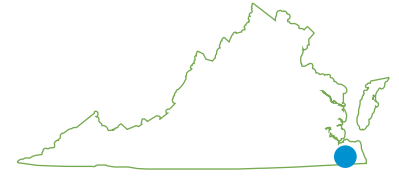


Profile: **City of Chesapeake**



Balancing Farmland Protection and Solar Development

In the late 2010s, Chesapeake began to see a drastic increase in interest from solar developers who wanted to build new arrays in their community. Driven in part by Dominion Energy's goal of transforming the electric grid by expanding renewable energy, which was spurred by state legislation, pressures to convert agricultural land and open space quickly rose. Leaders in this independent city recognized that they were not prepared for this level of growth. Working together, the City Council and Planning Department created an innovative plan and policy to manage solar development while supporting farmland protection, working to find a balance between land uses.



Situation

Chesapeake is the second-largest city in Virginia, both in population and land area. It covers nearly 353 square miles and is home to over 250,000 people. While the City is large and growing, it still sustains some rural land use, and agriculture remains an important feature of the community.



The [2022 Census of Agriculture](#) shows that Chesapeake, which is an independent city and not part of any county, so it has its own Census of Agriculture findings, has retained roughly 180 farms that collectively cover nearly 40,000 acres. Most of that acreage is in cropland. The main products are soybeans, corn, and nursery crops. About 16 percent of the city's farmers sell directly to consumers, which is double the state average.

As a growing city, development pressure has long been a challenge. Data from [American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat 2040 report](#) suggests that conversion to low-density residential development is a particular risk in the more open areas in the central and southern parts of the city, which has the city's most productive, versatile, and resilient soils. That development pressure accelerated and took on a new form in 2018 when Dominion Energy announced that it would seek to transform Virginia's electric grid by prioritizing more renewable energy production. Jimmy McNamara, the

Planning Director for Chesapeake, explained that, since then, solar developers have expressed heightened interest in expanding utility solar within the City's limits.

Recognizing that they were not prepared for the rapid expansion of solar facilities, City Council leaders asked the Planning Department for advice—and asked them for a plan to manage the growth.

Approach

Toward the end of 2018, Planning Department staff began to review strategies for managing solar development in a way that supported renewable energy without letting it run rampant over agricultural lands and economies. (See [Mitigating the Impacts of Solar Siting](#) fact sheet.) They also looked at an inventory of the programs that then existed in the Commonwealth to support the agricultural community and promote thoughtful land use. They wondered: Is there a way to merge these things?

Knowing the impact any policy to influence solar development would have on landholders and community members, staff made sure to engage regularly with citizens. “It was especially important for us to speak with farmers,” shares Alyssa Neil, a Principal

Planner in Chesapeake. “Prioritizing their voices and input was a goal.”

Based on their research and stakeholder engagement processes, Planning Department staff drafted a plan and a policy, which they proposed to the City Council. Their proposal set out site-specific guidelines around the installation of vegetative screens and road maintenance. It also centered on the use of a conservation-focused “stipulation”—a voluntary commitment to offset or mitigate the negative impacts of a proposed development.

The planning department proposed offering solar developers the opportunity to voluntarily contribute to the City's [Open Space and Agricultural Preservation \(OSAP\)](#) program. The OSAP program was founded in 2003 to [purchase development rights](#) from landowners to preserve farmland and other open spaces in perpetuity. Utilizing stipulations is an innovative approach to managing solar expansion while preserving farmland for

the community. It did not outlaw solar arrays, yet it also did not set the stage for widespread sacrifice of farmland. The City Council liked the balanced proposal, and it was adopted in the summer of 2019.

“We tried to be very clear with the guidelines we put

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It was especially important for us to speak with farmers. Prioritizing their voices and input was a goal.
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ALYSSA NEIL,
PRINCIPAL PLANNER



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in place to minimize any confusion or frustration,” explains Kevin Finn, Chesapeake’s Comprehensive Planning Administrator. “In many ways, this strategy really levels the playing field.” McNamara agrees, and he also emphasizes the voluntary nature of the stipulation: “We cannot force developers to contribute to the OSAP program. This isn’t a mandatory ‘fee.’ It’s a stipulation on a conditional use permit, and it is voluntary.”

The stipulation language itself highlights that clarity and voluntary nature. In their guidance for solar facilities, the City Council and Planning Department included draft language that developers could use: *“In an effort to promote and preserve agricultural lands, the applicant/owner offers and the City accepts an annual contribution of _____ dollars to the City of Chesapeake’s Open Space and Agriculture Preservation (OSAP) Program or similar program as approved by the Director of Planning, or designee. The first contribution shall be paid prior to the issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy for this use and each annual contribution shall be paid every twelve (12) months thereafter.”*

Outcomes

So far, Planning Department staff report that the OSAP stipulation approach has been successful. And while feelings about solar development can run high in Virginia—with some people strongly supportive of renewable energy expansion and some highly opposed—many citizens, including farmers, appreciate the strategy. A [2024 local news article](#) about a new 41-acre solar project cites residents, farmers, and local leaders who describe the approach as a win-win.

Chesapeake now hosts almost a [dozen different solar developments](#) within its boundaries, covering over 2,000 acres. So far, every project that has been approved since the City Council adopted the new policy has contributed funds toward the OSAP program. “We think they make



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this contribution because they want to be good partners, good members of the community,” says McNamara.

The injection of funds has been helpful for the OSAP program. While the money has not led to a flurry of new projects, it has helped the program persevere in the face of rapidly rising land prices. With development rights now so expensive because of the population growth in this popular city and area, the funds from solar stipulations enable the City to continue purchasing development rights from interested farmers on strategic properties without having to drastically increase funding from other sources, helping to secure an agricultural future for the area and stimulating the rural economy.

Lessons Learned

When asked what advice they have for other communities looking to manage solar development in a thoughtful way that preserves agricultural land, staff in the Chesapeake Planning Department offer a few different thoughts.

McNamara advises, “Be specific about what you want to see in your community. Be clear about what goals you’re trying to achieve.” He explains that the city was focused on site-specific guidelines, such as installing vegetative screens. It also was intent on preserving agricultural land. But they focused less on directing solar development to specific places, so solar projects

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Continually engaging with the community is essential to making sure that you're serving others and guiding land use in the right ways.

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**KEVIN FINN,
COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING
ADMINISTRATOR**

are scattered across the area. Because directing growth to one specific place was not defined as a goal, it did not happen. “That’s not a good or a bad thing,” McNamara says. “It’s just a result of prioritizing certain things and not prioritizing others.”

Finn emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement. “It’s important to listen to your community. If you’re making a policy that affects farmers and landowners, go talk with farmers and landowners. That’s true when you’re creating guidance, like we did with the stipulation. But it’s true afterward, too. Continually engaging with the community is essential to making sure that you’re serving others and guiding land use in the right ways.”

Neil, McNamara, and Finn all stressed a final point, which boils down to this: be humble, open-minded, and willing to adjust. When the Planning Department and City enacted their new policy in 2019, it was solid. Yet in the years after its initial adoption, they noticed some flaws. These were challenges they did not anticipate. To cite one specific example, when the solar facility guidance was initially drafted, the Planning Department staff had not fully considered the impact on rural roads that equipment would cause during the construction phase. As a result, their roads and residents suffered. So, the Department pivoted. They addressed flaws in the original proposal and brought a revised version back to



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the City Council, which was approved in August 2022. Planning leaders did not rule out going through an amendment process like this again if needed, showing that they are committed to maintaining good service even as conditions change.

Planners in Chesapeake recognized that solar development competed with agriculture for land. Based on research and public engagement, they found a win-win solution to encourage renewable energy and preserve farmland at the same time, while correcting course as needed. In doing so, they highlight a plan and policy—and just as importantly, a thoughtful planning process—that works for people and places in their community.