

*Will hundreds more
of these next door...*



*...spoil views
like this?* →

**Dark sky protectors
worry as development
marches west**

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL
For Foothills Forum

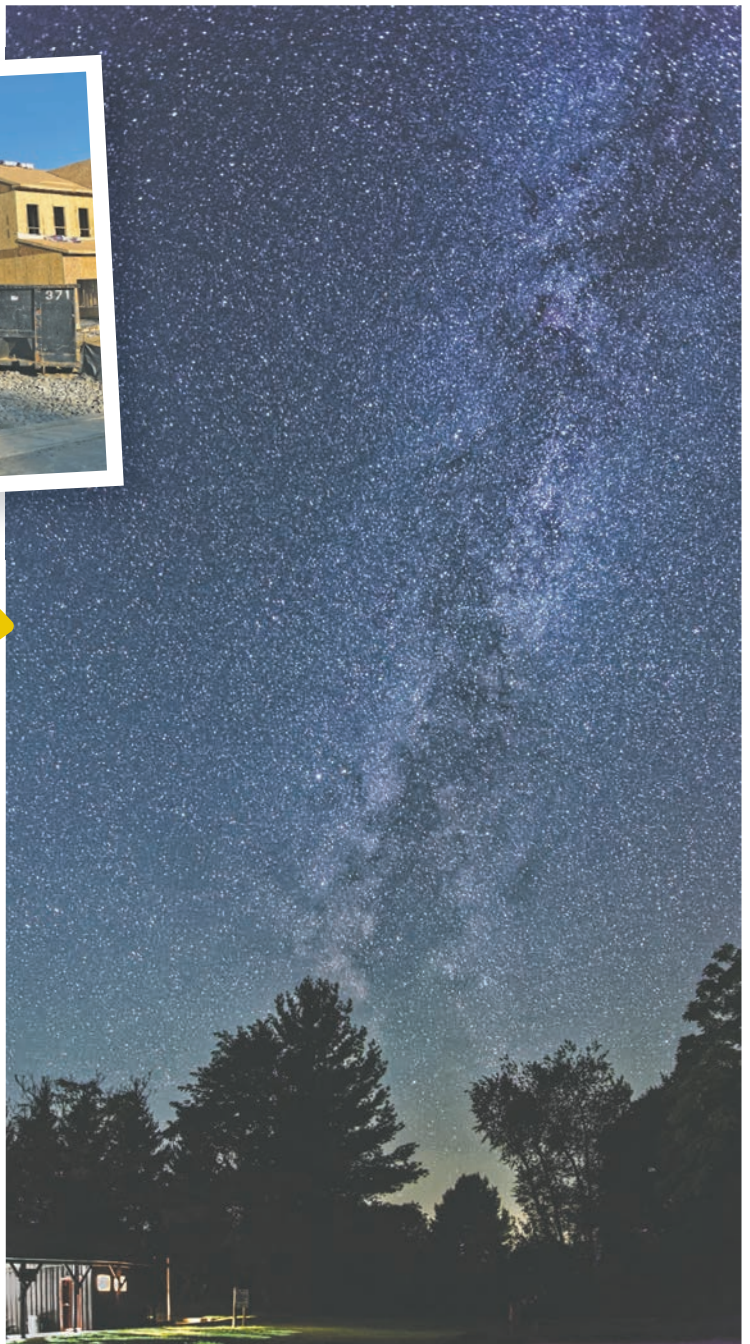
On a moonless night in late August a cluster of people moved gingerly in the Rappahannock County Park shadows to take turns peering at the starry sky through amateur astronomers' telescopes.

The sun had slipped below the horizon an hour earlier. Dusk fell during a lecture and slide show in the picnic pavilion and the stars emerged, faintly at first, then as bright as a planetarium show. No telescopes were needed to see the Big Dipper and Milky Way, but the instruments brought into focus the rings of Saturn, the Ring Nebula, the M13 star cluster and distant galaxies.

Nights like this explain why many in Rappahannock are passionate about keeping skies dark and why some now are worried about the potential glow from a huge housing and commercial project being built almost on the

county's doorstep at Clevenger's Corner that could intrude upon the stargazing.

"Wow!" a woman from a Washington, D.C., suburb exclaimed as she looked through Nathan Harness's 10-inch Orion



BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL (TOP) AND JOYCE HARMAN (ABOVE)

**Construction at
Clevenger's Corner,
top left, is in full
swing. The Milky
Way, as seen from
the Rappahannock
County Park, above.**

See **DARK SKIES**, Page 11

DARK SKIES

From Page 1

XT telescope. No sooner had she finished then she'd go to the back of the line again.

"She was visibly moved," said Harness, an electrical engineer from Luray and Northern Virginia Astronomy Club member. "It was her birthday and she said this was her best birthday present."

"Saturn is the best crowd-pleaser there is," said Milt Roney, an astronomy buff and National Air and Space Museum volunteer who gave a talk about how astronomers gauge the temperatures of stars by their colors.

Software engineers Monika Gobisetty and Ram Srinivarapu of Herndon found the Dark Sky event by searching on the internet. Her family back in Hyderabad, India, "would be surprised and amazed. I don't think my mom would believe there are these many stars in the sky," she said.

And seven-year-old Peter Rounsaville, brought by his father Ted, said, "I think it's cool." The science-minded Cub Scout spent several nights afterwards looking for constellations.

The seven-acre park off U.S. Route 211 outside the Town of Washington customarily closes at dusk, but the Rappahannock County Recreational Facilities Authority (RCRFA) and the Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection (RLEP) stage four of these star-gazing events a year on new moon nights, as well as occasional ones when the moon is full or in other stages.

Fifteen miles down the road at Clevenger's Corner in Culpeper County, bulldozers have cut a swath through hundreds of acres at the juncture of Lee Highway and Rixeyville Road for the Stonehaven project and carpenters are beginning to build some 760 Lennar Corp. homes, priced at a half-million dollars and up. Sold signs already sit outside homes and vacant lots on the first block.

Drawings show a 240-acre preservation buffer along the Rappahannock River and 500 acres along Route 621 in rustic Jeffersonton, with a clubhouse, swimming pool, tennis courts and trails but also a future shopping center with five fast-food drive-



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Dark skies advocates Kaye and Rick Kohler, Claire Cassel and Torney Van Acker at the county park, for which Van Acker led the effort to secure an International Dark Sky Park designation in 2019.

FEWER PEOPLE, LESS LIGHT

People per square mile:

28 Rappahannock	113 Fauquier
139 Culpeper	816 Loudoun

throughs as well as other stores, a hotel and library.

The development abutting the South Wales Golf Course sits a few miles from Culpeper's shared border with both Rappahannock and Fauquier counties.

Local environmentalists now are trying to convince Lennar, a Miami-based homebuilder, and Saadeh Partners, LLC, the commercial developer, to go above and beyond what Culpeper zoning ordinances require to limit light pollution.

Representatives from RLEP, the RCRFA and the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) as well as Bob Parks, executive director of the Smart Outdoor Lighting Alliance (SOLA), in July held an amicable Zoom meeting with Lennar's land development manager, who "seemed very receptive to our ideas" for mitigating the glow, said Laura O'Brien, the PEC's Rappahannock field representative. Lennar declined to make the manager, Joseph Roque, available for an interview.

The environmentalists' principal concern is not the single family houses and townhomes but the Stonehaven "village" commercial

center. Emad Saadeh, principal of the Woodbridge building company, did not respond to an interview request.

Both Lennar and Saadeh acquired the rights from other developers that secured zoning permits back in 2005 but never moved forward, even as the population surged in counties closer to the nation's capital.

Even tourists speeding through Rappahannock en route to Skyline Drive can see that the county has held the line against suburban sprawl, keeping out big-box stores and McDonald's. The population of roughly 7,400 has grown by only a few hundred in the past two decades and density remains a fraction of that of its neighbors. Rappahannock has 28 people per square mile, Madison County 43, Page 77, Fauquier 113, Culpeper 139 and Warren 190, according to the Bureau of the Census. (To its east, Loudoun has 816, Prince William 1,438 and Fairfax almost 3,000.)

The sky is not as dark as it was back in the 1990s when Joyce Harman, a night photographer and recently retired holistic equine veterinarian, bought her 44-acre farm east of Flint Hill. "I used to not be able to see my feet when I went out in the dark to feed my horses. Now it's rarely that dark," she says. "From my house now I can see the lights of Culpeper, Warrenton and Front Royal. There's tons more development."



Joyce Harman

Still, the view at the county park was so striking that one first-time visitor mistook the galactic haze around the Milky Way for low-lying, wispy Earth clouds. "The skies that night were as dark as I've ever seen

in Northern Virginia," said Daniel Paz-Soldan, an engineer and star enthusiast who affixed a camera to his telescope to capture pictures of the Milky Way.

Promoting Dark Skies

As those NASA nighttime photos from space of cities ablaze up and down the Eastern seaboard attest, "Most places are awash in lights," says longtime RLEP president Rick Kohler, whose real estate firm in the Town of Washington advertises "country homes, farms, retreats and fun places" for sale in "a world apart" from the other Washington.

Kohler and wife Kaye began sounding the alarm after she read Paul Bogard's 2013 book, "The End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light." RLEP brought Bogard in to speak at the Little Washington Theatre.

And astronomy professor and NASA solar ambassador Greg Redfern drew a crowd of 300 when he gave one of his lectures and laser star shows in Castleton. While nearly 80 percent of people in North America cannot see the Milky Way, the local dark skies movement was off and running.

RLEP has succeeded in getting 250 problematic outdoor lights replaced at businesses, churches and residential properties with down-shielded LED lights for free, with help from a matching grant from the Krebs Foundation as well as a donation from Trinity Episcopal Church. That saves the property owner at least \$300 for the cost of the light and installation by an electrician. The energy-efficient lights lower electric bills, too.

Continued on the next page →

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling

the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

▶ More at foothills-forum.org

What do you think?

Send feedback to editor@rappnews.com



PHOTOS BY JOYCE HARMAN

Replacing outward facing lights has made a difference at many Rappahannock homes and businesses, including Shaw's Services in Sperryville.

➔ *Continued from previous page*

The PATH Foundation provided a \$25,000 grant to replace all the parking lot lights at the county's two schools as well as those on the buildings and doorways.

Shaw's Services in Sperryville was one of the first to sign up for a free replacement light. "I love it," says owner Ricky Shaw. "It shows everything in a nice, smooth, soft white light. It doesn't blind you. It shines on your lot instead of outside it."

Other examples are the parking lot and building lights of Amissville

Baptist Church, B&B Service Center and the Corner Store in Sperryville. The free replacement offer still stands. Another RLEP board member, retired engineer Torney Van Acker, even oversees the installations.

RLEP also convinced the Rappahannock Electric Cooperative to replace for free older, outdoor lights the coop leases to customers. Van Acker helped drive that bargain, convincing the coop it would save money on electricity and maintenance.

Van Acker, who moved to Castleton for its rural character, led the effort to secure the International Dark Sky

Park designation in 2019 from the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) in Tucson, Ariz. Three state parks in Virginia also boast the IDA imprimatur: Sky Meadow, James River and Staunton River.

"It took us one full year to get that certification," said Van Acker. "We got letters of support from the Board of Supervisors, from tourism and other businesses, and from the Shenandoah National Park."

When the nonprofit Foothills Forum was formed in 2015 to support the Rappahannock News and local journalism, it commissioned a survey of more than 3,200 residents on what they thought were the most important issues facing the county.

From a laundry list of more than two dozen issues, people ranked keeping the skies dark as their sixth biggest concern. (Getting better internet and cell phone service were Nos. 1 and 2, followed by maintaining the county's beauty, its farms and the quality of its rivers).

Not everyone is on board. When the issue of extending to residential lighting the county's zoning ordinance for the lights on commercial properties came up at a public hearing in October 2015, the Board of Supervisors squelched it. "It's an encroachment on our property rights," said one homeowner. "And the government already has enough control over our rights and our property, and we don't need any more."

Last year there was an acrimonious dispute between the Dark Sky event organizers and neighbors who share a driveway with the county park and were concerned about people coming into the park at night. It was resolved with an agreement to limit the number of events and construct a wooden fence to prevent trespassing and shield light from the private property.

The question of regulating outdoor residential lighting in Rappahannock remains dead for now. "A lot of people are afraid to lose their lights. They think of it as a safety issue, keeping burglars away," said Kohler. "But lights aren't necessarily keeping burglars away; it just shows them where to go."

So the emphasis remains on voluntary actions, like trying to convince the Stonehaven developers not to become another light "dome" like Warrenton.

The light replacement, notes RLEP board member Claire Cassel, "is all voluntary. You can't always convince people it's something they should or want to do. There's that fear sometimes, 'Oh, it's the dark.'"

On Clevenger's Corner, she said, "There's much more work to be done. We need to engage people from Culpeper and Fauquier. This cannot be just a Rappahannock County-led initiative."

Parks, a lighting designer and former executive director of the International Dark-Sky Association, is a longtime crusader for less obtrusive light. He consulted with both Fairfax and Loudoun Counties on their lighting ordinances and has worked nationally and internationally, as well. SOLA, a nonprofit, is successor to the Virginia Outdoor Lighting Taskforce that he founded in 1999. "When you look up at the night sky, it changes your outlook on life," says Parks, who keeps his own telescope on a mountaintop in West Virginia, where it's even darker.



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BY DANIEL PAZ-SOLDAN

DARK SKIES IN THE PARK

The year's next and last Dark Sky event at the Rappahannock County Park is Saturday, Sept. 24, with a lecture starting at 7 p.m. The authority also keeps the park open late five nights a year for star watchers without a formal program, including one on Oct. 22. Registration is required for those latter free observation evenings.