

Albemarle County AC44 Comprehensive Plan Policy Platform



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Introduction

The [AC44 Comprehensive Plan](#) update will serve as a guiding document for land and resource conservation, development, and investment for Albemarle County for the years 2024-2044. It will provide priorities for supporting the local economy, protecting and enhancing natural and historic resources, providing housing and transportation options, and much more. As such, it will have a significant impact on the future of the County. The County has committed to [equity](#) and [climate action](#), goals that The Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) broadly supports and hope will be fully and intentionally integrated into this Comprehensive Plan update.

At PEC, we believe that we all have a responsibility to the present and to the future — that has been our approach for the past 50 years. Looking forward, we believe that we must consider climate impacts when addressing land use changes in Albemarle County and take deliberate measures to both protect our natural resources and create sustainable, equitable communities. Further, we believe in a robust public process that enables participation from all, as this is our shared future.

PEC's vision for the future of Albemarle County and all its residents is bold and inclusive. The Albemarle County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors have an incredible opportunity to lead the way in rural climate resilience planning through the Comprehensive Plan in 2024. We encourage the Commission and Board to pursue bold and innovative approaches, to make evidence-based decisions, and create an Albemarle that is a resilient, equitable, and desirable place for people to live, work, and play.

This document summarizes PEC's priorities, where we believe we can support our mission and help inform Albemarle County's comprehensive planning process.

PEC's comprehensive plan policies are reflective of PEC's recently completed [2023 - 2028 Strategic Plan](#) and are informed by our [climate action](#) work and PEC's [Climate Action Platform in Support of a Climate-Ready Albemarle County](#). PEC's climate action policy platform was in turn responsive to the [County's Climate Vulnerability and Risk Assessment](#). Accordingly, PEC's approach for developing the AC44 Albemarle County Comprehensive Plan Policy Platform was to first develop a climate action policy platform with specific prioritized Comprehensive Plan Update recommendations. Those climate recommendations were reviewed and selected recommendations were integrated into our Comprehensive Plan Policy Platform.

PEC's Mission

Protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont, while building stronger, more sustainable communities.

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Vision for Albemarle County

We envision Albemarle County with the majority of its rural lands permanently protected, with intact natural and cultural landscapes, healthy waters, and working farms and forests that nourish vibrant, diverse communities where residents across all walks of life participate in decisions about its future.

We envision the County's urban areas as thriving, mixed-use, walkable communities with everyday access to open space, parkland, and recreational opportunities.

We envision a County that is sustainable, resilient, innovative, equitable, and one that leads by example on inland climate mitigation and adaptive planning.

Preserve the Natural Systems, Open Spaces, and Communities in the Rural Area

Albemarle County takes pride in its natural resources and magnificent cultural landscapes. The County's Rural Area is home to forests and farmland, wildlife habitats and corridors, waterways, orchards, vineyards, and historically and culturally significant properties. These rural lands sustain agricultural and forestry operations that are both economically and ecologically important to local communities and to the region. County residents and visitors prize these special places and important resources alike. Albemarle has substantial areas of conservation and has been a model for sustained local efforts to connect and protect critical resources. These conserved lands also help to maintain the rural character and scenic beauty of the Rural Area, and perhaps most importantly, provide increased resiliency by offsetting some of the most harmful climate impacts. It would be costly and difficult, if not impossible, to restore these important places and resources if we lose them.

- Protection of rural lands is an extremely important tool in building climate resilience and adaptation strategies, through the retention of intact and healthy watersheds, farmland, forests, and open space. We simply cannot succeed with the protection of rural lands if extensive sprawl is allowed to occur in Albemarle. Premature expansion of the Development Areas and overdevelopment of Rural Area villages must be avoided.
- Rural forests filter pollution from ground and surface waters, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, and slow the movement of water on the landscape, mitigating the intensity of heavy rainfall events. The County should prioritize the protection of rural tree cover and promote reforestation to compensate for loss of forestland.
- PEC strongly supports the adoption of the County's proposed Riparian Buffer Overlay District, recommended in the County's Stream Health Initiative that is supported by the Board of Supervisors. The proposed overlay district reintroduces the requirement that stream buffers be

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retained irrespective of land disturbing activities and in perpetuity, while maintaining the existing exemptions outlined for agriculture, forestry, and other limited land uses. Implementation of the proposed overlay district would strengthen protection of a broad network of stream buffers throughout the County, providing for stream health, climate resiliency and wildlife habitat, filtering nonpoint source pollution, and helping minimize erosion and sedimentation beyond the timeframe of a land disturbing activity.

- Nature-based solutions are strategies that the County should fully adopt to address societal challenges through the protection, sustainable management, and restoration of both natural and modified ecosystems, benefiting both biodiversity and human well-being. Nature-based solutions are underpinned by benefits that flow from healthy ecosystems. They target major challenges like climate change, disaster risk reduction, food and water security, biodiversity loss and human health, and are critical to sustainable economic development.
- The County should undertake the preparation of a *Rural Area Plan* to address both natural and working landscapes in order to preserve and promote the very aspects — forests, orchards, vineyards, farms, and open spaces — that provide a sense of place and wellbeing and support the local economy.
- The County should develop community-driven plans for rural villages and communities that address protection of cultural and natural resources, infill development, land use, transportation, and where appropriate, heritage tourism and recreation. With few exceptions, urban-type services should be limited to designated Development Areas and not located in Rural Area communities.
- The County should prioritize implementation of the County's *Climate Action Plan*, *Stream Health Initiative*, *Biodiversity Action Plan*, *Water Supply Plan*, and completion of the County's *Climate Resilience and Adaptation Plan*. The strategies and recommendations within each of these plans support protection of the Rural Area, biodiversity conservation, protection of water supply sources and food security, and maintaining and increasing resiliency in the face of climate change.
- The County should expand incentives for conservation easements. Specifically, the County must accelerate and increase support and capacity for its land conservation and purchase of development rights (PDR) programs, which are both critical tools for protecting the rural areas and water supply watersheds within them. We recommend further consideration, adoption, and allocation of resources for creative new approaches to land conservation and the PDR program, such as those proposed in the County's Stream Health Initiative.

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- Historic communities and villages should be protected through rehabilitation of existing buildings and structures, infrastructure, and community gathering spaces, as well as infill of new buildings within these communities, rather than expanding them into the surrounding rural landscape.
- Albemarle ranks 25th in the Commonwealth for crop production out of 97 reporting localities. The County is the 2nd highest producing county in Virginia for tree fruits and the 3rd highest producing county in Virginia for horses. And Albemarle produces 21% of all grapes harvested for wine production in the Commonwealth. We believe that preserving and protecting the farms, fields, and forests that are so characteristic to Albemarle depends in part on a strong, vibrant sustainable farm economy that keeps these rural lands economically viable.
- Soil is immensely important to our natural ecosystems and agricultural economy. Virginia State Code refers to the best soils as “prime soils,” and unfortunately, Virginia is losing this finite resource—which can’t be reproduced or replaced—to numerous forms of development. Protecting what remains is essential to ensuring current and future agricultural production and supporting a strong local food system in Albemarle County.
- Albemarle County’s extensive expanse of forests, streams, and cultural landscapes support tourism and recreation. In addition to being significant drivers of our local economy, Albemarle residents cherish these resources. Given that the Rural Area has been experiencing rapid growth of agritourism, event center destinations, and homestays, the County must ensure rural resources and communities are protected from incompatible and overly intensive land uses that may be associated with these businesses.

Create Stronger, More Sustainable Urban Centers and Neighborhoods in the Development Areas

In line with the County’s own objectives to prevent rapid suburban sprawl by using land efficiently and to reduce transportation-related emissions — its most significant source of greenhouse gasses — PEC has consistently championed the development of attractive, affordable, resilient, and equitable mixed-use communities.

In the Development Areas, we envision compact, well-connected communities, where homes, workplaces, and other necessities are all situated within a short distance of each other. Residents should feel safe walking or riding to the schools, jobs, shopping, parks, and green spaces they need to thrive. Investments in these focused communities will also benefit residents throughout the County, even if they live outside of the Development Areas. By providing attractive places to live in designated Development Areas, rural communities can retain their historic and scenic character and conserve land for the open

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space, natural systems, outdoor recreation, agriculture, and forestry on which all County residents depend.

- Since the 1980s, Albemarle County’s planning has been guided by a strong, overarching growth management policy. This approach has directed growth to designated Development Areas, already supported by existing services such as water and sewer. The County’s commitment to this approach is critical to maintaining long-term protection of the Rural Area and is supported by the County’s recent residential and non-residential buildout analyses, which indicate that the Development Areas can support projected growth.
- PEC has consistently advocated for compact, livable communities. We can and must use this principle to intentionally plan development that supports a high quality of life for all community members in a manner that is sustainable and equitable. We support both public and private investment in existing communities including infill development and redevelopment within areas already designated for growth because containing development and services within a compact area protects future generations from out-of-control future infrastructure maintenance costs.
- Urban areas and neighborhoods should be well-supported by reliable public transit and pedestrian- and bike-friendly ways for people to safely access services, recreational facilities, schools, workplaces, and natural areas. They should also include recreational green spaces to support public health through everyday recreational opportunities.
- Sustainable communities are less reliant on cars. Transportation is the top contributor to carbon emissions in the County. Fewer car trips and fewer vehicle miles traveled reduce carbon emissions and improve public health. To move toward greater sustainability, we recommend the County focus on both compact development and redevelopment and improving access to transit.
- Older neighborhoods should benefit from reinvestment focused on walkable access to new and existing greenspaces and recreational facilities. Reinvestment should also include repair and replacement of aging infrastructure including pedestrian facilities, streets, roads, and utilities. Reinvestment strategies should enhance and strengthen communities and avoid displacement of existing residents.
- Sustainable redevelopment and new development should be focused where infrastructure and services already exist, rather than subsidizing speculative development by extending services into the Rural Area. Development does not “pay for itself,” and indeed, the extension of service areas imposes costly infrastructure maintenance and upgrades on rate- and taxpayers and future generations.

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- As with private development within the Development Areas, public resources such as recreational facilities, parks, schools, and libraries should be located close to existing infrastructure and residential development.
- PEC is advocating for sustainable design, construction, and management of buildings, site development, and infrastructure including nature-based solutions that can provide multiple ecosystem and community benefits. PEC strongly supports the adaptive reuse and decarbonization of existing buildings and site development.

Protect Water Resources

It is imperative that the County — through growth management and resource protection — ensure its communities have adequate water supply, present and future. The Rivanna River watershed is the main source of water for the urban areas of Albemarle, the City of Charlottesville, and the University of Virginia. That watershed, along with the watersheds for the Sugar Hollow, Beaver Creek, North Fork Rivanna, Ragged Mountain, and Totier Creek reservoirs, must be protected from intensive land disturbances.

Given that our water supply originates in many rural areas of Albemarle, the County must prioritize protecting these rivers and streams and groundwater sources against land uses that will adversely impact water quality and quantity. Protecting water resources within the County's watersheds also serves to protect the Chesapeake Bay watershed and the Bay itself by reducing downstream impacts.

Protecting and restoring water resources, including floodplains and wetlands, has many additional co-benefits, including climate resilience, biodiversity, flood control, wildlife habitat and corridors, recreation, and natural and cultural heritage tourism.

Affordable Housing

The County should strongly support the preservation of existing affordable housing in both the Development Areas and Rural Area through funding from local, state, and federal sources. Local tools that can support existing affordable housing include affordable housing preservation funds, right of first refusal, tenant protections, code enforcement, long-term affordability covenants, limited equity cooperatives, and community land trusts.

PEC recommends the County survey the condition of existing substandard housing and work with private sector interests to assist in providing the necessary upgrades for these existing homes versus focusing exclusively on the provision of new affordable units elsewhere in the County. Displacement of residents in communities undergoing reinvestment should be avoided through appropriate strategies for maintaining and strengthening existing communities.

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PEC supports the goals, objectives, and strategies of the County's *Housing Albemarle* plan that address the preservation of existing housing and communities, fair housing and community equity, homelessness and special populations, sustainable communities, and the need to increase the supply of affordable housing and workforce housing in the Development Areas. PEC also supports the County's Affordable Housing Grant Program, which incentivizes the construction or rehabilitation of affordable housing through the provision of grants or loans to owners of residential rental properties and to individual homeowners to help meet the objectives of *Housing Albemarle*.

Shaping and Advancing Our Clean Energy Future

PEC is working to support an energy system that is smarter, more efficient, and better accounts for the negative externalities arising from the choices we make about energy consumption, generation, transmission, and distribution. We are advocating for a more distributed system that is less reliant on distant generating sources and incorporates a mix of local renewable power — customer owned, community based, and utility scale. Recognizing Virginia is in the early stages of its energy transition, we believe now is the time to reimagine and rebuild our energy system in a way that is just and fair to all residents and ratepayers.

A distributed model reduces environmental impacts and results in a more resilient and reliable grid. PEC is advocating for increased solar on rooftops, brownfields, parking lots, and small-scale ground-mounted facilities on farms and in residential communities. As other integrated solutions, such as battery storage and bi-directional charging become increasingly viable, we will advocate their efficacy both through demonstration and policy.

As the use of utility-scale solar expands, we are advocating for projects and associated infrastructure that are planned and sited in a way that is sensitive to Albemarle's most critical natural, cultural, and agricultural resources, as well as rural residents and communities. Mass grading of sites should be avoided to prevent soil erosion and siltation of streams, and to retain existing landforms, important soil resources, and the potential for rural land uses to resume on the site after the solar installation is decommissioned. Siting of these facilities should avoid removal of natural and working forests and loss of prime farmland. Where such impacts are unavoidable, robust mitigation should be required to compensate for the resource losses that occur.

Meeting renewable energy goals cannot rely solely on the development of renewable energy sources. The County should incentivize, to the greatest extent possible, sustainable buildings and site development and redevelopment, adaptive reuse of buildings and sites, shifting to electrification, and higher performing buildings and site development to reduce energy demand.