

# VTC

VIRGINIA  
TOWN & CITY

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE  
VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

## Outdoor spaces that do more!



### Also inside:

Destination Norfolk  
(Part 3)

CBM Spotlight:  
Blue Line Solutions



# Save The Dates!



The **Fall Educational Forums** are coming soon! Sessions will provide information to help attendees better protect their community and employees. All public entity staff and officials are encouraged to attend.

Locations include:

- Sept. 14: Fredericksburg
- Sept. 15: Williamsburg
- Sept. 21: Wytheville
- Sept. 22: Staunton



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## ABOUT THE COVER

High temperatures? Check. Kids wearing short sleeves and shorts? Yup. VML's annual look at outdoor destinations and doings in the Commonwealth? You've got it! For 2023 we're looking at how some outdoor places are serving many purposes and offering a variety of options. Happy summer! (pictured is pod cabin in Roanoke County's Explore Park, see page 11)

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## AND THE WINNERS ARE ...

Thanks to everyone who submitted entries this year. The 2023 Innovation Awards will be presented at this year's Annual Conference in Norfolk, the evening of Oct. 9.



# Keep cool and carry on!

**W**ELL, WE HAVE FINALLY gotten to the heat of summer; I hope everyone is staying cool! I first want to express my condolences to the Town of West Point and the loss of their long-time Mayor Jim Hudson. From the beginning of my time as a local government attorney he was kind, helpful and always willing to listen. He truly will be missed. Please read Town Attorney Andrea Erard's appreciation of Jim in this issue (page 6) to appreciate how significant he was to local government in Virginia in general and the Town of West Point specifically.

As in years past, this issue of the magazine is so much fun because it explores the theme of being outdoors in Virginia and there are so many wonderful outdoor activities in Virginia! One of my newest intrigues is the Town of Clifton Forge's sensory trail and plan for an all-abilities park. I love that the town has tried to incorporate seven senses (smell, taste, hearing, touch, movement and balance and body awareness) into their park. I can't wait to visit. It's always fun to go to a new locality and find a great park or hiking trail...or sensory trail!

So, get out and enjoy Virginia's outdoors! Hopefully these stories will inspire you as summer turns to fall and the weather becomes more temperate and comfortable for exploring some of the places featured in this issue.

To switch gears – next time you talk to a VML staff person please thank them for the software change and the new website. This was a project seven years in the making and it was an arduous process. We know that some of the changes mean doing things a bit differently for our members, but we are confident that as everyone gets used to the new platform it will make your

experience with our website, communications, and online resources better than ever. Being a member of VML has always been valuable and the recent changes make your membership even more valuable. If you don't have a log in or are having any problems accessing resources, please contact one of us and we will get you set up.

VML staff have now transitioned to full conference mode, and we are pleased to announce that we've received a fantastic number of entries for this year's Innovation Awards. It's always so rewarding to see all the wonderful things our localities are doing for their citizens! Conference registration is now open so please register and come to Norfolk on October 8-10 for some learning (and some fun)! The Mayors will also meet on the 7th. Those of you who came to Richmond for the 2022 conference will no doubt remember our keynote speaker Matt Lehrman who did a great job speaking (and listening) to our members on their concerns about civility. I am happy to let you know that Matt will be back this year to follow up on his conversation and tie it into this year's theme of "Respect for Local Government". Matt will be presenting at the Mayors Institute, the Opening Session on Sunday, and again in a breakout session on Monday.

So, in keeping with the theme of this issue, I look forward to hearing about your outdoor adventures this year when I see you Norfolk. In fact, one of the mobile workshops in Norfolk will be a bike tour of the Elizabeth River trail so we can have some new outdoor adventures together!



Returning for 2023: Matt Lehrman



## See you in Norfolk!

Register now at [www.vml.org](http://www.vml.org)





**VRSA Fall Education Forums** - See ad on inside front cover for information and to register.

- **Sept. 14: Fredericksburg**
- **Sept. 21: Wytheville**
- **Sept. 15: Williamsburg**
- **Sept. 22: Staunton**

**Oct. 7-8**      **2023 Virginia Mayors Institute** - Norfolk, VA (Register at [www.vml.org](http://www.vml.org))

**Oct. 8-10**     **VML Annual Conference** - Norfolk, VA (Register at [www.vml.org](http://www.vml.org))

PEOPLE

**Martinsville City Manager Towarnicki retires**



- Towarnicki -

On July 25, the Martinsville City Council issued a proclamation recognizing City Manager **Leon Towarnicki**, who previously announced he would retire at the end of the month after 41 years of service. In recognition of his service to the city, the council awarded him the prestigious “Key to the City.”

Towarnicki was initially hired as Martinsville’s city engineer on January 1, 1982, became director of public works on March 15, 1985, interim city manager on December 19, 2011, and city manager on March 26, 2013. Throughout his entire career, Towarnicki has taken pride in serving the city and its citizens with an unerring sense of genuine duty, dedication, and compassion.

Over the last four decades, Towarnicki has provided guidance to a succession of city councils on challenging city budgets, uninterrupted service to the public during the global COVID pandemic, and effective leadership during various natural emergencies.

The council expressed its heartfelt gratitude for over forty years of dedicated and outstanding service to the people of Martinsville by presenting Towarnicki with the proclamation and key.

**Adams joins Martinsville as interim city manager**



- Adams -

As of August 1, **Glen Adams** is the interim city manager for the City of Martinsville following the retirement of former City Manager Leon Towarnicki. Adams, contracted by the Berkley Group, will serve as a bridge between city managers while the

nationwide search for a permanent replacement is underway.

With a commitment to the City of Martinsville and its citizens, Adams expressed his enthusiasm for being part of the selection process to identify the ideal candidate who will continue the city’s progress. In a press release, he stated: “I am deeply honored to contribute to the City of Martinsville and its remarkable community, as I serve my role in the process to select the best person to move the city forward,” said Adams.

Adams brings more than 25 years of military experience and 20 years of senior leadership. He has previously held positions as city manager for the City of Santa Fe, TX, and as interim city manager for the Town of Purcellville.

The Berkley Group has contracted Adams on a month-to-month basis for a minimum of three months, with the goal of filling the city manager position by October.

**Lovettsville hires LaPadula for new economic position**



- LaPadula -

**Jean LaPadula** started as the Town of Lovettsville’s community engagement and economic development coordinator on July 10. This is a new staff position that was added with the adoption of the town’s fiscal year 2024 budget that began July 1.

The position will focus on aiding the town’s economic growth in town and will serve as a liaison with community organizations, nonprofits, and residents. The intent is to offer additional services to residents and businesses.

LaPadua holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from Virginia Tech with an MBA from Mount St. Mary’s University, and a master of teaching degree from Frostburg State University.

**Salem’s Taliaferro to retire in November**

In early July, Salem City Manager **Jay Taliaferro** announced he would retire



- Taliaferro -

from his current position on November 1, 2023. Taliaferro has been Salem’s city manager since December 19, 2019, and has served the city’s citizens in several capacities for over 32 years.

“To be able to serve others while giving back to the community that helped raise me has been an extremely special and unique experience,” Taliaferro said in a press release. “I appreciate the opportunity to lead the city more than anyone will ever know.”

Taliaferro began his employment with the City of Salem in 1991 as a staff engineer and in 1998, he was named city engineer by City Manager Randy Smith. In 2000, Taliaferro moved into administration as assistant city manager and served in that role under both Forest Jones and Kevin Boggess.

“I learned a great deal from all three of them,” he said. “The main thing each one made clear is the importance of keeping Salem moving in a positive and productive direction that will make all of our citizens and visitors proud.”

Taliaferro is a product of the city’s school division and he graduated from Salem High School in 1984. He later earned his bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from Clemson University and his master’s in public administration from Virginia Tech. He has served outside the city with a variety of regional organizations over the years ranging from Virginia’s Blue Ridge to the Western Virginia Regional Jail.

“The regional cooperation is one of the things that has really changed for the better in the past three decades,” he said. “From tourism to economic development we have

proven that there is strength in numbers and great value in working together.”

Despite having virtually his entire tenure as city manager defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, Taliaferro was able to navigate the city through that uncertainty and achieve several economic wins. The renovation and additions made to Salem High School’s main building and its athletic field house, the major upgrades at the Moyer Sports Complex and the downtown corridor improvements equated to nearly \$65 million in projects during this time.

During his tenure, the city’s bond rating improved to AA+ with the S&P Global Rating which among other things enhanced Salem’s ability to borrow money at a low interest rate. That in turn, saved the city’s taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In addition, Taliaferro has worked closely with several private developers to repurpose and reimagine historic properties in the city. The former General Electric manufacturing plant and the Valleydale Meat packing facility are both in the process of rising from the ashes.

“I have had the pleasure of working on a variety of projects and initiatives with Jay since I was elected to council in 2006, but I have known Jay much longer and he has always had Salem’s best interest at heart,” said Randy Foley, former mayor, and the longest tenured member of the current city council. “He and his family have made a lasting impact on the City of Salem, and I wish Jay nothing but the best as he enters this next phase of life.”

**Sanders appointed as Charlottesville’s new city manager**

On July 12, Charlottesville Mayor J. Lloyd Snook announced the selection **Samuel Sanders, Jr.** as the new city manager. His



- Sanders -

first day in the role was on August 1. Mr. Sanders has served as deputy city manager of operations for the city since July 2021, after serving most recently as the executive director of the Mid City Redevelopment Alliance in Baton Rouge, LA.

“When he came to Charlottesville, he was put in charge of departments and divisions dealing with areas like housing, transit, public works, planning, zoning. In some of those departments he found disfunction... he has quietly and effectively dealt with those

dysfunctional areas,” said Mayor Snook in a press release.

“I am thankful for the opportunity to be the next city manager of Charlottesville. It’s a big job and I’m ready to give it my all,” said Sanders in the same press release. He added that, “I accept the assignment to lead the charge and I look forward to talking with anyone who is willing to not only engage in problem identification, but also interested in solution consideration, too.”

As a native of Tuscaloosa, AL, Sanders is a graduate of Christopher Newport University and holds an M.P.A. from Troy State University. He completed the Achieving Excellence program at Harvard University’s Kennedy’s School of Government in 2020.

**Richmond’s Mayor Stoney elected chair of Central Virginia Transportation Authority Finance Committee**

At the inaugural meeting of the Central Virginia Transportation Authority (CVTA) City of Richmond Mayor **Levar Stoney** was elected as chair of the body’s finance committee. The CVTA Finance Committee is charged with reviewing and recommending the annual budget and reviewing revenue estimates, among other financial management tasks.



- Stoney -

“Richmond fought hard to ensure the CVTA would offer an unprecedented opportunity for regional collaboration,” said Mayor Stoney in a press release. “The authority is designed to ensure meaningful discourse and cooperation, resulting in a stronger transit network for all of the localities involved.”

The City of Richmond, as a central locality represented on the body, has veto power so all the body’s actions achieve buy in from key players. The city utilized its veto once during this inaugural meeting. During the meeting, the CVTA accepted the bylaws and guidance documents, established key priorities, approved of an ongoing board meeting schedule, accepted support from Plan RVA and confirmed Frank Thornton (Henrico) as chair and Kevin Carroll (Ches-terfield) as vice chair.

**About the CVTA**

Established by the 2020 session of the General Assembly of Virginia, the newly created authority provides new funding opportunities for priority transportation invest-

ments across the Central Virginia region. The General Assembly voted to impose an additional .7 percent sales and use tax and wholesale gas tax of 7.6 cents per gallon (or 7.7 cents per gallon of diesel fuel) to fund new investments in regional transportation. The body also set a minimum local maintenance standard, ensuring all participating localities continue to invest in their requisite transit infrastructure.

**Hilton is Mount Jackson’s new assistant town manager**



- Hilton -

At the July 11 meeting of the Town of Mount Jackson council, Mayor Donnie Pifer announced that **Olivia Hilton** had accepted an offer for the town’s assistant manager position. Hilton has served as Strasburg’s director of strategic initiatives since last summer and as the interim community development director for a year prior. She is also the owner of Olivia Rose Event + Design based out of Front Royal.

Hilton will work with Town Manager Neil Showalter until his retirement March 1. The intention is for Hilton to become town manager after Showalter’s retirement. Hilton is expected to start her new role in mid-August.

Hilton holds a master of public administration from James Madison University and degrees in criminal justice and public relations both from Radford University.

**Petersburg names Siodmok as director of planning and community development**



- Siodmok -

On July 29 the City of Petersburg announced the selection of **Naomi Siodmok** as the director of planning and community development. Siodmok is returning to Virginia with nearly a decade of experience in planning, which started in Roanoke County followed by work in San Diego, CA, and most recently Doraville, GA in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area.

“The role of planning in steering Petersburg’s expansion and development is crucial,” said City Manager March Altman in a press release. “Given the number of development projects underway, Ms. Siod-

mok’s addition to the city team will help ensure that Petersburg’s growth is sustainable, inclusive, and beneficial for all stakeholders.”

Siodmok’s experience includes leading a team recognized by the Atlanta Regional Commission in 2022 with the Visionary Planning Award for social, environmental, and economic sustainability efforts in Doraville; applying for, receiving, and managing millions in grant funding for transportation infrastructure projects that prioritize pedestrian and bicycle mobility; and assisting with the creation of the award-winning Mis-

sion Valley Community Plan in San Diego.

Siodmok prides herself in serving communities in transformation, which is illustrated through her most recent experience as the director of planning and community development in Doraville, GA. She worked to serve the majority-minority community by advancing transportation alternatives to cars, celebrating culture through public art, supporting environmental improvements, and promoting code changes that support redevelopment with public benefits.

“I look forward to working with the com-

munity and Petersburg leaders to celebrate what is valued in the city and to address the community’s concerns,” said Siodmok in the same press release. “Petersburg has a lot to offer, and I am excited to be a part of celebrating and enhancing it.”

Siodmok earned a masters in urban and regional planning from Virginia Commonwealth University and a masters of science in urban design from Georgia Tech. She is also recognized by the American Planning Association as a certified planner.

**Baldwin is Prince George’s new planning director**



**Robert Baldwin** began as the new planning director for the County of Prince George on July 17. The planning director is responsible for organizing and directing planning and zoning activities, services,

programs, and staff. The director will work closely with the county administrator and department directors and serve as staff support to various boards and commissions.

Baldwin has over 30 years of experience in municipal and federal planning, including his most recent role as the planning director and deputy city manager of the City of Portsmouth. He led several award-winning comprehensive plan projects, including the “Destination 2025” plan in Portsmouth and the “Build One Portsmouth,” which received the Resilient Virginia Community of the Year award in 2019.

Baldwin served as the regional community planning and liaison officer for the Department of the Navy, Naval Facilities Engineering Command Mid-Atlantic region. Additionally, he served as the chief planner for the County of York during which he was responsible for current and comprehensive planning, as well as transportation planning.

“I am pleased to welcome Robert Baldwin to our county,” said Donald Hunter, chairman of the Prince George County Board of Supervisors in a press release. “Mr. Baldwin’s experience will be an asset to the Planning and Zoning Department, and he will play an integral role in shaping our community.”

Baldwin is a member of the American Planning Association and the American Institute of Certified Planners. He holds a bachelor of arts degree and a master’s degree in urban and environmental planning from the University of Virginia.

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\* Includes loans and Municipal Advisory engagements | [valocalfinance.org](http://valocalfinance.org)

# Remembering Jim Hudson

By Andrea Erard

JAMES HULA HUDSON, III, was the former town attorney, councilmember, and mayor of the Town of West Point. He died of cancer on July 3, 2023. While he received many awards and honors during his life, his accolades have little to do with what he accomplished, or why he was successful.

I met Jim in 1999 when I was appointed as the attorney for the Town of West Point. At the time, Jim was a councilmember, and I did not know that he had also been the town's attorney. However, I did quickly learn that the "former town attorney" had not always recommended following the legal requirements as strictly as I did. I came to West Point with a law degree, but Jim Hudson made me a lawyer. He taught me to focus on what is important, and to let the little things go.

In the Town of West Point the position of mayor is mostly ceremonial. The mayor runs the council meetings but does not vote except in the event of a tie. But during the sixteen years that Jim served as mayor he was the glue and the secret sauce that make the town work. Jim never tried to exert authority, nor did he ever tell people how important he was. What he did was share information and build consensus among the members of council. Jim understood that leadership is not achieved through force, but through respect and cooperation. He regularly talked – and more importantly listened – to his fellow councilmembers. At meetings, he never cut anyone off. Longwinded or rude, citizen or councilmember, Jim let them talk and he listened with patience and then thanked them for their input.

Many elected officials equate doing "what the people want" with leadership. Jim did not ignore popular opinion, but he knew that true leadership involves making tough decisions and accepting criticism. As such, Jim never based a course of action on popular opinion. He did his homework, considered all the factors, and determined what was best for the whole community even when that course of action wasn't popular.

Jim was witty and he saw the humor in people, and in life. When Jim found something really funny (which was often) he would throw his head back and laugh. While he had a great sense of humor, he also appreciated everyone's dignity. His jokes were never mean, they were funny because he could so accurately assess a person. He viewed himself through that same lens and he also laughed at himself. Many of his jokes would start with, "Well you know what my daddy used to say...."

Jim saw the flaws in people, but he focused on the good. Jim was quick to point out his own flaws, and admitted when he was wrong. If a staff member made a mistake, he never embarrassed them. He knew that people can only grow when they feel safe, and Jim encouraged people to grow!

Part of Jim's magic was his calm, deliberate manner. He grew up on a farm in Halifax County and had a bit of a drawl. When my daughter was young, she fondly dubbed him "the slow talking Mayor." Even when situations grew heated or intense, Jim's manner of speech and level headedness made everyone feel like everything was going to be OK.

But what made Jim truly great was his humanity. People mattered to him. The Town of West Point mattered to him. He never treated anyone like they were disposable. No person or place is perfect – and Jim would have been the first one to tell you he was not perfect – but Jim played the hand he was dealt and knew how to bring out the best in people. To put it simply, Jim extended grace. When someone stumbled, he lent a hand to help them up, rather than kick them when they were down.

Jim leaves a legacy of good governance and structure. Jack Lawson, the "new" mayor, has already demonstrated that he is more than capable of continuing the legacy of leadership through respect, listening and communication. So, while we mourn our collective loss, I know that Jim would want us to focus on protecting and taking care of the town and the community that he loved so much.



## Electric vehicle charging stations complete in Uptown Martinsville

GREENSPOT SMART MOBILITY, in partnership with the City of Martinsville, installed three new Dual Port electric vehicle charging stations in the Bridge Street parking lot in Uptown Martinsville, to expand charging accessibility for EV drivers.

This installation is Greenspot's second in the City of Martinsville, with the first being at the Virginia Museum of Natural History. This new location will have three dual-port Level II chargers, offering a total of 6 parking spaces with access to EV charging.

The City of Martinsville has supported this project throughout its process as city leaders hope this addition will bring more visitors to Uptown

Martinsville to shop and eat while their vehicles charge.

Greenspot is an industry-leading smart mobility company specializing in development and management of EV charging stations and electric mobility solutions, including EV car share. Greenspot partners with public and private organizations, and has installed EV charging infrastructure throughout New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan, Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and New York, as well as internationally in Israel.

"At Greenspot, our mission is to accelerate EV adoption by providing sustainable infrastructure and world-class service to our drivers, as well as offering shared mobility solutions as an alternative to car ownership" said Chief Operating Officer, Joseph Desimone in a press release. "Ultimately, our goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainable methods of transportation that mitigate the reliance on fossil fuels."

For more information on Greenspot Smart Mobility, visit [www.greenspot.com](http://www.greenspot.com).



## AARP awards grants to seven Virginia organizations to make communities more livable

RECENTLY, AARP VIRGINIA ANNOUNCED seven organizations throughout the state will receive 2023 Community Challenge grants – part of the largest group of grantees to date with \$3.6 million awarded among 310 organizations nationwide. Grantees will implement quick-action projects that help communities become more livable by improving public places, transportation, housing, digital connections, diversity, equity and inclusion, and more, with an emphasis on the needs of adults age 50 and older.

"AARP Virginia is committed to working with local leaders to improve residents' quality of life through tangible changes," said AARP Virginia State Director Jim Dau in a press release. "We are proud to collaborate with this year's grantees as they make immediate improvements in their communities to jumpstart long-term change, especially for Virginians 50 and over."

Here in Virginia, projects funded include:

- Roanoke River Rails to Trails will conduct walk audits along the Tobacco Heritage Trail branch in Boydton, with the goal of identifying safety improvement opportunities.

- The Town of Fries will turn underutilized property beside the town farmers market into an accessible community garden available for use by older adults and all town residents.
- The City of Roanoke will stage an accessory dwelling unit design competition that will result in a set of actionable plans for ADU development.
- Arlington Neighborhood Village will create a Senior Ambassador Program to connect older residents with information about local services and will compile both an English and Spanish-language Senior Resource Guide.
- Appalachian Agency for Senior Citizens will convert an underutilized lot to a Fit for Life multigenerational park for exercisers of all ages, especially older adults.
- Blue Ridge Habitat for Humanity, Inc. will create and distribute a printed Quick Look Reference Guide, a one-page directory of services for older adults in the region.
- Local Office on Aging will create an outdoor fitness area at the existing Center for Health and Wellness, including installation of a walking track and fitness equipment suitable for use by older adults.

AARP Community Challenge grant projects will be funded in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. True to the program's quick-action nature, projects must be completed by November 30, 2023.

Learn more at [www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge](http://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge).



## Emporia completes KABOOM! playground

By Kayla Hardersen/*Independent-Messenger* (July 26, 2023) – Reprinted with permission.

IT WAS “ALL HANDS ON DECK” last week at Meherrin River Park. Local volunteers flocked to the site on Saturday to build a new playground in partnership with the City of Emporia, KABOOM! and the Emporia-Greenville Community Health Action Team.

KABOOM! is a national nonprofit dedicated to ending play-space inequity. The Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth partnered with the organization this year to provide grants to eight youth-oriented localities across Virginia who demonstrate a need for child-centered spaces.

“Some kids live really close to great, amazing playspaces that they have access to — at school, at home — when they’re making their way through their community, it’s easy for them to play. The community was built with them in mind,” explained Kathryn Lusk, vice president of programs. “In other places in America, there is either nowhere that is safe to play or the places to play are not accessible to kids.”

KABOOM! partners with local communities to combat this inequity by building playgrounds with kids in mind. Together with the Emporia/Greenville Community Health Action Team (CHAT), KABOOM! sat down with a group of local kids earlier this year and had them draw their ideal playground. Parts of their drawings — including a curva spinner, rock wall and cloudburst slide with three slides in one — made it into the final design.

“There was a young girl that said, “Can we make sure that we have swings for little kids and big kids so everybody can swing together?””, said Gloria Robinson, one of Saturday’s team leaders. “That really resonated for me because that was somebody that realized it wasn’t just about her, it was about her playing with all kids included.”

Little-kid and big-kid swings were just one of many exciting



additions KABOOM! brought to the park. Teams assembled spring riders and a jungle climber with a rope bridge at the new site as well as picnic tables and benches for the whole family to enjoy. Off to the side, volunteers also built a gaga pit for kids to play gaga ball: a newer, safer version of dodgeball.

It took all the volunteers, including Hunt Valley Contractors, about six hours to install the entire structure.

“Let this be a reminder that you made the kids of Meherrin River Park — you made their dreams come true, essentially,” KABOOM! Project Manager Jeff Hardy told the volunteers.

Within a couple of weeks the playground will be completed with poured rubber to cover the current sandy surface to make the park accessible and safer for all kids. In the coming years, the project will grow to include a splash pad, disc golf course and even an outdoor exercise court scheduled to be completed as early as September.

CHAT President Rustin Jessee could not thank the group enough.

“We not only found some more neighbors, but we found some more go-getters,” Jessee said. “So the sad news is you are now on our shortlist — when we do anything else, we know who to call and hopefully you’ll bring a friend or two with you.”

## Abingdon celebrates opening of accessible playground

ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 4 the Town of Abingdon held a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the official opening of the Meadows Inclusive Playground. The playground features play activities for children of all abilities including a rubberized surface that accommodates wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

Ballad Health and Niswongers Children’s Hospital donated \$100,000 toward an enhancement project to help make the playground at The Meadows more inclusive. With this goal, the town assembled a Kids Playground Design Committee for input on what equipment and activities they would like to see at the playground. The committee members were Mary Jane Anderson, Betty Jo Anderson, Grayson Ely, Karrington Wynne, and Emma Wilson

Local officials and VIPs in attendance included Mayor Amanda Pillion, Vice Mayor Dwyane Anderson, Councilmember Derek Webb, Bristol Regional and Johnston Memorial Hospital CEO John Jeter, Ballad Health Niswonger Children’s Hospital Vice President Chris Jett, and Town Manager Mike Cochran

At the ribbon cutting, Jeter stated that Ballad Health is commit-

ted to high-quality patient care but is also a health improvement organization dedicated to bridging the gap between communities and health-related social needs. He noted that equipment like saucer swings, roller slides, and other apparatuses on the playground aren’t just fun — they’re health care!

Mayor Pillion thanked Ballad Health for their investment in the town and The Meadows through their generous contribution to making the Inclusive Playground possible for future generations to enjoy



## Elkton town hall meeting aims to bring town council to the residents

THE ELKTON TOWN COUNCIL held its first of a kind informal “Town Hall Meeting” on August 7 on the front lawn of the town hall. The meeting was designed to keep the community informed of town projects and to allow attendees the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts. Between 25 and 30 community members attended.

Mayor Joshua Gooden welcomed attendees and opened the meeting with an overview and timeline of the Elkton Downtown Marketplace, a nearly 2-acre park planned for the property on West Spotswood Avenue across from Town Hall. Vice Mayor Rick Workman followed with a report on the generous \$130,000 plus

donations received to-date for its construction. Donors include Rockingham County, the Elkton Progressive Improvement Committee, Elkton Downtown Revitalization Corporation, Elkton Ruritan Club, RanMar Paving and Excavating, Rockingham Cooperative, United Bank, Southern Grace Band, Big City Band, and private citizens.

An overview of infrastructure projects – including sewer, water, and stormwater systems – was presented by Town Manager Greg Lunsford. He noted that the town’s 90-plus year-old systems have significantly deteriorated and must be replaced with systems that will meet current and future demands. He shared plans to relocate the Police Department to Terrace Avenue and announced that the new wastewater plant has received Virginia’s Certificate to Operate.

Public Works Director Gaither Hurt updated citizens on this year’s paving and sidewalk projects. Street paving this year will be along Gibbons Avenue and Shenandoah Avenue. New sidewalks will be installed on areas of Spotswood Avenue and Rockingham Streets, the next step in the town’s Pedestrian Master Plan designed to make Elkton a more pedestrian friendly community.

Elkton’s new Chief of Police, Mike King, and the new Town Attorney, Quinton Callahan, introduced themselves and joined the mayor, council and staff in discussions with attendees following the briefings.

The next “Town Hall” style meeting is scheduled for October. All residents and business owners are invited. Meeting details will be posted on the town’s website, Facebook, and newsletter “The Elktonian.”



## Roanoke County receives award for McAfee Knob shuttle

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Roanoke County received a National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Award for its entry Shuttle Service Solves Parking Congestion at Popular Visitor Destination in the Transportation category. The entry details the partnerships and strategies used to develop a shuttle service to relieve parking and traffic problems at the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot.

The number of visitors substantially increased in the last several years causing parking and the safety of visitors and the community to be a concern. The shuttle service addresses these concerns by providing visitors a convenient alternative. This type of investment in transit helps offer a sense of excitement for visitors, attracting them to return again, and promotes tourism for the region.

Roanoke County’s McAfee Knob is the most photographed location on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and has

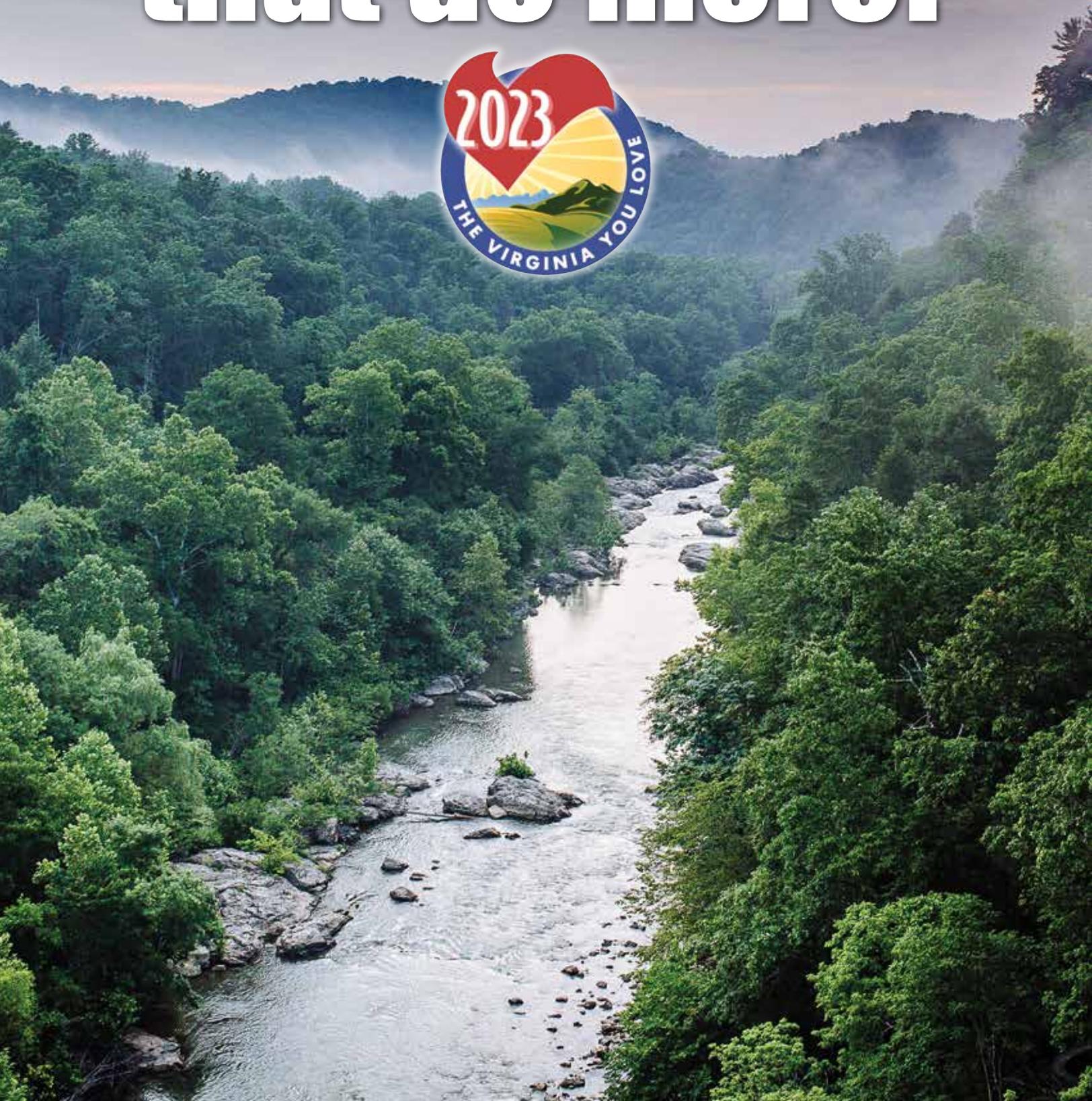
sparked increased visitation. McAfee Knob is between Dragon’s Tooth and Tinker Cliffs and is the most popular of the three sites in Virginia’s Triple Crown, with photographs frequently taken at the “diving board” bluff viewpoint. The McAfee Knob Trailhead shuttle service addresses the increasing parking demands at the trailhead parking lot by shuttling hikers from the Interstate 81 Exit 140 Park and Ride located in Roanoke County to the McAfee Knob trailhead parking lot in Catawba. This service is offered Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with occasional Mondays (i.e., Memorial Day and Labor Day) from the beginning of March through the end of November for 10-12 hours per day. The round-trip fare is \$10 per rider plus booking fees.

The Achievement Awards represent best-in-class services and programs that counties nationwide offer residents.

For more information about the National Association of Counties Achievement Awards, see the NACo Achievement Awards website at [www.naco.org/blog/announcing-2023-achievement-award-winners](http://www.naco.org/blog/announcing-2023-achievement-award-winners).



# Outdoor spaces that do more!



# Roanoke County's Explore Park: where adventure begins!

**L**OCATED JUST OFF THE BLUE RIDGE Parkway at Milepost 115, Roanoke County's Explore Park features hundreds of acres of rolling hills, pristine woodlands, hiking trails and river frontage. Explore Park is about 7 miles from Downtown Roanoke, 50 miles from Blacksburg, Va., 130 miles from Charlottesville, Va., and 245 miles from Washington D.C., Visitors also have opportunities for day trips to explore the Roanoke Region in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Whether you come for a day or a week (or more), a variety of outdoor adventures await you at Explore Park!



## Treetop Quest

Treetop Quest offers mental and physical challenges, a connection with the environment, an appreciation for nature, and a community of people who enjoy adventure. While soaring past the trees and conquering obstacles, adventurers are clipped into a continuous belay system, ensuring safety for all. No previous zipline or ropes course experience is needed to participate because aerial adventure guides assist everyone with gearing up before traversing the trees.

There are several ways to enjoy Treetop Quest:

**Young Adventurers.** The "Chick Pea" courses offer the smallest guests ages 4 to 6 years old a chance to challenge themselves. Although the courses are only several feet off the ground, and are meant to be enjoyed with ground supervision, they can still provide big thrills for little adventurers.

**Family Challenges.** Choose from three levels of difficulty in this series of tree-to-tree obstacles including tightropes, cargo nets, platforms, Tarzan swings, and zip-lines up to 45-feet above the forest floor.

**Aerial Speed.** This challenge level is devoted to thrilling zips as long as 160 feet during which participants achieve speeds as high as 25 miles per hour.

**Jump Around.** This fully enclosed, 1,500 square foot cargo net trampoline is more than 30 feet above the ground. Great for kids and parties of all ages.

Treetop Quest is open every Tuesday through Sunday, through August 6 with weekend operation through October. For an added layer of fun, visitors can enjoy Twilight Zips and Adventure Saturdays.

## Camping

Whether you are looking for a primitive camping or more of a "glamping" experience, you are sure to find something that suits you at Explore Park's campgrounds.

**Don's Cab-Inns.** Stay overnight in a hand-crafted cabin, spacious yurt, or RV space, all in proximity to a bathhouse. Convenient extras like firewood, linens, bath-sets, coffee, charcoal, and more can also be delivered to your campsite. The variety of options makes Don's Cab-Inns perfect for the whole family or large groups.

*"We are an "in-between" campground that is a good option for people who don't have an RV but don't want to stay in a tent. We also get a lot of people who would rather stay here than stay in a hotel."*

- Don Harrison, owner of Don's Cab-Inns.

**Pod cabins.** (See cover photo) You are sure to find a pod cabin that suits your party's size and preferences. Most units contain a queen size bed with mattress and full-size loft bunk with mattress and ladder. Two bunk style units sleep up to six. The couple's cabin features an electric fireplace, futon, and breakfast nook. All units contain heating and air conditioning, plus a refrigerator, microwave, and coffee maker. Four units are pet friendly for a service fee. For a unique experience, there's also an eco-friendly cabin option.

**Yurts.** The 16-foot round yurts sleep up to six, are air-conditioned and have a half-bath. A refrigerator, microwave and coffee maker are also included. Some of the yurts have a three-level double bunk bed while others have one queen size bed. Two yurts are pet friendly for a service fee.

**RV sites.** The pristine RVA sites are 12' by 35' and have 30-amp electrical service. No water or sewer hookup is available, but there are municipal water spigots near each site and a bathhouse is nearby. A dump station is free for overnight guests.

**Blue Ridge Campground.** Primitive camp sites, raised platforms, and group camp sites at the Blue Ridge Campground are available Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from April 1 to October 28. The Blue Ridge Campground is open on most holiday dates during that time.



## Mayflower Hills Disc Golf Course

Ranked #40 by UDisc on its list of the world's best disc golf courses for 2023, Mayflower Hills contains 18-holes of purpose-built disc golf play traversing a varied terrain of fields, woods, and hills. There are 105 possible course alignments thanks to at least two different baskets at each hole and starting points for beginners, intermediate and expert players.

The course was designed by members of the Roanoke Disc Golf Club and individuals with a passion for disc golf. The group looked at acreage, topography, and landmarks.

*“The course at Mayflower Hills checked off all the boxes. Some holes are out in the open with few obstacles but greater distance, while some holes tease you by playing in the woods. Players have opportunities to play uphill, downhill, through valleys, and more. The changes in elevation, Blue Ridge mountains in the background, and wooded pathways create a magical combination of everything you want in a disc golf course.”*

- Joshua Yerkes, president of the Roanoke Disc Golf Club

Discs are not provided but can be purchased at the Explore Park Visitor Center during hours of operation. While the course itself is free, a suggested \$3.00 donation helps with course maintenance and can be done with cash or scanning a QR code at the pay post.

## Trails, Greenways, and Blueways

Explore Park offers many opportunities for outdoor adventures with hiking and biking trails and several miles of river frontage including the beautiful Roanoke River Gorge.

**Biking.** Virginia's Blue Ridge is America's East Coast Mountain Biking Capital and Explore Park offers 14 miles of dual-use trails, including 9 miles of purpose-built bike trails. In fact, Explore Park is a key component of the area's Silver-Level Ride Center designation from the International Mountain Bike Association.

**On the water.** The Roanoke River is a great place for your next canoe, kayak, tubing, stand up paddling (SUP), or fishing excursion.



Several sites within Explore Park offer river access for anglers seeking stripers, catfish, and bass. A valid Virginia freshwater fishing license is required.

The boat launch site at the end of Rutrough Road is the furthest navigable point on the Roanoke River before encountering rapids. From here, boaters can journey seven miles downstream to Hardy Bridge and soak in the picturesque shorelines of Smith Mountain Lake.

**Vistas.** Only a 30-minute drive from Explore Park, McAfee Knob offers another daytime activity for guests. With 270-degree panoramic views, McAfee Knob is one of the most photographed sites on the Appalachian Trail.

## Twin Creeks Brewpub

Located inside the Park, Twin Creeks offers a full-service restaurant, Virginia wine and cider bar and outdoor fire pits.

## Seasonal offerings

**T-Rex Trail.** At Explore Park activities evolve with the seasons. A great example is Explore Park's newest summer attraction, T-Rex Trail, which allows visitors to travel back-in-time on a half-mile wooded path featuring four of Earth's geologic periods – Triassic, Jurassic, Early and Late Cretaceous. The trail has 19 animatronic dinosaurs, a dino dig-pit, and storyline exhibits. Photo ops abound along the trail and birthday party packages are available. The T-Rex Trail attraction operates various days of the week, May 27-August 13.

**Illuminights Winter Walk of Light.** In November and December, however, the T-Rex Trail becomes Explore Park's Illumi-



nights Winter Walk of Light. Visitors take in the sights and sounds of the season, including over 650,000 lights and a few flurries along the half-mile wooded path. More than 60,000 people visited the Illuminights walk last year for what has become an annual holiday tradition for many families who view the lights, shop for artisan crafts by dozens of local vendors, roast marshmallows around a campfire, and visit with Santa.

The event also serves as a fundraiser benefiting Explore Park and Center in The Square, a regional nonprofit, arts, cultural and educational organization. Explore Park and Center in The Square partner with Kroger to offer a canned food drive during Illuminights which benefits local food pantry Agape Center Vinton-Roanoke. Over the last three seasons, 2,119 pounds of food have been donated from the food drive!

**Live music.** Explore Park and Twin Creeks Brewpub have partnered to offer a free summer music series on the second Friday of each month from May through September,

**Adventure Saturdays.** Expanded family activities at Treetop Quest and T-Rex Trail, as well as crafts, nature activities, demos, and vendors are offered on Saturdays throughout the summer and fall.



*“The relationship between Explore Park and Center in The Square is truly special. It brings together a public-private partnership while giving back to our community. Being able to create memories with loved ones and support local vendors at the Artisan Shop ties together everything the winter months are about.”*

**- Martha Hooker, chair of the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors**

## Private events

Explore Park also holds facilities and outdoor recreation venues for weddings and birthday parties by providing the opportunity to rent facilities, picnic pavilions, outdoor venues, and more. Each area provides a gorgeous backdrop for a unique and memorable experience that can be tailored to meeting individual, community, group, and corporate rental needs.

## Find your adventure!

At Explore Park, guests can find the perfect adventure for their interests and abilities. All in one location, you can relax around a campfire, soar through the trees on the aerial ropes course, travel back in time to meet T-rex, paddle through the Roanoke River, hike or bike on miles of trails, experience a world-known disc golf course, or grab dinner and drinks. Explore Park is where adventure begins!

For more information about Roanoke County’s Explore Park, visit [www.roanokecountyparks.com/ExplorePark](http://www.roanokecountyparks.com/ExplorePark).

**About the author:** *Kaelyn Spickler is the public information specialist for Roanoke County.*

# Creating equitable access to green spaces in the City of Richmond

**T**HE CITY OF RICHMOND is home to many spectacular green spaces, such as Maymont (see article page 22) and the James River Park System. These places provide numerous benefits to residents and visitors, including recreation opportunities and places of respite to reduce stress. Green spaces also improve water quality, create wildlife habitat, and reduce heat and greenhouse gas emissions. There are many neighborhoods in the city, however, that lack equitable access to these amenities. Due to historic and institutional racism, communities of color are more likely to live in marginalized areas that lack green space and are more susceptible to the impacts of climate change. RVAgreen 2050, Richmond's equity-centered climate action and resilience plan, is working to improve access to green spaces for all Richmonders. A central objective of this plan is to ensure "all residents have the opportunity to engage with healthy natural resources, spaces, and biodiversity."

By partnering with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (the Alliance), the City of Richmond is improving access to green space for all Richmond residents while also improving water quality in the James River and Chesapeake Bay.

## Greening greater Fulton

The Greater Fulton community is in the easternmost part of Richmond along the border of Henrico County. Its commercial corridor on Government Road serves three neighborhoods in an area that has long been underserved. Parts of the community fell victim to

failed urban regeneration efforts in the 1960s and 70s that displaced thousands of Black residents. As a result, the area was left with significant pockets of poverty and a business district that is unreflective of the deeply rooted heritage of its residents.

Current conditions on Government Road include crumbling sidewalks, wide setbacks, and a lack of walkability, all of which have contributed to the economic decline of the business district. While some small businesses are in operation, there are many empty storefronts. Despite this, there is strong potential for new neighbor-owned businesses to move into the area. Surveys conducted by a local community group, Innovate Fulton, show residents' desire for a cafe or small grocery store, as well as street improvements that provide shade, create safer sidewalks, and beautify the community.

In 2019, Innovate Fulton approached the Alliance for assistance with a concept plan for a green street on Government Road. Rooted in Smart Growth principles, this plan called for additional green space, increased pedestrian safety, and public art. With funding support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Richmond Department of Public Utilities, Altria Group, and Luck Companies, the Alliance assembled a project team, and work began on the Greening Greater Fulton project to create an accessible, vibrant, green commercial district that improves both water quality and quality of life in Fulton.

The Alliance, along with partners Innovate Fulton, Groundwork RVA, Richmond Department of Public Utilities (DPU), design firm VHB, and local Richmond artists, have created a green street design that embodies the requests made by Fulton residents. Once installed,



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Swimmers enjoying a rope swing in the James River Park System.

## Blackwell Park improvements

Owned by Richmond Parks, Recreation & Community Facilities (PRCF), Blackwell Park is a 15-acre park built on a former landfill in the Blackwell community of Southside Richmond. Home to a historically redlined, underserved population, this local park is often used as a gathering space by the community and is long overdue for improvements.

Due to the settling of landfill debris beneath the soil, sinkholes have formed, sports courts have cracked, and recreational amenities have been deteriorating for several years. In 2018, PRCF developed a conceptual plan alongside the Blackwell community for park improvements, but the project stalled due to lack of funding. At that time, residents requested safer parking and park access, sports courts, a walking trail, and shade trees. In 2022, a big win came for the Blackwell community when PRCF was able to secure funding to construct two new basketball courts on site.

To implement the full scope of work envisioned in the concept plan, PRCF approached the Alliance for assistance. Thanks to funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, DPU, Altria Group, Luck Companies, and the Chesapeake Bay Trust, a project team has been assembled, community engagement has begun, and design work is underway. Construction for this project will begin in the summer of 2024. Partners on this project include PRCF, Southside ReLeaf, DPU, and Timmons Group. The goal of this project is to convert Blackwell Park into a thoughtfully planned, beautiful community asset that improves water quality and brings quality of life benefits to the Blackwell neighborhood.

Equitable, multicultural, and multilingual community engagement, led by Southside ReLeaf, will be ongoing throughout the entire project to create a community-centered approach that leads to long-term project success. Southside ReLeaf's goal is to improve the life expectancy and quality of life of Southside residents by increasing green spaces, reducing pollution, and improving infrastructure. They have a strong relationship with the Blackwell community and will use an engagement model that centers on education and advocacy to empower residents to take an active role in planning green spaces, like Blackwell Park, within their neighborhood. Initial community engagement has begun, and residents have provided input on their vision for the park. Touchpoints and updates for the community will happen during the implementation phase as partners want to be transparent about the project process. Volunteer events such as community clean ups and tree plantings will also help residents play an active, hands-on role in the improvements made to their park.

To create safer access to the park, DPU has generously pledged to fund the construction of a permeable parking lot, which is a much-needed improvement over the current street parking. Additional amenities requested by the Blackwell community will be implemented using green infrastructure practices such as permeable pavers, rain gardens, bioinfiltration soils, native trees, and conservation landscaping using native plants. This will be the first parks project of its kind in the Richmond area and will showcase how athletic amenities like ball fields, sports courts, and trails can benefit from, and be enhanced by, green infrastructure.



**Initial before/after renderings show the potential for this new public green space. The exact design has changed over time, but the quality of life aspects of the project have remained integral.**

over 14,000 square feet of green infrastructure, such as rain gardens, permeable sidewalks, street trees, and native plant gardens, will improve water quality in nearby waterways and reduce flooding and heat risks. These street improvements will also create safer sidewalks and beautify the neighborhood. To provide equal access for all residents, sidewalks will be widened to 6 ft to allow for proper wheelchair passage, and new ADA sidewalk ramps will be installed within the project area.

To kick off the project, three murals by artist Hamilton Glass were painted on buildings in June and July to celebrate the neighborhood's history and rich culture. Construction on this project will begin in late summer 2023, and once construction of the green street elements are complete, a sculpture created by Matt Lively and Tim Harper that celebrates innovation, diversity, and creativity in the community will be installed.

Working closely with the Fulton community has been at the forefront of each stage of this project. "In a lot of projects, less now, but in the past, things like this were done *for* a community, and this is

an example of things being done *with* the community. This is something really important in this day and age. It's something that young people resonate with and it's something that folks in the community resonate with," said Rob Jones, Executive Director of Groundwork RVA. "Here, there has been a real attempt step-by-step to make sure that folks in the community know what's happening and see themselves reflected. I don't know what's going to happen in this community, but the mural and the art will be here for a long time, and they are going to tell a story."



**Permeable pavers in an urban setting.**

WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

These proposed green infrastructure practices will reduce pollution and improve water quality in the nearby James River by capturing and filtering stormwater runoff. They will also provide other environmental and quality of life benefits to the Blackwell community such as improved air quality, reduced urban heat island effect, increased biodiversity and pollinator habitat, neighborhood beautification, and enhanced recreational facilities. These co-benefits demonstrate some of the many environmental, economic, and social services that a well-designed and maintained park can provide to its surrounding community.

### Additional resources

Projects that achieve multiple benefits to communities, like improved access to green space and clean water, require collaboration. Working with your regional Planning District Commission or local Department of Parks and Recreation are good places to start. Below are several funding opportunities to consider:

- Virginia Outdoors Foundation: [www.vof.org/protect/grants/go](http://www.vof.org/protect/grants/go)
- Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation Land and Water Conservation Fund: [www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/lwcf](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/lwcf)
- Chesapeake Bay Trust: <https://cbtrust.org/grants/green-streets-green-jobs-green-towns/>



Conceptual design for Blackwell Park.

Additionally, there is an influx of funding for improving green spaces, increasing urban tree canopy, and enhancing coastal resilience thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act. Often funding for these projects must be focused in Justice 40 communities, which are the ones most in need of community greening. Creating beautiful, healthy, equitable urban green spaces provides so much more than improved water quality; these investments also improve quality of life and beautify communities.

**About the author:** Christina Bonini is the senior green infrastructure projects manager at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. She is a proud Richmond, VA native who can often be found enjoying the city's James River Park System.

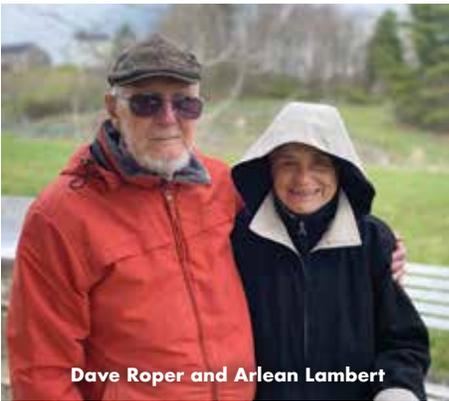
**About the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay:** *The Alliance restores the lands and waters of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Our collaborative and action-oriented approach delivers on-the-ground solutions and technical assistance and builds capacity to achieve healthier lands and cleaner water. With offices in Annapolis, MD, Lancaster, PA, Washington, D.C., and Richmond, VA, the Alliance brings clean water and resilient landscapes to our Chesapeake communities. For more information about the Alliance, please visit [www.allianceforthebay.org](http://www.allianceforthebay.org).*



# Growing a community garden program: Insights from the Town of Blacksburg

**T**HE GENESIS OF THE TOWN of Blacksburg’s now thriving community garden program began with visionary town resident Arlean Lambert whose father, Howard Hale, had purchased 20 acres off Mount Tabor Road in the 1950s. After Howard passed, Arlean’s son Jacob urged her to preserve the land against future development. After she retired, Arlean, who is an avid gardener, began

thinking of ways to make the land productive. Her success in achieving this goal would have reverberations for her entire community.



LIVE WORK EAT GROW

Dave Roper and Arlean Lambert

## Collaborations bring good things for all

In 2006, around the time that the newly retired Arlean Lambert was considering how to make best use of her land,

the YMCA at Virginia Tech was losing its community garden land to a cemetery expansion. Businesses and individuals donated time, materials, and funds, and Virginia Tech won a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create a Civic Agriculture and Food Systems minor. The grant allowed the YMCA at Virginia Tech to hire garden coordinator Jenny Schwanke to engage students and the public to develop community gardens. Schwanke and Lambert formed a strong friendship and got to know David Roper, a former professor

at Virginia Tech, who was looking for a place to build his novel solar greenhouse.

Following the construction of the Roper Solar Greenhouse on her land in 2009, Lambert officially opened five acres of her property to the community to create the Hale Community Garden, named after her late parents. During its first decade, the Hale Community Garden grew to 70 plots with gardeners from over 17 nationalities. During this time, Schwanke helped by collecting garden fees, assigning plots, and organizing community events at the gardens. Virginia Tech students, master gardeners, and other volunteers helped by maintaining the deer fencing and garden paths, weeding the beds, and planting flowers. The group also established beehives, a food forest, a small apple orchard, an herb garden, and a pollinator garden.

## Planning for the future means having partners

After that first busy decade, Lambert began thinking about how best to ensure that the garden would continue to serve the community well into the future. It was at this time she decided to donate the site to the Town of Blacksburg with easements to conserve it as gardens and open space in perpetuity.

Lambert recognized that the town was a stable entity willing and able to maintain the Hale Community Garden for the benefit of residents for years to come. While the town was excited to acquire the land and help support the thriving community garden program, there were some concerns about the staffing capacity needed to maintain and expand the garden operations and programming.

Enter the newly formed non-profit Live Work Eat Grow (LWEG) which was created with the mission to cultivate vibrant communities by fostering local food, farms, and gardens; create jobs and grow small businesses; support an affordable home for all; and gather friends and neighbors together. After multiple discussions, Lambert and the town both agreed that LWEG would be the perfect organization to manage garden operations at the Hale Community Garden. Not only did LWEG’s mission align with Lambert’s goals for the garden, but the organization also benefited from having a strong board. However, Lambert’s trust in LWEG didn’t come simply with a wink and a prayer. Rather, Lambert and LWEG entered into a written legal agreement that outlined each of their roles and responsibilities. Lambert also set up an endowment with the Community Foundation to help provide a source of annual funding for the long-term operations of the community garden.

JENNY SCHWENKE



Solar Greenhouse at the Hale Garden.

## One successful community garden sows the seeds for more...

Given the success of the Hale Community Garden and the long waitlist for community garden plots in the town, the Town of Blacksburg awarded Live Work Eat Grow a portion of the Town's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars in 2019 and 2020 to help establish new neighborhood community gardens in two low-to-moderate income areas. These areas have a higher proportion of renters and apartments where residents have little greenspace to create individual garden plots.

Town staff worked with LWEG to mail postcards to all residents in a few potential neighborhoods explaining the opportunity for a neighborhood community garden. Residents were asked to provide feedback via an online or paper survey to gauge their level of interest in having a community garden plot and to understand their knowledge about gardening. Based on the feedback received, two sites were chosen.

The Wong Park Community Garden opened in Spring 2020 at Wong Park off Wilson Street. The garden has 15 plots with priority given to those in the adjacent Bennett Hill and Progress neighborhoods.

The Garrison Garden opened in Spring 2021 and is named for Susan Garrison, a former town employee, resident, and sustainability advocate who developed Cedar Hill Park where the garden is located. The Garrison Garden is another "satellite garden" with 15 plots and the goal of serving the neighborhood.

To make both new community gardens possible, the town provided the funding, the land, and water lines to the gardens while LWEG installed deer fencing, tilled and ameliorated the soil, provided garden guidance, and managed the allocation of plots to residents.

Nearby residents immediately took advantage of these new community garden plots. Many gardeners noted the nutritional and financial benefits of being able to grow their own food along with the mental health benefits gardening provides. This was especially the case during the Covid pandemic.

Individual plots are rented on an annual basis and, depending on the size, cost between \$20-\$60 a year. The town continues to provide mulch and leaf compost to all the gardeners and mows the margins of the Hale Community Garden property to maintain the meadow/pollinator habitat.

Over the last two years, LWEG has continued to expand its program offerings by hosting summer camps in partnership with the Town of Blacksburg Parks and Recreation department, organizing potluck suppers, and holding hands-on volunteer and educational opportunities focused on growing healthy food and a dynamic community.

Some examples of topics covered in recent workshops include food preservation, over-the-fire cooking, maple tree tapping, and



Wong Park

MATT GENTRY, ROANOKE TIMES



Kids' Camp



Tree Tapping Workshop

LIVE WORK EAT GROW

preventing gardening injuries. These offerings expand the benefits of the community gardens beyond the individual plot holders and play a strong role in community building, an essential ingredient to a meaningful community garden experience.



## ...and more!

Each year Blacksburg's town council allocates funding to several nonprofit organizations that can demonstrate their benefit to the town's residents. Having shown its positive impact on the community, LWEG received some operating support for its garden program from the town in 2022. These funds by no means cover the full cost of operating the community garden program, but they provide an important source of revenue and stamp of approval that helps LWEG attract funding from individuals and other grantors.

The success of the community gardens has only increased interest and the waitlist for community garden plots continues to grow. As such, in 2022 the town council also chose to allocate a portion of its American Rescue Plan Act funding to LWEG to establish two more community gardens. Town staff sit on a project advisory committee tasked with helping to support implementation of these projects. Most recently, town staff have helped to identify potential new garden locations both on land owned by the town and in partnership with a private landowner. The goal over the next three years is to provide approximately 80 additional community garden plots for use by town residents.

## Lessons to grow by

Many of the ingredients that have led to the success of Blacksburg's community gardens are translatable to other localities across Virginia.

**1. Have a community champion.** In Blacksburg, this champion was a dedicated resident who had a passion for the work and took the initiative to involve others. But community champions come

in all forms. They can also be nonprofit organizations or local government offices for example.

**2. Involve multiple entities.** All community garden programs need land for the plots, individuals to manage them, and funding for start-up and sustained operations. In Blacksburg, no single entity could fill all these roles. Therefore, we have focused on building mission-aligned partnerships and defining roles to help fill gaps and to effectively utilize each other's strengths. There has been magic in combining the stability, resources, and institutional support of the town with the flexibility and mission focus of a non-profit.

**3. Pace yourself to your community.** By growing our community garden programs slowly, we have ensured sufficient capacity for success. For example, being able to demonstrate community impact over time has led to support for the funding needed to expand at a pace that does not exceed public interest and staff capacity. We know we are meeting a community need and desire, as demonstrated by the demand for new community garden plots and attendance at programming and events.

**4. Be willing to use public land.** You can't always count on individuals to donate private land. The Town of Blacksburg has been willing to repurpose existing public land for our community gardens. The success of those projects increases support for the program which can lead to more individuals being willing to donate private land.

**5. Trust but also document.** Of course, it's important that all the partners in a community garden project trust one another. In Blacksburg, however, the partners have backed that trust with well-structured agreements outlining use of funds, expectations of duties and roles, preservation of land, and many other aspects of maintaining community gardens.

The growth of Blacksburg's community gardens has been a fantastic success that continues to bear fruit. We wish other localities the best of luck in their community garden program endeavors!

**About the author:** *Kim Thurlow is the housing and community development initiatives manager for the Town of Blacksburg and New River Valley HOME Consortium.*

ASPIRE



Drone pic of Hale Gardens.

# A vision for a healthier Dumfries: Introducing Virginia's first Fitness Court® Studio

## Free outdoor fitness for all: Empowering the community through wellness opportunities

**N**ESTLED BETWEEN WASHINGTON, D.C. and Virginia's state capital, Richmond, lies the historic Town of Dumfries. Known for its rich traditions and heritage, Dumfries is now gaining recognition for its forward-thinking town council and mayor, Derrick Wood. A former United States Marine, Mayor Wood has long been dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles within his town. After receiving a notice from the Virginia Municipal League about grant funding being made available from the National Fitness Campaign, Mayor Wood seized the opportunity to make fitness equipment more accessible for his community.

This effort recently culminated in the Town of Dumfries becoming home to the Virginia's first Fitness Court® Studio, a.k.a. "The World's Best Outdoor Gym."

### What is a Fitness Court® Studio?

A Fitness Court® Studio provides over 2,000 square feet of wellness infrastructure. It includes an edge-to-edge art mural as a studio classroom backdrop that makes the perfect site to host classes in yoga, Zumba, Tai Chi, and more. On the opposite side of the outdoor classroom, exercise facilities provide seven different full body workout movement options. Every Fitness Court® Studio is digitally activated through the free Fitness Court® App which serves as a "coach-in-your-

pocket." This ensures that any adult – regardless of age, fitness level or ability – can access hundreds of workouts and track their progress. The accessibility of the Fitness Court® Studio combined with the ease of using the app empowers individuals to take charge of their fitness journey.

Learn more about Fitness Court® Studios at [www.nationalfitnesscampaign.com/fitness-Court](http://www.nationalfitnesscampaign.com/fitness-Court).

### A community effort for community good

After learning more about the Fitness Court® Studio and the grant opportunity from the National Fitness Campaign, Mayor Wood knew this was the perfect amenity to bring to Dumfries. The town's focus on healthy eating and an active living created a solid foundation of support that made it possible to get unanimous approval from the town council. Mayor Wood explains, "Based on our comprehensive plan and resolutions that are already passed, the project aligned with our vision and support was easy."

It was important to Mayor Wood and the council that the new fitness amenities be easily accessible to all residents to promote inclusivity and community engagement. As such, Mayor Wood notes, "We chose a location for highest density and best walkability in town."





Use the QR code to watch a Fox 5 news segment about the Town of Dumfries' new Fitness Court® Studio

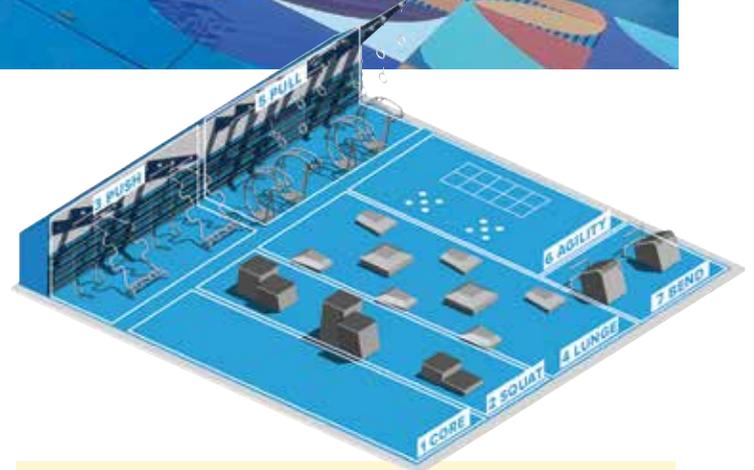
To keep the community informed throughout the process, Mayor Wood and his team used a variety of channels, including newsletters, the town's website, and active social media presence. Local and regional news coverage also helped spread the word, fostering excitement and interest. By showcasing the tangible benefits of tax dollars at work, the Town of Dumfries' officials and staff imparted a sense of pride and ownership among community members.

## A Fitness Court® Studio is born

The Town of Dumfries' newly completed Fitness Court® Studio offers more than just a place to exercise; it creates a vibrant space for wellness and community engagement. Yoga and Zumba classes, led by enthusiastic instructors from the area, are bound to attract a diverse range of fitness enthusiasts. The mayor's goal is to collaborate with local organizations, such as the Boys & Girls Club, local personal trainers, and the town's Parks & Recreation Department, to develop ongoing programming that maximizes the Fitness Court® Studio's full potential.

While the National Fitness Campaign grant played a big part in funding the project, the town used its general fund to cover the remaining costs. To ensure its continued success, all costs related to the studio and beautification around the structure have been committed beyond the initial grant.

Mayor Wood's vision extends beyond the Fitness Court® Studio. He envisions Dumfries as a thriving destination where people can live, work, and play in harmony. By providing accessible and engaging fitness options, he hopes to pave the way for a healthier and happier community for generations to come. Furthermore, the Fitness Court® Studio dovetails with the mayor's commitment to combating the mental health crisis, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic.



## Advice from Mayor Wood

For local leaders looking to make a positive impact in their communities through fitness, Mayor Wood encourages them to align their vision and mission with available resources, explore sponsorship opportunities, and prioritize budget allocation. In a time when mental and physical health is at the forefront of public consciousness, it's more relevant than ever to incorporate wellness initiatives into community development plans.

## But wait, there's more!

By being the first locality in Virginia to have a Fitness Court® Studio, the Town of Dumfries serves as a shining example of how investment in wellness opportunities can create a prosperous and vibrant town for all. But they will soon have company. The Town of Wise has already embarked upon its Fitness Court® Studio journey and more Virginia towns and cities are sure to follow. It's a great (and healthy) time to be in the Commonwealth!

**About the author:** Lindsay Valenti is the communications manager for National Fitness Campaign. You can learn more about how to get a Fitness Court® in your community by visiting NFC's website at [www.nationalfitnesscampaign.com](http://www.nationalfitnesscampaign.com). Follow along on NFC's social channels at Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube.

# It's more than just a walk in the park, it's Maymont!

**T**HE CITY OF RICHMOND has dozens of incredible parks, sites, views, and attractions. But those of us who live in the city know that one outdoor destination stands above them all. Just as New York City has Central Park, Richmond has Maymont. And just like Central Park, Maymont offers visitors an amazing variety of things to do. This family-friendly park has a “farm” and wildlife habitats that allows visitors to see a variety of animals in beautifully

maintained surroundings, a meticulously maintained Victorian mansion open to tours,

Italian gardens, a Japanese garden, walking trails, and the Robins Nature Center with activities for children including an aquarium and Maymont's famous river otter.

Moreover, the park is the site for events throughout the year including a popular concert series that attracts national touring acts to the verdant lawn to perform for throngs of happy fans who bring

folding chairs and relax under the stars. A fall “Garden Glow” event illuminates the park in vibrant colors and displays. Camps and educational programs are offered throughout the year.

At the **Maymont**

**Farm**, which is free of charge, visitors find goats, chickens, cows, sheep, and horses. The animals are friendly and enjoy the attention from animal lovers of all ages. Feed for the animals is available for purchase. A hike down the hill from the main farm building takes visitors down a winding path past wildlife habitat for bison, elk, Sika deer, a bobcat, and a fox. After crossing a small bridge, the path leads to exhibits featuring raptors, including a bald eagle, and a large enclosure with black bears. Displays along the path give details about each animal. All the wild animals that live at Maymont have been rescued and would be unable to survive on their own.

From the main farm buildings, a separate path leads to the **Dooly Mansion** with its carriage house and open fields and gardens.

## When is a park not a “park?”

THE DOOLEY'S named their estate “May Mont” which combined Sallie's maiden name with the French word for “hill.” As any longtime Richmonder will tell you, it's improper to say “Maymont Park” given its beginnings and should simply be referred to as “Maymont.”

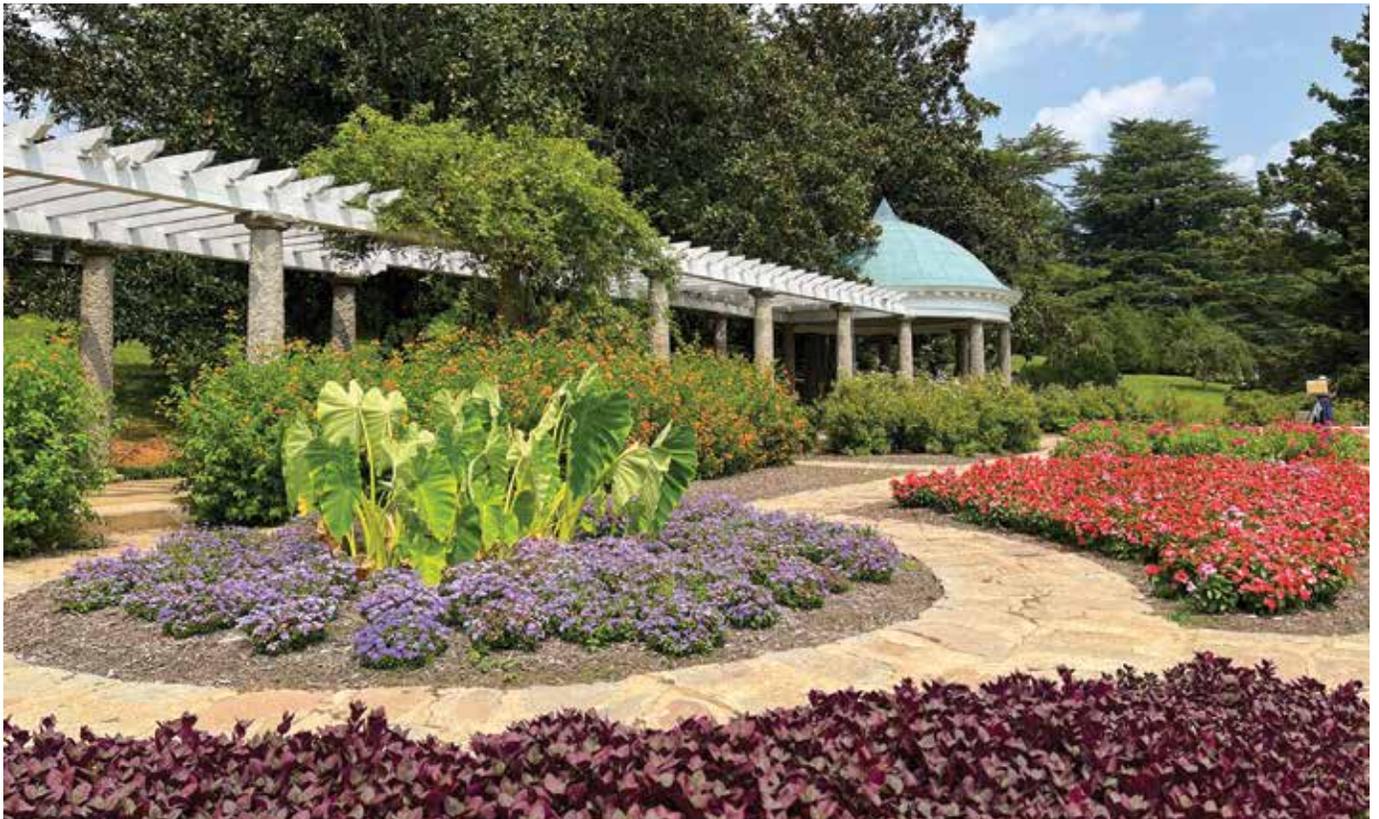




The Dooley's were childless and donated their estate to the City of Richmond to preserve for the community. For a small fee, visitors can take a self-guided audio tour through the mansion to learn about the life and times of James and Sallie Dooley, the mansion's architecture, and Gilded Age topics such as fashion, the lives of servants, and emerging technology. The mansion has been restored to how it appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the wealthy Dooleys lived in the home on their vast swath of land adjacent to the James River. Also preserved on the grounds are the Normandy-style Carriage House (built of James River granite), the three-storied Stone Barn and the Water Tower. The Carriage House is now home to a collection of 20 turn-of-the-century conveyances.

After a tour of the mansion, the gardens are a must-see! There are numerous small gardens scattered around the estate, but the main attractions are the **Italian Garden** and the **Japanese Garden**. Mr. Dooley had the Italian Garden created to demonstrate his wealth and even today it imparts a sense of old-world grandeur. The gardens have arches, cascading falls, regal steps tucked in the hillside, flowers, and sculptures. These arches of the Italian gardens are a popular place for photographs and visitors are likely to encounter brides posing for photos in full wedding regalia before their big day.

Having completed a promenade through the Italian Garden (wedding dress optional), a walk to the bottom of the trail brings visitors to the breathtaking Japanese Garden with a waterfall, bridge, stone



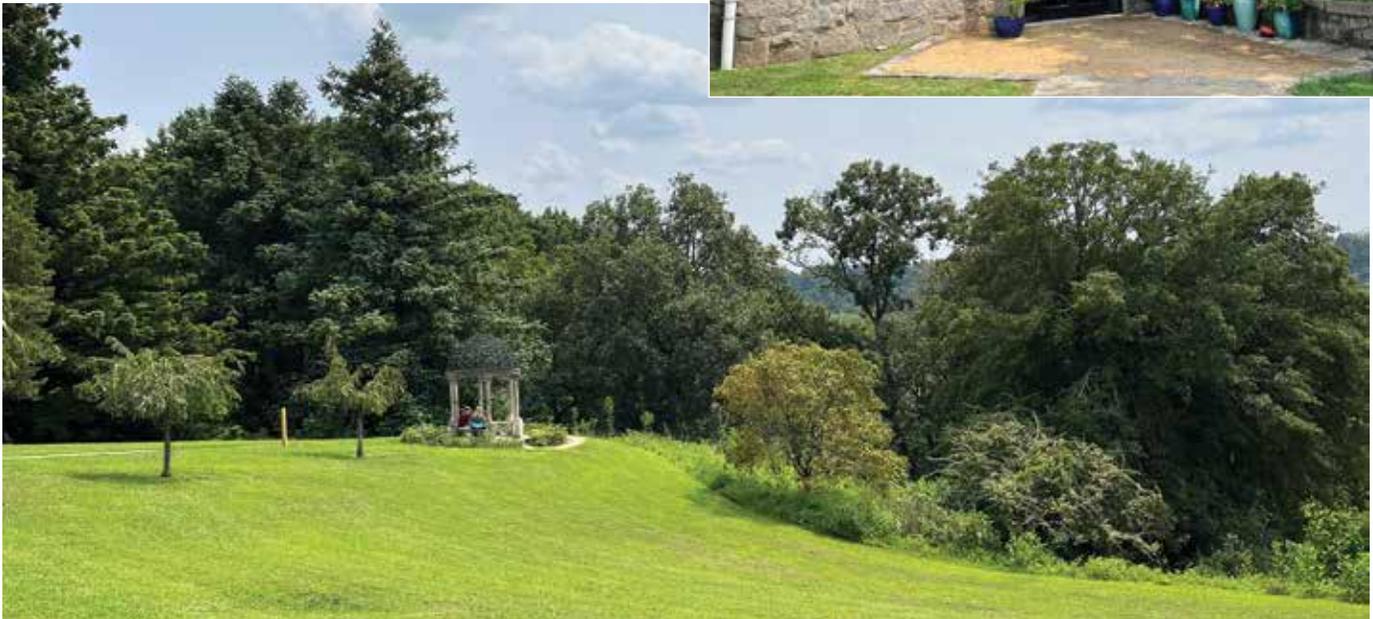
statues, and gorgeous trees surrounding a beautiful pond full of colorful fish. Other oft-spied residents of the garden include frogs, turtles, and dragonflies. Visitors can relax in the waterside gazebo, stroll the perimeter, or walk across a portion of the pond on raised flat stones.

For families, no visit to Maymont is complete without stopping by the recently remodeled **Robinson Nature Center**. This 29,000 square foot attraction holds delights for visitors young and old. Interactive displays entertain and educate about the James River ecosystem while the 30,000 gallons of aquariums hold species native to the area as well as more exotic offerings such as crocodiles and seahorses. The star of the show, however, is Louie the rescued river otter who cavorts, dives, and swims in this glass walled habitat to the delight of everyone who stops to watch.

Finally, the grounds of Maymont aren't just beautiful, they are an arboretum that is home to thousands of native plants and trees as well as more than 200 exotic species brought to the estate by the Dooleys. In fact, Maymont's trees have been recognized multiple times by experts as one of the country's most notable arboretums.

For all these reasons and more, a visit to Maymont is so much more than a walk in the park. To learn about what Maymont has to offer, visit [www.maymont.org](http://www.maymont.org).

**About the author:** *Josette Bulova is VML's policy communications coordinator.*





# Destination Norfolk: City of arts!

**Note:** *this is the third in a series of articles about the amazing City of Norfolk where VML members will gather October 8-10 for the 2023 Annual Conference.*

**T**HE CITY OF Norfolk is home to some of the most widely recognized and outstanding arts and cultural offerings in the Mid-Atlantic region. Norfolk's arts scene is anchored by an array of cultural institutions that showcase the city's commitment to preserving and celebrating its artistic heritage.

The **Chrysler Museum of Art** (site of this year's Host City Night) is a world-class facility that houses an impressive collection spanning fifty galleries, a growing collection of more than 30,000 objects, an interactive space for families and the only glass studio of its kind in the Mid-Atlantic region. With a focus on European and American art, the museum boasts works by renowned artists such as Monet, Rembrandt, and Degas.

The **Hermitage Museum & Gardens** is another gem that offers a unique blend of art and nature. Housed in a 20th-century

Arts-and-Crafts-style estate, the museum features a diverse collection of art, spanning 5,000 years, contemporary exhibition galleries, a Visual Arts Studio, and 12 acres of gardens and grounds that provide a serene setting and serves as a perfect venue for events. The Hermitage is the only museum in the Hampton Roads region accepted into the Smithsonian Affiliations program, which was created to share the Smithsonian's collections, exhibitions, scholarship, and programming.



Waterside Marriott, Norfolk | Oct. 8-10

## Independent galleries and studios

Norfolk's arts scene thrives within its independent galleries and studios. The **NEON District**, short for New Energy of Norfolk, is a prime example. This revitalized district is a hotspot for contemporary art, boasting vibrant murals, sculptures, and galleries that

showcase the works of local and international artists. The district's dynamic atmosphere is a testament to Norfolk's commitment to fostering a creative community.





## Performing arts

The performing arts also flourish in the Mermaid City. **Virginia Arts Festival**, the largest performing arts organization in southeastern Virginia, has transformed the region's cultural scene, presenting great performers from around the world and making Hampton Roads a cultural destination for visitors from across the United States and around the world. One of the anchor events of the Virginia Arts Festival is the **Virginia International Tattoo** hosted in Norfolk annually drawing performers from 31 nations. The **Virginia Symphony Orchestra** delivers breathtaking classical and contemporary performances at Chrysler Hall and the **Harrison Opera House** that resonate with audiences of all ages. The **Wells Theatre**, a historic venue dating back to 1913, hosts the **Virginia Stage Company**, presenting an array of theatrical productions that ignite the imagination. **Virginia Opera**, in its 49th year, is known and respected nationwide for the identification and presentation of the finest young artists, for the musical and dramatic integrity of its productions, and for the ingenuity and variety of its education and outreach programs.

Furthermore, the **Governor's School for the Arts** nurtures young talent by providing a specialized curriculum in areas such as dance, theater, music, visual arts, and film. This institution plays a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of artists while contributing to the city's cultural richness.

## Public art

The streets of Norfolk come alive with color and creativity through its vibrant public art scene. Murals and art installations can be found throughout the city, adorning walls, buildings, and even garages and the pavement. These striking visual expressions not only add to the city's aesthetic charm but also reflect its dynamic spirit and embrace of contemporary culture.



## More than a pastime...

In Norfolk, the arts are more than just a pastime; they're a way of life. From its world-class museums to its independent galleries, performing arts venues, and vibrant street art, Norfolk's creative landscape is as diverse as its residents. The city's dedication to fostering a rich arts scene ensures that visitors and locals alike can find inspiration, beauty, and a deep connection to human creativity around every corner. So, whether you're an art connoisseur or simply looking to be inspired, Norfolk's arts scene is sure to leave an indelible mark on your heart and soul.

We encourage you to explore our "City of Arts" during your visit for the 2023 VML Annual Conference!



*Scan the QR code to watch a video and learn more about the Norfolk arts scene.*



BLUE LINE SOLUTIONS By Mark Hutchinson

# Technology in service to public safety

**A**T THE MORE than 70,000 public and private k-12 schools across the United States, school administrators and school boards are responsible for fostering a safe learning environment – from the crosswalk to the desk – for millions of students. These administrators and board members are increasingly leveraging technology to reduce the risks of accidents, protect students, and reassure the community. In fact, schools have more security technology available to them than ever before.

From rural to urban school environments, Automated Speed Enforcement Cameras (ASE) and Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) have become essential security tools that serve three purposes: speed enforcement, area surveillance, and analytics sharing. ASE technology has proven to slow speeding vehicles through school zones by as much as 94% while ALPR helps security by capturing events through video management and analytics. The combination of these two technologies not only creates a safer place for children to walk to and from school



by reducing traffic speed, but it will also notify law enforcement if a registered child sex predator enters school property.

## Benefits beyond the school zone

At Blue Line Solutions we have seen first-hand how technology can help to save lives. That’s why we “Strive for Zero” – Zero crashes. Zero injuries. Zero fatalities. While there are many obvious benefits to using ASE and ALPR near schools, we have identified five important ways this technology has unexpected benefits for wider community.

- 1. Create an overall safer environment:** By deploying intelligent sensors, cameras, and warning systems, authorities can create a safer environment for pedestrians. These technologies detect speeding vehicles and prompt changes in driving behaviors that lead to slower speeds and reduced traffic flow. Moreover, speed enforcement and automated license plate recognition cameras in school crosswalks deter not only speeding but also criminal activity. This increases both student and resident safety. When incidents do occur, the cameras can provide crucial evidence for law enforcement.
- 2. Leverage data for municipal improvements and planning:** Intelligent traffic control systems can be integrated into



crosswalks to monitor traffic patterns and pedestrian volume during peak hours. This data enables city planners and law enforcement to make informed decisions about issues such as signal timings or traffic diversion measures during peak school hours. By efficiently managing traffic flow, local leaders can reduce congestion and create safer commutes for residents. Moreover, this data-driven approach ensures that future infrastructure development aligns with the specific needs of the community, leading to more sustainable and resilient neighborhoods.

**3. Increase community engagement:** A data-driven Public Information and Education (PI&E) approach is the most important component of a traffic safety program, but it is the most often overlooked. A PI&E component includes presentations at meetings of the local PTA, Chamber of Commerce, and businesses as well as information provided at community events. These efforts should be supplemented by disseminating data and information through schools' email portals and press releases. By making data about problems (i.e., the number of speeding vehicles over a given period) available to the community law enforcement and local leaders can garner "political permission" to address the problems. Furthermore, At Blue Line Solutions we have seen that when localities implement ASE and ALPR technology more people volunteer as crossing guards and participate in local road safety initiatives.

**4. Foster stakeholder partnerships:** An effective traffic safety program must include all the stakeholders in the community. Entities such as law enforcement, schools, civic and community organizations, and political leaders are all necessary to implement an effective program. Success is more certain when everyone works together on both the enforcement and education components to achieve the shared goal of changing driver behavior. This work not only has the immediate effect increasing safety, but it also creates important connections among the stakeholders that often prove helpful in other projects.

## Measurable, positive changes in driver behavior

ASE and ALPR technology combined with public education campaigns and new signage at schools and construction zones, makes drivers aware of their behavior. At Blue Line Solutions we work in collaboration with law enforcement, state and city government, and citizens to bring the technology to the community and raise awareness before, during, and after it is deployed. Our program averages the following results:

### Speed Reductions Achieved in School Zones

Reduction during PI&E phase	71.6%
Reduction during Warning phase	14.1%
Reduction during weeks 1- 4 of enforcement	8.3%
<b>Total Reduction</b>	<b>94.0%</b>

### Traffic Flow Reduction

Reduction during PI&E phase	-19.9%
Traffic flow increase during warning phase	+2.3%
Reduction during weeks 1-4 of enforcement	-3.7%
<b>Total Reduction in School Zone Traffic Flow</b>	<b>21.3%</b>

(Data Source: Blue Line Solutions as of 07/25/23 measuring program in 16 cities)

As seen in the above charts, the greatest reductions in speeding vehicles traveling through school zones are achieved during the PI&E and warning phases, when NO citations are issued. This data proves that the combination of PI&E and enforcement yields the desired changes in driver behavior. A related benefit is that drivers often choose to take alternate routes, thus reducing traffic flow in school zone areas.

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## Overcome initial concerns through public awareness

When implementing speed enforcement solutions, stakeholders often find the greatest reluctance in the political arena. Elected officials are often hesitant to embrace public safety solutions that have the potential to result in more speeding tickets for residents or to be perceived as overreach. Thus, the initial challenge is often in getting all stakeholders to communicate during the planning stages of a program to ensure it includes all the necessary components for success outlined above. Stakeholders can provide valuable support to elected officials by sharing the problem and proposed solution with the community in a data-driven approach.

## When everyone plays a part in public safety, everyone wins!

From the mayor to the school superintendent, to the community – everyone has a part to play in securing school zones or any area where speeds need to be reduced to keep people safe. Blue Line Solutions is proud to provide vital tools in the work of creating safer and more livable neighborhoods. Our technology has a proven track record of providing valuable speed detection, criminal detection, real-time monitoring, and data analysis. With these benefits, local leaders can do great things for their citizens.

**“Our number of accidents has decreased now that people are more cautious of their speed. Blue Line is always just a phone call or email away, and I highly recommend this program to other cities.”**

- Police Chief John Norman (Girard, OH)

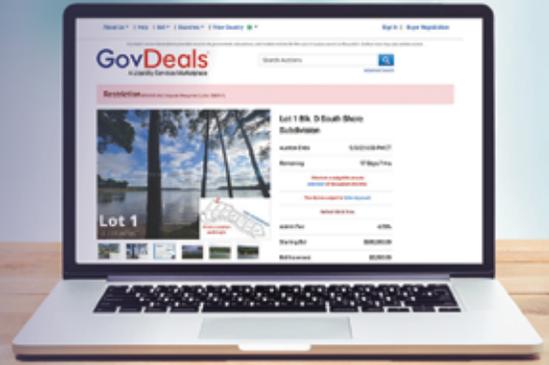


For more information on how Blue Line Solutions can help, visit [www.truebluesafer.com](http://www.truebluesafer.com).

**About the author:** Mark Hutchinson is the CEO and founder of Blue Line Solutions.

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Please note that each level of membership includes both year-round benefits as well as benefits specific to VML's Annual Conference held in the fall.



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