A MEMBERSHIP NEWSLETTER OF THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

SUMMER 2025

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Dominion SCC Case



# A Conversation on Trails and Connectivity

By Meredith Ogilvie-Thompson, Media Strategist

hile conserving the verdant landscapes of Virginia's Piedmont is foundational to The Piedmont Environmental Council's mission, making the outdoors accessible to everyone has become an equally vital goal. Over the past few years, we have deliberately integrated trail development into our broader conservation mission, protecting strategic properties that can serve as trail corridors or public access points to create lasting places and ways for people to experience the Piedmont's natural beauty firsthand.

I recently spoke with Peter Krebs, PEC's Community Advocacy Manager for Albemarle County and Charlottesville, about the benefits of more well-distributed public access to parks and green spaces, and how these initiatives underpin PEC's core value that public access to nature is critical to the health and well-being of individuals and communities.



PEC's Active Mobility Summit gave community members an opportunity get involved in planning the Three Notched Trail, which will connect Charlottesville to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Photo by Hugh Kenny

### Plantings for the Piedmont



**MOT:** Expanding public access to nature and the environment is a key focus area for PEC. How does our trails and connectivity work directly support this?

**PK:** Our work is making it easier for people to reach the beautiful and restorative outdoor spaces that make our community so special. We hope it motivates people to get outdoors more often without the need to drive far or at all. By eliminating the need to drive to outdoor spaces, we're removing a significant barrier to public access and reducing pollution.

**MOT:** Public access to parks and green spaces throughout the Piedmont became an even larger priority during the pandemic. What have you observed since then?

PK: We've seen increased numbers of people out walking, biking and visiting parks. One trail counter I monitor increased 400% during the pandemic, and the numbers haven't gone down since then. Even while indoor activity has resumed, people have recognized the value of fresh air and moving around outdoors. They've kept going outside, which is entirely positive. The downside, if there is any, is that there were already too few public outdoor spaces; so now the need is even greater. That can mean more and better trails in the parks we have, but it also means opening new areas where access is lacking. Fortunately, I'm seeing some of both, but much more needs to be done.

**MOT:** Could you walk us through some of the trail projects currently underway across the Piedmont?

PK: PEC recently hosted its largest Mobility
Summit ever, which kicked off planning the
Three Notched Trail that will connect Charlottesville to the Blue Ridge Mountains — and
the communities in between. The Fifeville
Community Trail and the work we are doing
in Biscuit Run Park both connect historically
neglected communities to nearby parks, while
also providing nonvehicular transportation
options within spaces that are themselves
restorative.

There's also the **Sperryville Trail** in Rappahannock, **Emerald Ribbons** in Loudoun and the **Gordonsville trails**. All of which serve dual functions of providing connectivity and access to fresh air.

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### Buy Fresh Buy Local Release



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Make a donation or get in touch with PEC at:

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Or visit: www.pecva.org

Thank you for helping to protect the Piedmont!





### **Conservation Benefits Everyone**

for granted — an unfortunate but inevitable

the landscape. But as I drove away from the

cost of the expanding human footprint across

rehabilitation facility, the orphaned opossum's

face imprinted on my memory, I found myself

wondering: What other costs of growth are we

accepting? And couldn't there be a better way?

By Jessica Edington, Publications Assistant

he car in front of me swerved to miss something in the road. I slowed, watching a small creature make its slow, plodding way across the asphalt. As I got closer, I realized it was a tiny baby opossum. Three other babies had already been struck in the road, with no mother in sight.

Heart in my throat, I pulled over and called a local wildlife rescue. Within an hour, I had delivered the impossibly adorable little creature, swaddled in towels, to a rehabilitation facility for native injured and orphaned wildlife.

Too often, I take wildlife vehicular strikes

A landscape under pressure

Our natural and agricultural lands are under immense pressure. Data centers — and the energy generation facilities and transmission lines needed to fuel them — vie

with housing sprawl to claim the Virginia Piedmont's green spaces. Development and an ever-growing network of roads and transmission lines fragment our landscapes, wildlife corridors and our communities.

According to the Land Trust Alliance, "In the United States, we lose roughly 150 acres of natural land and 40 acres of farmland every hour. That's the equivalent

Photo by Jessica Edington

of losing more than the entirety of Shenandoah National Park every year."

When we lose natural and agricultural lands, we lose more than acres.

When we lose green space, we lose the

vital organs of our planet that filter pollutants and give us clean air and clean water.

When we lose farmland, we lose access to fresh, life-giving food and the agricultural economies that underpin our communities.

When we lose forests, we lose our best natural defense against climate change, extreme weather events and the catastrophic flooding that has wreaked havoc in recent years.

Land is more than acres. Land is life.
For more than 50 years, The Piedmont
Environmental Council has made land
conservation a priority because we know it's
one of the best ways we have to shore up the
defenses against the micro and macro tragedies that come with unchecked development:
A contaminated stream. A child struggling
with asthma from air pollution. Floods that
wash away homes and neighborhoods. An
orphaned opossum in the road.

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### **Questioning an Explosive Forecast:**

### PEC Intervenes in Dominion IRP

By Julie Bolthouse, Director of Land Use

everal years into the data center explosion in our region, the big picture is finally becoming clear to both the public and our decision makers. No longer are our communities just hearing The Piedmont Environmental Council's warnings about the potential future impacts of this growth; we are all facing the full onslaught of those impacts now.

That's why this year we chose to intervene in the Dominion Energy Integrated Resource Plan, or IRP, and question the reasonableness of the plan and the massive energy demand underpinning it.

#### Why Dominion's IRP Matters

The Dominion IRP is a long-term proposal — filed at regular intervals — for meeting energy demand in the state. The most recent IRP was filed with the State Corporation Commission in October 2024, with plans for meeting an unprecedented energy demand that is projected to double Dominion's entire load in Virginia over the next 15 years. The vast majority of that new demand comes from planned data centers.

When the SCC considers Dominion's IRP, people and organizations can serve as "interveners," posing questions and offering additional information the SCC can use in its decision to either approve the IRP or ask for another round of revisions. PEC has stepped up as such an intervener in this most recent IRP.

The ballooning demand for power generation and transmission lines to serve data centers has led to expedited power projects across the state. These power projects not only threaten Virginia's natural resources, the climate, and many of the Virginia Piedmont's rural areas, but also could result in more than a doubling of electricity costs for anyone with an electric bill, including residents and small businesses in our communities.

Dominion's IRP seeks to meet the explosive load forecast over the next 15 years with a variety of power sources, including 3.4 gigawatts (GW) of new offshore wind added to the 2.6 GW already in development, 1.3 GW of new nuclear, about 12 GW of new solar, and 6 GW of new methane gas generation, plus 4.5 GW of new battery storage. That's a total of 25.3 GW of new power solely to serve

data centers. To put that in perspective, that is more than the peak demand of the entire Virginia Dominion Energy territory, which extends from the southeast of the state up to northern Virginia and includes 2.7 million households.

#### PEC's Feedback for the SCC

Of the many interveners in the SCC case, PEC's contribution brought in a unique and powerful perspective not covered by others.

- We argued that Dominion's proposed IRP is built on an unsustainable and unreasonable energy demand forecast based not on real need, but on Dominion's own actions. Dominion has actively sought out new data center customers and entered into contracts that today total 40 GW of power for the data center industry, creating an "energy crisis by contract." The scale of these contracts has pushed the SCC into a corner, forced to reconcile potential impacts on the grid and other utility customers.
- We highlighted for the SCC and the public that Dominion is agreeing to contracts with unreasonable in-service dates and then using those contracts to justify massive build-out of fossilfuel infrastructure in a fashion that fails to protect the state and residents.
- > We argued that Dominion should be required to model a plan with later in-service dates for the power commitments to in the contracts. Extended timelines would ensure that the necessary energy transmission and generation infrastructure is installed in a manner that is consistent with state policies and that protects customers, communities, and natural and cultural resources. This approach would reduce the growing risk of "stranded assets," leaving Virginians holding the bag for building and energy infrastructure if and when data center companies do not grow as much as they've proposed.

### What We're Doing Next

Following our action alert on the IRP case in front of the SCC, the public submitted over 300 comments expressing concerns with data center growth and Dominion's plan for meeting it. Many of



Dominion's IRP plans to meet some of the explosive load forecast from new data center customers with methane gas generation, which could mean more gas pipelines cutting through our rural landscapes. Photo courtesy of Dominion Pipeline Monitoring



The ballooning demand for power generation and transmission lines to serve data centers has led to expedited power projects across the state, including transmission lines and substations. *Photo by Hugh Kenny* 

those comments were from PEC members like you! Now that we have brought these issues to the SCC, we will continue to build on them in the upcoming SCC biennial review of Dominion rates and transmission line cases.

Intervening in these SCC cases is only one part of PEC's strategy to protect the northern Piedmont region and all of Virginia from the dangerous impacts of this industry. At the state level, we are persistently advocating for comprehensive data center reform, and at the county level, our land use staff work on the ground daily to educate local decision makers about the risks of continued data center campus approvals without full consideration of energy, water, air quality and quality of life impacts.

We challenge the fundamental fallacy that Virginia must meet the ever

growing energy demand of this industry; it is time we start asking how much is actually sustainable. Data centers run our digital world, but Virginia already has the largest data center market in the world, one that stands to quadruple under the many approved projects and Dominion contracts made without any oversight. That growth is threatening our water supplies, deteriorating our air quality and public health, contributing to climate change, degrading our communities, parks, and quality of life, and raising our electric bills.

The state cannot afford a business-as-usual approach. We will continue to push the SCC, our utilities, our state agencies, our General Assembly and our local elected officials to change their policies to address this crisis.

# It's a great time to GO SOLAR!

### Through July 15...

Our annual Solarize Piedmont campaign is well underway and you still have time to get the process started. So if you've been curious about getting a solar system for your home, farm or business, now is a great time to learn more, get a free assessment, and pursue installation with pre-vetted

SOLARIZE

installers offering reduced pricing that's negotiated in advance.

Solarize Piedmont, offered in partnership with the Local Energy Alliance Program, is available to anyone who lives or has property in Albemarle, Clarke, Culpeper, Fauquier, Greene, Loudoun, Madison, Orange or Rappahannock counties, or the City of Charlottesville.

Save money on electric bills, reduce air pollution, combat climate change, become more energy independent... there are many great reasons to go solar!

Learn more and sign up now through July 15 at pecva.org/solarize.

# Plantings for the Piedmont: A Team Effort

Linnea Sherman, Plantings for the Piedmont Program Coordinator

as I stood with a Fauquier County landowner. We leaned against a fence at the end of the site visit, discussing the coming tree planting projects at her property, when she said, "I want you to know that we're a team. Whether it's today as we're standing here, tomorrow, or the next day, we're in this together."

I smiled and thanked her, but felt my throat tighten with emotion. I hadn't known how badly I needed to hear that.

As the spring season of tree planting and restoration efforts approached, the normal nerves that come with these complex projects were heightened by an air of uncertainty about the future of the federal grant that funds our Plantings for the Piedmont programs. Along with our team of partners, we crossed our fingers that we would be able to continue our

important work helping landowners protect streams and drinking water through tree plantings.

Since 2021, Plantings for the Piedmont has directly restored about 79 acres of riparian buffers and 3 acres of upland forest in the Rappahannock and Potomac watersheds by planting about 24,000 trees. Riparian buffers are the vegetated areas along rivers, streams, creeks and other waterways, and they are effective and efficient means of protecting water quality throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed. These buffers stabilize stream banks, reducing erosion and flooding, as well as filter pollutants and provide shade that keeps water temperatures cooler for aquatic organisms to thrive. With healthy riparian buffers, we can ensure the water we drink is clean and will be available for future generations.

And as the
Fauquier landowner
put it, it is a team
effort. Supported
by a grant from the
National Fish and
Wildlife Foundation,
we work in collaboration with Friends of
the Rappahannock,
the Virginia Department of Forestry,
and other state and

federal agencies.
And, of course, the landowners, whose patience while we collaborate on planting plans and navigate the web of supporting organizations and changing timelines illustrates their commitment to good stewardship.

As this spring 2025 season began to take shape, the tenuous funding

landscape faded into the background. In its place, I was reminded again of the importance of our work.

Connectivity amplifies the impact of restoration efforts, and this season we installed planting projects on two different properties that both have frontage on Cromwell's Run, an impaired stream in Fauquier County. The landowners of these properties don't know each other, but through Plantings for the Piedmont, they are connected to a network of restoration across the watershed.

George Callaghan, a Fauquier County landowner whose property abuts Cedar Run, said he reflected on the importance of doing good for others even if he wouldn't ultimately see the

PEC staff work with a landowner on a tree planting project along a stream in Fauquier County. Photo by Hugh Kenny



George Callaghan and PEC's Linnea Sherman at a tree planting in Fauquier County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

tangible rewards. Cedar Run flows to the Occoquan and then Potomac rivers — major drinking water sources for residents of Northern Virginia — and the 1,400 native trees across 7 acres of riparian buffer we planted together in March will benefit all those downstream.

"It felt important to become a good steward to the land, even though I probably won't see the trees fully grown. But I hope my kids will enjoy the shade and beautiful walks," he said.

George's comment serves as a point of optimism in uncertain times, and an important reminder that all those engaging in this program and other conservation efforts are linked, collectively working to conserve and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont. We're a team, whether or not you know your teammates. We're all in this together today, and tomorrow, and the next day.



### Pop Quiz

QUESTION

When is the best time to pick local blueberries in the Virginia Piedmont?

ANSWE

### d) All of the above

The summer is a great time to get your fill of local blueberries! You can find a farmers market or U-Pick farm near you in our just-released 2025-2026 *Buy Fresh Buy Local* guides. Once you have your bucket of blueberries, freeze them in layers on a baking sheet to keep them from sticking together or getting crushed. Or, eat them all at once!



Photo by Philip Cohen, Flickr

## Farm-to-Table Dinner and Virtual Auction

When > Saturday, September 27, 2025 5:30 - 11 P.M.

Where > Woodside Farm, 735 Nelson Rd, White Post, VA 22663

Save the Date! We are honored to invite you to PEC's 2025 Farm-to-Table Dinner at Woodside Farm in Clarke County, where Barbara and Andy Ferrari will host an enchanted evening celebrating conservation in the Piedmont. Permanently protected by a conservation easement, Woodside Farm is a magnificent property that contributes to a remarkable conservation legacy in Clarke County and offers sweeping views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Enjoy a curated farm-to-table dinner, expertly prepared by Susan Gage Catering, with the freshest locally grown produce from the PEC Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows. As always, this event will feature a live paddle raise and a virtual auction, which will be open for bidding from Sept. 19-29.





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

#### **American Kestrel Ecology Event**

When > June 13, 6 - 8 PM

Where > Blandy Experimental Farm, Boyce, VA

Join us to learn about conservation efforts to provide nesting habitat for American Kestrels across the Virginia Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley. PEC's Wildlife Habitat Program Manager October Greenfield will present on American Kestrel ecology and conservation challenges, followed by a field walk to learn about monitoring nest boxes. This program is designed for adults, but children accompanied by adults are welcome. Wear footwear and clothing for longer grass and uneven terrain. Learn more and register at *pecva.org/events* 

#### **Native Meadow Walk**

When > July 18, 8 - 10 AM

Where > Piedmont Memorial Overlook, Paris, VA

Join The Piedmont Environmental Council and Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes for a native meadow walk at PEC's Piedmont Memorial Overlook to learn about native plant identification, pollinators, songbirds, and meadow management! Learn more and register at *pecva.org/events* 

### **Conservation Benefits Everyone**

Continued from cover

#### A solution for everyone

Kim Biasiolli, a conservation program manager for PEC, is a forest ecologist who began her career as a field biologist, tracking and monitoring populations of rare plants.

"I realized through that work that protecting the land is the most important way that we can protect biodiversity," Biasiolli says. "Everywhere in this country, we're chipping away at protected areas. Larger landscapes are being fragmented into smaller, isolated pockets of natural habitat."

Biasiolli knew she could have a greater impact by focusing on permanently protecting land. At PEC, part of her work involves collaborating with people to explore conservation options for their land. Financial incentives available in Virginia offer benefits for those who choose to conserve their land, but Biasiolli knows the benefits radiate outward to touch their entire community.

"Everyone benefits from land conservation, even if they don't own land," says Biasiolli.

Take clean water, for example. "Conservation easements that require forested stream buffers permanently protect those stream corridors and prevent pollutants from entering the waterways that ultimately flow into our reservoirs. That's our drinking water," she says.

"And when we think about forests specifically, which make up a lot of our conserved lands, we're also protecting wildlife habitat, pulling carbon from the atmosphere, and building the resiliency of the landscape to better handle major flood events."

Then there are the economic benefits. Agriculture is Virginia's largest private industry, and combined with forestry, the industries have an economic impact of over

\$100 billion annually and support nearly 500,000 jobs. "Protecting our working forests and farmlands protects our rural economies, which are a big part of our local economy and all the products that are produced locally," Biasiolli says.

Conserved open spaces also make up the scenic vistas that inspire the Piedmont's thriving outdoor recreation culture, another major economic driver as well as a key component of healthy communities. In Charlottesville and Albemarle alone, tourism spending reached nearly \$1 billion in 2023; the same year in Virginia, outdoor recreation generated over \$13 billion and supported over 120,000 jobs.

Biasiolli adds, "When rural lands are converted to development, there are fiscal costs to the locality in providing community services like water and sewer lines, fire and rescue, and schools. All citizens have to support that sprawl through their taxes."

In contrast, PEC staff work extensively on local land use planning to support stronger, more sustainable communities — work that is directly related to conservation. "By limiting development in the rural areas and directing it toward development areas, we are encouraging smart growth through thoughtful and intentional planning, while simultaneously protecting the rural land-scape and its resources to benefit the entire community," says Biasiolli.

Indeed, conserved land benefits everyone, well beyond the landowner and the boundaries of their property.

And if you don't own land, there are still ways to support conservation in your community, says Biasiolli.

"You can support organizations that do land conservation, like PEC and our partners," she says. "This can be financial support or volunteering your time. You can also support conservation through advocacy. At the local level, make sure your

### **Nature Photography Walk**

When > August 8, 6 - 8 PM (rain date August 15)

Where > Piedmont Memorial Overlook, Paris, VA

Bring along your camera or smartphone for a collaborative nature photography walk at PEC's Piedmont Memorial Overlook. All skill levels are welcome! Learn more and register at *pecva.org/events* 

#### **History Hike**

When > September 13

Where > Piedmont Memorial Overlook, Paris, VA

Join The Piedmont Environmental Council and the Virginia Piedmont Heritage Area for a history hike at PEC's Piedmont Memorial Overlook near Ashby Gap in Clarke and Fauquier County. This hike will explore both human and natural history of the preserve and surrounding area and finish with magnificent views of the Crooked Run Valley. Learn more and register at *pecva.org/events* 

### **Farm-to-Table Dinner and Virtual Auction**

When > September 27

Where > Woodside Farm, White Post, VA

Save the date for PEC's annual farm-to-table event and virtual auction! Learn more at *pecva.org/woodside* and contact Montana Lanier Ruffner at (*mlanier@pecva.org*) with questions.



Flooding in 2018 washed out this portion of Holkham Road in Albemarle County. Increased development increases stormwater impacts, with costly repercussions for infrastructure and aquatic systems. *Photo by David Hannah* 

local leaders, including the planning commissioners and board of supervisors, know that conservation is a priority. Even our public servants don't always understand the benefits of conservation."

#### **Building connections**

Through our connections with our supporters, partners and community advocates, PEC and other conservation organizations have helped landowners permanently protect more than 450,000 acres of land in our nine-county region: an exciting achievement that has made the Piedmont a model for conservation on a national scale. Still, there is more to be done.

"Now we're working to be more strategic about where we're protecting land to have the greatest impact, and working to improve connectivity across the landscape," says Biasiolli.

One of her efforts to boost connectivity is the Southern Shenandoah Borderlands project, which aims to protect the lands bordering Shenandoah National Park to create a large, connected conservation corridor to support drinking water protection, climate resiliency and biodiversity.

"A lot of species can't tolerate habitat edges and some aren't able to cross large areas of development," says Biasiolli. "When you have a larger block of land, you have more interior habitat and connectivity for wildlife to move across the landscape when they need to find food or mates."

In addition, Biasiolli is working with partners in the region like Wild Virginia and others in the Virginia Safe Wildlife Corridors Collaborative to create opportunities for safe passage for wildlife across roads, which also protects human safety by reducing collisions. Virginia consistently ranks in the top 10 states for likelihood of vehicle-wildlife collisions, but projects by the Collaborative are studying improvements to wildlife crossings that are already reducing the number of collisions. For example, a 2021 study in Albemarle County found that fencing directing wildlife to existing culverts and underpasses reduced deer-vehicle collisions between 88-97%, and more than doubled the number of deer and other mammals using the safer passages.

A few days after I dropped off that baby opossum, the wildlife rescue emailed me with an update. He is doing well and will be released into the wild in a few weeks, once he's old enough to re-enter the natural world. There, he'll eat a lot of ticks — one of the many ways healthy ecosystems benefit us all.

As he does, I am grateful for the many opportunities we all have to support land conservation and make the land he returns to a safer, healthier and greener home for all our human and wild neighbors.

### **Growing Connections:**

## How *Buy Fresh Buy Local* Guides Strengthen Our Community

By Meredith Ogilvie-Thompson, Media Strategist

hen Mike Peterson walks the fields at Kinloch Farm each morning, he is doing more than checking on cattle. He is nurturing connections that stretch far beyond the rolling hills of The Plains — connections between families and their food, between communities and farmers, and between people and the land that sustains them.

"We are fortunate to be part of such an important publication... like [the] Buy Fresh Buy Local guide," said Peterson, Kinloch's Farm and Conservation Director. "It provides the regional community a one-stop shop to search for a farmer or grower who can provide food for their family and friends, a concept we do not take lightly."

This sentiment captures exactly why The Piedmont Environmental Council's *Buy Fresh Buy Local* guides matter so much. Published as three distinct editions — Northern Piedmont, Loudoun County and Charlottesville Area (includ-

ing Nelson, Fluvanna, Louisa, Greene and Albemarle counties) — these biennial directories are not just lists of farms and markets. They are roadmaps to stronger, more sustainable communities.

Farming and forestry together make up Virginia's largest industry. In our region, the guides connect hundreds of local producers with thousands of families seeking fresh, seasonal food. From Kinloch's grass-fed beef to small vegetable farms tucked into mountain hollows, the directory is a veritable treasure map to the incredible diversity of food grown throughout the Piedmont.

But the impact goes far deeper than convenience. Buying local is also an investment in agricultural resilience that protects farmland and strengthens rural economies, all while supporting families who have chosen to stay on the land and helping reduce the financial and environmental costs of shipping food across continents.

In this way, the Buy Fresh Buy Local guides support PEC's core tenet that land use policies are not just aspirations for the future, but impact residents today. Put another way, can residents and visitors source their food locally? With Buy Fresh Buy Local, the answer is a resounding yes.

Then there are the stories you might never have known about your food. The artisan bread at the farmers market you can't resist? Those nuanced flavors come from locally grown and freshly milled grains offered by the likes of Deep Roots Milling, featured in our Charlottesville Area guide. The crisp cider you enjoy on a fall day? The heirloom apples pressed to make it come from an orchard fertilized by grass fed cattle at Long Stone Farm, featured in the Loudoun County guide. The Buy Fresh Buy Local guides make these connections visible and accessible, and help transform abstract concepts about food security and sustainability into concrete choices families can make together.

As Peterson notes, connecting families with local food is "a concept we do not take lightly." Neither does PEC. In a world of industrial agriculture and global supply chains, local food systems offer something precious: the chance to know where our food comes from and the opportunity to support our local community. Buying fresh and buying local nourishes communities in ways that go far beyond the plate.



### **New guides out now!**

Check your mailbox, farmers market, local grocers and restaurants, library and more for copies of the 2025 - 2026 *Buy Fresh Buy Local* guides.

### A Conversation on Trails and Connectivity

Continued from cover

**MOT:** How are you working to connect public and privately conserved lands and public trails into a more cohesive network?

PK: That's a real challenge and a golden opportunity. In Albemarle, many areas are technically privately owned but function like public parks, such as Saunders Monticello Trail, James Monroe's Highland and UVA's Foxhaven property off Reservoir Road.

Here's an example of what a larger connected landscape might look like: back in 2019, PEC helped the City of Charlottesville purchase what is now the Heyward Community Forest from a private owner. Since then, local trail groups have been collaborating with the city and others to connect those 150 acres to a much larger area, including Boar's Head, Ragged Mountain Natural Area, and beyond, which would total over 2,200 acres for recreational use. That's almost three times larger than Central Park, and it's right next to Charlottesville.

**MOT:** In terms of the role PEC plays, would you say we are a convener, land acquirer, technical advisor, community connector or something else?

PK: PEC is all of these things, plus a catalyst. We provide gravity to unite groups and hold projects together while connecting people with resources, such as with the Mobility Summit. We're also committed partners who have spent years building trust and checking in constantly, so we are very accountable to our partners and to the public. That trust is reciprocated in the form of real support. Thanks to our members and donors, we are able to take a long view and keep pushing through the multiple years this work often requires.

**MOT:** Not everyone enjoys equal access to nature. How are you addressing equity considerations in your connectivity work?

PK: I look at where people live and where access is lacking as a starting point. The most important thing I do is spend an enormous amount of time — perhaps the majority — meeting people in communities and listening to them. Everyone wants access to the outdoors, but what that looks like is not the same for everyone.

**MOT:** How do you measure success beyond just miles of trail built?

PK: The miles of trail, the bikes, the shoes—none of these are as important as the health and happiness they bring to communities. It's absolutely critical that people come to love the outdoors so they will be willing to protect the natural systems that are necessary for all life to continue. I see that love and connection every day.

**MOT:** What are the biggest challenges in creating connected trail networks?

PK: I am regularly amazed by how much people love the trails and public access that we do have. They don't just say so, and they don't just use the trails. They also show up in large numbers for volunteer work parties. However, the level of public financial investment in access does not match the desire or demonstrated support. There needs to be more public investment and there needs to be greater follow-though on projects that are already proposed. While we bring people together we also advocate for change.

**MOT:** PEC aims to permanently protect 30% of the Piedmont's lands by 2030. How does trail connectivity factor into this broader conservation vision?

**PK:** Conservation is about protecting water, soil and air for humans and nonhumans, now and for future generations. This need is existential, but we also need to get more people outdoors because it's tremendously beneficial for them and it's crucial for future conservation. People who spend lots of time in nature regularly are its

greatest champions, and conversely, those who are unable to do so are unlikely to be supportive.

We need to be strategic and increase access where it is lacking and focus on projects that provide multiple benefits. Prioritize projects that simultaneously provide access to fresh air, get people out of cars and connect communities. That's what we're doing.

**MOT:** How do you balance the sometimes competing interests of conservation, public access and private property rights?

**PK:** Every project is unique, but two things are always the same and always essential: getting everyone to the table and communicating. Sometimes people come up with third-way solutions that none of us would have thought of alone. And sometimes, if people are unwilling to engage, we have to look for other ways to meet our basic goals. Either way, we keep circling back and keep trying.

**MOT:** Looking 5-10 years ahead, what's your vision for the future of trails and connectivity in the Piedmont region?



Kids enjoying the Montpelier-Grelen trail, created through a partnership between PEC, Montpelier and Grelen Nursery. Photo courtesy of The Montpelier Foundation

PK: While the Piedmont is a vast and varied region, better access to the outdoors is a broadly shared goal. I hope our communities become better connected, that people are able to spend more time outdoors taking care of themselves and spending quality time with people they care about. Our fragmented infrastructure and our separation from nature are the fruits of bad decisions over several generations. Ten years won't be enough to solve that. But I definitely see good progress in my own community, and am inspired when I travel around the region.

Volunteer opportunities, advocacy initiatives, and community planning processes all offer chances to contribute to this vision of a region where people and nature flourish together. By supporting trail development and connectivity, residents can help build a future that honors the natural and cultural heritage of the Piedmont while creating new possibilities for exploration and connection.

## On the Ground

### Albemarle & Charlottesville

> Planning is underway for the **Three Notched Trail**, which will eventually connect Charlottesville to Crozet, the Blue Ridge Tunnel and Waynesboro. The process began at PEC's 5th Annual Active Mobility Summit in March, and now Albemarle County is hosting a series of listening sessions to collect public input and ideas. The plan will include a proposed route, an implementation plan, and a few shovel-ready designs for initial phases that will improve local connectivity.

- > Albemarle County staff have been working on a more comprehensive data center zoning ordinance that addresses noise, water use, and facility siting. This ordinance will build on the initial stopgap Zoning Text Amendment the Board of Supervisors approved requiring a special use permit for data centers over 40,000 square feet in industrial districts.
- > After nearly four years, the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors has nearly finished the county's **updated Comprehensive Plan** AC44 and intends to adopt a completed plan later in 2025. AC44 reflects the growing role of economic development and the diminished role of the Growth Management Policy that directs growth into the Development Areas to protect the communities and resources in the Rural Area.

### Clarke

- The Planning Commission brought draft ordinance language for the new **Double Tollgate**Light Industrial District for public comment in April. PEC's Tia Earman, the only speaker, spoke in favor of the smart growth approach the county has taken and made several specific recommendations which the commission accepted. The commission unanimously approved the new language and will pass it to the Board of Supervisors for final adoption.
- > This spring, the county's Planning and Zoning staff held three community meetings to gather input on the upcoming historic village area plans and the update of the rural lands plan. Village residents expressed concerns about traffic and connectivity, while the agricultural community was concerned about a lack of young and new farmers coming to the county, likely due to the high cost of land and lack of smaller, more affordable parcels.

### Culpeper

> The Town of Culpeper is **overhauling its code of ordinances**, a key tool for guiding land use
and development. The overhaul will transition
the town from strictly traditional zoning to a
hybrid code that includes form-based zoning,
which concentrates more on how buildings look
and less on what occurs within them. Residents
can view and comment on the draft code on the
town website.

- In March, the Culpeper County Planning Commission unanimously recommended denial of a **300 MW substation for the DALRO Project**, a data center campus outside the Culpeper Tech Zone. The applicant withdrew the proposal before the Board of Supervisors could hear the case.
- ➤ The Board of Supervisors is considering changing its zoning ordinance to require a **special use permit for data centers outside of the Culpeper Tech Zone**. PEC is supportive of this change, which would remove data centers as a by-right use in all light and heavy industrial zoning districts in the county and could potentially allow the board to require additional information about a project before approving it.
- ➤ The Board of Supervisors has begun **restricting through-truck traffic** on Algonquin Trail (state Route 647) in Stevensburg. Construction traffic from the nearby Marvell data center campus has damaged this recently paved road.

### **Fauquier**

- > PEC and other groups are opposing VDOT's revised **plan to replace the Interstate 66 bridge over Broad Run**, which adds almost 35 additional feet of width to the previously planned replacement. We have major concerns about the impacts to the adjacent Chapman-Beverley Mill, the Broad Run-Little Georgetown Rural Historic District, the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve and other resources nearby. VDOT held a public hearing on May 29 in Marshall, at which the vast majority in attendance expressed concern about the project.
- > The Warrenton Town Council, composed largely of council members elected on an anti-data center platform, has directed the Planning Commission to consider **repealing the provisions of the zoning ordinance** that allowed Amazon Web Services to apply for a data center near the northern end of town. The previous council's approval of the application is the subject of an ongoing lawsuit by neighboring property owners and Citizens for Fauquier County. The Planning Commission recommended the repeal at their meeting on May 20.
- > The Fauquier County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors will be considering data centers proposed for Remington (Gigaland and Convergent) in May and June.

### Greene

> PEC supported Greene County's **Zoning Text Amendment process to address the potential threats to rural areas from over-scaled agritourism development**. While recognizing the important economic role tourism plays in the county, the zoning amendment seeks to address community concerns about increased traffic, impacts to groundwater and wells, noise and light pollution, and the erosion of the rural character of the landscape. Impacts to groundwater and wells are especially concerning, as Greene is experiencing repeated periods of drought.

### Loudoun

- The Western Loudoun Comprehensive Plan
  Amendment and Zoning Ordinance Amendment updates continue: the Transportation and
  Land Use Committee facilitated discussions with agricultural and business stakeholders, residents and county staff. The April meeting focused on overnight stay accommodations, and the June 18 meeting will focus on Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority license uses in Western Loudoun. The public may provide input on the county website. We expect the first drafts of the new ordinance to come to the Zoning Ordinance Committee late this summer.
- > The Board of Supervisors initiated Phase 2 of the Data Center Comprehensive Plan Amendment and Zoning Ordinance Amendment in April. PEC will be engaged to encourage higher environmental performance standards. The board will continue to discuss at the June 18 Transportation and Land Use Committee meeting.
- > Dominion's proposed **Morrisville to Wishing Star transmission line** now includes a new alternate route. We're awaiting an announcement of the State Corporation Commission hearing date for the **Golden to Mars line** expected in the early fall and the status of the **Aspen to Golden line** appeal to the Supreme Court of Virginia.
- > So far in this seventh season at the **Community Farm at Roundabout Meadows**, we have hosted more than 20 volunteer days and donated thousands of pounds of produce to hunger relief organizations in Clarke and Loudoun Counties. Our exciting new agrivoltaics project, coupling crops and solar production, is also underway.

#### **Madison**

➤ The Madison County Board of Supervisors adopted an **updated Comprehensive Plan** on May 7. Alongside county residents, PEC has been engaged in the process from the beginning in November 2022, and believes the Comprehensive Plan gets it right. The updated plan will be the conservation-informed roadmap for new land use proposals: advancing an approach to growth that complements existing services and infrastructure, protects natural resources, open space, and productive farmland, and enhances economic opportunities and quality of life for residents.

### **Orange**

> The Board of Supervisors has undertaken a project — expected to run through the end of 2025 — to consider some major changes to the zoning ordinance, including **changes to the current agricultural district**. PEC is hopeful the proposed changes will better protect farmland, but we were concerned to hear comments from project focus groups that believed conservation easements negatively impact agriculture.

Conservation easements are a critically impor-

## On the Ground

tant tool for protecting Orange County's rural landscape and working farms, as well as our waterways, forestland and important natural and cultural resources. The board will debate the proposed changes in a series of public work sessions. PEC will continue to monitor the board's progress and provide updates.

> PEC is closely monitoring the statewide rollout of regional workgroups tasked with drafting regional water supply plans by 2029. For example, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission will guide the creation of a single regional water supply plan for Culpeper,

Fauquier, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock counties, in partnership with stakeholders that include localities, PEC and other conservation organizations. The five-year effort officially kicked off in February. PEC will work with local officials and residents to create sustainable plans informed by climate change and drought considerations.

### Rappahannock

> The Board of Supervisors has asked county

staff to prepare a zoning ordinance amendment that would require new residential construction to comply with Dark Skies standards, which currently only apply to commercial and industrial

> Rush River Commons in the town of Washington held an open house and began loading in its first 16 tenants in April. Sixteen of the 18 units are affordable housing restricted, and planning is underway for the second phase of the project, to include office, community and commercial space, with trails and public spaces.

# Out&About

### **Conservation Speed Dating** in Northern Albemarle



▲ The Northern Albemarle Conservation Speed Dating Workshop held at Montfair Resort Farm welcomed 20 landowners and producers to have one-on-one conversations with local conservation organizations and agencies over large-scale maps of their properties.

### **Award Winning Staff**



▲ Friends of the Rappahannock recognized PEC's Linnea Sherman for her dedication to restoration work in the Rappahannock River watershed, as demonstrated through her leadership guiding our Plantings for the Piedmont program.



▲ PEC President Chris Miller was recognized with the Choose Clean Water Coalition's Clean Water Champion Award for his decades of work championing clean water in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

### Kestrel **Banding** in Madison **County**

Virginia Grassland Bird **Initiative Assistant Lauria** McShane bands a female kestrel in Madison county from a box that was installed as part of the VGBI nestbox program.



### **Dolley Madison Garden Club: Just Sustainable Forum**



◆ PEC Land Use **Field Representative** Don McCown discusses land use issues with event attendees at the **Dolley Madison** Garden Club's Just Sustainable Forum.

### Dear Friends,

nnovation and relentless implementation. The combination of these two qualities is what makes The Piedmont Environmental Council particularly special in creating the space, the possibility and the foundation for conservation outcomes that endure. Sustained progress takes time, especially when you are trying to change land management practices or instill a conservation mindset. It can be advised by science and supported by access to resources, but it relies on an openness to new ideas and a steadfast commitment to implementation by individuals and families over generations. And, increasingly, it requires planning, investment and immediate action to steward and protect what has already been conserved.

That's why our Annual Gathering at Eldon Farm on June 8 is so interesting and important this year. We'll be celebrating a lifetime of work and vision of the Akre family, who are generously and carefully stewarding a 7,100-acre plot of land for the greater good. Built to test and demonstrate a new approach to the future of conservation, the Akre's plans for Eldon Farm grew from three years of planning, drawing on generations of thinking about sustainability and led by one of the world's preeminent landscape architects, Thomas Woltz. And the plans are girded by partnerships and the additional legal, technological and financial resources to endure for another two generations.

In the United States, we benefit from people and families innovating and collaborating on broader community-wide efforts that complement other public and private projects. The land at Eldon Farm connects the lands and ecosystems of Shenandoah National Park, Old Rag, and the Virginia Rapidan Wildlife Management Area to private lands conserved along the Hazel, Hughes, Rose and Rapidan tributaries

that join to form the Upper Rappahannock watershed.

Importantly, the dramatic effort at Eldon Farm can be successful, at least in part, because thousands of other families — in Rappahannock County, in other areas of the Piedmont, and in the Shenandoah Valley adjoining Shenandoah National Park and George Washington National Forest

— have also committed to the same set of ideas and a collective vision. The challenge of engaging, educating and empowering successive generations and new residents and decision makers is PEC's essential work, amplified by the partnership of dozens of other organizations. After 50 years, our collective and cumulative impact is significant, dramatically visible on a global basis.

At the current scale of nearly 600,000 acres of conserved land in the PEC service area and millions of acres along the Appalachian Corridor, the work of PEC and our conservation partners is observable from space. During our annual meeting last year, Dr. Travis Belote's keynote address showed, via satellite, the effects of this conservation on wildlife corridors and confirmed that the greater Shenandoah ecosystem is in the top 20% of global priorities for biodiversity, carbon capture and clean drinking water.

Just as important as the land, water, and biodiversity impacts of our work are the continuing and lasting benefits of community engagement and participation. The investment in PEC and conservation



Eldon Farms in Rappahannock County, the site of PEC's 2025 Annual Gathering. Photo by Hugh Kenny

has inspired a higher level of community engagement across a range of issues, a diverse ecosystem of civic and social welfare organizations that complement ongoing land use planning and conservation efforts. We see this every day in your active participation in local government and civic organizations. The counties within PEC's service area have high rates of voter participation year after year.

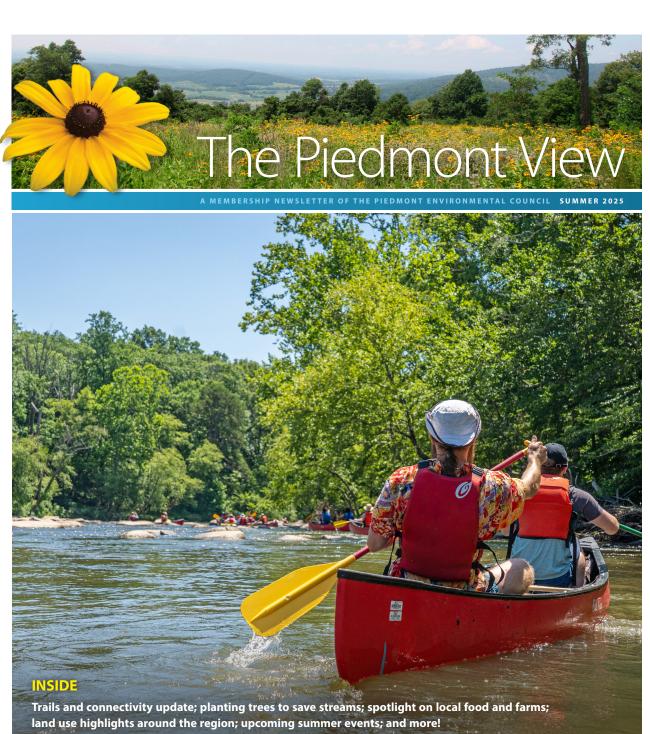
As a result, our communities are places people want to live in, visit and return to again and again. They are growing, arguably in a more sustainable and resilient way, faster than the state as a whole. Compared to the rest of Virginia and the rest of the

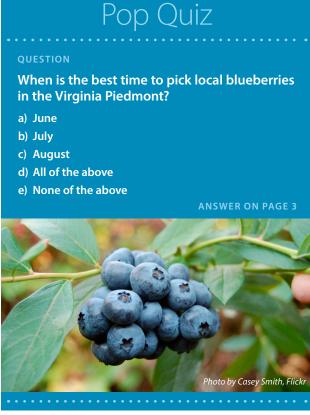
U.S., the Virginia Piedmont has the communities people choose to move to, visit, enjoy, and invest in over time.

Sincerely,

Chris Miller, President

to hy Hugh Kenr







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www.pecva.org