

# Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 193

OCTOBER 2024

Bob Fetzer's 50 Years

Sycamore Station

Lick Run Farms

FirstBank Downtown

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Crowning Touch

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# WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Like the interior of an auction house on a high-bidding Saturday, it's all we can do not to make this edition of FRONT cluttered. It's all treats for October where we're handing out the following from our FRONTdoor: A profile on Crowning Touch and its specialized services for seniors. Then there's the 50-years-in-business construction giant Bob Fetzler and Building Specialists. We scoot to the farm (and area boutique restaurants) with Big Lick Farms. And finally, we introduce the little, popular Sycamore Station shop at Hanging Rock. But wait! Did we say "finally"? There's more: expert advice, professional development, news, announcements, happenings, and reviews. It's all good. And waiting for you to dive on in as we hit Q4.



**Tom Field**  
Publisher



**Gene Marrano**  
Editor

“”  
Make every visit count. — Page 39

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# A Most Unique Proposition

by Tom Field





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# OCTOBER



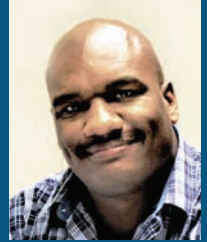
Carrie Cousins



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Shawn Nowlin



Sam Sokolove



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Valley Business FRONT has organized an Advisory Board comprised of a selective group of diverse business professionals who support our mission and have an interest in how our business journal best serves our local communities and region. As a sounding board throughout their term, board members have been given the task of helping FRONT understand the issues and develop coverage. You will note that the Board is comprised of experts in many different business / industry "fronts." This is intentional, as we are reporting on all the areas that affect our regional economy and are important to you. Although the members are encouraged to keep FRONT updated on their own industries and the key players, they aren't limited to their area of specialty, as all commercial enterprises ultimately collaborate to impact our quality of life here in this part of Virginia. An additional contribution by the Advisory Board involves direct input on the various FRONTLists we present throughout the year. In keeping with our policy of being "the voice of business in the valleys" we ask each reader to join us as an editorial partner by contacting us with your ideas. You know more than we know about your business—or you certainly should—and that inside knowledge shared with our readers will make us all better at what we do.

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There are more  
rogue movers  
than ever. — Page 14



Farmers  
who cultivate  
genuine  
relationships  
are usually  
more  
successful.

— Page 31

Biographies and  
contact information  
on each contributor  
are provided on Page 60.

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# A Most Unique Proposition

Story & Photos  
by Tom Field

4 Businesses in 1  
Serving the Senior Market





It's no mystery, really. Not for Nancy Drew. Not for Linda Balentine. The auction house at Crowning Touch doesn't have an auctioneer. Never did.

"We're the only auction house in Virginia without an auctioneer," says Balentine, owner and operator of the Crowning Touch business, located on Williamson Road in Roanoke. "There are lots of online auctions, for sure. But we have our own hybridized 'browse-and-bid' system" that lets bidders manage their own transactions. "Browse-and bid," she reiterates, "is our own brand."

If she sounds protective of that brand, you're right. She is. Crowning Touch—as the name sort of



implies—is an empire. For one, she built it from the ground up. (We reported on the business when it first began three decades ago.) But it also resembles an empire in its expansion. Today, Crowning Touch is four businesses in one, each with its own fiefdom.

There's Crowning Touch Auctions. This is the auction house that's garnered a reputation for having unique and desirable artifacts, furniture, heirloom items, home decor, jewelry, and all sorts of treasured items that were collected by mostly seniors throughout their lives. And that—is the other big stone Balentine used to build her castle: she designed it almost exclusively for the senior demographic and market.









Next, there's Crowning Touch Senior Moving Service, the keystone for the whole empire really. Balentine started with the moving company; after she recognized a great need in this market for services specialized for seniors.

Although her business is in its 29th year, Balentine says the senior focus is just as important as ever—still filling its own niche.

"Most people don't realize," she begins, "that there are only five [legitimate] moving companies here. There are more rogue movers than ever; and folks really need to be careful."

Balentine says even some of the good movers still hire out subcontractors for special items like valuable clocks and pianos.

"And what movers help you find homes for your pets, your plants... or help you hang pictures?"

It's these extras that make a difference, she says.

Also, Balentine warns about movers who provide estimates over the phone or online.

"You just cannot give an accurate estimate without an onsite walk-through," Balentine says.

Crowning Touch also offers pickup and delivery services.

The third line of business is Crowning Touch Consignment.

This is the "retail store" operation where the same kind of unique items are offered for sale, and the proceeds are split 50:50.

The inventory—both the auction and consigned merchandise—creates quite the list (you can see it in work at the two buildings and on the website) but the huge catalog is a simple and straightforward one.

Lastly, and most recently, there is the fourth "touch" of the business that serves within the senior sector: Crowning Touch Real Estate.

It doesn't take a Nancy Drew detective to figure out something: Linda Balentine has captured a unique market for her business empire that addresses the many individuals (and ever growing silver demographic) at a significant point in their lives. The point in time when many older folks are ready to simplify or downsize or remove the clutter that has surrounded them after a half a century of living.

Balentine saw this in 1995. And that very need hasn't diminished at all since then.

Crowning Touch can move you and your belongings, it can sell or auction all the furniture and art and decor and "stuff" you no longer need around you (even vehicles, boats, etc.); and it can even sell your house and the property itself. All of it, with an understanding of seniors' objectives, Balentine says.

## Stats on Seniors and their Homes

In the United States, the number of seniors aged 65 and over is projected to nearly double to 95 million by 2060, representing over 23% of the total population.

—National Council on Aging

The South had the largest net migration gain of older people

—Forbes

Residential relocation is a way for older adults to cope with income changes, health changes, and other life cycle events such as the loss of a partner. The number of movers aged 60 and older increased by 1.4 million from 2010 to 2019 in the United States.

—Journal of the APA

Home modifications for accessibility can cost \$10,000—\$100,000

9 in 10 U.S. homes are not ready to accommodate aging adults

Roughly one-fifth of seniors (21%) over age 65 have completely paid off their mortgages

—Choice Mutual

Living in a multiuse community is increasingly appealing to aging boomers who want to stay connected and engaged

The multiuse model is resonating with both seniors and their adult children

—AARP

Linda Balentine's startup of the business (which began with the moving services) was a rough one. She was living in Highland County; she and her husband ran a business together, but divorced and sold it. One thing led to another, and she found herself broke and homeless. A friend owned a moving business; and she proposed the specialization for seniors—but the deal flopped. Rather than give up the idea, Balentine found a project through a local real estate agent, rounded up firefighters and police officers (from a basketball court) to help with the move, and executed that first job. From that point, her trek included bank meetings, working with old trucks and equipment, and even rekindling with and re-marrying her husband.

Today, Balentine operates a most unique business model, oversees a full staff of employees, and manages the facilities and equipment to make Crowning Touch a formidable and go-to source, especially geared for the senior market.

"My husband is Dan, last name Roach; so I kept my Balentine name since it fits better in the moving business," Balentine quips. She has three sons, a daughter, 11 grandchildren, and highly recommends home-schooling (which she does, with her seven-year old).

It's no mystery. But it is a story of detective-like perseverance.



Dan Smith

Bob Fetzer with renovated homes along Campbell Avenue.

# BSI: A Pioneer at 50

By Dan Smith

**Bob Fetzer’s innovations at his construction company have helped preserve and improve Roanoke’s homes and businesses.**

Commercial and residential development in a metro area the size of the Roanoke Valley is a highly competitive, often intense business, and the developers don’t always appreciate each other for that reason.

There’s a Roanoke exception, however. Everybody loves Bob Fetzer, whether they are competitors, customers or just the admiring public. There are few exceptions and with that background, it’s easy to say—

though hard to believe—that Fetzer and Building Specials Inc. have been in business making friends and building notable projects for 50 years in October.

David Hill of Hill Studios has worked with Fetzer and notes that “Bob is the company. People love him.”

Says John Garland, a noted Roanoke historical preservationist, “I have known Bob as a



Submitted

Campbell Avenue Homes renovation.



business associate for decades and I have always been impressed with his honesty and integrity. Bob is the perfect gentleman and is an inspiration to the local construction community.

"He is not your typical hard-sell contractor, but he wants his clients to feel comfortable with him as their builder. He will go out of his way to explain the intricacies of the construction industry to his clients.

"Bob's 50th year in the construction industry is the testimony of his work ethic, integrity, and customer loyalty; loyalty earned by his expert service."

One of the region's top re-developers, Ed Walker, had this to say: "Bob Fetzer is in the pantheon of builders and historic redevelopers in Roanoke. He showed me and many others how to pursue this difficult work—and everybody that knows him aspires to emulate his creativity, generous spirit, commitment to creativity and quality, and positive community impact with an emphasis on arts and culture."

They began a notable project 20 years ago. Says Walker, "I met Bob when we worked on the renaissance of the Grandin Theatre and Blacksburg's Lyric Theatre. Bob was essential to the success of that amazing project. Kind, enthusiastic, positive, fun, smart, gets the job done."

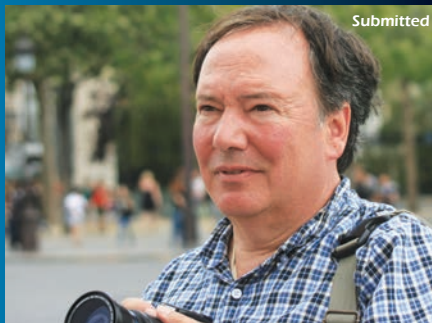
Fetzer is not a man with his head so deep in his business that he has no time for the community. Quite the contrary, in fact.



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Mill Mountain's Discovery Center was a BSI project.

## 'DOES WELL BY DOING GOOD'



Submitted

David Hill of Hill Studio in Roanoke has worked with Bob Fetzer for many years and knows him professionally as well as anybody. Here's what he has to say:

"We are extraordinarily lucky to have Building Specialists in the Roanoke Valley. Its 50 years have benefited the region and improved the quality of life for all of our citizens. Every time we work with Building Specialists we are impressed by the creativity, the attention to detail, and the respect its people have for everybody involved in the process of building.

"Building Specialists' success is due in large part to the kindness of its founder, Bob Fetzer. Bob is the kind of guy who must run into the card store on the way to a meeting, even though we are already tight on time. Why? He is buying several cards he will send later that day – one for a neighbor who is in the hospital, one for a former employee whose mom died, and one for client's birthday. He does this almost every day.

"Bob shows up on your doorstep with a bunch of flowers the night he learns of a family emergency. That's who he is. And this care and positivity radiates to everybody on the team. Bob would rather spend dozens of hours assisting fundraising efforts than delete key elements out of Mill Mountain Visitor Center.

"And who could forget, Building Specialists hosted one of the most challenging episodes of television's Extreme Home Makeover – volunteering thousands of man hours so a lady in Blacksburg could have a great new house. If you get a chance to work with Building Specialists on any business venture, you will see how it incorporates this "intangible" into everything it does."

—Dan Smith



The ABC home build was done in freezing temperatures and snow/ice.

The former Roanoke Citizen of the Year has served on a number of boards including Downtown Roanoke Inc. (chairman), Council of Community Services, Total Action for Progress, Better Business Bureau of Western Virginia and Valley Beautiful. He is past president of the Roanoke Regional Home Builders Association and is a founding

member of Roanoke Valley Greenways and Pathfinders for Greenways.

Residential Design and Build Magazine has named BSI Builder of the Year; Downtown Roanoke Inc. has presented the company with three Golden Trowel Awards; BSI was contractor for the ABC TV Extreme Makeover show. Fetzer's renovation of the Trinity United Methodist in Old Southwest is noteworthy as is his involvement as one of the first developers to buy land in a blighted downtown neighborhood and renovate its buildings for offices and affordable housing.

As important as anything he has built has been his intense interest in re-developing a downtown Roanoke that appeared to have no future 35 years ago. But he was one of

# TOP PROJECTS FROM BSI

Following are some of Building Specialists' noteworthy projects over the years.

**Historic Grandin Theatre - Roanoke**  
*Architect: Rife + Wood. Completion: 2003*  
Building Specialists, Inc. renovated and restored the Roanoke Valley's only remaining historic movie house. With the demolition of an existing small viewing room, moviegoers are welcomed by a new 1930s-style marquee. This project included a new 1930s-style lobby, complete with terrazzo floors, painstakingly restored. BSI assembled a team of skilled craftsmen to restore much of the historic architectural details of the grand old theatre, including restoration of the hand-painted murals discovered during cleaning. BSI began construction on this project with only a handshake and a promise to work in this team effort. Fetzer not only helped with fundraising for the project, but he offered a reduced rate for BSI's services and also asked the same of our subcontractors and vendor team.

**Fikse Residence - Smith Mountain Lake**  
*Architect - Danny Goins. Completion: 2011*  
Doug and Polly Fikse's dream was to build a home for their extended family to vacation and host family get-togethers. With a history

of family vacations at Smith Mountain Lake, the couple knew where they would build; they just needed the perfect design. The design-build project between architect Danny Goins, the clients and BSI called for a 15-seat theatre, wine room, workout room with sauna, library, boathouse, indoor water feature and much more. The most exciting component to this project was the state-of-the-art technology designed to run the home security, communication and entertainment systems completely remotely. At the time this technology was extremely uncommon in residential use and was designed by the owner and his company On-Q Legrand. After two years of design work and two years of construction, this 10,500 square foot "smart home" was completed on schedule. Building Specialists incorporated many commercial building techniques.

**ABC Extreme Home Makeover - Blacksburg**  
*Architect: Virginia Tech School of Architecture/ Building Specialists. Completed: 2005*  
Makeover: Home Edition producers contacted Building Specialists to give Carol Crawford-Smith a new house. Despite knowing that this project was under strict time constraints and was to be performed without compensation, Building Specialists did not hesitate to volunteer its services. BSI preconstruction

the developers who took a keen interest in not only re-developing business buildings, but in creating apartments for wealthy and middle-income and poor people in the heart of Roanoke, taking that downtown population from about 100 to more than 2,000 today.

Fetzer comes from a noteworthy Elizabethton, TN, family. His dad, a commercial iron worker, served on city council for 16 years and was chairman of the Democratic Party for a good while (Fetzer is not politically active). His dad was also on the school board. His mother died recently at 105 and his father died at 95.

Family still plays a significant part: his grandson Parker Midyette, 22, has been

working for Building Specialists and along with Vice President Michael Bennett and the rest of the BSI employees, he has built a solid team to step in when retirement comes due. Fetzer is 73.

Fetzer graduated from East Tennessee State University after attending Carson-Newman College as a football player for a spell. Bad knees forced him to leave football.

For the longest time, Fetzer's building philosophy has been "save as much as you can." He estimates he has renovated "30 or 40 properties," including 16 units on Patterson Avenue and a later concentration on the depressed West End, where he has renovated a number of older homes with good bones. He says that "several" re-developers "went

team organized a group of subcontractors and vendors and ordered panelled walls, trusses, doors, windows, and other building products. The twist was that the materials were needed within two weeks and the house had to be constructed in under five days. Building Specialists organized over 300 subcontractors, and more than 4,000 volunteers, which endured frigid temperatures, ice storms, and snow to construct a house for the Crawford-Smith family. Despite it being the worst building conditions in the history of the show, the home was completed in time for the big reveal.

#### **Historic Kegley Residence - Roanoke Multiple Projects: 1993-2024**

The home is listed in both the National Historic and Virginia Landmark Registries and is one of the oldest homes in the Roanoke Valley. George and Louise Kegley lived there and have both died in recent years. The home is now owned by their son, his wife and his young family. In 1993, during a severe storm, a large ash tree fell onto this historic Greek Revival 1843 home and sustained over a quarter of a million dollars in damage. Building Specialists was called on site to work with the insurance claim to remove the tree and repair the damage to

the home. Over the years, BSI has continued to work with this multi-generational home on projects.

#### **Campbell Avenue - Downtown Roanoke Architect/Designer: Building Specialists/ Earle Shumate. Completion: 1985**

After years of neglect and decay, these homes along Campbell Avenue were restored and renovated into affordable housing for low-income residents. Renovated Properties, Ltd. has significant experience in the acquisition, development, rehabilitation, and operations of rental properties throughout the Roanoke Valley. Renovated Properties (Fetzer is president) has rehabilitated over 28 rental units in 12 buildings on Campbell Avenue and Day Avenue, as well as additional properties on nearby blocks. These properties are well known by local residents as the "rainbow block," as each house is painted a bright color. Funds were provided through private financing, VHDA, and HUD as part of the City of Roanoke's NCEP (Neighborhood and Community Enhancement Programs). This project was the beginning of refurbishing dilapidated homes throughout Downtown Roanoke.

(Source: Sandy Murray, BSI.)



Submitted

Christ Episcopal Church renovation

bankrupt trying to renovate some of those [blighted] properties." It was, indeed, a risk he was willing to take.

He and David Hill were at the front end of developing downtown housing. "David did a mockup of what downtown living would look like," says Fetzer. The goal was to buy empty buildings and establish apartments on the upstairs floors.

Fetzer's bid for the new Discovery Center on Mill Mountain came in low, but the project went over budget. Fetzer found contributors to balance the budget and keep the building in line with the architect's vision.


Along with other construction and development professionals like Walker, Hill, Garland, Lucas Thornton and a couple of others, the work was underway. "I don't consider them competitors," says Fetzer. "I work with them." Fetzer became president of Downtown Roanoke Inc. in 1988 and headed the housing task force. At the time, "the city was so blighted and had so much empty space," he says. "Initially, there was opposition to making it a historic district," but that faded as success grew. "Young people are in the top category" of residents now and "a lot of them are students" at one of the several colleges downtown. "We probably have 1,000 students now."

Retired Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce President Joyce Waugh had

a close working relationship with Fetzer for years. She says, "For any small business to stay in business through the winds of economic change for just 5 or 10 years says a lot. For Bob Fetzer and Building Specialists Inc. to grow and serve our beautiful Virginia's Blue Ridge for 50 years is remarkable. I believe he's done well because he practices what he believes, continuing to support and give back to the community that he loves and has supported his work.

"From serving on many boards and associations ... to helping a former dancer have an accessible home in Blacksburg, and supporting nonprofits around the region, Bob's integrity in building and desire to make the Roanoke region better has been a driving force toward achieving that goal. When he's seen a need, he's advocated for improvements and combined his interests with others to help make things happen."

Sandy Murray has been marketing director for Fetzer's company for some years. Fetzer calls her "a huge asset." She says, "BSI is really Bob and he has made it what it is, from the cleaning company he started into the commercial and residential construction company it now is."

Says Walker in conclusion, "The region, development community and every neighborhood he's worked in owe Bob so much. Roanoke has been very, very fortunate to benefit from his work for so long." 



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## FINANCIAL FIGURES

By Michael Shelton

**Executive Summary:**  
*As the leaves change and the year winds down, October offers business owners a golden opportunity to sharpen their financial toolkit.*

## Smart money moves: 5 essential year-end financial strategies for business owners

With the clock ticking toward December 31st, it's time to take stock, seize year-end tax advantages, and plan for a prosperous new year. From boosting retirement savings to smart tax moves, the final quarter can make or break your financial goals. Here are the must-do strategies to ensure your business closes the year on a high note.

### 1. Review Profit and Loss Statements

Analyzing your year-to-date financial performance can reveal where you're on target and where adjustments may be needed. Understanding cash flow and profitability trends will allow you to make decisions about capital investment, operational cuts, or even bonuses.

### 2. Maximize Tax Deductions

Before the year ends, it's important to consider all potential tax deductions. Business owners can reduce taxable income by accelerating expenses into the current year, such as purchasing new equipment or paying for next year's expenses upfront. October is also a good time to consider making charitable donations, which can provide tax benefits while supporting your community.

### 3. Retirement Contributions

One of the most effective ways to reduce your tax burden while planning is to maximize retirement contributions. Business owners should explore options like SEP IRAs or 401(k) plans. Contributions made before the year-end deadline can significantly reduce taxable income.

### 4. Evaluate Benefits and Compensation Packages

Now is also the time to review employee benefits and

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compensation packages. Open enrollment for health insurance typically occurs in the fall, making it a good opportunity to reassess your company's health plans, bonuses, or stock options. Ensuring competitive benefits not only helps retain talent but can also offer tax-saving strategies.

## 5. Plan for Next Year

October is a great time to set financial goals and budgets for the upcoming year. Reviewing your current position allows you to make informed decisions for 2024, whether you're aiming for expansion, cost-saving measures, or a pivot in strategy.

Taking these proactive steps before year's end is essential for business owners looking to optimize their financial health. These strategies not only maximize tax savings but also improve cash flow, enhance retirement contributions, and help align business goals for future success. A well-executed year-end plan lays a solid foundation for the year ahead. Consulting with a financial planner or tax professional is always advisable to tailor strategies to your unique needs, ensuring that you make the most informed decisions for your business's long-term success. 



October is a great time to set financial goals and budgets for the upcoming year.

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Anne Sampson photos



# History and Community at Hanging Rock

By Anne Sampson

**Hinchee family keeps its retail tradition going with its new shop at the roundabout at Hanging Rock**

If you grew up around Salem, and you're of a certain age, you might remember the old Hinchee & Hinchee store – "Meats, Groceries & Feed"—sitting empty behind its rusty gas pumps, where Dutch Oven Road winds its way past the actual Hanging Rock in western Roanoke County.

Hinchees have lived and worked in that corner of the county along Mason (or Mason's) Creek since 1860, when William Hinchee bought land from the Garst family, and worked there as a blacksmith for the next 50 years. Descendants have operated the general store, a garage, and an explosives business, DAMA, Inc., near Hanging Rock. A marriage into to the Richardson family saw Hinchees working at Green Market in Salem, and Orange Market, which still operates at the intersection of Route 311 and Thompson Memorial Drive, in the building that once also housed a workshop and the DAMA office.

This year, another descendent of that 19th century blacksmith, Nancy Hinchee

Pace, and her daughter, Maggi Pace, have started a new enterprise at 1900 Dutch Oven Road, just between the turn off from Thompson Memorial, and Hanging Rock Battlefield Park. The park and its trails, commemorating the Civil War Battle of Hanging Rock, occupy land donated by the Hinchee family and Pathfinders for Greenways.

The new business, which opened July 17th, is a café/retail/community space called Sycamore Station. "We decided on the name due to the stand of trees on the site," said Maggi. "The American Sycamore is known as a symbol of strength, resilience, protection, and longevity, so we felt those were important characteristics for our growing business."

Maggi describes Sycamore Station as a "three-pronged idea", which hinged on their desire to provide a rentable community space, local products, and food. "The food is a much bigger deal than we thought it would be," she said.





Which might be understandable. Sycamore Station's menu features fresh, mostly organic breakfast and lunch items, with twists on old favorites, along with coffee shop offerings, smoothies and Maggi's homemade scones. The retail space showcases local and regional arts and crafts, ranging from photography and painting to soaps, ceramics, wood turning and jewelry. The vibe is light, open and minimalist, despite the well-stocked shelves. And local can be as close as the artist down the street, who also teaches classes there.

"The man who does our wood-turned bowls is part of the trail crew that leaves from here every Wednesday," said Maggi. When the Hinchee Trail was developed, he gave them bowls he made from trees that stood on the property.

The simple dining room is easily converted for classes and meetings. Maggi built the tables herself out of rustic flooring, designed to fold up out of the way. Wall-hung dining bars around the

room fold down flat. Shelves hold books and games for all ages, encouraging patrons to take their time.

Although Sycamore Station has been open for barely two months, people are already treating it as their "third place": that social environment, separate from home and work, where you hang out, have meetings or work remotely.

"It's interesting how quickly people have become regulars," said Maggi. "We have a...wedding planner who is here three out of five days we're open. She meets [clients] here." Other patrons are there a couple of times a week, sitting at the same table, getting the same order.

"We get a lot of traffic from [Interstate] 81," added Nancy. "If you Google 'coffee shop,' we come up." One family stopped after moving in a student at Virginia Tech. Another family from the Netherlands came in after a trip across the United States, on their way to Washington, D.C. to fly home.

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A feeling of community was important to the mother and daughter team, and it seems to have its origin in the days of the Hinchee & Hinchee store. Nancy's father, Raymond "Jim" Hinchee and his brother, Lloyd, took over the store their father founded when Lloyd returned from Korea in the 1950's.

"We've had people come by the shop and talk about their experiences," said Nancy, "and they're almost emotional about having the store here."

"One lady told how Daddy and his brother made it possible for [her and her husband] to have a house," selling them property on Timberview Road on terms that made it affordable.

"While we were building the store, a man stopped and told us that Daddy and his brother made it possible for his family to eat. His father had a job that didn't pay on a regular basis. Back in the day you could have an account and they would hold his account open longer so he could buy his groceries. Then the man started to cry and told us that, when he went to war, they came down...and gave him

\$50 and wished him well. He was just overcome with emotion. I never knew these stories."

As she researched family history over the years, Nancy kept finding her father's name on neighbors' official documents. She finally realized that he was a notary, witnessing deeds and other transactions for the whole community.

"There's a whole generation of people, who are thinning out, who have these memories," she said.

Maggi, who earned a degree in Environmental Education from Wake Forest in 2010, has long had the vision of some kind of business on this bit of family property. In 2018, they bought a camper and converted it to a food truck "as a stepping stone" to a brick-and-mortar business. Covid delayed their plans, but by 2022, they were getting their feet wet and making contacts by working festivals and markets.

Her vision encompassed a kind of community center, a place where people came together to learn, relax and refresh themselves. Right now, Sycamore Station hosts Tai Chi classes on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. A Salem artist taught a well-attended workshop and plans to do more. A singer-songwriter from Catawba shared a free hour of music in September. A local book club calls the restaurant home. Maggi herself, who coached lacrosse and taught sciences at Salem High School, has held environmental workshops for young children, including wildflower identification, birdhouse building, and water quality assessment. She'd like to do that again, when time permits.

For now, though, she and her mother are running a café that's busier than anticipated (they've added part-time help), and catering private events in their airy dining room, including the use of their personal collections of china and glassware.

When someone is interested in teaching classes there, Maggi and Nancy craft a deal that works for everyone. "I think of

that story of the couple that bought the land on their own terms," said Nancy. "I like to think of giving people a chance." The old store connection is important, too.

"I think knowing that this is a family thing attracts people to it," said Nancy.

"It's not something plopped down here from outside," Maggi added.

Ultimately, Sycamore Station embodies a family legacy of entrepreneurship and service to the community.

"It's nice that people want to come here and stay for a while," Nancy continued. "That's a real compliment. We worked really hard to make this a welcoming place." She especially enjoys making time to talk with patrons and hear their stories.



"If you have time to make connections," said Nancy. "it's so much more meaningful than just turning out food." 🍷



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## SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

By Sam Sokolove

### Executive Summary:

*Engaging dissenting voices isn't about managing conflict; it's about harnessing diverse perspectives to drive growth.*

*Sam Sokolove is the Senior Consultant and Director of Government Contracting for Building Beloved Communities, which works to help non-profit organizations grow. [sam@buildingbelovedcommunities.com](mailto:sam@buildingbelovedcommunities.com)*

## Opinion vs action: a litmus test for constructive engagement

In a previous life, I wore two hats: executive director of a faith-based nonprofit and publisher of a statewide community newspaper. The publishing aspect was punishing - every day brought new challenges. Battles with the editorial committee over content, distributors over failed deliveries, the post office over rising postage rates, and salespeople over commissions were constant.

Yet, amid these struggles, an unexpected benefit emerged. When faced with passionate individuals eager to voice concerns about our organization's direction or a community issue, I had a ready response: "Would you write an opinion piece about it? We'd be happy to consider it for publication."

This simple tactic revealed a crucial insight: while many hold strong opinions, few take the initiative to articulate them in writing. This observation can be transformative for community organizations, especially in faith-based and advocacy work.


The key lies in fostering an environment where feedback from stakeholders is not just welcomed, but expected to be constructive. This should be part of a formal or informal understanding between organizational leaders and the community members they serve. Randy Grieser, founder and advisor of ACHIEVE Centre for Leadership, aptly puts it, "When someone is willing to disagree and share their honest opinion, it means they care about the work they are doing."

Rather than a litany of complaints, stakeholders should be encouraged to offer reflective insights and suggestions for improvement. Creating platforms for expression, whether written or verbal, can help channel dissent into constructive dialogue. However, gathering opinions is just the start. The real challenge lies in turning diverse viewpoints into meaningful action.

Organizations benefit from developing systems to evaluate and implement suggestions from all sources. This could involve creating task forces or offering leadership opportunities to stakeholders. Cultivating a culture where constructive dissent is welcomed can be transformative. Regular community meetings, open-door policies, and transparent decision-making processes support this goal.

This approach requires a shift in mindset for both organizational leaders and community members. Leaders must be open to feedback and willing to act on good ideas, regardless of their source. Community members, in turn, should understand that their role extends beyond voicing complaints to offering thoughtful, actionable suggestions. With robust stakeholder engagement and accountability,

organizations can transform discord into a wealth of actionable ideas that fulfill their mission more effectively. In community organizing, opinions are plentiful, but constructive feedback is invaluable. Organizations that actively seek out, consider, and act on well-articulated, constructive opinions - whether written or verbal - position themselves to thrive. By embracing and channeling dissent constructively, leaders create more vibrant, responsive, and effective organizations.

This 'litmus test' of engagement - the willingness to offer constructive feedback - can help distinguish between casual critics and committed contributors, serving as a powerful tool for building stronger, more responsive community organizations. 

“While many hold strong opinions, few take the initiative to articulate them in writing.”








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Courtesy photos



Cam Terry

# Roanoke farmer promotes resilience for food, community camaraderie

By Shawn Nowlin

**An urban farmer sees potential in the city plot he holds a long-term lease on.**

Among the roughly 98,000 individuals that make the City of Roanoke such a diverse community is a farmer whose signature garden salad mix can be purchased at Bloom on Main Street, River & Rail on Crystal Spring Avenue and other area restaurants.

His name is Cam Terry, and when he moved to the Star City eight years ago from Colorado, it didn't take long before he ingrained himself with the local agriculture and food community. Today, he is the lead farmer at Garden Variety Harvests (GVH) at Lick Run Farm in Roanoke on 10th Street NW. Terry's responsibilities are plentiful. In addition to developing and implementing various farming activities, he also maintains records and develops strategies for budgetary resources, among many other things.

According to its website, "Lick Run Farm is the farm headquarters where we plant, grow, pick and pack food for local eaters. Dating back to the 1940's, this was the site of the Crowell Nursery, and since 2010, it has been the site of ongoing permaculture and community building."

Gaining access to land and long-term tenure can be an arduous process. The tract that Terry manages was purchased by a land trust with his business currently holding the lease. "The farm was bought from Rick Williams, who gave it the name 'Lick Run Farm.' It was once an abandoned property," he said. "Rick worked here for 12 years, but as he got up there in age, we were happy to strike a deal where the land trust could pay him a fair value and put us here for a fair price." Williams was also on the Roanoke



City Planning Commission at one point.

Terry, who graduated from the University of Denver in 2009 with a degree in Theatre, Film and Television Production, makes a living selling various produce grown on more than a third of an acre. His opinion that people, regardless of where they live, should have access to healthy, quality food.

There are numerous ways one can make a real difference in the community they live in. In Terry's case, he accomplishes this by using his resources, surrounding himself with quality people and having a selfless personality. Farmers who cultivate genuine relationships are usually more successful.


When Terry realized just how many Roanoke Valley families lack access to healthy food options, especially in northwest Roanoke, he wanted to do something about it. The Real Food Campaign, of which Terry is a partner, is a research project that explores the nutrient density of organic and local produce.

In addition to serving on the Local Environment Agricultural Project (LEAP) Board of Directors, Terry is also a member of the SWVA Agrarian Commons Board. On July 31, several people gathered at the LEAP Store at 1027 Patterson Avenue for their official grand opening. One of the speakers who addressed all in attendance was Terry. Lick Run produce can now be purchased

there three days a week; on other days it can be found at local Farmer's Markets, on the weekend for example in Grandin Village.

Virginia's population of farmers currently sits at around 19,000. Terry is 35, while the group's average age is 58. When the 2018 Farm Bill was enacted, it strengthened support for America's farmers through a combination of safety net, farm loan, conservation and disaster assistance programs, benefitting Terry and his colleagues.

As a grower of different vegetables, Terry appreciates that he is able to do his passion year-round. Seeing people enjoy his produce warms his heart. Speaking about the annual Okra Fest that he hosts on his farm (it was last month this year), Terry said, "Okra is really a big crop for us. This gave us an excuse to throw a late summer party on the farm. This is our third year doing this. It's also a big celebration of arts and culture."

As the demand for fresh produce continues, Terry is ready to meet the challenge. The tag of "Roanoke Farmer" is something that Terry wears with tremendous pride. When he looks across the Roanoke Valley landscape, limitless potential is what he sees. "We are always trying to show that small faces can be productive. The farm can be - but doesn't always have to be out in the country," he said. 



Submitted photos

## Radford University's new hub >

Radford University celebrated the opening of its new **Artis Center for Adaptive Innovation and Creativity** with a ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony last month. The new center, which opened at the beginning of the 2024 fall semester, is a state-of-the-art complex that brings together arts, health sciences and technology in modern teaching environments. The 178,000 square-foot complex is the largest academic building on Radford's campus, and the largest capital construction project in the history of the university. The Artis Center is home to the university's College of Visual and Performing Arts and benefits students in the Waldron College of Health and Human Services and the College of Nursing.

The Center houses a 500-seat proscenium theatre, 200-seat studio theatre, a performance hub with learning stairs and a courtyard with an amphitheater. Educational spaces include

a group clinic space with six clinic spaces and observation rooms, a large active-learning classroom for nursing, recording studio, photography and ceramics labs, Maker Space, fashion and interior design studios, active-learning classrooms, dance studios, theatre studios and shops, drawing and painting studios, and music education and music therapy classrooms. The Artis Center is named for **Pat and Nancy Artis**, the latter a 1973 Radford University graduate and the recipient of an honorary doctorate in 2021. Pat Artis serves as an educator in Virginia Tech's Department of Aerospace and Ocean Engineering.

"Students will experience classroom settings that are tailored to their needs, designed for maximum learning and exchange and where they can still find that out-of-the-way nook for a late-night study or a group practice session," Radford University President **Bret Danilowicz**, Ph.D., said at the ceremony. "We are only just beginning to understand the Artis Center's full potential, but the possibilities are endless."





## VBR welcomes MATPRA to town >

Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge hosted "MATPRA" for the first time last month. Over the course of three days, attendees of MATPRA - or **Mid-Atlantic Tourism and Public Relations Alliance Media Marketplace** - experienced over a dozen restaurants and other attractions and adventures in Virginia's Blue Ridge as they participated in the conference. Kathryn Lucas is VVBR's Director of Public Relations: "it's a really big deal to be hosting this event. [The writers] represent 165 publications. Historically the host of this event gets a lot of positive media coverage. I've already been seeing a ton of social coverage in the immediate aftermath of our opening reception at Six and Sky and Center in the Square last

night." Salem Mayor had welcoming words at the start of the MATPRA event at Hotel Roanoke.

PR representatives from all over the region met with travel writers – around 60 - in a speed dating style format, hyping their own cities and regions to writers looking for a good story. The benefit to Virginia's Blue Ridge is that all these writers now have experiences in Roanoke Philadelphia Blogger, Michelle Granera, who says she had driven past Roanoke many times but never stopped before. She talked about Center in the Square where the welcome celebration was held. "The view from Six and Sky was incredible [the rooftop restaurant at Center in the Square]. We got to see the mountains and the sunset, just the city from above. It really was a great atmosphere."



Gene Marrano photos



## BEST JOB EVER

By Jennifer Leake

**Executive Summary:**  
*Taking proactive steps to deal with business fears helps you become less of a victim of your circumstances and more of a master of them.*

# How to exorcise business fears and unlock growth this halloween

It's hard not to think about what truly haunts us as Halloween approaches. For business owners, ghosts don't hide in dark corners. Instead, they manifest as fears of failure, risks, and the unknown. The scariest parts of running a business aren't found in horror movies but in our day-to-day decisions to grow, adapt, and survive.

Halloween offers a perfect opportunity to exorcise these business demons and embrace growth. Here's how to take inspiration from the season of spooks and turn your fears into success.

### Face the Monsters: Acknowledge Your Business Fears

Every business owner has fears. Whether it's fear of financial instability, fear of competition, or fear of not meeting customer expectations, these anxieties can loom large, much like a monster lurking under the bed. The first step to overcoming these fears is acknowledging them. What are your top business concerns? What's the worst that could happen? Once you define the "monster," you can develop strategies to tame it.

### Transform Fear into Action

Fear is a natural response to uncertainty and can paralyze progress if left unchecked. Channel fears into constructive action. Set measurable goals to address your concerns. For example, if financial stability haunts you, rework your budget, cut unnecessary expenses, and explore new revenue streams. If you fear competition, refine your value proposition and find creative ways to stand out. By transforming fear into proactive steps, you become less of a victim of your circumstances and more of a master of them.

### Create a Killer Team


Like any good ghost-hunting team, you need the right people by your side to succeed. This Halloween, evaluate your team's strengths and identify gaps in your organization. Do you have the right people in the right roles? Are they motivated and empowered? A strong, cohesive team will help you tackle the challenges ahead, and just like in any scary movie, it's always safer to have a trusted crew around you.

### Embrace Change (and the Unexpected)

Halloween is a time of surprises and unpredictability—much like business. It reminds us that change is constant and the

unexpected is inevitable. Embrace innovation and stay flexible in your approach. Use this season to think about how you can adapt to changes in your industry or customer needs. Businesses that thrive are those that aren't afraid to pivot when necessary.

This Halloween, instead of fearing the unknown, take charge of it. Your business's success lies not in avoiding what's scary but in confronting it with courage and strategy. After all, the real trick is turning your fears into treats for your business.

If you are considering a trusted advisor to help identify the "monsters" holding your business back, schedule a consult at [bit.ly/MeetJL30](https://bit.ly/MeetJL30) to discuss how we can work together to turn your challenges into opportunities for growth. 

“By transforming fear into proactive steps, you become less of a victim of your circumstances and more of a master of them.”



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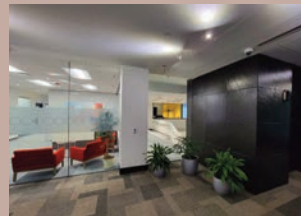
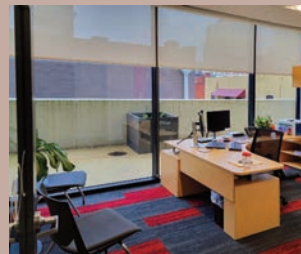
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## “Consistency” matters

**FirstBank opens downtown Roanoke office marking the sixth branch in our local market ...so far**

Todd Ross escorts us through the newest location for FirstBank, at the tall office building at 310 First Street in downtown Roanoke.

The digs are nice. Modern and colorful character. But all Ross wants to talk about is the Bank’s character.

That probably makes sense—when you’ve been in banking your entire professional career. From his first stint with the Federal Reserve right out of college—to a number of bank positions after that—to his current position as of April 2023 when he assumed Market President for the Roanoke Region—Ross has “lived” in many bank offices. He’s sat at many a conference table.

The character he most often mentions is “community service.”

And the characteristic he cites most often? “Consistency.”

“After being with a number of banks since 1987, including a community bank that was acquired twice, I wanted to return to the community bank roots. I like the fact that FirstBank is a Virginia-based community bank.”

Ross also likes “local decision-making” for commercial loans (particularly real estate-related) because a lot of that stopped, he says, at certain economic times, “but we continued to be consistent.” He says FirstBank is not like many of the larger banks that are data center-driven.

He cites FirstBank CEO Scott Harvard and President Dennis Dysart as facilitators for local communities.

“They support our offices here,” Ross says, “and they trust our commitment to local community organizations and events, like the Botetourt 5k and Center in the Square, for example.”

Ross is a local resident; he grew up in Vinton, married his high school sweetheart (married 37 years), and they have three children, who all live and work here.

In this region, FirstBank (First National Corp. acquired The Bank of Fincastle in 2021) currently manages six offices: Daleville, Fincastle, Troutville, Blue Ridge, Cloverdale, and Roanoke. (They are looking for the next location in Southwest Roanoke County, Ross reveals.) The Roanoke Region has about 40 employees.



## Building a Better Future for the Next Generation

We recently announced the recipients of our Cox Charities Community Grants and proudly awarded 21 Virginia-based organizations with \$5,000 each. These grants were fully funded through the generosity of our employees to help build a better future for the next generation. Congratulations to the following Roanoke-area organizations that were selected:



### Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia

This grant will support expanded academic initiatives during afterschool hours to ensure Club kids are set up for great futures.



### Children's Assistive Technology Service

This grant will support the refurbishment of donated adaptive mobility equipment for children with disabilities from families with limited resources.



### Children's Trust

This grant will support programs to increase awareness and prevention of child abuse and neglect.



### Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke Valley

This grant will support a women's build program to empower women to help families build strength, stability and independence.



### The Roanoke Public Library Foundation

This grant will purchase books to meet the demand books for middle and high school students in the Valley.



### Virginia Institute of Autism

This grant will support adult programming to help participants live, work and play in their communities to the fullest extent possible.

We're making a lasting positive impact in the communities we serve through community service and volunteering, monetary contributions, digital equity, and sustainability. To learn more about Cox Charities visit [www.coxcharitiesva.org](http://www.coxcharitiesva.org).



## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By **Carrie Cousins**

**Executive Summary:**

*Your website is a direct reflection of your business and brand; it should not be neglected.*

# Your website is more than just a website

A website is an investment in your brand and business.

It's like having a solid fleet of vehicles wrapped in your colors and logo or a beautifully designed storefront with products begging to be bought.

The commonality in each of these investments is that they are a direct reflection of your business and brand. The thing that is different about each of these things is that the first of the three – the website – is often neglected and left in ill-repair.

Often that results in an emergency situation – the website goes down, it gets hacked, features stop working, or you just can't work on it anymore.

You wouldn't let your vehicles or storefront get in this condition, so why your website?

Your website is one of the most used and public brand elements you own. Many customers and potential customers will visit it to establish your credibility and legitimacy without you ever knowing they were there. From that initial visit, they make a choice as to whether to do business with you or not.

What do you want them to see? What kind of online customer experience will you create?


The right website choices are different for every business, but there are a few elements that stay the same. Here's a little checklist to help you stay on track:

- Start with a website that is yours. That includes a domain that you own and dedicated hosting for your website. (Yes, an agency can manage this for you, but you should be the owner of it all.)
- Build on a platform and tool that is highly regarded, as customizable as you need, and is fast and search-engine friendly. (This can be a tall order, but generally, WordPress or Shopify fit the bill.)
- Regularly maintain the website once it is complete. (Again, having an agency or dedicated web person here makes this run a lot smoother. They will likely work on updates and fixes in a development environment, test everything to make sure it works, and then push those updates to the live website for a seamless customer experience with no downtime.)
- Create and update content on a schedule. (A website is only as good as you make it. If your latest blog post

is from three years ago, it has almost zero value to a customer looking at it today.)

- Develop a plan to rebuild and refresh every three to four years. (That might seem like a quick turnaround but think of the speed at which everything online is changing. With rapid changes in technology and user preferences, devices, and how they interact online, companies that don't stay aligned with tech will fall behind.)

Your website is an extension of your brand. It should look, feel, and function in a manner that mimics your brick-and-mortar store. It should also stand alone as a tool to help generate leads and sales.

And if you think no one is looking, you might be surprised. Your business is judged every single day by the quality, professionalism, and brand you portray online. Make every visit count. 

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## ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

**Executive Summary:**  
*FRONT publisher shares  
some personal politics.*

### My stump

It's October. Depending on when you're reading this, I have as much as six weeks to maybe a day (or a few hours) to convince you to vote for my preferred presidential candidate.

Not really.

Your mind is probably made up. And you're either excited, anxious to one degree or another, or disgusted. You're probably not apathetic. Wait: strike that. I think I do know a few of you who couldn't care less. But for the majority of our readers, you feel—or you'd like to feel—you have a stake in this “most important election of all elections” as many of our elections have been branded.

Good for you.


I would chant “Go Vote!” like we hear so much in the media; but the reality is, if you're an individual who is not inclined to cast a ballot, then by all means... don't. I've never been one to insist that all eligible voters in America exercise that right, that privilege. You have just as much right to abstain (though I don't recommend it.) And if you're not invested or informed; it's fine if you stay home.

So, here—in the counter-interest of what a publisher of a mass-marketed journal should do—is my advice. Let me begin by saying I'm fortunate in that—I kid you not—my circle of friends, family, and associates is about as evenly split as possible. 50:50 Republican/Democrat. Even 50:50 on the far right/far left spectrum. I honestly can't tell you if I'm involved with more conservatives or liberals.

So, why would I take a chance to alienate half of my audience by recommending you vote for my preferred presidential candidate? We all know businesses that have been harmed by doing exactly that. I'll walk right into and patronize an organization that supports someone or a party I oppose; but I know many of you choose not to do that. We're more polarized than ever; and making your politics public is a risk when you have a market to serve.

I think I'm safe.

I'm not asking you to vote for my preferred presidential candidate. But if you will incline, me; I do invite you to check out something. There is at least one candidate who actually answers each question directly. No hesitation. His planks and positions are clear. There is no equivocation like we've been witnessing.

He has zero chance; but if nothing else, it's refreshing to hear from a candidate who doesn't make us laugh, cry, scratch or shake our heads. I'll lose again November 5th, like I have lost every four years since 1988. I'll keep losing until some momentum finally grabs firm to help us ditch the duopoly that has restrained our progress and has not been in our best interest. I invite you to just listen (even if just a few minutes) to: [www.votechaseoliver.com](http://www.votechaseoliver.com). 




## As inflation cools interest rates start to come down

As this issue went to press the consensus was that any rate cut by the Federal Reserve Board would be a quarter point – 25 basis points in Fedspeak – with an outside chance of a half point. It would be the first time the rate would be cut since 2022 and the height of inflation that the average person feels on a regular basis at the grocery store. “I think the Fed wants to display independence, so I am pretty sure they will not give either political party a ‘valid’ reason for criticism,” said Vijay Singal, head of the finance department in Virginia Tech’s Pamplin College of Business. He added that the lower mortgage rates seen before the impending rate cut had already figured in the quarter point drop, which had driven mortgages down from over seven percent to just over six percent.

“It’s the continuing cuts that will bring down interest rates more,” says Singal, noting that The Fed is set to meet again in November, after they have another two months to analyze job loss or job growth rates, and retail spending by the U.S. consumer that is really the engine of this economy. A 50 basis points cut would be an acknowledgement by Fed Chair Jerome Powell that interest rates in general are just too high. But that bigger cut would concern some people adds Singal, those who might think the economy needs that deeper cut perhaps to ward off a recession. “[But] that depends on what explanation they might provide.”

Economists and Wall Street types hang on every nuanced sentence that emanates from Jerome Powell’s mouth, and with the election next month, how people interpret what he says about where the economy is headed could help some make their choice before heading to the polls or mailing in a ballot. The smaller cut would be followed by a “lets see how the data comes out, in terms of employment and inflation, so that they don’t have to pause [the cuts]. It’s a question of credibility [for] The Fed, that really takes a hit,” notes Singal. Or even a scenario in which the Federal Reserve Board says, “we made a mistake,” and raises interest rates again.

The labor market “is not in a bad shape,” the unemployment rate (above 4 percent national, lower in Virginia “is okay,” but the job numbers that have been revised downwards in recent months is a concern to Singal. Whatever the Fed does over the next few months may not reveal their full impact for up to 18 months,” Singal concludes, “The Fed has a long lead time.” Stay tuned. 

“ ”  
It's a question of credibility...



## THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

### Executive Summary:

*The Fed weighs in on monetary policy in the midst of a Presidential campaign focused largely on the economy.*



## Are Non-Compete Agreements Lawful in Virginia?

In the 35 years that I have represented Virginia businesses and executives in workplace matters and litigation, I have lost count as to the number of times I have heard someone say words to the effect that non-compete agreements are “unlawful” in Virginia. (Spoiler alert: they can be lawful.) This article provides answers, and an update.

### **As a General Statement, Non-Compete Agreements may be Valid in Virginia if Narrowly Tailored to Prevent Direct Competition.**

It is true that restraints against competition are not favored in Virginia. They may be enforceable, however, when the agreement is “narrowly drawn to protect the employer’s legitimate business interest, is not unduly burdensome on the employee’s ability to earn a living, and is not against public policy.” Omniplex World Servs. Corp. v. US Investigations Servs., 270 Va. 246, 249 (2005). In evaluating these factors, courts consider the function, geographic scope, and duration of the restriction.

The function element is assessed “by determining whether the prohibited activity is of the same type as that actually engaged in by the former employer.” Home Paramount v. Schaffer, 282 Va. 412, 416 (2011). In other words, where the restriction only precludes the employee from doing competing work (as opposed to doing any work for a competitor), it is generally enforceable. Enforceable restrictions prohibit an employee from engaging in activities that actually or potentially compete with the employee’s former employer.

Courts evaluate these cases on their own merits, equities, and context. But the above concepts provide the framework for the types of non-compete agreements that may be enforceable in Virginia.

### **But Wait—There is a Virginia Law that Invalidates Non-Compete Agreements with So-Called “Low-Wage Employees.”**

I blame Jimmy John’s. In October 2014, the national media reported that Jimmy John’s required all its employees to sign non-compete agreements. “It’s one thing for a high paid exec to be prohibited from working at a competitor. But Jimmy John’s actually imposes non-compete clauses on its low-wage workers.” Jimmy John’s Under Fire for Worker Contracts, CNN Money (October 22, 2014). As the public policy evolved, in October 2016, the Obama Administration issued a “call to action” urging state policy makers to enact reforms to reduce the prevalence of non-compete agreements, especially those imposed upon so called “low-wage workers.” In 2020, Virginia responded. Virginia enacted a law that prohibits employers from entering into, enforcing, or threatening to enforce, a covenant not to compete with a “low-wage employee.” (The law does not apply to agreements in effect prior to July 1, 2020.) A covenant not

## GUEST COMMENTARY

**By Todd Leeson,  
Gentry Locke**

### **Executive Summary:**

*Be wary of oversimplifying your understanding of non-competes.*

to compete is defined to include a restriction that would prohibit an employee from providing services or products to a customer post-employment, unless the employee initiates contact with or solicits the customer. There are some limited exceptions, most notably for employees who are “predominately” paid by commission.

“Low-wage employee” is a misnomer. The General Assembly adopted a moving target definition that ties the “low wage” threshold to the “average weekly wage of the Commonwealth.” The practical effect is that a new average weekly wage is calculated each year when, inevitably, the average weekly wage goes up. On January 16, 2024, the Virginia Department of Labor & Industry (“DOLI”) announced that the average weekly wage for the next 12 months had risen to \$73,320 annually, or \$1,410 per week. (I expect that many persons who earn a salary of \$73,000 would be surprised to learn that they are considered “low wage” employees in the Commonwealth.)

### The Federal Government is Attempting to Invalidate Non-Compete Agreements.

As you probably heard, on April 23, 2024, the Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”) issued a Final Rule (the “Rule”) that was set to take effect on September 4, 2024. The Rule would have included a “comprehensive ban on non-competes with all workers.” The Rule aimed to prohibit employers from using or enforcing non-compete agreements with employees or independent contractors when their employment ends, in order to address what the FTC deemed “unfair methods of restricting competition.” The Rule was met with substantial criticism from business advocates as being a drastic, and unwarranted, expansion of power by a Federal agency.

On August 20, 2024, a U.S. District Court Judge held that the Rule was “promulgated . . . in excess of [the FTC’s] statutory authority.” *Ryan LLC v. Federal Trade Commission*, 3:24-cv-00986-E (N.D. Tex. 2024). As a result, the Court held that, the



Restraints against competition are not favored in Virginia. They may be enforceable, however...

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The Rule was met with substantial criticism from business advocates are being... drastic...

Rule would be “set aside.” Although the decision will likely be appealed, it seems unlikely the Rule will ever take effect. [Full disclosure—when the FTC first announced the proposed Rule in 2023, I was confident that the Rule would never take effect because I was certain the FTC had exceeded its authority. I was surprised that we had to wait until the 11th hour to receive the good news!]

Be aware that in 2023, the General Counsel (“GC”) to the National Labor Relations Board (“NLRB”) opined that an employer who proposes, maintains, or seeks to enforce a post-employment non-compete agreement, even in a separation agreement, has violated Section 8(a)(1) of the National Labor Relations Act (“Act”), except in very limited circumstances. In the GC’s view, most non-compete provisions are overbroad and chill non-supervisory employees in the exercise of their Section 7 rights. This position, if applied and upheld, will be available to any non-supervisory employee, even those without a union, because Section 7 rights apply to non-supervisory employees. Similar to the FTC, it is my judgment that the NLRB lacks the authority to impose this rule upon employers. To my knowledge, however, the courts have yet to rule on the NLRB’s efforts to regulate non-compete agreements.

#### **Employers Seeking to Protect Their Interests Against Unfair Competition Have Other Options.**


This article primarily addresses non-compete agreements. It is important to add that employers have other options to protect themselves against unfair competition. As one example, companies are increasingly including separate “non-solicitation” covenants in their agreements with key employees that apply in the post-employment context. Such covenants are well suited to executives, sales personnel, and key employees who are customer-facing. The concept is that departing employees can compete as long as they stay away from certain customers for a period of time. Here’s an example of the concept:

During your employment, you gained access to our trade secrets and other confidential information. If your employment ends, you agree not to solicit, directly or indirectly, or perform work, for any known customer or known active prospect for a period of 18 months.

These “non-solicitation” covenants must also be narrowly tailored. For example, assume a company has thousands of customers, and dozens of distinct product lines in various locations throughout the world. Assume also that a particular sales employee focuses upon a single product line in a limited region with a handful of customers. It would likely be invalid if the non-solicitation covenant could be interpreted to include thousands of customers unknown to this sales employee in other product lines or locations. As another tool, it is well-settled that a company can require that its employees not use, disclose, or otherwise misappropriate the company’s trade secrets, or other information that is confidential or proprietary. Here too,

however, companies should not overreach. Not all internal information can be kept confidential. For example, it is a violation of Federal and Virginia law to prevent an employee from discussing or disclosing his or her own compensation.

## Final Thoughts and Recommendations

There is much more to say about an employer's efforts to minimize its risks if a key employee were to leave and seek to compete against their former employer. There is no one-size-fits all solution. I highly recommend that an employer be proactive and strategic well before an employee departs. Business owners should invest the time to evaluate the steps they can and should take. (In 2006, my law partner Greg Haley wrote an article in which he urged employers to cast their nets with a focus upon catching the "whales, not the minnows." This remains excellent advice.) 



Employees have other options to protect themselves against unfair competition.



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## FRONTReviews >

**Readers and patrons of the business journal are invited to submit reviews (along with an optional photo) to [news@vbFRONT.com](mailto:news@vbFRONT.com). We've expanded our reviews to include books, music, art, performances, culinary—with a preference for local productions. Reviews must be original, include the author's name and location, and should be brief, under 350 words.**

# A LITTLE BOOK TO SAVE HUMANITY

Dana C. Ackley, PhD

### *Get along, li'l citizen*

Civility. That seems to be Dana Ackley's great hope. First, we discovered he developed a counseling practice in our market for many years that attracted business and community leaders—putting the tenants of EQ (emotional intelligence) in his methodology. The approach involved building up a kind of thinking (embracing emotion rather than dismissing it as irrational) to enhance success. A few years ago, he helped form a consortium of sorts—the Roanoke Collaboration Project—that intentionally placed folks who might disagree with each other, in the same room, to work matters out.

And now, the book. I got ahold of a pre-released version. The not-so-modestly-entitled *A Little Book To Save Humanity* (self-published by EQ Leader; 2024) is Ackley's stab at the possibility of mass society getting along. To do that, the book says we have to use our brains. But to use our brain correctly, we have to understand how it works, and which parts serve the better outcome. Ackley speaks of “conflict entrepreneurs” that invade our perspectives (politicians and the media being at the top of that chain) and the need to “protect ourselves from ourselves.” But this is no mere namby-pamby, pie-in-the-sky, crystal-holding posi-think camp. Ackley digs deep to show why we respond the way we do; and he inserts a hefty self-assessment at

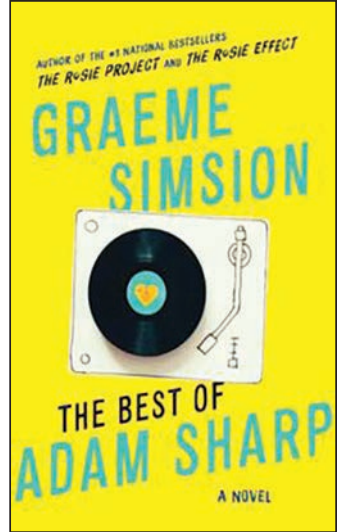
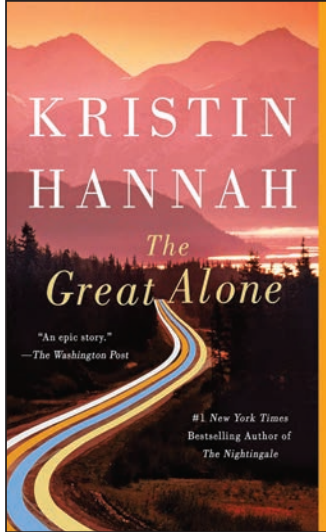
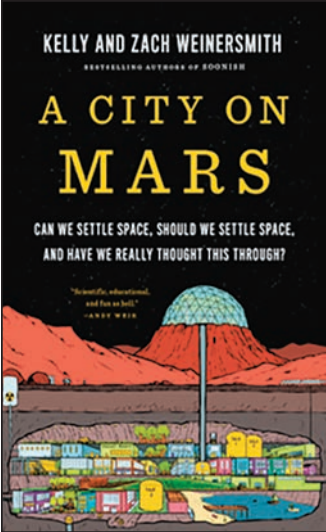
the end. Can this quick-deep read truly save humanity? If everything is put into practice? Hmm... there have been books with a tad more leverage that made the same claim (one is called Holy Bible; and even it isn't universally accepted); but practically speaking, this one—can't hurt. Most of the revelations make perfect sense.

—Tom Field

### *Life on Mars?*

Authors Kelly and Zach Weinersmith, a husband and wife research team, who wrote a previous best-selling book called *Soonish*, (she's a professor at Rice, he makes the webcomic *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*, both have impressive resumes (he's been featured in *The Economist*, *Forbes*, *the Wall Street Journal* etc.) They live on a farm in Virginia, and have now authored *A City On Mars: Can We Settle Space, Should We Settle Space, And Have We Really Thought This Through?* (Penguin Press; 2023), which throws cold water on the idea of colonizing Mars, and perhaps the Moon first as a jumping off point to the red planet.

Whole chapters examine space wars, battles over territory on the worlds, even making babies in space (the gravity thing for starters) — and should we just set up shop in lava tubes left over from earlier volcanic activity — instead of erecting more expensive



above ground structures? And what does all that radiation from the sun on Mars – without the protective layer of an atmosphere like ours – mean for humans? Expertly researched and told with a constant sense of humor that at times seems a little too jokey, *A City On Mars* nevertheless should scratch the itch for those who find the idea of breaking the bonds of earth and settling elsewhere a compelling, if somewhat far-off tale.

—Gene Marrano

## Harsh trial

Finally read a Kristin Hannah book. She's one of our most prolific and popular modern writers (about two-dozen best sellers, if you didn't know!). I see why. Hannah writes with great efficiency. Sometimes, I feel like she even skips over details; but it turns out, you didn't really need them.

In *The Great Alone* (St Martin's Griggin; 2019) we have a dysfunctional small family of three, a homesteading attempt in Alaska, and a victim of Vietnam. Let's see, where to start. You'll love the daughter, hate the father, and wonder about the mother. You'll feel both the beauty and terrible force of "the last frontier." *Alone* is so easy to read, great character development, and a most solid storyline. One of the most vivid descriptions is that difficult six-months light, six-months dark dual season you have no

choice but to accept "up there." Intentional as a metaphor or not, it serves as a valid revelation for human survival.

—Tom Field

## When the music died

What was that? I'm not sure what I just read, but I'm still scratching my head. *The Best of Adam Sharp* (HarperCollins; 2016) caught my attention as a novel with references to music I know. I'll stick with that motif, then, for this review, and just say that if this book were music, it'd be a shallow pop jingle soundtrack for a mattress commercial on radio. There's really no story here. A relationship, but superficial at best. What it reminds me of is when you're at a bar, and someone mentions some trivia (like name that song or artist) and folks chip in and start adding to the list. Just rambling. In fact, our author/narrator actually does just that—adding a "Playlist" at the end of every song title he cites in 369 pages. How a major publishing house produced this, I have no idea. It's like stumbling across the cheesiest soap opera playing on television in your reclusive aunt's living room.

—Tom Field

*The reviewers:* **Tom Field** is a creative director and a publisher (including FRONT); **Gene Marrano** is a news reporter and editor of FRONT.

## Lea: State of the City is good >

During his final State of the City Address in late August, Roanoke City Mayor **Sherman Lea Sr.** said **Roanoke City** is in a good place, highlighting more than 100 million dollars in funding for the city school district and the ongoing Wasena Bridge replacement project—which is the largest public works project ever taken up by the city. When it comes to addressing homelessness in the Star City, Lea says officials have made some progress on that front. “Additionally, 106 of these individuals moved into housing with long-term housing vouchers and supporting services.”



Lea said he believes the city’s best days are still ahead, his address was hosted by the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce. “For the past several years Roanoke has experienced record economic growth, led by the sectors of healthcare, biomedical research and higher education.” Lea added that record funding for the city public school system and creation of the Charles W Day Technical School on Ferncliff Avenue NW underscores the city’s commitment to bettering the lives of young people through education said Lea. “This tech center will undoubtedly benefit our community for generations to come.”

## VWCC’s president retiring >

Dr. **Robert "Bobby" Sandel**, the fourth president of **Virginia Western Community College**, announced that he will retire next year. His 23-year tenure has been marked by a strong growth - and a transformation on campus, including enrollment and course growth, agreements with other organizations and an increased emphasis on workforce development. Sandel came to Virginia Western in 2001 and will depart from a school that has seen seven consecutive semesters of enrollment growth emerging from the pandemic. “The college is in a great position financially ... we got reaccredited for 10 years; our performance indicators in the system are in the top 3 of the 23 [community] colleges. I just feel comfortable – I can hand this off to someone [with] all of the key points in place.”

During his tenure, Sandel has overseen more than \$138 million in new building construction and renovations. Sandel, who came to Virginia Western from Mountain Empire Community College, says he may remain involved as a member of the Virginia Western educational Foundation - IF the board votes him in. Sandel says Virginia's chancellor for the Community College System, Dr. David Doré, asked him to stay on a bit longer as the president at Virginia Western so they can search for his replacement.



Sandel will now retire on June 30th, 2025. \$138 million in new construction on campus, articulation agreements with more four-year schools, a closer relationship with local businesses on what they need trained workers for - including more than 100 programs and training sessions to meet the region’s workforce needs. Sandel’s wife Jane is a retired educator herself; he says travel is on their agenda.



## Ferrum and P&H sign agreement >

**Ferrum College** has entered into articulation agreements with **Patrick and Henry Community College (P&HCC)** that will enable students with associate degrees from the community college to transition smoothly into business management or social work majors and earn bachelor's degrees within two years. Eligible students will also qualify for tuition benefits from the Panther Promise program.



These agreements focus on Ferrum's Bachelor of Science in business administration: sports management and the Bachelor of Social Work degree. Ferrum already accepts associate of arts and associate of science graduates from all Virginia community colleges with access to the Ferrum Promise for most majors at Ferrum. Since 2019, the Ferrum Promise has ensured automatic completion of general education requirements, allowing the students to focus on coursework in their major area of interest and finish bachelor's degrees in two years or Ferrum College covers the remaining cost.



## Good Sam CEO honored >

LeadingAge Virginia, an association of 118 members, not-for-profit aging services organizations in Virginia, has given its 2024 Vision Award to **Aaron Housh**, CEO of Good Samaritan Advanced Illness Care and Hospice, in the wake of Good Sam's opening of the Roanoke Valley's first freestanding in-patient hospice house this year on Cove Road NW in Roanoke. Housh was instrumental in bringing the Sheila S. Strauss Hospice House and Center for Caring to fruition this year. A goal more than 30 years in the making, the establishment of a hospice house was conceived upon Good Sam's founding in 1992. The non-profit is still fundraising to cover the costs of the project.

## Cox gives >

Recently, six local nonprofits were each awarded \$5,000 grants through **Cox Charities** to support their programs. Cox Charities Grants are funded entirely by employee giving with grant applications reviewed by the Cox Charities Council, a panel comprised of Cox employees from across Virginia.

This year's recipients of the Cox Charities Community Grants are Children's Trust, Children's Assistive Technology Service, Virginia Institute of Autism, Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke Valley, Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia, and The Roanoke Public Library Foundation. "At our core, giving back to the communities we serve is not just a practice—it's who we are," said **Jeff Merritt**, market vice president for Cox Roanoke.





## Pinnacle with Drumstick Dash again >

**Pinnacle Financial Partners**, a Tennessee-based bank with a major presence in downtown Roanoke, is once again the lead sponsor for the **Rescue Mission of Roanoke Drumstick Dash**, the Thanksgiving morning 5K run/walk event that hopes to draw upwards of 9000 this year. It's a major fundraiser for the feeding programs at the Mission, as CEO **Lee Clark** again highlighted during his turn at the podium when the sponsorship announcement was made. Race director **Molly Bullington** with Blue Ridge Racing, who also oversees the Blue Ridge Marathon events every April, was on hand as well last month to show off the medal each run finisher will receive in the 5K (3.1 mile) race through downtown Roanoke.



## Who doesn't love tacos? >

The third annual **Tacofest** that supports the **Huddle Up Moms** non-profit drew more than a dozen vendors, including many local food trucks and other brick and mortar shops, to Elmwood Park early last month. A panel of judges that included Roanoke Vice Mayor **Joe Cobb** and WDBJ-7 show host **Natalie Faunce** chose their favorite taco, as did attendees via a People Choice Award and a VIP election. Tacofest raises funds for Huddle Up Moms services for expecting and newborn mothers, including education, health screenings and supplies for those in need (diapers, wipes, formula etc. at its Haven office on 5th Street Northwest in Roanoke. **Erika Jones** is the Haven Support Specialist for HUM: "[we] also worked really hard this year to hunt down those food trucks that the community may not know about." Judges' Choice: Hangrcy; People's Choice: Empanada Nirvana Roanoke; VIP Choice: Diablostacos, which now has a storefront in Salem.



## New RoCo CTE breaks ground >

Construction has begun on **Roanoke County's** new **Career and Technical Education Center**. Jason Suhr, the Director for Career and Technical Education at Roanoke County Public Schools, says that building is about building "the most efficient educational pathway" for high school students during the day, but then have a considerable adult education presence well into the evening."

The hope is that 80 million dollars project in Northeast Roanoke County near the Bojangles on Peters Creek Road will be complete by the winter of 2027. It will replace the 60-plus year-old Burton Center for Arts & Technology, with more space and an expanded curriculum. "It's old, it's been retrofitted so many times, it's antiquated, just not a good situation." The new facility will be dubbed the Roanoke County Career and Technology Center.



## Warm Hearth holds big bash >

On August 10, the **Warm Hearth Foundation** kicked off its annual fund drive with the 11th annual Cheeseburger in Parrot-dise fundraising event in Blacksburg. The Warm Hearth Village said the senior living community raised more than \$69,000 with the help of dozens of sponsors—an all-time high, allowing it to, "continue our work advocating, innovating and caring for seniors in our community; carrying on the mission ... our established in 1974."

For the first time the evening included a VIP happy hour before the main event. Participants enjoyed The Panjammers under a tent and socialized with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The Breakfast Club band entertained guests in the ballroom and everyone had an opportunity to bid on auction items, get "tattooed" and dance in a 360Pphoto booth with NW Party Rentals.

*Valley Business FRONT is FRONT'n About at many events each month. Check the social media links at [www.vbFRONT.com](http://www.vbFRONT.com) for more coverage.*

## EDUCATIONAL FRONT



Dalton

**Dixie Watts Dalton** was recognized by the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association with the Distinguished Teaching Award for faculty with 10 or more years of graduate teaching experience. She is a professor of practice in the Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech. Dalton earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in agricultural economics from Virginia Tech and a Ph.D in economics from Duke University.

**Mario Ferruzzi** has been appointed dean of Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He most recently served in the Department of Pediatrics



Ferruzzi

at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and director of the US Department of Agriculture Research Service-funded Arkansas Children's Nutrition Center. Ferruzzi was a Murdock Distinguished Professor at North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, professor at Purdue's Colleges of Agriculture and Health and Human Sciences, and worked as a Nestle research scientist and product developer.

**Max Esterhuizen** '12 has been named the director of communications and marketing for Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and Environment. Esterhuizen will lead the planning and execution of a



Esterhuizen

comprehensive strategic communications and marketing plan for the college that aligns with and advances university wide strategic goals and initiatives. Esterhuizen joined Virginia Tech in March 2020 as the assistant director of communications and marketing for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Prior to joining Virginia Tech, Esterhuizen worked in Radford University's University Relations.



Scott

**Rachel Scott** has been named the new chair of the Department of

Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. Scott has been a member of the Virginia Tech community since 2005. Her research largely focuses on Islamic law, modern Islamic political thought, and religion and secularism.



Dupre

Virginia Tech's College of Architecture, Arts, and Design gained an "impact champion" when Professor **Karine Dupre** began her new appointment as associate dean of research and creative scholarship on Aug. 1. An architect and urban designer, Dupre is coming to Blacksburg from Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, where her most recent leadership position was that of impact champion. In this role, Dupre provided support and guidance to



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researchers across the university.



Lee

Virginia Tech alumni and longtime network services employee **Steven Lee** has been appointed to serve as the new executive director for Network Infrastructure and Services within the Division of Information Technology. Lee brings more than 20 years of experience in IT and operations. Lee succeeds outgoing executive director William Dougherty, who retired in July.

## FINANCIAL FRONT

**Penny Hodge** has joined the board of directors of Virginia Credit Union (following Aug. 1 merger with Member One Federal

## Have a career announcement?

Send announcements to [news@vbFRONT.com](mailto:news@vbFRONT.com). Photos should be color, 300dpi. A contact / source must be provided. Inclusions are not guaranteed and all submissions are subject to editing.



Hodge

Credit Union). She is the retired assistant superintendent of finance and operations for Roanoke County Public Schools, and has more than 30 years of experience in public education and local government. Hodge has a BS in business accounting from Radford University, serves on Virginia Western Community College Advisory Board, and is a CPA.

**Matt Huff** has joined the board of directors of Virginia Credit Union



Huff

(following Aug. 1 merger with Member One Federal Credit Union). He is a principal and president at Poe & Cronk Real Estate Group. Huff is an honor graduate of Virginia Tech with a degree in finance.

**Tyler Caveness** has joined as an associate director of Virginia Credit Union (following Aug. 1 merger with Member One Federal Credit Union). He is the founder and principal at Caveness Investment Advisory, that specialized



Caveness

in wealth management for the self-employed. Caveness has a bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard University.



Rowe

**Tim Rowe** has been appointed leadership team lead for regional efforts in member

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services, employee engagement, and community involvement with the new Roanoke Valley, New River Valley, Lynchburg markets of Member One, division of Virginia Credit Union. He is a board and finance committee member of Local Advisory Board for Virginia Western Community College and is a former director of the Blue Ridge Land Conservancy. Rowe has a Bachelor of Science in finance, insurance, and business law from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and a Master in Business Administration from Radford University.

and Taubman Museum Board of Trustees. Hopstetter has a Master of Business Administration and Bachelor of Arts in business administration from Saint Leo University.

## MEDIA FRONT



Schwaner

**Jeffrey Schwaner** has joined Cardinal News as executive editor. He grew up in Rhode Island, graduated from Cornell University, and has been a storytelling coach and editor with Gannett's Virginia newspapers for more than nine years, including stints with investigative projects to daily beat maintenance.



Hopstetter

**Jean Hopstetter** has been appointed leadership team lead for the organization's integration goals and objectives. She is on the board of Roanoke County Public Schools Education Foundation



Cousins

Digital. She has more than 15 years of experience, including interdisciplinary skills in marketing, writing, design, and media. Cousins is a recognized leader with PRSA Blue Ridge public relations, AAF Roanoke advertising, Outdoor Media Summit; and her work was featured in Design Shack, Webdesigner Depot, The Next Web, and Fast Company.



Brown

**Matt Brown** was promoted to director of account management at LeadPoint Digital. He has 20+ years of experience in advertising and social

media, including design, art direction, marketing promotions, and project management. His previous positions were with a local ad agency and newspaper; and he has been a longtime member, president, and officer with AAF Roanoke ad club, winning National President of the Year in 2015.



Ryberg

**Bryan Ryberg** has joined 5Points Creative in Roanoke as the new director of account services. He holds a bachelor's degree in history from Portland State University and a master's of education from Florida Atlantic University. Ryberg served at Roanoke College as assistant vice president for enrollment.

*Compiled by Tom Field and Gene Marrano*

## MARKETING FRONT

**Carrie Cousins** was promoted to vice president at LeadPoint



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“ I wanted to return to the community bank roots. — Page 36

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## *Driving west*

**TMEIC Corporation America** is moving its headquarters from Roanoke County to Brookshire, TX; though the large building on Electric Road near Salem will continue operations and retain most of the existing 250+ employees. The company makes automation systems, large motors, photovoltaic inverters, and energy storage systems for the industrial sector.

## *Rural charity*

**Farm Credit of the Virginias** donated \$130,000 through its Charitable Contributions Fund to 18 nonprofit organizations in Virginia, West Virginia, and western Maryland. NPOs in our region included Botetourt County Fair Association, Roanoke Foodshed Network, Virginia Cooperative Extension (Franklin County – Franklin County first responders and Pittsylvania County women's safety skills and education), and Virginia FFA (ag workshops).

## *Retro-design, new-energy*

**RBW EV Cars**—a British sports car manufacturer—is expanding to the US market at a manufacturing plant in Cane Creek Centre industrial park with Danville and Pittsylvania County. It's initially an \$8 million investment with around 140 jobs; and

the company will make electric cars that mimic classic roadsters from the 1960s and 70s. The Roadster and GT models have starting prices around \$140,000 and \$150,000 respectively.

## *VT's new science lab*

The new undergraduate science laboratory building on **Virginia Tech's** campus is now open; a 102,000-square-foot facility with 26 flexible and adaptable wet, dry, and specialty labs. The building was constructed by Skanska USA and designed by ZGF and VT's Division of Facilities.

## *Some dam improvement*

The **Claytor Lake hydroelectric** plant on the New River in Pulaski County will receive \$5 million in federal funding from the Dept. of Energy for upgrading the Appalachian Power facility as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

## *Jefferson possibly magnetized*

Although it's in the earliest of stages, **Roanoke City Public Schools** is entertaining the idea of adding an additional high school, and one possibility is creating a magnet school for arts and sciences in the **Jefferson Center** building, currently home to the culture, arts, education and

performance venue (that was repurposed from the original Jefferson High School).

## *Roanoke-Salem treats*

**Sips and Scoops** ice cream shop has opened in Roanoke County in Oak Grove Plaza off Electric Road. **Donnie D's Bagels & Deli** (second location) on Brandon Avenue should open by publication time. **Show Pony** "refined comfort food" restaurant in Grandin is projecting a November opening.

## *Street surveys*

Three area localities: **Roanoke County**, **Botetourt County**, and **Town of Vinton**—held community meetings in September regarding safety on roadways for motorists, bicyclists, transit riders, micromobility users, and pedestrians. Additionally, each has released an online survey that anyone can participate in; particularly regarding Routes 11, 24, 116, 220, 221, 419, and 460.

You can take the survey here: Roanoke County [ [www.RoanokeCountyVA.gov/SS4A](http://www.RoanokeCountyVA.gov/SS4A) ]; Botetourt County [ [www.BotetourtVA.gov/SafeStreets](http://www.BotetourtVA.gov/SafeStreets) ]; Vinton [ [www.VintonVA.gov/528/Transportation](http://www.VintonVA.gov/528/Transportation) ]

## *ech'd out to the nines*

**RAMP** (The Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program) announced the nine cohorts to its newest cohort and inaugural "On RAMP"

pre-accelerator program.

The RAMP-In-Residence startups receive \$20,000 in non-equity funding, expert mentoring, free office space and high-speed internet in downtown Roanoke's Gill Building, and other perks, and include: **Drivengo** (Blacksburg) customer touchless interfaces for multiple industries; **DentAI** (Richmond) AI-powered dental splint design; **N-Factor** (Blacksburg) negotiation platform; and **Portcullis Research** (Blacksburg) supply chain document control.

RAMP entrepreneurs for Fall 2024 include: **Rufus Pasley** (Roanoke) recommissioned wind turbine blades; **Edward Gaines II** (Stafford) "Eudaenibua" bio and digital healthtech in neurodegenerative disease space; **Amethyst Edmond** (Roanoke) microorganism infection control; **Douglas Pitzer** (Roanoke) "Stroke of Genius" education system; and **Toni Sperry** (Pulaski) "Pod Farms" vertical hydroponic systems.

## *VT med school site*

A site has been proposed near the existing **Virginia Tech** campus for the estimated \$184 million School of Medicine building.

## *Slavery acknowledged on campus*

A sculpture entitled "Authors and Architects" by Richmond-based



artist Sandy Williams IV, depicting a massive bronze block of books has been commissioned by **Roanoke College** as a memorial dedicated to recognizing and honoring the role of enslaved people in the college's history. The books are engraved with names of formerly enslaved Black people with ties to the school; and the sculpture will be placed in the lawn across from the Admissions building.

*VWCC an economic driver*

**Virginia Western Community College** contributes over \$300 million annually to the regional economy, according to a new study. The report from data analytics firm Lightcast found that Virginia Western added \$329.1 million in income to the Roanoke Valley economy in the year studied, fiscal year 2021-22, supporting 4,405 jobs in the Roanoke Valley.

The \$329.1 million in contributions come

from college operations, students and alumni. The net impact of the college's operations spending added \$32.9 million in annual income to the regional economy. The net impact of Virginia Western's former students currently employed in the regional workforce amounted to \$292.7 million in added annual income.

*School swap*

**PowerSchool** (CA-based with a significant office in Roanoke) will be acquired by Bain Capital in a transaction valuing the company at \$5.6 billion. PowerSchool develops cloud-based software for K-12 education and was established in Roanoke after it acquired Roanoke-based Interactive Achievement in 2016. The Bain acquisition is expected in "the latter half" of this year.

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Crop Block Grant Program funding has been awarded to eight agricultural projects in Virginia to help promote and enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops grown in the state. **Virginia Tech** gets a share of that funding for several projects including disease management, development of new blackberry varieties and mitigating food safety risks.

*Virginia well below nation unemployment rate*

The BLS' Current Employment Statistics Survey ("CES" or "establishment survey"), states that Virginia reported non-farm payroll employment gains of 4,800 in the month of July. According to BLS Local Area

Unemployment Statistics ("LAUS," or "the household survey"), Virginia's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in July remained unchanged at 2.7 percent, 1.6 points below the national rate which climbed 0.2 points to 4.3 percent.

*Board appointments by the Governor*

Safety and Health Codes Board: Michael Everett of Christiansburg, Scale and Instrumentation Technician, BAE Systems, USW Local 8-495; Rare Disease Council Michael Friedlander of Roanoke, Vice President for Health Sciences and Executive Director, Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion; Board for Hearing Aid Specialists and

## Notable Transactions

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- **CJC Global LLC** purchased the former (and dilapidated) **Claytor Memorial Clinic** building and 1-acre property in the Gainsboro neighborhood of Roanoke for \$475,000
- The former **Groendyke Manufacturing** industrial building in Buchanan has been repurposed and opened as "**Factory Flats**" 21-apartment complex with craft brewery
- 4,200-sq ft office space at **110 East Main St Salem** was leased for undisclosed amount
- 99,500-sq ft industrial building in **Martinsville** was purchased by an entity of Times Equity NY diversified investment, asset, property management, and alternative energy company for \$2.35 million
- Two-story, 3,992-sq ft **Cave Spring Office Building** at 4235 Colonial Ave Roanoke was purchased for \$450,000
- **Montgomery County** approves apartments above commercial buildings on Prices Fork Rd

SOURCES: commercial real estate firms; municipal records; FRONTnews feeds

Opticians Dr. Jennifer Mundorff of Roanoke, Audiologist, Salem VA Medical Center; Virginia Council on Environmental Justice Hope Cupit of Bedford, CEO, SERCAP, INC.

---

*Consumer sentiment ticks upward*

The most recent survey of Virginians state-wide by the **Institute for Policy and Opinion Research at Roanoke College** shows a healthy jump in Consumer Sentiment - and the public continues to spend. Roanoke College Economics professor Dr. **Alice Kassens** is also a senior analyst for the Institute: "I would say that this is significant, [but] we need to see what happens in the coming months," notes Kassens, who was not ready to call it a trend just yet.

The latest quarterly Roanoke College Consumer Sentiment poll took place over a 5-day period in mid-August; 730 completed interviews came from random phone calls to Virginians and an online survey. Strong spending, slowing price growth, a still-robust labor market and wages outpacing the inflation rate. The Institute Consumer Sentiment spiked up by almost 4 and a half points since a second quarter skid. Inflation that fell below 3 percent for the first time since March 2021 was one likely factor.

Kassens, also a professor of economics at Roanoke College, says consumers are

encouraged by the continued cooling of prices. Virginians are also more optimistic than the nation as a whole - by about ten points, according to the Virginia Index of Consumer expectations that was also part of the survey.

---

*Starkey Road rerouting questioned*

The debate continues over VDOT's proposed changes to the **Starkey Road/419** intersection in the Tanglewood area of Southwest Roanoke County. The VDOT project applies to the section of Electric Road on Route 419, between Ogden and Starkey Roads. The plan is to stop traffic from crossing 419 at the Starkey Road intersection - with motorists then forced to make a right or left turn and access the other side of Starkey - where a number of businesses and offices are located.

At a briefing of Roanoke County Supervisors in late August, VDOT Engineers said the project is about serving the next generation by improving capacity on busy 419, where the Reimagine project and redevelopment on the Tanglewood Mall property continues. Not everyone likes the project. Roanoke County Supervisor **Paul Mahoney** continues to question how preventing cars from crossing 419 at the Starkey Road intersection will ease congestion on 419/ Electric Road. "I try to avoid 419. I like to go across Starkey; that lets

me get to Food Lion, Bellacino's, Buffalo Wild Wings. Then I take the back way to Tanglewood. It just seems odd to me that we would be adding more traffic to 419."

---

*Hollins looks to bring more diversity to the school*

**Hollins University** has been awarded a grant from the Come to Believe (CTB) Network to study adding a two-year college on campus that serves underrepresented students. Hollins will collaborate with CTB to look at the viability of instituting the nonprofit organization's innovative two-year college model, which is intended to provide low-income students with greater access to higher education and complete an associate degree with little or no debt.

It's a component of the Hollins plan that revolves around three "gears," Academic Excellence, Access, and Wellness, and the CTB grant supports one of three goals under the Academic Excellence gear: "Transformative Learning to Advance Social Mobility."

---

*Get2KnowNoke website gets makeover*

The talent attraction brand for the **Roanoke Regional Partnership** has launched a redesigned Get2KnowNoke website; a more go-to, interactive resource for those looking to start careers here, find a place to

live - or to just connect. Julia Boas is director of talent strategies for the Regional Partnership, she worked with a team to remake the Get2KnowNoke.com website: "we had a lot of things that job seekers and businesses would come to us asking questions about all the time. Our [website] really didn't have a lot of the answers there. We just really went through top to bottom and cataloged every single thing that people come to us for."

Funding from GO Virginia helped pay for the upgrade, working with the Firefli creative firm. On the "new" Get2KnowNoke.com, potential residents can look online for the perfect neighborhood, job seekers can join a free "talent" network and local companies can access a pool of qualified candidates.

---

*Flak for RAM House move*

After a late August community meeting hosted by Old Southwest Inc., where many raised strong objections and concerns about **RAM House** moving to their neighborhood by 2025, the executive director of that day shelter for the homeless is pushing back. The new home for Roanoke Area Ministries (made possible with a grant by Virginia Transformer's CEO) will feature showers, private counseling spaces, medical service and a computer lab for day shelter guests.

Executive director **Melissa Woodson** says their goal is to be good neighbors in Old Southwest. As for the daily shelter guests: “we looked for a building the whole four years I’ve been there. {Another} fell through, and it took us another three years. I just feel like this building is meant to be. It’s in the right place at the right time.” RAM House closed on their new 6,000 square foot Elm Avenue Home in January; extensive multimillion dollar renovations ahead of a late 2025 opening are underway.

### VT grant

The U.S. Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration (EDA) has awarded \$338,086 to the **Roanoke-Blacksburg Innovation Network**. The EDA investment supports a Network project to help guide and facilitate innovation in the Roanoke-New River Valley area and beyond. “Through this grant, U.S. EDA has recognized the Roanoke-New

River Valley region as an attractive hub for innovative businesses and companies. “This \$338,086 grant helps Roanoke-Blacksburg Innovation Network lead mentoring sessions and roundtable events in collaboration with local and statewide partners to assist early-stage startups,” said U.S. Congressman Morgan Griffith (R-VA).

The project whose funds the EDA grant is directed towards is the Catalyzing Entrepreneur Impact and Support Project. Upon completion, the project will help enhance future economic sustainability and bolster redevelopment in the region. Main industries in the New River Valley include Advanced Manufacturing, Food Processing & Agribusiness, Information Technology, and Unmanned Systems. The Roanoke-Blacksburg Innovation Network, with affiliated entities including Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council and Verge, proactively secures grant funding to support regional innovators, entrepreneurs,

and infrastructure investment.

### Big money for Pembroke company

The U.S. Department of Energy has awarded **NanoSonic, Inc.**, located in Pembroke, a \$1,150,000 grant. These funds are directed to support a project developing hydrogen and fuel cell technologies. “Innovative and specialized small businesses are key contributors to scientific research and discovery,” said U.S. Congressman Morgan Griffith. “This grant helps NanoSonic develop hydrogen and fuel cell technologies to advance American energy security.”

The project supported by this grant is known as the Novel Anion Conducting Poly (Carbazole) Membrane for Water Electrolyzers. The funds are made available by the DOE Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy. NanoSonic’s projects contribute to the fields of science, chemistry and

engineering, with major clients including NASA and the Department of Defense.

### More Tech research money

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has awarded **Virginia Tech** a \$616,104 grant for research related to renal fibrosis. Renal fibrosis impacts the kidneys and is linked to chronic kidney disease. U.S. Congressman Morgan Griffith (R-VA) issued the following statement: “The National Kidney Foundation states that one in three American adults are at risk for kidney disease. “This grant for \$616,104 helps Virginia Tech study the impacts of therapies related to kidney disease.”

### VCOM also gets a boost

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has awarded the **Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM)**,

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# CONTRIBUTORS

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Todd is rated "AV/Preeminent" by Martindale-Hubbell, is repeatedly named one of the Best Lawyers in America in Labor & Employment Law, and has regularly been named

to various lists, including Virginia Legal Elite. As recent examples, in 2022, Virginia Lawyers Weekly named Todd a "Go-To Lawyer for Employment Law, and in 2022 Best Lawyers in America named Todd the "Lawyer of the Year" (Labor law-management) in Roanoke. Todd was also honored by Virginia Lawyers Weekly in 2021 as a "Leader in the Law."

**Gene Marrano** is FRONT editor and an award-winning anchor and reporter for WFR Newstalk radio. "Best one on one interview" award from Associated Press of the Virginias for his interview with former Roanoke County Chief of Police Howard Hall. [gmarrano@cox.net]

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**Mary Ann L. Miller** is vice president of business banking and community relations at Bank of Botetourt. A graduate of Bridgewater College, she has been in the banking industry for more than fifteen years and currently serves on the board and executive committee as past-president with the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, a board member with the Daleville Institute, and is vice chair of the board of with the Botetourt Family YMCA. A native of Botetourt County, she resides in Daleville with her husband and two children.

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**Alicia Smith** is vice president of F&S Building Innovations in Roanoke. She grew up in the construction business and has served in multiple capacities, currently managing all sales, design, production and marketing of the residential division. She's also the president of Build Smart Institute and serves on several boards, community and church organizations. Alicia enjoys lake-life living and fun times with her family (husband and two daughters) and friends.

**Dan Smith** is a veteran journalist and member of the Virginia Communications Hall of Fame, a winner of numerous press association awards, the Small Business Journalist of the Year, two Perry F. Kendig Awards and the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge's Literary Award. He is author of eight books, including the recent novels "NEWS!" and "CLOG." [pampadansmith@gmail.com]

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based in Blacksburg, a \$444,816 grant for research and training related to complementary and alternative medicine. "This grant for \$444,816 helps VCOM direct more resources to explore potential medicines and educate the medical community, said Congressman Morgan Griffith, "the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine trains and educates gifted physicians in their commitment to promote healthy communities, including those in underserved and rural areas."

*Roanoke City Super contract extended*

The **Roanoke City School Board** unanimously approved a two-year contract extension for Superintendent Dr. **Verletta White**, which will now run through June 30, 2028. White joined Roanoke City Public Schools in 2020. Under her leadership, RCPS has among other highlights noted, doubled Career & Technical Education seat capacity with the

opening of the Charles W. Day Technical Education Center (DAYTEC), in pursuit of ensuring all students graduate with both a diploma and a resume.

*Roanoke-based company expands into Martinsville*

**Hopkins | Lacy**, a mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (MEP) service contractor, has announced the opening of its new office in Martinsville, to serve the growing needs of the region. The Martinsville office will support key regional projects, including Monogram Foods, Caesars Virginia, Ferrum College, and Centra Health. Hopkins | Lacy is the MEP division of Branch and is headquartered in Roanoke. Hopkins | Lacy operates throughout the mid-Atlantic and is expanding into North Carolina.

*Dublin brownfields money*

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

has awarded the **Town of Dublin** a \$750,000 grant for brownfield site development of properties may be complicated by the presence of a hazardous material or substance. The grant for \$750,000 affords Dublin the opportunity to restore and repurpose land by conducting and developing cleanup planning." This grant is a part of a broader campaign to put previously contaminated properties back into productive use. The Brownfields Multipurpose, Assessment, and Cleanup Grant program administers the related funds. An additional \$250,000 may be available, contingent upon availability.

*Leaky Center*

Water damage has closed several of the museums at Roanoke's **Center in the Square**. An HVAC technician noticed water coming out of Center in the Square on July 19th. Center in the Square President & General Manager, **Tara Marciniak** says she, the Center staff as well staff from the various museums rushed to the

scene. A water hose left on overnight led to a pressure buildup until it finally burst.

The Science Museum is closed until at least October first and Kids Square is closed until November. Mill Mountain Theatre, The Harrison Museum of African American Culture, the roof top restaurant and atrium remain open. The shuttered attractions will use this time out to add new features. "It looked like it was raining inside Kids Square; walls had to be rebuilt says Marciniak, who succeeded Jim Sears more than two years ago.

*Connected citizens*

**Citizens** in Floyd (also known as Citizens Co-Op and Citizens Telephone) released a statement that as of August 2024, it is the first company in Southwest Virginia to have connected every home in a single county to 1 Gbps fiber internet.

*Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field*

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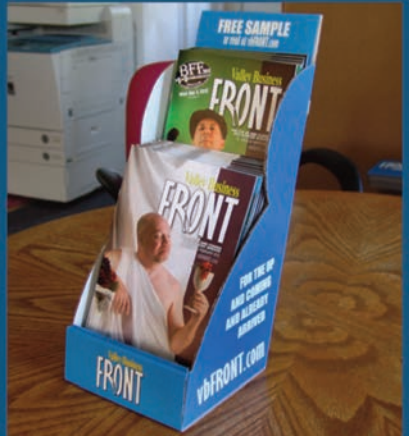
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