

outbursts

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Save Our Towns reaches out to mayors of small towns

Response to Internet series prompts new season, which begins Sept. 1

By Andrea Brunais and Keith Pierce

Save Our Towns launched a year ago as a social media experiment. It soon became a multilayered project of ambitious scope. The Internet series, released in monthly Web episodes, aims to guide and inspire leaders working hard in Appalachia to improve their towns. Speaking to a precisely defined audience – small-town mayors and town managers – Save Our Towns connected mayors with each other and produced fascinating results.

Here is some of what the series achieved in the first season:

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The series surveyed mayors and town managers in the 80 small towns and independent cities within Virginia's Appalachian region. Mayors and town managers confirmed what we had suspected: The favorite segment is "Examples of Awesome," a two- to three-minute story describing one element of a town's economic-development efforts that has paid off. Also popular: the "reality show" segment involving a town that was followed for a year, along with the "Expert Tip." A typical comment from the survey: "I usually learn something from every episode."

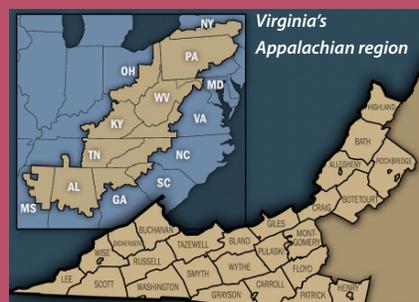


In *Save Our Towns* Episode 5, Terri Fisher, outreach coordinator for Virginia Tech's Community Design Assistance Center and co-author of 'Lost Communities of Virginia,' shares lessons described in the book.

A RESOURCE-RICH WEBSITE



The website www.saveourtowns.outreach.vt.edu/ offers a multitude of resources to mayors, all in one place. The "VT Projects" page offers summaries of research projects by Virginia Tech faculty members in Appalachia. A new "Extension" tab, created for Season Two, lists Extension agents and specialists whose work is prominent in Appalachian Virginia.



Apart from the survey, we received overtures from mayors asking us to help them solve problems – we connect them with faculty experts – or to request that we come to their towns to tell their stories. Because the Web episodes proved popular, we have committed to produce a second season of *Save Our Towns*.

ANALYTICS

The *Save Our Towns* project touched hundreds of people, especially in our target audience of Appalachian small towns in Virginia. Numbers help paint a picture:

Save Our Towns website

- 6,000 sessions
- 11,000 pageviews

Save Our Towns trailer and episodes

(YouTube views): 5,304

Save Our Towns news releases (unique pageviews on VT News): 4,674

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NEWS COVERAGE

The inaugural season of Save Our Towns ended with a bang – a cover story on the Horizon section of the Sunday Roanoke Times headlined “St. Paul, the Little Town that Could,” dominating the front page and including two photos. (See link under the St. Paul headline below).

Throughout season one, Save Our Towns generated much media coverage, including a story on WSLs-TV news and WVTF public radio as well as stories in the Collegiate Times and the Bristol Herald Courier. On social media, best-selling author and director Adriana Trigiani (her movie “Big Stone Gap” comes out in October) acknowledged the first episode on her Facebook page.

Save Our Towns also included a nine-story partnership with the magazine *Valley Business Front*. We submitted a bylined, full-page Save Our Towns story each month, along with photos and Virginia Tech-branded Save Our Towns graphics.



Jessica Snead, a Virginia Tech communications major, was pictured in the May edition of *Valley Business Front*; she was doing an “Examples of Awesome” field report from Buchanan, Virginia.

Watch all the episodes now at:
www.saveourtowns.outreach.vt.edu

Progress in St. Paul

Note: A longer version of this story on St. Paul was published in The Roanoke Times. Visit: <http://tinyurl.com/StPaulwrapup>

In 2014, when Save Our Towns sought a mayor to follow with video cameras for a year, we asked around and kept hearing: “You’ve got to contact Kyle Fletcher in St. Paul!” The scrappy mayor built a reputation as the chief cheerleader of the commonwealth’s tiniest town ever to earn Virginia’s Main Street designation.

So what did St. Paul accomplish over the 12 months we visited? The focus on tourism paid off with the attraction of five new tourism-related businesses. As for numbers, in 2013, the town did not receive any revenues from taxes on overnight lodging; this year collections are expected to top \$2,000. With revenues from restaurant-meal taxes approaching \$220,000 annually, the town experienced a 10 percent increase in this category over two years.

The town built a sewer plant, soon to go online, and plans to earn money selling services to residents in other jurisdictions.

St. Paul has much to celebrate. A town that had to repay Community Development Block Grant money to the state in 2006 for nonperformance turned things around dramatically, winning the Virginia Municipal League’s Achievement Award in 2014 for a town of less than 5,000 residents. It even won a new grant of \$770,000 to fix up downtown facades, according to the treasurer.

The mayor declines to take the credit for the progress. He often mentions the longtime volunteer group St. Paul Tomorrow. “Everybody in St. Paul is a volunteer,” he says. “I really believe that.”



Save Our Towns host Keith Pierce, right, shares photos with St. Paul Mayor Kyle Fletcher

www.outreach.vt.edu

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