



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

Photo by Dara Bailey

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• SPRING •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

Unison Considering County Program to Solve Village Water and Sewer Problems *By Tara Connell*

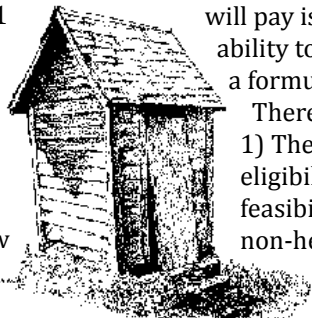
Loudoun County thinks Unison has two big, wet, stinky problems—one wet one and one stinky one, actually—and it is inviting us to do something about them.

The wet one is Unison’s chronic water shortages, particularly in the village. The stinky one is our “unsatisfactory wastewater disposal system problems,” which is a fancy way of saying our failing septics and perhaps worse.

As a result, members of the Unison Preservation Society and others in the community plan to hold a meeting, most likely in May, to discuss whether to create a utility district and build facilities to fix these problems.

The meeting will occur after door-to-door and neighbor-to-neighbor polling takes place to get some information out and assess interest in the county’s proposal under The Loudoun County Water and Wastewater Program.

The program was created after a 2011 “Water & Wastewater Needs Assessment” was done by Loudoun. Remarkably, it found the county had 31 homes with outhouses as of 2010; 35 homes that discharged raw sewage into Loudoun waterways; 1273 non-conventional sewage systems; 13,245 septic systems, quite a few of which were older



than 30 years; and 15,141 private drinking wells.

It said “Unison has crummy wastewater treatment,” said resident Kim Hart. Hart helped Willisville get a wastewater treatment facility.

More precisely, the report said of 36 habitable structures studied in Unison, 8% have unsatisfactory sewer systems. The status of a third more systems was “unknown.” Cost of fixing just these problems was put at \$998,000 in 2011.

Hart spoke at a March 2 meeting in Unison with Scott Fincham, the Environmental Program Specialist of the county’s Department of General Services.

Fincham said Unison’s woes make it eligible for help from the county in building a wastewater treatment facility, a common water supply facility, or both.

But here’s the rub: The community has to take the initiative, do the bulk of the upfront work, and then ultimately has to pay for some or most of the project.

A decision on how much the county will pay is based on the community’s ability to pay, which is determined by a formula.

There are three steps to the process: 1) The application, which determines eligibility; 2) A determination of feasibility; and 3) An evaluation of non-health and safety factors such as the historic nature of the

community, total cost, and cost per home served.

“We might as well apply,” said Steve Chase, president of the Unison Preservation Society and a homeowner in the Village. “It doesn’t commit anyone to anything.”

However, making an application requires the first decision to be made by the community: What will be the boundary of the community? That will determine the water and/or wastewater district.

“It needs to be big enough to include any existing structure with a problem, but small enough not to invite new development,” said Hart.

“The county created a program to help existing places, not to create opportunities for developers. The method was to draw a line around an existing place,” said Hart, who suggested Unison pick the Historic District.

But, said Chase, the Historic District may not be big enough to catch everyone with a serious issue.

First step. First problem. The boundary is important because 60 percent or more of the owners of habitable structures within the district must sign onto the process before the county will agree to proceed. And once facilities are built and operational, everyone in the district is hooked into it/them and must pay.

There are different funding mechanisms and payment methods, according to Fincham and the county's Need's Assessment document.

A relatively modest monthly cost (part amortization of system construction costs and part annual operating and maintenance costs) is greatly offset by the increase in property value that comes from being connected to reliable utilities, according to Hart. In addition, homeowners would no longer face, on their own, the considerable costs of repairing or replacing, aging wells and septic systems.

Hence the door-to-door discussions and the community meeting. Chase has said the UPS will help facilitate the early discussions. However, at least two residents will be required at some point to step forward as project leaders.

Applications must be submitted with supporting information between January 1 and March 29 of the calendar year. Chase believes Unison can get one in by March 29, 2018.

Anyone interesting in canvassing the community or otherwise getting involved should email Chase at unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org. ■

History Lesson: The Unison-Bloomfield School

In 1916, a modern, and quite impressive, two-story schoolhouse was built at the highest point on Bloomfield Road—about halfway between the two villages of Unison and Bloomfield so that children from both villages could walk to school. The school was part of the Progressive Education movement sweeping the country at that time. It was one of sixteen schools built in Loudoun County during this period. For the next three decades, through The Great War, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the Second Great War, the Unison-Bloomfield schoolhouse was the mainstay of the educational and social life center of both towns.

Over 2,200 local children spent their formative years within the walls of the school during the 30 years of its existence. Indeed, it provided a modern, professional bridge of learning throughout one of the most volatile eras of our



An eight room school on Bloomfield Road served the villages of Unison and Bloomfield, and the surrounding farms, from 1916 to 1944, including high school classes from 1918 to 1934.

country's existence. When the school burned down in 1944, both Unison and Bloomfield never recovered from the loss. To this day, the stonewall of the old school grounds running along the north side of Bloomfield Road at the highest point on the road are a quiet remembrance to the importance of education in the first part of the 20th century.

Long-time Unison resident, Flora Hillman has spent months researching the history of the school and has produced a lengthy report on her findings. Based on private interviews with former school students during the 1930s, archived documents from the Loudoun County School District, deeds, published remembrances, and legal documents from the Loudoun County Archived Records Department, her report spans the colorful educational tapestry of years between 1916 and 1944 when the local countryside woke each weekday, from September until June, to the sounds of the ringing school bell on top of the hill on Bloomfield Road.

We invite our readers to take a step back in time to the first half of the 20th Century and enjoy a history of the old Unison-Bloomfield School. The full report can be found on the UPS website. Just log onto unisonva.org and click on the front-page link to the Unison-Bloomfield School report. We hope you will enjoy this online journey back in time to the old school days of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. ■

Catesby Farm allowed special exception to hold 200-person events

At its December 2016 hearing, the Loudoun Board of Supervisors voted 8-1 (Kristen Umstadd of Leesburg being the one "no" vote) to allow Catesby Farm on Welbourne Road to receive a "Minor Special Exception," permitting 20 parties, weddings and events annually of 200 guests each at the historic estate. The vote reflects the Board's view that the new property designation, as a commercial event center, would be a better option than a Bed and Breakfast (B&B), a by-right alternative that would allow the applicants to host an unlimited number of events of the same scale without a zoning change as long as the owners occupied the property, served breakfast and carried out other activities associated with running a B&B.

The County is currently waiting for the applicant to file a new site plan that reflects the new designation. The neighbors and other concerned residents in the Unison area, many of whom banded together to express strong opposition to the "Minor Special Exception," are watching to see how several issues will be resolved in the owners proposed plan. Among the concerns is the possible alteration of the driveway access point to the property from Willisville Road, which may involve construction of a turn lane, and is further complicated by its location in a minor flood plain. Once the plan is filed, the appropriate County agencies will weigh in. ■

Counting on Unison—One Bird at a Time

By Tara Connell



Once a year, every year, dozens of your neighbors get up crazy early in the morning to walk, ramble and tramp across the fields, woods and marshes of Unison to count, one by one, the amazing and delightful array of birds that live around us all the time and most of us never see at all.

The occasion is the annual Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count.

Begun in the U.S. 117 years ago, it continues today throughout the country and around the world and is, the Society says: “The nation’s longest-running citizen science project.”

It’s beginning was pretty gruesome: A once-a-year Christmas slaughter of birds by people who wanted to see who could kill the most. But in 1900 that came to an end when Society ornithologist Frank M. Chapman said let’s count them instead. Phew.

They divided up the country (and then the world) into 15 mile diameter circles, which were then further apportioned into 12 manageable pie-like sections and assigned to teams. The international map at Audubon.org is a riot of bubbles—overlapping in highly populated areas, lonely in others.

Audubon’s goal is “to assess the health of bird populations, and to help guide conservation action,” the website says.

And because of it, we now know what the bird population of Unison looks like at the turn of every year since the census began here in the mid-1960s and how it’s changed over that time. It’s quite a bit more magnificent than a quick look in the backyard will tell you.

Unison’s story is one of Golden and Bald Eagles, Great Horned Owls, Red-breasted Nuthatches, varieties of Hawks, Woodcocks and Quails and as well as the everyday Northern Cardinal, Bluebirds and plentiful Canadian Goose. Each one is counted on a single chosen day and its appearance, or disappearance, recorded for posterity. Charts are available at Audubon.org.

Observers for Unison work in a circle called Calme’s Neck after the small land formation tucked into a turn of the Shenandoah River in Boyce. The center

of the circle is where Route 7 crosses the river. Unison territory is covered in two lower right-hand sections (10 and 11). (See map below)

Each year, on a day chosen by people doing the work in the circle—but sometime between December 14 and January 5—teams gather at designated spots and begin their counts. They are tallied and sent to the Audubon Society and posted along with thousands of others.

This year, the Calme’s Neck count was held on January 2 and found 85 species of birds in the circle that includes the Unison area, including 3051 Canadian Geese, 27 Bald Eagles, four Great Horned Owls, 1 Northern Goshawk, 44 Pileated Woodpeckers and—randomly picked from a list of 115 species: 459 Carolina Chickadees, 123 Northern Mockingbirds, 64 Red-shouldered Hawks, 15 Cedar Waxwings, 117 Wild Turkeys, 154 House Sparrows and many, many more, common and uncommon—14,921 individual birds to be exact.

For you non-birders, the highlights of that list are the Northern Goshawk and the four Great Horned Owls, according to the counters. And, the fact that we have eagles is “very good!” said Margaret Wester, who runs the Calme’s Neck circle. A Golden Eagle also has been in the circle in the past but didn’t show up

for this year’s count.

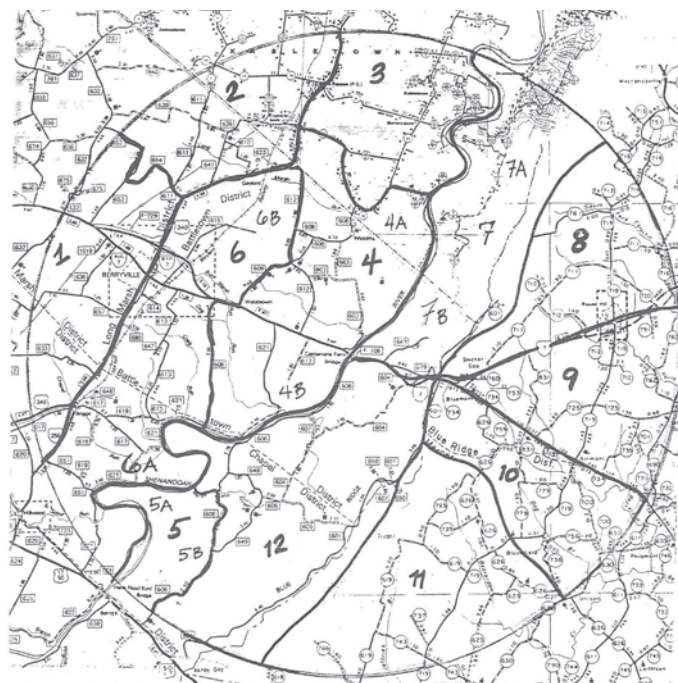
So the Christmas Bird Count is a big deal for birders, for the environment and, apparently, for the people whose land is used. So before the counting begins, a lot of preparation is done. Property owners are asked for permission, or reminded they have given it in the past.

“We are grateful that people allow us onto their property,” said Marcia Weidner of Unison, who heads a team each year. Her section leader, Joe Coleman, credits her with obtaining the critical permissions in the Unison area.

Rarely do Unison landowners object, Weidner said. An occasional surprise visit from a team tracking a rare find is usually smoothed over with a quick explanation and a promise to be good stewards.

Plus “People here have good management practices and keep maintaining the habitat we have,” Weidner said. “Once they’re aware they have Red-breasted Nuthatches, they become really interested in keeping them.”

Another promise always kept: Once a rare find is made—like the Great Horned Owls—no one tells where they are. Birders come from everywhere to look, and the crowds can get annoying to property owners, she said.



The Calme’s Neck circle, shown here is divided into 12 smaller “slices.” Unison is located in sections 10 and 11 in the lower right area. The village is right outside section 10.



Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

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How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.

Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.



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About now, if you live in the Village of Unison or on property to the east toward St. Louis, you are saying: "No one has ever come to me for permission to count birds on my property." That's because that part of the Unison community falls right outside of the Calme's Neck circle and not quite in the neighboring Central Loudoun Circle.

"It's the nature of circles," said Coleman, who leads the Calme's Neck section that Weidner works but also heads up the Central Loudoun Circle, which does the census on a different day. He also is president of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. The man is a serious wildlife guy.

Coleman, Weidner, Wester, and Bruce and Edith Smart, leaders for the other section of Unison, all described this year's count as pretty typical.

"It was a little dry this year so it wasn't a great year for ducks. It wasn't a great year for birds of prey. The mild winter kept them up north," said Coleman.

"Our resident birds? The ones that people talk about? The Northern Cardinals. Blue Birds. Very Plentiful," Coleman said. "It was a relatively good year for that."

Also, he said "We usually do relatively well for owls and did this year," Coleman said. That requires a team getting up extra early for some nocturnal observing.

"There was a Gadwall," Bruce Smart said, when asked if his group found anything unusual this year. A Gadwall is a type of duck, like a Mallard, he explained.

The Smarts have been fixing breakfast for their team and running their section for 18 years. Asked if there have been any major changes over those years, Smart was quiet for a moment, then said: "There used to be more Quail. And I haven't seen a Woodcock in a while, and the Rough Grouse have disappeared. I'm not quite sure why. All of those birds are beautiful."

Smart says any day's count can depend on the weather, or any number of other random factors. For instance, "There were fewer geese this year ... lots of Red-shouldered hawks. "



Photo by Michael Zuckerman.

A female Red-shouldered Hawk surveys Woodtrail Road for a good nesting location.

But the long trends are for "less of the game birds, more of the oriented birds or the migrating birds," he said.

Wester agreed, and pointed out some additional trends, some good and others not so good: "The Hairy Woodpecker numbers are less than previous and of any of the other Woodpeckers. Fortunately, House Sparrow and Starling numbers seem to be declining ... water fowl not so bad, but still less than before. Bluebirds are doing well thanks to several Bluebird trails in the area," Wester said.

Of the day itself, Smart summed it all up: "It's just a fine day of fellowship in the wild."

Civilized? "Yes, civilized," he said, chuckling. "But no (neck)ties."

If you would like to become part of the count, sign up at Audubon.org by November or email margaretwester@hotmail.com. If you want to see the counts in Calme's Neck going back over the years, go to Audubon.org, search Christmas Bird Count, click on CBC results, plug in the requested parameters and click on Calme's Neck. Voila.



Emails Wanted

Unison Preservation Society would like to keep you in the loop with news updates and events notices by email. If you would like to receive information by email, please let us know your address by, of all things, email to: unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.

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