



Past VML Achievement Award winners

2013

Clifton Forge – under 5,000
 Strasburg – 5,000-10,000
 Martinsville – 10,001-35,000
 Leesburg – 35,001-90,000
 Arlington – over 90,000
 City of Fairfax – Communications
 Virginia Beach – President's Award

2012

Wise – under 5,000
 Marion – 5,000-10,000
 Falls Church – 10,001-35,000
 Danville – 35,001-90,000
 Portsmouth – over 90,000
 Fredericksburg – Communications
 Abingdon – President's Award

2011

Blackstone – under 5,000
 Abingdon – 5,000-10,000
 Winchester – 10,001-35,000
 Leesburg – 35,001-90,000
 Richmond – over 90,000
 Blacksburg – Communications
 Manassas – President's Award

2010

Elkton – under 5,000
 Purcellville – 5,000-10,000
 Herndon – 10,001-35,000
 Blacksburg – 35,001-90,000
 Alexandria – over 90,000
 Hampton – Communications
 Galax – President's Award

2009

Broadway – under 5,000
 Ashland – 5,000-10,000
 Falls Church – 10,001-35,000
 Leesburg – 35,001-90,000
 Henrico County – over 90,000
 Alexandria – Communications
 Virginia Beach – President's Award

2014 VML Annual Achievement Awards

And the winners are ...

THE NUMBER OF RESPONSES to the call for entries in this year's Virginia Municipal League Achievement Awards competition is evidence that the commitment to creative, imaginative and cost-effective local government remains alive and well across the Commonwealth.

From some of the smallest towns to the largest cities and counties, the entries reflected the highest standards of professionalism and innovation, two traits that remain cornerstones of local government in Virginia.

More than 50 entries were received for judging in six categories – five based on population and one for communications programs and projects open to local governments of all sizes. In addition, a President's Award is presented to the winner of the population category judged to have fulfilled VML's entry criteria the best.

The VML Achievement Awards program has a distinguished history as the most prestigious local government awards program in the state, attracting more entries than any other competition.

This year's winner of the President's Award is the **Town of Rocky Mount** – for bringing to fruition the 500-seat Harvester Performance Center, a venue on pace to attract more than 40,000 music fans downtown in its first year of operation. The ambitious project was judged as the best of the five population category winning entries.

The winners of the other population categories for 2014 are:

The **Town of St. Paul** – for devising and executing an economic development strategy that promoted the town's numerous natural assets when a substantial downturn in the coal industry appeared inevitable.

The **Town of Pulaski** – for marshaling money and substantial community support to rebuild a railroad station and museum to exacting historical standards following a fire in late 2008.

The **City of Falls Church** – for employing a combination of fast-

thinking, altruism, innovative design and collaboration to keep a much-needed child development center and its public-private social services programs in its borders.

The **City of Danville** – for countering the exodus of textile and tobacco industry jobs by forging a handful of successful public-private partnerships that are adding a new look and vibe to much of downtown.

And the **City of Norfolk** – for listening and responding wholeheartedly to a grass-roots movement in the city to cultivate a vibrant arts district on the edge of downtown.

The winner of the communications category is the **City of Poquoson** – for successfully rebranding itself a decade after the devastating effects of Hurricane Isabel made the city synonymous with tidal flooding in the minds of many.

Judges for this year's competition were Ted McCormack, former director of governmental affairs for the Virginia Association of Counties and the former associate director of the state Commission on Local Government; Linda Robinson, a retired local government liaison for Henrico County, and Jeff Lake, volunteer services manager at the Public Health Accreditation Board whose 35-year career in state and local public health and human services includes working for Fairfax County.

The winners will be presented their awards at a banquet during the VML Annual Conference in Roanoke on Oct. 7.

Descriptions of the winning entries are included on the pages that follow.



City responded to grassroots voices and an arts district was born

SOMETIMES THE HARDEST job is letting others take the lead – giving up control is not always something that municipalities do well. But in the case of pursuing creative endeavors, such as an arts district, leading with city rules and procedures is not always the best approach. The Norfolk Arts and Design District is a proud product of a grassroots effort that was supported and encouraged by the city. You can't force a creative community. You have to cultivate it and help it grow.

The City of Norfolk and the community had been discussing the need for an arts district for several years, but no concrete

plans were forthcoming. In 2012, a group of motivated and impassioned locals from the alternative newspaper AltDaily, headed by Editor Jesse Scaccia and Publisher Hannah Serrano, made an organized pitch for an

arts district north of Brambleton Avenue along one edge of downtown. They published a report, NEAD Project (Norfolk Emerging Arts District), detailing a vision for an arts district, with food trucks, street performers, sculpture gardens, crosswalks painted like piano keys, vertical gardens and streets filled with people (see attached NEAD Project).

Fueled by the efforts of the local community and new state legislation granting localities the authority to create arts and cultural districts without individual authorization from the General Assembly, the city embraced the concept of creating an arts district in the underutilized area north of Brambleton Avenue. City Council devoted energy to the topic at its 2012 retreat and followed up with the formation of a task force to pursue the development of an arts district.

Why North of Brambleton Avenue?

The area north of Brambleton Avenue, on the northern border of what is Norfolk's compact downtown, was ripe for a new direction. The area contained an abundance of underutilized properties, but was strategically located at the

heart of Norfolk's cultural attractions, including the recently expanded Chrysler Museum of Art and Glass Studio, the Harrison Opera House, Scope Arena and Chrysler Hall. The area was also home to several pioneering businesses such as Exotic Home Interiors, Inside Business, Daevid's Flowers & Decor, Fuzion Ink Tattoo and Piercing Studio, and Grace Street Grill, as well as the headquarters of the Virginian-Pilot newspaper. Altogether, this presented the perfect opportunity to create a unique destination nestled between the growing downtown housing market and the well-established urban neighborhood of Ghent.

Taking action

The specific actions that took place in the development of the Norfolk Arts District embody the spirit of innovation, efficiency and entrepreneurship. The grassroots initiative led to partnerships with the community and an ongoing community empowered experience. Here is a summary:

A grassroots approach to planning

Hatching a plan. The NEAD Project (Norfolk Emerging Arts District) calling for the development of an arts district in the area north of Brambleton Avenue was published in July 2012. This grassroots effort outlined the vision for an arts district adjacent to downtown in the area north of Brambleton.



Norfolk's Arts and Design District is the product of a grassroots effort that was encouraged and supported by the city.

It was a unique approach to planning where the community actually prepared and presented the plan – and asked the city to partner with it – to bring additional tools to the effort and change regulations to “get out the way.”



Norfolk

Over 90,000 Population



The Arts District is proving to be a magnet for shoppers.

Creating an environment for community-led initiatives by redirecting resources and reviewing regulations

City backing. The grassroots effort was first embraced by the city government when City Council took up the topic at a planning retreat in 2012, leading to the formation of a task force to begin to formally address this issue. The city pledged to cooperate with the community-led effort, which was adopted as policy in March 2013 as a part of *plaNorfolk2030*, Norfolk’s updated general plan.

Partners. Norfolk Team Better Block, a partnership with Team Better Block of Texas, the City of Norfolk and more than 130 volunteers and community leaders, physically “tested” ideas for revitalizing the area with pop-up retail options, parklets and new traffic patterns. Within a few weeks of the project’s start-up, a long vacant, 15,000 square-foot building sold, council passed zoning changes, a pop-up shop moved toward permanency, a streetscape plan was advanced and lots of people got fired-up about the budding district.

Flexibility. Modifications to the zoning ordinance permitted art district uses and simplified the process for starting new ventures, including zoning changes to allow antique stores, breweries, consignment stores, flea markets, educational facilities, art studios, dance studios and used book stores. The city also revised parking standards, calling for reduced parking in the area adjacent to downtown, helping to spur the renovation of the existing buildings in this area.

Collaboration. Urban Design Associates of Pittsburgh conducted a design charrette aimed at providing a framework for collaboration among the city, arts and civic organizations, property owners and private investors in order to create a lively, dynamic and sustainable arts district. This plan provided an outline of immediate and long-term infrastructure needs to support the district.

Achieving an entrepreneurial, sustained, community-led effort

Getting creative. An existing city program that fostered skill-building in Norfolk high school students was linked with an initiative to provide opportunities for positive experiences in the Norfolk Arts District. The result was a unique summer art experience – the Norfolk Emerging Leaders Public Art project. Artists worked with students to complete large scale murals during the summer of 2013.

Art Walk! The local community organized a group of participants to survey sections of the Arts District to identify potential blank canvases for future art or planting, resulting in a catalog of the area. The end result: 10 to 20 small and large green spaces, which will be created and maintained by individuals, children, families, local business, artists, restaurants, green thumbs, entrepreneurs, master gardeners and beginners. Two large scale murals have been completed and are drawing considerable attention.

Kickstart Norfolk. Alchemy NFK and the Push Comedy Theater (both located in the Norfolk Arts District) headed a crowd-funding effort to reach their all-or-nothing fundraising goals by offering backers exclusive rewards and experiences in exchange for their donations. The Pushers plan to renovate a 90-seat comedy theater for live improvisation and standup acts, while Alchemy NFK (an open source office, studio, music space and a tool for the community become more involved in the arts) plans to upgrade its facilities into a functioning creative community center complete with artist spaces and a photography lab.

More to come. Upcoming or ongoing activities include Pop Up video exhibitions, relocation of a public park called The Plot to a vacant lot in the Arts District, Pop Up retail in shipping containers, new live work space, new loft housing developments and a nomination for state and national Historic District Designation – the “Granby Street Auto Row Historic District.”

Results

Careyann Weinberg, president of Alchemy NFK and interim executive director of the Norfolk Arts and Design District, summed up the successful initiative this way:

“A team came together recently to look at our vision for the Norfolk Arts District. Despite the background of each individual, every single person had the same type of neighborhood in mind ... a safe, playful and vibrant one. I’m confident that if the community and the city work together, we can easily see much of our vision within five years. Some arts districts take 10 or more years to get off the ground. There’s so much momentum and heart here in Norfolk that I know we can make the district special in no time. The key, in my opinion, is ensuring the grass roots efforts are supported and encouraged. You can’t force a creative community. You have to cultivate it and help it grow.” 