



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

Newsletter of the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (RACC)

August 2017

RACC to members and the public:

'You've Got the Power'

RACC's booth at this year's Community Festival on Saturday, August 26, will emphasize the many ways that families and businesses can choose to reduce their carbon footprints and thus limit their contribution to climate change. In doing so, they will likely find that their health and their pocketbooks also benefit.

Some of these choices involve upfront investment with gradual repayment (solar cells), while others produce immediate gratification (locally grown food). Here are some examples to be featured at the RACC booth:

- Electric vehicles are improving from advances in battery technology. Several vehicles and a solar charging device will be on display.
- Solar photovoltaic cells now provide electricity to many homes and businesses in the area. Whether the panels are mounted on the roof or on the ground, the result is lower electricity bills.
- Local produce sold at farmers' markets or in stores not only tastes wonderful but avoids transport over long distances. Local farms also may use lower levels of petroleum-based chemicals and fertilizers.
- New lighting technologies are filling the stores and provide a wide variety of choices for economical, durable illumination.
- "Smart windows" and films that can be retrofitted on existing panes reject heat without affecting transparency when viewed from inside or out, day or night.
- Misting fans can lower the temperature on a patio or in a barn by the magic of evaporation — using a little water and minimal power, which can also be solar.

RACC will add exhibits in "Energy Alley" along the Wells Fargo Bank drive-through, featuring a misting fan, a solar bird bath, Mark Cline's sculpture of the Natural Bridge of Virginia, and an exhibit describing progress on the Arcadia Initiative (see also the report of the Land Use Committee with this newsletter).

RACC supports easement for property on Maury River

The City of Lexington is considering a request to allow a conservation easement along the Maury River on acreage within city limits. A staff report to City Council recommended against the easement, but RACC's Land Use Committee argues in its favor.

Owner Andrew McThenia wants to put his land into an easement that would limit development to one or two residences for family members while continuing to allow public access to the river. He describes the property as "about 39 acres of riverfront land in East Lexington, located at the end of Campbell Lane across from the Chessie Trail" (see map). He notes that the property is largely wooded and forms a riparian buffer zone.



The McThenia property occupies the "thumb" in this Google map.

RACC advised the city that the property presents geological, topographical and economic obstacles to dense development. Problems include steep slopes, rocky outcrops, sinkholes, and possible contaminant migration from an old city dump. In addition, construction of city infrastructure for multiple houses would be very expensive.

Placing the McThenia land in a conservation easement would support the surrounding area as an attractive place to live, preserve the view from the Chessie Trail, and possibly help Lexington meet future watershed requirements.

House Mountain suit rescheduled for December. See story on Page 5.

RACC Position Paper: Lexington's zoning process needs work

The City of Lexington is preparing to revise its Comprehensive Plan, which is usually expected to drive the development of zoning ordinances to implement the plan. Members of the RACC Land Use Committee became concerned that the city is revising its zoning first, putting the cart before the horse. RACC therefore wrote the city's Planning Commission to request that no significant legal actions, such as the sale of city-owned property, be taken pending the approval of the Comprehensive Plan and subsequent appropriate revisions to the zoning code.

Issues of concern to RACC include but are not limited to:

1. Community input vs. administrative discretion. The Matrix of Uses by Zone, by increasing the number of "by right" uses (requiring no public input) as opposed to current "conditional" uses (requiring public input) drastically reduces community participation as well as site-specific considerations, and has potential negative impacts on neighborhood harmony in residential areas.
2. "Incentive zoning" (the allowance of super-density as a tradeoff for open space and other amenities) is poorly defined. The relevant text gives broad discretion to developers, and lacks the transparency required for public understanding.
3. The Multifamily Mobile Home District is not reflected in the proposed ordinance. This type of housing meets a legitimate need and should not be precluded from city land.
4. The proposed Future Land Use Map, which would be adopted as part of the zoning package, designates school properties for residential use.

There is a growing public perception that the decision-making process regarding land use is moving away from past city practices that ensured effective public participation and development of consensus regarding proposed changes. The process may be driven by the financial and/or time constraints that accompany the use of outsourced planning expertise.

RACC stated that members of its Land Use Committee with appropriate professional experience are willing to work with city officials and interested citizens to help find a consensual solution.

Dominion to darken surfaces on some of its giant towers

Dominion Power has agreed to a final settlement to mitigate the appearance of the extra-tall towers it built to support its Dooms-Lexington powerline. The section that will be treated runs from Newport Road in Augusta County to just outside the Lexington substation.

According to one of the suing landowners, James Gercke, the agreement calls for Dominion to coat towers 130-183 with Natina, a chemical that reacts with the towers' galvanized metal surface to produce a dull brown finish. The State Corporation Commission (SCC) has yet to approve the settlement, but has already ordered that the towers in Albemarle County be slightly darkened.

According to Mr. Gercke, the settlement had to balance the need for mitigation on a large scale against the cost to Dominion of the initial treatment and possible future maintenance. Mr. Gercke added, "While the settlement is not perfect, I am hopeful that it will markedly reduce the visual impact of the towers on the countryside."

Meanwhile, a separate suit filed by landowner Kris Baumann has not been settled and continues to seek construction of smaller, darkened towers and overhead lines that are located in better positions. That suit accuses Dominion of misleading citizens and the SCC about the size and appearance of their planned towers.

Ridge & River News

is published quarterly and edited by Sally Nunneley

Send suggestions, articles or letters to RACC@rockbridge.net or mail them to the address shown on the cover.

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RACC Board Meetings

are open to members and guests

Time: 4:30 p.m., first Thursday of each month*

Place: RACC Office, Wells Fargo Building 2nd floor
101 South Main Street, Lexington, VA

*Please contact RACC at 540-463-2330 or e-mail racc@rockbridge.net to confirm date and time.

Volunteerism is the key to progress. Help RACC grow!

Here is the latest information on RACC's committee activities. They cover a broad range of conservation interests, including both current issues in the community and long-term objectives. Volunteers are needed! *To help, contact the people shown below or the RACC office, 540-463-2330 or RACC@rockbridge.net.*

Land Use Committee

The Land Use Committee works on many important conservation issues. Members have a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding land use and planning, but we are always looking for people who are willing to help. Current issues include assisting with Lexington's efforts to revise its planning and zoning regulations and supporting a request for a conservation easement in the city (see stories on Page 1).

The committees's regular meeting is at 4 p.m. on the second Thursday of each month at the RACC office. Please contact Chris Wise at jwise@wlu.edu to learn more.

Arcadia Initiative

This project involves the conserving the landscape of a large portion of the southern part of Rockbridge County and the northern part of Botetourt County. Arcadia itself is a small settlement in Botetourt whose name evokes a natural landscape, and the surrounding area remains largely natural. This is one of the few still largely undeveloped areas that cross the Valley of Virginia, linking the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Allegheny Front. Much of the land is in public ownership through various state and federal agencies, while most of the private land remains forested or is in low intensity agriculture. The LUC is working with various individuals and groups that are supportive of this effort to foster conservations efforts while boosting local economic development through water quality improvement projects, alternative agriculture, outdoor recreation, and tourism.

Natural Bridge State Park

Long-range master planning for the NBSP is underway. A local Advisory Committee provided input to planners for Virginia's Department of Conservation and Recreation; the resulting plan will be unveiled in late 2017 or early 2018. This plan envisions campgrounds, trails, new visitor education and interpretation experiences, demolition of old buildings and construction of new ones, as well as changes in traffic patterns that may include reducing or eliminating

traffic across the Bridge. The Friends of the Natural Bridge State Park is being formed to assist with labor and funding to make the NBSP the best park in Virginia. Please contact Jean Clark at director@lexingtonvirginia.com if interested in helping with this organization.

Braiding the Way

This effort will boost outdoor recreational opportunities in the Rockbridge area to stimulate economic development, boost the quality of life and conserve natural resources. Over the last two years, a committee has met to gather information on resources and needs.

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RACC members and others are asked to take the "Outdoor Recreation Survey" at:
surveymonkey.com/r/outdoorrecreationrockbridge.

.....
Potential projects include multiple trails and boat-launching sites. A public presentation and an announcement of the first new project will take place this fall. Local organizations are asked to join a partnership to support the development and maintenance of these facilities and to continue the work of this committee. For more information contact Jean Clark (see above).

Other areas of interest

The committee also works on the Buffalo Creek Wildlife Corridor and related conservation efforts; trails and transportation; and expansion of outdoor recreation opportunities and publicity to encourage green tourism.

**Recycling containers
available for public events**

For information and to reserve containers, please contact Jane Comstock at the RACC office, jane@rockbridge.net.

Watershed Committee

The RACC Watershed Committee meets monthly to consider “all things water-quality” in Rockbridge County and the Maury River watershed.

Certain issues have been of concern recently, like the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline with its attendant construction disturbance. The committee also wrote a substantive letter to the Lexington City Council supporting removal of the Jordan’s Point dam.

We currently have about 30 trained volunteers who monitor local water quality. Committee members have obtained funds for supplies and training, as well as managing the website for data entry.

Some years ago, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for Chesapeake Bay as a basis for restoring clean water to the region’s waterways. Our committee participates in multiple TMDL programs for Rockbridge County with special focus on the Lake Merriweather Dam and it’s effect on water quality in the Little Calfpasture watershed and Goshen Pass. We are also involved with the Buffalo Creek and Wood’s Creek TMDLs.

The Watershed Committee welcomes visitors, prospective members, new ideas and enthusiasm.

For further information, contact Daphne Raz at fellowship57@gmail.com.

Annual Community Cleanup

RACC, VDOT and Rockbridge County jointly sponsored the 23rd annual Community Cleanup, March 25 - April 2, using the longer period to allow flexibility in scheduling. More than 350 people in about 50 groups or as individuals collected more than 600 bags of trash from local roadsides.

An enthusiastic team named the “Trash Bashers” won the annual Litter Challenge for the 2nd year in a row by collecting more than 46 bags of refuse along Lone Jack Road. They were presented with the Litter Cup, fashioned by Mark Cline, at the June meeting of the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors.

Cleanup coordinator David Harbor wants to thank the RACC volunteers who helped distribute supplies, the participants who made the cleanup a success, and our partners in the event: VDOT contributed the orange bags and vests while Rockbridge County’s recycling centers and the Rockbridge Regional Libraries served as depots for supplies. More information on the 2017 cleanup can be found on the RACC website under Current Projects, and includes a map with links to groups and photos.

We hope to see you and your group out next spring. Watch the RACC newsletter for the date.

To help, contact David Harbor, david.harbor@gmail.com.

Seniors take note: Price of National Park pass is rising

At one time the National Park Service had a program for citizens 62 years of age or older called the Golden Age Passport. The card allowed seniors free entrance to parks and half-price camping, and cost nothing based on the theory that by this age people had paid taxes all their working lives and could benefit from National Park visits.

In 1994 this morphed into the Senior Pass which costs \$10 and covers entrance fees for all Federal Public Lands.

On August 28 the cost for this card will rise to \$80. However, passes bought before that date will still be honored, so there is still time to get the \$10 version.

Whether you get your pass before the price increase or after, it is still a bargain if you intend to travel and visit some of the treasures our nation has to offer.

You can buy a pass at any National Park that charges an entrance fee (Shenandoah National Park is the closest to us) or on line at nps.gov.

Solar Co-op adds area installations

The Mountain and Valley Solar Co-op closed on July 15 with about 100 members, at least 41 of whom have already signed contracts for installation.

As the photovoltaic industry continues to mature, it makes increasing economic sense and becomes easier to “go solar.”

‘House Mountain Affair’

Small numbers of this beautifully illustrated book by Harry Warner are still available at the RACC office and in local bookstores.

The book makes a fine gift for those who love our mountains, and all profits go to RACC’s efforts to keep the House Mountain Preserve in its natural state.

Pipeline projects move toward government approval

As part of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, RACC continues to closely monitor environmental issues related to the Atlantic Coastal Pipeline (ACP) and the Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP). Each belongs to private utility and energy-transportation companies and consists of a large conduit (42-inch diameter) designed to transport compressed natural gas from the Marcellus Shale formation in West Virginia and Ohio to the East Coast.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission recently released the required environmental impact statements for the pipelines, and the Forest Service has posted a draft decision to grant the necessary permits with a deadline for objections on September 5. Virginia's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has posted draft requirements for water quality protection and scheduled three public meetings (the session on Aug. 7 at JMU is the closest to Lexington); the deadline for comments to DEQ is Aug 22.

Government pipeline permitting processes involve multiple agencies with various deadlines; RACC members are encouraged to follow the news on the RACC website and other sources.

Documents outlining Dominion's proposed construction methods and the requirements of the DEQ are available at deq.virginia.gov. In addition, the DEQ must review separate Erosion and Sediment Control and Stormwater Management plans. These reviews have been contracted out to a consulting company for \$2.2 million, but that company is already working on other Dominion-related projects, raising questions about their independence and thoroughness in conducting this work. DEQ itself will consider input on the technical and engineering requirements of the plans. The public input period for that effort closes on October 13.

There are serious questions regarding the justification for these pipelines. Although natural gas has been proposed as a "bridge" energy source for the transition from coal to renewables, analyses suggest that use of the pipelines will annually emit greenhouse gases equivalent to 20 coal-fired power plants or 14 million passenger vehicles.

As a further problem, federal authorities evaluate the need for each pipeline as a stand-alone case with "need" defined by the presence of prearranged customers for the gas, ignoring existing pipelines and construction plans for others in the same area. In fact, independent studies suggest that existing pipelines will be able to meet projected demand. Regardless, the ACP is a wonderful investment for Dominion: under Virginia regulations, the public guarantees that Dominion will be paid for this \$5.2 billion project plus a 15% profit.

House Mountain trial date reset

RACC's suit defending the agreements of the House Mountain Preserve has been rescheduled for December 6-7. Judge Carson granted a continuance as requested by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) over objections lodged by RACC's attorney, Jared R. Jenkins.

RACC and VOF joined together 30 years ago in a successful effort to save House Mountain from development, and at that time signed formal agreements establishing a House Mountain Management Committee with members appointed by both parties and broadly representing the stakeholders.

However, in 2015, VOF attempted to unilaterally end the agreements and take over management of this Rockbridge treasure. RACC then sued to preserve the original arrangements. In November of 2016, Judge Carson determined that the case should proceed to a jury trial. VOF's lawyers failed in an attempt to move the trial to a venue away from Lexington, and then just before the July trial date requested the delay that Judge Carson granted.

RACC continues to hope that pre-trial negotiations will produce a settlement to preserve the mountain in its undisturbed state, as originally intended by the donors to the purchase fund.

During all of the legal proceedings, RACC's attorney, Jared R. Jenkins, has provided his services without charge despite the considerable time and effort involved in responding to the numerous legal challenges mounted by VOF.

Donate to RACC today to support its important work!

Please consider moving up a step.

The events of this year remind us once again of the critical role RACC plays in policy-making in Lexington and Rockbridge County. From water quality in our streams and rivers to land use and zoning questions in the city and beyond to energy issues throughout the area, RACC continues to be a sought-after source of objective information and analysis aimed at preserving this special place.

Your support allows these efforts to continue and expand, and we ask that you make your annual donation now and consider increasing your support. Right now we've less than half of what we need to balance our budget this year. Please help us continue to protect the unique natural resources we all value so much.

Annual Giving	Membership Level
Up to \$60	Supporter
\$61 - \$149	Steward
\$150 - \$499	Benefactor
\$500 - \$999	Conservator
\$1,000 - \$4,999	Sustainer
Above \$5,000	Visionary

Telephone: 540-463-2330 * Website: rockbridgeconservation.org * Facebook page: Rockbridge-Conservation

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