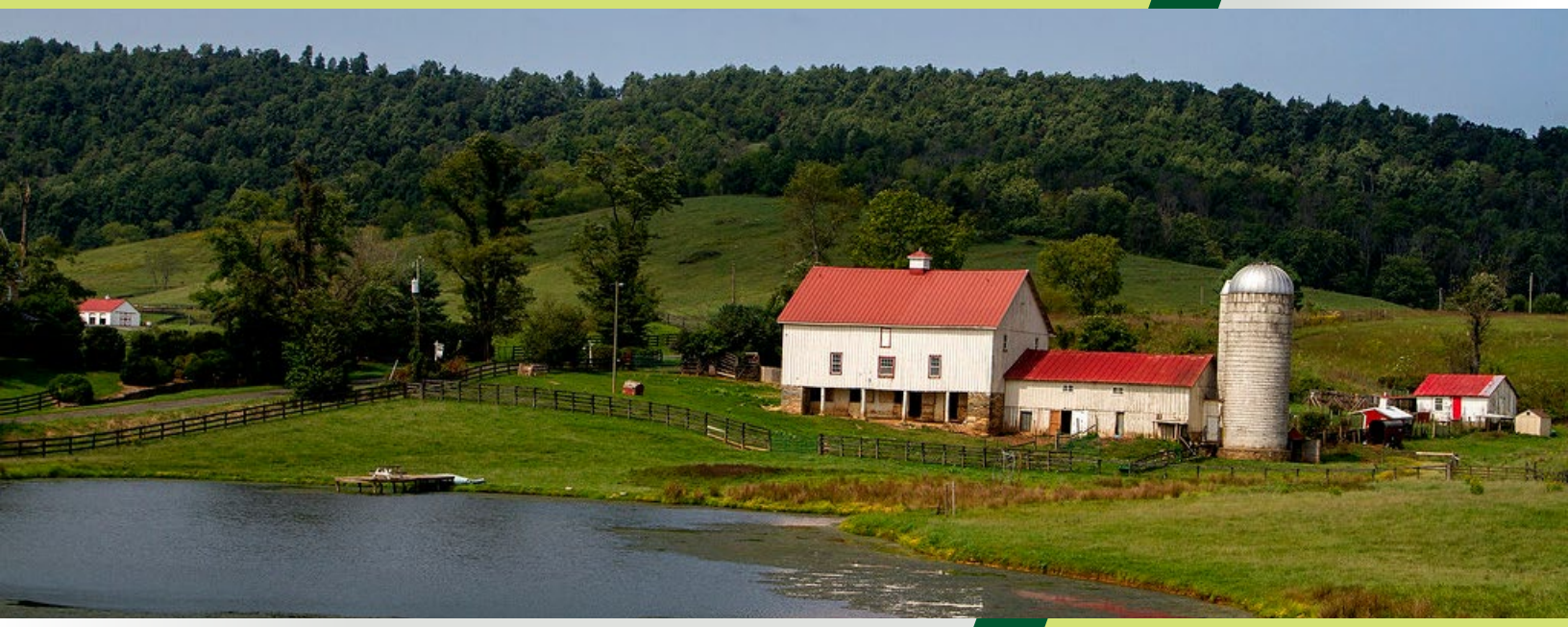
How to Plan for Agriculture



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Planning is a collaborative process to help people envision the future, make informed decisions, and create a roadmap to ensure their communities are places where they want to live, work, and play. State and local governments plan for many things to support community health, safety, and well-being.

States hold public planning authority. While they generally assign land use planning to local governments, they often share responsibility for functions like road maintenance. State and regional planning authorities create plans for specific sectors or cross-cutting issues like transportation and economic development.

Too often, communities plan *around* agriculture instead of *for* agriculture, treating it as open space "just waiting around to be developed to its highest and best use." But agriculture itself is a valuable land use (See the Why Plan for Agriculture in Virginia? fact sheet) providing communities with fresh, local food, environmental assets, economic opportunities, and cultural heritage.

Planning for agriculture is a process to ensure Virginia's farms thrive and continue to provide a wealth of public benefits. It can be included as part of a comprehensive plan or other planning process, or it can be pursued as a self-standing activity. Either way, it creates a road map to protect farmland, strengthen farm viability, and conserve agricultural resources.

Virginia Authority

Virginia is a strict Dillon Rule state, which means local government powers are limited to those granted to them by the state legislature. One of these powers is planning.

The state legislature requires local governments to create and adopt comprehensive (comp) plans to guide land use decisions, transportation, and public investments. It further requires them to review their comp plans at least once every five years to determine if they need to be amended.

The Commonwealth is divided into 21 planning districts which are created by local governments and overseen by a Planning District Commission (PDC). PDCs are a political subdivision chartered under the Regional Cooperation Act to facilitate regional action. They support local planning, collect data, and conduct studies on issues of regional significance. They also create regional plans in cooperation with local governments, businesses, citizen organizations, and other interested parties. The Virginia Association

of Planning District Commissions (VAPDC) is comprised of and promotes coordination and cooperation between the PDCs and regional councils. It brings diverse resources together at the regional level in partnership with local, state, and federal entities to strengthen regions and the Commonwealth.

Virginia's constitution established four types of local governments: cities, towns, counties, and regional governments, along with a variety of inter-local, multi-local, and sub-state regional arrangements and entities including planning districts. Thus, planning occurs at many jurisdictional levels and addresses many types of issues—from land use and transportation to hazard mitigation and emergency management. Since none of these address agriculture as a priority, planning for agriculture is a way to recognize and support the values agriculture brings to a community.

How to Plan *for* Agriculture

The Why Plan for Agriculture? document outlines reasons to plan for agriculture. A holistic plan for agriculture includes three main parts: Retaining and protecting farmland, conserving natural resources, and supporting agricultural economic viability. It is comprehensive—like a comprehensive land use plan. That said, communities sometimes focus on one of the three elements, like the farmland protection part of the plan.

The planning practices which follow are based on several guiding principles. To start, there is no silver bullet: Virginia's population is growing and increasingly diverse[1] with 8.6 million people living on nearly 40,000 square miles.[2] Its agricultural communities also are very diverse and vary from region to region. This means each community or planning district will have different priorities and needs. One size will not fit all—effective plans are tailored to meet each community's unique needs and priorities. Thus, community engagement is essential. Engage early, often, and throughout the process.

Along with these principles, it is important to identify and build on existing assets—from natural resources and built infrastructure to financial and social capital. Asset-based strategies marshal existing resources to create opportunities and respond to needs. Further, be sure to use reliable data to inform decisions and to plan with implementation in mind. Nobody wants to go through a planning process only to have the final plan sit on a shelf collecting dust!

Planning Practices

As the diagram above shows, community engagement is at the heart of a successful planning process. It is both a principle and a practice.

Beyond community engagement, several main steps lead to plans, policies, and programs that reflect a community's priorities and result in desired outcomes: Assess conditions and trends; Envision the future; Generate recommendations; Develop and vet the plan; Implement actions; Evaluate progress and adjust tactics if necessary. The process is iterative and does not have to follow a specific order. This is why the diagram is a spiral rather than a line. But some steps need to be taken before others, even if they are returned to later.

ENGAGE

Meaningful engagement takes creativity and commitment to reflect on the who, what, when, where, and how of public participation. Meet people where they are. For example, farmers' availability is often seasonal, affected by weather and the crops and/or livestock they raise. Plan meetings in places that are convenient to them, potentially

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in the early evening, or in the winter. It helps to create a database to manage relationships and a website to keep people informed and engaged throughout the process.

Various approaches are used to solicit input, share information, and engage community members. *Surveys* are a good way to gather basic information. *Interviews, listening sessions,* and *focus groups* both relay and gather information. Deeper approaches to foster education, collaboration, and action include *public meetings, forums*, *charrettes*, and approaches like *World Café* which can be pursued together or independently. It is helpful to have at least three public meetings throughout the planning process to solicit input, generate recommendations, and share results.

ASSESS CONDITIONS AND TRENDS

Plans must be based on good data to illuminate trends and conditions, uncover assets, and address challenges. Federal data, like the Census of Agriculture, is widely available and reliable (See "Additional Resources") but often only updated every five or 10 years. Also, each source has its own definitions and collection methods, so combining data from different sources can be tricky. Local sources include existing community plans, tax maps and records, aerial photography, and Geographic Information System (GIS) data available through government entities, universities, and/or planning authorities. Land Grant Universities and Extension also can provide data and expertise.

Primary data can be gathered through surveys, interviews, and other engagement strategies. *Dot Poster Surveys* are a quick, accessible, and inexpensive way to collect information in public settings. Respondents use sticky dots to answer questions on a large poster board instead of filling out questionnaires or being interviewed.[3]

A *SWOT analysis* is an effective tool to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It can be used to further understanding of agricultural, business, population, and other conditions, identify issues, and inform community discussion. Other useful assessment tools include:

- *Asset mapping* to identify agricultural resources such as the locations of farms, markets, processing infrastructure, and waste disposal.
- *Cost of Community Services* studies to measure fiscal impacts of different land uses, including agriculture.
- *Economic impact assessments* to evaluate the total economic impacts of agricultural production, including indirect and induced effects.

ENVISION A DESIRED FUTURE

Another early and essential step is to bring stakeholders together to create an aspirational vision of the future. Visioning is a creative, judgment-free process. Common approaches include brainstorming ideas for participants to prioritize to reach agreement, small groups working together to create a statement, and individuals writing their own visions on sticky notes and posting on a wall. Individual or small group statements can be combined into a vision that reflects the whole community's desires.

Scenario planning is a more involved approach to visioning. It allows people to develop alternative visions based upon differing conditions. *Appreciative Inquiry* is an asset-based approach that uses questions and dialogue to help participants generate positive ideas. It also can be used as part of a SWOT analysis.

GENERATE GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACHIEVE THEM

Where visioning is broad and aspirational, setting goals and objectives is specific. Communities often strive to set "SMART" goals, which are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**cceptable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound. An example could be to protect 25 percent of the community's prime farmland by 2035. Objectives might state metrics for achieving this using different policy or program tools.

Once the community has agreed on a vision, assessed its situation, and drafted goals, it can propose strategies and specific actions to achieve them. This often requires further research and engagement to ensure the actions proposed achieve their goals to build a base of support for implementation. Effective plans tie recommendations to goals and objectives, so actions are tailored to achieve a stated priority. They consider cost and resource availability and include low hanging fruit—easy wins and short-term strategies—as well as more complex mid- and long-term strategies. Actions are most likely to be implemented if they have a timeline, assigned roles and responsibilities, and accountability measures.

DEVELOP AND VET THE PLAN

Basic elements of a plan for agriculture include an assessment of trends and conditions, a description of assets, maps, the vision, goals and objectives the community set, as well as the recommended strategies and actions to retain and protect farmland, advance conservation practices, and promote agricultural viability. They describe the planning process, who was involved, and appendices that report on public input.

Once drafted, it is important to vet the draft with the community and then integrate their feedback. Make sure to keep people informed of the timeline for needed approvals and how and when the final plan will be made available.

IMPLEMENT ACTIONS

A plan is only as good as strategies and follow-up actions taken to achieve its vision and goals. Implementation includes policy changes like new or revised zoning ordinances, new or strengthened programs to support agriculture, and public investment in needed infrastructure or personnel.

EVALUATE PROGRESS, ADJUST TACTICS

Implementation happens over time, so it is important to develop metrics to gauge progress.

These can be used to assess results and adjust tactics, if needed, to achieve the community's vision and goals. Indicators can be based on the plan's initial metrics but also can be revised if new information is useful or becomes available.

To Learn More

- American Farmland Trust: "About Planning for Agriculture"
- Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions: "Introduction to PDCs"
- World Cafe: "The World Cafe Method"
- American Farmland Trust: "Cost of Community Services Studies"
- Extension Foundation: "Engaging Communities through Issues Forums: A How-To Guide for Onsite and Online Community Engagement"
- Yellow Wood Associates: "You Get What You Measure"
- University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension: "A Paradigm for Community Development: The Floras' Community Capitals"

NOTES

1 US Census Bureau, Population Change, 2020, accessed 10/7/2024, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/virginia-population-change-between-census-decade.html

2 US Census Bureau, State of Virginia Profile, 2020. Accessed 10/7/24, https://data.census.gov/profile/Virginia?g=040XX00US51

3 Larry Lev and Garry Stephenson, "Dot Posters: A Practical Alternative to Written Questionnaires and Oral Interviews," *Journal of Extension*, Tools of the Trade, 37, no. 5 (October 1999), https://archives.joe.org/joe/1999october/tt1.php.