

CHAPTER SIX RURAL AREA

INTRODUCTION

The vision of the Rural Area has not changed much over time. From providing a legacy for a future generation of farmers, to providing habitat for wildlife, keeping taxes low, and maintaining the rural community, the vision for our rural landscape is important.

The physical character of this area is low, flat land with wide floodplains and altered drainage. It is a place that still contains working farms, farm related businesses, limited non-residential areas along with some scattered housing sites. There is a significant presence of existing agricultural and other rural-based economic activities in this part of Virginia Beach. This presence is reflected in the diversity of agricultural and rural related activities including traditional and specialty crop cultivation, tree farms, equestrian facilities, wetland banks, fish farms and other similar uses. It also contains large areas of exceptional environmental resources.



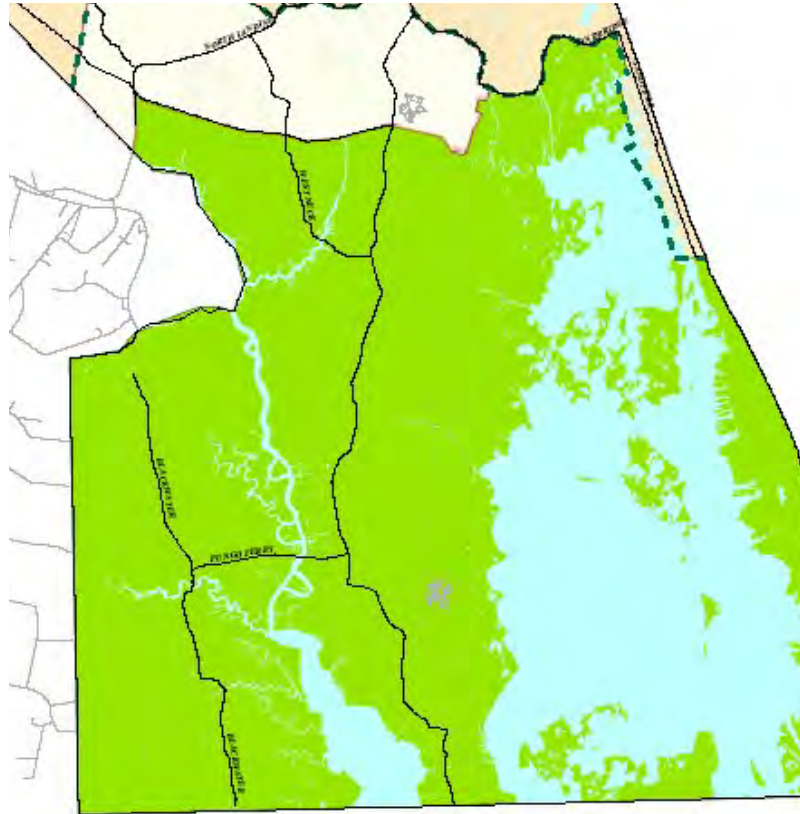
Looking North from Pungo Ferry Bridge



Farm House and Out-Buildings

The Rural Service Area, lies south of Indian River Road from North Landing Road to Muddy Creek and Back Bay and extends to the North Carolina border. The land, wetland and water cover 138 square miles, close to half of the total area of the City. Of the 30,300 acres of land, approximately 27,000 is devoted to production agriculture, upland forest and pasture. Wetland and water cover about 48,700 acres and an additional 9,700 acres is either privately owned or federal and state owned property used for environmental conservation purposes. Only about 3,200 acres of land in this area is actually developed, comprised mostly of rural dwellings and a small amount of rural commercial uses.

Most of the area is comprised of Land Management soils. These are Somewhat Poorly, Poorly or Very Poorly drained soils, as defined in the 1985 issue of the U.S. Soil Survey for Virginia Beach, and are not suitable for large subdivisions. It would be highly impractical to extend public water and sewer lines to this area. Given these factors, it is logical to conclude that the Rural Area should remain rural into the foreseeable future and, as such, it must rely on sound rural planning principles and effective economic strategies to help it retain its character and vitality.



Rural Area

RURAL PRESERVATION PLAN

It is the purpose of this Rural Preservation Plan to identify appropriate, fair and equitable rural planning policies for our Rural Area. The City seeks to achieve the following five planning objectives:

1. Preserve and Promote the Opportunity for Continued Agricultural Production

One of the key objectives of the Rural Preservation Plan is to provide opportunities for preserving agriculture. Our City's agricultural land (cropland, pasture, forest), both north and south of the Green Line, has dwindled from about 51,000 acres in 1982 to roughly 34,000 acres in 2000. Approximately two-thirds of all farmland is now located within the Rural Service Area. In order to stop or reverse this downward trend, effective and affirmative agricultural preservation strategies must be put into place. Agricultural preservation is an important economic and land use issue. Hence, it is important for comprehensive planning strategies to do their part in reinforcing and promoting agriculture as much as possible. One implementation tool Virginia Beach has been using with much success is the Agricultural Reserve Program.



Large Farming Operation

2. Recognize the Rural Character and the Need to Preserve its Open Space and Scenic Beauty



Horse Pasture Beside a Rural Road

The City of Virginia Beach wants to preserve the rural way of life for the people who live there, but how can we accommodate the demand for a rural lifestyle without diminishing the rural setting in the process? Many people who live in rural areas expect to continue the rural lifestyle enjoyed by previous generations.

Rural areas may be characterized as a balance between the natural environment and human uses with farms, horse boarding, campgrounds, wineries, and open space activities served by long stretches of two lane roadways. There are occasional "commercial nodes" like Back Bay and Creeds that are small in scale with a few houses next to some shops serving, in a limited way, the commercial needs of a rather large geographic area. Industrial uses will generally be those that are related to and dependent on natural resources such as agriculture, timber or minerals.



Tractor Along Rural Road

Rural character also translates into a quieter, less hectic and more independent way of life, one that is removed from the congestion, density and fast-paced activities of urban life. While some growth occurs, it does so without disrupting the lifestyles of those who have chosen to live here and without forcing the need to bring in wider "urban" type roadways, public water and sewer lines and sprawling development.

3. Protect and Maintain Environmental Resources so that they Remain for Future Generations



Looking South From Pungo Ferry Bridge

Well over half of the total area south of Indian River Road is comprised of water and tidal and non-tidal wetlands. Much of it is located in low-lying floodplain zones, publicly owned environmental conservation areas, and areas consisting of poorly drained soils. These so called "Land Management Soils" are capable of handling only a very limited amount of new development.

It is an important comprehensive planning objective to protect and maintain all our valuable environmental, scenic and agricultural resources against inappropriate activities, and intense

growth pressures. We must orient rural residential development away from sensitive environmental resources to areas consisting of well-drained soils and deeper water tables that are capable of handling septic systems. This, coupled with the objective of maintaining a reasonable overall level of rural development potential, establishes sound planning policy that balances the need for reasonable rural growth against its impact on the surrounding natural environmental.

Because of the unique topography in this area, no new residential dwelling units shall be located within the floodplains as cited in Section 5B of the City’s Site Plan Ordinance.

4. Provide Reasonable Rural Development Opportunities

This Rural Preservation Plan affords reasonable rural development opportunities well beyond the 10 or 20-year horizon. Property owners may choose to sell their development rights by participating in the Agricultural Reserve Program or to develop their land either ‘by-right,’ which yields a minimum density, or through a conditional use approach which may yield a higher rural density while preserving large tracts of farmland and open space areas. Rural development potential is based on land area and soil quality as opposed to lot frontage. The design of a new development is a key component to minimizing impacts to or loss of rural character. Growth should be guided towards the more traditional rural center.



Existing Agricultural Development

5. Eliminate Need for Urban Infrastructure

It has been a long-standing policy of the City not to allow the extension of urban infrastructure into the rural area of the City. The Rural Preservation Plan allows reasonable levels of rural residential development to continue into the foreseeable future thus ensuring that demand placed on public facilities will remain at or below what is deemed acceptable for rural communities. For example, throughout the 1980's and 1990's, the average rate of development in this area has been around 30 dwelling units per year. The City will continue to track rural growth, as measured by the number of new houses built, to ensure a continued balance exists between public facility supply and demand for this area.



Tractor Along Rural Road

INSTRUMENTS TO ACHIEVE A QUALITY RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The application of the successful Agricultural Reserve Program and the implementation of rural design guidelines will help stabilize and reinforce the rural way of life in southern Virginia Beach. These elements are described below.

Agricultural Reserve Program

The Agricultural Reserve Program (ARP) was established in 1995 with a goal of preserving 20,000 acres of agricultural land and open space. It is one of the most successful programs in the nation according to the American Farm Land Trust. The ARP is a non-development option available on a voluntary basis to property owners in the rural area. It preserves land for farming, preserves the rural character and environmental resources of the area, and reduces or minimizes the need for urban infrastructure. It works by purchasing development rights from property owners at fair market value, then providing farmers some equity in their land. It instills fairness in the picture by offering market value compensation to property owners, thus ensuring that their land's development value will be realized. The ARP is an important long-range implementation tool for rural and agricultural preservation. The ARP sites are not to be used for wetland mitigation.



Farm in Agricultural Reserve Program

Rural Development Guidelines

If the property owner elects not to enter the Agricultural Reserve Program, but instead wishes to develop his or her property, the Comprehensive Plan seeks to achieve these objectives by giving property owners a choice of two rural residential development options: a By-Right option with calculated density of no more than one dwelling unit per 15 acres; or a Conditional Use option allowing a slightly higher calculated density of one dwelling unit per 5 acres within areas designated as Soil Area 1 and one dwelling unit per 10 acres within areas designated as Soil Area 2 (See Southern Rural Soils in Appendix).



Rural Beauty

Non-residential development should be located within a rural commercial center unless the non-

rural residential is agricultural in nature or a farm, part of a farm, stable or a mill. The rural centers should be thought of as focal points for the existing and future development in this area of the City. Development in these rural centers can include a mix of locally oriented retail or services designed to be compatible with the landscape of the area.

The following rural residential and non-residential guidelines should be met, as appropriate, whenever a rural development proposal request is submitted for review. See City Zoning Ordinance Article 4 Agricultural Districts for further additional implementation purposes regarding the development of rural properties. Design Guidelines are found in Chapter Seven Community Appearance section of this Comprehensive Plan Policy Report.

Rural Development Guidelines - Residential



Pastoral Setting

Rural settlement patterns reinforce pastoral ways of life. The immediate views along the main rural roads are of pasturelands, croplands, hedgerows, fencelines, natural fields and forests. Located at a distance off the road are farm homes, barns, silos, and other outbuildings. Successful rural residential developments do not dominate, but complement this pastoral setting and showcase the attractiveness of the natural surrounding countryside.

These successful developments include large open space areas that are retained in their natural state, used as farmland, gardens, equestrian centers or other rurally compatible uses. Houses are arranged and streets are aligned in ways that create or adapt to the natural rural setting and do not follow a typical suburban pattern of regimentation. Landscaping, fences and country roads are arranged and aligned throughout a rural subdivision in a manner that frames open spaces and provides an attractive connection between the main rural road and rural home sites.



Pro - Conservation Development

Likewise, new rural homes are built with an architectural design and choice of materials that



New Rural Home Set Amidst a Horse Pasture

distinguish them from their suburban counterparts. Their uniquely rural design of homes do not turn their back to the main roadway but, though set back, convey a sense of outward connection to the land and rural community. It applies such techniques as large, open wrap-around porches, pitched rooflines, detached or side-loading garages and incorporates architectural treatments that takes it cue from local farm buildings, hunting clubhouses and other examples that reflect the architectural heritage and agrarian character of south Virginia Beach.



Homes of Rural Heritage

1. Subdivide residential lots on soils that possess the best drainage and water table characteristics using a reasonable mixture of acceptable rural residential lot sizes provided it is determined by the City that the principal goal of protecting agriculture and conserving our natural resources is not compromised through this subdivision method.
2. Illustrate the ultimate plan of development, as well as anticipated development phases, if any.
3. Maximize the opportunity for agricultural, equestrian and similar compatible rural activities as part of the residential development. Avoid fragmenting or dividing remaining farmland and open space into small lots.
4. Locate protective buffers between proposed residential structures and abutting agricultural operations. These buffers should be at least 50 feet in width. The first 25 feet of such area adjacent to an on-going agricultural operation should be heavily planted with a mixture of grasses and low growing indigenous shrubs; and the second twenty-five feet of such area adjacent to the structure should be planted with a double row of trees with a minimum caliper of 1½ inches and should be centered no more that thirty feet apart.

Such trees should be indigenous and consist of a mixture of 25% deciduous and 75% evergreen to screen as necessary or to provide scenic vistas. Seasonal changes and foliage color should be thought of when selecting planting materials.

5. Whenever possible, plan developments to preserve existing trees and other significant natural resources. In those cases where development is proposed within areas of existing tree cover, design the placement of buildings and driveways so as to save and protect as many trees and other significant environmental features as possible.
6. Include substantial setbacks, with landscaping, between dwellings and rural arterial roadways as discussed in Section 402 of the City Zoning Ordinance.
7. Provide flag lots, where warranted to advance the purpose of this plan, taking into consideration the size of the lots within the subdivision, existing or future tree cover and other pertinent characteristics relating to the need for rural residential privacy and open space. Design appropriate widths and pavement types for driveways serving flag lots. (e.g. fire truck access)
8. Provide longer distances for rural cul-de-sac streets than is otherwise permitted throughout the City. Locate roadway drainage ditches a sufficient distance from the edge of pavement to enable emergency vehicles to pass around road obstructions.
9. Minimize all access points along rural arterial roadways, for example, through consolidation of properties.
10. Provide greater streetlight separation distances than is otherwise permitted throughout the City. Focus the light on the road rather than lighting up the sky.
11. Protect land for open space purposes through the use of a variety of legal instruments, such as deed restrictions, appropriate zoning classifications, protective easements or transfer to a stewardship agency (eg. foundations or conservation groups), or through some other appropriate means.
12. Establish visible landmarks that are incorporated into the design of development entrances that recall the rural heritage of this part of Virginia Beach.



Windshield View of Rural Virginia Beach



Old Farm Equipment
Serving as a Landmark

Rural Development Guidelines – Non-Residential



Existing Rural Commercial Buildings

1. Protect rural character and existing scenic views.
2. The identity of Virginia Beach's rural community should take its cue from its rural heritage. The areas known as Creeds and Blackwater have some buildings that encourage a type of design reminiscent to the area.
3. Franchise retail, office parks or shopping centers are not encouraged.
4. Development in rural commercial centers can include locally oriented retail, service and community uses scaled to be compatible with the character of the rural landscape.
5. Create non-residential development at key crossroads to encourage community interaction of people, not vehicles.
6. Non-residential locally oriented retail or services are limited in the rural area and do not require the extension of urban services.
7. Recognize the scenic contribution that the rural non-residential nodes can offer and design with this in mind. Look at your surrounding area; if the existing buildings are white clapboard sided structures with tin roofs and porches, using this theme and incorporating materials similar to the clapboard siding and metal roof would assist in defining the place. Note that the buildings located at these defined non-residential nodes are brought closer to the road. Parking is minimal.
8. Commercial retail development should be located in existing defined rural commercial centers, such as Creeds and Blackwater, for supporting the local rural community in lieu of strip shopping center development.



Small Farm Operation