



America in Bloom Symposium & Awards Celebration

An American Legacy: Honoring the Past, Shaping the Future

**Celebrating
25 Years**

SEPTEMBER 24-26, 2026
Alexandria, Virginia

**Hosted by AIB Communities
in Prince George's County, Maryland**

**Check Out
the
Pre-Symposium
Educational
Tour**

AmericaInBloom.org/Symposium



WELCOME TO THE 2026 AMERICA IN BLOOM SYMPOSIUM & AWARDS CELEBRATION

Welcome to the America in Bloom Symposium & Awards Celebration! This special gathering brings together community leaders, volunteers, and passionate advocates from across the country who share a common goal – creating more beautiful, vibrant, and welcoming places to live, work, and visit.

This year's symposium is especially meaningful as we celebrate America in Bloom's 25th anniversary. For a quarter century, communities of all sizes have embraced the power of flowers, plants, trees, heritage, and environmental stewardship to strengthen civic pride and improve quality of life. This year's theme, "An American Legacy: Honoring the Past, Shaping the Future," reflects both the remarkable accomplishments of the past 25 years and the exciting opportunities that lie ahead.

Throughout the symposium, you will hear inspiring stories, discover practical ideas, and connect with others who are making a difference in their communities. From engaging educational sessions to tours that showcase local successes, the symposium is designed to spark new ideas, celebrate achievements, and strengthen the network of people working to make their communities bloom.

Thank you for being part of the America in Bloom community and for helping continue the legacy of building beautiful, thriving communities across the country.

National AIB Symposium Committee

- Chair: Rod Barnes
- Sue Amatangelo
- Shannon Beatty
- Leila Hamroun
- Kim Harden
- Kelly McWhorter
- Pam Newton
- Leslie Pittenger
- Karin Rindal
- Chastity Williams

America in Bloom promotes and builds vibrant and sustainable communities through volunteerism and education emphasizing flowers, plants, trees, heritage, and environmental and lifestyle enhancements. America in Bloom envisions communities across the country as the best examples of welcoming and vibrant places to live, work, and play.

A Message from Our Host Communities in Prince George's County, Maryland

This year's America in Bloom Symposium is proud to be hosted by a vibrant collection of communities across Prince George's County, Maryland – each bringing its own personality, passion, and commitment to creating beautiful, welcoming places to live.

Together, these communities represent the power of collaboration, demonstrating how neighboring municipalities can work collectively to elevate quality of life through beautification, sustainability, and civic pride. From waterfronts and pollinator-friendly plantings to public art, tree canopies, and engaged volunteers, these hosts embody the spirit of America in Bloom in action.

What makes this group especially inspiring is their shared dedication to progress while honoring their unique identities. You will experience a dynamic range of community-driven initiatives – proof that meaningful transformation doesn't depend on size, but on vision, partnership, and heart.

Sincerely,

The Prince George's County Host Committee

- Rod Barnes, *Town Administrator, Edmonston, MD*
- Michelle Bailey-Hedgepeth, *Deputy Manager, College Park, MD*
- John Hoatson, *Town Manager, Cottage City, MD*
- Dan Spealman, *Town Administrator, Colmar Manor, MD*
- Ilhan Abdi, *Office and Program Manager, Colmar Manor, MD*
- Averil Gray, *Town Clerk, Edmonston, MD*
- Jamileth Mendez, *Communications Specialist, Edmonston, MD*
- Clate "CJ" Jackson, *Town Administrator, Forest Heights, MD*
- Ray Jefferies, *Communications Director, Bladensburg, MD*
- Leslie Riddle, *Special Projects Director, Hyattsville, MD*
- Kenneth Warren, *Acting Manager, District Heights, MD*
- Angela French-Bell, *City Manager, Seat Pleasant, MD*
- Ed Hooker, *Historic Architect, National Cemetery Association*
- Doretha Epps, *Colmar Manor, MD*



Sunset at National Harbor Maryland and a View of the Capitol Wheel

Photo: cre8tive_pixels - stock.encvato.com

Hotel & Airport Information

Make your hotel reservations at the **Westin Alexandria** online at AmericaInBloom/Symposium or by calling **703-253-8600**.

To receive the special AIB rate of \$219/night plus tax for single or double occupancy, you must tell them you are with the America in Bloom group and **tell them the code: AME**.

Reservations must be made by August 31.

With a nice blend of modern convenience and boutique sophistication, the Westin Alexandria Old Town is perfect for your time at the AIB Symposium. You'll find beauty along the cobblestone streets and red brick sidewalks in Old Town Alexandria, home to specialty shops, boutiques, and museums. With easy public transportation options, you can experience Alexandria and nearby Washington, DC during your free time.

The Westin Alexandria, located at 400 Courthouse Square in Alexandria, Virginia, is very close to Ronald Reagan National Airport (Airport code: DCA).

THANK YOU

To This Year's Symposium Sponsors



THANK YOU

To Our Media Sponsors



Pre-Event Optional EDU Tour

Enhance Your Experience

An Exclusive Opportunity for AIB Symposium Attendees.
Special Registration Required.

Thursday, September 24

9 AM – 3:15 PM

Pre-Tour: Waterfront Wonders – A Day of Discovery from National Harbor to Old Town Alexandria **(Special Registration Required)**

Start your symposium experience with a day that blends learning, beauty, and a bit of adventure! This engaging pre-tour takes you along the Potomac River to explore how two vibrant waterfront communities – National Harbor and Old Town Alexandria – are using art, environmental design, and community spirit to create inspiring public spaces. Enjoy unique experiences along the way, including a ride on the Capital Wheel with sweeping views of the D.C. skyline, lunch on your own at National Harbor’s lively waterfront, a scenic water taxi cruise across the Potomac, and a charming trolley ride through historic Alexandria. It’s the perfect mix of education and enjoyment, and an unforgettable way to kick off your time at the Symposium. **Please note this tour includes lots of walking and uneven surfaces. Unfortunately, handicap transportation is not available for this trip. The cost is \$89. Seating is limited so register early. See the registration form for details.**

Below: Marina at sunset in Old Town Alexandria Waterfront area Photo: AS Photo Family - stock.adobe.com





Market Square and City Hall at night in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia

Photo: jonbilous - stock.adobe.com

Symposium Program

Thursday, September 24

4 PM Newcomer Connection: Let the Celebration Begin

Welcome to all the first-time attendees. We are glad you are here! This informal session will allow you to meet AIB volunteers and staff, learn how to get the most out of the conference, and help get you ready for the learning, inspiration, and fun ahead.

4:30 PM Celebrating Leadership: Elected Leaders and Municipal Administrators Reception

This reception recognizes the elected officials, municipal leaders, and supporters whose work has strengthened communities across the country. Guests will celebrate America in Bloom's 25th anniversary, honor exceptional contributions, and enjoy a time of connection and reflection.

6 PM Opening Night Reception

Catch up with old friends and make new ones during this informal cash bar event.

7 PM Community Connections Dinner Celebration

Now it's time to celebrate your achievements. This is a time for food, fun, and awards! Each AIB community will be recognized for their efforts. This is where we celebrate YOU and what YOUR community is doing to make America bloom!

Friday, September 25

Submit your educational sessions hours to your professional organizations to earn CEUs.

8 AM Morning Jolt: Cuisine, Caffeine, and Conversation

Cuisine + caffeine + conversation = great start to the day. Grab some breakfast, coffee/tea, and converse with other AIB attendees and the Showcase of Innovation companies. These companies feature innovative products and services relevant to your community.

8:30 AM Welcome & Keynote Presentation: Places for Business – Designing Downtowns for Economic Vitality **Erin Barnes, Main Street America**

Successful, welcoming places don't happen by accident. This session explores how intentional investments in public spaces can strengthen communities. Learn how small, visible improvements can build pride, attract visitors, encourage economic development, and create welcoming places where people want to live, work, and spend time (and money). You will leave with ideas and simple actions that can help connect community pride with economic vitality.

9:30 AM Powering Progress: Leveraging Grants & Partnerships to Transform Your Community

James Dillon, City of Tavares, Florida

How do communities move from good ideas to measurable impact? The answer often lies in strategic partnerships and smart grant leveraging. In this engaging session, learn how Tavares, Florida has achieved remarkable results by aligning vision with funding and collaboration. From identifying the right grant opportunities to building partnerships that truly matter, James will provide practical insights into how Tavares has maximized resources to drive beautification, economic vitality, and long-term community success. Learn how to position your projects competitively for funding, cultivate meaningful relationships with public and private partners, and create momentum that extends beyond a single grant cycle. Whether your community is just getting started or looking to scale existing initiatives, this session will offer actionable strategies to help you turn partnerships into progress and funding into lasting impact.

10:15 AM Showcase of Innovation & Conversation

This networking break allows you to continue sharing ideas and meeting Showcase of Innovation companies.

10:30 AM Why Old Places Matter

Leila Hamroun, TetraTech

This session will explore the value of historic buildings, districts, and public spaces in creating vibrant, connected communities. Learn why preserving and celebrating these places strengthens local identity, fosters community pride, and contributes to economic and social vitality. The session will highlight practical strategies for integrating historic preservation into community beautification and planning efforts.

11 AM Reimagining Vacant Spaces: Creative Placemaking in Communities

Ronit Eisenbach, University of Maryland and Maura Dwyer, Neighborhood Design Center

Vacant lots, empty storefronts, and underutilized corridors exist in every community. Each represents untapped potential. This session explores how communities of all sizes can transform overlooked spaces into vibrant, economically productive and socially connected places. Learn how beautification, environmental stewardship, and strategic partnerships can convert vacant spaces into opportunity. Get practical, low-cost activation strategies, tools for building cross-sector collaboration, and ideas for temporary-to-permanent initiatives. Leave inspired and equipped to reframe vacant spaces not as liabilities, but as catalysts for resilience, community pride, and sustainable growth.

11:45 AM Showcase of Innovation & Conversation

This networking break allows you to continue sharing ideas and meeting Showcase of Innovation companies.

12 PM Lunch & Learn: Meet Our Hosts from Prince George's County

Enjoy your lunch while getting to know our host communities from Prince George's County. Each will share a brief introduction to their town, highlighting the people, partnerships, and projects that are helping make their communities more beautiful, vibrant, and welcoming. Hear the unique stories behind the places we'll visit later in the day.

1 PM Buses Depart for Prince George's County Adventure

Spend the afternoon exploring five nearby vibrant Prince George's County, Maryland communities participating in America in Bloom – Edmonston, Colmar Manor, Cottage City, Bladensburg, and Hyattsville. Each stop offers a unique window into how local leaders, volunteers, and residents are bringing the AIB principles to life. See how communities of different sizes and character approach beautification, community engagement, environmental stewardship, and economic vitality. From creative small-space plantings and revitalized public spaces to partnerships that bring residents together, the tour provides a wide range of practical ideas and inspiration that you can take home and adapt to your own community. This time of discovery concludes with an evening of celebration along the scenic banks of the Anacostia River. Attendees will gather for a lively reception, followed by dinner with colleagues and new friends from across the country. As the sun sets, the evening culminates with fireworks lighting up the sky – an unforgettable moment that captures the spirit of America in Bloom communities.

8:30 PM Buses Depart for Return to Hotel

Saturday, September 26

Submit your educational sessions hours to your professional organizations to earn CEUs.

8 AM Morning Jolt: Cuisine, Caffeine, and Conversation

Cuisine + caffeine + conversation = great start to the day. Grab some breakfast, coffee/tea, and converse with other AIB attendees and the Showcase of Innovation companies. These companies feature innovative products and services relevant to your community.

8 AM Youth Half-Day Program: Growing the Next Generation of Community Leaders (Special Registration Required)

Communities thrive when young people are engaged and empowered to help shape the places they call home. This special half-day youth program will introduce students to the ideas behind the America in Bloom program while giving them opportunities to explore how plants, environmental stewardship, and community pride can make a real difference. They will also learn what it means to be a leader in building a welcoming, vibrant community. **The cost is \$60. Seating is limited. See the registration form to sign up for this half-day program.**

**8:30 AM State of the Organization
Mason Day, AIB President**

Learn about the organization's current status and how AIB is striving to make even more of an impact in communities.

9 AM The Great Idea Swap

Get ready to share, learn, and leave with a notebook full of new ideas. This will be a lively exchange of practical tips and creative approaches for building beautiful and vibrant communities. Table leaders will guide the conversation around different topics, with a new one introduced every eight minutes to keep the energy high and the ideas flowing. It's a fun, fast-paced way to hear what's working in other communities, share your own successes, and discover new ideas you can use.

10:15 AM Showcase of Innovation & Conversation

This networking break allows you to continue sharing ideas and meeting Showcase of Innovation companies.

10:30 AM Quick Takes: Insights from AIB Communities

Speakers from three AIB towns and cities will each share ideas drawn from their experience working to strengthen and beautify their communities. Expect practical ideas, fresh thinking, and inspiration you can take back home.

11:15 AM Meet with the Advisors

This time is set aside so community members can meet with Advisors and delegates from other AIB communities. Get excellent insight into the ordinary and extraordinary things towns and cities are doing across America. AIB Advisors will share what they saw during their visits to communities and how to enhance your town's participation in AIB.

Afternoon Lunch and Free Time on Your Own

The afternoon is yours to explore. Take the free nearby trolley to explore Old Town Alexandria or hop on the nearby public metro to head to Washington, DC. to see the monuments and explore the nation's capital.

5:30 PM Closing Night Reception

This final night cash bar reception allows you to mingle with old and new friends, swap contact information, and make plans to stay in touch.

6:30 PM Evening in Bloom Banquet

The anticipation goes into high gear with dinner, fun, and awards. This final-night event shines the spotlight on the transformative efforts by AIB communities.

Garden and gazebo in Alexandria, Virginia Photo: jonbilous - stock.adobe.com



Schedule At-A-Glance

Thursday, September 24

- 9 AM - 3:15 PM** Pre-Tour: Waterfront Wonders – A Day of Discovery from National Harbor to Old Town Alexandria (**Special Registration Required**)
- 4 - 4:30 PM** Newcome Connection: Let the Celebrating Begin
- 4:30 - 6 PM** Celebrating Leadership: Elected Officials and Municipal Leaders Reception
- 6 - 7 PM** Opening Night Reception
- 7 - 10 PM** Community Connections Dinner Celebration

Friday, September 25

- 8 - 8:30 AM** Morning Jolt: Cuisine, Caffeine, and Conversation
- 8:30 - 9:30 AM** Welcome & Keynote Presentation: Places for Business - Designing Downtowns for Economic Vitality
- 9:30 - 10:15 AM** Powering Progress: Leveraging Grants & Partnerships to Transform Your Community
- 10:15 - 10:30 AM** Showcase of Innovation & Conversation
- 10:30 - 11 AM** Why Old Places Matter
- 11 - 11:45 PM** Reimagining Vacant Spaces: Creative Placemaking in Communities
- 11:45 - 12 PM** Showcase of Innovation & Conversation
- 12 - 12:45 PM** Lunch & Learn: Meet Our Hosts from Prince George's County
- 1 - 8:30 PM** Prince George's County Adventure

Saturday, September 26

- 8 - 8:30 AM** Morning Jolt: Cuisine, Caffeine, and Conversation
- 8 - 12:30 PM** Youth Half-Day Program: Growing the Next Generation of Community Leaders (**Special Registration Required**)
- 8:30 - 9 AM** State of the Organization
- 9 - 10:15 AM** The Great Idea Swap
- 10:15 - 10:30 AM** Showcase of Innovation & Conversation
- 10:30 - 11:15 AM** Quick Takes: Insights from AIB Communities
- 11:15 AM - 12:30 PM** Meet with the Advisors
- 12:30 - 5:30 PM** Lunch and Free Time on Your Own
- 5:30 - 6:30 PM** Closing Night Reception
- 6:30 - 9:30 PM** Evening in Bloom Banquet

Schedule and speaker line-up is subject to change.

Registration

Save Money!
Register by September 4th

First Name

Last Name

Company Name (if applicable)

Mailing Address

City

State

Zip/Postal Code

Country

Phone Number (including area code)

E-mail Address

Please list any dietary or mobility restrictions:

Please select one of the following packages:

Full registration - \$375
(\$425 after September 4)

Thursday AIB dinner and awards only - \$150
(\$175 after September 4)

Saturday AIB dinner and awards only - \$150
(\$175 after September 4)

Additional packages available:

Thursday, Sept 24: Pre-Tour: Waterfront Wonders – A Day of Discovery from National Harbor to Old Town Alexandria **Please note this tour includes lots of walking and uneven surfaces. Unfortunately, handicap transportation is not available for this trip. The cost is \$89. Seating is limited.**

Saturday, Sept 26: Youth Half-Day Morning Program **The cost is \$60. Seating is limited.**

Will you join us for the Friday afternoon and evening activities in Prince George's County?

Yes No

Method of Payment (Registration will not be processed without payment.)

U.S. check/money order enclosed (Make payable to America in Bloom)

Charge my : VISA MasterCard American Express

Account number: _____

Expiration date: _____

V-Code: _____

Name as appears on card (please print) _____

Authorized signature: _____

(I hereby agree to the terms and conditions of my card issuer agreement)

Billing Address (if different from mailing address)

City

State

Zip/Postal Code

Country



Register online at AmericaInBloom.org/Symposium or send a copy of this registration form to:

America in Bloom • PO Box 44005 • Columbus, OH 43204

P: 614-453-0744 • **E:** aib@AmericaInBloom.org

Cancellations made on or before September 4 will be refunded in full, minus a \$25 processing fee. Cancellations made after September 4 are non-refundable.



America in Bloom

PO Box 44005

Columbus, OH 43204

