

THE CONNECTION

CENTRE VIEW ❖ Chantilly ❖ Great Falls ❖ Herndon ❖ McLean ❖ Oak Hill ❖ Oakton ❖ Reston ❖ Vienna

Looking for Something To Do with Others? Try Mahjong

PAGE 13

Cyndi Hoffman, owner of Ono Brewing Company in Chantilly, has helped build a growing Mahjong community that now draws hundreds of participants into classes and social play.

Westfield Summer Stage Presents 'Les Misérables'

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ENTERTAINMENT, PAGE 12 ❖ CLASSIFIEDS, PAGE 14

PHOTO COURTESY OF CYNDI HOFFMAN

JULY 1-15, 2026

ONLINE AT WWW.CONNECTIONNEWSPAPERS.COM

Det. Boyden Is Sully's Officer of the Quarter

Honored for his 'initiative and investigative depth.'

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Det. Thomas Boyden is the Sully District Police Station's Officer of the Quarter for January through March. He was feted at the May 13 meeting

of the station's Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC).

Det. Sgt. Rich Boaz, of the Criminal Investigations Division (CID), wrote the letter nominating Boyden for the award. In it, he explained why Boyden was worthy of receiving this honor.

Boyden began a temporary assignment with the Sully Criminal Investigations Division (CID) in late January. And, wrote Boaz, "He immediately demonstrated an exceptional level of investigative skill and professionalism. From the outset, he showed a natural ability to

analyze complex cases, integrate seamlessly into ongoing investigations, and contribute meaningfully to the unit's workload. His performance quickly distinguished him as a reliable and capable investigator, ultimately earning him a full-time position on the Sully CID team – an achievement that reflects the confidence placed in him by his peers and supervisor."

Shortly after joining the unit, Boyden began investigating a significant series of catalytic-converter thefts that had begun in November 2025. "The crimes consisted of numerous catalytic converters stolen primarily from Isuzu box trucks across the district, affecting multiple victims and resulting in losses totaling tens of thousands of dollars." SEE DET. BOYDEN, PAGE 8

LEGAL NOTICE

NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC OF AN APPLICATION BY COLUMBIA GAS OF VIRGINIA, INC. FOR AUTHORITY TO INCREASE RATES AND CHARGES AND TO REVISE THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLICABLE TO GAS SERVICE CASE NO. PUR-2026-00014

On May 14, 2026, Columbia Gas of Virginia, Inc. ("CVA" or "Company") completed the filing of an application ("Application") with the State Corporation Commission ("Commission"), pursuant to Chapter 10 of Title 56 of the Code of Virginia ("Code") and the Commission's Rules Governing Utility Rate Applications and Annual Informational Filings of Investor-Owned Gas Utilities, 20 VAC 5-205-5 *et seq.* The Company requests authority to increase its rates and charges as part of a multi-year rate plan ("MYRP"), with the first increase effective for services rendered on or after October 4, 2026, and the second increase effective for services rendered on or after October 4, 2027. CVA additionally seeks to revise the terms and conditions applicable to gas service. The Company asserts that based on roundtable discussions with Commission Staff ("Staff") regarding the consideration and benefits of MYRPs for natural gas companies, the Company is proposing an MYRP for the first time.

In its Application, CVA states that the proposed rates and charges are designed to increase the non-gas base revenues of CVA by approximately \$64.3 million for the rate year October 1, 2026 – September 30, 2027 ("Rate Year 1") and to create a further incremental revenue increase of \$14.6 million for the rate year October 1, 2027 – September 30, 2028 ("Rate Year 2") (collectively, "Rate Years"). CVA further asserts that approximately \$14.9 million of the revenue requirement for Rate Year 1 and \$14.5 million of the revenue requirement for Rate Year 2 are attributable to the recovery of costs associated with investments under the Company's Steps to Advance Virginia's Energy ("SAVE") Plan pursuant to Code § 56-603 *et seq.* (the "SAVE Act"). The Company states that, pursuant to the SAVE Act, it is proposing to include in base rates recovery of the costs associated with approximately \$116 million of net rate base SAVE investments as of September 30, 2026. The Company represents that it was last authorized to increase its rates and charges effective October 2024 in Case No. PUR-2024-00030 ("2024 Rate Case").

CVA asserts that the earnings test analysis of the Company's jurisdictional operations during the 12 months ending December 31, 2025, after limited accounting adjustments, shows a return on equity ("ROE") of 8.14%, which is below the authorized earnings test ROE of 9.75%. CVA represents that, in addition to these under-earnings, the increase in base rates proposed by CVA in this Application is driven primarily by the Company's ongoing capital investments to accommodate pipeline and facility safety and modernization, and to accommodate sustained demand for natural gas.

CVA further represents that since the 2024 Rate Case, the Company has continued to enhance pipeline safety and reliability through its safety management system approach by identifying, prioritizing, and reducing risks. The Company states that significant Distribution Integrity Management Plan ("DIMP") initiatives that are currently underway and are expected to continue in 2026 and through the Rate Years include, but are not limited to, damage prevention and both cross bore and unplanned exposure investigation and remediation. The Company requests approval of the annual amount of eligible safety activity costs of \$5.9 million that it maintains is necessary for the DIMP.

In its Application, the Company proposes an ROE of 10.95%, which it asserts falls within the proposed cost of equity range for CVA of 10.30% to 11.30%. CVA represents that its proposed rates would result in an increase to the average monthly bill of a residential customer using 5.1 dekatherms of approximately \$10.81, or 11.11%, over current rates for services rendered on or after October 4, 2026, and an increase of \$3.03, or 3.16%, per month for services rendered on or after October 4, 2027.

The Company also proposes modifications to its currently effective Rate Schedules, General Terms and Conditions, and Form of Service Agreements (collectively, "Tariff"). The Company states that the proposed modifications to the Tariff are to provide clarification and updates and correct for typographical errors. CVA requests that the Commission authorize the implementation of the rate and tariff modifications proposed in the Application, on an interim basis subject to refund, effective for services rendered on or after October 4, 2026, and the second increase effective for services rendered on or after October 4, 2027.

Interested persons are encouraged to review CVA's Application and supporting public documents in full for additional details.

TAKE NOTICE that the Commission may apportion revenues among customer classes and/or design rates in a manner differing from that shown in the Application and supporting documents and thus may adopt rates that differ from those appearing in the Company's Application and supporting documents.

The Commission entered an Order for Notice and Hearing in this proceeding that, among other things, scheduled a public hearing on CVA's Application. The Commission noted that the proposed revenue requirement, if approved, would result in an increase to customer bills. Pursuant to Code § 56-238, the Commission suspended CVA's proposed rates for a period of 150 days, the maximum allowed by law, and permitted CVA to implement the proposed rate increase and revisions to the Tariff on an interim basis, subject to refund with interest, for services rendered on or after October 11, 2026.

The Commission schedules a telephonic portion of the hearing for the receipt of testimony from public witnesses on the Application, as follows:

(a) The portion of the hearing for the receipt of testimony from public witnesses on the Application shall be convened telephonically at 10 a.m. on December 15, 2026.

(b) To promote fairness for all public witnesses, each witness will be allotted five minutes to provide testimony.

(c) On or before December 9, 2026, any person desiring to offer testimony as a public witness shall provide required contact information to the Commission. This information may be provided to the Commission: (i) by filling out a form on the Commission's website at scc.virginia.gov/case-information/webcasting; or (ii) by calling (804) 371-9141.

(d) This public witness hearing will be webcast at scc.virginia.gov/case-information/webcasting.

On December 15, 2026, at 10 a.m., or at the conclusion of the public witness portion of the hearing, whichever is later, in the Commission's second floor courtroom located in the Tyler Building, 1300 East Main Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219, the Hearing Examiner will convene a hearing to receive testimony and evidence related to the Application from the Company, any respondents, and the Staff.

To promote administrative efficiency and timely service of filings upon participants, the Commission has directed the electronic filing of testimony and pleadings, unless they contain confidential information, and required electronic service on parties to this proceeding.

An electronic copy of the public version of the Company's Application may be obtained by submitting a written request to counsel for the Company: Vishwa B. Link, Esq., McGuireWoods LLP, Gateway Plaza, 800 East Canal Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219, or vlink@mcguirewoods.com. Interested persons also may download unofficial copies of the public version of the Application and other documents filed in this case from the Commission's website: scc.virginia.gov/case-information.

On or before December 8, 2026, any interested person may submit comments on the Application by following the instructions found on the Commission's website: scc.virginia.gov/case-information/submit-public-comments. Those unable, as a practical matter, to submit comments electronically may file such comments by U.S. mail with the Clerk of the State Corporation Commission, c/o Document Control Center, P.O. Box 2118, Richmond, Virginia 23218-2118. All such comments shall refer to Case No. PUR-2026-00014.

On or before September 23, 2026, any person or entity wishing to participate as a respondent in this proceeding must do so by filing a notice of participation at scc.virginia.gov/clk/efiling. Those unable, as a practical matter, to file a notice of participation electronically may file such notice by U.S. mail to the Clerk of the Commission at the address listed above. Such notice of participation shall include the email addresses of such parties and their counsel. A copy of the notice of participation as a respondent also must be served electronically on counsel to the Company, any other respondents, and Staff. Pursuant to 5 VAC 5-20-80 B, *Participation as a respondent*, of the Commission's Rules of Practice, any notice of participation shall set forth: (i) a precise statement of the interest of the respondent; (ii) a statement of the specific action sought to the extent then known; and (iii) the factual and legal basis for the action. Any notice of participation filed by a person not represented by counsel shall also set forth why the filer's positions in this matter are not adequately represented by another party to this proceeding and cannot be expressed through written or oral public comments as provided for in this proceeding. Any organization, corporation, or government body participating as a respondent must be represented by counsel as required by 5 VAC 5-20-30, *Counsel*, of the Rules of Practice. All filings shall refer to Case No. PUR-2026-00014.

On or before October 14, 2026, each respondent may file with the Clerk of the Commission at scc.virginia.gov/clk/efiling any testimony and exhibits by which the respondent expects to establish its case. Any respondent unable, as a practical matter, to file testimony and exhibits electronically may file such by U.S. mail to the Clerk of the Commission at the address listed above. Each witness's testimony shall include a summary not to exceed one page. A copy of all testimony and exhibits shall be served electronically on the Company, any other respondents, and Staff. In all filings, respondents shall comply with the Commission's Rules of Practice, as modified herein, including, but not limited to: 5 VAC 5-20-140, *Filing and service*, and 5 VAC 5-20-240, *Prepared testimony and exhibits*. All filings shall refer to Case No. PUR-2026-00014.

Any documents filed in paper form with the Office of the Clerk of the Commission in this docket may use both sides of the paper. In all other respects, except as modified by the Commission's Order for Notice and Hearing, all filings shall comply fully with the requirements of 5 VAC 5-20-150, *Copies and format*, of the Commission's Rules of Practice.

The public version of the Company's Application, the Commission's Rules of Practice, the Order for Notice and Hearing, and other documents filed in this case may be viewed on the Commission's website at: scc.virginia.gov/case-information.

COLUMBIA GAS OF VIRGINIA, INC.

\$207B Virginia Budget with Landmark Data Center Tax

How a new tech industry tax shields local homeowners from school and transit hikes across Northern Virginia.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

Virginia's \$207 billion, two-year state budget automatically became law Monday after the General Assembly accepted all 14 of Gov. Abigail Spanberger's proposed amendments, locking in a final spending plan ahead of a Tuesday 11:59 p.m. deadline to avert a government shutdown.

Because lawmakers voted to adopt the governor's exact package of structural changes, the budget bypassed the need for a final executive signature. The tallies concluded a legislative process, with votes on the amendments ranging up to 23-16 in the Senate and 71-22 in the House of Delegates.

"Today, by finalizing our budget, Virginia is charting a path toward a stronger, more secure, and more affordable future for every family who calls our Commonwealth home," Spanberger said in a statement. "This budget reflects our shared commitment to strengthening Virginia schools, expanding economic opportunity, and addressing the affordability crisis created by reckless policies out of Washington — all while contending with President Trump's disastrous cuts to healthcare."

She added that with "historic investments in education, four percent raises for our teachers, and landmark funding to help families manage the rising cost of childcare, we are



PHOTO VIA FACEBOOK/
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger at an economic expansion event in Halifax County, Va., Monday, June 29. That same day, the commonwealth's \$207 billion biennium budget was enacted into law, featuring a first-of-its-kind statewide energy consumption tax on data centers projected to generate \$600 million in annual revenue.

making real strides to uplift every student, listen to parents, support educators, and prepare communities for long-term success."

The bipartisan votes concluded a months-long standoff within the General Assembly's Democratic majority over how to regulate the state's booming tech sector. Some lawmakers sought to eliminate existing tax breaks to force data centers to contribute more to state revenue; others expressed concern that aggressive taxation could drive the industry out of Virginia.

Lawmakers compromised by preserving the industry incentives while introducing

SEE \$207B VIRGINIA BUDGET, PAGE 8

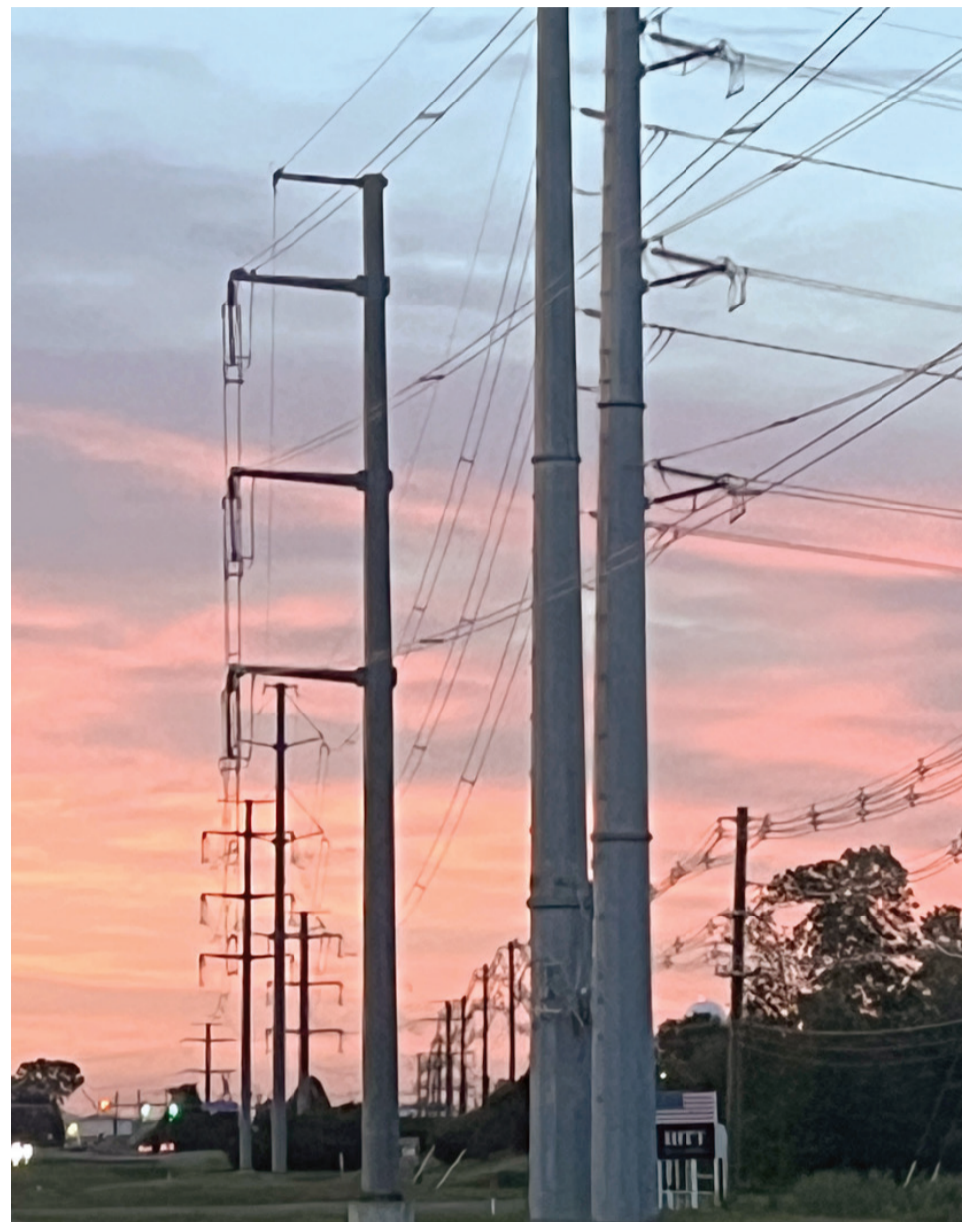


PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

High-voltage transmission lines stand outside a data center in Sterling, Va., Thursday, June 18, 2026. Under Virginia's newly enacted budget, a data center energy tax will leverage tech infrastructure to fund statewide teacher raises and transit, partially shielding Northern Virginia homeowners from local tax hikes.

Hyper-Local Infrastructure Protection Package

6 ways new budget impacts Northern Virginia.

The finalized state budget package includes six key budget provisions specifically designed to protect Northern Virginia's local infrastructure and shield suburban residents from rising regional expenses. Under the funding framework, three targeted provisions shift major utility infrastructure costs and regulatory enforcement actions onto tech industry data centers. The remaining three measures secure immediate funding mechanisms to stabilize

regional transit systems, support local public school budgets, and deliver direct household utility relief across Fairfax, Arlington and Alexandria.

High-Demand Ratepayer Grid Insulation

House Bill 1393 protections require the State Corporation Commission (SCC) to separate utility infrastructure costs, forcing data centers drawing 25 megawatts or more to foot the bill for their grid expansions rather than letting transmission fee costs spike residential bills. Senate Majority Leader Scott Surovell, D-34, said during the April reconvened session that there were "efforts afoot in the General Assembly ... to ensure that data centers are paying their fair share, as I think everyone

broadly agrees is necessary."

Environmental Sound Assessments and Local DEQ Noise Regulations

Environmental Sound Assessments and Local DEQ Noise Regulations command the Department of Environmental Quality, known as the DEQ, to establish strict acoustic baseline rules for cooling systems, providing a regulatory framework for residential subdivisions adjacent to commercial zoning (via HB 153 / SB 553). The provision mandates standardized noise tracking. Surovell highlighted during a February committee hearing why these

protections were fast-tracked: "The noise issues are some of the things we hear the most from people that live next to data centers."

Data Center Water Scarcity Mitigation and Closed-Loop Mandates

Data Center Water Scarcity Mitigation and Closed-Loop Mandates direct the DEQ to establish strict groundwater protection rules, requiring future data center developments to use closed-loop air

cooling or 100 percent recycled stormwater rather than depleting local municipal water reserves. The provision establishes a formal review timeline to designate "cooling water scarcity areas" across the state, a measure heavily pushed by inner-Northern Virginia representatives to prevent industrial water consumption from compromising localized utility infrastructure.

WMATA Operating Lifeline

The final budget package secures \$153 million to fully fund Virginia's share of the WMATA regional operating subsidy, preventing service cuts or fare hikes across

"The noise issues are some of the things we hear the most from people that live next to data centers."

— Sen. Scott Surovell

SEE HYPER-LOCAL, PAGE 8

Broad Relief for Virginia Families Coming July 1

From rent, paychecks, and medical bills to boosted school funding, here's how the new budget could impact everyday costs.

By MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

A wide-ranging slate of new state programs to fill gaps in housing, workforce, healthcare, and education for Virginia families took effect July 1.

From rent, paychecks, and medical bills to increased school funding, the new state budget addresses everyday costs and residents' pocketbooks through four key areas of newly enacted provisions — reforms that are vital to the Northern Virginia communities of Fairfax County, Arlington County, and the City of Alexandria.

"Today, by finalizing our budget, Virginia is charting a path toward a stronger, more secure, and more affordable future for every family who calls our Commonwealth home," said Gov. Abigail Spanberger in a statement issued June 29, highlighting how the finalized budget targets kitchen-table costs. "We are investing more than \$100 million to make housing more affordable, lower energy costs, and make sure every Virginian can build a stable future without being crushed by rising costs."

The implementation follows the General Assembly's final adoption of the governor's fiscal amendments on June 29, enacting the commonwealth's comprehensive \$207 billion spending plan for the 2026–2028 biennium. Introduced during the 2026 legislative session by Del. Luke E. Torian (D-Prince William), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, the measures — packaged as House Bill 30 — directly address cost-of-living strains.

Speaking from the House Appropriations Committee room in Richmond four months earlier on Feb. 22, Torian underscored the underlying philosophy of the legislative package. "This budget is not just about filling gaps," Torian said. "At its core, this budget is about affordability — and about whether Virginia is doing everything it can to help families not just survive, but build stable, secure lives."

1. Expanded Renter Protections and Housing Preservation

The Extended Eviction Grace Period (HB 15 / SB 48), championed by Sen. Aaron Rouse (D-Virginia Beach) and Del. Phil Hernandez (D-Norfolk), applies to all Virginia tenants. The Virginia Legislative Information System (LIS) notes this update "provides tenants with a longer period to rectify nonpayment before a landlord can initiate eviction proceedings." The grace period expands to 14 days from five days.

The Virginia Eviction Reduction Program Expansion (HB 527 / SB 628) is backed by Del. Adele McClure (D-Arlington) and Sen. Mamie Locke (D-Hampton). Locke noted that the Eviction Reduction Program establishes a permanent, data-driven framework,

stating during its passage that the measure ensures Virginia is "moving away from a reactionary posture on housing instability and toward a sustainable, proven prevention infrastructure."

The Local Housing Authority Empowerments legislation (SB 4 / HB 867) was introduced by Del. Elizabeth Bennett-Parker (D-Alexandria) and Del. Rae Cousins (D-Richmond). According to the Virginia Housing Alliance, these updates focus on preserving buildings and expanding zoning options to scale up affordable inventory, rather than administering individual cash benefits.

2. Stronger Wage Protections and Labor Measures

The Pay Transparency & Salary History Ban (HB 636 / SB 215) was introduced by former Del. Michelle Maldonado (D-Manassas) and Sen. Jennifer B. Boysko (D-Fairfax). Gov. Abigail Spanberger said the law "will ensure that employees are offered the pay they deserve while promoting greater transparency in the application process."

The Minimum Wage Path (HB 1 / SB 1), patroned by Del. Jeion Ward (D-Hampton) and Sen. L. Louise Lucas (D-Portsmouth), codifies the current \$12.77 baseline and schedules incremental increases, hitting \$13.75 on Jan. 1, 2027, and \$15.00 by Jan. 1, 2028.

The Wage Theft Safeguards (HB 238), introduced by Del. Dolores McQuinn (D-Richmond), ensures workers are protected. The Virginia Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI) investigates claims for all workers, making it a crime for an employer to threaten to report a worker to immigration authorities or withhold earned pay.

3. Healthcare Affordability and Consumer Mandates

The Pharmacy Benefit Manager Crackdown (HB 625 / SB 161) and Prior Authorization Limits (HB 736) are led by Del. Rozia Henson (D-Prince William), Sen. Russet Perry (D-Loudoun), and former Del. Michelle Maldonado (D-Manassas). Enrolled individuals in commercial or employer-sponsored plans automatically receive these baseline benefits. Gov. Abigail Spanberger said, "These bills are a significant step forward to make sure that when your family needs care, you can get it."

4. Boosted K-12 Public Education Funding
Local School Division Support and English Language Learner (ELL) initiatives receive funding through the state budget (HB 30). Public school divisions are legally mandated to provide a free K-12 public education to every child residing within their district boundaries, regardless of immigration status.

School divisions are prohibited from inquiring about immigration status during enrollment, thereby ensuring immediate legal rights to ELL instruction, in accordance with policy guidance from the National Immigra-



our site

Eviction Process

SCREEN CAPTURE VIA FAIRFAX COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE WEBSITE

A screen capture from the Fairfax County government website displays an updated warning regarding the local eviction process. Effective July 1, 2026, House Bill 15 replaces Virginia's standard five-day nonpayment notice with a mandatory 14-day grace period for renters across the commonwealth.



SCREEN CAPTURE VIA WIKIPEDIA

Alexandria City High School serves a student body in which nearly 40% of students require English Language Learner (ELL) support. Under Virginia's newly enacted 2026 state budget (HB 30), a new infusion of funding takes effect on July 1 to expand support for local school divisions and instructional programming.



SCREEN CAPTURE VIA ZILLOW

A rental listing shows the Crystal Flats apartment building on Saturday, June 27. New tenant protection and eviction laws passed during the 2026 Virginia General Assembly session take effect July 1.

tion Law Center and the Oyez Project. This impact is felt statewide, including in Alexandria City Public Schools, a system where

the division reports that students come from 118 countries and 37.5% to 38% of the student body requires English Learner support.

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HERNDON POLICE DEPARTMENT VIA FACEBOOK

The Herndon Police Department posted on Facebook that a weapon, described as a Norco MAK-90 Sporter, a Chinese semi-automatic AK-47 variant, was seized along with two 30-round magazines containing a total of 51 rounds of ammunition. Officers responded to a restaurant in the 100 block of Elden Street around 2:30 a.m. Saturday, June 6.

Judicial Standoff: Virginia Gun Law

Virginia judge's preliminary injunction halts state's new restrictions on semi-automatic firearms days before they were set to take effect.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

Lancaster County Circuit Judge John Martin issued a preliminary injunction on Thursday, June 25, blocking a law that would ban the sale and manufacturing of certain semi-automatic firearms and large-capacity magazines. Because of the ruling, the weapon ban does not take effect as scheduled on July 1.

The legislation made it a Class 1 misdemeanor to import, sell, manufacture, pur-

chase, or transfer certain semi-automatic firearms — often referred to as assault weapons — and high-capacity magazines holding more than 10 to 15 rounds.

Sen. Saddam Azlan Salim, D-Fairfax, and Del. Dan Helmer, D-Fairfax, introduced identical bills, Senate Bill 749 and House Bill 217, which the General Assembly passed and Gov. Abigail Spanberger signed into law. Supporters say the restrictions comply with the Virginia Constitution, while opponents challenge their constitutionality.

BULLETIN BOARD

Submit civic/community announcements at ConnectionNewspapers.com/Calendar. Photos and artwork welcome. Deadline is Thursday at noon, at least two weeks before the event. Or via email calendar@connectionnewspapers.com.

FREE INDEPENDENCE DAY LYFT RIDES

WRAP, a local nonprofit organization, announced that free safe Lyft rides will be offered to would-be drunk drivers throughout the Washington-metropolitan area during this weekend's Independence Day celebrations.

Offered by the nonprofit Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP),

the 2026 Independence Day SoberRide program will be in operation beginning at 4:00 p.m. Saturday, July 4th (Independence Day) and operates until 4:00 a.m. on Sunday, July 5th as a way to keep local roads safe from impaired drivers during this high-risk holiday.

During this 12-hour period, area residents ages 21 and older celebrating with alcohol may download the Lyft app to their phones then enter the SoberRide code in the app's 'Payment' tab (under the 'Add Lyft Pass' option) to receive their no-cost (up to \$15) safe transportation home. WRAP's 2026 Independence Day SoberRide® promo code will be posted at 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 4th on www.SoberRide.com.

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COMMUNITY NEWS AT A GLANCE



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION VIA X

The Virginia Department of Transportation and Transurban marked the opening of the 495 Express Lanes Extension's Bicycle and Pedestrian Trail with a "4.95K" fun run, a distance chosen as a nod to I-495. The new shared-use path expands recreational and active transportation options in the McLean region. The project completes a critical piece for non-drivers and "demonstrates VDOT's commitment to delivering multimodal travel solutions that move more people – not just vehicles – through our busy travel corridors, and aligns with Fairfax County's long-term trail improvement plans," said Michelle Shropshire, VDOT Northern Virginia deputy district engineer.

Ribbon-Cutting Opens 495 Express Lanes Bicycle and Pedestrian Trail in McLean



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION VIA X

McLean's new parallel 495 trail officially opened between Lewinsville Road and Live Oak Drive on June 27 with a fun run. The shared-use path is isolated from highway traffic by noise walls and new Beltway crossings and "is a tremendous asset for Fairfax County, providing safe and accessible connections for walkers, runners, cyclists and families while strengthening our regional trail network," said Jeff McKay, chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors.



OFFICE OF SUPERVISOR WALTER ALCORN VIA FACEBOOK

Arts Herndon, Herndon PRIDE Celebrate Community, Creativity and Inclusion

Jo Ormesher, far left, CEO and president of Arts Herndon, joins community members and elected officials, including Fairfax County School Board member Kyle McDaniel, third from left, Fairfax County Supervisor Walter Alcorn, center, State Sen. Jennifer B. Boysko, right of Alcorn, and U.S. Rep. James Walkinshaw, second from right, at the 2026 Herndon PrideFEST in Herndon, Saturday, June 27, 2026. Following the annual event, hosted by Arts Herndon and Herndon PRIDE, Alcorn noted on social media that "Herndon is at its best when we celebrate our diversity and ensure everyone feels welcome and included!"



FAIRFAX COUNTY FIRE AND RESCUE DEPARTMENT VIA INSTAGRAM

Virginia Task Force 1 Urban Search and Rescue with Fairfax County Fire and Rescue in Venezuela

Deployed to Venezuela on June 26, members of the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department, Virginia Task Force 1 (VA-TF1/USA-01), work to remove a woman from a collapsed building following two catastrophic, back-to-back earthquakes, magnitudes 7.2 and 7.5, that struck northern Venezuela late Wednesday, June 24. The U.S. Department of State activated the elite Urban Search and Rescue team.

'When You Hold Your Own Child, Remember Elizabeth'

Two-year sentence for drunk crash that killed Centreville teen.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Centreville's Liz Chong was just 16 – with her whole life before her – when a drunk driver crashed into her car last year and killed her. If not, she would have graduated with her Chantilly High classmates, June 3, and she and her family would be eagerly looking forward to her future.

Instead, two weeks later, her loved ones sat in a courtroom while the person responsible for her death was sentenced to eight more months in jail. Before that happened, Herndon resident Carlos Daniel Parada Hernandez, now 24, expressed his deepest remorse for ending her life.

But nothing stood out more than the anguished, heartrending sobs bursting from Chong's mother as the case ended. Because, as she'd earlier told the court, it's still incredibly difficult for her to go through the motions of daily life, knowing her eldest daughter is dead.

Indeed, at the outset of the June 18 proceedings in Fairfax County Circuit Court, she took the stand and spoke directly to Parada Hernandez: "Carlos, it's been a year and four months since you took our daughter's life, and our lives have never been the same. Many times, I think I'm still in denial, because it's too painful to accept that she's gone from this earth. I often ask why, and I agonize over her death, but I still have no answer and may never get one.

"Elizabeth was my first baby and the child most like me; so many of her thoughts and feelings were like my own. Raising children is not easy – you may discover that one day when you have children of your own. Although there were difficult moments, Elizabeth brought me joy, far more often than not. While I did not get to spend as much time with her as I would have wanted in this life, I look forward to the day I will see her again [in heaven].

"Forgiveness is not a word I can use right now, but I do hope and pray you never drink and drive again. When you have your own family, remember ours. When you hold your own child, please remember Elizabeth. I will pray for you, your parents and your future family and ask that God will transform your life.

"Despite that we don't want to get out of bed, don't want to meet and talk to other people – don't feel like living anymore – my husband and I will move forward and live our lives as best we can for the two girls we have here now. As you live

"I hope one day, you, too, will be in heaven where you can meet Elizabeth and ask for her forgiveness."

— Liz Chong, mother of crash victim

your life, when things are difficult, I hope you remember us and that, despite our pain, we choose to keep going. I hope one day, you, too, will be in heaven where you can meet Elizabeth and ask for her forgiveness."

The tragedy occurred Feb. 27, 2025, shortly before 10:30 p.m., on a curvy, hilly and dark section of Pleasant Valley Road near Braddock Road in Centreville. Afterward, Parada Hernandez told police he'd veered over the double-yellow line and struck Chong's vehicle head-on. He also admitted to drinking two shots of Jameson Irish whiskey at Hooter's restaurant in Chantilly, 30 minutes before the crash.

Heading home after work, he was driving a 2023 Toyota Corolla northbound on Pleasant Valley while Chong was driving southbound in a 2013 Toyota Camry. Fairfax County police initially charged Parada Hernandez with driving while intoxicated (DUI). But after Chong died, some 90 minutes later, the charge was upgraded to DUI involuntary manslaughter.

Parada Hernandez has been in jail without bond since that night. Following several case continuances, he pleaded guilty March 31 before Judge Michelle Kaminsky, who also sentenced him. After the mother's testimony June 18, defense attorney Mark Dycio spoke on his client's behalf.

"These cases are difficult for everyone involved," he said. "From the earliest stages, Carlos has accepted responsibility. He didn't seek bond, accepted the consequences of his actions, cooperated with law enforcement, and acknowledged his culpability in causing a devastating and irreversible loss.

"He's devoted himself to becoming a better person than the one who made those choices that brought us to this tragedy. During

the almost 16 months he's been incarcerated, he's used his time productively and completed numerous rehabilitative, educational and recovery-focused programs.

"Nothing will change what brought him here today, but the STAR program required Carlos to confront the role alcohol played in his life and [its] devastating consequences. There's an agreed, two-year cap with the commonwealth on the sentence he'll receive. But with his acceptance of responsibility, and remorse, the low-end of the [state] sentencing guidelines now recommends no incarceration. So we'd ask Your Honor to consider giving him time served."

However, Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Chris Keegan asked the judge to impose the agreed-upon two years. "Across this county, the past few weeks, families have been celebrating their children's graduations," he said. "But the Chong family is unable to do that because of decisions made by the defendant. The commonwealth applauds [his] efforts since then to better himself, but the facts remain. At the time his blood was drawn [after the crash], his BAC [blood-alcohol level] was .2 – double the legal limit and then some.

"While waiting for food at Hooters, he'd taken between two and three shots of Jameson – hard liquor. The defendant's a bartender, and he knows better. He's aware of the effects it would have on an individual – particularly on one driving. When the crash occurred, the defendant admitted he was going an estimated 10 mph over the speed limit – another conscious decision he was aware of, with a prior reckless-driving conviction.

"That decision, plus the alcohol in his system, caused him to veer and lose control – resulting in the crash that caused

Liz's death. Two years' incarceration for the life of a young juvenile who had her whole life ahead of her is appropriate."

Next, Parada Hernandez stood and addressed the victim's family. Crying the whole time, he said, "I wish I could say the correct words to show how much I care about the pain and damage I caused you. But they'll never erase what I've done or the hole I've left in your family. You don't deserve to suffer this way

for my negligence. You deserve to have your daughter in your arms, and I'm so sorry I took that away from you. I'll never forgive myself for the loss of her life."

Speaking to the deceased teen, he said, "I took away your future that was waiting to be filled with so many experiences. I'm filled with anguish and self-hatred for taking you away from your family who did nothing but love you. I wish for your peace and solace, and I wish for your family to heal. I'm profoundly sorry for all the distress I caused them. You deserve to be here, instead of me."

Then focusing on the judge, Parada Hernandez said, "I take full responsibility for my actions and express my deepest remorse. A young woman lost her life – a daughter, a sister, a loved one with dreams and goals – because of my reckless decisions. I think about the memories she had yet to make, and the fear and pain she suffered in her final moments, and it breaks my heart. I'll carry that for the rest of my life.

"I now realize the impact my alcoholism had on my life. I can't take back the suffering I caused, but I can dedicate myself to never causing anyone else such pain again. I'll work toward becoming a more responsible person and want to help others deal with their addiction and avoid making the same mistakes I made. Every day, I'm reminded that my choices resulted in a tragedy that can never be undone. But I hope to live the rest of my life in a manner that respects the memory of the victim and shows that I'm committed to change."

Judge Kaminsky then said she was inclined to accept the plea agreement. Acknowledging Parada Hernandez's acceptance of responsibility and his statement in court, she said she also considered the vic-

tim-impact statement written by one of Liz Chong's sisters, the mother's testimony, the probation officer's pre-sentencing report, plus the letters she'd received from both sides.

loss suffered by Elizabeth's family and friends. The evidence and statements provided describe her as a kind and compassionate young woman who brightened the days of those around her.

"She brought joy to her mother; she was a daughter, sister and friend and a source of strength for her family. She had dreams of serving others – of becoming a doctor or nurse or serving in the Marine Corps. And sadly, those dreams will never be realized. Nothing this court can do today can bring her back or repair that void left by her passing, and I'm sorry for that. A life has been lost, and that weighs heavily on this court.

"I've also considered the defendant's history and his conduct since this incident. He's been described by those who know him as a compassionate and loving friend – someone who's provided care and support for his mother." The judge also noted the programs Parada Hernandez took in jail, plus his accountability and desire to change and grow.

"I believe he feels the gravity of what he did and the harm that resulted," said Kaminsky. "Two lives were changed forever – one ended and one altered beyond recognition. The court must impose a sentence that reflects the seriousness of the offense and provides accountability and consequence. At the same time, the court recognizes the defendant's efforts toward rehabilitation and the potential for a productive future.

"Mr. Parada Hernandez, you are not defined solely by the worst moment in your life. This tragedy will always be a part of your story, but it does not have to be the conclusion of it. You can move forward in a way that honors Elizabeth's life. You can still contribute

positively to your community and to society." The judge then sentenced him to seven years' incarceration, with all but two years suspended, and placed him on three years' active proba-

tion. He must also undergo substance-abuse and mental-health evaluation and follow any treatment recommended.

In addition, Parada Hernandez must remain drug- and alcohol-free and eventually enroll in and comply with all terms of the Virginia Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program (ASAP). His driver's license was revoked, and he's now serving the remaining eight months of his sentence.

Key highlights of the proposed FY2027/2028 budget include:

- Makes Virginia more affordable, more secure, and more prepared for the future.
- Maintains a fiscally responsible, structurally balanced budget in both years while preserving strong reserves.
- Delivers nearly \$2 billion in new education funding — the largest investment in public education in Virginia history.
- Invests \$577 million in childcare and early childhood education to help working families and strengthen Virginia's workforce.
- Provides 4% raises for teachers and school support staff and 3.5% raises for state employees in each year of the biennium.
- Continues Virginia's path to a \$15 minimum wage, increasing wages to \$13.75 in 2027 and \$15 in 2028, while investing \$47.7 million to raise wages for state employees, constitutional officers, and home healthcare workers.
- Funds implementation of Paid Sick Leave and Paid Family and Medical Leave, delivering long-overdue protections for Virginia workers.
- Invests \$92 million in affordable housing, homelessness prevention, and eviction prevention programs.
- Includes \$150 million to lower health insurance premiums and nearly \$1 billion to protect Virginians from federal funding cuts and economic uncertainty.
- Invests \$20 million to eradicate sickle cell disease.
- Establishes a Data Center Energy Consumption Fee expected to generate up to \$1.2 billion over the biennium, helping protect ratepayers and ensure the industry contributes its fair share.
- Makes major investments in public safety, including Virginia State Police, violence prevention initiatives, victim services, and first responders.
- Establishes a regulated adult-use cannabis market that prioritizes public safety, consumer protection, and accountability.

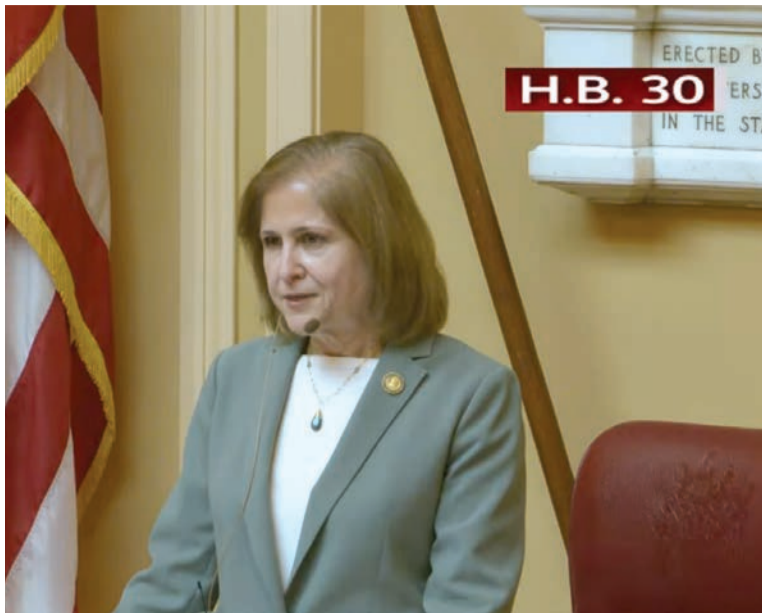


PHOTO VIA SENATE OF VIRGINIA

Virginia Lt. Gov. Ghazala Hashmi presides over the Senate chamber as the General Assembly reconvenes in Richmond, Va., Monday, June 29. Senators met to consider and approve Governor Spanberger's budget amendments, cementing a \$207 billion biennium package featuring a historic tech industry data center tax.

HANDOUT VIA VIRGINIA HOUSE DEMOCRATS

A graphic from the Virginia House Democratic Caucus outlines key highlights of the newly enacted 2026-2028 biennium state budget Monday, June 29, 2026.

\$207B Virginia Budget with Landmark Data Center Tax

FROM PAGE 3

a new energy consumption tax of 1.1 cents per kilowatt-hour on data centers. The tax is projected to generate up to \$600 million annually, totaling \$1.2 billion over the two-year budget cycle, to fund core state services.

"This institutes a statewide energy consumption tax on data cen-

ters to ensure this industry pays its fair share and does not drive up costs for Virginia families," Spanberger said prior to the vote.

While the new data center tax revenue will be largely generated by tech facilities concentrated in Loudoun and Prince William counties, the final budget redirects a portion of those funds to

help jurisdictions absorb the costs of regional growth. The revenue is slated in part to help close transit deficits in Arlington County and the City of Alexandria, while addressing budget shortfalls for Fairfax County Public Schools and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Beyond local transit and schools,

the final spending plan funds broader statewide initiatives, including residential utility bill credits and a new \$2 million annual grant program to provide life-saving cancer screenings for Virginia firefighters.

While the bulk of that new revenue serves the wider state general fund, top regional lawmakers

emphasized the significance of the technological compromise.

"I think we went through a lot to get here, but at the end of the day, data centers are going to contribute about \$1.2 billion over the biennium to help fund our government," said Senate Majority Leader Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax, who represents a portion of Fairfax County.

Hyper-Local Infrastructure Protection Package

FROM PAGE 3

the Orange, Silver, Blue, and Yellow lines. Championed by House Finance Chair Del. Vivian Watts, this funding matches the target recommended by the SJ 28 Joint Subcommittee on Public Transit to protect daily core commuters. Rather than establishing a permanent new tax stream, the legislative compromise prevents a looming fiscal challenge through an ongo-

ing funding model that combines targeted state appropriations, existing regional transportation allocations, and temporary legislative waivers on WMATA's statutory 3% operating growth cap.

Local Sales Tax Authority for School Construction

Expanded Local Sales Tax Authority for School Construction grants jurisdictions the authority

to place a voter referendum on the ballot for a 1 percent retail sales tax dedicated exclusively to school modernization, bypassing traditional property tax hikes. The provision incorporates Senate Bill 66, championed by Northern Virginia Senators Jeremy McPike, D-Prince William; Jennifer Boysko, D-Fairfax; and Barbara Favola, D-Arlington. Co-sponsor Favola noted during the legislative session that

with the average age of Virginia school buildings hitting 50 years, homeowners can no longer bear infrastructure burdens alone.

Utility Meter Ratepayer Carbon Rebates

The Utility Meter Ratepayer Carbon Rebates provision mandates nearly half of all state carbon auction funds to be distributed directly back onto residential and

small-business electric bills to mitigate regional capacity costs. The mechanism allocates 45 percent of Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative proceeds back to consumers.

House Appropriations Committee Chair Luke Torian, D-Prince William, spoke about the compromise following the final budget votes. "When the two bodies get together and have meaningful conversations, we can make some very good decisions."

Det. Boyden Is Sully's Officer of the Quarter

FROM PAGE 2

lars, over several months," wrote Boaz.

"Boyden quickly immersed himself in the complexities of the case, working collaboratively with fellow CID detectives, reviewing surveillance, writing cell-tower-data search warrants, and analyzing investigative leads. His critical recognition of a white panel van connected to a previous traffic stop he conducted proved to be the turning point that allowed detectives to identify and ultimately charge two suspects.

"Boyden's coordination extended across jurisdictions as he worked alongside neighboring agencies, crime analysts

and ultimately the Sully NPU [Neighborhood Patrol Unit] team, whose assistance he recruited to safely execute the arrests of the suspects. His investigative efforts also uncovered potential links between the suspects and broader criminal activity — including copper-wire thefts in Charles County, Md., and possible connections to federal investigations involving the FBI.

"This level of initiative and investigative depth exemplifies outstanding police work. Det. Boyden's contributions to this case clearly demonstrate that he is highly deserving of the Officer of the Quarter Award."

PHOTO COURTESY OF MPO SCOTT RICHARDS

From left, Capt. Anthony Stancampiano, assistant station commander; CAC Chair Karen Bilak; Det. Thomas Boyden and Major Jane Russell, station commander.



Fairfax County Food Insecurity Near Historic High

StarKist, Cornerstones and nonprofits mobilize as local cost of living outpaces wages.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

More than one in four households in Fairfax County continue to face food insecurity, hovering just under a historic peak of 27% as a mismatch between cost of living, local wages and inflation squeezes individuals and families.

In a report released in the fall of 2025 by the Capital Area Food Bank, the county's food insecurity rate is a staggering 26%. The data debunks the myth that hunger only strikes the unemployed, revealing that 77% of food-insecure households in the region have at least one working adult. Furthermore, 41% of households impacted by federal spending and employment cuts are already struggling to secure food. Prices are now 21% higher than they were during the pandemic five years ago, and real wages in Greater Washington are down 12.1%, compared to a 2.7% decline nationally.

Against this economic backdrop, local organizations scrambled to provide a lifeline. On June 18, StarKist, Feed the Children, Cornerstones and Floris United Methodist Church hosted the fifth annual Resource Rally in Herndon, an effort specifically designed to bolster food supplies for five regional pan-



Volunteers from Starkist, headquartered in Reston, distribute resource kits designed to support a family of four with up to 20 meals during the fifth annual Resource Rally in Herndon held at Floris United Methodist Church.

try programs and nonprofits along the Dulles Corridor.

"Federal layoffs, inflation, and rising costs for groceries, gas and transportation are leading more families to turn to neighborhood pantries and feeding programs for support," said Shannon Steene, CEO of Cornerstones. "Today, our community responded with remarkable compassion and generosity, rallying in a shared commitment to ensure

no family faces food insecurity alone."

During the event, volunteers distributed 400 Feed the Children family kits, providing more than 8,300 meals to local households. Each kit contained StarKist products, 25-pound boxes of shelf-stable food, 15-pound boxes of household essentials and personal care items, and boxes of Avon products.

The economic pressure driving families to these lines has been building for years. Since

May 2020, the overall cost of living in the Washington area has surged by 21%, while regional wages have ticked up by a mere 6%, according to the report.

"Addressing food insecurity requires collaboration and a shared commitment to supporting families," said Michael Merritt Jr., vice president and head of marketing and innovation at StarKist, which is headquartered in Reston Town Center.



From left: Andy Lacher, board chair for Cornerstones; Shannon Steene, CEO of Cornerstones; Bill Gray, director of spiritual formation for Floris United Methodist Church; and Debbie Cali, director of serve and connections ministries for Floris United Methodist Church.



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COMMUNITY NEWS AT A GLANCE



OFFICE OF U.S. REP. JAMES WALKINSHAW VIA FACEBOOK

Town of Vienna Hosts Naturalization Ceremony

U.S. Rep. James Walkinshaw, representing Virginia's 11th Congressional District, congratulates the newest U.S. citizens after a naturalization ceremony hosted by the Town of Vienna on Saturday, June 27. The naturalization ceremony serves as one of the main events during Liberty Amendments Month running from June 13 – July 13. This month commemorates the legacy of the 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which granted citizenship, equality, and voting rights to all Americans, regardless of race, gender or culture.



MCLEAN COMMUNITY CENTER VIA FACEBOOK

McLean Community Center Celebrates Independence Day

From the VA250 Mobile Museum, field games, stilt walkers, children's parade, fireworks and more, the McLean Community is at 'The Center of it all,' bringing the joy of the 250 Independence Day Celebration to young and old

Ribbon Cutting of 'Summer Symphony' Mural in Herndon

From left, Herndon Woman's Club Arts and Culture Committee member Peggy Lanier; artist Patricia Eprem; committee co-chair Lori Rayburn; Herndon Mayor Keven LeBlanc; and Town Council Member César del Aguila celebrate the unveiling of Eprem's new mural, "Summer Symphony," on June 15, in the Town of Herndon. Rayburn and LeBlanc cut the ceremonial ribbon for the artwork, which is located on the back of Mile 20. The Herndon Woman's Club Arts and Culture Committee and James Building owners Steve and Wanda Mitchell donated funds for the mural. The piece is part of an ongoing public art initiative by the club, and town leaders praised the artwork for brightening the commercial core and expanding Herndon's public art footprint. Town Manager Dan Hoffman and other supporters also gathered to attend the official unveiling. Eprem said she had "so much fun" creating the interactive mural, where passersby can imagine "holding the curtain from the side" and opening the scenes themselves. LeBlanc noted that the project helps the town "continue to extend the public art scene that we have in Herndon."



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION



JIMMY'S OLD TOWN TAVERN VIA FACEBOOK

It's a "It's a Muralcle!"

Memory Lane Mural Ribbon-Cutting at Jimmy's Old Town Tavern

Artist Meghan Bogue, center in the hat, joins community members and project organizers for a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the completion of the "Memory Lane Mural" outside Jimmy's Old Town Tavern in Herndon, Friday, June 26. This image, captured from a video posted to Facebook by Shutter and Compass, highlights a fundraiser benefiting Making Everything Good (MEG), a local volunteer-run non-profit founded by first responders and veterans providing crisis assistance, mental health support, peer resources and community outreach programs to first responders, military members, and veterans (and their families), survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. View the reel at <https://www.facebook.com/reel/864713412918263>

Westfield Summer Stage presents 'Les Misérables.'

A powerful story of hope, forgiveness and redemption.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Each year, Westfield Summer Stage attracts some of the most highly acclaimed students from throughout the area to perform an exceptional show. And this July is one of its most challenging ever, "Les Misérables."

The curtain rises at Westfield High on Friday-Saturday, July 10-11, at 7 p.m.; Sunday, July 12, at 2 p.m.; and Friday-Saturday, July 17-18, at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$15 in advance at www.westfieldtheatre.com, or \$17 at the door.

There's a cast and crew of more than 70, plus a 16-piece orchestra. And since so many of the actors are seasoned theater students, Director Christine Maxted said, "It's been a huge treat to work with this group. The audience will be in awe of their vocal talents and professionalism. It's hard to believe most of them are still in high school."

Set in 19th-century France, it's the story of Jean Valjean, who's served 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. Thanks to a compassionate bishop, he's released from prison and reinvents himself, becoming a wealthy businessman and mayor focused on redeeming himself and helping others.

He also adopts Cosette, an orphan whose destitute single mother, Fantine, was forced into prostitution after losing her factory job. She needs the money so she can send it to the Thénardiens, corrupt innkeepers holding her daughter captive. Meanwhile, Javert, a rigid and uncompromising police inspector, doesn't believe Valjean has reformed and relentlessly pursues him for decades.

Later, as Cosette grows up, she falls in love with Marius, a student revolutionary who fights in the 1832 Paris Uprising. He's severely wounded during the violent battle, and Valjean risks his life to save him.

A dramatic musical, the show's "overarching messages are about hope, forgiveness and redemption," said Maxted. "People will connect with various characters and see [similarities to] their own life experiences and dreams. I believe in the story and the opportunities it provides for the performers. It's not often done at schools because of its level of difficulty. I directed it with high-schoolers 12

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Standing in front of the students' barricade against the French soldiers are (from left) Rebecca Zanotti, Sienna Nguyen, Colin Stoffer and Tony Hillary.

years ago, and it made me change from being a music teacher to a theater teacher."

Scenes take place at a prison, the bishop's home, a factory, hospital, student barricade, wedding, bar, café and gardens. Actors will be dressed as soldiers, convicts, beggars, wedding guests, bishops, nuns, well-educated students turned revolutionaries, bar patrons and the wealthy elite.

Delighted to direct this show, Maxted said, "It's a unique opportunity to work with students from other schools, especially having seen their Cappies performances. The audience will be inspired by our well-trained and committed actors – it's quality theater."

Portraying Valjean is 2026 West Springfield High grad Tony Hillary. "He starts out as downtrodden, hopeless, and bitter at the government and the world," said Hillary. "But a bishop takes him under his wing and shows him love and compassion. So he becomes driven to become a better person and turn his life around."

"When he begins taking care of Cosette – first, as a child and then as a teen – he's protective of her and you see his caring side. Yet, even though he becomes softer and more compassionate, he still has an edge and isn't afraid to stand up to Javert and fight for what's right."

The hardest part of playing Valjean, said Hillary, is "trying to portray his toughness while not being off-putting to the audience and being someone they could relate to and root for. But I like all his interactions with the other characters – not just acting, but also musically. So it's fun to explore the different, recurring, musical themes in the show."

Hillary's favorite song is "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables" because "it's character-driven and intimate. Marius expresses his most raw emotions, despair and regret. It starts softly and builds to a huge crescendo."

He also said audiences will be able to easily follow the storyline.

"Mrs. Maxted made sure we understood the story, characters and their context," he explained. "And when the actors understand the material, it's easier for audiences to understand what's going on. So it informs our acting and makes our performances more believable."

Westfield High senior Rebecca Zanotti plays Fantine. "She's sacrificed a lot for Cosette," said Zanotti. "She goes from being a naïve girl to a young mother who gets pregnant out of wedlock, which was taboo then in France. She's in the working class and doesn't have the time or money to raise a child. But she's hardworking and clings to hope as long as she can. She's a Madonna figure and the epitome of selfless motherhood."

"It's a nuanced role to play because she goes through lots of emotional events and hardships," continued Zanotti. "[Author] Victor Hugo's writing of her character is very realistic. Fantine's pushed around by circumstances she can't control, and you see why she has to make the choices she does."

Zanotti's favorite number is "Epilogue," the show's finale. "I love how it incorporates the melodies of the previous songs in the show and beautifully concludes everything," she said. "It wraps up the story's messages in a pretty bow. And toward the end, the whole ensemble comes together and does really nice harmonies."

Calling this show "classic musical theater," Zanotti said many musical-theater tropes come from "Les Misérables," and it also tells people about historical events happening then. "Audiences will be able to tell how much our cast likes each other," she added. "And it's nice to have students from different schools blending so well together. We all love singing and performing onstage, so our camaraderie enhances the overall production."

Centreville High senior Sienna Nguyen portrays Eponine. "She's a hopeless romantic in love with Marius, who's in love with Cosette," said Nguyen. "Eponine is a



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LILLI MCNERNEY

Posing in character are (standing, from left) Tony Hillary and Colin Stoffer and (sitting, from left) Sienna Nguyen and Rebecca Zanotti.

poor street urchin whose parents con people out of their money. She helps them but is sensitive about what they're doing and doesn't like helping them do it. But because of her upbringing, she's streetwise. She's a good person and helps Marius locate Cosette. She's selfless because she wants to make him happy, even at her own expense."

Enjoying her part, Nguyen said, "Eponine is an iconic role in musical theater because she has a lower range but can belt out a song, as well. And I like honing in on my strength because that's how I sing, too. And because she wants Marius for herself, she's conflicted, so it's interesting portraying her duality because, inside, she's breaking and getting crushed."

"Stars" is Nguyen's favorite song. "Javert sings it because he, too, is torn between following the law and having mercy toward Valjean," she said. "This song explores that, lowers Javert's defenses and allows the audience to see his vulnerable side." He's played by Loic Razanakoto of Washington Liberty High.

"Les Mis' is popular because it remains relevant to this day due to its themes of standing up to injustices, fighting for what's right, and love persisting in tough times," said Nguyen. "Having actors from all over Northern Virginia allows us to showcase the great theater scene we have here. And audiences will see everybody's hard work come to fruition."

Colin Stoffer, a Chantilly High senior, plays Babet, a student at a Paris university, plus a prisoner and part of the ensemble. As Ba-

bet, "He's a thief and part of the Thénardiens' gang that tries to rob Valjean and is mean to Eponine," said Stoffer. "He's only motivated by money, doesn't care what the students are fighting for and pick-pockets everyone – even the poor. He almost gets into trouble, but escapes."

"He's fun to play, especially acting with the four other gang members, because we're the story's comic relief. We're not the story's true evil, just a symptom of it. Our motivations are different from everyone else, and we have individual quirks. We also carry ourselves differently from each other because we're just focused on our own selves and goals, not always the gang's goals."

Stoffer especially likes the act-one closing number, "One Day More," sung by the whole ensemble. "I like hearing the whole cast sing together because I think it's the show's strongest moment and the epitome of what everyone's fighting for," he said. "They're saying, 'This is the last day we're putting up with being put down by the ruling class, and a new age for the lower class is dawning.' This show really mirrors what's going on in America today."

He said audiences will enjoy the ensemble's singing and costumes. "Our vocals will shock, touch and impact them with our wall of sound and our messages," said Stoffer. "And our costumes are accurate to the time period. The costume designers worked hard on them, and they'll transport audiences to that era."

ENTERTAINMENT

FAIRFAX COUNTY

FARMERS MARKETS RETURN

Operated by the Fairfax County Park Authority, these popular markets connect residents with local farmers and food producers at 10 convenient locations. Shop seasonal fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy, baked goods and artisanal products, while enjoying a vibrant, open-air market experience.

WEDNESDAYS

McCutcheon/Mount Vernon: April 22-Nov. 25, 8 a.m. - noon. Sherwood Library, 2501 Sherwood Hall Lane

Oakmont: May 6-Oct. 28, 8 a.m.-noon. Oakmont Recreation Center, 3200 Jermantown Road
Wakefield: May 6-Oct. 28, 2-6 p.m. Wakefield Park, 8100 Braddock Road

THURSDAYS

Annandale: May 7-Oct. 29, 8 a.m. - noon. Mason District Park, 6621 Columbia Pike

Herndon: May 7-Oct. 29, 8 a.m. - noon. Old Town Herndon, 700 Block of Lynn Street by the Red Caboose

FRIDAYS

McLean: May 1-Oct. 30, 8 a.m.-noon. Lewinsville Park, 1659 Chain Bridge Road

Kingstowne: May 1-Oct. 23, 3-7 p.m. In the Giant parking lot, 5870 Kingstowne Towne Center

SATURDAYS

Burke: Apr. 18-Nov. 21, 8 a.m.-noon. VRE parking Lot, 5671 Roberts Parkway

Reston: Apr. 25-Nov. 21, 8 a.m.-noon. Lake Anne Village Center, 1609-A Washington Plaza

SUNDAYS

Lorton: May 3-Nov. 22, 8 a.m.-noon. VRE parking lot, 8990 Lorton Station Blvd.

SUMMER CONCERT & ENTERTAINMENT SERIES

Reston Community Center (RCC) transforms Reston's plazas and parks into community gathering places with its acclaimed Summer Concert & Entertainment Series, running from just before Memorial Day through September. All are invited to enjoy free live music and family-friendly entertainment set in some of Reston's most beloved outdoor spaces as we head into the heart of summer.

Wednesdays: Midweek Music on the Lake

Sunset Concerts | Schedule

Lake Anne Plaza

Wednesdays, June 24 – August 26

7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Fan favorites return to Lake Anne Plaza for Sunset Concerts on Wednesday evenings, from 7:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. so audiences can enjoy slightly cooler temperatures and golden hour views by the lake.

Thursdays: Fresh Finds at Halley Rise

Take a Break Concert Series | Schedule

Halley Rise (2025 Fulton Place, Reston)

Thursdays, June 25 – August 27

7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

In its third year, Take a Break Concert Series

spotlights fresh talent in one of Reston's newest neighborhoods. This laid-back, open space offers plenty of room to dance or play and a new 7:30 p.m. start time lets the heat ease off a bit.

Summerbration Fab Fridays | Schedule

Reston Station

Fridays, May 29 – September 25

7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Then head to Reston Station for the always packed Summerbration Fab Fridays, now starting at 7:30 p.m. so you can stop by Happy Hour with Darden first. These high energy cover bands turn the plaza into a dance party with favorite hits all night long.

Saturdays: Playtime in the Park

Family Fun Entertainment Series | Schedule

Reston Town Square Park

Saturdays, July 4 – August 22

10:00 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.

Saturday mornings bring the Family Fun Entertainment Series to Reston Town Square Park, a summer highlight with puppetry, magic, music, juggling and more! Kids can dance, giggle and get the wiggles out, with plenty of fun for adults too.

Sundays: Classics Under the Sky

Sunday Art in the Park with Shenandoah Conservatory | Schedule

Reston Town Square Park

Sundays, June 21 – August 30

12 ❖ THE CONNECTION ❖ JULY 1-14, 2026



Vienna's Independence Day Celebration takes place on Thursday, July 2, 2026 at Yeonas Park in Vienna.



Be sure to catch Still Surfin' – A Tribute to the Beach Boys on Thursday, July 2, 2026 at McLean Central Park Amphitheatre in McLean.

7:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Spend Sunday evening at Sunday Art in the Park with Shenandoah Conservatory in Reston Town Square Park, where rising classical musicians offer concert quality performances that are friendly, fun and accessible to all ages.

JUNE 18-AUGUST 27

Summer Concert Series. 7-8 p.m. At National Museum of the Marine Corps, 1775 Semper Fidelis Way, Triangle. The Marine Corps Heritage Foundation invites the public to enjoy the 2026 Summer Concert Series at the National Museum of the Marine Corps. From June through August, audiences can experience six free, family-friendly evenings featuring premier U.S. military ensembles representing the Marine Corps, Navy, Army, and Air Force. Concerts are held on the Museum's entry plaza. Guests are encouraged to bring lawn chairs or picnic blankets. Admission and parking are free and open to the public. The Museum, Tun Tavern, and Museum Store will remain open until 6:45 p.m. on concert evenings. Visit the website: <https://www.marineheritage.org/>

Concert Schedule:

❖ July 2, 7 p.m. – U.S. Marine Drum and Bugle Corps & U.S. Army Old

Guard Fife and Drum Corps

❖ July 30, 7 p.m. – U.S. Air Force Band Airmen of Note

❖ August 20, 7 p.m. – U.S. Navy Concert Band

❖ August 27, 7 p.m. – "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band

SUMMER ON THE GREEN SERIES

Music lovers of all ages are encouraged to grab a lawn chair or picnic blanket and head to the Vienna Town Green for free summer concerts at 6:30 p.m. beginning in June. The Vienna Town Green is located at 144 Maple Ave., E, Vienna. The Summer on the Green series features a wide range of musical genres, including rock, blues, country, reggae, jazz, and children's music performed by local and regional musical acts.

2026 Schedule

July 10: The Cassaday Concoction - Rock, Blues, Soul, Reggae

July 24: Fat Chance – Rock

July 31: US Army Blues Swamp Romp - Jazz and Folk of Louisiana

Aug. 7: The Maiden Band - Classic Rock 70s to present

Aug. 14: US Navy Band Commodores - Jazz

For more information, visit www.viennava.gov/summeronthegreen.

FREE CONCERTS IN THE PARK

At Burke Lake Park, Burke. 7 p.m. every

Wednesday night from June 24 to Aug. 19 at Burke Lake Park for an incredible line-up of bands, food trucks, 2 Silos beer, and Ice Cream. The atmosphere is informal, so bring a picnic blanket, lawn chairs, and relax with friends and family.

SCHEDULE

July 1 – ChumpChange. Food Trucks: Ned's New England Deck, Paisanos and Bruster's of Alexandria Ice Cream

July 8 – The Magic Trio. Food Trucks: Roaming Coyote, Paisanos and Ello Gelato

July 15 – SoHo Down. Food Trucks: Kaziville (hot dogs), Cousins Maine Lobster Paisanos and Bruster's of Alexandria

July 22 – JunkFood Band. Food Trucks: Roaming Coyote, Paisanos and Ello Gelato

July 29 – The Skip Castro Band. Food Trucks: Kaziville (hot dogs), Ned's New England Deck and Bruster's of Alexandria

Aug. 5. The English Channel. Food Trucks: BABU-JI, Cousins Maine Lobster and Ello Gelato

Aug. 12 – The Randy Thompson Band. Food Trucks: BABU-JI, Roaming Coyote and Bruster's of Alexandria

Aug. 19 – The Soul Shakers. Food Trucks: Kaziville (hot dogs), Ned's New England Deck and Bruster's of Alexandria

JUNE 22 TO JULY 19

Connections That Bind, Art & Friendship. At

JoAnn Rose Gallery, 1609-A Washington Plaza North, Reston. Closing reception July 19, 2-4 p.m. Sandra Dovberg is a longtime member of Reston Art Gallery and Studios. She is downsizing and offering a rare opportunity to acquire original work to grace your walls at reduced prices of 50% off label prices. Her paintings include a variety of mediums & collage materials emphasizing her constant awareness of color, line, shape, texture, memory and academic training. There will be seven other artists displaying: Pat Macintyre, Marthe McGrath, Cindy Grisdela, Jenn Duncan, Julia Malakoff, Rosemarie Forsythe and Doug Fuller.

CLIFTON CELEBRATES

250 YEARS OF AMERICA!

Clifton is proud to join communities across the country in celebrating America's 250th anniversary! The CBA has decided to honor this moment with 2 new events in addition to the parade and picnic.

2hours50minutes of Live Entertainment | July 3rd at Harris Park at 5pm

To mark this historic milestone, we are hosting a special showcase at Harris Town Park featuring 2hours50minutes of local talent. Sign up to participate:

<https://forms.gle/j3u4r3oKRdnXm7Xt5>

Whether you are a musician, a poet, an actor, or a storyteller, we want you to help us bring the spirit of our nation's journey to life. Your performance doesn't have to be "patriotic" in the traditional sense—we are looking for anything inspired by the themes of history, community, and the American spirit. There will be a trivia contest as part of the entertainment. KIDS are encouraged to participate!!!

Parade & Picnic | July 4th at 4pm

Begin planning your float/marching group/band now. No registration in advance. Parade begins on Dell Ave at 4pm. The parade ends at Ayre Square with the pledge of allegiance. Picnic at Harris Park to follow. CBA will provide BBQ, beer, water station (bring your bottle to refill). There will be a dunk tank and lots of activities: watermelon eating contest, tug-o-war, egg toss. Please bring a side dish to share.

Clifton's 250th Book Club | July 5th at the barn at 1pm

Clifton's book clubs are invited to come together to discuss We the Women: The Hidden Heroes Who Shaped America. Individuals who are not in book clubs can also attend – look for others who want to form a new book club?

JULY 1-31

Summer of the Arts. At City of Fairfax Regional Library, 10360 North Fairfax Street, Fair-

WWW.CONNECTIONNEWSPAPERS.COM

ENTERTAINMENT

fax. Pathway Homes' 13th Annual Summer of the Arts Exhibit showcases the creativity of its clients who are living with a variety of mental illnesses and co-occurring disorders. From July 1-31, artwork submitted by formerly homeless individuals recovering from serious mental illnesses will be displayed at the City of Fairfax Library. Art and creativity are an integral part of recovery for Pathway Homes' residents. Pathway is a mental health non-profit. Artist Reception: July 28, 5:30-7:00 p.m. (free).

JULY 1 TO AUG. 2

"America at 250" Art Exhibit. At McLean Art Gallery, a new topical exhibition from the McLean Art Society celebrating our country's milestone birthday. Featured are 180 new works from 45 local artists, including paintings in oil, acrylic, pastel, watercolor and mixed media; drawings; photography; sculpture and works in wood, glass, ceramics and jewelry. Opening Reception on Friday, July 3 from 5-7 p.m. The Gallery is located in the Chesterbrook Shopping Center, 6224B Old Dominion Drive, McLean (near Starbucks) with plenty of free parking. Get your free tickets at [250.eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com)

SUMMER CONCERT SERIES

Thursdays June 18 to July 30, 7 p.m. At McLean Central Park Amphitheatre. The MCC famous, free concerts are back at the McLean Central Park Amphitheatre! Grab your family and friends and enjoy live music every Thursday evening from June 18 to July 30 at 7 p.m.

Thursday, July 2, 7 p.m.

Happy 250th, America!

Still Surfin'—A Tribute to the Beach Boys

Thursday, July 9, 7 p.m.

Oh, I Love that Song!

One Hit Wonderers

Thursday, July 16, 7 p.m.

Go-Go legend!

EU (Experience Unlimited)

Thursday, July 23, 7 p.m.

"Stylin', Living it up in the city!"

Uptown

Thursday, July 30, 7 p.m.

"Beastie Boys meet Sesame Street,"

Koo Koo

SOUNDS OF SUMMER: LOCAL CONCERTS IN FAIRFAX COUNTY

Create your own summer soundtrack with the Summer Entertainment Series. Attend free, live concerts taking place at locations all around Fairfax through August. Award-winning entertainers take the stage in this series that is set to enrich the community and promote togetherness in Fairfax County. This season consists of 124 performances at 20 venues. Mark your calendar for some incredible performances including:

Wednesday, July 1, 7 p.m.: Rocksteady Project, Franconia District Park

Thursday, July 2, 5:30 p.m.: U.S. 257th Army Band, Fairfax County Government Center

Friday, July 10, 7:30 p.m.: Gayle Harrod Band, Lake Accotink Park

Wednesday, July 15, 7:00 p.m.: SoHo Down, Burke Lake Park

Saturday, July 18, 7:30 p.m.: No BS! Brass Band, Workhouse Arts Center

Friday, July 24, 7:30 p.m.: City of Falls Church Concert Band, Mason District Park

Saturday, July 25, 7:30 p.m.: Lover: The Unofficial Eras Tour, Arrowbrook Centre Park

Saturday, Aug. 8, 7:30 p.m.: Roberta Lea and the First Take Band, Arrowbrook Centre Park

Wednesday, Aug. 12, 7 p.m.: Junkyard Band, Franconia District Park

Thursday, Aug. 13, 7 p.m.: Brookhouse, Frying Pan Farm Park

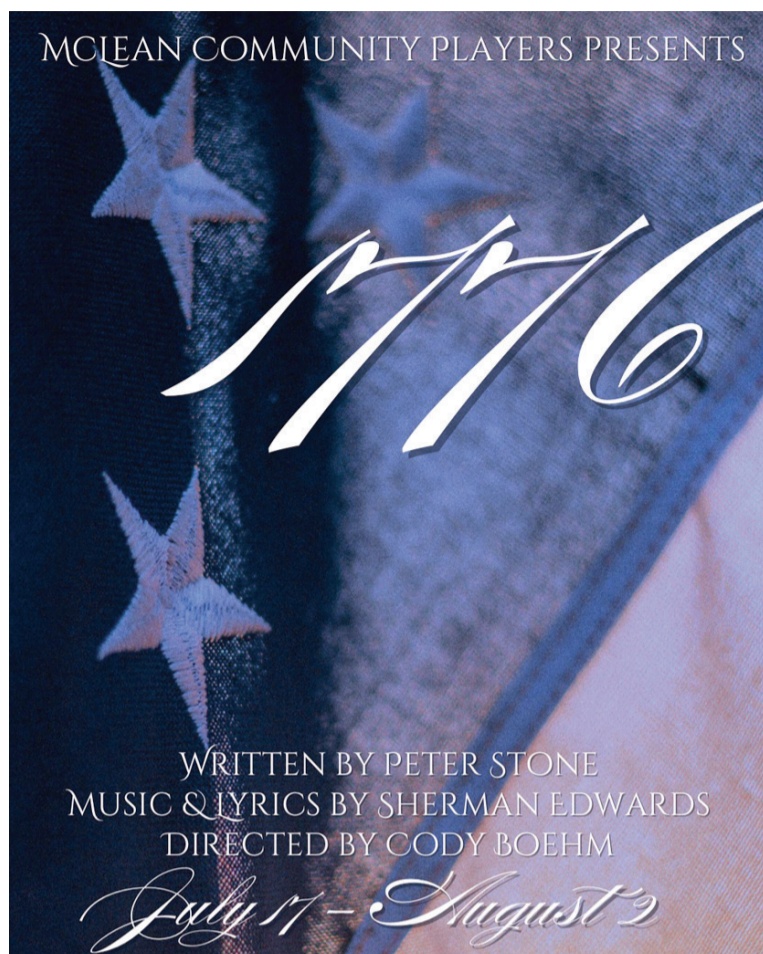
Friday, Aug. 14, 7:30 p.m.: Pat McGee, Mason District Park

Thursday, Aug. 20, 7:30 p.m.: Alexandria A Cappella Collective, Nottoway Park

THURSDAY/JULY 2

Vienna Independence Day Celebration. 6 to 10 p.m. At Yeonas Park, 1319 Ross Drive, SW,

www.CONNECTIONNEWSPAPERS.COM



McLean Community Players present "1776" from July 17 to Aug. 2, 2026 at the McLean Community Center's Alden Theater.

Vienna. Features an exciting evening of live entertainment, food trucks, and a firework display. The stage will feature a strong lineup of entertainment, including Taiko Japanese Drums for kids, a small ensemble from the Vienna Community Band, and Latin pop-rock from Ocho de Bastos. Visit www.viennava.gov/fireworks.

FRIDAY/JULY 3

Stars, Stripes, Splashes (pool party). 1 - 4 p.m. At Hunters Woods Pool, Reston.

Free for RA Members & RecPass holders; \$20 for Non RecPass holders (free for kids under 3)

SATURDAY/JULY 4

July 4 Reading. 1-3 p.m. At Historic Pohick Episcopal Church, 9301 Richmond Hwy., Lorton. As part of the America 250th Anniversary, the community is invited on Saturday, July 4 to a free public reading of the Declaration of Independence at Historic Pohick Church by historical re-enactor, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Costa, portraying the Rev. Mr. Lee Massey, the Rector of Pohick Church in 1776. The reading will take place at 1:00 PM, with a reception and free docent tours of the colonial church of George Washington and George Mason following the presentation. Visit the website at www.pohick.org.

SATURDAY/JULY 4

Herndon Fourth of July Celebration. At Bready Park, 814 Ferndale Ave., Herndon. This year's celebration takes on special significance as the Town of Herndon joins communities across the nation in commemorating America's 250th birthday. Residents and visitors are invited to gather for an evening of live entertainment, family-friendly activities, food, and one of the region's most anticipated fireworks displays. The celebration begins at 6:30 p.m. with family games, hands-on crafts for children, live music, and a variety of food and refreshments available for purchase. The evening will conclude with a spectacular fireworks display beginning at approximately 9:30 p.m.

Event Highlights:

- ❖ Family games and activities
- ❖ Kids crafts and hands-on fun
- ❖ Live music (performer to be announced)

- ❖ Food and refreshments available for purchase
- ❖ Fireworks display at 9:30 p.m.

WEDNESDAY/JULY 8

Battle Marks. 12-1 p.m. At the National Museum of the United States Army, 1775 Liberty Drive, Fort Belvoir. Explore the realities of wartime life and service through the lens of Soldier graffiti. Discover how their artwork offers an unfiltered window into the realities of wartime life and reflects broader themes of identity, resistance, and remembrance. Visit <https://www.thenmusa.org/public-programs/history-talks/>

THURSDAY JULY 9

Angela Easterling & Brandon Turner in Concert. 7:30-8:30 p.m. At Nottoway Park, 9537 Courthouse Road, Vienna. Free.

TUESDAY/JULY 14

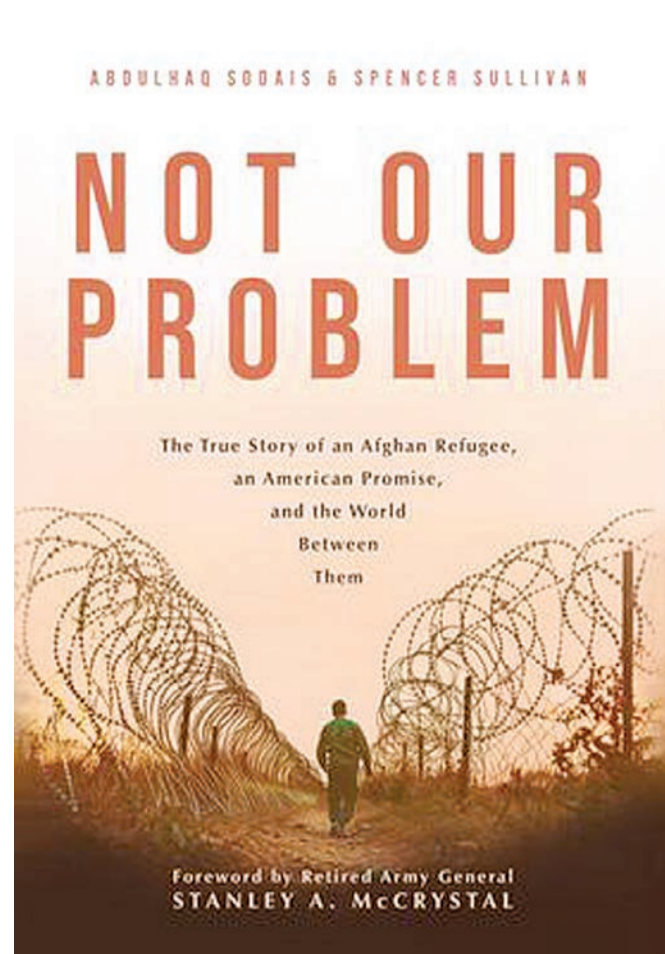
Remembering the Revolution. 12-1 p.m. At National Museum of the U.S. Army, 1775 Liberty Drive, Fort Belvoir. Arlington National Cemetery, the National Army Museum, and the National Park Service will come together to explore the many legacies of the American Revolution at Arlington National Cemetery. Visit the website: <https://www.thenmusa.org/public-programs/battle-briefs/>

"1776" BY MCCLEAN COMMUNITY PLAYERS

Celebrate America's 250th birthday with McLean Community Players' Tony Award-winning musical "1776," a witty, inspiring and surprisingly human portrait of the passionate debates, rivalries and courage behind the founding of a nation. Weekends of July 17-August 2; Fri-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Matinees Sun., 2 p.m. At McLean Community Center's Alden Theatre, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. \$25/\$20 Seniors/\$18 McLean district residents

SUNDAY/JULY 19

Film Club. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. At Cinema Arts Theatre, 9650-14 Main Street, Fairfax. Film Club debuts new independent and foreign films that have screened at Cannes, Sundance, etc. The titles are secret until you



Connections That Bind, Art & Friendship can be seen June 22 to July 19, 2026 at JoAnn Rose Gallery in Reston.

arrive. Tickets available at the Box Office for \$19. Film Club occurs monthly on August 16, September 20, October 4, and October 18. Website: <https://www.cinemaartstheatre.com/film-club-2026/>

SATURDAY/JULY 25

Summer Slugfest. 12-3 p.m. At E.C. Lawrence Park, 5000 Stonecroft Blvd., Chantilly. Ellanor C. Lawrence Park Friends is proud to present the inaugural Summer Slugfest, a charity softball game uniting alumni from two legendary local youth sports organizations for an afternoon of friendly competition, community spirit, and charitable impact. The six-inning game features alumni players (ages 21 and over) from the Chantilly Youth Association (CYA) and the Southwestern Youth Association (SYA) competing for the 2026 Slugfest Cup. The free public event will feature: ❖ An alumni softball game between former CYA and SYA players ❖ Food trucks featuring gourmet hot dogs and cool summer treats ❖ Giveaways, merchandise, and a 50/50 raffle ❖ Family fun and community engagement ❖ Live on-field broadcast from CYA's The Sideline podcast

TUESDAY/AUG. 18

Trivia Nights in Tun Tavern. 6-9 p.m. At National Museum of the Marine Corps, 1775 Semper Fidelis Way, Triangle. Think you have what it takes to claim the top spot? Assemble your strongest team of up to six and join us for Trivia Nights at Tun Tavern at the National Museum of the Marine Corps! Compete in pop culture, geography, and general knowledge trivia, with a fun bonus round to keep things interesting. Event is free and open to the public. Visit the website: <https://www.marineheritage.org/eventscalendar>

SENIOR MOVIE DAY

At Reston Town Center Movie Theater. 10 a.m. Reston Association presents Senior Movie Day, sponsored by Friends of Reston. Join us on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Coffee, donuts and OJ are provided, and door prizes are distributed prior to the movie. Free. Ages 55+
July 22: After the Hunt
Aug. 26: A Little Prayer (rated R)

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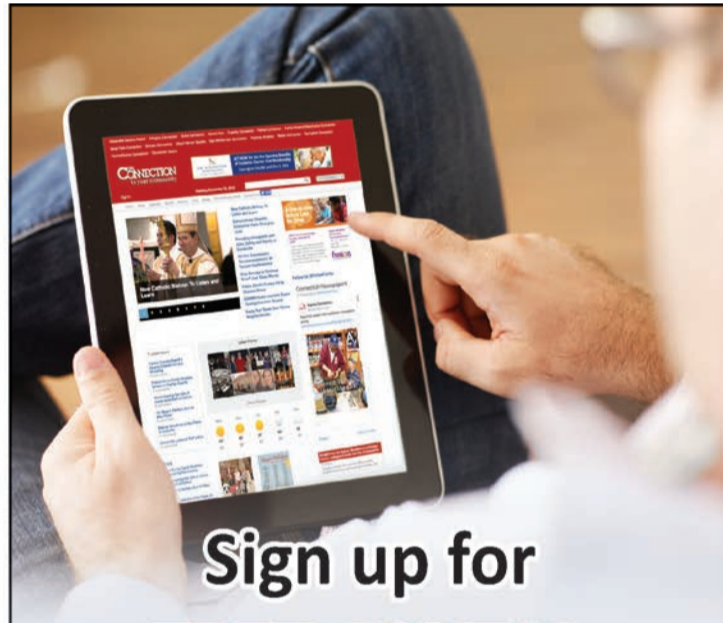
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PHOTOS COURTESY CYNDI HOFFMAN

Cyndi Hoffman leads a Mahjong 101 class at Ono Brewing Company, where beginners learn the fundamentals of the game in a structured, social setting.



Cyndi Hoffman, owner of Ono Brewing Company in Chantilly, has helped build a growing Mahjong community that now draws hundreds of participants into classes and social play.

Mahjong Revival Builds Community at Ono Brewing

A former biology teacher creates an unexpected hub for the fast-growing game of Mahjong, drawing hundreds of players into classes, leagues, and social play.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE CONNECTION

On most nights at Ono Brewing Company in Chantilly, the usual brewery soundtrack of clinking glasses and conversation is now joined by something less expected: the soft shuffle of tiles and the quiet concentration of players trying to complete a winning hand in Mahjong. The centuries-old game has suddenly become one of Northern Virginia's fastest-growing social pastimes.

Cyndi Hoffman, owner of Ono Brewing Company, says the surge reflects a broader cultural shift that began after the pandemic, when people emerged from isolation looking for in-person connection.

"In the last five years, people were seeking opportunities to connect and do things with humans again," she said. "And now people are just tired of scrolling endlessly on phones and looking for things to do and Mahjong is it."

THE GAME'S RECENT RISE has been fueled by social media and renewed visibility, but Hoffman says the real driver is simpler: people want something to do together.

"It's super popular right now," she said. "It's hit the mainstream."

Mahjong at Ono did not begin as a planned expansion. It started, Hoffman said, as a way to fill a familiar seasonal lull at the brewery in January.

Two beginner classes launched in late January and sold out almost immediately. More followed, along with social play nights and structured leagues. Demand kept climbing.

"It's gotten so popular I've had to hire additional instructors just to meet demand,"

Hoffman said. "We're teaching about 45 people just this week."

What began as an experiment has quickly become a defining feature of the business.

Mahjong has also transformed the brewery experience itself. Players can sip a beer, grab BBQ, and settle into an evening that blends strategy with something closer to a social club than a classroom. Hoffman calls it "socialize and strategize."

The introductory class runs about two to two-and-a-half hours, enough time to learn the basics, not everything.

After that, students are encouraged to simply play.

"The game is very complex," Hoffman said. "You can spend months or years mastering it. But after one class, you can go play socially."

Participants can then move into intermediate and advanced classes — or simply return for social nights and league play. One recent four-week Wednesday night league for 32 players sold out.

The appeal, Hoffman said, is that Mahjong is both structured and endlessly expandable. It rewards repetition, strategy, and the subtle art of paying attention to what everyone else is doing — without making it look like you are.

"I had only heard about Chinese mahjong from movies, but when I saw an American mahjong class, I jumped at the chance and quickly fell in love with it," said Shirley Wirwati. "I enjoy the challenge, learning the strategy, meeting new people, and the competitive energy of league play."

"My gift to my husband this Valentine's Day was Mahjong 101 at Ono Brewery," said Jacque Whang. "It's relaxed, social, and doesn't feel intimidating especially if you're

just starting out."

Aimee Besler said she had long been curious about Mahjong but never had a way to learn until now.

"I jumped at the opportunity," she said.

She now plays regularly and helps organize meetups. "It's pretty amazing how people come together to share something cerebral, but also social."

After 18 years teaching high school biology, Hoffman approaches Mahjong instruction the same way she once approached scientific concepts: by breaking complex concepts into manageable steps.

"You have to chunk it out," she said. "Just like mitosis or photosynthesis."

Even instructor training follows a structured format to ensure consistency across classes.

Hoffman encourages new players to give the game time before deciding whether it's for them.

"It took me five exposures before I really felt like, 'oh, I get it,'" she said. "I encourage people to give it at least three."

Patience, she added, is essential. The game tends to reward those willing to sit with uncertainty long enough for it to make sense.

Hoffman envisions Mahjong at Ono growing beyond classes and social nights into more structured competitive play.

"I'd love to be a Northern Virginia hub for tournaments," she said.

Future plans include intermediate and advanced leagues and possibly regional events drawing players from across the area.

For now, growth is measured more simply: full classes, returning players, and a steadily growing waiting list.

A Bloody Business



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

I was reminded a few weeks ago about something in my life which I hardly need reminding about: my thyroid cancer diagnosis and my chronic kidney disease, both stage IV; two for the price of one (one of which would be plenty, two is overkill, literally). The reminder came when one of the levels in my monthly lab work was higher than (A) It needed to be and (B) higher than it has ever been. Not exactly cause for celebration (certainly not ringing a bell at any infusion centers announcing a cured patient). However, after 17+ years of this, I'm fairly well-prepared in how one reacts to such cancer-related abnormalities. However, this time, the measure generated an email from my nephrologist's dialysis coordinator acknowledging this recent elevated level. He asked me if I was experiencing any symptoms (and he listed them: fatigue, poor sleeping, disinterest in food, hiccups, et cetera) relating to my kidney disease. The complicating factor is treatment of my thyroid cancer exacerbates my kidney disease and managing my kidney disease is at cross purposes with how I treat/live with my thyroid cancer disease. The classic "damned if you do ... " scenario.

Fortunately, none of the disease-related symptoms had manifest themselves. Moreover, my levels declined enough in my special-ordered two-week later lab order (instead of the usual four) so I was sort of "off the clock," as my friend Sean would say. As a result, all the interested parties retreated from their presumptive brinks. I was advised to hydrate more and to schedule my next lab in its customary four-week slot. And so, the medical professionals will be closely monitoring my lab work to evaluate if this higher-than-normal level was an outlier or the long-awaited, probably anticipated beginning of the slide (I can't say "end"). Nevertheless, diagnosis to date, my cancer life (diagnosed late Feb. 2009) has mostly been lived on easy street, with a few unexpected turns and a couple of potholes along the way. If I was to complain I'd be an expletive deleted (although that catheter that was inserted in the hospital when I was admitted with a collapsed lung in 2015 was kind of a problem).

Still, this kind of mental anguish is what "dropping the other shoe" is all about. On the one hand, I think about my cancer situation/predicament all the time with intermittent interruptions. On the other hand, I think about my cancer situation/predicament during those intermittent interruptions. As you can read, it matters not which hand or which compartmentalized part of my brain is working, it's all working on cancer stuff. And ignoring it all is the method to my madness unless and until I get a jolt - like lab results. It is these lab results which are on the frontline of my coexistence with cancer. When something happens/dare I say, portends, it will likely be the lab work that does its indicating. And right now, and in early June when I'm back "labing" every four weeks, I will be in a heightened state of anxiety. But since there's only so much I can do to impact these future results, I have to tell myself to "act naturally" (as Buck Owens and Ringo Starr sing) and not overreact.

There's no real reason to do so now anyway. There's no advantage in being miserable and uptight in advance of my next lab work. If those results are disappointing, shall I say, then my life will become more complicated. As such, there's no reason to complicate it now. Bad news travels fast enough. I don't need to hurry it along. And anticipating it likewise serves no purpose. It will be bad enough when it's fact. Until then I can live with the fiction.

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

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