

# Foothills Forum Survey, Part Two: A rural life challenged

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## Unspoiled Rappahannock confronts spotty cellphones, aging population, fire and rescue services, taxes



Dennis Brack

Searching for a signal: A silo off Route 211 conceals a cell tower. "Roughly 60 percent of the county has cell coverage now," said Roger Welch, chair of the Board of Supervisors. "We've got so many hollows and dead spots, we would never, ever get 100 percent unless new technology came down the road."

Something went terribly awry on that autumn Saturday morning as two maintenance men cleared brush on Juba Mountain Road. The sharp blade on Richard Allen Brown's trimmer hit something and slashed the back of his leg, severing an artery. His co-worker tried to fashion a tourniquet and then, because his cellphone had no reception, frantically ran a half-mile uphill to the nearest house to call for an ambulance from a land line.

The Sperryville Volunteer Rescue Squad arrived eight minutes after the call. Two other companies responded as well and a medevac helicopter was called, all too late for the 67-year-old Sperryville man, an avid hunter and fisherman whose family said he "just loved to make people laugh."

Respondents rated the following on a scale of “Not important at all” (1) to “Very important” (4).

<b>The issues of concern</b>	<b>Average rating</b>
1. Internet service	3.35
2. Cell phone coverage	3.33
3. Maintaining beauty of the county	3.32
4. Maintaining family farms	3.24
5. Quality of rivers	3.19
6. Maintaining night skies	3.06
7. Limiting taxes	3.02
8. Availability of resources to allow “aging in place”	2.95
9. Control of drunk driving and illegal drug use	2.89
10. Quality of public education for children	2.83
11. Availability of health services	2.77
12. Housing affordability	2.77
13. Services for the elderly	2.72
14. Availability of mental health services	2.69
15. Support for victims of domestic violence	2.67
16. Matching workers with jobs	2.64
17. Crime control	2.64
18. Opportunities for job training	2.50
19. Housing availability	2.48
20. Maintaining the County road network	2.48
21. Availability of retail businesses	2.45
22. Supporting the tourism industry	2.44
23. Improving the County road network	2.26
24. Parks and recreation facilities	2.21
25. Child care services	2.01

Source: University of Virginia Center for Survey Research

Laura Stanton

Rappahannock residents gripe about a myriad of inconveniences from the county’s spotty cellphone service – the missed call from a doctor’s office or a teacher, the important text message that didn’t get through, the boss or a customer not being able to find them in a pinch. Mostly they grin – or grit their teeth – and bear it. Some would prefer no service to a profusion of cell towers.

But Richard Brown's death on the side of Juba Mountain Road that October 2014 morning was a stark reminder that the wide gaps in cell service across the county can be a matter of life and death.

That helps explain why four out of five residents surveyed by the University of Virginia for the Foothills Forum ranked inadequate cellphone and internet coverage as the biggest issues facing the county.

The wide-ranging survey conducted last fall and released last week shone a bright light on more than a score of issues that residents see as important to the future of Rappahannock, one of the most pristine and sparsely populated counties in the Commonwealth.

Each of Rappahannock's 4,200 households was mailed a survey, and 42 percent filled them out – an unusually high response rate. The News ran the full results April 14 under a cooperative agreement with Foothills Forum, a nonprofit group that citizens formed in 2014 to enhance local news coverage.

The survey showed something everybody knows and appreciates: people love it here in a county that bills itself as "A Scenic Masterpiece Made Perfect by Nature." They want the beauty, the mountain vistas, the clean rivers and the dark, starlit skies preserved, even if they must drive out of the county to shop at a supermarket or fill a prescription. They like the job that county government, the schools and social service agencies are doing. They don't want to move anyplace else. They want taxes kept low.

But beneath the high levels of satisfaction, the respondents showed a keen awareness of the challenges the county faces. More than 70 percent were receptive to some, unspecified changes; the rest want it to stay just as it is. Almost everybody places a high value on privacy.

### | *Part One: Life in Jewel of Virginia*

The News explored these challenges in interviews with more than two dozen Rappahannock residents from all walks of life – homeowners, business people, elected officials, and leaders of the many volunteer and civic groups.

These issues have been discussed and debated endlessly for years at Board of Supervisors meetings and other forums – the graying of the population of 7,300; the difficulty of filling depleted ranks of fire and rescue volunteers; the lack of affordable housing and jobs as well as high land prices and zoning restrictions that make it difficult for young people to make a life in Rappahannock; the absence of a commercial tax base that could ease pressure on homeowners' property taxes. Some see a divide between those who have lived here their whole lives and those who move here, often in or on the verge of retirement. Others say it's not the locals but some weekenders and new retirees who are most resistant to change.

These challenges ricochet against each other and accelerate. To probe beneath the surface, the News asked people about their own attachments to the county, what approaches to the challenges they'd take and how they envision their future.

## **The Young and the Old**

Two generations – the young and the old – live markedly different lives in Rappahannock County. Young people wonder where to find any work, much less a job on which they can afford to buy a house. Elders wonder if they can stay in their homes when they need more help with everyday living.

Rappahannock residents stand among the oldest in the Commonwealth, with a median age of 49.9. That's a dozen years older than all of Virginia and four to nine years older than neighboring counties. The 2010 Census found 19 percent of residents were 65 and older, a 46 percent jump in just 10 years. A fifth of the population is 17 and younger and three-fifths are working age (18-64).

Almost 28 percent of those who answered the Foothills Forum survey were over 65. Three-fifths expressed concern about the availability of resources to allow “aging in place.” Some are dealing now with the difficulties of lining up health aides or getting to doctor appointments outside the county. Others in their 50s and 60s look down the road and ponder what lies ahead.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. I do have a daughter and sister in the county but I don’t want to put the burden on my family,” said Mike Cave, 61, of Flint Hill, a retired Virginia Department of Transportation supervisor and lifelong resident.

“We have watched a number of our friends move away from Rappahannock because they could no longer afford to care for their property and themselves,” said Bette Mahoney of Washington, a retired federal executive who helped design the Foothills Forum survey.

Nancy Buntin, 66, said it isn’t easy to grow old in the county without family help. The retired Loudoun County teacher returned home to Washington in 2009 to care for her dying father, former Rappahannock Sheriff and Virginia State Trooper Bill Buntin, and her mother, Betty Buntin, the former superintendent of welfare.

Betty Buntin, who turns 100 this year, drove herself until 2011 but now, “I take Mother wherever she needs to go. She always wanted to stay in her home and that’s what she’s going to do,” said Nancy. If she cannot find enough assistance locally, she is hoping second cousins “will help me get into some type of care situation down near them in southern Virginia” where her grandfather farmed tobacco.

Nancy, like the majority of respondents to the Foothills Forum survey, thinks the county has to make some changes. “I feel the county has to grow. I see small towns dying for want of business. We need something to keep us going,” she said. She watched Loudoun County undergo major changes and urbanization and hopes it doesn’t come to that, but said, “Once change begins, it accelerates.” A large scale housing development in Rappahannock would be “a precursor to more big changes. In my heart I don’t want that. But we need more small businesses coming in.”

Stonewall-Hawthorne District Supervisor Chris Parrish, 68, a second-generation farmer growing hay and raising cattle on his Thornton River Farm, is sanguine about the county demographics. “People have been growing old and dying forever. That’s going to keep happening. Hopefully the family steps in and takes care of them. All these people have a choice to sell their property and buy a house next to a hospital if they’re really concerned about that,” he said.

Beverly Jones, an executive coach and leadership consultant who is vice chair of the Foothills Forum and whose Buckeye Farm is in Slate Mills, said, “We don’t want to turn into an old folks’ community with poor services for the elderly.”

Cliff Miller IV, 45, who’s given rebirth to the antiques store and added a pub to the landmark red schoolhouse on his family’s Sperryville property, sounded a similar note. “People come here to retire. Do you want a population that’s all over 60 years old? It’s not a very vibrant community when you have that.”

“There aren’t a lot of jobs unless you want to open a microbrewery or wash dishes or wait tables at the Inn at Little Washington,” said Hampton Supervisor John Lesinski. Land and home prices are out of reach “when you have the income of a nurse or starting teacher.”

“In Rappahannock, unless you work for the county, VDOT or some small business, there’s not enough to sustain life,” said Paul Komar, 65, president of the Castleton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company and longtime resident who previously endured a commute of 96 miles each way to his job for Lockheed Martin in Crystal City.

Donna Marquisee, 58, a native plants gardener and landscaper, observed, “There’s no middle-aged here. You’re either young or you’re old.”

Donna and husband Steve, a luthier – he makes string instruments – moved to Rappahannock from even more rustic Bath County in 2000 “so our kids could grow up in a world like we grew up in, where there wasn’t much development.” The boys, Forrest and Jonathan, now in their 20s, have stayed, with Jonathan working for the Piedmont Environmental Council and Forrest making his living as a songwriter and musician, playing with the bluegrass Gold Top County Ramblers and, with his brother and others, in Madonnas in a Field, a “rockin’ country” band.

Forrest entered the county’s music scene after Mary Washington University as an intern to documentary filmmaker Steve Willis. Steve Marquisee built his son a recording studio where Forrest has recorded his own and others’ records.

“It would be great to have my own place. Luckily I get along with my parents well enough that I don’t have to worry about that,” he said. The Madonnas play gigs in Charlottesville and D.C. but also close to home. “I’m lucky there are places close by where we can play locally and don’t have to schlep our gear 100 miles.”

“I don’t make a lot of money,” he said, but he loves the outdoors and the scenery and doesn’t mind having to drive to Culpeper or Front Royal for Thai food. He dreams of catching a big break and touring the country, but when he gets off the road, it will be Rappahannock to which he returns home.

Wakefield District’s Roger Welch, 69, chair of the Board of Supervisors, said young people face “the same choices today” that he did when he graduated from Rappahannock High School a half-century ago: to stay and work on a farm, leave for college or training, or find a job elsewhere. “We do not have manufacturing, large box stores and things like that to hire people and create jobs. Studies always bring up [the need for] more jobs, more affordable housing. We don’t have them.”

## Answering calls for help



Dennis Brack

“Up to this point, volunteer services in many areas, including fire and rescue, have kept taxes moderate,” said Harold Beebout, 75, chief of the Sperryville Volunteer Rescue Squad. But now, he believes, the drop in volunteerism and increased demand for services by the elderly makes higher taxes inevitable. Beebout worries that will drive out more young families and fuel further “gentrification, with an increasingly wealthy and aging population.”

The future of Rappahannock’s all-volunteer fire and rescue companies hangs in the balance. Few – including supervisors and some company chiefs – doubt that the county soon will have to hire at least a few full-time emergency medical technicians or firefighters to answer calls. The ranks of volunteers are thinning as fewer young men and women sign up. One rescue worker is 82 and answered several hundred calls last year.

Harold Beebout, 75, chief of the Sperryville Volunteer Rescue Squad, himself ran 220 calls and “over 1,600 since we started counting in 2008.” Beebout and wife Mary Frances leMat, the Foothills treasurer, bought their 32-acre home in 1977 while still in the middle of careers as executives, respectively, at Mathematica and Social & Scientific Systems Inc. After retirement, the rescue squad became his passion.

“The flow of new volunteers is simply not large enough to maintain our all-volunteer system,” said Beebout, who advised on the survey. “The volunteers running the majority of EMS calls and a substantial portion of fire calls are in their 60s and 70s. Many have said they are retiring from EMS and firefighting within the next three years.

“Up to this point, volunteer services in many areas, including fire and rescue, have kept taxes moderate,” said Beebout, an economist by training. But now, he believes, the drop in volunteerism and increased demand for services by the elderly makes a dramatic increase in taxes inevitable. He worries that will drive out more young families and fuel further “gentrification, with an increasingly wealthy and aging population.”

There are seven volunteer companies in the county. Amissville, Castleton, Chester Gap, Flint Hill and Washington handle both fire and ambulance calls; Sperryville, the oldest, has separate squads. Flint Hill Volunteer Fire & Rescue Company had no one to answer ambulance calls in January when Bill Welch, the company president, chaplain and captain of the rescue squad, was incapacitated with a knee problem. “If I could have got out of bed, I would have went in January,” said Welch, 68, who uses a crutch and has had three hip replacements and several back

surgeries.

Flint Hill has just signed up two new trained EMTs and a third is expected soon. Bill Welch believes that if the supervisors “did more to help us out,” the volunteer shortage could be solved without hiring responders. The current system still works, he said. “If people dial 911, they’ll get somebody.”



[Dennis Brack](#)

“In 1968 when I joined the fire department (in Pennsylvania), I was excited to be standing on the running board of a fire truck going down the road – which is totally illegal today – and going into a burning building,” said Paul Komar, 65, president of the Castleton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company, pictured with his wife, Sharon, the company’s EMS chief.

Komar, the Castleton chief, believes it is not a shortage of able bodies but a lack of motivation that has caused the ranks to thin. He conceded that breadwinners often must commute to jobs outside Rappahannock, but added, “Many say, ‘I wouldn’t do that job unless you paid me.’”

“In 1968 when I joined the fire department (in Pennsylvania), I was excited to be standing on the running board of a fire truck going down the road – which is totally illegal today – and going into a burning building,” he said.

“The kids look at it differently today,” said Komar. “We didn’t have internet, cellphones, the advantages the younger generation today has, where they can go on Facebook or Twitter and say, ‘Oh, yes, let’s meet over here.’ Next thing you know, they’re gone. They are not around to run calls at 2 or 3 in the morning.” Family responsibilities also lure young couples away from the fire house.

Fire and rescue volunteers get a break on personal property taxes and assistance for training costs. The state standards are exacting and the level of skill required on quarter-million-dollar ambulances with advanced life-saving equipment is formidable.

It isn’t like the old days, said Frank Huff, 68, former longtime chief of Flint Hill Volunteer Fire & Rescue, where he and wife Sherry E. Hamill-Huff both have served as EMTs. “When I started, all we had was advanced first aid and CPR. That was it .”

## The tax burden on homeowners



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"There's a fragile balance. Nobody here wants Burger King, Wal-Mart or Sheetz. That's the lifestyle we have accepted out here. However, that comes with certain consequences ... If you want to provide public services – fire and rescue, public education, maintaining your roads – you've got to have a tax base," said Hampton Supervisor John Lesinski.

Rappahannock's real estate tax rate of 70 cents per \$100 valuation is low by Northern Virginia standards, but more than neighboring Warren, Page and Madison counties and less than Culpeper and Fauquier. The Census reports the median value of an owner-occupied Rappahannock home is \$383,700 so the tax bill on that would be \$2,686.

Complaints that taxes are too high are common. A two-thirds majority in the survey said limiting taxes was important or very important.

Supervisors over the years have kept a tight rein on spending – too tight in the view of some activists demanding more social services.

More than half the current \$22.7 million county budget goes to pay for the education of the 900 students in the two schools. Some \$2.9 million is spent on public safety, \$800,000 on fire services and \$380,000 on emergency services. The county spends about \$800,000 on the landfill, \$226,000 on the public library, \$54,500 promoting tourism, and \$23,500 on parks and recreation. Some of these expenses are supplemented by state, federal and grant funding.

More than half the revenues come from taxes on real estate (\$10.8 million) and personal property (\$1.7 million). Conservation easements lower some property owners' tax bills while ensuring the land will never be developed. Mike Cave, the VDOT retiree, feels that pushes the burden onto homeowners like him.

"A lot of people buy land in the county and put it in easements," he said. "Myself, having a house and two acres, I probably pay as much in personal property and real estate taxes as some of the others who might have 25 acres."

While the Foothills Forum survey was anonymous, people were given the opportunity to write what they liked and

disliked most. One person complained about the “tax burden being placed entirely on homeowners/landowners. No business taxes in this county.” Another griped: “Taxes, for what little bit we get in services .... The property owners are paying too much.” Someone else griped: “They want to tax us for our own well water that we pay for and keep up! No!”

Some jurisdictions in Virginia tax business’ gross receipts, but not Rappahannock. Some citizen groups have argued that Rappahannock could ease the property tax burden by boosting tourism and bringing in light industry that could provide jobs without creating eyesores, traffic headaches and other problems.

Parrish, the vice chairman of the Board of Supervisors, said, “It’s kind of a pie in the sky wish that you could solve it with that.” A proposal to build a Dollar General store on Route 211 outside Washington riled many in the county in 2013. The franchise company, which sells low-priced groceries and other merchandise at 12,483 stores in 43 states, eventually backed away.

Parrish doesn’t regard it as much of a loss from a revenue and jobs standpoint. “If we want the county to remain as it is, we pretty much have to realize that the burden of maintaining the county is going to remain on the individual houses,” he said.

“There’s a fragile balance. Nobody here wants Burger King, Wal-Mart or Sheetz. That’s the lifestyle we have accepted out here,” said Lesinski, who works in commercial real estate outside the county. “However, that comes with certain consequences.... If you want to provide public services – fire and rescue, public education, maintaining your roads – you’ve got to have a tax base .”

## The dead zones

Given how passionately people in Rappahannock feel about maintaining the beauty of the county, it’s remarkable that improving internet and cell service ranked higher as the top priorities in the survey (it was close; roughly four of five respondents felt strongly about all three issues).

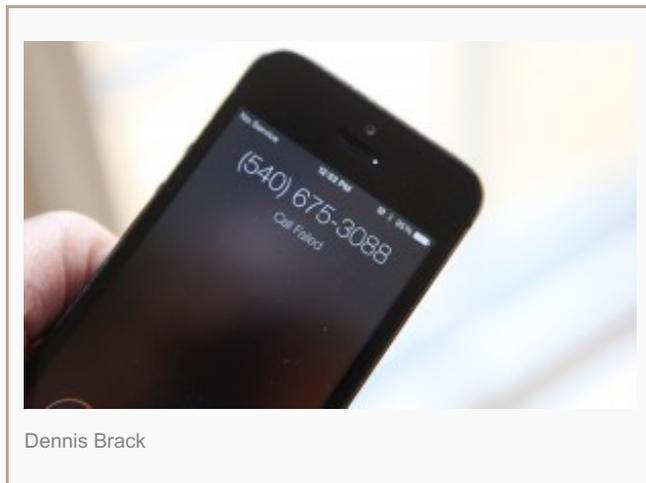
Apart from the worries about public safety, no one thinks it would be easy to provide blanket internet and cell coverage across the county’s 267 square miles. Cable and phone companies seem to have made the calculus that there aren’t enough potential new customers to make it worth their while to close all the gaps.

“The only reason Sprint came here was when they advertised they covered the U.S., they had to prove it,” said Supervisor Welch. “Roughly 60 percent of the county has cell coverage now. We’ve got so many hollows and dead spots, we would never, ever get 100 percent unless new technology came down the road.”

One-fifth of those who responded to the survey lacked internet at home. For those who do have it, 43 percent described the quality as fair or poor. Nearly 80 percent of business people said the internet was important to their business.

Tourists driving through Sperryville on the way to Old Rag Mountain or down 211 to Shenandoah National Park are surprised to find no bars on their cellphones. “It’s an ecotourism issue,” said Lesinski, who won an open seat on the board last fall pledging to work for better connectivity.

Visitors are disappointed when they go “to the wineries and B&Bs and restaurants and they can’t call back home to



see how the baby sitter is doing or, frankly, if they just can't download an app or text a picture of a glass of wine and say, 'Hey, look where I am now,'" he said.

An even bigger issue is getting service for children to do homework after they go home from wired classrooms, said the former school board chair.

Past proposals to build more cell towers in the county, even if camouflaged as trees or silos, have stirred opposition. Monica Worth, a communications consultant and past president of the Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection, fought a proposal to erect a cell tower at the high school on grounds that student drivers would reach for their phones as soon as they got out of classes and become distracted drivers.

Worth said "the internet is much more important to me – and I believe to the county at large. Access to empowering information resources and education is what's spotty here. Just about everyone has a land line and can make a phone call. Cellphones are a convenience and an emergency tool, but they will not be reliable in an emergency until cell technology itself changes and can reach every nook and cranny here."

Even a landline is no guarantee of good service. Jim Manwaring, whose 1,100-acre cattle farm sits in the shadow of Red Oak Mountain in Woodville, said, "The land lines are falling apart and Verizon doesn't care about that business. You call to get a repairman and they say, 'We'll have somebody there in two weeks.'"

Donna Marquisee, who lives in a mountainside hollow outside Washington, has no cellphone and doesn't want one. "That's the big enigma," she said. "We want the convenience of being able to communicate with everybody at any moment but we also want our privacy."

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