**2024 All-America City Award Application**

Theme: Strengthening Democracy through Local Action and Innovation

**Community Information**

**Community name and state: City of Roanoke, Virginia**

**Your community is applying as a:**  Village  Town  Tribe  City  County  Region

**If applying as a region, name participating communities:** Click or tap here to enter text.

**If applying as a neighborhood, name city:** Click or tap here to enter text.

**Has your community applied before?** Yes No If Yes, which years: 1952, 1979, 1982, 1988, 1996, 2012, 2017, 2020, 2022

**Has your community been a Finalist before?** Yes No If Yes, which years: 1952, 1979, 1982, 1988, 1996, 2012, 2017, 2022

**Has your community been an All-America City before?** Yes No If Yes, which years: 1952, 1979, 1982, 1988, 1996, 2012, 2017, Hall of Fame inductee 2019

**Contact Information**

**All-America City Award contact (primary contact person available throughout competition & follow-up):**

Name: Katie Hedrick Title (if any): Community Inclusion Coordinator

Organization/Government/Other: City of Roanoke, VA

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Phone (business/day): 540-853-1283 Mobile Phone: 540-588-0621

E-mail Address(es): Kathryn.hedrick@roanokeva.gov; bob.cowell@roanokeva.gov

**If named a finalist, your community will receive a complimentary membership (or membership renewal if an AAC application was submitted last year) to the National Civic League for one year. To whom should this membership be directed?**

Individual’s Name: Bob Cowell

Organization: City of Roanoke

Address: 215 Church Ave SW, Suite 364

City, State & Zip Code: Roanoke, VA 24011

Phone Number: 540-853-2333

Email: bob.cowell@roanokeva.gov

**We agree to follow the National Civic League’s rules regarding use of the All‑America City Award logo, a registered trademark of the National Civic League. We allow the League and the All-America City Award to share this application and the information enclosed in it with League and AAC networks to promote the work of our community. If we are named an All-America City, we agree to conduct a post-AAC conference call or regional forum for the AAC network that features our projects. If named a finalist, we understand and commit to either raising the money or covering the cost of sending a community delegation to attend and compete in the three-day** [**Awards Event and Conference**](https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/america-city-award/about-the-event/)**. In a pay-it-forward spirit, if named a finalist or All-America City, we agree to consider supporting AAC through a National Civic League membership for a minimum of the next three years.**

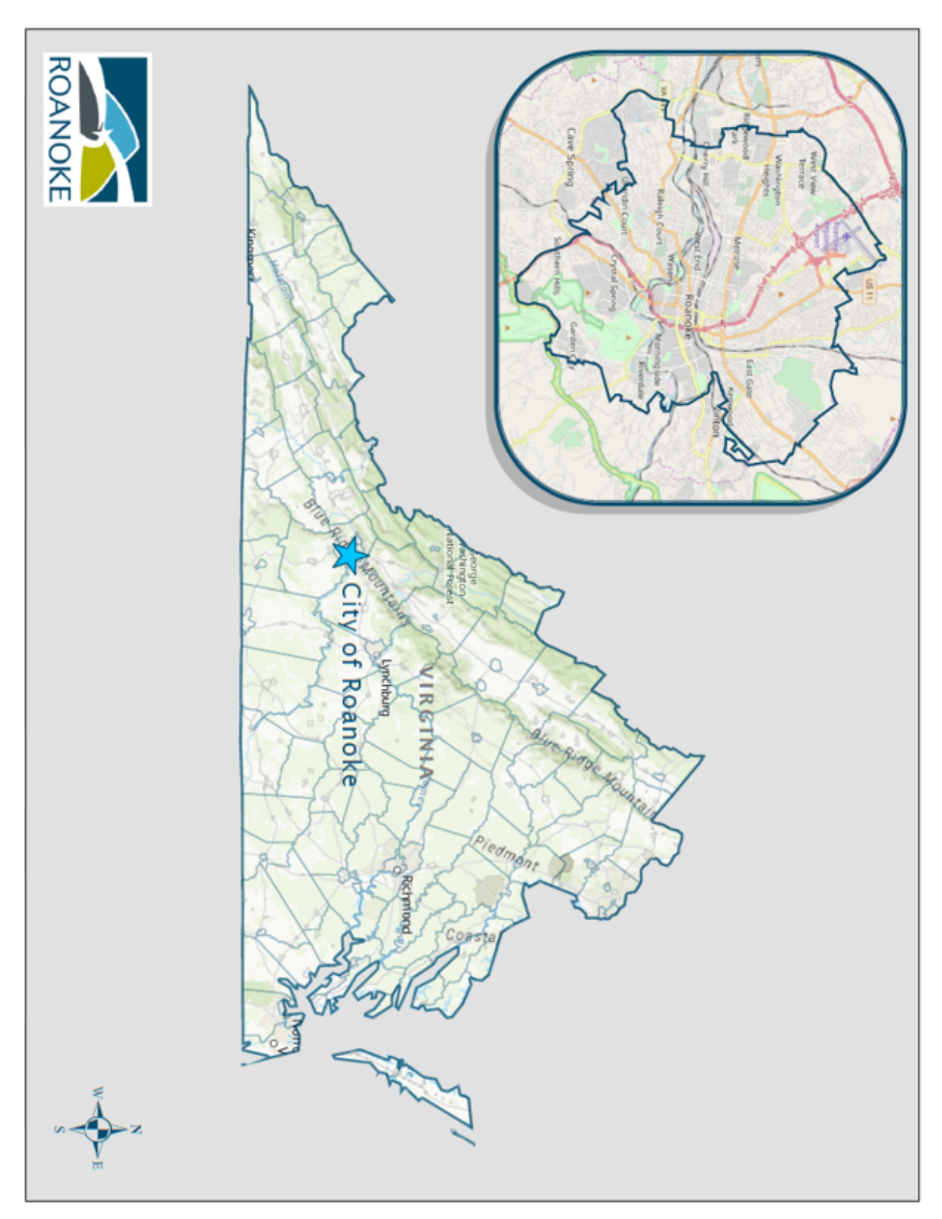
**Signature:**

**X\_\_**Katie Hedrick**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Date: 2/16/24

Name: Katie Hedrick Title: Community Inclusion Coordinator

**MAP**



**Community Statistics and Map**

Note: Use the most up-to-date statistics possible for your neighborhood, town, city, county, or region (source suggestions: [U.S. Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045221), State Department of Economic Security, State Department of Finance, Department of Public Health, and local school statistics).

POPULATION (most recent Census): 97,847

POPULATION PERCENTAGE CHANGE 2010-2020 (indicate + or -): -2.2%

Source/Date: July 2022 Census estimates

RACIAL/ETHNIC POPULATION BREAKDOWN:

White 60.1%

Hispanic or Latino (of any race) 6.6%

Black or African American 29.3%

Asian 3.2%

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) 0.2%

Mixed Race 6%

Other %

POPULATION BREAKDOWN BY AGE GROUP (percentages, if available):

19 years old and under 24%

20-24 6.6%

25-44 27.9%

45-64 27.1%

65 and over 14.3%

Source/Date: https://www.virginiaworks.com/\_docs/Local-Area-Profiles/5104000770.pdf

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LEVEL: 18.4%

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 3.2%

PERCENTAGE OF HOME OWNERSHIP: 51.9%

Source/Date: 2022 Virginia Employment Commission

WORKFORCE DISTRIBUTION—Name the three largest employment sectors in your community and provide the percentage of total employed in each:

Employment Sector 1: Health Care and Social Assistance, 20.1%

Employment Sector 2: Government, 12.9%

Employment Sector 2: Retail Trade, 11.2%

Education Attainment Breakdown

Bachelor’s Degree or higher 21.7%

Some college or Associates degree 31.3%

High School or GED 31.5%

Less than High School 15.5%

No schooling      %

**PART I: Tell Your Community’s Story**

In the heart of Virginia's Blue Ridge, Roanoke stands as a city of vision, action, and unparalleled beauty. Founded in the late 1800s, Roanoke has become the largest city in Southwest Virginia. The City of Roanoke is a very diverse city, and we always have been. This has historically been a source of our greatest challenges, but is also a foundation for many of our triumphs and successes. Over the past decade, our community has undertaken a transformative journey, confronting historical challenges head-on while fostering a future of inclusivity, innovation, and meaningful civic engagement.

Roanoke's history bears the weight of industrial disinvestment and a legacy of racist systems and neglect that have left segments of our population behind. In the neighborhoods of Northwest Roanoke, home to a significant percentage of Roanoke’s African-American population, and Southeast Roanoke, historically inhabited by the industrial working class, the echoes of urban renewal and underinvestment have lingered.

With a response that transcends acknowledgment of these historical disparities, Roanoke is embracing a visionary 2040 Comprehensive Plan that prioritizes equity considerations, aiming to address root causes rather than superficial issues. The 2040 Plan recognizes the need to rectify the consequences of urban renewal, redlining, and chronic underinvestment that persist in our city. At the forefront of our equity initiatives stands the Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board (EEAB), including a subcommittee devoted to community trust. Founded in 2020, the EEAB actively works to dismantle legal elements of institutional bias, foster community healing, and ensure ongoing accountability in governmental policies. Recognizing the need to rebuild trust, especially within African American communities, this effort has been pivotal in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.

As we look toward the future, Roanoke envisions a city that overcomes its history of disinvestment and racial disparities, by embracing transformation to become a hub of diversity, technology, innovation, and well-being. The creation of the Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board, coupled with the establishment of a Community Inclusion Coordinator position, signifies our dedication to fostering an inclusive community leadership structure. In essence, Roanoke's story is one of resilience, collaboration, and commitment to creating a community where every resident has equitable opportunities to live, learn, work, play, and prosper. Our journey is ongoing, but the progress made serves as a testament to the strength of our community and its unwavering spirit.

**PART II: Describe the Strength of Your Community’s Civic Capital**

**Shared Vision and Values**

The City of Roanoke is a safe, caring, and economically vibrant community in which all have equitable opportunities to live, learn, work, play, and prosper. Roanoke is a vibrant urban center with strong neighborhoods set amongst the spectacular beauty of Virginia’s Blue Ridge. This shared vision begins with Roanoke’s Strategic Plan, which describes the community vision, policy priorities, broad strategies, and performance measures. Work on this plan occurs annually at an all-day Council retreat where community conversations and resident surveys are used to inform Council and staff as they develop updates.

Roanoke’s community vision and shared values are also determined through a Comprehensive Plan. Most recently in 2020, Roanoke’s community came together to chart its future in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. A year’s long process of direct engagement with the community yielded a community plan focused on advancing policies and actions promoting:

• A Livable Built Environment

• Harmony with Nature

• A Resilient Economy

• Interwoven Equity

• A Healthy Community

• Responsible Regionalism

Diverse working groups were formed for each of these focus areas or themes. These groups gathered information, assessed data, and proposed actions. Community open houses, which were held at locations throughout the City at varying times to ensure all had the opportunity to participate, furthered these efforts. Online surveys, specific conversations with youth, minority populations, immigrant groups, and service providers rounded out the City’s efforts at ensuring the plan genuinely represented the priorities, values, and desires of the community. The formal process of Council briefings and public hearings then followed the robust engagement efforts of the prior year.

**Culture of Engagement and Engaged Residents**

Roanoke’s residents have been actively shaping their community for decades. The City of Roanoke offers both formal and informal methods of engagement that are accessible to its residents. Informal conversations and meetings as well as service on boards and commissions are essential elements. Utilizing technology also allows residents to actively provide feedback on City projects and ask questions or obtain resources about City departments. With the popularity of social media and the emergence of AI platforms like Zencity, Roanoke has been able to monitor the silent majority through sentiment analysis.

*Gun Violence* – The City of Roanoke has established ongoing engagement efforts around the community’s concerns over incidents of gun violence. The creation of a grant funded Youth and Gang Violence Prevention team provides direct engagement through one-on-one youth case management and community discussions over grief and trauma. The formation of the Rapid Engagement of Support in the Event of Trauma (RESET) team works to de-escalate tension in neighborhoods that have experienced incidents of gun violence and connect the neighborhood to resources. City Council also convened the Gun Violence Prevention Commission to study the issue of gun violence in the community and recommend strategies for prevention, intervention, and response to reduce incidents of gun violence and address its effects on the community. The Commission works with residents and community partners in developing programs that create meaningful opportunities for positive, non-violent pathways for health and wholeness. As directed by the Star City Strong Recovery & Resiliency Advisory Panel, the Commission reviewed applications for gun violence prevention and intervention grants from community non-profit organizations. Throughout two grant cycles, 25 non-profit organizations were awarded funding for intervention and prevention work in our most affected neighborhoods.

*Opioid Abuse* – In response to the unprecedented opioid abuse epidemic in our country and readily apparent in our region, an initiative was undertaken, drawing together diverse participants from health care providers, social service providers, recovery advocates, and law enforcement officers, to collectively identify ways to advance prevention, treatment, and recovery. Led by the largest local health care provider and one of the area’s free health clinics, the Roanoke Valley Collective Response to Opioid Abuse gathered dozens of participants over a period of several months resulting in a blueprint full of intervention opportunities. This initiative resulted in the deployment of a comprehensive harm reduction program mitigating health risks associated with substance use, a data collection and assessment program, and a peer recovery network. In fall of 2023, the Collective Response launched a Recovery campaign highlighting stories of hope and success for addiction recovery in the Roanoke Valley.

*Public Art* – Roanoke views art and culture as integral to the community for multiple reasons including its ability to foster connection and strengthen all of our voices. Local organizations RIDE Solutions, Greater Roanoke Transit Company, and the Roanoke Arts Commission partner on programs like Art by Bus to help bring enlivenment and increased livability to all corners of the city, providing an exposure to the arts in communities to which it may not always be accessible. Artist in residence, Jon Murrill, has engaged the community in his work by encouraging community groups to assist in painting large-scale murals. In this way, residents are able to put a physical stamp on the community, look back at a project, and say that they helped create that. In 2024, the Arts Commission is launching a new program called Arts Connect Neighbors. This program will bring artists of all mediums into City neighborhoods as a unique way for residents to build community.

**Inclusive Community Leadership**

The City of Roanoke recognizes the importance and value of effective leadership that empowers individuals irrespective of factors like address, age, or other attributes that might lead to marginalization. Additionally, Roanoke understands that cultivating this group of leaders is not a random occurrence but requires intentional efforts to engage and develop such individuals.

*Leadership College* –Leadership College is a 9-week community leadership and engagement program that introduces participants to a variety of resources and information available to residents as they work within the community to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods while promoting a stronger sense of community. Leadership College is an interactive, practical, and engaging series of discussions, lectures, and role-plays that help residents learn about the City, how it works, and how they can help shape its future. Graduates of this program have gone on to serve on various non-profit boards, become neighborhood leaders and advocates, and have even been elected to City Council.

*My City Academy*—Building on the success of Roanoke’s Leadership College, My City Academy is a 5-week leadership and engagement program that is designed specifically for our refugee and immigrant population. My City Academy introduces participants to municipal government services to help them gain a better understanding of how their government works and ways in which they can be involved. The leadership portion of the training is modeled after the nation-wide Natural Helpers curriculum and participants are encouraged to take what they learn and volunteer within their respective communities, providing leadership and guidance in navigating City services and community-based resources.

*Youth Services Citizens Board* - The City of Roanoke commits to serve as an advocate for the needs of all youth and their families with the objectives of positive youth development through the planning, collaboration, coordination, and implementation of services. For nearly a decade, the City has supported a Youth Advisory Board that includes the voices of area youth and hosts an annual learning and youth empowerment event. The Youth Summit includes multiple breakout sessions and a forum to ensure Roanoke youth have an opportunity to be heard on issues that are important to them. Youth representatives on the Board also annually accompany City elected officials to Washington, D.C. to engage with Congressional representatives from Roanoke.

**Embracing Diversity and Equity**

The City of Roanoke embraces the diversity that creates the rich tapestry of our community. A network of organizations, non-profits, and the City of Roanoke have collaborated many times throughout the past years to honor and celebrate Roanoke’s multicultural diversity through a Local Colors Festival, to create and support a Welcoming Roanoke Plan, and to become the first locality in Virginia to earn a 1-star designation as Certified Welcoming.

Roanoke City officials placed interwoven equity at the core of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. For the first time in the city’s history, its land use, housing, transportation, and economic development policies center around providing equitable opportunities to all residents to live, learn, work, play, and prosper. As a result of prioritizing interwoven equity, a resident advisory board was founded which is dedicated to the work of dismantling legal elements of institutional bias, fostering community healing, and ensuring ongoing accountability in governmental policies.

**Authentic Communication**

Roanoke actively engages and informs its community through a comprehensive multi-channel communication strategy relying upon neighborhood organizations and associations, informal networks, social media, faith-based communities, web pages, task forces, and traditional print and video media. Through the use of person-to-person networks, Facebook, Instagram, the City’s web site, a municipal podcast, and media releases, the City ensures its residents are aware of what is going on in the community and how they may be able to get involved, regardless of how they typically receive their information.

The Roanoke Police Department has been holding community forums in every corner of the city. It is a space for police, city leadership, and the community to come together to discuss what the community needs and to build trust. Through direct engagement with the community and appointments of city residents to a variety of decision-making and advisory boards and commissions, the City ensures its residents are actively engaged in problem solving and decision-making.

The City of Roanoke has created a robust language access plan to ensure translation services, both in person and virtually, are provided and every employee is trained in how to access these services. Both the City of Roanoke and Roanoke City Public Schools have taken proactive steps in creating an incentive for bilingual employees.

**Collaborative Institutions**

As a medium sized city with limited financial resources, public-private partnerships and collaboration are vital to Roanoke’s ability to successfully grow and transform. We know that we are working at our very best when we can work together with the community. The variety of regional efforts, both formal and informal, carried out by the local divisions of government as well as the many collaborative initiatives undertaken and sustained by area service providers and non-profits are a testament to the collaborative nature found in Roanoke. Most notably in the past three years, we have seen collaboration through the following projects:

* Goodwill and the NW Food Initiative have helped to bring a community grocery store, Melrose Plaza, to an area of our city designated as a food desert.
* Habitat for Humanity received APRA funding to address affordable housing in SE Roanoke. Further collaboration was encouraged that will allow Habitat to assist two additional local non-profits to provide accessible, transitional rental housing for their clients.
* Local Environmental Agricultural Project (LEAP) is addressing and increasing the community’s access to fresh healthy food and food production.
* Public-private partnership between the Roanoke Arts Commission, private building owners, and the surviving family of artist Dorothy Gillespie saw the restoration of a famous three-story mural in Roanoke’s downtown district. Further, in 2024, a program called Arts Connect Neighbors has launched to bring art in its many forms (paint, sculpture, dance, storytelling, music making, acting, etc.) and nearly 50 artists into city neighborhoods for free. This program is a new approach to building community in Roanoke’s neighborhoods, engaging our residents in ways that allow them to connect with each other, and beginning to shape the neighborhood in which they want live.
* More than 25 non-profits throughout the city are providing community programming for gun violence intervention as part of the framework of the Gun Violence Prevention Commission.

City of Roanoke residents, businesses, and non-profits embrace collaboration with the City and each other, many of whom express appreciation for being able to engage with others in meaningful ways that add value to their city.

**PART III: Describe Three Community-Driven Projects or Programs**

**ACTIVITY ONE**

**Star City Strong Recovery and Resiliency Advisory Panel**

**Challenge**

Over the past decade, the City of Roanoke, like other cities across the country, has faced numerous challenges: a global pandemic, rates of inflation not seen in more than forty years, limited access to fresh, healthy food, increases in those experiencing homelessness, political divisiveness, increased violence, and the ongoing impact of climate change. COVID-19 disrupted our way of life, tragically claiming the lives of over 1,000 regional residents. The pandemic also highlighted disproportionate impacts on people of color, the elderly, minority-owned businesses, and youth, amplifying pre-existing inequities. In 2021, Roanoke received over $64 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and took a unique approach to determining their use.

**Actions**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Roanoke's community united—healthcare, schools, nonprofits, businesses, places of worship, residents, and local government—working tirelessly in uncertain times to respond to the impacts of the virus and prepare the foundation for the community’s recovery. Roanoke approached this unprecedented public health and economic crisis within the context of three stages – Response, Recovery, and Resiliency. The Response Stage involved significant actions to address public health needs and mitigate economic impacts. The Recovery Stage focused on safely reopening the local economy and supporting local businesses, individuals, and families. As the community transitioned through the pandemic, these stages continued to address immediate needs.

Ultimately, our community deserved not just recovery – meaning a return to the pre-COVID world– but resiliency. Roanoke saw an opportunity to transform our community, addressing the inequities that kept residents, families, and businesses from fully participating in the success of our community. The work of the Advisory Panel was an integral step in shaping this equitable, resilient, and stronger Star City. The Advisory Panel played a crucial role in this transformation, beginning with stakeholder interviews and focus groups to gather input. Through these efforts, more than 100 individuals representing a wide diversity of perspectives offered their preliminary thoughts about the challenges that confronted the community as we recovered from COVID-19 and how the funds received by the City could best be used to address these challenges.  In July 2021, the Star City Strong: Recovery and Resiliency Advisory Panel was formed, comprised of 36 community members representing the Roanoke Branch NAACP, the Roanoke Latinx Community, local faith community, non-profits, and two youth representatives from the Youth Services Citizens Board alongside the Mayor, Vice Mayor, and City Manager. Representing diverse perspectives, the panel worked to recommend the best use of ARPA funds.

The Advisory Panel met seven times and conducted a public hearing, reviewing data and engaging in facilitated discussions. This process generated a list of potential initiatives and projects to aid the community's recovery and build resiliency. Panel member Betty Jean Wolfe described the public hearing as a pitch meeting for anyone who had an idea to advocate for their project. She stated the process felt “open and transparent” throughout. The panel's final meetings focused on prioritizing these initiatives and projects.

**Outcomes**

The Advisory Panel made recommendations to City Council that would support the community’s recovery and build resiliency by investing in projects and initiatives that benefit people, places, and governance. Under these categories, there were specific “big lift” investments recommended, but emphasis was placed on investments reinforcing one another to maximize the transformational benefits.

**Habitat for Humanity**  
The Star City Strong Recovery and Resiliency Advisory Panel supported the stabilization and continued vitality of neighborhoods by investing in affordable, accessible, and safe housing. The COVID-19 pandemic had a harder impact on low- to moderate-income community members, and housing costs have increased dramatically making the problem worse. The Advisory Panel supported an initiative offering a comprehensive approach to addressing affordable, accessible, and safe housing in the community.

Habitat for Humanity was awarded $2.6 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding for their pilot program, *Partners in Prosperity,* that will add 18 new or rehabilitated homes to the City’s housing stock. The Habitat for Humanity model works with potential homeowners over a period of time to prepare them for homeownership. They focused their efforts within the City's current community development target area, the Belmont-Fallon neighborhoods, which is a low- to moderate-income neighborhood in Southeast Roanoke. The *Partners in Prosperity* proposal also includes a workforce development component where a cohort of young adults were trained and equipped to participate in rehabilitation and construction to gain the skills needed to access long-term careers in the construction industry with Roanoke Valley employers. Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke Valley Executive Director Karen Mason shared her appreciation for the MOU process that allowed awarded funds to go directly to the organizations rather than being done on a reimbursement basis. This provided “immediate relief and allowed organizations to begin work quickly.” Also being a member of the Advisory Panel allowed Karen to see a bigger picture of the community’s needs and facilitated collaboration with other organizations in the pilot program. Since the launch of *Partners in Prosperity*:

* A kick-off meeting was held in early January with Family Promise of Greater Roanoke (FRGR) and Blue Ridge Independent Living Center (BRILC) who are partnering with Habitat to assume the titles of four of the 18 single-family residences to be built as part of the PIP program. Once the homes are completed and the title transferred, each organization will use the homes as rental units for the many families to whom they provide case management services.
* Seven of the 18 homes have been dedicated and sold to qualifying homebuyers, housing a total of 24 people. Two more homes will be sold and dedicated in May 2024. Another three will be sold and dedicated by July 2024, with the remaining two housing units to be completed by December 2024, resulting in a total of 25 more people accessing the benefits of permanent homeownership as their solution to affordable housing.
* Habitat received 170 applications for the PIP workforce development program, and selected an inaugural class of eight. Habitat has extended the on-the-job training component for its inaugural class by an additional four months and is looking to start a second class of eight construction assistants in July 2024. Build Smart Institute, a PIP partner, will provide private instruction classes to Habitat’s cohort.

**LEAP**

The Advisory Panel recommended a resiliency investment to enhance and expand local food systems and related programs. This includes expanding infrastructure to support more local food production and distribution, supporting improvements in the urban agriculture spaces and developing network, expanding and enhancing fixed site and mobile farmer’s markets, and expanding current and developing new financial incentives for people who have limited food budgets so they can take home more local fruits and vegetables.  The recommendation led to a $2.5 million American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant from the City of Roanoke to Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) to expand and enhance Roanoke’s local food system. Since receiving this funding:

* LEAP has moved their team and operations into the new LEAP Hub building in West End.  The new infrastructure (walk-in cooler, loading dock, and freezers) has allowed LEAP to purchase more food from local farmers and food businesses and to distribute more food via the Mobile Market, Community Produce Program, and Farm Share. The community room is open to the public, the retail food store will open this spring, and the West End Farmers Market pavilion for the year-round weekday market will be completed by the fall.
* LEAP supported infrastructure development at six urban agriculture spaces in Roanoke City including Goodwill Grows Garden, Washington Carver Garden, Lick Run Urban Farm, and LEAP’s three community gardens. Between all the sites, the ARPA funding allowed for new fencing, bed replacements, garden redesign, wash stations, and tool storage. These improvements have increased the effectiveness of the urban agriculture spaces and created more room for deep community member involvement in food production.
* LEAP made repairs to infrastructure and equipment at the LEAP Kitchen to increase its capacity to support food businesses in its incubator kitchen. In addition, LEAP built out a light processing space in the LEAP Hub to produce more frozen fruits, vegetables, soups, and sauces, all made from local produce. The light processing decreases food waste and increases access to produce, especially for people who have limited kitchens or manual dexterity to handle fresh produce.  Due to increased demand for the fresh and frozen produce items, LEAP installed a refrigerator for the Mobile Market, purchased an electric cargo van for produce distribution, and plans to retrofit another electric van for a more energy-and cost-efficient Mobile Market.
* Customers experiencing food insecurity continue to participate in and rely on the Harvest Bucks program to help them access affordable, local, and culturally appropriate fruits and vegetables. ARPA funding allowed LEAP to expand programs to meet the needs of more seniors who are low income, immigrants and refugees with limited access to full-service grocery stores or personal vehicles, kids at the West End Farmers Market, and people who participate in SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid. The Harvest Bucks allow community members to choose, with dignity, the food that is best for their families and their health. In 2023, LEAP provided $132,950 in financial incentives for produce; this is a 26% increase from 2022 and 99% increase from 2021.

**Melrose Plaza**

The Star City Strong Advisory Panel sought to ensure both that no one in our community lacks the essentials of shelter, food, and personal safety and to support the stabilization and continued vitality of neighborhoods and business districts. The Advisory Panel recommended a resiliency investment to create a public-private initiative to serve as a community hub located in the Melrose area that would be anchored by a grocery store. The recommendation led to a $10 million American Rescue Plan Act grant from the City of Roanoke to Goodwill Industries that resulted in Melrose Plaza. This Northwest hub will include a full-service grocery store for access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food in an area designated as a food desert; access to financial empowerment from the Bank of Botetourt; a wellness center run by local health and medical experts; and a free, public adult high school called the Excel Center. The Melrose Plaza project is of utmost significance to our city. It not only pays homage to the rich legacy of Northwest Roanoke but also provides essential resources like education, healthcare services, and access to fresh, nutritious food. These resources have the power to positively affect the life expectancy of our residents, and reimagine the future for this part of our city.

Goodwill Industries has led the way with extensive and ongoing community engagement for the Melrose Plaza project. In 2023, the Melrose Plaza Advisory Panel met six times with four meetings listed as community listening sessions and having up to 30 community members in attendance. Goodwill Industries has presented information about Melrose Plaza to eleven separate community businesses and organizations with a combined attendance of almost 300 and had representation at thirteen events with recorded attendance over 2,700. The Melrose Plaza Advisory Panel has devised a community engagement strategy for 2024 that provides ongoing communications and gives updates to three main constituencies: community members, non-profit organizations, and faith-based partners. There are already more than six events planned for the year. In addition to these events, Goodwill Industries and the Melrose Plaza Advisory Panel are planning to have an educational speaker series on several topics including healthy recipes, yoga, acupuncture information, technology seminars, and historical and cultural topics.

Melrose Plaza broke ground in November 2023 at the site of Goodwill Industries of the Roanoke Valley’s prior headquarters. Each element of the plaza will celebrate with its own grand opening with the grocery store, Market on Melrose, scheduled for late 2024.

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| --- | --- | --- |
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| City Manager | Executive Director | Director of Community Engagement |
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**ACTIVITY TWO**

**Community Inclusion Programs**

**Challenge**

The City of Roanoke has a long history of welcoming immigrants and refugees from many countries and backgrounds, but prior to 2020, the City itself had little infrastructure in place to support this work. According to 2017 data, immigrants made up 5.5% of the population in the Roanoke region, but were responsible for 35.2% of the total population growth in the region. Students in Roanoke City Public Schools speak more than sixty languages and half of Roanoke’s residents who speak languages other than English in their homes have limited English proficiency (LEP). This creates challenges on many fronts—barriers of language, cultural differences, existing distrust from experiences with other government organizations, and lack of understanding of how local governments function. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became paramount to quickly and effectively communicate health information to all residents, including those with limited English proficiency.

The City partnered with a local language services company to provide on-demand interpretation support for press conferences, updates, and individual interactions. A grant from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management also provided funding for a part-time bilingual specialist to provide support and outreach specifically to Roanoke’s Spanish-speaking population. In this role, the specialist called dozens of individuals to schedule vaccine appointments, created flyers and other informational materials, visited local stores and businesses, and was on site at many City-sponsored vaccine clinics to interpret and provide assistance. As the pandemic slowed and became more manageable, the value of this position grew beyond just COVID and Spanish-speaking families. In June of 2021, the position was made full time and renamed Community Inclusion Coordinator. The focus shifted to assisting individuals, families, and communities from all backgrounds, developing a citywide language access plan, and ensuring equitable access for all who live in the City of Roanoke.

In 2019, even before the pandemic, City leaders began to recognize the gaps in services to the non-native population and received a grant from Gateways for Growth to create the Welcoming Roanoke Plan. In this Plan, specific challenges and goals were identified to ensure that Roanoke welcomed immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers. The plan was built from a shared vision by using a survey that was distributed to the City’s immigrant population. The survey was available online and was distributed by local partners that were involved in the planning process. A working group was created from the Roanoke Refugee Dialogue Group and consisted of various service providers, educators, and local government staff to analyze the survey data. Finally, priorities and policies with action items were drafted and revised to include feedback from a series of community meetings. In this plan, the specific challenges identified by these groups were feelings of disconnection from their community, language barriers, and lack of job opportunities.

The City of Roanoke’s Inclusion Programs are designed by using this data as well as conversations, observations, and the expertise of local non-profits and service providers. As challenges and barriers are identified, program staff work to develop communication, policies, and services to directly meet these needs.

**Actions**

With the creation of Community Inclusion Programs and the coordinator position, the City was able to focus on building programs, services, and activities specifically to benefit the refugee, immigrant, and LEP population in the City. The first major project undertaken was the Language Access Plan. The initiative began in January 2021, when the City signed a contract with Volatia Language Network to provide on-demand interpretation and translation services. As staff utilized the language services over the following months, the Office of Community Engagement realized the need for a comprehensive guide and policy for providing meaningful access to all residents. In the first phase of the plan, an LEP call-in line was installed for every City phone number, allowing City employees to bring an interpreter onto a phone call, and allowing residents to contact departments through an interpreter. In addition to the call-in lines, tablets are available in the lobbies of several City buildings to allow video-remote interpretation including the availability of American Sign Language for residents who are deaf or hard of hearing. The second phase of the plan was the drafting and implementation of a written Language Access Plan. The Plan includes a policy statement; the background and legal authority for language access; demographic data analysis; agency oversight and annual monitoring provisions; and procedures for interpretation and translation, public notice, staff training, and complaints. Additionally, the Coordinator worked with Human Resources to establish a bilingual employee pay incentive program. The City is fortunate to have many employees who speak languages other than English and use that language regularly in their work. This program was developed to compensate those employees for their additional skills and work, and to provide an additional line of communication between City staff and residents. Not only does this break down language barriers, but it provides a link to residents’ cultures and countries of origin.

The Community Inclusion programs also work to address feelings of disconnectedness among Roanoke’s refugee and immigrant populations. In 2022, the City launched My City Academy, a five-week program that provides refugees and immigrants with leadership training and introductions to City services and staff. Roanoke is a very diverse city, with nearly sixty languages spoken in our public schools, at least seventy-two countries of birth, and a refugee resettlement office. Yet despite our cultural diversity, there is a distinct lack of engagement from these residents and an under-utilization of City services and programs. To improve this engagement, City staff designed a program that would enhance the leadership skills of refugee and immigrant residents, inform them of City services and programs, and build trust by developing relationships between staff and our refugees and immigrants.

We intentionally tailored our curriculum to meet the needs of our participants by identifying specific challenges and opportunities within these communities. We focused on health and human services; housing and community resources; trauma-informed basics; public safety and emergency preparedness; and helping principles like listening actively, asking empowering questions, and setting boundaries. For our first cohort, we worked with local non-profits to recruit ten Roanoke residents who had recently come to the city from other countries. Nine participants had official refugee or asylum status and one came as an immigrant and is now a City employee. Over four consecutive Saturdays, the participants heard from City departments; toured the Police Department, Public Works Service Center, the iconic Mill Mountain Star, and Melrose Library; learned about qualities of a leader, active listening skills, and making referrals to service providers; participated in a trauma-informed workshop; and, perhaps most importantly, built a support network that continues to be in touch. Participants received library cards, attended a job fair and filled out applications with the help of Human Resources consultants, learned to build an emergency kit, and tried grilled cheese sandwiches for the first time! Various community partners shared with the group as well, including Roanoke City Public Schools, the Small Business Development Center, Habitat for Humanity, and Trauma-Informed Care Network. At the conclusion of the program, the participants were recognized by the mayor and two of our graduates shared their experiences before City Council.

By specifically targeting refugee and immigrant residents for leadership training through My City Academy, the project promotes diversity in local leadership positions. This diversity enriches decision-making processes, ensuring that a broader range of perspectives are considered, and increasing trust in local government. During one session of MCA, participants completed applications to serve on Council-appointed boards and commissions, and graduates spoke at a City Council meeting.

Because of the skills, drive, and commitment of the participants, and the partnership of community organizations, this humble program has led to lasting change in our city and increased civic engagement from some of our newest residents.

Another way the City has partnered with others to promote feelings of connectedness is by hosting cultural events. In 2021, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, nearly 200 individuals who had fled Afghanistan settled in Roanoke. The suddenness of the evacuations meant many families were separated, people were lonely and felt isolated, and there was a sense of hopelessness in the community. Our local resettlement agency and a couple non-profit partners asked the City to co-host what would become an annual celebration of Nowruz, or Persian New Year. This observance coincides with the first day of spring and celebrates new beginnings, hope, and growth. This year, we will host very special guests from the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon to share their experiences. This provides not only an opportunity to experience community and develop friendships, but also builds bridges between our native-born residents and our newcomers. It has become a platform for advocacy through storytelling and sharing important issues, like the proposed Afghan Adjustment Act.

We are also initiating and recruiting for a Community Advisory Panel. Last summer, a woman from Afghanistan approached the Community Inclusion Coordinator with an idea she had. In Afghanistan, each province or area sends an elected community leader to speak on their behalf to the primary government in Kabul. “Can we do this in Roanoke?” Sayeda asked. She explained her vision of having multiple levels of leadership, some based in apartment complexes or residential areas with larger populations of refugees, and some who are already known and trusted community leaders. These leaders, she continued, would give voice to the concerns, challenges, and ideas of their communities and report this back to City staff and leadership. While the City of Roanoke intentionally works to make communications and information accessible, it has primarily been in one direction. Sayeda’s idea will enable two-way communication between local government and many of our residents who have typically been excluded from decision-making and other civic processes. Even in this first conversation with Sayeda, she mentioned that many women who practice Islam are unable to exercise around men, so they are sitting at home and experiencing negative health outcomes. The Coordinator worked with Parks and Recreation to identify a recreation center that can be utilized for a private exercise space. The refugee community is also very dependent on public transportation and shared concerns about the lack of covered bus shelters, or even benches to sit on while waiting for the bus. Sayeda mentioned this, and a group of English learners worked with Blue Ridge Literacy to write a letter to the Mayor expressing these concerns. This letter was presented to City leadership during the Municipal Building tour, a program that takes place during the annual Welcoming Week celebration.

**Outcomes**

As of January 2024, our language services averaged 435 calls per month and the City has 30 certified bilingual employees from ten departments speaking five languages. Without the ability to understand and communicate effectively, nearly one in ten Roanoke residents were previously unable to participate fully in the programs, services, activities, and neighborhoods in our City. With the implementation of the Language Access Plan and other inclusion programs, all residents now benefit from effective and accessible communication and services. Interpreters are provided for meetings of City Council, boards, and commissions. This enables all residents not only to understand the meetings but also to participate in them.

The City of Roanoke has also been designated a Certified Welcoming place by the national non-profit Welcoming America, the first city in Virginia to receive this designation! The process required the City to meet rigorous criteria across areas like economic opportunity, equitable access, education, and civic engagement. On-site interviews were conducted by Welcoming America staff and attended by representatives of nearly a dozen organizations and groups including Roanoke City Public Schools, Virginia Western Community College, Virginia Career Works, Casa Latina, Roanoke Refugee Partnership, the Roanoke Police Department, Blue Ridge Literacy, and Commonwealth Catholic Charities. The interviews were evaluated not solely on programs and services provided by City government, but also on the level of collaboration and community involvement in these programs.

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**ACTIVITY THREE**

**Interwoven Equity/Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board**

**Challenge**

The Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board (EEAB), born out of the comprehensive plan (City Plan 2040), seeks to address two main challenges. The first was drafting a twenty-year comprehensive plan that used best practices in planning, contained all the necessary components, and advanced the vitality of the City and the quality of life of its residents. The second challenge, and the primary focus of the board, is to promote equity and increase empowerment for all residents.

The City of Roanoke struggles to overcome a legacy of historically under resourced neighborhoods, generational poverty, and urban renewal that have led to inequitable outcomes for certain residents, racially segregated neighborhoods, and shortened life expectancies, among other health problems. According to Census data, the population of the City of Roanoke in 1970 was about 83% white and about 17% black. In 2022, the population had shifted to only 63% white, 30% black, and 7% people of other races. As the diversity in our City has grown, unfortunately, our efforts to provide equitable outcomes and opportunities to all have not. For many years in the second half of the twentieth century, City leaders developed policies and made decisions to benefit those residents with the most money and privilege, usually white families. From 1955 to 1972, the City completed Urban Renewal projects ostensibly to spur economic growth, eliminate unsafe housing, and improve the City’s central business district. While some of these goals were met, there were many more negative, long-lasting, and traumatic results of these projects. In Roanoke, as in many other cities across the nation, Urban Renewal specifically and intentionally targeted primarily and historically black neighborhoods to be razed. Under the guise of “blight removal,” homes, businesses, churches, and schools were bulldozed to make way for progress. The families that lived in these neighborhoods were relocated to other areas of the city where they often could not afford new mortgages, were placed in government-subsidized housing, and lost a sense of community and belonging. While this is not a part of the city’s history that we want to glorify or emphasize, we do acknowledge its damaging impact and the effects that persist today.

As the City and its partners began to visualize Roanoke twenty years from now, overcoming this harmful and shameful past was very important. The vision the group developed states, “In 2040, Roanoke is both a diverse and an inclusive community with access and opportunities available to all including: education, housing, healthcare, employment, and quality of life. Roanoke recognizes how these opportunities are interconnected and how past actions created barriers that limited opportunity for underserved communities, particularly the African-American community, and eroded trust in institutions. To maintain a high level of Interwoven Equity and inclusion, the community is engaged to continuously identify and predict changes that could become opportunities or barriers and to adapt appropriately to those changes.” Once the words were put to paper, the next step was ensuring the plan was carried out.

**Actions**

City Plan 2040 was born out of a lengthy, meticulous process of research, engagement, feedback, and editing. The most important step in any planning process involves collaborating with members of the community. Without listening and gaining an understanding of community needs and values, it is impossible to develop a meaningful plan.

Authentic participation requires not only meaningful involvement with residents throughout the planning process, but the empowerment of residents to become driving forces within their own communities.  To “ensure that the planning process actively involves all segments of the community in analyzing issues, generating vision, developing plans, and monitoring outcomes,” the American Planning Association identifies seven actions in their Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans. These include:

* Engage stakeholders at all stages of the planning process
* Seek diverse participation in the planning process
* Promote leadership development in disadvantaged communities through the planning process
* Develop alternative scenarios of the future
* Provide ongoing and understandable information for all participants
* Use a variety of communications channels to inform and involve the community
* Continue to engage the public after the comprehensive plan is adopted

To achieve the seven recommended actions, Roanoke residents and stakeholders were engaged throughout plan development. Varying outreach methods were used to contact all communities within Roanoke in an effort to reach diverse participants. Planning staff relied on those already engaged to act as representatives and recruit others from their community into the planning process. Specific meetings were held to address equity and hard-to-reach areas. Updated information was continually provided in the form of reports, speakers, and events throughout the creation of City Plan 2040 to help residents create their vision for the City’s future.

From all this engagement and discussion, staff developed six guiding themes to direct the Plan. Reflecting on Roanoke’s history and the present challenges, one of these guiding themes is Interwoven Equity, the aim of which is to “ensure fairness and equity in providing for the housing, services, health, safety, and livelihood needs of all citizens and groups.” Interwoven equity is the idea that decision making and policy making are based on principles of equity and are examined for bias and potential unintended consequences for any specific group of people. The Plan is further divided into priorities, policies, and action items. One of the first action items completed, under the policy of leading community healing, was to create an office or Council-appointed commission that evaluates existing and proposed policies through an equity lens. In 2020, City Council developed the Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board, consisting of seven community members charged to:

* Review the priorities for Interwoven Equity in City Plan 2040 and any subsequent City comprehensive plan;
* Develop proposed plans for the implementation of policies and action identified for each priority set forth under Interwoven Equity in City Plan 2040; and
* Review all existing City policies, ordinances, and regulations and recommend to City Council changes in such policies, ordinances, or regulations to eliminate the city of any policies or procedures that promote inequity or limit empowerment.

In addition to the seven-member board, there are five subcommittees each chaired by a board member and comprised of community members with expertise in specific areas. The five subcommittees each focus on one of the priorities of Interwoven Equity: Trust, Neighborhood Choice, Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, Inclusive Culture, and Service Delivery. Their charge is to review the policies and action items under the respective priority and craft recommendations to ensure implementation.

The EEAB has also driven collaboration with other agencies, organizations, and communities. For example, staff met with the Office of the Corporation Counsel and Office of Equity in Milwaukee County to learn more about their equity audit, reviewing policies and ordinances for equity across the entire organization. This will shape the next phase of the EEAB’s work.

**Outcomes**

Prior to 2021, the plaza adjacent to the Municipal Building was named in honor of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. A statue of the general once stood in the plaza, but was removed in 2020. The conversations of the EEAB, and specifically the Trust subcommittee, acknowledged the pain and contention this caused in our community, and undertook a campaign to rename the plaza. The process included public comments, surveys, and conversations which resulted in City Council dividing the plaza into two parcels and renaming one “Henrietta Lacks Plaza” and the other “Freedom Plaza.” Freedom Plaza contains flags and a memorial to the City’s war veterans. Lacks Plaza was named to honor and remember Henrietta Lacks, who was born in Roanoke and whose cancer cells were harvested without her knowledge or consent. These cells, now known as the HeLa Cell line, have been used for groundbreaking medical research and are lauded as the first immortalized human cell line and one of the most important cell lines in medical research. Once the Plaza was renamed, the EEAB began working with a local artist and sculptor to design a statue of Ms. Lacks. On October 4, 2023, the 72nd anniversary of her death, the statue was dedicated by her grandson, City Council members, and other dignitaries. It was a really special time to see what was once a symbol of racial discord and hatred replaced with a symbol of healing, hope, and unity.

Currently in Roanoke, the Federal building is named after Richard H. Poff, a former Virginia Congressman and State Supreme Court Justice, who vocally opposed integration and voted against the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, and 1968, and against the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Another of the key outcomes of the EEAB has been legislation introduced to rename the building in honor of Reuben E. Lawson, a Roanoke civil rights attorney. Mr. Lawson filed the first desegregation case in Southwest Virginia, and he played a role in integrating Roanoke’s Victory Stadium, in defiance of Virginia’s segregation law. Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine introduced legislation, on what would have been Mr. Lawson’s 103rd birthday, to rename the building. Former U.S. Attorney John Fishwick, who worked closely with the EEAB to move this effort forward, said, “Reuben E. Lawson was a trailblazing Civil Rights attorney in Roanoke. His legacy and fearlessness during a turbulent time of civil unrest throughout our country has long been overlooked, and naming Roanoke’s federal building in his honor will give Mr. Lawson the recognition he deserves.” While the legislation is still awaiting full approval by the House and Senate, Mr. Fishwick notes, “Being endorsed by the relevant City committees and ultimately by Roanoke City Council has made a big difference … When we met with Senator Kaine, he specifically asked what was the position of City Council on the renaming.” While the EEAB and its subcommittees had a hand in drafting the language and the official proposal to Council, this was very much a community-initiated and –led project.

One of the policies of the EEAB is to hold at least one public hearing each year. This has drastically increased civic engagement around key issues in the City, allowing residents to speak to City leaders and provide insight, feedback, and valuable perspective.

The Department of Planning, Building, and Development in the City is also currently working to pass zoning text amendments. The amendments they are pursuing fall directly under the Neighborhood Choice priority of Interwoven Equity and will focus on expanding housing opportunities in the City of Roanoke. The proposed amendments will remove exclusionary zoning practices, implement the comprehensive plan, and remove regulatory barriers to housing opportunities. A few of these text amendments will regulate dwelling as land use, define household to include family and nonfamily living arrangements, reclassify dwelling types, and ensure the City uses remaining land efficiently. Planning staff has worked to educate the community around these amendments and get their feedback through interactive open houses (including Lego structures) at public libraries, virtual meetings, and a video campaign.

The Executive Director of Community Development and Placemaking will be attending an upcoming EEAB meeting to share about these zoning reforms, answer questions, and seek the endorsement of the board. While the board has no explicit decision-making authority, progress is shown in the City’s desire and effort to communicate more frequently, directly, and effectively with residents and seek input from groups like the EEAB. This transparent, bidirectional communication has been one of the most transformative outcomes of the EEAB and the larger themes of City Plan 2040. It has created a path for residents to communicate with officials and have a role in determining measures taken to ensure equity and empowerment across the City of Roanoke.

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