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From left, Dumfries Town Council member Shaun Peet, Prince William Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler, Prince William County Supervisor Andrea Bailey, Potomac District, and Dumfries Mayor Derrick Wood attend a "topping-out" ceremony for The Rose Gaming Resort in Dumfries on Jan. 5. CAMERON DELEAN | INSIDENOVA

Changes upcoming for public comment? Board hopes to curb marathon meetings

» BY NOLAN STOUT
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Prince William County officials are considering new limits on public comment procedures at Board of Supervisors meetings.

During Tuesday's meeting, board Chair Ann Wheeler outlined the initial framework she is proposing to revise public comment rules in response to meetings regularly running well past midnight.

Public comment was more limited in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic but gradually became more robust throughout 2021. In 2022, public comment increased substantially, primarily driven by those supporting or opposing the controversial PW Digital Gateway data center project.

"One of the questions I get out in the community is, 'Why can't you run the

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'Shining star on 95' sees progress

Rose Gaming Resort in Dumfries plans to open by end of the year

» BY CAMERON DELEAN
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Construction workers and local leaders gathered last week to celebrate the ongoing transformation of a former landfill that will soon become a major tourist attraction and economic boon to Dumfries and Prince William County.

Yates Construction was joined by elected officials and community members Jan. 5 for a "topping-out" ceremony at the forthcoming Rose Gaming Resort, which is currently slated to open by year's end.

The site has seen steady progress since the January 2022 groundbreaking, project officials said, with the bulk of the framework for the facility finished.

When complete, the nearly \$400 mil-



Construction on the \$400 million project started in January 2022. CAMERON DELEAN | INSIDENOVA

lion project will include up to a 350-room hotel, over 50,000 square feet of gaming space, eight bars and restaurants, a cultural venue, a multi-purpose space and over 80 acres of outdoor green space for a variety of recreational activities.

"This is a huge milestone. The landfill was here for over 40 years," said Dumfries Mayor Derrick Wood. "It provided

many jobs, and it was the topic of many memories, good and bad ... But today this topping-off signifies the progress and the change, the change that Dumfries is no longer just this place on [Interstate] 95."

Wood said The Rose will be "that shining star on 95 ... the one that people are

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New Democratic candidate emerges for county chair

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Deadly Dumfries shooting an 'unimaginable tragedy'

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Hoops coach Mike Harris finds his groove in Freedom

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Solar farm proposed for Gainesville area

» BY NOLAN STOUT
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A North Carolina company wants Prince William County to be home to its second solar farm in Virginia.

HCE Waterloo Solar LLC, a subsidiary of Raleigh, N.C.-based Holocene Clean Energy, is seeking a special-use permit for the facility.

The roughly 232.3-acre property is at 2539 Logmill Road in the county's northwestern corner off U.S. 15 near the Prince William-Loudoun-Fauquier county lines. The land is owned by William and Elizabeth Latham.

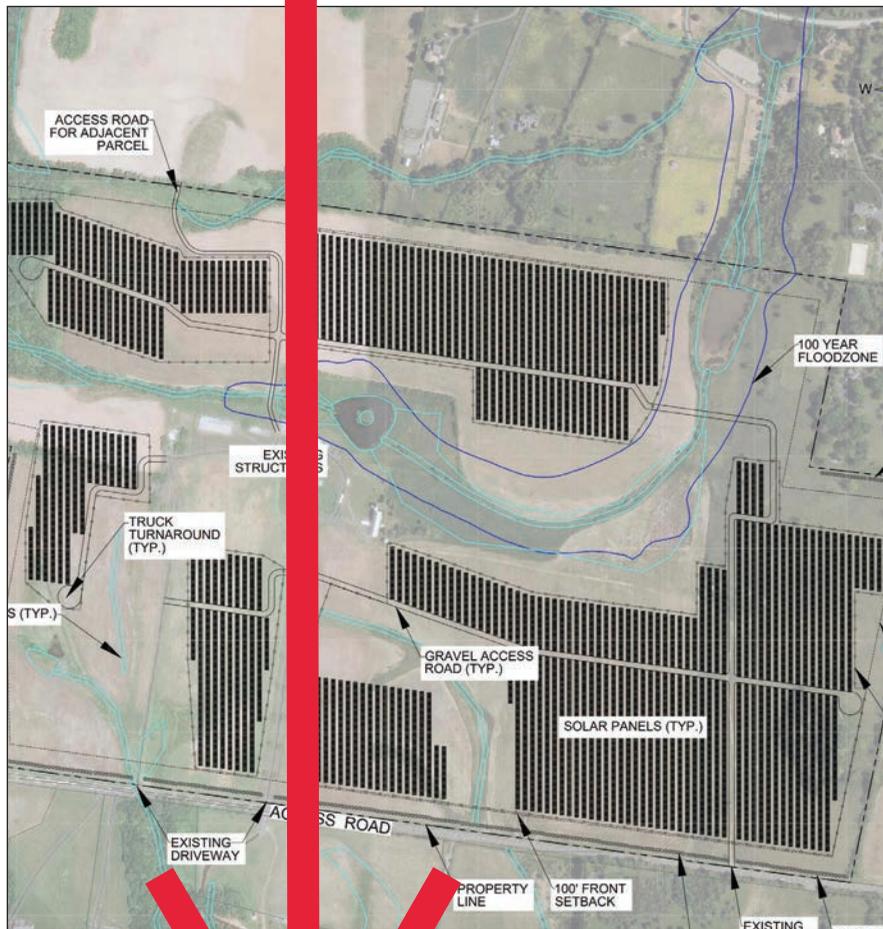
The property is zoned for agricultural use and requires a special-use permit for a solar facility.

The project is one of three listed on the company's website currently under development, with two in Virginia and one in Delaware. Holocene has an existing 100-acre farm in Charlotte County, Virginia, and several in North Carolina.

"Solar can be considered a form of agriculture – as the harvest is of the sun's energy – that becomes a highly valued, marketable resource," the application says.

The facility would sit on 125 acres of the property and produce 20 megawatts of electricity. It will be interconnected with the Northern Virginia Electric Co-operative grid.

The project would include a 100-foot setback from all property lines and the



A North Carolina energy company is planning a solar farm in northwestern Prince William County off U.S. 15. PROVIDED

height of solar panels will be capped at 9 feet.

The company expects a project life of 35 years. Afterward, the panels would be

removed and the land would be returned to its original condition.

No public meetings have been scheduled on the application.

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A rendering of The Rose, a proposed gaming resort in Dumfries, shows the hotel and gaming center alongside Interstate 95. PROVIDED

going to want to come to from all over D.C., Maryland and Virginia."

The Rose Gaming Resort is expected to have a major economic impact on the area, generating an estimated \$59 million in annual tax revenues and hiring more than 600 team members.

The venue will include gaming entertainment and other amenities that have the potential to bring money Virginians spend at the MGM Grand in Maryland back into the state to recapture a share of the entertainment spending.

"When I got elected in this community I asked the question: Why do people continue to just drive through Dumfries and they're not driving to Dumfries? ... Today this topping off signifies the progress and the change, the change that Dumfries is no longer just 'this place on 95,'" Wood said.

Dumfries Town Manager Keith Rogers Jr. hailed the project and thanked all involved.

"It's often said that great progress does not come about without great vision," he said.

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meetings better?' And a lot of that has to do with lengthy public comment time," she said.

State law does not require local governments to hold public comment sessions, although legislators have periodically tried unsuccessfully to change the law.

The Board of County Supervisors meetings are typically broken into two parts – at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. – with public comment allowed at both sections. Speakers are allowed three minutes each and can sign up for both sessions.

For public hearings, speakers are limited to three minutes unless they represent an organization, which allows five minutes.

LIMITING SPEAKING TIME

Wheeler's proposal is to limit public comment in the afternoon and evening to one hour each and limit speakers to one public comment slot per month.

For public hearings, Wheeler recommended that once 45 people have signed up, the speaking limits are automatically reduced to two minutes per person and three minutes for organizations.

A review of board meetings by InsideNoVa found that between January 2021 and January 2023, the board has held 88 public comment sessions. They ranged from four minutes each on Oct. 5 and Oct. 12, 2021, to a long of 3 hours and 13 minutes on July 20, 2021.

In 2022, meetings regularly stretched into the morning past 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. In

the fall, one meeting ended at 4:30 a.m. and another lasted until 9:47 a.m.

Wheeler said late meetings put a burden on the public and county staff.

"No one is doing their best at midnight," she said.

In 2021, public comment was held 48 times with an average length of 43 minutes. Of those, 18 public comment sessions took less than 30 minutes and 37 lasted less than an hour. Eleven sessions lasted more than an hour, and only three were more than two hours.

In 2022, at least 41 sessions were held, and only one public comment period was less than 30 minutes and only nine were less than an hour. Thirty-one lasted more than an hour and six were more than two hours.

The average in 2022 was 1 hour and 21 minutes per public comment session, with the quickest being four minutes in the afternoon on Nov. 22.

The longest this year was in an afternoon meeting on Aug. 2: 2 hours and 46 minutes. The board had only an afternoon session planned that day so members could participate in National Night Out activities, but supervisors missed the event partly because of the length of public comment.

Combining afternoon and evening sessions since January 2021, aggregate public comment has exceeded two hours on 19 occasions, with 15 of those in 2022.

Supervisor Victor Angry, D-Neabsco,

comment portion; the two slots are distinct.) The rules also prohibit "the use of obscenity or other speech tending to create a breach of the peace."

In comparison, Fairfax County limits its public comment to 10 speakers per session, and residents can speak only once per six-month period. Speakers are barred from discussing "issues under litigation; issues that have been scheduled for public hearing before the Board; and personnel matters or comments regarding individuals."

Loudoun County's rules vary depending on the time of the month. At its first Tuesday meeting, public input is allowed at 6 p.m. and capped at 90 minutes. At its meeting on the third Tuesday, it allows eight speakers limited to 2½ minutes each at 5 p.m. Then, at 6 p.m., public comment is open but capped at 90 minutes.

Loudoun County supervisors approved additional rules this month to either end meetings at midnight or have two-thirds of supervisors vote to extend the meeting.

Arlington County has some of the most stringent rules in Northern Virginia. It holds public comment at 8:30 a.m. during Saturday meetings and limits speakers to two minutes. The county board allows only one speaker on "each topic, but opposing views on the same topic will be considered two different topics."

Prince William County supervisors did not set a timeline to vote on the changes.

NEARBY JURISDICTIONS

Prince William is the only Northern Virginia county without limits on either the number of speakers at public comment or a cap on total time for public comment. The county's rules only prevent speakers from discussing an issue during public comment that is already scheduled for a public hearing that day. (A person can speak to the issue during the public hearing time but not during the public

HOA president targeted with hateful flyers

Incident comes amid debate over Belmont Bay proposal

» BY NOLAN STOUT
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The irony wasn't lost on K.P. Lau.

When the president of the Belmont Bay Homeowners Association first spotted the flyers on Dec. 20, he saw a face with which he was all too familiar.

The dozens of hateful flyers have "End This Reign of Terror!" scrawled on the top and bottom. In the center is Lau's name next to an equal sign. On the other side of the equal sign is a photo of Mao Zedong.

Mao was a Chinese communist revolutionary who established the People's Republic of China in the 1940s. He oversaw a regime that, among other measures, is remembered for the Great Leap Forward, a four-year campaign to industrialize the country that led to a famine killing tens of millions of people.

'AN UGLY UNDER LAYER'

It's not the first time Mao's visage has been a forbidding presence in Lau's life, but this time he's better able to take a stand.

Lau was born in southern China during World War II, moving to the Shandong Province in eastern China after the war. But when he was 5, the Chinese Communist Revolution brought Mao into power. The family fled to Taiwan to escape the new regime.

Lau eventually came to the U.S. for an education and worked in power plant engineering and with politicians in Washington on energy issues.

Mao died in 1976, long before Lau moved to Belmont Bay in 2008.

But Mao's face reappeared in Lau's life in December, nearly 73 years after Lau fled the regime. The message is clear: Someone is trying to equate his opposition to a proposed development with Mao's rule of China.

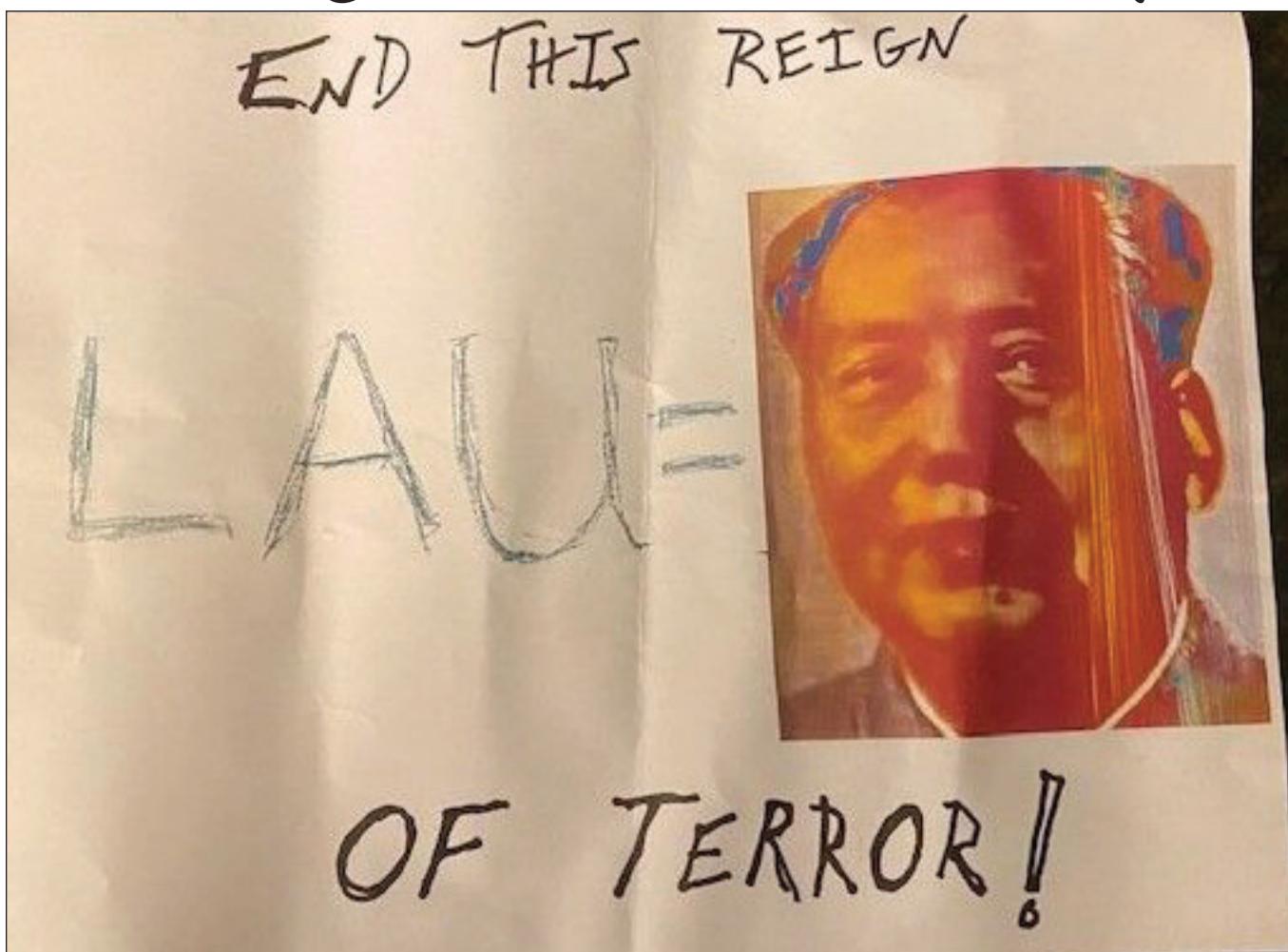
Around the same time the flyers were discovered, one of Lau's tires was slashed. He thinks the two are connected and inextricably tied to his stance on the proposed development of Belmont Bay.

"These two events have exposed an ugly under-layer of our community," Lau told residents. "The prejudice expressed by this flyer and the thuggish action to damage personal property are not representative of the people and lifestyle for whom I am leading the fight."

MORE THAN 1,300 HOMES PROPOSED

The Caruthers Cos., which developed the existing housing in Belmont Bay, is seeking to amend the conditions of a previous rezoning on 170 undeveloped acres of the property, off U.S. 1 in northeastern Woodbridge. The acreage, spread across several undeveloped parcels, is currently approved for 411 age-restricted homes, 1.42 million square feet of commercial space and 505 hotel rooms. The company wants to revise those approvals to allow up to 1,390 homes and a mix of commercial uses.

Lau, the HOA and several Belmont Bay residents have been vocally opposed to the project. Outside of the rezoning, the HOA



Flyers distributed in the Belmont Bay community had "End This Reign of Terror!" scrawled on the top and bottom and an image of Mao Zedong, a Chinese communist revolutionary who established the People's Republic of China in the 1940s. PROVIDED

is being sued by the developer over public access to the entrance of The Osprey's at Belmont Bay.

"When I ran for the board, my objective was and still is to preserve the beauty and tranquility of Belmont Bay and to accommodate a balanced new development," he said.

Lau said his position leading the HOA since the development was proposed has been "taxing" to him and his wife because of the development plan, leaving him "exhausted and stressed."

MOVING FORWARD

In a letter to residents, Lau said the intimidation tactics would not deter his work.

"Myra and I love Belmont Bay and we want to give back. We could easily move away and enjoy our retirement elsewhere," he said. "These unfortunate events have reaffirmed our resolve to continue the fight. We will not be intimidated and harassed to abandon our belief and the will to protect Belmont Bay. After all, this is America."

Lau said two neighbors have provided security camera footage of the person suspected of distributing the flyers around 4 p.m. on Dec. 20. The footage shows what appears to be a white male wearing a white hard hat, dark pants and a dark shirt underneath a reflective vest.

Lau is asking neighbors with security cameras to review footage for more images of the suspect. He is asking anyone with information to contact police or the HOA.

Lau is so determined to find the perpetrator that he's offering a \$1,000 reward for information leading to their identity.

First Sgt. Jonathan Perok said Prince William County police took a report of a

vehicle's tires being slashed and labeled the report as vandalism. He said police were informed of the flyers, but they did not break the law.



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SWIMMING SENSATION



Battlefield High School senior Camille Spink hugs runner-up Jillian Ferrari of Woodson after winning the 50-yard freestyle race at the Class 6 state swimming championships in Hampton Feb. 18. The University of Tennessee-bound Spink won all four events in which she participated at the championships, capping a remarkable career at the Haymarket school.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

Story and photos in Sports, 15-16

A win for Weir in Gainesville

Republican tops Summers to succeed Pete Candland

BY NOLAN STOUT
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Republicans have retained the Gainesville District seat on the Prince William Board of County Supervisors.

Haymarket Town Councilor Bob Weir prevailed in Tuesday's special election for the seat, according to unofficial results from the Virginia Department of Elections.

Weir handily won with 60.4% of the vote, or 4,195 votes, over Democrat Kerensa Summers, who received 2,735 votes.

"Words cannot express my appreciation for all of those who spent hours, days and

weeks supporting my effort," Weir told constituents. "This morning I'm kind of like the dog that finally caught the car, what do I do with it now? Not because I don't know what to do, but rather because there are so many things to be addressed ... that it may be difficult to pick the first priority."

Weir's victory restored the partisan makeup of the eight-member board to a 5-3 Democratic majority.

The Gainesville seat was vacated after the Dec. 16 resignation of longtime Republican Supervisor Pete Candland, who was first elected in 2011. Candland's resignation was spurred by expanded



BOB WEIR

limitations on his voting powers by Commonwealth's Attorney Amy Ashworth. The recommendation was tied to Candland's involvement as an applicant in the controversial PW Digital Gateway proposal in his district. The project proposes 27.6 million square feet of data centers on 2,139 acres along Pageland Lane.

The election was the first referendum on the board's new Democratic majority, albeit in a district Republicans have held since 1995. Democrats took control of the board in 2019, ending a Republican majority that had existed since 1996. The Democratic party had last held a majority from 1988 to 1992.

GAINESVILLE >> PAGE 7

Planning Department turmoil continues

Director resigns abruptly; deputy leaving in March

BY NOLAN STOUT
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The top planner for Prince William County has abruptly resigned and a leading deputy will depart in March, returning an air of uncertainty to the department's leadership.

Recently-hired Planning Director Mark Buenavista resigned effective immediately on Feb. 16, and Deputy Planning Director Meika Daus will depart the county on March 3, according to a county spokesperson.

Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler did not wish to comment on the matter.

The planning office reviews development and land-use applications. The planning director provides assistance and oversees support staff for the Planning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, Historical Commission, Agricultural and Forestal Districts

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OBX residents urge teens to take party elsewhere

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New candidates in Coles District

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March, April lineup set for Hylton Center

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Advisory Committee, Architectural Review Board and the Trails and Blueways Council.

Buenavista was on the job less than a month to lead the department that had been without a permanent administrative head for more than a year. He is the second planning director to abruptly resign from the role in the past 16 months.

The county will now be searching for its fourth planning director since late 2020.

The turnover started after Planning Director Rebecca Horner was appointed as a deputy county executive in January 2020. Her successor Parag Agrawal, who took the Prince William job after renegeing on his hiring as Charlottesville's director of Neighborhood Development Services before working a day with the city, was hired in November 2020.

Agrawal abruptly resigned Oct. 15, 2021, to "pursue other opportunities," according to Horner. His departure came around the same time as two longtime members of the Planning Commission also resigned.

Horner served as interim director after Agrawal's departure until Buenavista was hired in December 2022 with a Jan. 23 start date. Buenavista's salary was \$185,000.

Daus has been in the county's planning department for more than seven years, serving as a deputy director since May 2021.

The turnover in the department also comes as the county has recently finalized an update to its Comprehensive Plan, which will serve as a guideline for development through 2040. The county is also considering potential changes to areas it has targeted for data centers, including the massive and controversial PW Digital Gateway.

NEWS BRIEF

DUMFRIES TOWN COUNCIL 275TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

The Dumfries Town Council has passed a resolution to establish a committee to plan a celebration in 2024 to mark the 275th anniversary of the town's charter, according to a news release. The resolution, which passed unanimously, marks a significant milestone in the history of Dumfries and signifies the council's commitment to preserving and celebrating the town's rich heritage.

The celebration will include a series of events and activities designed to bring the community together and honor the town's long and proud history. From parades and festivals to historical reenactments and educational programs, the celebration promises to be a memorable and exciting event for residents and visitors alike, town officials said.

The Dumfries Town Council is inviting interested individuals to submit letters of interest to participate in the planning committee. The committee will play a crucial role in determining the scope and focus of the celebration and will work closely with local organizations and businesses to ensure that the event is a success.

Individuals who are interested in participating in the committee should send a letter of interest to planning@dumfriesva.gov by March 1. The council will review all submissions and select the committee members by March 21.