

The magazine of the Virginia Municipal League

# VIRGINIA

T O W N S H I P

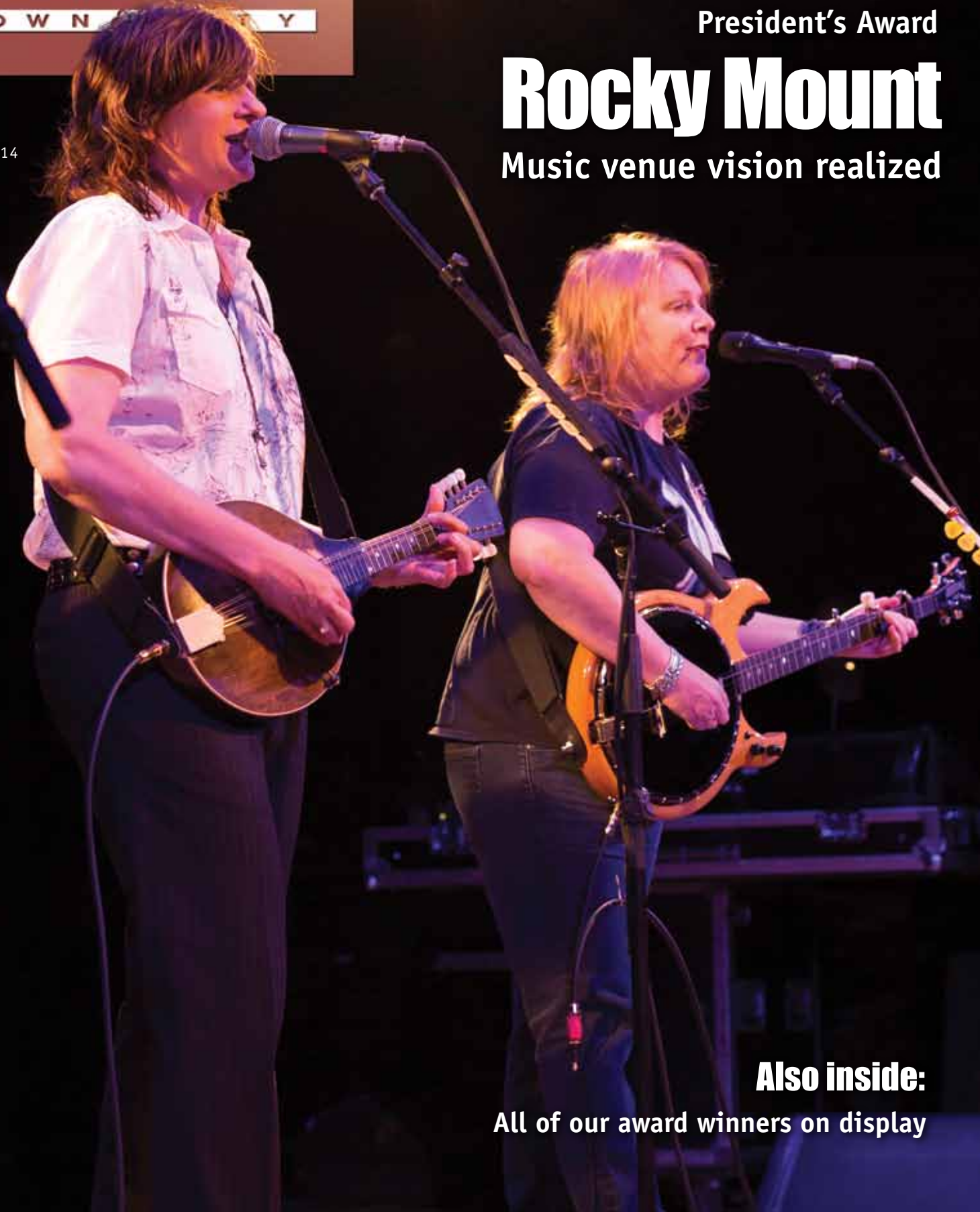
VOL. 49  
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President's Award

# Rocky Mount

Music venue vision realized



**Also inside:**

All of our award winners on display



## About the cover

*The Indigo Girls perform April 24 at the Harvester Performance Center in Rocky Mount. Winner of the President's Award, Rocky Mount's entry was one of more than 50 received for judging in six categories in the 2014 VML Achievement Awards competition..*

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### **PRESIDENT'S AWARD: Town of Rocky Mount**

A decade in the making, the 500-seat Harvester Performance Center in Rocky Mount is on pace in its first year of operation to attract more than 40,000 music fans downtown to hear world-renown performers.

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A decade following a devastating flood that accompanied Hurricane Isabel, Poquoson successfully rebranded itself to undo the stubborn stigma that had made the city synonymous with tidal flooding in the minds of many.

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Pulaski marshaled money and substantial community support to rebuild a railroad station to exacting historical standards and expand a museum following a fire in late 2008.

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Norfolk listened and responded wholeheartedly to a grassroots movement in the city to cultivate a vibrant arts district on the edge of downtown.

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# 2014 VML Annual Achievement Awards

And the winners are ...

## 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

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 employed creative development strategies to retain child development center

**T**HE CITY OF Falls Church had a problem. It was renting surplus space to the Easter Seals Child Development Center of Northern Virginia, a much loved and much needed public/private social services program, but its growing public school system was in need of the space.

Ending Easter Seals' lease would mean losing an important community service. As municipalities throughout Northern Virginia have become larger and more prosperous, non-profits like Easter Seals are going further afield to find affordable space. But the City of Falls Church was determined to keep Easter Seals in its borders. A combination of fast-thinking, altruism, innovative design and collaboration allowed Easter Seals to not only stay in the City of Falls Church, but to own a beautiful new facility all its own.



**The facility was built within the shell of an existing warehouse allowing the development to receive tax incentives for adaptive reuse and waste reduction.**

Construction. He thought Bellingham might be willing to part with the property, if it was for a worthwhile cause.

Bringing Bellingham on board proved to be the easiest part of the process. Not only was he willing to sell the property at a price Easter Seals could afford, he also offered to renovate the building on an expedited basis to meet the project's very aggressive timeline. The obstacles to realizing this opportunity lay in the property itself.

The structure was a nearly windowless, one-story, industrial warehouse built in 1973 to store auto parts. The site was a quilt of different jurisdictions and zoning overlays. While the area around it was ripe for development, the property itself languished, in part because of competing zoning prerogatives. Straddling the border of the City and the County, the property was subject to the regulations of four different zoning districts, both commercial and residential. This created a problem: in three of the four zoning districts, the Child Development Center would be allowed by-right; however, the fourth district would require a special exception to allow this land use.

Thus it was fortuitous that Bellingham, the owner of the site, was a general contractor who had also made previous overtures to the local authorities to develop the property. When he first purchased the warehouse, Bellingham engaged Studio Twenty Seven Architecture to turn the building into a net-zero, sustainably designed, headquarters for Monarc Construction. While this earlier effort was eventually shelved, it helped establish the relationships needed to expedite turning the property over to Easter Seals and permitting the new land use.

While the local Economic Development Authority created a \$3 million bond package to assist Easter Seals in obtaining financing for the project, John Bellingham re-engaged Studio Twenty Seven Architecture to create a new design for the

Easter Seals Serving DC|MD|VA is the independently incorporated 501(c)(3) that provides services in the region as an affiliate of the nationwide Easter Seals organization that supports more than one million children

and adults living with a variety of conditions, from autism to Alzheimer's Disease. The organization has a network of hundreds of sites throughout the United States. The Easter Seals Child Development Center of Northern Virginia (CDC) in Falls Church delivers programs and activities that maximize the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of children and ensures they succeed in school when they reach kindergarten age and beyond. In the Falls Church area, it is the only child development center that will accept children under the age of 2 within five miles, and the only facility serving children below the age of 5, who have special needs such as disabilities, medical frailties (e.g., cancer, heart disease, feeding tubes), within 10 miles.

James Snyder, director of planning and development services for Falls Church, knew that keeping the Easter Seals Child Development Center in the city was imperative. During a brainstorming session an idea was hatched.

"A contractor had purchased a property with an old building to relocate his headquarters," Snyder explained, "but due to the turn in the economy the project was never realized." Snyder knew the contractor, John Bellingham of Monarc



**Falls  
Church**

**10,001-35,000 Population**



**A children's art project adorns the center's hallways.**

warehouse. The development team needed to establish the financing, and achieve multiple special exceptions, variances, and approvals, all while creating and executing a design for a highly regulated facility. And, due to the sun-setting municipal lease in the old site, the new 14,000 square foot Child Development Center had to be completed in seven months.

To expedite the development, the two municipalities whose border cut through the property had to act as one. Remarkably, both the city and the county agreed to a singular building permit review, inspection and enforcement. The county agreed that since the largest portion of the site would be within the city boundaries, the city should be the primary authorizing agency. The city agreed to keep the county fully engaged and informed as the project proceeded. A shared realization



**The site sits among an enclave of thriftily-built 1950's shingle homes, spotty strip development and a fizzled industrial area.**

that Easter Seals was a critical community asset helped foster a unified vision.

The obstacles to development continued. Zoning rules dictated that the property, due to its proposed use, had an intensive parking requirement. If stringently applied, almost 100 percent of the site would need to be paved with parking. In order to make room for play areas, gardens, and on-site storm water management strategies, parking needed to be limited. Again, a multi-jurisdictional solution was found. Adjacent to the site the City and the County jointly maintained a parking lot. The city and county agreed to allow Easter Seals staff and visitors to use this parking area, and granted a variance. The site could be developed as envisioned.

That vision included many environmentally sustainable strategies. "The land development aspect of the Easter Seals development fit the definition of LID, Low Impact Development," explained Karen White, the civil engineer on the

project. The facility was built within the shell of the existing warehouse, allowing the development to receive tax incentives for adaptive reuse and waste reduction. An innovative storm water management system retains and filters all storm water onsite without straining city facilities and potentially increasing pollution in area waterways.

Other sustainable strategies include pervious play areas, a migratory butterfly way-station, and an expeditionary learning garden that the children help maintain. This promotes therapeutic outdoor activities, learning and environmental stewardship. Chair of the Board of Easter Seals Serving DC|MD|VA, Janis Schiff, shared that the staff are energized "to maximize our new facility" and are "developing a 'Save the planet curriculum, to learn about the world through interaction with this sustainable building."

The new facility also generates much of its own energy. An extensive photovoltaic (PV) array consisting of 168 PV panels capable of generating 45,000kwh per year is installed on the roof. Bellingham had purchased the system for the earlier, planned renovation for the building, but it was never employed. In the process of turning over the building to Easter Seals, reselling this system proved to be out of the budget. Bellingham came up with a creative alternative, proposing a Power Purchase Agreement to operate the solar panels for Easter Seals and sell the energy back to the non-profit at a discount. Easter Seals benefits from the solar panels. The electrical power generated is sold to Dominion Virginia Power through a special "Solar Purchase Program." Bellingham will then donate the full system to Easter Seals once the initial period is concluded. Now Easter Seals is using less energy while also reducing their overall operating cost.

Finally, the new facility also includes a geothermal field, which will eventually have the capacity to heat and cool the entire building. That is some way down the road, the wells were placed during construction, but the required systems and connections proved to be too costly for the initial budget.

The Easter Seals development began giving back to the community even before it was completed, providing an impetus for the city to make much needed public improvements. As part of the agreement to keep Easter Seals in Falls Church, the City allocated \$50,000 to provide sidewalks, street and safety lighting where there had been none, as well as repaving the road leading to the facility.

The Easter Seals development is an example of how creative urban redevelopment, shared public and private vision, collaborative municipal efforts and sustainable design may coalesce to support critical community programs. Like many projects, it could not have been possible through the efforts of an individual; it takes a collection of key players doing what they do best to realize the vision of this project. The city, and Easter Seals, is grateful to both the public and the private partnerships that made this re-development a success. 