

Prince William Times

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Covering Prince William County and surrounding communities, including Gainesville, Haymarket, Dumfries, Occoquan, Quantico and the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park.



See PrinceWilliamTimes.com for coronavirus updates



COURTESY PHOTOS

Nancy Hogan, LPN, administers the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Dot Moore, a resident of Novant Health UVA Health System Caton Merchant House in Manassas.

A shot at normalcy COVID-19 vaccines administered at assisted living home in Manassas

By Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITER

These are the things Walter Howell has missed the most since the pandemic turned life at his Manassas assisted living facility upside-down last March: visits with family, getting out “to see what the world looks like” and playing bingo.

That’s why Howell, 99, said he wanted to be first in line to get a COVID-19 vaccination when they were offered to residents of Novant Health UVA Health System’s Caton Merchant House last week.

“I feel I’m the oldest, and if I could take it, anybody could take it,” Howell said.

A few hours after his arm was poked with a syringe filled with the Moderna vaccine on Thursday, Jan. 14, Howell said he hardly felt a thing.

“It was mild compared to some [shots] I got when I was in the service and we were going into the islands,” said Howell, a World War II Navy veteran who served in Guam. “We took plenty of shots, and some of them hurt. This was mild.”

Howell, a native of Long Island, N.Y., came to live at the Novant Health UVA Health System’s Caton Merchant House a few years ago to be closer to family. He said he’s happy there and has made many friends.

But life has been different since the pandemic began 10 months ago, he says. Residents were mostly relieved to begin receiving the vaccine last week



Walter Howell

and consider it “a light at the end of a tunnel,” said Caton Merchant House Executive Director Mandy Dickinson.

“They are very appreciative that we’re able to offer them shots,” Dickinson said. “They’re hopeful now.”

Because residents of skilled nursing homes and

assisted living facilities are so vulnerable to complications from the COVID-19 and have made up a tragically large part of the nation’s death toll, they are in the top priority group for receiving the vaccine.

The federal government hired two national pharmacies – CVS and Walgreens – to vaccinate long-term care facility residents and staff separately from the state-run vaccination efforts to ensure they received their shots in a timely manner.

But despite that exclusive treatment, it’s still taking weeks to administer the vaccinations. That’s why the Novant Health UVA Health System, which owns and operates Caton Merchant House, decided to vaccinate Caton Merchant House residents on its own.

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Vaccine supply runs thin as COVID cases rise

By Daniel Berti and Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

As new COVID-19 cases reported daily rose to new levels over the weekend, the Prince William Health District had bad news to share about vaccination appointments. A nationwide shortage in vaccine doses will likely mean a weeks-long delay in shots for those who don’t already have an appointment.

As of Sunday, Jan. 17, the health district had already filled its available vaccination appointments through Feb. 15 and began collecting eligible residents’ names and contact information for a waiting list.

New appointments will begin to be scheduled at the end of January for dates and times after Feb. 15, Prince William Health District spokeswoman Kathy Stewart said Monday. The health district launched a new online form for the waiting list on Sunday. Those who have already filled out a previous form do not have to complete the new form, as their information will be transferred to the waiting list and they will be contacted for an appointment when they come available, Stewart said.

See VACCINE, page 2



Claudia Ordonez, 41, left, and her mother, Dinora Mejia, 60, a longtime custodian at Potomac View Elementary School, died days apart from COVID-19.

SUBMITTED

Family loses mother, sister to COVID-19

Longtime custodian was the first Prince William schools employee to die of COVID-19

By Jill Palermo
TIMES STAFF WRITER

For the Mejia family, COVID-19 has exacted a horrible toll. Both Dinora Mejia, a longtime custodian at Potomac View Elementary School, and her adult daughter, Claudia Ordonez, contracted the virus in December, were eventually hospitalized and died just two days apart on Jan. 10 and 12.

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Moo and cock-a-doodle-doo for you, too?

County expands cattle, domestic fowl districts

By Daniel Berti
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Thousands more Prince William County residents can keep cattle and domestic fowl on their properties as a result of new rules approved by the Prince William Board of County Supervisors last week.

During the Tuesday, Feb. 2 meeting, the county board signed off on two resolutions -- one expanding the county's domestic fowl overlay district and the other changing the county's zoning rules for keeping cattle.

As a result, about 1,800 parcels were added to the domestic fowl overlay district, and about 3,800 more agriculture-zoned parcels can keep cattle. The parcels now allowed to keep cattle are almost entirely within the expanded domestic fowl overlay district.

Domestic fowl

The domestic fowl overlay district was created in 2011 and covers almost all the semi-rural residential and agricultural zoned areas of the county. The expansion adds 3,900 acres to the district, including the last remaining semi-rural residential areas in the Coles and Occoquan districts.

Homeowners within the district are allowed a certain number of "bird units" based on the acreage. Those units can be broken down in different ways. One "bird unit" allows a homeowner to have up to 10 chickens, which is equivalent to 20 pigeons, six ducks, four turkeys or one ostrich.

The maximum number of fowl allowed on a parcel depends on the parcel's size. Parcels between 1 and 4.99 acres are allowed one bird unit per acre. Parcels between 5 and 9.99 acres are allowed three bird units per acre. There is no limit on bird units per acre on parcels of 10 acres or more, according to the Prince William County Code.

The expansion adds 1,811 acres to the overlay district in the Bacon Race area off Davis Ford Road in the

Occoquan District and 2,800 acres to the overlay district in the Coles District off Hoadly Road behind the county landfill.

Several property owners in those areas have asked to be allowed to keep domestic fowl on their properties, and others are already illegally keeping domestic fowl in that area, according to county staff.

The new rules also removed about 70 acres from the overlay district from the Gainesville and Brentsville districts that are not eligible to keep domestic fowl even though they were within the overlay district.

The expansion does not mean all homeowners in the district will automatically be allowed to keep domestic fowl. A special-use permit is required for any property that is zoned semi-rural residential, and homeowners' associations can choose to prohibit domestic fowl in their neighborhoods.

Any parcels zoned agricultural that are under 10 acres and located within the domestic fowl overlay district will be allowed to keep domestic fowl by right. Also, all properties zoned agricultural that are over 10 acres can keep domestic fowl by right.

Cattle

Cattle are now permitted on parcels of 2 acres or more within the domestic fowl overlay district. County residents living on those parcels can keep cattle at the rate of one per acre after the first acre.

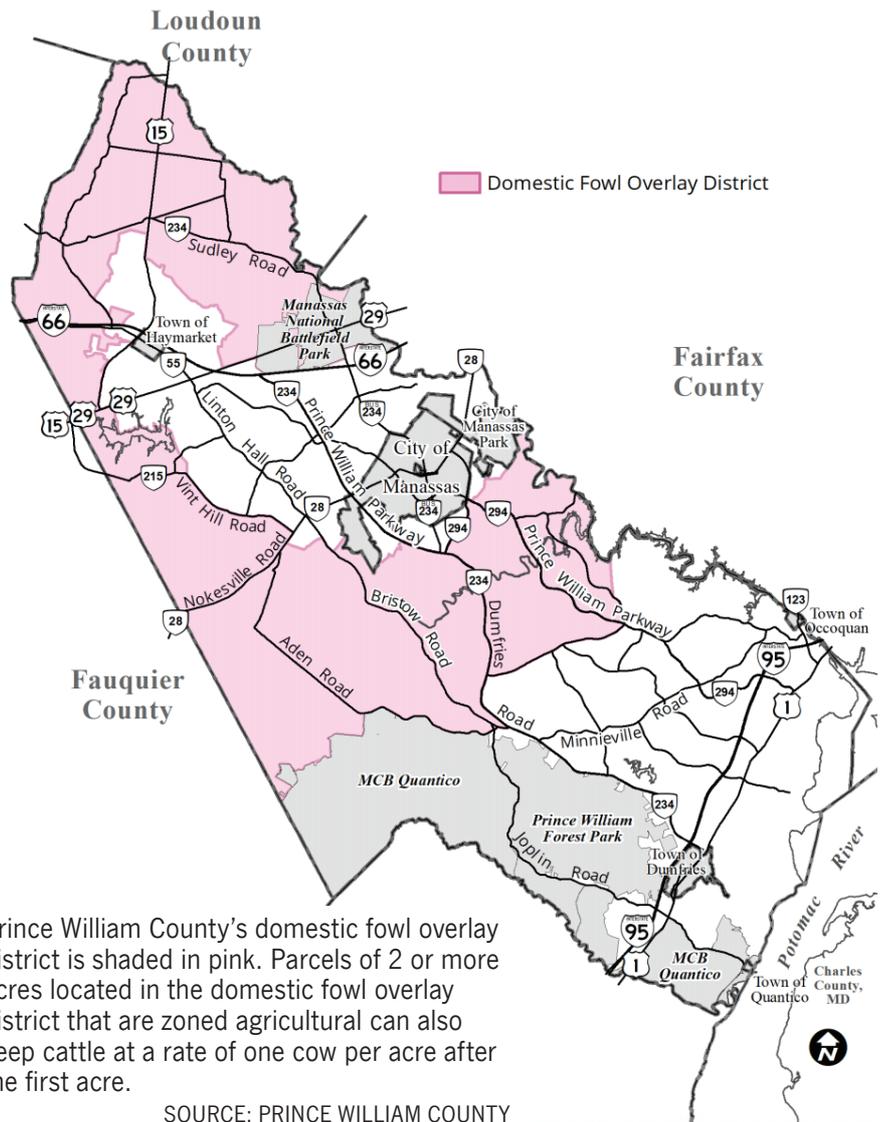
Previously, cattle were allowed only on parcels larger than 10 acres.

The change more than doubles the parcels on which residents are allowed to keep cattle, increasing the number from 2,538 to 6,534.

The county's planning department said the new rule "provides increased flexibility in allowing the keeping of cattle on agricultural zoned land in areas of the county that have already been recognized for their rural characteristics."

Reach Daniel Berti at dberti@fauquier.com

Domestic Fowl Overlay District



Prince William County's domestic fowl overlay district is shaded in pink. Parcels of 2 or more acres located in the domestic fowl overlay district that are zoned agricultural can also keep cattle at a rate of one cow per acre after the first acre.

SOURCE: PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

Rod Hall joins race for 31st state House seat

By Daniel Berti
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Prince William resident and state transportation official Rod Hall as joined the crowded race for the 31st District seat in the Virginia House of Delegates and has already racked up a few key endorsements.

Hall, 44, is the chairman of the Virginia Aviation Board and was appointed to serve on the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority by Gov. Ralph Northam in 2020. He currently works as public policy advisor at the Washington Office of K&L Gates, focusing on transportation and infrastructure issues.



Rod Hall

Hall previously served as the head of legislative affairs at the Federal Aviation Administration during the administration of former President Barack Obama. Prior to that, he worked as a senior congressional staffer on Capitol Hill.

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Nina and Andrew Fleischauer, owners of Sunshine Honey Farm, with one of their cows.

Tax bills still going up, but not as much

Supervisors mull first cut to the real estate tax rate since 2016

By Daniel Berti
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Prince William Board of County Supervisors is poised to reduce the county's real estate property tax rate for the first time since 2016, increase the county's data center tax rate by 15 cents and implement a new cigarette tax to fund the budget for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The board unofficially agreed upon the changes in tax rates in a series of straw votes taken during a four-hour budget markup session Tuesday, April 20. The board will officially vote to adopt the budget at its next meeting, Tuesday, April 27.

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Local 'hobby farms' take root

As big farms leave Prince William, small growers flourish during the pandemic

By Daniel Berti
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Nearly every morning in the spring and summer, Sarah Desmedt diligently cuts seasonal flowers on her 16-acre Nokesville farm, arranging and wrapping dozens of brightly colored tulips and daffodils in tissue paper before bringing them to her farm stand, known as Bloom Flower Farm, at the end of the driveway.

On weekends, she barely has time to chat with customers before heading back to the garden for more. And after a few hours, she's typically run out for the day and closes shop. She says there's nearly always a steady stream of cars pulling up to the stand throughout the summer.

"We had a much busier year than we've ever had," Desmedt said one morning in late March, as she worked on setting up a display of tulips.



Sarah Desmedt, owner of Bloom Flower Farm, in Nokesville.

Bloom Flower Farm is one of numerous hobby farms and "pick-your-own" style farms in Prince William that offer fresh, local produce directly to consumers. Some offer flowers, others have locally grown fruits and vegetables, fresh eggs, milk and farm-raised chicken, pork or beef.

See HOBBY FARMS, page 6

Data center market drives vacant land prices near \$1 million per acre

By Daniel Berti
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The price of vacant land in some parts of Prince William County is nearing \$1 million per acre as data center developers look to capitalize on the Northern Virginia region's quickly expanding data center market, according to county officials.

"They are just building like crazy," said Tim Leclerc, Prince William County's assistant finance director. "We've seen land purchases on a per acre basis up in the Loudoun County area that are approaching \$2 million. We've seen them approaching \$1 million here."

Leclerc told the Prince William Board of County Supervisors in March that vacant land assessments rose 15% overall in 2020 – the highest one-year jump in assessments in more than a decade. In areas of Prince William where data centers are allowed by-right, Leclerc said vacant land assessments rose 103%.

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