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SW Va. residents, lawmakers seek new rules for chemical spraying of Christmas tree farms

https://richmond.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/christmas-trees-virginia-pesticides-jeff-campbell-bill-stanley/article_ffcf1370-9f5e-11ee-a978-93cda696a952.html#:~:text=A%20handful%20of%20area%20residents,apply%20pesticides%20to%20the%20trees.

GRAYSON — Wanda Coleman, a resident of this county in Southwest Virginia, remembers when she was caught in chemical spraying last year from nearby Christmas tree farms.

“When you’re mowing the grass, you don’t hear much else,” she said. “Then I looked up and there was a helicopter and chemicals were falling on top of me.”

She said the helicopter was spraying crops of trees next to her home and that it had turned around over her property.

Candace Stevenson recalls getting caught in a drift of spray in April 2020 while taking her daughter on a walk near her home — an incident that upset the local organic farmer and inspired her to begin using testing strips to monitor nitrate levels in local streams.

Virginia farmers grow cypresses, firs, pines and spruces on more than 460 farms across the state, according to the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Christmas trees typically take eight to 10 years to reach maturity, be harvested and end up adorning living rooms during the holidays. Until then, they are sprayed with pesticides to keep pests at bay and ensure continued growth.

While some of the tree crops in Grayson County, about 280 miles southwest of Richmond, span large swaths of mountaintops, others spread within just a few feet of residents’ homes. A handful of area residents have formed an advocacy coalition called Preserve Grayson, which has pressed for a state law to require advance notification and disclosure of chemicals before companies apply pesticides to the trees.

While nitrates can commonly be found in water, higher levels [could indicate the presence of pesticides](#) — often a result of storm runoff from agricultural use nearby or chemical dumping. But locals say they are in the dark about what pesticides are being used and if the spraying is posing a public health risk.

“They’re going to do what they’ve got to do,” another resident who wished to remain anonymous said of Christmas tree farms using pesticides.

But the resident would like to see more precautions taken to minimize health risks — citing well water quality as a particular concern.

According to the [Virginia Department of Health](#), wells should be tested for pesticides when “significant amounts of herbicides or pesticides have been applied near your well, or if your well water is found to contain elevated nitrite or nitrate concentrations and an agricultural source is suspected.”

The [Virginia Household Water Quality Program](#) is a resource to help people get their well water tested for a variety of bacteria and chemicals, but it does not specifically test for pesticides.

The well that provides the water for the resident’s house sits just a few feet from a Christmas tree farm where younger trees are growing on the other side of the fence, awaiting their eventual harvest years from now.

Stevenson said notification about chemicals and when pesticides will be sprayed is especially important for seniors with health concerns who spend much of their time at home, as well as for low- or fixed-income residents who lack air conditioning. Advance notice would enable them to make personal choices when they know spraying is happening, like staying indoors and closing windows. Residents with well water could monitor its quality.

“We shouldn’t have to be subjected to these chemicals on our private property,” Stevenson said. “We don’t choose to live like that.”

Then-Del. Jeff Campbell, R-Smyth County, [introduced a bill](#) in this year’s session that would have required any company using aircraft to apply pesticides west of the Blue Ridge to notify state officials seven days in advance. The company would have been required to notify the commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services about the location, date and time of the spraying and the brand or product name of the pesticide to be applied. A violation would have been subject to a civil penalty of \$500 for a first offense and \$2,500 for each additional offense.

Campbell’s bill failed to gain traction this year, but other lawmakers have signaled interest in exploring the matter.

‘A glaring loophole’

There are no pesticide notification requirements in Virginia’s [Pesticide Control Act](#). This means the tree farms in places like Grayson County do not have to notify residents when they plan to spray. Virginia law does require advance notification to homeowners associations or management companies for [condominiums or apartment complexes](#).

Noah Sachs, an environmental law professor at the University of Richmond, calls this “a glaring loophole.”

He added: “At apartment buildings if someone applies pesticides to the lawn, my hunch is that it’s mainly about the pets. ‘Do you want your pets on the lawn right after a pesticide application?’ Yet here we have aerial spraying of pesticides in much higher quantities and there’s no notification required.”

Andrew Moore, the director of the National Agricultural Aviation Association, said proposals like Campbell’s are “unnecessary.”

The association opposed [Campbell’s bill earlier this year](#) — arguing that seven days’ notification is not conducive to pest treatment and that an Environmental Protection Agency [atmospheric model](#) helps ensure precise pesticide applications.

Moore also pointed out that the EPA approves pesticides for use and that the federal Food Quality Protection Act requires crop protection products be reviewed every 15 years.

Sachs of the University of Richmond said: “Aerial sprayers will point to this federal law and say ‘what’s the big deal? EPA is approving these as safe.’ The big deal is the EPA is not anticipating the concentration of pesticides that neighbors will be exposed to.”

But Moore also pointed to an organization called [DriftWatch](#) where crop producers, beekeepers and pesticide applicators can voluntarily log information to better determine which sensitive crops may be near where pesticides are being used. A few local beekeepers [have registered their apiaries](#).

“Nobody wants to be fined or damage things on nearby land,” Moore said.

Even with layers of regulations and guidelines for targeted application, some Grayson County residents worry about aerial spraying up against property lines of private homes. Preserve Grayson also sent the Richmond Times-Dispatch what it termed a locally taken video of a helicopter spraying chemicals on trees near a home.

Legal action

In the summer of 2022, members of Preserve Grayson met with Southwest Virginia lawmakers, who submitted a letter to state agencies relaying their concerns.

Campbell; Dels. Israel O’Quinn, R-Washington County, and Terry Kilgore, R-Scott; and Sen. Todd Pillion, R-Washington County, wrote that “While the most recent statistics indicate that Virginia ranks 7th in the United States in Christmas tree production, it appears that numerous tangential issues are being created in Grayson County specifically.”

The lawmakers wrote that “most of the issues seem to be emanating from one corporation” — Bottomley Evergreens and Farms.

They noted that while it is legal to use helicopters to deploy pesticides, “it is doubtful that Virginia Code contemplated spraying at altitudes of 2,500-5,000 feet. Additionally, such altitude means these chemicals are often sprayed onto adjoining landowners’ homes, farms, bee hives, creeks, etcetera.”

Bottomley, based in North Carolina, also operates a farm in Grayson County. The company has been cited a number of times, including being [fined by North Carolina’s Department of Environmental Quality for damaging mountain streams](#) — a case [later tossed during an appeal due to a signature issue](#). (The North Carolina agency employee who signed the paperwork assessing the fine reportedly was not authorized to do so.)

A Bottomley subsidiary in Oregon [settled suits with the U.S. Department of Labor](#).

According to Freedom of Information Act responses that Preserve Grayson shared with The Times-Dispatch, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in 2021 issued \$4,800 in fines for multiple violations concerning Bottomley’s pesticide spraying in 2020.

When reached, a contact for Bottomley did not provide a staff member to be interviewed for this story.

The Virginia agriculture agency is responsible for inspecting pesticide use and conducting investigations based on complaints it receives to determine if pesticide applicators are complying with laws and pesticide labels. This is part of why Preserve Grayson has worked to raise awareness if neighbors see something they think might be violating law or label use.

Members of Preserve Grayson have also met with U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-9th, who represents Southwest Virginia, including Grayson’s 15,000 residents. He told The Times-Dispatch in a recent email that he believes “we need to do more with targeted pest control measures.”

Griffith said he plans to seek clearance for a pesticide hearing in the Oversight Subcommittee — which he chairs — of Congress’ Energy and Commerce Committee. He added he is worried about pesticides that the EPA has approved more recently, saying the full impacts on humans “are not entirely known.”

While residents like those involved in Preserve Grayson have a voice, wildlife doesn’t.

It’s one reason why state Sen. Bill Stanley, R-Franklin, has expressed interest in reviving an effort to require advance notice of aerial spraying.

“A pollinator such as a bee does so much more for us than a pretty Christmas tree in the corner of a living room,” Stanley said.

Proponents say a notification law could add another layer of accountability beyond the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' authority to investigate potential violations and the voluntary resources of sites like DriftWatch.

It's unclear whether Bottomley or the Virginia Christmas Tree Growers Association would oppose or support such future legislation. The growers association could not be reached despite multiple attempts.

"This is not about stopping spraying or pitting big corporate farms against small farms," Stanley said. "It's about making sure there's advance notice. And this shouldn't be partisan."

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Several South Richmond neighborhoods lack a grocery store — here's what could bring one

https://richmond.com/news/local/business/several-south-richmond-neighborhoods-lack-a-grocery-store-heres-what-could-bring-one/article_67fb7832-266d-11ee-97a5-0b531aa3f471.html

For Sarah Pentecost, 29, Richmond's [Manchester](#) neighborhood provides the kind of lifestyle she enjoys — walkability and bikeability.

She lives with her boyfriend and their dogs in an apartment minutes from restaurants and shops, along with parks and nature trails. Downtown Richmond is across one of a handful of bridges over the James River. However, when it's time for grocery shopping, Pentecost relies on her boyfriend's car — a vessel they try to limit using — because aside from a few bodegas, there are no grocery stores nearby.

"I chose this lifestyle," she said of living as car-free as possible. "But not everyone is privileged to have someone drive them when they need it."

Manchester is one of several neighborhoods in Richmond's South Side where residents have to drive about 10 to 15 minutes in most directions to reach a grocery store. And for those without a car, the trip by bus or bike can take even longer.

"It can be a challenge for people to carry a lot of things on a bus, or if they have to switch buses or walk a mile or so past their bus stop with their groceries," Pentecost said.

Manchester is one of South Side's rapidly growing neighborhoods — its development attracted Pentecost to the area.

What was once largely industrial real estate has been transformed into loft apartments. Breweries and restaurants are scattered around, and a bevy of homes sprawls from Manchester into the Blackwell, Oak Grove and Swansboro neighborhoods.

Many of the neighborhoods south of the James River have been historically Black because of restrictive zoning and racial covenants on what properties could be sold in years past. [Several South Side neighborhoods were also previously redlined.](#)

This means that when mapping Richmond in the 1930s for part of a Depression-era program to revive the nation's housing market, appraisers lined Black-populated neighborhoods in red and deemed them "hazardous" areas for home loans. The process further deepened inequalities among Richmond's neighborhoods.

Where low density had also once been an argument against attracting a grocer to South Side neighborhoods, residents and officials think the argument is moot amid Manchester's growth.

Recent census data shows that the [population tripled](#) in Manchester in the past decade.

"I understand the social issues in this country. People didn't always want to do things that would benefit us," said area resident Pam Williams, who is Black.

She moved to the area with her husband and sons over a decade ago and has watched Manchester grow.

"There's diversity of income levels and people and density," she said. "They can't say that anymore. This neighborhood is in bloom."

Planning for the future

City Council President Michael Jones, who represents Richmond's 9th District, says he thinks it will not be much longer before Manchester gets a grocery store.

"Manchester, they're gonna get one sooner because of who's moving in there. Other areas ... I'll have hair first," said Jones, who is bald. "I'm talking about a full, robust Afro before other areas do."

Manchester's [racial demographic is 45% white](#) residents, followed by 34% Black residents and then other ethnicities. Much of the population is composed of [adults 25 years or older with at least a bachelor's degree and an annual income per capita of \\$50,000](#), according to census data. Over 90% of the residents are considered [non-family households](#), meaning they live alone or with roommates. In other words, most of the neighborhood is composed of young professionals.

Neighborhoods south of Manchester are majority-Black, with a range of family and non-family households. Per-capita income drops below what Manchester's residents earn.

Hamilton Lombard, a demographer at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center, said Manchester is "relatively affluent compared to some nearby neighborhoods where the income per capita is less than half or a third its level — but not nearly as affluent as neighborhoods in western Richmond."

A 15-minute drive westward along Forest Hill Avenue reveals several shopping centers with grocery stores. Venture north of the James River around Carytown, and there are three grocery stores within a block of one another.

"If you're a family in the Fan or even near West End, you get your pick of the litter," said Robert Kelley, a business professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. "It's all a 5-minute drive from where you live, and a lot of them are walkable."

Back on the South Side, there are bodegas, small markets or dollar stores — all of which technically sell food, but Williams said that's not good enough.

"Sure, the dollar stores are selling some food items, but it's not fresh produce or meat. It's just not the same," Williams explained.

Nationwide, Dollar General has been on a push to offer produce options in stores with a goal of hitting 5,000 stores by 2024. None of the locations with produce are currently within Richmond's city limits.

If a grocery store does set up shop in or near Manchester, it could serve as a closer destination to other South Side neighborhoods as well.

Kelley said suburban grocery stores typically attract families, which contributes to more sales. A store in Manchester would need to balance the young professional crowd while drawing in families from surrounding areas.

He added that it's a "20-year bet" when companies are deciding where to invest in a store.

Manchester and nearby neighborhoods have work to do to attract a grocer, said 1st District City Council member Andreas Addison. His district is north of the river in Richmond's West End.

"We've got to work on building up some density," Addison said, adding that city government can help through zoning changes to encourage more development.

It's why he said he supports rezoning areas along Hull Street, Richmond Highway and parts of Midlothian Turnpike to support mixed-income developments and increased density.

A focus on density, enhanced transit and mixed-income housing developments along those corridors will “really help drive the ability of attracting not just a grocer,” but other needs as well, like health services and more business growth in the area, Addison said.

[A report](#) released this summer through the city’s Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility indicated various transportation needs around Richmond.

Infrequent and unreliable bus service, insufficient bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and “disconnected travel nodes” are common in several South Side neighborhoods, said the report, which also noted safety concerns along several corridors where severe accidents have occurred.

Community feedback included in the report also indicated desire for Pulse rapid transit bus lines or increased frequency of existing bus routes.

In fact, GRTC is exploring the possibility of a [north-south Pulse bus line](#) to enhance public transportation in the area and region, with the line potentially crossing the James River by using the Route 1 Bridge, the Manchester Bridge or the Mayo Bridge — all of which cut through or near the Manchester neighborhood.

Addison points to the Pulse rapid transit line on Broad Street that runs from East Richmond westward into Henrico County as an example of success that can be replicated on the South Side. Residential and commercial real estate has continued to thrive along the Pulse line north of the James River, and he is eager to see how a new Pulse line could build connections in South Side.

As GRTC is [planning bus line expansions into Richmond suburbs](#), it’s also considering a microtransit program where riders can request on-demand shared rides to and from existing bus stops or certain activity centers.

[Recent surveys](#) open to residents and conducted by the city indicate support for a north-south bus rapid transit route, shelters at bus stops, revitalization of the corridor along Richmond Highway, pedestrian safety improvements in areas where more people walk and improved sidewalks.

‘Activity breeds activity’

Tucked between Hull and Bainbridge streets lies the shell of two grocery stores. A parcel on the addresses 2005 Hull St. and 2000 Bainbridge St. was a Siegel’s Grocery Store from the 1950s to the early 1990s, when it became a Community Pride location. Spearheaded by entrepreneur Johnny Johnson, the local grocery chain sought to close gaps in food access around Richmond, and Johnson garnered national attention. But by the early 2000s, he closed his stores amid financial issues.

The building was acquired by former Live Well Financial CEO Michael Hild and his wife, Laura, in 2017. Though they began work renovating the old building, they had not decided what to repurpose it into before Hild was [sentenced to 44 months in prison](#) in a bond fraud scheme. The semi-restored building sits vacant.

A more recent attempt at bringing a grocery store to the area also remains a question mark, but the property's owner is hopeful even as he is putting it on the market.

Brent Graves, principal at construction company Conquest Moncure & Dunn Inc., has courted a few national chains for a parcel he owns at 201 W. Commerce Road. He said he always thought the site would be ripe for a grocery store.

"Activity breeds activity," Graves said.

He recently put the 1-acre parcel in Manchester up for sale. Prior to that, he said he had connected with a few national chains that ultimately did not work out, such as Lidl, Publix and Trader Joe's.

Divaris Real Estate had been Graves' contact when attempting to attract the Trader Joe's. CEO of the company Gerald Divaris explained that "there's no one size fits all" for clients when considering where to set up shop.

He noted how, like Manchester, Richmond's Scott's Addition neighborhood used to be largely industrial. What was once primarily warehouses has been converted into loft apartments, breweries, restaurants and office space. Residents in Scott's Addition do not have to travel too far to get to an Aldi and a Whole Foods that have popped up in recent years.

Divaris explained that in neighborhoods where there is less commercial real estate or fewer offices nearby, people who live there may work elsewhere. This contributes to shopping habits.

"Sometimes a community is in a transitory phase and the people who are living there are working somewhere else so their shopping patterns are different. They tend to buy depending on the hours they work and near where they work as opposed to where they live," Divaris said.

Across the river in Richmond's East End, a locally operated grocery store is working to attract a wide range of customers in a transitory area — which previously lacked a grocery store. Since its 2019 opening, the Market @ 25th has balanced clearing enough of a profit margin to stay open with meeting the needs of its low-income clients.

Chief Operating Officer Jae Scott noted that the shopping patterns are different for those customers because their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits are available at the first of each month. That's when about half of the store's customers come through.

Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood contains an array of apartments and homes, and a cluster of Richmond's public housing courts are also nearby. The Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority has ongoing work to transform public housing units into mixed-income developments, and a [new program could help public housing residents around the city become homeowners](#).

And — as in Manchester and Scott's Addition — more people are moving into the area.

The store's pricing and staffing have fluctuated over the years as it has established itself in the community. While all customers can benefit from seasonal price freezes on some produce items, customers with SNAP benefits are also eligible for discounts on produce items.

"Our margins are as low as we can make them, but we're still nowhere near being hugely profitable," said Steve Markel, who, with his wife, Kathie, financially backed the mixed-use development that houses the store, a culinary school operated by J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, and office and retail space, as well as apartments.

Where national grocery chains have been hesitant to enter such areas as the East End and South Side, developments like The Market @ 25th can serve existing and future residents, said Markel, chairman of the board of Markel Group.

Back on South Side, Graves has envisioned his Commerce Road property as a multistory mixed-use development with apartments and retail space — particularly a grocer. Pending a buyer, its future is unclear.

Graves continues to watch the area evolve — once-empty lots gave rise to new apartments, and old industrial buildings were converted to residential or mixed use. With proximity to employers like CoStar and Truist and interest in bus line expansions, Graves thinks it won't be long before 201 W. Commerce takes shape as something new and a grocer anchors itself in the neighborhood, even if not on his parcel.

"With some of that synergy and activity, I might as well give someone else the opportunity to see what they can pull together in terms of developing the site."

Growing community

But some people aren't waiting for a grocer to come in and close a gap in easier food access — they're taking matters into their own hands.

Duron Chavis is on a mission to bring more urban agriculture to area residents — particularly Black and brown residents.

“I like to challenge people on the concept of a ‘food desert,’” Chavis said. “The crux of that is that there isn’t a grocery store. There are other solutions that don’t rely on a multinational corporation to come in.”

A big part of that, he says, is urban agriculture and people being able to grow their own food for themselves and their communities.

Twenty years ago, Chavis founded the Happily Natural Day festival to bring together and celebrate Black small-business owners and farmers. The project also grew into a network of community gardens and farm space around Richmond, Chesterfield County and Petersburg under the Happily Natural Day nonprofit umbrella.

“We work to build Black community ownership of their food system,” Chavis said. “So we want to address historical inequities in landownership, the historical dispossession of Black and brown people from landownership.”

For example, his Central Virginia Urban Farmer Fellowship trains people to develop their own urban farm businesses.

“Our role in this work is to catalyze Black and brown farmers regionally, to increase access to healthy food — and not wait for corporate multinational companies to plop a grocery store in the middle of South Side and hope that that’s the answer to all the problems,” Chavis said.

While an accessible grocery store in the neighborhood can alleviate food access issues, Chavis said it does not address all of the layers of underinvestment in historically Black areas.

“It doesn’t solve the problem of poverty or that Black and brown members have been marginalized into poverty and into all of these other social inequities,” Chavis said. “The only way forward is for those communities to be invested in deliberately and intentionally.”

One of the gardens Chavis oversees is Sankofa Community Orchard off Covington Road in Richmond’s South Side. The 5-acre property grows a variety of fruits and vegetables, hosts various community and educational events, and helps to reduce water runoff into the James River’s Reedy Creek.

It’s one of several community gardens and mutual-aid organizations around the city that work to address food access issues.

Just off Bainbridge Street near Carter Jones Park in Swansboro, a South Side neighborhood near Manchester, lies Fonticello Food Forest. Every Wednesday afternoon, people gather between noon and 2 p.m. for free produce and other foods.

Laney Sullivan and Jameson Price, who co-founded Fonticello Food Forest, coordinate with such organizations as Feed More and Seasonal Roots and other businesses to gather food that might otherwise be wasted.

In some cases, that means grocery stores are offloading an overabundance of certain items or food that might be thrown out due to slight damage or nearing an expiration date. Seasonal Roots, an online farmers market, practices zero waste by donating its extra products to groups like Fonticello Food Forest.

“We’re working with whatever organizations we need to be able to intercept food waste,” Price said.

While Sullivan said Fonticello Food Forest is at capacity of what it can handle, she hopes the work of various community gardens and groups around Richmond helps fill a crucial need for people to get food.

Other groups host food giveaways, each serving different areas of the city. Food Not Bombs sets up at 4 p.m. on Sundays in Monroe Park. Folks can also find colorful RVA Community Fridges at various locations around the city — often outside of various businesses or churches. Chavis’ Sankofa Community Orchard has one as well.

“There’s only a certain number of green spaces allocated for community gardens. Space in this densely populated area is not going to be able to grow enough food to really impact food insecurity,” Sullivan said. “So I love that we’re able to do this free food distribution.”

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Capitol page programs give teens an up-close look at democracy in action

https://richmond.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/capitol-page-programs-give-teens-an-up-close-look-at-democracy-in-action/article_15857d2a-3863-11ee-8f66-df9eafc7fc55.html

Erik Conyers smiled as he stepped into Virginia’s House of Delegates chamber — a room he spent a formative period of his life in a decade ago.

Now 24, he works as a special assistant to constituent engagement in Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s office, but at 14 he was among a handful of teens buzzing around Virginia’s Capitol, running errands for lawmakers and watching democracy in action.

The House of Delegates and state Senate are accepting applications for their [page programs](#) in which several dozen 13- and 14-year-olds from around the state spend the legislative session assisting lawmakers with various tasks (like meal and paper deliveries) and observing committee and floor meetings. The program culminates with the pages conducting their own mock session, debating model policies from the floor of

the chamber, and electing members of the group to serve in positions like lieutenant governor or Speaker of the House to oversee the process.

In what is essentially a paid internship, the pages spend full days in the Capitol, receive meal stipends and lodge in the Omni hotel in their off hours. They also have to stay on top of their schoolwork.

“It was a good challenge,” Conyers said. “I think it really prepared me for the real world.”

He noted how the program falls at a pivotal time in participants’ lives — newly into adolescence and just before starting high school.

“I felt like it really allowed me to balance my time and figure out my priorities,” he said. “I had to balance schoolwork and then being here from 8 to 5 o’clock every day.”

A balancing act

Applications for the programs, which opened this month, will close in October. Teens and their families can get information on how to apply through the [Capitol Classroom](#) portion of the General Assembly website.

Next year’s legislative session is scheduled for Jan. 10 to March 9.

The Senate says it receives 150 to 200 applications each year for 36 to 40 spots. The Speaker of the House usually gets about 250 applications for 32 available appointments.

Students accepted into the programs are responsible for coordinating time away from their classrooms and for the assignments they must complete while away.

The experience also fed Conyers’ growing interest in government. When he later attended Virginia Commonwealth University, he studied political science along with his passion for fashion merchandising. Eventually, he went on to work for Republican Garrison Coward’s 2019 House campaign. (Coward lost to Democrat Dawn Adams.) Following an internship in the Secretary of the Commonwealth’s office, Conyers took on the full-time role he now holds in the administration.

Virginia is among [over 30 states to have page programs in at least one chamber](#), most of which are geared toward middle school or high school students.

Paul Nardo, the clerk of the House of Delegates, called pages “the arms and legs” of keeping things moving during sessions.

Each year, the House program costs an average of \$300,000, and the Senate program costs about \$264,000 — accounting for housing the students, chaperones, salaries and stipends.

“You get what you invest in,” Nardo said of the programs.

More than administrative work during legislative sessions, pages participate in professional development workshops and community service projects. Some alumni have gone on to careers in public service or politics.

House and Senate records indicate that Virginia’s page programs date to the 1850s. The positions were held by adults then and later geared toward teens.

It wasn’t until 1967 that Vincent Tucker became Virginia’s first Black person to serve as a page and, in 1970, Sallie McCutcheon became Virginia’s first female page.

Nowadays, it’s a more diverse cohort of blazer-adorned teens shuttling around the Capitol.

While the pages come from around the state and bring different insights, passions and backgrounds, interests in public service and professional development are threads connecting them.

“My time there instilled public service in me,” said Karli Foster, who was a Senate page in 2013.

When the session ended, she got involved in a nonprofit in Martinsville called The Harvest Foundation and interned in local government in Southside’s Henry and Franklin counties. She now works as an economic development specialist in Roanoke County, which feeds her interest in economics.

Originally from Martinsville, more than three hours southwest of Richmond, she said she had not known about the program. Her father, who worked for the Department of Juvenile Justice, was in Richmond frequently and suggested that she apply.

Foster said experiencing debates and amendments as bills passed and failed was a thrilling experience.

“It was really cool to see another part of the state and get to interact with our state legislators on a daily basis,” she said.

Making connections

Sometimes a page’s name badge matches that of a sitting legislator. When pages are introduced on the first day of session, this is when a collective “oooooh” can be heard from some of the lawmakers.

But applications for the programs are open to any interested teenager around the state — so long as they will be 13 or 14 during the legislative session.

It was by chance that Drew Goodove learned of the program.

A Virginia Beach resident, he initially learned of the opportunity while visiting his grandparents in Richmond. They took him for a tour of the Capitol and, when he learned about the page program, he knew it was the professional development experience he was seeking.

Beyond performing tasks during the workday, pages are also exposed to workshops on such topics as fiscal management or cybersecurity. Page alumni often visit to discuss their careers or education as young, or older adults.

For Goodove, a highlight of his 2019 experience was the mock session where he was the mock lieutenant governor.

“You sit where the lieutenant governor actually sits in the Virginia Senate chamber; you get to use their gavel,” Goodove explained. “The really funny part about it is that the senators are actually pages that come and attend the mock session. So it’s kind of like the roles reverse, which was funny.”

Goodove enjoyed serving as a Senate page so much that he went on to serve in the U.S. Senate’s page program in Washington in 2022.

The vibe, he said, was not as jovial as in the Virginia Senate, where there are only 40 lawmakers who, despite partisan differences, have formed a camaraderie. But yet again, he witnessed lawmaking in action.

Now 18, Goodove will soon attend Duke University, where he plans to pursue a career in technology — an asset he said he may someday bring to Congress if he decides to run and prevails.

“I would take the expertise I get from whatever (science, technology, math and engineering) field I go into, probably, and apply that to politics, because I think that’s where our country is moving,” Goodove said.

Like Goodove, Bill Oglesby learned of the program serendipitously. A friend of his had taken part in the program, and Oglesby became intrigued enough to apply. This was back in 1970, when Oglesby was a Richmond-area teen, years before he would work as a broadcast journalist and VCU professor.

When applying for the program, he recalled being so determined that he walked into the office of his state senator at the time, William Parker, a Democrat who served in the chamber from 1980 to 1988.

Oglesby recalled walking downtown with a friend when they realized they were near his office. So he decided to be bold.

“Being a clueless 14-year-old, I just went in and took the elevator up to his office and asked if I can see him,” Oglesby said with a laugh.

He remembers his mom answering the phone one night with the senator on the other line to tell his family he’d been accepted.

Oglesby went on to be assigned to then-Sen. Doug Wilder, a future lieutenant governor and governor. Oglesby described seeing history in action when Wilder, the first African American elected to the Senate since Reconstruction, gave a floor speech urging the legislature to change Virginia’s state song, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia,” which had references to slavery. (Lawmakers made multiple attempts to amend and/or replace the song in the coming years, before legislators eventually shelved it, declaring it state song emeritus.)

Wilder went on to become the nation’s first elected Black governor.

“It was just a really great experience to see,” Oglesby said.

While Oglesby’s experience as a page reaffirmed his growing interest in law — the reporters he watched on the sidelines also influenced his future career in journalism.

Flash-forward 53 years — and [he still visits the Capitol with a cohort of other pages who’d served in 1970](#). Their reunions happen every five years, and it’s a chance to revisit their old haunts before having lunch or dinner and checking in on one another’s lives.

One of them, Ben Dendy, never fully left the Capitol.

Dendy first became a House page at 13, when he was fresh from volunteering in Democrat William Battle’s gubernatorial campaign. (Battle lost the 1969 election to Republican Linwood Holton.)

Dendy says growing up in a politically engaged household sparked his interest at a young age. So his time as a page continued his early political education — inspiring him to go on to serve as a legislative aide, work on more campaigns and eventually serve as a senior staff member for Democratic Govs. Chuck Robb and Gerald Baliles.

In his work as president of the Vectre Corp., a communications and lobbying firm, Dendy can still be found wandering around the Capitol. Dendy is also a member of the VCU board of visitors.

“I think a key thing definitely was connections,” he said of a skill he gained during his time in the program.

And — “you just learned a great deal about the governmental process.”

Oglesby, who is part of the reunion of 1970-era pages, agrees.

“It’s learning how the government works in a way that sticks with you much more than just sitting and learning about it at school.”