

THE ROANOKE TIMES
OCTOBER 23, 2022
Small-town revival
By Luke Weir

BUCHANAN — Folks drift from afar, sometimes without realizing, to this small town for the fun and beauty of nearby trail hikes, bike rides and inner-tube floats, but they might stay a while upon discovering the classic charm of Main Street.

In idyllic Buchanan, Town Manager Susan McCulloch said she often watches from her home on Lowe Street while summertime paddlers put into the James River. As autumn falls over Botetourt County, reinvention is how she describes changes of recent decades in this rural town of 1,100 residents.

“People just love the river here. And it is beautiful, absolutely beautiful,” McCulloch said. “The river used to be this space we turned our backs toward. Now, we’re facing and embracing it.”

The James River of the past was periled by pollution, and poor watershed management resulted in frequent flooding, culminating in a 1985 flood that remains deepest on record, town officials said.

The river for decades was kind of let go, but is now a renewed focal point for townspeople and visitors, said Harry Gleason, Buchanan’s director of community development and events.

“The outfitters and their success really got people thinking differently about the river, because they were bringing so many people here,” Gleason said. “It continues to grow that way, people seeing it as an asset.”

Twin River Outfitters offers adventures afloat from its waterside storefront on Lowe Street beside Buchanan Town Park. Co-owner John Mays said there are still too many tires to fish out of the James River, but far fewer now than when the tubing business began 17 years ago.

“We ended up relocating our business from Glasgow, Virginia, to Botetourt County, specifically Buchanan, because of all the numerous river access points on the James River,” Mays said. “It’s just worked out really well as a nice tourism, outdoor recreation-minded area.”

Town officials said they hope to facilitate future outdoor assets for Buchanan by looking ahead. It is one of 25 small communities nationwide participating in the federal planning program Recreation Economy for Rural Communities.

“We’re happy that this is going to be a community-driven plan that will be coming from the citizens of Buchanan,” McCulloch said. “It will be a roadmap for our long-range planning.”

The goal of the federal program is to help rural communities leverage outdoor recreation to revitalize Main Streets, improving environmental protection and public health along the way, according to an announcement from the Environmental Protection Agency.

A 12-member local steering committee is now working with federal consultants over a six-month span to develop strategies and an action plan for growing Buchanan's outdoor recreation economy, town officials said.

“These are things that the residents of the town will be enjoying also,” Gleason said. “It’s not something that’s being done for a customer base, it’s really things that will improve life for the community.”

The recreation economy has been at play for years in Buchanan, but by putting a name to it and nailing down actionable plans for the future, town officials hope to garner more momentum for downtown revitalization.

Already, redevelopment of the former Groendyk factory buildings will result in something new for Buchanan: creation of a 4,000 square-foot brewpub, McCulloch said. That’s one example of a strong outdoor economy helping to attract new business.

“Whatever tourists like, so do residents. If you drive around Buchanan, you see so many canoes and kayaks outside of people's porches,” McCulloch said. “People move here to be near the river, and to enjoy it.”

Homes that would have never been purchased in prior years are now desirable places to live, Gleason added.

“It's seeing a lot of investment, simply because of the ties to the river and recreation,” he said.

And Buchanan is not the only small town in Botetourt County angling for the future.

Fincastle this year commemorated the 250th anniversary of its founding, with every intent to carry that history into the future, said Mayor Mary Bess Smith.

“I can't think 250 years into the future, but you know, just short-term there's so much going on,” Smith said. “With the new courthouse remodel and the new history museum that'll go up, this is really going to give us an opportunity to reinvigorate downtown Fincastle.”

With construction underway downtown on a new county Courthouse, and recent plans announced to open a Fincastle History Museum, Smith said those public investments should help entice business growth.

“I would love to see more private sector investment coming in,” Smith said. “We've got some old buildings even on Courthouse Square that are outside of the scope of the courthouse project, but would just be beautiful if they could be reinvigorated, remodeled and repurposed.”

A lot of people have put time into the community, its traditions and history, and that’s something Smith said can be built upon during a time of great societal change.

“In this era of technology and everything associated with it, one of the things I hope Fincastle will become is like a Mecca for genealogical research,” Smith said. “A lot of the paperwork related to some of the early families is located in Fincastle. We have a couple of resources that you can only get by coming to town.”

She also mentioned bolstering the artisans and other talented people of Fincastle, population 700, as a means of building the community. It takes more than brick and mortar to give a town its presence, Smith said.

“Two hundred and fifty years from now, I would hope that a lot of our buildings would still stand,” she said. “As testament to the fact that people did a lot of work to try and continue to preserve those buildings.”

Across the state, small communities looking to develop their downtowns can access small business and tourism grants, said Del. Terry Austin, R-Botetourt, a Buchanan native.

“It's very challenging today to be a small town,” Austin said. “We have to be very innovative and creative to attract and draw people, but I think we also have something that those other entities don't have, and that's a personal aspect.”

There are lessons small towns can learn from each other, he said. Successes from one place, be it in Vinton, Lexington or Williamsburg, could be worth replicating elsewhere.

“I'm impressed with the little town of Clifton Forge, the Masonic Theater over there,” Austin said. “I wish we had a facility like that.”

The 1906-built theater in Clifton Forge reopened in 2016 after extensive renovations, and, like Twin River Outfitters, is an example of how business investment can drive downtown revitalization, Austin said.

There is a growing movement to return to small towns and tight-knit communities with quaint downtown storefronts, he said.

“I think that's what people are going to seek in the future,” Austin said. “I witness people every day who are giving back, who've grown up in small town communities and are coming back and devoting their time. I think that's a critical component of society today.”

As internet becomes more accessible and with more people able to work remotely, the opportunity arises for more people to live in rural areas, said Bo Trumbo, a former state senator and longtime Fincastle resident.

“A lot of people think of the future and they think in terms of technology, and they see the West Coast and the Northeast, and Northern Virginia,” Trumbo said. “So it's ironic that the increase in broadband has provided an opportunity for people to migrate into more rural areas and still be able to work from a distance and be able to take hold of the advantages that small town life has.”

Furthering the outdoor economy in Buchanan and emphasizing the historicity of Fincastle are continuations of those towns' foundations, he said. It makes good sense for any town to use its existing and past assets to encourage authentic future growth, for community and commercial well-being.

“When people think of history, they think of tri-cornered hats and all that sort of thing, but it was very much a commercial aspect,” Trumbo said. “Each one of those towns has a history in and of its own that has continued on to the present.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JUNE 1, 2021

Concern grows as rent relief ends

By Luke Weir

Figuring in requests that were still processing as of April 1, rent relief to the Roanoke and New River valleys likely totals at least \$18 million, given to more than 3,500 applying households.

Cancellation of his summer job caused a Roanoke schoolteacher to miss rent for one month last year, and now his family faces possible eviction, similar to others across the city and region rebounding from coronavirus-induced hardships, even as pandemic-era renter protections expire.

Faced with an eviction notice, Vincent Brown said he applied to the state for rent relief in April, but did not hear back about his status in time for one of the eviction-related hearings held in Roanoke General District Court on May 24.

Late fees and a general increase in the cost of living have kept Brown behind on that one month's rent, he said during a phone call last week.

"I'm doing the best I can. I pay the rent, I pay the lights, I pay the water. I pay my car, I pay the insurance. I pay everything," Brown said. "I just don't have any extra when I'm done ... to pay that back rent."

The special education teacher for Roanoke City Public Schools said his usual summer job working in the division warehouse was canceled last year due to pandemic precautions, leaving him short on rent for that August. Now Brown, 42, his wife and their three teenagers are contesting an eviction notice from property management.

"They're continuously charging me late fees, which makes me look like I'm further behind than I am," Brown said. "I'm paying now, but I'm waiting on rent relief, and I'm playing catch-up from being hit by the pandemic."

The Brown family's is one story of the coronavirus' economic impact in Roanoke, and one case out of the roughly 3,000 evictions filed in court here since March 2020, according to web tracker data compiled by the Legal Services Corp.'s Civil Court Data Initiative.

Judge Francis Burkart continued Brown's case to July, because Brown applied for the Virginia Rent Relief Program. The state RRP fund was created in early 2021, using more than \$700 million from federal coronavirus relief allocations to pay off rent owed by pandemic-affected people.

"That program is ending, but it's helped out a lot of people," Burkart said of Virginia rent relief during May 24 court proceedings. "If the rent relief program comes through and everybody is satisfied, then nobody needs to be here."

The rent relief money usually took about 45 days from application to arrival, Burkart said. As long as tenants applied for relief, the judge usually extended their evictions cases to give more time for the money to show up.

Since the program's inception early last year, more than 3,500 households in the Roanoke and New River valleys received rent relief totaling at least \$18 million, according to data provided by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.

Roanoke alone accounts for more than 2,000 regional rent relief recipients, totaling \$10.8 million sent to the city's residents, according to the DHCD data as of March 31. About half of Roanoke's almost 100,000 residents are renters, demographic data said.

But it's unclear what level of protection or assistance will be available for Virginia renters moving forward. With funds drying up, the rent relief program closed to new applicants May 15.

The Legal Aid Society of Roanoke Valley helped almost 500 low-income people file applications for approximately \$2 million in rent relief, said Mona Raza, a staff attorney at the nonprofit who specializes in landlord-tenant law.

"We saw all kinds of families and some individuals ... just all kinds of people," Raza said of rent relief applicants. "People are still calling, but unfortunately, it's over."

Spurred by a federal moratorium, eviction filings in Roanoke dropped significantly at the start of the pandemic, and as of late April were still about half as frequent in the court system as pre-pandemic averages, according to Legal Services Corporation data.

The data shows 139 eviction filings in Roanoke this April, compared to 22 evictions filed in April 2021, where the normal average in April is 277 filings.

"Right now we're kind of in a lull, sort of coasting along," Raza said of the city's eviction caseload. "But there's probably going to be a tsunami coming in."

Raza said a wave of evictions could be looming later this summer, once the last of the state rent relief money is doled out and as tenants' leases are not renewed.

"There's an incentive because of the housing market for landlords to sell, or to raise the rents," Raza said. "Now there's no rent relief program, and the rents are increasing. So tenants are kind of in a bind again."

Legal Aid and other organizations have been in discussions with city government to find additional aid for Roanoke renters, Raza said.

"If someone applied for rent relief, then it was very likely that they were going to get help," Raza said. "There will probably be some news coming out about where people can go to get some help with their rent, but it's not going to be anything like this program has been."

For people facing eviction, it is important to attend court hearings, and to reach out to a lawyer for help, she said. Legal Aid provides free consultation to low-income people, and can make sure landlords are adequately following eviction law.

Russell Potter reached out to Legal Aid for help after his apartment lease expired and the landlords did not want to renew it for a fourth year.

His monthly rent at Brandon Point Apartments increased by about \$90 since moving in, Potter said. The 73-year-old chess instructor said he is struggling mightily to find an affordable place to move into next, and he has lost income canceling classes to fight his eviction.

“We've got a crisis going on here ... People are really suffering,” Potter said. “Where do people go without much money?”

Potter said some sort of rent control and an increase in affordable housing availability are needed in the region to keep people from homelessness. A study in 2020 identified need for at least 5,300 additional affordable rental units in the Roanoke Valley and Alleghany Highlands.

“Wake up and look around. You're looking at a calamity when winter comes around here,” Potter said. “There are not enough housing units being built, and the ones that are being built are skyrocketing in price for no good reason.”

Legal Aid has helped Potter stay in his apartment, still paying rent past the expiration of his lease in December 2021, he said. But he fears the day when sheriff's deputies come to serve the eviction notice for good.

“Right now, my situation is kind of bleak,” Potter said. “I eventually will be visited by the sheriff at the door.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

MARCH 27, 2022

Into the weeds as hemp concerns clash

By Luke Weir

Hemp legalization was not intended to get people high, said a lawmaker whose proposal to close loopholes in state cannabis code was approved this winter by the legislature, to the dismay of hemp businesses in Southwest Virginia.

In response to a proliferation of Delta 8 THC products for sale in stores across Virginia, Sen. Emmett Hanger, R-Augusta, this year carried a bill alongside Sen. Bill Stanley, R-Franklin County, to redefine legal distinctions between the non-intoxicating hemp plant and its mind-altering sibling, the cannabis plant.

“There are lots of uses for hemp... I'm glad we're able to grow it,” Hanger said. “But it seems like the traditional uses that we were hoping for did not come about as quickly as some would have hoped.”

Hemp plant fibers have wide potential for use in a variety of industries, from applications in textiles to development of bioplastics. However, flowers from hemp plants can be processed to synthesize high concentrations of Delta 8 THC and other counterparts the THC chemical, used in consumable products like vape pens and gummies.

“Hemp was intended to be something totally different: structural, bedding, clothing, those types of things,” Hanger said. “Those markets are slow to develop.”

Delta 8 THC, thus far unregulated by state or federal law, can cause psychoactive side effects in users, similar to effects of the chief high-inducing ingredient in cannabis, Delta 9 THC. Hanger’s Senate Bill 591, approved by the Virginia General Assembly and awaiting the governor’s signature, sets out to tighten regulations by altering the state’s definition of cannabis.

“There are some people who have products out there on the market in Virginia that would be banned under this legislation, unless they sell as a licensed vendor in a more regulated market,” Hanger said. “Right now, that’s not the case.”

While demand for hemp rope is slow to emerge, consumers seem keen on Delta 8 THC and other related hemp products. Prevalence of such products in convenience stores and headshops has increased since the 2018 Farm Bill legalized hemp and its byproducts nationwide.

“There is a lot of money to be made. I’m not opposed to people making money,” Hanger said. “But I’m concerned about the safety of people when there’s a proliferation of products out there that you can inadvertently get high from.”

At least 17 other states have banned such products, as other states continue to contemplate legal adjustments.

For Eric Bissey, owner of Nice Dreams gift shop in Blacksburg, hemp products are a significant source of his revenue. Hanger’s bill, if signed into law, would severely limit sales at Nice Dreams, Bissey said.

“Probably 40% of my business right now is selling CBD products that are protected under the Farm Bill,” Bissey said. “I have veterans that come in to purchase items... people that have sleep issues... people with anxiety that come in... There’s just so many different uses.”

He said use of hemp-derived THC products have been misrepresented by lawmakers, and proposed changes will only bolster the illicit market that Virginia is trying to convert into a taxable cannabis industry.

“All this bill is going to do is cause people to go back to the black market, which is where they got their product before,” Bissey said. “My product is safe. It’s been tested. All you have to do is scan the QR code, and it shows you the independent lab results of exactly what is in the product.”

Given that cannabis consumption was legalized in Virginia last year, it seems counterintuitive to further restrict hemp, he said.

“Yes, people are doing it recreationally,” Bissey said. “It shouldn’t matter, because the state has made it legal.”

Bissey said legislators are regulating Delta 8 THC and other hemp THC derivatives because the state wants control over who makes money from the hemp and cannabis markets. He said it’s a money-grab.

“Right now this is in direct competition with them having their monopoly, so they’re just going to eliminate it,” Bissey said. “They’re eliminating their competition which is unregulated, so that they can control everything else through regulation.”

For growers of hemp, SB 591 further complicates cultivation, said Jonathan Zinski, founder of Rezin Botanicals in Gladys, south of Lynchburg.

“I see the intent, but it’s really hurting a lot of Virginia business owners,” Zinski said of HB 591. “We definitely do need more protection. I agree with a lot of the talking points. But I think this is too severe, and it’s hurting hemp farmers.”

The bill specifies that hemp plants can only have a fraction of a percent of any derivative of THC. Problematically, Zinski said, Delta 8 THC and other such derivatives naturally occur during the hemp plant’s life cycle.

“For a hemp farmer trying to be compliant, they’re going to have to start testing for all these other isomers of THC, which do occur naturally in the plant,” Zinski said, adding that “industrial hemp and marijuana are the exact same plant,” except for the methods used to grow them.

In addition to growing hemp, Zinski said he is working to start a nonprofit that focuses on cannabis education, responsible use, and riddance of cultural stigma surrounding the plant.

“Some of this is almost like prohibitionist rhetoric,” Zinski said of current legislation. “We do need more protections, but again, it’s hurting honest people, and it’s not helping Virginians.”

Given the stigma and novelty surrounding cannabis legalization, it is challenging to educate lawmakers, he said.

“The way they’re doing it, we need precision accuracy with this issue,” Zinski said of lawmakers. “They’re shooting a shotgun... at a target that’s got a whole bunch of innocent hemp farmers standing behind it.”

Hanger said the hemp and cannabis industry are indeed areas of education for him and others. He said lawmaking sometimes causes unintended impacts, and he encouraged people to reach out with their concerns.

“I’m discussing with some of the processors that are out there, and the retailers, some potential amendments that we might entertain,” Hanger said. “If there are amendments that we need... then I’m all for that.”

With the General Assembly set to reconvene its 2022 lawmaking session in late April, there remains opportunity for Hanger to work with the office of Gov. Glenn Youngkin on amending SB 591 before it is signed into law.

“Or, if the opponents of the legislation are totally successful, they might convince him to veto the bill, but I would hope we don’t go there,” Hanger said. “We have some time to work on it... probably about a month that we can work on this to get it right, if there is a right to it. I’m not sure. We kind of stirred a hornet’s nest.”