

# Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 212  
MAY 2026

City Wide cleaning  
Carilion's Usability  
The 'Wolfman'  
WoodWirks charcoal  
Yokohama closure  
FiftyLove color

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Aaron Ewert  
CroySafe



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# WELCOME TO THE FRONT

How should we welcome you to your May 2026 edition of FRONT?

Let us count the ways.

A safe room. A wolfman. A personal color guide. A plant closure. A bag of charcoal. A cleaning crew. A simulation lab. Not to mention six columns, a commentary, one performance and three book reviews, a dozen 'abouts,' over a dozen career announcements, and 18 business notes.

Did we throw in the lumps of coal because you're a bad boy or girl? Is the wolfman here to scare you? Do you need a safe space or a cleanup from your mess?

Nah. It's all good.

We're just being up FRONT with the diverse lineup. Enjoy.



**Tom Field**  
Publisher



**Gene Marrano**  
Editor



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CroySafe is a new enterprise banking on a growing market and desire for safe rooms.

By Tom Field



“ ”  
Every one of you inspire me!  
— Page 21

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# MAY



Aila Boyd



Daniel Colston



Rachel Edwards



Emily Field



Kelsey Monahan



Dan Smith

## Advisory Board

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

# 2026 CONTRIBUTORS



**Carrie Cousins**



**Kayla Dixon**



**Dan Dowdy**



**Tom Field**



**Frazier Hughes**



**Gene Marrano**



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**Mary Ann L. Miller**  
Bank of Boletourt /  
finance – banking



**Alicia Smith**  
F&S Building Innovations /  
construction

“”  
Each client receives recurring, proactive inspections.  
— Page 16

“”  
There's a culture of innovation and disruption in this area that is hungry for development and support.  
— Page 60

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 54.

“”  
I don't do rainbows and unicorns.  
— Page 24





Photos: Tom Field

"CroySafe is a natural next step for us as a company. This new division helps people feel safer and more prepared in their homes and businesses. It's about creating peace of mind," —Eric Croy, owner of Croy Contracting and president of CroySafe

# Safe and Secure? Count On It.

CroySafe is a new enterprise banking on a growing market and desire for safe rooms.

**By Tom Field**

Someone in the crowd at the ribbon-cutting for CroySafe murmured, “he needs to show a little more enthusiasm.”

Everyone laughed.

The comment was about Aaron Ewert, who was clearly enthusiastic. A cheerleader for a new “division” of long-standing Croy Contracting for building safe rooms. His advocacy is understandable. First of all, he says it was his idea. Even more significant, is the promise of a hungry market.

Ewert, CroySafe’s business development director, says people are more attentive than ever to the potential of natural disasters and the fear of home intrusions and theft. The Safe Room product offers an excellent way to prevent tragedies to life and property and provide security.

“When I came on board 16 months ago, I had an idea

**“We are looking to fill the huge gaps in the residential and commercial personal protection market here in Southwest Virginia. With extreme weather, fires and intrusion being on the rise, we believe CroySafe can help mitigate those gaps to keep people and property safe.”** —Aaron Ewert, Business Development Director of CroySafe

## WHAT DO PEOPLE PUT IN SAFE ROOMS?

- Themselves(!); during home intrusion or threat
- Jewelry, Watches, Vintage Wine, Expensive Items
- Weapons, Firearms, Ammunition
- Valuables, Collectibles, Rare Items
- Important Documents, Licenses, Passports, Records
- Money, Precious Metals
- Family Albums, Photos, Video, Media





Demo room at CroySafe in Botetourt County. This one is 8-foot by 8-foot and shows how people can safely secure belongings such as important documents, media like photographs and video, vintage wine, rare artifacts, jewelry, weapons, money, and themselves.

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- A smarter alternative to a traditional safe
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for Eric," says Ewert. Eric Croy is the founder and owner of Croy Contracting, which he started about 35 years ago. The company is a 24/7 facilities maintenance contractor that handles a variety of commercial accounts, including hundreds of Wells Fargo banks, and facilities of Cox Communications, Coca Cola bottling, the railroad, among the industrial lineup.

"One of my lifelong friends had started a company by the name of CW Armor (that makes bulletproof vests for police, military, and the general public). He's a local American veteran and ex-Army Ranger. He also invented the large format armor material known as Gator Wall. It looks kind of like drywall; it can be painted, plastered, covered with drywall or paneling, etc. Gator Wall is in the Pentagon, courtrooms, etc. businesses including large international corporations, and homes.

I brought CW Armor to meet Eric one day. CW Armor had a Safe Room concept but did not want to build them—they just wanted to sell the Gator Wall. So, we are now the construction arm, and CW Armor provides the material."

CroySafe serves both residential and commercial clients. Ewert says they are working with architects, churches, law firms, and "hopefully, schools and any business that would like to protect their

employees and property. Once again, we can help with intrusion, fire and extreme weather like tornadoes and hurricanes.”

CroySafe just started around six months ago. Ewert says they have sold a few Safe Rooms to residential homes and are in discussion now with schools and businesses. At the ribbon-cutting on April 8, he says he has five quotes out now and four more opportunities.

“Folks are figuring out what a Safe Room is and why they need one.”

Ewert says the process of getting and installing a CroySafe Safe Room is straightforward.

“We find or get a lead; we usually will go to their house or business first to look at the space and make any recommendations. That will take about 45 minutes. We then will go back and create our estimate depending on the customer’s needs and desires.”

## CROY CONTRACTING

Croy Contracting, a Botetourt County-based construction and contracting firm with more than 35 years of service in the region’s residential and commercial markets, is expanding its operations with a \$3.45 million investment to launch CroySafe, a new division specializing in professionally installed safe rooms for homes and businesses. The project will create 30 new jobs in the region.

The expansion positions Croy Contracting at the forefront of a growing market focused on permanent, built-in security solutions designed to protect families, employees, firearms, and high-value assets while seamlessly integrating into any space.

—Botetourt County announcement



CroySafe rooms are bulletproof.



Croy Contracting has been in the construction business for nearly four decades. A ribbon-cutting for CroySafe was held at the headquarters in Botetourt County on April 8. In attendance included Eric Croy and Aaron Ewert of CroySafe; Norvell West, Bob Carpentieri, and Erin McKee of CW Armor, Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce representatives and executive director Jacqui Sobieski; Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce representatives and executive director Eric Sichau; Roanoke Regional Partnership representatives and president John Hull; and other stakeholders.

The company encourages people to visit the demo Safe Room at its shop in Botetourt.

“Once we have the contract signed, we can build some of the smaller units in as little as two days. Depending on size and custom requests we can have it done in 2-5 days. Some folks like to order custom cabinetry or add in a bathroom or other amenities.”

Ewert says the 8x8 standalone room on a concrete pad “goes for around \$35,000, depending on any custom finishes,” so pricing can vary greatly depending on those factors and the size. “We can go anywhere; but right now, we are hoping to stay within 200 miles of our office here in Hollins.”

“CroySafe is a natural next step for us as a company,” said Eric Croy, owner of Croy Contracting. “This new division gives us the chance to use that experience in




a way that helps people feel safer and more prepared in their homes and businesses.”

After 35 years running his contracting business, the veteran founder and owner sounds a little reserved in comparison to his energetic development director. Both Croy and Ewert are local to Roanoke; Eric went to William Fleming High School and Aaron went to Patrick Henry High School.

Safe Rooms back then only existed in hidden bunkers and for the most exclusive demographic.

One could see growth in this market as a sad statement—or it could just be a smart response to an individual exercising the highest degree of responsibility and security.

There’s no question it can be a life—and property—saver. 



Submitted

# Spreading the Ripple

By Rachel Nicole Edwards

A dusty hotel lobby? Spotted office windows? Cluttered waiting room? City Wide Facility Solutions assists with all things cleaning and maintenance.

“City Wide represents our clients — not our own work. We partner with small, local ‘mom-and-pop’ cleaning companies that truly excel at cleaning,” says Jeff Gilley, general manager of City Wide’s Blue Ridge

branch. “Our management team handles client communication, site visits, operational oversight, and accounting so our contractors can stay focused on delivering consistent, high-quality service. This structure allows those businesses to grow faster both within and outside of City Wide.”

The company’s typical client can be found anywhere from manufacturing and





City Wide Blue Ridge's Jeff Gilley: "When [the company] approached me about opening a franchise location in Roanoke, given that my wife, Jackie, is from the area, the decision was an easy one."

industrial to logistics and medical facilities.

Before Jeff Gilley found his purpose at City Wide, his first experience was in sports radio in Washington, D.C., where he worked as a Sports Update Anchor for WJFK and WNEW for two years. When he realized sports weren't his true passion, he was led to a sales position with Speakers Bureau in Arlington, VA. Gilley shares, "after meeting my wife in 2020, I relocated to Richmond and joined the City Wide Richmond location. There, I set several national sales records, including the highest contract revenue sold

in a single year. As a result, Chris Sweeney, the company's majority owner, approached me about opening a franchise location in Roanoke. Given that my wife, Jackie, is from the area, the decision was an easy one."

Now that Gilley is rooted in Roanoke, his invaluable work is behind City Wide's commitment to Virginia's Blue Ridge, covering a wide range of communities beyond Roanoke including Salem, Blacksburg, Wytheville, Lynchburg, Staunton, Harrisonburg, and Winchester among many others.



To have such a wide footprint, City Wide Facility Solutions does not spread itself thin, but strategizes to offer its clients an experience equitably tailored to their needs.

“We have documented procedures for every part of the operation, ensuring consistency, accountability, and clarity across all accounts,” Gilley explains. “Each client receives recurring, proactive inspections, with the frequency based on the size of the facility and scope of work. These inspections are not designed to simply ‘check a box.’ We actively look for potential issues and identify solutions before a concern is raised by the client.”

Staying ahead of client’s needs means much more than securing a nightly mopping job. Mistakes, accidents, and emergencies can happen, from fires and floods to an overlooked pest problem or



leaky faucet. City Wide's uniqueness lies in its hands-on, visible approach to such situations. Gilley praises the way City Wide stands out for how quickly and effectively they respond when issues arise.

Another unique aspect to City Wide's services is that they require no long-

term contracts. Their month-to-month agreements encourage their teams to bring their best to work every day, prizing performance, perseverance, and responsiveness to clients above all else. In addition to everyday cleaning and emergency response, Gilley says his company's work doesn't stop there.





“Our clients also utilize our Account Managers to help with twenty plus other services like window washing, pressure washing, handyman, floor work, parking lot services, roofing, painting, and more. We only use licensed and insured vendors who deliver results for other clients. This brings peace of mind to our clients because we

bring proven vendors to the table. Clients who utilize their Account Manager can save hours a month.”

This means City Wide’s clients can breathe easy knowing their facility is in good hands, and their focus can remain on what’s most important for their businesses. It is City



# BEFORE AND AFTER CITY WIDE FACILITY SOLUTIONS



BEFORE



AFTER




Wide's goal, after all, to positively impact the communities it serves. Jeff Gilley calls this "spreading the ripple," and that it's his favorite part of his job. City Wide's Blue Ridge location is just one of 115, and the company as a whole is a nationwide initiative: a broad scope with detailed focus. To Gilley, "spreading the ripple" means going above and beyond business to lift communities up through giving back. "City Wide also takes philanthropy pretty seriously. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been raised for organizations like SEAL Future Foundation, LiFT, GiGi's Playhouse, and the YMCA through our annual charity gala," Gilley adds.

The support of every company is its

community, and at the heart of every community is its people. Jeff Gilley appreciates being at City Wide and the people there who have impacted his life.

"I enjoy working with my wife, Jackie. She was my first Account Manager and now works in Accounting. We could not be where we are today without Jackie and the rest of our amazing team— Jeff Huffman, Andrew Phillips, Zac Oginz, Montrelle Johnson, Brian Godfrey, Morgan Nebera (Operating Partner), and Chris Sweeney (Operating Partner)."

"I also enjoy helping our Independent Contractors grow their business," Gilley concludes. "Thank you to all of our incredible contractors!" 



## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

**By Carrie Cousins,  
LeadPoint Digital**

**Executive Summary:**

*I don't typically use this space to highlight the company I work for, LeadPoint Digital. But this spring has been packed with some amazing things. I hope you'll be kind enough to indulge me this one time.*

## Kudos ...to us!

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LeadPoint Digital achieved 2026 Premier Partner status in the Google Partners program. This designation places LeadPoint Digital in the top 3% of all agencies in the United States.

### TOP 3%!

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Earning this achievement requires meeting three strict criteria: managing a significant ad spend threshold, onboarding new clients at a high rate, and retaining those clients at a high rate. These qualifications mirror LeadPoint's core mission where the focus is client success.

This is an annual honor, so we must keep working! To see our team rise to the top of Google agencies in less than five years is incredible. It is amazing to set out to be the best on behalf of clients ... and actually achieve it.

### Best Place to Work

LeadPoint Digital was named one of the 2026 Best Places to Work in Virginia. The honor is bestowed by Virginia Business and awards are held in partnership with Best Companies Group.

This one makes my heart pitter-patter for a team that puts in 110% for clients every day – almost all of our people work right here in Roanoke – and provided feedback in

# Google Premier Partner

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anonymous surveys that this is truly a great place to work.

**Thanks, AAF Roanoke!**

I was lucky enough to be awarded a Silver ADDY and Judges' Choice Award in the Western Virginia Advertising Awards this year for work on a project for the New River Conservancy. Creative work doesn't get enough credit in a world where AI can spit out something in seconds.

True creativity happens when we stop and actually think on the path to solving a problem. It's messy and beautiful. Thank you AAF for continuing to recognize that advertising is both a discipline and art. And congrats to everyone who won an award this year; every one of you inspire me! 🏆

“To see our team rise to the top of Google agencies... is incredible.”






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Dan Smith

Nathan Amos at his teller station at Pinnacle Bank's Hershberger Road branch in Roanoke.

# Opportunity or Setback?

By Dan Smith

**For Nathan Amos, the setbacks come around and he uses them to his advantage.**

There was a strong indication early-on that Nathan Amos had a knack for adapting and adjusting.

As the 32-year-old bank teller tells it, he was a junior in high school who was a good

enough football player at Franklin County High School that college recruiters were knocking on his door. Virginia Tech was one of them. Amos was a big kid, standing 6-feet-4-inches and carrying well over 200 pounds, solid base for a young center. One



Nathan Amos designed his own tattoo but allowed a professional to apply it.

day, during a workout, he “blew out my knee while doing one-legged squats.” The pain eventually gravitated to his ankle, and his promising football career was done.

Not a tear one did he shed. Instead, he turned his attention to body building, power-lifting, a healthy variety of jobs, and art. His mother and father are/were artists and Amos had sold his first work at the age of 7. He was no rookie. All he lacked

at the time was the organizational skill to accommodate all he wanted to accomplish.

These days, Amos, who remains quite literally larger than life—the size of an NFL offensive lineman at 6-foot-4, 340 pounds—works as a teller at Pinnacle Bank because “I am good with numbers.” And, he mentioned, “for fun and relaxation.”

Amos and his wife, Britnie, have three boys,

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This is Amos' werewolf. He enjoys drawing fanciful figures.

9,4, and 1, who are beginning to show an enjoyment of art. Britnie, also an artist, "got me into using color," says Amos.

His father, Roger Amos, is a noted graphic fabric designer having done work for Nike, Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister, American Eagle, Disney and the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. His mom, Kim Amos, is a successful wire artist. The boys, says Amos, "doodle."

Amos, who also writes music, filling up his creative side, has had a wide variety of jobs along the way including furniture mover. "I was moving a 300-pound couch [by himself] and blew out my back. That has kept me from getting back into bodybuilding for now." It also led to him being fired, he says. Another setback, another opportunity.

Much of Amos' drawing has a dark side. "I

don't do rainbows and unicorns," he says, and when he was in 7th grade, he drew a savage wolf with wings and sold five copies of it to classmates. That day he became a professional.

By the 12th grade, he was creating with an airbrush and at one point, he drew a Franklin County High eagle on a T-shirt and wound up selling more than 200 of them before graduation. He said the school threatened him with copyright infringement, but nothing came of it.

In the 11th grade he became an apprentice tattoo artist and did "a lot of memorial tattoos." He did mention that he failed an art class in high school because his teacher "was offended" by the darkness of his work.

Art, says Amos, "has always been my go-to when I need a break from reality. I do portraits in graphite and charcoal




What good is a comic book without a little blood?

and have ventured into skin tones lately.”

Amos has his own small graphics company in Rocky Mount on the side, making “T-shirts and signs mostly. If you can dream it, we can make it.”

In the past, he has been an auto mechanic for

Duncan Ford, a computer technologist for Allstate, a personal trainer for the YMCA four years, and a factory worker for Altec. He has been with Pinnacle, he says, for seven years. The banking, appropriately, was the result of “passion to help.”

That and his willingness to adapt. 

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## BUSINESS CENTS

By Daniel Colston

**Executive Summary:**  
*The best kind of growth  
is controlled growth.*

*Daniel Colston, CFP®,  
CEPA runs a tax and  
investing firm in Roanoke,  
Upward Financial Planning,  
specializing in helping  
business owners and  
retirees. He can be  
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upwardfp.com](mailto:daniel@upwardfp.com).*

## Scaling without losing your center

Years ago I remember overhearing my former boss hang up on a telemarketer—pretty abruptly, and honestly, a little harsh. It caught me off guard. I remember thinking, “Man, that felt unnecessary.”

Fast forward to today. I run multiple businesses with several phone lines, and between spam calls, robocalls, and junk emails, the volume is overwhelming. I get it now. In fact, I’m probably less patient than he was.

That moment stuck with me because it highlights something every business owner eventually faces: the noise.

And the bigger you grow, the louder that noise becomes.

So, the real question is this—how do you scale your business without losing your focus, your quality, or your sanity?

I’ve seen both sides done wrong.

Some companies chase growth at all costs. They add jobs, hire quickly, expand services, and before long, quality slips. Customers feel it. Reviews reflect it. Margins shrink. Growth without systems is just chaos with a bigger payroll.

On the other hand, I’ve seen owners who never scale. They stay stuck doing everything themselves—sales, operations, customer service—because “no one can do it like I can.” The result? Burnout, capped income, and missed opportunities to create jobs and impact their community.

The goal isn’t just growth, it’s controlled growth.

You have to build systems that protect quality:

- Clear processes for how work gets done
- Training that actually sticks
- Accountability at every level

At the same time, you can’t remove yourself completely. You still need a pulse on the business. That doesn’t mean doing everything—it means knowing what matters.

For me, that looks like:

- Listening to a few recorded calls each week
- Checking key numbers like close rates and job profitability
- Staying connected with team leaders

You don’t need to hear everything—you just need to hear enough to know if things are on track.

But back to the noise—because it’s real, and it’s constant.

If you don’t actively filter it out, it will consume your time and attention. That’s why part of scaling is protecting your focus:

- Delegate call handling to trained staff or a VA
- Use tools to filter spam and prioritize real opportunities
- Set boundaries around your time

Growth requires attention—but not scattered attention. Focused attention.

At the end of the day, scaling a business isn’t just about making more money. It’s about building something sustainable—something that creates jobs, serves customers well, and strengthens your local economy.

Grow—but stay anchored. That’s where real success lives. 📱

“

Growth without systems is just chaos with a bigger payroll.



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Submitted photos

## THE MISSION

The mission of WoodWirks is to produce the highest quality Culinary Charcoal™ with the lowest environmental impact, through partnerships with local forestry activities.

# Homegrown “Culinary” Charcoal? You Betcha.

**Northwest Ace Hardware Partners with Virginia-Based WoodWirks to Bring Premium Culinary Charcoal to the Blue Ridge and New River Valleys**

Roanoke-based Northwest Ace Hardware, with 18 locations across the region, just announced its partnership with WoodWirks, a Virginia-based producer of premium culinary lump charcoal. As the first major retailer to carry WoodWirks in the Blue

Ridge and New River Valley, Northwest Ace Hardware will offer customers a superior, sustainably produced grilling and cooking fuel.

WoodWirks crafts 100% natural hardwood




lump charcoal using sustainably sourced timber and a proprietary firing process that preserves the wood's natural resins. The result is a premium culinary charcoal that delivers exceptional heat, consistent burn times, and superior flavor—qualities prized by serious grill masters and professional chefs alike.

Every batch is hand-sorted and contains no additives, binders, or chemicals, ensuring a clean burn with minimal ash and maximum performance. WoodWirks also maintains one of the lowest environmental footprints in the industry through strategic partnerships with local forestry operations and a circular economy model. The company powers its kilns using lumber end cuts from regional truss manufacturers, transforming what would otherwise be waste into energy and

closing the loop on multiple waste streams.

“We’re thrilled to partner with WoodWirks,” said Vance Overstreet, owner of Northwest Ace Hardware. “This is more than just another product on our shelves. WoodWirks represents everything we value—outstanding quality, environmental responsibility, and strong support for the local Virginia economy.”

The new WoodWirks culinary charcoal line is now available at all Northwest Ace Hardware locations. 

## WHAT IS CULINARY CHARCOAL™ AND WHAT MAKES IT SUCH HIGH QUALITY?

Culinary-Grade: All natural always, Culinary Charcoal™ is sourced sustainably to provide the most flavor enhancing grilling experience. WoodWirks uses primarily Virginia Oak and Virginia Cherry trees that have been marked for landfills or destined for bun piles. Each batch of charcoal is single origin and can be traced to the soil it grew in, which adds depth and complexity to the firing process to retain the natural resin of the trees. Consistently chefs and home-grillers alike report that WoodWirks charcoal lights fast, burns clean, and enhances whatever they are cooking far better than anything they've used before.

## STARTING THE FIRE

Made in Caroline County, VA, this women owned, small business established themselves with local butcher shops, eventually catching the attention of Paddy Coker, who at the time was head chef of the #1 steakhouse in the USA in 2022; Hawksmoor. Paddy, now active Culinary Director and part owner has a long history with charcoal. While establishing Hawksmoor, he burned through a variety of common brands, all of which he found were equally disappointing... until he tried WoodWirks. The Hawksmoor steakhouses in the US exclusively use WoodWirks Culinary Charcoal and will continue to do so. To this day WoodWirks is used in multiple Michelin star and award-winning restaurants.

WoodWirks principals include Dawn Young, CEO, Co-Founder and Co-Owner; Greg Seitz, COO, Co-Founder and Head of Production; Patrick Coker, Culinary Director and Co-Owner; Hilary Kline, Marketing Director and Events Coordinator.



## Pricing your property

Pricing a home isn't simple. Early in my career, I learned quickly that online estimates like Zillow Zestimates and tax values often miss upgrades and true market conditions. The best price comes from comparing recent sales, current listings, and condition.


When I first started in real estate, I priced homes for one of those companies that buys houses. They come in and try to buy your house for a whole lot less and then they'll typically resell it or flip it. I was pricing homes in Florida, Charlotte, and was also in neighborhoods in Raleigh, Richmond and most importantly right here in Roanoke Virginia. It was not always easy without MLS access in other states.

Getting a second opinion of what a house is worth is always important as well. I most recently went on a listing presentation where I even asked an appraiser for their feedback. I also reached out to one of the top realtors here that I'm friends with to ask for their opinion on a home I am pricing. I did this just to make sure I am giving my client the best.

I've even had clients have their home appraised before putting it on the market which could cost \$500 to \$700 to make sure they listed their home for a fair price. But here is the deal, even the appraiser can be off with pricing.

Other ways to price besides to see what sold previously is to see what is on the market now.

What is listed like yours? What is pending like yours? Is it the same school zone? That makes a difference too. I have three tools to price a home and if the three are consistent, I feel that is what the price should be.

So, my advice. Interview three or more realtors. Get a price. If two of the three Realtors have the same price that is probably what you should list your property for. If the third realtor is off some or not as high as the others and you want to use that Realtor instead of the other ones that's okay because pricing homes can be really difficult. It's still okay to use the Realtor that may not have the same price as the others. This does not mean that they don't know as much or they are not as good. In fact, they may be more qualified and worth your time more than you know. 

## REAL ESTATE MATTERS

By Frazier Hughes

**Executive Summary:**  
*There are a lot of factors to consider when pricing a home for sale.*

*Frazier Hughes is with Keller Williams Realty. Reach him at [frazierhughes@gmail.com](mailto:frazierhughes@gmail.com)*



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Tommy Miller, City of Salem

File photo

# Salem, regional leaders focus on jobs and redevelopment after Yokohama closure

By Aila Boyd

**In the wake of Yokohama's planned closure in Salem, city and regional leaders say their immediate focus has been twofold: helping displaced workers transition into new jobs as quickly as possible and positioning the former plant for long-term industrial reuse.**

Salem Director of Economic Development Tommy Miller said the city moved quickly after the closure announcement to coordinate with workforce and economic development partners across the region.

"Since the Yokohama closure, the City of Salem has worked closely with regional, state and federal workforce partners to support impacted employees and connect them with available resources," Miller said.

Those efforts have included job placement services, resume assistance, access to unemployment benefits and retraining opportunities for affected workers.

Miller said the city partnered with the Greater Roanoke Workforce Board, the Virginia Works Rapid Response team, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, Virginia Western Community College and other organizations to create a regional response network.

Together, those partners hosted service sessions to help workers understand the resources available to them and organized multiple job fairs aimed at connecting former Yokohama employees with local and regional employers.

The workforce effort has already drawn strong participation. A March 5 regional job fair attracted 157 attendees who officially signed in, following an earlier Feb. 17 event that drew 134 attendees.

The purpose of the fairs has been to help workers reenter the workforce as quickly as

possible once their layoffs become effective while also encouraging them to remain in the Roanoke Valley.

Miller said workforce partners have also maintained regular communication with area employers to identify hiring needs and directly share those openings with displaced Yokohama workers.

While the city has been a major partner in the response, Miller emphasized that the employment events have been part of a broader regional workforce initiative involving state, local and federal partners.

He said the city does not directly track how many former Yokohama workers have found jobs, noting that the Greater Roanoke Workforce Board is responsible for maintaining that data.

At the same time, Miller said Salem has turned its attention to the future of the former Yokohama site, which he described as one of the city's top economic development priorities.

"The Yokohama site is now a top priority for the City of Salem Economic Development Department," Miller said.

He said the city is still in the early stages of evaluating long-term opportunities for the industrial property, but discussions are already underway with Yokohama leadership and a wide range of partners.

Those conversations include the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the



Submitted

Yokohama job fair

Roanoke Regional Partnership, the commercial real estate community and utility providers, all working to identify potential users for the property.

“Our goal is to position the site competitively for a wide range of industries, including both domestic and international prospects, with a focus on long-term investment and quality job creation,” Miller said.

He said Salem’s strong record of supporting business investment through local and state incentive packages remains an important tool in those efforts.

According to Miller, incentives would be considered on a case-by-case basis depending on the prospective company’s needs, the scale of investment and the number of jobs expected to be created.

He added that any future zoning or infrastructure improvements would be shaped by the needs of the eventual tenant or owner, while taking advantage of the site’s existing industrial capabilities and utility access.

Miller said the closure has also sharpened Salem’s broader economic development strategy by reinforcing the importance of business retention while expanding efforts to diversify the local tax base.

That means increased outbound marketing to attract investment across multiple sectors rather than relying too heavily on any one industry.

At the regional level, Roanoke Regional Partnership Executive Director and CEO John Hull said the organization is viewing the closure through the lens of the region’s advanced manufacturing strengths.

Hull said the partnership has taken what he described as a proactive and strategic approach, working with Yokohama, the city and utility partners to better understand the property’s long-term potential.

While the site is not yet market-ready, he said the region continues to see significant value in both the facility and the workforce left behind.

Hull said one of the Roanoke region’s

greatest strengths remains its highly skilled and experienced manufacturing labor force.

“That talent aligns well with the advanced manufacturing companies already in our recruitment pipeline, particularly those focused on precision production, automation, and operational excellence,” Hull said.


As a matter of policy, Hull declined to discuss specific prospects, but he said workforce quality remains one of the strongest drivers in conversations with advanced manufacturing firms considering the region.

More broadly, Hull said the Yokohama closure reflects the reality that global manufacturers regularly reassess their footprints and production strategies.

“It does not diminish the Roanoke Region’s competitive advantages. In fact, it reinforces



Yokohama celebrated its 100 millionth tire from the Salem plant in March 2023.

the importance of continuing to diversify our industrial base, strengthen workforce development efforts, and position the region for long-term success in advanced manufacturing,” Hull said. 



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Submitted

Debbie Smith: "With over 13 years of experience of photographing women, I couldn't help but notice how certain colors had a transformative effect on my clients. Some hues made them radiate, while others didn't quite capture their essence. That's when I decided to delve into color analysis to help them with their clothes."

# What's Your Color?

By Kelsey Monahan

FiftyLove Photography, owned and operated by Debbie Smith in Christiansburg, is a women's photography studio offering sessions such as personal branding,

headshots, glam sessions, the "40 over 40 movement," boudoir photos, and color analysis. You'll also find a downloadable posing guide tailored for women over 40.



Kelsey's consultation revealed a winter palette best complimented her image. Other palettes are likewise grouped in seasonal tones: cool, light, airy (Summer); warm, bright, light, jewel (Spring); warm, muted, earthy (Autumn); cool, deep, saturated (Winter).

The purpose behind FiftyLove Photography is to empower women of all kinds to celebrate their own unique beauty and confidence.

## The Review:

Imagine leaving a 1:1 session equipped with the knowledge of what looks good on you... and truly believing it? For some of us, you don't have to receive much convincing of what looks bad on you, but what's impactful about the Color Analysis Consultation with Debbie Smith of FiftyLove Photography in Christiansburg is seeing with your own eyes the power of choosing the right colors for yourself. This experience changes the internal dressing room monologue from "I look terrible in this!" to "This looks terrible on me," immediately identifying why, and moving on.

Whether you struggle to turn a critical, unbiased eye on yourself or not, having a professional guide you through the various colors and tones may result in a surprising outcome. Those online, low-quality quizzes may have been steering you wrong all along. Debbie approaches the process in a friendly, warm, yet matter-of-fact way – because there's just no denying the way your face transforms as the color swatches flip from unbecoming to flattering almost magically.


It's confidence-building to be able to look



"Debbie's color analysis process leaves you empowered and focused on leaning into your natural beauty rather than just avoiding your flaws." —Kelsey Monahan

in the mirror with someone else beside you and state, "That is not my color" without being offended or taking it personally. Or the opposite, "Wow! Did you see how my lips turned pinker and my eyes got brighter!?" without shying away from the compliment.

Sitting in front of a mirror with natural lighting and a stranger beside you for 1.5 hours may sound daunting initially, but the process leaves you empowered and focused on leaning into your natural beauty rather than just avoiding your flaws.

Instead of investing your money in what's trendy, you now have the seemingly scientific data to support a classic, timeless color palette in your closet because it's customized for you. What is literally a deeper analysis of your outer self, leaves you transformed in a deeper way than you might expect. 

For information or booking, visit [fiftylovephotography.com](http://fiftylovephotography.com). Currently, in-person sessions are \$197 (for one client; \$374 for two); and the online analysis is \$122.



## THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

**Executive Summary:**  
*Botetourt County prepares to welcome (despite some opposition from local residents over health and quality of life concerns) one of the world's biggest tech companies to Southwest Virginia.*

## Botetourt data center project moves ahead

Google is officially moving forward with plans to construct a data center campus in the business park at the Greenfield Center in Botetourt County just off U.S. 220. County Administrator Gary Larrowe says an annual tax revenue is projected at nearly \$30 million for the three data buildings planned for. "It has been an all hands on deck operation to be actually able to pull this off. In a small community of 34,000 and the staff that we have. What we're doing is solidifying the economic future and the technological future for Botetourt." In the data center world "it seems like the multiplier effect is more like six – if that's the case and if you end up having 50 jobs and then the multiplier ... then you're actually creating 300-350 jobs in reality. That would be per each [of three planned] data centers."

The three Google data centers could require up to six million gallons of water a day from Carvins Cove for the campus at peak times of the year (like summer); Google says it is closely working with the Western Virginia Water Authority to explore other cooling options. Larrowe also says he looks forward "to seeing who may want to co-locate here as a result of this operation. There will be opportunities I feel certain in the future associated with that – and being able to multiply out with some of the activities they have planned for us [in] sustainable investments that we'll end up seeing in the future." A portion of the Greenfield Center property (Google purchased over 300 acres from the county) had to be rezoned for a data center, although the large majority of that tract was already zone "by right," and did not require any additional action by the County Planning Commission or the Board of Supervisors.

The Rocky Forge wind turbine project – another controversial Botetourt County endeavor – is finally a "go" and the Google data centers in Botetourt will source some of its power from there – potentially alleviating the concern some have that they would have put a strain on the electrical grid – ultimately driving up rates for local residents. There are more than 4100 data centers in the United States, housing the high speed chips that fuel Artificial Intelligence. Those chips demand a high amount of cooling to keep them from overheating as they work to solve problems and answer questions from users. It doesn't seem like AI is going away.

In Indianapolis, a city-county councilor says his home was shot at early in the morning of April 6, less than a week after he publicly supported a data center that has been embroiled in controversy for the past six months, reports yahoo! news. A note that read "No Data Centers" was tucked under the doormat. Virginia has over 660 operational data centers, concentrated in Northern Virginia, with hundreds more under construction or planned, making it the largest data center market in the U.S.

continued on Page 41

## Ideas, ideas, ideas

It gets tempting at times—turning away from all the clutter of content and sticking with the sources you’re generally agreeable with. Especially today. There is SO MUCH. CONTENT.

In our personal lives, we’re often encouraged to surround ourselves with positive supportive people—not those who are negative or disrupt our peace and well-being. Epicurus sought tranquility and I often think of the Daniel Klein book, *Travels with Epicurus: Meditations from a Greek Island on the Pleasures of Old Age*, where the good life is fleeing conflict and enjoying simple pleasures. Ahhhh.

So, if that’s a genuine and valid life lesson, why wouldn’t it apply to our consumption of content from media?

I think we should take breaks.

I can think of two times specifically: 1) at least a week of vacation, camp, or some getaway and removal from the blabber—and 2) our most senior years, when you’d rather finish out with a smile on your face than a crabby old frown.


But I don’t do that right now. I’m in the news business, after all. And though I feel like gravitating to the ideas that build on my world view—I make a point to diverge. I listen to all sides, even when it raises my blood pressure.

When I attended the pro-Google “Data Centers 101” private panel session, I also chatted with the protestors outside. When I see significant stories on television news, I jump between networks. When I’m invited to a webinar—such as the recent VT-sponsored talk by Nobel prize winner Daron Acemoglu—I paid attention, even as I knew going in, I would probably agree with nothing he shared. And yet I wiped my slate clean and considered his data.

Is my mind changed from this approach? Seldom. But I can appreciate other views; and it helps to see the how and why folks think differently than I do.

Again, it REALLY IS difficult to listen to all the ideas. We don’t have the time. It’s so much easier to stick with the content creators we respect, trust, appreciate, and believe.

It’s also lazy.

I refuse to be lazy. 



## ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

**Executive Summary:**  
*Whether you’re left,  
right, centrist...  
notice all directions.*



## How cultural investment is shaping the future of Downtown Roanoke, Virginia

Municipal leaders in Roanoke, Virginia, have asked themselves a question that many larger cities have asked themselves: Should the city center's future be built around short-term entertainment or long-term cultural enrichment? For many of us who are engaged in building up the arts in Roanoke, the answer is multifaceted.

Both options bring excitement and opportunities for engagement to the Roanoke area. Entertainment-driven options, such as casinos or seasonal attractions, can draw crowds, but for a city looking to sustain growth, we have to ask ourselves if these short-term entertainment options can sustain long-term energy.

### The short-term vs. long-term entertainment options

While casinos and other high-traffic entertainment venues can promise high volume and high revenue, they are designed to entice visitors for short bursts, whether a weekend away or an evening out with friends. The challenge emerges after these short events are over and the excitement has faded.

Visitors have come to Roanoke, spent their money, but moved on. The local mainstays, like the schools, small businesses, and resident creatives, may see little of that prosperity, and it has little impact on the area's long-term growth.

Our concentration at Star City Center for the Arts is not on dollars, but depth. Our arts-based model has been built not to provide fleeting moments, but to provide momentum toward a bright cultural future for Roanoke.

### Sustainable cultural investment

While there is certainly no lack of talent or imagination in Roanoke, there has traditionally been a shortage of sustainable outlets to allow that talent and creativity to take hold and grow over time. When art is allowed to take root in an area like Roanoke, the talent that has been nurtured there is unlikely to leave once bigger cities with larger cultural footprints come calling.

Long-term investment in an area's cultural identity can be game-changing. A center for the arts can create a consistent infrastructure for creativity, performance, and idea generation that a short-term entertainment option, such as a casino, simply cannot compete with.

At Star City, we seek to create year-long engagement through classes, performances, workshops, rehearsal space, and creative collaborations that build over time. Artists and performers will understand that they have a permanent place to learn, belong, and grow their art, whether it's fine art, dance, or performance-based. This community-driven approach can help grow a city's

## GUEST COMMENTARY

By **Kayla Dixon**,  
Marketing Manager —  
Star City Center  
for the Arts

**Executive Summary:**  
*Roanoke, Virginia, is investing in the arts to build a sustainable cultural future, transforming its downtown from short-term entertainment to long-term creative growth through the Star City Center for the Arts.*

**StarCityCenter  
fortheArts.com**

entire creative ecosystem, fueling tourism, hospitality, dining, small businesses, and education in the process.

## A multidisciplinary hub

With Star City Center for the Arts, we are on a mission to provide this creative infrastructure, acting as a multidisciplinary hub that connects talent to opportunity. We want the entire Roanoke community to participate and revel in a mix of artists, musicians, instructors, theater groups, and creative entrepreneurs under one roof. It's all meant to create a steady rhythm of activity, as opposed to one-and-done events.

Beyond the multidisciplinary engagement, the "center for the arts" approach also creates economic ripple effects. Events and productions require a wide network of contributors, including prop designers, costumers, technicians, performers, instructors, and local vendors. The arts ecosystem naturally brings together a diverse workforce, all contributing to a shared creative outcome.

We want to contribute to creating an environment that both entertains and activates the community.

## A sense of identity and belonging

When a city relies on short-term entertainment to define its cultural offerings, it does little to


foster a sense of identity or belonging for visitors or residents. But when families and creatives visit the same space and when artists learn to collaborate on projects, it creates ownership. The creative works represent the community, and children grow up with the space as a core memory of their formative years.

This level of ownership and integration into the community creates a sense of pride among those who frequent the space and participate in the creative expression. People are more apt to invest in places they feel connected to, which creates long-term cultural viability for the city.

## Creating a place for connection

Sure, a night at the casino or the comedy club can be fun. But a center for the arts has an impact that extends far beyond its walls.


Even before our official opening, Star City Center for the Arts has been living its central mission: to foster connection in the city we call home. And although our focus is local, our reach is growing.

Through partnerships with neighboring cities and instructors from across the nation, we aim to bring more attention to Roanoke's unique talent base. We are hopeful that through a feeling of deep connection, people will be invested in the long-term success of Roanoke's cultural identity. 

## Marrano / There's something

from Page 38

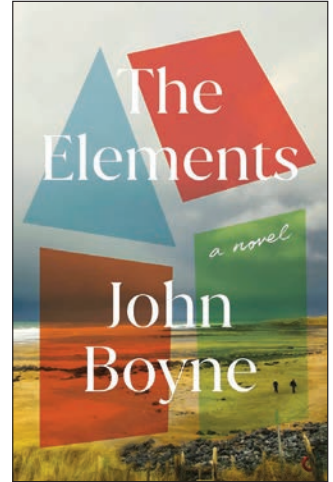
Almost 600 in the Commonwealth are in the planning stages, but some will have to overcome local opposition – and some local government bodies, even as Google, Microsoft and other data center builders hold out the promise of

major tax revenue benefits that many localities can only dream about. Botetourt has already reaped some of the benefits early – Google paid for several new ambulances for example. Stay tuned. 

“ “  
Is my mind changed from  
this approach? Seldom. — Page 39

“”  
I mean Boyne IS the author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* after all, so happiness... is remote.

“”  
It was obvious... she was struggling.



## FRONTReviews >

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

### *Deep as dirt*

Melodramatic. I don't think that's a word; but it's my critique word of choice upon finishing John Boyne's *The Elements* (Henry Holt; 2025). It's not "melodramatic" in the sense of exaggerated emotional provocation; but the personal trauma... good lord. Not one, not two, but every major character has tragedy that slays the spirit. Most of it—violent. (I mean Boyne is the author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* after all; so happiness is more remote than an island of 400 population off the coast of Ireland.)

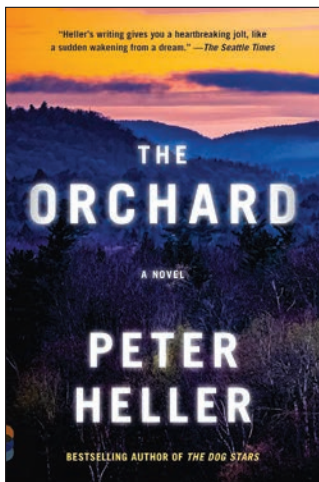
I usually think of two responses to violent tragedies: revenge or forgiveness. Here, in *Elements*, we get a third: moving on. We are introduced to one exceptional vigilante. But the remaining cast of victims

have no real forgiveness; and our narrators give no such expectation. Revenge, you see, captivates us. And if you simply try to move on, after you have suffered terrible violations, well that makes a story, too, as such conflicts build a powerful narrative. The elements of Water, Earth, Fire, Air (the four entitled sections) are brilliant metaphors for our character studies. If I had one wish, it would be that the author consider what one of his own characters said; that she liked writing a novel, because the characters could be happy. Wonderfully written, I just hate to see sexual abuse, murder, suicide, depression, and outright evil at such pervasive levels. A little more balance to those four commanding elements, I suppose.

—Tom Field

### *Poetic simplicity*

*The Orchard* (Vintage; 2025) by Peter Heller is quite simply, a beautiful read. Nature-natural, but simpler than *A River Runs Through It*; Quaint-natural, but simpler than *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Why mention two classics... is *Orchard* destined to reach that level? Not really. But that's because it's simple, simpler, like I said. I found it poetic. A poetic novel (novella?), which is well-suited for its thematic structure. How about I just describe a few things in this story: Frith (Scout-like, like *Mockingbird*, but simpler); her mother Hayley, lovely acquaintance Rosie; a Bernese Mountain



dog; a biker gang; a rustic, poverty-stricken cabin; Chinese poetry; and the backwoods of Vermont's Green Mountains. Beautiful, simply.

—Tom Field

## *An honest, raw, sometimes uncomfortable memoir*

Americans watched Christian Applegate grow up on the long running sitcom *Married ... with Children* in the late 80's and early 90's. She then went on to co-star with Will Ferrell in *Anchorman* and in movies like *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*. The capstone of her career was probably the three seasons of *Dead to Me*, a riveting series with plenty of plot twists and turns.

One of those turns for Applegate was her 2020 diagnosis with Multiple Sclerosis, and on camera it was obvious in season three that she was struggling. Applegate lays it all out in her searing new memoir, *You With The Sad Eyes* (Little, Brown and Company, 2026). MS has now left America's former sassy, brazen teen sweetheart from her *Married* days largely bedridden – and often bitter, as she looks for the joy left in her life, especially her daughter Sadie. She grew up in legendary Laurel Canyon in LA, was friends with musicians like Stephen Stills and actors like Johnny Depp, enduring a somewhat bumpy childhood – always knowing from an early age she wanted to

be an actor – and a dancer, which she did with a broken foot on Broadway. A tough read but fans will appreciate her tenacity while recalling her better days.

—Gene Marrano

## *Impressive doubleheader weekend for RSO*

The Roanoke Symphony Orchestra presented a weekend doubleheader last month beginning with a Pops series concert, the Classical Mystery Tour, backing a group of four musicians in mop tops playing a wide range of music from the Fab Four. Beatles classics from their early bubblegum rock days to psychedelic classics like *I Am the Walrus* and from the last album the Beatles ever recorded, *Abbey Road*. Two days later, a Masterworks concert including the RSO Chorus and the Radford University, with music from Vivaldi and J.S. Bach's Magnificat, heavenly voices singing spiritual music in Latin. Guest alto and soprano vocalist made it even more of a special event. Two splendid concerts in very different genres. The Masterworks season concludes in May with Elgar and Dvořak.

—Gene Marrano

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



## Church to senior living >

**Restoration Housing** showcased another real estate transformation—this one, “Trinity Commons” involved significant repurposing of the historic (1903) Trinity United Methodist Church on Mountain Ave in Roanoke. The new purpose will be an adaptive reuse for senior housing. Trinity Commons has fifteen high-quality, affordable rental apartments for seniors age 55 and older earning between 0% (homeless) and 80% of the area median income. The 1903 Worship Hall and 3rd Street Coffeehouse music venue were preserved as well and will continue to serve the community.



## VACU in B'Burg >

**Virginia Credit Union** has opened its first branch in Blacksburg at 200 N Main Street. It's the first new location in the New River Valley by the now merged VACU and Member One Federal Credit Union. The 3,700-square-foot building has a drive-thru, ATM, walk-up ATMs, and a 2,400-square-foot community room. “The Blacksburg community has welcomed us with opened arms... and this new branch is one way we’re demonstrating our commitment to invest in the people, businesses, and communities we now have the privilege to serve,” says VACU President/CEO Chris Shockley. VACU now has 39 full-service branches across Virginia.



## What's that critter? >

Virginia Tech biologist **Julie Allen** and an international team developed a set of recommendations to ensure trustworthy biodiversity monitoring data when identifying creatures "trilling, scuttling, tweeting, rustling, or slithering" in the woods, jungles, and various environments. Results were published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and tactics were applied in an XPRIZE Rainforest project where she earned a grand prize on the study of 100 hectares of tropical forest in 24 hours, while producing insights within 48 hours. Photo depicts a drone slowly lowering a water sampler though the rainforest canopy to collect environmental DNA during the 2024 XPRIZE games.



## Wellness on location >

Aetna Better Health® of Virginia, a CVS Health® company, opened a new **Community Resource Center (CRC)** at the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority's **EnVision Center** (at 2607 Salem Turnpike NW), expanding access to health, wellness, and social care resources for individuals and families in the Roanoke community. The opening coincided with the EnVision Center's annual spring community cookout on April 4, where the **Aetna Wellness on Wheels (AWoW)** mobile unit offered free onsite health screenings for attendees.



## Data dump on data center >

The **Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce** and **Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce** co-sponsored a "Data Center 101" panel presentation at Charter Hall in downtown Roanoke on April 14—a pro-business, pro-tech development session with Cathie Vick (Google PR); Michael McEvoy (Western Virginia Water Authority); Whitney Czelusniak (Appalachian Power); and Rick Roden (Mountain Lakes Chamber of Commerce) and moderated by John Hull (Roanoke Regional Partnership). Over 100 people attended and about a dozen protestors surrounded the complex, peacefully but vocally opposing the Google project to attendees entering and exiting.

The morning session primarily addressed the data center complex (three buildings) coming to Botetourt County at the Greenfield Industrial Center.

The most vocal cheerleader was Rick Roden (far right on panel) who is the president of Mountain Lakes Chamber of Commerce in Jackson County, AL who spoke of the benefits of their Google data center, saying it's been "an absolute gamechanger" many times. He said the majority of employees were hired locally, and the residual boom from construction, food, and other trades contributed to a \$2.1 billion economic gain in 2024. He cited education as the best benefactor; recognizing the high ranking of Botetourt schools already, "the school systems are gonna get better," he said. He also said the initial detractors "faded into the sunset." The APCO rep mentioned consumer rate-protection measures via tariffs and cooperation with state regulators for "large load" users. The water rep assured the local sources (including Carvins Cove, principally, but also Spring Hollow reservoir and underground sources like Crystal Spring) have "more than adequate water" for the complex, including the 2 million-gallon-day averaged usage that has been projected. The Google rep (who got the most panel time) shared many reasons why the project is needed and why it's a good fit here. Pointing out a \$9 billion growth for Virginia from data centers, the company's commitment to pay 100% for all building infrastructure, her comment that got the most chuckles: "data centers are the daily fabric of our lives... there is not anything we do that doesn't use a data center... even the protestors on social media."

Water usage was clearly at the top of the list of complaints by the protestors.



## BRANCH brings CTE to high schoolers >

Students at Eastern Montgomery High School stepped out of the classroom and into real-world careers last month. **BRANCH**—a major construction firm based in Roanoke—partnered with Montgomery County Public Schools to host a CTE – or Career and Technical Education – Takeover Day. The school was transformed into a hands-on learning environment, where students experienced career opportunities in the construction industry. Students used equipment simulators, explored construction tools and technology, and connected with industry professionals. The event highlighted high-demand careers in the skilled trades—and shows students they can build prosperous futures and help improve their communities.



## Playground evokes Williamson Road corridor >

A new playground at the **Williamson Road Library Branch** has cut a ribbon - the **Plaza de Esperanza**. "Hope Square," was designed by a Danish company with a local rep and was created with features that evoke Williamson Road businesses. Some of the signage at the Plaza de Esperanza is in Spanish, a nod to the large number of Hispanic residents in the area. Part of a \$2.9 million dollar federal "Safer Communities," grant passed through the state paid for the new playground, which includes bi-lingual signage. It also helped fund other gun violence prevention programs in Roanoke. Helen Ferguson is the grants manager for the City of Roanoke: "we're focusing on areas that's high impact – this [playground] is a good way to have impact. We're looking for ways to get kids involved." The Plaza de Esperanza playground was designed by a company based in Denmark that specializes in child play environments; "Hope Square," includes features and signage that highlights the Williamson Road corridor – then and now.



## Big check for Carilion’s Proton therapy >

Community Foundation Serving Western Virginia has awarded a \$500,000 grant to the Carilion Clinic Foundation to support the addition of proton therapy at the Carilion Taubman Cancer Center (under construction.) Proton therapy is an advanced technology for treating pediatric cancers and complex tumors. The closest proton therapy centers now are in Fairfax and Hampton Roads, more than a three-hour drive away. The Carilion Taubman Cancer Center, now under construction on Carilion’s Riverside Campus in Roanoke, will improve access to cancer care for the region by doubling patient capacity, expanding access to advanced treatment options, and broadening the range of clinic trials available. “This grant represents a significant investment in the health and future of Southwest Virginia, and the Community Foundation is honored to support a project that will bring lifesaving research and technology to the people who need it most,” said Michelle Eberly, Director of Grants and Donor Engagement. The Carilion Taubman Cancer Center is expected to open in 2028.



## United Way on the move >

In January, United Way of Virginia’s Blue Ridge moved from its longtime home offices in downtown Roanoke on Campbell Avenue to an Electric Road office park in Southwest Roanoke County. This morning United Way and guests celebrated the move with a ribbon cutting orchestrated by the Roanoke Regional Chamber, where Eric Sichau is the President and a United Way board member: “this space will represent connections, it represents partnerships – the kind of work that happens when we come together. Sichau said he is a part of the United Way building committee, “that helped get this process here.” United Way President and CEO Abby Hamilton urged more people to get involved with the new “opening doors” campaign - asking potential donors to be part of the next chapter for United Way.



## New shared wet/dry lab opens this month >

The shared wet-dry lab space proposed about five years ago along Roanoke's "Innovation Corridor," for a Carilion property on South Jefferson Street is about to come to fruition - and it now has a name. The City of Roanoke and Carilion Clinic have approved a Memorandum of Understanding in establishing a biotech incubator—**RoVA Labs**, as in Roanoke Virginia. RoVa labs is designed to support the growth of research spinoffs says Marc Nelson, Roanoke's director of economic development: "it's a big next step, for Erin Burcham (Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance), Amy White (Dean of STEM at Virginia Western), so many people. It's actually been a labor of love." Researchers who need a short term wet or dry lab can lease space at RoVa labs; Nelson says there are interested parties already and he expects leases to be signed after a May 6 ribbon cutting: "this is kind of a missing piece. We're not Raleigh or San Francisco, and we're not trying to be. But the researchers that do come here they can say, I want to be in Roanoke for a lot of different reasons, I can get all of my work done here, whether it's in this lab for my main employer – or for this spinoff company I've created." The biotech collaboration says Roanoke City, "reinforces the bridges that connect higher education, health services - and industry." The city, Carilion, Virginia Tech, Virginia Western Community College and the Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance - which runs the RAMP high tech business accelerator just up the block on South Jefferson - are all partners in RoVa Labs, which will lease space to researchers who need lab space for a short period of time to tweak their idea or invention. Carilion still owns the building and will manage the new lab space for at least ten years. Initially only about half of the 40,000 square foot space will be utilized for RoVa Labs; Nelson says the lab can create up to 250 jobs within five years.



## Chaos—on wheels >

There could be chaos coming through your neighborhood soon - in the form of a rolling art studio. Owner and self-described Chief Chaos Coordinator Miranda Thornton looked for a bricks and mortar location for **Chaos Corner**, which she calls a "splatter studio," before deciding to turn a bus into an art workshop. Thornton is not an artist - she's a chemist by profession - but says she wanted to bring something "different," to the region. The Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon cutting for Thornton and the Chaos Corner. If you've ever wanted to paint and make art on a canvas - but don't want to deal with the cleanup process—Chaos Corner—actually a converted school bus—might be a good option. She hopes to go beyond just private party rentals – by offering more of a drop-in experience for those that want to try the "Splatter Studio," individually. "You're presented with gear from head to toe, goggles, the [protective] suits, all of that. Then you are given lots of different paint options, different tools. Everybody gets a canvas and take [it] home when they're done."



Gene Marrano



## Funding for upgrades at Knob >

The last time US Senator Tim Kaine took the shuttle bus up to the **McAfee Knob** parking lot on Route 311 two years ago it was to celebrate the new pedestrian bridge going up over the busy roadway. Kaine was back last month to note the next phase of improvements. On a swing through southwest Virginia, Kaine made a visit to western Roanoke County to talk about the \$6.3 million in federal funding he helped secure for a parking lot expansion and other amenities: "you have to have a very big table and a lot of people around the table to plan, decide what works, strike the right balances to finance, implement and then make sure that the experience is what you hope it will be for all these hikers and all these families that will come here." The parking lot expansion along Route 311 on land purchased from private property owners will bring the number of parking spaces up to around 100 – and the lot will be paved. Pete Eshelman with Roanoke Outside says regional partners have done a good job promoting and investing in local outdoor venues: "it worked. So now the question isn't how to attract people, it's how to manage that demand. This isn't just a bridge, it isn't just a parking lot, it's part of a system – the Appalachian Trail, the regional greenway system. Together they create a place where people choose to be." Senator Kaine, an avid outdoorsman who published a book two years ago about his Virginia outdoor adventures, secured that new funding from the National Park Service to improve safety and the visitor experience. That includes a restroom building and a permanent shuttle stop for those coming up to McAfee Knob from Salem and then returning, ideal in the Fall when even those 100 spaces in an expanded parking lot will be full.

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

## EDUCATIONAL FRONT



Martin

**Tom Martin** is the new executive director for the Institute for Creativity, Arts, and Technology (ICAT) at Virginia Tech. He's been serving as interim co-executive director alongside Lisa McNair, deputy executive director at the institute, since August 2025. A member of the Virginia Tech faculty since 2001, Martin is also a professor in the Bradley Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

## FINANCIAL FRONT

**Chris Frazier** has been promoted to chief lending officer at Farm Credit of the Virginias. He is a Scott County



Frazier

native and has been involved with agriculture since a young age. Frazier has a bachelor's degree in environmental science from University of Virginia and an MBA from King University. His previous role as regional sales and lending manager included service in Roanoke, Wytheville, Abingdon, Lewisburg, Ripley, Gate City, and Floyd.

**Jenny Tofano** has been promoted to branch manager at Bank of Botetourt's Melrose Plaza Office in northwest Roanoke. She will continue to serve as vice president and mortgage loan officer with Virginia Mountain Mortgage. Tofano has 30 years of banking experience, including 18 years

in retail banking and more than a decade in lending.

## DEVELOPMENT FRONT



Mullins

**Andy Mullins** has joined Waldvogel Commercial Properties as senior vice president. He is a graduate of Emory & Henry University and has over 20 years of experience in real estate.



Beckley

**Noah Beckley** has joined Waldvogel Commercial Properties. His real estate brokerage

career began in 2023 after first working as a project manager for David Simmons Customer Homes in Charlotte, NV. He is a graduate of Bridgewater College.



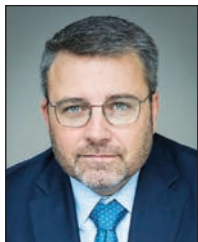
Maxwell

**Molly Maxwell** has joined the Roanoke Valley Greenway Commission and Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission as Planner III: Recreation and Roanoke Valley Greenway Coordinator. She previously served as city and trails planner Carbondale, IL. Maxwell has nine years of experience in community planning, active transportation, and trail infrastructure, and six years in general planning, land development, and transportation initiatives. She has secured more

# LENDING THAT LISTENS.

than \$6 million for greenways and trails and worked on projects such as the Saluki Greenway.

## TECH/INDUSTRY FRONT



Higgs

**Jason Higgs** has joined Autonomous Flight Technologies as the new director of defense strategy and business development. He has over 20 years of service as a US Air Force Special Operations pilot, including 13 deployments and more than 3,000 flight hours—over 1,300 in combat. Major (retired) Higgs also led training and readiness of more than 350 Airmen operating drones in high-threat environments, which helped shape tactics

and procedures still in use today.

## LEGAL FRONT



Hubbard

**Robinson Hubbard** has joined Spilman Thomas & Battle (Spilman) Roanoke office as Counsel. His primary practice area is local government law, with particular emphasis on matters involving Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Conflict of Interests Act (COIA), and

constitutional law. Hubbard's experience includes key legal roles within local governments (Orange County, Charlottesville).

## TOURISM FRONT

**Demp Bradford** has joined Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge as Vice President of Sports and Sales. He brings more than 25 years of executive experience in sports tourism, event management, and nonprofit leadership, including serving as VP/COO of Greensboro Sports Foundation and president of Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission. Bradford has also led recruitment and execution of

NCAA championships, conference tournaments, and international sporting events. He's a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill and East Carolina University and has served as an adjunct professor in sports administration and finance at Guilford College.

## NON-PROFIT FRONT

**Amber Allen** has been appointed new vice president of developmental disabilities at DePaul Community Resources. She has more than 25 years of experience in human services and has extensive knowledge of the Virginia Dept. of Social Services, Dept. of

## Have a career announcement?

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



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**NIKKI GRIFFIN**

**SVP, Chief Mortgage Lending Officer**  
**NMLS# 804784**



# CONTRIBUTORS

**Jason Boone** is Vice President & Business Banking for Freedom First Credit Union. He is a lifelong resident of the Roanoke area, graduated from Cave Spring High School and earned a degree in business from Liberty University. He has over 20 years of experience in banking, more than half of that at Freedom First. He enjoys spending time with his family and friends, hiking, playing volleyball with RVVA, and following Penn State football. [jboone@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.

**Daniel Colston**, CFP®, CEPA runs a tax and investing firm in Roanoke, Upward Financial Planning, specializing in helping business owners and retirees. [daniel@upwardfp.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.

**Kayla Dixon** is a multifaceted dance professional, educator, and creative marketer based in Roanoke, Virginia. After discovering her love for dance at the age of 10, she quickly realized the arts were not a temporary interest, but a lifelong passion that would shape the trajectory of her career. She had the honor of working with and representing the Prevention Council of Roanoke County as a youth

speaker and liaison with the Roanoke County Police Department, participating in community initiatives and presentations alongside government officials and law enforcement focused on prevention, education, and community impact. Today, Kayla remains deeply active in the dance industry as a teacher, choreographer, and dance adjudicator. In addition to her creative and technical work, Kayla has developed a strong focus in marketing, social media management, and community engagement. Kayla approaches marketing as more than promotion, it is a form of storytelling, advocacy, and education. Her ability to connect with people, amplify local voices, and promote the arts makes her an invaluable asset to Star City and the community it serves.

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

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

**Emily Field** is the office administrator for Berryfield, Inc. (publisher of FRONT and a media / marketing firm).

She lives in Salem with her husband, Tom, and is the mother of three and grandmother of three. [efield@berryfield.com]

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

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

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

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

**Mary Ann L. Miller** is vice president of business banking and community relations at Bank of Botetourt.

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

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

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

**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]

Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Virginia Dept. of Health; Dept. of Medical Assistance Services; and the Virginia Board of Nursing. For the past 12 years, Allen served as director of residential services at DePaul.



**Keating**

Associate, with a focus on data management.

**Chelsea Keating** is the new Associate Director of Community Engagement, with a diverse professional background in hospitality, human resources, recruitment, and community outreach.



**Harder**

Warm Hearth Village in Blacksburg has welcomed two new team members to the Philanthropy Department. **Dominique Harder** is a Philanthropy

## GOVERNMENT FRONT

Virginia Tech alumna **Carrie Chenery '08** has spent two decades working to grow

Virginia's economy. In January, Gov. Abigail Spanberger appointed her as Virginia's secretary of commerce and trade. Chenery grew up on a Rockbridge County beef cattle farm that has been in her family since the early 1800s. Her parents also operated several small businesses. At Virginia Tech, she earned dual degrees in agricultural and applied economics and environmental policy and planning.

Virginia Tech alumna **Katie Frazier '04** spent more than two decades working in Virginia agriculture, representing producers, supporting rural communities, and advancing agricultural priorities in Richmond and Washington,



**Frazier**

D.C. In January, she became Virginia's secretary of agriculture and forestry. At Virginia Tech, she earned dual degrees in agricultural and applied economics and political science. After graduating in 2004, Frazier joined the Virginia Agribusiness Council, where she spent nearly 14 years representing Virginia's diverse agricultural and forestry interests

*Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.*

“ Workforce quality remains one of the strongest drivers [for] manufacturing firms considering the region. — Page 35

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Roanoke-based **LeadPoint Digital** achieved 2026 Premier Partner status in the Google Partners program—a designation placing the agency in the top 3% of all agencies in the U.S.

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*Gobbling up inventions*

**Virginia Tech** ranked 59th in the issuance of invention patents, according to the National Academy of Inventors in its annual report covering utility patents in 2025 by top U.S. universities.

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*SWVA asks  
'why they here'*

**Friends of Southwest Virginia** (19 county, 4 city community development organization serving southern and western borders of Virginia) selected tourism research firms Datafy and Future Partners to lead a new regional market research initiative for analyzing visitor behavior, travel patterns, and traveler sentiment.

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*AM grant in region*

A \$4.2 million investment from **GO Virginia**, matched by more than \$2 million in regional support, will help Southwest and Southern Virginia create jobs, connect more students to manufacturing careers, and build on the region's growing strength in advanced manufacturing. Led by the **New River Valley Regional Commission** and supported by **Virginia Tech** and partners across GO Virginia Regions 2 and 3, the

initiative is expected to create 100 jobs in its first two years and help develop a workforce pipeline to manufacturing and technology careers. The project focuses on additive manufacturing and advanced materials, or AM2, a fast-evolving field with applications in industries such as aerospace and energy. It will help companies test new technologies and processes, shorten the path from idea to production, and connect employers with a stronger pipeline of talent.

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*Curtains for SV8*

**Salem Valley 8**—an AMC multi-screen movie theater in Salem—has closed. The movie complex operated for 50 years. A statement from AMC thanked patrons and recommended their AMC Classic Roanoke 10 theatre behind the Tanglewood Mall complex in Roanoke County.

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*Yeah, about  
our coffee list*

We knew when we featured coffee shops in our April 2026 edition of **FRONT** it would not be a complete list. Several places have opened right around the same time as our feature, including **Asher's Coffee** in Roanoke's Grandin Village and Covenant Coffee (food truck) based on Roanoke's Franklin Road—just to name two.

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*Underground  
news outlet sold*

**The Roanoke Rambler**—an online hyperlocal media outlet—has been sold to Ollie Howie, who serves on Roanoke's

Economic Development Authority and is founder of Mount Auburn Venture Partners. He has a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and graduated from Roanoke's William Fleming High School. Roanoke Rambler was founded in 2021 and had a staff of three journalists whose positions were terminated after Howie's acquisition.

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*Not so pretty news*

**Voyant Beauty**—a manufacturer of body wash, gels, creams, personal care products—is laying off about 95 people by August. A company announcement stated manufacturing would cease, but the facility (Hollins area of Roanoke) would remain open and “function in a different limited capacity.”

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*VACU's NPO support*

**Virginia Credit Union** has donated \$120,000 during the first quarter of 2026 to support the work of 17 nonprofits and community organizations serving residents across the Roanoke Valley, New River Valley, and Lynchburg. Notable contributions include \$20,000 to Roanoke-base Total Action for Progress (TAP) Breakthrough Fund; \$22,500 to Feeding Southwest Virginia, Lynchburg Daily Bread, and Blue Ridge Area Food Bank; and \$10,000 to Carilion Children's Hospital.

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*Bill to legalize  
skill game vetoed*

Governor Abigail Spanberger has vetoed

legislation that would legalize skill gaming. Amid the expansion of gaming over the last decade, Spanberger reiterated that Virginia continues to lack a centralized, independent entity to regulate all legal gaming. The Governor also pointed to data collected by the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority (ABC) during the window of time when skill games were allowed to operate legally in Virginia between 2020 and 2021. This data illustrates a concentration of skill gaming machines in communities with higher percentages of residents living below the poverty line, lower education levels, and higher percentages of minority residents than the Commonwealth as a whole.

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*Minimum wage  
going up in Virginia*

Governor Abigail Spanberger has signed legislation to incrementally increase the state minimum wage to \$15 per hour. The legislation will increase the minimum wage to \$13.75 per hour on January 1, 2027, and subsequently increase the minimum wage to \$15.00 per hour on January 1, 2028. “If you work full time in Virginia, you should be able to afford to live in Virginia. You should be able to keep up with your rent or mortgage, fill your medications, and save for your kids' futures,” said Spanberger. Opponents say the \$15 per hour wage will eliminate jobs and be a burden for small businesses, especially in areas of the state where the cost of living is lower;

and prices of goods and services will rise along with the hike.

### *Vet school moves on up in rankings*

By nearly doubling National Institutes of Health funding from \$3.8 million to \$7.5 million, the **Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine** rose five positions to No. 13 nationally among veterinary schools, according to the Blue Ridge Institute for Medical Research. The leap capped an eight-year climb from No. 24. In making that announcement, it was noted that, “the result arrived against a significant headwind. Federal research funding has contracted broadly, and Virginia Tech has not been insulated from those pressures.”

### *Salem baseball rebranding*

A new season and a new name - the **Salem RidgeYaks** - formerly the Salem Red Sox – opened the 2026 Carolina League season last month. General Manager

Allen Lawrence has been with the Salem Low-A franchise for 25 years - through several different club names, ballpark sponsorships, major league affiliations, while watching future major leaguers like Mookie Betts and Roman Anthony play at what is now Carilion Clinic Field: “opening day is always exciting, certainly even more to be excited about this year with the new name, the new brand, new colors, new jerseys. We’ve done a lot of stuff around the stadium, new paint jobs, new lights, new bullpen.” Minor League baseball in particular is designed to be a family-friendly, lower cost alternative to the big leagues, and Lawrence says once again there will be plenty of special themed events at the ballpark.

### *Shop local say growers*

The **Grandin Farmers Market** opened up for the season early last month and more farmers markets have or will do the same since then. The non-profit LEAP, the organizers of the Grandin market, strives to make locally grown food more accessible

## Have an announcement about your business?

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in the Roanoke Valley. LEAP’s and their food-access manager, Connie Kenny, says farmers markets are a perfect way to bring people together: “chatting with each other, asking each other, hey have you tried this food?” Kenny says produce like tomatoes and strawberries need a little more time to grow before they show up at local markets. The Grandin Farmers Market is open through the spring and summer from 8 a.m. to noon every Saturday. “For the farmer it’s deeper than just making the sale, it’s about them feeling connected to the people that they’re feeding.”

### *Regional Partnership outlines 2025 wins*

During Roanoke City Council last month, the **Roanoke Regional**

**Partnership** shared statistics on its work throughout 2025. The organization focuses on recruiting businesses and connecting them to resources to relocate or expand in the Roanoke Valley, while creating jobs and improving quality of life. John Hull is president of the public-private partnership: “a consultant we work with regularly ranked the Roanoke region in the top third of U.S. Metros for food and beverage attractiveness ... the Roanoke Outside and our partnership with Virginia’s Blue Ridge ultimately helps gain that recognition.” Last year there were 679 “opportunities,” noted Hull, “that’s 38 percent over 2024. The opportunity for the region is greater than it ever has been.” Hull says the Roanoke region continues to attract interest from businesses

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and investors as project numbers climb. Hull also said the partnership's five-year strategic plan, Thrive 2027 - launched in 2022 - has generated nearly \$400 million in economic impact capital and created more than 3,100 jobs.

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*New autism clinic coming to Roanoke*

### VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment

(VIA) is expanding its reach with a new clinic-based Pediatric ABA program in Roanoke, launching in August. Located adjacent to Roanoke VIA Day School on Whitwell Drive, the program addresses a critical need for specialized early intervention services for preschool-aged children (ages 2-6) with autism. By replicating the success of its Charlottesville model, VIA aims to bring high-impact, evidence-based results to the Roanoke community. The program will serve up to 12 children, with the waitlist officially opening this spring.

VIA's early intervention services prioritize school readiness for children under six by blending evidence-based therapy with comprehensive family support. When services begin in the toddler years, research shows meaningful gains in communication, learning, and social skills, along with improvements in daily living skills that support long-term success.

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*MGCC to expand offerings*

**Mountain Gateway Community College** is offering a new Science Associate of Science degree beginning in the fall of 2026. Starting in the Fall of 2026, the college's Forestry program will introduce a specialized track within its Science Associate of Science (AS) degree. While this degree provides a broad foundation across STEM fields, this new pathway is specifically geared toward students pursuing a four-year degree in Natural

Resources and Forestry. This curriculum was developed in collaboration with Virginia Tech, home to the #1 ranked four-year Forestry program in the United States. The program streamlines the transfer process, allowing students to complete five specific Forestry courses alongside initial mathematics, science, and humanities requirements at MGCC.

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*Sands to step down at VT*

After a 12 year run **Virginia Tech** president Tim Sands says he will step down in the next few months, saying in a news release that, "it was the right time to begin the process of stepping aside and provide the next president the opportunity to take the baton at full stride and continue Virginia Tech's significant growth and momentum." On his watch, Virginia Tech announced plans to build an "innovation campus" in Alexandria

as a signature part of the higher education package that brought Amazon's HQ2 to Northern Virginia. Fifteen major new construction projects have been launched since Sands came aboard in 2014, totaling 1.9 million square feet. Also noted in the news release: the transition of the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine from an independent institution to the university's newest college and expansion of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC, with more than 40 faculty-led research teams in 260,000 square feet of laboratory and teaching space - doubling the university's economic impact in Roanoke from \$214 million in 2017 to \$475 million in 2025. Sands and his wife, Laura P. Sands, plan to remain in the area. "Laura and I will always be Hokies," he said. "We plan to stay rooted in Blacksburg as this is most definitely home."

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*Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.*

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Folks are figuring out what a Safe Room is and why they need one. — Page 11

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# Usability Works at Carilion Clinic created to fill a niche in bringing new Medtech to market

By Gene Marrano

**Carilion Clinic's Simulation Center puts medical device prototypes to use, helping to reduce risk, accelerate product development and bring innovations to market more efficiently.**

Carilion Clinic says it will strengthen the region as a hub for bio-technology innovation – via a new engineering consultancy designed to support medical device manufacturers who need feedback on how to make a prototype better - and how to master the regulatory requirements.

Robert Turner, PhD, says Carilion's Center for Simulation, Research and Patient Safety - adjacent to Dr. Pepper Park - is where these new "medtech" inventions or upgrades are put through the paces - making sure the devices being prototyped align with how health care is actually delivered - sometimes on a first pass that's not the case.

Dr. Turner says Roanoke was ready for what is called Usability Works at Carilion Clinic. "We've got accelerators, incubators, investors, all the ingredients for an incredible recipe. I think more importantly there's a

culture of innovation and disruption in this area that is hungry for development and support."

Turner, who is the managing director for Usability Works, says medical device development - or medtech - doesn't have to take place in Boston or Silicon Valley. It can happen right here in Roanoke, where there already is state of the art researchers and facilities in place: "a lot of companies struggle to understand what that really looks like in terms of the activities, the timelines and the deliverables that the FDA wants to review for a device headed to market."

Usability Works at Carilion Clinic can provide services says Turner that medtech people had to find elsewhere (he mentions Boston and San Francisco) before they launched the consulting department. "Support throughout that regulatory landscape." The missing link he adds, "a gap that was assessed by Carilion

Clinic. It was a plan in progress to close that gap and provide consulting services, especially to local and regional medtech and biotech.”

Developing a medical grade device involves actual use testing in the field, which Usability Works supplies support for, according to Turner. “Then identifying areas where the device is not working as intended [or] not meeting the assumptions of the intended users. We can feed that back to the engineering teams and have them course correct.” Turner says its often not an engineering flaw, but because that medtech doesn’t align with how care is actually delivered.


Usability Works is expected to attract startups, established companies and investment in the region with researchers and academic partners. Medtech testing takes place at the Sim Center in clinical environments, simulated operating rooms, intensive care units, ER’s and so forth. Validation studies, use-related risk analysis and design consulting are among the one stop services now offered by Usability Works at Carilion Clinic. Early stage innovators and established manufacturers are all welcome.

“As far as I know we are unique in the sense that we are embedded with a hospital system,” says Turner. “There are other human factors



DR Robert Turner at right

and research programs within hospital systems, and simulation centers, but none that are oriented toward the regulatory support of medical device manufacturers ... providing regulatory grade evidence of safe and effective use.”

This sounds like a mission statement: “By combining scientific rigor with regulatory insight, Usability Works helps clients de-risk innovation, accelerate regulatory approvals, and design products clinicians and patients can trust.” Right here in Roanoke, Virginia, the latest addition to the growing Biotech and Medtech ecosystem – and ready to grow again the month when RoVa Labs on South Jefferson takes the lid off the shared wet/dry lab space. 



Turner says Usability Works has connections to Carilion Innovation, where in-house personnel at the Clinic are developing their own tools that also need to be tested.

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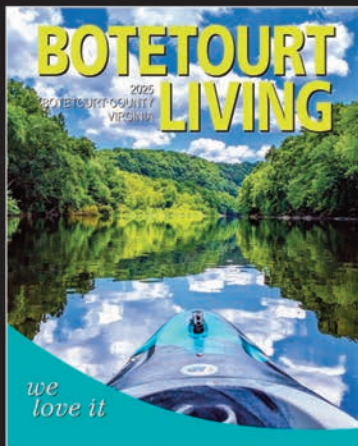
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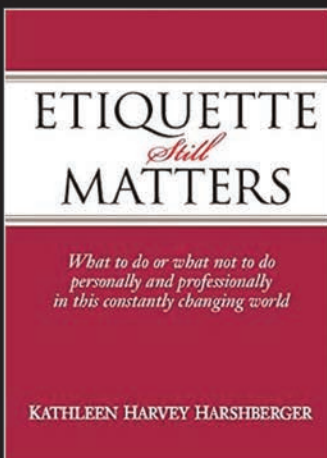
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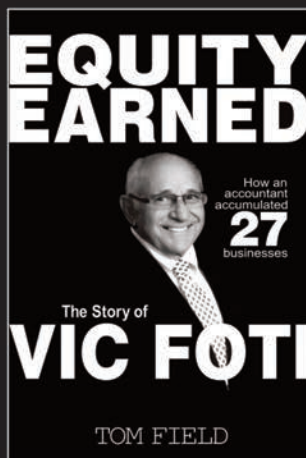
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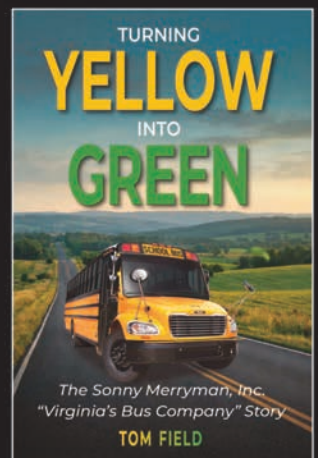
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