



# RIDGE AND RIVER NEWS

## *The Newsletter of Rockbridge Conservation*

Fall 2025

### ***Celebrating Conservation***

Rockbridge Conservation held its Annual Meeting on Oct 19 at Kendal at Lexington. About 40 RC members attended in addition to board members, officers, and staff. Preliminary activities included a guided walk on RC's Sunnyside Preserve adjacent to Kendal and a social hour in Kendal Hall with beverages and heavy hors d'oeuvres.

The business meeting was convened by RC president Bob Biersack, who presented a review of the organization's 2025 activities (see story on right).

Treasurer Megan Hess reported that memberships and donations in 2025 are below previous years, but the value of the two endowments has grown with rising markets. She also noted that, thanks to careful stewardship and frugal management, expenses to date are well under budget. However, RC still needs strong year-end fundraising to meet the year's goals for supporting key operations and avoiding unsustainable draws on endowment.

Biersack then conducted the election of board members and officers for 2026 and presented Conservation Awards to individuals who have made extraordinary efforts to strengthen local conservation efforts.

For details, please see related stories:

- ★ Board and Officer Elections, Page 2
- ★ Conservation Awards, Page 3

### *Letter from the President*

#### **Progress in 2025 and What's Next**

Autumn is often a time for looking back on the past year's efforts and accomplishments. This review also gives us a chance to begin looking forward with an eye toward using what we've done and learned to help guide us toward what's next. For Rockbridge Conservation, 2025 gave us several examples of hard work yielding important results.

I think it's safe to say that the amazing efforts of our Waste Prevention Committee have persuaded local organizations to operate their big public events in ways that minimize waste. From the *Bull and Oyster Fest* supporting the Rockbridge Area Health Center to the *Freedom Food Festival* benefiting many area non-profits to the *Palmer Ice Cream Supper*, a long-time community tradition, our efforts to reduce waste through composting and recycling meant that thousands of pounds of material went to new, productive uses instead of being dumped into the landfill. We've shown that a few straightforward steps can produce big benefits, and I think that organizers of these and other events will make those efforts routine in the future.

The past year may also represent a major turning point in a seemingly intractable problem for the Maury River, a critical element in the Rockbridge area's ecosystem. After years of frustration with poor management of the Lake

*See President's Letter, Page 2*

## *A Happy Gathering for Rockbridge Conservation!*



Photo by  
Spencer

## Rajsky, Hirt to Join Board

**Ehi Rajsky** is an Assistant Professor of Accounting at W&L. She grew up in Nigeria and went to college there, then moved to the United States with her immediate family. After earning her Ph.D. in Business from Temple University, in 2022 she relocated to Rockbridge with her husband and son.



Her experience with Nigeria's major waste management challenges informed her awareness of environmental issues and inspired her conservation interests, which include advocating for proper waste disposal, environmental beautification, and public education on environmental protection.

In her leisure time, Ehi enjoys traveling and reading, environmental beautification, and public education on environmental protection. And she says she has watched the entire series of the TV show "Frasier" more than 10 times.

**Sam Hirt** grew up in Fairbanks, Alaska, where his love for the outdoors grew through picking wild blueberries, outdoor fun in Boy Scouts, and a healthy diet of salmon and moose. After earning a Ph.D. in Ecology from Auburn University, he moved to Buena Vista in 2016 to teach Biology and Environmental Science at Southern Virginia University, and fell in love with the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Sam loves the community and livability of Buena Vista, and walks or bikes to work whenever possible. His conservation interests include reducing and managing waste, including collection of food scraps for a local farm and starting a recycling program for the SVU campus.

## President's Letter Cont'd from Page 1

Merriweather dam at the Boy Scout camp in Goshen, a group of committed residents in the Maury River Alliance, with support from Rockbridge Conservation, found paths to engage positively with the Scouts and relevant state and local officials. Together they have developed a lake management plan with specific steps that will benefit both the scouting experience and the quality of the Maury's water.

Our commitment to water quality led us to accept a new challenge, managing a program for the Virginia Department of Health that uses federal funds to provide new well and septic systems for local homeowners whose incomes wouldn't support the expense of such work. Doing this directly improves the health of local citizens while also improving water quality more generally; we've successfully identified eligible homeowners, conducted bidding processes and completed work on several sites. These tasks were a big departure from the types of work RC usually does, but it targets an important part of our community and leads to broad environmental benefits. We're very pleased with the results.

Similarly, in 2025 we were able to provide financial support to four more Habitat for Humanity homeowners who installed rooftop solar systems. There are now seven houses in the Greenhouse Road community that are producing their own clean, renewable electricity and achieving significant monthly savings on their utility bills. This program will continue as Habitat begins building on South Main Street in Lexington.

The coming year will bring new challenges as we celebrate our 50th birthday and embrace again our commitment to protecting the unique environmental characteristics that help define this community.

—Bob Biersack

- **RC Officers & Returning Board**
- **Members Elected for 2026**
- Members at the Annual Meeting re-elected board members David Agnor, Sam Allen, Megan Hess, and Shannon Spencer for three-year terms.
- Members also elected the following officers:
  - President, Shannon Spencer
  - Vice President, Melody Tennant
  - Treasurer Megan Hess

## Awards for Conservation Heroes

The Annual Meeting on Oct 19 featured the presentation of awards to several people who have, over many years, devoted extraordinary time and effort to local conservation projects.

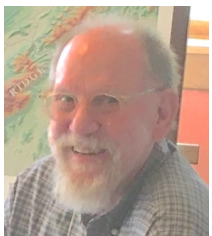
**Karen “KB” Bailey and Hunter Mohring** were honored with a **Lifetime Achievement Award** in grateful recognition of their visionary leadership, creative energy, and myriad contributions to the community. Together with the late Mollie Messimer, they created Boxerwood as a center of nature education that, over two decades, has touched the lives of thousands of local school children, their families, and their neighbors. More recently, they created the Meadow, an adjacent natural-burial cemetery, and donated it to Boxerwood with an endowment to maintain it in perpetuity.



**Chris Slaydon**, Director of Community Development for Rockbridge County, was presented with a **Conservation Planning Award** recognizing his commitment to community participation in important policy and planning decisions that impact all residents and visitors in the county. Slaydon and his team actively seek public engagement and work hard to engage in discussions that then influence outcomes. The award was accepted on Slaydon’s behalf by colleague Viveca Hanson.



**James and Karen Pannabecker** received a **Historic Preservation Award** in recognition of their efforts to protect, preserve and breathe new life into the historic structures at Thunder Bridge near Natural Bridge Station. The Pannabeckers are restoring assorted structures on the site and have welcomed artists to locate their studios there.



**Larry Evans** received in absentia a **Special Award** for his many years work on a variety of conservation projects and long service as the organization’s treasurer. Rockbridge Conservation is grateful for these and many other services he performed over the years.

**Ridge & River News** is published quarterly and edited by Sally Nunneley and Shannon Spencer.

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## Thank You, Mollie, Your Legacy Will Benefit Us All!

Rockbridge Conservation gratefully acknowledges receipt of a generous bequest from the estate of Mollie Messimer, a leader in establishing and strengthening conservation efforts in this area. Molly was an early Executive Director of the Rockbridge Area Conservation Council (now RC) and one of the founders of Lexington’s beloved Boxerwood.

The bequest will become a part of RC’s endowment, where, together with other gifts, it will support conservation efforts long into the future.

## From the Watershed Committee

Charles Winder, W&L biologist, met with RC’s Watershed Committee. He has reviewed 15 years of data from W&L’s Woods Creek Biomonitoring Project, which tracks bacterial counts and stream life in local streams. The data from several Lexington sites indicate the persistent presence of *E. coli* and other coliform bacteria that indicate contamination with human waste.

Committee members also noted that studies of macro-invertebrate life raise new concerns about imbalances in stream ecology with an over-population of leaches and a benthic health score of just 3 out of 12 points.

## 2026: Marking 50 Years of Rockbridge Conservation

In 2026, RC will celebrate half a century of conservation here in Rockbridge!

Activities will include hikes, special programs, public events, and stories in this publication and others, highlighting the achievements we’ve made together to preserve and protect Rockbridge County’s natural and historic resources, as well as the future we’re building together. A full calendar of events is coming soon!

—Jamie Goodin, Executive Director

## Consider Year-end Giving to Rockbridge Conservation!

If you haven't yet made your annual donation to renew your membership, or if you would like to make an additional gift, please scan the QR code shown here, visit [rockbridgeconservation.org/donate](http://rockbridgeconservation.org/donate), or send a check to P.O. Box 564, Lexington, VA 24450. You can also donate stocks, bonds or mutual funds to Rockbridge Conservation through Vanguard Brokerage Services: DTC# 0062; Account #2682-1917. For more information, email us at [info@rockbridgeconservation.org](mailto:info@rockbridgeconservation.org)



Although we are a largely volunteer organization, we rely on the financial support of our members to provide administrative leadership and technical support to our volunteers. Member donations allow us to run recycling programs, maintain our two public trails, provide information about environmental activities and alerts in our area, collect and test river water samples, help put solar panels on Habitat houses, restore river and stream banks, advocate for the protection and preservation of our local waterways, fields, forests, and much more! Having an active membership also helps us apply for grants to fund our projects.

***Please donate today!*** With your support, we can make a difference right here in Rockbridge County.

Tel: 540-463-2330 \* Email [info@rockbridgeconservation.org](mailto:info@rockbridgeconservation.org) \* Website [rockbridgeconservation.org](http://rockbridgeconservation.org) \* Facebook [Rockbridge-Conservation](https://www.facebook.com/Rockbridge-Conservation)

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Board Members:

Rockbridge Conservation  
P.O. Box 564  
Lexington, VA 24450



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