



Profile: Fauquier County

Improving Communication by Creating an Agriculture Collaborative



Leaders in Fauquier County needed to improve their internal communications around agricultural issues. Many different departments impact and influence agriculture in their community, but too often, these departments were not engaging with one another, leading to confusion. To solve this problem, Fauquier County created an “Agriculture Collaborative,” where leaders from different departments meet regularly to discuss agricultural issues. Since starting this informal initiative, leaders and departments report better connections and communications with their county colleagues, enabling them to better serve the agricultural community.

Situation

Fauquier County is located between Charlottesville and Washington, D.C. The county has several small towns within its borders, and while it is not densely populated, its population has increased significantly in the last two decades—from 55,000 people in 2000 to an estimated 76,000 in 2024. It is regularly listed as one of the wealthiest counties in the Commonwealth.

Fauquier’s landscape is rolling and lends itself well to agriculture. Livestock production is particularly important, though the county also produces a wide variety of crops, from commodity grains to vegetables, fruit, and specialty crops. As of 2022, there were [just over 1,000 farms in the county](#), down roughly ten percent from five years prior. High land prices make it challenging for young people to get a start in agriculture.

Farming is important to Fauquier County’s economy, environment, and culture, and the county government recognizes that importance. Many different departments, from the Agricultural Development Department and Cooperative Extension to Planning and Zoning, Economic Development, and more, serve farms and farmers.

In 2022, a former deputy county administrator noticed a growing disconnect among these different departments. Many of the county’s staff members and leaders were engaging with agriculture, but they were all doing so from individual vantage points. As a result, their work could become siloed. That isolated approach led to confusion among farmers in the community; they would sometimes receive different answers to the same question, depending on the department they

asked. The separations between departments also limited opportunities for the county to collaborate and strategically plan together.

Approach

Reflecting on this reality, the then-deputy county administrator wondered: Wouldn't it be helpful if department leaders got together and talked through challenges and opportunities together? Could that lead to better outcomes for the various departments and, more importantly, for Fauquier's farmers and agricultural communities?

These questions led to an idea, and the idea led to action. To facilitate better communication, she launched the Fauquier County Agriculture Collaborative after confirming interest and buy-in from leaders in multiple departments.

Jim Hilleary, who served as the Director of the county's Department of Agricultural Development until his recent retirement, explains the workings of the Agriculture Collaborative. Once a month, leaders from various departments get together for what is typically an hour-long meeting. Sometimes, there is a formal presentation, such as when Hilleary led a session called "A Decade of Change," which highlighted findings from recent Census of Agriculture reports. Other times, the leaders just share updates. Every department and division leader that regularly touches agricultural issues—from Planning and Zoning, Community Development, and Economic Development to the Soil and Water Conservation District, Cooperative Extension, and the county administrator's office, and sometimes others—is invited to attend.

"Each department has a different perspective as it relates to supporting agriculture," Hilleary explains. "The Collaborative meetings give them a chance to bring important information to the table."

Holly Meade, who directs Fauquier's Community Development Department, echoes that perspective. "With these meetings, the guiding question is, 'What can we learn from one another?'" The meetings help us understand what everybody else is dealing with and give us an opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other. We can identify trends together and explain what we're seeing—all so we can be proactive in supporting our agricultural community instead of being reactive."

Sometimes, "being proactive" just means keeping everyone informed about a critical issue affecting the agricultural community. Other times, it means discussing a specific project and understanding diverse points of view.

Maybe there is a proposal for a new agritourism operation on a local farm. What do the Planning and Zoning offices need to know about this proposal, and how can they support it while ensuring it abides by all requirements? How are the Economic Development and Agriculture Development Departments strategizing promotion of the new effort? Cooperative Extension and the Soil and Water Conservation District might be asking: Are there ways to teach the public about agriculture or advance a specific conservation practice here, and how do we help the farmer think through plans to be economically viable? The Collaborative gives each department a chance to ask these questions together, avoiding potential conflicts and miscommunications through thoughtful discussion.



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HOLLY MEADE,
DIRECTOR, FAUQUIER COUNTY
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The group has also worked on envisioning larger projects together, such as bringing a meat processing facility to the county to better support farmers raising livestock and wanting to improve their marketing and distribution. If the county continues to pursue the project, the Collaborative could help improve the application and implementation process.

Outcomes

Members of the Agriculture Collaborative say that the monthly meetings are helpful and have improved their collective work. (See [Agricultural Boards and Committees & Development Officers](#) fact sheet.) But they also stress that enhanced communications and connections transcend the scheduled meeting time.

“It’s not that we had bad relationships at all,” Meade emphasizes. “But because we’re talking to each other more regularly, we’re more comfortable communicating, and we have a common thread. That goes beyond just the meetings themselves.”

Melissa Allen, who leads the John Marshall Soil and Water Conservation District and is an active member of the Agriculture Collaborative, agrees. “Two years ago, when I would think about the leaders of other departments, I had a name but no face,” she says. “Now, because of the collaborative, I can put faces to the names. I actually know them, and I am more likely to pick up the phone to call the Zoning office or the Economic Development team and ask a quick question. Or I’ll see something going on in the community that I was unaware of, and I’ll call the Director of Community Development and ask, ‘What’s going on there?’ They do that with us, too. The Agriculture Collaborative has opened lines of communication.”

That comfort with communication, even when it is quick and informal, has paid dividends for Fauquier



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County. “There’s a real advantage to [something like this],” says Hilleary. “It improves understanding among the stakeholders so that problems can be headed off or there can be a compromise found more quickly. The stakeholders are at the same table, literally, and they’re accustomed to talking to each other.”

Lessons Learned

Agriculture Collaborative members have learned some lessons about ways to make the effort most impactful. These insights revolve around time management, setting realistic expectations, getting started, and knowing who to include in conversations.

“Who are we kidding—it’s always hard to make time for meetings, and we have some really busy people in this group,” reflects Meade. Making the meetings no longer than an hour has made the time commitment more manageable. Setting an agenda in advance and choosing a “point person” to lead the meeting and ensure things stay on time are also helpful strategies. With these meetings, even if the intent is just to connect and share updates, “We always come away with something positive,” Meade continues. “I could honestly say that these coordination meetings we have put in place are hugely beneficial. I’d encourage other counties to explore doing something similar.”

Regarding setting realistic expectations, members say that the goal should not be to become an expert on every issue. It is important to set a goal of becoming more informed while still trusting colleagues who have content expertise. “I would never say that I understand zoning or community development a hundred percent, and they don’t understand what we do a hundred percent,” says Allen, “but having a basic knowledge really helps.”

Allen also speaks about getting a collaborative going and knowing who to include. “I would encourage other counties to do something like this. I’d suggest that if someone were interested in starting this effort in their own communities, they first go to their county administrator. You want buy-in from the county. It’s also important to gain interest and support from your peers in other departments,” she says. “Then, get together and ask: What are our goals? What do we hope to accomplish with these meetings?”

She also points out that it can be helpful to know who not to include and why. “Having elected officials join the meetings can sometimes change the dynamic pretty quickly, so it may be best to just start with full-time staff from various departments and offices.” In addition to changing the dynamic, having three or more elected officials in a formal, planned conversation may

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**MELISSA ALLEN, DISTRICT MANAGER,
JOHN MARSHALL SOIL AND WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

constitute a “public meeting,” which places all sorts of different rules and expectations around the gathering.

The advice from these Fauquier leaders is sound. Their experiences suggest that prioritizing communication between departments, initiatives, and offices is productive.



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