

# The Business Journal

of Tri-Cities Tennessee / Virginia

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**BRISTOL**

## Bristol works to secure Amtrak



Rendering of AMTRAK AT Bristol Station.  
ORIGINAL PHOTO BY EARL NEIKIRK

*Plus*  
Tennessee sets standard for student financial education  
and  
Tennessee Hills Distillery Expansion

January 2024 | \$3.00  
Volume 36, Number 2

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***Bristol a key to passenger rail expansion***

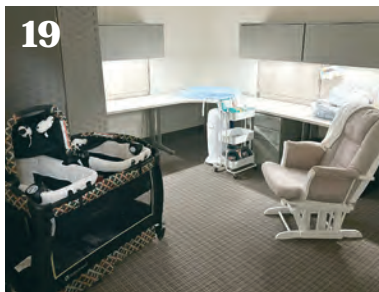
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The Business Journal of Tri-Cities TN/VA is published monthly by Derby Publishing, LLC  
PO Box 5006  
Johnson City, TN 37602  
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Subscription \$35/yr



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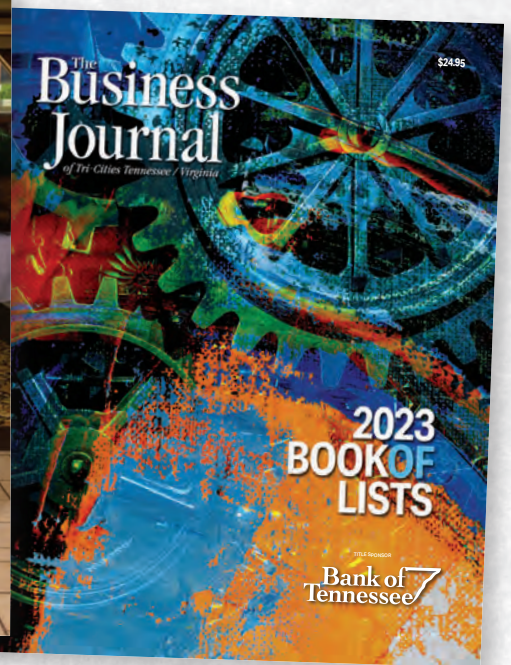
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# Be patient with our erratic housing market

I owned a midsize home in a pleasant neighborhood for nearly a decade and sold it about two years ago. I am glad I did so when I did. And while renting right now is not ideal either, it won't be a good time to buy a house for a while.

The problem is a long-standing housing shortage and moribund market, which may take years to resurrect. The foundational issue in the Tri-Cities is a scarcity of homes, due to underbuilding and transplants to the region.

And it's not just here.

The National Association of Realtors recently estimated that the United States overall lacks more than five million starter homes. The shortage has driven up costs for buyers and renters. The average value of a home is up a whopping 40% since COVID-19, the highest three-year increase in recorded history.

At this time 15 years ago, real-estate agents had over two million vacant housing units available. That number has dwindled to around 730,000, despite the country's population growing. Rural areas, suburbs and especially cities are expensive. The monthly payment on a new home has increased by more than 50% in the past three years, as 30-year mortgage rates more than doubled.

Why? When coronavirus arrived, the Federal Reserve pushed interest rates down to near zilch. This led to a surge of home sales, with the volume hitting its highest level since the Great Recession concluded.

Buyers rushed to find low mortgage rates; sellers scrambled to take advantage of soaring prices. Taking advantage of magnanimous work-from-home policies, folks also relocated.

Inflation then caused prices to rise because of demand created by stimulus checks. The Fed raised interest rates to cool down the rate of price growth, but this led to a run-up in mortgage rates and a crash in home sales. Would-be buyers decided to rent instead of buy. Would-be sellers stayed instead of moving, because why relinquish a 3% mortgage rate for a 7% rate? Very few units hit the market, and prices stayed high.

As one local agent recently told me, "An uncomfortable



situation has enveloped today's market. People can't afford to sell or to buy."

He explained that prices are high because mortgage costs are high, while rents are high because rental inventory is paltry — about 35% less than a decade ago.

"This means we are stuck paying more than we wish," he added.

I've never worked in real estate but believe a drop in mortgage rates could reactivate the housing market, increase demand and lead to a flurry of new activity. However, it won't solve everything. Our limited supply of homes would lead to higher prices; millions of prospective homebuyers will flood the market, as homeowners finally will feel motivated to sell, giving

up their low rates for lofty offers. But then affluent buyers outbid one another and eliminate less affluent buyers.

No one should expect the return of anything resembling a buyer's market, so long as a housing shortage and supply issues persist. Until housing production ramps up for a prolonged period, things won't markedly improve.

On the positive side, northeast Tennessee counties recently ranked among the least vulnerable to housing market declines. In a study of 581 U.S. counties, focusing on home affordability, equity, foreclosure rates and unemployment data, Sullivan County ranked 562 and Washington held a 540 ranking. Counties with the highest rank are considered least vulnerable.

What should a family seeking to buy a home do? Buy and refinance, when possible, if you have the financial ability. Put down as large a down payment as you can to cut your mortgage costs. Otherwise just rent — for perhaps the next decade.

I'm not an expert, but that's my best advice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Asis J. Hood". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

# Youngkin announces manufacturing expansion in Russell County

**A**s 2023 closed, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin announced that Bates Family Farm, LLC will create a dozen new jobs and invest nearly \$1 million to relocate its manufacturing facility to a 40,000 square foot building owned by Russell County.

This effort is being undertaken to meet growing consumer demand for the farm's skincare products.

Bates Family Farm aims to leverage its success to build the new manufacturing facility and creamery to produce food products, bottled goat milk and artisan cheeses for wholesale and retail distribution. This space will allow for the development of these new products and additional production capacity.

Bates Family Farm is committed to purchasing 100% of all expected agricultural products from Virginia, an increase of more than \$2 million over the next three years as a result of the coming expansion.

"I am pleased to see this AFID award assist in the relocation and expansion of Bates Family Farm, a Virginia home-grown, agricultural business, founded by one of our country's veterans," Youngkin said in a Dec. 27 press release. "This project increases economic development activity in Russell County, provides new jobs in a rural area, and demonstrates our support of the Commonwealth's dairy industry and to Virginia's entire agricultural community."

Shannon and Joseph Bates established Bates Family Farm in Russell County just over a decade ago. The company produces a full line of goat milk-based skincare products to include soap, lotion, lip balm, and body cream that are sold in more than 1,000 retail stores and specialty shops across the country.

"This AFID grant award and the support we have received from Russell County are critical factors in our decision to move forward with this project," Joseph Bates, who serves as CEO, said. "We are honored to grow our business in the county we call home and be part of Virginia's agricultural community."

Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Matthew Lohr noted that "the commitment to purchasing all Virginia grown goat milk is a tremendous benefit to Virginia goat milk producers and increases the visibility of specialty product producers in Southwest Virginia."

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services worked with Russell County and the Russell County Industrial Development Authority to secure the project for the Commonwealth. Youngkin approved a \$70,000 grant from the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund, which Russell County will match with local funds.

"Russell County is committed to continuing to focus on agribusiness as a growing and vital part of our local economy. This project will not only create jobs and investment in the county, but also grow the business' contributions to local tax revenues," Russell County Industrial Development Authority Executive



**Bottled goat milk is among the items produced by Bates Family Farm in Southwest Virginia.**

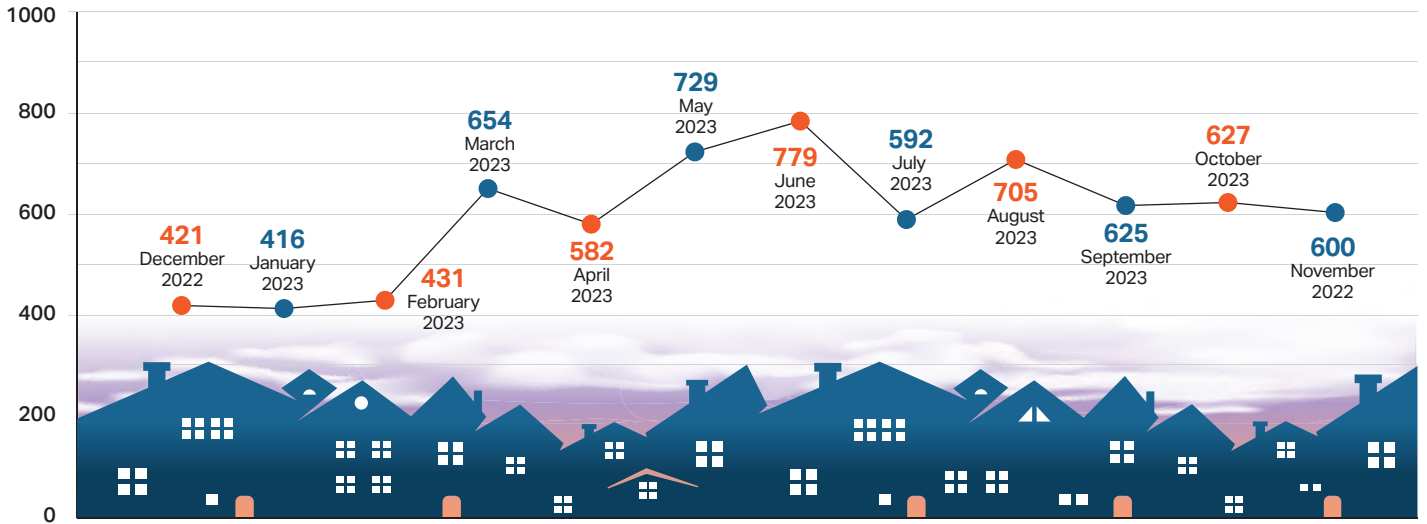
Director Ernie McFaddin explained.

Thanking the family for its investment, State Sen. Todd Pillion of Southwest Virginia added that he's "extremely pleased to see this public-private partnership help a Virginia small business expand its offerings and create jobs in a rural area."



## Tri-Cities Home Sales

Past 12 Months



Source: NETAR

“

NETAR's Pending Sales Index declined 13 points from the previous month; however, it's five points higher than it was during November last year. The index removes some of the noise from the monthly raw numbers and benchmarks how the market is performing against a pre-pandemic baseline. The index is a forward-looking indicator based on the 2018 annual average for signed contracts instead of closings.

- Don Fenley

## Home Sales, Year to Year

Sales **583**  
 Average Sales Price  
**\$263,372**  
 New Listings **674**

Sales **600**  
 Average Sales Price  
**\$293,831**  
 New Listings **756**



Source: NETAR

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## Bristol remains key to passenger rail expansion

By A.J. Kaufman, Managing Editor

**T**he Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) recently took over efforts to expand passenger rail service to Bristol. The agency is in the midst of a multi-year process to identify, review and potentially fund various new passenger rail corridors.

Currently, Amtrak only extends passenger service from the nation's capital to Roanoke, via Charlottesville and Lynchburg. A second train was added to the Roanoke route last year.

A study from the same year estimated it would cost more than a half-billion dollars – adjusted for 2030 inflation levels – to bring service from New River Valley to Bristol.

Virginia's Director of Rail and Public Transportation Jennifer DeBruhl discussed the possible Bristol route during a recent call about railroading issues in the region. At the time, the Commonwealth awaited word from FRA on a corridor program for Washington D.C. across Southwest Virginia into Tennessee, commencing at Bristol. At a Dec. 9 press conference alongside U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith announced that federal funds were awarded to the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

"This \$500,000 grant by the Federal Railroad Administration

is great news," Griffith commented. "The proposed corridor would extend rail service to Bristol, which would provide more transportation options for those living in Southwest Virginia and those traveling to the area."

Meanwhile across the state line, the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) was tasked with finding the most sensible potential corridors. Released last July, their study found, "intercity passenger rail service could help increase connectivity and facilitate tourism and other economic development initiatives in Tennessee."

Beth Rhinehart, president and CEO of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, has worked for many years on this idea, along with many others.

She serves on the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority, has participated in a press conference with Tennessee legislators, and has been asked by Kaine and Warner to bring community leaders to the table for conversations about trains coming to and through Bristol.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided funding for the Corridor Identification and Development Program.

With Tennessee's lone rail service located across the state in Memphis, there's a clear void between East Tennessee and Atlanta.

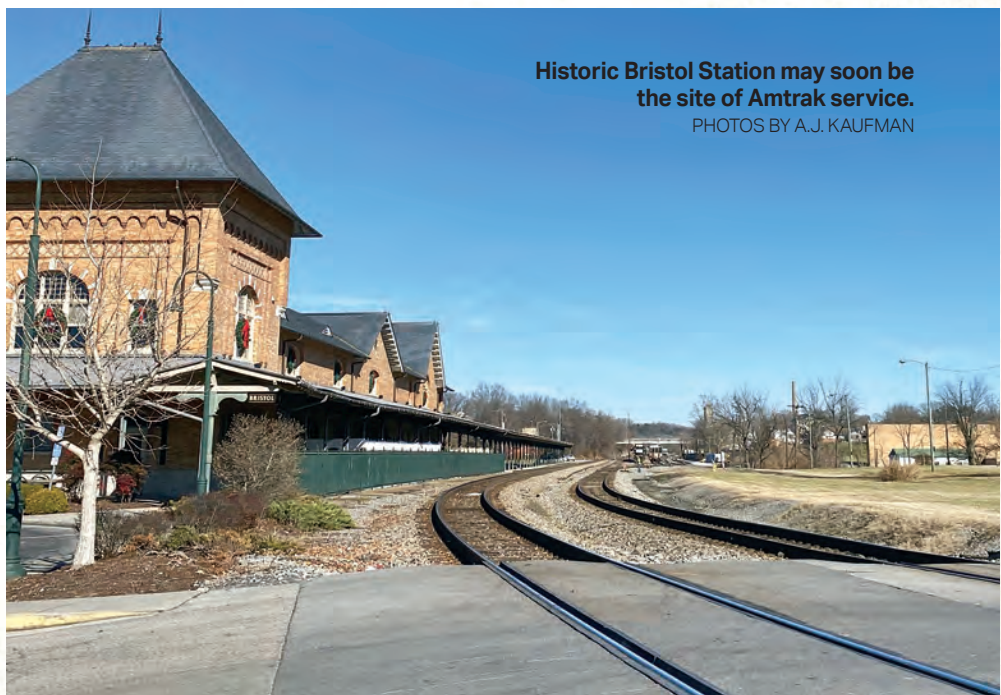
"The success of this effort lies partly with not just dead-ending in Bristol, but connectivity further south and southwest of here," Rhinehart told the *Business Journal*. "We are kind of in that sweet spot... We are the next logical point for Virginia to build out passenger rail opportunities for all Virginians. We feel like Bristol is the point to connect and open up Tennessee into a lot of the Northeast Corridor opportunities."

“For years, we've been championing the expansion of rail to every corner of the Commonwealth because it's a slam dunk for local economies, cuts traffic, and protects the environment,” Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner said in a their joint statement on Dec. 9. “We're thrilled the bipartisan infrastructure law is taking a big step towards expanding service across the entire Commonwealth so communities along the I-95 corridor and beyond can be connected by more convenient, consistent passenger rail.”

Another appeal is diminishing congestion and decreasing delays on Interstate 81 for truck and car travel. This can provide families with a more convenient opportunity to travel to Washington D.C., New York City, and can lead to essential growth in Southwest Virginia. It's also important for business.

"This added mode of transportation is essential to growth in Southwest Virginia. It's important when businesses are looking to locate here," Rhinehart explained. "It's something that has garnered more local and regional support than a lot of things that are discussed. It's one of those things, as a

SEE RAIL, 12



**Historic Bristol Station may soon be the site of Amtrak service.**

PHOTOS BY A.J. KAUFMAN

**RAIL, CONTINUED**

chamber that serves across that state line, it was a good fit for us to help lead that conversation, since we serve both sides; we have relationships with both sets of federal legislators; and the work that we do with government relations and advocacy makes us a good fit to work with both states as well.”

Another important positive is historic Bristol Station. Rhinehart believes only minimal upgrades would be needed for the restored downtown station to meet passenger rail standards.

Tennessee officials from TACIR, the Tennessee Department

of Transportation, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation and the FRA convened in Bristol last summer for a town hall hosted by the Bristol Chamber to discuss the possibility of extending service. At that meeting, Volunteer State representatives said they are considering a Chattanooga to Bristol route as one of three primary options. This is outranked by a proposed Nashville to Chattanooga to Atlanta route. The Bristol to Chattanooga was equally ranked as Tier 2, along with a Memphis to Nashville corridor.

For fiscal year 2023, Amtrak Virginia served a record 1.26 million passengers, about 35% higher than their previous record. 



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# Distillery represents region, sets sights higher



The Tennessee Hills Distillery in Jonesborough.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF TENNESSEE HILLS DISTILLERY

By A.J. Kaufman, Managing Editor

Stephen Callahan and his wife, Jessica, founded Tennessee Hills Distillery in Jonesborough in 2014. Less than a decade later, the brand has expanded throughout our region. And throughout the time, the company has found important ways to enrich the lives of local residents.

In 2021, the couple established Tennessee Hills Brewstillery in Johnson City and broke ground on a \$25 million expansion of his distillery in Bristol a year later. Additionally, Callahan served four years as an alderman in Tennessee's oldest town, on the board of trustees at his alma mater, Emory & Henry, and helped establish a Brewing and Distillation Studies Minor at ETSU last year.

Tennessee Hills was established with the vision of creating exceptional handcrafted spirits to "captivate the palates of enthusiasts and connoisseurs alike, a brand that represents the people, culture, and the spirit of the Appalachian Highlands," the founder relayed.

The Callahans' commitment to quality quickly gained them recognition by becoming Jonesborough's top tourist destination, with over 100,000 visitors a year and receiving numerous national-level spirit competition awards.

During the unprecedented challenges emanating from the Covid-19 pandemic, Tennessee Hills Distillery responded to the urgent need for hand sanitizer in northeast Tennessee by swiftly pivoting its operations. With only four employees at the time, the distillery transitioned to manufacturing hand sanitizer to address the shortage in their local community.

This involved the leveraging of expertise in alcohol production, adapting its production processes and deploying resources. Tennessee Hills therefore demonstrated a commitment to public health and played a critical role in providing essential supplies to meet demand during a crisis.

"This proactive and impactful initiative exemplified the company's dedication to serving the community and exemplified its agility and willingness to contribute to the greater good during challenging times," Callahan told the *Business Journal*. "Our love for the region and desire to make a major economic impact is a real one."

Also in 2020, Tennessee Hills solidified its position as a trailblazer in the state's craft spirits industry by opening a "sophisticated and alluring" craft cocktail bar. The owners believe the bar's success stems from its commitment to crafting

SEE CALLAHAN, 14

**CALLAHAN, CONTINUED**

an excellent cocktail experience, by “seamlessly blending innovation, artistry, and a deep passion for mixology.”

Tennessee Hills Distillery expanded its offerings a year later by opening the Brewstillery in downtown Johnson City, which quickly became a popular destination for visitors seeking to experience unique drinks crafted by the company. According to Callahan, the Brewstillery “...provides a welcoming and engaging environment for guests to immerse themselves in the art of craft distilling and brewing.”

Looking toward the future, however, perhaps as important as any endeavor is Tennessee Hills’ collaboration with ETSU. This visionary idea constitutes a milestone among workforce development and education within their growing industry.

“This partnership resulted in the establishment of a minor program designed to cultivate the next generation of skilled professionals in these specialized fields,” Callahan explained. “By merging academic expertise with real-world industry insights, the program provides students with a comprehensive and practical education, empowering them to thrive in the evolving landscape of craft beverage production. Tennessee Hills Distillery’s commitment to internships, knowledge sharing, and industry-relevant curriculum directly contributed to shaping a talent pool equipped to meet the growing demands of this dynamic and increasingly vital sector.”

Unsurprisingly, considering the company’s meteoric rise, Tennessee Hills aims to achieve national prominence and recognition. In August 2022, they broke ground on a 39,000 square foot distillery expansion in Bristol, across from The Pinnacle. The new experiential facility will emphasize in-depth operational tours, tasting bars, cocktail bars, and green spaces for entertainment. The new production facility will rank Tennessee Hills as the 4th largest self-producing distillery in the Volunteer State and capable of distilling 100 barrels of whiskey per week.

Simultaneously, Tennessee Hills is creating a new business model called the Tennessee Hills Creamstillery in an existing building. The new business will be the first of its kind with an emphasis on both alcoholic and non-alcoholic ice creams, cream liqueurs, whiskey infused baked goods and gourmet cheesecakes.

Once completed in 2024, the new Bristol operation will push the staff of Tennessee Hills to over 75.

Business leaders in the community have taken notice.

“Based on my expertise and experience as an entrepreneur, I am very confident Stephen will end up being one of the next great Niswonger, McGlothlin, Greene, Niswonder-type entrepreneurs of this great Appalachian Highlands region,” Scott Andrew, CEO of Retail Service Systems, recently told the *Business Journal*. “He is a humble, giving, hardworking entrepreneur that puts customers and employees first.”



Stephen and Jessica Callahan



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TENNESSEE HILLS DISTILLERY

# Tennessee sets standard for financial education in schools

By A.J. Kaufman, Managing Editor

Since 2013, the Tennessee Department of Education has required a half-semester personal finance course to fulfill graduation requirements. The state says the course is “designed to inform students how individual choices directly influence occupational goals, future earning potential, and long-term financial well-being.”

Proudly, the state serves as a model and among the few to enact such a mandate at the high school level. In the past decade since, a wave of financial literacy legislation has been embraced nationwide, as states push to get important personal finance classes integrated into their public schools.

Industry experts note that while financial literacy has long been a national priority, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked the aforementioned state-level legislation to spread nationwide.

Virginia joins Tennessee among the early adopters, too. Along with the Volunteer State and Old Dominion, only Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina and Utah have what Next Gen Personal Finance refers to as the “gold standard” of personal

finance education: a standalone half-semester course solely focusing on finance. Some 15 others are in progress.

Currently, less than a quarter of U.S. public high school students were guaranteed to take a personal finance course, although this number is up from under 17% in 2019. The information comes from Next Gen Personal Finance’s 2023 annual report. Based in California, Next Gen is a financial literacy nonprofit with a bold mission that by 2030 every graduating high school student will have taken a one-semester course in personal finance.

Right now, though, the majority of high school students can only take personal finance as an elective or part of another unrelated course, and one report found access gaps also exist along geographic and socio-economic lines.

The latest tracking data from Next Gen — from late November — shows 23 states, including Tennessee, guarantee at least one

SEE FINANCIAL EDUCATION, 16



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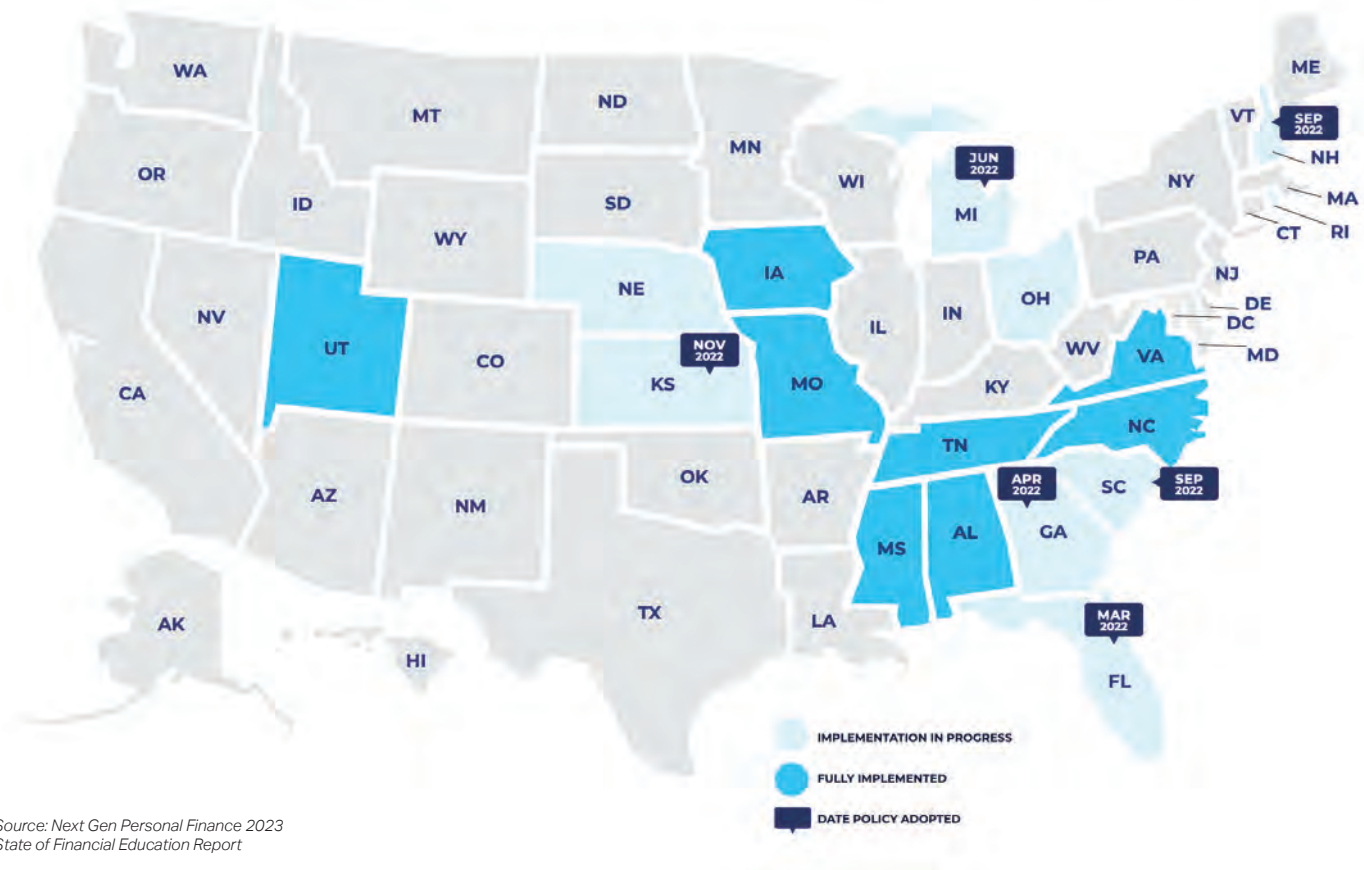


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## 17 states guarantee a Personal Finance course for all public high school students.

In 2022, 6 more states (FL, GA, KS, MI, NH, SC) added Personal Finance graduation requirements. Now, 40.5% of U.S. public high school students will be guaranteed to take a Personal Finance course.



### FINANCIAL EDUCATION, CONTINUED

semester of personal finance before high school graduation. However, Tennessee is one of the few states that requires both economics and personal finance courses, whereas other places may prioritize one over the other.

About half the states required an economics course for graduation last school year, according to an annual survey from the Council for Economic Education.

While Tennessee adopted the high school mandate earlier than most other states, advocates tell us there's still progress to be had.

"The work is never done," Tennessee Financial Literacy Commission Director Bill Parker told CNBC last month. "When they get to that high school course, ideally, they're in a position to hit the ground running with some more advanced concepts that they can apply to their own lives."

Created by the General Assembly under the Financial Literacy Program Act of 2010, the commission aims to incorporate personal finance into schools "as early as possible."

The group has outlined priorities in its strategic plan through fiscal year 2025-26, which includes state-level advocacy for

expanded financial literacy programming.

### Why again?

Numerous studies have revealed the benefits of teaching children financial literacy at a young age and a strong connection between financial literacy and financial well-being.

Students who are required to take personal finance courses are often more likely to tap lower cost loans or grants if and when they attend college. According to a study from National Endowment for Financial Education, they are also less likely to utilize high-interest credit cards.

"No matter what walk of life a person pursues — farmer or pharmacist, ballplayer or businessman — a common denominator throughout life will be the person's understanding of financial matters and making smart money decisions," Powell Valley National Bank President and CEO Leton Harding told the *Business Journal*. "Bankers and others in Tennessee and Virginia have been committed for decades to improving financial and economic education. Smarter consumers make for better customers."

It's a win-win endeavor overall, and the states encompassing the Tri-Cities region lead the way. **BJ**



# Crooked Road marks 20 years

By A.J. Kaufman, Managing Editor

This year marks the 20th anniversary of The Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail.

For the first two decades, the road has served as an integral piece of Southwest Virginia's economic recovery.

The organization has been dedicated to promoting traditional old time and bluegrass music experiences to visitors by marketing the unique and authentic cultural institutions of Southwest Virginia, such as the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol, Carter Family Fold in nearby Hiltons and the Ralph Stanley Museum to the north in Clintwood.

The Crooked Road began as a 330-mile-long driving trail that connected Southwest Virginia's historic music venues and was officially recognized as Virginia's Heritage Music Trail by the Virginia General Assembly in 2004.

Since its inception, the organization has grown to service all 19 counties, 54 towns and four cities within the Southwest region.

"Many communities' economic diversification plans have wholeheartedly embraced the creative economy," Executive Director Tyler Hughes told the *Business Journal*.

He said a perfect example is Clintwood, as the town needed to diversify its economy after decades of being a thriving coal community.

Opening the Ralph Stanley Museum 20 years ago was crucial. The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) partnered with The Crooked Road to make it happen.

From the onset of The Crooked Road, the organization worked closely with partners at DHCD to identify cultural institutions that could become economic engines to grow a given community's tourism

SEE CROOKED ROAD, 18



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**Crafting a new guitar at Wayne c. Henderson school of Appalachian Arts Marion, VA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WAYNE C. HENDERSON SCHOOL OF APPALACHIAN ARTS



**The Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, Va.**

## **CROOKED ROAD, CONTINUED**

economy. The partnership has led to renovations and funding around institutions like the aforementioned Carter Family Fold, a premier tourist destination for Scott County.

The tiny community of Floyd, about 130 miles northeast of Bristol, has an economy built upon the foundations of the region's ties to agriculture, music and handicrafts.

Hughes says The Crooked Road also tries to support artists directly by working alongside the region's musicians, dancers and luthiers (craftsmen who build and repair string instruments) to present their work in various venues.

Local luthiers are marketed at places like Cunningham Handmade Instruments in Grayson Highlands and the Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts in Marion. Aspiring woodworkers take guitar building classes with world-class luthier, Wayne Henderson, whose popular guitars are played by professionals, including Eric Clapton.

The Crooked Road on Tour partners with old time and bluegrass acts from across the region to bring both musical and educational programs to schools and theaters across the nation.

"Our organization also works to market the region as the perfect place to not only hear music, but to make music," Hughes, who assumed the lead role last summer, added. "What we seek to do is showcase an unfiltered and authentic version of Southwest Virginia's culture. We don't try to dress it up or over-commercialize it, because we seek to honor the traditions of this artform as well."

A banjo player and square dance caller from Big Stone Gap, Hughes graduated from ETSU's Bluegrass, Old-Time and Country Music Program in 2015.

The Crooked Road's office is located at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace in Abingdon. [B](#)



**Wayne Henderson's top-notch finger-picking is a source of great pleasure and pride to his friends, family and neighbors in Grayson County, Virginia. His guitar playing has also been enjoyed at Carnegie Hall, in three national tours of Masters of the Steel-String Guitar, and in seven nations in Asia. In addition to his reputation as a guitarist, Henderson is a luthier of great renown. He is a recipient of a 1995 National Heritage Award presented by the National Endowment for the Arts. He produces about 20 instruments a year, mostly guitars; he is almost as well-known for the mandolins he has made. Good friend Doc Watson owned a Henderson mandolin. He said, "That Henderson mandolin is as good as any I've had my hands on. And that's saying a lot, because I've picked up some good ones."**

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WAYNE C. HENDERSON SCHOOL OF APPALACHIAN ARTS



A room at the Kingsport Chamber was transformed into a room for newborns and their mothers.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KINGSPORT CHAMBER

## Kingsport Chamber, Youngkin working to tackle childcare issues

By A.J. Kaufman, Managing Editor

A personal story illustrates how successful policies can increase employee retention and prevent new mothers from having to choose whether to leave their newborn children in the hands of others or risk their careers.

Madison Greene's maternity leave and return to the office was made more comfortable by her employer, the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce.

The marketing coordinator was one of four Kingsport Chamber employees to find out last year that they were expecting a child. The Kingsport Chamber has long had an "Infant at Work" policy, with the standard unpaid maternity leave, and the benefit of bringing children to work until they are six months old.

One week before her son was born in October, a supervisor pulled Greene aside to discuss her leave. Greene was informed that the leadership team came together to create a new culture with a six-week paid maternity leave policy, in addition to the Infant at Work policy.

"As you can imagine, I felt immensely blessed and cared for by my employers," Greene told the *Business Journal*. "Kingsport Chamber has gone above and beyond to ensure the ease and comfort of its employees and their little ones. I am able to get my work done successfully without having to be separated from

SEE **CHILDCARE**, 20

CHILDCARE, CONTINUED

“Many of us have benefited balancing dual roles of employees and caregivers — from infant to elder care. This culture fosters employee appreciation, retention, loyalty and strong performance.

**- Elaine Bodenweiser,  
CFO Kingsport Chamber**

my newborn son. I can walk into my office each day with the confidence that I have co-workers to support me as I transition into motherhood. They say it takes a village, and I am blessed enough to work with mine.”

To make the transition back to work with her son as manageable as possible, Greene says the leadership team took a large office space and renovated it to become a quiet room/nursery space. They also added blackout curtains for privacy, provided a travel crib, bassinets, diaper changing station, books and privacy screen with rocking chair.

Kingsport Chamber chief financial officer Elaine Bodenweiser — who has been in her role for 15 years and with the company for 37 — is happy to maintain a family first culture.

“Many of us have benefited balancing dual roles of employees and caregivers — from infant to elder care. This culture fosters employee appreciation, retention, loyalty and strong performance,” she explained to the *Business Journal*. We affectionately call our co-workers our “Chamber Family,” and employees’ children have been dubbed “Chamber Kids,” celebrating Easter egg hunts and Halloween trick-or-treat in the office. Bring your Kid to Work days are encouraged when parents are faced with an unexpected event, such as a school closing. Companies must listen, adapt and evolve to the needs of their employees, even more so in our current tight labor market.”

Across the state line, Glenn Youngkin wants Virginia to invest nearly \$500 million annually for two years to fund a new measure that he believes will expand available childcare options, reduce bureaucratic red tape for families and provide needed support for parents to continue serving in the workforce.

The Building Blocks for Virginia Families initiative aims to address one of the “most vexing challenges today,” per



**Madison Greene**  
PHOTO COURTESY OF KINGSPOK CHAMBER

Youngkin at the launch in December. The governor said this investment would be an increase of \$180 million per year over current funding. A new \$25 million capital fund is also part of the proposal aimed at reducing so-called childcare “deserts” for more than 300,000 children. The funding partially aims to replace pandemic-era federal dollars that soon will dry up.

Southwest Virginia figures prominently. The commonwealth’s blueprint project is the redevelopment of the former Abingdon Kmart into a regional child development and workforce hub. A \$5 million state grant went toward the 87,000-square-foot project expected to open this August in Abingdon’s Towne Center near Interstate 81.

Once fully operational, the facility is expected to accommodate 300 children through age 4. The United Way of Southwest Virginia (UWSWVA) is collaborating with Food City and the town of Abingdon on the project. UWSWVA recently announced a funding commitment of \$1.5 million from the Anne and Gene Worrell Foundation for the child development and workforce hub.

“Our aspiration is truly to follow the great leadership out of Southwest Virginia that came together with public and private resources to renovate a building that was no longer being used and transform it into a hub of both childcare opportunity and workforce development,” Youngkin said in part. **BJ**

## Tennessee allots nearly \$200 million in water infrastructure investments

The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) recently announced 49 grants, totaling \$191.2 million, from the state's American Rescue Plan (ARP) fund. TDEC is administering part of this money through competitive grants for regionalization, water reuse, resource protection and a state strategic project.

Of the 49 grants announced in mid-December, 14 are for regionalization, eight for water reuse and 27 for resource protection. Several localities within the Tri-Cities Region will benefit from the monies.

Regionalization projects will provide cooperative support across water and wastewater systems to improve the sustainability, affordability, and/or reliability of systems. Water reuse projects will reclaim water from a variety of sources then treat and reuse it for beneficial purposes. Resource protection projects will either improve water infrastructure resilience to extreme weather events, improve the management of stormwater to improve water quality, and/or restore natural landscape features such as streams or wetlands. The additional strategic project will address regional wastewater needs.

"This process demonstrates the importance of quality water infrastructure throughout the state, and we are glad we can help make the best investments possible from these funds," TDEC Commissioner David Salyers explained.

Counties and cities, water utility districts, water utility authorities, and for-profit water infrastructure systems — if in partnership

with one of the eligible entities as the lead grant applicant — were eligible to apply.

The Northeast Tennessee locations include the following:

### **Mountain City (\$997,500)**

The Town of Mountain City, in partnership with Cold Springs Utility District (CSUD), will use ARP funds to address regional drinking water needs. The project will integrate the CSUD system into Mountain City's system, addressing increased demand for drinking water in Mountain City while allowing for higher efficiency and lower costs.

### **Erwin Utilities (\$875,425)**

Erwin Utilities will use ARP funds to relocate approximately 1,000 linear feet of water main and two stream crossings to outside a stream buffer and floodway, which will protect both from future flood damage and improve access for maintenance and repair during flood events.

### **Johnson City (\$3,386,655)**

The City of Johnson City will use ARP funds on the West Walnut Basin project. This will improve hydrology and reduce flood activity during extreme weather events through the removal of warehouses on the site and the restoration of pervious land through the creation of a pond with increased natural vegetation, and the installation of a high-density polyethylene pipe.



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# Kingsport Cintas recognized by Tennessee for workplace safety record

Just before Christmas, a local company received a pleasant surprise.

The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration (TOSHA) recognized Cintas in Kingsport with its Volunteer Safety Through Accountability and Recognition (STAR) Award. It is the first time the Kingsport site has earned the coveted award.

The Volunteer STAR Award is the state's highest honor for workplace safety and health and is a nationally recognized program patterned after the OSHA Voluntary Protection Program (VPP). Because the company has received the award, its Kingsport facility is considered a Volunteer STAR site.

"We set the bar very high for this award and Cintas rose to the challenge and not only met but exceeded TOSHA's high standards for workplace safety in Tennessee," Department of Labor and Workforce Development Assistant Commissioner Wendy Fisher explained. "It takes a tremendous amount of effort and determination from everyone at the facility to create and maintain a safe and healthy workplace at this level."

Fisher traveled to Kingsport on Dec. 18 to present the Volunteer STAR Award to Cintas' managers and employees.

"We are incredibly proud of our Cintas Partners. Working safely every day is our number one priority and the Kingsport Partners have demonstrated their commitment to a world-class and injury-free workplace," Cintas General Manager Matt Broehl said. "Cintas has the most VPP sites among all organizations in the United States and the Kingsport site is honored to be the first in the great state of Tennessee."

Employees at this Cintas site process industrial laundry. Many local companies across the Tri-Cities utilize their services.

There are currently 33 Volunteer STAR sites in Tennessee. The company receives a glass award to display, along with a Volunteer STAR flag to fly at its facility. The company also has the option of using the Volunteer STAR logo on its correspondences and documents. The standard for participation in the STAR program confirms a company's safety and health program helps reduce accidents and injuries. As part of the program, TOSHA removes employers from programmed compliance inspection lists for three years.



Wendy Fisher, from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, with Cintas General Manager Matt Broehl.

## ETSU reports record fiscal year in sponsored program and research funding

From research in rural health to work in the booming field of biotechnology, East Tennessee State University aims to generate scholarship that has a real-world impact both in the region and beyond.

And in the last fiscal year, ETSU earned more than \$70 million in external awards. That funding goes toward pushing major advancements in a range of diverse fields.

"ETSU is certainly known for the immense and engaging hands-on learning experiences we offer our students with a goal of helping them move from enrolled to employed," said Kimberly D. McCorkle, ETSU provost and senior vice president for Academic Affairs. "We are also producing high quality research that is making a positive impact on our region and the world, and the more than \$70 million in external funding validates that reality."

Funded projects this year have helped advance projects crafted to enhance educational opportunities, health and wellness, the economic landscape and more.

ETSU also recorded 124 faculty members from across the colleges as principal investigators on external awards. Such a role is significant, meaning that these ETSU faculty are playing a key leadership role, shaping the vision and direction of various projects.

"These investments, often from highly competitive federal funding agencies, make plain that ETSU is a place where

cutting-edge research is occurring," said Nick Hagemeyer, vice provost for Research and Chief Research Officer at ETSU, who was named to a prestigious research fellowship program in 2023. "Our faculty engage in meaningful, impactful, scholarly work, demonstrating creativity and the ability to change and transform with ever-evolving technology. That is certainly what you want to see from a research university."

It isn't just professors crafting important scholarship. Students are engaging, too.

Earlier this semester, graduate students impressed during a research competition. First-place winner Jessa Leigh Aldridge is producing work that could help children who suffer from Dravet Syndrome, a rare but serious form of epilepsy.

Undergraduate students likewise have considerable opportunities to work with faculty on research.

Held each spring, the Jay W. Boland Undergraduate Research Symposium fosters discussion and collaboration in a variety of fields that span the hard sciences, business and technology and more.

"ETSU has prepared me for my future in many different ways, including the opportunity to do undergraduate research and engage with mentors who have done this before and know how important research is," Olivia Campbell, a former ETSU student now studying multilingual education at Vanderbilt University, said.

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# Northeast State joins local schools for new teacher apprenticeship program

Earlier this winter, Northeast State Community College forged a new program with two local county school systems. The effort aims to bolster the region's K-12 teacher workforce.

Northeast State created an apprenticeship pathway for teacher's assistants and paraprofessionals in the Carter County and Johnson County school systems. These apprentice candidates continue to work full-time while earning college credits to become K-12 teachers.

"We are extremely excited this partnership is beginning to take on and address the teacher shortage in our region," said Holly Free-Ollard, vice president for economic and workforce development at Northeast State. "Northeast State is about to embark on a new journey in the apprenticeship world, we are excited to have this partnership with these two counties."

Northeast State announced this new apprenticeship at the Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing in Kingsport. Assistant Director of Carter County Schools and Human Resources Director Diana Bowers joined Elementary Curriculum & Instruction/Federal Programs Supervisor at the event to sign the apprenticeship agreements.

The paraprofessional teaching assistants selected as apprenticeship candidates will pursue an associate degree at Northeast State and enter the transfer pathway to earn a four-year degree. The apprentices pursue one of three selected pathways at Northeast State: Early Childhood Education (K-3); the Pre-Early Childhood Education (Pre-K-3); the Pre-Teacher Education (K-5); or associate of science degree in Pre-Teacher Education (Secondary Education) pathway.

Northeast State says the new apprenticeship sets forth a two-phase pathway for candidates. In the first phase, students enroll at Northeast State to earn college credits and on-the-job (OJT) training hours while earning an associate degree. In the second phase, students enroll at a four-year institution where they complete necessary college credit hours and OJT hours to earn a bachelor's degree. The associate degree matriculates all credit hours toward the student's four-year degree.

"When they get their teaching certificates, they will be teaching with us and staying in our counties," Wills said. "We are choosing our best teaching assistants to enter the program."



Diana Bowers, left, of Carter County Schools, and Angie Wills of Johnson County Schools, with Northeast State President Jeff McCord.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTHEAST STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Nathan Weber, assistant vice president for academic affairs programs and services at Northeast State, said the new agreement arose to address any shortage of K-12 teachers in the region. Data suggests a significant shortage of K-12 teachers across Tennessee. According to a U.S. Department of Education report for the 2023-2024 school year, Tennessee's Pre-K, kindergarten, and K-12 grades reported teacher shortages in the areas of mathematics, social studies, English, science and art/music education.

"It is the first apprenticeship in teaching for Northeast State," Weber explained. "Prospective students from both school systems have already applied to the college; we will be working with those students individually to develop their schedules."

A K-12 teacher in the Volunteer State is required to hold a bachelor's degree and earn a practitioner teacher's license. A teaching candidate must be enrolled in or have completed an approved educator preparation program and meet all professional assessment requirements as specified by the State Board of Education. Both Wills and Bowers note how teacher assistants and paraprofessionals form bonds with students and peers as they serve their schools.

"Our paraprofessionals have strong roots in the community," Bowers added. "We know they are going to be with us."



# King and VHCC sign guaranteed admission agreement



From left are VHCC President Adam Hutchison; VHCC vice president of instruction & student services Derek Whisman; King Provost Matt Roberts; and former King President Alexander Whitaker. PHOTO COURTESY OF KING UNIVERSITY.

Just before Thanksgiving, King University and Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC) announced a collaboration on a Guaranteed Admission Agreement that simplifies the application and enrollment process for those students who have completed their associate degree and wish to continue on into a four-year program.

“VHCC and King have a long and excellent history of working together to make educational pathways accessible for students throughout our region,” King Provost Matt Roberts said. “This agreement ratifies that partnership and simplifies the process for those VHCC students seeking to further their knowledge and specialize in their degree program.”

Upon completion of the transfer-oriented degree program at VHCC, students will be accepted as having met King’s General Education requirements, except for Common Experience classes unique to King. By aligning these areas of study and guaranteeing admission, students are presented with a streamlined, more affordable pathway to a four-year degree.

In the College Board’s 2023 report, Education Pays, data showed that the median earnings of those with a two-year degree totaled just over \$52,000 annually, while those completing a four-year degree saw earnings roughly \$20,000 higher per year.

“Education is a worthwhile investment in yourself as an individual, as well as an asset when looking at future earnings,” said Derek Whisman, VHCC vice president of instruction and student services. “When you look at the value of a degree over a lifetime, it can mean dramatically increased social mobility and the difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars in income.

VHCC is excited to work with a great transfer partner like King University as, together, we continue to build a stronger workforce in Southwest Virginia.

Also at King in recent months, students enrolled at the School of Nursing are enjoying the opportunity to expand their classroom experience with the addition of 10 nursing simulators installed in newly renovated laboratory settings.

Nursing simulators are life-size mannequins that mimic live patients with a high degree of realism. They can be programmed to present various health care needs and respond to student interaction, providing immediate feedback and invaluable learning experiences.

King’s high-fidelity simulators offer students practice in working with adult, pediatric, and infant patients in a number of settings, including those encountered in childbirth, older adult, and critical care environments.

The school’s leadership is grateful for friends of the university who made this extraordinary upgrade possible and “delighted to make these state-of-the-art resources available to our students.”



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# Oakley named president of Mullican Flooring

As the new year began, Mullican Flooring promoted Pat Oakley to president of the Johnson City-based company.

Oakley succeeds Neil Poland, who now serves as executive chairman.

A veteran of the industry for more than a quarter-century, Oakley joined the leading manufacturer of hardwood flooring in 2000 as a regional sales manager. He was promoted to national sales manager in 2005, where he supervised regional managers, oversaw national sales goals and managed relationships with key distribution retailers. In 2017, Oakley was promoted to vice president of marketing and led various strategic initiatives.

“I am honored to lead a company as strong and committed to excellence as Mullican Flooring,” Oakley said. “During our almost 40-year history, Mullican has become one of the top national hardwood flooring manufacturers, largely through the guidance of Neil Poland — a proven leader who embodies Mullican’s standards



Pat Oakley

for sustainability, innovation and quality. I am excited to carry on with the exceptional direction he has set for this company, and I am committed to ensuring Mullican continues to create great experiences for our customers.”

Poland had served as Mullican’s president since 1999. He was responsible for leading the company’s significant growth and diversification, expanding its product line to become one of the most comprehensive in the industry, and steering Mullican to its current position as one of the leading hardwood flooring brands in the country.

“Pat is a proven leader who exudes a relentless work ethic, tremendous energy and enthusiasm for our business,” Poland added. “He has done a superb job managing two segments within our company, and this should be a natural step in Pat’s career.”

Founded in 1985, Mullican Flooring is headquartered in northeast Tennessee and also operates additional production facilities in Southwest Virginia, western New York and West Virginia.

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# “He doesn’t have ulcers... but he’s a carrier.”

*This is a monthly 'bright-side of life' column brought to you by Bill Derby, Publisher of the Business Journal. A national award-winning columnist for his newspaper, the Johnson City News & Neighbor, Bill has penned over 1,200 weekly columns.*

By Bill Derby, Publisher

There are many coffee clubs nestled inside local cafes and restaurants in towns around our area. Wise old men gather daily or weekly to share words of encouragement and wisdom they have learned over the years.

They pass on gossip, discuss political situations, root out local ne'er-do-wells, dwell on high taxes, sports wins or losses.

It's an honor to be asked to join one of these educational java groups. Once you're in, it's for life. Comments heard around the tables are descriptive, so many times pointed and some very sharp. They may be directed at local politicians, sports coaches, their old bosses or even a buddy sitting across the table. Listed below are actual quotes and comments directed at human beings. Bless their hearts.

- “This guy is really not so much of a has-been, but more of a definite won’t be.”
- “When he opens his mouth, it seems that it is only to change feet.”
- “He should go far, and the sooner he starts, the better.”
- “He’s got a full 6-pack but lacks the plastic thingy to hold it all together.”
- “A gross ignoramus—144 times worse than an ordinary ignoramus.”
- “He’s been working with glue too much.”



- “He brings a lot of joy whenever he leaves the room.”
- “When his IQ reaches 50, he should sell.”
- “If you see two people talking and one looks bored, he’s the other one.”
- “A prime candidate for natural de-selection.”
- “Donated his brain to science before he was done using it.”
- “Gates are down, the lights are flashing, but the train isn’t coming.”
- “He’s got two brain cells; one is lost, and the other is out looking for it.”
- “If he were any more stupid, he’d have to be watered twice a week.”
- “Some drink from the fountain of knowledge; he only gargled.”
- “It takes him two hours to watch ‘60 Minutes.’”
- “The wheel is turning, but the hamster is dead.”
- “He doesn’t have ulcers...but he’s a carrier.”
- “He would argue with a fencepost.”
- “I would like to go hunting with him sometime.”

## AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

### KOSBE announces 2023 award winners

Finalists from across the region gathered in December for breakfast at Taylored Venue & Events in downtown Kingsport for the 29th annual Kingsport Office of Small Business Development and Entrepreneurship (KOSBE) small business awards event.

The KOSBEs promote economic impact by recognizing small businesses that are leading by example and making an extraordinary contribution to the communities they do business in. The winners exemplify leadership and excellence in overcoming adversity, as well as a passion for helping others succeed. Award winners serve as inspirational leaders to other local small businesses and model best practices that will progress the region as a whole.

The 2023 KOSBE winners are:

1. Empassion Pelvic Health – New Business Excellence Award
2. International Wig Co. – Customer Service Award
3. Greater Impact Realty – Community Impact Award
4. J. Ross Painting and Drywall – Staying Power Award
5. HomeFront Concierge Physical Therapy – Innovation Award
6. Cardboard Shuffle – Gazelle Award
7. Edify Salon & Extension Bar – Distinguished Business Excellence Award
8. Flow-Tech HVAC & Plumbing, Inc. – Ernie Rumsby Award for Veteran-Owned Business



Back row, from left are Ginger Nixon, Kathy Oakes, Haley Meister, KT Moyer, James Enguita, and Nathan and Audra Atwell Front row, from left are Ketmanee Whitlock, Melanie Abbott, Noelle Eades and Amanda Starnes. Not pictured: Mark Vicars and Heather Gardner

## ON THE MOVE

Electro-Mechanical recently announced the hiring of two new regional managers.

Leslie Case joins Electro-Mechanical as regional sales manager, Midwest. She brings valuable expertise, including in her most recent role was as regional sales manager, West, for Ritz Instrument Transformers.

Case holds a degree in engineering Management/industrial Engineering from Missouri University of Science and Technology.

Matt Weintraub will serve as Electro-Mechanical's regional

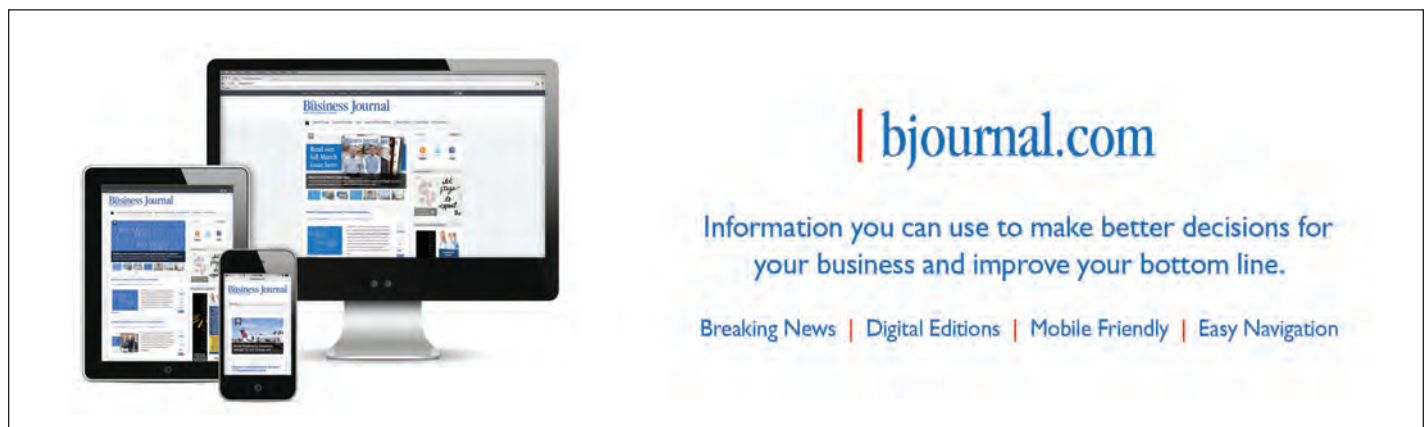
sales manager, Northeast. With a bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering and a master's in engineering management from George Washington University, Weintraub brings a wealth of expertise. His prior roles include regional sales manager for Hubbell Inc.



Leslie Case



Matt Weintraub



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## Doing economic development the old-fashioned way – rolling up our sleeves and refusing to be outworked

**N**ETWORKS Sullivan Partnership's Director of Economic Development Michael Parker could not have been more correct when he told me last spring that there was someone he met at the MRO Americas trade show with whom I would relate.

That person was David Lotterer, a Senior VP with renowned consulting firm JLL, with whom Michael had discussed our partnership with Tri-Cities Airport in the development and marketing of Aerospace Park, a 160-acre, shovel-ready, Select Tennessee Certified Site, with access to TRI's 8,000-foot-long runway.

The airport is the poster child for regionalism and collaboration, and as such, Executive Director Gene Cossey and Business Development Director Mark Canty — along with investing partners of Sullivan and Washington counties, and the cities of Bristol, Johnson City and Kingsport — had previously explored contracting with an aviation-based development expert, but we couldn't find the right fit.

FAA regulations require a unique knowledge base and contact list of prominent national land developers. After a few phone calls and Zoom meetings with David, I was convinced Michael's instincts were spot-on. Once Gene and Mark met David, they were also convinced.

NETWORKS typically splits costs for such endeavors evenly with the airport, so it is important that we are all onboard. For me, perhaps the biggest selling point was when David referred to the grind of economic development as "chopping wood," a metaphor I used frequently some years ago, but had let slip from the lexicon a while back.

We have since adopted the term as our mantra here at NETWORKS. From our staff to our investors in Bluff City, Bristol, Kingsport, Sullivan County and Hawkins County, precious little time passes without someone referencing our mission's required persistence and commitment as "chopping wood." Whether it be marketing and recruitment, existing industry services, workforce development, or property development, the willingness to do

the work has to be there. It has in many ways been the foundation of relationships with many of our partners and other communities across the state that comprise Team Tennessee. I have used those words in discussions with new executive director of the NETNHub, John Rose, in describing our values and strategies.

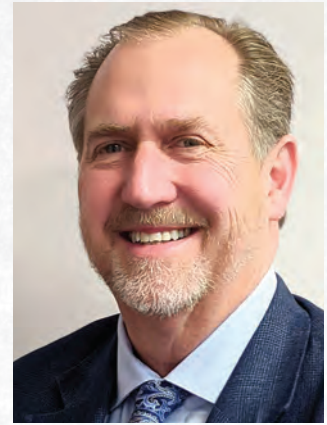
In boardrooms, coffee shops, chamber of commerce meetings, and on the pages of this publication, in recent years much has been said about how Northeast Tennessee should best go about our work in economic development — the "traditional" primary job and investment attraction that is our primary focus, workforce development, tourism, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, policy making, quality of place.

Many have focused on "that one thing" that they feel is missing, whether it be a regional umbrella organization, developing a memorable name or brand, or a marketing blitz to bring front-of-mind awareness to our area. Years of working in economic development at both local and regional levels have proven to me that "that one thing" simply does not exist. It is everything. And it takes everybody.

Last year, NETWORKS and our partners were fortunate to work with some great companies. Some announced projects here. Others went elsewhere. Many simply petered out. A few are still in the works.

Likewise, organizations like the ETSU Research Corporation, First Tennessee Development District, the Northeast Tennessee Tourism Association, our region's chambers of commerce, and neighboring EDOs have each enjoyed their own successes.

What brought us the success we have enjoyed thus far will be what brings us even more success in this new year and the future: hard work... and a very sharp ax blade.



By Clay Walker

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*Clay Walker is the CEO of NETWORKS Sullivan Partnership*

# Beginning of a New Year

- perfect time to review and plan your finances.

# 2024

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# Protect yourself from **influenza**. . . Get vaccinated!

## What is influenza?

- Influenza (flu) is a serious disease caused by a virus.
- Influenza can make you feel miserable! Fever, cough, shaking chills, body aches, and extreme weakness are common symptoms.

## How do you catch it?

- You can catch influenza from people who cough, sneeze, or even just talk around you. **It is very contagious.**



## Is it serious?

- **Yes!** Tragically, every year infants, children, teens, and adults die from influenza.
- Influenza is very unpredictable. No one knows how deadly influenza will be each year.
- Even if you have a mild case of influenza, you can still pass the virus on to your friends, family, and coworkers who could get very sick or even die.



## Am I at risk?

- **Yes.** Influenza is most dangerous for people with health conditions like heart and lung disease, the very young and very old, and pregnant women. But anyone can become seriously sick from influenza – **even young, healthy people.**

## How can I protect myself from influenza?

- Vaccination is the best way to prevent influenza.
- Everyone age 6 months and older should get vaccinated against influenza every year.
- Vaccination not only protects the person who gets immunized, it also protects the people around them – for example, babies who are too young to be vaccinated.



### Get your influenza vaccination today!

Flu shots are available at any Ballad Health Pharmacy, Ballad Health Medical Associates clinic or local pharmacy of your choice.



For more information, visit [www.vaccineinformation.org](http://www.vaccineinformation.org)