

# **Batesville Residents Seek to Deter Truck Traffic After Bridge Upgrade**

April 7, 2023



*A tractor-trailer gets stuck trying to maneuver through Batesville, right behind a sign advertising a community*

More than 150 people jammed into the Batesville United Methodist Church on March 22 to participate in a meeting with county and state officials about an impending bridge improvement project on Plank Road (Rt. 692) near the center of the small rural village. Local residents heard about the project only last month when Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) workers knocked on a couple of doors to inform property owners they would be working in the right of way near the bridge.

Already plagued by large trucks barreling through Batesville and regularly bottoming out at the intersection with Miller School Road, residents worry that an upgraded bridge will open the floodgates to truckers looking for an east-west cut-through on Plank Road between Rt. 29 and Rt. 250/164. The Batesville Community Club (Ruritans) and Batesville Historical Society organized the March meeting, and neighbors from North Garden to Afton to Crozet were also in attendance as State Senator Creigh Deeds, county Supervisor Jim Andrews, and VDOT and county police representatives listened and tried to address concerns.

The discussion began with why the project is happening now. "This project's start date [set for early May] was actually set by the Culpeper District Structure and Bridge Office," explained Ed San Nicholas, Acting Resident Administrator for VDOT, "and it was done in concert with Albemarle County Fire and Rescue. It's really just an upgrade to the superstructure, nothing to be done with the substructure." San Nicholas said that the bridge, built in 1903, has a 17-ton weight limit, which won't support "large fire apparatus" as it continues to deteriorate. "If we don't take care of it now, it will begin to affect the ability of fire and rescue to respond, as they will have to find alternate routes, which will increase response time."



*VDOT plans to upgrade this bridge on Plank Road over the Mechums River, just west of Batesville. Photo: Lisa Martin.*

While Batesville has been asking the county and VDOT to address speeding and truck traffic on Plank Road for more than a decade, many at the meeting were focused on the increased tractor-trailer presence that an upgraded bridge would allow. Residents said they are not arguing against bridge safety, but pointing to the “unintended consequences of infrastructure improvements,” as one attendee put it.

Many attendees spoke about the narrow, winding nature of Plank Road, emphasizing the danger large trucks pose to those walking, biking, and driving smaller vehicles. A North Garden resident who is in the trucking business commented, “I can say categorically that if I’m running a large pickup with a legal eight-foot-wide trailer and encounter another pickup with a trailer, I have to drive off the road to pass. There are so many places where that road simply cannot accommodate a large tractor-trailer.”



*A large crowd discusses the impact a bridge upgrade will have on tractor-trailer traffic through Batesville with county and state officials.*

Several county school bus drivers who drive Batesville routes were in attendance and agreed. "There are five full-sized school buses that pick up this area's kids," said a driver named Ms. Winter. "That means 41 feet long, 11 feet high, 10 tons. I've driven the same route for five years and I've never seen traffic like this, or road conditions like this. Two vehicles of that size simply cannot fit on a road this size, and it's incredibly dangerous for me to have to come around a blind curve and slam on my brakes and get over into the dirt and tree branches on the side of the road. We need VDOT to help us a little here."

A group of Batesville and other local citizens worked for several years to get a through-truck restriction on the section of Plank Rd. from Rt. 29 to Miller School Road, which they achieved, but according to some speakers that

restriction has not been enforced. Neighbors asked the police representatives if they would follow up on photos of speeding trucks if local residents took them, and the police said yes, if the resident was willing to go to court to testify.

Batesville resident Jack Heyrman drew applause from the crowd by insisting the bridge project be delayed. "You must not start May 1," he said to the VDOT officials. "By the time the [truck restriction] impact study is done and can have any effect, trucks will already be rolling through. The state, the county, and VDOT—all of you need to work together to delay this project. I got no letter in the mail about this, and this project will close the road for a couple of months. We should have all been notified and we weren't, so the only responsible thing to do here is to delay this."



*A tractor-trailer takes up most of Plank Road as it barrels through Batesville.*

Kristen Roubardin, who owns the Batesville Market, concurred about the lack of notice. "It really would have been nice, as a business, to get a heads-up that there was going to be closure on the road during a really busy time," she said. "My livelihood, my employees' livelihood depends on traffic that comes through." She folded the many issues surrounding the bridge upgrade into a single theme. "It's really about preserving the historic district. It's about preserving the way of life for everyone who lives up and down this country road. There needs to be a way for our kids to exist safely on the street, on their bikes."

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A woman who said she's lived in Batesville for 54 years stressed the safety aspect of the debate from the other side. "I've had one of the firefighters tell me that if my house was on fire, he's crossing that bridge to get to me no matter what it takes. We need that bridge to be fixed for fire and rescue vehicles. And some local people here have tractor-trailers and haul heavy equipment, and they need the bridge fixed, too, so keep that in mind."

Sam Speedie, who in past years lived on the corner of Plank and Miller School Roads, said there are frequent instances of jackknifed trucks getting stuck in that intersection. "These can require a police response, require a tow, in some cases knocking out the power infrastructure and access to internet—these incidents can have a long tail."

Speedie also inquired about alternative traffic calming methods for Plank Road. "Traffic tables or pillows [flatter, softer types of speed bumps] could be used as emergency services-friendly forms of traffic calming that can address unsafe speeds where vehicles are coming over a blind rise at 50



miles per hour, bearing down on the crosswalk at the market."

VDOT Resident Engineer for Albemarle County Carrie Shephard responded that those aren't allowed on Plank Road. "Unfortunately, traffic calming in that traditional sense does not apply to this route because it's a 'collector.' The purpose of a collector road is to move vehicles, move traffic, and traffic calming measures like speed bumps and things that you're mentioning are for local roads, residential streets, like in a neighborhood. I understand that it's 25 miles an hour [in Batesville] but according to our purposes, it's a collector."

Afton resident Tracy Browne asked about a compromise. "I'm wondering if there could be a happy medium where maybe the bridge is sized to accommodate the majority of emergency vehicles but not make it viable for large [semi-truck type] commercial vehicles?"

Shephard said no. "Our business is to upgrade bridges so that anyone in the travelling public can use them," she said. "We can't purposefully improve a bridge [but] have a set weight limit—our goal is to make it safe for all legal loads. The best option for the community is to pursue a through-truck restriction, working with the county."

County transportation planner Kevin McDermott, who worked with Batesville residents five years ago on the truck restriction to the east of the village, said that residents need to prepare for a long haul. He described an almost two-year process to request a restriction, beginning with a county study that analyzes historic traffic patterns and road conditions, followed by a public hearing and approval process with the county Board of Supervisors, followed by another regulatory approval from the Commonwealth Transportation Board. The latter step alone could take up to nine months.

"This is a big fight," said McDermott. "There's a lot of people in the trucking industry who will come out, they will say this [restriction] can't happen. So, I'm just letting you all know that once we do the study, we have to make sure

that we can convince everybody to actually want to put that truck restriction on the road. So, keep that in mind."

Batesville resident and former Batesville Market owner Alex Struminger summed up the community's intention in taking up the fight. "We're not saying we want to slow down the wheels of progress in terms of improving the area," he said. "In fact, what we're kind of saying is, we've already improved it—we have created a community here that is thriving. We've got the store up and we've got young people with families living here and little children running around. People all know each other, we all help each other. This is a real community of the kind that you don't see just anywhere. So, we want to keep it, and we're saying [to the authorities] that we've arrived at something and you all should support us."

# Crossroads Inn Expansion Deferred at Planning Commission

March 2, 2023



*Matt Lovelady, Pippin Hill's director of operations, speaks to the Planning Commission at its February 14 meeting*

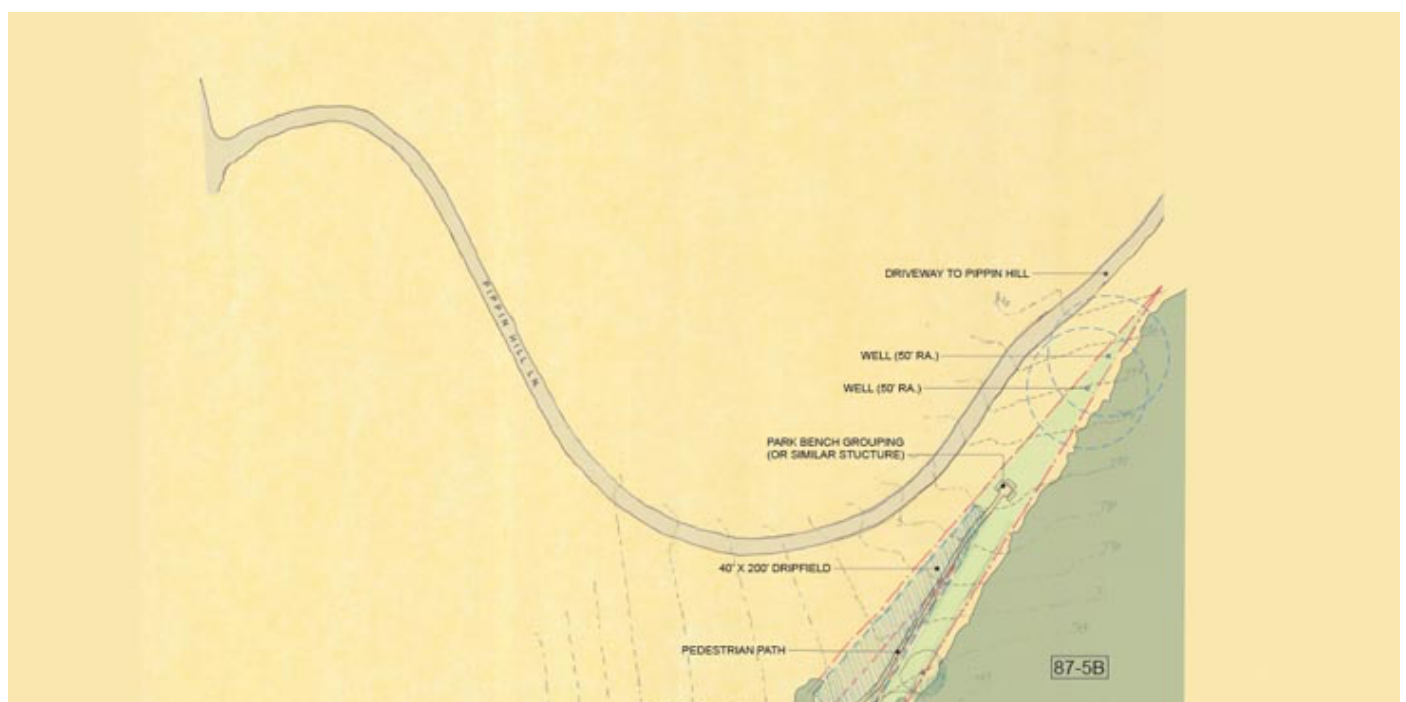
The owners of Pippin Hill Farm and Vineyards in North Garden appeared before the Albemarle County Planning Commission (PC) on February 14 to request a Special Use Permit [for a proposed inn expansion on a parcel of land adjacent to the vineyards](#). An existing structure on that parcel—the historic Crossroads Tavern and Inn—currently offers six guest rooms along with 30 seats for tavern dining.

The Pippin Hill owners plan to renovate the tavern building and two others and to build 12 additional guest rooms in four “cottage” complexes plus additional parking, landscaping, and an internal road connecting to the winery up the hill. The concept envisions cottage gardens, a village green, a kitchen garden, and an extensive array of guest experiences including farm-

to-table dining, a cooking school, spa and wellness escapes, and historic education tours. The project proposal says the owners "intend to evoke the character and ambiance of a charming, historic village retreat nestled on a verdant hillside."

The county planning department's staff report, issued in advance of the PC meeting to advise the commission on whether the project adheres to county rules, gave a greenlight to the plan, citing its potential to "promote and enhance tourism." The report downplayed concerns over water and sewer capacity and increased noise and traffic, and said the character of the nearby area would be remain "unchanged."

Matt Lovelady, Pippin Hill's director of operations, presented a summary of the owners' efforts to mitigate the effects the expansion, including "density, lighting, viewshed, and resource management." "We don't feel that this project sets a precedent for more commercialism or more expansion," said Lovelady. "We do feel we are leaning into the historic uses of the property. We don't have any plans for late-night events there, we don't have any reason for folks to celebrate there." He also said his team has opened a VDOT study of the nearby Plank Road intersection and they fully support any changes to that intersection to slow people down.





Conceptual drawing of Pippin Hill's proposal to expand the Crossroads Inn on a parcel just south of the winery, with twelve "cottages" in four clusters in the middle.

## Neighbors Wary

Pippin Hill Farm & Vineyards lies entirely within the 2,300-acre Bundoran Farm residential development envelope. The land is held in conservation easement and is managed by an internal board that approved the winery's location years ago as a small operation in line with Bundoran's environmental

mission. More than 30 Bundoran neighbors and concerned citizens attended the Planning Commission meeting to express their objections to the expansion.

“Our county Comprehensive Plan gets chipped away and eroded by those who seek to expand incrementally and push the limits of what they can do, and the best example of this is Pippin Hill,” said Nora Seilheimer. “What started as a small farm winery has substantially grown over time and now hosts over 80,000 visitors and has a commercial restaurant, snarls local traffic flow, decreases local air quality, and negatively impacts the quality of life for neighboring properties. Pippin Hill has set out to exploit the provision for historic inns, [but] the scale of this project is neither proportionate nor subordinate to the historic inn and associated structures. If you approve this proposal, what will happen next?”

Bundoran resident Mack McKee said, “Let’s be clear about what this proposed development is—it is a party venue, plain and simple, designed to increase the frequency and size of the events at the adjacent Pippin Hill winery. These events are invasive enough to the community, and expanding their scope and intensity would be a disservice to the surrounding neighbors in the rural area in which they live. The plan presented to you is an attempt to fit a round peg into a square hole. The [proposed] landscaping buffer along the west property line will not hide from view the monolithic 450-foot-long building footprint or diffuse the night lights, and who will police the late night noise?”


Jon Scheumann, a near neighbor to Pippin Hill who has organized the area’s resistance to the expansion into a 150-person group called Protect Rural Albemarle, said the proposal clearly flouts county code. “The project is characterized as an ‘inn with cottages,’—sounds lovely,” he said at the meeting. “But Albemarle code section 3.1 states that a ‘hotel’ means ‘one or more buildings having six or more guest rooms that provide transient lodging,’ so this is a hotel. According to the Comprehensive Plan, hotels are

not to be built in rural areas. I'm deeply concerned about the precedent that approval of a hotel in a rural community like this will set."

*Jon Scheumann, organizer of the community group Protect Rural Albemarle, speaks to the Planning Commission at its February 14 meeting*

Over the past year, Scheumann convened meetings and sent information out to neighbors about the specifics of county ordinances covering historic inns and hotels. Several of the group's points seemed to resonate with the commissioners, particularly the county code requirement that any expansion of a historic structure be "clearly subordinate" to the original structure. Pippin Hill's proposal would encompass about 5,000 square feet, significantly more than the historic structure, with a 400-foot linear array of buildings along a prominent ridgeline facing Plank Road.



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## Commissioners Unconvinced

After ticking off a list of potential conditions on the proposal that had been discussed to address citizen concerns, commissioner Karen Firehock summarized the problem as she saw it. "At the end of the day, it seems to me that what is [proposed to be] slid into that slice of a ridgetop is too much for that property," she said. "[The expansion] is sort of creatively tucked in to the ridge, but it still seems to me to be highly visible from multiple points and that makes it difficult to blend. I just don't know how to put this much of a hotel into the slice that they have. I'm leaning against this at this time, because I think it's too much for the property and I think it's too visible."

Commissioner Luis Carrazana agreed. "The number of mitigations we've talked about—hydrology, archaeology, screening, landscapes, and we've heard more from the applicant—we could put all of these requirements on the application, but at some point, we have to ask whether we're doing all that to fit something that doesn't fit in a particular application," he said. "The terms subordinate, complementary, that's where I'm having a tough time because I think at some point the inn is actually subordinate to this [proposed] function—[the cottages are] going to be the primary function here now."

Planning Commission chair Corey Clayborne said, "I would love to see an iteration of this project move forward, I think we have got to figure this piece out from an economic development standpoint. I think something that gets the job done but still maintains the respect of that historic structure ... would advance in some way."

Other commissioners agreed that it was the particular combination of narrow parcel and intense density that gave them pause, and appeared to be leaning against recommending approval for Pippin Hill. However, just as they began to make a motion for a roll call vote, Lovelady rushed to the podium to request a deferral of the application. "There was a lot brought up, and I think



we need to cover the ground much better than we have so far," said Lovelady. The commissioners voted unanimously to allow an indefinite deferral of the application.

Asked for his perspective after the meeting, Scheumann was circumspect. "From the outset I thought it was going to be very challenging to defeat this," he said. "So, a lot of my personal focus has been on whether we can constrain it—shrink the footprint, create a tighter envelope, and then create enough caution and delay and shrinkage that, from an investment standpoint, does it still make sense?"

Scheumann is glad to have pursued the issue for more than a year, particularly as county officials seemed reluctant to articulate a defined limit to development projects like this one. He expects Pippin Hill to resubmit the application, and stresses to the members of Protect Rural Albemarle that "this is delayed, this is not dead."

"As loosely organized as we were, if we hadn't been expressing our voice, this would have just trotted through [the process] and been approved," he said, "and then it's too late. This is not just a Bundoran Farm issue, it's a North Garden issue, it's an Esmont issue, it's a Batesville issue. We don't want to wake up one day and be a recreation of Rt. 151 in Nelson."

*Update 3/13/23: This article was originally published with the headline "Pippin Hill Expansion Deferred at Planning Commission" and has been updated to more accurately describe the application, which is for the Crossroads Inn.*

# Planning Commission Greenlights New Montclair Plan

October 5, 2023



*A rendering of the revised layout for 122 dwelling units in the Montclair development on Rt. 240. Courtesy Shimp Engineering.*

The Albemarle County Planning Commission voted on September 26 to recommend approval of a revised and slightly smaller proposal for Montclair, the planned development on Rt. 240 next to Wickham Pond that has been central to a furious year-long debate about whether a protected stream runs through the property. The 157-unit project was deferred in mid-2022 until a final analysis by the county's Community Development Department last November, which concluded that an intermittent stream—and its 100-foot required buffer—did exist and must be accounted for.

Montclair was recently resubmitted for county approval as a 122-unit development, with 2.5 fewer acres available to build on due to the required stream buffer. The plan envisions 94 attached units (condos, duplexes) and 28 multi-family (apartment) dwellings, plus 16,500 square feet of commercial area projected to contain office space or a small restaurant in addition to the existing child care facility. The proposal estimates that 21 school-aged children would enter the public school system from Montclair, and that the development will generate an additional 1,200 car trips in and out daily.

The Crozet Leadership Team (CLT) sent members of the Planning Commission a document outlining their concerns ahead of the meeting. In it, they pointed out that the proposal is inconsistent with the county's Comprehensive Plan and the Crozet Master Plan, particularly with respect to the county's commitments to providing necessary infrastructure in the Growth Areas.

For example, the project asserts that increased traffic from Montclair was considered by and is consistent with the 2021 Crozet Master Plan's traffic analysis; however, that analysis assumes that the Eastern Avenue connector road will be built. The connector would provide a direct north-south link from central Crozet down to Rt. 240 and would relieve traffic congestion and improve flow, but the project's \$40 million price tag is not currently in the county's budget. "Crozet's Master Plan is obsolete," read the CLT's document. "Without critical infrastructure or a viable workaround, approving more growth is irresponsible and threatens our safety."

The Montclair plan contains no westbound turn lane into the development, so to alleviate backups on Rt. 240 both at the entrance and at the nearby Park Ridge Road intersection, the developer's narrative proposed a "mini-roundabout" there, presumably to be paid for by the county. In response, the CLT document emphasized the gravity of the problem with a map. "Nearly a third of Crozet's population has only two ingress/egress options [to the west

at Tabor Street and the east at Park Ridge Road], one of which is already gridlocked,” said the document, which also noted that no roundabout at that location is part of the county’s six-year road plan.



ZONING MAP AMENDMENT  
 APPLICATION PLAN  
 ZMA202000012  
**MONTCLAIR**  
 A NEIGHBORHOOD MODEL DISTRICT  
 TMP(s) 56-91A & portion of 56E-2  
 project ID: 20.014  
**REVISED 13 APRIL 2023**  
 Revised 19 December 2022  
 Revised 17 June 2022  
 Revised 07 March 2022  
 Revised 17 November 2021  
 Submitted 21 September 2020

**Context Map**  
 Sheet 1 of 10

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  - 6 - Land Use Categories
  - 7 - Proposed Circulation
  - 8 - Conceptual Grading & Stormwater
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  - 10 - Conceptual Street Section

**SHIMP ENGINEERING, P.C.**

Map showing the buildable area for Montclair on Rt. 240 between Wickham Pond and Park Ridge Drive Photo Shimp Engineering.

Montclair’s developer, Vito Cetta of Weather Hill Homes, said the Comprehensive Plan “has been incredibly successful” at providing housing for county residents, primarily in the Growth Areas. Following Cetta, more than a dozen Crozet citizens spoke to voice their opposition to the Montclair project until sufficient roadways and sidewalks to handle the increased population are built.

During the commission’s discussion, Commissioner Luis Carrazana seemed to sympathize with the residents. “Crozet has taken its share of development, as we all know, over the last several years with minimal infrastructure improvements,” he said. “I would really like to see how we can

talk about the Eastern Avenue connector, and we need to look at some incremental steps to improve safety. It's hard to continue to look at projects [in Crozet] and recommend approval when the infrastructure's not there."

Commissioner Julian Bivins bristled at Carrazana's suggestion. "It feels like there are people in the community and colleagues who are asking us to do a moratorium on development until certain conditions are met," said Bivins. "I think I'm uncomfortable with that position and I'd like some clarity." The county attorney spoke up to say that moratoriums are not allowed by the state because every application is entitled to consideration on its own merits. Bivins elaborated on his feeling. "I'm uncomfortable with [a moratorium] since I'm not sure where that line would be drawn. What if an applicant felt that we were being arbitrary?"



Carrazana replied that he was not suggesting a blanket moratorium, but was looking at this particular situation. "I do find this development to have merit, but we need to find ways to expedite some of the improvements that need to be made [in Crozet]."

The majority of the commissioners seemed unconvinced that the safety problems described by residents warranted a "no" on the Montclair. "I wondered how hard it was now for someone to get from this development to, say, Harris Teeter," said Nathan Moore. "I drove it in six minutes," he said, smiling, insinuating that traffic was not really much of a hardship.

Commissioner Karen Firehock addressed the assembled crowd. "I know that there's some level of distrust with this developer from what happened with the stream and the prior proposal," she said. "The community has done a

great service in making sure that the stream stayed on the map, and I do believe that your work has resulted in this [revised] plan. This big blob of green space is now protecting the stream and I see that as a victory, and as an amenity for Mr. Cetta's development. [But] it's also true, that middle density was added to the parcel [in the Master Plan process], and I appreciate the development because of the diversity of density that's provided. So I think it is a good design."

*Map showing the only two points of ingress/egress from central Crozet presented by the Crozet Leadership Team.*

Lonnie Murray, the commissioner representing White Hall, dissented. "I'm not currently in favor," he said. "I support the idea of density and could even support it here in this place if there was the infrastructure on the ground, or we thought it was coming soon. It doesn't look like it is. The point was made we can't just keep voting for things when the infrastructure doesn't appear. I think Crozet is reaching a tipping point in its frustration, and the fact that we don't have a plan yet for the connector, the fact that Park Ridge Road is

unsafe, means I can't support [this project] at this time. It is important that density goes in the Growth Areas, but there's some weirdness with this proposal."

The motion to recommend approval of the Montclair rezoning request passed 5-2, with Murray and Carrazana voting no. The final step will be the project's hearing before the Board of Supervisors, on a date not yet announced.

"The real question before the Planning Commission was a much bigger one than people think," said Crozet resident Eric Schmitz after the meeting, "and the county's final answer to it will have deep, wide, and lasting implications for everyone living in Albemarle County, whether in the Growth Area or the rural area. The question is, 'When making an individual land use decision, do the county's longstanding Master Plans to build roads (that were deemed essential for public safety) matter at all?'"

"The Planning Commission's answer was crystal clear—'No, they do not.' Every resident in every district should listen carefully and urge their Supervisor to think about the message this sends to Albemarle citizens."