

CO-OP CONNECTIONS



Virginia
Cooperative Council

Quarterly newsletter of the Virginia Cooperative Council - "Achieving together what one cannot do alone."

Winter 2019



VCC President Richard G. Johnstone, Jr. presented Allen Melton with the Cooperative Leadership Award in recognition of his 45 years of service to Virginia's cooperatives.

"(Allen) has been an indispensable member of the Council for many years, serving as staff and in leadership roles on our board of directors."

VCC President Richard Johnstone, speaking about 2019 Leadership Award recipient Allen W. Melton

Council honors longtime leader

Allen Melton of Mechanicsville received the Virginia Cooperative Council's (VCC) 2019 Leadership Award in a surprise presentation Oct. 3 at the Council's annual Co-op Month Breakfast, held at The Place in Glen Allen, Va.

A native of Galax, Va., Melton's co-op career began in 1973 when he joined Southern States. During his 43-year tenure, he served as manager for retail support, as well as of accounting and of corporate loss prevention, before retiring in 2016 as manager of operations support.

Melton's contributions to the Council began in the early 1990s and continue to this day. He has served numerous terms on the VCC board, including several as an officer, and was VCC Executive Secretary from 2016-2019.

"I continue to rely on Allen's wisdom and expertise in hosting the annual Virginia Institute of Cooperative Education," said Mary Howell, who took over as VCC Executive Secretary earlier this year. A video of Johnstone presenting Melton with his award can be viewed on the Council's Facebook page.

In This Issue

- Annual Meeting set for March 11, 2020
- Virginia Foundation of Cooperation raises \$325 from silent auction
- VICE alumni profiles: Morgan Slaven
- Scroggs-Raper Scholarship earners honored at VA Tech Awards Banquet; applications due March 1, 2020

Highlights from Bette Brand's Co-op Month address

"We know that co-ops are an important and underutilized tool for revitalizing Rural America, but how is USDA promoting and developing them? USDA is composed of eight mission areas, with an Undersecretary overseeing each one. Rural Development is a mission area with three agencies: Rural Housing Service, Rural Utilities Service, and Rural Business-Cooperative Service, which is the agency I lead.

"Our cooperative programs have always provided invaluable data, statistics, and research that help cooperatives make fact-based decisions and strategically plan. However, until now these programs have always operated mostly on their own – separate from the rest of RBCS. Under a recent realignment at the National Office, we are redesigning our structure so that all our staff work more closely together (and are) aware of all the programs within our portfolio that cooperatives might want to consider applying for, and to help cooperatives navigate the application process.

"Developing a deeper understanding of cooperatives will also help our staff ensure that they write rules and regulations in ways that are cooperative-friendly. For example: currently SBA requires a personal guarantee for each loan they provide. This requirement is not easy for cooperatives to fulfill since they oftentimes have hundreds of member-owners. Because all of our staff at RBCS now have a better understanding of cooperatives we have structured our programs to not require a personal guarantee from them.

"We want to make sure that cooperatives maximize their access to financing through all our programs. Our Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program annually distributes roughly \$5.8 Million dollars to 29-30 cooperative development centers. These centers are mostly non-profits, along with a few that are based at universities. They provide technical assistance to develop new co-ops and provide some help to recently organized co-ops. The Virginia Foundation for Agriculture, Innovation and Rural Sustainability, or VA FAIRS, is an especially important partner of ours. In the past three years, VA FAIRS has produced 15 feasibility studies, 45 business plans, and more than 40 grant applications which resulted in over \$6 Million grant dollars flowing to your rural communities. Focusing on agriculture cooperatives, VA FAIRS has been particularly suc-

cessful in helping producers apply for our Value-Added Producer Grants, or VAPGs. These grants help ag producers enter into value-added activities, and if a producer is a farmer co-op they can receive priority in the application process.

"There are many programs in USDA Rural Development's portfolio, and we at RBCS are dedicated to ensuring that all prospective or current cooperatives are aware of them.

"As we celebrate cooperatives this month, I challenge each of you to look for new and unique ways that they might be used in your own community. Doug O'Brien, President and CEO of the National Cooperative Business Association, said that we are currently living in a "cooperative moment". He defined that moment as one where people feel particularly excluded both economically and societally. These moments have happened periodically throughout our country's history, and on each of these occasions forming cooperatives was an empowering and democratic way for folks to make sure that their voice was heard and that their opinions or preferences count."



VCC President Richard Johnstone with USDA Administrator – Rural Service Bette Brand, a past VCC board member. At the Co-op Month Breakfast, the Virginia Agribusiness Council surprised Brand with an award recognizing her many contributions.

Members in the news

This past September, the **Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives**, in conjunction with the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's international unit and with support from the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corp. organized "United We Light: Project Bolivia." As told in the November/December issue of *Cooperative Living* magazine, 15 linemen from eight member co-ops, including VCC members **A&N, Northern Neck, Rappahannock, Shenandoah Valley & Southside**, traveled to the Oruro region of this South American nation, working at high altitude and in primitive conditions to bring electricity to 52 households across five villages. "We are approaching the holiday season, and through their selfless efforts, they gave the best gift of all—the gift of light," said CEO Richard G. Johnstone, Jr. Read more at www.co-opliving.com and mark your calendars for VCC's Annual Meeting at Graves Mountain Lodge on March 11, 2020 when John Medved of **Rappahannock Electric Cooperative** will share their story.

Starting Dec. 5 with the topic "Personality & Team Work," **Farm Credit of the Virginias** (FCV) is hosting a year-long series of webinars focused on succession planning and transition topics. "These webinars are free and held through GoToMeeting, so you can join by phone or computer from your home or office," explained Katie Frazier, FCV's Chief Marketing & External Affairs Officer. To request a full schedule, email KnowledgeCenter@FCVirginias.com.

A partnership between the **Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative**, Nestle USA and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay has earned a \$200,000 grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to help fund the Dairy Farmer Led Sustainability Project, in which six dairy farms work to improve their resource management and improve their environmental footprint.

Want to share news from your cooperative? Email mary.howell@sscoop.com or add a guest post on the Council's Facebook page.

The VICE Squad: Where are they now?

This column profiles past attendees of the Virginia Institute for Cooperative Education (VICE). Please contact VCC if you'd like to suggest a VICE graduate to feature in an upcoming issue!

Morgan Slaven, Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative

What did participating in VICE mean to you? What are your favorite memories?

I attended VICE in 2009 and NICE in 2010. These were by far the most engaging, “real world” learning experiences I participated in as a young person. VICE provided my first exposure to how a business operates and the obstacles that can arise, so that I could critically think through issues that cooperatives face every day. It was a great sneak peek as to what to expect in the working world! I ran for a state FFA office during the summer of 2009. When I walked into the room for the first day of interviews, I was excited to see several of my VICE peers were there. It was great to already have a network built into that experience and the folks that I met at VICE continue to be peers I engage with on a regular basis, personally and professionally. NICE was held at the University of Tennessee the year I attended, and I have great memories of bonding with participants from other states and singing in the talent show.

How has participating in VICE and NICE influenced your career?

While at VICE, I learned the core focus of any cooperative is to serve the needs of its members. While I have a relatively young career, every paid job I've held has been tied to serving a membership base, from working as an assistant at American Farm Bureau Federation in DC, to my current role as the manager of public affairs at Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative. My family are SVEC members, both home and on the farm, and serving the community I grew up in makes my professional life doubly fulfilling.



Morgan Slaven, 2009 VICE participant

Executive Secretary's Message

VCC's Co-op Month celebration on Oct. 3 had a bumper crop of 55 members who enjoyed an inspirational address from USDA Administrator Bette Brand, a longtime VCC member. After we presented Bette with a Graves Mountain Lodge gift basket and history book related to her current position at the USDA, she responded with this personal note:

“What a great morning with so many of my Virginia friends. I also wanted to thank you for the book on the history of Agricultural Cooperative Service. What a treasure! I was thrilled to find a photo of one of my most valuable team members, Assistant Deputy Administrator, Andrew Jermolowicz. I am reading every page and remember most of the history from the outside looking in. Now, as Paul Harvey would say, I am learning the ‘rest of the story.’”

“Thank you so much for your work with VCC and your passion to keep the organization growing and relevant. If you ever need anything from USDA Rural Development, please let me know. Bette”

A range of donations from our members helped our silent auction raise \$325 to benefit next year's VICE, scheduled from March 27-29, 2020. If you know any 16-19 year olds who may wish to attend, send them to www.virginia.coop to complete an application!

During Co-op Month, the Council sent out two media releases and had a social media campaign with daily Facebook posts.

During Co-op Month, I attended the Southern States retirees' luncheon on Oct. 25, sharing the news about Allen Melton's award and encouraging more to join as individual members. On Oct. 30, I spoke to a dinner club of University of Richmond students and faculty about Virginia cooperatives and some of the ways they are currently working to meet member needs.

As 2019 draws to a close, we'll be gearing up for next year's Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education by updating some of our tests and materials. Many thanks to all who've already mailed in your membership renewal and consider making a tax-deductible gift to the Virginia Foundation of Cooperation.

Wishing everyone a safe and happy holiday season!

- Mary Howell



The Virginia Cooperative Council shared membership information with Southern States retirees who gathered Oct. 25 for a luncheon at Willow Oaks Country Club in Richmond.



2019 Scroggs–Raper Scholarship recipients at the VA Tech Awards Banquet on Oct. 2. From left : VCC Past President JT Anderson, Grayson Lambert, Chris Kuhler, Matt Holt (AAEC Dept. Chair), Eli Mefford, Hunter Sanderson, Garrett Shumate & Ethan Wagoner.

Scroggs-Raper Scholarship applications available

Thanks to generous donations from Luther Raper and Claude Scroggs, the Virginia Foundation of Cooperation, Inc. (VFC) is able to fund annual scholarships to students at Virginia's land grant universities. Applications for the coming year are due **March 1, 2020** and may be accessed at www.virginia.coop or by contacting VCC.

Donations to the Foundation are always welcomed and are tax-deductible.

Welcome to our newest members!

Carroll Gilbert, Southern States retiree

Natasha Skelton, The Conservation Fund

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