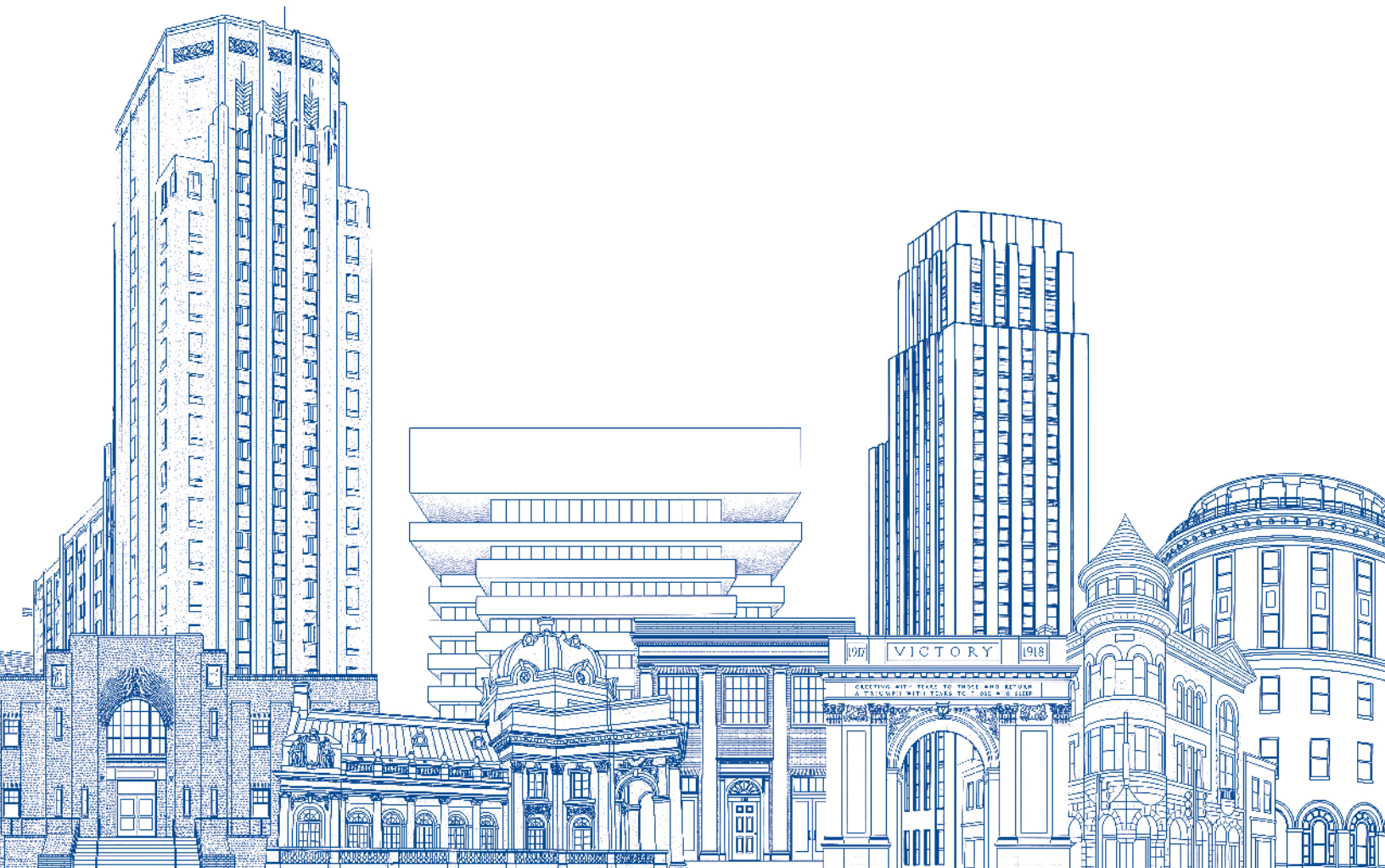




Investing in What Works

FY 2026 IMPACT REPORT



Investing in What Works

Strengthening Communities.

Expanding Opportunity.

Delivering Results.



Virginia First Cities is a coalition of the state's oldest and most historic cities advocating for increased support and better policies from the state, while sharing best practices among members.

From the Chair and Executive Director

Dear Virginia First Cities Board, Friends and Partners,

Throughout Fiscal Year 2026, Virginia First Cities delivered what our members expect: investment in proven solutions. We advocated strongly for city priorities across housing, economic and workforce development, public safety, education, and other critical areas.

Our efforts included advancing VFC's Urban Public-Private Partnership Redevelopment Fund, protecting the Virginia Community Wealth Building Fund, expanding partnerships and funding to reduce and prevent gun violence, and supporting legislation that gives cities more tools to create affordable housing.

Our membership is comprised of amazing cities with cultural offerings, historic attractions, world-class universities, and businesses of all sizes. From "mom and pop" endeavors to Fortune 500 enterprises, our cities have them all. While we are the regional centers of our Virginia communities, our cities experience above average and high levels of fiscal stress and face the challenge of a law that limits our growth. Virginia's independent city structure creates unique limitations, and state policies should recognize that we are not always on a level playing field.

When legislative policies fail to take these differences into account, we must educate our representatives about the unique challenges facing our cities. The "Housing Near Jobs" and "Housing Targets" legislation illustrate the concern. "Housing Near Jobs" legislation would have required by-right housing in business districts and reserved 25% or more of district land for that purpose—without requiring affordable housing or allowing mixed-use options.

While this legislation was unsuccessful, we are aware that it could be revived. It is incumbent upon us and our local partners to educate and

create incentives and options that promote needed housing while allowing city concerns to be part of the solution. We support well-thought-out policies that encourage the creation and preservation of quality housing that meets the needs of our residents. Most importantly, we remain open to fresh ideas.

Virginia's economy continues to present challenges for local governments, businesses, families, and communities. Resources are limited, needs are immediate, and there is little room for approaches that do not produce results. We continue to invest in what works to get things done, not in policies that offer negligible value or worse.

As Chair of the Virginia First Cities Coalition, I am proud to join our Executive Director and the leaders of our 17 member cities in moving this work forward. We are focused on making our voice count, building partnerships that produce results, and advocating for investments that strengthen communities and expand opportunity across the Commonwealth. Together, we can ensure Virginia's historic core cities are positioned to thrive for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Councilwoman Tina Vick
*Chairperson,
Virginia First Cities*



Kelly Harris-Braxton
*Executive Director,
Virginia First Cities Coalition*

In Brief:

The 2026 General Assembly Session

Local Authority—A Mixed but Consequential Year for Virginia’s Historic Cities

The 2026 General Assembly delivered meaningful progress for Virginia’s historic cities—particularly in housing, economic development and public safety.

Marked by a new governor and Democratic majorities in both chambers, the 2026 session brought a notable shift in tone and delivered significant policy and budget wins.

2026 Legislative Highlights

Housing & Economic Development

Housing was one of the defining issues of the 2026 session, with an emphasis on increasing supply and accelerating development. VFC consistently advocated for a balanced approach—one that expands housing opportunities while preserving local decision-making, citizen participation and the inclusion of affordable units in the housing mix.

A significant victory was **SB 285**, which directs the Board of Housing and Community Development to establish criteria for the **Urban Public-Private Partnership Redevelopment Grant Program** in consultation with VFC, VACo, VML and VEDA. The legislation, largely the result of VFC advocacy, appropriately recognizes fiscal stress and declining commercial real-estate assessments as factors in prioritizing urban redevelopment.

The session also enacted a broad range of housing measures, including:

- New tools for **mixed-income and affordable housing development**;
- Expanded authority for local affordable housing grant programs;
- Homeownership assistance for local government employees;
- Greater flexibility for accessory dwelling units and manufactured housing;

- New housing data and statewide housing-needs assessments;
- Long-awaited and expanded inclusionary-zoning authority, effective July 2027; and
- New tools and protections addressing affordable rental housing and tenant stability.

VFC also worked to defeat legislation that would have imposed sweeping **by-right development requirements and statewide housing targets**. The Housing Near Jobs bills (HB 816/SB 454) and related statewide housing-target legislation failed in 2026, but similar proposals could return. We will continue to educate that by-right is not the right policy for many of our cities, as it has the potential to turn back the clock on the commercial revitalization efforts that have worked very well in our older cities.

VFC’s position remains clear: **housing supply matters, but a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for landlocked, fiscally stressed, independent cities**. Localities need the flexibility to balance housing, economic development, infrastructure, historic preservation and community priorities.



L-R: Laura Bateman, VFC Legislative Director; Kelly Harris-Braxton, VFC Executive Director; Governor Abigail Spanberger; Jamie Crawford, VFC Policy Coordinator/Program Manager

Public Safety & Community Well-Being

Public safety remained a major VFC priority in 2026, with action on **gun-violence prevention** (see related article), **local law enforcement**, **community violence intervention** and **first-responder support**.

The General Assembly enacted restrictions on the future purchase, sale, importation and manufacture of certain assault-style firearms and large-capacity magazines, while preserving existing lawful ownership.

The session also strengthened opportunities for regional law-enforcement collaboration, including co-response models such as **Marcus Alert**, and expanded workers' compensation protections for law-enforcement officers and firefighters experiencing PTSD.

For cities, **HB 599/Aid to Localities with Police Departments** remains a critical state-local partnership tied directly to Virginia's long-standing annexation moratorium. The

FY 2027 budget maintained the program but did not increase funding pursuant to the Code of Virginia—reinforcing VFC's position that the Commonwealth must recognize the fiscal consequences of its restrictions on city growth.

VFC also helped advance continued investment in the **Safer Communities Program and community violence intervention**, reflecting an increasingly important understanding that public safety is not solely a policing function. Stronger communities, economic opportunity and violence prevention are essential components of public safety.

Another important achievement was the creation of the **Firefighter Cancer Screening Grant Program** with \$2 million over the biennium to help qualifying local fire departments and companies provide eligible cancer screenings for career firefighters.

continued on next page

Workforce, Local Government & Transportation

The 2026 session brought significant changes affecting local employers, including paid sick leave and new civil remedies involving wage, overtime, worker classification and prevailing-wage violations.

The General Assembly also passed legislation establishing a statewide framework for collective bargaining by local government, K-12 and higher-education employees. Governor Spanberger vetoed the legislation, citing unresolved fiscal and operational concerns. The issue is likely to return in 2027.

Virginia also moved toward a regulated retail cannabis market, with sales scheduled to begin

July 1, 2027, creating new implementation and local-government considerations.

Transportation policy increasingly intersected with housing and economic development. The final budget directed the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, working with DHCD, to conduct a statewide review of **transit-oriented development around existing and proposed rail and transit stations**. The review will examine housing barriers, economic-development opportunities and potential funding sources, with a report due to the Governor and General Assembly in December 2026.

Looking Ahead To 2027

The 2026 session reinforced VFC's broader advocacy position: **Virginia's historic cities face unique physical and fiscal constraints, made more significant by the Commonwealth's moratorium on annexation and growing federal cuts.**

At the same time, cities are being asked to deliver more housing, strengthen public safety, support economic growth, revitalize aging commercial districts and provide essential services with limited tools and resources.

VFC will continue to make the case that **local leadership is not an obstacle to statewide progress—it is an essential part of the solution. And the state/local/regional partnership is essential to strong cities.**

As we look toward the 2027 General Assembly, VFC will advocate for policies that recognize the unique role of Virginia's historic cities and give local elected leaders the **authority, resources and flexibility to build stronger, more prosperous communities.**



Laura Bateman
VFC Legislative Director

Fiscal Stress of VFC Members

This information comes from the FY2023 Report on Fiscal Stress Data from the Virginia Commission on Local Government. The report measures the fiscal stress of 133 Virginia localities. Classes run from low fiscal stress (22 localities), to below average stress (52 localities), to above average stress (46 localities), and to high fiscal stress (23 localities).

VFC Member Rankings

City	2023 Rank	Class	2022 Rank
Emporia City	1	High	1
Martinsville City	3	High	6
Portsmouth City	4	High	14
Danville City	8	High	10
Harrisonburg City	9	High	17
Petersburg City	11	High	2
Hampton City	14	High	12
Hopewell City	16	High	20
Newport News City	17	High	16
Norfolk City	18	High	19
Lexington City	22	High	21
Roanoke City	23	High	22
Staunton City	28	Above Average	29
Winchester City	33	Above Average	30
Richmond City	35	Above Average	24
Williamsburg City	53	Above Average	40
Charlottesville City	68	Above Average	34

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VFC Members are ranked
in the top ten fiscally
stressed localities.

12 of 17

VFC members are classified
as having the
highest fiscal stress
in the commonwealth.

Gun Violence Prevention: Turning Research Into Action

Virginia First Cities + UVA Gun Violence Solutions Project

A Statewide Partnership for Safer Communities

“Virginia First Cities was our first choice of partner The GVSP is excited to continue its partnership with Virginia First Cities as both organizations work to improve public safety in cities across the Commonwealth”

— Prof. Andrew Block, Director,
State and Local Government Policy Clinic,
UVA School of Law,
and Bobby Doyle, GVSP Director

60+

Leaders Convened

17

VFC Cities Engaged

From Conversation to Impact

1 Statewide Convening

In 2025, Virginia First Cities partnered with UVA's Gun Violence Solutions Project to convene nearly 60 leaders for a statewide conversation on firearm violence.

2 In Their Own Voices

Local leaders' experiences and ideas helped shape *In Their Own Voices*, a report on youth gun violence prevention authored by UVA's Andy Block, Dr. Lucy Guernera and others.

3 Safer Communities Expansion

The partnership helped build support for expanding Virginia's Safer Communities program—an expansion ultimately approved by the General Assembly.

4 Growing Collaborations

New collaborations with Richmond, Petersburg and Newport News—and continued work on firearm violence data and prevention—are extending the impact of the partnership.

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Shared Agenda

*Together, VFC and
GVSP are turning
research, experience
and local leadership
into action for safer
Virginia communities.*

Virginia Gun Violence Prevention Summit, September 17, 2025



Andy Block, University of Virginia School of Law; Sarah Scarbrough, REAL LIFE; Trae Watkins, Youth Engagement Specialist; Steve Drew, Newport News Chief of Police; Greg Hopkins, City of Richmond

State Budget Wins

FVIP Grant Expansion — \$7M Increase

Expansion of Firearm Violence Intervention and Prevention (FVIP) Grants, including Hospital Based Programs, Outreach Workers, and Violence Interrupters.

Safer Communities Expansion — \$8M Per Year

Expanded to Hampton, Newport News, Hopewell, Petersburg, and Danville. All nine localities with the highest rates of gun violence now have funding.

Total Prevention/Intervention Funding

\$38 million per year in combined prevention and intervention funding across Virginia.

Community Schools & Community Builders

Funding secured to help schools tackle chronic absenteeism through community schools and community builders programs.



Bobby Doyle, CVSP Director



Jovan Davis, Community Violence Interrupter; Laura Bateman, VFC

Annual Meeting, May 2026

Science Museum of Virginia



VFC Members and Governor Spanberger



Tina Vick, VFC Chair, and Governor Spanberger



Housing Panel: Laura Bateman; Andrew Clark, Homebuilders Association of Virginia; Joe Lerch, VACo; Andrea Dono, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance; Brian Koziol, Virginia Housing Alliance



Newly Elected Executive Committee Members: Kelly Harris-Braxton, Executive Director; March Altman, Petersburg City Manager; Tina Vick, Newport News Councilmember (Chair); Ken Larking, Danville City Manager (Treasurer); Mamie Johnson, Norfolk Councilmember; Odie Donald, Richmond CAO (Secretary). (Not pictured: Dany Fleming, Harrisonburg Vice Mayor (Vice Chair); Jimmy Gray, Hampton Mayor)

Board of Directors

(Executive Committee in bold)

Hon. Juandiego Wade, Mayor, City of Charlottesville
Mr. Samuel Sanders, Jr., City Manager, City of Charlottesville
Hon. Sherman Saunders, Council Member, City of Danville
Mr. Ken Larking, City Manager, City of Danville
Hon. Yolanda Hines, Council Member, City of Emporia
Mr. William E. Johnson, III, City Manager, City of Emporia
Ms. Mary Bunting, City Manager, City of Hampton
Hon. Jimmy Gray, Mayor, City of Hampton
Hon. Dany Fleming, Vice Mayor, City of Harrisonburg
Mr. Ande Banks, City Manager, City of Harrisonburg
Hon. Rita Joyner, Vice Mayor, City of Hopewell
Mr. Michael C. Rogers, City Manager, City of Hopewell
Hon. Frank Friedman, Mayor, City of Lexington
Mr. Tom Carroll, City Manager, City of Lexington
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Mr. Robert Fincher, City Manager, City of Martinsville
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Mr. Andrew Trivette, City Manager, City of Williamsburg
Hon. Les Veach, Mayor, City of Winchester
Mr. Dan Hoffman, City Manager, City of Winchester

In memoriam

The Virginia First Cities Board of Directors mourns the sudden passing of The Honorable Frank Friedman, Mayor of Lexington, on July 2, 2026. Mayor Friedman brought steady leadership and genuine warmth to every discussion, and his years of service to Lexington—and to VFC—reflected a lifelong commitment to community and public service. We will miss his thoughtful voice at the table and are grateful for the legacy of collaboration he leaves behind.

Executive Committee



CHAIR:

Hon. Tina Vick
*Councilmember
City of Newport News*



VICE CHAIR:

Hon. Dany Fleming
*Vice Mayor
City of Harrisonburg*



TREASURER:

Mr. Ken Larking
*City Manager
City of Danville*



SECRETARY:

Mr. Andrew Trivette
*City Manager
City of Williamsburg*



AT-LARGE MEMBER:

Hon. Jimmy Gray
*Mayor
City of Hampton*



AT-LARGE MEMBER:

Mr. Dan Hoffman
*City Manager
City of Winchester*



AT-LARGE MEMBER:

Hon. Mamie Johnson
*Councilmember
City of Norfolk*



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