

CONSERVATION EDITION

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Conserving a Crown Jewel in Culpeper County

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

Western View Plantation in Culpeper County gets its name from the panoramic vista of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah National Park seen from its pastures and fields. This 700-acre working farm exemplifies the kind of agricultural operation that sustains a thriving rural economy.

Thanks to the efforts of many — including a farming family dedicated to conserving farmland for the continuation of our local food systems — PEC used \$1.6 million of state and federal funding to purchase an Agricultural Land Easement that now permanently protects the excellent soils and streams that run through Western View. (For more information on the ALE program, see our story on Page 2.)

Owners Tom and Kim Nixon worked with The Piedmont Environmental Council and a slate

of other partners to conserve Western View, the largest property placed into conservation easement in PEC's nine-county region in 2024 and now the largest easement PEC holds.

"It could be the crown jewel of Culpeper County in 50 to 75 years because of its size, and there's never going to be any major development on it," says Kim Nixon.

For the Nixons, farming is a family operation. Tom grew up working on a farm in Orange County, and he and his wife Kim have been farming together in Orange and Culpeper counties for decades. They've instilled their love of farming in both their adult children, as well. Daughter Elizabeth manages the cow herd, overseeing spring and fall calving for about 1,000 cows. Son Robert manages the crop crew, which plants 5,500 acres of farmland



At the Nixon's Western View family farm, daughter Elizabeth oversees the cow herds, including about 1,000 calving cows in the springtime. Photo by Elizabeth Nixon

that the Nixons lease or own in the area, including Western View.

Even so, the Nixons know that a family farming legacy is not a guarantee. They have seen farmland lost around them over the years.

"This whole area is developing way too fast," says Kim. "There's a new data center within 5 miles of this farm. We want to preserve the land. We want our kids to have it."

"It's part of our livelihood. We want to protect the land and make it better so it will be productive for generations," agrees Tom. "We want this to be a generational farm."

The Nixon family knew they wanted to place Western View under a conservation easement

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Data Center Reform Campaign Continues

By Julie Bolthouse, Director of Land Use

In the pre-dawn hours in a Haymarket parking lot, a few dozen people huddled in record cold temperatures as they made their way to the warm glow of a charter bus. Their destination: Richmond. Their mission: convince legislators to enact data center reform during the 2025 General Assembly session.

Our Data Center Reform Platform

As Virginia cities and counties continue to approve more data centers, and transmission lines to serve them follow, the public

outcry has brought new communities into the growing Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition. We now represent over 60 nonprofit organizations, homeowner's associations and communities. The coalition came prepared to the 2025 General Assembly session with a fully fleshed out Data Center Reform Campaign.

Building off of the extensive outreach efforts of The Piedmont Environmental Council and our many partners through the coalition over the past year, we proposed a legislative platform that focused on four pillars of

data center reform: **1) enhanced transparency, 2) state oversight, 3) ratepayer protection, and 4) incentives for efficiency.** We worked with legislators to draft key bills that address these fundamental reform needs. Unfortunately, most of these bills failed, but the four pillars of reform remain the guiding star for our ongoing efforts.

Outreach and Lobbying Efforts on the Four Pillars

At the beginning of the General Assembly session, Sen. Russett Perry and a group of bipartisan legislators held a press conference to announce their focus on our four pillars of data center reform and five bills they planned to carry forward to implement these pillars. This helped frame the need for data center reform for the General Assembly and the media, which heavily covered the event.

Participants braved ice and record cold temperatures for Data Center Lobby Day on Jan. 20, leaving Haymarket at 5:30 a.m.

Photo by Elena Schlossberg

Less than a week later, on Jan. 20, more than 80 people attended the Data Center Reform Coalition's first independent lobby day to demand action. Attendees met with over 50 legislative offices and shared information with dozens more. Attendees who had previously lobbied in Richmond on this issue in 2023 and 2024 noted that legislators had a much stronger understanding and interest in the issue compared to years past.

This year, the impacts of data centers are hard to ignore. Dominion Energy's draft Integrated Resource Plan showed over \$100 billion of energy infrastructure investment needed to meet the skyrocketing demand. Additionally, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) recently completed a study on data center impacts that made it clear that meeting the energy demand of the data center industry will be extremely challenging and that ratepayers will be subsidizing the infrastructure needed.

Acknowledging growing residential impacts, the JLARC study

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PEC's conservation achievements of 2024 are not a surprise, but rather the direct outcome of PEC staff focusing on our strategic plan goal of seeing 30% of the land in our nine-county region permanently conserved by the end of 2030. And though conservation is generally measured in acres, Kane explains that "the acres are just a shorthand for the more important, life-sustaining resources and benefits the land provides" — resources and benefits that don't always immediately come to mind in conversations about conservation.

County-by-county total acres protected by conservation easement

County	Number of Easements Closed	Acres Protected in 2024*	Total Acres Protected*
Albemarle	7	664	114,034
Clarke	7	368	28,124
Culpeper	2	745	22,281
Fauquier	10	825	112,451
Greene	3	184	10,971
Loudoun	10	702	70,854
Madison	2	970	17,461

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Greene	3	184	10,971
Loudoun	10	702	70,854
Madison	2	970	17,461
Orange	4	630	41,056
Rappahannock	1	359	34,310
PEC Region	46	5,446	451,542

* Numbers are rounded

PEC’s Big Year in Conservation

Continued from Page 2

Clean and ample water, for example. Soils rich enough to produce healthy food. Carbon sequestration and filtration of air and water. Protection against flooding impacts and a warming planet. And the economic value to local communities of vibrant agricultural and forestry based industries.

Many conservation organizations and partners are doing great things in Virginia and the Piedmont, but PEC has a unique toolbox that has helped us open the door to an incredible year of conservation that goes much deeper than acreage.

Amping up direct protection of working farmland

The 1,743 acres of working agricultural land PEC was able to conserve last year in partnership with landowners is particularly significant because the development pressures on agricultural lands are greater than ever.

Virginia lost nearly 500,000 acres of farmland from 2017–2022, more than was lost in the previous 15 years combined, according to the 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture. And 10% of all Virginia farms stopped operations during the same time period. What’s more, fragmentation of remaining farmland has increased land prices to the point of making it difficult to impossible for new and young farmers to enter the field.

“As part of our strategic plan goals, we identified an opportunity to spur conservation by making use of funding available through the USDA’s Agricultural Land Easement, or ALE, program,” Kane said. Created under the 2014 Farm Bill, the ALE program is rarely used in Virginia, but is one of the most significant sources of federal funding available for conservation. It’s a “purchase of development rights” program that pays farmers to relinquish the development rights on their properties. With ALE program funding, PEC can help a landowner use a conservation easement to protect high quality farmland soils, protect water and keep land in production agriculture.

With generous support from the Volgenau Foundation, PEC initiated a focused effort to make use of the ALE program to accelerate conservation in the

Upper Rappahannock, where many large working farms are strong candidates for the program. Since 2018, PEC has tapped \$3.7 million in ALE funding to match with \$1.17 million from the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to conserve five farms and over 2,100 acres. PEC has an additional \$2 million in ALE funding and \$1.2 million from VLCF to conserve five more farms totalling almost 1,300 acres over the next 18 months. We believe it is possible to create a pipeline where PEC can help protect four to six farms through the ALE program each year.

PEC’s promotion of the ALE program has sparked renewed interest in conservation from owners/operators of large working farms who are finding that conservation is an option for reinvesting in farm infrastructure, buying more land, and helping to pass farms to the next generation. That is a win-win for farmers, local farm economies, and the Upper Rappahannock’s mosaic of natural, cultural and agricultural resources.

Building long-term relationships and trust that make the difference

Part of what makes an ALE program work in the Virginia Piedmont is the bedrock of PEC’s work as a community-based organization since 1972. Getting to know our neighbors and build long-lasting relationships opens the door for conversations with people about land stewardship, conservation and the future.

“For example, our conservation staff had one-on-one conversations with more than 150 landowners last year about potential conservation options for their land,” Kane said. Staff also attended more than 85 different community events—sometimes as a speaker or host and other times setting up an information table at a partner organization’s event—to talk with folks about PEC, the work we do, and how we can help them plan for the future of their properties.

Partnering with local landowners takes on many forms and doesn’t always lead to a PEC-held conservation easement. That’s not our goal. “We see ourselves as an important part of a network of public and nonprofit orga-

nizations dedicated to helping landowners, knowing what tools are available and connecting them to those tools or to other organizations that might be perfectly suited to their particular need,” Kane said. “We have an expansive knowledge of the various roles and resources within the conservation arena, and our goal is to provide the best advice we can. That builds a lot of credibility.”

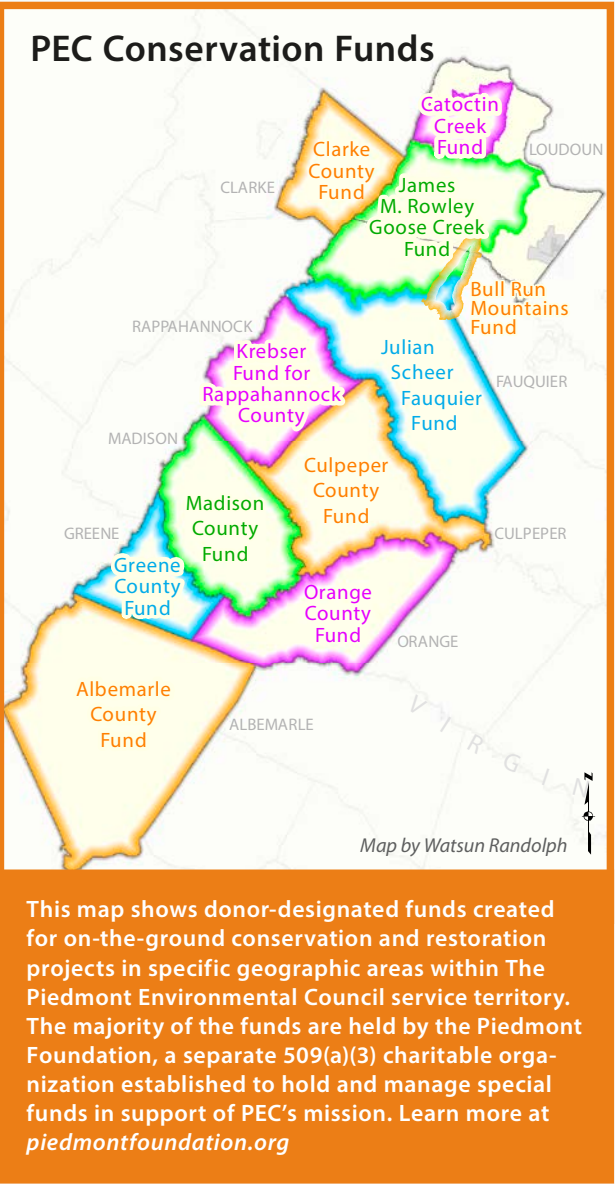
The strength and breadth of PEC’s 40-plus board members also helps. These are people who live in our community, who are connected to people throughout our region, and who play an important role in connecting PEC staff to their neighbors. They are believers in our mission, directly living it in many cases, and also strong supporters of our work. Their credibility and authenticity gives people a much more meaningful introduction to PEC.

Helping landowners with conservation costs

The third set of implements in PEC’s conservation toolbox are our conservation funds, which are special funds held by the Piedmont Foundation for use by PEC for on-the-ground conservation and restoration projects. Each of PEC’s 11 conservation funds serves a specific geographic region, and most have operating guidelines and a local citizen advisory committee that makes recommendations to the PEC Board of Directors on use of the funds.

Love of the land motivates most landowners’ decision to donate a conservation easement. But the cost of donating an easement is oftentimes a significant obstacle. A landowner’s upfront cost of land survey, appraisal, legal counsel, and other due diligence expenses, combined with a stewardship contribution that conservation organizations use to care for the land in perpetuity, too often prevent landowners from proceeding with conservation. For Carolyn Smith, PEC’s Madison County Land Conservation Fund contributed funding to ensure the long-term stewardship of her property’s conservation values in 2023. In fact, using just over \$61,000 from our PEC conservation funds, we assisted six landowners with easements that protected over 1,163 acres over the past two years in Clarke, Culpeper, Greene and Madison counties.

These conservation funds not only provide direct financial assistance for easement costs, they often support projects that enhance restoration and stewardship on public and private lands, and enable us to leverage other available state or federal funding that allow landowners to implement stewardship



practices that improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat. For example, in 2021, the Krebs Fund for Rappahannock County Conservation provided financial support for the creation of the Sperryville Trail Study and Invasive Species Management Plan, which will ensure the future and longevity of this important publicly accessible trail — on private property — that links areas of the village previously lacking safe pedestrian access and much of which runs along the Thornton River.

Finally, the conservation funds can provide financial support in instances where PEC or a conservation partner is directly purchasing land with high conservation value, often threatened by conversion. This was the case in 2024 when two different conservation funds were used to complete PEC’s purchase of the 6-acre Aldie Assemblage, a property in Loudoun County at the intersection of the Bull Run Mountains and Little River. Here, PEC’s James M. Rowley Goose Creek Fund provided the critical seed money needed to initially pursue the purchase, while financial assistance from PEC’s Bull Run Mountain Conservation Fund contributed the final \$25,000 needed to reach the \$600,000 purchase price.

With our long-term relationships forming the cornerstone of our conservation success, PEC applied our unique experience with programs like ALE and our regional conservation funds to make 2024 our biggest conservation year yet. Through the support of our members and partners, we intend to keep that momentum going in 2025.



PEC’s Krebs Fund for Rappahannock County Conservation helped fund a study that will ensure the longevity of the Sperryville Trail, which provides safe public pedestrian access to the village through mostly private property.

Photo by Hugh Kenny

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

BELMONT FARM

Expanding a Piece of Heaven

By Lauria McShane, Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative Assistant

As the warm sunlight stretches through the bare tree branches at The Piedmont Environmental Council’s Warrenton office, Hans and Anne Wachtmeister huddle in the yard for a picture. With a smiling face, Hans holds up a sign that reads, “This property is forever protected with a conservation easement.”

This sign will find its place amongst the expansive views of Belmont Farm where cattle meander through soft rolling grasslands, clear streams lace their way through the woodlands and, off in the distance, the Blue Ridge mountains jut into a placid blue sky. This is the second sign the Wachtmeisters add to their landscape to accompany the picturesque views of Fauquier County’s farmland — a symbol that this sanctuary will be here in perpetuity.



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Hans and Ann affectionately call their home “a piece of heaven,” and rightfully so. In 2022 they completed their first conservation easement, also held by PEC, to protect 381 acres of forest and grassland at Belmont Farm. That piece of heaven expanded this past December when they closed on this conservation easement to protect an additional 177 acres.

Now totalling 558 acres of protected land, the Wachtmeisters’ property adds to a growing green buffer around the Warrenton service district. Neighboring the Wachtmeister property lies the Clifton Institute, Hopefield, The Meadows, and Whitehall Farm, which together create an extensive network of almost 2,185 acres of protected land. This network is home to forested lands, agricultural operations and the headwaters of Cedar Run that deliver clean water to the town

of Warrenton, thus benefiting all those in their community who live downstream.

The Wachtmeisters show us that more can always be done to conserve our land and our home, the Virginia Piedmont. Through generous donations of conservation easements, this region’s natural lands can continue to provide our communities with fresh water, clean air and thriving ecosystems that strengthen our quality of life and sense of place well into the future — making the Piedmont a little piece of heaven for all of us who call it home.

BEAVER DAM FARM

A Conservation Win in Loudoun County

By Mike Kane, Director of Conservation

In December 2024, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation helped the Bonnie family preserve the 138-acre Beaver Dam Farm, a longstanding conservation priority at risk of development near the Village of Unison in Loudoun County. After the Bonnies purchased the farm earlier in the year, VOF secured a Virginia Land Conservation Foundation grant to purchase a conservation easement that maintains the agricultural viability of the farm and protects the historic character of the rural landscape within the Unison Battlefield National Historic District and the Beaverdam Creek Historic Roadways District.

The conservation of Beaver Dam Farm also marked an important milestone in protecting water quality, as conservation of the farm’s nearly half-mile of frontage along Beaverdam Creek provided the last link in a continuous 5-mile corridor of protected lands along the waterway. Beaverdam Creek is a major tributary of Goose Creek, a designated Virginia Scenic River and public drinking water source for Loudoun and Fairfax counties. With the landowners and VOF expanding the conservation corridor, the preservation of Beaver Dam Farm reflects our shared progress in ensuring our waters are clean and plentiful in the future.

The Bonnie family’s decision to purchase and preserve Beaver Dam Farm brings to a happy close efforts by local residents and The Piedmont Environmental Council — stretching back at least 20 years — to find a conservation outcome for the farm. The preservation of the farm also represents another step forward in achieving PEC’s goal of helping landowners conserve at least 125,000 acres, or 50% of the land in the Goose Creek watershed. To date, more than 110,000 acres, roughly 44% of the Goose Creek watershed — an area more than 2.5 times the size of Washington, D.C. — have been permanently protected through public and private land conservation.

Conserving a Crown Jewel in Culpeper County

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when they first acquired it a decade ago. No strangers to the ALE program, they conserved Glenmary Farm in Orange County back in 2018, permanently protecting that 382-acre award-winning cattle, turkey and grain farm.

PEC’s work with the Nixons on Glenmary Farm established our model for accelerating farmland protection through the federal ALE program. Including Glenmary Farm, PEC has now secured over \$6.7 million to purchase 10 ALE easements totaling over 3,400 acres.

Unlike traditional donated easements that offer tax incentives, ALE easements provide the landowner with a cash payment upfront. This makes conservation accessible to more landowners, including those who may not be able to pursue a donated easement.

“This model allows us to protect high quality agricultural soils in Virginia while allowing farmers to reinvest funds into their operations, land stewardship practices and the local agricultural economy,” says PEC Director of Conservation Mike Kane.

“Easements are a wonderful intersection between the goals of the land owner and the resources to be protected,” says Kane.

While conservation easements in general provide many benefits, from

wildlife habitat to carbon sequestration, the federal ALE program is designed to protect two key resources in particular: water quality and prime agricultural soils.

“Top soil is not created overnight,” says Kane, noting the productive soils found at Western View. “It takes millennia to create the conditions that are good for agriculture. As the climate changes, the Piedmont is going to be one of the areas most suitable for agriculture and food production. Protecting the best soils for that food production is really important; it’s an established public good.”

This kind of landscape-level conservation has important ripple effects beyond Western View itself. Neighboring farmers have also protected hundreds of acres with conservation easements,

“It’s part of our livelihood. We want to protect the land and make it better so it will be productive for generations.”

— Tom Nixon

something the Nixons hope will make the area a haven for agriculture for years to come. Local food systems and strong rural economies depend on working farmland. Conserving land under the ALE program helps ensure that land is not only protected, but stewarded in such a way that the benefits literally flow downstream.

“Clean local streams lead to a restored Chesapeake Bay,” says Kane. As part of the ALE program, the Nixons will protect 3 miles of stream frontage on Western View with riparian buffers. These buffers will improve not only local water quality, but also water quality for all communities and ecosystems downstream.

Emerging research also suggests that cropland and pastureland, like forestland, has the potential to sequester carbon from the atmosphere. At Western View, about 600 acres is open for crops and grazing, while about 100 acres will remain forested. Conserving land like this is an important tool for mitigating the effects of a changing climate that will impact our communities.

While PEC is the principal easement holder on Western View, many parties came together to make this project a reality. PEC purchased the conservation

easement that now protects Western View with \$1.1 million from the federal ALE program and a \$500,000 grant from the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation. PEC’s Culpeper County Conservation Fund and the landowners contributed toward its continuing stewardship. The Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District co-holds the easement with PEC, an innovative partnership that allows PEC to learn from their staff’s knowledge.

“It’s really fantastic to have the technical expertise of Culpeper Soil and Water as a partner in this. To be able to confer with their professionals and share knowledge is really advantageous,” says Kane.

Wanting to protect farmland from being lost to sprawling developments and data centers, Tom and Kim are enthusiastic supporters of the ALE program. But the timeline isn’t always a speedy one. “It’s a lot of hurry up and wait,” Kim laughs about their three-year process. Still, they agree that they would encourage other farmers to pursue ALE.

“I wish there were more funds so groups like PEC could get even more farmland under easement to protect it and save it,” says Kim.

“We would do it again,” agrees Tom about using ALE. “If we buy another farm, we will do it.”



Data Center Reform Campaign Continues

Continued from cover

also described data centers as an “industrial use” not appropriate in residential areas. All too often, localities approve data centers bordering residential areas, harming residents’ quality of life.

Bills Proposed to Implement the Four Pillars of Data Center Reform

To create some level of state oversight, Del. Josh Thomas and Sen. Richard Stuart sponsored two bills — HB 2027 (Thomas) and SB 1448 (Stuart) — that would have required that the State Corporation Commission and the Department of Environmental Quality review large data center applications. Their respective committees felt these bills had unmitigated budgetary impacts and did not advance them.

Companion bills in the Senate and House, SB 1353 (Srinivasan) and HB 2035 (Simonds), could have increased transparency about the energy and water use of existing data centers. Unfortunately, the House Labor and Commerce Committee and the Senate Finance Committee felt that such disclosures were a national security risk and thus dropped these bills, as well.

Sen. Creigh Deeds and Del. Richard Sullivan sponsored bills — SB 1196 (Deeds) and HB 2578 (Sullivan) — to tie the state tax exemption for data centers (which has reached \$1 billion annually) to energy efficiency and sustainability standards. These bills did not make it out

of committee.

Finally, multiple representatives brought ratepayer protection bills — HB 2101 (Lopes-Maldonado) and SB 960 (Perry) — that would have protected residents and businesses from subsidizing the data center industry’s energy infrastructure. The House Labor and Commerce Committee defeated HB 2101 with little discussion or explanation.

Only SB 960 (Perry), the ratepayer protection bill, and HB 1601 (Thomas), a transparency bill, passed both the House and Senate.

Where are we now?

Only five of the 30 data center reform bills we advocated for survived their respective chambers and passed the House and Senate:

➤ **SB 960 (Perry) / HB 2084 (Shin)** SB 960 and HB 2084 went into conference, but the committee did not the accept stronger language of SB 960 requiring the SCC to determine if residential ratepayers and other businesses are subsidizing the energy infrastructure needs of the data center industry. Rather than accept weak language, Sen. Perry chose to pull her bill. HB 2084 passed with the weakened language that does not empower the SCC to do anything new.

➤ **HB 1601 (Thomas) / SB 1449 (Ebbins)** These bills went into conference and were combined. They would: 1) require

sound profiles for facilities using over 100 MW of power; 2) allow localities to require site assessments to examine effects on water and agricultural resources, parks, historic sites and forests; and 3) require that, prior to local consideration, utility companies review and describe any substations and transmission voltage that would be required if the data center application were approved.

➤ **SB 1047 (Roem)** This bill was amended to require the Virginia Department of Energy, in consultation with the SCC, to evaluate potential energy demand response programs and ensure programs are cost effective and do not result in increased local air pollution through the use of fossil fuel generators.

The House- and Senate-approved budget also includes funding for the Joint Subcommittee on Tax Policy to study the benefits of data center tax exemptions and review the JLARC recommendations on how exemptions could be used to incentivize better data center development. Unfortunately, the budget also included a \$15 million handout to Pulaski

County for road extensions, grading, and natural gas pipeline extensions to support the construction of a data center and power plant.

Next Steps

The ultimate success or failure of these bills will depend on the governor, who holds the veto pen over any approved bills and the budget.

Although disappointed that legislators failed to take more action on data center reform, we did get some important bills nearly to the finish line. We have made this one of the biggest issues of the session and plan to maintain this momentum into 2025 by continuing media outreach, speaking at conferences and community meetings, participating in upcoming SCC cases, and tracking and commenting on associated energy, water, and air quality impacts at both the local and regional level.



From the balcony of her home in Gainesville, Ari Govoni-Young’s view is a data center: a windowless monolith that emits a constant hum. Photo by Hugh Kenny

The Next Generation

By Faith Schweikert, Communications Specialist

For over 100 years, three generations of Goodalls have owned and worked to improve their land in Madison County, which now stands at 596 acres after enlarging the farm several times. Now, brothers Joe and Paul have fulfilled their parents’ final wishes to keep the land as a farm. In April, PEC used grants from the USDA’s Agricultural Land Easement program, the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation, and the Volgenau Foundation to purchase a conservation easement for \$1.3 million, permanently protecting the farm for the next generation.

“My dad had a basic philosophy of ‘I don’t own my land. I am a steward of the land I’ve been given by God to look after during my lifetime, and I want to leave it better than I found it,’” Paul said.

“We heard that many times and that’s certainly still a big motive for us.

“And my mom saw the farm [that she grew up on] get sold and become a subdivision with fairly large lots. So...she saw that place change, and she and Dad were hoping for that not to occur on the farm that they had worked together to acquire.”

After their parents’ passing, the brothers continued to improve the property their parents had loved so much. With financial and technical assistance from Friends of the Rappahannock, the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA, the Virginia Department of Forestry, and PEC, they created a forest stewardship plan, implemented rotational grazing, planted riparian buffers, and installed a well and livestock

waterers. For their efforts, they received the Soil and Water Conservation District’s 2019 Forestry Award and Friends of the Rappahannock’s 2020 Clean Water Award.

Joe remembers driving his dad around the land long after his dad was no longer able to move about it and farm.

“He would say, ‘If you work the land all your life, you have an attachment to it. It’s almost like it’s a part of you and you kind of have that need to go see it every so often.’”

Seeing this connection with the natural world form from even the smallest of interactions — like when over 100 students, from middle school to college, came to the property to plant 3,765 trees with the PEC’s Headwater Stream Initiative — was one of the brothers’ favorite parts of this experience.

“We were thinking about how they would feel. Not only are we protecting the land, but we’re also introducing the next generation to what this is and why it’s important,” Paul said. “[The students] are the ones who are going to decide what our society does in regards to environmental protection and stewardship of the environment. So, we feel good about that...There were conversations about students wanting to come back in five years and see what it looked like because it’s not instant gratification. It’s a long-term view.”

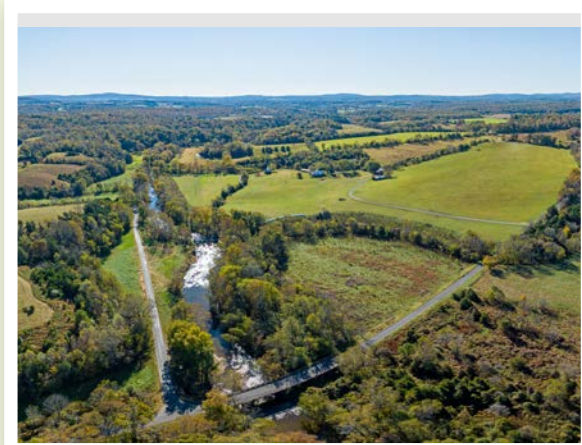


Joe and Paul Goodall were able to fulfill their parents’ wishes to keep their land as a farm for the next generation, thanks to help from PEC securing an Agricultural Land Easement. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Significantly adding to the protected lands in Madison County, the Goodall easement protects roughly 300 acres of woodland, 332 acres of prime agricultural soils and statewide significant soils, 4.51 miles of permanent vegetated stream-side buffers and 6 acres of wetlands.

“You’re doing it for the environment, for the world that we’re going to be leaving our children and grandchildren and our neighbors’ children and grandchildren,” Joe said. “The earth has been here a long, long time, and as Dad pointed out, we have a short period of time where we get to care for it. So to me, [an easement] just feels really good. And with how many people get their drinking water from the tributary of the Robinson River and the Rapidan, it’s a good neighbor thing to do.”

The easement on Goodall Farm includes 4.51 miles of permanent, vegetated riparian buffers and 6 acres of wetlands. Photo by Hugh Kenny



General Assembly Update

Every day, Piedmont Environmental Council staff engage at the local, state and federal level to shape public policy with an eye toward protecting natural resources and advancing sustainability. These efforts include the annual Virginia General Assembly, which convened on Jan. 8 for a short session during which legislators introduced and considered over 2,000 pieces of legislation.

As of this writing, the General Assembly has adjourned “sine die,” completing its work until the governor signs bills, proposes amendments or wields his veto pen. Legislators will return to consider the governor’s action on April 2. In our winter issue of *The Piedmont View*, we tracked four topics: data center reform, conservation, energy and climate, and land use and local authority. We detail the progress of data center reform on the front page, but how is legislation in the other categories faring?

Conservation

The Virginia’s Great Outdoors Act (HB 2059) moved farther in the legislative process than ever before, getting a hearing before the House Appropriations Committee where a broad range of voices from the conservation, tourism and recreation communities spoke in its favor. The committee voted to “gently lay the bill on table for the day,” where it remains, dead for this year. The committee chair and members agreed its components were valuable, but would not make a commitment to the program in total. However, legislators have proposed several budget amendments in the House and the Senate to achieve many of its goals, so we are hopeful for incremental progress.

A series of bills related to conservation died before they crossed over from the House to the Senate, or vice versa, including a bill to increase the land

preservation tax credit from \$75 million to \$100 million (HB 2382) and a bill to examine the Commonwealth’s land conservation goals and highlight the need for robust funding for conservation now and in the future (SB 1198). We monitored and helped amend an interesting bill (SB 1435 / HB 1721) that would have required entities using eminent domain to take any land protected by a conservation easement to compensate the commonwealth and local governments, but it did not survive to be passed onto the governor.

Legislation to make Oak Hill in Loudoun County, Virginia’s newest state park passed the House of Delegates unanimously, but did not survive the Senate, where leaders expressed concern about the state’s future financial obligations to maintain the park. (Read more about this in our story on page 7.)

Land Use and Local Authority

This session saw several bills that would have shortened local governments’ review times on land use applications, compelled approvals if certain circumstances were met, or even taken away localities’ authority to say “no” to a variety of housing, utility-scale solar and other projects favored by the development industry. PEC has consistently worked to preserve local planning and land use control, and believes local control is the best means of ensuring that communities can determine their own destinies.

Committees in the House and Senate amended many of these bills so that they are now more encouraging and permissive in nature, allowing Virginia’s 95 counties, 38 independent cities and 189 towns to apply the flexibility their circumstances require. PEC actively worked with legislators to amend bills that would affect accessory dwelling units (SB 304), allow zoning exceptions to properties



Photo by Hugh Kenny

owned by faith-based organizations to build housing (SB 1178) and battle fill-dirt dumping from data centers and other large scale developments in rural areas of our region (SB 1422), among many others.

Energy and Climate

Legislation (SB 1190) that would have required localities to demonstrate contribution to their own energy needs and broader state needs, mainly through the approval of renewable energy projects such as utility-scale solar, failed in the Senate. Localities could benefit from increased technical assistance and support for utility-scale solar best practices, but removing their ability to assess these projects based on local needs could set a dangerous precedent for state authority over local decision making.

Most of our priority bills on distributed energy generation and storage in the commonwealth have passed and are headed to the governor’s desk. PEC helped author the long duration energy storage bills (HB 2537 / SB 1394) that increase long duration energy storage build requirements and include a

non-binding model of best practices informed by locally based organizations such as PEC and the Virginia Association of Counties. The package of distributed generation expansion bills (HB 1833 / SB 1040) — which would triple the amount of distributed generation utility companies are required to build on parking lots and brownfields — and virtual power plant bills (HB 2346 / SB 1100) also passed and now need the governor’s approval. Bills facilitating parking lot solar (HB 2037) and easing interconnection costs (HB 2266) have also advanced to the governor’s desk.

This session began with both great opportunity and great hazard for PEC’s four broad priority areas of data center reform, conservation, energy and climate, and land use and local authority. Like all legislative sessions, we had wins and losses, and we hope that we have prepared the ground for next years’ longer session under a newly elected governor. The battles will continue next year and potentially in a special session that leadership may convene this spring.

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

LILLY PROPERTY

Conservation Funds Protect Clarke County Property

By Keely Murphy, Conservation Field Representative for the Potomac Watershed

Sometimes advancing conservation in our region means supporting another partner’s vision. This was the case last year, when The Piedmont Environmental Council contributed funds from our Clark County Land Conservation Fund to the purchase of a conservation easement at the 43-acre Lilly property, facilitating a conservation win for all parties.

The Lilly family has owned their cattle farm since 1997 and wanted to see it continue to be used for agriculture while maintaining its natural beauty. For the Clark County Land Conservation Easement Authority, conserving the property played a vital role in protecting groundwater and providing clean drinking water, as the property has karst geology and is part of Clarke County’s groundwater recharge area. A conservation easement would retire two of the three development rights on the

property, while leaving one for Mary Keith Lilly’s son to one day build a house.

In spring 2024, PEC, Clarke County, and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Farmland Protection Fund each supplied \$37,625, totalling 75% of the easement purchase price. The landowner, Mary Keith Lilly, donated the remaining 25%. This project exemplifies the strength of the relationship between PEC and the easement authority and was a success for PEC’s local conservation funds, which give us creative flexibility to bolster conservation in our region. The advisory committee for the PEC Clarke Fund



Photo courtesy of Clarke County Land Conservation Easement Authority

recommended that PEC provide the funding that made the easement possible. PEC’s Clarke Conservation Fund continues to support the easement authority in increasing conservation in Clarke County.

Exploring New Public Parks in the Piedmont

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

Winter is my favorite season to get outside and hike. I, like many other Virginians in the Piedmont, was in luck this past season: several new public parks opened in the last year that make for perfect winter hiking. Though the parks are new to me, they were born from years of sustained conservation efforts. The Piedmont Environmental Council's work building stronger communities with greater access to public natural spaces begins with conservation and advocacy for increased connectivity.

Conserved public spaces have measurable impacts on our lives: research shows that spending time outdoors improves both physical and mental health, and can even improve students' grades, lower blood pressure and drive economic growth. If you enjoy outdoor adventures like I do, lace up your boots and come with me as we explore a couple of these new parks that opened in 2024, as well as one potential future park.

Biscuit Run Park

Biscuit Run Park in Albemarle County is a gem of forestland, streams, meadows and ponds near the City of Charlottesville. Just inside the trailhead at the parking area on state Route 20, we might see a cerulean warbler on his spring migration or a box turtle digging her way up from her winter resting spot. Along the 8.5 miles of primarily wooded trails, we might pass families walking their dogs or bicyclists out enjoying nature with us.

At nearly 1,200 acres, Biscuit Run Park is notable not only for its large area — twice the size of the next largest park in Albemarle County — but also for its proximity to existing neighborhoods. It's rare to find so much protected forested land so close to where people already live and work. PEC has championed Biscuit Run for years, from creating the park to making it accessible to public with bridges, trails and greenways linking the park to surrounding neighborhoods. Some of these projects are part of Albemarle's plans for future phases of Biscuit Run Park, but there is still more work to do.

PEC's Albemarle and Charlottesville Community Advocacy Manager Peter Krebs has been working to expedite the construction of a second park entrance with a pedestrian and bicycle bridge to cross Biscuit Run Stream and provide access to the adjacent Southwood neighborhood, which holds the largest concentration of affordable housing in the area. PEC hired a local engineering firm to design the bridge, and now Albemarle County has fast-tracked its construction. The expeditious work created savings that were used to design an additional mile of greenway connecting the new bridge to a future Monacan Nation Tribute Park in Southwood. The General Assembly's final budget, awaiting the governor's

signature, includes \$1.3 million for trail construction.

PEC envisions a park that is not only accessible to the residents of Charlottesville and Albemarle, but an integral component of a healthy, thriving community.

Culpeper Battlefields State Park

Let's travel north to the new Culpeper Battlefields State Park in Culpeper County, where from the crest of Fleetwood Hill we'll see panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. We might pass a tour guide leading a group on horseback as they learn about Brandy Station Battlefield, the site of the largest cavalry battle in North America. Interpretive signs along the trails tell the story of the battles of Cedar Mountain, Kelly's Ford and Rappahannock Station, fought during some of the darkest chapters in our nation's history.

The result of nearly 40 years of hard work, Culpeper Battlefield Park's first 236 acres opened to the public in June 2024. Like Biscuit Run, it is being built out in stages, and ultimately the state park will encompass 2,200 acres once all of the land transfers are complete. And like Biscuit Run, its realization comes from sustained conservation work.

The American Battlefield Trust and the Brandy Station Foundation conserved and donated much of the land for the park. PEC has long supported the project and helped launch Friends of Culpeper Battlefields, a coalition whose efforts were instrumental in the creation of the state park.

Even with such strong support, Virginia's 43rd state park almost didn't happen. Over the years, development threatened to dull or erase the historic context of the land. Thanks to the American Battlefield Trust and partners such as PEC, Virginians now have a new state park in the Piedmont that not only gives us access to nature and outdoor recreation, but also preserves an irreplaceable opportunity to understand our history.

Oak Hill (State Park?)

Now that we've visited urban Biscuit Run and rural Culpeper Battlefields, let's consider the tale of a new state park that almost was, and still could be: Oak Hill in Loudoun County.

As a state park, the historic Oak Hill property could offer Virginians public access to nature and trails to explore more than 1,000 acres of fields, forest, wetlands



PEC staff stand at the new sign for the Culpeper Battlefields State Park on June 8 following the ribbon-cutting event. Photo by Hugh Kenny

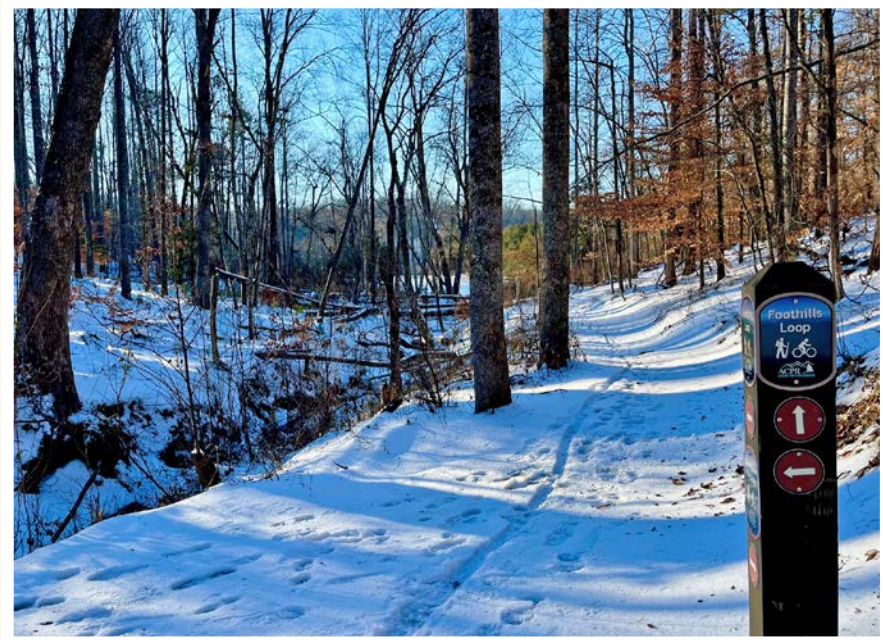
and wildlife habitat. Visitors could tour the well-preserved home of James Monroe, the last founding father to serve as president, or look for bald eagles and osprey along the miles of Little River frontage. And an Oak Hill state park would open opportunities to enhance wildlife habitat and improve water quality.

While a bill in the 2025 Virginia General Assembly would have created the park with no upfront cost to the state — thanks to over \$41 million in contributions from various sources — the Senate killed the bill, fearing future maintenance costs. In doing so, they nearly squandered a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect a National Historic Landmark and offer easy access to the outdoors for millions of visitors to and residents of Northern Virginia.

Perhaps recognizing the rare opportunity before Virginia here, Gov. Youngkin included as part of his March 24 budget amendments approval of a new state park at Oak Hill, subject to review and approval of final details by both the Secretary of Finance and the chairs of the Senate Finance and House Appropriations committees. His proposals will be taken up for action by the General Assembly when it returns to Richmond on April 2 for a reconvened "veto session." We are hopeful that Senate and House leadership see their way to approve this solution.

Parks like Biscuit Run, Culpeper Battlefields, and hopefully soon Oak Hill require years, sometimes decades, of dedicated work by communities, local and state governments, and organizations like PEC and our many partners advocating for shared public spaces. Your voice, too, has the power to make these parks a reality and connect people with nature, with history and with each other. This spring, I encourage you to visit your local parks, and as you take in the fresh air and green spaces, I invite you to consider the many hands and voices that went into creating that park.

Extensive trails wind through Biscuit Run Park, with plans for more to come. Photo by Peter Krebs



Oak Hill, the well-preserved home of James Monroe in Loudoun County, may become a state park this year. Photo by Hugh Kenny



More Than Vegetables at the Community Farm

By Catherine Fisher, Community Farm Specialist

When a PEC staff member recently posed the question “what does the farm mean to people beyond just donating to food pantries?” I remembered my first farming experience, when I discovered that farms are so much more than the food they grow.

In summer 2019, I interned at my university’s campus farm where we grew organic produce for the dining hall. I loved following the plants from seed to vegetable and doing everything I could to get them there — it gave me purpose to give them life. I craved the way the soil crumbled in my fingers, and I wore the dirt that stained my hands as a badge of pride.

Although I grew up playing sports outside, I had never done that type of physical labor in the

heat, and it felt good to push my body. Sharing the discomfort of those long, hot days with my coworkers somehow made the grit of all sweeter, especially seeing the joy our delivered produce brought to the chefs’ faces.

Strangers and family members alike started to tell me that I looked happy. I had heard all my life that purpose gives you happiness, but I didn’t know for myself until I experienced the discipline and constant connection to people and place that is deeply rooted in community-focused agriculture. That summer brought clarity to my career and life trajectory, and refined my view of the local food system and all of its interdependent parts. Food became both an interactive experience and a product of collaboration in a way

that’s easy to miss unless you’ve experienced some part of the process yourself.

Now, I have the pleasure of sharing this revelatory experience with volunteers at PEC’s Community Farm, hoping they too might witness the multifaceted beauty of agriculture.

We begin each volunteer day with a history of the Roundabout Meadows property and the hardscape of strip malls and residential development it would have become if not for 20 years of determined conservation effort. Then we share the steps we’ve taken since then to restore the property, improve its soil, and retain its agricultural use. We’ve improved water quality in Howser’s Branch with cattle-exclusion fencing and hosted field walks to showcase the reestablished native grassland meadow. We tell volunteers about our food pantry partners and their essential work feeding food-insecure people in Loudoun and Clarke counties. And as they transition into the day’s work of transplanting seedlings, harvesting, or mulching, volunteers experience the why and how behind our sustainable farming practices, a small but mighty piece of PEC’s vision.

The Community Farm’s narrative is often centered around the food we donate, but it is also a tale of land conservation and connection. To experience agriculture is to reinvoke the people, plants and land back into the



Volunteers at PEC’s Community Farm plant the crops that will go on to reduce food insecurity in the region while also learning about the connection between farming, conservation and responsible land stewardship. *Photo by James Bussells*

Sun-warmed berries sweeten a day working on the Community Farm. *Photo by Hugh Kenny*



narrative of our food. When visitors and volunteers spend time at the farm, I hope the personal stories they create with food are also stories of community and relationship.

As the days get longer and our seventh season begins, I invite you to the Community Farm to create new memories with meaningful food interaction. Come observe the fields, hold a seedling in your palm, hear the wind move through the orchard, smell just-harvested

beets or taste sun-warmed berries. Come witness how the farm is not just vegetable production, but also a showcase of land stewardship and a place for conversations about more sustainable communities. I invite you to come and be surprised at what you might learn about yourself and the many environmental and human forces at play in agricultural systems. This discovery is what first drew me into farming in 2019 and what still keeps me hungry for more.

How to get involved

Our volunteer season runs from the beginning of April through October. Our volunteers are individuals, families, school and church groups, scouts and clubs, and business groups. As they help us grow a diverse array of fruits and vegetables, volunteers learn about the importance of hunger relief programs, sustainable agriculture and practices for responsibly stewarding the environment. Learn more and sign up to volunteer at pecva.org/farm.

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

PUTNAM PROPERTY

The Little Forest That Could

By Faith Schweikert, Communications Specialist

Deep within the center of a former 1,200-acre monoculture pine plantation-turned-utility-scale solar project lies a donut hole of amazing, permanently protected natural hardwood forest. It exists because Christine and Bob Putnam took yet another of their many steps of fierce commitment to the environment and to Albemarle County by placing their 70 acres of forestland into a conservation easement with the Albemarle County Easement Authority last year.

“It’s some dream that my mom had, being able to be realized in the end, that makes me want to cry thinking about it,” Christine said. “She just loved the idea of the natural space being conserved.”

It doesn’t take long, sitting by the house amongst the trees towering upward to notice the many varieties of birdsong, critters rustling, and insects crawling and flying around the plants and trees. This is exactly what the Putnams intended when they moved onto the property shortly after it had been logged. They refused to replant a monoculture of pines, instead relying on the existing seed bank in the soil to regenerate with hardwoods, as all

logged forestland has the potential to do, and encouraged growth of a natural, mixed deciduous forest.

Unfortunately, it is surrounded on all sides by the opposite as land use change continues to convert much of the natural land cover in the area, resulting in pollution and a lack of diverse habitats to support biodiversity.

“All the wildlife depends on this forest,” Bob said. “They can’t eat anything from the monoculture yellow pine plantation; it’s like a desert. So basically this little island of native forest is what supports most of the wildlife in the region right now.”

Within the last few decades, hundreds of acres of forest like the Putnams’ were bought up and turned first into pine plantations and later utility-scale solar. They would get near-daily solicitations inquiring about their “empty lot.” But they knew their land wasn’t empty; it was essential to the natural world.

Piece by piece of conserved land, no matter the size, makes a difference to the landscape. So The Piedmont Environmental Council assisted the Putnams in thinking through land conservation options. They ultimately con-



Photo by Hugh Kenny

served their land with the Albemarle County Easement Authority, a local county program that protects land in the county’s rural area, even smaller parcels like the Putnams’. Now, gratefully, the solicitations skip over their property once and for all.

“So all this transformation occurs, but right here, it’s going to stay the same; that’s what’s so important about being in the conservation easement,” Bob said. “This is an island of native wildlife and flora.” Forever.

On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

- The fifth annual Piedmont Mobility Summit, organized by PEC with support from a broad coalition of partners, brought together more than 150 community members over two days in March. This year’s summit focused on the ambitious Three Notched Trail project, which will provide a safe, accessible pathway for walking and biking from Charlottesville to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The summit included presentations, discussions, facilitated planning workshops and lots of information and inspiration.
- PEC worked for over a year to convince the county Board of Supervisors that the zoning ordinance needed to be revised so that data centers could only be approved via special use permit versus by-right in industrial districts. The board finally took action and approved a resolution in January directing staff to take a two-phased approach to developing a draft zoning text amendment. An initial amendment would only allow data centers via special use permit in industrial districts; a second amendment would detail performance requirements for data center applications.
- The Albemarle County Comprehensive Plan update process is currently focused on drafting all chapters, and after hosting Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors work sessions for each draft chapter, finalizing all draft chapters. Though PEC supports much in the completed draft chapters, we continue to have strong concerns about the county’s lack of support for its own conservation programs and ambivalence toward maintaining its effective Growth Management Policy, which works to protect the county from sprawl. PEC continues to work with the community to advocate for these programs and policies.

Clarke

- The Clarke County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission are embarking on an updated Rural Lands Plan, a major project in 2025. The Board of Supervisors has done an initial review of the plans and returned it to the Planning Commission for adjustments. The Comprehensive Plan subcommittee met in January, and we anticipate an initial draft of the new plan for the commission this summer with a final draft for public review and input by the late fall.
- A second major project for the county this year is a new zoning district for the Double Tollgate Area. A draft first came to the Planning Commission in March with language pertaining to land use and use regulations, such as density, building heights, and buffering and screening requirements. The Planning Commission will likely hold public hearings for the plan in May before it moves to the Board of Supervisors for action.
- The county has retained the services of the Commonwealth Preservation Group to begin work on the rural villages overlay districts. The continued availability of funds for portions of this project is in question, given the current status of federal grant money.

Culpeper

- On Dec. 3, the Board of Supervisors approved an amended proffer agreement for Clevenger’s Village, also known as Stonehaven. The new language specifically prohibits data centers on the site, among other changes. After first denying that data centers could be developed under the current zoning, the developer admitted that the use had been grandfathered in. While we would have liked to have seen other changes, we considered data centers the greatest threat to the area and were glad to see it addressed.
- In January, Dominion Energy presented the Culpeper Tech Zone project to the Board of Supervisors. This project includes a significant upgrade to the existing transmission corridor and four substations. Stephen Precker of Dominion Energy indicated that recent data center approvals in the Town of Culpeper were driving this project, which would place several substations near residential areas, including an affordable housing complex currently under construction.
- After a Feb. 19 work session, the Board of Supervisors has decided to pause changes to the rural subdivision ordinance. PEC supports the proposed change to increase the minimum lot size allowed in Culpeper’s agriculturally zoned lands. The County has been subject to increasing development pressure from Northern Virginia and Fredericksburg.
- On Mar 11, the Town Council voted to accept a proffer amendment proposed by STACK Infrastructure, the data center operator behind the planned Culpeper Technology Campus. The amendment will increase how much noise pollution the data centers can emit in residential areas and exempt construction noise from any noise restriction, but also included needed changes to how the noise is measured. Thanks to efforts from the residents of Culpeper, the council removed noise standard exemptions for backup generator testing and operation during power shortages (as opposed to emergencies). We see the issue of noise returning to Culpeper for both the town and the county as the data centers begin to break ground.

Fauquier

- Thanks to thoughtful public comments and strong advocacy by Protect Catlett, Citizens for Fauquier County and Protect Fauquier, a developer withdrew its application to rezone 60 acres of land in Catlett for a 1.4 million-square-foot data center campus with an electric substation. Instead, the site may be developed as a warehouse. Though not yet finalized, preapplication materials filed in December indicate that the warehouse would be non-distributing, and any proposal for distribution would have to undergo special exception approval. A warehouse would have a far lesser impact on traffic, noise and air quality than either a data center or a distribution center. PEC and residents will remain vigilant as the developer continues to weigh its options.
- The Board of Supervisors recently approved Sun Tribe Solar’s special exception permit application for a 161-acre solar project in Remington, located on land owned by Luck Stone that will eventually be occupied by an expansion of its existing quarry operation.
- At its Feb. 20 meeting, the Fauquier County Planning Commission unanimously rejected Open Roads Renewables’ application for a Comprehensive Plan Compliance Review for its agrivoltaics project in Midland. Open Roads had incorporated the majority of PEC’s feedback on the company’s drafted conditions of approval.
- The County Department of Community Development accepted development proposals for three different data center campuses in Remington. Already, the county has approved 1.8 million square feet at Remington Technology Park. Now, county staff are reviewing three proposals from Convergent, SAMX and Gigaland totalling an additional 4 million square feet. Public hearings with the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors on these proposals can be expected this year.

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

About how many flowers does a healthy worker bee visit in one trip?

ANSWER

d) 1,500 flowers

Bees come by their “busy” nickname honestly! While it varies based on the species of the bee and the season, on average a healthy worker bee visits around 1,500 flowers in one trip. Over their lifetime, about 1,150 honeybees contribute nectar to make one 16-ounce jar of honey. That’s a lot of flowers!

Another fun honey fact: there were 44 honey producers listed in the 2023-2024 edition of *Buy Fresh Buy Local Piedmont* across all three chapters. Find your local honey and so much more in the newly updated 2025-2026 edition of *Buy Fresh Buy Local*, hitting mailboxes and newsstands this April!



Photo by Sheryl Pollock

On the Ground

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Greene

- ▶ PEC continues to closely follow the county's efforts to address water supply planning and implementation of water supply projects. This work includes funding and building a new reservoir and replacing treatment plants and aging sewer and water supply piping. As the Virginia Piedmont continues to experience extended periods of drought, water supply infrastructure is a priority in Greene.
- ▶ Greene County has adopted a new ordinance for Technology/Flex/Research and Development Districts in part to attract companies involved with defense intelligence work associated with Rivanna Station in Albemarle, the location of three Department of Defense intelligence agencies. Greene and Albemarle counties have been working together to establish a defense intelligence innovation corridor extending from Rivanna Station in Albemarle nearly 9 miles into Greene County. That initiative is part of a regional effort to build a defense intelligence innovation corridor extending from Fauquier County to Charlottesville.

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Loudoun

- ▶ The Planning Commission finished work on phase one of its Data Center Comprehensive Plan Amendment and Zoning Ordinance Amendment and moved these onto the Board of Supervisors with a recommendation of denial and six additional suggested edits to the scope of work. These amendments would allow the county to better manage data center development.
- The board held a public hearing on Feb. 12, and on Mar. 4 discussed the potential to grandfather (exempt) any data centers from the new regulations. PEC and partner organizations held a rally before the board's Mar. 18 vote to pass the data center amendments. The board also voted to grandfather the 22 by-right and nine legislative applications already in the system, with a key exception that requires board review of any data center application within 500 feet of a residential dwelling.
- ▶ Loudoun County began work in earnest at the end of 2024 on the Western Loudoun Rural Uses and Standards Comprehensive Plan Amendment and Zoning Ordinance Amendment, which would address long-standing regulations for the Rural Policy Area that have negatively impacted farms and other rural businesses and reduce impacts on neighboring property owners. The first of seven projected intensive stakeholder work sessions took place in the Transportation and Land Use Subcommittee of the Board of Supervisors. The second session, on Jan. 29, covered agricultural processing and farm worker housing.
- The sessions are designed as roundtable discussions involving stakeholders, the supervisors covering western Loudoun, two planning commissioners, and county staff. These sessions are loosely scheduled through January 2026, with the next planned for Apr. 24 covering value-added farming, lot yield calculations, and "other farm issues."

- ▶ Proposed recommendations from staff and consultants for the county's U.S. Route 50 Traffic Safety and Operations Study raised a public outcry at the Feb. 3 public input session. The recommendations included turn lanes at several intersections, road-widening between the roundabouts east of U.S. Route 15, and additional lanes on the roundabouts. Supervisor TeKrony has arranged for an additional public input on March 26, after which, final recommendations will be determined.

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Madison

- ▶ The on-again, off-again plan to repurpose the former Criglersville Elementary School into a boutique hotel can now move forward in earnest after the county approved the rezoning of the property in January. Separately, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources approved the property for designation on the Virginia Landmarks Register in December, opening the door for the owner to pursue historic rehabilitation tax credit improvements to the building. The Department of Historic Resources will nominate the property for recognition on the National Register of Historic Places. PEC believes the slightly scaled-back plan approved under the rezoning will allow for preservation and provide a new economic use for the historic building, while addressing potential impacts on residents, who have expressed concerns about increased noise and traffic in the rural village.
- ▶ The process of updating the county's Comprehensive Plan, which started in November 2022, is moving closer to completion. A final draft of the document is expected to be presented to the public for comment in April. The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors will then have to approve the final version. PEC has been engaged in the process from the beginning and will share any upcoming public input opportunities, as well as continue to advocate for language that promotes conservation and smart growth.

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Orange

- ▶ The lawsuit brought by the American Battlefield Trust and others against Orange County — citing violations of state law and local ordinance in its 2023 approval of the Wilderness Crossing rezoning — finally had its first day in court in late March. The judge did not issue a ruling from the bench, and is not expected to issue a decision on whether or not to allow the case to proceed until the summer.
- While not a plaintiff to the lawsuit, PEC has actively opposed Wilderness Crossing from the beginning. Most recently, PEC filed an "amicus curiae" (a Latin phrase meaning "friend of the court") brief earlier in March, highlighting how Wilderness Crossing would undermine the long history of public and private investment in protecting natural and historic resources along the Route 3 corridor, and stating that the public is entitled to a transparent process when elected officials are contemplating far-reaching land-use decisions that can transform the region and the landscape. The rezoning allows for a sprawling, 2,600-acre mix of up to 32 million square feet of

energy- and water-hungry data centers, 5,000 homes and hundreds of thousands of square feet of commercial space.

- ▶ The Orange County Planning Commission is drafting proposed changes to the county's zoning districts. The commission is considering dividing the current Agricultural (A) district into Agricultural 1 (A1) and Agricultural 2 (A2) districts. The A1 district would potentially be more protective of farmland than the current A district, while A2 might be similar to the current A district. Additionally, the commission is discussing the creation of a variety of overlay districts, which could be a method of providing an additional layer of protection for sensitive resources. A technology district under consideration would set some guidelines for data centers. PEC will monitor these discussions closely and will promote public input opportunities.

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Rappahannock

- ▶ On Jan. 15, PEC's Land Use Field Representative Sarah Parmelee gave a presentation about data centers to the Rappahannock County Planning Commission. Residents were concerned that Rappahannock was vulnerable because data centers were not explicitly prohibited in the county code. Because Rappahannock has very little industrial land and lacks infrastructure such as municipal water or fiber optic cable, we are less concerned and advised that Rappahannock leave its code as it currently stands. PEC is concerned that explicitly prohibiting data centers could invite a reversal at a future date.
- ▶ During its Jan. 13 meeting, the Washington Town Council unanimously approved the contract for the multi-use trail through Washington, funded in part by PEC's Krebsner Fund. The trail will connect the Rush River Commons and Washington post office to the town center in one direction and to the Washington School on Mt. Salem Avenue in the other direction. Given limited sidewalk access throughout the town, this new trail will provide safe access to residents and visitors.
- ▶ The Sperryville Community Alliance released the Sperryville Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility Plan in January. The plan details 24 infrastructure recommendations, including roundabouts, new sidewalks and crosswalks, speed limit reductions and a bridge replacement to make Sperryville a more pedestrian-friendly village. The next step will be submitting the plan to VDOT for review. The alliance has identified two potential VDOT programs to support the improvements: the SMART SCALE Program and the Transportation Alternatives Program.
- ▶ The Inn at Little Washington has proposed a new plan for the spa expansion originally presented to the town's architectural review board in May 2023. The new proposal details an entirely separate building to be constructed near the intersection of Main Street and Harris Hollow Road. According to the architect overseeing the project, the two-story building will cover 18,000 square feet. Though members of the architectural review board voiced concerns about the design and scale of the building, the proposal was ultimately approved in January.

Out&About

Nest Boxes for Virginia’s Smallest Falcons



Photo by Scott Jenkins

◀ Our Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative assistant, Lauria McShane, helped train this year’s cohort of Old Rag Master Naturalists to install and monitor kestrel nest boxes. Kestrels populations have declined by half since the late 1960s, and nesting boxes are an important way to help the small falcons overcome habitat loss.

Active Mobility Summit



Photo by Hugh Kenny

▲ Our Albemarle and Charlottesville Community Advocacy Manager Peter Krebs addresses the audience at PEC’s 2025 Active Mobility Summit in Charlottesville. This year, the summit brought together over 150 attendees across two days to find ways to improve walking, biking, running and everyday access to nature in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

Woods & Wildlife Conference



Photo by Virginia Cooperative Extension

▲ PEC staff including Lauria McShane (left), Sarah Parmelee (center), Kim Biasioli (right) and Linnea Sherman (not pictured) attended the 21st Annual Landowner Woods & Wildlife Conference. Kim and Linnea presented at the conference, which provided information, tools, and personal contacts to help private woodland owners keep their land intact and well managed.

Charlottesville Open House



Photo by Montana Lanier Ruffner

◀ The Charlottesville Office opened our doors to welcome visitors new and old to our 2025 open house. Staff chatted with residents from around the southern Piedmont region about our local conservation and land use projects.

UPCOMING Events

Event details subject to change.
Please check pecva.org/events for the latest information.

22nd Annual Bluebell Walk: In Tribute to Mike Stevens

When > Sunday, April 13 • 11 AM – 1 PM
Where > Bonny Brook Farm, Catlett

This family-friendly celebration of spring is a delightful chance to walk amongst a beautiful streamside field of Virginia’s iconic and ephemeral bluebells on a private conserved property. Wear waders and splash around in the brisk Cedar Run waters on the way! Learn more and register at pecva.org/bluebells.

Tree Giveaway at Gilberts Corner Market

When > Saturday, May 3 • 10:30 AM while supplies last
Where > 39950 Little River Turnpike, Aldie, VA

PEC, in partnership with Friends of the Rappahannock, will be giving away 300 one-gallon native trees at the Gilberts Corner Farmers Market this spring. Come learn about the importance of planting native Virginian species and take a tree home with you at no charge! Tree recipients will just be asked to provide a few details about where your tree will be planted. More information on species availability will be forthcoming at pecva.org/events.

Birding Walk at Roundabout Meadows

When > Friday, May 9 • 8:30 – 10:30 AM
Where > Roundabout Meadows Farm: park at Mt. Zion Historic Park, 40309 Little River Turnpike, Aldie, VA

Join us for a birding walk through the Roundabout Meadows pastures and meadows, where we may spot eastern meadowlarks, field sparrows, indigo buntings, plus a variety of other grassland and shrubland species. The walk will cover approximately 1.3 miles through rolling pastures and across a small creek. Bring binoculars and dress for tall vegetation and uneven terrain. Learn more and register at pecva.org/events.

Spring Nature Walk at the Piedmont Memorial Overlook

When > Friday, May 16 • 9 – 11 AM
Where > Piedmont Memorial Overlook, Paris, VA

Join us for a nature walk at PEC’s Piedmont Memorial Overlook to learn about native plants, pollinators, songbirds and more! The native meadow is the jewel of the property, offering refuge for native species in a changing landscape. Bring binoculars and dress for tall vegetation and uneven terrain. Learn more and register at pecva.org/events.

Wildflower Walk at Roundabout Meadows

When > Saturday, May 31
Where > Roundabout Meadows Farm: park at Mt. Zion Historic Park, 40309 Little River Turnpike, Aldie, VA

Join Dr. Andrea Weeks – Director of the Ted R. Bradley Herbarium and Professor at George Mason University – and PEC’s Dana Melby for a morning walk along the Old Carolina Road Trail and through the meadow while learning about wildflowers and PEC’s approach to restoring the meadow. All skill levels are welcome. The walk will be approximately 1 mile long and will traverse a mowed walking path with occasional uneven ground. Learn more and register at pecva.org/events

Inspiring Conservation: PEC’s Annual Gathering at Eldon Farms featuring Thomas Woltz

When > Sunday, June 8
Where > Eldon Farms, Woodville, Rappahannock County, VA

Join us for a fun, informative day in a beautiful setting. Featuring keynote speaker and famous landscape architect Thomas Woltz, our annual meeting is a great place to see friends and learn more about local efforts to build a stronger, more sustainable region. Register at pecva.org/eldonfarms and contact Montana Lanier Ruffner at (mlanier@pecva.org) with questions.

Dear Friends,

After a hard winter, with measurable snow cover for over a month, damaging wind storms, inevitable frustrations with a closely divided General Assembly, and unprecedented presidential actions disrupting federal conservation, environmental, and energy policy, I look for signs of hope this spring. Emerging plants, the first flowers, news of the annual migration of salamanders and the sound of birds and frogs all herald new possibilities.

At The Piedmont Environmental Council, we are reaffirming our dedication to conservation and restoration of the Piedmont's land and waters, to community planning and design, and to reform for data centers and the energy infrastructure they demand. We're excited by continuing enthusiasm for the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative, with a full roster of landowners signed up to help protect critical habitat. We are working with partners on promising conservation projects all across the region. Especially in the Charlottesville area, and hopefully at Oak Hill in Loudoun, momentum is growing for new trails and new public access to open spaces. And we are raising the profile of the impact of data centers and the energy they require locally, in Virginia and across the United States.

At our Annual Gathering (a renamed annual meeting) this spring, we will celebrate the incredible vision of the Akre family for the future of Eldon Farms. Thomas Woltz, owner of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, will give a keynote presentation on the restoration and conservation plan for these 7,200 acres that link the Appalachian ecosystem along the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah National Park to the wildlife corridors and working lands of the Upper Rappahannock River watershed. The model provided by Eldon Farms can inspire others to invest in conservation, remove invasive species, and restore native habitats while enabling farming and forestry activities to continue.

At the same time, real challenges lie ahead. Over the past three months, the Virginia General Assembly has

debated state policies that are central to PEC's mission, values and programs. The Piedmont region is at the center of a new economy based on global cloud computing and artificial intelligence. We are converting arable farmland with adequate water supply into data centers, substations, industrial-scale solar, transmission lines and battery storage. Many of these farms and other lands at risk are excellent locations for stream restoration, wetlands protection, improvement of riparian habitats for wildlife, and public access. Often, they also contain important historical and cultural resources.

Land for data centers and energy infrastructure also competes with housing and amenities for our existing and projected population, driving the cost for new housing dramatically upward, despite relatively small population growth and nearly full employment.

In response to these pressures, the General Assembly session also weighed how much authority and determination local governments versus state agencies should have around such issues. Narrow majorities want state mandates rather than deliberate and careful modifications with local self-determination. PEC and the Coalition for Smarter Growth believe that a more sustainable future depends on local and regional planning that takes into account location efficiency and community design.

The increasing volume of federal mandates to expand energy infrastructure and suspend longstanding protections for communities and conservation values concerns us, as well. In recent weeks, the Trump administration has moved to eliminate the review of projects funded and permitted under the National Environmental Policy Act. And with an executive order declaring a "national energy emergency," the



A summer storm brews over Madison. Photo by Hugh Kenny

administration is pursuing a dramatic expansion of fossil fuel exploration and natural gas and electrical infrastructure while simultaneously suspending existing environmental laws to protect air, water, wildlife and historic and cultural resources.

But hope springs eternal and, with your support and engagement, we will continue progress toward more conservation, restoration and better planning for the future. Your efforts to directly address your concerns to local, state, and federal officials, combined with direct action to conserve, restore, and sustain the lands and waters of the Piedmont are a model for the future, a bright light of hope in a darkened world. PEC staff have carried your message, highlighting the importance of local self-determination and prioritizing community and natural resource values.

Sincerely,

Chris Miller, President



Photo by Hugh Kenny

The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL SPRING 2025

INSIDE
PEC's biggest conservation year yet; legislative updates from the General Assembly; how the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows grows more than food; land use highlights around the region; upcoming spring events; and more!

Amtrak in the orchard. Photo by George Novey

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

About how many flowers does a healthy worker bee visit in one trip?

a) 150

b) 500

c) 750

d) 1,500

e) 3,000

Photo by Hugh Kenny

ANSWER ON PAGE 9

Piedmont Environmental Council

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