

# Mount Vernon Gazette

MOUNT VERNON'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER • A CONNECTION NEWSPAPER

DECEMBER 4, 2025

## Traffic Around Belvoir Takes a Hit With Limited Gate Access Hours

BY MIKE SALMON

**G**aining entry to Fort Belvoir is getting tougher in recent days as the military base has encountered a couple of events that directly impact their hiring of guards to pass vehicles onto base.

According to their description, the base is experiencing “significant staffing and hiring challenges that impact daily gate operations,” it said, and this not only impacts members of the military but also civilians in the Mount Vernon area that work for the Army at Fort Belvoir.

The title of a Belvoir website page describes the challenge, “Who’s Willing to Man the Gate? Fort Belvoir works to keep gates open among hiring freeze and other obstacles.” The base is home to over 150 companies that support the Army on Belvoir and they only have 28 employees to watch the gates. To cover all the shifts they need 11 more people to fill guard and police vacancies. Officials are facing difficulties hiring qualified candidates, so the lines at the gates are moving slowly.

“Several guards left for higher-paying jobs during the recent government shutdown, further straining staffing levels,” it said on their website.

With fewer guards available, the Army has consolidated operations to Farrar Gate at the airfield, which is accessed off the Fairfax County Parkway; Tulley Gate on Richmond Highway; Lieber Gate; and Kingman Gate off Telegraph Road.

They are all operating on limited schedules.

Belvoir only has 45 soldiers in their law enforcement department, they say on their website. Some of their gates are being repaired too so that’s another factor that’s hurting the flow of traffic.

“I understand this is a big problem,” said Garrison Commander, Col. David Stewart. “We hear the complaints on a daily basis, and I want the Service members, Veterans and civilians that work, live and play on Fort Belvoir to know that I and the rest of my garrison command team are doing everything in our power to work on creative solutions to this growing issue,” said Stewart.



Hiring problems limit traffic flow at the Fort Belvoir gates.

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

## Holiday Dress-up

BY SUSAN LAUME  
CONNECTION NEWSPAPERS

**H**orses and riders of Tamarack Stables in Lorton were among those dressed for the season recently. The riding group donned costumes to add to the fun of their event at Laurel Hill Equestrian Center in Lorton. The horse and rider teams participated in western games, including fast gallops, weaving, barrel circling, and keyhole. Apparently, horses enjoy dressing for the holidays too.



Lillian Thompson, of Lorton, with Bell of the Ball



Clare Bonomi, of Mount Vernon, with RJ



Holiday Outings  
with a Different Twist

SEE MORE, PAGE 10





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# The Potomac River, Stuck at a B Grade

**A grade of B sounds OK, but the details are daunting.**

BY GLENDA C. BOOTH  
CONNECTION NEWSPAPERS

**T**he Potomac Conservancy gave the Potomac River a B grade in its recent report card, the fifth B in ten years. And while a B is better than the D the river got in 2011 or the C in 2013, the river is “showing no overall improvement in a decade,” the Conservancy announced. “The Potomac’s overall health has stopped improving.” The river is still not safe for swimming or fishing, concludes the analysis.

Dubbed “the nation’s river,” at least the Potomac is not an “open sewer,” as the Washington Post denounced in 1951 or “a national disgrace,” as President Lyndon B. Johnson lamented in 1965.

The Potomac River watershed drains 14,670 square miles in four states, a watershed with a population of around seven million people. It supplies drinking water to five million people. Of the total population in the watershed, 81 percent live in urban areas. In Northern Virginia, it forms the eastern border of the city of Alexandria and Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William counties.

In a separate, recent Conservancy report, Belin wrote, “Extreme droughts and flooding are becoming the new norm, degrading stream health and community safety. And powerful interests are moving fast: rolling back federal protections, slashing conservation funding and allowing for unchecked data center sprawl.”

The report card uses six indicators: pollution, fish, habitat, land, people and climate.

## The Good News

Labeled as “good news,” the report card shows a steady decline in nitrogen, phos-



The Potomac River viewed from Collingwood Park.



Several groups collect trash like this along the river’s shoreline multiple times a year.

phorus and sediment and an increase in river-related recreation, up ten percent since 2020.

Over one-fifth of the land in the watershed is protected from development.

## The River’s History

In “The Potomac River, A History and Guide,” published in 2012 book, author Garrett Peck traces the river’s natural and human history, from its origin as a trickle at the foot of West Virginia’s Backbone Mountain 3,140 feet above sea level to its mouth at the Chesapeake Bay.

Here are a few facts from the book. The Potomac River:

- ❖ is 383 miles long and flows “through some of the oldest land in the world”;
- ❖ is “spared from channelization that permanently scarred so many of our nation’s rivers”;
- ❖ in the Alexandria-Mount Vernon area is tidal;
- ❖ has five remaining lighthouses, including Jones Point on the southern end of Alexandria.



PHOTOS BY GLENDA BOOTH

SEE THE POTOMAC RIVER, PAGE 6

The report card indicates that river-related recreation is on the rise.



PHOTO BY JENN LOVING

A volunteer collects trash at one of Potomac Conservancy’s Potomac River Clean Ups



Many people find sitting by the river relaxing.



# New Shop in Belle View, Houseplants and More

By Glenda C. Booth  
Mount Vernon Gazette

People come into Genius Genus thinking they are tutors. But no.

"We are not tutors," says Christy Castro, co-owner with her husband, Ed, of a new shop in Mount Vernon's Belle View Shopping Center. Genius Genus is a houseplant and plant-sitting store where the Castros typically have between 70 and 100 houseplants and other plant-themed items for sale.

"Bringing green inside creates a sense of place," Christy Castro says. "A sense of peace and calm." Shoppers are intrigued by the shop's name. "Plants are the geniuses," she explains. "I'm not. Mother Nature made them."

The indoor plant industry got a boost from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, she argues. Cooped-up people during the lockdown wanted to bring some beauty into their homes and learned that houseplants also improve indoor air quality.

Christy got the "house plant bug" from her mother and grandmother, who always had plants inside their homes. She still cherishes her great-great-grandmother's begonia.

The Castros shop in greenhouses in Culpeper, Virginia; Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Florida for houseplants. Almost 60 percent of the plants are tropical. Some of the more common popular plants are pothos ("devil's ivy"), spider plants, begonias and philodendrons. They have several shelves of plants that are safe for pets and children.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has a list of toxic and non-toxic plants at <https://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/asPCA-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>.

Plant prices range from \$6 to several hundred dollars. Shoppers can be someone wanting a centerpiece to rare plant collectors.

The Castros offer houseplant care advice. A plant needs five things, Christy Castro stresses: water, light, food, soil and pruning. If customers are worried about insufficient light, they can buy grow lights in the shop. Some are simple bulbs that screw into a regular lamp.

The shop offers plant repotting, plant deliveries and plant sitting, which involves one of their staffers watering and feeding plants when owners are

away.

Some customers come in and say, "I have a black thumb. I can't grow anything." Christy explains that customers must choose a plant that will work in the customer's home's atmosphere. A tropical plant does not necessarily need rainforest humidity. Think cactuses and succulents.

## Plant Chats and Games

Eventually, the Castros hope to have a plant-themed game night with plant bingo. The prize? A house plant. They will host a Coffee, Tea, Me and Plants where people will discuss plants. "There are actually house plant groupies," she snickers. "It's a little-known obsession."

In addition to plants, the shop has gifts, books, aprons, calendars, t-shirts, cards, coasters, vintage pots, grow kits, plant food, potting soil, plant accessories (including "plant jewelry") and even plant-themed games with names like Verdant and Herbaceous. You can buy cat grass seeds to grow plants that cats can safely eat and create gift baskets.

The shop carries t-shirts, cards and totes made by Matt Zdance, who creates ink prints on various media and watercolors with pressed flowers made by Sydney Hunter.

## Pet Walkers, Sitters and Taxis

For 15 years, the Castros have also had a pet sitting and dog walking business, called The Unleashed Pet. One of their six employees can visit the pet several times a day, if needed. This company's service area is from Arlington's Crystal City south to Fort Belvoir, most of the city of Alexandria and the Kingstowne area.

They also offer a pet taxi to take pets to the veterinarian and provide dog harnesses, seat belts and crates. They've even transported pets to and from weddings, beloved pets who were part of the wedding party.

Ed Castro grew up in Houston, Texas. Christy grew up in the Groveton and Dale City areas and in mid-October they moved the shop from Alexandria's Prince Street to Belle View. "I love this area," Christy said.

"Growing and caring for something is therapeutic," Christy believes.

They have at least 200 houseplants, four dogs and five cats in their home.

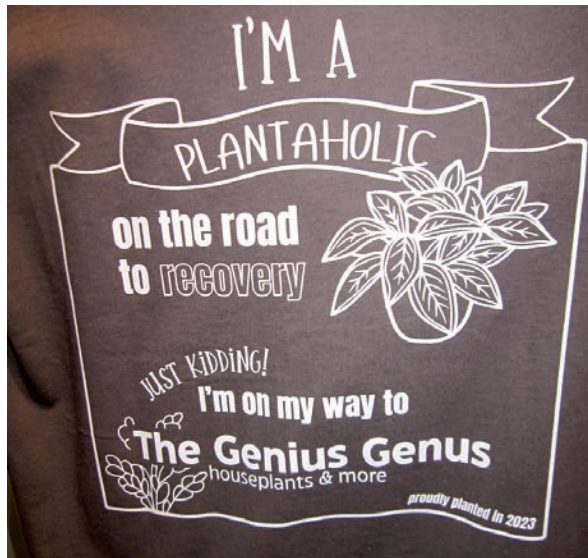
Information: [www.thegenusgenus.com](http://www.thegenusgenus.com) and [www.theunleashedpet.com](http://www.theunleashedpet.com)



The shop Genius Genus sells plants safe for pets.



Genius Genus co-owner Christy Castro and a pencil cactus.



A t-shirt that Christy Castro designed and sells.



A happy bunny plant, a hybrid from Ecuador which got its name because the top of the leaves look like rabbit ears.



Popular Houseplant: A philodendron.



Popular Houseplant: A Bella palm.





PHOTO BY JOHN BORDNER/GAZETTE PACKET

Alexandria National Cemetery will hold its Wreaths Across America ceremony Dec. 13 as part of the nationwide tribute to American veterans.

# A Nation Remembers

## Wreaths Across America set for Dec. 13.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN  
GAZETTE PACKET

Millions of Americans will unite on Saturday, Dec. 13, to participate in Wreaths Across America, the annual tradition of laying evergreen wreaths on the graves of veterans across the country.

Alexandria National Cemetery is one of the thousands of locations that will honor veterans in what is considered a solemn symbol of gratitude.

"The mission of Wreaths Across America is to remember the fallen, honor those who serve, and teach the next generation the value of freedom," said Col. Jerry Krueger, Commander of VFW Post 609. "Last year over 1,000 Alexandria area patriotic citizens joined

military veterans from several VSOs, along with Scouts, cadets, church groups, and more, in placing wreaths on all 4,229 veterans' gravestones."

VFW Post 609 will again host the event, now in its 17th year in Alexandria. The Alexandria tradition first began in December of 2009.

Wreaths Across America began in 1992 when Morrill Worcester of Maine donated surplus wreaths to Arlington National Cemetery. Today, it has grown into a global movement with ceremonies at more than 5,200 locations in all 50 states, at sea, and abroad, involving over two million volunteers.

The 2025 theme, Keep Moving Forward, symbolizes resilience and unity in challenging times. According to organizers, they hope to inspire communities to overcome obstacles together, just as service members did in defense of liberty.

Volunteers in Alexandria, Arlington and across the country will place wreaths while saying each veteran's name aloud in a symbolic act ensur-

ing their memory endures.

The Arlington Convoy, known as the longest veterans' parade, began Dec. 6 when trucks left Maine to escort the wreaths to Arlington National Cemetery with stops at schools and memorials along the East Coast.

Boxes of wreaths will be unloaded at Alexandria National Cemetery Dec. 12 after delivery from Wreaths Across America.

The Dec. 13 kickoff ceremony for Wreaths Across America at Alexandria National Cemetery will begin at 9:30 a.m. The public is invited to join VFW Post 609, members of other VSOs, church groups, Civil Air Patrol cadets, scouts, and local residents to place several thousand Veterans Remembrance Wreaths at the tombstones of over 4,200 veterans buried at Alexandria National Cemetery. The cemetery is located at 1450 Wilkes Street in Alexandria.

For more information, contact Joseph Mattera at [jmatters1@gmail.com](mailto:jmatters1@gmail.com) or Jerry Krueger at [JerryKrueg@aol.com](mailto:JerryKrueg@aol.com).

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# The Potomac River, Stuck at a B Grade

FROM PAGE 3

## Runoff Is Rising

As for bad news, polluted stormwater runoff is increasing and is the only source of pollution that is on the rise. When runoff flows over paved and hardened surfaces, it carries pollutants like oils, fertilizers and trash. Urban and agricultural environments are major contributors to polluted runoff.

Pollution is exacerbated by continuing forest loss and extreme weather, like droughts and downpours. Pollution is “driven by policies that tolerate industrial agriculture, unchecked development and reckless deforestation,” the report contends.

At a Nov. 12 press conference, Michael Nardolilli, Executive Director of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, attributed polluted stormwater to dense development’s widespread impervious surfaces. Hedrick Belin, president of Potomac Conservancy, stressed the goal of having rainwater naturally infiltrate into soils instead of washing off hard surfaces.

## Some Fish Are Struggling

Populations of striped bass, white perch and small mouth bass have steadily dropped over the past 20 years. Striped bass got a D-grade and both white perch and smallmouth bass got a grade of D+. Shad populations are unstable.

Invasive fish like blue catfish are pushing native species out of their traditional habitats. Chesapeake Channa, invasive northern snakeheads, “have established a firm foothold in the watershed,” the report asserts.

“Consuming fish remains illegal for communities who live in and around Washington, D. C.,” says the report.

## Habitats

Land use and river quality are inextricably linked. “Our forests and wetlands are not decorative — they are defenders,” the report maintains. “They filter pollutants, protect against flooding and offer sanctuary to people and wildlife alike. ... Restoring and protecting our land is not just about beautification — it’s about repair, reconnection, and power.”

Forested buffers garnered an A grade. There’s been “an uptick in installed forested buffers over the past three years,” but all states lag behind in their watershed implementation plan goals for forest buffers, falling 132,645 acres short.

In implementing best management practices for land, the report concludes that Maryland and Washington, D.C. “have made strides, while Virginia lags far behind,” calling these disparities “political” and the choices communities have made. Best management practices are measures set by the Chesapeake Bay Program Partnership to protect and restore water quality.

The river’s wetlands, forests and shorelines are at risk by development and poor planning. “The Potomac’s habitats — its wetlands, forests and shorelines — are being pushed aside by unchecked development and fragmented planning. When ecosystems are broken, so is our ability to breathe, cool down, grow food and find peace. True res-



PHOTO BY JOHN BRIGHENTI

Fall colors reflect on the Potomac on a calm morning Autumn morning



PHOTO BY POTOMAC CONSERVANCY

Memorial Bridge over the Potomac River.

toration goes beyond conservation — it requires reinvestment in places where both ecosystems and communities have been neglected,” the report argues.

The report gives stream water quality a grade of C+, tidal water quality a C- and underwater grasses a C- grade.

## Warnings

Global warming is changing the climate, leading to warmer air and water tempera-

tures, longer droughts and more severe rain storms that stress the river’s ecosystems.

Rising sea levels mean more local flooding. By 2080, Washington, D.C., could have water levels 1.3 to 4.3 feet higher than today. Among the suggested solutions are restoring wetlands, reestablishing stream connectivity and upgrading stormwater systems. Other solutions include holding polluters accountable, implementing “nature-based solutions” and reclaiming public spaces for community

use.

Belin is hopeful. He said via email, “We’re not just protecting forests or pulling trash. We’re safeguarding a river that over five million people depend on for drinking water and outdoor enjoyment.

We’re building trust that community-led conservation can solve big problems. We’re restoring hope.”

The report: <https://potomacreportcard.org/>





NOTICE OF WATER RATE AND BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING

December 11, 2025 at 6:30 p.m.

At 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, December 11, 2025, Fairfax Water will conduct a public hearing on its Proposed Schedule of Rates, Fees, and Charges. The hearing will be held in Fairfax Water’s offices at 8570 Executive Park Avenue, Fairfax, VA.

The proposed changes, to be effective April 1, 2026, include the following:

- An increase in the Availability Charge from \$4,930 to \$5,090\*.
- An increase in the Local Facilities Charge from \$24,290 to \$24,850.
- An increase in the Service Connection Charge from \$1,840 to \$1,960\*.
- An increase in the Account Charge from \$48 to \$50.
- An increase in the Quarterly Service Charge from \$16.55 to \$17.55\*.
- An increase in the base Commodity Charge from \$4.03 to \$4.35 per 1,000 gallons of water.
- An increase in the Peak Use Charge from \$4.15 to \$4.20.
- An increase in the Turn Off / Turn On Charge from \$58 to \$61.
- An increase in the Fees for Use of Fairfax Water Fire Hydrants to include the increase in the Commodity Charge and Peak Use Charge.
- An increase in the Overhead Charges for Materials from 12% to 14%.
- An increase in the Installation of Sewer Use Meter Charge Inspection Fee from \$47 to \$48.
- New proposed rate: After Hours Service Restoration Charge of \$58.

\*Charges reflect fees associated with a standard 5/8” residential meter. Changes in charges for larger residential and commercial meters are reflected in the Proposed Schedule of Rates, Fees, and Charges.

Fairfax Water is also proposing a \$253 million budget for calendar year 2026.<sup>1</sup> Water sales are expected to provide \$222 million and the remaining \$31 million is expected from connection charges, investment income and other sources.

The major areas of operation and maintenance expense are:

| Category                              | -- \$1,000s -- |            |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
|                                       | 2025           | 2026       |
| Personal Services & Employee Benefits | \$ 73,630      | \$ 81,178  |
| Power and Utilities                   | 14,489         | 15,070     |
| Chemicals                             | 15,134         | 16,089     |
| Purchased Water                       | 8,712          | 9,313      |
| Supplies and Materials                | 6,981          | 8,080      |
| Insurance                             | 1,066          | 1,410      |
| Fuel                                  | 793            | 885        |
| Postage                               | 675            | 692        |
| Contractual Services                  | 15,510         | 15,650     |
| Professional Services                 | 2,194          | 2,310      |
| Other                                 | 2,866          | 3,270      |
| Sub-Total                             | 142,050        | 153,947    |
| Transfer to Improvement Fund          | (12,005)       | (12,104)   |
| Total                                 | \$ 130,045     | \$ 141,843 |

Net revenues are expected to be appropriated as follows:

|                  |              |
|------------------|--------------|
| Debt Payment     | \$54,018,574 |
| Improvement Fund | \$11,000,000 |
| General Fund     | \$45,492,000 |

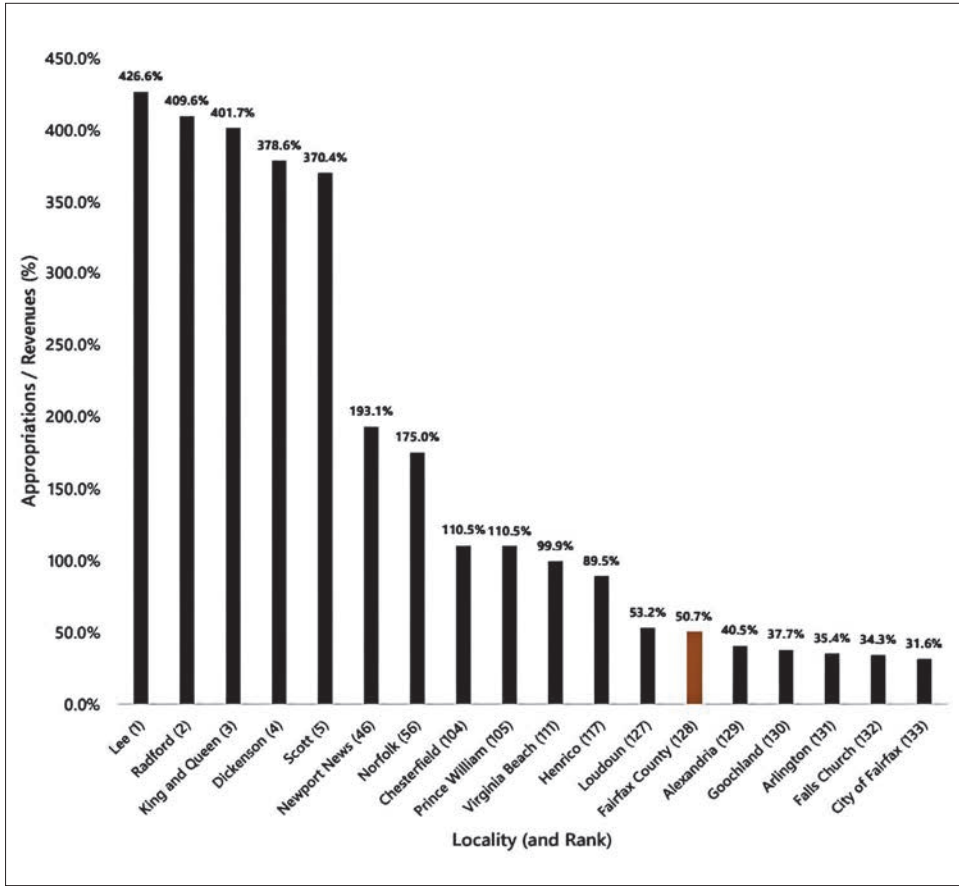
<sup>1</sup>Fairfax Water’s Board will continue to monitor economic factors and review revenues and expenditures at mid-year to determine if additional action is needed.

Visit [fairfaxwater.org/rates](https://fairfaxwater.org/rates) to view a copy of the proposed changes.

Those wishing to speak at this hearing or desiring a copy of the proposed changes should call Ms. Jessica Love at **703-289-6029**. Interested parties may submit written comments to [PublicHearingComments@fairfaxwater.org](mailto:PublicHearingComments@fairfaxwater.org) or mail written comments to:

Fairfax Water  
Public Hearing Comments  
8570 Executive Park Avenue  
Fairfax, VA 22031

All written comments must be received by close of business on **Wednesday, December 10, 2025** to be included in the record of the public hearing.



SOURCE: REVENUES AND RETURNS ANALYSIS

**Fairfax County Appropriations as Percentage of Revenues (FY 2024):** Fairfax County receives approximately 50 cents back on each dollar contributed to Virginia revenues and ranks 128th out of 133 localities. City of Alexandria received approximately 40 cents and Arlington County approximately 35 cents back on each dollar contributed to Virginia revenues.

# Fifty Cents

Last week, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors reviewed the findings of a new “Revenues and Returns” analysis prepared by the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service and commissioned by Fairfax County. The analysis provides an updated snapshot of how much revenue Fairfax County generates for the state and how much of it returns to the county through direct and indirect appropriations.

The numbers show that Fairfax County contributes a significant portion of the state’s General Fund (~20%). Yet receives back half of what it generates. For every \$1 Fairfax County produced in revenue, it received ~\$0.50 in return. This total reflects both direct aid, about 21.2 percent (e.g., K-12 funding), and indirect or other state support, about 29.5 percent (e.g., Medicaid funding), totaling roughly 50.7 percent. The analysis also makes clear that Northern Virginia is a key driver of the Commonwealth’s revenue; without the contributions of this region, the state’s financial landscape would be significantly different.

This analysis provides important context for Fairfax County and neighboring jurisdictions as we continue working in partnership with state leaders to explore solutions that ensure a fair and sustainable approach to funding critical core services like public education.

Key takeaways (FY 2024):

- ❖ Fairfax County is Virginia’s largest local contributor to the state’s General Fund.

locality, with about 1.15 million residents — roughly 13% of the state’s population.

- ❖ The county generated approximately \$5.77 billion in General Fund revenue (20.7% of the state total).
- ❖ State General Fund appropriations benefiting Fairfax totaled about \$2.93 billion, or 11.1% of statewide spending.
- ❖ For every \$1 contributed, Fairfax County receives roughly \$0.50 back.

Regional Comparisons:

- ❖ Arlington County: \$1.406 B generated; \$0.498 B received (approximately \$0.35 per \$1)
- ❖ Loudoun County: \$2.092 B generated; \$1.114 B received (approximately \$0.53 per \$1)
- ❖ Prince William County: \$1.405 B generated; \$1.552 B received (approximately \$1.10 per \$1)

The analysis also includes a breakdown of how this revenue is generated. This chart shows the estimated \$5.77 billion Fairfax County contributed to the state by category, highlighting the major sources of General Fund revenue, see chart.

SOURCE: FAIRFAX COUNTY

See the full, 80-page report here [https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/economic-initiatives/sites/economic-initiatives/files/Assets/eic\\_materials/November\\_25\\_2025/FairfaxCounty\\_RevReturnAnalysis\\_2025-11-20.pdf](https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/economic-initiatives/sites/economic-initiatives/files/Assets/eic_materials/November_25_2025/FairfaxCounty_RevReturnAnalysis_2025-11-20.pdf)



## SENIOR LIVING

# Culture and Community

## Brightview hosts 3rd annual Bollywood Extravaganza.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN  
GAZETTE PACKET

**B**rightview Senior Living in Alexandria hosted its 3rd Annual Bollywood Extravaganza, a community cultural celebration in Northern Virginia.

Organized in collaboration with the Northern Virginia Senior Resource Network (NVSRN) and supported by numerous local partners, the gathering brought together residents, families, professionals, and community members for music, dance and networking among senior living professionals.

The event featured Bollywood performances, traditional music, and cuisine representative of India. Guests enjoyed henna art and a display of colorful attire that reflected the cultural heritage and history celebrated during the festivities.

The star of the show was the surprise appearance of Sarah, the first horse to attend an NVSRN event. Courtesy of Virk Equestrian Arts and Shadow Falls Equestrian, the unexpected guest was the center of attention and featured in many photo opportunities with attendees.

The event was coordinated by Faiqa Clark and the Brightview Senior Living team, along with contributions from partners such as Care With Love, NurseAmerica, Dream Vacations, VivaNova Real Estate, and Dulles Health & Rehab Center.

A crowd of more than 140 attended the Bollywood Extravaganza, which aims to underscore the importance of cultural diversity and social engagement in senior living communities.  
[www.nvsrn.org](http://www.nvsrn.org)



Dancers enjoy the 3rd annual Bollywood Extravaganza Oct. 15 at Brightview Senior Living.



Nancy Coleman, sales manager, and Karen Stewart, executive director of Brightview Senior Living, with Steve Gurney, founder of Positive Aging Sourcebook, and Sarah, the first horse to be featured at the NVSRN Bollywood Extravaganza.



Brightview Senior Living staff at the Oct. 15 Bollywood Extravaganza event.

PHOTOS BY  
JANET BARNETT  
GAZETTE PACKET



## Intersection Improvements At Fort Hunt Road-Rollins Drive Underway in Groveton

**S**cheduled for mid-2026 completion, construction is underway on improvements aimed at improving pedestrian and driver safety at the Fort Hunt Road (Route 629) and Rollins Drive-Westgrove Boulevard intersection, according to the Virginia Department of Transportation.

The improvements include:

- ❖ Building a channelizing concrete island on the Rollins Drive side of the intersection, thus making Rollins Drive right-in-right-out only and eliminating the thru movement from Westgrove Boulevard to Rollins Drive.

- ❖ Adding Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFBs) and a pedestrian refuge island to the existing Fort Hunt Road crosswalk. The existing left-turn lane from Fort Hunt Road to Rollins Drive will be eliminated as a result.

- ❖ Installing new pavement markings and signs.

- ❖ Making drainage improvements.

During construction, weekday lane closures outside of peak travel hours on Fort Hunt Road, Rollins Drive and Westgrove Boulevard will occur as needed.

The \$500,000 Fort Hunt Road and Rollins Drive/Westgrove Boulevard improvements project is financed with state and local funding and is scheduled for completion in mid-2026.

Drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians are reminded to use caution when traveling in active work zones. Be alert to new traffic patterns and limit distractions.

<https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/projects/northern-virginia-district/rollins-drive-safety-measures-in-fairfax-county/>

## Hypothermia Season

**A**s colder weather sets in, people experiencing homelessness urgently need safe shelter and support.

There were 1,322 people experiencing literal homelessness in Fairfax County on the night of the 2025 Point in Time Count. <https://www.fairfax-county.gov/homeless/point-time-count-2025>

The county's services for those experiencing homelessness include:

- ❖ Six shelters for adults and families. Call Fairfax County Coordinated Services Planning at 703-222-0880 (TTY 711) to request a bed or outreach if you are unsheltered. Or, go directly to the nearest shelter.

- ❖ A 24-hour hotline for victims of domestic and sexual violence: 703-360-7273, TTY 711.

### At Risk?

If you see someone you think is at risk for hypothermia, call 703-691-2131 TTY 711. This is the non-emergency police number. A police officer will respond and conduct a wellness check.

Fairfax County's Hypothermia Prevention Program runs from Dec. 1 to March 31 and helps to ensure no one experiencing homelessness sleeps outside during the winter. The program provides warm shelter, food, clothing, connections to supportive services and more for unhoused individuals. Overflow shelter capacity is available if unseasonably cold weather occurs. <https://www.fairfax-county.gov/homeless/hypothermia-prevention-program>

SEE HYPOTHERMIA, PAGE 8



# Man Arrested in Woodlawn After Bomb Threat

Detectives from the FCPD Organized Crime and Intelligence Bureau arrested a man after he threatened to bomb a Fairfax Connector bus in Woodlawn, according to police.

On Nov. 30 at 10:22 a.m., officers responded to the 8700 block of Richmond Highway in Woodlawn for a report of a bomb threat. When officers arrived, they learned Blake Davis Norton, 57, of no fixed address, claimed he had a bomb in his backpack before boarding a Fairfax Connector bus, according to police

reports.

Officers quickly located the bus and evacuated the immediate area. With the assistance of our Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit (EOD), the backpack was safely examined and did not contain any explosive material.

Norton was arrested and transported to the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center. He was charged with Threats to Bomb or Burn. He is being held without bond.

## Hypothermia Season

FROM PAGE 8

[fairfaxcounty.gov/homeless/hypothermia-prevention-program](https://fairfaxcounty.gov/homeless/hypothermia-prevention-program)

The Hypothermia Prevention Program is operated in partnership with nonprofits, faith organizations and community groups.

Unhoused adults in need of immediate shelter can go to any of the adult shelters or one of the regional Hypothermia Prevention Program locations. Adults with children should contact Coordinated Services

Planning; county staff will connect the family with appropriate shelter and resources. 703-222-0880, TTY 711, Monday - Friday, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

You can support these efforts by making financial contributions and donating essentials like clothing, furniture, school supplies and funds to participating nonprofits. Volunteering at shelters or contributing to prevention programs can also make a tangible difference in helping those who are experiencing homelessness.



❖ A list of nonprofit partners


seeking financial help, and donations of clothing, furniture, school supplies and more, is here: <https://www.fairfax-county.gov/homeless/nonprofit-partners>


Job training, shelter support, fundraising and other assistance is needed across the county. Volunteer opportunities can be found on the Volunteer Fairfax website.

If you see someone who is unsheltered and you think is at risk for hypothermia, call 703-691-2131 TTY 711. This is the non-emergency police number. A police officer will respond and conduct a wellness check.

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PHOTOS BY GLENDA BOOTH/GAZETTE PACKET



Lisa Pregent welcomes Aladdin to Mount Vernon every Christmas.



With his long neck, Aladdin can hold his head high.



Aladdin has his own quarters, a shed on the estate.



Pregent and Aladdin bond.



Aladdin has distinctive facial features.



# Holiday Outings with a Different Twist

By GLENDA C. BOOTH  
THE CONNECTION

Christmas may typically mean tinsel and toys, Santa and stockings, but for a different twist your family could try a 1,500-pound camel and a Civil

War encampment.

## Aladdin, the Camel, at Mount Vernon

Aladdin, a dromedary camel with golf-ball-size brown eyes, welcomes between 500 to 1,000 fans a day at Mount Vernon Estate, there until Jan. 7.

"Mount Vernon is beautiful during the holidays," said Lisa Pregent in a Nov. 26 interview. "There's a magical feel about the place and Aladdin adds to it." Pregent, Senior Livestock Manager, noted that Aladdin's been coming to Mount Vernon for 17 years and said, "He recognizes us, the same

pen, the same faces, the same smells."

Bottle fed as a youngster, he is mostly docile, but when he sees a vehicle coming, he goes on the alert, "waits at the fence and gurgles at us," she said. He's likely expecting a treat. Aladdin first came to Mount Vernon in 2008 at age

11 months. Now 17, he is quieter, calmer Pregent said. Dromedary camels have an average lifespan of 40 years.

Aladdin is about seven feet tall from his hoofs to the top of his bump, an ungulate native to North Africa and the Middle East. He has SEE HOLIDAY OUTINGS, PAGE 11



Aladdin attracts between 500 and 1,000 admirers a day.



Kevin Rawlings has portrayed a Civil War Santa Claus every December at Fort Ward Park for 35 years



Soldiers stacked their guns teepee style to keep them dry and decorated them for the holidays.



# Holiday Outings with a Different Twist



The entry gate to Fort Ward Park.

FROM PAGE 10

long eyelashes, heavy fur, large feet and small nostrils, adaptations for desert life, Pregent explained. He munches on hay, eats four to five pounds of grain and drinks five to ten gallons of water daily.

Why a camel at Mount Vernon? In 1787, George Washington brought a camel to his plantation for the holidays for 18 shillings (\$170 today) and recorded, "By the man who brot. A Camel from Alexa. For a show."

In Washington's day, entertainers traveled around with rare or specially-trained animals. A farmer, Washington was interested in animals. He wrote that he saw a tiger, a "Lyoness" in 1766, a "Cugar" and "Sea Leopard" in Philadelphia while President.

Aladdin lives in Fairfax Station the rest of the year and travels to Mount Vernon in a horse trailer.

Pregent, who has worked at Mount Vernon for 30 years, also takes care of the estate's cows, horses, pigs, sheep and chickens.

On Nov. 26, Everett from St. Petersburg, Florida, exclaimed, "Wow! I've never seen a camel before."

This is my first camel." Aladdin was unfazed, focused on Pregent's bucket.

## A Civil War Christmas at Fort Ward Park

On Dec. 13, 12 noon to 4 p.m. at Fort Ward Park in the City of Alexandria, re-enactors will celebrate Christmas as Civil War Union Army soldiers did in December 1861 when they occupied Alexandria. A red-cheeked, jolly Santa Claus in 19th century garb and an authentic beard will greet visitors.

The soldiers will cook a Christmas meal in an iron kettle over the campfire, perhaps turkey and potatoes or a stew. During the Civil

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War, the Christmas meal was likely a welcomed switch from the daily diet of eight hardtack crackers, 16 ounces of salt pork or salt beef, beans and dried vegetables.

In 1861, soldiers earned \$13 a month, according to records of that era. "The Regulars were the professional backbone of the volunteer armies," says the Third U.S. Regular Infantry Re-enactors' website, the group portraying these soldiers. Company D was formed at Fort Ward in 2000.

## A Seasoned Santa

Kevin Rawlings from Frederick, Maryland, has portrayed Santa Claus every December at Fort Ward for 35 years. He wears a red-and-white-striped cap with a tassel and a suit made by his wife consisting of red-and-white-striped wool trousers, a Union blue jacket with faux white fur trim and a work coat. His jacket has 35 white stars representing the states, including those that seceded. Santa's attire is based on an 1863 Harper's Weekly magazine cover by Thomas Nast.

Rawlings has "done Santa" all these years because "Children have unconditional love for Santa," he says. They bring their wish list to him in the restored officer's hut where his tree will be decorated with acorns, pinecones and dried pork, decorations described in a soldier's letter.

In 1997, Rawlings wrote a book about Civil War-era Christmas traditions, titled *We Were Marching on Christmas Day*.

Some of Americans' modern-day holiday traditions, like trees, caroling and gifts date back to that time, he says.

Fort Ward, built in 1861, was one of the defenses of Washington ordered built by President Abraham Lincoln around the nation's



The museum at Fort Ward Park displays some Civil War artifacts.



capital after Confederate troops defeated the Union Army in the first Battle of Bull Run in Manassas. Builders sited forts on strategic heights overlooking turnpikes, railroads, bridges and shipping routes.

Fort Ward helped guard the Leesburg and Alexandria Turnpike, now Route 7, and Alexandria's

port. Fort Willard in today's Mount Vernon Belle Haven community and Fort Scott in Arlington, now parks, are other Virginia examples. Information:

<https://www.mountvernon.org/plan-your-visit/things-to-do/animals/aladdin/>  
<https://www.alexandriava.gov/FortWard>



# ENTERTAINMENT

## HOLIDAY EVENTS IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA

**Fifth Annual St. Nicholas Market (Dec. 7, Alexandria)** The Market is held mostly outdoors and will feature 40 local Catholic artists and makers selling their creations for the Christmas season at Saint Rita Catholic Church.

**Del Ray Artisans Holiday Market (Dec. 5-21; first three weekends in December, Alexandria)** The 30th annual market offers unique handmade fine arts and fine crafts from local artists.

**McLean Holiday Art & Crafts Festival (Dec. 5-7, McLean)**: This three-day indoor show at the McLean Community Center features regional artisans selling a variety of handmade items, including pottery, jewelry, and holiday decor.

**Old Town Alexandria Christmas Market and Holiday Craft Show (Dec. 13, Alexandria)**: This large holiday market at John Carlyle Square features local artisans, holiday music, and seasonal food and drinks.

**Mosaic Holiday Village (Dec. 13-14, Fairfax)**: Enjoy shopping at the Holiday Market, which features local artisans, and participate in other festivities in the Mosaic District.

**Farmer John's Holiday Market (Dec. 6-7, Leesburg)**: Get into the spirit at this festive market with Christmas trees, wreaths, handmade crafts, and hot cider.

The largest indoor art festival in the region, the Capital Art & Craft Festival, returns to Northern Virginia Dec. 12-14, 2025, with more than 300 juried artisans at the Dulles Expo Center. [www.CACFart](http://www.CACFart)

**Holiday Lights & Parades:**

**54th Annual Scottish Christmas Walk Parade (Dec. 6, Old Town Alexandria)**: For 54 years, Campagna Center has celebrated Alexandria's Scottish heritage during the holiday season with both the Taste of Scotland and the annual Scottish Christmas Walk parade.

**Ice & Lights: The Winter Village at Cameron Run (Begins Nov. 15, Alexandria)**: Ice & Lights provides a fun, outdoor family experience to explore new, dazzling light displays, take family pictures or selfies with a variety of festive scenes, enjoy a hot beverage and snack, and take a spin on the ice rink under the stars.

**Bull Run Festival of Lights (Begins Nov. 14, Centreville)**: Drive through this popular park to see a spectacular festival of lights.

**Christmas Illuminations (Dec. 20-21, Mount Vernon)**: George Washington's Mount Vernon hosts an evening with fireworks over the Potomac, a historic winter encampment, and tours of the illuminated mansion.

**Meadowlark's Winter Walk of Lights (Begins Nov. 7, Vienna)**: This popular seasonal event features a half-mile walk through decorated gardens.

**Alexandria Holiday Boat Parade of Lights (Dec. 6, Alexandria)**: Watch decorated boats light up the waterfront in the 25th annual parade.

**Greater Manassas Christmas Parade (Manassas)**: A long-running tradition held on the first Saturday in December, featuring floats and performers.

**Santa Lights Manassas (Dec. 5, Dec. 6 Manassas)**: On the first Friday of December, join the annual tree lighting ceremony to welcome Santa to Historic Manassas. The 79th annual parade takes place the next day.

**39th Annual Santa's Wonderland Parade and Winter Festival (Dec. 6, Colonial Beach)**: A winter festival kicks off with a parade of decorated floats and vehicles.

**More Holiday Events:**

**Alexandria Jingle Bell Jam (Dec. 7, 8-11 a.m.)**: A Santa breakfast, DJ and holiday magic show are all part of the fun at the Heritage Ballroom at Hotel Heron! Get your tickets now. Brought to you by Alexandria Living Magazine and Thrivent.

**Holidays with a Twist, Alexandria Symphony Orchestra (Dec. 20-21, Alexandria)**: Alexandria's favorite holiday musical tradition returns featuring stirring choruses from Handel's Messiah. Dancers from BalletNova perform the greatest moments from The Nutcracker. Plus carols, classics and other sparkling favorites of the season.

**Concerts at Christ Church: Celtic Music for Christmas (Dec. 8, Alexandria)**: Ensemble Gut, Wind, and Wire presents a holiday program of Celtic and English early music, 'Drive



**Celebrate ice skating with the start of the outdoor ice skating season on Thursday, Dec. 4, 2025 at Cameron Run Regional Park.**

the Cold Winter Wind Away'.  
**National Christmas Tree Lighting (Dec. 4, Presidents Park, DC)**

**A Christmas Carol (Dec. 5-20, Alexandria)**: at the Little Theatre of Alexandria (tickets go on sale Nov. 6!)

**Del Ray Holiday Season Kick-Off (Dec. 7, Alexandria)**: Join the Del Ray community for holiday cheer at the Del Ray Holiday Kick-Off on Sunday, Dec. 7.

**The Nutcracker (Nov. 28-Dec. 23, Manassas)**: The Manassas Ballet presents the classic holiday ballet at the Hylton Performing Arts Center.

**Santa Train Rides (Dec. 1, 8, 15 and 18, Alexandria)**: The Virginia Railway Express (VRE) runs special holiday trains perfect for families, roundtrip from Alexandria to Manassas.

**Aladdin the Camel (Nov. 26-Jan. 6, Mount Vernon)**: Meet the Christmas camel at George Washington's Mount Vernon, a nod to a real event from 1787.

**Holidays Through the Ages (Dec. 5-29, Woodbridge)**: Step back in time at the Rippon Lodge Historic Site to see how holidays were celebrated in different centuries.

**Santa Stampede 2025 (Dec. 6, Alexandria)**: Get some exercise at this fun, festive run held in John Carlyle Square.

**HOLIDAY LIGHT SHOWS AT NOVA PARKS**  
**Drive, Walk and Skate into the holidays with three unique holiday light show experiences.** Tickets for the 2025 holiday season are now on sale and all 3 NOVA Parks light shows will be open as of November 15.

**Meadowlark's Winter Walk of Lights**

Walk a sparkling half-mile garden trail while sipping on a hot beverage for an enchanting evening at Meadowlark's Winter Walk of Lights in Vienna.

Meadowlark's Winter Walk of Lights is an elegant garden trail aglow with countless sparkling lights, perfect for a date night or family holiday outing. The half-mile walk through the enchanting Meadowlark Botanical Gardens (Vienna, VA) features lighted nature themes and animated displays along a paved wheelchair and stroller-accessible trail. Stay warm by sipping on a hot beverage (with or without spirits) as you walk and s'mores to finish out the evening. Treat your pup to their favorite walk of the year on specific dates. The Winter Walk of Lights is illuminating the gardens for its 14th season, bringing joy to more than 100,000 visitors each year.

Open nightly November 7 through January 4. Capacity is limited; reservations are required to ensure access on a specific date. Prices range \$19-24 per person; promo codes available for specific dates. Visit [winterwalkoflights.com](http://winterwalkoflights.com) for details.

**Bull Run Festival of Lights**

Drive through 2.5 miles of dazzling lights at

Northern Virginia's largest drive-through light show at the Bull Run Festival of Lights in Centreville.

Experience the magic of the holidays at the Bull Run Festival of Lights, Northern Virginia's largest drive-through holiday light show! A family favorite for three decades, the Bull Run Festival of Lights dazzles with a 2.5-mile display of holiday and fairytale vignettes. Enjoy time with family while staying warm and cozy as you slowly drive through the animated displays in Bull Run Regional Park. New displays are added every year—drive through the Winter Wonderland where it's always snowing and see the tallest light display yet.

Open November 14 through January 4. \$30 per vehicle online; additional discounts available for specific dates with promo code. Visit [bull-runfestivaloflights.com](http://bull-runfestivaloflights.com) for details.

**Ice & Lights – The Winter Village at Cameron Run Skate and explore a winter village wonderland for a playful outdoor experience at Ice & Lights – The Winter Village at Cameron Run in Alexandria.**

Just minutes from Old Town Alexandria, enjoy ice skating amidst a winter wonderland at Cameron Run Regional Park (Alexandria, VA). Ice & Lights offers a fun, unstructured outdoor family experience to explore unique light displays, snap family pictures or selfies with a variety of displays, and take a spin on the outdoor ice rink.

Tickets are available for the Village Only or Village and Ice Skating. The Winter Village opens November 15 and nighttime ice skating begins November 28. Daytime ice skating begins December 6. Prices range \$9-24 per person depending on activity and date. Capacity is limited; reservations are required to ensure access on a specific date. Ice skating reservations are required. Visit [cameroniceandlights.com](http://cameroniceandlights.com) for details.

Visit [novaparkslights.com](http://novaparkslights.com) for more information and to purchase tickets.

## NOW THRU DEC. 14

**Parallel Lines: A Second Act in Color.** At The Athenaeum, 201 Prince Street, Alexandria. Featuring art works by Laura Caligiuri and Leslie Thornton. Longtime friends and collaborators, Laura Caligiuri and Leslie Thornton have each embraced bold, creative second careers as visual artists following successful professional lives. This exhibit is a celebration of their reinvention, renewal, and the expressive use of color. Through a shared love of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting, the artists explore rich contrasts: vibrant and muted hues, fluid forms, textured surfaces, and lyrical gestures. Their work speaks to spontaneity and emotion, where each brushstroke and each line presents new challenges and unexpected resolutions. The Athenaeum Gallery is open Thursday to Sun-

day from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.

## MEETS EVERY SUNDAY

**Bird Walks. 8 a.m.** At 6401 George Washington Memorial Parkway, Alexandria. Friends of Dyke Marsh organizers lead bird walks every Sunday morning. Meet at 8 a.m. in the south parking lot of the Belle Haven picnic area. Walks are led by experienced birders and everyone is welcome to join us.

## MEETS EVERY MONDAY

**Monday Morning Bird Walk. 7 a.m.** Meets at 3701 Lockheed Boulevard

Alexandria. The Monday Morning Bird Walk is sponsored by the Friends of Huntley Meadows Park and takes place every Monday at 7 a.m. April-September and 8 a.m. October-March. Following the walk, members of the group gather at the nearby Denny's for breakfast and to compile the morning's bird list. Call (703) 768-2525.

## WEDNESDAY NIGHTS

**Wednesday Night Bingo. 7 p.m.** At Atlas Brew Works, 2429 Mandeville Lane, Alexandria. The Capital City Showcase, the company that brings you some of the DC area's best events, is hosting an amazing night of everyone's favorite game at Atlas Brew Works Alexandria. Win prizes on every round, and the winner of the final round gets a \$50 Atlas Brew Works gift card for your next visit! There's also \$6 select Atlas drafts! Plus pizza served from the world famous Andy's Pizza! Email at [capitalcityshowcase@gmail.com](mailto:capitalcityshowcase@gmail.com)

## MGNV PLANT CLINICS ARE OPEN

**The Alexandria Old Town Farmer's Market Plant Clinic at 301 King St., Alexandria operates on Saturdays from 7 - 9:30 a.m.** Del Ray Farmers Market Plant Clinic at Oxford & Mt. Vernon Avenues, Alexandria operates on Saturdays from 8:30 - 11 a.m. The Arlington Farmers' Market at N. 14th and N. Courthouse Roads, Arlington operates on Saturdays from 8 - 11 a.m. The Fairlington Farmers' Market Plant Clinic at 3308 S. Stafford St., Arlington, operates on Sundays from 9 - 11 a.m.

## YEAR ROUND ON SUNDAYS

**Farmer's Market. 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.** At Casa Chirilagua Community Center, 4109 Mt. Vernon Ave., Alexandria. Experience fresh foods, native plants, artisan crafts, music and community at Four Mile Run Farmers & Artisans Market in the heart of Arlandria outside the Casa Chirilagua Community Center, every Sunday 9-1 p.m.

## ONGOING

**Revolutionary War Exhibit.** At the National Museum of the U.S. Army, Alexandria. The National Museum of the United States Army has opened a special exhibition, Call To Arms: The Soldier and the Revolutionary War. The two-year exhibition commemorates this year's 250th Birthday of the U.S. Army and next year's 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This 5,000 square-foot exhibition features a rare collection, specially curated by the Museum, that includes Revolutionary War artifacts from the original colonies, England, France and Canada. Among the exhibit's highlights are a pair of General George Washington's pistols, the original flag of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment carried by the Army's first African American Soldiers, and a complete Loyalist uniform—one of the rarest items in the collection. The sword of British General Charles Lord Cornwallis, presented to Washington at the surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, will also be displayed for a limited time.

## NOV. 12 TO DEC. 7

**Expressions in Light** by Mahua Mazumdar. At the Torpedo Factory, Alexandria. Opening reception & artist talk: Friday, Nov. 14 from 6:30-8 p.m. Visit: <https://www.theartleague.org/gallery/exhibits/>

## THURSDAY/DEC. 4

**Celebrate Outdoor Ice Skating. 6-8 p.m.** At Cameron Run Regional Park, 4001 Eisen-  
[www.ConnectionNewspapers.com](http://www.ConnectionNewspapers.com)



# ENTERTAINMENT



The Del Ray Artisans 30th Annual Holiday Market takes place Dec. 5 to 21, 2025 in Alexandria.



The Bull Run Festival of Lights runs now through Jan. 4, 2026.

hower Ave., Alexandria. Alexandria Mayor Alyia Gaskins and members of Alexandria City Council will commemorate the start of outdoor ice skating season with a Winter Ice Skating Party & Ribbon Cutting at Alexandria's only outdoor ice skating rink. Attendees can receive half off ice skating and admission to Ice & Lights—The Winter Village at Cameron Run (Ice & Lights), a free cup of hot chocolate and the opportunity to meet animals native to Northern Virginia at Critter Corner. To receive the discounted Village & Ice Skating ticket price of \$10.75 per person, use code MAYOR50 at checkout online. Evening ice skating and the Winter Village will be open daily November 28-December 30. Daytime ice skating will be open: weekends December 6-14; daily December 20-January 4; and weekends and holidays January 10 through February 28. Tickets are available for Village Only admission, Village & Ice Skating or Daytime Ice Skating. Regular prices range \$9-24 per person depending on activity and date. Capacity is limited; reservations are required to ensure access on a specific date. Ice skating reservations are required. Visit [cameroniceandlights.com](http://cameroniceandlights.com).

**DEC. 5-6, DEC. 12-13, DEC. 19-20**  
**Holiday Tours. 5:30 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 6:30 p.m.**  
 At Pope-Leighey House, Alexandria. Enjoy hot cider, cookies, and holiday music as you tour the Pope-Leighey House during special evening tours. This is a unique chance to see the home decorated for a mid-century holiday!

**DEC. 5 TO 21**  
**Del Ray Artisans 30th Annual Holiday Market.**  
 At 2704 Mount Vernon Avenue, Alexandria, VA. Holiday Market is the first three weekends in December (Dec 5-7, Dec 12-14, Dec 19-21). Offers unique handmade fine arts and crafts from local artists. Choose from wall art, pottery, photography, jewelry, glass, and more! Plus 2026 wall calendars support Del Ray Artisans nonprofit. Free admission. Different artists each weekend! Open Fridays 6-9 p.m., Saturdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Details: [delrayartisans.org/event/holiday-market-2025](http://delrayartisans.org/event/holiday-market-2025)

**FRIDAY/DEC. 5**  
**Taste of Scotland. 6:30 to 10:30 p.m.** At the ALX Community Atrium, 277 S. Washington Street, Alexandria. Presented by the Alexandria-based nonprofit Campagna Center, this holiday tradition marks the official kickoff to Alexandria's Scottish Christmas Walk Parade, which benefits Campagna's educational programs that serve more than 2,000 under-resourced children and families each

year. Campagna Center puts on its signature fundraising event, the Taste of Scotland, an evening of celebration and community. Guests will enjoy tastings of more than 30 Scotch varieties and other whiskeys from around the world, along with festive entertainment and engaging activities. Additional event highlights include:  
 Expert-led whisky education and interactive experiences from Macmillan Spirit House  
 Festive catering and an open bar with beer, wine, and holiday-inspired drinks  
 Games and prizes, including a Scotch tasting challenge to test your palate  
 Opportunities to mix and mingle with sponsors, supporters, and Scottie, Campagna's Scottish Christmas mascot  
 Guests are encouraged to wear their favorite plaid and enjoy an evening rich in holiday and Scottish spirit. All proceeds from the event support Campagna Center's work. Tickets start at \$150 per person, and the event is open to guests 21+. The parade starts at 11 a.m. and will include a festive line-up of bagpipers, dancers, clans, and decorative floats to celebrate Alexandria's Scottish heritage. For more information visit <https://www.campagnacenter.org>.

**SATURDAY/DEC. 6**  
**First Saturday Used Book Sale: 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.** at Sherwood Regional Library, 2501 Sherwood Hall Lane. Selection of over 20,000 gently used children's books, fiction, history, biography, home and garden, cooking, crafts, sports, religion, travel, CDs, DVDs, and more. Unless specially priced, \$1 for hard backs and large paperbacks, and 25 cents for mass market paperbacks. Visit <https://www.fairfax-county.gov/library/branches/friends-of-sherwood-regional> for information on other days and times for the library's ongoing book sale.

**SATURDAY/DEC. 6**  
**MVHS PTSA Holiday Market. 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.**  
 At Mount Vernon High School, Alexandria. Hosted by Mount Vernon High School PTSA, this event raises funds for student scholarships, teacher grants, and outreach programs supporting our MVHS community. They are also still accepting vendor applications — interested vendors can apply here: [forms.gle/wcoz2KBLRkfeYY4B7](https://forms.gle/wcoz2KBLRkfeYY4B7).

**SUNDAY/DEC. 7**  
**Athenaeum's Member Appreciation Holiday Party. 1-4 p.m.** At The Athenaeum, Alexandria. Join in the 2025 Athenaeum Member Appreciation gathering. This is a celebration for our members who help us keep the historic building in good condition, open to the



**Ice & Lights: The Winter Village at Cameron Run (Begins Nov. 15, Alexandria):** Ice & Lights provides a fun, outdoor family experience to explore new, dazzling light displays, take family pictures or selfies with a variety of festive scenes, enjoy a hot beverage and snack, and take a spin on the ice rink under the stars.

public free of charge, and filled with vibrant arts programs.

**SATURDAY/DEC. 13**  
**Coats, Caviar & Community! 4-8 p.m.** At 6343 South Kings Highway, Alexandria. Join in Coterie Grand's "The Grand Coterie Winter Soiree: Coats, Caviar, & Community" — a beautiful evening centered around generosity, connection, and meaningful community impact. Here's what to expect:  
 Donate a new or gently used coat or lightly used winter apparel to support The Next Steps Shelter & FACETS  
 Uplifting music and an inspiring community atmosphere  
 Food and beverages available for purchase — including a full bar, charcuterie boards, and a pasta bar  
 Zora Hughes Coffee on site  
 A caviar experience by founder Susan Smallwood for all coat donors  
 Terri Long bringing her signature positivity and vibrant energy  
 Press coverage capturing this impactful community moment  
 A fun photo booth experience for guests  
 Monetary contributions welcome if you're unable to attend  
 Guests can enjoy rejuvenating 10-minute on-site massage sessions

Must be 21+ to attend  
 Payment methods accepted: Cash & Card  
 RSVP is required — FREE tickets available on Eventbrite:  
<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/grand-coterie-winter-soiree-tickets-1935769270999?aff=oddtcreator>

**DEC. 13-14**  
**The Nutcracker Holiday Ballet. 12 p.m. and 5 p.m. each day.** At Rachel M. Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center, Alexandria. The Metropolitan School of the Arts (MSA) is thrilled to announce its highly anticipated holiday production of The Nutcracker, featuring special guest artists from one of the nation's leading companies, The Joffrey Ballet from Chicago. Joffrey Ballet's Yumi Kanazawa and Blake Kessler will grace the stage as the Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier, a highlight set to elevate the production for audiences. Their participation marks a significant collaboration, offering MSA students an inspiring opportunity to share the stage with world-class professionals. The cast also features dancers from the Manassas Ballet Theatre, including: Shaw Wu as the Nutcracker Prince, Masaya Kankeo dancing the Arabian Pas De Deux, and Kuan-Lun Li dancing the Mirliton Pas de Deux. Tickets are \$35 to \$37 at [www.metropolitanarts.org](http://www.metropolitanarts.org).



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**Published by**  
**Local Media Connection LLC**

**1606 King Street**  
**Alexandria, Virginia 22314**

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**NEWS DEPARTMENT:**  
**gazette@connectionnewspapers.com**

**Mary Kimm**

Editor and Publisher

mkimm@connectionnewspapers.com

**Jeanne Theismann**

jtheismann@connectionnewspapers.com

@TheismannMedia

**Mercia Hobson**

Staff Reporter

mhobson@connectionnewspapers.com

**Mike Salmon**

Contributing Writer

miksalmson6922@gmail.com

**Glenda Booth**

Contributing Writers

**ADVERTISING:**  
For advertising information  
**sales@connectionnewspapers.com**  
703-778-9431

**Debbie Funk**

Display Advertising/National Sales

703-778-9444

debfunk@connectionnewspapers.com

**David Griffin**

Marketing Assistant

703-778-9431

dgriffin@connectionnewspapers.com

**Classified & Employment  
Advertising**  
703-778-9431

**Publisher**

Jerry Vernon

703-549-0004

jvernon@connectionnewspapers.com

**Editor & Publisher**

Mary Kimm

mkimm@connectionnewspapers.com

@MaryKimm

**Production Manager:**

Geovani Flores

**CIRCULATION**

**Circulation Manager:**

Ann Oliver

circulation@connectionnewspapers.com

A Connection Newspaper





# Alexandria's Holiday Parades on Dec. 6

*The 54th Annual Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk Parade and the 25th Annual Alexandria Holiday Boat Parade of Lights return Saturday, December 6, 2025.*

**A**lexandria, VA – During Alexandria's Biggest Holiday Weekend, spanning December 5-7, celebrate the return of two of the region's top signature events, the 54th Annual Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk Parade in historic Old Town Alexandria from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and the 25th Annual Alexandria Holiday Boat Parade of Lights along the Potomac River shoreline at 5:30 p.m. with dockside activities from 2 to 8 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 6, 2025.

The Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk Parade is a celebration of Alexandria's founding in 1749 by Scottish merchants and its naming after Scotsman John Alexander who owned the land that became Alexandria. The 2025 parade kicks off at 11 a.m. and features more than 100 parade units, including dozens of Scottish clans dressed in colorful tartans, pipe and drum bands, terriers and hounds and community groups. This year's Grand Marshal is Alexandria Mayor Alyia Gaskins, and the Masters of Ceremonies are Julie Carey, the Northern Virginia bureau chief for NBC4, and Heather Had-dock, past president of the Scottish American Women's Society of Washington, D.C. The parade is produced by Visit Alexandria in partnership with Campagna Center and the City of Alexandria. Additional support is provided by Wegmans, Scottish Government USA and First Watch Strategies & Events. The parade is sponsored by Wegmans.

The Alexandria Holiday Boat Parade of Lights begins at 5:30 p.m. and will feature more than 50 brightly lit boats cruising along one mile of the Potomac River shoreline from Old Town North to Ford's Landing Park. From 2 to 8 p.m., parade-goers can enjoy dockside festivities at Waterfront Park, including a pop-up beer garden from Alexandria's award-winning Port City Brewing Company, food and beverage vendors and family-friendly activities. The parade is produced by Visit Alexandria in collaboration with the City of Alexandria, City Cruises – Alexandria and the Old Dominion Boat Club. The Holiday Boat Parade of Lights is sponsored by Amazon.

For more information on programming, parade routes, viewing locations, transportation considerations, FAQs and additional weekend happenings, please visit the parade webpages at [ALXScottishWalk.com](http://ALXScottishWalk.com) and [ALX-BoatParade.com](http://ALX-BoatParade.com).

**Alexandria Holiday Boat Parade of Lights from a previous year. This year, it's Dec. 6**



PHOTO BY MANGO MIKE ANDERSON

**Coming up: Del Ray Holiday Kick-Off Christmas tree and Menorah lighting 2025 is Sunday, Dec. 7 at 6 p.m. at the Pat Miller Neighborhood Square. Bring new, unwrapped toys for the Alexandria Sheriff Department's Operation Elf; and travel-size toiletries and non-perishable foods for Carpenter's Shelter.**



PHOTO BY JANET BARNETT

**Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk from a previous year. This year, it's Dec. 6**



## A Key Moment



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

So, this is what it feels like to be self-sufficient. I've rarely experienced a moment of pride like this. Why? Because if this "it" had to do with yours truly using his hands to solve a problem, the problem usually remained unsolved. As an adolescent, I remember my father having a toolbox in the house, but its purpose escaped me. As a result, I, nor my brother, Richard was groomed for home/car/computer repair. Typically, then and now, if I had a problem that involved using my hands, it pretty much meant using my fingers to make a call to a person or a service to do what I couldn't. But not last Sunday. I faced my problem with a can-do approach rarely seen in my problem-solving history. What was it I fixed? I replaced the battery in the key fob of my 2022 Audi Q3. A first in my 20-plus years of Audi ownership.

As with these many tasks (car, computer, household), I am unhelpful, shall we say. In addition, not only am I incompetent, but mostly I'm just not that interested. As the second son of Barry and Celia Lourie, renters until my father retired at age 70, I was not really exposed to any household/honey-do-type chores. My sole job was taking out the rubbish from under the kitchen sink and depositing it in the "rubbish pale" buried in the ground downstairs/outside near the side entrance to our second-floor home. Occasionally I had to take out the trash "canned up" behind the garage and drag it out to the front of the house for the weekly trash pick-up. That was pretty much it. If anything needed to be fixed, a call was made and arrangements were soon to follow. My primary pursuits were sports and chocolate. (Not lawn care either as we were renters and as such, it was not our responsibility.)

It wasn't until I was married at age 24 that my deficiencies really became apparent. It wasn't so much a problem for me as I had spent my entire life birth to wedding, not having and/or not being able to do anything constructive around the home, car and nowadays, the computer. However, it was much harder on my wife Dina. Her expectation was that as a man I had some intrinsic God-given abilities to be useful. It was a disappointment (I'm moderating her reaction) when she realized that I had no such abilities.

Having spent years showcasing how little I could do, this particular key-fob problem presented an opportunity. Moreover, on the face of it, changing a battery didn't seem insurmountable. In fact, when this key-fob issue arose previously (batteries do run out), I took the key-fob to the dealer, and they happily obliged my incompetence and changed the battery for me. However, not being a complete dunce, I did pay attention as the service person swapped out the battery on my key fob. I have to admit; even by my standards, the battery replacement didn't seem all that complicated. After all, I'm not a complete idiot, despite what some of our regular readers may feel, so I decided I'd give "it" a try.

First, I looked at the key fob to see what I could see. I saw nothing, as in any clues as to how I might solve this problem. I poked and prodded and nothing. Moreover, there was no indication that there was any hope for a future with my changing this battery without some kind of help. Vowing to move on, I asked myself: where might there be information about my car's key fob? And it hit me, just like I was a character on one of those old "Firesign Theatre" albums: the owner's manual. Ta da. Success. Not so fast. I couldn't follow the diagrams (though I could follow the table of contents). As has occurred many times before with me, following written how-to directions like this is next to impossible. Let me clarify, following directions/diagrams presented in this two-dimensional way is not next to impossible, it is absolutely/unequivocally impossible - for me. And as soon as I realized, what I was up against, I closed the owner's manual in disgust. Down but not yet out, I sat back in my driver's side seat and thought. Then it came to me: the internet. There are sites to show people how to do almost anything. Replacing a key-fob battery is child's play (except this child couldn't play). I got out of my car and walked into my home and turned right toward my home office. The one with the computer/internet. I sat down and cautiously typed in "How to change the battery in the key fob on a 2022 Audi Q3?" And there the headline popped up on my computer screen: "Changing the battery in a key fob ...." I clicked on the top entry and viola, a video began. The simple words of wisdom I heard from the host, while he actually, in front of my eyes, changed the battery gave me hope. Hope that one day I could change/replace the battery. And as it turned out, this was that day.

*Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.*



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