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*Protecting and promoting the natural resources, rural economy,  
history and beauty of the Virginia Piedmont since 1972*

Culpeper County Planning Commission, Chairman Sanford Reaves  
302 North Main Street  
Culpeper, VA 22701

Concerning: 2022 Comprehensive Plan Update, Draft II

Dear Culpeper County Planning Commission,

Firstly, Piedmont Environmental Council would like to thank the Planning Commission and the Planning Department of Culpeper for their hard work on this comprehensive plan and for the additional time for review and analysis. PEC has always supported planning that seeks to protect critical resources while allowing for the development of vibrant, highly livable communities. The 2022 Comprehensive Plan is a significantly more thorough document than the previous comprehensive plans and we sincerely appreciate the effort that the Planning Staff has made to address our initial concerns. However, there are still several key items that we feel should be addressed before the Comprehensive Plan is approved.

### **Land Consumptive Industries**

The Commerce and Innovation designation in the Future Land Use Plan encourages data center development in unsuitable locations and significantly increases the amount of acreage to be considered for this disruptive, non-agricultural land use. Per the current zoning, data centers can occur in Light Industrial and Heavy Industrial zoned areas, of which there are approximately 1,600 acres of undeveloped land. The Commerce and Innovation designation would open an additional 500 acres of land for potential data center development currently not under industrial zoning.

Cloud HQ is part of the undeveloped industrial land. This site offers 1.2 million square feet<sup>1</sup> of potential data center development. For reference, the Marvell data center will only consist of 430,000 square feet<sup>2</sup> of data center. With this much land available for data center development we do not see the need for adding additional land for this use. We are concerned that allotting excessive amounts of land for data center construction will lead to sprawling data center development in the County and necessitate additional infrastructure such as new high-power transmission lines and substations. Targeting data center development to the most appropriate areas that have the least impact on surrounding uses and are adjacent to existing transmission lines protects critical resources, neighborhoods, and private property from eminent domain claims for new transmission line routes.

We strongly recommend that data center development be moved to a separate designation such as Land Consumptive Industries that considers only existing Industrial zoned lands with the necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.culpeperva.org/locate/cloudhq/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.datacenterdynamics.com/en/news/amazon-files-to-build-data-centers-in-culpeper-county-northern-virginia/>

infrastructure. We recommend including access to community water and sewer as part of the necessary infrastructure for data centers; as the Comprehensive Plan notes in multiple instances, Culpeper County is almost entirely reliant on groundwater for all residential and commercial needs. By allowing data centers to have unrestricted access to rural groundwater through private wells, the county has no way to regulate or moderate water consumption. This can have serious implications for county residents and agricultural operations in times of severe drought.

We are also concerned that there is no guidance on battery storage facilities. These are large batteries associated with utility-scale solar installations that are a huge risk to local water supplies as well as a danger to first responders as the chemicals in the batteries are very flammable and highly toxic. We strongly recommend carefully considering where these storage facilities should be located and whether they should even be allowed in certain areas.

As evidenced by recent hearings, both utility-scale solar and data center campuses are potentially very disruptive to any adjacent communities. In addition to construction traffic, these industries require a connection to the electric grid which can include new infrastructure such as transmission lines, they can be visually intrusive in a rural or historically significant landscape and can produce nuisance levels of noise greatly impacting livability and desirability of neighborhoods near them. We strongly recommend that the Comprehensive Plan include guidance concerning the placement of these facilities and their substations in areas that will not have a negative impact on the residents of the area, home values, or commercial enterprises such as tourism. We recommend that the Future Land Use Plan only include areas that meet these criteria when designating lands for these uses.

### **Inappropriate Tax Incentive Areas**

One of the reasons for updating the Comprehensive Plan on a regular basis is to allow the county to revisit and update outdated or inappropriate designations and policies. As the values of the county change or new information is learned, it is important not to retain policies that are no longer in line with the community's desires. For these reasons, we recommend reconsidering the appropriateness of the Brandy Station Technology Zone. The Technology Zone appears to be a tax incentive encouraging economic development at the site. Most of the acreage included in the Brandy Station Technology Zone is A1 Land and not zoned for commercial or industrial use. The situation has changed and this site is now less than 3,000 feet from the new Culpeper Battlefields State Park and the Civil War Graffiti House.

The Brandy Station Technology Zone is no longer an appropriate place for this type of economic development and would better serve the tourism or agricultural economic development interests by remaining agriculturally designated. There's no reason the County should carry over the Brandy Station Technology Zone into the new land use plan. Further, the Board of Supervisors should consider reevaluating technology zones in the County overall and provide more clarity and transparency about them in the comprehensive plan.

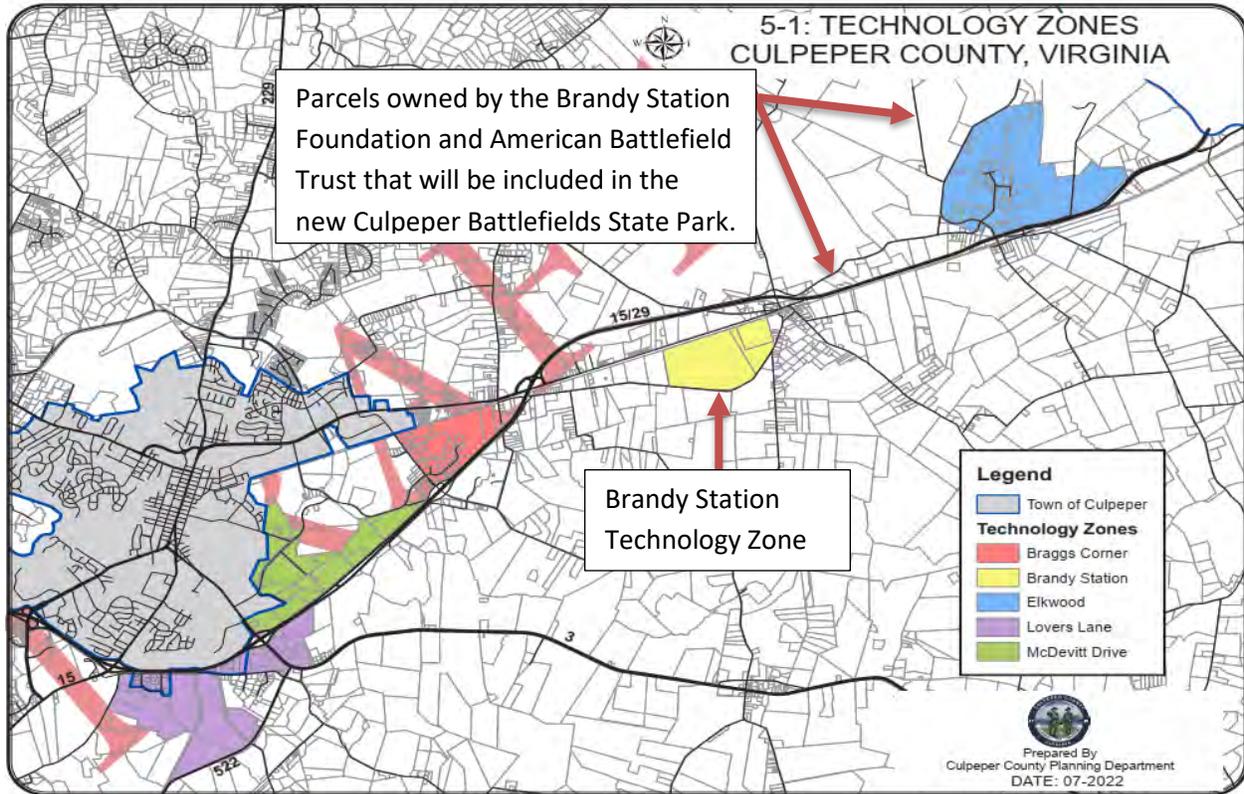


Figure 1: Technology Zones, Culpeper County Virginia. From the Economic Development Chapter, Page 5-20

### Brandy Station Historic/Convenience Center

Page 2-55 of the Future Land Use Plan describes Historic/Convenience Centers as the following:

*[a designation for] smaller crossroad communities and for those of historic importance. Resources that qualify for historic importance include historic buildings, such as churches and private homes. These areas should be compact, and the land use should be limited to low-density residential and low-intensity commercial uses that will primarily serve nearby residents. The primary goal is that these centers remain as they currently exist as much as possible. The areas recognized as Convenience/Historic Centers are Boston, Jeffersonton, Lignum, Mitchells, Reva, Richardsville, Rixeyville, Stevensburg, and Winston.*

We urge the County to consider including Brandy Station in this designation as we think it better fits the communities desires and the resources that are in and around Brandy Station.

Page 4-42 of the Environmental and Historical Resources Chapter describes Brandy Station thus:

*The Brandy Station area of community interest includes most of the older structures in the village of Brandy Station and is outlined on the area map. Most of the area identified is south of Route 15/29 and the Southern Railroad corridor. There are many late 19th and early 20th century structures, with the newer structures generally in keeping with the older. Any new construction should be encouraged to maintain that motif. The structures of local significance include Graffiti House, Blue Haven, Bailey's Store, Stone*

*Compton House, Brandy Baptist Church, Christ Church Rectory, Christ Episcopal Church, Brandy Station Post Office, Fleetwood Methodist Church, Humphries House, and Stevens Masonic Lodge. A more intensive historic-site survey or archaeological reconnaissance is probably not needed when considering development in this area, although excavation should be performed with caution.*

We believe that these resources should be protected rather than promoted for industrial development. It seems incongruous that other historic crossroads in the County are noted for their unique character while Brandy Station remains the target of industrial development by both the county and outside organizations such as the Virginia Economic Development Partnership<sup>3</sup>. We encourage the County not to put the wants of developers above the needs of the community.

### **Urban Sprawl in the Rural Areas**

Maintaining the rural character of the county and containing urban sprawl are serious concerns for the citizens of Culpeper. Allowing urban sprawl not only creates unsustainable communities that do not have good access to everyday needs but also strains local infrastructure such as roads and compromises natural resources such as forests and open space which provide many ecosystem services and make the county a desirable place to live. Focusing residential development in areas already zoned for this use, that have access to community resources such as water and sewer and are within a short walk or bike ride to residents' schools, workplaces, and other needs helps to protect natural resources from fragmentation and preserve the county's agricultural economy and character.

Containing development can also make the community more resilient in times of disaster. As previously mentioned, Culpeper County relies almost exclusively on groundwater, and encouraging residential development beyond established community service areas makes the county vulnerable in times of drought as well as in times of groundwater contamination from either septic or industrial pollution. Additionally, protecting forests and open space from fragmentation safeguards the ecosystem services they provide such as water and air filtration. Maintaining these natural systems is often less expensive and more resilient than engineered solutions such as water treatment facilities.

Sprawl often increases traffic on unsuitable roads and can put commuters in direct conflict with existing farm traffic. For example, Rixeyville Road has been the site of multiple accidents including more than one fatality and traffic is only anticipated to increase in the wake of the Stonehaven/Clevenger's Corner Development. Residential developments that are removed from everyday necessities such as schools and grocery stores lack alternative modes of transportation such as walking or biking and must rely entirely on motor vehicles to access basic needs. Having these alternatives can calm traffic in areas and create a healthier and more vibrant community.

As we have previously noted, there are nearly 1,600 acres of undeveloped, residentially zoned land, within the existing service boundary of the Town of Culpeper<sup>4</sup>. This calculation does not include the nearly 800

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<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://sites.vedp.org/virginia/propertyid/288488>

<sup>4</sup> Calculations based on the current Culpeper County Zoning. <https://www.webgis.net/va/CulpeperCo/>

acres of vacant residential land within the town limits<sup>5</sup>. Much of this land is within walking distance of the amenities of Culpeper including, Culpeper County Highschool and retail stores. We strongly encourage the County to channel growth to areas that have already been zoned for residential use and have the potential to develop highly livable communities before sacrificing more agricultural lands.

Reducing urban sprawl and slowing the growth of the county are priorities for the residents of Culpeper which is achievable if the County contains development to the lands already zoned for this use. We are concerned that both drafts of the 2022 Comprehensive Plan are determined to encourage sprawling development into the heart of Culpeper's rural areas when there is an abundance of appropriately zoned land remaining vacant.

We strongly recommend that plans to expand the service boundary of the Town of Culpeper be dropped until all of the land within the current boundary is already in use. If these lands are not appropriate, then we recommend that the County consider downzoning from R1 and R2 to RA or A1 and removing it from the service area. As we have already noted, condensed, well-planned residential areas can be highly desirable and liveable. They can put less of a burden on the local infrastructure and can be more resilient to disaster while preserving the rural character of the county which is so important to its residents.

### **Catalpa Rural Transition Area**

The Catalpa Rural Transition Area will encourage unsustainable, low-density residential development on rural lands. This transition area will not have walkable access to every-day needs, it will increase traffic on rural roads, and as noted in the plan, will potentially impact environmentally sensitive areas including Bald's Run, Rudasill Branch, and a 66-acre lake. The shape of the transition area also pre-disposes the loss of other agricultural lands by driving a residential wedge in an otherwise rural Catalpa District.

Even though the Catalpa Rural Transition Area was part of the 2015 Comprehensive Plan, it is not exempt from reconsideration. The Comprehensive Plan is updated regularly so that the planning can be adjusted to reflect the changing goals and priorities of the community.

### **Mount Zion Church Road**

The Mount Zion Church Road is so infrequently traveled that it is not even referenced as a minor collector road in the Transportation Chapter of the current draft. This is a rural area with windy roads and any residents living there must drive to get to work, school, or the grocery store. Designating the lands along this road for future Low Residential Land Use is exactly the sort of rural sprawl that the county should be avoiding because it will bring congestion to roads that are not designed to handle heavy traffic. This designation may also prevent farmers in this area from obtaining a conservation easement or enrolling in a paid-development-right program to protect their land for future generations of farmers because such conservation practices will technically go against the Comprehensive Plan.

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<sup>5</sup> Calculations based on the current Town of Culpeper Zoning.  
[https://www.culpeperva.gov/government/information\\_technology/mapping\\_\\_\\_gis/index.php](https://www.culpeperva.gov/government/information_technology/mapping___gis/index.php)

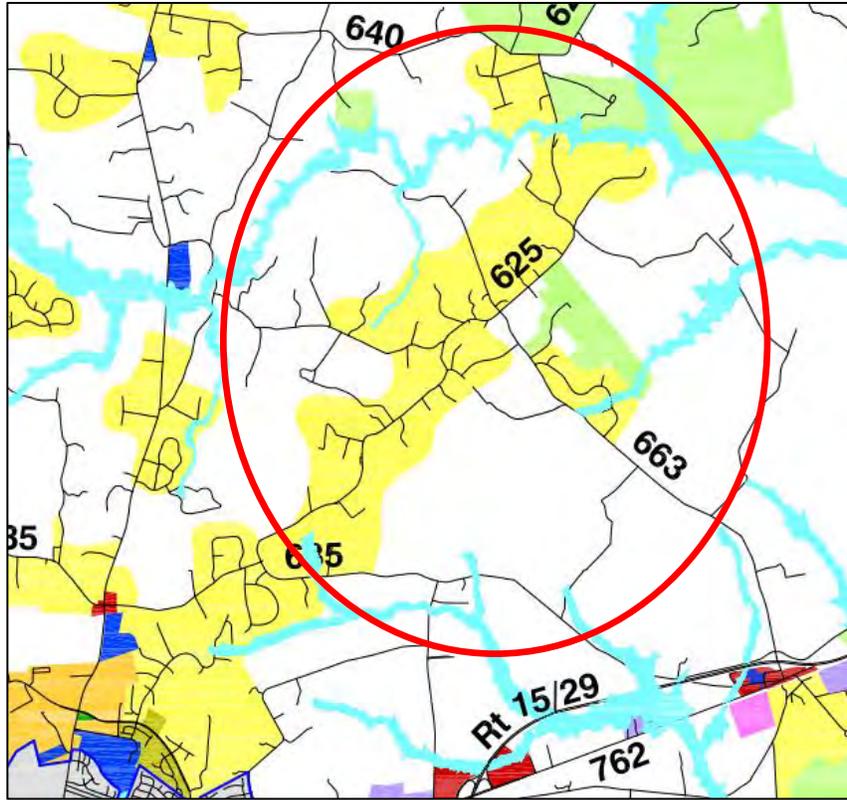


Figure 2: Mount Zion Church Road area. From the Future Land Use Plan, Page 2-37.

There is some residential land use in this area, but encouraging growth here will result in the same infrastructure and community problems that we anticipate with the Catalpa Rural Transition Area. These lands are better served protecting the natural resources that enhance and safeguard Culpeper’s waters, wildlife, and rural aesthetic.

**Protection of Water Resources**

Water is a critical resource and Culpeper needs to take steps to safeguard its supply before it becomes compromised either by drought, contamination, or overuse. The tenuous nature of the county water supply is mentioned throughout the Comprehensive Plan, but the plan could do more to safeguard the water supply such as:

- require information concerning anticipated water consumption and the potential for water contamination when evaluating new residential and industrial developments
- make conducting a long-term viability study of Culpeper’s water supply a priority
- identify key recharge areas and watersheds and recommend future land use designations that will protect them as a resource
- Identify and protect community well-heads from possible contamination

Proactively identifying and taking steps to secure the county water supply will help make the county more resilient in times of natural and man-made disasters such as drought or contamination. Acting before there is an issue can reduce the risk of Culpeper facing water supply or quality issues in the future.

### **In Conclusion**

The Comprehensive Plan is an opportunity to improve on previous planning and think critically needs and wants of the community. Culpeper's population is increasing, but that does not mean that the county needs to abandon its agrarian character to provide new residential and economic opportunities. We urge the Planning Commission to focus on using the land already zoned for residential and industrial development as efficiently and effectively as possible and protecting our wealth of historic and natural resources so that they can be protected for future generations.

Thank you for considering my remarks. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely

*Sarah Parmelee*

Sarah Parmelee  
Culpeper Land Use Representative  
Piedmont Environmental Council