

Next Door

Neighbors

Bluefield State University unveils strategic plan as enrollment growth continues

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Building on one of the strongest enrollment growth rates among West Virginia’s public four-year institutions, Bluefield State University has unveiled its new strategic plan, “Building the Future Together,” a roadmap that will guide the university’s continued growth and expansion of opportunity for students across southern West Virginia and the broader region through 2030.

Bluefield State recently recorded 7.8 percent overall enrollment growth, continuing a strong upward trend for the university. The institution also led all public four-year institutions in West Virginia in full-time equivalent

enrollment growth at 9.5 percent, while first-time freshman enrollment increased by 37 percent, reflecting growing interest among new students.

Bluefield State University President Dr. Darrin Martin said the strategic plan will help the university build on that progress while strengthening its long-term mission.

“Bluefield State is experiencing a period of renewed growth and optimism,” Martin said. “This strategic plan provides a clear direction for where we are headed and how we will continue expanding opportunity for students while serving the workforce and communities of our region.”

The strategic plan outlines several priorities that will guide the uni-

versity through 2030, including growing enrollment, strengthening student retention and success, enhancing the student experience, ensuring financial sustainability, advancing academic excellence, and investing in faculty and staff development.

University leaders say the plan will also focus on expanding career pathways, strengthening partnerships with employers and community organizations, and aligning academic programs with workforce needs in high-demand fields.

“Our responsibility is not only to educate students, but to prepare them for meaningful careers and leadership in their communities,” Martin said. “This plan ensures that Bluefield State continues to grow



File photo by Tara Wyatt

Bluefield State University has been named a Fulbright Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Institutional Leader for 2025, marking the fifth time the university has received the recognition from the U.S. Department of State.

while staying true to our mission of access, excellence, and student success.”

The plan was developed through a collaborative process involving a diverse committee of faculty, staff, and university leaders who worked together to identify priorities

while staying true to our mission of access, excellence, and student success.”

BSU, E-2

New housing projects underway across Mercer

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Efforts to develop new and affordable housing across the region are continuing.

Five projects are currently planned across Mercer County to address the region’s housing needs. The Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Corporation is serving as a co-developer on all five of the projects, which includes the ongoing efforts to convert the historic Hotel Thelma in Bluefield into a new 10-unit apartment complex for senior citizens in the city’s East End, as well as the creation of space for a new restaurant.

Work on the Hotel Thelma project got underway in January, and a formal groundbreaking ceremony was held last month.

Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., was able to tour the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“She asked a lot of insightful questions,” Tracey said of Capito.



Contributed photograph

Ground was broken Feb. 26 on the Hotel Thelma project in Bluefield. Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., also toured the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“Clearly she understood what we are doing at the property. We also had the opportunity to tell her what this project will bring to the community. Affordable housing for seniors, specifically designed for that age group. We

walked her through all of those design features. She was very impressed with the design that we’ve developed, and also spent some time in what used to be Thelma’s Cafe.”

The old Hotel Thelma is a historic landmark

in the city that served Black travelers during the days of segregation.

In all, 24 different funding sources are helping to transform the historic landmark into the new senior apartments, Tracey said. That’s up from

the original 19 funding sources when the project began in January.

In addition to Hotel Thelma, two other housing projects are planned in Bluefield, along with a fourth in Princeton and a fifth in Bramwell. Each project was

awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh’s Affordable Housing Program.

Tracey said if all goes as planned, BARC and its co-developers are hoping to begin work on the remaining four

HOUSING, E-2

LEADING HEALTHCARE in the Two Virginias

Princeton Community Hospital



AMERICA'S 250 BEST HOSPITALS

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BSU

Continued from E-1

that will guide Bluefield State's next phase of growth.

Amanda R. Matoushek, PhD, Dean of the College of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences and Professor of Psychology at Bluefield State University, served on the committee and said the document reflects the university's broader commitment to developing well-rounded graduates while strengthening the institution itself.

"This strategic plan reflects the true nature

of Bluefield State, supporting development of our students academically, civically, and ethically, preparing them to make impactful change locally and globally," Matoushek said. "All of the strategic priorities are interconnected, providing not only improved student outcomes, but a sustainable future for BSU by investing in faculty and staff development so we can continue innovating our methods to remain on the cutting edge of academic excellence."

The strategic plan also emphasizes collaboration across the uni-

versity and engagement with alumni, community partners, and industry leaders to support long-term institutional growth.

"Building the Future Together reflects exactly what this moment requires," Martin said. "It is a shared vision that calls on our entire campus community to work together as we strengthen Bluefield State University and help shape the future of our region."

University leaders said the plan is also designed to strengthen Bluefield State's role as an economic and

workforce partner for southern West Virginia and the surrounding Appalachian region. By aligning academic programs with emerging industries and expanding pathways for traditional and nontraditional students, the university aims to help meet workforce demand while creating new opportunities for students and families across the region.

The strategic plan focuses on six key priorities designed to guide the university's growth and impact:

- Grow Enrollment through expanded recruitment and new path-

ways for traditional and nontraditional students

- Strengthen Student Retention and Success with improved advising, first-year programs, and support services

- Enhance the Student Experience by increasing engagement opportunities and strengthening career readiness

- Ensure Financial Sustainability through diversified revenue, expanded fundraising, and responsible budgeting

- Advance Academic Excellence by aligning programs with workforce needs and supporting faculty innovation

- Invest in Faculty

and Staff Development through training, mentorship, and professional growth opportunities

Bluefield State University, founded in 1895, is dedicated to providing affordable and accessible pathways to higher education through certificate, associate, bachelor's, and master's degree programs while preparing students for meaningful careers and lives of service.

The full "Building the Future Together: Strategic Plan 2025-2030" can be viewed on the Bluefield State University website at www.bluefieldstate.edu.

HOUSING

Continued from E-1

projects soon.

"It's possible that all four could start construction this year," Tracey said.

The largest of the four developments is a housing project planned on Duhring Street in Bluefield, not far from city hall, that calls for the construction of 10 new single-family homes. It is a home ownership project with the newly constructed houses then being sold to income qualified buyers. BARC is a co-developer on that project along with the Bluefield Land Bank, according to Tracey. BARC is still looking to raise additional funding for the project, but officials are hoping to start construction on the development this year.

Tracey said BARC and the Bluefield Land Bank are currently working to document all of the funding sources lined up for the Duhring Street project, including the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh and the West Virginia Housing Development Fund.

"So all of that is pre-work before we really put the shovel in the ground," Tracey said. "And of course hiring a civil engineer to do soil tests. Everything preparing for the starting structure."

The second Bluefield project calls for the transformation of the former Traveler's Hotel

in Bluefield into an 11 unit affordable apartment complex while also providing space for retail and commercial development on the first floor of the structure. The old Travelers Hotel on Raleigh Street is located adjacent to the Raleigh Street Cinemas. The hotel was originally a Green Book property during the 1930s and 1940s. It was later converted into an office building and offered some dining in the 1980s. The structure is currently vacant.

Once completed, it will benefit people who work downtown, including employees of Alorica/Intuit, who may be looking for a place to live close to their job. Those living in the apartment complex also will be able to walk to the Raleigh Street Cinemas, the Granda Theater, the RailYard restaurant and other downtown attractions.

Tracey said officials are working to finalizing funding sources before construction begins on the Traveler's Hotel project.

The third project to receive a \$1.5 million Affordable Housing Program grant is located in Princeton and will be called the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments. BARC is partnering with Mountain Acres Properties, Inc., a church non-profit that comes out of the United Holy Church of America denomination on the development. The goal is to develop housing for senior



Contributed photograph

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citizens in the area.

The fourth project seeks to convert the former Pence Hotel in Bramwell into 10 affordable apartments to serve both senior citizens and those working in the ATV hospitality industry. BARC is partnering with the Bramwell Foundation on the Pence Hotel project.

"And of course BARC has partners on all but one of the projects," Tracey said. "The Traveler's is BARCs alone."

According to the individual project summaries, the Travelers Hotel Apartments project will preserve and renovate an historic Green Book hotel at 602 Raleigh Street in downtown Bluefield, adjacent to the recently reopened and restored historic Granada Theater. The project will create 11 affordable, healthy, and safe studio

and one-bedroom apartments targeting individuals working in downtown Bluefield and one commercial/retail bay on Raleigh Street. The project is designed to benefit low- and moderate-income residents of Bluefield, particularly individuals who work in the city's downtown.

The Duhring Street Homeownership project will use vacant land owned by the city of Bluefield's Land Bank to build 10 new single-family homes for sale to first-time homeowners and other income-qualified buyers. The homes will be built on city-owned parcels on Duhring Street and Mercer Street. The sites were chosen based on their proximity to services and amenities (grocery stores, pharmacies, health care, transportation,

churches, schools and entertainment); their suitability for development (topography and access to utilities); and readiness to proceed. The project is a short two-block walk from the site of Bluefield's largest employer, Alorica/Intuit, which has 350 employees. Two types of single-family homes will be built: seven two bedroom, two bathroom homes with 1,035 square feet of living space and three bedroom two bathroom homes with 1,435 square feet of living space.

According to the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments project summary, it will create 10 affordable apartments for seniors in Princeton. The project will consist of newly constructed one-story apartments, in multiple buildings, built on vacant land, which was previously the site of the historic Dunbar School. The project's location is nearby to grocery stores, restaurants, health care services, and opportunities for recreation and entertainment.

The Pence Hotel project will convert the historic Pence Hotel on Main Street in Bramwell to 10 affordable studio and one-bedroom apartments. The Pence building will also include a first floor retail/commercial bay, with a medical clinic identified as the desired use for the space. The apartments will target seniors as well as workers in the ATV-related hospitality business.

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Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Top: Brush Creek Falls. Bottom: Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Tourism growth continues in Mercer County with record visitor spending

BLUEFIELD — Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The figures highlight continued growth in the county's tourism sector and ongoing marketing efforts by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau to attract travelers to southern West Virginia.

Visitor spending in Mercer County has increased by more than 50% since 2019. Officials say travelers now bring more than \$600,000 into the local economy each day. The industry also generated \$20.19 million in com-

bined state and local tax revenue, which officials estimate saves local households about \$827 annually in taxes.

"Our mission is to create economic growth by promoting Mercer County as a destination," said Jamie Null, executive director of Visit Mercer County CVB. "Tourism continues to strengthen our communities, support local businesses, and highlight the natural beauty and culture that make Mercer County uniquely Appalachian."

Investments aimed at improving visitor experience

The Visit Mercer County CVB has also continued investing in projects aimed at improving the visitor experience and strengthening local tourism assets.

Recent projects include restoration of the

Almost Heaven Swing at East River Mountain Overlook, a popular scenic attraction frequently photographed by visitors, and development of a new visitor center intended to help travelers plan trips and explore local attractions.

Officials say the improvements are intended to enhance access to the county's scenic overlooks, outdoor recreation opportunities and small-town attractions.

Website redesign boosts trip planning tools

Tourism officials also point to growth in digital engagement following the redesign of the Visit Mercer County website, which focuses on accessibility and trip planning resources.

The site recorded more than 317,000 active users and more than 360,000 sessions,



Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

according to the CVB. Improvements included accessibility features for users with assistive technologies, along with mobile performance upgrades and improved navigation.

Data from the bureau shows the website generated 4,986 travel guide requests, 633 newsletter subscriptions and 43,932 referrals to local tourism partners and businesses.

National exposure increases through media and social platforms

Visit Mercer County's digital marketing and social media campaigns also expanded the county's national reach. Tourism videos and social media posts highlighting outdoor recreation, waterfalls and local attractions generated more than 4.5 million views across platforms.

Public relations efforts resulted in 231

media placements across more than 75 outlets, generating an estimated \$331 million in editorial value, according to the CVB.

Mercer County tourism was featured in publications including Southern Living, Forbes, Blue Ridge Outdoors, Matador Network, WV Living and Only In Your State, along with other travel and lifestyle publications.

Work underway on key projects across area

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

PRINCETON — Work is now well underway on a number of key projects for the region, including Princeton's new wave pool and Bluefield's transformative Safe Streets for All transportation project, among various other regional developments.

In Princeton, the bath house and mechanical room that will serve the wave pool are now under roof. Warm weather, including several days of 70 degree readings earlier this month, allowed construction crews to make significant progress on the project.

The wave pool and aquatic facility project are on schedule with officials still eyeing a grand opening date to coincide with the Fourth of July, Princeton City Manager Mike Webb said.

In the meantime, work continues on the bathhouse, concession area and mechanical room, all of which are being handled by Swope Construction Company of Bluefield. A second contract was awarded for the actual wave pool, which is being built by Aquatic Builders Ltd of New York.

"The main thing is that again they're on schedule," Webb said. "It is going to be something that not only Princeton can enjoy but Mercer County, the surrounding counties and really the region. Whether it'd be from Blacksburg over or Wytheville up you've got a true regional tourism draw type of product that is coming together here, and that's why we want to make sure that everybody has a chance to enjoy it. Families can come in, you can have food while you're there. You can get drinks while you are there. You can enjoy the sunshine as we build out the dog park and the walking trail and the other amenities around it. It really makes it a full day of things you can do in Princeton."

The wave pool project is being funded through a \$4 million bond issue, which is being matched with an additional \$475,000 in city funds.

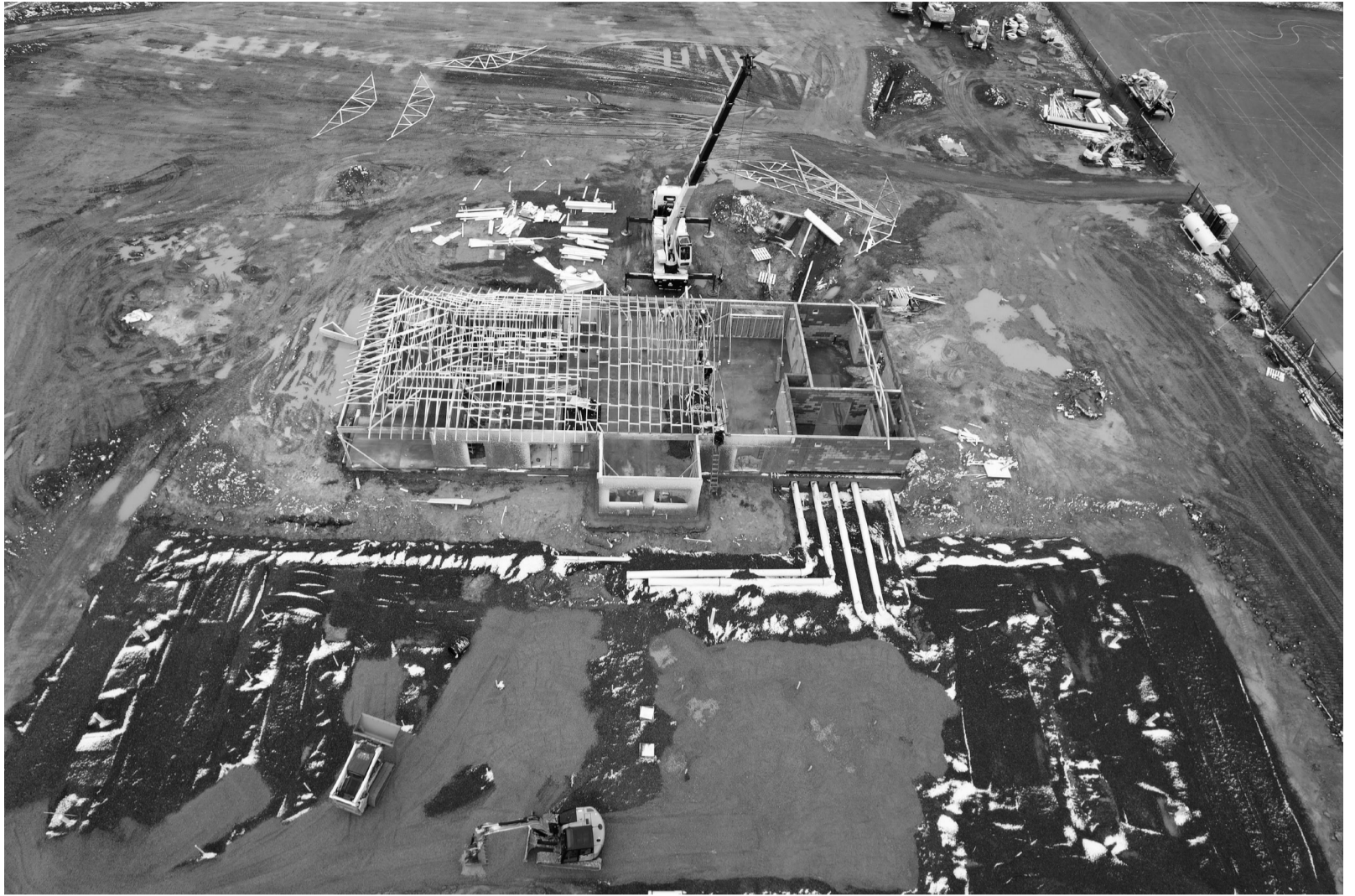
Wave pools are swimming pools which create artificial waves. The aquatic facility is being constructed in the field behind the Princeton Towers, not far from the existing city hall complex off Bee Street.

Work got underway on the new wave pool and aquatic center last fall, and the two contracts on the project called for a 160 day construction schedule. While the snow, ice and cold temperatures in January and February did impact the ongoing work, Webb said construction crews were able to make significant progress once temperatures warmed up.

The city is hoping to have the wave pool open in time for the Fourth of July, which is always a big day in Princeton with a variety of musical shows and activities, as well as fireworks.

But this year's Fourth of July gathering will be even bigger since it coincides with the U.S. Semiquincentennial celebration observing America's 250th anniversary.

Already a number of events are being planned in the city to coincide with the expanded patriotic celebration this year, including a performance by "Slippery When Wet – The Ultimate Bon Vib Tribute" show that will perform at 8 p.m. on the evening of July 4th along with three opening acts, the city announced earlier



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

this month.

The wave pool and aquatic facility are being developed along a 11-acre tract of land that was donated to the city of Princeton by the Preservati family. In addition to the wave pool and bath house, several multi-purpose fields also are being developed at the site along with a new dog park.

The first multi purpose field will be ready for the public, and area schools, to utilize later this spring, according to Webb.

Hydroseeding and grading work was completed last fall at the site of that first multi-purpose athletic field, which Webb said will be available for area schools, community groups, organized leagues and the general public to use.

Work on a second multi-purpose athletic field — at the same 11 acre site — is expected to begin later this summer.

In the neighboring city of Bluefield, design and engineering work got underway in early March on the \$31 million Safe Streets for All project, a federally funded initiative that has been more than two years in the making.

City Manager Cecil Marson announced during the March 10 meeting of the Bluefield Board of Directors that engineers were now on the ground in Bluefield working on design plans as well as right-of-way assessments for the Safe Streets for All project.

The transportation improvement plan for the city is being funded through \$25 million in federal dollars and \$6 million in state funds.

"We're just excited to finally get it under way, and I think it will be really great," Marson told the Daily Telegraph after the March 10 meeting. "As we get through the summer folks will start seeing some renderings, and some real designs of what the roads are going to look like, and the sidewalks and the streetscapes, which I think everyone will be really excited about. It's going to really change the way these streets look, and the way folks have access in the bike lanes and things like that. So I'm really, really excited to get this thing rolling."

The actual construction probably won't start until next spring, according to Marson.

"You're not going to see shovels and grounds being torn until spring



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

of next year," Marson said. "So right now, a lot of the engineering and work with utilities and the environmental is underway as we speak."

Engineers with CTL engineering and AECOM engineering are working with the city on the Safe Streets for All project, which focuses on College Avenue, Stadium Drive and U.S. Route 52.

The project will specifically convert four of Bluefield's key intersections to roundabouts, create pedestrian and bicycle accommodations through a strategic mountain gap, and make safety improvements that include implementing traffic-calming strategies and installing sidewalks, crosswalks, rectangular rapid-flashing beacons, and street lighting on selected corridors, according to the project's description. Locations for Safe Street projects range from College Avenue, Stadium Drive, Cumberland Road, Princeton Avenue, U.S. Route 52 and other roads in the city along with the intersection connecting Cherry Street, Maryland Avenue and Stadium Drive.

As for the planned roundabouts, two of them will be on College Avenue and one at U.S. Route 52 near Hill Avenue and the entrance to Bluefield State University.

The Safe Streets for All project isn't to be confused with the \$1.25 million federally-funded Reconnecting Communities project, a

similar transportation improvement initiative that calls for an overhaul of roads and sidewalks in the city's East End area.

The Reconnecting Communities plan focuses on an area of the city that begins near the entrance of Bluefield State University and from there extends through the northeast end of Bluefield past the Grant Street Bridge and toward Hotel Thelma, a local historic landmark that is currently being converted into apartments for senior citizens with room for a restaurant.

The planned pedestrian sidewalks for Bluefield State University students traveling from the former Bluefield Regional Medical Center site to the main university campus is also a part of the Reconnecting Communities project.

In addition to the Safe Streets for All and the Reconnecting Communities projects in Bluefield, planning also is continuing for a \$13.4 million transportation project in the city that will allow for the replacement of the archaic Midway Tunnel and the construction of a new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the flood-prone tunnel.

In 2023, U.S. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va. announced a \$13,480,000 award for the city of Bluefield through the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, a component of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act leg-

islation, which will allow for the replacement of the Midway Tunnel and the construction of the new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the tunnel.

Marson said planning for the Midway Tunnel project is continuing.

Another project envisioned by Bluefield also is in the planning stages, and will actually be developed outside of the city limits on land owned by Bluefield near Kee Dam and the King Coal Highway construction site.

Marson also announced at the March 10 city board meeting that a boundary survey of the land owned by the city near Kee Dam had been completed.

The project planned on that property is expected to be connected to the region's ATV tourism industry, and may include a housing component for ATV tourists.

In the neighboring town of Bluefield, Va., remediation work will be getting underway soon on two downtown properties that are being renovated for new business use.

The town sought bids for remediation work earlier this year on the former Bank of Graham building and the former Graham Jewelry building.

Both structures are currently owned by the town, but the building that once housed the former Bank of Graham is being sold by the town. It is located at the corner of Spruce Avenue and Virginia Street. As its name implies, the

two-story structure was once a bank, but it is currently vacant.

The Bank of Graham will be sold by the town to a private entity once the remediation and renovation work on the two-story structure is completed, according to Bluefield, Va. Town Manager Andrew Hanson.

The former New Graham Jewelry building will undergo remediation work and then renovations with help from a \$245,000 Industrial Revitalization Award from the state and a \$250,000 grant award from the Virginia Tobacco Commission. The Bluefield, Va. Industrial Development Authority is working to restore the 4,000-square-foot building into a modern commercial space capable of supporting two new businesses. The first floor of the building will be designed for retail or dining use, while the second floor will be converted into a communications lab.

Hanson said discussions are continuing with Bluefield University for the second floor of the structure and the search for a restaurant for the first floor continues.

"On the Graham Jewelry building, we would like to partner with Bluefield University for them to have space for their students on the second floor," Hanson said in an earlier interview. "We are still hoping for a restaurant (on the first floor)."

Contact Charles Owens at
cowens@bdtonline.com

Beaver, W.Va. teen wins state's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest

By Eric Cravey
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BECKLEY — It's not often that a middle schooler's artwork ends up on thousands of pieces of clothing, but that is the new reality for Reese Childers, of Beaver.

The Shady Spring Middle School eighth grader is the winner of the West Virginia Secretary of State's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest. Reese's work was selected from art submitted by more than 1,100 eighth grade students from 42 West Virginia counties. The 42 first-place winners were separated into four regional contests. On Feb. 17, Secretary of State Kris Warner named Childers one of four Regional Winners who would then also serve as finalists for the statewide award.

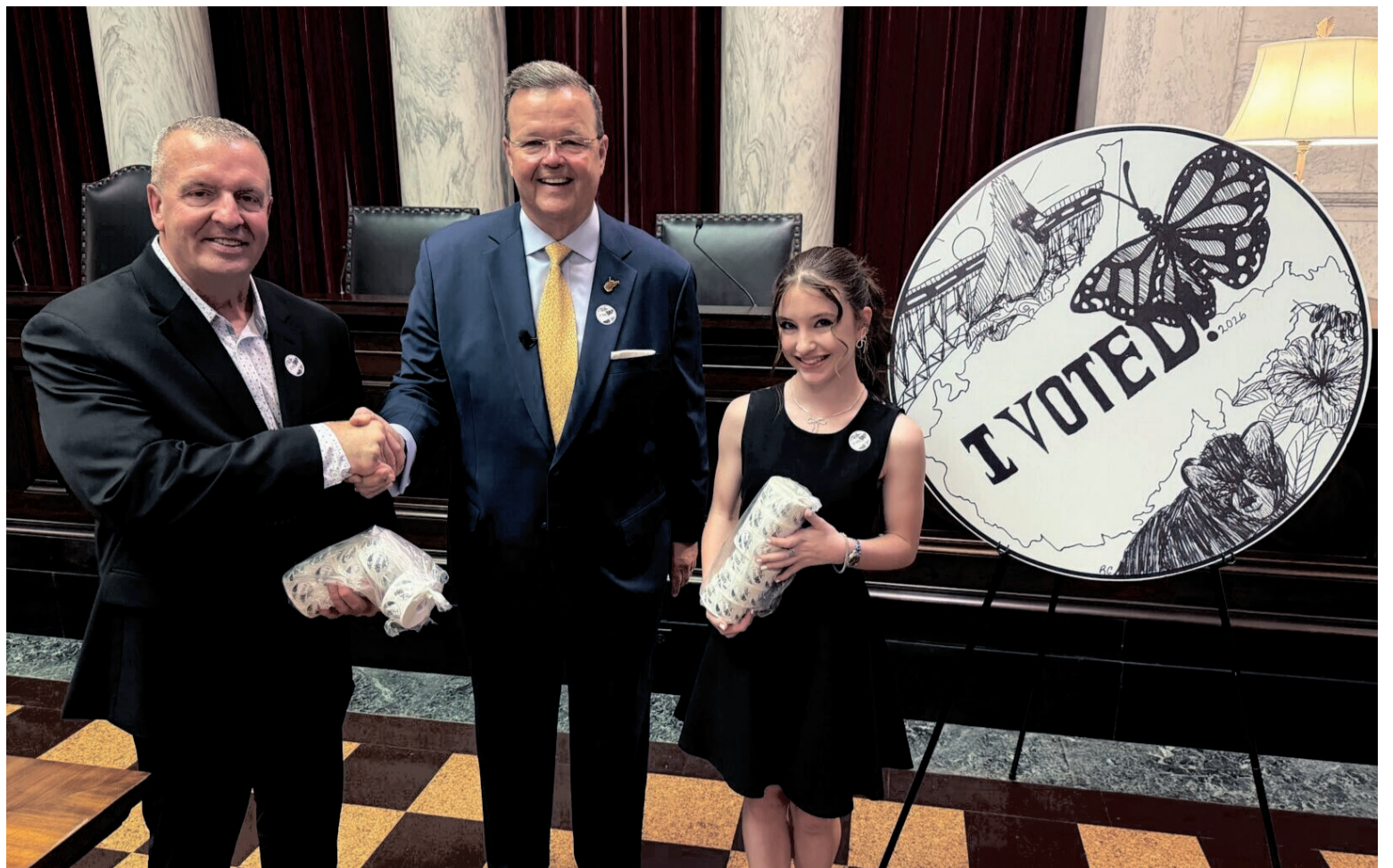
Reese learned about the contest in her West Virginia Studies class and, having been an accomplished artist whose award-winning work was displayed at Tamarack in 2025, she knew immediately what she wanted to draw for her contest entry.

"Typically when I set my mind to something, my brain just rushes with, like images or ideas of what I usually want to do, and it's hard for me to change from that," she said. "So, I knew right there on the spot what I was going to put in the sticker drawing. And I rushed home, and I started doodling and sketching it out."

Childers has been exposed to art and creative pursuits since she was born as her mother, Crista Childers, teaches art at Shady Spring Elementary. She was also Reese's fifth grade art teacher.

"She just has such a natural gift for it. She's very talented, and it's just something she's always doing," Crista Childers said. "And she's always like, doodling on her hand, doodling in her binder, drawing in a sketchbook. You know, just everything is just like, she said, in pictures to her."

Contestants were limit-



From left, Raleigh County Clerk of Court Scott Van Meter, W.Va. Secretary of State Kris Warner and Reese Childers, winner of the first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest held by Warner's office. Van Meter and Childers are holding rolls of "I Voted!" stickers made with her original artwork.

W.Va. Secretary of State Office

ed to using three colors, but Reese chose to use black. The sticker, which will be given to voters statewide in the May Primary, could be placed on lapels all over West Virginia. After all, she used some of the Mountain State's most precious icons to promote the civic duty of voting.

"Well, my sticker showcases all of the state symbols for West Virginia, like the black bear, the monarch butterfly, the state outline, New River Gorge Bridge, the red Cardinal, the Rhododendron and the honey bee," Reese said. "So really, it's just, it's kind of some of them have bright, vibrant colors, but a lot of them also have lots of black in them."

Even though Reese's West Virginia Studies class included a lesson on civics and why it is important to vote in a democratic society, she has had

similar lessons in such duties previously. Her grandfather Sam Suttle, of Beckley, has served for years as an election poll worker. When he found out she was a finalist for the contest, he became her biggest cheerleader.

"I put it on Facebook. I told everyone I knew," Suttle said. "I worked in the public for years, and I knew a lot of people, so anyone I saw, I would show the artwork and say, 'She's in this contest. And these are 'I Voted!' stickers. So if you would look for I'd appreciate it.'"

From Feb. 17 until 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 27, the general public was allowed to vote online for their favorite of the four designs. Warner's office said 15,947 votes came in during the 10-day period.

As the winner of the contest, Reese took home a plaque featuring her artwork, while

Raleigh County Clerk Scott Van Meter took home 11,000 stickers featuring Reese's design.

Warner presented Reese the award on March 11 after his office hosted a forum dubbed "Civic Learning for a Stronger West Virginia." The forum and the press conference were held in the Chambers of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals at the State Capitol.

During the ceremony, Reese became the first person to use one of the stickers she designed as she placed it on her grandfather's lapel.

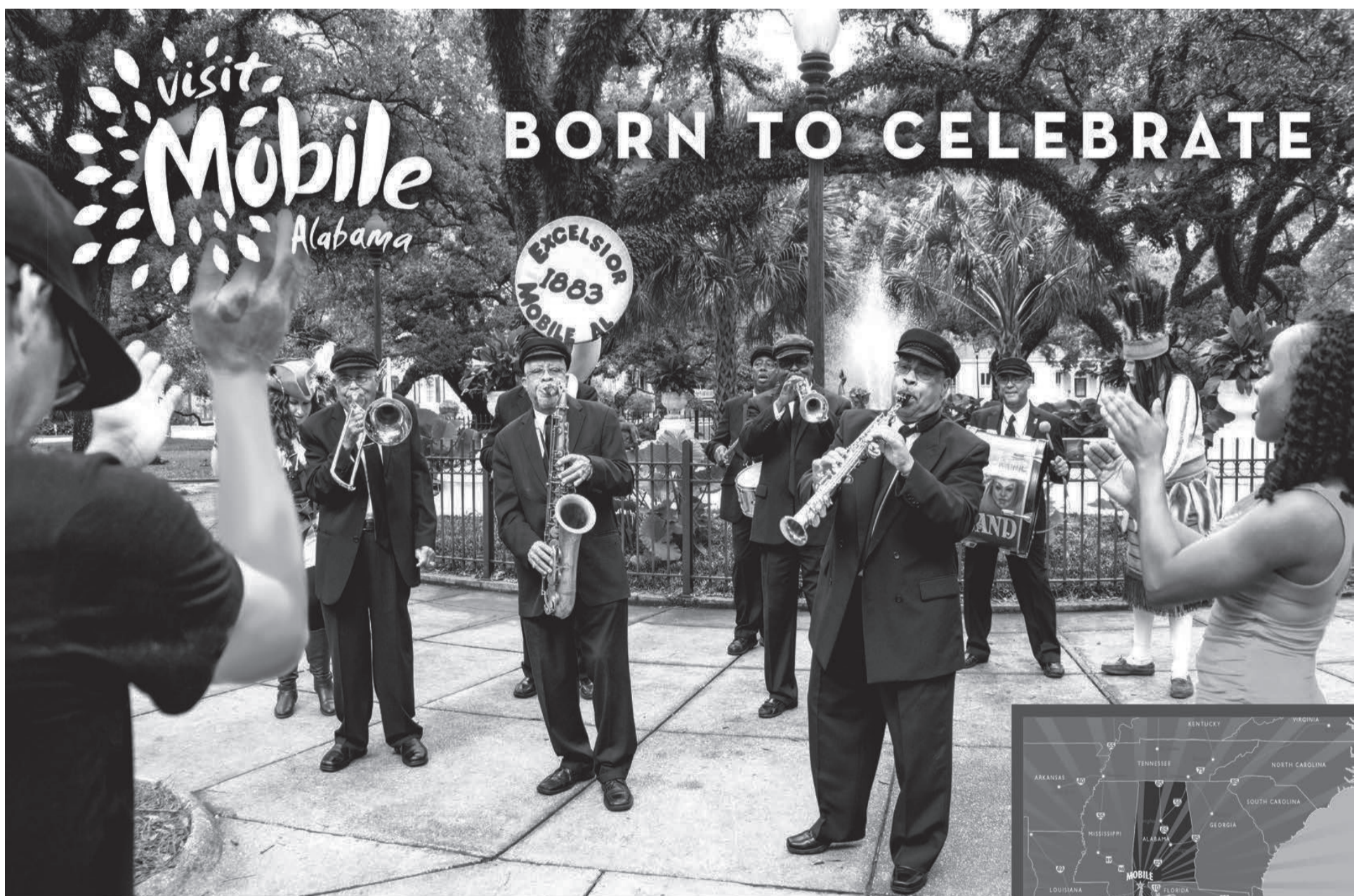
"Oh, that was a highlight for me that day. I mean, to think that I got the very first sticker that was to go on people's lapels after they voted, a symbol that, you know, saying, 'I voted in a West Virginia election,'" Suttle said. "I mean, it was very flattering."

Suttle characterized Raleigh County voters as committed and said the County Clerk's Voter Registration staff takes a lot of pride in increasing the number of voters each year.

"I mean, they're very, very excited about the fact that the winner of this contest is from Raleigh County," Suttle said. "And I think the people that vote in Raleigh County will be excited to know that they're wearing a sticker that was created by someone from this area."

And while art and civic duty are not often paired together, Reese hopes her sticker design will make people think differently.

"And, judging by my sticker, it may change people's minds, to maybe get out more and do more hikes and see the natural beauties we have out here," she said.



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Two Virginia's

Neighbors



Steve Keenan/The Fayette Tribune

Veteran competitive race organizer Donnie Hudspeth, of Mountain Air Productions, is pictured near the Glade Creek Grist Mill at Babcock State Park on Feb. 20.

Hudspeth turns Babcock love into successful trail racing events

By Steve Keenan
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

Donnie Hudspeth holds a deep affinity with Babcock State Park, located in Clifftop in Fayette County.

"Babcock is such a special place," he said. "It has everything an outdoor enthusiast could ask for. Beautiful trails with overlooks you can run or hike to (and drive to), great fishing, a lake for kayaking, a Class 5 river for kayaking, mountain biking and large picnic areas for all types of gatherings."

"And lots of waterfalls, I love the sound of waterfalls. And, of course, the famous (Glade Creek) Grist Mill."

Hudspeth credits his wife, Beth, with planting the notion of staging competitive trail races on Babcock's sprawling 4,127 acres.

"When I started the Gristmill Grinder (a

half-marathon trail event held at Babcock in the spring), trail running was in a huge growth phase and there was market research to prove it," said Hudspeth. "I was a trail runner myself and we often ran at Babcock."

"I didn't start the race because of research, though. One day, Beth and I were running at Babcock and on the way home she said, 'You should have a race there.' So, I went and talked to the superintendent and we came to an agreement that I could try it. Twenty-one years later, here we are."

Hudspeth launched the Babcock Gristmill Grinder in 2004. A companion fall trail race, the Sticks & Stones 15-kilometer, turns 11 years old in 2026.

Under Hudspeth's guidance, those races were preceded by the Upper Gauley River Race in 1993.



Steve Keenan/Fayette Tribune file photo

The United States women's team races in the slalom event during the 2001 World Rafting Championships in southern West Virginia.

"Apparently being a programmer/analyst and details (oriented) made me well-suited for the race directing," he says.

The 2026 Gristmill Grinder is planned for April 18.

The first year of the Gristmill Grinder the race was called the Bab-

cock 12 mile Trail Race and traversed a slightly different course than subsequent years, according to Hudspeth. "It was actually 16 miles

because GPS was new to me and I couldn't figure it out," he said.

"My first race to organize was the 'Upper Gauley Race' in 1993,"

HUDSPETH, F-5



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Arts foundation renews grant for Appalachian history

By Laura West
VIRGINIA TECH

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech has been awarded a \$5 million Mellon Foundation grant to support Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia, an initiative to document, reinterpret, display, and amplify histories and experiences that highlight collective struggles in Appalachian communities, especially those stories that have been hidden, silenced, denied, or excluded.

The renewal brings the foundation's support of the initiative to \$8 million and will extend work beyond the initial nine projects made possible by a \$3 million grant in 2022. The renewal also will enable additional community engagement and partnership and will fund the creation of 10 to 12 new monuments under the banner Monuments Across Appalachian Places.

The grant is part of the Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project.

Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia (MAAV) is led by Virginia Tech faculty Emily Satterwhite and Katrina Powell, scholars committed to recognizing people too long denied a voice.

"This award reflects the amazing work done by the MAAV team and the community members leading these projects," said Powell, Alumni Distinguished Professor and senior research fellow in the university's Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies. "It's an honor to research with communities and to support their efforts in telling their community histories. We're excited to move to this next phase."

With greater listening power, Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia will be able to continue the important work of providing validation and a stronger

sense of identity to pockets of the community that have felt unseen and unheard.

"If people don't have pride in themselves and their communities, they don't fight for themselves," said Satterwhite, director of the Appalachian Studies program within the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, drawing from the words of sociologist Cynthia Duncan. "Through MAAV we have seen that when stigmatized communities work together to commemorate suppressed histories they foster pride and strengthen region-wide networks of solidarity."

The success of the initiative as a champion of regional histories enhances Virginia Tech's visibility in the Appalachian region and its role as a partner with Appalachian communities.

"This spectacular award is like hitting the Powerball in the humanities," said Laura Belmonte, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. "Katy and Emily have assembled a world-class team for the MAAV project, one that has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations in creating unique and powerful work with partners across the commonwealth. I am truly elated that the Mellon Foundation's extraordinary generosity will allow MAAV to expand its geographic scope and to continue elevating unsung facets of the rich and complex histories of Appalachian communities."

Since the initiative's launch in 2023, the project has shed light on nine pieces of history manifested in a variety of forms, from traditional monuments, such as statues, to public art, a living botanical garden, and a festival. These include the most recent monument, Raising the Shade, which honors 70 Afri-



The January unveiling of a monument in Rocky Mount, Virginia, honors the United States Colored Troops, who fought for freedom and for preservation of the Union from 1863-65. The project, called Raising the Shade, was supported by Monuments of Appalachian Virginia.

can American men from Franklin County, Virginia, who served in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War.

The monument, a 14-foot bronze statue, was unveiled Jan. 18 outside of First Baptist Church in Rocky Mount. It is one of the few monuments in the country and the first in Virginia to specifically recognize these soldiers, many of whom were born into slavery and fought for the Union and their own freedom — yet whose stories have remained in the shadows.

"MAAV established strong support and camaraderie with our project," said Glenna Moore, spokeswoman for Raising the Shade. "We felt safe and protected with their guidance, which was always there whenever we needed it. The expertise of Virginia Tech's faculty and staff was also extended to us, and it was crucial to our project, from planning difficult community conversations with trauma-

informed techniques, to research partnerships with students and support when we, as a group, felt anxious and overwhelmed."

Developing new monuments

Idea generation for the new group of monuments will occur during six commemorative workshops and a Conjure Lab series hosted for Appalachian grassroots organizations, educators, artists, and community leaders.

Applications for the first of six commemorative workshops are due March 24. These events, which will focus on community-generated, trauma-informed approaches to commemoration, will transform how Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia engages with the community. Locations will include Appalachian sites — in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia — where the Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia

team hopes to identify new stewards of important and moving untold histories. The formal call for new monument proposals will be announced later this year, and applications will be due on Oct 15.

At the workshops, four in-person and two online, attendees will be introduced to Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia and its existing monuments and hear testimonials and advice from current collaborators. Through breakout sessions focused on training, writing, and planning and permitting for new monuments, participants will leave the workshops with basic application materials and resources that they can use and distribute as they cultivate their own strategies for increasing the visibility of shadowed histories and struggles.

The Conjure Lab is a pilot project that will begin with a history deserving of commemoration and

then work to identify a team of community members and partners to realize their vision for how best to honor that history. Like the workshops, the lab will lean on arts-based methods and deep community participation to create not just monuments, but entire movements to amplify regional histories, strengthen community power, and catalyze social transformation.

"MAAV is more than a conduit for creating physical tributes to unearthed histories," said Powell. "It is also very much a research-driven initiative based on extensive community engagement and participation."

On April 29, from 5 to 9 p.m., the nine initial projects will be highlighted in a culminating celebration anchored by a series of short films at the Lyric Theatre in Blacksburg. The films were produced by Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia's videographer, Matthew Pickett.

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In Southwest Va., Scott County parents search for answers amid children's cancer diagnoses

By Marina Waters
VIRGINIA MERCURY

RICHMOND — As 10-year-old Andryk Williams of Fort Blackmore, Virginia, prepares for his next round of cancer treatment at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, he keeps in mind those who are part of what his mom calls his "army."

"He's got an army behind him and he knows it," Andryk's mom, Kelsey Williams, 33, said during a phone interview from St. Jude in Memphis. "He's going to win the battle for the army."

Andryk was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, a rare and aggressive bone cancer, in 2025. The diagnosis came after intense pain in his hip sent him to his doctor and nearby Niswonger Children's Hospital in Johnson City, Tennessee, where his family was told he could have rhinovirus, or perhaps a pinched nerve, and he was sent home. After increased pain and a trip to the emergency room, his illness was finally revealed.

"He has a very high pain tolerance," Kelsey Williams said. "He has bilateral club feet. He's been through so much already. So for him to be in constant pain, there was something obviously wrong."

Andryk isn't the only one. Parents and community members say childhood cancer diagnoses have become less rare in the county perched in the southwest corner of the state, just minutes from the Tennessee border.

Megan Smith, 35, is a local oncology nurse who has gathered data and led the search for more information on Scott County's recent pediatric cancer cases. According to Smith, 14 children have been diagnosed with some form of cancer in Scott County since 2023. Two kids were diagnosed in 2023, five in 2024 and seven in 2025.

The increase in cases in Scott County, along with the advocacy of concerned parents there, led Smith to push for a study from the Virginia Department of Health and the Virginia Cancer Registry.

"I knew the numbers based yearly for pediatrics cases," Smith said. "I knew something wasn't right."

Smith created the Scott County Strong Facebook group, where she's posted the latest numbers and updates from families. She also posted cancer signs and symptoms — which helped Kelsey Williams discover her son's cancer.

"If it hadn't been for Megan's post about signs and symptoms to look for in kids and to get them tested immediately if they have these symptoms," Williams said she might not have connected the cancer symptoms to her son. "I saw that post and thought about how Andryk was having this severe hip pain, especially at night, and he kept running a low grade fever randomly."

The Virginia Department of Health held a town hall meeting at Gate City High School Thursday, Jan. 8, to report its findings from its Suspected Pediatric Cancer Cluster Investigation Report analysis. The study consisted of data from Scott County pediatric cancer diagnoses between 2014 and 2023 for ages 0-19.

The day before the meeting, VDH announced the cancer rates



From left: Andryk, Kelsey and Kyler Williams during a visit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, where Andryk is staying while undergoing treatment for bone cancer.

in Scott County did not meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) definition of a cluster, based on the eight cases included in the report.

However, the study did not include information from the past two years, when some of the Scott County pediatric cancer diagnoses were confirmed.

Smith and parents across Scott County are troubled by the delayed data.

"How is there a two-year data lag," Kelsey Williams asked, "and we live in 2026 where everything is electronic?"

"We want to know what steps can be taken," Smith said. "What can happen to get rid of this data lag? The kids in Scott County don't have two years to wait. How many kids does it take?"

According to the VDH, the lag is due to the time it takes for cancer data to be reported and verified.

"Cancer Registries throughout the country have a two-year delay as cancer data take time to be finalized," VDH Public Information Officer Cheryle Rodriguez said in a Feb. 27 statement. "Virginia regulations allow facilities and providers up to six months to report a diagnosis, similar to other states. Registries may receive multiple reports for the same person. We combine information to build a complete case. These steps are part of the quality assurance process of our work."

The preliminary data for 2024 and 2025 will be reviewed once the VDH receives 90% of the expected number of cancer cases in Virginia for those years, Rodriguez added.

"VDH is committed to being transparent about steps it's taking to address the community's concern," Rodriguez said. "We want parents to know that we understand that they are worried and concerned about the health of their children. VDH will continue reviewing 2024 and 2025 cases as data become more complete. We will inform the community as soon our next analysis is complete."

For 6-year-old Avyn Culbertson of Fort Blackmore, her B-cell leukemia diagnosis came in 2024, after experiencing a days-long fever and pain in her leg. Her mother, Ashley Culbertson, 40, attended the Jan. 8 meeting, which she believes didn't address the cur-



Andryk Williams of Fort Blackmore, Virginia, age 10, was diagnosed with the rare and aggressive bone cancer Ewing sarcoma in 2025. He's seen here with a service dog at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, where he is receiving chemotherapy and treatment. His mother Kelsey Williams is pushing state health leaders to learn more about why several children in the area have experienced pediatric cancers in the past two years.

rent increase in diagnoses.

"We are seeing such an influx in childhood cancer in our area," Ashley Culbertson said. "And it seems like it keeps rolling. It doesn't cut it to cut it off before 2024. Why even do the study if you can't pull what we need for now? That's how we all feel, I think."

Throughout her daughter's treatment, and following the VDH's community meeting, Ashley Culbertson said she's seen increased fear from local families as the community searches for answers.

"I feel so horrible for the new mothers and all the families in our county who have this worry, this deep worry in the pit of their stomachs right now for their children," she said. "I've had new mothers talk to me about how scared they are ... just trying to do everything they can to protect their children."

Culbertson said there's a "deep embedded fear" in her neighbors now, even those whose children haven't been diagnosed with cancer. Concerns about water quality pervade the area and many question whether there's a link with the children's sickness.

Smith has created the Southwest Virginia Mountain Valley Coalition, a nonprofit that aims to independently test water, air quality, soil, local water ways and more. The coalition is currently accepting donations to fuel its work.

"We are hoping to get out and get the word out about the coalition so we can do more testing," Smith said. "Testing for the volatile components within the water is not cheap. It can get up to over \$1,000 depending on what you're testing for. And that's the next step we need to take."

Many in the community have performed their own water and radon tests. Various factors such as the health of local mussels in the nearby Clinch River could also offer more info, Smith said. The community has also discussed examining local well water, the impact the local cave system could have on local water sources and even what pesticides could affect local families, among many other potential factors, she added.

Other children in the area have also had similar symptoms to kids who are diagnosed with some form of cancer, Smith said. According to the information she's gathered among the community, three cases have presented like leukemia, with one patient going to St. Jude only to instead discover an autoimmune disease. Others, she said, have lost weight and exhibited other signs, all without a cancer diagnosis.

"My thought is whatever they are exposed to, it's not just causing cancers," Smith said. "Its acting just like cancer. Whatever these kids are being exposed to, it's causing autoimmune dis-

eases as well."

For families like the Culbertsons, their lives revolve around reaching an end to their cancer journey.

Avyn is receiving weekly treatments until October, when she can hopefully ring the bell at St. Jude, marking the end of her treatment.

"It's surreal," Culbertson said. "There has been so much pain and sorrow, and honestly, a lot of joy as well. God has opened so many doors in Avyn's journey for people we've never met before. It's been an amazing journey. But Lord, I can't wait for her to ring that bell."

Avyn has used her craft room in their home, built through Make-A-Wish and The Home Depot support, to start the nonprofit Battle Bandages, which donates bandages to kids undergoing treatment. The idea sparked from Avyn's own experience of having blood drawn and fingers pricked and seeing a bandage brighten the experience.

"Now we use her craft room to help others," Culbertson said, "and to help the other families going through this."

For others, like the Williams family, the journey continues.

Andryk will receive chemo treatment for the next four or five months, Williams said. Meanwhile, she and Andryk remain at St. Jude while Andryk's younger brother, Kyler, remains in Scott County with Williams' mother. While

families at St. Jude never receive a bill for treatment, travel, housing, or food, keeping life going back home is a challenge.

"Where I'm the only adult in the household," she said, "I'm the only income, when I'm here, I can't work and can't pay my bills."

The family has set up a GoFundMe to defray costs and help purchase food for Andryk.

"Especially when we're inpatient, he doesn't usually want to eat until after his chemo treatments are done, which is usually done later in the night, after the cafeteria closes," she said. "So I'm having to DoorDash him food from restaurants so he can eat."

At home, Smith and others are still pushing for answers.

"I want the public to know we aren't stopping," she said. "No matter what, because we as a community are seeing this everyday. We are seeing the impact it has on our community and on our kids."

Even amid cancer diagnoses and looming questions, both families find hope in St. Jude and a community, almost like an army, at home ready to support them and their children.

"This kid has so much fight in him," Williams said of Andryk. "There's no doubt he's going to win. He's too stubborn. He's too resilient. And he's too much of a fighter."

Virginia Mercury is part of States Newsroom, the nation's largest state-focused nonprofit news organization.

Southern W.Va. meetup aims to expand

By Riley McCoy
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

BECKLEY — As West Virginia's outdoor economy continues to grow, recreation officials organized a community meetup at Elevation Sports in Beckley March 12.

The New River Gorge Outdoor Community Meetup brought together outdoor organizations, local governments, recreation advocates and businesses connected to the region to discuss trail development, community projects and strategies to strengthen the state's growing recreation sector.

The meetup served as a forum to discuss strategic milestones, highlight regional initiatives, connect partner organizations and encourage broader community involvement in the outdoor recreation network.

Corey Lilly of West Virginia University's Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative said the outdoor economy represents a \$2 billion industry in West Virginia and a \$1.3 trillion sector nationally, according to recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

"The new numbers from the Bureau of Economic Analysis just came out just a couple weeks ago and it stated we have an incredibly strong economic sector," Lilly said. "And it's only been tracked since 2018, so this is West Virginia's way to bolster and build on the momentum from our national park designation."

Groups in attendance included Friends of the New River Gorge, Beckley Area Trails, Raleigh County Outlaws, Ascend West Virginia,

Piney Creek Watershed Association, New River Alliance of Climbers and the Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, as well as the host, Elevation Sports.

"We just know the power of getting together—of community, connecting and networking—and really moving this \$2 billion sector of the economy forward in West Virginia," Lilly said.

As the meetup swung into audible chatter, attendees were presented with a microphone and an opportunity to give community updates during a lightning-round presentation.

Mitch Lehman, director of outdoor economic development for the city of Beckley, said Beckley is trying to "change the perception of Beckley" through its outdoor action plan and a pipeline of new amenities, including a trail system in the Stanaford area, a bike skills park and a disc golf course.

Beckley Area Trails board member Jaxon Lee said he sees that work as foundational.

"Trails are the backbone of the outdoor economy," Lee said. "Taking care of them, making new ones, and getting our community members to use them, is our biggest goal."

Lee explained how that effort showed measurable growth in 2025, with more than 470 volunteer hours, \$53,000 raised and 20 new paying members after memberships opened in November.

Molly Williams, director of Raleigh County Parks and Recreation, said Raleigh County Parks and Recreation is tying that same momentum to parks, trails and youth programming.



Corey Lilly, outdoor community developer for the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative, shares an economic update with members of the local outdoors community at Thursday's NRG Outdoor Community Meet Up hosted by Elevation Sports and the Beckley-Raleigh Chamber of Commerce.

"We want to make sure that they're exposed to outdoor recreation in the right way," Williams said. "They're also learning skills that they can use for employment in the future."

Williams said the county is advancing projects including phase two of the Clear Fork Rail Trail, a future visitor center at Lake Stephens and an Adventure Rec program for students, while also incorporating park history such as Fitzpatrick Park's role as a segregated Black park into future signage and interpretation.

Other speakers filled in the wider picture.

Friends of the New River Gorge promoted volunteer trail work. Active Southern West Virginia promoted free activity programs and the Beckley Half Marathon.

Stewards Individual Placements highlighted



Members of the New River Alliance of Climbers, from left, Nick Smith, Meghan Braley and Tricia DeFranco.

a middle school outdoor adventure program tied to conservation careers, while Wild Institute promoted rescue and outdoor industry training.

Visit Southern West Virginia stressed the long-term tourism val-

ue of the outdoors, and Country Road Cabins pointed to the business side of visitor traffic.

From trail expansion to youth programming, the evening's updates showed how Beckley and its surrounding partners are trying to

turn outdoor recreation into a larger part of the region's identity and future.

Elevation Sports is located at 3100 Robert C. Byrd Drive, Beckley.

Reach Riley McCoy at 304-254-2080 or email at rmcocoy@register-herald.com.

Entrepreneur brings floral design company to Beckley

By Jessica Farrish
FOR CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

BECKLEY — It's a modern response to the classic bridal question: "What about the flowers?"

FauxReal Flowers — the upscale, faux floral design salon based in Raleigh, North Carolina — makes its northern debut with a fashion house in Beckley.

FauxReal Flowers Beckley owner Alica Williams offers luxury and eco-friendly floral designs from her showroom at Brookshire Lane.

She said the Beckley location is the only one in West Virginia.

For those who have never ventured into a FauxReal Flowers showroom in Atlanta or another major Southern city, Williams said FauxReal Flowers offers brides, corporate event organizers and others another option for floral arrangements.

"These are high-end faux flowers that look and feel real," Williams said as she pointed to a display of hundreds of uncannily realistic florals in her showroom.

Some wedding planners rank the use of faux flowers, or "permanent botanicals," as a top wedding trend for 2026.

They require no water and are lighter, which allows more creative positioning, according to some wedding planners.

They leave less of a carbon footprint than fresh florals, according to data at the FauxReal Flowers website. That's because they do not involve removing an oxygen-producing botanical from the earth.

They're also less costly than live flowers, and wedding planning web-

site The Knot reported that the savings has made faux florals a popular choice for a growing number of brides and grooms.

Williams said some couples have cut their floral budgets by 50 to 60 percent at FauxReal Flowers in Beckley. It's no secret the wedding flower business makes up a large part of the U.S. economy. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Data Analysis, the U.S. wedding flowers market was valued at approximately \$4.11 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow to \$5.2 billion by 2035.

Williams emphasizes, however, that "faux" does not mean a less expensive look.

She pointed out that artists have crafted the faux blooms to be virtually identical to fresh florals.

"Rarely can people tell they aren't real, unless they really start inspecting," she said.

Mothers of the bride who may be suspicious of the modern faux floral trend would be hard-pressed to choose the "real" flower from the eco-friendly faux blooms in Williams' salon, where anthers tip whimsically from delicate stamens.

When touched, delicately-veined silk roses at the Beckley boutique offer an "ouch" experience from "thorns" and the same velvety texture of a rose, without the wilt.

News of the new store was good news for a number of local brides, including Fayette County bride-to-be Cassidy White.

"I'm so excited about this new business in the area," said White,



Alica Williams is proprietor of the only location of FauxReal Flowers in West Virginia.

a college student who is planning her Oct. 3, wedding to Matthew Ferris, a member of the the West Virginia State Police. "I definitely think FauxReal Flowers offers a more modern service than traditional florists."

White said she envisions flowers that look "timeless, bold, romantic and picture-perfect" for her special day.

"As a bride, the idea that I can keep my bouquet as a memory instead of watching it fade a few days later is

such a win and a simple reminder of one of the best days of my life," she said. "It's beautiful, practical, and honestly gives a sense of security, knowing that the flowers will look the same as the day they were purchased and were not a

waste of money."

Williams said FauxReal Flowers offers a personalized experience for every bride.

"I will have an online form that you can go to fill out, and it asks information such as what style you're looking for, what you're needing as far as centerpieces, bridal bouquets," Williams said.

Williams said she makes an initial cost proposal based on uniform pricing, until the bride visits the FauxReal Flowers showroom to personalize her experience.

"They will come into my shop, where I have displays of all the florals I have available, and they will choose which flowers, which colors," she said.

The FauxReal Flowers showroom is tailored to brides, and invites them to relax and enjoy the selection process, as they say "hello to the faux" blooms.

An added "bonus" is that Williams' team sets up the faux arrangements for the event and takes them away afterwards, she said.

"A lot of people will try to DIY or buy the flowers, and then, at the end of the wedding, they're stuck with the flowers on Marketplace trying to sell them and get rid of them," Williams said. "With this option, you don't have this hassle."

FauxReal Flowers will hold a grand opening on March 7 at the Brookshire Lane showroom.

Floral arrangement booking is available at www.beckley.fauxreal-flowers.com

More information is available by calling FauxReal Flowers at 304-860-0861.

HUDSPETH

Continued from F-1

Hudspeth added. "It later became dubbed 'The Animal' because it was long and painful. I didn't come up with that name.

"A couple years later, the town of Summersville approached me to host a race at Summersville Lake. With my old friend, Michael Gray, we designed a kayak/mountain bike/run adventure triathlon. After a couple years we handed it over to Summersville. Right about that time, I was invited to sit in on a meeting with Fayette County to come up with an event to replace 'Whitewater Wednesday.' Out of the meeting came Captain Thurmond's Challenge."

Captain Thurmond's Challenge came to life as the result of a work by a dedicated committee. "We had a committee, so it wasn't just me running the whole show," said Hudspeth, of Hico. "I would manage most of the race coordination but the administration part I didn't have to. The committee had many resources and contacts which was so helpful with getting volunteers, National Guard for shuttles, etc."

"The race originally started in Historic Thurmond with a mountain bike leg to Cunard, which is a put-in for the Lower New River Gorge. From there, paddlers would paddle to Fayette Station and then runners would run up to the town of Fayetteville and the finish. I would paddle on a team with a biker and a runner so I could go to Cunard and set up that transition station. When my biker got to Cunard, I would race to Fayette Station and hand off to my runner. Then I would stay until the last boat came in and pack up that transition station. It worked pretty well."

Hudspeth, whose Mountain Air Productions has been the coordinating agency for the events, has seen numerous changes in running over the years.

"The trail running scene has changed a lot since then," he said. "I think the Babcock Gristmill Grinder was one of the few trail races in the state and maybe the first in Fayette County. In just a few years my race grew to over 250 runners,

which was my limit. It was included in the Trail Runner Magazine Trophy Series, which was a national series and 34 races.

"Now, trail races are everywhere every weekend, many different formats and distances. It's really cool to see how it has grown, though it does make it a competitive market."

Planning and behind-the-scenes work for the races "takes hundreds of hours," said Hudspeth, including tasks such as securing sponsors and partners, marking the course, runner registration, working with volunteers and social media outreach.

He says the competitors enjoy themselves on the challenging trail courses.

"I think racers have a blast out there," Hudspeth said. "Trail runners are a bit different than road runners in that they aren't quite as serious about being competitive and just joyful to be running in the woods."

"There is so much visual entertainment to keep you mentally engaged. When you're running through overlooks and creeks, looking at waterfalls and rhododendron tunnels, how can you not be happy?"

"I think our volunteers thoroughly enjoy it, too," he added. "I have some folks that have volunteered every year for 20 years. I know I enjoy race day. The months leading up to it are tedious but race day is a party for everyone there. Everyone is laughing and cheering and ringing cowbells."

Hudspeth himself hasn't had the luxury of toeing the start line for many of the events he's directed. "I did race in the Upper Gauley Race the first three years. I started the race because I wanted to race there. After that, it just was too logistically difficult to race and direct it. It had grown and we needed venues for post-race things like food and music. The Babcock courses I've been running for almost 30 years. I love those courses. That's why I started the races there, I wanted to share the park."

"I've never raced there except with my watch."

Hudspeth also was a race director for a West Virginia delegation which helped put on the 2001 World Rafting Cham-



Donnie Hudspeth, center, assists participants during the 2001 World Rafting Championships in southern West Virginia. Steve Keenan/Fayette Tribune file photo

pionships in the region in the middle of the Gauley River rafting season and in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States.

The world event "was a whole bunch of work, probably eight or nine months of work," he recalls. "They came here because of the Gauley Race."

"I had been approached two different times by the event manager for the WRC from South Africa. They finally decided to do it in 2001, and the state (W.Va. Division of Tourism) was the big sponsor for it. We had other sponsors, too."

The event occurred over three counties — Raleigh, Fayette and Nicholas — and marked the only time the WRC has been contested on United States soil.

"We got an extra release day for the World Rafting Championships on the Gauley with the higher water level," said Hudspeth. "That was the first time that ever happened."

"They gave us extra water. There was a film production for it that was on Outdoor Life Network in the U.S. that went to, like, 32 million households. And it was distributed through Trans World Sports to over 100 countries."

"I think it was a good shot in the arm for West Virginia just to boost the knowledge about

West Virginia and the natural resources here."

Hudspeth's Animal Upper Gauley was staged on the Monday following the WRC conclusion. "Some of the international teams raced because we had big cash prizes."

"My intention from the beginning with all my races was to highlight West Virginia in a positive way," Hudspeth says. "West Virginia gets bad exposure sometimes, but there is good here, too."

"I felt like it was a diamond-in-the-rough and we have a lot to show off here with our amazing natural resources. I know my events brought people here that would otherwise not have come here; they told me so. And then they came back."

In addition to allowing the people to enjoy the splendor of the state park and the surrounding area, the races have an economic impact, said Hudspeth. "That's money into the local community and word of mouth exposure," he said.

"Leading an active lifestyle was also part of the equation for me, promoting outdoor recreation," Hudspeth added. "With the Babcock Gristmill Grinder, we even added a 5K fun run/walk for friends and family to participate in. It's the same start/finish as the half-marathon but goes on the

road down to the grist mill and back.

"We wanted to encourage people to get outside and exercise and enjoy the park. Some runners let their kids or family do the walk while they run, which is pretty cool."

Mike Foster, the Babcock State Park superintendent, says the trail races Hudspeth has created and curated for the park have been a positive addition. "They've been very popular with very good outcomes," said Foster. "We absolutely love to see folks in high volume using our park."

While participating in the races, park visitors also may visit the park's gift shop and even partake of the park's lodging offerings, Foster said. "It's a nice little boost for us."

"Having folks be able to experience the park two times of the year that are pretty much stellar for the park" is big, Foster added. "They kick off our season and wrap it up for us. Donnie and that group just does an outstanding job coordinating. We've got a great relationship."

"Those are two nice events. Everybody's happy and has a great time."

For more on the trail races, visit gristmillgrinder.com. For more on Babcock, visit wvstateparks.com/parks/babcock-state-park/.

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Small Business Success Center

Our leadership embraces and supports business development. The City of Bluefield is filled with opportunities for growing businesses, entrepreneurs, or new industries. The Bluefield WV Economic Development Authority (BEDA) operates the Small Business Success Center (SBSC) which of business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs a place to gain resources, training, and consultations for business development. We are committed to your success.



Learn in MyBluefield

The City of Bluefield is within a 50-mile radius of 13 Higher Education Institutions with 65,000+ students. Bluefield is home to Bluefield State University, which offers several degrees within four academic schools including Business, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, and Nursing and Allied Health. The City is also home to Bluefield High School, Bluefield Middle School, and Bluefield Primary, providing quality education for our children and youth.



Recreation for all Ages

Bluefield is the southern gateway to the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System and is filled with recreational activities to be enjoyed by all ages. Here, you'll enjoy a scenic sunset view at the East River Mountain overlook, watch the Bluefield Ridge Runners collegiate wooden bat league play at Bowen Field, or enjoy college and high school football at the historic Mitchell Stadium. Bluefield's art scene recently welcomed the newly renovated Granada Theater which complements our unique dining and shopping experiences in our historic downtown and beyond.

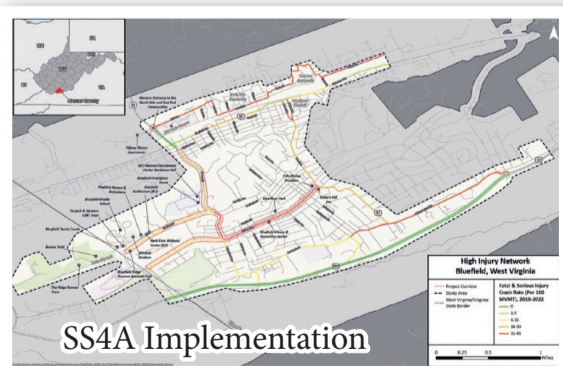
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SS4A Implementation



Splash Pad Upgrade



Travelers Hotel Project

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