

VTC

VIRGINIA
TOWN & CITY

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

Managers matter!



Also inside:

Bonus feature:
Main Street matters
in Virginia

CBM Spotlight:
Virginia Tech
Graduate Certificate
in Local Government
Management Program





VIRGINIA LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS CONFERENCE

Wednesday, Jan. 8, 2025

The Place at Innsbrook, 4036-C Cox Road, Glen Allen, VA 23060



The Elected Officials Conference is a valuable training and networking opportunity for newly elected and veteran local officials from across the Commonwealth. In addition to information on good governance, basic budgeting, and land use, the agenda will include a preview of what to expect from the 2025 General Assembly and so much more!



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BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH SOUND GOVERNMENT



ABOUT THE COVER

As you will read in this issue of *VTC*, on at least one occasion a mayor has told his new manager: “Your job as town manager is to wear a dark suit, stand in the back of the room, and make sure the council and I look good.”

This is perhaps not the worst advice ever given to a local government manager in Virginia, but it’s only a rudimentary sketch of the difference an effective manager can make to a community. Thankfully this issue of *VTC* is here to help to complete the picture.

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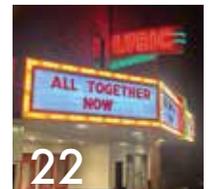
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Farewells, welcomes, and the road ahead!

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE who exercised their right to VOTE! Whether you liked the outcomes or not, I appreciate that we as Americans have the ability to vote. Congratulations to all of you who won an election and condolences to those who did not. I am sad to see some of our elected officials move on in their life journey, but I am excited to see where they go and look forward to meeting all our new members. Welcome!

Whether you are new to elected office or returning, please plan on attending VML's Local Elected Officials Conference on January 8 at a place appropriately called

"The Place at Innsbrook" near Short Pump just outside of Richmond. At this one-day event, we will offer code

compliant Conflict of Interest and Freedom of Information Act training* as well as sessions on topics of interest to elected officials in Virginia.

**Check with your clerk to determine if you need this training*

This issue of the magazine is all about managers and the important job they do. Most localities in the Commonwealth have the council-manager form of government which allows the manager to enact the policies that the governing body outlines. The manager should keep the governing body informed of the activities of the locality and communicate with the body as a whole. It is important that all members of the governing body are well informed and support the manager to provide continuity for the community. The governing body must act as liaisons between the government and the citizens. Respecting each other's roles is how the locality can be successful. I hope you

enjoy and benefit from the perspectives on local government management inside this issue.

Looking ahead, the General Assembly session looms! Please speak to your legislators about your local legislative agenda and the VML legislative priorities. Our legislative priorities include support for public education, funding for community services boards and behavioral health needs, land use control and state assistance to local police departments just to name a few. The full legislative program can be found at www.vml.org/Advocacy/Legislative-Program.

Also on the near horizon, VML's Legislative Day is January 30 and promises to be a lot of fun! There will be updates during the morning, time to visit the General Assembly in the afternoon, and an evening reception. It is also a great opportunity to invite your legislators to dinner after the reception. Please make restaurant reservations ASAP as Richmond's downtown is always lively during sessions. Also, make appointments to visit your delegation members during the

afternoon or early morning.

Finally, if you are not receiving VML's newsletter *eNews*, please take the time to get signed up by sending a request to enews@vml.org. Our newsletter is the primary way we keep all our members up to date on the actions (and inactions) of the General Assembly and we don't want you to miss out!

I hope that everyone had a Happy Thanksgiving, and I look forward to seeing you all soon.



Learn more about these events and additional opportunities at www.vml.org

CALENDAR

- Jan. 8** **Virginia Local Elected Officials Conference** - The Place at Innsbrook, Richmond, VA. Registration and information at www.vml.org.
- Jan. 30** **2025 Local Government Day** - Richmond Downtown Hilton, Richmond, VA. Registration and information at www.vml.org.
- Oct. 12-14** **2025 VML Annual Conference** - Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center, Roanoke, VA



Rush to retire as Marion’s town manager



- Rush -

On November 11, **Bill Rush** announced his plan to retire at the end of the year after more than a decade as Marion’s town manager.

His 11-year tenure saw the openings of the Henderson School of Appalachian Arts and Emory & Henry’s School of Health Sciences, the merger of Marion’s fire department and lifesaving crew into a single department, and a boundary adjustment with Smyth County that added land to Marion along Interstate 81. The town introduced an infrastructure project to rehabilitate its water and sewer systems, and established the BAUD (Blighted, Abandoned, Underutilized, and Dilapidated Properties) program to combat blight and address the local housing shortage.

Marion also invested in recreation, transforming the town pool into a waterpark with the aid of federal pandemic relief money. In 2023, the town was awarded a \$1.7 million grant from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and the National

Park Service to help develop the new Callan Drive Recreational Park, featuring sports fields, a dog park, a walking trail, and an outdoor amphitheater.

Rush has been an active member of the Virginia Municipal League and served on the VML Board beginning in 2018. Prior to his time with Marion, Rush acted as Chilhowie town manager from 2001 to 2006. He also served a stint on the Smyth County School Board, representing the Chilhowie District.

Grottoes appoints O’Brien town manager; makes Morris assistant town manager



- O'Brien -

At its November 13 meeting, the Town of Grottoes Council appointed **Kyle D. O’Brien** as town manager. O’Brien started his local government career in Grottoes, serving three years as town manager from 1997-2000. Most recently, O’Brien retired from the Town of Broadway after serving more than 24 years as town manager. He will begin his new position on December 2.

O’Brien succeeds Stefanie D. McAlister, who left Grottoes in June. Joseph S. Paxton had acted as interim town manager since July.

“We are excited to welcome Mr. O’Brien back to Grottoes,” said Mayor Jo Plaster in a press release. “Kyle brings broad experience as a local government manager in Virginia. Town council was impressed by the depth of his knowledge and experience, his personal demeanor, and his professional approach to working with the town council, staff, and the community for the betterment of the town. Given his extensive town management background and first-hand knowledge of the town, we are confident that Kyle will hit the ground running from day one and will be a valuable asset to our community for many years to come.”

During his previous stint as Grottoes’ town manager, O’Brien secured over \$12 million in grants for a variety of projects including parks, downtown streetscape improvements, economic development, wastewater treatment upgrades, and drinking water treatment improvements. He promoted the creation of an Industrial Development Authority to serve as a conduit agency for tax-advantage financing for non-profit or-



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ganizations and businesses and spearheaded the creation of a non-profit community-based organization to oversee downtown revitalization efforts.

O'Brien earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of North Carolina Asheville and a graduate certificate in Local Government Management from Virginia Tech. He is a member of the International City/County Management Association and the Virginia Local Government Management Association.



- Morris -

Also at the November 13 meeting, the council approved the establishment of the new assistant town manager position, appointing **Tara H. Morris** to fill this role. Morris currently serves as assistant to the town manager.

In her new position, Morris will be the town's zoning administrator and will serve as purchasing agent and safety officer. She has more than 22 years of service with Grottoes in several different positions, including deputy zoning administrator and clerk to the council.

Newport News selects White as its first community violence prevention manager



- White -

The City of Newport News has appointed **Synethia White** as its first community violence prevention manager. White brings a wealth of experience in community outreach, conflict resolution, and program development. With 20 years of experience in public service and a proven track record of engaging diverse community groups, she is poised to lead city initiatives to reduce violence and promote safety.

In her new role, White will oversee, develop, and implement comprehensive violence prevention strategies, collaborate with local organizations, and engage community members to create sustainable solutions. Her efforts will focus on addressing the root causes of violence, promoting education and awareness, and building strong partnerships within the community.

"Mrs. White's leadership and passion for community engagement make her the ideal

candidate for this important position," said City Manager Alan K. Archer in a press release. "We are confident that her innovative approach will help us create a safer Newport News for all residents."

Movers and shakers

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

Prior to joining the Newport News team, she served as the director of strategic initiatives for Cities United. She has also held various roles with the City of Hampton, including Youth Violence Prevention Program manager and executive director (neighborhood resources coordinator). Additionally, she has worked for the Hampton-Newport News Community Services Board, Virginia Commonwealth University as a prevention specialist, and the City of Newport News as an activities coordinator.

White earned a Bachelor's degree in Sociology with a minor in Human Services from Old Dominion University. She also received a certificate in Nonprofit Management from Tidewater Community College.



The VML Voice is the official podcast of the Virginia Municipal League. Each episode explores a different locality or issue but the focus is always on Virginia and the local governments that make the Commonwealth work for everyone.



Contact Rob Bullington, rbullington@vml.org to suggest topics, ask questions, or inquire about sponsorship opportunities.



Scan the QR code to listen to the newest episode



NVRC completes first phase of Wayfinding and Amenities Implementation Study for scenic trail

THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA REGIONAL Commission (NVRC) recently completed the first phase of the two-phase Wayfinding and Amenities Implementation Study for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (PHNST).

The project was developed to address findings from the 2022 study, *Health, Social Equity, and Economic Impact of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail in Northern Virginia*, as well as the wayfinding objectives laid out in the National Park Service's *The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Route Marking & Graphic Identity Guide*. The study examined more than 140 miles of braided trails, with more than 4,000 photographs taken and coordinated by NVRC with 40+ volunteers.

The Wayfinding and Amenities Implementation Study intends to assess how consistently the PHNST is promoted throughout the Northern Virginia region, to evaluate where there are gaps in the trail's promotion and navigation (e.g., logos, blazes, and informational signs), and to collect data to share with trail managers and the public on the location and condition of the variety of wayfinding types, amenities, and points of interest. Phase 1, as outlined in a recently published report, resulted in an inventory of existing wayfinding and amenities along the trail using volunteer-collected data. This data inventory is displayed in associated interactive maps, primarily intended to be used by PHNST trail managers to inform planning and funding efforts.

The amenities and points of interest will soon be added to the existing visitor information maps on the Potomac Heritage Dashboard to show PHNST visitors where current amenities are

located and to expand the points of interest, and ultimately to improve the future user experience of the PHNST network.

Phase 2 of the project, to be conducted in 2025, will examine where the trail requires increased and improved signage and amenities for greater trail accessibility. NVRC will hire a consultant to utilize data collected from phase 1 to create a full wayfinding and amenities implementation plan, including the prioritization of recommended sites to install new signage and amenities.

Links to the study and interactive maps can be found at www.potomacheritagenoa.com/studies-and-reports.



Study addresses homelessness in Greater Virginia Peninsula

VIAM ADVISING, a Houston-based firm helping communities work to end homelessness, has been contracted by the City of Newport News to conduct a study to address homelessness in the Greater Virginia Peninsula.

The Virginia Peninsula Homelessness Study aims to gather data and community feedback to better understand homelessness

in the region. Input collected during this study will help shape a comprehensive report to guide future strategies tailored to local needs.

Over the last few months, Viam Advising has been reviewing data and reports related to housing and homelessness while engaging in conversations

with local leaders. In late October, the Viam Advising team visited the peninsula for the first of several site visits. The team hosted focus groups with frontline homeless services staff, and with people who have recently experienced – or are currently experiencing – homelessness.

In mid-November, Viam Advising held public forums in Williamsburg and Newport News to present the initial study findings and to incorporate community input. For geographic representation, these meetings were split between the upper and lower regions of the peninsula.

After analyzing all the data, the Viam Advising team will compile a final report. The study is expected to be completed by the end of December 2024 and should be released shortly thereafter. There will be a public presentation of the final report; details of the meeting will be posted online when the date and time are finalized.

For additional information and to follow progress on the study, visit www.viamadvising.com/understanding-homelessness-on-the-virginia-peninsula.



Virginia Tech receives \$1.1 million Virginia Housing grant to buy advanced 3D construction printer

Plans call to build 10 affordable homes in Virginia with the printer by 2026

ON NOVEMBER 14, Virginia Housing awarded a \$1.1 million Community Innovation Demonstrations grant to Virginia Tech for the purchase of an advanced, mobile 3D construction printer. The school's Virginia Center for Housing Research will also apply grant funds toward 3D Concrete Printing (3DCP) tests, training, research, and partnerships to print 10 affordable homes in Virginia by 2026.

"For years, we have been working with our partners, exploring innovative construction techniques," said Tammy Neale, CEO of Virginia Housing in a press release. "This collaboration with Virginia Tech marks a pivotal step forward. This latest program allows us to quickly test, learn, and train future workers and partners to advance and scale 3D-printed housing across the Commonwealth."

The Tvasta SIRA RC20 is a robotic crawler arm-based 3D concrete printer, which uses an additive construction process to create concrete structures layer by layer. Refined from bulky, larger systems, the nearly 11-foot high, four-ton, eco-friendly printer reduces construction time and waste. Unlike traditional construction methods that rely on molds and manual labor, 3DCP automates the process, allowing for faster, more precise construction. This technology is primarily used to build walls, structural components, and even entire buildings.

About the Virginia Housing grant

Phase 1 of the grant is underway and focuses on purchasing and maintaining the printer. The other three phases will create a 3DCP grassroots service for affordable housing projects in Virginia, including:

- Phase 2: Training construction partners in 3DCP technology, starting with two training cohorts in the first year and increasing to four in the second year.

- Phase 3: Advancing research with Virginia Tech's faculty to expand 3DCP knowledge and applications.
- Phase 4: Collaborating with Virginia developers to construct durable, high-performance housing that meets community needs.

Virginia Tech faculty and students will work on the project with the Myers-Lawson School of Construction, Virginia Center for Housing Research (VCHR), The School of Architecture and Design, and the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE). Dr. Andrew McCoy with VCHR and Dr. Alex Brand with CEE applied for this latest Virginia Housing grant after partnering with the state housing finance agency in the past.

"Our goal is not to be homebuilders, but to facilitate the homebuilding process using 3D printing technology," McCoy said. "Our role as educators is to bring these technologies to Virginians, translate their opportunities, and equip Virginia contractors and developers with the knowledge and training needed to leverage 3DCP technology for affordable housing."

Site selections are still in the works for the 10 homes to be 3D-printed through this grant.



City of Fairfax announces green building policy

THE CITY OF FAIRFAX is developing a green building policy that will establish standards and incentives for new public and private construction, as well as major renovations. The policy aims to preserve and enhance the city's natural resources and environment; reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and increase clean energy; and provide social, health, and economic benefits for the community.

According to the city's 2020 Community-Wide Greenhouse Gas Inventory, buildings accounted for 43% of total GHG emissions. The primary tools for reducing GHG emissions from the building sector are increasing energy efficiency and generating renewable power on-site.

The goals of the green building policy include reducing GHG emissions by 80% from 2005 levels by 2050, achieving 100% renewable electricity for government operations by 2035, and establishing 100% renewable electricity community-wide by 2050.

For more information, visit www.engage.fairfaxva.gov/green-building-policy.



Portion of Virginia Creeper Trail reopens from Abingdon to Damascus

CYCLISTS AND HIKERS REJOICE: A 17-mile stretch of the popular Virginia Creeper Trail is now open to the public, a beacon of resiliency in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail occupies the bed of what was once a rugged mountain railroad connecting several southwestern Virginia towns. Stretching 34 miles from Abingdon to Whitetop Station, for nearly four decades the trail has provided natural beauty to visitors from all over the world.

However, the arrival of Hurricane Helene in September 2024 has forever altered the landscape. Severe flooding washed away extended sections of the trail and destroyed 18 trestles. The entire upper trail from Whitetop Station to Damascus remains closed as the U.S. Forest Service assesses damage and plots restoration efforts.

From Abingdon to Damascus (“The Start to the Heart”), the trail winds 17 miles through valleys and rolling hills along the Holston River. The gentle rail-trail grade is suitable for beginners and families, but does require light pedaling. At its lowest elevation, the trail crosses South Holston Lake on a magnificent curving trestle. Additional hiking trails are open at nearby Cherokee National Forest and Grayson Highlands State Park.

The Town of Damascus, nicknamed “Trail Town USA” as the crossroads of seven major renowned trails, was hit particularly hard by the storm. Downtown flooding threatened many buildings and



businesses, but thanks to an immediate outpouring of community support, the town is already in recovery mode and reopening local landmarks – including the Virginia Creeper Trail.

“Damascus Strong”

The Town of Damascus has set up the “Damascus Strong” direct fund, which will allow donations to go where they are needed most. Supporters can specify that they want their donation to go the Direct Fund, the Virginia Creeper Trail, the Downtown, or Emergency Services.

More information is available at www.damascus.org/hurricane-helene.

Staunton Environmental Programs Division receives conservation award

ON NOVEMBER 7, THE CITY of Staunton’s Environmental Programs Division was honored with the Helen and Tayloe Murphy Conservation Leadership in Government Award for the stream restoration project in Gypsy Hill Park. This prestigious award, bestowed by the Garden Club of Virginia, recognizes outstanding government leadership and commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable practices in the Commonwealth.

Willow Hughes, environmental programs specialist, accepted the award on behalf of the city.

Staunton is the first recipient of this award, which was established in 2023.

The Gypsy Hill Park stream restoration project aims to revitalize Peyton Creek by repairing damaged channels and enhancing the park’s ecology. The project will not only improve water quality and help reduce flooding risks downstream, but also create a more aesthetically pleasing environment for park visitors.

“We are honored to be recognized for our dedication to

environmental conservation,” said Environmental Programs Administrator Pete Kesecker in a press release. “This award is a testament to the hard work of our team and the support of the Staunton community, who have made environmental issues a priority for our city.”

The project will help the city meet federal stormwater pollution reduction mandates and improve the aquatic habitat. Additionally, it will daylight, or uncover, portions of the stream that are currently underground, enhancing the park’s natural beauty.

About the Garden Club of Virginia

The Garden Club of Virginia (GCV), established in 1920, is a nonprofit organization focused on conserving natural resources, preserving Virginia’s historic public gardens, and cultivating the knowledge and love of gardening. Today, GCV comprises 48 independent garden clubs with 3,400 members throughout Virginia. It offers educational programming in conservation, floral design, horticulture, photography, and more for its members and the general public. Since 1929, GCV has produced Historic Garden Week, the country’s only statewide home and garden tour, which is hosted by its member clubs.



Managers matter!

By Robert A. Stalzer

IN 1908, THE CITY OF STAUNTON created a new path for city government in Virginia, the United States, and the world – the council-manager form of government. This system was created to bring function and order to a previously uncoordinated structure in which basic municipal functions were not happening in a timely or cost-effective way. In helping their own community better meet its needs, the visionaries in Staunton probably had no idea their model would be adopted in thousands of communities. But that's exactly what happened!

After 116 years of the council-manager form of government, local government managers continue to matter as they provide the professional assistance and help carry out the policies and goals adopted by their local governing bodies in an ever-changing world.



“Wear a dark suit, stand in the back of the room...”

ANSWERING THE QUESTION, “Why do managers matter to Virginia local governments?” might sound like a straightforward proposition. But after 43 years of serving in five local governments – including 36 years in Northern Virginia as a town manager, city manager, and deputy county executive – I’ve come to appreciate that the answer is far more layered than it first seems. Since beginning my career in Virginia in 1979, each year has brought a deeper understanding of the many roles local government managers are entrusted to fill and why those roles matter so much.

I still remember something a former mayor told me early in my career: “Your job as town manager is to wear a dark suit, stand in the back of the room, and make sure the council and I look good.”

It wasn’t exactly what I imagined my job would be, but his point was clear: A manager’s role is to support the community and its elected leaders by working steadily and thoughtfully behind the scenes to help everyone succeed.

In fact, behind every council decision, every budget and capital improvement program, every community project, there’s a team led by a manager who, steadily in the background (dark suit optional), is there to facilitate problem solving and to keep the vision moving forward. The role isn’t just about administration; it’s about empowering the council, staff, and community to succeed as they work together to build a place people are proud to call home.

“Stalzer’s 10 Reasons Why Managers Matter”

While the manager’s role may look a bit different across Virginia’s urban centers, coastal communities, and rural towns, the reasons why managers matter remain remarkably consistent.

Managers matter when they...

#1 – Facilitate visionary leadership. Managers aren’t just administrators; they’re the visionaries steering the future. Working alongside councils, boards, commissions, residents, businesses, and staff, they help craft plans that reflect the community’s needs and aspirations to ensure that the government moves forward with purpose.

#2 – Build trusting relationships. Building trust is a continuous process, and a manager’s role is to foster that trust by removing fear and encouraging transparency. Relationships built on trust between elected officials, the manager, staff, and the community are the bedrock of effective governance and quality service. Trust grows from modeling openness, being accessible, and demonstrating vulnerability – such as admitting when they don’t have all the answers or acknowledging mistakes – which shows a commitment to authenticity. Additionally, showing genuine care often involves simply being present and listening. Monthly ride-alongs with police and fire crews and sharing early-morning breakfast burritos with public works and parks staff can go a long way too!

#3 – Drive effective communication. One of my favorite quotations from an elected official is: “I don’t want to hear about it, and I don’t want to read about it. I just want to know it.” Managers make sure that clear, direct communication flows in all directions, encouraging a culture where innovative ideas can flourish. Listening to all perspectives – even the outliers – is key.

#4 – Embrace and lead change. We’ve all heard the saying, “Everyone wants progress, but no one wants change.” Managers work through this paradox by building a culture of adaptability, explaining the benefits of change, and guiding stakeholders through the process.

#5 – Lead in times of crisis. When things go sideways – whether it’s a natural disaster, a public health emergency such as COVID-19, or a major event that’s gone off the rails – a manager’s steady hand makes all the difference. They coordinate resources, keep communication flowing, and guide the community through chaos and toward recovery.

#6 – See and communicate the bigger picture. Managers have the unique ability to recognize connections that others might overlook. This helps people to connect the dots and understand the bigger picture of how their individual efforts align with broader goals. Managers don’t need to have all the answers; instead, they focus on asking

key questions: Why are we here? What’s our purpose? Who are we serving? By fostering this clarity, managers empower their teams to work toward a shared vision, ensuring that everyone is pulling in the same direction.

#7 – Focus on long-term planning and implementation. Managers are dedicated to long-term sustainability rather than just short-term election cycles. They serve as the vital link between policy and action, ensuring that plans have a clear path forward – even when project durations extend beyond the governing body’s tenure. After all, a plan without a roadmap is simply wishful thinking!

#8 – Foster community engagement. Managers serve as vital connectors between government and community, opening channels for dialogue, active listening, and inclusive representation. They engage the community through public forums, workshops, and digital platforms, while building partnerships with individual residents, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, nonprofits, schools, and advocacy groups. I have often initiated and led community meetings on pressing topics – such as public safety, homelessness, code enforcement, historical monuments, housing and commercial redevelopment, as well as plans for new facilities and infrastructure. A key part of the manager’s role is to “open the black box” of local government, offering a transparent look into decision-making processes and creating opportunities for people to participate and influence outcomes.

#9 – Develop future leaders. Nurturing the next generation of leaders begins with a commitment to building a capable, adaptable staff. Beyond sending staff to established programs like those at the University of Virginia’s Cooper Center, managers can also create targeted growth opportunities through acting leadership roles and key project assignments. Examples from my experience include entrusting a senior fire department employee to lead the city’s strategic plan work and appointing an assistant to the county executive to lead a



high-profile code enforcement operation. These assignments not only advanced critical initiatives but also created new career opportunities for these individuals.

#10 – Shape workplace culture. By embodying the organization’s core values and adhering to the International City/County Management Association’s Code of Ethics, managers lead by example and cultivate a positive, resilient workplace culture. They may also sprinkle in a dose of self-deprecating humor – or even bring in a therapy dog for good measure! This past Halloween, in a fun twist, my direct reports dressed up as me, complete with dark suits and mustaches. They really nailed the look, and I have to say, it was both hilarious and heartwarming to see a dozen mini-me’s running around. Moments like these reinforce the camaraderie within the team and remind us that when you foster a supportive culture, it’s not just about getting the job done – it’s about building relationships that fuel effective governance (and make room for a little fun along the way).

Real-life challenges

In putting together my “10 Reasons Why Managers Matter”, I was reminded of how these principles translated into tangible outcomes in the real-life situations I faced. The results we achieved in three very different communities demonstrate the profound impact of effective management. Each success relied on visionary leadership, trust-building, long-term planning, collaboration and effective implementation. The transformative change we saw would not have been possible without the collective effort of the community, staff, and elected leaders working toward a common goal.

Consider these real-life challenges I faced during my years in local government:

Challenge: Overcrowded housing

The Situation: The community center was packed, and emotions were high as dozens of concerned residents demanded action to stop overcrowded, unsafe, illegal boarding houses that were multiplying in their neighborhoods.

The Solution: We addressed the problem of overcrowded, illegal boarding houses by creating a unified, dedicated code enforcement team and emphasizing community engagement and trust-building. Through cross-departmental collaboration and modernized enforcement practices, we resolved the issue in less than a year. This initiative went beyond tackling zoning and building code violations; it demonstrated how managers lead change by communicating a clear vision, actively engaging with the community, and implementing strategies that drive results. Ultimately, it underscored the importance of building trust within both the team and the community, showing that a unified effort can lead to sustainable, replicable solutions.



Challenge: Emergency services

The Situation: Our 9-1-1 call center and emergency operations were crammed into a dark, moldy former elementary school with outdated technology. With nearly half of our call-takers and dispatchers leaving each year, this operation was practically a crisis on standby.

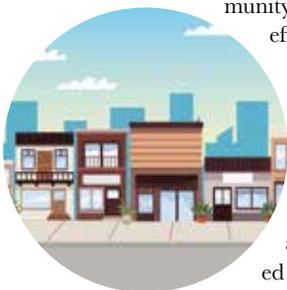
The Solution: We transformed our struggling 9-1-1 operation by restructuring the department and securing funding for higher pay and better retirement benefits while designing and constructing a high-tech communications and emergency operations center. This project, delivered ahead of schedule and under budget, relocated our call takers and dispatchers from a deteriorating facility to a state-of-the-art space. The upgrade not only boosted morale and improved retention but also underscored the importance of visionary leadership and long-term planning. This initiative demonstrated to our “first of the first responders” that they are valued and integral to providing excellent public safety services. Through effective project implementation, we created a facility that will serve the community and region for years to come, showcasing how strong leadership and management drive lasting change and significant outcomes.





Challenge: Downtown redevelopment

The Situation: After more than a decade of planning and community meetings, a major downtown revitalization effort was stalled, leaving residents frustrated and businesses in limbo.



The Solution: Our stalled downtown project was restarted through visionary leadership, active community engagement, and a renewed commitment to collaboration. By building trusting relationships among stakeholders, we successfully completed a municipal building, library, parking facilities, and public spaces that attracted private investment and brought new energy to the area.

This work wasn't achieved overnight; it required long-term planning, steady implementation over a five-year period, and clear communication to ensure everyone understood the bigger picture as well as their roles and responsibilities. Ultimately, this shared commitment showed that when we work together toward a common goal, we can create remarkable outcomes for our community.

Challenge: Neglected rural community

The Situation: During a comprehensive planning update, staff "discovered" a geographically segregated, very low-income African-American community straddling the county line. Forgotten by both jurisdictions, this area suffered from unpaved roads, contaminated wells, inoperable septic systems, and severely blighted housing.



The Solution: When we identified a neglected, very low-income rural area lacking basic services, it became clear that a new vision was needed to address the solution. We established a community development corporation dedicated to bringing

clean water, sewer, paved roads, and safe housing to this underserved community. Building trusting relationships with residents who had long been overlooked was crucial, and we engaged in effective communication to ensure their voices were heard throughout the process. By collaborating closely with the neighboring county, we transformed this vision of equity and service into a reality for 250 residents, demonstrating the power of long-term planning and implementation to create meaningful change.

The takeaway

Effective management isn't just about getting things done. It's about leading people through change, bringing the community into the process, and making progress by delivering solutions that endure. Local government managers will always matter—not just because of what they do, but because they're the ones building the foundation for communities that will thrive today and for generations to come.

Reflecting on my retirement earlier this year, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunities I had to work alongside dedicated elected officials, talented staff, and passionate community members. My hope is that the next generation of local leaders embraces the spirit of collaboration that has guided my career. With a team-oriented approach and a shared vision, we can continue building communities that are not only thriving but are also a source of pride for everyone who calls them home.



About the author: *Rob Stalzer retired in March of 2024 after a 43-year career in local government leadership and management. He also taught graduate level planning, economic development and public administration courses at Virginia Tech and George Mason University from 2008 until 2017.*

The philosophical manager: Cody Sexton, Town of Vinton

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

- From *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake



WHY DO WE get out of bed each morning? The alarm goes off, the morning routine begins, and the problems start rolling in. Texts, emails, calls, even the friendly “hey-do-you-have-a moment?” at the coffee shop seem to pile up quicker and quicker. This all happens before we even set one foot into the office or log in remotely. And we know that once we do, a veritable Pandora’s box of problems awaits us. Every day, as one notable meme on Instagram declared, it gets harder to tumble out of bed and pour ourselves a cup of ambition.

When first asked to write an article for this “Managers Matter” issue of *Virginia Town & City*, I could not help but ask myself: Do we matter? The old philosophy major in me (insert slightly bemused eyeroll from my staff) cannot help but to go back to first questions. Why do we even presume from the beginning that we matter? So much of our world, in fact, would seemingly tell us that we do not matter. So many seem to be saying that the nameless, faceless unelected bureaucrats are ruining this country, not helping it. We should just get out of the way and let the private sector do it. At best, we should be simple functionaries to help someone else who truly matters get from point A to point B.

So, once again, why do we get out of bed? How do we end up where we are?

My journey in local government began with purely material purposes. At the height of the Great Recession, I found myself in graduate school like so many others who could not get a job after college (philosophy major, remember?). My goal had always been to get a PhD and enter academia, whittling away at pliable minds in some ivy-covered building. My desire to eat and have money sent me down a more practical road. I enrolled at the Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP) at Virginia Tech in their Master of Public Administration program. A few close influences and a senior thesis on Plato’s *Republic* had made me interested in the work of government. CPAP seemed to check all the boxes.

But why local government? As I said, I began with material purposes. When looking at the course and curriculum offerings at CPAP, there were many ways to fill our elective slots. We could specialize in

one of many policy areas, or we could enroll in the Local Government Management Certificate. A specialization simply appeared on your transcript as a list of courses. The Certificate, though, could hang on your wall! More pieces of paper hanging on the wall, I thought, would showcase more achievements and lead to better job prospects. After all, that was the whole point, right? Little did I know, however, that a force of nature was heading my way.

Bob Stripling blew into my life in the spring of 2012. At the time, I just thought he was quirky or a little odd to say the least. When I became his graduate assistant for the Certificate program, I had no idea what kind of wild ride I was in for. He introduced me to the world of local government – the people, personalities, communities, and relationships that make up our profession. And, for all I knew, he was the ringleader of many of these circuses. Life at that time was interesting, though, and I was about to be hooked.

At CPAP, pre-career students had to complete an internship to graduate. Bob fatefully asked me one day, “What do you know about Stafford County?”

I knew precious little except that my aunt had retired from there and you drove through it on the way to D.C. Bob said, “Yeah, but they pay their interns.”

Bob has always had a way with words, so it was a deal! My aunt and uncle agreed to let me stay with them that summer as long as I had reliable transportation. So, armed with a down payment from savings and student loans, I bought a new Mazda (230k miles later it’s still going strong), and I packed my bags for Stafford.

That summer, Anthony Romanello and his team changed my life. His plan for an internship was to give the broadest possible exposure to the work of local government. This meant that I got farmed out to a different department each week while also attending board and committee meetings and answering customer service calls in the 311 Center. Anthony knew exactly what he was doing giving a curious, bright-eyed intern a local government buffet.

I helped with summer camp. I observed Family Assessment & Planning Team and Community Policy & Management Team meetings. I wrote talking points. I listened to excuses from people not paying their water bills. I talked to poll workers during a primary. I toured a dam construction site, fire stations, and parks. I met “Paul Waldowski, 8 Pickett Lane” who spoke at every single Board meeting. I even sat in the Emergency Operations Center in the days after the derecho when people had no power and no clue what to do. I was a sponge. I was not prepared to fall in love with local government, but I did. That time was amazing; however, it would take nearly a whole year before that love found its purpose.

I was invited back the following summer to intern with Stafford County and help with their 350th Anniversary celebrations. In August 2013, on the penultimate day of the internship, some friends from the Planning and Zoning Department invited me to do “shore inspections” with them in the county boat. Now, to be fair, we had received complaints about clear cutting along some shoreline properties, so someone needed to lay eyes on the issue. A beautiful late summer day with barely a cloud in the sky just happened to be a perk.

Sun-soaked and sweaty, I meandered back to the office at the end of the day and decided to head home early. I-95 was already backed

up (a brief yet powerful statement that still elicits exhaustion), so I turned to take the long way home, cutting through the various neighborhoods in southern Stafford. On the way home, stopped in congestion, I happened to look over at some rows of townhouses. They were simple, nondescript dwellings originally built as starter homes but now were supporting the waves of growth coming from further north. In that moment, though, something hit me. The most profound revelation, an epiphany of sorts landed right in my lap while looking at those homes: People live there!

Yes, people live there. People – families, friends, and strangers alike – live there. Those homes are the centers of their universes, the places around which they arrange their lives. The big and small moments of their lives happen there. Life happens there. And we, in local government, get to impact that life. It is so plain and so simple, really. They do not and may never know our names. They may never directly see our work. But our impact is real. We set the stage for all of that.

In that moment, I knew I had found my calling. Sometimes life is grand, filled with red-letter days and celebrations. But sometimes, in those boring times, we can find something special, a new truth about

ourselves...even while sitting in traffic.

Maybe this is why we get out of bed?

But, what about that poem at the top of my article? Did you think I would forget? Certainly, an article that begins with the opening lines of a 19th century English Romantic-era poem does not scream “Read me!” While I have often found that poetry, philosophy, and the arts give color to our monochromatic work, I also know that my stories may veer into seeming self-indulgent at times. The best ones do. But maybe that is the point? We can never know where we are going without understanding where we have been.

What do we see when we look at our lives? Mundane moments, chance meetings, random opportunities? See the people. Hear the conversations. Feel the risk. Look at each of those little things we have done. They add up. Can you find the threads, the small waves ebbing and flowing?

Read the opening lines again. Each grain of sand can tip the scales. Every wildflower can surprise. The smallest gesture can ripple beyond the time we spend together to last long after we part.

Thanks for all you do.





VRSA
Virginia Risk Sharing Association

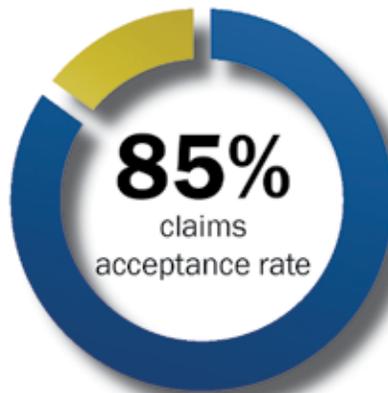
WHAT SETS

US APART



Our member relationship is distinct from that of a brokerage, agency, or other pools, to their customers and clients.

We exist solely to serve our members.



Broadest Coverages



We offer the broadest protections tailored to our members' interests.

Services



We provide training, contract review, site inspections, property appraisals, and a valid panel of physicians.

Your Team



Members have a dedicated service team to manage claims and ensure proper protections are in place.

Grants



We provide grants to assist members in preventing or reducing losses and continuing education.

Cybersecurity



We are the first Virginia pool providing cyber coverage, including a cyber attorney, security self-assessment, sample response plans, and more.

Consulting



We offer free consulting in human resources, public safety, communications, and local government.

The indomitable manager:

Sara McGuffin, Town of Amherst



VTC: *What was your path to becoming a town manager?*

SM: I'm one of those weirdos who knew they wanted to be in government because I had some exposure when I was young. And then as I spent more time exploring it, I knew I wanted to end up in local government. I got a grant to do an internship when I was in college at Isle of Wight County that allowed me to rotate through different departments and I landed in planning and never left! So, I got a graduate degree in planning, went back to Chesterfield County, which is where I grew up, and came up through the world of planning.

When I had my kids, I went part-time for several years and then I was a stay-at-home mom for several years. During that time, I was on the Planning Commission for Appomattox County where I lived and then ran for the Board of Supervisors. Then I went back to work in planning in Cumberland and finally in 2018 to being the manager here in Amherst. I got hired as the manager right as I was finishing up my tenure as an elected official, so the timing worked out perfectly.

VTC: *What do you like most about being a manager of a smaller locality?*

SM: I think that for anybody who wants to do good – and it doesn't matter what kind of good that is – public service is obvious. The question is, do you want to impact a small number of people greatly or a larger number of people less? When you work in a rural community or a small town, you have a much greater impact on a

smaller number of people. I like that better. I like being able to see and to be connected on a regular basis with the decisions that are being made.

I also find as a manager that the work-life balance is easier to manage in a smaller community where people tend to be much more in tune to who you are and where you live. I mean, they see you at the grocery store! I actually find that that makes people more respectful of my time rather than less. They don't want to impinge on your family time because they see your family.

VTC: *You had a medical emergency several years ago that meant some significant changes to your work. Would you mind sharing what happened and how you came back from it?*

SM: On July 4th weekend in 2020 I had four major strokes and a minor stroke while on my motorcycle that led to a catastrophic accident that almost killed me. When I woke up in the hospital, I was completely blind and my liver was crushed. In time, I got back a percentage of my vision, but it was very clear that that it was never going to be back to normal. I had been a manager in Amherst at that point for two and a half years. But, two months after the accident I met with the town council in a closed session and said, 'I'd like to come back to work in a month.'

I was in terrible physical shape and I was clear with the council that I was never going to drive again and that my vision was permanently compromised. One of the longest serving council members, who's still on council, looked at me and said: "Do you still believe you can do the job?"

I said I was sure I could, and he said, "Then we can pay people to drive you."

Nobody ever brings this up as an issue, nobody ever looks at it like this is a flaw or a problem. I tell my teenager when things bother her that she doesn't like about herself that those things are features not bugs. That's kind of how I view my disability. Making that mindset



shift – this is just the package of who I am – makes me more determined to move forward. I am still more capable than some people in some areas and I am less capable than some people in other areas, and you just have to choose to move forward from there.

I could have been on disability for the rest of my life, but I'm just not wired that way. So, if the town was going to have me, I was going to come back, and they decided that they were going to have me.

VTC: *How do you cope with the impaired vision in doing your work?*

SM: My family, including my mom who is 80, helps me get back and forth to work. But today was a nice morning so I walked.

I saw a wonderful neuro optometrist who helped me come up with some of my accommodations and figure out therapies and things that would help me function better. I have a 42-inch TV for my computer monitor. The biggest challenge that I have visually is during budget season because letters make words, so letters and words are logical and it's a lot easier to track those. It's much harder to track numbers in a spreadsheet, so I spend a lot of time with my face squished up to the monitor with a little plastic marker, so I don't lose track of where the numbers begin and end and to make sure that I'm reading them correctly.

I might not be as fast as I was, but I'm still the same person.

VTC: *But minus the motorcycle, right?*

SM: I have stepped down to just the smaller dirt bikes since I'm never going to be on the road again. I gave the 250 I was riding when I crashed to my son.

VTC: *Getting back to your work, is there any aspect of the job you enjoy more than the others?*

SM: I really enjoy bringing projects to completion. There's just so many things that we need to do and finding the method to get those projects done is really important to me. I've got a big dry erase board in my office that tracks all the different projects. That's really fulfilling to me, because that's real things that make things work better.

We just got our wastewater treatment permit renewed. Standards continue to go up and what can be discharged into the creek becomes stricter with each renewal. We just completed a centrifuge project for our sludge dewatering with our ARPA funds. So that couldn't have come at a better time! I don't know how we would have met the permit criteria if that centrifuge hadn't been constructed.

The tedious part is all the grant reporting anytime we're working with a grant agency. We certainly have ones that are favorites and ones that are least favorites but I won't call anybody out.

Also, I love the budget, even though it's tedious. I know that sounds weird. I'm not even an accounting person or a budget person by training. I love the budget because you can see where the locality chooses to place its priorities.

VTC: *You're definitely in the right job, because nobody I've talked to has ever said the words, 'I love the budget' in that order to me.*

SM: Budgeting is more fun at a town level than it is at a city or county level, because towns are the sweet spot in Virginia governance. Towns only have to do what towns choose to do. So the budget is much less constrained by the things required by the state – most of those are at the county budget level. The budget is much more an exercise in the things that the town prioritizes as opposed to a list of things you have to accomplish.

VTC: *OK, on the flip side, what's a thorn in your side?*

SM: Elections are a thorn in my side. Just because of the uncertainty. Of course we all value representative democracy, right? And it's great to have new people, but when you have high levels of turnover in a given election cycle, the learning curve or the loss of institutional memory can be a real issue.

VTC: *Is there an upcoming project that you're particularly excited about?*

SM: We are in the process of doing an automated water meter project. We're still old school here and drive around and read meters. We waited a long time to do automated meters because we wanted the technology to get to a place where it was actually going to be a win for our customers.

With the new automated meters customers will be able to monitor their own usage and be able to see if they have a leak and what they're using during the course of the month. The reports will come into the office, and we'll be able to see if there's some unusual usage and then, even if a customer isn't monitoring, we'll be able to tell them, 'Hey, you've got unusual usage.' That's a really neat improvement for customers that wasn't available with the previous technology.

VTC: *Is there anything particularly important about being a town manager that we haven't covered here that you think people should know?*

SM: It's a great way to do great things for your community!



The reluctant manager: Debbie Kendall, Town of Gordonsville



VTC: *What led you to become a town manager?*

DK: I started out my career as a planner. After I graduated with a degree in geography from Virginia Tech, I really didn't know exactly what I was going to do. I got a job working as a planning technician at the Fifth Planning District Commission in Roanoke. It was through that process that I realized that I really wanted

to work in local government planning. At that time I did not have any aspirations toward management.

VTC: *I always wondered what happened to the kids that majored in geography. And now I know. They become managers.*

DK: Now you know! Some of us become managers in small towns, absolutely. But before that happened, I went up to Bedford County and was a planner there for about three-and-a-half years. I saw firsthand what county government looked like and what a county administrator dealt with. After that experience I just was not enthusiastic about pursuing a career in county administration because it's very political and stressful. I didn't want a part of that.

From Bedford, I was able to take a job with Orange County as their planning director and move closer to family. I was planning director in various capacities with the county, and after about 11 years, the Town of Gordonsville picked me up as their town planner and clerk. I was the town's first real town planner by name. They needed someone to revise their comprehensive plan, and I had that experience. They also needed someone to be their town clerk because the clerk had resigned.

At that time, it was a perfect fit for me! I got to learn firsthand what happens in town management. I worked very closely with the town manager. I felt more like an assistant town manager than a town planner and clerk because I was writing a lot of the material for Council's agenda packets. She told me she was going to train me to be the town's next manager. I resisted at first. I was really enjoying my role as planner and clerk. Our town is involved in a lot of events, and I was responsible for coordinating those events, which was a lot of fun. Taking on management of the entire organization was admittedly very daunting to me, so initially I said, 'I really don't want to do that.' But she continued to train me anyway. She gave the council plenty of notice before she retired, and they went through the interview process. Initially I wasn't going to throw my hat in the ring, but after some encouragement from a former council member I did, and they hired me. That was ten years ago.

VTC: *At that point was there any extra certification, training, or development that you did either because you had to or because you wanted to?*

DK: I looked at the local government management certification program, but I never got involved because of the expense. This might sound weird, but I didn't feel right asking the town to pay for it, and it was more than I could afford on my own. I knew there were scholar-

ships available, but I also had a lot going on when I first became town manager. Our streetscape project was getting ready to go under construction. It was my first big task as a manager, and I had never managed a construction project before. And I was overwhelmed – every day brought a new and different challenge I didn't readily know how to handle – I just didn't have it in me to also take classes. After being manager for about seven years, though, I met the eligibility requirements to become a Credentialed Manager through ICMA, and that has given me the structure I need to pursue professional development on my own.

VTC: *Given that your background was in planning, what were some of your blind spots coming into the manager role? Budget maybe?*

DK: I really stressed over creating my first budget for the town. The former manager did a great job of helping me understand the budget process before she left. In fact, the last budget she prepared, I worked with her on it so I would understand the different things that she went through to help council navigate that process. Also, I went from planning projects to actually carrying them out – that was a steep learning curve for me.

Becoming a member of the Virginia Local Government Managers Association (VLGMA) was very helpful to me. It opened my eyes to a much broader network of colleagues and mentors who were there to help. I didn't always seek them out necessarily, but when there were specific issues that I just didn't know how to navigate they were there to help.

VTC: *I guess this is a good time to mention that you are currently the president of the VLGMA. What are some of the things that you want to get accomplished during your tenure?*

DK: It's important to me that our members know that the organization is there to be a supportive resource for them. Also, for those who are not members to realize that VLGMA is there for information, networking, and for education. We have two annual conferences, and our "Deputies, Assistants and Others" group has a very robust program twice a year that's very beneficial for deputy and assistant managers who may want to move up into the role of manager at some point.

When I write my monthly article for the VLGMA newsletter, I always try to find something to be positive about that's current to what we're dealing with regularly.

VTC: *Given that your path to becoming a manager was not exactly straightforward, what would you say to young people who are interested in learning more about local government management and want to get involved?*

DK: I always worried that you had to have a master's degree in public administration to do this job. But obviously you don't. I mean, I'm literally living proof! I think if you want to serve your community, if you want to be involved in what's done in your community, if you want to be involved in guiding your elected officials to doing great things for your community, if you can see yourself managing other people to accomplish those goals...then being in local government management is a great way to do all of that!

Even if you don't have a master's degree, even if you just have maybe a bachelor's degree in some field, maybe it's in finance, maybe it's in planning, maybe it's in geography, there are resources available

to learn what you need to be an effective manager at any level. Those resources certainly include the local government certificate program through Virginia Tech; the Virginia Institute of Government programming, both the Leading, Educating and Developing (LEAD) program and the Senior Executive Institute (SEI); the Virginia Women's Municipal Leadership Institute, as well as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) because VLGMA is an ICMA affiliate.

VTC: *Given the demands, what keeps you motivated to do the job?*

DK: Gordonville is my hometown, and growing up I never for a second thought about being the manager of the town. I'm sort of a reluctant manager, but now that I'm here, I like being involved in so many different facets of the community. And, I really love helping people. There are still people in the community I knew as a child – helping to make the community better for them makes me proud.

VTC: *Do you have anyone supporting you?*

DK: I have a great staff, especially my wonderful assistant who's also our clerk. I affectionately refer to her as my second brain. I really couldn't do this job without her. She's almost like an assistant manager for me because she is so involved in everything that I deal with and then some. I also have a supportive mayor and council, and my family, especially my daughters, are a constant source of support.

VTC: *What's something that you're particularly proud of or that you think was a really good win for the town since you've been manager?*

DK: Probably a couple of things. We have a lovely downtown, and that's in large part due to the town pursuing the streetscape improvement soon after I became manager. There was a lot of private investment that facilitated the next step for us, which was to do the streetscape project. So, I'm really proud of that. I'm also proud of the park project that we're undertaking that includes constructing a very nice new pool to serve the community.

VTC: *What's something you didn't expect that you wound up enjoying?*

DK: The time when I had to step in as pool manager for our public pool. It was a great way to engage with the community, I saw these people every weekend. I got to meet a lot of kids in the community – which was really fun for me – and I also got to meet and work with our lifeguards who are some really dedicated, energetic young people. I'm still in touch with some of them even now even though they may not work for us anymore because they're in college and they're going on to bigger and better things.

VTC: *Did they give you a whistle?*

DK: I have a whistle, and I even got to use it! At one point I even thought about getting certified as a lifeguard.

VTC: *It sounds like for people that are interested in becoming managers, particularly of small towns, one of the pluses is that you never know what the day is going to bring?*

DK: If you're looking for a job that is different every day, this is one! You get to wear a lot of different hats.



Main Street matters in Virginia

JUST A COUPLE HOURS to go until showtime for one of Harrisonburg’s Levitt AMP concerts downtown and Andrea Dono can be found picking up dog poop in anticipation of almost 1,000 attendees who will soon be flooding the lawn with picnic blankets, chairs, and refreshments.



Down Interstate 81, Todd Wolford’s walk to the coffee shop has extended from his planned 15 minutes to an hour as he runs into business owners and local officials, residents and nonprofit partners who all want to discuss activities and opportunities in Wytheville’s Main Street district. Wolford doesn’t mind. “We are public facing, we are accessible, we are easy to talk to, and we build relationships and trust.”

Dono is the executive director of the Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR) and Wolford is the Executive Director of Downtown Wytheville, Inc. (DTW), the local organizations leading the Main Street revitalization efforts in their respective localities. What sets their economic development work apart from the traditional models, is the person-focused and place-based grassroots nature of their approach and the fact that they are laser focused on historic commercial districts.

This is known as the Main Street Four-Point Approach, which was developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the 1970s when people asked for help saving their dying historic downtowns. Today, Main Street America leads this nationwide movement and helps organizations holistically and inclusively tackle their challenges and realize opportunities in the areas of design, promotion, economic vitality, and organization.

With more than 1,100 Main Street organizations around the nation, Main Street America partners with state and city “coordinating” programs to provide direct supports to the cities, towns, and neighborhood districts. Virginia Main Street, housed in the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), offers training, technical assistance, consultant services, and grants to municipalities and neighborhood districts throughout the entire state.

Main Street nonprofit organizations work hand in hand with regional and local partners – supporting major employers, local

governments, building and business owners, entrepreneurs, and community groups – to strengthen the historic district’s sense of place and economic opportunities for livability and talent and investment attraction. Their work complements that of most local governments, and they exemplify impactful public-private partnership where joint projects and initiatives are true collaborations.

In Wytheville, those relationships and trust in DTW are evident in how it has been integrated into the workings of local government. “People have come to treat us as the community development arm of Wytheville, and I think that the town sees that as beneficial,” notes Wolford.

Likewise, Dono’s day may consist of co-leading the downtown master planning process with the city’s economic development executive director, matching entrepreneurs with commercial space, building new downtown parks, adding inclusive programming for children with unique needs to events, and working on building new community parks.

“I think the thing that drew me to the job is that as a Main Street executive director every day is different and we have to wear so many different hats,” says Maggie Elliott, executive director of Believe in Bristol (BIB) who has been with the organization for nearly a decade.

Ashley Kershner, the executive director of the Downtown Lynchburg Association (DLA), agrees and suspects that she would feel bored at a “regular” job. She appreciates having the ability to take on all aspects of event planning, community and economic development, marketing and promotions, and nonprofit management from working with volunteers, human resources and recruiting. “I can drive an electric lift and I’m my own finance executive director,” says Kershner. “People don’t realize the breadth and depth of skills that it takes to do this job.”





Bright Nights & Lights in Lynchburg

“We have to be collaborative and strong communicators,” adds Diana Schwartz, chief executive officer of the River District Association (RDA) in Danville. “You have to be able to communicate all kinds of information to a variety of people.”

The spirit of open communication, collaboration, and willingness to do whatever needs to be done lays the foundation for strong support of Main Street organizations in communities around Virginia. The trust of the public and the public sector was instrumental when the COVID-19 pandemic brought events and travel to a standstill, closed businesses, and sent workers home. Schwartz notes that RDA had the agility to act quickly and be the first ones out of the gate to publish a guide to resources which was updated several times a day.

Similarly, HDR’s Dono observes: “We were the leaders in our

community and the larger region. We have the connections and know what the businesses and residents need. We know where to find the resources. We share a love of small businesses and sense of community, and thankfully, our strong marketing ability allowed us to get information out there and tell the public know what we were doing, and how they could support the local businesses.”

With new regulations, resources, and guidance coming minute by minute, especially in the early days of the pandemic and lockdown, many Main Street executive directors spent their days and nights interpreting policy, diving into the details of funding sources, innovating drive-through lanes, and helping small businesses get established on e-commerce platforms to continue generating revenue. “We helped folks fill out grants and became a one-stop shop of information for the small business community,” notes Wolford, illustrating just one aspect of how Main Street organizations and helped to make their local economies more resilient.

BIB’s Elliott notes that “because our organizations are separate from city government, we were able to move quickly and have access to different resources.”

This flexibility makes having a high performing and impactful Main Street organization an ideal partner for localities. For example, when the Town of St. Paul wanted to rehabilitate the historic Lyric Theater for the community, they turned to St. Paul Tomorrow (SPT). At the time Kathy Stewart, SPT’s executive director, was on the organization’s board. Soon after her Main Street organization got involved, she was hired as their paid executive director. Stewart explains, “In 2013 the town bought the property, and I was asked to chair that committee, but when the executive director left in 2015, I was hired and continued to manage the project.”

Ten years – and countless bingo fundraisers – after the town bought the theater, the Lyric reopened in December of 2023 as a live performance venue. The same year the town bought the theater, it also purchased another large, vacant downtown building that would eventually become the Western Front Hotel. SPT secured grants from Virginia Main Street, the Industrial Revitalization Fund, and the Appalachian Regional Commission that made both of those projects possible. Today SPT still operates and manages the theater for the town. “The Lyric has been our most successful project,” says Stewart, “but we’ve also done a lot of beautifications through public art – our Gateway art project and Alleyway Arts – that have been very effective.”



St. Paul Gateway Mural



Likewise, in Danville the RDA secured resources from Virginia Main Street that supported a partnership with the City of Danville's Economic Development Office to develop a Feasibility Study of the former Dan River Fabrics' "White Mill". This 650,000 sq ft "white elephant" along the river was visible to all visitors and passersby. Today, phase 1 of the rehabilitation is underway and will create trendy housing as well as office, restaurant, and retail space. "This is a transformational project for our city, and with this partnership in place, we are breathing new life into this historic building that will serve us for the next 100 years," says Schwartz.

In South Boston, DDBS served as the project manager for a highly successful Community Business Launch (CBL) program that launched five new businesses in the Main Street district. "We put a lot of time into a survey before we started, asking people what kind of businesses they wanted to see," says Vest. "The results of the CBL program changed the face of our downtown. We ended up with a younger demographic of women-owned businesses and started seeing young moms strolling and shopping downtown, lattes in hand! Strategy-driven revitalization was a goal from then on out."

Currently there are 27 Virginia communities across Virginia running "Advancing Main Street" organizations, which are those meeting the highest national standards set by Main Street America. At the beginning of 2025, Virginia Main Street will designate a new cohort of Advancing Main Street communities. Virginia Main Street has been working with these communities one-on-one and providing technical assistance and funding to get early initiatives off the ground. The goal is to prepare the communities to lead fully resourced re-

vitalization efforts through the Mobilizing Main Street program, a two-year, cohort-based accelerator curriculum for communities that are ready to take their Main Street efforts to the next level to join the high performing Advancing Main Street network.

When you see the signs welcoming you into a Virginia Main Street community, look for spectacular old buildings flourishing with modern, new uses. Look for murals and parks. Look for thriving businesses and evidence of social cohesion from community-building events. And, when you find them, you'll see how the Main Street Approach works and how it models the best of public-private efforts and people- and place-based economic development.

Fresh perspectives: A Main Street directors' conversation

As much as Main Street leans on the wisdom of its seasoned directors, the unique backgrounds of each crop of new directors brings a fresh perspective and renewed energy to the network. Brady Cloven (Winchester Main Street), Kristen Kiefer (Historic Manassas, Inc.), Antonio Miller (Downtown Ashland Association), and JB Brown-Crowley (Hilton Village in Portsmouth) are either new to the job or their community is in start-up mode and is new to the network. Virginia Main Street (VMS) spoke with this cohort recently to find out how it's going.

VMS: *What drew you to Main Street and the job of director?*

Kristen: Working on the national level most of my career, I came to understand that what happens in a community needs to influence what's happening at the national level. I have raised my family here and wanted to give back to my community in a meaningful way.

Brady: I am from Virginia and was working in nonprofits with small business ecosystems and local government support in the Boston area. We had wanted to move back to Virginia and came to Winchester as this position became available. I was instantly hit by the community feel of it.

VMS: *What has surprised you the most about the job?*

Antonio: The community unity is by far the most surprising





Antonio Miller



JB Brown-Crowley

aspect of Ashland. I have never seen such a diverse place work together so well.

Kristen: It is a bigger deal than I thought it would be to get the community to understand what Main Street really is.

Brady: Yeah, same as Kristen, it's been hard getting people to understand the Main Street program. Especially because the program had been administered through the city and we just became a non-profit. But people think 'OK, well, we've seen this before.'

VMS: *What does a day in the life of a Main Street Manager look like?*

Brady: A lot of coffee.

Kristen: Yeah, a lot of coffee meetings.

JB: My day never looks like I think it will. A lot of our stakeholders have different kinds of hours, so I've scheduled one

night a week to work from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. with city council meetings or dinner meetings so that I can be diligent about how I meet with people.

VMS: *What do you want your partners and stakeholders to know about Main Street?*

JB: We don't just do events here. We are about the program. We

are about all four points (Design, Economic Vitality, Organization and Promotion).

Antonio: Main Street is about looking out for small businesses and can be a vital resource for any small community looking to upgrade their preservation capabilities, support small businesses or drive economic development through community development.

Brady: That we are a community organization – community driven with a community mission. It's not what I want or what the board wants. It's what the collective of Old Town Winchester feels will be best for them.

VMS: *What do you want to accomplish for your community?*

Kristen: Being the connector for the Historic Manassas downtown businesses and residents as we co-own the economic vitality and vibrancy of our community.

Brady: Bringing stability to the new organization and to the businesses in the district. We want to be the rising tide that brings everybody along.

Antonio: A balance between preservation and growth.

JB: Being a champion locally for the city, even those who experience the spaces differently in terms of accessibility. And a 'Great American Main Street' award!

About the author: *Rebecca Rowe is the associate director of economic development and community vitality at Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.*

About Main Street America

Founded as the National Main Street Center in 1980, Main Street America now promotes the Main Street Approach™ in more than 2,000 communities world-wide. In the late 1970's the National Trust for Historic Preservation piloted this approach to community and asset-based development to combat decades of disinvestment and decline in historic commercial districts. Main Street is designed to be grassroots, inclusive, and preservation based – creating places that are rich in history, culture, and character with thriving local economies



that appeal to residents and visitors through a holistic and balanced work plan that includes the Four Points: Design, Promotion, Economic Vitality, and Organization.

Administered locally through nonprofits and units of local government, Main Street organizations are made up of skilled staff from a variety of professional backgrounds and buoyed by their boards and volunteers as well as public and private partners. Together they secure the resources to not only run a successful organization, but to take on the activities that will be the most impactful to the community. They create and implement programming to support and grow resilient local businesses that create jobs and grow local wealth; execute welcoming events and enticing marketing programs to promote the businesses, district, community, and organization. They connect building owners with resources such as historic tax credits or design assistance, implement public arts and place making projects such as mural programs and pocket parks, creating places that draw investors, job creators, and talent.

About Virginia Main Street

Virginia Main Street, the state coordinating program that implements the Main Street Approach™ in partnership with Main Street America, was started in 1985 with four communities. Today the team works with approximately 100 communities across three tiers of participation providing tailored technical assistance, targeted training programs, coordinating consultant services, and assisting in developing impactful projects for grant funding. Once a year the directors and managers



of the Advancing Virginia Main Street (AVMS) communities get together with the Virginia Main Street team for the annual Director's Retreat in one of the communities within the network. Over three days they network, tour, learn, and problem-solve together. The professional generosity that is so inherent to the program and the retreat gives rise to the Main Street definition of R&D – Rip Off & Duplicate – as each community is committed to the success of its partners across the state.

In 2025, Virginia Main Street will celebrate its 40th anniversary of revitalizing the built and business environments in historic commercial districts across the Commonwealth. From 1985 to 2023, Virginia Main Street communities created more than 8,200 businesses; 27,000 jobs; and generated more than \$2.6 billion in public and private investment.

Upcoming event: Join VMS in marking the state and local achievements all year long, but especially at Main Street Station in Richmond from 6–8 p.m. on Tuesday, February 4 to celebrate together!



A first look at the financial capacity of Virginia’s towns

A DISCUSSION ON TOWN financial management starts with the uniqueness of Virginia’s local government structure compared with the rest of the United States. Towns are a part of counties and have different financial capabilities as compared to cities and counties in Virginia. Financial capacity is different from financial condition – financial condition is a one-time look at town’s ability to pay its current expenditures within existing revenues. Financial capacity takes a more long-term approach; it does consider financial condition, but it also looks at how well local governments can deal with future events.

Virginia Tech examined how the 190 towns in Virginia are managing their financial challenges individually and collectively.

The initial phase of this topic started with a research project in 2023 that looked at the actual financial impacts of the pandemic on cities, counties and towns in Virginia¹. The data was from the Auditor of Public Accounts and the project analyzed revenue trends from 2019 to 2023. The review included towns in Virginia which are required by state code to prepare an annual audit². The findings from that research project demonstrated that the reporting towns were more significantly impacted as compared to cities and counties due to their high reliance on economically sensitive taxes (meals, sales, and lodging) and lower reliance on real estate taxes. Towns had deeper shortfalls in local tax revenue and were taking longer to recover after the pandemic, as compared to cities and counties.

The conclusions from the initial study led to a more focused study in the spring of 2024 of the previously identified towns and their perspectives on financial capacity.

Financial capacity

Financial Capacity is defined as “the local government’s ability to utilize financial resources to provide stable delivery of public services and to deal with future events.” The towns’ staff were asked: *How do you know if your town has sufficient funds to provide government services?* The towns responding to the survey identified 12 factors that they use to measure financial capacity. Then, we asked them to indicate the importance of these factors. The survey results and analysis of the top three key factors identified by the survey are below.

Key factor #1: Adopting a balanced budget

The state code requires local governments to adopt a budget by the first day of the fiscal year. Unsurprisingly, towns that responded to the survey identified this factor as an extremely important factor in determining a town’s financial capacity. The analysis of revenues and expenditures and the policy decisions that accompany the development of a balanced budget represents one of the most significant tasks elected officials and managers perform on an annual basis.

How important are the following to your locality in measuring financial capacity?

| Statement | Not at all important | Slightly important | Moderately important | Very important | Extremely important | Very and Extremely important |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Adopting a balanced budget | 0.00% | 0.00% | 3.13% | 31.25% | 65.63% | 96.88% |
| General Fund Unassigned Fund Balance Levels | 3.13% | 6.25% | 3.13% | 43.75% | 43.75% | 87.50% |
| Compliance with adopted financial policies | 0.00% | 0.00% | 12.50% | 43.75% | 43.75% | 87.50% |
| "Clean" unmodified audit opinion | 3.13% | 0.00% | 9.38% | 34.38% | 53.13% | 87.50% |
| Cash funding for capital projects | 0.00% | 4.17% | 16.67% | 54.17% | 25.00% | 79.17% |
| Adoption of a capital improvement plan | 3.13% | 9.38% | 18.75% | 25.00% | 43.75% | 68.75% |
| Low debt levels | 0.00% | 9.68% | 25.81% | 38.71% | 25.81% | 64.52% |
| Tax collection percentages-low uncollectible amounts | 6.90% | 6.90% | 24.14% | 37.93% | 24.14% | 62.07% |
| Budget Stabilization Fund levels | 9.38% | 18.75% | 21.88% | 37.50% | 12.50% | 50.00% |
| Fiscal Distress Monitoring Ratios | 20.00% | 13.33% | 36.67% | 30.00% | 0.00% | 30.00% |
| Credit Rating | 16.67% | 13.33% | 43.33% | 6.67% | 20.00% | 26.67% |

Key factor #2: An appropriate level of general fund unassigned fund balance

For towns, the appropriate level of general fund unassigned fund balance should be considered given the individual towns' challenges. The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends two months of general fund operating expenditures³. But many towns operate enterprise funds such as water, sewer, trash collection and electric systems. According to the GFOA, "It is essential that a government maintain adequate levels of working capital in its enterprise funds to mitigate current and future risks"⁴.

The level of working capital is also dependent on general fund support to the enterprise fund. In that case, a higher level of unassigned fund balance should be considered given the general fund support and a lower level of working capital. Towns should consider a balance in both enterprise working capital and unassigned general fund level policies. Some towns carry an unassigned fund balance from 50% to 100% of general government expenditures.

Key factor #3: Financial policies

Localities that have adopted financial policies demonstrate a commitment to financial management. Of the towns surveyed, 87% indicated that they have financial policies with the prevailing types of policies being fund balance policies and debt management policies.

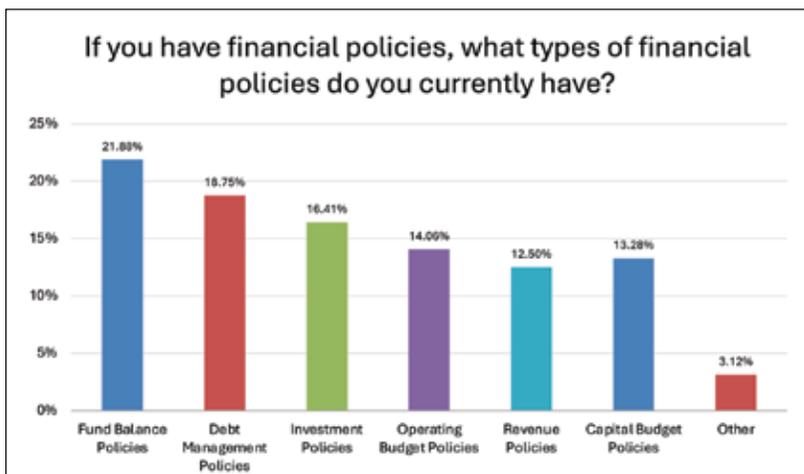
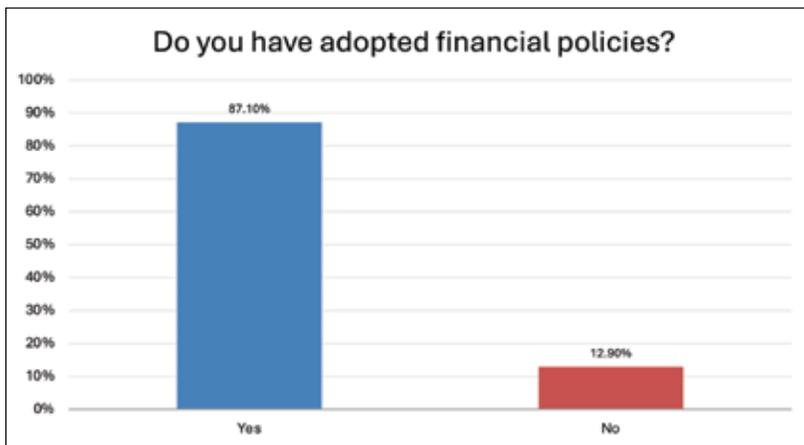
How do towns communicate financial information to their elected officials?

As part of the survey, the towns were asked what financial reports they provide to elected officials and the frequency of that reporting. Of the 38 towns responding to the survey, 31 reported updating

elected officials during the annual audit presentation, 28 through the budget process, 25 through monthly council reports, and 24 responded to individual council requests. Monthly summary revenue and expenditure reports submitted to councils were identified as extremely important in communicating financial information to elected officials.

| Answer | # of Responses Out of 38 Towns |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Annual Audit Presentation | 31 |
| Through the budget process | 28 |
| Monthly council package/ financial status report | 25 |
| Respond to individual council member requests | 24 |
| Quarterly Financial report | 9 |
| Other | 2 |

| How important are the following financial reports or data in reporting to the governing body? What does the governing body want to know about the Town's financials? | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Statement | Not at all important | Slightly important | Moderately important | Very important | Extremely important | Very and Extremely Important |
| Summary revenue and expenditures by fund year to date | 0.00% | 6.25% | 15.63% | 37.50% | 40.63% | 78.13% |
| Detail Budget to Actuals for Revenues and Expenditures - year to date | 3.13% | 6.25% | 18.75% | 31.25% | 40.63% | 71.88% |
| Cash Balances year to date | 3.13% | 6.25% | 28.13% | 21.88% | 40.63% | 62.50% |
| Accounts payable listings (monthly) | 34.38% | 21.88% | 12.50% | 15.63% | 15.63% | 31.25% |



Next steps

The initial survey helped to identify the key components of financial capacity for towns and the results provided some general guidelines for towns to consider. The next step will be to develop a tool that all towns – even those without the audit requirement – can use to evaluate financial capacity.

About the author:

Stephanie Davis is a collegiate associate professor and certificates program director at Virginia Tech.



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¹Davis, S. D., & Zuniga, R. (2023). COVID-19 Pandemic Financial Impacts on Virginia's Local Governments: A First Look at Total Local Revenue and Vulnerable Local Taxes. *Municipal Finance Journal*, 44(2), 77-.

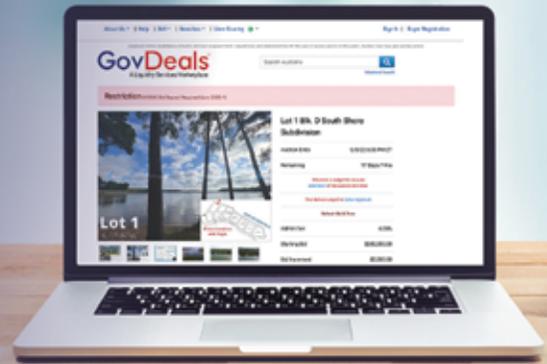
²Code of Virginia Section 15.2-2511. Auditor of local government records, etc.; Auditor of Public Accounts; audit of shortages; civil penalty.

³Fund Balance Guidelines for the General Fund: <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/fund-balance-guidelines-for-the-general-fund>

⁴Working Capital Targets for Enterprise Funds: <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/working-capital-targets-for-enterprise-funds>

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