

# Gov. Northam Helps Celebrate Historic Onancock School Centennial



**Left: Gov. Ralph Northam speaks during Historic Onancock School's centennial celebration Saturday, Sept. 25. Right: From left, Rita D. McClenny, Virginia Tourism Commission president; Onancock Mayor Fletcher Fosque; Gov. Ralph Northam; and Robert Sabbatini, Eastern Shore of Virginia Chamber of Commerce executive director, cut a ribbon to officially mark the opening of a new playground at the Historic Onancock School.**

## Story and Photos by Carol Vaughn

Gov. Ralph Northam was among dignitaries attending the centennial celebration for Historic Onancock School Saturday.

Northam, HOS board members, and other officials cut ribbons to officially mark completion of three major projects at the former school, which now serves as a community and cultural center.

Ribbon-cutting ceremonies were held back-to-back for the Onancock LOVE sign in front of the school, an elevator, and a new playground on the grounds.

Northam is a 1977 graduate of the school and he also attended elementary school there when it was a 12-year school.

"This is where I was educated and this is where I was raised — and I've never forgotten my roots," said Northam.

"I remember every teacher that I had here; I remember every coach; and it literally is what shaped me to be who I am," he said, adding, "So, we have a lot to be proud of here at Onancock High School."

He praised those who worked to save and repurpose the building after it was no longer needed as a school.

Northam pledged to "do everything that I can" to help HOS financially when he prepares his final budget, saying, "It's so important that we keep

places like Onancock High School so that we can teach our history. It's so important to know where we've been so we know how to move forward."

Northam noted that tourism, including in places like Onancock and other Eastern Shore destinations, is Virginia's number two industry, behind agriculture.

Rita McClenny, president and chief executive officer of the Virginia Tourism Corporation, said HOS is "part of that vibrancy that has its arms open to all those who will come to visit here ... for all of you who live here and love this beautiful, beautiful Onancock, but also for the artists that are housed here — and just creating opportunity, an incubator."

Speaking about the LOVE sign, McClenny said, "It's about the heart, the love, of people who will visit, go over to that LOVEwork, take pictures, post it on social media, share it with their friends — and they are going to see the reaction ... 'I can tell they were having a good time.'"

She predicted the sign "will be a central draw" for the town.

Cynthia Serini Downing, vice president of the HOS board of directors, spoke before the second ribbon-cutting about HOS' new elevator, made possible by a donation from Becky Rootes, who has since died, and a grant from



**Gov. Ralph Northam and other dignitaries cut a ribbon officially celebrating the Onancock LOVE sign's installation during Historic Onancock School's centennial celebration Saturday, Sept. 25.**

the Eastern Shore of Virginia Community Foundation.

The elevator will increase accessibility and make it possible to apply for grants, many of which require properties to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Julie Badger, director of the Eastern Shore of Virginia Community Foundation, said the nonprofit sector is an economic motivator.

"The board was very happy to make the grant," she said.

Mayor Fletcher Fosque spoke before the final ribbon-cutting, at the playground.

"Onancock is incredibly proud to have this gorgeous playground," he said, thanking Joni Donohoe, HOS executive director, for her work and the Robert E. and Marie Orr Smith Foundation for a grant that made the playground possible.