



Virginia Municipal League Announces Winners of the 2021 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.

VML received nearly 70 entries, from which judges selected one winner in each of eight categories. One of the category winners will be chosen by VML President and City of Galax Mayor Willie Greene to receive the President's Award. The winner of the President's Award will be announced at VML's 2021 Annual Conference on October 3rd at the Lansdowne Resort in Leesburg.



Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy says: "We were overwhelmed by the incredible response from our member localities and very impressed by the attention to detail and care displayed in each submission. It's been an incredibly challenging time for local governments and these entries are just one more example of how Virginia's localities are meeting and overcoming those challenges. Thanks to everyone who submitted and congratulations to all the winners!"

The winners of the 2021 VML Innovation Awards are:

Category: COMMUNITY HEALTH

Winner: City of Galax

Project Light is a partnership between the City of Galax and God's Storehouse and Soup Kitchen operating out of the former Old Town Market building. The project serves as a community kitchen and soup kitchen, and food bank. The program has expanded to provide adult and child education support, addiction recovery counseling, and support and education programs. The Project Light partnership will soon add kitchen space for startup businesses, nutrition and food budgeting classes, small business development with shared office and workspace, and provide an expanded trained labor force to attract and support businesses in our area.

What the judges said: "A need in the community is being met through community action by providing meals, tutoring programs and helping those in need! And the success continues in the partnership's ongoing building fund!"

Category: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Winner: Town of Hillsboro

Hillsboro's ReThink9 Traffic-Calming, Pedestrian Safety and Infrastructure project has transformed the town. The story of how one of Virginia's smallest towns (120 residents) overcame the myriad challenges to fundamentally improve their community is a remarkable story of economic revitalization, local volunteer civic leadership, community engagement, and extraordinary collaboration among engineers, designers, tradesmen, and construction workers. The project has revitalized and restored Hillsboro's historic role as the hub for a robust agricultural economic region. Moreover, the improvements to Route 9 support Hillsboro's status as a gateway to Northern Virginia's thriving agritourism destinations of wineries, breweries, organic farming and farm-to-table dining, produce stands and local art and artisan studios.

What the judges said: "Tiny Town, Giant Accomplishment! A triumph of civic leadership and managerial excellence. This one has it all. I've done and seen many, many utility/streetscape projects, but none that comes close to what little Hillsboro has done!"

Category: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY**Winner: Town of Purcellville**

In 2020, the Town Council of Purcellville decided to transform 93.38 acres of land owned by the town into the largest municipality owned carbon sequestration and nutrient credit bank project in Northern Virginia. Engaging the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the town's management team applied for and obtained approval to develop the nutrient credit bank to support environmentally responsible development within the precious Chesapeake Bay Watershed. In May 2021, the Town of Purcellville planted 111,000 trees on the property. Based on current pricing of nutrient credits, the Town of Purcellville Nutrient Bank project is estimated to obtain over \$1 million of net revenue for the town. In addition, this project will enhance air quality in Purcellville and Northern Virginia, provide suitable habitat for wildlife and insect species native to VA and this physiographic region, and invite passive recreational activities for citizens and visitors.

What the judges said: "This was a great project that took minimal local resources to create an environmentally and financially successful project for the town. To generate a source of revenue from open land, and then use those funds to assist in your other utility needs is a great idea. With the continued impacts of stormwater regulations, this is also an economic development asset for the town. Great idea and definitely something that can be duplicated elsewhere."

Category: PUBLIC SAFETY**Winner: City of Chesapeake**

The Chesapeake Fire Department (CFD) has implemented a program that uses a team approach for cardiac care in the community. As part of the program, CFD seeks opportunities for continuous improvement through innovation, training, and connecting with our citizens. Prior to implementing the program, EMS was viewed as a separate entity from the hospital-based management of patients. Firefighters and paramedics were not part of a primary program for the recognition of cardiac events. Under the new program, CFD has begun using a multi-faceted approach to cardiac care in our community. The first is the implementation of the Verified Responder program. Second, CFD implemented T-CPR (dispatcher-assisted CPR instructions) and provides full pre-arrival instructions through ProQA. Third, CFD dispatches one or two police officers with an AED to all incidents of cardiac arrest. Fourth, CFD utilizes CODE-ST AT data review software for post incident critique of cardiac arrest events. Fifth, CFD subscribes to the CARES Registry (Cardiac Arrest Registry to Enhance Survival). Sixth, CFD's EMS Division is part of the Chest Pain Review Committees with the regional hospital systems.

What the judges said: "Chesapeake Fire Department has submitted a technically detailed entry of their highly professional and comprehensive emergency Cardiac Care program. The program has won a national award from the International Fire Chief's Association. The program contains a number of innovative features...[and] demonstrates deep use of local resources."

Category: WORKING WITH YOUTH**Winner: City of Roanoke**

The Star City Reads program works to combat literacy challenges by ensuring that all our city's children have access to books beginning at birth. From July 2020 until June 2021, the placed 19,764 books into the hands of at-risk children. This was a nearly 40% increase from the previous year. Given the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, family literacy became more important as many children in the community needed to learn at home. Through virtual story times and STEM activities the program adapted to reach more families. Curbside literacy kits provided families with books, educational opportunities, and at home activities. Moreover, the libraries developed a state-of-the-art neighborhood E-branch for literacy programs, children's activities, and educational materials in a friendly outdoor environment. The program also distributed books and educational materials at the Melrose Fall Festival in October 2020 and at the new Read and Ready Festival in June 2021. With thirty-three community partnerships, Star City Reads increased its presence in the community to distribute a record number of books to children in need this past year.

What the judges said: "I think this was a great example of a collaborative solution by using so many partners to create the program and continue its success. They have seen a huge impact in graduation rates since inception. The fact that they have gathered so many community partners that are beyond local government shows the impact and success it has created. I think this is program can be scaled up or down to a community size."

**Category: COMMUNICATIONS****Winner: Town of Wytheville**

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the mandates set forth by the Governor's Office regarding gatherings, Wytheville Town Council had to make the hard decision to not hold its popular annual Christmas Parade and weekend of holiday events in 2020 because the crowds that would normally line Main Street would have far exceeded the restriction numbers. There was a need to creatively make the situation festive and enjoyable while staying safe and healthy. The Wytheville Christmas Show was designed to allow the community to come together virtually, and to invite friends and relatives near and far, and to take a few moments away from the stress and sadness of 2020 to smile. Citizens "needed a little Christmas" and the Wytheville Christmas Show video was created to fill that need. It was released on YouTube and via social media. The 40-minute presentation included performances and interesting segments from some of the most talented people in the community. It was a little taste of the festivities that would normally have been experienced live and in person during the holiday season.

What the judges said: "The entire town of Wytheville is commended for sharing it's creative and innovative message during the awful year of Covid! What a great way to involve so many – the citizens, Wytheville town departments, schools, and businesses – in spreading Christmas joy in a safe yet beautiful venue. And the video reached so many even beyond the town limits!"

Category: Risk Management**Winner: City of Williamsburg**

Within the span of five weeks the City of Williamsburg's Voter Registrar organized two drive-thru elections, consolidating the City's two physical voting locations into a single drive-thru system at the Williamsburg Fire Department. The City used this drive-thru system for the City Council election on May 19, 2020, and the Virginia Republican Primary for U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives on June 23, 2020. (The City did not have a Democratic Primary race last June.) This system included a robust campaign to encourage voters to vote absentee and allowed residents to feel safe as they exercised their right to vote amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic. The two precincts were split between the two bays of the fire station; a ballot box was set up for walk-up voters, as well. Voters filled out their ballots and handed them to an election officer, who put them into the ballot box in full view of the voter, who remained inside the car. City employees made up the majority of the roughly 40 volunteer election officers, who split the work into two shifts. The volunteers wore masks and gloves, issued disposable pens and privacy screens to the voters, cleaned clipboards after each voter's use, and sanitized their hands after handling each ballot.

What the judges said: "What an ingenious and effective use of existing resources to manage the health risks associated with an essential civic event! After a year of not feeling safe doing ordinary things, the citizens of Williamsburg were given the option to exercise their right to vote *and* to feel safe doing it. The measurable results shown in the number of citizens who used the drive-thru option show that this innovative approach not only worked for Williamsburg but also could be easily replicated elsewhere."

Category: Local Champion**Winner: Town of Vienna – Town Manager Mercury T. Payton**

In 2020, during the height of unrest following the murder of George Floyd, Town of Vienna Manager Mercury Payton felt that he had to take some action to help bring our community together. He came up with the idea of creating a celebration of the four "Liberty" amendments to our constitution which extended our individual rights and liberties. Originally conceived as a one day commemoration, Mercury pivoted to a month long celebration after the state declared Juneteenth a state-wide holiday, with one week devoted to each of the four liberty extending amendments – the 13th, which abolished slavery*, the 14th, which granted due process and equal protection under the law to all citizens, the 15th, which granted black males with the right to vote, and the 19th which guaranteed women the right to vote.

Vienna's inaugural Liberty Amendments Month kicked off on Juneteenth, with speeches and a large outdoor event at the First Baptist Church and ended with a multicultural street fair and celebration on July 17. The dates of LAM were deliberately chosen so that the 4th of July would fall in the middle.



Working through our local representatives and the Black Caucus, Mercury was successful in getting LAM declared a state-wide commemoration. In Vienna, LAM certainly has been a community builder. Over 30 different organizations have come together to offer over 30 different events in our inaugural LAM celebration. The events cover a broad scope of disciplines, including art, music, dance, education, and lectures. Finally, LAM has enhanced Vienna's image as a progressive and caring community, dedicated to equality and justice for all.

**VML Note – It's important to remember that many communities in Southwest Virginia and the surrounding region celebrate August 8th as "Emancipation Day" since it is considered the date on which news of the 13th Amendment reached those remote areas.*

What the judges said: "Wow! Town Manager Payton really hit a home run with this idea. This is an excellent example of a community leader recognizing a need, finding a fantastic solution, and then giving 110% to make it happen. A big success for Vienna and for all Virginians!"

VML congratulates each of these local governments for demonstrating innovation in service to its citizens. The awards will be presented on October 3rd at the 2021 VML Annual Conference in Leesburg. VML President Willie Greene, Mayor of the City of Galax, will present the awards.