

# AC44 Summary | Strengthening Albemarle's Land Conservation Programs



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Albemarle County has been a leader in the Commonwealth in establishing and supporting its land conservation programs. The programs are a critically important tool for protecting Albemarle's open space, which includes working farms and forestland and important natural and cultural resources. By reducing land conversion in the Rural Area, they simultaneously work to reduce sprawl and encourage smart, compact growth within the designated Development Areas. The climate crisis and ever-increasing development pressures mean that proactive, intentional efforts to protect our land and water are needed now more than ever.

As part of the AC44 Comprehensive Plan update, The Piedmont Environmental Council encourages the County to **increase support for and strengthen its land conservation programs, including reinstating its purchase of development rights (PDR) program**. Because this is of critical importance, we propose that the County make this a **catalyst project**, one of the highest priorities for implementation over the next five years.

## What are the County's Land Conservation Programs?

The **Albemarle County Easement Authority (ACEA)** is a public body that holds open-space easements. An open-space (or conservation) easement is a voluntary legal agreement that limits development of rural land and permanently protects its natural and cultural resources.

The **Acquisition of Conservation Easements (ACE)** program is a ***purchase of development rights (PDR)*** program designed to provide a financial incentive for landowners of modest means to protect their farmland from future development.

## Public Benefits

- Improving **climate resiliency** by **retaining forest and farmland**, helping to maintain carbon sequestration capability and mitigate the impacts of major flood events. [Land conservation is climate action](#) and is widely recognized as a critical [natural climate solution](#);
- Ensuring the quality and quantity of **water resources** for drinking, recreation, and habitat;
- Protecting **public health** and minimizing climate impacts from vehicle congestion and emissions associated with sprawl;
- Enhancing **biodiversity conservation**, by protecting natural habitat and ecological connectivity across the landscape;
- Supporting our **local economy** through production of local farm and forest products and tourism that relies on maintaining **scenic and historic viewsheds**; and
- Reducing expenditure of public funds by minimizing the demand for suburban infrastructure and services in the Rural Area.

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## Recommendations & Action Steps

**PEC recommends the County identify strengthening the land conservation programs as a catalyst project, to include the following action steps:**

1. Restore the County's purchase of development rights (PDR) program (ACE). Establish a stable and dedicated funding source and allocate permanent staff resources for the program.
2. Establish an **Albemarle Conservation Fund**, in addition to a stable and consistent funding source for the PDR program. The fund should be structured to receive payments from other sources; one example from a nearby County is the [Conservation Easement Program Fund recently established by Culpeper County](#). A Conservation Fund would allow Albemarle's conservation programs the flexibility to receive additional support through other channels, including through siting agreements and mitigation payments, in order to offset unavoidable impacts of major land use projects in the Rural Area.
3. Enhance the County's existing PDR program with a newly updated approach, focused on continuation of equitable farmland protection, while also addressing co-benefits of climate, biodiversity, and stream health.
4. Implement the two land conservation proposals designed as part of the [Stream Health Initiative](#), both of which were endorsed by the BOS in a work session on December 1, 2021. These are proposal #6 (Land Conservation for Water Quality) and proposal #7 (Riparian Conservation Assistance Program).

## **Ways to Get Involved**

- Submit comments in writing: Public comments should be sent to the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors at [BOS@albemarle.org](mailto:BOS@albemarle.org) and the Planning Commission at [PlanningCommission@albemarle.org](mailto:PlanningCommission@albemarle.org). When sending an email to the Board of Supervisors, the County Executive is also receiving your email.
- Attend a work session or meeting: Showing up in person demonstrates to elected officials that their citizens are paying attention to the decisions that impact them.
- Speak up: Citizens can speak for three minutes at the start of every Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission meetings to have their voice heard.
- Stay informed and engaged: This is a long process that has the potential to impact every facet of life in Albemarle County for the next 20 years. [Sign up for PEC's AC44 email alerts](#), the [County's Engage updates](#), and review PEC's [AC44 Comprehensive Plan Policy Platform](#) and [Climate Action Plan](#) at [pecva.org/ac44-comp-plan/](http://pecva.org/ac44-comp-plan/).