Vibrant Virginia

Engaging the Commonwealth to Expand Economic Vitality

Edited by Margaret Cowell and Sarah Lyon-Hill

Uncorrected Proof of Introduction

VIRGINIA TECH™
PUBLISHING

Center for Economic and Community Engagement

Blacksburg, Virginia

Introduction

Margaret Cowell and Sarah Lyon-Hill

O n November 13, 2018, Amazon announced that one of its second headquarters (HQ2) would be located in Arlington, Virginia. As part of the deal, the company announced a $2.5 billion investment and the promise of 25,000 full-time, high-paying jobs. That same day, nearly 250 miles to the south, the City Council in Martinsville, Virginia, discussed a proposed list of projects to be included in their 2019 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) being prepared for the US Economic Development Administration (EDA). Among the items listed were an $800,000 proposal to purchase blighted properties and an $100,000 proposal to recruit manufacturers of clean energy components to Martinsville's Enterprise Zone. And eighty miles to the west of Martinsville, the Blue Ridge Crossroads Small Business Development Center announced on their Facebook page that same day the grand opening of The Graceful Goose, a fine décor and gifts shop on South Main Street in Galax, Virginia. Meanwhile in Virginia Beach that day, city leaders joined Grammy Award–winning musician and hometown hero, Pharell Williams, to announce a new music festival called "Something's in the Water," which would aim to unite the Hampton Roads region, confront racial tensions, and spur economic growth.

While the nature and scale of the investments being made in these areas is obviously quite different, leaders in all four of these places

presumably have the same goal: to promote opportunities for local residents and firms to advance and thrive. Whether it's high-tech jobs with Amazon in Arlington, blight removal and clean energy expansion in Martinsville, small business development in Galax, or cultural tourism in Virginia Beach, this snapshot of one single day in the Commonwealth of Virginia reminds us that the opportunities and challenges we face across our urban and rural areas are unique but also in many ways universal. Our goal in this book is to explore cases across the urban-rural continuum, looking at connections and disconnects, documenting similarities and differences, all with an eye toward highlighting opportunities for community stakeholders from all sectors to address regional challenges.

Never have these opportunities and solutions seemed more important than they do now, as we begin to dig out from and adjust to economic devastation and political divisiveness unlike anything in modern history. It is true that some parts of Virginia were buffered from the brunt of the 2020 economic fallout from COVID-19 because of their ties to state, federal, and other anchor institutions, which remained largely unaffected. But it is also true that other parts of Virginia's Commonwealth were simply devastated when the floor fell out from underneath the low-wage service workers who are disproportionately employed in retail, passenger transportation, arts and entertainment, accommodation, restaurant and bars, and other personal services that depend on face-to-face interactions. There are also many places in between; including a cross-section of mid-sized Virginia towns and cities that, even before the pandemic, were working tirelessly to repurpose existing assets and talent, cultivate a more diverse economic base, and undo the lasting effects of generations of segregation and concentrated poverty.

We know that the work of community and economic development is not facile, especially in the present environment. We also know that it will not necessarily be easy to convince skeptics that there are lessons we can learn from one another. Nevertheless, we aim to try. The divisive 2016 and 2020 presidential elections reminded us just how big the chasms have become between the haves and the have-nots, the right and the left, the urban and the rural. The unfortunate reality is that sustainable and equitable economic growth has eluded many rural parts and some urban areas of our Commonwealth and those who stay in lagging regions find it more difficult to access the wealth-creating opportunities that generally are found in more prosperous areas. Still, while we might be

tempted to point to Virginia's declining rural areas as proof of an urban-rural schism, leaders in lagging metropolitan regions like Hampton Roads would probably argue that urban areas can also be left behind. Their 2020 State of the Region report noted that "While Virginia was 'open for business,' it seemed that Hampton Roads was on the outside, looking in" (42). Other urban areas, including much of Northern Virginia, faced their own challenges related to economic success, including exacerbated issues of affordability, congestion, and increasingly longer commutes.

No one could blame the person who concludes that Virginia is a commonwealth of extremes, with each end of the continuum far too afield to peacefully coexist or to perhaps learn something from one another. How can a place like southwest Virginia, with its close economic and cultural ties to Appalachia and its history of coal and tobacco production, possibly relate to a place like Richmond, home to a Federal Reserve Bank and an economic base that is supported by law, finance, and government? While there are certainly distinguishing features that make these places unique, there are also many ways in which they are similar. Both are grappling with how to reinvent themselves, embrace (and sometimes encourage) dynamic change, and manifest what their own version of the creative or innovation economy will look like.

It seems possible then that certain challenges and opportunities might be universal for all Virginia localities. After all, aren't we all interested in seeking knowledge about how to cultivate strong, vibrant, and inclusive communities? Who among us is not concerned with cultivating capacity to take advantage of emerging opportunities or at the very least embrace economic change? And who would turn down an offer to procure the resources needed to enact changes that will further contribute to the strong, vibrant, and inclusive economy they have imagined?

The Vibrant Virginia Initiative

We launched Vibrant Virginia in 2017 in order to create a space in which we could explore answers to these and other questions. Drawing on scholarship, practice, and outreach from Virginia Tech faculty, staff, and students, as well as myriad partners from across the Commonwealth with which we regularly work, we have examined an array of issues impacting the quality of life across the urban and

rural regions of the Commonwealth of Virginia. We have tackled cross-cutting topics such as expanding K–12 education reform, supporting entrepreneurial ecosystems, and growing advanced manufacturing to context-specific concerns such as coastal resilience, unmanned systems, and mine-land reclamation. Our broad, but inclusive focus reflects that, from the onset, our Vibrant Virginia team has committed to elevating the voices of community leaders, local governments, small businesses, nonprofits, and K–12 and university educators.

The idea for Vibrant Virginia was conceived of by Dr. John Provo, director of Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE). Inspired by our colleagues in Oregon—who embarked on a similar journey with their book, Toward One Oregon (Oregon State University Press, 2011)—Dr. Provo assembled a core leadership team to shape our own initiative in Virginia. The senior leadership team from Virginia Tech includes Guru Ghosh, Ed Jones, Karen Roberto, Karen Ely Sanders, Susan Short, and Anne Khademian (now with Universities at Shady Grove). Within the CECE, we were assisted greatly by the efforts of Albert Alwang, Conaway Haskins, Julia Kell, Neda Moayerian, and Scott Tate, some of whom have contributed chapters to this book. Early conversations led to the realization that, in order for the initiative to be successful, Vibrant Virginia would have to emphasize equal and engaged partnerships among university faculty and communities for the purpose of imagining possibilities and co-creating solutions to economic and social challenges.

To facilitate these partnerships and to encourage greater university engagement across Virginia, the Vibrant Virginia initiative evolved into a multipronged approach that would ultimately include:

- community conversations where faculty traveled to regions across the state to listen to community stakeholders and their needs;
- campus conversations where groups of Virginia Tech faculty, staff, and students met to discuss connections, challenges, and opportunities related to scholarship and outreach across the Commonwealth;
- seed grants to students and faculty who wished to partner with community actors to address a challenge facing rural and urban communities in the Commonwealth; and

- this book and its related website (https://cece.vt.edu /VibrantVirginia.html), both of which offer chapter authors and community stakeholders the opportunity to voice their perspectives and reflect on both the formal submissions related to Vibrant Virginia as well as their own ideas about what makes for a vibrant Virginia.

 An essential element to the Vibrant Virginia initiative, the community conversation series brings together a diverse group of local stakeholders to discuss pertinent issues facing the Commonwealth's regions. From K–12 educators to entrepreneurs, manufacturers to university faculty, farmers to nonprofits, these conversations connect community members to Virginia Tech faculty and resources. Since 2018, fifteen conversations have been held in places such as Saint Paul, Newport News, Farmville, South Boston, South Hill, Danville, and Arlington. These community conversations will continue for the foreseeable future. Figure I.1 shows the geographic scale and locations of these conversations as of 2021.

The campus conversations provide an opportunity for the Virginia Tech community to connect with one another and share research, outreach, and teaching developments in topics related to Vibrant Virginia. A typical conversation would include updates from stakeholders, presentations from seed-funding recipients, and announcements from funders, including USDA Rural Development and the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.
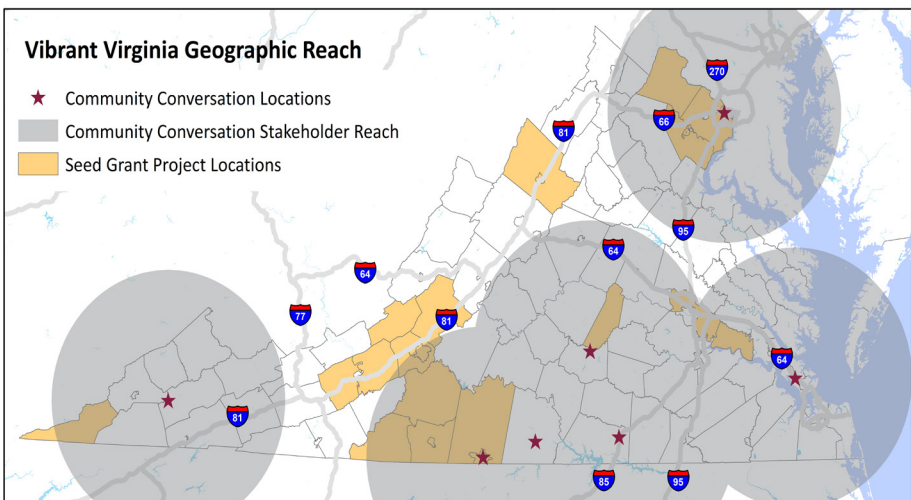

Figure I.1. Vibrant Virginia Program Activities

Seed funding began in spring 2018, when four projects were awarded funding from an applicant pool of fifteen proposals. A second round was awarded to three additional projects in 2019. In total, applications came from all of Virginia Tech's eleven colleges. The modest seed funding has allowed faculty, staff, and graduate students to dive deeper and look into new research projects that align with the Vibrant Virginia goals. Many of these funded projects are represented in this book, including the projects described in chapters written by Rebecca J. Hester, Katrina M. Powell, and Katherine Randall; Phyllis L. Newbill, Susan G. Magliaro, Kerry O. Cresawn et al.; and Max Stephenson, Jr., Lara Nagle, and Neda Moayerian.

The final piece of the Vibrant Virginia initiative is this book, which represents the culmination of Vibrant Virginia's early efforts. For this edited collection, we solicited contributions that would investigate the ties that bind us across the urban-rural continuum. Our goal was to curate a collection of writings that would include both practical experiences and scholarly contributions related to Vibrant Virginia; seek to "connect the dots" between learning, discovery, and engagement; advance the important work being done at Virginia Tech and other colleges and universities in Virginia; and celebrate the communities, stakeholders, and government officials with which we regularly collaborate. We humbly assert that, with this book, we have succeeded in doing so.

Vibrant Virginia, the book, starts from the fundamentally optimistic premise that a vibrant Virginia is possible. While our contributors highlight divergences, inequities, and tensions between urban, rural, and the places in between, they also help us to highlight the opportunities that are afforded by a more holistic understanding of the urban-rural continuum. Though it may seem easier to focus on the chasms that exist in this wonderfully diverse amalgamation of counties, towns, and cities, doing so would mean that we missed an opportunity to collectively think about, work on, and actualize solutions with benefits that are broadly realized.

For some readers, this leap may initially seem insurmountable. If you fall into that category, let us begin simply, by conceiving of Virginia as:

- a commonwealth full of places that are economically, conceptually, and physically interdependent;
- a place that is full of opportunities and challenges; and

- a dichotomy, but one that is bounded by common laws
  and institutions.

If we believe these ideas to be tenable, then we can begin to unpack the more complex notions of a vibrant Virginia, many of which are highlighted in the chapters that are included herein.

The chapters that follow offer a multifaceted glimpse into the many ways that Virginia's communities and regions are working to cultivate a strong, vibrant, and inclusive economy. As you will read, their efforts are not without difficulty, as evidenced by the many challenges the authors describe throughout the book. Still, stories of the wins and the losses provide ideas for those who wish to replicate successful efforts or avoid mistakes that have already been attempted. Moreover, these stories remind us that the Commonwealth of Virginia is full of places that are economically, conceptually, and physically interdependent. They also describe the bridges that exist between these places as being both tenuous and also resilient. Our hope is that Virginia's leaders—including local, regional, state, federal, private sector, and nonprofit partners—will consider the sound advice provided by the authors in this book to help the Commonwealth achieve its promise of an even stronger, more vibrant, and increasingly inclusive economy.

Overview of the Book

The first section delves into Virginia's urban-rural divide. It urges us to consider what comes to mind when we think of an urban place. What does it mean to live or work in a rural area? How do statewide politics and public policy affect the urban-rural divide in Virginia? These and other questions are the focus of part I, which includes an overview of Virginia across the urban-rural spectrum, a look at how changing demographics have shaped Virginia politics, and an overview of how the Commonwealth has employed state policy to shape economic development outcomes. Together, these chapters set the stage for a candid conversation about what a truly vibrant Virginia might look like and how the very nature of vibrancy might vary from place to place.

In chapter 1, Sarah Lyon-Hill and John Provo challenge us to think critically about existing definitions of urban and rural places. The authors describe ongoing conversations among federal and state agencies

working to understand how changing demographics affect how we categorize places and their residents. They then hone in on Virginia to remind us that urban, rural, and other places also differ in terms of their social, environmental, and economic characteristics. Finally, and perhaps most important, the authors remind us of the importance of thinking about both the interdependence and nuance of place and provide a host of Virginia examples to illustrate these important ideas.

In chapter 2, Stephen J. Farnsworth, Stephen Hanna, and Kate Seltzer discuss Virginia's changing political landscape. More specifically, they compare county-level voter support for Mark Warner's 2001 campaign for governor versus his 2020 reelection campaign for senator. The comparison is astutely used as a proxy to illustrate how rural influence in Virginia politics has declined over the last two decades, as fewer Democratic officials have been elected to represent rural areas. The authors offer four key interlocking reasons why rural influence has declined and conclude with some thoughtful considerations for how rural Virginia might engender a revived political influence in coming years.

Continuing with the exploration of statewide effects on urban and rural places, chapter 3 presents a thorough discussion of how state economic development policy is being leveraged to bridge Virginia's divides. Stephen Moret offers insights into how the Virginia Economic Development Partnership and key partners are utilizing state-level policies to encourage employment growth in smaller metro and rural regions. Recognizing that many of these same areas have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, Moret bluntly reminds us of the new challenges we face in the economic recovery of areas that had already been struggling with a lack of economic opportunity. He concludes with an optimistic discussion of the Rural Think Tank's policy recommendations to advance a rural growth agenda.

Part II focuses on the importance of cultivating a vibrant and connected economy. When we think about the vibrancy of a place, we often think about its economy and the employment opportunities available to the people who call it home. Continuing our exploration of what a vibrant Virginia looks like, the chapters in this section offer a glimpse into the workforce and economic development challenges and opportunities that exist within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of regional connectivity and the importance of re-casting the way we think about industry clusters. In the past,

most discussions of industry clusters have focused on agglomerations, knowledge spillovers, networks of businesses, and labor pools within concentrated urban areas. Christiana K. McFarland and Erica Grabowski propose an alternative way of thinking about industry clusters and do so in a way that disabuses us of the notion that clusters only exist in denser areas or that they are incapable of spanning jurisdictional boundaries. The authors challenge us to think about the idea of regional connectivity with a new focus on cluster-based strategies that may help us to bridge the urban-rural divide, especially in rural and lagging regions looking to identify potential industrial pathways.

Thinking creatively about ways to grow and diversify regional and local economies, particularly rural areas, is the focus of chapter 5. In it Scott Tate and Erik R. Pages describe how two Virginia regions have embraced entrepreneurship as a means to build connections that will facilitate better linkages between small towns, urban centers, and large anchor institutions. They begin their chapter with an astute overview of how economic development policies and priorities have shifted in recent decades and discuss the implications of new statewide programs like GO Virginia, which is a bipartisan, business-led economic development initiative to diversify the economy and create more high-paying jobs through incentivized collaboration between business, education, and government. The authors end the chapter with some promising lessons, which will likely be of use to other communities seeking to enhance their region's entrepreneur ecosystem and connect rural areas to regional assets.

Chapter 6 emphasizes the important role that higher education plays in facilitating workforce development and STEM education opportunities. Phyllis L. Newbill, Susan G. Magliaro, Kerry O. Cresawn, Lindsay B. Wheeler, Elizabeth W. Edmondson, Albert Byers, and Padmanabhan Seshaiyer discuss the importance of developing a statewide STEM network in order to grant access and opportunity for high-quality STEM learning across the Commonwealth. Their chapter proposes a blueprint for a strategic, multisector STEM network to promote STEM literacy and expertise across the Commonwealth and describes efforts to build a statewide collaborative of partners working to do so. The chapter ends with strategic recommendations that will likely prove useful to both Virginia stakeholders and people working elsewhere to support STEM networks.

Chapter 7 by Erv Blythe and James Bohland includes a compelling argument for why broadband connectivity is essential to any understanding

of a vibrant and equitable Virginia, while also acknowledging "last mile" challenges and ways to overcome them. An important argument is made in this chapter when the authors critique what they describe as a dominant legacy coalition and policy framework that supports corporate providers over community-oriented solutions designed to bridge the broadband gap. Given the strength of this coalition, the authors rightfully ask whether community broadband initiatives can be successful in Virginia. In their answer, the authors point to a few successful community-based efforts across the Commonwealth. They end with a series of recommendations for how we might increase broadband connectivity and a reminder that the future viability of rural communities and some urban communities will depend on our success in doing so.

Virginia is a commonwealth made up of dynamic public spaces, vibrant imaginaries, and historic towns and cities. The importance of these places and the people who live and work within them is the focus of the chapters in part III. Together, they describe the diversity of experiences, opportunities, and challenges affecting communities across Virginia. The authors herein remind us that the vibrancy of Virginia should be measured not only in economic terms but also in terms of the relationships that are built, the histories preserved, and the continued well-being of communities therein.

Patrick County in the Piedmont region of Virginia is the focus of the work described in Max Stephenson Jr., Lara Nagle, and Neda Moayerian's chapter on arts, culture, and community building. In chapter 8, they describe their work with community members in Patrick County to explore the ways that community cultural development (CCD) strategies—including story circles, workshops, and surveys—can be used to encourage individual and social learning. The authors provide great insights into their longtime engagement with Patrick County as members of Virginia Tech's Institute for Policy and Governance (VTIPG) and shed light on adaptations made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic. They end the chapter with a poignant discussion of how social imaginaries can help community members uncover shared understandings of how they belong and how they can create change.

Chapter 9 takes a deeper look at a specific placemaking initiative in the Tri-Cities region of Virginia. Conaway Haskins describes how the Southside Community Gateway Project came to be, how it was funded, and how a regional foundation worked with local governments to facil-

itate public art that would enhance several strategically important highway intersections across three localities: the cities of Hopewell and Petersburg and the county of Prince George. In doing so, Haskins provides a detailed case study showing how small cities and the suburban and peri-urban communities that surround them can use public art to advance economic development via creative placemaking. The chapter ends with an important reminder that although the Gateway Project has generally been well received, such public art interventions inherently exist within contested spaces and cannot be thought of as stand-alone strategies to bridge the many divides that exist within regions.

A shared understanding of place is central to the argument that John Accordino and Kyle Meyer develop in chapter 10, which highlights Virginia's historic cities and towns. Focusing on downtown commercial areas, the authors describe the evolution of these places from their development as regional centers, to their decline after World War II, and to their recent efforts to make these communities more hospitable to entrepreneurs looking to live and work in these areas while also tapping into regional or broader networks of innovation and commerce. Their chapter provides insights into how the Commonwealth of Virginia and local partners are helping to facilitate these efforts. They end with an important reminder about interjurisdictional conflict and ultimately point to a few examples we might use as inspiration.

Public engagement efforts are also front and center in the work of Scenic Virginia, whose leadership in founding a scenic viewshed register is highlighted in chapter 11 by Leighton Powell, Lynn M. Crump, Richard G. Gibbons, Lisa Dickinson Mountcastle, Patrick A. Miller, and Jisoo Sim. The authors begin with a history of Virginia's programs for scenic resource recognition and preservation. They follow up with an overview of the public engagement activities and programs that they helped develop to promote scenic beauty across the Commonwealth. A unique collaboration between Virginia Tech and Scenic Virginia is described, most notably the development of a tool that would act as a "defensible decision framework for identifying and assessing the characteristics of a scenic viewshed" (223). The authors conclude with a discussion of the growing importance of scenic resources during the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming threats of sea level rise and climate change.

A focus on vibrant, healthy, and connected communities is the focus of part IV. Across the entirety of the urban-rural spectrum, families and communities rely on public health, social service, and transportation entities for assistance. The importance of these institutions has never been clearer, given the overlapping threats from COVID-19, economic upheaval, regional inequalities, and racial injustice that have challenged communities across the Commonwealth in recent years. The chapters in this section offer several examples that highlight the importance of collaboration when it comes to promoting vibrant, healthy, and connected communities.

Ongoing and acute challenges related to refugee resettlement are the focus of chapter 12. Rebecca J. Hester, Katrina M. Powell, and Katherine Randall describe a pilot study in southwest Virginia involving several nonprofits, service provider organizations, and newly resettled refugee partners. Using interview and focus group data, the authors focus largely on refugee resettlement policy implementation in rural areas. Their writing reminds us of the importance of social networks in rural communities, particularly for newcomers seeking to comply with the sometimes daunting expectations of integration. Their work ends with a discussion of the newly founded Virginia Consortium for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies (VCRMDS).

In chapter 13, Mary Beth Dunkenberger, Sophie Wenzel, and Laura Nelson discuss the important university and community collaborations that can support communities in their responses to substance use disorder (SUD) and opioid use disorder (OUD). The authors point to the overlapping public health, economic, and law enforcement issues that converged in recent years to exacerbate the crisis. Given the interdependent nature of these challenges, the authors offer lessons from their work in Roanoke and the New River Valley, illustrating how communities can develop a coordinated response that includes proactive leadership from these and other sectors.

In chapter 14, Stephanie L. Smith, Abdulilah Alshenaifi, Elizabeth Arledge, et al. turn toward locally elected governing bodies with the authority to enact health-promoting ordinances to examine which diseases, risks, and other health issues reach the agendas of city councils and boards of supervisors in both urban and rural areas of Virginia. While there are some differences across urban and rural areas, the authors find that noncommunicable diseases and related risks, mental health, and broader

healthy community initiatives appear frequently across all communities. The chapter ends with a discussion of implications for those engaged in health policymaking, including a reminder about the risks associated with coercive financial incentives and entrepreneurial grantmaking.

As Nicholas J. Swartz, Justin Bullman, and Jordan Hays remind us in chapter 15, transportation is another form of infrastructure necessary for dynamic communities and connected economies. The authors discuss the importance of regional air service, especially in rural metropolitan areas like the Shenandoah Valley, where members of the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport (SHD) and James Madison University (JMU) partnered to form the Fly SHD Community Air Service Task Force. The chapter provides a rich description of how the task force came to be and general lessons for other places looking to bolster their own regional airports and for other groups looking to engage in community-based efforts and initiatives.

The book concludes with reflections from us, the editors, on findings from the book as well as the broader Vibrant Virginia initiative. We conclude with a brief reminder about contested narratives of vibrancy, the interconnectedness and embeddedness of localities and regions, the inertia of investment, and the power of place. In doing so, we remind ourselves that a quick glance across the United States reveals that Virginia is not alone in its extremes. States across the country simultaneously grapple with acute growth in some areas and lagging regions in others. The inequities that result can be astonishing, but so too can the opportunities, especially when we consider creative ways to bridge the gap. As the chapters that follow illustrate, Virginia is replete with examples of communities that have found ways to integrate opportunities across the urban-rural continuum. We hope you enjoy exploring these stories with us.