



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the 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: Amherst County

Program Title: Route 29 Business Beautification Committee

Program Category: Community and Economic Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Jeremy Bryant

Title: County Administrator

Signature: 

2023



AMHERST

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Amherst County's
VACo Achievement
Award Submission

PROGRAM: ROUTE 29 BUSINESS BEAUTIFICATION
COMMITTEE

AMHERST COUNTY | 153 Washington St. Amherst, VA 24521

Brief Overview

Amherst County's Route 29 Business Beautification Committee was created in 2016 as an advisory committee to the Planning Commission. Prior to the creation of the committee, the business corridor was viewed as unattractive and unmaintained. Therefore, the purpose of the committee was to beautify the roadways of Amherst County to instill pride and appreciation of the citizenry and the attractiveness of their community.

Since the creation of the committee, partnerships between numerous organizations have been created to advocate for the revitalization and upkeep of the Route 29 Business corridor. These partnerships have led to supplementary landscaping, blight removal, coordination efforts between local, state, and private entities, and incentive programs for businesses. Through these initiatives, the committee continues to facilitate an attractive and highly functioning corridor.

Executive Summary

Amherst County's mission is to nurture a vibrant and healthy community with a vision that it will be known for its safety, neighborly atmosphere, and connectedness; its business education, recreational opportunities, and passion for natural beauty. In order to aspire to this vision, one of the County's goals is to promote growth and redevelopment along the Route 29 Business corridor. However, due to its antiquated and unappealing state, the County saw little to no development while neighboring localities began to flourish.

Through the creation of the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee, an advisory group to the Planning Commission, innovative solutions were created through the cooperation of intergovernmental departments, state and local agencies, and private enterprises arose. Agreements, programs, and incentives were born through the committee in which the County's goal of advocating for the revitalization and upkeep of the Route 29 Business corridor continues to cultivate.

Problem Overview

Route 29 Business in Amherst County developed and saw an increase in economic activity in the post-World War II era. Zoning requirements such as setbacks, landscaping, sign regulations, and ingress/egress requirements were not enforceable. The business corridor for lack of better terms was the Wild West and unplanned.

In addition, the community was bypassed with a new limited access highway, which was constructed in 2004 as an alternate route from Amherst County to the City of Lynchburg, which inherently reduced the amount of car traffic along the business corridor. Naturally, due to the lack of traffic, business growth and redevelopment were stalled along the corridor. Thus, keeping Route 29 in its archaic and unattractive state.

Then, shortly thereafter, Amherst County saw its neighboring localities flourishing with redevelopment. The City of Lynchburg began its gentrification of downtown and Forest, which is located in Bedford County, VA, became the new hotspot for business.

Amherst County staff and its citizen knew action was needed to attract development to the County. What could the County do? An ordinance to retrofit existing lots to conform to zoning requirements such as landscaping and sign regulations? That just is not

feasible in a small locality such as Amherst County. Instead, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee was formed as an advisory committee of the Planning Commission with the goal of beautifying the roadways and instilling pride and appreciation of the citizenry and the attractiveness of our community. In order to do so, the Committee works with government agencies, businesses, non-profits, and community groups to facilitate an attractive and highly functioning business corridor.

The Solution

The Committee, which was formed in 2016 as an advisory committee to the Planning Commission consists of nine (9) voting members to achieve representation from a wide variety of stakeholders. Five (5) at-large members are selected by the Planning Commission, of which three (3) members are business owners that own property, manage a business or regularly conduct business along the corridor. The other two (2) at-large members are citizens of the County. The remaining members are made of two (2) from County staff, one (1) member from the Planning Commission, and one (1) member from the Economic Development Authority. In addition to the nine (9) voting members, the Committee also supports one (1) youth participant to provide input on all matters before the Committee but does not cast a vote.

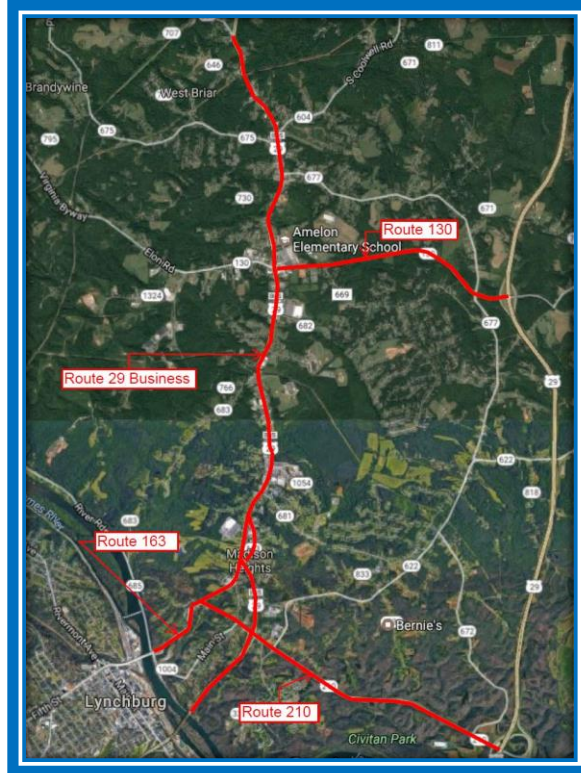
The Committee meets on a monthly basis to advocate for the revitalization and upkeep of the Route 29 Business corridor. The goals of the Committee include but are not limited to the following:

- Recruit active members who can communicate well and inspire their neighbors to participate.

- Organize into appropriate sub-committees or sub-units to affect the work of the committee.
- Understand and be connected to Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) personnel, process, and resources so as to be enabled to take advantage of VDOT's knowledge and resources.
- Develop a program to address landscaping, signage, parking, sidewalks, artwork, and lighting.
- Advocate for funding to apply to the needs of the program.
- Develop and maintain a positive image, communications, and media relations.
- Pursue grants.
- Work with County staff

Implementation

In July 2016, the Amherst County Planning Commission approved a charter for the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee, in which the below geographic boundary was set.



Geographic Area of the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee

Through this charter and a disbursement of funds of \$15,000 annually from the Board of Supervisors, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee has initiated the following projects:

- Tree Plantings within the Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) right-of-way
- County Banners
- Route 29 Business Mini-Grant Program
- Coordination efforts with VDOT
- Abandon Sign Removal
- Daffodil Plantings
- A+ Improvement Award
- Route 29 Business Corridor Liaison – Grounds Technician Position

Tree Plantings

In 2018, a joint effort with several months of planning between the Committee, Virginia Department of Transportation, Amherst County Public Safety, Public Works, Sheriff's Office, and



Assortment of pictures taken from the tree planting

Community Development came to fruition. Roughly, 120 trees were planted along the business corridor; the species included Sugar Maples, Red Maples, Yoshino Cherry, and Crape Myrtles. Then, in the spring of 2021, the Committee collaborated with Amherst County Public Works and Community Development for the replacement of 16 trees. In



Yoshino Cherry tree blooming on Route 29 Business

Virginia Department of Transportation.

addition to the tree replacements, county staff worked in partnership with VDOT to learn proper pruning techniques. Lowes, an adjoining business to the Route 29 business corridor donated pruners, loppers, and handsaws to help with the maintenance of the trees. The Route 29 Business Beautification continues to maintain the plantings through an agreement with the

County Banners

Alongside the same time as the tree plantings, the Committee proposed raising banners with the County logo along the corridor and Riveredge Park. Through a partnership with American Electric Power (AEP), 71 electric poles were identified to allow County banners



County Banners on AEP poles

placed on them. Of those 71 poles, the Committee has been able to place banners on 59 of the poles. McBride Signs sponsored three banners and the County's Board of Supervisors was able to fund the remaining. At the time of writing this submission, the Committee, County staff, and McBride Signs are currently replacing 22 of the 60 signs.

Route 29 Business Mini-Grant Program

In an effort to encourage community pride and enhance property fronting along the defined geographic area, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee launched a mini-grant program for local businesses. The mini-grant program, which launched in 2019 began with a budget of roughly \$7,000 and could allocate up to \$1,000 for approved projects. Qualifying improvements include sign replacement and restoration, landscaping, removal of blight, façade improvements, tree planting, and fresh paint on buildings.

The Committee realized that the match of \$1,000 was not enough for business owners to make substantial improvements to their lots. Therefore, in 2022, the Committee partnered with the Economic Development Authority to increase the match amount from \$1,000 to \$5,000. The partnership between the Committee and Authority has a 50/50 match with each contributing up to \$2,500 for each approved grant. In total, 11 grant submissions have been approved with over \$74,000 of renovations completed; with a total of \$11,000 of disbursements given out to local businesses.



Before and after picture of an approved mini-grant submission

VDOT Coordination Efforts

A major obstacle the Committee identified in trying to beautify the corridor was the grass-cutting and street sweeping maintained by VDOT. Prior to the Committee identifying these areas of concern, VDOT was cutting grass areas along Route 29 Business four times a year and street sweeping happened maybe once a year if funding allowed. The Committee



VDOT Street Sweeping 12 miles of Route 29 Business

and VDOT were able to come to an agreement to have the grass areas cut at a minimum of ten times per year and street sweep at least twice a year. The extra work performed by VDOT has not only helped beautify the community but has also been beneficial to the 120 trees planted along the corridor.

Abandon Sign Removal

The Committee was able to have two abandoned signs removed along the business corridor through a collaboration with the Community Development Office, Commercial Steel Erection (CSE), and property owners. The first sign removed was an old blockbuster sign that was taken down through enforcement by the County's zoning ordinance. The removal of the sign helped the property owner fill the vacant storefront with a new business a few years later. The second sign removed was an old Exxon sign located along the corridor. The property owner agreed that the sign should be removed and CSE, without charge removed the sign pro-bono.



Before and after photo of the Blockbuster sign being removed

Daffodil Plantings

In November of 2022, Amherst County volunteers and staff planted 2,000 bulbs inside the grass medians along Route 210 and 130 connector roads. The Route 29 Business Beautification Committee, a subcommittee of the Planning Commission, funded the

project. The project was a group effort among Community Development, Public Works, the Economic Development Authority, the Amherst County Sheriff's Department, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee, volunteers, and the Virginia Department of Transportation.



Blooming Daffodils along Route 130

A+ Improvement Award



Cascio & Sons Receiving the A+ Improvement Award

The A+ Improvement Award, founded in 2023 by the Committee, recognizes businesses along the corridor that have made improvements and investments in the aesthetics of their property. This award provides the Committee an opportunity to positively acknowledge the

efforts of businesses that show, through action, that they

share the vision of the committee to create a welcoming and attractive corridor for our citizens, guests, and potential new businesses. The Committee selects a new business to recognize each quarter of the calendar year, in which their acknowledgment is recognized by a certificate and write-up in the local newspaper.



Motor World Receiving the A+ Improvement Award

Route 29 Business Corridor Liaison – Grounds Technician Position

Despite all of the efforts, the Committee has taken to help beautify the corridor they recognized that having someone in the field to monitor the geographic area identified in the charter would only enhance their mission of advocating for the revitalization and upkeep of the Route 29 Business Corridor.

THE POSITION: *This position works with County staff, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee, VDOT and other stakeholders to coordinate and conduct grounds-related maintenance and clean-up efforts along the Route 29 Business corridor and ensure VDOT and other safety-related rules and regulations are followed. Attendance at required meetings and regular communication with stakeholders is essential. This position is a hands-on position requiring skilled and semi-skilled work physically maintaining the Route 29 Business corridor, primarily the geographic area that the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee oversees, and assisting with the maintenance of other County grounds, outdoor signage, facilities, athletic fields and parks as needed. Work is performed under the direct supervision of the Facilities and Grounds Division Manager.*

This position has been successfully filled as of July 1, 2023, and is currently going through VDOT's training to ensure all proper safety measures are taken while performing work along the Route 29 Business corridor.

Conclusion

Route 29 Business after its post-World War II development remained in its archaic and unattractive state for nearly six decades. Furthermore, the County and its citizens saw their neighboring localities flourish with developments and gentrification and knew something had to be done in order to attract these developments and businesses to their community. Through an innovative approach, the Route 29 Business Beautification Committee promoted cooperation between intergovernmental agencies,

state and local entities, and private enterprises to address the problem of an unattractive and distasteful business corridor. This committee has been able to not only talk about change but also show action and provide a model that other local governments may learn from or implement. Amherst County does not stand alone in wanting to beautify their community.