

PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE IN VIRGINIA



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The “Planning for Agriculture in Virginia Toolkit” is a guide to help communities protect their farmland, sustain agriculture, and improve environmental outcomes. Informed by in-depth research and grounded in extensive stakeholder engagement and national expertise, the toolkit offers a variety of resources—from fact sheets and profiles to presentation slides and geospatial data—to support communities who want to ensure a healthy and prosperous future for agriculture.

From the Chesapeake Bay to the Blue Ridge Mountains, nearly 40,000 farms support Virginia agriculture and the abundant economic, environmental, and cultural benefits it provides. But Virginia’s farms face an uncertain future. Escalating land values, supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, volatile weather, and other forces threaten farmers’ livelihoods and the agricultural landscapes they maintain. This toolkit is meant to help local leaders, planners, conservationists, concerned citizens, and farmers ensure there is a vibrant future for agriculture.

American Farmland Trust offers our deepest thanks to the following advisory committee members who gave so much time, energy, and insight to this effort.

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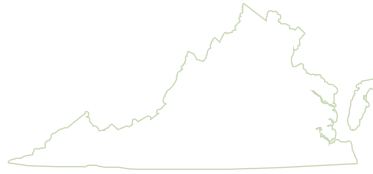
ABOUT AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

American Farmland Trust is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on protecting the land, promoting regenerative agricultural practices, and supporting farmers and ranchers. American Farmland Trust launched the national conservation agriculture movement and raises public awareness through

our No Farms No Food® campaign. Since 1980, American Farmland Trust has supported hundreds of thousands of farmers and ranchers by working with partners to permanently protect nearly eight million acres of U.S. agricultural land and by advancing environmentally sound farming practices on millions more.

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PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE IN VIRGINIA



The Planning for Agriculture in Virginia Toolkit helps local leaders, planners, and citizens support the future of agriculture—Virginia’s leading private industry. It offers guidance through fact sheets, profiles, data and supporting resources, and presentation slides. The toolkit explains why planning for agriculture matters and provides practical tools to protect farmland, strengthen farm viability, and promote conservation.

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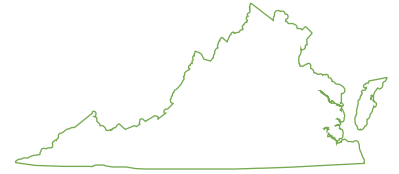
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Why Should a Community Plan for Agriculture?

Agriculture is Virginia's number one private industry, but it faces many challenges. Census of Agriculture data shows that the number of Virginia farms declined by 18 percent between 2012–2022—a loss of more than 7,000 small and midsized farms in only ten years. New farmers struggle to afford and access land, and aging farmers have challenges with succession planning. Profit margins are slim, and volatile weather patterns make production more difficult. Poorly planned growth and development are projected to convert 600,000–800,000 acres of farmland in the next two decades.

Despite these challenges, communities can take action to cultivate a sustainable and resilient future for agriculture, one that holistically values all that farming offers to the Commonwealth. Planning for agriculture offers a hopeful path forward, one rooted in thoughtful and intentional strategies. This process empowers communities to take their future into their own hands to advance a shared vision for agricultural land use, stewardship, and economic development. With this approach, local farms and the communities that support them can flourish.

Why Plan for Agriculture?



AUGUSTA COUNTY, VA (USDA/BOB NICHOLS)

From the Chesapeake Bay to the Blue Ridge Mountains, nearly 40,000 farms on over 7 million acres sustain Virginia's abundant agrarian landscape. The Commonwealth's largest private industry, agriculture sustains a wealth of economic, environmental, and cultural benefits. It provides food, fiber, and other basic needs. It supports fiscal balance. It boosts recreation and tourism. And it connects us to our history.

The Founding Fathers praised small farms for building a stronger and more independent nation. They promoted sound stewardship by rotating crops and using compost to improve soil health and increase production. But today, Virginia's farms are under threat, challenged by competition for land and markets and the uncertainties of volatile weather. "Planning for agriculture" is a way communities can leverage their rural and agricultural assets to prosper and thrive.

Agriculture is an Economic Engine

Agriculture is the cornerstone of Virginia's economy. Among the nation's most diverse farming sectors, its 38,995 farms produced a market value of nearly \$5.5 billion in 2022. Leading the way are its top three

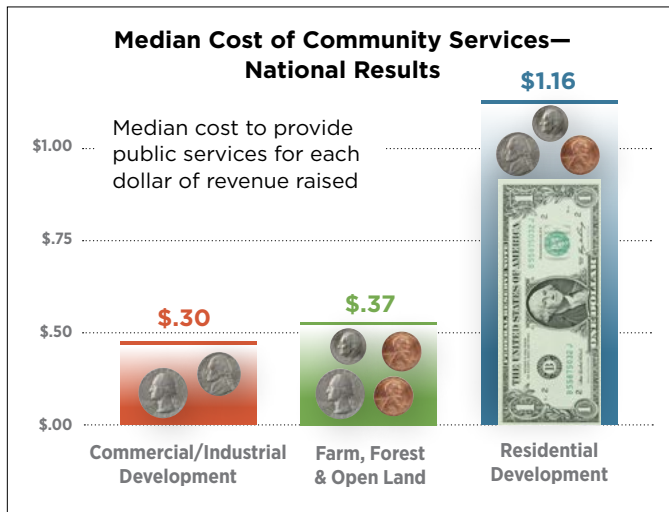
commodities: broilers with \$1.6B of farm cash receipts, cattle and calves with \$482M, and turkeys with \$454M.¹

Including the added value of goods and services, agriculture has a total annual economic impact of over \$80 billion—about 7.4% of Virginia's GDP. It supports over 380,000 jobs from the farms themselves and the support businesses that process, market, and distribute farm products.² In addition, for every dollar invested on the ground, federal conservation dollars added value of about \$1.10 to Virginia's economy.³ And a study of the total economic activity stimulated by Virginia's agritourism sector estimated it at approximately \$2.2 billion.⁴

As the Commonwealth's largest private industry, the health of Virginia's cities, counties, and towns depends on a thriving agricultural economy.

Farmland Supports the Local Tax Base

Virginia's farmland supports the local tax base. On average across seven counties, every dollar of property tax revenue generated by working and open lands required only 42 cents back in community services, whereas a dollar from residential development required \$1.20 back in services.



These findings are consistent with those from more than 150 Cost of Community Service Studies (COCS) from across the country that find farmland contributes more property tax revenue than it receives back in public services, even when land is enrolled in Use Assessment programs. In contrast, residential development costs more in services than it provides in revenues. Like commercial/industrial land uses, farmland helps balance community coffers and keep property taxes down.

Farmland is an Essential Natural Resource

Virginia's 7.3 million acres of farmland⁵ are an essential natural resource. They absorb and filter stormwater and help defend against a changing climate. A California study found that farmland emits 58–70 times fewer greenhouse gases (GHGs) per acre than developed land;⁶ in New York, a similar study found that farmland emits 66 times fewer GHGs per acre than developed land.⁷

Diversified farming systems and conservation practices offer many ecological benefits—from soil fertility and pollination to wildlife habitat, clean drinking water and fire suppression. In short, well-managed farmland enhances biodiversity without diminishing yields.^{8 9}

Farming is Important to Virginia's History and Character

Farms and farmers have had an indelible impact on local communities.

Beyond economics, they provide scenic landscapes and sustain rural culture. Whether in the mountains of Southwest Virginia, the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley, the rich soils of the Tidewater area, or the Piedmont's fertile plateaus, they are integral to Virginia's character and history.

American democracy was founded on the principal that people can own property and make a living from the land. From Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—the nation's "founding farmers" who called Virginia home—to the diverse agrarians who farm today, agriculture is the foundation of our food systems and a hallmark of distinctive rural landscapes. Vital to Virginia's heritage, it is a source of pride for its people and a legacy to pass on to future generations.



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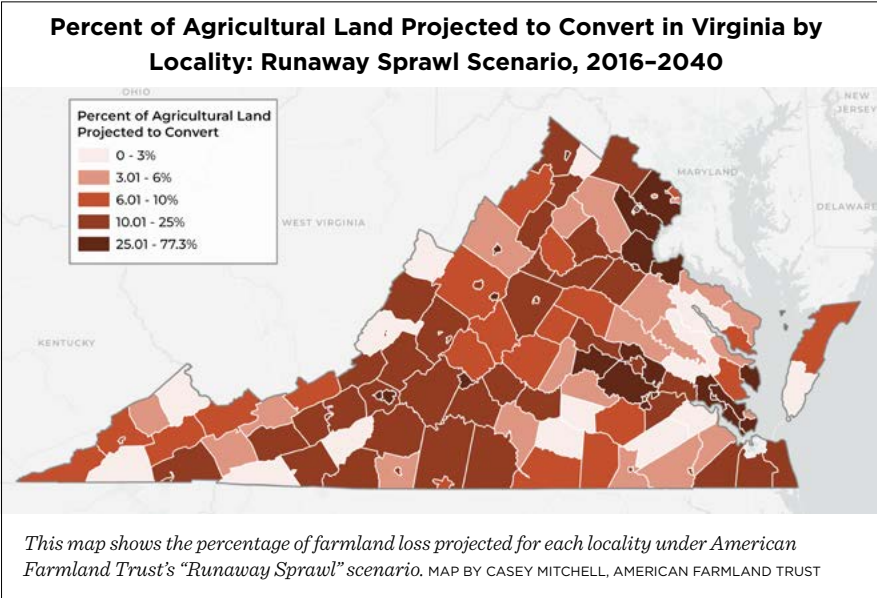


CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Virginia’s Agriculture is Under Threat

Virginia agriculture faces an uncertain future. The state lost 18% of its farms between 2012 and 2022; land in farms fell by 1 million acres.¹⁰ While it is unclear what happened to all this farmland, what is known is that the remaining farms are threatened by high land values and real estate development, volatile markets and weather, labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and consolidation both within agriculture and agricultural markets.

According to AFT research, Virginia ranks sixth nationally in the percentage of farmland converted to low density residential development—and 11th for overall farmland conversion. Nearly half of the conversion occurred on the state’s best quality farmland.¹¹ Beyond scattered, large lot housing development, utility scale solar, warehouses, and data centers are devouring farmland. Dubbed “Data Center Alley,” Northern Virginia is the nation’s largest hub with over 100 data centers which house hardware used to store, process, manage, and deliver large amounts of data. As more people, businesses, and government agencies use Artificial Intelligence and adopt digital technologies, the need for data centers will continue to grow. Without thoughtful planning, these various pressures will drive run-away sprawl and the conversion of



another 836,200 acres by 2040. But with better planning and farmland protection, that number could be reduced by more than half a million acres.¹²

Given these pressures, farm real estate values are rising fast—up 10.4% from 2023 to 2024¹³ and 35.4% since 2014.¹⁴ This makes it hard for young and beginning farmers to secure land and enter the field. With 40% of Virginia’s farmers age 65 and older, and only 8% under age 35, this raises urgent questions about who will farm in the future. While the number of beginning farmers increased almost 8% from 2017, their average age was 48.6—younger than the average of all farmers, but still middle-aged.¹⁵

Change in Market Value from 2017 to 2022

MARKET VALUE OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS SOLD AND GOVERNMENT PAYMENTS				
ECONOMIC CLASS	NUMBER OF OPERATIONS 2022	NUMBER OF OPERATIONS 2017	CHANGE	
Less than \$25,000	28,879	33,038	-14%	
\$25,00–\$50,000	3,466	3,524	-2%	
\$50,000–\$99,999	2,110	2,182	-3%	
\$100,000–\$249,000	1,552	1,723	-11%	
\$250,000–\$499,999	879	972	-11%	
\$500,000–\$999,999	811	876	-8%	
\$1,000,000–\$2,499,999	796	677		15%
\$2,500,000–\$4,999,999	351	162		54%
\$5,000,000 or more	151	71		53%
Total	38,995	43,225	-11%	

Data derived from the 2022 Census of Agriculture—State Data, Table 2: Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold Including Food Marketing Practices and Value-Added Products: 2022 and 2017.

Farm economics are tough. For example, on average, farmers only receive \$0.16 of every consumer dollar spent on food.¹⁶ Most of Virginia's farms are small and rely on off-farm income, but even mid-sized farms are struggling. The only farms that are increasing are those with \$1 million or more in market value—especially those with \$2.5 million or more.

The threat to small commercial and mid-sized farms is of particular concern. Representing the vast majority of Virginia's farms, they buy local inputs and equipment and hire local people, supporting local economies. Often the backbone of rural communities, they are associated with civic engagement and more equitable income distribution.¹⁷ And they are more likely to supply food for their communities.¹⁸ Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call. For the first time in a generation, American consumers experienced food shortages. Local and regional food systems pivoted quickly to fill gaps, offering communities a hedge against global supply chain disruptions.^{19 20 21}

Finally, Virginia agriculture is already experiencing the effects of an increasingly volatile climate. Farmers are grappling with more intense rainfall and flooding on one hand and more sustained heat and droughts on the other. These trends put pressure on livestock, affect farmers and farm workers, and reduce crop yields. In addition, sea levels are rising faster than in the past, threatening coastal communities, especially Hampton Roads.^{22 23}

Planning for agriculture can address these threats. With community support, vision, and a proactive game plan, Virginia's vital agricultural sector can meet the challenges of the 21st century and continue to provide a wide range of benefits to its people and communities.

Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Planning is a process to create a road map for actions and decisions to achieve a future vision. In the public sector, planning is a profession and practice to optimize the health, safety, and wellbeing of people in communities. It occurs at many levels, from cities and towns to counties, states, and regions. And it encompasses a wide range of specialties: from land use, transportation, and housing to economic development, hazard mitigation,



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and historic preservation, among many others.

Planning for agriculture is a way to sustain Virginia's farms, farmers, and farmland and help them thrive. Addressed either as a stand-alone activity or as an element in other kinds of plans, it offers a path forward to retain and protect farmland, strengthen agricultural viability, and conserve natural resources. Toward these ends, it relies on the active participation of the people it most affects—especially farmers. (See *How to Plan for Agriculture in Virginia*.)

Plans for agriculture are based on a community's shared vision for the future.

They can steer new real estate development away from working farms, reduce regulatory barriers, identify market opportunities and infrastructure needs, and protect soil and water. They can also respond to the larger social, economic, and environmental issues which affect agriculture. These issues are connected and complex, so it is important to align planning for agriculture with other planning efforts.

NOTES

For a list of references, [click here](#).

To Learn More

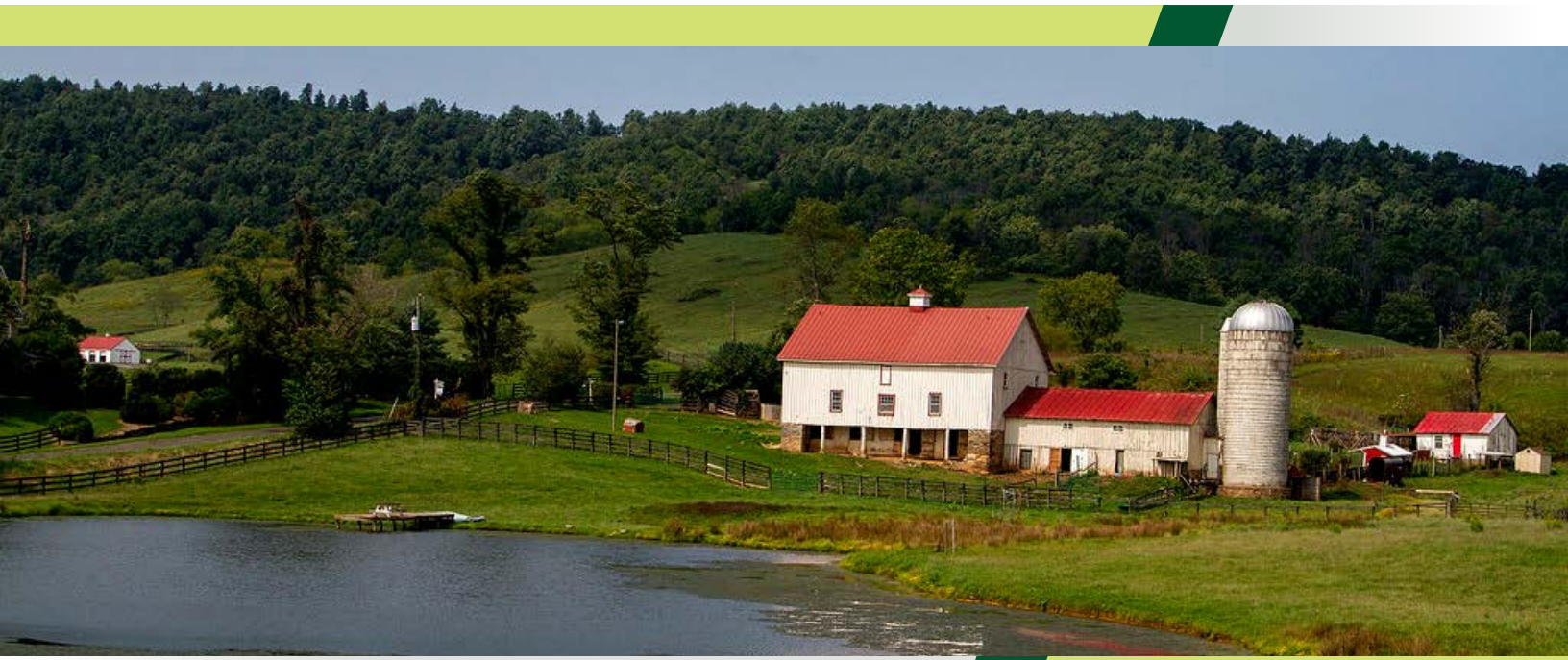
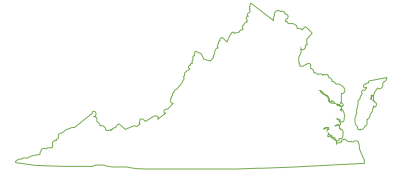
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- › [American Farmland Trust: "About Planning for Agriculture"](#)
- › [Julia Freedgood, *Planning Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems: From Soil to Soil*](#)
- › [UVA Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service: "The Economic Impact of Agriculture and Forest Industries in Virginia"](#)
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- › [American Farmland Trust: "Regenerate Virginia"](#)

How Can a Community Plan for Agriculture?

In Virginia, local governments control land use and other planning-related decisions in their jurisdictions. This includes planning for agriculture, whether as a stand-alone plan or as a component of a comprehensive, economic development, or other local plan.

Planning for agriculture is an iterative process to engage farmers, local leaders, planners, and concerned community members in developing a shared vision and goals. Guided by public input and grounded in research, the process results in a game plan that can be adjusted and changed over time. Plans for agriculture are not static documents that gather dust on shelves. Instead, they are strategic, implementable plans that help communities create the conditions for agriculture to thrive.

How to Plan for Agriculture



USDA-NRCS/JOHN MARKON

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 diverse¹ 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



USDA/BOB NICHOLS

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.

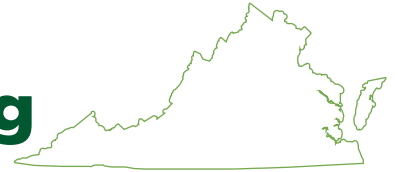
To Learn More

- › [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”](#)
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Funding Support for Planning for Agriculture



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Many organizations and foundations in the nonprofit, government, and quasi-governmental spheres support conservation, land use, and economic development planning. Through grant programs, some of these entities provide financial resources that make it possible for local governments to plan for agriculture. Planning takes time and expertise, and it requires personnel and other resources. Communities of all sizes and in all geographic areas benefit from grant funding that allows them both to support and to expand the scope and depth of their planning process. Foundations, commissions, and organizations that offer financial support and offer technical assistance can help localities advance robust planning efforts.



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Virginia has several entities that provide funding related to planning for agriculture. Some programs concentrate on specific geographies, while others are open to applicants from across the state. Different entities have different requirements, priorities, and processes, so it can be helpful to conduct research to see which opportunities are most relevant to a particular community goal.

Sources of Support

A variety of organizations offer grant programs that can support local governments in a planning for agriculture effort. Most funding entities offer extensive information on their websites about each of their programs, and many welcome inquiries and questions from interested applicants. Some host informational webinars in advance of an application's due date, and some may even conduct individual outreach to inform relevant parties about opportunities. Whatever the case, it's worth researching these opportunities and understanding all the benefits and expectations. It's also worth thinking strategically about how you can align your own community's goals and visions with the mission of the funder, giving your proposal a better chance at success.

Below are a handful of entities that offer financial support to local governments that would like to begin or expand a planning for agriculture initiative. These entities are a strong place to start for communities that want to gain support for their planning for agriculture work.

The Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission

operates several programs that provide grant or loan funds to accomplish specific economic revitalization objectives. All programs require dollar-for-dollar matching funds. The Commission's service area includes 40 tobacco-dependent localities in Southern and Southwest Virginia. Local governments and nonprofits serving those localities are eligible to apply to the Commission's grant and loan programs for projects that will enhance the economic growth and development of the region. <https://revitalizeva.org/>



The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC)

was created by the 2008 U.S. Farm Bill. The concept was first introduced by university researchers working on rural development issues in 1980 at Tuskegee University's Annual Professional Agricultural Worker's Conference for 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant Universities. Working across seven states, SCRC invests in the region's economic future through a grant program, publishing research, and income-producing learning. The SCRC works across 100 counties or county-equivalents in Virginia, mostly in the eastern half of the Commonwealth. <https://scrc.gov/>



The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

is an economic development partnership entity of the federal government and 13 state governments focusing on 423 counties across the Appalachian Region. ARC's mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia. The ARC operates mostly in the western half of Virginia. <https://www.arc.gov/>



The National Fish and Wildlife Federation (NFWF)

offers the Chesapeake Small Watershed Grants (SWG) Program, which is delivered in partnership with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Chesapeake Bay Program. This partnership promotes voluntary, community-based efforts to protect and restore the diverse and vital habitats of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributary rivers and streams. The SWG program's Planning and Technical Assistance Grants offer up to \$150,000 for projects that enhance local capacity to implement future on the ground actions that enhance water quality and advance community-based assessment planning, design, and other technical assistance-oriented activities. <https://www.nfwf.org/programs/chesapeake-small-watershed-grants>



The Chesapeake Bay Program

is a unique regional partnership that has led and directed the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay since 1983. The Program and its partners offer multiple grant opportunities to help fund restoration projects of all sizes across the Chesapeake watershed, which covers roughly 60 percent of Virginia. <https://www.chesapeakebay.net/what/grants>



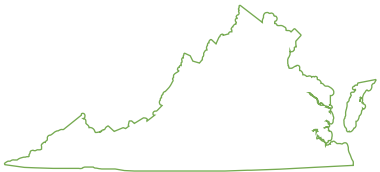
The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)

provides funding to support planning projects through their Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) grant. The program awards matching grants of up to \$20,000 for a single locality application or \$35,000 for a multi-locality application. The Planning Grant program requires a 1:1 match, but reduced match requirements are available for economically distressed localities. <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/agriculture-afid-planning-grants.shtml>



Is Your Community Farm Friendly?

A Checklist to Gauge Local Support for Agriculture in Your Community



DOES YOUR COMMUNITY...

Protect farmland and promote thoughtful growth

...address agriculture in your comprehensive plan and/or other community plans?	YES	NO
...support agricultural and forestal districts?	YES	NO
...allow use-value assessment?	YES	NO
...purchase development rights on farmland?	YES	NO
...allow transfer of development rights?	YES	NO
...mitigate the impacts of utility-scale solar siting on farmland?	YES	NO
...have zoning that prioritizes agriculture and guides things like setbacks and buffers?	YES	NO
...have urban development areas?	YES	NO

Support agricultural viability

...incentivize new and expanding agribusinesses?	YES	NO
...invest in community food or other processing facilities?	YES	NO
...have a “Buy Local” or other promotional campaign?	YES	NO
...allow retail marketing and/or value-added processing on farms?	YES	NO
...support farm to school or other institutions?	YES	NO
...have reasonable regulations regarding agritourism?	YES	NO
...encourage agricultural leadership so farmers are represented in local decision making?	YES	NO
...have clear guidance on things like accessory uses, farm labor housing, renewable energy, etc.?	YES	NO

Advance conservation agriculture

...support your local soil and water conservation district?	YES	NO
...have policies to encourage composting?	YES	NO
...guide solar siting on farmland?	YES	NO
...adopt an individually tailored program to protect water quality?	YES	NO
...provide resources to encourage on-farm conservation?	YES	NO

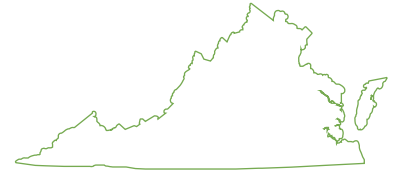
Adapted from New Hampshire Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture and UNH Cooperative Extension’s
“Is Your Town Farm Friendly? — A Checklist for Sustaining Rural Character”

Farmland Protection and Thoughtful Growth

Virginia's farmland is under threat. Between 2001 and 2016, 340,000 acres of Virginia's farmland were converted to development—enough land to generate \$164 million in annual agricultural revenue. Nearly a third of this land was “Nationally Significant,” meaning it was particularly well-suited for agricultural production. Most of the farmland loss came from poorly planned, low-density residential development, which may not be immediately visible but leads to suburbanization over time. Building on this work, AFT has now projected that 50 counties (or county-equivalents) could lose more than 10 percent of their farmland by 2040—with 18 counties projected to lose more than 10,000 acres each.

By protecting farmland and pursuing thoughtful growth, communities can retain productive acreage while accommodating other public needs, like affordable housing, efficient transportation, and renewable energy. The series of strategies and policies below offer various measures that local leaders can take to ensure a future for the foundation of agriculture: the land itself.

Comprehensive Planning



SARAH KOHRS

Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, which means local government authority is limited to the powers granted by the state legislature. Counties, cities, and towns need General Assembly authorization to enact most policies. However, the legislature has granted local governments control over land use decisions in their jurisdictions, including the authority for land use planning and zoning.

[Virginia State Code § 15.2-2223](#) calls for local planning commissions to prepare and recommend Comprehensive Plans (Comp Plans) to guide the physical development of territory in their jurisdictions. As such, decisions and plans vary widely between communities. Local governments must adopt Comp Plans, review them, and potentially update them every five years. They must include transportation as an element of their plans, but transportation decisions generally are made at the state level.

According to the Virginia State Code, [Comp Plans](#) direct “a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and

resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants, including the elderly and persons with disabilities.” Transportation plans must be included that accommodate multi-modal forms of transportation and consider how to align transportation infrastructure with affordable housing and accessible community services. They include analyses of conditions and trends, provide a long-term vision for the community, and can include more-detailed ordinances that define, direct, and regulate acceptable land uses. Comp Plans are the foundation for local policies like zoning and subdivision ordinances. However, because Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, they may not impose more limits on development than the General Assembly has authorized in the Code of Virginia. In short, local ordinances must be consistent with overall state law.

Virginia is divided into planning districts based on the community of interest among its counties, cities, and towns. Planning District Commissions (PDCs) are regional planning organizations that can facilitate coordination between jurisdictions on important regional issues—like transportation.



Cities, counties, and towns of 3,500 or more people are eligible for commission memberships. Virginia has 21 PDCs composed of elected officials and citizens appointed by local governments.

PDCs “encourage and facilitate local government cooperation and state-local cooperation in addressing on a regional basis problems of greater than local significance.” They are a political subdivision chartered under the [Regional Cooperation Act](#) by the local governments of each planning district.

PDCs serve as a liaison between local governments and state agencies, develop regional strategic plans, and assist in the development of substate plans. They also collect data, conduct studies, identify opportunities, implement services, provide technical assistance, and participate in statewide geographic information systems (GIS).

Their authority is limited: Their actions may not affect the powers and duties of local planning commissions, and they may not implement their plans and policies without the agreement of the member local governments. [The Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions \(VAPDC\)](#) supports PDCs and works to coordinate inter-PDC functions and to bring diverse resources together in partnership with local, state, and federal authorities.

Virginia has a complex web of county government classifications ranging from commissions and boards

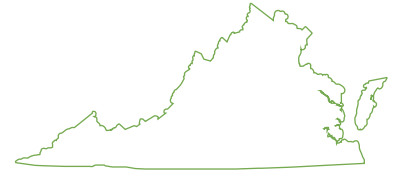


to executives and managers. Most cities have a council-manager or mayor-council form of government. These bodies have final say on land use decisions.

To Learn More

- › [American Planning Association, Virginia Chapter](#)
- › [Virginia Planning District Commissions](#)
- › [Resilient Virginia](#)
- › [The Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association: “Managing Growth and Development in Virginia: A Review of the Tools Available to Localities”](#)
- › [Virginia Department of Transportation: “Land Use and Development”](#)

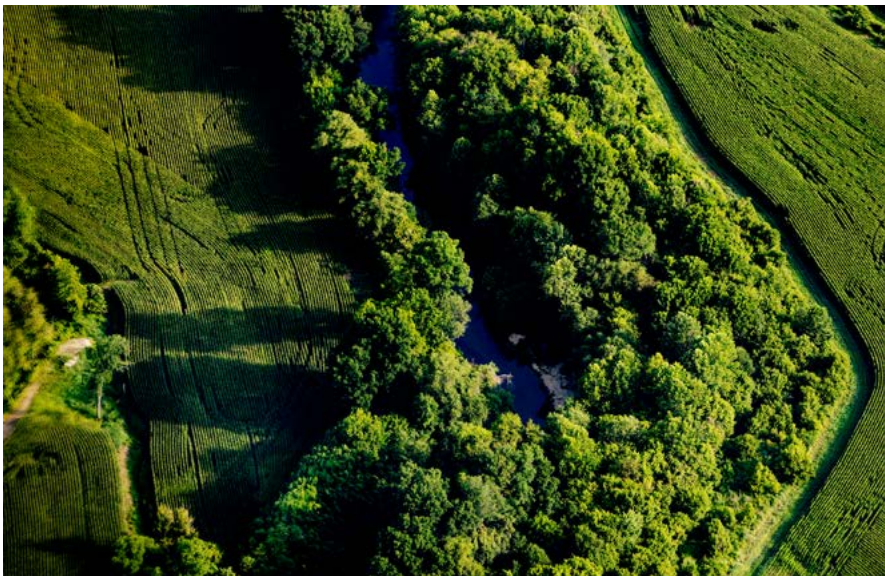
Agricultural and Forestal Districts



JACOB GILLEY

Agricultural district laws are a voluntary, incentive-based response to development pressure. Designed to limit non-farm development, they offer landowners a package of benefits to support farm viability and keep land in farming. The package varies from state to state. Many promote coordination with local planning and include provisions

to protect farmland like limiting eminent domain and special assessments. Many give farmers extra [Right to Farm](#) protections and require agricultural impact statements for public projects to protect farmers from having public facilities sited on their land. Some make enrolled landowners automatically eligible for [Use-Value Assessment](#), provide tax exemptions for farm buildings, and address other issues, like supporting sound conservation practices.



WILL PARSONS/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Fifteen states, including Virginia, have active programs with varying acreage requirements and terms of enrollment. According to American Farmland Trust research, they are found to be most effective when they align with local comprehensive plans, offer local governments a right of first refusal if the property comes up for sale, and improve eligibility and/or ranking in the state's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

The Virginia General Assembly passed the [Agricultural and Forestal Districts Act](#) in 1977 to conserve, protect, and improve the state's working lands to produce food and other farm and forest products, and to conserve and protect them as valued natural and ecological resources.

HOW IT WORKS

Eligible landowners may enroll some or all of their land in a district for between four and 10 years. They can renew their enrollment at the end of the term. They also may add parcels to an existing district at any time by following the process for creating a new district.

In exchange for enrollment, landowners receive use-value assessment, so their land is taxed at its current use, not the market value for its potential use. They also receive some protection from eminent domain. This includes a special public review process for land being acquired for things like roads and power lines, and for public spending on non-farm purposes. And they are protected from local laws that unreasonably restrict farm structures, farming, or forestry practices unless they are directly related to public health.

Each agricultural and forestal district must have a core minimum of at least 200 acres which can be comprised of one or several connected parcels. Once the district is established, landowners may enroll additional parcels of any size, so long as:

- › They are connected to a parcel that is already included in the district;
- › They are within 1-mile of the core; or
- › They are considered to be “agriculturally or forestally significant.”

Once enrolled in a district, landowners may subdivide and develop their property to provide for more intensive farm or forestal production, or to provide dwellings for their immediate family and/or anyone who earns a substantial part of their income from their operation. They

are not allowed to subdivide and then sell land to someone who is not a family member. No other development or subdivision is allowed. Local governments may review their districts and—with the recommendations of the local advisory committee and the planning commission—determine whether to terminate, modify or continue the district.

CONSIDERATIONS

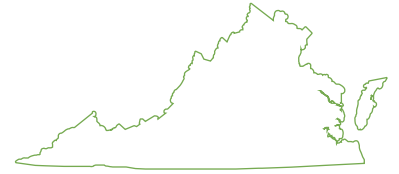
Agricultural districts provide agricultural landowners with safeguards to keep farmland in farming and farmers on the land. Districts must be recognized in comprehensive plans, local ordinances, and administrative decisions, and state and federal agencies must consider them when developing and implementing policy.

Agricultural and Forestal Districts are created as a partnership between landowners and their local governments. They are especially beneficial to landowners in localities that do not offer land use assessment, as enrollment in the district protects them from special taxes and local laws that unreasonably restrict their operations. Districts offer protection from development pressures as they discourage local policies that do not support agricultural, forestal or open space land uses.

To Learn More

- › [Code of Virginia 15.2-4300 Agricultural & Forestal Districts Act](#)
- › [ARCGIS Virginia Agricultural Forestal District Layer](#)
- › [Louisa County Example Resources](#)
 - › [Agricultural and Forestal District Instruction Sheet](#)
 - › [AFD Program Brochure](#)
 - › [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- › [VA Farm Bureau: “Agricultural and Forestal Districts FAQ”](#)

Cost of Community Services Studies



ANDRIY BLOCKHIN/ALAMY

Cost of Community Services (COCS) studies are a case study approach used to determine the fiscal contribution of local land uses. They are a snapshot in time of a local government's costs versus revenues for major land uses over the course of a recent tax year. Unlike typical fiscal analyses, COCS studies assess farmland and other working and open lands along with residential, commercial, and industrial development.

Virginia Studies Description

PURPOSE

COCS studies offer communities a straightforward and inexpensive way to measure the contribution of farmland and other open lands to the local tax base. They provide a baseline of current information to help local officials make informed land use and policy decisions, especially in communities where farmland is a significant land use, but which lack the resources to conduct a large fiscal impact analysis. They do not predict the impact of future growth.

HOW IT WORKS

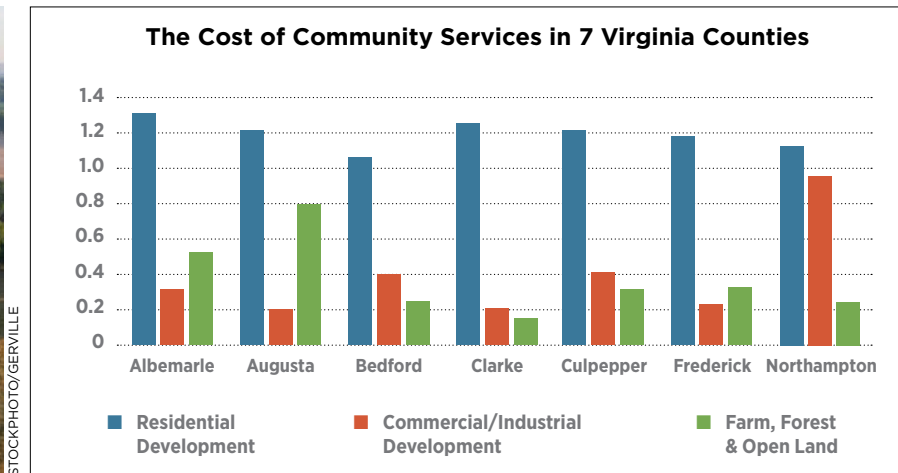
Virginia has a handful of county-level COCS studies that assessed the net fiscal impact of residential, commercial/



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

industrial, and working/open land uses in a recent fiscal year. Most defined agriculture using the state's [Use-Value Assessment](#) or [Agricultural Districts](#) program definition, although some studies solely focused on agricultural and forestry properties larger than 20 acres.

Property tax revenues are reported by land use, but other types of revenues are not. These include permits and fees, sales tax, taxes from special districts, state and/or federal aid, and so on. Researchers rely heavily on interviews with financial officers, department heads, and budget managers to provide financial data, answer



questions, and offer insights to categorize these additional revenues and how funds were spent on a land use basis. Typical expenses include general government, public safety, public works, road maintenance, schools, water and sewer use, and more.

The final step is to allocate each line item of the budget across the major land use categories. The rationale behind these allocations should be explained in an appendix or an accompanying report. Data is checked, rechecked—and often rechecked again for accuracy and consistency. Then ratios are calculated to compare total revenues to total expenditures in each category to show the net cost for each land use.

MEDIAN COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES—RESULTS

Farmland supports the local tax base. Across seven Virginia counties, every dollar of property tax revenue generated by working and open lands required 42 cents back in community services. Like commercial and industrial development, the property taxes from working farms help to offset the deficit from residential development, which required \$1.20 back in services.

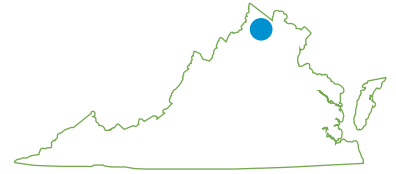
CONSIDERATIONS

COCS studies are a relatively quick and inexpensive way for community leaders to assess the fiscal contributions of working lands to local coffers. They are a snapshot in time of the public sector costs of a community's major

land uses, but do not predict the impacts of future land use decisions and do not assess the total economic benefits of any given land use. They tend to be most useful in agricultural communities that are experiencing development pressure and can help change public perception about the importance of policies like Use-Value Assessment. To see how one Virginia County pursued a COCS study, see [“Understanding the Fiscal Impacts of Farmland Protection through a Cost of Community Services Study,”](#) a case study on Clarke County's process and results.

To Learn More

- › [American Farmland Trust: “Cost of Community Services Studies”](#)
- › [COCS: Making the Case for Conservation](#)
- › [UVA Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service: “Albemarle County COCS Study”](#)
- › [Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority: COCS Study](#)
- › [UVA Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service: “Fauquier County COCS Study”](#)
- › [Matthew Kotchen and Stacey Shulte, “A Meta-Analysis of Cost of Community Services Studies”](#)



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



CATHY KEUHN



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.”



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.

“
People want their tax money to go to useful things, and this study shows that maintaining farmland is an economically useful thing.
”

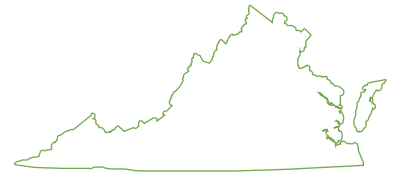
**ALISON TEETOR,
RETIRED COUNTY PLANNER**

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.



Purchase of Development Rights



USDA PHOTO

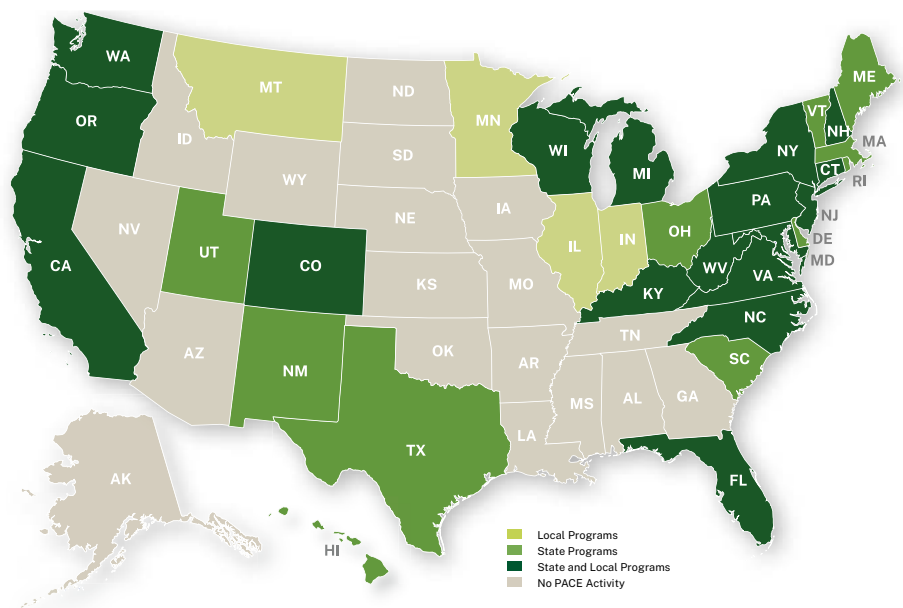
Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) programs protect farmland for farming forever. Based on the principle that private property rights can be donated, transferred, limited, and/or sold, PDR programs pay willing landowners to restrict non-farm development on their land in perpetuity—including through future changes in ownership. They achieve this by using an agricultural conservation easement—a voluntary and flexible legal agreement—to protect the land’s natural resource values.

Conservation easements keep land in private ownership while protecting a full range of natural resources from water quality to wetlands and wildlife habitat. *Agricultural conservation easements* specifically protect land for agriculture. So in many places, PDR programs are called Purchase of Agriculture Easement (PACE) programs, and the federal program is called the [Agricultural Land Easement Program](#) (ALE) program.

As of January 2024, 30 states had established PDR programs (see map). Of these, 17 had local programs, including Virginia. Private conservation organizations, like land trusts, also accept

donated easements and sometimes buy them, often using federal matching funds. Qualified entities can partner with USDA’s ALE program which may contribute up to 50 percent of the easement’s fair market value.

Together, public and private efforts have permanently protected about 7.5 million acres of farmland across the U.S.



Several state and local programs have enhanced their programs by adding affordability mechanisms to maintain protected farmland in active agricultural use. One approach is an *Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV)*. As its name suggests, OPAV requires protected land to be sold for a price that reflects its agricultural land value, not its full market value for non-farm use. Similar to OPAV, *pre-emptive purchase rights* are meant to ensure that protected land is sold to qualified farmers. *Affirmative easements* go a step further to require that protected land remain in active agricultural use.

Virginia PDR Program

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Virginia program is to help localities develop PDR programs to protect farmland and the agricultural industry, especially by retaining a critical mass of farmland comprised of parcels that are economically viable farming operations.

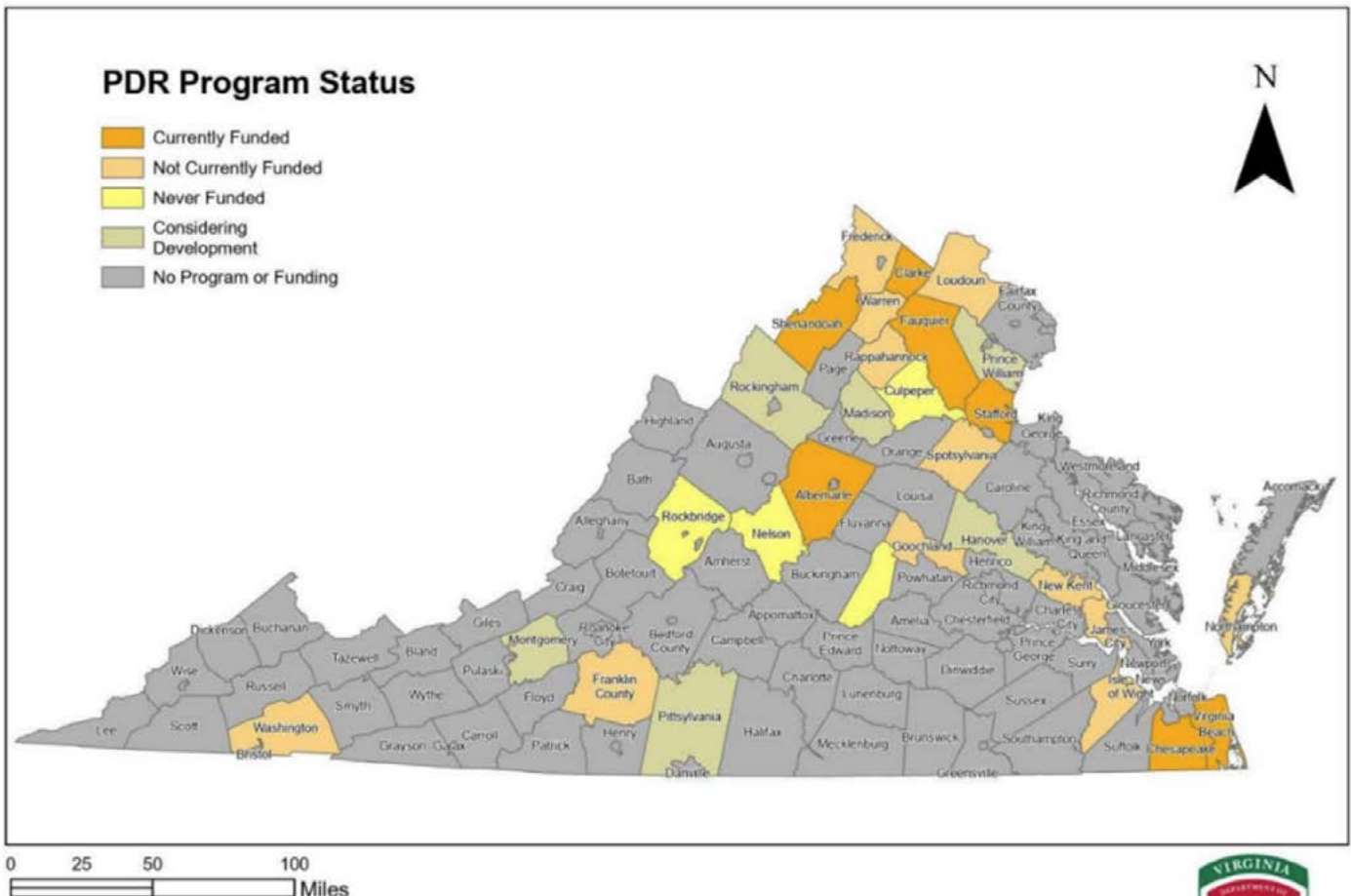
HOW IT WORKS

In 2001, Virginia's General Assembly created the Office of Farmland Preservation within the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). In 2008, the program expanded to create the Farmland Preservation Fund, which allocates state matching funds to local purchase of development rights programs. VDACS helps both public and private entities create local PDR programs by developing criteria, policies, and practices, and by identifying sources of funding. In 2024, the General Assembly transferred the Office of Farmland Preservation to the Department of Forestry (DOF), merging the office with DOF's existing easement program and creating the Office of Working Lands.

As of January 2024, VDACS had invested about \$23.5 million in PDR and helped 21 localities develop programs. In 2024, this included \$875,000 in grants to six localities



Status of Local PDR Programs in Virginia



Map Updated 11/13/2024



GERVILLE/ISTOCKPHOTO

including Clarke, Fauquier, Shenandoah, and Stafford counties, and the cities of Chesapeake and Virginia Beach.

To apply, localities must codify a PDR program by ordinance or resolution. The Office of Working Lands reviews their proposals to ensure they meet state guidelines. Guidelines include providing information on project ranking, monitoring and stewardship, and education and outreach, among other things. Additionally, the Farmland Preservation Fund requires a 1:1 match from the locality to access state funds.

To receive funding, eligible entities must submit two forms annually:

- › [Fiscal Certification Form](#)
- › [Program Certification Form](#)

In addition, although no locality has adopted a program, under 1981 amendments to Virginia's Open Space Land Act, localities may lease conservation easements for a short period of time, determining eligibility, duration, restrictions, and compensation. Virginia landowners also can donate a conservation easement to a land trust or other qualified entity. The donation may qualify as a non-cash charitable gift, which may yield a federal income tax deduction, a state income tax credit, or federal estate tax exemptions. Local officials may consider partnering with a land trust that services their area to raise awareness of farmland protection opportunities in their communities.

CONSIDERATIONS

PDR saves a permanent supply of farmland for future generations. It frees up liquid assets for farmers who often are

“land rich but cash poor,” protecting land ownership and sustaining agricultural land use. Because landowners tend to reinvest PDR proceeds into local economies—buying equipment, livestock, inputs, and so on—it stimulates local economic development. It also has been shown to encourage conservation adoption and to support farm transfer to the next generation.

Some Virginia counties have had great success and achieved multiple benefits with PDR programs (See [Stafford County case study](#)). Their success relies on consistent investment and personnel capacity to do deals and to effectively monitor and enforce easement terms.

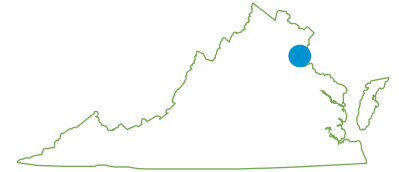


JACOB GILLEY

To Learn More

- › [VDACS: “Farmland Preservation”](#)
- › [VDACS: “PDR Ordinance”](#)
- › [Virginia Department of Forestry: “Conservation Easements”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Agricultural Conservation Easements”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Status of State PACE Programs, 2024”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Status of Local PACE Programs, 2024”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “ACEP-ALE for Entities”](#)
- › [Tom Daniels, “An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Pennsylvania’s Farmland Preservation Program”](#)
- › [Virginia United Land Trusts \(VAULT\)](#)
- › [Office of Working Lands Preservation Annual Report 2024](#)
- › [Land Trust Alliance: “What is a Land Trust?”](#)

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



STAFFORD COUNTY, VA

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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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.
”

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



STAFFORD COUNTY, VA

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.

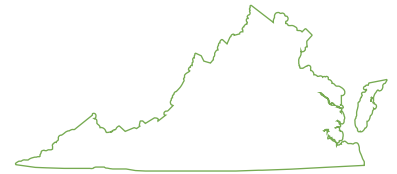
Thinking about the impact of Stafford’s program, Baker believes the results are worth the work. “To me, it’s about the con-

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.”

“
**To me, it’s about the connection 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.**
”

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

Mitigating the Impacts of Solar Siting



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

In a decade, the U.S. added over 209 gigawatts of solar energy capacity—an increase of 723%! Virginia is among [the top 10 states in solar energy production](#). Most of the boom involves land-based arrays often developed on prime farmland, which tends to be flat, unshaded, well-drained, and close to existing grid infrastructure. [Research from Virginia Commonwealth University](#) shows that since 2016, around 40% of Virginia’s utility-scale solar construction occurred on farmland. In response, Virginia is one of a few states working to mitigate the impacts of utility-scale solar development on agriculture.

Local governments also have pursued actions, such as creating overlay zones to site utility scale solar developments on disturbed lands and setting guidelines to encourage sound development. With clear guidance, balanced land use planning, and thoughtful decision-making, state and local governments can create policies to support both agriculture and solar energy.

Virginia Program Description

Virginia Executive Order Forty-Three set goals for renewable energy production. It was followed by the [Virginia Clean Economy Act](#) (VCEA) which amended

state regulation of electric utilities to reduce carbon emissions. The VCEA established a mandatory renewable portfolio standard which is driving the creation of new solar arrays. [Code of Virginia § 45.2-1708](#) requires local governments to promote renewable energy and generate electricity through technologies that do not contribute to greenhouse gases.

In 2022, Virginia passed House Bill 206 to address the impacts of these new policies. It requires a mitigation plan for energy projects that the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) determines will have a significant adverse impact on natural and historic resources including arrays that disrupt more than 10 acres of prime agricultural soils. DEQ is developing regulations to implement these requirements.

Purpose

The goals of Executive Order Forty-Three and the VCEA are to power 100% of Virginia’s electric system with renewable energy sources by 2050. [House Bill 206](#) seeks to mitigate significantly adverse impacts these may have on natural and historic resources. Combined, these pieces of legislation are meant to advance renewable energy in a sustainable and responsible way.



How it Works

The VCEA provides clean energy targets and includes a few initiatives. It requires Virginia's two large, investor-owned utility companies (Dominion Energy and Appalachian Power) to retire carbon-emitting electrical generation facilities over time—when exactly depends on the type of plant. It establishes megawatt targets for wind, solar, and energy storage and sets new energy efficiency standards for utilities.

Local ordinances must be consistent with state policy, provide reasonable siting criteria, include reasonable requirements for buffers and setbacks, limit noise, and address generation facility decommissioning. Agricultural property owners are allowed to install solar panels to serve their own property needs, provided that installations comply with local zoning, height and setback requirements, and any local historic, architectural, or corridor protections. These conditions apply to both roof and ground mounted panels.

Given public concerns, several codes govern local authority and decision making around utility-scale solar facilities:

- › [Virginia Code § 15.2-2288.7](#) allows localities to provide by-right authority to install solar arrays in any zoning classification and to require permits to guide disposal of solar panels.
- › [Virginia Code § 15.2-2241.2](#) directs bonding provisions for decommissioning of solar energy equipment, facilities, or devices and includes reasonable restoration including soil stabilization and revegetation of disturbed ground cover.

- › [Virginia Code § 15.2-2288.8](#) provides special exceptions for solar photovoltaic projects so that localities may grant special exception including in their zoning ordinances for any solar photovoltaic (electric energy) project or energy storage project.
- › [Virginia Code—Article 7.3](#) governs siting of solar and energy storage projects. It gives host localities powers to hire and pay experts, negotiate and enter into siting agreements with agreed-upon terms and conditions, including mitigation, compensation to pay for capital needs, and assistance to deploy broadband.

Considerations

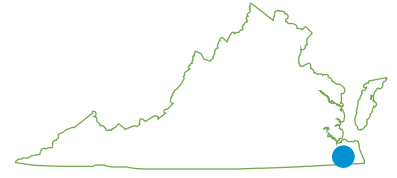
Balanced approaches are needed to protect farmland while promoting renewable energy. Developing large expanses of farmland for solar arrays limits agricultural uses, drives up land values, displaces farmers who rent land, and increases barriers to land access for the next generation. AFT has developed a set of [Smart SolarSM principles](#) and [“Recommendations for State and Local Governments to Advance Smart Solar Policy”](#) to address these issues.

House Bill 206 is a good first step. Local governments also can ensure their policies minimize farmland conversion—especially on the most productive soils—by encouraging solar arrays in ditches, on barns and other farm structures, incentivizing solar development on rooftops and on already disturbed lands like parking lots and brownfields. (See [Zoning for Agriculture](#) fact sheet.)

To Learn More

- › [American Farmland Trust: Smart Solar](#)
- › [Energy Sage: “Solar Carveouts: What You Need to Know”](#)
- › [VCU Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs: “Re-evaluating the Land Use Impacts of Utility-Scale Solar Energy Development in Virginia”](#)
- › [Travis Grout and Jennifer Ifft: “Approaches to Balancing Solar Expansion and Farmland Preservation: A Comparison across Selected States”](#)
- › [VALEN—Virginia Land and Energy Navigator](#)

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.



CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

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.



CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

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

“
It was especially important for us to speak with farmers. Prioritizing their voices and input was a goal.
”

ALYSSA NEIL,
PRINCIPAL PLANNER



CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

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



ALL IMAGES: CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

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.

”

**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



CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

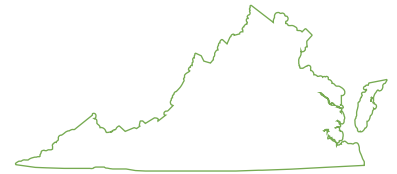


CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

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.

Transfer of Development Rights



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Transfer of development rights (TDR) programs create market incentives to shift development from designated “sending areas” to “receiving areas” where increased development is preferred. They compensate landowners who sell development rights in the sending areas and offer incentives to developers to build in receiving areas. Incentives typically include things like density bonuses, reduced parking requirements, or regulatory flexibility.

TDR programs are a growth management tool that combines planning and zoning to address community priorities. Most operate at the local level, but there are a few regional examples like the New Jersey Pinelands. While TDR programs can advance many community priorities, they mostly are used to balance natural resource protection goals with goals for growth and development.

When used to protect farmland, TDR programs are like [Purchase of Development Rights \(PDR\) programs](#) except that instead of using public funds, they leverage the private marketplace. Both are voluntary, pay landowners to limit development on some or all of their land, and use conservation easements to protect the land. Some allow developers to make monetary payments in lieu of transfers. In these cases, the government entity buys the conservation easement, often in partnership with a state or local PDR

program and/or a local land trust. Some purchase and retire development rights to stimulate the market and/or reduce overall building potential while others establish TDR banks to buy and hold development rights, then sell them to developers.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

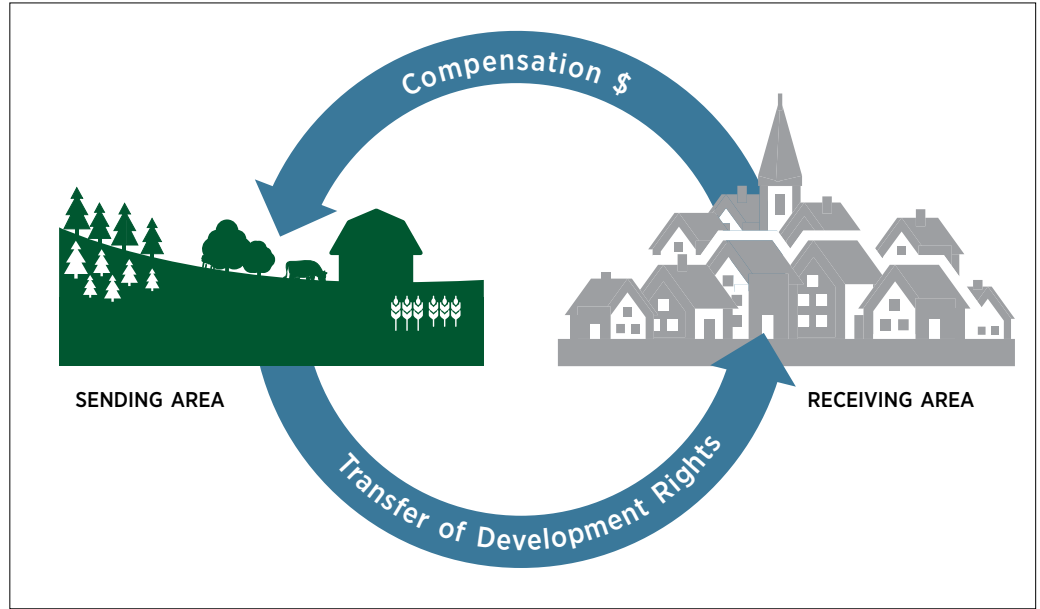
[Virginia’s TDR Law](#) allows local governments to create TDR ordinances to conserve and promote public health, safety, and general welfare. The ordinances establish procedures, methods, and standards for the transfer of development rights within a jurisdiction. Enacted in 2006, the statewide enabling legislation was first directed at local zoning ordinances and then amended in 2007 to allow TDRs across county-city boundaries as long as the local government entity and circuit court approved it.

HOW IT WORKS

Local governments are required to give notice and hold a public hearing before adopting or amending a TDR ordinance. Ordinances must identify sending and receiving areas with a map or other description, indicate the minimum acreage and reduction in density of the sending property, and assess the infrastructure in the receiving

area to ensure its ability to accept higher densities. The locality also must establish systems to monitor the severance, ownership, and assignment of the development rights.

The landowner in a sending area may use the rights to build at a higher density in the receiving area or sell their rights to a developer to use in the receiving area. Once established, sending area restrictions are binding to both current and future landowners, protecting the land in perpetuity.



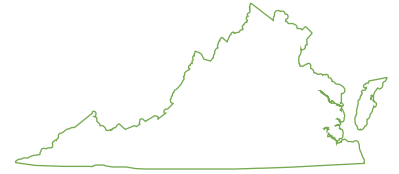
CONSIDERATIONS

TDR has not been widely used in Virginia, but a few local governments have adopted ordinances, including Arlington, Frederick, and Stafford Counties. Because of its reliance on zoning, it can be difficult to build public support to pass a TDR ordinance. Still, with careful planning, ongoing administration, and clear regulations, TDR can be an effective way to leverage the private marketplace to protect farmland while also accommodating a community's goals for thoughtful growth. Ultimately, the success of a TDR program depends on strong demand for development rights in the areas that receive them.

To Learn More

- › [“A Model Transfer of Development Rights Ordinance for Virginia Localities”](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Transfer of Development Rights”](#)
- › [American Planning Association: “Is Your Community TDR-Ready?”](#)
- › [American Planning Association: “Quick Notes: TDR”](#)

Urban Development Areas



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Urban Development Areas (UDAs) promote efficient land use. Often called Urban Growth Boundaries or Urban Service Areas, they identify areas to encourage development and areas to protect to support rural land uses. Higher density and mixed-use developments take place inside the urban development boundary and receive robust public services, including amenities like parks. Agriculture, forestry, and other low density land uses occur outside the boundary and receive limited public services.

Areas are designated on land use maps and used to guide decisions on infrastructure and other development, especially the extension of roads, public water, and sewer. Set for a specified time to accommodate projected population growth and land use needs, they can be revised or renewed at the end of the period. The first UDA was enacted in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1958 to control sprawl and limit the costs of community services.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

Local governments in Virginia can designate UDAs to promote transportation-efficient development, attract new development, and encourage local economic development. This approach also opens opportunities for state funding and planning assistance. For example, Virginia's transportation plan (VTrans) identifies capacity needs and improvements in UDAs. This makes them eligible for [SMART SCALE](#) funding, which evaluates potential transportation projects based on several key factors. These include improving public safety and increasing accessibility, promoting efficient land use and reducing congestion, increasing accessibility, and more. They also become eligible for support from the state's Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment's (OIPI) Growth & Accessibility Planning (GAP) Technical Assistance Program.

HOW IT WORKS

In 2007, Virginia passed legislation to require high growth localities to designate [urban development areas \(UDAs\)](#) to concentrate new development in areas with adequate infrastructure. The code was amended in 2012 to define UDAs more broadly, make them optional, and increase eligibility for SMART SCALE funding.

UDAs are designated by local governments, identified in comprehensive plans, and reviewed every five years. Voluntary and optional, they must be appropriate areas for higher density development due to public infrastructure such as transportation facilities and public water and sewer, eligible for infill or redevelopment, and incorporate Traditional Neighborhood Design which fosters mixed land uses, walkability, and multiple forms of transportation.

Any locality may amend its comprehensive plan to incorporate one or more UDAs. If adopted, the plan must identify UDA boundaries and show them on future land use maps. The areas must be sufficient to meet the projected development needs for at least 10 but not more than 20 years. The boundaries must be reexamined—or if necessary, revised—every five years in accordance with the review of the comprehensive plan and population

growth projections. To the extent possible, the law encourages public infrastructure funding to be directed to these areas. UDAs are also allowed reductions in stormwater management requirements.

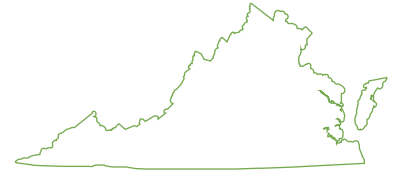
CONSIDERATIONS

UDAs promote efficient land use by designating areas for development and for conservation and protection. They require somewhat sophisticated planning to ensure they are large enough to meet demand for new development but not so large that they encourage leapfrog development. They also should be consistent with both the comp plan and local land use regulations and should not conflict with neighboring jurisdictions.

To Learn More

- › [VTrans: “Urban Development Areas”](#)
- › [Prince William Conservation Alliance: “Urban Development Areas”](#)
- › [We Conserve PA: Urban Development Boundary](#)

Use-Value Assessment



SARAH KOHRS

Every state has at least one program to mitigate the impact of rising land values from new development on farmland. The most common is Use-Value Assessment. Also known as “differential” or “current use” taxation, Use-Value Assessment programs tax farmland at its present use value for agriculture, not its potential use value for nonfarm development. This reduces the property tax burden on farmland. While these lands generate less revenue than other land uses, they require very little in the way of public services and infrastructure, providing surplus revenues to balance community coffers.

Since 1956, 49 states have adopted Use-Value Assessment programs, each with its own requirements for participation and treatment of issues like farm ownership, size, income, and management. The most effective programs have criteria and independent verification to ensure enrolled land remains in active agricultural production. Most states collect rollback taxes when land changes use, 29 assess withdrawal penalties if the land is disenrolled or no longer farmed, and a handful call for a conversion tax. Some include provisions to restrict the use of the land to agriculture for a specified term, and a few require conservation adoption or compliance.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

The program’s goals are to ensure a reliable supply of agricultural, horticultural, and forest products, while also preserving open spaces.

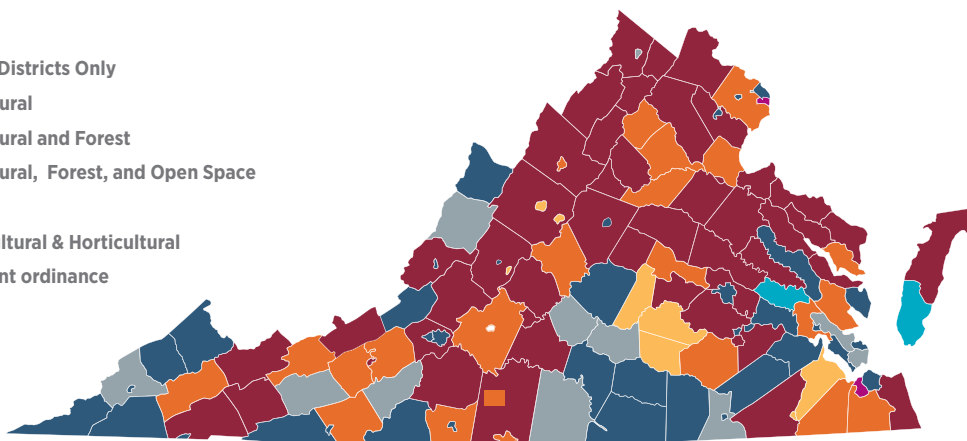
HOW IT WORKS

The [Code of Virginia § 58.1-3230 through § 58.1-3244](#) allows any county, city, or town which has adopted a land-use plan to assess four categories of eligible land at its current use value, including agricultural, horticultural, forestry, and open space. Adopting use-value taxation is voluntary and the locality does not have to adopt all four categories. If a jurisdiction does not have a program, land enrolled in an agricultural or forestal district still may qualify.

Established in 1972, every year Virginia’s [State Land Evaluation Advisory Council \(SLEAC\)](#) provides localities with suggested tax rates for each of these categories. To do so, SLEAC contracts with the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech to develop use-value assessment estimates of land in agricultural and horticultural uses. Once approved, these become the state’s recommended

Tax Year (TY) 2024: Counties and Cities* with Use-Value Assessment Ordinances

- Agricultural & Forestal Districts Only
- Agricultural & Horticultural
- Agricultural & Horticultural and Forest
- Agricultural & Horticultural, Forest, and Open Space
- Open Space
- Open Space and Agricultural & Horticultural
- No use-value assessment ordinance



* Counties/Cities are identified from annual use-value reports and may differ from actual implementation. Contact government officials in each county/city for the current use-value implementation. Not all participating cities are identified on this map.

use-value estimates for commissioners and assessors to use in their programs.

To qualify for the program, land must meet eligibility requirements, including:

- Being devoted to a qualifying use for at least five consecutive years
- Being at least five acres, excluding a one-acre house site
- Being used for hay, grain, crops, or pasture
- If used for pasture, having a minimum number of livestock, such as one head of cattle per five acres, or five swine or sheep per five acres, or 66 turkeys or 100 chickens per five acres

If there is a change in acreage or to a nonqualifying use, land enrolled in a use-value program may be assessed roll-back taxes and penalties.

In 2019, the law was amended to authorize localities to provide by ordinance that the annual increase in the assessed value of eligible property may not exceed a specified dollar amount per acre. In 2022, the General Assembly created the [Forest Sustainability Fund for Local Government](https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/58.1-3242.1/) (<https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/58.1-3242.1/>) to help offset lower or forgone tax revenue. Forgone revenue is the fair market value minus the forest use value times the local tax rate. Proceeds can be used for public education, outdoor recreation, or forest conservation.

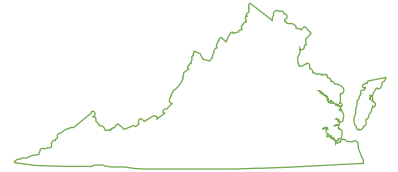
As of 2023, 88 of Virginia’s counties and cities had adopted local use-value ordinances to help maintain farm and forestal use. In addition, several localities without these ordinances have authorized [Agricultural and Forestal Districts](#) where enrolled landowners also may qualify for use-value assessment.

CONSIDERATIONS

Local governments typically tax land at its “highest and best use” for commercial or residential development. Use-value assessment ensures farm and forestal lands are taxed at their current use value rather than their speculative value for development. This helps sustain rural economies and reduces the need to sell working lands for development. Since these lands contribute more to the local tax base than they require back in public services (See [Cost of Community Services fact sheet](#)), Virginia’s Use-Value Assessment program provides relief to landowners and helps balance the local tax base.

To Learn More

- [Virginia Land Use Value Assessment Program](#)
- [American Farmland Trust: “Differential Assessment and Circuit Breaker Tax Programs”](#)



Zoning for Agriculture



REBECCA DROBIS

Zoning defines and regulates the “what, where, and how” of different land uses. Its purpose is to protect health, safety, and general welfare.

Zoning has various forms. *Euclidean* is the best known. It separates land uses by dividing them into broad categories, typically residential, commercial, and industrial development. Categories also can extend to agriculture, parks, and open space, among other land uses. Zoning takes other forms, as well. For example, instead of focusing on land use, *Form-based zoning* addresses the physical relationships of buildings to streets, sidewalks, and other public spaces. *Incentive zoning* encourages certain types of development with rewards, instead of relying on regulation. *Mixed-use zoning* allows multiple uses which otherwise would be confined to separate zones. *Performance zoning* is market oriented and uses effects-based criteria to guide proposed developments. Zoning also can be used to stimulate investment in economically distressed areas. For example, *enterprise zones* are created to improve economic conditions within a targeted area, as defined by a state, and covering a distinct geographical area of a county, city, or town.

Zoning ordinances define and regulate the scale, scope, and intensity of allowable land uses. They include a definition of terms, maps, and text that outlines their

authority and intent, jurisdictional reach, uses and restrictions, development standards, and administrative procedures. This includes defining what is considered a farm. They can play an important role in supporting agricultural innovation, allowing uses like on-farm processing, marketing, renewable energy, and season-extending infrastructure, like hoop-houses. They also can protect farming operations by requiring developers to construct buffers between a new subdivision and working farms or to restrict locating utility-scale solar installations on prime farmland.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

Virginia’s zoning ordinances are used to promote the health, safety, or general welfare of the public and to achieve legislative objectives. These are detailed in depth in [§ 15.2-2280](#) of the Code of Virginia and include things that support agriculture such as safety from fires and floods, creating attractive communities, and providing for the preservation of agricultural and forestal lands.

HOW IT WORKS

[Code of Virginia Code—Chapter 22. Planning, Subdivision of Land and Zoning](#) authorizes the creation

of local planning commissions and requires local governments to adopt a [Comprehensive Plan](#) which lays the foundation for zoning and other local ordinances. Thus, local governments have authority to designate areas for various types of public and private development, use, and density. This includes classifying territory within their jurisdictions as agricultural¹ as well as Targeted Development Areas (TDA) which are defined in comprehensive plans and depicted on their maps. Implementation may occur through the adoption of zoning standards, and in the case of TDAs, through public capital facility investment. While local governments have authority for zoning, not all of them have used it as a tool.

County governing bodies have jurisdiction over unincorporated territory, whereas municipal governments have jurisdiction over their incorporated areas. Localities design zoning regulations to meet their own unique needs and aspirations. Both may use zoning to determine and permit, as well as regulate and restrict, how land is used and the physical aspects of development, including redevelopment.

When directed by local governments, local planning commissions propose zoning ordinances. They must prepare supporting documents, including maps, that show the division of territory into districts and text to describe the regulations that apply to the different divisions. The governing body then must hold at least one public hearing, address public input, and finalize the ordinance.

The Code addresses some issues that directly affect agriculture. For example, in [§ 15.2-2284. \(Matters to be considered in drawing and applying zoning ordinances and districts\)](#), it calls for zoning ordinances to be drawn and applied with reasonable considerations for the conservation of natural resources and the preservation of agricultural and forestal land. It deems solar facilities “substantially in accord with the comprehensive plan if (i) such proposed solar facility is located in a zoning district that allows such solar facilities by right; (ii) such proposed solar facility is designed to serve the electricity or thermal needs of the property upon which such facility is located, or will be owned or operated by an eligible customer-generator or eligible agricultural customer-generator under [§ 56-594](#) or [56-594.01](#) or by a small agricultural generator under [§ 56-594.2](#); or (iii) the locality waives the requirement that solar facilities be reviewed for substantial accord with the comprehensive plan.” However, most zoning decisions affecting agriculture are made at the local level.

CONSIDERATIONS

Agricultural Protection Zoning (APZ) protects high quality soils and directs new development away from areas with working farms and towards settled areas with community infrastructure. Agricultural overlay zones (AOZ) can strengthen or waive provisions in existing zones and often are used to reduce conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors and/or to identify priority areas within zones to support the business of agriculture. For more details, see [Zoning to Protect Farmland](#). Zoning also can be used to determine what kinds of agricultural activities are allowed, whether they are allowed by right or are an accessory or ancillary use, or if they require special permitting. For more information, see [Zoning to Support Agricultural Enterprises](#).

Zoning can be a dirty word if the community believes it infringes on private property rights rather than protecting quality of life. Landowners may threaten to sue—although when ordinances are drafted well, they stand up to legal challenges. When zoning for agriculture, it is important to get input and buy-in from the farming community to ensure that ordinances are farm-friendly and support local agriculture.

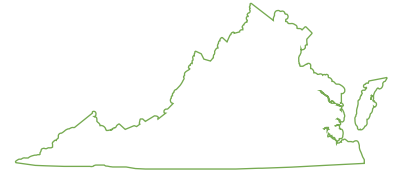
To Learn More

- › [Code of Virginia: Article 7. Zoning](#)
- › [Virginia Building Codes](#)
- › [Millman Land: “What structures can be built on agricultural land?”](#)

NOTES

- 1 **Key Zoning Classifications in Virginia:**
 - Agricultural Zoning** (A-1) is meant to protect farmland and rural landscapes, support agricultural activities, and accommodate residences for farmers.
 - Commercial Zoning** regulates business operations, from small local shops (B-1) to large commercial centers (B-2), defining allowed intensity levels which determine the scale, scope, and style of business activities.
 - Industrial Zoning** regulates manufacturing and industrial operations, separating light (M-1) from heavy industrial activities (M-2) that require more controls to protect surrounding areas.
 - Mixed-Use Zoning** encourages a mixture of compatible uses to create vibrant, walkable communities.
 - Residential Zoning** addresses housing developments, ranging from low-density single-family homes (R-1) to higher-density townhouses and apartments (R-2, R-3).

Zoning to Protect Farmland



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Many communities have large-lot rural-residential or rural-agricultural zones that allow farming activities but do not prioritize them. While some small farms may survive in these zones, they do not protect agricultural land. Instead, they often fragment the agricultural land base and lay the ground for future urbanization.

Zoning to protect farmland defines agriculture as the preferred land use and limits activities that interfere with commercial farm production. It sets performance standards for accessory and ancillary uses and may or may not regulate lot size. The following approaches can be used to protect farmland for farming and promote thoughtful growth.

Agricultural Protection Zones

Intended to protect high quality soils and support the farm economy, Agricultural Protection Zoning (APZ) directs new development away from areas with working farms and towards settled areas with community infrastructure.

Common forms of APZ:

- *Area-based allocations* prioritize agriculture but allow some residential development. The allocations

generally are based on acreage or percentages of the total parcel—for example, a 90/10 ratio of farmland to development.

- *Sliding-scale zoning* is based on farm size. The larger the parcel, the more buildings allowed. For example, a 20-acre parcel might allow one or two dwellings while a 200-acre parcel might allow 10. Ordinances often reward soil quality, adjust road frontage requirements, and/or require clustering to retain as much farmland as possible.
- *Effective or Exclusive* agricultural zoning limits land uses to farming and/or ranching and to operations that support it. Some communities reduce property taxes for farms in these zones. *Intensive Agricultural Zones* are the most restrictive, only allowing dwellings related to the farming operation.
- *Fixed density* agricultural zoning generally is based on current land use patterns. It limits development on very large lots based on typical farm size—for example, one house for every 25, 40, 80, or more acres.

Agricultural Overlay Zones

Agricultural overlay zones (AOZ) are a type of overlay zone specifically designed to protect agricultural resources. Used to create, strengthen, or waive existing

provisions without redrafting entire zoning ordinances, they can be more or less restrictive than the base zone. They often are created to reduce conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors and/or to identify priority areas within zones to support the business of agriculture.

Most AOZs protect high quality agricultural soils and support the farm economy. They may be used to sustain farms in zones where agriculture is not a preferred land use, or to allow associated commercial, marketing, and light industrial uses like farmers markets, farm supply and equipment enterprises, value-added processing, and so on. They can be used as a [Transfer of Development Rights sending zone](#).

Buffers and Setbacks

Buffers and setbacks create distance between farms and non-farm neighbors to reduce conflicts, trespassing, and vandalism. They also protect natural resources. Buffers are often vegetative to reduce the spread of dust, noise, smells, and ways working farms may bother nonfarm neighbors. They also can be used to protect soils, waterways, and sensitive habitats from agricultural runoff. *Conservation buffers* include wildlife corridors, greenways, windbreaks, and filter strips. *Riparian buffers* contain perennial plants, shrubs, and/or trees to protect adjacent waterways and can be managed to produce a harvestable crop.

Buffer ordinances may have standards on vegetative materials, require a minimum width or density, or vary requirements based on the type and purpose of the buffer. Ordinances also may require setbacks, which are the distance between a farm and neighboring property, a natural resource like a wetland, or other areas. They often are between 100 and 200 feet.

Ordinances regulate setbacks and buffers in many ways. They may require one, the other, or both between existing farms and abutting new development. They may limit requirements to certain types of farms or development. Some combine them and require a buffer within a setback, while others simply require a minimum buffer distance.



BOB NICHOLS/USDA

Urban Agriculture Zones

Zoning for urban agriculture addresses farming on vacant lots and small parcels, as well as rooftops, hoop houses, and greenhouses. It also may address vertical agriculture which takes place in warehouses, shipping containers, and other buildings—including skyscrapers. Cities often use agricultural overlay zones to indicate what kinds of agricultural activities are allowed in appropriate places, while others have created dedicated urban agriculture zones. Considerations are similar to rural agricultural zoning but are more likely to address the built environment and extend to charitable, educational, and other non-commercial activities.

Enterprise Zones

Enterprise zones are distinct, economically distressed parts of a county, city or town. The Virginia Enterprise Zone Program is a state and local partnership to improve economic conditions within targeted areas designated by the governor. They are intended to encourage private investment and job creation. The Commonwealth offers two grant-based incentives to support Enterprise Zones: [The Job Creation Grant](#) and [the Real Property Investment Grant](#).

[The Code of Virginia § 59.1-542](#) allows the governing body of any county, city, or town to apply in writing to the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to receive an enterprise zone designation. The law allows Enterprise Zones to include up to three noncontiguous areas, limited according to the size and nature of the jurisdiction, and whether or not it is incorporated. Once designated, local governments are responsible for implementing the program and providing incentives within the context of their overall economic development efforts.

Targeted Development Areas

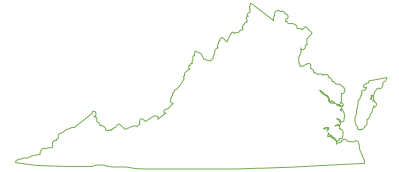
[Virginia Code § 15.2-2232](#) allows local governments to designate areas for various types of use, density, and overall development. As their name suggests, Targeted Development Areas (TDA) select specific areas for development and growth, based on the jurisdiction's own criteria. TDAs are defined in comprehensive plan policies, depicted on comprehensive plan maps, and can be implemented through zoning and capital facility investment.

Agricultural Viability Through Farm-Focused Economic Development

Farming is a cornerstone of Virginia’s economy. As the state’s largest private industry, agriculture contributes more than \$82 billion per year in total economic impact—and more than \$100 billion when combined with forestry. Yet many farms and farmers are struggling economically. Virginia lost 18 percent of its farms between 2012 and 2022, according to the Census of Agriculture. The number of large farms increased while small and midsize operations declined, consistent with the national trend toward consolidation. This trend is a concern given the many economic, environmental, and agricultural benefits that come with thriving agricultural communities.

To sustain these benefits, it is important for communities to meaningfully support agriculture by creating opportunities so that a diverse range of types and scales of agriculture can thrive. Below are several strategies, programs, and approaches that local governments can use to strengthen agricultural economies.

Agricultural Boards and Development Officers



REBECCA DROBIS

Communities across the country have created both formal and informal advisory boards to give agriculture a larger voice in local decisions. Often these boards identify and resolve agricultural issues and ensure local policies value and support agriculture. Sometimes, they help support local marketing efforts and organize events to raise community awareness of agricultural issues, or they ensure that local departments are in regular communication with one another. Generally voluntary boards and committees, in some states they are called agricultural commissions. Their size and composition vary by location and may include members of other local boards with related interests, such as a planning commission, zoning board, conservation district, or economic development commission.

Some local economic development authorities have created agricultural development staff positions to promote agricultural economic development, and some planning departments have created agricultural planning positions, as well. In California, for example, several counties have created a *Farmbudsman* position to help farmers navigate complex regulatory processes.

Virginia Programs Description

PURPOSE

Virginia has several types of agricultural advisory boards, committees, and development officers. Each has its own purposes.

- ▶ Virginia Code [§ 15.2-4304](#) requires local governments to establish **agricultural and forestal district (AFD) advisory committees** as soon as they receive their first application. AFD committees advise Boards of Supervisors and Planning Commissions on additions to, withdrawals from, and reviews of AFD districts. They include four landowners engaged in farming or forestal production, four other local landowners, the commissioner of revenue or the local government's chief property assessment officer, and a member of the local governing body.
- ▶ While AFD committees are prescribed by the Code of Virginia, other advisory boards, commissions, and committees can be created and authorized by Boards of Supervisors. **Agricultural development boards and committees** promote agriculture as an industry,

develop and implement plans to sustain agriculture and other rural economies, increase farm viability, and provide advice and recommendations to local governments on agricultural issues.

- » Some Virginia counties schedule regular meetings with representatives from different local government departments that touch or influence agriculture, calling these groups **agriculture collaboratives**. (See [Fauquier County Agriculture Collaborative profile](#).) Meeting regularly can create opportunities for frequent communication and minimize misunderstandings and missed opportunities. Each county or community may decide on a different composition for their agriculture collaboratives. However, it is often beneficial to invite representatives from the following types of offices: Economic Development; Cooperative Extension; Soil and Water Conservation Districts; Planning and Zoning; Community Development; Environmental Services; Finance; Tourism; County Administration; and possibly others.
- » Virginia Farm Bureau has volunteer advisory committees on about a dozen specific agricultural industries, like dairy, peanuts, and feed grains. **Farm Bureau committees** identify commodity-specific issues and make legislative recommendations to address concerns.
- » **Agricultural development officers**—sometime known as agricultural economic development directors—support the farming community through strategic economic development, and they serve as a voice for agriculture within the county government. Some counties have set aside funding to hire full- or part-time agricultural development officers. These individuals work for the county, focusing mostly on agriculture-focused economic development opportunities. They help farmers apply for grants, host events enhancing public engagement with the agricultural community, lead local marketing efforts, and more. For an example, see the [Grayson County Agriculture Economic Development Director profile](#).

How It Works

Communities can hire staff and establish agricultural boards and committees through local bylaws, codes, and ordinances. Generally, the Board of Supervisors will appoint committee members and may designate subcommittees, such as land protection and conservation, education, marketing, and so on. Specific departments may hire agricultural development officers, or the jurisdiction may create a new department focused on agricultural development. AFD Advisory Committees are governed by state law and must uphold the authority of the Virginia Code. Members are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the local governing body.

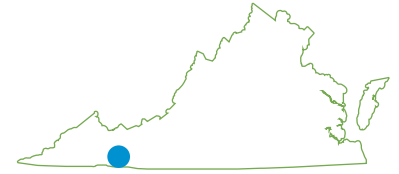
Considerations

These boards, and in some cases employees, can give a more formal voice to agriculture in community decision-making processes. They can pursue local priorities, plan for the future, and make residents aware of agriculture's local significance. Communities have a great deal of leeway to decide if they want to establish agricultural and forestal districts, tap existing bodies for support and guidance, create new boards or commissions, or hire employees to advance agriculture and related economic development priorities.

To Learn More

- » [Code of Virginia: Agricultural and Forestal Districts Act](#)
- » [Bedford County: "Bylaws for Ag Economic Development"](#)
- » [Essex County: "Agricultural and Forestal Economic Development Advisory Board"](#)
- » [Fauquier County: "Agricultural and Forestal District Advisory Committee"](#)
- » [Grayson County profile](#)
- » [Fauquier County profile](#)
- » [Matson Consulting: "Agricultural Development Board Guide: Creating Effective Local Support for Agriculture"](#)

Profile: **Grayson County**



Supporting the Farm Economy with an Agriculture Economic Development Director



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA

Grayson County is a rural community in Southwest Virginia. Agriculture is its leading industry, but farmers there face serious financial challenges. Between 2002–2022, the county lost nearly 35 percent of its farms. Recognizing that farmers needed more targeted support to help with marketing, grant applications, community engagement, and more, the County created a paid agriculture economic development director position to help farmers prosper and thrive.

Situation

Grayson County is a rural place. Nestled in Southwestern Virginia along the Tennessee and North Carolina lines, its total population is around 15,000 people. No major interstates run through the county, and as Census of Agriculture data shows, cows outnumber people by more than two to one. “Agriculture is our number one economic driver in this county,” says Mitch Smith, the county’s deputy administrator. Virginia Cooperative Extension estimates that the economic impact of agriculture in the county is [around \\$80 million per year](#).



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA

Still, farms in the county have faced challenges, especially in the last decade. According to the Census of Agriculture, between 2002–2022, Grayson lost 34 percent of its farms, [from 939 down to 616](#). [Major declines in dairy and tobacco](#) farming in particular led to financial hardship, especially for small and midsized farms.

In 2018, well aware of both agriculture’s economic importance to the county *and* the challenges that many individual farmers faced, Grayson’s then-county administrator created a volunteer agricultural advisory board. (See [Agricultural](#)

Boards and Committees & Development Officers

fact sheet.) Comprised of farmers and agricultural professionals, the board met regularly to strategize ways to better support the farming community. After several meetings and discussions, they shared ideas and feedback with the county administrator. They wanted to fully engage him and secure a government champion to help further their work, which would be key to any proposals they put forward.

Approach

As their first major action, the advisory board conducted a [SWOT analysis](#) themselves to identify the county's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. John Fant, a military veteran, farmer, and former county supervisor who served on the board, says, "We listed all these things in our analysis, and one of the things that popped out was that we needed somebody focused on agriculture. We have a great cooperative extension person here," he continues, "but that person is limited in what they can do when it comes to recruiting, marketing, and emphasizing certain economic things."

Another member of the advisory board, Brantley Ivey is also a farmer as well as a county supervisor. He agrees with Fant's recollection. "That was the number one thing we came up with," he said. "If agriculture is paying the bills, we need to be giving more support from the county to our farming community."

The board and some like-minded leaders lobbied the county to create an "agriculture economic development director" position. Given the county's limited budget, this was not an easy task. However, the "sell" was made slightly easier because it aligned with Grayson's comprehensive plan, which expressed a desire to strengthen agriculture. The board made sure to emphasize that when making their pitch.



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA

“

If farming is an important component of your county, then you need to have somebody focused on making sure that the industry is well represented and talked about, so it continues to thrive.

”

JOHN FANT,
AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

"If farming is an important component of your county, then you need to have somebody focused on making sure that the industry is well represented and talked about, so it continues to thrive," says Fant. "We do that for everything else. Most counties have an economic development agency or an industrial board. If you're doing it for manufacturing, then you ought to be doing it for agriculture."

"I think rural counties can get caught up on thinking that the 'silver bullet' for economic progress is to fill their industrial parks with Amazon and Walmart distributors," Ivey says. "But that's not a silver bullet. I'm not saying we shouldn't go after outside businesses to move into our county, but in the meantime, we need to support the businesses that keep our county going. When it comes to economic development, let's look inward a little bit. When we already have an established industry like agriculture in our county, why wouldn't we support and grow the established industry instead of bringing in a new one?"

Although Grayson County has one of the smallest budgets in the state, county leaders listened to the advisory board and their allies—and ultimately agreed to create the role. The emphasis on agriculture's economic impact, as well as the alignment with the comprehensive plan and the vocal support of allies in government, helped make the difference.

The role started off as part-time in 2019. This was a good way for the county to "ease into" the change. Someone was hired to fill the position, and that person immediately went to work helping farmers with marketing their products, identifying grant opportunities to support their business, and more. When their first hire left the part-time role for a new job opportunity, county leaders doubled down. In 2021, they changed the

role into a full-time position and hired a new director to devote more time to helping farmers flourish.

When the role was transitioned to full-time, the county also expanded the scope of work. The

responsibilities and goals of the agricultural economic director are to:

- Identify, develop, and recruit emerging agricultural and horticultural opportunities;
- Lead in the pursuit and vetting of new business opportunities in the areas of agriculture, food security, livelihoods, and economic growth;
- Provide technical leadership for the planning, review, research, and implementation of agricultural economic expansion initiatives;
- Develop marketing opportunities for locally produced products using local and regional events and state programs;
- Develop and coordinate agri-tourism events with the Director of Tourism.

Outcomes

So far, say Smith, Fant, and Ivey, the results have been impressive.

The full-time agriculture economic development director started out with a focus on farmer and community engagement. Since 2021, she has expanded and strengthened the county's annual agricultural fair, where the community can highlight their agriculture and traditions. She hosts a regular Friends of Agriculture breakfast and invites farmers, agricultural leaders, and the public to break bread together. And she organizes an annual awards banquet for Grayson's farming community. The event uplifts success stories, celebrates jobs well done, and honors a few high-achieving farmers with cash prizes, plaques, "hall of fame" status, and public recognition. In recent years, the crowd at this banquet has ballooned, and the Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Commissioner of Agriculture have both driven 5 hours from Richmond to attend.



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA

According to farmer Sarah Torres, all these efforts help build community, make farmers feel valued and appreciated, and raise awareness of the importance of local food and farms.

Beyond building community and raising awareness, the director helps market local agriculture. She maintains a website—www.farmgrayson.org/—that promotes Grayson County agriculture to consumers and offers locally-relevant resources. She helps write and navigate grants for farmers and farm businesses, bringing more outside money into the county's agricultural community. She represents the county at events, manages the agricultural advisory board, engages with local schools, oversees a community commercial kitchen, and markets products, making sure businesses and buyers understand the value of Grayson-grown products. She also serves as a "connector" among the farming community, which is especially helpful for new and beginning farmers in the area who may need more help meeting people and accessing expertise. And in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which caused major destruction from flooding in Grayson, she has helped connect farmers with disaster relief.

It is worth noting that, between 2017 and 2022, the Census of Agriculture shows an 86 percent increase in Grayson's market value of products sold, a 92 percent increase in farm-related income, and a 361 percent increase in net farm income. These increases cannot be deemed causally related to the new position—but the county's emphasis on supporting agricultural economic development that began in 2019 likely played a part.

"We're very grateful for the support," says Torres, who runs a dairy with her siblings. In the last year or so, the agriculture economic development director has helped them take steps toward adding a creamery on their farm, offering assistance with various grant proposals and business planning, setting up advisor visits to the farm,

“

This is who we are. We're a farming county. And so, to me, the position is definitely worthwhile.

”

**SARAH TORRES,
FARMER**

and giving encouragement during a daunting process. The creamery will boost the farm's economic viability and direct marketing capacity. “I don't know what we would've done if it hadn't been for her I know that other people feel the same way. We're not the only ones she's doing these things for. She does it for any farmer who asks for help.”

Lessons Learned

Along the way, Grayson County leaders have learned several important lessons about supporting the local agricultural economy. For one, it is essential to actively engage with the farming community. Creating opportunities to learn from farmers and agricultural leaders—such as through an agricultural advisory board and regular public gatherings, like agriculture breakfasts—is essential to making sure that whatever solutions are implemented are grounded and truly necessary. In addition to actively engaging the farming community itself, it is key to connect meaningfully with influential local leaders and the public so that they can understand the importance of agriculture.

For another, counties should not underestimate the importance of collecting good, usable information before launching into an idea. That is why the SWOT analysis was so useful. In Grayson County's case, it was this process conducted by the agricultural advisory board that helped them understand tangible steps they could take to meaningfully support the agricultural economy.

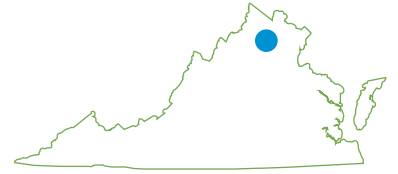
These analyses do not always have to be extremely formal, nor do they have to be expensive.

Finally, leaders in Grayson County learned that working to build social capital goes hand in hand with increasing direct economic and marketing opportunities. Efforts to better engage the community around agricultural issues—such as inviting them to agriculture awards ceremonies or county fairs—can lead to greater support for local farmers. When combined with specific tactics like applying for grants and promoting products, the multi-focused approach of the agriculture economic development director has yielded real benefits.

“If agriculture is a part of [a community's] economy and they have an interest in supporting it, I think the position is well worth the investment,” says Smith. Speaking from her perspective as a farmer who has worked directly with the agriculture economic development director, Torres agrees. “This is who we are. We're a farming county. And so, to me, the position is definitely worthwhile. I realize it is an expense, and yes, our budget is tight, and it gets tighter all the time. But to me, if you take that away, you're denying one of the pillars of our county economy, and you're shooting yourself in the foot. So I would advocate for this position. I think that it's important.”



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA



Profile: Fauquier County

Improving Communication by Creating an Agriculture Collaborative



JON BILLOUS/ISTOCKPHOTO

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.



TMERSH/ISTOCKPHOTO

“

With these meetings, the guiding question is, ‘What can we learn from one another?’

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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



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

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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**The Agriculture Collaborative has
opened lines of communication.**
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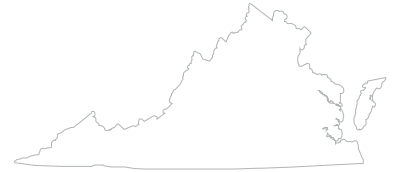
**MELISSA ALLEN, DISTRICT MANAGER,
JOHN MARSHALL SOIL AND WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

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.



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM



Agricultural Development and Marketing Support



RENE CARRANZA/USDA

State departments of agriculture and some economic development authorities have programs to support farm viability and agricultural economic development. These programs generally are designed to develop farm businesses and support their promotion and marketing, and to support the development of middle infrastructure: agricultural processing, distribution, and technology to strengthen the overall viability of agriculture as an industry. Some go further by making capital, loans, and other financial support available to producers to relieve the shortage of nontraditional options for investment in agricultural businesses.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) helps producers identify appropriate markets for their products, both domestically and abroad.

HOW IT WORKS

VDACS's Division of Marketing and Development serves producers, commodity boards and associations, retailers, and buyers through its field offices, which are located throughout the state, and overseas.

Its *Office of Agriculture and Forestry Development (OAFD)* has several programs to provide economic development assistance to farm, food, and forestry businesses, and maintains a [list of financing resources](#) for agribusinesses.

The governor's [Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund \(AFID\)](#) provides grants to communities for various priorities including planning, value-added processing facilities, and infrastructure to support local food production and sustainable agriculture. This program can require varying levels of match funding, but it remains a beneficial option for local governments across Virginia.

The [Virginia Food Access Investment Fund](#) awards grants to businesses and nonprofit organizations to expand access to fresh food in underserved communities. Local governments can consider encouraging entities and organizations in their area to apply.

Other programs include: The [Farm to School](#) program; International marketing; Domestic marketing and promotions; Virginia Grown; Virginia's Finest; and Virginia Food Access Investment Fund Grants.



USDA/JAY PINSKY



USDA/JAY PINSKY

Local governments can create their own agricultural economic development and marketing programs by creating guides to local farm products, establishing farmers' markets, and investing in processing and distribution infrastructure. For example, Fauquier County has created a [“Find Farm Products” directory](#). Hosted on the county’s website, this directory highlights farms that market their products directly to consumers, farmers markets, roadside farm stands, community-supported agriculture subscriptions, online farm product sales, and more.

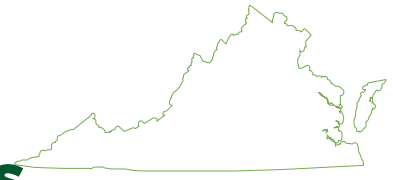
CONSIDERATIONS

Supporting local farms and farmers through investments in marketing and middle infrastructure is a proven strategy to improve the viability of local agriculture and the conservation of agricultural resources. Leveraging state programs and investing in agricultural economic development efforts can pay big dividends both for individual farms and for Virginia communities.

To Learn More

- › [Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services: “Marketing and Economic Development”](#)
- › [Mayors Innovation Project: “Local Food and Economic Development: A Guide for Local Governments”](#)
- › [USDA Agricultural Marketing Service: “The Economics of Local Food Systems: A Toolkit to Guide Community Discussions, Assessments and Choices”](#)

Agriculture and Forestry Industry Development Grants



LANCE CHEUNG/USDA

Some states and the federal government provide grants, low interest loans, loan guarantees, and other incentives to support farmers and invest in agricultural infrastructure to expand their marketing opportunities. For example, USDA's Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) supports the development, coordination, and expansion of local and regional food business enterprises that engage as intermediaries in indirect producer-to-consumer marketing to increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

The Governor's *Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID)* Fund is a discretionary, performance-based economic development incentive specifically for agriculture and forestry value-added or processing projects. Its purpose is to support agribusiness development at all scales, but it prioritizes controlled environment agriculture (indoor farming), meat processing, aquaculture and forestry, which have been identified as target growth opportunities. Some AFID grants also support planning efforts to enhance the economic viability of agriculture and forestry.

HOW IT WORKS

AFID grants are awarded to a political subdivision—such as a town or county—for the benefit of a company or shared-use facility. Funding is awarded with a match requirement (generally 1:1) and based on the expectation that the grant is necessary to the success of the new or expanding facility and thus critical to supporting the local agricultural community. The grant amount and terms are determined by the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and approved by the Governor.

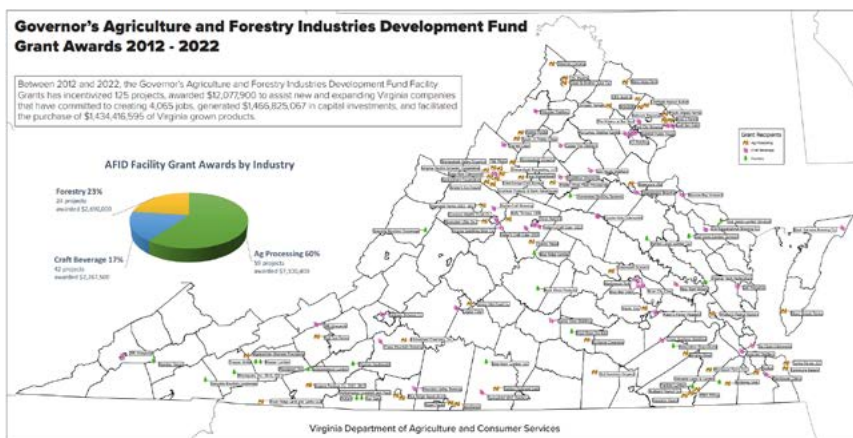
AFID grants have four tracks:

- ▶ “AFID Facility” grants incentivize new and expanding agribusinesses. The maximum grant allowed to any one project is capped at \$500,000. In unique circumstances, this limit may be exceeded for projects that are determined to be of statewide or regional importance. Facility grants require localities to contribute a dollar for dollar (1:1) match in cash or in-kind.
- ▶ “AFID Planning” grants support innovative local efforts to assist agriculture and forestry-based businesses and encourage local governments and the ag/forestry community to work together to integrate

working land industries into their community economic development activities. These grants can support planning for agriculture and the development of local policies and programs to support agriculture and protect farmland. A single locality can apply for up to \$20,000 and a multi-locality applicant can apply for up to \$35,000 per grant. Planning grants usually require a 1:1 match, but economically distressed localities may be eligible for a reduced 2:1 match. Reduced match for multi-locality applicants may be considered under special circumstances. At least 50% of the match must be in cash and newly committed to the project. Up to 50% may be in-kind or composed of other funds.

- » “AFID Infrastructure” grants support large capital projects for community infrastructure that supports local food production and sustainable agriculture. The maximum award per grant is \$50,000 and requires a 1:1 match. At least 50% of the match must be in cash and newly committed to the project. The rest may be in kind or composed of other funds. Localities are encouraged to work with small farmers, food producers, local food systems advocates, and others interested in building their community’s local food and farming infrastructure. This competitive grant requires an equal cash match from the locality, with reduced match available for economically distressed localities.
- » “AFID Blue Catfish” grants support the processing, flash freezing, and infrastructure of invasive blue catfish species. The maximum award is \$250,000 and at least 50% of the total project costs must come from non-federal matching funds.

Program administration varies based on the grant award. The Facility grant provides capital for new or expanding agriculture and forestry value-added or processing facilities. While the funding is provided up-front, businesses must meet performance metrics. Both the Infrastructure and Planning grant programs award reimbursable grants primarily for capital projects at new and existing food hubs, farmers’ markets, commercial kitchens, and other value-added facilities such as those used for processing and packaging meats, dairy products, produce, or other Virginia-grown products.



According to the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, between 2012 and 2022, over \$12 million of AFID grants were awarded to incentivize 125 projects to assist new and expanding Virginia companies that have committed to creating 4,065 jobs, generated \$1,466,825,067 in capital investments, and facilitated the purchase of \$1,434,416,595 of Virginia grown products.

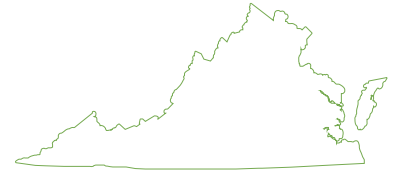
CONSIDERATIONS

Local governments can take advantage of AFID grants to develop and expand businesses to invest in infrastructure to support agriculture, create jobs, and facilitate marketing opportunities. They also can create their own agricultural development and marketing programs and team up with neighboring counties to develop regional programs that address economies of scale.

To Learn More

- » [VDACS: “Governor’s Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund Infrastructure Grants”](#)
- » [VDACS: “Governor’s Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund Planning Grants”](#)
- » [VDACS: AFID Facility Grants](#)
- » [VDACS: AFID Planning Grants](#)
- » [VDACS: AFID Infrastructure Grants](#)
- » [VDACS: AFID Blue Catfish Grants](#)
- » [USDA: Infrastructure Grants and Opportunities](#)

Agritourism



USDA-FPAC/CHRISTOPHER WILLIS

Agritourism combines agricultural production with farm entertainment and/or education to attract visitors to the farm. Usually pursued to diversify farm income, it also stimulates rural tourism. A growing industry, the Census of Agriculture definition includes recreational services like hayrides, farm or wine tours, U-pick operations, corn mazes, and harvest festivals. It also can allow the renting of farmland for hunting, fishing, and other rural activities.

Most states have enacted agritourism legislation either directly or through secondary laws. However, it is typically regulated in local zoning ordinances as an accessory or conditional use. Ordinances may address minimum parcel sizes, maximum facility sizes, setbacks, parking, signage, noise, nuisances, and hours of operation. Large events, like concerts, festivals, and weddings, often have tougher local regulations which address issues like traffic control, number of guests, amplified sound, and outdoor lighting.

Virginia Program Description

Virginia addresses agritourism in [Virginia Code Chapter 64](#), defining it broadly to include “any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of

the general public, for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, horseback riding, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions. An activity is an agritourism activity whether or not the participant paid to participate in the activity.”

Note, the Virginia Right to Farm law prohibits localities from enacting zoning ordinances that unreasonably restrict farming and forestry practices in agricultural districts, including agritourism enterprises. (See [Right to Farm](#) fact sheet.)

PURPOSE

The Code of Virginia defines agritourism and limits the liability of agritourism professionals. It also authorizes local governments to regulate agritourism activities that substantially affect public health, safety, and general welfare.

HOW IT WORKS

The law requires agritourism professionals to post visible warning signs, directional signs, and “off limit” areas to receive liability protection for injuries or deaths caused by inherent risks of agritourism activities.



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USDA/PETER HOWARD PHOTOGRAPHY

Inherent risks include dangers from land, equipment, animals, and the potential for participants to act negligently. Signs must have black letters of at least one inch in height and include the following notice: “WARNING” or “ATTENTION” followed by “Under Virginia law, there is no liability for an injury to or death of a participant in an agritourism activity conducted at this agritourism location if such injury or death results from the inherent risks of the agritourism activity.” ([§ 3.2-6402.](#))

Because the law allows local governments to regulate agritourism activities, communities set their own parameters for what is—or is not—allowed so long as the activities fall under the general guidelines of Virginia’s code. Thus, communities approach agritourism differently through zoning and other local policies, which may require things like filing a Determination Form.

CONSIDERATIONS

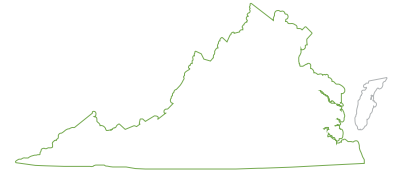
Agritourism offers many benefits—from educating the public about agriculture to economic development. It provides farmers with alternative income streams and preserves rural heritage. But it requires careful planning

and appropriate local ordinances to address potential challenges like increased traffic and congestion on rural roads, noise, and legal liability. (See [Zoning to Support Agricultural Enterprises](#) fact sheet).

To Learn More

- › [American Planning Association: “Knowledge Base Collection: Agritourism”](#)
- › [Esther Akwii and Sophia Kruszewski, “Defining and Regulating Agritourism: Trends in State Agritourism Legislation,” Vermont Law School, 2024.](#)
- › [Heather Wheeler, “Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences: PowerPoint”](#)
- › [Virginia Cooperative Extension: “Agritourism”](#)
- › [USDA Economic Research Service: “2022 Census of Agriculture: The majority of U.S. counties generate some agritourism income”](#)

Community Food and Processing Facilities



REBECCA DROBIS

State and local Community Facilities Programs offer support to develop or improve food and agriculture processing infrastructure, often within the context of other state food processing laws. At the federal level, USDA Rural Development also has a Community Facilities Program which offers direct loans, loan guarantees, and grants to develop or improve essential public services and facilities to help increase the competitiveness of rural communities in attracting and retaining businesses.

Virginia Program Description

Virginia has several state laws that govern food processing and community food facilities. Facilities that manufacture, process, pack, or hold food for sale must abide by Virginia's Food Laws as well as local regulations such as zoning and licensing.

The [Code of Virginia Chapter 51. Food and Drink Law](#) requires inspections and permits for food manufacturers, food storage warehouses, and retail food establishments. Section [§ 3.2-5130](#), which governs food establishments, includes nonprofit organizations holding

one-day food sales and private homes where food is prepared. In addition, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) [AFID Infrastructure program](#) provides grants to support community facilities like commercial kitchens, food hubs, and other value-added facilities (See [Agriculture and Forestry Industry Development Grants](#) fact sheet) and [Code of Virginia, § 3.2-108.2](#) provides financial incentives and technical assistance to slaughter and meat-processing facilities.

Local governments and boards of health also can pass zoning and other ordinances to guide the development of community food and agriculture facilities.

PURPOSE

The purpose of these laws and regulations is to protect health and safety while encouraging value-added processing, retail sales, and expanded market opportunities for Virginia grown food and agriculture products. They enhance economic opportunities and can improve quality of life in rural communities by financing, constructing, and inspecting facilities.

HOW IT WORKS

Generally, the Virginia Department of Agriculture (VDACS) regulates and inspects packaged foods including those that are canned, frozen, or baked while the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) regulates and inspects ready-to-eat foods like chopped fruit. State inspectors VDACS and VDH also uphold federal laws.

Local governments—often boards of health—develop local regulations and ordinances related to value added processing of agricultural products that people eat. These vary by location but often require permits for food facilities and zoning approval for food processing and related businesses on farms and in homes. Local governments also can invest in community facilities themselves and support them through zoning and favorable local ordinances.

CONSIDERATIONS

Agricultural operations benefit greatly from expanded infrastructure to add value to raw products. These could include facilities with equipment for adding value to specialty crops, grading, co-packing, labeling and/or storing, as well as processing meat, poultry, and dairy products. They include facilities like food hubs and smaller facilities like community kitchens. Along with supporting agriculture, they can be a source of jobs and revenues for local communities. However, these facilities require careful planning to make sure that they have the supply, workforce, and market demand needed to support the initial investment and their economic viability over time.

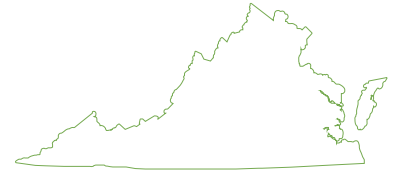


USDA

To Learn More

- › [USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Program](#)
- › [VA Food Works: “Food Business Regulations and Options for Value-added Processing”](#)
- › [Virginia’s Home Kitchen Food Processing Regulations](#)

Farm to School Programs



DANIEL JAMES

Farm to School programs are available in all 50 states. The primary goal of these initiatives is to make local food and agricultural education available at early care and educational settings. A form of *geographic preference procurement policies*, they offer farmers additional market opportunities to support farm viability and increase access to local farm products in public institutions. Programs advance core elements including local procurement, school gardens, and food and agriculture education.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

The [Virginia Farm to School program](#) promotes opportunities for schools, distributors, and growers to work together to increase the volume of and equitable access to locally grown foods served in school cafeterias and dining halls at all levels of education.

HOW IT WORKS

The Virginia Farm-to-School program increases access to fresh, healthy, Virginia-grown food while providing hands-on learning opportunities in a variety of school settings. Created to teach students about the seasonality

of farm products, it promotes the importance of supporting local agriculture and the benefits of protecting farmland. The program also expands market opportunities and boosts sales of local farm products. In school year 2022-2023, 88% of the state's School Food Authorities participated in the program in at least some capacity.¹ According to the Virginia Department of Education, Farm to School has significantly increased the volume of locally grown food served in school cafeterias, providing farmers with a consistent market and raising awareness about the value of Virginia-grown products.²

Farm to School programs are supported by Agriculture in the Classroom (AITC) through hands-on learning, AITC-designed lessons and resources, and educator training to support core subjects and uphold the Virginia Standards of Learning. Virginia AITC is a statewide educational program which offers resources, training and support to help educators and volunteers connect children to agriculture.

CONSIDERATIONS

Farm to School (and to other public institutions) programs have many benefits. They bolster the local agricultural economy, help farmers diversify their markets,



DANIEL JAMES

and improve farm viability. At the same time, they improve health and nutrition and provide educational opportunities and hands-on learning. These benefits are highlighted in the [Page County Farm to School profile](#).

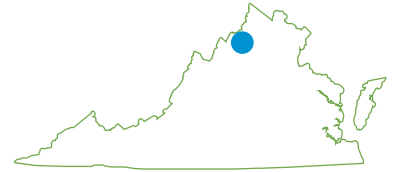
But contracting and coordinating deliveries of local farm products can be logistically challenging, and maintaining programs can require significant time and resources. Plus, not all schools have the kitchen staff or equipment to prepare fresh meals. So it is important for communities to plan carefully to make sure they have the supply of local products and the institutional capacity to create a successful program.

To Learn More

- › [VDACS Office of Food Distribution](#)
- › [National Farm to School Network](#)
- › [USDA Farm to School Resources](#)
- › [Virginia Farm-to-School Toolkit](#)
- › [Virginia Department of Education: Farm to School](#)
- › [Virginia Farm to School Census](#)
- › [Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom](#)
- › [National Agriculture in the Classroom](#)

NOTES

- 1 U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Farm to School Census: State Profile for Virginia,” 2023, <https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/census-results/states/va>
- 2 Virginia Department of Education, “Virginia Farm to School,” 2025, <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/programs-services/school-operations-support-services/school-nutrition/programs-promotions-and-initiatives/virginia-farm-to-school>



Profile: **Page County**

Increasing Economic Viability through a “Farm to School” Program

Page County is in Virginia’s fertile Shenandoah Valley. Its nearly 500 farms are highly productive, and the county ranks fifth in the Commonwealth for the market value of agricultural products sold. But the number of farms and land in farms have declined in recent years because of economic challenges. Public school leaders decided to support a “Farm to School” program to bring fresh, locally grown products into their cafeterias while also supporting the area’s agricultural economy. They also felt that this program could encourage students to learn more about agriculture. Starting small and growing as capacity allowed, Page County’s Farm to School efforts have flourished.



DANIEL JAMES

Situation

Page County is 50 miles northeast of Staunton in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley. The South Fork Shenandoah River winds from south to north throughout the county; Interstate 81 lies a few miles west of its western border; and a third of its landmass is in either Shenandoah National Park or national forest lands.

With a population of roughly 24,000 people, [Page County](#) is largely rural. Like other rural places, its population skews older, with 29 percent of its residents aged 60 and older. The county’s median household income is \$59,396, which is below the state’s median income, and 9.5 percent of its population is below the poverty line.

Agriculture is the foundation of Page County’s economy. It [ranks fifth in the Commonwealth](#) for the market value of agricultural products sold and is home to nearly 500 farms. Despite recent declines in farms and farmland, agriculture remains a key element of the county’s environment and culture.

Leaders in Page County understand agriculture’s importance, yet they have also seen many farms struggle. As such, some leaders have taken creative steps to support its economic viability. In the mid-2010s, the county’s public school system began participating in a multi-county USDA grant program to offer locally grown food in their schools. Initially, their involvement was limited to sourcing just a few products, like apples and sweet potatoes. During this period, they saw both

the economic potential of giving local farmers a stable market and how much students enjoyed the fresh local foods. When they hired a new Supervisor of Nutritional Services in 2017, the county expanded their [Farm to School program](#), believing it could especially help young and smaller scale farmers looking for consistent markets.

Approach

That then-new nutritional services leader—Virginia “Jenny” Jeffries, who still leads this work in 2025—was committed to seeing the Farm to School program succeed. “I was born and raised here, and I have a love for this community,” she says. “I have seen the number of farms decrease, and I have seen industries leave our county. So, for me, once I got into this position and realized most of the money for school nutrition programs is coming from the federal government, I thought: ‘what a great way to spend that money, to spend it locally and help local farmers.’”

Thankfully, Jeffries had a foundation from which to start. The existing local procurement efforts, limited as they were, helped others within the schools and community see that the approach was possible. Working

with a limited number of products at the beginning also gave Jeffries and her colleagues a chance to work through and learn the logistics of the procurement process, which can be complex. [Learning to navigate](#) purchasing guidelines, delivery and storage capacity, food preparation, food safety, and farmer engagement takes time. She continued sourcing limited products and then slowly began adding more.

Occasionally, the products are grown by students in school gardens and donated to the cafeterias, or they are raised by Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H members. But most of the time, they are bought from nearby farms. Jeffries and her team try their best to source farm products from within Page County, and they have successfully undertaken outreach efforts to connect with these farmers. But they also source some things from within 100 miles of the county’s center, which still supports regional agriculture. When that is not possible, they try to source from within Virginia.

One of the biggest goals of Page County’s Farm to School program—and one particularly relevant to Planning for Agriculture—is related to economic development in the agricultural community. “Being able to financially support our farmers and hopefully be able to help them



DANIEL JAMES

“

[The program] supports the local agricultural economy while providing opportunities for students to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, and proteins and learn about their food.

”

BEE THORPE,
LEAD FARM TO SCHOOL SPECIALIST,
VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

sustain their farms is important to us,” says Jeffries. She especially tries to do that for new and beginning farmers in the county, wanting them to understand that the school system can be a profitable, reliable, and consistent market. While no economic impact data exists for Page County specifically, [national findings](#) affirm that farmers benefit from these initiatives.

Through this Farm to School program—which is active in all eight of the system’s schools—students get a taste of local agriculture. Sometimes, they tour the farms that provide them with meat or produce. They get to meet their farmers and know where their food comes from. Even when that cannot happen, they at least know that some of what they are consuming comes from a farm nearby.

Other times, they get to eat things that their peers raised in a school garden. “One of our school gardens grew radishes,” Jeffries mentions, “and toward the end of the school year, they brought us radishes. There are 500 kids in that school, and we made tossed salads and cut those radishes so small that everyone had at least a tiny piece of radish. The pride that those kids had, knowing that they were part of producing that little bit of radish, was huge.” Jeffries also notes that the students have come to taste the difference in produce sourced locally and produce that is brought in from several states away.

All these experiences get students—and, by extension, their families—more engaged with agriculture in their community.

Outcomes

Over eight years, Jeffries and her team have incorporated a variety of locally grown foods into school meals, from sweet potatoes, salad greens, and tomatoes to



DANIEL JAMES

cantaloupe, butternut squash, peppers, and onions. They are working to add proteins, like chicken and pork. Last year, they spent nearly 10 percent of their food budget on local products, an impressive-yet-achievable threshold.

“It is really a win-win for communities when they invest in these programs,” says Bee Thorp, the Lead Farm to School Specialist for the Virginia Department of Education. “It supports the local agricultural economy while providing opportunities for students to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, and proteins and learn about their food.”

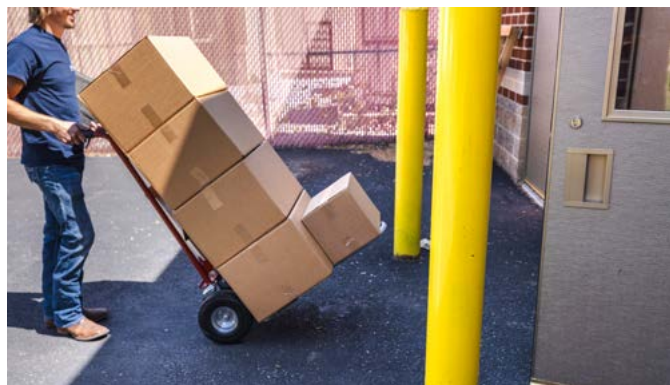
Seth Benton, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Program Manager for Food Distribution, agrees. “We have a marketing division here that works with farmers. We have staff members located throughout the state that try to hook up farms with schools—and not just with schools, but with other business opportunities. We try to make connections between the farmers that are looking for a market and the folks who are going to purchase. Farm to School gives producers who don’t always have a market an additional place to sell their food, and that’s certainly a benefit to individual farmers, but to the community as a whole as well.”

Lessons Learned

Thorp and Benton share that the most important aspect of a successful Farm to School program is having a nutrition director who wants to make it happen. The Farm to School program in Page County did not appear out of thin air. Getting to where they are now required hard work, patience, and flexibility.

Jeffries’ biggest piece of advice to others is to “start small and be patient.” Begin with sourcing one

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ingredient, such as lettuce for a salad bar. Work through the ins and outs—the outreach, sourcing, storage, and preparation—for that one product. And when that starts to feel manageable, think about how to expand.

Utilizing small amounts of locally grown products can be simple. However, securing local products on a large scale can be challenging for both farmers and schools. They have to go through a bid or “request for proposals” process, which is complicated and can be difficult for local farmers to submit the lowest bid and make any profit. But school nutrition programs can write their requests for proposals to make local farmers more competitive. They can factor in the time of harvest and source identification or ask for additional services like coming to speak to students about agriculture or inviting

“

It is a win for our students because they're getting that local food, and it's a win for the farming community because we're able to infuse that money back into our area.

”

SETH BENTON, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES PROGRAM MANAGER FOR FOOD DISTRIBUTION

school field trips to the farm. School systems can ask for these services explicitly in their proposal requests, signaling things that make it possible for local farmers to stand out.

Jeffries' background in food regulation has helped her navigate this sometimes-complex process, but she shares that other people—whether school nutrition directors like her or someone in a position like Thorp's—can help with answering questions. Someone who wants to lead this charge in Virginia does not have to go it alone. They can also benefit from excellent resources that support the work, including an in-depth [Farm to School Toolkit](#) from the Virginia Department of Education.

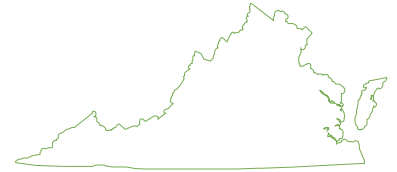
Getting the word out to farmers about the Farm to School program can also be a challenge—or an opportunity. For example, Jeffries attends local and regional marketing meetings hosted by VDACS so she can meet farmers and inform them of the program. She also talks with extension agents in her area, who might call to ask what products she is most interested in purchasing so they can advise farmers. And she shares her contact info and encourages farmers to get in touch directly: “If you have something to sell from your farm, call me. I will figure out a way to work with you.” To her peers in other school systems, she explains that it is essential to “be present as much as possible” in the agricultural community.

On the farmer side, Benton says distribution to schools can be tough, especially for smaller-scale producers who often lack the time and/or resources to deliver products themselves. Packing, processing, and storage can present challenges, depending on the farm product. Extension agents, VDACS staff, and others can help farmers navigate these logistical challenges.

“For whatever reason, this has been one of my personal goals for our community and for our students,” Jeffries says. “It's all about the holistic impact. It is a win for our students because they're getting that local food, and it's a win for the farming community because we're able to infuse that money back into our area.”

[To learn more about Page County's program, see this short video.](#)

Farm Link Programs



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Decades of intense competition for land have resulted in very high land values, especially for cropland. In the past, most farmland transferred between generations within a farm family. Today, many farmers do not inherit their land. With little land available to rent or buy, land access has become a significant challenge. Many states and some local governments have created policies and programs to address these issues (see [Other Programs to Support the Next Generation](#) fact sheet). Farm Link programs are one of the most common.

Farm Link programs facilitate land access by connecting farmland seekers with retiring farmers and other farmland owners. Most provide a matchmaking website with a searchable database to facilitate connections. Some go further to include educational resources, mixers, mentoring, referrals, and technical assistance.

Most programs are operated by nonprofit organizations, but 11 states implement and/or invest public dollars in these programs. Virginia is one of them.

Virginia Program Description

Virginia Farm Link is a program of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). Established in [Virginia Code § 10.1-1119.4](#), it was authorized in 2008 to help facilitate transfers of agricultural properties and operations. It has a searchable, online database and provides staff to help prepare business plans and provide research and information on innovative farming methods and techniques, financial, marketing, and other matters.

PURPOSE

The program is designed to help retiring farmers and landowners transfer their farms to beginning and expanding farmers who want to acquire land, equipment, and information on innovative farming methods and farm business management.

HOW IT WORKS

The Farm Link program has a free website to link existing farm owners with farm seekers. Farm seekers

click the “[Find Farmland](#)” link and farm owners click the “[Find a Farmer](#)” link to sign up for accounts. The website offers a resources tab with relevant information on topics including farm leases, business planning, conservation, farm transition, resource providers, and so on. It also includes listings of upcoming workshops on topics ranging from filing farm taxes to farm equipment and safety to heirs’ property.

Based on feedback from users, in 2012, the program created a Certified Farm Seeker (CFS) program to help farm seekers demonstrate their knowledge and skills to farm owners. In partnership with Virginia Farm Bureau and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition, the CFS program helps seekers demonstrate that they have on-farm experience, a resume to show their experience level, and a farm business plan. While all seekers are free to use the site, CFS seekers display the CFS logo on their user profile, which gives them a leg up.

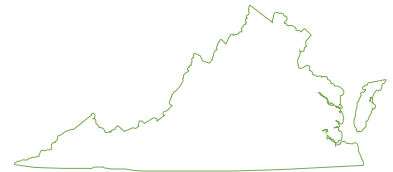
CONSIDERATIONS

Farm Link programs are a response to the urgent need to transition farms to a new generation. They serve many functions, from listing properties on a website to providing education and technical assistance. Most operate on a shoestring, but to be really effective, they need dedicated staff and sustained funding. To support the future of agriculture in their areas, local leaders can promote Virginia Farm Link among aspiring and retiring farmers and advocate for more support for staff to provide technical assistance to facilitate farm succession and transfer.



To Learn More

- › [Virginia Code § 10.1-1119.4. Virginia Farm Link Program](#)
- › [Virginia Farm Link](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: “Virginia Farm Link Program Enabling Statute”](#)
- › [Leslie Pillen and Clare Hinrichs, “Land Link Programs in the Northeast U.S.: A Program Assessment and Lessons Learned”](#)
- › [Land for Good: “Developing & Strengthening Farm Link Programs”](#)
- › [FARM VA: Farm Agricultural Resources and Mediation of Virginia](#)



Other Programs to Support the Next Generation



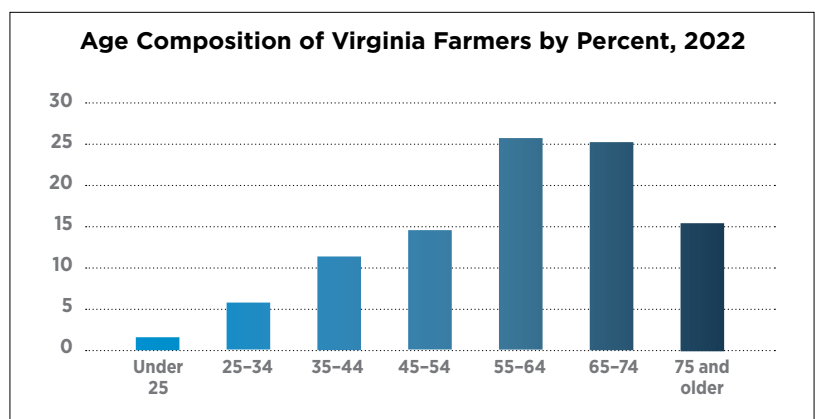
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Land and access is a significant challenge, especially for young and beginning farmers. Markets are tight with very limited acreage available to rent or to buy, especially on the open market.¹ Given that many new producers do not inherit land, it is increasingly difficult to secure suitable, available, and affordable acreage.²

With more than 40 percent of Virginia's farmers aged 65 and older, transitioning land to the next generation is important to the future of agriculture in the Commonwealth. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, since 2017, Virginia had a modest increase in the number of farmers under age 35 and of new and beginning farmers who have farmed for ten years or less. But the average age of beginning farmers is 48.6. While lower than the state's average age of 59.2, this figure suggests that it remains difficult for young people to enter the field.

Virginia has adopted a Farm Link program to address this issue, but concerned policy

makers and local leaders could consider additional programs that other states have adopted to support access to land and other agricultural resources.



Less than 8 percent of Virginia's farmers are younger than 35, while more than 40 percent are 65 or older. This is in striking contrast to the general workforce, where 35.5 percent of all workers are under age 35 and only 6.7 percent are age 65 and older.³

Source: USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022 Census of Agriculture. [Table 52. Selected Producer Characteristics: 2022 and 2017](#)

Aggie Bonds

Sixteen states offer Aggie Bond programs to help beginning farmers and ranchers buy land, equipment, buildings, and livestock. Typically run by a state department of agriculture or state finance authority, these federal/state partnerships allow private lenders to receive federal and/or state tax-exempt interest on loans made to beginning farmers. This makes it possible for local lenders to offer lower interest rates—on average, one to three percent lower than the commercial farm rate. Liability for these loans rests with the private lender.

By offering loans with below market interest rates, Aggie Bond programs are a cost-effective way to pass savings on to beginning farmers. Further, the interest farmers pay on these loans is exempt from federal—and in some cases, state—income taxes.

Beginning Farmer Tax Credits

Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (BFTC) programs give agricultural landowners a credit on their state income

taxes in exchange for renting and/or selling farmland and other agricultural assets to beginning farmers. As of 2024, [six states have authorized BFTC](#), each with its own priorities and approaches. The first, [Nebraska Next Gen](#), was authorized in 1999. It provides state income tax credits to an agricultural asset owner who enters into a three-year rental agreement with a beginning farmer. Assets include land, livestock, buildings, and machinery. [Iowa's beginning-farmer-tax-credit-program](#) is similar, while Kentucky only incentivizes tax credits for the sales of agricultural assets. [Minnesota](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [Ohio](#) offer tax credits for both sales and rentals.

Farm Purchase and Protection Incentives

Farm Purchase and Protection Incentives (FPPI) programs have the dual purpose of incentivizing land access and protecting farmland. They are designed to help young and/or beginning farmers buy farmland while also protecting it with an agricultural conservation easement.



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- › [Maryland's Next Generation Farmland Acquisition Program](#) is basically a fast-moving easement option purchase program. Selected applicants receive downpayment funds to buy farmland and subsequently protect it. Maryland also offers a small-acreage (SANG) program. SANG helps qualified young or beginning farmers who have trouble entering agriculture because of high farmland costs and lack of access secure adequate financial capital. It supports purchases of smaller farmland properties between 10 and 49 acres.
- › [Delaware's Young Farmers Program](#) provides a zero-interest loan in exchange for an easement on farmland purchased through the program.
- › Pennsylvania adopted an exemption from the state's realty transfer tax if a protected farm is conveyed to a beginning farmer.
- › [Rhode Island](#) created a Farmland Access Program to buy farmland from willing landowners at fair-market value, restrict it with an affirmative agricultural easement, then sell it to a qualified farmer at restricted agricultural value. (Rhode Island's program is also known as a "Buy-Protect-Sell" program.)
- › Washington created a tax-exempt bond program to help beginners and historically underserved farmers and ranchers acquire farmland at lower interest rates. (Washington's program has a "Buy-Protect-Sell" component.)

Farmer Mentoring Programs

Farmer mentor programs pair experienced farmers with new and beginning farmers. They offer experiential farm education, and they provide one-on-one business coaching, training, and other educational opportunities. Some offer apprenticeships while others offer training with a strong mentoring component. The USDA collaborates with [SCORE](#) to provide free business mentoring to farmers and rural business owners.

The Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition Program offers a [Farm Mentor Network](#) to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills between experienced farmers and beginning farmers. Farm mentors volunteer to share information, insights, and experiences with mentee farmers willing to learn. Most are working farmers themselves, and each offers a different experience depending on their time availability and farm needs. The



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Virginia Soil Health Coalition also offers a [Virginia Farmer Mentor Network](#). Farmers at any age and skill level can join this peer-to-peer program to learn about and implement practices that improve soil health and increase production. For more information on farmer mentoring programs, see the [Farmer Mentor Programs fact sheet](#).

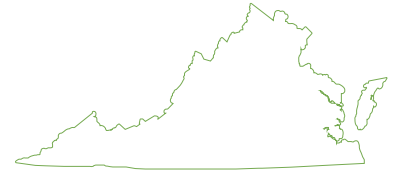
To Learn More

- › [Council of Development Finance Agencies: “Aggie Bonds”](#)
- › [Julia Valliant, Marie O’Neill, and Julia Freedgood, “Bipartisan creation of US Land Access Policy Incentives: states’ efforts to support beginning farmers and resist farm consolidation and loss”](#)
- › [Julia Valliant and Julia Freedgood, “Land Access Policy Incentives: Emerging Approaches to Transitioning Farmland to a New Generation”](#)
- › [IA: Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Program](#)
- › [PA: Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Program](#)
- › [MN: Beginning Farmer Tax Credits](#)
- › [OH: Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Program](#)
- › [MD: MARBIDCO Next Generation Farmland Access Program and MD: MARBIDCO Small Acreage Next Generation Program](#)
- › [DE: Young Farmers Program](#)
- › [WA: Farmland Protection and Land Access Program](#)
- › [NE: Next Gen Program](#)

NOTES

- 1 Bigelow, Daniel, Allison Borchers, and Todd Hubbs. U.S. Farmland Ownership, Tenure, and Transfer, EIB-161, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, August 2016. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/74672/eib-161.pdf?v=4266>
- 2 Katchova, A.L. and Ahearn, M.C. (2016), Dynamics of Farmland Ownership and Leasing: Implications for Young and Beginning Farmers. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 38: 334-350. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aep/ppv024>
- 3 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Table 3.1 Civilian Labor Force by age, sex, race, and ethnicity 2003, 2013, 2023, and projected 2033. August 29, 2024. <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/civilian-labor-force-summary.htm>

Right to Farm



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Kansas enacted the first Right-to-Farm law in 1963 to protect feedlots from litigation. Today, all 50 states have passed some form of Right-to-Farm act. While each state has its own statutory language, overall these acts are meant to protect qualifying farmers from lawsuits, nuisance complaints, and unreasonable regulations. Right-to-Farm provisions also may be included in state zoning enabling laws and addressed in [Agricultural District](#) programs. Some local governments have enacted their own ordinances to strengthen and clarify language in state law and to educate residents about agricultural activities.

When new residents move into rural areas, they often do not expect the sounds, smells, dust, inputs, and insects that come with working farms. Right-to-Farm laws are meant to protect established farmers from public nuisance suits filed by neighbors who seek to stop or change farming operations—typically limited to operations that follow generally accepted or best management practices.

Virginia Program Description

PURPOSE

[Virginia's Right-to-Farm Act](#) was enacted in 1981 and became effective in 1995 to protect farmers from baseless nuisance suits and significant and unfair judgments.

HOW IT WORKS

According to the [Code of Virginia 3.2-300 definitions](#), the Right-to-Farm Act applies to agricultural operations located in an area zoned as an agricultural district or classification who are in “substantial compliance” with laws and regulations and who follow best management practices. Operations include farms devoted to the “bona fide” production of crops, animals, and poultry, including food production (fruits, vegetables, nuts, meat, dairy), tobacco, nursery, silviculture, and floral products. It does not protect operations that pollute streams or water, or that cause overflow onto someone else’s land.

The Act limits local governments from enacting zoning or other ordinances that unreasonably restrict or regulate farming (and forestry) practices or structures in an agricultural district or classification unless such restrictions bear a relationship to the health, safety, and general welfare of its citizens. Localities may adopt requirements like setbacks and minimum area

requirements, so long as they do not unreasonably interfere with farming operations.

Recent amendments limit filing a nuisance suit to people with an ownership interest in the property and prevent suits from people who knew about the farm when their occupancy began. If the agricultural operation is found liable, damages are limited to the reduction of the fair market value of the property of the person filing suit.

CONSIDERATIONS

Virginia's Right-to-Farm law is meant to protect farmers from frivolous complaints and nuisance lawsuits from neighbors who knew about the operation when their occupancy began. It does not protect against claims of negligence or issues like trespassing. It constrains local governments from limiting operations they deem to be nuisances and prevents them from requiring a special use permit for farming activities in agricultural zones.

While statutes sometimes hold up in court, this is not always the case. Some consider the law unfair because only affected landowners can sue, leaving out renters and other family members who claim negative effects.

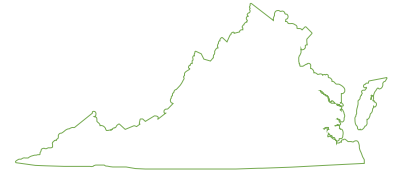


REBECCA DROBIS

To Learn More

- › [Code of Virginia Chapter 3 Right to Farm](#)
- › [National Agricultural Law Center: "State Right to Farm Provisions"](#)
- › [One Rural: "Virginia's Right-to-Farm Summary"](#)

Zoning to Support Agricultural Enterprises



CITY OF CHESAPEAKE

Zoning ordinances define agricultural uses and can be used to determine whether activities like agritourism, commercial composting, farm stands, riding stables, wineries, or value-added processing are allowed by right or are considered accessory (subordinate to agriculture but related) or ancillary (unrelated). They also determine when uses are conditional and/or require special permitting. Once defined, ordinances usually include performance standards to guide the appearance, intensity, scale, and scope of the built environment. In Agricultural Protection Zones, they generally limit the amount of land and/or structures allowed for specific purposes and require that accessory and ancillary activities support and do not thwart future farming activities.

Accessory and Ancillary Uses of Agricultural Land

Accessory uses support agriculture but are secondary to its principal permitted uses. In the [Code of Virginia § 3.2-6400, Definitions](#) a farm is considered land used for the production, cultivation, growing, harvesting, or processing of agricultural products. Agricultural products are broadly defined to include “livestock, aquaculture,

poultry, horticultural, floricultural, viticulture, silvicultural, or other farm crops” but also include agritourism, which is defined in the Code. Given this definition, accessory uses would include marketing-related activities like value-added processing or a farm stand.

Ancillary uses are secondary land uses that do not support the farming operation but also do not interfere with it, like renting office space in an outbuilding or leasing land to hunters.

Agritourism

The Code of Virginia defines agritourism activity as “any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public, for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions” (See [Agritourism](#) fact sheet) and states that no locality is allowed to regulate agritourism activities unless there is a substantial impact on the health, safety, or general welfare. However, the Code does provide criteria to measure those impacts. As a result, some communities have created zoning



USDA PHOTO/DAVID KOSLING

provisions to establish standards and/or to require special permits for certain types of activities. Standards and permitting often are based on acreage requirements and number of attendees, and to address food trucks, vehicle trips, traffic, and other concerns related to health, safety, and general welfare.

Composting

Composting combines organic wastes in rows, piles, or vessels, including leaves and yard waste, manures, discarded food, and bulking agents such as wood chips. Adding compost to the soil improves its fertility, promoting higher yields and limiting petrochemical inputs. It has other environmental benefits, as it provides carbon sequestration, improves water retention in soils, and reduces methane emissions by keeping organic waste out of landfills.

Some farms compost their own waste while others handle municipal leaves and other organic materials as a source of extra income. Zoning ordinances can address the size and scale of composting operations, determine what wastes can be composted, and create policies to mitigate odors and pests. Commercial composting facilities generally are regulated by state as well as local governments because they have larger impacts and require plan approval and setbacks especially if in or near residential zones. Local governments also may

consider regulations to prevent stormwater runoff, and to screen large sites from public view.

Farm Labor Housing

Zoning can address housing development specifically for farm labor. Ordinances vary widely but generally are fairly flexible as long as standards uphold public health and safety laws. They may allow mobile homes, cabins, or other temporary housing for seasonal workers, or allow building a second or third house on farm without triggering subdivision regulations. Housing provided through the federal H2A program must meet state and local health and safety standards—if not, [federal standards](#) must be applied. Employers are responsible for compliance with all the applicable standards, including those that require cleaning.

On-Farm Energy Production

Wind turbines, solar arrays, and methane digesters supply farms with renewable energy and in some cases can be sold to utilities for additional income. By adapting roofs and other structures, ditches, and other marginal land, they can augment agricultural operations without undermining the farm's underlying purpose.

Utility-scale energy production, especially solar, requires significantly more land and is a more complex issue,

often competing with agriculture and food production. Thus, zoning frequently allows energy production for agricultural use by right but is more restrictive about commercial installations (See [Mitigating the Impacts of Solar Siting](#) fact sheet).

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) [has developed regulations](#) that use a Permit by Rule (PBR) for small renewable energy projects of 150 megawatts (MW) and less. As a result, any renewable energy project that meets DEQ's regulatory requirements is deemed to have a permit. The statute and implementing regulations address pre-construction natural resource analyses, mitigation, post-construction monitoring, and other PBR requirements.

Retail Marketing and Value-Added Processing

Zoning can be used to support on-farm sales through farm stands, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and other forms of direct marketing. Ordinances address the scale, scope, and seasonality of different types of operations, what kinds of products can be sold, and how much must be produced on the farm. They also address issues such as road setbacks, parking, lighting, and signage. These issues are especially important to address for year-round farm stores and CSAs, which require parking and infrastructure requirements to



USDA PHOTO/LANCE CHEUNG

accommodate shoppers and farm-share pick up.

Zoning also can be used to regulate farm-to-consumer marketing in public places. Communities often support *farmers' markets*, where farmers come together to sell local food and other products. Depending on size and frequency, they may take place seasonally in a facility like a park or parking lot, or year-round in a permanent structure. Zoning can assign how, when, and where these markets operate. Some communities have a straightforward permitting process and allow farmers' markets by right across all or multiple zones. Others require a special permit and restrict them to commercial, mixed use, or other specified zones. Ordinances may leave rulemaking to the individual market or regulate

what kinds of products may be sold. They also may regulate signage, parking, and whether entertainment or the sale of local crafts are allowed. *Mobile markets* operate like small farmers markets on wheels, often serving communities with limited access to fresh, local food. Communities may have specific ordinances for these markets or simply extend farmers' market regulations. Some ordinances dictate the size or grade of allowable vehicles, but usually they are allowed in parking lots of facilities with public access.



GRAPEWOOD FARM

Finally, zoning can support on-farm processing, as well as *community kitchens* and *incubators* which allow for shared use of food processing equipment farmers can use to add value to their products. These operations must comply with state and local health ordinances and sanitary regulations.

Signage

Signs can be used to promote the location of local farms. [The Code of Virginia Chapter 12 section 33.2-1204](#) addresses signage in its General Policies and Regulations. Zoning also can address both permanent and seasonal signs and billboards. Permits and setbacks may be required, especially for permanent signs. Ordinances usually define their size and placement, what materials can be used and how much illumination—if any—is allowed. For example, Fauquier County requires a sign/zoning permit for permanent signs when installed or refaced, and a building permit for a new sign unless the sign is painted on a building, is a flat sign screwed to the building, or is a freestanding sign less than 6' in height with no lighting.

Wineries, Breweries, and Distilleries

Wineries, breweries, and distilleries are another way farmers can add value to their products. Communities can use zoning to determine which types of activities are allowed by-right and where—usually in rural areas—and which require a zoning clearance, like weddings and other large events. While producing and harvesting fruit and grains are considered agricultural, processing them into alcoholic beverages like wine, beer, and spirits are not and are regulated under [Virginia Code § 4.1-206.1](#).



USDA PHOTO/LANCE CHEUNG

[Manufacturer licenses](#). Zoning can be used to address issues like on-farm wine tasting rooms, restaurants, helicopter rides, as well as acreage requirements based on numbers of visitors and other issues related to agritourism.

To Learn More

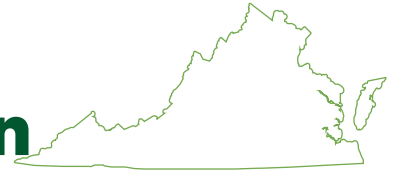
- › [American Planning Association: “Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning”](#)
- › [Code of Virginia § 3.2-6400, Definitions](#)
- › [2009 Small Renewable Energy Project Statute](#)
- › [Virginia Cooperative Extension: “Bramble Hollow Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study”](#)
- › [US Department of Labor: “H2A Housing Standards for Rental and Public Accommodations”](#)

Conservation Agriculture

Virginia's farmers must manage disruptions from increasingly volatile weather patterns and changing climatic conditions. In any given year, agricultural communities in Virginia can face both severe droughts and severe flooding. Record high temperatures are putting pressure on livestock, creating dangerous working conditions for farmers and farm workers, and reducing crop yields. Intense storms cause major damage from the mountains to the coast.

Conservation agriculture can help farming become more resilient to address this adversity. By embracing practices that enhance resilience and, over the long term, pay off financially, farmers can set themselves up for a better chance at success. While much of the support to advance conservation agriculture stems from federal and state programs, local governments can also support conservation through strategies and efforts like the ones mentioned below.

Chesapeake Bay Preservation



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

The Chesapeake Bay supports more than 17 million people across six states. Its massive watershed spreads across more than 64,000 miles.

Restoration efforts started in the 1980s and continue to this day. But with the multitude of rivers and streams that feed it carrying pollutants, the Bay is still on EPA's "dirty waters" list.

The first Chesapeake Bay Agreement was signed in 1983 between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, and the Chesapeake Bay Commission. It called for cooperative action but did not include specific requirements or a timeline. Over the following decades there were several lawsuits and subsequent agreements. In 2014, Virginia, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and the EPA signed the [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#). Representatives from each of the states, officials from other federal agencies, local governments, and citizens meet regularly to carry out the Agreement's policies which include clear goals, outcomes, and a timeline to restore the health of the Bay, its tributaries, and surrounding lands.

Virginia Programs Description

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement guides broader restoration efforts across the entire watershed, including Virginia. To address Virginia's own impacts on the Bay, the Virginia Assembly enacted the [Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act \(Bay Act\)](#) in 1988 to manage nonpoint source pollution. It comprehensively addresses the effects of land use planning and development on water quality in the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Area (CBPA). Recognizing that local governments have primary responsibility for land use decisions, it creates a direct relationship between local land use and protecting water quality and expands local authority to manage water quality within CBPAs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Bay Act program is to protect and improve water quality in the Chesapeake Bay by requiring the implementation of effective land use management practices.

HOW IT WORKS

In Virginia, more than 80 counties, cities, and towns border the tidal waters of the Chesapeake Bay. The

Bay Act requires them to adopt an individually tailored program to ensure land use and development in CBPAs protect state water quality. Local governments determine and map CBPA boundaries within their jurisdictions, develop Bay protection measures, and incorporate those measures into their comprehensive plans, zoning, and subdivision ordinances. They are involved in developing and carrying out Watershed Implementation Plans (WIPs) to reduce pollution and participate in various Chesapeake Bay Program workgroups and in regional water quality monitoring to assess progress towards Bay restoration goals.

Local governments work with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and other partners to reduce loads of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment flowing into the Bay. DEQ provides policy guidance and local program oversight. Each Bay Act locality has a DEQ program liaison who provides one-on-one technical assistance as needed and who assists with program compliance reviews. State agencies are required to be consistent with local comprehensive plans and ordinances adopted to comply with local Bay Act requirements.

CONSIDERATIONS

Program compliance can be expensive, and local governments often struggle to support restoration efforts. This can lead to significant delays in program adoption. To address this, they can apply for grants from federal sources including [EPA Chesapeake Bay Program](#), [NFWF Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund](#), and state sources including [Virginia's Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund](#).



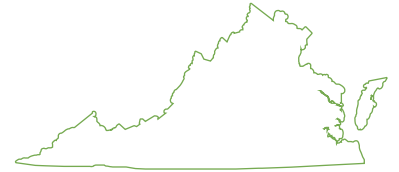
WILL PARSONS/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Environmental law is complicated and there have been several large lawsuits concerning the Bay. Communities benefit from legal representation by an environmental attorney who has sufficient local knowledge to develop successful compliance strategies and to defend local ordinances in the event of an alleged violation.

To Learn More

- › [Virginia DEQ: Chesapeake Bay](#)
- › [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#)
- › [Chesapeake Bay Program: Funding and Financing](#)
- › [Chesapeake Bay Commission](#)
- › [VASWCD Chesapeake Bay District Services](#)

Composting



TOM WITHAM/USDA

Composting is the process of recycling organic materials by combining waste products like leaves, food, wood chips, and manures into piles, rows, or vessels. As these materials break down, they turn into compost which can be added to soil to improve its fertility, promoting healthier crops and reducing the need for chemical fertilizers. Compost also stores carbon and improves water retention in soils, and it reduces methane emissions by keeping organic waste out of landfills.¹

Farmers often compost their own organic waste and may offer services to compost municipal leaves and yard waste. This scale of composting is generally exempt from regulation. However, commercial composting has larger impacts, so it is often regulated by state governments. The U.S. Composting Council tracks legislation and created a Model Compost Rule Template for states to adopt.² To protect public health and safety, local governments often add to state regulations by requiring things like site plan approval, setbacks, and regulations to prevent stormwater runoff, and address neighborhood issues like dust, pests, and odors.

ABOVE: Trent Deans, Veteran Compost D.C. works organic composting operations at the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture in Virginia.

Virginia Programs Description

Virginia has several programs that address composting. The [Virginia Solid Waste Management Regulations](#) (VSWMR, 9VAC20-81), the [Virginia Pollution Abatement \(VPA\) Permit Regulation](#) (9VAC25-32), and [Sewage Collection and Treatment Regulations](#) (9VAC25-790) all govern composting operations within the Commonwealth.

The VSMR has the most application to agriculture. It applies to acceptance of yard waste, feedstocks, and manures from herbivores that are generated off site so long as they do not pose a nuisance or present a potential threat to human health or the environment. It allows agricultural exemptions so long as operations follow criteria outlined in [9VAC20-81-397](#). VPA Permit Regulations spell out procedures and requirements for permits pursuant to the State Water Control

Law. Administrative Code [9VAC25-790-570](#) applies to the design and operation of conventional sludge composting including buffers, grading, and measures to control odors.

PURPOSE

The purpose of these laws is to establish standards, procedures, and requirements in handling compost and sludge to protect public health, public safety, the environment, and natural resources.

HOW IT WORKS

VSWMR provides requirements for siting, design, construction, operation, maintenance, closure, and post-closure care of solid waste management facilities in the Commonwealth. Composting is allowed on farms as an accessory use so long as certain requirements are met. For example, the composting area must be 300 feet from a property boundary and 1,000 feet from an occupied building.

Local governments in the Commonwealth have limited authority to require organic waste diversion from solid waste streams but can address setbacks, buffers, screening, and so on through zoning and other local ordinances. Several Virginia cities have composting programs to collect food scraps and dispose of them in a sustainable way. Farmers who compost agricultural waste products or work with local governments to compost municipal leaves and other organic matter can use the compost to improve soil fertility or sell it as a soil amendment product, creating an added revenue stream.

CONSIDERATIONS

Composting occurs in many places and at many scales, from backyards to farms to commercial facilities. It has many benefits for soil health, waste reduction, and

reducing carbon and methane emissions, but if not properly managed can have downsides like run-off, odors, and pests—from flies to rodents to larger wildlife like raccoons and even bears.

Local governments can address the pros and cons of composting through zoning and other local ordinances. Zoning (see [Zoning to Support Agricultural Enterprises](#) fact sheet) can be used to allow composting in some districts and restrict it in others. It can address scale by allowing it by right for leaves and farm generated waste but requiring permits for commercial operations. Buffers and setbacks can limit impacts like runoff, odors, and debris on adjoining properties. Other ordinances can be used to set size allowances, limit what types of wastes can be composted and/or to mitigate the impacts of odors and pests.

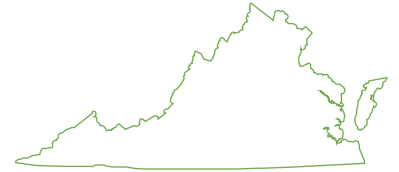
To Learn More

- › [Virginia Conservation Network: “Composting for Waste Reduction and Soil Health”](#)
- › [Virginia Department of Environmental Quality \(DEQ\): “Report of the Waste Diversion and Recycling Task Force to the Governor and General Assembly of Virginia”](#)
- › [Virginia General Assembly. Senate Bill 1319 to study waste control and recycling.](#)
- › [Office of the Governor: “Executive Order 17 Recognizing the Value of Recycling and Waste Reduction”](#)
- › [U.S. Composting Council: Model Compost Rules Template](#)

NOTES

- 1 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Reducing the Impact of Wasted Food by Feeding the Soil and Composting,” Overviews and Factsheets, August 12, 2015.
- 2 U.S. Composting Council, [“Model Compost Rules Template \(MCRT\) Version 2.0,”](#) accessed March 15, 2023.

Farmer Mentor Programs



USDA/BOB NICHOLS

Farmer mentor programs offer experiential farm education, provide one-on-one business coaching, training, and other educational opportunities. Most pair experienced farmers with new and beginning farmers, transferring valuable expertise from one generation to the next. Others help established farmers improve their farming practices, increase profitability, and learn new skills. The USDA collaborates with [SCORE](#) to provide free business mentoring to farmers and rural business owners.

Virginia Program Description

There are many different farmer mentor programs operating throughout Virginia. Some operate only within a specific geographic area, while others operate statewide. Some focus on advancing specific soil health practices, and others offer more generalized support. Most are operated by nonprofit organizations or Cooperative Extension.

PURPOSE

Farmers benefit from a wide variety of both formal and informal educational programming. From Cooperative

Extension resources to soil health field days to business management classes at educational institutions, there are many opportunities to learn and grow. Sometimes, however, farmers learn best from other farmers. The function of Virginia's farmer mentor programs is to facilitate this learning.

HOW IT WORKS

There are multiple organizations throughout Virginia that manage farmer mentor networks. Some of these programs are listed below:

- › Virginia Soil Health Coalition's "[Virginia Farmer Mentor Network](#)" helps connect experienced farmers with other farmers to increase the adoption of practices that boost soil health and increase production. This program operates statewide.
- › Virginia Forage and Grassland Council's "[Farmer-to-Farmer Mentor Program](#)" pairs "experienced grazers with new or beginner grazers to help show them the ropes when it comes to successfully implementing prescribed grazing practices and techniques on their farms." This program is especially active in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

- › Virginia No-Till Alliance’s [“VANTAGE Farmer Mentor Program”](#) connects farmers who have extensive experience with cover crop and no-till practices with farmers who are less familiar with these practices, all in an effort to boost soil health and crop production through peer learning. The program is particularly active in the Shenandoah Valley.
- › Virginia Tech’s Eastern Shore Agricultural Research and Extension Center leads a [mentoring network](#) among crop producers in their region.
- › Virginia Tech and Virginia Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) co-lead the [“Integrated Conservation Agronomy Farmer Mentoring Program,”](#) which “provides a setting for informal conversations between farmers with flexibility in communication frequency, duration, and method.” This program operates statewide.
- › Appalachian Sustainable Development’s [“Farmer and Rancher Mentoring”](#) program is an on-farm internship opportunity for beginning farmers that provides hands-on education to those interested in pursuing a career in agricultural production. The program operates in Southwest Virginia.
- › Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition’s [“Farm Mentor Network”](#) works to “facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills of experienced farmers and ranchers with the beginning farmer and

rancher community. It also provides an opportunity for long-term working relationships for successful farming.” The program is available statewide. Mentor Farmers serve as teachers and volunteer to share their knowledge and experiences. Each defines their own educational experience and sets the schedule and terms of the relationship.

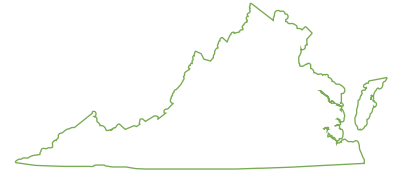
CONSIDERATIONS

Mentor programs can be an effective way to connect the energy and enthusiasm of young farmers with the wisdom and experience of established farmers. Local leaders in Virginia who want to support farmers in their communities may consider sharing information about these mentor networks to facilitate learning, advance conservation practices, and improve agricultural viability.

To Learn More

- › [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project: “Supporting Mentors to Teach Next Generation Agrarians: A Farm/Ranch Mentor Training Toolkit. New Entry Sustainable Farming Project”](#)
- › [SCORE and USDA Partnership](#)

Local Resource Sheets for Farmers



REBECCA DROBIS

When it comes to getting support from their community, farmers have many places to turn. Soil and Water Conservation District offices and Cooperative Extension agents can offer advice on conservation strategies. USDA Local Service Centers can help farmers access the many services provided by the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Rural Development agencies. Agricultural and Economic Development offices may be able to offer marketing or promotion strategies.

Pretty quickly, a farmer can become overwhelmed by all the options for help and have trouble knowing where to turn. A locally tailored resource sheet can help them navigate a sometimes-complex process. Resource sheets outline the many opportunities, funding sources, and technical assistance opportunities available to farmers in a specific area.

Purpose

A local resource sheet can communicate all the different avenues for support available to farmers in a given county. The main goal is to limit confusion and facilitate action. These sheets—which can be developed by any

local leader within a county or community—can be distributed to farmers at events, in local offices, or via the mail.

How it Works

A community leader or individual office can take the lead on developing a resource sheet for local farmers. They can begin by brainstorming all the different departments and services that may engage with the farming community. They might continue that brainstorming by considering the sorts of questions that farmers most frequently ask. Then, they should “ground truth” these questions and needs by engaging with other leaders in the community, as well as farmers themselves. Has anything or anyone been left out? Have we anticipated the needs of most farmers as best we can?

Then, the creator of the resource sheet can call or meet with leaders of all the different offices that touch agriculture in their community. They can ask these leaders to share the best ways to get in contact with their team, and they can request a brief 3–5 sentence description of the services the team offers. Soon, a community can have a detailed resource sheet with appropriate contact

information to distribute to farmers, helping them know where to look for help.

Ideally, these resource sheets are brief—no more than 1–2 pages. At this length, the sheets can easily be printed and distributed. It's worth investing time and energy, and perhaps even limited financial resources, into designing the resource sheet so that it is visually appealing. After all, farmers should hang on to these sheets and reference them regularly. Making them visually appealing increases the likelihood that farmers will keep these flyers and perhaps post them in an easy-to-see area, like on a refrigerator door or an office wall.

Some communities may opt to create their resource sheet as an online resource, either by posting it on multiple county office websites (including Cooperative Extension's) as a static PDF document or by creating a more interactive website. Grayson County in Southwest Virginia, for example, has created a website called "Farm Grayson" as part of their agricultural development efforts. On their website, they have pages devoted

fully to sharing relevant resources—from the contact information of local agricultural service providers to a mapping service that displays soil types to economic viability strategies. Fauquier County has done similar things to elevate helpful resources.

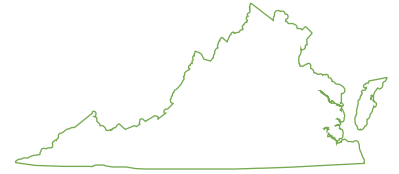
Considerations

Whatever path is pursued—whether a simple 1-page document or a more detailed interactive website—a resource sheet can be a valuable tool for farmers in your community, helping them access all the support they need to be more successful and sustainable.

To Learn More

- › [Grayson County: "Farm Grayson"](#)
- › [Fauquier County: "Relevant County Links"](#)

Soil and Water Conservation Districts



USDA-NRCS/BRANDON O'CONNOR

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) were established after the devastating Dust Bowl in the 1930s to prevent soil erosion and floods, conserve soil resources, and use, conserve, and dispose of water. Today, SWCDs develop locally driven solutions to a wide variety of natural resource concerns including soil, water, wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife.

SWCDs are established by state law and governed by local leaders. District staff work with landowners and local government units to conserve and manage natural resources. They provide services from conservation planning and implementation to public education and land protection.

Virginia Program Description

In 1938, the Virginia General Assembly authorized the creation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and recognized them as political subdivisions of state government. [The Code of Virginia /title10.1/chapter5/](#) defines their role and authorities, as well as the composition of the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, which provides financial support, coordination, and information exchange to the districts. The districts rely on state and local funding to carry out their mission and work closely with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), whose employees administer financial appropriations and other administrative functions and

foster cooperative working relationships with federal, state, and local agencies.

Today, 47 SWCDs serve most localities in the Commonwealth. They employ more than 150 full- and part-time staff who provide education and technical assistance to landowners and the public on topics such as soil stewardship, water quality, and agricultural conservation. They also are supported by the private, nonprofit [Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts \(VASWCD\)](#), which offers SWCDs training and resources. Its Educational Foundation promotes conservation leadership through stewardship, education, and award programs and is funded by donations.

PURPOSE

The mission of Virginia's SWCDs is to conserve state and local conservation resources by developing and implementing programs to conserve soil and water resources, control erosion, and prevent pollution.

HOW THEY WORK

Each district is directed by a board of directors who are elected in general elections and serve four-year terms. Full- and part-time staff perform a wide variety of tasks. They provide resources to farmers who want to adopt conservation practices. They promote conservation through outreach and education through field days, public meetings,

and classroom education. They develop and manage programs and provide technical expertise to help landowners and communities protect natural resources and prevent nonpoint source pollution. They help landowners with conservation planning—including agricultural provisions of local [Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act](#) ordinances and implementing [Virginia's Agricultural Stewardship Act](#). And they serve as gatekeepers to state cost-share programs by working directly with farmers to implement best management practices (BMPs) and distribute funding through programs like the [Virginia Agricultural BMP Cost-Share Program](#).

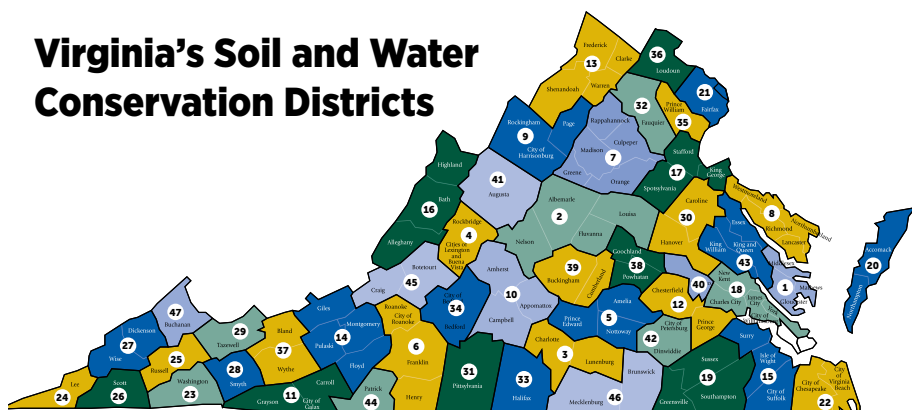
Virginia's SWCDs are supported by state funds appropriated by the General Assembly, and local funds from county, city, and town governments. Districts also may receive grants, donations, and other sources of revenue. Operating funds are administered through a grant agreement between DCR and each individual district. Agreements outline grant deliverables and DCR expectations and must be approved by the District Board. Program Funds, which are commonly referred to as cost-share money, typically are used to support water quality improvement projects.

All told, SWCDs are on the front lines of supporting conservation, water quality, and sustainable agriculture in Virginia's communities. They guide land use practices and play a pivotal role supporting environmental quality through education, technical assistance, and financial assistance.

CONSIDERATIONS

Counties can provide additional funding to SWCDs because they recognize the vital role they play in protecting natural resources and ensuring sustainable land use because these benefit communities environmentally and economically.

Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts



- | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 - Tidewater | 12 - James River | 24 - Daniel Boone | 37 - Big Walker |
| 2 - Thomas Jefferson | 13 - Lord Fairfax (Winchester) | 25 - Clinch Valley | 38 - Monacan |
| 3 - Southside | 14 - Skyline | 26 - Natural Tunnel | 39 - Peter Francisco |
| 4 - Natural Bridge (Buena Vista, Lexington) | 15 - Peanut (Suffolk) | 27 - Lonesome Pine | 40 - Henricopolis |
| 5 - Piedmont | 16 - Mountain (Covington) | 28 - Evergreen | 41 - Headwaters (Staunton and Waynesboro) |
| 6 - Blue Ridge (Roanoke) | 17 - Tri-County/City (Fredericksburg) | 29 - Tazewell | 42 - Appomattox River (Petersburg) |
| 7 - Culpeper | 18 - Colonial (Williamsburg) | 30 - Hanover-Caroline | 43 - Three Rivers |
| 8 - Northern Neck | 19 - Chowan Basin | 31 - Pittsylvania | 44 - Patrick |
| 9 - Shenandoah Valley (Harrisonburg) | 20 - Eastern Shore | 32 - John Marshall | 45 - Mountain Castles |
| 10 - Robert E. Lee (Lynchburg) | 21 - Northern Virginia | 33 - Halifax | 46 - Lake Country |
| | 22 - Virginia Dare (Chesapeake, Virginia Beach) | 34 - Peaks of Otter (Bedford) | |
| | | 35 - Prince William | |

They often support activities to address a local priority issue which is beyond the scope of available funding, like [this outreach and engagement position partnership between Albemarle County and the Thomas Jefferson SWCD](#). By helping landowners take good care of soil and water resources, SWCDs help sustain agricultural viability, maintain wildlife habitat, and protect drinking water for their communities.

To Learn More

- › [Virginia Association of SWCDs](#)
- › [National Association of Conservation Districts](#)
- › [Virginia DCR: "SWCDs"](#)
- › [Membership Directory: VA SWCD](#)
- › [Virginia Agricultural Stewardship Act Guidelines](#)

Profile: **Albemarle County**



Teaming Up to Spread the Word about Conservation

The Thomas Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) serves four counties in central Virginia, including Albemarle County. This SWCD offers both financial and technical support to farmers to help advance on-the-ground conservation. In recent years, SWCDs have received an influx of state conservation dollars—sometimes receiving so much money that they have trouble spending it all. In 2020, with this funding influx on the horizon, the Thomas Jefferson SWCD teamed up with Albemarle County to hire an outreach-focused staff person to spread the word about conservation opportunities in the agricultural community.



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD

Situation

Albemarle County is in the Piedmont region of central Virginia, roughly 60 miles northwest of Richmond and 100 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. The county is home to the historic city of Charlottesville, where the University of Virginia is located. When combined, Charlottesville and Albemarle County have a total population of roughly 160,000 people. The area features a combination of rural and urban landscapes with rolling hills and beautiful vistas. In many ways, Albemarle's economy, landscape, and culture remain heavily influenced by agriculture.

According to the [2022 Census of Agriculture](#), Albemarle is home to about 860 farms, down five percent from 2017. Most of these farms—65 percent—are 10-179 acres in size. While production systems are diverse and varied, vegetables, fruits and berries, and hay, as well as horses and sheep, are particularly important to the county's

agricultural economy. The diverse agricultural landscape includes cropland, pastureland, and woodland, with the latter two categories covering slightly more acreage.

Given the high number of farms in the county, there is ample opportunity to pursue conservation opportunities and promote stewardship of natural resources. In Virginia, as elsewhere in the U.S., [Soil and Water Conservation Districts \(SWCDs\)](#) are leaders in this work. SWCDs are political subdivisions established to conserve and protect natural resources, including soil, water, and other related ecosystems. Essentially the grassroots of conservation, district staff work with landowners and communities to develop and implement conservation plans and practices, tailoring their services to meet local needs and priorities.

The [Thomas Jefferson SWCD](#) serves Albemarle and three other counties in the area. It is one of the largest SWCDs in Virginia, covering nearly 2,000 square miles.

THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD



Over the years, they have been receiving more and more money from the state to deliver both technical and financial assistance to farmers to enhance their conservation efforts. The money is welcomed, and it's making a huge impact—but it can at times be difficult to get “on the ground.”

To address this challenge, the Thomas Jefferson SWCD teamed up with Albemarle County in 2020 to conduct strategic—and effective—conservation outreach, aligned with both of their goals and visions.

Approach

In 2019, leaders at the Thomas Jefferson SWCD knew that a tremendous influx of new state funding was on the horizon. Previously, their SWCD received roughly \$700,000 per year, which had recently increased to \$1 million. The funding then jumped to \$3 million—and now more than \$7 million per year. Looking at the horizon back then, they realized that they needed a strategy to enhance their outreach and take steps to spend this money wisely in pursuit of their conservation goals.

Anne Coates, who serves as the Executive Director of the Thomas Jefferson SWCD, went to Albemarle County leaders with a bold idea to fund an outreach position for her team. Doing so would enable a full-time staff person to focus exclusively on raising awareness about the conservation opportunities available to farmers. This person could do in-person outreach and events. They could improve the SWCD's social media presence. They could support the newsletter and help create a communications strategy. They could, in short, get more farmers interested in conservation and help put more funding on the ground.

“

We were going from receiving \$1 million a year to more than \$3 million a year to support conservation in our district, and I wasn't sure how we'd get all that new money out the door.

”

**ANNE COATES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THOMAS JEFFERSON SOIL AND WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

“We were in frequent enough communication with [Albemarle County leaders] that we understood their priorities and goals,” says Coates. “I said to them, ‘This is outside money coming into your community, and it's a lot of it.’ I just happened to mention that we were going from receiving \$1 million a year to more than \$3 million a year to support conservation in our district, and I wasn't sure how we'd get all that new money out the door.”

According to Coates, their response was: “Well, maybe we can help.”

Crucially, Coates and her team were willing to compromise. When Albemarle leaders asked about the cost of a position like this, Coates explained that the role did not necessarily have to be “permanent.” They could make the new outreach position a one-year role, which was more palatable to the county from a funding standpoint yet still helpful for the SWCD in that current moment. Plus, it would lay the foundation for improved outreach and conservation communication in the future. Coates emphasized that this small local investment would help put state funds to use in the county, which was a major selling point.

Ultimately, Albemarle County agreed to fund the one-year outreach position, in part because they decided to use stormwater planning funds to cover costs since improved conservation practices would help address these issues. Coates and others from the Thomas Jefferson SWCD worked with county leaders to design the job description, and then they posted the role. They hired their outreach coordinator in early 2020, just a few weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic began.

Immediately, the outreach coordinator began to assess communication efforts with other staff members. She saw that their outreach efforts were not coordinated. Multiple different staff members were sending out different messages to the public at the same time, drowning out each other's reach and, as Coates said, "stepping on each other's toes." The coordinator helped create a communications calendar to ensure that different outreach messages did not overlap or conflict.

Further, the coordinator, in partnership with program staff members, created an annual list of timely topics. "We realized that, as part of our outreach, you really have to put information out when the farmer needs to see it—not just at any random time," Coates explains. "We started to make sure our messages were synced up with on-the-ground things that were happening. Is it hay cutting season? If it is, let's share information about how we can help farmers in that process. If it's not hay cutting season, let's not do a social media post about that."

That insight may sound simple—but for a team so maxed out with programmatic responsibilities, having someone to develop a communications strategy was a huge improvement.

The outreach coordinator also dove deeper into social media engagement, a tool that has become more popular with farmers. They did a [series of posts](#) about agricultural conservation practices and the ways that the SWCD could help farmers learn more and implement their own conservation strategies. They led traditional efforts, too: posting flyers in gas stations and farm stores, placing brochures at the public libraries, and including stories in their newsletters. They collected analytics on

all this outreach, helping them further refine their communications strategies.

Outcomes

The Albemarle County-funded outreach position at Thomas Jefferson SWCD only lasted one year—but the impacts continue to be felt today.

"Traditionally, word of mouth has been our biggest outreach tool," mentions Coates. Making sure people are satisfied with service and then encouraging them to tell their friends and neighbors is a tried-and-true method. Before they created the outreach position, Coates estimates that more than 90 percent of the calls and emails they received from farmers and landowners came because of word-of-mouth outreach. Thanks to the coordinator, engagement began to change. "In the most recent survey analysis we did, where we asked people to let us know how they heard about our work,

only about 60–70 percent was from word of mouth. The rest came from other methods, like social media. That's still a lot for word of mouth," she says, "but the numbers suggest that we're reaching more people in different ways."

The most impressive outcome of the coordinator's diverse outreach was to help get the increased state funding on the ground. Nowadays, there is no shortage, says Coates, of people who want to work with their district. This helps them achieve their conservation practice adoption goals and leads to more positive impacts. Given the rapid rise in state funding amounts and the number of trained staff it takes to deliver assistance, Thomas Jefferson SWCD still struggles on occasion



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD

to spend all their allocated conservation dollars—but it is not because of poor outreach or because of limited awareness.

Plus, even though the funding for the full-time position has now gone away, Coates was able to set aside funds and time for one of her team members to focus part of their work on communications and outreach. Because of the former full-time outreach role, they are now able to do so with a foundation in place and a successful strategy to reference.

Lessons Learned

Coates has advice for others who want to advance on-the-ground conservation from the local level. Most importantly, she says that districts and localities need to work together to figure out what their needs are. “At that time in 2019–2020, I needed an outreach person because I was getting more money coming in. The staff that I have that are really good at being in the field—I couldn’t pull them in and say, ‘Can you sit around for half the day and do social media posts?’ No, I need them to do what they’re good at. I think for me, it’s knowing your district and your needs.”

Another lesson relates to relationships. That was really the key, Coates said, in partnering with Albemarle County on this effort. “We have a long-standing relationship with them. So when we pitched this idea, it wasn’t a cold call. It was built on the success of other programs.”

Coates’ final “lesson learned” is a word of caution: “Outreach can be a double-edged sword.” People are now well aware of how the Thomas Jefferson SWCD can serve them—and their office gets lots of calls. “We’re at a point now,” she says, “where we could do no outreach and still have our phones ringing off the hook!” Having the staff capacity to respond to the results of effective outreach can be a challenge, but it is a good one to have.

For local leaders who want to support on-the-ground conservation, creative partnerships with SWCDs can be a productive path forward. When rooted in existing relationships, new efforts have a chance to thrive.



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD

“
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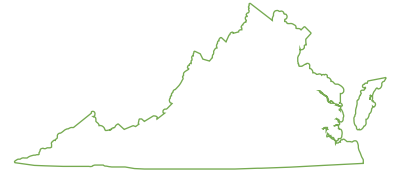
**ANNE COATES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THOMAS JEFFERSON SOIL AND WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**



THOMAS JEFFERSON SWCD

Additional Resources

The following section contains a variety of resources to help communities plan for agriculture. In the online toolkit, users can find different data sources, tools, and reports that support this work. In this compiled PDF, readers can see a list of organizations across Virginia that can assist in different elements of planning for agriculture efforts.



Supporting Organizations



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Many different organizations, government departments, and associations exist to help local leaders in some or all parts of the planning for agriculture process. Below are several entities operating within Virginia that may be able to offer assistance and support.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is a national nonprofit organization that works to save the land that sustains us by protection farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land.

www.farmland.org

- › **AFT's Farmland Information Center** is a clearinghouse for information about farmland protection and stewardship. It has a staffed answer service and searchable website with extensive resources to support planning activities.

www.farmlandinfo.org

American Planning Association (APA) is a national organization which elevates and unites the planning profession to help communities, their leaders, and residents anticipate and navigate change.

<https://www.planning.org>

- › **APA'S *Sustaining Places: Best Practices for Comprehensive Plans*** provides a framework to turn principles into a plan and score the results, providing processes and pointers for communities to use. <https://www.planning.org/publications/report/9026901/>

- › Virginia has a robust, active state chapter of the APA. The chapter offers many opportunities for learning, and they encourage connections among planning professionals across the state.

<https://virginia.planning.org/>

The **Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)** is an economic development partnership entity of the federal government and 13 state governments focusing on 423 counties across the Appalachian Region. ARC's mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia.

<https://www.arc.gov/>

CivicWell (formerly the Local Government Commission) supports leaders responding to the climate crisis and its impact on their communities. It is a nonprofit organization which equips, connects, and cultivates leaders working toward a more sustainable

and resilient future through policy guidance, collaborative partnerships, and direct assistance.

<https://civicwell.org/about-us/>

Cooperative Extension is a nationwide research and education system which, among other things, supports agriculture, natural resources, health and nutrition, community development, and emergency preparedness. It operates through state land-grant universities in partnership with federal, state, and local governments, and the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Extension agents provide technical assistance and translate science to farmers, ranchers, and the general public. <https://ext.vt.edu/>

- The **Small Farm Outreach Program**, a part of Cooperative Extension at Virginia State University, educates and empowers small farmers and ranchers to own, operate and sustain farms and ranches independently with agricultural training programs that improve farm management skills and quality of life. <https://www.ext.vsu.edu/small-farm-outreach-program>

GO Virginia is a bipartisan, business-led economic development initiative that is changing the way Virginia's diverse regions collaborate on economic and workforce development activities. It supports programs—including in agriculture—to create more high-paying jobs through incentivized collaboration between business, education, and government to

diversify and strengthen the economy in every region of the Commonwealth. <https://govirginia.org/>

International City/County Management Association (ICMA) is an association of professional city and county managers and other employees who serve local governments dedicated to creating and sustaining thriving communities throughout the world.

<https://icma.org/>

National Agricultural Law Center has a library of subject-based reading rooms each with a comprehensive list of electronic resources for an agricultural or food law topic. Links are provided to major statutes, regulations, case law, articles, publications, and other research resources.

<https://nationalaglawcenter.org/research-by-topic/>

National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is a nonprofit organization that represents America's 3,000 conservation districts and the people who serve on their governing boards. NACD promotes responsible natural resources management and conservation by representing locally-led conservation districts and their associations through grassroots advocacy, education and partnerships.

<https://www.nacdnet.org/about-nacd/>

- **Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts:** <https://vaswcd.org/>



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National Association of Counties (NACo) serves county elected officials and employees to advocate for county priorities, promote exemplary county policies and practices, nurture leadership skills and expand knowledge networks, optimize county resources, and enrich public understanding of county government. <https://www.naco.org/what-we-do/about-naco>

National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) provides advocacy, education, research, and training for the nation's regional development organizations. The association and its members promote regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions to strengthen the economic competitiveness and quality of life across America's local communities. <https://www.nado.org/about/>

National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) serves as the national voice for regions by advocating for regional cooperation to address community planning and development opportunities and issues. NARC members include regional councils, councils of governments, regional planning and development agencies, Metropolitan Planning Organizations and other regional organizations. <https://narc.org/>

National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT) serves more than 13,000 towns and townships across the U.S. to enhance the ability of smaller

communities to deliver public services, economic vitality, and good government to their citizens. <https://www.natat.org/>

Piedmont Environmental Council works to protect and restore the lands and waters of the Virginia Piedmont while building stronger, more sustainable communities. As part of their work, PEC helps communities pursue a thoughtful approach to land use planning that balances growth and development with natural and cultural resource protection. <https://www.pecva.org/>

The **Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission** is a 28-member body created by the 1999 General Assembly. Its mission is the promotion of economic growth and development in formerly tobacco-dependent communities, using proceeds of the national tobacco settlement. To date, the Commission has created tens of thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in Southern and Southwest Virginia. <https://revitalizeva.org/>

United States Conference of Mayors is the official non-partisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. Members set organizational policies and goals, share information and best practices, and otherwise contribute to the development of urban policy. <https://www.usmayors.org/>

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the federal agency that administers federal laws related to agriculture and forestry, food and nutrition, natural resource conservation, rural development, and related issues. It is comprised of 29 agencies and has offices at more than 4,500 locations across the U.S. and abroad.

<https://www.usda.gov/>

- » Agricultural Marketing Service:
<https://www.ams.usda.gov>
- » Farm Service Agency:
<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/index>
- » National Institute of Food and Agriculture:
<https://nifa.usda.gov/>
- » Natural Resources and Conservation Service:
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>

Vermont Law School Center for Agriculture and Food Systems works to address food systems challenges, provides legal services, and develops resources to empower the communities it serves. <https://www.vermontlaw.edu/academics/centers-and-programs/center-for-agriculture-and-food-systems>

The Virginia Association of Counties (VACo) exists to support county officials and to effectively represent, promote, and protect the interests of counties to better serve the people of Virginia. VACo's missions are to be: efficient, innovative and goal-oriented; an effective force representing local governments at the state and national levels in legislative and regulatory processes; and a valuable resource network for planning and implementing new ideas and technologies. <https://www.vaco.org/>

The Virginia Association of Planning District Commissions (VAPDC) is an organization comprised of the 21 Planning District Commissions/Regional Councils in Virginia. VAPDC works to bring diverse resources together at the regional level in partnership with local, state, and federal entities to strengthen regions and the Commonwealth. <https://www.vapdc.org/>

Virginia Community Food Connections works to create healthy, food-secure communities and strong, equitable regional food systems by ensuring fresh and local produce is accessible and affordable for all. The organization brings together organizations including small farmers markets, local nonprofits, and key stakeholders to address food security, farmer viability, and affordable access to fresh produce.

<https://virginiacfc.org/>

The **Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)** promotes the economic growth and development of Virginia agriculture, provides consumer protection, and encourages environmental stewardship. Headquartered in Richmond, the agency has several field offices, four regional diagnostic animal health laboratories and a global network of representatives promoting Virginia products internationally. <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/>

The **Virginia Farm Bureau** supports farmers through a number of programs to create an environment where agriculture can prosper in order to improve the lives of Virginians. It works in the legislative, business, leadership, and education realms. <https://www.vafb.com/supporting-farmers/farmers-in-action>

The **Virginia Foundation for Agriculture, Innovation and Rural Sustainability (FAIRS)** is a 501(c)(3) foundation organized in Virginia. It is a Cooperative Development Center offering technical assistance to those transitioning into, or involved in, value added agriculture. These services are offered through assistance from and cooperation of our partners. <https://vafairs.com/>

The Virginia Land and Energy Navigator (VaLEN) brings together GIS information related to prime farm and forestland, land conservation, brownfields, transmission lines, and other topics to support land use planning and decision-making at the local level. VaLEN's goal is to support and inform decision-making and can be used to balance economic development and natural resources conservation. https://valen.ext.vt.edu/web_portal/about

The Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement provides research and university connections to organizations and communities, helping them to think strategically and find a pathway to economic prosperity. <https://cece.vt.edu/>

The **Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service** offers rigorous training programs and nationally recognized applied research in service to the public good. Our non-partisan, reliable services help policymakers and elected officials, students, governments, and community leaders in Virginia and beyond. <https://www.coopercenter.org/>



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