

# THE RAPPAHANNOCK REPORT

*The Rappahannock Group Sierra Club Newsletter*



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## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

I will begin this newsletter with a quote from Wendell Berry:

**“To cherish what remains of the Earth and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival. The Earth is what we all have in common.”**

The Rappahannock Group had another successful Earth Day! We appreciate all who stopped by our booth to discuss important issues concerning our community.



# LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

We were honored to award our Living Green Awards this Earth Month to two local proprietors, Rachel Ricci of Blue House Blooms and Keith Lebor of Olde Towne Butcher. What do these two very different businesses have in common?

Both Rachel Ricci of Blue House Blooms and Keith Lebor of Olde Towne Butcher share a deep commitment to local sourcing and environmental stewardship, and are community-focused small businesses.



Rachel Ricci of  
Blue House of Blooms



Keith Lebor of  
Olde Towne Butcher

We also had children write promises to Dear Mother Earth. These were very sweet, impactful moments that fostered environmental stewardship and showed what this planet means to our children. Earth Day and every day promises made are actionable, small steps that are needed to protect our planet. These actionable steps can yield visible results by reducing waste (especially single-use plastic), conserving water, and lowering energy consumption.



Leading by example in your community creates a positive ripple effect and cultivates a healthier planet. By nurturing Mother Earth, we will recognize that we are a shared home. Take the steps!

kindest regards,  
Cindy

# OUTINGS

by Geoff Johnson

The Rappahannock Group Sierra Club hosted a great Outing this past quarter, a joint venture with the Falls of the James Group. We visited the North Anna Battlefield Park in Doswell, VA, and hiked the Blue Trail (3+ miles total, in-and-out). This trail included steep hills and uneven terrain, making for a sometimes strenuous hike. History buffs got a chance to enjoy the historic markers and interpretive signs along the trails, which describe the 1864 Battle of North Anna that took place at this site.

We had a good turnout of over a dozen folks, and afterwards we drove to Ashland and had lunch at the Caboose Market and Cafe.



As always, Sierra Club Outings are free and open to the public. If you'd like updates on future adventures and volunteer opportunities, please email Geoff Johnson at [geoffwithrgsc@gmail.com](mailto:geoffwithrgsc@gmail.com). We'd love to have you join us!

# A DATA CENTER WIN IN STAFFORD

by Jeff Eastland

On March 25, 2026, the Stafford County Planning Commission voted 7-0 to recommend, to the Board of Supervisors, a rezoning request for the Market at Austin Ridge, a development project along Courthouse Road, Rte. 630 in Stafford Va. The property is now to be rezoned from A-1 (Agricultural) to B-2 (Urban Commercial).

On the surface that doesn't sound like anything too out of the ordinary.

But what it represented was a victory for the people of Stafford County.

Because within the original application, a three part developmental proposal, included, in addition to a proposal for a hotel, restaurants, and other commercial development, a Data Center. A Data Center via a request for rezoning to M-2 (Heavy Industrial-required for data center buildout). Also included was a request for rezoning to M-1 (Light Industrial) plus a concurrent request for a reduction in setbacks and buffers to accommodate such development.

The project was a Trojan Horse. It was an attempt to fold a Data Center into a multi-faceted development proposal that included a hotel, restaurants, and other commercial development that is desired and is consistent with the area. Such proposed rezoning and reduction in ordinances would have set a dangerous precedent for development in the county going forward.

But Stafford County citizens and officials weren't fooled. The citizen's group Protect Stafford adroitly pointed out to the County Planning and Zoning Department and the Planning Commission that the project did not align with the county's Comprehensive Plan and vision for the TDA (Targeted Development Area) in the corridor along Courthouse Road.

Specific misalignment included violations for sections for Tree Preservation, Location and Siting, and new Standards regarding setbacks and buffers, including accessory (generators, substation) buffers approved by the county last October.

The county Comp Plan and vision for that corridor calls for a "Mixed Use" of Residential, Commercial, and Retail. Not "Business and Industry".

The Planning and Zoning Department agreed. They recommended that the Data Center component (M-2 rezoning) be removed. Eventually, with input and comments from the citizen's group Protect Stafford and the Planning Commission, the M-1 Light Industrial Component, seen as a potential bridge to a future M-2 Heavy Industrial (required for Data Center development), was also removed as well.

At the Planning Commission meeting on Feb. 25, 2026, which included many comments from the public, the project was deferred to the March 25, 2026 meeting, where the final approval for a B-2 rezoning, for Mixed-Use development in line with the county's vision for the area, took place. For the hard work of the citizen's group Protect Stafford, a win.

This process showed how it should work. Awareness, effort, and due diligence. Citizen input, combined with County staff and Planning Commission recognition and affirmation of the Comp Plan, TDA and County Ordinances that should properly govern how all future development be built.

# POTOMAC RUN RUNNING DRY

by Sarah Balon

Virginia has lost 42% of its wetlands since the 1600's, a daunting statistic when we consider that 60% of Virginia falls within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. If you live in Stafford County, the previous fact likely hits too close to home.

Last year at the Stafford Board of Supervisors meeting on December 16th, several residents expressed their concerns over the Potomac Run Wetland, belovedly called the Potomac Run Swamp, going dry (30 minutes in). Citizens put together their own studies, analyzing rain data and conducting site assessments, in an attempt to prove that 30 acres of the Swamp drying out is not due to drought, but caused by the construction of the Stafford Technology Campus (STC), a 23 building data center that covers 503.84 acres of land, 470 of which were a part of Stafford County's last five remaining contiguous forests. While I'm sure readers can concur that clearcutting 470 acres of land encompassing streams that flow into a wetland will have major downstream effects, County Administrator William Ashton reasons that "available data does not support a casual link between STC construction and pond water level," and since the Swamp increased in water after it rained "response of the pond to that rainfall supports a conclusion that rainfall is probably the primary driver of the pond levels (Feb. 2nd, 2 hr 48 mins in)."



March 4th Powerlines going through  
STC off Eskimo Hill Rd.



March 30th STC off of Eskimo Hill Rd.  
left of powerlines pictured

## POTOMAC RUN RUNNING DRY



April 19th STC off Eskimo Hill Rd.



March 23rd Dirt blowing onto Eskimo Hill Rd. from area pictured on left

It is fairly obvious when looking at the last image that all of the uprooted dirt is going to find its way into our streams, undoubtedly clogging them and subverting water movement. However, when making this argument to a governing or industry body, it is often met with 'well, we don't know what stream quality was like before.' You are then additionally faced with the fact that sound hydrologic surveys are often conducted on a ten year time span. This means that now is the time to start tracking water data- do not wait until after an invasive project is built. Although I started taking measurements after clearcutting began for the STC, I am now developing a baseline for before data center operations that we will be able to look back on.

You do not have to be a scientist to collect water data. I purchased my pH meter from Apera Instruments (not sponsored). This kit is great for beginners because it has everything that you need to get started, although I highly recommend purchasing an additional 10.01 buffer for a three point celebration. If you feel completely lost, Apera Instruments has an easy to follow tutorial on how to take proper measurements under videos. A few pointers: do not cheapen out on your meter, calibrate your meter every time before entering the field (Apera Instruments says you can do it once a month, that it incorrect for the precise measurements that we want), do not collect bias data, meaning you want to collect in both dry and wet conditions (in fact, when it rains is when all the action happens because the total dissolved solids are running to the stream), and finally it is important to be as consistent as possible. Maybe you don't have the time to collect data every day, or even every week, but aim to commit yourself to testing once a month. The wetlands mapper provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can be used to find waterbodies close to you, and you can also compare this map with locations of applications being proposed in your county.

Collecting water data can also bring you closer to your community and help you form a deeper relationship with your land. For example, when I was testing a comparison stream to the STC in the Granville Estates neighborhood (S5 on my data sheet) a super inviting lady called over to me from her driveway and asked

# POTOMAC RUN RUNNING DRY

why I keep walking down the adjacent hill. This isn't the first time I had individuals curious about my research and I explained to her what I was doing. We were able to have a conversation about the stream that flows on the side of her house that she spent so many evenings sitting and watching. She said she likes it best in the fall when the leaves are off the trees because she can see the water better. I asked her if she has ever seen anything living in the stream; notably stream 5 is the only stream with flowing water that I am testing that has absolutely no life, no fish, not even a frog. She reaffirmed that she has never seen anything living, but was unsure why, and I explained to her that her stream's pH usually falls around 5.50 and that fish need a range of 6.50 to 8.00. The pH of the water provided an ah-ha moment for her. Now instead of looking at the stream and thinking that it is simply just a dud, she is able to conclude why her stream does not sustain life.



April 26th First wall of STC put up off of Richmond Highway, photo taken uphill from Stream 1, which flows through the middle of the property



April 26th View of trees clearcut into Stream 1 where I tested the water pH 6.15



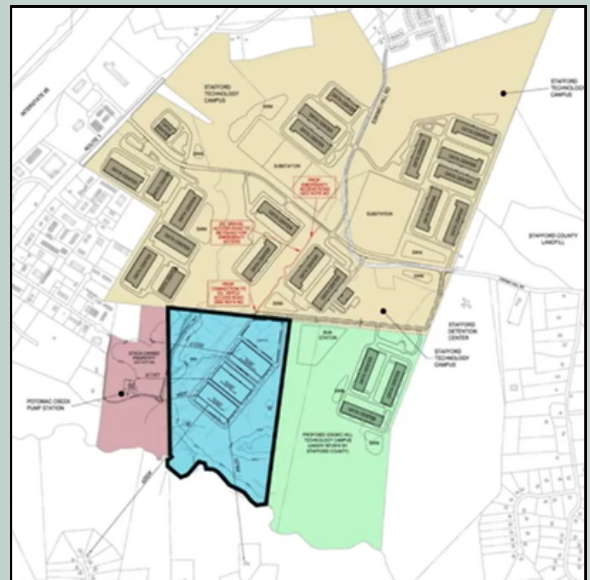
April 26th Looking downhill from first wall, trees clearcut and left over Stream 1

## POTOMAC RUN RUNNING DRY

I want to reiterate that while we can look at the pictures above and know that the stream is being negatively impacted by the drove of clearcut trees and uprooted sediment, an argument can and will be made that we do not truly know if the quality of the stream has decreased. This is why numbers are so important, they are a fact and cannot be speculated against. I tested directly upstream and downstream of the tree barricade, and the pH was 6.43 and 6.15 respectively. This is the lowest pH measurements that I have taken on this stream, other than the one outlier of 6.30, which is upstream from the STC site (aka not affected by) and taken in the rain, which naturally brings acidity. It is also important to note that pH is measured on a logarithmic scale, so there is a greater difference between 6.15 and 6.43 than there is on a linear scale.



March 30th Tree cutting along Eskimo Hill Rd.



Map of STC currently under construction (Yellow), Proposed Potomac Creek Campus (Blue), and Proposed Eskimo Hill Technology Center (Green)

In addition to collecting data, it is important to read through the data center applications and attend your county's Planning Commission/Board of Supervisors meetings. While this may seem time consuming, I believe it is necessary if we want to remain informed and hold productive conversations about development. Early in my research a friend and I were driving down Eskimo Hill road to survey the area and they exclaimed, "I don't even know why they are cutting along the road, they aren't even building over there!" I have not read the application yet, so the most that I could give was "Oh my god, that's terrible." After reading the March 8, 2024 Comment Response Letter, I realized that the county requested that trees be kept along Eskimo Hill Road, but the applicant responded by saying, "Tree preservation areas are proposed in areas where feasible, while allowing flexibility for future utilities to be installed." Not reading the application prevented me from having a meaningful conversation on how negotiations were done between the county and the applicant and the importance of strict tree preservation standards. STC is tentatively scheduled to go in front of the Planning Commission on May 13th in a request to rezone an additional 34.94 acres for a data center.

## POTOMAC RUN RUNNING DRY

On April 22nd, I attended a Planning Commission meeting for the Potomac Creek Campus, which is proposed directly under STC. Although I did not initially plan to speak, I decided to once I heard their attorney claim that the closest house is across Potomac Creek, six football fields away from the proposal (3 hrs. 1 min in). Looking at page 9 of the GDP, which was shown during the meeting, two lines are drawn south of the site pointing to the 'two closest houses' 2,164 and 2,924 feet away. However, the two closest houses are actually to the west of the site on Musante Lane, which is the road drawn on the left side of the pink- the pink being a declared zone that, if turned residential, Potomac Creek Campus will apply additional buffers for the homeowners. When asked about the houses on Musante Lane the attorney said they are 1,600 feet away from the site. These are two homes that were not accounted for during site planning, and simply because they are positioned on the left side of Musante Lane, not on the right in the pink, Potomac Creek Campus, as of now, will not provide these two residents with additional buffers. Potomac Creek Campus is scheduled to be heard in front of the Planning Commission again on May 27th. This scenario is why I believe it is important for every community member to attend their county meetings. As far as I know, I am the only one in that room who has been down Musante Lane, and if I was not there these homes would have been overlooked. The people have to protect the people, and we have to make sure everyone is spoken for.



March 9th Happily in front of Potomac Run Swamp



April 19th Two out of three beaver lodges in the Swamp, a reminder of what I am doing all this for

The worst thing that we can do is believe that it is too late to take action. In the fight for sustainable land use and clean waterways, we need people on all fronts, and we all need to set aside the time to record data, coordinate with our communities, advocate for stringent tree preservation areas, and hold meaningful conversations.

Questions, Comments, or Concerns? Please email me at [sarahbalon3@gmail.com](mailto:sarahbalon3@gmail.com)

\*If you have trouble accessing a link, all applications can be looked up on the [Stafford County Website](#)

# POWER DOESN'T LIVE AT THE TOP

by Karen Tavakoli

There's a persistent idea in human conflict that if you remove the leadership, the "head," the system collapses. Decapitate the government. Eliminate the leadership. The rest will fall apart. It sounds clean, strategic, and efficient. But it's based on a flawed understanding of how systems work. In nature, removing the "head" doesn't end the system. It rarely even slows it down.

Walk into a forest and try to find the leader. **You can't.**

There is no central tree issuing commands, no one single organism directing traffic, and no single point holding everything together. What you find instead is a vast, interconnected system, with roots woven through soil, fungi linking tree to tree, and water and nutrients moving in every direction. If one tree dies, the forest doesn't collapse. Resources reroute, light reaches the forest floor, and new growth emerges. What looks like loss is often the beginning of something more diverse and more resilient. The system doesn't depend on a head; it depends on connection. And connection only works if signals move freely through the system. When something is stressed, damaged, or under threat, that information must be able to travel. Systems stay healthy not just because they are connected, but because they respond.



Even in places where hierarchy appears obvious, it isn't functioning the way we assume. Take an ant colony or a beehive.



From the outside, it looks like a monarchy, with a queen at the top and workers below in a clear chain of command. But that's not how it works. The queen doesn't give orders. She produces. The colony runs on local interactions, including chemical signals, environmental feedback, and decentralized decision making. Each individual responds to what is happening around them, not to instructions from above. Remove individuals, even large

numbers, and the system adapts. It reorganizes, compensates, and continues, because the intelligence of the system is not located in one place. It is distributed. And that intelligence depends on response. Local signals matter. When individuals respond to what is happening around them, the system adjusts in real time. When those signals are ignored or dismissed, the system doesn't become stronger. It becomes brittle.

## POWER DOESN'T LIVE AT THE TOP

The same pattern shows up when systems are disturbed.

Fire moves through a forest, storms tear through landscapes, and disease wipes out dominant species. From a human perspective, it looks like devastation, but in ecological terms, it is disturbance, and disturbance is part of how systems evolve. After a fire, seeds germinate that could not before, species that were suppressed find space to grow, and diversity increases. The system reorganizes, often into something more complex than what existed before. Nature does not collapse under pressure. It reshapes.

So why do we expect something different from human systems?

Because we mistake structure for function, and authority for awareness. Governments look centralized, leaders sit at the top, and decisions appear to flow downward, so it feels logical that removing leadership would remove power. But power does not actually live where we think it does. It lives in shared identity, cultural memory, institutions, relationships, and networks of people. Remove a leader, and those things do not disappear. They reorganize, sometimes into competing factions, sometimes into decentralized resistance, and sometimes into something more extreme than what existed before. What was meant to simplify the system often makes it more chaotic and harder to control. Especially when the system stops responding to what is happening inside it.

The underlying assumption is mechanical. Remove a critical part, and the system stops. But living systems do not work like machines. They work like ecosystems. Ecosystems do not fail when something is removed. They adapt, redistribute function, rewire connections, and continue, often coming back differently than before.

This does not mean nothing is ever lost. Species disappear. Systems can be pushed beyond recovery. But collapse, when it happens, is rarely the result of a single removal. It comes from sustained disruption, from the erosion of relationships, from the loss of diversity and response over time. That is the real lesson. Resilient systems are not built on control. They are built on diversity, redundancy, relationships, and adaptability.

In the landscapes I work with across the country, the healthiest systems are never the most controlled ones. They are the ones with the most connections, the most overlap, and the greatest capacity to absorb change without collapsing. There is no single point that, if removed, brings everything down. You cannot eliminate a system by removing its head, because the head was never the system. The system is the network beneath it, the connections between parts, and the shared forces that hold



# POWER DOESN'T LIVE AT THE TOP

together. Nature figured this out a long time ago. It does not concentrate power in one place. It spreads it out, weaves it together, and builds in the ability to survive loss.



So when we try to “end” a system by removing its leadership, we are not dismantling it. We are disturbing it. And it will respond, not by disappearing, but by adapting.

The question is whether that adaptation strengthens what is within it or exposes where it failed to respond.



Both are expressions of the same system, responding in different ways.

## About the Author

Karen Tavakoli is the founder of Karen for Nature, an ecological designer, public speaker, and award-winning nature photographer. She helps communities restore biodiversity and reconnect with the natural world, one yard at a time. Learn more at [www.karenfornature.com](http://www.karenfornature.com)

# ENVIRONMENTALISM WRAPPED IN PLASTIC

by Paula Chow

Looking at Japan's environmental stewardship from a traveler's month long perspective and experience appears confusing. No research but simply with observation, I am reporting about the difficulty to practice my daily eco-friendly habits. I usually had questions about the "how to's" and there were not always solutions to my questions.

Hotels claim to have eco-friendly policies where they will only clean the rooms once every 3 days. However, they will leave a plastic bag of clean towels and a toothbrush on the door handle daily, in spite of explaining that I do not need any clean towels nor a toothbrush throughout my stay.

There are no trash receptacles on the streets nor in most business sites. Even the airports and restrooms lack trash receptacles. In Japan, one is expected to be responsible for one's own trash. This practice began following the 1995 subway sarin gas attacks when the government removed all public trash bins.

In Japanese culture societal harmony is among the most highly regarded values. The Japanese are sensitive toward public spaces and how they use them as an individual. Public spaces belong to others as it belongs to them. Because of this, keeping the environment clean is every person's responsibility. Therefore, handling one's trash is simply the norm.

As tourists, the receptacles you'll find are only found in 3 categories: plastic and aluminum cans, combustible and non-combustible. At the hotel, there was simply trash and plastic bottles/ aluminum cans (probably glass bottles, too). Single-use food containers went into the trash.

Japan incinerates their trash which are labeled combustibles. These include plastic bags, food waste, old clothes, dirty food containers, hygiene products, diapers, polystyrene, candy and food wrappers, receipts and note paper.

The non-combustibles are materials such as electronics, metals, ceramics, non-recyclable glass and large household waste such as appliances, electronics, etc. I couldn't figure out what I, as a tourist, would have to dispose of in this category.

Recyclables change with municipalities.

They generally require rinsing the plastic bottles and containers and even to take off the label (which goes into combustible) before recycling it.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM WRAPPED IN PLASTIC

The convenience stores have receptacles for combustibles and recycling and the convenience stores (every block) have recycling bins. Pretty much these are the only sites to find them and it is expected that only customers should utilize these. They are not for the passers-by.



I had two annoyances. The first was noticing almost all people who made purchases took plastic bags. In the retail shops, they took the heavy fancy paper bags. I rarely saw reusable bags.

The other annoyance I had was that 95% of the eateries, whether small or more formal, provide single-use chopsticks. I travel with my own utensil pack which includes a pair of chopsticks. One sushi chef was so impressed, he offered to wash my chopsticks upon the completion of my meal.

One of the issues that stood out was the individual wrapping of food items from cookies to produce. Although this is a major contributor to the plastic waste, it is their tradition of individual packaging, primarily noticeable in food items, that is part of the gift giving custom, a major practice of Japanese culture. The individual wrapping is a sign of respect as well as hygienic practice. Department stores are especially popular for these specially packaged goods but these individually wrapped foods are ubiquitous throughout Japan in individual stores, chains and grocery stores, too.

Again, because of the cultural values of respect, cleanliness, order and responsibility, the streets and sidewalks are free of litter and gum residue. That's so refreshing. Everyone takes their trash and recyclables home. This was a wonderful experience.

I will do some research to learn more about their plastic use and incineration issues. What confuses me is that there is also the contrast of the Japanese culture of mindful consumption and reducing waste called "mottainai." There's a lot to learn. There needs to be some adjustment with the clash of values with tradition and the reality of human behavior impacting our environment.

SAVE THE DATE



NUCLEAR ENERGY  
PANEL DISCUSSION

LEARN ABOUT SMALL MODULAR  
NUCLEAR REACTORS (SMR)

Thursday, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2026 @ 6pm

Central Rappahannock Regional Library  
1201 Caroline Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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It's always important to stay engaged in what your elected representatives are doing on the local, state, and federal levels. You have a say, so vote!

## **Contact Us**

If you want to reach out to us, you can email  
[RappahannockGroupSierraClub@gmail.com](mailto:RappahannockGroupSierraClub@gmail.com)

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