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News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Virginia Beach Announces City's 2026 'Champion for the Arts' and Inaugural 'Champion for the Arts Educator'

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA – The [Virginia Beach Arts & Humanities Commission](#) is proud to announce **Betsy Atkinson** as the City's 2026 **Champion for the Arts** and **John Brewington** as the City's inaugural **Champion for the Arts Educator**. These annual honors celebrate individuals whose leadership, generosity, and advocacy strengthen the arts and enrich cultural life across Virginia Beach.

The [Virginia Beach Arts & Humanities Commission](#) will present the 2026 Champion for the Arts and Champion for the Arts Educator awards during a ceremony, 5-7 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 6, at [Sandler Center for the Performing Arts](#), 201 Market St. Those interested in attending the 2026 Champion for the Arts award ceremony, which is free and open to the public, are asked to RSVP to artsinfo@vbgov.com by July 23.

2026 Champion for the Arts: Betsy Atkinson

Betsy Atkinson, a long-time Virginia Beach resident and distinguished business leader, has been a steadfast and transformative supporter of the arts for decades. Known for championing the arts through her business, Atkinson Realty, she uses her professional influence and network to grow audiences and increase visibility for local arts organizations.

A devoted patron of Ballet Virginia since its founding in 2008, Atkinson has provided extraordinary philanthropic support to ensure the organization's survival and artistic excellence during and after the pandemic.

"Betsy is an extraordinary businesswoman," said Suzanne Lownsbury, co-artistic director of Ballet Virginia. "She not only understands the business side, but also truly comprehends how the arts can make a huge impact. Her generosity is a testament to her love for the community."

Beyond Ballet Virginia, Atkinson volunteers extensively with dozens of organizations, including Hurrah Players, Zeiders American Dream Theater, Virginia Beach Chorale, Eggleston Services and Chesapeake Bay Academy. She brings leadership experience from numerous board positions, including the Neptune Festival Board, Chesapeake



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Academy Board, and the Rotary Club, and previously served as the first female chair of the Virginia Beach Planning Commission.

Atkinson is widely admired for her business acumen, community spirit, and deep understanding of the power of the arts to enrich lives — qualities that make her an exemplary Champion for the Arts.

2026 Champion for the Arts Educator: John Brewington

The City proudly introduces a new honor in 2026: the **Champion for the Arts Educator** award, created to highlight individuals who demonstrate extraordinary commitment to arts education. The inaugural recipient, **John Brewington**, has shaped arts learning in Virginia Beach for more than four decades.

Brewington served as fine arts coordinator for Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) 2004–2025, overseeing curriculum and instruction for band, orchestra, chorus, elementary music, and theatre programs serving more than 40,000 students and 185 teachers. His leadership ensured that VBCPS remained a nationally recognized “Best Community for Music Education” for over 15 years.

As music director and conductor of the [Tidewater Winds Concert Band](#) since 2006, Brewington continues to create meaningful performance opportunities for students, including collaborative concerts that provide hands-on instruction alongside professional musicians.

“It has been a pleasure to work with John Brewington on so many levels over the years,” said Michael Kerry Williams, executive director of Tidewater Winds Concert Band. “His passion for music is only exceeded by his passion for education. He will go the distance to ensure students and teachers have the tools they need to succeed in and out of the classroom. John always says, ‘When students attend a program, they need to have something for the head (an intellectual growth), the hand (a technique learned), and the heart (a transformative passion from the experience).’ This is what drives him.”

Brewington’s contributions span instruction, administration, advocacy and community outreach. He led the development of literacy-integrated arts programming through the RiME (Reading in Music Education) initiative, now serving seven regional school districts.

His extensive leadership roles include serving as president of the Virginia Music Educators Association, chairman of the Virginia Coalition for Fine Arts Education, keynote speaker for statewide arts conferences, and contributor to statewide arts standards and policy initiatives. His career honors include National Administrator of the Year



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(Educational Theatre Association), Virginia Theatre Teacher of the Year, and induction into the National Bandmasters Association.

The Champion for the Arts award came about through the development of the City's first-ever strategic plan for the arts, [Virginia Beach Arts Plan 2030](#), in order to recognize community members dedicated to the furtherance of the arts in Virginia Beach. The Commission felt that honoring citizens who go above and beyond to raise awareness for the arts in Virginia Beach was an important first initiative to implement from the Arts Plan 2030.

Previous Champion for the Arts award recipients include Barbara Lewis, Tom and Juanita Felton, Barbara and Andrew Fine, Meredith and Brother Rutter, Nancy Creech, Rose Daria, Em Davis, Jane Batten and Joan Brock.

ABOUT THE CITY OF VIRGINIA BEACH CULTURAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT:

The Cultural Affairs Department engages residents and visitors through meaningful arts, heritage and cultural experiences to connect and strengthen communities. The department assists and directs the Virginia Beach Arts & Humanities Commission, coordinates the City's Public Art Program, oversees the Virginia Beach History Museums, provides contract management for the Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, serves as the liaison with Virginia MOCA, Virginia African American Cultural Center and the ViBe Creative District, and serves as a resource to local arts and humanities organizations.

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