

A message from VML President Dwayne Tuggle



IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that my year as your president is coming to a close! It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as your president and I want to wish our new president, Mayor Kelly Burk from Leesburg, best wishes for a successful and enjoyable year. I look forward to supporting her as immediate past president.

One of my goals for the past year was to increase the number of opportunities for our members to learn about safety for themselves and for those they serve. We live in difficult political times, and I want everyone to feel secure in choosing to serve. This effort began at the Mayors Institute last year, continued with a special day of programming at the Elected Officials Conference in January, and now includes sessions at this year's Annual Conference. We can all think of examples of bad things happening to political leaders all the way from the national level down to the very local level, so I believe it will be important to carry forward this good work.

Like many of you, I've always tried to find ways to make a difference on a larger scale. For example, my father instilled a love of baseball in me, and I grew up playing the game. But I wanted to do more, so at a young age I began umpiring. Of course, I was happy to make a little (*very* little) pocket money, but being involved in the game beyond the role of participant was important to me. This motivation led me to work as umpire-in-chief for Lynchburg and the Little League World Series. I went on to serve as district administrator and as a member of the Board of Directors for Little League. Just last month I spent three weeks in Williamsport, PA, working in security for the Little League World Series, something I've done for over 30 years! In fact, I am proud in recent years to have served as the assistant director for security for the Little League World Series.

That's a long way from being a kid tossing a ball with his dad!

In that same spirit, when I retired from the Virginia State Police after three decades, I wanted to find a way to continue to serve locally. So, in 2016 I ran for mayor of Amherst and in that role found ways to give back to my community. But just two years later, I decided I wanted to find ways to share and learn from other local leaders around the state, so at the urging of my town manager, I attended my first VML conference, and I've been involved ever since! What I love most about VML is that

we take home great ideas to solve problems and improve our communities based upon what we learn from everyone else.

So, while I am proud to be the mayor of Amherst, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to make an impact beyond my community by serving on VML's Board of Directors. Over the past year, I have had opportunities to engage with state and national leaders, shape the direction of the league, and work with local officials from across the country on the issues that matter most to towns and cities. One of the "perks" of being president is having a board meeting in or close to your own locality, so in June I had the pleasure of hosting my fellow VML board members for a meeting at Sweet Briar College. While I was happy to have that opportunity to show off my town, I was also happy as VML president to visit several member localities across Southwest Virginia this summer. That trip only cemented my (unbiased) opinion that Virginia – all of Virginia – is a great place to be!

Thank you for everything you do for your communities and thank you for your service. Successful local governments are what make the Commonwealth succeed for everyone, and it's good to know that through VML, we have ways to help each other succeed.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Tuggle".

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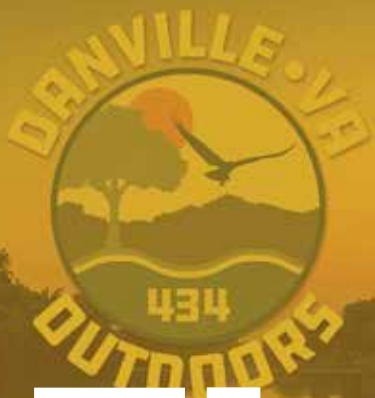
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2025

The Year

IT WAS A challenging year for local governments to keep track of everything happening at the state level. But VML was here to help our members make sense of it all!

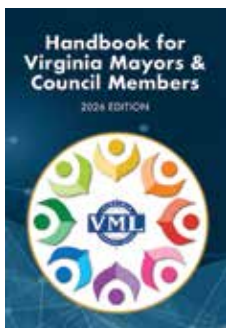
In 2026, after years of divided executive and legislative branches, all three branches were controlled by the same party and the floodgates opened. From collective bargaining to retail cannabis, from a one percent local option sales tax for school construction to making school zones safer with expanded local options for speed cameras, the General Assembly pushed through legislation with far-reaching consequences for local governments.

Of course, not every initiative came to fruition as our new governor decided she would have a say with vetos and amendments. So, while some legislation with deep implications for local governments – like collective bargaining for public employees – did not become reality this year (due to the governor's veto), you can be sure they will be back in some form next year. Other initiatives, like retail cannabis, took a strange turn and found a new life in the budget. Still others, such as pedestrian crossing monitoring systems and a one percent local option sales tax for school construction (a VML priority for several years) are now law.

Over the past year, VML also made sure that our members had plenty of chances to learn together and from each other. The 2025 Annual Conference in October was held at the historic Hotel Roanoke and January kicked off with another offering of our Elected Officials Conference in Richmond with FOIA and COIA training for local elected officials. In February, we welcomed our members back to Richmond for Local Government Legislative Day, which is always a valuable opportunity for our staff to provide updates on legislation and for members to make their delegations aware of the issues important to local governments. In May, we hosted the third annual Small Towns Conference in Chincoteague.

Our members have access to resources like the new 2026 edition of our *Handbook for Mayors and Council Members* and the annually updated guide to the *Virginia Freedom of Information Act*, *Virginia Conflict of Interests Act* and the *Virginia Public Records Act*. VML members also receive regular updates via our newsletter *eNews* and magazine *Virginia Town & City*.

We do all this with one overarching goal in mind: to ensure that our local government members have the information they need to do what's best for their communities.



Lobbying & Advocacy

2026 General Assembly Session



The 2026 Session saw 24 new faces in the 140-member General Assembly, as 22 new delegates and two new senators took their seats during the month of January.

Of course, those weren't the only new faces this year. Former Governor Glenn Youngkin kicked off the legislature's proceedings on Wednesday, January 14, 2026, followed that weekend by the swearing-in of Virginia's new – and first female – governor, Abigail Spanberger.

That handoff was more than ceremonial; it was substantive. The former governor not only handed over the keys to state government, but also the budget that he and his finance team had been working on for months during the fall of 2025. New governors rely heavily upon the members of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations committees to assist with modifying the budget they inherit. And this year was no different, except that the Senate threw Governor Spanberger and the House of Delegates a wicked curveball. Specifically, when the Senate and House rolled out their respective amendments to the introduced budget on Sunday, February 22, the Senate version included a proposal to sunset the sales and use tax exemption for equipment used in data centers.

What was projected to be a minor revenue inconvenience when it was initiated years ago has ballooned into a billion-dollar headache that the Senate decided it wanted to phase out earlier than expected. The bottom-line revenue differences that resulted from these differing visions for the budget ground negotiations to a halt.

But, while progress on the budget moved glacially, it did not stop the members of the General Assembly from attempting to advance numerous legislative initiatives during the session itself. In fact, the number of bills and resolutions introduced by the House and Senate increased by 17 percent during the session from 3,107 in 2025 to 3,646 in 2026. Ultimately, 1,131 bills were signed into law by Governor Spanberger.

Budget

It was a long time coming, but on June 29, with one day to spare, the Commonwealth had a budget for the 2026-28 biennium!

Just a week earlier, the Commonwealth's legislative budget writers had wrapped up their fiscal homework, admittedly a few months late.

2026 Annual Review

Wanting to have her say and final stamp on the budget, the governor requested 14 amendments – nine language-only changes and five that recommended \$63 million in additional funding – that were ultimately approved at the second Reconvened Session of the 2026 Session on Monday. Later that day, Governor Spanberger signed her name to the new biennial budget.

Data centers took center stage

The dispute about the appropriate level of taxation on data centers was clearly the fiscal policy issue that led to the protracted budget delay. Simply put, the Senate budget proposed to sunset the sales and use tax on data center equipment at the end of 2026, instead of 2035. When it was initially enacted, the exemption was projected to cost the general fund several million dollars each year, but the tax incentive for data centers has grown to nearly \$2.0 billion annually.

The House's budget writers and Governor Spanberger acknowledged the foregone revenue but expressed concerns that sunsetting the exemption for a growing industry early could jeopardize the Commonwealth's status as the data center capital of the world.

Ultimately, all parties agreed to a data center consumption tax that is expected to generate no more than \$600 million each year with any excess being returned to the data centers, but it isn't clear that this is the last word. In fact, the final budget directs a joint subcommittee to examine issues around the current tax exemption and other ancillary impacts of data centers as described below. Findings from that group may inform future policy changes.

Budget winners

In total, the approved general fund operating budget sums to \$73.6 billion for the 2026-28 biennium, including \$8.3 billion in new general fund commitments. The approved budget also adds \$2.7 billion in cash for capital projects.

The big budget winners of 2026 are not new to the limelight. More than \$3.0 billion was allocated to health and human resources (HHR) programs, \$1.9 billion to central appropriations, and \$1.4 billion for elementary and secondary education. Those three categories accounted for more than three-quarters of new general fund spending in the 2026-28 biennial budget as depicted below – HHR (36%), central appropriations (23%), and K-12 education (17%).

Most of the new general fund commitments in health and human resources were for required spending in Medicaid, primarily health and long-term care services for the elderly and disabled but also pregnant

women and children. None of these new dollars were used for the Medicaid expansion population, which receives no general fund support.

Central appropriations accounted for the second largest portion of new state spending in the final Conference Agreement. The introduced budget included 2.0% annual salary increases for state employees and state-supported local employees. The General Assembly upped the increase to 3.5% each year. In total, compensation costs for these salary increases totaled \$714 million. The budget agreement also included several large infusions of cash, including:

- \$489 million for state agency health insurance premiums.
- \$350 million for unanticipated increase in Medicaid spending.
- \$225 million to address the uncertainty of federal funding.
- \$100 million for environmental impact monitoring.

Finally, elementary and secondary (or K-12) education received large allocations of general funds to provide 4.0% salary increases in each year of the biennium. The cost of these increases was approximately \$771 million. Funding for special education was augmented by \$148 million in new allocations.

Last year, the House and Senate established an interim work group to assess the impact of federal budget actions on the Commonwealth, meeting in various communities around the Old Dominion. The Conference Agreement includes roughly \$624 million over the biennium to plug budget holes created by federal budget writers.

As a reminder, most of the federal budget decisions related to ongoing Medicaid funding have not been programmed into the state budget; the impact of those decisions will need to be addressed in the coming years. It's also worth noting that on August 25, the governor issued Executive Order 20 to begin addressing these gaps.

Budget amendments of interest that passed

An analysis of all the budget amendments significant to localities was published in the July/August issue of *Virginia Town & City*. Below are a few of the bigger items.

One percent

local option sales tax for school construction (Item 4-14 #2c) – The final version of the budget included one of VML's top

Use the QR code to access the July/August issue of *Virginia Town & City*.



priorities for the last several years: statewide authority for all counties and cities to impose a one percent local option sales and use tax dedicated solely for school construction. Although nuances added to the language during the legislative process mean that the final product is not entirely what VML sought, this is still a big win for local governments.

All counties and cities are now authorized to impose a sales and use tax of up to one percent if approved by voter referendum and ordinance dedicated solely to capital projects or major renovations of public schools.

Key components of this legislation mean that this tax:

- Can only be used for new capital projects or major renovations.
- Cannot be used for previous debts but can be used for future debts related to bonded projects.
- Expires 20 years after the date of the resolution.
- Is not granted as standalone referendum authority for the two towns which operate their own school divisions.

The budget also allows members of Planning District Eight (PD8) in Northern Virginia to use this authority for transportation funding related to the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), as well as school construction. Any locality in PD8 wishing to use this authority for both transportation and school construction can do so; however, the percentage must not exceed a total of one percent.

Cannabis retail marketplace established (Item 4-14 - Enactment 5) – Establishes a retail cannabis marketplace in Virginia. Cannabis retail sales were included in the biennial budget, which creates a state-regulated cannabis retail market with sales beginning July 1, 2027. Provisions include new local taxation on cannabis retail sales, continuation of local land-use authority for cannabis retailers, expansion of local ordinance authority to prohibit the public consumption of cannabis or sharing of cannabis on public school property, and authorization for localities to adopt ordinances regulating the hours of operation for cannabis retailers. However, under the legislation localities will not be able to ban retail cannabis operations.

This legislation includes two authorities that have been part of VML's legislative program since 2021: local taxation authority on cannabis retail sales and retaining local land use authority. A third priority – local authority to hold a referendum on retail cannabis sales – was not included in this legislation.

Localities are prohibited under the biennial budget from adopting any ordinances that prohibit the “cultivation, processing, possession, sale, distribution, handling, transportation, consumption, use, advertising or dispensing of marijuana or marijuana products.” However, a locality may adopt ordinances that:

- Regulate the hours of operation for the sale of retail marijuana.
- Prohibit the public consumption or sharing of marijuana products as those acts are described in §4.1-1108.
- Prohibit the possession or consumption of marijuana products on the grounds of public elementary or secondary schools during or after school hours as those acts are described in §4.1-1109.

Localities are required to levy a local tax rate on cannabis retail sales of between 1-3.5%. Furthermore, localities retain land-use authority over cannabis retailers, and retailers must demonstrate during the application process for licensure from the Cannabis Control Authority that their premises are in accordance with local land-use requirements.

The language in the biennial budget establishes a maximum of 350 retail licenses, with licenses to be distributed evenly among all areas of the Commonwealth (taking into account population densi-

ties) with retail stores limited to a maximum square footage of 2,500 square feet.

The Cannabis Control Authority must provide notice to localities through their manager, administrator, or other designee with a 30-day window for the locality to provide any objections upon preliminary approval for a cannabis license. The Cannabis Control Authority may deny licensing if the applicant does not meet local land-use and zoning laws and may revoke licenses if a business does not conform to local requirements regarding sanitation, health, construction, or equipment, or if the business is delinquent by more than 90 days in payment of any local taxes, penalties, or interest owed to the locality.

Under the budget language, the Cannabis Control Authority will develop regulations for licenses ranging from cultivators and processors to retailers and other regulated activities during the second half of 2026 with licenses issued in early 2027.

State Employee and State-Supported Locals Pay Raise (Item 469 #7c) – Includes \$96.0 million in FY 2027 and \$215.0 million in FY 2028 to provide 3.5% increases each year of the biennium for state employees and state-supported local employees. The local employee salary increase includes:

- Locally elected constitutional officers.
- General Registrars and members of local electoral boards.
- Full-time employees of locally elected constitutional officers.
- Full-time employees of Community Services Boards, Centers for Independent Living, secure detention centers supported by Juvenile Block Grants, juvenile delinquency prevention and local court service units, local social services boards, local Pretrial Services Act and Comprehensive Community Corrections Act employees, and local health departments where a memorandum of understanding exists with the Virginia Department of Health.

Legislation of interest that passed

An analysis of all the legislation affecting localities was published in the May/June issue of *Virginia Town & City*. Below are a few of the more significant items.

Use the QR code to access the May/June issue of *Virginia Town & City*.



Housing

SB388 (McPike) / HB1279 (Cole, J.) Affordable housing; religious organizations and other nonprofit tax-exempt properties. Requires localities with a zoning ordinance to allow certain nonprofit and religious organizations to build by-right housing on their property with only administrative approval. The property has to have been owned by the entity for five years prior to the development application and 60% of the housing should be affordable. The first floor may include a coffee shop, health clinic, or other uses ancillary to the operation or mission of the organization. The provisions of this bill take effect on January 1, 2027, and expire on January 1, 2031. The property is to be affordable for 30 years.

SB531 (Srinivasan) Zoning; development and use of accessory dwelling units. Localities are now required to include in their zoning ordinance for single-family residential districts a method to allow attached or detached accessory dwelling units. The bill requires that the permit be \$500 or less and sets out criteria related to setbacks, height, etc. There is a delayed effective date of July 1, 2027.

Please note that a locality may adopt an ordinance that “substantially complies” with this statute prior to July 1, 2027. VML recommends discussing this option with your attorney.

HB14 (Price) / SB290 (Aird) Virginia Residential Landlord and Tenant Act; landlord remedies, noncompliance with rental agreement. If a condition exists in a dwelling unit that constitutes a material noncompliance by the landlord with the rental agreement or with any provision of law that, if not remedied within a reasonable time frame, constitutes a fire hazard or serious threat to the life, health, or safety of a tenant or occupant of the premises, a locality may institute an action on behalf of any tenant or occupant of the premises who is injured by such material noncompliance for injunction and damages to enforce the landlord's duty to maintain the dwelling unit. There are numerous notice requirements that have to be met before the locality inserts itself.

General Government

SB699 (Ebbin) Virginia Freedom of Information Act; public bodies to post meeting agendas. This legislation states that when a public body posts an agenda (which shall be posted on the government website if available) prior to the meeting, no final action may be taken on items added to the agenda after the meeting commences unless they are time-sensitive or are the subject of a closed meeting. The bill also defines "final action."

SB530 (Srinivasan) State and Local Government Conflict of Interest Act; electronic disclosure by local government officers and employees. This legislation requires local government officers and employees to file their annual disclosure statements electronically with the Virginia Conflict of Interest and Ethics Advisory Committee. Localities with populations over 250,000 will have to begin this process January 1, 2028; over 100,000 in January 2029; and under 100,000 in January 2030.

HB177 (Anthony) Fees for passing bad checks to localities; payment order not paid by recipient. Localities charge fees for bad checks; this bill makes it possible to charge a fee for bad electronic payment orders as well.

SB443 (McPike) / HB891 (Shin) Siting of battery energy storage projects; commercial solar photovoltaic generation facilities; permitted accessory use. Deems battery energy storage projects as a permitted accessory use in all zoning districts on any parcel of land that is subject to an approved special exception or similar approval for a solar facility with other criteria outlined in the legislation.

HB1404 (Guzman) Appointment of a youth representative to a local governing body. Allows a local governing body to appoint a youth representative to serve as a nonvoting member of the governing body.

Public Safety

HB862 (Cousins) / SB391 (Stuart) VASAP/ASAP authority and funding. Updates provisions of the Code of Virginia regarding the governance and operations of the Virginia Alcohol Safety Action Program (VASAP) and community-based Alcohol Safety Action Programs (ASAPs). Adds new requirements, such as a required but unspecified local funding contribution from each locality (county, city, and town) participating in an ASAP as well as a requirement for a local fiscal agent for each ASAP and for a local government to serve as employer of record.

Amendments initiated by VML and VACo delay the local funding requirements until January 2028 and require creation of a work group that includes VML, VACo, General Assembly budget committee staff, and VASAP representatives. This work group is now underway and will examine VASAP's funding structure and sustainability and look at other states' programs. This report is due to the General Assembly by October 1, 2026.

Human Services

HB681 (Hayes) Retired law enforcement officers for emergency and temporary detention admissions. Clarifies that retired law enforcement officers may carry out emergency custody and involuntary temporary detention orders.

HB976 (Price) Alternative transportation providers; youth transport and custody. Permits a person who 1) works for, or contracts with, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, or 2) works for a private or state hospital in Virginia to provide transportation. Also addresses allowable alternative transportation providers for transportation and custody of minors during an emergency custody and involuntary temporary detention process.

HB1366 (Callsen) Department of Social Services; corrective action plans and control of local boards/departments. Authorizes the Commissioner of Social Services to create and enforce corrective action plans for any local board/local department that fails to administer public assistance and programs in accordance with law and regulations, or whose actions/inactions pose a substantial risk to the health, safety, or well-being of a child or adult. A local department may request assistance with programs/services from the state, which can deploy staff or contract with a private entity to assist the local department with public assistance and social services.

The bill also creates a task force with state and local representation to review eligibility and administration of state-administered benefits and possible changes in processes/applications, and develop a comprehensive improvement plan to address changes needed at the state and local department level, including a study of funding and local match requirements and the methodology used to allocate administrative funds. The task force's report is due November 1, 2026.

HB1490 (Tran) Centralized hotline for reports or complaints of child abuse or neglect. Shifts child protective services reports/complaints from a local intake model to a centralized intake model. Requires a comprehensive study of CPS issues and local practices by a third-party contractor and report to a work group established under the bill. This report will also include identified best practices and recommendations for an effective and efficient intake system. The work group will include state and local staff and state organization representatives. The findings and report are due to the General Assembly by December 1, 2026. Finally, the bill directs VDSS to phase in the centralized intake system beginning July 1, 2028, through July 1, 2030. Local DSS agencies would administer intake until phased into the centralized intake system.

Elections

HB630 (Callsen) / SB176 (VanValkenburg) Elections; conduct of election; ranked choice voting; locally elected offices; report. Expands the eligibility for elections to be conducted using ranked choice voting to all local public bodies including towns. Currently, only county boards and city councils can use ranked choice voting.

SB438 (Bagby) Absentee voting in person; available the second and third Sunday before all elections. Requires absentee voting locations in person to be open for a minimum of five hours the second and third Sundays prior to any election.

Education

HB544 (Askew) / SB498 (Aird) Commission on School Construction and Modernization; revisions; elimination of sunset. Eliminates the sunset of the commission and establishes a regular meeting schedule. **Note:** The Commission began meeting again in September 2026.

Natural Resources

SB386 (Stuart) / HB1443 (Lopez) Owners of sewage treatment works; land application, marketing, or distribution of sewage sludge; perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances; testing requirements. Directs the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to regulate per-fluoroalkyl and poly-fluoroalkyl (PFAS/PFOA) levels in biosolids to be land applied on agricultural land. PFAS/PFOA are used in industrial and manufacturing processes for consumer and industrial goods ranging from takeout containers, shampoos, and raingear to mining equipment and fire suppression foam at airports.

Transportation

SB59 (Diggs) / HB684 (Hayes) Photo speed monitoring devices; systems for traffic signals; school bus video-monitoring systems; proof of violation. Creates a training program at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services that will allow non-law enforcement officers, "Conservators of the Peace," to certify photo speed enforcement violations. This will allow a locality to employ trained staff to administer photo speed enforcement violations and free up sworn law enforcement officers currently confirming photo speed monitoring violations.

SB84 (Williams Graves) Photo speed monitoring devices, pedestrian crossing violation monitoring systems, and stop sign violation monitoring systems; placement and operation. Authorizes the use of pedestrian crossing monitoring systems in school and active work zones. Penalties, process and requirements to operate such a program are identical to those for operating a photo speed enforcement program.

SB219 (Jones) Photo speed monitoring devices; placement and operation; summons. Requires a second notice to be issued for speed violations issued under a photo speed enforcement program and requires that the DMV place a hold on any new vehicle registration, renewal, or issuance of license plates until the penalty is paid.

SB221 (Jones) School crossing zones; active times. Allows localities to extend the duration of school zone monitoring from 30 to 60 minutes.

Sovereign Immunity

SB637 (Ebbin) Virginia Human Rights Act; definition of "employer"; sovereign immunity. The bill expands access to the Human Rights Act. The original version waived sovereign immunity for any violations of the Virginia Human Rights Act by a government agency. The final version does not contain that waiver.

Workgroups & Studies

When the General Assembly wraps up each year, the efforts of studies and workgroups mandated by its legislation begin. VML staff work throughout the summer and fall to represent the interests of local governments during these meetings. Some of the many 2026 workgroups and studies are outlined below.

Workgroup: HB707 (Hayes) State government; transaction of public business; prohibited website domains

HB707 would have required all public bodies (as broadly defined in the bill) to have a .gov website domain and email address. Due to the cost and expansion of the bill, HB707 was continued to the 2027 General Assembly Session. In the interim, a letter was sent to the Joint Commission on Science and Technology (JCOTS) to study the cost, implementation, and feasibility of changing all domains.

Workgroup: Item 260 #1c Property Tax Exemptions

Requires the Department of Taxation to convene a workgroup to review the cost of mandatory property tax exemptions for disabled veterans and their spouses. The workgroup is required to:

- Review and collect data on the cost of the exemption and implications to localities.
- Detail changes to the exemption and the impact of those changes to localities.
- Evaluate legislation previously introduced by the General Assembly on these exemptions.
- Provide any recommendations to the General Assembly on these mandatory property tax exemptions.

The first meeting of the workgroup was held on September 16, 2026. VML staff provided data to the TAX Department documenting double-digit costs for the unfunded mandate.

A report of the workgroup's findings and recommendations is required to be submitted to the chairs of House Finance, House Appropriations, and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees by November 15, 2026.

Workgroup: Item 21#3c Child Advocacy Center

Directs the Commission on Youth to work with stakeholders (including VML) to develop recommendations to "incentivize" local governments to draw down additional funding to support Child Advocacy Centers through partnership agreements to include allocation of space, and administrative or other support. Recommendations will also include potential access to funding through various court fees or other revenue options. The report is due November 1, 2026. **Note:** These centers currently receive state general fund support.

Workgroup: Water Quality Improvement Fund

The Water Quality Improvement Fund (WQIF) workgroup evaluates Virginia's WQIF framework, looking at fund administration, statutory updates, and the potential inclusion of the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund (SLAF). A preliminary report was issued in January 2026, and a final report is due by November 1, 2026.

Workgroup: SB582 (Salim) / HB774 (Thornton) Elections; absentee and provisional ballots; cure process.

Requires that if the electoral board determines that any person having submitted a provisional vote was not entitled to vote as a result of a material error or omission on the provisional ballot form, the registrar must promptly notify the voter by telephone or email of the error or omission and provide information to the voter on how to correct the issue so his ballot may be counted. The voter is entitled to make such necessary corrections before noon on the Monday after the election. The bill moves the deadline for curing errors or omissions in absentee ballot applications from noon on the third day after the election to noon on the Monday after the election. The bill also requires the Department of Elections to issue guidance to local election officials on the uniform processing and counting of provisional ballots, including any provisional ballot cast by a person submitting a registration application on the same day as the election. The bill has a delayed effective date of January 1, 2027.

Policy & Legislative Committees

VML's 2026 Legislative Committee, led by Hampton Mayor James Gray and Farmville Mayor Brian Vincent, began its work in June with an overview of the 2026 General Assembly Session, studies underway by the General Assembly this year, and presentations on data centers and collective bargaining.

VML's five policy committees held meetings over the summer to learn about and discuss current issues and update their statements for the coming year.

Some highlights included:

The **Finance Policy Committee** received a presentation on access and affordability of local audits from Rachel Reamy with the Auditor of Public Accounts Office; discussed the status of the current Virginia Alcohol Safety Action Program (VASAP) workgroup; and held a panel discussion about the state of the local economy featuring four members of the policy committee from across Virginia.

The **General Laws Policy Committee** received briefings on the SB233 (Head) study of the Fire Programs Fund and E-911 funding issues, and an overview of election administration issues.

The **Human Development & Education Policy Committee** received a briefing on Virginia Department of Education priorities from Superintendent of Public Instruction Jenna Conway, as well as a presentation on the study of Child Advocacy Centers from Will Egen with the Virginia Commission on Youth.

The **Community and Economic Development Policy Committee** discussed impact fees and proffers as well as the status of Virginia Housing Commission workgroups.

The **Infrastructure Committee** heard presentations and discussed several transportation and environmental quality issues.

All of the committee's revised policy statements are posted on VML's website. The proposed statements and the proposed legislative program will be discussed, debated, and adopted during the Annual Business Meeting at the VML Annual Conference. Please review the draft statements prior to the meeting; paper copies will NOT be provided.

Events, Education & Training

Mayors Institute & Annual Conference

The 2025 Mayors Institute & Annual Conference was held at the Hotel Roanoke October 11-14. On the first day of the Mayors Institute, attendees heard from Gary Campbell, owner of Impact2Lead, LLC and the president and CEO of Johnson Health Center, on "Inspiring a Culture of Excellence." Day two featured sessions on "Personal Safety for Public Officials" led by Glenn Armstrong with the Virginia State Police and "Social Media for Public Officials" with Town of Rocky Mount Mayor C. Holland Perdue.

The Annual Conference kicked off the afternoon of October 12 with presentations by staff from the City of Roanoke, followed by two concurrent "Learning Labs" featuring short presentations on topics such as Next Generation Automated Traffic Safety Enforcement, ADA Compliance for Local Government Technology, Evaluating the Fiscal Impact of Real Estate Development, Clean Water Assistance for Local Governments, and more. The first day of the conference closed with the VML Awards Banquet, at which it was revealed that the City of Danville had won the President's Award for Innovation in the Community Health category for its "Danville Outdoors" initiative.

On Monday, morning breakout sessions covered topics such as Community Policing for the Elected Official and the Officer, Data Centers & Economic Development, Locality-Driven Housing Solutions, Collective Bargaining - Right to Work, Virginia's Energy Present & Future, and Financing of Public Utilities. The



afternoon was devoted to mobile workshops to the Wasena Neighborhood Projects, the Roanoke-Blacksburg Airport, and the Roanoke Regional Water Pollution Control Plant. During the Annual Business Meeting later that afternoon, members voted on VML's draft policy and legislative statements as well as VML's slate of officers. Town of Amherst Mayor Dwayne Tuggle became the new VML president. That evening, VML hosted a Bluegrass Reception with live music and the City of Roanoke held a host city event at the Taubman Museum.

The final day of the conference wrapped up with back-to-back general sessions that sought to answer the questions "What's in Store for Virginia's Economy?" and "What's in Store for Virginia Politics?"

Virginia Local Elected Officials Conference



The Virginia Elected Officials Conference (formerly Newly Elected Officials Conference) is a valuable, annual offering that includes topics relevant for both new and long-serving elected officials. Previously a one-day event, the 2026 event was held over the course of two days beginning the afternoon of Wednesday, January 7 and wrapping up the afternoon of Thursday, January 8 at The Place at Innsbrook. On the first day, attendees heard presentations on Safety for Public Officials, Opportunity Zones, and Cybersecurity. VML hosted a reception at the adjacent Capital Ale House that evening.

Day two of the event included sessions on topics such as Budgeting, Local AI, Council/Manager Relations, and Veterans' Exemptions. The event also included the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Conflict of Interest Act (COIA) training required of all elected officials in Virginia.

The next Elected Officials Conference will take place January 7-8, 2027, at The Place at Innsbrook. There will be a reception on the evening of January 7. The event will once again include FOIA and COIA training.

Local Government Legislative Day



On February 5, nearly 300 elected officials and staff from VML member localities gathered at the Richmond Hilton Downtown for 2026 Local Government Legislative Day. The event kicked off at noon with remarks by VML President and Town of Amherst Mayor Dwayne Tuggle. Attendees then heard from Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources David Bulova and Secretary of Finance Mark Sickles, as well as Jessica Hoff, executive director of the Virginia Housing Alliance.

VML policy staff then walked attendees through the legislation and budget items important to local governments. After the briefing members visited the General Assembly to meet with their delegations and voice the concerns of their communities. That evening, Senator Mark Warner spoke at the reception and stayed to chat with members.

Thanks to everyone who came! This event is essential to furthering the goals of the VML Legislative Program and making local voices heard at the General Assembly each year. The next Local Government Legislative Day will be held Thursday, February 4, 2027, at the Richmond Marriott.

Small Towns Conference

Given the success of the 2024 and 2025 Small Towns Conferences, VML added another half day to the event this year, which ran from May 13-15. Thanks to Chincoteague Mayor Denise Bowden and the staff of the Chincoteague Center for making everyone feel welcome. The first day featured an afternoon session “Tools & Materials for Building Communities” hosted by The Timmons Group, followed by a VML Reception at Steamers Restaurant. The second day, was full of programming on topics such as “What Your Attorney Wants You to Know,” “New Marijuana Laws and the Workplace,” “Council/Manager Relations,” and more. The town provided their new shuttle bus to ferry attendees to and from the hotels as well as the evening reception hosted by Virginia American Water at the Ropewalk Restaurant. Friday morning included sessions on “Social Media for Towns” and “Downtown Revitalization.”

The next Small Towns Conference will be held in Clifton Forge, May 19-21, 2027.



Communications

Magazine: *Virginia Town & City*

Each issue of VML's magazine *Virginia Town & City (VTC)* features the latest comings and goings of local government officials and staff, highlights of our members' achievements and fun events, profiles of our Community Business Member organizations, and articles on topics from across the Commonwealth. Since the last Annual Report, some of the topics featured in VTC include:

2025:

- **November/December** – Features on each of the Innovation Award winners including President's Award for Innovation winner the City of Danville. Also, Annual Conference wrap-up with photos and a spotlight on the Town of Gate City.

2026:

- **January/February** – We visited the Town of Amherst to get to know our new president, Mayor Dwayne Tuggle. We also spotlighted the Town of Round Hill.
- **March/April** – For this special “Thinking Outside the ‘Burg” issue, we featured the cities of Fredericksburg, Harrisonburg, and Petersburg, as well the Town of Pearisburg. Plus, there were photos from our Elected Officials Conference and Local Government Legislative Day.
- **May/June** – We featured the essays from the winners of our annual “If I Were Mayor” essay contest for 7th and 8th graders; we published a comprehensive review of the just-concluded General Assembly Session with all the legislation localities needed to know about; and, we spotlighted the towns of Ashland and Altavista, as well as the City of Charlottesville.
- **July/August** – The big budget review for localities took a bit longer this year because, well, the budget took a bit longer. Also, we included a 2025-2026 Supreme Court term roundup with decisions important to local governments, and we spotlighted Roanoke County, the Town of Dumfries, and the City of Bristol.

Newsletter: *eNews*

As the league's primary channel for distributing information to our members, *eNews* is a valuable resource for local government officials and staff. Throughout the year, the bi-weekly *eNews* covers the issues, opportunities, and events that matter to Virginia's local governments. This is especially true during General Assembly Sessions, when *eNews* is published sometimes as often as several times a day along with Action Alerts that keep our members aware of happenings at the General Assembly.

News Board

While the reporting and analysis in *eNews* is password protected and available only to league members, the events, announcements, and opportunities posted to our News Board are available to anyone. You can find the News Board on the Resources tab of VML's website, and the most recent items are listed in each issue of *eNews*.



Website: www.vml.org

Not only is the VML website the repository for back issues of our newsletter and magazine, it is your resource for everything VML! Want to know who is on which policy committee? Want to download the latest edition of the *Handbook for Virginia Mayors and Council Members*? Need to register for a VML event? Want to post a job opening for locality?

All these things (and so many more) are available to our members at www.vml.org.

Awards

Innovation Awards

In September, VML was pleased to announce the winners of its annual awards for excellence in local government. The statewide competition recognizes innovative problem-solving, excellence in management, citizen participation, and improved services to citizens.

Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy said, “It's inspiring to see that despite the budget uncertainty this past year – or in some cases, because of it – our localities found ways to innovate and succeed. Virginia's local governments have a lot to be proud of. In fact, there were almost double the number of entries compared to last year. Thanks to everyone who entered and congratulations to the winners!”

The City of Danville took home the **President's Award for Innovation**, which was announced at the Awards Banquet on Sunday, October 12 at the Hotel Roanoke during the 2025 VML Annual Conference.

Former VML President Steve Trivett remarked on his process for selecting “Danville Outdoors” as the President's Award winner: “Picking a single winner was not easy! But this section from the winning application helped my decision: ‘Working together, the initiative provides hands-on programs, community events, and environmental education that engages residents of all ages and backgrounds, while breaking down barriers to equitable access. This turns every park, trail, and green space into a classroom for



learning, exploration, and connections.’ The ‘connections’ across community, across generations, and across organizations and the ongoing nature of this initiative became the clincher for my choice!”

The winners of the 2026 Innovation Awards were:

**PRESIDENT’S AWARD FOR
INNOVATION & COMMUNITY HEALTH:**

City of Danville – Danville Outdoors

COMMUNICATIONS:

City of Alexandria – Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Communications

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Town of Hillsville – Community Business Launch

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY:

Town of Strasburg – Town Run Riparian Native Plant Buffer

PUBLIC SAFETY:

City of Norfolk – Community 1ST

RISK MANAGEMENT:

City of Roanoke – Safety Awareness Event

WORKING WITH YOUTH:

City of Chesapeake – 10th Annual CE3 Engine Camp

“If I Were Mayor” essay contest

The annual “If I Were Mayor” contest invites seventh and eighth graders from throughout Virginia to submit essays describing what they would do if they were mayor of their hometown. The essay contest is a key component of VML’s civic education programming, which seeks to teach schoolchildren and adults how local government works and how they can become involved in making their communities better places to live, work, and play.

The challenge to the students is to present an issue in their locality, talk to others about possible solutions, and then identify what solution would best address the issue.

The 2026 winners were:

- Statewide winner: **Serene Colden** of Lindsay Middle School in the City of Hampton
- Region 1: **Kenzley Frye** of Northwood Middle School in the Town of Saltville
- Region 2: **Hailey Coleman** of Martinsville Middle School in the City of Martinsville
- Region 3: **Kinley Carter** of Lylburn Downing Middle School in the City of Lexington
- Region 4: **Elijah Zug** of Appomattox Middle School in the Town of Appomattox
- Region 5: **Willa Thom** of Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School in the City of Falls Church
- Region 7: **Alexis Hargrove** of Edward W. Wyatt Middle School in the City of Emporia
- Region 8: **Finley O’Shell** of Isle of Wight Academy in the Town of Windsor

*VML did not receive entries from Region 6 this year.



Of statewide winner Serene Colden, VML President and Mayor of the Town of Amherst Dwayne Tuggle noted, “She addresses an issue that affects many localities throughout the country. Serene’s approach to the problem looks at not just how to solve the problem, but how to engage and inform citizens while doing it. Great job, Mayor! Congratulations Selena and to all this year’s winners!”

All winning essays were featured in the May/June issue of *Virginia Town & City*.

New Staff Member



In July, **Jessica Dennis** began as the Virginia Municipal League’s new deputy director. Jessica began her local government career in 2014 with the City of Norfolk, working in the City Manager’s Office as an analyst until 2021. She then transitioned to representing the city’s state and federal legislative interests as the intergovernmental relations officer until 2024.

Prior to joining VML, Jessica managed Norfolk’s Capital Improvement Plan implementation dashboard and coordinated fiscal impact and legislative analysis as a principal analyst for the City of Norfolk’s Department of Budget and Strategic Planning.

As VML’s deputy director, Jessica will advise VML member localities on legal and policy matters, monitor legislative and regulatory developments, and help advance the interests of local government through advocacy and stakeholder engagement.

A native of Texas, Jessica holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Bioenvironmental Sciences from Texas A&M University and a Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law Center.

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