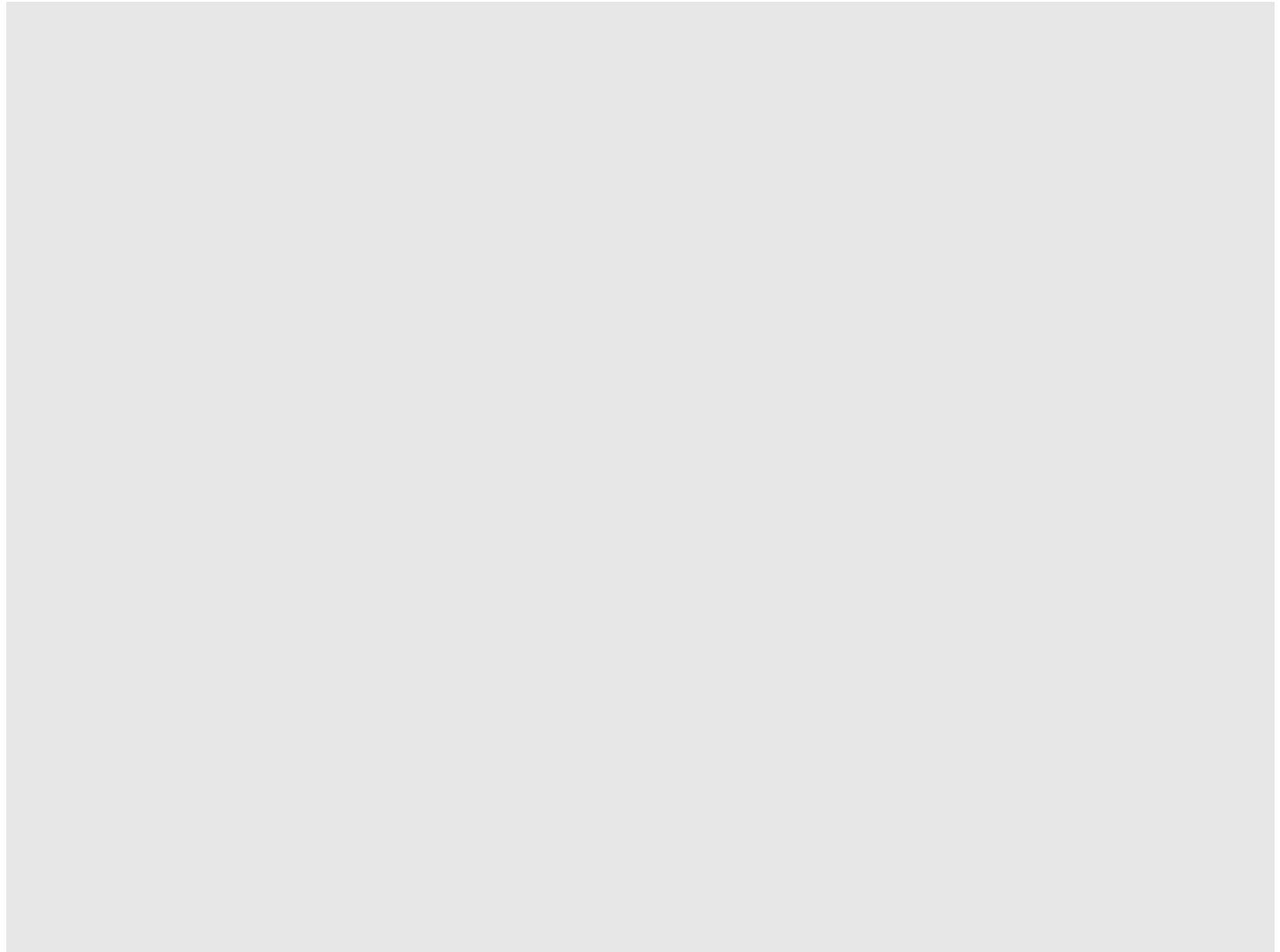


BREAKING

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FEATURED

State lawmakers set aside \$24.2 million to commemorate the year 1619. Here's how it was spent.

By MEL LEONOR AND PATRICK WILSON Richmond Times-Dispatch Oct 18, 2019

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President Donald Trump was among the dignitaries attending the July 30 celebration of the 400th anniversary of representative government in English North America held at Jamestown Settlement. American Evolution spent \$840,000 to stage the

Commemorating the events of 1619 in Virginia was an expensive endeavor for the Virginia taxpayers.

State lawmakers put up more than \$24.2 million over five years to mark 400 years since the first meeting of representative government, the arrival of the first enslaved Africans and other key historical markers for English North America that took place in Virginia that year.

Public records on expenditures this year reviewed by the Richmond Times-Dispatch show Virginia taxpayers shelled out hundreds of thousands on ticketed or private events, public relations firms to lure national and international journalists, hefty speaking fees and donations to Virginia nonprofits. They spent \$145,000 to bring artist Queen Latifah to Richmond. And \$12,000 on plastic tote bags.

Lawmakers appropriated the funding to the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, an educational state agency focused on Virginia's early history. The spending was made by a sub-agency called American Evolution, whose steering committee is co-chaired by House Speaker Kirk Cox, R-Colonial Heights, and Senate Majority Leader Tommy Norment, R-James City.

Kathy Spangler, the executive director of American Evolution, said the events and other programming were designed to build awareness of Virginia's role in the creation of the United States' democracy to a national and international audience.

In 2017, then-Gov. Terry McAuliffe battled with Republican legislative leaders who were appropriating \$10 million for the commemoration. McAuliffe wanted to cut it to \$5 million that year and spend the other \$5 million on mental health assessments for jail inmates and other needs he said were more critical.

"I needed money for mental health screenings and assessments in jails," McAuliffe said in an interview Thursday. "This is taxpayer money — this is not your personal piggy bank."

"If you budget five, they'll spend five. ... If you budget 10, they are going to spend 10."

McAuliffe lost that fight.

One of the highlights of the year's commemorative events was the 400th anniversary of representative democracy in English North America, marked by a 1619 legislative gathering July 30 among Virginia colony settlers in Jamestown.

The invitation-only commemoration event drew President Donald Trump, state and federal lawmakers and dozens of other invitees under an air-conditioned, carpeted tent walled-off by plastic ivy. Attendants were served a light breakfast of pastries before the event, followed by a picnic, where southern ham biscuits and shrimp-and-grits were served by waiters. A luncheon for 700 people followed.

The event was paid for by American Evolution and came at a price tag of \$840,000. That included more than \$100,000 for the tent, \$94,000 worth of food and \$184,000 for broadcast equipment to livestream the event. It also included \$139,000 for the setup of a public Richmond Symphony concert that night.

That price tag does not include planning services by Jack Morton Worldwide, a Boston-based event planning firm that collected agency fees totaling \$289,000 between January and July for that event and others.

It also doesn't include \$9,000 spent on a video of Cox played during the event produced by the Richmond-based firm Orange Frame or \$65,000 for a speech by presidential historian Jon Meacham.

A spokeswoman for the 2019 commemoration said the event was open to current and some former lawmakers and their guests. The White House also received 150 open invitations.

Members of the Virginia General Assembly were reimbursed for one night in hotels such as the Williamsburg Lodge and Williamsburg Inn, and for meals and mileage.

Sixty delegates attended, each receiving \$300, for a total of \$18,000. As of Oct. 4, 31 delegates had filed for state reimbursement for hotels and meals at a cost of just under \$10,000, according to the office of House Clerk G. Paul Nardo. Twenty-one senators attended the event and state reimbursement costs were not immediately available, according to Senate Clerk Susan Clarke Schaar.

American Evolution paid \$2,214 for a state plane to fly U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner and their staffers from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington County to the commemorative session and back. Both senators spoke at a forum that day.

Public records obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request show the event was one of multiple events with hefty amounts of taxpayer money involved. Sometimes the events were invitation-only while others were open to the public but limited to paying attendees.

Some events appeared to have loose connections to the events of 1619. However, Spangler said the point of the commemoration was to use technology and tie history to the present, bringing in hundreds of groups to participate.

“In being contemporary, it allowed us to not just focus on 1619 and expect that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people would get excited about 1619 for four years — so we took a 400-year arc approach. So the commemoration is the 1619 to 2019, Virginia to America, looking at that arc of history to be contemporary.”

One such event was the Global Pathfinder Summit in May, a five-day convening of millennials from Virginia and abroad that “inspired engagement in the 2019 Commemoration’s key themes of democracy, diversity and opportunity,” according to a press release sent after the event.

Participants attended sessions throughout the week on cultivating democracy and social justice across the globe. Many speakers for the event — including Wael Ghonim, an activist famous for his role in 2011’s pro-Democracy protests in Egypt — were flown into Charlottesville from abroad, hosted in two Charlottesville-area hotels and paid speaking fees for their time.

Honorariums for speakers, including some University of Virginia professors, totaled just over \$90,000. Flights totaled just over \$47,000.

The event included a few dozen Virginia millennials invited to participate, including Del. Lashrecse Aird, D-Petersburg, and Tucker Obenshain, the daughter of state Sen. Mark Obenshain, R-Rockingham.

Attendees were lodged at the Omni Hotel in downtown Charlottesville at a cost of just under \$68,000. Meals for the entire event cost nearly \$98,000.

The total budget for the event was just over half a million dollars.

Spangler said events like the Global Pathfinder Summit gave an international audience insight into the critical role Virginia has played in the development of the United States and of democracy globally.

“The commemoration was always intended to focus on building awareness of Virginia’s role in the creation of the United States,” to a national and global audience, she said in an interview.

Investments that brought attention on Virginia, Spangler argued, will pay dividends to Virginia taxpayers in the form of tourism and economic development.

To that end, the 2019 commemoration contracted with multiple marketing and public relations firms, in addition to several in-house, full-time staff with roles in marketing.

Between January and July, the New York City-based firm Finn Partners was paid \$328,000 for its services, which included drafting press releases and coordinating media coverage. Native Collaboration, a Richmond-based communications firm, was paid \$300,130, though some of those payments include sponsorship passed on to other organizations. Johnson Inc., another Richmond-based communications firm, was paid \$63,000. Howell Design Inc., based in Williamsburg, was paid \$121,000.

Combined, the payments come to \$812,000 between January and July. Spangler said all companies the agency contracted with were selected through the state’s competitive procurement process.

In addition, 2019 commemoration staff with marketing in their titles made annual salaries totaling more than \$300,000.

Marketing spending also included nonprofit contributions and staff travel expenses to promote the commemoration’s work at events such as the Virginia International Tattoo military festival held in April in Norfolk; Fire, Flour & Fork, an upcoming food festival in Richmond from Oct. 31 to Nov. 3; a gathering of the Virginia Association of Museums in April; and others.

The 2019 commemoration also worked with the Richmond-based Orange Frame to produce video content throughout the year. That included the video of Cox, the House speaker, that played at the beginning of the July Democracy event.

It also included a four-minute video on the commemoration's homepage that cost just under \$17,000. The video, posted July 25, had been watched 385 times as of Friday afternoon on YouTube.

Other promotional videos cost between \$5,800 and \$21,600. Between January and July of 2019, Orange Frame was paid a total of \$138,700 for its work.

One of the signature events of the 2019 commemoration that was directly tied to 1619 was the commemoration in August of the arrival of the first Africans to an English colony in North America.

The daylong event — which attracted 1,500 attendees to the main ceremony and 6,500 throughout the weekend — was hosted at Fort Monroe and entrance was free to the public. A spokeswoman for the commemoration said 21,000 watched the ceremony via livestream.

Spangler said that the commemoration spent more than two years highlighting the history of the estimated 20 Africans who arrived at Fort Monroe, previously Point Comfort.

“It can’t be understated the importance of the marketing communications. The story of the arrival of the first Africans was known in Virginia but not nationally recognized,” Spangler said.

“There was a significant investment in all of these stories getting amplification” so in 2019 the recognition and awareness would create interest in what was happening in Virginia, Spangler said.

She said more than 90 journalists attended the event, including some from France, and said that many articles about 1619 published around the country between 2016 and 2019 can be attributed to the commemoration’s hefty marketing operation.

“We invested in our brand. We invested in marketing to a statewide audience, but then very importantly to a nationwide audience as well,” Spangler said.

State lawmakers, when killing bills, often talk about the importance of conservative spending in Virginia.

Bruce Cruser, executive director of Mental Health America of Virginia, said by email that “mental health needs are tremendous, and we hope that the governor and legislature will see the needs and provide significantly more funding for our mental health system in the next biennium.”

Jonathan Zur, who leads the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities and sits on the Virginia Complete Count Commission working on the state’s 2020 census effort, said that the state’s \$1.5 million request for census outreach — rejected by the General Assembly in the spring — would have offered sizable returns. National estimates show that for every person not counted, states lose about \$2,000 annually in federal funding for 10 years.

Zur said he couldn’t comment on whether commemoration expenses were appropriate. But, he said, “It’s really unfortunate that we weren’t able to get more support in the General Assembly and resources for the census outreach.” Gov. Ralph Northam ultimately funded the work through one of the state’s emergency funds.

Spangler said a study to be released in May will show Virginia got good return on its investment for taxpayer spending on American Evolution.

A preliminary study by the firm Chmura Economics & Analytics, contracted by the commemoration, says that visitor spending related to commemoration activities between 2016 and 2018 generated \$15.6 million in economic impact. Cumulatively, state and visitor spending generated 378 jobs in that time frame.

“The bipartisan investment of public dollars made by the General Assembly and the governor, combined with \$4 million in corporate and individual contributions, helped power the multi-year commemoration that culminated in a series of signature events this year,” Cox and Norment said in a joint statement.

“The commemoration and these events significantly boosted state tourism and generated tens of millions in economic impact for the commonwealth. Both Frommer’s and the New York Times named Virginia one of the best places to visit in 2019, due to the 2019 Commemoration’s events, exhibits and programs.”

Spangler said the commemoration spent some of its funding on history education efforts in state schools and developed an app that walks visitors through some of Virginia’s key historic sites. She said that videos produced throughout the commemoration would live online forever as an educational resource.

“We obviously have been very intentional about expanding the narratives about our history, and being more earnest and honest and truth telling about what the history represents in ways that don’t breed dissent but foster conversation. We think we’ve done that. And we think we’ve done it in a way that could have some lasting value,” she said.

“I think in the end when the economic impact study is complete, there will be a healthy [return on investment] in a number of different ways that I think will show value for the investment.”

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