys.

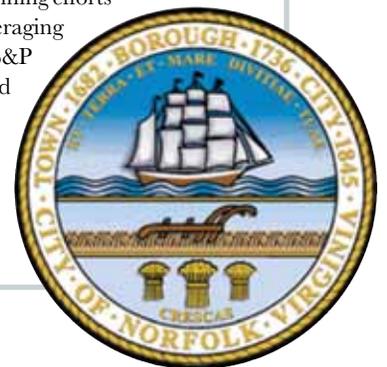
Winning poems will be displayed on DASH buses and trolleys during National Poetry Month in April 2020. Visit www.alexandriava.gov/Arts for additional information about this and other literary programs.



Norfolk receives AAA credit rating from S&P

STANDARD & POOR'S GLOBAL RATINGS (S&P) has raised Norfolk's credit rating to AAA on its long-term general obligation bonds, making the city one of just 16 local governments in Virginia with this highest credit rating. S&P said that the higher rating reflects the city's strong economy, management and budgetary flexibility.

According to the city's media release, S&P applauded the city's resiliency efforts to address sustainability, climate change and sea level risk in its long-term financial and capital planning efforts and its development regulations, while leveraging its strategic location and importance. S&P also noted the city programs designed to improve the economic power of its residents including the redevelopment of the St. Paul's neighborhood. Additional information can be found on the city's website: www.norfolk.gov.



Hampton begins ‘Digital City Transformation’



IN FEBRUARY THE CITY OF HAMPTON completed the installation of fifteen solar-powered smart poles as part of its “Digital City Transformation” initiative. The poles will provide Wi-Fi access, charging ports, and lighting for enhanced security to the Y. H. Thomas Neighborhood Park. The poles can store energy for up to eight days with no sunlight and are designed to light the area where someone is walking, both to save energy and to reduce light pollution.

According to the city media release, the smart poles are part of a pilot program designed to reduce carbon footprint and energy costs, provide Wi-Fi access, and improve security. They will also increase neighborhood resiliency by continuing to produce light and charging power during electric outages. Staff is evaluating other sites for installation of smart poles, which can be retrofitted onto existing poles and can include sensors that monitor traffic and sea-level rise.

“Foster to Youth Initiative” gets underway in Portsmouth

THE U.S. HOUSING AND URBAN Development Department announced in February that the Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority, in cooperation with several other local agencies, received a grant of more than \$100,000 for the Foster to Youth Initiative (FYI). The HUD funding will provide housing assistance and supportive services for 14 young people in Portsmouth who are aging out of foster care and are at risk of homelessness.

This is the third award of vouchers in the Mid-Atlantic region as well as the third award in the Tidewater area of Virginia accounting to a HUD representative.

In addition to the housing authority, local agencies involved in

FYI include the Portsmouth Department of Social Services, the Portsmouth Homeless Action Consortium Continuum of Care (CoC) and Portsmouth Volunteers for the Homeless.

According to a HUD media release, nationwide more than 20,000 young people age out of foster care each year and the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare estimates that approximately a quarter of those experience homelessness within four years of leaving foster care.



Autonomous vehicle pilot concludes in Albemarle County

THE ALBEMARLE COUNTY BOARD of Supervisors was briefed in February on the results of the pilot AVNU (“Autonomous Vehicle, Neighborhood Use”) shuttle. The pilot was the first autonomous shuttle on public roads for the public’s use in Virginia.

According to the media release, the pilot program was in operation for 90 days and operated in and around Crozet. During that time, the shuttle traveled 530 miles autonomously and transported 750 passengers. A safety ambassador rode the shuttle during the pilot but there were no incidents that required intervention.

During the trial, the AVNU shuttle traveled public roads with pedestrian, cyclist, car, truck, and bus traffic at various times of the day.

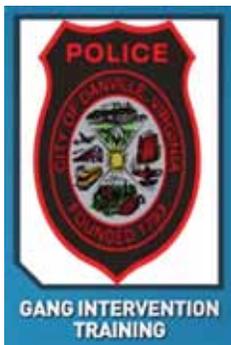
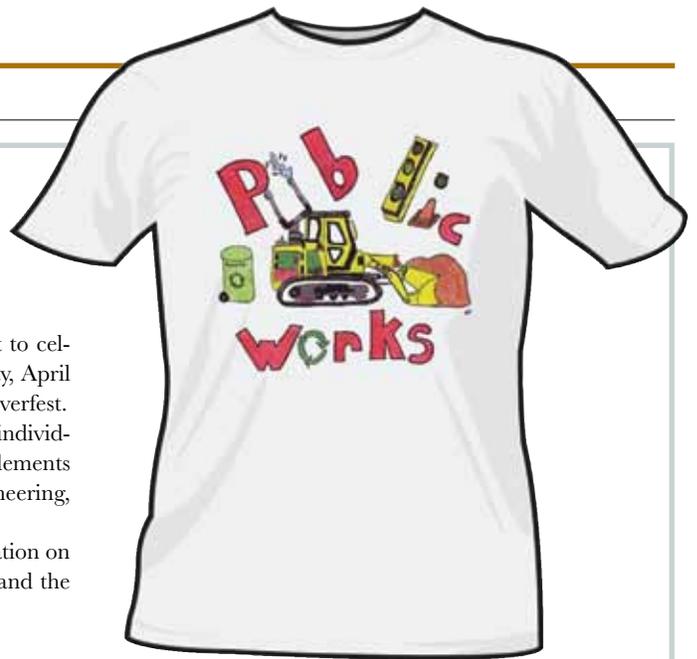
A link to the final report to Albemarle County is available at www.perronerobotics.com/county-shuttle-report.

Waynesboro hosts t-shirt design contest

THE CITY OF WAYNESBORO is hosting a t-shirt design contest to celebrate “Public Works at Riverfest 2020,” which will be held Saturday, April 25. The winning design will be worn by Public Works staff during Riverfest.

The city’s website advised that the design entries should be the individual’s interpretation of public works but could include such design elements as vehicles and equipment, water and sewer utilities, recycling, engineering, stormwater systems, etc.

The “Public Works at Riverfest 2020” event will present information on the role of public works in ensuring the health of the South River and the Chesapeake Bay.



Gang intervention training held in Danville

CITY OF DANVILLE OFFICIALS and agency staff recently met with representatives from the National Gang Center for two days of training on the formation of a multi-agency intervention team to encourage youth to leave the street gang lifestyle for a better path.

The city team will be composed of

people from law enforcement, probation, outreach, education and social services. According to the National Gang Center, a multi-agency intervention team can increase the effectiveness of each agency’s efforts, reduce duplication of services, increase access to services, and ensure that gang members are held accountable for their actions.

Thus far, the program has been implemented at five sites across the U.S.

Halifax County-South Boston library system holds early literacy fundraiser

THE HALIFAX COUNTY-SOUTH Boston Public Library System held its fourth annual early literacy fundraiser, titled “Rock ‘n Read,” in December, featuring the auction of guitars, ukuleles and one hand-built cigar box guitar! Fourteen local artists donated their time in readying the items for the auction.

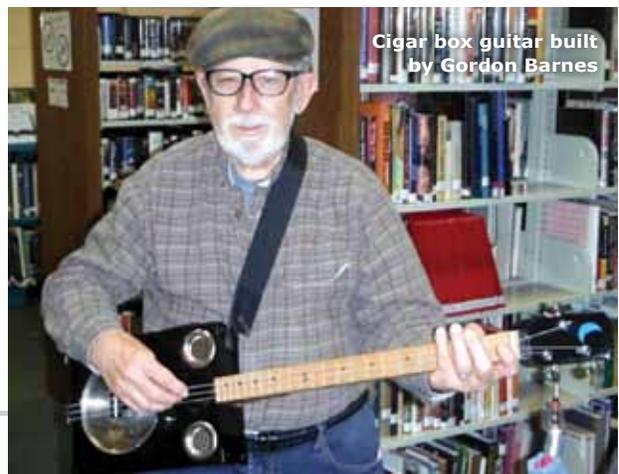
The early literacy fundraising event began four years ago when a local church donated chairs for children to the library’s early literacy specialist. After the chairs were painted, they

fetched \$1200 in an auction for the literacy program.

This year’s event included the auction, live music hors d’oeuvres, and wine. More than \$1,700 was raised, with proceeds to go to the development of early literacy services and the children’s areas of the Halifax and South Boston Public Libraries. The program was featured in The Library of Virginia’s “Uncommonwealth” blog: <https://uncommonwealth.virginiamemory.com>.



Under a Tree by Rachel Smith



Cigar box guitar built by Gordon Barnes

Hometown H2O gets underway in Suffolk with donation of water well



WHEN A FAMILY OF SIX was displaced from their home after their water well failed, Hometown H2O installed a new one! Hometown H2O is a domestic water program aimed at bringing education and access to clean and sustainable water to people and communities in need across the United States.

The program is an extension of the Chris Long Foundation's Waterboys initiative and the result of a partnership announced in December 2019 with Xylem Inc., a water technology company.

Chris Long, the founder and chairman of the foundation that bears his name, is also a two-time Super Bowl champion.

In addition to the new well, Xylem and a team of volunteers are completing interior and exterior home improvement projects on the property to help improve the family's overall quality of life.

Xylem and Waterboys, along with nonprofit partner Water Well Trust, seek to raise awareness about domestic water issues. For example, most people are unaware that 1.5 million people in the U.S. lack access to clean, safe drinking water at home. This partnership will deliver a series of water well projects to provide rural communities with reliable, safe water access. Additional information is available at www.waterboys.org/hometown.

Coastal resilience project breaks ground in Norfolk

IN FEBRUARY, VIRGINIA Gov. Ralph Northam, Norfolk Mayor Kenneth Cooper Alexander and city residents celebrated the groundbreaking of the \$112 million Ohio Creek project.



The Ohio Creek Watershed Project is part of Norfolk's resilience strategy to design a coastal community capable of dealing with the increased risk of flooding, create economic opportunity, and advance initiatives to connect communities, deconcentrate poverty and strengthen neighborhoods.

The watershed includes two residential, predominantly African American neighborhoods with civic leagues and a strong community identity. A new park will connect the neighborhoods and will include a flood berm, a restored tidal creek and wetland, as well as a multi-use sports field and places for community gatherings and recreation. Pump stations, tide gates, road improvements, pervious pavement, and other water retention strategies will be incorporated to improve the city's storm water system.

Additional information is available at www.norfolk.gov/3867/Ohio-Creek-Watershed-Project.

Roanoke County begins citizen security camera program



THE ROANOKE COUNTY Police Department is partnering with residents and business owners to launch a citizen security camera program to help keep the community safe. Residents and businesses may voluntarily register privately owned surveillance camera systems with the police department. The cameras may help save investigative time by capturing information at crime scenes. Police personnel will have to get permission to view the footage which may assist in the apprehension and prosecution of criminals involved.

*We are living in the future
I'll tell you how I know
I read it in the paper
Fifteen years ago
We're all driving rocket ships
And talking with our minds
And wearing turquoise jewelry
And standing in soup lines
We are standing in soup lines*

- John Prine "Living in the Future"
from the album *Storm Windows* (1975)

Technology you can use... for real

WHAT I LOVE MOST about Mr. Prine's wry, musical commentary on the future is the acknowledgment that innovation rarely delivers everything people want (i.e. personal rocket ships) and even less rarely delivers what they need (i.e. soup). For all the shiny objects and buzzwords associated with the technological revolution of the past 20 years or so, it remains true that the big companies driving that progress these days (i.e. Google, Facebook, etc.) don't make their money selling better soup, they make the majority of their revenue selling ads. Which is to say, Facebook never filled a pothole and Google won't deliver social services. These, and hundreds of other essential tasks, still fall to the people who work in local governments.

But, while we wait for our rocket ships, technology still has an important role to play in making the work that people do easier and better. To that end, we've gathered some articles about platforms, ideas and products any local government

agency might want to consider. While we aren't saying that these will work for everyone, we felt them worthy of your attention.

So, courtesy the technological revolution, allow us to present new and better ways to...

Service your Citizens (and a whole lot more) using the power of cloud computing as presented by Roger Keren from Oracle.

Define Success and Engage your Community with an online platform specifically designed for local governments to assess their constituents' preferences and opinions as outlined by Matt Fulton from POLCO and NRC.

Tell Your Story by sharing your department's successes (and near successes) with likeminded individuals in local government on a private, free platform as created by James Alfano from GovLaunch.

Provide Desk Phones for Your Staff using a cost-effective, feature-rich Voice Over Internet Protocol system as told by Brendan Hogan from VML.



Smarter solutions for a connected government

A CITIZEN SITS STRANDED at a bus stop late at night. Unsure whether she missed the bus, or if the bus is simply running late, she eventually resorts to calling a friend to pick her up.

Good thing she had a phone!

But, given the data and technology available today, citizens in any municipality should be able to use their smartphones to access up-to-date transit schedules in real-time. This technology would allow the woman stuck at the bus stop to see exactly where the next bus is, its estimated arrival time and even how many passengers are onboard so she can predict whether she's likely to have a seat once it arrives.

In fact, cloud-based solutions now make it possible for state and local government agencies (no matter how small) to make customer service a key part of their IT solutions. But while many private sector companies have leveraged technology to improve customer service, the equivalent government information and services are often absent or, when they do exist, difficult to use. Government often faces challenges the private sector does not, including a dearth of funding, rigid policies and regulations, and/or long procurement cycles. That said, because citizens have become accustomed to the high-level of service they receive from the private sector, they expect their government to behave just as efficiently. The reality is that it can deliver the same

high-level of service by prioritizing the right approach. One way, is leveraging the advantages of the cloud.

Cloud-based systems enable agencies to:

- Coordinate the timing of and the approach to improvements in citizen experience.
- Move away from old, unreliable, and in most cases, poorly designed legacy systems.
- Create a true enterprise of efficiencies and reduce costs by integrating mobility, the Internet of Things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI) derived from machine learning.
- Allows citizens to interact with government 24/7, and in the ways that are most convenient for them.
- Easily and quickly add new capabilities without the headache of having to do it yourself.

Beyond customer service, state and local government agencies can reduce repetitive and menial tasks, improve transparency, remove barriers to interaction and help boost economic development.

To better understand how it all works, let's examine a key area where this approach is taking root in state and local government agencies: Economic and community development.



Streamlining economic and community development

Economic and community development are critical to any locality seeking to attract new businesses and expedite the construction and renovation of schools, town centers, office parks and homes – projects that can revitalize communities and create jobs.

Today, many economic development and city planning departments are burdened by cumbersome and paper-driven processes, where multiple individuals and agencies must examine and approve a series of sequential and time-sensitive actions using manual processes that have been in existence for decades. Many towns, cities and coun-

ties also have antiquated legacy systems that are unable to communicate with other departments.

Fortunately, thanks to cloud-based systems, solutions to these problems are quickly within the reach of local governments of all sizes. This new category of transactional service can accelerate the routine business of government through end-to-end assisted digital workflow solutions that take advantage of what is now routine in commercial transactions: online payments, email and text reminders, mobile approvals and sophisticated mapping capabilities that give builders, city planners and citizens an instant snapshot of any parcel of land with its permit status.

Using the latest advances in technology, users are seamlessly

Case Studies

Improving the citizen experience in San Jose, CA

As a community based in the heart of Silicon Valley, San Jose city leaders recognized residents had high expectations for innovation and participation. Passed by the mayor and city council in 2016, the San Jose Smart City Vision sought to help citizens engage city government in safer, more inclusive and user-friendly ways. As part of this vision, city leaders launched Project ACE (Amazing Citizen Experience) at the end of 2016 to transform how the city provides services and information.

ACE includes advanced customer engagement features. As prioritized by the community, these included: removing abandoned vehicles, addressing illegal dumping, fixing potholes, repairing streetlights and cleaning up graffiti. Citizens can report these issues via whatever channel they choose – phone, website, chat or mobile app. The solution integrates the city's back-office systems, automatically routing citizen service requests to the work crews in charge of responding.

Today, San Jose's local government agencies can make decisions based on real-time data and analysis. Lessons learned regarding communications, process engineering and user-centric design have helped reshape the city's customer relationship management system that handles 170,000+ citizen requests per year.

Responding to the opioid crisis in Massachusetts and Illinois

Unfortunately, Virginia's localities are all too familiar with the opioid crises affecting every corner of the United States. The numbers are staggering. Every day in the United States, 91 citizens die from an opioid overdose – a rate of one person every 16 minutes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To help stem the tide, the state governments in Massachusetts and Illinois moved to cloud-based solutions to provide citizens better access to information and resources. Examples of how the new systems provide benefits include:

- Individuals suffering from opioid use disorder, their family members and their caseworkers can access a portal, answer a few short questions and receive real-time detailed information on the most appropriate resources and/or treatment facilities based on their location, health insurance coverage and the substance(s) being abused.

- Treatment providers can update the information about their services in real time.
- Treatment providers can also provide up to-the-minute details of waitlists for support programs.

Both the Illinois portal and the Massachusetts portal were implemented to assist call centers operated by Boston based Health Resources in Action (HRiA). The underlying software is cloud-based, which means it can be set up and configured quickly at a fraction of the cost and time of traditional portals. The portals don't replace the call centers, but rather work in tandem with them to provide citizens additional channels to receive assistance.

This cloud-based solution allowed Massachusetts to handle more than 23,000 calls and 147,000 website visits in 2017.

Safeguarding environmental compliance in Ohio

Every state has environmental requirements that businesses must adhere to. Whether you manufacture rubber ducks or want to open a restaurant, there are specific regulations with which you must comply. The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) decided to make this process easier by offering a one-stop "wizard" to business owners seeking an easy-to-use, online environmental permitting, licensing and registration experience.

Using Ohio EPA's online wizard, businesses can determine which permits, registrations, licenses or notifications are required by either the federal or state EPA. The wizard directs the user through a series of questions to determine if a permit is required. References to EPA regulations and jargon have been purposely omitted wherever possible.

The wizard contains paths for common business and industry types as well as a separate path for individuals who may be using the tool to find occupational licensing requirements or environmental health issues that may overlap with federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Although the tool is being used by the Ohio EPA to fulfill a government need, it is based on Oracle Policy Automation, which helps organizations in all industries effectively deliver services and determine policy obligations while maintaining full compliance with laws and regulations. So, what is good for the private sector goose turns out to be good for the public sector gander as well!



guided to the resources they need, without shuffling between licensing employees or visiting multiple websites. Moreover, these solutions integrate back office systems for procurement, finance and supply chain needs, expediting payments and making most transactions as easy as booking a hotel room or ordering a pizza.

But that's just for starters! Focusing on modernization through the lens of the citizen has proven to reduce paperwork, phone inquiries and in-person office visits while improving compliance and speeding up the routine machinations of government to increase productivity. For example, real-time connectivity between developers and local government offices on the progression of permits reduces idle time for the developer and reduces phone calls to agency offices. And citizens, especially those not accustomed to the complexities of home construction, can quickly and easily get answers to their questions through a guided intuitive online experience.

Steps to prepare for digital transformation

Regardless of size and whether government organizations are just beginning to embrace digital or are looking to refine current approaches, they can benefit from these five steps:

- 1. Establish leadership and set goals.** It doesn't take a lot of people or money to create a "digital center of excellence." In fact, you may find that you already have people on staff interested in learning what it takes to implement an integrated and collaborative digital strategy.
- 2. Assess digital readiness.** To do this you need to find out which of your constituents are the prime users of whatever technology platforms you currently offer. Then, you need to learn how they interact with the agency in question.
- 3. Identify key characteristics.** This can be accomplished by conducting a survey to find out what technology-based services your citizens currently use the most. This will provide clues as to what government-based technology services they are likely to use if they became available.

4. Understand key technology requirements. Discover what enterprise and digital technology investments are required to deliver the desired end-to-end digital experience. Establish a roll-out plan and then communicate it to your citizens. If appropriate, offer training and/or online resources to answer questions. Short demonstration videos on your locality's website can go a long way!

5. Drive collaboration. Departments using the same or similar technology should build consensus and establish standards. This can help speed deployment time and eliminate confusion.

Learn more

Oracle has a wide array of options that can positively affect the way Virginia's local governments interact with their citizens. As a Municipal Business Associate (MBA) member of the

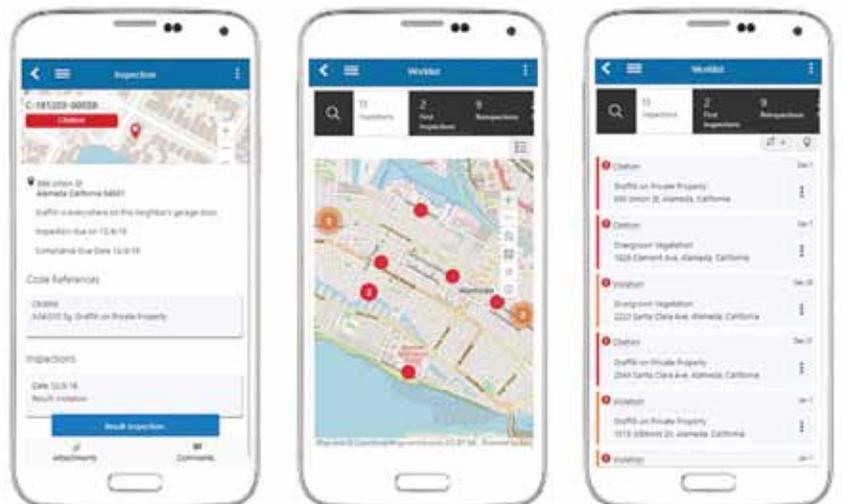
Virginia Municipal League, we are ready, willing and able to assist you.

Examples of our products that can benefit a locality of any size include:

- The Oracle Customer Experience (CX) platform that integrates services, social, mobile and marketing efforts for a complete citizen engagement solution.
- The Oracle Public Sector Community Development platform enables government entities of all sizes to improve and facilitate land development and economic growth while ensuring public safety and accountability. This platform launched with the permit and inspection process. Additional capabilities for planning and zoning, and finally code enforcement, will be rolled out in coming months.
- Register for one of Oracle's webinar series or request a personalized demonstration from me (Roger Keren).

About the author: Roger Keren is the Public Sector Citizen Experience Manager for Oracle. He can be reached at roger.keren@oracle.com.

ORACLE®



Defining success through technology: Citizen engagement and performance assessment made better

HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS in your community? As the pace of innovation in the private sphere continues to increase, it is more important than ever that those working in the public sphere understand their citizens' values and have a reliable, detailed gauge of whether or not they think their local government is meeting their needs. For local decision makers to truly understand what drives growth, vibrancy, and, to put it simply, excitement in their communities they need an authentic, organizational value check that is consistently pursued, promoted, and regularly updated.

Your mission: engage and assess

Most local governments commit themselves to some level of citizen engagement and performance assessment. These initiatives can take many forms, and always require a multi-faceted approach in order to reach enough people to be considered representative.

Among the most commonly used, traditional forms of engagement are formal public meetings as well as more informal gatherings. At the time of this writing, however, local governments dealing with the coronavirus are exploring ways to meet without gathering in person. Hopefully we will be back to normal soon because, as anyone who has ever received a confusing email from a co-worker knows, some things are best decided by people getting together in the same room.

But when it's not possible to all be in the same room, we thankfully have more ways of engaging each other remotely than at any other time in history. Social media, for example, has provided an overwhelming and largely unstructured online way to "engage" positively (and negatively) on almost everything. When you consider how local governments conduct their business, it's not surprising that social media is full of frustrations from both residents and local officials about how traditional meetings are ineffective in getting meaningful input from more than a vocal minority. But this underscores how the open, unstructured and, in many cases, uncivil nature of many social media platforms only leads to unclear, confusing and frustrating feedback for local leaders and community members to parse.

All of this points to the importance of stakeholder engagement and formal performance assessment efforts. These can take many forms. Some utilize quantitative data to focus on measuring work output measures, but this approach fails to account for the real qualitative outcomes and the extent to which the work being accomplished is meeting residents' expectations and supporting local values. To develop an accurate understanding of performance, both quantitative and qualitative measures need to be tracked over time. The challenge is, of course, how to accomplish this in a meaningful, affordable, and statistically valid way.

Enter civil technology

Without question, the use of technology in performance assessment and resident engagement is growing fast. Online solutions can reach more community members in a way that is convenient to them and can provide real-time responses with meaningful demographic

mapping data. In order to be successful, however, this technology needs to be 1) easy to use, 2) structured to provide meaningful, civil input, and 3) relevant to the desired type of information.

Which approach to use?

A community working to develop a performance assessment and engagement program must first consider whether to use a probability or non-probability-based approach for gathering input from its residents.

Probability-based sampling has long been the bedrock of performance assessment survey research. Foundationally, this means that everyone (or as close to everyone as possible) has an equal, or at least known, probability of being included. The sample (the subset of the population that will be invited to participate) is chosen in either a random or systematic way with the goal of reducing the chance of bias.

A probability-based approach should be used when the results need to be statistically valid within a maximum level of certainty. As an example, performance assessment programs typically utilize probability-based approaches.

Non-probability approaches are best used when its desirable to assess sentiment and perspective on a specific topic, policy, or issue. Technology has brought new and exciting opportunities for increasing the reach, decreasing the cost, improving the timeliness and reducing the environmental impact of non-probability assessments. Using an online polling platform (like that offered by Polco, see below) allows questions to be distributed through a variety of channels (websites, social media, email lists, newsletters, etc.).

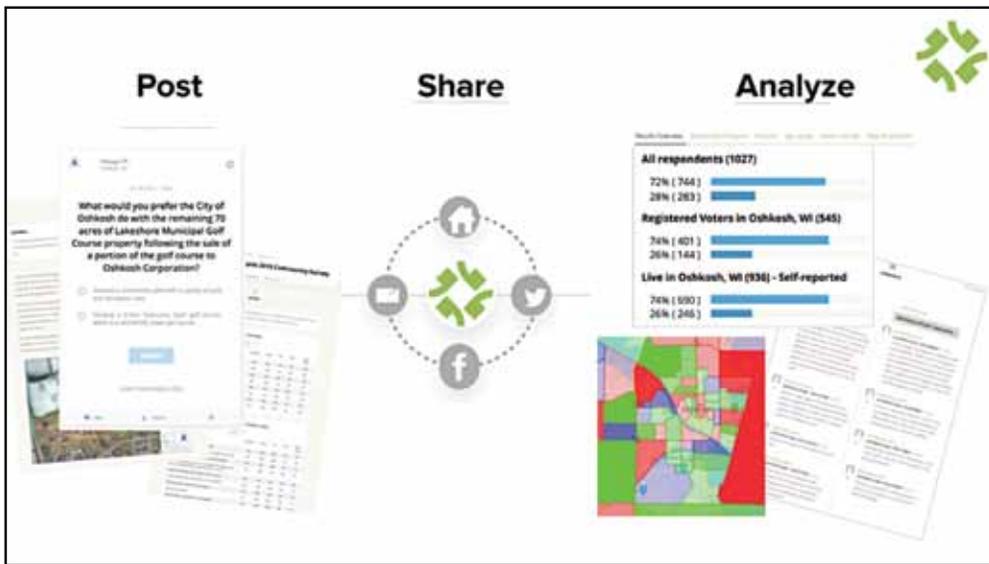
This is called a "non-probability" approach because the probability that any given resident received (or did not receive) the survey invitation is not known. That doesn't mean the results are inherently inaccurate, but questions about who is participating are harder to answer.

Introducing Polco's free engagement platform

Polco's free web-based engagement platform is designed to help communities engage residents on local topics and issues, in real-time, to help better inform decision makers. Polco's unique verification process allows responses to be aggregated at an overall level as well as filtered to reflect input from registered voters in the community. By customizing the engagement profile, Polco maps sentiment down to the precinct level and provides helpful demographic information about the response group. Decision makers can be more confident about the data because they know they are hearing from actual residents.

How does it work? Polco's engagement outreach platform utilizes a Post/Share/Analyze approach.

- 1. Post.** Communities post questions and surveys on a personalized municipal profile to which residents are directed through all appropriate community communication channels.



ongoing digital panel of engaged residents and stakeholders can be a new engagement audience.

An important benefit of using Polco's non-probability approach is the ability to monitor the overall number of responses as well as the demographic spectrum of who is responding. A community can modify outreach efforts to ensure a sufficient number of responses as well as to obtain input from as representative a group as possible. Non-English speaking residents can utilize browser translation capabilities to participate. Having the ability to monitor overall engagement levels and demographic groups makes Polco a powerful new component of a community's communication strategy.

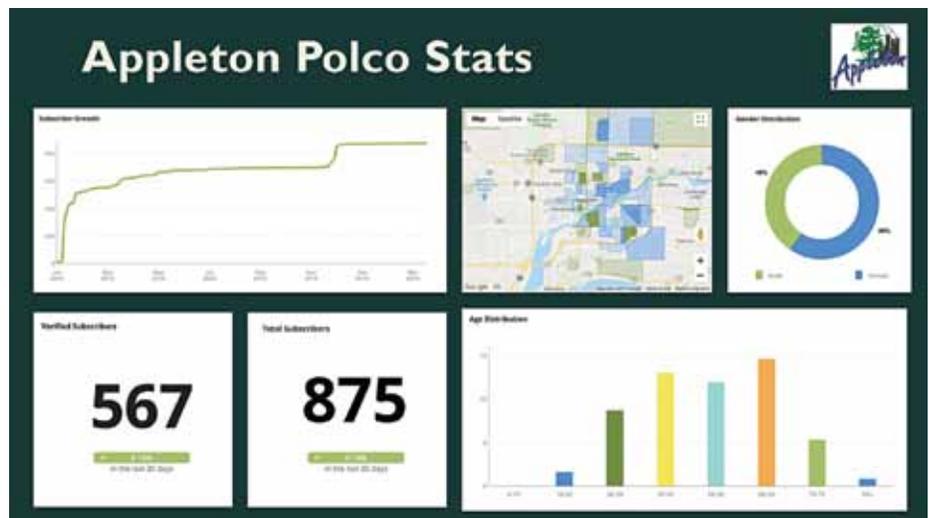
2. Share. Questions can be embedded into social media accounts, and distributed through newsletters, communications, etc. The more a community promotes the engagement, the more successful the engagement will be. When a resident initially engages, names and zip codes are requested to assist in the verification process. Email addresses are needed for residents to be reminded weekly about unanswered questions and to be notified when future engagement is desired.

Technology platforms, like Polco, can help to build strong digital audiences and help local leaders better understand resident sentiment and satisfaction levels. A robust, ongoing engagement platform is a great way to help your locality define success.

About the author: *Matt Fulton is vice president of national engagement for Polco and NRC.*

3. Analyze. Residents can see overall results after providing their response to any question or survey. Respondents are also offered the opportunity to comment on every question, but this is limited to a single comment to support civil discourse and avoid the type of cross-current conversations that take place on so many social media platforms.

An engagement and assessment platform like Polco can become part of the community's overall communication strategy, engaging a much broader resident audience, and offering a very convenient and meaningful way to help interested residents inform and guide local decisions. This



Integrating technology: Polco and NRC



Polco



NRC

Polco and the National Research Center (NRC) merged in 2019 to form the premier performance assessment and online engagement company in the country. The company's two brands enjoy the partnership and endorsement of both ICMA and NLC.

NRC's recognized gold standard survey tool is The National Community Survey™ that assesses overall community performance and incorporates benchmarking comparisons with other jurisdictions nationally. The availability of this extensive database greatly enhances opportunities to understand relative performance, and when combined with other data, helps users understand the underlying reasons for shifts in community performance.

NRC has also conducted extensive custom surveys focused on specific community needs and has numerous standardized sur-

veys designed to assess specific service areas. Historically, NRC's scientific surveys tools have utilized random sampling and mail survey approaches. Polco's platform allowed the opportunity to expand participation to residents not included in the initial random sampling. The online data collection is kept separate, and the online responses are helpful for further informing officials about performance satisfaction.

Recently, NRC used Polco's platform to create an extremely affordable version of The National Community Survey™ designed for communities under 10,000. It is a perfect example of how technology is helping communities to demonstrate performance through a specific outreach effort. The survey invites residents to participate online to help maximize reliability in assessing overall performance.

By Rob Bullington

Govlaunch wants to help local governments take back the innovation narrative one story at a time

ON ANY GIVEN MORNING, the *VTC* editor's in-box is full of emails from businesses trying to convince us to promote their products or purchase their services. Usually, I forward those messages to the digital circular file, but a recent communication from James Alfano, CEO and founder of Govlaunch, caught my eye. I'll admit that it was refreshing to learn that Govlaunch wasn't trying to sell me anything. Their platform is 100% free. So, I spent some time checking it out and was suitably impressed. Here's what I learned.

What is Govlaunch?

San Francisco-based Govlaunch is an "innovation wiki," a free, private platform designed to help local government employees share the novel ways they're improving their communities using new technologies, modern designs and better processes.

"Local governments of all sizes are doing a lot of amazing things to improve services and reduce costs. But these successes aren't being shared because there isn't a good way to organize and disseminate this type of information," James lamented. He then added "as a result, many governments are operating in isolation – forced to reinvent the wheel each time they face a new problem."

"We decided that the best way to help these folks innovate better was to provide a medium where they can more easily share what they're doing – what's working, what's not working."

The site is pre-populated with profile pages for every city, town and county government in the U.S. and Canada, amounting to more than 25,000 pages in total. With plans to expand into other countries soon, the company's goal is to cultivate an international community for crowdsourcing the largest library in the world for local government innovation.

How does it work?

The site can be used by any local government employee and there are no requirements to participate. To join, users can sign up at join.govlaunch.com and must connect using their LinkedIn profile. To ensure the privacy of the community, James and his team vet all users to make sure they are connected to a government.

Once verified, Govlaunch allows you to easily share your projects – what your government has done or what's in the works.

According to James, "No one has time to read case studies anymore, let alone write them, so we built out these modules to make it really easy to quickly share what they're doing, the tools involved, any relevant resources, and if they're working with other governments. Plus we've built it into a community platform that ties these together."

Because everything is interconnected, Govlaunch gives you a number of ways to search for information.

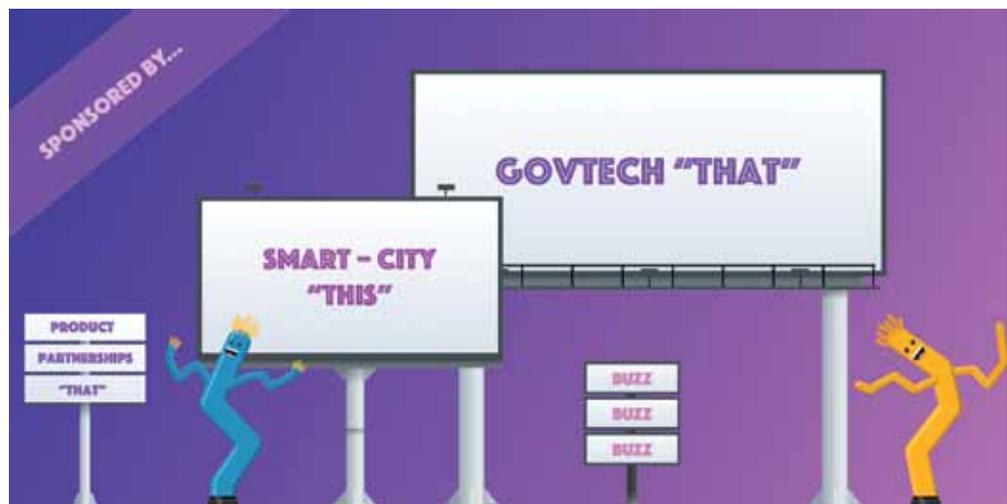
Curious about chatbots? On Govlaunch, you can quickly find out what governments are experimenting with chatbots, how they're being implemented and what tools, if any, are being used.

Want to know what products a neighboring locality is using, or what projects are being pursued by localities in other states?

All of this is possible too.

James continues, "We're trying to build this in a way that, no matter what size and budget you have, as a community you can find projects that are relevant to you that you can actually attempt to try."

But, if GovLaunch is free to users, how does it stay in business? James explains, "We're giving vendors paid tools to enhance their product profiles and submit project 'success stories' that their government partners can verify voluntarily. Vendors are still restricted from the core community and cannot solicit any of our users – nor can they view any content that isn't made publicly viewable by our users."



What's in it for Virginia localities?

At its most basic, Govlaunch provides a place where local government employees can show off their work and then share what they've accomplished with other local government employees. The platform is free, user-friendly and offers a colorful, easy way to catalog projects. Think of it as a Facebook for local government projects – albeit, one that is only available to fellow local government employees.

Taken a step further, however, Govlaunch can be used to research what other localities have done in a particular area before a local government staff embarks on a similar project. Sharing lessons learned is rarely so accessible and easy.



Who's writing the local government innovation narrative?

FOR ANYONE INTERESTED in government innovation, this is an exhilarating time to be alive. The internet is abuzz with “smart cities-this” or “govtech-that” — the excitement is palpable and long overdue.

So why am I worried?

Because this newfound interest in local government is attracting a lot of new actors to the marketplace. Search for “local government innovation” anywhere online and you’re more likely to find something produced and/or posted by a vendor than someone in government. While vendor contributions aren’t necessarily a bad thing, they are inadvertently crowding out the voices of the public servants they attempt to serve.

This isn’t surprising.

Whereas local government folks rarely have the time to read a case-study (let alone write one), vendors blessed with large marketing budgets are pumping out sponsored articles, special reports, and featured podcasts at a dizzying clip.

The alarming truth is that this shift in contributors is beginning to skew the innovation narrative away from the perspective of public servants on the ground.

Why does this matter?

With no easy way for those in local government to share innovative efforts, the narrative shifts away from what’s actually happening to what the private sector perceives innovation to be.

Here are few ways this is shaking out:

- “Technology is always the answer.” If you were to go by what’s published online, innovation almost always equates to buying a flashy new product. That’s because “govtech” sounds cooler than improving processes or empowering staff. I beg to differ. Improved processes are not only cool, they’re also way cheaper! That’s not to say technology doesn’t have a place in the conversation — but it’s just one of many ways that governments are innovating.
- “Failure is not an option.” The only time media outlets cover failure is when it occurs spectacularly. Vendors understandably don’t talk about their failures either. I wave yet to see a company publish a case study about how their product didn’t help a community.

You can’t make lemonade without a few lemons

AT GOVLAUNCH WE’VE BEEN on a mission to catalogue local government innovation wherever it’s happening — and we’ve learned a lot along the way. Perhaps most surprising is how rarely local governments share information related to failed projects or initiatives.

No one wants to talk about failure. But failure is something that we should embrace and actively share with each other. How else are we going to collectively learn from these failures?

The ability to share project failures is critical in the public sector.

You’re working hard to cut costs, work more efficiently, and improve services for your community. And we think you should have easier access to the information and tools needed to accomplish this. That’s why we’ve released a new way to share those projects or initiatives that may have missed the mark.

Govlaunch allows you to share your projects — what your government has done or what’s in the works — now with a quick way to indicate if the project was successful or not.

- Privately share failed projects with a community of your peers — or opt to publicly share with them your constituents



- Present and discuss failed projects or initiatives in a safe and productive way with a community of like-minded innovators
- Search for projects you’re interested in to review how it has or hasn’t worked in other similar communities

Our hope is to encourage more sharing of failure in a free and open community platform of local government innovators. So, let’s learn from what didn’t work and make failure more productive for everyone. You can try out Govlaunch by visiting join.govlaunch.com.

- “Large cities/counties are driving innovation.” I get it, big projects by big city and county governments usually grab the most clicks and eyeballs. Small and medium-sized communities though are doing amazing things to improve services and reduce costs...but you’d never know it.

It’s time to flip the script

We know that we need more first-hand accounts from those managing budgets and the demands of constituents — i.e. those who are delivering real results — or at least making some great attempts that may have missed the mark (see sidebar).

We also know that government innovators are stretched for time and don’t have an easy way to catalogue or share their stories.

Thankfully, there are some great groups — like Bloomberg Cities, Code for America, and ELGL — that are helping public servants connect with one another and share their experiences.

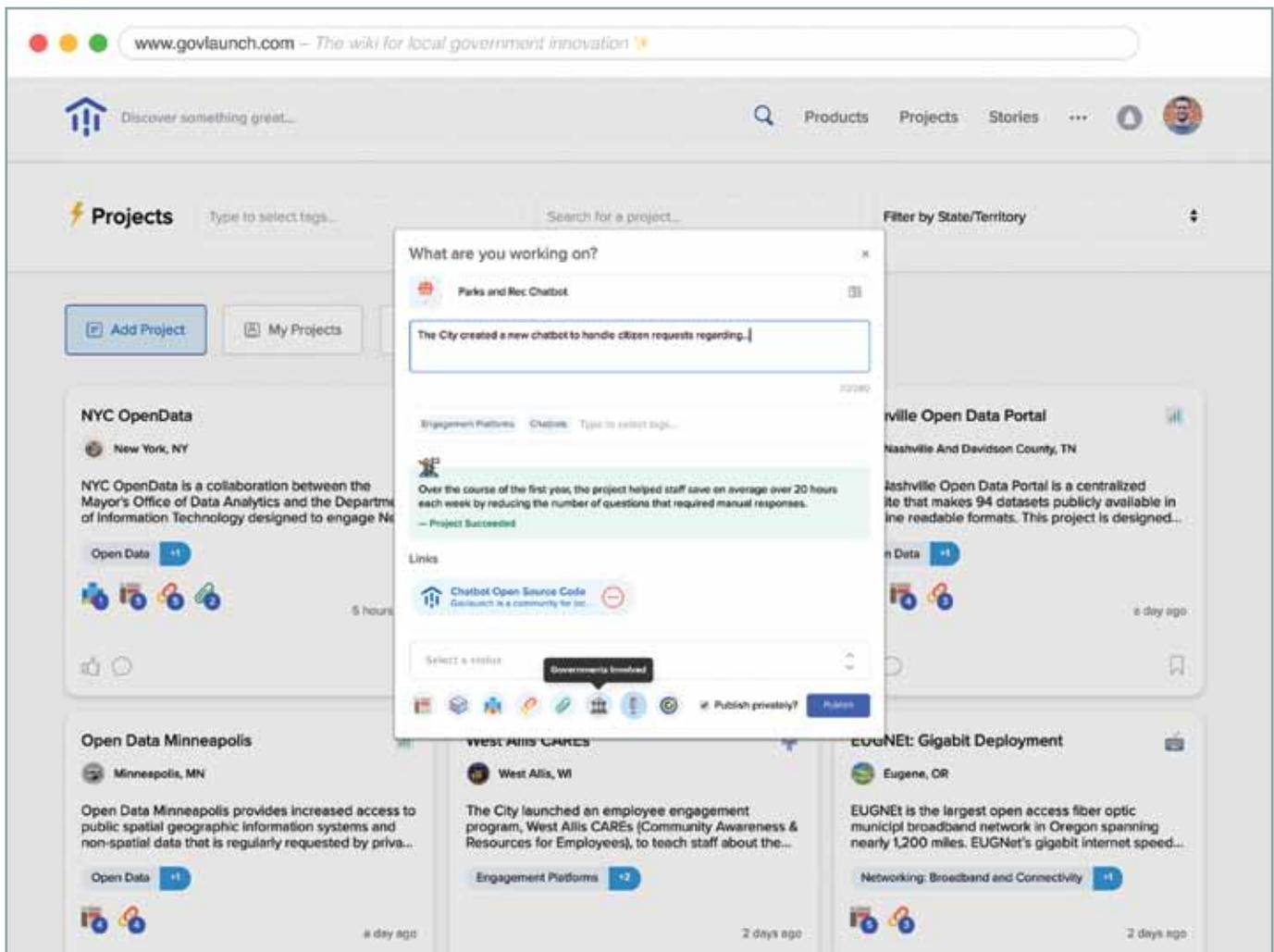
But we need much more information — from governments of all sizes.

At Govlaunch, we’ve set out to build something fundamentally different from existing resources out there. We’re growing a community of local government innovators that are crowdsourcing their stories using free tools we designed specifically for them (and with their feedback).

While other groups have attempted to build “innovation communities” in the past, these attempts ultimately devolved into libraries of sponsored materials by vendors.

We’ve learned that while community building is hard — not to mention getting members to contribute their stories — it’s vitally important.

About the author: *James Alfano has an extensive background working with local governments. Prior to Govlaunch, James co-founded EfficientGov, a local government-focused media company which was acquired by Praetorian Digital in 2014. Before that, he spent six years at the Washington D.C.-based consulting firm Marlowe & Company helping over 50 cities and counties secure grant funding and navigate federal regulatory issues.*



Reaping the benefits of converting to VoIP

ON MARCH 10, 1876 Alexander Graham Bell made the world's first telephone call to the only person on Earth capable of receiving it: his assistant in an adjoining room. "Mr. Watson," he said, "come here. I want to see you."

While the message itself was somewhat lackluster – and most definitely did not help Alexander hit his step count for the day – the medium was revolutionary and has brought us to the present moment where our "telephones" are really computers that along with making phone calls allow us to do 1,000 other things. In fact, today Mr. Watson would be more likely to receive a text "I ❤️ 2CU!"

It's not clear if this qualifies as "progress," but there it is.

While the digital revolution has changed so much, it's a fact that many offices continue to use hard wired PBX (Private Base Exchange) phone systems. As I recently learned, however, an office equipped with good internet service can experience real advantages by switching from PBX to VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) desk phone service.

The VoIP journey

The Virginia Municipal League was an excellent candidate to move from a PBX based phone system to an internet-based VoIP. I began the process by reviewing VoIP providers using Capterra (www.capterra.com), a leading software comparison website. I looked for providers that could meet a minimum criterion of 1) duplicating our existing phone service while 2) reducing the cost.

I determined that Jive Communications (www.jive.com) was the most suitable provider.

Working directly with a Jive sales representative, I negotiated a 2-year-contract price that was less than half of the previous cost per phone line on our PBX system. Jive Communications also owns GoToMeeting (www.gotomeeting.com) which allowed their sales promotion to include GoToMeeting software licensing for each phone (normally priced at \$12.00/user per month). Each user also received a new Yealink TP54W full featured phone with external power supply. These phones can also use powered ethernet in lieu of a convenient power outlet. The phones are Linux based and include a 4.3" 480 x 272 Pixels Color Display and built-in Bluetooth 4.2 for Bluetooth headsets and mobile contacts synchronization. To sweeten the deal,



a Yealink wireless conference phone was also offered at a steeply discounted rate.

The new phones may be connected to the internet by ethernet or Wi-Fi (including 5G). For VML's purposes, no additional ethernet wiring was needed since I was able to use existing computer drops and so that each employee's computer now connects through his/her phone. As a bonus, the phones can be plugged into an ethernet connection offsite for events as needed. The conference phone we acquired as part of the deal also offers Bluetooth connectivity, allowing it to connect to a staff member's cell phone at an event site!

Faxes and alarms

I then considered VML's venerable 10-year-old fax machine. Although we rarely need to receive or send a fax, it is occasionally necessary, so we decided to replace it with a virtual fax service. Faxes are now received to the existing fax number which emails it to a central email account as an email message with an attachment. Now, sending a fax is as simple as sending an email with a scanned attachment. Plus, no paper or toner is wasted on fax spam (like cruise specials or gutter cleaning).

On a related note, VML has a 10-year-old fax machine for sale if any of our readers are interested?



Next, we had to consider our alarm system which operates over a POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service – I’m not making up this retro-nyl) line and is not supported by VoIP. To solve the issue, we could either add a cellular connection device to the alarm system or have a POTS line installed just for the alarm. The POTS line was a lower cost (sometimes old ways are best) so that’s what we did.

How do we like our new phone service?

Aside from the new phones and distinct VoIP sound of a caller’s voice (which is neither better nor worse, just different), most of the staff have not taken much notice of the change. Which is to say, the service works fine. For those who dig deeper, however, the extensive list of features offered by the VoIP service are impressive. One significant change from our PBX system was to implement an auto-attendant which allows callers dialing VML’s main number to use a voice menu to route their call. This includes a choice to connect with a voice bridge that offers the ability to conference up to 20 users on a call. The GoToMeeting computer or mobile phone-based software supports voice conferencing for up to 155 users as well as video conferencing and desktop sharing. Hold music (love it or hate it) was an additional feature not available on our existing PBX system.

By far, however, the most popular new feature among the staff is voicemail to email. When a caller leaves a message, the recipient also gets an email with details and a recording of the message they can access directly from their email.

Users are offered the ability to completely control most features on their phone. Softphone software may be installed on a workstation, laptop, tablet or mobile device to replicate most features of a desk phone. Users can also choose to have their desk phone routed to an app on their smartphone so they can make and receive calls for that number while on the go.

Finally, the GoToMeeting software that came with our new plan is accessible from each user’s Jive web portal or from an installed app.

Each user can control their own videoconferencing scheduling and meetings.

Caveats and lessons learned

Setting up and configuring the VoIP system did require a significant number of manhours. The configuration is completed through a web-based administration portal. This is not included with the purchase and must be provided by the buyer or outsourced to an IT vendor. Also, when considering a switch to VoIP, additional time should be allocated to train staff and create user documentation.

On the plus side, my experience with Jive Customer Center was that they provided an exceptional level of support during the system configuration as well as troubleshooting technical problems afterward. For example, soon after we switched over, we experienced a significant technical problem with voicemail that we were able to resolve by working with Jive Customer Support. They helped me determine that the issue was being caused by a software glitch on the phones. The phone manufacturer then provided a procedure that resolved the issue.

The bottom line

By switching to VoIP, VML was able to save over 60% of our previous monthly phone service cost. Plus, we now have enhanced service features and licensing for video-conferencing software. Best of all, the new desk phones for the staff were included in the contract at no additional expense! The existing phone numbers were ported over to the new system and there was little downtime for incoming calls.

So, while VoIP may not be appropriate for all offices, in our case it turned out to be a great fit and worthwhile for any office to investigate to see if it will work for them.

About the author: *Brendan Hogan is the Virginia Municipal League’s Information Technology Administrator.*



Why the Astros mean you are a bigger target for cyber criminals

Houston, we have a problem!

AS EVERY SPORTS FAN (and even some who aren't) now knows, the Houston Astros took advantage of technology to steal opponents' pitches. Their scheme evolved over the course of several seasons, including one culminating in a World Series title. Just as the Astros evolved the "art" of sign stealing, cyber criminals continue to evolve their tactics.

The key takeaway here is that your organization is a target because of the information assets you control. Many entities don't think of their information as an asset or realize the types of information they are charged with keeping and/or communicating are valuable

in and of themselves. But, information like names, addresses, account numbers, etc. are used virtually everywhere – and your responsibility is not just for the data you maintain, it includes the data you transmit and data you receive from outside agencies.



Information is an asset that in the wrong hands becomes a threat as it is used to perpetuate social engineering crimes such as fraud. Cyber criminals actively look to exploit weaknesses based on the information gathered. These weaknesses include manipulating a victim's sensibilities through use of authority, endearment or eagerness to please.

Simply stated, the value of information is rapidly increasing. Local government departments need to understand the value of their information and the risk of that information being compromised.

Questions such as, "How much should we invest in cyber protection?" should be answered by first understanding what information of value exists, where it is located, and how it is accessed. With this knowledge, government entities can more effectively evaluate how much to spend to address potential weaknesses.

Local governments are vulnerable!

According to the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, for the first half of 2019, two-thirds of all ransomware attacks targeted state or local government.

Cyber criminals count on government entities using older technology, having limited resources to protect themselves, and not fully understanding the value of their information assets. Moreover, the increased use of integrated systems reduces human intervention and the visibility of information to those who manage it.

For all these reasons, it's important for local government staff to fully understand what information is being managed and shared through systems, as well as how this information is being protected.

Additionally, government entities have mandates for information transparency, which allow for further exploitation. For example, the Virginia Freedom of Information Act and Virginia Public Procurement Act promote awareness, transparency and openness of local governments and their activities. While these acts were intended to benefit the public, they have the unintended consequence of allowing criminals access to the information and operations of local governments.

Consider the following scenario: A local government publishes a Request for Proposal (RFP) including payment information. A fictitious party, purporting to be a responding party to the actual RFP, requests the name of the bank institution and internal wiring procedures including the maximum allowable wiring amount. All these things would be legitimate questions for a legitimate respondent to ask but could be used for nefarious purposes by an illegitimate respondent.

Information security is everyone's concern

Information security is not just an IT issue, it's an operational risk that impacts nearly every facet of local government.

In the above example, the information, if disseminated, would have come through procurement without engaging IT staff at all. As such, every person in an organization is a potential entry point for exploitation. Local government staff need to be trained on the confidentiality, integrity and availability of information. Staff play an important role in keeping information and operations secure by:

- Not clicking suspicious links or attachments
- Avoiding sharing password or other confidential information
- Locking devices and securing work areas when not in use
- Thinking through the implications of sharing information with external parties

Most importantly, encourage staff to say something if they see something as it might prevent a major issue.

VRSA can help

When investing, or considering increased investment, in cyber security, we encourage our members to consider staff awareness training and their current policies and procedures. Governments can minimize the likelihood of a cyber loss or information disruption event by keeping these two areas up to date.

One resource available to our members is YourCISO. Local governments can complete a Security Health Check, which creates a gap analysis report showing potential shortcomings and vulnerabilities in IT and operational controls and processes. This resource also includes awareness training, policies and incident response templates designed both to address staff training and policy and/or procedure updates for the organization.

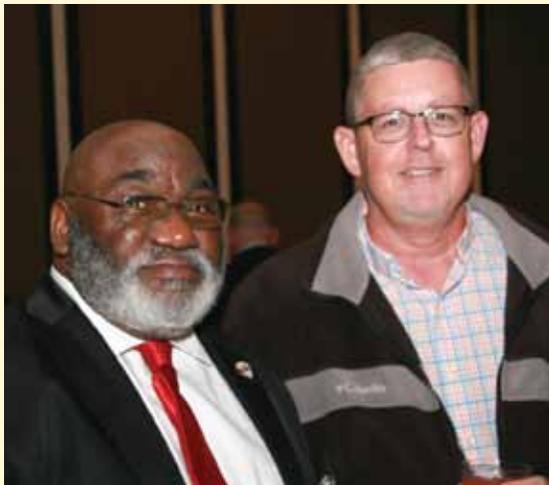
VRSA also provides thought leadership training sessions around the Commonwealth on this topic. One of the training sessions, "You're a Target, So Protect Your Wallet," focuses on cyber security, physical security, and administrative updates to help protect local government assets and promote awareness.

Contact VRSA to review all the tools they have to help protect against cybercrime.

About the authors: *The Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) is the first and most financially sound self-insurance pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia. VRSA provides auto, property, liability, and workers' compensation coverage to Virginia's local political subdivisions.*

2020 Legislative Day highlights

MORE THAN 400 LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS from across the Commonwealth gathered at the Omni Hotel in downtown Richmond on Thursday, Feb. 6th to learn about legislation and issues before the 2020 General Assembly. VML President and City of Norfolk Council Member Tommy Smigel kicked off the event by noting that Local Government Legislative Day is “the day for all of us learn how the decisions being made by the General Assembly might affect us; and it’s a day to make our voices heard.” Speakers included Governor Ralph Northam, Jim Regimbal from Fiscal Analytics and policy staff who provided updates. After a day spent talking to legislators, attendees returned to the Omni for an evening reception.



2020



LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEGISLATIVE DAY





The secret's out about South Hill

LIKE MANY TOWNS in the region, South Hill had its start as a railroad town and became known for its tobacco industry. But today, the town stands apart thanks to its diversified economy built on manufacturing and trade as well as a thriving tourism industry, fueled by its proximity to Buggs Island Lake and Lake Gaston. Furthermore, South Hill benefits from the support of local businesses and organizations that work to keep the entire community vibrant and alive.

So, what are the secrets behind South Hill's growing economy?

Secret #1 – A can-do attitude (literally)

Public canneries are usually associated with the New Deal and the Second World War when they were a way for many communities to make the most of local resources. Area farmers and keepers of Victory Gardens could bring their perishables to these locations to use the commercial scale facilities to preserve their goods. Although not as prevalent as they once were (ask a millennial to locate the nearest public cannery and you're more likely to wind up at a micro-brewery), public canneries still exist in towns like South Hill that recognize their value.

The Southern Virginia Makers Market in South Hill, which is run by the Southern Virginia Food Hub (SVHB), has taken the concept of a public cannery to a new level to serve a variety of local agribusinesses. The market houses a local grocery, commercial kitchen, dairy processing room, deli, coffee shop and community classroom. The kitchen and dairy processing room are used by farmers and bakers to turn out products ranging from butter and cheese to casseroles, jellies, and baked goods. Products can be sold through the grocery store and deli. Further, farmers can sell produce to the SVHB, which processes them for sale in the grocery and deli and markets them under the brand "Southern Virginia."

The town's website says this makers market "is the only one in the United States combining the commercial kitchen, dairy processing room, deli, educational classes, and local food grocery opportunity for farmers and producers of all kinds."

Furthermore, the market is used to conduct classes on agribusiness, cooking, healthy eating, canning, sustainable farming and other topics in cooperation with Virginia State University's School of Agriculture and the Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Secret #2 – Schoolhouses rock (as housing)

South Hill's housing supply was recently bolstered by two projects involving the redevelopment of former schools. In 2018 the town council entered into an agreement with Landmark Asset Services to rehabilitate the former John H. Groom School into a 55-unit multifamily facility. The project received some Tax Credit funding for the rehabilitation efforts and at least some of the units will be for moderate-income households.



The Groom School initiative was followed later that year by an announcement that a local private investment group would purchase

the former South Hill Elementary School to redevelop the property into 27 market-rate, multi-family dwellings named "The Lofts on Franklin."

The development has converted the former auditorium into a new rentable venue called the Dogwood Auditorium. Its name originated from the historical dogwood tree out front that is now believed to be the largest living dogwood in the United States. The former cafeteria was converted into 313 Franklin Cocktails & Kitchen which has received dynamite reviews.

Secret #3 – Keep history alive

South Hill is home to two sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Originally built in 1925 as a vaudeville theater, the restored Colonial Theatre is now home to the Colonial Center for the Performing Arts. The center includes an art gallery, ballroom and the Earl O. Horne Auditorium, named for the former mayor who was instrumental in the theatre's redevelopment. For a long time, the theater was the town's only structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, just a year ago, Whittle's Mill Dam, situated on the Meherrin River about 6 miles from the town, was also named to the register. Once part of an 18th century grist mill, the town currently maintains the Max Bagley Crowder Memorial Park at the site of the dam.

An ongoing venture for South Hill is working with neighboring jurisdictions to develop the Tobacco Heritage Trail, which will link Chase City, South Hill, La Crosse, Broadnax and Lawrenceville with a 150-mile hiking, cycling, and horseback trail.

Enough with the secrets!

The Town of South Hill has much more to offer than we can cover here, which is fitting for a town with the new motto of "So Unexpected." But, you can expect to learn more about everything South Hill has to offer on the town's excellent website: www.southhillva.org.

Two fun facts about South Hill (one expected, one surprising)

- **A totally appropriate and expected name.** As a community located just south of "the little mountain," it's not hard to guess how the Town of South Hill got its name. (Hint: it has to do with its location.)
- **A highly unusual and unexpected shape.** While its name might not inspire surprise, most folks are impressed to learn that South Hill is one of only three towns in the nation to be planned and developed in a circular pattern!



About the author: Rob Bullington is VML's Director of Communications and editor of *Virginia Town & City*.



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