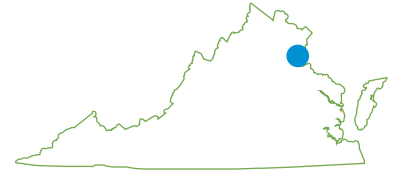


Profile: Stafford County



Protecting Farmland through a Purchase of Development Rights Program

Stafford County has experienced massive population growth and real estate development in recent decades. That growth has brought some economic opportunity, but much of it has come at the expense of the county's agricultural land. Recognizing the threats posed to the county's farmland and wanting to support the economic viability of farm families, Stafford County leaders began strategizing ways to protect agricultural land in the mid-2000s. They ultimately adopted a Purchase of Development Rights program to help ensure farming can remain in the county into the future, and their work in this space continues today.



STAFFORD COUNTY, VA

Situation

Stafford County is between Richmond and Washington, D.C. The county is bisected by Interstate 95, making it easy to drive to the Commonwealth's capital and the nation's capital. In the last three decades, the county has experienced explosive growth, driven largely by its location and the number of commuters who want to live there. The population grew by 84 percent between 2000 and 2024, increasing from [roughly 92,000 people to 169,000 people](#). This growth has led to opportunity—but it has also brought challenges.

Despite this growth, agriculture is still important to Stafford's economy. As the county [states on their land conservation website](#), "Along with the benefits of growth comes the responsibility to protect the working farms that sustain us, the nature preserves that provide vital plant and wildlife habitat, and the historic homes and landscapes that honor and celebrate our past."

According to 2022 Census of Agriculture data, there are [more than 200 farms within the county](#). Most of them are small-scale, operating on less than 50 acres, and more than 41 percent of the county's farmers have been farming for ten years or less.

These farms and farmers have seen tremendous real estate development pressure from the county's growth. "We've had a lot of development in the last 20 years," says Kathy Baker, the county's Assistant Director of Planning and Zoning. "We're really losing a lot of farmland and open space out on the eastern and western sides of the county. There aren't that many big parcels of land left." The Census of Agriculture shows that the county's "land in farms" declined by 56 percent between 2002–2022, from more than 26,000 acres to less than 12,000. This loss cannot be entirely contributed to development, but its scale is worth noting.

County leaders started paying more attention to these trends in the early 2000s. They began to consider the impacts that farmland conversion would have on local food systems, wildlife habitat, scenic value, and more. Around that time, they decided to address farmland loss head-on. They had prioritized conservation in their comprehensive plan but felt compelled to do more.

Approach

In the mid-2000s, leaders appointed an agricultural commission, whose main goal at the time was to [strategize ways to preserve working farmland](#). That commission studied the issue from many angles and suggested creating a [Purchase of Development Rights \(PDR\)](#) program, sometimes called a [Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement program](#), that would focus its efforts on conserving farmland, a move inspired partly by a model PDR ordinance that the state released in 2005.

A PDR program uses funding—often a combination of local dollars and state and/or federal matching funds—to buy development rights from farmers and landowners.

In exchange for placing a permanent legal restriction, known as a [conservation easement](#), on the property to ensure that it remains open space forever, landowners are compensated for the fair market value of their development rights. The program then “stewards” the property, checking it once per year to ensure that the conservation easement is being upheld. A PDR program signifies meaningful investment in the agricultural community.

In 2006, the [county issued some limited seed money](#) from their general fund and prompted the program’s new leaders to see if any farmers would be interested in participating, formally establishing the program in 2007. Immediately, several farmers submitted applications, and the PDR program closed its first farmland protection project in 2009.

Starting in 2011, the county decided to allocate regular funding from a dedicated source to support the PDR efforts, using rollback tax excess from the Land Use Program. They have also pursued matching funds—specifically from the Virginia Department of Agriculture



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and Consumer Services and the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation and, on occasion, federal sources—which helps bring outside money into the county’s agricultural community.

Further, they have solidified ranking criteria to evaluate applications. These criteria include five categories—in order of significance: Quality of Parcel (productive capability), Likelihood of Development, Circumstances Supporting Agriculture, Environmental and Aesthetic Quality, and Culture Resources—that are explicitly communicated in the [county legal code](#).

Outcomes

Since that first transaction in 2009, the [Stafford County PDR program](#) has permanently protected over a dozen farms through the PDR program, totaling nearly 1,200 acres. These farms, which are [described briefly on the county’s website](#), have featured a variety of production types—from cattle and vegetables to hay and commodity crops—and range in size, from less than 40 acres to more than 200 acres. [Two new projects](#) were just finalized in Spring 2025. Several more are in the queue and expected to be finalized in the coming years.

Baker, who oversees the program, is quick to point out that the benefits of participating in Stafford’s PDR program extend beyond farmland protection. For some of the farmers she has worked with, especially those described as “land rich and cash poor,” the program has enhanced their economic viability.

One farmer who participated in the program put the influx of cash toward buying more land and expanding their farm operation, keeping more land in agriculture. Others have used the proceeds to pay off mortgages or settle family ownership and title issues, such as heirs’ property. Some, Baker shares, “have been able to build a

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DEUNTAY DIGGS,
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS CHAIRMAN



STAFFORD COUNTY, VA

new agricultural building or get more equipment to improve their farm. We have really seen it help their economic viability. It has been different for just about every property owner.”

According to Baker and program participants, the PDR program has been a success, achieving wins for conservation and for the local agricultural economy. Elected leaders have praised the program, too. [In an April 2025 article](#) detailing recent conservation successes, Board of Supervisors Chairman Deuntay Diggs said, “Through PDR and other land preservation tools, Stafford continues to protect our working farms, the nature preserves providing animal and plant habitats, and the historic homes and landscapes

that honor our past.” Stafford’s PDR program is not the largest or most active in Virginia, but its efforts and vision have benefited the community.

Lessons Learned

In Stafford County, securing consistent, adequate funding, both from local and non-local match sources, has been a frequent obstacle. For one, conservation easements can be expensive, sometimes costing hundreds of thousands of dollars for just one project. For another, leaders need to constantly see that there is a return on investment, but it can be challenging to show successes without first having stable funds. That dynamic can lead to windows of time where funding is tight. Rollback funds from the Land Use Program have been helpful, but demand for the PDR programs often outstrips financial capacity.

Staff capacity has been an issue, too, especially as the program’s popularity has increased. PDR projects take time and energy to move from start to finish, and

sometimes—as in Stafford’s case—there may only be one person spending a substantial amount of time on the effort.

At various points in the program’s history, especially after the initial surge of interest, conducting education and outreach has also been a struggle. Again, these sorts of efforts take staff time and resources. But Stafford County has recently adopted a creative solution to this challenge, teaming up with the [Northern Virginia Conservation Trust](#) to devote a full-time staff person to working in the county. The county pays half of that employee’s salary and NVCT pays the other half, a unique public-private partnership that results in a conservation win for the entire community. It is in part this partnership that has led to the high number of pending projects and helped to “broaden the county’s overall land protection program,” says Baker.

For other county leaders considering adopting a Purchase of Development Rights program in their own communities, Baker has some helpful reflections. First, she says, urging patience, “It takes time.” Programs like this do not happen overnight. Second, partnerships—whether formal or informal—can be immensely helpful. Teaming up with other county offices, nonprofit groups, land trusts, and/or conservation agencies can build momentum and deliver results. And finally, starting a PDR program takes a lot of work, and you need a champion for the cause. “It is going to take someone who really, really wants to do it and who can



make the case to other local officials,” she continues. That is especially true when efforts hit a roadblock, which will inevitably happen. It is helpful to have vocal, respected advocates who are in visible leadership roles, such as county administrators, supervisors, planning directors, or other well-known officials. Securing the support of local farmers and the agricultural community is paramount as well.

Thinking about the impact of Stafford’s program, Baker believes the results are worth the work. “To me, it’s about the con-

nection that a lot of these people have to the land. [It is about] being able to help them continue holding onto that land and farm and continue doing what they love.”

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**KATHY BAKER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF
PLANNING AND ZONING**