

SCHOOL CLOSURES, CANCELLATIONS, EARLY DISMISSALS AND VIRTUAL LEARNING DAYS DUE TO

Winter storm warning issued for Hampton Roads; up to 8 inches of snow expected in...



School closures, cancellations, early dismissals and virtual...



This could be high storm watch Hampton R

How Virginia Beach lost Something in the Water

By STACY PARKER

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | OCT 06, 2021



FEEDBACK



Festivalgoers climb on the Something in the Water sign to get photos on April 27, 2019, near the Beach Stage in Virginia Beach. (Sarah Holm)

FEEDBACK

Listen to this article



VIRGINIA BEACH — Pharrell Williams’ [Dear John letter to Virginia Beach](#) Tuesday stung the core of the city’s conscience, and it’s going to take more than lip service to ease the pain. The Grammy-award winning celebrity and Virginia Beach native indicated that the city has lost the Something in the Water festival.

So what went wrong?

ADVERTISING

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)



Just a few years ago, **then-Police Chief James Cervera approached Williams with a proposition**. Help us, he said, bring about positive change to a weekend that had developed a reputation as violent. College Beach Weekend, a non-city sanctioned event held at the end of April at the Oceanfront, draws thousands of mostly Black college students to the beach with no organized events.

It needed direction. Williams stepped up.

ADVERTISEMENT

FEEDBACK

In half the time it would take to put on such an elaborate festival, Williams secured a hefty lineup of stars in 2019 to perform on beachfront stages. The “Pharrell and Friends” set on Saturday night that year included a bevy of special guests and surprise additions: Jay-Z; Hampton Roads natives Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott, Timbaland and Fam-Lay; Tyler, the Creator; Snoop Dogg; Diddy; Usher; and Charlie Wilson

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

[Pharrell Williams cites ‘toxic energy’ in Virginia Beach as city leaders scramble to save **Something in the Water**](#) »

In the months leading to **Something in the Water**, there was some apprehension among residents, who talked about the violent clashes between Black students and law enforcement during Greekfest in 1989. Racial tensions from that notorious Labor Day weekend event lingered decades later.

But **Something in the Water** washed away all traces of negativity. It proved **a peaceful success**, in how it shifted the paradigm and generated revenue. It was sold out with 35,000 tickets, drumming up \$25 million for the region. **In Virginia Beach alone**, it generated \$1.2 million in taxes from lodging, meals, admissions, and business permits and licenses.

More importantly, though, most **agreed that feelings of inclusivity and positive energy abounded** in Virginia Beach during the three-day festival.

“**Something in the Water** showed the world how far the city has come since Greekfest,” Councilman Aaron Rouse said shortly after the 2019 event. “We will not let our fears of the past stop us from progression and moving forward.”

FEEDBACK

Williams intended to bring the festival back in 2020. Tickets were sold and most of the schedule was in place when the coronavirus pandemic **forced planners to cancel**, then not schedule it in 2021.

With vaccines widely available, 2022 was looking like the year for **Something in the Water** to come back.

But in the 2 1/2 years since the inaugural event, something went terribly wrong in Williams’ eyes, according to his letter to the city manager this week.

“Toxic energy” took over the city, Williams wrote.

One sticking point in his letter: He's unhappy with the city's response to the [death of his cousin](#), Donovan Lynch, who was shot by a police officer March 26 during a night of [chaotic violence at the Oceanfront](#).

The officer who shot Lynch, 25, did not have his body camera on. Lynch's family, including Williams, wanted a federal investigation into the shooting. A special grand jury is currently investigating, and Lynch's family has filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the officer.

Rouse said in a telephone interview Wednesday morning that Williams is not alone in believing that city leadership failed to take a proactive approach in the aftermath of the Lynch shooting. Rouse said he, too, found it to be "disheartening" when city leaders didn't meet with the families of two people fatally shot that night — Lynch and Deshayla Harris. Police have said Harris, 28, was a bystander killed by a stray bullet.

And yet when City Manager Patrick Duhaney, who was hired in 2020, heard that Williams may not bring the festival back, he pleaded in a letter to Williams asking to meet with him and Mayor Bobby Dyer to talk it out.

FEEDBACK

"Where is that same energy and focus that you have for the festival?" Rouse said in the interview. "Where was that around these shootings?"

Williams expressed that sentiment, too, in his letter: "I wish the same energy I felt from Virginia Beach leadership upon losing the festival would have been similarly channeled following the loss of my relative's life."

Williams, his business partner at Venture Realty Co., and the firm that handles communication for the festival did not reply to requests for comments Wednesday.

The 'toxic' reference, Rouse said, could be stemming from how some city leaders handle issues of inclusion. Rouse, who has served as an at-large representative on

“You offer your perspective when you come from a different background, and many times, it goes in one ear or another, and then it’s ignored,” Rouse said.

He ticked off a number of issues the City Council dealt with recently, including a disparity study looking at how and with whom the city does business; hazard pay during the pandemic for city services workers, of which many are minorities; and a federal lawsuit in which a judge declared the citywide voting system illegal and discriminatory.

“These are the underlying issues,” Rouse said.

Whether anything can be done to change Williams’ mind remains to be seen.

Dyer said Tuesday he wants to meet with Williams and talk about his concerns to try to bring Something in the Water back to Virginia Beach.

In a prepared statement, the mayor said Wednesday he went against the grain after he was elected in supporting the festival.

FEEDBACK

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)



October 6, 2021

Statement From: Mayor Robert M. "Bobby" Dyer



FEEDBACK

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

“Not everyone thought it was the right thing to do, but I believed it was the right thing to do, and it was a huge success,” the mayor wrote.

He wrote that the city lost “momentum” with Something in the Water last year because of COVID.

“But it was our intention then, and it remains now, to host the event in 2022. We see it as a catalyst for promoting positivity, and that’s why the manager and I still want to talk. We’re hopeful Pharrell will accept,” he wrote.

LATEST ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Love, respect and wit animate book ‘On Animals’

6:15 AM

Virginia Arts Festival celebrates 25th anniversary season with legendary acts and the International Tattoo’s return to Scope

JAN 19, 2022

Former Attorney General Bill Barr’s memoir to be published March 8

JAN 19, 2022

Scholars doubt new theory on Anne Frank’s betrayal

JAN 18, 2022

Actor-comedian Louie Anderson undergoing cancer treatment

JAN 18, 2022

FEEDBACK

Weekend Scoop Newsletter

Weekly

Check out the latest entertainment and arts news, then plan your weekend with a look ahead at what's happening around Hampton Roads.

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

Councilmember Michael Berlucchi, who has been an active proponent for human rights in the city, said it's critical that city leadership works to mend fences now.

The festival helped welcome people to Virginia Beach and provide a sense of pride in the community, he said. It also, "responded to the history of racial tension and violence that have occurred during that weekend," Berlucchi said. "All of us owe it to the people of Virginia Beach and Hampton Roads who were inspired by Something in the Water to continue to deliver on that promise."

Rouse said the city needs to take action.

"We have to look in the mirror and be critical of ourselves, and say: 'These are the areas we need to improve.' That is how we mend our relationship with Mr. Williams."

Stacy Parker, 757-222-5125, stacy.parker@pilotonline.com

Topics: [virginia beach](#), [something in the water](#), [pharrell williams](#), [mayor bobby dyer](#), [donovon lynch](#), [venture realty group](#), [dome site](#), [atlantic park](#), [enterprise](#)

FEEDBACK

Stacy Parker

Staff Writer



Stacy Parker covers Virginia Beach government, tourism and development. She's a Virginia Beach native and a University of Maryland graduate who began her career in journalism as a teen correspondent for The Pilot years ago.

Unsold 2021 SUVs Now Almost Being Given Away: See Prices

SUV Deals | Search Ads | Sponsored

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

Sign up now

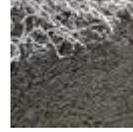


SCHOOL CLOSURES, CANCELLATIONS, EARLY DISMISSALS AND VIRTUAL LEARNING DAYS DUE TO

Winter storm warning issued for Hampton Roads; up to 8 inches of snow expected in...



School closures, cancellations, early dismissals and virtual...



This could be high storm watch Hampton R

ADVERTISEMENT

ELECTIONS GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

How Virginia Beach turned red again

By STACY PARKER

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | NOV 05, 2021



Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

Sign up now



Virginia Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin takes the stage at an election-night rally at the Westfields Marriott Washington Dulles on Nov. 2, 2021 in Chantilly, Virginia. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images/TNS)

VIRGINIA BEACH — As the red wave swept across the commonwealth on Election Day, Democrats realized their stronghold on the state's most populous city wasn't strong enough.

Glenn Youngkin, the Republican candidate for governor, **captured more than 50% of the vote statewide** and 53% in Virginia Beach. A slew of candidates for state seats also beat their blue opponents.

ADVERTISING

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)



What happened? Did the stars align for the Republican ticket this year, or did voter disappointment on social issues including crime and education swing the pendulum to the right?

For starters, three Republican candidates who won on Tuesday have a connection to Virginia Beach.

ADVERTISEMENT

Youngkin was raised here as a teenager. Winsome Sears, **the lieutenant governor-elect**, was a state legislator in the early 2000s for the 90th District, which includes parts of Norfolk and Virginia Beach. And Jason Miyares, **who defeated two-term incumbent Democrat Mark Herring** for attorney general, currently represents the 82nd District, which encompasses parts of Virginia Beach.

“In terms of having maybe a home region boost, the Virginia Beach area is a pretty good area to be from.” said J. Miles Coleman, University of Virginia’s Center for

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

Throughout the election, Coleman said he kept tabs on the election climate in Virginia Beach, along with Chesterfield County, because both localities supported presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016, but favored President Joe Biden in 2020.

“Those were the types of areas Youngkin as a Republican would have to make inroads in, and he did,” Coleman said.

A defining moment came at the end of the race, during the last debate between Youngkin and opponent Terry McAuliffe.

In a discussion initiated by a question about new state guidelines that allow transgender students to use the bathroom and locker room of their preferred gender identity, Youngkin said parents should be involved in the decisions of local school districts and their children’s education.

McAuliffe retorted: “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.”

It added fuel to fires that had been lit in school board meetings across the state. Parents have been pleading for more oversight regarding classroom curriculum and library books some consider inappropriate. In Virginia Beach, parents, grandparents and students have been lining up to air concerns on the hot-button issues.

“Youngkin was really given a gift at that debate,” said Coleman. “It gave Youngkin something concrete to point to.”

Former Gov. Douglas Wilder, a Democrat, said McAuliffe’s “arrogance” in the debate about how schools should operate harmed the Democrats.

“Education is always key,” said Wilder, 90, who served from 1990-94. “They paid a price for it.”

But that wasn't the only challenge Democrats needed to overcome to keep the governor's mansion and other key positions, Wilder said. He believes the party fell short on addressing the interests of voters of color.

"The Democrats didn't make a case," Wilder said.

There's also the issue of McAuliffe being aligned with the same party as Biden. Virginia Beach is home to military families and federal workers who may have recently become disappointed in the president's performance.

"Biden is seen as either unpopular or not being able to pass his priorities in Congress," Coleman said. "That's probably part of it as well."

McAuliffe served as governor from 2014-18, succeeding Bob McDonnell, a Republican. But McAuliffe didn't win in Virginia Beach in 2013. His Republican opponent, Ken Cuccinelli, carried the city with 2,137 more votes.

Four years later, Democrat Ralph Northam beat Republican Ed Gillespie for the governorship. Northam won by 6,369 votes in Virginia Beach, according to the Virginia Department of Elections. Democrats have won four of the state's five most recent gubernatorial elections, but the flip from blue to red is not a shocker. History shows Virginia voters become disenchanted with the party controlling the White House and vote against it in gubernatorial races.

Since 1977, when voting for governor, Virginia has always chosen the party opposite of the sitting president's, with the only exception being McAuliffe in 2013, when Barack Obama was president.

[View complete election results »](#)

"I think we're starting to get back into that pattern," said Coleman. "It's almost like a return to normalcy."

What could shift Virginia Beach back to blue in the next election cycle?

LATEST ELECTIONS

Louisiana U.S. Senate hopeful smokes pot in political ad, slams arrest disparities

JAN 18, 2022

Virginia Beach taxpayers on hook for legal costs as city appeals voting rights lawsuit. Councilman wants it to stop.

JAN 12, 2022

Norfolk Democrat Jackie Glass wins special election for Virginia's 89th House District

JAN 12, 2022

Judges let North Carolina GOP redistricting plans stand

JAN 11, 2022

Madison Cawthorn should be disqualified as candidate over Jan. 6 involvement, N.C. voters say

JAN 10, 2022

Proven leadership for people of color will be the deciding factor, Wilder said.

“No democrat is going to win without strong Black support,” he said. “Why should that Black support go to that Democratic candidate? What has been evidenced? What has been shown?”

A “simple understanding” of constituents’ needs would help, too, he said.

“Get rid of the b.s. and talk to the people,” Wilder said. “Don’t forget, they are where the votes are, and you need to connect with them.”

Stacy Parker, 757-222-5125, stacy.parker@pilotonline.com

Stacy Parker

Staff Writer



Stacy Parker covers Virginia Beach government, tourism and development. She's a Virginia Beach native and a University of Maryland graduate who began her career in journalism as a teen correspondent for The Pilot years ago.

ADVERTISEMENT

CONNECT



TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

Chicago Tribune

New York Daily News

Sun Sentinel of Fla.

Hartford Courant

The Daily Meal

The Baltimore Sun

Orlando Sentinel

The Morning Call of Pa.

Daily Press of Va.

Studio 1847

COMPANY INFO

Careers

Place an ad

Contact us

Help Center

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

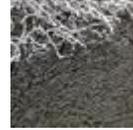


SCHOOL CLOSURES, CANCELLATIONS, EARLY DISMISSALS AND VIRTUAL LEARNING DAYS DUE TO

Winter storm warning issued for Hampton Roads; up to 8 inches of snow expected in...



School closures, cancellations, early dismissals and virtual...



This could be high storm watch Hampton R

ADVERTISEMENT

LOCAL GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Pharrell Williams cites 'toxic energy' in Virginia Beach as city leaders scramble to save Something in the Water

By STACY PARKER

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | OCT 05, 2021



FEEDBACK

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

Sign up now



The city's leadership learned last week that Pharrell Williams will not bring back the highly successful Something in the Water Festival to Virginia Beach in 2022, and begged him in a letter to reconsider. (L. Todd Spencer)

Listen to this article



VIRGINIA BEACH — It appears the Something in the Water Festival is going to be a one-hit wonder.

FEEDBACK

The city's leadership learned last week that Pharrell Williams indicated he wasn't bringing back the highly successful festival to Virginia Beach in 2022, and begged him in a letter to reconsider.

ADVERTISING

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)



A few days later, the music superstar, who lived as a child in the city's Seatack neighborhood, sent a letter back to the city manager, explaining his disappointment with Virginia Beach.

Williams wrote that he wished the city had taken a more proactive stance after his cousin Donovan Lynch was shot by a police officer in the resort area last March.

ADVERTISEMENT

FEEDBACK

Virginia Beach, Williams wrote, has been “run by - and with toxic energy.”

“I sang about a room without a roof, but I am tired of kindly and politely being shown the door,” he wrote.

Williams wrote that he decided to hold the 2019 festival to “ease racial tension.”

[Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox](#)

[Sign up now](#)

But he feels that the city isn't valuing his solutions for "human rights for all," he wrote.

The total economic impact of the festival on Hampton Roads was \$24.11 million, according to the city.

LATEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Hampton Roads cities prep for snow; homeless outreach underway

3h

Virginia Beach continuing fight against federal ruling declaring voting system discriminatory

JAN 19, 2022

Ex-Norfolk sheriff Bob McCabe's lawyer asks for competency evaluation, says mental health has declined in jail

JAN 18, 2022

Virginia Beach considers selling land next to Rudee Loop

JAN 18, 2022

Youngkin's order to end Virginia's statewide school mask mandate gets pushback

JAN 16, 2022

Mayor Bobby Dyer, when reached by phone late Tuesday night, said he wants the festival to come back to Virginia Beach and plans to take steps to make it happen.

FEEDBACK

"We're hoping we can have a face-to-face meeting with Pharrell and go over his concerns and see what we can do to get things back on track," the mayor said. "By meeting in person and communicating, I am confident we can move in a better direction. That would be best to build those positive bridges."

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)



From the Desk of
Pharrell Will

Pharrell Williams
Miami, FL

October 5, 2021

Dear Mr. Duhaney,

I love the city of Virginia Beach. I've always loved Virginia Beach and most importantly our people. It's a place that

When we did the festival, it was to ease racial tensions and



FEEDBACK

Letter from the City of Virginia Beach:

Virginia Beach Letter to Pharrell Williams



City of Vi

OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER
(757) 385-4242
FAX (757) 427-5626

September 29, 2021

Something in the Water Festival
Attention: Mr. Pharrell Williams (via Email)



FEEDBACK

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

[Sign up now](#)

Topics: [Virginia Beach](#), [Pharrell Williams](#), [Something in the Water](#)

Stacy Parker

Staff Writer



Stacy Parker covers Virginia Beach government, tourism and development. She's a Virginia Beach native and a University of Maryland graduate who began her career in journalism as a teen correspondent for The Pilot years ago.

Erika Eleniak Turns 52, And Here's How She Looks Like Now

Boite a Scoop | Sponsored

Doctor Tells: Do You Have Too Much Belly Fat? (Eat This Before Bed)

Gundry MD | Sponsored

63 Year-Old Fitness Legend Shares His 4 Must Eat Foods

Power Life By Tony Horton | Sponsored

Tommy Chong: The Horrifying Truth About CBD

Tommy Chong's CBD | Sponsored

Shop Now

FEEDBACK

These Loaded Camper Vans Are Turning Heads

Camper Van Warehouse | Search Ads | Sponsored

Get our most popular newsletter delivered to your inbox

Sign up now