



*Unison Preservation Society*  
**NEWSLETTER**  
*Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside*

*View of Middleburg Christmas Tree Farm from Unison Road.  
 Photo by Dara Bailey*

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• FALL •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

# Essential to Unison

## Our work is at the village's heart

*Dear Neighbors and Friends:*

After 17 consecutive years of oysters and auctions, barbeque and baked goods, Unison's annual Heritage Day is taking a break. Like so much else in our lives, Covid-19 got us. Fear of the virus made it just too dangerous to bring everyone together to raise a ruckus or, frankly, some money for our favorite cause: Unison's preservation.

But also like so much else, the essential work of the Unison Preservation Society (UPS) is continuing even though it looks a bit different. Long-time members Mitch Diamond, Caroline Helmyly and David Slosman have retired. But we have five new members of the Board, all of whom live in village. And the Board this year voted to create an Advisory Board, made up of former members and highly qualified friends of Unison (For a list, see back page).

Our meetings are still being held but they are virtual—as are many other meetings with preservation groups around the county. I know that because UPS is one of 55 members of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition and helped found the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance. Both meet on Zoom and I attend the meetings.

Even so, members of UPS often do show up in person to advance a cause or protest an unacceptable move by the county or a local developer, just as we do show up virtually or in writing, via letters or news ar-

ticles. County and state officials listen when the Unison Preservation Society speaks, as we have on a number of issues this year in Loudoun that directly affect Unison and its surrounding neighborhoods.

# Christmas in the Village

*By Tara Connell*

Frans Kok is taking on climate change and frankly, if I were climate change, I'd be looking over my shoulder.

This is a guy who knew nothing about farming 40 years ago when he bought his 40 acres. Today he owns the remarkably successful Middleburg Christmas Tree Farm in the heart of Unison and has been known to sell up to 3000 trees at \$85 to \$107 a pop.

Or used to sell 3000 trees, which is why climate change has a target on its back.

Two Christmas seasons ago, Kok pared down to all but about 200 sales—and plans to do the same this year—because of what he says is a tree destroying fungus soup brought on by the rising temperatures of climate change.

He will not let that stand. Kok is fighting global warming and the fungus it brings with it by changing the trees he plants and educating his clientele. Unlike many of his competitors, he says, he is not spraying his

*Continued on page 2.*

Here are some of the causes and projects the Unison Preservation Society has been working on since the last Heritage Day:

UPS entered 2020 by turning our attention and energy to our friends in St. Louis, who were battling the developer MOJAX's plan to put a 27-house subdivision across the street from Banneker School. As the issues (water and sewer, traffic, inappropriate designs, lack of community input) and developer infractions (damaged envi-

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*Frans Kok stands next to a healthy Norway Spruce, one of the tree types he uses to fight the effects of climate change. Photo courtesy of Frans Kok.*

way out of the crisis but outsmarting it.

“Christmas tree farmers are a very conservative lot,” says Kok, and most deny global warming. These growers are planting the same types of trees they always have planted and spraying their trees with fungus killers, he says. Their efforts are doomed because, he says “The fungus has evolved.” It has adapted to the spray.

“I’m one of the few liberals,” says Kok, smiling. When he was hit with the fungus, he began planting tree species that resist the rising heat and are immune to the fungus—6000-8000 seedlings each spring. While there was drought this year, his second-year seedlings have done well, he said.

According to Kok and the various Christmas Tree associations, consumers may discover this year that the Scotch Pines, White Pines, Blue Spruce and Douglas Fir of their youth might be hard to come by, thanks to the ravages of climate change and failed spraying programs.

On the Middleburg Christmas Tree Farm this year and going forward there will be more Norway Spruce, Black Hill Spruce, Concolor Fir, Canaan Fir and a new breed called Baby Blues, a climate hardy version of the Blue Spruce. “We are kind of by ourselves doing that,” he says.

“My Baby Blues are five-years-old,” he says. But they are only about three feet tall now and won’t be ready for sale for a few more years. The traditional Colorado Blue Spruce, a classic Christmas tree that has always been popular with his buyers, was hard hit by the fungus in this region and are no longer sellable.

Besides, he says “The business has changed.” Where you once could hand people a saw and that was that, now you

## Trees at Buttonwood



For the first time in four years, Unison will have two cut-your-own Christmas Tree farms. The tree farm at Buttonwood—formerly White Oak Farm Christmas Trees—will be open week-ends between Thanksgiving and Christmas with Canaan Fir, Concolor Fir, Norway Spruce and a few Colorado Blue Spruce, says Tad Zimmerman. The address is 22042 Newlin Mill Road.

***“Christmas tree farmers are a very conservative lot, and most deny global warming. These growers are planting the same types of trees they always have planted and spraying their trees with fungus killers. Their efforts are doomed because the fungus has evolved.”***

need carts, wrappers, shakers, picnic tables, and Web sites. He pretty much concedes people don’t welcome dead mice in their trees anymore.

Much has changed from 1980 when Frans Kok and his wife, Mary Shirley, bought their first 40 acre tract of land in Unison as a getaway from their Washington, D.C. apartment. Kok was a banker and economist. Shirley was and is an economist with the World Bank. Both were city people.

“I expanded to 126 acres. It was expensive,” says Kok. “I wanted to figure out what to do with it.”

So like all good bankers, he “pushed the numbers.” The most cost-effective operation he came up with was, of course, Christmas tree farming. He had calculated the time to grow the trees, the competition, the price of trees. Perfect!

He planted 6000-7000 seedlings and the couple went back to town.

Kok—a native of The Netherlands who had never actually done any farming—returned in June to find his seedlings overrun by grasses.

Bobby Craun, the local farmer who had grown corn, wheat and soya beans on the land Kok bought, “saved my tail,” Kok says.

Craun devised a plywood device that protected the seedlings while the mower took care of the grasses. All this despite Craun’s skepticism about the tree farm endeavor. “Here was this crazy urban guy planting trees on land his great-great-grandfather cleared of trees” to plant crops,” says Kok. He came around when he saw the parade of cars with trees on top five years later, according to Kok.

The first year Kok opened his Unison Road gates to the drive he named “Christmas Tree Lane,” Kok made \$10,000. By 1990, he was clearing \$45,000 a year. “For us, it was good money.” Until the fungus hit, he was selling up to 2000-3000 trees a year, at prices ranging from \$85 to \$107.

“I’m still surprised at how close I came” when he ran the numbers in 1980,” Kok said.

The success of his operation has allowed him to buy more land and plant more seedlings. He learned how to market Christmas trees (see [Middleburgxmastrees.com](http://Middleburgxmastrees.com)), has a 4000-name mailing list and is a member

of all the right Christmas Tree associations: There’s a national one, state ones and the Loudoun Valley Christmas Tree Association.

And he definitely knows all about the trees and the tree buyer: “Never cut down a live tree” no matter how large, weird or ugly it is. Someone will buy it, he says.

He tells the story of a couple arriving at the sales shed with a straight up and down pillar of a tree, saying a bald eagle flew over when they were looking at it and a buck hopped by—so they had to have it.

“I don’t think people care much about the tree. It’s walking around, on the farm ... the experience,” he says.

As for Kok, “I love trees. I have a real affinity for trees. But if it weren’t remunerative to the extent that it is, I wouldn’t have done it.”

However, just get him talking about the different types of trees, their strengths and weaknesses in this climate, what people like and tree fads, what works for hanging bulbs and how it sits in the room, it is clear that the non-farmer from The Netherlands is a city-folk no more. It’s hard to imagine him walking away due to a little fungus and a mere piffle like Global Warming.

So, the obvious question: Is he sticking around? Between the fungus, the pandemic (he and his wife have been living out here full time during the Covid scare), and the issues of aging (he’s 77), what’s he going to do? Will he sell out to developers and skedaddle back to full-time DC living?

“I’m in it for the long haul ... but you never know,” he says, talking about the vagaries of fate. As to selling to developers, he says: The three lots of his current holdings are all in conservation easement, and at most only three houses could be built on the land if he ever sells.

However, “I get a kick out of walking out on the farm. I just installed a big array of solar panels to run everything on the farm.” A friend who shall remain nameless said she called to say hi recently and came away 90 minutes later with a full head of information about solar energy.

And you’ll never guess: He’s getting a huge tax break as a result. Climate change is working for Frans Kok now! ■

To buy a tree at the Kok’s farm this year, you will need to register at [middleburgxmastree.com](http://middleburgxmastree.com) and follow the procedures for sales. More information is available there.

## Essential to Unison (continued)

ronments, ignored remediation) became clearer and clearer, UPS jumped in with opposition letters to the Army Corps of Engineers and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. We also drew newspaper attention.

Then, by our joining with other preservation groups such as the Piedmont Environmental Council, the Virginia Piedmont Heritage Association and the Loudoun Coalition, the weight of the opposition was enough to at least bring MOJAX to a costly and temporary halt and force a re-evaluation by the local and state agencies.

As of this writing, Chair Phyllis Randall of the Loudoun Board of Supervisors had announced a preliminary deal for the county to buy the land and development rights from MOJAX, ending its project. Not only will the location most likely be turned into a park, but also the residents will be able to use the already drilled wells. Since water was the most critical issue at this location, this solution has all the makings of a major victory for St. Louis and Western Loudoun.

Another example of the success of unified protest is the Aldie Firehouse project, which ended early this year. Then Unison board member Mitch Diamond and advisory board member Owen Snyder, as leading members of the Loudoun Coalition, helped fight and win against the county's plan to place an inappropriately large Firehouse on Route 50 in Aldie, causing the demolition of historic buildings.

Lessons learned in that fight are now being marshalled to oppose the county proposal to put an 18,500 sq. ft. firehouse in Philomont on the community's beloved horse show grounds on Snickersville Turnpike. UPS, on its own and as a member of the Village Alliance, has taken a position against the proposal due to the lack of community input prior to the decision. This fight is just beginning and because of the public outcry—of which UPS was an early leader—the county already is ever so slightly pausing in their thoughtless, head-long advance. Much more to come on this, and UPS will be there for this one.

The power of unity was demonstrated first and foremost by the Coalition's successful two-year battle to shape the county's approach to the Rural West in the new Comprehensive Plan, which became law last year. The Coalition has since taken

on the important next step of putting the concepts of the 2020 Plan into law through a rewrite of the Zoning Ordinance.

Via the Village Alliance, Unison is deep into the process of making laws to protect the rural historic villages of Loudoun through zoning, planning and other ordinances. The rewrite—so far slowed by Covid—is due for completion now in early 2021.

But Unison also has had a special task thrust on it in the Zoning rewrite because it isn't recognized by the county as an historic village. To win that designation from the Board of Supervisors, the village needs to be properly mapped—a project UPS

was working on with the Village Alliance when the pandemic and another important village project moved to the forefront.

Early in the year, UPS took the lead with other property owners in the village to ask that Unison be considered for village-wide water and sewer plants. After several attempts over more than two years, the county received our application last March just as the pandemic struck. That slowed the process on the county's end, unfortunately.

In September, the county reported it was back at work on the Unison application. Hopefully, a decision on the village's request for an in-depth study will happen soon.

*Continued on next page.*

# Another Insect Invasion May Be on the Horizon

By Howard Lewis

Like a sequel to a bad horror movie—the first movie being the invasion of the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) that over the last few years has left hundreds of dead ash trees all over the Unison area—we may now face an even worse invasion: the Spotted Lanternfly (SLF). In contrast to the EAB, which mostly went after ash trees, the SLF snacks on walnuts, maples, oaks, pines, sycamores, cherries, almonds, peaches—the list goes on and on—with black walnut, Virginia creeper, wild grapes and the invasive Tree of Heaven at the top of the list.

The SLF is an invasive insect from Asia and it has been around for a very long time. Documents from 12th Century China describe it in detail. It has no native predators in this country. It may not be in the Unison area right now, but it has been spotted (no pun intended) as close as Berryville. The October issue of *Smithsonian* magazine has a long article on the devastation the SLF is causing to nurseries, orchards, vineyards, backyard gardens and trees in Pennsylvania's Leigh Valley. In short, the enemy is just over the horizon.

Putting things in pretty simple terms, a healthy plant has a plumbing system that draws food and water up from the soil to nourish the parts of the plant above ground while sending nutrients down to its roots below ground. The SLF basically screws up this plumbing system—sucking nutrients

from the plant and excreting sugar water (honeydew) that destroys the understory below. This either kills the plant outright or severely weakens it.

What should we all be doing about this?

First, learn how to identify the SLF, which develops in stages. In the first three stages, the nymphs are wingless with black with white spots (see image at right) its body and legs. In the fourth stage, the nymphs develop red patches with white spots (see image left) before becoming adults with their distinctive red wings (see image at top). For more information on identifying the SLF, go to the websites listed in the footnote below. Obviously, if you think you see a SLF, report this to the Virginia Cooperative Extension office in Leesburg.

Beth Flores-Sastre ([flores69@vt.edu](mailto:flores69@vt.edu)) is the expert on the SLF there.

Second, get rid of *Alianthus* trees—the so-called 'Tree of Heaven. The SLFs not only feed on these invasive trees because the alkaloids in them make the SLF unpalatable to predators, but also lay their eggs on them in the fall (as well on many other trees). An excellent source for how to deal with *Alianthus* trees, is the Blue Ridge Prism website ([blueridgeprism.org](http://blueridgeprism.org)).

Stay tuned. We'll have more on this horror movie sequel in future newsletters. ■

#### Spotted Lanternfly Resources:

1. [ext.vt.edu/agriculture/commercial-horticulture/spotted-lanternfly.html](http://ext.vt.edu/agriculture/commercial-horticulture/spotted-lanternfly.html)
2. [loudoun.gov/5101/Spotted-Lanternfly](http://loudoun.gov/5101/Spotted-Lanternfly)



Adult Spotted Lanternfly with wings closed (left) and open (top).



## 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](mailto:unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org).



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## Essential to Unison (continued)

Meanwhile, the day-to-day work of the Unison Preservation Society goes on—but that work is what eats up most of our money. We produce this newsletter three or four times a year and we have other printing and production costs for various projects or routine business expenses which together average about \$5,200 per year.

But our main expense is the village centerpiece, the historic Unison Store. As with any older building, maintenance is costly and on-going. The interior, exterior and grounds of the store are in constant need of attention. A leaky roof, painting, repairs to aging wood, broken appliances—all occurred this year. The grounds need attention all the time (as you all know).

To date, all of these expenses have always been met with the money we raised at Heritage Day (\$12,545 last year) and other income from rentals at the store (see chart). Luckily, this was the year we had no major repairs or breakdowns at the store and no expensive disasters to confront like the frequent water and septic issues that plague the village and prompted desire for Unison water and sewer solution.

As to the store, all of us at UPS—and we hope in the village and the surrounding neighborhood—believe in the value of the historic store as a community

resource. We also believe its architecture and open land set a tone for the beauty of the village that is critical to keeping Unison one of the most well preserved villages in Virginia (see [visitloudoun.org/blog/post/tiny-towns/](http://visitloudoun.org/blog/post/tiny-towns/)).

We believe the preservation of Unison begins right in the heart of the village.

So for those of you who have always helped us out by buying Heritage Day tickets for yourselves and guests, bidding on and winning items at our silent and public auctions, or just making a generous October donation, we ask you to remember us again this year, even without the oysters and barbeque to grease the skids. As you can see, our work for your community has only become more important.

We promise to return as soon as we can with a great party to say thank you and remind you what a wonderful place Unison is and, hopefully, always will be. Thank you. ■

*Tara Connell*

*President, Unison Preservation Society*

**TO DONATE:** Mail checks to PO Box 606, Middleburg, VA 20118 or go to [unisonva.org](http://unisonva.org) and donate via the paypal link on the home page.

## Unison Store Expenses and Revenue Fiscal Years 2014 through 2020

	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	Average
<b>EXPENSES</b>								
Repair & Maint.	7,503	7,065	7,015	10,835	17,870	3,267	5,705	8,466
Cleaning	1,200	1,350	2,366	2,500	2,400	2,850	2,550	2,174
Landscaping	3,736	10,164	3,484	1,715	1,300	3,050	1,738	3,598
Electric	1,201	1,634	799	974	1,511	774	735	1,090
Internet	795	923	828	1,023	1,068	1,068	1,068	968
Trash Removal	450	371	360	360	396	396	396	390
Insurance <sup>1</sup>	4,775	4,878	4,909	5,644	4,162	4,942	5,775	5,012
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>19,659</b>	<b>26,385</b>	<b>19,761</b>	<b>23,051</b>	<b>28,707</b>	<b>16,347</b>	<b>17,966</b>	<b>21,697</b>
<b>REVENUE</b>								
Apartment Rent	20,398	14,033	15,000	13,400	16,800	16,800	16,800	
Store Rent			4,272	1,805	1,935	1,960	1,555	
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>20,398</b>	<b>14,033</b>	<b>19,272</b>	<b>15,205</b>	<b>18,735</b>	<b>18,760</b>	<b>18,355</b>	<b>17,822</b>

<sup>1</sup>Insurance covers the building at \$400,000 with a \$1,000 deductible and general liability of \$1 million. Insurance also includes directors and officer's liability.