

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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JUNE 2026

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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

The visual on our FRONTcover this month depicts an entrepreneurial family and their business idea of combining all sorts of wellness therapies into a one-stop-shop. Owner Randy Epling ran that idea through a gauntlet—THE Gauntlet, as a matter of fact—a business competition and entrepreneurial network that just keeps gaining more and more traction throughout our regions. (We've reported on The Advancement Foundation since its founding.) That process is a good idea. Building AND learning at the same time always pays off, based on all the stories we report month after month, year after year. In like fashion, your FRONT is building and learning and placing multiple contributions in front of you with each publication. We'll salt your temperament, warm you all over, float your boat, cool down and relax your spirit. Or, we'll gladly do it all, in our one-stop-64-page journal. Namaste.

Tom Field
Publisher

Gene Marrano
Editor

“ ”
Is this going to end well? — Page 42



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Advancing Our Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The Advancement Foundation & Twelfth Annual Gauntlet Program

By Rachel Nicole Edwards



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JUNE



Zachary Collier



Carrie Cousins



Tom Field



Lindsey Hull

Advisory Board

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

2026 CONTRIBUTORS



Dan Dowdy



Rachel Edwards



Emily Field



Olivia Marone



Gene Marrano



Nicholas Vaassen

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It was called The Gauntlet and not The Walk in the Park for a reason.

— Page 13

““

We're the first ever center [dedicated] for informatics and data science.

— Page 41



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construction

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





Advancing Our Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The Advancement Foundation & Twelfth Annual Gauntlet Program

By Rachel Nicole Edwards

From one-of-a-kind spas to glamping, dog retreats, and ecological solutions, the Advancement Foundation undoubtedly nurtures southwest Virginia's sharpest ideas. Formed in Vinton in 2007, the goal of the Advancement Foundation is to create and support an "entrepreneurial ecosystem." A place where start-ups and small businesses can support each other's development with access to resources and infrastructure just for them. The Advancement Foundation partners with a myriad of community organizations with a local focus, tailoring their support system to main-street type businesses in Virginia. Like an ecosystem, thriving networks are built under the Foundation's canopy.

This April, the Advancement Foundation celebrated their twelfth annual Gauntlet program, the first to be hosted by their new VIA Center in Buena Vista. The Gauntlet is Virginia's largest business competition of its kind. "The Gauntlet helped us expand our business in a lot of ways. We were most impressed by how much they covered," says Randy Epling. Randy and his wife, Ginger, co-own Oasis Wellness Escape in Martinsville. The Gauntlet's special training for regional business was just what they needed. "We covered a concrete business plan that caters to specific markets rather than individuals, and were given a standard operating procedure," Epling shares. The Gauntlet's rulebook gives a solid trajectory

“ ”

We're really proud of what we've got here.

ON THE COVER

Oasis Wellness Escape won first place at the 2026 Gauntlet Business Awards Program by The Advancement Foundation held at VIA Center in Buena Vista. A family-owned and operated personal wellness multi-spa "escape—where health, vitality, and relaxation come together" in Martinsville. Services—individual and packages—include a salt cave, float tank, infrared sauna, and therapeutic relaxation room. The team depicted on our FRONTcover includes Randy and Ginger Epling, co-owners; and their son, Brent, operations manager.



ABOUT VIA IN BUENA VISTA



The Advancement Foundation hosted its most recent high-energy business competition at the new Virginia Innovation Accelerator Center (VIA) in Buena Vista. The VIA is home to more than your typical office spaces and meeting rooms. There's Junction 245, with a cafe, tasting room, and market designed for local entrepreneurs to showcase their products. There's the VIA community room for meetings, celebrations, and events. And in development is the VIA kitchen, an upcoming production space to ignite the creative tastebuds of Southwest Virginia's culinary artists, caterers, and more.

for business growth, making an otherwise overwhelming goal more tangible. "You got a million things going as a business goes. This has you sit down and complete the tasks."

This year, Randy and Ginger brought home the Gauntlet's first place prize. Their Oasis Wellness Escape is a "wellness revolution" center with unique suites designed to help customers float away to relaxation. Suites include a salt cave, sauna, and oceanesque float tank. The place is a haven of holistic wellbeing, nurturing







for the body and the mind. "It's not just a spa—it's wonderful for you," Epling speaks with enthusiasm for his business. "We're really proud of what we've got here. I don't know that there's anything within a hundred miles that has what we do under one roof."

The Gauntlet's 2026 platinum-level winners also included M2 Testing Solutions, Skyward Studios, Happie Hippie, Roanoke Roaming Spirits, and Lyrik's Cafe. This dynamic group of innovators were awarded thousands of dollars to ignite their progress. Rachel Coleman, founder of Skyward Studios, reflects, "about halfway through The Gauntlet I made the joke that it was called The Gauntlet and not The Walk In The Park for a reason. The program is demanding but also rewarding if you're serious about your business." Skyward Studios is a brand-new venture in Christiansburg offering flexible workspace, offices, and meeting spaces for groups of up to 40 as well as hosting its own events.

Valerie Brown of M2 Testing called the Gauntlet program "both challenging and supportive" but "that pushed us to think bigger and refine our vision for growth."

Brown says her favorite part of the program was the mentorship and connections. "Being able to learn from experienced professionals and collaborate with other





STATS FROM ANNETTE



“Through the Gauntlet program, Virginia’s largest business program and competition, and now QUEST; where we’re fostering scalable, high growth potential companies, we have served more than **1300 entrepreneurs/innovators** and leveraged the knowledge of **300+ mentors**. Together, with many of our partners, we’ve **INVESTED over \$8 million** in entrepreneurship, innovation and community development.

What’s truly extraordinary is that for the past 12 years—that’s 144 months, 626 weeks, over 4,300 days—a steady group of dreamers and doers has shown up, again and again, to support and invest time, talent and treasure for businesses and community development across this region.”


—**Annette Patterson**, founder and president of The Advancement Foundation

PHOTO: Annette Patterson “making connections” on the cover of FRONT; Sept 2019

entrepreneurs was invaluable. It reminded me that building a business is not something you have to do alone.”

While the Gauntlet is the forerunner of the Advancement Foundation’s work, the energetic organization has so much more up their sleeves. In response to Virginia’s ever-evolving entrepreneurial landscape, the Quest was introduced as a competition for cross-regional, high-growth tech start-ups to share their vibrant ideas. The 2026 Quest winner was ADAR Upcycle, a promising trailblazer with a goal to revolutionize waste remediation.

Reflecting on their experience at the 2026 Gauntlet, Epling, Brown, and Coleman shared how impressed they were with the diversity of business they networked with. “I enjoyed connecting with other entrepreneurs the most; sharing knowledge and resources, and learning about so many other cool ventures in Virginia,” Coleman says. “My biggest takeaway would be the things I learned about myself along the way. I have a better understanding of not just where my strengths lie but also what brings me joy in what I do.”

Brown agrees, adding, “the Gauntlet is not just about expanding a business, but about creating something meaningful that positively affects the people around you.” 





All photos: Lindsey Hull

The Buffalo Hemp Company's Roanoke location on Main St. in Wasena.

Rolling the dice on rolling the joint

With a Governor's signature, The Buffalo Hemp Company got bad news on May 19

By Lindsey Hull

This story completely changed from its original version. With the Governor of Virginia signing a veto on May 19 on a law that would legalize recreational marijuana sales for adults over 21, the owner of The Buffalo Hemp Company says he is now discontinuing plans to expand and might sell the business.



Jason Gallimore and Evan Slaski at The Buffalo Hemp Company's Roanoke location

Derek Wall, co-owner of Floyd-based Buffalo Hemp Company, closed on a \$575,000 17,000 square foot building on May 13. Already, he had purchased grow tables, lights and dehumidifiers for the building ... all kinds of equipment worth at least \$175,000. He had gotten it for a song at a Michigan auction, shipped it to Floyd County. He was just waiting for that closing, and for Governor Spanberger's green light.

He was betting that recreational marijuana sales were going to happen—sooner or later.

"We're in this limbo," Wall said in mid-May.

"When the governor was elected, we thought there was no way the Dems would not approve a bill [to legalize recreational marijuana sales]," he said.

House Bill 642 and Senate Bill 542 were sitting on the governor's desk, waiting for her signature. Together, those two bills would have legalized the retail sale

of recreational marijuana to adults 21 and older in Virginia. Spanberger had requested a series of amendments, which the legislature had declined.

On May 19, Spanberger vetoed the legislation, providing the following statement:

As Virginia pursues a legal retail market, it is critical that we incorporate lessons learned by other states and ensure that our regulatory framework is fully prepared to provide strong oversight from day one. That includes clear enforcement authority and sufficient resources for compliance, testing, and inspections, and robust tools to crack down on bad actors who continue to profit from the illicit market.

Jason Gallimore, Buffalo Hemp Company operations and marketing manager, had hoped that common sense legislation like HB 642 and SB 542 would clearly delineate between hemp-based CBD and marijuana-based THC, allowing both types of products to be sold in safe, regulated spaces.



Gummies containing 10 mg THC can produce a legal, intoxicating effect, but could also be an overwhelming experience depending upon the user's tolerance level, according to Evan Slaski.

"Anything THC derived should be in a cannabis controlled market. In my opinion, hemp should be for CBD. It should be for fiber and rope and shirts and all that kind of stuff. And then anything THC driven should be under the scope of cannabis legislation," Gallimore said.

Building business

Had their recreational marijuana plans been able to move forward this year, the new Floyd building would have been

the site of that county's first controlled environment agriculture facility.

That facility would have initially employed ten full-time and up to five part-time employees, earning between \$40,000 and \$100,000 annually. The lead grower, already identified, would have started off with 5,000 plants and scaled up from there.

"We'll probably wind up selling the building and equipment," Wall said on the day of the veto.

“Do I keep Buffalo Hemp open and continue to sell hemp products for the next year? Probably not,” he said, adding that he had stayed in the business for the last five years in hopes that, one day, the company would have a license to sell cannabis.

“That’s not to say if they pass a bill next year, I won’t get a license and try to go again,” Wall said.

Legislation can make or break people in this industry. In 2018, the federal Farm Bill opened the door to CBD sales, providing an opportunity for businesses like The Buffalo Hemp Company to open.

One shift in a rule can cost undue time and money to meet new regulations, and often those changes appear arbitrary to the people actually in touch with clients on a day to day basis, people like Evan Slaski, store manager for The Buffalo Hemp Company’s Roanoke location.

“It doesn’t make running a business easy, that your products are obsolete every other year, every year, almost,” Wall said, referencing the numerous times his company has had to repackage, relabel or reformulate products to remain in compliance with new rules and regulations.

“It is unbelievable to me how they overregulate this industry,” operations and marketing manager Jason Gallimore said.

“Why don’t they regulate liquor like that?”

The federal government has been making major tweaks to laws surrounding CBD and marijuana which, if not amended or overturned, will have a monstrous effect on the 24 billion dollar industry come November, potentially criminalizing 85% to 90% of CBD-based products.

“There’s a lot of risk in hemp,” Wall said.

Buffalo Hemp Company currently sells hemp-derived CBD products and products containing some THC to a consumer base that is mostly driven by a desire to find natural products to address certain ailments. Still, a number of their clients purchase products containing THC, looking for some fun.

For the people who want a little high, Buffalo Hemp Company already carries dozens of items containing legal amounts of THC. Slaski helps customers choose what they can tolerate, if they are unsure. A gummy containing 10 mg THC with 250 mg of CBD, for instance, can be enough to produce a legal, intoxicating high for some people.

“I would liken it to smoking, maybe a little bit of a joint or a bowl to yourself,” Slaski said. “To a beginner, it is definitely going to be an overwhelming experience. To someone who is experienced and has built up a slight tolerance, 10 milligrams is a good evening at home.” 🍷

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LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By Carrie Cousins,
LeadPoint Digital

Executive Summary:
Echoes of a challenging job market flood the airways about this time each year. Just as new graduates are entering the job market come reports of slowing growth in some industries, or the impact of artificial intelligence in the workplace.

Congrats, grads! now, go find a job!

Here's some good news for the class of 2026:
There's a place for you.

Billionaire and entrepreneur Mark Cuban, also of Shark Tank fame, said it best "new grads should be taking jobs" at small businesses. He's not wrong. The chances of graduating and starting at Google or TikTok right away are slim, but when it comes to marketing and advertising, smaller agencies, nonprofits, and even in-house teams have a place for young marketing pros.

The challenge is setting yourself up to rise above all the other resumes and noise when thousands of other people just like you are competing for the same jobs.

As someone who regularly hires recent grads, here's what I am looking for when you don't have a packed resume.

- **Real-world experience:** Internship and job history are important. I want to see that you have tried some things out. Can you show work product from those roles? If you lack here, DIY your portfolio. Start a blog, build a website, or manage a social media account or Google Ads campaign for a personal project. Track metrics and data and show results.
- **Networking and in-person connection:** Ask me to coffee. I'll take coffee with almost anyone who seems interested in the marketing and advertising industry. That doesn't mean I'll hire you, but I will help connect you with others in the area that might. And you never know, when I have an open position, your name might already be at the top of the list. Who you know matters tremendously.
- **Tech or certification stack:** Get certified in essential marketing tools – Google Analytics 4, Google Ads, Adobe Creative Suite ... and the list goes on. Show your skills with real credentials.
- **Focus on a premier skill or set of skills:** Too many young marketers want to tell me they can do everything. But

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the reality is you probably only have the true capacity to do one or two things exceptionally well at this stage. Focus on those and look for a job where you can use those skills while learning new things.

- Market yourself well: Three-quarters of all resumes that come across my desk look the same. Deploy the same techniques for your resume that you would use to market a service or product. That will catch my attention.

All these things come down to one basic idea. You must have great communication skills.

- Speak and dress professionally.
- Ask questions that show you did your homework.
- Explain how you will be great for my company.
- Be transparent about your strengths and weaknesses.
- Follow up and say thank you.

Then cross your fingers and stay in touch with the people and companies that you think are a good fit. Fostering that network will pay off in the long run. 



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Gene Marrano photos

RoVa Labs welcomes first tenants

By Gene Marrano

RoVa Labs is based on elite incubators nationwide, providing specialized labs and “high-touch mentorship” according to its backers.

Local government officials, state lawmakers and biotech stakeholders in the Roanoke Valley are calling it a really big deal - the new shared lab space and business incubator in the heart of Roanoke’s Innovation Corridor. RoVa Labs, which we reported on last month as well, has now cut the ribbon and is already lining up tenants. Formally RoVa Labs at Carilion Clinic - Carilion still owns the building

on South Jefferson Street – the facility is designed to support the growth of biotech research spinoffs. Startups can rent time in the wet or dry labs that will be available, as they look towards commercializing their big ideas.

Almost 16 million dollars in state funding happened after some lobbying by Roanoke

stakeholders, recalls State Senator David Suetterlein: “this was a great innovative project, and I was so excited about the opportunity [to help secure the funding]. It was going to be such a good thing for Roanoke.” Suetterlein said he was able to convince lawmakers on the far side of Virginia to support the RoVa Labs state funding – believing the biotech breakthroughs born there can help heal people better all over Virginia – and far beyond its borders. That pitch resonated.

Among the first tenants at RoVa Labs is Tiny Cargo, a Fralin Biomedical Research Institute spinoff where better ways to deliver medicines internally is the target. Roanoke Mayor Joe Cobb says it’s not just lab space: “it’s a place that will attract biotechnology, innovators that in turn will develop ideas into real solutions, make a real difference.” Cobb called Roanoke a model for communities elsewhere in the Commonwealth, showing what happens when “education, healthcare, research and local government work together.” The Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance, the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Virginia Western Community College’s STEM program are also on board with the new RoVa Labs as partners.

Dean Lee Learman at VTCSOM is also on board with exposing medical school students to what might be going on at RoVa Labs: “by integrating innovation, research and clinical insight ... we are

ROVA LABS FEATURES

- Private and open wet-lab suites with benches, sinks, gas/vacuum, and emergency systems.
- Shared equipment, including biological safety cabinets, CO2 incubators, shaker/incubators, refrigerated centrifuges, freezer, cold room, water purification, and basic analytical tools.
- Prototyping and medical device support, including light fabrication benches, small-form 3D printing, and introductions to the region’s certified contract manufacturers.
- Innovation Studio, a specialized commercialization launchpad that provides startups with advanced prototyping tools, strategic mentorship, and resources to accelerate the transition from breakthrough bench research to market-ready solutions.
- Team space, including furnished offices, huddle rooms, an event lounge, and phone rooms.
- Operational support, including biohazardous/regulated waste streams; chemical inventory templates; Environmental, Health, and Safety (EHS) onboarding; and a Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) start pack.

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Erin Burcham at podium

creating new ways for our students to learn how discovery moves from the lab to the bedside.”

RoVa Labs will initially use around half of the 40,000 square feet available. Carilion Clinic Innovation is another of the building's first tenants. Carilion Innovation works with Carilion employees who have their own ideas on how to make health care better. Carilion Executive Vice President Don Halliwill said the spirit of innovation is alive and well in Roanoke – and it lies within the Innovation Corridor along South Jefferson Street, as coined by the City of Roanoke. “Our community partnerships have built ... a center of gravity; for health sciences,

biotechnology, research, education and innovation. We want more companies to locate here.”

Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance Chief Executive Officer Erin Burcham was one of the principal players in selling the vision of a shared lab space and biotech incubator - and helping to secure state funding for the project. “After a GO Virginia feasibility study a coalition was formed,” she remarked at the building’s grand opening in May, “we didn’t just take the report to Richmond – we took a unified vision ... a team for Virginia’s future.” Apparently where a shared biotech wet/dry lab space is concerned, the future is here now. 

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BIZ OPS

By Zachary A. Collier

Executive Summary:
According to surveys from the Project Management Institute, around half of projects meet original schedule targets. That means, of course, that the other half experience delays, which can significantly impact the performance and success of the organization.

Don't let schedule delays derail your project

There are many reasons why projects fail to hit their schedule deadlines. Some causes of delay are beyond human control, such as severe weather conditions impacting the progress of a construction project. But other causes are behavioral. For example, it is common that the time it will take to complete a project is simply underestimated because of unanticipated errors or problems such as having to fix software bugs or reworking a product that has a defect or quality issue.

Other non-value-adding (but necessary) administrative tasks, like report writing, also take time that is often not accounted for during the scheduling process. There could be issues with clients changing the scope mid-project or issues with obtaining and keeping funding. Multitasking is another behavior that causes project delays. As one switches between tasks, time is lost in the transition. As the Roman writer Publilius Syrus said, *"To do two things at once is to do neither."*


Yet another problem is that people tend to procrastinate, not starting a task until the deadline is approaching. This causes tasks, which might otherwise have been completed early, to be completed on time or even late. Extending the deadline is no help, since that just causes one to procrastinate more. This phenomenon is sometimes summarized as Parkinson's Law - *"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."*

How can schedule delays be avoided? The first thing that can be done is to understand the key risk drivers that could impact your project. Identifying the sources of risk and then quantifying them in terms of their likelihood and consequences can give the organization a better sense of whether the project is vulnerable to disruptions and delays.

Scheduling methodologies like PERT and CPM can give project managers a better understanding of what activities are "on the critical path," meaning that delays to those



activities will cause a delay to the entire project. Tasks that are not on the critical path have “slack,” or a cushion that can accommodate some level of deviation from the target task duration.

Knowing what project risks can cause delays and what activities are on the critical path enables project managers to be proactive in planning and controlling the project. Implementing safeguards and processes to stay on track and offering incentives for on-time completion of project activities can protect the organization from the costly impact of delays. Built-in contingencies and buffers can make the difference between timely delivery and scrambling to catch up. Don't let your project be part of the half that are late – planning ahead today can help you to avoid schedule disruptions in the future. 

Zachary A. Collier is Assistant Professor of Management and Director of the Center for Applied Analytics at Radford University.



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 JOSLYN & THE SWEET COMPRESSION ♦ MAMA SAID STRING BAND
 CANYON LIGHTS ♦ BELLA RAYNE ♦ THE WEIRD SISTERS ♦ MUSIC ROAD CO
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 FLORENCE & THE FEELING ♦ HASH THE BAND
2025 ON-THE-RISE WINNER 2025 ON-THE-RISE RUNNER-UP

ON-THE-RISE

FREE WHENEVER ♦ FRUTE ♦ JACOOZY ♦ LATE NIGHT SPECIAL ♦ MOGA FAMILY BAND
 NEW TRANSLATIONS ♦ RENEE CHRISTINE ♦ STONE THROWERS
 TAND ♦ TEDDY & THE ROUGH RIDERS

LOCAL LOVE

BLUE MULE ♦ CASSIDY SNIDER & THE WRANGLERS ♦ COREY HUNLEY & THE MILLIONAIRES
 FATHER SUN ♦ FREAK RANGERS ♦ JATOBA ♦ JOHN & FRIENDS ♦ KEROSENE WILLY
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 ♦ MANY MORE!



Connecting the dots to local food and farm producers - and to consumers

By Gene Marrano

Regional Farmer's markets, farm to table eateries, brew pubs, organic farms and more - a new initiative that connects residents and visitors to local food businesses in the area has officially launched a unique "trail."



Amanda McGee



Cam Terry

It's called the Roanoke Region Food and Farm Trail, with several dozen local farms and food businesses on board. Think of the Crooked Road Trail or a brewpub trail. Maureen "Mo" McGonagle is director of the Roanoke Foodshed Network, which has created the trail: "a one stop hub where people can access all things food and farm across the region – farmer's markets, farm retail outlets, farms across the region, farm to table restaurants. We're going to have a calendar of events for agritourism experiences." Anybody that's passionate about supporting local or regional food will find the Roanoke Region Food and Farm Trail to be their go-to source, says McGonagle.

Episode two of a six-part video series the Roanoke Foodshed Network is putting together, showcasing regional food businesses, debuted last month during the official launch for the Roanoke Region Food and Farm Trail, held at Big Lick Farm in northwest Roanoke City. The Good Food, Good People docuseries tells the stories of those who produce and sell food at local farmer's markets, or to regional restaurants and small grocery stores. It's available for viewing on the roanokefoodandfarmtrail.com website, where participating businesses are listed as well. "There's a lot of excitement," says McGonagle, "over the past year we've

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Mo McGonagle



also been doing a storytelling campaign [with farmers for the docuseries].”

Cam Terry and his Garden Variety Harvests operation is a member of the Food and Farm Trail, operating on the Big Lick Farm property in northwest Roanoke City after operating as a “one man show,” on several plots in the valley. He’s been through five growing seasons so far: “when the food is grown in the right way and it gets into the right kitchens; those stories compel eaters

to tell them. Telling these stories takes time, effort, and consistency. Efforts like the Food and Farm, Trail help to coordinate and optimize our efforts as we market our farm businesses.” Terry says it was all about education and spreading the word, “about how awesome its is to support and eat locally – and seasonally.”

The roanokefoodandfarmtrail.com lists several dozen trail participants, from farms in the region, to local brewpubs, farm-to-

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table eateries, farmer's markets, small retailers who source local products and coffee shops. McGonagle says the trail project "was a long time in the making," and went through several iterations, and only came to be after the buy-in from partners and community members who saw the value of shining a light on those local food producers and end user customers.

Listening sessions hosted in 2017 by LEAP, which operates several farmer's markets and now has a hub warehouse/retail location on Patterson Avenue SW in Roanoke, brought to light what farmers called "a critical need to support farm viability in our region, through marketing support and consumer education. That really sparked plans to expand and sustain the [trail] project." COVID meant the project took a backseat for a while," McGonagle adds. "But the vision never disappeared." McGonagle offered special thanks to

Maureen Best, the executive director for LEAP, to help sustain its momentum.

Amanda McGee, director of community development for the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, also helped bring the project to the next stage of development according to McGonagle. McGee recalled working on a 2015 map that highlighted regional destinations where a "locavore," - one who eats foods grown locally whenever possible - could find what they were looking for. "I'm so proud of the Roanoke Foodshed network for really bringing this to this new iteration. I think it's going to be so effective at communicating the message of our local food and agriculture businesses. Agriculture is economic development. It is the epitome of the local business. When we spend money with farmers in our region we spend money with our neighbors. Economic diversity is really important [and] shopping locally has the best impact." 

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Pump, pump it up

How accurate are those gas pumps? Is a gallon exactly a gallon? Is the information that's displayed correct? Daniel Torrence's workspace includes gas stations and retail outlets. He's a compliance officer with the Office of Weights and Measures in the


Division of Consumer Protection at the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Here, he inspects and verifies fuel dispensed matches the readout we all see when pumping our gas (he also inspects scales). Torrence lives in Craig County, and his work covers the region. Good news: No rejection stickers here. 

Photo by Tom Field



THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

A longtime favorite local business and a newer outdoor retail shop get ready to collaborate later this year.


Two businesses with links to Roanoke River Greenway team up

Black Dog Salvage plans to reopen its second warehouse later this year on Ashlawn Street in the Norwich neighborhood. At the same time, Roanoke Mountain Adventures will relocate its retail operations from the Wasena area to the main Black Dog location off Memorial Avenue. Black Dog's warehouse on Ashlawn Street is located just off the greenway like Black Dog's primary location, where it will house most of the company's salvage inventory, including antique lumber, doors and other large-scale reclaimed materials.

That will free up ten thousand square feet for Roanoke Mountain Adventures (RMA), which will move its retail operations from Wasena, with plans to expand its bike shop, outdoor gear and apparel, and adventure outfitting services, offering more new inventory alongside its used sale items. Call it a good problem - Roanoke Mountain Adventures owner Jeff Todd says his current three-thousand square foot space is bursting at the seams. The new location will triple RMA's retail floor space says Todd, who has gotten to know Black Dog owners Robert Kulp and Mike Whiteside.

"I really did not know them at all before this conversation started maybe last summer," notes Todd, "I just really enjoyed getting to know them and their entire team. It's obviously a great business that's been around for a long time. What's exciting is that we've got someone to collaborate with. We see a lot of ways to work together."

Todd also says 2027 looks like the year RMA will be able to take full advantage of the in-river park at Wasena (just over the foot bridge into Vic Thomas Park) featuring a series of man-made rapids, for its kayak and flotation services. "The in-river park will not be completed before [this] summer. At last look, it's likely to be completed in the Fall. Same thing with the [new] bridge connecting Wasena to downtown. You have those two large projects that are basically right along where we normally would offer those floats. It really complicates the logistics. Basically, we're looking at making do for this summer."

RMA rents kayaks and tubes for Roanoke River floats; he says the opening date target for the move to Black Dog Salvage is September 1. For two established businesses that depend in large part on foot traffic generated by the Roanoke River Greenway they border, this could be an ideal collab. 



Eliminate one point of pain

Here's one idea for you if you're a budding entrepreneur.

Having gone to countless "shark tank" affairs, business competitions, entrepreneurial programs, pitch panels (serving on a few), vc and angel prospectus preparations, business planning, and the like, I've gained a little insight over three decades of observation. I've noticed who wins. And I've also noticed who sticks around after winning.

I got a collection of tips.

But what if I only had one? What if the new entrepreneur and I were passing each other on up-and-down escalators (not even an elevator... but escalators with mere seconds to spare and all the distractions around us) and I only had enough time to shout out ONE piece of advice?

"Get rid of a pain, Charlie!"

That's what I would shout out. Unless the person's name wasn't Charlie. Then, I'd use his or her name.

It turns out, you can do a lot, you can accomplish greatness, you can build a successful enterprise by doing just that one thing: eliminating a point of pain.

That's it.

It's really that simple. (Or challenging.)

It's also a 9:1 ratio. Nine out of ten people will respond to eliminating a negative over acquiring a positive. People will do anything and everything to avoid a problem.

In fact, that one person who is positive and reaching for a star—does so, because he doesn't currently have the star. It's probably more accurate to say all motivation is avoiding a consequence.

Therefore, think about the business you want to build. What's ONE THING you wish similar businesses did better or that your business could solve?

Do that, Charlie. 🍷

“
”
All motivation is
avoiding a consequence.



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By **Tom Field**

Executive Summary:
*Business building
advice—abridged.*



Chelsea Seeber / VT

Landon Marston, Virginia Tech Associate Professor of civil and environmental engineering

GUEST COMMENTARY

By Noah Frank

Executive Summary:
VT engineering professor shares a perspective on data center resource allocation.

The power/water trade-off for data centers

There's a lot of conflicting information floating around about just how much water data centers really use.

When it comes to the hyperscaled, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven data centers, there's water for cooling the components, especially during intense model training. There's some nominal water use for each query. But how that water—and, at least as crucially, power—is allocated is a lot more complicated than may appear on the surface.

For Associate Professor of civil and environmental engineering Landon Marston, who specializes in environmental and water resources engineering, it's not the water use that so often gets highlighted that concerns him.

"Energy is a bigger deal in my mind than water," he said. "Water gets more attention, probably because people understand that more. It's obviously fundamental to life. You know what a gallon of water is—most people don't know what a kilowatt-hour of energy is."

The resource allocation equation is, essentially, a trade-off between power and water. But there are often complimentary costs within each trade-off. Server racks can be cooled through other technologies, such as air-side

cooling, but that will, in turn, require more power. And the water use from generating that power can be a lot more than people realize.

“From a water perspective, that could potentially have an impact on local water resources because many forms of energy generation—particularly when we’re talking about natural gas, coal, and nuclear—will withdraw and consume a notable amount of water,” said Marston.


So while initiatives like the Ratepayer Protection Pledge require AI companies to be responsible for their own power, mega projects will also put multiple layers of strain on local water resources. In a 2021 study, Marston and his team estimated that about three-fourths of the total water footprint of data centers actually came from offsite power sources, and recent data suggests that number may now be closer to 90 percent.

“You’re solving one problem, but perhaps you’re creating new ones,” said Marston.

In water-abundant areas, this could actually be a benefit, serving to reduce some of the energy load. But in drought-stricken areas where many major data center projects are planned, like southern Arizona, the Colorado River Basin, and Texas, already strapped municipalities could face compounding competition for both water and power resources. There’s also the broader issue of water loss in places like Lake Powell, which could diminish the Hoover Dam’s ability to create hydroelectric power for the region.

“I think we’re going to see more recognition of this beyond pure academics because it’s starting to impact people’s lives when there’s simply not enough water available to meet direct water requirements, but energy demands as well,” said Marston.

In the other direction, it also takes a lot of energy to purify and move water from one place to another, with about 80 percent of municipal water processing and distribution costs spent on electricity. For major new projects, like the Google data center in Botetourt County, Virginia, these resource costs can be accounted for, so long as the public-private partnership helps support the cost of all this additional infrastructure capacity. Marston’s larger worry is if, due to broader forces, that partnership breaks down.

“What happens if we’re in an AI bubble?” he asked. “These data centers commit to purchasing all this water, investing in all this infrastructure, the utility moves forward with that, makes these really large investments that have these 30-year payback periods. Then, three years down the road, the data center industry dips, and many of these data centers they’re serving go under. Who’s on the hook for all those stranded assets?” 

“

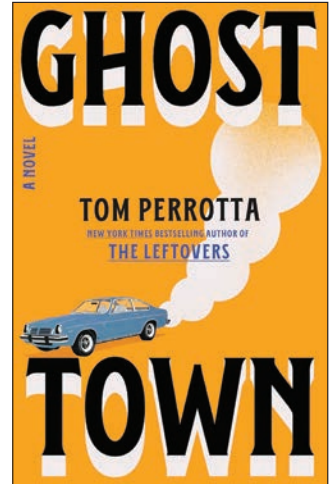
Energy is a bigger deal in my mind than water.

”

Server racks can be cooled through other technologies... but that will, in turn, require more power.

FRONTReviews >

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



1970's Jersey Bildungsroman

If, as 'they' say, "brevity is the soul of wit," then *Ghost Town* (Scribner; 2026) by Tom Perrotta will likely be the wittiest novel you'll read this year. He has complete chapters that are shorter than some novelists' paragraphs. Even the ten or so titled sections are merely a few chapters. The book is 273 pages, but you wouldn't know it. I have to admit: I love the format. Turns out, Perrotta's writing repertoire has been scripted for screen; so that terseness makes sense.

Now, on to our story. The parallels to my life are uncanny. Teen years in 1970s suburbia coinciding with the untimely death of our protagonist's mother. Like playing The Doobie Brothers on an 8-track in a Chevy Vega, I could relate to every scene. (Funny note: Jimmy rides in his cousin's Vega and thinks it's a fast car; goes to show how our ideas might be skewed a bit when we're young and what we thought was cool.)

What a replay. What a trip. Nostalgia and bittersweetness at its finest.

—Tom Field

The underrated shark

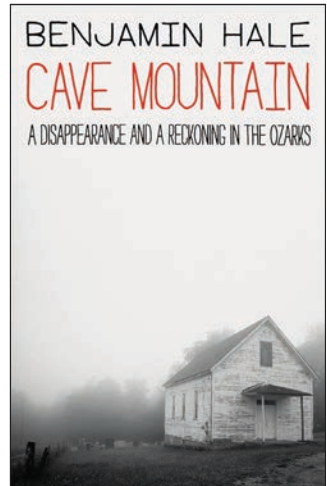
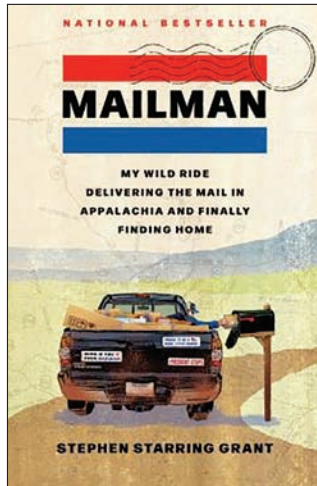
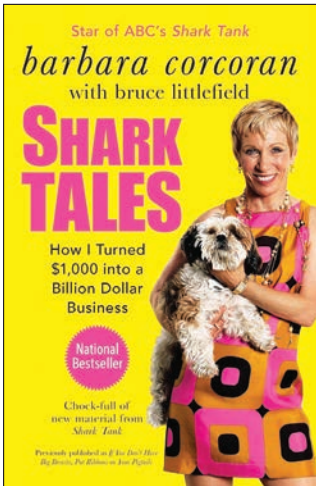
I'm going to be real. No one says "Barbara Corcoran" when asked who is the most interesting or richest or even most notable 'shark' on the popular television show Shark Tank that features entrepreneurs pitching potential investors. As a matter of fact, I'd

be willing to guess she jumps in the least as an investor on all the ideas presented. Yet, I find her—particularly on matters of real estate—to be the one on the board / panel I'd be inclined to listen to the most. Corcoran might not be the most engaging shark on that show, but I've heard her in other interviews where her intelligence is surprisingly savvy and adept. To put it another way, I probably trust her the most. There's something about her gut and insight I find attention-worthy. Another surprise? Her book, *Shark Tales* (which was originally published as *If You Don't Have Big Breasts, Put Ribbons on Your Pigtails*) is an enjoyable read—even if you're not a fan of "business books." Although it's now over 15 years old, Corcoran's *Shark Tales* (Portfolio/Penguin; 2011) features truly useful advice. Her story is wonderfully told; but I do suspect its surprising effect and impact is mostly due to Bruce Littlefield, the ghostwriter. He's credited, after all (that doesn't always happen, especially with celebrities) and again, her persona isn't the most enthusiastic on the Shark Tank set. She's a smart go-getter and ever-so-worthy entrepreneur sort, nonetheless. A good read with valuable lessons.

—Tom Field

Blacksburg writer delivers mail

Axed from a corporate marketing consultant group when COVID hit, Stephen Starring Grant was 50 and had cancer. He needed a job pronto for the health insurance, for starters. So the Blacksburg resident



became a mailman. A member of the United States Postal Service, training in Roanoke before taking on a route in Blacksburg that stretched from the Corporate Research Center at Virginia Tech to routes and roads so rural Grant even had to ford a small brook or two.

He tells it all in *Mailman. My Wild Ride Delivering the Mail In Appalachia and Finally Finding Home* (Simon & Schuster, 2025), from the trials of training and not thinking he could remember all those details to the kindhearted residents along his route that got to know him in the year he worked for the USPS. The occasional rogue dog or crazy customer too. Rediscovering America as it says in the book jacket. Let's just say it being very well organized and able to remember a lot of little points about how to stack a route would be good traits to have. Well written by the longtime managing and marketing consultant, you may appreciate your mail carrier a little more after reading *Mailman*.

—Gene Marrano

Lost in the Ozarks—long version

Not my genre; I have to lead with that. In *Cave Mountain* (Harper; 2026) we have Benjamin Hale's report of two young girls who suffered tragedies in the Ozark Mountains—one six-year-old (related to our author) who went missing but then found three days later in 2001; one three-year-old who was murdered in a bizarre doomsday cult in 1978. Both in the same neck of the

woods. Hale ties the two stories loosely together, based primarily on the serendipitous location. I picked the book up because it was new, it included mountains and the South, and because nearly all of my reviews here in FRONT have been literary fiction; and I felt obliged to read real life. Being in the news business, I get enough real life. (Almost all of mine is for positive purposes, thankfully.) Sure enough, *Cave Mountain* slapped me—hard. For well over half of the book, I felt abused, because it read like straight news reporting. I could have Googled the two victim's names and gotten all I needed to know in fewer than five minutes. But then—Hale goes deep—I mean deep—into the various sects of Christianity that seemed to build one unspoken but shouted maxim: if you are religious, here is every reason why you shouldn't be. Our agnostic-atheist does more than tolerate religions folks, however (he attempts understanding and 'exorcises' empathy); and above everything else, he indirectly insists you question your faith if you are so-inclined to have any. His biggest takeaway on Christianity is a dire warning on those who follow *sola scriptura*; where the Bible is the only source of truth and revelation. The idea of "anathema" is too often (perhaps always?) misapplied to dangerous consequences. This book was thoroughly depressing. But I won't forget it.

—Tom Field

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



Gene Marrano



Carilion dedicates midwifery clinic >

Carilion Clinic has dedicated its first dedicated midwifery clinic, located in a Carilion facility near the Radford University at Carilion nursing school and Community Hospital in downtown Roanoke. Midwife services are geared towards women in their reproductive years and beyond, including annual exams, cancer screenings, family planning and menopause care. The dedicated midwifery clinic at Carilion on Highland Avenue opens its doors to patients in April.

Carilion certified nurse-midwife Daniela Paul says they will also introduce Radford University at Carilion and Virginia Tech-Carilion School of Medicine students to midwifery services as part of their training. "When somebody goes online and lookup midwives of Roanoke, there will be a physical location for people to say, I can go there, I can ask questions, I can send messages. So many women are looking for midwifery care. It's a lot more popular than it used to be when I started being a midwife."

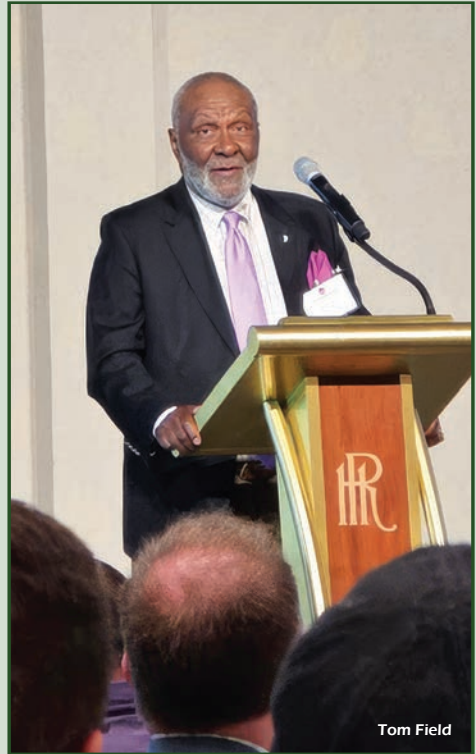


Submitted

VTC-SOM's informatics center >

A global nonprofit dedicated to early diagnosis, treatment, and ultimately future cures for Primary Immuno-deficiency, or P-I, has landed in Roanoke at the **Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine**. The **Jeffrey Modell Center for Informatics and Data Science**, was dedicated in late April. The Jeffrey Modell Foundation is named for a teenager who succumbed to PI at age 15 in the 1980's. Dr Nick Rider is a professor clinical immunology, that's in the department of Health Systems and Implementation Science, and an associate medical information officer at Carilion Clinic; he says they worked for over a decade to land the Modell Center at the medical school where he says AI-aided research will advance how to use data to better understand immune disorders and improve patient care: "informatics is the science of studying information ... to improve outcomes in health care by driving data to knowledge, and information to wisdom. They have over 500 centers worldwide and we're the first ever center [dedicated] for informatics and data science."

Primary Immunodeficiency or PI causes children and adults to have infections that come back frequently or are unusually hard to cure. 1 in 500 persons are affected by one of the known PI's according to the Modell Foundation. Rider says they've gained experience elsewhere with the Modell Center and its use of artificial intelligence to aid research into immune disorders. At the Modell Center launch at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine in late April, Dean Dr. Lee Learman called the occasion, "a milestone for the entire field of immunology."



FCS's RVL ends well >

"Is this [course of action] going to end well?" That's a question Dr. Henry Deenen says we all need to ask more often, before we do what we're about to do. Deenen, CEO of Global Hope Network International was the keynote speaker at **Faith Christian School's Roanoke Valley Leadership Series** 10th annual affair at Hotel Roanoke Conference Center on April 29. Over 150 attended the event, which also recognized **Peter Lewis** of Apple Ridge Farm as its 2026 Inspiring Roanoke Award recipient.



Elliot's support of VWCC >

Diane and William Elliot and Roanoke-based Davis H. Elliot Company, Inc. received the 20th Annual Chancellor's Award for Leadership in Philanthropy by the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education. They were nominated by Virginia Western Community College. The event honored more than two dozen individuals, families, and businesses from all 23 of Virginia's community colleges; and Chancellor David Dore told the 200+ guests the recipients "represent an extraordinary \$27 million in lifetime giving to Virginia's community colleges."



Collective bargaining >

Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce, Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce, and Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce co-hosted a **Legislative Wrap-Up** at Salem Civic Center on May 5. Representatives on the panel included Senator David Suetterlein, Senator Chris Head, Senator Bill Stanley, Delegate Joe McNamara, Delegate Lily Franklin, Delegate Eric Phillips, Delegate Sam Rasoul, and Delegate Terry Austin. One of the top topics concerned the development of data centers in our region, which even crept into the issue of the state budget currently at an impasse.



Tom Field



AFOG LOVE >

A Few Old Goats brewery in Buchanan gets an appreciative nod from us for having one of the most relevant, best-fitting "LOVE VIRGINIA" display/signs in our region. The letters are formed from 1) kegs [beer]; 2) button [the beautifully repurposed Buchanan brewpub used to be a button manufacturer; 3) kayaks [the scenic James River and popular launching spot is a short walk away]; 4) railroad ties [historic and current rail line runs right behind the property]. A perfect tie-in. Well played, AFOG Buchanan.

Titans of tech >

Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council (RBTC) hosted its annual TechNite gala on May 7 at Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center to a packed ballroom of 500.

After the cocktail networking and lavish dinner stations, the program started with a brief

interview of RBTC members, where charter member Nanci Hardwick (MELD Manufacturing / Aeroprobe) noted the large crowd and support, saying "when I first started with the Council we could have probably fit at three of these tables." She continued, "I don't think we all realize how much we do" in the tech community and that our region "will be a textbook for marrying technology and manufacturing."



A full slate of award nominees in multiple categories was presented, followed by these TechNite 2026 winners:

- Entrepreneur of the Year | Narro Trucks, Inc. and Webster Santos
- Innovator of the Year Award | Dr. Eli Vlasisavljevich
- Large Leading Tech Company | Carilion Clinic and Novonesis
- Small Leading Tech Company | Tight Technologies
- Regional Leadership Award | Don Halliwill, Carilion Clinic
- Rising Star Award | Dr. Jenny Munson, Cairina
- STEM-H Educator Award in Higher Ed | Leah Thomas, Virginia Western Community College
- STEM-H Educator in K-12 | Jason Suhr, Roanoke County Public Schools
- Ruby Award | Dr. Angela Joyner and Dr. Ken Nicely
- Hart of the Entrepreneur Award | CJ Page, QlutchQMS
- Hall of Fame | Tim Sands, Virginia Tech

Radford University's analytics center >

Radford University Davis College of Business and Economics recently launched the **Center for Applied Analytics**. In an increasingly data-driven economy, students need to enter the workforce with the ability derive insights from datasets and communicate complex analytical results. The goal of the new Center for Applied Analytics is to further analytics education and research at Radford University, the Southwest Virginia region, and beyond. Directed by Dr. Zachary A. Collier (also a Valley Business FRONT columnist), the center will promote analytics education, work with local organizations on data-related projects, and conduct cutting-edge analytics research. Analytics involves the application of mathematics to solve complex problems. Three broad categories of analytics include descriptive analytics, which describes the current state of systems or processes; predictive analytics, which aims to forecast what will happen in the future; and prescriptive analytics, which guides decision makers in what is the best course of action based on balancing the costs, benefits, and risks.





TT's celebrity tour >

Texas Tavern—the iconic and historic Roanoke hamburger/hotdog joint—was the feature star and “burger of the month” with its Cheesy Western at Hamburger America in New York City on May 7. TT’s Matt and Molly Bullington celebrated with the popular Hamburger America Chef George Motz (“burger scholar”) and the Great American Hamburger culinary campaign sponsored by Southern Living magazine.



VWCC upgrades to gold medal >

Virginia Western Community College's military-friendly ranking has been elevated—from silver last year to gold this year, 2026-2027 term. The Military Friendly organization assesses educational institutions on benchmarks including graduation, retention, job placement or transfer rates; loan default rates; and veteran outcomes as well as outcomes for Guard and Reserve students, dependents, active duty, and military spouses. To achieve Gold Status, Virginia Western had to meet five or more benchmarks and meet qualification percentages compared with other schools in the award category of Large Community College in this survey cycle. “Over the past year, we’ve implemented new and optimized processes that significantly reduce certification wait times for VA benefits users, while also expanding our outreach efforts to better connect with service members and veterans where they are,” said Brandon Snead, VERITAS Veteran Liaison at VWCC and US Air Force veteran.

Funding for upgrades at Knob >

During an industry roundtable at the **East Coast Sawmill, Logging & Pallet Equipment Exposition (EXPO Richmond)** in Doswell Governor Abigail Spanberger signed an executive directive creating the Virginia Wood Council — a new advisory body focused on growing Virginia's forestry industry, supporting loggers, and making sure Virginia's forests remain strong into the future. The Council will also help the industry contend with the challenges created by federal tariffs and support business expansion into new markets. "The Virginia Wood Council [will] drive economic growth, help businesses access new markets for Virginia-made wood products, and keep our forests and wood-based businesses strong for generations to come," said Spanberger. Virginia has approximately 16 million acres of forestland, and forestry is Virginia's number three private industry — currently generating more than 108,000 jobs and contributing \$21 billion annually to Virginia's economy. As much as 25 percent of revenue received from forest product sales is returned to the localities where the forests are located.



Roanoke Women's Foundation honors >

The **Taubman Museum of Art** held its 21st annual luncheon last month, a celebration of women in the arts and arts education in the community. One of the two honorees was Judy Larson, former director of the Taubman Museum of Art, when it was at Center in the Square as the Art Museum of Western Virginia. "Women get written out of arts history. I think it has turned around in the 21st Century. This luncheon today is trying to right some things that hasn't been terribly right for decades, maybe centuries. The women were always there, they just rarely made the arts history book or the lecture, or the important collections. They were passed over," says Larson.

Larson was with the Art Museum of Western Virginia when Randall Stout was hired to design the Taubman building; she left before it opened in 2008 for a museum post in California. Also honored was Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo, a board member for the Taubman Museum and Roanoke College. Past Roanoke Women's Foundation honorees were also saluted. Carilion Clinic CEO Emeritus Nancy Agee - who rose from nurse to the top post at Carilion - was the keynote speaker. The Roanoke Women's Foundation awards significant grants to non-profit arts and culture organizations on an annual basis. "I really feel Roanoke is experiencing a Renaissance," says Larson, "and I think this building is a big part of that. I was so glad, with the committee, to pick Randall Stout. I think he really had a vision."



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





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EDUCATION FRONT



Dixon

Warren Dixon has been named the next dean of the College of Engineering at Virginia Tech. Dixon's experience includes advancing high-impact research, expanding academic programs, and building strategic partnerships. He currently serves as the interim dean of the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering at the University of Florida and will begin his new term at VT in July. Dixon is a prolific and highly cited researcher with a bachelor's degree from Clemson, master's degree from the University of South Carolina, and a Ph.D from Clemson, all in electrical engineering. His recognitions include

Fellow of American Society of Mechanical Engineers (2016); Fellow of Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (2016); Air Force Commander's Public Service Award (2016); Distinguished Member of the IEEE Control Systems Society (2020).



Houston

Anne Houston, an anatomy and physiology teacher at Cave Spring High School, has been selected as the 2026 Roanoke County Public Schools Golden Apple Teacher of the Year.

Celeste Derey Brogdon has been named the new assistant dean of advancement for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) at Virginia Tech. A Roanoke



Stewart

native, Brogdon returns to her home state with more than two decades of experience in university advancement, agricultural partnerships, and stakeholder engagement.



Sturm

Belinda Sturm has been appointed department head of the Charles E. Via, Jr. Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, effective July 25. Sturm will come to Virginia Tech from the University of Kansas, where she serves as director of the Kansas National

Science Foundation Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) and is the Ross McKinney Endowed Professor of Environmental Engineering.

FINANCIAL FRONT



Lawrence

Stephanie Lawrence has been promoted to commercial office manager at the Roanoke headquarters of Ridge View Bank. She joined the bank two years ago as a universal associate and was subsequently promoted to assistant manager. With 30 years of banking experience, Lawrence relocated here from Tampa Bay, where she spent 18 years as a branch manager.

Ryan Applegate has



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Applegate

joined Ridge View Bank as Private Banker, serving clients throughout Roanoke and New River Valley. Based in Roanoke, he has more than 15 years of local banking experience and a diverse background that includes branch management, financial well-being initiatives, and community development. Applegate is a lifelong Roanoke Valley resident, Salem High School graduate, board member of Family Service of Roanoke Valley, and team advisor for Leadership Roanoke Valley.

Shannon McClure has joined Farm Credit of the Virginias as an enterprise risk management analyst, based in the Roanoke branch. She is a lifelong resident of Roanoke County who

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McClure

holds a bachelor's degree in history from Liberty University and an MBA from Western Governors University. McClure has sixteen years of experience in financial services, including positions at a large bank and community bank.

TECH/INDUSTRY FRONT

Chance Kristo has joined the team at Tech Squared in Roanoke which includes service

with enterprise systems. He has over a decade of IT experience, a former US Navy and Roanoke College graduate, and previously worked at Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion.

SPORTS FRONT



Widmar

Joe Widmar of the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs was named the SPHL Most Valuable Player for the 2025-

2026 season. The 31-year-old center for Roanoke's hockey team produced 29 goals, 51 assists, and a plus-six rating. He led the league in both assists and points and set a new franchise record (for 77 points in a season).

ARTS FRONT



Koroneos

Stefanos Koroneos has joined Opera Roanoke as Producing Director. He has



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more than 25 years of international experience as a performer, stage director, and arts executive. Born in Athens, Greece, his career began as a

baritone, performing on some of the world's most prestigious stages and collaborating with legendary figures in the field. He has served as both general and artistic director of

Teatro Grattacielo in New York City and assistant director Carmen at the Metropolitan Opera as well as directorial credits of Mozart's Idomeneo and Don Giovanni,

Zandonai's *Giulietta e Romeo*, and *Le nozze di Figaro* and Rossini *Perduto*; productions in Greece, U.S., Italy.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

““

It's going to be so effective at communicating the message of our local food and agriculture businesses. — Page 31



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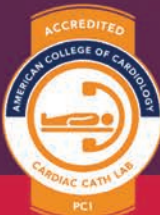
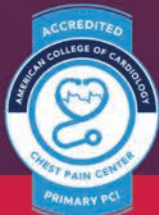


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CONTRIBUTORS

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]

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Carrie Cousins is the Director of Digital Marketing at LeadPoint Digital in Roanoke. For 15+ years, she has helped businesses tell their stories and get better results online with practical digital marketing strategies. She also an active leader in AAF, serving on the local and district boards, and is an adjunct professor at Virginia Tech.

Dan Dowdy is the business development director for Valley Business FRONT and owner of The Proofing Prof proofreading services (proofingprof.net). His background includes service in the U.S. Air Force and an extensive career in education, including

teaching college-level writing competency and business courses, and working for a Fortune 100 company. [ddowdy@vbFRONT.com]

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

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

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also publishes a blog at www.fraim.cpa/blog and is frequently interviewed as a business financial expert in national media channels. [micahfraim@fraimcpa.com]

Noah Frank is the assistant director of communications and news, DC area, for Virginia Tech. [nafrank@vt.edu]

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

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

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

Mary Ann L. Miller is vice president of business

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

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

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

““”

It is unbelievable to me how much they overregulate this industry.

— Page 19

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“The spirit of innovation is alive and well in Roanoke. — Page 24

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Spot me a 10?

The Spot on Kirk—the popular boutique music venue operating in downtown Roanoke—is celebrating ten years in business this year. Stats include over 600 shows and more than 30,000 attendees. With far too many artists and performances to list here, the Spot is well known for bringing a colorful and diverse lineup of genres, especially acoustic and sought-after under-the-radar acts with loyal fan bases.

How 'bout \$10M for HU?

Hollins University received a \$10 million gift from alumna Jane Parke Batten to support a need-based scholarship program. Batten's gift is one of the largest donations in Hollins' history and will fund scholarships for students through the graduating class of 2032. Known as the Hollins Opportunity for Promise through Education (HOPE) Scholarship program, it helps high-achieving students who need financial assistance attend the university.

Cementing an acquisition

Titan America, which operates the Roanoke Cement plant in Botetourt County, has acquired Pennsylvania-based Keystone Cement Company, a reported \$310 million value.

120+ credentials

Roanoke College-Roanoke Valley (RC-RV) and its collaboration with

ed2go, now offers a workforce training program for building skills and earning sought-after credentials. The online courses are flexible and span a catalog of options in healthcare, cybersecurity, project management, construction trades, and more. Program details at Roanoke.edu/CareerReady.

RCPS tech school #1 in USA

Charles W. Day Technical Education Center (DAYTEC) at Roanoke City's William Fleming High School was selected as the 2025/26 School of the Year by WIX Filters "Tomorrow's Technician" program. DAYTEC received \$10,000 and was the 17th recipient of the annual national program that "salutes the best technical training schools in the country."

e-Hub with a little extra

The Entrepreneur Resource Center has opened at Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center. ERC provides "something different: a structured, accessibly entry point into the innovation ecosystem" and promises founders they can "gain traction [and] connect to the right people faster, where momentum can turn into real companies."

TJG pres gets SBA POTY

Curtis Joachim of **The Joachim Group (TJG)** was recognized as the 2026 Small Business Person of the Year by the U.S. Small Business

Administration (SBA). TJG is a full-service accounting firm headquartered in Roanoke; and Joachim is a CPA, Certified Government Financial Manager, and Chartered Global Management Accountant, as well as a Marine veteran who served in the 1st Gulf War.

Vertical or flat?

AeroFarms microgreen vertical farming facility in Pittsylvania County continues to perplex with mixed reports. The latest news (as of publication) has the company stating it has canceled a mass layoff and potential shutdown, even though those announcements were made over the past five months. Whether the company is still pursuing a sale or restructuring is uncertain, but for now, jobs appear to be preserved (anywhere from 120 to 180) for the time being at the 140,000-square foot facility in Cane Creek Center industrial park.

Smokey on the move

The Virginia State Police Division 6 headquarters that has long occupied a building in Glenvar (off West Main Street, Salem) has moved to 1745 Loch Haven Drive, Roanoke (the former 3-story, 72,000-sq-ft All

Biking, paddling to the dogs

Roanoke Mountain Adventures—an outdoors bike-kayak livery and local booking adventure experience outlet—is moving from its spot

in the old repurposed icehouse in Wasena to another river-and-greenway-access point just a short distance away—the popular Black Dog Salvage warehouse and retail outlet, essentially moving from the west side to the east side of Wasena recreation area.

Rolling off the press no more

Collegiate Times, the college newspaper for the Virginia Tech community, has halted the printed paper. The news will still be published in digital form, but the presses stopped after an impressive run of 123 years (and over 3,000 weekly issues). The announcement was made May 3, citing other college newspapers that stopped print versions.

Eat'em up, trail

A new **Roanoke Region Food & Farm Trail** has been formed to bring together locals and visitors with the farms, markets, restaurants, and related food businesses in an effort to promote and advocate for our vibrant local food system. Info: roanokefoodandfarmtrail.com

No more sleeping in waiting rooms, cars

Hospitality House of the Blue Ridge (HHBR) is a new nonprofit initiative to provide a 25-room "affordable, home-like lodging for adult patients and their loved ones [who have traveled to receive] medical attention, critical care in the region." The planned facility has secured early support

from Carilion Clinic, according to Brian Wells, GM of Hotel Roanoke, who is helping to head up the initiative.

Visit Mabry Mill again

Mabry Mill—the popular destination on Blue Ridge Parkway (Floyd County)—is reopening its restaurant. MM176 has been selected as the newest operator for food, beverage, and retail services in the restaurant and gift shop at the site—a most frequent calendar pinup favorite and Parkway attraction.

Retirement mandate for small biz

Following Governor Spanberger's signing of HB176 and SB149, Virginia businesses that have five or more employees and have operated for two or more years are required to register and facilitate **RetirePath** Virginia, beginning July 1. The new state law lowers the eligible threshold from 25 employees to five and includes part-time workers. Approximately 35,000 eligible Virginia businesses will receive a notice of the requirement to either register for RetirePath or offer their own qualified retirement plan.

Med bills gone

The Secular Society—a nonprofit in Blacksburg—released a statement that it eliminated \$51,348,305 in medical debt for 35,007 residents of 18 counties of Southwest Virginia. The program (partnering with NY-based Undue

Medical Debt) serves uninsured and underinsured individuals meeting specific poverty/income requirements.

Props for Brookdale

Brookdale Roanoke has been recognized by U.S. News & World Report as a Best Memory Care among senior living communities across the nation for the fifth consecutive year. Brookdale Senior Living Inc. is a nationwide operator of senior living communities, with 568 communities across 41 states.

More Tech grants

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded **Virginia Tech** two grants that total \$1,211,582. The breakdown includes \$818,500 for Cardiovascular Diseases Research and \$393,082 for Biomedical Research and Research Training.

Virginia workers get paid family leave

Governor Abigail Spanberger has signed legislation creating a paid family and medical leave program to support more than three million workers across the Commonwealth. Virginia is the first state in the South with statewide paid family and medical leave. The Commonwealth has now joined 14 other states, Washington DC - and most of the world - in offering a paid family and medical leave program. Starting in 2028 Virginia workers will be able to

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take up to 12 weeks of paid leave to address serious health needs for themselves or a family member, including parental leave. Virginians will receive approximately 80 percent of their average weekly wage, capped at 100 percent of the state's average weekly wage. All but the smallest businesses will institute a payroll tax to help fund the program. Currently, the average Virginia worker who takes four weeks of unpaid leave loses more than \$3,600 in income. The paid family and medical leave program will be administered through the Virginia Employment Commission.

The Commonwealth looks to craft economic development policy

Governor Abigail Spanberger has announced the launch of a statewide tour focused on developing a comprehensive economic development policy to guide the Administration's work to deliver results for business, workers, and communities. This roadmap will focus on growing Virginia's economy and creating economic opportunity for all Virginians. The Governor and members of her Cabinet will host events to hear from business leaders, industry experts, and

education partners across communities about the concrete steps Virginia can take to accelerate economic development. Spanberger has also signed an executive order establishing a Cabinet-level Steering Committee — chaired by Secretary of Commerce and Trade Carrie Chenery — to spearhead the effort and build upon Virginia's competitive advantage.

Matching tourism grants issued

More than \$2.2 million in matching grant and sponsorship funds will be awarded to 143 local tourism programs. The Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC)'s Marketing Leverage and Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) Marketing Programs — pair local marketing investments with matching state funds to support Virginia's tourism industry, extend overnight stays, and encourage visitors to spend more across the Commonwealth. Local partners will commit \$4.3 million to match the VTC grant funds, generating \$6.5 million in new marketing and event production initiatives. In total, these awards will impact 858 localities, businesses, and organizations that partner with VTC to encourage statewide tourism. Recipients

include: Floyd Tourism; Floyd Country Store; Floyd Center for the Arts (\$45k); Moonlight Manor Bed and Breakfast and the Town of Floyd (\$11k); Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber of Commerce "Season Stretcher" program (\$10k); Sinkland Farms in Riner, Pulaski County Tourism "Experience More, Stay Longer" (\$20k); Exchange Music Hall in downtown Roanoke and the adjoining Promissory Hotel (20k); and two tourism programs in Salem (\$25k).

Capital for startups

\$2.48 million in strategic investments through the Commonwealth's Capital for Communities Fund (CCCF), will support projects that will expand access to financing for small businesses and entrepreneurs across Virginia. In this region People Inc. will launch a rural community builder and entrepreneurs' initiative, addressing ownership and appraisal gaps in rural downtowns, specifically Virginia Main Street communities. By pairing \$82,500 in grants and \$420,000 in loans with technical assistance, People Inc. says it will support 50 businesses, providing 20 loans and creating 10-20 jobs.

GO Virginia grants will support projects

More than \$15.3 million in Growth and Opportunity for Virginia (GO Virginia) grants will support a new portfolio of projects across the Commonwealth focused on workforce development, advanced manufacturing, unmanned

systems, life sciences, and site development. The projects leverage \$9.5 million in local, private, and institutional investments and are projected to deliver economic impact, including training more than 6,000 Virginians, creating more than 600 new jobs, supporting business growth, and strengthening Virginia's position in high-demand industry sectors. In Region 2 locally, the AM2 Initiative to Grow Advanced Manufacturing (\$4,230,160) is a multiregional effort to scale advanced manufacturing through coordinated investments in talent development, innovation infrastructure, and business support. The project will establish an industry consortium; develop training and credentialing programs; and provide resources for prototyping, commercialization and workforce development.

Beale's is back

After closing a year ago, the taproom for Beale's Brewery in the Town of Bedford has reopened. New owner Vee Patel says Beales coming back means a lot to the and surrounding area. "It's something people here always have a connection to." When the opportunity came up it felt like a chance to bring that back. But also take it further than where it had been." That means selling more Beale's brews over a larger region. (Beale's kept brewing beer and sold to retail shops during its hiatus.) Some of the original Beale's crew will return as well. Patel says the reopened taproom will feature barbeque,

new beers, old favorites and a hard seltzer.

Growing tourism in the Commonwealth

Virginia's Statewide Strategic Tourism Plan for 2026–2029 has been released, a comprehensive roadmap designed to guide tourism growth, increasing both visitation and traveler spending over the next four years. Developed by the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) in partnership with Hunden Partners, a nationally recognized firm in destination development and tourism planning, the plan provides a coordinated, data-driven strategy to strengthen Virginia's tourism industry and support economic growth across all regions of the Commonwealth.

Delta Dental of Virginia safety net grants to be used for staffing

Delta Dental of Virginia recently presented \$222,600 dollars to a handful of "safety net" clinics in the Roanoke Valley, including The Bradley Free Clinic, Child Health Investment Partnership, or CHIP, of the Roanoke Valley, and New Horizons Healthcare. Delta Dental calls it an investment in "oral health infrastructure." The Commonwealth currently meets only 66% of patient demand for oral health care according to Delta Dental, ranking second to last in the U.S. Polly Raible, executive director of the Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation, says there are various reasons for

this: rising equipment costs, recent changes to Medicaid eligibility, and - most importantly - workforce shortages. "We have a definite workforce shortage in Virginia," notes Raible, "we are a thousand dental hygienists short. That is a lot of why we are unable to meet the demand for preventive services."

Paddling the old, New river

Radford, Giles County, and the 37-mile **New River Water Trail** was cited by tourism organization Virginia is for Lovers in its list of "Best Towns for Paddlers" due to the "first rate scenery" kayak and canoe paddlers get from one of the oldest rivers in the world.

Radford graduates record number of BSN students

Radford University has awarded approximately 350 Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degrees during the 2025-26 academic year, marking the highest number of BSN degrees conferred in the university's history. That places Radford among the largest producers of pre-licensure BSN graduates in Virginia among four-year public universities. The total includes graduates from both the winter and spring semesters. Wendy Downey, dean of the College of Nursing, says, "our graduates are exceptionally prepared, compassionate professionals who will make an immediate impact in communities across the commonwealth and beyond." The 2025-26 total represents continued

growth from the 2024-25 academic year, when Radford awarded approximately 295 BSN degrees. Virginia, like much of the nation, continues to face a shortage of qualified nurses. Carilion Clinic typically represents the first hiring option for its BSN graduates, says Downey.

More coffee please

The Grandin area in Roanoke City is home to a brand new café. Asher's Coffee, which has been a staple at farmer's markets in the area, has set up shop in the former On The Rise bakery space in the Grandin neighborhood next to Community Inn. Ashers had been located in a space near Golden Cactus Brewing in downtown Roanoke. Owner Jacob Asher says he has always dreamed of having a breakfast spot but didn't think opening one in Grandin

was possible: "I kind of lucked into this space in a way. We're happy to be in the corner right at Grandin and Memorial [Avenue]. It's definitely fulfilling an America Dream as best I can." Asher says he hopes to import his own coffee beans at some point in the future.

VIA to branch out in Roanoke

A Charlottesville-based non-profit that's been in Roanoke for several years now will launch a new pilot program here, focused on early intervention for young autistic children. VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment will launch its Pediatric ABA Program in Roanoke this summer, next to its VIA Day School that used to be known as the Blue Ridge Autism and Achievement Center - or BRAAC. ABA is Applied Behavior Analysis - a therapy that applies

an understanding of how behavior works to real world situations. Zenith Barrett is VIA's Regional Advancement Officer: "it's designed to work alongside young children, preschool aged students, 18 months to about 5 or 6 - really help them get kindergarten ready. We're really excited ... to offer this service in the Roanoke Community." The Pediatric ABA Program in Roanoke will launch with a pilot involving 10 to 12 preschool aged children in late summer or early fall - Barrett says they hope to double that number after reviewing the results. Other VIA Centers for Neurodevelopment are located in Lynchburg and Lexington.

Two more seasons and out for DWS at RSO

The Roanoke Symphony Orchestra (RSO) has announced that Music Director and Conductor

David Stewart Wiley will extend his contract with the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra for one additional year to coincide with the celebration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the RSO. He will conclude his tenure on July 1, 2028, after serving as Music Director since 1996 - the longest tenure in the history of the RSO. Reflecting on his announcement, Wiley shared: "My heart is full for what we have accomplished together. After 30 amazing years, it feels like the right time to pass the baton to a new artistic leader, and I wanted to allow the RSO time to plan for this significant transition. The RSO will surely find the right person who can bring a new artistic vision to Virginia's Blue Ridge."

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

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Paul Mitchell The School Roanoke is a cosmetology school with a campus in Roanoke at Towers Mall that prepares students to pass the state board examination. Programs include Cosmetology (1000 hours) and Barbering (basic: 750 hours; master: 250 hours; both: 1000 hours). Here we have Michael, Amber, and Michaela showing a great example of a hands-on workspace. 

Photo by Olivia Marone

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 This could be an ideal collab.
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