

CONSERVATION EDITION

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## A Conservation Journey in Madison County

By Faith Schweikert, Communications and Policy Fellow

Carolyn Smith's Madison County property has been on quite the journey since her parents first purchased the former cattle operation in 1965. Donating a 129-acre conservation easement in late 2023 came on the heels of decades of successful land stewardship by Carolyn, her parents, and a community of partners who have worked to restore and repair the land for wildlife habitat, pollinators and native plants.

"Every cool conservation organization under the sun has had a part at Carolyn Smith's property, so I think [her property] is a great way to showcase how all these partners come together," said PEC Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Coordinator Maggi Blomstrom.

It was Friends of the Rappahannock Deputy Director Bryan Hofmann who first introduced Carolyn to The Piedmont Environmental Council, while they were planting trees on her property. He told her PEC could assist with the conservation easement that she, and her parents before her, had been thinking about for years.

Back in 1965, Carolyn's parents' focus their first year in Madison was just to ramble over the acreage and get to know it. They found beautiful, native ephemerals in bloom, but lots of erosion and ravines from the cattle that used to graze the fields. So, they began

the process of rejuvenation by turning to their Madison County Virginia Cooperative Extension agent and a local forester for help.

"Because my parents loved nature and loved to be out of doors, they had a sense that they could improve the land," Carolyn said. "Their appreciation of the beauty of the natural world and the interconnectedness of life [led them to] understand that what they did on the land and with the land would have impacts on a ton of other species.

"For them it was a physical, mental, spiritual replenishing nourishment to come down here on the weekends [before they moved down full time post-retirement], so any idea of building something or turning it into something else wasn't in the picture; it was just about nature," she said.

In the five decades between when Carolyn first floated on the ponds and played in the tree houses her father built and 2016, when her parents passed away and she moved full time to the property, the landscape transformed. The tens of thousands of tree seedlings she'd helped plant as a child had matured into forest, and native plantings filled the land. Her parents had also put a hearty attack on invasive species like Japanese honeysuckle and multiflora rose.

Despite living abroad and in California as a Russian-language interpreter for most of her



Carolyn Smith on her newly-conserved property in Madison County.  
Photo by Hugh Kenny

career, Carolyn was able to spend about 20 years living part-time in Madison helping her parents and getting involved in the community as an adult. The connections she made during that time formed her community and furthered her learning about land stewardship.

"I knew I had a future here in Madison, my pull to it was strong enough," Carolyn said. "When my folks died, the way to stay close to them and honor their work was to continue it so it's just wonderful that I could do that and feel like I'm carrying on the legacy."

She took the Virginia Master Naturalists course at the Old Rag Chapter. Service projects and educational programs led her

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## Conserving a Cultural Crossroads

By Cindy Sabato, Communications Advisor

In Locust Grove, an old woods meanders some 1.4 miles alongside the banks of the Rapidan River, on the Orange County side, between the river and State Route 3. Its dense canopy provides and protects habitat for state-threatened species and shades a network of public trails beneath. Through the woods' 172 acres, the trails reveal a natural floodplain that makes the area more resilient against intense storms and a wetlands with nearly 200 feet of vegetation buffering the shoreline, helping keep clean Rapidan waters that will eventually flow to the Chesapeake Bay.

These woods are called Siegen Forest, and they lie within what was the first German settlement in colonial Virginia. Germanna, and Siegen Forest, got their names from the 42 German immigrants who crossed the Atlantic from the Siegerland area of Germany in 1714, and the 20 families that followed three years later. This westernmost outpost of colonial Virginia at the time drew workers from their native German principality of Nassau-Siegen to mine for iron.

A shallow river crossing here, still called Germanna Ford, later bore witness to the Civil War, as it was one of few places along the Rapidan River where large groups of infantry and cavalry could cross quickly. Siegen Forest saw the Army of the Potomac's surprise

defeat in the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863 and U.S. Colored Troops fight bravely during the inconclusive Battle of Wilderness a year later.

Owned by the nonprofit organization Historic Germanna since 1956, Siegen Forest today holds rich ecosystems of flora and fauna and several archeological sites that provide insight into early German immigrants and 18th century-Native American and African American histories on the land. The area's deeply layered past and the woods' rich natural and recreational resources make last year's permanent conservation of Siegen Forest an achievement worthy of celebration.

On Oct. 27, 2023, Historic Germanna's executive director, Jennifer Hurst Wender, and board president, Keith Hoffman, signed a perpetual open-space easement on Siegen Forest. The easement is held by the Virginia Board of Historic Resources. "This is a project that has been many, many years in the making



The newly conserved Siegen Forest sits between Va. Route 3 and the Rapidan River in Orange County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

and involved the partnership of so many different organizations, probably going back at least a decade," said Maggi Blomstrom, PEC's Rappahannock-Rapidan conservation coordinator. "Owning land is expensive, and Historic Germanna was exploring ways it could both protect the property and raise funds to reinvest in its care and into the organization."

Kristie Kendall, formerly PEC's historic preservation coordinator and Historic Germanna board member, introduced the organization to the possibility that a conserva-

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# 2023 Land Conservation Totals

In 2023, **6,315** acres of land in Albemarle, Clarke, Culpeper, Fauquier, Greene, Loudoun, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock counties were permanently protected with 52 conservation easements. The new conservation easements in 2023 bring the total amount of land protected in PEC’s nine-county region to **446,096** acres.

“This is a positive step toward the ambitious goal, set in our 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, of conserving 100,000 new acres by 2030, a critical threshold for sustainability, biodiversity and climate resilience. Longer term, we’d like to see 1 million acres conserved, a milestone we believe is achievable through continued strong partnership with landowners and preservation allies using a combination of public and private conservation tools,” said Mike Kane, PEC conservation director.

“PEC’s 50-year practice of community-based conservation knits together many individual projects into a much broader, composite picture across the region. Each single conservation project is motivated by the unique perspectives of diverse landowners with varied properties, and by caring about the people and places of this region, we’re able to build a collective mosaic of conserved lands that results in many public benefits, including cleaner waters, greater biodiversity, and increased public access to nature,” said PEC President Chris Miller.

In Orange County’s town of Gordonsville, two small conservation easements, held by PEC, reflect the value of urban conservation in improving access to outdoor recreation and nature in the built environment. As part of a community-wide effort to improve historic Verling Park, PEC purchased and conserved two lots, about an acre each, with the help of a Preservation Trust Fund grant from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, before donating them to the town. The parcels will allow the town to expand the 70-year-old park’s footprint, connecting it to Firemen’s Fairgrounds and surrounding neighborhoods. An enlarged park will make way for new and improved tennis courts and other park features, including a regulation sized swimming pool that will replace what was, in its heyday, one of the only integrated public pools between Charlottesville and Fredericksburg, enabling all children from five rural counties to learn to swim.

Virginia’s Piedmont is a unique place for residents and visitors alike, with its exceptional natural resources, productive farms and forests, and a landscape steeped in history. The abundant public benefits of these irreplaceable resources are multifaceted — individual, regional, global, economic, ecological, recreational and climatic.



County-by-county total acres protected by conservation easement

County	Number of Easements Closed	Acres Protected in 2023*	Total Acres Protected*
Albemarle	11	2,065	113,370
Clarke	4	154	27,756
Culpeper	3	106	21,536
Fauquier	9	1,065	111,626
Greene	0	0	10,787
Loudoun	16	2,286	70,152
Madison	1	126	16,491
Orange	3	223	40,426
Rappahannock	5	289	33,951
PEC Region	52	6,315	446,096

Learn more about protecting your land with a conservation easement at [pecva.org/easements](https://pecva.org/easements).

Map by Watsun Randolph. Map created by PEC for presentation purposes only. Data source: American Battlefield Protection Program, County Governments, USGS, VA Department of Historic Resources, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation. Although efforts have been made to verify data, accuracy is not guaranteed.

\* Numbers are rounded

CONSERVATION STORIES ACROSS THE REGION

ANNE & DRU CRAWLEY

# Filling in the Missing Piece

By Laura O'Brien, Rappahannock County Field Representative

Walking along the gravel driveway of Anne and Dru Crawley's property, five miles from the village of Amissville, I recognized immediately the significance of this 63-acre stretch of land. I'm greeted first by the rolling hardwood and hemlock forest carpeted by thick groves of *Diphasiastrum digitatum*, a small evergreen plant better known by its common names: running cedar or ground cedar. Further in, the elevation steeply drops off toward the Rappahannock River meandering below it, with resilient trees growing even on its most dramatic slopes.

This property in western Fauquier County has been in Anne Crawley's family for over 50 years, and Anne and Dru have brought unfettered enthusiasm to their relationship with the land as its stewards. They'd been considering the permanent protection of this special place for quite a while. And when Anne attended PEC's 2023 annual meeting, enthusiasm turned into action. Less than six months later, we gathered in PEC's Warrenton Office to sign the required documents, and the conservation easement was recorded at the Fauquier County Circuit Court Clerk's office that afternoon. I'm not sure, but it may have been one of the quickest easement projects in PEC history, thanks to the excitement and determination of everyone involved.

At the landscape scale, the permanent protection of the Crawley's forested

riverfront land is a key piece of the Upper Rappahannock watershed puzzle. It is the connecting piece between two sets of properties already under conservation easements with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. Altogether, they form 3,000+ connected acres of protected land around the Rappahannock River and its tributary Thumb Run.

Large patches of open and forested natural land like this give wildlife lots of area in which to move safely about to access food, shelter and other populations. More and more, such corridors are being fragmented by roads and development, making the Crawley's conservation decision so important. In fact, the Virginia Wildlife Corridor Action Plan specifically includes the Crawley property in a map of "Corridors for Wildlife Biodiversity Resilience."

But they didn't need an action plan to know the significance of their property as a haven for wildlife. "Anne's mother introduced me to her love of wildflowers more than 30 years ago. I have fond memories of wandering through the woods looking for them with her," said Dru. "A few years ago, Anne and I started using [the popular nature app] iNaturalist to document the flowers, plants, and animals on our property. I was surprised at the variety we found!" The list of 260 different species of plants and animals continues to grow.

By extinguishing the development rights on their property, the Crawleys



The Crawley property sits along the banks of the Rappahannock River in western Fauquier County, about 5 miles from the village of Amissville. Photo by Hugh Kenny

have forever protected 100 feet of forest and vegetation along their portion of the Rappahannock River, helping prevent erosion, filtering pollution and excess nutrients from entering the river, and providing shade and cover for wildlife. Their conservation decision also benefits people farther downstream, as their property lies amid the headwaters of the Rappahannock River, which provides drinking water for the City of Fredericksburg and other communities.

From wildlife habitat to water quality



Anne and Dru Crawley with PEC Rappahannock County Field Representative Laura O'Brien. Photo by Hugh Kenny

and beyond, each new piece of land that joins the ranks of permanently protected properties further strengthens quality of life and sense of place in the Piedmont, contributing immeasurably to overall human health and well-being. And, all because each landowner, like the Crawley's, decided to embark on the journey of making their ethos of responsible land stewardship perpetual.

BETH PLENTOVICH AND HOWIE KELLY

# Protection through Perseverance

By Laura O'Brien, Rappahannock County Field Representative

Beth Plentovich and Howie Kelly know the true importance of relentless incrementalism for achieving exponential results. I first noticed this as we trudged up the steep arduous slopes of their forested property near the village of Flint Hill; in the moments I paused to catch my breath, Beth pointed out and removed many of the non-native invasive plant species we encountered during our trek. Nearly a year later, their perseverance struck me again, when Beth agreed to walk the entire perimeter with me to track down boundary markers — a truly Rappahannock County-esque activity — on

a breezy day in late November. But the true cumulative achievement of their determination was when Beth and Howie — after several years of discussion and collaboration — permanently protected their 48-acre property with a conservation easement donated to The Piedmont Environmental Council.

Less than a mile from Shenandoah National Park, Beth and Howie have lived on and stewarded their property for over

a decade, but this land has deep ties to the complex history of the park and the Flint Hill area. After the State of Virginia took land and homes from thousands of people to establish Shenandoah National Park, the Shenandoah Homesteads Project was created to relocate some of those who had been forcibly displaced. Nearly a century ago, Beth and Howie's land was part of a property bought by the government for the Flint Hill Unit of this initiative.

Today, the property supports forest dwelling animals and aquatic species such as the American eel. Its southern boundary runs along the Jordan River, a Class II Wild Trout Stream that provides important habitat for the Eastern brook trout. Once abundant in Virginia, the Commonwealth's only native trout has almost vanished from the Virginia Piedmont in all but the remote headwater streams in and around Shenandoah National Park, including this stretch of

the Jordan River now protected in perpetuity.

Beth and Howie are in good company when it comes to permanently protecting their land. Right next door, Over Jordan Farm is a regenerative agricultural operation that is permanently protected with a conservation easement held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. And excitement about Beth and Howie's conservation extends to other neighbors as well; since they donated their easement, I've encountered nearby community members expressing their appreciation for Beth and Howie's decision.

Looking ahead, Beth and Howie don't see the permanent protection of their property as the final step of being responsible stewards. Instead, they continue to explore opportunities to improve and maintain the ecological health of their land.



Aerial view of the property, looking northeast. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Beth Plentovich and Howie Kelly. Photo by Hugh Kenny



## Dedicated to Howie Kelly

I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been able to assist Beth and Howie in the donation of the conservation easement protecting their very special property. I'm particularly grateful to have gotten to know Howie, who passed away earlier this year. Howie was an inspiring and kind pillar of the Rappahannock community whose legacy extends beyond the immensely generous decision that he and Beth made to permanently protect their land. — Laura O'Brien

CONSERVATION MINI-STORIES

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LONG ACRE FARM  
A Creative Solution for a Farming Conundrum

By Cindy Sabato, Communications Advisor

In Greene County, young Dustin Watson works the 274-acre cattle farm co-owned by two elder family members. In a region regularly losing productive family farms to land costs, development pressures, and declining interest, “one of the agricultural challenges for people hoping to get into farming is that land often isn’t available. Here at Long Acre Farm was a good opportunity for a young farmer to continue a legacy begun by his family, but as is the fate of so many Virginia farms, one of the co-owners needed to sell the land,” said PEC Land Conservation Director Mike Kane.

Dustin attended a workshop where PEC’s then-field representative Peter Hujik gave a presentation on the federal Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program,

run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The ALE program pays farmers for the development rights on their land, which forever reserves the land for agricultural uses.

He approached Peter with his predicament, in hopes of finding a way forward. At first blush, the ALE program doesn’t work for Dustin, because he doesn’t own the property. And a recent variation of the ALE program, which would give a conservation organization, such as PEC, funding to buy a property, conserve it, and then resell the property at a lower value — a “buy-protect-sell” approach — also wouldn’t work because the only part of the family wanted to sell.

“But part of our identity as an organization is to be able to provide a really proactive approach to solving conservation problems. A great deal of conversation, negotiation, and brainstorming ensued, and we landed on what turned out to be a creative solution,” said Kane.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) would loan Dustin the money to

buy out his family member; PEC secured grants from NRCS and the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to purchase the easement; and Dustin would use the money from the sale of the development rights to pay off the loan to AFT.

“The ability to move forward on this conservation project was built on plentiful good will and trust among the parties, including AFT, Dustin and his family and PEC,” Kane said. “We all were working on the shared objective of keeping the farm in the family and in operation. Fortunately, conservation of the farm through the ALE program is the catalyst for making it happen. Of course, a key was to document that trust and goodwill through a series of agreements that commit Dustin and his family to conserve the farm and, in turn, PEC’s commitment to purchase the conservation easement. These basic commitments provided AFT the comfort to make a loan to Dustin in a manner consistent with AFT’s mission.”

With all the pieces in place, the final step is to finish the permanent protection of the farm with an agricultural land easement to be completed in 2025.

“Without this innovative series of transactions, Long Acre Farm would have likely been divided and sold. And there was already a young farmer right there who wanted to keep farming. So this was



O.P. Shifflett (left), Dustin Watson’s great grandfather, originally purchased Long Acre Farm in 1939. His son, and Dustin’s grandfather, Randolph Shifflett (right), expanded the farm with an entry into commercial poultry farming. Years from now, Dustin (center) will eventually run the family farm. Courtesy Dustin Watson

a win if only we could find a way to a solution. And that’s what PEC and all the parties worked together to make happen,” Kane said.

Many thanks to Dustin and his family for their persistence and to American Farmland Trust for their willingness to provide a creative financing solution that will save Long Acre as a working farm. Additional thanks goes to NRCS staff for the extra flexibility and guidance on this buy-protect-sale ALE variation. We also thank the Volgenau Foundation, as its support of farmland conservation in the Rappahannock watershed allowed PEC to commit to purchasing the easement prior to securing all of the grant funding necessary for a successful outcome.



Dustin Watson and his mother, Kathy. Photo by Gillian Bowman

A Mixed Bag at the General Assembly

By Julie Bolthouse, Director of Land Use

Between our trip to Richmond to join Virginia Conservation Network’s Jan. 31 Conservation Lobby Day and our persistent efforts on behalf of the many conservation priorities before the General Assembly, this has been a very busy, and challenging, legislative session. Despite disappointments, the environmental community made some notable progress on a few key priorities.

Road Trip to Richmond for Data Center Reform

Working with the Coalition to Protect Prince William County and National Parks Conservation Association, we organized a bus trip for some 50 people from Northern Virginia to go down to Richmond for the VCN’s Conservation Lobby Day on Jan. 31. Leaving at 5 a.m. Armed with information, flyers, and advocacy t-shirts, these hearty people embarked on a day full of meetings with key decision makers, with an eye toward data center reform.

After opening comments from Sen. Danica Roem and Del. Josh Thomas, our group took a divide-and-conquer approach, meeting with more than 25 legislators throughout the day. We were recognized in the Senate Chamber by Sen. Roem, shared our story with a class of students touring

the capitol, and testified on a data center bill that happened to be up in committee that day. Our ride home was filled with the mixed emotions of both celebration — of our success in sharing important information that amplified this issue among elected officials — and solemn acknowledgement that most of our legislators would not change course during this General Assembly session.

One bill we supported, HB 338 (Thomas), passed the House with amended language that watered-down what would have been a requirement that data center proposals include a site assessment of water usage and carbon emissions. It was continued to 2025 by the Senate.

Most of the 16 other pieces of legislation touching on our various data center reform goals, from modifying tax incentives to measuring energy demand and impacts on natural and historic resources, never made it out of their respective houses and were also continued to 2025. These bills were set aside in deference to a statewide study on data centers currently being conducted by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), due to be completed in November 2024. JLARC is the highly respected research agency whose work informs the General Assembly’s legislative function. As JLARC conducts its



PEC, members of the Data Center Reform Coalition, and citizens of the 28th State Senate District, brief the legislative aide of Senator Bryce Reeves on the impacts of data centers in Culpeper and Orange counties. Photo by Hugh Kenny

research and engages all stakeholders, PEC staff and other members of the Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition will be providing our insights into the issue.

Although we support the study’s desired outcome to quantify the financial and environmental impacts of the data center industry on Virginia and Virginians, it

should not have been a barrier to meaningful action on data centers this session. The longer the General Assembly delays, the greater the potential impacts on our electric rates, environment and communities — the growing impacts of which are well known

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# Bridging the Urban/Rural Divide

By Teddy Pitsiokos, Community Farm Coordinator

As I passed through Ashby Gap on a snowy January morning, gazing out on the patchwork of farms bridging Clarke and Fauquier counties, I turned down the radio to linger on a thought: how do we comprehend the value of this place? Surely there are few who would deny the beauty of this landscape and the immeasurable wealth it holds for our region.

Other drivers heading east are laser-focused on moving swiftly through their commute to suburban and exurban areas that hold a different type of wealth. Passing through historic Upperville, into Middleburg and then Aldie, I worry they miss the thousands of acres of productive farmland that dominate the landscape. Once at PEC's Community Farm at Gilberts Corner, I met my daily reminder that these farms don't stretch on forever.

Stepping out of my car with my coat zipped up tight, only my eyes were bare to feel the unmuffled January winds off the west side of this swath of land once planned for strip malls and suburban neighborhoods. In these months when the Community Farm isn't growing food, my job is to figure out how to do a better job than last year. I've been writing, crunching numbers, and planning for the miracle of spring, when this land will come alive with vegetables, visitors and wildlife. Construction sites are silent today, but I hear the echo of rock hammers and delivery trucks in my memory, ingrained into the landscape like the contour lines of last year's vegetable beds.

If the Route 50 corridor is the gateway to the Piedmont's rural farm-country, then Gilbert's Corner is its welcome sign. Continuing east beyond this landmark,

one can't help but notice the sudden change in population density and land use. Some may say that rural and suburban communities are often at odds, with seemingly contradictory priorities and values. The reality is that one cannot exist without the other, and forging a path toward a strong and prosperous future benefits from an appreciation of their interconnection.

From my perspective over at Gilberts Corner, I can look in either direction and see these two very different, but interdependent worlds. I also see how the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows symbolizes the synergy between suburban and rural communities. More than a place that produces food to feed the hungry, the farm demonstrates the public benefit of conserved farmland easily accessible to local neighborhoods and weaves together suburban and rural Loudoun into a stronger, more sustainable community. Here, we engage hundreds of volunteers every year, eager to support their community's health by helping us provide fresh vegetables to local food banks. We also host a variety of school groups, helping connect young people with the value of conservation, food, and community service.

It's also a crossroads, a place for a diversity of conversations about how we can contribute to the health and welfare of our communities. By partnering with organizations like Loudoun Hunger Relief,



PEC's Community Farm and surrounding lands at Gilberts Corner were once planned for strip malls and residential development. Photo by Hugh Kenny

we get direct feedback from families that receive our produce, which helps guide our crop production. And we engage volunteers in meaningful conversations to build community consensus on what types of volunteer activities are the most empowering.

Not every important conversation takes place at a town hall or committee meeting. Decisions that impact our neighbors are made around dinner tables, in churches, in the supermarket, and sometimes on farms. Listening to one another helps inform the foundation for a shared vision around a more sustainable future. Sustainable growth is fundamentally democratic, because without listening to our neighbors we can never know how our actions might affect the world beyond our perception. As we turn the page to start our sixth season, I invite you out to the Community Farm to be a part of the conversation.



Author Teddy Pitsiokos, Community Farm Coordinator, working with volunteers during the 2023 harvest season. Photo by Mitchell Pittman

## Volunteer at the Farm

Over the past five years, PEC's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows has grown and donated over 130,000 pounds of produce for food banks in Loudoun and Clarke counties with the help of over 1,000 volunteers. 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. Throughout the season, volunteers plant seeds in our greenhouse, transplant seedlings into our fields, care for crops, and harvest a diverse array of fruits and vegetables. Along the way, volunteers learn about the importance of hunger relief programs, sustainable agriculture and stewarding the environment responsibly.

Learn more and sign up to volunteer at [pecva.org/farm](https://pecva.org/farm).

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to our regulators, agencies and utilities. Already, PJM, the organization that operates the regional electric grid, has recommended billions of dollars in new transmission infrastructure, the majority of it a direct result of data center development in Virginia.

### Conservation, Renewable Power, Rural Roads, and Other Bills

Conservation Lobby Day was but just one day of many that PEC staff advocated on for a variety of legislative priorities, either remotely or in-person.

#### Funding for Virginia's Outdoors

The Virginia Great Outdoors Act was a proposal to provide permanent, dedicated funding for conservation programs.

It received bipartisan support and was broadly and enthusiastically received, with both the House Natural Resources Subcommittee and the Agriculture, Chesapeake, and Natural Resources Committee voting in favor to pass the bill. Unfortunately, it did not make it through the House Appropriations Committee. Our Virginia Outdoors, a bipartisan coalition promoting the outdoors for present and future generations, will continue its campaign into the next General Assembly session.

#### Progress on Community and Parking Lot Solar

Expansion of distributed and community-owned solar energy has been another major initiative for the conservation community. With so many thousands of acres of existing developed land, already engineered for stormwater management, the time is right to lessen solar energy's impacts on "greenfields" by adding solar to the already-built and underutilized spaces like rooftops and parking lots. Two sets of bills move us in that direction by expand-

ing shared solar into Appalachian Power territory and raising the capacity of shared solar in Dominion territory. Those bills, HB 106/SB 253 and HB 108/SB 255, have passed both houses and have moved to Gov. Youngkin for approval.

The Parking Lot Solar Development Pilot Program and Fund bill (SB234) passed out of the Senate with strong bipartisan support and a broad range of stakeholder support testimony. The House version (HB367) was tabled, and the Senate version of the bill was subsequently tabled in the House Appropriations Committee. However, the initiative was funded in the House budget through the appropriations process, and we now ask that the Senate budget find agreement with the House budget.

#### More Authority to Preserve Unpaved Roads

Virginia's current funding system prioritizes paving for improving gravel roads. HB 74 and SB 644, patroned by Loudoun legislators Del. David Reid, De. Geary Higgins and Sen. Russet Perry, would clarify that gravel road improvements could include options other than paving, making it easier for localities to preserve these historic resources. Both bills passed their respective houses and have been advanced to the Governor's desk for final approval.

### Other Bills...

We followed and commented on a number of other bills, too many to cover in full. A few, however, made it through their respective chambers, including HB 109, which increases transparency in utility votes for PJM projects; HB 985 prohibiting use of toxic road sealants SB 276 authorizing the study of financing for rooftop solar; and SB 243, which establishes a PFAS Expert Advisory Committee.

We're also happy to report that several bills we opposed or had serious concerns about were voted down or reduced in scope. SB 339, a bill that would have broadly allowed cryptocurrency mining in industrial areas has been reduced to a study. And SB 697 (VanValkenburg), which would have limited local government authority of the siting of utility-scale solar facilities, was carried over into 2025 without action.

By the time you read this, the General Assembly session will be over, but you can still talk to your legislators about these important issues. It is critical that our representatives know that the public is paying attention and appreciates their efforts. Writing and meeting with them during the off-season can even be the best opportunity to make your voice heard, because it's free of the whirlwind of the General Assembly session.



Members of the Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition gathered in Haymarket at 5 a.m. for a bus ride to Richmond for Conservation Lobby Day. Photo by Hugh Kenny

# Who’s Protecting the Piedmont?

The Virginia Piedmont is one of the most breathtaking places in the country, with exceptional natural resources, productive farms and forests, and a landscape steeped in history. Nearly a half-million acres of conserved lands strengthen our quality of life and sense of place and serve as the foundation for well-functioning ecosystems, a strong local food supply, and a refuge for a healthy variety of flora and fauna.

But this region isn’t what it is by chance. It’s taken the careful planning and work of countless people and organizations determined to preserve its beauty and irreplaceable gifts of nature for generations to come. Here, we highlight two of those people, who are protecting the Piedmont with a passion and focus on stemming the decline of our once-abundant grassland birds.

GEORGE GARDNER

## American Kestrel Box Program Volunteer

By Lauria McShane, Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative Assistant

Dedicated volunteer George Gardner can often be found in the picturesque grasslands of Virginia, assisting bird banders and monitoring nest boxes with the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI), a PEC partner initiative along with Smithsonian’s Virginia Working Landscapes, American Farmland Trust and Quail Forever. With the help of volunteers like George, VGBI works with landowners to install nest boxes in farm fields.

These allow researchers to band and track adult and fledgling birds for a better understanding of their behaviors as we work to stop the decline of grassland birds in the Piedmont.

George, who lives along Keyser Mountain in Rappahannock County with his wife Cecile and their pointer Brie, first began volunteering with PEC two years ago, planting trees and restoring public habitats with the Rappahannock County Park Natural Resource Committee. But he soon learned about the steep decline in American kestrel populations from research done by The Clifton Institute, Smithsonian’s National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute, and VGBI. He set his sights in a new direction, adding the nest box program to his long list of volunteer activities.

In spring, George can often be seen climbing ladders to install nest boxes. April through June, he tracks kestrel reproduction progress and keeps a running record of what he finds. “We use a special endoscope camera on a pole extension to look inside the nest box for a clutch of eggs or a kestrel sitting on the eggs or recently hatched nestlings,” he explains. Remembering a particularly exciting week in January, out in the field with VGBI partner and kestrel researcher Alan Williams, George said, “We captured four kestrels for banding, and best of all, also trapped a red tailed hawk, which we also banded. The hawk was especially neat to see and hold!” Last year, George helped the banding team band over 900 birds.

“Being involved with the VGBI program has given me great personal satisfaction in being able to help in a small way to further understand kestrel ecology and to contribute to their reproduction numbers,” George said. He encourages anyone interested in protecting native bird populations to volunteer with VGBI’s nest box program. Visit [vagrasslandbirds.org](http://vagrasslandbirds.org) to learn more about the program, volunteering, or participating in VGBI’s nest box program.



Photo by Alan William

LAURIA McSHANE

## Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative’s New Staff Member

By Sophia Chapin, Communications Specialist

“As soon as I landed, I fell in love with the fact that we have the mountains, we have trees, we have streams and rivers, and we have communities that care about each other,” says Lauria McShane, PEC’s Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI) Assistant who first came to Virginia from California to attend Sweet Briar College in 2019. Since then, Lauria has worked with the James River Association as a riparian buffer steward and at Seven Bends Native Plant Nursery in marketing.

Now, she has stepped firmly into the world of birds, helping landowners in Albemarle, Madison, Greene and Orange counties implement land management practices that protect grassland bird species like the Eastern meadowlark, bobolink, loggerhead shrike, Northern bobwhite, and dozens others. For Lauria, a lot of the joy of her day-to-day comes from fostering relationships to the land. “I first applied to this job because I love working with the connection between people and the environment,” she says.

She also has a keen interest in agriculture, stemming from her days working at Sweet Briar’s greenhouse, gardens and apiary. “Food production is interesting to me because we’re taking something from the land, but there are also ways we can create habitats on those lands to make it a win-win situation,” she explains. The Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative achieves these wins by providing technical support and funding to landowners and producers across 16 counties. For example, its financial incentives program helps farmers pilot rotational grazing practices, which can reduce feed costs to raise cattle while also leaving enough patches of tall grass for grassland birds to successfully nest.

Now that Lauria has settled into her role, she’s looking forward to meeting new faces at upcoming events and through ongoing site visits. “The Charlottesville area has a lot of landowners, a lot of farmers, who are interested in conservation. We just want to get the word out to how they can help. I’m finding that when I get onto landowners’ properties, it’s a very positive experience — they want to give back to their community and their environment, and it gives me a lot of hope for conservation.”

If you’re out and about in Charlottesville, you may catch Lauria on excursions with the Piedmont Bird Club or ambling local trails on her horse Hope.

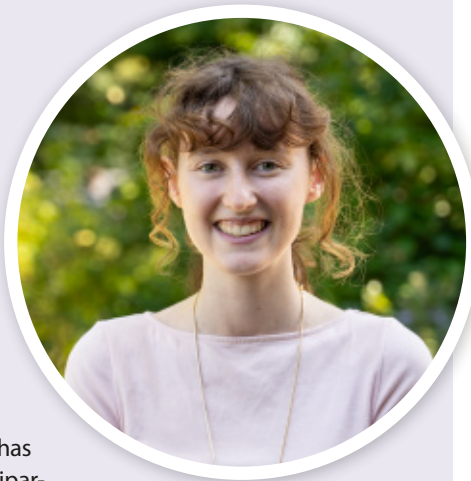


Photo by Marco Sánchez

### Pop Quiz

QUESTION

Which of the following countries ran on 100% renewable energy for consecutive days last year?

ANSWER

e) all of the above

Albania and Paraguay are 100% hydropower, Iceland runs on a mix of hydro and geothermal power. And Portugal, last year, ran for a week on a mix of solar, hydro and wind energy.

Portugal’s journey can be particularly instructive, as the country of 10 million had little hydropower and no nuclear power when it began its journey to hit Paris Agreement goals by 2050. Its last coal plant was decommissioned in 2022 and its grid remade to handle renewables. It also created new hydropower generation and ran significant wind auctions nearly 20 years ago, recently retrofitting the turbines with more productive

ones. Lastly, it built solar and wind on the same locations, saving money on project construction. Portugal’s next steps to move closer to 85% renewable energy by 2030 are to add increased distributed generation, battery storage and 10 gigawatts of floating wind turbines.

Here in Virginia, we’ve committed to a goal of 100% renewable energy by 2050. While escalating data center demand here poses distinct challenges, Portugal has a somewhat similar peak demand of 20 gigawatts, and its recent 100% renewable streak demonstrates the benefits of a planned, multi-solution strategy for finding success in the clean energy transition.



ABOVE: Canical Wind Farm, Madeira, Portugal. Photo by Jason Bickley

# Introducing PEC’s New Board Chair and Leadership Team

By Cindy Sabato, Communications Advisor

Jean Perin and George Ohrstrom led The Piedmont Environmental Council, as board co-chairs, with great humility, care and passion for 10 years. In January, they turned the reins over to David Aldrich and a new board leadership team of Leslie Cockburn, Chris McLean and Margrete Stevens.

“With courage to back our efforts as a staff in the face of reluctance, skepticism, and often Goliath-sized challenges, Jeannie and George have shaped PEC’s vision and provided the support we’ve needed to bring good ideas to fruition. “Collectively, our new board officers exemplify the depth of the board as a whole. Each brings a range of experiences as landowners, community leaders and professionals in their fields, all of which will capably advance PEC’s mission and vision,” said PEC President Chris Miller.

**David Aldrich** is PEC’s new board chair. He, his wife Jennifer, and their two children have called Rappahannock County home for 19 years. The Virginia countryside first drew them away from the hustle and bustle of New York City back in the mid-1990s, where David left behind a career in investment banking and accounting to join a government contracting firm. They landed in The Plains and stayed for almost a decade. When The Plains got “too crowded,” David laughs, they headed south. “We just love the rural nature of Rappahannock County,” he said.

Almost as soon as they arrived in the Virginia Piedmont, the Aldrich’s heard about PEC. “We immediately connected to its mission and were keen to support its efforts. Having moved to Virginia from a once-rural and bucolic area that had been overwhelmed and suburbanized by development, we realized how critical PEC’s work was and still is today,” David said.



The Aldrich’s have permanently protected 450 acres in Rappahannock County, lands David describes “as an interesting mix of open spaces, woodlands, water and wildlife. Our interest has been not just extinguishing development rights, but also supporting, improving and protecting habitat.” To that end, they’ve invested in native plantings to support bird and wildlife habitat, installation of trees and shrubs along waterways to improve water quality, and the “laborious and almost impossible task of invasive plant species removal.”

In 2010, Jean invited David to join the board representing Rappahannock County. Four years later, he became board treasurer, a role he says “allowed me a more complete understanding of the organization, its goals and challenges.” He served as board treasurer for the next nine years, under board leadership of Jean and George.

Stepping into the board chair role this year is stepping into very big shoes. “Jean and George, along with secretary Alton Keel and vice chair Mark Ohrstrom, provided significant contributions of time, talent, and treasure during their leadership tenure. And I know the new board leadership team — Leslie, Margrete, Chris and I — will continue to rely

on their extensive experience, knowledge and guidance as we move forward together leading PEC.”

“PEC has been extremely successful over the past 50 years. Begun with a focus on protecting and preserving land in the Piedmont, PEC has evolved into an organization capable of, and willing to, take on major regional, national, and even international environmental issues such as data center development. More than any other time, the need for PEC is high, and this organization is uniquely suited to address challenges that will not go away any time soon, and may in fact increase in magnitude and complexity,” David said.

“My understanding and appreciation of the importance of PEC’s work, its impressive capabilities, and the qualities of the people at PEC are what keep me involved. I hope I continue to facilitate the growth of PEC, with a particular focus on development of its staff of expert performers, for as long as the organization is interested in my participation,” he said.

**Chris McLean** follows David Aldrich’s tenure as board treasurer for a three-year term. Outside of his career in finance as a wealth management advisor, Chris has a passion for the preservation of Virginia’s natural landscapes. In addition to serving PEC’s board of directors since 2015, he is also a board member of The Piedmont Foundation since 2020, the Samuel Miller Agricultural Trust, and Wildrock Nature Play and Discovery



▲ **David Aldrich, board president**  
Photo by Jennifer Aldrich

◀ **Leslie Cockburn, board vice-chair**  
Photo by Scott Willis

Center, and former chair of the James River Association. A native of Charlottesville, Chris graduated from University of Virginia and University of Richmond Law School, and is deeply engaged with the PEC programs in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

PEC’s new vice-chair is **Leslie Cockburn**, multi-award-winning journalist, author, and filmmaker. She is world-renowned for her many documentaries, films and other works on the effects of international conflict and foreign policy in the U.S. and abroad. The avid sailor, skier, swimmer and hiker served on PEC’s board from 2007-2017 and rejoined in 2021. She raises Red Devon cattle and produces organic hay with husband Andrew on their farm in Castleton, and has also created an ornamental garden dedicated to butterflies and bees. In 2022, Cockburn was appointed by the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates to the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation Board of Trustees and currently serves on the board of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Haiti.

**Margrete Stevens**, a PEC supporter for more than 30 years, joined the board in 2023 and steps into the role of board secretary for a three-year term. She also serves on PEC’s Julian Scheer Fauquier Land Conservation Fund Advisory Committee. Margrete and her husband Mike have hosted PEC’s beloved annual Bluebell Walk on Cedar Run at their Catlett property for 21 years, and permanently conserved Bonny Brook Farm in 2010. Recently she’s begun land management practices there to reintroduce native grasses and restore the wetlands to better protect Cedar Run — work that’s become a community demonstration component of the annual bluebell walk. Stevens is also a member of the Fauquier County Architectural Review Board and the board of The Clifton Institute, and has served as president of The Warrenton Hunt and The Warrenton Garden Club. Her distinguished career as an international law attorney involved disputes with various environmental implications all over the world.



▲ **Margrete Stevens, board secretary**  
Photo by Hugh Kenny

**Chris McLean, board treasurer** ►  
Photo by Ashley Shilling



# Out&About

## Greene County Land Use & Conservation Outreach



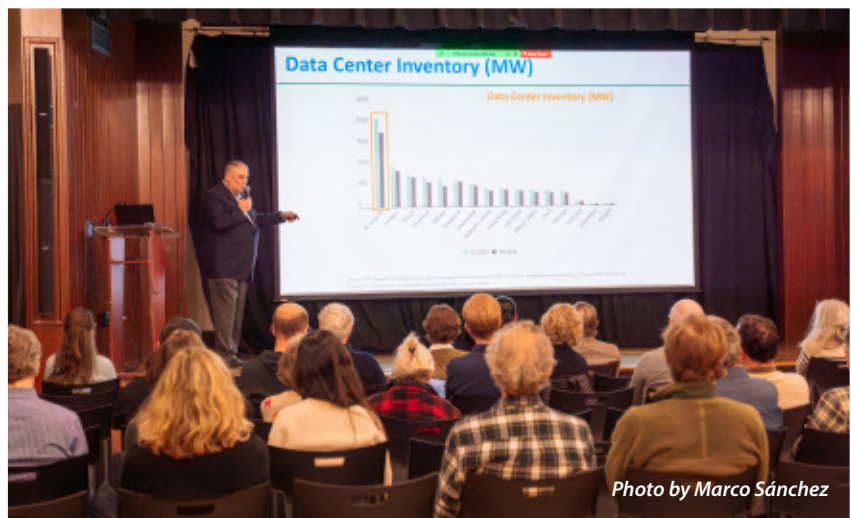
▲ In January, PEC field representatives Kim Biasioli and Rob McGinnis spoke with Greene County residents and neighbors about land conservation easements, the surge of data centers and other development projects in our southern region.

## Conservation Lobby Day



▲ PEC field representatives Gem Bingol (far left), Don McCown (second from left), Sarah Parmelee (far right), and Land Use Director Julie Bolthouse (second from right) were among several PEC staff who traveled to Richmond on Jan. 31 to participate in the Virginia Conservation Network’s annual Conservation Lobby Day. Along with VCN partners and other concerned citizens from the region, they met with legislators to advocate for such legislative priorities as data center siting, parking lot solar, national battlefield protections, utility funding structure, and much more.

## Data Center & Energy Infrastructure Community Meetings



▲ In January and February, PEC held community meetings in Purcellville and Charlottesville to share what we’ve learned recently about energy infrastructure and transmission line proposals tied to data center growth in Virginia. Here, PEC President Chris Miller addresses the audience at our Charlottesville presentation, held at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center.

## Conservation Partner Award



◀ In December, two PEC staff members received the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District’s conservation partner award from District Manager Melissa Allen. In collaboration with JMSWCD, Maggi Blomstrom, Rappahannock-Rapidan Conservation Initiative Coordinator, and Linnea Stewart, Tree and Stewardship Coordinator, facilitated the planting of more than 5,893 trees on 23.7 acres in Fauquier County last year.

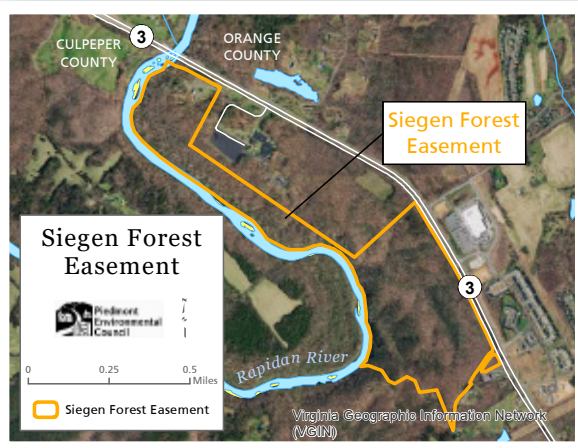
## Conserving a Cultural Crossroads

Continued from cover

tion easement could potentially support both goals. The journey that followed involved extensive research, meticulous planning, and thoughtful conversations and deliberations to ensure conservation was the right step for Historic Germanna. Ultimately, PEC Conservation Director Mike Kane helped envision a conservation solution through Virginia’s Land Preservation Tax Credit and other grants. Blomstrom wrote a successful grant application for \$647,370 from the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to help purchase the Siegen Forest easement, and the American Battlefield Trust contributed another \$655,000 with an American Battlefield Protection Program grant from the National Park Service. With a generous gift from Bill Prime for conservation in the Rappahannock watershed, PEC contributed another \$20,000 for additional costs associated with the easement, “which was well spent on Reese Conser-

vation Consulting, who which helped bring all the funding pieces and partners to closing,” Blomstrom said. “We are thrilled to have achieved this pivotal milestone. Placing Siegen Forest under easement...ensures our steadfast dedication to preserving and perpetuating Germanna’s rich historical and natural resources for generations to come,” said Keith Hoffman, board president of Historic Germanna, in a press release. Now, as part of the conservation easement, a new public access site on the Rapidan River is being celebrated with a ribbon cutting on Saturday, Apr. 27. “The Rapidan River is the largest tributary of the Rappahannock River, which is a state scenic river. Together, they offer incredible outdoor recreational opportunities like paddling, fishing, swimming and more, and yet there are very few public access points. Outdoor recreation is essential for present and future

generations, and the new Germanna Ford Public Boat Launch is key to building out the Upper Rappahannock River Water Trail that PEC, Friends of the Rappahannock, and several other partner organizations have been working on,” Blomstrom said. PEC is proud to have been part of this collective achievement. “Not one organization could do it alone, and every little piece had its own timeline. But the beauty of PEC and all the partners involved in this project is that we’re all in it for the long haul,” said Blomstrom. “We work in perpetuity, and this truly encapsulates everything PEC, as an organization, is working to protect: public access to nature, a forested buffer for improved water quality, and a great conserved, green buffer for people



along the I-95 corridor that serves as a gateway to our larger Piedmont Region.” Through nature trails, archaeological digs, genealogy research, lectures and other public programs, Historic Germanna invites visitors to deepen their understanding of this area’s past. “I love knowing that the history of this land will always be preserved for the benefit of future generations to learn from. That’s the thrilling part for me,” Blomstrom said.

# On the Ground

## Albemarle & Charlottesville

- Albemarle County landowners have donated a conservation easement that permanently **protects over 184 acres of land and water along Green Creek** in the community of Schuyler. The easement, held by PEC, helps protect high conservation value forest and farmland, water quality, and natural habitat, and helps provide important connectivity to other conserved lands.
- Phase II of the **Albemarle County AC44 comprehensive plan update** process is nearing completion. We are pleased to report that the draft Rural Area chapter includes a recommendation for completion and adoption of a Rural Area land use plan, for which PEC has advocated for many months. We are reviewing and will comment on the goals and objectives for the final three chapters: Rural Area Land Use and Transportation, Development Areas Land Use and Transportation, and Community Facilities. Once these goals and objectives are completed, the AC44 process will move into Phase III, which will focus on action items for each chapter. The County’s scheduled completion and adoption of the comprehensive plan update is at the end of 2024.
- A major focus of PEC is on a **proposed electrical transmission line rebuild** running through important Albemarle Rural Area cultural landscapes driven by the proliferation of data centers in Virginia. PEC held a community meeting in early February at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center in Charlottesville focusing on energy infrastructure and data centers in Virginia including information on historic, natural, cultural and scenic resources that would be impacted by the proposed transmission line project.
- One of PEC’s major initiatives in Albemarle addresses the need to improve the effectiveness of the **County’s land conservation programs** in implementing comprehensive plan updates related to its rural area and environmental stewardship objectives. We will be recommending reinstatement of the County’s Purchase of Development Rights Program, establishment of a consistent and dedicated funding source, and addition of permanent county staff capacity to support land conservation programs.
- Community engagement is getting underway for a new **Charlottesville Parks and Recreation Master Plan** that will guide future planning, policy, and development of programs and facilities for many years. Learn more and share your feedback at *engagepros.mysocialpinpoint.com/Charlottesville*.

## Clarke

- On Jan. 16, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to pass an updated zoning ordinance for **utility-scale solar installations in Clarke County**. The update originally called for a moratorium, but with input from PEC through each phase of the process, the Planning Commission chose to tighten up existing regulations and clean up language to offer more specific guidance.
- The Planning Commission forwarded the **Horace Virginia LLC utility-scale solar proposal** to the Board of Supervisors with a recommendation of approval. The commission shared our concerns about the low-sitting-row mounted panel style causing significant soil erosion to the site, which consists of a high percentage of prime agricultural soils. A number of conditions were added to the approval to address this and several other concerns of the commission.

## Culpeper

- The Town of Culpeper is **overhauling its code of ordinances**, a key tool for guiding land use and development in the town. This is an important process for residents as the definitions of certain districts and what uses are allowed within those districts could change. Residents are encouraged to view the draft changes on the town website at *town-of-culpeper-zoning-update-project-culpeperva.hub.arcgis.com* and submit comments to the Town.
- Red Ace Capital, which previously rezoned and sold 85 acres of agricultural land on Route 3 to a Texas-based data center company, has submitted a **new rezoning application for 17.6 acres of agricultural land** next to the first property. This application is worrisomely vague, lacking a maximum square footage and height for the proposed buildings amongst other basic information. It also seeks to retain over 50 possible uses, including data centers, warehouses and gas stations. PEC is concerned about the speculative nature of this project and the many potential impacts that some of the listed uses may have on nearby residences.
- On Dec. 5, the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors voted to approve **Cielo Digital Infrastructure**, a 300-megawatt data center proposal with three, two-story buildings on Nalles Mill Road within the Town Water and Sewer Service District. While near other approved data center sites, it will require a new substation and possibly additional upgrades or expansion of the existing transmission lines. Supervisors were also concerned about the lack of information about the number of backup generators this facility will require and the amount of fuel that will be stored on site.

- Dominion Energy has submitted its application for the **Germanna Line and Substation** to the State Corporation Commission. This \$54.3-million project will build 1.8 miles of new transmission line and a six-acre substation to serve the Amazon-owned Marvell data center in Stevensburg. This transmission line project will cross private land and likely disrupt the viewshed of Salubria, one of the few remaining Georgian style architecture examples in Virginia. Our understanding is that this line and substation, which will be paid for by Virginia ratepayers, are being built solely to support a single data center. We also suspect this infrastructure will encourage additional industrial development in this otherwise rural area. Community members can submit comments, referencing case number PUR-2023-0026, to the SCC before May 21, 2024 via email to *sccinfo@scc.virginia.gov*.

## Fauquier

- Town of Warrenton planning staff have accepted Amazon’s third submission for the proposed **Amazon data center** site development plan. Like its most recent submission, some information was made available to the public, but the site development plan, details on noise emitting equipment, and many responses to town staff comments were redacted. Amazon continues to justify these redactions as Virginia Freedom of Information Act exemptions intended to protect information about the facility’s security and utility systems. Discussions with Dominion about electrical service to the site are still pending.
- PEC, along with Citizens for Fauquier County, Protect Fauquier, and Protect Catlett, are continuing to share information on **PJM-approved transmission line proposals** to serve the explosive growth of data centers in Virginia, including the upgrade of an existing 500-kv line running through Fauquier County. Dominion and other utilities are conducting community outreach for each proposal leading up to a final public hearing and decision by the State Corporation Commission.
- In December, the Board of Supervisors approved a **policy intended to provide guidance to data center development in the county**. The policy was drafted in the final quarter of the year with the help of a working group that includes PEC, our community partners, the County Economic Development Department and data center development interests. Although not legally binding, it will have a significant influence on the County’s review of upcoming data center applications.

# On the Ground

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## Greene

➤ In a recent **presentation of our land conservation and land use work in Greene County**, we discussed the important role conservation easements play in protecting Greene’s rural landscapes and natural resources, highlighting two major land use concerns: 1) the potential for data center development and its associated energy infrastructure, and 2) the potential land-use, transportation, and environmental impacts of the planned **Rivanna Station Futures**, a public-sector development initiative associated with the U.S. Department of Defense’s Rivanna Station. An Albemarle County official recently described this initiative as potentially extending eight miles from the North Fork of the Rivanna River all the way to Greene County “with the possibility of realizing a level of potential similar to Silicon Valley at the onset” and anchoring development up to Greene County.

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## Loudoun

- PEC held its third **informational meeting on data centers and transmission lines** at Woodgrove High School on January 22 with 170+ in attendance. We held a subsequent, online meeting on Mar. 4.
- In February, the Board of Supervisors kicked off amendments to the **comprehensive plan and accompanying zoning ordinance (CPAM/ZOAM) as relates to data center development** in the county. PEC made recommendations on both amendments. With a focus on revising and mapping where data centers can be located, these amendments will contain more specific policy language and standards for data centers, as well as the more than 30 new substations projected to be added to the grid in eastern Loudoun. Supervisors are also taking steps to replace by-right data center development with special exceptions, to ensure there is oversight on the remaining parcels available for this kind of build out. The full CPAM/ZOAM process is expected to complete in 2025.
- At the Board of Supervisors’ March public hearing, **PEC will once again provide input as the board takes up three different and controversial applications**: 1) a final decision on the Philomont Fire House, 2) the Village at Clear Springs, a large residential development and professional tennis facility with 16 lit outdoor courts in the Transition Policy Area, and 3) a 600 megawatt data center on the banks of Goose Creek, a project that requires a special exception and rezoning.
- PEC has been providing input since the beginning of the **Prime Soils and Cluster Subdivision Zoning Ordinance Amendment** in 2020 and will continue as the Board of Supervi-

sors takes up this initiative, likely in April.

- On Jan. 9, the Purcellville Town Council voted to void the sale of the **historic Pullen House**, located near the Fireman’s Field complex, and partner with the Purcellville Historic Society to build out the property as a community park. Volunteers in the Purcellville business community are working with the historic society to plan for removal of the asbestos-filled house and add a new pavilion for use by the community for classes, parties and potentially even a farmers market.

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## Madison

- After rejecting an earlier proposal, and in the wake of a subsequent lawsuit, the County has sold the former **Criglersville Elementary School** to the Richmond developer who originally proposed renovation and repurposing it into a boutique hotel and wedding venue. PEC was pleased to see an attempt to save the historic school building, but concerned about potential negative impacts connected to proposed additional lodging on site. The developer has yet to announce his plan going forward, other than to reiterate his desire to bring the structure back to life. The property is still zoned agricultural, so a special use permit would be required in order to operate a hotel or event venue.
- Madison County’s **comprehensive plan update process** continues, with input from last fall’s community survey now being incorporated into the draft chapters. The Board of Supervisors is expected to review and approve updates to the plan in 2024. PEC is encouraging the County to approach development in a way that complements existing services and infrastructure, enhances a walkable town with everyday access to nature, and protects natural resources, open space and working farmlands. PEC will also keep residents apprised of opportunities to provide further input.

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## Orange

- The Virginia Freedom of Information Act lawsuit that PEC filed against Orange County in October concluded in December when officials turned over non-disclosure agreements signed by 10 local officials “for the benefit of Amazon.com, Inc. and its affiliates,” as well previously redacted documents and a privilege log listing all withheld documents, avoiding a hearing in court. We filed the lawsuit against the County for improperly denying public access to documents pertaining to the 2,600-acre Wilderness Crossing rezoning request. We hope our success in this case is a

reminder that local governments cannot operate behind a veil of secrecy, hiding important land use decisions from the public purview, and highlights the critical importance of local groups like PEC and others holding elected officials accountable to the laws of Virginia and the people of their communities. Read our full press release at: [www.pecva.org/resources/press/pec-lawsuit-confirms-abuse-of-foia-by-orange-county-for-the-benefit-of-amazon](http://www.pecva.org/resources/press/pec-lawsuit-confirms-abuse-of-foia-by-orange-county-for-the-benefit-of-amazon)

- PEC is reviewing the **proposed 932-acre, 80-megawatt Sunfish utility-scale solar project**, near the community of True Blue, on a productive farm that includes the ruins of historic Morton Hall. We are concerned about this project’s impacts on over 650 acres of prime farmland and/or farmland of statewide importance. No public hearing date has been set. We will continue to monitor this proposal and push the County to approve only those projects that are well-designed and -sited and that mitigate impacts to historic, cultural and natural resources.

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## Rappahannock

- The Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission are currently **considering amendments to the subdivision ordinance and tourist home standards in the County zoning ordinance**. PEC staff continue to monitor these discussions.
- The Virginia Department of Forestry’s Community and Urban Forestry grant program has awarded the Rappahannock County Park a grant of \$18,500 for the **restoration of the park’s forested area adjacent to the Rush River**. PEC staff provided assistance on the grant application, which is matched by additional funding from the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District. The restoration project will include removing non-native invasive species and re-establishing native tree canopy in the riparian area.
- The Sperryville Community Alliance hosted a **community discussion on improving pedestrian safety** in the village of Sperryville on Feb. 6. Nearly 100 people — including PEC staff — attended the event. PEC continues to monitor these discussions and support our partners in creating walkable communities.
- PEC and our partners at the Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection co-hosted a Conservation ‘Speed Dating’ Workshop on February 22. The event facilitated a series of one-on-one discussions between local conservation practitioners and Rappahannock landowners about available technical assistance and financial incentive programs.



# UPCOMING Events

Event details subject to change.  
Please check [pecva.org/events](https://pecva.org/events) for the latest information.

## Charlottesville / Albemarle Active Mobility Summit

**When** > **Thursday, March 21 • 9 AM – 6 PM**  
**Where** > **The Wool Factory, 1837 Broadway Street, Charlottesville**

Whether you're a cyclist, walker, runner, or simply interested in promoting active lifestyles and access to the outdoors, the fourth annual Charlottesville / Albemarle Active Mobility Summit invites you to join other residents and partner organizations for a full-day workshop. The event is hands-on and collaborative, centered on learning, active participation, and fellowship—and it's free! Visit [pecva.org/mobilitysummit](https://pecva.org/mobilitysummit) for information and registration.

### Save the Date!

## National Park Day 2024 Benefiting Cedar Mountain Battlefield

**When** > **Saturday, April 6 • 9 AM – 12 PM**  
**Where** > **TBD**

The 28th annual Park Day brings volunteers from coast to coast to battlefields, museums, cemeteries and historic sites across the country to make a lasting impact on our nation's heritage. For more than 25 years, Park Day has seen volunteers give thousands of hours to build trails, rake leaves, paint signs and more. Help make this Park Day the biggest one yet, in celebration of the upcoming 250th anniversary of America and the launch of the new State Park at Culpeper Battlefields! Sign up at [friendofcedarmountain.org/park-day](https://friendofcedarmountain.org/park-day) to help at Cedar Mountain Battlefield.

## 21st Annual Bluebell Walk along Cedar Run

**When** > **Sunday, April 7, 2024  
11 AM – 1 PM**  
**Where** > **Bonny Brook Farm, Catlett**

This family-friendly celebration of spring, sponsored by PEC's Julian Scheer Fauquier Land Conservation Fund, 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! This year's bluebell walk is in memory of Jocelyn Sladen. Learn more and register at [pecva.org/events](https://pecva.org/events).

## Ribbon Cutting Celebrating the Protection of Historic Germanna's Siegen Forest and the New Germanna Ford Boat Launch

**When** > **Saturday, April 27  
10 AM – 4 PM**  
**Where** > **Historic Germanna, 2062 Germanna Highway, Locust Grove**

The Siegen Forest Conservation Celebration and ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Germanna Ford Public Boat Launch promises to be a day filled with fun, nature, and history. The day will feature archaeological and historical activities, nature walks, kayak launching, hands-on stations, and participation from our cultural and ecological partners with information tables. Learn more at [germanna.org](https://germanna.org).

## PEC's Annual Meeting

**When** > **Early June**  
Join us for a fun, informative day in a beautiful setting. Catch up with friends, participate in a workshop and learn more about local efforts to build a stronger, more sustainable region. Registration information will be available soon. Contact Montana Lanier Ruffner at [mlanier@pecva.org](mailto:mlanier@pecva.org) with questions.

## Volunteer at the Community Farm

**When** > **All Spring!**  
**Where** > **3990 Hoswer's Branch Road, Aldie**

Spring planting is already underway at PEC's Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, and that means there are lots of ways volunteers can help us reach our 2024 goal of donating 50,000 pounds of produce and eggs to Loudoun Hunger Relief and food pantries in Clarke County. Now through November, volunteers can to plant and transplant veggies, herbs, and fruit, and harvest and sort ripe produce. To learn more about volunteering and sign up, visit [pecva.org/farmvolunteer](https://pecva.org/farmvolunteer).



**Brambleton Area Middle School Service Day at the Community Farm.** Photo by Scott Abeel

# A Conservation Journey in Madison County

Continued from cover

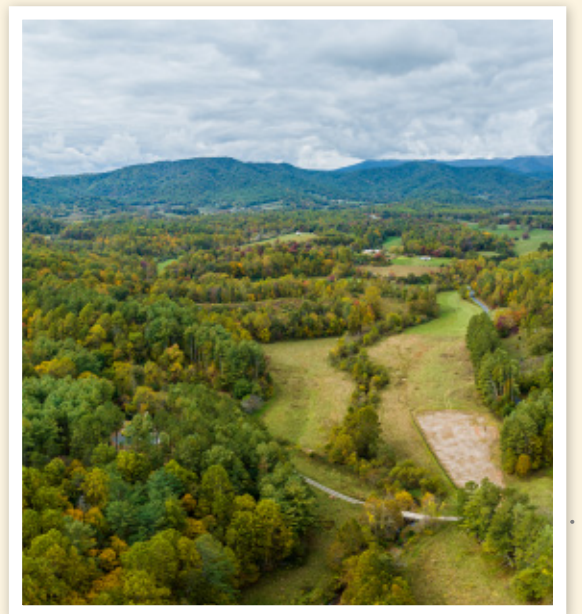
to more organizations, such as The Clifton Institute, Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes, and the Beaver Coexistence Fund. And they expanded the network of resources she could turn to for help.

The costs associated with improving natural resource concerns and water quality issues can be significant for landowners — but fortunately in our area, numerous organizations and agencies partner to leverage financial resources and technical expertise for landowners. At Carolyn's property, Friends of the Rappahannock planted a riparian buffer of about 4,000 trees to support water quality and wildlife habitat with help from a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant. She got help financing her restoration work through cost-sharing programs offered by the Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and with grants and payments from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program.

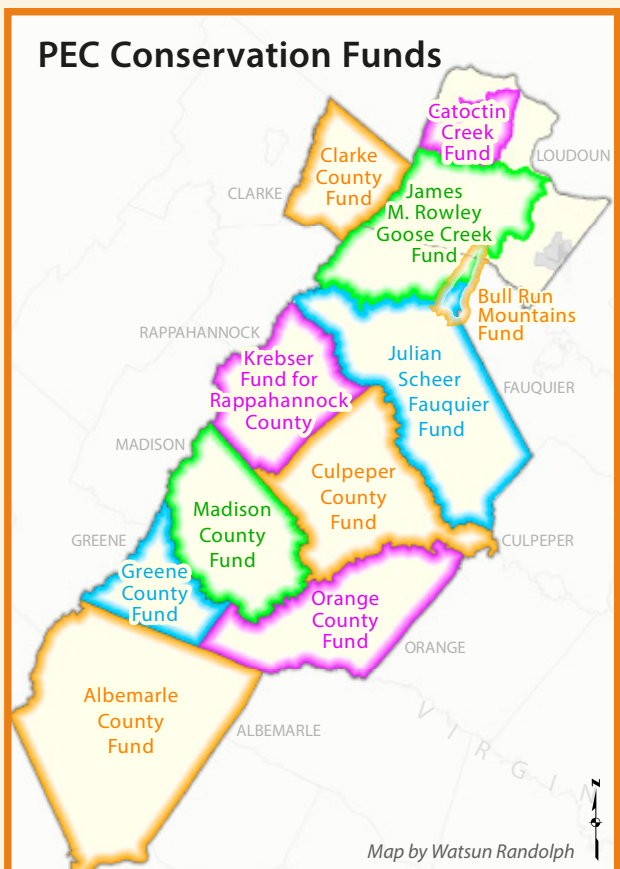
And yet she still had time to partner with PEC on the year-long process of protecting the property with a conservation easement. After Bryan's initial introduction of PEC, he returned to the property with Maggi for a fateful walk through Carolyn's restored meadows and woodland trails that ultimately led to the conservation easement. The no-division easement includes significant frontage along Pass Run, a tributary of the Robinson River in the Upper Rappahannock watershed, which is a focal area for PEC. The Rappahannock River is a source of drinking water for the City of Fredericksburg, so permanently protecting water quality provides benefits far beyond the property. And PEC's Madison County Land Conservation Fund supported Carolyn's conservation easement through a contribution of \$13,000 toward long-term stewardship of the property's conservation values.

But this isn't the end for caring for the land, as Carolyn sees it as a "living entity." For example, she enthusiastically described her recent conversion of two former hayfields to native grass and wildflower meadows. Already, she's converted two former hayfields into native grass and wildflower meadows, excitedly describing how she improved her process in the second meadow by collecting native seeds in the fall and then hand-seeding the meadows during two weeks of good frost cover.

"I feel like it's an honor and a privilege to be a steward of the land, so it's a responsibility I take very seriously," Carolyn said. "So for the rest of my life, however long it's going to be, my mission and my purpose is to give as much to the land as I can to restore its natural balance. I feel like it's such a worthwhile cause to dedicate it to."



### PEC Conservation Funds



This map shows donor-designated funds created for on-the-ground conservation and restoration projects in specific geographic areas within The Piedmont Environmental Council service territory. The majority of the funds are held by the Piedmont Foundation, a separate 509(a)(3) charitable organization established to hold and manage special funds in support of PEC's mission. Learn more at [piedmontfoundation.org](https://piedmontfoundation.org)

**Looking west over Carolyn Smith's property.**  
Photo by Hugh Kenny

# Dear Friends,

For more than 50 years, PEC has advocated that local governments, state agencies and communities plan together for long-term sustainability with a thoughtful balance between development and conservation.

As a result of PEC’s advocacy for a holistic approach: land use decisions and proposals in Virginia now take into account effects on the state’s transportation systems; state and local policies identify lands with public benefits and offer incentives for conserving those lands; and the Virginia Piedmont has become a national model of public and private conservation. In just the past year, we’ve accelerated conservation efforts with an eye toward large connected areas of protected lands to help meet local, state, and national goals for water quality, farm soils, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration.

If you’ve been following PEC over the past 18 months or so, you can’t help but have noticed a consistent theme: all of this positive momentum is at risk of being overrun by the rise of one industry — data centers.

In areas where data centers are concentrating, years of successful efforts to reduce overall energy consumption by encouraging investment in energy efficiency are being dramatically offset by a peak electrical demand in Virginia now projected to double (or more) by 2040. That demand increase comes with lasting impacts to local communities and ratepayers and to the climate, our air and water, our wildlife, and our natural, cultural and historic resources. New power has to come from somewhere. It has to be generated and it has to travel from source to sink via our electric grid and transmission lines. The impact could be spread over hundreds of thousands of acres and communities far from where the demand is being generated.

The notion that we can provide all of this power entirely from renewable sources and also on the timeline the data center industry is demanding it, is unrealistic. Already, FirstEnergy Corp. has announced

it will postpone retiring its Fort Martin and Harrison coal-fired power plants in West Virginia. Here in the Commonwealth, Dominion Energy is pursuing a major new natural gas facility in Chesterfield and openly questioning whether fossil-fuel retirements can proceed on time. As important, under current laws and regulation in place in Virginia, the costs of rapid expansion of energy generation and transmission will be borne by ratepayers through electrical bills projected to double over the next 15 years. And right now, investor-owned utilities are seeking profit guarantees related to the development of small modular nuclear reactors - an unproven technology - at ratepayer expense, even if these plants are never completed or never generate electricity for their customers.

Virginia committed in 2020 to an ambitious goal for renewable energy, which PEC supports. When it comes to solar, the state is making tremendous progress toward the goals of the Virginia Clean Economy Act, which requires development of 16,100 megawatts of solar and onshore wind by 2035. According to the Virginia Association of Counties, over 11,000 megawatts of utility-scale solar projects have been approved, more than two-thirds of the way toward meeting that goal.

However, the energy demands of the data center industry are moving the goalposts, and in doing so, impeding progress on a green-energy future built to serve our homes, local businesses, transit and vehicles. Dominion Energy’s Integrated Resource Plan submitted in May 2023 asserted that the demand from data centers could not be satisfied by the framework set out in the Virginia Clean Energy Act and recommended continued operation of existing natural gas plants, construction of new gas plants, massive investment in small modular reactors, and transmission that connects to coal and other fossil fuel generation outside of Virginia.

Meanwhile, there seems to be little-to-no appetite for hard conversations about the need for careful planning and siting of data centers, about their

potential energy usage, or about the importance of best practices and community engagement. Similarly, there is a reluctance to support the regulation and mitigation of impacts of energy infrastructure. In 2022, PEC advocated for legislation that set a path toward reasonable mitigation for utility-scale solar. More recently, we supported legislation to study and regulate the effects of data centers. Unfortunately, we also saw legislation to fast track approvals and reduce local government authority over land-use decisions. Ultimately, PEC continues to advance the idea that more attention — not less — should be given to mitigating unavoidable negative impacts.

Hundreds of billions of dollars worth of investment are expected due to this data center expansion. If even 10% of that were set aside upfront for mitigation, Virginia could make a substantial commitment to offsetting the impacts on nature, public health, and communities, to ensure we continue moving toward Virginia’s climate goals without sacrificing our collective great strides in conservation, water quality, and carbon sequestration. It’s time for our residents and elected leaders to demand more from the data center industry. And we should consider removing tax breaks on computer equipment and other incentives without meaningful requirements for energy efficiency, reduction of water consumption and measures to reduce noise and other neighborhood-level concerns.

A lot of learning has taken place over the last three years. Now it’s time to demand greater transparency, greater accountability and greater investment in what makes Virginia special. While there is still time.

Sincerely,

**Chris Miller, President**



Photo by Hugh Kenny



# The Piedmont View

A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL    SPRING 2024



**INSIDE**  
Conservation stories from 2023; legislative update from the General Assembly; meet PEC’s new board officers; land use highlights around the region; upcoming events, and much more


2023 Photo Contest Winner, “Virginia Bluebells” by Rod Erickson

## Pop Quiz

QUESTION

Which of the following countries ran on 100% renewable energy for consecutive days last year?

- a) Portugal
- b) Paraguay
- c) Iceland
- d) Albania
- e) All of the above



ANSWER ON PAGE 6



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