

MINUTES

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF HENDERSON**

**BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 2024**

The Henderson County Board of Commissioners met for a Special Called Meeting at 5:30 p.m. in the Steven D. Wyatt Auditorium located in the Patton Building of the Blue Ridge Community College campus at 180 W Campus Drive in Flat Rock, NC.

Those present were: Chairman Rebecca McCall, Vice-Chair J. Michael Edney, Commissioner Daniel Andreotta, Commissioner David Hill, Commissioner William Lapsley, County Manager John Mitchell, Assistant County Manager Amy Brantley, Attorney Russ Burrell, and Clerk to the Board Denisa Lauffer.

Also present were Community Development Director Christopher Todd, Engineer Marcus Jones, Emergency Management Director Jimmy Brissie, Chief Communications Officer Mike Morgan, Infrastructure Manager Mike McKinney, Planning Director Autumn Radcliff, Planner Liz Hansen, and Director of Facility Services Andrew Griffin. Deputy Tracy Davis provided security.

CALL TO ORDER/WELCOME

Chairman McCall called the meeting to order and welcomed all in attendance.

INVOCATION

Nolan Ramsey provided the invocation.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chairman McCall led the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

Chairman McCall thanked the audience for attending the special called meeting to discuss the future of Agriculture in Henderson County. She said she was impressed and a bit overwhelmed by the turnout, as the auditorium seated 105 people. All the seats were filled, and people lined the aisles and filled the lobby. She said that this demonstrates the passion for farming in our community. She continued that the county has a rich history of agriculture, and it is important to keep our agricultural heritage alive moving forward.

McCall said that the county was nearing the end of the development of the 2045 Comprehensive Plan, which was one of the reasons for tonight's meeting. She said there had been a lot of input regarding what farming needs to be in the next twenty years. The 2020 Comprehensive Plan also addressed agriculture, and as a result of the 2020 Comprehensive Plan, Agribusiness (or AgHC) was formed in 2012. AgHC, she said, is making some changes that the Board wanted to share with everyone tonight and also to allow the attendees to speak and give their opinions about those changes.

County Manager John Mitchell said he had asked Planning Department staff to put together some data points to share at the meeting. He said there would be several opportunities for public input. One was tonight's meeting, where people could either speak at the microphone during public comment or share their feedback on notecards provided in the lobby. He said there was also an

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email address where citizens could email their comments. The email address provided was agriculture@hendersoncountync.gov.

Planner Liz Hansen presented the following information on the current state of agriculture in Henderson County and historical data from the last decade.



Ms. Hansen explained that a Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) is an area of Henderson County set aside by landowners for agricultural use only. VAD was introduced to the county in 1991 through the Farmland Preservation Ordinance.

Voluntary Ag Districts – 2023 Update

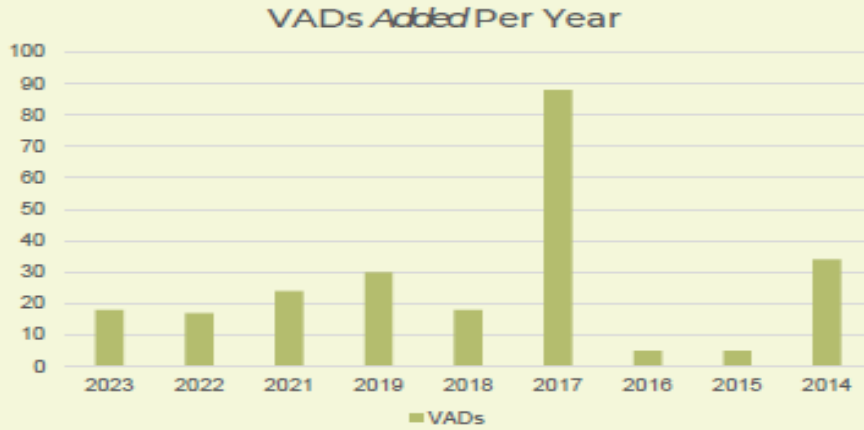
District	Parcels	Landowners/Farms	Acres
Blue Ridge	88	35	1320.29
Edneyville	75	30	1716.66
French Broad	36	16	827.57
Fruitland	101	38	2418.73
Green River	15	10	3286.72
Jeter Mountain	0	0	0
Lower Hoopers Creek	20	4	413.4
Mills River	36	15	1005.89
Mountain Page	11	5	153.89
Total December 2023	382	153	11143.15

Voluntary Agricultural District Totals

Date	Parcels	Landowners/Farms	Acres
September 2021	364	149	10901.96
December 2021	377	156	11331.64
December 2022	390	158	11525.02
April 2023	381	152	11116.35
December 2023	382	153	11143.15

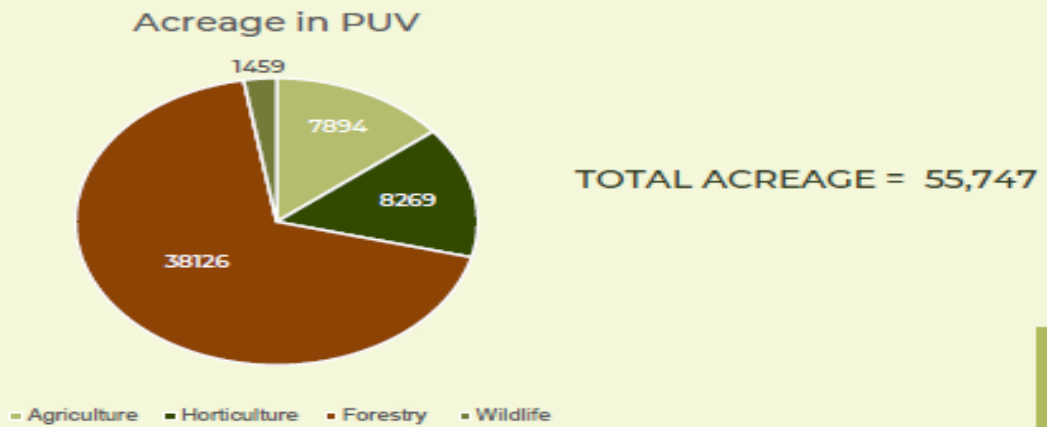
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Voluntary Agricultural Districts

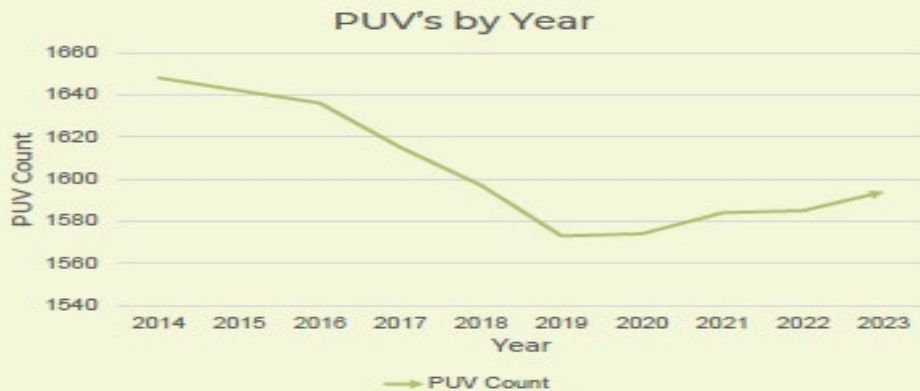


The Present Use Value Program allows land to be taxed on the present use value instead of the market use value of the property.

Present Use Value Program

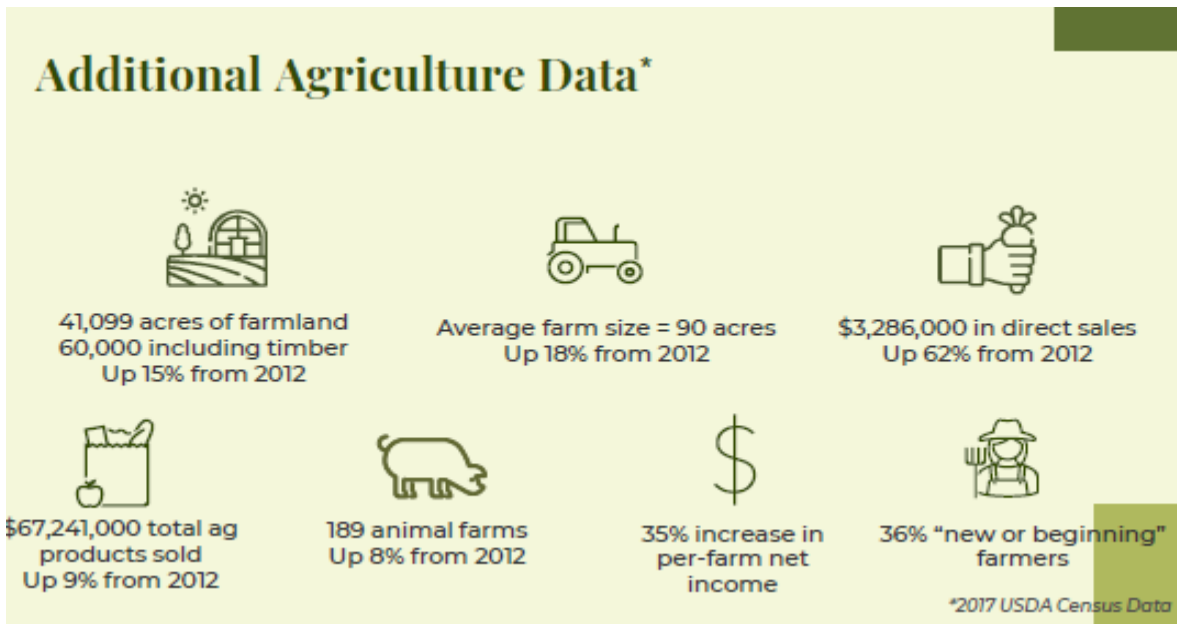


Present Use Value Program

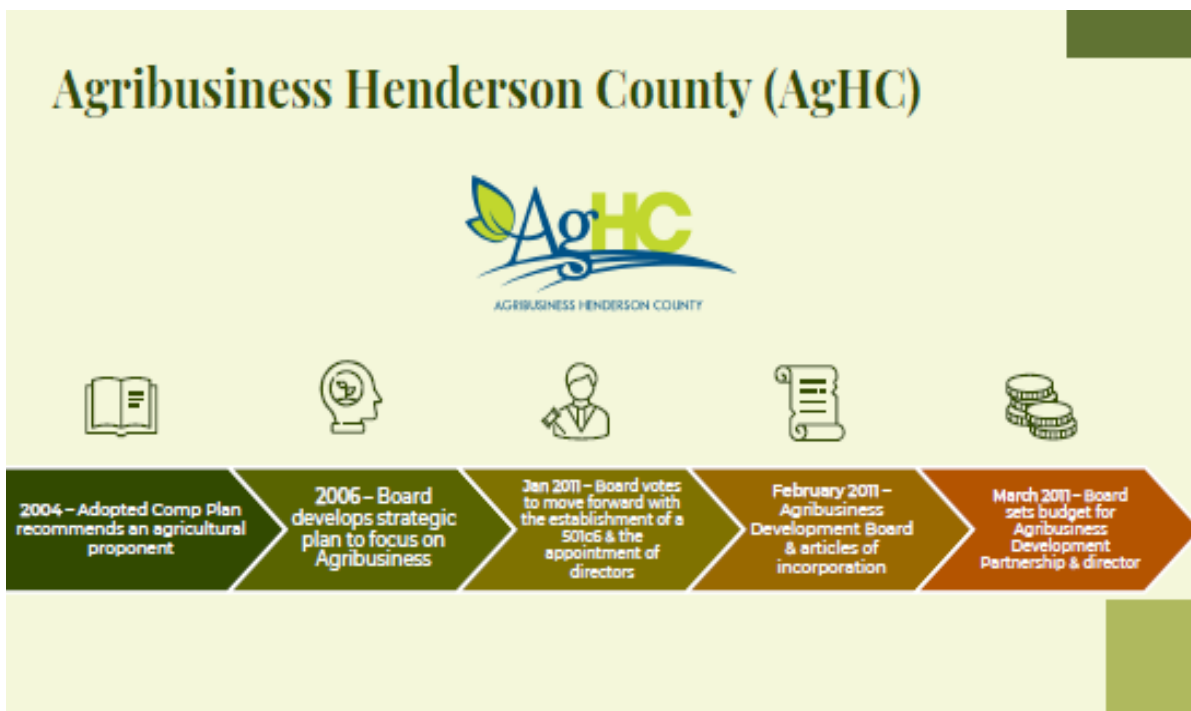


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Ms. Hansen stated that the following information was pulled from the 2017 USDA Census, which was a little outdated. However, it has shown growth in various agriculture applications since 2012. She shared that the 2022 County-Level USDA Census Data will be released mid-February.



The 2020 County Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2004, included several agricultural-based recommendations, including creating an entity such as AgHC. As a result, AgHC was officially funded and started in 2011.



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Ms. Hansen said that since FY2012, the county has budgeted and allocated over \$1.7 million toward AgHC. Additionally, there have been other agricultural operations, including a grant that Blue Ridge Community College received in 2022 to fund the construction of a new greenhouse to provide support for their Horticulture program, and other larger greenhouse operations have moved into the county in the last several years.



Hansen said the county wants to continue to preserve land for agricultural uses. Present programs such as the Voluntary Ag Districts, Present Use Value Program, and AgHC have contributed to the success of preserving agriculture. Other tools to preserve agriculture that the county has not tried include the creation of a Farmland Preservation Fund and the use of Agriculture Conservation Easements.



In closing, Hansen encouraged citizens to share questions or comments by utilizing the email designated for agriculture.

Have a question or comment?
 Send an email to:
agriculture@hendersoncountync.gov

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Chairman McCall invited AgHC to present information on what it has done since its creation in 2011 and to explain current changes that are taking place as they move into the future.

AgHC Executive Director Mark Williams thanked the board and those in attendance for the opportunity. He said it was encouraging to see so many people interested in the future of agriculture in our county. He shared that he chosen to take early retirement from the county last fall. Now that AgHC has transitioned from a county operation to a non-profit organization, he was hired as a consultant.

Mr. Williams shared what AgHC has done since it began in 2011 and an update on where they are headed.



www.AgriHC.org

Mission

**Preserve and Grow
Agriculture & Agribusiness
in Henderson County**

(through a business approach and
improving profitability)

What we do to achieve the Mission:

1. **Ag-Related Business Development**
2. **General Business Support for the Ag Industry**
3. **Identify Marketing & Production Opportunities**
4. **Education and Community Involvement**
5. **Advocacy and Public Relations**
6. **General Promotion of the Ag Industry**
7. **Relationship Building - Connecting People and Cultivating Synergies**

ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

- Henderson County Initiative – began June 2011
- Non-Profit Corporation 501(c)(6) - April 2013
- Public-Private Partnership for the purpose of Ag Economic Development
- Public Support/Partners
 - Henderson County
 - Town of Mills River
 - City of Hendersonville
- 67 Private Member/Partners
- 17 Board Members



HENDERSON COUNTY Agribusiness Economic Impact

Total "Farm Gate" Receipts	\$130M
Agribusiness (Value-Added)	\$655M
Agri-Tourism	<u>\$ 90M</u>
TOTAL INCOME	\$875 Million

TOTAL EMPLOYMENT 5,400 Jobs
(Multiplier Affect of 2.8 = 15,000 Additional Jobs)

* Data Compiled by Agribusiness Henderson County 2023

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Biggest Growth Areas

- 1. Controlled Environment Agriculture**
(Greenhouses and Vertical Farms)
- 2. Intensive Farming Practices**
(Investing a lot of resources and labor into small tracts of land in order to increase yield – Trellis Apple Orchards, Vineyards, Plasticulture Farming)
- 3. Processing & Value-Added**
(Packing Facilities, Wineries, Cideries)

Ag-Related Business Development (Economic Development Projects)

Tri-Hishtil
Bold Rock
Flat Rock Cider
Flat Rock Fresh Produce & Apples
Bitwater Farms
Lakeside Produce
BrightFarms
AgriFacture
Ohalo Genetics
“Project Eagle” – New

Economic Development Projects Directly Attributed to AgHC Efforts

Capital Investment	\$193,000,000
New Jobs Created	585

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RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Capital Investment	\$193,000,000
Added Tax Revenue to the County	\$832,000/Yr
Grants Received and Supported	\$2.5 Million+
Ag Property Transactions Facilitated (35 Parcels)	1029 acres

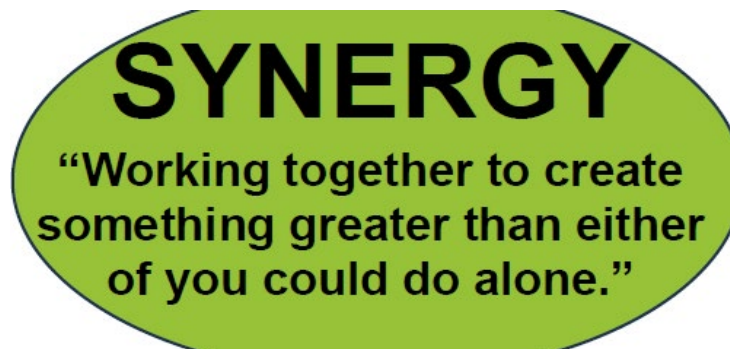


Mr. Williams said the most significant fact he could present is that every dollar invested in AgHC yields \$4.38 in tax revenues.

General Business Support

- **New and Existing Operations**
- **Large or Small**
- **Member and Non-Member**
- **Qualifications to be considered Ag**
- **Farm Sales Tax Exemption**
- **PUV Assistance**
- **Voluntary Ag District enrollment**
- **Zoning Issues – Ag Exemptions**
- **Permitting – Building, Utilities, etc.**
- **Labor and Housing**

Williams stated the AgHC works with everyone, not just the big farms and greenhouses, as some have said. He said support is provided to anybody and everybody, whether they are a member or non-member.



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(Packing Facilities, Wineries, Cideries)

Mr. Williams said that the apple-growing community had been discouraged because there is no apple processor in the county and may believe there has been too much focus on bringing greenhouses and wineries to Henderson County.

Williams said there had been some confusion about AgHC wanting to take over the idea of being “the group” for a Farmland Preservation Program. He said they do their part in trying to educate people about farmland preservation and are still very supportive of the concept. However, they did not particularly want to do it but would consider it if asked.

Biggest Challenges

1. Labor – Domestic Unavailable, H-2A
2. Government Regulations
3. Weather – Late Freeze, Flood, Hail
4. Land – High Cost, Development

Farmland Preservation efforts

- Present Use Value (PUV)
- Land Development Code (LDC) - 2007
- Farmland Preservation Plan - 2007
- Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD)
- Enhanced Voluntary Ag Districts (EVAD)
- AgHC formed - 2011

TOP REASONS AGRICULTURE IS WORTH SAVING IN HENDERSON COUNTY

- Economic Benefits
- Our Future Generation
- Food Security
- Quality of Life

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In closing, Mr. Williams thanked everyone for their support of AgHC.

Chairman McCall recognized NC State Representative Jennifer Balkcom and a group of students in attendance who were members of the Future Farmers of America.

PUBLIC COMMENT

1. Alan Ward stated that he did not have a clear idea of where AgHC was going. He said some good relationships had developed, but there were also some questions as far as the purpose of AgHC, especially with the money that has been put in. He believes we are way behind on farmland preservation.
2. Don Ward said he was representing Apple Ridge Farms and said they were one of the largest apple growers in the county. He stated he and other farmers he has met with have never been approached by AgHC for anything and had never been asked to become a member.
3. Sandra Oates said she was an AgHC Board member and thought the board had been good in reaching out to and helping a lot of people but said sometimes you need to reach in yourself to get things out of a board, bank, or whomever it is you are doing business with. She said tourism is a big part of her business, and those who sell apples or have roadside stand businesses benefit from it. She believed that instead of just looking at the land, we should look at these businesses bringing tourists into our county.
4. Linda Pryor said agriculture has deep roots in Henderson County, and so many people attending the meeting speaks to that. She stated the farmers all needed to unite to keep agriculture sustainable in Henderson County. She hopes the Board's goals include keeping agriculture strong in the county, considering all types of farms when making decisions, and providing transparency, openness, and honesty.
5. Jason Davis, who stood at the podium with his three young sons, told the Board those boys are why he continues to farm. He suggested that the Board hold more meetings to discuss agriculture in Henderson County. He said he hopes the county and the state will continue investing in agriculture.
6. Burt Lemkes with Trishistil commended AgHc and Mark Williams for the help his company had received in establishing their business in Henderson County.
7. Gary Steiner has a small farm in the county, along with a greenhouse and beehives. He feels that farmers face daily harassment and developers are not held to the same standard. He was thankful for the agricultural deferment program.
8. Judy Justice with D & M Orchards farms apples. She said the local apple business is struggling as the county has no apple processor. She said the Apple business needs help.
9. Jimmy Cowan shared his ideas for the future of agriculture in the county. He believed that when making decisions, the board needs to do what is right for society, not what may be right for any individual sector. Funding and initiatives should be done in a way that unifies the industry and is inclusive. This is to be done in a way that provides agriculture economic growth and current farmer and farmland support and protection. He said the number one way to preserve farms and farmland in the county is for farmers to be profitable with clear and necessary but non-excessive regulations. He believes the county needs to demonstrate a clear commitment to the future of agriculture by providing a much-talked-about and sought-after consolidated Ag Services Building. He thinks there needs to be a voluntary farmland preservation program through the Soil and Water Conservation District. He said Conserving Carolina does great work but has a much broader focus when talking about

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agriculture conservation. He believes Soil and Water need to have the ability to hold farmland conservation easements. He would like the county to commit the funds for rollback taxes from land sold out of present use value to a Farmland Preservation Fund. He said they will not agree on everything, but the local farmers must work together toward common goals.

10. Kelly Cantrell said the goals outlined in the mission statement for AgHC have not wavered. He compared economic development to a pendulum swing, which he said is currently swinging toward commercial greenhouses. Still, he believes the swing will turn to other farm businesses in the future. He said economic development comes in waves and is not “stuck” to one industry. He said the most significant thing he has gained from AgHC was the connections formed with every member and new member. He believes that real relationships are made during the five-minute conversations before and after a meeting.
11. Joseph Decola said he and his wife are the owners of the “biggest-littlest” vineyard you have never heard of, Corkscrew Willow Vineyard. He said while looking for a place to start the vineyard, he came across AgHC. He found working with Mark Williams excellent; Mark helped the couple make the necessary connections.
12. Stan Rhodes talked about the problems with freight for the apples. He would like to see a farmer’s co-op in the county where any farmer can sell their commodities or products. He said God and the farmers are the most important things in our lives.
13. Jeff Young expressed gratitude for the Board of Commissioners' support of AgHC since its inception. He said AgHC is a valuable tool, and preserving and promoting the farming culture is a proactive effort. He stated he supported Jimmy Cowan's earlier suggestions and urged the Board to lean into those suggestions.
14. Paul Shoemaker, a local farmer from Mills River who sells at several farmer's markets, said that the customers repeatedly expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to buy locally grown vegetables from the farmer who grows them. He stated the “farmer’s market movement” has been taken off in the county. Twenty years ago, he said there was one farmer’s market, and today, there are five: Etowah, Mills River, Flat Rock, and two on Saturday mornings in Hendersonville. He said together, during the summer months, these five markets likely sell vegetables, fruits, meat products, and baked goods to more than 1000 customers weekly. He believes preserving farmland property needs to become a top priority for the Board of Commissioners.

Chairman McCall thanked all of those who spoke at the meeting. She encouraged audience members to share their comments on cards provided in the lobby or to email to agriculture@hendersoncountync.gov. She said that the meeting was not all about AgHC. Still, the Board had taken the opportunity to share with the citizens that AgHC was no longer a county department; it had rolled off to become its own entity, much like what happened with the Partnership for Economic Development. It rolled off and became its own entity and has since become very successful in bringing jobs and industry to our community.

McCall encouraged those who were not a part of the Voluntary Ag District to consider joining as it does not cost anything nor does it affect its members in any way. It helps the Board track how much farmland is actively being farmed in the county, which is very important in moving forward.

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Vice-Chair Edney said he had been a commissioner for a long time and found this meeting to be one of the most productive in which he has been involved. He stated the speakers were talking from the heart; they were on point and identifying what and where many problems are while also providing possible solutions. He expressed his gratitude for their comments.

Chairman McCall said that with farmland preservation on the horizon, it would be a topic of conversation and planning this year. She wondered who was going to farm that farmland. She said she believed some of those future farmers were in the room. However, there were other people interested in farming who were not raised on a farm and did not have the same opportunities as those who were. They (the county) want to allow those people to achieve their dreams. She said Blue Ridge Community College had agreed to start an apprenticeship program for farmers. She said the program would start in the summer and shared that to become a part of the program, farmers will need to send an email to agriculture@hendersoncountync.gov. The apprenticeship participants are paid employees, but they are employees who are getting an education and will learn the business side of farming, as well as about insurance and regulations, and the farmers are their mentors. She shared there would be more details and in-depth discussion at the upcoming Apple School next week.

In closing, Charman McCall said that in order to keep farming in Henderson County, we all had to work together.

Chairman McCall made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:05 p.m. All voted in favor, and the motion carried.

ADJOURN

Attest:

Denisa A. Lauffer, Clerk to the Board

William Lapsley, Chairman

APPROVED: