



RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

Newsletter of the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (RACC)

March 2018

Judge overturns House Mountain verdict

RACC was surprised and deeply disappointed by a state trial judge's plan, announced in a February 23 letter, to set aside a unanimous jury verdict in favor of RACC in the case of RACC v. Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF). This lawsuit seeks to maintain the original contractual agreements between RACC and VOF intended to permanently protect the House Mountain Preserve in its natural state and insure a level of local control of the property's management and future ownership.

In 2013, VOF attempted to unilaterally dissolve the agreements that had successfully guided activity on and management of House Mountain for more than twenty-five years, seizing all decision-making authority for itself and creating an advisory-only committee for local input on VOF actions and decisions.

Believing that VOF's action violated both the spirit and the letter of the original agreements signed in conjunction with the purchase of the property, RACC sued VOF, seeking to defend the original agreements and management structure for the mountain. RACC believes this was necessary to keep faith with all of the people who contributed money, time, and energy for the preservation of House Mountain during the twenty-eight years since the land was purchased. Most importantly, RACC believes that meaningful local participation in decision-making is an integral part of the original partnership.

See House Mountain overturned, Page 3



The "Coastal Canoeists" display their haul from Goshen Pass the 2017.

Join in the Community Cleanup, March 17-25

See details on Page 2.

Whither Lexington?

Forums considers its future

RACC is hosting a series of three sessions to engage the public in Lexington's effort to draft a new Comprehensive Plan for development and zoning.

The first session will be held at Lylburn Downing Middle School on Wednesday March 21 from 7:00-9:00 p.m. Focus of the discussion will be the limits to Lexington's growth. While the city has always faced some natural limitations due to geography and resources, others have been imposed through local or external policy decisions.

The first hour of the forum will feature landscape architect Arthur Bartenstein's remarks on "Lexington: Boom or Bonsai," a title that refers to the dichotomy between those who advocate for growth and others who prefer to maintain a smaller, quieter city. He will be followed by architect and RACC Co-President Lee Merrill speaking on his insights from long familiarity with the city and issues related to its development.

In the second hour, W&L's Tom Camden will moderate a panel with Rusty Ford, Stephanie Wilkinson, Lee Merrill and Leslie Straughan. The audience will be asked to submit questions for the panel to discuss in the last part of the forum.

Coffee and cookies will be provided. The stronger the attendance, the better for Lexington. Get involved now, before decisions are made!

RACC needs help for financial sustainability

How much is local conservation worth to you?

Since 1976, RACC has labored to protect the unique natural and cultural landscape of Rockbridge County and the Valley of Virginia. Its vision as an organization comes from a deep understanding of local history and an acute awareness of the future challenges facing the Rockbridge region. Guided by this long-term perspective, RACC's mission is to raise awareness of local environmental issues and empower the community to engage in sustainable use of land, water, and energy.

RACC's efforts are sustained by dozens of wonderful volunteers supported by two excellent part-time staff members, private financial contributions, partnership with local institutions, and occasional grants and bequests. Nevertheless, its financial resources are limited and, as of today, barely support its ambitious mission and growing list of conservation activities. RACC has a very tight operating budget (\$54,000 for 2018) and needs to find more donors to cover those expenses with their generous, tax-deductible gifts. As you decide upon the amount of your 2018 contribution to RACC, please consider the following two actions on behalf of RACC:

Increasing your annual giving to produce a cumulative long-term impact on RACC's future financial position.

Did you know that it takes \$60 today to be equivalent to a \$15 gift in 1976 when RACC got started? The organization has a broad base of small- and mid-range donors, but if a substantial number of those supporters would step up a level, the effect on the operating budget would be extremely helpful. For donors at the Visionary level, committing to a larger annual gift would join bequests and gifts to the endowment to help ensure RACC's financial viability for years into the future. Increased giving shows that you value local conservation and are willing to support it.

Encouraging friends, family, and acquaintances to join in support of RACC. Expanding and diversifying our membership will bring new energy and ideas to the table and increase community involvement with our mission.

Ultimately, as a supporter of RACC, you are making an investment in the future of conservation in Rockbridge County, and your contributions reflect the extent to which we value the unique qualities of the place we hold dear.

Whether you value the land, the water, or the local 'energy' in Rockbridge, RACC will continue to work on your behalf to protect it for future generations. Please refer to the Giving Levels on the outside page. RACC needs your help!

Community Cleanup set for March 17-25

Get ready for the 24th annual Community Cleanup, sponsored by RACC in partnership with Rockbridge County and the Virginia Department of Transportation. Again this year, the dates include two weekends and the intervening week to provide flexibility for scheduling conflicts and weather situations.

The cleanup is a volunteer citizen effort to pick up trash along roadsides and in other public areas to beautify our Rockbridge home and strengthen our sense of community. In 2017, about 350 people in 50 different areas filled more than 600 trash bags. We can do better — if more people pitch in!

Sign up for the effort by visiting rockbridgeconservation.org and clicking the green Community Cleanup button on the main page, or mail in a signup form. The forms, together with trash bags and safety vests, are available now at the Rockbridge Regional Library and its in-county branches, at the Recycling Collection Centers and the Office of Community Development located in the Rockbridge County Administrative building.

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.

RACC Board Meetings

are open to members and guests

Time: 4:30 p.m., first Thursday, even-number months*

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

*Please confirm specific date and time at 540-463-2330
or racc@rockbridge.net.

House Mountain overturned

Continued from Page 1

On December 7, 2017, a Rockbridge County Jury found unanimously in favor of RACC, both in its overall verdict and in the two pages of questions about specific aspects of the Agreements, determining that the Agreements remained in force.

Now, after last week's ruling to aside the jury verdict, RACC must defend not only the community's role in decisions about House Mountain, but also the integrity of an unbiased jury of Rockbridge County citizens in the adjudication of this matter. The judge had at least two opportunities to rule on the case on his own, but instead opted to oversee a jury trial and then to have the jury deliberate to a conclusion. Rejecting the jury's decision after the fact is a blow to the judicial process itself.

RACC believes more strongly than ever that the local community's role is critical in preserving this iconic natural landmark, and so it will appeal the court's decision to set aside the jury's verdict and unjustly disregards the will of the people of Rockbridge County.

How can citizens help? Please do the following:

- 1) Write letters and speak out to express the community's grave concern about the dismissal of the verdict after the jury had carefully considered all of the evidence presented at the trial and the testimony of participants in the writing of the original Agreements;
- 2) Please also donate generously to RACC's House Mountain Defense Fund with a designated contribution at the RACC website or by mailing a check (see addresses on back page); and
- 3) Watch for future announcements of a community-wide steering committee to support immediate judicial, legislative, and political efforts to defend House Mountain.

Arcadia Initiative recommended for Virginia Outdoors Plan

RACC is pleased to announce that the Arcadia Initiative has been officially recommended for inclusion in the new Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP) by both the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission and the Roanoke-Allegheny Regional Commission. The Plan is the state's comprehensive document for ongoing land conservation, outdoor recreation, and open-space planning; it is renewed every five years.

The 2018 Plan will describe the Arcadia Initiative as a multi-jurisdictional effort to preserve large landscapes for the protection of wildlife migration and forest ecology. The Initiative covers much of southern Rockbridge County and northern Botetourt County, where the Allegheny and Blue Ridge mountain ranges are close together and are connected by the James River; it currently has relatively little human development, is heavily forested, and is an ecologically rich area.

The Initiative's current sponsors are RACC's Land Use Committee and the Valley Conservation Council's Upper James Program. They are together planning a stakeholder meeting later this spring to bring together the managers of the many affected public-lands agencies to establish common goals for the Arcadia Initiative and explore opportunities for program synergies in natural/ecological land conservation throughout the Arcadia region.

To be included in the state plan, Arcadia and other projects must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Have statewide or regional significance.
- Demonstrate involvement and support from multiple jurisdictions.
- Be capable of initiation within the next five years.
- Address top needs identified by the Virginia Outdoors Survey.

In addition to the Arcadia Initiative, four other local projects supported by RACC have been nominated to the 2018 VOP Plan:

- 1) Replacing the Chessie Trail bridge over the South River and completing the trail's connection from Lexington to Buena Vista;
- 2) Developing access points along the Upper James River Water Trail and the projected Maury River Water Trail;
- 3) Implementing the James River Heritage Trail to include the Upper James River Water Trail and the Allegheny Highlands Blueways;
- 4) Completing the master plan for the 13-mile trail to connect the Brushy Hills Preserve-Brushy Blue Greenway (west of Lexington) to the Blue Ridge Parkway (east of Buena Vista).

Watch this space for news of further progress for projects in the Rockbridge area.

Donate to RACC today to support its important work!

Please consider moving up a step.

The stories in this issue of Ridge and River News again highlight the critical role RACC plays in policy-making in the Rockbridge area. From water quality in our streams and rivers to land use and zoning questions in the cities 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 is critical to sustaining these efforts, and we ask that you make your annual donation now and consider increasing your support for 2018 and beyond. 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

If you have not yet donated in 2018 or can raise your contribution, please give at rockbridgeconservation.org or mail your check to RACC, P.O. Box 564, Lexington, VA 24450.

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

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