



Unison Preservation Society

NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Village and Countryside

WINTER • 2023

• WINTER •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

Loudoun County Zoning Rewrite

The Zoning Ordinance Rewrite (ZOR) continues its long journey through the public review and approval process. The ZOR is a massive undertaking with a lot of chapters. It is being reviewed in working sessions by the Loudoun County Planning Commission three or four chapters at a time. There are a total of 13 chapters. Unison resident Robin-Eve Jasper has been following the ZOR and other zoning matters and provides a detailed report on some of the important issues affecting Unison.

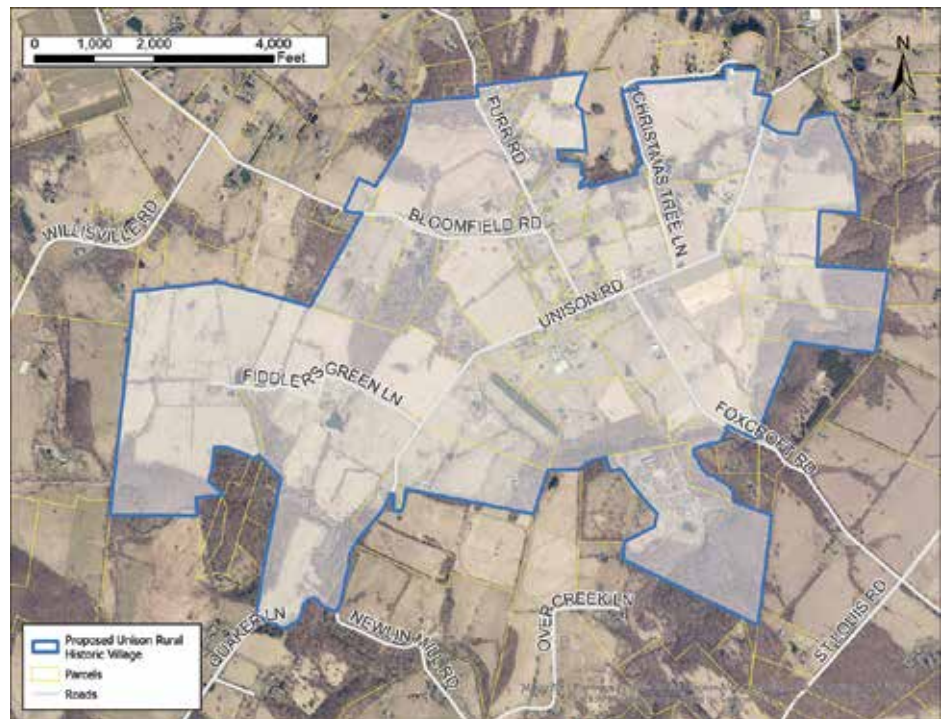
For Unison, the ZOR is a good news and a not-so-good news story. I'll start with the disappointing news.

Rural Historic District: Despite a remarkable effort by Unison stakeholders to try and garner some protection through the ZOR for Unison and other historic villages that were not recognized for protection in the 2019 Comprehensive Plan, no protection is included in the current draft of the proposed regulations. This makes the Unison Preservation Society's initiative to develop a small area plan and have Unison formally designated a Rural Historic Village (RHV) by the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors even more time sensitive and more important. A map showing the proposed rural historic village boundaries for Unison is shown at right. The map has been submitted to all property owners included in the proposed RHV and there has been no objection from any of them. Being a RHV brings with it a modest set of protections that ensure that new development is consistent with the look and feel of the existing village in terms of building size and setbacks, lot sizes (what real estate developers call "massing"), garage loading, and road access. It does not include other design restrictions.

Prime Agricultural Soils: More generally, protection for rural western Loudoun is advancing through measures to protect "prime agricultural soils". This means that the rules for cluster developments are being modified to ensure the preservation of soils that are good for farming and

agricultural pursuits. In the past it was permissible to subdivide large rural lots in such a way that the best farming soils could be used for building sites and drain fields in cluster developments. The proposed regulations attempt to

Continued on back page.



Proposed rural historic village boundaries map of Unison.

What Have We Lost with Those Dead Ash Trees Around Unison?



By Howard Lewis

Ash trees are native to large parts of the northern hemisphere and can even be found in southeast Asia. They have been valued by many different people over the centuries. A large part of Viking mythology, for example, centered on a single ash tree—the World Tree—growing on an island in the middle of the ocean. And some of the Viking's primary gods were said to have magical spears made of ash, which may account for the fact that the non-magical spears of real live Vikings warriors were also made of ash.

These days, if any Viking gods or warriors lived around Unison, they would be hard put to find sufficient ash from which to make their spears. In the last half dozen years, hundreds, if not thousands, of ash trees have died in the Unison area—killed by the emerald ash borer.

Like the Vikings, Native Americans also understood the value the ash tree—black ash, in particular. They used it to produce one of the most indispensable items of everyday life—the basket. According to an

article in the Smithsonian's American Indian magazine, "native weavers in what is now the Great Lakes and Northeastern United States and eastern Canada have known for centuries that when it comes to a hard but flexible wood that can be coaxed, bent and twirled into a basket, nothing compares to black ash."¹

The recent loss of ash trees has even hit America's favorite past time—baseball. A baseball supposedly rockets off the sweet spot of a bat made of ash better than from a bat made of any other wood. Joe DiMaggio used ash bats in his 56-game hitting-streak in 1941. Ditto Roger Maris' 61-home runs in 1961. Babe Ruth and Ted Williams used ash bats. But today? According to the *New York Times*, not a single one of the 300 players who came to the plate in postseason play last year used an ash bat.² Thanks to the emerald ash borer, ash bats may be headed toward extinction.

Probably Unison's own baseball team used ash bats, but the team played its last game in the 1957, so the impact of the emerald ash

bore on this front doesn't register too much in present day Unison.³

It does, however, register on a lot of other fronts.

The most obvious hit for many Unison landowners is in their pocketbooks. Cutting down even one large tree can run into hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars and on some Unison farms we aren't talking about one tree but dozens. Dead ash trees become very brittle, which makes them dangerous to climb. They need to be dropped on the ground, if possible, or taken down piece-by-piece by a professional arborist in a bucket lift. And, once on the ground, if they aren't chipped and hauled away, residents are left with endless burn piles or stump dumps.

The costs of cutting down the dead ash represents a short-term impact on Unison, which may be coming to an end as the last dead ash will probably hit the ground around here in the not too distant future. The long-term impacts are probably just beginning to be seen. For example, 40 to 50-foot ash trees are no longer providing shade in the woods around Unison, which opens up the forest floor to a lot more sunlight. That's a double-edged sword. More sunlight can encourage native ground covers and understory shrubs and trees, but it also encourages non-native invasives such as the highly aggressive Japanese stilt grass that can be found all over Unison.

The loss of the ash trees is also having an impact on the birds. According to University of Delaware entomologist, Doug Tallamy, the ash tree is host to around 150 species of native moths and butterfly larvae with about 20 percent of these completely dependent upon the ash tree.⁴ As Tallamy keeps reminding us, if you want to feed the birds, feed the insects first. With the loss of the ash trees, we aren't doing as good a job of feeding the birds around Unison as we once were, except maybe for woodpeckers.

Woodpeckers love to feast on emerald ash borer, accounting for maybe 35-40 percent the insects mortality, according to a US Agricultural Department (USDA) report.⁵ The same article also discusses USDA research on biocontrol experiments. The main focus of this effort has been a parasitoid



Since it has been treated for the emerald ash borer, this old, storm-battered ash tree near Unison will be leafing out this coming spring. It was probably a young tree during the Roaring 20s a hundred years ago and hopefully will be seeing many more springs to come. Some ash can live 250 years or more, at least they could before the emerald ash borer hit.

wasp that attacks the emerald ash borer. The wasp has been released in 25 states, including Virginia. There are also insecticides that are effective in protecting individual ash trees, but they are expensive and can kill some of the other beneficial insects in the tree.

But it is not just the birds that we should be concerned about here. Oak Spring Garden ecologist, Rea Manderino, points out that we should be equally concerned about the insects:

Not only is the loss of the ash important for the birds, but losing the insects themselves is a sadness! Several sphinx moths (aka "hummingbird" moths) depend on ash and are at risk of extinction. When American Chestnut was lost as a major tree, at least five species of moths went extinct.

Is there any glimmer of hope in all of this? Maybe.

As Ms. Manderino explained at a recent Oak Spring Garden event, unless the tree has been treated, the emerald ash borer has pretty much killed off any ash tree around here that's larger than an inch in diameter. That's the bad news. The good news is that it leaves saplings and seedlings alone. The Unison area probably has hundreds of small ash saplings and seedlings growing in the fields and forests around here.

Since the borer has pretty much eaten its way through Unison, it has moved on to greener pastures, so to speak. Our ash saplings and seedlings are safe for now, but as they mature they become susceptible to any emerald ash borer still hanging around. So, it may come down to a race between the borer and the research mentioned above, which also includes work on developing an ash that is more resistant to the borer. (Not all ash are equally susceptible to the emerald ash borer. White ash seems to have some resistance while green ash and black ash seem to have none).

So, with further research, who knows? Unison may sometime in the future—the distant future—have some ash trees dotting its fields and forests once again.

In the meantime, we've lost a beautiful tree. That's probably the biggest impact on Unison. ■

¹ Anne Bolen, Silent Killer..., Smithsonian American Indian Magazine, Spring 2020.

² New York Times, October 20, 2022.

³ See UPS newsletters from Spring 2022 and Spring/Summer 2015 for history of Unison baseball team.

⁴ Bringing Nature Home, Doug Tallamy (2007).

⁵ Ash Tree Update 2017, US Department of Agriculture.

Howardsville Revitalization

The winter issue of the 2015 UPS newsletter featured an article by Unison resident, Kim Hart, on the historic village of Howardsville, which included a sidebar on how one Howardsville resident was almost taxed out of his house. Kim provides an update here on recent developments in Howardsville. (For Unison residents who don't know the exact location of Howardsville, go to the end of Bloomfield Road in the village of Bloomfield, turn left on Airmont Road. In about a mile, Airmont turns into Greengarden Road at Trappe Road. A quarter of a mile further on, Howardsville is on the right.)

A lot is happening in the little village of Howardsville, just south of Bloomfield.

Howardsville was founded in the 1870's when freed slaves began purchasing small lots subdivided within a woodlot that had been carved off a plantation that is now known as Newstead Farm. As one of the few, small African-American agricultural communities to withstand Jim Crow and exist to this day, Howardsville is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Wastewater Treatment Facility Now Operational

At the turn of this century, Howardsville was dying because its lots didn't percolate. Children raised with outhouses couldn't return because septic drain fields could not be found to support new houses. But, with the help of Loudoun County Government official, Scott Fincham, and Loudoun Water, a new wastewater collection system is now installed and operational. Connections are

in progress. Descendants from six of the "traditional" Howardsville families are now either living in the village or working on new homes so they can. This is historic revitalization.

Loudoun/VDOT Stormwater Management Study

In the 1960's, VDOT rebuilt and paved Greengarden Road. Unfortunately, this process appears to have altered the flow of storm water in and around Howardsville, further degrading the habitability of the existing lots. In response to some tough questions from returning Howardsville descendants, Loudoun County and VDOT have come together to study these problems. With funding from the Loudoun Board of Supervisors, the study began in February. Once strategies are identified, both the County and VDOT have pledged funds to mitigate problems as much as possible. ■

Unison Updates

Unison Community Water and Wastewater Study

At a meeting in the Unison Store on February 2, Loudoun County officials met with Unison residents to discuss a preliminary proposal to provide a community water and wastewater service to 34 properties in and around the village of Unison. These properties are now serviced by individual wells and septic systems. The owners of the 34 properties that would fall within this community water and wastewater system must now decide how they want to move forward in examining the details contained the County's study and ultimately whether they want to accept the proposal to create a community water and wastewater system.

Conservation Easement Assistance

The Loudoun County Board of Supervisors recently increased the income cap limit to \$500,000 for landowners seeking assistance in putting their property into easement under the County's Conservation Easement Assistance Program. The program provides reimbursement up to \$25,000 for qualified applicants to cover the up-front costs such as lawyers fees and other charges connected with placing farmland and open spaces into permanent easement with non-profit organizations such as the Land Trust of Virginia or the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.



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 unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com



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Loudoun County Zoning Rewrite *(Continued)*

preserve at a minimum 50 percent of the area with the best soils in the originating parcel and maintain the requirement that 70 percent of the land in the originating parcel be maintained as a Preservation Farm lot, Rural Economy lot and/or Open Space. They would reduce the number of Residential Cluster Lots in a development to 15 (from 25), while providing more flexibility to property owners to tighten up the Residential Cluster Lots and reduce their size (down to 3 acres from 4 acres). Several organizations have raised concern about the ability to site sewer drainfields away from the Residential Cluster Lots on Open Space lots and the intensity of uses allowed on Rural Economy lots (e.g., wineries up to 20,000 square feet in size, breweries, and special events venues). The Prime Agricultural Soil and Cluster Subdivision Amendment is pending before the Loudoun Planning Commission.

Short Term Rentals: Another hot topic has been short term rentals by owners (think AirBNB or VRBO). The County allows such rentals—which it defines as rentals that are fewer than 30 consecutive days—but since 2018 has required that the property owners register with the County. Registration is free and the information that the County learned through the registrations has been used to craft a zoning amendment to address the short-term rental market. The proposed amendment

differentiates between rentals of accessory dwellings and whole houses. It addresses rental capacity, management requirements, lot size, parking, sewage, food service (not allowed), safety, etc. The bottom line is that while the proposed zoning amendment places some commonsense constraints on all short-term rentals and requires permitting of commercial whole house rentals, the proposed amendment does not prohibit them.

For more detailed information on planning and zoning matters please visit Loudouncounty.gov/2935/zoning-ordinance-amendments-ZOAMS and Loudouncoalition.org/zoning-committee. They are both great resources.

Conservation Easement: In the end, the gold standard for preservation and protection of Unison's historic landscape is the establishment of conservation easements. We are indeed fortunate to have so many local property owners who have committed their properties to preserve our historic village and its environs. **In order to answer questions that property owners might have about conservation easements, the UPS Preservation Committee is hosting a cocktail hour chat with representatives from the Land Trust of Virginia at the Unison Store on Thursday, March 30 at 6:30PM. Please join us if you are interested and able, or feel free to email me at eltonfarmva@gmail.com with questions. ■**



Would You Like to Stay Informed?

If you would like to learn more about what the Unison Preservation Society is doing for you, please make sure you are on our mail and email lists so you don't miss any important announcements and special events in and around Unison. Contact us at unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com. We would love to hear from you!