

THE MAGAZINE OF THE
VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE



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call for entries

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These kids are all write!

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"If I Were Mayor"
essay contest



Statewide Winner

Jelena Ly

of Edward W. Wyatt
Middle School
in Emporia





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ABOUT THE COVER

Nope, that's not a typo on the cover! We know all about reading and writing and wouldn't dare make a mistake like that on the cover of our education-themed issue. But hopefully we got your attention because the winners of our annual "If I Were Mayor" essay contest for 7th and 8th graders have put their ideas on paper and we're pleased to share them – along with several articles dealing with education – in this issue of *VTC*.

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Visit www.vml.org or
scan the QR code to
download the VML app.

School's out for summer... but the learning never stops!

CANNOT BELIEVE THAT it is June already! But there are signs that summer is approaching everywhere. In fact, I saw parking signs for a graduation event at the Siegel Center here in Richmond this morning, which is about as literal of a sign that summer is near as you can ask for! For most everyone in the Commonwealth, school is out for the summer, which is ironic given that this issue of *Virginia Town & City* is focused on education. Inside you'll find some great news about Virginia's education system including the lifting of the support cap which was a big win for localities during the 2025 General Assembly Session.

By the time you read this, VML will have hosted our second annual Small Towns Conference which was held in Farmville on June 5-6. The conference included discussions on topics like housing, land use authority, economic development, cybersecurity, and many more. Planning an event like the Small Towns Conference is always a reminder of how important it is to continue learning. In that spirit, I'm pleased to let you know that registration is now open for the 2025 VML Mayors Institute & Annual Conference happening at the wonderful Hotel Roanoke. The Mayors Institute will take place on

October 11 and conclude the morning of October 12. The Annual Conference will begin in the afternoon of October 12 and conclude on October 14. Please make plans to join us! We will begin finalizing the programming soon, so if there are topics that you would like to see on the agenda, please let me know.

Summer is also the time for VML's legislative and policy committees to begin their work to prepare for the 2026 General Assembly Session. The Legislative Committee is responsible for considering and developing positions on existing or proposed state and federal legislation or regulations. The VML constitution states that the composition of the legislative committee be 24 people,



with 12 from cities and urban counties over 35,000 in population, six from cities and urban counties with a population under 35,000, and six town representatives. This group meets 3-4 times per year and proposes the VML legislative program to the league membership at the annual business meeting in October. In addition to the Legislative Committee, there are five policy committees: Community and Economic Development, Infrastructure, Finance, General Laws, and Human Development and Education. The policy committees receive briefings on statewide issues, consider possible changes to their committee's policy statement, and develop legislative recommendations for the Legislative Committee to consider. These policy statements are also presented at the annual business meeting for the league membership to approve.

Summer is also the season for the work groups created by the General Assembly to begin meeting. Please read *eNews* for continued updates on what's happening with these work groups.

So, while it's always great to relax, even during the summer months there are opportunities to learn new things. I hope that you enjoy your summer and this issue of the magazine!



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

CALENDAR

Aug. 25

Innovation Awards Submission Deadline - Open to all VML members. Information at www.vml.org. See page 37 for complete rules.

Oct. 11-12

2025 VML Mayors Institute - Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. See page 17 to register.

Oct. 12-14

2025 VML Annual Conference - Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. See page 17 to register.



In Memoriam:

Harry "Reed" Fowler Jr., former Newport News director of public works



Harry "Reed" Fowler Jr., 69, passed away at his home in Hayes on May 3. Born in McKeesport, PA, he was the son of Harry Reed Fowler Sr. and Mildred Jean Fowler, both of whom preceded him in death.

Fowler carried his blue-collar roots proudly, rising from humble beginnings to become a respected public servant. His career in local government spanned nearly four decades, including over 30 years with the City of Newport News as director of public works and, most recently, as deputy county administrator for Gloucester County. During his tenure as public works director for Newport News, Fowler played a vital role in guiding the city through times of crisis, including the massive cleanup following Hurricane Irene in 2011. Under his leadership, the department managed the removal of over 100,000 cubic yards of debris, coordinating with federal partners and private contractors to restore neighborhoods and infrastructure.

Known for his calm presence, practical wisdom, and deep sense of responsibility, Fowler was a trusted leader who earned the respect of colleagues and citizens alike. His commitment to public service left a lasting impact on the communities he served.

In memory of Fowler, contributions may be made to Reformation Lutheran Church, 13100 Warwick Blvd., Newport News, VA 23602, or Riverside Hospice, 7358 Main Street, Gloucester, VA 23061.

Former VML Executive Director Richard Lawrence DeCair



On April 30, **Richard Lawrence DeCair** of Miami, FL passed away at the age of 88. DeCair, originally from Muskegon, MI, served in the U.S. Army after high school and went on to earn a Bachelor's degree from Western Michigan University and a Master's degree from the University of Virginia.

DeCair held many professional and civic positions throughout his life, including executive director of the Virginia Municipal League; executive director of the Dealer Bank Association; vice president for Public Finance at New York-based investment firm, Blyth Eastman, Dillion Company; and development director for the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired where he oversaw the fundraising efforts (or "friend-raising" as he would say) for the Capital Campaign in the late 1990s that led to the then-largest expansion of the Lighthouse in Little Havana. Most recently, DeCair served as business manager for Java Holdings and GRABER Realty Group in Miami.

Civic-minded and community-focused, DeCair always strived to get involved and give back, including in the late 1950s in his then hometown where he led efforts to install new lights for the Colon Dam pedestrian bridge. His boisterous efforts led to the local townsfolk calling the final reveal "Dick DeCair's Dam Lights!" He also won a Telly Award for the Ray Charles PBS Benefit Concert for the Miami Lighthouse that he co-produced in 1999.

A Celebration of Life was held on June 6 at the Miami Shores Country Club. In lieu of flowers, please make lifechanging memorial gifts to Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, in memory of Dick DeCair, at MiamiLighthouse.org.

Lazaro to retire from Northern Virginia Regional Commission



- Lazaro -

Robert W. Lazaro Jr., executive director of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), has announced his retirement from the commission effective at the end of August 2025.

He has served as executive director since March 2017.

Lazaro leads an award-winning staff of 16 accomplished professionals. During his tenure he stabilized the NVRC's finances, created its first rainy day fund, and invested in personnel and technology to improve the commission's operations. Prior to his role as executive director, Lazaro served as NVRC's director of regional energy and sustainability policy, creating and overseeing the commission's solar program. Since 2014, the program has resulted in more than 1,000 contracts for 9.2 MW of new solar in Northern Virginia, with a private sector investment of more than \$28 million.

Lazaro has a long history of public service in the community, serving first as a councilmember in the Town of Purcellville and four terms as mayor. During his tenure as mayor, the town was recognized in a number of areas for environmental protection and sustainability, winning the Governor's Gold Medal for Environmental Excellence (2010), the Historic District Design Excellence Award (2011 & 2012), and the prestigious Siemens Sustainability Award for Small Communities (2012). Under Lazaro's leadership, Purcellville placed more land in conservation than any town in Virginia and became the smallest community in Virginia to achieve a AAA bond rating.

Recognized as a leader in the Commonwealth, Lazaro served as chairman of the Virginia Municipal League (VML) Environmental Quality Committee, chaired the VML Go Green Committee, served as vice-chairman of VML's Legislative Committee, and served on the board of directors of the Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions.

Lazaro also served on the board of directors of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, the board of directors of the Local Energy Alliance Program, the board of directors of Visit Loudoun, the George Mason University Research Foundation, and the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation.

Petty named Front Royal town manager



- Petty -

The Front Royal Town Council has selected **Joseph W. Petty** as the new town manager. The unanimous decision by the council followed an extensive search with a strong list of candidates.

His employment with the town began on April 14.

Mayor Lori Cockrell said in a statement, "I have had the opportunity to work with Joe in the past. Joe has always shown an excellent work ethic, a positive outlook, and a keen ability to communicate with citizens, staff, and elected officials. He has a passion and a true understanding of our community, which made him the best candidate to continue moving Front Royal forward."

Petty holds a Bachelor's degree from George Mason University and has worked in planning, zoning, and business and economic development over the past 15 years. Following his college graduation, he was the vice president of operations for a business development organization that attracted quality commercial and residential development. In 2018, he began work with the County of Warren in Planning & Zoning and Economic Development.

Petty has belonged to various civic organizations and local government committees and has remained involved with community initiatives. He is a member of leadership programs including the Virginia Association of Zoning Officials (VAZO) and the Virginia Economic Developers Association (VEDA).

Petty will lead 177 employees and oversee a \$51 million budget, which includes \$33 million in enterprise funds.

City of Winchester selects Savage as new fire and rescue chief

The City of Winchester has named **Drew Savage** as its new fire and rescue chief.



- Savage -

Savage brings a wealth of experience, with nearly two decades in fire and rescue including extensive training, operations, and organizational leadership. His journey began as a firefighter-paramedic with Norfolk Fire-Rescue in 2005, and he most recently served as their assistant chief of administrative support services.

"After an exhaustive internal and external search, Drew really distinguished himself among the applicants," said City Manager Dan Hoffman. "He brings decades of experience in public safety and has demonstrated success with Norfolk Fire-Rescue. We are delighted to have Drew join the team and look forward to him leading our Fire and Rescue Department."

Savage replaced outgoing Winchester Fire and Rescue Chief Jon Henschel, who retired on April 1. Before Savage assumed his duties in early May, the department was led by Acting Fire and Rescue Chief J.D. Orndorff.

Savage is known for his problem-solving skills and collaborative approach to addressing administrative, operational, and cultural challenges. He led the Norfolk Fire-Rescue Department's response to COVID-19, supported recruitment efforts, supervised training and professional development, and has extensive experience in budget oversight and operational supervision.

Savage holds a Master's in Organizational Leadership/Fire Rescue Executive Leadership and is a graduate of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program.

Simon is new fire and EMS chief in Salem



- Simon -

Salem City Manager Chris Dorsey has named **Steve Simon** as Salem's new fire and EMS chief. The veteran firefighter took over the department on May 12, replacing John Prillaman, who retired after more than 27

years of service to the Salem community. "I am extremely excited and pleased that Salem is able to welcome someone of the caliber of Chief Simon onboard to lead our Fire and EMS Department," Dorsey said. "The department has strong traditions and an outstanding reputation, and I feel certain that Chief Simon will be able to not only maintain those things but elevate them in the coming years."

Simon brings an incredible wealth of diverse regional experiences to the job. He most recently served as the executive director at the Western Virginia Emergency Medical Services Council, where he oversaw support services for the EMS needs of 18 local governments. Prior to taking that position, he was the fire chief for Roanoke County Fire and Rescue from 2015-2021.

Simon has a Bachelor's in Fire Service Administration from the University of Maryland, a Master's in Executive Fire-EMS Leadership from Grand Canyon University, and he is a graduate of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the U.S. Fire Administration, Department of Homeland Security.

During his 27-year career with Roanoke County Fire and Rescue, he rose from the position of paramedic/firefighter to the rank of fire chief before retiring in 2021. Throughout the years, he has made it a priority to pay it forward to the next generation by serving as an instructor in the Bachelor's program of Fire-EMS Emergency Management at Radford University.

Since Prillaman's retirement in December 2024, Deputy Chief Matt Rickman has led the department as its interim chief. He returned to his former role in the department when Simon's tenure began in mid-May.

"I want to thank Matt for immersing himself in the interim role and doing such a solid job in this transition period," said Dorsey. "He took great care in maintaining and developing personnel and moving many of our current programs and advancements forward. He and Steve will make a great team for Salem."

City of Richmond appoints Popovich as next deputy chief administrative officer for human services



- Popovich -

In March, the City of Richmond announced the appointment of **Amy Popovich** as the next deputy chief administrative officer (DCAO) for human services. Popovich brings over a decade of experience leading strategic, community-driven public health initiatives in Richmond. Previously, as nurse manager for the Richmond and Henrico Health Districts, she oversaw a team of over 100 clinical staff and spearheaded programs that bridged the gap between public health and community needs. From leading COVID-19 response efforts to launching initiatives in school health, newcomer services, and chronic disease prevention, her work is rooted in collaboration, advocacy, and impact.

"I am so excited for Amy to add her incredible depth of compassion, collaboration, and expertise to the City of Richmond," said Mayor Danny Avula. "I've seen firsthand what she can accomplish and the level of

servant leadership she brings to a team. I can't think of a better person to step in, hit the ground running, and lead our Human Services portfolio."

The city's Human Services portfolio includes the Office of Community Wealth Building; the Department of Justice Services; the Department of Neighborhood and Community Services; the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities; the Department of Social Services; and the Richmond Public Library. Together, these agencies enhance economic stability and improve health outcomes and the overall well-being of Richmonders across all stages of life.

Popovich succeeds departing DCAO Traci DeShazor, who has led the Human Services portfolio since 2023. DeShazor oversaw the organization during a critical period, including the development of the Southside Community Center, the establishment of the Department of Neighborhood and Community Services, the opening of the Community Resource Center, and an expansion and deepening of the city's shelter response.

Popovich started her new role on April 28. Director of Social Services Shunda Giles served as acting DCAO in the interim.

Moore takes over as Bedford chief of police



- Moore -

The Town of Bedford has announced that **James D. "Jim" Moore** has accepted the position of chief of police, bringing over 35 years of experience in law enforcement at the local, state, and federal levels. Moore was officially sworn in on April 7.

A native of Radford, Moore comes to Bedford from Chesterfield County, where he served on the police department's command staff as leadership development training coordinator. His distinguished career began as a game warden with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, followed by roles as a deputy sheriff in Goochland County and over two decades as a supervisory special agent with the FBI.

Town Manager Bart Warner emphasized the thorough and competitive hiring process, which drew 45 applicants nationwide and included interviews with panels of law enforcement professionals and local citizens. Both panels independently named Moore their top choice.

"Jim brings a wealth of experience and a passion for leadership and training that will serve our department and community well," said Warner. "He's ready to hit the ground running."

Moore holds a Bachelor's in Criminal Justice from Radford University and a Master's in Administration of Criminal Justice from VCU. He is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy and has participated in several prestigious law enforcement training programs across the country — both as a student and an instructor.

Alleghany supervisors hire McFadyen as new county administrator

During the April 1 regular meeting of the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors, board members unanimously voted to hire **Ken**



- McFadyen -

McFadyen as the next county administrator.

"The Alleghany County Board of Supervisors is pleased to have Ken come on board," said Matt Garten, chairman of the board. "With many of the current board initiatives, Ken's economic development expertise, understanding of public management, knowledge of the region, and his philosophy of regional cooperation will help the county continue to move in the right direction."

Since 2016, McFadyen has served as director of economic development in Botetourt County. He will assume his role as county administrator in Alleghany County full-time in early June.

McFadyen has over 25 years of experience in local government administration and economic development, including seven years as executive director of the Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority, which serves Grayson County, the City of Galax, and Carroll County. He has also held previous positions in North Carolina county and town management.

McFadyen served as president of the Virginia Economic Developers Association in 2018 and has worked closely with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the Virginia General Assembly, and previous governors' administrations. During his tenure in Botetourt County, seven companies announced their decisions to locate or expand in the county with approximately 1,000 new jobs and \$185 million in capital investment. McFadyen has also been a

strong advocate for small businesses, helping them grow and thrive. His work with universal broadband installation and support of remote workers has also been recognized at the state and regional levels.

McFadyen earned his Master's in Public Administration from Appalachian State University, where he also earned his undergraduate degree in History. He is an Eagle Scout and former Rotary Club president.

Taylor named director of Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities



- Taylor -

Alexandria City Manager James F. Parajon has selected **Hashim Taylor** as the new director of the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (RPCA). He officially assumed the role on April 14.

Taylor is an experienced parks and recreation professional with a strong background in leading large-scale projects and expanding community programming. Originally from Alexandria, Taylor grew up participating in the city's RPCA programs — an experience that helped shape his passion for public service and community impact.

Most recently, Taylor served as the director of parks and recreation for the City of Cedar Rapids, IA, where he oversaw operations for more than 5,000 acres of parkland, 100 miles of trails, three golf courses, six swimming pools, and several recreation and cultural facilities. During his time there, he played a key role in securing over \$12 million in state and federal funding to support the \$37 million ReLeaf Cedar Rapids initiative — a major reforestation effort following the 2020 derecho storm. He also led the development of several community projects, including the Ellis Golf Course Event Center, Jones Park Lodge, Hughes Park, 16th Ave Dog Park, Riverside Skatepark, and a 10-court pickleball complex. In addition, he helped advance planning efforts for the Greenway Parks Plan update, community gardens in parks, and the Westside Library Park project, while expanding recreation programming to serve a broader and more diverse population.

Before his time in Iowa, Taylor was the recreation program manager for Prince William County, where he oversaw countywide recreation programs, facility operations, and community engagement efforts. He

PEOPLE

also held leadership roles in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, where he managed large-scale recreation projects, public-private partnerships, and park revitalization efforts aimed at improving public access to quality parks and facilities.

Taylor earned his Master of Business Administration degree from Regent University and currently serves on the board of directors for the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

Frenzel appointed parks and recreation manager of Mount Jackson



The Town of Mount Jackson has appointed **Cindy Frenzel** to the newly created position of parks and recreation manager. Frenzel brings a wealth of experience in environmental education,

community engagement, and program development, making her an invaluable asset as the town moves forward with its Master Park & Pedestrian Connectivity Plan and other exciting community initiatives.

- Frenzel -

Frenzel's diverse background includes over 12 years as the education coordinator and most recently as program director for the Friends of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River, where she developed and launched innovative environmental education programs for all ages, recruited and managed volunteers, and collaborated with numerous conservation organizations and community groups.

Her experience extends to the national level, having served as a National Fire Prevention Education team leader and public information officer with the USDA Forest Service for nearly two decades. In this role, Frenzel developed and implemented community education plans to reduce human-caused wildfires and provided critical information during wildfire incidents nationwide. She also served as the Virginia State Project Learning Tree (PLT) coordinator for the Virginia Department of Forestry, fostering environmental education across the state.

Frenzel's passion for community involvement is further demonstrated by her experience as a children's ministry coordinator and her long history of volunteer work, including with the USDA Forest Service, Family Promise, and the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center.

Assistant Town Manager Greg Beam said in a statement, "We are incredibly fortunate to welcome Cindy to the Mount Jackson team. Her extensive background in environmental education, her proven ability to build strong community partnerships, and her passion for creating engaging programs make her the ideal person to lead our Parks and Recreation initiatives. We are confident that her experience will be instrumental in enhancing our public spaces and recreational opportunities for our community."

Frenzel holds a Bachelor's in Forestry and Wildlife - Resource Management with a minor in Biology from Virginia Tech, and a Certificate in Fine Arts - Pottery from Lord Fairfax Community College.

Holt appointed Richlands town manager



Ron Holt was appointed Richlands town manager on May 1. Holt, Richlands police chief since 2022, previously worked with the Tazewell County Sheriff's Office and served on the Bluefield Town Council

- Holt -



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for six years, including a stint as vice mayor. He also previously served as interim town manager of Richlands.

Holt's appointment follows former Town Manager Jason May's departure in January 2025.

Throughout his law enforcement career, Holt has filled various roles including patrol, community relations, D.A.R.E., criminal investigations, Virginia State Police Drug Task Force agent, and task force officer for the United States Marshals Service Fugitive Task Force. He plans to stay on as police chief for a few years until his retirement from the department. Most of his day-to-day police duties will be handed over to Captain Adam Crouse.

Holt has a Bachelor's in Organizational Leadership from Bluefield State University and a Master's in Public Administration from Liberty University.

Thomas hired as public information officer for Prince George County



Hannah Thomas has been named public information officer (PIO) for the County of Prince George. She assumed the role on May 1.

As PIO, Thomas will be the county's spokesperson. Her duties will include handling social media and communicating information about the county with members of the public. County Administrator Jeffrey Stoke said in a statement, "We're pleased to welcome Hannah Thomas to Prince George County and look forward to using her talent and experience to keep the citizens of our community informed."

Thomas has a Bachelor's in Journalism from the University of Missouri. In her career as a journalist, Thomas compiled an extensive background in local, state, national, and international news and politics, working throughout Europe, Missouri, Indiana, Georgia, and Ohio.

Roanoke appoints Papa as director of planning, building, and development

The City of Roanoke has named **Jillian Papa** as director of planning, building, and development. With nearly 20 years of urban planning experience and over a decade of service in Roanoke, Papa brings a proven track record of leadership and community engagement to her new position.



- Papa -

Papa's career includes key roles such as zoning administrator, planning manager, deputy director, and most recently acting and interim director. She is also a master's-level instructor at Virginia Tech and holds advanced degrees in Historic Preservation and Sociology.

Papa is a Certified Zoning Administrator (CZA), an American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) member, and active in several professional associations including the Virginia chapter of the American Planning Association (APA) and the Virginia Association of Zoning Officials. She is a graduate of the Batten Leadership Program at Hollins University and Leadership Roanoke Valley.

Beyond her professional achievements, Papa is actively engaged in the community, serving on the board of directors for the United Way of the Roanoke Valley and as a member advocate for APA Virginia.

Chupik honored by Local Government Attorneys of Virginia

Elizabeth S. Chupik received the 2025 A. Robert Cherin Award for Outstanding Deputy or Assistant Local Government Attorney during the April conference of the Local Government Attorneys of Virginia, Inc. (LGA). Chupik is a retired associate city attorney for Virginia Beach.



Elizabeth S. Chupik receives the 2025 A. Robert Cherin Award from former colleagues **Rebecca "Becky" D. Kubin**, City of Virginia Beach deputy city attorney, and **Mark D. Stiles**, City of Virginia Beach city attorney, during the Local Government Attorneys of Virginia, Inc.'s 2025 spring conference in Charlottesville.

The Cherin award recognizes a deputy or assistant local government attorney for exemplary public service and unwavering commitment to the highest ethical and professional principles. Chupik served with the highest distinction in the Virginia Beach City Attorney's Office for 18 years. As associate city attorney, she mastered eminent domain law and distinguished herself as a premier practitioner in the practice area, sharing her knowledge and mentoring fellow attorneys. She was also a member of the City Attorney's First Amendment Team, addressing critical issues regarding the interplay between city regulation and the constitutional right to freedom of speech, and she assisted her office's litigation team with planning and zoning-related litigation matters.

From 1993 to 2000, Chupik served as an assistant and deputy commonwealth's attorney for the City of Norfolk and as an adjunct professor at William & Mary Law School, where she taught legal research and writing, ethics, and trial advocacy. Retiring in February 2025, she ultimately served the people of Virginia and her local government as an attorney for almost 30 years. She currently serves as an adjunct professor for William & Mary Law School, teaching a lawyering skills program.

LGA promotes common interests and an exchange of information among its members on legal issues that are particularly relevant to Virginia's counties, cities, and towns. The LGA's member services include conferences, a legal handbook, a monthly newsletter, and more.

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 vtc@vml.org.

New Charlottesville historical marker to recognize the Carver Inn

ON MARCH 22, THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT of Historic Resources and the City of Charlottesville unveiled a state historical marker at the former site of the Carver Inn, which was razed in the 1970s to widen Preston Avenue.



During the era of segregation, the inn was among the few hotels in Central Virginia listed in the Green Book, a national guide to facilities that welcomed African American travelers. In addition to lodging, the Carver Inn offered fine dining, a private social club, and a beauty salon and hosted famous guests including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Thurgood Marshall.

The new marker, located in the 700 block of Preston Avenue, was funded by the city's Historic Resources Committee. Following the unveiling, Preservation Piedmont hosted a viewing of a documentary film featuring the Carver Inn in the Swanson Room at the Central Library. The room honors Gregory Swanson, the first African American to attend the University of Virginia. Swanson resided at the Carver Inn after his successful lawsuit to gain admission to the graduate law program.



James City County joins regional effort to curb recycling contamination

JAMES CITY COUNTY is taking action to improve recycling quality and reduce contamination in curbside carts.

Beginning this spring, James City County will participate in the regional Feet on the Street cart-tagging recycling project, led by askHRgreen.org. This initiative will provide residents with personalized, real-time curbside recycling education and feedback to help ensure only acceptable materials make it into the recycling stream.

James City County is one of several Hampton Roads localities participating in Feet on the Street, which will reach more than 32,000 households across the region, including select recycling routes in Newport News, York County, James City County, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Virginia Beach.

The initiative is part of a broader three-year recycling education effort made possible through a \$1.9 million EPA Recycling Education and Outreach Grant awarded to the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC).

"We have to tackle the confusion around recycling head-on, and we have to do it together," said Katie Cullipher, askHRgreen.org team leader. "Giving residents more access to information and better resources will have a major impact on the quality of recycling programs in James City County and across the region."

The Feet on the Street campaign is made possible with technical support from The Recycling Partnership, a national nonprofit. Trained community-based observers will visit neighborhoods on collection days to review recycling carts and provide direct feedback to residents on how to reduce contamination. This hands-on approach helps ensure that only appropriate materials are

recycled, improving efficiency and reducing waste.

"We're excited to bring this initiative to James City County residents," said Bob Dittman, solid waste director of James City County. "Real-time feedback has proven effective in communities nationwide, and we're confident this effort will make a real difference in improving recycling habits here at home."

In addition to Feet on the Street, James City County residents can also take advantage of the newly launched Waste Wizard online tool, which provides easy access to local recycling and waste disposal information in Hampton Roads. Over the coming months, residents will see additional resources – including educational cart stickers, enhanced convenience center signage, and targeted communications – all designed to simplify recycling.

Residents can contribute to this effort by staying informed and recycling the right way. To learn more about proper recycling practices, visit askHRgreen.org/recycle.



New study presents options to expand the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail in Loudoun County

THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA Regional Commission (NVRC) has announced the completion of the 2024 Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Western Loudoun County Feasibility Study. The project identifies options to fill a significant gap in the trail in Loudoun County from the Town of Leesburg westward. This concludes a year-long planning process, developed with stakeholder and public input, envisioning completion and potential future access to the trail.

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (PHNST), administered by the National Park Service, is made up of a diverse network of locally managed trails and routes in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, spanning a corridor between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Allegheny Highlands in Pennsylvania. There are several trail gaps in the network that need to be completed, including the western Loudoun gap.

Design and planning firm Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects was selected to conduct the study in January 2024. In winter and spring 2024, Lardner/Klein developed a methodology to complete an analysis of potential trail routes and conducted initial information meetings with relevant PHNST stakeholders. Over the summer and fall of 2024, Lardner/Klein completed its analysis to identify the feasibility of different route options for completing the network gap.

The study process included several opportunities for community input, including two public meetings in May and October 2024, two online questionnaires, a StoryMap, and individual meetings with specific partners, such as the Potomac Heritage Trail Association, Bike Loudoun, and the VDOT State Trails Office. Community input was an essential aspect of this study, and the results aimed to fully capture stakeholders' questions and feedback.

The feasibility of developing the trail along the identified sections was evaluated in detail. The consultant identified public and private lands, river access points, and existing roads that could be linked together to form a new section of the trail. All concepts expand public access and provide new recreational opportunities, taking into account trail safety along busy roads, natural and cultural resource protection, and future maintenance and sustainability.

Overall, the results of the study present the feasibility of potential routes within the PHNST corridor, including considerations for routes that have limited feasibility or are unfeasible. These findings primarily represent a starting point for future planning efforts for trail designation. NVRC will continue to coordinate with Loudoun County and the National Park Service to conduct outreach and engagement around the study's findings and evaluate next steps for determining a connected trail route for the region. Completion of new trail sections will depend on funding, land acquisition, and future design and engineering studies.



Petersburg mayor joins national effort to end childhood hunger

PETERSBURG MAYOR SAM PARHAM has joined the Mayors Alliance to End Childhood Hunger, a nonpartisan coalition of over 400 mayors from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., united in the

fight against food insecurity affecting more than 13 million children across the U.S.

Mayor Parham's work includes partnering with the Petersburg Public School System to improve meal quality and ensure students enjoy nutritious options.

"No child in Petersburg should go hungry," said

Parham in a statement. "By joining this coalition and collaborating with local groups like FeedMore, we can guarantee every child has access to the food they need to thrive."

The Mayors Alliance, in partnership with Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign, leverages the leadership of mayors to enact effective solutions to childhood hunger. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local and state leaders implemented successful programs to combat food insecurity. The alliance aims to build on those efforts through innovative policies, partnerships, and enhanced awareness of the ties between hunger, poverty, and systemic inequities.

For more information, visit <https://mayorshungeralliance.org>.



Dumfries celebrates wins and work at AAMA conference

IN A RECENT BLOG POST, Town of Dumfries Mayor Derrick Wood described his experience with fellow mayors from across the country at this year's African American Mayors Association (AAMA) Annual Conference. Held under the theme "The Power of Now," Wood said the conference "challenged us not to wait, but to act. To lead from where we stand. To use our platforms and relationships to create real, lasting change in our communities – right now. And that's exactly what the Town of Dumfries is doing."

At the conference, Dumfries was awarded a \$75,000 grant for its Boys & Girls Club, funding that will be used to renovate the club's kitchen and launch a new program designed to teach young people how to grow their own food and cook healthy meals. Wood called the grant "a powerful step toward health equity, sustainability, and youth empowerment."



In addition to the grant, two Dumfries youths received \$5,000 scholarships as part of AAMA's national youth leadership initiative.

During the conference, Wood served as co-chair of the AAMA Transportation, Infrastructure, and Resiliency Committee. This group crafted and introduced a federal policy resolution that calls on Congress and the White House to make meaningful investments in aging infrastructure, stormwater systems, and flood mitigation projects, especially in communities historically left behind.

But Wood stressed that real progress doesn't happen alone. He encouraged residents to get involved by joining a local board or commission, attending a town council meeting, and bringing solutions to the table.

"[In Dumfries] we're building a government that is responsive, transparent, and focused on results, but we can't do it without you," Wood enthusiastically noted. "'The Power of Now' isn't just a conference theme – it's a call to action for all of us. We've got momentum. We've got vision. And with your voice, we've got even more power. Let's get to work."

The 2025 AAMA Annual Conference featured sessions on infrastructure, economic mobility, housing, climate resilience, and how local leaders can continue building towns that thrive, not just survive. Wood reported coming away from the event with "new partnerships, actionable strategies, and a renewed commitment to keep pushing for community advancement."

"In rooms filled with mayors of cities big and small, what united us was this: We all want our communities to grow stronger, safer, and more sustainable," Wood said. "That takes vision, resources, and collaboration. And at AAMA, we found all three."

Williamsburg breaks ground for new WATA transfer center

ON APRIL 3, the Williamsburg Area Transit Authority (WATA) held its first-ever groundbreaking ceremony to commemorate the start of construction on its new transfer center in the northern part of Williamsburg.

"Our customers will soon have a transfer center worthy of their dignity," said Matthew Scalia, executive director of WATA. "So many people and groups have supported and worked to make this project a reality because they share WATA's vision of connecting people, growing our economy, and improving our quality of life."

Currently, four of WATA's routes transfer in the space between the Walmart Supercenter and Lowe's Home Improvement on E. Rochambeau Drive. The new 3,800-square-foot facility will provide amenities needed for both riders and bus operators, including indoor and outdoor waiting areas, a customer service center, bus information display screens, public restrooms, and six bus bays, allowing for future service expansion.

The anticipated total project cost is about \$11 million. Construction is expected to be completed by August 2026. Project partners include Wendell Companies, Skanska, and Syncon, LLC.

Speakers at the ceremony included Scalia; Brian Fuller, deputy county administrator of York County and a member of the WATA

Board of Directors; Sheila Noll, chairman of the York County Board of Supervisors; and Tiffany Robinson, director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

"Our local jurisdictions and WATA share a common interest. That is to provide reliable, dependable, public transportation that is both convenient and affordable for our citizens and our visitors alike," Noll said. "We hope that this project is just one more step in the right direction."

When complete, the transfer center will complement other significant improvements to rider experience WATA has made in the past two years, including real-time bus locating on the Transit app, increased frequency on multiple routes, and mobile ticketing.



Lynchburg cuts the ribbon on Kiwanis Centennial Riverfront Playground

THE CITY OF LYNCHBURG, in partnership with the Kiwanis Club of Lynchburg, hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony on May 2 to celebrate the grand opening of the Kiwanis Centennial Riverfront Playground at Riverfront Park. This new addition is the first fully accessible playground in the city, designed to provide inclusive play opportunities for children of all abilities.



Attendees heard remarks from Mayor Larry Taylor, City Manager Wynter C. Benda, and representatives from the Kiwanis Club.

This milestone represents a significant step forward in creating a community-centered space in

downtown Lynchburg. In addition to the playground, the city also opened the adjacent public restroom facility as a part of the development of Riverfront Park, a key component of the Downtown and Riverfront Master Plan 2000 and Downtown 2040 plans.

The goal of this project is to complete the necessary infrastructure for a park that serves as a premier destination for performers, visitors, and residents alike. The park will be better positioned with amenities to host special events, festivals, movies, and live performances.

The proposed site plan includes a laydown area and a covered loading dock – essential features for touring acts. The city hopes to attract 10-20 performances annually. To enhance the pedestrian experience, a new sidewalk will be installed along Jefferson Street and the Riverwalk Trail will reopen along the northern edge of the park.

Albemarle County awarded GO Virginia grant for Rivanna Futures site

ALBEMARLE COUNTY HAS BEEN awarded a \$613,570 grant through the GO Virginia Region 9 Council to support the continued development of the Rivanna Futures site. The funding will support the design work necessary to continue preparing the site for future construction and investment.

The grant will fund design for road access, site plans, grading, stormwater infrastructure, and utility extensions associated with the initial phase of development, accessing the first 50 acres. This work will help accelerate the deployment of any future funding the county may receive from state and federal sources.

“This award is a strong affirmation of our vision for Rivanna Futures and the role it can play in strengthening our local and regional economy,” said Board of Supervisors Chair Jim Andrews. “We are grateful for the partnership with the state and look

forward to the momentum this creates in growing the national security sector in Albemarle County.”

Rivanna Futures is envisioned as a hub for intelligence and national security agencies, academic institutions, and private-sector partners, leveraging its proximity to Rivanna Station. Since acquiring the property in December 2023, Albemarle County has taken steps to prepare a 172-acre portion of the site for future development, including environmental assessment, zoning, and infrastructure planning. These efforts have raised the site’s readiness ranking from Tier 1 to Tier 3 under the Virginia Economic Development Partnership’s (VEDP) five-tier site characterization system. A higher tier indicates a shorter development timeline for a given site.

“This funding moves us one step closer to making Rivanna

Futures a location of choice for companies developing services and technologies that advance national security interests,” said Economic Development Director Emily Kilroy. “We’re pleased that Albemarle County’s collaborative approach and alignment with Virginia’s targeted sectors positioned us to receive this support.”

The county will continue to pursue state and federal support to position Rivanna Futures as a leading site for innovation and growth.



Radford Heritage Foundation receives grant for Glencoe Mansion

GLENCOE MANSION CAN look forward to a makeover in celebration of its 150-year anniversary.

In response to a preservation grant application, the Radford Heritage Foundation (which operates Glencoe) and the City of Radford will receive \$225,000 in federal funding from the National Park Service's Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grants Program.

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources recommended funding for three projects, including Glencoe Mansion, the Rex Theater in Galax, and the Sidna Allen House in Carroll County. The department received 31 pre-applications and narrowed that list to 16 full applications. All three historic landmark finalists will receive \$225,000 as part of the special funding for Southwest Virginia.

The Glencoe project will address the prevention of water infiltration, and the repair of damage to exterior trim and interior plasterwork. According to Museum Director Scott Gardner, "These much-needed repairs will place the building in good standing for the future and will lay the groundwork for the installation of period details such as wallcoverings and appropriate finishes."

The plan for the museum also aims to reconfigure the existing rear entry into the universal entrance for all visitors to the museum,

enhancing overall accessibility to welcome a wider range of people. It will also allow for the redevelopment of the restrooms at the site to meet current accessibility standards.

Glencoe Mansion was the home of General Gabriel C. Wharton and his wife, Nannie Radford Wharton, and a century of descendants. Wharton descendant Sue Heth Bell recently donated an incredible collection of 1,233 historic family documents to Virginia Tech's Special Collections. The documents include the letters featured in the 2022 publication *The Whartons' War: The Civil War Correspondence of General Gabriel C. Wharton and Anne Radford Wharton, 1863-1865*, which is available for purchase at Glencoe.



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.



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Towns of Charlotte County hold semiannual leadership meeting

IN 2023, CHARLOTTE Court House Town Councilmember Terry Ramsey had an idea: gather the mayors and officials from Charlotte County's four towns twice a year to discuss shared challenges and successes.

Word of the concept spread so quickly that all surrounding towns were included. The first meeting took place in October 2023 at the Commonwealth Regional Council (CRC) conference room in Keysville. It had 12 attendees from Charlotte Court House, Keysville, Drakes Branch, Phenix, Blackstone, and Charlotte County.

There have been four meetings thus far in October and April of each year. Representatives from the towns of Kenbridge, Crewe, South Hill, Victoria, and Burkeville have also attended. At the most recent gathering on April 24, the group discussed increasing the meeting frequency to a quarterly basis.

"Each meeting has gone especially well and has been beneficial to all towns," said Sara Crawford, Charlotte Court House town manager. "The opportunity to come together on a regular basis has been 100% worth the time."

Each meeting lasts roughly 90 minutes under the guidance of a rotating chair, where each town takes a turn. Ramsey serves as the secretary. A typical agenda includes the selection of the rotating chair, approval of the agenda and previous meeting minutes, sharing of current challenges and successes, and any other business. Past topics of discussion have included annual audits, the Lead and Copper Rule, lack of written policies and procedures, water cut-off policy, use of social media, alternatives to property taxes (such as meals and cigarette), accounting software, and business licenses. The organization also shares any recent training or upcoming conferences.

Fairfax hosts fifth annual Asian Festival on Main

THE OLD TOWN FAIRFAX Business Association (OTFBA) on May 18 hosted the fifth annual Asian Festival on Main in historic Old Town Fairfax. This free, family-friendly event has grown into the largest Asian cultural celebration in Virginia, drawing tens of thousands of visitors from across the DMV region.

This year's festival transformed Old Town Fairfax into a vibrant, multi-sensory celebration of Asian heritage, featuring a packed lineup of live entertainment and cultural performances, 60+ Asian food vendors and food trucks, 60+ local and artisanal vendors, kids' activities, an exciting cosplay contest, a lively karaoke stage, and the fan-favorite Hollywood Casino Beer Garden.

The Choy Wun Lion Dance Troupe returned to headline this year's performances, captivating the crowd with their iconic lion

and dragon dances in celebration of the Lunar Year of the Snake. ESKM, a Korean-American R&B sensation based in Seoul, took the stage as a featured performer. Originally from the DC Metro Area and a graduate of Berklee College of Music, ESKM has made a name for himself globally with bilingual tracks that blend emotional storytelling with energetic K-Pop beats.

Rising star Toshi, known for his boundary-breaking creativity and fearless stage presence, also performed at the festival. Born in Brooklyn and of Japanese-Chinese heritage, Toshi also served as a judge for the cosplay contest, further connecting with fans and fellow creatives.

Elaine Espinola once again served as event host/emcee. Espinola is a seasoned multimedia broadcast professional, co-host of Great Day Washington on WUSA9, and former Mrs. DC America 2015. She is a passionate advocate for women's empowerment through entrepreneurship and serves on the advisory board of Touching Heart, a nonprofit that teaches children the joy of giving.

Proceeds benefited the Choy Wun Lion Dance Troupe and AALEAD, a nonprofit group that supports low-income and underserved Asian American & Pacific Islander youth with educational empowerment, identity development, and leadership opportunities through after school, summer, and mentoring programs. For more information, visit asianfestivalonmain.com.



Suffolk Tourism receives two Virgo Travel & Tourism awards

EACH YEAR, THE VIRGINIA Association of Destination Marketing Organizations (VADMO) honors the best and brightest in Virginia's tourism industry. Whether it is an innovative marketing campaign, a wildly successful destination event, or a top-notch tourism professional, the Virgo Awards showcase the immense talent and dedication of destination marketing organizations across the Commonwealth. Industry peers located outside of Virginia served as judges for the awards and the submissions were evaluated on the quality of the application, economic efficiency, budget, purpose and objective of the initiative/event and the economic or community impact. Projects, campaigns, and efforts completed between January and December of 2024 were eligible and the winners were announced during a ceremony at the 2025 VADMO Tourism Symposium on April 10 in Harrisonburg.

Suffolk Tourism received two awards in the "Best in Niche Tourism" category, which celebrates "creative and successful tourism initiatives that showcase a destination's niche tourism market."

Suffolk Tourism's "Choose Your Own Adventure" marketing campaign was awarded the Virgo for in the Eco-Tourism/Outdoor Adventure subcategory. The yearlong marketing initiative featured an outdoor adventure video, multiple print ads across local and statewide publications, advertorial in Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine's Roadtrip Section, social media promotions, etc.

Suffolk Tourism also received the Virgo in the Arts/Music/Culture/Heritage subcategory for its 2024 "Hometown Holiday Weekend in Downtown Suffolk." By collaborating with local businesses, city departments, and community groups, the curated "Hometown Holiday Weekend" evolved into a diverse lineup of festive events and activities that highlighted the spirit of the season while supporting local engagement and economic vitality. This initiative served as an example of creative, impactful event

coordination and the power of partnership to accentuate the goals of a shared mission.

Learn more about Suffolk Tourism at [VisitSuffolkVa.com](https://www.visitSuffolkVa.com).

About VADMO and the Virgo Travel & Tourism Awards

VADMO is a membership-based association of independent destination management organizations and supporting businesses who share political and community support with the primary mission of promoting their areas as meeting and tourism destinations. VADMO strengthens and solidifies Virginia's tourism industry and its economic impact through professional development advocacy and networking, contributing to individual member destination success.

Established in 2009, the Virgo Travel & Tourism Awards recognize and celebrate the success of destination marketing organizations along with their respective staff members and volunteers. Virgo is a Latin derivative of the state name "Virginia" and related to Virtus, the Roman goddess found on the Virginia state flag.



Mount Jackson celebrates Buck Ryan Day

THREE-TIME NATIONAL fiddle champion Buck Ryan, a native of the Town of Mount Jackson, would have turned 100 years old in May. His hometown marked the occasion with Buck Ryan Day, a celebration of music, history, and community.

Arnold W. "Buck" Ryan began his professional music career in 1940 at the age of 14. A gifted bluegrass fiddler, Ryan took top honors at the National Hillbilly Music Center in Warrenton and went on to win several contests throughout the years. In 1956, he joined Jimmy Dean's Texas Wildcats and became one of very few fiddlers who recorded for a major label at that time. After a storied career with many groups, he retired in 1981 and passed away at age 56 in January 1982.

Buck Ryan Day was held on Saturday, May 3 on King Street in downtown Mount Jackson. Attendees enjoyed live music and dancing, an antique car show, displays of Buck Ryan memorabilia, local goods, fresh food, and more. The town also commemorated the 200th anniversary of its beloved Union Church with a historic bell ringing, remarks from Mayor Donnie Pifer, and a discussion of the history of Union Church and Revolutionary War soldier Daniel Gray.

Middle schoolers wanted for third annual Water Tower Showdown

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS across the Bedford, Lynchburg, Roanoke, and Salem areas are invited to dive into design and innovation at the third annual Water Tower Showdown, jointly hosted by the Virginia Section of the American Water Works Association (VA AWWA), the Bedford Regional Water Authority, Lynchburg Water Resources, Salem Water Department, and the Western Virginia Water Authority.

Scheduled for Saturday, July 26, this fun and educational competition challenges students in grades 6–8 to design and build a model water tower that is not only structurally sound and efficient, but also creative and visually striking. Participants will compete for cash prizes — and bragging rights — by demonstrating their engineering skills and imagination.

Students are encouraged to think outside the box. Towers can be constructed from any materials, and bonus points will be awarded for creativity and innovation. Whether it's repurposing an old broom handle or inventing a tower shape no one has seen

before, unique designs are highly encouraged.

“The Water Tower Showdown, now in its third year, is a great example of utilities breaking down barriers with the public and trying to make education fun and engaging,” said Mark Titcomb, who has served as a judge for the event with VA AWWA for multiple years. “Western VA Water Authority, Bedford Regional Water Authority, Lynchburg Water Resources, and Salem Water Department are working together to challenge local schools with a STEM competition while pulling back the curtain on the water infrastructure that surrounds and supports their communities.”

Participation is free and open to middle school students from public, private, or homeschool settings, either individually or in teams of up to four students.

Registration is open until Thursday, July 3. Space is limited to the first 30 individuals or teams, with a maximum of five teams per school. Information and registration are available at <https://vaawwa.org/events/watertowershowdown2025>.

Civil War soldiers' remains formally buried in Fredericksburg

THE CITY OF FREDERICKSBURG worked with the National Park Service to formally bury U.S. Civil War soldiers' remains discovered in 2015 during excavation along Sophia Street. This burial took place on May 2, following several years of archaeology and research on how to move forward with this historic event.

In May 2017, the City of Fredericksburg requested the remains be buried in the Fredericksburg National Cemetery to rest alongside other fallen American Civil War soldiers who died locally. Since the cemetery has been formally closed to burials since 1945, multiple archaeological investigations were required

to ensure a clear plot for burial. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these investigations and delayed the process of finding an appropriate location until late fall 2023. Managed by the National Park Service, the Fredericksburg National Cemetery was established in 1866 and holds the remains of 15,243 soldiers, sailors, and Marines, most of whom died during the Civil War. At least 85% of the graves are unidentified, resulting in over 12,770 unknowns.

Archaeologists determined that the remains belong to U.S. soldiers using DNA and radiocarbon dating, the context in which

they were found, and associated artifacts, including uniform buttons. The Fourteenth Connecticut Regiment, among others, used the location where they were found as a divisional hospital for their wounded soldiers. The found soldiers likely died from wounds inflicted during the first Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862.

The National Cemetery Administration has provided the headstone, which will match others in the cemetery and include the epitaph “Unknown.”

Learn more about the discovery and burial on the National Park Service website at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/discovery-of-union-hospital-burial-in-fredericksburg.htm>.



Virginia Innovation Accelerator in Buena Vista nears construction milestone

THE VIRGINIA INNOVATION ACCELERATOR (VIA), a transformative project revitalizing the historic Mundet-Hermetite manufacturing plant in Buena Vista, is nearing the completion of a significant phase of construction. With updates to utilities, interior renovations to create flexible retail and manufacturing spaces, a community commercial kitchen, and the addition of modern infrastructure to support small business operations, the project is on track to become a hub of innovation, business acceleration, and economic revitalization.

With this milestone, VIA is poised to launch JUNCTION 245 Tasting Room, Café & Market — a cooperative marketplace designed to support entrepreneurs and boost economic development in the region.

This ambitious project, spearheaded by The Advancement Foundation with the support and partnership of the City of Buena Vista and state and federal funders, is converting the historic industrial site into a thriving hub of entrepreneurship, innovation, manufacturing, and community engagement. The completion

of this phase will include not only retail-ready spaces and a commercial kitchen, but also the Buena Vista Visitors Center and collaborative co-working areas for mentorship, business operations support, and business acceleration programs — all aimed at boosting economic activity and providing opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

Construction is anticipated to be complete by late June, with a grand opening and ribbon-cutting celebration to follow when new merchants have set up.

“This is more than just a retail opportunity,” said Nickie Hawkins of The Advancement Foundation. “JUNCTION 245 is an immersive accelerator experience designed to help local entrepreneurs scale up their business, refine their brand, and connect with a growing customer base in a supportive, collaborative environment.”

Entrepreneurs and businesses who apply and are selected to join JUNCTION 245 will enjoy significant benefits. They will have access to affordable, customizable retail, manufacturing, and packaging spaces designed to meet their unique needs. In addition, they will receive valuable mentorship from industry experts to help refine their branding, packaging, marketing, and distribution strategies. Participants will also have the option to utilize a fully equipped commercial kitchen and production facilities to support food production and preparation.

For more information visit the website <https://acceleratev-virginia.com/2025/03/12/explore-junction-245>.



Martinsville Electric Department honored with “Certificate of Excellence in Reliability”

THE CITY OF MARTINSVILLE was recently honored with the Certificate of Excellence in Reliability from the American Public Power Association (APPA). This certificate recognizes APPA member communities that placed in the top 25th percentile of reliability nationwide in 2024, as measured against the U.S. Energy Information Administration’s (EIA) data. APPA helps public power systems track outage and restoration data through its eReliability Tracker service and compares the data to national statistics tracked by the EIA.

The City of Martinsville expressed gratitude for the dedication and commitment of its Electric Department for serving the community and keeping the city running. The department’s ongoing focus on proactive maintenance, quick response times during outages, and dedication to monitoring and restoring service are all integral to achieving this level of reliability.





VML ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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OCT. 12-14, 2025



Roanoke

Experience the metro-mountain charm of the City of Roanoke where hundreds of local government officials, speakers and member organization representatives will gather this fall for the 2025 VML Annual Conference.

Scan for Conference details and to register.



These kids are all write!

BASED ON THIS YEAR'S ENTRIES FOR the annual VML "If I Were Mayor" essay contest, the future of leadership in Virginia's local governments looks bright.

Seventh and eighth graders from across the Commonwealth were prompted to identify an issue in their locality, talk to others about possible solutions, and then present a solution to best address the issue. Students submitted a wide range of thoughtful (and thought-provoking) responses, with topics including food insecurity, citizen safety, quality of health care, and traffic abatement. Above all, these entries displayed remarkable compassion and hometown pride – attributes that may very well someday guide these spirited youths into prominent leadership roles.

"Virginia is in good hands with these young people waiting in the wings to become tomorrow's local government leaders," said Michelle Gowdy, VML executive director. "My heartfelt congratulations to all the winners and thanks to all the students and their teachers who participated this year!"

Steve Trivett, VML president and mayor of the Town of Ashland, commended statewide winner Jelena Ly for her essay addressing community access to healthy, affordable food: "She went beyond describing the challenge that required multiple actions; she also took the wise road of tracking and measuring the success of her action items with an eye on all the neighborhoods. She displayed wisdom using her heart and her head, compassion for meeting emergency needs, and the practicality of empowering people to take ownership and personally choose healthier diets. Congratulations, Jelena, and to all this year's winners!"





Statewide Winner

Jelena Ly

Edward W. Wyatt Middle School – City of Emporia

Teacher: Sutania McBean



IF I WERE THE MAYOR of Emporia, I would focus on combating food insecurity in our community. According to Feeding America statistics, Greenville County has a food insecurity rate that is approximately 14 percent, which is higher than the Virginia average. With our grocery options becoming limited in recent years, many residents must travel significant distances to access affordable, nutritious food.

The problem is particularly severe for elderly residents and those without reliable transportation. The economic challenges faced by Emporia – which has a poverty rate of around 13 percent – exacerbate this issue, as many families must choose between paying bills and purchasing healthy food.

I spoke with my friend, a former resident of Greenville County, about potential solutions. “We need more than just occasional food drives,” she said. “Emporia’s residents need sustainable access to fresh food year-round, especially for families with children and seniors on fixed incomes.” She also observed that “the community garden that some residents have proposed would be helpful, but it’s not enough to address the scale of the problem.”

After considering my friend’s input and researching successful models in similar-sized rural communities, I would implement a three-part solution. First, I would establish a permanent, year-round farmers’ market in downtown Emporia, providing a reliable venue for local farmers to sell produce directly to residents at affordable prices. Second, I would develop a mobile market program – essentially a grocery store on wheels – to visit underserved neighborhoods on a regular schedule. Finally, I would partner with the Virginia Cooperative Extension to expand community garden spaces and provide education on growing and preparing nutritious foods.

My approach addresses both immediate access needs and builds long-term food resilience in our community. While emergency food assistance through food banks remains important, these sustainable solutions would help reduce dependence on emergency services and empower our residents to maintain healthier diets. As mayor of Emporia, I would measure the success of the project by tracking improvements in food access, community health indicators, and reduced rates of food insecurity across all neighborhoods in our city.





Region 1 Winner

John Sawyer

Gate City Christian School – Town of Gate City
Teacher: Pamela Vanover



GATE CITY HAS A POPULATION of over 2,000 people, but I notice around town that there is not all that much to do in terms of fun places. There aren't many places (like apartment complexes) where people who can't afford a home can live. Also, there aren't many clothing stores, malls, or buildings with multiple businesses. The ideas I will present can give this town a chance to be a place where you decide to lower your foot on the brakes and check out what there is to offer, rather than lowering your foot on the gas to get to the nearest shortcut to your humble abode.

Whenever my parents drive me through Gate City, I notice many abandoned buildings where there is a chance for new businesses to dwell that could even skyrocket the city's popularity. My idea is to let more people recognize this town as a wonderful place.

A local member of the Gate City community agrees with my idea of getting people to this town. But some of you might ask "how will we do that?" We could allow more spaces for rental homes, scatter a wide variety of restaurants, and let in businesses that regular people would love to see here that could attract people from near or even far away. Another idea is to have many attractions like parks for the children (plus for kids who are in any way disabled), and even a public swimming pool! If we give all kinds of people places to feel welcomed with open arms maybe they will stick around and live here. This place can change within a few years from a population of just over 2,000 into a place with eight or even ten thousand people.

Finally, as a Christian, I would love to see more places where churches could be built, so that we can bring more people to the House of God where they are in a safe place. Overall, my ideas are to bring people to this town to realize that this is a beautiful place to love and experience rather than skipping over it.





Region 3 Winner

Foster Pickett

Lylburn Downing Middle School – City of Lexington
Teacher: Spencer Golladay



HOW MUCH EFFORT does it take you to get to work or to school? How about getting to your home or to a friend's house? How long does it take you to get coffee from Pronto? Well, for a lot of people in Lexington it takes so much more effort than is necessary. Why? Because the roads and sidewalks downtown are so old that they no longer work for modern life. But with a few small adjustments, the sidewalks and roads in downtown Lexington could be so much more navigable. As your mayor, I propose limiting parking to one side of the streets downtown and moving potted plants and signs from the sidewalks to above the buildings and out of the way.

Our roads are too narrow for today's big cars. I ride down Washington Street almost every day, and I see drivers that look stuck at the corner near Sweet Things. When large trucks and SUVs are parked on both sides of the road, it can be difficult for two cars to pass each other. Drivers have only two choices: scratching the car on their left or scratching the car on their right. This problem could be solved very easily. The city should allow parking only on one side of the road.

However, the problem is not only with the roads. The sidewalks are not big enough either. They are not wide enough for two people to walk next to each other. Anyone who walks on Washington Street or Main Street notices that the sidewalks are narrow and blocked by numerous obstacles. We have potted plants, street signs, commercial signs, lamp poles, and stairs in the way. This problem can also be solved easily. The city should move the potted plants where they won't be in the way and hang the signs and lamps above the sidewalk.

The problems with our sidewalks are even worse for people in wheelchairs. There are other problems, too. We could do more for people in wheelchairs, such as curb cuts that help them cross the street from one sidewalk to another. For some people, better sidewalks are the difference between being stuck at home or being able to do what everyone else can.

When asked about limiting parking to only one side of the road, and moving obstacles in sidewalks to above the buildings, a Lexington city resident said, "Changes to our city sidewalks are long overdue! I think a proposal to limit street parking is a great start. Furthermore, opening the sidewalks by moving signs and decorative plants seems a great way to encourage visitors to explore downtown Lexington businesses."

With some community help, these changes would be very easy to implement and would increase the walkability and drivability of Lexington. As mayor of Lexington, I respectfully ask the city council to take action now.





Region 4 Winner

Adrienne Eagle

Cornerstone Christian Academy – Town of Appomattox
Teacher: Kelly Peters



IF I WAS A COMMUNITY LEADER, such as a mayor, I would want to solve the quality and services of health care because we live in a rural area with limited resources and options. The residents of Appomattox have trouble accessing specialized medical care and even sufficient basic health care providers. The limited public transportation options prevent people from traveling to specific health care facilities, including those in larger cities. Some areas of town have limited access to essential infrastructure like broadband internet which can also lead to problems accessing telehealth

and other online health care resources.

People that I asked about our health care services problems feel that we need to find ways to build places such as walk-in clinics or even better doctors' and dentists' offices. They feel that we need to be provided with more and better support to invest in things like mobile clinics, decreasing medication costs, and improving insurance coverage. If we can get those kinds of things then it would be easier to improve the stability of our health care providers and be able to keep better doctors closer to us.

I feel like the community members' solutions sound amazing, and if I were mayor, I would try and figure out how I can make some, or even all, of them come true. I would also open a 24-hour emergency health care facility here. I feel that we need to figure out a way to fix the problems with health care in rural areas such as Appomattox. There is so much that can be done to improve health care in Appomattox that is being overlooked and pushed aside, and nothing is being done about it. The Town of Appomattox needs to find a way to build all of this to provide the care and support that older ladies and gentlemen may need. I also think that in the near future Appomattox should build a hospital so that when there is an emergency the ambulance doesn't have to drive 30 minutes to the nearest hospital.

In conclusion, I would like to improve the town of Appomattox's health care to benefit everyone, but especially those who have a hard time traveling, bad health problems, or emergencies. I hope everyone agrees that we need better health care facilities, health care providers, doctors, and dentists. I believe that everyone should have equal options for good health care, but that you should also always pray to God for healing and health.





Region 5 Winner

Caroline Le

Harper Park Middle School – Town of Leesburg

Teacher: Jean Austin



IF I WAS MAYOR of Leesburg, I would focus on the traffic problem on Route 15. I asked Jean Austin, my civics teacher, why there is so much traffic on Route 15, and she told me that due to the merge of two lanes to one after passing Battlefield Parkway, a clog is formed and makes it harder to travel.

This not only means longer waiting times, but it also hurts local businesses as many people who consider going north don't want to make the slow trek through rush hour traffic. This traffic also hurts local neighborhoods and development because, as Ms. Austin explained, heavy traffic discourages people from buying houses in the area.

To brainstorm some solutions to this problem, I asked a variety of community members what they would do for that specific area of Route 15 (because Route 15 is 791.7 miles long!). Many people suggested simply adding more lanes to the road. Others suggested building bridges over Route 15 to cut down on the number of traffic lights needed. Some suggested not allowing trucks to travel on the route.

After gathering these possible solutions, I started to search for articles and reports to find out what experts thought about the problem. I learned that this Route 15 debate has been a hot topic in our community, and many plans have been written up and revised. This can be seen in a documentation of a Board of Supervisors meeting sent to me by Jeffrey Austin, who works for Shirley Contracting, LLC. The document introduced several plans and highlighted the concerns of many citizens, most of which dealt with safety. A part of the plan was to add more lanes to a majority of the route.

However, I found this idea should be approached with caution. A report written by Norman Marshall of Smart Mobility, Inc. points out that widening the road can lead to backups in portions that are not expanded. He described this as "bottleneck-shifting." However, both reports did agree on the use of traffic calming measures like roundabouts.

After researching, I have come up with a probable solution that is a good mix of many ideas. I think it is important to add more lanes, but overdoing wouldn't be good. So, instead of adding more lanes to the parts south of Lucketts Road, all parts of the road north of Lucketts Road will be expanded to two lanes with medians added for safety. This means that cars will not need to merge into one lane. Roundabouts will also be added periodically at places like Montresor Road, Stumptown Road/Lucketts Road, and Spinks Ferry Road to remind drivers to slow down, yet not stop the flow of traffic. Lastly, traffic calming measures like speed humps should be implemented in the town of Lucketts for pedestrian safety.

This project will affect the whole community. So, for the plan to work, I will need to talk and collaborate with town officials, contracting companies, residents, businesses, and other organizations and departments.





Region 7 Winner

Noelle Harris

Edward W. Wyatt Middle School – City of Emporia
Teacher: Sutania McBean



IF I WERE MAYOR, what would I do to help my community? First, I would have to ensure the safety of the community, especially for children and senior citizens who do not know what to do in unsafe situations and sometimes cannot do anything. This is important because everyone in a community needs safety. Even some adults cannot handle activities alone, and that is perfectly okay. If I were the mayor of this city, I would prioritize keeping everyone in my community safe to the best of my ability.

I questioned some people about their thoughts about our community's safety. Some responded that they felt safe, but others said they had problems they thought needed a solution. One person said that it is unsafe for anyone under 18 to stay out late. Their solution to this problem was a curfew for anyone under 18. This is a good solution because it might help kids not get in trouble or end up in violent or unsafe situations.

Another problem in our city is littering. To some people, this is not a big problem; it is just trash. But this is a problem because some animals get into other people's trash because they do not throw their trash in the trash bin. Also, the trash gets into the streets which is very unsafe because it could cause a car wreck.

My solution to the safety problem is to enact a curfew. Also, police officers should do more night patrols to ensure no minors are out alone late at night. For our litter problem, I would get people who care about the community (including myself) to help clean the city. It will be easier because the city is not very big. However, if people keep littering, I will have police issue penalties whenever they see someone litter. These are my solutions to issues that make our community unsafe, harmful, and an unpleasant environment. This is what I would do if I were mayor.





Region 8 Winner

Ellie Stevens

Poquoson Middle School – City of Poquoson
Teacher: Joyce Alexander



IF I WERE MAYOR, my head would be spinning in all sorts of directions. What should I do to satisfy the citizens of Poquoson? How should I make Poquoson a secure place? Are there any problems that are unknown? I am Ellie Stevens, and I have very strong opinions regarding the problems in the small town of Poquoson. One of the issues that we have in Poquoson is the lack of sufficient sidewalks. This affects many people who may walk to work, school, or even around the neighborhood. Without sidewalks, we're often forced to walk on the road, which can be extremely dangerous for

pedestrians.

I spoke with my neighbor, Mrs. Paulette, who has lived in Poquoson for over 10 years. She informed me that we have to build more sidewalks and fix the ones we currently have. I agree with Mrs. Paulette. Building more sidewalks along Little Florida and Poquoson Ave. would allow the children who bike or walk to school to have safe access for transportation. I brought this up with Mrs. Paulette and she thinks it would make our community a much safer place for pedestrians and possibly even encourage more people to walk instead of driving. She also said that having more crosswalks and pedestrian signals at very busy intersections would make Poquoson a much safer town.

Even though I think that Mrs. Paulette's ideas are quite good, I truly feel that we can do better. Along with filling and constructing sidewalks, we need to put improved lighting along the sidewalks. This would make them easier to use, especially in the morning or at night when it is dark. This will also alert walkers to sticks, rocks, or other things that may be in their way. Also, adding green spaces and benches to the sidewalks would make walking more pleasant and encourage more people to be outdoors. Poquoson is a beautiful city, and I would love to see others enjoying it as much as I do! If we all work together to maintain the beauty of Poquoson, the city will be a pleasant and enjoyable place to live.

In conclusion, improving the safety and walkability of Poquoson isn't just about the infrastructure; it's about gaining a sense of community and encouraging healthy lifestyles. By enforcing these changes, Poquoson can become a model for other small towns, demonstrating that thoughtful planning and community engagement can lead to a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly environment.



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Goodbye to the support cap: A victory in education for Virginia's local governments

WHEN FOLKS CONSIDER public school funding, most thoughts typically center around facility improvements and teacher raises. However, there are a plethora of other unsung heroes whose daily contributions make schools work in Virginia, especially in rural communities. Whether it is the nurse who covers multiple schools or the custodian who doubles as a bus driver in the mornings and afternoons, rural schools are the pride of their communities largely because of the support personnel who work behind the scenes to improve our schools and assist our students.

In Southwest Virginia, like other rural communities, we have become experts at doing more with less. For years, we struggled without the state funding we needed to recruit and retain these critical support heroes. I am proud to say that our collective advocacy has paid off — the 2025 Virginia General Assembly fully removed the support cap, a decision that will directly benefit our schools and communities.

The support cap, a temporary austerity measure implemented during the Great Recession of 2008, was an arbitrary limit placed on state funding for non-teaching support staff. It forced rural and high-poverty school divisions to make impossible choices, providing fewer services for students or placing heavier burdens on local governments. For 16 long years, this outdated policy limited the educational opportunities of our most vulnerable students.

But we never stopped lifting our voices. Rural schools, educational organizations, local leaders, educators, parents, and community members spoke with a unified voice, sharing stories of dedicated staff stretched too thin and the undeniable impact on students. Our message was clear and consistent: the time had come to prioritize student support over outdated austerity measures.

That message was heard. In February, legislators voted overwhelmingly to remove the support cap entirely, with the final budget reflecting nearly \$223 million in funding to restore support personnel to our schools. It was a bipartisan victory, embraced and supported by Republicans and Democrats. Lawmakers recognized the importance of investing in our students' well-being and futures.

This is a transformative moment for Virginia's schools. With the support cap removed, school divisions across the Commonwealth — especially those in rural and high-poverty areas — will finally move closer to having the resources they need to provide essential services. Nurses will be able to focus on student health without being spread too thin. Counselors can offer critical mental health support. Custodians and bus drivers can maintain safe, efficient operations without juggling multiple roles. Our schools can finally function as the safe, supportive environments our students need and deserve.

But this victory is more than just a funding change. It is a testa-

ment to the power of collaborative advocacy, the importance of never giving up, and the value of rural voices in statewide decision-making. Our communities came together, shared our stories, and made our case. In the end, the support cap was removed and students won!

As we look ahead, we must continue to ensure that this investment in support staff translates to tangible improvements for our students. Our work does not end with funding. It is just the beginning of a new chapter in which staff and schools, especially those in rural areas, are recognized and supported for the vital role they play in the lives of our students.

About the author: Keith Perrigan is the president of the VA Rural Schools Coalition and superintendent of Washington County Public Schools.

MARKUS SCHMIDT/VIRGINIA MERCURY



An education in legislation

What I learned interning with the City of Falls Church during the 2025 General Assembly Session



AS A FAIRFAX COUNTY high school student with an interest in politics and law, I contacted the City of Falls Church in November of 2023 to see what internship opportunities were available. I was directed to Ms. Cindy Mester, the city's community relations and legislative affairs director. That's how I came to work with Ms. Mester on behalf of the city during the 2024 and 2025 General Assembly Sessions. It has been an amazing opportunity, and I consider myself very fortunate to have had the experience.

My internship has put me in the perfect place to appreciate how ideas debated as bills in Richmond are transformed by localities across Virginia into real life policies and entities. Among my earliest assignments was to take over the task of legislative tracking, which is about turning legalese and fine print into a plan ... oftentimes before the ink is even dry! Fortunately, it turned out that I have a knack for the work. What follows are some lessons learned as a legislation tracker deep in the trenches of two very busy sessions.

Long, tedious, and worth it!

Every year, legislative staff from localities across Virginia and lobbyists advocating on behalf of localities from organizations like the Virginia Municipal League work to keep up with thousands of bills making their way through the House and Senate. The first lesson any local government lobbyist learns is that Virginia's Dillon Rule means that authority for localities flows from the state. This makes the work of a local government lobbyist essential. Even a single bill can have far reaching consequences – changing how whole departments work or restructuring requirements that have been unchanged for years. As such, local governments must continually advocate their interests to their representatives in Richmond as they negotiate the balance between local authority and state control.

This year, there were 3107 new resolutions and bills across both houses, which led to 15 different versions of the City of Falls Church's



(L-R) Vice Mayor Debbie Hiscott, City Clerk Celeste Heath, Legislative Affairs Director Cindy Mester, Delegate Marcus Simon, Councilmember Laura Downs, Legislative Intern Alex Li.



(L-R) Legislative Affairs Director Cindy Mester, Councilmember Laura Downs, Mayor Letty Hardi, Senator Saddam Salim, Councilmember David F. Snyder, City Clerk Celeste Heath, Vice Mayor Debbie Hiscott, Legislative Intern Alex Li.

In praise of Local Government Day

Of course, the tracking is only one portion of the legislative process for the city. When a locality truly wants to make itself heard, VML's Local Government Day in Richmond is one of the best ways to do it. This event, held near the halfway point of the session, provides an opportunity for legislative staff and local leaders to hear briefings from VML staff on legislation and budget items that could affect localities. The afternoon is spent visiting delegates and senators and attending committee hearings to hopefully eliminate or mitigate the impacts of bad legislation and support good legislation.

I was privileged to attend this year's event, which was held on January 30, as part of the Falls Church delegation that included Ms. Mester, our mayor, vice mayor, clerk, and several council members. It was

only my second time at the event, but I was reminded how Local Government Day always brings into stark relief just how rapidly the legislative session is passing. When we entered the General Assembly Building, the screens on the wall showed legislators voting on bills – some in spans as short as five seconds – before moving on to the next one. The elevators were full of mayors, city managers, and council members from localities across Virginia, making the stairs the faster option in most cases. Our small delegation visited the offices of several representatives and senators, including Senator Salim and Delegate Simon, who represent Falls Church.

Local Government Day at the General Assembly reinforced for me how vital it is for local governments to share knowledge and advocate collectively. My experience also showed me that even as an intern, I could contribute to that process, helping turn legislative updates into real change. It was especially inspiring to see the machinery of governance in motion: concerns voiced, information exchanged, next steps established. Legislators are responsible for the interests of thousands of constituents, yet I felt that there was weight behind their promises in the meetings and the goals they sought to achieve. I saw how being in Richmond on that day meant that even short conversations brought the human aspect to the city's legislative priorities.

Legislative tracking log. Every bill on the tracking log, which was updated weekly, was related to the city's legislative program and was analyzed for its potential impact to the city. Totalling 232 entries and sprawled across nine columns, the log was meticulous and constantly changing as it captured details including (but certainly not limited to) a bill's status, the state code section it affected, and its anticipated impact to the city. It was easy to begin to think of the tracker as a living thing, whose life began when legislators began to pre-file bills and ended when the governor issued his last decisions.

To be clear, the process of compiling bills is long and tedious. But those hours spent hunched over a computer screen make it possible for local governments to effectively articulate and defend their authority. The rewards for this labor become all the more apparent after the bills pass. Tracking the legislation as it changes throughout the session builds awareness and provides local government staff with invaluable time to anticipate what new requirements they will need to meet, sometimes as soon as July 1 of the same year!

As an example, consider SB816/HB2029 from the most recent session. This legislation provides property tax exemptions for elderly and disabled individuals, which means that local governments must revise their tax policy while also providing more flexibility in implementing affordable housing measures. Other examples include bills such as HB2036 and SB1416, which will require the officers in the Falls Church Police Department to learn about new definitions for certain crimes such as reckless driving. These changes take time to implement, and tracking has allowed the city to have a shared playbook since March, so all affected departments are aligned and informed.

On the other hand, tracking potentially beneficial legislation gives the city time to take advantage of any new authority or sources of funding. Some examples from this session include HB2630, which gives localities the authority to create a tree canopy fund, or HB1659, which allows local governments to establish a Local Foundation and Soil Management Fund. When the city is aware of new opportunities like these, it can be more active in encouraging the environmental protection efforts through its budget that these bills are meant to support.

Legislation tracking not only identifies new issues and opportunities, but it can also help prevent surprising developments to bills that the city is expecting to arrive in a particular form. For example, a particular highlight for Falls Church in this legislative session was SB1011/HB2137, which added Falls Church to the list of cities that can maintain an affordable dwelling unit program. Although there weren't any surprises, simply tracking the bill over its lifespan allowed the city to maintain a constant awareness of its status.

Final thoughts

With the 2025 General Assembly Session concluded, and the tracking complete (for now), the culmination of my efforts will be a presentation during a regular city council meeting in which I will identify key takeaways and discuss the new laws and their implications for the city. I will also highlight the most important changes in a report that anyone can access.

My key takeaway from my continued internship is that it has deepened my appreciation for the intersection of local governance and state policy. Local governments must be uniquely responsive to everyday concerns as they implement broader frameworks set by the state. As such, one should never underestimate the impact of staying informed and building bridges between policymakers and the communities they serve. At the local government level, an abstract concept like democracy is demystified and solidified by people contributing their passion and interest to make their community better.

About the author: Alex Li is a high schooler living in Fairfax County who is working with the City of Falls Church on legislative matters. He is passionate about local government and plans to pursue a career in law.

Never stop learning!

Continuing education as part of succession planning can help stop municipal staff “brain drain”

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN an organization’s top performers and most experienced staff move on? How many weeks – or months – can elapse before a new hire is fully onboarded? And, in the meantime, how do the remaining employees address the resulting workload imbalance?

These are all questions municipal government agencies must contemplate as an increasing number of staff at all levels approach retirement. This process of preparing to replace integral talent is known as “succession planning,” and it’s a concept that organizational leaders are wise to embrace. Specifically, succession planning should account for in-house talent; leaders should work with their junior employees to identify skill gaps and determine career development strategies accordingly.

Ultimately, succession planning prepares organizations for the inevitable challenges that accompany employee turnover. The aging baby boomer workforce further underscores the importance of succession planning, as there are currently droves of senior-level employees preparing to retire. The question, then, isn’t a matter of whether

succession planning is appropriate for local governments; rather, it’s: How can these organizations use succession planning to transform internal talent into a qualified pipeline of future top performers?

Prepare junior staff to be tomorrow’s leaders

Hiring outside talent is a notoriously cumbersome and time-consuming task that takes a reactive approach to replacing key employees. Consequently, organizations that rely on this strategy alone to source qualified candidates will invariably struggle to maintain efficient operations and meet internal deadlines.

On the other hand, organizations that leverage succession planning and encourage staff members to upskill can typically save time backfilling senior-level positions by simply promoting existing team members. Succession planning also encourages employees at every level to sharpen their skill sets and develop the proficiencies necessary for career advancement. Continuing education is a vital component



of an effective succession planning program. Not only does continuing education supplement on-the-job learning, but it also expedites professional growth.

Through succession planning that incorporates continuing education programs, local government agencies can provide their employees with a transitional period, during which time entry-level and mid-career professionals may prepare to fill the roles of their soon-to-depart senior team members. At the same time, employers who prioritize succession planning and continuing education programs help foster positive morale among their employees. Workers feel appreciated and more satisfied with their job when organizational leaders demonstrate an interest in their career development.

Continuing education offers across-the-board benefits

With finite resources, budget constraints, and hectic, fully booked schedules, there is no shortage of obstacles plaguing Virginia's municipal leaders and support staff as they strive to serve the public. Remote continuing education can help empower busy employees as they pursue personal growth, explore career advancement opportunities, and prepare to seamlessly transition to senior-level positions. Moreover, municipal leaders who direct their employees to institutions with affordable programs tailored to their individual career goals can build good will with their staff which can lead to greater rates of retention for municipal agencies.

The curricula offered by higher learning institutions often align with skill sets and career tracks favored by municipal employees. In fact, there are myriad undergraduate- and graduate-level tracks suited to public-sector professionals. The courses offered by these programs emphasize practical competencies and leadership skills to help staff

expand their skill sets. As a bonus, the positive feedback loop between the time spent working and the time spent learning provides an incentive for employees to perform their roles more efficiently.

American Public University is your partner in succession planning

American Public University (APU), a VML member organization, offers a vast array of affordable, online continuing education programs relevant to local government leaders and staff. As a pioneer of online education, APU has more than 200 programs taught by scholar-practitioners with extensive backgrounds in their respective fields. With a diverse community of students and educators, APU also provides a wealth of networking opportunities, both online and in person.

Thanks to our partnership with VML, APU is able to offer staff from VML member localities 10% off tuition rates. Moreover, APU's asynchronous courses are designed to accommodate working professionals, like local government employees, as they pursue degrees, certificates, and microcredentials. **This means that online classes at the university have no set login times, and students can complete weekly assignments as their schedules permit.**

Thanks to the flexible, online opportunities offered by institutions like APU, local government employees at every stage of their careers can advance their knowledge, demonstrate initiative, and bridge skill gaps through higher education. Municipal agencies benefit by being able to operate more efficiently—and backfill open roles swiftly through in-house pipelines of qualified talent.

For more information about VML's partnership with American Public University, visit [APUPartners.com/VML](https://apupartners.com/vml).

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Understanding and building local government capacity

AS LOCAL GOVERNMENT leaders we often hear, “We’d like to take on this project or pursue this initiative, but we just don’t have the capacity.” This explanation is often accepted without much scrutiny because for many people “capacity” is simply shorthand for resources—funding, staffing, and equipment. In this view, capacity becomes a static measure: e.g., add two employees working 40 hours a week, and capacity is achieved.

Thinking about capacity simply in terms of resources, however, fails to capture its full measure. Capacity is not just about adding resources; it’s about understanding what’s needed to fulfill every aspect of a project or initiative and then pinpointing what is needed to bring it to a successful conclusion.

The four dimensions of capacity

A dynamic understanding of capacity begins with awareness of its four distinct subtypes:

- Analytical capacity
- Coordination capacity
- Delivery capacity
- Regulatory capacity

Appreciating these interconnected components of capacity leads to a more nuanced understanding of what local governments need to operate, adapt, and succeed in both routine and crisis situations.

To illustrate how the four subtypes of capacity work together, let’s consider how they would be part of some typical local government challenges.

Challenge #1 – Aging water infrastructure

In this scenario, **analytical capacity** involves collecting and interpreting data on pipe materials, water usage patterns, and breakage history to predict where failures are most likely to occur. This allows the public works department to develop a data-driven replacement schedule that prioritizes the most vulnerable sections of the system.

Coordination capacity brings together public works staff, financial officers, community leaders, local businesses, and state agencies to create a comprehensive plan. This coordination ensures that street repairs can be synchronized with pipe replacements, minimiz-



ing disruption and costs, while keeping residents informed through various communication channels.

Executing the plan requires **delivery capacity** – securing bond funding, managing contractors, tracking progress against timelines, and adjusting operations as needed. It also involves having current standard operating procedures that detail exactly how each phase of the project should be implemented.

Finally, **regulatory capacity** involves navigating environmental permits, water quality standards, and procurement regulations. It requires balancing compliance with these rules while maintaining flexibility to move the project forward efficiently.

Challenge #2 – Emergency response to a flash flooding event

Now, let’s see how these same capacities apply during an emergency. In this case we will consider capacity to respond to a sudden flash flooding event that affects multiple neighborhoods.



In this scenario, **analytical capacity** helps emergency managers quickly assess which areas are at highest risk based on topographic data, stormwater system maps, and real-time rainfall information. This analysis guides resource deployment decisions and evacuation priorities.

Coordination capacity activates the emergency operations center, bringing together first responders, public works, social services, and volunteer organizations to create a unified response. It also involves coordinating with neighboring jurisdictions for mutual aid and with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management for additional resources.

Putting the emergency plans into action requires **delivery capacity** to deploy rescue teams, establish evacuation shelters, restore critical infrastructure, and provide clear, timely information to impacted residents. This capacity depends on well-developed emergency plans and regular training exercises.

Finally, **regulatory capacity** allows emergency managers to navigate disaster declaration requirements, procurement rules for emergency purchases, and health and safety regulations, while maintaining enough flexibility to respond to rapidly changing conditions.

Building better capacity in your community

Understanding these four dimensions of capacity allows local governments to move beyond “We don’t have enough resources” to focus on specific improvements that will increase capacity in those areas where it is most needed (see chart below).

Capacity is a marathon, not a sprint!

The next time you hear “We don’t have the capacity,” don’t just assume more resources are the answer. Instead, consider asking what type of capacity is lacking. Is it an analytical challenge? A coordination

issue? A delivery problem? Or regulatory constraints? By identifying the specific capacity gap, you can develop targeted solutions and achieve your goal.

Remember that capacity building is an ongoing process, not a one-time investment. Regular assessment of your government’s capacities across these four dimensions will help ensure your community is prepared for both everyday challenges and unexpected emergencies.

About the author: *Phil Miskovic is the town manager of the Town of Crewe where he previously served as mayor. He is completing a PhD at Virginia Tech in Public Administration. Phil is currently the chair of the Town Section on the VML Board of Directors.*

Capacity Type	Definition	Examples	Ways to Improve
Analytical	Ability to collect, interpret, and use data to inform decisions	GIS mapping of infrastructure; Analysis of service call patterns; Budget forecasting	Invest in data collection tools; Train staff in analysis methods; Develop key performance indicators
Coordination	Ability to bring together diverse stakeholders to address complex problems	Cross-departmental project teams; Active community engagement; Regional collaboration efforts	Establish regular coordination meetings; Develop stakeholder networks; Create clear communication protocols; Build relationships before they’re needed
Delivery	Ability to execute plans and implement programs effectively	Project management systems; Written plans; Standard operating procedures; Performance tracking	Delineate roles and responsibilities; Develop detailed implementation plans; Conduct regular training exercises; Document processes and procedures
Regulatory	Ability to navigate rules while maintaining appropriate flexibility	Permitting processes; Procurement procedures; Emergency declarations	Regularly review local ordinances; Train staff on regulatory requirements; Build in appropriate discretion; Develop streamlined emergency protocols

Self-Assessment Tool: Evaluate your local government’s capacity

For each question below, rate your jurisdiction on a scale of 1 (needs significant improvement) to 5 (strong capability).

Analytical Capacity Assessment

- Do we systematically collect data to inform decisions? (1-5)
- Do staff have the skills and tools to analyze this data effectively? (1-5)
- Are we using appropriate metrics to measure performance? (1-5)
- Do decision-makers receive timely, accurate information? (1-5)

Coordination Capacity Assessment

- Do we have effective cross-departmental teams? (1-5)
- How well do we engage external stakeholders in planning? (1-5)
- Do we have established partnerships with other jurisdictions? (1-5)
- Are our communication systems effective across all levels? (1-5)

Delivery Capacity Assessment

- Do we consistently meet project deadlines and goals? (1-5)
- Do we have written plans, developed through an inclusive planning process? (1-5)
- Are our standard operating procedures written, current, and followed? (1-5)
- Do staff have the necessary training for their responsibilities? (1-5)

Regulatory Capacity Assessment

- How well do staff understand relevant regulations? (1-5)
- Do our processes balance compliance with efficiency? (1-5)
- Can we adapt quickly to regulatory changes? (1-5)
- Do we have appropriate discretion built into our policies? (1-5)

Scoring:

- 16-20 points in a category: Strong capacity
- 11-15 points: Moderate capacity, some improvements needed
- 6-10 points: Limited capacity, significant improvements needed
- 1-5 points: Critical capacity gaps requiring immediate attention

VIRGINIA AMERICAN WATER

By Marybeth Leongini

Your partner for safe, reliable and affordable water and wastewater services

VIRGINIA American Water, a subsidiary of American Water, is the largest water company in the state, providing safe, clean, reliable, and affordable water and wastewater services to approximately 384,000 people in nine counties and two independent cities.

In April of 2024, Virginia American Water acquired the Town of Cape Charles' water and wastewater systems. The drivers behind the sale were the need to improve the quality and quantity of the town's water and to ensure infrastructure upgrades for both systems – all while keeping rates below what the town would likely have to charge if it were to maintain ownership of the systems.



Back (l-r): Adam Charney, Mayor, Town of Cape Charles and Steve Bennett, former vice mayor, Town of Cape Charles. Front (l-r): John Hozey, former town manager, Town of Cape Charles and Charlie Piekanski, vice president of operations, Virginia American Water

A year later, Virginia American Water was proud to share with the town and its residents a recap of what they'd accomplished by having already invested over \$1.9 million in Cape Charles. Here are the highlights of the completed projects:

Key water system improvements:

- Replaced over 800 water meters.
- Installed new SCADA technology that allows our team to monitor plant operations and control them from a centralized location and view what is happening in the distribution system.
- Enhanced water quality by replacing the treatment plant's filtration.
- Improved system resiliency by installing new or replacing existing generators.
- Completed plant upgrades to improve employee safety and security.

Key wastewater system improvements:

- Installed sewer meters to measure sewage flows to collect data.
- Completed smoke testing of sewer laterals to identify leaks or breaks in sewer lines.

- Inspected sewer laterals using CCTV camera technology to identify tree roots or debris that have entered the pipes as well as inflow and infiltration of groundwater and stormwater.
- Completed plant upgrades to improve employee safety, including lighting, HVAC, and ventilation improvements.

Furthermore, the sale of the town's water and wastewater system to Virginia American Water has resulted in much-needed capital investments to upgrade the aging infrastructure. Virginia American Water was able to make necessary improvements to the systems without significantly affecting the rates paid by the town's residents.

Currently, Virginia American Water is in the process of completing a comprehensive planning study of the town's drinking water and wastewater systems. In total, we plan to invest more than \$10 million in Cape Charles' water and wastewater systems by 2032! These investments are part of Virginia American Water's statewide initiative to accelerate replacing aging infrastructure and increase system reliability and resiliency in the communities we serve.

Welcoming our new Cape Charles customers

From the beginning, and throughout the acquisition process, both Virginia American Water and the Town of Cape Charles were committed to prioritizing communication and transparency with residents. In addition to a series of public meetings held to provide a forum for residents to ask questions, regular updates from the town manager on each step in the process were shared through the Cape Charles Gazette, the electronic newsletter published by the town.

Immediately following the closing of the acquisition, Virginia American Water held two open house events for our new customers in Cape Charles. The events provided the opportunity for them to learn more about the benefits of being a Virginia American Water customer and to meet the company's state leadership and members of the local operations team, as well as representatives from the customer service, water quality, and external affairs teams.

A word about rates

Following the acquisition, there were no immediate changes to water and wastewater rates for customers in Cape Charles. Because Virginia American Water is regulated by the State Corporation Commission (SCC), any proposed changes in rates are subject to extensive governmental review and approval. When Virginia American Water received its most recent rate order, which included consolidating rates for all customers – including those in Cape Charles – to statewide single tariff pricing, we were happy to inform most of our new customers that their new rates reflected a reduction. Consolidated rates allow costs associated with infrastructure investments to be allocated statewide among our growing customer base, which helps stabilize future rates and maintain affordability.



Virginia American Water, with support from American Water Charitable Foundation, donates \$10K to the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative (CCRRI).

Partnering with the communities we serve

Our employees take great pride in serving our communities. Many also demonstrate a deep commitment to these communities by volunteering their time, resources, and expertise in neighborhood organizations, charitable activities, local boards, and other benevolent endeavors. Giving back is fundamental to our culture, and our employees do so with joy and enthusiasm. Through the American Water Charitable Foundation, employee contributions to eligible nonprofit organizations are matched up to \$1,000 per year.

The American Water Charitable Foundation (AWCF) also offers grants through its Keep Communities Flowing grant program to support impactful initiatives and organizations across American Water’s footprint. Combined, Virginia American Water and the AWCF contributed over \$302,000 in communities where we operate.

AWCF grant recipients in Cape Charles include Cape Charles Va Main Street Inc., Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative Inc., Cape Charles Historical Society, and Citizens for Central Park.

Virginia American Water is proud to partner with the men and women who volunteer for and support our local fire departments. To show our appreciation, Virginia American Water created the Fire-fighting Support Grant Program to benefit local fire departments. Since launching the grant program in 2013, Virginia American Water has contributed more than \$38,000 to help local volunteer fire departments purchase emergency gear, life-saving equipment, training materials, and essential firefighting apparatus.



Members of the Virginia American Water team present a firefighting grant to Cape Charles Volunteer Fire Company.

Onboarding our new employees

With our Cape Charles acquisition we welcomed eight new employees who were formerly employees of the Town of Cape Charles. Their orientation as Virginia American Water employees began with a celebration of the acquisition with their new colleagues from across the state. The town manager, mayor, vice mayor, and council members also joined the festivities.



The Virginia American Water team gathers in the Town of Cape Charles to welcome eight new colleagues.

The three-day new employee orientation included the typical onboarding paperwork and overview of policies and procedures, but most of the time was spent on the programs that underscore the company's focus on safety. At Virginia American Water, safety is woven throughout the fabric of our organization. Integral to this strategy is our commitment to safety leadership, employee accountability, and caring for our people. Every meeting at American Water begins with a safety message. By successfully working together and caring for each other, we believe we can achieve excellent health and safety performance and zero injuries.

About Virginia American Water

Virginia American Water has a long history in the Commonwealth of Virginia dating back to 1886. We take great pride in what we do and hold ourselves to high standards. We never forget that at the end of every water pipe, there's a family looking to us to provide life's most critical need; that our treatment plants and processes serve to protect against potential disease; and that our communities should be stronger because we are there.

The voluntary sale of water and wastewater assets to an experienced operator, like Virginia American Water, is a proven method for municipalities to gain access to resources for urgent infrastructure investments and greater operational expertise. Even those municipalities that do not face urgent infrastructure challenges have found that voluntarily selling their systems to professional water operators allows them to offload risk, monetize assets, and focus resources on other local priorities. However, the sale of a water or wastewater system is a complex process, and all parties need assurances that they are getting a good deal.

Committed to investing in our systems

Our experts regularly monitor, maintain, and upgrade our facilities so they continue to operate efficiently and meet regulatory standards. This requires investing millions each year in our infrastructure, including treatment plants, tanks, pump stations, pipes, fire hydrants and metering equipment.

In 2024 alone, we invested more than \$42 million in water and wastewater system improvements statewide. These investments include critical water main replacements that help to enhance water service reliability and improve fire flow protection. We've built a new water storage tank at our Hopewell treatment plant. In Alexandria, we've replaced pumps, upgraded electrical components, improved instrumentation, and replaced the backup power generator at our Braddock Road Pump Station. In our Prince William District, two of the chemical clarifiers at our wastewater plant are being replaced this year. We're also making critical upgrades in our Eastern District, which now includes the drinking water and wastewater systems in Cape Charles.

Customer service is key

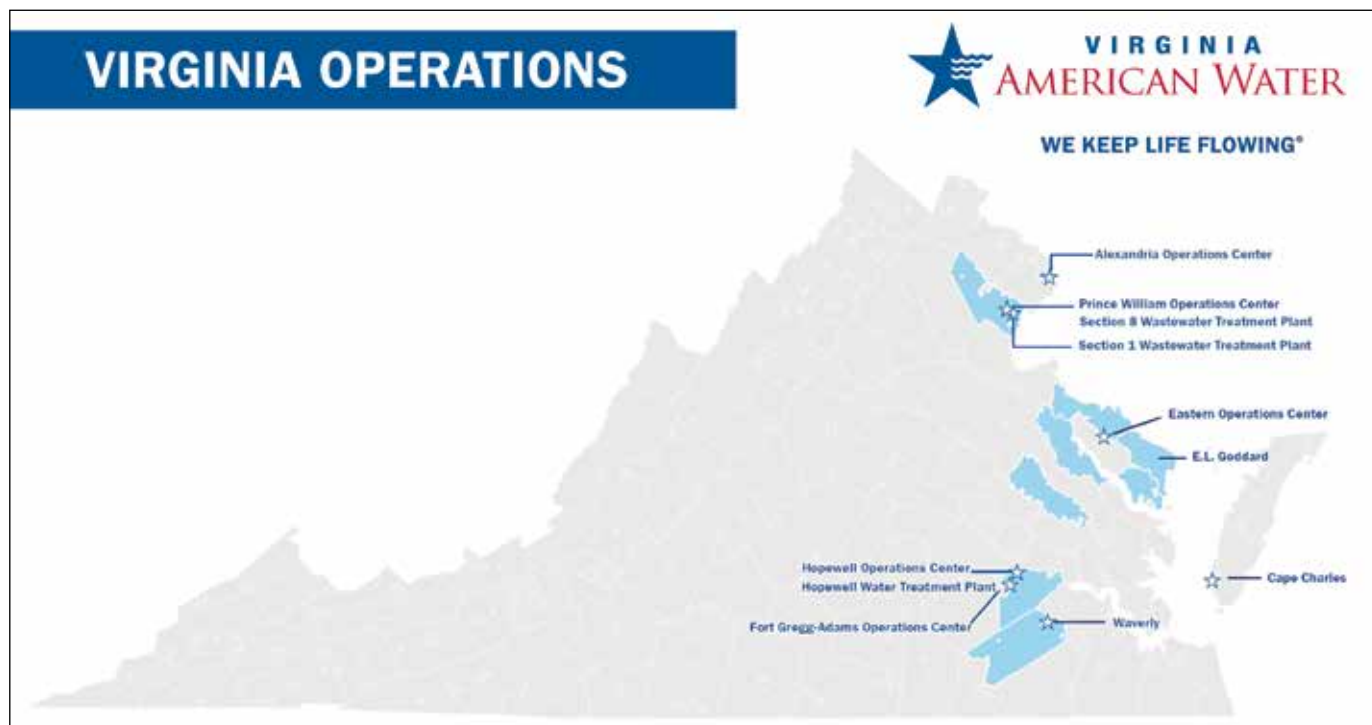
At Virginia American Water, our customers are our number one priority. Throughout the company's footprint, Virginia American Water offers 24/7 customer service for emergencies. Customers also have the benefit of using MyWater, so they can do things like manage their account, track water usage, and activate or deactivate service online, anytime.

Customer assistance programs

Virginia American Water understands that sometimes customers face circumstances that stretch their financial resources, and we are here to assist. Our customer service representatives will work with customers on a plan to pay the balance of their bill over time.

Our H2O Help to Others Program offers grants of up to \$500 per year for customers who qualify (federal low-income guidelines). Grants are supported by corporate donations and customer and employee contributions. Since the program was first launched in 2010, Virginia American Water has assisted hundreds of households with their water bills.

About the author: *Marybeth Leongini is an external affairs manager for Virginia American Water.*



Virginia American Water's Service Areas



2025 VML Innovation Awards CALL FOR ENTRIES

THE VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE'S INNOVATION AWARDS celebrate the programs and individuals that make it possible for our local governments to solve pressing

problems, address emerging needs, and adapt to changing circumstances.

Local governments of all sizes are encouraged to compete for coveted Innovation Awards across seven categories. The **entries will be judged based on the scope and results of the project in relation to the community's size**, thereby putting all localities on a level playing field.

One of the seven category winners will be selected for the prestigious President's Award for Innovation. The winner of the President's Award will be revealed when all the award winners are honored during the Awards Banquet at the VML Annual Conference in Roanoke in October.

Don't miss this premier opportunity to spotlight innovative programs that make your town, city or county a great place for people to call home!

Enter online at www.vml.org/Opportunities/Innovation-Awards

Criteria

Projects and programs are judged on how well they demonstrate the following:

- **Innovative problem solving**
- **Improved quality of life**
- **Excellence in management**
- **Making the most of local resources**
- **Increased citizen participation**
- **Long-term value to the community**
- **Adaptability to other communities**

Award-winning projects typically demonstrate innovative ways of delivering services, addressing community needs, or significantly improving an existing service.

2025 CATEGORIES

AWARD CATEGORIES are based on broad topics. As such, many projects relate to more than one category. The same project cannot be submitted for more than one category. When deciding what category best fits your project, consider the primary goal of the project and which components of the project demonstrate the greatest innovation.

Localities may submit only one entry in each of the seven following categories (i.e., a maximum of seven submissions total per locality):

Community Health

Includes building healthy community environments through active lifestyle programs, nutrition education, and improving access to healthier food choices.

Economic Development

Includes business development and retention; international competitiveness; infrastructure development and investment; planning, land use and zoning; blight; enterprise zones; housing; transportation; workforce development; and historic preservation.

Environmental Quality

Includes natural resources and the authority of local governments to manage the environment, including water resources and quality, solid and hazardous waste management, air quality and the Chesapeake Bay.

Public Safety

Includes police, fire, rescue services, emergency planning and coordinated response, building code enforcement, jails, health, and mental health related to public safety.

Working with Youth

Includes civics education, pre-k-12 education, summer programs, parks and recreation, and literacy programs.

Communications

Includes promotional campaigns, branding campaigns, crisis plans, events, customer service programs; media can include online, video, print, social and other formats.

Risk Management

Includes a proactive process of identifying, assessing and mitigating a locality's risks. This includes but is not limited to fiscal and physical assets, information technology and data, governance and management.

President's Award for Innovation

One winning project from the category winners will be selected for the top prize – the President's Award for Innovation – and will receive this top honor in addition to the award in their category. The President's Award can come from any of the categories.

Deadline

All entries must be received via email by 5 p.m., Monday, Aug. 25, 2025.

Rules for entering

The competition is open to all VML local government members.

All entries must be submitted via email. Localities must download the entry form at www.vml.org/Opportunities/Innovation-Awards and fill in all of the requested information directly on the form. The completed form must then be emailed to mtimbreza@vml.org.

Entries must cover **new projects** or programs completed between Jan. 1, 2024 and June 1, 2025. For **existing projects**, entries must cover major enhancements during the same time period.

Each entry form must be fully completed and must be signed by the local government's chief administrative or elected official.

A local government can only submit one entry in each of the seven categories. The President's Award for Innovation is not a separate category.

Supporting materials totaling no more than 10 pages, including photos, brochures, charts, or other information, can be included in a separate document. This document must be emailed as an attachment.

NEW FOR 2025: The video component is now optional. If you want to include a video, please provide a link to the video in your supporting materials. The video should be posted to a readily accessible website or platform (i.e., YouTube, Vimeo, etc.). The video should be no more than five minutes in duration.

Judging

Entries are screened by VML staff and judged by individuals chosen for their expertise. The judges generally represent a variety of backgrounds.
Please note: The scoring will remain confidential throughout the process.

Winners

Winners in each category will be announced ahead of the Annual Conference happening October 12-14, at the Hotel Roanoke. The awards will be presented during the Awards Banquet on October 12 at which time the winner of the President's Award for Innovation will be revealed. All winning entries will also be featured in VML's magazine *Virginia Town & City*.

Questions?

For more information about completing your entry or other details, contact Manuel Timbreza at mtimbreza@vml.org or call 804-649-8471.



Enter online at
[www.vml.org/
Opportunities/
Innovation-Awards](http://www.vml.org/Opportunities/Innovation-Awards)





Join VML

Set your organization apart in the local government marketplace of product, services, and ideas by joining the VML Community Business Membership (CBM) program. For more information contact Rob Bullington at rbullington@vml.org or check under the "Corporate Engagement" tab at www.vml.org.

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About the VML Community Business Membership (CBM) Program

As a CBM organization you hold a sustaining membership in VML and keep your firm or organization connected with the issues that are important to municipalities around you. Being a CBM places your organization at the forefront in the minds of VML members, ensuring you the visibility, access, and awareness that will help move your organization forward.

Scan QR code to view new 2025 CBM program benefits >





**You've got vision.
We've got resources.
Let's solve this.**

Virginia Housing offers a variety of grant and loan programs to help local governments, nonprofits and developers revitalize neighborhoods and solve workforce housing needs.

To learn more about partnering with us, contact us at Resources@VirginiaHousing.com.

