



Virginia Association of Counties ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 3, 2019.** Please include this application form with electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

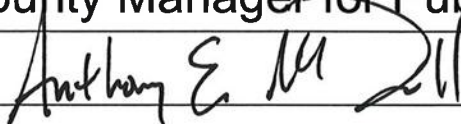
PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico
Program Title: Highland Springs Historic District Website
Program Category: Information Technology

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Anthony McDowell
Title: Deputy County Manager for Public Safety
Signature: 

Executive Summary

In May 2018, the Secretary of the Interior approved the inclusion of the Highland Springs community in Henrico County for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The establishment of the Highland Springs Historic District is intended to provide a tool to facilitate investment in both commercial and residential properties in a community that had been targeted for revitalization. Several other strategies have also been put in place for this purpose.

To help facilitate information sharing with residents, businesses, property owners, and the general public, a new interactive website (<http://historichighlandsprings.com/>) was created to provide easy access to information about the district and, more significantly, individual properties in the district. A key element of the website is a map identifying contributing and non-contributing historic resources in the Highland Springs district. The user can click on any of the 1,300 properties and access the architectural survey form for the property along with high resolution photographs.

All of this was done in order to make it easier for potential users of state and federal historic tax credits to access information and learn about the benefits of the designation and the process for accessing these benefits which should ultimately stimulate investment and revitalization in the community.

Problem/Challenge/Situation

In 2013, Henrico County began looking at strategies for revitalizing the commercial corridor and surrounding residential areas of Highland Springs in eastern Henrico County. The community is characterized by 1940s and 1950s era commercial buildings, many of which are underutilized or have had minimal, if any, improvements over the years. The commercial corridor is within the

County's Enterprise Zone and financial incentives were already in place to stimulate investment in commercial properties. The incentives were not being taken advantage of at a high rate so County staff was seeking additional tools to help facilitate private investment in the commercial corridor. This effort was quickly expanded to include the surrounding residential community that was characterized by a majority of residential structures over 50 years old, high vacancy rates, and a single-family owner occupancy rate close to 50%.

The process of creating the historic district resulted in photographs and survey forms for each of the 1,300 resources within the district. This information, particularly the architectural description from the survey forms, will be of use to any property owner or potential investor who may seek federal or state historic tax credits to offset rehabilitation costs on eligible properties. In addition to the federal tax credit of 20%, the Commonwealth of Virginia offers an additional 25% credit. A potential 45% tax credit has proven throughout the state to be an effective incentive to generate investment and spur the adaptive reuse of historic properties. Henrico saw a need to easily provide this information to interested investors and property owners as well as those with an interest in local history.

The primary objective for the website was to provide a user-friendly way for property owners and potential investors to understand the significance of the National Register designation, provide information about benefits available to property owners, and to determine if a property they were interested in would be eligible for the benefits provided by the designation. If not for the easy look-up feature of this website, users would have to navigate a convoluted series of state-run databases or state agency archives to determine the extent of the district, if their property was eligible, or to access architectural survey information about their property.

Secondary objectives were to help promote the district and Highland Springs community by providing some basic history of the area and to help generate pride in the community to ultimately inspire property owners to further invest and improve the buildings and community.

The website is also a means to provide information on other financial incentives for the area including the County's real estate tax abatement program and the state and local Enterprise Zone grants and incentives.

For both County staff and State Department of Historic Resources (DHR) staff, as well as researchers and consultants, information is consolidated in a very simple format that easily enables documents to be printed or exported. As far as County staff were able to determine, no other district in the state or likely the country has this extent of material this easily accessible.

This project involved coordination not only between multiple County agencies but also with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to provide easy access to information for residents, property owners, and potential developers. Providing information freely via the internet is part of the County's efforts to encourage community and economic development in a community that has seen disinvestment, underutilization of commercial properties, and low owner-occupancy rates over the last several decades. What began as a streetcar corridor with a "main street" type commercial area evolved over time to an area with a preponderance of buildings with uses unrelated to their original purpose. The designation as National and State historic districts, with the corresponding availability of investment tax credits, capitalizes upon the architectural and historic character of the community and enables investment in these buildings for more modern uses that would otherwise not have been financially feasible. The information provided at the <http://historichighlandsprings.com> website is intended to help facilitate this type of investment.

How the Program Was Carried Out

After approval of the district by the Virginia Historic Review Board in December 2017, County staff began conceptualizing a website that would be ready when the district was listed in the National Register, which occurred in May 2018. During that time, a domain name (<http://historichighlandsprings.com>) was purchased and standardization of data formats for linked documents was completed. The clean-up of the data was necessary as survey forms, photographs, and site plans were prepared by three different consultants and packaged differently as data were submitted to the State.

The Historic Highland Springs website was built on the WordPress platform. The site provides the platform for downloadable reports, historical content, and an interactive map that provides access to property specific information. Building the interactive map was the most time consuming and technically challenging portion of the website. The GIS Office in the County's Information Technology Department built a Web Mapping Application in ArcGIS Online. This application relies on a custom Web map which consumes hosted map services and is stored online in "the cloud". Numerous back end application configurations were performed to enhance the aesthetic and functionality of the application. The base data for the map includes the site plans and architectural surveys for approximately 1,300 parcels and over 3,500 high resolution color photographs which required a complex organizational structure to allow for varying number of attachments. Specialized Arcade scripts were written to parse out relevant property specific information when necessary. Several iterations were performed and reviewed to ensure the site is user friendly for non-technical users. Lastly, the branding of the application was matched to the project website. The website is viewable on mobile devices as well as all major operating systems and browsers.

Several County agencies were key partners in this effort: The Information Technology Department created the interactive map and acquired the domain name. The Planning Department coordinated the overall design and build of the website. The County's Department of Public Relations and Media Services provided additional video and photographs, and with the County's Division of Recreation and Parks, assisted with the development of a brochure for the website and district. The Virginia Department of Historic Resources provided a review of some of the website content and helped publicize it through their mailing.

While it is never precisely clear who accesses the website, the expectation is that anyone with an interest in Highland Springs, historic preservation, the history of Henrico County, and more importantly anyone in a position to invest and help improve Highland Springs and benefit from the National Register designation will find the website useful.

Financing and Staffing

This program was low cost. There were low direct costs for registering the domain name and for purchasing the website template. The website was built by Henrico staff through collaboration between the departments of Community Revitalization, Planning, and Information Technology. Henrico Public Relations and Media Services assisted with developing a logo for the district and provided images and other marketing materials.

The Department of Community Revitalization spent approximately \$500 to print brochures to promote the district and website. These brochures were mailed to property owners within the district by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources; that agency incurred the mailing costs for sending brochures to over 1,000 property owners.

The only ongoing costs will be for the continued registration of the domain name.

Program Results

Since September 2018 when the website went live, traffic to the site has been increasing. For this type of program it is difficult to track and measure specific outcomes, but we expect to start seeing an increase in the use of tax credits for revitalization of historic structures in this district over the next few years. The main objective of this program is to provide information to the public. Because it is providing specific information to a specific geographic area we know that the impact may be small, but anticipated usage of the site more than justifies our investment in the project. We do not anticipate any changes to the district in the foreseeable future and therefore any adjustments to the website would be very minor, will be undertaken in house, and have no direct costs.

We will monitor the use of tax credits in this district and whether this approach can be used in other areas of the County to stimulate investment in other older communities.

After the brochure about the district and website was mailed out, Henrico and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources received many phone calls from property owners with interest in the tax credit process, indicating that there is desire to undertake rehabilitation.

Brief Summary (3-4 paragraphs)

The Historic Highland Springs website is an innovative way to provide information to residents, property owners, and potential investors. Detailed survey information and photographs about properties within the historic district is available for free and at all hours to interested users, without the need to visit state archives. Providing the information in this easy to use manner will

help to facilitate the use of federal and state historic tax credits in making improvements to historic properties and bringing new life to the Highland Springs community.