



## Updates from the Office of Economic Development

### Save the Date!



Join us on Saturday, October 4th from 10am – 2pm at Piedmont Virginia Community College Bolick Center and explore a career in the trades! Local and regional employers will be on site with vehicles, equipment and tools for you to try out. Learn from Master Craftsmen, Journeymen and Apprentices what a day in the life of their career is like, get your questions answered, and watch live demonstrations from these professionals. Staff from Piedmont Virginia Community College and Charlottesville Area Technical Education Center will be available to provide information on courses and tuition assistance available to help you get started on an exciting and in demand career pathway. Talk with employers about their job openings, advancement opportunities, salary, benefits and more. Food, music and prizes will round out a fun filled day for

the entire family. Employers who are interested in participating or sponsoring, please email [bichej@charlottesville.gov](mailto:bichej@charlottesville.gov) or visit <https://www.nextgenskilledtradesday.org/>. You're not going to want to miss it!

### Charlottesville Business Recognized at CBIC Gala

During its 26th Annual Gala, the **Charlottesville Business Innovation Council (CBIC)** recognized a number of businesses and individuals from the greater Charlottesville area for their achievements in science, technology, innovation, and social good. Awardees included several companies from the City of Charlottesville including:

**Virginia Diodes** – Business of the Year  
**Caju AI** – Startup of the Year  
**Tiger** – Employer of the Year



Photo Courtesy of Pura Photo

During the event, our very own Chris Engel presented the award for Student Entrepreneur of the Year to Adair Maynard. The Office of Economic Development has been pleased to sponsor this award for a number of years, in support of the young entrepreneurs in our region.

A list of all finalists and award winners can be found on the [2025 CBIC Award Finalists page](#). Please join us in congratulating all of these deserving companies and individuals, and in celebrating the work that CBIC does to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in the Charlottesville area!

### Ready To Work Two Year Anniversary Celebration

**READY TO WORK**

You're invited to attend Ready to Work's Two-Year Anniversary celebration on Friday, July 18th from 9am – 11am at City Space

where we will recognize the Ready to Work employers and hear from Ready to Work graduates

and partner providers. The Ready to Work pilot was launched in July 2023 and is a partnership between the City of Charlottesville's Office of Economic Development and Rappahannock Goodwill Industries. Ready to Work is a free workforce training program that certifies jobseekers in soft skills, assists them with resume, cover letter and interview preparation, and connects them to a Ready to Work participating city employer for a guaranteed interview. In January of 2025, Ready to Work launched in Culpeper County to serve residents in the Rappahannock-Rapidan region. Representatives from the Culpeper chapter will share their experiences with their pilot as well. All are welcome but we ask that you RSVP to [bichej@charlottesville.gov](mailto:bichej@charlottesville.gov) by July 14th. If you are an employer or a jobseeker interested in participating or learning more, staff will be on site to answer questions and enroll you on the spot. Click [here](#) to learn more about the Ready to Work program. RSVP today and bring a friend!

### 3rd Annual Piedmont Pitch Winners Named

On May 29th, family, friends, supporters, and members of the Charlottesville business community packed PVCC's Bolick Center to watch five finalists pitch their ideas in the 3rd Annual Piedmont Pitch entrepreneurial competition. A collaboration among the City of Charlottesville Office of Economic Development, Albemarle County Economic Development, Central Virginia Small Business Development Center, and Community Investment Collaborative, Piedmont Pitch seeks to provide local entrepreneurs with one-on-one business advising, virtual learning opportunities, and assistance in developing a business plan, in pursuit of a total of \$15,000 in prize money.



Over 40 draft business plans were submitted and reviewed to determine the finalists, which represented several different business sectors. **New Wing Studio** offers uniquely designed cards, textiles, wallpaper, and more, while **Lyan's Sweets & More** and **Botanical Fare** specialize in specialty food and beverage offerings. Sunflower Contracting provides light contractor and maintenance services, as well as job opportunities for differently-abled individuals. **Wild Space** designs landscapes and habit gardens using flora native to the area.

During the competition, each finalist was given ten minutes to share details of their proposal and business plan, before a panel of local judges was given five minutes to ask follow up questions. After all finalists had completed their pitches, the judges deliberated before awarding the first place prize and \$10,000 to Sunflower Contracting. Wild Space took second place and \$5,000. Congratulations to Sunflower Contracting and Wild Space!

This year's Piedmont Pitch event took place immediately following the inaugural Piedmont Ascent business conference that brought together over 50 entrepreneurs and small businesses owners for an afternoon full of learning and networking opportunities.

Make sure to stay in the know about upcoming business events and opportunities in the City of Charlottesville by following the Office of Economic Development on **Facebook** and **LinkedIn**.

### VTC Microbusiness Marketing Grant Opportunity



Small, tourism-related businesses in Charlottesville with events planned to help attract tourists to Virginia currently have the opportunity to apply for up to \$5,000 in matching marketing grant funds through the Summer 2025 Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program. In order to qualify, businesses must employ 20 or fewer full-time employees and have events planned for the September to May shoulder season. The program covers a wide variety of business types including boutique retail, restaurants, craft breweries and distilleries,

boutique lodging, and more. Grant funds are provided under a 1:1 match, with businesses allowed to match through in-kind or cash contributions. The deadline for the Summer 2025 application cycle is Thursday, July 24th, so don't delay! For more information on the program, including a list of eligible items, and to submit your application, visit the VTC Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program website.

### Aspiring Entrepreneurs: There's Still Time to Join the Launchpad Program

Your window of opportunity is wide open. Charlottesville's **Launchpad** program is still accepting vendors, making now the perfect time to launch your business and connect with your future customers.

This opportunity helps to remove cost as a barrier that might otherwise keep you from participating in two of the region's top farmers' markets on Saturdays, **Charlottesville City Market** and **IX Art Park Farmers Market**, as well as **Farmers in the Park** during the middle of the week. Launchpad gives new and emerging entrepreneurs the chance to showcase their products, engage with customers, and grow their brand within a supportive community. Whether you're just getting started or testing a new idea, this is a space where your business can thrive with minimal upfront costs.



Vendors receive a tent, table, and only need to pay the one-time application fees for the three market experiences. With weekly vending options downtown on Saturdays and throughout the week, there's plenty of room to share your vision and gain traction.

Don't let this season pass you by. There's still time to step in, show up, and build something great. Charlottesville is ready for you.

## Business Spotlight: Vegan Comfort Soul Food



Owned and operated by Casandra Rodriguez, **Vegan Comfort Soul Food** began in 2020 and has become a local favorite for those craving delicious, healthier versions of traditional soul food classics. A Charlottesville native raised in Fluvanna County, Casandra returned to the area to raise her family.

She shared that Charlottesville's strong and supportive food scene made it the perfect place to launch her business. Vegan Comfort Soul Food is best known for transforming hearty, meat-based soul food dishes into flavorful vegan alternatives free of dairy, dye, and nuts. What started as a personal mission to create healthier meals for her family at

home later transitioned into a full-service catering and vendor business. Menu standouts include the vegan shepherd's pie, mac 'n' cheese, and candied butternut squash.

Like many entrepreneurs, Casandra has learned valuable lessons along the way. "Structure your business the right way from the start", she advises. "Keep your finances separate and try to be prepared for the unexpected; things happen." Lastly, "grants and funding can be hard to access if your foundation isn't solid."

From local events to university partnerships, Vegan Comfort Soul Food has built a strong presence in the community. She has completed over fifty events locally, with more on the way. Various UVA departments have been amazing supporters, and **BEACON Kitchen** has been a huge help, allowing her to operate out of a new commercial kitchen facility.

She offers these encouraging words for aspiring entrepreneurs, "do as many events as you can in the beginning, network, and stay focused. Most importantly, don't give up."

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## OED Fun Fact

Did you know that Juneteenth was originally called "Jubilee Day"? The name "Juneteenth" emerged later, a combination of "June" and "nineteenth", referencing the date of the announcement. Recognition of this day in Charlottesville will be held on Saturday, June 14th at the Jefferson School City Center Lawn. There will be a parade at 10:00 AM, the Black Business Expo from 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM along with live performances throughout the day



The Albemarle County & City of Charlottesville Buy Local campaign highlights small businesses within the Charlottesville-Albemarle area through a multi-channel, multimedia promotional and educational campaign. To learn more about the campaign, click [here!](#)



The Central Virginia Small Business Development Center is a team of business and technical experts available to advise and assist entrepreneurs, confidentially and free of charge. They offer 1:1 assistance, curated research, access to technical experts and professionals, and timely events/training. To see upcoming SBDC events, click [here!](#)

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