

Mount Vernon Gazette

MOUNT VERNON'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER • A CONNECTION NEWSPAPER

DECEMBER 18, 2025

PHOTOS BY KATHERYN FOGDEN



Supporters hold signs at the vigil calling for solidarity with immigrant neighbors. Mt Vernon Supervisor Dan Storck is third from left.



About 80 people turned out on a cold night for a vigil for solidarity with immigrant neighbors in Hybla Valley.

Vigil in Solidarity with Hybla Valley Immigrants

Faith leaders and neighbors highlight ICE activity in the Richmond Highway Corridor.

BY MARY PADEN
MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE

Prominent faith leaders and neighbors joined Latino community organizers for a candlelight vigil last week to highlight the impact of increased ICE activity in the Richmond Highway Corridor.

The increased activity began on Saturday, Nov. 22 when ICE agents fanned out from a staging area at the Gerald Hybland Government Center parking lot into residential areas where they knocked doors looking for immigrants, according to Tenants and Workers United (TWU) Community organizer Marianela Reynado Funes.

The vigil honored three men from Hybla Valley who were detained that day. It was held in the parking at 8410 Richmond Highway, where one of the men was taken while he was selling coconuts and tropical fruits.

About 80 people attended the vigil which featured a statement from Denis Reyes of Hybla Valley, recently released from ICE, and an appearance by Mount Vernon Supervisor Dan Storck, who said community members have a right to be treated respectfully and humanely and offered assistance with county resources.

The vigil was sponsored by Tenants and Workers United, which has organized residents of the area's five mobile home parks and several apartment buildings around issues like rising rents and poor conditions for about six years.



The crowd on a cold night at a prayer vigil for immigrants focuses on Mount Vernon Supervisor Dan Storck who gave impromptu remarks of support.

"We are standing here tonight, in compassion, solidarity and resolve. We're here to raise awareness about our neighbors, local individuals and families, who have been separated, are suffering, and are living in fear," said Lindsey Hiller, a leader of a rapid response group of neighbors recruited and trained by Tenants and Workers United.

"The terrifying ICE detentions we've all witnessed in the media are happening right here in our own community," she said.

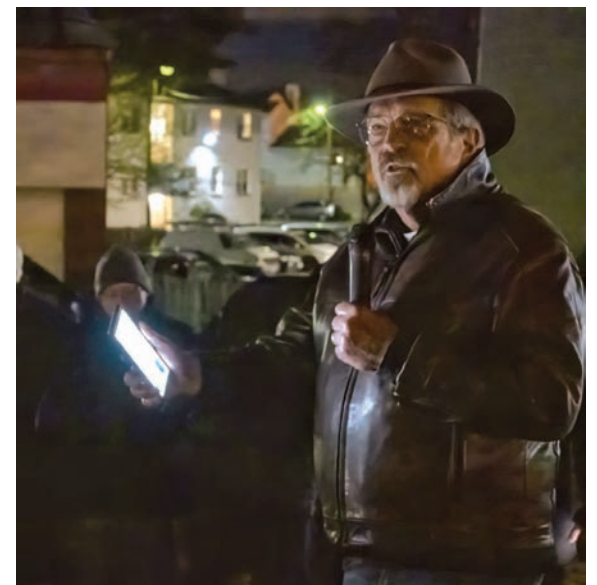
Speaker Denis Reyes, said he was taken by ICE in mid-October and held in two detention centers where he saw men crying because

they were separated from their families and uncertain about their future.

"I was crying," he admitted. He said he was traumatized but never lost hope and thanked the rapid response team for taking care of his family while he was detained.

Although their families asked that their names be withheld, the men taken on Nov. 22 were identified as a coconut and tropical fruit vendor taken from the rally site, a man taken from the parking lot of Walmart while shopping, and a construction worker taken from his home at Lafayette Apartments. They were pictured on a poster.

SEE VIGIL, PAGE 9



Rev Keary Kincannon, retired pastor of Rising Home Mission Church, recalled when ICE waited outside the church hypothermia shelter eight years ago to detain six overnight guests.



Photos on posters recalled three community members detained by ICE.

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Groups Sue Fort Belvoir, Allege PFAS Pollution

BY GLENDA C. BOOTH
THE GAZETTE

Two Virginia conservation organizations, the Potomac Riverkeeper Network and Wild Virginia, filed a suit on Dec. 1 challenging Fort Belvoir's stormwater discharge permit granted by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) effective Oct. 1, 2025.

The two nonprofits argue that the DEQ permit fails to comply with the federal Clean Water Act and the Virginia State Water Control law because it fails to include monitoring or limiting discharges containing PFAS substances into the Potomac River, Accotink Creek and other tributaries of the river, calling DEQ's decision "arbitrary, capricious and unlawful."

The organizations' press release asserts that PFAS contamination has been "proven by the Army's own studies" and that "DEQ failed even to make the required analysis of the extent of PFAS discharges and their effects on state waters."

Dean Naujoks, Potomac Riverkeeper, said, "Fort Belvoir releases pollution into a unique stretch of the river that serves as a regionally significant spawning ground for rockfish and shad, and as critical habitat for the Atlantic sturgeon, an endangered species. The science is clear: PFAS contamination of our waterways threatens harm to aquatic life as well as to people who consume seafood."

Twice this year, the Connection and Mount Vernon Gazette reported on DEQ's consideration of the permit application.

The environmental groups' petition includes several Northern Virginians who allege potential adverse impacts from PFAS substances in area waters, including Larry Zaragoza, chair of the Environment and Recreation Committee of the 40-member Mount Vernon Council of Citizens Associations (MVCCA). MVCCA in May approved a resolution supporting limits on Belvoir's PFAS discharges.

To quote from the petition, "Dr. Zaragoza understands that the presence of PFAS in surface waters can also lead to bioaccumulation in fish tissue (PFOS accumulates over 2,000 times higher in fish tissue than in the water), which impacts the safety of fish for consumption.



PHOTO BY GLENDA BOOTH

Two Virginia conservation organizations, the Potomac Riverkeeper Network and Wild Virginia, filed a suit on Dec. 1 concerning Fort Belvoir's discharge of PFAS into the Potomac River.



PHOTO BY MIKE MADATIC

This shows possibly polluted water, because it's discolored, from the site's discharges.

He is particularly concerned that people who rely upon subsistence fishing as a part of their diet will be exposed to high levels of PFAS due to discharges from Fort Belvoir. Without the necessary monitoring and limits for PFAS in Fort

Belvoir's stormwater permit, the continued discharge of these toxic chemicals threatens the safety of locally caught fish for consumption. Accordingly, Dr. Zaragoza avoids eating locally caught seafood and cautions others because

of the known PFAS contamination in the watersheds surrounding Fort Belvoir."

Fort Belvoir is an 8,700-acre military installation in southeastern Fairfax County, established in 1917 as Camp Humphreys.

"The science is clear: PFAS contamination of our waterways threatens harm to aquatic life as well as to people who consume seafood."

— Dean Naujoks, Potomac Riverkeeper

Asked for comment, a Fort Belvoir public affairs official emailed on Dec. 9, "Fort Belvoir cannot comment on any pending litigation."

PFAS Chemicals

PFAS, which stands for perfluoroalkyl or polyfluoroalkyl substances, is a group of over 10,000 chemicals, dubbed "forever chemicals" because they are long-lasting. PFAS substances are found in products like non-stick cookware, clothes, carpets and personal care products and fire-fighting foam.

Earlier this year, Belvoir representatives pointed to a 2022, 164-page "preliminary assessment/site inspection report" by Arcadis, which concluded, among other findings, "... the use, storage and/or disposal of aqueous film-forming foam (AFFF) is the most prevalent potential sources of PFAS chemicals at DoD facilities."

The report's summary concludes that 12 of 17 sites had "PFOS, PFOA and/or PFBS present at concentrations greater than the risk-based screening levels ..." and that "the majority of OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] risk screening level exceedances ... can be attributed to historical and present fire station management and fire-fighter training activity, as well as fire truck maintenance activities."

The report is at https://aec.army.mil/Portals/115/PFAS/2022_Final_Fort_Belvoir_PFAS_PA_SI_Report_Volume_I_Compressed.pdf?ver=mhQpHy-JiIob_3KEfbQnTgw%3d%3d.



PHOTOS BY GLENDA BOOTH

After cutting the ribbon, regent Anne Neal Petri told CEO Doug Bradburn, "Your scissors are sharper than mine."

A Restored Mount Vernon Opens to the Public

BY GLENDA C. BOOTH
MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE

Some things never change. Grandparents love to show off their grandchildren. In George and Martha Washington's newly-restored bedchamber at Mount Vernon, portraits of their grandchildren adorn the walls, the two youngsters they raised, George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis.

Though it's a somber room because this is where the nation's first president died in 1799, it sparkles with some original Washington furnishings and new floral reproduction wallpaper featuring flowers and love birds. Curators knew that the original, 1790s wallpaper was made in France by Réveillon and found a sample in York, Maine, preserved from that era and had reproduction wallpaper made to make the bedchamber authentic.

On Dec. 10, Mount Vernon hosted the re-opening and ribbon cutting of their latest, three-year, \$40 million restoration of parts of the mansion. Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) regent Anne Neal Petri called the effort a "big home improvement project." She reminded attendees gathered on the bowling green that the MVLA rescued Mount Vernon in 1860 when it was in dire disrepair and neither the state nor federal government would take it on.

Doug Bradburn, Mount Vernon's President and Chief Executive Officer, said, "We move slowly and we save things," calling this restoration the most ambitious in

SEE HELPING, PAGE 5



In the New Room, the table is set for the holidays with a hedgehog-shaped cake and another topped with molded swans.



The New Room has decorative features like this called "composition ornamentation."



Visitors on Dec. 10 were eager to go to the second floor to see the Washingtons' restored bedchamber.



A portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington's "right arm" in the Revolutionary War, hangs in the bedroom that he used.

A Restored Mount Vernon Opens to the Public

FROM PAGE 4

the estate's history and a "gift to the American people" as the nation nears its 250th anniversary. Thanking the many carpenters, engineers, masons, curators, archaeologists and others who made it possible, he challenged, "You cannot understand America's founding without understanding George Washington. And you cannot understand George Washington without understanding Mount Vernon."

Commending Washington's engineering skills, Bradburn said that the first president arranged for water from his roof to flow into the dung shed, chuckling, "Not only was he first in war and first in peace, he was first in composting."

Bradburn reported that during the cellar's excavation, archaeologists found 35 18th century glass bottles. Of the 35, 29 were intact and contained preserved cherries and berries, a glimpse into food preservation practices of the 18th century. Behind a wall in the Washingtons' bedchamber, they found a rare fork with a green-stained, ivory, pistol-grip handle, which matches cutlery orders Washington placed in the 1760s.

In what the Washingtons called the "New Room," restoration experts replaced the termite-eaten floor framing with white oak cut with axes and two-man saws, replicating the original carpentry methods.

The New Room's construction began before the Revolutionary War, explained Thomas Reinhardt, Director of Preservation. The New Room was designed in the neo-classical style of the British gentry. By the construction's end in 1787 after the war, Washington wanted to show that Americans could compete in taste and style with the Europeans. The bright green, two-story room has a Venetian window and decorative features like an Italian marble mantel, crown molding and composition ornamentation, an approach involving pressing and gluing a putty-like goo onto wood and letting it dry.

<cl>The Bedchamber

The Washingtons' bedchamber today displays nine original objects, including Martha's dressing table, a Chinese porcelain basin, a French bidet, a French clock, a silver inkwell and Martha's desk made in France. In the 18th century, the family called it "Mrs. Washington's Room," because it was in this room that she managed the household and her correspondence. The bedstead, six feet long, now has white dimity curtains.

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Painters were sprucing up the kitchen's roof on Dec. 10.



Archaeologists are doing an excavation associated with the cellar's restoration.



Martha Washington's desk is in the main bedchamber and family portraits hang on one wall.



A portrait of George Washington Parke Custis and one of his sister, Nelly, brighten the bedchamber.

Not so glamorous but necessary, the revitalization also involved installing a new heating-ventilation-air-conditioning system, improving drainage around the cellar and repairing sections of framing and masonry for stronger structural stability.

The entire first and second floors are now open to the public, after parts being closed since January 2024. Work is underway to remove all 20th century materials and restore the cellar to its 1799 appearance by the fall of 2026.

Mount Vernon's mansion was well built for its day, but not for over 230 years of wear and tear, 21st century weather and the one million people who visit every year.

PHOTOS BY
GLENDA BOOTH



The bedchamber has new period wallpaper.



The six-foot long bed in the Washingtons' bedchamber has new white dimity curtains.

Store for Dogs and Dog Lovers Opens in Belle View

BY GLENDA C. BOOTH
MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE

If your dog has allergies, a sensitive stomach or thin fur or is easily agitated, The Dog Store is ready to help.

This new shop opened on November 29, in the Belle View Shopping Center, a sister to their 11-year-old, Alexandria-Del Ray store.

"We feed and treat dogs in depth based on our knowledge," said Paul Haire, the owner, in an interview, stressing, "We focus on longevity and peak health. For example, if you pay more for dog food, you'll pay less for veterinary care." He said that he or his staff have field tested all of their products.

Holiday and Other Amusements

The front window is full of cheery, holiday-related dog wares. On December 6, Santa greeted a steady "procession" of pooches. Asked where he lives, Santa quipped, "The North Pole. The traffic is much worse here than at the North Pole." Santa, portrayed by Rich David on December 6, will be back on December 20, 1 to 3 p.m.

Many of the store's toys will keep dogs "mentally engaged," said employee Annabell Bivens. One that resembled a child's fabric book had compartments for food for the dog to paw out. "With these, you can tire out a dog mentally on snow days," Bivens said, when dog walks aren't possible. She maintained that 20 minutes of stimulation equal a 45-minute walk.

Dog lovers can now buy holiday cookies for man's best friend, cookies that are "human grade," made of wholewheat flour, applesauce and crushed peanuts, but no salt or sugar, noted Bivens.

Promoting Health

Bivens, whose title is Knowledge Manager, explained that among their health-promoting products are supplements containing hemp which she said are anti-inflammatories to help calm dogs and enhance their immune and nervous systems. These products, while related to marijuana, do not contain THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the compound in cannabis that causes intoxication.

Haire credited Bivens with being an expert on naturopathic and homeopathic dog treatments.

Dogs can be picky eaters or have allergies, she commented, and she curates all dog food products. The store offers a 100 percent guarantee and tries to recommend food that "will agree with the dog." For example, if the dog has a heart condition, she recommends a grain-inclusive product with added taurine, an amino acid. Other products which she calls "novel proteins" are good for "sensitive stomachs."

The store's fish oils, which can be added to a dog's food, are "good for joint and eye health," Bivens said. The oils come from anchovies and sardines, not large fish in which heavy metals can bioaccumulate.

The store also sells leashes, coats and boots and center stage is a "gnaw bar," full of things for chewing "for every chewing style and every size mouth," she said, adding that most dogs like to chew for their dental



Santa greeted Bunky, a golden retriever.



Santa snuggled with Roo, a chihuahua mix.



A dried carp fish head is one of the chewable products.



Holiday dog toys for sale.



Paul Haire is the owner of the two stores, here with a chewable bully stick and treat lock.

health and mental stimulation. The gnaw bar has options like bully sticks, marrow bones, carp heads and freeze-dried hairy pig ears." The store offers no rawhide products because many have glue that can get stuck in a dog's throat or stomach.

The Dog Store also has the "cat corner" selling food, treats, catnip and toys.

Doggie Day Care

Haire also has managed Your Dog's Best Friends, a "cageless," dog day care business, for 20 years in Del Ray. Among other services, the day care center offers "bedroom boarding" with no crates. Dogs sleep in a room with a person present, simulating the dog's home sleeping arrangement. "It's a low-stress, dog sleepover-over party," Haire chuckled.

Why did Haire choose the Belle View area for a store? "We have wonderful neighbors here and Fairfax County was overwhelmingly positive," he said. The store has seen "a



Santa made friends with Gertrud, a Leonberger.

steady flow of customers and well-wishers," he said, human and canine.

At The Dog Store, every dog is special. There are no underdogs.

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Skaters take to the ice Dec. 4 at Cameron Run Winter Village.

Ice and Lights

Cameron Run Winter Village opens.

Alexandria Mayor Alyia Gaskins and members of Alexandria City Council commemorated the start of outdoor ice skating season with a winter ice skating party and ribbon cutting Dec. 4 at Cameron Run Regional Park on Eisenhower Avenue.

The Winter Village at Cameron Run is Alexandria's only outdoor skating rink. a free cup of hot chocolate and the opportunity to meet animals native to Northern Virginia at

Critter Corner.

Evening ice skating and the Winter Village will be open daily through Dec. 30. Daytime ice skating will be open: daily Dec. 20-Jan. 4; and weekends and holidays Jan. 10 through Feb. 28. Tickets are available for Village Only admission, Village & Ice Skating or Daytime Ice Skating. Regular prices range \$9-24 per person depending on activity and date. Capacity is limited and reservations are required to ensure access on a specific date. Ice skating reservations are required.

Visit cameroniceandlights.com for more information and to purchase tickets.

— JEANNE THEISMANN



PHOTOS BY JANET BARNETT/GAZETTE PACKET

Attendees warm up over a fire pit Dec. 4 at Cameron Run Winter Village.

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PUBLIC NOTICE

Please be advised that there will be 15-minute fireworks displays that will take place as part of the public evening event, Christmas Illuminations, at George Washington's Mount Vernon on

Saturday, December 20

Sunday, December 21,

between 8:00pm and 8:30pm.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association thanks you for your tolerance and apologizes for any disruption.

To receive Mount Vernon fireworks notifications via email, please write to events@mountvernon.org

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S

MOUNT ★ VERNON

VDOT

Virginia Department of Transportation

Public Notice

Updated weight limits on Virginia bridges and culverts

In accord with state and federal law, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has imposed new or changed existing weight restrictions and installed new signage indicating the updated weight restrictions on the following bridges and culverts (structures) in Virginia within the last 30 days.

Jurisdiction	Fed Struc Id	Route #	Route Name	Crossing	Posted Date
CHARLES CITY	4809	607	STEEL TRAP ROAD	WEST RUN	12/4/2025
POWHATAN	13851	621	COSBY ROAD	GADDES CREEK	12/4/2025
ROCKINGHAM	15801	859	LINDALE ROAD (ROUTE 859)	WEST FORK LINVILLE CREEK	11/21/2025
SCOTT	16849	689	LUNDSFORD MILL ROAD	BRANCH	11/19/2025
ROANOKE	14809	0F880	BRETHERN ROAD/F880	BRANCH OF BACK CREEK	11/19/2025
GILES	8402	605	SPRUCE RUN ROAD/605	SPRUCE RUN	11/18/2025
GRAYSON	8878	678	FOX CREEK ROAD	MIDDLE FOX CREEK	11/10/2025

The list above is not a comprehensive list of all structures with weight restrictions in the Commonwealth but shows only structures that have new or changed weight restrictions within the last 30 days. The list contains only basic structure identification and location information and the date the new or changed weight restriction and signage became effective.

For a full listing of all bridge and culvert weight restrictions with detailed information about specific structures, including location data and actual weight limits, visit vdot.virginia.gov and navigate to Traffic and Travel/For freight operators/Truck restrictions. This page references a posted structures report and a GIS map tool that contain detailed information about restricted structures in Virginia. To receive email notifications regarding new or updated weight restrictions for structures statewide, complete the sign-up form on the web page.

Notices regarding bridges and culverts with new or updated weight restrictions are published monthly by VDOT. For additional information or questions, please contact haulingpermits@vdot.virginia.gov or the Load Rating Program Manager, Manjil Devkota at 804-786-4064.

The Virginia Department of Transportation is committed to ensuring that no person is excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any of its programs or activities on the basis of race, color, or national origin, as protected by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If you need further information on VDOT's Title VI Program or special assistance for persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency, please contact the Virginia Department of Transportation's Title VI Program Specialist at 804-786-2730 or corina.herrera@vdot.virginia.gov.

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MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE ❖ DECEMBER 18, 2025 - JANUARY 7, 2026 ❖ 7

The Region's Water Supply Is Vulnerable

BY GLENDA C. BOOTH
MOUNT VERNON GAZETTE

A recent report predicts that the source of 75 percent of the Washington region's water – the Potomac River – faces serious challenges in the future because of a warming climate and increased demand. Water use could climb 17 percent by 2050 and severe droughts could bring water shortages, as early as 2030, the study forecasts.

The Potomac is the only source of drinking water for Washington, D. C. and Arlington County. Five utilities in the region withdraw and treat water from the river: Fairfax Water, the Washington Aqueduct, WSSC Water, the city of Rockville and Loudoun Water. Three upstream reservoirs (Jennings Randolph, Savage and Little Seneca) supplement the river's supply.

"It's climate change, combined with the increase in demand that may be putting the whole system at risk," said Mike Nardolilli, Executive Director of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB), the study's sponsor.

"Parts of the DC region have only one source of drinking water – the Potomac River – and just a one-day backup of water supply."

— Mike Nardolilli, Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin

"We can no longer ignore the fact that parts of the DC region have only one source of drinking water – the Potomac River – and just a one-day backup of water supply," he said.

Possible Shortages

The ICPRB study predicts an increasing chance, up to around one percent in 2030 to around five percent in 2050, that the region will face water shortages. This could bring water use restrictions and perhaps water not coming out of taps, said Cherie Schultz, director of ICPRB's Cooperative Water Supply Operations on the Potomac.

The report's predictions use several possible scenarios.

Climate Change

Temperatures will rise three percent from 2010 to 2039, the report predicts, and the changing climate will increase hydrologic variability in stream flow and precipitation. Increasing precipitation and competing warmer temperatures could decrease stream flow because of more evaporation.

"Wet years will be wetter," noted Schultz. Droughts may become more severe and extreme drought years will be dryer, so droughts will be more stressful, she said.

"Four out of nine modeled scenarios predict that in the event of an extreme drought, the upstream reservoirs will run out of water as early as 2030, indicating that short-term measures should be taken to improve reliability," the study states.

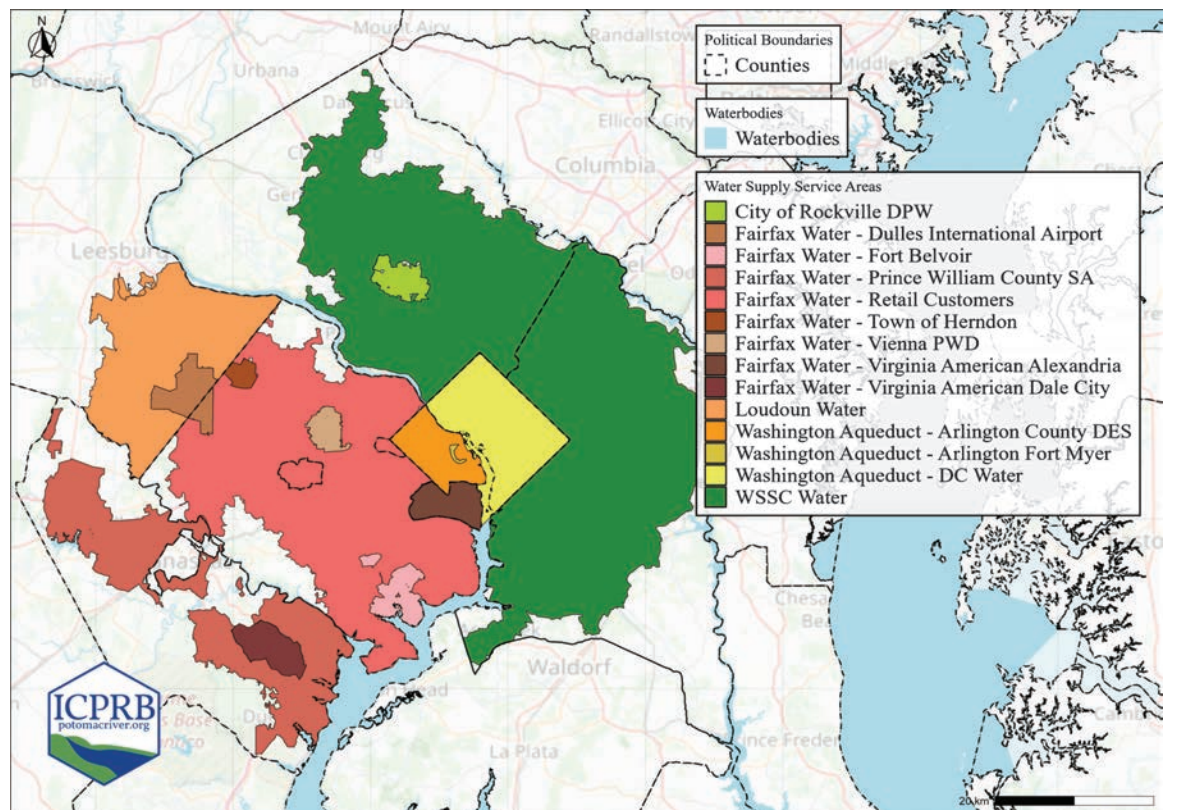
Nardolilli said that the water supply's vulnerability also presents a national security risk. "The U.S. Department of Defense has a requirement that all military bases should have a 14-day backup supply of water, but that's not the case here in the D.C. area, where there's a one-day backup for a lot of the military installations here, including the Pentagon," he said. A previous ICPRB study concluded that water supply disruption could bring a region-wide loss of \$15 billion in gross regional product and hundreds of millions in lost taxes.

The new study reports that water use "has remained stable over the past several decades despite significant population growth," from 3.4 million to 5.0 million, a whopping 47 percent jump from 1990 to 2023. The authors credit this largely to the adoption of water-saving fixtures and appliances, which has made building new reservoirs unnecessary, Nardolilli said. But the report warns that both water demand and the population are projected to increase over the next 25 years.

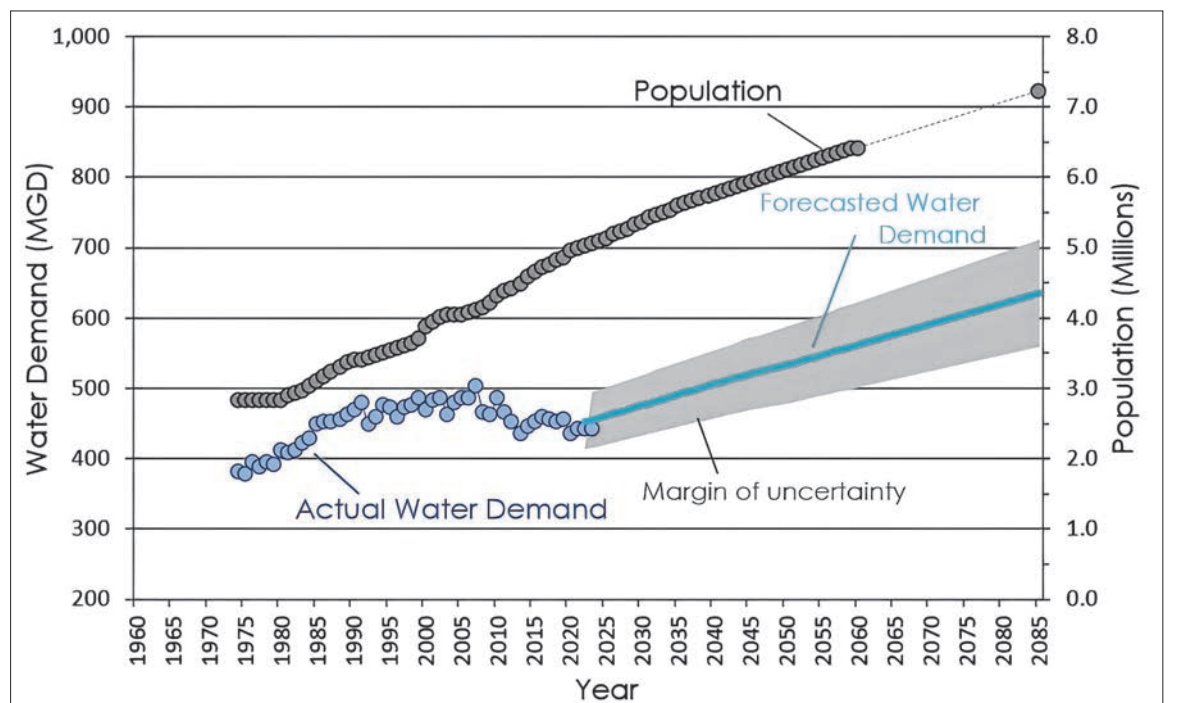
Data Center Water Demand

The water use of the growing numbers of data centers is riddled with unknowns, Schultz said. "The study finds that upstream data center water use is expected to grow over time and could become comparable to several established water-using sectors, such as commercial, industrial and thermoelectric facilities," according to ICPRB. The centers' evolving technologies complicate predictions.

Researchers are also hampered by the lack of solid information on data center water use. "Right now, there are no requirements or limits on water usage," at data centers,



Water utility service areas.



Forecasted Water Demand

Nardolilli said. "We are hopeful that legislators in the various states could at least require data centers to provide that information, so that we all can get a sense of how much water they are using."

Nardolilli, director of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin, said that Virginia exempts data centers from sales and use taxes which in effect is a \$1 billion subsidy. "We think it would be nice to link that support for data centers with at least a requirement that they report on their water usage," he urged.

Solutions

In terms of solutions, Fairfax Wa-

ter plans to convert the Vulcan Materials Company's quarry in Lorton into a future reservoir. DC Water is investigating treating and reusing wastewater effluent. The Army Corps of Engineers started a water supply feasibility study in 2024 to recommend possible solutions. Congress is now considering appropriating \$1.8 million for the study.

The ICPRB report does not cover or recommend water conservation measures by customers.

When asked, what's the message to the average homeowner, Rene Bourassa, Communications Manager offered, "Be mindful of the water you use in your everyday life, even if we aren't in a drought.

Reduce your shower time, turn off the tap when you are brushing your teeth, only run the laundry and dishwasher when you have a full load and fix leaks. These are little actions everyone can do on a daily basis to build good habits and save water."

Congress created the ICPRB in 1940 with appointed commissioners from Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and the federal government. ICPRB prepares a report every five years to evaluate the adequacy of water supplies to meet anticipated demands.

Information

<https://www.potomacriver.org/>
www.connectionnewspapers.com

Vigil in Solidarity with Hybla Valley Immigrants

FROM PAGE 1

Funes said the coconut vendor is at Farmville Detention Center where he is held in a large cell with 100 people sleeping in three-level beds. She said his brother reported that he and 30 percent of his cellmates are sick and that he has been unable to obtain an important prescription medicine.

Stateline reported recently that immigration arrests in Virginia are five times higher than last year. The independent research organization Trac reports that 75 percent of those detained had no criminal record.

Over the past several months, Tenants and Workers United recruited and trained a response group of about 25 volunteers to report and record ICE activity in the area, Funes said. “But this group has gone beyond that to bringing food and supplies to the families of those taken and now they are bringing 200 holiday meals to people in the community,” she said.

In addressing the rally, Supervisor Storck said, “It is my pleasure and honor to be here in solidarity with all for you. When power acts illegally, it is our responsibility to fight back and make sure people are treated respectfully and humanely — always.” He offered the services of his staff member Diego Rodriguez Cabrera to help with access to food, shelter and county services (see sidebar) and stressed that Fairfax County Police have “taken an oath to protect all of you.” Fairfax County policy prohibits its county police from cooperating with immigration enforcement.

The vigil’s opening prayer was delivered by Rev. David Yocis, pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church of Mount Vernon and co-facilitator for Ventures in Community, a 50-year-old association of faith communities and nonprofits who work with lower-income neighbors in the corridor.

He prayed for those taken, their families, those who live in fear, the larger community (“give courage to all who are moved to speak and to act”) and even the ICE agents (“teach them to respect the humanity of each and every person”).

Rev. Tom Ferguson, pastor of Good Shepherd Catholic Church, which has a large Hispanic ministry, said, “To all of us here this evening, this is my message of hope that we must share with those who live in fear: our common humanity is an invitation to see the face of God in every person created in His image.”

Rev. Keary Kincannon, now of Aldersgate Methodist Church, recalled protests and vigils of eight years ago after overnight guests at the Rising Hope Mission Church hypothermia shelter were arrested by waiting ICE agents when they left at 7 a.m. This was during the first Trump administration when Rev. Kincannon was pastor of Rising Hope.

At the vigil he prayed, “Make us truth-tellers, O God, for you promise that the truth will set us free.

When lies, intimidation, and injustice threaten to dominate, keep us grounded in your truth—truth that liberates, heals, and brings life. Let perfect love cast out all fear—from our neighbors, from our communities, and from our own hearts.”

Funes concluded the vigil by calling on citizens in attendance to “Be a good neighbor and support this community.” She urged them to sign up for training and join the rapid response team by calling TWU at (703) 684-5697.



Behind the vigil, Univision interviewed local resident Denis Reyes about his time in ICE detention.



A Univision reporter describes the prayer vigil for immigrants held Dec. 10.



Rev. David Yocis, pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church of Mount Vernon and co-facilitator for Ventures in Community, gave the opening prayer at the vigil.

PHOTOS BY KATHERYN FOCDEN

Fairfax County Services

The Mount Vernon Supervisor’s office encourages people to let them know when people are going through hardship and so they can mobilize to help. Contact Diego Rodriguez Cabrera, Human Services and Parks Aide, Supervisor Dan Storck, Mount Vernon District. Phone: 703-780-7518, Email: diego.rodriguezcabrera@fairfaxcounty.gov

Some online resources are shown below.

“Immigrants in Fairfax County” page at Fairfax county’s website <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/immigrants-fairfax-county>

County Policies

The Fairfax County Police Department’s General Order 604 restricts its ability to ask for immigration status and to voluntarily work with federal enforcement agencies, unless legally obligated. Residents should feel comfortable reporting crimes and collaborating with the police. Review the policy here: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/sites/police/files/assets/generalorders/go-604.pdf>

Fairfax County’s “One Fairfax and Trust Policy” states that the County does not ask for legal status when interacting with residents. However, if you are being evaluated for financial assistance, intake workers may ask for immigration status to determine whether the caller is eligible for federal funds: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/trust-policy>

If Someone is Deported

Residents who need help after the deportation or detainment of a loved one can contact Coordinated Services Planning (CSP) for rental assistance, utility assistance, housing stability inquiries, financial assistance, and other needs. Call 703-222-0880 Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. More information here: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/neighborhood-community-services/coordinated-services-planning>

Additionally, they can connect you with USCIS resources that help locate detained loved ones and can refer residents to state and federal representatives.

To locate someone you believe has been detained by ICE, check the USCIS Detainee Locator System: <https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/search>

Further Resources

Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS) has compiled a Human Services Resource Guide (HSRG), which is a searchable database with information on thousands of nonprofit and government services available to Fairfax County residents. Anyone with an Internet connection has 24/7 access to it, including from mobile devices.

The database includes detailed service descriptions, eligibility, locations (maps and directions), and contact information. See it here: <https://fairfacs.powerappsportals.us/resource-guide/>

Legal Rights Information from Nonprofits

The organizations below provide legal rights education and services.

- ❖ Legal Aide Justice Center: <https://www.justice4all.org/rapid-response-toolkit/#KYRVIDEOS> – The Rapid Response Toolkit w/ Know Your Rights Recordings (EN/SPN)
- ❖ Catholic Legal Immigration Network: <https://www.cliniclegal.org/toolkits/rapid-response-toolkit> - Tool Kit Information
- ❖ Catholic Charities: <https://www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/get-help/immigrant-and-refugee-services/> - Immigration Legal Services
- ❖ CASA VA: <https://wearecasa.org/legal-services-va/> - Immigration Legal Services + Empowerment Workshops
- ❖ Center for Migrant Rights: <https://amicacenter.org/> - Educational Resources
- ❖ Centreville Immigration Forum: <https://centrevilleimmigrationforum.org/about-us/>
- ❖ Just Neighbors: <https://www.justneighbors.org/> - Legal Immigration Services + Educational Materials
- ❖ Ayuda: <https://ayuda.com/legal-services-4/immigration-law/> - Legal Immigration Services + Educational Materials
- ❖ Immigrant Legal Resource Center: https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/resources/imm_preparedness_kit_april2020_1.pdf - Preparedness Toolkit

The Diploma Divide



SCREENSHOT FAIRFAX COUNTY YOUTH SURVEY 2023-2024

Students with disabilities will be facing Virginia SOL changes and accountability given action by the Virginia Board of Education on Nov. 13, 2025. The board approved a plan to delay the official implementation of the higher cut scores until the 2026-2027 school year, which will serve as a preparation year, with the existing proficiency cut score of 400 remaining in effect. The board also approved a schedule to gradually increase cut scores, beginning in the 2026-2027 school year and reaching the final, highest cut scores by the 2028-2029 school year.

How Virginia's SOL exams fail students with disabilities and English Learners.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE GAZETTE

For students with disabilities and English Learners in Virginia, and elsewhere in the United States, earning a Standard High School Diploma is crucial for accessing postsecondary opportunities, including federal financial aid, military service

Doors shut as state officials press to meet federal legislation.

and career pathways. However, thousands of Virginia students are effectively barred from this diploma by a single requirement: the Verified Credit mandate. This mandate generally requires students to pass an approved state assessment, which, for the vast majority, means passing the state's Standards of Learning (SOL) exams. Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) data from the 2022-2023 school

year show that thousands of students in these two groups did not earn a Standard or Advanced Diploma.

As Michelle Cades, advocate of the Fairfax County Special Education PTA, noted, this situation "really shuts a lot of doors."

The Federal-State Policy Collision

The crisis is driven by the interaction of state requirements and federal legislation, primarily the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act. These federal laws require the VDOE to limit the number of students assessed via the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program to no more than 1 percent of all students. This cap is pressuring school divisions to move students from the alternate track (VAAP) to the general SOL track, even when the students lack the foundational skills necessary to master the curriculum. Foundational skills are the prerequisite abilities required for the next level of instruction.

A Daughter's Dilemma

Amanda Campbell, president of the Fairfax County Special Education PTA, and the mother of an eighth-grade student with disabilities, illustrates this systemic crisis. According to Campbell, her daughter has significant communication disabilities, minimal speaking skills, and motor-planning disabilities. Fairfax County Public Schools placed her daughter in the

SOL-track English and pre-algebra classes this year, despite the child having never received the foundational instruction those courses assume. "A child who hasn't been taught to multiply and divide does not belong in a pre-algebra class," Campbell said.

Campbell identified two problems within the crisis in an interview on Dec. 13. She said that the SOL testing format is not fully accessible to her daughter, even with permitted accommodations, and there is a lack of appropriate, credit-bearing, curriculum-based courses below pre-algebra to build her daughter's skills. "As long as the state requires the exams to get the standard diploma - kids need to both catch up to the grade level content and have accessible tests when they get there," said Campbell.

Consequences of the Applied Studies Diploma

The dual-pronged dilemma often leaves parents "stuck," said Campbell, and can result in students earning the less-valued Applied Studies Diploma, a non-standard credential. Campbell discussed the "least dangerous assumption" model. Campbell argued that it does less harm to assume a child is learning and to give them full access to instruction than to withhold education because they can't yet demonstrate what they know, only to discover years later that they understood all along.

The Applied Studies Diploma is significantly less valuable because



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEPTA
Michelle Cades, advocate with the Fairfax County Special Education PTA.



SCREENSHOT OCT. 23, 2025
SCHOOL BOARD MEETING
Dr. Michelle Reid, superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools.

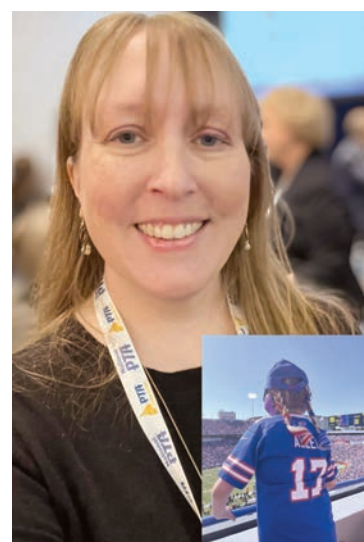


PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANDA CAMPBELL
Amanda Campbell, president of the Fairfax County Special Education PTA and mother of a daughter with disabilities.



PHOTO LEGAL AID
HTTPS://WWW.JUSTICE4ALL.ORG
Hank Bostwick, senior attorney at the Legal Aid Justice Center, says that Virginia's new accountability standards risk deepening existing inequities.

nonstandard credentials, such as the Applied Studies Diploma, are not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid office. This prevents access to critical Pell Grants and federal loans to fund higher-level education, including college and technical schools. Cades confirmed, "A student who graduates with [an Applied Studies Diploma] is not eligible for federal financial aid."

Scale and Systemic Challenges

The professional consequences of a non-standard diploma are also severe. Students are unable to indicate on job applications that they hold a Standard Diploma. Not having the Standard diploma also renders them ineligible for military

enlistment. A 2020 Virginia JLARC study noted that "About 20 percent of Virginia students with disabilities graduate with a diploma that provides limited value for accessing future educational and career opportunities." The long-term cost is staggering:

Based on the Virginia Department of Education, Class of 2023 cohort data, 2,193 of 7,075 English Learners (31percent) and 1,910 of 10,613 Students with Disabilities (18 percent) failed to earn a Standard or Advanced Diploma, with a total of 1,769 English Learners (25 percent) and 1,274 Students with Disabilities (12 percent) dropping out of the system.

The Legislative Response: HB 1957

The state's legislative attempt to address the issue came in the form of House Bill 1957, introduced by Del. Dan Helmer (D-Fairfax). The bill was designed to provide new assessment pathways and reduce the high-stakes reliance on a single SOL test.

"Virginia students, teachers, and parents agree: our testing system is two decades old and badly needs an overhaul," Helmer said in a written statement on Dec. 12. "Our bill ensures that teachers can teach and students

can learn the material they need, and not spend valuable class time on tests that don't effectively measure student performance."

The Policy Gap

Crucially, however, HB 1957 did not eliminate the high-stakes test barrier, the required SOL final proficiency score for graduation, nor did it address the availability of foundational instruction and the inaccessibility of the test format, which left students like Campbell's daughter in a policy gap. Compounded by these challenges, an opposing action by the Governor-appointed Virginia Board of Education increased the policy gap: the Board approved signifi-

SEE THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE, PAGE 13
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Plaid Tidings

Alexandria's Scottish heritage shines in 54th Annual Scottish Christmas Walk Parade.

PHOTOS BY JANET BARNETT/GAZETTE PACKET



The City of Alexandria Pipes and drums leads the Scottish walk Parade through the streets of Old Town Dec. 6.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN
GAZETTE PACKET

The historic streets of Old Town came alive with the sound of bagpipes and the vibrant colors of tartans as thousands gathered for the 54th Annual Scottish Christmas Walk Parade, a tradition that celebrates the city's Scottish roots.

Dubbed "one of the U.S. South's most magical holiday towns" by Travel + Leisure magazine, the Dec. 6 parade marked the highlight of Alexandria's busiest holiday weekend.

More than 100 units participated in the parade, which was sponsored by Wegmans and produced by Visit Alexandria in partnership with the Campagna Center and the City of Alexandria.

The parade featured Scottish clans in traditional tartans, pipe and drum bands, terriers

and hounds, and community organizations. The event also featured city officials, first responders, and local nonprofits.

This year's Grand Marshal was Mayor Alyia Gaskins, Alexandria's first African American woman mayor, while the Masters of Ceremonies included Julie Carey, NBC4 Northern Virginia bureau chief, and Heather Haddock, past president of the Scottish American Women's Society of Washington, D.C.

The parade concluded with the traditional massed band concert at Market Square, featuring the City of Alexandria Pipes and Drums, the St. Andrew's Society's Washington Scottish Pipe Band, and the Kiltie Band of York. The music echoed Alexandria's historic connection to Scotland, dating back to its founding in 1749 by Scottish merchants and its namesake, Scotsman John Alexander, who owned the land that became Alexandria.



The St. Andrew's Society Washington Scottish Pipe Band.



Alexandria Fire Chief Felipe Hernandez, Sheriff Sean Casey and Police Chief Tar-rick McGuire.



Lawson Moore and Cindy Golubin represent the Rotary Club of Alexandria.

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Members of the Alexandria City High School Titans JROTC program.



A performing troupe during the Scottish Walk Parade.



Four-legged parade participants.



A young parade participant poses for the camera.



Visitors of all ages turned out for the parade.



Members of the Little Theatre of Alexandria.

Plaid Tidings

PHOTOS BY
JANET BARNETT
GAZETTE PACKET

A furry
friend enjoys
the parade.



The Alexandria Caen Sister Cities Committee.



Parade Grand Marshal Mayor Alyia Gaskins, center, on the Market Square reviewing stand.



One of more than 100 Scottish Walk Parade units.



Burke & Herbert executive vice president Joe Collum.

The Diploma Divide

FROM PAGE 10

cantly higher proficiency cut scores for the SOL exams.

VBOE's Impact and State Outlier Status

Dr. Michelle Reid, superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools, shared projections showing the immediate impact: "When looking at Fairfax County Public Schools pass rates, 26 percent of our students who passed their math SOL ... would no longer be considered passing if they took the same test with these new cut scores." Virginia remains an outlier, one of only a handful of states that still require an exit exam for a Standard Diploma, running counter to the national trend toward multiple pathways for graduation.

The Inequity for English Learners

The crisis is not limited to students with disabilities; it extends to English Learners. The Virginia Board of Education's decision to raise the cut scores and tie them to the rigorous national benchmark of the National Assessment of Educational Progress creates a fundamental flaw in measurement. Hank

Bostwick, senior attorney at the Legal Aid Justice Center, argues that Virginia's new accountability standards risk deepening existing inequities. Raising cut scores while continuing to administer the SOL exams almost exclusively in English creates a measurement flaw. "Virginia is effectively testing students' language acquisition and content knowledge at the same time," he stated, which disproportionately impacts schools serving multilingual communities.

Alternatives, the Invisible Student, and the Proposed Path Forward

Campbell acknowledged that for students with disabilities, credit alternatives such as Locally Awarded Verified Credit and Special Permission are state policies designed exclusively to help those with an Individualized Education Program or Section 504 Plan earn the Standard Diploma without passing the SOL test.

Virginia is currently navigating a major assessment shift: the implementation of stricter SOL passing scores, heightened pressure to enforce the federal one-percent cap on the Virginia Alternate Assess-

ment Program (VAAP), and the adoption of a "special permission" credit accommodation that offers limited relief. Amanda Campbell argues that this system is failing the most vulnerable students. She maintains that the state cannot simply push students off the alternate assessment track to meet the one-percent cap without providing systemic solutions.

Campbell's proposed plan calls for the state to pair cap enforcement with two key actions: creating truly accessible SOLs and developing new, credit-bearing courses specifically designed to bring these students up to grade level so they can successfully pursue a Standard Diploma.

Campbell describes her family's experience as "exhausting and isolating. ... Kids like my daughter are invisible in the community and in the system."

The critical decision for the Virginia General Assembly in the upcoming session is whether to maintain the current SOL-based graduation requirements of five verified credits or transition to a system that no longer uses exit exams as the determining factor for earning a Standard Diploma. The path chosen will shape the post-secondary future of Campbell's daughter and that of thousands of Virginia students.

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PHOTOS BY BILL MCKNIGHT

A volunteer carries a wreath to place at a gravesite as part of Wreaths Across America Dec. 13 at Alexandria National Cemetery.

Volunteers prepare to enter the gates of Alexandria National Cemetery as part of Wreaths Across America Dec. 13.

A Nation Remembers Veterans honored during 34th Wreaths Across America.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN
GAZETTE PACKET

More than 1,500 volunteers gathered Dec. 13 at Alexandria National Cemetery for the 34th annual Wreaths Across America Day, continuing a tradition that began in 1992 as a simple gesture of remembrance. This year's theme, "Keep Moving Forward," underscored resilience and unity as participants honored the service and sacrifice of America's fallen heroes.

"Our youth need to be told the history of so many patriotic everyday Americans who stood up, as they put on a military uniform, and took an oath, to serve our country," said Jessica Krueger of Alexandria VFW Post 609 Auxiliary. "Many of the veterans buried in our VA cemeteries gave the ultimate sacrifice to preserve our freedoms. We should not take their sacrifices for granted."

Brief remarks were made at the cemetery gates by VFW Post 609 Commander Col. Jerry Krueger (ret) and guest speaker Darrell Owens, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Volunteers then spread out across the cemetery carrying evergreen wreaths adorned with bright red bows. As each was placed at a gravesite, the name of the veteran was spoken aloud, a gesture that ensures the fallen is not forgotten.

The event was part of a nationwide effort that saw over 3.1 million wreaths placed at nearly 5,600

locations, from local cemeteries to overseas memorials.

Karen Worcester, Executive Director of Wreaths Across America, reflected on the day's significance:

"The wreaths laid today serve as a powerful gesture that unites communities, families, and even generations," Worcester said. "When volunteers say the name of a veteran aloud while placing a wreath, it ensures they live on in our hearts and memories."

Commander Krueger opened the ceremony outlining some of the history of the cemetery, which opened in 1862 as a permanent resting place for thousands of Civil War Union troops.

"The cemetery was authorized by the National Cemeteries Act as one of 14 'soldiers cemeteries' in July 1862," said Commander Krueger. "As part of a local early civil rights movement, in January 1865, 118 US Colored Troops (USCT) were exhumed from the now-named



Veteran gravesites are adorned with wreaths as part of Wreaths Across America Dec. 13 at Alexandria National Cemetery.

who served.

Alexandria National Cemetery aimed to cover all 4,229 veteran graves, with over 1,292 wreaths sponsored by community efforts.

St. Rita's American Heritage Girls troop has been involved since 2011, steadily increasing coverage from one wreath for every 12 headstones to nearly one for every three graves today.

Volunteers will return on Jan. 17, 2026, for "Wreaths Out," the annual cleanup event that offers another opportunity to honor service members. Pickup is scheduled to begin at 8 a.m. and the wreaths will be recycled at a local land fill.

Fundraising takes place year-round to sponsor wreaths at veterans' cemeteries. The Wreaths Across America national organi-



A Marine Corps service wreath is placed at the flagpole of Alexandria National Cemetery Dec. 13.

zation has renewed its special offer of providing 2 for 1 wreaths for each \$17 wreath pledge made now through Wednesday, Dec. 31.

To support VFW Post 609 at Alexandria National Cemetery with a pledge, use code www.wreath-sacrossamerica.org/VA0930P.

"The purpose of Wreaths Across

America is to Remember, Honor, and Teach," said Commander Krueger. "We thank the public volunteers who have joined us in paying tribute to so many who have preceded us in military service, our comrades all. We salute them and appreciate their service, to ensure they are not forgotten."

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SENIOR LIVING



The Fairfax Chorus.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED



Singing in the holidays.



The residents join in with the vocals.

Holidays Start with the Fairfax Chorus at The Fairfax at Belvoir Woods

BY MIKE SALMON
THE GAZETTE

When Lisa Makosewski was looking for a new place to move from her home in Philadelphia, she looked for a spot that would be close to her nephew and niece, so the Woods at Fort Belvoir looked good on the map, but even better in person. "I walked in and felt immediately at home," she said. That feeling expanded more when she started participating in all the activities including holiday events this month which added to her comfort. "It makes everybody feel festive," she said.

The Fairfax Chorus was featured in early December and will be followed by a tree lighting ceremony, a Christmas Brunch and a New Year's Eve gala. "A nice mix of things," she said.

According to Jill K. G. Arvanitis,

the Recreation and Activities Director, the social activities are a big reason why residents choose to live at The Fairfax. "We have many in-house activities as well as outings for a broad range of interests and abilities. Many residents jokingly comment that we are much like a cruise ship, except we do not set sail," she said.

Additional activities for the holiday season include an Army-Navy Football Game tailgate party, a Hanukkah Celebration dinner partnering with a local temple, an art lecture focusing on several British artists, and a special health presentation on Holiday Harmony.

Expanding the social circle is a big factor for seniors, said AARP in a recent story about making friends. An activity in the 55+ communities is a good place to start. According to their survey "74% of all adults surveyed cited

in-person socializing as being the key to their happiness," the AARP study summary stated.

The Fairfax is a continuing care retirement community and provides all levels of care.

There are over 450 residents in specialties like Independent Living, Assisted Living, Memory Care, and Skilled Nursing.

There are 15 different models of apartments available in a neighborhood setting just across Richmond Highway from Fort Belvoir. On one side, it is bordered by Telegraph Road for easy access to Springfield and Kingstowne. There is an indoor pool, library, fitness center and pickleball courts. These are all factors in their social initiatives.

In addition to the activities around the holiday season, The Fairfax has things going on all year.

"There's always something," Makosewski said.

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ENTERTAINMENT

HOLIDAY EVENTS IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA

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

Holiday Lights & Parades:

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

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

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

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

More Holiday Events:

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

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

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

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

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

HOLIDAY LIGHT SHOWS AT NOVA PARKS

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

Meadowlark's Winter Walk of Lights

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

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

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

Bull Run Festival of Lights

Drive through 2.5 miles of dazzling lights at Northern Virginia's largest drive-through light show at the Bull Run Festival of Lights in Centreville.

Experience the magic of the holidays at the Bull Run Festival of Lights, Northern Virginia's largest drive-through holiday light show! A family favorite for three decades, the Bull Run Festival of Lights dazzles with a 2.5-mile display of holiday and fairytale vignettes. En-



Mia's Italian Kitchen in Alexandria will have New Year's Day dining on Jan. 1, 2026.



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

joy time with family while staying warm and cozy as you slowly drive through the animated displays in Bull Run Regional Park. New displays are added every year—drive through the Winter Wonderland where it's always snowing and see the tallest light display yet. Open November 14 through January 4. \$30 per vehicle online; additional discounts available for specific dates with promo code. Visit bull-run-festival-of-lights.com for details.

Ice & Lights – The Winter Village at Cameron Run

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

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

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

Visit novaparkslights.com for more information and to purchase tickets.

MEETS EVERY SUNDAY

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

MEETS EVERY MONDAY

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

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

WEDNESDAY NIGHTS

Wednesday Night Bingo. 7 p.m. At Atlas Brew Works, 2429 Mandeville Lane, Alexandria.

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

MGNV PLANT CLINICS ARE OPEN

The Alexandria Old Town Farmer's Market Plant Clinic at 301 King St., Alexandria operates on Saturdays from 7 - 9:30 a.m. Del

www.connectionnewspapers.com



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

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

YEAR ROUND ON SUNDAYS

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

ONGOING

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

NOW THRU DEC. 21

Del Ray Artisans 30th Annual Holiday Market.

www.ConnectionNewspapers.com



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

At 2704 Mount Vernon Avenue, Alexandria. Offers unique handmade fine arts and crafts from local artists. Choose from wall art, pottery, photography, jewelry, glass, and more! Plus 2026 wall calendars support Del Ray Artisans nonprofit. Free admission. Different artists each weekend! Open Fridays 6-9 p.m., Saturdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Details: delrayartisans.org/event/holiday-market-2025

THE HOLIDAYS IN MOUNT VERNON

There's no better place to get into the holiday

spirit than George Washington's Mount Vernon. Throughout the month, guests can step back in time during Mount Vernon by Candlelight estate tours, enjoy Breakfast with Santa, sip festive Holiday Afternoon Tea, meet Aladdin, the beloved Christmas camel, and experience much more. Visitors can complete their holiday shopping at The Shops at Mount Vernon, where they'll find gifts perfect for even the most discerning individuals. Some of the most popular Mount Vernon inspired gifts included holiday ornaments, the Key to the Bastille paperweight,

the Commander-in-Chief wool blanket, books, whiskey and wine, and custom prints. Just in time for the holidays, guests now can explore the newly restored Washingtons' Bedchamber and enhanced Mansion rooms—including the Central Passage, Little Parlor, and Old Chamber—each meticulously revitalized through Mount Vernon's recent preservation efforts. Visitors can also pick up and stamp the new Virginia 250 Passport, a free commemorative travel guide featuring more than 70 historic sites across the state, offering unique stamps,

SEE HELPING, PAGE 19

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PUBLIC NOTICE

Munitions Response Site Prioritization Protocol (MRSP) for Former Training Areas, Fort Belvoir, Virginia

Former military training activity at locations on Fort Belvoir are undergoing review using the Department of Defense (DoD) Munitions Response Site Prioritization Protocol (MRSP). The MRSP protocol is used to prioritize DoD actions at former munitions response sites (MRSs) that have a potential for residual unexploded ordnance, discarded military munitions or munitions constituents. The MRSP evaluation criteria includes assessments of former site usage, types of munitions, source, locations, population proximity, ease of access, ecological/cultural impacts, and property status (EHE); chemical warfare munitions usage (CHE); and human health assessments (HHE) for multiple environmental media.

The U.S. Army Environmental Command (USAEC) has updated the MRSP prioritization status for eight (8) former MRSs located on the Fort Belvoir North Area Munitions Response Area (MRA) in Springfield, Virginia, and one (1) MRS on Fort Belvoir Main Post. The updated status for these sites indicates that the MRSs no longer warrant fiscal prioritization with ongoing munitions actions at Fort Belvoir. This assessment is attributed to the completion of years of munitions remedial actions and environmental investigations at the sites, culminating in Military Construction (MILCON) redevelopment at six of the sites (M-32, M-33, M-34, M-35, AOPC16, AOPC21), and regulatory closure of one site (FBNA-CDC), and completed evaluations at the remaining two sites (CRC-W, EPG).

In accordance with 32 CFR 179.5, Fort Belvoir invites the public, regulators, and other stakeholders to review the **updated MRSP** scores for the following MRSs:

FTBL-004-R-01	CRC-W: Combat Range Complex - Water
FTBL-005-R-01	EPG: Engineer Proving Ground
FTBL-005-R-04	AOPC-16: Range 1A Munitions Burial Pits
FTBL-005-R-05	M-33: Range 5A
FTBL-005-R-06	M-34: Ordnance Pits at Range 5
FTBL-005-R-07	M-35: Range 5B
FTBL-005-R-08	M-32: Range 5A, Steel Cutting Pit, Building 5091
FTBL-005-R-09	FBNA-CDC
FTBL-005-R-10	AOPC 21: Range 5A Munitions Burial Pits

The MRSP documents for Fort Belvoir are available for a 30-day public review period at: <https://home.army.mil/belvoir/>

Please direct comments or questions to:

Richard A. Santos,
Environmental Branch Chief
9430 Jackson Loop, Fort Belvoir, Virginia 22060
Phone: 703-806-3193
e-mail: richard.a.santos.civ@army.mil

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A Connection Newspaper



ENTERTAINMENT

FROM PAGE 17

discounts, and opportunities to enter prize drawings.

Mount Vernon by Candlelight is offered on select dates through December 23. Experience the magic of the holiday season with a guided 45-minute candlelit tour through the Mansion and historic grounds. Guests will step back in time as they explore lantern-lit paths, meet 18th-century characters, and learn how Virginians celebrated Christmas in 1775—marking the 250th anniversary of that pivotal year in American history. Visitors can greet Aladdin, the beloved Christmas camel, on the 12-acre field; join 18th-century dancing in the greenhouse; and enjoy live music, caroling, and photo opportunities with beautifully decorated trees in the Ford Orientation Center. The evening also features complimentary ginger cookies and spiced cider, tavern games on the bowling green, and an immersive Revolutionary War encampment where guests can experience what life was like for Continental Army soldiers during the first Christmas of the war.

Holiday Afternoon Tea on December 22–23, and 27–28 Indulge in a festive “Holiday Afternoon Tea” at the Mount Vernon Inn Restaurant with seasonal teas and a curated menu of sandwiches, scones, and sweets are served amid live harp music in the estate’s elegant dining room.

Ford Evening Book Talk: The Home Front on December 16. Historian Lauren Duval will discuss her deeply researched book, *The Home Front: Revolutionary Households, Military Occupation, and the Making of American Independence*, offering a ground-level view of how the American Revolution impacted private lives across race, status, and freedom.

Breakfast with Santa on December 20. Celebrate the season with a special holiday breakfast buffet at the historic Mount Vernon Inn Restaurant. Take a photo with Santa and enjoy decorating Christmas cookies.

Christmas Illuminations on December 20 and 21. Experience a magical, family-friendly evening. Shop for unique holiday gifts at an artisan winter market, visit with Aladdin the camel, have conversations with 18th-century soldiers in a winter encampment, and witness spectacular fireworks over the Potomac River.

NEW YEAR’S EVE DINING + NEW YEAR’S DAY BRUNCH Palette 22

Hours: 11 AM – 1 AM

Arlington’s most artistic celebration awaits at Palette 22, where NYE gets a pop of color, creativity, and sparkle. Sip into 2026 with La Marca Prosecco or upgrade your midnight toast with Beau Joie Brut Champagne, perfect for pairing with a lively night of bites, beats, and festive fun. On New Year’s Day, guests can enjoy brunch from 10am-3pm, and dinner during regular business hours.

Address: 4053 Campbell Ave., Arlington, VA 22206

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/palette-22-arlington>

Ada’s on the River

Hours: 11:30 AM – 1 AM

Celebrate with sweeping waterfront views and a luxury holiday feast — from Miso-Glazed Arctic Char to an elegant Surf & Turf and a stunning 14 oz American Wagyu Ribeye aged 65 days. Close out 2025 with caviar-level sparkle thanks to Cricova Pinot Meunier Extra-Sec and Domaine Carneros Brut as the clock strikes midnight. On New Year’s Day, guests can enjoy brunch from 10am-3pm, and dinner during regular business hours.

Address: 3 Pioneer Mill Way, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/adas-on-the-river-alexandria>

Vola’s Dockside Grill

Hours: NYE Brunch from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm,

www.ConnectionNewspapers.com

Dinner until 2:00 am

Ring in the New Year with a waterfront celebration at Vola’s Dockside Grill! Start your New Year’s Eve with style at their special NYE Brunch from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, featuring delectable dishes and a festive atmosphere. As the day unfolds, transition into a night of excitement with a Dinner service that lasts until 2:00 am, accompanied by a lively NYE event featuring a DJ to keep the party going until the early hours. Embrace the first day of the year with a delightful New Year’s Day Brunch from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm, setting the stage for a day of relaxation. The celebration continues into the evening with an à la carte Dinner menu available until 11:00 pm. Join Vola’s Dockside Grill for a New Year’s extravaganza filled with good food, good company, and a waterfront view to remember. Cheers to a fantastic year ahead!

Address: 101 N Union St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/volas-dockside-grill>

Mia’s Italian Kitchen

Hours: 11 AM – 1 AM

Celebrate like the Italians do — with comfort, warmth, and bubbles. Mia’s features special entrées including the decadent Veal Chop Parmigiana and Maine Lobster Ravioli in preserved lemon–caviar butter sauce. Raise a celebratory flute of Canella Prosecco Superiore or Pinot Noir Brut Rosé as you welcome 2026 with flair. On New Year’s Day, guests can enjoy brunch from 10am-3pm, and dinner during regular business hours.

Address: 100 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/mias-italian-kitchen-alexandria>

Joe Theismann’s Restaurant

Hours: 11 AM – 1 AM

Joe Theismann’s kicks off 2026 with hearty comfort like a 14 oz Drunken Ribeye marinated in whiskey-soy and finished with garlic butter, plus a Seared Ahi Tuna Salad for a lighter celebration. La Marca Prosecco and Beau Joie Brut Champagne keep glasses clinking well past midnight. On New Year’s Day, guests can enjoy brunch from 11am-3pm, and dinner during regular business hours.

Address: 1800A Diagonal Rd, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/joe-theismanns-restaurant>

BARCA Pier

Hours: 11:30 AM – 1 AM

Ring in 2026 along the waterfront at BARCA, where Mediterranean style sets the tone for the night. Enjoy Surf & Turf Skewers with za’atar scallops and aleppo-spiced shrimp or Seared Branzino with caponata — paired perfectly with Balerin Prosecco or Nicholas Feuillatte Brut Champagne for a dockside toast under the stars. On New Year’s Day, guests can enjoy brunch from 11am-3pm, and dinner during regular business hours.

Address: 2 Pioneer Mill Way, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/barca-wine-bar-and-pier-alexandria>

The Majestic

Hours: 11:30 AM – 1 AM

Celebrate the arrival of 2026 in the heart of Old Town at The Majestic, where timeless hospitality and elevated American comforts set the tone for a festive night out. Guests can enjoy delicious dishes and classic cocktails late into the evening before welcoming the new year with ease. Keep the celebration going the next morning with a special New Year’s Day brunch from 11 AM to 3 PM, followed by a relaxed dinner service to kick off 2026 deliciously.

Address: 911 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/the-majestic-alexandria>

Royal Restaurant

Hours: 8 AM – 10 PM

Ring in the New Year with timeless indulgence at The Royal, featuring elevated classics like Lobster Thermidor with cognac sauce and

Cast Iron NY Strip Au Poivre with rosemary butter and crispy Brussels sprouts. Champagne is a must, with pours like Benvolio Prosecco and Banshee “Ten of Cups” Brut to toast to 2026 in delicious style. On New Year’s Day, The Royal will open during regular business hours, 8am-10pm.

Address: 730 North Saint Asaph Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Reservations: <https://www.opentable.com/r/royal-restaurant-alexandria>

DEC. 19-20

Holiday Tours. 5:30 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 6:30 p.m.

At Pope-Leighey House, Alexandria. Enjoy hot cider, cookies, and holiday music as you tour the Pope-Leighey House during special evening tours. This is a unique chance to see the home decorated for a mid-century holiday!

SATURDAY/DEC. 20

Holiday With a Twist. 7:30 p.m. At Rachel M.

Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center. Presented by Alexandria Symphony Orchestra, Alexandria’s favorite holiday musical tradition returns featuring stirring choruses from Handel’s Messiah and dancers from BalletNova performing the greatest moments from The Nutcracker.

SATURDAY/DEC. 20

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JAN. 2-31, 2026

Toy Stories Art Exhibit. At Del Ray Artisans, 2704 Mount Vernon Ave., Alexandria. Explores the cultural, emotional, and imaginative world of toys. Celebrate the toys that brought you happiness in your childhood or comfort you with nostalgia as an adult. Opening Reception: Friday, January 2 from 7-9 p.m. Gallery hours are Thursdays 12-6 p.m., Fridays 12-9 p.m., Saturdays & Sundays 12-6 p.m. Details at DelRayArtisans.org/exhibits.

SATURDAY/JAN. 3, 2026

Don’t Let it Happen to Poetry! (A Poet’s

Reunion). 6:30 p.m. At The Athenaeum, Alexandria. Great Publishing Company LLC in partnership with the Northern Virginia Fine Arts Association invites you to start the year off right with poetry and poets. Join in the 7th Don’t Let It Happen to Poetry! orchestrated by Athenaeum Poet In Residence, KaNikki Jakarta. Network with like-minded artists in anticipation of a great poetic year.

THE BIRCHMERE

At 3701 Mount Vernon Ave., Alexandria. All shows are at 7:30 p.m., unless otherwise noted. Tickets available at Ticketmaster.com. Contact The Birchmere at 703-549-7500 or www.Birchmere.com.

DECEMBER

Wed. 17: Mac McAnally \$79.50

Thu. 18: Carbon Leaf \$49.50

Fri. 19: Carbon Leaf \$49.50 SOLD OUT!

Sat. 20: A John Waters Christmas \$59.50 SOLD OUT!

Sun. 21: Luther ReLives Holilday Show starring William “Smooth” Wardlaw \$55.00

Mon. 22: Christmas Brass Spectacular featuring The Capitol Bones All Brass Big Band with Lena Seikaly \$39.50

Fri. 26: Tarsha Fitzgerald Presents VOICES OF MOTOWN Christmas! \$45.00

Sat. 27: A Very MAYSA Christmas \$79.50

Sun. 28: Bela Dona Band \$39.50

Wed. 31: New Year’s Eve with The Seldom Scene & Shelby Means -7:30pm- \$49.50

JANUARY

Sat. 3: Last Train Home \$35.00

Fri. 9: Ricky Skaggs & Kentucky Thunder \$55.00

Sat. 10: Ricky Skaggs & Kentucky Thunder \$55.00

Wed. 14: Derek Gripper & Ballaké Sissoko \$39.50

“Algorithmed” Out



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

According to William Shakespeare, it used to be that “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.” Now that very same stage/world has evolved into an algorithm, and we are merely bits (or is that bytes) of computer space, make that a data center (coming to an open space near you). And although Hal, the computer voice from “2001: A Space Odyssey,” has not quite taken over as feared, his AI wanna-bes sure have. Soon, those of us making miscellaneous inquiries of entities/businesses - anything/anyone really, will be dealing less and less with actual human beings and more and more with a chip off some old mother’s board processor’s block. To invoke and rearrange an old Maj. Frank Burn’s comment from the long-running television series M*A*S*H: You can’t swing an outdated computer something or other without hitting an i.t. person. Finally, after 50 years, the former audio-visual students in high school are getting their piece, and the rest of us, getting their comeuppance.

What has set me off on this tangent is the driverless car innovations that are trickling into a traffic pattern near you. Aside from not understanding how it knows where to go and how, at least tipping will be minimized if artificial intelligence comes to as cab near you. And the ever-present language barrier between passenger and customer will become less of a problem and more of a pleasure. Nevertheless, sitting idly by while a computer navigates the ins and outs of driving/maneuvering through traffic (or simply home or work) will provide some relief from the stress of driving, it will however likely increase the stress of being a passenger. How do I not pay attention to the decisions this computer is communicating to a chip with whom I have zero say-so and complete dependence? Can you say/feel and more helpless?

And as for what happens when I’m not in the car; when I’m home, at work or on holiday - still connected/communicating with the world through my cell phone, iPad, laptop or desktop, the real trouble will begin/continue. How do I know what words I am reading are real, actually attributed to whomever, presenting facts and/or opinions honestly and correctly, or somehow directed at me and my demographics or, are they presented for public consumption? How do we synthesize what we are seeing and hearing as credible and believable as opposed to dismissing it all because of the bots/computer farms? (Why bots? Do they/did they come from the country of Botswana?) Are we all to become victims of an ever-involving computer-generated elite (a la Cyberdyne Systems from the first two “Terminator” movies) who are not capitalists but rather computers who have become self-aware “controllers?” We may still have freedom of speech, but the audience won’t be listening or be the least bit concerned. I’ve always felt that I present better in person than on paper. What if there is no more paper? What if I apply/respond to a non-person? Will I be worried about its computer algorithm instead of its people/policies/goals/objectives? If so, life will be an awful lot different going forward than it will be reminiscing backward. If humanity is “algorithmed” out of our lives, then sitting in a driverless car will be the least of our problems.

I’m all for progress, despite my baby-boomer age range. But it’s the path we’re on that scares me. It’s the “Is it Memorex?” commercial all over again. Although in this instance, the question going forward will be something like, “Is that truth or consequences?” (not the game show) which may or may not lead to life or death-type decisions. Hardly how I anticipated my golden years.

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



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