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THE GREENSVILLE COUNTY WATER AND SEWER AUTHORITY

May 31, 2013

VACo Achievement Award
1207 East Main Street, Suite 300
Richmond, VA 23219-3627

Dear VACo Award Committee:

Greensville County's entry for the 2013 VACo Achievement Award, Community Development Category is enclosed. Our submission encompasses the Washington Park Community Development Program, Phases I, II, and III.

This community development project showcases the positive community benefits that can be achieved when local government, neighborhood leaders, non-profit agencies, and local citizens unite behind a common goal. Thank you for the opportunity to showcase this inventive program.

Please contact me if you have questions or need additional information.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Moses A. Clements', is written over a horizontal line.

Moses A. Clements
Public Works/Assistant Authority Director

MAC/ljp

Enclosure

**Greensville County
2013 VACo Achievement Award
Community Development Category**



Greensville County
1781 Greensville County Circle
Emporia, VA 23847
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Greensville County
2013 VACo Achievement Award Submission

Community Development Category

Executive Summary

Greensville County has successfully created and implemented a unique community improvement project in the Washington Park Neighborhood. The community improvement effort was a multiple activity program focusing on housing improvements, homeownership creation, infrastructure improvements, and the construction of a new community center. It was an effort that partnered the local Boys and Girls Club, a housing advocacy group, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, community activists, utility service providers, VDOT, local landlords, and area families. Greensville County administrated the projects and the County Staff assumed all of the leadership/oversight roles.

The programs: converted 28 rental units into single-family (SF) homeownership opportunities, substantially reconstructed 34 substandard SF units, rehabilitated 20 substandard SF housing units, demolished 11 dilapidated, derelict housing units, installed 4100 lf of new sidewalk/curb and gutter, constructed 7900 lf of new storm drainage piping/ditches, built 530 lf of new residential street, installed 8 new streetlights and constructed a 3500 sq ft Community Center. The total cost of the improvements was over \$4.1 million.

The project was an ambitious undertaking that accomplished all of its objectives. It directly benefited the project area residents, surrounding community and the county as a whole. The program provides an excellent blue-print for dealing with substandard neighborhoods. It could easily be replicated by other jurisdictions.

2013 VACo Achievement Award Submission

Community Development Category

Project Name: Washington Park Community Development

Program, Phase I, II, and III

All of Virginia's Counties have problems with substandard neighborhoods. This problem was especially evident in the Washington Park area of Greenville County. To address these issues, Greenville County created an innovative community development program. The program addresses the needs within a specific geographic area by partnering local elected officials, county staff members, a national organization, public service providers, nonprofit agencies, grant funding agencies, community activists, and neighborhood residents.

History:

The Washington Park neighborhood is an area of central Greenville County that had become synonymous with absentee landlords, derelict housing, law enforcement issues, deteriorating infrastructure, and a multitude of social problems. The county started the program by conducting a needs analysis. In the summer of 2001 a Community Meeting was held in the neighborhood. It was attended by a majority of the Washington Park residents. Those residents clearly, and repeatedly, stated their areas of need - Housing Rehabilitation, Storm Drainage, Pedestrian Access, and Street Improvements.

After a thorough review of the community, the County Staff recognized that the project was too large for a single program. A phased approach was the only financially responsible method to address the community's needs. To implement this approach, specific geographic areas were delineated for Phases I, II and III.

The Challenge:

Substandard housing was determined to be the largest problem. Approximately 75% of the housing units in the program areas were rentals. All of the rental units were in very poor condition. The County Staff immediately realized that rehabilitating rental units was not feasible. Additionally, repairing the rental units would not address the problems of absentee landlords, lax property maintenance, vacant units, and abandoned structures. The county staff quickly realized the only way to institute a true neighborhood revitalization would be to purchase the rental units, remove the existing structures, build new houses, and offer those units to the current tenants as homeownership opportunities.

The County Staff was initially overwhelmed by the size and the expense of the project. The staff researched the neighborhood by conducting door-to-door surveys and the use of community meetings. After more than 2 years of research, it was determined that the financial impacts of complete neighborhood improvement would exceed \$4 million. It was obvious that local funds could not fund the proposed improvements; therefore, the staff began searching for grant funds, cheaper methods of instituting the desired improvements, and agencies/individuals that could partner with the County.

An Innovative Approach:

The County Staff quickly realized that improving the community hinged on homeownership. The majority of the Washington Park population was not interested in the long term health and/or growth of the community. Eliminating the rental units and providing homeownership opportunities would change that mindset. The idea was to replace the rental units with single-family residential structures and then offer those units to the existing renters as homeownership opportunities. The largest homeownership obstacle was keeping monthly mortgage payments affordable. The Staff determined

that the mortgage payments would have to be approximately the same as the existing rental costs. This was a challenging issue.

The Staff determined that a large number of partners would have to be identified and engaged in order to bring the project to life. The staff started discussing the project with the Greenville County Board of Supervisors and then reached out a housing agency, a grant provider, community organizers, project area residents, project area landlords, and a local youth agency. It was also determined that local utility providers and VDOT would need to lend assistance. It was an eclectic group. The varying interests/policies of each organization presented enormous challenges for the steering committee. Slowly, the participant's roles began to take shape.

The obvious choice for the housing agency was a local group named the Southern Virginia Development Corporation (SVDC). The SVDC is a local nonprofit housing agency. Their mission is to supply safe, decent, affordable housing to the residents of Greenville County. That group was extremely interested in the project and became the first partner to commit. Likewise, the Board of Supervisors and the Building/Planning Departments were equally interested. Unfortunately, identifying and convincing the remaining entities was a challenge.

The steering committee overcame all of the issues. It took more than 2 years of planning sessions, public meetings, door-to-door interviews, and the preparation/submission of multiple grant applications. Finally, a planning grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) was acquired. That grant provided funding to employ a consulting engineer to study the infrastructure issues and allowed the steering committee to focus on housing.

By far the most difficult task was convincing the project area residents that the program would occur. The neighborhood was filled with the disenfranchised. The majority of the residents did not believe that true neighborhood revitalization was possible. They were also leery of the homeownership

aspects of the project. These individuals had never considered homeownership. They were people that society had largely forgotten.

The steering committee began holding public meetings, conducting in home face-to-face discussions, and distributing flyers/other printed materials. Slowly a spirit of cooperation and trust began to develop. At a public hearing a Greenville County Staff member, Mr. Lin Pope, blurted out a sentence that became a slogan for the program: “A new house, for an old house price.” The slogan stuck and it changed people’s attitudes. At every turn, steering committee members were asked the same question, “Can I really own a new house for the same payment I’m currently paying in rent?” The answer was always, “Yes, yes you can.”

Once the residents bought into the housing activity the remaining pieces fell into place. It resulted in the following plan:

- The Board of Supervisors (BOS) would support and apply for Community Development Grants from DHCD to implement the improvements.
- The project would take a phased approach to renovation and no area in the neighborhood would be skipped.
- If the grant applications were funded, the BOS would appoint the SVDC to act as the Housing Rehabilitation Board.
- The County Building Department would strictly enforce the property maintenance code on the existing structures in the project area.
- The SVDC would try to purchase the existing rental properties in the project areas.
- The County Staff would supply the SVDC with administrative support for the large undertaking.
- Greenville County would supply the “bricks and mortar” for the Community Center; the local Boys and Girls Club would provide the programs.

- And, most importantly, the current rental population would commit to a homeownership program.

The County Staff worked closely with DHCD to produce and submit the grant applications. The Phase I grant application was submitted in 2003, the Phase II grant was submitted in 2006, and the Phase III grant was submitted in 2007. The total cost of the three projects was more than \$4 million. DHCD supplied almost \$2.6 million, the SVDC supplied approximately \$0.8 million, and the County supplied the remaining funds. Once the funding was in place the real work began. The time had come to put the game plan into action. .

The Results:

The Phase I grant was awarded in 2003 and the actual work began in 2004. The Phase II grant was awarded in 2006 and the work began in 2007. The Phase III grant was awarded in 2007 and the work began in 2008. All of the improvements were completed in calendar year 2012.

The rental property was purchased, 45 existing substandard houses were demolished, 34 new homes were built, 20 existing units were rehabilitated, 28 units were offered as homeownership opportunities, 4100 lf of new sidewalk/curb and gutter were constructed, 7900 lf of new storm drainage piping and ditches were installed, 1200 lf of new outfall ditches were installed, 530 lf of roadway was constructed (to connect two dead end streets), and 8 new streetlights were installed. The total cost of the improvements was over \$4.1 million.

The Homeownership Program is a huge success. The program requires households to participate in a one-year lease-purchase program. During that twelve month period, the households make monthly lease payments to the SVDC, attended household budgeting classes, first-time homebuyer classes, and home maintenance instruction. The classes are arranged by the County Staff in cooperation with the Cooperative Extension Service and private consultants. The classes are designed to provide the skills

necessary to become successful homeowners. The lease payments are a gauge of the household's ability to meet the financial requirements associated with homeownership.

During the lease-purchase phase, the County Staff carefully monitors the participant's progress in three areas: (1) Classroom participation, (2) quarterly home inspections, and (3) monthly reviews of each unit's payment history. Failures occur; however, they are not prevalent. They are most often caused by a failure to make timely and in-full monthly lease payments.

The lease-purchase payments are collected by the SVDC and placed into a down payment account for the homeownership candidate. Upon successful program completion, the down payment account is utilized to fund the closing costs associated with the real estate transaction. Any funds not used at closing are supplied as a down payment for the purchase. The only items deducted from an individual's down payment account are insurance costs, and repairs. These costs are typically less than \$500 over the one year period. Most households accumulate an escrow account value of approximately \$4,000. Having these monies available is a large part of the program's success.

Another activity that made the program successful was the customization of the homes. The SVDC allows program participants an array of options on the home's interior, exterior, HVAC systems, the addition of porches, and storage sheds. Each housing program participant is allowed input on colors, floor coverings, door locations, driveway placement, floor plan arrangement, etc. These inputs transform the residents into stakeholders; giving them ownership in the process.

Each household was counseled that the homeownership program is a hand-up, not a handout. Changing the attitudes of the disenfranchised has been a slow process, but, it has happened. This is most obviously demonstrated by the success rate, which is currently at approximately 85%.

Each household is also required to seek commercial financing for the purchase of their unit. If they are unable to obtain market financing, the SVDC will provide a mortgage for the purchase. In an

amazing display of interagency cooperation, the Greenville County Water and Sewer Authority (GCWSA) agreed to accept the monthly payments for the SVDC. All of the households in the project area are utility customers of the GCWSA; therefore, the residents are provided with a convenient payment location. Most importantly, the program fulfilled the promise of “a new house for an old house price.”

But, a new house in an infrastructure starved neighborhood will not flourish. That is why the infrastructure improvements and the new Community Center were so important to the project. The drainage improvements eliminated standing water, flooded crawl spaces, and street flooding. The sidewalks provide safe pedestrian access and a sense of community. The street connector improved vehicular access, especially for emergency service providers and first responders. Street lights assist the neighborhood leaders in identifying night-time problems, and add to the feeling of a neighborhood. Lastly, the 3500 square foot Community Center has become a focal point for the area.

The local Boys and Girls club has a contractual relationship with Greenville County to provide programs/activities at the Community Center. There are athletic activities, feeding programs, after-school instruction, summer enrichment opportunities, a state-of-the-art computer lab, and a library offered at the facility. The Center is conveniently located on a large parcel of land that is within easy walking distance of the entire Washington Park Community. Access is enhanced by a pedestrian walkway, that was specifically constructed as a part of the Community Center project. The programs are geared to elementary age children and have been well received by the local population.

The Washington Park Community Improvement Programs would not have been successful without the efforts of numerous Greenville County Staff members. The County Building Inspectors have acted as the Rehabilitation Specialists for the housing portions of the grant projects. The Building

Department also assisted by enforcing the property maintenance code and being proactive on the diverse issues that arose.

The County Planning Department oversaw the combination of property parcels and the subdivision of existing properties. This resulted in residential lots that adhere to modern zoning requirements and enhanced the positive impacts of the housing program.

The County Finance Department processes all of the financial items, including the drawdown requests for grant monies, and assisted in locating financing for the purchase of the properties by the SVDC.

The County Administrative personnel prepared reports/agendas for the SVDC meetings, maintains the grant files, and acts as the point of contact for the grant agency and the housing program participants. The GCWSA receives, tracks, and reports the monthly mortgage payments for the SVDC.

Lastly, but most importantly, the Greenville Board of Supervisors and the County Administrator endorsed and supported the staff's efforts. BOS Chairperson Peggy R. Wiley, BOS members – Michael W. Ferguson, Dr. Margaret T. Lee, James C. Vaughan and County Administrator, K. David Whittington are worthy of special recognition for their vision. Their display of confidence and leadership was directly responsible for the success of this project.

This housing program could be easily duplicated in other jurisdictions. Mortgage rates are at an all time low. Utilizing that financial incentive provides an opportunity to offer mortgage payments that are often less than standard rental rates. The difficult part is getting started. Once the ball is rolling, it picks up momentum. That is clearly evidenced in Greenville County. We are currently working on Phase IV of the Washington Park Community. Eventually, an entire neighborhood will transition from rental units to the fulfillment of the American Dream – homeownership in a vibrant, progressive community.

PHOTOS
AND
PROJECT LOCATION MAP

**New Washington Park Community Center – constructed as a part of the
Washington Park Community Improvement Program**

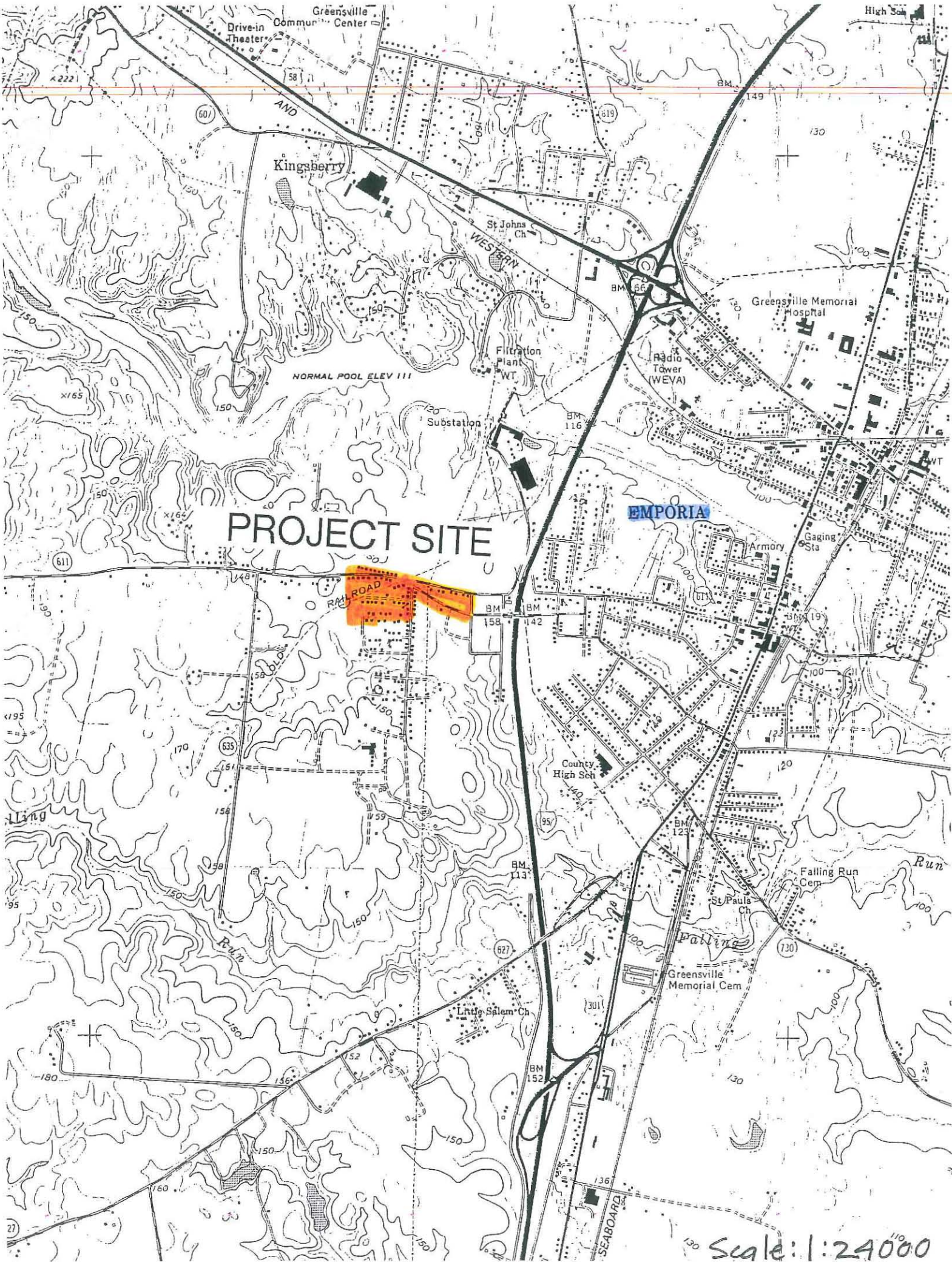


80 Easter Street – BEFORE – SUBSTANDARD RENTAL



80 Easter Street – AFTER – NEW HOMEOWNERSHIP





Scale: 1:24000

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



2013 Achievement Awards

ATTN: 2013 Achievement Awards Program
Virginia Association of Counties
1207 East Main Street, Suite 300
Richmond, Va. 23219-3627

Call for Entries



2013 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 1, 2013

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2013.**

Program Information

Locality Greensville County

Program Title Washington Park Community Improvement Program, Phase I,II,III

Program Category Community/Economic Development

Contact Information

Name Moses A. Clements

Title Assistant Authority Director

Department Greensville County Water & Sewer Authority

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Telephone # (434) 348-4259 Fax # (434) 348-4149

E-mail mclements@gcwsa.com

Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name K. David Whittington

Title County Administrator

Signature* _____

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.