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Centralina Presents Region of Excellence Awards

Recipients recognized for positive advancements in our region

The [following is a link](#) to photos courtesy of Centralina Regional Council

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Feb. 9, 2023 – Centralina Regional Council (Centralina) has announced the recipients of its Region of Excellence Awards.

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.

An independent panel of judges selected the award winners. Centralina would like to thank this year's judges: William P. Morgan (Jr. Former City of Statesville Council Member), Larken Egleston (Former City of Charlotte Council Member) and Professor Suzanne Leland (Director of the MPA Program at UNC Charlotte). A separate panel of experts evaluated the Clean Fuels category; judges included Carina Trustram Eve (Energy, Climate and Resiliency Program Analyst with Energetics) and Megan Green (Air Quality Program Manager with Mecklenburg County Air Quality).

The six award categories and winners are:

- **Aging in Action: Anna Rice**
 - Awarded to a project, program or plan that demonstrates commitment and contribution to older adult issues, engagement and advocacy.
 - Rice retired in 2022 after a 45-year career as executive director of the Iredell Council on Aging. Under her leadership, the Council on Aging grew from a small nonprofit to an organization recognized statewide for its programs and services for older adults and their caregivers. Rice's dedication, fiscal responsibility, and support for her staff and the seniors they serve has had a lasting impact on the community and the aging network in North Carolina.

- **Cross-Community Collaboration: City of Albemarle – Firefighter Cadet Academy**
 - Awarded for demonstrating the value of partnerships across communities to achieve better outcomes for their community.
 - In collaboration with Rowan-Cabarrus Community College and Stanly Community College, the Firefighter Cadet Academy provides 18 weeks of instruction through classroom and hands-on training led by City of Albemarle firefighters and special skilled instructors. By creating this academy, the city helped to tackle a top-of-mind issue surrounding staffing challenges in their region through an initiative that not only drew in strong applicants but kept them interested in a career with the fire service.

- **Improving Quality of Life:**
 - **Small Community Winner: Town of Spencer – Yadkin River Park Trailhead**
 - Awarded for utilizing cooperative volunteerism to expand community, recreational and transportation opportunities.
 - The new trailhead will offer seamless connectivity between Rowan County and amenities on the Davidson County side of Yadkin River Park. Once completed, the park will enhance nearby properties by leveraging scenic views of the river. The project will also expand recreational opportunities for families and offer carbon-free transportation alternatives for commuters.

 - **Large Community Winner: Cain Arts Center (located in the Town of Cornelius)**
 - Awarded for expanding recreational services that encourage community participation.
 - This new addition to Cornelius was created in response to a need the Town saw to provide an arts and culture venue that would revitalize their community. The center offers workshops, summer camps, music lessons, and more. The center also provides scholarships to historically underrepresented groups and expands access to quality arts education throughout the community.

- **Local Government Innovation: City of Gastonia and Gaston County**
 - Awarded for its partnership in building inspection services, which delivers measurable value and impact at the local government level.
 - This partnership is an example of the success that comes from city and county government working collaboratively toward a common goal. The stakeholders created an effective solution to address a challenge in their community and ensure effective and efficient service delivery. The city and county worked through many challenges, including but not limited to computer software utilization for permitting, the reassignment of Gastonia building inspection staff to Gaston County, and allocation of vehicles from the city to the county in order to ensure that the development community would continue to receive timely and high quality services. The outcome is a model that can be replicated in other local governments that are experiencing similar staffing shortages.

- **Clean Cities/Centralina Clean Fuels Coalition: UNC Charlotte Energy Production and Infrastructure Center**

- Awarded for its PoleVolt Curbside Electric Vehicle Charging Project, which demonstrates leadership and excellence in clean transportation and alternative fuel activities.
- This project advances the expansion of adaptive, lower-cost electric vehicle supply equipment and delivers an innovative solution for expanding public access to EV charging. The project has improved access to electric vehicle infrastructure in historically underserved communities and helped lay the groundwork for future transportation equity efforts within our region. PoleVolt’s success will be used to inform future installation of public right-of-way charging at the local, state and national levels.
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- **James D. Prosser Excellence in Leadership:**
 - **Large Community Winner: Mike Downs, Cabarrus County Manager**
 - Awarded to an individual who exemplifies and promotes excellence in government, outstanding leadership and high ethical standards.
 - Downs has served Cabarrus County for more than three decades. Under his leadership, Cabarrus County has funded the construction of seven schools, expanded fire services, and fostered cross-jurisdictional collaboration with local municipalities. He has mentored a number of his colleagues and inspires others through his words and actions.
 - **Small Community Winner: Jonathan Blanton, Ranlo Town Manager (located in Gaston County)**
 - Awarded to an individual who exemplifies and promotes excellence in government, outstanding leadership and high ethical standards.
 - In his three years with the town, Blanton has bolstered Ranlo’s financial position and secured federal and state funding for infrastructure improvements. He has taken the lead in planning successful community events to bring together the citizens of Ranlo. As a leader, he also demonstrates kindness and empathy and strives to build consensus among staff and the Town Council.

“Congratulations to all of our Region of Excellence Award winners for making significant and positive advancements in our region,” said Geraldine Gardner, Executive Director of Centralina. “We are excited to celebrate the successful initiatives, collaboration, and innovative local government action that make our region a better place to live and work.”

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. Its mission is to lead regional collaboration and spark local action to expand opportunity and improve quality of life. The organization is governed by a Board of Delegates, comprised of local government members, and is one of 16 regional councils in North Carolina enabled by the General Assembly. For more information, visit www.centralina.org.