



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of York

Program Title: Keep It In York County

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

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Title: Director of Economic & Tourism Development

Department: Economic & Tourism Development

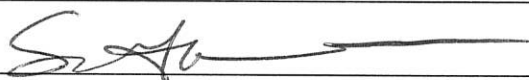
Telephone: 757-890-3525 Website: www.yorkcounty.gov

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Susan Goodwin

Title: Deputy County Administrator

Signature: 

Keep It In York County

A Community-Driven Buy Local Initiative Strengthening York County's Economy

Category: Community Development, Economic Development, & Land Use

Executive Summary

York County's *Keep It In York County* Buy Local initiative is a long-standing community economic development program designed to strengthen the local economy by encouraging residents to support locally owned businesses. Originally launched in the late 1990s in partnership with the York County Chamber of Commerce, the program began with simple grassroots efforts, including Buy Local window decals, an online business directory and events calendar, and a memorable bumper sticker campaign that rewarded residents spotted around town with local business gift cards. Over time, these efforts helped establish a strong Buy Local culture that continues to shape consumer behavior and community identity throughout the County. The County's Board of Supervisors further reinforced this commitment by adopting a "Look Local First" purchasing directive for County departments.

In recent years, York County has modernized the program to reflect evolving consumer habits and new communication channels. The initiative now operates as a comprehensive, multi-platform program led by the County's Economic & Tourism Development Department and supported by partnerships with regional organizations, chambers of commerce, and the local business community.

Key program components include the quarterly **Buy Local Buzz** consumer e-newsletter reaching more than 3,000 subscribers, a professionally produced video storytelling series highlighting York County entrepreneurs, and more than **59 featured business and milestone articles** that provide in-depth promotional exposure for local companies. The County also launched its first **York County Restaurant Week** in 2024, an annual event designed to increase foot traffic to local restaurants and encourage residents to discover new dining options.

In addition to consumer engagement, the initiative provides direct marketing assistance to businesses through programs such as the **Small Business Marketing Grant**, cooperative advertising opportunities, professional photography services, and Google Virtual Tour grants to enhance businesses' online presence.

Together, these initiatives create a coordinated ecosystem that promotes local spending, strengthens small businesses, and reinforces economic resilience. By combining storytelling, community engagement, and direct business support, York County's Buy Local initiative provides a scalable model for local governments seeking to strengthen their local economies while fostering community pride and collaboration.

Problem / Challenge

Like many communities across the country, York County's locally owned businesses face increasing competition from national retail chains, regional shopping centers, and online marketplaces. Small businesses

often operate with limited marketing resources, making it difficult to maintain visibility and attract customers in a highly competitive marketplace.

York County also recognized that many residents were unaware of the full range of businesses operating within their own community. Even long-time residents may not realize the diversity of restaurants, retailers, and service providers available locally. This lack of awareness can limit opportunities for local businesses and reduce the economic benefits that occur when residents choose to shop locally.

These challenges became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many businesses faced declining traffic and uncertainty about how to reach customers. At the same time, residents increasingly expressed interest in supporting local businesses and strengthening their community's economic recovery.

York County recognized an opportunity to address these challenges through a coordinated Buy Local initiative designed to increase awareness of local businesses, encourage residents to support them, and provide businesses with additional tools to promote themselves effectively. The *Keep It In York County* initiative was developed to meet this need by combining community engagement, storytelling, and targeted marketing support to strengthen the County's local business ecosystem.

Program Description

The *Keep It In York County* initiative is administered by York County's Economic & Tourism Development Department and operates as a comprehensive Buy Local program designed to increase visibility for local businesses, encourage residents to shop locally, and provide direct marketing support to small businesses.

A cornerstone of the initiative is the **Buy Local Buzz** consumer e-newsletter, distributed quarterly to more than 3,000 subscribers. Designed specifically for residents, the publication highlights local businesses, promotions, events, and community stories while featuring engaging segments such as *Foodie Finds*, *Meet the Maker*, *Hometown Tourist*, and *Hidden Gems*. With open rates consistently between **35 and 40 percent**, the newsletter serves as a primary platform for connecting residents with local businesses and encouraging them to shop, dine, and explore locally.

Another major component of the program is York County's emphasis on **story-driven promotion**. The County produces professionally written featured business and anniversary milestone articles that highlight the stories, achievements, and history of local companies. More than **59 businesses** have been featured to date. These stories are shared across County websites, newsletters, and social media platforms and are also repurposed in the County's printed *It's Your Business* magazine mailed to local businesses.

York County also produces **video storytelling initiatives** that highlight the people behind local businesses. Several professionally produced video series feature authentic first-person accounts from York County

business owners describing their experiences and connections to the community. The County also elevates traditional ribbon cutting services not just by coordinating logistics, promoting attendance, and providing props and speakers, but also by using in-house staff to capture high quality photo and video content. Staff then produce quarterly *New In Town* TV and YouTube spots showcasing recent openings. The comprehensive grand opening program ensures strong leadership presence while providing new businesses with immediate visibility and residents with awareness of new places to shop, dine, and engage.

The initiative also includes targeted consumer engagement campaigns designed to drive local spending. York County launched its first **Restaurant Week** in 2024 to encourage residents to discover locally owned restaurants through coordinated promotions, special menu offerings, and original content. The initiative has grown to include 22 participating restaurants and, in 2026, included a TV campaign that resulted in 10,000+ website visits. Educational initiatives such as the *12 Reasons to Buy Local* campaign further reinforce the economic benefits of supporting local businesses.

In addition to promotional initiatives, York County provides **direct marketing assistance to businesses** through programs such as the Small Business Marketing Grant, which offers **50 percent matching grants up to \$2,500** for marketing and advertising initiatives. Additional support includes professional photography services, Google Virtual Tour grants that enhance businesses' online visibility, and cooperative advertising opportunities that allow small businesses to participate in regional campaigns at a reduced cost.

Community partnerships also play an important role in the program. York County collaborates with organizations such as the Greater Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce on initiatives like the **BOOST discounted gift card program**, and coordinates promotions through the long-standing **Rewards Card** discount program which encourages residents and visitors to shop locally.

Innovation, Collaboration & County Leadership

York County's Buy Local initiative demonstrates innovation through its creative use of storytelling, modern communication platforms, and collaborative partnerships. Rather than relying solely on traditional advertising, the County has developed a content-driven strategy that highlights the people and stories behind York County businesses. This approach creates stronger emotional connections between residents and local entrepreneurs while building long-term community pride.

The program's storytelling initiatives illustrate this innovative approach. The County partnered with an experienced Hampton Roads filmmaker to produce a professionally developed video storytelling series featuring York County business owners. These videos are distributed across economic development, tourism, and Buy Local platforms, expanding the reach of Buy Local messaging and providing lasting promotional assets for the featured businesses.

York County also demonstrates innovation through its ability to combine high-quality production with low-cost engagement strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the County launched the **Love Local Biz** social media contest, encouraging residents to submit short videos celebrating their favorite York County businesses. The contest generated strong community participation and provided businesses with additional exposure using simple tools and modest incentives.

Collaboration is another defining feature of the initiative. York County works closely with chambers of commerce, regional organizations, and local partners to expand the reach of Buy Local messaging. Partnerships with organizations such as the York County and Greater Williamsburg Chambers of Commerce and Retail Alliance have helped extend promotional opportunities and strengthen the overall Buy Local ecosystem.

The program also benefits from strong **internal collaboration within County government**. Following the merger of York County's Economic Development and Tourism departments in 2022–2023, Buy Local initiatives have been integrated across multiple communication platforms, including newsletters, blogs, advertising campaigns, and social media channels. This alignment allows the County to maximize staff expertise, share marketing resources, and ensure consistent promotion of local businesses.

Financing and Staffing

The *Keep It In York County* initiative has evolved through a combination of County investment, strategic partnerships, and efficient use of staff resources. In the beginning, the program operated as a highly cost-effective grassroots effort. Early initiatives such as the bumper sticker campaign relied on community participation and modest incentives while generating significant awareness throughout the County.

As the program expanded, York County's Economic Development Authority began dedicating additional resources to support its growth. The County now administers the program through its Economic & Tourism Development Department, where staff coordinate program initiatives, partnerships, and communications.

To enhance program quality, the County engages local professionals for certain initiatives. For example, an award-winning Hampton Roads filmmaker was contracted to produce the Buy Local video storytelling series, and a professional writer assists with featured business articles and the Buy Local Buzz e-newsletter.

This combination of staff leadership, targeted contracting, and strategic partnerships allows the County to maximize the program's impact while maintaining cost efficiency.

Results and Community Impact

The *Keep It In York County* initiative has generated measurable results by increasing visibility for local businesses, strengthening community engagement, and reinforcing a culture of local support.

The **Buy Local Buzz** newsletter reaches more than **3,000 subscribers** and consistently achieves open rates between **35 and 40 percent**, significantly exceeding industry benchmarks. The publication is a key platform for promoting local businesses, events, and promotions while encouraging residents to shop locally.

York County's storytelling initiatives have also produced substantial visibility for local businesses. More than **59 businesses** have been featured through the County's Featured Business and anniversary story series, providing in-depth promotional coverage that many small businesses would not otherwise receive.

Targeted engagement campaigns such as **Restaurant Week**, social media promotions, and community contests have generated strong participation while encouraging residents to discover new local businesses. These initiatives help reinforce the economic benefits of supporting locally owned establishments.

In addition to exposure, the *Keep It In York County* Buy Local program provides direct marketing support through grants, professional photography, cooperative advertising opportunities, and digital marketing tools such as Google Virtual Tours. These initiatives help businesses strengthen their marketing capabilities and attract new customers.

The initiative has also helped reinforce a strong Buy Local culture throughout the County. Businesses proudly display Buy Local window decals, residents actively participate in community promotions and events, and local spending continues to support the small businesses that contribute to employment, tax revenue, and community vitality.

Most importantly, the program shows how County government can play a leadership role in strengthening the local economy while fostering community pride, collaboration, and long-term economic resilience.

Model for Other Localities

York County's Buy Local initiative provides a practical model that other localities can replicate regardless of size or available resources. Many of the program's most successful components, such as business storytelling, newsletters, social media engagement, and community promotions, require modest financial investment but deliver meaningful visibility for local businesses.

Communities can implement similar programs using existing communications staff, partnerships with media and local chambers, and collaborations with colleges or freelance professionals. The program's structure also allows localities to begin with simple initiatives and expand over time as resources allow.

By combining scalable communication strategies, community partnerships, and targeted marketing support, the *Keep It In York County* initiative demonstrates how local governments can build a sustainable Buy Local culture that strengthens small businesses and supports long-term economic vitality.

**Get ready for a
second helping of Shorty's
DINER TO EXPAND WITH ADDITIONAL LOCATION**

There's just something universally appealing about a 50s diner. The only thing better? Two of them.

Shorty's Diner has been a staple of The Edge District since opening its doors inside the James-York Plaza in upper York County. Known for its comfort food and nostalgic vibe, the popular eatery pays homage to classic 1950s diners.

Tony Short grew up in the restaurant industry—helping his father, Gil, launch Shorty's in October 2011.

"My dad said, 'Let's open a restaurant and see what happens.' It was so successful that now we're all a part of the business," Short said.



With the recent retirement of his father, Short is poised to leave his mark on the family business with the opening of a second County location in Grafton. Diners in the lower County are eagerly awaiting the new addition, which will be more convenient. It will be located in the former Bay Haven Grille on Route 17 and is anticipated to open in late February. Short has long been instrumental in the expansion and on more slated

of the business to open by Shorty's owners like Mom and Dad, dedicated

- ✓ 60 local businesses featured
- ✓ Distributed via web, social media, e-news and print
- ✓ Evergreen content with lasting marketing value

**Buy Local Video
Storytelling Series**

This professionally produced video series features the authentic voices of York County business owners. The series elevates Buy Local messaging through original storytelling and high-quality production, creating deeper community connection and business visibility. The spots are featured across County, economic development, tourism and Buy Local platforms (online, print and social media).



- ✓ 3-part original video series
- ✓ Locally produced by an award-winning Hampton Roads filmmaker

Featured-Business and Milestone Stories

York County has published dozens of in-depth articles spotlighting business anniversaries, accolades and achievements. These locally produced pieces feature professional, long-form storytelling and multi-platform exposure *at no cost* to the participating businesses.

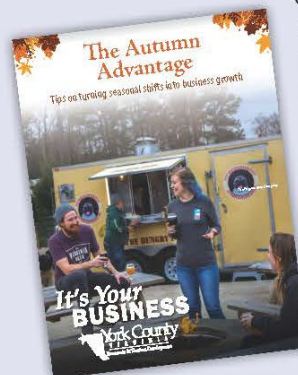
**Innovation During COVID
Video Series**

These six videos tell the story of how York County businesses adapted and persevered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distributed digitally in the early months of the pandemic, the professionally produced series reinforced the power of timely, authentic storytelling as an economic development tool, showing that impactful Buy Local content can be created at varying production levels to meet community needs.



It's Your Business Magazine

This attractive print magazine encourages peer-to-peer Buy Local support by sharing opportunities, updates and successes among fellow County businesses. It makes use of direct mail to businesses to maximize readership in a user-friendly format that even makes its way into public/customer audiences.



Keep It In York County

keepitinyorkcounty.com

Consumer Engagement & Buy Local Activation

York County Restaurant Week



- ✓ First-ever restaurant week for York County
- ✓ Annual, repeatable activation
- ✓ Sector-specific Buy Local engagement

Launched in 2024, Restaurant Week celebrates local dining while driving foot traffic to independently owned restaurants through coordinated promotion and original content. From special temporary menu items to discounts and deals, this effort introduces residents to new-to-them dining spots.

Bumper Sticker Campaign – Program Origins

One of the original Buy Local initiatives, this grassroots campaign encouraged residents to display Buy Local bumper stickers on their vehicles. Community members spotted with the sticker could receive local business gift cards—creating a fun, highly visible and low-cost way to promote Buy Local participation. These stickers can still be seen around the County 20 years later.



Buy Local Buzz eNewsletter

- ✓ 3,000+ subscribers
- ✓ 35–40% open rate
- ✓ Popular segments: Foodie Finds, Hometown Tourist, Behind the Scenes, Hidden Gems

This quarterly consumer e-newsletter is designed to inspire residents to shop, dine and explore locally through insider tips, deals, events, accolades and original content.



Show some love for your favorite York County business!
Submit a short video describing what makes this business special—it can be a store, restaurant, company, even a home-based business! Videos will be posted to Facebook. The best part...both you AND the business could win a prize! The business featured in the most liked and shared videos will win \$200 and the person who submitted the video will win \$100!

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: JULY 9, 2021

- RECORD**
In under 30 seconds, record your self praising a York County business. Do they have a unique product/service? Go above and beyond? Give back to the community?
- SEND**
Email your video to the address below. Be sure to include your name and the business name. We'll review and post it to York County's Facebook page and a host of partners' Facebook pages.
- SHARE AND LIKE**
The video with the most likes and shares by July 23, 2021 wins! Encourage your friends to like and share. The winning video and contest will be announced on July 23, 2021.

Email entries to yccadmin@yorkcountyc.org
For full contest rules: bit.ly/LoveYorkBiz

'Love Local' Campaign

Launched in 2021 during the pandemic, this three-month social media contest invited residents to submit short videos celebrating their favorite York County businesses for a chance to win cash for themselves AND the business. Videos were shared on County and partner platforms, generating strong organic engagement while providing businesses with free exposure. The initiative demonstrated how user-generated content and modest incentives can create high community participation with minimal cost.

Keep It In York County

keepitinyorkcounty.com

Direct Business Support & Economic Leverage

Business Marketing Grants



- ✓ 50% matching grants (with cap)
- ✓ Professional photography for business use
- ✓ Increased online engagement & SEO
- ✓ Support advertising, marketing and promotional campaigns aligned with Buy Local goals

Our Small Business Marketing Grant, E-Commerce Grant and Google Virtual Tour Grant provide direct financial assistance to help local businesses promote themselves to residents and visitors via websites, virtual tours, social media, and traditional marketing and advertising campaigns.



Citizen Rewards Program

For more than a decade, this County-managed discount program has encouraged residents to shop locally while driving repeat business. Offers range from 25% off products to free admission to BOGO deals.

Buy Local Ad Campaigns & Education Initiatives

Paid digital, radio, billboards, sports field banners and print advertising placements extend Buy Local messaging beyond County-owned channels, reinforcing awareness and driving consumer action. Educational articles and strategically placed graphics help citizens and business owners understand the value of buying local.



When you buy local, you create:

keepitinyorkcounty.com

SHOP LOCAL SPREAD CHEER

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WHY BUY LOCAL?

More Jobs

Local businesses employ other local service companies, thus expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs and increased local employment.

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WHY BUY LOCAL?

Lower Taxes!

Local businesses put less demand on roads, sewers, schools and safety services than do most residents. They also generate revenue per sale, helping keep resident taxes lower.

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WHY BUY LOCAL?

Economic Strength

Each dollar spent locally returns up to 3½ times more money to the local economy.

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