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Power Surge

Data center boom leads to expansive transmission proposals

By Julie Bolthouse, Director of Land Use

As we strive to advance Virginia's clean energy future, a key focus area from our strategic plan, we must address the booming data center growth in our state that is requiring unprecedented expansions of our energy grid and hindering our ability to get off of fossil fuels.

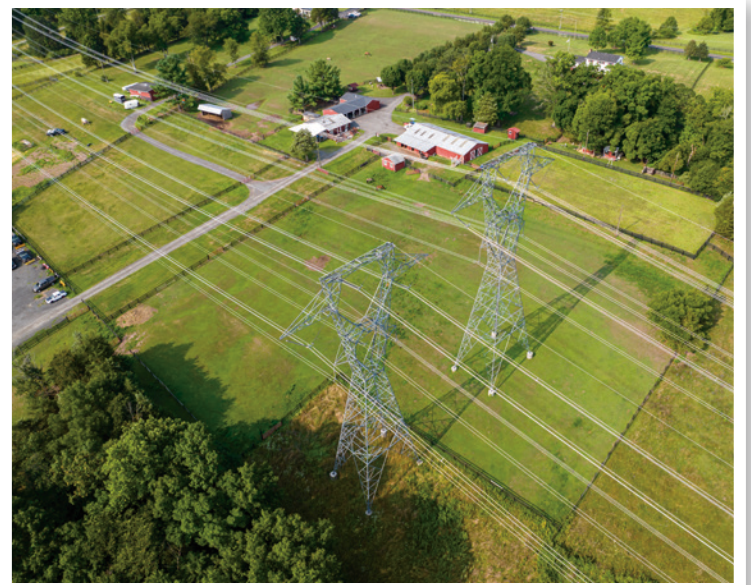
Recently, *Business Insider* ran a story titled, "Data centers sprouting up as a result of the AI boom, minting fortunes, sucking up energy, and changing rural America." This story explained that the now ubiquitous presence of data centers in places like Northern Virginia has a flipside: "the facilities consume quantities of power so vast that they have begun to tax entire energy grids and could exacerbate the climate crisis."

Virginia is seeing the first results of this on our regional energy grid in the form of proposals for a new 1,000-mega-watt (MW) natural gas facility in Chesterfield County and several new transmission lines that will traverse through Virginia, Mary-

land, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia communities with the primary purpose of delivering more power to Northern Virginia data center campuses. This is only the beginning, and progress on a clean energy future will be pushed further back if localities continue to approve more and more data center space without any regulatory oversight from the state.

Utilities are legally obligated to serve data centers, no matter how much energy they need or where they want it delivered. As a result, a tangled web of transmission lines descend upon our lands: local transmission line projects that directly serve new data center developments, regional transmission line projects to move large amounts of electricity from generation sources to regions where it is demanded, and brand new energy generation sources to provide what our existing energy system can't. All of this infrastructure is largely paid for by Virginia ratepayers like you and me.

It is true that modern society worldwide is increasingly reliant



To serve the increasing energy needs of the booming data center industry, PJM Interconnection is proposing, over just the next five years, more transmission line construction and upgrades than the Commonwealth has ever seen. Photo by Hugh Kenny

on everything data centers make possible. It is also true that there needs to be a full accounting of the environmental, public health, and fiscal costs of data centers in the Commonwealth. Virginians, and Virginia, should not bear the brunt of hosting the majority of the world's internet usage without greater transparency, better planning and meaningful mitigation.

Another question we often hear is: won't we need new transmission to transition the grid to renewable energy sources? The answer is: yes. However, the transmission line projects in front of us aren't that. They look a lot more

like extension cords connecting power-hungry data centers to existing energy sources, locking us into an old model reliant on fossil fuels, when we need to be moving into the future.

The Chesterfield peaking plant, proposed by Dominion Energy to help meet expected increased energy demand linked to data center growth, would be the largest natural gas facility in the state. It would reduce air quality in the area, disproportionately impacting disadvantaged communities nearby. Rather than

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Conservation Community Priorities for the 2024 General Assembly

By John McCarthy, Senior Advisor and Director of Strategic Partnerships

Virginia's long tradition of "off-year" elections being closely watched by the rest of the country continued in 2023, and the results have broadened the partisan divide between the executive and legislative

branches of government in the Commonwealth. When Governor Youngkin took office two years ago, ending two terms of Democratic control of the executive branch and bringing with him a Republican majority to the

House of Delegates, the Senate remained in Democratic hands. With this election, the House returns for the 2024 General Assembly session with a Democratic majority, further extending the divided government. You will continue to hear and read any number of opinions on what that may mean for various policy agendas, but most of the issues of concern to The Piedmont Environmental Council transcend the partisan divide. We all value and depend on the Commonwealth's clean water, natural resources, wildlife, agricultural bounty and extraordinary beauty.

PEC has worked with our partners in the Virginia Conservation Network to develop *Our Common Agenda*, which can be

downloaded at vcnva.org/our-common-agenda, setting forth the legislative goals of the conservation community. PEC staff have authored or co-authored eight of the briefing papers used to educate legislators, their staff and our supporters in the work of achieving these ends. Each of these papers is an example of the thought leadership PEC brings to public policy, and our partnership with VCN gives us the broadest possible base of support.

Inspiring PEC's work in the upcoming session and for the coming years is our newly adopted 2024-2028 Strategic Plan. You can read or download at pecva.org/strategicplan. Rooted in

Continued on page 7



Photo by Hugh Kenny

Out&About

Farm-to-Table Dinner and Gala

Caroline Collomb's home, Oakwood, was the perfect backdrop to celebrate conservation and our collective impact on the nationally significant Virginia Piedmont landscape. This year's Farm-to-Table Dinner was a wonderful occasion to recognize the efforts of outgoing board co-chairs Jeannie Perin and George Ohrstrom on behalf of PEC, our partners, and the communities we serve (see *President's Letter on page 8*), and to thank Jeannie for her vision and diligence in shaping this annual gala over the years.

Thanks to the generous support of our donors, this year's paddle raise in honor of Jean Perin resulted in over \$440,000. These gifts will support PEC's strategic plan initiatives to protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont, while building stronger, more sustainable communities.



▲ PEC's Gertraud Hechl joins out-going board chairs Jean Perin and George Ohrstrom. Photo by Hugh Kenny



▲ Guests meander the picturesque grounds at Oakwood ahead of the Farm-to-Table dinner. Photo by Hugh Kenny



▲ PEC President Chris Miller addresses an enthusiastic crowd at the picturesque Oakwood Farm for this year's Farm-to-Table Dinner. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Wild & Scenic Film Festival



▲ PEC senior field representatives Kim Biasioli and Rob McGinnis (from left) spoke about Land Conservation and Comprehensive Planning in Albemarle County during the Wild and Scenic Film Festival on October 11 in Charlottesville. The festival is a fundraiser for the Living Earth School. Photo by Peter Krebs

Community Farm Donation



▲ In early October, PEC Community Farm Manager Teddy Pitsiokos delivered about 250 pounds of produce to Christ Church Cares Food Pantry Coordinator Bette Marchese in Clarke County. It was our second of four donations planned this fall to Christ Church Cares, in addition to three donations to FISH Clarke County. For the past four years, PEC has been donating 100% of the produce grown and harvested by staff and volunteers at our Community Farm to Loudoun Hunger Relief, and we are excited about the possibility of adding Clarke County to our regular farm donation program next year. Photo by Mary Parham

Transmission Line & Data Center Community Meetings



▲ Along with our partners, Citizens for Fauquier County, Protect Fauquier, the Coalition to Protect Prince William County, and Protect Catlett, PEC has co-hosted four community meetings to share what we've learned about the potential for new transmission lines proposed in the Piedmont and surrounding areas. We anticipate scheduling similar meetings throughout our region to discuss what is driving the unprecedented development proposed for Virginia and how it might affect broader conservation and climate goals. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Wilding Book Talk



▲ We were thrilled to co-host, along with The Garden Conservancy and Oak Spring Garden Foundation, a captivating talk by award-winning journalist and author Isabella Tree in Middleburg this fall. At a time when the loss of biodiversity and the enormity of climate change is being felt around the globe, Tree's standing-room-only lecture, based on her newest book, *The Book of Wilding — a Practical Guide to Rewilding Big and Small*, shared her firsthand knowledge of how spectacularly nature can bounce back when given the chance. Photo by Hugh Kenny

CSG Smart Growth Social



▲ The Coalition for Smarter Growth (CSG) attracted record turnout for its Smart Growth Social, co-hosted with Transportation for America. Two special guests made the case for frequent transit and funding Metro: WMATA's dynamic General Manager Randy Clarke and leading commentator David Zipper. CSG is a division of PEC focused on transit-oriented communities as the most sustainable way for the D.C. region to grow. *Photo by Hugh Kenny*

Rappahannock River Symposium



◀ Several PEC staff members participated in this full-day of collaboration and learning about various topics focused on clean water and environmentalism in the Rappahannock River Watershed. Here, PEC's October Greenfield, along with Justin Proctor, share how the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative is leading farmers to help protect these songbirds in our region. PEC staff members were also on the planning committee and gave talks on community-driven public access projects and drone photography and storytelling. *Photo by Marco Sánchez*

Out & About

Bringing Solar to Farms in the Piedmont

By Ashish Kapoor, Senior Energy and Climate Policy Analyst

Enough sun hits the earth in an hour to power humanity's electric needs for the entire year. It's a weathered quote that still retains its impact, regardless of its repetition. While anyone trying to implement such a reality will tell you that it is much easier said than done, many among us have found their own way to contribute to our collective solution. And now, with a USDA Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) paying for up to 50% of a farm's renewable energy or energy efficiency project, plus the 30% federal tax credit and Solar Renewable Energy Certificate (SREC) revenue, that solar choice is easier than ever.

Robert Ellis, of Clifton Farms in Rixeyville, went the DIY route at his cattle farm and woodshop. Back in 2016, he purchased solar panels, power optimizers, and an inverter, and went to work connecting steel, concrete, panels, and wires to create a ground-mounted system that powers his agricultural well, farmhouse and woodshop. Ellis' system gives him not only energy independence, but also savings on his electricity bill. He took advantage of the federal tax credit and SRECs and, in the next few years, he will have a full return on investment, with most of his electricity being "free" from that point onward.

Ellis' system was a hit in his community, and he's now helping a neighbor who runs a local Christmas tree farm set up a solar system there, too. That neighbor will be able to apply for a REAP grant to cover 50% of his cost and also use the federal investment tax credit for

an additional 30% of his remaining cost. He can further support his investment with SRECs, which are awarded for every megawatt hour a user produces and publicly traded at the state's market rate. An average farm-based solar system can produce thousands of dollars in additional value through these SREC sales.

These incentives, coupled with an increase in demand and the benefits of a distributed solar energy grid, were the focus of PEC's recent Solar on the Farm event at Kildee Farms in Culpeper, co-sponsored with Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District, Minority and Veteran Farmers of the Piedmont, and American Farmland Trust. Audience members thoroughly enjoyed a talk by Ellis and Kevin Powers, of Powers Brewery, about DIY and developer-based solar systems on working agricultural enterprises. Solar United Neighbors talked about the REAP program, Sun Tribe Trading explained SRECs, and Tiger Solar explained a typical distributed solar project process.

Audience engagement made the information provided even more instructive. For those who'd tried solar before, but were dissatisfied by the national vendors they worked with, the workshop inspired them to try again with the new REAP program and local solar developers. Others had questions about the timeline for installation and how best to create an accurately sized system. The conversation on SRECs became an existential exchange on the nature of "renewableness," and participants were energized talking

about this more market-based monetization of their future solar systems. Many signed up to get estimates from the three solar developers present at the event: SunDay, Tiger and Virtue.

Virginia's Clean Economy Act mandates that Virginia shift to a 100% renewable future by 2050. And while



Photo by Hugh Kenny

it is encouraging that the Commonwealth has taken important steps towards these goals in recent years, most of that renewable development has come via utility-scale solar in rural areas. PEC believes that other forms of renewable development, particularly distributed generation, must also be part of a thoughtful and holistic approach to addressing the complex energy issues facing our lands and our communities.

Distributed generation is energy that is created and used near the source of production, versus a traditional centralized system whereby energy is produced and sent over transmission lines. The decentralized approach of distributed solar includes everything from rooftop and small-scale farm solar to installations on landfills, brownfields and parking lots. These systems make efficient use of built land, much of which is already disturbed, and connect much more quickly to the energy grid, which is particularly relevant in our moment of data center-driven demand escalations. Lastly, a distributed grid can decrease the amount of new transmission we need, while also creating a more resilient grid and protecting citizens against future rate increases.

It's exciting to see more and more distributed projects across the commonwealth. D.C. Metro is adding four parking lot solar installations that will have 10 MW of capacity, while Dulles Airport is adding 100 MW of solar, much of it between its runways. The Ivy landfill in Albemarle County is adding a 12.5W solar installation and, in southwest Virginia, 65,000

At our recent Solar on the Farm workshop, Robert Ellis explained how he built, permitted and connected the DIY solar array that powers his cattle farm and woodshop.



Photo by Robert Ellis



Lynne Kaye's Unison farm, in Loudoun County, is powered in part with solar she installed as part of PEC's Solarize Piedmont campaign. *Photo by Lynne Kaye*

acres of former coal mine land will be opened up for potential energy purposes. It's a good start, but significantly more energy development on built land will be needed if Virginia is to meet electric demand while also protecting prime farmland, forests, cultural and historic sites.

Furthermore, data center demand is pushing Virginia's electric grid to the limit, with estimates showing a doubling of peak load over the next 15 years, and the Commonwealth needs to quickly add new energy sources to the grid. One gigawatt can power at least 250,000 homes. Currently, nearly 40 gigawatts of utility-scale renewable projects are in varied states of development on the PJM grid. Each project, if viable, can take five to seven years to connect, which means that in the meantime, more carbon-emitting sources, such as gas and coal, will be added or retained to fill in the gaps.

Whether it's DIY or in the hands of the Commonwealth's many trusted local solar businesses, now is a better time than ever to go solar. The stakes have never been higher — for the Commonwealth or for the planet. If the sun were like a coffee pot, our current energy system is full of a few overflowing cups. We can either keep it that way, or we can put some more coffee mugs on the table.

On the Ground

Albemarle & Charlottesville

- The **Fifeville Community Trail**, which opened in 2022, connects Benjamin Tonsler Park to surrounding neighborhoods and provides a nature-full walking route between 5th Street and the Cherry Avenue corridor. With support from UVA's PhD-Plus program and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, PEC recently worked with neighborhood residents to create historic signage describing the brickyard that once existed on the site and some of the ways the landscape has changed as a result of urban renewal and the park's expansion.
- The county has reversed its decision to combine the Rural Area chapter and Development Areas chapter into a single Land Use and Transportation chapter in the **AC44 Comprehensive Plan Update**. This is a big win and a key factor in protecting the rural area from development sprawl. PEC spoke at numerous board and commission meetings about the critical importance of a standalone Rural Area chapter and, through much community outreach, drove community members to directly engage supervisors and planning commissioners on this issue.
- PEC continues to monitor and advocate for smart policies regarding the County's development of **Solar Energy Facilities and Riparian Buffer Overlay District ordinances** and a **potential electrical transmission line rebuild** running through important Albemarle Rural Area cultural landscapes driven by the proliferation of data centers in Virginia.
- Albemarle County launched its innovative **MicroCAT** micro-transit service, allowing riders to use an app (or make a phone call) to book free car rides within (and between) the Pantops and 29-North areas. This pilot service, which is operated by Charlottesville Area Transit, will extend service to many parts of the designated growth area that are not dense enough to support regular, fixed-route bus service. Learn more at city.ridewithvia/microcat

Clarke

- PEC's Clarke County Land Conservation Fund created an **Easement Assistance Grant** to help eligible landowners in Clarke County place their property under a conservation easement. The grant reimburses up to \$5,000 in qualifying expenses, and applications will be accepted on a rolling basis starting in January 2024. Information and application instructions are available at the Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority at clarkelandconservation.org or The Piedmont Environmental Council at pecva.org.
- This month, the Planning Commission will review language to **strengthen the county's utility-scale solar zoning ordinance**. PEC has given input on these ordinances and encouraged the county to strengthen existing language rather than ban utility scale solar, as the Board of Supervisors originally requested.

Culpeper

- On Nov. 8, the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors voted to update the **Technology Zone Ordinance**, a tax incentive program that has encouraged data center development in Culpeper. The update will shrink the area where data centers are eligible for incentives to the McDevitt Drive area in the hopes of limiting utility sprawl. PEC has advocated in support of this change to the local data center incentive area.
- On Nov. 9, the Culpeper County Planning Commission voted to forward **Cielo Digital Infrastructure** to the Culpeper Board of Supervisors with a recommendation for approval. Cielo is a 300-megawatt data center with three, two-story buildings on Nalles Mill Road within the Town Water and Sewer Service District. While this campus is near the approved sites for CloudHQ, Copper Ridge, and the Culpeper Technology Campus, and removed from residential areas, it will require a new substation and possibly additional upgrades or expansion of the existing transmission lines.
- The American Battlefield Trust has officially begun the transfer of land from trust ownership to state ownership in preparation for the launch of the **new state park at Culpeper Battlefields**. This new park will include multiple battlefield sites in Culpeper County, including Fleetwood Farm in Brandy Station and Cedar Mountain Battlefield. The park is scheduled to officially open in summer 2024.

Fauquier

- Town of Warrenton planning staff have released their second round of comments on the proposed **Amazon Data Center**, with redactions of the Site Development Plan and many staff comments. Amazon justified these sweeping redactions by citing Virginia Freedom of Information Act exemptions intended to protect information about the facility's security and utility systems, despite the exclusion of standard information and details about noise-emitting equipment. PEC and our partners are concerned that these overly broad redactions set a disturbing precedent that could exclude public engagement in future data center proposals in Virginia.
- The County continues to grapple with the **transmission line proposals** that have been announced by PJM Interconnection, the organization that coordinates electricity transmission in 13 states and the District of Columbia, to serve the explosive growth in data center energy demand in Virginia. PEC and our partner organizations in Fauquier County have organized multiple town hall meetings providing information to residents on the proposals as well as how they can get engaged. On Dec. 13, PJM Interconnection's preferred transmission line path options, released in October, will be reviewed.

Greene

- PEC received **\$767,500 in combined state and federal farmland protection funding** from the National Resources Conservation Service and Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to help a

young farmer permanently protect a farm over 200 acres in Greene County with a conservation easement. The property, bisected by two tributaries to the Rapidan River, encompasses productive farm soils and forest of high conservation value.

- The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality is undertaking the preparation of a **Benthic and Bacteria Implementation Plan for the North Fork Rivanna River watershed** in Greene and Albemarle counties. The plan will address impairments of the North Fork Rivanna River watershed, which is on Virginia's list of impaired waters for having too much *E. coli* bacteria and failing to support aquatic life. The North Fork Rivanna River watershed supplies drinking water via the Rivanna Water & Sewer North Forth Intake. PEC is currently monitoring this project and updating community members in both Greene and Albemarle counties.

Loudoun

- On Dec. 12, the Loudoun County Finance Government Operations and Economic Development Committee will review an additional presentation by County staff on the establishment of a **Purchase of Development Rights** program. Over the past year, PEC has worked with various partners in support of the staff proposal and will continue to provide feedback and resources as appropriate.
- The Board of Supervisors finished its review of the **Zoning Ordinance Rewrite** on Oct. 30. County staff has made updates to the draft with board-directed edits and prepared a new draft that was made available on Nov. 30 for public review in advance of a Dec. 13 public hearing. If all goes as planned, the Board will adopt the final draft in December. PEC staff have followed every meeting and been deeply involved in providing stakeholder feedback to the Board throughout its review.
- While PEC supports the Board of Supervisors' adoption of the zoning ordinance rewrite this year, we are urging the county to prioritize a **Rural Zoning Amendment** next year, to address a series of long-standing rural issues. These include off-site impacts from rural economy businesses, better protections for farming operations and better environmental protection for sensitive natural resources.
- Unfortunately, the **Prime Soils and Cluster Subdivision Zoning Amendment** that we expected to be incorporated into the County's Zoning Ordinance Rewrite prior to adoption will not happen as planned. Instead, it will be taken up at the Planning Commission's Dec. 14 meeting and the incoming Board of Supervisors during its new term.
- The **Mickie Gordon Park Special Exception** was withdrawn after community members provided extensive feedback on an alternate vision for what the community wants in a park. A revised proposal will be forthcoming in the new year.

Madison

- Madison County's **Comprehensive Plan update process** continues, and in November, PEC helped County staff and comprehensive plan update committee members develop an

online community survey for gathering input. PEC promoted the survey and urged residents to ask the County to approach development in a way that complements existing services and infrastructure, enhances a walkable Town of Madison with everyday access to nature, and protects natural resources, open space and working farmlands. The updated plan will be adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2024.

Orange

- PEC was **awarded over \$1.7 million in state and federal farmland protection funding** from the National Resources Conservation Service and Virginia Land Conservation Foundation to help protect two working farms totaling over 540 acres in Orange County. Located in the Madison-Barbour Rural Historic District, these two easements will protect productive farm soils and valuable wildlife habitat.
- PEC continues to **raise alarms that the Rapidan River may not be able to meet long-term water needs for Wilderness Crossing’s** proposed thousands of additional residents and millions of square feet of industrial uses. In a drought, there may not even be enough water for current residents, according to Rapidan Service Authority. And yet, the RSA has asked Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality to increase the permitted daily withdrawal from

the Rapidan by 1 million gallons. PEC and Friends of the Rappahannock are actively following this application through the review process. The public comment period has not yet been announced.

- On Nov. 9, PEC **filed a lawsuit against Orange County** for improperly denying public access to documents pertaining to the Wilderness Crossing rezoning, in violation of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act. On Nov. 16, the County provided copies of previously withheld nondisclosure agreements and agreed to re-review our original request and provide a log of any other withheld documents. We now know that ten local officials, including members of the Board of Supervisors, signed NDAs “for the benefit of Amazon.com, Inc. and its affiliates.”
- The lawsuit reflects our growing concern that NDAs are being used to fast-track data centers, which bring massive infrastructure consequences that affect residents and cause irreversible environmental impacts. PEC believes, and Virginia law affirms: the public has a right to know the details behind local land use decisions. To allow public officials to hide behind a veil of secrecy undermines the democratic process.
- PEC continues to **actively support our Wilderness Battlefield Coalition partners’** ongoing legal challenge to Wilderness Crossing. No hearing date in that suit has been scheduled as of press time.

Rappahannock

- Friends of the Rappahannock and PEC hosted **two volunteer tree planting events** in Rappahannock County this fall. On Nov. 18, volunteers planted native trees along the Thornton River and the Sperryville Trail, in partnership with the Sperryville Community Alliance and the Rappahannock League of Environmental Protection. On Dec. 6, volunteers planted native trees along the Rush River at Rappahannock County Park. Additional financial support for these tree planting projects came from the Department of Forestry.
- Rappahannock County landowners have donated to The Piedmont Environmental Council a **conservation easement** that permanently protects over 48 acres of land near the village of Flint Hill, including high conservation value forest, a Class II Wild Trout Stream, and steep slopes near Shenandoah National Park.
- PEC’s **Krebsler Fund for Rappahannock County Conservation** has awarded two grants for key programs improving land management and water quality in Rappahannock County. The Culpeper Soil and Water Conservation District received \$50,000 for its financial incentive program supporting Rappahannock farmers who participate in stream exclusion practices. The Krebsler Fund also awarded \$25,000 to Friends of the Rappahannock for riparian tree planting projects in Rappahannock County.

Why I Give

Year-end giving allows PEC to maintain our momentum going into the new year, and there are many ways to show your support before 2023 comes to a close. Many members continue to send contributions by mail, while others make one-time or recurring monthly gifts online. We also accept gifts of securities, gifts from donor advised funds, and Qualified Charitable Donations (QCD’s) directed from a donor’s IRA (for those 70.5 years and older). For more information on these giving options, contact James Bussells at jbussells@pecva.org or (540) 347-2334 ext. 7007.

“I grew up in Fauquier County and am grateful to now live here with my family, offering my children that same joy and pleasure of catching minnows in the creek, stumbling upon a bird’s nest or hiking up to the Piedmont Memorial Overlook. We give to the PEC because our area needs our support and contributions in order to conserve its beauty, biodiversity and rustic nature. The organization’s dedication to environmental stewardship has a significant impact on our daily lives and that of future generations, and we are happy to support their tireless efforts to protect and restore Piedmont land and waterways.”

— Selina McPherson, Fauquier County



“Our support of PEC is an investment toward preserving and sustaining the Virginia Piedmont for the benefit of future generations. There is no organization better positioned to advocate for the protection and conservation of a region with national significance. PEC is a vital voice for those whose lives and livelihoods are deeply connected to this extraordinary place.”

— Ryan Velasco and David McKnight, Rappahannock County



“We are proud to support PEC – the entire community benefits from their research, advocacy and outreach efforts. Thanks to all the community leaders who had the foresight to launch this special organization and to the staff who work so tirelessly for all of us.”

— Pete Smith and Marcia Marsh, Fauquier County



Thanks to supporters like you, PEC is able to carry out the holistic mix of conservation, planning and advocacy for which we are known. If you’d like to make an end-of-year donation, visit pecva.org/donate for instructions on secure, online donations, gifts of stock and other options. You can also send a check, made out to PEC, to **P.O. Box 460, Warrenton VA, 20188** or make a gift over the phone by calling James Bussells at **(540) 347-2334 ext. 7007**. Thank you and happy holidays!

2023 Photo Contest Winners

“Your best submissions yet!” was what one community member said after taking a look at this year’s photo contest finalist entries. Indeed, we received hundreds of amazing entries into our annual photo contest, making a tough job for our judging panel to narrow it down to just a few. Thanks to all the photographers who shared their talents with us, our professional judges, and the many community members who voted for our winners. Entries to our photo contest help us build a gallery that lets us share the immense beauty of the Piedmont and tell its stories visually. By public vote, the winner’s of PEC’s 2023 annual photo contest are:



NATIVE PLANTS AND FUNGI

Rod Erickson
of Bluemont,
Loudoun County
Early rays of sunshine painting the forest floor covered in bluebells along the Shenandoah River at Cool Springs Battlefield, Clarke County.



BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES

Cassidy Girvin
of Charlottesville
The aurora borealis dancing in the northern sky from high up in the Shenandoah.

YOUTH CATEGORY

Dexton Meurer
of Charlottesville
Dirty Feet in Crozet, Virginia.



NATIVE WILDLIFE

Malcolm Andrews
of Charlottesville
A pair of cedar waxwings pass a serviceberry back and forth in an apparent sign of affection in Albemarle County.

Upcoming Events



As we head into the winter months, we are already planning out events and activities for 2024. Spring brings with it planting season at the Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows, tree plantings in the Potomac and Rappahannock River watersheds, conservation easement workshops, our annual Bluebell Walk, and much more! We’ll also hold town halls and community updates on various development proposals as needed. Stay tuned to our events page at pecva.org/events!

Pop Quiz

QUESTION

How many species does an oak tree support?

ANSWER

Known as the King of Biodiversity, the mighty oak tree provides food, protection, or both, for more life-forms than any other North American tree, according to Douglas Tallamy, Professor of entomology and wildlife at the University of Delaware, in his book, *Bringing Nature Home*. Most sources say that oak trees support over 2,300 different species, including 534 species of moths and butterflies, 38 bird species, 31 mammals, and 1,178 invertebrates, among others. Of these, 320 species are found only on oak trees

and another 229 species are rarely found on any tree other than oak. Even as a sapling, the oak gets straight to work providing food and homes for wildlife. Every bit of the oak tree has value — flowers, acorns, leaves, bark, roots, and even its deadwood. And, the 716 types of lichen and 229 types of mosses hosted by oaks add to the nesting material, food and shelter they provide. As it grows and ages, the oak becomes even more valuable, developing cavities, crevices, dead wood and other features that plants and



Photo by Kenneth Cole Schneider, Flickr

animals love. And, by capturing more carbon and holding more rainwater than other trees, oak trees are invaluable in fighting climate change.

Power Surge

Continued from cover

aiding our transition away from these heavily polluting energy sources, this plant would perpetuate their use for decades to come, bringing water and air pollution with it. Serving the data center industry’s exploding energy needs should be secondary to our transition to clean renewable energy and our state’s conservation goals.

More locally, PJM Interconnection, the regional grid operator in the mid-Atlantic, is moving forward with a number of transmission line projects to address the initial 7,500 MW of increased energy demand from data centers in Northern Virginia. PJM is charged with operating a competitive wholesale electricity market and managing the high-voltage electricity grid to ensure reliability.

From among 72 proposals by 10 utility entities, PJM has chosen to focus, for now, on two new pathways through northern Loudoun County and Maryland, as well as numerous upgrades and expansions, including projects in Albemarle, Fauquier, Prince William and Loudoun counties.

The total cost of these inter-regional transmission lines is \$4.9 billion, which will be integrated into utility bills for all Virginia ratepayers. Meanwhile, Dominion Energy is also having discussions about other transmission lines to directly serve new data centers being built in Culpeper, Prince William, Fairfax, and Loudoun counties, which ratepayers will pay for as well. PJM’s set of recommended lines will be sent to

the Board of Managers for final approval in mid-December.

Transmission Line Expansions Through Public and Private Conserved Lands

The new and expanded transmission line rights of way planned by PJM will cut through a number of conserved lands, including the newly formed Sweet Run State Park in northern Loudoun, Harpers Ferry National Historic Park, the Appalachian Trail, Waterford Historic District (a National Historic Landmark), Manassas National Battlefield Park, and numerous local parks, riparian buffers and privately held conservation easements.

The visual impact of these massive 500-kV lines should be obvious, but they also carry environmental impacts on waterways, forest resources and farms. The rights of way under these lines are cleared of trees, invite a proliferation of invasive species, and require repeated herbicide applications to keep them clear. The ground is disturbed as new poles are installed, and no barns or other permanent structures can ever be built under them.

With the state’s support and generous contributions of our members and landowners, conservation groups like PEC have worked hard to conserve places rich in natural and cultural resources. We have provided public access to treasured places and protected watersheds and the local agricultural food system through private land conservation. Encouraging unbridled data center development that requires sprawling transmission line expansions in these conserved places puts state policies at odds. In turn, the presence of transmission lines in areas designated as agricultural or forestland protection can negatively impact agricultural use, tourism, scenic appeal, and recreational value, increasing pressure for

land conversion to sprawling industrial uses instead.

Coming Together, Calling for Change

PEC has led the formation of the Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition, made up of more than 20 environmental, conservation, historic preservation, and climate advocacy groups, along with representatives of communities and neighborhoods across the state. This coalition is urging Virginia to study the cumulative effects of data center development on the state’s electrical grid, water resources, air quality, and land conservation efforts, and to institute several common-sense regulatory and rate-making reforms for this industry.

We are also calling on the Virginia General Assembly to require more transparency around energy and water usage, additional review of cumulative impacts at the state level, and adjustment of the rate structure to shift the cost of additional infrastructure resulting from global data usage away from Virginia ratepayers and onto the industry itself.

The enormous energy grid expansion tied to this growth is unprecedented. It amounts to a direct subsidy to the data center industry and Dominion Energy that will dramatically increase electric bills for homes and businesses, while simultaneously requiring residents to forfeit land and resources. As local approvals continue to pile up, the infrastructure debt and cumulative impacts on our environment and communities increase. Economic development that results in environmental degradation and leaves Virginians paying the bill is not progress. The state needs to pause approvals, study these issues, and get a handle on this industry before it is too late.

For more information and to get involved visit pecva.org/datacenters.



Data center development is increasingly being built in close proximity to homes and recreational facilities like the W&OD trail in the foreground. Photo by Hugh Kenny

Conservation Community Priorities for the 2024 General Assembly

Continued from cover

PEC’s core values, our mission is to protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont, while building stronger, more sustainable communities. Everything we do at PEC is guided by this mission, including our work helping to craft state policy and influence spending priorities. Perhaps no principle is more important to us in this work than the fact that we value this region’s people and lands, its history and culture, its beauty, and its future.

With the many issues facing Virginia throughout the upcoming session, PEC staff will work with VCN and other allies to testify before the legislature, speak about budget priorities and amendments, and help lead with our strategic plan as our guide. Below are summaries of a few of the issues we’re hoping to advance during the 2024 legislative session.

Shaping and Advancing Virginia’s Clean Energy Future

The rapid development of the data center industry in Virginia, and the explosive growth of the energy infrastructure it depends upon, is leading to the most enormous industrialization of Virginia’s landscape in our Commonwealth’s history. The investments and commitment that Virginia has made to a clean, renewable energy-based future stand in the hazard as the power demands of this single industry are projected to double Virginia’s energy needs in just over a dozen years

— in direct conflict with our goal of transitioning away from polluting fossil fuels. What’s more, because of the outmoded way energy transmission infrastructure is funded, Virginia ratepayers will help pay for it, by way of our electric bills, bearing the brunt of an industry driven by the internet usage of the entire world.

One of the key focus areas of PEC’s strategic plan is based on managing this change with planning and balancing of conservation values, neither of which have been offered by the data center industry, utilities or state government. PEC feels that Virginia urgently needs a study bill to both evaluate the impacts of the data center market and a better way to manage its energy demands.

Conservation

We are in a time when the funding resources to accomplish landscape-scale conservation and open space access have never been greater. The federal government is making historic levels of investment in a variety of programmatic sources, such as the Agricultural Land Easement program of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Forest Legacy Program of the U.S. Forest Service, and others.

These opportunities would allow us to reach PEC’s ambitious but achievable goal of adding another 100,000 acres of conserved lands, reaching the benchmark of 30% by 2030. To do so,

state resources committed to this goal will need to increase, as will our own efforts in leveraging them to this end. In addition, our long-standing efforts at supporting the protection of wildlife corridors will be a part of our focus.

Transportation

The nationally recognized SMART SCALE Scoring system for transportation has undergone repeated attacks by officials who want their local projects funded without regard to regional priorities. SMART SCALE has been carefully developed and focused on achieving the best transportation outcomes, such as limiting congestion and improving safety, while also integrating shared means of transit for rail, bus, bike and pedestrian. It also seeks to avoid expensive, trip-inducing major new projects designed more for industry profit than for traffic management or public safety.

Earlier attempts by road construction advocates and some Commonwealth Transportation Board members have focused on removing certain criteria, such as environmental and land use impacts, and increasing others, like congestion relief. This approach would artificially elevate the score of some of the worst projects in our region, like the Bi-County Parkway/Outer Beltway. PEC’s goal is to maintain the SMART SCALE program in as little altered a form as possible.

Land Use

When the region’s local governments make decisions on land use proposals, they consider only the local and site-based impacts. For a variety of reasons, from scale, to jurisdiction, to regulatory realities, and others, they aren’t able to weigh the broader consequences of major proposals like data center developments or roadway projects. Municipalities aren’t equipped to consider that the inevitable outcome of approving millions of square feet of data centers all across the Commonwealth will end up being the enormous impacts of the linear infrastructure needed to connect them to an overtaxed grid. The General Assembly must provide guidance and restrictions for such decision-making.

With conservation opportunities and the means to fund them so great, we find ourselves in a race against time and the accelerating demands of the digital world to protect the values we all hold dear. We want the General Assembly to place meaningful limits on the growth of an industry that both threatens and promises so much, and to balance the equally compelling needs of shifting to renewable energy and protecting working farms and conservation values. PEC will reach out to you as the session gets underway to keep you informed and to seek your support as we find ways forward on these fronts.

Dear Friends,

2023 has been an exciting year of reflecting on and restating the mission, priorities and programs of PEC with the rollout of a new strategic plan. Now more than ever, we feel the call to protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont, while building stronger, more sustainable communities.

PEC is a central catalyst for shaping positive change in our region. We take a comprehensive, high-level view of trends in policy, economics, and social change, while working in our communities at the most granular level. We work as a land trust on conservation and as an advocate on local land use planning and policy. We are present and active in the many local and state decisions that affect the Virginia Piedmont region, and relentless in the pursuit of a sustainable and resilient future.

What characterizes our work more than anything else, is showing up, being present. Today, I'm honored to shine a light on our current, and outgoing, Board Co-Chairs, Jean Perin and George Ohrstrom II, who have shown up for PEC and been ever-present in our work for the communities we serve over the past decade. They embody the values of this organization in so many ways and in so many forums.

- Leading by example.
- Participating.
- Stepping in when others cannot or will not.
- Taking a holistic perspective, while also focusing on implementation and details.
- Caring, not only about the projects and the policies, but also about the people and communities.

Jeannie and George have, with great humility, made possible some of the most significant conservation and restoration work in the world by PEC and many partners — 90,000 acres in the past 10 years in the Piedmont and nearly a million acres in Virginia. Over those 10 years, PEC strengthened and defended the Virginia Land Preservation Tax Credit and advocated for related policies for conservation, best management practices, and restoration, which have become models for the rest of the United States. Under their leadership, PEC has been recognized by three different governors for conservation excellence, most recently as a partner with Fauquier County and other organizations working to expand public access to the Upper Rappahannock River. In 2018, PEC won a Dugdale Conservation Lifetime Achievement Award from the Virginia Garden Club. 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.

Both Jeannie and George support not only PEC, but also partner organizations, civic groups and public bodies. From the very local Clarke County Planning Commission and Friends of the Shenandoah to regional and statewide organizations like Virginia League of Conservation Voters and others, they repeatedly commit their time and personal resources to advancing the broader goal of a sustainable future.

They also lead by example. Both are active in the granular work of their neighborhoods, from ensuring trash and signs are removed from scenic byways to leading local efforts to conserve and restore streams and rivers like Spout Run and Goose Creek. Both have



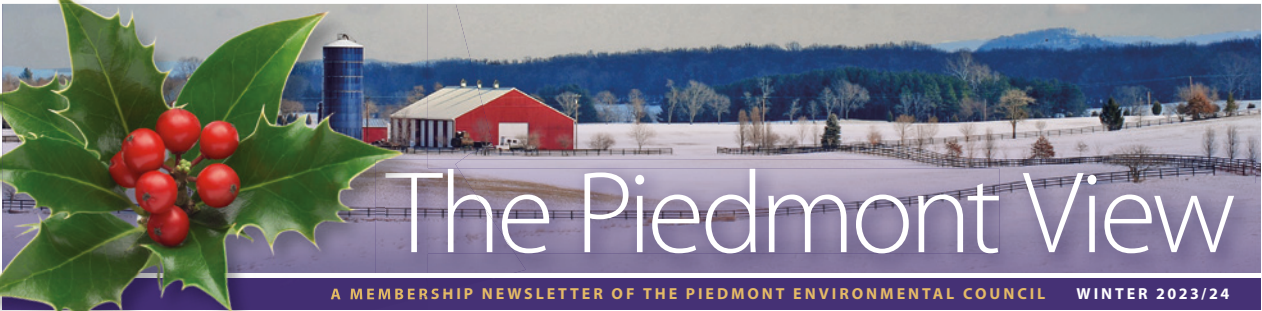
PEC Board Co-Chairs George Ohrstrom II and Jean Perin. Photo by Missy Janes

conserved and restored their own properties, modeling preservation of historic values and adoption of land management practices to improve habitat and long term sustainability. Both are active in advocating directly with government officials. And both make an effort to attend the hundreds of events and activities that PEC and our partners organize.

Please join me in thanking Jeannie and George for their years of dedicated service. I hope all who believe in our mission will follow their lead with the same spirit of active participation, partnership, and kindness for the communities we serve.

Sincerely,

Chris Miller, President



INSIDE
A 2024 General Assembly preview; this year's photo contest winners; a look at how PEC is bringing distributed solar to farms in the Piedmont; PEC staffers Out & About; and more

Lakewise Mirror at Walnut Creek Park in Charlottesville. Photo by Rob Baker

Pop Quiz

How many species does an oak tree support?

- a) 2,300
- b) 534
- c) 1,178
- d) 69
- e) 320

ANSWER ON PAGE 6



Photo by Sludge G, Flickr



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