

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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APRIL 2026

Westlake / SML Center

Drain Dome

Radio IQ

Tiny Cargo

Holly Kobia

Coffee Shops

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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

"Oh, don't tell me that!"

That's how a patron responded when she introduced me to an associate at a recent business function. I had said, "Yeah, we're in our 38th year" when she told her workmate I published the business journal. My years in the journal business reminded her how L-O-N-G that timeframe is, which instantly computes (in some of our heads) as "how old that makes me!"

You see, she's been with us since the beginning. I helped her out.

"But that's the FRONT," I said. "I'm including the original Blue Ridge Business Journal" newspaper tabloid that debuted in 1988. "The Valley Business FRONT 'magazine version' started in 2008."

"Oh, good," she replied. The 20-year difference made a B-I-G difference.

Either way, 211 editions of FRONT (this one) or around 500 of BRBJ is... a LOT. A lot of news about the progress of one of the best little regions on the globe.

"Oh, do tell me that!"

We will. We do.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

““”

A little cleanup can do wonders for both focus and morale. — Page 30



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I needed a new
venture business
like I needed a
hole in the head.

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Our Coffee Shops

By Rachel Nicole Edwards



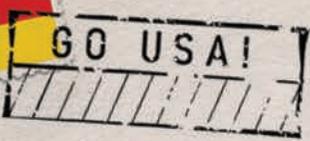


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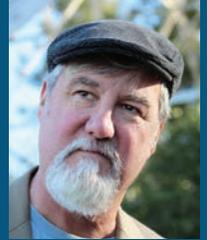
Jade Richardson Bock



Carrie Cousins



Emily Field



Tom Field



Gene Marrano



Nicholas Vaassen

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.

2026 CONTRIBUTORS



Dan Dowdy



Rachel Edwards



Lindsey Hull



Olivia Marone

““
She empowered me to leverage my best talents and skills.

— Page 32

““
Like most big bills, it's a stew comprised of smaller pieces of legislation—more than 40 housing programs.

— Page 34

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 48.



Phil Barbour
Freedom First Credit Union /
finance—credit unions



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finance – banking



Alicia Smith
F&S Building Innovations /
construction





Submitted photo

Albemarle Bakery & Coffee House

Our Coffee Shops

By Rachel Nicole Edwards

A cup of fresh coffee warming your hands. The scent of roasted coffee beans. A cozy window seat. The voices of business professionals and neighbors alike. These are the sights, sounds, and experiences many of us seek at the local cafe, whether to grab a coffee on our morning commute to work or to meet with friends for an afternoon chat.

Since the rise of the "coffee house" in the

15th century Middle East and Europe, coffee has been our fuel for commerce, productivity, and discussion. Roanoke City opened its first coffee house, "The Virginia Cafe" in 1917 and ever since, Southwest Virginia has attracted coffee-loving entrepreneurs and connoisseurs of all kinds.

Here are around two dozen locally owned and operated "coffee shops" serving our communities.

The Albemarle Bakery & Coffee House Roanoke

"Our cozy little cafe and bakery await you."

Asunder Coffee Buena Vista

"We simplify coffee and make it easy, no matter your coffee knowledge. There are no stupid questions, and we are here to help you along your coffee journey."

Bean Bliss Coffee Bar Salem

"Meeting everybody in the community... getting to know them... including our 'regulars'... it's the best part of this business and why I come to work every day."
—Crystal Bowles, owner

Brew Initiative Coffee Roanoke

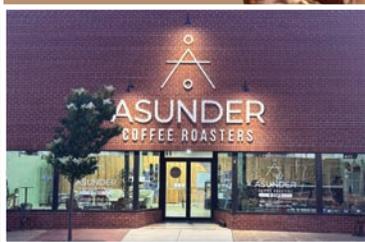
"We provide quality beverages to brave adventurers and weary travelers alike, matching with our tabletop gaming theme. Part of the reason I started Brew Initiative Coffee is because I left a career where I quite often left at least one person or group upset at the outcome of each encounter. I wanted to do something where I made people happy with the things I was making."
—Nils Olson, owner

Canvas & Coffee Roanoke

"Together, we've poured our hearts into shaping a space that feels calm, inviting, and open to all—a place where creativity can thrive and where everyone can find a moment of peace. Coffee brings us together, and art gives us room to express ourselves. Here, the two belong side by side."
—Sarah and Esteban, founders

Cello Coffee House & Cafe Roanoke

"We are coffee shop and Mediterranean café serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner, international coffees and teas, ice cream, smoothies, açai bowls, bubble tea, Baklava, gyros, Shawarma, Falafel, bagels, burritos, vegan and vegetarian options."



Asunder Coffee



Bean Bliss Coffee Bar



Brew Initiative Coffee



The Coffee Bus

Roanoke

"The Coffee Bus was created to bring high quality coffee into spaces where people are already gathering—festivals, events, and community moments. It's about convenience, atmosphere, and giving people something they look forward to."



The Coffee Bus

Crumbles

Roanoke

"Welcome to our cozy little breakfast and lunch spot in Roanoke. A delicious way to start every morning! Mouthwatering biscuits, breakfast platters, coffee and more."



Crumbles

First Light Coffee Co.

Rocky Mount

"We are a mobile coffee trailer that has a main location three days of the week (bookings on Mondays, Tuesdays, Saturdays). We offer hot and iced lattes, homemade pastries, and specialty drinks that change monthly. Our goal is to bring a little light to someone's day in each cup of coffee we serve!"

—Bethany Bower, owner



First Light Coffee Co

The Flour District

Lynchburg

"Since we opened in 2023, the space has grown from an artisanal European-style bakery and cafe producing in-house baked pastries and carefully crafted coffee and tea beverages, to the heart of Bedford Avenue where it's situated in Lynchburg. The Flour District has expanded its offerings not only from a carefully curated drink menu utilizing beans roasted nearby in Roanoke and flour locally sourced, to a destination for casual breakfast and lunch catering. The cafe itself is a popular event rental destination for all types of parties and celebrations, and the Teaching Kitchen off the back of the bakery hosts multiple cooking and baking classes weekly which have been wildly popular with Lynchburg residents and those living just outside the city as well."

—Amy Wisniewski, COO



The Flour District

Global Blend

Roanoke

"Global Blend is a mission-driven café where great coffee meets global purpose. We believe simple everyday moments—like sharing a cup of coffee—can spark dignity, hope, and lasting impact."



Global Blend



Halwa Bakery & Cafe

Halwa Bakery & Cafe Blacksburg

"I was born in Egypt and have Lebanese heritage on my father's side. My bakery, Halwa, is named after the Arabic word for "sweets," "dessert," and also "beautiful." I chose a name that felt just right for a place built on love, tradition, and creativity. Halwa is more than a bakery or a café; it's a celebration of culture, passion, and love. It's how I share my roots—with every dish, every dessert, and every customer who walks through the door. Whether you're trained or self-taught, what truly matters is the heart you put into your food. Halwa is my dream come true—my heart, my home, and a home for everyone who visits."
—Karmen George; owner, chef, designer

Kind Brew Roanoke

"Kind Brew is a family-owned coffee and tea house where thoughtfully crafted beverages and eats are served. Our mission is to create a welcoming space for our local community while supporting reforestation efforts globally."

Lighthouse Coffee Blacksburg

"Even in the simple act of making coffee, we get the awesome honor to represent the goodness and love of Jesus."



Kind Brew



Lighthouse Coffee



Little Green Hive

Little Green Hive Roanoke, Daleville

"Because Coffee is Personal."

Mill Mountain Coffee & Tea Roanoke, Salem, Blacksburg, Daleville

"One of the oldest, continuous local coffee shops in the area; offering locally-roasted specialty coffee."

One Love Coffee House Roanoke, Troutville

"One Love Coffee House exists to bring people together over exceptional coffee, creating a welcoming space where community, conversation, and connection thrive. We believe great coffee has the power to unite people from all walks of life and inspire moments that matter."



Mill Mountain Coffee & Tea



One Love Coffee House

RND Coffee Roanoke, Vinton

"Classic, fresh, culinary-inspired."



RND Coffee

Red Rooster Coffee Floyd

"Quality coffee (local and retail distribution) and roasting as well as known for its high attention on positive community impact."



Roadmap CoffeeWorks

Roadmap CoffeeWorks Lexington (also Fredericksburg)

"Award winning (as in Forbes, USA Today, Coffee Review) 30+ year boutique favorite craft coffee."

Red Rooster Coffee





Second Cafe

Running Latte

Roanoke

"Running Latte is more than a coffee stop—it's a destination for dreamers, doers, and everyone in between. Whether you're commuting, exploring the mountains, or just passing through, we're here to make your day brighter, one delicious cup at a time."

Second Cafe

Roanoke

"Coffee, charm, community."



Sugar Cube Cafe

Roanoke

"More than just sweets! Sugar Cube Cafe blends playful desserts, boba tea, and comforting Korean-inspired dishes all in one cozy spot. From coffee, classic and seasonal bubble teas, milkshakes, and savory goodness."



Sugar Cube Cafe

Sweet Donkey

Roanoke

"Hip, local nook in a historic house with gourmet coffees, lattes and teas, pastries and light fare."



Sweet Donkey

Sycamore Station

Salem

"Imagine a space that allows you to break free from the fast-paced daily routine. Somewhere you can sit down, enjoy the natural setting seeping in around you, sun setting over the mountains. Really see and hear those you bring with you; a place to nourish the soul. That's what we aim to do."



Sycamore Station

Vinton Café: Kitchen & Bakery

Vinton

"Good food, great coffee, and a place that feels like home. Our mission is to serve our community with care, creativity, and hospitality in every plate and cup." 

Vinton Café Kitchen & Bakery





Lindsey Hull photos

The cinema can presently host guest speakers, such as the author event with Vickie Gardner pictured here. The concession area provided gathering space for a small crowd, which then moved into the screening room for a reading.

Calling All Stars

By Lindsey Hull

A new performance venue proposed for Westlake Towne Center Site at Smith Mountain Lake would also serve as a multi-use community space. But the clock is ticking on raising the funds to purchase the building



Westlake Cinema is located at Westlake Towne Cinema in Moneta, VA

Excitement is growing surrounding a proposal to turn the Westlake Cinema, located in Moneta's Westlake Towne Center, into a new multi-use community space. Called The Smith Mountain Lake Center, the venue will host performances — live

music, community and professional theatre and guest speakers — as well as meetings, special interest classes, even conferences.

And they'll still serve up movies with a side of popcorn. The only thing that



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Renderings of the proposed SML Center renovations were on display at a recent event held at the Westlake Cinema (pictured, Jack Phillips, SML Center board president)



Matt Karris is putting a professional spin on community theatre at the lake.

might derail this train? Money.

The Smith Mountain Lake Center board has until June 1 to raise \$1.5 million to purchase the cinema from the Willard Companies, board president Jack Phillips said. The board desires to raise an additional \$1.5 million to cover renovation and operating expenses.

Willard Companies Vice President Ron Willard II declined to comment on details of the agreement, though he did specify that the cinema will remain open if the sale does not happen.

The cinema, which shows first run movies — films that have just been released to theatres — opened in 2004, just two years after the movie industry saw peak ticket sales totaling 1.6 billion in the U.S. and Canada, according to Nash Information Services. Sales steadily declined in the years that followed until the pandemic caused many theaters to close entirely. When they reopened, theaters recovered slowly, rebounding to only half of their peak by 2025, according to a Pew Research Study.

In a 2025 survey, 67% of U.S. adults under the age of 29 said they had seen a movie in a theater in the previous twelve months; the same was the case for only 39% of those surveyed over age 65.

The median age in Moneta in 2024 was 57; 35.7% of the population there was age 65 or older.

Prior to the pandemic, the Westlake Cinema was running at 30% to 40% capacity, said Tim Gardner, SML Center board member. Now, the cinema is running at 8%, but it is still selling enough tickets to be self-sustaining, to pay the rent and keep the doors open.

The SML Center board plans to continue operating two of the cinema's four cinema screens when the new community center opens. Screening room one will be removed to make space for a combined reception area and conference hall, meeting space and a new concession area complete with a bar and hot kitchen. The second screening room will feature a stage, functioning as a performance and lecture hall.

"I'm kind of treating it like a little upscale community theater, but when we actually open the center, we will produce musicals and shows and bands and talks with performers that are all professionals," SML Center artistic director and cinema general manager Matt Karris said.

Karris directed "The Addams Family" musical, which was performed before sold-out crowds at the Westlake Cinema last year. This spring, he's bringing "Bonnie and Clyde" to the stage.

The SML Center is a perfect fit for the community, according to Willard, who cites over 200 new residences which are planned to be constructed within walking distance of the site over the next 3 to 5 years. "To

have this in their backyard is going to be kind of neat," he said.

"There are a lot of older people here, retirees," said Phillips. "They don't like to drive at night and dodge deer, right? So, they don't like to drive to Roanoke to see something and then have to drive home."

"I really feel that this has an economic benefit that is going to help every place on the lake, Bedford, Franklin County, Pittsylvania County. It's one of those things that floats all boats," Gardner said.

The SML Center board hired Vincent Magnini, executive director of the Institute for Service Research, to produce an economic impact study in 2022, when the board was evaluating the former Grand Home Furnishings building as a potential site for the community center — the purchase of that building fell through when the former owners sold to a different buyer, Tim Gardner said.

The results of that study, which used the IMPLAN model, determined that the Smith Mountain Lake Center would create an \$11.5 million economic impact within Franklin County in its first year — that number includes direct, indirect, and induced effects.

The finding was based, in part, upon projected revenue produced for a five-year business plan prepared for Smith Mountain Lake State Park in 2019. According to that report, that plan determined that every dollar spent in the park produced approximately \$16-18 in economic impact. Therefore, "this state park ratio aids in illustrating that the approximate 12:1 ratio between revenue projections and economic impacts of the proposed SML Center are realistic and conservatively estimated," the report concluded.

A new study has not been prepared for the Smith Mountain Lake Center board's current plan involving the Westlake Cinema. 



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LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By Carrie Cousins,
LeadPoint Digital

Executive Summary:
Developing a great marketing strategy sets the groundwork for long-term success.

Digital strategy starts with acting ... so why are you just reacting?

There's a strong chance your marketing efforts are stuck in an exhausting cycle of reactivity.

You see a competitor launches a new campaign, so you scramble to match it. A weekly report shows a dip in high-intent lead volume, so you immediately pivot your ad spend. The event happening next week has weak signups and so you launch an email campaign.

Every one of these situations, requires a response and you might feel like you are being productive, but really it is just reacting.

The strategy guiding these activities should have started long before seeing something happen. Developing and executing a great marketing strategy starts with a lot of activity that doesn't produce a "today" result; it sets the groundwork for long-term, sustained success.

When you are reacting, you let the market, competition, or a spreadsheet dictate your day.

When you are acting, you are the architect, focusing on a robust foundation of high-intent keywords, diversifying lead sources, and creating automated workflows that perform even when the "fire of the day" is burning elsewhere.

Proactive marketing is about setting a direction and having the discipline to ignore the noise. This is where a trusted partner can be the most beneficial. They can help you filter through the distractions on the path to success.

How do you know if your marketing partner is rooted in active strategy? Look for these three signs:

1. A true partner understands how your profit margins or geography impacts a Google Ads bid. They don't just talk about "clicks"; they talk about your bottom line.
2. The best teams can take technical information, think AI-driven proposal generation or algorithmic shifts,

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and translate them into plain English. If a marketing team treats strategy like a black box, they are usually hiding a lack of depth.

3. A reactive team says "yes" to every ask. A strategic partner has the backbone to question tasks that get in the way of strategy and explain why.

Direction of your marketing strategy starts in-house. It's a two-way plan of communication and information to ensure you get the best results for your business or organization.

This means sharing the "Why" instead of just the "What." Instead saying "We need a new whitepaper," say, "We need to generate more service leads in a specific zip code." This empowers your marketing partner to use their expertise to find the best solution, rather than just executing a task.

In an era where AI can automate the "doing," the real value of a marketing partner lies in the thinking. Stop reacting to the market and start defining it.

For those with true grit, it's survive and advance. 



Stop reacting... start defining.



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Tom Field

Karl Mardian with Drain Dome

“I had a problem I couldn’t ignore.”

By Tom Field

Tired of the mess and water damage, Karl Mardian came up with a product to solve it.

Call it entrepreneurialism by necessity.

Many of us are familiar with this problem. Leaves and debris that clog a drain. And when that drain is the one in the stairwell just outside your basement door—you’re asking for serious problems that can result in a flooded basement.

“I went to every local hardware store looking for a fix and found nothing,” says Karl Mardian. “I even knocked on neighbors’ doors; and I saw everything from individuals blocking

their basement doors to duct-taping pieces of screen doors over their drains.”

Mardian says the genesis of his product idea came from struggles with his own home.

“When we moved into our home in Penn Forest [area of Roanoke County], we were excited for a newer house; but we quickly learned that age doesn’t prevent drainage disasters. Our basement got water three times because of the standard, tiny flat drain covers used in most construction.

I envisioned a mushroom-shaped dome with a stem to help keep it in place. I worked with an engineer friend to create a 3-D rendering, and after 14 different modifications and rigorous testing, I knew I had it. The final design provided 8.5 times the surface area of a standard drain, meaning it stays clear even when buried in leaves."

Mardian, who works in the biotech industry and serves as a leader for a local congregation in the Roanoke Valley, says "I needed a new venture business like I needed a hole in the head. But I had a problem I couldn't ignore. My own basement was flooding; and once I found a solution that worked for me, I felt a responsibility to bring it to market so other homeowners could have that same peace of mind."

Called the "DrainDome" Mardian says he met with his friend, Charlie Overstreet of Northwest Hardware, to see if he

thought this was a viable product.

"Charlie's encouragement was the green light I needed. I secured a U.S. patent and found an American manufacturer in Illinois. Today, the product is 100% American-made, and we handle all our regional distribution right here from my warehouse."

DrainDome is available at all 18 Northwest Hardware locations. You can also find it at Amazon and on the direct site, draindome.com. Mardian says he is also in the final stages of expanding an online presence to include the digital storefronts for Walmart, Lowe's, and Home Depot.

DrainDome is currently listed around \$30 (and Mardian says the packaging design will be changed from the photo shown here.)

He'd like "every homeowner to have access to this simple, permanent fix." 

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Tiny Cargo, BIG DREAMS

By Gene Marrano

A company built around the concept of tiny particles extracted from whole milk – yes milk – promises a more targeted way to deliver critical medicines to organs in the body

From a testing bench at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute downtown to its new home in northeast Roanoke City just off Plantation Road - The Tiny Cargo Company features state of the art cleanrooms and filtration systems that separate minute particles from milk - to be supplied by Homestead Creamery in Franklin County – called exosomes, which can then deliver medicines to targeted areas of the body.

Tiny Cargo was founded in 2018 by cell biologist professor Rob Gourdie at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute and Dr. Spencer Marsh, now the Tiny Cargo chief science officer. Tiny Cargo is shooting

for full production later this year after several certifications - believing there are a number of markets for their product, ranging from oral medicines to nutritional supplements and advanced skin care. Simply put, microscopic particles called exosomes that are filtered in a multi-step process from milk can be used to carry medicine to specific areas of the body for more effective treatment.

In late February they cut a ribbon at Tiny Cargo's new home just off Plantation Road in northeast Roanoke, as it gets ready to scale up at a new production facility. Rob Gourdie is the President, and his brother

Alan is the CEO. They're originally from New Zealand, where Alan was director of a commercial fishing company for a decade. He noted how local and state officials have joined forces to help get Tiny Cargo off the ground and on its way to commercializing the product.

"This first of its kind facility in the world owes its existence first and foremost to the people of [Roanoke] City." If it takes a village to raise a child, Alan Gourdie says "many special people," came together to help create Tiny Cargo as it prepares to go market, what he called, "the mobilizing of the community." Now a growing number of stakeholders beyond the city limits and state lines are supplying the funds needed to get Tiny Cargo ready for the markets it will go after.

"We're first to market with this - the world's first industrial milk exosome supplier," notes



Gourdie, who also hailed the Roanoke Regional Partnership, the Roanoke Valley Development Corporation and the Greater Roanoke Valley Development Foundation for their help in finding a permanent home for Tiny Cargo. "We were struggling," to find a building, until that partnership found their new permanent home.

Investments in the biotech sector cooled



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off for a few years says Gourdie, but are now “hot,” again – perfect timing for Tiny Cargo perhaps. “It’s been a very difficult couple of years raising money,” says Alan Gourdie, who calls himself a serial entrepreneur that will still make New Zealand his regular home base. He singled out Heywood Fralin for “the fastest commitment,” to investing in Tiny Cargo.

It took 30 minutes; Heywood’s son William soon followed with his own commitment.

Roanoke Mayor Joe Cobb hailed “the amazing tribe,” that is helping get Tiny Cargo out of the lab and into full production mode. “Today is really a celebration of the first of its kind advanced manufacturing facility right here in the City of Roanoke. This is proof that



Spencer Marsh



Michael Freidlander



Alan Gourdie

global innovation can start here, and that we have the ecosystem to help it grow here.” Cobb also noted that the Innovation Corridor along South Jefferson Street in downtown Roanoke has now branched out to the northeast quadrant of the city. “Roanoke has made a very deliberate commitment to growing our life sciences and biotechnology sector. Companies like Tiny Cargo help anchor those industries here.”

Dr. Michael Friedlander is executive director of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, where Tiny Cargo perfected its methodology: “it’s one thing to know there’s a market for something, and to engineer and make the product, we need that all the time; it’s another thing to have insights into the future that others have not yet grasped – to be able to think about potential uses.” Finding the “right talent” to take those next steps is the real challenge says Friedlander – more than having a brick and mortar

location – even more of a challenge than searching for investors. “Finding talent is a really special thing.”

Tiny Cargo will distill those exosomes from milk delivered from Homestead Creamery in a clean room environment; full production is expected this Fall. “We’re making a market that does not exist [at the moment] says Alan Gourdie, “that requires an enormous amount of effort.” With some of the biggest biotech boosters in the region behind them, Tiny Cargo stands poised to take that next step.

“Roanoke is evolving from trains to brains,” says Spencer Marsh, “and I think this building embodies that. There’s a train track right next door. This building [originally] was a lumber storage facility. As of tonight, it houses the world’s first industrial scale ... cleanroom for the production on milk exosomes. It’s really just a fascinating evolution.” 

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On the air

“On the air” is an interesting work space indeed. But that happens for Program Director Nick Yee (and the two dozen or so staff) in the studio at Radio IQ in Roanoke. The 53-year running WVTF

public broadcast radio station plays around a dozen news and entertainment programs (regional, national, global) and over a half-dozen music programs (from classical to jazz and other genres). WVTF and Radio IQ are affiliates of National Public Radio (NPR).

Photo by Olivia Marone



SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

by **Jade Richardson Bock, Senior Consultant with Building Beloved Communities**

Executive Summary:
A cleaner space = a clearer mind. Are you ready to get rid of the clutter?

Clearing the clutter, clearing the mind: how a spring refresh can boost office productivity

In the depths of winter, my boss and I found ourselves working on site to support a busy organization that was drowning in work AND drowning in clutter. Holiday cards from years past decorated the cubicle walls, finger prints smeared across the cluttered staff refrigerator door, piles of abandoned handouts filled the conference room shelving. We were there to streamline and support operations, but clearly someone also needed to streamline and support the removal of accumulated workplace detritus.

There's something about the first warm breezes of a Virginia spring that stirs us to open windows, clear desks, and reset our routines. Inspired by our recent onsite cautionary tale, I am bringing that spring zing to my work life, where a little cleanup can do wonders for both focus and morale.

Researchers have long connected physical order with clearer decision-making and reduced stress. Start small: recycle outdated papers, archive old project folders, and wipe down those neglected corners of your desk. Unsubscribe from mailing lists that no longer serve you, rename chaotic file folders, and create a consistent system for documents. It's amazing how a few clicks can make your digital landscape feel as light as a spring morning.

Once the clutter's gone, consider how your space supports collaboration and energy flow. Move a chair closer to natural light, add a few green plants, or rearrange seating to encourage interaction. Even small shifts can lift spirits and spark creativity.

This seasonal reset isn't just about aesthetics; it's about psychology. Warm weather and longer days improve our mood and motivation, which we can amplify when our environment matches that feeling. When your office reflects freshness and efficiency, it subtly invites your brain to focus on what matters. The act of sorting and cleaning itself can even restore a sense of control in a busy workweek.

Finally, take spring cleaning beyond the physical. Sweep through your schedule, too. Can that weekly meeting become monthly? Are meetings the right length? Is an hour-long check in appropriate or will 45 minutes suffice? Could that overflowing to-do list use a little pruning? Setting boundaries and trimming excess commitments are as vital as clearing the paper pile.

A good spring refresh reminds us that productivity isn't about doing more — it's about doing what matters in a space that supports us. So, open those windows, enjoy the fresh air, and let the season inspire a cleaner space and a clearer mind. 



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Submitted

Storytelling for nonprofit fundraising

By Rachel Edwards

Holly Kobia's recent Chamber award, recognizing her commitment to community, serves her fundraising mission as well.

"We're not coming here to fail or succeed but to learn," is the approach that Holly Kobia, founder and principal of Kobia Consulting, believes in as she empowers and coaches non-profits in the Roanoke and New River Valleys and beyond.

For small and medium-sized non-profits, fundraising can be overwhelming. Kobia started her business with a mission to change the stigma surrounding philanthropy and fundraising. With executive advising, evaluation, and fundraising strategy development, Kobia helps non-profits maximize their philanthropy potential and overall impact. Teaching is Kobia's favorite aspect of the project.

"They all need something a little different, but it usually comes down to needing the fundamentals," Kobia says. These fundamentals include what a fundraising and engagement

plan looks like, and the significance of stewardship and communication.

Having the ability to tell your story is everything.

"She empowered me to leverage my best talents and skills," Robyn Stuart, Director of Alumni and Constituent Relations at Virginia Tech praises. "Holly's energy and enthusiasm for her work is infectious. She approaches challenges with a true problem-solving mindset, not afraid to take things head-on, but always thinking outside the box to find creative solutions."

Within the work of fundraising, Holly Kobia's emphasis on creativity and storytelling sets her apart. "Your story is the heartbeat of your work," Kobia says. Her passion for storytelling comes from her journalism background, which brought her to the New

“Kobia Consulting exists to redefine how nonprofit leaders approach fundraising — shifting from urgency to ownership, from tactics to strategy, and from survival to sustainable growth.

River Valley from her home in Pittsburgh. After a dozen years as a news anchor and producer with various news organizations such as WDBJ7, the CBS-affiliate operating out of the number 70th Nielsen ranked Roanoke media market, Kobia bloomed as a trusted communicator. Relationship building and asking questions as a journalist translated well into the world of philanthropy and fundraising. Kobia’s next chapter began at Virginia Tech, where she worked to raise \$100 million for the College of Architecture and Urban Studies and later the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.

Following her lasting impact and love for Virginia Tech, Kobia’s ongoing drive to serve her community and experience on a non-profit leadership team inspired her to create a new venture: Kobia Consulting.

“Kobia Consulting exists to redefine how nonprofit leaders approach fundraising — shifting from urgency to ownership, from

tactics to strategy, and from survival to sustainable growth,” Kobia shares her mission statement, highlighting her goals to teach new perspectives of fundraising.

Though her consultancy’s work also lifts up non-profits across state lines, Kobia’s heart belongs to Blacksburg, Virginia. Her consultancy has worked with local non-profits such as WWII Museum of the NRV, Havenwood Equestrian Center, and Imagination Library of the NRV.

In 2025, the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce named Holly Kobia Outstanding New Member of the Year.

“I was nominated because of my commitment, network, and deep roots in the Roanoke valley. I’ve run free workshops through the Chamber to work with local businesses, and I truly believe in the Chamber’s mission,” she shares, citing the reasonableness and thoughtfulness of her work to her success. 





THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

Last month's US Senate passage of the bipartisan ROAD to Housing Act was deemed the largest legislative housing package introduced in decades. But does it have legs?

Congress looks for the right road to follow on how to jump start housing construction

There's no doubt that there is a housing affordability crisis in the country; recently the average age of a first time home buyer in this country crested over 40. (PS a long, long time ago I bought my first home at age 23 – in now uber-pricey Boulder County Colorado of all places, where I worked in a factory – there's no way that happens today.)

The *ROAD to Housing Act*, which at press time had not gone over to the House, where it's likely there will be changes, is billed as legislation that can help build more homes, bring down home purchasing and renting costs, preserve affordable housing in rural areas, help reduce homelessness, and address the rising share of housing owned by large corporate investors.

Like most big bills it's a stew comprised of smaller pieces of legislation – more than 40 housing provisions. The **RESIDE Act**, creates a new pilot program to help communities convert vacant buildings – such as abandoned hotels, warehouses, and strip malls – into affordable homes. The **Housing Supply Expansion Act** updates the federal definition of manufactured housing to allow homes that are not built on a permanent chassis, helping encourage innovation and expand affordable housing options.

The **Homes Are For People, Not Corporations Act**, is legislation that prohibits large institutional investors from purchasing certain single-family homes to promote homeownership opportunities for American families, not corporations. The **Whole-Home Repairs Act** authorizes a pilot program to offer grants and forgivable loans to eligible recipients to address home repair needs and health hazards to stabilize aging housing stock. The **Better Use of Intergovernmental and Local Development (BUILD) Housing Act**, is legislation that cuts red tape around environmental reviews, empowering state, local, and tribal governments to streamline reviews and increase housing development.

These are just a few of the provisions in the *ROAD to Housing Act* omnibus bill and they seem to make sense. But it's also at the local level that governments are going to have to show leadership and sometimes make unpopular decisions about a housing development that some may not want in their backyard so to speak. More housing starts means spreading the property tax burden around more, so those bills don't automatically climb every year.

We've never recovered from the Great Recession of 2008 (and the real estate crash) when it comes to housing starts. If

continued on Page 36

Read the beans

I am NOT going to write my column about coffee just because that's our cover feature this month.

Okay. I am.

It IS a most favorite beverage of mine. Many others, too. Obviously.

And I'll share a few local favorites of mine. I like a LOT of our locals featured in this FRONT; but when someone drives out of his way—just to snag a cup—you know the place is a top lister. Indeed, that relatively new Albemarle House is a car-stopper. Not only is the coffee fantastic—but the venue is so unexpectedly CLEAN for a well-visited house o' coffee. Impeccable service, too. And should you pair your cup o' joe with a pastry or bakery item—win-win, my friend. And then there's RND. I mean, someone tried to REMOVE AN ENTIRE FRIGGIN' BRIDGE, and I'll still reroute every possible way to drop by that Wasena favorite o' mine. The regular size latte is perfecto.

I'm getting carried away with the o-apostrophes, I see. It happens with this topic o' interest.

My journey o' coffee has evolved over the years.

When I was a wee lad—and I mean like eight years o' age, I would skedaddle over to my Aunt Honey's house next door. Unlike parents or other adults, Aunt Honey would always be making coffee—and she always offered me a cup. I don't think many eight years old appreciate coffee; and I can't even say that I did; because I polluted whatever she made in that old percolator with spoonful-after-spoonful-after-spoonful-after-spoonful of sugar. I would stir and sip and just shiggy-shake all over when I got to that last slug o' pure sludge of sugary glob at the bottom. Today, I gag just thinking about the concoction.

Isn't it funny how our tastes change?

As a young adult, my choice was plain-nothing-fancy coffee with a splash of cream.

Then, I graduated to favorite beans and regions. I know Columbian is ubiquitous and no longer considered one of the exotics; it's still my favorite go-to.

Stylistically, I had an affair with Cappuccino, but soon pivoted to the Latte—but no flavorings, just whole milk. Today, I'll still snag a Latte from time to time; sometimes with an extra shot of espresso.

And then—I went to Ireland.

continued on Page 36



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:
*Have your tastes
changed from
years ago?*

Marrano / There's something

from Page 34

the bipartisan *ROAD to Housing Act* is not the be all and end all some might wish it to be, the bill appears to point us in the right direction at least. 

Field / On Tap

from Page 35

Of all expressions, the Americano is a go-to and most popular choice in the Emerald Isle.

So, for the past few years until today, I almost exclusively opt for the Americano. Add my own cream (always).

The point of this illustration o' business import is that our tastes change. We all know that. It's just that as business operators or managers or working professionals, we often forget that fact o' life.

Have you REALLY considered to what degree your customers, employees, and stakeholders have changed?

Who knew you could learn so much from coffee. Am I right? O' course. 

“Who knew you could learn so much from coffee?”

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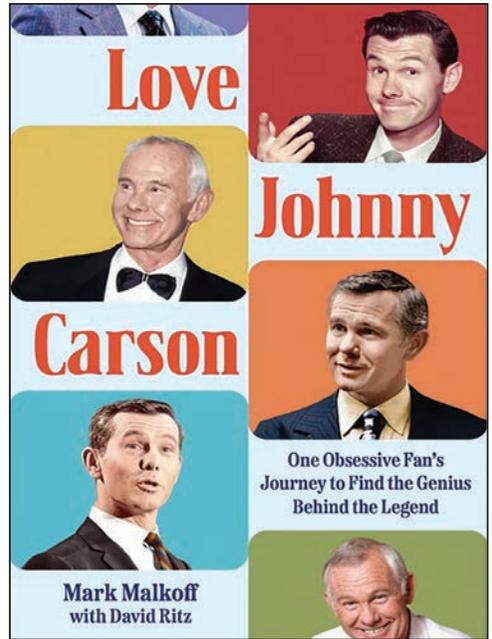
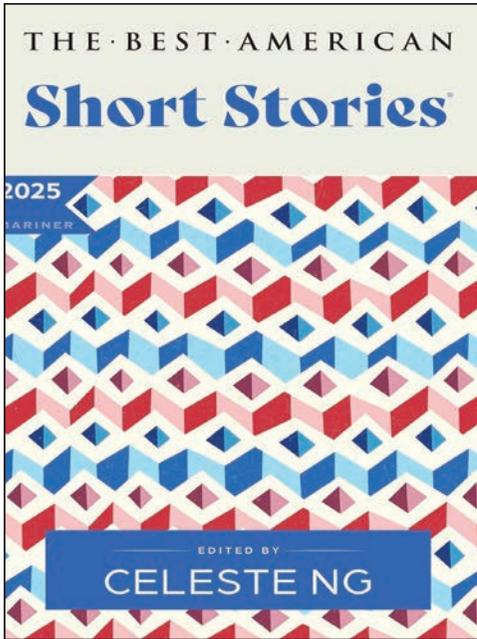
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FRONTReviews >

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

Read me a story, daddy

Short stories rule. I'm not going to deny the great pleasure of settling down with a most engaging novel; but the genre of the short story is often underrated, I fear. *The Best American Short Stories: 2025 edition* (Mariner, 2026) is a most worthy read. The experience is the adult version of 'bedtime stories read to you as a child' if you were so lucky to have that in your formative years. The 2025 compilation (Mariner has done this—and other 'best of' genres, since at least 1978) is too good to read just one (at bedtime or anytime). I enjoyed all but one of the 20 selections. Nineteen of the entries get four or five stars. Justin Taylor's *What About This*; Carrie Moore's *Till It and Keep It*; and Hannah

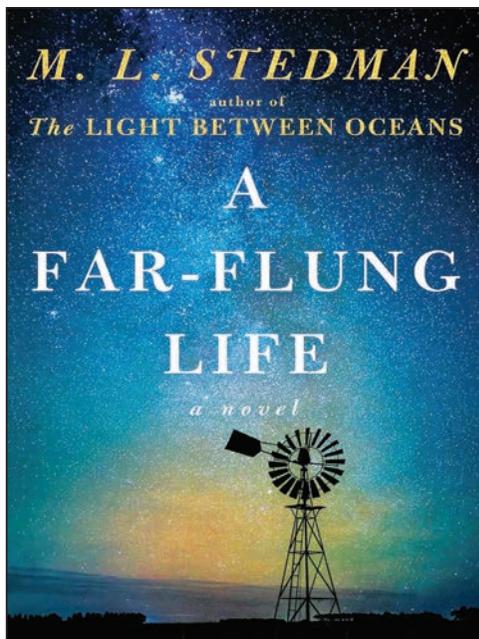
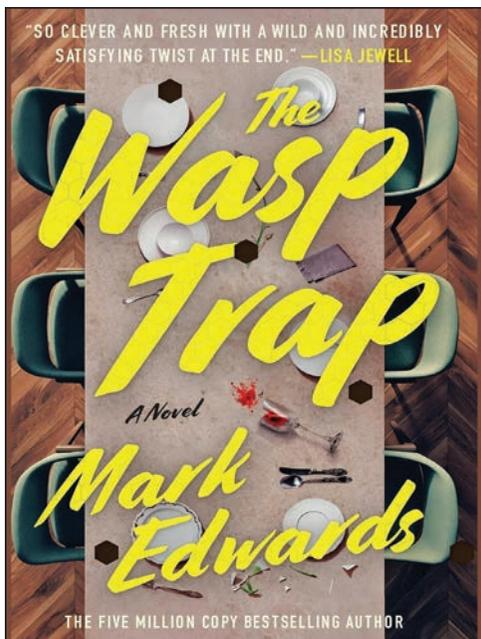
Kingsley-Ma's *Underwater* are among the five stars. Here's a tip: After you read one, THEN go back and read editor Celeste Ng's note about it—and the author's own note about it at the end of the book. (Reading both of those sections independently makes little sense when compared to reading them along with the stories.) This compendium is worth picking up every year. Five stars.

—Tom Field

Here's Johnny!

Comedian, writer and podcaster Mark Malkoff is a huge fan of the late Johnny Carson, who took the reigns at *The Tonight Show* from Jack Paar in 1962 and over the next three decades was the undisputed king of late night TV, hands down. Several other networks challenged the NBC franchise with their own spin on the late night talk show format, but all failed. Malkoff, who for eight years hosted *The Carson Podcast* (and looks much too young to remember most of the Carson era while it was on television,) has now put his passion for Carson into a new book, *Love Johnny Carson: One Obsessive Fan's Journey to Find the Genius Behind the Legend* (Dutton 2025).

Read how Carson helped launch the careers of numerous standup comics, who all hoped



their set was good enough to be welcomed over to the couch for a sit down with Carson, even for a few minutes. Why he stopped talking to Joan Rivers, who had been a favorite guest host (Carson had many), why he banned guests like Orson Welles and William Shatner, or decreed they could only be booked when he was off, and a guest host sat behind the desk. How Ed McMahon came to be on the Tonight Show. But all agreed the Johnny Carson was the consummate professional and the master of his craft, in this biography that's also a love letter to show business and the singular legend of Johnny Carson.

—Gene Marrano

Psychopathic profiling

Lies, betrayals, greed, murder, secrets—all the classic themes are explored in *The Wasp Trap* (Atria; 2025) by Mark Edwards. A psychological thriller, it's the overarching plot I like most: online dating and profile app development during the dot.com mad rush for capital funding. Throw the former young developers as now older developers at a reunion-turn-hostage situation, and you get *The Big Chill* meets *Clue*. The "whodunnit" twist at the end wasn't entirely surprising, but I did find myself thinking it would have been a better twist if it were the character

I had in mind the whole read through. A rather light read, given the dark plot—but it held me just enough to stay to the end for the resolution.

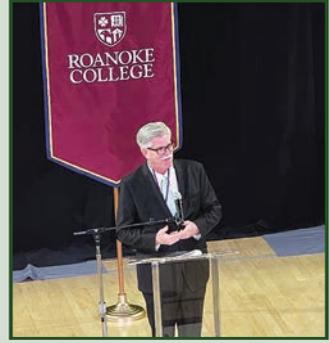
—Tom Field

Serious shepherds' tale

What a wonderfully told family saga. This one—*A Far-Flung Life* (Scribner; 2026) by M.L. Stedman—is set in Western Australia, mid 1950s—1970. Impressive is the richness in storytelling via surprisingly short chapters. A few lessons: 1. Our sheep station land lease operators prefer the moniker "pastoralist" over "farmer" even though sheepherding defines the multigenerational empire; 2. Everybody has secrets, some are devastating if they got out; 3. Some with the darkest secrets are the most admirable, responsible, kindred spirits; 4. Mind your own damn business. *Far-Flung* themes include all the ones of high drama: compliance, responsibility, expectations, protection, passion, sacrifice, hardship, and happiness. Rich.

—Tom Field

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



The need for speed >

The Roanoke Regional Partnership **Get2Know Noke's** "The Future of Talent Summit 2026" was held on March 5 at Roanoke College. The half-day event attracted around 150 people who listened to ideas, advice, and information on the job market prospects for today and tomorrow. Keynote speaker **Paul Hudgins** of Carilion Clinic said, "workforce development is our greatest challenge" and the priority is "speed." Panelists for the employer sector included Cynthia Lawrence (Carilion); Stepanie Byers (GO Virginia); Chase Parker (Steel Dynamics); and Paul Bixel (TMEIC). Educator panelists included Dr. Michelle Seref (Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech); Dr. David Berry (Virginia Western Community College); Dr. Bryan Cobb (Roanoke College); and Carl York (Roanoke County Public Schools).



Highlander money management >

Radford University received a \$2.5 million gift from **Virginia Credit Union** to establish a Financial Success Center, a campus-based hub designed to advance financial well-being for students, faculty, staff, alumni and residents in the New River and Roanoke valleys. Opening during the 2026-27 academic year, the center will provide comprehensive financial education, one-on-one coaching and community programming focused on practical money management skills, including budgeting, saving, student loan management, credit building, investing and preparation for purchasing a first car or a home. Richmond-based Virginia Credit Union president and CEO **Chris Shockley** is a 1992 alumnus of Radford University. The Virginia Credit Union Financial Success Center will be funded at \$250,000 annually for 10 years. (L to R) *Cherry Dale, Senior Vice President of Financial Education, Virginia Credit Union; Chris Shockley, President/CEO, Virginia Credit Union; Donna McCloskey, Dean, Davis College of Business and Economics at Radford University.*



Tom Field



S-ROCO awards >

Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce held its Annual Awards Breakfast on March 18 at the Salem Civic Center. Over 200 attendees celebrated the "best of the year" recognitions of: Salem Golf Simulator (Salem Small Business); Salem Animal Hospital (Roanoke County Small Business); Salem Montessori School (Salem Large Business); Grand Home Furnishings (Roanoke County Large Business); Express Employment Professionals (Franchise); HopeTree Family Services (Nonprofit); Valleydale Apartments (Salem New Business); Align Neurology (Roanoke County New Business); Medeco / ASSA Abloy (Manufacturer); Feeding Southwest Virginia (Service); Brendan Carroll (Salem Police Officer); Natalie Maxey (Roanoke County Police Officer); Andrew St. Clair (Salem Fire/EMS); Caitlin Ward (Roanoke County Fire/EMS); Tullio O'Reilly (Volunteer); and Carey Harveycutter (Citizen of the Year).



Inside dig >

Friendship held its Friendship Park Groundbreaking on a cold and blustery St. Patrick's Day, setting up the celebration inside. (L to R: Joe Hoff, Friendship president; NL Bishop, Friendship board vice chair; Lucian Grove, Friendship board chair; Betty Luber (Friendship resident); and Sarah Stephens, Friendship development officer. Friendship Park is a new outdoor gathering space on North Campus designed to enhance resident wellness, connection, and recreation.



MGCC goes orbital >

Mountain Gateway Community College (MGCC) has announced the addition of Orbital Welding to its curriculum at the Rockbridge Regional Center, a high-tech advancement that positions students at the forefront of the pharmaceutical, semiconductor, and data processing industries. Orbital welding is considered a gold standard for high-purity industries. Unlike traditional manual welding, this automated process rotates an arc 360° around a static workpiece, such as a pipe. This ensures the ultra-clean, "hygienic" welds required for transporting sensitive fluids in food and beverage production, pharmaceutical labs, and the complex piping systems used in microchip manufacturing.

Training on orbital welding equipment will be integrated into the Pipe Welding focus, starting with the Summer 2026 semester at the Rockbridge Regional Center in Buena Vista. This addition ensures that MGCC graduates remain the most competitive candidates for high-paying roles in Virginia's growing tech and manufacturing corridors.



Volvo rolls out new model in Dublin >

Things are looking up at the **Volvo Trucks North America** plant in the New River Valley, as a brand new "regional hauler" is ready to go to market. First unveiled almost a year ago, the Volvo Trucks VNR model is built on a new platform and is designed for short-haul regional companies that still need an 18-wheeler to deliver the goods. Chris Stadler is a product marketing manager for Volvo Trucks: "what we try to address there are the types of customers that are operation in a certain region, staying maybe within a tri-state area." Stadler says Volvo North America envisions the out and back Day Cab will be the top seller. The Volvo VNR features a tighter turning radius and higher fuel efficiency; its available with a less fancy sleeper cab as an option, in case that out and back trip turns into a night on the road. One of the first production orders is earmarked for Clayton Homes, a regional builder of pre-fab houses - and an ideal customer for the Volvo VNR says Stadler. More than 7000 people work at the Volvo Trucks North America plant in Pulaski County. The 2.3-million-square-foot facility produces all Volvo trucks sold in North America and has been building trucks for U.S. and Canadian customers for more than 40 years. Volvo Trucks recently invested \$400 million in major upgrades at the manufacturing plant, including a new 350,000-square-foot cab welding facility.



Mexican eatery has big plans here >

There's a new Mexican fast-casual restaurant in town. Last month, **QDoba** cut a ribbon on their new Colonial Avenue home, across from the Towers Shopping Center. Ron Welshman is director of operations for QDoba franchises in the region - 114 and counting: "five months in the making and we get in open," says Welshman of renovations to a building that had been home to a bank and a restaurant. We've got three more to go up in the area; bring that flavor to Roanoke has been one of our goals for the past two years, and we're here."

Another QDoba should open on West Main Street in Salem within a month; a location at Crossroads shopping center in Roanoke is also planned, as is expansion in the New River Valley. QDoba is based in San Diego and has more than 800 locations; 114 in the regional franchise market. The first 100 people in line at last month's ribbon cutting received free burritos for a year - one per month.



Gene Marrano

Arts Pop! again at Taubman >

This was the 6th Roanoke Arts Pop! last month, where about 30 non-profits in the Roanoke Valley and a few from the NRV, met with the public at the **Taubman Museum of Art**, offering information about their organization and maybe hosting some fun and games at their booth. Katrina King-Singh is with the Taubman Museum: "it's [our] mission to bring people together for learning, enjoyment, discovery. What better way than to be a convener for the arts and culture organizations within our community ... to showcase all of the amazing work all our wonderful [non-profits] are doing in our community and beyond." A number of organizations including Local Colors, the Bear Theatre and Roanoke Ballet Theatre took advantage of 20-minute time slots allotted for performances in the Taubman Museum auditorium as well.



VWCC, Excel Center join forces >

The Excel Center in Roanoke at Melrose Plaza and **Virginia Western Community College** have signed an agreement to create new opportunities for students to pursue career pathways. Kelly Weems, Senior Director of Community Impact, Goodwill Industries of the Valleys, says through the partnership, students at The Excel Center will be able to earn industry credentials or certifications through Virginia Western while completing coursework for a standard high school diploma that opens the door to job opportunities in several fields. "Health care is definitely a large [focus for students], we even have some interested in welding as we get into trades for example."

The Excel Center, operated by Goodwill Industries in a number of the regions it serves, is the first public adult high school in the Commonwealth and part of a national model that has helped more than 15,000 adults graduate high school and earn career certifications. Dr. Elizabeth Wilmer is Vice President of Academic and Workforce Solutions at Virginia Western: "we are here to serve our students whether they are 18 and adult student. We're really excited to serve the adult population and to help them translate from being a high school student to entering the workforce – with credentials. That we'll offer within this program."



Submitted

Taziki's special dish for Lent >

Eating fish for Lent, especially on Friday, is a time-honored tradition for many of a Christian-based faith. To that end **Taziki's Mediterranean Restaurant** on Franklin Road in Roanoke has brought back a grilled fish meal with a side salad for Lent, which ends this year on April 4th - Holy Saturday - the day before Easter. Shayna Pleasants is the General Manager at Taziki's Roanoke location: "we don't do this all the time, we do it once a year that we bring our fish back. It is a hit. Everybody loves our grilled fish. The blackening season that we use for our tilapia is absolutely wonderful. We make our homemade caper dill sauce [also]. It is so good." Pleasants says the community response has been good since Taziki's opens its doors 9 months ago, next to First Watch in the Ivy Market center.

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



Lee

Nigel Lee has been named Officer of the Year by Virginia Tech Police Department. Lee has served the Virginia Tech community since 2016 and brings more than 20 years of prior law enforcement experience. He is a U.S. Army combat veteran who served during the first Gulf War. Lee's leadership was instrumental during VTPD's most recent accreditation cycles.

Dr. **Kenneth Nicely** has been appointed director of human resources for Botetourt County Public Schools. He has 35 years of experience in education and administration, including previously serving as superintendent of



Nicely

Roanoke County Public Schools. Nicely earned a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish with a minor in mathematics from the College of William & Mary, a Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of Virginia, an Educational Specialist degree in educational leadership from Virginia Tech, and a Doctor of Education from Virginia Tech. He is a graduate of Botetourt County Public Schools.

Roanoke County School Board has named several new administrators for the 2026-2027 school year. Dr. **Leanna Rippey**, current assistant principal at Northside High School, will become the new principal at NHS, replacing **Jill Green**, who will become the

assistant superintendent of administration and HR for Roanoke County Public Schools. Dr. **Chris Benson**, current principal at Hidden Valley Middle School will transfer to Northside Middle School to replace Dr. **Paul Lineburg**, who will retire at the end of the current school year. Dr. **Andrea Johnson**, current assistant principal at Salem High School, will become the new principal at Hidden Valley Middle School. **Kristyn Schmidt**, current assistant principal at Oak Grove Elementary, will become the new principal at Burlington Elementary.

Virginia Tech had 12 of its faculty named senior members of the National Academy of Inventors (NAI), joining 230 emerging inventors selected nationwide for the 2026 class. They include: **Christopher Arena** (biomedical engineering); **Romesh Batra** (mechanical engineering); **Luis DaSilva** (cybersecurity); **Christina DiMarino**

(electrical and computer engineering); **Stefan Duma** (technology and applied science); **Tomas Hou** (electrical and computer engineering); **Amanda Morris** (chemistry); **Jennifer Munson** (biomedical); **Aaron Noble** (mining and minerals engineering); **John Rossmesl** (neurology); **Michael Schulz** (chemistry); **Abby Whittington** (materials science and chemical engineering).

FINANCIAL FRONT



Bell

Amanda Bell has been appointed Assistant Vice President and Commercial Office Manager at Ridge View Bank at its Salem branch. A graduate of Salem High School and Virginia Western



Community College, Bell spent nearly a decade with Truist Bank in branch management.

WELLNESS FRONT



Herman

Dr. **Andrew Herman** has been established as the first endowed chair in pediatric medicine by a partnership between Carilion Clinic Foundation and Children's Miracle Network. Herman joined Carilion in June after serving as vice president and chief medical officer for Levine Children's Hospital and Jeff Gordon Children's Center at Atrium Health in Charlotte, NC. In addition to his role at Carilion, he serves as professor and chair of

the Department of Pediatrics for the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine.



Herman

Rosemarie Fernandez, MD has joined Carilion Clinic and Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine as Chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine. She served as the Executive Vice Chair for the Department of Emergency Medicine and the Research Director for the Center for Experiential Learning and

Simulation at the University of Florida. She attended Rutgers University, earned her medical degree from the University of Michigan Medical School, completed her residency in Emergency Medicine at the University of Cincinnati, was a Howard Hughes research fellow at the University of Michigan Medical School, and is an alumnus of Hedwig VA Ameringen Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine.

Connette Gill, MBA, MSN, RN, NE-BC, CPPS, has been hired as the Assistant Chief Nursing Officer at Carilion Medical Center. She comes from Central Carolina Hospital, where she served as the Chief



Gill

Nursing Officer and led strategic initiatives to improve patient outcomes and nurse engagement. Previously, she also served as the Assistant Chief Nursing Officer and Director of the Cardiovascular ICU at Frye Regional Health Center, where she improved care coordination and transfer processes.

Grant Greenberg, MD has been hired as Chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine and Carilion

Have a career announcement?

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

FOCUS ON MOMENTS THAT MATTER.



Bank of Botetourt



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CONTRIBUTORS

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]

Jade Richardson Bock is a Senior Consultant with Building Beloved Communities, a Roanoke based company that supports nonprofit organizations. www.buildingbelovedcommunities.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]

Rachel Nicole Edwards is an award-winning author and soon-to-be Hollins University graduate. Rooted in her home of Botetourt, she has enjoyed writing about her community for the FRONT, Botetourt County Historical Society, and in her own Giollachrist novel series. [morningstarnovels@gmail.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]

Lindsey Hull writes about a little bit of everything. As a poet, she authored "the mountains rumble" in 2024. Reach her at lindsey.smith.hull@gmail.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. [nicholasvaassen@gmail.com]



It's one thing to know there's a market... it's another thing to have insights into the future. — Page 27



Greenberg

Clinic and the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine. He comes from Lehigh Valley Health Network, where he served since 2016 as the Leonard Parker Pool Endowed Chair of Family Medicine. He also held the role of Chief Medical Executive for the Primary Care Service Line. Earlier in his career, Dr. Greenberg spent 16 years at the University of Michigan, where he served as Medical Director of the Chelsea Health Center and earned a master's degree in health systems administration. Greenberg also has a master's degree in Ecology and Environmental Biology at Indiana University.



Samady

Habib Samady, MD has joined Carilion Clinic as Senior Vice President and Carilion's inaugural Director of the Cardiovascular Institute. Samady most recently served as the President of the Cardiovascular Service Line and co-founder and President of the Georgia Heart Institute

at Northeast Georgia Health System. Previously, he also served as a Professor of Medicine, Director of Interventional Cardiology, and Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory at Emory University School of Medicine. Dr. Samady has over two decades of experience and is an internationally recognized cardiologist with over 290 published research manuscripts. He is also the co-founder of Covanos, an Emory University-based computational coronary physiology start-up.

DEVELOPMENT FRONT



Caldwell

Jennifer Caldwell has been promoted to Chief Estimator by Building Specialists, Inc., (BSI) Construction & Design. She has 30 years of experience in the construction industry and has been with the company for a combination of seven years. She graduated from Clemson University with a BS in Construction Science and Management, plus a Minor in Business Administration. Caldwell's responsibilities include guiding the estimating team in estimating both residential and commercial projects as well as working closely with Owners

and Architects on establishing budgets and schedules.



Whicker

Chris Whicker has been promoted to Project Manager/Estimator by Building Specialists Inc., (BSI) Construction & Design. He will work with the project management team to lead the company in its 51st year in business. Whicker has been with BSI for 10 years and was initially hired as a superintendent. In his dual role he works closely with clients, subcontractors and suppliers, managing and estimating both residential and commercial projects. He is a graduate of UNC Greensboro and has worked in carpentry since he was 16 years old and has been in the industry for 30 years.

TECH/INDUSTRY FRONT



Bobbert

Chip Bobbert has been appointed director of innovation at the Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance.

His focus will be working across the RBIA portfolio of organizations and programs to lead regional innovation strategy, founder and investor engagement, and cross-sector partnerships that advance technology and life science commercialization in the region. Bobbert holds a graduate degree in Instructional Technology and is a United States Marine Corps veteran.

SERVICE FRONT

Melinda Rector has been appointed as executive director of the Regional Center for Animal Care and Protection (RCACP). She began working with RCACP in 2017 as director of operations. Prior to that position, she worked for Roanoke County for 35 years and also served as business coordinator for Roanoke County's General Services Department. RCACP serves the City of Roanoke, Counties of Roanoke and Botetourt, and the Town of Vinton. The center receives between 4,000 and 6,000 animals annually, and operates a foster program, dog training, pet food pantry, and partners with adoption and rescue organizations.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

Advertising & PR awards

AAF Roanoke (ad club) held its annual Western Virginia “ADDYs” Advertising Awards on Feb. 26. Among the winners were: Gary Gilmore (Silver Medal); Meaghan Dee (Howard Packett Award for Creative Excellence); Virginia Tech’s Nikki Giovanni Immersive Experience (Best in Show; Gold; Mosaic); Carilion Clinic (Best of Digital); Branch (Best of Print); VT Dining, ACK Studios, and Carrie Cousins (Judge’s Choice); Donna Wertalik (Advertising Person of the Year). The ADDYs also include student awards.

PRSA Blue Ridge (public relations) held its annual Summit Awards on Feb. 12. Among its winners were: Greg Moore, WSLS News 10 (Adam & Alison Award for Media Excellence); Virginia Tech College of Liberal Arts & Human Services (Tactics); 5 Points Creative (Campaigns); LeadPoint Digital (Paid Media); Roanoke County Schools (Events); Amanda Ennis (Rising Star); Danville VA Office of Economic Development (multiple awards).

Pulaski’s first pint pour

The Great Wilderness Brewing Company has opened its new brewery in the Town of Pulaski at 91 First St, NE. It’s the first brewery in the town.

Wine awards

The **2026 Virginia Governor’s Cup** medalists from our region (out of 113 wineries

statewide) included Gold medals by Ankida Ridge; Ecco Adesso; Hamlet; Rockbridge; Silver medals by Beliveau; Chateau Morrisette; Great Valley; Lakehill; and Bronze medals by Beliveau and Chateau Morrisette. The top twelve scoring wines will earn a place in the Governor’s Cup Case, whereupon one will be selected for the top award on March 12.

Wine back on the mountain

Bent Mountain Winery—a new winery repurposed from longtime AmRhein’s winery that closed a few years ago—has begun placing its wine in select merchants in the Roanoke area, including Wine Gourmet, The Jolly Grape, and Treehouse Tavern on Bent Mountain. A tasting room and event venue is possible soon.

Kingdom ending

Crowning Touch—a senior moving, auction, consignment, and realty business in Roanoke—announced its closing at the first of March. The 30-year business is conducting a liquidation sale for an undetermined time. Owner Linda Balentine says the entire business is closing and not being sold.

Seafood by lamplight

Three Brothers Seafood of VA has opened at 5524 Williamson Road, Unit 10 at the Lamplighter Plaza in Roanoke. The market (that also has a location in Greensboro, NC) offers live crabs,

oysters, and other shellfish, as well as a variety of wild caught, farm-raised and live, whole, and cut fish. Fish processing is available by staff on premises.

Creative foodie space in B’burg

Draper Provisions & The Library Café is a new development proposed by the current owner/operators of Blacksburg Wine Lab, who are seeking investments for repurposing a building to a “combination upscale neighborhood café, daily shopping marketplace, and provisions and kitchen retail store. Details on the site (409 Draper Rd, Blacksburg), concept, and investment opportunities are at draperprovisions.com

More rocks

Rockydale Quarries (and subsidiary B&S Contracting)—which was founded in 1932, headquartered in Roanoke and employs 170—is being acquired by Nashville-based construction and roadbuilding company Rogers Group, Inc. for an undisclosed price. The acquisition and expansion covers 13 states.

Southside goes to space

Italian rocket manufacturer **Avio** is investing over \$500 million and more than 1,500 jobs in Pittsylvania County at the Southern Virginia Multimodal Park in the Town of Hurt. Avio will manufacture solid rocket motors for defense, propulsion, missile

systems and the commercial space sectors. The facility is expected to be operational by 2028.

Trailer on, Giles

Interstate Group—a Idaho-based manufacturer of industrial cargo, dump, and utility trailers—is expanding its facility in Giles County. The near \$9 million investment should create around 50 new jobs.

Hospice halting

Bedford Hospice House is closing mid-April. The Centra-owned facility served around 275 patients since 2017. The nonprofit that manages fundraising will continue to support the organization if another provider takes over.

ROA roa-ring

Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport (ROA) reported a record-breaking year with nearly 827,000 passengers served in 2025. Virginia Department of Aviation says that translates to a total economic impact of \$618 million.

From flowers to flavor

Dorothy & Frank’s restaurant and bar has opened in downtown Roanoke at the former long-vacant Fallon Florist shop on Church Avenue.

Quiet, car jobs

Fukoku Korea—an automotive parts manufacturer (sound-dampening and heat management products)—

is opening a plant in an existing building at the Patriot Centre Industrial Park in Henry County, a near-\$19 million investment that should create around 60 new jobs. The facility could begin operations as early as January 2027.

local housing / community centers; Agency on Aging; Floyd County Sheriff's Dept; Live Work Eat Grow, Montgomery County Christmas Store; Habitat for Humanity Restore, Replenish Fest; and New Freedom Farm, among others.

Have an announcement about your business?

Send announcements to news@vbFRONT.com. A contact / source must be provided. Inclusions are not guaranteed and all submissions are subject to editing.

Cleaned up

The local franchisee of **360clean** (Tariq and Mackenzie Shaw) was recognized as the 360clean Franchisee of the Year at the national meeting in Atlanta.

Citizens for community

Citizens Telephone Cooperative (Citizens) in Floyd awarded \$1,700 in 2025 to Christmas for Children, Senior Graduates, Medical Charities of Floyd, Santa for Seniors, and Floyd Antique Tractor Fun Run as part of its Associated Citizens Employees (ACE) nonprofit community service group. Citizens employees also supported FISH partners (deck building, bush trimming); local nursing homes;

Tech's contribution remains strong

Virginia Tech released its Economic and Community Impacts of Virginia Tech 2026 report for year 2025, covering the state, Blacksburg and New River Valley, Roanoke Region, and Northern Virginia. The result: \$4.7 billion for the Commonwealth and \$3.4 billion for NRV. That data translates to a \$10 return for every \$1 invested in VT.

Creeper is a cash cow

A recent study out of Virginia Tech finds that **The Virginia Creeper Trail** has quietly boosted southwestern Virginia's economy at a scale that few outside of the counties it runs through

may realize. Dylan Andrews, an economic development specialist with Virginia Tech, says the \$61-million-dollars in economic output that the trail generates makes sense, when you consider the number of travelers the trail brings in each year: "in a typical year it would bring in well over 100,000 to 150,000 visitors from outside the region; that doesn't count the people in-region that use [the Creeper Trail] daily." But when Hurricane Helene ripped through the area in 2024, it dealt a severe blow to the local economy situated around the trail. Some businesses lost as much as half their yearly income. Andrews describes how one such shop was affected: "we were down there on a Friday about three weeks after the storm had hit.

On a typical Friday, this time of year they would have 220 riders [renting bikes]. That day they had 15 signed up." Andrews notes that rebuilding efforts continue, and the trail's conservators recently received a Congressional allocation to help repair the Whitetop to Damascus stretch the trail. The Damascus to Abingdon Virginia Creeper trail segment remains open.

Local non-profits housing projects boost

61 projects to help Virginians find housing will receive \$14 million in Virginia Housing Trust Fund Homeless Reduction Grants. The investments are designed to advance efforts to reduce homelessness in Virginia by supporting 19

Notable Transactions

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- 927,500-sq-ft industrial property at 100 Morgan Olson Way in Cane Creek Park in Danville sold
- **Nothing Bundt Cakes** leased 2,056-sq-ft of retail space at Spartan Square on W Main St, Salem
- **Appliance Studio Inc** renewed its lease of 2,216-sq-ft of industrial space at Varsity Park Storage on Franklin Rd, Roanoke
- **Stericycle** renewed its 6,702-sq-ft of industrial space at 1328 Roanoke Blvd in Salem
- **Academy Sports+Outdoors** applied for permits for former Pete's Deli and Ashley Furniture retail spaces at Towne Square in Roanoke
- **Dutch Bros Coffee** applied for special exception use of property on Hershberger Rd, NW Roanoke (near Home Depot)

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

permanent supportive housing projects, 29 rapid rehousing projects, and 13 innovation projects for underserved populations. Locally some of that funding went to the Council of Community Services in Roanoke, \$203,610.00 for Rapid Re-housing 2026; and the New River Community Action \$132,850.00 for Housing Trust Fund Rapid Re-housing FY 2026.

More broadband for Giles

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded **Pembroke Telephone Cooperative** a \$700,000 grant for an Outlying Areas Broadband project. The funding will support installation of a fiber network that serves broadband to 74 homes and 15 businesses and community anchor institutions. In partnership with the Giles County Board of Supervisors, Pembroke Telephone Cooperative has developed a plan to achieve universal coverage of high-speed fiber-to-the-home infrastructure. This project will support 110,880 feet of fiber network construction.

Credit union recognized

Member-owned Virginia Credit Union (VACU), with 1,100 employees and 490,000 members,

has received the 2026 Gallup Exceptional Workplace Award (GEWA) for the fourth consecutive year, while also earning recognition from Gallup for its strengths-based culture for the first time. "Our people don't just work here — they invest their talents, energy, and passion into serving our members, their teammates, and our communities every single day," said Chris Shockley, President/CEO of VACU.

Seed money for growing jobs

Friends of Southwest Virginia has received a \$127,000 grant from the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission to support a regional initiative focused on creative economy development and outdoor recreation business recruitment. This funding provides critical matching support that allows Friends of Southwest Virginia to leverage nearly \$1.1 million in federal investment from the Appalachian Regional Commission. The dual investments will support several major initiatives designed to guide long-term economic growth across the region, including comprehensive asset inventory and economic impact study of Southwest Virginia's creative economy, which will measure the full contribution of outdoor

recreation, the arts, music, cultural heritage, and related creative industries to the regional economy. The project also supports a 10-year Creative Economy Master Plan and the development of a regional Creative Economy Dashboard and the groundwork for a regional Outdoor Recreation Manufacturing Initiative.

Two VT research grants

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has awarded **Virginia Tech** two grants totaling \$844,824, to support biological chemistry research — specifically complex biological research projects.

SML development

Franklin County has approved 103 new homes near Smith Mountain Lake in the second phase of Westlake development. Alexander Boone is the president of **ABoone Development** in Roanoke, which will build out the infrastructure before selling the lots to Ryan Homes. Boone says the publicly traded builder with projects in multiple states has greater purchasing that helps drive down construction costs - making the finished home more affordable. "Historically we've built them all out [ourselves] but recently

I've been selling to Ryan Homes. They sold 25,000 houses last year, and they can buy materials for forty percent less than we can."

Improvements coming at McAfee Knob

\$6.3 million in federal funding is headed to **Roanoke County** and will be used to make improvements to the parking lot at the McAfee Knob trailhead, including upgraded restrooms, a permanent shuttle stop shelter and enhanced connections to the pedestrian bridge over Route 311 that opened last year. Paula Benke is a transit planner for Roanoke County: "hopefully we get to where we have 104 parking spaces that are actually paved and striped, and its more safe for people to be able to fund a spot — and not have all of the congestion we've had in the past." (Not to mention restrooms that would replace the porta potties. There's been no word yet on when work to enact these improvements would start, says Benke.) McAfee Knob is one of the most frequently visited spots along the Appalachian Trail locally.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

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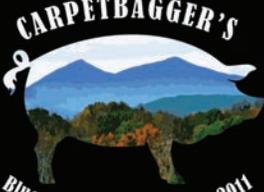
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They don't like to drive at night and dodge deer. — Page 19

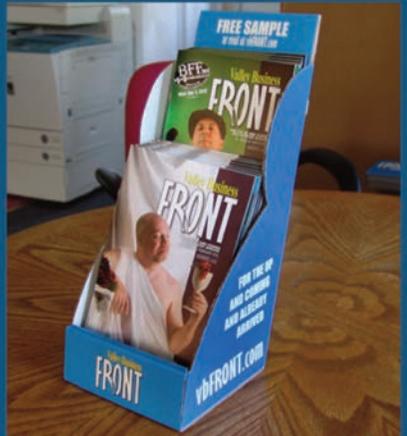
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