



VML BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING
Thursday May 12th - 9:00am
Marriott Downtown Richmond
Richmond, Virginia
Agenda

- Only one person speak at a time and give the courtesy of listening to your colleague
• Start and end in a timely fashion
• Debate an item and move on, there is no need to rehash
• Stay on topic and be respectful
• Agree to disagree in a professional manner
• Seek to understand and be understood
• Know when to move on
• Don't monopolize the time
• Give everyone a chance to be heard

WEDNESDAY MAY 11th - Dinner TBD - Meet in the Lobby 6:30pm

THURSDAY MAY 12th 9:00am

- I. Call to Order
a. Introductions
II. Consideration of Minutes
a. Executive Board minutes for February
III. Review of Strategic Plan Discussion
a. Led by Chris Bennett - The Spark Mill
IV. Review of Financials
a. Proposed 2023 Budget
V. Staffing / Conference Update
VI. CLOSED SESSION
VII. Future Meetings:
a. August 18th at 9:00am - Richmond
b. 2022 Annual Conference - Richmond - Oct. 1-4th
c. December 8th at 9:00am
VIII. Adjournment by 11:30

July 11 82

190 City/Towns
7 Counties
31 School Div
250 APTA ORITE
478 Total
VRSB Members
2021 528
2022 508 Monday

**MINUTES**  
**VML BOARD OF DIRECTORS**  
**FEBRUARY MEETING**  
**OMNI RICHMOND**  
**February 3, 2022**

**In attendance:** Jon Stehle, Willie Greene, Bill Rush, A.D. “Chuckie” Reid (via telephone), Kelly Burk, Jill Carson, Derrick Wood, Katie Cristol, Phil Miskovic, Steve Trivett, Stephanie Reynolds-Moon, Robert Ike (Michelle Gowdy, Roger Wiley and Sue Mellen were also in attendance)

**Call to Order:** President Stehle called the meeting to order at 10:04 am.

**Minutes:** Minutes from the Board of Director’s meeting in December was approved without objection.

**Legislative Update:** VML Legislative Staff provided updates on various pieces of legislation and budget items/issues. There was general discussion.

**Amicus Brief Request:** There was general discussion about the request from the City of Petersburg’s City Attorney. A motion was made and passed unanimously to decline this request.

**Request to host the VML 2024 Conference:** There was general discussion about the offer to host the 2024 Conference. It was decided that this will be revisited at the May meeting.

**Financials:** Sue recapped the current financials providing an update on the financial situation for this fiscal year. This information was accepted by vote without objection.

**Adjournment.** The meeting was adjourned at 11:25am.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Gowdy  
Executive Director

**MINUTES**  
**VML BOARD OF DIRECTORS**  
**MAY MEETING**  
**MARRIOTT RICHMOND**  
**May 12, 2022**

**In attendance:** Jon Stehle, Willie Greene, Bill Rush, A.D. "Chuckie" Reid, Derrick Wood, Katie Cristol (on the phone until 10:15am), Phil Miskovic, Steve Trivett (arrived 9:25am), Stephanie Reynolds-Moon, Robert Ike (Michelle Gowdy, Roger Wiley and Sue Mellen were also in attendance)

**Call to Order:** President Stehle called the meeting to order at 9:11 am.

**Minutes:** Minutes from the Board of Director's meeting in February were approved without objection.

**Financials:** Sue went over the proposed 2023 annual budget and it was approved without objection.

**Closed Session:** The Board went into closed session to discuss contracts.

**Motion:** Upon entering open session a motion was made to direct the Executive Director to present an addendum to VRSA for their current contract. There was no objection.

**Amicus Brief Request:** There was general discussion about the request from the City of Martinsville's City Attorney. There was a motion made to authorize the Executive Director to spend up to \$5,000 for this requested brief – there were no objections.

**Strategic Plan:** Chris Bennett of the Spark Mill joined electronically to discuss the VML strategic plan and the staff retreat that was held on the strategic plan. There was general discussion.

**Staff update / Conference:** There was general discussion about staff changes and the 2023 and 2024 conferences. The 2024 host city will not be prepared so VML will look for another city for 2024.

**Future Meetings:** There was general consensus that the VML August 18<sup>th</sup> meeting would be moved to July 28<sup>th</sup> in Richmond.

**Adjournment.** The meeting was adjourned at 11:25am.

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Gowdy  
Executive Director

# Virginia Municipal League

Strategic Plan: Preliminary Findings Report

February 2020



the  
**spark ml**  
we make change possible

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SPARK MILL

We are a regional strategic planning firm based in Richmond, VA. Serving clients throughout the state of Virginia, we offer services in strategic planning, organizational development, nonprofit sustainability, board facilitation, and community engagement. We've been helping a wide variety of clients, including nonprofits, government agencies, associations, and businesses, flourish and live into their mission and vision since 2009. Our five-member staff prides itself on recommending cost-effective and practical solutions with tangible action steps that can be implemented by the organization and/or agency.

### **The Process**

We use creative methods to refine strategy and end with an actionable plan that is immediately useful to guide decisions. We work together with clients to design a process that meets the overall goals of the project. The exact steps

# Table of Contents

## **Project Overview**

Stakeholder Overview	4
----------------------	---

## **Report Overview**

Themes	5
--------	---

Organization	5
--------------	---

<b>Themes</b>	6
---------------	---

<b>Sparks</b>	16
---------------	----

<b>Transformation Opportunities</b>	17
-------------------------------------	----

<b>Appendix A: Key Stakeholders &amp; Interview Questions</b>	19
---	----

<b>Appendix B: Membership Survey Summary</b>	20
--	----

<b>Appendix C: Conference Data Gathering Summary</b>	21
--	----

# Project Overview

## Stakeholder Overview

We gathered data from over 350 people using one-on-one interviews, intercept interviews at the annual conference, a membership survey, executive committee meetings, and a retreat with the staff. We also reviewed internal documents, including previous strategic documents, an annual budget, organizational chart, and other important organizational data. See Appendix A at the end of this document for the list of stakeholders.

## Background

### Process

We began the project in September 2019 with a kick-off meeting with the members of the executive committee to discuss data gathering at VML's annual conference. After the conference we met with a strategic planning team to design the rest of the data gathering for the project.

Strategic planning team members included:

President Tommy Smigiel  
President Elect Willie Greene  
Vice President Jon Stehle  
Past President Anita James Price  
Executive Director Michelle Gowdy  
Chief Operating Officer Sue Mellen

During this November meeting, we determined which key stakeholder voices we needed to engage and how best to talk with them. Once the team created the stakeholder list, The Spark Mill began engaging stakeholders and gathering data. We conducted six stakeholder interviews, a survey with the membership, and a retreat with the staff.

Upon completion of gathering data from internal and external stakeholders, we began sifting through data and identifying key themes. This report articulates the findings from that data.

# Report Overview

## Organization

### **Themes**

In this section, we articulate the themes that emerged from the stakeholder data. A theme is a topic or idea that we heard in multiple stakeholder conversations. For each theme, you will find a brief narrative along with supporting quotes. Items in quotes are direct quotes from interviews. We identified the following eight themes in our data-gathering:

- Members are an asset
- Evolve governance structure
- Advocacy and education are your core work
- Build relationships and expand presence
- Capacity necessary for program evolution
- “Go to” organization
- Flexibility serving towns and cities, large and small
- Supporting the work

### **Sparks**

Here we share quotes that did not fit a specific theme and that we thought were important for you to see.

### **Transformation Opportunities**

In this section, we identify potential opportunities for the organization to consider as it crafts its strategic plan.



# Themes

## MEMBERS ARE AN ASSET

The way Municipal Leagues determine membership (by locality and not by individual) presents certain challenges. First, you are continuously educating newly elected officials about who you are and what you. Second, the individual turnover in member localities is constant. This dynamic impacts recruiting and retaining leadership. At the same time, the individuals in your member municipalities are an asset that you can leverage in terms of their collective wisdom and to help the organization drive impact. Stakeholders encouraged you to find ways to engage the individuals who are part of member localities to drive impact for the members and deepen members connection to the organization.

*"Maximize on your strength of the membership. Local government is a powerful force, I don't see this .org pushing themselves. VML could be a lot more powerful if they tried."*

*"I'd like to see them start to reach out and engage some of the younger elected. Getting them involved in leadership roles, providing leadership opportunities and responsibility. They want their voices heard. Possibly creating a VML podcast. Utilize social media. You have an app, it's only used for the conference twice a year."*

*"Engagement tools we have used. We started an academy for excellence in local government in partnership with a local university. We give people credit for the classes that they take that is run through the school of public policy at that school. They get a certificate. It takes 1-2 years. From the perspective of a local elected official who maybe wants to climb the ladder to other positions - they have something to put on their resume. That has been a huge driver in our success. It's great to have this in our back pocket when I go to talk to state officials to give credibility to the local officials."*

*"I needed to find a way to get people more engaged in a new way. We put together the "banner city" program. People get certain credits for everything they do in the municipal league. Its a member rewards program for participation in the league. It's created a friendly competition. Winners get a banner and a plaque. This recognizes communities. I was a bit skeptical when we started it, I have been very pleased with it. It's giving the city the credit for what its people are doing."*

*"Give the credibility to the city or town. I don't go anywhere where I am not tweeting or Facebooking about it. Keeping people excited about what cities and towns are doing."*

*"We have a conference planning committee that puts the conference together. They choose food, workshops - it really is their conference and we work hard to make it theirs."*

*"We started Municipal Mainstreet. Part of our exhibit hall is our members exhibiting what they are doing in their town. They are just so excited to talk about all the neat things to talk about in their town. It's a friendly competition. We only have 157 cities, we have 70 participate. We had a lot of our exhibitors in the main hall. Something like that was very helpful in spurring additional attendance and interest."*

*"Consider creating a brain trust or mastermind group. Think of Silicon Valley, you have all of these creatives in one room just creating. Like an incubator space for government. That would bring so much added value."*

*"I like what VML represents. It's given me the opportunity to learn. I think it would be better if it gave me the opportunity to share."*

*"I was a part of the mayors institute, what I would like to see more of is learning from each other. Creating a forum to submit questions or situations and let the others in the room tell me how they've dealt with the situation, because there's not a one size fits all approach. This would give us an opportunity to walk away with more tangible solutions."*

## EVOLVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Stakeholders noted that in order to drive greater impact for VML's members and the impact of local government, your governance model needs to evolve. Some stakeholders spoke to process while others spoke of how VML's governance is structured. Additionally, multiple stakeholders mentioned struggles with getting involved in leadership. Please note – these comments were not directed at individuals but the structure. Stakeholders believe a better governance model will strengthen the work you do.

*"Please think and understand your responsibility as governing board to the organization and its mission and not think so much about your resume. You need to get about the work."*

*"Legislatively we are in constant education mode. Sometimes it can be as much 50-60% in one session. I am constantly educating legislators about what we do and who we are. You spend all this time to educate them well, the next thing you know, they are gone. That is frustrating to deal with that. The longer I am here the most challenging thing I have to deal with is egos. I get very frustrated about having to deal with egos. These people get elected and think they know everything."*

*"I think there are some structural issues with VML that need to be addressed."*

*"I don't think they put in the energy that they ought to. And the organization hasn't insisted [on it] and hasn't provided info for their responsibilities."*

*"Need good policies in place that define Board's role, define the ED's role and turf; so that it is right there on the paper. People need to respectfully stay in their lanes."*

*"VML should do comprehensive onboarding of new boards explaining their role and responsibilities."*

*"I notice the lack of diversity on the Exec Comm. The leadership feels like its predetermined."*

*"These officials are not out there strategically because they are on the election cycle. They need to think beyond the election cycle. Someone needs to be looking ahead."*

*"In addition to what they currently do, maybe information on how to participate more on a state level. Also, information on how to be involved with the organization. Like I didn't know there were meetings about the nomination process."*

*"Your board also has to change - the nominating process needs to change, you need fresh ideas."*

*"The issue is fulfilling the mission of the org. on a consistent and excellent basis. Use this process to reinvigorate your mission."*

*"Include non-elected municipal staff. Also, you can use presidential appointments used to balance diversity on the board (race, gender, ethnicity, etc.)"*

*"Selection of Leadership needs improvement and also "promises" and "deals made to further others position and bolstering their resumes are forgotten and NOT honored. Leaves a very bad impression on the leadership and staff involved."*

*"You need to get your structure, policies, and procedures to sustain the operations through executive committee turnover - you need to be stronger. Put the fundamental things in place."*

## ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION ARE YOUR CORE WORK

VML is overwhelming known for its advocacy work with the General Assembly and the training that you offer to municipal leaders. Your stakeholder value your knowledge and expertise. And they want more. Your stakeholders want you to double down on these areas and continue to deliver excellence and innovation in your programming.

*"The primary strength they bring - as a statewide organization - is the advocacy they bring to the legislative process. It's the advocacy for localities, especially the small towns. I think VML does a good job of that. That is their bread and butter."*

*"[Keep up the work on] the opportunities they provide for their members to be informed and trained on issues they are going to have to be dealing with. Giving them tools to prepare them to deal with the issues. Think about the training coming up - learning about how to be an elected official. That is a great service. They are also doing something the same week focused on where are things going to go with the state budget."*

*"They do a very good job of understanding researching and advocating on local government issues."*

*"The training that they provide or organize is impressive. They are very good at convening the right people and the subject matter experts to promote collaboration and consensus."*

*"[What does VML do?] That's a good question because I've tried to explain it before but I have a hard time. [Perhaps] a group of government officials who come together to learn from each other."*

*"All of these services are important but the real value is someone watching for us when the General Assembly was in session."*

*"More effective lobbying in concert with VACo."*

*"VML is really good at communicating with the liaisons about things. They are really good about finding forewarning us on things and keeping up."*

*"Continue to be relevant - make sure conference sand trainings what they send out are easily digestible. Keep in mind your audience - use infographics with a link and text to go with it. Trying to get as much info as possible in front of your base in an effective manner."*

*"I'm not clear on what exactly VML offers me to help me reach my community, other than we get to go network for a weekend."*

*"Every couple of years we get a new council. Some localities have a legislative liaison some don't. When newly elected officials are elected, it would be really beneficial to have some training that helps them know what legislative liaisons do and how they can use them. I know they do a training for newly elected officials. Some don't know what we do. Help them understand what VML does versus what Liaisons do, or what they won't do for them."*

*The legislative is so broad - you are trying to address every town, city and counties issues. VML ought to have here are the key issues for towns, counties, cities. Stay away from the taxing - VACO has that.*

*"Legislation that impacts cultural awareness. We all have our little silos and we are not building bridges that connect our different silos. As localities, we need to learn to bridge that gaps with what other cultures are doing. For example, how when we say something, it*

*offends another culture. We should be able to be in an environment where we can be aware of and tolerant of people."*

*"Training. Local training for elected officials. Council development. More of the council members are coming in, and the learning curve is so steep. There needs to be training, A to Z so that councils understand budget and financial managers, legalities of HR management, and their roles."*

*"More trainings. There's a book that's supposed to come out. Just some basic welcome information, here is what we do with you. Something that can educate a council member on your role. I learned a lot on my own; like where are my trainings and what can I ask to go to."*

*"Continue fighting/lobbying for our rights on the local level."*

- 4 40% of needs identified by localities were either advocacy or education/training related

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPAND PRESENCE

Stakeholders voiced a desire for deeper relationships with VML. This showed up in two ways. First, members want to see you present in their regions. They value you and the relationship they have with you and when VML is present in their region/municipality they feel valued, too. Second, they also desire stronger connections between their member colleagues - and they believe you are in a perfect position to help facilitate those connections.

*"I like the regional meetings, but I would like them to be more impactful. Our regional meeting was just okay. They could be mini-training - make it something council members don't want to miss. If there were something in between conference - drive in workshops, something like the finance forum but not just finances?"*

*"Visit localities to hear what the localities need so that the staff is more acclimated with them and their needs."*

*"While I don't know their day to day operations, certainly [an opportunity for them is] getting on the road and building capacity within those communities. Rather than give them fish, teach them how to fish. It's a hard thing to do in some of those communities and towns. There are holes in the bucket. [i.e. people are leaving at high rates.] How can VML empower those who stay? Empower and inspire them to be the change agents in their communities."*

*"The leadership needs to get out and spread the message. Get out and visit your constituents. Get out and visit like a bigger funder or those who are "in the paper" (i.e. in crisis.)"*

*"More visitation to the Southwestern member localities by staff and executive committee."*

*"Getting out into the field. Interact with council members and staff. Maybe that does nothing more than increase their workload. Maybe that drives being able to have more capacity to better serve."*

- ✦ *From the survey: In order for my locality to be successful I need \_\_\_ from VML:*
  - ✦ *Opportunities to discuss with peers/ other similar towns and cities what has worked/not worked relative to the three challenges above.*
  - ✦ *A regional meeting to discuss regional issues that do not apply statewide.*
  - ✦ *Locality size (square miles and/or population) specific communication that highlights success and failures of such from around the commonwealth.*
  - ✦ *More tools for looking at best in class activities of other local governments.*
  - ✦ *Input about other localities successes.*
  - ✦ *More opportunities to see what works in other communities.*
  - ✦ *More regional collaboration, more workshops discussing economic development and growth, and more opportunities to attend workshops.*

## CAPACITY NECESSARY FOR PROGRAM EVOLUTION

As mentioned above, stakeholders desired for VML to play a stronger role in building relationships with and between municipal leaders across the commonwealth. They see you uniquely positioned to do this work. They also acknowledge that doing this requires an increase in staff and board capacity. The larger question this raises is, What structure is necessary for greater impact in relationship building?

*"With their personnel they can't [be a 'go to' resource for localities] yet. The legislative process can take on a life of its own. I don't understand how Michelle does everything that she does so well."*

*"My vision of something like that, where you are becoming more services oriented would take more staff and more capacity. You would need more folks who could go out and meet with councils and give training to them."*

*"Hire some more staff. I don't know what there staffing levels are. It seems like they may want to have a few more foot soldiers on the ground. Focus on quality not quantity. I would*

*encourage VML to clone Neil Minx. Find other people like him that have enough experience and background knowledge on all these issues to add value to the organization."*

*"VACo has stolen some of their talented staff. Joe Lurch saw the writing on the wall and now VACo has the upper hand in terms of staff capabilities."*

*"Honestly, I think Michelle and her team have just gotten back to full staff. I want them to gel together and best determine how to use those folks. She has been working to rebuild the organization after some personnel changes a few years ago. I think they are doing a really good job building back, and I want them to have time to gel and work together."*

*"I think VML is an important organization - I would like to see them grow a little bit. When there were more consultants, there were more specialty people. I like having them as the SME. It would be nice if they had more people boots on the ground people, not just so I can access, but so that in session, they are not going crazy."*

## "GO TO" ORGANIZATION

"Be the go-to organization" was an oft repeated refrain across stakeholder groups. Some stakeholders believe you already are and they want you to cement that reputation by continuing to deliver strong advocacy at the General Assembly and relevant training for municipal leaders. Others, acknowledging the challenges from your recent history and the separation with VRSA, encourage to grow into that "go-to organization" by growing your impact with the GA for your members and offering excellent training opportunities. Regardless of the perception of your status as "the go-to" organization, stakeholders were consistent in the desire for you to seek continued growth and impact in your core services.

*"They are amazing SMEs when it comes to Virginia local government matters. Especially from a fiscal and legal perspective. I am in awe of the wealth of info they have and the relationships they have across the commonwealth. All around great organization."*

*"Economic development is going to be critically important. There are a lot of communities that have been written off by people. What can VML do to promote and engage these communities?"*

*"VML should be the ones leading the charge as the paternal figure to all of Virginia's cities and towns. They should be seen as the thought leader and the one you go to when you have 'wrecked the car.' What do you do to get them out of that mess? Right the wrong? What services could you provide on an interim basis? What can you do to help us flourish? What can you do to do link communities with the people?"*

*"I would say to them - they are doing a great job. While they may have had some setbacks with leadership changes, they are a critical partner to steering the direction of the state. Don't*

*lose site of the bigger picture. dense communities are going to be more critical components to solving some of the world's problems."*

*"Be the 'go to' with cities, towns, counties, and the state. Have a component that provides education and training to the local governments – but this should be secondary. I think that right now VML is perceived as THE local gov organization. I think that it's really important that VML maintain that strength of position. You need to be the voice of local government period."*

*"At times, I see VML as a resource statewide. Is there a regional resource that I can go to? As a council member, it's hard for me to reach out to VML. Instead, we go to committee meetings, we do this, we do things on a macro level as opposed to understand how they can help us as council people. VML has to personalize the indoctrination into VML. Notice I'm not talking about transportation, economic development, those things are constants. It's the variables, it's the cultures, it's the awareness."*

## FLEXIBILITY SERVING TOWNS AND CITIES, LARGE AND SMALL

At the Annual Conference we heard a lot about the tension between serving towns and cities, both large and small localities. This feedback was primarily from the smaller localities. As we looked at the survey responses through the lens of locality size, we found there was not a significant difference in what they wanted in order to be successful. We also looked at the responses by region and again found no significant difference between the overarching needs of localities. Surely how those needs are addressed may differ due to size and complexity, but VML has an opportunity to lift up the common needs and challenges that all municipalities face and unite members around this while at the same time differentiating how you address regional needs. This won't necessarily require a change in how you do work but may suggest alterations in how you communicate about the work you are doing.

*"[A barrier to them doing their best work is] representing a diversity of relationship of the members. VA Beach is different from Fairfax and small towns in SW Va. That is going to be a challenge."*

*"They have a bit of a passion for urban issues. Virginia is such a unique state. You've got the 95-64 corridor (urban crescent). And the towns and cities in Southside and Southwest Virginia. The economies of those communities have declined and gone stagnant. What can they do to engage those communities and be change agents for them? Maybe they are doing that, but I just don't see it."*

*Cultural competency would be one [an area for improvement]. Anecdotally we have staff who are people of color when they are assigned to go too far SW VA by themselves, they*



*express concern. There are not many people down there who are like me. VML could have a role as adding that to their menu.*

*"While larger groups have a legislative liaison, the town manager or the mayor are going to GA. VML helps those smaller groups to give them a voice."*

*"It's a good conference, but there is nothing for small towns – it's all for big towns. They need to think about us small rural areas as well. I had to go out and find my own information about Main Streets and Community Heart and Soul."*

*"I love how they offer sessions geared towards towns and cities. For a matter of perspectives and acknowledging those differences."*

## SUPPORTING THE WORK

The split between VML and VRSA introduces a felt sense of urgency and concern over financial sustainability. From our observations, while there are financial realities with the split, the ship is not sinking. It is actually a different metaphor – what kind of ship do you want to be, and then how do you keep it afloat? In talking to partner municipal leagues in other states there are opportunities to leverage your conference and other services to generate additional revenue to support growth. Stakeholders identified other possibilities like exploring a stronger partnership with VACo and the possibility of reconnecting VML and VRSA (on the 5-10 year horizon).

*"From a strategic standpoint to fund this look at dues, what value do you place on services you get from VML? IF you are going to phase in greater dues - what do you offer? More fee-based services along with dues increase? Perhaps add extra trainings with new. Maybe there is some opportunities there.*

*"[Put a] twist on new services to members on a more personal basis. If that means looking more entrepreneurial, do that."*

*"They were still doing their payroll with the VRSA - get some independence from them. It seems like an incredibly poor dynamic with them. I know that when it feels like domestic violence, that is not a good thing. They need to find a way to assert their own independence."*

*"I think there are some options they have for their conference. I am a little biased. Their conference is really lowly attended. We have about 3000 attendees. We were in the same boat in 1999. We wanted to expand the number of offerings and workshops we were offering. We expanded the look and feel of the conference so that it was in the 21st century. We try to make it as inviting as we can to our members. We can't ask our members to pay*

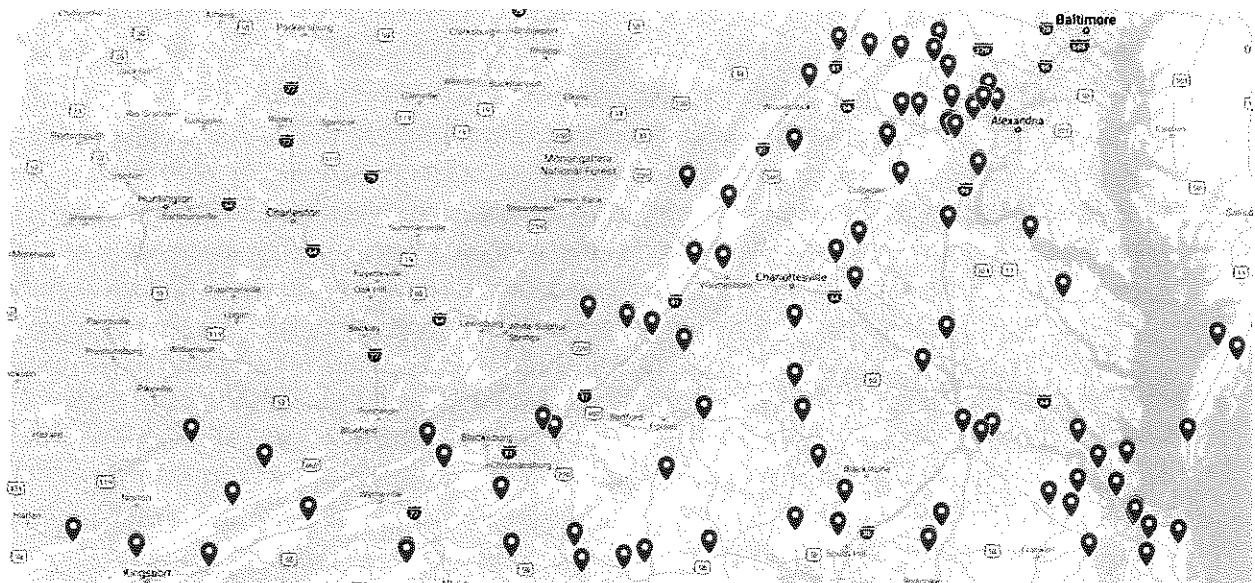
any more dues. Our conference makes a substantial amount of money. The benefit and return will be worth it.”

“Michelle needs to tell the executive committee [the VRSA relationship] is over and we need to move on. Michelle needs to push people and move them past this.”

“There was a time when cities were cities and counties were counties. There is now no reason to have two different organizations servicing localities. Rebuild your strength and credibility.”

“Try out working together [with VACo] a bit more. They are already functioning like this legislatively.”

### Survey Respondent Zip Code Map



## SPARKS

*"I'd love for their social media to be a little more active. During the conference there has been a minimal usage. The more they do that the better."*

*"Additional information, but combined with VACO. So much overlaps but we aren't in tune sometimes."*

*"VML needs to fully embrace newcomers to Annual Meeting. I felt lost during my first attendance and have not attended since."*

*"Important to think about why certain localities don't attend the conference? Usefulness, costs, etc."*

*"Change is okay, it's constant. Just because it's always been done that way doesn't mean it has to continue. It's okay to break tradition. We don't have to do it one way because it's always been done. Find different ways to break the norm."*

*"More minority representation at places other than the NBC lunch."*

*"The current town/city/urban structure is flawed at the town level. Resource dependency theory tells us that those towns with greater resources will maintain and increase resources. Those with less resources will continue to struggle; they need a greater amount of attention, resources, and advocacy from VML. Look at the attendee numbers for VML events or representation on committees over the last decade or so relative to population, geographic location, and economic data. You'll find that those who participate (those who have a voice) are overwhelming those who can afford to do so, or even have a basic comprehension of the value of VML. Unless researchers identify why localities don't participate, this entire strategic planning process will be an exercise in futility. Good starting points for resolving these issues are to (1) restructure the section system (and therefore the executive committee) to better provide representation to underserved localities; and (2) restructure cost of attendance at VML events to a need-based formula."*

*"When I became director, we had no vision for what the cities were trying to do. We went through an analysis and talked to clients and asked what a modern city [in our state] looks like. From this discussion we established 2030 principles, six ways we can measure those qualities, and how modern a city is and measure a city for its future viability. Once we knew what those six aspects were, we designed all of our internal structure to help them achieve those things."*

# Transformation Opportunities

## **Clearly State The “Why” Behind What You Are Doing... Its Not About You – Its About Them**

What is the deeper “why” behind all the work VML does? As Simon Sinek states in his viral TEDx Talk: “people don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it?” When we asked the staff about the deeper “why”, one group stated: “We believe sound local government creates better communities.” This kind of impact and missional clarity is the lens through which you begin to evaluate organizational structure, training, advocacy, and any emerging programming. Impact and mission-centered focus helps keep you aligned and invites (and expects) leadership and membership in that missional work.

## **Root Your Identity In Relationships**

A great opportunity exists for you to evolve from being seen as an organization that provides products and services that your members consume to an organization that engages its members in creating a stronger Commonwealth by creating strong, effective local governments. The former makes you something that people consume. The latter roots your identity as a mission-driven organization that engages and equips its members in delivering excellent local governance.

## **Leverage One of Your Greatest Assets – Your Membership**

The above shift allows you to pivot your relationship with your members from transactional to more collaborative. As a mission-driven member organization you get to create the framework for your members to engage, share, give, and receive in missionally aligned ways. This leverages your relationships with your members and build stronger connections between them. Moreover, it also allows you to leverage the wisdom, experience, and knowledge of your members in ways that move the mission and vision of strong, healthy local governance forward.

## **The Insurance Ship Has Sailed - Focus On Your Core, And Continue To Build Excellence**

At the Executive Committee meeting in October we heard and felt a lot of fear and anxiety around the split with VRSA. This is natural with any significant break in relationship. Now is the time to acknowledge the reality of the break and its impacts, and move forward in this new iteration of VML. This means self-differentiating and charting your own path

independent of VRSA. The way to go forward is to focus on your strengths, deliver excellence in your outputs, and strengthen authentic relationships with your membership.

### **Evolve Your Governance Structure For Greater Missional Alignment**

To make the pivots named above, VML will need evolve its governance structure and processes. This includes creating by-laws and policies; formal on-boarding including delineation of roles and responsibilities; greater transparency in the process for getting engaged in leadership; and consider the optimal size and structure of the executive committee. A strong, healthy governance structure sets the framework for organizational success.

# Appendix A:

## Key Stakeholders Interviewed and Questions

### One-On-One Interviews

- Scott Hancock, Maryland League Director
- Paul Meyer, NC League Director
- David Comny, Commission on Local Government
- Kim Payne, Former Member, Berkley Group
- Jack Tuttle, Former Member
- David Blount, Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission

### General Interview Questions

- Tell me how you got involved or connected with VML?
- What would you say that VML is best known for?
- What opportunities for improvement does VML have?
- If you had 1,000,000 and you gave it VML how would you like them to spend it?
- Who do you think VML should be when they grow up?
- What are the barriers to VML doing their very best work?
- If VML could only focus on one area, what would that be (area to make the greatest impact)?
- If you could give one piece of advice to VML as it sets its direction for the future, what would it be?
- If you could pass a secret note to the VML board, what would it say?

# Appendix B:

## Member Survey Summary

### VML SURVEY FINDINGS

#### RESPONSES

Total: 383  
 Conference Link/Kiosk: 98  
 Email Survey: 285

#### DEMOGRAPHICS

86% Member Locality / 10% Assoc. Member / 4% Exec. Committee  
 55% Town / 35% City / 6% County / 3% Urban  
 36% Council / 28% Not Gov't / 26% Manager / 10% Mayor  
 29% 15+ yrs / 27% 1-4 yrs / 19% 10-15 yrs / 18% 5-9 yrs

	NOT AT ALL	SOMEWHAT	MOSTLY	DEFINITELY
I understand what VML does	2%	17%	37%	44%
VML represents issues that are important to my locality.	2%	20%	40%	38%
Local interests are protected by VML.	3%	19%	41%	37%
VML makes a significant impact through its advocacy work.	2%	20%	40%	38%
VML makes a significant impact through its education work.	4%	24%	39%	32%
VML is helping me make a positive difference in my community.	9%	33%	33%	25%
VML provides a valuable service to its members.	2%	18%	33%	47%

#### LOCALITY CHALLENGES

\$\$\$ : unfunded mandates, taxation  
 Infrastructure : water, housing, transportation  
 Economic Development  
 Government Dynamics : Dillon's rule, regional collaboration  
 Hiring/Employment : retention, understaffed

#### OPPORTUNITIES WHAT LOCALITIES NEED FROM VML

Resources and Information (32%)  
 Education and Training (22%)  
 Advocacy (18%)  
 Rural and Regional Support (9%)

# Appendix C:

## Conference Data Summary

### VIRGINIA MUNICIPAL LEAGUE November Update

#### CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The Spark Mill attended Virginia Municipal League's 2019 Annual Conference. During the conference, we gathered data from four sources:

- A facilitated kick-off session with the Executive Committee
- Thirteen in-person interviews
- A survey of conference attendees (97 respondents)
- Open-ended prompts at a booth in the exhibit hall.

The information gathered at the conference is one part of a larger data-gathering phase for strategic planning. The rest of the data-gathering will be designed by the Strategic Planning Team, a mix of Executive Committee members and VML staff.

NOTE: These are preliminary themes that were heard from our conversations at the conference. They ARE NOT final themes for the project.

#### PRELIMINARY THEMES

##### **Expand on your strengths.**

Members appreciate the work you do educating local officials and advocating on behalf of localities. They want to see you do more for newly elected officials to prepare them for their time in office. Likewise, they desire more connection and understanding of their contexts from VML.

##### **Deepen relationships.**

Members expressed this on two levels. First, they desire would like to see VML more deeply engage with member localities. Second, members expressed a strong desire for peer learning experiences so they could both share and learn from their colleagues in other municipalities.

##### **Need for racial diversity.**

Racial diversity came up in multiple conversations at Annual Conference. Two specific areas members spoke to were the overall racial make-up of attendees and the racial representation of speakers.

##### **Continue to be relevant.**

While your work is valued, members urge you to keep an eye on how you are serving members. They envisioned VML being "the first call" that an elected official or locality would make if they have a question or a challenge they want to resolve.

##### **How do you manage the tension in serving different-sized localities?**

Virginia Municipal League | Executive Committee Kick-Off | October 2019 | Page 1 of 3



Many members felt that VML favored larger localities in their policy positions and conference offerings. We heard several comments to the tune of "Hey, don't forget the smaller towns and cities." Some larger municipalities point out that VML is a strong voice for smaller localities who don't have legislative liaisons. Given the variety in member locality sizes and locations, this is a significant tension to manage.

**Pathways to leadership are not clear.**

Several members signaled a desire and willingness to serve in leadership with VML. However, they did not know or understand the ways to get more involved in leadership.

MOST IMPORTANT STRATEGIC PLANNING QUESTIONS

**Connecting Members**

- What services do our members want that we aren't providing\*
- How do we better communicate the goals of VML?
- How do we better connect with other localities- be less fragmented?
- Needs priorities

**Internal Capacity**

- Supervision and efficiency in staff and brand
- Personnel
- Do we have enough resources and staff to move forward?\*
- Increased technology interactions with members
- Stability of personnel
- Consistency in messaging and performance
- Meeting and training skills
- Greater outreach

**Growing/ Enhancing Membership**

- Do we know what's needed?
- What new benefits can we offer members?
- To increase our services
- Growing our member base
- How do we get more people engaged?
- Are members satisfied?\*
- How to empower members to connect more intentionally\*
- Who are VML more strategic partners?

**Funding Revenue**

- What are the best fiscal opportunities for future growth and member engagement?
- Financial stability
- How do we change our business model to be sustainable
- What one new funding stream can start in 2021?\*
- ID new revenue streams\*
- Better strategic partnerships
- Who are unknown VML partners we need to engage?

- Plan to gain more GA respect
- Integrity and value relationships\*

- What are the most desired services for localities and how do they generate income for VML?\*
- How do we attract new support?

### Relevancy

- Where do we go from here?
- How do we resolve differences in shifting political climate
- What will our brand look like including marketing/ logo?
- What do our members want/ expect from VML?\*

- Is VML's role changing?
- Ways of showing relevancy\*
- Are we showing that we are strong enough to survive
- Meeting and training skills
- History vs all-new

### Value-Added Programs

- What are the services we should be providing to members?
- What are the gaps in the VML services?

- Do we do enough?
- Innovative ways to grow services\*

### Mission/ Vision/Alignment

- One new "thing" we can do in 2020 to create energy
- How do we ensure we change in the way that we do no harm
- Roadmap for the next 5 years\*
- How to bucket all activities to achieve our goal

- Plan to become the one stop shop for local government
- Improve communication
- Where will we be in 2025
- What is the best path for VML to serve localities and thrive long-term? \*
- Where do we begin? Action Plan

## SURVEY OVERVIEW

Almost 100 respondents to the survey of which, 79% of survey respondents represented member localities. Age distribution was healthy, and 73% of respondents were white with 64% representing towns.

- 40% have been participating with VML for 1-4 years, remaining categories around 15%
- 61% identified as Councilpersons, 15% Managers, and 11% Mayors
- How well does VML tell its story? 39% average, 34% well, 14% very well, 12% very poorly or poor
- Experience questions trended mostly positive
- Effectiveness questions trended mostly positive, some lower scores on Legislative Day and Conference
- Top 3 needs: Resources, funding, information
- Top 3 challenges: economic development, infrastructure, education, funding