

THE MAGAZINE OF THE
VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE

Learning in a year like no other

Inside:

Read the
winning essays

Stories
from school
superintendents

Schools as a
community
catalyst

Tech lessons
we all had to
learn this year

...and more!



Statewide Winner

Laila Beck-Covington





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ABOUT THE COVER

Thanks to the students, teachers, administrators, and staff who kept the light of learning burning this year! In this issue we hear what some of them have to say about the 2020-2021 school year and get some perspective on the future of learning.

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ARPA: Making the best of it!

I'M WRITING THIS on May 19th and like many of our towns, I am still waiting to hear how much money each of you will receive from the Federal Government. Over the last couple of days there were presentations by the House and Senate money committees – where the members echoed this sentiment but were also quick to say they would get the money to the localities “quickly.” It is fair to ask: Just how quickly is “quickly” and what will the towns have to do to get the money? The answer: No guidance yet.

Hopefully by the time you read this, that guidance will have arrived, and we will be working with you to make the best use of it!

To that end, VML has asked the Governor's Office to form a task force including state and local officials to make sure that we are using each dollar to its highest and best use. VML President Willie Greene, Mayor of Galax and Jeff McKay, Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors wrote a wonderful op-ed piece in support of our request that ran in the May 13th edition of the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. In that article, they observed that “ARPA is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make fundamental improvements to our infrastructure and to provide crucial help to our residents, businesses and schools that could have impact far beyond the immediate crisis. We must ensure that every dollar received is working to the fullest benefit of all Virginians.”

Keep your fingers crossed.

Ironically, the day before he lifted the mask mandate VML sent a letter to the Governor's Office asking that he consider presenting a timeline of when various items listed in the State of Emergency will end. These items included matters of importance to local governments such as electronic meetings, the eviction moratorium, utility shut offs, and more. I am hopeful

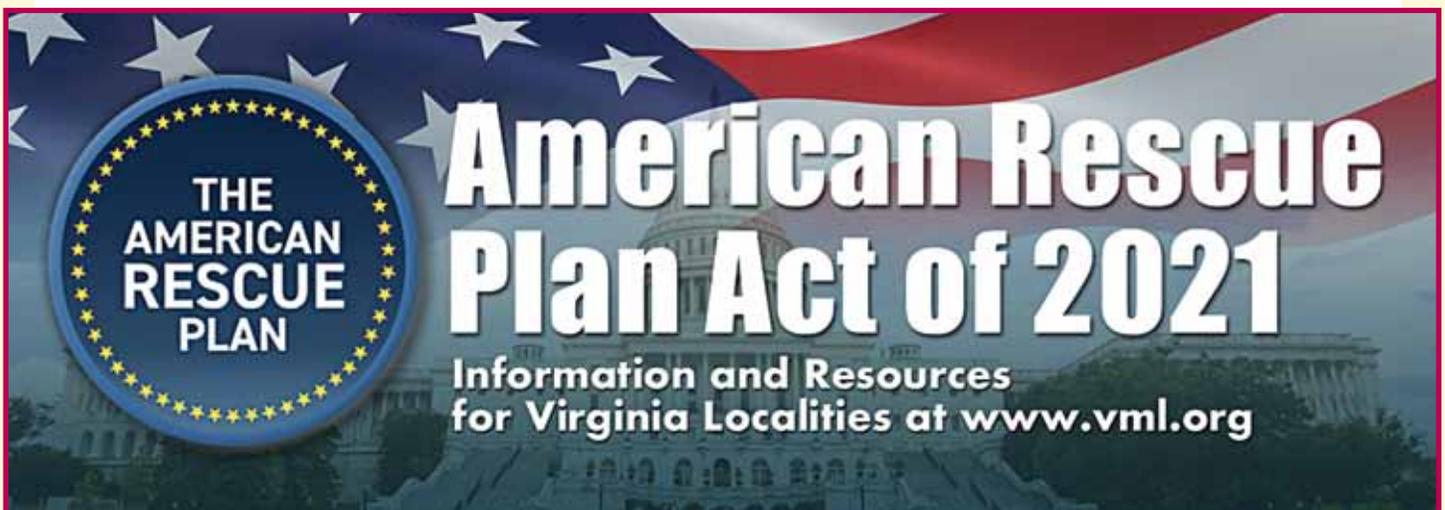
that the administration understands that all these things should not be ended without due notice to localities. As you know, the lifting of the mask mandate was attended by a lot of confusion. Hopefully, the right people learned a lesson about looping in localities *before* announcing big changes such as these. VML believes that it is in all our best interests to be deliberate about the process of getting back to normal.

And it does look like we are on the road back to normal! With the easing of restrictions, it is time to plan the VML Conference which will be held in Loudoun County featuring the Towns of Loudoun. The articles about each town in *Virginia Town & City* have been so much fun to read and I can't wait to visit all of them again. We expect that registration for this event will open sometime in mid-June. I don't think I'm alone in saying that it will be so nice to be together once again!

One thing that will be a little different this year is that the Mayors Institute, normally held just prior to the conference, will be held in the summer during the second week of July in conjunction with the Newly Elected Officials event. This is a change to accommodate the venue and to try something new; more details will be available shortly.

Finally, returning to ARPA (as all things seem to do these days), please know that as guidance from Treasury becomes available VML will distribute it to our members. Furthermore, in the coming weeks there will be resources and webinars on what the guidance means, how to use the money, and other relevant items of interest. They will all be announced via *eNews* and listed on our website at www.vml.org/american-rescue-plan-act-resources.

Let's spend this money in the best way to better our communities. Thank you for all you do!



- July 15, 2021** **Newly Elected Officials Conference**
Omni Hotel, 212 Ridge McIntire Rd, Charlottesville, VA 22903
- July 15-16, 2021** **Virginia Mayors Institute**
Omni Hotel, 212 Ridge McIntire Rd, Charlottesville, VA 22903
- Oct. 3 - 5, 2021** **Virginia Municipal League Annual Conference**
Lansdowne Resort, 44050 Woodridge Pkwy, Leesburg, VA 20176

PEOPLE

Blacksburg Town Clerk Boone-Caldwell retiring after 41 years

In a letter to the Blacksburg Town Council, Town Clerk **Donna Boone-Caldwell**



announced she would be retiring on August 1 after 41 years of service. Boone-Caldwell said the decision was not an easy one to make, but the timing is right. "I have enjoyed a wonderful career and I'm grateful for the professional opportunities the town has provided me, in addition to the many friendships that I have been blessed with over the years."

When Boone-Caldwell started her clerk career in 1980, she had little experience with local government. "I limped along, valued input from all who were willing to give, and forged ahead." With a bit of help from her colleagues and Mayor Torchy Walrath, she soon took ownership and excelled in her position.

In Boone-Caldwell's 41-year tenure, there have been four mayors, five town managers and 30 different members of town council. Some of her most vivid memories include the launch of Blacksburg Transit; vision and revitalization projects in Downtown Blacksburg; arrival of the internet with the Blacksburg Electric Village; the town's Bicentennial Celebration; Tour DuPont races through Blacksburg; community shock and healing from April 16, 2007; and, most recently, how well Blacksburg navigated the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for the changes that she has seen, Boone-Caldwell said it has been a wonderful experience. "So much has changed since my first day on the job. Without a doubt, the secret to my longevity has been the willingness to accept change and roll with the flow," she said.



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Do you know someone who's on the move? Send your announcements about new hires in local government, promotions, retirements, awards and honors to Rob Bullington at rbullington@vml.org.

PEOPLE

"I know I will miss my colleagues and co-workers, but I leave feeling that my 41 years were well spent with very few regrets. Times shared, friendships forged, and a great feeling of accomplishment has prepared me for my next chapter."

Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission Executive Director Strickland to retire after 42 years

Wayne Strickland, who directs the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, plans to retire at the end of June after 42 years. Strickland was hired in 1979 as a regional planner. He became chief of land use and environmental planning and later executive director.



- Strickland -

In a press release, Commission Chair Bradley Grose said that Strickland "has always conducted himself in a gentlemanly manner as he has provided steady leadership for the Regional Commission. Wayne's leadership, intelligence, and effectiveness are highly respected in our region and throughout the state."

Governmental authorities on access to broadband and water and sewage treatment as well as the greenway program began during Strickland's tenure and drew commission support.

The regional commission dedicates itself to fostering region-wide approaches to problems and issues that impact more than one county, city, or town. The commission's member governments are the counties of Alleghany, Botetourt, Craig, Franklin and Roanoke; the cities of Covington, Roanoke and Salem; and the towns of Clifton Forge, Rocky Mount and Vinton.

McAlister begins as the Town of Grottoes new manager

Stefanie McAlister, a native of Augusta County and former Rockingham County employee, began work as the town manager for Grottoes on May 10. She replaced Joseph S. Paxton, executive manager of the Berkley Group and retired Rockingham County administrator, who has



- McAlister -

served as interim town manager on a part-time basis since November 30, 2020.

In a press release, McAlister, who moved from Richmond to take the job, said she is looking forward to working with the town. "I think we got a great opportunity here," she said.

Also in the press release, Mayor Jo Plaster said she was delighted to welcome McAlister to the Grottoes community and looked forward to working with her.

"The town is fortunate to have Ms. McAlister join the town, as she has experienced success at both the state and local government level," she said. "During the interview process, we were impressed with her ability to relate to council and with town employees. Her experience and knowledge of the local area, both as a native of the area and from her time at Rockingham County, makes her an excellent fit for our community."

McAlister graduated from James Madison University and worked as a planner for Rockingham County from 1995 to 2009. She most recently served in the Virginia Department of Emergency Management as an operations manager of the 911 and Geospatial Services Bureau and was director of its regional outreach division from 2018 to present.

Lexington welcomes new Police Chief Greene

On May 10, **Angela Greene** began as the City of Lexington's new police chief. She replaces Mike Frost who has served as interim police chief since October 2020.



- Greene -

Greene joins the Lexington Police Department following an extensive recruitment process led by the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police (VACP). With 20 years of law enforcement experience, and eight of those years in senior leadership positions, Greene brings a wealth of knowledge to her new role. She most recently served as chief of police for the City of Portsmouth.

In a press release, Greene stated, "I am ecstatic to become a part of the Lexington family, and for the privilege to lead the honorable men and women of the Lexington Police Department. Working in partnership with our community, we will continue the successes in public safety that the city has enjoyed over the years, while elevating the levels of community collaboration and improving the quality of life for everyone."

City Manager Jim Halasz said, "I am

thrilled that Angela will be joining our city team and the community, as our next chief of police."

Chief Greene is a native of New Jersey where she was born to immigrant parents. Greene holds a Bachelor of Arts in pre-law and political science from Fairleigh Dickinson University and is currently obtaining her Master's in public administration from Old Dominion University. She is also a member of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police and the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Dewberry hires former local government staffer Kilduff

Dewberry, a privately held professional services firm, has announced that **Todd Kilduff**, PE, has joined the firm as an associate and senior project manager based in the firm's Richmond, Virginia, office. Prior to joining Dewberry, Kilduff served as the deputy county administrator for community and economic development in Goochland County.



- Kilduff -

According to the press release, Kilduff joins the firm to support its expansion in the commercial and economic development markets. He will aid in the alignment of the firm's national strategies to local business development activities, and work to continue diversifying Dewberry's portfolio across Virginia.

Kilduff earned a Bachelor's in environmental analysis and planning with a minor in biology from Frostburg State University and is a registered professional engineer in Virginia. He is a member of the Virginia Local Government Management Association, Virginia Rural Water Association, Virginia Association of Municipal Wastewater Agencies, International County/City Management Association, and the American Water Works Association. In addition, Kilduff is a 2019 graduate of Leadership Metro Richmond, a 2018 graduate of the Virginia Commonwealth University's Certified Planning Commissioner Program, and a member of the Bon Secours Community Advisory Council.

McCulloch is the Town of Buchanan's new manager

On April 12, **Susan McCulloch** began work as the town manager for the Town of Buchanan. She replaces Jon Ellestad who was serving as interim town manager after former town manager Janson Tyree resigned. In her new position, McCulloch will oversee the day-to-day operations of the



- McCulloch -

town government and work with the mayor and council to implement their strategic vision for the community.

In a press release, McCulloch stated, "Buchanan is a beautiful town with so much to offer. Its leadership has some terrific goals, and I'm excited to get started."

Buchanan Mayor Craig Bryant expressed support for McCulloch. "We are thrilled to have someone with Susan's extensive education and community and economic development background coming to Buchanan," said Mayor Bryant. "Her

passion for local government and helping communities grow will be a huge benefit to the town."

McCulloch is originally from New Hampshire and moved to Virginia to attend Averett University for its equestrian studies program. In her own words, she stayed because she fell in love with Virginia's mountains, towns, rivers, beaches, and strong yet hospitable people.

McCulloch holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Old Dominion University and comes to Buchanan after serving for the past two years as the economic development project manager for Pittsylvania County. In that role, she helped recruit companies to Danville and Pittsylvania County, and was part of a team that attracted nearly \$483 million in capital investment and created 1,557 jobs. She also was the program manager for Pittsylvania's Business Assistance Fund.

Prior to her time with Pittsylvania County, McCulloch spent over 10 years with the City of Martinsville as the community planner and zoning administrator, focusing on redevelopment and community renewal projects. She also has experience with community organizations while working for and leading the Martinsville Uptown Revitalization Association.

Gallop is the City of Norfolk's new director of human services

Denise Gallop has taken the position of director of human services for the City of Norfolk. She has served as interim director since 2020. According to the accompanying press release, under Gallops leadership, Human Services employees have found innovative ways to ensure Norfolk's most vulnerable residents have access to services during the pandemic. Her team's rapid response led to a record number of benefits processed on time.



- Gallop -

Gallop is also credited with getting state legislation passed that will help the city better monitor in home day care. In 2020, the department had the highest number of adoptions in the region.

Gallop holds a Master's in social work from Norfolk State University.

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PEOPLE

Grier named Roanoke's deputy city manager; Stovall retires



- Grier -

Clarence G. Grier has been named deputy city manager for the City of Roanoke. Grier will replace **Sherman Stovall** who is retiring from the position after 27 years of service. Stovall was named deputy city manager in August 2020, having served as assistant city manager for operations since 2010. He also served as acting city manager from July to September in 2017, during the period between the departure of city manager Chris Morrill and the arrival of City Manager Bob Cowell. Prior to his service in the City Manager's Office, he worked



- Stovall -

in positions within the Office of Management and Budget, including as its Director from 2004 to 2010.

In his new role, Grier will assume the responsibility of managing and directing city departments, public safety agencies, and programs based on general direction and policy of the city manager and council.

Grier and his wife have family in Roanoke, and his first job after college was in the area. He was a high school and college basketball star and was drafted by the NBA's Houston Rockets in 1987.

In a press release, Grier cited his ties to the area. "I am excited and truly honored to be provided the opportunity to return to the Star City where my career began and serve the citizens of the City of Roanoke. Roanoke is very dear to me both personally and professionally," said Grier.

Most recently, Grier served Guilford County, N.C. as deputy county manager, where he supervised nine departments: Animal Services, Child Support Enforcement,

Emergency Services, Family Justice Center, Fleet Operations, Information Services, Purchasing, Risk Management and Minority Women Business Enterprises. His local government experience also includes service as assistant county manager-chief finance officer for Orange County, N.C. and as director of finance for the Greensboro Housing Authority.

Grier holds a Bachelor's in business administration from Campbell University. He is a Certified Public Accountant, an AICPA Chartered Global Management Accountant and an AICPA Certified Information Technology Professional.

Correction: In the April issue of VTC, we were pleased to acknowledge **Robert Tang** as the new Director of Finance for the Town of Herndon. However, the photo included in that article was incorrect. We apologize for the error.



The VML Voice is the official podcast of the Virginia Municipal League. Each episode explores a different locality or issue but the focus is always on Virginia and the local governments that make the Commonwealth work for everyone.

Contact Rob Bullington, rbullington@vml.org to suggest topics, ask questions, or inquire about sponsorship opportunities.

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Town of Front Royal, Chamber of Commerce work to kickstart small business as part of economic recovery

THE TOWN OF FRONT ROYAL and the Front Royal Warren County Chamber of Commerce are partnering to offer small business consulting services in an effort to help kickstart small businesses in the area.

The services, which are tailored to meet each individual business owner's needs, will be available until April 2022. The business does not need to be a member of the Front Royal Warren County Chamber of Commerce to use the program.

In a press release, President of the Front Royal- Warren County Chamber of Commerce Niki Foster stated, "Part of the Chamber's mission is to connect business with the resources they need to be successful and encourage growth. We are excited to team with the Town of Front Royal to move forward from the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 crisis. This is just part of what our organization does to help businesses thrive in our community."

Prospective and existing business owners located in Warren County and Front Royal interested in using the services can contact consulting specialist Herb Melrath at hmelrath@frontroyalchamber.com to schedule an appointment.



Good news out of Petersburg

New bioscience jobs in the works

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Petersburg was pleased to announce that several bioscience businesses would be coming to the city and/or building new facilities. This month, Governor Northam announced that one of those companies, Ampac Fine Chemicals (AFC), would be expanding by investing \$24.5 million at its new 200-acre Petersburg campus which will create 156 new jobs.

AFC is in the supply chain for creating the chemicals needed for producing new drugs. Another Petersburg-based bioscience company, Phlow, develops drugs and vaccines from the compounds produced by AFC. Finally, Civica Rx, which is building a \$124 million facility, will distribute these drugs and vaccines directly via syringes or vials to hospitals across the country.

Library welcomes new Tech Knowledge bus



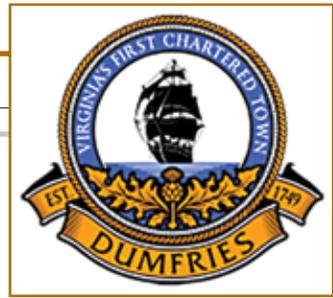
PETERSBURG PUBLIC LIBRARY has been included in a select group of 20 Virginia libraries to be awarded a CARES subgrant and this funding has been used for the new Petersburg Public Library Tech Knowledge Bus.

The Tech Bus will take internet access and select library services to various neighborhoods around Petersburg while the library is still closed to the public due to COVID-19.

As the library is a primary resource for providing internet access to community members, the Tech Knowledge Bus is equipped with laptops and library books. Visitors will have the ability to check out books, print and fax documents, register for library cards, and connect to WiFi that extends to anyone within 300 feet of the bus.

The Petersburg Public Library hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony on May 13 when the first neighborhood experienced the Tech Knowledge Bus.





Dumfries welcomes information management firm Neubus

THERE'S A NEW BUSINESS coming to the Town of Dumfries! Neubus, which provides turnkey imaging and document management solutions to help government agencies capture, store, manage, and share information, will be opening their East Coast office in Dumfries.

In a press release, Town Manager Keith Rogers, Jr. stated "We are thrilled to welcome Neubus to Dumfries. Our strategic location in the DC Metro area and logistical midpoint on the East Coast were some of the factors that attracted them. This move is directly aligned with our economic development goals."

Founded in Austin, Texas, Neubus is one of the few document management companies that complies with the strictest security

standards across government agencies, including CJIS and HIP-PA. These security processes and procedures are employed across some of the largest Federal and State agencies in the nation.

Mayor Derrick Wood credited the work of town staff in the firm's choice of Dumfries. "Growth is never by chance," observed Woods. "It's the result of a vision and having the right team to help execute it. Neubus choosing our town is evidence of our vision for Dumfries becoming a destination place, not only for visitors – but also for business."

Neubus will be located in the John Wilmer Porter Municipal Building and plans to begin local operations this month.

DEQ accepting applications for Clean School Bus Program

THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT of Environmental Quality (DEQ) will award \$20 million to Virginia public schools from the Volkswagen Environmental Mitigation Trust through two rounds of competitive application processes. The grants will fund the price difference between a battery electric bus or a propane bus

and equivalent diesel bus, up to \$265,000 per electric bus and associated charger and customer-side installation or up to \$20,000 per propane bus.

Applicants must be in a Virginia public school district. Private schools, public charter schools, private transportation companies and non-profit agencies are not eligible to apply. Applications are due no later June 25, 2021 at 5:00 p.m. Awards will be announced in July 2021.

The Volkswagen Environmental Mitigation Trust was established following settlements resolving allegations that Volkswagen violated the Clean Air Act through the use of emission testing defeat devices designed to cheat on federal emissions tests.

The applications and required attachments are available on DEQ's Volkswagen webpage:

www.deq.virginia.gov/get-involved/topics-of-interest/volkswagen-settlement-agreement



Solarize Charlottesville campaign open until June 30

THE SOLARIZE CHARLOTTESVILLE campaign is live! Residents who sign up for the campaign will receive a free solar assessment and will be eligible for a free home energy assessment by a certified residential building analyst.

Recently, the City of Charlottesville announced that Alteryx and Virtue Solar have been chosen as its selected installation partners for the Solarize Charlottesville campaign. Participants will be connected with one of these installers based on their geographic region.

Solarize Charlottesville is presented in partnership with the City of Charlottesville Climate Protection Program. More information about the Charlottesville campaign is available at **www.solarizeva.org/solarize-charlottesville**.

Solarize Virginia is a community-based outreach initiative that

reduces the cost and complexity of going solar by providing a one-stop-shop for education and installation. Managed by the Virginia nonprofit Local Energy Alliance Program (LEAP), the program offers discounted prices and vetted installers through a competitive bidding process, and provides ongoing customer support and education to make the experience as streamlined as possible.

The program is executed in partnership with local governments, and other supporters. Those interested in a campaign in their area should send an inquiry to **info@solarizenova.org**.



Fredericksburg's long wait is over... it's finally time to play ball!

EXACTLY ONE YEAR AGO, in the May 2020 issue of *Virginia Town & City*, we ran an article about Fredericksburg's new baseball stadium and its team the "FredNats." Construction on the stadium had begun in July of 2019 and it was ready for the 2020 season. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it remained uncertain when Opening Day would be. As we reported at the time, city and team officials were hopeful that Opening Day would be sometime that summer. That proved to be too optimistic. However, on May 11, 2021 – after almost two years of waiting



– the City of Fredericksburg was thrilled to host the home opener for the FredNats at their new ballpark!

It was well worth the wait. On Opening Day, the team welcomed over 2,000 fans at 30 percent capacity. During the game against the Delmarva Shorebirds, outfielder #15 Jake Randa hit the first ever home run at FredNats Ballpark. Although the FredNats fell short to the Delmarva Shorebirds 7-5, the energy inside the ballpark from the fans was electric!

And while the return of baseball is a welcome sign of normal life, fans were reminded of a few safety measures still in place to ensure everyone was happy, healthy, and comfortable:

- Major League Baseball requires everyone inside the ballpark to always wear a mask except for when eating or drinking.
- All seating is in pods six feet apart
- The stadium is 100 percent cashless

Anyone interested in finding out more about the FredNats is encouraged to visit www.frednats.com. Go FredNats!

Danville announces project to redevelop White Mill

CITY OF DANVILLE officials recently announced a project partnership to redevelop the iconic White Mill building on Memorial Drive into a multi-use project that initially will feature 110,000 square feet of commercial space and 150 apartments. Another 100 apartments are planned in a future phase.



The joint venture between the Danville Industrial Development Authority and The Alexander Company includes other key components, including an easement over approximately 1.12 acres of land fronting the Dan River for the extension of the Riverwalk Trail; plans to use the canal on the south side of

the building as a whitewater feature; and, plans to restore the covered bridge that spans the river from the north side of the White Mill building to the former Long Mill site.

"This is a transformational project for our city, and it is only fitting that we make this announcement nearly 100 years after construction was completed on this building, which served as Dan River Mill No. 8, but we know better simply as the White Mill," Mayor Alonzo Jones said in a press release.

The project is set to be completed in the summer of 2023.



With the release of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funds, local governments have the opportunity to address the economic fallout and unequal impact of COVID-19. This is an incredible opportunity to increase trust in local government and tell your community's story of recovery. The Berkley Group can help your community develop a roadmap to maximize return on investment and take the pressure off of managing all aspects of the funds and projects by offering the following services:

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- Strategic Planning;
- Capital Improvement Planning;
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Learning in a year like no other



By Rob Bullington

WELCOME TO THE MAY ISSUE of *Virginia Town & City*. This time every year we look at the state of education in Virginia. Last year, we took the opportunity to ask Virginia educators from pre-K to college to tell us about their experiences as schools suddenly closed and went virtual. At the time, many people hoped kids could return to their classrooms in the fall – and some were able to do so. Most, of course, needed to continue to work remotely at least part of the year. The only saving grace was that teachers and administrators had the summer months to prepare.

So much for summers off!

And then the new school year arrived with different school systems trying different approaches and often needing to adjust as the pandemic waxed and waned. It is fair to conclude that the state of education in Virginia this year was literally all over the map. However, it would be wrong to say that the 2020-2021 academic year was crazy. Rather, it is more accurate to say the past academic year *could have been even crazier* if it were not for the perseverance of students, the dedication of teachers, and the steady guidance from principals and superintendents not to mention the flexibility and hard work of staff and support personnel. All of them deserve praise for keeping the light of learning burning bright during a dark time. Thank you one and all!

As we (finally) exit the pandemic tunnel, we can say with confidence that we've all learned something on our journey. And that's what this issue is all about!

First, we hear from our 2021 "If I Were Mayor" essay contest winners. This year we asked 7th graders across Virginia to tell us what it was like to be a student during a pandemic. How did their school system and teachers adapt? What worked for them? What didn't work? And the kids came through for us! We had so many great responses – some expressing very strong opinions – that made selecting this year's winners particularly difficult. In the end, though, these are the 7th graders who rose to the top:

- **Statewide Winner: Laila Beck-Covington** of the Spratley Gifted Center in Hampton

- **Region 2: Marjorie Davis** of Martinsville Middle School in Martinsville
- **Region 5: Claire Weatherly** of Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School in Falls Church
- **Region 6: Matthew Ezrre** of Culpeper Middle in Culpeper
- **Region 7: Erin Moore** of Liberty Middle School in Ashland
- **Region 8: Dallas Barringer** of Montross Middle School in Montross

Note: Regions 1, 3 and 4 did not participate this year.

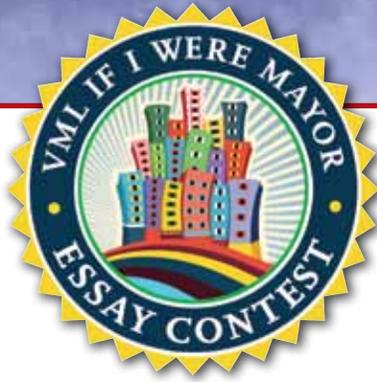
But this wasn't a year for just the kids to get educated. We think you'll agree after reading the essays by four of Virginia's school district superintendents that everyone involved in schooling learned something new. We're pleased to present the thoughts of the following school superintendents:

- **Keith Perrigan** – Bristol Virginia Public Schools
- **Aaron C. Spence** – Virginia Beach City Public Schools
- **Phyllis Pajardo** – City of Fairfax Schools
- **Susan Tilley** – Galax City Public Schools

We also wanted to take this opportunity to look at something positive (and completely unrelated to the pandemic, for a change) happening in Virginia's schools. **Rob Winstead** from VMDO Architects was happy to oblige with a piece on two new school buildings in Virginia designed by his firm that are setting a whole new standard for learning environments and garnering national and international attention.

Finally, to acknowledge that this was a year in which many of us (present company included) felt like we were back in school because we had to learn so many new ways of doing our job, we asked VC3's **Kevin Howarth** to summarize all the tech lessons we've picked up since March of 2020.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together. Class is now in session!



Statewide Winner

Laila Beck-Covington

Spratley Gifted Center
Hampton, VA



AS A SOCIETY, we have had to adapt to the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. No matter what your role in society may be, you've most likely done something virtual. In an attempt to keep life going while protecting ourselves, most of what we do has had to be done from home. Many adults work from home, and students have had to attend school

from home. With this new virtual schooling experience come both pros and cons. If I were mayor, I would implement the positive and improve the negative to better the day-to-day school experience.

During the pandemic, most middle and high schools have given the students time to catch up on work and to have private conferences with their teachers. In my school district, remediation or catch-up day is every Friday. In other school districts, remediation time may be provided on another day. Either way, this remediation time is both helpful and necessary. It provides a time for students to complete assignments and to receive the extra help they need. Remediation also allows students the time to plan and schedule for the upcoming week. I have used these Fridays to complete any unfinished assignments and to meet with my teachers. It has been beneficial to me and others because we can address any missing assignments that are due and use the extra day to get work done ahead of time. For these reasons, the new remediation day is a positive that should be maintained.

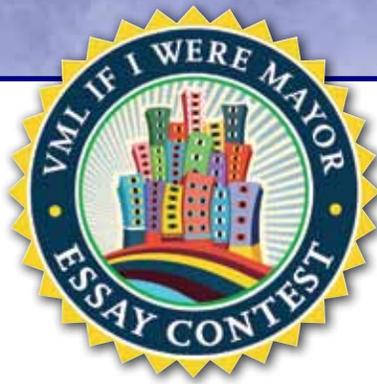
While virtual school has its perks, it also has its downsides. As we all know, without the Internet, technical devices are useless. Unfortunately, several students across the state of Virginia don't have access to the Internet or have slow Internet connections. This is an issue because it can cause students to miss classes and miss instruction due to a lost connection. Students with an unreliable connection are often kicked out of Zoom or Google Hangouts, and they often miss important information while trying to reconnect. Not only do Internet complications interfere with classes, but they also prevent students and teachers from completing the necessary work to continue being productive. Due to Covid-19, work is no longer on paper, so we must all rely solely on the Internet to receive and submit assignments. Internet issues interfere with this process. Although I attend

school in a Virginia city, I live in a rural area, so my Internet connection is unreliable. I have experienced being kicked out of a Zoom or having to wait for reconnection before I can submit an assignment. These issues with Internet access and reliability are negatives that need to be addressed.

If I were elected mayor, the first thing I would do before making any changes to any school is meet with my district's school board. I would present my ideas and collaborate with the school board members to figure out the best way to implement my suggestion. My suggestion would be to permanently make every Friday a day for making up work, getting help from teachers, and getting work turned in. This change would allow students to continue to get ahead in their studies and be prepared for the up-coming week. In order to improve the Internet for the students in rural areas, which are usually the areas with the Internet complications, I would collaborate with Verizon, the Internet company known for its Fios internet. I would work with Verizon to get better routers and towers in rural areas where the business may not be as lucrative, but the need is great. This would allow students and teachers to have better connections and less interruptions. As mayor, I would make these two changes a priority to address the needs of students.

Covid-19 has changed our way of living, especially the way a normal school day operates. Now that school is virtual, there are both pros and cons. If I were elected mayor, I would use my power to continue the positive remediation Fridays and improve the negative Internet issues in order to improve the school day for all of the students in all of the schools.





Region 2 Winner

Marjorie Davis

**Martinsville Middle School
Martinsville, VA**



DUE TO COVID – 19, life has not been the same for people around the world. In Martinsville, for example, children have not been able to go to school in person, the unemployment rate has surged, and public gatherings have been discouraged. As a result, members of the community have developed feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and self-doubt. In short, they need to be assured that things will improve. If I were mayor of

Martinsville after the COVID-19 pandemic, I would perform several actions to benefit the community.

To start, I would collaborate with the local school board in the effort to return kids safely to school for face-to-face instruction. For example, while learning in a virtual environment, Martinsville students have struggled with attending classes and completing assignments because of home-based distractions and unreliable technology.

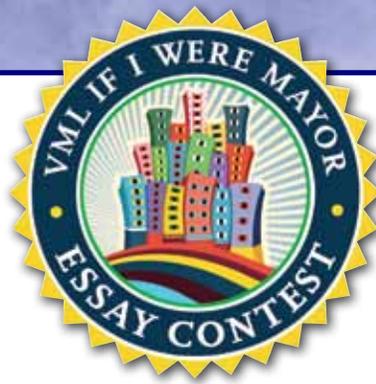
If students were able to go back to school, these issues

would not interfere with their education. Besides, children tend to learn better in person; moreover, they are more likely to understand and complete their classwork. In addition, I would work with local employers to make sure that working conditions are appropriate for their employees. For instance, During the pandemic, many workers in Martinsville contracted the virus, in part, because employers did not enforce the use of masks or social distancing.

As mayor, I would hold employees accountable for supplies to preserve their health and safety. Furthermore, I would put up a fund raiser and donate to people in need. To illustrate, the money would help homeless people, shelters, and hospitals. it would help people that lost their jobs or that are unemployed, the money could also help the city by building more homes.

In conclusion, if I were the mayor of Martinsville after the COVID-19 pandemic, I would perform several actions to benefit the community. First, I would let the kids go back to school in person. Second, I would let people that are unemployed go back to work. Lastly, I would put up a fund raiser and donate to people in need.





Region 5 Winner

Claire Weatherly

Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School
Falls Church, VA



THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME to speak to you today. As we all know, the 2021 school year has been different than normal due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I have had a lot of experience with virtual learning and have discovered numerous things that have and haven't worked. As mayor, I would implement solutions and ask you to do some simple things that would make it easier for your students and children to thrive during virtual learning. Establishing

a routine similar to what I would do in normal times helps improve my focus, organization, and makes me ready for the day. There are also things that I have found don't work well but are easy to find a solution for. One such thing is needing to follow exercise videos in PE.

I have found that having a routine similar to what I did pre-pandemic is helpful. It helps me focus and get more things done. I make sure that I have enough time in the morning to get dressed, eat breakfast, and get ready for school. Getting dressed and not doing school from my bed is beneficial for my focus because it makes me feel more awake and ready for the day. It will help students pay attention because they will feel more like they are in school. If you don't leave your bed, then it is more likely that you aren't able to focus as well. Eating breakfast before class is also important because I can then listen and participate during class.

The final thing kids should be sure to do daily is to write any homework or activities on a calendar or agenda. This will help them stay organized and not fall behind on any work. If I were mayor, I would ask parents to help their kids make time to get ready in the morning by reminding them to set an alarm or having things set up for school ahead of time. Parents or teachers should also make sure that students have a place to record their homework. Schools could solve this by buying agendas or adding them to the school supplies list at the beginning of the year. Finally, the night before class, students could move their laptops and other supplies to where they will do class the next day. This would let them sleep in a little more because they wouldn't have to set up their workspace in the morning.

Something that hasn't worked well for me as a student and athlete is only following exercise videos in PE. Following an exercise video is not very interesting for me because we do one every class and they are all somewhat similar. Always doing the same kind of exercises doesn't work well for me because not all exercises help for different sports. There is also no way to adapt the exercises to my skill level. If I were mayor, I would ask teachers to solve this by planning for one day where there was an exercise video in class and one independent day for exercising. If kids could choose what they want to do for exercise, they would have more fun because they could do something they are interested in. This would also give kids a way to get off screens and go outside to get fresh air. The teachers could ask students to submit a picture of what they did so that they know that kids exercised during the time.

As people begin returning to school in a hybrid schedule, they can still use these tips to help make the transition smoother. Having a normal routine will be beneficial to your students and children because they will not have to change their routine as much when they return to school. Having a varied PE would also be beneficial because they will not struggle when they go back to normal PE exercises.

If I were elected mayor, I would look forward to serving the Falls Church community and using my experience to make virtual learning go as smoothly as possible for students in Falls Church.





Region 6 Winner

Matthew Ezrre

**Culpeper Middle School
Culpeper, VA**



COVID-19 HAS CAUSED schools to make virtual learning so that students could learn without needing to come into the building. This has had some good and bad things that have come with it. The good thing is that when you are at home, you can work at your own pace and manage your own time. The bad thing is that some students cannot work well from home and need teachers with them because of a disability or maybe they just learn better that way.

If I were mayor, I would make the experience for students as much better as I can.

Virtual learning has come with some benefits. One of these benefits is that students can work at their own pace which allows them to learn faster or take more time on something they do not fully understand. Virtual learning has allowed me to turn a seven-hour school day where I get up at five in the morning into a two-to-three-hour school day where I get up whenever I want. This may also allow students who struggle with a topic to take more time on it which allows them to learn it better. This is one of the good things about virtual learning but there are also some bad things.

There have been many negative things about virtual learning. For example, some students may work better in the classroom as opposed to at home because they need more help from teachers. Students with learning disabilities need more help in the classroom and parents may not be prepared to deal with the stress and work to help their students for hours at a time to make sure that they are learning. Also, some students who can work from home may just work better at school.

If I were mayor, I would try to make these things better so that more students can learn and be successful. With the first thing, virtual learning being helpful, I would make it so that teachers use slideshows instead of videos so that students can go through them at their own pace. I would also make it so that students with disabilities can come to the building all week which will have a dedicated room in the school that is thoroughly cleaned to prevent spread of COVID-19.

If I were mayor, I would try to make everyone at school do better in life.





Region 7 Winner

Erin Moore

**Liberty Middle School
Ashland, VA**



MY NAME IS ERIN MOORE, and I go to Liberty Middle School in Ashland Virginia. I do not envy the job of mayor right now in this hectic world. If I were, I would probably do a horrendous job of it, but if I were, I may be able to help with a few suggestions because of my experience with Covid-19 and in-person school.

I believe that in-person school is incredibly important for people who need to be social or have a normal experience in their life for their mental health with everything going on in the world. I also believe that online is also important since some people need to be more careful because they are at higher risk than others or if they live with another family member at higher risk. Liberty Middle School is also making sure that everyone is keeping safe in this difficult time by cleaning regularly and enforcing social distancing.

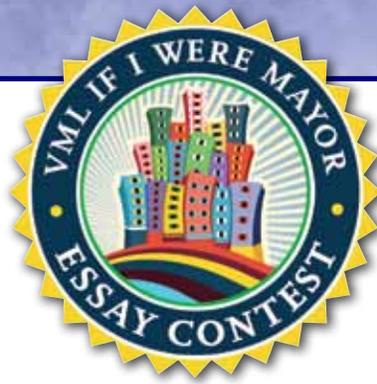
Something I believe could be improved is working harder to stay positive. Something that has got me through this tough time is remembering that many people are currently dealing with or have dealt with having Covid-19. It is tough to stay positive through everything going on in the world, but we need to remember that everyone else is going through the same thing as us, and if we need help someone will be there to give it.

If I were mayor, I would remind everyone that we are all going through this experience, because it can feel like we are all alone sometimes. I would also tell them about my experi-

ence with my mental health and how I discovered things about myself I never would have known otherwise. Instead of looking at all the negative things that can be all consuming at times, you should look for that light, the one thing that keeps you moving forward and together we will get through this stronger than we were before.

If we can make these little changes in our actions or mindset it will make a big difference in the community and maybe persuade others to take action as well. It may be hard not to hug a friend or go to the new restaurant down the street, but when this is all over these things will still be there and you can do them safely. If you need motivation to do these things, think about your grandparents that you haven't seen since March last year, or that trip to Greece you were supposed to take in June that got cancelled due to Covid-19. Whatever that motivation may be, keep it in the front of your mind as you go about your day and, together, we will get to the light at the end of the tunnel.





Region 8 Winner

Dallas Barringer

**Montross Middle School
Montross, VA**



HELLO, MY NAME IS DALLAS Barringer. I am a 7th grader at Montross Middle School in Montross, Virginia. I want to tell you what I would do as mayor: The major issue facing people right now is COVID-19. Lots of people are getting sick and passing away. Other people are losing their jobs. As mayor I would like to get people to wear a mask and social distance. Overall, I want to make our city better.

2020 has been hard for many people; loved ones have passed on, schools shut down, the list could go on. Although this year has had its ups and downs, there were some positive experiences. When people were socially distancing there were fewer people getting COVID-19, which was great for everyone. Another thing I thought worked well was when people wore masks. There also has been less pollution because fewer people have been getting out. Even though there were lots of issues, there were lots of benefits, too.

There were lots of responses that worked, but there were also ideas that didn't. Some people might have worn masks, but many people didn't. When people don't wear a mask, it causes a chain reaction, making COVID go from one person to another. Then everyone will end up getting it. The other big downfall is opening buildings too soon; it might be fun, but is it safe? The answer is NO!

Places that should not open yet are arcades, schools, fast food places, and other locations

where people are in large groups. People take off their masks and eat or play outside and touch the same toys on the playground. People may wear masks, but they do not help a hundred percent, unless they are wearing n95 masks and they are tight to the face. Everyone should wear masks and social distance.

If I were mayor, I would ask for people to wear masks if they did not have a medical problem. I would ask people to social distance and ask that there be no more than ten extra people during social gatherings. I would make these rules to protect the people in my city. I would hope that the cases of COVID-19 would decrease. As mayor, I would listen to what the people want and need and take votes for what they hope to make happen.

I will do what needs to be done. Which is why I should be mayor.



Stories from school superintendents



Weighing the risks: A lesson in the value of local control over education decisions

By Dr. Keith Perrigan

While studying for AN ED.D. in Educational Leadership at Virginia Tech, I took challenging classes related to budget, curriculum, community relations, and many other important topics. One class that was not offered in “Superintendent School” was “How to Lead During a Pandemic.” As has been the case in leadership roles in every sector of society, COVID-19 has completely changed my role as a superintendent. However, one thing that COVID-19 didn’t change was my responsibility as a superintendent.

Based on our School Boards’ expectations, my primary responsibility as superintendent is to ensure that students in Bristol are provided a safe place to grow and thrive and that our staff work in an environment that is conducive to safe and effective teaching and learning. As our division considered which instructional model to follow (in-person, hybrid, or virtual) last summer, the theme that continued to surface during the planning process was balancing risk.

During a pandemic there were a multitude of health risks that had to be considered as we planned to reopen last fall. Some things were certain during our planning process. We knew that COVID-19 was serious and very contagious. We knew that congregate settings were often hubs of transmission. We knew that the elderly and unhealthy often experienced the most severe symptoms of the virus. However, since a pandemic of this magnitude had not occurred in over a century, there were many risks associated with COVID-19 were unknown. For example, at the time we really didn’t know how risky COVID-19 was for young, healthy students. Our School Board and Leadership Team took the things we knew about COVID-19 and placed them on an imaginary scale while also trying to appropriately factor in the risks we didn’t know at the time.

Of course, as school leaders in a high poverty locality, there were many risks not associated with contracting the virus that we had to consider. For example, most of our students depend on our school system for nutritious meals. Many our students receive mental and behavioral health services while in our schools. A large percentage of our parents have hourly jobs that require they go to a worksite and clock in to perform their duties; they depend upon our schools to be a place for their children while they work during the day. To excel and thrive, some of our students who learn differently rely on our schools for the special services they require. Too many of our students come to school each day because it is the only safe refuge that they know. So, while some of the health risks of COVID-19 were unknown, we were very familiar with the risks associated with these non-health factors.

We placed those known, non-health related risks on the other side of the imaginary scale.

It became very clear early in the decision-making process that regardless of the model we chose to follow, or how the scales tilted, as we returned to school last fall there were going to be many sleepless nights. If we chose to come to school in-person, we would stay up worrying about COVID-19 transmission and outbreaks in our schools. If we chose to return to school in a hybrid or virtual format, we would stay up worrying how the basic needs of our students would be met.

When all was said and done, our school board saw that the risks

of not bringing our students back to school far outweighed the unknown health risks associated with COVID-19. We decided that if we were going to have sleepless nights, we would do so while worrying about the things we could control instead of things we couldn’t. We chose to offer in-person learning, four days per week, for every family who chose to attend.

Looking back now, it is clear that we made the best decision for our community. 70 percent of our families joined us, in-person, on August 20. Students, parents, and staff cooperatively and precisely followed the very intensive and detailed Return to School Plan we developed. Thankfully, our School Board’s calculation proved correct. The risks associated with returning to school in-person were mainly associated with fear; a fear of the unknown. Due to excellent implementation and phenomenal cooperation, we are now serving almost 80 percent of our students in-person. We have had no outbreaks in our schools and have only had 2 instances of transmission of COVID-19 at school, both related to after school activities. Awards assemblies are occurring, while proms and graduations are being scheduled.

However, it is also very clear, that what works in Bristol will not necessarily work in other localities. Balancing risk in other communities may look very different. For Virginia’s schools, having the local autonomy to decide what direction to take was of paramount importance. Population density, community cooperation, local metrics, and other factors had to be considered on a local and regional level as schools made decisions about returning to school. Thankfully, Bristol’s analysis of risk was correct for our community and we were able to have a quasi-normal school year. Hopefully, we will rest easier as we begin planning our return to school next fall!

About the author: *Dr. Keith Perrigan is the superintendent of Bristol Virginia Public Schools.*



A professional and personal perspective on the pandemic

By Dr. Phyllis Pajardo

Masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, stay home, telework, video conference. These words have been part of my personal and professional vocabulary for years; however, beginning in March 2020, each word took on a deeper and different meaning. Masks went from being something I wore occasionally in celebrations of seasonal events (i.e. Halloween, Mardi Gras) to a daily requirement. Gloves shifted from something worn as a young lady attending church service (particularly Easter) to being worn when shopping at the local supermarket. Video conferences shifted from the occasional novelty that accommodated an out-of-town relative, contractor/vendor, or international traveler/speaker to the daily method of professional meetings for local and regional colleagues.

During my 40-year career as an educator my work has focused on students’ academics, social and emotional health, and safety. In March 2020, my educational leader role in a small, suburban community, continued to focus on our student and staff health and safety; however, the responsibilities took on a more profound meaning with an unparalleled set of expectations. During daily briefings on COVID-19 we sought to understand the virus as we learned about the symptoms, precautions, and stats. The information was overwhelming

Superintendents

and constantly changing as we tried to attend to the well-being of our students, families, and staff. There were multiple daily meetings and problem-solving sessions with new teams of leaders from a wide scope of departments throughout the city, region, and state; all formed specifically to anticipate and address ongoing concerns. Initially, the meetings were in-person or by telephone, then we shifted to in-person meetings with social distancing before settling into meeting virtually for most of the year as cases spread through our communities.

In late March 2020, we shifted to 100 percent virtual staff meetings, as Virginia's governor closed schools. In April 2020, we transitioned to 100 percent virtual instruction for students. In addition to the pandemic, we acknowledged other issues that were present and becoming more evident in our community – racial/ethnic inequities, food insecurities, technology access gaps, and disproportionalities. Happily, we were able to make some progress despite the pandemic. It was a pleasure during the spring 2020 to plan how our city would stand up a new childcare program for school-age children of Fairfax City staff and community members who were essential workers. In July, our team enthusiastically developed a multi-step process after our Board initiated a public engagement process to consider renaming our middle school, which for over 50 years was named for a Confederate soldier.

Throughout my professional journey, I have had an enduring belief in the power and efficacy of community organizations. I was confident in our community's ability to band together to help each other through this despite the uncertainty. Together we had to expand the role of food and nutrition services to provide at-home, daily meals to students. We also had to ensure that students had internet access and tech devices to support our transition from in-person to virtual learning. To achieve these things, organizations in Fairfax City sought opportunities to partner with the schools. The Rotary Club of Fairfax, A Place to Eat, and the city's Professional Firefighters and Paramedics Local 2702 are just some of the community organizations that stepped up and stepped out to support our students, staff, and families.

The City of Fairfax fire department has always been a strong supporter of the city's schools and conducts annual drives for backpacks and winter coats. Many members of the fire department serve as mentors, participate in career days, and read to student groups during "Read Across America" days.

In summer 2020, the City's Professional Firefighters and Paramedics Local 2702 launched the "Masks and Macs" campaign. This effort recognized our city's hard-working teachers during the pandemic. Citizens sponsored a \$15 care package to provide teachers with an N95 mask and a family-sized serving of macaroni and cheese.

Another strong community supporter is the Rotary Club of Fairfax (of which I have been a proud member for the past five years). Like the fire department, the Rotary has a long-standing partnership with city schools. Our local Rotary Club provides dictionaries to third graders and purchases constitution booklets for every 8th grader in our middle school. Annually, the Rotary recognizes two city teachers with its "Teacher of the Year" awards. Perhaps most impressively, the Rotary provides scholarships for graduating seniors at Fairfax High School, the city's only high school. Last year, the Rotary Club of Fairfax awarded over \$20,000 in scholarships!

In 2020 the Rotary recognized the greater need in the community and asked me how they could help city students in need. I connected the Rotary with A Place to Eat, a group dedicated to providing supplemental food to city students. To date, the Rotary Club of Fairfax has donated almost \$9,000 to A Place to Eat, which helped feed over 250 city school families during a time that has seen many families struggle with food insecurities.

A Place to Eat is a division of A Place to Stand, a local non-profit dedicated to eradicating homelessness and hunger. Before the

pandemic, A Place to Eat partnered with our schools to establish food pantries for students and families in need. When our schools closed in March 2020, A Place to Eat quickly shifted its operations. Each month, the group organizes volunteers to donate, pack, and distribute food and gift cards for families. A Place to Eat not only collected canned goods and shelf-stable foods but also created a program for volunteers to get excess produce from local farmers markets to deliver to families.

Our schools are stronger because of organizations such as these which have made me appreciate the value of partnerships and shown that with focused attention we can work through difficult times. We recognized these groups during our December 2020 School Board meeting and expressed our deepest gratitude for their work. Around the same time, our high school returned some of its students to in-person instruction. The task of teaching some students virtually and others in-person was a challenge that our teachers ably overcame. All was going well as we prepared to return even more students to in-person instruction and we felt increasingly confident that we would be able to successfully navigate the pandemic. I was overjoyed to see students and staff in person.

However, things abruptly changed for me when my 70-year-old sister tested positive and was hospitalized in January 2021. All the things I had read about, talked about, and reported on for months in professional settings were now front and center in my personal life. My family knew that my sister, who had pre-existing health issues, would need intensive care. Close contacts and family household members were quarantined and tested; some were positive and asymptomatic, others were negative. For almost one anguished month, we received updates from the inundated healthcare workers. Each day was heart wrenching. When my sister passed away in February 2021, I was only able to see her via Zoom; other family members gathered outside of her glass-walled room. All of this was done out of an abundance of care to avoid contracting and spreading the virus to other family members.

The loss of my sister left a hole in my heart deeper than I can describe. Now, most times when the pandemic, stats, or vaccines are mentioned; it's more emotional for me. It hurts! However, I persevere through COVID-19 briefings which are still very much needed.

Even with this personal tragedy, I can muster enough positive energy to see glimmers of hope. Many school and district staff, including me, have been vaccinated. This was planned and executed through the partnership with the community health department and the dedicated work of our health professionals. Many students and staff have safely returned to four days of in-person instruction. We are planning an in-person graduation for our high school students in our football stadium, and in-person end of year retreat for our School Board. While we will continue to practice health and safety protocols with these events, it will be good to see our community come together. The graduation celebration will be a reminder of the diligence of many professionals who have worked tirelessly, our community partners who found meaningful ways to cheer us on, and our community at large, which stayed strong and connected throughout the pandemic. Our 500 high school graduates will represent the resilience of all our students who had to sacrifice and adjust during a pivotal time in their lives.

Closer to home, my family continues to think of and find ways to honor our beloved sister and to keep each other safe and healthy. As my 40th year in education winds down, these past 12 months of the pandemic will always stand out as a year in which my professional and personal worlds intersected in a way I could never have anticipated.

About the author: *Dr. Phyllis Pajardo is the superintendent of the City of Fairfax Schools.*



Challenges and opportunities of pandemic proportions

By Dr. Aaron C. Spence

I remember exactly where I was Friday, March 13, 2020. Because that is the day that the COVID-19 pandemic became more than just a news headline or something we needed to keep an eye on. The seriousness of what was coming hit home powerfully and permanently in that moment when Virginia's governor shut down schools across the state.

The news came during a meeting with my leadership team. We were sitting at a large conference table making plans for a one-day closure to get everyone prepared for a possible short-term shutdown. Just as the meeting started, one by one, phones started to buzz and ding with texts and alerts about the governor's decision. Suddenly, there was no time to prepare. We were closed immediately and for at least two weeks. Those weeks, of course, turned into months.

Up until that moment, there was no playbook for running a school division and educating tens of thousands of students during a global health pandemic. As I look back on the past year, I am frankly stunned and gratified by what we have accomplished as a division, despite this virus, despite all the upheaval and disruption to life as we knew it.

With the school buildings shut down, we shifted our learning plans and considered how to end the school year while supporting our community and keeping students engaged in learning. We worked with the city to open Safe Learning Centers, where children of city and school employees could continue learning safely during the day. Our high school seniors were able to successfully finish their schooling with us and we held intimate and creative graduation ceremonies.

As the summer passed, we worked on how we were going to reopen schools safely. We wrestled with competing and changing guidance. We struggled with competing interests, some political, some just genuine differences of opinion about what would be safest for students and staff. We considered all those things and settled on science to build our return-to-school plan, one that allowed us to monitor community spread of COVID-19 and to bring students back with mitigations in place to lower the risk of exposure.

In the fall, we began bringing students back for in-person instruction, but in November a dramatic spike in COVID cases in our region forced us back to virtual instruction. By February 2021, we were again transitioning students back to in-person instruction in phases. By the end of April, all students whose families had chosen to have their students in a face-to-face environment were back in the classroom four days a week (Mondays have been – and remain – virtual, asynchronous learning days since the pandemic started). This was accomplished well ahead of any legislation or other order that might require it.

We are poised to have outdoor graduations this year, we've built the most robust summer program in the history of Virginia Beach, and at our most recent board meeting, I announced our intention to have all our students back five days a week beginning with the 2021-22 school year.

My team – and probably workers across the Commonwealth – have likely grown tired of hearing the metaphor of “building a plane while flying it.” But when this pandemic shut us down, that is what we had to do (without a blueprint). And we successfully stayed aloft. In fact, we became darn good pilots!

We kept our staff employed and paid, taking care of our workforce and bolstering our local and state economies in a time of economic crisis. We served more than seven million meals to our students. Our division has been 1:1 for some time, but we made our parking

lots and playgrounds Wi-Fi accessible and offered extended hours for Chromebook exchanges or replacements. We delivered a thousand hotspots to families to help them connect.

Indeed, this health crisis has revealed just how important technology is to the successful delivery of educational experiences even as it has exposed gaps in learning and equity as well as the need for social and emotional supports. While these items were at the forefront of our normal schooling, it has been gratifying to see our staff really dig into the available resources to help meet these needs and implement best practices during the pandemic and to plan for the post-pandemic world. We've also created a mental health task force of community partners to identify gaps in mental health support and resources and make recommendations on how we can better serve our staff and families.

The pandemic has caused us to pay more attention than ever to meeting the needs of our entire community. As such, I am excited about our recently enacted equity policy, which calls on us to create an environment where all students benefit from high standards, have access to effective and inclusive learning environments, and are given the resources for a high-quality education. Also underway is an equity assessment which will help lead to the development of an equity plan, bringing to life the goals and emphases outlined in our strategic plan, *Compass to 2025*. I can't wait to see how these efforts move our division forward and continue the positive changes for Virginia Beach City Public Schools!

Because of all this work and so much more – and the challenges of the pandemic notwithstanding – our students continue to thrive academically, and every single one of our 86 schools remains fully accredited by the state. And while we all agree that teachers and students belong together in a physical classroom, we have also discovered that there are some young learners who thrive in the virtual environment, which is why we are also offering a fully virtual learning experience for our students who want this through the VDOE's Virtual Virginia school.

We are taking all these lessons learned over this past year to help us evolve the educational experience for our children and their children and their children's children. Whatever was “normal” is likely not coming back exactly as it was before. And that is as it should be since we know, that while good for many, the old “normal” did not serve all kids well—and there's opportunity in that. Our students aren't the only ones who can learn new things.

Certainly, over the past 15 months there have been long days and nights when it was a real challenge to keep positive. But when times seemed their darkest and most divisive, I leaned into my core beliefs as an educator. And I asked my staff to remember why they became educators. And to listen.... listen to the sounds of children in hallways and classrooms again, laughing and learning. That's why we're here. That's why we do it.

About the author: *Dr. Aaron C. Spence is the superintendent of the Virginia Beach City Public Schools.*



Using past experiences to navigate the pandemic present

By Susan Tilley

With great enthusiasm and hopes for the future, I began my first superintendency in Galax City Public Schools on January 1, 2020. A mere seventy-three days later, I was a “pandemic superintendent.” My grand plans were put on hold by the need to manage the immediate needs of the shifting health landscape. I have been in leadership positions in public education for over 25 years, and I have been blessed to have experiences that have

Superintendents

prepared me to lead. Pandemic experience, however, was missing from my resume!

As I reflect on my experiences over the past year, I realize that the leadership lessons I had learned throughout my career did in fact prepare me for this unique time. The importance of collaboration with others, making communication a priority, and most importantly, keeping students at the center of every decision, are priorities that hold true even in pandemic conditions.

During the turbulent months of the pandemic, I benefited from relationships with our division staff, my fellow superintendents, our School Board, City Council, and families. There is nothing our staff did not step up to do, do well, and do quickly. Since the moment we closed, they have innovated and pivoted in all areas of their responsibility. For example, the work of our custodians became completely different. Their original work schedules no longer met the deep cleaning requirements necessary to keep our school community safe. Our cafeteria team also found new ways to do their work. Although the students could no longer visit the cafeteria, the staff still made sure they were fed three meals a day. Our bus drivers also had entirely new responsibilities including door-to-door meal deliveries. This was unheard of before the school closure!

Without question, the work of our teachers has been changed dramatically. A complete transformation in how teachers approach their work is not only rare, but usually takes quite a long time. The abrupt closure of schools demanded that new approaches be implemented immediately. Whether or not teachers were comfortable teaching in a virtual environment, they found themselves compelled to master it and they embraced the challenge.

I have never been more inspired by what I witnessed our staff accomplish these past 15 months. They never complained, remained steadfast in their commitment to the children, and were as flexible as any team could ever be. I know educators everywhere have been heralded as pandemic heroes, and rightfully so, but I was privileged to observe the Galax team in action, and they were champions in their quest to find ways to make things work even as the ground shifted under them.

My circle of support grew beyond the division during these months. My fellow superintendents in the southwest region of the state were a constant source of knowledge and camaraderie. As opposed to the traditional monthly meetings held in years past, our region immediately began meeting weekly or more often when needed. We brainstormed, problem-solved, shared resources, and supported one another through uncertain times. Together we ultimately formed a Region VII Virtual Academy to serve families who wanted their children to be served in a virtual environment for the 2021-2022 school year. This was a collaborative effort led by several strong, pioneering superintendents with whom I have the pleasure of working.

The Galax City School Board was another resource for wisdom, perspective, and expert guidance. All five board members are deeply committed to the welfare of our school community. They weighed options carefully, thoughtfully reviewed data, listened closely to staff and families, and remained united in their decision-making. The welfare and safety of our school community was their top priority, and they made tough decisions accordingly. Because of their strong leadership, Galax City Public Schools was able to provide in-person instruction five days a week for all grade levels with minimal transitions to virtual learning. A school board that remains respectful and open to ideas that differ from their own but united in action is precisely what all school communities deserve, and Galax City Public Schools is blessed to have just that.

Mayor Willie Greene, council members, and City Manager Keith Barker were also steadfast in their support of our schools. They provided resources such as PPE and supplies, partnered with us to provide daycare for families during our virtual opening of schools, and continued to provide full financial support of our school budget

needs. Our school division has long benefited from the outstanding leadership of our city council, and the pandemic only served to enhance this already positive relationship.

While the school staff and local government officials were essential to our success, our families were the most remarkable partners during the multiple transitions of opening, closing, and virtually opening our schools. By no means were they always happy about the changes, but their support of Galax schools never wavered. They were understanding, respectful, reasonable, and kind when sharing their feelings about the decisions we made. They shared their thoughts by calling, emailing, attending meetings, and posting on social media, but continued to express support for our teachers and staff. Certainly, families were divided in their preferences. Some wanted us to offer in person instruction no matter what the circumstances; others felt virtual instruction was the only safe option. Despite their personal beliefs, they remained united in the belief that we were making decisions in the best interest of all students and staff. I know not all school divisions enjoyed the same support, and I will be forever grateful to our community for extending goodwill to us without fail.

Not only did I enjoy the benefits of collaboration, but I also found unexpected opportunities to get to know our community and communicate with our families. Of course, this is always a priority for new superintendents, but rarely is it done in pandemic conditions. To keep everyone informed, we made phone calls, posted to social media, shared surveys, and circulated publications to families on a routine basis. We distributed meals in car windows at a drive through each week and delivered meals to front doors. We answered countless calls and emails to provide guidance to families as we navigated our way through the end of one unprecedented school year and the beginning of the next. These opportunities strengthened my ties to the community I serve. Communication has always been a hallmark of my leadership efforts, and it served me well in this unique circumstance.

While collaboration and communication were essential during the pandemic, keeping students at the center of our decision-making proved to be the most important touchstone as we moved forward. On my desk I have a business card that one of my former superintendents and dearest mentors made for all staff. It says: "How will this decision affect young people?" It serves as a visible reminder of the importance of keeping students at the heart of my work. In uncharted times like this past year, I circled back to this question countless times. Every single thing had to be rethought. Traditions as long-standing as commencement were out of the question. Daily bell schedules no longer met our needs. Grading practices we have relied on for decades were no longer feasible. Providing quality instruction could no longer be accomplished through conventional methods. Even how we served meals, transported students, and conducted arrival and dismissal were all routines that were no longer options. Never had I been as challenged to find new solutions to serve children. But thanks to collaboration, communication, and the determination to keep the students at the center of all considerations, we crafted new and sometimes better ways of making it all work.

My hope for the future is that the lessons we learned during this pandemic will remain with us. We are better because of this experience. We now know we can do hard things even during hard times. We can transform teaching and learning much faster than we ever thought possible. We can craft solutions, establish new routines, and disrupt the status quo to find better ways. We are better together when we collaborate frequently across community and region. We are in the business of serving children, and nothing, not even a global pandemic, can deter us from our mission.

About the author: *Susan Tilley is the superintendent of Galax City Public Schools.*

Schools as a community catalyst: Happy, healthy, and high performing

AMONG THE MANY LESSONS we have learned this past year is the importance of schools as critical social infrastructure. Schools are one of the greatest investments most communities make, so leaders must fully leverage precious tax dollars to do as much as possible with that investment.

While the core function of schools is learning – educating the population and preparing students to thrive as effective citizens – communities can leverage schools to address a variety of needs and make progress toward their highest aspirations. The following stories show how two Virginia localities have used schools as a catalyst for change and an opportunity to address larger community issues.

“Innovation for the good of society and the planet.”

Discovery Elementary School (Arlington County, VA)

One way to create change is to put a new spin on something “known” and thereby inspire ambivalent people to become engaged. Greta Thunberg, for instance, brought urgency to the climate debate by taking the known concept of a workers’ strike and giving it a fresh, youth-led awakening. This in turn raised climate change awareness around the world.

In a similar vein, educators, students, civic leaders, and community members in Arlington took the “known” concept of public-school design and infused it with the novel intention to create the next generation of environmental stewards. The result is Discovery Elementary School – a net-zero energy school which has helped both normalize

and energize school design and created momentum at the local, state, national, and international levels:

- At the local level, the success of Discovery Elementary School convinced Arlington Public Schools to make net-zero energy a requirement for the procurement of all new construction.
- At the state level, local leaders successfully lobbied the Virginia Assembly to pass legislation that allows net-positive schools to sell and keep the funds generated from this excess energy.
- At the national level, the U.S. Department of Energy launched the Net-Zero Accelerator at Discovery – a national partnership aimed at demonstrating how investing in renewable energy translates into cost savings and enhanced learning environments. Plus, Discovery is the first school to receive LEED Zero Energy certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.
- Internationally, Discovery is the first verified net-zero energy building certified by the collaborative partnership of the International Living Future Institute and New Buildings Institute.

All of these “firsts” happened for a school designed using public funding and intensive public engagement that prioritized financial stewardship and community buy-in. Moreover, Discovery Elementary School is designed to meet a larger goal – to be an example of responsible climate action near the nation’s capital that inspires thinking about the immediate need for net-zero energy buildings.

Schools like Discovery can serve as teaching tools not just for the students who will learn there. For designers and civic leaders, the building has volumes to teach about alternative energy, environmen-



A 496kW photovoltaic array generates more energy than the school consumes over the course of each year, resulting in an annual utility savings of over \$100,000. Photo by Digital Design & Imaging.

Schools

tal stewardship, and healthy and sustainable behaviors – while also achieving critical goals for carbon neutrality. Even better, the project, including the PV system on the roof, came in well under the original budget and will save Arlington more than \$100,000 each year in avoided utility costs.

A “World Changing Idea”

Discovery Elementary School was selected from more than 3,000 entries as an honorable mention in both the “Education” and “Spaces, Places, and Cities” categories in Fast Company’s 2020 World Changing Ideas program which honors products, concepts, companies, policies, and designs that pursue innovation for the good of society and the planet. 2020 honorees included the author’s firm, VMDO Architects, and other companies “actively engaged and deeply committed to flattening the curve when it comes to the climate crisis, social injustice, or economic inequality.”

Arlington County shows the way

Because of Discovery Elementary School and other sustainable projects, Arlington County was the first locality in Virginia to commit to 100 percent clean, renewable electricity by 2035. Continuing its work with VMDO Architects, which designed Discovery, Arlington is pursuing two more net-zero energy schools (Fleet Elementary and Cardinal Elementary) and a net-zero energy ready community center (Lubber Run Community Center). These projects have changed the expectations for all public projects by scaling up the implementation of net-zero energy buildings, renovations, and modernizations.

Arlington may be at the forefront of this effort, but it will soon have plenty of company across the Commonwealth. In March 2019, the Virginia legislature passed HB2192, requiring “that new public-school buildings and facilities and improvements and renovations to existing public school buildings and facilities be designed, constructed, maintained, and operated to generate more electricity than consumed.” And in April 2020, Virginia became the first state in the South to commit to a 100 percent clean energy agenda.

All this points to the timeliness of scaling up net-zero energy design across the Commonwealth, particularly for critical public investments like schools. Doing so will help Virginia’s localities meet the challenges of climate change head-on, reduce the operational burden of public facilities on the community, and educate generations of enlightened stewards to thrive in jobs of the future.

The rooftop Solar Lab at the Discovery Elementary School allows students to interact with a variety of renewable energy systems to engage in experiential learning and support the curriculum. Photo by Lincoln Barbour.



“This is a special place. It inspires stewardship.”

Bluestone Elementary School (Harrisonburg, VA)

Nicknamed “the friendly city,” Harrisonburg has a well-earned reputation as a welcoming community. Between 2002 and 2013, the city’s population grew by 21 percent with Harrisonburg City Public Schools (HCPS) experiencing a 32 percent increase in school enrollment during that same time. Over the past seven years alone, HCPS has experienced the highest school enrollment growth rate in Virginia!

Part of the reason for the dramatic increase in population and school enrollment is Harrisonburg’s designation as a refugee relocation city. In fact, 35 percent of HCPS students identify as English Language Learners, representing over 60 different countries and speaking 58 languages. This diversity offers opportunities for learning about cultures but also presents the formidable challenge of ensuring this growing population receives the appropriate level of support.

To help capitalize on the opportunities and meet the challenges of a diverse student body, HCPS asked VMDO Architects to work on the design of the new Bluestone Elementary School. HCPS established guiding principles that included celebrating its amazing student diversity, fostering a sense of inclusion, and offering flexible learning opportunities in a net-zero energy ready environment that could evolve and expand with the school community. The resulting design embraces cultural diversity and helps students relate to the larger world while maintaining a sense of local community designed just for them.

Bluestone’s design encourages connections to the areas’ watershed, ecosystem, and history. Teaching spaces offer expansive views to the outdoors and common areas are aligned with key sightlines to the surrounding Shenandoah Valley. Students learn experientially by studying the effects of daylighting, rainfall, and changes in weather on the environment. Environmental graphics and wayfinding explain Harrisonburg’s unique natural setting and invites students to explore parallel settings around the world.

Most students and teachers spend more time in school than anywhere other than home. As such, Bluestone’s design prioritizes the physical health and well-being of all the building’s users by leveraging controlled daylight, fresh air, and healthy materials. The site, the building and even the furniture and environmental graphics are designed to promote physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. To minimize long-term operational costs, the building is designed to be net-zero energy ready, using 75 percent less energy than the national average for elementary schools, and is prepared to receive a rooftop PV array through a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA).

To better understand the impact of its design decisions on user experience and outcomes, the Bluestone project team initiated a post-occupancy evaluation using the Occupant Indoor Environmental Quality Survey developed by UC Berkeley’s Center for the Built Environment (CBE). A few highlights from the post-occupancy evaluation:

- 80% of building users say the building enhances connections with students
- 86% of building users say the school is a community asset
- 93% of building users feel more connected to nature and the outdoors

“At Bluestone, we’re learning to take care of ourselves, to take care of each other, and to take care of our school. The students understand this is a special place. It inspires stewardship.”

– Anne Lintner, Bluestone Elementary School Principal



At Bluestone Elementary School a spacious lobby invites the community into the school and serves as a hub connecting the learning communities on 3 levels. A piano fills the lobby and cafeteria with music. Photo by Alan Karchmer.

- 87% of building users say that they are satisfied with the building overall
- 31% reduction in staff absenteeism in the new building

In 2019 Bluestone Elementary School received CBE’s “Livable Buildings Award” for achieving some of the highest user satisfaction scores in CBE’s nationwide database. The award demonstrated the success of Bluestone from the most important perspective – that of the building users! It also demonstrated the value of an inclusive planning and design process to achieve a transformative learning environment embodying its core mission: to build community and celebrate diversity.

“I can see the difference in kids in this building versus other buildings. This building really encourages kids to be happy. Everything in this building is designed with a purpose. You’ll see kids skipping in the halls. You’ll see kids stopping and looking at things that have been designed into the building. You just see happy kids.”

– Craig Mackail, COO, Harrisonburg City Public Schools

Conclusion

Thoughtful school planning and design can help our communities address complex issues like climate change, diversity, equity, and well-being without adding project costs. Further, these high-performance buildings increase user satisfaction and minimize operational expenses for the life of the project, preserving critical public funds to meet other needs.

As centers of the community that touch the lives of most of its citizens in some way, schools are powerful indicators of our highest aspirations. The municipal projects from Virginia outlined in this article illustrate how purposefully designed schools can go beyond their core missions of supporting student learning and achievement to advance broader community goals.

Additional information

For more information about VMDO Architects, Discovery Elementary School, and Bluestone Elementary School, please visit <https://vmdo.com>.

To read more from the Center for the Built Environment about the Livable Buildings Award, please visit: <https://cbe.berkeley.edu/news/livable-buildings-awards>.

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Tech lessons we all had to learn this year

LEARNING TO WORK and learn remotely – whether we wanted to or not – was one of the first adjustments many of us had to make at the outset of the pandemic. While remote work, video conferencing, and collaboration tools have existed for several years, many of us avoided using them in lieu of in-person office meetings and traditional phone calls. Thinking back to March 2020, we may remember our first fumbling attempts to appear on video to our colleagues, work through audio issues, and set up rooms in our homes to hopefully replicate our office setup.

What a difference a year can make!

The widespread adoption and mastery of virtual meeting skills since March 2020 adds up to a culture in which remote work and learning will likely remain a big part of our lives post-pandemic. And while many of us – from the tech-savvy to those less so – have figured out how to make the previously foreboding world of remote work a breeze, there are clearly gaps that need addressing.

In this article, I share a few of the remote work and video conferencing issues our company, VC3, has seen municipalities struggle with over the past year – along with some lessons learned.

Remote work

If IT support was difficult in an office, we learned it is much harder to help employees working from home. Here were some of the key areas where our clients experienced issues.

Equipment: In some cases, organizations had already issued laptops and mobile devices to employees. For those that had not, the best solution to add more flexibility was to provide work laptops to remote employees. Those organizations that allowed remote employees to use their own computers found themselves facing security and support challenges – especially if an employee’s personal computer had serious issues and could not be easily accessed remotely by an IT support technician.

Remote access solutions: How did people access their work desktop or applications? From logging on through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to accessing cloud-based applications on the internet, we had to figure out the best way for employees to access their work easily yet securely. This included email, documents, files, and the software required to perform daily tasks. VPNs worked best with organization-owned devices while secured, typically browser-based remote portals and cloud-hosted applications worked best with employee-owned computers.

Cybersecurity risks: Remote devices, such as home computers, are outside an organization’s managed security boundary and do not always have the same protections in place as office computers. Employees working from home computers needed to make sure they applied security updates and worked on supported, modern operating systems. Organizations needed to ensure that home computers had quality antivirus software and that home WiFi, routers, and firewalls were running the latest updates. Cybersecurity training to teach people

about phishing attacks and other scams became more important than ever over the last year.

IT issues: Few things will make an employee feel more helpless than experiencing an IT issue while working from home. Unless they were fortunate enough to have a family member who is an IT expert, many people working remotely became frustrated by printing issues, missing files, or even frozen computers. Organizations quickly realized that they needed an IT helpdesk that offers remote support if they were going to be successful.



Data backup: What if an employee’s remote desktop or laptop breaks? What if they accidentally delete important files? What if they get ransomware? Making sure remote employees have a data backup and disaster recovery solution became essential this year. It was important that data not just reside locally on an employee’s desktop or laptop hard drive. Instead, having files, documents, databases, email, and website content accessible through the cloud or servers located at the office meant employees didn’t have to store these files on their own computers.

Video conferencing

Whatever video conferencing tool we chose, we all learned important lessons ranging from security to etiquette. Here’s some of our big takeaways from a year of meeting virtually.

Enterprise-grade video conferencing software makes all the difference. Consumer-grade software simply does not have the needed administrative security controls which makes the risk of using it too high. Using enterprise-grade conferencing software (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams) became a necessity to hold consistently high-quality meetings.

Meeting passwords or a virtual “waiting room” for at-

tendees is a must. Unknown participants should not be able to directly join a meeting. This year, we learned about virtual waiting rooms and lobbies where guest participants wait before being granted access to a meeting. An alternative approach is to require a meeting password for entry.

Screen sharing works best when used for a specific application rather than an entire desktop. This prevents a participant from accidentally sharing confidential or sensitive information. For example, if an employee shares their screen and accidentally shows their banking account information on their desktop, then another video conferencing attendee could capture a screenshot of this information.

You can tell when internet bandwidth and working equipment are lacking. As we all know by now, a poor internet connection affects the video quality of a person talking in a meeting. This year, we also struggled with insufficient microphones, speakers, and headphones. To avoid communications issues (and embarrassment), we had to troubleshoot these items, invest in better speakers and microphones, and make sure our employees were properly equipped.

Testing video calls = Saving time. The great thing about video conferencing software is that we can test it before the actual meeting takes place. This way, we did not have to struggle with issues during the meeting, wasting everyone's valuable time.

Want to look good? It's all about the lighting. Sometimes, people on a video conference look like they are joining the meeting from a cave or black hole. Conversely, the sun or a lamp can sometimes replace faces with a blinding light. This year, we learned to adjust our lighting, so we look like ourselves.

Want to be heard? Speak clearly into the microphone. It's difficult to hear people when they sit too far from their microphone. We learned to sit close to our microphone and speak clearly.

A professional appearance is still important. Yes, we know you are working from home, but it's still jarring to see you wearing sweats, off-center in the video image, loudly eating a sandwich, shushing a barking dog, etc. etc. Bottom line: Working at home is still work. Be sure to look and act somewhat professional.

Using mute. No matter how hard you try to eliminate background noise, it's inevitable that sounds (like sirens or a pet) will creep in. We learned to turn on mute if we were not speaking for a long time, cutting down on distracting background noise.

The non-tech lessons

Ultimately, technology also taught us some very human lessons this year. Among the more important...

Remote work can work! Prior to 2020, many organizations resisted allowing employees to work remotely because they feared a drop in productivity. Now, we know that isn't the case. Employees still do their work and come through for organizations despite being remote. In some cases, we saw that productivity actually increased!

Necessity really is the mother of invention. During the pandemic, we didn't just perform the same old work in a new setting. We innovated by using productivity tools in new ways, finding unique uses for video conferencing software (such as holding polls or using instant messaging and voice chat simultaneously), and going way beyond email and the phone to collaborate.

Everyone is responsible for cybersecurity and basic technology upkeep. This year, employees had no choice but to up their cybersecurity and technology game since an IT support person wasn't going to visit their cubicle like the old days. That meant keeping an eye on their computer's antivirus, software patching, and functioning to look for issues. Cybersecurity scams and phishing attempts also proliferated, and employees needed to be more

accountable about clicking on suspicious links and attachments.

Boundaries are for setting (not doing away with). When working remotely, it's easy to spend too much time at our computers, letting work and life bleed together in an unhealthy way. Say what you want about commuting to an office, but it clearly demarcated the beginning and end of a workday. To preserve our work/life balance (and our collective sanity), we set boundaries between our workday and personal lives.

Technology brings us closer even while we are isolated. What if this pandemic happened 20 years ago? A very thin, but still very silver, lining of the pandemic was that it arrived at a time when we could at least still see each other's faces. It also humanized us; we saw people's homes, kids, and pets in the background and felt closer as a result. We found that we need these humanizing moments during our most isolated times.

Conclusion

As the world returns to some semblance of normal, many of these lessons will stay with us forever – from the banal information technology insights to the revelations about our shared humanity. This is also a time to reflect on what went right, what went wrong, and what can be better. If you are still struggling with some of the lessons above, then reach out for help from a trusted IT partner. We've learned so much!

About the author: *Kevin Howarth is the Marketing & Communications Manager for VC3, the largest managed services provider focused on local government in the United States. His background includes 18 years of content development and marketing experience in information technology, cybersecurity, and municipal government.*

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Access to marijuana has changed: Basics for your locality

Introduction

On April 7, 2021, the General Assembly approved gubernatorial recommendations to legislation it passed to legalize marijuana.¹ This legislation permits possession of recreational marijuana starting July 1, 2021.² The legislation allows for retail sales of marijuana beginning January 1, 2024, but this portion of the bill must be reenacted after the 2021 Virginia elections.³ This legislation will radically change Virginia's approach to marijuana. Not surprisingly, many localities may be wondering about local regulatory options.

Conflict with federal law

Marijuana is a controlled substance and marijuana operations – even if operating according to state laws – are illegal under federal law.⁴ In 2013, the Obama administration issued a memorandum stating that the federal government would not prosecute small possession cases but would instead focus on higher level operations.⁵ In 2018, Trump Attorney General Jeff Sessions rescinded this memorandum, which opened up small marijuana operations and use to federal prosecution.⁶ To date, the Biden administration has given no indication of reviving the Obama-era memorandum, and President Biden has stated his opposition to the legalization of marijuana.⁷ Under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, states that legalize marijuana benefit from an appropriations rider barring the Department of Justice from using funds to prevent states from legalizing marijuana.⁸ Still, despite Virginia's efforts, participants in the marijuana industry remain possibly at risk under federal law.⁹

Local options

Under the new Virginia statute, localities have options to control the retail sale of marijuana (but not possession, for example—see (b)(i) infra). These options include prohibiting retail marijuana stores via referendum, submitting an objection to the Board of Directors of the Virginia Cannabis Control Authority (“CCA Board”), using land use authority, regulating time of sale, and taxation.

Referendum

If a locality does not use the referendum process provided by the legislation, retail marijuana stores will be legal in the locality.¹⁰ If a



locality desires to prohibit retail marijuana stores, it must follow the referendum procedures in the new Virginia Code §4.1-629:

1. The governing body of the locality must petition its circuit court for a referendum on the question of whether retail marijuana stores should be prohibited in the locality.
2. Once filed, the circuit court shall order election officials to conduct a referendum on a date specified. The date can be no more than 90 days after the order is issued. The clerk of court shall publish notice of the referendum in the newspaper once a week for 3 consecutive weeks prior to the referendum.
3. The question on the ballot must be “Shall the operation of retail marijuana stores be prohibited in _____?”
4. If a majority of qualified voters in the referendum vote “No” on the question of whether retail marijuana stores shall be prohibited in the locality, retail marijuana stores shall be permitted to operate within the locality 60 days after the results or on January 1, 2024, whichever is later. No subsequent referendum may be held.
5. If a majority of qualified voters in the referendum vote “Yes” on the question of whether retail marijuana stores shall be prohibited in the locality, retail marijuana stores shall be prohibited in the locality effective January 1 of the year immediately following the referendum. A referendum on the same question may be held subsequent to a vote to prohibit retail

marijuana stores, but not earlier than four years following the date of the previous referendum. Any subsequent referendum must follow the same procedures as the previous referendum.

6. The legality of the referendum can be challenged upon the complaint of 15 or more qualified voters of the locality, if filed within 30 days after the results of the referendum are certified.

Towns are to be treated as separate from their county if the town holds its own referendum.¹¹ However, if a county holds a referendum, any town within the county shall be treated as part of the county.¹² Thus, if a referendum to prohibit retail marijuana failed in a town, retail marijuana could still be prohibited in that town if its county held a successful referendum to prohibit retail marijuana.

The initial referendum on the question of whether the operation of retail marijuana stores shall be prohibited in a particular locality shall be held and have its results certified after July 1, 2022 and no later than by December 31, 2022.¹³ A referendum will not be permitted after January 1, 2023, unless such referendum follows a referendum held prior to December 31, 2022, and any subsequent referendum, in which a majority of the qualified voters voting in the referendum voted “Yes” to prohibit the operation of retail stores.¹⁴

Options beyond referendum

Land use and business licensure requirements. Under the new legislation, localities cannot adopt any ordinance or resolution that regulates or prohibits the cultivation, manufacture, possession, sale, wholesale distribution, handling, transportation, consumption, use, advertising, or dispensing of retail marijuana or retail marijuana products.¹⁵ Nonetheless, localities still retain their abilities to adopt and enforce local ordinances to regulate businesses licensed to sell marijuana including local zoning or other land use and business license requirements.¹⁶

Some limits on localities may create apparent conflicts with local powers. For example, the legislation prohibits localities from regulating the advertising of retail marijuana or retail marijuana products.¹⁷ This prohibition on the regulation of advertising questions localities’ abilities to regulate signs, especially because the legislation includes signs in its definition of advertising.¹⁸

The statute provides rules for outdoor advertising that include zoning restrictions. These zoning restrictions apply to signs near sensitive locations like schools, playgrounds, and drug treatment facilities.¹⁹ Importantly, this section goes on to state “[p]rovided that [outdoor retail marijuana or retail marijuana products advertising] signs are in compliance with local ordinances, the distance and zoning restrictions contained in this section shall not apply to ...” other types of marijuana establishment signs.²⁰ The clause states that the zoning requirements imposed on signs near “sensitive locations” mentioned in the section do not apply to signs that comply with local ordinances placed by licensees on their premises (with additional restrictions) and to directional signs.²¹

Thus, localities have not lost all ability to enforce local ordinances on signage, even for marijuana business signs. Marijuana businesses still must comply with the CCA Board’s sign regulations and local sign requirements. Further, marijuana enterprises need to be licensed by the CCA Board and obtain approval from a locality in terms of zoning requirements or any other local requirement allowed by the legislation.

Submit objection to the CCA Board. When a license application is sent to the CCA Board, the CCA Board shall notify the local governing body of the application through the town manager, city manager, county administrator, or designee of the locality.²² Local

governing bodies can then submit objections to granting of a license within 30 days of the application’s filing.²³ One basis for the CCA Board to deny a license is the facility’s location, with respect to a local government-operated facility, will adversely affect or interfere with the normal, orderly conduct of the governmental facility’s affairs.²⁴ The CCA Board can also deny a license if the applicant’s facility “is so located that granting a license and operation . . . would result in violations of local ordinances relating to peace and good order.”²⁵

More options. Localities have further options to regulate marijuana. For instance, localities can regulate the time of sale of retail marijuana.²⁶ Localities can provide for fines and other penalties for these ordinances, which will be enforced as if they were Class 1 misdemeanors.²⁷ Further, localities may still pass their own ordinances mirroring the legislation’s prohibition of consumption of retail marijuana in public places (including schools) and provide penalties for violations.²⁸

Localities can also use taxation to control marijuana. Localities may levy a 3 percent tax on taxable marijuana products.²⁹ This tax would be in addition to any local sales tax, food and beverage tax, and excise tax on meals.³⁰ If a town elects to tax, any tax imposed by the surrounding county will not apply within the limits of the town.³¹ If a locality decides to impose such a tax, it must notify the Cannabis Control Authority and any retail marijuana store within the locality within 30 days.³² The ordinance takes effect on the first day of the second month following its enactment.³³

Conclusion

Despite changes in the way the Commonwealth handles marijuana, localities still have a say in how marijuana may be regulated in their community. Localities still have several options that can make this transition easier.

Bottom line: The legalization of marijuana is likely to pose interesting issues for local governments in the coming years.

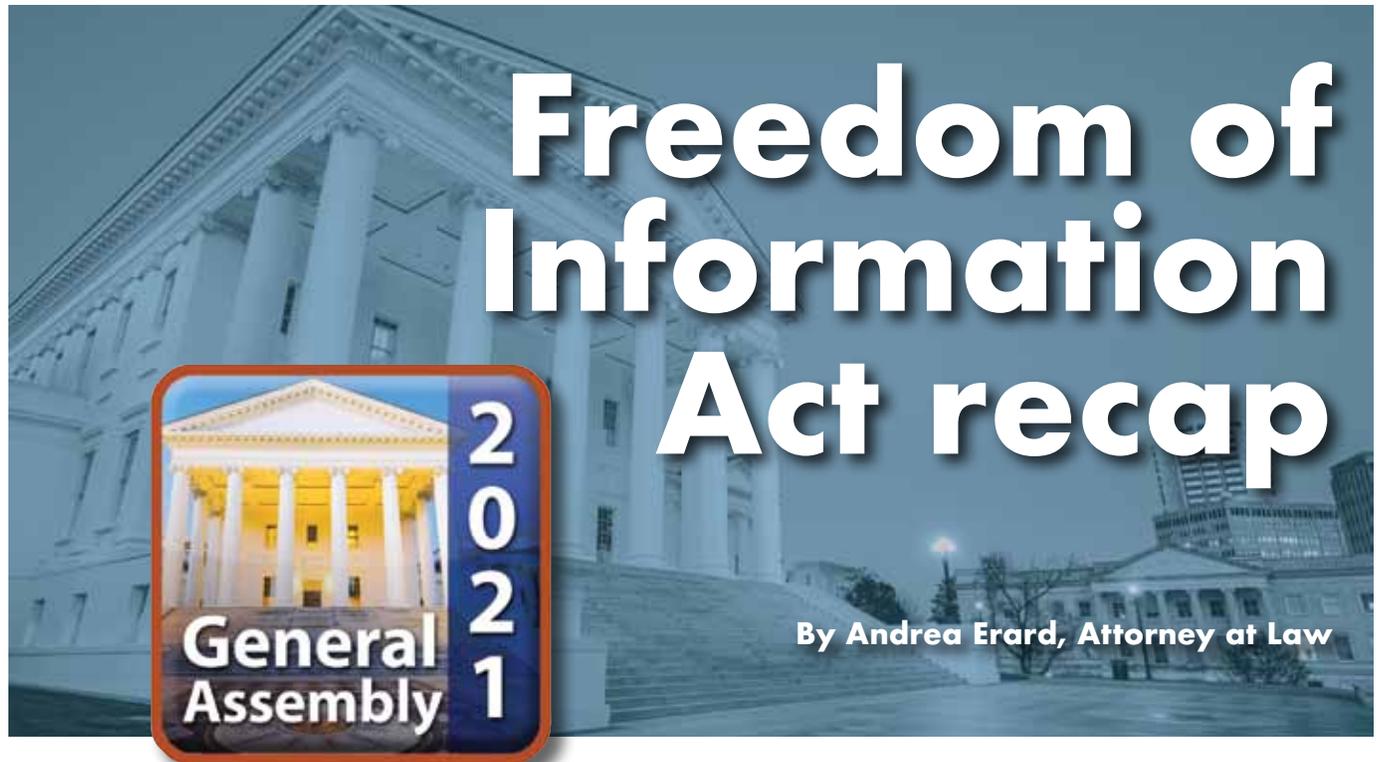
About the author: *Donnie Garrett Autry is an associate with Greehan, Taves & Pandak, PLLC.*

¹2021 Va. Acts Chap. 550, <https://lis.virginia.gov/000/chapter550.pdf> (all subsequent cited sections are referring to this citation unless stated otherwise). Note that the General Assembly legalized industrial hemp (parts of cannabis plant with less than 0.3% THC) in 2015. See 2015 Va. Acts Chap. 158, <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?151+ful+CHAP0158>.

²Eighth enactment.
³Seventh enactment.
⁴21 U.S.C. § 801 et seq.
⁵Memorandum from James Cole, Deputy Attorney General, to Department of Justice (Aug. 29, 2013), <https://www.justice.gov/iso/opa/resources/3052013829132756857467.pdf>.

⁶Memorandum from Jefferson B. Sessions, III, Attorney General, to Department of Justice (January 4, 2018), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1022196/download>.
⁷William Cummings, Biden, lone top 2020 Democrat to oppose federal marijuana legalization, cites ‘gateway drug’ concern, USA Today (Nov. 18, 2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2019/11/18/joe-biden-says-marijuana-may-gateway-drug-opposes-legalization/4226908002/>.

⁸Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, H.R. 133, 116th Cong. § 531 (2020), <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr133/BILLS-116hr133enr.pdf>.
⁹21 U.S.C. § 801 et seq.
¹⁰§ 4.1-630(A).
¹¹§ 4.1-629(C).
¹²*Id.*
¹³23rd Enactment.
¹⁴*Id.*
¹⁵§ 4.1-630(A).
¹⁶§ 4.1-630(C).
¹⁷§ 4.1-630(A).
¹⁸§ 4.1-600.
¹⁹§ 4.1-1405(A).
²⁰§ 4.1-1405(D).
²¹§ 4.1-1405(D)(1)-(2).
²²§ 4.1-1000(B).
²³*Id.*
²⁴§ 4.1-809(2)(c).
²⁵§ 4.1-606(B)(18).
²⁶§ 4.1-631.
²⁷*Id.*
²⁸§ 4.1-630(B), §§ 4.1-1108-09.
²⁹§ 4.1-1004(A).
³⁰*Id.*
³¹§ 4.1-1004(B).
³²§ 4.1-1004(D).
³³*Id.*



NUMEROUS AMENDMENTS have been made over the 50 years plus since the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was introduced. During the 2021 Virginia General Assembly, more than 1,476 pieces of legislation were considered. Five of the bills passed amend FOIA. The Act is continually being updated to ensure access to public records and meetings of public bodies. Below is a list of the amendments.

Criminal investigative records

Currently, the release of criminal investigative files is discretionary. After July 1, 2021, criminal investigative files relating to a criminal investigation or proceeding that is not “ongoing” must be released. “Ongoing” is defined as “...a case in which the prosecution has not been finally adjudicated, the investigation continues to gather evidence for a possible future criminal case, and such case would be jeopardized by the premature release of evidence.”

Public bodies have 60 workdays to respond to a request for criminal investigative files. This is a significant change.

Electronic meetings

Currently, a member of a public body may participate in a meeting electronically where a quorum is physically assembled and the member is unable to be physically present because of a personal reason or a medical condition. After July 1, 2021, a member may also participate electronically because of a medical condition of a family member that requires the member to care for the family member.

Electronic meetings during an emergency*

As of July 1, 2021, a public body can meet electronically, without a quorum physically present, when the Governor has declared a state

of emergency, the nature of the emergency makes it impracticable to meet, and a meeting is necessary to provide for continuity of government operations.

**Please note that there is budget language related to electronic meetings in effect until the end of June 2022 which has different criteria from the bill which is effective July 1, 2021. VML recommends asking your attorney about the differences prior to holding electronic meetings after July 1, 2021.*

Personal contact information no longer released

Personal contact information belonging to citizens will no longer be required to be disclosed after July 1, 2021. Citizens who make a request to a public body, or the members of a public body, for the purpose of receiving electronic communications from the public body, or any of its members, will only have their home or business address, email address, or telephone number disclosed if they specifically request that it be disclosed. This contrasts with the current requirement that personal information be withheld only if the citizen requests that the information be withheld.

Trade secrets includes carbon sequestration agreements

Proprietary information and/or trade secrets relating to carbon sequestration agreements that is voluntarily provided by a private business, and that are identified as proprietary, may be withheld from public disclosure.

About the author: *Andrea Erard is an attorney in Richmond, VA whose practice concentrates in areas of local government law. She represents counties, cities, towns, school boards and local departments of social services.*

CITY OF FAIRFAX

By Matthew Kaiser

How a beloved sycamore was reborn as a whimsical treehouse

SEVERAL FOREST CRITTERS have found a new home in the trunk of an old sycamore tree in the City of Fairfax's Ratcliffe Park. Visitors do not need to be alarmed by the black bear, fox, squirrel, and raccoons, however. The animals are part of a beautiful sculpture created by local chainsaw artist Andrew Mallon.

How did it come to be? When a stately sycamore tree in the playground died last fall, city residents were heartbroken. The tree had provided shade at the playground for many years, and people loved it. Fairfax City Cultural Arts Manager Megan DuBois saw an opportunity to create something special. DuBois was aware of Mallon's work and hired him to create something joyful from the community's loss.

"My first thought was, 'Wow! That's a big tree!'" Mallon says. The artist doesn't sketch his ideas ahead of time; he lets the tree dictate his designs. After assessing the massive trunk, a vision formed in his mind of a whimsical treehouse crawling with woodland creatures.

Mallon is a former carpenter who enjoys whittling and hand-carving as a hobby. At some point, he realized he had the natural ability to carve anything he wanted. But carving with hand tools took too long. After a quick class in which he learned how to carve bears and owls with a chainsaw, he cashed in his change jar and bought his first chainsaw.

Mallon says sycamore, which is neither too hard nor too soft, is a good wood for carving. He uses a large chainsaw to remove big chunks of wood and then uses smaller saws for the details. Once he begins, Mallon can complete a sculpture in less than a week.

Explaining his creative process, Mallon says, "It evolves as I go. It transforms into the blurry vision that's in my head to what it's going to be."

Because his sculpture was carved in a busy public space, people congregated to watch Mallon wield his saws. "They love to watch, love the process," he says. "I got a lot of smiles, a lot of thank-yous. That makes my work not feel like work. I love what I get to do."

Mallon added a range of textures with his smaller saws, and the smooth, shiny sanded and stained areas contrast with the dark areas burned into the design with a blowtorch. The finished sculpture looks as if it were pulled from a children's fantasy story and brought to life.

To fully appreciate the treehouse sculpture, you need to see it in person. The level of detail and the massive size of the transformed trunk are remarkable. Mallon's forest creatures cling to the tree among interlocking leaves. The windows and doors seem like they should open to reveal an interior space. In fact, mesmerized children tentatively reach out and touch the tree in disbelief.

"It's a really imaginative piece, and I hope people use their imaginations when they interact with it," DuBois says.

Mallon is going to carve the remaining pieces of trunk into additional works of art. The city plans to add shade structures, and discussions are underway for a unique, new picnic pavilion on the site.

About the author: *Matthew Kaiser is the communications and marketing director for the City of Fairfax.*



Chainsaw artist Andrew Mallon in front of another project in the making.



Taking in the Town of Lovettsville

The fourth of VTC's "Towns of Loudoun" series

NESTLED IN A QUIET COUNTRY bubble at the top of Loudoun County, the "Top Town in Virginia" hugs the Maryland border just south of the Potomac River. The Town of Lovettsville is known for its award-winning restaurants like Market Table Bistro and Patowmack Farm, its authentic Oktoberfest Celebration, and family movies, events, and festivals on the Town Green. The community also has a strong sense of national pride as evidenced by a Gold Star Families Memorial, flag lined streets, and annual Memorial Day, Patriot Day, and Veterans Day ceremonies.

Visitors are invited to reserve a table for a special occasion, drop by for a bite to eat, enjoy a stroll through town, go for a run on our shared use path or stop at our bike station to rest in the shade. No matter where your day takes you, Lovettsville is ready and waiting with open arms and smiling faces.



A long history of being a bit different

Lovettsville, originally known as "The German Settlement," is a small town with historical roots that go back to 1732. The town, which was laid out in 1820 by David Lovett and last incorporated in 1836, has served as a thriving commercial center for the surrounding farm areas for about two centuries. For most of its history, Lovettsville was a largely self-sufficient, rural community, in which people worked in the vicinity of where they lived. In fact, almost every building in the historic part of the town had a commercial purpose at one point or another.

Culturally and socially, Lovettsville originally aligned more with Frederick County, Maryland, than with the rest of Loudoun County. The settlers of the region in the 18th century came from the north rather than from the south and east as was the case for the rest of Loudoun County. These early settlers were mostly German-Americans, whose families had come from Pennsylvania and New York, through Western Maryland starting in about 1731. Although some continued into the Shenandoah Valley, many saw no reason to go any farther.

During the Revolutionary War, these German-Americans were fiercely patriotic and fought for independence from Britain. During the Civil War, the Lovettsville area voted overwhelming against secession (88 percent opposed) in 1861, and along with Waterford (a Quaker community), raised the only organized military unit from the present state of Virginia which fought for the United States of America. This military unit was known as the Independent Loudoun Virginia Rangers.

Loving Lovettsville

Today, Lovettsville is a walkable community with open spaces, park areas, shops, attractions, and events. Visitors arriving from the north are welcomed by one of Virginia's LOVE signs. Designed by a local artist, Lovettsville's LOVE Sign shines as the perfect entrance to the Town Square, lovingly referred to as the "Squirkle" given its

somewhat circular layout, which is home to the Lovettsville Veterans Memorial. The Squirkle also serves as a gathering place for town activities. In June 2018, the town council officially renamed this area "Zoldos Square," in recognition of former Mayor Robert Zoldos II for his two decades of leadership and service to the town.

Events on Zoldos Square include activities such as Wintertainmentfest and "Berserkle on the Squirkle." The holiday themed Wintertainmentfest, which includes the town tree lighting ceremony, caroling, and stories, typically occurs on the first Friday in December. Residents and visitors sip hot cocoa while cheering on the lighting of the town tree as a festive way to kick off the season. Another annual tradition is the New Year's Day "Berserkle on the Squirkle" in which residents are invited to start working off those holiday pounds! This "5K-ish" event is the only 5K around with no rules: the laps don't count, funny costumes are required, regifted holiday presents serve as prizes, and the winner of the race is chosen by drawing a name out of a hat.





Veterans Day event



Oktoberfest celebration event



Patriots Day event



Weiner Dog Races at Oktoberfest

Zoldos Square is also home to annual ceremonies recognizing the service and sacrifice of our nation's heroes. Lovettsville hosts annual Memorial Day and Veterans Day Ceremonies and holds a Patriot Day Ceremony every 9/11 in conjunction with the Lovettsville Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company and the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office. Each ceremony is held at the town's beautiful Veterans Memorial.

The Town Green, located at 11 Spring Farm Drive, has a variety of amenities including the award-winning Walker Pavilion, picnic tables, and benches. The Walker Pavilion was named after the longest serving mayor in Loudoun County history, Elaine Walker who served on the Lovettsville town council for 10 years and then served as mayor for 22 more! Special events such as Summer on the Green, MayFest, Eggstravaganza, and Oktoberfest all make use of the Walker Pavilion and the Town Green space.

Summer visitors to the town can partake of the Lovettsville Summer on the Green series with free movies and concerts throughout the season. There is no better place to be on a summer evening than by the Walker Pavilion with family and friends enjoying a movie or concert while watching the sun set behind the Short Hill Mountains.

When summer turns to fall, Lovettsville rolls out the welcome mat for 15,000 visitors to the town's famous Oktoberfest celebration of its rich German heritage. Authentic German cuisine, live music performances, street artists, beer, wine (and more!) mark the occasion. Lovettsville's Oktoberfest celebration traditionally kicks off with a hearty pancake breakfast, followed by the tapping of the beer kegs, Bavarian music and dance performances under the Main Tent with the Alte Kameraden and the Alpine Dancers. Attendees enjoy the Weiner Dog Races where they can cheer on their favorite pups and the kids enjoy a Kinderfest area complete with free games and activities. Many visitors savor the authentic German food of the Washington Saengerbund and shop their way through arts, crafts, and service vendors lining the streets. Admission, parking, and all-day entertainment is FREE.

As we come out of the COVID Pandemic, Lovettsville is planning on a smaller festival for 2021, but still plans to celebrate in true Lovettsville fashion!

After the chilly months of winter, Lovettsville kicks off the summer season with our annual Mayfest celebration on the last Saturday in May with family activities, amazing food, and entertainment at Lovettsville's Town Green & Walker Pavilion. Young attendees enjoy the Fun Zone complete with relay races and rock climbing, while older visitors enjoy the live music accompanied by a glass of beer or wine. Everyone loves the pie eating contest and the majestic Loudoun County countryside! Mayfest, which returns in 2022, is open to the public and includes free parking and admission.



Gold Star Families Memorial Monument

A place of honor

This year, the Town of Lovettsville was very excited to welcome the first Gold Star Families Memorial Monument in Northern Virginia. One Family Brewery, in partnership with the Herschel Woody Williams Medal of Honor Foundation, selected Lovettsville as the home of the 65th Gold Star Memorial. These monuments are a two-sided tribute made of black granite. One side bears the words: “Gold Star Families Memorial Monument, a tribute to Gold Star Families and Relatives who sacrificed a Loved One for our Freedom.”

The other side tells a story through the four granite panels: Homeland, Family, Patriot, and Sacrifice. At the center of this tribute, is a silhouette of a saluting service member, which represents the legacy of the loved ones who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. Together, these features tell each community’s unique story. The memorial is open all year and is a great opportunity to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend our freedoms.

Out and about

The Lovettsville Community Park, a 91-acre park site located across the street from the Lovettsville Community Center, was purchased in December 2004. This park is currently under construction and has both active and passive features planned, including a historical interpretive exhibit, an off-leash park, an outdoor performance area, picnic pavilions, playing fields, equestrian and walking trails.

The town’s shared use path, located on the west side of South Berlin Pike, provides safe non-vehicular travel from the center of town to the intersection with Loudoun Street. The path is an eight-foot-wide asphalt trail suitable for walking, running, biking and rollerblading. After the new fire hall is completed on the south end of town, the path will run the full length of the southern half of town.

Many bicyclists travel through the Lovettsville area on scenic bike routes around Loudoun County. For these velopedists, the town has a new bike station located at the intersection of East Broad Way and Berlin Pike. Bicyclists are welcome to stop, put air in their tires or make repairs, or set their bike on the provided rack while getting snacks at the nearby 7-Eleven. A picnic table makes the bike station a great place to rest and take a break in the shade.

Civic organizations

Clubs and organizations are a vital part of the Lovettsville and the organizations work together to broaden community engagement. Lovettsville is proud to be home to the Lovettsville Volunteer Fire and Rescue and Auxiliary, Lovettsville Lions Club, Lovettsville-Waterford Ruritan Club, Lovettsville Game Protection Association, Lovettsville Masonic Freedom Lodge No. 118, Lovettsville American Legion Post 1836, and Lovettsville American Legion Auxiliary Unit 1836.



Little League Baseball team

There also very active Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Trail Life and American Heritage Girls Troops, a 4-H Club, Little League Baseball, Softball, Football, Soccer, the Loudoun Valley German Society, and the Lovettsville Garden Club.

Food for every taste

Lovettsville may be known as a charming small-town community, but it is also known as home to some of the best food in Western Loudoun County, with award winning restaurants like **Market Table Bistro** offering farm-to-table cuisine from locally sourced ingredients and **Patowmack Farm**, which was one of the first farm restaurants in the United States. Whether you need to reserve a table for a special occasion or are biking through town and need a place to refresh, Lovettsville has what you need. Stop by **1836 Kitchen and Taproom** for a locally sourced drink; **Thaiverse** for authentic, high quality Thai cuisine; **Andy’s**, Lovettsville’s favorite Mediterranean restaurant for over 30 years; **Burapa Asian Bistro** serving up an Asian fusion menu; **Velocity Wings** for a sports bar offering never frozen wings, mouth-watering burgers and craft beers; **Soul Food Sensations** serving up delicious southern food for your soul; **Dinner Belles Kitchen Cupboard** offering subscription meals, event catering, daily special sandwiches, and a wonderful selection of specialty groceries and beverages; **Rodeo’s Mexican Grill** serving authentic Mexican food; and, **Rasco NY Pizza** serving up hand tossed New York style pizza, pastas, subs, salads, strombolis, calzones, and much more. New to Lovettsville this year, is **Flying Ace Farm**, Loudoun County’s first farm distillery and brewery. There is something for everyone!

Cheers from Lovettsville

On behalf of the Town Council and residents, we wish to thank the Virginia Municipal League for this opportunity to tell you about our fantastic little town. We look forward to hosting you in Loudoun County at the VML Annual Conference this fall.



About the authors: *Nate Fontaine is the mayor of the Town of Lovettsville; his wife, Lizzy Fontaine, is a director, national recruiter, and national trainer for Thirty-One.*



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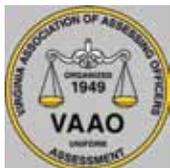
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