

A Short History of the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (RACC)

Anyone coming to Rockbridge county is immediately struck by the exceptional beauty of the place: its landscape, the clean streams that flow out of the mountains, the patchwork of settled farmland and forest that lies in the floor of the valley, the trails that weave through the forests, the Parkway, the vernacular architecture, the vibrant college towns, and the many historic sites.

In 1974, the completion of Interstate 81 and the siting of a huge manufacturing plant in a rural part of the county raised concerns among many local people. A year later, anticipating the coming changes and the threat these changes could pose to the special character of this area, a small group of Rockbridge citizens decided to promote a better understanding of land use planning. Aided by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, committees were formed to study relevant aspects of planning, and four nationally prominent speakers were brought here to conduct seminars about planning. A year later, the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council was formed as a non-profit volunteer organization. RACC is a grass roots organization, composed of concerned residents, land owners, farmers, merchants, teachers, tradespeople, students and others who want to protect and preserve the unique and healthy rural/town character of the Rockbridge area. RACC focuses on the preservation of this “sense of place”.

Today the Council has nearly four hundred families and businesses as members. RACC is made up of people who care enough about this place to give their time, energy, and abilities to help protect and enhance the qualities of life found here. As committees and individuals report to the Board on the current events in the county, the discussion may range from **water quality** and managing **run-off, paving policies** for country lanes, **recycling**, threats to **roadless areas** in the National Forest, **cell tower** placement, innovations in **forestry** practice, and **county landfill** capacity, to **organizing hikes** on **Brushy Hill, House Mountain**, around **Moore's Creek Reservoir**, or in **Goshen Pass**. The Board initiates actions and educational programs, it undertakes studies of environmental concerns, it cooperates with other organizations that share its mission, and it advocates appropriate governmental reactions to emerging threats to the environmental quality of the area.

RACC's Accomplishments

RACC's many accomplishments give insight into the scope of the local projects and issues which it has addressed in our community during the past 28 years. RACC initiated many programs and projects including the purchase of the top of **House Mountain** and establishing and managing it as a protected area, and the transformation of the old C & O railroad bed into the **Chessie Trail** between Lexington and Buena Vista.

Some of RACC's other accomplishments include:

- studying potential **impacts of exporting spring water** out of the county,
- funding a **scholarship** for local students to attend **Nature Camp**,
- initiating **corridor studies** of the roads leading into Lexington,
- **planting trees and shrubs** along the Route 11 and 60 medians,
- initiating reclamation of an abandoned **Goshen quarry**,
- initiating the establishment of a **recycling** program in the County,
- **monitoring water quality** in local streams,
- creating a **slide show** dealing with conservation for use in local schools,
- sponsoring **educational lectures** and seminars on conservation issues and “smarter growth”, and
- coordinating the annual community **roadside trash clean-up**.

RACC has cooperated with local governments and other conservation organizations on many projects including:

- ❖ establishing the **Rockbridge Easement Agreement Program (REAP)**, a voluntary County program to purchase development rights from farm and open land owners;
- ❖ promoting **Conservation Easements and Ag/Forestal districts**;
- ❖ building **support for modern intermodal railroads** to facilitate truck transport of goods as part of a balanced transportation plan for the I-81 corridor;
- ❖ developing **Jordan's Point Park**;
- ❖ studying of the **effects of a proposed cogeneration plant** on local water and air quality;
- ❖ development of the **County sign ordinance** and establishment of **by-ways along scenic roads** in the county; and
- ❖ providing expertise to local governments on a variety of issues including **Moore's Creek** reservoir, the **County Court House** renovation, and initiating a **ground water inventory**.

Currently RACC is producing a **video about natural hazards** for development, working diligently to foster continued **improvements in land use planning**, and participating as an active partner with RAIL Solution to seek a better, more **balanced solution to I-81 congestion** than the proposed massive highway widening plan.

The Council publishes a newsletter that informs people about conservation activities in the County, and has published the *Trail Guide to the Chessie Trail*, and *A Special Place, a Conservation Guide for Homeowners*.

A more complete listing of RACC past and current projects is available at the RACC website at <http://rockbridgeconservation.org/> . The RACC office is located on the second floor of the Wachovia Bank building, 101 S. Main Street, Lexington, Virginia.