

AGRICULTURE ELEMENT

Introduction

Henderson County has a long history of agricultural production, and agriculture is highly valued by urban residents and rural communities. It joins tourism, retirement, manufacturing, and commerce as a pillar of the county economy. The nature of agriculture has evolved over the years, but changes have become even more pronounced recently. For example, even a few years ago, competition from Chinese producers of apple juice would have been hard to imagine. Henderson County is growing rapidly as a result of the high quality of life that is attracting retirees and professionals seeking a small town atmosphere, a moderate climate, and mountain scenery. Development is taking some land out of farm production and placing price pressures on other farmland. Local action is needed by farmers and by our community as a whole for agriculture to continue to thrive.

Positive changes are also occurring. Farmers are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial by shifting to crops that are in demand. Trees and shrubs, bedding plants, greenhouse crops, fresh vegetables, organic produce, and value-added products are a few examples.

As the following discussion of related public input will show, agriculture is important to Henderson County's residents. The success of agriculture in Henderson County ultimately lies in the creativity and drive of our farmers. However, there are many tools that the County can bring to bear on the problem of farmland loss and on other pressures on our agricultural economy which will help to sustain the county's agricultural community.

This Comprehensive Plan focuses on assisting the competitiveness of our agricultural enterprises and protecting the farmland base that is key to a thriving agricultural economy. This element is a summary of *A Strategy for Sustaining Henderson County's Agricultural Community* which is a separately bound document that was produced through a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program. The Recommendations and Action Strategies set forth below derive from that document.

Public Input

Public input gathered for this Comprehensive Plan clearly points to agriculture as a top priority of Henderson County residents. Much of the emphasis of that input centered

upon the aesthetic issues surrounding agriculture. Respondents to the Citizen Survey ranked the scenic rural character and open space protection just behind water and air quality protection as top issues, and they consistently indicated a willingness to address these issues via policies, regulations, and spending. Agricultural economic development, while moderately important, did not rank as high as did agricultural land protection.

The results of the Community Meetings further reinforce the Citizen Survey: the single largest topic of discussion was the desire to protect the county's agriculture and rural landscape. Here again, the emphasis tends to be on the aesthetic and quality of life values of agriculture rather than upon the economics.

Appendix II, Public Input, *Agricultural Community Meeting Summary* summarizes public input during agricultural community meetings. Perhaps the two most important points to emerge from the agricultural community meetings are as follows:

- Farmers are interested in continuing to practice agriculture, but they desire marketing and economic development assistance.
- Farmers would like to protect farmland, but most do not want protection to occur through regulation, and they cannot afford to "give away" the development value of their land without proper compensation.

Recommendations & Action Strategies

Recommendation A-01: Reduce Farmland Loss.

The preservation of agriculture as a component of the economy, a land resource, a visual feature of the landscape, and a way of life is a high priority to the citizens of Henderson County. Development pressures upon farmland in Henderson County are substantial, and farmland is a finite, "non-renewable" resource. Farmland that is converted for development is effectively forever lost. Section 2: *Land Use Trends*, which discusses changes in the county's land use patterns, measures a substantial decline in farmland acreage in Henderson County, noting that if recent trends continue, the county farmland base may decrease by half by 2017, to roughly 23,000 acres.

Farm income could be maintained by moving to crops with a better per-acre yield. Nonetheless, the loss of farmland will mean the loss of farm income, farm jobs, and less business for companies that support agriculture. It would also mean a decline in the

rural landscape that helps to draw residents to the county and that contributes to its high quality of life and tourist industry.

Numerous national, regional, and local public non-profit organizations are engaged in the protection of farmland and are equipped with the skill and expertise to do so. However, funding for farmland protection is very limited, and without more substantial resources, such organizations can succeed only in sustaining vestiges of Henderson County's agricultural heritage. Effective protection will depend upon the leveraging of existing programs with funding and upon other commitments from local government.

It cannot be the goal or responsibility of local government to preserve every acre of farmland within its jurisdiction, and this Comprehensive Plan does not establish firm protection goals. Rather, it is the intent of this Comprehensive Plan to create a planning and funding framework that maximizes the possibilities for voluntary farmland protection.

A. Consider the costs and practicality of establishing a farmland protection fund for Henderson County.

Henderson County will consider the costs and practicality of establishing a fund to support the protection of important farmland within its boundaries. Because all citizens and jurisdictions within Henderson County have an interest in the protection of farmland, the County will seek the cooperation and participation of its municipalities in the development and maintenance of such fund. If it is established, contributions to this fund should come from a number of sources, including grants and donations from Federal, State, private, and non-profit sources, as well as contributions from Henderson County and its municipalities. Among other things, a farmland protection fund should be utilized to leverage the voluntary conservation activities of the non-profit community; for public education; and for the funding of agriculture-related training and economic development activities.

B. Promote and expand voluntary agricultural districts to minimize land use conflicts and to protect farmers' right to farm.

The Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program is described in Section 2: *Factors Influencing Growth*. Participating areas are shown on Map # 07, *Agricultural Districts* (Appendix I). The program protects agriculture by minimizing conflicts between farmers and non-farming neighbors. However, the program is underutilized, in part

due to misconceptions about its relationship to land use regulations. Public education about the value of the program is necessary to expand its application within the county.

C. Ensure that County-funded economic development programs and projects support farmland protection.

Agriculture and industry are often in competition for the same land. In the future, the County is likely to provide funds or otherwise participate in the recruitment and retention of industrial businesses, as well as the development of industrial sites. The County will identify ways to pursue the protection of farmland through economic development programs and projects in which the County is involved. For example, County economic development incentives and policies should encourage the protection and the continuation of agriculture, horticulture, and forestry within flood-prone areas.

Recommendation A-02: Expand access for agricultural enterprises to economic development and tourism promotion programs and support services.

Profitability is the best farmland protection tool. But like industrial and commercial enterprises, agricultural enterprises occasionally need access to timely technical assistance and management advice, as well as access to capital, in order to sustain profitability. As farmers become more entrepreneurial and seek value-added enterprises, the line between manufacturing and agriculture often becomes less clear. As farms become a source of accommodations and tourist events, their connection to travel and tourism organizations becomes stronger. Economic development activities in western North Carolina have traditionally focused on manufacturing and tourism promotion. However, if agriculture is to succeed, it will be necessary to provide the industry with similar development attention.

D. Explore ways to make County economic development incentives more readily available to agriculture-related businesses.

E. Provide maximum benefits under Present Use Valuation Taxation program.

Under North Carolina State law, county governments are authorized to tax forest, horticultural, and agricultural land at rates that reflect their present use, rather than at their higher appraised value, so long as those properties meet certain requirements. The County will review the current status of its Present Use Valuation Taxation

program and identify ways to structure that program to best protect agriculture, horticulture, and forestry in Henderson County.

F. Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to farmers.

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, Blue Ridge Community College, and a number of other programs and organizations currently offer assistance and advice to farmers. The County will work with these organizations to ensure that such programs continue and expand in terms of content and availability, and that they continue to evolve with the needs of the agricultural community. Programming areas in need of particular attention include the following:

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| a) Helping farmers to identify new products and develop marketing strategies | d) Coordinating access to advice regarding taxation, estate planning, and other legal issues relevant to farmers |
| b) Business planning and management | e) Agricultural technical advice |
| c) Grant writing | |

G. Promote agricultural products that are produced in Henderson County.

When agricultural products such as shrubs, vegetables, and fruit are purchased from local sources, those dollars circulate in the economy roughly 2.5 times. These purchases help improve not only farmers' income but also the economic status of the community. A number of measures to promote locally-produced agricultural products should be considered:

- a) Promote local agricultural products through the existing "buy-local" efforts of the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations.
- b) Assist the Cooperative Extension Service and Henderson County Travel and Tourism Department in the development of a brochure and companion website that will promote locally-produced agricultural products to both locals and tourists.
- c) Explore ways to support local agriculture through the purchasing programs of Henderson County Government and School System
- d) Participate in the development of the Henderson County Heritage Tourism Plan, which would facilitate the development of agriculturally-related tourist programming and destinations (see Action Strategy E-03.D of the *Economic Development Element* of this Comprehensive Plan).

- e) Partner with other organizations to develop and advertise additional retail outlets for locally produced crafts and agricultural products. For example, consider aiding in the establishment of a retail facility in a high-visibility area.

Other steps should be identified and acted upon.

Other Action Strategies

The following Action Strategies are intended to implement any number of the aforementioned Recommendations.

H. Identify an agricultural proponent or facilitator.

The County will identify an agricultural facilitator on County Staff, or assign this responsibility to the Chamber of Commerce or other organization, to support Henderson County's agricultural industry. Among other things, this individual should be dedicated to grant writing, coordinating marketing and technical assistance, coordinating tourism and economic development activities, promoting agricultural districts, working to identify and protect key farmlands, and other responsibilities related to the implementation of the Recommendations and Action Strategies of this element. More generally, this individual should serve as a voice and an organizing agent within the agricultural community.

Relationship to Other Elements

The *Growth Management Strategy (GMS) Element* of this Comprehensive Plan will suggest a number of additional Recommendations and Action Strategies that will benefit farmland protection:

- a) The *GMS* will recommend the consolidation of the Henderson County Zoning Ordinance with other land development ordinances into a Land Development Code. At that time, the County will review its zoning requirements to ensure that on-farm sales, farm-related bed and breakfasts, agri-tourism related businesses, and other secondary agriculture-related operations are permitted where appropriate.
- b) The *GMS* will recommend that most dense residential development and most commercial and industrial development be encouraged within the urbanized core of the county. Such a development pattern will make better, more efficient use of infrastructure in urban areas and keep down the cost of government services, thereby accommodating growth while reducing the development pressure on outlying farmland.

- c) Current County land development regulations contain provisions allowing developers to create “open space” developments, whereby a portion of the project is permanently set aside from development while the development potential from that portion is transferred to the remaining area to be developed. The GMS will recommend that such provisions be carried forward into future land development ordinances and that they be enhanced through generous incentives that encourage the protection of agricultural and other sensitive natural areas in exchange for additional development potential.
- d) The GMS will recommend that, should the State of North Carolina ultimately enable local governments to do so, Henderson County should consider establishing a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. Please see the *Growth Management Strategy* of this Comprehensive Plan for more information regarding TDR programs.
- e) The GMS will recommend that Henderson County’s land development regulations be modified to include setbacks and/or buffer requirements for newly constructed residential developments that adjoin existing agricultural land uses.

Section 4 of this Comprehensive Plan will set forth a community-based planning framework for future planning in Henderson County. Key opportunities for agricultural, horticultural, and forestland protection should be identified as part of each Community Plan. Among other things, Community Plans should provide a basis for the application of farmland protection funds envisioned in Action Strategy (A) of this recommendation.

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