

Small Towns Conference “Cliff Notes”

By: Councilwoman Mary Ramirez

The two-day Small Towns Conference had presentations on the following topics:

- **Placemaking for Community Change**
Melody Warnick, Writer and Editor, Virginia Tech
- **The Foundations of Good Governance**
Kimball Payne, Executive Manager, The Berkley Group
- **Legislative Updates/Town Specific Information from VML**
Mitchell Smiley, Policy Manager, VML
Josette Bulova, Policy Communications, VML
- **Legal Issues in Towns**
Larry Spencer, Town Attorney, Town of Blacksburg
Mike Lockaby, Attorney, Spillman, Thomas & Battle, PLLC
- **Housing in Small and Rural Places**
Mel Jones, Research Scientist and Associate Director, Virginia Tech Center for Housing
- **Strategic Planning in Small Communities**
Stephanie Davis, Collegiate Associate Professor, Virginia Tech
- **Values-Based Leadership is Transformational Leadership**
Michael Gallagher, President, MK Leadership
- **Financial Strategies for Small Towns**
Stephanie Davis, Collegiate Associate Professor, Virginia Tech
Kyle Laux, Senior Vice President, Davenport & Company, LLC
LeAnna Surratt, Town Manager, Town of Hillsville
- **Regional and State Economic Analysis**
Sheryl Baley, Visiting Professor of Practice, Virginia Tech
- **Economic Development Panel – Expert Advice and Best Practices**
David Manley, Executive Director, Wythe County, Joint Industrial Development Authority
Dana Cronkhite, Director of Economic Development, Dickenson County
John Kilgore, Director of Economic Development, Scott County
Nichole Hair, Executive Director, Mount Rogers Regional Partnership

The Small Towns Conference provided me with the following takeaways:

Areas of great success for the Town of Haymarket:

In listening to the financial status of various small and rural towns in the Commonwealth, it is apparent that the Town of Haymarket has done exceptionally well during and after the pandemic. By and large, townships were hit the hardest from the pandemic due to loss of tourism, meals taxes, and lodging taxes. The financial capacity of a town is reflected in the government’s ability to utilize financial resources, and thanks to our Treasurer we have financial policies that ensure we do just that.¹ For example, our Town Treasurer ensure that a balanced budget is adopted every year (as required by state code), and he enforces the following with bi-weekly monitoring with the finance committee*:

- Fund Balance Policies (“rainy day fund” of at least 2 months’ worth of expenses – we have more)

¹ Defining Local Government Financial Capacity PowerPoint, Stephanie Dean Davis, Collegiate Associate Professor

- Debt Management
- Investment Policies
- Operating Budget Policies
- Revenue Policies
- Capital Budget

*Please note that most towns self-reported that they monitor their financial policies adherence on an annual basis.

In addition to our financial wellbeing, another strength highlighted by the conference, is our Town Manager’s push for Strategic Planning. Strategic Planning provides a vision and roadmap for the “Budget Prioritization Process.”² It is in the Town’s best interest to support the Town Manager’s efforts to vitalize our Strategic Plan and use it for the following purposes:

- Accountability Tool (for both Council and Staff)
- Communication Tool (both internal and community-wide)
- Prioritization Tool (to ensure efficacy during our tenure)

Another strength the Town of Haymarket has exhibited would be our community’s place attachment. Place attachment was defined as a feeling of being deeply at home in a place, a sense of belonging.³ People with high levels of place attachment have reported having higher levels of well-being, social capital, self-esteem, physical health, and life expectancy. It is also noted that along with the above, increased place attachment of community members has shown an increase in local GDP. The presenter mentioned 10 behaviors that increase place attachment, which the Town of Haymarket has done exceptionally well with most of the following:

1. Walk and bike
2. Buy local
3. Build relationships
4. Enjoy local assets
5. Experience nature
6. Volunteer
7. Eat local food
8. Be civically engaged
9. Create something
10. Build resilience

² Strategic Planning PowerPoint, Dr. Stephanie Davis, Collegiate Associate Professor, Center for Public Administration Policy, Virginia Tech

³ Placemaking for Community Change, Melody Warnick

Areas of improvement for the Town of Haymarket:

As mentioned above, our Strategic Plan should be prioritized. This effort will provide to be most beneficial to the newly elected Council that will start their terms in January 2025.

Another place for improvement that goes along with strategic planning, is ensuring good governance practices⁴ are adhered to. An interesting highlight of the discussion was the differentiation between “who has authority vs. who has responsibility.” Setting boundaries and framework that ensures all of staff and Council know the rules, and ensure all parties adhere to the rules. It was stated that “Any question that a member of Council asks staff, the answer should go to all members of Council.”

A suggestion offered by the Kim Payne was for Council to establish their own rules of order as opposed to Robert’s Rules of Order. Further suggestions to improve the function of government include:

- A workable Town Charter
- An up-to-date Town Code – consistent with charter
- Human resources policies and procedures[^]
- Financial management policies- reserves, debt management, etc[^]
- An informative budget
- Comprehensive Plan
- Strategic Plan
- Rules of procedure – readopt every 2 years
- An informative website
- An onboarding process for newly elected officials
- Council/Manager Principles

[^]these items are currently in progress and assigned to Town of Haymarket staff

Some stretch goals, with a five-year start-to-completion timeline would include:

- Citizens Engagement and Communication Plan
- Asset Management Plan
- IT Master Plan
- Public Safety Master Plan
- Utilities Master Plan
- Parks & Rec Master Plan
- Streets and Sidewalks Plan
- Emergency Management Plan
- Organizational Staffing Plan

⁴ The Foundations of Good Governance PowerPoint, Kimball Payne

Possible Future Actions for the Town of Haymarket:

It is my suggestion that Council consider the following actions to aid in supporting and improving the town we love and live in:

- Host a retreat with Kim Payne for Council and staff in the new year of 2025 to aid in the onboarding of any new members of Council.
- Host an Organizational and Strategic Planning Meeting with consultation from Stephanie Davis in the new year of 2025 to aid in the success of the new Council.
- Create and adopt Town of Haymarket Town Council rules of order
- Continue to build on the successes the Town of Haymarket has experienced to include more community-driven and oriented efforts like:
 - “Porch Fest” – citizens play instruments on porches, can include businesses hosting artists.
 - Improving sidewalk and bike lane conditions through construction or improvement efforts.
 - Facilitate more volunteer efforts within the town limits and with town charities.
 - Engage community with more civically-minded programming

I wish to thank Council and staff for ensuring my ability to attend this conference. I look forward to implementing the knowledge gained for the betterment of our beautiful town. Please see the last page to include any references, PowerPoints, and contact information I acquired.

Best,

Mary Ramirez

Councilwoman, Town of Haymarket

You are welcome to reference most of the presentations and documents provided during the conference here:

<https://www.vml.org/Opportunities/Small-Town-Conference#present>

Other Resources of interest:

Virginia Finance Network hosted by VT Professor, Dr. Sheryl Bailey:

<https://virginiatech.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUqc-2sqjMqHt0xksJV73kWDy-wXH3-zPNv#/registration>

Strategic Planning in Small Communities: A Manager's Manual

<https://icma.org/page/strategic-planning-small-communities-managers-manual>

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