

## **‘A CULTURE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP’ Tech Trending Downtown**

More Startups Set Up Shop In City

**By JEREMY HUNT**  
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**HARRISONBURG** — By his own account, Mike Fulkerson moved to Harrisonburg from Washington, D.C., kicking and screaming the entire way.

Much has changed since Fulkerson, a former Rosetta Stone executive, came to the Valley in 2005 for a job in the community where the language-learning software company got its start 22 years ago.

“I really fell in love with the Valley and Harrisonburg,” he said.

So much so that when he left Rosetta Stone in August 2012, Fulkerson stayed in the area and opened a business management software company, Bizy.

Bizy is just one of several tech startups to open in recent years in the downtown area.

Brian Shull, the city’s economic development director, sees it as an upward trend that’s helping to further diversify Harrisonburg’s economy and provide good jobs.

“It’s a unique story that we have so many tech firms sort of clustering in the downtown Harrisonburg area,” he said. “That really creates some neat synergy, and I think we’re starting to build a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation that I think will encourage others into venturing to starting a new business.”

About 10 years ago, Harrisonburg official established a downtown technology zone that provides tax incentives for qualifying companies that locate in the downtown area. In the past several years, at least a half-dozen tech companies have set up shop downtown, including Pickarious, a growing video-based online platform for buying and selling goods; Web design firms GroMobi and Venture Interactive; Drawbridge Technologies, a cyber security consulting company; and Approved Colleges, which connects people with online degree programs and provides Web-based job training.

“It’s a benefit in that we can have job opportunities for graduates from [James Madison University, Eastern Mennonite University and Bridgewater College],” Shull said. “They can stay in the area if they so choose, so it’s nice we can continue to build that pipeline of talent.”

As far as choosing to locate in downtown, Fulkerson said the decision was a no-brainer.

“I love the convenience of being able to walk. I don’t like getting in my car and driving if I don’t have to,” said Fulkerson, principal at Bizy. “Being able to walk to restaurants or out to get a beer

is attractive. The vibrant feeling of being downtown as opposed to an office park or strip mall — this is just so much nicer.”

Bizy opened about a year ago just off Court Square on East Market Street.

With a team of six employees, Bizy is developing an application to help businesses manage employee performance evaluations. Pickarious, one of the newest downtown ventures, launched its website in October. Principal Andy Harbick describes the site as Craigslist plus video-sharing Website YouTube, marrying the online classified ad community’s user-friendliness with the benefits of showing off goods using video instead of images.

“We want to make it really easy to sell your stuff, to have it be fun, to be low cost and to have it be viral in a Web-based and mobile platform,” said Harbick, a 1996 JMU grad who moved back to the Valley from Seattle in 2003 to take a position with Rosetta Stone.

Fulkerson is a partner in Pickarious, as is former Rosetta Stone Chief Executive Officer Tom Adams.

Harbick is only one of the trio who was laid off as Rosetta Stone restructured its business model, which resulted in more than 60 pink slips last year alone.

Even as it has reduced its local workforce, Rosetta Stone remains the largest tech firm in downtown Harrisonburg with more than 300 employees. After Harbick’s position was cut in June, he decided to run with the idea for Pickarious that he and Fulkerson started to develop a month prior. It takes its name from the term “picking,” a distribution term co-opted and made popular by cable television show American Pickers to mean value shopping.

Pickarious connects shoppers in Harrisonburg, but Harbick plans to launch the site nationwide eventually.

Harbick, the sole full-time employee, works out of Larkin Arts on Court Square.

“My personal experience of downtown Harrisonburg is it’s just a pleasant place to be,” he said. “There’s lots of entrepreneurial energy that crosses [between technology companies and nontech businesses].”

Tony Huffman, president of Approved Colleges, said Shull was instrumental in keeping the business in downtown.

The company started out in an office on East Market Street and launched its website in October 2012.

“There are lot of adults out there today that need to better themselves through education ... just to stay relevant in their careers,” Huffman said. Approved Colleges has seen success early and recently moved to a larger, redeveloped space on West Bruce Street just off Liberty Street.

In November, Approved Colleges committed to hiring 10 new staff members in addition to its nine, qualifying it for the city's downtown technology zone.

Certified businesses are eligible for a three-year exemption from the city's business, professional and occupational license tax, as well as a 25 percent reduction on its property tax for machinery and equipment in the first year of certification.

"The city does have some nice perks for businesses that will locate in the technology zone in the city," Huffman said. "So, we found a nice space being built out, [and] it made sense, so we decided to stick around Harrisonburg."

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— **ANDY HARBICK**

PRINCIPAL AT PICKARIOUS