

Emily Oaks Named Executive Director of Foothills Forum

Veteran journalist Emily Oaks has been named the new Executive Director of Foothills Forum, the community-supported nonprofit that provides award-winning local news coverage of Rappahannock County.

Oaks has several decades of experience working for small and mid-size newspapers, most recently as editor of the *Culpeper Star-Exponent*.

She succeeds Andy McLeod, who has served as Executive Director for the past three years during which Foothills' journalism and financial support grew dramatically. McLeod informed the Foothills board several months ago that he planned to step down when a successor could be found.

"We knew that replacing Andy would be difficult," said Foothills board Chair Andrew Alexander. "But we're fortunate to find someone with Emily's breadth of experience and deep commitment to quality local journalism."

"It has been a privilege to serve this unique, vitally important journalistic enterprise - and to be a part of Rappahannock, a very special community," said McLeod. "I am deeply grateful to the Foothills board and to everyone from Sperryville to Washington to Amissville, from Chester Gap to Castleton, and everywhere in between."

Oaks said she appreciates being able to build on her newspaper experience in her new position.

"I consider journalism a critical public service, and I am excited to invest my efforts in strengthening the Rappahannock community," she said. "The vision of Foothills Forum and its outstanding board mirrors my own. I look forward to working with them."

Foothills hires local freelance journalists, some who spent their careers with major news outlets, to produce in-depth stories, photography, video and graphics that appear regularly in the *Rappahannock News* and other area publications.

While they are editorially independent, Foothills and the *Rappahannock News* have a partnership that has consistently produced award-winning local news coverage. Last year alone, Foothills and the newspaper combined for 16 first place awards, as well as 14 other second and third place awards in the Virginia Press Association's annual journalism competition. The *Rappahannock News* won "sweepstakes" honors as the state's top news outlet among weeklies of its size.

Since its founding nearly a decade ago, Foothills Forum has been at the forefront of the national community-supported journalism movement.

More than 2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005, with digital giants like Google and Facebook increasingly capturing local advertising. Those that have survived have been forced to dramatically shrink their newsroom staffs. Hardest hit have been non-daily newspapers, where people get most of their local news.

Studies show that when communities lose their newspaper, voter participation and civic engagement typically decline, political polarization increases and taxes often rise because journalists are no longer covering government meetings or serving as watchdogs over public officials.

Oaks, a Utah native who studied journalism and English at Brigham Young University, began her career in the late 1980s as a reporter and editor for *The Daily Herald* in Provo. She subsequently served as a columnist and feature writer for a newspaper in suburban Chicago before moving to Virginia where she became an editor and staff reporter for *The Free Lance-Star* in Fredericksburg.

She then served as editor of the *Culpeper Star-Exponent* from 2018 until last year.

She begins her new job with Foothills Forum on April 15.

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