

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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FEBRUARY 2026

Buena Vista's Virginia
Innovation Accelerator

Northpoint Insurance
Advisors

Blue Ridge Literacy

Jefferson Center

Taqueria El Paso

Downtown Roanoke

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a market report

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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

What a great spot to place a new and exciting resource for entrepreneurs: Buena Vista! All us locals know you pronounce it “b’yoo-na” and not “bway-na” (sorry, California); but the idea of “good view” still applies. And what a vision it is for startups, niche businesses, boutique operators, techie types, and any energetic soul who wants to build our next local product or service. Thanks to The Advancement Foundation for another planting in its portfolio of resources for our growing entrepreneurial microcosm.

And speaking of visionaries, the balance of your FRONT this month includes reports on Downtown Roanoke, Inc., The Jefferson Center, Blue Ridge Literacy, Northpoint Insurance Advisors, and even a Taqueria El Paso food truck.

Good views we have here in our FRONT region, indeed.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

“

Longer-lasting success has not happened by accident. — Page 27



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“Immigration enforcement is now a major issue. — Page 18

KNOW THE SIGNS!

SAVE A LIFE



SIGNS OF A HEART ATTACK



Pressure or squeezing in the center of the chest



Shooting pain through shoulders, arms, neck or jaw



Shortness of breath



Heartburn, nausea or indigestion-like pain



Dizziness, fainting or sudden abnormal sweating

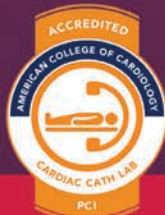
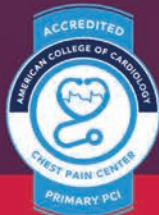


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FEBRUARY



Aila Boyd



Bonnie Chavez



Tom Field



Olivia Marone



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.

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“Roanoke's city market boasts the title of 'oldest continuously operating open-air market' in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

— Page 27

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 56.

“There is a desire to have work that is more than a transaction. — Page 16





From cigarette paper plant to innovation hub

By Aila Boyd

What was once one of Buena Vista's largest manufacturing employers is being repositioned as a multi-use center for entrepreneurship, small-scale manufacturing and community activity, as The Advancement Foundation completes Phase 2 of redevelopment at the Virginia Innovation Accelerator.

The 40,000-square-foot facility, formerly home to the Mundet-Hermetite cigarette paper plant, sat vacant for nearly eight years after manufacturing left the city. Over the past three years, the Roanoke-based nonprofit has raised \$2.5 million to reactivate the building and surrounding property,

transforming it into a diversified economic development site intended to serve both business and community needs.

Phase 2 marks a significant expansion of the accelerator's footprint, adding retail, food production and public gathering spaces to



Before

the business incubation and light manufacturing uses introduced in Phase 1.

Annette Patterson, president and founder of The Advancement Foundation, said the redevelopment was intentionally designed to be sustainable long after grant funding ends. "Grants are great, but they go away and you have to be able to sustain these projects for the community," she said.

The Advancement Foundation purchased the building in late 2021 and moved quickly to open Phase 1, which focused on office space, classrooms, conference rooms and manufacturing bays for early-stage companies. The accelerator initially targeted innovators in areas such as agricultural technology and energy, while also accommodating nonprofits and service organizations.

Phase 2 broadens that focus with the addition of Junction 245 Marketplace, a vendor-based retail space now home to about 20 to 21 small makers. Vendors sell

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VIA CONFIGURATION

- business acceleration services
- office spaces
- value added product development
- small scale manufacturing space
- outdoor recreation and tourism incubator
- meeting and event spaces
- Junction 245 Marketplace (retail, food, beverage)
- VIA [commercial] Kitchen
- apartments (Phase III)

products ranging from candles and wood goods to specialty food items, offering low-risk retail exposure for businesses not yet ready for a traditional storefront.

The marketplace occupies a former loading bay that once served the plant's shipping operations. Today, it functions as a walkable, street-facing space connected to downtown Buena Vista.

Nickie Hawkins, director of the Virginia Innovation Accelerator, said the marketplace model was created to lower barriers for small businesses while building foot traffic



organically. She said some vendors are still in the early stages of finding an audience as additional components of the project come online.

Also included in Phase 2 is a café and taproom, currently awaiting final health department and Virginia ABC approvals. The space is intended to feature local and regional beer and wine, along with café-style food.

Adjacent to it is a fully equipped commercial kitchen designed for caterers, food trucks and packaged food producers seeking to scale operations.

Hawkins said demand for kitchen access has exceeded

“ ”

It reflects the collective vision, creativity, and determination of an entire community working together.

expectations. “I’ve been shocked that there’s such a demand and people are willing to come from as far away as Pennsylvania,” she said.

Because the accelerator is operated by a nonprofit, Hawkins said pricing for the kitchen is designed to help businesses grow rather than maximize revenue.

Renovations during Phase 2 also included ADA-accessible entrances at both ends of the building, expanded restroom facilities and upgrades to support higher public use. A large industrial-style community room — once a paint room for the manufacturer — has been repurposed for conferences, weddings and public events.

Outdoor recreation space along the Maury River is planned for spring, tying the facility into the Riverwalk corridor and expanding its role as a community destination.

The \$2.5 million investment reflects a mix of federal, state and partner support. Funding sources include the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development’s Industrial Revitalization Fund, USDA support and equipment funding through the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.



Additional matching value came through donated equipment from the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research in Danville, which provided surplus assets aligned with the accelerator's industry focus.

Patterson described the project as an example of collective investment. "This project has truly been a stone soup moment," she said. "It reflects the collective vision, creativity and determination of an entire community working together."

Higher education institutions have also played a central role. Virginia Military Institute, Washington and Lee University, Southern Virginia University and Mountain Gateway Community College — all within five miles of the site — have contributed interns, volunteer labor and programming support.


The accelerator currently houses about 30 businesses across its office, warehouse and manufacturing spaces, with several areas nearing capacity. Marketplace vendor space remains available, and Hawkins said foot traffic is expected to increase once the café, taproom and kitchen are fully operational.

Some businesses located at the accelerator previously participated in The Advancement Foundation's Gauntlet program, now entering its 12th year. Others were drawn by the availability of flexible space and access to business development resources.

Looking ahead, Phase 3 plans include construction of 16 apartments on the property, addressing housing shortages in Buena Vista, Lexington and Rockbridge County while providing an additional revenue stream to support long-term operations.

The Advancement Foundation is also launching The QUEST, a new competition and support program aimed at higher-growth and technology-driven startups. Patterson said the program is intended to help early-stage innovators overcome initial barriers and prepare for participation in larger regional initiatives.

Patterson said aging industrial buildings are common in rural communities and often represent both a challenge and an opportunity. Patterson believes the project has become a dynamic model for what can be done in rural communities.

Hawkins said community response has been particularly strong among former plant employees who have visited the site during redevelopment. "They were just so happy that something was happening here." 

VIA IS FOR

- startups
- founders
- investors
- industry leaders

“
The project has become a dynamic model for what can be done in rural communities.”



Submitted photos

Billie, Scottie, and Eli Wyatt

Legacy Meets Leadership

Northpoint Insurance Advisors: family business, literally.

In an age when many small businesses struggle to attract and retain young talent, Northpoint Insurance Advisors is witnessing something remarkable: the next generation isn't just stepping in — they're stepping up, choosing to build their futures alongside their parents in a business rooted deeply in Southwest Virginia.

The agency — family-owned, locally operated, and serving the region for more than 45 years — is witnessing two parent-child teams shaping its future: President Scottie Wyatt, his wife Billie, and their son Eli, alongside Marketing and Operations Manager, Tullio O'Reilly and his daughter Ann Marie.

These aren't symbolic roles. They are hands-on, shoulder-to-shoulder partnerships that reflect a generational handoff built on shared purpose, work ethic, and commitment to community.

And now, the region is taking notice.

Northpoint was recently named the 2025 Business of the Year by the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce. In that same evening, Tullio O'Reilly received the Chamber's 2025 Community Service Individual of the Year award — a recognition of the leadership Tullio has brought to volunteerism throughout the New River Valley.

But behind the accolades is a deeper story — one about legacy, family, and the power of local businesses to carry their communities forward.

A Business Rooted in Southwest Virginia

Northpoint's story began in 1979, when the agency first opened its doors in Blacksburg. Decades later, when Scottie Wyatt purchased the business from founder Dan Carper, he assumed leadership not just for an agency but a philosophy: the belief that insurance is, at its core, a relationship business.

Today, that belief guides everything Northpoint does. With offices in Blacksburg, Salem, Dublin, and Floyd, the agency serves thousands of families and businesses across the New River and Roanoke Valleys.

"Since I grew up in the New River Valley, I'm proud to be a local business with deep local roots," Scottie said. "But what truly sets us apart is the people — the clients we serve and the employees who have trusted us to train them and build their insurance careers

here. That's where our strength comes from."

Generations Working Side by Side

While Northpoint has always been a family-driven business, the recent rise of two parent-child teams inside the company marks a unique moment.

Scottie and Eli Wyatt

Scottie Wyatt has been president of Northpoint since 2017, but watching his son Eli join the agency has brought a new dimension of joy and significance to his work. "It's special to see your child step into something you've poured so much into," Scottie said. "Eli works hard, cares deeply about our customers, and wants to build something meaningful. As a parent, that's incredibly rewarding to witness."

Eli, part of the rising generation of professionals building careers in Southwest Virginia, has brought fresh energy — and a deep appreciation for the community that shaped him. Customers consistently cite his responsiveness and enthusiasm within their



Tullio and Ann Marie O'Reilly



countless reviews of his service. “Working alongside my dad has been incredible. I get to learn from his experience every day while also bringing my own perspective to the table. It’s a rare opportunity to grow professionally while sharing something so meaningful with family,” said Eli.

Tullio and Ann Marie O’Reilly

Similarly, Tullio O’Reilly — known throughout the region for his community leadership and service — now works alongside his daughter, Ann Marie. “Being able to mentor Ann Marie while also collaborating with her reminds me why family and community are at the heart of everything we do at Northpoint,” said Tullio.

Where Tullio has built a reputation as a champion for service and outreach, Ann Marie is following in his footsteps with her professionalism and a heart for people. Ann Marie said, “Being part of this agency alongside my dad allows me to see firsthand what dedication to community and clients really looks like — and it motivates me to do my best every day.”

For a business built on trust and relationships, these generational pairings create powerful continuity. They show customers that Northpoint isn’t a corporate office in another state — it’s a team of neighbors, families, and long-term

community members who intend to serve for decades to come.

Why the Next Generation Matters

Across the country, small and mid-sized businesses are seeing a resurgence of younger professionals choosing mission-driven, locally rooted careers. For many within the Gen-Z and Millennial demographics there is a desire to have work that is more than a transaction. They also do not want to wait decades in order to be able to make a measured impact. Northpoint is a great backdrop to highlight these emerging trends. The work of the agency isn’t transactional — it’s advisory, relational, and deeply connected to community well-being. Additionally, both Eli and Ann Marie are able to work directly with leadership, shaping decisions and strengthening Northpoint’s future.

This intergenerational teamwork also strengthens client relationships. Customers often comment that Northpoint feels both seasoned but energetic—a balance of experience and innovation.

Award-Winning Community Commitment

At the heart of Northpoint’s recent accolades is a simple truth: this team loves its community.

The agency participates in more than 15 local initiatives annually, partnering with organizations such as Valley Women's Clinic, the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce, Young Life NRV, Feeding Southwest Virginia, the NRV Home Builders Association, and the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce.

Under Tullio's leadership, Northpoint employees collectively contribute hundreds of volunteer hours and provide significant financial support across the region.


So when Northpoint received Business of the Year and Tullio was named Community Service Individual of the Year, the awards weren't just trophies — they were affirmations of

values lived out, according to the Chamber.

Looking Ahead: A Future Built on Legacy and Local Roots

As Northpoint continues to expand its presence across Southwest Virginia, one thing remains clear: its foundation is strong because it is built on people — families, customers, and a rising generation who values purpose, service, and belonging.

The next chapter of Northpoint isn't about growth for growth's sake. It's about continuity. Legacy. The passing of torches and the building of futures — together.

And in that way, Northpoint reminds us that sometimes, the most powerful business stories aren't about disruption — but about coming home. 

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Blue Ridge Literacy learners struggle to keep current with shifting immigration status

By Gene Marrano

A Roanoke non-profit more than three decades old, whose mission is teaching English to refugees and immigrants looking to work and raise a family here, is doing its best to help keep “learners,” aware of where they stand.

A recent survey shows 60% of companies say immigration enforcement is now a major issue - causing construction workers to leave or avoid job sites. Industry leaders warn the shortage could limit future development. Locally, Building Specialists reports a Craig County project is three months behind schedule, in large part due to a labor shortage made worse by worker fears, whether they are undocumented or not sure of their temporary status any more.

An estimated 13 percent of Colorado's construction workforce reports construction owners.com is composed of immigrants without legal status, according to the American Immigration Council. These workers are often responsible for labor-intensive, lower-paying jobs at construction sites, such as drywall installation and bricklaying.

The travel and tourism sector supports around 15 million U.S. jobs, with hotels directly employing about 8 million, with around one-third of those roles held by immigrants (HVS Executive search). Immigration sweeps have also impacted

the food processing industry, causing labor shortages and disrupting the supply chain, which can then lead to higher demand and prices for more limited inventory.

2025 was a challenging year as well for Blue Ridge Literacy, the Roanoke based non-profit that works with refugees and immigrants on their English proficiency, using volunteer tutors for a multiyear program that also helps prepare those hoping to become citizens at some point. BRL executive director Dr. Ahoo Salem, an Iranian immigrant herself and now a U.S. citizen, says new travel restrictions from many countries, a narrowing or loss of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and revisions to the naturalization process has made the climate more challenging for BRL.

“Since last January we have been tracking what’s going on with our learners in terms of enrollment, people’s comfort in coming to in person classes, or if they want to shift to other types of [virtual] services.” Salem says BRL learners are motivated to learn English in order to further assimilate into

the Roanoke community – and make them candidates for better jobs where knowing the language would be a plus.

Temporary visa (TPS) holders had been coming to BRL in large numbers from Haiti to learn better English, but that number has dropped over the past year with further restrictions. Salem gets messages that someone can't come to one of the five levels of classes Blue Ridge Literacy offers in sequence, because they have to talk to someone about their TPS status, to see if their legal pathway to staying in the United States is still clear – “or do they have to pack up and leave. These are realities that our learners are working with.”

Afghan learners, as BRL likes to call their students, have seen their TPS status terminated, and new restrictions on who can come here from Afghanistan has left reunifications in limbo for some. In many cases, “it’s becoming more and more impossible for them to continue having their new life here, with the rest of their family members.”


Long term planning for BRL learners has become more difficult; Salem says some tell her, “well today, I’m completely eligible to be here, yesterday I was not ... tomorrow we’ll see.” She links that to finding a job or even accepting a promotion. Some “have had to put off really good opportunities,” with the shifting TPS landscape over the past year-plus leading to uncertainty.

Salem says refugees and immigrants need to be more aware than ever of their legal rights – and perhaps work harder on



Ahoo Salem

mastering a satisfactory level of English. Immigrants are always dealing with paperwork, with rules and regulations; “the reality is coming to the U.S. is not easy. It’s not an easy country to come to. You have to be aware of how you are following guidelines.” Of her own experience with emigrating, with her parents as well, “I know how the system works.” She says there are resources in the Roanoke area for those who know where to find them, to enable them to keep track of their legal status, which she says, “can be scary – but it’s helpful”

Now Ahoo Salem implores others who come here, hoping to stay with their families, to be gainfully employed in a number of industries always needing help, and become part of the U.S. fabric: they need to know how the system works, and how it can change quickly in the current political climate. 



Fall 2025 graduation



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

**By Carrie Cousins,
LeadPoint Digital**

Executive Summary:

Anyone who knows me has probably seen me get passionate about digital marketing as a tool to help build and grow your business. There are so many different ways to think about reaching core audiences in the right place and time to create a conversion.

14 things to love about digital marketing


In this month of all things love, here's my little love letter to digital marketing (in list format, of course).

1. You can see what works, and what doesn't. In the digital landscape, a strong digital marketing team sets measurable goals so you can see exactly what your efforts are doing well, and even those things that are underperforming.
2. Digital marketing comes with built in accountability. Numbers don't lie. If you started a new campaign and are seeing no new traffic, no new leads, or no new sales, it's a sign to look at that tactic.
3. You can start small and scale as you see results. Looking to sell more widgets? Start with a modest digital advertising spending; if revenue outpaces spending, consider increasing budget until you hit the point of diminishing returns.
4. Digital marketing is transparent across teams. With a good dashboard, sales, marketing, and leadership can all see the same picture of marketing efforts. This makes investment to performance to goals clearer and makes decisions a little bit easier.
5. There's no waiting to see if things are working. Digital marketing works in real-time, so you can see your wins in real time, too.
6. Optimization never stops. Yes, if a strategy is working you should let it keep working, but you can continue to optimize to get better results.
7. Digital marketing aligns with business goals. Because it is measurable, you can connect leads, sales, customer value, and cost per acquisition directly to campaigns.
8. Only the best, most relevant digital marketing tactics survive. Online visitors confirm your approach with clicks and engagement. If you aren't getting those, it is a sign to rethink the strategy.

Digital Marketing Is Easy With A Good Partner.

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9. Digital marketing is fluid and dynamic. You can change it up at any time – creative, copy, audience, goals. This is the beauty of online marketing.
10. There's less overall risk with marketing when you can drive value with digital. Think of it as a growth engine. So many people start their journey online for your product or service before you even know they are there; being out front with digital marketing helps you attract some of that attention.
11. Digital is attributable in a way that some other marketing tactics are not. You can see exactly where leads and sales come from: paid versus organic search, social media versus email, mobile versus desktop. All of these things can help you develop marketing strategy for even greater success.
12. Prove value and build trust to stakeholders with true and credible reporting. There are generally multiple sources to back up digital marketing efforts – website analytics, advertising metrics, social media stats – and when you put it all together, they should tell the same story. Turn this into a clear dashboard with KPIs and it will supercharge your reporting with digital activity that connects directly to sales and revenue. (Return on investment made easy!)
13. Digital marketing can help level the playing field for small businesses. With smarter targeting and great messaging, you can compete with a modest budget.
14. Skill and strategy are the key ingredients to winning in the digital space. The tools are there and anyone can use them but really knowing the ins and out of the platforms makes a difference. Mix that with great marketing and creative strategy for the best results. 

“

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and scale up
as you see
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The Roanoke Jefferson Center's 102-year history comprises various chapters

By Gene Marrano

A hub for community engagement, over the years what is now Jefferson Center first served as a high school, before being rebuilt more than 30 years ago. It will soon be looking for a new executive director.



Submitted photos

Jefferson Center is now the Shaftman Performance Hall, a smaller performance space, a music lab for students and home to a number of non-profit offices. It's long been a stopping point for a bevy of award winning performers. The Roanoke Symphony Orchestra, Roanoke Ballet Theatre and Opera Roanoke often call Jeff Center home.

A condensed timeline: opening of Jefferson Senior High (1924), the start of housing educational programs and offices (1975), creation of the Jefferson Center Foundation

(1989), Phase 1 construction, which converted classrooms to offices, begins (1992), and the Jefferson Center ribbon-cutting ceremony (1993).

An organization doesn't sustain a level of consistency without effective people thriving in leadership roles. Cyrus Pace, the longtime Executive Director of the Jefferson Center, led major capital campaigns and steadied the ship at Jeff Center, known for an eclectic roster of talented performers in a variety of genres. Next month Pace will



Cyrus Pace, the musician

step down after 15 years as executive director. Jefferson Center's Director of Operations, Kim Billings, will step in as Interim Executive Director.

Pace leaves after advising Roanoke City Council in recent years that Jefferson Center needs at least six million dollars to update the century-old building. The city owns the property, but terms of the original lease made Jefferson Center responsible for



Lee Fields performing

general upkeep. Pace contends what needs to be upgraded goes far beyond any light repairs or preventive maintenance.

Last May, Pace sent city officials a letter about preserving the Jefferson Center financially, saying in fact that that a sizable infusion of funds from the city was imperative. "We project insolvency [otherwise] during calendar year 2026," Pace wrote to Roanoke City Manager Valmarie Turner at the time.






High School Booster Club 1926

That was despite a 2024-2025 season he called, "our most successful ever with record-breaking attendance and real momentum. The loss [of significant funding] will mark not only the end of vital programming and community services, but also the eventual disappearance of one of Roanoke's most cherished and historic assets."

That would also mean the end or relocation of the Music Lab: "this is a great initiative. We have students who aspire to be engineers, while others aim to be songwriters. We have had some folks go on to national and international stardom." The Music Lab often invites visiting artists in town for a gig at Jeff Center to spend time with students earlier

in the day. In a past life, when Pace was a Coordinator of Fine Arts for Roanoke City Public Schools, he helped facilitate a music grant that brought \$450,000 worth of instruments to local youth.

After earning a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Roanoke College, Pace went on to get a master's degree in jazz performance from Manhattan School of Music. A certified music teacher in Virginia, Pace has self-produced multiple albums. "The arts are about connection, and Jefferson Center's strength comes from the people who support, attend, and believe in our mission," Pace remarked in the news release announcing his mid-March departure. 

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Downtown Roanoke then and now: the economic heart of the Star City

By Emma Thomas

Downtown Roanoke Inc. offers a snapshot on what's happening in Roanoke's urban center

It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the city of Roanoke literally grew up around the railroad. According to the City's official website, in 1852, the town's 500 residents moved from "Old Lick" to "Big Lick" to be closer to the tracks after the old Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio railroad – present day Norfolk and Western – bypassed the original site of the small town. At the tail end of the 19th century, Roanoke City was officially chartered. By that time, landmarks that would be recognizable to today's residents were already beginning to spring up around the railroad tracks.

The Historic City Market took off in 1882 with the help of a handful of entrepreneurs who sought licenses from the city to sell their wares. By 1886, the original City Market Building had opened its doors to serve as a covered market. From there, Market Square

continued to shape up, and now, nearly one hundred and fifty years later, Roanoke's city market boasts the title of the "oldest continuously operating open-air market" in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Even with such a rich history to draw on, the long-lasting success of the downtown Roanoke area has not happened by accident. Organizations like Downtown Roanoke Inc. have been working since at least 1960 to preserve Roanoke's unique history and character, all while moving towards an innovative future for the area. Downtown Roanoke Inc. partners with multiple local organizations and agencies to ensure that downtown Roanoke will continue to live up to its legacy as the business and cultural center of southwestern Virginia.

Downtown Roanoke, Inc.'s official mission statement is to make downtown Roanoke "the preferred place to work, live, and play." In pursuit of that goal, they continue to work alongside other organizations in the area on ongoing beautification and safety improvement projects, event planning, and economic developments in the one-hundred-twenty-two block area that we now call "Downtown."

The fruits of that labor can be seen in Downtown Roanoke Inc.'s annual year-end report. In the past year alone, the organization says it has helped create new opportunities to draw visitors into the area with holiday and night markets, shopping days, downtown Roanoke gift guides, and fourteen new events. Those new additions brought the total number

Tina Workman





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- Roanoke City Market
- Center at the Square
- Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Water Center
- Roanoke Museum of Art
- City Public Building
- Roanoke Synagogue
- Roanoke City Market
- Center at the Square
- Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Hargrove Art & Science
- Library
- Roanoke Park Amphitheater
- 1st Roanoke of Transportation
- City Hall
- Roanoke University Campus
- Peter Pan Playground
- Public Parking
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of 2025 events in downtown up to forty-nine, and they drew 130,000 attendees. According to Downtown Roanoke Inc., one hundred percent of the revenue that tourism generates is being reinvested into the downtown area.

Asked for her perspective on the current state of businesses heading into 2026, Tina Workman, President and CEO of Downtown Roanoke Inc., said, "Downtown Roanoke continues to demonstrate strong vibrancy and momentum driven by new residents, increased tourism, and ongoing business growth," says Workman. In 2025 alone, more than twenty new businesses opened ... currently, within the Downtown Service District, there are over fifty retailers, and more than seventy restaurants," she added. Workman notes that much of that business growth is thanks to downtown's expanding residential population. This year, downtown Roanoke grew to include more than 3,000 residents: a 327 percent increase since 2010.

The past year did not bring unfettered growth to the area, however. Workman

notes, "As is common in many downtowns, we have experienced some retail closures this year due to retirements and the demand for online shopping. The City of Roanoke is actively working to address these vacancies, and there are several projects in the pipeline. However, due to confidentiality agreements, I'm unable to share specific details at this time."

While she may not be able to give more details about who or what is coming to the area, Downtown Roanoke Inc.'s 2025 annual report highlighted that more than \$200 million has been invested in eight current and projected projects in the downtown area. If you are looking to expand your operations into downtown Roanoke, though, you may not have to wait for these projects to come to fruition.

Workman says, "Downtown does have some available space, which provides [the] flexibility to recruit the right mix of businesses, and support thoughtful, strategic growth." A real estate firm survey revealed last month that there has been some upward tick in downtown Roanoke office space leasing. 





Cookin' on wheels

With the popularity of food trucks these days, we're all familiar with seeing them... from the outside. But how are they as 'work spaces'? Tight! But Josue Javier Vasquer and Leticia Diaz make it work with Taqueria El Paso (today at 4804

Williamson Road in Roanoke, though they also operated a food truck in Christiansburg for seven years). Tight space, indeed—but also—clean! The business specializes in Mexican food: tacos, tortas, burritos, quesadillas, and a 'special' Cuban Torta and 'the best' Pollo con Tajadas, which is Honduran street food with fried chicken and plantains.

Photo by Olivia Marone



SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

**By Bonnie Chavez ,
CEO of Building
Beloved Communities**

Executive Summary:
*The best time to support
employee well-being is
before they're in crisis.*

*Bonnie Chavez is the
CEO of Building Beloved
Communities, a local
consulting firm specializing
in community-centered
business solutions.
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When family comes first: lessons from the hospital room

Nothing stops you in your tracks like a phone call from your mom complaining of pain in her side and chest. I'm writing this article from my mom's hospital room after her unexpected gallbladder removal. Between the beeping monitors and her care team taking vitals and giving updates, I've been reminded of something we all know deep down but often forget in the day-to-day grind: family is number one, and business is number two.

That can be hard to admit when you run a small business. You pour everything into keeping the lights on, supporting your staff, and serving customers. But moments like these put it in perspective, your work matters, but your people matter more. And if you want your business to thrive when life throws you a curveball, delegation isn't optional; it's essential.

Delegate and Trust Your Team

If you're always the one with the answers, you're also the one who can't step away. Build trust by giving your team room to lead. Let them make decisions, even if they solve things differently than you would. When you empower others to handle the day-to-day, you give your business (and yourself) breathing room. It's a sign of strong leadership, not weakness.

Vulnerability Is Strength


It's okay to say, "I need help." Whether that means asking your operations manager to step up during a family emergency or telling a client you need an extra day, it's a reminder that we're all human. Vulnerability creates connection; it also sets a powerful example for your team. When leaders are honest about limits, it gives everyone else permission to do the same.

Build a People-First Policy Environment

Consider adopting policies that make it easier for your staff to show up for their loved ones and themselves. Here's a few ideas:

- Flex time or compressed schedules so employees can attend medical appointments or care for family members.
- Emergency PTO banks or a shared leave pool for staff facing sudden life events.
- Hybrid or remote flexibility, even temporarily, to maintain stability during personal or family emergencies.

- Clear cross-training plans so responsibilities can shift smoothly when someone needs time off.
- Remembering healing takes time, there may be follow up appointments, extra rest days needed, physical therapy appointments, or even just a day to catch up on laundry or emails.

When life demands your attention elsewhere, your business should be structured to bend, not break. A compassionate workplace isn't just good for morale, it's good for continuity, loyalty, and long-term sustainability. I'm reminded that leadership isn't about being everywhere, it's about building something that can stand while you focus on what matters most. As I submit this article, don't worry, mom is already home and planning her next trip to the casino. 

“Your work matters, but your people matter more.”






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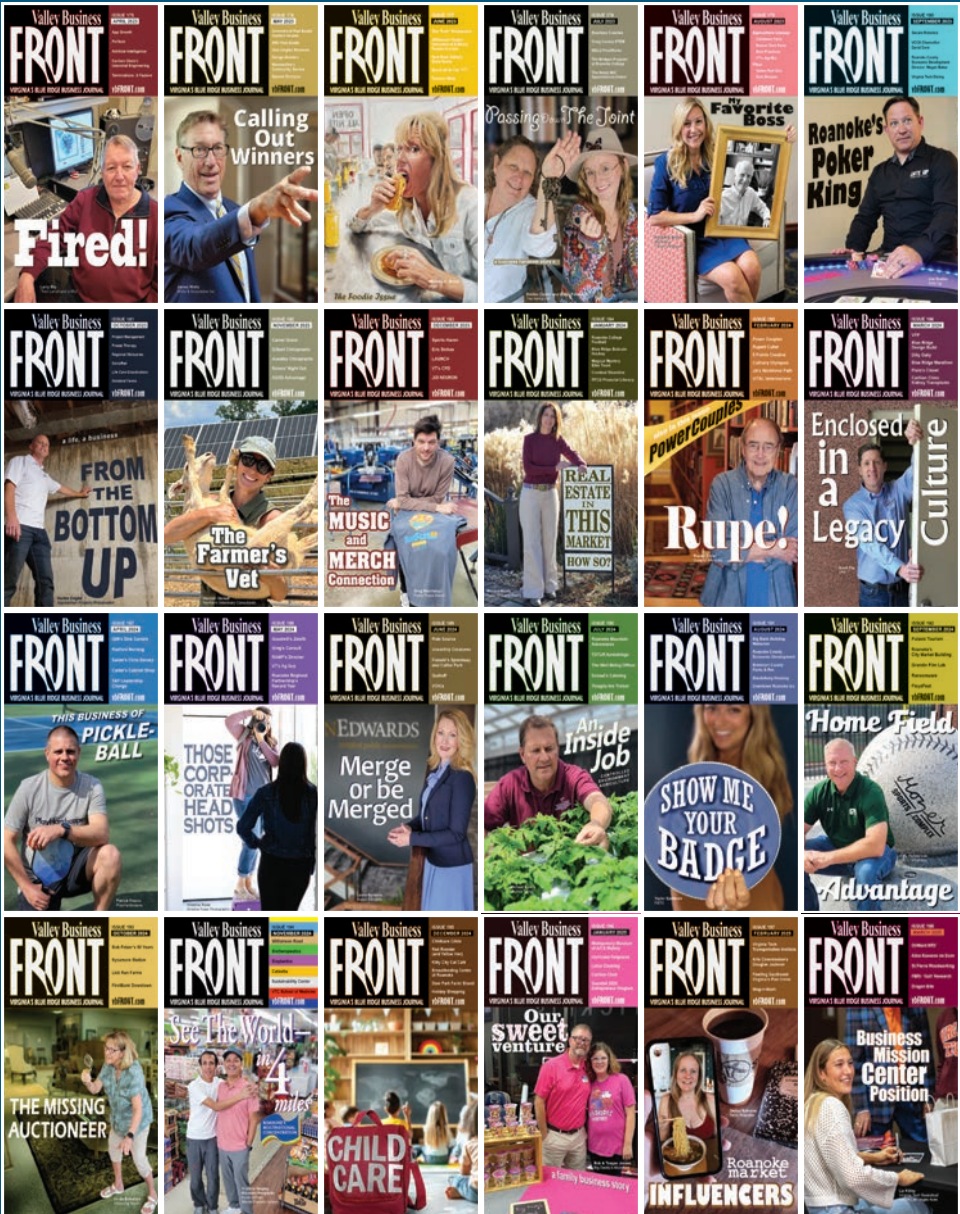
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THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

Vicki Gardner fought back from the brink after being shot on live television beside her beloved Smith Mountain Lake. And now she's written about that day, her family and life's journeys.

Roaring back from the abyss

I've met Vicki Gardner before and of course many of us remember what happened to her on August 26, 2015, when she watched the reporter and videographer interviewing her on live TV about Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber of Commerce events shot dead in front of her, before she was shot in the back and played dead on the outdoor deck at Bridgewater Plaza. Alison Parker and Adam Ward were the WDBJ-7 journalists gunned down by an irate ex-colleague (who had a history of aggression at a string of TV stations he worked for) from the Roanoke television station.

Gardner made it back and soldiered on for another four years but left the Chamber after 17 as executive director in 2019, short of her 20 year goal but with lingering issues from the hollow point bullet that tore up internal organs and left permanent back issues, leading her to call it quits. Not that she's gone away; Gardner, now in her 70's, has been helping to lead the charge on raising money to buy a big enough building that could be turned into a large meeting place, with room for performing arts as well. She says the Lake community lacks such a venue.

Early on the people behind Smith Mountain Lake Center had targeted a former Grand Home Furnishings warehouse, but another buyer swooped in before they had enough money to make an offer. Now a theater property owned by the Willard Family is the focus and Gardner says they are negotiating.

Vicki showed me some very personal photos of the scars on her stomach as she spent those first few weeks in the hospital; a jagged long red scar that for a time had to be pried open periodically so that sponges inside her body that were soaking up excess fluid could be replaced. Yes, it was painful. There were all sorts of tubes and ports at various points on her body, and for a while a colostomy bag that her husband Tim dutifully changed for her.



Vicki Gardner

They made each other laugh as Vicki recovered and wouldn't you know, four-plus months after she was *shot and left to die*, a subtitle of her new memoir, she and Tim were sitting up close at a Jimmy Buffet concert in Brooklyn, after he heard that in a *People* magazine article one of their children said that her parents play Buffet's music all year long when they entertain. In the runup to the New Year's Eve concert, the Ultimate Parrothead sent them a

continued on Page 40

Pressing pause

Destination marketing, they call it. Visitor bureaus all over want to brand their communities as a “destination” market—a place everyone wants to visit. That’s a worthy goal. Economic developers want to market their communities as a place to work, a good place for business. Another worthy goal.

It’s good to be attractive. Ugly is so... unnecessary. When we have so many ways to brand up.

Here’s yet another consideration as we market our region and its communities. It’s a perspective we can address even as we brand up our destination and economics. It struck me the other day as I was chatting with a local merchant about “what all our downtown needs.”

I compare this notion to “hitting the pause button.”

There are so many communities I enjoy—not so much as a major destination—but simply a place worthy of pausing to stop by. Or a place worthy of a short day trip. Or—and this one’s my favorite from a point of uniqueness—a place you want to stop by on your way to or from a trip.

My favorite PAUSE PLACES

Floyd, the town

Granted, we’re not usually passing Floyd on a trip (it’s too far off major interstates); but we love it for Saturdays. Floyd’s farmers market is one of the best. The shops are nice. And if there is an event, Floyd is cool—including its Country Store jamboree on Friday nights. Two great wineries, too.

Lexington

Coming back from a trip down I-81, it’s an easy thing to hop off for a spell in Lexington. Some nice shops; and those two colleges right up on each other and adjacent to downtown provide nice walks and views.

Staunton

Who knew? That’s what I always say about this town. It’s rather amazing with its great lineup of eateries, boutique merchants, Shakespear theatre, cigar lounge, and lighted-up-closed-down-street summer nights. Someone’s paying attention.

Rocky Mount

Another surprising locale on your way back from the beach or lake. There’s the Harvester (incredible lineup of performers). And a speakeasy. Some shops. Not a ton of options, but it always feels poised. Stay tuned.

Bedford

Like Rocky Mount, it seems poised for more. Like any



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:
Communities attract people for various reasons; capitalizing that has been an ongoing challenge.



It's not about
the challenge
we face, but
how we
handle it.




It' good to
be attractive.

Marrano / There's something from Page 38

frozen drink machine, beach towels, sunglasses, flip-flops and more.

We also spoke about days when this hard-charging, still very active businesswoman and I both traveled the country by plane extensively – we both tried to avoid getting stuck at Chicago O'Hare, looking to avoid one of the endless summertime delays (not always successfully) due to thunderstorms. And flying all over the country as marketing director for a nationwide steak restaurant chain sort of lost its luster for her.

That ultimately led Gardner to the long run at the SML Chamber – interrupted by one very bad day in 2015, when the only reason she remained alive is that the assailant's gun misfired or ran out of bullets. "Every day, I can choose to feel bitter about my circumstances or find something positive and adapt to each new curveball thrown my way," she writes in the last chapter of her memoir, *Survival Has Consequences*. "I understand life isn't always fair. I've learned many times that it's not about the challenge we face, but how we handle it."

Good advice for everyday life or for business – from an extraordinary person. Rock on Vicki Gardner! 

Field / On Tap from Page 39

minute we'll hear a new lineup of reasons to pause and check out. Its proximity to Smith Mountain Lake helps. Peaks of Otter is fab; but that's a bit more than a pause.

Abingdon

A little ways down toward the border, but a wonderful PAUSE PLACE. Just the Creeper Trail, the Barter Theatre, the Martha Washington Inn, and The Tavern are more than enough reasons to "stop by" or hop off that exit.

Danville

To be perfectly candid, we don't pause our travel or think of a day trip here. That's bound to change, though. Southside is becoming more attractive each year—and the casino is worth a PAUSE even if you don't gamble. Riverside views: nice.

Roanoke, Salem, Vinton, Blacksburg?

All great Pause Places; but "home" for me, so I'll reserve my observations in the interest of not sharing my bias. All four of these are worthy of out-of-towners' attention.

Here's the thing. My wife and I are enjoying a meal on an outdoor table on the sidewalk in one of these PAUSE PLACES, and a couple sits beside us. They're not "from here" so they ask what's the town all about and what's there to do.

We answered with a list. If you can't do that for your community, it's not even a PAUSE PLACE, much less a destination.

You might as well stay home. Or keep truckin' by. 

A fourth economic engine for Virginia

Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor (BRIC) Launches to Accelerate Virginia's Fourth Economic Engine

The Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor (BRIC), a new business-led nonprofit organization uniting leaders from Danville, Martinsville, Roanoke, Blacksburg, and the counties in between, announced its official launch in October 2025. With 501(c)(3) approval from the IRS and a founding board of more than 40 of the region's most influential business leaders, BRIC is poised to serve as the unified voice of the megaregion—advancing shared priorities in infrastructure, workforce, and innovation-driven growth.

"BRIC was created to leverage our region's shared momentum to become an economic powerhouse for Virginia," said Ben Davenport, Co-Chair of BRIC and Chairman of First Piedmont Corporation. "From advanced manufacturing to life sciences and defense innovation, we're already building the industries that will power Virginia's future. The Fralin Biomedical Research Institute is performing world class research that will enhance the lives of people throughout the world. Out of this extraordinary research, startup companies are being formed that will greatly improve the region's economy. BRIC gives us the structure to accelerate that progress together on a megaregional scale."

Heywood Fralin, BRIC Co-Chair and Chairman of Retirement Unlimited, Inc., added, "For too long, this part of Virginia has been defined by what it lost. BRIC is about defining what's next—a united, future-focused corridor that is resilient, competitive, and ready to lead. Our work together will benefit everyone in our megaregion for generations to come while generating new revenue streams for the Commonwealth."

A Unified Voice for the Megaregion

BRIC represents a new model for regional collaboration in Virginia. Modeled after successful megaregions such as the Greater Washington Partnership and RVA757 Connects, BRIC brings together business leaders to advocate for transformative investment across traditional city and county lines. The organization is independent from government, operating with the speed and focus of business, and guided by professional management and research partners.

"BRIC is both an organization and a place," said Rachel Yost, Managing Partner of S.I.R. and BRIC's acting executive director. "It's an organization to connect the dots between world-class assets—like Virginia Tech, the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, Carilion Clinic, and others, and to present a united front for investment and innovation. It's also what we are calling our megaregion — the Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor."



Tom Field

"BRIC [is] our megaregion [that] connects the dots between world-class assets—like Virginia Tech, the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, Carilion Clinic, and others, to present a united front for investment and innovation." —Rachel Yost, Managing Partner of S.I.R. and BRIC's acting executive director.

GUEST COMMENTARY

By Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor

Executive Summary:
A new business corridor—covering our region and Southside—has big plans to accelerate contribution from our manufacturing sector



For too long, this part of Virginia has been defined by what it lost. BRIC is about defining what is next—a united, future-focused corridor that is resilient, competitive, and ready to lead.



BRIC current coverage includes Radford, Blacksburg, Roanoke, Danville, Martinsville, and the Counties of Giles, Pulaski, Montgomery, Floyd, Roanoke, Craig, Botetourt, Franklin, Patrick, Henry, Pittsylvania, Halifax.

Vision 2050: Charting the Future

BRIC's signature initiative, Vision 2050, is a once-in-a-generation planning effort to define the long-term economic, infrastructure, and innovation strategy for the Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor. The plan will identify key priorities for advanced manufacturing, life sciences, and national security; develop strategies to strengthen workforce pipelines; and lay out a roadmap for infrastructure and investment across the megaregion.


Through Vision 2050, BRIC aims to position the Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor as Virginia's fourth economic engine, joining Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Hampton Roads as one of the top drivers of statewide population, talent, and economic growth.

Founding Board of Directors

The BRIC Board includes business and institutional leaders representing every part of the corridor:

- Ben Davenport Jr., Co-Chair
- BRIC First Piedmont Corp
- Heywood Fralin, Co-Chair BRIC Retirement Unlimited, Inc.
- Eddie Amos (Retired Senior Vice President of Technology for GE)
- Robert "Bob" Archer Blue Ridge Beverage Co.
- Steve Arner Carilion Clinic
- John (Jack) Avis Avis Construction
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- Jim Frith Frith Construction Company
- Richard Gibson VT Corporate Research Center
- Jeff Haley Atlantic Union Bank
- Brad Hall Appalachian Power
- Jeremy Hoff Hooker Furnishings
- Bill Hume Interactive Design Group (IDG)
- Rick James Adams Paving
- Michael (Mike) B. Jones Intertape Polymer Group
- William "Bill" Martin, Jr. Blue Ridge Aquaculture
- Kate Keller Harvest Foundation
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- Telly Tucker Institute for Advanced Learning & Research
- Richmond Vincent Goodwill of the Valleys
- David Wallenborn P1 Technologies
- Neil Wilkin Optical Cable Corporation

Additional leaders representing industries from manufacturing and energy to finance and education are joining the BRIC Board of Directors every day. 

The Blue Ridge Innovation Corridor (BRIC) is a strategic nonprofit organization uniting the voice of business across Southern Virginia—from Danville and Martinsville through Roanoke and Blacksburg—to drive inclusive, innovation-based economic growth. BRIC's mission is to amplify existing strengths, uncover new opportunities through strategic research and collaboration, and unite leaders to secure transformative investments in innovation and infrastructure.

To learn more about BRIC and Vision 2050, please reach out to Rachel Yost at Rachel.Yost@sirhq.com or visit www.blueridgecorridor.com.

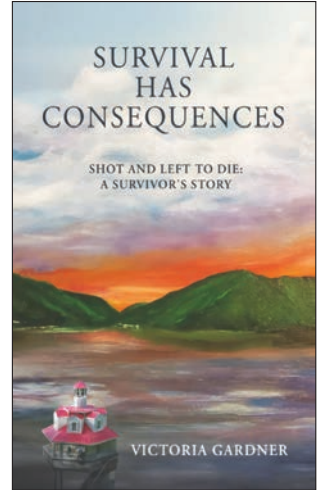
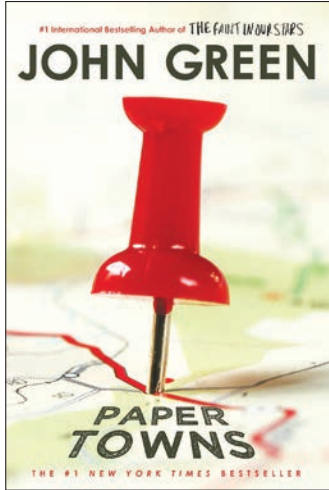
“BRIC was created to become an economic powerhouse.”



The plan will identify key priorities for advanced manufacturing, life sciences, and national security...

FRONTReviews >

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Mapped out

Paper Towns (Penguin; 2008) by John Green reminded me of the movie *Stand by Me* (adapted from Steven King's short story, *The Body*). This one has high school kids; but their interactions and the sleuthing had a similar vibe. Green's throwing in "paper towns" (copyright traps on maps) generated quite the draw, providing a fantastic framework for our plot. Replete with literary references (i.e. Melville and Whitman) only enhanced the tale (for me). The resolution was the only disarming thing. Typically, a good story plotline builds to a climax, and then either resolves intentionally or leaves everything unresolved. This one—kept everything pretty much the same. It's as if the grand build-up was wasted time; but in this case, the fiction (I'd call it YA) was made more realistic, I suppose. There's also one kibble of dread: you may question whether only individuals who are suicidal, nihilistic, or despondent are the most in touch with the reality of life; while "the rest of us" are gullible or naïve. If true, that would be the harshest lesson of all. Like an imaginary town on a map, nothing's there.

—Tom Field

Standing up at SML

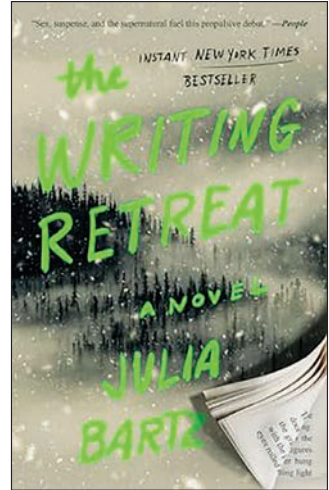
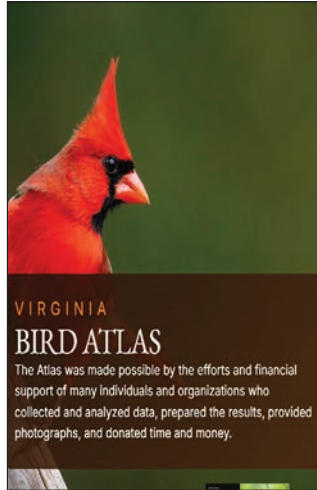
After being shot and left for dead, Victoria Gardner could have become bitter or negative. Instead, she turned in another direction; and in *Survival Has Consequences*

(SML; 2025) she shares positive and creative steps that lead to personal recovery. Despite what must have been a struggle with her own PTSD, she provides an impressive script about the dreadful shooting on-air during a live television newscast on August 26, 2015 that killed two journalists. Gardner faced many challenges, from standing upright again to numerous surgeries; but the ultimate message of counting her blessings is ever more prevailing. If you have ever been faced with a tragedy and need to be uplifted from a depressive state into a positive force, read this book! You won't be able to put it down.

—Karen Debord Phillips

A rich transition

If you like family sagas, pick up *The Greatest Possible Good* (Avid; 2025) by Ben Brooks. The genre is more easily developed in historical (think British royalty) or demographic (think crime family) formulaic settings; but I've found truly contemporary dramas often fail. Not so here. With the overarching theme of the ever-present distinction between the haves and the have-nots, you'll be absorbed by the Candlewick family. How daughter Evangeline's theoretical notions served as a catalyst to father Aurthur's actual self-sacrificial mission makes for a fascinating plot—not to mention an introspection of individual obligation. And what about the responsibility to your own inner circle versus others? Is failing one as bad as failing the



other? Throw in son Emil and mother Yara, while shaking the bag to make your blended family, and you'll have ample opportunity to both laugh and weep at what transpires in the posh Cotswolds region of England in a mere ten-year span. A wonderfully written tragicomedy.

—Tom Field

Come fly away

Our birds rule. Don't they? Virginia truly is a great state for bird lovers. If you agree (or care to learn more) you should check out the *Virginia Bird Atlas*—an online resource produced by a collaboration of Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, Virginia Society of Ornithology, and Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and Environment (and its Conservation Management Institute). Did you know Virginia has one of the highest bird diversities among states in the eastern U.S.? Just released is the second breeding bird atlas, and it is a comprehensive "avian survey project in the entire Commonwealth, conducted from 2016 to 2020" covering "more than 200 bird species." Click on any bird (say, something as popular as the Blue Jay to more elusive, such as the Northern Harrier, for example) and you'll get a description, location, confirmed sightings, status, conservation, and an interactive map. Visit it at vabirdatlas.org.

I'm in no bird-watching club, but I enjoy this site. I just contacted the producers and asked

them to consider working towards a future edition that includes audio samples of bird calls with their listings. How cool would THAT be?

—Tom Field

But not Stephen King

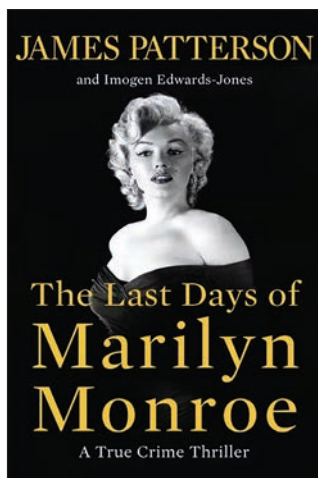
The Writing Retreat (Emily Bestler/Atria; 2023) by Julia Bartz is eerily reminiscent of Stephen King's *Misery*. Only here, we get a group of five young women who are starstruck by a widely popular feminist author who invites them via a contest to an exclusive and private writers' retreat. You could say the retreat venue is eerily reminiscent of Stephen King's *The Shining*. Just about every aspect of the plot deals with stolen work, until it crescendos with a notion that questions whether all successful novels were written by thieves and proxies. Does idol-worship create gullibility? Is greatness a mere transactional purchase one can make? Is lesbian sex a higher grade than heterosexual sex? Does Stephen King care about copyright protection? These are the questions for a novel that was fun to consume, even as it spun a bit out of control at the end.

—Tom Field

Local author's different type of novel

When you talk to Smith Mountain Lake area author Linda Kay Simmons about her new novel, *Channeling Eve*, she brings up narcissism –

“She brings up narcissism a lot...”



a lot, when referring to the character Tobias, who in the novel is Eve's sometimes philandering, often absent and well to do husband/father of her children. Each chapter is told from a different person's point of view. Eve is paralyzed from two strokes and a fall but travels out of her body – communing through her husband's lover, who is also an artist that channels Eve's thoughts on to the canvases she paints.

The turbulent dynamics of a fifty-year marriage fraught with hidden truths, betrayals, and a wife's desperate desire for retribution, with three children each battling their own demons. There's a big reveal at the end, pointing the finger at someone who may be at least partially responsible for her condition, although *Channeling Eve* (2025, Snowy Day Publications) lacks that early on big moment or crisis that sets the tone and course of action for the rest of the book. It's more like a slow burn all the way through, but the storyline draws you in.

—Gene Marrano

Another 'Last Days'— this one on Marilyn

James Patterson's *The Last Days of John Lennon*, was the first, now comes *The Last Days of Marilyn Monroe* (Little, Brown and Company, 2025), with help from Imogen Edwards-Jones. The crime? It might be how Marilyn Monroe was typecast by Hollywood, as she struggled to be respected as a competent actress, taking classes with some of the best

acting teachers and coaches in New York and Hollywood.

It might be her constant battles with booze and pills, that often led her to being late for a shoot and most likely didn't help her legendary ability to not remember lines – until she would just snap to for a few minutes and nail it. When she died in 1962 after being fired from a movie that was never made, Marilyn went into a final spiral that led to what was attributed to an accidental overdose of medication. Earlier that same night Patterson writes in *Last Days*, Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, with whom she had engaged in a now-ended affair, visited Monroe in her Hollywood bungalow, after she had made threats to go public with her liaisons with both Bobby and his brother John – the President of the United States earlier. Hmmm.

Patterson wrote the book like a true crime dialogue, with imagined conversations to keep the story moving along. Marilyn Monroe was a unique icon in the 1950's, despite the personal ups and downs, the early professional setbacks, the failed marriages to Joe DiMaggio and playwright Arthur Miller, and the desire to be fully respected by the industry. A page turner.

—Gene Marrano

The reviewers: Karen Debord Phillips lives at Smith Mountain Lake and is an owner-operator of Bedford Landings B&B; Tom Field is a creative director, writer, and publisher; Gene Marrano is a news reporter and FRONT editor.



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Wet on our roof >

He's Moldovan, but this work is called **Roanoke Among the Raindrops**—a beautiful watercolor from Ion Carchelan curated by **The Little Gallery** in downtown Roanoke. Many of his scenic and landscapes include birds, like Cardinals, in the details. Both Ion and his daughter, Julia Carchelan (whose work is also at The Little Gallery) employ soft, swooping techniques in their wet-in-wet watercolor paintings. The painting depicts the iconic stairway on the Rooftop at Roanoke's Market Square. The Carchelan collection is captivating.



Tom Field

NYE at music hall >

The Exchange Music Hall—downtown Roanoke’s newest large capacity music venue at the renovated former First National Exchange Bank building (corner of Jefferson and Campbell) that is still under development to include a boutique hotel and restaurant—hosted a grand New Year’s Eve celebration, where sold-out attendees got to see the site for the first time. The party included regional band Holy Rollers and national act Grace Potter. A “test of sorts” for the challenging acoustics in such a large, open, hard surface environ—both promoters and attendees likely agreed the sound engineering performed fine, fully filling the space as it bounced off hundreds of celebrants. See FRONT Notes for more reactions.



Hospital shuttered since 2017 reopened >

The **Stuart Community Hospital** in Patrick County has officially reopened its doors for operation. U.S. Congressman Morgan Griffith, Chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, toured the facility last month, spoke with Hospital leadership and staff and attended the ribbon cutting ceremony. "A new rural hospital opens its doors right here in Virginia's Ninth District! Rural Virginia communities like Patrick County benefit from increased health care services and resources, which is why I was excited to be a part of today's ribbon cutting ceremony and celebrate this news with the local community," said Griffith.



What's your type? >

You can't judge a book by its cover, we're told. But what about just the typeface? Libraries often have displays of books by newness (release), genres, themes, etc. **Salem Public Library** has a display of books called "Unconventional Fonts on the Cover." How clever. Will the words inside capture your attention as well as the cover typeface promises? You be the judge.



Tom Field

Big conversation piece >

Charlotte's Web Antique Mall in downtown Salem has this impressive piece greeting you right when you enter. A "biggest-heaviest-conversation-piece-ever" the vintage type cabinet with drawers and compartments for all the lead type back in the newspaper printing days of yore awaits a buyer with eclectic tastes or selective appreciation. It's massive, it's heavy, and though the thousands of type pieces are not included, it has everything you need to stimulate conversation and interest. Drawers and drawers (both sides) for A to Z, zero to nine, and all the other typography symbols, spaces and whatnot.



Good Morning VBR >

The **Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce** is calling a new series of networking sessions that launched last month, "Good Morning VBR." Chamber president Eric Sichau says representatives from all seven localities in the Chamber's coverage area will be on hand every second Wednesday in odd-numbered months for sessions that will last just over an hour.

Participants include Directors of Economic Development, City Managers and County Administrators from Botetourt County to Rocky Mount. "We said to our localities when we bring the business community every other month certainly there will be some dedicated networking time, and then everybody's going to get 3-4 minutes ... to give an update to the business community – what's the big highlight the locality wants to give for that particular month. That's kind of the goal."

Sichau calls it, "an opportunity for our members that may not have access to those folks, to say hello. It's an event designed to drive value for chamber membership. We've heard we want more networking time, but we [also] want more programming. That really does fit in with the theme of the Chamber." The first Good Morning VBR session was held at Roanoke College last month and will rotate at other locations for the rest of the year. Non-members are welcome to the ticketed series, see the Roanoke Regional Chamber website for details.



RidgeYaks reaction >

When Salem's minor league baseball team changed its name from Red Sox to **The Salem RidgeYaks**, reviews were mixed. But that's what team officials expected. On November 8, 2025, Allen Lawrence General Manager of the Salem minor league baseball team and his staff made the long-awaited announcement on what the new team name would be. Salem went from the Red Sox, the name of their major league affiliate, to the RidgeYaks. He says the change has generated a lot of passion on both sides.

"When we were the Red Sox people could go on Amazon or Fanatics or some [site] like that and buy Red Sox merchandise, but now the only place to buy RidgeYaks merchandise is here in our team store [at Salem Memorial Ballpark]. We've almost had to retrain ourselves on how to operate a retail establishment."

Yes, Yaks do live in Virginia, on farms and in several parks. Allen says the RidgeYaks symbolize strength and resilience, and they can be seen on team merchandise paddling a kayak down a mountain stream. Yak is also inside baseball for a home run. Lawrence says children seem to like the change from Red Sox; Boston is still the team's Low-A Carolina League affiliate. The RidgeYaks open their 2026 season in early April.

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**



Hatton

Dr. **Karl Hatton** has been appointed Vice President for Enrollment Management at Ferrum College. He has more than fifteen years of experience in executive leadership, enrollment strategy, student success, and institutional growth. Hatton has expertise in data-informed decision-making, student-centered recruitment, and cross-functional collaboration.



Wagner

Nicole Wagner—longtime Virginia Tech

fundraiser—has been named the university's new assistant vice president of gift planning. In this role, Wagner oversees the Office of Gift Planning, a 10-person team responsible for collaboratively securing a quarter of the university's overall annual fundraising.



Rideout

Steve Rideout (M.S. '98), professor and associate director of Extension in the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, has been named the new director of Virginia Tech's Agricultural Technology Program in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Rideout brings more than 23 years of experience in agricultural research, Extension leadership, and student engagement

to the role. He joined Virginia Tech in 2005 as an assistant professor and Extension specialist.



Heck

Michelle Heck, an internationally recognized plant pathologist and agricultural researcher, has been appointed director of the School of Plant and Environmental Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. Heck, who previously served as lead scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service (USDA-ARS) and adjunct full professor of plant pathology and plant-microbe biology at Cornell University and the Boyce Thompson Institute, officially begins her new position on June 1, 2026.

**RECREATION
FRONT**

Allen Lawrence, general manager of Salem RidgeYaks, and former Red Sox Jackie Bradley, Jr., were inducted into the 2026 Salem Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame.

**FINANCIAL
FRONT**



Rheinheimer

Jennifer Rheinheimer has been appointed Chief Financial Officer for Freedom First Credit Union. She has served as Vice President of Finance for the past three years and will succeed Linda Johnson, current CFO, as she assumes the role of Chief Executive Officer. As CFO, Rheinheimer will oversee the accounting, finance, compliance,



audit, and business intelligence departments.



Lima

Kristina Lima has been promoted to assistant vice president and branch manager (Bonsack) at Bank of Botetourt. She has been with the Bank for more than a decade; graduated from James River High School and Radford University (business and Spanish).



Walker

Rachel Walker has been promoted to deposit compliance officer at Bank of Botetourt in the

Buchanan Care Center. She has an associate degree in management at Virginia Western Community College and is currently enrolled at Radford University.

MEDIA FRONT



Boyd

Aila Boyd was named 2025 Writer of the Year for Valley Business FRONT.

Bill Roth of Virginia Tech radio play-by-



Roth

play voice was named Virginia Sportscaster of the Year (for the 13th time) by the National Sports Media Association.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Tammy Shepherd has been selected as Chair for 2026 by the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors. She served as the Vinton District representative since 2024; this is her first

year serving as Chair.

David Radford has been selected as Vice Chair for 2026 by the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors. He served as the Windsor Hills District representative since 2018; he previously served as Board Chair in 2020 and 2025, and as Vice Chair in 2021.

ARTS FRONT

Kim Billings has been appointed interim executive director at Jefferson Center upon the departure of Cyrus Pace (in March), who served for 15 years.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

FOCUS ON MOMENTS THAT MATTER.



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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. [pwbbarbour@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.

Bonnie Chavez is the CEO of Building Beloved Communities, a local consulting firm specializing in community-centered business solutions. Her driving force is to help all organizations overcome business barriers with a lens focusing on smart solutions that benefit the community. Bonnie is a proud lesbian, Latina woman who values her family, roots,

heritage, and culture. [bonnie@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]

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]

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).

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.

Caitlyn Scaggs a Blacksburg native, owns Connect 936—a marketing, branding, and business strategy consultancy. [hello@caitlynsaggs.com]

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.

Emma Thomas is a Roanoke native and 2022 Hollins University Graduate. She works for WFIR News Talk Radio as a reporter. [thomasek432@gmail.com]

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]



...the best Pollo con Tajadas... — Page 33

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[Cowboy] Boots in the air

Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport (ROA) has added a direct flight to Dallas Fort Worth International Airport (DFW) with American Airlines that begins in June. The announcement follows years of local efforts to secure it—and some financial guarantees as well. Roanoke-Blacksburg Airport was awarded a Small Community Air Service Development grant in 2018 - \$750,000 to recruit and subsidize service to a new airline hub, and from the start, Dallas-Fort Worth was the primary target. Airport Director Mike Stewart says that after years of waiting, the federal money will act as a safety net, ensuring American Airlines can afford to take a chance on the Star City: “not only a financial guarantee—a minimum revenue guarantee is what it’s called in the industry—but also marketing assistance. You want to minimize the risk for the airline.” Stewart expects American to fly into Roanoke late each evening and take off for DFW every morning. He says the new Dallas route will instantly change the math in many air travelers’ calculations. By plugging Roanoke into American Airlines’ largest hub, hundreds of global destinations will now be just one stop away. The new service opens up more than 200 one-stop connections starting in June. Tickets are on sale.

Star companion

Roanoke’s **Center in the Square** (museum, performing arts, restaurant,

play-and-learn 7-story center) and various stakeholders are considering a new Sky Garden project as well as a Giant Ferris Wheel up on the roof. The great wheel would accent the other downtown lights and icons (Dr Pepper and H&C Coffee neon signs) with a large LED “star” light in its center, complementing Roanoke’s Star on Mill Mountain and designation as the “Star City of the South.”

Another sticking point

Valley Vital Care infusion pharmacy has opened in northwest Roanoke at Valleypointe complex.

Popular retailer closed

The **Gift Niche** store in Roanoke City Market downtown has closed. The merchant offered gifts, clothing, jewelry, pocket books, home décor and similar items and has been operating for 43 years.

Productive production

P1 Technologies (profiled in FRONT September 2025 edition) is investing \$2.8 million to expand its advanced manufacturing capabilities, following a merger with Keltech. The expansion will create about 25 new jobs at the Roanoke County plant with approximately 500 employees.

Tired out

Yokohama Tire plant in Salem announced it is closing (by September 2026—a date corresponding with the

conclusion of the union agreement). The Salem facility employs nearly 400 people and produces consumer tires, cited by the company as reduced in demand and a reason for the closing. The plant opened in the 1960’s and Yokohama bought it in 1989 from Mohawk Rubber Co. Yokohama’s non-union plant in Mississippi has grown to nearly 900 employees and produces both consumer and commercial-grade tires.

ReStore reaches #1

Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Roanoke was recognized as the number one store in the nation in gross sales for communities of its size.

Science moves

The **Science Museum of Western Virginia** is moving out of downtown Roanoke’s Center in the Square; no specific date or new location has been announced at the time of this publication.

Governor Youngkin makes more appointments on his way out

Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority, Board of Trustees: Amanda Marko of Roanoke, President, Connected Strategy Group; Commission on Local Government: Beckham A. Stanley of Bedford, Principal, Rural Results Consulting; Virginia Forensic Nursing Advisory Council: Melissa Harper of Roanoke, Forensic Nurse, Ultra Health PEDS Forensic Nursing Department; Forensic

Nurse, SAFE Center of SWVA

Greenway fertilized

A Greenway Coordinator position is open and has now been integrated from the **Roanoke Valley Greenway Commission** to the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission—a change that should expand resources and funding opportunities, according to RVARC.

Help arrives for rural businesses impacted by Helene

Former Governor Glenn Youngkin announced that the first assistance payments to farmers and forest landowners impacted by Hurricane Helene have been disbursed through the Virginia Farm Recovery Block Grant. The first payments being made are for operations that suffered income loss as a result of market loss. Payments for producers and landowners who suffered other types of losses, such as infrastructure, future economic losses for perennial crops, timber, plasticulture, and more, follow this first payment round. Virginia is one of six states to receive Helene-related block grant funding from the USDA, and the first state to accept applications and begin disbursing payments.

More Panda coming

Cushman & Wakefield | Thalheimer has announced the sale of a near one-acre site located at 816 W Main Street in Salem. CFT Developments

purchased the acreage from Driven Brands, Inc. for \$1,500,000 and plans to redevelop the property for a **Panda Express** restaurant, scheduled for completion in early summer 2026.

Better ways to cool a data center?

Blue Ridge Soil and Water Conservation District representative Freeda Cathcart spoke to the Botetourt County Supervisors last month at a public meeting, last week, asking them to seek more energy efficient and sustainable cooling practices at the proposed **Google** data center for the county. "I've been looking at the technology; there's some really cool technology emerging with data centers. Microsoft is getting ready to build one [that uses] no water at all. It's a closed loop system. It's cutting edge." The former Roanoke City Council candidate urged Supervisors to look at emerging technologies for cooling the data center that are more

environmentally friendly. Data centers typically use water – lots of it – to cool the chips that power AI and other ultrafast computations. There are worries that pulling a million gallons or more out of Carvins Cove to do that daily would strain resources from the Roanoke Valley's primary water source, which straddles the Botetourt-Roanoke County line. Many localities in Virginia have said no to data centers.

Economic development news from Roanoke County

The Vinton Area Chamber hosted a ribbon cutting for the new **Vinton Café Kitchen and Bakery** at 126 E. Lee Avenue in Downtown Vinton. The Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon cutting for the new **Askia Concierge and Metabolic Medicine** at 4519 Brambleton Avenue in Cave Spring. **Greco's Pizza** is now open at The Shoppes at West Village at 3549 Electric Road Suite B in Cave Spring.

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.

Hanging Rock Tavern has reopened with a new menu at 1790 Thompson Memorial Drive in Hanging Rock.

at the three airports.

Vinton hotel project moves forward with new MOU

Airports awarded funding

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has awarded grants to several airports in Virginia's Ninth District: \$484,863 to the Virginia Tech Montgomery Regional Airport Authority, \$139,113 to the Twin County Airport Commission and \$112,932 to the Tazewell County Airport Authority. This grant money was made available through the FAA Fiscal Year 2026 Airport Infrastructure Grant program and will be used to construct more storage space

Both Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton have both signed off on changes to the "Memoranda of Understanding," regarding the hotel being built in downtown Vinton. The changes reflect a new developer - KARA Roanoke; an additional parcel being added to the project, and an amendment that raises the amount of tax revenue Roanoke County will reimburse the town of Vinton as part of the hotel partnership. Pete Peters is the Vinton Town Manager: "the MOU extends out to five years and is capped at

Notable Transactions

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- 81.64-acres at 3940 Tall Pine in Roanoke sold for \$405,000 by LQ Investments Virginia to Mill Creek Estates for future development of Loblolly Mill Estates
- Pinnacle Bank property at 4467 Starkey Rd in Roanoke sold for \$1,570,000
- Roanoke Moose Lodge at 3233 Catawba Valley Dr in Salem on 23-acres with retail center, office and industrial warehouses, pool, and recreation area sold for \$1,695,000

COVENANT REAL ESTATE SERVICES

- Montrose Air Quality Services renewed lease of 18,515-sq-ft industrial space at 5705 Hollins Rd in Roanoke
- 187-unit Terrace Apartments at 1532 Bluemont Ave and 1540 Maiden Lane in Roanoke sold for \$7,000,000 by Terrace North/South LP to Terrace Partners LLC
- 9,785-sq-ft industrial property at 2744 Nicholas Ave in Roanoke sold for \$1,300,000 by Jack St Clair to Clark Electrical Services

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

\$500,000, and there was some nuances on how that revenue was achieved and how they were distributed. But at the end of the day the MOU has made the necessary adjustments.” Vinton Town Council approved that MOU change last month, after Roanoke County did the same shortly before that. The Town of Vinton and KARA held a groundbreaking in September on a \$12 million investment that will bring 92 rooms and 10 new jobs. Opening date is expected by early 2027.

Center in the Square ponders a rooftop Ferris wheel

Center in the Square president and CEO Tara Marciniak has been kicking around the idea of putting a Ferris wheel on the rooftop at the downtown cultural hub for some time - and talked about it again during a taping of the Buzz for Good, program: “at first, I was joking, I said well fine, we own the building, we’ll just put it on the roof. I kept thinking about it; I figured I’m going to talk to our architect and see whether or not it’s possible. Instead of laughing at me out of the room, he said, yeah.” Center in the Square already has a Ferris wheel in mind - a Board member owns one that was located at the long-gone Lakeside Amusement Park.

The Quest will focus on higher tech startups

The Advancement Foundation will roll out its 2026 version of The

Gauntlet business mentoring and competition early this month; as always focused on new or emerging “main street,” businesses. Now Foundation executive director Annette Patterson says they have launched “The Quest,” a new business competition focused on high-growth and tech-driven startups: “autonomous systems, IT, data, energy, advanced manufacturing,” says Foundation president Annette Patterson.

“That is going to be smaller group of folks [and] will entail having case managers work with them on specific needs they have, in order to scale their companies. It’s obviously different from what folks in The Gauntlet are getting, which is more general business development.” Both The Quest and The Gauntlet mentoring programs will conclude with an awards ceremony in April.

Carilion Children’s expansion

The new **Carilion Children’s Pediatric Medicine** has cut the ribbon on its new Lexington location. The practice will expand pediatric service offerings for the greater Lexington and Rockbridge County areas, increasing access to expert care for all children.

Onward NRV Talent Network

Onward New River Valley (Onward NRV) has launched the NRV Talent Network, a new LinkedIn group created

to help college students, recent graduates, early-career professionals, and employers in Virginia’s New River Valley connect directly in an easy to access space in order to make career opportunities easier to find and navigate. The NRV Talent Network was established to address a critical gap in the regional talent ecosystem by linking people early in their careers with local employers and job opportunities. While the NRV has world-class educational institutions, employers, and career resources, students often lack awareness of what’s available in the region, which can lead them to leave the area.

By bringing job seekers and businesses together in one shared location, the group aims to strengthen career pathways while supporting long-term economic growth across the New River Valley. “Through the NRV Talent Network, we want to create a sustainable pipeline where students can see clear career pathways, employers can connect with local talent, and young professionals can envision themselves living and growing their careers in the New River Valley,” said Laken Blankenship, Onward NRV Talent and Business Strategies Manager.

Melrose place

There’s a new business association in Roanoke. Melrose Avenue NW and the immediate area is one of the largest business districts in the Star City. Michael Hamlar and his team at Hamlar-Curtis Funeral Home have

been working on starting a business association there for several years. He says through working with the city he’s learned there are more than 500 businesses on and around Melrose Avenue. Hamlar says bringing these all together builds community with the launch of the non-profit Melrose Business Association: “if you have a hundred people go down to city hall there more likely [is a census] in the community, as opposed to one person going down there ... there’s strength in numbers.”

Businesses do not have to have a Melrose address to join the MBA. They just need to be in the vicinity. There is an informational meeting February 5 from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. at the L.H. Hamlar Event Center at 4516 Melrose Ave. Hamlar says the newly minted business group, “will serve as a unified voice for business owners and entrepreneurs committed to the continued success of the area.” Hamlar also says the MBA may help overcome what he calls an unfair perception that the Melrose Avenue corridor isn’t a safe place to live or operate a business.

There’s no place like Homeplace

A legendary Catawba area restaurant is coming back to life under new ownership. In May 2021, the Wingate family announced that **Homeplace Restaurant** in the Catawba area would be closing its doors in the wake of the pandemic. This past October Dustin Hanegar

and wife unveiled their plan to bring the restaurant back to life. Henegar has been working with the Wingates to reopen the restaurant, after purchasing the property from them. It will feature the same menu, some previous staff members, and the familiar, homey nostalgic feel: "opening a restaurant has been a dream for my wife and I for a long time. We believe in working alongside your children, if you're lucky enough to do that." Henegar says there will be some new wrinkles as well. The goal is to have

Homeplace reopened in time for Easter weekend.

The Exchange debuts to sellout crowd on NYE

Roanoke's historic landmark at Jefferson and Campbell – a former neo-classical 1912 bank building - has been transformed into a music venue and hotel. In the aftermath of the **Exchange** Music Hall's New Year's Eve debut, featuring Grace Potter and Holy Roller, Sam Calhoun, chief operating officer of Across the Way Productions, called the

concert a success and expressed gratitude for the turnout. With any venue debut comes the question of improvement. Calhoun says his team has been taking feedback on everything from crowded spaces and long restroom lines to the bar service process – and some sound issues in the cavernous, high ceiling hall. "90 percent of the feedback we have so far is that people really, really enjoyed the sound. I've heard ten percent of the feedback where people had critiques of that and we take that seriously. We

take that list and go try to fix that." What's next for The Exchange Music Hall? Calhoun says the venue will go dark for about two months to make improvements. An updated events calendar, including concerts, private events, galas, and more, will be released after the downtime. The Exchange is located inside the Promissory Hotel, profiled here last month.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

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“ ”
The next generation isn't
just stepping in—they're
stepping up. — Page 14



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