



Piedmont Environmental Council 2010 Strategic Plan





Piedmont Environmental Council 2010 Strategic Plan

Introduction

In December of 2010, the Board of The Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) adopted a revised strategic plan. This followed a 15 month period, beginning September of 2009, during which the board and staff of The Piedmont Environmental Council undertook a reassessment of our region and our organization to determine what, if any, changes were needed to our goals, programs and structure as we looked ahead to the next twenty years. This report summarizes the strategic plan and the actions it recommends.

The Piedmont Environmental Council was founded in 1972 with the purpose of preserving important attributes of the Northern Piedmont region of Virginia. Those key attributes are the open spaces, natural viewsheds, historic features, agricultural activity and the clean air and water that make living, working and visiting the region so special. Protecting these attributes, while recognizing the importance of economic vitality, has always been, and remains our core organizational goal.

As an organization we have had incredible success over the last 38 years. This success is most readily described by the 336,000 acres of land placed into conservation easements, the 71 Historic Districts that have been created, the one million acres of land still in agricultural use, the growing number of farmers markets, wineries and historic destinations, the creation of service districts in each county and the dark night skies we still enjoy. Throughout this same time the region also saw higher population growth and economic growth than that of the Commonwealth overall.



Photo by Patricia Johnson

COVER:
Top photo by
Larry Behunick
Bottom photo by
Rose Jenkins

Adjusting to Change in Our Community

While PEC has succeeded in sustaining many of the core natural and historic attributes of the Piedmont over the last four decades, change is inevitable. Learning how to adapt to change is a core human trait and one PEC has done well. Over the last 15 months, we identified a number of important changes in our community that we considered in building our strategic plan. The programs we undertake and policy positions we take in order to achieve our goals must reflect these on the ground realities.

.....

In Demographics

The population in the Piedmont doubled in the last 20 years and now exceeds 635,000. It is projected that our population will grow from today's 635,000 by at least an additional 215,000, and perhaps by 480,000 people in the next 20 years (assumes between 1.5% - 3.0% annual population growth). This growing population will further tax our infrastructure and our ability to protect our region's character.

» *We need to sustain our land use policies and preservation tools to accommodate growth while achieving our goals.*

75% of the residents in the Piedmont today live in suburban or urban communities. This limits their direct access to, and perhaps appreciation of, the key attributes (e.g. open spaces, agricultural activity) of the region that PEC was created to preserve.

» *We need to improve access to and appreciation of the natural, historical and agricultural resources of the Piedmont for all constituents.*

Our community will continue to change. Within 20 years, 85% of the population of the Piedmont will have been born and/or lived here post 1990. Hence residents' perspectives on the Piedmont of the future will be based on evolving conditions, without reference to those in place at the time that PEC was founded.

» *We need to continuously build awareness of and appreciation for the benefits of the open spaces, the agricultural economy, clean air and water, and the historic character of the region.*

.....

In the Political, Social and Economic Arena

County governments are facing significant fiscal challenges.

Working farmers and rural businesses continue to face daunting economic and regulatory challenges with prospects for diminished support and infrastructure for agricultural activity.

Pro-development lobbying in Richmond and at the county level is more sophisticated and better funded than ever.

Frenetic lifestyles of typical households of the Piedmont leave little time for community engagement, which was traditionally the backbone of groups like PEC.

» *All of these changes will tax our ability to preserve and improve on the important successes of the last 38 years in the areas of land conservation, zoning and land use ordinances, and agricultural and rural economy protection. We need to sustain our strong working relations with policy makers and grow our support base within the Piedmont.*

County by County

Change has come at different levels and speeds to each of the nine counties that we serve in the Piedmont. Loudoun County has grown almost five-fold in the last 20 years and now is home to over 312,000 people. On the other end of the spectrum, Rappahannock County added just 751 people in twenty years and has a total population of 7,373.

Each of the nine counties has different land use rules, political systems and attitudes and different economic and social drivers. Yet they all share common historic and natural resources.

» *In each county we must continue to be an effective advocate for our goals. And we must continue to develop county-level financial and political support for our programs. Our regional goals can not be achieved if we fail in any of our counties.*

Current Strengths and Challenges of Our Organization

Our strengths

The successes achieved by PEC and our partners were due to many factors. These strengths of the organization need to be acknowledged and preserved, including:

1. Highly skilled program staff that are widely recognized for the caliber of their work and their dedication
2. Visionary leadership with a strong grasp on policy issues
3. Exceptional working relationships between PEC staff and key policymakers at the county and state level
4. County field officers and County Advisory Boards that effectively identify and address local issues in a timely manner
5. The ability to collaborate with other organizations in the regional, state and national levels
6. Well considered policy positions on key areas of focus, including: air and water quality, energy, historic preservation, land conservation, land use and transportation
7. Strong core base of donors and supporters who have sustained our programs

Our challenges

PEC has changed over the years—in many good ways, and some not so good. PEC has also failed to change in some important ways. The strategic planning process included a stark look at the organization and recognized room for improvement.

1. Financial Resources

Too much of our funding comes from annual giving, our donor base is too narrow, and we have too often operated with a deficit.

- » *Beginning in the spring of 2011, we are increasing our development staffing and expanding our communications efforts in order to help build a stronger financial base. Our board has also agreed to lead in the arena of financial giving and getting, in order to assure our fiscal integrity.*

2. Organizational Structure

PEC is a flat organization—living the delicate balance between being loose and fluid, and structured and inflexible. We must preserve our ability to respond to events as they happen, but also be organized enough to succeed.

- » *We have created a regularly meeting management committee, and are working on ways to improve our internal communication and coordination. We also have to be better prepared for inevitable changes in our staffing, while recognizing the quality and caliber of existing staff.*

3. Board Structure

For all non-profits, the Board plays a crucial role in every aspect of the organization. The Board is responsible for PEC's strategic direction, senior leadership and financial viability.

- » *Our Board has committed to an enhanced level of engagement in all key areas and has shown their willingness to follow words with actions. In addition to participating in and endorsing the strategic plan, the board has set new standards for giving. Going forward, the board will be reorganizing itself to reflect the changes at the program level and the need to take a greater role in development, finances, and policy.*



Photo by Patricia Johnson

New Directions for The Piedmont Environmental Council

As part of the 2010 Strategic Plan review, the Board reaffirmed PEC's commitment to existing core programs focused on land use, transportation, air and water quality, historic preservation, and smart, low-impact energy solutions. We also considered how our programs might need to evolve to better reflect the changes in our community. The region in which we operate and the range of other organizations operating in the region are very different today than twenty years ago. Key changes in our programs are outlined here:

1. Becoming a Full-Service Land Trust

Preservation of rural and natural lands is key to maintaining the spectacular viewsheds, vibrant agricultural economy, and rural culture that makes the Piedmont a desirable place to live, work and visit. With our long held goal of seeing one million acres of private land conserved in the Piedmont, PEC has been an active participant in efforts to preserve the land.

Initially, our role was purely as a promoter of easements. More recently, we have seen the need to accept easements for land that would otherwise not have been protected. We saw this as the best means to foster easements while limiting our potential risks.

Today, we see a situation where the opportunities that stem from becoming a full-service land conservation group greatly outweigh the perceived negatives.

As a full-service land trust, PEC can:

- Help to set and raise the standards for all conservation easements
- Foster more support from the community
- Increase our chances of reaching our goal of one million acres of protected land in the region
- Provide additional options to conservation easement donors in the region
- Improve our ability to achieve our overall goals for the Piedmont

» *PEC is the best prepared and funded private land conservation organization in the Piedmont; by becoming a more active holder of conservation easements, we strive to be a better participant in the land conservation effort.*

2. Expanding our Work in Support of the Rural and Agricultural Economy

Since its inception, PEC has recognized that the vitality and character of the Piedmont is directly connected to its history, its natural beauty, and its farms and farming. PEC works to support the broad based rural economy in the context of its goals of preserving open space, air and water quality, natural viewsheds and better communities. However, we have not made this a central part of our programs or our communication.



Photo by Sarah Cramer

The wide range of farms in our community provide food, create jobs, support open space and recreational pursuits, and build regional identity. Tourism that capitalizes on the natural beauty and history of the Piedmont provides revenue to our counties, supports many businesses, creates jobs, and thereby allows us to continue to enjoy those resources.

PEC has a substantial number of successful programs that support agriculture and the rural economy. These include:

- Land use initiatives for zoning that protects farmland and farming activities
- *Buy Fresh Buy Local* guides
- Meet the Farmer Dinners
- Assistance to new farmers markets
- Farm-to-Chef Directory
- *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* educational training
- Virginia Ag and Food Entrepreneurship Program
- Land conservation and Purchase of Development Rights programs
- Historic Preservation—identifying and protecting sites

But we can and should do more. An expanded program with a full-time Rural and Agricultural Economy Program Manager could add tremendous value to the community and help PEC achieve our goals.

- It would allow us to expand many of the programs now active in a few counties across the Piedmont.
- It would allow us to provide new services of potentially high impact (e.g. enhanced Farm Link, Legal Guide for Farming).
- It would better reflect our true commitment to the rural and agricultural economy of the Piedmont.
- It would fill the needed but missing role in many counties between agricultural extension and economic development.
- It would create a strong voice for legislative policy issues in Richmond.

» *PEC will take a more active role in enabling a vibrant rural and agricultural economy in the Piedmont.*

3. Building Better Connections through Communication and Outreach

Given an increasingly transient and diverse population of residents/voters in our community and the large percentage of current residents who live in urban/suburban communities, we need a meaningful increase in our communication and outreach efforts to build awareness of our shared interests and support for our policies and programs. Without widespread support, we will have neither current legitimacy with policy makers nor meaningful impact on the sustainability of our communities.

To address this we will:

- Create a new leadership position for Communication and Outreach
- Fully integrate outreach into all of our programs
- Invest in technologies that allow us to more effectively reach and communicate with all constituents
- Build a more effective messaging platform that explains our vision for the Piedmont and our goals

» *PEC will strive to connect more effectively with all of our constituents to inform the community about the relevant issues.*

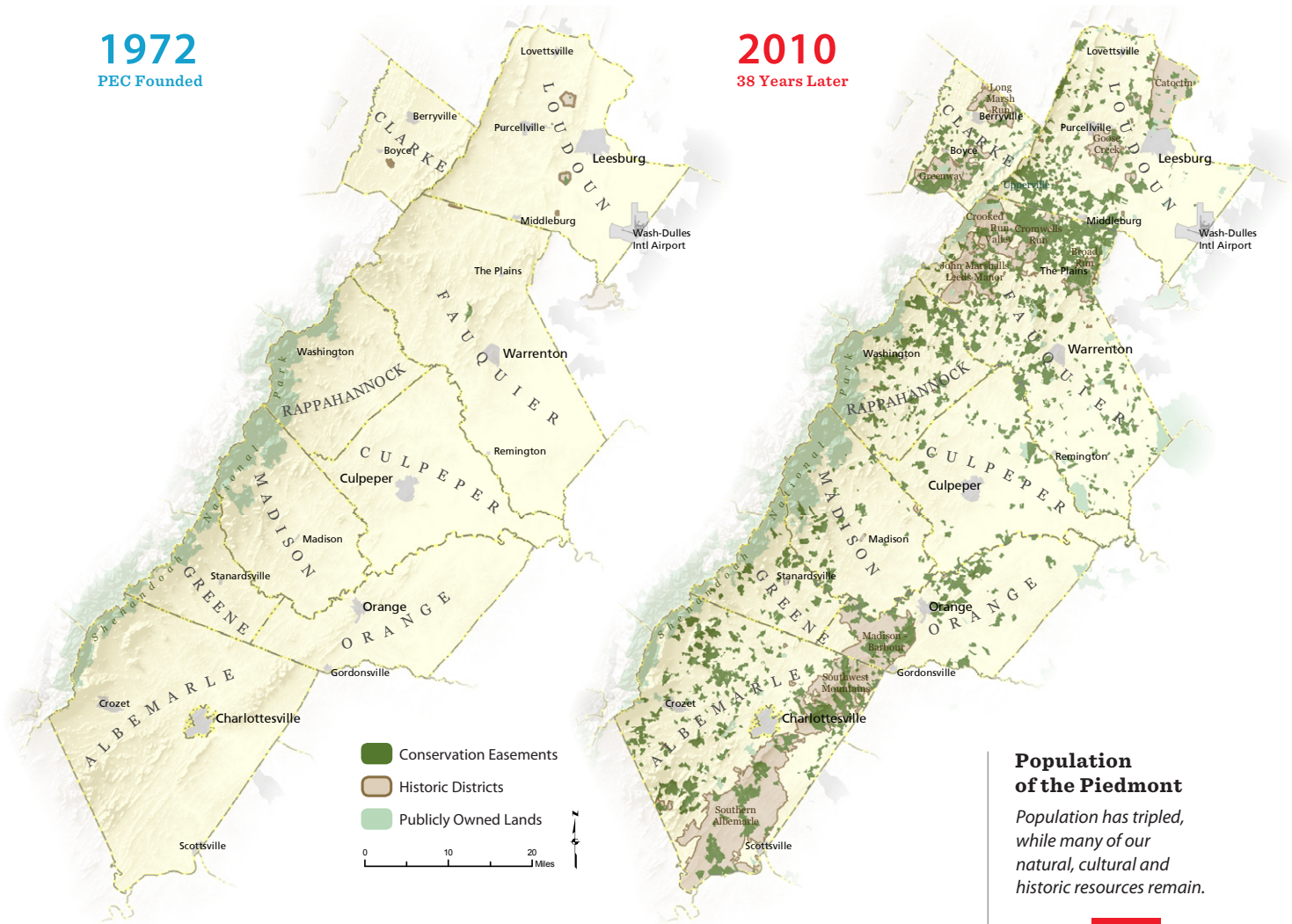
Conclusion

The Piedmont Environmental Council is today the best organized, best funded and best positioned organization to protect the most important attributes of the region. It remains the strongest voice for the Piedmont, and the success of its goals are truly in the best interest of all residents, workers and visitors in the region. With the actions planned to address the challenges identified in this report, PEC's long-term ability to achieve our regional goals will be even greater.

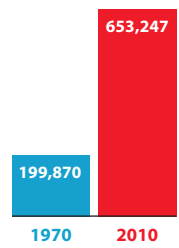
38 Years of Success in the Piedmont

1972
PEC Founded

2010
38 Years Later



Population of the Piedmont
Population has tripled, while many of our natural, cultural and historic resources remain.



Natural and Historic Resources

	1972	2010
Conservation Easements	300 acres	336,000 acres
Historic Districts	7	71

Agricultural Activity

In 2007, there were 6,427 active farms covering over 1 million acres. Source: USDA

PEC's Buy Fresh Buy Local Program includes:

- 81 wineries
- 20 Farmers Markets
- Over 900 Participating Members

Source: U.S. Census Bureau