



Shenandoah River One of Nation's Most Threatened

Valley Conservation Council (VCC) joined with American Rivers and the Potomac Conservancy in April to release a report announcing that the Shenandoah River is one of the most endangered rivers in the US due to runaway development. The Shenandoah River is not one of the most polluted rivers in the nation, though recent fish kills and widespread water quality impairment threaten to permanently change the character of the river if action is not taken soon. The "Endangered" status signifies that this is a critical time for action on land use policies in the Valley before over-development irreversibly harms the river. Although causes of the fish kill are not yet determined, it is suspected that multiple causes may have a role in water quality impairments.

VCC Executive Director John Eckman says the listing "is one more clear sign that localities must act now to put in place strong, sensible conservation and growth policies. Part of the problem is the type of development that's occurring in the Valley region. Land development in the Valley has progressed at about twice the rate of population growth. There's an inherent inefficiency there—it's a design issue."

VCC Hosts Forum on Industry and Agriculture

On June 27, amid concerns about a potential "mega-site" industrial development in Weyers Cave, VCC brought together citizens, politicians, farmers, and business leaders for a forum on Industry, Agriculture, and the Valley's Future at Blue Ridge Community College. Speakers included Robin Sullenberger from the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, Charles Curry from Augusta County's Agricultural Task Force, Delegate Chris Saxman, and Delegate Steven Landes from the Center for Rural Virginia. The high attendance underlined the importance of coming together to discuss different visions for how to direct future growth in the Valley. In his presentation, Charles Curry said, "It's important to have a strong economic development policy, based on strong citizen input. The policy needs to be localized. It needs to be compatible with other sectors of the economy, cost-effective, and well communicated." Landes summed up, "I think this is an opportune time to have the debate on growth and what's appropriate and what's not."



Photo by EdNeville.com

What can you do?

- Get involved in local planning processes such as comprehensive plan review or revisions to zoning by-laws.
- Visit VCC's website, www.valleyconservation.org for pointers to a wide range of resources.
- Invite VCC to offer an educational program for your local planning commission, town council, or board of supervisors on how to mesh smart conservation with smart growth through voluntary approaches to land protection and better models for development.



VCC's forum on industry and agriculture brought in speakers and leaders to address a hot topic in the central Shenandoah Valley.

More Land Protected

The recent trend of tremendous land protection activity continues. In 2006, the acreage under permanent conservation easement that VCC co-holds has jumped from 4,500 acres to 5,900 acres—more than a 30% increase—with the addition of two new easements. Robert Davis and his sister Betty Lew Davis Moore have placed an easement on 500 acres of farm and forest land in Bath County that their family has farmed for generations. With over half a mile of frontage on the Cowpasture River and lying next to the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest, the Davis tract adds to the amount of uninterrupted conserved



Owner Robert Davis and VCC's John Eckman discuss the easement for this outstanding property in Bath County.

lands. The other recent co-held easement protects more than 800 acres in Rockbridge County.

Another notable easement on an active farm, this one held solely by Virginia Outdoors Foundation, is the Bandy farm in Highland County. Carol and Larry Bandy have permanently protected their 76-acre Highland County sheep farm in the Bluegrass Valley.



The easement on the Bandy sheep farm in Highland County helps protect a vital headwaters area of the Potomac River.

Touring Working Lands in Scenic Swoope

The Augusta Garden Club's historic garden tour on April 29th highlighted the working landscape of the Swoope area. Several of the properties on the tour are permanently protected through conservation easements, as are many other properties in the surrounding area. VCC staff members and volunteers joined with the Garden Club to present information about easements at each of the conserved properties. Bobby Whitescarver and Jeanne Hoffman live at Meadowview, which was on the tour. Noted Whitescarver, "Many landowners in the Swoope area recognize that their quality of life is directly related to farming and their agrarian past and have taken the action necessary to protect this way of life for generations to come. Our hope is that more people will step up to the plate and do what is necessary to protect it."



VCC volunteer Charlie Huppuch and homeowners Jeanne Hoffman and Bobby Whitescarver helped Garden Tour visitors understand how properties can be conserved.

Funding Will Enable VCC to Encourage Riparian Projects

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation has awarded VCC \$100,000 from the Water Quality Improvement Fund to protect the fragile riparian areas along rivers and streams. VCC will use this money to fund the purchase of the riparian component of larger whole-farm (entire tract) easements along impaired streams in the Shenandoah watershed. The purpose of riparian conservation is to improve stream health, filter nutrients and pollutants, and provide essential wildlife habitat. Riparian easements typically protect vegetation along stream banks in order to establish streamside forests and guard the soil against erosion and flood damage. Conservation easements are legal documents that restrict development on land to protect it in perpetuity. Please contact VCC staff member Jackie Jamison if you are interested in protecting the streams and wetlands on your property in the context of a whole-farm easement.

VCC Holds Smart Growth and Local Roads Workshop

On May 31, 60 people gathered in New Market for “Local Roads and Smart Growth,” the latest in a series of VCC seminars targeted to local planners and related officials on land use topics. This one invited planners from all levels of government in the region as well as Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) staff to explore design standards to support compact rather than sprawling development.

Rob Hofrichter led off by describing VDOT’s role in road design. Sara Hollberg next set the context with her presentation on Changing the Pattern of Development: Principles of New Urbanism. Mark Graham, Director of Community Development for Albemarle County, described how VDOT’s newly revised residential street standards are more flexible and what issues are still being resolved. Michael Barnes, also of Albemarle County, gave the developer’s perspective on New Urbanist projects. David Patton, VDOT’s Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator then gave an update on how VDOT is integrating walking and biking into road design. One of the most valuable aspects of the regional gathering was the opportunity for give and take through the question and answer panels and a facilitated session at the end.

Easement Gathering Encourages Others

VCC members Matt and Betsy Morgan and Elizabeth Morgan Borkey graciously welcomed many neighbors to their conserved property in Rockbridge on May 6 to discuss private land conservation and celebrate the great progress landowners have made in protecting the area north of Jump Mountain. The Middlebrook-Brownsburg area boasts one of the highest concentrations of privately protected land in Virginia west of the Blue Ridge. The Morgans provided an opportunity for landowners considering easements to meet with others who have been through the process. If you would like to host a similar event at your home, please let us know.



Matt Morgan fires a reproduced Civil War-era cannon for guests at the easement gathering he hosted.

Board Nominations Sought

If you would like to nominate someone to serve on the board, please contact the VCC office.

New Urbanism Where are smaller streets taking us?



Slide courtesy of Michael Barnes

Developer Michael Barnes covered the many aspects of urban street design.

The workshop focused on roads in terms of how to make development more compact and communities more livable. “We are always looking for ways to help address growth pressure. It helps to bring people together to address the nuts and bolts of better development.” says VCC Executive Director John Eckman. “We were pleased that counties, cities, towns, and VDOT all were well represented.”

Tax Credit Changes Coming

The transferable tax credit Virginia offers to landowners who place a qualified easement on their property is arguably the most generous state benefit in the country. The program is responsible for a huge boost in easement donations, but the budget impact is a concern to lawmakers. Governor Kaine has offered amendments to a bill providing some useful reforms to the program. We expect these changes will be enacted: reduction of the value of tax credits from 50% of easement value to 40%; a \$100 million cap per year on the program statewide starting in 2007; and strengthened standards and review, particularly on very large deals, to avoid abuses in the program. These changes still ensure a very strong incentive for farm and forest landowners who wish to protect their properties.



VCC Board Member Mark Hollberg and Executive Director John Eckman share a laugh at the recent board retreat held at French Brothers cabin in Shenandoah County.



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I-81 Corridor Named Most Endangered Historic Site

On May 19, APVA Preservation Virginia included the I-81 Corridor in the Shenandoah Valley on its lists of "Most Endangered Historic Sites in Virginia." As Valley residents know, the interstate corridor is rich in both history and scenic beauty. It passes through Civil War Battlefields, historic towns, and pastoral farmland and is an appealing gateway to the Shenandoah Valley region.

APVA Preservation Virginia reported that "the Virginia Department of Transportation's plans to build a \$13 billion tolled truck way on I-81, with a daunting average of eight to twelve lanes, would irreversibly change the Corridor forever." VCC has joined with fifty local governments and groups to support the campaign to protect the unique historic places and traditional rural character of the I-81 Corridor.

Welcome, Greg!

VCC extends a warm welcome to our new part-time office manager, Greg Moody. Greg hails from Staunton and is an accomplished jazz musician. He is active in the Stonewall Brigade Band.



Upcoming Events

August 25 – Staunton Art Opening

with Beverley Street Studios of Staunton featuring landscape paintings of the McKelden Smith property, which is protected by a historic easement

September 9 – VCC Annual Membership Meeting and Field Day

Join us at 3 pm for afternoon workshops and a wonderful evening meal at a historic country home in Stuart's Draft.

Membership Renewal Time

Thanks to everyone who has renewed their membership this spring! If you haven't already, now's the time.

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