

President's Award Winner

Charlotte Lieu

Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School
Falls Church, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Charlotte Lieu



Falls Church City is a warm and welcoming city, filled with kind people and remarkable services. However, when I find myself getting up to throw away a wrapper during my school lunch break or when I go out to eat at restaurants in my hometown, I commonly notice significant amounts of food being thrown away. This issue is unfortunately under-discussed as food waste is a major problem in my city, and our squandered food should be put to much better use.

To investigate, I first asked my mom about her views on food waste as a Falls Church City resident. She told me that she estimates that the equivalent of two to four meals weekly goes to waste when she cooks at home; feeling guilty about this, she wishes there was a better way to save the food. She also pointed out that she had never really considered food waste at home before. Considering the restaurant perspective, I also interviewed Rebecca Tax, an owner of local restaurants Claire & Don's and Lazy Mike's, and she conveyed how she believes food waste is a serious problem, as many customers tend to leave a lot of food uneaten. She added that she's used composting to reduce her restaurants' food waste. Finally, I questioned a local Giant grocery worker, Anant, who told me his store throws away a good amount of food because all items that are not purchased one week before expiration dates are thrown into the trash.

Evidently, food waste is a problem that can be tackled. If I were mayor, I would propose many solutions for this problem. I would first organize a food donation program throughout the city, incentivizing grocery stores and farmer's markets to donate non-perishable, unsold food that is within a safe expiration window to the program. Individual citizens would also be able to contribute food donations, and a public social media campaign would spread the word. From there, the collected food would be prepared for redistribution to local homeless shelters, food banks, and charities. To get students interested in volunteering, and to fund the program's management, I would talk to the school board to negotiate a partnership with private corporations headquartered in northern Virginia to set up a scholarship initiative for Falls Church City high school students who dedicate a minimum of forty outside-of-school volunteer hours to the donation program annually.

Furthermore, as mayor, I would position compost bins outside of all our restaurants and schools. Over time, the organic compost would be sent to nourish our city's local garden and to support our urban forestry initiatives. Lastly, all constituents would be required to watch an informative PowerPoint on food waste, including what food can be composted, while also spreading awareness about how to help with at-home composting tutorials.

With all these ideas, I know Falls Church City can implement practical solutions to decrease food waste in our city, and as mayor, I would lead the way in our efforts to become more food conscious.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 1 Winner

Olivia Wyatt

Northwood Middle School
Saltville, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Olivia Wyatt



Saltville is a small town in southwest Virginia with several scenic views and good people. It does not have many places for recreational activities, but it has a lot of potential. However, Saltville is not perfect. There are some problems, perhaps the most important being that there is less care for the environment than needed. Saltville is a beautiful town, but litter is slowly consuming it.

Saltville's litter problem is more important than people realize. If I were mayor, I would take the initiative to fix this issue. I interviewed my parents about this issue, and they said that they have noticed that this has become a serious problem – and I agree. They said that trash cans and garbage pickup should be more widespread and accessible. If litter was reduced in Saltville, it would help a lot of people, plants, and animals to thrive. Not only would it help the environment, but it would have many other benefits. Property value would increase, it would make the town look better, and it would set a good example for the future generations of the town.

As mayor, I would fix this problem and take the advice of the citizens. I would hold public surveys to see in what ways the people of Saltville would prefer these problems to be handled – and to see if they approve of my ideas of ways to handle the problem. I would enact higher fines for littering in the town, make trash cans and recycling bins more accessible, and increase funds for garbage pickup around the town. I would hold a fundraiser for the town and organize an annual event to encourage the citizens of the town to help pick up trash. I hope that the people of Saltville would do their best to reduce the amount of litter by taking on the responsibility of waiting to get rid of their trash until they find a trash can, and disposing of recyclable materials such as plastic, paper, aluminum, metal, etc.

If I were mayor, I would try my best to do what is best for the citizens of Saltville: cleaning up the town.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 2 Winner

Jordin Hernández Machuca

Martinsville Middle School
Martinsville, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Jordin Hernández Machuca



According to American Community Survey Reports, five percent of all workers in the United States used public transportation in 2019. However, relying on public transportation for daily commutes and extracurricular travel can be very expensive for some people. This is particularly true for economically depressed areas like Martinsville, Virginia, where the charges for public transport have proven to be burdensome for many residents. If I were the mayor of Martinsville, I would make public transportation more affordable by marginally augmenting local taxes.

While speaking with my father, Walter Hernandez, about the cost of public transportation in Martinsville, he agrees that it is costly. In fact, he states: “Yes, it [public transportation in Martinsville] is expensive due to various taxes levied in the country.”

Ironically, however, as the mayor of Martinsville, I would slightly increase local taxes to reduce public transportation costs overall. More specifically, the money collected from the extra taxes on food and personal property would subsidize the price tag of using public transportation, such as the bus system, in the city. In so doing, the overall expense for utilizing any form of public transportation in Martinsville should decrease significantly. Therefore, the city residents would be able to keep more money in their pockets and pay for things they really need, such as food, clothes, housing, and health-promoting products and activities. However, my father offers another solution: “Well, what I would do to make public transportation less expensive is to maybe lower it to half the price.”

In conclusion, as the mayor of Martinsville, it would be a priority of mine to make public transportation more affordable for my constituents. One way I could accomplish this goal is to use increased tax revenue to lower the cost of public transportation by at least half of its current charge. Regardless of how the cost of public transportation is reduced, one thing is clear: it needs to be done to make transportation more affordable for all Martinsville residents.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 3 Winner Elizabeth Loring

**Sacred Heart Academy
Winchester, VA**



If I Were Mayor

By Elizabeth Loring



Hello, my name is Elizabeth Loring. I live in Winchester Virginia, and I am a seventh grader at Sacred Heart Academy. I want to tell you about one major problem Winchester is facing and how, if I was Mayor, I would solve it. The main problem I believe Winchester is facing is homelessness.

The biggest causes of homelessness are mental illness and addiction. According to the director of the Winchester Rescue Mission, ninety percent of people in the homeless shelter in Winchester have a mental illness. People with mental illnesses or addictions might struggle to keep a steady job or take care of themselves.

Another cause of homelessness is inadequate education or poor money management skills. This could be because they did not complete their education or were not taught to manage money correctly. Without these skills, people might not have the right credentials to get a job. People might not spend money on things they need, like food, and instead spend it on things they don't need.

A third cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing and increasing rents. The higher rents and housing prices go, the fewer people will be able to afford them. Even if people have a steady income, they still might not be able to pay rent or afford a house because their wages are not enough.

Since homelessness is caused by many factors, the solutions must be diverse. As Mayor, I would address this problem through indirect and direct solutions. I would encourage the City Council to allocate more money towards addiction and mental health services. I would also apply for government grants to fund these services. I would help raise awareness to help people understand more about homelessness. I would make sure the zoning and planning codes allowed for homeless shelters and affordable housing. I would also encourage construction companies to consider building more affordable housing.

There are many organizations that help with the homeless population, such as homeless shelters, churches, and social services. Schools also help homeless children. It's important to work with these organizations because they will have a lot of experience in this area. I would work with these organizations so they can give me ideas for more ways to solve homelessness. I would also encourage the nearby community college and banks to help people get better education and financial training.

In conclusion, I think some of the best ways to help with homelessness would be raising awareness, allocating more money towards mental health and addiction centers, ensuring zoning and planning codes allowed for homeless shelters and affordable housing, and working with other organizations. I would do this because as Mayor, I have to help everybody in my city as much as I can.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 4 Winner Kailey Krotzer

**Kenston Forest School
Blackstone, VA**



If I Were Mayor

By Kailey Krotzer



“If we’ve learned any lessons during the past few decades, perhaps the most important is that preservation of our environment is not a partisan challenge; it’s common sense. Our physical health, our social happiness, and our economic well-being will be sustained only by all of us working in partnership as thoughtful, effective stewards of our natural resources.”

- Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States.

Keeping our town clean is as important as our health and wellbeing. When we keep not just our homes but our community clean, our town is not only safer, but people become more lively. Therefore, if I were a mayor, I’d keep our town clean.

One way we can keep our town clean is by acting in the present. Gandhi said, “The future depends on what we do in the present.” It means that we need to act now, not tomorrow or the next day. We keep saying that we need to clean the environment, but when we keep delaying it our environment’s cleanliness rate declines. We need to all work together now to start our long journey to clean our town.

Another way that we can keep our town clean is by making a monthly pick up around the town. A local resident suggested this idea, and I believe it would be successful. It is our job to not get too proud and take care of what takes care of us: nature. We need to keep it clean so it can continue to thrive and help us go on with our daily lives. As the population grows nature experiences more neglect from us. We need to take care of our community because once it is gone, we won’t be able to get it back.

Although it’s a great idea, many people argue that it takes money from more crucial things. When we spend money cleaning our towns and neighborhoods, we lose focus on more important things like helping residents find homes and jobs. But when we clean our communities, we open more space for jobs and homes for residents. To help residents find jobs and homes we need to first clean up the communities we live in to give our residents a reason to enjoy and want to continue living in our town.

Cleaning up the environment is very important. We all know sadly that there will always be people who think that littering is okay. We also know though that there will always be people who want their hometown clean. As mayor, I will begin programs that keep my community clean and appealing.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 5 Winner

Rose Weatherly

Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School
Falls Church, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Rose Weatherly

Falls Church City, a 69.4% white town of 15,000 is exclusively affluent, inclusively minded, and values diversity. Every year, it's becoming more expensive to call it home. As mayor, my top priority would be to increase diversity by increasing affordable dwelling options. I would focus on two issues – the currently small number of affordable units and the condition of the few that do exist.

Falls Church has a handful of affordable units, but the number is shrinking due to the rise in house prices and affordable housing units expiring. The median sales price on houses in Falls Church increased by \$80,000 from 2021 to 2022 and from 2020 to 2021 the assessment on residential real estate rose 4.07%, resulting in increased property taxes. Rising prices make Falls Church more exclusive to affluent people. My solution is to increase the average percentage of proffers for affordable living from 6% to 9% and negotiate with developers for the units to remain affordable as long as the building stands. Proffers are money a developer gives a city following the construction of their building. Redirecting proffers towards affordable housing would result in less going towards schools, libraries, and sidewalks, but they have been recently updated here. If the increased proffers going to affordable units were negotiated to last for as long as the building stood, Falls Church would have more affordable units available and for a longer time. Vice Mayor Hardi, a long-time advocate for affordable housing, supports my proposal saying that as more developers come to Falls Church, proffers could dramatically increase the amount of affordable housing.

Secondly, as mayor, I would address the state of existing affordable dwellings. Some affordable units in Falls Church are unsafe but the landlords say they can only fix problems about which their tenants tell them. Sometimes this is hard for tenants because of their job schedules, language barriers or not being able to pay for a lawyer to help them. Some affordable units have been reported for rodents and mold, making for an unsafe home. Because Virginia laws protect landlords more than tenants, the city is powerless to force improvements. The existing Health and Human Services Department helps tenants talk to their landlords but it's not well-known. My solution is to remind tenants in unsafe homes of the assistance they can receive. I would also create and publicize a list of pro-bono lawyers willing to help tenants hold landlords accountable for their living conditions. Having the resources accessible would hopefully encourage tenants to demand safer living conditions. Vice Mayor Hardi supported my solution and said the city was working to be able to better support tenants, and a case has been taken to Richmond.

In conclusion, if I were mayor, I would help continue to build a more diverse and inclusive community by increasing the number and condition of affordable housing which would allow lower-income families to live in our town.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 6 Winner

Haley Lumpkin

Culpeper Middle School
Culpeper, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Haley Lumpkin



Culpeper, VA doesn't have many well-known recycling plants, and the plants we do have make us deliver our recyclable items to them. This causes people to think recycling things is a waste of time and resources, making our county less eco-friendly. If I was the mayor, I could find a solution to this problem, and hopefully help the town grow in a positive way.

I interviewed a community member and asked what they think we should do to save vital resources for both parties. They suggested that we repurpose the unused space at Culpepper Middle School's car-rider drop-off to make it easier to lessen recyclables and get students to school at the same time. You could say this would cost the companies time and money by having to take the time to drive out to us, but the benefits of the materials we provide should be sufficient cause to pick up our recyclable items.

Our recycling plants don't accept smaller items, they recycle cars, wood, metal, and things normal households don't usually have. This makes it hard to recycle and makes people think there isn't a place to put items that could be recyclable. Mayors have lots of different departments to run, and people could say this idea would waste a mayor's time, but this project could help small businesses in the recycling industry get out there and help people around the globe.

My last idea is to have recycling bins in areas with high foot traffic. Areas they could put these bins are public parks, movies, the downtown area, elementary schools, and fast-food chains/restaurants. These bins could be collected by volunteers and could help students in the National Junior Honor Society or the National Honor Society by adding to their hours. You could say relying on volunteers could end the process before it begins, but this idea could pull people in the community closer together, bringing up everyone's spirits.

In conclusion, helping the recycling community could bring great benefits and opportunities for everyone involved. If we go through with this plan, our recycling plants will get more use, and there will be less unnecessary waste at landfills. I hope that if I was mayor people would be more conscious of our waste issue.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT

Region 8 Winner

Sophia Buckley

Hugo A. Owens Middle School
Chesapeake, VA



If I Were Mayor

By Sophia Buckley

Since 1960, habitat loss has negatively affected natural ecosystems, biodiversity, and global warming. It is the 2nd largest human contributor to global warming. Recently in Chesapeake, a road was closed due to a mother bear and her 3 cubs napping in a nearby tree. Habitat loss is becoming a major problem, not only does it affect animals, but it also affects humans. If I were a mayor, I would do everything to protect my community.

Habitat loss is a problem because it decreases the range of certain populations of organisms. It can result in genetic diversity and the production of infertile youths. Land is being changed so we can use it for more intensive uses. Woodlands and pastures are being converted into subdivisions and shopping centers. It is estimated that over 93,000 acres of Virginia are converted to non-renewable uses each year.

Habitat loss affects humans by causing economic disruption and an increase in poverty. It also causes people to push into natural habitats and humans will start relying on wildlife for subsistence. It increases the spread of life-threatening diseases including malaria and dengue fever. Habitat loss affects animals by causing them to have no safe place to live, no healthy lifestyle, or no home at all. It increases the risk of predation, their food availability is reduced, and many of them are dying. This is one of the main causes of extinction and it is affecting the circle of life.

The person I asked said they would make places for certain animals to live, like shelters. I think this could work but I believe there are too many different animals and variations in their lifestyles. Doing this would not create a "wildlife" like lifestyle, it would be more of a house pet style. I think the best solution for this would be to make reservations where you are not allowed to build or visit. This is the best solution because this leaves plenty of room for growth for the animals and room for the humans to function in their daily lives. Making wildlife reservations that would be especially restricted for the animals to have their part of the world would be ideal. I think my idea is better because it leaves enough space for everyone, and it is a lot easier to conduct. While the other opinion is still good, it's less ideal and harder to do and it would change the way the animals function.

I believe that we should share this world with wildlife because habitat loss affects a lot more than you would think. When we take part in a solution to help solve this problem, we are positively changing our community. We have plenty of space to share with wildlife and we can create a happier, healthier, and better functioning community. As a mayor, I would create a better community starting with addressing habitat loss.



BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH
SOUND GOVERNMENT