



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

*Wildflower meadow
at Lazy Dog Farm.
Photo by Howard Lewis*

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• SUMMER •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

High Tech Comes to Grassland Bird Research

By Howard Lewis

Grassland birds incubate their nests laid on the ground in the middle of fields at around 86 degrees Fahrenheit. “So what,” you might ask? The answer: At that temperature an overhead drone with a thermal camera should be able to detect where the nests are located in a field covered with 2-3 feet of tall grass, which in turn could make the job of scientists studying grassland birds a lot easier—a high tech solution to finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. Using drones to study grassland birds is what Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), part of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, has been testing in select fields around Virginia, including some right in the Unison area.

UPS newsletter readers may remember an article at the beginning of last year about the VWL’s research on grassland birds being done in nearly 28 acres of fields on our farm located on Bloomfield Road. I have been following this research and was intrigued by this high tech approach to their work. So, I called Dr. Amy Johnson, VWL’s Program Director, to learn more. She told me that a professor at James Madison, drawing upon students from three disciplines—biology, engineering and communications—helped to initiate the effort with VWL two years ago along with experts from the Smithsonian’s Movement of Life program.

Traditionally, to locate a nest, researchers will spend hours noting birds’ behavioral cues and systematically searching through tall grasses looking for nests—time consuming for the researchers and sometimes disruptive for the birds. The drone program

hopes to address both these problems.

The program is still in the testing phase of development and the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed this work down. Among other things, scientists need to see exactly how effective drones can be in detect-



Amy Johnson (left) and intern search for grassland birds with a drone (top of picture) at sunrise.

ing birds' nests at the peak of the breeding season from mid-June to early July when grasses are 2-3 feet high. And they need to determine how high the drones should fly so as not to disturb the nesting birds but still be able to detect their nests. Grassland birds have perfected the art of hiding their nests from predators over thousands of years so the VWLs scientist have their work cut out for them.

Dr. Johnson points out that nesting mortality for grassland birds can be especially high in working grasslands—sometimes reaching over 95 percent in actively hayed fields. So, understanding the timing of nesting for grassland birds here in Virginia is important for generating recommendations for bird-friendly land management practices. The drone program dovetails nicely with research work that VWL has just begun with the American Farmland Trust to study how pastures can be managed to enhance grassland bird nesting success.

Helping private landowners understand how they can manage their land to help grassland birds and other wildlife is what VWL is all about. Anyone interested in the learning more about VWL or partnering with them should contact Dr. Amy Johnson at johnsonae@si.edu or visit their website at www.VAWorkingLandscapes.org. ■

Seeing the Future of Unison, One Vision at a Time

By Tara Connell

Here, look into my Crystal Ball: It's 2022 and the Loudoun Board of Supervisors has just approved the first overhaul of the county's Zoning Code in nearly 20 years.

The question it's been asked is this: What can Unison expect from this Zoning Ordinance rewrite?

The first vision we see is a Unison firmly protected by laws and county codes designed to honor the rural nature of Western Loudoun and its historic towns and villages.

But wait. It's growing cloudy and there's another vision coming into view. This one has a Unison with densely populated housing developments, wineries close to villages, shooting ranges near our horse fields and noisy weddings at old estates every weekend.

It really could go either way.

To give you an idea of what's at stake in this zoning rewrite and why we are look-

ing to a crystal ball, we first need a little background:

Loudoun is redoing its Zoning Ordinance not only because the county has completely and utterly changed since 1993 when the last one was enacted, but also because of the new Comprehensive Plan.

You remember the Comprehensive Plan? That's the document fought over last summer... the Plan we all thought would forever change our rough-tough, fightin'-the-developers-at-every-turn world and make the West safe for those of us who love the Loudoun of horses, green spaces and fresh air.

Well, it only made it safe as long as there was a total Zoning Ordinance rewrite that turned into law all the wishes and dreams expressed in the Plan. That's what is going on right now.

This is how the rewrite is being done: When the Comp Plan was finished and enacted last June, the county asked all

Updates Around Unison

Water and Sewer

Unison's application for a water and sewer study by the county was submitted by the March 31 deadline and is currently under review for eligibility and evaluation of health safety concerns, according to Scott Fincham, the county's Environmental Program Specialist. The process was slowed by the county's shutdown for the pandemic, however. An email list of all residents in the Water and Sewer district has been compiled by the village coordinators and information will be sent as it becomes available. Contact tara@rstarmail.com with questions.

St. Louis Development

Before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issues a permit to MOJAX LLC to disturb wetlands and drill for water in St. Louis, the Corps wanted to know what the effect the permit will have on historic properties in the

area. Among the properties affected are a church, a graveyard and the village itself. The initiation of this "Section 106" review has been cheered by local preservationists who oppose the development by MOJAX of 30 houses in the middle of this historic African-American community. Comments were due to the ACE by June 13 and letters were sent by most preservation organizations in the area, including the Unison Preservation Society, Mosby Heritage Area Association, Loudoun Conservation and Preservation Coalition and the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance.

Rural Roads

Loudoun County's beautiful unpaved roads have been named to Preservation Virginia's list of most endangered historic sites. The 300-mile network of roads were nominated to the list by America's Routes, a local group formed to protect our unpaved roadways. Unison's Mitch Diamond and Bloomfield's Jane Covington are members.

Heritage Day

Given the pandemic, it is highly unlikely that Heritage Day will be held this November in its usual form. An announcement will be made later this summer about the event. Members of the Unison Preservation Society Board would like to know how the community feels about holding Heritage Day. Please email tara@rstarmail.com with your opinions.

Unison Honey

Unison Honey is back! John and Joan Gardiner's famous mid-village stand is open for business in its new location, 12-feet back from the street's edge outside Joan's studio. Stop by 24/7 to get your delicious, local honey. The stand is self-serve!



Photo by Joan Gardiner.



Historical Unison is today too: A carriage ride in modern Unison is not unusual and serves to remind residents of the village past. Retaining what makes Unison unique is critical to the village's future. Photo by Dara Bailey.

the people with an interest in the plan to give advice to the team doing the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite, which naturally was nicknamed ZOR.

These stakeholders included developers, the real estate industry, politicians and, of course, the preservation community. Among the latter group was the Loudoun County Conservation and Preservation Coalition. The Unison Preservation Society (UPS) is one of 50 or so non-profit members of the Coalition.

As it did with the Comp Plan, the Coalition took that bone, put it in their teeth and ran with it. The organization formed a Zoning Committee and put Maura Walsh-Copeland in charge. Walsh-Copeland's previous effort was to shepherd the Coalition's detail-laden and hugely successful effort to help shape to 2019 Comprehensive Plan.

To deal with the ZOR, she said: "Ten sub-committees were formed last fall and began documenting zoning issues and changes needed not only because of the new comp plan, but also because of numerous application and enforcement issues over the past five years." The results of that work, submitted to the county in May, can be seen at <https://loudouncoalition.org/zoning-sub-committee-input/>.

To arrive at their recommendations, the ten subcommittees took each line of the 2019 County Plan and—using examples from real-life events, statistics, experts and best practices from county, state and the federal governments—developed specific requirements for the county staff to include in new Zoning regulations.

I spoke to Walsh-Copeland and members of two of the ten subcommittees—the

ones most likely to impact Unison: Madeline Skinner and Margaret Good of the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance Committee (Unison is a member) and Owen Snyder the Rural Uses Committee. Snyder is a resident of Unison and former officer of UPS.

So here we are back at the crystal ball, looking at 2022 when the rewrite is complete, approved and starting to be enacted.

Let's look more closely at that first version: Unison has been named an historic village with all the rights and privileges that go with that. It is part of special historic village zoning district, perhaps a revised and strengthened Virginia Conservation Overlay District or VCOD.

Under the new Code, Unison residents have helped create a village plan unique to Unison. "The emphasis will be on the uniqueness of each village," says Skinner. "The Comp Plan talked about an individual plan for each village."

Also with the new Zoning Code, there is flexibility for situations common to historic villages, says Good. Typically, historic villages have older buildings, narrower streets, tourists, museums, awkward traffic and other problems not accommodated well in the 1993 Zoning Ordinance.

Within the Unison plan in 2022, there is a way to provide for affordable housing by tucking small apartments here and there legally, allowing different setbacks from the unpaved roads, perhaps a Unison museum and some innovative types of commerce.

Other historic villages might look the same, or different. Their plans would be theirs.

Surrounding Unison in this future vision is a "green" buffer, in which development

is prohibited. This buffer is part of the landscape so Unison and other historic villages will be set off and distinct. In this future, Unison will always look and sound like Unison.

And finally, in my crystal ball, enforcement of this new code is generated by the county staff not by citizens. This is truly a dream of the future, according to Snyder.

Current practice is for Zoning Enforcement to begin only when a formal complaint is lodged. Which means it's pretty much up to the neighbors to count the number of wedding attendees and register the noise levels. In all the Coalition subcommittees, enforcement surfaced as a priority problem.

But now to this other, darker vision. The path to approval of the Zoning Ordinance has many forces working against preservation and in favor of more growth in the Rural West. It easily could look like this:

- At several sites near Unison are wedding venues, a brewery or winery or two and a shooting range. Unless strictly regulated, Snyder said, the trend toward plopping these venues down near villages will continue, with their noise, misuse of water, pesticide pollution and sewer problems.

Continued on next page.

Farmland Gets County Support

In a major victory for the Rural West, Loudoun's Board of Supervisors on June 16 voted 9-0 to fast-track a "time-sensitive" Zoning Ordinance Amendment to the current county Code that will let county staff review and/or limit the placement of buildings on prime farming soil when builders propose cluster developments on large tracts of rural land.

A cluster development occurs when structures on lots of 20 acres or more are located in a small section of the development and the rest is left as open space, supposedly for farmland. The concept was applauded as a preservation tool in Loudoun's 2003 General Plan but failed in practice because "our zoning was never really ... updated to enforce that," said Blue Ridge Supervisor Tony Buffington, who introduced the legislation. Developers use prime land because it's better for septic systems.

The expedited amendment process will move along in tandem with the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite as a signal to developers now and to the rewriters that the Board wants this protection in the updated Code. However, developers can't be forced to adhere to it until the new ordinance is approved.



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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- Developers in this dark vision have the right to put multiple homes on lots near historic villages because “buffer zones” have been defeated. With cluster developments or not, Unison can be garroted by close-in subdivisions when owners of nearby large lots sell out. A favored argument by developers is “affordable housing.”
- Complaint-driven enforcement continues when the BOS decides not to fund the necessary staff to inspect properties around the county. Residents are unable to keep up with the numerous violations and the noise, pollution and lack of clean water drive out most residents who love the open, Rural West.

Said Snyder “I think the real danger is this clustering, ... the lack of enforcement ... and also the lack of environmental protections.” He said he was hopeful about the Coalition’s work, but: “I recommended changes to many regulations and would be happy to see some of my major ones accepted.” (See “Farmland Protected” sidebar).

Snyder also called for the county to create a water usage plan along with the new Zoning Ordinance. There isn’t such plan at present.

Both Skinner and Good, while a bit more optimistic, said they doubted the Historic Village Alliance would get all its requests either. But the most important, in their view: A special district, in which residents have a say in the community’s fate.

In the end, all were in agreement: It’s in the community’s hands.

So what can people do?

In two words, “pay attention!” said Walsh-Copeland. The Coalition is on top of the process, she said, keeping tabs on the county staff through rewrite process despite delays from the virus. A new timeline for completion of the rewrite currently is being decided but staff indicated to the BOS that approval of the new Code may be pushed into early 2022.

Her recommendation is that the public send e-mails or notes to the Board of Supervisors before the new timeline is approved, expressing support for “the work of the Loudoun Coalition as it’s submitted and requesting that work be used by Staff during their summer/fall writing.”

Contact the Board at BOS@loudoun.gov, Chair Phyllis Randall at Phyllis.randall@loudoun.gov, and Blue Ridge Supervisor Tony Buffington at tony.buffington@loudoun.gov. The Board’s mail address is: PO Box 7000, Leesburg, VA 20177-7000.

And If you see a development or an inappropriate use happening in your neighborhood, say something. Contact Owen Snyder at owensnyder1@gmail.com or this writer at tara@rstarmail.com. And be sure to log it officially in the county “Report a Concern” system: <https://www.loudoun.gov/3055/Report-an-Issue> to get a response.

The crystal ball says it’s time to take action. ■

“Real” Geraniums Summertime in Sandy Wilson’s Garden



Retiring from their jobs as communication lawyers in Washington, Sandy Wilson and her husband, Bob Pettit, moved to Unison in 2011, restoring a very old Quaker farmhouse on Furr Road and surrounding it with beautiful gardens. Sandy even began a new career, getting a graduate certificate in landscape design. As a landscape designer and garden blogger, she emphasizes low-maintenance landscaping that allow people to “age in place” rather than be overwhelmed by their gardens. Her latest blog entry on hardy geraniums, a perfect summertime plant, can be found at a-peaceable-garden.com. - HL

Above: *Geranium x cantabrigiense* ‘Biokovo’: Slightly more refined than ‘Bevan’s Variety’ (shown in the background), ‘Biokovo’ is a naturally occurring hybrid found in the Biokovo Mountains in Croatia.