



Profile: **Clarke County**

Understanding the Fiscal Impacts of Farmland Protection through a Cost of Community Services Study



ALISON TEETOR

Land protection is a high priority in Clarke County. But in the wake of the 2007-2009 recession and subsequent economic struggles, some citizens in the community began to question the value of conservation efforts. They wondered if investment in farmland protection strategies—from programs like use-value taxation and purchase of development rights—was worth it. To understand the economic impacts of maintaining agricultural land in their community, Clarke County leaders commissioned a fiscal analysis called a Cost of Community Services study—and found that their investments in farmland protection were wise.

Situation

Clarke County is located roughly 70 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. While no interstates run through the county—Interstate 81 parallels the county’s border to the west—the community does have a few major highways, including two that connect the county to the nation’s capital. Commuters can leave Clarke County and be in downtown D.C. in a little over an hour. They can be at Dulles International Airport in 45 minutes.

Despite its proximity to a major city and amenities, Clarke County is a largely rural place. As of 2023, its population hovered at just over 15,000 people. Agriculture remains an important economic driver and land use in the county. The [2022 Census of Agriculture](#) lists 421 farms in Clarke, most of which are between 10-179 acres in size. The market value of agricultural

products sold is more than \$16 million, with cattle and calves, horses, and grains making up most of that value. About 12 percent of farms sell directly to consumers, which is higher than the state and national average.

Recognizing the importance of farms and farmers in their community, Clarke County leaders have long invested in tools to protect farmland. They have adopted use value taxation, for example, which taxes land at its agricultural use value rather than its fair market value. (See [Use-Value Assessment](#) fact sheet.) They also fund and operate a [Purchase of Development Rights](#) program, which compensates landowners for permanently preserving their land as open space. The county’s program has protected [nearly 10,000 acres](#), much of it agricultural. When combined with conservation easements held by other entities, such as

nonprofit land trusts, on nearly 20,000 acres, Clarke County is home to [more than 28,000 acres of protected land](#)—roughly 25 percent of its total land mass.

Many people in Clarke County love the community's farms and open spaces. They value its rurality. But in the wake of the Great Recession, some started to question the value of investing in farmland protection. Were the public dollars being spent through the Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority worth it? Was use-value assessment fair and worth retaining? According to Alison Teetor, who worked in the county's planning department for more than 30 years before retiring in the summer of 2025, "People were worried that these efforts were a drain on our funds."

So, in 2017, rather than dismissing or ignoring these questions and concerns, Clarke County leaders went on the hunt for answers.

Approach

The [Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority board](#), which is made up of one Board of Supervisors member, one member of the Planning Commission, and five citizens, met to discuss the questions that

were raised. They floated the idea of pursuing a "[Cost of Community Services](#)" (COCS) study for the county. (See [Cost of Community Services](#) fact sheet.) A few members of the board were familiar with these studies because other counties in Virginia had done them; in fact, Piedmont Environmental Council had even completed one for Clarke County more than two decades earlier.

A COCS study is a fiscal analysis that examines a local government's revenues versus costs for major land uses over the course of a recent tax year. Unlike typical fiscal analyses, COCS studies include farmland and other working and open lands along with residential, commercial, and industrial development. They generate a ratio that illustrates how much money is spent to provide public services—such as roads, public health and safety, schools, and more—for every dollar generated in property tax revenue. It was exactly the type of study that could respond to citizens' concerns.

At the request of the board, Alison Teetor and her planning department team got in touch with the [Weldon Cooper Center](#) at the University of Virginia. They had completed a study in nearby Fauquier County just a



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ANDRIY BLOKHIN/ALAMY

few years earlier. The Weldon Cooper Center, whose mission is to provide data and services to communities, governments, and public sector leaders, agreed to conduct the study, which would cost about \$12,000 in total. Clarke County successfully applied for an Agricultural and Forestal Industries Development (AFID) planning grant to cover 50 percent of the study's costs.

Terry Rephann, who works with the Weldon Cooper Center and led the COCS study, got to work. He and his team analyzed a variety of Fiscal Year 2017 data sources, from county budgets and property tax income records to permit applications and public safety statistics. They also interviewed 15–20 different leaders within the county government, including the commissioner of revenue, county administrator, planning department staff, and community service providers, like the sheriff.

They analyzed all the data and interviews, calculated ratios, and then double- and triple- checked them. The Weldon Cooper Center finished the study in 2018,

offering a preliminary draft to a small group of leaders, including the Conservation Easement Authority, and answering their questions. Rephann and his team then presented the [final report](#) to an open meeting of the Board of Supervisors, where citizens were invited to attend. They took questions from the board and from citizens, walking them through how the results were obtained. Rephann remembers a few dozen people attending the presentation.

Outcomes

The [Clarke County COCS study](#) showed that efforts to protect agricultural and open land in the county—even when taxed at use value—benefitted the tax base. For every dollar received for residential land uses, Clarke County spent \$1.24 to provide services to those areas, leading to a negative ratio. Consistent with other COCS studies, the Weldon Cooper Center found that it costs more to provide services to residential areas than the county receives in property taxes from those same areas. Expenses for schools, public safety, and public

works made the service costs for residential areas particularly high.

Open space and agricultural land, however, was a different story. For every dollar received for these land uses, the county only had to spend \$0.50 to provide services. Notably, the costs associated with the purchase of development rights program (see [PDR](#) fact sheet) and use value assessment are included in this analysis—showing citizens the value to fiscal coffers that farmland protection can provide. Like agricultural and open space land uses, commercial and industrial land uses also yielded a positive income-expense ratio in the COCS analysis.

“Cost of Community Services Studies inform decision makers of what’s going on in a community, and they illustrate why, from a financial standpoint, things like land preservation, use-value taxation, and zoning matter. These studies provide objective information that they can use to make decisions,” says Rephann. “Many of the people who started land conservation programs in Virginia are now stepping back, retiring, or even passing away. These studies can show a new generation why farmland preservation is important.”

Teetor agrees. “Any talk I gave publicly about our planning or land protection work, I made sure to mention this study. The numbers are clear and easy to understand. I mean, cows don’t ride school buses! The COCS study helps to educate citizens about the benefits of conservation and the costs of providing necessary services to residential land uses.”

Lessons Learned

When asked if she would encourage other localities to complete a COCS study, Teetor says, “Yes. Do it. In our case, it has been one of the strongest tools we have to show the importance of land conservation. Everyone understands money and economic impacts. People want their tax money to go to useful things, and this study shows that maintaining farmland is an economically useful thing.”



GLENHAM SMITH

Working with the Weldon Cooper Center was easy, she continued. From her perspective, the hardest part of the process was waiting for them to have the time and capacity to get started.

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**ALISON TEETOR,
RETIRED COUNTY PLANNER**

Rephann also offers some words of wisdom. For a community that is not experiencing much development pressure, he says, these studies may be less useful. But for a county that is experiencing pressures, or for one that wants to understand if its conservation investments are worthwhile, COCS analyses are useful. “There’s no reason for a community experiencing

growth not to do something like this.”

Rephann mentions that, while their capacity can at times be limited, the Weldon Cooper Center is open to being contacted about conducting more COCS studies in Virginia, and he thinks that other nonprofit groups and universities may also be positioned to complete these analyses. While the studies need to be thorough, and there is a lot of research and engagement involved, he also says that “they’re not rocket science.”

Clarke County’s experience with conducting and then using a Cost of Community Services study shows the value that good, objective information can provide.