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Centralina Regional Council Presents Region of Excellence Awards

Ten Recipients Announced During Virtual Awards Ceremony

Photos available at <https://photos.app.goo.gl/7CaDqyVoALHkrU4YA>

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – May 12, 2022 – Yesterday, Centralina Regional Council (Centralina) announced the recipients of the Region of Excellence Awards in a virtual ceremony. Presented annually, these awards recognize individuals, communities and organizations for their outstanding achievements over the previous calendar year in support of Centralina’s mission to expand opportunity and improve quality of life in the nine-county region that includes Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Lincoln, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties.

“Each year we ask local governments to nominate innovative projects, programs, plans and individuals that contributed to significant and positive advancements in the region,” said Geraldine Gardner, Centralina Regional Council Executive Director. “Regionalism not only encourages collaboration, but also the celebration of successful initiatives and innovative local government action. The Region of Excellence Awards also provides a forum for county and community leaders to learn from best practices and to network with their peers in the region.”

An independent panel of judges reviewed the 27 applications and selected the award winners. Centralina would like to thank this year’s judges: Troy Selberg, former Councilmember, Town of Harrisburg; Erskine Smith, former Town Manager of Mooresville and retired ICMA (International City/County Management Association) Senior Advisor; and Suzanne Leland, Professor and MPA Director, UNC-Charlotte. A separate panel of experts evaluated the Clean Fuels category; judges included Susan Jenio, Sales Representative, Guardian Fueling Technologies, LLC; Steve Huss, Assistant Division Manager, Fleet Services, City of Gastonia; and Kelly Baker, Administrative Services Director, City of Salisbury.

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Centralina is honored to announce the winners of the Region of Excellence Awards:

- **Cross-Community Collaboration Award (Small Community) – Lake Norman Economic Development**

Lake Norman Economic Development received the cross-community collaboration award for prioritizing workforce development and their community events. The group connected students with local businesses and job opportunities through two large workforce events: virtual speed networking and Journey 360, a manufacturing event. The events involved the Lake Norman Education Collaborative (part of the Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce), the Town of Huntersville, local businesses and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The goal of the collaboration was to provide high school students with various career pathways in advanced manufacturing, healthcare and information technology.

- **Cross-Community Collaboration Award (Large Community) – Rowan County Education Collaborative**

Members of the Rowan County Education Collaborative meet monthly to discover innovative and collaborative ways to work together to increase educational attainment and create a talent framework that promotes prosperity for businesses and residents of Rowan County. Since its inception, the collaborative has:

- Passed the Rowan County \$45 million education bond
- Connected downtown businesses to students
- Articulated over 50 career pathways between Rowan Cabarrus Community College and Catawba College, with Livingstone College in progress
- Provided Rowan-Salisbury high school seniors with free college coursework at Catawba College
- Connected high school juniors and seniors to financial aid through the FAFSA Now campaign
- Received a grant to partner with Rowan-Salisbury Schools and Catawba College to underwrite teacher preparation in underserved communities

- **Local Government Innovation Award – Gaston County’s Tourism Development Department**

Due to the increase of visitors and hotel demand, the Gaston County Tourism Development Department decided to collaborate with the Tourism Development Authorities for the cities of Belmont, Gastonia and Mount Holly to develop tourism action plans. Through the development of customized community tourism action plans, they were able to identify shared priorities for tourism demand, create a collective strategy for tourism initiatives and implement a project evaluation tool to drive tourism in the area. The action plans will have a mutually beneficial impact to the community and visitors as a result of increased visitor spending and capital investments.

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- **Improving Quality of Life Award – Neighborhood C.A.R.E Center**

The Neighborhood C.A.R.E Center is a non-profit organization headquartered in the Town of Cornelius that provides support to individuals, families and small businesses. They are dedicated to improving the quality of life through relational and faith-based programs. In 2021, the Center and their volunteers:

- Provided 50 families with grocery donations, which averaged about 10,000 meals
- Gifted 300 children with Easter goodie bags
- Gave 35 mothers a free oil change on Mother's Day
- Provided over 3,000 free lunches over the summer
- Facilitated a fall clothing drive with over 75 family volunteers to send clothes to an orphanage in the Dominican Republic

- **Clean Cities Award – Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT) Electric Vehicle Bus Fleet**

The CLT Electric Vehicle Bus Fleet utilized clean fuels and fuel alternatives in airport vehicles to reduce the consumption of traditional transportation fossil fuels. CLT also supported sustainability by:

- Purchasing 100% battery electric zero emissions buses that will last for 12 years
- Replacing older vehicles with newer vehicles to reduce emissions
- Implementing fuel economy improvements to lower fuel costs
- Reducing gasoline gallon usage by almost 40,000 gasoline gallon equivalents

- **Aging in Action Award – Senior Community Connections**

Senior Community Connections is a non-profit organization that provides transportation assistance, technology, minor household repairs and social activities to keep older adults engaged in their community. The organization saw the Town of Davidson as their initial targeted service area, but as the need grew in other neighboring towns, Senior Community Connections expanded to the Town of Cornelius and greater Lake Norman area. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, they provided more than 300 services to their members and sponsored activities such as yoga classes, art programs and coffee meetups.

- **James D. Prosser Excellence in Leadership Award – Mike Legg, Kannapolis City Manager**

Mike Legg has devoted more than 27 years of his career to the citizens of Kannapolis, where he began his public service career as the first planning director for the city. During the tumultuous time when North Carolina had the largest one-day layoffs in the state's history, Mike was named Assistant City Manager. His strong leadership skills guided the city out of a crisis, eventually earning him the title of City Manager. Mike has continued to lead Kannapolis through incredible strategic growth with the I-85 corridor infrastructure investments and the Kannapolis Gateway Business Park, now home to Stewart-Haas Racing and Haas Formula One. Thanks to tax incentives, the city also secured a \$100 million Amazon Distribution Center and a \$58 million Gordon Food Service facility that has increased job growth in the area.

- **COVID-19 Resiliency Award – Fred Benson, Mecklenburg County Community Advisory Committee Volunteer**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Fred Benson was committed to ensuring long-term care residents were knowledgeable about their civic duty to vote. He created an advocacy resource guide that included resident rights in facilities, Ombudsman program contact information and steps to advocacy in long-term care. He also worked to connect each facility with their elected officials and polling locations. Fred’s volunteer work has been instrumental in promoting advocacy to long-term care residents and their families.

- **COVID-19 Resiliency Award – Behavioral Health Collaborative Program**

The Behavioral Health Collaborative Program is a partnership between Union County’s social services department and Union County Public Schools. The program addresses the need for supporting students’ social, emotional and mental health in Union County’s public school district. In 2021 during the height of the pandemic, the program provided aid to elementary, middle and high school students with suicidal ideations. This program also connected families with support agencies that offer resources for food deliveries.

- **COVID-19 Resiliency Award – Stephen Eaton, Gaston County Public Health Director**

During the pandemic, Stephen Eaton instantly became a household name to residents in Gaston County. Stephen worked to create a transparent channel of communication with the community and media that provided critical public information and updates. He regularly spoke at school board meetings, County Commissioner meetings and provided media interviews to honor public concerns and build trust and grow confidence in the county’s local response. His team coordinated 30,000 vaccinations between January-May of 2021 and created a local task force of health organizations to create actionable steps and form a unified response to the pandemic.

About Centralina

Centralina Regional Council is a public organization that was established to serve the needs of the greater Charlotte region, including Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Lincoln, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties. Our mission is to strengthen regional collaboration and improve quality of life, which we accomplish in three distinct ways. We identify regional opportunities and spark action by facilitating area-wide planning, collaboration and problem-solving. We support local governments by giving them the technical support, training and expertise they need to serve their communities. Finally, we provide direct health, aging and workforce services to individuals. Through these three levels of engagement and impact, we seek to unite our region by a common vision for a thriving and prosperous place to live, work and play. For more information, visit www.centralina.org.