



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Tuesday, April 7, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Albemarle County

Program Title: AC44

Program Category: Community Development, Economic Development, & Land Use

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VACo Awards Submission – AC44

Executive Summary

Albemarle County expects to welcome 31,000 new residents over the next 20 years, growth that demands clear, current, and community-grounded direction. Adopted in October 2025, AC44 is a complete, community-driven update to the Comprehensive Plan built through one of the most extensive public engagement efforts in the County's history. The result is a more concise and navigable document organized around a clear Growth Management Policy, topic-based implementation chapters, and "Big Moves" that translate a 20-year vision into priorities aligned with the County's Strategic Plan.

What distinguishes AC44 is how it was built. Over four project phases, more than 2,700 residents shaped the plan through 87 public meetings, 39 questionnaires, and a wide range of engagement formats, including chat kits that empowered community members to lead their own conversations and bring input back to the planning team. Community feedback was consequential at every phase, from the Guiding Principles established in Phase 1 to the draft chapters reviewed in Phase 4. The final plan reflects a documented public record in which residents can trace a direct line from what they said to what the document says.

AC44 offers a transferable model for Virginia localities navigating growth pressure, demonstrating that fiscally responsible, environmentally sound, and genuinely community-centered planning is achievable.

Project Narrative

Innovative Solutions for Albemarle County's Future

Over the next 20 years, Albemarle County expects to welcome 31,000 new residents. That scale of growth demands clear, current, and community-driven direction. Albemarle County 2044, known locally as AC44, is the County's community-driven update to the Comprehensive Plan, built from the ground up through one of the most extensive public engagement efforts the County's history, and adopted in October 2025.

A usable plan: AC44 replaces the County's 2015 Comprehensive Plan with a document that is more concise and easier to understand and navigate. It has four parts: a policy overview, a Growth Management Policy, nine topic-based implementation chapters, and a supporting appendix. Each topic chapter concludes with a detailed matrix of objectives and actions to provide clear, actionable direction for achieving plan goals.

Navigating growth: At the core of the AC44 mission is a strategy to welcome the 31,000 new residents expected over the next 20 years. The County's Growth Management Policy directs how and where future growth will occur. The policy directs new growth to the County's designated Development Area (representing 5% of County land area) while preserving the County's Rural Area (95% of County land) for agriculture, forestry, and conservation.

The Development Area supports compact and dense urban development with a mix of uses, accommodating population growth through a variety of housing types and employment uses. Additionally, the Development Area makes use of existing infrastructure,

promotes efficient service delivery, and facilitates well-connected transportation networks through a variety of modes, including walking, biking, and transit.

With a focus on conservation, the County's Rural Area limits growth and development sprawl, protecting valued resources, including farmland, forest, scenic views, natural habitat, clean water, and historic sites – all elements that give Albemarle County its renowned character. By addressing the distinct characteristics and needs of the County's Development and Rural Areas, AC44's Growth Management Policy offers a model for fiscally and environmentally responsible growth.

Implementation priorities: AC44's Implementation section establishes seven "Big Moves."

These strategic groupings of key initiatives are organized around common themes that span multiple topics and policy areas. The Big Moves provide prioritized guidance for policy decisions and resource allocation and align with the County's Strategic Plan and five major work programs in the years after adoption. This structure gives County leaders a practical framework for translating long-range vision into near-term action.

A Foundation of Collaboration

A plan of this scope required the community, and not just their presence at a public hearing. Growth decisions with real consequences for residents could not be made without the perspectives, priorities, and local knowledge of the people they would affect. AC44 was developed through a multi-year process that relied on extensive collaboration and input across all phases of the project to create a plan that addresses the needs and priorities of the community's diverse constituencies.

A community-centered plan: AC44's outcomes reflect a planning process that invested heavily in public participation. More than 2,700 people participated through online survey responses, chat kit conversations, emailed comments, and in-person and virtual event attendance across 87 public meetings and events and 39 questionnaires. The process generated more than 44,000 visits to the AC44 website and 85,000 opens of 46 e-newsletters, supported by 39 local media stories, 59 social media posts, four podcasts, and 11 videos. This depth of engagement produced a plan with strong community backing and a documented public record that supports defensible, community-grounded decision-making going forward.

Among the most distinctive engagement tools was the chat kit: a structured conversation guide that empowered residents to lead their own discussions within their existing networks, whether that be neighborhood groups, faith communities, civic organizations, or even their own families. Rather than requiring everyone to come to County-led events, chat kits pushed the engagement process outward, letting community members serve as facilitators and bringing aggregated input back to the planning team. Alongside chat kits, the AC44 team deployed a wide mix of formats including Lunch and Learn events, Community Check-Ins (in-person and virtual), Zoom webinars, podcasts, social media, and monthly newsletters, ensuring participation was accessible to people with different schedules, comfort levels, and prior experience with local government.

Input that shaped the plan: AC44's engagement was iterative through all four project phases. Early engagement in Phase 1 surfaced the community priorities that became AC44's four Guiding Principles. In Phase 2, input from residents, the Planning Commission,

and the Board of Supervisors shaped draft goals and objectives for each plan topic. As draft chapters were published incrementally in Phase 3, residents could respond to proposed actions online, and staff incorporated that feedback into successive drafts. In Phase 4, the full draft plan was published for community review before final adoption. The result is a plan where residents can trace a line from what they said to what the document says.

A transparent roadmap to adoption: Throughout the process, the AC44 team was deliberate about closing the feedback loop by not just gathering input but reporting back on what was heard. Monthly newsletters tracked progress, summarized community feedback, and outlined upcoming engagement opportunities. Phase-specific webpages gave the community a clear view of where the project stood, what decisions were ahead, and how residents could still participate.

Stakeholder collaboration: In addition to public engagement, AC44's development relied on sustained collaboration with County staff across multiple departments, partner agencies including VDOT, the Virginia Department of Health, utilities, and regional commissions, and the County's Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. This approach produced a plan with broad institutional ownership and a stronger foundation for implementation. It also allowed AC44 to address regional priorities addressing transportation needs and climate action. The collaborative process included 39 work sessions with the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors, culminating with two public hearings to adopt the final plan in fall 2025, ensuring that elected and appointed officials had a deep understanding of AC44's content, rationale, and implementation framework.

A Model for Planning and Local Government

Directing growth: AC44's Growth Management Policy offers a clear, defensible, transferable model for localities facing development pressure. By concentrating growth in Development Area and protecting 689 square miles of Rural Area for agriculture, forestry, and conservation, the policy demonstrates how to accommodate significant population growth without sacrificing fiscal responsibility, environmental stewardship, or rural character.

Activity and Employment Centers: AC44 emphasizes the use of these centers to identify locations in the Development Area that are best suited for higher densities, a mix of uses, and employment-generating uses. AC44's introduction of these centers provides other jurisdictions with a practical, place-based alternative to uniform density targets. By tailoring intensity, design expectations, and multimodal transportation investments to specific walkable nodes, the centers framework offers a model for localities seeking to modernize land use categories, encourage mixed-use development, and expand affordable housing opportunities in a community-responsive way.

Evidence-based growth management: AC44's appendix includes the County's two most recent Buildout Analyses, conducted to gauge remaining development capacity in the County's Development Area. By embedding this analytical foundation in the plan, AC44 ensures that future land use decisions and growth management policies are grounded in current local data, a model for evidence-based planning practice. Regular follow ups every two to three years will provide updated Buildout Analysis data to monitor Development

Area utilization, informing needs regarding growth, density, and potential changes to Development Areas boundaries.

Implementation framework: AC44's seven Big Moves provide a prioritization framework that bridges comprehensive planning and near-term resource allocation and can be aligned with a locality's strategic plan and annual work plans. This structure is adaptable for localities seeking to strengthen the connection between vision and implementation in their comprehensive plans.

Public inclusion: AC44's four-phase engagement process brought community members into planning's core work. Early engagement identified community priorities used to establish AC44's Guiding Principles, articulating the community's aspiration to be Green and Resilient, Welcoming and Equitable, Thriving and Prosperous, and Connected and Accessible. By showing people how their input shaped the plan's foundational values, AC44 demonstrated that effective, sustainable planning is a transparent, responsive, community-focused discipline.

See AC44 For Yourself:

[AC44 Engagement Hub Archives](#)

[Comprehensive Plan \(AC44\) | Albemarle County, VA](#)