



Statewide Winner

Piper Dellinger

Town of Strasburg – Signal Knob Middle School

Teacher: Margaret Bachman



WHY DOES THE TOWN of Strasburg have citizen involvement issues, why is involvement important, and how can we fix it? My name is Piper Dellinger. I reside in Fishers Hill, right outside of the town of Strasburg where I go to school. I have been in contact with our mayor Ms. Brandy Boies so that I could better understand my community's issues and how they can be solved.

Why does the town of Strasburg have citizen involvement issues? Although this question can be interpreted in different ways, I take it as our citizens being unaware. I think that the citizens of Strasburg are unaware of the votes and decisions that are made in our town. Many of these decisions impact their everyday life. Not long ago I attended a town council meeting for my Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter during national FFA week. Looking back there were two things I noticed. The first thing I noticed was that I had no clue what was happening in my town! There were points brought up and discussions about problems that I had no clue were happening in my town. The second thing that occurred to me was that I was very unaware about town council meetings. The only reason I was aware that a meeting was happening was because of my involvement in FFA. Though the town posts a calendar with the council meeting dates on Facebook, I still believe they are overlooked. I don't think this problem is because people don't see them on the calendar. I think the root of this problem is that citizens are unaware of what happens in a town council meeting. I think that these meetings have a reputation of being not meant for everyday citizens. However, it is quite the opposite. The town council discusses things that impact everyday citizens' lives. So, why do everyday citizens feel they should not be involved?

Why is citizen involvement in their town's government even important? Because the town government makes decisions that impact citizens' everyday lives. Mayor Boies informed me, "Elected officials are making these decisions. We need more people to vote, pay attention to elections, and even consider running."

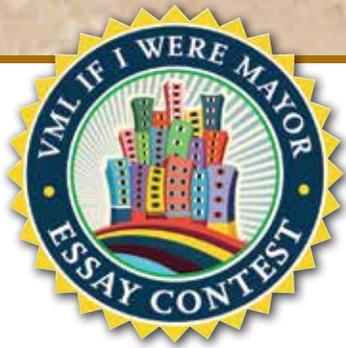
It is important that citizens stay up to date with the local government so they can understand why changes are made. If citizens are unaware of why changes are made, then they might jump to conclusions and become nasty to government officials. I think it is important to remember that town officials are normal people. Take Mayor Boies for example. In one of her emails to me she said, "We need everyday citizens to be engaged with government. Often (and I was one of them) we are busy focusing on our careers and families, and volunteer passions, but we are not paying attention to the decisions that are being made that impact our everyday lives."

With an issue like citizen engagement of such importance there has to be a solution. Throughout writing this essay, I have thought of a few ways to improve our town citizens' involvement with their local government. The first idea I have is to go into more detail on Facebook. I think social media can be a very helpful tool when it comes to informing people. Many people spend a lot of time on Facebook. Like I said earlier, people see the council meeting calendar, but I think there should be a separate thing stating what will be discussed in that specific meeting. Another thing I think the community would benefit from is the council getting involved with the school. For example, there could be a day or two each year when the town council members visit classes in the high school and talk about what they do.

Overall, I think the community needs to promote its local government more.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT



Region 1 Winner

Maya Morrison

Town of Marion – Marion Middle School
Teacher: Matthew Neese



IF I WERE MAYOR there would be a lot of changes that I would make. I am going to share some of them with you today. I would give our police officers more training. Now, you may think that our officers have all the training that they need, but did you know that our officers don't have adequate training for a problem concerning a person with a mental health issue or a history of mental health issues? They need that training to help them better evaluate and assess the situations that they are put into. The community member that I asked about this agreed that police officers need more training in dealing with people experiencing a mental health crisis. I would have a mandatory week of mental health training every three months. How would I fund that, you may ask? In all

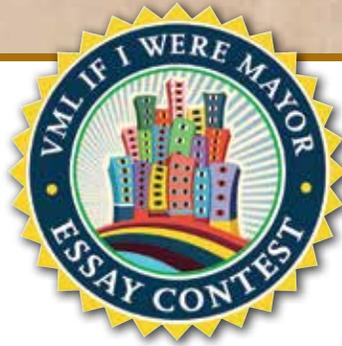
criminal cases where the victim is awarded restitution, I would charge interest starting the day of court and ending when the restitution is paid in full, or I would charge a small fee to be accessed on all criminal cases where the defendant is found guilty.

Another problem that we have in Marion is that there are tons of litter! Who would want to come to see a state park filled with trash? I don't know about you, but I sure wouldn't want to go there! So, to fix this problem I would have Juvenile Detention and some of the people at the local jail – depending on their crimes – and drug court participants pick up the trash in Marion. They would get paid a small wage to be put toward their court fines and costs. You may think that it is not safe to do this, but they would be supervised the whole time by officers. How would a small town pay for this? We would ask for federal funding. When I asked a community member what they thought about this solution to the litter problem they said that it was a good idea. However, they said they would only use drug court participants because they aren't convicted of violent crimes, are required to do community service as part of the program, and need less supervision, which would keep costs low.

Those are some of the problems that I would fix if I was the mayor of Marion Virginia.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
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Region 2 Winner

Avery Gallimore

Town of Rocky Mount – Christian Heritage Academy
Teacher: Laren Massey



IF I WAS THE MAYOR in Rocky Mount, I would try to solve any problem possible. However, one problem that I would like to solve is the flood risks. This is a real problem within the community, and I would hope to improve it as mayor.

Floods can have a huge impact on Rocky Mount. A survey run by Risk Factor, a website that assesses different types of risks, says of Rocky Mount, “There are 182 properties in Rocky Mount that have greater than a 26% chance of being severely affected by flooding over the next 30 years. This represents 7% of all properties in Rocky Mount.”

Even though 7% may seem small, it still will affect several families and their land. Unfortunately, floods will still have an impact on the citizens of Rocky Mount. Some good news is that the risk of flooding is only moderate. Still, transportation will stop, the police and firefighters may not be able to reach those in need, and power will be out. Risk Factor reports that “41 out of 287 homes will be affected by the floods.” Considering that most likely multiple people live in a house, many people will be affected by floods.

I asked my friends Skylar, Ruthie, and Addy what they would do about this problem. Addy said, “I would try to get the citizens of Rocky Mount to come out and support the community. They could make donations and donate their time. Joining together as a whole could boost relationships and get jobs done.”

Ruthie said, “Make sure everyone who needs medical attention gets it. Then do the best you can by giving resources for damage and health reasons. Then set up news stations and give everyone positive feedback, letting them know it will be OK. Then an inspector would come to make sure everything is safe and make sure the economy is back on track.”

Skylar told me, “I would make sure rivers and bodies of water have proper materials and drainage systems to somewhat control the flooding.”

I feel like all my friends’ solutions were very well said and could all work. However, here are my suggestions. As mayor, I would first protect the houses better. I would suggest to the architects to not build in flood plains and assess proper drainage when building properties. For older houses, I would say to build barriers and trenches to keep the water out. Secondly, I would focus on infrastructure. I would make better drainage systems and have better management of ecosystems to prevent erosion.

Those are my solutions for reducing flood rates in Rocky Mount. If we can try to use all or most of these suggestions, then we can make life in Rocky Mount better.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
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Region 3 Winner

Aiswarya Vinu

City of Staunton – Shelburne Middle School
Teacher: Corinna Hunter



IF I WERE MAYOR, I would fix one of the biggest problems many schools face today which is teacher pay. Did you know that teachers in Virginia make \$31,791 less than teachers in Washington D.C.? That is because teachers in Staunton, Virginia get paid the lowest in the state. The teachers of Virginia are getting paid \$45,736 yearly but teachers in D.C. are getting paid \$77,167 yearly. The last time the teachers got a pay raise was on July 1, 2019. It was only a 5% pay raise. Plus, the state doesn't pay for any teachers beyond those needed to meet the minimum student-to-teacher ratios set by the Standards of Quality. For example, the student-to-teacher ratio in kindergarten shouldn't exceed 24-1, according to 2018's Standards of Quality.

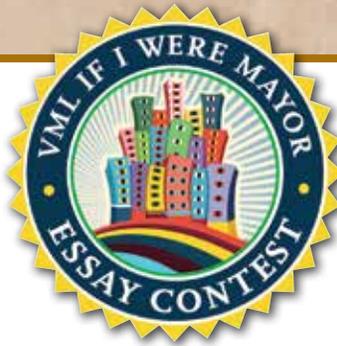
I interviewed our school superintendent, Dr. Smith, and I asked him if there's a way to increase teacher pay. His response was, "The only way is if the state gives us the 60% they are required to pay."

Another question I asked was, "Why are teachers getting paid so little?" Dr. Smith's response was, "Because the state of Virginia is not doing its part."

This is very shocking because schools are a big part of childhood and giving kids the best school experience possible is an important part of many families. But if kids are sent to schools where even the teachers are not getting paid enough then just think about how the school environment might look.

The solution to this problem might be very difficult to carry out. It will cost a lot of money. So, the best solution would be to start a march to the White House and personally meet with the president to address this very crucial issue. Another way might be to file a case against the state for ignoring the schools of Staunton Virginia.





Region 5 Winner

Madeline Sherwood

City of Falls Church – Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School
Teacher: Kieran Shakeshaft



MY COMMUNITY OF Falls Church City is full of places to walk to. We have many local restaurants, shops, and parks to visit. With our small size of just over two square miles, the city should be very walkable. However, that's not always the case. In many neighborhoods, public areas, and even to some of our schools, it can be difficult to walk due to the lack of sidewalks.

With the ever-increasing use of motor vehicles, walking and biking is very important. Not only does it decrease the pollution that vehicles cause, but it also has health benefits. Spending more time walking can increase both physical and mental health. If there is no sidewalk to walk on, people are left with no choice but to walk in the street, which could be unsafe, or just skip walking altogether and drive. Being able to walk and bike to places in a city like Falls Church is important because it is better for the people walking and the city that they are walking in, which is why we need more sidewalks to do those activities.

I talked to my mom, a community member in Falls Church, about possible solutions for the sidewalk issue. Her proposal is to have more funding for the existing sidewalk program in Falls Church, the Missing Links Program, which repairs and adds sidewalk infrastructure in areas of the city that are missing sidewalks. Having more funding would be helpful for the program because it would allow it to hire more staff and materials to plan and build sidewalks around the city. However, this funding has to come from somewhere, and she suggested either raising money or relocating funds from other less pressing programs to help increase funds for the sidewalk program.

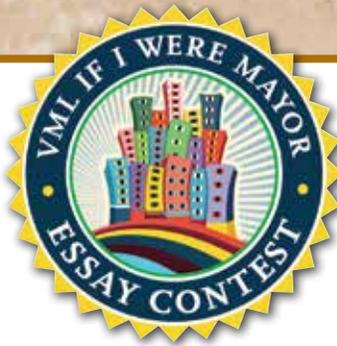
I think that this solution is a good start, but there is much that needs to be done. On average, 200 feet of concrete sidewalk can range from about \$1800 to \$2400. This can get quite expensive, as there are many areas of Falls Church that need sidewalks. The Missing Links Program would need much more funding to build sidewalks in all the places that don't have them. To fund the program, we could raise money through events such as city-wide fairs, similar to existing fall festivals, where there are many things to buy, games to play, and food to purchase. However, this time, some money that's made could go to funding the Missing Links Program.

Another way to get funding for the program could be to require developers who want to build in the city to provide some money for the sidewalk fund, since there is lots of construction going on around Falls Church, and much of it makes walking around town harder.

If more funds could be raised for the Missing Links Program, then it would be much easier for sidewalks to be built around Falls Church. Having these sidewalks would be beneficial to community members, and make the city much easier to bike and walk in.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
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Region 6 Winner

Leia Hatem

Town of Leesburg – J.L. Simpson Middle School
Teacher: Matthew Ludwig



IF I WERE THE MAYOR of Leesburg, I would address the issue of the increased number of airplanes flying over densely populated areas in Leesburg. I have been living in Leesburg for 14 years, and this issue hasn't been a problem until recently. The source of this problem is flight schools at the Leesburg Executive Airport, which is the second-biggest general aviation airport in Virginia. The planes are flying all around Leesburg and especially over the neighborhoods. This causes two problems, the first being safety as the planes cause pollution, the second being noise disruption.

Many people may not realize that the pollution the planes cause when they fly directly overhead is harmful. The planes fly over areas with many people, and the pollution is especially harmful for children. The population in Leesburg is dense and has close to 50,000 residents, and the pollution from the airplanes is putting all those people at unnecessary risk. Plus, animals, pets, and wildlife are exposed to pollution. Even a small exposure to the pollution caused by planes can put residents at risk of lung disease, heart cancer, and respiratory infections.

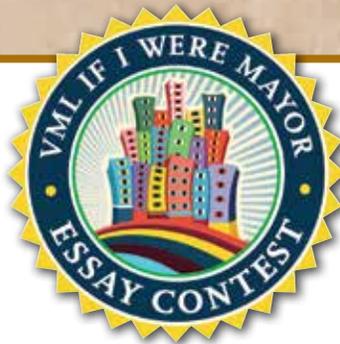
The planes are also causing a lot of disruption that countless people in the town have noticed. From personal experience, I have noticed that other people coming to Leesburg from out of town have been shocked by the level of noise the planes constantly cause. The noise disrupts sleep, work, businesses, and even extracurricular activities such as sports. The planes also fly all throughout the day, even before waking hours. The noise can even harm residents by causing sleep disruption and high blood pressure.

I talked to several members in the community who voiced their concerns as well. One community member offered the solution of not allowing the flight schools – which fly over homes repeatedly in circular patterns – to take place in the Leesburg Executive Airport but in a different one surrounded by fields and farms. I think this would be a great solution. If the planes flew over a sparsely populated area, less people would be affected by this, and the flight school could take place as usual. I suggested the idea to other members in the community who thought that, with a few adjustments, the solution would be effective.

To me, this solution would be most beneficial and effective for both the residents of Leesburg and the airports. We all should have a right to live free of disruption and without fear of health problems caused by pollution. Leesburg would benefit from this solution as it would be a safer and more enjoyable place to live, work, and grow up.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
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Region 7 Winner

Eli Henry Smith

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



HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED what you would do if you were mayor? Well, I have. I have seen some recurring problems in the city and schools across the globe. One problem is food waste. Cities and schools have experienced food waste problems every day. Reducing food waste would benefit the cities and schools by helping those in need, reducing the amount of trash, and allowing people to share unwanted food.

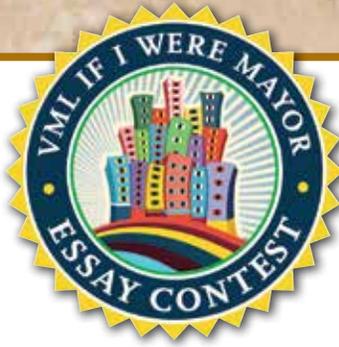
To start, I would have my own company with a program to promote reducing the amount of food wasted. Some people don't have the luxury to eat anything they want (or anything for that matter) and with the program decreasing food waste in schools it could decrease the number of people in need. To also increase the number of people participating in the program we will take it to social media for faster promotion.

Secondly, in cities, there is a lot of trash around the streets and inside some buildings. I would add very accessible trash cans all around the city and have a job for some of the people who are in need. This job will have them join the company and pick up trash around the city which will promote the program. As for schools, I would have more custodians on the job to help and I would increase the number of trash cans for students.

I would also promote the saying "sharing is caring" in my program for the people who are in need. Kids in school have food that isn't touched or won't be eaten that someone could use. If kids in school shared food with their peers there would be a decrease in kids who are in need.

In conclusion, food waste should happen less in schools and cities worldwide. My program would be a great way to start to change a big problem.





Region 8 Winner

Jay Reese

York County - Grafton Middle School
Teacher: Veronica Hodges



If I Were Mayor

IMAGINE DRIVING ON a major road in your city and watching somebody dash across it to the other side when the stop light turns red. Wondering how somebody could be crazy enough to brave the roadway in the middle of the day, you search for crosswalks that the person could have used to safely cross the street. However, you find none. My community of the Yorktown/Grafton/Hampton Roads area lacks crosswalks, sidewalks, and bike lanes.

Transportation is extremely important in this modern world, but lack of infrastructure can limit the possibilities of non-fossil fuel methods to go places. As non-sustainable fuel sources diminish, and climate change becomes worse, more stable methods for transportation will be needed. By not working to resolve this problem now, we are crippling ourselves for the future. I know that this is a problem in my community because it affects many people negatively.

One group of people that are affected are students. For example, I know a student who lives half a mile from her school. However, the lack of sidewalks and crosswalks means that she cannot safely walk to school. A ten-minute walk becomes a twenty-minute bus ride. If she could walk to school, it would not only keep the environment cleaner, but also open a bus route for another area that is not within walking distance. Many times, my bus and/or another bus has had to drive a double route to get everybody back home.

Another cohort of people that are affected by lack of transportation infrastructure are those who only have one car. An adult I know only has one car between herself and her working husband. In her neighborhood, she has crosswalks, but they are not connected to the rest of the community. She lives within walking distance of Kroger, but she cannot get there because there are no crosswalks for her to safely do so. This lack of infrastructure is problematic for those with less income.

Trying to find a solution, I asked some fellow students what they thought could be done. The peers I asked came up with the idea of hiring workers to paint crosswalks, paint bike lanes, and build sidewalks. Money would be set aside from taxes to pay for the infrastructure. Another person I asked was my mother, who suggested that as new neighborhoods are approved to be built, a requirement could be to install infrastructure such as sidewalks and crosswalks.

I believe that a mixture of my peers' solution and my mother's solution would work to solve the problem. Fixing the problem works for now, but putting in rules as a safeguard for the future will prevent a lack of infrastructure from occurring again. By preventing and changing the lack of transportation infrastructure, life in my community will improve and thrive.



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