



Mayor George Fitch;
right, Old Court House



The Future, Now

Warrenton is a forward-thinking small town. It has low taxes, a bustling historic district and bold plans to become energy-independent. Naive ambitions? That's what the mayor heard when he decided to start a bobsled team ... in Jamaica. By CLARKE C. JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF GREENOUGH

Warrenton Mayor George Fitch is nothing if not goal-oriented. A former foreign service officer-turned-international trade consultant, Fitch was celebrating a friend's wedding in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1987 when he got an audacious idea: What if Jamaica were to enter a bobsledding team in the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics? Most of the people Fitch knew either laughed or scoffed at the idea—but Fitch, who had worked at the U.S. embassy in the island nation, was serious. He knew that the key to bobsledding is the 40-yard push of the sled at the start, and that starting well depends on having team members with

excellent speed and leg drive. Since Jamaica has some of the best sprinters in the world, Fitch reasoned, there was no reason why the warm-weather Caribbean country could not shock the winter sports world.

He was proved right, after overcoming several roadblocks to turning his whimsical notion into reality. “No one believed a legitimate team could be put together in six months,” says Fitch, 61, who also worked on the Caribbean Basin Initiative for the Reagan administration. Fitch tried to persuade the Jamaican government and private companies to sponsor a team, but all turned him down. The Jamaican track team did not want to help, either, fear-



miles from Washington, D.C., and 25 minutes west of Fredericksburg, Warrenton is “a classic crossroads community,” according to town manager Kenneth McLawhon—close to the cultural action in the nation’s capital but also at a peaceful remove from suburban sprawl.

Located in Fauquier County and in the heart of wine and hunt country, Warrenton has been very proactive about managing its growth.

One of the promises Fitch made while running for mayor was to reduce the cost of city government, and he has followed through on that pledge. One of his first acts was to eliminate the Office of Economic

ervation and downtown revitalization group formed in 1988, began a major effort to renovate the district to promote development. The plan has worked: Old Town is now a magnet for locals and visitors alike, who enjoy the neighborhood’s history, appealing shops and varied dining. Among the attractions is Brentmoor, an Italian villa-style home built in 1861 for Fauquier County judge Edward Spilman and later purchased by Col. John S. Mosby, a Confederate cavalry commander. During the Civil War, Mosby would harass Federal troops in and around the county and then, with his troops, slip back into the local community before his next attack, earning himself the nickname The Gray Ghost.

The creation of an aesthetically pleasing “Main Street” environment in Old Town has been a catalyst for growth, attracting an array of new businesses and generating additional tax revenue for the city. Indeed, the popular Red Truck Bakery and Market announced in March that it was moving from the village of Orlean into Old Town, where it

will occupy what was once a circa-1925 Esso filling station. According to Amy Gable of the Partnership for Warrenton, the group has assisted the town in burying overhead power lines in Old Town, building brick sidewalks and, following a major town fund-raising effort, installing replicas of historic streetlamps in the historic district. “Brass plaques soon will be placed on each streetlamp, recognizing the donors and their families,” says Gable. All new construction in Old Town, including additions and modifications, must be approved by an architectural review committee. The Partnership also has created a merchant association and, with assistance from local landscape architect Meade Palmer and consultants from the National Trust, conceived more uniform and visually appealing signage for Old Town, reducing what Gable calls “sign pollution.”

Steve Wecker, the genial owner of Iron Bridge Wine Co., a restaurant and wine bar in the district, credits the Partnership with “giving Old Town a cohesive vision for the mer-

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ing injury to its runners. However, Fitch found a friend in the head of the Jamaican military. “He was the only one who believed I could pull it off,” Fitch recalls. “He gave me his best sprinters and a helicopter pilot to be the driver.” Fitch put up about \$120,000 of his own money, mostly to fly the newly formed team to pre-Olympic competitions in Europe. “Our goal was to beat several teams and not be an embarrassment by coming in last.” In fact, at one event, Jamaica beat 10 teams. Fitch recouped his investment, thanks to the popularity of Jamaican bobsled team T-shirts, designed by his wife, along with the proceeds from the sale of the story to Walt Disney Pictures for the movie *Cool Runnings*. The team did not qualify for the finals at Calgary, but its performance was respectable—and Fitch used remaining funds to sponsor Jamaica’s 1992 bobsled effort in Albertville, France.

Such out-of-the-box thinking by Fitch, who has been Warrenton’s mayor for 11 years, and by numerous other civic leaders helps explain why this northern Virginia town with a population of 8,000 may be one of the most progressive municipalities in America, focused on economic efficiency, historic tourism and quality of life. Situated about 50

Development, which he concluded did not justify its expense to tax payers. “I believe a more efficient government can reduce the cost of government, and thereby reduce the taxes paid by the citizens of Warrenton,” says Fitch. The fiscally conservative Mayor “walks the walk,” as they say: Warrenton’s real estate taxes are among the lowest—if not the lowest—in the Commonwealth, having declined over the last decade from 18 cents per \$100 of assessed value to 1.5 cents today. What’s more, cars valued under \$20,000 do not have a personal property tax levied on them. Fitch’s small office would not even be considered a good broom closet by most municipalities today.

Warrenton has two distinct areas. The city’s commercial corridor, with the national stores and restaurants found in most cities, can be found along the Routes 15 and 29 bypass. The other area is Warrenton’s 143-acre historic district, known as Old Town. The center of Warrenton, Old Town was down at the heels until the town council and the Partnership for Warrenton, a historic pres-

Above, Brian Noyes, owner of Red Truck Bakery; right, lamb chops from Iron Bridge Wine Co.





Facing page, top row, from left: the Mosby Museum, Old Jail, dogwood bloom. Middle row: Red Truck Bakery's bread, the new aquatic center, Chris Catlett at the clothing store Christine Fox. Bottom row: Iron Bridge Wine Co., Black Horse Inn.

chants in the area. We have a clear-cut idea of where we are going in this part of Warrenton, and I'm very excited about [the area's] future."

Laurie and Kitty Enright, a pair of energetic sisters who own Molly's Irish Pub, agree. They moved their

Joseph Warren, who died at Bunker Hill, Warrenton was considered a wealthy little town by the 1860s. During the Civil War, a number of battles and skirmishes took place near Warrenton. In the late 1880s, the area became popular with horse

Gum Drop Square Christmas and Evening Under the Stars, a September fund-raising event that features dining and dancing in the middle of Main Street. Says town council member Sparky Lewis, "Our Gum Drop Square Christmas program

see the historic homes, Civil War sites and the many wineries scattered throughout the area. Warrenton is minutes away from the Warrenton Point to Point Races, held in March, and the popular Gold Cup steeplechase races are held twice a year, at Great Meadow.

Warrenton is showing what dedicated planning and leadership can do for a small community—and there is certainly no shortage of optimism about the future. "I see nothing but positives," says Lewis. "We are well-situated geographically and blessed with a strong balance sheet." He professes pride in the fact that Warrenton is a place "where the butcher and baker live in harmony with industry leaders."

Joan Williams, a fellow council member who was born in the town in the 1930s, is equally bullish. "Warrenton has always been a quaint town," she says, "but I believe it is really improving. Growth may seem slow, but I think we are managing it with good decisions." What could be more important? ●

During the Civil War, a number of battles and skirmishes took place near Warrenton. In the late 1880s, the area became popular with horse lovers—and that remains the case today. The Warrenton Horse Show, one of the state's oldest horse shows, will be celebrating its 110th anniversary in 2009.

business to Old Town eight years ago when, according to Laurie Enright, foot traffic was light. "There was not much going on," she says. "We came in on a gamble—build it and they will come—and so far it's paid off." When she is not serving Guinness Stout, fish and chips, bangers and mash and more, Laurie Enright is a lieutenant colonel in the Air National Guard. She flies C-130 aircraft on weekends.

The mayor, along with others in Warrenton, has a keen interest in energy efficiency and eventually wants to make Warrenton less energy-dependent. Warrenton has implemented a "green initiative" that includes a new building code and stricter energy consumption regulations for government buildings. What's more, the town is now building a new facility to trap gases from its sewage treatment plant to power the nearby Warrenton Aquatic and Recreation Facility—a \$26 million complex that opened in late 2007 and is a major symbol of community pride.

And Fauquier is exploring an even bigger and bolder biogas project. According to county administrator Paul McCulla, "The county is working with a private company to study the feasibility of converting the county's household waste and garbage, which would normally be disposed of in the landfill, into a useable source of energy." If the study proves the idea to be viable, McCulla adds, the county will take the next steps toward building a waste gasification plant and providing renewable energy to the area's residents.

Warrenton started out, like a lot of towns, as a trading post. It was incorporated as a town in 1810 on land donated by Richard Henry Lee, great-uncle to Gen. Robert E. Lee and one of the first to call for American independence from the British, at the Second Continental Congress. Named after Revolutionary hero Gen.

lovers—and that remains the case today. The Warrenton Horse Show, one of the state's oldest horse shows, will be celebrating its 110th anniversary in 2009.

Ideally located for a weekend getaway or just a day trip, Warrenton has much to do inside and outside its town limits. There are a number of family-oriented annual activities in Old Town—the two most prominent events being the town's

is nationally recognized, and our Evening Under the Stars gala was showcased at the National Main Street Conference last year as an example of extraordinary fund-raising achievement." The town is working to create a Historic District Park, with an amphitheater and stage setting, at the head of its Rails to Trails route.

Of course, a driving tour through Fauquier County is the ideal way to

Warrenton | Dining, Hotels & Attractions

Attractions

THE FLYING CIRCUS AIRSHOW
Routes 17 & 644, Bealeton
540.439.8661 or
FlyingCircusAirshow.com

OLD TOWN WARRENTON
A Virginia and National Historic District, Old Town features the Old Court House, the Warren Green Hotel, a statue of native son Chief Justice John Marshall, quality shops and restaurants and a historic walking tour.

OLD JAIL MUSEUM, COURT HOUSE SQUARE
Two buildings (1808, 1823) house Civil War, Revolutionary-era and Indian artifacts as well as Col. John S. Mosby exhibits. One of the oldest remaining jails in the state. 540.347.5525 or FauquierHistory.com

RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER
One of the state's cleanest waterways flows along the entire western border of the county, providing fishing and canoeing opportunities.

VIRGINIA CIVIL WAR TRAILS
A self-guided driving/walking tour of 11 local Civil War sites. For a map and more information, contact the Warrenton Visitor Center, 540.341.0988.

WARRENTON AQUATIC AND RECREATION FACILITY
800 Waterloo Road
540.349.2520

WARRENTON-FAUQUIER VISITOR CENTER
33 N. Calhoun Street
800.820.1021

MARRIOTT RANCH GUIDED TRAIL RIDES
5305 Marriott Lane, Hume (30 minutes from Warrenton)
540.364.2627 or MarriottRanch.com

WARRENTON SPRING FESTIVAL
Held annually on the third Saturday in May, this year on the 16th.
540.347.4414 or FauquierChamber.org

Dining

BEN AND MARY'S STEAK HOUSE
6806 James Madison Highway
540.347.4100

CLAIRE'S AT THE DEPOT
65 S. 3rd Street
540.351.1616 or ClairesRestaurant.com

THE CORNERSTONE CAFE & BISTRO
251 West Lee Highway
540.349.0300

CRESCENDO BISTRO
32 Main Street
540 347 0550

FROST DINER
55 Broadview Avenue
540.347.3047

IRON BRIDGE WINE CO.
29 Main Street
540.349.9339 or IronBridgeWines.com

MAIN STREET GRILL
79 Main Street
540.351.0550

MCAHON'S IRISH PUB & RESTAURANT
380 Broadview Avenue
540.347.7200

MOJITOS & TAPAS CUBAN RESTAURANT
251 West Lee Highway
540.349.8833 or MojitosAndTapas.com

MOLLY'S IRISH PUB
36 Main Street
540.349.5300

NAPOLEON'S
67 Waterloo Street
540.347.4300

RED TRUCK BAKERY AND MARKET
22 Waterloo Street
540.364.1883 or RedTruckBakery.com

Inns

BLACK HORSE INN
8393 Meetze Road
540.349.4020 or BlackHorseInn.com

POPLAR SPRINGS INN AND SPA
9245 Rogues Road, Casanova
540.788.4600 or PoplarSpringsInn.com

Local Wineries

For a complete list, with descriptions and directions, see VisitFauquier.com or call the Visitor Center, 540.341.0988.