

# Meridian High Student Newspaper, The Lasso (P. 14-15)

February 12 - 18, 2026

FOUNDED  
1991

VOL. XXXVI  
No. 1

# Falls Church News-Press

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## Beyer Keeps F.C. in Dem Redistricting Proposal

### NEW 'BLUE'-PRINT

Virginia Voters May Face Referendum This April

BY NICHOLAS F. BENTON  
FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

In a clarification of earlier reports, the office of U.S. Rep. Donald S. Beyer Jr. confirmed to the *News-Press* yesterday that Beyer will continue to represent the City of Falls Church in the Virginia Democrats' new redistricting plan.

Democratic leaders in the Virginia General Assembly last week formally released their long-anticipated congressional redistricting proposal, designed to reshape the Commonwealth's 11 U.S. House districts ahead of the 2026 midterm elections.

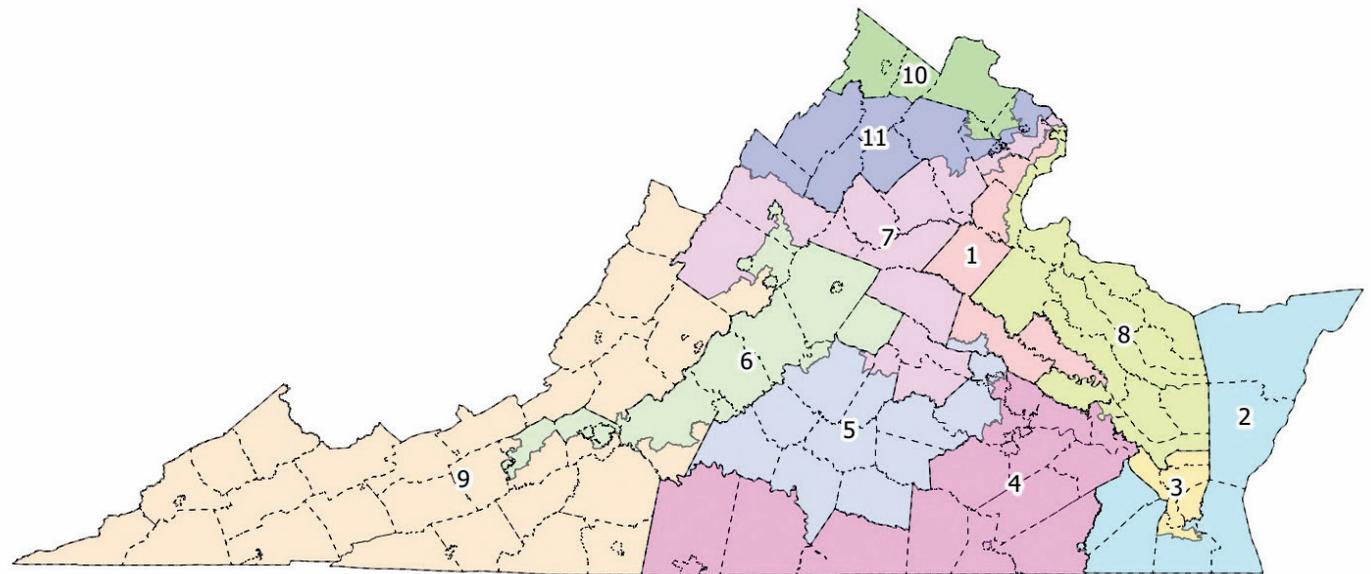
The plan — which would need voter approval in a statewide referendum in April and survive pending legal challenges — aims to align district boundaries with recent demographic shifts while positioning Democratic candidates competitively across nearly the entire state.

Under the Democrats' proposal,

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## Senior Living

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THE MAP SHOWING the Democratic Party plans to reshape Congressional districts in Virginia to counter efforts by Republicans doing likewise in Texas, North Carolina and elsewhere was circulated this past week. It could require voter approval in a statewide referendum in April. (Map: Courtesy)

## Black History Month: Meridian High Student Speaks Out

BY NICHOLAS F. BENTON  
FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

The City of Falls Church's public schools' elected School Board got more than it bargained for at its meeting Tuesday night when they invited the president of the City's Meridian High School Black Student Union to speak before it in acknowledgment of Black History Month.

Xavier Smith, a junior at Meridian High, was polite, articulate and soft spoken, but his words were unexpectedly powerful.

He said, "Having attended every level of school within the Falls Church City Public

Schools, I can personally testify that being Black can be incredibly isolating, especially at a young age. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not receiving comments about my race. Whether they were microaggressive remarks about my hair or openly racist insults, each incident served as a reminder that I was different."

Smith's comments were in the context of his advocating for "a positive and lasting impact across the entire district built on four pillars: unity, leadership, service and excellence." Of these four, he said, "I believe that unity is the

foundation of them all."

He began, "Being a Black student in a community where we are a significant minority, such as Falls Church, can be incredibly challenging. Because of this, one of my main focuses as president of the Black Student Union has been community building. To me, community building means creating a space where students feel safe, supported and encouraged to succeed.

"For many students at Meridian who might often feel misunderstood or underrepresented, the Black Student Union serves as that space. Through meaningful conver-

sations about culture, identity, pride and excellence, BSU helps shape the next generation of confident, successful and unified Black leaders."

But, he went on, "one important issue I want to recognize is that this resource is currently only available to high school students. Noting his own experience growing up in the Falls Church school system, he said, "Without a support system like the Black Student Union to affirm and celebrate who I was, I often felt like my differences were bad. This experience is com-

*Continued on Page 4*

# FALLS CHURCH NEWS BRIEFS

## New Events Proposed for F.C. At City-Restaurateur Meeting

A range of new events and a revival of the New Year's Eve Watch Night were among the topics of discussion at Tuesday's meeting between Falls Church City staff, City Council and Economic Development Authority members and City restaurant owners held at the Viget offices in downtown Falls Church.

New events, such as a seven-block-long "pub crawl" on W. Broad St. and a LGBT Pride event and others were among proposals adopted for moving forward. Restaurateur Thomas Harvey of Harvey's Restaurant cited numerous shortcomings on the City of Falls Church website in terms of access to information about public events and services. He and Colm Dillon of Ireland's Four Provinces spoke adamantly that better marketing of the City to outside areas is in the keen interest of the entire City as a whole, and not any one group.

The second meeting of the combined groups, the first since December, grew out of concern for the City's decision not to close the 100 block of W. Broad for the annual Watch Night event last New Year's Eve, which cut deeply into City business revenues for that evening.

## Falls Church City Hall, Library Closed for Presidents Day Monday

Most City of Falls Church programs and services will be closed on Monday, Feb. 16, for Presidents' Day, including City Hall and the Mary Riley Styles Public Library. The Community Center will be open from 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

## Creative Cauldron Welcomes Schwarz's Scrapbook

Stephen Schwartz's *Snapshots: A Musical Scrapbook*, an original musical which incorporates over two dozen of Schwartz's songs, including songs from 'Wicked,' 'Pippin,' 'Godspell,' 'The Baker's Wife,' 'Rags,' 'Working,' 'Children of Eden,'

and 'Enchanted,' opens tonight (Thursday, Feb. 12) and runs through March 8 at Falls Church's Creative Cauldron.

The musical is described as "a touching and authentic look into how we fall in love and the poignant power of trusting our hearts and memories."

## City of F.C. Calls for Entries To Memorial Day Festival

Applications to participate in a City of Falls Church's Memorial Day Parade and Festival on Monday, May 25, are now open. New this year, according to the City's Department of Recreation and Parks, the City will add a \$200 incentive to any group that applies for their float to be in the parade.

Businesses located inside the City of Falls Church may register to participate in the parade at no cost. All others must register as a sponsor to participate.

## Calif. City Votes for Rent Freeze

The city council of Santa Barbara, Calif., in a split vote, has approved a temporary citywide rent freeze, joining 35 other cities and counties in California with some form of rent stabilization or rent control ordinances in place.

Once in place, the temporary rent freeze is set to lapse on Dec. 31 or when a permanent rent stabilization ordinance is approved by the city, which could be implemented by 2027.

Santa Barbara's action also aligns with a broader movement in California: the city is joining 35 other cities and counties statewide that have adopted some form of rent stabilization or rent control ordinance.

The temporary freeze will prohibit many of the city's landlords from raising a tenant's base rent this year for rent paid as of Dec. 16, 2025. It exempts many types of rental units, including Section 8 housing, housing built after 1995, single-family homes, some condominiums and government housing.



FALLS CHURCH RESTAURANT owner Thomas Harvey (right) and F.C. City Manager Wyatt Shields (left) bracketed a list of possible events that could be held in the Little City at a meeting of City officials with restaurant owners this Tuesday. (Photo: News-Press)



MERIDIAN HIGH junior Xavier Smith (standing) addressed the Falls Church School Board Tuesday as president of the school's Black Student Union. (Photo: News-Press)



REALTOR TORI MCKINNEY (center) hosted her annual Mardi Gras party with the F.C. Chamber of Commerce at the Solace Outpost Tuesday. She's flanked by other City A-listers Gina Caceci (left) and Tom Gittins (right). (Photo: News-Press)

# Virginia Redistricting Plan Counters Moves Elsewhere

Continued from Page 1

the new map would significantly alter existing boundaries, potentially giving the party a projected 10 out of 11 seats in Congress — a dramatic shift from the current 6-5 Democratic advantage.

Party leaders argue the plan is a necessary response to aggressive mid-decade redistricting efforts by Republican legislatures in other states that have reshaped seats in Texas, North Carolina, and elsewhere.

Rep. Beyer has said, “What Trump has done with the mid-decade redistricting in places like Texas has made the national elections very unfair. If the Republican states are all gerrymandered and the Democratic ones aren’t, then we can’t win. We’ll leave it up to the Virginia voters. We have to win the fairness argument with the Virginia voters.”

On the new boundaries of his 8th District, Beyer said, “Many of its voters will be people I know well and have long represented, while others live in communities I served as lieutenant governor. I will work hard to earn the trust of Virginians from Falls Church to Yorktown.”

The new 8th District in the current proposal includes areas like Groveton, Fort Hunt, Hybla Valley, Mount Vernon, part of Fort Belvoir and Lorton and south Arlington County in the north end to York County, James City County and Williamsburg in its southern end.

As such, the proposed map would divide traditionally Democratic strongholds across multiple districts to maximize the party’s competitiveness statewide — including Northern Virginia, Richmond, Charlottesville, and Blacksburg.

Adjacent Falls Church, Fairfax County would be split into five congressional districts, with portions of the county assigned to the newly configured 7th, 8th, 10th, and 11th districts.

The idea is generally to pair urban and suburban areas with outlying rural counties to create diverse voting coalitions.

The new 8th district plan currently has a 49.7 percent advantage for Democrats there, the state’s widest, to an 18.1 percent advantage, the plan thus sharing some of the Democrats overwhelming advantage into other more traditionally Republican areas.

The proposed new 7th District, currently represented by Rep. Eugene Vindman,

would be reconfigured to stretch from portions of West Falls Church, Annandale, Pimmit Hills, West Springfield and Burke to parts of Augusta County and Powhatan County.

The redistricting proposal comes amidst an intense national battle over mid-decade map changes. Virginia’s Constitution traditionally reserves redistricting for once every 10 years — following the federal census. However, Democrats in the General Assembly have pursued a temporary constitutional amendment to permit a mid-decade redrawing of U.S. House districts, citing national Republican efforts to reshape other states’ maps.

In late January, a Tazewell County Circuit Court judge ruled that Democrats’ attempt to amend the state Constitution was legally invalid, citing procedural violations.

The Democratic leadership has appealed the decision and remains committed to placing the question before voters in an April 21 referendum. The Virginia Court of Appeals has bumped the Democrats’ appeal to a final decision by the Virginia Supreme Court, which is expected to rule soon.

If it goes the Democrats’ way and it wins voter approval in April, the new maps would be in place for this year’s Congressional primaries, which have already been pushed back from June to August, and, of course, the midterm general elections in November.

At a town hall at the Falls Church City Hall last weekend, the City’s two representatives in the state legislature, Del. Marcus Simon and Sen. Saddam Salim, confirmed to a full house of constituents that they are confident state Democrats have followed the law in advancing their plan, noting that the Tazewell judge’s ruling was the result of Republican opposition efforts that searched out “the reddest part of the state” to advance its lawsuit.

With wider majorities in both houses in Richmond, and Democrat Abigail Spanberger in the governor’s seat, aggressive policies to restore and advance social equality, including a repeal of the infamous Marshall-Newman amendment from the Virginia constitution, will be on statewide ballots in November.

Saturday’s town hall in Falls Church included a friendly intervention from a dozen members of the Northern Virginia CASA organization seeking protections against unlawful ICE and Border Patrol activities in Virginia.

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# Meridian Black Student Union Head Cites Need to Help Younger

Continued from Page 1

mon, and incredibly dangerous for Black youth, who should be learning to love themselves, not to be ashamed of what makes them unique.”

In this context, he said, he said he is advocating “for new and intentional conversations about how we can support Black students throughout the entirety of their school career.” He added, “When students are experiencing bias and racist comments beginning in elementary school, waiting until ninth grade to provide meaningful support is simply not enough. Without early exposure to positive environments that celebrate identity, students can develop lifelong struggles with self-worth and belonging.”

Smith called on the School Board “to explore additional ways to support Black students at every level. Whether its professional training that helps teachers become more trusted adults, increased cur-

riculum that highlights and celebrates Black achievement, or initiatives that encourage community and connection among Black students. Any effort that works toward celebrating the diversity and differences between students can have a powerful impact on students like me. And there is no better time to begin this work than during Black History Month.”

At the conclusion of his remarks, Smith was met with a stunned silence, not only from the School Board members, but those in the audience, as well.

Smith was subsequently invited to come forward for a photograph with the entire board, when they all were then greeted with applause.

Smith was accompanied at the meeting by Meridian High senior Aimee Harris.

In other Falls Church events highlighting Black History Month, the Tinner Hill Foundation, in collaboration with the City of Falls Church, is hosting events honor-

ing local African American history. A major highlight is the “Voices of Resilience: Embracing Black History and Arts” symposium next Saturday, February 21, featuring experts from the Smithsonian and George Mason University.

Key 2026 Tinner Hill and City of Falls Church Black History Month events include:

Marian Costner Selby Exhibit and Peace Garden (Feb 21, 1–3:30 p.m.): Held at Meridian High School, this free event explores how arts and history challenge stereotypes.

Mary Riley Styles Public Library Displays: Throughout February, the library features special book displays in the Main Reading Room, including staff favorites from Black authors and a dedicated African American history collection.

Educational Resources: The Tinner Hill Heritage Foundation continues to highlight the significance of the first rural branch of the

NAACP, founded in 1915, and the local civil rights struggles.

All the programs are free and open to the public.



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## Celebrate Black History Month

**Symposium**  
**Voices of Resilience: Embracing Black History and the Arts**  
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**Saturday, February 21, 2026 • 1:00–3:30 PM**  
**Marian Costner Selby Exhibit & Peace Garden • 5th Floor**  
**Meridian High School • 121 Mustang Alley • Falls Church, VA 22043**

You are invited to a free symposium exploring how Black history, visual arts, and performing arts challenge stereotypes, reshape narratives about race, foster inclusivity, and preserve the African American legacy.

**Program Highlights**

- Special Music by Wammie Award Winner, **Carly Harvey**, "DC Queen of the Blues"
- Performance Poetry Recital by **Angeliqwe Palmer**, 2024-2027 Fairfax County Poet Laureate
- Moderated Panel Discussion
- Audience Participation
- Tour of the Marian Costner Selby Exhibit

**Distinguished Panel**

- **Dwan R. Reece, PhD** – Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
- **Spencer Crew, PhD** – George Mason University, Department of History and Art History
- **Audrey Davis** – African American History Division, Office of Historic Alexandria
- **Irene Chambers** – Board of Directors, Tinner Hill Heritage Foundation (THHF)

**Moderator: Inga A. Watkins, J.D.** – Social Justice Committee, an initiative of THHF

**FREE - The public is invited.**  
 Doors open at 12:30 PM  
 Registration requested but not required. Walk-ins are welcome.  
<https://Embracing-Black-History-Arts.eventbrite.com>  
 Information: [www.tinnerhill.org](http://www.tinnerhill.org)  
 Refreshments will be served.

Presented by the Social Justice Committee, an initiative of the Tinner Hill Heritage Foundation in partnership with the Chi Beta Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

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**SATURDAY (FEB 21)**

LION DANCE • FACE PAINTING  
BALLOON TWISTING • CARICATURES



# Falls Church News-Press

Since 1991, an award-winning LGBT-owned general interest community newspaper.

Vol. XXXV, No. 1  
FEBRUARY 12 - 18, 2026

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# EDITORIAL

## Fighting Fire With Fire

As the map of Virginia on page one of this edition, the proposed new redistricting of U.S. congressional districts designed by the now-stronger Democratic majority in the state legislature, and which voters in Virginia will probably have the chance to vote on in April, is the very epitome of what the colorful term, "gerrymander," means.

Without apology, Democratic leaders in Virginia have worked out this map in their effort counter an identical effort initiated by President Trump to redraw districts in Texas in an attempt to give MAGA Republicans an edge in the November midterms and the 2028 presidential election. Virginians would not be asked to vote for this new map if Texans hadn't already done it first. Additionally, Democrats in California have also weighed in to counter the Trump move in Texas, and other states undoubtedly will, as well.

So, while there will be a lot of hand wringing and pearl clutching over what's being proposed in Virginia, when faced with what Trump has been trying to do, to skew all future elections in MAGA's favor, in the spirit of the violent assault on the nation's capital in January 6, 2021, there is little doubt in our minds that this is how Virginians must "fight fire with fire" in the defense of democracy.

Lest we forget, in the redistricting following the 2010 U.S. Census, a process normally done every 10 years, a Republican majority in Richmond drew U.S. congressional boundary maps that permitted only two Democratic-majority districts out of 11 at that time.

Hopefully, if the current effort succeeds, by the next normal redistricting round following the 2030 U.S. Census, Virginia's congressional district boundaries will revert back to roughly how they are right now, where Democrats control seven of the state's 11 districts.

But this current "10-1" plan, as readers can see on the page one state map, is designed to counter Trump's Texas move by giving Democrats the edge in an additional three districts in Virginia, effectively cancelling out the Trump move in Texas.

In this context, it is heartening for citizens of Falls Church to learn that the new plan keeps their "favorite son," U.S. Rep. Don Beyer as their U.S. congressional representative. Beyer, with his parents and brother Mike, founded their family business in Falls Church in the 1970s and he was president for a year of the Falls Church Chamber of Commerce in the 1980s. So, keeping him representing the Little City matters a lot.

But that notwithstanding, we adamantly support this new redistricting plan and enthusiastically encourage our readers to do likewise. It will be a challenge to win the statewide referendum in April, and it will take every vote we can muster to stop Trump.

## PLATFORM

1. Keep the news clean and fair.
2. Play no favorites, never mix business and editorial policy.
3. Do not let the news columns reflect editorial content.
4. Publish the news that is public property without fear or favor of friend or foe.
5. Accept no charity and ask no favors.
6. Give 'value received' for every dollar you take in.
7. Make the paper show a profit if you can, but above all keep it clean, fearless and fair.

# IN MEMORIAM: DAVID ANTHONY JACOMET

David Anthony Jacomet, 80, of Winchester, Virginia, passed away at home on January 24, 2026, with his wife, Maude, by his side. He was born on May 31, 1945, in Kansas City, Missouri, to Melvin and Lucille Jacomet.

Dave grew up in Falls Church, Virginia, and attended St. James Catholic School. He graduated from Bishop Denis J. O'Connell High School in 1963 and went on to Georgetown University, where he was a member of the Delta Sigma Pi fraternity. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in business in 1967 and participated in Air Force ROTC. Following graduation, he served four years on active duty in the United States Air Force as an auditor and accountant.

Dave married Marcy in 1965, and together they welcomed five daughters over the next ten years. He spent most of his career with the Internal Revenue Service and was able to retire early, which allowed him cherished time with Marcy before her passing.

In 2010, Dave married Maude in Winchester, Virginia. They built a life grounded in simple joys: working together in the garden and yard, taking daily walks, and cooking meals side by side. Over the past several years, Maude devoted herself to his care and loved him fiercely.

A man of deep and quiet faith, Dave lived with purpose and humility. He had a lifelong commitment to ministry within the Catholic Church, visiting the sick and bringing Communion to the homebound in Leesburg and Falls Church. He attended daily Mass with Maude at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Winchester and, until the COVID pandemic, was a regular visitor at the Winchester Senior Center. He also volunteered at Sunrise Senior Living in Leesburg.

Dave was a devoted Georgetown and Big East basketball fan. He coached his daughters' basketball teams, offering steady encouragement from the sidelines. He served on the Falls Church City School Board and was a longtime member of High Point Pool in Falls Church.

In his free time, Dave enjoyed matting and framing photographs, working in his yard, and tinkering on small projects in his basement workshop. He valued good conversation and time spent with family and friends.

Though soft-spoken by nature, Dave was a steady and gentle presence in the lives of those who knew him. He had a special way of making each of his daughters feel uniquely loved, often teasing each one that she was his favorite. It was Rachel. He will be deeply missed and fondly remembered.

Dave was preceded in death by his first wife, Marcy Houck Jacomet; his brother, Tom Jacomet; and his parents.

He is survived by his wife, Maude; his five daughters, Laura Van Landingham (Reneau), Katie Clinton (Neal), Susie Poindexter (Tom), Rachel Dienna (Nick), and Karen Dixon; ten grandchildren, Anne Toma (Brandon), David Cesnik, Matt Cesnik, Abigail Clinton, Hayley Swestka (Rob), Calvin Poindexter, Nolan Poindexter (Skye), Charlie Dienna (Angel), Morgan Dienna (Kirstin), and Tyler Dienna (Paige); and five great-grandchildren, Olivia, Jackson, Riley, Oliver, and Briella.

A visitation will take place on Friday, February 13, 2026, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at Murphy's Funeral Home, 1102 W. Broad Street, Falls Church, Virginia.

A Celebration of Life will be held on Saturday, February 14, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at St. James Catholic Church, 905 Park Avenue, Falls Church, Virginia.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made the Winchester Senior Center, 1001 E. Cork Street, Winchester, Virginia 22601, winchestersc@seniorsfirst.info.



# Senior Living

Winter 2026



Pages 7-12

# Cozy Winter Welcome

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## Eighty and Viral: Taking Over TikTok

BY FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

By any reasonable measure, TikTok is supposed to belong to the young. It is the land of Gen Z dance trends, rapid-fire humor and slang that seems to expire every 72 hours. Yet increasingly, some of its most compelling stars are not teenagers but 80-year-olds — seniors with smartphones, sharp wit and decades of perspective no algorithm can manufacture.

The numbers help explain why you are seeing more gray hair on your For You Page. According to Pew Research Center, 37 percent of U.S. adults say they use TikTok. While the platform remains heavily youth-skewed, it is no longer “kids only.” Twelve percent of adults 65 and older report using TikTok, compared with 63 percent of adults ages 18 to 29. About 5 percent of seniors use it daily. The gap is wide — but it is narrowing.

Scroll long enough and you will find them: an 82-year-old retired teacher offering brisk, unsentimental advice on marriage; an 85-year-old great-grandmother demonstrating how to make Sunday gravy “the right way”; a World War II history buff correcting misconceptions in the comments; a former jazz musician explaining why vinyl still sounds better. They look directly into the camera and speak plainly, cutting through the noise.

It is tempting to treat the phenomenon as novelty — “Isn’t it cute?” — but that misses the point. What these creators are doing is quietly radical. They are occupying digital space that was not designed with them in mind and, in some cases, building followings in the hundreds of thousands.

The appeal is not complicated. In a culture that prizes speed, they move deliberately. In a medium built on filters, they are refreshingly unfiltered. Their wrinkles are visible, their lighting imperfect, their humor often dry and self-deprecating. They are, in a word, authentic.

There is also something reassuring about watching someone who has lived through the Depression, Vietnam, Watergate, the Cold War, 9/11 and now the age of artificial intelligence calmly explain how to poach an egg or balance a checkbook. They have seen trends come and go. TikTok is simply another chapter — albeit one with better background music.

Closer to home, the lesson resonates in communities like Falls Church, where civic life has long depended on intergenerational exchange. The Little City prides itself on

walkability and neighborliness, but increasingly connection happens as much on screens as on sidewalks. For seniors who may no longer drive regularly or who live alone, platforms like TikTok can offer more than entertainment. They provide engagement.

Consider the retired engineer sharing daily “Dad Facts” about how bridges are built, or the grandmother posting reminders about voting in local elections. Short videos spark conversations that might otherwise never happen. Younger viewers ask questions. Older creators respond, sometimes with follow-up videos. A digital dialogue unfolds.

There are, of course, pitfalls. Social media can be unkind, and ageism remains alive online. Some older creators report condescending comments or outright hostility. But many say the support far outweighs the negativity. For every dismissive remark, there are dozens of messages thanking them for wisdom, humor or simply the comfort of a steady voice.

A few have even turned their accounts into modest income streams through brand partnerships or merchandise. More often, however, the motivation appears less commercial than communal. They are there to tell stories, to stay engaged, to prove — perhaps to themselves as much as to others — that curiosity does not expire at 80.

A broader cultural shift is underway. As life expectancy increases and 80 becomes less an endpoint and more a milestone, traditional notions of aging are being rewritten. Today’s 80-year-olds are more likely to exercise regularly, travel and embrace new technology than previous generations. The stereotype of the technologically helpless senior is quickly becoming outdated.

For younger viewers, the exposure can be eye-opening. It is one thing to hear that older generations have “been through a lot.” It is another to hear it directly from someone who lived it, delivered in a 60-second clip between dance challenges. History becomes personal. Aging becomes less abstract. That may be the quiet gift of 80-year-olds on TikTok: they humanize longevity.

In Falls Church and beyond, the image of a senior propping up a phone to record a quick video may draw a smile. But it should also draw respect. In stepping into a digital arena dominated by youth, they are not simply chasing trends. They are claiming relevance.

They offer a gentle but powerful message to viewers of every age: It is never too late to learn a new dance — or to teach one.



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# How the Shepherd's Center Strengthens the Community

BY FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

For many older adults in McLean, Arlington, and Falls Church, the ability to age in place depends on something most of us take for granted: a reliable ride. When driving is no longer possible, routine medical appointments, dental visits, physical therapy, pharmacy runs, and grocery trips can quickly become difficult or get skipped altogether. The Shepherd's Center of McLean-Arlington-Falls Church (SCMAFC) helps remove that barrier through a simple, community-powered solution. It provides free, volunteer-driven transportation and practical support that keeps seniors safer, healthier, and connected.

SCMAFC's impact reaches beyond logistics. Each ride helps ensure continuity of care by making it easier for clients to attend appointments on time, follow treatment plans, and manage chronic conditions. Errand rides support proper

nutrition and medication adherence, reducing stress for seniors and their families alike. Because volunteer drivers often offer friendly conversation along the way, the service also helps ease isolation by giving clients a trusted point of contact and a bright spot in the week.

That social interaction matters on both sides. For clients, a ride can also be a chance to be seen, heard, and engaged, especially for those who live alone or have limited daily contact. For volunteers, those same conversations provide perspective, purpose, and genuine connection. Many drivers describe leaving a ride feeling more optimistic, more grounded, and more connected to the community they live in. In that way, the service supports emotional well-being for everyone involved, not just transportation needs.

Just as importantly, SCMAFC strengthens community bonds by turning goodwill into an organized and dependable network. Volunteers gain meaningful rela-

tionships across generations, and families gain peace of mind knowing their loved ones can get where they need to go without complicated arrangements. It is a local model that quietly improves quality of life through neighbors helping neighbors while supporting broader community health and resilience.

Volunteering, in general, is one of the simplest ways to strengthen a community. When people give even a small amount of time, it fills real gaps that government and businesses cannot always reach, and it reminds neighbors that they are not alone in facing everyday challenges.

## Volunteer Opportunity in Northern Virginia: Driving Older Adults to Medical Appointments

The Shepherd's Center of McLean-Arlington-Falls Church (SCMAFC), an all-volunteer nonprofit organization, is seeking additional volunteers to support its mission of providing free trans-

portation to seniors for medical and dental appointments or running errands to grocery stores and pharmacies.

There is no minimum commitment. Volunteers are free to choose when and how often they drive, and can select one-way or round-trip rides based on their availability.

## Volunteering with the Shepherd's Center:

- Gives you a sense of fulfillment knowing you have made a tangible difference in someone's life.
- Fits your availability with flexible scheduling.
- Provides an opportunity to make meaningful connections with older adults. Many clients have lived overseas and have interesting backgrounds and stories to share, and volunteers brighten their day with companionship.

Drivers describe the experience in deeply personal terms. One volunteer shared, "I've cultivated new

relationships, and it makes me feel a strong sense of accomplishment knowing I can assist elderly clients." Another noted, "The clients we serve are so interesting and genuinely seem to enjoy spending time with us to and from their appointments." A third reflected, "When I am feeling down about the world, driving a community member reminds me that even an act that seems simple can be transformative for others."

For detailed information or to apply, visit <https://scmafc.org/volunteer> or call (703) 506-2199 and leave a message.

In a region where busy schedules and long distances can make everyday tasks harder for older neighbors, the Shepherd's Center of McLean-Arlington-Falls Church offers something powerful: a caring and flexible system that helps seniors remain independent and engaged while giving volunteers a meaningful way to strengthen the community.



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[scmafc.org/volunteer](https://scmafc.org/volunteer)  
or [contact@scmafc.org](mailto:contact@scmafc.org)



**shepherd's center**  
OF MCLEAN-ARLINGTON-FALLS CHURCH



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# Boccelli & Bad Bunny Bring Us Back to Love

Nicholas F. Benton

FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

With a bit of a thaw in the weather this week, events from the last week have produced some grounds for optimism as America moves toward world-changing midterm elections in the fall that, I'm increasingly confident, scores of millions will lean into heavily to make sure will be fair.

It's not only the stunning turn-arounds in special elections in formerly pro-MAGA districts in Texas and Louisiana. It's not only the national polls showing the current president's approval rating in the low 30 percent range. It's not only the next No Kings demonstrations in March that will draw the biggest crowds yet all across the land, or that all these millions carry cell phones that can, and do, record everything that only a few decades ago no one could see.

It's the recent uplifting cultural developments that stir me the most. Take the examples of the Opening Ceremony for the Olympics now underway in northern Italy and last weekend's Bad Bunny Superbowl halftime show.

The Olympics ceremony was Italy's gift to humanity's fight against the kind of fascism it had to live through for a couple ugly decades a century ago. It focused on the timeless contributions of that great culture to beauty, specifically the beauty of the human voice, of the godlike sound of Andrea Boccelli singing perhaps the greatest paean to hope and heroism in the human repertoire, Giacomo Puccini's stirring "Nessun Dorma" from his opera, "Turandot."

Notes posted on the TV screen when he finished, with the added benefit of a full orchestra and chorus, cited a quote from Celine Dion saying, "If God were to sing, he'd sound a lot like Andrea Boccelli." The same could be said about Dion, herself, in my book, and her epic performance of the great Edith Piaf hit, "Hymne a l'Amour" at the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics.

Just as Boccelli sang in a foreign (to English) language, so did Bad Bunny, the talented Puerto Rican superstar, during halftime at the Su-

perbowl last weekend, underscoring the fact that MAGA Land is not, as in the fantasy riddled minds of its deluded, racist core components, anywhere even remotely near the center of any portion of the universe worth caring about.

As one blogger remarked about the Superbowl halftime, "A gay woman singing 'America the Beautiful,' anti-Trump punk band opening, a Puerto Rican performing the halftime show in Spanish, and the sound defeat of the Patriots by a woman-owned and operated team. 2026 might just be looking up, after all."

Bad Bunny, whose real name is Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, elevated the real America that the MAGAots are seeking to destroy in a beautiful exhibition of love and compassion that was flawless and spellbinding for the scores of millions of the game's TV viewers who watched around the globe.

As for the game itself, won in unconventional defense-dominated fashion by the woman-owned Seattle Seahawks, it exemplified changes in the sport that have arisen from those who've called out its terrible brain-damage consequences on its players. As seen last week, players in recent years have resorted more to tacking by means of stand-up group hugging scrums, by contrast to helmets to the knee caps modes of years past, to avert head injuries, or even head contact.

Not surprisingly, one of the game's new safety measures along these lines, paused kickoffs, drew the ire of the regrettable Trump, watching from Florida, who commented on social media that the measure should be scuttled.

Speaking again of the magnificent "Turandot," Japanese Olympian figure skater Yuma Kagiyama was set to perform his free skate program this week to the opera's triumphant new, more female-empowered 18-minute conclusion (given that Puccini died before he was able to complete that opera in the 1920s) written by modern composer Christopher Tin and librettist Susan Soon He Stanton. The new ending was commissioned last year by the Washington Opera, which survives even as Trump shut down its Kennedy Center venue this month.

So, you advocates of love and beauty, bear up, fight the good fight, and let's take back America before the year is out.



## A Penny for Your Thoughts

By Penny Gross  
Former Fairfax County Supervisor

Local Government Legislative Day in Richmond, sponsored by the Virginia Association of Counties and the Virginia Municipal League, attracts hundreds of local elected officials to interact with General Assembly members on issues of mutual, and sometimes not so mutual, interest to the constituents they represent. Last fall's general election resulted in a complete changeover of power from Republican to Democrat. The House of Delegates has 64 Democrats and 36 Republicans, the Senate remains narrowly Democratic at 21 to 19, and the Governor, Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General are Democrats. Abigail Spanberger, the first female Governor of Virginia, addressed the local government leaders in person late in the afternoon, something Governor Youngkin never did in his entire four-year term.

Thousands of bills are proposed in the General Assembly every year. Most are rejected during the committee process, an esoteric exercise that seems to invite debate but usually is reduced to a literal two or three minutes of testimony in agreement or opposition. Many of the bills have significant fiscal implications for local governments. A bill to require testing for PFAs (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as forever chemicals) before land application of sewage sludge, a common method of disposal after treatment, would place a large fiscal impact

on wastewater facilities and local governments across the commonwealth, costs which would be borne by ratepayers and taxpayers.

The hated "car tax" has been the subject of debate for decades. The state's share of covering a portion of the tax was capped years ago when Richmond decided that it was simply too expensive to maintain the promised ratio of state to local levies. Eliminating the car tax without a plan to replace that local revenue would be devastating to localities. In Fairfax County, car tax revenue in FY 2025 was more than \$200 million, or equivalent to about seven cents on the real estate tax rate. Delegates and senators should be reminded that state income taxes provide a majority of the Commonwealth's revenue, but localities are reliant on real estate for the majority of their revenues. That local tax structure dates to Thomas Jefferson's time as governor! An overhaul of Virginia's tax structure, as arduous as that may be, should be a multi-year goal of the General Assembly, in consultation with local governments.

Legislation that would limit sovereign and qualified immunity of local governments could result in increases of 250 to 400 percent in insurance premiums for localities, costs of several hundred million dollars that would fall directly on local taxpayers. The curious language of SB 228 states that when a locality provides liability insurance or self-insurance, as many larg-

er jurisdictions do, that provision "is deemed a waiver of sovereign immunity." Local governments are charged with providing inherently risky but necessary functions, not just law enforcement and emergency response, but also social services, land use decisions, and public works. Without sovereign immunity, localities face open-ended liability for lawsuits, including high-dollar verdicts.

Providing more affordable housing opportunities is a local, regional, and statewide goal, but those land use decisions are, and should be, the purview of localities, not the General Assembly. Two bills making their way through the General Assembly would permit local Boards of Zoning Appeals to overturn local land use decisions if the locality has not made a "good faith effort" to meet required housing targets over a five-year period. Current state law requires localities to include housing goals in their comprehensive plans. So far, the sponsors of the bill have not been receptive to local input about maintaining local land use authority. The same sponsors have introduced bills that would make multi-family residential a "by-right" use in commercial districts. These bills could have a negative effect for mixed-use developments, such as the very popular Mosaic District, that include both commercial and residential components.

Crossover day, when bills move from one chamber to the other for consideration, is next week; the 60-day (long) session is scheduled to adjourn on March 14, so there is a lot more work ahead in the General Assembly, and a lot more opportunity for local governments and constituents to weigh in.

approximately 20-30 years of age, wearing a gray beanie, black North Face puffer jacket, blue jeans, and black shoes.

Destruction of Property, W Broad St, Feb 7, 12:10 p.m., victim reported a known party broke their phone during an altercation.

Assault and Battery/Robbery, W Broad St, Feb 7, 2:40 p.m., victim reported a coworker took their Apple watch and keys after striking them.

Larceny, S Washington St, Feb 7, 4:12 p.m., victim reported an identified suspect stole office equipment.

Shoplifting, W Broad St, Feb 8, 3:00 p.m., two unknown suspects stole merchandise.

Larceny, Hillwood Ave, Feb 8, 8:59 p.m., victim reported an identified suspect stole their phone.

## City of Falls Church Crime Report

Week of  
Feb 2 - 8, 2026

Fraud - Wire, Lincoln Ave, Feb 2, 2:50 a.m., an unknown suspect wired money from the victim's account.

Larceny, Little Falls St, Feb 2, 7:00 p.m., victim reported sporting equipment was stolen.

Larceny of Vehicle Parts, Roosevelt Blvd, Feb 3, 8:44 a.m., an unknown suspect stole license plates off the victim's vehicle.

Shoplifting, Wilson Blvd, Feb 4, 3:30 p.m., an unknown suspect stole merchandise.

The suspect is described as a Hispanic male, approximately 28-33 years of age, approximately 5'5" in height, weighing roughly 220 pounds, wearing glasses, a brown hoodie and gray sweatpants.

Driving Under the Influence, S Washington St, Feb 4, 8:45 p.m., a female, 61, of the City of Falls Church, was arrested for Driving Under the Influence.

Trespassing, W Broad St, Feb 6, 8:49 a.m., a male, 30, of no fixed address, was arrested for Trespassing.

Shoplifting, W Broad St, Feb 6, 3:37 p.m., an unknown suspect stole merchandise. The suspect is described as a black male

Special

## LASSO

Edition

Winter

Meridian High School, Falls Church, Virginia

2026

## Changing traffic patterns strangle access to secondary campus

BY LAYLA KOZBELT AND ANNA GOLDENBERG

The 2025-26 school year has been marked by constant changes in traffic patterns outside Meridian and Mary Ellen Henderson, mostly affecting the senior and staff lots. On Oct. 3, 2025, Meridian Transportation announced that students and staff would no longer be able to make a left from Leesburg Pike into Mustang Alley between 8:00 and 8:30 AM. However, this regulation was lifted a couple months after.

The issue began at the end of the 2024-25 school year, when Meridian's former School Resource Officers (SROs) Sergeant Chuquillangui and Officer Reyes were promoted within the police force, leaving the secondary campus without an SRO. One of the jobs of the SROs was to direct traffic at the intersection between Leesburg Pike and Mustang Alley. Without anyone directing traffic, driving in the area became much more difficult.

This traffic was only made more difficult by the construction in the West Broad development.

"What we noticed immediately when we started school this year was traffic was a bit chaotic," Meridian Principal Peter Laub explained, "Now add to that...before you get to McDonald's, there was a new traffic light...that traffic light wasn't on yet, and because of the road work, they had torn up the median."

The school district requested for a police officer to come and direct traffic in the area, allowing students and staff to drive in the area safely. The police, however, refused to send someone to direct traffic. Instead, they set up cones preventing drivers from making a left turn off of Leesburg onto Mustang Alley between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m.

"[The traffic cones] made it much safer for buses to exit the parking lot, for cars to exit the parking lot cleanly, because there was just traffic going right or coming straight," Laub explained.

Only a couple of months later, those traffic cones were removed, with no explanation to students or staff, to the frustration of some drivers.

"I've had it happen where I'm turning right from the right turn lane, and somebody's not paying attention to the right turn lane, and they almost hit me because they're trying to get into the school," senior Fiona Gillaspay said.

Although this change was difficult for some students, others much prefer having the left turn reopened.

"It was just like they blocked off a part of it, so I had to go another way. And then that was just really annoying. But then recently, they've adjusted it, so the time is a little better now," senior Katherine Bickel explained.

The cones were removed after the traffic light at Chestnut Street was finished, making traffic more controlled and safe in the area.

"That traffic light is up and working. The medians are now fully in place. There are "no U-turn" signs ... I think from a police perspective, they're not needed because there's a traffic light now that will help traffic flow," Laub stated.

The Lasso reached out to the police department, but did not receive a response.

These frequent changes in traffic flow have caused problems for students who try to access Meridian in the morning, as the congestion has greatly increased their commutes.

"I leave my house at 8:00, and I don't get to school until 8:30. I live like 10 minutes away," Bickel described.

The congestion can cause large amounts of cars to come to a standstill. Senior Sophie Hazan described how the traffic can back up as far as the intersection between Haycock Road and Broad Street.

"Even if it is a green arrow, it's usually backed up by a ton of cars...because once you turn left, the next light is red. It's always red, which makes the intersection completely clog up so nobody can really move," she said.

Not only is the traffic slow, it is also quite unpredictable, making it even more difficult for drivers to determine when to leave for school.

"Even if I do leave at a reasonable time, depending on the traffic, I could be up to five minutes late to class, or two minutes early," senior Aaron Jacobson

noted.

This traffic is compounded by the construction that is taking place in the next door West Broad development.

"They were doing construction in the right turn lane the other day, and I think it causes some restriction when it comes to which roads we can use," Gillaspay said.

However, she also noted that there are benefits to the construction, such as the new traffic light at Broad street and Chestnut.

"[The traffic light] makes it more difficult to come in, but it honestly also makes it easier to go out, so I'm not averse to it," she described.

Despite this, other students find the construction to be doing much more harm than good to the traffic flow.

"The tow trucks are, like, right in the middle of it, and there's potholes, so you have to swerve

around. It just takes forever," Bickel said.

Others believe that the issue is not related to construction at all. Mustang Alley is quite small, and only has one entrance and exit that is accessible in the morning. The same applies to the senior lot. Some students believe that this is where the real issue lies.

"If I'm being honest, the main bottleneck, I believe, is that there's only one entrance into the parking lot and also the fact that we only have one parking lot," Jacobson pointed out.

As construction continues, the traffic jam does not seem like it will let up any time soon. Although Principal Laub is sympathetic, he explained there was little he could do.

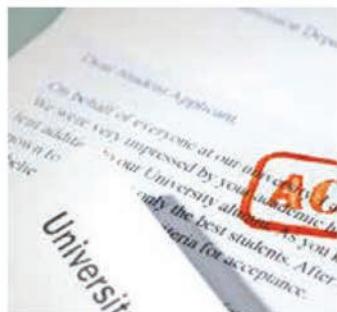
"This was the solution that was put forth by our police, so all I can say is I sympathize."



Meridian students and staff struggle through a traffic jam every morning to attend work and school. (Photo by Anna Goldenberg)

## Is college harder to get into?

BY GENEVIEVE HARDY



(Photo via C2 education)

As many students finish up their college applications for the 2025-2026 school year, they stress as the chances of getting into their top colleges decrease.

Selective colleges have been consistently lowering their acceptance rates and increasing their standards in the past years. In 2003, acceptance rates for Harvard and Stanford were at 10-12%, but now they are down to 3-4%.

"For less competitive schools, their acceptance rate is rising but

for top schools prices are rising which just makes it harder," said senior Kira Pike.

Test scores are also becoming increasingly competitive. Throughout COVID-19 many schools switched to test-optional policies, inflating the score range as only students with the highest scores would choose to submit. However, many colleges are now requiring SAT or ACT score submissions for 2027 graduates.

Colleges are also increasing their selectivity. A reputation of

high selectivity makes colleges appear more prestigious, increasing their amount of applicants. This results in lower acceptance rates overall.

Finally, many colleges are struggling financially because of inflation and declining international enrollment. As a result, many small private liberal arts colleges are closing or merging with other colleges, decreasing options for students. This increases applicants to larger schools, in turn, making those schools more

competitive.

Student debt also is a large factor which affects students' college decisions. For most students, cost is a large factor and can determine which schools are more accessible.

Lower acceptance rates for top colleges, more competitive applicants, and less colleges to choose from are all making colleges harder to get into.

Lasso Continued on Page 15

# Does AI belong in schools?

BY LAYLA KOZBELT



The infiltration of AI is a controversial topic around the US and in other countries around the world. (Photo via slate.com)

Artificial intelligence is a new and powerful tool we are learning to navigate and manipulate. With such a wide variety of features, generative AI has the range to complete tasks, answer questions and explain complex concepts. In schools, it may tempt students to cheat on tests or have it complete assignments, decreasing critical thinking skills and creativity. An MIT study also found that generally, the more time users spend talking to ChatGPT, the lonelier they feel.

On the other hand, some argue that it would be beneficial to understand how to use AI for the long-term, as it has already infiltrated social media platforms, businesses and now, school systems.

School systems are a particu-

larly tricky area for AI implementation. Schools are supposed to teach children fundamental educational skills. Is AI a tool that can be used to make teaching and learning easier or is it destroying critical thinking skills?

Some students believe that AI has no place in Meridian.

"Students should not be using AI since it should be limited to worthwhile purposes and not brainrot," sophomore Asha Nath remarked. "AI could do some good, but no one is using it to make a meaningful difference - people just use it as a shortcut or entertainment."

On the other hand, some students believe that there are some acceptable ways to use AI.

"I think that it depends on

the situation," noted sophomore Aarya Kamboh, "If you are using AI on assignments, it shouldn't be allowed. Although, I personally use it to help me study, which is really helpful, and I think that should be allowed."

Notably, a large amount of information provided by AI is incorrect or misleading. A study led by BBC found that major AI assistants like ChatGPT, Copilot and Gemini were wrong at least 45% of the time.

AI is technology advanced far beyond calculators or Google. It is capable of significantly more. AI can write essays, interpret data, create fake images and much more. Some see the extensiveness of AI as a new form of innovation, while others believe it is a "Pandora's Box" of the future.

Principal Peter Laub is hoping to utilize AI in several beneficial ways.

Laub commented that AI tools "make it rather easy to abandon a culture of integrity," but that Meridian "spent much of the year on a concentrated journey to enhance our collective understanding of Academic Integrity."

An AI committee was newly formed at Meridian to collect community input about decisions regarding AI in schools. The group was composed of students, staff and teachers. The committee spoke about their feelings towards AI at Meridian.

Many felt that AI should be incorporated as it is already "pervasive."

"[AI] can lead you to a lot of better sources by starting you at one point," senior Henry Herman noted.

Other students felt that AI was a technological revelation that would be useful in schools.

"I feel like being familiar with the technology and having that ability to prompt it and get what you want out of it is very valuable," senior Aiden Harper commented. "And if we try to stay away from AI and make it completely human, I'm sure to a degree, learning would improve, but you have to be a little future focused."

The committee did acknowledge concerns about AI "replacing" teacher feedback.

"It's that connection with the teacher and being able for them to give their input, I feel like that's a big part of the learning process and taking that out makes it feel a whole lot less rewarding," said Harper.

The committee addressed concerns about different levels of AI accessibility for different students. With normal ChatGPT, students can reach a limit on the number of prompts they can request. More wealthy students may purchase ChatGPT Premium, allowing them to ask unlimited prompts and giving them a possible advantage in the school system.

"They might have an advantage in class and that could prove unfair to other students," Herman reiterated.

On Dec. 16 and 17, the SCA Exec Board held a town hall, where students were encouraged to give advice about AI use at Meridian. The information would be taken into consideration when Superintendent Terry Dade forms a standardized district policy about AI in schools.

Students spoke out, saying AI "prepares you for the real world" while others noted that AI "does a lot of damage to creativity as a whole."

Meridian is already seeing forms of AI implementation. On Dec. 17, Principal Laub wrote that "all MHS students and staff now have access to gen-AI tools via Google's Gemini software." In the same update, he wrote that "beginning January 5, access to ChatGPT will be redirected to Securly AI, making ChatGPT use safer for students on their FCCPS devices."

It appears that AI will be incorporated into Meridian one way or another. Regardless of the possible issues, Meridian administration is ready to tackle the uncertainty that comes with this new technology, rather than attempting to weave education around it.

The exact future of AI at Meridian is still unclear. What is clear is that AI already plays a significant role in our school.

## Duke Dawson accepts D1 track scholarship

BY RYAN DEGANAN AND CAMILA CONTRERAS

Senior Duke Dawson has been an exceptional track and field athlete during his years in high school, and his talent has been rewarded by his commitment to run D1 track at Furman University. The prestigious program offered Dawson an athletic scholarship to compete at multiple events throughout the season.

"I chose [Furman University] because it's a very good school, has a very good business program, I like the coaches and people, and the weather is really nice in South Carolina," Dawson said.

Dawson's sprinting is what scored him this scholarship,

and this is reflected through the events he will compete in. He is currently planning on partaking in the 100m, 200m, and 4x100 relay races.

A scholarship of this magnitude isn't achieved on a whim. Luckily, Dawson knew he wanted to compete at a higher level very early on in his high school career.

"I decided that I wanted to run track in college during my sophomore year, when I made states and had a very good year overall," Dawson said.

Dawson is very happy with Furman as his choice, but getting recruited took more effort than just running track at a high level.

"The recruiting process for me

looked like a lot of texting coaches and trying to get my name out," Dawson said. "The school really fits my goals of obviously becoming D1 and competing at a high level, and since it's a pretty small school, the teaching is very focused and I think that's also very helpful for me as a student."

Dawson was quick to credit the people closest to him for helping him on his journey to recruitment.

"The person who has supported me most throughout my track journey has been my mom. She texted a lot of the coaches that I was talking to, helped me come up with emails to write, took me to every event, signed me up for

clinics, and went to every single track meet," Dawson reflected.

While the excitement is still fresh, Dawson knows the challenges to come will be difficult.

However, Dawson has the talent and discipline to become a successful athlete, and his career will certainly be one to watch.



Dawson's Instagram post announcing his commitment

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**PUBLIC NOTICE  
CITY OF FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
PUBLIC HEARING**

A Planning Commission public hearing and possible recommendation to City Council is scheduled for February 18, 2026, at 7:30 pm, or as soon thereafter as the matter may be heard, on the following:

(TR24-28) RESOLUTION TO AMEND THE CITY OF FALLS CHURCH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TO UPDATE CHAPTER 8, "COMMUNITY BUILDING BLOCKS: COMMUNITY FACILITIES, INFRASTRUCTURE, UTILITIES AND PUBLIC SERVICES"

The update to Chapter 8 of the Comprehensive Plan, "Community Building Blocks: Community Facilities, Infrastructure, Utilities, and Government Services" plans for the next 20 plus years using the most recent demographic projections, industry-specific best practices, and the existing infrastructure. The Chapter contains an overview of existing facilities, an evaluation of needs, and recommended next steps for the City's government services and facilities, public safety, City utility services, and third-party utilities. More information can be at: <https://www.fallschurchva.gov/2283/Chapter-8-Update-Community-Facilities-In>.

The materials for the above item will be available on the city's webpage prior to the public hearing: <http://www.fallschurchva.gov/PC>. All persons desiring to present their views on the items will be heard. For copies of materials and other information, contact Jack Trainor [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov).

All public hearings will be held in the Council Chambers, 300 Park Avenue, Falls Church, Virginia. All persons desiring to present their views on the items will be heard. Comments may also be sent to [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov). Remote participation information at [www.fallschurchva.gov/pc](http://www.fallschurchva.gov/pc). For copies of legislation and other information, contact Jack Trainor [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov). The City of Falls Church is committed to the letter and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act. To request a reasonable accommodation for any type of disability, call 571-421-7943 or e-mail [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov).

**NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
CITY OF FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA**

A Planning Commission public hearing and possible recommendation for City Council action on the following is scheduled for Wednesday, March 4, 2026 at 7:30 p.m., or as soon thereafter as the matter may be heard.

(TO25-22) ORDINANCE TO AMEND THE CODE OF THE CITY OF FALLS CHURCH CHAPTER 48, "ZONING," SECTION 48-2, "DEFINITIONS," SECTION 48-3, "GENERAL REGULATIONS" AND SECTION 48-1101, "GENERAL REQUIREMENTS," TO INCREASE MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR TREE CANOPY COVERAGE WITHIN NONRESIDENTIAL ZONING DISTRICTS

The proposed amendments to the Zoning Code would update minimum standards for tree canopy coverage within non-residential zoning districts, including B-1 Limited Business, B-2 Central Business, B-3 General Business, T-1 Transitional, T-2 Transitional, O-D Official Design, and M-1 Light Industry districts.

All public hearings will be held in the Council Chambers, 300 Park Avenue, Falls Church, Virginia. All persons desiring to present their views on the items will be heard. Comments may also be sent to [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov). Remote participation information at [www.fallschurchva.gov/pc](http://www.fallschurchva.gov/pc). For copies of legislation and other information, contact Jack Trainor [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov). The City of Falls Church is committed to the letter and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act. To request a reasonable accommodation for any type of disability, call 571-421-7943 or e-mail [jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov](mailto:jtrainor@fallschurchva.gov).

[fcnp.com](http://fcnp.com)

**ABC NOTICE**

West Falls Community Association Inc, trading as West Falls Community Association, 7120 Leesburg Pike, Suite 101B, Falls Church, Fairfax County, VA is applying to the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Authority for a Commercial Lifestyle Center, Wine, Beer, Mixed Beverages, Consumed On Premises to sell alcoholic beverages. NOTE: Objections to the issuance of this license must be submitted to ABC no later than 30 days from the publishing date of the first of 2 required newspaper legal notice. Objections should be registered at [www.abc.virginia.gov](http://www.abc.virginia.gov) or 800-552-3200.

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# This Week Around Falls Church

## Thursday, Feb. 12

### Winter Storytime

10:30–11 a.m.

Mary Riley Styles Public Library, Lower Level Conference Room

Ages 2–4 (Preschool). Songs, stories and rhymes. Please pick only one storytime per week to attend; see the children's desk for a ticket upon arrival.

## Friday, Feb. 13

### Winter Baby Time

10:30–11 a.m.

Mary Riley Styles Public Library, Lower Level Conference Room

Ages 0–24 months with a caregiver (older siblings welcome). Baby storytime with songs and rhymes, plus stay-and-play afterward with toys designed for babies and time to mingle with other families.

## Saturday, Feb. 14

### Falls Church Farmers Market

8 a.m.–12 p.m.

City Hall Parking Lot

Weekly outdoor market featuring local vendors and seasonal products.

## Saturday, Feb. 14,

### Valentine's Day Tea

2–4 p.m.

Cherry Hill Farmhouse

Afternoon tea event for Valentine's weekend at Cherry Hill Farmhouse.

## Saturday, Feb. 14,

### Eden Center Lunar New Year Celebrations

Starting at noon

Eden Center, 6751–6799 Wilson Blvd., Falls Church

Vietnamese Tét Lunar New Year celebration with free face painting, balloon twisting and caricatures. Also held Tuesday, Feb. 17 and Saturday, Feb. 21. Lion dances on Feb. 17 and Feb. 21.

## Saturday, Feb. 14

### Workhouse Arts Center

— Second Saturday +

Inova Blood Drive

Saturday (times vary)

Workhouse Arts Center

(historic former Lorton Prison grounds), Lorton, VA

Second Saturday includes new exhibition openings, interactive art workshops for families and adults, a Create & Sip lantern experience, a Veterans Open Studio honoring active-duty and retired service members, and an Inova Blood Drive.

## Saturday, Feb. 14

### Washington Sinfonietta

— Beethoven Piano

Concerto

7:30 p.m.

The Falls Church Episcopal

Program: Fanny Hensel, Overture in C; Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 4 in G, Op. 58 (Rachel Franklin, piano); Haydn, Symphony No. 83 in G, Hob. I:83.

## Sunday, Feb. 15

### Odeon Chamber Music

Series — Wan-Chi Su

Piano Recital

4 p.m.

St. Patrick's Episcopal Church, 3241 Brush Drive, Falls Church, VA 22042

Admission: Free (donation of \$25 or more appreciated). Program: J.S. Bach, French Suite No. 5 in G major (selections); J. Haydn, Piano Sonata No. 62 in E-flat major; V. Silvestrov, Bagatelle; F. Schubert, Piano Sonata No. 21 in B-flat major.

## Monday, Feb. 16, 2026

### Freedom of Artistic Expression: Is it At Risk?

7 p.m.

Creative Cauldron Stage

President's Day Falls Church 250 "Soap Box Conversation" hosted by Creative Cauldron Stage and Falls Church Arts. Speakers get three minutes. Moderated by Jim Coyle, Chair of the Falls Church250 Committee; rules of engagement followed.

## Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2026

### Eden Center Lunar New Year Celebrations

Starting at noon

Eden Center, 6751–6799

Wilson Blvd., Falls Church

Free face painting, balloon twisting and caricatures. Feb. 17 includes a community flag ceremony and giveaways. Lion dance scheduled (also Feb. 21).

## Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2026

### NUE: Elegantly Vietnamese Lunar New Year Celebration

Ongoing (Feb. 17–March 3)

944 W. Broad St., Falls Church

Year of the Horse drink specials with local artists, plus red "li xi" envelopes. With a \$250 dine-in purchase, guests can join NUE's animal dice game for prizes including an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Vietnam or Las Vegas.

## Wednesday, Feb. 18,

### FC History Room: Walk-in Hours

4–8 p.m.

Mary Riley Styles Public Library, Falls Church History Room

Stop by during walk-in hours to ask a question, research a topic, or learn more about the local history collection. Age group: high school through adult.

Have an event you want to see in the News-Press?

Send us an email to [calendar@fcnp.com](mailto:calendar@fcnp.com)

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MAR 14	SAVED BY THE 90S 90S DANCE PARTY
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SEIZE THE AWKWARD

## Kids Steal Show in 'School of Rock'

BY PATRICIA LESLIE

Is it possible for a zealous adult to steal a show from a bunch of fifth-graders?

Not if you're one of the fifth-graders in "School of Rock" at the Little Theatre of Alexandria where Dewey Finn (Jarod Glou) is a pseudo substitute teacher, crazy about music.

Dewey's exuberance can leave you breathless at times (or maybe all the time), while he tries to take students on a chase to win "Battle of the Bands" and, simultaneously, become a temporary teacher and earn a salary to take Dewey out of debt.

How did this quirky man ever get in a classroom?

He faked his way in, seizing the identity of his good friend Ned (Andres del Campo) at whose apartment Dewey has roosted for a while, much to the dismay of Ned's sassy girlfriend, Patty (Maia Potok-Holmes) who tries to throw Dewey out.

And away we go!

Dewey bluffs and puffs his way into the hearts of the students, gradually building their trust and admiration and, surprise! The budding musicians, singers and managers want to become band contestants!

While unloading their problems on Dewey.

Meanwhile, the prissy principal of the private school, Ms. Mullins (Jilliann Law), stealthily makes her way to Dewey's classroom to see what's going on since their loud musical practice sessions have been reported by another teacher.

Ms. Mullins also wants Dewey to know that the students' parents (who don't listen to their offspring) are coming for Parents Night Out (which just happens to be the night before the band contest) and Dewey had better be ready.

And ready he is, with the students, to boot!

One student as Freddie (Jasper Bischoff) seemed to really be playing the drums, and playing he truly was. Every time Jasper took up the percussion, from then on my eyes were locked on him.

Director and choreographer Kristina Friedgen told me at intermission that the three other student musicians were "real," too, two of them only learning how to play their instruments since December when rehearsals began.

What?

Unbelievable! So polished and confident they were on bass (Alexandra Blinde), guitar (Lucas Pellerito) and keyboard (Penelope Porter), all of whom play at alternate performances with Cecilia Garbaliuskas, Riley Byrd, Brooks Moretti and Jonathan Walpole.

Other alternate actors are Samantha Regan and Adrianna Weir who take turns leading the class as very capable student band managers.

Aimee Faulkner conducts six professional musicians on an elevated backdrop platform atop the stage with Nathan Weisbrod, the drummer, going silent whenever Jasper hit the drums, one of the most challenging demands of the show to coordinate, Friedgen said.

Other cast members, some who act alternately, are Loren Blinde, Nisa McColgan and Nesu Chizengeni (as the shy Tomika) and Maria Ciarrocchi.

Also, Hannah Culp, Naya Gilliam, Sean Gilliam, Benjamin Gorini, Robin Lewis, Angus Long, Arianna Parenti, Joey Pond, Isaiah Salley, June Tuss, Garrett Walsh and Mila Weir.

The crew includes Christine Tankersley and Bethany Weinstein, producers; Beck Webster, assistant director; Katie Lewis and Dawn Morrow, stage managers; Vincent Worthington, set design; Ken and Patti Crowley, lighting; Juli Worth and Alan Wray, sound; Mia Glatter-Droll, costumes; Julianna Cooper, associate choreographer and Natalie Turkevich, hair and makeup.

When the hit movie was released in 2003, Jack Black was the star, but Alexandria's musical is based on Andrew Lloyd Webber's version which opened on Broadway in 2015 and ran for three years, winning four Tony Award nominations.

And what's a show without some romance thrown in? Not a very good show but since this is a good show, there's a bit of romance thrown in and I'll leave it to you to figure out who's who. (The Saturday night audience loved the romance.)

"School of Rock" (with some adult language) runs through Feb. 28, 2026, Thursday through Saturday nights at 8 p.m. with weekend matinees at 2 p.m. Tickets (with fees), \$39. Duration: About 2.5 hours plus an intermission.

Little Theatre of Alexandria, 600 Wolfe St., Alexandria 22314, ph. 703-683-0496, Box Office; or 703-683-5778, Main. Boxoffice@thelittletheatre.com.



(L to R) Isaiah Salley (James), Jonathan Walpole (Lawrence-partially hidden, Naya Gilliam (Shonelle), Nesu Chizengeni (Tomika), Mila Weir (Marcy), June Tuss (Sophie), Brooks Moretti (Zach Mooneyham), Jarod Glou (Dewey Finn), Joey Pond (Billy Sandford), Cecilia Garbaliuskas (Freddie Hamilton), Riley Byrd (Katie), Adrianna Weir (Summer Hathaway), Benjamin Gorini (Mason)(Photo: Matt Liptak)

## CRITTER CORNER



**THIS IS Sapphire she is 3 years old!**

*Just because you're not famous doesn't mean your pet can't be! Please send in your Critter Corner submissions to [crittercorner@fcnp.com](mailto:crittercorner@fcnp.com).*

## Movie Review: Hamnet

LISA SINROD

"Hamnet" is a lovely movie. The PG-13 film was released nationwide in December and is still showing in local theaters. It has several nominations for the upcoming 2026 Academy Awards. Jessie Buckley ("The Lost Daughter") stars as Agnes Shakespeare alongside Paul Mescal ("Normal People") as William Shakespeare. These two Irish actors deliver standout performances in this historical drama, particularly Buckley. Her raw, guttural acting style brings emotional depth to the film's powerful themes of love and loss, making this period piece especially moving. Young Hamnet, child of Agnes and William, is played superbly by British actor Jacobi Jupe.

The film is set in 16th-century England and tells the tale of Agnes Shakespeare (often referred to as Anne Hathaway in historical documents) and her marriage to William Shakespeare. They had three children and tragically lost their son Hamnet at age 11 in 1596, the story of which is presumed to have formed the basis for one of Shakespeare's best-known plays ("Hamlet"). Details of William Shakespeare's personal life remain largely undocumented, therefore this film utilizes basic known facts and artistic license to fill in the rest of the emotionally atmospheric plot. An opening caption informs viewers that the names Hamnet and Hamlet are considered interchangeable. Hamnet's death has a deep impact on the scaffolding of the Shakespeare family at a vulnerable time. It leads to distance and blame between Agnes and William as they navigate the increasingly public nature of his career and the depth of grief suffered by Agnes. She is portrayed as powerful and intuitive, yet also isolated in motherhood.

The scenery surrounding the Shakespeare family home in Stratford-upon-Avon is lush and pastoral, while the period set

pieces evoke an authentic sense of the time. The film's pace feels like a gentle unfolding of multiple emotions, although the emotions themselves are intense. The interplay between the Shakespeare siblings is touching. Hamnet and his twin sister, Judith, are preternaturally close, which make his sudden passing all the more brutal. The dynamics of the grieving Shakespeare parents (Agnes and William) is complex, with overlays of guilt and blame. Filmmaker Cloe Zhao, known for directing the Academy Award winning 2020 film "Nomadland", uses her trademark long shots in filming and involvement with nature and landscapes to great effect. Zhao worked with screenwriter Maggie O'Farrell, whose novel "Hamnet" serves as the basis for this film.

The ultimate throughline of the movie, explored more near the end, is how the tragic passing of William Shakespeare's son led Shakespeare to create the play "Hamlet". Shakespeare's long periods of being in London to work on the play created emotional distance between Agnes and William as they adapted to life without their son Hamnet. A staging of the play is shown in this story, with the suggestion that art can have a cathartic effect on the suffering of loss. A very effective casting touch is the use of Noah Jupe (the real-life older brother of the actor who portrays young Hamnet) to play Hamlet in the staging of the play. The resemblance is uncanny when seeing the young Hamnet before his death and the imagined somewhat older version of him rendered in the play by his actual sibling. The play-within-the-film scenes deliver dramatic and explosive moments late in the film. I don't typically tend toward the historical drama genre as a preference, yet this film pulled me in and didn't let go. Hamnet is a story of tragedy, creativity in the arts, and of the beauty of human resilience. I give this movie an A. If you haven't yet seen it, you may wish to do so while it is still in theaters.

## FALLS CHURCH BUSINESS NEWS & NOTES

### Chamber to Host Stars & Stripes Ball

The Falls Church Chamber hosts the Annual Business Awards Gala on Thursday, March 19 at the State Theatre. In the spirit of America's 250th Anniversary, the event is named the Stars & Stripes Ball, it will celebrate the Falls Church business community. Chamber member Casual Pint Falls Church will host an American Trivia Night on March 4, 7:00 – 9:00 pm to warm everyone up. Sponsorships are available by contacting the office: [info@fallschurchchamber.org](mailto:info@fallschurchchamber.org). Nominations for the 5 categories, Small Business of the Year, Large Business of the Year, Nonprofit of the Year, Company Culture of Excellence, and Pillar of the Community are open and forms are available on the website, <https://www.fallschurchchamber.org/> with a deadline of February 23. Groove Jet will provide live music and there will be a silent and live auction. The public is invited to celebrate local businesses and tickets are on sale now.

### Casual Pint Wine Tasting

Thursday, February 12, 5:00 – 8:00 pm – Casual Pint Falls Church hosts Kysela Pere et Fils with a free wine tasting. Visit to try new vintages and your favorites.

### CSE Sessions with The Artist's Way

Sunday, February 15, 12:00 – 2:00 PM – The Center for Spiritual Enlightenment is holding a series of three interactive sessions using art (watercolor, sketching, writing and poetry) using Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*. Participants explore art, spiritual principles and meditation. Sue Bracey leads the sessions on February 15, February 22 and March 1 at The Center.

### Building Your Value Proposition Design (VPD)

Thursday, February 19, 10:00 am - 12:00 pm - Please join Senior Business Counselor, and Adjunct GMU Professor George Siragusa, as he guides you through a step-by-step process of building your Value Proposition Design, which is invaluable to startups, early-stage companies, growth, or even mature businesses!

<https://clients.virginiasbdc.org/workshop.aspx?ekey=110460007>

### Lost Dog & Cats Rescue Awarded Grant

The nonprofit PETCO Love unveiled a check for \$100,000 to Lost Dog & Cats Rescue Foundation under their campaign, Love Stories, which highlights the impact of pet adoption for animals and humans. Anna Ridge of Alexandria wrote a 'love letter' about the adoption of a two-year old dog, Yuki, through LDCRF and the transformation it made to her and her husband's lives. Her letter was selected and gave LDCRF the surprise grant.

### Meridian Job Fair

Meridian High School will host a job fair for local businesses who have summer, seasonal or part-time positions for high school students. The event will be held on Thursday, March 12 from 11:45 am - 1:45pm. Please complete the form below if you would like to participate:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeLeevVzPrvT8wDOPNaAyKUW-Br0uj1v68Mzbf1sgI-G\\_MG10g/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeLeevVzPrvT8wDOPNaAyKUW-Br0uj1v68Mzbf1sgI-G_MG10g/viewform)

### Another Way to Celebrate America's 250th: Field Trip Contest

The nationwide contest, America's Field Trip, is back and invites students in grades 3-12 to share their perspectives on America with the chance to win extraordinary trips to some of the country's most iconic landmarks this summer. In honor of America's 250th anniversary, the contest has expanded to include 250 winners (up from 150) to receive an unforgettable field trip experience or a cash prize. Entries will be accepted through March 30, 2026.

[https://america250.org/fieldtrip/?utm\\_campaign=a250\\_25\\_email&utm\\_source=mailchimp&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=AFTlaunchemail](https://america250.org/fieldtrip/?utm_campaign=a250_25_email&utm_source=mailchimp&utm_medium=email&utm_content=AFTlaunchemail)

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## Our Man In Arlington

### BILL FOGARTY

In the midst of much uncertainty in the world these days, Arlington received a gift this past week from a group of about 20 Buddhist monks who came through Arlington on their Walk For Peace. Their 2,300-mile journey started in Texas over three months ago. On the afternoon of Monday, February 9 the monks entered Arlington from Route 1 in Alexandria, walking through Arlington's streets lined with spectators and well-wishers. I was fortunate to see them along Washington Boulevard, waiting patiently with others for the monks to make their way through Arlington. Not everyone knew about this march; I was standing next to someone who asked me, "what are we waiting for?"

The monks turned right, onto Glebe Road, and spent the night at Marymount University. They left early on Tuesday morning, going down Glebe Road, and crossing over Chain Bridge. A Facebook feed came in handy, as one could watch them depart from the campus, and head down to the bridge. My in-person and online observations were similar. There was no loud cheering; instead, there was a mood of quiet reverence, with some people offering flowers to the monks. The Tuesday morning crowd lining Glebe Road had a good number of young children along the route, as school had not yet started. It was touching to see one monk hand a flower to a young girl; the look on her face was precious.

My intent for a column this week was to write about the challenges in accessing local news in this day and age of rapidly changing journalism. Increasingly, it seems to be more and more difficult to keep informed about local matters. This is not a new problem, but it certainly has been made more obvious when reflecting on the latest spate of firings at The Washington Post. While their coverage of local news had already dwindled over the years, the latest developments are especially discouraging. Every morning for decades I would read the Post, starting with its cover-

age of sports (from the professional to the high school level.) It looks like I need to find a new breakfast routine!

The Walk For Peace, and its trek through Arlington, provides an opportunity for me to ask you a very specific question for your contemplation: through what news sources did you hear about the march? Or maybe you did not hear about it at all? I wrote an earlier column about the many ways that one can get information from the County. With the Walk For Peace, there was useful information provided by the County. But the quality and speed of getting information from the County depends on how many County "lists" you are signed up for. Much of the Walk For Peace information came to me from "word of mouth" news – such as Facebook posts and forwarded emails from friends, and other types of social media posts by various groups.

A more general follow-up question for you is this: where do you get news about what is happening in our community life in the County? Local print journalism in Arlington basically died with the demise of the weekly Gazette Leader in 2024. Scott McCaffery, who spent 26 years as editor of the Sun Gazette newspaper chain, is now a reporter for the online news publication known as ARLnow. Scott wrote an article about the history of local print journalism in a February 5 article (which you can access on the ARLnow website). McCaffery included a lengthy list of news publications that covered Arlington over the past century. In a way, his article was a kind of obituary for print journalism in Arlington.

As for today's column, I am running out of room, so next week I will have to continue my exploration of suggested ways to access local news. If any of you have any recommendations, you can email me at [historybillfogs@gmail.com](mailto:historybillfogs@gmail.com). And I am happy to receive feedback as to the types of local news you would like to see. I have some opinions on all that --- but I will wait till next week to reveal the three things I would like to see.

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