POTOMAC LOCAL NEWS

Stafford Supervisors Advance Land Conservation Efforts with PDR Program Update and New Tank Creek Easement

By **Uriah Kiser**
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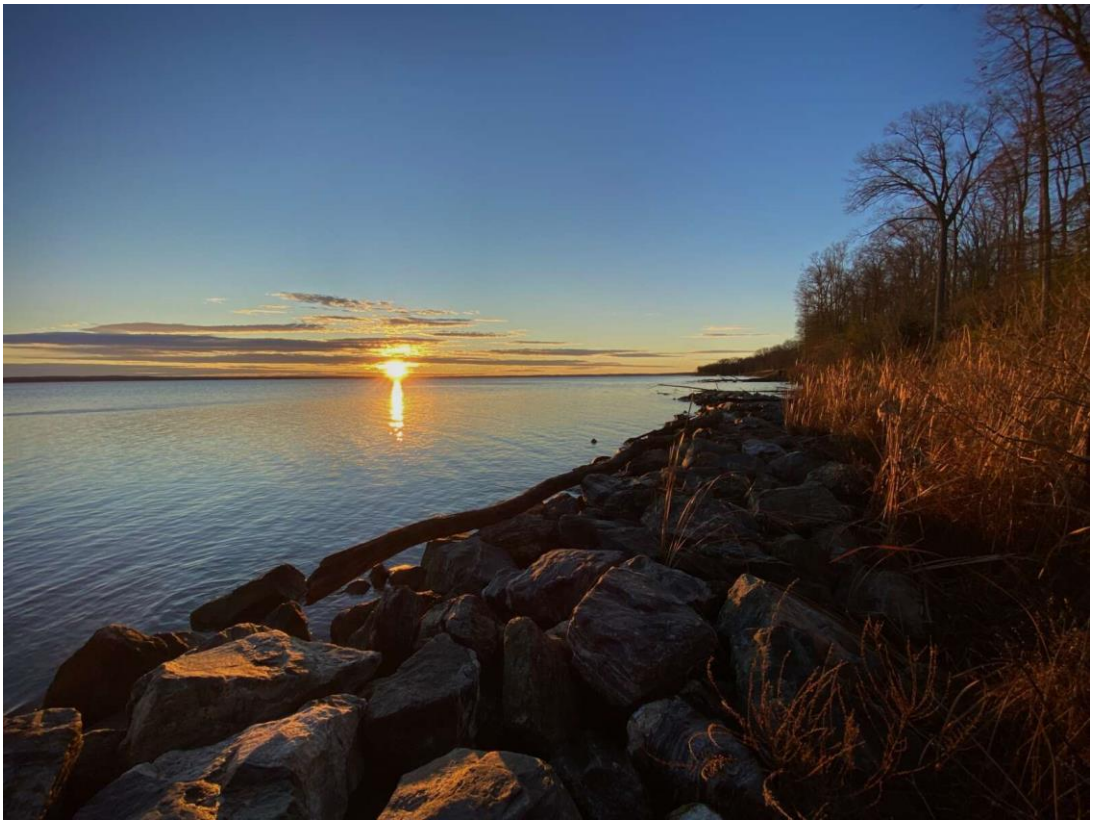

Widewater State Park in Stafford County. [Photo: Virginia State Parks] The Stafford County Board of Supervisors on March 17 received an update on its long-running Purchase of Development Rights program and unanimously approved a resolution accepting a co-holder open space easement on a forested preserve in the Widewater area, actions aimed at protecting rural lands and waterways.

Interim Land Conservation Specialist Nancy Cotting presented the status of the PDR program, which the board established in 2007. Under the program, the county pays landowners to restrict residential development on their properties while they retain ownership and agricultural uses. Perpetual easements are placed on the land and held by the county.

Cotting reported that the program has secured 16 easements on 1,317 acres and retired 325 development rights through four application rounds. Four pending applications cover an additional 142.27 acres. The current budget stands at approximately $1.2 million, sourced predominantly from rollback taxes with an annual allocation.

She noted the challenge of securing matching funds. “We seek and require matching funds for each of these PDRs,” Cotting said. “That can take some time. There are four to five matching agencies that we go to, the county providing fifty percent of the match, an external organization funding the other fifty percent of the match. This brings the current timeframe for completing one of these up to generally three to four years.”

Cotting proposed developing efficiency options to speed the process and broaden landowner participation. These include allowing 50 percent of the easement value to be donated by the landowner — keeping county financial obligations unchanged — and accepting straight donations of easements, with the county covering the due diligence costs of about $25,000. Under the donation option, the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust would hold the easement per the county’s memorandum of understanding.

The board gave conceptual support for continuing to develop these options toward a future resolution. Supervisor Crystal Vanuch thanked Cotting for “thinking outside the box,” and the full board indicated approval.

Cotting also provided a broader context: Stafford County, excluding Quantico, totals 144,905 acres, with approximately 12,000-plus acres conserved county-wide through PDR, land trusts, and state agencies.

Later in the meeting, Laura Hassell of the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust presented resolution R26-90 for a co-holder open space easement on the Tank Creek Preserve, a nearly 20-acre property in Widewater. The trust acquired the land in December 2024 using state and federal grants, with no cost to the county.

Hassell highlighted the property’s conservation values. “It’s entirely forested with many mature hardwood trees,” she said. “There’s a spring that originates on the property, which leads to Tank Creek, which then, of course, goes to the Potomac River and the

Chesapeake Bay. It was originally part of the historic Chelsea estate, so it has historic value, and it also aligns with county goals for protection of rural areas."

The easement will be co-held by Stafford County and the Navy through the REPE program, given the property's proximity to military installations. The trust will monitor and manage the site. Public access will be allowed, and the county may use the property, such as for campers from nearby Potomac Park. A ribbon-cutting is planned later this year.

The board approved resolution R26-90 unanimously with no discussion or questions.

These actions build on the county's ongoing commitment to land conservation. Cotting emphasized that the PDR program "preserves farmland and open space, our objective," offering landowners an alternative to development. Hassell noted the trust's work in Stafford, having conserved nearly 1,500 acres directly and assisted with about 3,000 more through partners.

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Author



Uriah Kiser
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