

ALERT

Danville firefighters say pay is too low; city manager points to steps being taken to address issue

John Crane

Dec 29, 2022

Thursday was Matt Page's last day as a Danville firefighter/EMT. That's because he has taken a full-time EMT position with the Appomattox Rescue Squad, where he will make significantly more money.

After commuting from his home in Appomattox to work for the Danville Fire Department since October 2015, Page cannot afford to work in the city anymore.

"With the increasing inflation and rising cost of gas and our salaries just stagnating, it's not affordable," Page, 27, told the Danville Register & Bee on Thursday morning.

After seven years with the fire department in Danville, Page will leave making roughly \$40,000 a year. He will make about 20% more working fewer hours in Appomattox.

"I will be working less time and making more money in the long run," Page said.

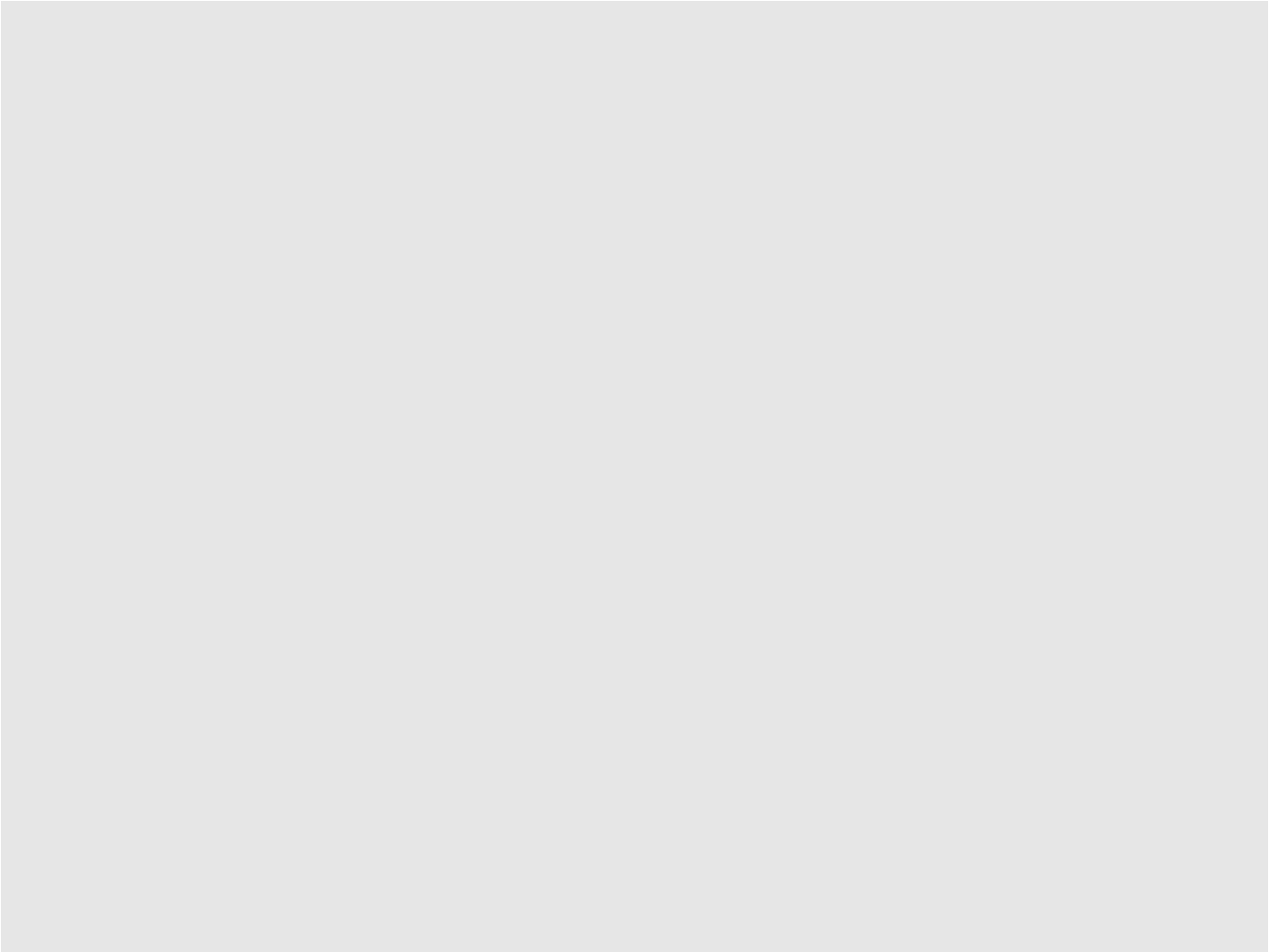
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A firefighter pay study presented to Danville City Council earlier this month showed that starting pay for a Danville firefighter falls nearly 20% short of the market average hiring minimum of \$42,034.

The pay range minimum for a firefighter in Danville is currently \$34,085.95 per year. Starting next month, that starting pay will be \$35,434. Since firefighters work 53 hours a week instead of the traditional 40, that equates to \$12.81 per hour after an increase is implemented for all municipal employees (except for the Danville Police Department) to account for the January 2022 state minimum wage increase to \$11. For beginning firefighters, their minimum pay will be just 81 cents above the \$12 minimum wage that will go into effect in Virginia Jan. 1.

In addition, the city of Danville plans to implement a \$1,000 per year raise for all employees (except for the Danville Police Department) in 2023 to address the state minimum wage increase to \$12 an hour and its annual pay-for-performance increase in July, Danville City Manager Ken Larking pointed out. The police department received a bump in pay in 2021 to address retention and recruitment issues unique to the law enforcement profession following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer.



Danville Fire Department Capt. Tom Collins says Danville's firefighter pay is too low and is not keeping up with that of competing localities.

John Crane

When the \$1,000 per year adjustment is made, minimum pay for firefighters will be \$13.17 per hour, Larking said.

The city will hire the Berkley Group — which conducted the firefighter pay study — to perform an organization-wide pay study to address disparities that have developed because of volatility in the market over the past three years since the pandemic.

“We have some employees across multiple departments who are well below market average,” Larking said in a prepared statement last week. “We believe a city-wide study would be the most efficient method to address disparities.”

The study will begin in February and will be complete before the end of the 2022-23 fiscal year on June 30.

As for actual pay — what fire department employees are being paid as opposed to advertised salary ranges — the city is doing better compared to the market average, the study found.

Danville pays about 87% of the market's average actual pay for a firefighter, which is \$45,931. Following the city's adjustment in January, the city's pay will be 90% of that of the market.

Larking said that average actual pay for firefighters in Danville will be \$41,292, or \$14.93 per hour, on Jan. 1. Following the \$1,000 increase next year, that pay will go up to \$42,292 annually, or \$15.29 per hour, he added.

"This will be 92% of the market as compared to average pay for firefighters with our competing jurisdictions," Larking told the Danville Register & Bee.

Misleading

But using the phrase "average actual pay" is misleading, considering there are many firefighters making less money than that, said Danville Fire Department Capt. Tom Collins.

"That is a mischaracterization of what is actually going on," Collins said during an interview last week, adding that some firefighters are being paid below \$40,000 per year.

During its study, the Berkley Group compared the city's firefighter salary range to that of organizations in 16 other localities, including Pittsylvania County, Martinsville, Blacksburg, Lynchburg, Roanoke, South Boston, Henry County, Bedford County, Charlottesville and other communities.

Collins, 41, who started out as a firefighter with the city in 2003, worked his way up to captain and is currently paid \$64,800 per year. That is below the average actual pay of \$73,400 for fire captains, according to the Berkley Group study.

In 2003, when the state's minimum wage was \$5.15 per hour, Collins began his career at \$8.83 an hour — about 70% above the minimum wage then. Now the starting pay is barely above the current minimum wage, he pointed out. To maintain that 70% rate above minimum wage, starting pay would have to be around \$20 per hour, he said.

Other localities have been making sure they are paying their firefighters a better wage, Collins said.

“That’s what everybody else is doing,” he said.

When asked about Collins’ starting pay compared to the minimum wage in 2003, Larking said, “I’m not sure that’s a fair comparison [to current minimum pay relative to current minimum wage]. The best way to look at this is how the pay compares to other localities.”

During her presentation earlier this month, Margaret Schmitt, a member of The Berkley Group team that conducted the study, said, “Current city minimums of all studied jobs tend to lag the market average minimums.”

The study presented options to address the city’s low pay, including going ahead with the planned increase in salary ranges and completing an overall market study of city pay for all its roughly 1,100 employees.

Schmitt also offered the idea of the additional \$1,000 flat increase to pay-range minimums and current actual employee pay to improve competitiveness, at a cost of \$920,000 to the city.

The shifts

Larking pointed out that the way firefighters are paid cannot be compared to the way regular 40-hour workers are compensated. Firefighters in Danville work 53 hours per week with no overtime until they exceed that number and usually work 24-hour shifts, with one to five days off between shifts.

“Because they work a 24-hour shift, they are expected to be responsive when there’s a need of help,” Larking said. “Some stations are busier than other stations and some days are busier than other days. Anybody who has applied to be a firefighter understands the nature of the work when they get hired and knows what is expected of them.”

While 24-hour-shift employees must respond to calls as needed, “they are not expected to be working the entire shift,” Larking added.

“The 40-hour-per-week employee is expected to be working the full eight hours per day,” he said.

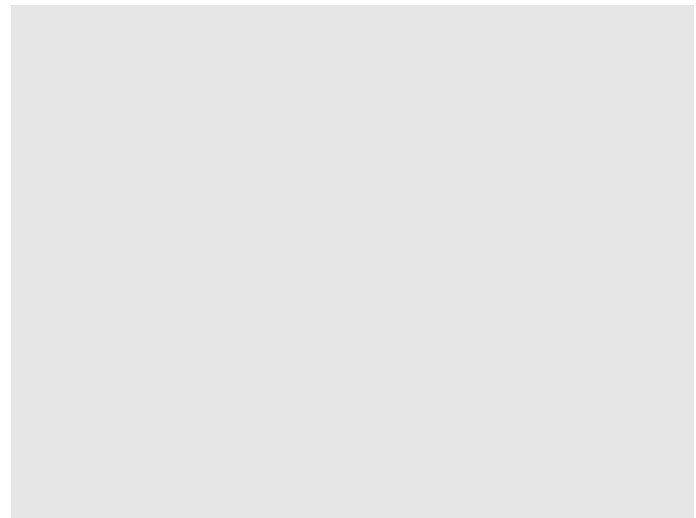
Due to the nature of the 24-hour shift, firefighters work 2,766 hours per year, compared to 2,088 hours per year for 40-hour employees, Larking said.

Also, firefighters can retire earlier and receive higher retirement pay in relation to their working salaries, he added.

As for Matt Page, he recalls driving past three other fire stations in other localities on his way from Appomattox to work in Danville. He said he could make about \$15,000 more per year at one of those other stations.

“It’s been kind of a hard pill to swallow,” Page said, referring to his low pay in Danville. “Everywhere else has shown appreciation.”

Page always loved his job and the department in Danville, but felt underappreciated.



Crews with the Danville Fire Department battle a blaze Dec. 1 at 2035 Westover Drive. Starting firefighter pay lags behind that of other competing localities.

Danville Fire Department, contributed

Danville's pay is far behind other competing localities, and it will be difficult for the city to keep up while other already higher-paying communities continue to give their firefighters raises, Collins said.

"Everybody around us is going to continue to go up," Collins said.

Also, firefighters struggle with low pay while the city manager is up for a raise that could be approved by Danville City Council next month, from \$200,925 annually to \$232,068, Collins said.

"It's so dirty," Collins said. "It's unbelievable they're doing this right now."

However, "the City Council sets the pay for their employees," Larking said.

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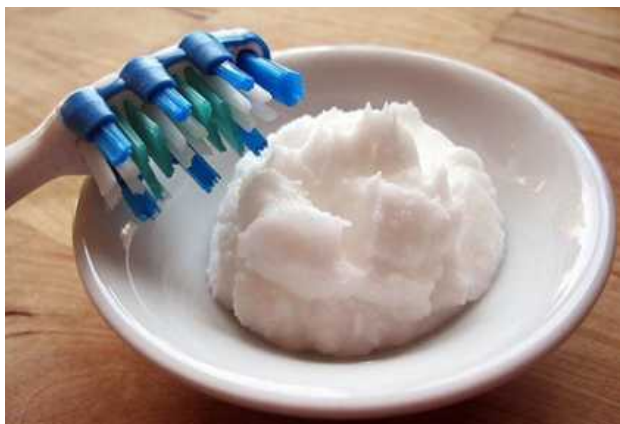
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ALERT

DANVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Danville School Board protocol limits members' speech, forbids them from speaking to media

John Crane

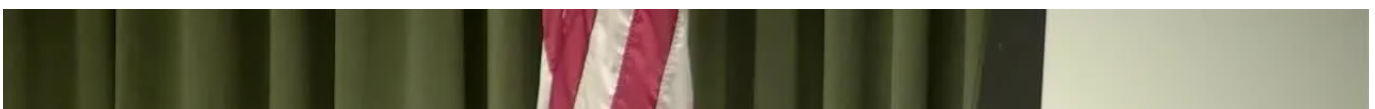
Dec 3, 2022



The Danville City Schools administration building sits along Main Street downtown. The Danville School Board has a practice that authorizes the board chair to speak to the media on board matters, instead of individual board members.

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

John Crane





That is unlike rules for the Pittsylvania County School Board and Danville City Council which, like the Danville School Board, have publicly elected members that represent citizens.

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Members of City Council and the county school board are allowed to speak freely to the press when asked questions on government-related matters.

Danville Mayor Alonzo Jones was taken aback when told about the city school board's policy.

"I'm kind of shocked, to be honest," Jones told the Danville Register & Bee. "The citizens may be shocked, as well. They want to hear from the people they elected."

It's important for individual elected officials to be able to speak publicly to let constituents know what they're doing as their representatives and whether they are upholding their promises, Jones said.

But Danville School Board Chair Crystal Cobbs denied the board had a policy designating the chair as its official spokesperson for all media questions.

"We don't have a policy that states the school board chair be the official spokesperson for all media inquiries," Cobbs said via email Thursday. "What we do have is governance norms and protocols that we try our best to adhere to."

According to those norms and protocols posted on the Danville City Schools' website, "The school board chair will be the official spokesperson for the board for all media inquiries related to the school board, including ones on social media. The superintendent or public information officer will respond to inquiries regarding day-to-day operations."

Cobbs added that such a protocol is not unique to Danville Public Schools. The board first voted on them in 2018 following recommendation from school board training with the Virginia School Boards Association.

"In addition, the norms and protocols are not imposed upon us by the superintendent or the division," Cobbs said. "Governance norms and protocols are created and approved by the school board."

The school board's governance norms and protocols and code of conduct are reviewed during its annual reorganization meeting, she said.

State level

When asked whether the Virginia School Boards Association recommended the board's procedure on media inquiries, President David Woodard said boards can set the protocol they want or choose not to have one.

“It is not a requirement, it is a best practice used by some boards,” Woodard said Friday.

Most districts operate in that fashion, said Danville City Schools Superintendent Angela Hairston.

“This is not outside of traditional protocol,” Hairston said, referring to the school board’s protocol.

The Danville School Board’s practice is not uncommon, Woodard said.

“You would need to check with each school division around the state, but I believe a lot of divisions have the chair or a designee to be the spokesperson for their board,” Woodard said.

There are 132 school divisions in the state of Virginia.

Hairston said she supports the school board’s protocol if members feel it would be successful for them.

“The superintendent has very little to do with the board protocols,” Hairston said. “We as a community should support any protocols or any norms that they feel are necessary to help them function successfully as a board.”

One narrative

But having one person speak for an entire board creates an atmosphere where there is only one narrative, said Megan Rhyne, director of the Virginia Coalition for Open Government.

“The point of an elected school board is to bring a diversity of opinions and experiences,” Rhyne said.

When asked how the association feels about the issue of the Danville School Board’s policy stifling free speech among board members representing citizens, Woodard said, “Each of the local school boards can set whatever protocol they choose when it

comes to speaking with the media.”

Cobbs said the board chair has an additional responsibility to preside at the board meetings. The board chair has one vote, the same as their colleagues, she said.

“Every board member is encouraged to express their individual opinions, reasons why they vote a certain way, etc. with the premise that it is their opinion and not the opinion of the full board,” Cobbs said. “Board members frequently share their opinions and concerns during our board meetings which you and the public can attend and view. Before a vote is taken, there is an opportunity for board members to discuss as well as an opportunity for board members to share their thoughts and opinions during closing comments. Freedom of speech isn’t limited as appears to be an assumption.”

The process goes like this: When the Danville Register & Bee reaches out to board members by phone, the newspaper is told the chair has to answer the questions. Those questions are generally answered in the form of emailed statements.

In the past, many of those responses have come from the division’s public information officer and attributed to the school board chair, an indication the administration of Danville Public Schools had a hand in crafting the message to the public.

Often, school board members will ask for information from the superintendent to include in a response, Hairston said.

“They do it on their own accord because they want to provide accurate information that reflects the work being done in the district,” Hairston said. “The board chair has a rightful desire to provide accurate information. As large as the school district might be and the activities, oftentimes, they may not be privy to all the details of every aspect of the questions.”

The Register & Bee emailed each Danville School Board member seeking comment on the protocol prohibiting individual members from talking to the media earlier this week for this story. The only response came from the chair.

Neighboring Pittsylvania County’s school board does not have a rule designating the chair as its spokesperson on issues related to the board.

“We don’t have a written policy that would do that,” said Pittsylvania County School Board member Sam Burton, who represents the Chatham-Blairs District. “Every division has different issues. The city schools certainly have a lot of issues we don’t have.”

Danville’s school board members do not represent districts within the city, but are at-large members.

“We all do things differently across the state,” said Pittsylvania County Schools Superintendent Mark Jones.

Neither Jones nor Burton would give their opinion on the city school board’s protocol.

The Tazewell County School Board’s protocol is to typically have the chair or vice chair answer questions from the press regarding board business or positions, said Woodard, a member of the school board.

“The member in each district will often speak to district-specific questions,” Woodard said.

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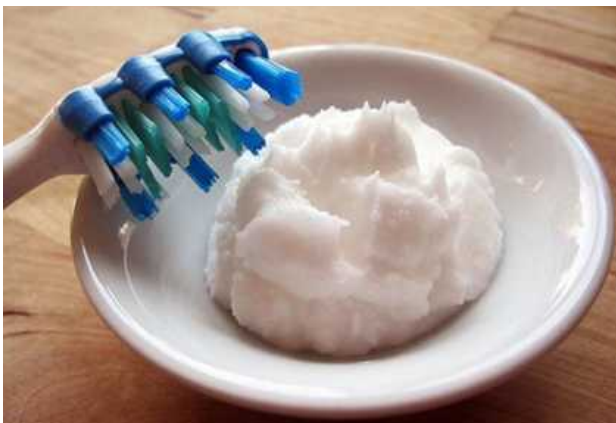
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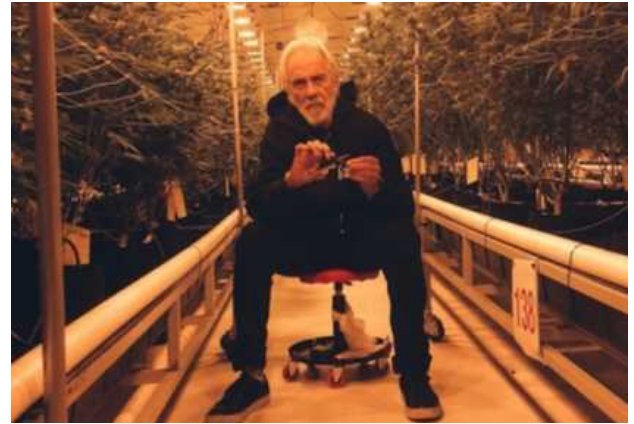
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By John Crane

ALERT

In 2019, when questioned about sharing casino revenue, Pittsylvania County wasn't game

John Crane

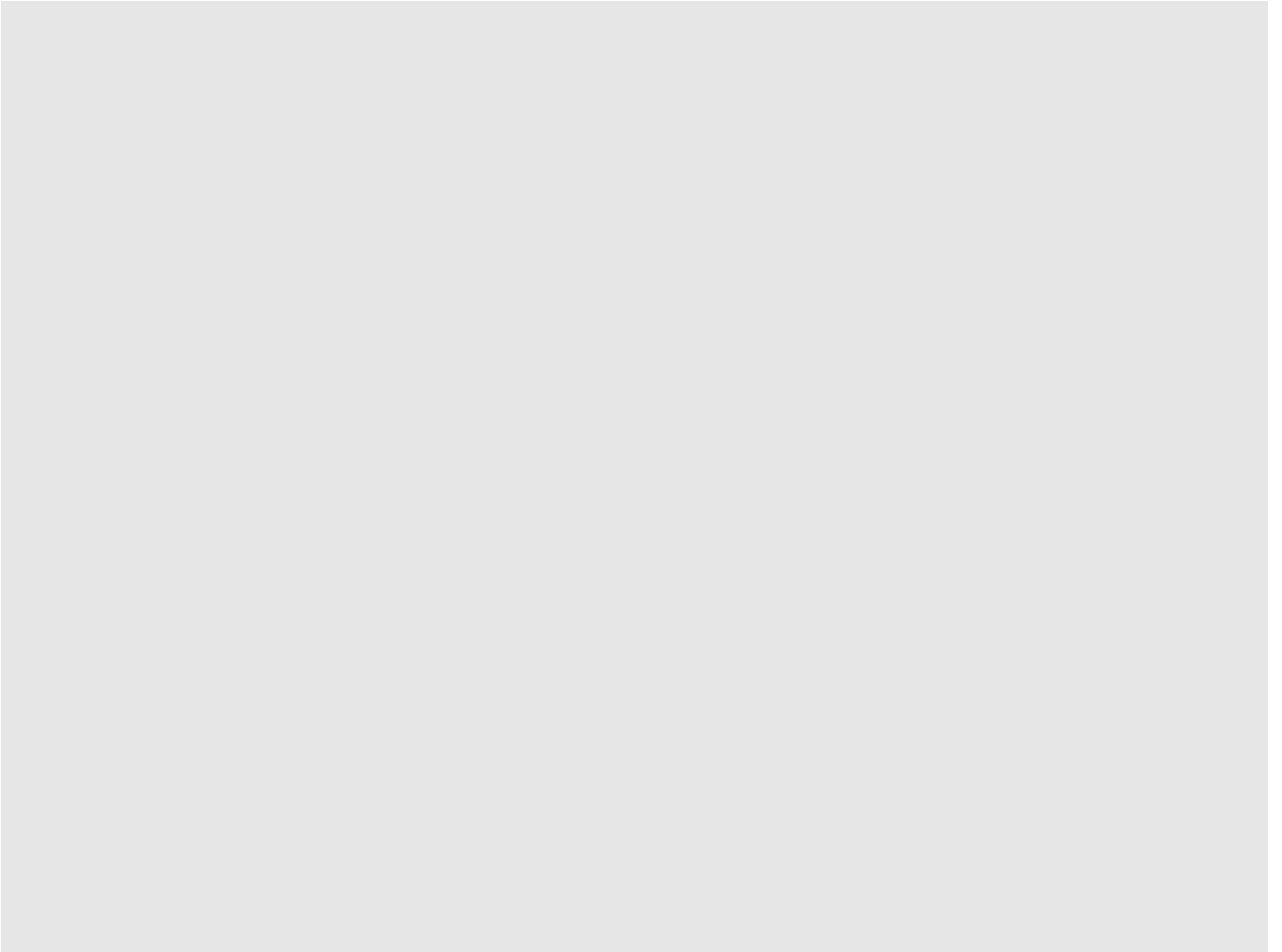
Oct 29, 2022

First, Bristol is required by state law to share its monies generated from its casino, whereas Danville and other localities allowed to have casinos are not, Danville City Manager Ken Larking pointed out.

City officials in Danville did not discuss the possibility of sharing gaming-tax revenues from Caesars Virginia with Pittsylvania County, Larking added.

When the Virginia General Assembly approved legislation allowing casinos in certain eligible host cities meeting criteria — including Danville — and with approval from their voters, Bristol was the only city required to share its revenues, Larking said.

The other cities in the legislation were Richmond, Portsmouth and Norfolk.



Officials break ground on the Caesars Virginia project at the former Dan River Inc. site in Schoolfield on Aug. 11.

Register & Bee, file

“The General Assembly selected those communities because of the unique circumstances [high poverty rates, high unemployment] in those communities and so the revenue generated by the casino was intended to address those issues,” Larking said.

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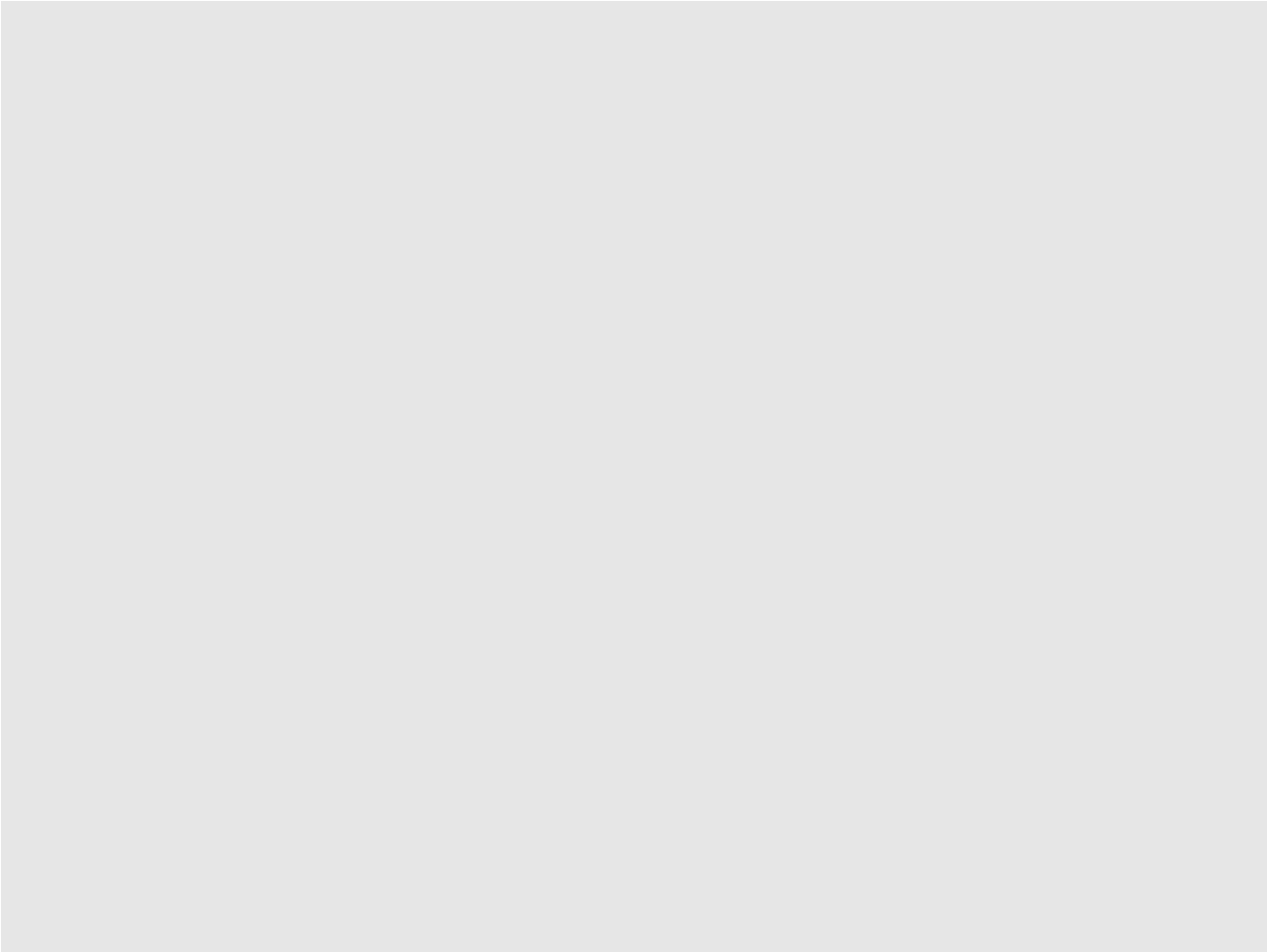
Considering how well the city and county get along and work together, it would have been nice if the two localities could have collectively shared in the process, Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors Chairman Vic Ingram said.

However, “they [the city] didn’t get cooperation from the county, so I just consider that our loss,” Ingram, who was not on the board when the idea of a casino in Danville was considered by local officials in 2019, added.

“The city and the county disagreed on the casino,” he said. “Based on that, the city moved forward, we got left behind and I do not blame the city for that.”

Chatham-Blairs Supervisor Bob Warren also pointed to the productive relationship between the city and county. But he added that the county “didn’t come out for or against the casino. We remained neutral on that.”

Either way, the county and the region as a whole will reap the benefits of casino, whether directly or indirectly, Warren said.



Caesars Virginia's plans include a \$650 million destination resort casino with 500 hotel rooms inspired by Danville scenery. There will also be a spa, pool area and fitness center.

Caesars Virginia, contributed

“We [the city and the county] work so well together, in the long run, whatever is beneficial to Danville will end up benefitting the county as well,” Warren said.

Caesars Virginia in Danville will likely attract endeavors that will positively affect the county, he added.

“There will be some projects that come from the casino being there that hopefully will benefit Pittsylvania County,” Warren said.

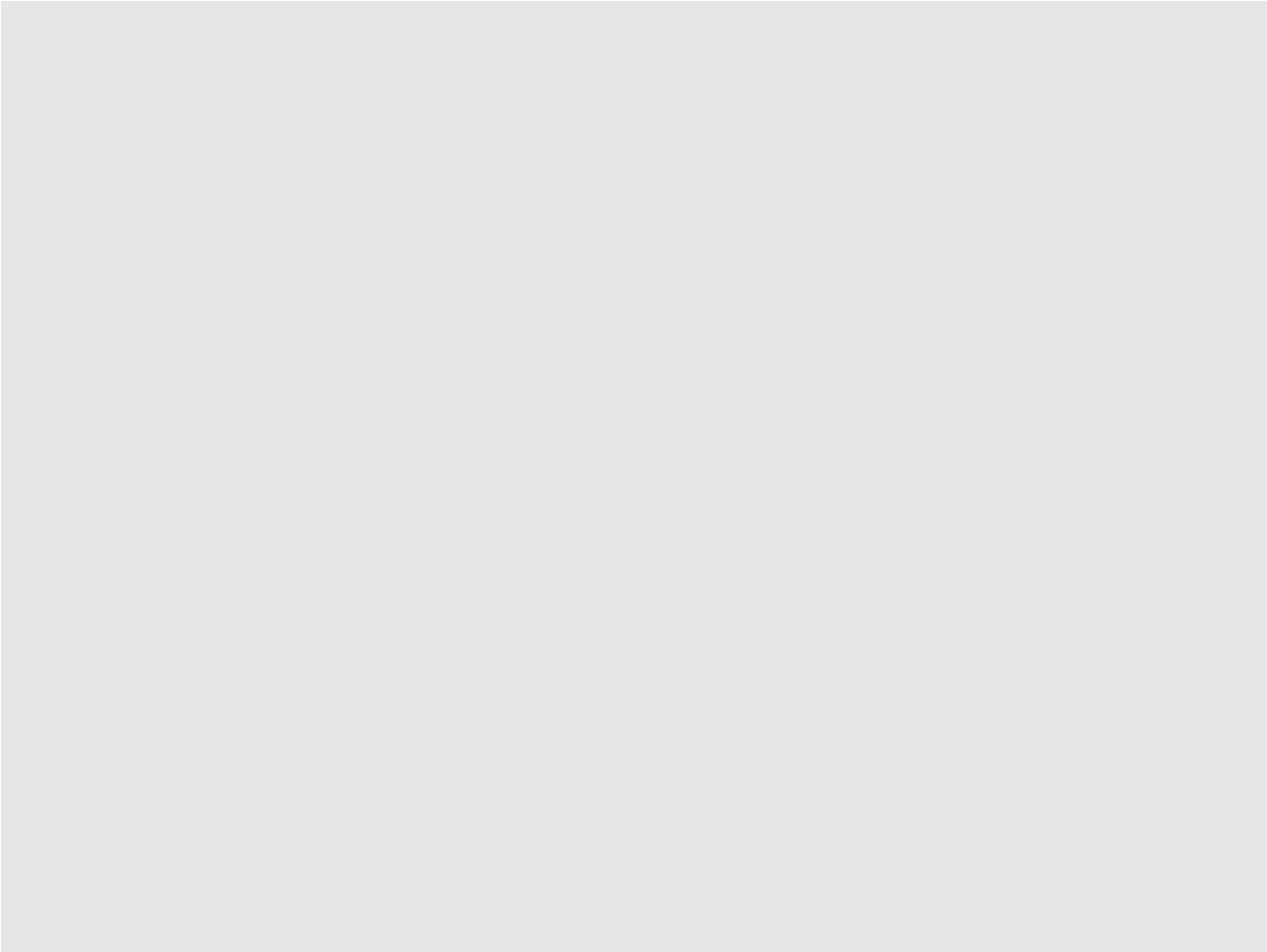
Del. Danny Marshall, R-Danville, said that when the casino legislation was drawn up in Richmond, Bristol officials wanted the requirement that their city share their gaming-tax revenues with surrounding localities.

“Nobody else did that, so that’s why Bristol is sharing its money,” he said.

Marshall said he approached county officials in 2019, including the county administrator and board of supervisors’ then-chairman, about the possibility of receiving a share of revenues from a casino in Danville.

The chairman at the time wanted the money but said he would not endorse the idea of a casino, Marshall said. Some of the board members did not support the project, he said.

As for Bristol, an entity called the Regional Improvement Commission receives the entire local share of the gaming-tax revenue generated by its casino and distributes it among the city and 12 counties included in the Virginia Department of Transportation’s Bristol District. Those counties include Bland, Buchanan, Dickenson, Grayson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise and Wythe, according to a March 3, 2020, article in the Bristol Herald-Courier.



The casino will feature more than 1,400 slot machines and table games, Caesars Sportsbook and WSOP Poker Room, a live poker room named for and carrying the spirit of the legendary World Series of Poker with 25 tables.

Caesars Virginia, contributed

“I think from the outset, everybody recognized that this project would benefit not just the city of Bristol but benefit the entire region,” Bristol City Manager Randy Eads told the Herald Courier in 2020. “Southwest Virginia as a region needs a financial infusion, and this is one way to allow everybody to benefit from this economic development project at the Bristol Mall.”

Messages left for Eads by the Danville Register & Bee were not returned.

The Herald-Courier reported on Oct. 16 that September revenues from the Bristol Casino rose slightly compared to August, totaling more than \$14.3 million.

The Bristol Casino, future home of Hard Rock, generated \$14.3 million in adjusted gross revenues from slots and table games in September, the Herald-Courier reported. That total included \$11.32 million from its 870 slot machines — a slight decline compared to August — and more than \$2.98 million for table games.

Since opening July 8, Virginia's first, and currently only, casino has recorded more than \$40.3 million in adjusted gross revenues, the newspaper said.

As for Danville, its development agreement with Caesars Virginia calls for a minimum of \$5 million in annual gaming-tax revenue for Danville after it opens. Taxes on real estate, meals and lodging will also generate money for the city. Officials expect \$38 million in total annual revenues from the casino after it begins operating.

Caesars Virginia's plans include a \$650 million destination resort casino with 500 hotel rooms inspired by local scenery. There will also be a spa, pool area and fitness center.

The casino will feature more than 1,400 slot machines and table games, Caesars Sportsbook and WSOP Poker Room, a live poker room named for and carrying the spirit of the legendary World Series of Poker with 25 tables, Caesars Entertainment has said.

Meeting and convention space will total 40,000 square feet with an entertainment venue to accommodate up to 2,500 guests. There will also be restaurants and bars. Nine hundred construction jobs will be filled as well as 1,300 operational jobs.

The company plans to open the casino in 2024.

By John Crane
