

Valley Business **FRONT**

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

**ISSUE 207
DECEMBER 2025**

Sand Tray Therapist
Oak Hall Cap & Gown
Turcotte Technology
Huddle Up Moms
Fox Tourism
Promissory, Exchange,
¡Suerte!

vbFRONT.com

A photograph of a man standing in front of a large, classical building with many columns. The man is wearing a tan jacket over a dark shirt and blue jeans. He has his hands in his pockets and is looking at the camera. The building has a sign that says "Banking on" in large, white, 3D letters. The text "a New Music Hall, Hotel, Restaurant" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Banking
on**

**a
New
Music Hall,
Hotel,
Restaurant**

Sam Calhoun
Across-the-Way Productions

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After 25 years of dedicated service, Paul Phillips, Freedom First President and CEO, plans to retire. The Board of Directors is pleased to announce that Linda Johnson, our current Chief Financial Officer, has been selected as the next CEO. Linda is a passionate leader whose vision, expertise, and unwavering commitment to our mission of "Helping People Prosper – Helping Communities Thrive" reflect the heart of Freedom First.

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"I could not be more honored to lead Freedom First into its next chapter. I'm excited to build upon the strong foundation and leadership Paul has established."

**-Linda Johnson,
incoming CEO**

WELCOME TO THE FRONT

What a way to wrap up the year.

The new music hall [plus] restaurant [plus] hotel is on our FRONTcover. It has an inaugural event for New Year's Eve; and the whole building will be coming alive in 2026. Even from its first iteration as a bank in 1912, this building has always possessed a vibe. There's a sense of renewed energy and commerce with this exciting \$10 million project.

And that's not all we're celebrating in your final edition for 2025. As the year closes, we're opening doors to tourism, technology, community service, wellness, and manufacturing.

You don't have to put on a hat and blow a horn—but if you do, we're ok with that.

We wish you a most joyful holiday season and an entrance to our new year that is most promising.

See you in FRONT.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

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DECEMBER



Jade Richardson Bock



Aila Boyd



Emily Field



Tom Field



Olivia Marone



Gene Marrano

Advisory Board

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.

2025 CONTRIBUTORS



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Carrie Cousins



Dan Dowdy



Dave Henry



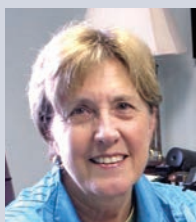
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construction

“”
The Roanoke
Valley is
our home...
since 1889.

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“”
She finds that
people in
Southwest
Virginia have
so much heart.

— Page 61

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contact information
on each contributor
are provided on Page 52.

“”
Don't underestimate the
power of virtual goodwill.
— Page 22





Tom Field

Sam Calhoun

The Exchange—The Promissory—¡Suerte!

A most recognizable, iconic, historic bank headquartered in downtown Roanoke gets a most ambitious makeover ever

By Hart Fowler

The Exchange gives new life to a century old downtown bank building and aims to make Roanoke a draw for performers and showgoers that thrive in large standing room only venues

There's something holy about repurposing an epic-sized temple of capitalism built in the roaring-twenties-Gatsby-era, during the peak of Roanoke's railroad boom, into a modern day concert venue/boutique hotel/restaurant called The Promissory.

The National Exchange Bank building had been vacant for nearly a decade when Lucas Thornton bought the building for \$10,000,000 four years ago. He brought in John McBroom and Across the Way Productions (FloydFest), and local restaurateur and musician JP Powell (Lucky, Fortunato). They reimagined the 55,000 square feet of open space and mezzanine as a place to be dedicated to as many as 1,200 show-goers.

All while keeping the integrity of the elegant and historic architecture and decoration intact, and housing Suerte!, a Spanish-inspired restaurant and wine bar and the 27 room Promissory boutique hotel.

"The building has beautiful vaults that will become green rooms or speakeasy-style hangouts. There's an old banker's office off the mezzanine we want to turn into a swanky, hidden bar—somewhere people can slip away and then rejoin the show," said Sam Calhoun, COO of Across the Way Productions, the same company that curates and operates FloydFest and now The Exchange Music Hall.

The Exchange is a vision of gilded, Greek columned classical grandeur, with granite and marble, originally intended to promote faith in the business of savings and loans. "All of us believe this could be something huge for Roanoke, which is emerging as a live-music city," said Calhoun. He knows the live music business primarily due to his experience (now as a co-owner) with FloydFest.

"We've been talent-buying for 25 years. We know the missing pieces in Roanoke's music scene, and The Exchange is truly going to fill a niche we've needed for years — if not decades," Calhoun said. "We've had bands pass us by simply because we didn't have the right venue, and now The Exchange is going to be that missing piece that brings a different level of talent to Roanoke."

Jefferson Center seats 925, but like most theaters it is not suited for shows where an audience wants to move, sway, order at the bar, or stand in the back.

THREE NAMES IN ONE

The Promissory

This is the boutique hotel. It's also the primary name of the whole venue / complex.

The Exchange

AKA The Exchange Music Hall. A concert hall with elegant and stately décor, designed with musical acts in mind; social and dynamic.

(both "promissory" and "exchange" are brands that play off financial terms and the original and iconic First National Exchange Bank building in downtown Roanoke)

Suerte!

This is the restaurant. Spanish-themed with expected culinary-related cuisine. The word translates to "luck" (which could also play into financial terms, but more likely a 'sister' to nearby Lucky restaurant) Will the signage include an inverted exclamation point in front of the name? We'll see.

“...this could be something huge for Roanoke, which is emerging as a live-music city

— Sam Calhoun



Submitted photos

"We are primarily a standing-room-only venue. The mezzanine will have cocktail or bistro tables for people who want seating, but the main floor is standing room. It creates a completely different energy than theater seating," Calhoun said. More like a FloydFest concert where lots of folks stand and groove.

Excellent sound quality is essential to the success of any performance, both for the audience and the performers. Developer Lucas Thorton said sound design was a focus from the start. "It's a beautiful space but it has a lot of plaster and glass. Figuring out how to control the sound—bringing the highs down, keeping the lows from getting buried—has been a big effort. If it doesn't sound great, no one cares how pretty it is."

Thornton, a downtown developer of living/retail spaces like The Bower, added: "especially in Roanoke, where we want to attract touring acts—we might get them on a Tuesday or Wednesday between Nashville and D.C. or Charlotte and D.C. We'll get them because we have a beautiful hall that also sounds really great."

Calhoun said the details are being finalized on a multiyear agreement with Across the Way for booking the "lobby space," and praised the initial synergy between The Exchange, Promissory Hotel,

THE PLAYERS

(not all of them, by a long shot; but here are some of the principal people involved)

Lucas Thornton — overall building; developer

Sam Calhoun — overall point man for the music venue (along with **John McBroom**, **Jessica Taylor**)

JP Powell — overall point man for the restaurant

To Be Named — general manager for the hotel

“ ”

...a
performance
hall just
felt right

— Lucas Thornton



Lucas Thornton

Submitted photo



Submitted photos

NEW YEAR'S EVE!

Publisher's Note: I don't know how. When I visited The Exchange (music hall and main level part of this project) in mid-November and was told it would be ready for a celebratory inaugural concert on December 31, I almost fell off the mezzanine. All I saw was major renovation under construction. MAJOR work happening with a lot more to go. The hustle required to get this venue ready for New Year's Eve is beyond belief. But I know what one Sam Calhoun has accomplished with FloydFest. So, yes. I got my tickets.



James Mountford



Submitted press photo

Grace Potter—performs at The Exchange on December 31, 2025 / January 1, 2026 (depending on how you define the New Year celebration). The three-time Grammy nominee has been described as power vocal rock-n-roller infusing rock, blues, folk, and country genres. With her band, the American singer-songwriter is known as Grace Potter and the Nocturnals. Richmond-based Holy Roller (southern-Americana-soul) also joins the holiday show lineup.

and Suerte! restaurant. After the New Years Eve opening, the building will be closed for a couple of months while the restaurant opens. A re-grand opening will include a consistent concert calendar.

"While we'll have major touring shows, we'll also feature regional and local bands. We want synergy with downtown. For example, Parkway Brewing is opening at The Bower. Why not coordinate—have their outdoor band play early, then host a later show inside The Exchange? Plenty of opportunities for collaboration."

Thornton is not booking the bands, but music inspired him to build the venue. "Going to concerts was a big part of my youth, my first ones were around age 14 or 15. Back then Roanoke got a surprising number of major bands I think about a space like ours. The architecture has a sense of drama, and a performance hall just felt right. I don't know yet how some of those heavier rock bands will sound in our hall, but I'm eager to find out," Thornton said. Grace Potter played FloydFest in 2010 and 2015 and will play the inaugural New Year's Eve event with Holy Roller from Richmond opening the show. 

“...primarily a standing-room-only venue... creates a completely different energy than theater seating

— Sam Calhoun



Oak Hall Cap & Gown: Stitching Tradition and Innovation

By Aila Boyd

For more than 135 years, Oak Hall Cap & Gown has been a fixture in the Roanoke Valley's manufacturing landscape, crafting academic, judicial and religious regalia from its headquarters in Salem. You may have never heard of them, but you might have seen their gowns being worn by smiling graduates somewhere.

Founded in 1889, the family-owned company has grown from a single plant to five manufacturing facilities—four in Virginia and one in Mississippi—while

never once laying off an employee.

"Our commitment to providing our customers with the finest quality regalia



Submitted photos

available, along with our award-winning customer service, has earned us the reputation of being the premier regalia manufacturer,” said Scott Lively, president of Oak Hall. “It’s an honor that we have never taken lightly—being able to supply regalia on an annual basis for the most important event on a college campus.”

That focus on quality and consistency has guided the company’s slow but steady growth. “Providing a stable workplace for our employees has given them the security that they need to thrive,” said Executive Vice President Donna Hodges. “We’re especially proud of the number of second- and third-generation employees that call Oak Hall home.”

Although Oak Hall’s customer base spans some of the most prestigious universities in the country, the company’s roots remain firmly planted in Southwest Virginia. “The Roanoke Valley is our home and has been since 1889,” Lively said. “Southwest Virginia has a long history in the textile world. While it’s unfortunate that so many industries have moved their operations offshore, it continues to give us the determination to thrive, and our employees understand and appreciate that.”

Amanda Livingston, president of the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce describes Oak Hall Cap & Gown as “a company with such a rich history,” noting that the family-owned business has thrived





in Salem for more than 135 years, helping preserve Virginia's textile heritage while creating regalia that celebrate generations of graduates.

That local pride shows in the company's workforce culture, where dedication and craftsmanship remain at the center of operations. "Our employees are, without question, the most dedicated, hard-working group and are fully invested in Oak Hall's success," Lively added.

While many textile companies have moved production overseas, Oak Hall remains firmly committed to U.S.-based manufacturing and sourcing. "Our most popular fabrics, including the sustainable Greenweaver fabric, are produced in South Carolina," Lively said. "It's important for us not only to produce in the U.S., but also to source materials from U.S. companies as well."

That commitment, Lively said, helps preserve domestic textile knowledge and supports jobs across the Southeast. It also allows Oak Hall to maintain its rigorous quality standards and its promise of quick turnaround when institutions need regalia fast.

Oak Hall's craftsmanship has earned it industry recognition as both a manufacturer and an expert in academic tradition. "We continue to do things the right way, never

cutting corners on the quality of our products," Hodges said. "Equally important is the partnership that we share with our customers. They look at us more as advisors than simply as another vendor."

While the design of academic regalia has remained largely unchanged for more than a century, Oak Hall continues to find creative ways to personalize the experience. "We encourage colleges and universities to implement color and school branding as part of the gown," Hodges said. "Graduates can celebrate and express their individuality with a first generation, student athlete or one of the many other stoles that we offer."

In 2009, Oak Hall became the first company in the industry to introduce sustainable caps and gowns—a move driven by environmental awareness and customer demand. "As each generation became more conscious of the carbon footprint that is being left by those that came before, we found it important to participate in the reduction of that footprint," Hodges said. "Our Greenweaver gown can be recycled, but more importantly, it's already made from recycled material."

That effort continues today through lean manufacturing and close collaboration with suppliers. The company reduces waste by adopting efficiency-focused initiatives and

investing in technology that precisely maps and cuts fabric to minimize leftover material.

Even as the company embraces innovation, Oak Hall remains a steward of one of academia's oldest traditions. "A high school graduation is the culmination of 12 years of progressive learning, while bachelor, master's and doctorate degrees typically signify the career path of the graduate," Hodges said. "The commencement ceremony celebrates the end of one chapter and beginning of another and is one of the few formal ceremonies left where participants are instructed how to dress."

That reverence for tradition extends to Oak Hall's internal culture. Employee training, advancement, and pride in craftsmanship are central to the company's philosophy. Even experienced sewers often need specialized training to craft graduation gowns and judicial robes, so supervisors work closely with them to uphold the company's high-quality standards.

He added that Oak Hall promotes from

within whenever possible. "The majority of upper management and supervisors worked in a different role within the company before being promoted. This lets others know that hard work, dedication and overall knowledge of the process is rewarded."

The pride in that process often comes full circle. Oak Hall employees, Hodges explained, take immense pride in seeing their craftsmanship on display at graduation ceremonies, adding that customer photos featuring the company's regalia are a meaningful reminder of their work's impact.

As Oak Hall looks toward the future, its mission remains rooted in the values that have carried it through more than a century of growth. "We look to continue the path set during our first 136 years to carry us forward to our next 136 years," Lively said. "While the players will be different and new technology will be implemented, we look for the culture to remain the same. Our overall goal is to put a quality gown on the back of every student walking at the commencement ceremony." 





LEAD BY EXAMPLE

**By Carrie Cousins,
Lead Point Digital**

Executive Summary:
*Go ahead and be
daring... it's worth it.*

Success (or failure) starts with a mantra

Dare to suck.

These three little words were part of a talk from a graphic design consultant early in my career. She doesn't know it, but every time I'm not sure what to do next or what turn to take, that phrase becomes my mantra.

And it's been good for business.

What started as a design philosophy – that really just translates to why not try it – has evolved into a guiding concept. What is the potential ceiling of trying something new? What happens when you are not afraid to fail?

The answer is quite simple. You take the leap; you try things you would not have; you think more analytically about what ifs (good and bad).

It's not something that changes overnight, not for me anyway.

I started my dare to suck journey by expanding design elements and stretching visual compositions. Nothing life changing here, but it got me used to thinking through scenarios. It also helped me getting more used to failure with designs that just didn't work.

I dare more greatly with job and career changes. I have failed and excelled.

The philosophy is core to business decisions, large and small, that have helped shape how I approach work, growth, and working with people. Small dares everywhere have helped me work outside normal comfort zones, partner with other amazing companies, and meet people that I can't imagine not knowing.

It happens personally too. My first – and pretty much every – marathon I have run is an experiment in daring to suck. Will I cross the finish line? Will I meet my personal goals?

How does it work in practice?



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It starts with a tiny voice inside my head: "Dare to suck. What's the worst that could happen?"

Think through that worst scenario. Is it really all that bad? (If the answer leads you on a path of catastrophe, this is not the time to take the dare.)

Then flip it – what's the best that could happen from taking a chance? Business opportunity? New friendships? A better career path moving forward? (That's when you should listen to that voice and go for it!)

Personally, this mantra has made me think more critically. It's not just a jump in every time. It's a strong "what if?" I dare to suck several times a month, from small decisions like trying a new lecture with college students to taking on a new client or reframing a business decision.

As 2025 is barreling toward an end, I can see how this year has been shaped by this thought process.

Dare to suck. You'll never know what opportunities you might miss if you never take a chance. 

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AFTER: Robert Turcotte, 71 years old (2025)

Man witnesses 41 years of change—and survives

By Bart Wilner

Business owner salutes long-time employee in the rapid-changing computer-network-technology industry.

Robert Turcotte joined Entre Computer Center May 29, 1984 as a 30-year-old Systems Consultant.

In 1984 Robert consulted and educated business owners on the new IBM Personal Computer (PC). Everyone wanted to know what it was, what business applications were available, and what it cost. The IBM

PC was a small computer with a configuration of an 8088 Intel Processor, 16kb of RAM, up to two 360kb floppy drives, green monochrome 13-inch screen, 80-column dot matrix printer, a keyboard, and IBM DOS. The application software included word processing (WordStar), spreadsheets (VisiCalc), and database (dBase). A full package was around \$10,000.00.



BEFORE: Robert Turcotte, 30 years old (1984)

Windows 11. It's a system you can get for about \$1,500.

Additionally, in 1984 there were no discussions about networking, WiFi, Internet, email, texting, security, backup and recovery, ransomware, Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, smart phones, cloud computing, Google Search, Google Maps, Google Earth, servers, laptop computers, tablet computers, color inkjet and laser printers, Microsoft Office Suite, online banking, online airline, hotel, restaurant, and car reservations, online news, books, and music, numerous industry specific software applications, and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Just to name a few!

Four decades in this industry have been exciting for Robert but has required hard work, constant learning, and a commitment to excellence. It is clear the fast paced technology does take a toll after 41 years as evidenced by the before and after pictures.

Robert Turcotte is retiring from Entre Computer Center on December 31, 2025.

Robert, congratulations on a wonderful career and thank you for always providing outstanding advice, service, and satisfaction to our customers. Additionally, your many years of public service have made our community a much better place. Best wishes for your well-deserved retirement. 

Over the next 41 years the computer products, the software applications, and the prices changed. The computer products became faster, more powerful, and smaller, and the software grew in features and applications never imagined. All while the prices decreased year after year.

Additionally, new technologies were developed that were never dreamed of in 1984.

What Robert could not recommend or sell in 1984 includes:

Today's PC with an Intel I7 6 core processor, 16gb of RAM, 512gb solid state hard drive, 24-inch flat screen high-definition monitor with a built-in camera, mouse, and MS



SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

**By Jade Richardson Bock,
Senior Consultant,
Building Beloved
Communities**

Executive Summary:

*There are creative,
affordable ways to
spread cheer, foster
loyalty, and uplift your
spirits and the community
at the same time.*

A more meaningful holiday season

As the holiday lights go up across Virginia, small businesses find themselves at the heart of the community's celebrations—and challenges. 2025 has seen funding for services cut, in tandem with rising prices from beef to health care. Tight budgets and busy calendars don't have to limit your business's impact.

Host a Giving Back Event

Partner with a nearby food pantry, homeless shelter, or children's charity for a collection event. Set a goal—like filling a bin with canned goods or collecting winter coats—and offer a small thank-you for donations, such as discounts or a branded keepsake. Highlight the effort online and encourage other businesses to join the cause!

Lift Up Local Creators

Dedicate space on your shelves or tables for artisans, bakers, or crafters in your area. Not only does this showcase unique gifts for shoppers, it also keeps money circulating locally and forges relationships with fellow entrepreneurs. Consider hosting a holiday pop-up, inviting artists to demonstrate their craft or musicians for an acoustic in-store set. These events draw foot traffic and create memorable experiences shoppers will share.

Adopt a Neighborhood Project

Organize a volunteer day—invite your staff, customers, and neighbors to clean a playground, rake leaves for seniors, or decorate a public space. Share the unique skills that you showcase every day at your place of business. It doesn't have to happen in December! Every January in celebration of Martin Luther King Jr Day, Building Beloved Communities provides "Nonprofit Fix It Day" and pairs experienced consultants with nonprofits to provide free guidance. What services can your company provide?

Create a Giving Tree or Wish List

Partner with a local nonprofit to set up a "giving tree" in your store with ornaments representing needs from the people they serve: gift cards, warm socks, toys, or books. Shoppers can select an ornament, purchase the item, and bring it back to your business for collection. It's visible, inviting, and helps direct generosity to where it's needed.

Share Holiday Cheer Online

Finally, don't underestimate the power of virtual goodwill. Shout out customers, employees, or partner organizations on your social media. Feature stories that showcase generosity and togetherness and create space for community members to thank one another.

When businesses give back, the whole town shines brighter—and the true spirit of the holidays comes home. 

The price is right—again

It's key to remember that some realtors work primarily with buyers, and some primarily list. I primarily list, and I've got an agent on my team who helps buyers alongside me.

I recently listed 10 properties in about 11 days, and I'm not saying this to toot my own horn. But when about five of my listings are sitting a little longer than they normally would, I reach out to other agents to get their feedback. For example, if I have a home that hasn't had any showings after a couple of weeks, which is pretty rare, I'll send it to five of the best agents I know and ask for their feedback to help move the property. When I did this recently, it came down to one thing: price.

Then there's speculation. One realtor told me there's a low pool of buyers right now, which is why some homes are sitting.

Another realtor I spoke with has so many buyers she has to send them to other agents.

Another realtor at my gym said she is telling all her clients that homes are on the market 40–60 days. Back toward the end of August, it was about 38 days.

There are a lot of factors that go into selling homes. I've really never had a problem selling property during the holidays. In fact, a couple of years ago I put a house under contract on Christmas Eve!

During the holidays, your house will still sell, and price is key—even if you have to do a small price improvement after it's been on the market a few weeks. I disagree with people who think that if they see a price go down, something must be wrong. To me, it shows the seller is willing to negotiate—and as a buyer, this helps you too.

When it comes down to it, the truth is that price is the key to everything. Other factors include location, layout, and condition. Buyers are savvier, not overpaying, and paying close attention to interest rates.

Stay optimistic, and don't forget that the market will test your price to make it right. 🏠

“There are a lot of factors that go into selling homes.



REAL ESTATE MATTERS

**By Frazier Hughes,
Walker Real Estate
Solutions**

Executive Summary:

There are so many speculations about the market and what's going on. There's the news, there are the realtors in the trenches, and then there's what people are saying on the streets—so here's the latest.



HUM founders: Kim Butterfield, Jaclyn Nunziato, Emily McCorkle

Award in hand, Huddle Up Moms co-founder looks to the future

By Gene Marrano

Dr. Jaclyn Nunziato is looking for some heavy hitters – and more donors in general – to further strengthen its mission to serve expectant and new mothers.

Last month Junior Achievement of Southwest Virginia honored several people by inducting them into the 2025 Southwest Virginia Business Hall of Fame. That list included attorney Nicolas Conte, a legal counsel for Carilion, and Paul Nester, the President and CEO for Roanoke Gas. The 34th annual JA event also recognized Blue Cow Ice Cream owners Jason and Carolyn Kiser as entrepreneurs.

Then there was Dr. Jaclyn Nunziato, an OB-GYN physician at Carilion who was named the Social Entrepreneur of the Year by Junior Achievement of Southwest Virginia. She says long-term health in the region depends on deeper private sector involvement in efforts like Huddle Up Moms (HUM), the nonprofit she co-founded around five years ago that supports hundreds of families each month with diapers, education, support groups and postpartum care navigation.

Nunziato, a New York native, says the old saying is true: “the people that have the least give the most.” But she would like to see those who have more give more towards causes like Huddle Up Moms. She is also the executive director for the organization, which recently moved into a bigger space in downtown Roanoke that can hold all of the diapers, baby wipes, formula etc. they collect and distribute to those in need.

A major grant last year helped jump start a diaper collection drive for the Diaper Bank now up and running. To date they’ve collected more than 40,000 diapers for distribution. Here’s something many don’t know says Nunziato – diapers are “heavily taxed,” and not covered by WIC (Women Infants Children) or SNAP benefits. Nor by insurance either. “It limits people’s ability; they have to pay without support.”

Many in this community work two jobs or are single parent who can't afford basic necessities she notes. "Roanoke is one of the largest diaper poverty cities in Virginia." She says about one third of families in Roanoke and the surrounding region are experiencing diaper poverty – which is where the Diaper Bank comes into play.

Among HUM's notable achievements to date: they serve 300-400 mothers monthly as a 100% volunteer nonprofit. The Moms Under Pressure program addresses hypertension in expectant mothers and has distributed more than 500 blood pressure cuffs for free over the past 3-4 years. A mobile outreach van will be launched in 2026, delivering diapers, formula and education to rural Southwest Virginia. HUM now has 8 hospital affiliates and 25 organizations it works with to support expectant and new mothers.

Huddle Up Moms has also collaborated with other organizations to tackle the issue of postpartum in new mothers and is now part of the CDC's "Hear Her," campaign, where thousands of bracelets will be distributed to raise awareness about the dangers of untreated postpartum depression, and the maternal health warning signs. Women are dying a year after giving birth Nunziato warns, from preventable conditions like stroke, cardiovascular disease and suicide.

"In the healthcare space we see them for six weeks [after a birth] but these things are happening much later on. Right now, the current system isn't recognizing those warning signs."

Nunziato says success in this kind of work is measured differently than in the business world. "Social entrepreneurship is different in the return on investment versus the impact – we're not bringing in millions of dollars – but I would argue that our impact and what we're producing is more important in some ways. I think it really shows that there's a disconnect between nonprofits and [for profit] businesses." More important perhaps than putting your name on a building or a project, "it is equally or more important to have businesses really give in meaningful ways." The Taco Fest fundraising and awareness event at Elmwood Park over the past few years – featuring local food trucks and restaurants, with a taco judging contest – has also been a success.

As for the immediate future, Dr. Nunziato asks, "what if we envision something different in 2026? What if the people that had the most gave the most? What if they gave even more of their time, put more of their value in really investing in infrastructure and the economy of Roanoke and the surrounding counties? We need that type of support to keep the lights on, to keep us growing." 



Jaclyn Nunziato



Taco Fest



BEST JOB EVER

By Jennifer Leake

Executive Summary:

Here's my take on the "12 Days of Christmas" to highlight the leadership actions that create clarity, engagement, and stronger teams. If this resonates and you'd like to explore it for your workplace, feel free to reach out.



The 12 days of a Best Job Ever® workplace

Every December, holiday music follows us everywhere—from the grocery store to the dentist's office, often including *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, a song famous for being festive, repetitive, and deeply committed to birds. But workplaces don't need partridges, turtle doves, or a sudden influx of drummers drumming. They need something far more valuable: clarity, communication, and leadership that doesn't disappear on December 26.

So, here's my lighthearted, workplace-friendly spin on the classic tune, minus the livestock but full of practical gifts your team will actually appreciate.

Day 1: One Clear Role Benchmark

Because nothing says "Happy Holidays" like finally knowing what your job actually is.

Day 2: Two Structured Interviews

A gift to future you, who won't have to wonder, "Why did we hire this person again?"

Day 3: Three Expectations Clarified

If you can't explain the role, they can't perform the role. Simple as sugar cookies.

Day 4: Four Onboarding Milestones

Imagine if new hires didn't spend week one guessing passwords and hunting for supplies. A miracle!

Day 5: Five Hiring Red Flags

(Feel free to sing "Fiiiive biig red flaags!")

If your process includes rushing, vague roles, missing references, or "we'll wing it," consider this your warning.

Day 6: Six Strengths Identified

People shine when they use the strengths that energize them—not the ones you hope they have.

Day 7: Seven Goals Well-Set

Not 27. Not "whatever comes up." Just seven meaningful goals that can be achieved before next Christmas.

Day 8: Eight Leaders Listening

Because nothing builds trust like leaders who actually hear what people say—especially before problems snowball.

Day 9: Nine Feedback Moments

Small, quick check-ins beat the annual "surprise performance review," which no one wants in their stocking.

Day 10: Ten Clear Priorities Set

Help your team avoid the "everything is urgent" blizzard—no snow shovel required.

Day 11: Eleven Check-Ins Monthly

Short, simple, human conversations. No meeting invitations titled "Touch Base About Touching Base."

Day 12: Twelve Months of Engagement

Engagement isn't a once-a-year event like eggnog. It's something you nurture all year long.

This season, as you wrap gifts, untangle lights, and pretend fruitcake is enjoyable, remember the greatest workplace gifts aren't seasonal at all. They're the everyday habits that make work easier, more transparent, and more human. Hire right, engage employees, lead well—and your team will give you the best gift of all: their best work.

And not a single goose or drumming drummer required. 🦊

“
Feel free to sing,
'Fiivve biiig red flaags!'”



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PERSONAL FINANCE

By Dave Henry

Executive Summary:
Let's talk about interest rates — and the impact they have on people looking to buy homes in the Roanoke Valley and the New River Valley.

Mortgage rates are coming down

Over the past 12 months, the average 30-year fixed-rate mortgage has dropped from just over 7% to a little above 6%. So, what does that mean for people looking to buy a home? The answer depends on where they are in their homeownership journey.

1. First-Time Homebuyers

First-time buyers are often renting — perhaps in a condo, townhouse, or apartment — paying their landlord's mortgage while building none of their own equity. Meanwhile, rental prices have surged more than **28% over the last five years**, with many renters now paying as much as a monthly mortgage payment would cost.

Most first-time buyers don't have a large down payment saved, but that's okay. There are many loan programs offering **0%, 3%, or 3.5% down options**. Combined with today's **lower interest rates**, this could be an ideal moment to transition from renter to homeowner — and start building equity and long-term wealth instead of just paying rent.

2. Move-Up (and Move-Down) Buyers

The second group already owns a home — likely with a mortgage rate between **3% and 5%**. In fact, about **70% of mortgage holders** fall into this range. However, their families may have grown, their needs changed, or they may simply crave a new space — whether that's a larger home or a smaller, more manageable one.

The biggest hurdle? Giving up that ultra-low rate. It's understandable — trading a 3% mortgage for a 6% one feels painful. But as rates continue to trend downward, that gap is shrinking. For many, the financial difference is becoming manageable enough to make that long-awaited move a reality.

3. Retirees and Downsizers

Then there are the retirees — long-time homeowners ready to embrace a more relaxed pace of life. Many are looking to move out of busy cities and into scenic areas like **Smith Mountain Lake** or **Claytor Lake**.

Often, their current homes (sometimes in northern Virginia or the Northeast) are fully paid off, with much of their net worth tied up in home equity. Selling that home is the key to funding their ideal retirement property. Fortunately, **lower interest rates** make it easier for "move-up" buyers to afford those homes, increasing demand and helping retirees get top dollar for their sales — freeing up more funds to enjoy the next chapter.

The Bottom Line

The Roanoke and New River Valleys are already seeing a noticeable uptick in real estate activity — and **lower mortgage rates are a big part of the story.**

Falling rates benefit everyone:

- **Sellers** attract more qualified buyers.
- **First-time buyers** can afford to enter the market.
- **Current homeowners** gain flexibility to upsize, downsize, or relocate.

In short, lower rates are helping more people make their next move — whether it's buying their first home, moving into their dream home, or retiring to the lake. 🏡

“”
Combined with today's lower interest rates, this could be an ideal moment to transition.



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Sand box

Laura B. Farmer, Ph.D., LPC, CSAC is a counselor, educator, scholar, and Qoya instructor. A research committee member of the Society for Sexual,

Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities, her practice “harnesses the power of art, music, movement, metaphor, writing, sand tray, and other creative techniques to support your transition.” Discover more at laurabfarmer.com.

Photo by Olivia Marone



THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

A long time budget stretching food staple may be making a comeback as food prices remain higher.

Looking for signs of confidence in the economy in what people buy

First it was cardboard boxes that was suggested as the canary in the coal mine for a slowing economy. Would shippers like Amazon, Walmart, UPS etc. be ordering less shipping containers for the holiday season, anticipating or actually seeing that consumers were holding off on making purchases at the same clip they usually do around the holidays, either scared off by higher prices, in some cases due to tariffs on imported goods.

I guess we'll wait to see if that theory by Virginia Tech economist Jadrian Wooten comes to pass, but now he has another possible barometer: a blast from the past, Hamburger Helper, is making an apparent comeback. "Households are feeling financial pressure and trying to find places in their budget where they can get more for less," Wooten said. "People are looking for ways to stretch meals and make expensive items like beef last longer."

Indeed, Hamburger Helper commercials are back on TV (the smiling oven mitt, remember?), and at least one portrays what looks like an upscale, two working parents couple wondering what they'll do to whip up a quick, delicious dinner. One pound of ground beef and a box of Hamburger Helper noodles to help stretch their budget, and 20 minutes on the stovetop, did the trick.

There are some other interesting ads popping up on TV lately, or as buys on cable systems, for products that keep rooms smelling cleaner, clothes that smell fresh and cleaning products to keep things spotless and germ-free. It seems with people also going out to eat less and staying home more, maybe they want their homes as antiseptic as some restaurants, and they want the people sitting around them to smell better.

"This trend isn't about people spending less overall, but where they are spending it," says Wooten, an associate professor with the Virginia Tech Department of Economics. "We're still seeing high levels of consumer spending, which we would normally consider a good sign for the economy. However, this news likely highlights how consumers are cutting some corners on everyday meals so they can still afford splurges, like dining out occasionally or treating themselves to small treats. We saw it in the 1970s and again in 2008 when demand for pasta, beans, and other low-cost foods surged."

Wooten says a spike in sales for budget-friendly foods like Hamburger Helper may not signal an impending recession, but it offers a window into how Americans are coping with higher prices and less confidence in where the economy is heading. I always did like Hamburger Helper, I have to admit ... 

If it matters...

So many of us encourage everyone to buy local.

Does that include your media?

If you think it matters, I have to tell you something: you don't have a lot of choices.

But first things first.

I'm the first person to say you're under no obligation to buy your goods and services from local sources. Maybe there are financial considerations where you simply must go out of market, because the local option is too costly. Maybe there is just not a good provider locally. Maybe what you want or need isn't even available here. And lastly—I hope this is not true—maybe no local company has earned your business. You can expect all of those requirements before you give your support to a local business. That's only fair.

Well, friends, there is a product and service sector in our neck of the woods that has become increasingly—exported.

Our media.

If it matters to you, you might be surprised to discover what "local" media outlets are not truly local. Television has local affiliates, of course; but our stations here are owned by companies in Texas, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, and Arlington. Newspapers have local editions here, of course; but they're owned by companies in Iowa and West Virginia. Magazine publishers offer community and niche titles, of course; but they are now owned by companies in Virginia Beach, Lynchburg, Richmond, and North Carolina. (Even magazines named for your city or state.)

What's left? One regional and one hyperlocal digital outlet (and other smaller online operators); and one significant radio group.

In print? We are just about the only significant print media group that remains based here in the Roanoke Valley.

If it matters to you to support local, we appreciate your patronage as a reader and your dollars as an advertiser.

Thank you, from BERRYFIELD: publisher of Valley Business FRONT. 

“ ”
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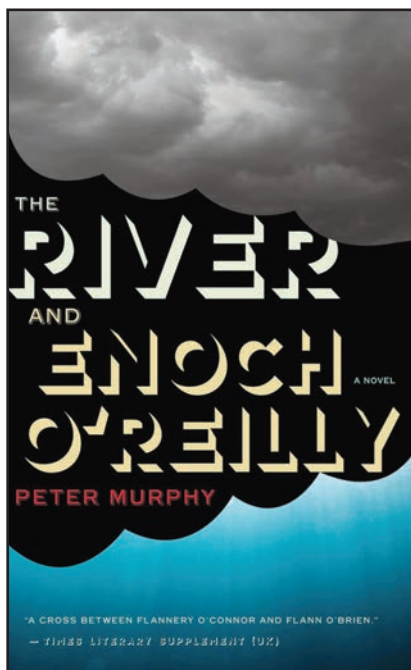


ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:

In November, yet another local media group was acquired by an out-of-market company.



FRONTReviews >

Readers and patrons of the business journal are invited to submit reviews (along with an optional photo) to 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.

Two local shows shine

The downtown Roanoke Bear Theatre brought to stage last month a play that also became a popular movie, *On Golden Pond*, starring several of the Fonda clan you may recall. It was Henry Fonda's last movie, and he won an Oscar. The Bear Theatre stage version was directed by Angela McNeil, who swears the play is better than the movie. She could be right. The stage version with David Walton Jr. in the role of Norman – the cranky family patriarch who may be showing signs of

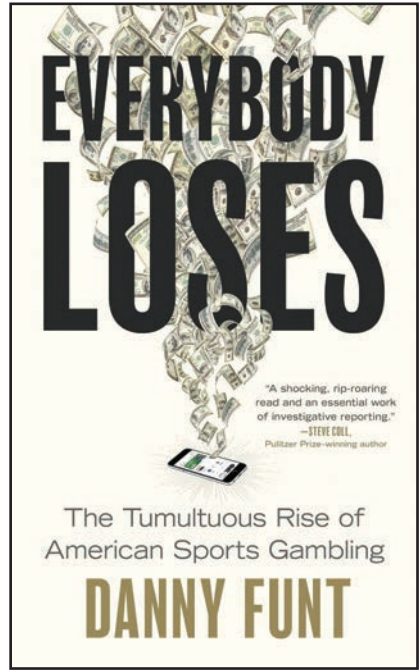
dementia – was well acted by a solid cast, demonstrating that the addition of the Bear Theatre to the local list of community theater venues was a worthy one.

Meanwhile Little Town Players (on the exact same two weekends; lets hope these local playhouses try to avoid that next year) staged *The Diary of Anne Frank* – definitely not the dramedy that On Golden Pond might be, although there was comic relief at times. A show to remember with talented cast and relevant today, when fear of deportation and antisemitism are considered.

—Gene Marrano

Rough waters

The River and Enoch O'Reilly (Harper; 2013) by Peter Murphy presents one of my favorite things in literary fiction: character studies. You'll get a slew of nine-plus introspections that describe these folks with that Irish voice that never lets go. (An ethnic stereotype, I know. But it's true.) I was absorbed. The format was turbulent and unpredictable (like a flood?) which threw me and made



me want to stomp on my editor's cap; but the illustrative writing washed me along, dripping but satisfied.

Disruptive pacing aside, I can't help but be enthralled with a compelling storyteller. If I were Murphy's agent, I would hand this book over to a playwright. All the casting notes are ready.

—Tom Field

Noodle/Ramen lovers take note

In the same spot at Springwood Plaza in Southwest Roanoke County where Ike's, the ramen shop used to be, is Noodle Factory, which ironically still offers several different Ramen dishes featuring beef, pork belly, a vegan choice and more. Then there is the Black Vinegar Mian noodle-based dish, a spicy Beef Ban Mian, among others, even the Vietnam noodle soup Pho. Plus rice dishes, curry, etc.

A perfect grab and go place if you're not inclined to eat there. Let's celebrate a little more food diversity in the Roanoke Valley,

especially in a part of town (southwest Roanoke County,) that could use some.

—Gene Marrano

Don't bet on it

In this eye-opening debut investigation, *Everybody Loses: The Tumultuous Rise of American Sports Gambling* (Gallery; new release January 2026) reporter Danny Funt digs into the rise of American sports betting. Through firsthand accounts of bettors, including a teacher who lost more than \$100,000 in two years, and former sportsbook executives (one of whom admits these companies are 'selling that you can win, but you can't'), Funt paints a disturbing portrait of a developing industry. No stone is left unturned in this comprehensive takedown.

—Publishers Weekly

The reviewers: **Tom Field** is a creative director, writer, and publisher; **Gene Marrano** is a news reporter and FRONT editor.

Muralist marks his alma mater >

His work is all over town, and now **Jon Murrill** just unveiled his latest project, a nearly 900-square-foot mural that encompasses all four sides of a building at **Roanoke College**. This is the first mural painted at the college. It was commissioned as part of the new student living community, Maroon Village, which repurposed shipping containers to create a modern, eco-friendly approach to campus housing.

Murrill, a graduate of Roanoke College (Class of 2009), welcomed students into the project, putting paint cans in their hands and giving them an insider's look into the world of public art. Over 50 students took part in painting workdays, putting paint cans in their hands and giving them an insider's look into the world of public art.



We love our VBR >

Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge always delivers—as evident by the organization's annual meeting on Oct. 23 at Braeloch on Glenbrun Farms in Roanoke County. The 2025 awards were presented to **Scott Ramsburg** of Roanoke Valley Television (Tourism Ambassador); **Anna Prillaman** of Twin Creeks Distillery (Golden Star); and **Eric Sichau** of Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce (VBR Past Chair). **Bart Wilner** (VBR board and Entre Computer Center) spoke about the tremendous gains the tourism organization has made for our region, including \$923 million in local direct visitor spending and the finding by Northstar Marketing that we have two "world class assets": our Blue Ridge Mountains and the Blue Ridge Parkway (not to mention all the other draws, from museums to cuisine to sports to outdoor recreation).



Tom Field

Listen to go >

GO Virginia—"an initiative by Virginia's senior business leaders to foster private-sector growth and job creation through state incentives for regional collaboration by business, education, and government"—held its Region 2 "State of the Region" address on Oct. 29 at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke. Though the 3rd floor meeting space was unsuitable for most viewing the presentation, the information and statistics shared were impressive—and audible, nevertheless. Materials included a most robust compilation of performance (and grant awards) in the 2025 Annual Report and 2025 Growth and Diversification Plan. Region 2 includes: the cities of Covington, Lynchburg, Radford, Roanoke, and Salem; and the counties of Alleghany, Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford, Botetourt, Campbell, Craig, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski, and Roanoke. Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement is the support organization, providing fiduciary oversight and administrative services.



Tom Field

Emerging energy >

Roanoke Blacksburg Technology Council (RBTC) held its Emerging Tech Conference at Hotel Roanoke Conference Center on Oct. 29—30. The agenda was as diverse as it was comprehensive, attracting attendees with interests from career development to innovation strategies to specific disciplines, such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology. Conference format: also diverse... featuring keynote addresses, panel discussions, fireside chats, and plenty of networking / social engagements. The Talent Lounge, hosted by Stuart Mease, placed seven technology employers in person-to-person connections. Jason Suhr (Roanoke County Career & Technical Education) said the mission is to generate "opportunity-ready" students (for emerging tech) and that outcome is dependent on "measuring what matters."

MGCC forestry program >

Mountain Gateway Community College (MGCC) announced that its Forestry program has been awarded \$3,250 through the Farm Credit of the Virginias (FCV) Agricultural Career Enhancement (ACE) grant program. This funding will support MGCC's ongoing outreach efforts by helping fund a Forestry Career Advisor recruiting position, aimed at introducing students across Virginia to careers in natural resources.

MGCC is one of six post-secondary institutions sharing in \$43,000 of grant funding provided by FCV. "The Farm Credit of Virginia's ACE Grant support is vital for MGCC to continue educating K-12 students about the vast career opportunities within natural resources," said Scott Reigel, Program Head for MGCC Forestry. "Our Forestry Career Advisor provides much-needed exposure to youth all across Virginia on the important values in forest resource conservation."

Courtesy of MGCC



Grover's award >

The **Grove on Patterson** in Roanoke was awarded Outstanding Community Organization by Virginia Governor Glen Youngkin and First Lady Suzanne Youngkin. The Grove supports pregnant and parenting women who receive substance use treatment while remaining with their children. Pictured left to right, Robert Natt, Donna Littlepage, First Lady Suzanne Youngkin, Governor Glenn Youngkin, Dr. Kim Simcox, Isabel Thornton, Shirley Holland.



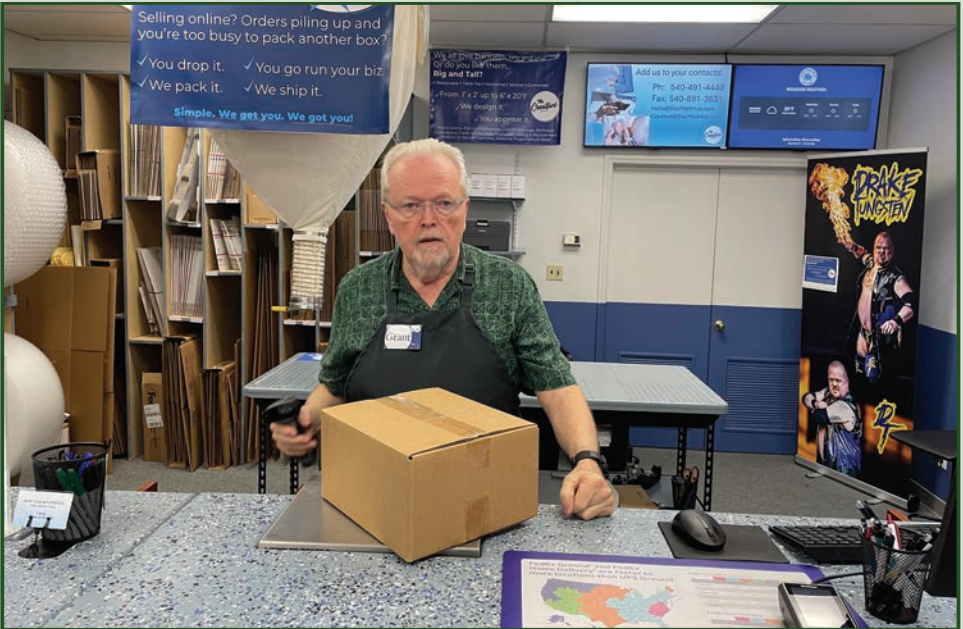
Carilion's proton therapy >

After reaching its 100-million-dollar goal to fund the **Carilion Taubman Cancer Center** now under construction, the regional health care system is already almost halfway through another capital campaign fundraiser. Carilion is now raising 50 million dollars for an Advanced Radiation treatment called Proton Beam Therapy, said to target tumors with "pinpoint accuracy" according to Dr. **Tony Sepaul**, Carilion's chief physician executive: "a highly technical, complex therapy requiring the right people to utilize it. It will also be an educational research tool."

At an event last month, Carilion revealed that 20 million dollars-plus towards that 50 million dollar goal is collected already, with 17.5 million of that coming from **Nicholas and Jenny Taubman**, who earlier donated another 20 million dollars for the Cancer Center itself, slated to open in 2028. It will be the only Proton Beam Therapy available in the region. "I think about someone being diagnosed with cancer from this region being able to stay close to home and receive high class extraordinary care right here. It's a game changer for our city, for our region."



Gene Marrano



Mail, ship, and local gifts >

A former executive director for the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce opened his own small business earlier this year - **Star Mailhub**, on Electric Road in Southwest Roanoke County. Not only can packages be shipped from or to Star Mailhub via FedEx, UPS and other major carriers, **Grant Holmes** has also created an artisan gift shop with crafts for sale from local makers.

"Somewhere around 25 different local artisans that make everything from wood turning to jam, took pictures and everything else. You might be thinking about gift season – it's a great time to stop by and grab some gifts. And if it's for Aunt Marge in Oregon, we can also ship it." Holmes also does voiceovers for commercials.



'Rescued' house >

Restoration Housing is at it again - the nonprofit broke ground last month on its tenth overall project and fifth in the Belmont SE Roanoke neighborhood. Restoration housing purchased the late 1800's fire-damaged two-story house from the Rescue Mission and will invest about \$300,000 in the project says executive director **Isabel Thornton**: "it's one of the oldest houses we've taken on for sure. It's a small house but elaborate, intricate carving. The exterior details are really one of a kind.

Historic tax credits and ARPA funds will help defray construction costs for the blighted property on Dale Avenue SE, which will become one-bedroom apartments for two tenants that had been homeless; Commonwealth Catholic Charities is working with Restoration Housing on those logistics. "We call it permanent, supportive housing," notes Thornton, whose husband Lucas is involved with other housing projects like The Bower (where the downtown bus depot used to be) and the new Promissory hotel/music venue/restaurant.

"It's a form of housing that's considered best practices for keeping people out of homelessness. It has supportive services built in. There's rental assistance built in. It mitigates the risk for landlords [Restoration Housing in this case]," says Thornton. It's the second blighted home Restoration Housing has purchased from the Rescue Mission on Dale Avenue SE for rehabilitation.



Yakety-Yak in Salem >

Reaction to the name change has been mixed at best on social media, at least early on, but the Salem Red Sox are now the Salem Ridge Yaks, and after the rebranding reveal on Saturday Yaks merchandise has been selling at a brisk clip. Those merch sales include orders from 20-plus states, as minor league baseball fans and collectors elsewhere join the "Yak Pack."

Salem General manager Allen Lawrence at the reveal event: "the kayak represents the waterways and outdoor recreation that we

love here in our area. The yak personifies strength and resilience. It has a double meaning – for anybody that doesn't know it, a yak is a home run." Allen said coming up with a name after announcing the change from Red Sox a year ago, "was a collective effort from our community." The franchise remains a Single-A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. The new mascot - replacing Mugsy - is Mac the Yak, named after nearby McAfee's Knob.



Ridge View's year 1 at HQ >

Roanoke-based **Ridge View Bank** had two branches up and running before breaking ground at its new, 17,000 square foot home office and "smart branch" on Franklin Road in Roanoke. That building cut the ribbon in November 2024. Last month Ridge View president **Carrie McConnell** and staff celebrated the first-year anniversary with customers and the community they serve, with raffles, giveaways, birthday cupcakes and a visit from Roanoke Mayor Joe Cobb.



McConnell also says they look forward to the Fed meeting in December, where a nother rate cut is forecasted, a move which could give the bank loan business a boost if interest rates move lower. The business customer, large and small, is a special focus for Ridge View. Meanwhile McConnell says Ridge View Bank is formulating plans to plant a branch in the New River Valley, and to several states bordering Virginia, including North Carolina and Tennessee.



Gene Marrano

Tudor House finds a home >

Five years after **Tudor House** was founded after the death by suicide of Louis Tudor - the owner of Tudor's Biscuit World and a popular swim coach, the non-profit has a permanent home inside Jefferson Center. Dr. **Kathleen Thorell** is the executive director for Tudor House: "this is such a step forward for us, because we're able to have a permanent space that people can come and seek resources, they can volunteer and help us do our outreach into the community, [it] gives us a place to have educational training, as well as have our teen ambassadors meet. We've been able to coordinate services the counselors and the wellness treatment that we have here in Roanoke. One of the goals at Tudor House is to be that bridge to help people find those resources because it can be very intimidating."

Tudor House has also collaborated with other organizations in the area and has sent over 1000 "comfort bags," to people seeking psychiatric help at Carilion Clinic or elsewhere this year alone. They welcome donations of blankets, socks, slippers and activity books to help stock those bags. A grant from the Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church Endowment Fund helped make the new home for Tudor House at Jefferson Center a reality.



NRVRC

NRVRC honors >

The **New River Valley Regional Commission** board of directors recently honored its 2025 award recipients, with local government elected officials, state and federal representatives, and local government planning commission chairs in attendance. **New River Community College** was the recipient of the Citizen of the Valley award. **Angie Covey** was recognized for her role in helping to establish the Access to Community College Education (ACCE) program that provides two years of tuition at New River Community College at no cost to high school graduates in the region. Since 2015, the program has grown to serve over 500 students each year.

Judge **Lee Harrell**, 27th Judicial Circuit of Virginia, was the recipient of the Champion of the Valley award, for his leadership in the development and implementation of the Recovery Court program, he has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to justice, rehabilitation, and community transformation.

Dr. **Tamarah Holmes**, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, was the recipient of the Friend of the Valley award. Holmes serves as the Director of the Virginia Office of Broadband and State Program Manager for the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and has overseen approximately 25,000 houses and businesses receiving broadband service in the region, and several million dollars of ARC investment for transformative projects such as the Old Prices Fork School Redevelopment, industrial park expansions, New River Water Trail Extension, and planning for the reintroduction of passenger rail service to the New River Valley.

Valley Business FRONT is FRONT'n About at many events each month. Check the social media links at www.vbFRONT.com for more coverage.

EDUCATIONAL
FRONT



Ross

Julie Ross has been named the next executive vice president and provost of Virginia Tech. Currently, the Dean of Engineering, Ross has served the university since 2017 and been involved in many advancements and initiatives, including the increase of the endowment by 53 percent to \$322 million, and securing over \$413 million in new gifts and commitments. She holds a bachelor's degree from Purdue University and a doctoral degree from Rice University—both in chemical engineering.

Jamie Soltis has been named superintendent of Roanoke County Public Schools effective July 1, 2026. He began



Soltis

his RCPS career in 1999 as science teacher at William Byrd High School, followed by positions as assistant principal and principal at Glenvar High School. In 2019 he joined Salem City Schools and had positions as director and assistant superintendent; then returned to RCPS as deputy superintendent. Soltis has a Bachelor's degree from Longwood University, a Master's degree in Administration and Supervision from the University of Virginia, and a Doctorate in Education from Radford University.

Emily Sarver, the Stonie Barker Professor of Mining and Minerals Engineering at Virginia Tech and adjunct faculty member in the Charles E. Via, Jr. Department of Civil



Sarver

and Environmental Engineering, has been named President of the Society of Mining Professors (SOMP). An international organization with members from more than 40 countries and 150 institutions worldwide and roots reaching back to the 18th century, the Society of Mining Professors makes contributions to the future of the mining, minerals, and energy disciplines.



Hillman

Jim Hillman has been named chief of staff for the Division of Finance at Virginia

Tech. Hillman will work to provide operational excellence and programmatic oversight of enterprise-level strategic planning, division wide program implementation, performance metrics and reporting, business operations, policy development and compliance, and organizational effectiveness. Hillman first joined Virginia Tech in 2009 and has worked with the finance division in financial and administrative roles.

Karl Rich has been appointed head of the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics in Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, effective January 10. Rich comes to Virginia Tech from Oklahoma State University, where he serves as the director of the Master of International Agriculture Program in the Ferguson College of Agriculture, professor of agricultural economics, and Humphreys Chair in Global Studies.



FINANCIAL FRONT



Sweeney

Hannah Sweeney has been promoted to branch manager at the Vinton office of Bank of Botetourt. She has more than a decade of experience in the financial industry, lives in Vinton, and is replacing the retiring branch manager, Paula Robins.



Johnson

Linda Johnson has been named the new CEO of Freedom First Credit Union. She was serving as Chief Financial Officer and

succeeds president and CEO Paul Phillips. Johnson—who selected from the Board's national search—was part of FFCU's leadership team for 11 years, helping grow the credit union's assets from \$248 million to \$1.2 billion. He experience also includes enterprise-wide initiatives, talent development, and AI-driven innovation. She holds dual Bachelor's degrees in Business Administration and Management and a Master's degree in Finance and Accounting.

WELLNESS FRONT

Jon Bonadies, MBA, CMPE, ACHE, has joined Vistar Eye Center as the new



Bonadies

Chief Executive Officer. With more than 30 years of healthcare leadership experience, Bonadies has helped physician-led organizations grow while enhancing operations and elevating patient care. Most recently, Bonadies served as Chief Operating Officer of Emergency Physicians of Tidewater, a 200+ provider medical group that partners with Sentara Health throughout the Hampton Roads region of Southeastern

Virginia. Vistar Eye Center is a provider of comprehensive eye care services across Southwest Virginia.

LEGAL FRONT



Pierce

Suzanne Pierce has joined the Roanoke office of Spilman Thomas & Battle as Member. Her practice focuses on corporate law, mergers and acquisitions, intellectual property, data privacy and compliance, and commercial real estate.

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Pierce's experience spans both domestic and international markets; she began her legal career in Northern Ireland, and is admitted to practice law in the United Kingdom, New York, and Virginia.

SPORTS FRONT



Kitley

Elizabeth Kitley has been named Assistant to the Head Coach of Virginia Tech women's basketball. She's the popular player who made ACC Player of the Year three times; four-time All-ACC First Team; finalist for the Wade Trophy and Lisa Leslie Award (2024); and All-American. Kitley—who joins head coach Megan Duffy—will work with community engagement, fundraising, NIL efforts,

and have roles with the broadcasting on Virginia Tech Sports Network radio and ACC Network Extra.



O'Dea

Matt O'Dea has been named team captain for Roanoke's Rail Yard Dawgs hockey team. He's the sixth captain in franchise history and is playing his sixth season with Roanoke. His record includes an all-time franchise leader among defensemen for goals, and ranking second all-time in franchise history for games played (as well as earning a 2023 President's Cup championship ring).

James Franklin has been hired as head coach for Virginia Tech football. He brings more than 30 years of coaching experience,



Franklin

most recently as head coach of Penn State. Franklin has a 128-60 record and when at Penn State the team finished in the top 12 of the final College Football Playoff rankings in seven of the last nine seasons. He has a bachelor's degree in psychology from East Stroudsburg University and a master's degree in educational leadership from Washington State.



Rosner

government affairs director at All Points Broadband. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Radford University and was selected for Virginia Governor's Fellow Program.

Justin Shepherd has joined Montgomery County as Utilities Director. Shepherd's appointment coincides with the finalization of the transition of Public Service Authority (PSA) staff and operations into the newly created Utilities Department. Shepherd has served in various roles with the Town of Christiansburg since 2008, most recently as Assistant Utilities Director since May 2023.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Kyle Rosner has been appointed Director of Economic Development for Botetourt County. Rosner's experience includes serving as senior advisor for National Telecommunications and Information Administration and

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CONTRIBUTORS

Linda Balentine is a Roanoke entrepreneur, founder, and owner of Crowning Touch Senior Moving Services as well as its transport, consignment, auction, and real estate portfolio. The business caters to the high growth senior citizen demographic and has been serving our regional market since 1996. [linda@crowningtouchusa.com]

Phil Barbour is proudly rooted in Southwest Virginia, graduating from Patrick Henry High School and James Madison University. With more than 25 years of experience in financial services, he has risen from teller to branch manager—ultimately becoming a leader in Private and Business banking. He gives back through volunteer work with educational and nonprofit organizations. Barbour enjoys his time with his wife, two sons, an energetic Siberian Husky, and tackling endurance challenges, like the Marine Corps Marathon, Ironman 70.3, and Virginia 10-Miler. [pwbarbour@freedomfirst.com]

Aila Boyd serves as the editor of “The Fincastle Herald” and “The Vinton Messenger” and coordinates social media for the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce. She holds an MFA in writing from Lindenwood University.

Jennifer Poff Cooper is a senior correspondent for FRONT, and a graduate of the RB Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University. She is a native of Christiansburg, where she lives and writes in her family’s home place. [cooperjp91@gmail.com]

Carrie Cousins is the Director of Digital Marketing at LeadPoint Digital in Roanoke. For 15+ years, she has helped businesses tell

their stories and get better results online with practical digital marketing strategies. She also an active leader in AAF, serving on the local and district boards, and is an adjunct professor at Virginia Tech.

Dan Dowdy is the business development director for Valley Business FRONT and owner of The Proofing Prof proofreading services (proofingprof.net). His background includes service in the U.S. Air Force and an extensive career in education, including teaching college-level writing competency and business courses, and working for a Fortune 100 company. [ddowdy@vbFRONT.com]

Emily Field is the office administrator for Berryfield, Inc. (publisher of FRONT and a media / marketing firm). She lives in Salem with her husband, Tom, and is the mother of three and grandmother of three. [efield@berryfield.com]

Tom Field is a creative director, marketing executive and owner of Berryfield, Inc. in Salem, and owner of Valley Business FRONT magazine. He has written and produced programs and materials for local and international organizations for 40 years. [tfield@berryfield.com]

Micah Fraim is a top-referred Certified Public Accountant and business finance strategist who is well-connected in the regional business community and nationally recognized. Publisher of The Little Big Small Business Book, he also publishes a blog at www.fraim.cpa/blog and is frequently interviewed as a business financial expert in national media channels. [micahfraim@fraimcpa.com]

Dave Henry is the owner of Henry Mortgage Group on Franklin Road in Roanoke.

[dave@henrymortgagegroup.com]

Kevin Holt is a partner at Gentry Locke’s Roanoke office where he has worked since 1998. His specialty practice area is commercial, real estate, intellectual property, and ERISA (Employee Retirement Income Security Act) litigation. He enjoys supporting and attending games of his two sports-active daughters and enjoys traveling (visiting 27 countries and 38 states).

Frazier Hughes was recruited by the CEO of Keller Williams Realty after being named 2017 salesman of the year at Berglund Luxury of Roanoke. He also hosts The Roanoke Real Estate Podcast, is Dale Carnegie Trained, a former radio personality, and is a Social Media Influencer. [frazierhughescom@gmail.com]

Jennifer Leake is a seasoned Certified Management Consultant (CMC®) with over 30 years of business and consulting experience. She is a certified trusted advisor in the areas of employee assessments, engagement, and emotional intelligence. She offers ideas and best practices to help you hire the right people, engage employees, and lead effectively to enhance workplace performance and drive overall business success. [Jennifer@AssessmentPros.com]

Olivia Marone is a seasonal contemporary portrait photographer with over two decades of experience. While she has worked in a variety of photographic settings, her true passion lies in the studio. With expert facial coaching and a knack for helping clients feel at ease, she ensures you look your absolute best. [olivia.marone@gmail.com]

Gene Marrano is FRONT editor and an award-winning anchor and reporter for WFIR 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]

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.

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.

Nicholas Vaassen is a graphic design specialist with over a million years of experience. His design projects include logos, magazines, web design, signs, newsletters, postcards, business cards, and any other marketing materials you can think of. [nicholas.vaassen@gmail.com]

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Low-light in the limelight

Elbit Systems of America is expanding its manufacturing facility in Roanoke County with a \$30 million investment that will also add 288 jobs. The company makes low-light night vision devices—especially for the defense industry.

Enclosures opening

VFP—a Roanoke headquartered business that manufactures enclosures for utility infrastructure equipment, networks, systems—and featured on our FRONTcover (March 2024), is expanding its production campus in Scott County (Duffield) with a \$35 million investment, expected to create 200 jobs and double the capacity.

Straightening the curve

Those most familiar with Interstate 81 in this region are familiar with the hazardous section in Botetourt County around the Town of Buchanan exits. A \$270 million investment has been announced by the Commonwealth to improve the stretch between mile markers 167 and 169, an area near Arcadia experiencing frequent backups and crashes.

Larger appraisal entity

Miller, Long & Associates, Inc. and Vail Appraisal, LLC, have merged to create one of the largest real estate appraisal firms in Virginia. The new name is **MLA Valuation**

& Advisory; and the market service area includes all of Virginia and portions of West Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

More coffee, please

RND Coffee has opened a third location at Riverside 2 in the Virginia Tech Carilion complex. A popular Roanoke coffee shop, RND has locations in Vinton and Wasena.

One fewer for Roanoke print

Virginia Beach-based VistaMedia has acquired **Leisure Media 360** (publisher of The Roanoker) for an undisclosed price. With the merge, the expanded VistaMedia now includes three dozen magazines, including Blue Ridge Country, niche publications (senior, visitor) and community/regional titles.

Yak arrives in Salem

Salem RidgeYaks is the new name and team brand, replacing the Salem Red Sox (since 2009); Salem's Class A minor league baseball franchise. The public reveal was on Nov. 9. The team is still an affiliate of the Boston Red Sox, still in the Carilina Leage, and still owned by Diamond Baseball Holdings. Previous Salem team names (before the Red Sox) included the Avalanche, Buccaneers, Redbirds, and Pirates. RidgeYaks incorporates

the Blue Ridge Mountains, outdoor recreation (kayaking), and a mascot named Mac the Yak (for McAfee's Knob site on the nearby Appalachian Trail)—as well as a reference the "yak" home run designation. The new brand is expected to generate more merchandise sales and join many other minor league teams that have adopted creative, whimsical nicknames.

Got your 250 passport?

Virginia 250 Passport Program is a statewide collaborative by Virginia Museum of History & Culture and others where folks visit selected, signature museums and welcome centers to get their book stamped and receive discounts and prizes, while they discover how Virginia helped shape the story of our nation. In our region, the Passport works at Historical Society of Western Virginia, Botetourt County Historical Society and Museum, Salem Museum & Historical Society, Montgomery Museum of Art and History, Historical Smithfield at Virginia Tech, Blue Ridge Institute & Museum, Rockbridge Historical Society, Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, Frontier Culture Museum, and the VA250 Mobile Museum.

B'burg stepping up

The Blacksburg Partnership, Town of Blacksburg, Virginia

Tech, and Downtown Blacksburg Inc have released a 5-Year Retail and Downtown Action Plan that addresses policy and administration, design, tourism and promotion, and economic vitality. The plan can be reviewed at stepintoblacksburg.org/downtown.

B/E beach life

Brown Edwards has acquired the 37-year Virginia Beach-based DeRoches & Company accounting firm. The deal adds more than two dozen employees and expands BE's reach in the Hampton Roads region.

Welcome to Buena Vista

Modine, a manufacturer of thermal management technology and solutions, will invest \$19.6 million through 2029 in planned capital expenditures to expand its presence in Buena Vista. Virginia. The investment will fund a combination of warehouse, office, and testing facility construction, as well as new machinery and equipment transfers to support growth in Modine's heating business. The project will create 57 new jobs. As part of the expansion, Modine will locate the headquarters of its heating business to Buena Vista from Wisconsin.

Tourism grants

104 local tourism programs will receive more than \$625,000 in matching-grant funds to boost the period

between peak and off-peak season travel across the Commonwealth, supporting Virginia's continued growth as an all-season tourism destination. The \$627,877 in awards is funded through three Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) programs: the Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program, the VA250 Tourism Marketing Program, and the Vacation Tours with VA DMO MMLP Co-op Program.

Local partners committed more than \$729,992 to match the VTC grant funding, generating more than \$1.3 million in new marketing initiatives. In total, the programs will benefit 624 tourism partners statewide. The City of Salem will receive \$12,500 in grant funding. "In a city like Salem a 10, 15, \$20,000 grant doubles what we can spend to create tourism products for people to visit Salem. You have to stay on top of it all

the time [to remain competitive]," says Carey Harveycutler, Director of Tourism for the City of Salem.

GO TEC lands in Roanoke County

The **Institute for Advanced Learning and Research (IALR)**, in partnership with **Roanoke County Public Schools**, have announced the launch of Great Opportunities in Technology and Engineering Careers (GO TEC®) Career Connections Labs in two middle schools in Roanoke County.

Hidden Valley Middle School and William Byrd Middle School join four other middle schools in the New River Valley that are installing new GO TEC labs with nearly \$1 million in GO Virginia funding and over \$500,000 in matching support from local and regional sources. Each of these labs are scheduled to be operational by the

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end of 2025. Roanoke County is part of GO Virginia Region 2.

GO TEC Career Connections Labs are designed to spark student interest in middle school by connecting classroom experiences directly to high-demand, high-wage career fields. The program introduces students to more than a dozen technology and engineering pathways, including Automation & Robotics, Precision Machining, Healthcare Technologies, IT Coding & Networking, Metrology, and Welding.

Developer plans housing project in Roanoke

Lawson, a real estate development firm in

Norfolk, is building a second affordable housing development in the Roanoke Valley, this time in the Hollins area. Lawson has been awarded 9% Low-Income Housing Tax Credits for the Williamson Reserve Apartments, located just past Hollins University. Austin Pittman, Lawson Vice President and Director of Development, says The Williamson Reserve Apartments will be income restricted, for those earning up to 60% of the area median income. "Low income is a misnomer. I think a better [description] is the affordable tax credit program. It's [targeted] towards working class families," says Pittman.

Williamson Reserve will

Notable Transactions

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- Undisclosed buyer purchased 170,000-sq-ft, 8.65-acre **ReaderLink Distribution Services** facility at 1100 Intervale Dr in Salem for \$11.55 million; to be leased by ReaderLink
- **Specialty RX** leased 10,035-sq-ft of industrial space at 811 Connecticut Ave in Roanoke
- **Orange Theory Fitness** leased 3,216-sq-ft of retail space at Christiansburg Marketplace at 2705 Market St NE in Christiansburg
- **Spin & Smoke LLC** leased 2,200-sq-ft of retail space at 525 Orange Ave in Roanoke
- **Physicians Associates of Virginia** leased 9,101-sq-ft of office space at 1421 3rd Street in Roanoke
- **HSCG Properties** purchased former Ghent Hill Design & Furniture Restoration buildings (2 at 14,000-sq-ft) at 1308 8th Street in Roanoke for \$650,000

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

add 80 energy-efficient apartment homes. It will be built in two phases with construction starting in summer 2026, featuring a mix of one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments. Lawson's Smith Ridge Commons, a 216-unit affordable community on Peters Creek Road, is near completion and is accepting applications.

Foundation grants

Roanoke Women's Foundation (RWF) has announced its 2025 grant award recipients: New Life Birth Center (\$37,000), St. Mark's Lutheran Church (\$40,000) Sleep In Heavenly Peace (\$50,000), Camp Easterseals Virginia (\$80,000), Family Service of Roanoke Valley (\$100,000) and Roanoke Area Ministries (\$125,000). "Today, we celebrate the remarkable difference we've made together with our nonprofit partners. Every donation, every vote, and every act of generosity has shaped over two decades of

service and community strength," said Betsy Whitney, President of the Roanoke Women's Foundation.

RWF supports non-profit organizations in the cities of Roanoke and Salem, the Town of Vinton, and the counties of Roanoke, Botetourt, Craig, Floyd and Franklin. Since 2005, RWF has provided \$6,126,217 in grants to arts and culture, education, the environment, and health and human service organizations.

MMT announces 2026 lineup of shows

Next year, **Mill Mountain Theatre** will bring a lineup of beloved musicals to its Trinkle Mainstage - including Oklahoma!, The Wizard of Oz, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and 9 to 5. Matt Shields, managing director at Mill Mountain Theatre in, says none of these shows have ever been performed on the mainstage with adult casts. Alongside the mainstage productions,

Shields says the season will also feature a selection of student shows and a concert series. Single and season tickets for next year's productions are now on sale. "This is the first season I've planned with [former director] Ginger Poole right there with me," says Shields, a long time employee at MMT who started out in the props department. "None of these plays have been done on the main stage before with adult casts. Last time we did Oklahoma we were till at the Grandin Theatre in the '80's."

NS-UP merger could be in the works

It must still clear some regulatory hurdles, but **Norfolk Southern Corporation** has announced that shareholders voted overwhelmingly to approve merger plans with Union Pacific at the company's Special Meeting held last month. Mark George, President and CEO of Norfolk Southern, on the call: "by eliminating interchanges, customers products will

reach their destination faster. Increased speed and reliability, combined with lower freight costs per mile makes rail a more attractive option than truck." If approved the transaction - the merger with Union Pacific- is expected to close by early 2027.

A more grown-up Chucky Cheese

Dave & Buster's—a popular national chain that combines an arcade, sports bar, and restaurant, geared to families is possibly coming to Valley View Mall in Roanoke. Although it's still speculative (no official announcement as of publication date), a floor plan was leaked, showing the franchisee.

FloydFest gearing up for 2026

The first of a half dozen or so releases from **Across the Way Productions** - the company behind **FloydFest** - has been announced. Chief operating officer and

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co-owner Sam Calhoun says they've been trying for years to secure the Tedeschi Trucks Band, which has its roots in the Allman Brothers. It will finally happen at Festival Park in Floyd County, sometime next July 22nd through the 26th: "we have wanted Tedeschi Trucks on the mountain for many, many years.

We feel it's perfect for the FloydFest family."

Also announced are Andy Frasco and the UN, Caitlyn Kriso and the Broadcast, Larkin Poe, local favorite Issac Hadden and about a dozen more performers. Calhoun is also excited about other early headliner

announcements for My Morning Jacket, Stephen Wilson Jr. and another Grammy winner, Lukas Nelson. Look for additional lineup announcements for FloydFest 26 daydream over the next few months. As for the new daydream tag, Calhoun says, "every year we work really hard both

on the art and on the imagery of the theme. I think right now America just needs a little break. We need a day dream. Right?"

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

Check out additional FRONT Notes from Valley Business FRONT on our Facebook site or social media links at www.vbFRONT.com.

“Hamburger Helper commercials are back on TV. — Page 34

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Breaks Interstate Park - Fox Ziplining with Friends of SWVA staff

All About Appalachian Assets

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

“Everything starts with a visit,” says Catherine Fox, Director of Regional Destination Development for Friends of Southwest Virginia.

The organization works to “envision Southwest Virginia’s creative economy.” It covers 19 counties, four cities, and 53 towns located on Virginia’s southern and western border, helping each of them

cultivate sustainable economic development opportunities.

Destination development means assessing what a region has in place, enhancing it,



Submitted photo

and “visioning to see what’s possible,” says Fox. It could be working with Virginia Main Street to inventory what currently exists and suggesting options for open storefronts to keep downtowns vibrant. Or enhancing synergy between trailhead towns to draw hikers to main streets. It looks at what residents love, what visitors love, and what is sustainable.

“How do you build capacity and livability that also promotes visitation?” Fox said. “It’s not just what you see but the intangibles like pride in community and quality of life.”

The focus of Friends of Southwest Virginia has evolved from music (The Crooked Road

music trail), to adding an artisan network (‘Round the Mountain), to a current emphasis on outdoor recreation (SWVA Outdoors) – “a three-legged stool,” said Fox. She works collaboratively with the subsidiaries to boost them through channels the Friends of Southwest Virginia can provide.

One resource, of course, is funds. According to Kim Davis, Executive Director, “Friends of Southwest Virginia is funded through a diverse mix of regional, state, and federal sources, including state appropriations, earned income from operations at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace, and



Will Payne (co-owner) based in Bristol- Squabble State Hard Cider and Spirits

grants from federal, state, and private foundations.”

Fox has held her position for about six months, but she is not new to tourism. She had previously been with Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge for 33 years. As a graduate in Hospitality & Tourism Management at Virginia Tech, she was recommended by “an amazing professor” for a job with that

group’s prior iteration in the fall of 1988.

“I learned and grew with the organization’s growth,” Fox said. That included experience in forming partnerships, advocacy and working with local governments, and visioning.

Later, she became “entrenched in destination development.” A pinnacle was attracting the Iron Man Triathlon to Roanoke in 2021,

as it brought more than 1,200 athletes and their families to glimpse areas all the way from downtown Roanoke to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Fox eventually moved to marketing and gross strategy firm Eddy Alexander, where “I learned new things from new destinations” that varied from Danville to Eureka, California. “An amazing place on the West Coast with a unique vibe. I love it there just like I loved watching the Danville region - Visit Sosi - transform to the spotlight for tourism and economic development.”

When she began asking “what can I do to make a difference?” Fox returned to the tourism world, joining Friends of Southwest Virginia.

Fox continues to be based in Roanoke, working part-time in the organization’s Abingdon headquarters and also traveling the region.

Because of Southwest Virginia’s size, she often focuses on “telling a story from one end to the other by itinerary building.” The Crooked Road, for example, boasts music stops throughout the region’s footprint that folks can take in one part at a time.

Friends of Southwest Virginia brings its communities several specific services. One is providing visuals, such as photography and videography. Another is market research, so communities know who their audience is and how to target visitors most effectively. Its soon-to-be redesigned website will fully represent the best parts of the region and have the most relevant information for visitors.

One of Fox’s favorite parts of this role is meeting new people, especially each community’s “cheerleaders.” She finds that people in Southwest Virginia have “so much heart” with their desire to see their communities prosper while also maintaining traditions.

Fox also enjoys finding undiscovered gems in Southwest Virginia. She recently went ziplining in Breaks Interstate Park, and noted that the number one resort in the country according to Travel + Leisure magazine is Primland in Meadows of Dan.

“You think you know your state, but you don’t until you get a chance to see it,” Fox said.

When asked how promoting Southwest Virginia is different from promoting the Roanoke /Blue Ridge region, Fox exclaimed, “It’s bigger! Nineteen counties is a lot!” Also, “the product is so different.”

There is a much broader target market. It could be someone seeking entertainment, a foodie, or someone desiring outdoor recreation. If you’re in Giles County people visit from West Virginia, if you’re in Patrick County people visit from North Carolina.

The industry has changed over the years, Fox said. When she graduated college, tourism was all about hotels. Now, destination marketing is about seeing a community thrive and grow. That means using economic development metrics on lodging, restaurants, retailers, outfitters, and employers, and also looking at “how tourism impacts communities in ways we don’t realize.” She now sees synergy – an “aligned narrative” – between economic development and tourism planning as well.

Tourism is rewarding, but it is hard, Fox said. Challenges center on “things out of our control that cause visitation patterns to change.” Like Hurricane Helene. Like the recent government shutdown, because people don’t know whether the Blue Ridge Parkway is open or whether their air travel will be smooth. Like tariffs, which have meant Canadians stopped traveling down Interstate 77.

AI is another wild card. People are using it to create itineraries, for example, so tourism officials have to learn “how we can use it more effectively.”

The future of the region, Fox said, rests on “being at the table in Richmond,” which means convincing people in other parts of the state of the region’s value. Which circles back to her goal of trying to build a reputation for the area by “getting people to know how amazing the region is.”

She said, “It’s incredible what we have here. I want to tell the story.” 

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