

Rappahannock News

rappnews.com

143rd Year • No. 34

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20, 2020



\$1

SCHOOLS FACE THEIR BIGGEST TEST

‘A whole lot of moving parts’

BY RANDY RIELAND
For Foothills Forum

When Rappahannock’s public school students return next Monday, they’ll kick off their school year with a temperature check.

They’ll be wearing masks, too, at least on the buses and in the hallways. They can remove them once they get to their desks, where they will be shielded with plastic barriers from their classmates.

But beyond the obvious pandemic precautions, the school district is about to become part of something far more abstract and challenging. It is a kind of experiment to see not just how well students learn and teachers teach when a school’s top priority is to keep everyone safe, but also how kids, used to the messy swirl of personal connections and social interactions, adapt to

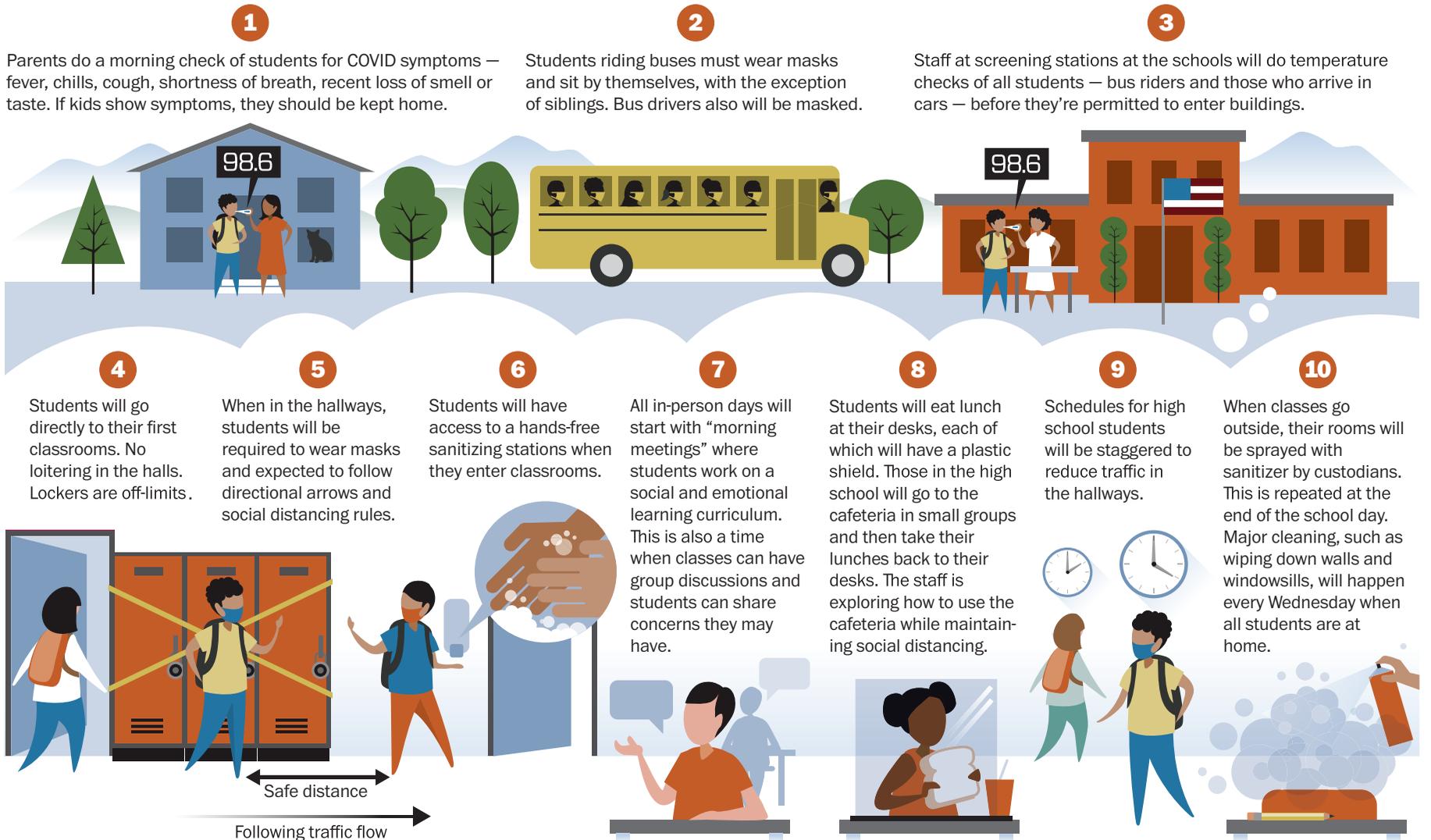
See **SCHOOLS**, Page 12



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM

‘I MAY NEVER PLAY FOOTBALL AGAIN’ | The reality of COVID-19 is just now hitting Taven Murrah, a Rappahannock County High School athlete who is entering his senior year. Taven’s story and others from RCPS are found beginning on Page 13.

A TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY IN ATYPICAL TIMES | How Rappahannock County's public school students will get back to class next week



BY LAURA STANTON FOR RAPP NEWS AND FOOHILLS FORUM



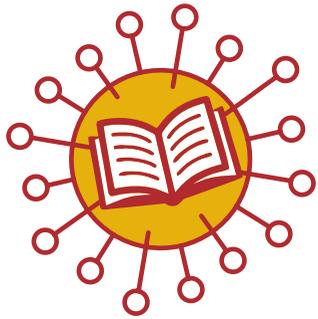
Running Republican, juggling a pandemic

At a Rappahannock fundraiser last weekend, Congressional candidate Bob Good conceded risks of COVID-19 — sans mask: “I believe that we need to take reasonable precautions.” Page 16

This week

MEETINGS & NOTICES	17
OBITUARIES	20
COURTHOUSE ROW	20
CROSSWORD	21
CLASSIFIEDS, LEGALS	22





BACK TO SCHOOL

A Rapp News-Foothills Forum Special Report

KIDS AND COVID-19

Here is some of the latest research on how the coronavirus affects children.

While children comprise **22 percent** of the U.S. population, about **7 percent** of the coronavirus cases in the U.S. have been children up to the age of 17. (CDC)

Analysis of COVID-19 data from 14 states found that the hospitalization rate among children with the virus (**8 per 100,000**) remains low compared to the rate for adults (**164.5 per 100,000**). But one in three hospitalized children was admitted to an intensive care unit, about the same rate as for adults. (CDC)

There was a **90 percent increase** in children's coronavirus cases during a four-week period between July 9 and August 6. (American Academy of Pediatrics)

Children have been **.4 percent** of COVID-19 deaths. Nineteen states have had no child deaths. (American Academy of Pediatrics)

In a recent study, **children under the age of 5 with COVID-19** were found to have more of the virus in their upper respiratory tract than adults or older children. (JAMA Pediatrics)

A recent study in South Korea concluded that **children younger than 10** were less likely to transmit COVID-19 than adults, but **kids age 10 or older** may transmit the infection at levels similar to adults. (Kaiser Family Foundation)

PHOTOS BY
LUKE CHRISTOPHER
FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

SCHOOLS

From Page 1

an environment gone strangely anti-septic.

Earlier in the summer, Superintendent Shannon Grimsley had hoped that all students would be able to return on a close to normal schedule. But it soon became clear that if Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS) was going to meet Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines on social distancing, it would need to cut the capacity of its two school buildings in half.

A total of 117 students will attend classes in person four days a week, although because of the space constraints, the district wasn't able to accommodate many of the requests for that arrangement. Most of the parents who requested the maximum in-school option cited lack of child care, financial hardship or unreliable or no broadband access, according to Grimsley.

Most students (523) will be split into two groups and follow a hybrid schedule of two days of in-school classes and three days of virtual learning. A third set (133) has opted to stay at home and study only online five days a week.

"I am very worried about the lack of socialization," said Kathy Sickler, the school district's social worker. "I know safety has to come first. But seeing other kids only two days a week is not enough."

"I feel for the kids," added Jimmy Swindler, the high school's principal. "Kids are wired to be social. What we need to do goes against that grain."

Ideally, if the coronavirus data from state and regional health officials stabilizes, and the COVID-19 transmission rate in Rappahannock remains low, the RCPS will be able to switch to four days of in-person learning. But if the numbers worsen and Gov. Ralph Northam orders a move back to Phase 2, only students with special needs and young children will be permitted in the schools.

Change is a constant

Any day things could change. That's the reality. No matter how much planning and preparation has gone into making classroom learning possible, one outbreak could shut everything down again. If a student or staff member tests positive for the coronavirus, in-person learning could be cancelled for two to five days. That decision will be up to the school board.

As school nurse, Courtney Atkins is RCPS's chief COVID-19 watchdog. If a student arrives with a temperature higher than 100 degrees, or other symptoms — such as a new cough, shortness of breath or loss of taste and smell — he or she will be sent to an iso-



Welcome back to class: Rappahannock's public schools have incurred nearly \$450,000 in expenses to retool for COVID.

lation room where Atkins will do a more comprehensive assessment, including determining if the student has had any exposure to someone with the virus.

The student will be sent home, but

if they haven't been exposed, they can return to school 24 hours after their fever is gone.

"Children and staff should not be in school with a fever," Atkins →



Enjoy some art and retail therapy at Hazel River Arts & Antiques!

Antiques • Unique Gifts • 30+ Vendors Under One Roof • Consignment's Welcome

CREATIVE ART WORKSHOPS

2nd Saturday of the month from 11-2! Call for details.

CONTACT US - 12625 Lee Hwy. Washington VA • 540-987-8440 • HazelRiverArtandAntiques.com



High school Principal Jimmy Swindler: "I feel for the kids. Kids are wired to be social. What we need to do goes against that grain."

➔ said. "But a fever can mean a lot of things, not just the coronavirus."

If a student seems "highly suspicious" because they present COVID symptoms, they will be sent home, with a suggestion that they see a physician. If the doctor recommends a coronavirus test and it comes back negative, they will be able to return to school.

In the event a student or staff member tests positive, they'll have to quarantine at home for 10 days after the diagnosis. If they report being exposed to someone with the virus, they'll need to stay home and isolated from the sick person for two weeks.

If someone who has been in the school buildings tests positive, Atkins said she will work closely with the Virginia Department of Health on contact tracing and in determining what next steps should be taken, including temporary closure.

Another reality is that a positive case could spark calls to shut things down.

"Closing down over one positive case is not what our guidance would tell us to do," Grimsley said. "But that might be what politics tells us to do, based on perception and the optics."

Time for a reboot

When Gov. Northam ordered Virginia's schools closed last March, the RCPS teachers and staff were thrown into the white water.

They had to scramble to convert curriculums designed for face-to-face teaching into disembodied lessons coming through a computer screen. In the process, they learned that they couldn't rely on using videos or other streaming content because only about a third of Rappahannock students had suitable broadband connections in their homes.

They also saw that many kids struggled without the structure of a daily schedule and the familiarity of a classroom setting. Parents tried to pick up the slack, but often it was a thin patch.

Fifth grade teacher Layne Vickers pointed out that most elementary school children had little experience

with online learning. Some took to it. "But," she added, "a lot of parents said that getting their kids to sit down in front of the computer to do schoolwork was like pulling teeth."

Still, teachers, parents and students managed to improve a close to the school year. It was clear, though, that a reboot would be needed to reopen in August.

But a reboot to what?

Even Superintendent Grimsley wasn't quite sure. But she got a good sense of how complex and wide-ranging an undertaking it would be when the Virginia Department of Education released a 130-page planning guide, titled "Recover, Redesign, Restart" in June.

With a clearer picture of the state's expectations, Grimsley and her team began developing a plan. But they didn't have much time, and the guide covered a lot of ground.

They quickly created nine different task forces, inviting members of the community to join staff and teachers in tackling a broad set of issues — from health and safety to meals and transportation to reconfiguring spaces and schedules to addressing the social and emotional needs of students and staff.

"There were a whole lot of moving parts," she said.

Clearing the air

Grimsley thinks that one benefit of having a separate committee focus on each of the tasks is that RCPS was able to get a jump on ordering the unusual batch of supplies needed to keep everyone in the schools safe. Some districts, she said, have had their requests placed on back order and may have to wait months.

Much of the job of tracking down supplies fell to Robin Bolt, RCPS's executive director of Administrative Services. She concedes that she faced a huge learning curve.

"There have been a massive amount of things that have never been on our radar before. The face shields, the N95 masks," she said. "This is the hardest I've ever

See **SCHOOLS**, Page 14



VOICES



TAVEN MURRAH

Senior football and soccer player and track athlete – he's on the hybrid schedule

On having fall football season cancelled:

"I was training three weeks ago, and midway through my workout it hit me. I thought, 'I may never play football again.' I didn't even know how to cope with it, really."

On following a hybrid schedule:

"I'm not sure if I'm going to struggle, but I know I'm not a virtual learner. But with two days in school at the beginning of the week, I'll have some kind of structure to my schedule. I'll know what I have to do for the week. I won't just have a computer telling me what I have to do."

On this senior year:

"In one way, it's cool, we're only going to school two days a week. But then it's like, it's my senior year and we're only going to school two days a week. There's some good and a lotta bad to it."

COURTNEY ATKINS

School nurse/athletic director



On the reaction of teachers:

"It's been a mix of emotions. Teachers are concerned, obviously for their own health, but also for a lot, it's 'I want to make sure I'm doing what's right for the kids.' They want to make sure they're following the guidelines properly. That is a great way to start."

On the cancellation of sports until December:

"I've encouraged the coaches to really stay engaged with their athletes, even if it's over Zoom or through a quick email. We want them to know that we are in this with them."

On the coming months:

"I do feel positive about what we're doing, and that we're on the right track to a new normal way of doing school. I don't have this ominous feeling. I really don't. People are saying it won't be if, but when. But maybe it won't be when."

More Voices, next page

Mountainside Dance Center



All Classes available in small groups or individual basis!

- Adult & Children's Ballet
- Hip Hop & Contemporary Movement
- Cross Training for Young Athletes
- Movement Therapeutics
- Fitness & Balance
- Scholarships Available
- Foundations of Dance & Movement for the Young Student
- Tap Dance Children & Adult Classes

Scholarships are available for dance classes only - partially funded by the Claudia Mitchell Fund.

CONTACT US - 12625 Lee Hwy, Washington, VA • 540-987-9390 • mountainsidedancecenter@gmail.com



JIMMY SWINDLER
Principal, Rappahannock County High School

On dealing with the pandemic:

"If my experience of the past six months has taught me anything, it has been to be prepared for any eventuality at any moment. For a while, we were drinking from the fire hose. There was just so much uncertainty. There still is."

On adjusting to a new normal:

"One big challenge is learning new social habits that go against the grain of everything we've learned in our lives — handshakes, hugs, standing close to someone when you're talking. We're going to be teaching new social habits."

On the class of 2021:

"They're the ones I'm really concerned about. Can we come up with things we can do for our seniors that can at least give them something to remember?"



KATHY SICKLER
RCPS social worker

On following a hybrid schedule:

"There's a lot of research that shows that kids thrive when there's stability and consistency. We can make this hybrid schedule as stable as possible, but it's not what school used to be. And it's not what these last five months have been. So, it's another adjustment for the children and their parents."

On financial anxiety in the community:

"I'm getting feedback from high schoolers who are mad that their parents are not letting them do school virtually, because they wanted to work to help out with the family income. We still have some stressors out there about family finances."

On student attitudes about coming back:

"I know some students going into their senior years, and they're a little anxious about the unknown. Also, a little angry about their senior year not being a traditional senior year. Not necessarily angry at school, but the situation."

"I also know some students who are totally ready to come back to school. To see their friends. And, they recognize that they need structure, a reason to get out of bed in the morning."



LAYNE VICKERS
RCPS fifth grade teacher

On the hybrid class schedule:

"We did all in-person last year, then went to all-virtual, and now we're doing a mix. I'll see a group of kids for two days, then I'll see a different group another two days. It's hard to wrap my head around what it will be like."

On having young students follow the new rules:

"We're going to have to take it slow and steady. Just how they learned how to tie their shoes, they'll learn how to do this as well."

On connecting with students:

"You want to make the most of your time. It needs to be active and engaged. We're going to have to find new and different ways to make those connections. You can do Zoom meetings and Google Meet with them. I just hope we can get back to in-person learning full time."



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

JENNA ROBEY
Senior volleyball, basketball and softball player — who is on the hybrid schedule

On virtual learning from home:

"Last spring was hard because I am a visual learner. It was really hard for me to focus. I was at home and I'd think there really were a lot of other things I could be doing. Or if I had something that was due, and it stormed and my wi-fi went out."

On overlapping sports seasons next year:

Because we're such a small school, one of the hardest things is that a lot of the kids who play basketball also play volleyball. And a lot of kids who play volleyball also play softball."

On her senior year:

On one hand, I'm not so upset because at least as of right now, we'll still get to be in the school setting. But I am a little upset because I know things are going to be way different. We'll have to deal with social distancing, and high schoolers aren't very good at that. Plus, everyone will be wearing a mask, and it will be so hard to tell facial expressions."

SCHOOLS

From Page 13

worked over the summer."

In addition to purchasing 750 KN95 masks and 1,350 cloth masks to be made available to every student, teacher and staff member, Bolt ordered plastic shields to screen three sides of every student's desk. She bought more than 100 touch-free hand sanitizer dispensers, which are now in every classroom, and spread around the schools and the RCPS administrative offices. And, she acquired five electrostatic backpack misters. They'll be used to disinfect classrooms and hallways after school, and when students in a class are outside.

Playground equipment will also be sprayed daily. A "deep cleaning" where everything is wiped down, including walls and window sills, will be done every Wednesday, the day when all classes are virtual. The ventilation system will run two hours earlier in the morning and two hours later after school.

Grimsley estimated that since March, RCPS has incurred almost \$450,000 in COVID-related expenses, including \$62,000 to purchase devices for each student. She emphasized, though, that since it has been able to use funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and also repurpose other money in its budget, no additional county tax dollars have been spent.

Aside from when they're seated at their desks, students will be required to keep their mouths and noses covered. Or as Grimsley put it: "If they're on their feet, the mask is on."

Principal Swindler said that students who choose not to wear a mask will be asked to switch to the all-virtual schedule. "We're not going to turn this into a dis-

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?

Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

➔ More at foothillsforum.org



cipline issue," he said. "Safety is not discipline. If you can't do it, then you're going to have to stay home and do all your learning remotely."

Raising spirits

Swindler does feel that RCPS's teachers have a better handle on online teaching than they did during the hectic days last spring. Many learned through trial and error, and the difficulties so many students had in streaming video only complicated matters. Now, students will be given flash drives which they can use to download content to home computers instead of depending on a good broadband connection.

Also, every student will be provided their own device — iPads for kids in Pre-K through first grade, Chromebooks for everyone else.

Probably the most notable upgrade involves the use of an online platform called Virtual Virginia. First launched by the state's Department of Education in 2006, it was ramped up dramatically last spring to enable teachers to use its virtual curriculum while being able to personalize the lessons.

In some ways, Swindler thinks a bigger challenge

this year will be finding ways to provide the kind of shared experiences that shape friendships and memories. The cancellation of sports by the Virginia High School League until at least mid-December will make it that much harder.

"School sports in this country, more than anywhere else in the world, is such an integral piece of the fabric of our high school experience," he said. "That's the part I hope we can figure out."

Swindler believes the high school should be able to sustain its peer mentor program, in which seniors and juniors are linked up with eighth graders to help them adapt to life in their new school. He likewise is hopeful that P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Relationships Inspire a Drive for Excellence), the extracurricular clubs started by teachers, can keep meeting in some form.

"We need to have ways kids can have fun, but still be safe," he said.

For her part, Grimsley acknowledged that when students return next week, they could be feeling anxiety along with the usual start-of-school excitement. That's to be expected, she said. The key is to keep a close track where they are emotionally and socially.

"You can't really have any learning if their brains are occupied with anxiety and fear," she said. "We want to get a pulse on that every day."

The teachers came back to the schools earlier this month and have spent the past few weeks learning the new protocols and training to sharpen their virtual teaching skills.

They, too, likely worry about the uncertainty of the coming months.

"Yes, there are some anxieties, but I haven't seen the angst and protesting other school districts are facing," Grimsley said. "For the most part, our staff is ready to come back and be here for the children. There's a sense that we need to be here."

Rappahannock News

rappnews.com

143rd Year • No. 36

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2020

\$1

Not so fast with amended comprehensive plan

County residents pointed out typos, incorrect information in document

BY PATTY HARDEE
Special to the Rappahannock News

A behind-the-scenes showdown between County Administrator Garrey Curry and Planning Commission Chair David Konick headed off what could have been an illegal process to amend the comprehensive plan approved for

Board of Supervisors' consideration at the planners August 19 meeting.

At that meeting's public hearing on the comp plan, several speakers pointed out typos and incorrect information in the document or suggested additions. For example, one speaker urged the planners to add "bicycling" to the list of outdoor activities enjoyed by tourists and residents, although there were far more serious corrections to

See **PLAN**, Page 8

Learning your 'A's' and 'B's'



BY HOLLY JENKINS

Rappahannock County Public Schools held their "second" first day of school on Thursday, Aug. 27. Teachers and staff greeted Group B students for the first time for in-school instruction after Group A, which had returned Monday, Aug. 24, completed their classes for the week. Seen here, 5th grader Mary Reinboldt waves hello to the new school year while kindergartner Daiana Flores brings a pretty pink reflection to her COVID-altered classroom.

HOMIE SWEET HOMIE?

A RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS/FOOTHILLS FORUM SPECIAL REPORT

- Is there a housing problem in Rappahannock?
- Are there not affordable houses to rent or buy here?
- What's at the root of the housing challenges in the county?
- How do housing prices compare to elsewhere?
- Who faces the biggest challenge: Renters or buyers?
- Who is most in need of affordable housing?
- What is housing's impact on hiring?
- What's the impact of Airbnb and weekend rentals?
- And why does affordability matter?

STARTING ON PAGE 10, find answers to these questions – and a clearer picture of the county's housing situation.



WHY APPLETON CAMPBELL?

BUILT ON TRUST

by providing

Honesty, Integrity & Experience Since 1976

540.518.2001 | appletoncampbell.com



“Very good customer service. Professional. Not pushy.
- Michael H. ”

Three ways Rappahannock can vote early, starting Sept. 18 • 5



This week

MEETINGS & NOTICES.....	15
OBITUARIES.....	20
COURTHOUSE ROW.....	20
CROSSWORD.....	21
CLASSIFIEDS, LEGALS.....	22





HOME SWEET HOME?

A RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS/FOOTHILLS FORUM SPECIAL REPORT

Questions about who gets to live in Rappahannock are perennial

STORIES BY **SARA SCHONHARDT** • GRAPHICS BY **LAURA STANTON** • FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Housing has long been a topic of discussion in Rappahannock. What's available? What's affordable? Commissioned studies have attempted to better understand the challenges — though most have taken a regional view with little local follow up — and nonprofits have formed to help offer more options than what's currently available.

The 2020 update of the county's comprehensive plan, now headed to the Rappahannock Board of Supervisors for consideration and another public hearing, acknowledges the importance of affordable housing and encourages development within "designated village areas." The challenge: How to provide it without damaging the unique character and scenic beauty of Rappahannock.

This report, the first of two, aims to enrich these continuing discussions by analyzing responses from 120 people to a questionnaire we circulated last fall. It also includes expert input based on more than three dozen interviews to paint a clearer picture of the county's housing situation. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the deep recession it has sparked, the focus on housing is even more timely and important.

In future pieces, we'll tell the stories of several residents who have faced housing challenges and report on some potential solutions. In the meantime, we'd like to hear from you. What do you think could help address some of the county's housing issues? Do you have a story or housing experience to share? Send your thoughts to editor@rappnews.com.

How would you describe the housing options in Rappahannock?

(Sized by housing questionnaire responses)



What we learned:

1

Housing is limited and expensive, especially for lower and middle-income households.

2

Rentals are a problem because they're even more limited than homes for sale and many are found by word of mouth.

3

Home values are higher in Rappahannock than many neighboring counties, and far above the national median. The same is true of median rents.

4

More than half of all renter-occupied households in the county are considered cost-burdened, meaning renters pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing.

5

As a result, people are putting a **larger percentage of their income** toward paying for housing.

6

And when **households are paying more for housing** than they can really afford, they have less to spend on other needs, such as food, transportation and savings.

7

Yet the results of our community questionnaire reveal that people largely chose to live in Rappahannock for a combination of reasons that make it more appealing than living elsewhere: They love the county's natural beauty and peace; its sense of community. They have family here, deep roots or employment.

8

Housing prices have been increasing while incomes have not. This makes it more challenging for households to afford their rent and mortgage payments.

9

Second homes and short-term rentals, such as those offered through Airbnb, remove homes from the market, particularly in tourist-driven economies.

10

Housing stock is down at the same time that demand has jumped, according to real estate market data. The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the supply-demand gap, sending home prices up.

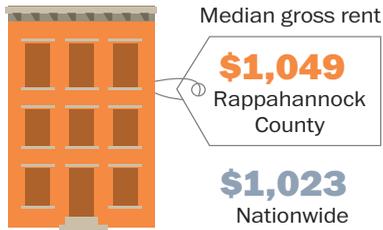


Rappahannock in context

A look at how the housing situation in Rappahannock compares to the nation, according to the latest Census figures, (2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates).

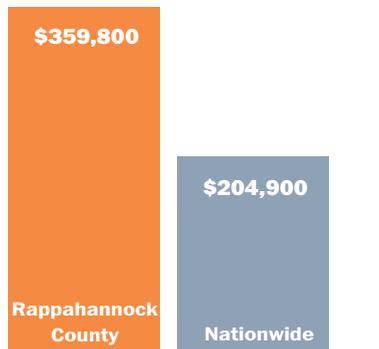
Higher rents

The median gross rent for Rappahannock County is higher than the nation.



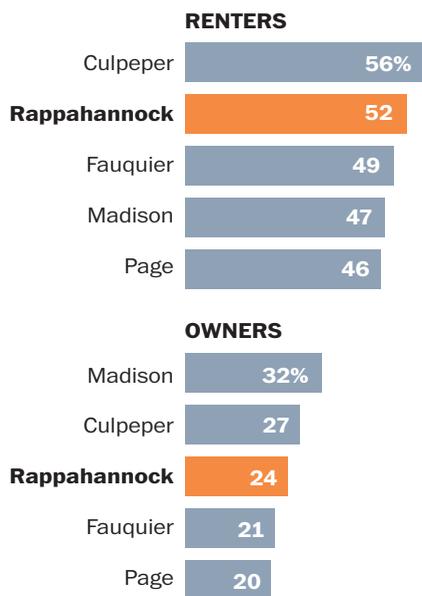
More expensive homes

Median housing values are higher than those nationwide.

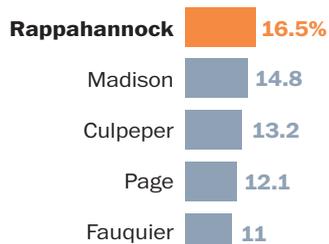


Stretched to pay for housing

Percentage of Rappahannock County households paying **more than 30 percent of household income** on housing costs:



Percentage of Rappahannock County households paying **more than half of their household income** on housing costs:



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey 5-year estimates; United Way ALICE project

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Our goal with this special report is to ground some of the local arguments on housing in facts and data. We had a base to start with: Concerns about housing affordability and availability surfaced in the March 2016 Foothills Forum Survey. At that time, housing affordability was the 12th most important of 25 randomly presented issues. And four in 10 respondents told us they could not afford to live in Rappahannock.

More recently, community members listed housing as the top need in the nonprofit health and human services agency People Inc.'s latest needs assessment of the 13-county Northern Piedmont region it serves.

We followed the Foothills Forum Survey last fall with an unscientific but extensive community questionnaire that sought direct feedback from residents and would-be residents about their housing challenges. The 120 responses provide a snapshot of their experiences, ranging from how they make decisions about where they live to their budget limitations.

The questionnaire, distributed in hard copy and through the online polling platform Survey Monkey, was sent out by the Rappahannock County Public School system; the Food Pantry; to local clergy via the Benevolent Fund, which provides residents with short-term, emergency financial help; the Facebook group RappRentersNet; the Industry Night group, which hosts gatherings for people employed in the food and farm sector; the county's Department of Social Services; and numerous business and community leaders. We then compiled answers from the 120 responses and grouped them into different data sets, which revealed some of the biggest takeaways.

Data used to inform this project also comes from Census figures, information available on real estate sites such as Zillow, and through local real estate agencies. Plus, we conducted some three dozen interviews with housing experts or those whose work relates to housing in addition to holding numerous conversations with local residents.

Frequently asked questions

Is there a housing problem in Rappahannock?

Rappahannock County has a shrinking, multigeneration population of roughly 7,300 people — youth, workers, retirees and second-home owners requiring a reliable roof over their heads. That includes the community's essential employees in education, public safety, hospitality and services. Some residents fear building more houses, particularly those suited to the needs of the middle- or lower-income population, imperils the natural beauty and open spaces we all profess to love and want to preserve.

Yet many of those same essential workers point to high rents, high home prices and taxes as reasons they struggle to live here. And it's why many must live elsewhere.

"As a professional couple with a good income, we still can't afford most housing in Rappahannock," said a would-be resident who responded to the Rappahannock County Community Housing Questionnaire (See About this Project above).

"Places are either way too high, or don't meet renters' standards,"

said another respondent. "I need a house to call my own, for my family. [We] currently live with my grandparents and it's very cramped."

One respondent cited sparse availability, "especially for people with limited incomes who work in the county to provide services to people."

"Too expensive for this market," said another. "Finding housing is just sheer luck. Makes renters willing to accept substandard housing and landlords."

Another challenge we heard: The lack of small houses on small acreage suited to young workers, small families or seniors.

Are there not affordable houses to rent or buy here?

Housing supply is low in Rappahannock, as it is at a national level. That is partly because demand has outpaced new construction, especially for low- and middle-income properties that are less lucrative for builders. Rappahannock's restrictive zoning exacerbates this shortage. People are also staying in their homes

See **HOME**, Page 12

What it takes to survive here

The **Household Survival Budget for Rappahannock** gives the cost of housing, food, transportation and health care at a *bare-minimum* "survival" level. It does not include any savings, leaving households without a cushion for unexpected expenses and unable to invest in the future.

Family of four*

\$4,938 per month

Misc. \$698

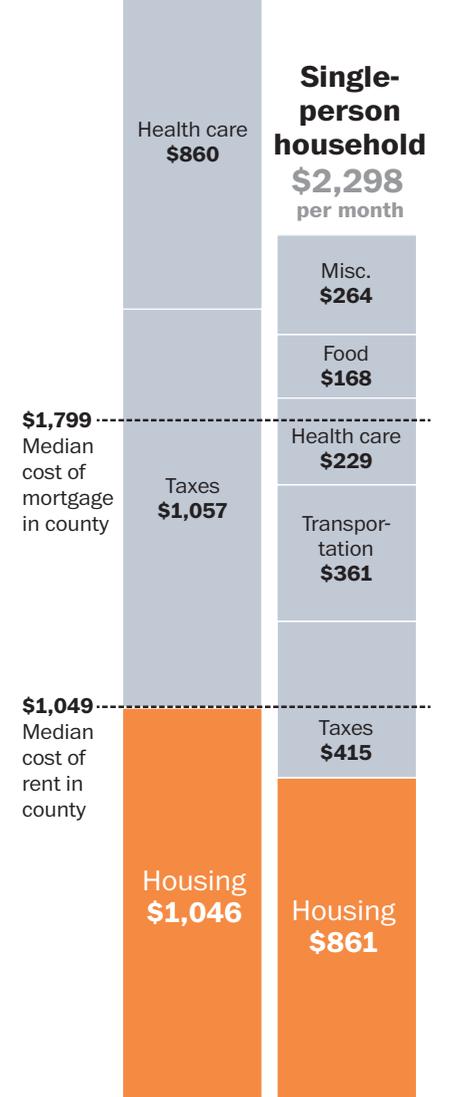
Food \$555

Transportation \$722

Health care \$860

Taxes \$1,057

Housing \$1,046



*Does not include child care

Sources: United Way ALICE project, which draws on data from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; U.S. Department of Agriculture; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Internal Revenue Service; Tax Foundation; and Virginia Department of Social Services, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 mortgage data



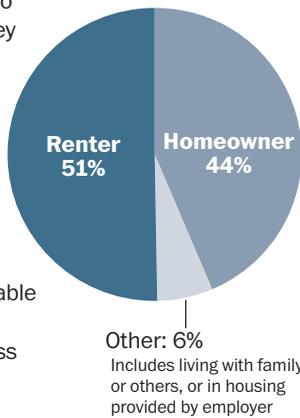
HOME SWEET HOME?

Rappahannock housing snapshot

A survey of people who live and/or work in Rappahannock reveals that the cost of housing is the main driver in the choices people make about where they live.

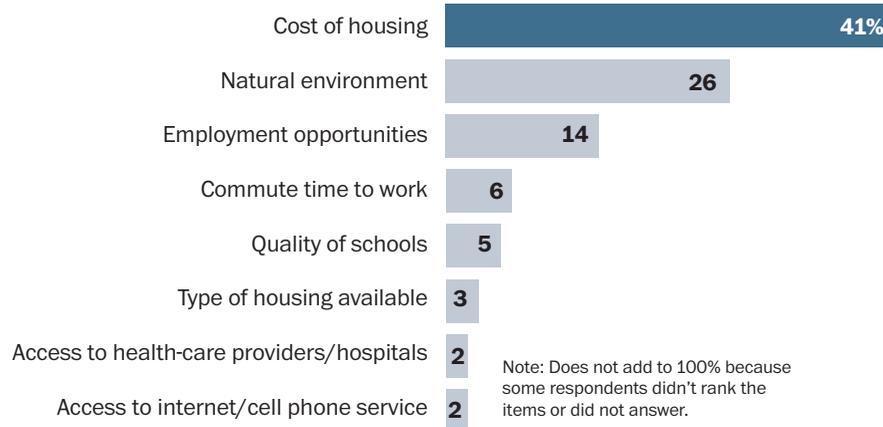
Renting vs. owning

Just over half of the 120 respondents to our survey said they were renters. That matters because renters tend to have lower incomes and spend more of their earnings on housing, making them more vulnerable to income shocks caused by a job loss or recession, for example.

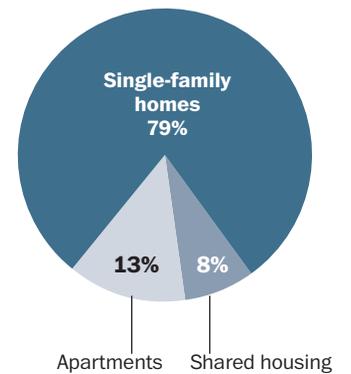


What do you consider when choosing where you live?

Respondents selected cost of housing as their top consideration when choosing where they live.



Type of housing respondents say is best suited to their needs



SOURCE: Rappahannock County Community Housing Questionnaire

HOME

From Page 11

longer. And while historically low interest rates have made it easier for homeowners to afford a mortgage, limited supply and heavy competition among buyers has pushed up prices.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, inventory levels have dropped further, said agent Cheri Woodard, largely because people who may have been thinking about selling have taken their homes off the market.

As of the end of August, there were 66 residential properties on the market in Rappahannock, not including land or farms, according to Adam Beroza at Woodard's agency. That's down from the same period last year, when on average there were 93 residential properties available. In 2018 it was 92, and in 2017 it was 95.

Second-home owners in Rappahannock who might have rented out their properties are moving into those spaces full time, further reducing supply, said Amy Timbers, an agent with Washington Fine Properties who often works with or advises renters.

"There is definitely an affordability issue for low and moderate income people in Rappahannock County," Rob Goldsmith, president and CEO of the nonprofit People Inc., said in an email. "There's just not many affordable housing options for people in the county."

There are homes here priced around \$200,000, said Woodard, particularly in the Chester Gap area. But there are typically just a few at any one time, and buyers looking in that price range can't be as picky about what they want.

A questionnaire respondent described the options this way: "Anything big enough to hold our family is in the \$700K range, and anything that's affordable is in a horrible location or can't get Internet."

How do Rappahannock housing prices compare to elsewhere?

Prices were high in Rappahannock even before the COVID-19 pandemic and have been trending upward.

The average home sales price for the first half of 2020 increased 19 percent, to \$435,191 from

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?

Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues.



FOOTHILLS FORUM

The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

→ More at foothillsforum.org

What do you think?

Let us know what you think of this project. Send feedback to editor@rapnews.com.

\$367,036 during the same period a year earlier, according to a July market report produced by Beroza.

At \$1,049 a month, Rappahannock's median gross rent is higher than neighboring Page, Warren or Madison counties. And the median home value for Rappahannock — \$359,800 — is higher than all five surrounding counties aside from Fauquier.

In addition, roughly 60 percent of owner-occupied homes in Rappahannock were valued at \$300,000 or higher compared to 32 percent nationally, according to 2018 Census data. More than 65 percent of residents pay \$1,500 or higher in monthly mortgage payments compared to around 50 percent at the national level.

And while half of all renter-occupied households pay more than the \$1,049 median rent, nearly as many (52 percent) are considered cost-burdened, meaning renters pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing. Altogether, the percentage of households in Rappahannock facing extreme cost burdens — paying more than 50 percent of their income on housing — is higher than surrounding counties.

"By far the largest housing challenge in rural communities is the ability for households to afford their rent and mortgage payments," said Lance George, director of research and information at the Housing Assistance Council (HAC), a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit focused on rural housing. "And that has largely been [due to] a very simple equation that incomes have been stagnant in rural communities ... while housing prices have been increasing, especially for renters." →

What's at the root of the housing challenge in the county?

ON THE SUPPLY SIDE

→ Too few units to meet demand, Beroza's data says. 24 of those 66 properties on the market were already under contract.

→ Rappahannock homeowners often remove auxiliary structures that could be fixed up and used as rentals rather than pay taxes on them, say real estate professionals.

→ Housing suitable for seniors is in short supply.

→ Competition between low-income earners or first-time homeowners with limited established credit, and retirees/second-home buyers with savings or good credit scores.

→ This tight housing market limits tenants' leverage, forcing some to live in substandard housing or accept higher rents.

→ Tourist homes, such as those listed on Airbnb or VRBO.com remove potential rentals from the market.

→ High construction costs make new builds lucrative only if they target high-end buyers.

ON THE DEMAND SIDE

→ Not enough land zoned for multifamily and small, single-family homes. While Rappahannock's tightly controlled zoning has allowed it to preserve its space and landscapes in ways other counties have not, it has led to higher costs.

→ Inadequate water and sewer infrastructure in villages where new homes can be built.

→ Long and complex development approval processes.



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

COMING UP IN TWO WEEKS

- Stories of county residents navigating the housing market
- Rappahannock real estate agents weigh in
- How the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the housing market
- The special challenges facing seniors

Who faces the biggest challenge: Renters or buyers?

Real estate professionals say the rental market poses the biggest challenge for Rappahannock, in part because it's so informal. Many rental homes are not listed with agents or online marketplaces but are shared by word of mouth.

The Facebook group RappRentersNet is trying to solve that problem by pairing landlords with potential renters, but the lack of a central database still makes it difficult to quantify what's available while allowing sellers to set their own prices regardless of market trends.

Bruce Geisert, who set up and administers the group, doesn't keep data on matches made, but it has grown to more than 500 members since starting in May 2019 and he says people seem to be finding housing. A challenge is reaching people who have a single room to offer or finding places for those who would be willing to share housing, he added.

Census data shows that just over one in four households are renters in Rappahannock. But for younger people, low-income and non-family households, the rental market is increasingly important.

And the share of renters both locally and nationally is growing. According to a recent report from

the U.S. Government Accountability Office, since the 2007–2009 financial crisis, growth in the share of renter households has reversed a decades-long trend toward homeownership.

Who is most in need of affordable housing?

The United Way defines households according to a metric known as ALICE — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. It measures whether a household earns enough to cover a basic budget including costs for transportation, housing, food, child care, health care and technology.

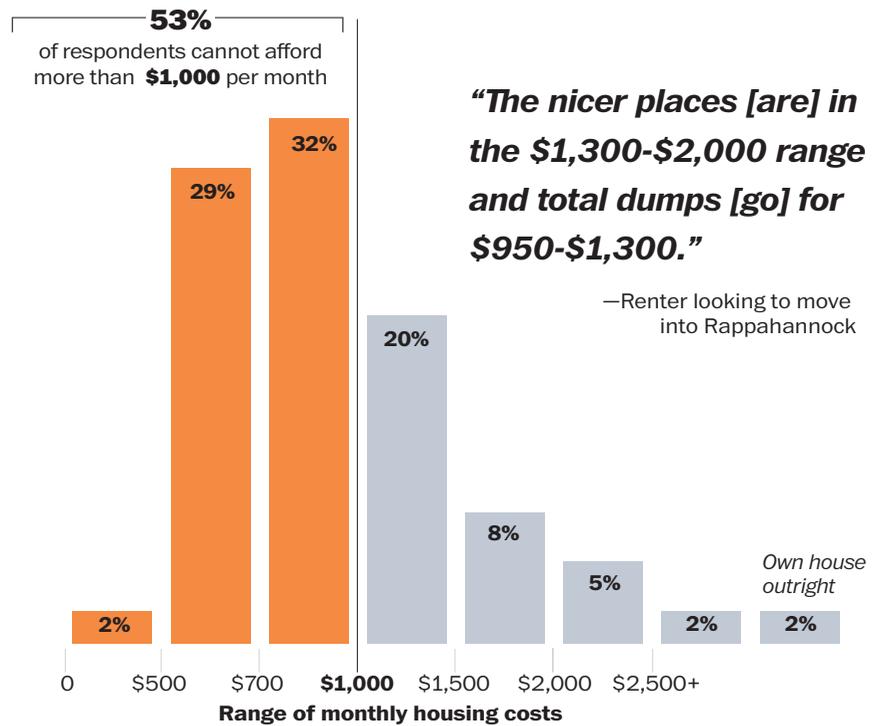
The ALICE report is important because it gives a sense of who within communities are experiencing the pressures of housing insecurity, said Darryl Neher, executive director of Fauquier Habitat for Humanity. He points to the backbone of our community — teachers, firefighters, police officers and young professionals.

“All of a sudden we're not talking about poverty housing, we're not talking about low-income housing, we're talking about the housing needs of the people who we would otherwise never really think about as being housing constrained or impacted by housing costs,” Neher said.

See **HOME**, Page 14

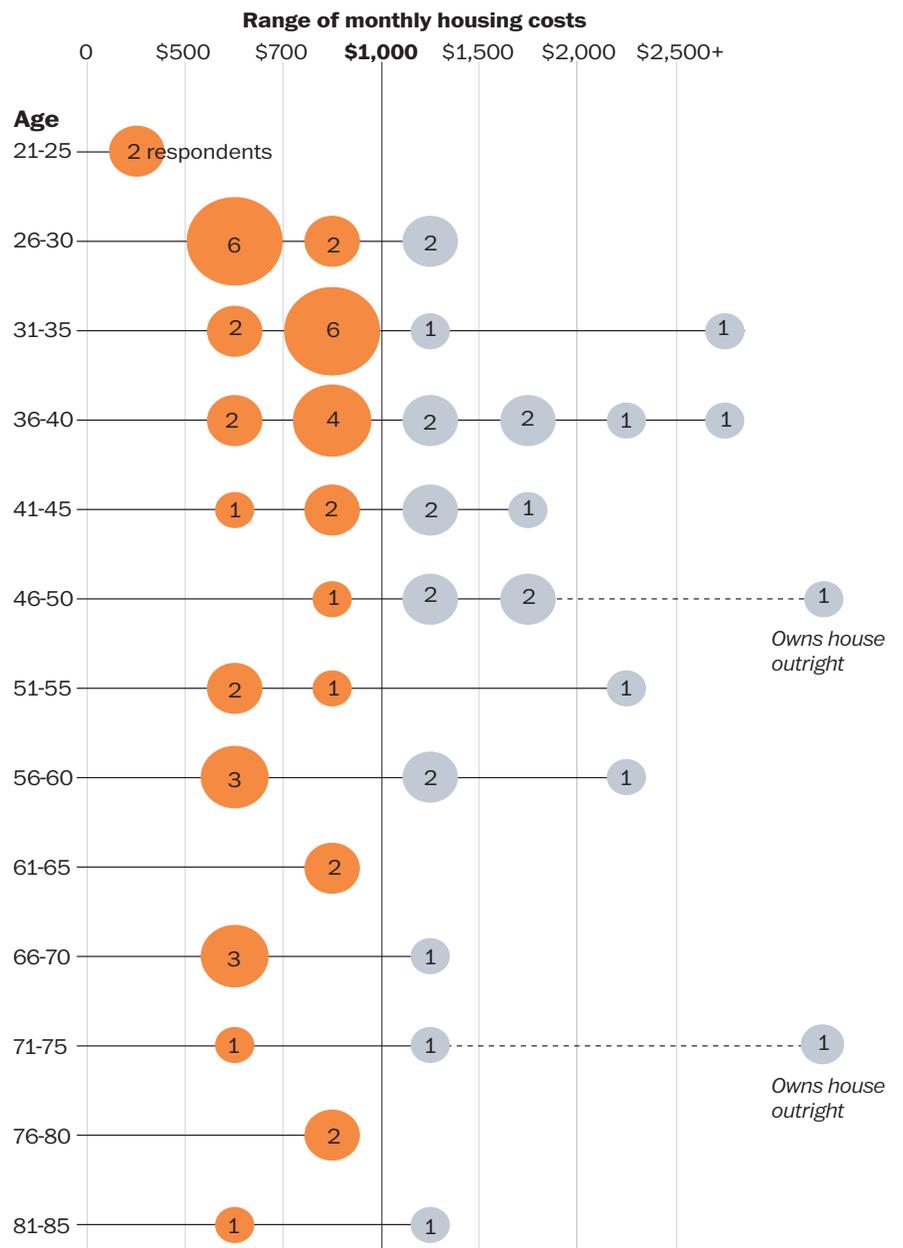
What housing can people afford?

More than half of respondents say they cannot afford more than **\$1,000** a month, but the median gross rent for Rappahannock County is **\$1,049** and the median mortgage is **\$1,799**, according to 2018 Census data.



Higher costs are out of reach for younger, older residents

Rappahannock residents under 35 years of age and seniors tend to struggle more with housing costs. Below, the number of people surveyed in each age group who can afford to pay within the ranges listed.



SOURCE: Rappahannock County Community Housing Questionnaire

Voting: Everything you need to know

KEY DATES

SEPT. 17 (THURSDAY)

Absentee ballots for which valid applications have been received and processed will start being mailed out on this day. Applications are only valid if submitted by registered voters.

SEPT. 18 (FRIDAY)

In-person absentee voting begins at Voter Registration Office, 262-A Gay St., Washington, VA, 540-675-5380.

OCT. 13

Deadline to register to vote or update an existing registration.

OCT. 23

Applications must be received at Voter Registration Office by 5 p.m. for absentee ballot to be mailed.

OCT. 24

Voter Registration Office is open on a Saturday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. for in-person absentee voting.

OCT. 31

Voter Registration Office is open on a Saturday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. for in-person absentee voting. Last day to vote in-person absentee.

NOV. 3

Election Day. Polls are open from 6 a.m. - 7 p.m.

In Rappahannock, a 60 percent increase in absentee ballot requests

BY BOB HURLEY
For Foothills Forum

Beginning Friday, Rappahannock voters can start casting their ballots for the Nov. 3 general election. Between Friday and Oct. 31, "in-person" voting can be done at the county Voter Registration Office at 262-A Gay St., Washington, between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. "Mail-in" absentee ballots will also start to be mailed to those who requested them.

"We have already received 700 applications for absentee mail-in ballots and I expect dozens of new applications before the request period closes on Oct. 23," said Kimberly McKiernan, director of elections. "We are working diligently to get these applications approved and the ballots mailed out in a timely manner."

McKiernan's office has seen a 60 percent increase in absentee ballot requests as compared to the 2016 general election. While McKiernan doesn't foresee problems getting the requested ballots mailed, she does "urge voters to mail in their ballots early to avoid any potential problems with postal delivery."

But with hundreds of absentee ballots to be mailed this week, McKiernan asked that anyone planning to vote in-person this Friday to wait until Monday. "We will certainly accommodate in-person voters on Sept. 18, but we are going to be very busy that day. So, if it is possible for folks to wait a couple of days, it would lighten our load," she said.



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOHILLS FORUM

They'll count Rapp's votes: Kimberly McKiernan (left), director of elections, with staffers Meg Flanagan and Sheran Rigg.

New changes

The Virginia General Assembly and Department of Elections have instituted several changes to the voting process. Among them:

→ Absentee voters will not have to pay for postage to mail their ballots. Each absentee ballot will come with a prepaid envelope addressed to the county voter registration office.

→ Each absentee ballot will be stamped with a unique barcode so voters can track their ballots by accessing the "Ballot Scout" internet site: tinyurl.com/rappballot

→ "Drop boxes" (to avoid purchasing costly metal drop boxes, Rappahannock will use rigid, security-sealed bags) will be placed at each polling station for voters wishing to drop off their absentee ballots.

→ Due to the pandemic, witnesses will not be required to validate absentee ballots.

Enough poll workers?

In the 2018 general election, a Pew Research Center analysis found almost six in 10 U.S. poll workers were age 61 or older, with roughly a quarter over 70. As many of these older poll workers are at higher risk for COVID, concerns have been reported that some will stay home, leading to staff shortages at the polls in Virginia and around the nation.

McKiernan says there is no such shortage in Rappahannock. "We have a core team of 40 well-trained, experienced poll workers and have recently added eight new workers," she said. "I do not expect a shortage of workers either in the processing of absentee ballots or working the polls on Election Day. We've had a lot of interest from people who want to help out, but once they hear about the long hours and intense work involved, some shy away," she said. Poll →

WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT?

Commonwealth of Virginia, Sample Ballot

County of Rappahannock
General and Special Elections
Tuesday, November 3, 2020

Instructions to voters:

To vote for a candidate, fill in the oval next to the name, like this: ●
To vote on an issue, fill in the oval next to Yes or No.
To write in a qualified candidate who is not already on the ballot, fill in the oval and write the name of the person on the line.
If you want to change a vote or if you have made a mistake, ask an election worker for another ballot.
If you make marks on the ballot besides filling in the oval, your vote may not be counted.

→ **VOTERS WILL CHOOSE** among candidates for president and vice president, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House of Representatives.

→ **TWO VIRGINIA CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS** are proposed as well. The first calls for **establishing a redistricting commission** that would be responsible for drawing congressional and state legislative districts.

The second would **waive state and local taxes** on automobiles or pickup trucks owned or primarily used by veterans who have a permanent 100 percent service-connected disability.



Proposed Constitutional Amendments

Constitutional Amendment #1

Should the Constitution of Virginia be amended to establish a redistricting commission, consisting of eight members of the General Assembly and eight citizens of the Commonwealth, that is responsible for drawing the congressional and state legislative districts that will be subsequently voted on, but not changed by, the General Assembly and enacted without the Governor's involvement and to give the responsibility of drawing districts to the Supreme Court of Virginia if the redistricting commission fails to draw districts or the General Assembly fails to enact districts by certain deadlines?

- Yes
- No

Constitutional Amendment #2

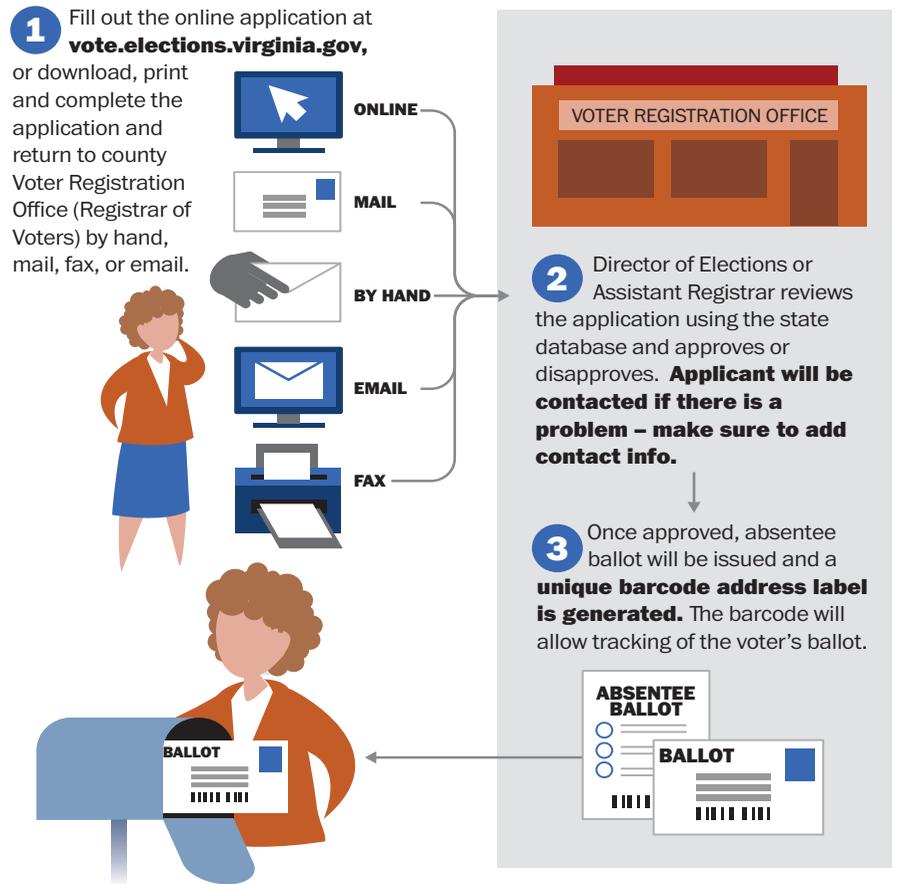
Should an automobile or pickup truck that is owned and used primarily by or for a veteran of the United States armed forces or the Virginia National Guard who has a one hundred percent service-connected, permanent, and total disability be free from state and local taxation?

- Yes
- No

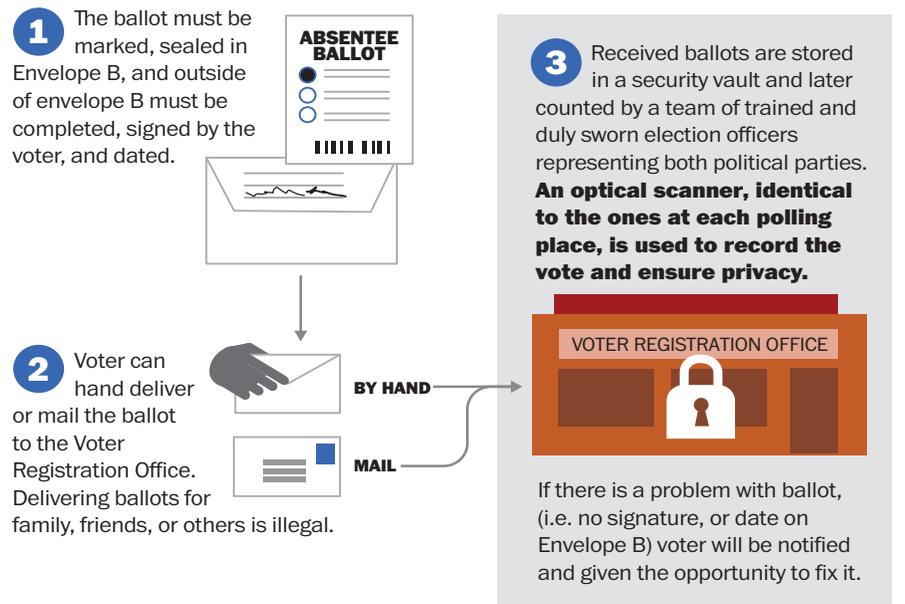
Day in the life of an absentee ballot

Only registered voters in Virginia can apply for and submit absentee ballots.

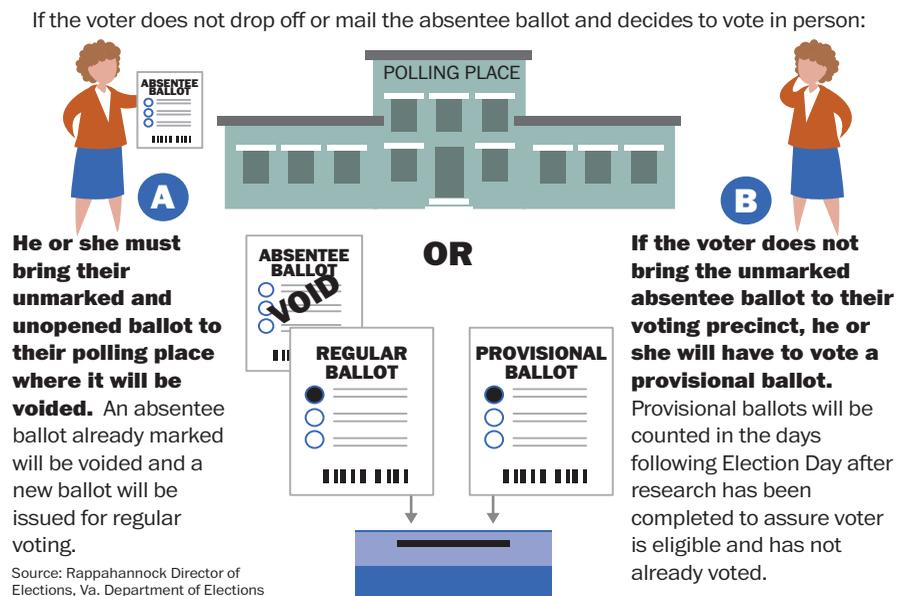
Applying for the ballot



Voting with absentee ballot...



...or voting in person after all



WHERE TO VOTE

Rappahannock's voting precincts – Polls are open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

101 – Town of Washington/Hampton District: Washington Volunteer Fire Dept., 10 Firehouse Lane, Washington.

201 – Amissville/Jackson District: Amissville Volunteer Fire Dept., 14711 Lee Hwy., Amissville.

301 – Sperryville/Piedmont District: Sperryville Volunteer Fire Dept., 11871 Lee Hwy., Sperryville.

401 – Scrabble/Stonewall Hawthorne District: Castleton Volunteer Fire Dept., 593 Castleton View Road, Castleton.

501 – Chester Gap/Wakefield District: Chester Gap Volunteer Dept., 42 Waterfall Road, Chester Gap.

502 – Flint Hill/Wakefield District: Flint Hill Volunteer Fire Dept., 945 Fodderstack Road, Flint Hill.

➔ workers normally earn \$150 to work up to 15 hours or longer on Election Day. Those interested in helping at the polls may contact McKiernan at 540-675-5380.

Voting absentee: What's required

A registered voter may vote absentee “in-person” or by mailing in their absentee ballot.

WHAT IF?...

Do I need a reason to vote by absentee? No

Do I need a witness present when I complete my absentee ballot? No. This requirement has been waived due to the pandemic.

I decide not to mail in my absentee ballot and vote at my voting precinct? Bring your unmarked ballot with you and return it to the Election Official.

I lose my mail-in absentee ballot? Contact the Voter Registration Office at 540-675-5380.

I don't have a Virginia driver's license? Can I use other forms of ID? Yes. A complete list of acceptable IDs can be found on elections.virginia.gov under “casting a ballot.”

My mail-in ballot arrives late due to postal delivery delays? Marked, absentee-by-mail ballots postmarked on or before Election Day will be counted if they are received at the Voter Registration Office by noon, Friday, Nov. 7.

I go to my voting precinct to make sure my mail-in ballot was counted? Election Officials at the polling place are only able to verify

IN-PERSON

➔ Starting Friday, Sept. 18, you may vote early “in-person” at the Voter Registration Office, 262-A Gay St. Washington, VA, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. (See McKiernan's comments on previous page).

➔ Voters do not need to fill out an application or provide an excuse for voting early.

➔ A valid driver's license or other identification is required. For a list of valid IDs, visit elections.virginia.gov under “casting a ballot,” or call the Office at 540-675-5380.

BY MAIL

➔ Registered voters must complete and submit an application for an absentee-by-mail ballot no later than Oct. 23.

➔ Applications can be completed online at vote.elections.virginia.gov. A valid Virginia driver's license or other ID issued by the DMV is required.

➔ Alternatively, the application can be downloaded, printed and mailed, or requested by phone from the county Voter Registration Office.

➔ Mailed ballots must be postmarked on or before Election Day.

➔ Ballots may also be hand-delivered up until 7 p.m. on Election Day at the Voter Registration Office or after hours in the mail slot, or on Election Day in drop boxes at their polling place. Only the person casting the ballot may deliver it and it must be marked, sealed in Envelope B, signed, dated and placed in the provided prepaid postage return envelope exactly as if it were being mailed.



Rappahannock will use rigid, security-sealed bags as “drop boxes.”

that you were sent a ballot. Instead, visit the link provided with your mail-in absentee ballot which enables you to track your ballot. For other questions, call the Voter Registration Office.

I want to drop off more than one absentee ballot at the Voter Registration Office, or designated ballot box? Virginia state law prohibits voters from delivering the ballot of any voter other than themselves.

I mail in my absentee ballot and then vote at my precinct? It is a felony if a voter attempts to vote twice.