

# VIRGINIA

TOWN & CITY

The magazine of the Virginia Municipal League

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NO. 10

DECEMBER 2019

## VML's new president!

Norfolk's native son  
Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr.

### Inside:

VML's 2020  
Legislative Program

A visit to FASTC  
and Blackstone

Rethinking recycling

...and more!



# Financial Strength and Partnership

The 2019 VRSA Annual Report is online now - highlighting VRSA's continued unparalleled financial strength and focus on partnership through increased member engagement. VRSA staff participated in more than 200 member engagements, including: 120 in-person trainings; 20 webinars; more than 30 events attended; 20 conferences attended or presented at; and more.

Read the report at: [www.vrsa.us](http://www.vrsa.us).



## VRSA: Partnering through increased member engagement

Last year, VRSA staff surveyed members to determine what training VRSA could provide that would benefit them most. As a result, member engagement and training has expanded.

Throughout the last year, VRSA staff coordinated nearly 200 member engagements throughout the Commonwealth. These included nearly 120 in-person trainings, 20 webinars, more than 30 events attended including Planning District Commission meetings, dinners, receptions/observances, regional roundtables, and site assessments. Additionally, staff sponsored, attended or presented at nearly 20 conferences.

Subjects for these trainings ranged from active shooter to crisis communications, cyber security, OSHA, reversible suspicion, confined space entry and trenching, supervisor liability, and the grievance process. Staff were also out and about conducting physical site assessments and safety inspections, as well as 501 in-person member visits from VRSA member services representatives.

Webinars were presented to nearly 420 members on subjects such as: HR Complaint Investigations; Ransomware; Minors and Breaches; Supervisor Training: How and What to Document; Accident Committee Review; Creating and Using a Job Safety Analysis; Policy and SOP Modules; The Grievance Process; and School Safety and Security.

These engagements are designed to assist members in managing risk, and ultimately, to reduce members' total cost of risk. VRSA staff also began promoting a speakers bureau list, available on the VRSA website under Publications/Brochures, which outlines the various topics for which staff can provide training.



The list is extensive and includes trainings broken down by topics such as general interest, communications, human resources, jail and juvenile detention centers, public safety, risk management, and workers' compensation.

Presentations focus on a variety of topics, including active shooter/workplace violence prevention; council/manager management; cyber security from a risk management perspective; public officials liability; crisis communications; complaint investigations; harassment in the workplace; supervisor liability; jail officer safety and liability.

## 2019 Annual Report



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## About the cover

*This is one busy guy. He's a council member from the City of Norfolk, principal of the Academy for Discovery at Lakewood, a city-wide Project Based Learning and International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme school, and our new president! Get to know Tommy Smigiel beginning on page 12.*

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### It's time to rethink recycling in Virginia

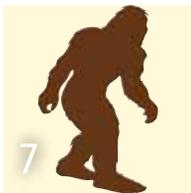
Learn what issues are making local recycling difficult to sustain and what can be done to help. By Monica Boehringer ..... [Page 16](#)

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### VRSA's annual report released

Financial strength and partnership signal a great year for VRSA. By VRSA staff ..... [Page 24](#)



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# Is the Dillon Rule going away?

## John Forrest Dillon was not a fan of local government.

SINCE THE HISTORIC Virginia election when the Democrats gained control of both legislative chambers, VML has received many calls and emails asking if we are excited because surely the Democrat majority will abolish the Dillon Rule; so I want to provide some background on the Dillon rule and its history.

States are typically either “Home Rule” or “Dillon Rule” states; Virginia is a Dillon rule state which means that the powers of localities must be specifically expressed or implied in either the Virginia State Constitution or the Code of Virginia. A home rule state is a transfer of power from the state to units of local government so that local governments can self-govern. Home rule states provide local government limited freedom from state interference along with certain powers to act quickly to respond to local issues. Over 40 states consider themselves home rule states.

John Forrest Dillon was a Judge for the 8th Federal Judicial Circuit (Iowa) in the late 1800s. He held a strong distrust for local government and was quoted as saying “those best fitted by their intelligence, business experience, capacity and moral character usually did not hold office and that the conduct of municipal affairs was generally unwise and extravagant.” The first reference to the Dillon Rule in Virginia was in the case of *City of Winchester vs. Redmond*, 93 Va. 711, 25 S.E. 1001 (1896).

Generally, the Dillon Rule restricts local governments’ powers except in 3 categories:

1. Those powers granted in express words;
2. Those powers necessarily implied or necessarily incident to the powers expressly granted; and
3. Those powers absolutely essential to the declared objects and purposes of the corporation – not simply convenient, but indispensable.

In our legislative package which you will see in the magazine is a

request for the state to authorize localities to prohibit distracted driving. Localities do not currently have the authority to enforce distracted driving summons. VML believes that the public would be much safer with this authority. Keep your fingers crossed this year!

VML supports more local authority and advocates for that every day, but the Dillon rule is entrenched in Virginia’s Constitution, laws and cases; that history cannot be changed overnight.

VML is preparing for the upcoming legislative session and urges you to attend the Finance Forum and Local Government Legislative Day events (January 6 and February 6, respectively). Our members’ support and voices are crucial. Also, please be aware that our *eNews* bulletin will be published more frequently during the 60-day legislative session to keep you updated on developments in the

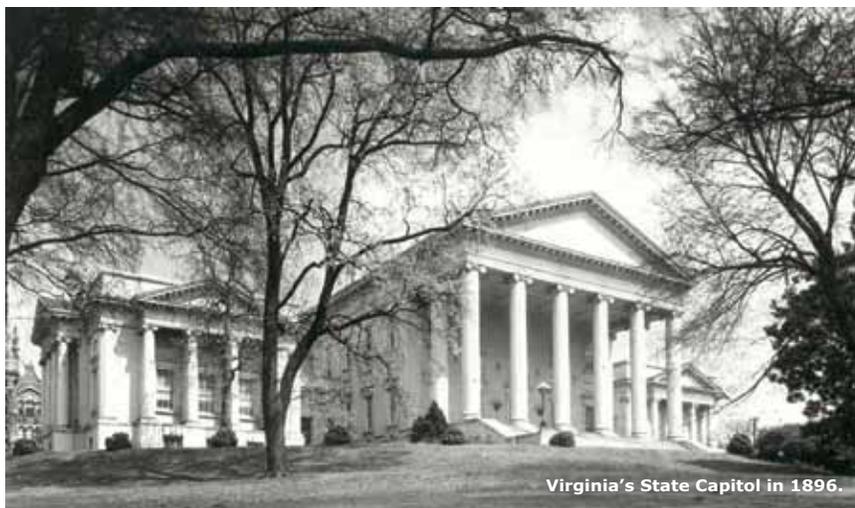
General Assembly that affect local governments.

Finally, never hesitate to contact VML with questions and suggestions and let us know if you talk with any legislators about local government issues. Your input helps us work better for you.

I hope everyone has a very happy holiday season and enjoys a safe, healthy and productive 2020! 



John Forrest Dillon (1831 - 1914)



Virginia's State Capitol in 1896.



VML connects you with a variety of networking and professional development events. Learn about these opportunities at [vml.org/events](http://vml.org/events).

**Jan. 6, 2020**

**2020 VML/VACo Finance Forum**

Delta Hotel by Marriott Richmond, 555 E. Canal St., Richmond, VA

**Jan. 10, 2020**

**Newly Elected Officials Conference**

Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission, 401 Water St. E., Charlottesville, VA

**Feb. 6, 2020**

**2020 Local Government Legislative Day**

Omni Richmond Hotel, 100 S. 12th St., Richmond, VA

## REGISTER NOW FOR THESE EVENTS AT VML.ORG



## NEWLY ELECTED OFFICIALS CONFERENCE

Friday, Jan. 10 • Charlottesville



Thursday, Feb. 6 • Richmond

## VML/VACo Commercial Paper

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## Timberville mayor receives Hometown Hero award

ALCOVA Mortgage presented Timberville Mayor **Don DeLaughter** with its Home-



- DeLaughter -

town Hero Award at a ceremony in Timberville on Nov. 30. The award, which ALCOVA has given annually since 2014, recognizes veterans for their service to the country and their continuing service to their communities.

DeLaughter served from 1983-1987 in the U.S. Army and achieved the rank of staff sergeant as an 82nd Airborne Paratrooper. He then went on to serve an additional two years with the Army National Guard. After his military service ended, DeLaughter worked for ALCOVA for 32 years and retired as a business manager. DeLaughter then took a position for 6 years as a deputy sheriff with the Rockingham County Sheriff's Department.

DeLaughter was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Timberville Town Council in 2001 and after three years was elected as mayor. As mayor, he has been instrumental in working through the process of securing land from the local American Legion Post for a new town park, named American Legion Park, which contains memorials to honor those from the area who served in the military.

## Halasz tapped as Lexington manager

**James M. Halasz** came on board as the city manager in Lexington on Nov. 8.



- Halasz -

Halasz has extensive experience in Virginia local government management, having served as the county administrator for over six years in Halifax County and over 12 years in the City of Staunton. Prior to those positions, he was the Director of Personnel and Purchasing at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, TN and spent eight years as village manager in towns in Michigan.

Halasz holds a master's degree in public administration from Michigan State University, completed the Senior Executive Institute at the University of Virginia and

is a member of the International City/County Management Association and the Virginia Local Government Management Association.

## Showalter appointed as manager in Mount Jackson



- Showalter -

**Neil Showalter** has been appointed the town manager in Mount Jackson. Showalter had held the position of finance director in the town for 10 years. Prior to that, Showalter worked as a certified public accountant at a public firm for 10 years and as a consultant.

Showalter is a graduate of James Madison University. He has been serving as the acting town manager since Kevin Fauber resigned the position at the end of September.

## Vienna hires its first economic development manager



- Monkou -

**Natalie Monkou** has just joined the Town of Vienna as its first economic development manager, and one of her first orders of business was to undertake a "thorough listening tour."

Monkou's listening tour fits in with Town Manager Mercury Payton's initial goal for the new position, which is to connect with existing town businesses to learn how the town can better serve existing businesses' needs and to build relationships with businesses and the community.

Monkou's previous experience includes four years in Arlington County, as a liaison between the county and three business improvement districts. She is also a member of the teams that landed Amazon's HQ2 and brought other business to the region. Prior to that, Monkou was the special assistant to the deputy chief of economic development in Prince George's County, MD.

Monkou has an undergraduate degree in English and a master's degree in public administration, both from the University of Maryland.

## Anderson appointed as council chief of staff in Richmond

Richmond City Council has announced the appointment of **Lawrence Rashad Anderson** as its new Council Chief of Staff, effective Nov. 18. In this position, Anderson will assist the council in its legislative role, providing government policy and oversight, and establishing the Richmond Government Budget.



- Anderson -

Anderson previously served as an urban research fellow at the American University School of Public Affairs - Metropolitan Policy Center in Washington, DC. Prior to that, Mr. Anderson led a variety of local management initiatives in New Orleans, LA; Baltimore, MD; and Richmond.

Anderson earned his Master of Arts in Political Communication from American University, Master of Public Administration from Virginia Commonwealth University, and Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Virginia State University. Additionally, he has held fellowships with the Journalism Initiative at Yale University and the University of Virginia Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership.

## Vineyard appointed as Charlottesville director of human resources



- Vineyard -

**Michele M. Vineyard** has been appointed the director of human Resources in the City of Charlottesville. Prior to this appointment, she was the director of human resources for the City of Roanoke.

Vineyard's career includes service in the City of Salem as assistant director of human resources and at AFLAC where she was a training supervisor.

Vineyard also served in the U.S. Air Force as a munitions operations specialist.

Vineyard received a master's degree in liberal arts, social science concentration from Hollins University and an undergraduate degree in business administration from Averett University.

### Utt reappointed to state board

Governor Ralph Northam has reappointed Pulaski Town Manager **Shawn M. Utt** to



- Utt -

the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). The council is an independent planning body working with the Centers for Independent Living and Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

to increase the effect of independent living services in Virginia. The council develops a three year state plan for independent living, facilitates the goals and activities within the plan and distributes Rehabilitation Act Title VII, Part B funds allocated by Congress.

### Murphy announces retirement as Charlottesville deputy manager

**Mike Murphy** has announced his retirement as the deputy manager for the City of Charlottesville after 25 years of working for the city. His last day of work was Dec.



- Murphy -

6. Murphy began work for the city as a youth counselor in 1995 and became director of community attention in 2003. He was named director of human services in 2010 and Assistant City Manager in 2015.

Murphy was named deputy city manager for human services in July 2019 supervising the city's Human Services, Social Services, Parks & Recreation, and Transit departments.

Murphy holds a Master of Education degree in mental health counseling and a Bachelor of Arts degree in speech communication and rhetoric, both from the University of Virginia.

### Harris announces retirement as Hanover county administrator

**Cecil R. "Rhu" Harris, Jr.**, county administrator in Hanover County, announced in November that he would retire next May. He has been with Hanover County since 1984, when he was hired as assistant director



- Harris -

of finance and became finance director in 1987. Harris was the acting assistant county administrator from 1990 to 1991, when he was appointed director of finance and administration. He became assistant county administrator for finance and administration in 1994, was appointed deputy county administrator in 1998 and appointed County Administrator in 2004.

Harris attended the University of Richmond where he received his bachelor of science degree in accounting. He also completed the Senior Executive Institute program at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. He is a member of the Virginia Local Government Management Association and is a member and past chair of the supervisory board for the Virginia Risk Sharing Association.

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## Winchester sponsors trivia challenge

THE CITY OF WINCHESTER is holding a year-long series of events in celebration of the city's founding in 1744. As part of the 275th anniversary celebration, the Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society partnered with the city's anniversary celebration committee to hold a History Challenge Trivia Night this past November.

Three-person teams vied to take top honors and cash prizes in the competition that focused on Winchester area history. The contest included three preliminary rounds of 25 questions each with a 15-minute break between rounds. Team participants didn't have to limit themselves to history—they could also enjoy the restaurant and bar at The Bright Box Theater, the venue for the contest.

More information on the anniversary celebration is posted on the city's website [www.winchesterva.gov](http://www.winchesterva.gov).



## Hampton schedules special police academy for faith-based leaders

THE CITY OF HAMPTON Police Department is offering a special police academy for faith-based community leaders, including ministers, pastors, and worship leaders, on Jan. 9. Like the city's Citizen Police Academy, the program will be delivered through weekly classes over a 12-week period. The purpose is to improve communications between citizens and police and to dispel misconceptions people may have about the police.

Participants in the program will learn about the day-to-day operations of the police department and will hear presentations by division personnel and the Commonwealth's Attorney on a wide array of issues including the department's mission, ethics, and community policing.

Additional information is posted at the city's website at [www.hampton.gov](http://www.hampton.gov).



## Co-working facility opens in St. Paul

THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S COLLEGE at Wise officially opened The Oxbow Center in November in the Town of St. Paul. The purpose of the center is to promote economic growth through access to a telecommunications infrastructure that will enable telecommuting and help high tech startup companies launch new ventures. The facility includes designated coworking space, privacy booths, offices, and conference rooms.

The center is the first co-working facility in the seven-county, one-city region of far Southwest Virginia. UVa-Wise partnered with the Center for Innovative Technologies,

Atomicorp, Mapcom Systems, the Virginia Tobacco Commission and Clinch River State Park to open the facility. Further, the center has received a grant from the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority that will enable the development of the Clinch River Ecological Education Center, which is scheduled to open in the spring of 2020.

More information is available at [www.oxbowcenter.com](http://www.oxbowcenter.com).

**(L - R) Bob Harrison, St. Paul IDA; Kelly Moody, UVA Wise Oxbow Center; Sara Williams, Virginia Tobacco Regional Revitalization Commission; Kyle Fletcher, Mayor Town of St. Paul; Josh Sawyers, UVA Wise Innovation Center; Don Finley, Growth4VA; Donna Henry, UVA Wise Chancellor; Ed Albrigo, Center for Innovative Technologies; Scott Shinn, Atomicorp; Sharon Buchanan, Virginia State Parks; Shannon Blevins, UVA Wise Economic Development Office; Vivek Patel, Ascent Virginia**



# Public fast-charging stations open in NOVa

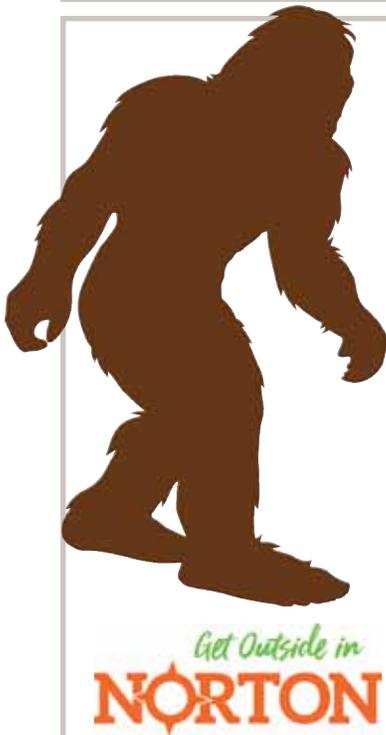
THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and EVgo, a public fast charging network for electric vehicles (EVs), hosted a ribbon cutting event on Dec. 4 to celebrate the opening of the EVgo fast charging station at Pike 7 Plaza in Vienna.

The Pike 7 station is EVgo's first high-powered public fast charging station opened under Drive Electric Virginia, the Commonwealth's Appendix D Volkswagen settlement program, and features four (4) EVgo 150 kW-capable DC (direct current) fast chargers.



In addition to the Pike 7 Plaza, EVgo also has opened three fast charging stations under the DEQ program, two in Fairfax County and one in Loudoun County, with more stations scheduled to be opening soon. The network is designed to complement existing charging stations as well as others that are in the planning stage.

EVgo was awarded a contract by DEQ in August 2018 to develop a statewide public fast-charging network. The Drive Electric Virginia network prioritizes DC fast chargers along heavily traveled roads and in areas that have high current and projected growing demand for EV charging. When the Drive Electric Virginia network is complete, approximately 95% of Virginians will be within 30 miles of an EV charger.



# Norton featured on public radio

A RECENT OHIO VALLEY RESOURCE broadcast by Brittany Patterson highlighted the City of Norton's efforts to diversify beyond its coal-based economy. A key component of the effort has been to explore the potential of another regionally abundant resource: Nature.

Researchers who examine economic transitions in coal-dependent communities point to examples of other mining communities such as Gallup, NM and Fayetteville, WV that have made the transition from mining to outdoor recreation.

As outlined in the story, in the 1970s the City of Norton began developing a 1,000-acre park located just a few miles from its downtown area called the Flag Rock Recreation Area. The park is now a key ingredient in a long-term plan to reorient the local economy to outdoor recreation. Eight miles of mountain trails have been completed, with more in the works, and campgrounds and hiking trails have been developed. The city also has launched a "Get Outside" campaign showcasing its natural resources.

The city was helped in 2011 by an episode of the Animal Planet series "Finding Bigfoot" that featured a local legend about a creature called the Woodbooger. Since then tourists have joined the search for the Woodbooger and the annual Woodbooger festival held every fall draws lots of visitors.

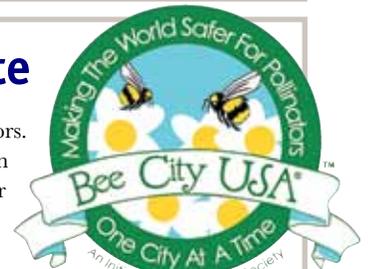
The audio and a print version of the story "Meet The Coal Town Betting Big On Outdoor Recreation" are available at [www.ohiovalleyresource.org](http://www.ohiovalleyresource.org).

Woodboogers aside, the City of Norton along with other localities in the region are looking at other, more traditional opportunities to encourage development. For example, the City of Norton, along with the Counties of Lee, Wise, Scott, and Dickenson, formed a Regional Industrial Facilities Authority to turn a former surface coal mine within the Norton city limits into an industrial park. And, with the help of a federal Abandoned Mine Land Pilot Program grant, that industrial park is turning into a reality.

# Hampton certified as 101st Bee City USA affiliate

THE CITY OF HAMPTON was recently certified as the 101st Bee City USA affiliate in the nation. To become certified, the city was required to establish a local government-sanctioned committee to provide a forum for the community to get involved in establishing or restoring habitats that provide food, nesting sites,

and overwintering sites for pollinators. Hampton is the fourth locality in Virginia to be certified; the other three are Lynchburg, Scottsville and Vienna.



## Newport News Police Department offers Project Guardian program

THE CITY OF NEWPORT NEWS Police Department's Project Guardian program educates all NNPD officers about the common characteristics of autism and teaches them how to interact with autistic individuals. A person with autism may respond to interactions with police differently than expected. For example, according to the city media release, flashing lights on an emergency vehicle might cause a person with autism to become frightened and act out. Some individuals with autism will not make eye contact, keep their fists clenched, or flap their hands.



Going one step further, the NNPD has created a voluntary database to help officers identify individuals with autism. People can voluntarily participate in the database, which includes basic information about the individual with autism, as well as a recent photo. This information is kept confidential and is only provided to first responders when called to a residence for service.

## Awards announced at Governor's Housing Conference

THE VIRGINIA HOUSING AWARDS, which recognize innovative, effective efforts to address the state's housing needs, were presented at an awards luncheon held Nov. 21 in Hampton as part of the Governor's Housing Conference.

Awards were presented in five categories:

**Best Housing Program or Service.** The City of Virginia Beach Department of Housing and Neighborhood Preservation received the award for its Housing Resource Center, a one-stop shop for people experiencing homelessness or a housing crisis. The Center delivers multiple services and housing options within a single building, including a singles shelter, short-term family housing, permanent housing, day services, human services, dining hall and a learning facility.

**Best Regional Partnership.** The Northern Virginia Housing and Economic Development Stakeholders' Collaboration received the award. Housing and economic development staff from Alexandria and Arlington County, with support

from VHDA, initiated regional discussions about how Northern Virginia could expand the range of housing options available in connection with the Amazon HQ2 proposal.

**Best Affordable Housing Development.** Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing received the award for the development of the Columbia Hills Apartment, a 229-unit affordable housing property that reclaimed a surface parking lot from APAH's adjacent, mixed-income garden apartment complex. The Appalachian Agency for Senior Citizens received the award for its Senior Living Community, a mobile home park in Cedar Bluff that provides housing for senior citizens and those with disabilities.

**Inclusive Community.** TM Associates Development Inc. received the award for its Woods at Birchwood located in Loudoun County that offers access to affordable housing.

**Best Housing Preservation/Revitalization Effort.** CFH Inc. received the award for its East End Mobile Home Park in the City of Manassas. The project involved the acquisition of a mobile home park that was threatened with closure due to deteriorating infrastructure.



## James City County hosts predatory lending workshop

JAMES CITY COUNTY continued its series of events on financial health and housing by holding a workshop on Dec. 5 on predatory lending. Dana Wiggins from the Virginia Poverty Law Center provided information on predatory lending activities and practices to avoid. The workshop was free to participants and snacks and childcare were provided.



## Staunton officials learn about light pollution

AT THE REQUEST of a neighborhood association, representatives from the City of Staunton participated in a community lighting workshop in November. Participants learned about light pollution and its effects on people who live in or close to cities.

Staff with the Smart Outdoor Lighting Alliance discussed best practices for community-friendly lighting, ordinances that support visually appealing lighting, and recommendations from the American Medical Association for street lighting.

A PowerPoint presentation made at the workshop is available on the city's website at [www.ci.staunton.va.us](http://www.ci.staunton.va.us).



## River District Association continues entrepreneurship program



THE RIVER DISTRICT ASSOCIATION in Danville recently announced the continuation of its Dream Launch entrepreneurship program in 2020. The program consists of a boot camp to prepare participants to open a business anywhere and a pitch competition for individuals wanting to open businesses in the River District in 2020.

The association held its first Dream Launch Bootcamp and Pitch Competition earlier this year. More than 75 people participated in the boot camp classes and nine took part in the pitch competition. Funding to expand or open new businesses was granted to four of those nine participants.

The boot camp includes weekly workshops held for eight weeks that teach business ownership skills. Participants who complete all the boot camp classes are invited to pitch their idea in order to receive a portion of the \$70,000 in funding and prizes that are available in the pitch competition. The projects that present the most viable and sustainable plans are awarded funding.

## A little less green can be good

PEOPLE IN RICHMOND ENJOYING some stretches of the James River Park, which runs on both the north and south banks of the river, may be seeing a little less green this time of year, and that's a good thing! Volunteers and city staff are working together to remove invasive plants that threaten native plants and trees. Many of the invasive plants such as English ivy are still green this time of year.

The James River Park System Invasive Plant Task Force is a partnership of 12 local organizations that address invasive plant coverage in the park. The Task Force partnered with VHB, Inc. to survey invasive plants for a baseline study in 2015 and has since collaborated to manage the plants and restore habitat by planting native species in project focus areas.

The park system will be participating in the National Invasive Species Awareness Week by sponsoring learning and hands-on opportunities from Feb. 25 through March 2. More information is posted at [www.jamesriverpark.org/invasives](http://www.jamesriverpark.org/invasives).

# 2020

## Virginia Municipal League Legislative Program

### **A new year and a new General Assembly But the same focus for local governments**

**T**HE 2020 GENERAL ASSEMBLY BRINGS with it a new majority in the House and Senate and new leadership on all its committees. It's also a budget year. Governor Ralph Northam introduces his two-year biennial budget in December and then the General Assembly uses its 60-day session to consider changes to that proposed budget, along with amendments to the current year (FY2020) budget, informally called the "caboose" budget.

State budget deliberations are of key interest to VML's communities because local governments manage many state mandatory and high-priority programs, essentially functioning as an administrative arm of the state. And, by way of saying "thanks for the help" the state saddles local governments with the "opportunity" to pay a substantial share of the costs for many of those programs! VML communities will be anxious to learn the details of state funding commitments for big ticket items such as K-12 education, stormwater local assistance and water quality programs, and local police department operations, as well as how adequate funding for community services boards and planning district commissions will be secured.

Apart from budget issues, legislative areas of concern to our members include provisions to expand broadband and access to housing; updates to the communications sales and use tax to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century realities; land use and zoning issues; means to address distracted and inattentive driving; and fiscally responsible methods to handle presumptive disability benefits.

What follows are the components of VML's 2020 Legislative Program which was developed by VML's policy and legislative committees during the past several months and adopted by the VML membership on Oct. 8 during the annual conference in Roanoke. It's important to note that although the program was created prior to the November elections, its core concerns and components are applicable regardless of which party controls the General Assembly.

**By Janet Areson, VML's Director of Policy Development**

## Guiding Principle: Local Authority

VML supports expanded local government authority and opposes any erosion of local authority.

## Legislative & Budget Priorities

\* = Legislative Priority    \$ = Budget Priority

### Education Funding \* \$

A strong public school system is essential to economic development and prosperity. The state must be a reliable funding partner in accordance with the Virginia Constitution and state statutes. The Standards of Quality should recognize the resources, including staff positions, required for a high-quality public education system. VML opposes changes in methodology and changes in the division of financial responsibility that result in a shift of funding responsibility from the state to localities.

Further, VML opposes policies that lower state contributions but do nothing to address the cost of meeting the requirements of the Standards of Accreditation and Standards of Learning.

Any approach to improving low-performing schools must include adequate state financial support. VML supports increased state funding for the Virginia Preschool Initiative, the K-3 reduced class size program and Early Reading Intervention program. VML also supports increased state stipends for highly effective teachers in high-poverty schools, and other innovative programs for teachers and students.

### Funding the Real Cost of Education \* \$

The state funding formula for education operating costs breaks down on a statewide level as 55 percent state/45 percent local funding. However, the Standards of Quality does not recognize the true costs of education, including pupil transportation, school support staff, providing and updating broadband and other technology, and instructional staff salaries. Neither does it recognize most construction and renovation costs.

As such, local governments match more than is required for basic state education dollars, pay the majority of public school capital costs and struggle to find scarce local tax dollars to keep up with the demands for meeting additional and expanding state requirements and for creating 21st century learning environments for our children to master the challenges of tomorrow's workplace.

VML supports actions for the Commonwealth to recognize and fund the true costs of public education, including new avenues for funding public school construction and renovation costs such as the creation of a pilot program of competitive grants using funds from the Virginia Public Building Authority to offset new construction or renovation costs for publicly owned and operated K-12 schools in fiscally stressed communities as defined by the Virginia Commission on Local Government.

### State Assistance to Local Police Departments (HB 599) \$

Almost 70 percent of Virginians live in communities served by police departments. The state created a program of financial assistance to local police departments (HB 599) when it imposed an annexation moratorium on cities more than 30 years ago. It has increasingly de-emphasized this funding obligation as a priority but has never

compromised on the annexation moratorium. VML calls for the state to honor its commitment to local governments and public safety by funding the program as stipulated in the Code of Virginia or lift the moratorium on annexation.

### Stormwater Local Assistance \$

VML supports continued investment of at least \$50 million annually in the Stormwater Local Assistance Fund to assist localities with critical stormwater projects to meet federal and state clean-water requirements.

### Mental Health Crisis Services and Alternative Transportation \*

VML supports efforts to ensure that adults and children experiencing a mental health crisis are able to obtain timely evaluation and assistance, including emergency custody and temporary detention, as close to their home community as possible. VML supports the statewide implementation of alternative transportation options to help individuals in crisis get to evaluation services and treatment with the goal of eliminating the reliance on local law enforcement for extended transportation and custody services.

### Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment \*

VML supports the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and urges the General Assembly to take the necessary steps to put this matter before the citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

## Other Legislative Positions

The 2020 VML Legislative Program (available at [www.vml.org/advocacy/general-assembly/legislative-program](http://www.vml.org/advocacy/general-assembly/legislative-program)) has a detailed description of VML's position for each of the following issues:

- **Abusive Data Harvesting**
- **Broadband**
- **Cancer Presumption and Workers' Compensation**
- **Commonwealth's Attorney Funding**
- **Communications Sales and Use Tax**
- **Distracted & Inattentive Driving**
- **Housing Solutions**
- **Human Trafficking**
- **Distributed Solar**
- **Funding for Community Services Boards**
- **Funding for Planning District Commissions**
- **Local Option Regulation of Disposable Plastic Bags**
- **Property Assessments Appeals**
- **State and Local Government Fiscal Relationship**
- **Taxing, Licensing, and Regulating Internet-based Businesses and Services**
- **Water Quality Funding**



# Tommy Smigiel

**T**OMMY SMIGIEL, Norfolk city council member and principal at the Academy for Discovery at Lakewood, is not known to crave center stage. As VML's new president, however, he appreciates the opportunity to be the voice for our members.

He does not take his new responsibility lightly and knows there is a lot of work to do. But as Norfolk Mayor Kenneth Copper Alexander stated: "VML got one of the hardest working council members in Virginia. He is a workhorse and doesn't stop until it's right for those he represents. He will bring that same work ethic to VML."

## VML's new president discusses a life of learning and working to help others.

Tommy has decided that the year of his term will be all about VML's members. His strong work ethic will be needed as VML goes through a strategic planning process which will engage its members on how the organization will move forward in the next

ten years. Asked what he's looking forward to the most in the coming year, Tommy says "I am excited to listen to our members, find out their needs, and hear about what VML can do to continue to support and improve upon our member services."

Tommy's strong work ethic comes from his parents who not only worked hard to make sure he and his siblings had what they needed but went the extra mile to be there for them growing up. "My dad had a hard job as a construction worker," recalls Smigiel, "but he still found time to coach my t-ball and soccer team." He notes that his mother "worked part-time jobs to help meet our family's finances, but also volunteered at our school and for our teams." Tommy thinks that his parents made it look easy, but their dedication to doing everything necessary to make ends meet helped shape who he is today.

Tommy knew at a young age that he would have to work hard in school to earn scholarships if he wanted to go to college. He followed his parents' example and applied himself to his studies and became the first one in his family to graduate from college. While attending Old Dominion University, Tommy ran for president of the student body on a platform of change and as a voice for students who didn't feel school administrators listened to them. During this time, Tommy also got his first taste of the Virginia General Assembly when he led a group of university student government presidents to convince a delegate and senator to sponsor legislation that would require Virginia universities and colleges to have a student representative on their Boards of Visitors. Despite serious opposition from university presidents, the legislation passed and remains in place more than twenty years later.

Watching his parents devote themselves to their children's schooling and give back to their community inspired Tommy to become a teacher. He taught Earth Science for five years and completed a master's degree in school administration. For his master's thesis project, Tommy designed a transition class for at-risk ninth graders that increased their chances of graduating on-time. The class focused on teaching self-control and self-discipline, team building, and leadership. The principal of his school was impressed and allowed Tommy to implement the program and teach the class. Two years later, Tommy was recognized for his work and honored to be awarded Teacher of the Year by both his school and Norfolk Public Schools. In 2008 he became the first teacher from Norfolk to be the Virginia Teacher of the Year and was one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year.

Three things inspired Tommy to run for



At the Lake Whitehurst West Civic League Summer Picnic with Mayor Kenneth Cooper Alexander, Civic League President Eileen Diffley-Murley, and School Board Member Lauren Campsen. Tommy helped the league get a blighted out-door pool and park donated to the city to create a new park and garden.



With Susan and Scott Bateman, co-owners of a new coffee shop and craft brewery to be called COVA opening in 2020 in the East Ocean View neighborhood. Tommy worked with them to find a location and assisted with the city processes.

## Tommy Smigiel

office. First, the experience of participating in the National Teacher of the Year program taught him the value of being a positive force in the lives of others. Second, while serving as vice president of his civic league, Tommy organized a community walk in response to a gang assault by teenagers on military personnel that left a man dead. Tommy was determined to find other ways to organize the community to make a difference. Finally, his council representative at the time made unsupportive comments about Norfolk's school system which convinced Tommy that it was time for a change in elected leadership.

Running for city council in 2010, Tommy unexpectedly beat the long-term council member by a slim margin of 116 votes out of 6,000 cast. Nine years and two more elections later, Tommy has followed through with his mission.

Crime in Tommy's neighborhood is down almost 40% from ten years ago. He has worked tirelessly to bring new development to his community, including single and multifamily homes, and he has followed through on a promise to support completion of a \$2.5 million community park. Bay Oaks Park is now enjoyed by residents and visitors to the area. Additionally, Tommy has been a strong advocate for Norfolk's school system and has educated his fellow council members on the strain placed on classrooms by the General Assembly's unfunded mandates and underfunding of the Standards of Quality.

His passion for education is also what led Tommy to get more involved with the Virginia Municipal League. He first served as on the Human Development and Education Policy committee, eventually becoming vice chair. He then served on the Legislative Com-

mittee and then he was elected Urban Section Chair, thus beginning his service on the VML Executive Committee. As Tommy explained in his acceptance speech at the annual VML Conference in Roanoke in October, he knows that VML has the power to bring together a network of partners to bring about real results to the benefit of its members. For him, that power was evident when VML played a key role in stopping the Opportunity Educational Institution school takeover bill.

Tommy stated, "It is when it really came together how powerful of an organization VML can be in standing up for our localities."

As VML's new president, Tommy Smigiel looks forward to standing up for its members to face the challenges to come. 



# 60 seconds with Tommy Smigiel

**Birthplace:** Norfolk, VA

**Family:** Wife Shannon Walsh, 2 daughters and 1 son, Devin (13), Erin (10) & Spencer (4)

**Current civic involvement:** City of Norfolk Census Complete Count Committee Co-Chair, Mayor's Commission on Gaming Co-Chair, Ocean View Advisory Committee Co-Chair, Little Creek Road Task Force, Sand Management Committee Co-Chair, Old Dominion University Darden College of Education and Professional Studies Advisory Committee

**Past civic involvement (a sampling):** Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, East Ocean View Civic League Vice President, Ocean View Civic League Treasurer, YMCA of South Hampton Roads Youth Advisory Board, Norfolk Relay for Life Logistics Chair

**Most unusual request received as a city council member:** Chickens. A group of citizens approached me about backyard hens. At the time, Norfolk's ordinance requirements made it impractical for most people to have backyard chickens. I didn't realize what a hot topic it would be. It took almost two years, and a lot of push back from council colleagues to get the ordinance updated, but three years later, it has been very successful.

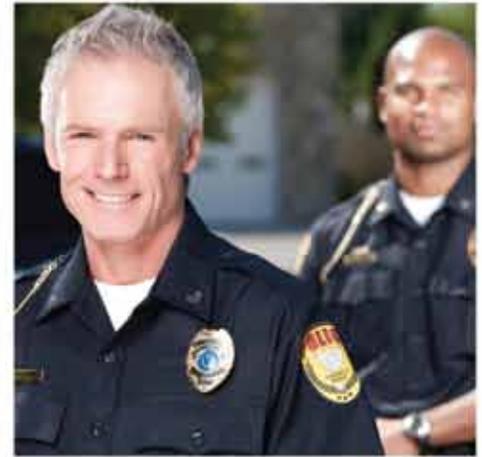
**Favorite food:** Chinese food does it for me. On the healthier side, I love all types of salads, especially those with unusual toppings.

**Least favorite food:** Seafood. I realize that as a Norfolk native I should love seafood as a matter of local pride, but unfortunately, I am allergic to it.

**Part of Virginia where you'd like to spend more time:**

I would love to have the opportunity to visit all the towns in Southwest Virginia. Since I was an Earth Science teacher, I would love to explore the geological features of the region as well.





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# It's time to rethink recycling in Virginia

By Monica Boehringer

**R**ECYCLING ISN'T SOMETHING new, it's been around since people began using (and reusing) tools. It's only recently, however, that it seems to have become more complicated. In fact, just a generation ago, recycling was simply part of being thrifty. Some of us remember a grandmother's drawer with the endless supply of twist ties or the rubber band ball that was kept to the side "just in case." Others recall those hand-me-down dresses or bikes, or that neighbor who seemed to have whatever part was needed tucked away in his garage. My memory is of my mother's compost pile for her garden. Nothing went to waste. When you stop to think about it, everybody has a story of someone who knew how to reduce, reuse and recycle. So, why has recycling become so hard for people to understand? What's the problem?

## Recyclables aren't trash!

Drawers full of odds and ends, hand-me-downs, garages full of just-in-case parts and compost piles all have one big thing in common: they help to reduce waste. Solid waste management is an essential part of a community's infrastructure. As with any essential service – the sewer system, the electrical grid, etc. – if part of the solid waste system malfunctions, the consequences can have costly, long-term effects. Unrecyclable trash being included with recycling is a common, and expensive, problem for many community's solid waste systems. This has led some jurisdictions to suspend their recycling programs, resulting in business closures, job losses and valuable materials being sent to landfills.

Recycling is a commodity and, just like soybeans or wheat, it is traded on the global market. The value of recyclable commodities such as plastic, aluminum and cardboard rises and falls based on demand. China, traditionally the biggest buyer of recyclable materials from the United States, purchases, on average, over \$6 billion worth of materials for use in manufacturing. In January 2018, China imposed a ban on the import of recyclable materials due to the volume of "contamination." More than a quarter of all the material they paid

for was trash and not recyclable. Imagine buying a bag of potatoes – and then finding out that a quarter of the bag was rotten. Now, imagine you paid \$6 billion for it! You wouldn't go back for more.

## Obstacles to overcome; opportunities to seize

Recycling is increasingly a vital component of a community's identity and valuable economic resource. So, why is Virginia not dealing with the issue of contamination and supporting opportunities to develop recyclable materials in Virginia? It comes down to three things: regulation, communication, and opportunity.

### The Virginia Recycling Association supports:

- **Regulatory Review**
  - A formal review of existing legislation.
  - The development of a new statewide program to establish standards for collection, processing and reporting recyclable materials.
- **Communication**
  - A statewide outreach program of accurate education and information.
  - Clear and accurate labeling to help the public understand what to recycle, how to prepare it for recycling and where recycling needs to be taken.
- **Opportunity**
  - Partnerships among the state government, local governments and private enterprises to encourage, stimulate, and support development and expansion of domestic markets for the sale of Virginia's recyclables.

**Regulation.** Virginia’s outdated regulation system lacks the structure necessary to effectively manage recycling. Many parts of the Virginia Waste Management Act have not been updated in over 30 years! There is no legislation to provide guidance for curbside recycling programs. There is no legislation that governs registration and management of Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs) that process recycling. In fact, what little information there is regarding recycling is under the heading of “litter control.” Just as real litter shouldn’t be mixed with recyclables, litter and recycling should not be combined when addressing waste issues. Recycling should not be preceded by “and” in our legislation or in our economy. Unlike litter, recycling is not a problem to be dealt with, it’s an industry that provides a valuable resource.

**Communication.** Misinformation about what can be recycled in a given locality has led to “wishful recycling” by citizens who put everything from clothing to garden hoses, food to lead pipes, (and even kitchen sinks!) in with their recycling in the hope that it will somehow be recycled or will be sorted out without compromising the actual recyclables.

**Opportunity.** As discussed above, reducing trash in recycling is a big challenge. However, it is also crucial to domestic recycling that we find new markets for our materials. Imagine if instead of looking abroad, MRFs could profitably sell their resource to manufacturers within the United States? As it is, the domestic options for MRFs are limited and when they do exist are often unable to take local recyclables.

For example, glass is one of the most difficult materials to recycle in Virginia because we lack facilities to clean and sort the glass that Virginians generate. Each year, Owens Illinois (O-I), which has large facilities in Danville and Toano, uses over 1 billion pounds of recycled

glass from curbside consumer containers and pre-consumer sources in Tennessee and Pennsylvania, but none from Virginia. Because we are unable to provide clean, sorted glass, the material that we could be selling to large manufacturers like O-I goes straight to landfills. (Source: 2011 Container Recycling Institute.)

### Recycling by the numbers:

- The recycling industry contributes over \$1.7 billion to the Virginia economy.
- According to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the volume of reported recyclable material in 2017 was 2,596,863 tons.
- Recycling 1,000 tons of glass creates slightly over 8 jobs.
- Manufacturers use recycled materials in hundreds of products: sunglasses, carpeting, designer shoes, air bags... the list goes on and on.

The Virginia Recycling Association works with businesses to promote the manufacture of recyclable materials as a resource providing jobs and economic growth to communities in Virginia. We encourage citizens to familiarize themselves with their own recycling operations and the challenges they face. This is a problem that many communities are waking up to and solutions require understanding how each locality recycles. Get involved and help support our efforts so that more of what Virginians use can be used again. 

**About the author:** *Monica Boehringer is the Vice President of the Virginia Recycling Association.*



# FASTC is open for business, so is Blackstone, VA.

## The Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) unveils its new, one-of-a-kind Foreign Affairs Security Training Center (FASTC) and a small town anticipates what comes next.

**W**E GET A lot of email at the *Virginia Town & City* editor’s desk, but it’s not every day that we get something from the Diplomatic Security Service. In fact, since I joined VML in the fall of 2018 we’ve only received one message from the DSS and that was on November 4th of this year.

Unfortunately, I totally missed it.

So, when the phone at the editor’s desk rang on November 5th with a caller ID of “U.S. State Department,” I panicked a bit. What had I done? What had I failed to do? Did I owe Secretary Pompeo money? Were they on to me? I did a quick mental check but could not recall being involved in any recent international incidents. As such, I concluded it was safe to answer the phone. And I’m glad I did, because it was an officer from the Diplomatic Security Service Public Affairs office. She wanted to make sure I’d received the prior day’s email invitation to the inaugural opening of the Foreign Affairs Security Training Center (FASTC) happening on November 14th at Fort Pickett, near VML member municipality Blackstone.

Not really knowing what I was getting myself into, but always happy to get away from the office and visit a member locality, I accepted. It sounded like fun.

Nine days later I found myself crawling through a smoke-filled hallway illuminated by flashing red lights while desperately gripping the ankle of the guy in front of me as sounds of gunfire and explosions reverberated from the walls.

Here’s the story of how I wound up in that hallway and what happened afterward when I escaped to Blackstone.

### Part 1 – in which I travel to Fort Pickett, hear a cool band, and meet the mayor

It was cold on November 14th. Really cold. But the drive from Richmond to Fort Pickett – down I95 to I85 and then Route 460 – was pleasant and I kept my truck’s heater cranked. Once on the grounds of Fort Pickett, I followed the “FASTC construction” signs until I eventually encountered three checkpoints and a large group of people in yellow and orange safety vests who directed me into a parking spot like I was trying to land an F-14 on the deck of the *Nimitz*.

Although my vehicle was on completely level ground, I decided to engage the emergency brake. It seemed appropriate.

## What is FASTC?

FASTC IS THE NATION’S LARGEST provider of foreign affairs security training. Located on 1,350 acres of the 55,000-acre training complex at Ft. Pickett, a Virginia Army National Guard installation, FASTC meets the Department’s growing and unique security training needs and the threats the foreign affairs community faces overseas.

FASTC will provide hard-skills security training annually to 10,000 Diplomatic Security Service special agents, security staff, other Department personnel and the foreign affairs community.

The FASTC campus includes three high-speed driving tracks, off-road and improved tracks, explosives ranges, tactical structures to simulate risk of serious injury or death situations and two smokehouses for situations when fire is used as a weapon. Training also in-

cludes land navigation, capstone exercises (used to prepare for large scale emergencies), and scenarios involving a mock embassy compound.



Building T1



The band braves the cold.



Improvised Explosive Device display

Pulling on my coat, I followed a stream of arriving visitors and dignitaries to the outdoor registration area, passed through some metal detectors and located the “Press” desk where I collected my credentials from the public affairs officer who had invited me.

So far, so good.

My first indication that the day might be a bit out of the ordinary came at the sight of a guy on a stretcher whose legs looked to have been blown off; he was receiving a blood transfusion from a 5-gallon bucket but seemed very calm about the situation. Upon closer inspection, this turned out to be a mannequin. In the tent next to the grievously wounded mannequin were two actual guys standing in front of an impressive array of weaponry. I learned that they were firearms instructors. When I mentioned I was at the event to learn more about how FASTC might benefit Blackstone, one of them said: “I just moved there; I guess I’m a new resident!”

I took this as a good sign.

Befitting the facility’s purpose, the austere central grounds of the FASTC complex are flanked by impressive buildings that look like they mean business. Instead of being disquieting, however, the stark structures have an oddly comforting effect, like a clean dinner plate or an unsullied patch of wet sidewalk cement. (Later I met a partner in the architecture firm that had designed

FASTC who told me that the design had been inspired by their work on the U.S. embassy in London.) As I crossed the grounds on the way to a large tent set up for the inauguration, I passed an assortment of sparkling vehicles and machinery as well as displays dedicated to subjects such as Improvised Explosive Devices and wound treatment.

I located a seat in the press section of the unheated, but full, tent and listened to the small military band providing background music. They sounded great, but as I pulled my coat tighter, I wondered if a trumpet or tuba mouthpiece could freeze to a player’s lips in the cold? Does the military issue lip balm in these situations? If the players were having similar thoughts, their disciplined countenances betrayed no fear.

Then the music stopped, and the program began. We heard from Wendy Bashnan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Training at the Diplomatic Security Service; Father Mark Moretti, the Diplomatic Security Service Chaplain; Michael Evanoff, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security; Brian Bulatao, Under Secretary of State for Management; and Emily Murphy, Administrator for the U.S. General Services Administration.

They all had good things to say about FASTC. Then the speakers used an enormous pair of scissors to cut a ribbon and FASTC was officially inaugurated!

We adjourned to a cramped but warm indoor reception area in the colorfully named “Building T1” for lunch and celebratory cake. I was trying to figure out how to balance a small plate of snacks, my notebook and phone without knocking anyone over when I was pleasantly surprised to encounter a familiar face – Phil Miskovic, council member from the Town of Crewe and current member of VML’s



(L-R) Town of Crewe Council Member Phil Miskovic and Town of Blackstone Mayor Billy Coleburn

structures have an oddly comforting effect, like a clean dinner plate or an unsullied patch of wet sidewalk cement. (Later I met a partner in the architecture firm that had designed



The celebratory cake



(L-R) Brian Bulatao, Under Secretary of State for Management; Emily Murphy, Administrator for the U.S. General Services Administration; Michael Evanoff, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security; Wendy Bashnan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Training at the Diplomatic Security Service; and Father Mark Moretti, the Diplomatic Security Service Chaplain.

Community & Economic Development Policy Committee. Phil introduced me to Billy Coleburn, the mayor of Blackstone (whose late uncle Dr. Jimmy Harris was also mayor and served a term as president of VML). I asked Mayor Coleburn what FASTC meant to him and he replied: “It’s biggest thing to happen to Blackstone since Fort Pickett!” I asked if they expected new hotels to be built now that around 10,000 people would be coming to train at FASTC each year. Mayor Coleburn had his doubts. “The Federal per diem is \$96, it’s hard to persuade developers that those people will have the money to spend to stay local.” I was surprised to learn that trainees would be bused in and out of destinations as far away as Short Pump (outside of Richmond) every day. However, as FASTC lacks food service options, Mayor Coleburn had high hopes for the region’s restaurants. “At the end of the day, only good things can come of this,” he said. “It just may take some time.”

About 10 minutes later the ever-cordial DSS public affairs officer ushered me into a small room to meet Wendy Bashnan who had just concluded an interview with the regional NBC station. I didn’t want to take up too much of her time, so I got right to the point: “What do you think FASTC will mean to Blackstone?” Deputy Assistant Secretary Bashnan didn’t miss a beat as she explained that FASTC would be using local accommodations as much as possible and that the facility would have a strong involvement with the region. She talked about the job opportunities already created by FASTC (which I later learned to be true when I visited the fleet maintenance shop) and the Diplomatic Security Service’s desire to create strong links between FASTC and the community. “Look,” she reasoned, “we know that the world

isn’t getting safer, so we are only going to get bigger.” Echoing what Mayor Coleburn had told me minutes earlier, she concluded: “At the end of the day, the premiere counter-terrorism training facility in the world is now located in little old Blackstone, VA! We’re energized by what this means, and we hope the community is as well.”

The reception crowd was beginning to dissipate as I made

my way back past the buffet and towards the exit. At the doors, the DSS public affairs officer informed me that the media tour was about to start. Did I want to follow her to the bus? I looked at the itinerary and noticed that the tour concluded with a Rocket Propelled Grenade demonstration.

“I’m in,” I told her.

## Part 2 – in which I get stuck on a boulder strewn hill

In the bus, I joined the two-person NBC news crew, a couple of FASTC personnel, the DSS public affairs officer and a publicist from the Virginia National Guard (whose ankle would later lead me to safety). Our guide was FASTC’s director of driver training, whose enthusiasm for the new FASTC facility, particularly the parts of it connected to motors and wheels, was evident. As we rolled to the first item on our itinerary “Vehicle Training,” the driver training director explained that between eight and ten thousand drivers would be trained per year at FASTC by a staff of 54 instructors and specialists. The time each trainee spends at the

facility and the skills they acquire will vary because an embassy staff member, for instance, may just need to practice driving on the left side of the road whereas an ambassador’s driver may need to know how to elude pursuers while under fire.

The driving instructors at FASTC include many ex-law enforcement personnel as well as several ex-professional race car drivers. Indeed, one of the drivers had won the SUV division in the Baja 2000 (which is what the annual Baja 1000 race was called in the year 2000 when the distance was increased to over 1700 miles, making it the longest, non-stop, point-to-point desert race ever held at the time). The driver training director made it clear that these are people who spend most of their waking hours (and likely many of their sleeping hours) thinking about cars; they are people who laugh while telling you how many vehicles they’ve totaled. He described working as a driving instructor at FASTC as a “dream job” for these folks.

FASTC maintains a fleet of 300 vehicles (cars, SUVs and Jeeps mostly). First stop on our tour was the fleet maintenance facility where, on any given day, 30-40 vehicles are serviced by a crew of two dozen maintenance staff. These workers, who are part of SNOOKUM Contract Services, are all residents of the surrounding area and do everything from washing to welding. The shop can handle full realignments using state of the art diagnostic equipment and can change a tire and have a vehicle back on the tracks in less than 5 minutes. “Best pit crew money can buy,” the driver training director said proudly of the shop staff.

The “best pit crew” smiled at us but mostly seemed interested in getting back to working on cars.

FASTC has 750 acres of tracks including highways, intersections and courses for drivers to practice extreme skills. “Think about it,” said the driver training director as our bus came to a stop at the top of an overpass dozens of miles from the nearest interstate, “no other government training agency has an interstate overpass for training!”

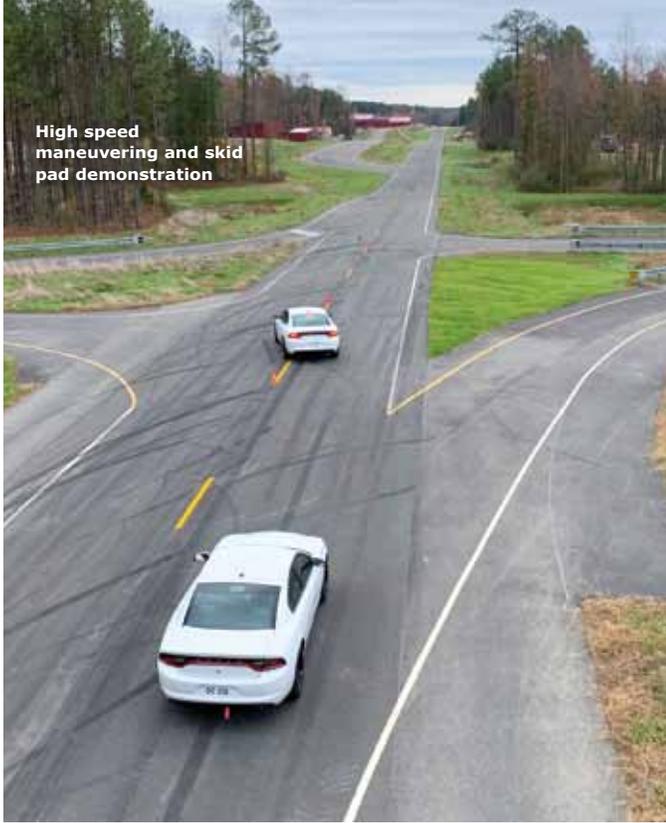
From atop our private overpass, we watched 2 drivers demonstrate hot laps, high speed maneuvering and skid pads. [Editor’s note – while this was all very impressive, they did not demonstrate an ability to parallel park on the left side of the street on a Saturday night

**The various skills taught at FASTC were previously spread across more than 11 training facilities in the mid-Atlantic region. It’s a testament to the dedication of the staff and the unique work description that of the roughly 500 staff members, 85% are people who chose to relocate in order to continue in their role.**

**The funding for FASTC was approved by the General Assembly way back in 2011. A recent issue of the Blackstone Courier-Record included the banner “FASTC, FINALLY!” and touted “471 jobs!” Not an insignificant number for a town with a population just over 3,600.**



Rubicons conquer the vertical rock climb



High speed maneuvering and skid pad demonstration

in downtown Richmond. So, it would seem I have them beat in one area]. Then it was on to the Vertical Rock Climb and obstacle course area where several trainers in Jeep Rubicons were demonstrating how to drive over large boulders and up the side of a steep rocky hill. The driver training director pointed out that these skills were vital because “you might be the best driver in the world, but if you put a hole in your gas tank in the middle of Afghanistan, you’re just as stuck as the worse driver in the world.” The drivers also demonstrated the correct way to pull a Jeep mired in deep sand free using another Jeep (hint – it involves a chain).

Perhaps it was the smell of exhaust in the air, or maybe it was the excitement of the revving engines, but I found myself volunteering to hop in a Jeep for one of the vertical rock climb demonstrations. The National Guard publicist jumped in the back and I took shotgun. Our driver was a former race car driver and insurance safety consultant(!). He kept his eyes on the road (or lack thereof) but maintained friendly, relaxed chatter as we began our ascent. From the ground, the mountain of boulders didn’t look too bad. But my impression changed considerably once we started up the 35° incline and I felt myself being pressed into the back of the seat by gravity. With mule-like determination, the Jeep crawled up the hill and then for a moment we were poised on the precipice before gravity reversed and we were thrown forward against our safety belts for the descent. In all, it was like a very bumpy, slow roller-coaster ride.

Our driver went around for a second pass and halfway up again we became stuck. “Probably should have stayed on the track,” he mused as he alternated between forward and reverse. Every time we drifted back, we’d hit a boulder and the Jeep would come to a dead stop with a loud, reverberating thunk! “Feel that boulder?” asked our driver without a hint of sarcasm. With each impact, I thought of the state-of-the-art shop for the vehicles we had just visited and considered the manner in which the drivers provided job security for the maintenance crew.

In all, we spent about five long minutes having a very calm conversation while our driver performed slight adjustments, forward and back, and eventually found the one combination of maneuvers to free us. He seemed pleased and admitted that it was more fun doing this than working for an insurance company.

### Part 3 – in which I learn about “smoke as a weapon” and a threatening pickup truck receives justice

Our next stop was at the FAW (Fire as a Weapon) smokehouse facility for what was billed as an “interactive scenario.” En route, we learned that FAW training became part of diplomatic security training in November 2013 shortly after the Benghazi attack. While waiting for the demonstration to begin, we were told that the buildings behind us were a replication of an actual embassy compound and barracks



Smokehouse after the demonstration

which were used to create assault and rescue scenarios for trainees. Surveying the concrete structures surrounded by a high wall in the middle of a field it occurred to me that A. if Blackstone ever decided to declare itself a sovereign nation, the United States would already have an embassy in place, and B. If the zombie apocalypse comes, I know where I’m headed. [Editor’s note to fellow zombie apocalypse refugees – the mock em-

bassy at FASTC is not furnished, so be sure to hit up an abandoned IKEA on the way there. I’ll bring the hex wrenches!]

Unlike the hollow embassy behind us, the FAW “smokehouse” in front of us looked outwardly unimpressive – like several mobile homes joined to make a less mobile home – but we were assured by a smiling staff member that the interior was more exciting. So exciting, in fact, that we would need to wear goggles. So, begoggled, the National Guard publicist and I took the first turn. Per instructions, the publicist felt the door and yelled, “Cold door” opened it and yelled “Smoke.” I followed suit. We dropped to our knees in the smoke-filled interior ablaze with red lights and awash in the sounds of gunfire and explosions. We began to crawl. “Left wall,” we yelled. The instructors, dimly visible through the haze, shouted that I needed to maintain contact with the lead person, so I grabbed the publicist’s ankle and hoped he didn’t mind. Despite full knowledge of where I was, the noise, inability to see and shouting began to get to me. We crawled and crawled, and it seemed to take forever but eventually I heard my guide yell “Cold door” and he opened it to the safety of the Virginia countryside.

Afterward, we walked through the larger smokehouse (thankfully, smoke free at the time) which is set up with different rooms bedecked with mock furnishings like lamps, tables and chairs and mannequins. This facility is used by security personnel to practice rescuing people from smoke-filled interiors.

Back on the bus, we were joined by a member of the Explosive Countermeasures Unit (ECU). He told us that his staff at FASTC can reproduce any Improvised Explosive Device (IED) that has been encountered in the field, so trainees get experience identifying, avoiding and/or deactivating them. As we rolled down SIM Alley, a few city blocks of building facades (like a movie set for a wild west town, only made of concrete and much less charming), he pointed out a moped, shopping cart and other seemingly ordinary looking items that held IEDs. Just before we made a turn he said, “See that pickup truck coming toward us? It’s been identified as a threat. A man is going to step

out of that doorway over there and fire an RPG at it.” A moment later, all he said came true and the mock RPG (more of a firework, but with an impressive boom, flash and cloud of smoke) flew through the air and exploded on the pickup. Everyone in the bus, including the FASTC personnel, was impressed. One of the staff said, “I’m glad that worked, last time it just sort-of skidded across the ground.”

Indeed, like that rocket, FASTC was no longer skidding along but had fully arrived. As we passed the pickup truck the two men sitting up front smiled and waved through the dissipating smoke. Very out of character for supposed “threats,” but a nice way to end our visit.

## Part 4 – in which I visit downtown Blackstone, make a consequential call and am party to a potential truck exchange

It’s a pleasant, short drive from Fort Pickett to Blackstone. As soon as I reached the shops along Main Street, I found a parking spot and started to walk around. There were several cozy looking restaurants and more than a few enticing antique stores. I knew that Blackstone had begun as a crossroads settlement in 1788 and that in 1798, as the town grew, John Schwartz opened a tavern in a building that remains a prominent feature of Blackstone’s historic district. The town was originally called “Black’s and White’s” after two taverns facing each other on Main Street. In the 1880s Dr. Jethro M. Hurt proposed the name “Blackstone” after the famous English jurist, and the rest is history. Prominent in that history are railroads, tobacco, farming, Fort Pickett (est. 1941) and the Blackstone College for Girls (1894-1950) where a young Bea Arthur did her first acting and Violeta Chamorro was a student long before she became president of Nicaragua.

I walked Main Street, snapping pictures and wondering how best to spend the short amount of time left until I had to return to Richmond. I decided to call Town Manager Philip Vannoorbeeck. “Where should I go?” I asked? “Where are you?” he returned. “I’ll come get you, look for a white truck with a light on top.” Five minutes later, Vannoorbeeck pulled to the curb in a town work truck, complete with brooms and shovels in the back, and we were off on a 20-minute tour of Blackstone.



Blackstone Town Manager Philip Vannoorbeeck

We drove past a new apartment complex nearing completion that I wondered might become homes for

FASTC staff. I asked Vannoorbeeck what he thought of FASTC coming to the area and if he thought the federal per diem would be an obstacle. He was matter of fact: “I think that developers will see the potential regardless.” Furthermore, “those 10,000 students coming every year to FASTC will want someplace to eat and stuff to do, that’s where Blackstone can benefit right away.” We stopped in front of the old Blackstone College for Girls, a beautiful collection of late nineteenth century buildings which had been owned by the Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center for more than six decades before a boiler plant fire led to its closure. Recently the site was purchased by a developer but plans for a hotel had not yet materialized. “It would take a lot of work,” conceded Vannoorbeeck, “but maybe with FASTC up and running it will get done.”

We drove down a slight hill into a residential area and came across a couple of town workers by their own truck. Vannoorbeeck rolled down the window to chat about a sewer line issue. While they were talking, a resident stopped alongside in a sharp looking Chevy Scottsdale pickup truck. The driver humorously accused the town of



breaking his sewer line and Vannoorbeeck countered with an offer to buy the man’s truck. “Sure, the price is \$5,000,” was the answer. Vannoorbeeck countered by offering to trade for a Ford he had at home, “the heater doesn’t work but that’s OK,” he observed in the chilly air. The resident didn’t seem keen on the trade but before he drove off Vannoorbeeck told him to get the Scottsdale ready and he’d be by with the Ford soon. “Sure, you do that,” came the less-than-genuine but good-natured reply.

Remembering the fleet maintenance crew and driving instructors at FASTC, I considered that Blackstone was a good home for everyone involved.

On the way back downtown, Vannoorbeeck drove past a nondescript brick building. “A long time ago, this was the town’s gas works,” he explained, “it was recently purchased by the group that did Trapezium Brewing [in Petersburg] to start a brewery here. It will be another place in Blackstone for all those students to come visit.” [see sidebar]

**In the June issue of *Richmond*mag, writer Kate Andrews profiles Petersburg developer Dave McCormack whose Waukeshaw Development is responsible for Trapezium and other regional businesses. She notes that Andrews has “started working on projects in the town of Blackstone, where Fort Pickett is constructing a new Foreign Affairs Security Training Center.”**

Our brief tour complete, Vannoorbeeck deposited me at my own pickup truck. On the way out of town, I stopped to take a picture of the historic Schwartz Tavern which was undergoing some exterior renovations. It seemed appropriate that a town poised for so much growth should take a moment to spruce up its past. I thought about trying to go inside but decided it could wait for another day. Afterall, there were plenty of reasons to return. **VTC**

**About the author:** Rob Bullington is editor of *Virginia Town & City* and is VML’s Director of Communications.



Future home of a brewery?

# VRSA's 2019 Annual Report focuses on financial strength and partnership

**T**HE 2019 VRSA ANNUAL Report highlights VRSA's continued financial strength. VRSA's net position at the end of

more than 30 events including planning district commission meetings, dinners, receptions/observances, regional roundtables, and site assessments. VRSA staff sponsored, attended or presented at nearly 20 conferences!

the year was \$121.4 million, driven by favorable investment results as well as a 5.6 percent reduction in losses. The pool's overall loss ratio was 67.9 percent. VRSA's strong net position is indicative of the pool's financial health – allowing VRSA to obtain reinsurance, expand coverages, and maintain stable rates in property and liability and workers' compensation coverage for the past nine years.

The annual report also spotlights many of the trainings VRSA participated in throughout the Commonwealth, specifically in the areas of general interest, communications, public safety and risk management, as well as regional discussions, conferences, and more.

Member engagement and training expanded greatly over the past year to include nearly 120 in-person trainings, 20 webinars, and

Last year, VRSA staff surveyed our members to determine what training would most benefit them. As a result, VRSA's offerings in 2019 included subjects of immediate interest to our members. These trainings covered topics such as active shooter situations, crisis communications, cyber security, OSHA, reasonable suspicion, confined space entry and trenching, supervisor liability, and the grievance process. Staff also provided physical site assessments and safety inspections, as well as nearly 600 in-person visits by VRSA member services representatives.

We presented webinars to nearly 420 members on subjects such as HR Complaint Investigations; Ransomware, Miners and Breaches; Supervisor Training: How and What to Document; Accident Committee

Review; Creating and Using a Job Safety Analysis; Policy and SOP Modules; The Grievance Process; and School Safety and Security.

These engagements are designed to assist members in managing risk, and ultimately, to reduce members' total cost of risk. VRSA staff also began promoting a Speakers Bureau for the various topics for which staff can provide training. The extensive training list is organized by topics such as general interest, communications, human resources, jail and juvenile detention centers, public safety, risk management, and workers' compensation.

Presentations focus on a variety of topics, including: active shooter/workplace violence prevention; council/manager management; cyber security from a risk management perspective; public officials liability; crisis communications; complaint investigations; harassment in the

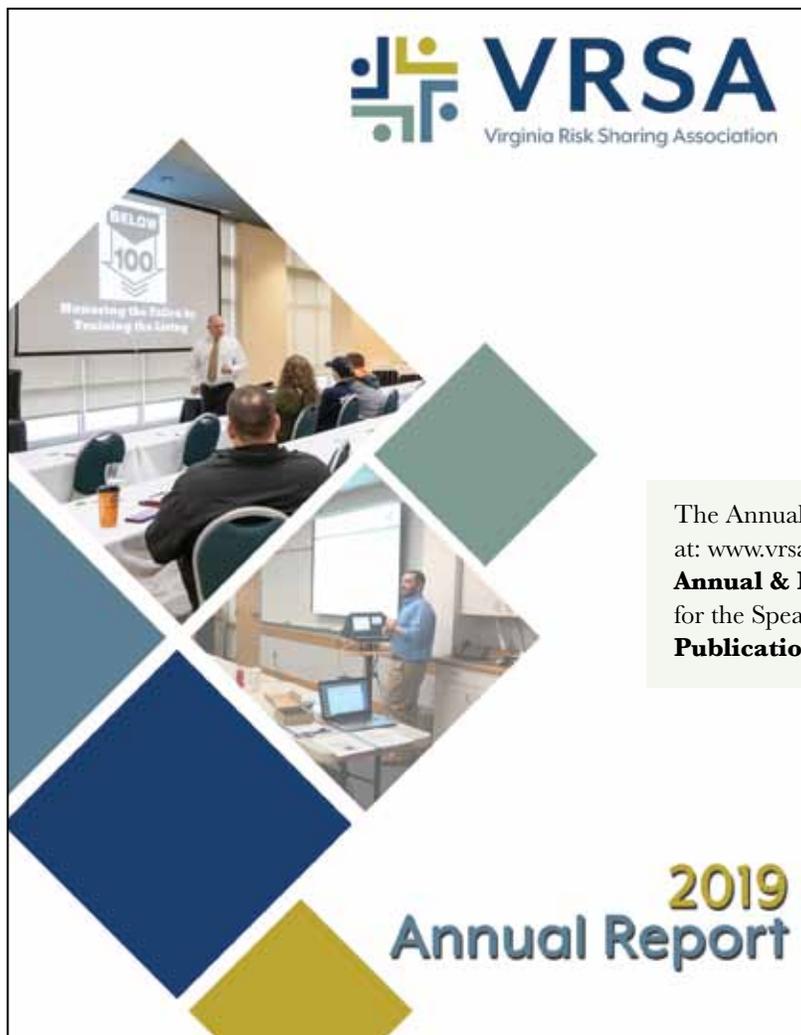
workplace; supervisor liability; jail officer safety and liability concerns; emergency vehicle operations and liability ethics; stress in public safety; fleet management;

The Annual Report is available online at: [www.vrsa.us](http://www.vrsa.us) under **Publications > Annual & Financial Reports**. A flier for the Speakers Bureau is available under **Publications > Brochures**.

OSHA at a glance; playground safety; workers' compensation 101; and controlling workers' compensation costs.



**About the authors:** *The Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) is the first and most financially sound self-insurance pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia. For nearly 40 years VRSA has provided auto, property, liability, and workers' compensation coverage to Virginia local political subdivisions.*





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