

The Free Lance-Star

Monday, October 12, 2026 • A Lee Enterprises, Incorporated Newspaper — Majority shareholder, David Hoffmann, Hoffmann Media Group • Fredericksburg.com

Gov: Keep conservation forest areas roadless

DAVE RESS
Richmond Times-Dispatch

When she was in Congress, Gov. Abigail Spanberger co-sponsored an unsuccessful bill to write protection of roadless areas in National Forests into law. Now she's telling the Trump administration not to rescind a 25-year-old regulation protecting these conservation areas.

The 2001 Roadless Rule bars road construction and timber harvesting on nearly 45 million acres of National Forest System land, including 394,000 acres in Virginia's George Washington and Jefferson National Forests.

"This is an issue of significant importance to the Commonwealth,"

Spanberger said in a letter to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, whose department includes the U.S. Forest Service.

"The Roadless Rule is critical to protecting sensitive wildlife habitat, water quality and drinking water supplies, as well as Virginia's outdoor recreation economy," Spanberger added.

The state Department of Conservation and Recreation has designated 103 Natural Heritage Conservation Sites in Virginia's roadless areas. The designation is for places considered Virginia's most significant natural areas.

These natural heritage sites include 32 that are essential to the long-term

persistence of associated wildlife species and 57 with high-to-outstanding significance because of their biodiversity, Spanberger said.

"The repeal of the Roadless Rule would open the door to further fragmentation of our forest areas ... disrupting important wildlife corridors and migratory patterns," she added.

Spanberger, noting that forestry is Virginia's third-largest private industry, said the lands currently protected by the Roadless Rule comprise only a small part of the state's forests open to logging.

The state's Department of Forestry works with the U.S. Forest Service to

make sure forests in roadless areas are healthy and that the lack of logging isn't increasing fire risks – health and fire safety were key reasons Rollins had cited for rescinding the rule.

"The current Roadless Rule works, and I ask that the USDA reconsider this rescission proposal and maintain the Roadless Rule," Spanberger said.

Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, along with Representatives Jennifer McClellan, D-4th; Bobby Scott, D-3rd; Don Beyer, D-8th; Eugene Vindman, D-7th; Suhas Subramanyam, D-10th; and James Walkinshaw, D-11th, have all opposed the proposal to rescind the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

COUNTY SEES MAJOR SHIFT ON DATA CENTERS



A data center is under construction in September in Virginia's Loudoun County.

JOSH MORGAN, USA TODAY

Industry generates \$1.2B in tax revenue, but officials halt new applications for a year

CHRISTOPHER CANN
USA Today

No place embraced the digital economy more than Loudoun County.

Long known as the wealthiest county in the United States, thanks to its proximity to Washington, D.C., and major government contractors, the county became a leader in the global data center boom. Companies flocked to the area for its extensive fiber network and fast-track approval process.

The region is home to more than 230 data center buildings, what the county describes as the largest concentration of computing hubs on the planet. The facilities consume enough electricity to power more than 2.2 million homes. Transmission lines tower over homes, and several hyperscale data centers are under construction.

"The growth there has been staggering," said Terry Clower, a professor of public policy at George Mason University.

Many residents are troubled by the construction rate and worry the county is too reliant on the money the industry brings in. Some also raise concerns about noise, pollution and

their property values.

"Our residents have had enough," said Juli Briskman, a member of the county board of supervisors who called for a moratorium. "It's gone too far."

Data center capital

In the 1990s, America Online and UUNet, one of the world's largest internet providers, established their global headquarters in Loudoun, spurring a wave of development. Within a few years, half the world's web traffic moved through the county, estimates suggest.

After the dot-com bubble burst, warehouses planned to be data centers sat empty. Later, during the housing crash, the county's balance sheet took a major hit and officials scrambled to fill the gap.

Buddy Rizer, head of the county's economic development agency, saw an opportunity in data centers and courted companies like Amazon and Google.

The plan worked. Over the next 10 years, the county saw the world's largest surge in data center development. In industry circles, Rizer is now referred to as the "king of data centers."

To quicken the pace of

development, officials backed a move to centralize permitting processes in Rizer's office. Companies also seized on the area's zoning rules, which allowed them to build data centers "by right" wherever office buildings were permitted, even if they were close to residential neighborhoods. The rules also allowed developers to skirt approvals from the board of supervisors.

Construction exploded amid increased demand for cloud computing and artificial intelligence.

Last year alone, the county issued building permits for more than 10 million square feet of data center space, the highest one-year number in the county's history. Together, data centers occupy 3% of the total land in the county, Rizer said.

'Love-hate relationship'

In fiscal year 2026, data centers produced \$1.2 billion in property tax dollars – almost 40% of the county's overall budget.

The wealth allowed officials to lower property taxes every year for the past 10 years. Tax rates on vehicles also were slashed.

Please see **SHIFT**, Page A3

RICHNECK ELEMENTARY

'I don't care if I go to jail'

Footage shows boy confronting police

JAMES POWEL
USA TODAY

Recently released police body camera footage shows a 6-year-old boy cursing at officers moments after he shot and seriously wounded his teacher at a Virginia elementary school in 2023.

The boy, seen in his first-grade classroom, is heard saying "I don't care if you call backup. I don't care if I go to jail."

The shooting occurred Jan. 6, 2023. The boy's teacher, Abby Zwerner, and 16 students had fled the classroom after the shooting at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia. The boy, identified as J.T. in court records, according to the Virginian Pilot, was held back by reading specialist Amy Kovac.

Zwerner was shot, with the bullet going through her hand and lodging in her chest. She survived and subsequently filed a civil lawsuit against the school's assistant principal Ebony Parker. The lawsuit alleged that Parker had not done enough after hearing multiple reports about the child having a gun. Zwerner won a \$10 million jury verdict in November.

The video was also used as evidence in Parker's criminal trial in May, where she faced eight counts of felony child neglect. The judge sealed the video after its introduction and after receiving "several media requests" for the tape. The charges against Parker were dismissed, according to previous reporting by USA TODAY.

The Virginian Pilot and Daily Press filed a motion to unseal the body camera footage in June. A judge agreed to unseal the footage as long as the boy's face remained blurred.

The Pilot published the video Oct. 6. "What we saw and heard was affecting, and led us to conclude the video has news value that supersedes its troubling content," the newspaper said in an editors note. "Importantly, it tells us something about the life of this child, himself a victim in this saga, and the circumstances educators at Richneck must have faced."

What does the video show?

The expletive-laden video, captured from the body camera of Officer Brian Torrez, according to the Pilot, shows officers entering the classroom following the shooting.

Kovac tells officers the boy "just admitted he had one bullet." She adds that "I told the AP (Parker) that there was a threat earlier."

The boy interjects saying "that (expletive) retired last year."

Please see **SHOOTING**, Page A3