



Virginia Association of Counties

ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

VACo

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: Hanover County

Program Title: Heart of Hanover

Program Category: Community & Economic Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: John A. Dooe SK

Title: Hanover County Administrator

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Program Category: Community and Economic Development & Land Use

Program: HEART OF HANOVER AWARDS

Hanover County, Virginia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Heart of Hanover Awards is an innovative economic development initiative created by Hanover County Economic Development to recognize, celebrate, promote, and strengthen its local business community. Developed in 2025 as the County's inaugural business awards program, the initiative addresses a common local government challenge: how to effectively engage and support small businesses while fostering community pride and economic growth.

The program combines public participation, strategic partnerships, and targeted marketing to elevate local businesses. It features seven publicly voted award categories and additional committee-selected recognitions, ensuring both community engagement and merit-based evaluation. Residents are invited to nominate and vote for their favorite businesses, creating a dynamic and inclusive process that strengthens connections between businesses and the community.

A hallmark of the program is its collaborative structure. The initiative is a joint effort among Hanover County Economic Development, the Hanover County Economic Development Authority, the Hanover Chamber of Commerce, the Hanover Education Foundation, and the Richmond Times Dispatch as a media partner, along with private sponsors. This cross-sector collaboration expands reach, enhances credibility, and ensures long-term sustainability.

The program is designed as both a recognition platform and an economic development tool. Participating businesses are equipped with promotional resources, including social media templates and marketing strategies, enabling them to increase visibility, engage customers, and drive local commerce. Many of the businesses crossed promoted each other for broader visibility.

Implementation was achieved through existing staff resources within the Economic Development Department, supplemented by partner contributions and sponsorship funding from the business community. This cost-effective approach demonstrates how impactful programming can be delivered without significant new public expenditure.

Results from the inaugural program include strong public engagement with over 600 businesses nominated and 32,000 votes! The increased visibility of the local businesses and the cross promotion among the businesses strengthened partnerships and community pride. The program also reinforces Hanover County's identity as a supportive and business-friendly locality.

The Heart of Hanover Awards provides a scalable and replicable model for other jurisdictions. Its structured timeline, adaptable categories, collaborative framework, and turnkey marketing resources allow other local governments to implement similar initiatives tailored to their own communities.

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM / CHALLENGE

Local governments face an ongoing challenge in supporting and promoting their business communities—particularly small and locally owned businesses—while also fostering community

engagement and economic vitality. In Hanover County, this challenge was amplified by the need to:

- Increase visibility and recognition for local businesses
- Encourage residents to support and engage with the local economy
- Strengthen relationships between the County, businesses, and community partners
- Provide a unifying initiative that celebrates economic contributions across diverse industries

Prior to the Heart of Hanover Awards, Hanover County lacked a centralized, community-driven program that recognized business excellence while simultaneously serving as a strategic economic development tool.

II. PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Heart of Hanover Awards was developed as a comprehensive solution to these challenges.

Launched in 2025, the program is structured around three phases:

1. Nomination Phase

Residents and businesses submit nominations over a three-week period. Nominations can be made daily, encouraging ongoing engagement and maximizing participation. As an incentive to vote daily for all seven categories, those who do are entered into a drawing to receive a “swag bag” of County and local business items.

2. Public Voting Phase

The top 10 businesses in each of the seven categories advance to a public voting round.

Community members vote to determine winners, reinforcing transparency and local involvement.

3. Awards Recognition Event

Winners are announced at a formal Business Awards Luncheon, bringing together business leaders, elected officials, and community stakeholders to celebrate achievements.

The program includes seven public-voted categories (such as Retail, Restaurant, and Nonprofit of the Year) along with committee-selected awards recognizing legacy businesses (those continuous in the County for 50+ years), the design and building improvement award and the Marc S. Weiss Small Business of the Year Award.

III. INNOVATION

The Heart of Hanover Awards represents an innovative approach to economic development in several key ways:

- **Community-Driven Engagement:** The public nomination and voting process transforms residents into active participants rather than passive observers.
- **Integration of Marketing and Recognition:** Businesses are provided with tools and templates to promote their nominations, enhancing their digital presence and customer engagement.

- **Dual Evaluation Model:** Combining public voting with committee-selected awards ensures both popularity and merit are recognized.
- **Economic Development Alignment:** The program goes beyond recognition to actively support local commerce and business growth.

This approach redefines a traditional awards program into a dynamic, interactive economic development initiative.

IV. COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

A central strength of the program is its collaborative design. The initiative brings together:

- Hanover County Economic Development (program leadership)
- Hanover County Economic Development Authority
- Hanover Chamber of Commerce
- Hanover Education Foundation
- Richmond Times Dispatch (media partner)
- Private sector sponsors

These partnerships provide:

- Expanded outreach and marketing capabilities
- Shared resources and expertise
- Increased program credibility
- Financial support through sponsorships

The program also engages elected officials, local leaders, and community organizations, reinforcing a unified approach to economic development.

V. FINANCING AND STAFFING

The Heart of Hanover Awards was designed to be cost-effective and sustainable.

Staffing

- Led by Hanover County Economic Development staff
- Supported by partner organizations and a planning committee
- Contributions from communications, marketing, and administrative personnel

Financing

- Sponsorship funding from private sector partners
- In-kind contributions from media and community partners
- Utilization of existing Hanover County Economic Development resources

This model minimizes public cost while maximizing impact through shared investment and collaboration.

VI. RESULTS AND IMPACT

The inaugural Heart of Hanover Awards program produced measurable and meaningful outcomes:

- **Increased Community Engagement:** Participation was much higher than anticipated in the nominations and voting phases
- **Enhanced Business Visibility:** Businesses gained exposure through coordinated marketing efforts
- **Strengthened Partnerships:** Collaboration among public, private, and nonprofit sectors was significantly expanded
- **Economic Impact:** Increased awareness and support for local businesses
- **Community Pride:** The program fostered a sense of shared identity and appreciation for Hanover's business community

The program also established a strong foundation for future years, with opportunities for growth and expanded participation, including thorough follow up meetings with the public and private partners to improve the program in the future.

VII. MODEL FOR OTHER LOCALITIES

The Heart of Hanover Awards offers a replicable model for other local governments due to its:

- Clear structure and timeline
- Scalable design adaptable to communities of different sizes
- Strong partnership framework
- Low-cost, high-impact implementation
- Built-in marketing and engagement tools

Other localities can adopt this model by leveraging their own chambers of commerce, media outlets, and community organizations, customizing categories to reflect local industries and priorities.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Heart of Hanover Awards demonstrates how local governments can creatively address economic development challenges through innovation, collaboration, and community engagement. By transforming a traditional recognition program into a strategic initiative, Hanover County has created a sustainable model that supports businesses, strengthens partnerships, and enhances community pride.