



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

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UNISON, VIRGINIA

Every Acre Counts

By Howard Lewis and Tara Connell

In past UPS newsletters, we have discussed in fairly general terms the opportunity of conservation easement, where property owners give up development rights to their land in exchange for tax benefits.

Our articles have:

- included maps showing that nearly 50 percent of the land around here is in easement;
- pointed out this is really important to maintaining the open space around Unison;
- shown this is something the government can't undo once the property has been set aside;
- observed this was one way to fight ever rising property taxes;
- and so on and so forth.

All of which is true. But when properties actually go into easement around Unison, there are no fireworks announcing the event. Sometimes one of those diamond shaped conservation easement signs may appear one day on a gatepost, but that's about it. Generally, this all flies under the neighborhood radar screen. Most people don't know about it.

So, we decided it was time to take a look at a real, live example of a property that went into conservation easement right around Unison. We asked Leslie VanSant, the new Executive Director of the Land Trust of Virginia (LTV), if she could give us the name of someone in the

immediate neighborhood who recently had put their property into easement.

She suggested we talk to Sandy Wilson and Bob Pettit of Persimmon Ridge Farm on Furr Road. As the crow flies, Persimmon Ridge Farm is pretty much right on top of Unison—about three quarters of a mile away. Bob and Sandy purchased the first section of their farm—roughly 20 acres with its historic Quaker farmhouse—in 2008. They spent more than two years renovating and adding onto the fieldstone farmhouse, sections of

which may date back to 1752.

Having retired from their jobs as communication lawyers in Washington, Sandy and Bob became official Unison residents in 2011. Sandy even began a new career as a landscape designer and gardening blogger (*a-peaceable-garden.com*), emphasizing the need to design beautiful yet low-maintenance landscapes that allow people to “age in place” rather than be overwhelmed by their gardens as they get older. It's a theme that can be found not only in the land-



Masthead photo: The view of Persimmon Ridge Farm looking south towards Unison. **Above:** The historic Quaker house restored by Sandy and Bob. **Right:** Duff, who Sandy and Bob adopted from Middleburg Humane in 2009. He specializes in garden excavation.

Within a four-mile circle around Unison, there are now eight square miles of land in conservation easement.

scaping around their house, but also in the house itself.

In 2014, the couple bought an adjoining parcel of about 10 acres on the north side of their property, bringing their total acreage to thirty. The 10 acres had been part of a larger piece of property—which was subdivided in the mid-1990s. Besides ensuring greater privacy, this purchase also brought with it the right to build another house on their farm. Sandy and Bob now had development rights to “give up” so they started thinking about putting their entire farm—all 30 acres—into conservation easement.

Much has been made of the tax advantages that come with conservation easement but for Bob and Sandy this was more or less frosting on the cake. As Bob said: “The tax credits are nice and we will take advantage of them, but this isn’t what drove our decision.” Sandy explained: “This particular piece of property is rich with history. The idea that it wouldn’t be preserved was an anathema to us.”

Persimmon Ridge Farm was indeed a very good candidate for easement, as well as an interesting study that may hold some lessons for other landowners around Unison.

To begin with, the farm had five out of

seven recognized conservation values (CV’s). CV’s are essentially criteria that the government considers important for putting land into easement. The more you have, the better off you’ll be both in terms of the dollar value of the development rights being given up as well as any challenge by the government to the easement.

The high number of CV’s attached to Persimmon Ridge Farm, by the way, are not unique. The accompanying map shows the CV’s for properties over 20 acres, which currently aren’t in easement, in the area around Unison, Upperville and Bluemont.

But that’s not all we can learn from this case. “Sandy and Bob’s situation is something that others around Unison should pay attention to,” according to the LTV’s VanSant.

Under current zoning, landowners around Unison cannot subdivide their property into lots of less than 20 acres. That means you need at least 40 acres in order to have development rights that can be given up in conservation easement. So, if you don’t have 40 acres, should you forget about conservation easement? Not necessarily.

Many of the farms around Unison have less than 40 acres, just like Bob and Sandy’s farm. But, this land, as

The Seven Conservation Easement Values

The seven conservation values on a parcel of land being considered for easement include whether it is:

1. In a historic district or has a historic building on it;
2. Contains wetlands;
3. Has a stream running through it;
4. Is adjacent to other property in easement;
5. Has road frontage;
6. Includes a forest of more than 20 acres;
7. Has more than five acres of prime farmland.

The fourth and fifth are considered the most important.

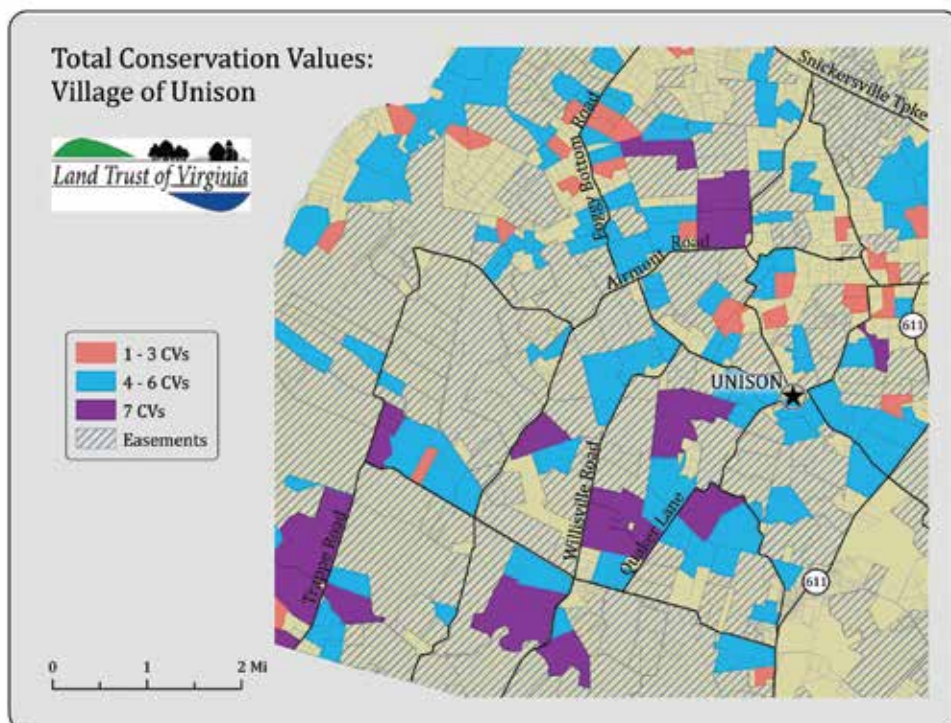
well as neighboring property, may have been subdivided years ago under previous zoning rules and therefore have development rights that haven’t been used—again, just like Persimmon Ridge Farm once the additional 10 acres were added. “This means that some landowners in the Unison area may be sitting on significant tax credits, which they either can use themselves or turn into cash,” VanSant explains.

Turning back to Bob and Sandy’s farm, with all the paperwork and assessments finished, Persimmon Ridge Farm, with its historic Quaker farmhouse, officially went into easement with the LTV in October of 2015.

Thirty more acres added to the eight square miles already in conservation easement. ■

To find out more about conservation easement (for example, if property less than 40-acres might qualify), landowners should contact the Land Trust of Virginia, or other organizations that accept conservation easements such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation or the Piedmont Environmental Council.

Left: The colors on the map indicate the different number of conservation values for properties not in easement around the Unison area.



And an XKE Pulled Up on My Right



More than a few people living around Unison are old enough to remember the 1964 rock & roll classic, Deadman's Curve, by Jan and Dean, which begins: "I was cruisin' in my Stingray late one night when an XKE pulled up on my right ..." Well, if you're cruisin' in Unison late one night and a red XKE pulls up on your right, that's almost certainly going to be part-time Unison resident, Jaime Steve. He's a "car guy" who collects classic cars and keeps them in the new white barn next to the pink house that he and his wife—Whitney—have in the middle of the Village. We asked him how he got into this hobby:

Cars are either in your blood ... or they're not. And to collect more than one old car, you either have to be single, or have a loving, understanding wife named Whitney.

It all started in 1967 with a rough looking 1951 MG sports car, which was parked way off the long road to my grandparents' house in Ithaca, New York. I spotted it when I was seven-years-old and pointed it out to my dad. The next day, my dad, my older brother and I snuck out of my grandparent's house to go over and "just look at" the old MG. Forty-five minutes later my dad bought the car for \$500—a lot of money for a young family in 1967! His bigger problem, however, was that he had to inform my mom of the new purchase. That didn't go as well as planned, although she eventually came around.

Today, that same 1951 MG—two painful restorations later—resides in our barn in Unison. That beaten up MG was the start of my full-on fascination with all cars, but mostly British sports cars from the 1930s through the end of the swinging 60s.

Collecting cars can be addictive. The '51 MG now has some distinguished stable mates ranging from a red 1969 Jaguar XKE to a gold 1966 Ford Mustang to a 1942 WW II Jeep. There's even a 1973 Volkswagen Squareback, which is nearly identical to the one my mom drove when my brother and I were growing up.

Nearly 45 years after it all started with my dad and that classic MG in up-state New York, there are now 32 classic cars in my collection ... and I'm a long way from finished!

Our car barn in Unison is also more than just a place to park cars. It's really a tribute to my car buddy and 20-year best friend, Adolph C. "Ace" Rosner. Ace was a veteran of WWII and the Cold War, who died about five years ago at age 94 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



Above: The XKE that may pull up on your right late one night in Unison.

Ace was also a serious collector of classic cars. At one point, he owned 44 vintage cars ... all at the same time! When I purchased my second old car and crossed the line into "collecting", I told Ace, "I'll never be as bad as you". He responded, "You're on your way!" He was right. ■

Middle: One of the MG's stable mates: a 1966 Ford Mustang. **Below:** Jaime Steve's Car Barn in Unison.



Above: The 1951 MG that started it all.





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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Part II: Everything You Wanted to Know About Septic Systems but Were Afraid to Ask

In last fall's UPS newsletter, we ran Part I of an article by Jerry Franklin, Environmental Health Supervisor at the Loudoun County Health Department, on the steps homeowners should take to properly maintain their septic systems. Recently, the county sent out its latest batch of notices to homeowners who need to have their septic systems pumped out by the end of 2016. Accordingly, this seemed like a good time to bring you Jerry Franklin's answers to our questions on the county's new pumping rules, what a failing system looks like, how to break your system and just how expensive it can be NOT to maintain your septic system.

Question: How long should a conventional septic system last?

Answer: Loudoun County still has some systems in use from the 1940's while other systems fail after only a few years. The average life of a conventional system is around 30 years.

Q. How much does an average conventional septic system cost to replace?

A. \$10,000 is a base estimate for a residential conventional gravity system. However costs can vary widely depending on the site, complexity, and size of the system. Costs of up to \$85,000 have been seen.

Q. Can you explain the new Loudoun County regulations on pumping out septic tanks?

A. Conventional systems must be pumped out or inspected every five years. If the operator, during his inspection, determines the tank does not need to be pumped and will likely not need pumping in the next two years, he may note that in a report to the Health Department and the system must be inspected again or pumped in two years. Alternative systems are inspected annually and the operator determines if the system requires pumping during that inspection and reports his findings to the Health Department. Tanks should be pumped when solids are one-third of the tank working volume. All tank pump-outs are required to be reported to the Health Department within two weeks of pumping. Only septic tank cleaners licensed in Loudoun are able to input pump-out

reports. Unlicensed pumpers are operating illegally. A list of licensed septic tank cleaners may be found at <http://www.loudoun.gov/index.aspx?nid=1428>.

Q. What are the signs homeowners should look for that indicate a system is failing?

A. Standing water or spongy areas over the absorption area or near septic components indicates a possible malfunction. Slow drains or backups are also signs of possible onsite sewage system issues.

Q. Depending on those signs, who should they call? Plumbers? Pumpers? Septic specialists? The Health Department?

A. The best person to call is a licensed operator. They can determine the source of the problem, determine if Health Department permits are required, make repairs, arrange for inspection and report to the Health Department.

Q. Besides old age, what are the other main reasons for septic system failures?

A. Overuse, tree roots, poor soil, ground or surface water influence, leaking tanks, damaged components.

Q. What is the list of things you should NOT put down the drain?

A. Wipes, pharmaceuticals, feminine products, condoms, toys, towels, cat litter, fat, oil, grease, paint, excessive bleach or cleaning products. ■

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