



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH SOUND GOVERNMENT

Virginia Municipal League Announces Winners of the 2023 Innovation Awards in Local Government

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The Virginia Municipal League (VML) is 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.

The judges selected one winner in each of seven categories. One of the category winners will be chosen by VML President and Town of Farmville Vice Mayor Chuckie Reid to receive the President's Award. The winner of the President's Award will be announced at VML's 2023 Annual Conference the evening of October 9th at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott.

Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy says: "There were so many great submissions; thank you to everyone who sent entries. It makes me proud of all the positive things local governments do for their citizens!"

The winners of the 2023 VML Innovation Awards are:

Category: COMMUNITY HEALTH

Winner: Town of Blacksburg

Entry: Growing a Community Garden Program

In 2019, a private landowner approached the Town of Blacksburg about donating the five acres that comprises the Hale Community Garden to ensure it would be maintained as a community garden and community asset in perpetuity. While the town was excited to acquire the land and help support the thriving community garden, there were some concerns about the staffing capacity needed to maintain and expand the garden operations and programming.

To address this challenge, the town developed a thriving partnership with Live Work Eat Grow (LWEG), a local nonprofit organization, to manage and expand the town's community garden program. Because of this partnership, the community garden program has grown substantially, and includes three established gardens with two more under development.

Along with providing space for community members to garden, LWEG hosts a variety of gardening and healthy living classes for all ages, along with regular potluck suppers and community gathering events. The community garden program provides a robust learning and service environment, while promoting the growing of healthy food and fostering a collaborative community spirit.

What the judges said: "Excellent project that helps underprivileged residents of the town. This should transfer well to other localities."

Category: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Winner: City of Roanoke

Entry: Revitalization of Historic Fire Station One

Historic Fire Station One was the first ever built in the City of Roanoke, making its debut in 1907 with a set of horse-drawn wagons. It evolved over the decades until modern demands outpaced its ability to provide sufficient care. In 2007, the building was decommissioned, and the Georgian Revival structure sat vacant for many years.

In 2018, after a lengthy RFP process, the city responded to the most competitive proposal it had received. Hill Studio and

Old School Partners proposed a private-sector solution to re-purpose and restore the building with the intention of making it a vibrant anchor at the south end of the City Market. After a two-year due diligence period, the new owners closed on the property for \$100 with a requirement to spend at least \$2 million in renovations. The team created a solution to pay homage to the past while providing full access for public use.

On September 23, 2022, the city celebrated the grand reopening of Historic Fire Station One. The first floor contains the flagship retail gallery of Roanoke-based furniture manufacturer Txtur. Upstairs was converted to a seven-room boutique hotel. An event space is situated amid the guestrooms. The station is complete with Stock Café and Bar, a 40-seat restaurant offering indoor-outdoor dining with handcrafted elements throughout.

After 100 years of service and 15 years of vacancy, this cherished landmark is again teeming with life.

What the judges said: “Excellent use of old infrastructure to leverage \$2 million in private investment.”

Category: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Winner: County of York

Entry: Next generation wastewater treatment project

The environmental health of York County waterways is vital to the livelihood of the county and surrounding areas for the economy, recreation, food, and healthy living. One of the key factors to healthy water is removal of detrimental nutrients, such as phosphorus and nitrogen, from the treated wastewater before it is returned to the water cycle. This is important because excess nitrogen causes algae blooms which consume oxygen needed for marine life. The need to reduce total nitrogen from the waterways is imperative, however, removing nitrogen from effluent can be costly.

To resolve this complex challenge, York County partnered with Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD) at the York River Treatment Plant (YRTP) to manage the wastewater and research nutrient reduction methods. After approximately 10 years of research, HRSD in partnership with DC Water developed an innovative method to upgrade existing systems at YRTP to remove nitrogen more efficiently from the wastewater. HRSD implemented the innovative full-scale Mainstream Partial Denitrification-Anammox (PdNA) process, the first facility in the world to remove a significant amount of nitrogen from the mainstream treatment system using anammox. This represents a paradigm shift for wastewater treatment, offering an opportunity to achieve sustainable nitrogen removal, energy neutral or even energy positive facilities, dramatic reductions in treatment costs, capacity benefits, and significant decreases in carbon footprint.

What the judges said: “Even someone without a background in wastewater management would be able to tell that this has innovative, significant benefits for the county’s residents.”

Category: RISK MANAGEMENT

Winner: City of Chesapeake

Entry: Route 168 Bypass Emergency Bridge Repairs

On May 11, 2023, a barge struck the underside of the southbound span of the Rt. 168 Great Bridge Bypass Bridge, damaging one of the girders. On May 12, city crews and consultants confirmed the damage then closed the outside lane, which resulted in traffic gridlock in the area, but was necessary to ensure public safety while city staff determined the repair plan. Public Works staff worked with a project consultant to determine the degree of damage and what repairs were necessary and developed and implemented traffic control plans to keep traffic moving as efficiently as possible.

Given that the bridge, a main route to the Outer Banks, normally carries nearly 70,000 vehicles daily off season and more during the summer, it was critical to move quickly. The city’s rapid, organized efforts enabled the consultant to identify one of only two contractors in the nation that could perform such a repair. Initial estimates were that it would take 30-60 days to complete the repairs and reopen the roadway, but the team’s efforts resulted in all repairs being performed, inspected, accepted and the roadway reopened a mere 13 days after receiving notification from the U.S. Coast Guard of the barge strike and in time for the busy Memorial Day traffic.

What the judges said: Planning for scenarios such as these can assist localities in identifying the resources, teams,



and action items needed to respond...Chesapeake's bridge repair response is something other localities could adapt."

Category: WORKING WITH YOUTH

Winner: City of Covington

Entry: AHPS School Consolidation Project

On July 1, 2022, Covington City Public Schools and Alleghany County Public Schools formed Alleghany Highlands Public Schools (AHPS). This merger occurred after years of preparation, public participation, and development of agreements, including shared funding agreements with both localities. The project emphasizes regional collaboration in the best interests of children and their education as well as economic and workforce development. The school consolidation builds upon regional collaborative efforts, including work of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism and the Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation.

Faced with a declining tax base and a lack of available land suitable for development given surrounding national forest and mountainous terrain, local leaders surmised that a key challenge was the fragmentation of resources across the localities of the Alleghany Highlands. Moreover, the region's history of being averse to collaboration complicated economic development despite the area's proximity to a community college as well as direct access to an interstate system and rail lines. The creation of AHPS can be viewed as a paradigm-shifting moment in the overall development of the region. By coming together to support children, its most precious resource, the Alleghany Highlands has created a best practice model of regional unity that supports a vital community.

What the judges said: "Impressive cooperative effort in a region that has had a difficult history of collaboration."

Category: COMMUNICATIONS

Winner: City of Williamsburg

Entry: "Future Festivals" Initiative to Inform Two-Year Plan

Every two years, the City of Williamsburg gathers public input as part of its two-year workplan, known as the Goals, Initiatives, and Outcomes (GIO) document. Due to COVID restrictions, the last time the city hosted in-person public input sessions was in 2018. That year, only about 50 residents — many of whom were familiar faces at city meetings — attended two sessions held in meeting rooms at a central location.

In the Fall of 2022, the City of Williamsburg hosted eight public input sessions called "Future Festivals". Attendees played games designed to gather feedback that would inform the development of the GIO document. To encourage attendance, the city implemented an extensive communication plan through news releases, videos, and recurring and varied social media promotions. In addition, Williamsburg police officers delivered fliers in the neighborhoods located near an upcoming Future Festival in the days ahead of the event.

In the end, more than 900 people attended Future Festivals, and more than 700 answered a GIO-related survey, resulting in more comprehensive data from a more diverse participant pool than ever before.

What the judges said: "Williamsburg's initiative was ambitious, had excellent quantifiable results, and involved a very significant commitment from the city staff from beginning to end."

Category: PUBLIC SAFETY

Winner: City of Manassas

Entry: Parent E3 Series

The Parent E3 Series is designed to Engage, Educate and Empower the City of Manassas' parents and caregivers to address at-risk behaviors affecting the city's youth. The program was created by the Manassas City Police Department's Community Vitality Officer, Thomas Rodriguez, to address concerns and problems with the community's at-risk youth population. The Manassas City Police Department (MCPD) created unique media kits for each program in the series designed to increase attendance at the event. The department partnered with the school system to develop language-inclusive content and on-site translations for Spanish-speaking residents, and to disseminate information about the program to parents in the community.

During the event, the MCPD offered dinner to all guests and volunteers through generous donations from the community's Kiwanis Club. Manassas City Public Schools offered childcare for parents with young children, to ensure everyone's basic needs were met so they could be fully present for the program. In addition to these efforts, MCPD also shared a video of the main lecture from each series on social media channels.

During the second installment of the series, five topics were selected for the 2022-2023 school year: Substance Abuse, Cyber Bullying/Internet Safety, Truancy/Absenteeism, and Mental Health. The Parent E3 Series' second installment saw significant improvements and overall participation more than doubled.

What the judges said: "The educational and problem-prevention approach of this excellent program is healthy and would work in any locality."