

The Daily Progress

Nelson County unveils major zoning ordinance overhaul

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Broadcaster Karl Ravech shares booth memories upon ESPN exit

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Tuesday, September 8, 2026 • dailyprogress.com

REAL ESTATE

Woodard on Water

No changes planned for City Market property right now, new owner says

ELI LERDAU
The Daily Progress

The surface parking lot that has been home Charlottesville’s City Market for more than three decades has traded hands for the first time since 1964. And its new owner is a local firm that once eyed the property for a mixed-use development.

Woodard Properties, which acquired the 0.99-acre parking lot at 100 E. Water St. from the Charlottesville Parking Center on May 18 for \$15 million, says there are no development plans for the site today. Technically, the new owner of the lot is an entity called Skyview Parking, a limited liability corporation

affiliated with Woodard. Skyview previously had a leasehold interest in the property that was signed in 2014. The \$15 million sale price is more than four times the property’s \$3.4 million assessed value, according to city property records. The transaction though will not

count toward the property’s 2027 assessment because the sale is not considered valid. Not only was the \$15 million sum agreed upon in Skyview’s lease, but the sale was what’s called a 1031 exchange in the real estate industry.

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ENVIRONMENT

SMOKE & FEARS



ELI LERDAU, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Houses overlook the Smurfit WestRock paper mill in Covington on July 8.

A paper mill is suffocating a small Virginia town, and officials are dismissing concerns

ELI LERDAU
The Daily Progress

Amanda Dean can smell the Smurfit Westrock paper mill in Covington before she gets out of bed. “In the morning, it’s really bad,” Dean told The Daily Progress. “You can even smell it inside the house.” She lives about 2 miles from the mill, but the smell can reach as far as Clifton Forge, more than 10 miles away. “It smells worse than the sewage plant,” Dean said. “It just smells like a lot of dirty diapers.” Ash covers her car most days. Dean has asthma, but until she moved to Covington she never needed an inhaler. Now, she has been hospitalized multiple times. She spent her 45th birthday in the hospital on oxygen. Her doctors told her it was likely that her proximity to the mill played a major part. Dean is one of roughly 5,600 residents in the small Allegheny Highlands city living

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CAL TOBIAS, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The Smurfit WestRock paper mill is seen, July 8, in Covington.

COURT

‘The mind of the threatener’

Case of state trooper who left threats at his neighbor’s doorstep moves to civil court

HAWES SPENCER
The Daily Progress

The criminal case against Virginia state trooper Logan Pingley may be winding down, but the woman who said his doorstep warnings terrified her has taken the fight to civil court. Saleena Pinheiro, 35, has sued Pingley in Albemarle County Circuit Court, accusing him of assault and intentional infliction of emotional distress over the two notes he left at her apartment door nearly two years ago. Her complaint seeks compensatory and punitive damages and demands a jury trial. The lawsuit, filed July 30, came about a month after Pingley’s criminal case resolved with a plea deal that avoided a felony or severe misdemeanor conviction. In an agreement that would leave him with a no-jail, Class 4 misdemeanor conviction of failing to identify himself while on another person’s property, the 31-year-old Pingley pleaded no contest June 26. Judge Cheryl Higgins deferred entering the conviction while requiring him to complete 60 hours of community service, pay about \$400 in court costs and remain out of trouble. On Aug. 20, Pingley’s attorney, Brady Nicks, filed documentation showing Pingley performed all 60 hours of that community service at the Waynesboro Animal Shelter. Pingley remains on unpaid leave from the Virginia State Police, according to spokesman Matthew Demlein. Pinheiro’s lawsuit contends that the consequences of the incident nearly two years ago went considerably further than two pieces of paper left at her door. As asserted during the criminal case, Pinheiro returned home Nov. 8, 2024, and found the notes: “You are not safe anywhere” and “F- — around and find out.” She immediately became “alarmed, apprehensive and fearful,” the lawsuit contends. Pinheiro contacted Albemarle police and showed officers video from her front-door camera depicting a man leaving the notes. Police told her they knew the man and identified him as Pingley, a state trooper who lived several blocks away, according to the complaint.



Pingley

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Marlene Condon: Mother Nature insists we use standard time year-around

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Weather
Sunny to partly cloudy
High: 84 **Low:** 61
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Covington

From A1

in the vicinity of the 126-year-old paper mill, which the national watchdog group the Environmental Integrity Project ranked one of the worst polluters in the country last year.

“It had one of the largest greenhouse gas emissions in the country in 2023,” Tom Pelton, a spokesman for the group, told The Daily Progress.

The Environmental Integrity Project found the mill pumped out more than 2,000 tons of nitrogen oxide, more than 200,000 metric tons of methane and roughly 170,000 pounds of hydrochloric acid in 2023 alone.

Covington’s cancer rate is considerably higher than the Virginia average, at 567.3 out of every 100,000 people, versus 415 statewide, according to the Virginia Department of Health. It is also is one of only eight localities in Virginia with a rising cancer rate.

“You could draw a circle around that area where the fumes are the worst from the mill,” Joshua Kidd, the owner of Red Roof Heirlooms & Antiques in Covington, told The Daily Progress. “You couldn’t put your finger on a house or a family that hadn’t had some form of cancer.”

The mill’s equipment is older than most living Americans. The 86-year-old boiler is the second-oldest in the nation.

“It’s difficult legally to force them to get a more modern boiler,” Pelton said.

Under a Clean Air Act provision known as the New Source Review, the plant is only mandated to modernize equipment if it expands or upgrades operations.

The mill reports only a fraction of its true climate footprint, largely thanks to a federal loophole exempting greenhouse gases released from burning wood. The company told the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency it released about 970,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases in 2023.

The real total, including wood-burning emissions, was closer to 2.5 million metric tons, according to the Environmental Integrity Project.

“It doesn’t matter if the pollution is coming from burning wood or coal,” Pelton said. “It’s going up in the atmosphere, and it’s warming the climate.”

Pelton’s group documented a dozen incidents over five years describing dark, discolored liquid being dumped from the plant into the neighboring Jackson River.

“It’s constantly tannin colored,” Sam Scott, a fishing guide who has worked on the river his entire life, told The Daily Progress.

The Jackson River is well known for its fishing.

Scott along with other fishermen and Covington residents The Daily Progress spoke to reported seeing foam pile up after spills, a common indication that chemicals and detergents are getting into water.

“When we see these discharges, we’re talking less than an inch of visibility,” Wesley Hodges, another longtime fisherman, told The Daily Progress.

“When it gets really bad, we can’t even fish the river,” Scott said. Discharges happen at least half a dozen times a year, he said, each shutting down fishing on the river for a week or more.

Scott said that every



CAL TOBIAS, THE DAILY PROGRESS

A truck drives away from the Smurfit Westrock paper mill on July 8 in Covington.

time he called the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality Blue Ridge Regional Office in Salem to report pollution, the man on the line would identify himself as being from Covington himself and having connections at the mill. He would assure Scott that Smurfit Westrock, which is based in Dublin, Ireland, was breaking no American laws.

“There are state policies staff must abide by to prevent employee conflicts of interest and to manage employee performance. Neither the state nor the agency require staff to disclose where relatives live or work,” Irina Calos, a DEQ spokeswoman, told The Daily Progress.

Both fishermen believe the timing of the worst spills is tied to periodic releases from the nearby Gathright Dam.

“Every so often the dam pulses, and it causes all kinds of erosion,” Joe DiNardo, a retired toxicologist with 38 years of industry experience, told The Daily Progress.

“There’s so much sludge and crap in the bottom of the water that it starts bubbling up and it smells like sewage,” Kidd said.

“Last week, the water right below the mill, the Covington City Park conductivity [a measure of dissolved pollutants] was reading 892 microsiemens per centimeter,” Andrew Young, an environmental attorney for the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of conservation groups, told The Daily Progress. That is more than triple what is considered deadly to aquatic life.

Water temperatures this year have been higher thanks to unusual heat, putting muskies, which many fishermen rely on, at greater risk.

“If this water gets warmer,” Scott said, “they’re just going to die out.” He said he’s already found dead muskies scattered along the river this year.

Multiple fishermen said state testing after fish kills has focused narrowly on dissolved oxygen, ignoring heavy metals or detergents that also could be responsible.

In 2024, Dominion Energy



ELI LERDAU, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The Smurfit WestRock paper mill is seen in Covington on July 8.



CAL TOBIAS, THE DAILY PROGRESS

A logging truck drives over a bridge near the Smurfit Westrock paper mill on July 8 in Covington.

crews doing nearby electrical work caused a fault that cascaded through the plant’s power system. It cut electricity to the wastewater treatment side for hours, while the mill’s internal power plant kept production running uninterrupted. The shutdown resulted in a fish kill during which several deer were reportedly found dead on the riverbank, something dissolved oxygen alone couldn’t explain.

Leachate, a contaminated liquid formed when water moves through waste, is piped to a nearby wastewater treatment plant that isn’t equipped to handle pollutants associated with paper production.

“Who knows really what else was dumped there,” Young said.

“Does it really make sense to continue producing when you know your waste systems are not going to be able to handle what you’re producing?” Dan Shaffer, executive director of Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, told The Daily Progress.

DiNardo said that the Jackson and James rivers are both formally listed as impaired for polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCB, contamination. The man-made organic chemicals consisting of carbon, hydrogen and chlorine atoms can accumulate in fish tissue and are linked to cancer.

“They’ll have like all these little bumps across their heads, horns or crowns, like a chocolate kiss,” Kidd said of the fish in the river.

This is a common symptom of dangerously polluted water, according to Scott.

DiNardo also has independently tested the river for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS or forever chemicals, and said he found them. State regulators have so far tested only fish tissue, not the water itself.

“Unless you test both, you have no idea what you’re dealing with,” DiNardo said. Some types of PFAS stay in water, some in fish tissue, he said.

Getting basic environmental information is incredibly difficult, as there is no easily accessible database for reports and data. The Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance has spent hundreds of dollars on Freedom of

Information Act requests.

“Not too many self-policing systems do a great job of policing,” Shaffer said.

The mill’s permit goes up for reevaluation every decade, and according to Shaffer and Young, the last time was marked by administrative rollover, not structural change.

“Leaves decaying don’t change the pigment of the water on a weekly basis,” Scott said about the claim made for years that the river’s discoloration was caused by decaying foliage.

“The Jackson and upper James rivers have been particularly dark the last couple of years due to drought conditions. When flows are lower, naturally occurring tannins become more concentrated, making the water darker brown,” the DEQ said in an email to The Daily Progress.

Smurfit Westrock has in the past released public statements in response to pollution concerns. Covington residents described those statements as “bland.” When pressed for comment by The Daily Progress, the mill said it would respond by July 29. It never did.

“It’s the lifeline of the town,” Shaffer said, noting that the plant has been central to Covington’s economy for more than a century.

“I want people to be more open about how it affects them personally,” Dean said, “and for the city council to do something to make the pollution issues not so bad for the citizens around here.”

“I’d love 20 years from now for the mill and Covington to be touted as a success story,” Shaffer said. “That’d be fantastic for the mill, for the town, for the region, for the river. That’s my goal with it.”

“I called the Corps of Engineers who monitored the dam, then the Department of Wildlife Resources who wanted nothing to do with it, so I called DEQ, and they said it was an EPA thing,” Hodges said.

Records obtained by The Daily Progress confirmed that many reports were outright dismissed.

“If this continues to happen at the rate it is, I won’t be fishing anymore,” Scott said.

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LEGAL BRIEFS

Public Notice

A foreclosure sale will occur on October 2, 2026, at 10:30 AM, for 4.219 acres of land on Stony Point Pass in Albemarle County. Equity Trustees, LLC will auction the property at Charlottesville’s Circuit Court, 315 E. High Street.

Cash only, with a 10% deposit at sale and balance due in 15 days. For details, visit www.aldridgepite.com or call 301-961-6555.

Albemarle Hearing on Rivanna, Pump Sept. 16
Albemarle County Supervisors

will hold a public hearing Sept. 16 at 6 p.m. in Lane Auditorium on two projects: Rivanna Futures land management and Beaver Creek Pump Station Fill. Public can review plans at the County Office Building. Details online and by calling 434-296-5832. Public comment invited.

Legal Briefs are condensed summaries of public notices published in this edition. These summaries are generated using artificial intelligence and are provided for reader convenience only. Readers should review the complete original legal notices in today’s publication or within the e-edition for full details (available in most markets).