

# Relief gives local restaurants a fighting chance

After bruising year, CARES Act begins to offer glimpse of future stability for struggling industry

By **Laura Wood Habr**  
Guest Columnist

More than a year ago, on March 16, as the lights went dim in dining rooms, cafes and coffee houses, I joined several other restaurant owners in a friend's empty eatery. All eyes were focused on a TV while we waited for guidance from the president at a White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing. President Trump told Americans to avoid eating and drinking at bars, restaurants and public food courts; avoid gathering in groups of more than 10 people; and avoid discretionary travel but, he offered no plan or relief to businesses being shut down.

Essentially, it was the referee blowing the whistle and clearing restaurants from the field with no commitment to assist our industry. The president had previously declared federal emergencies for hurricanes which had allowed businesses to file insurance

claims for "business interruptions," but not this time.

Restaurants were left on the sidelines, through no fault of our own, while governors competed to balance the public health threats, politics and the sputtering economy due to COVID-19. Our hospitality industry was sacked by the pandemic. Since then, we have petitioned and advised every level of government that the proposed CARES Act was insufficient and warned of the dire consequences if further delayed.

The National Restaurant Association estimates that more than 110,000 restaurants and bars in the United States closed or temporarily went out of business last year. More than 500,000 remain in an economic free-fall. More than 11 million employees and 5 million food supply chain workers have been impacted, according to the Independent Restaurant Coalition.

Like many, my family's restau-

rant has managed to barely squeak by with support from loyal customers and a dedicated staff. Those who succeed in our industry must master an array of life skills, and pandemic required new survival skills: grant processes, arbitration, business model innovation, and interpretation of changing health department COVID-19 regulations, while keeping our smiles on behind our masks during curbside pick-up and delivery.

As more Virginians are vaccinated and our economy gradually improves, restaurants continue to struggle. That's why the American Rescue Plan is such a crucial lifeline. President Joe Biden said, "help is on the way," and he delivered. His plan includes \$28.6 billion in grants for restaurants whose revenue fell in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. These grants prioritize independent restaurants and small chains and they set aside \$5 billion for the smallest restaurants with annual revenue less than \$500,000. This plan also puts another \$7.25 billion into the Paycheck Protection Program which is above what was allocated in the

December COVID-19 relief bill. Hopefully, with over 7 million Virginians scheduled to receive the \$1,400 stimulus checks more customers will be able to dine out and travel.

With such promising news, it's incredibly frustrating to hear critics say that it's wasteful spending or to simply advise opening up the economy. If only the solution was that easy.

Restaurants are cornerstones of our communities. We gather there with family and friends and nurture vital community-building relationships. Eateries boost surrounding small businesses and help create economically secure and resilient neighborhoods. This pandemic has informed our government at all levels of the contributions that small businesses make to our overall economy and quality of life.

Our government works best when our leaders work together. The federal leadership of the Biden administration along with congressional actions by Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine and Reps. Bobby Scott, Gerry Connolly, Don Beyer, Don McEachin, Elaine Luria, Abigail

Spanberger and Jennifer Wexton have finally given us a plan. Their work has allowed Gov. Ralph Northam to provide the additional assistance we've been waiting for.

This pandemic provoked innovative thinking by local leaders. Virginia Beach's Commissioner of the Revenue Phil Kellam worked with the Virginia Beach City Council to temporarily waive the meals tax on our customers, and to suspend fees for businesses required to maintain Virginia ABC licenses for 2021.

COVID-19 has compounded a complicated and fast evolving world, and I'm confident we will meet these challenges as we emerge into the new post-pandemic realities.

The American Rescue Plan is proof that we can work together. I'm grateful for the American people and the hope we now have.

*Laura Wood Habr, of Virginia Beach, is a small business restaurant owner and a founding member of several local and national nonprofit and business organizations.*

## VMI already has the right man for top job

Interim superintendent Wins deserves position

By **Gordon C. Morse**

There's really only one point to this piece: that retired Army Major Gen. Cedric Wins, the interim superintendent of Virginia Military Institute, should get the position permanently.

And the sooner that happens, the better.

Wins has rapidly earned admiration since returning to his alma mater and clearly has VMI headed in the right direction. If there's a dissenting opinion, I have failed to find it.

But let's stop there for a moment and broaden the context.

Last week, I asked an old friend — a native Virginian whom I've known for decades — what jumps to mind when you hear the words "Virginia Military Institute?"

Romance, she responded. The soul within.

You mean, as an ideal, I said, adherence to a code of conduct, to tell the truth, to be honorable?

Yes, "but the uniforms help, of course."

Then she added, "But they don't always get there. We're discussing human beings, remember?"

But they do try?

Right, she said. Constantly. That's the point.

So the idea, much promulgated by VMI, is that the institute revolves — culturally and practically (there are severe sanctions for infidelity to the truth) — around a long-nurtured concept of integrity.

Of honor, in other words. The school and this thought are one and the same; they feed off each other.

Who would think to start such a school today? It would be an interesting challenge, possibly difficult.

But such a school does exist in Virginia.

VMI is state-supported and

sits in Lexington. It inculcates (demands) a sense of honor in the belief that young people can realize that in themselves and become principled, effective leaders.

It has been doing so for a very long time — the measured results bear out the vaunted theory — but not perfectly.

Because, presently, it's under investigation, the administration of which was outsourced to Barnes & Thornburg, an Indiana law firm, and funded with a \$1 million state appropriation.

Why? Because of allegations published by The Washington Post last fall, which sent official Virginia — all Democrats these days — into a tizzy.

In short order, someone (nameless evermore) drafted a letter for the governor to sign, then ran up and down the corridors looking for other prominent officials to sign it. First line: "We write to express our deep concerns about the clear and appalling culture of ongoing structural racism at Virginia Military Institute."

Sentence first, verdict later.

Investigation — a magic, but much abused device. Useful in so many settings. There's a Virginia Parole Board investigation cranking up. What about that mess in Virginia Beach? Time for an investigation, everyone says.

We all know, of course, that the utility of these investigations pale beside their allure as political theater. But it tells you something else too relevant to VMI, relevant to most things Virginia these days: There is a large body of people residing in Virginia — increasingly serving in elective office — who are clueless about Virginia.

And, of those, there is another significant set of people whose ignorance of Virginia is willful and whose hostility to Virginia is pronounced. Can't dump the



Virginia Military Institute Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, interim superintendent, visits students in COVID-19 isolation and quarantine at the Econo Lodge, in Lexington, Virginia, on Feb. 17. **HEATHER ROUSSEAU/THE ROANOKE TIMES**

history of this place too fast, so why bother to understand any of it? Just cut it loose.

In all its vaunted ideals, with all its assorted imperfections, real or perceived, VMI may be the closest, truest institutional manifestation of Virginia itself. Others will argue other institutions, but VMI gets to the heart of it, romantically speaking.

Here's where Virginia set out to do something brave and true and, in many ways, succeeded. But the school, like the commonwealth, involves a high measure of complexity, historical and otherwise.

Or as someone said about church: Many attend, but few understand.

In Virginia, sadly, fewer and fewer understand. Or care to do so.

So with VMI under scrutiny — the Indiana folks will be issuing a report, with recommendations, help us — there has to be a considered response. It behooves the school, from this point forward, to tell its story with sustained vigor and purpose.

No longer assume that anybody knows anything. Work from there, from the basics, and keep at it.

And recognize, in Gen. Wins, a man of proven ability and shrewd temperament. A leader.

Last week, for the first time in VMI's 181-year history, a woman was given the highest-ranking

cadet position. Kasey Meredith of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, will lead the Corps of Cadets as regimental commander come the fall.

Meredith got the promotion because she earned it. But it's one more example of how VMI never, ever gives up on itself.

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## A heroic effort to feed students in Chesapeake

By **Larry Wade**  
Chesapeake Public Schools

As the country collectively reflects on the one-year mark of COVID-19, I am thinking about the countless ways the Chesapeake Public Schools School Nutrition Services staff has come together throughout the pandemic. Their unmatched resiliency and dedication to feeding our community's children deserve citywide recognition.

Childhood hunger was an issue before COVID-19, and now the need is much higher due to parents facing lost jobs and wages. No Kid Hungry estimates that as many as 1 in 6 kids in Chesapeake struggled with hunger in 2020, up from 1 in 8 prior to the pandemic. The economic hardship this crisis has caused for many families will continue even as our community begins to rebuild.

For many students, school is

the only place where a nutritious, wholesome meal is assured. During the pandemic, school nutrition services team members from Chesapeake Public Schools doubled down to ensure students stayed healthy and nourished.

When schools first pivoted to virtual instruction last March, School Nutrition Services in Chesapeake needed to innovate. Only then could we remove access barriers and reach more children, while at the same time keeping families and staff safe.

Two schools served as central kitchens where meals were prepared, packaged and loaded onto school buses. The meals were then taken to schools around the city to safely connect students with meals while promoting social distancing and other safety mitigation strategies. Our team passed out multiple days' worth of "Grab and Go" meals at a time.

What started as a simple curb-

side service has grown into a program that serves breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks at all 45 schools from 3:30-5:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Meal distribution is planned so that students will have meals and snacks for virtually an entire week.

To say that our teams are superheroes would be a vast understatement.

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a virtual town hall hosted by No Kid Hungry Virginia that highlighted both the opportunities and importance of school and community meals in continuing to address food insecurity in the commonwealth. As a panelist, I reflected on all the incredible work nutrition teams continue to do for our community.

An initiative that has been tremendously helpful in building awareness with families is "SNN," or "School Nutrition News,"

designed to help spread the word about meal distributions. School Nutrition Services in Chesapeake created this program to allow our teams to effectively communicate to caretakers when and where meal service was happening and how they could access food for their families.

From the outset, we embraced an "all-hands-on-deck" mentality. From the superintendent to the school board, principals, community partners and nutrition staff, we rallied our collective efforts to ensure students received healthy and nutritious meals despite learning taking place virtually.

Since Chesapeake opened for in-person learning for select grades in September, our meal program, of course, has continued to be an essential tool for supporting student readiness.

The USDA recently extended federal child nutrition waivers — originally implemented last year — through Sept. 30. These meal

waivers provide critical flexibilities and allow us to reach more kids. As schools and community organizations continue to reimagine traditional meal programs during this ongoing crisis, the waivers make it possible to connect kids with the nutrition they need.

At the end of the day, you can't teach a hungry child. As our region continues navigating the economic, social and political impacts of COVID-19, childhood food security must remain a top priority. It's imperative, now more than ever, that school nutrition teams, government leaders and community members come together to find long-term solutions to solve hunger in Virginia and beyond.

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