



**RURAL/AGRICULTURAL
Draft Text (July 7, 2023)**

Goal

The rural character of the county will remain an integral and vital component to Hanover’s culture and economy. Hanover County will strive to support agricultural and forestry uses and maintain the majority of the County for rural heritage. Sustaining the rural character of the County enhances and improves the quality of life for all citizens.

Why It Matters

Hanover County’s rural character is one of its most important assets, and residents have expressed interest in preserving that character. One of the guiding principles identified during the public engagement process was to maintain the County’s predominately rural character. County residents have expressed a significant connection to Hanover’s rural heritage and lifestyle, regardless of where they reside in the County. Hanover County is predominantly a rural locality in terms of land area. Approximately 78% of the County is located outside of the Suburban Service Area and the majority of that land is designated for rural/agriculture.

The rural character of the County is valued due to the scenic quality, natural environment, and fiscal health. Preserving large areas of land to promote an agricultural economy preserves the county’s rural character, provides for the long-term viability of abundant wildlife, provides food products, minimizes the need for urban infrastructure and services, and enhances the quality of life for our citizens. Preserving agricultural industries will help slow the conversion of rural lands to low-density residential uses, and therefore help stem rising service delivery costs to outlying areas.

This section of the Comprehensive Plan provides guidance regarding policies and programs that can be implemented that help ensure our vision for the County to be predominantly rural and for these areas to remain rural for the foreseeable future. It is important to promote the idea of agriculture as a desired use. While the open space is enjoyed by many, and is a valuable community amenity, discourage the view of agriculture as permanent open space, and do not expect farmers to carry the burden. In addition, this chapter will identify strategies to address how rural character can be incorporated into the Suburban Service Area.

Measuring Our Progress

- ~~Acreeage of Forestal and Agricultural Land Converted to a Different Use~~ ~~Number of Farm Conversions to Non-Agricultural Use~~
- Number of Projects Promoted through Economic Development for Agriculture/Agri-Business Type Uses

- Number of Projects Incorporating Rural Design Features/Characteristics

Quick Facts

- In 2017, there were 567 farms in Hanover County per the latest Census of Agriculture. This was a decrease of 6% from 2012.
- As of 2017, there were 89,186 acres in farmland, which is approximately 29.5% of the County's total area. The acreage in farms decreased 5% between 2012 and 2017.
- The average farm is 157 acres in area.

**Farms by Size
(2017 Census of Agriculture)**

| Size | Number | % Of total |
|---------------|--------|------------|
| 1-9 acres | 99 | 17 |
| 10-49 acres | 251 | 44 |
| 50-179 acres | 140 | 25 |
| 180-499 acres | 42 | 7 |
| 500-999 acres | 9 | 2 |
| 1000+ acres | 26 | 5 |

**Agricultural Producers
(2017 Census of Agriculture)**

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Total Number of Producers | 898 |
| Males | 536 |
| Females | 362 |
| Age < 35 | 102 |
| Age 35 - 64 | 505 |
| Age 65+ | 291 |

- In 2017, the market value of products sold was \$49,254,000, which is a decrease of 11% since 2012. In terms of market value of agricultural products sold, the County ranked 20th statewide.
- Crops produced in the County include soybeans, corn for grain, forage (hay), wheat for grain, and vegetables.
- Approximately 63% of the County (over 180,000 acres) is forested (per U.S. Forest Service: Forest Inventory and Analysis Application "EVALIDator").
- There are currently eight Agricultural and Forestal Districts (AFDs) in the County, which total 14,941.9 acres.

Rural Development and Character

Characterizing Rural

One of Hanover County's most treasured assets is its rural character, but what does *rural* mean? As part of the Comprehensive Plan public engagement process, stakeholders were asked to define what *rural* means to them. Based on feedback received (along with input from the Community Participation Team, Planning Commission, and Board of Supervisors), common characteristics of Hanover County's rural areas were identified as the following:

Much of Hanover County retains its rural character. There are diverse rural communities countywide, including Beaverdam, Montpelier, and Rockville to the west and Old Church and Cold Harbor to the east. While each part of the County may have its own unique character, these rural areas share some common characteristics:

- Scenic views of fields, farmland, forests, and open space;
- Limited light pollution;
- Limited very low-density residential development set back from rural roadways;
- Vibrant economy consisting of small-scale businesses that are primarily related to agriculture, forestry, and tourism;
- Compact villages and crossroads communities that include a mix of historic structures and new development that is consistent with the scale and traditional architecture of the area; and
- Strong sense of community.

This characterization can help guide decisionmakers as different programs, policies, and land use policies are reviewed in the County's rural areas, providing guidance as to what elements of the County's rural areas are most important to preserve.

Land Preservation

Different tools have been used to preserve land within rural areas and protect the characteristics listed above. Many of these tools are voluntary programs that private property owners proactively pursue.

- *Conservation Easements*

Conservation easements involve a voluntary legal agreement in which the landowner conveys property interest to a qualified organization for the primary purpose of protecting a property's critical resources and characteristics. Generally, a landowner voluntarily agrees to forego some or all of their property's development potential in perpetuity in exchange for tax benefits. Many landowners that take advantage of this tool are also interested in maintaining the rural and scenic character of their properties. Conservation easements protect a wide variety of environmental and cultural resources, including historic structures, archaeological sites, wetlands, riparian areas, and scenic viewsheds. A variety of organizations hold conservation easements in the County, including the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Virginia

Department of Forestry, Capital Region Land Conservancy, American Battlefield Trust, and the County itself. As of early 2023, the Assessor's office has indicated that 555 acres are under conservation easements.

- ***Agricultural and Forestal Districts (AFDs)***

Since the late 1970s, the Agricultural and Forestal District (AFD) program has been used to help protect the County's rural character. The AFD designation is a temporary and voluntary restriction to limit development and reserve the land for the production of agricultural products, timber, and the maintenance of open space. This program temporarily reduces the tax valuation for the land in exchange for the temporary relinquishment of development rights. Properties cannot be developed to a higher-intensity use while enrolled in the program. Additionally, proposed public improvements within an AFD must undergo additional review to determine potential impacts on agriculture and forestry. Properties are enrolled in the AFD Program by consent of the landowner and the County. These districts are reviewed by the Agricultural and Forestry Districts Advisory Committee, the Planning Commission, and the Board of Supervisors every six years to determine whether the districts should be continued, modified, or terminated. There are currently eight AFDs in the County, which total 14,941.9 acres.

- ***Land Use Taxation Program***

The Land Use Taxation Program allows landowners who can demonstrate that they use their property for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, or open space use to receive a reduced property tax assessment based on the value given its current use (resulting in a lower property tax bill). Property owners are required to pay back five years of the deferred taxes if the property is developed for residential or commercial use. As of 2023, 153,845 acres have been enrolled in this program.

- ***Public and Private Protected Lands***

There are properties throughout the County that are owned by governmental entities and non-profit organizations for conservation purposes. These properties permanently protect environmental features, viewsheds, and/or historic sites (including battlefields). For example, the National Park Service and associated entities own and manage land in the Mechanicsville and Cold Harbor areas to preserve Civil War battlefield sites. Hanover County and the American Battlefield Trust also own historically-significant properties in the Cold Harbor area. The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (also known as Preservation Virginia) owns Scotchtown and some surrounding parcels, protecting that historic landmark.

Residential Development in Rural Areas

Since 1982, higher-density residential development has been directed to the Suburban Service Area (SSA). In the remainder of the County – the rural area – residential development can occur at a density no greater than 1 dwelling unit for every 6.25 acres, except for family divisions that allow a minimum lot size of two acres.

Most of the County’s rural areas are zoned Agricultural (A-1). In 1996, the Board of Supervisors reduced permitted densities within the A-1 zoning district from 1 dwelling unit per 6.25 acres to 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres. To address the issue of lost density for agricultural property owners, two new zoning districts were created to allow rural residential development at densities of 1 unit for every 6.25 acres: Agricultural Residential (AR-6) and Rural Conservation (RC).

| Residential Development Options in Rural Areas per Current Zoning/Subdivision Regulations | |
|--|---|
| A-1: Conventional Subdivision | Property can be divided into lots that are at least ten acres in size accessed by public or private roads. Internal subdivision roads are not required (new lots can have direct access to existing public roads). No open space is required. This is a “by-right” option that does not require special approval. |
| A-1: Rural Cluster Subdivision | Property can be divided to accommodate one dwelling per ten acres, but the lots are clustered to preserve open space. At least 80% of the property must be preserved as part of a conservation lot, which cannot be further divided. Each residential building lot can be up to two acres in size and must be accessed from an internal subdivision road (which may be a public or private road). This is a “by-right” option only in areas designated <i>Rural Conservation</i> on the <i>Growth Management, Conservation, and Suburban Development Plan</i> . |
| RC: Cluster Subdivision | Property can be divided to accommodate one dwelling per 6.25 acres, but the lots are clustered to preserve open space. At least 70% of the property must be preserved as conservation area, which may include preservation lots, common open space, or a combination of both. There is no minimum or maximum size for the residential building lots. Lots must be accessed from an internal subdivision road. This development option requires rezoning (public hearing process). |
| AR-6: Conventional Subdivisions | Property can generally be divided to accommodate one dwelling per 6.25 acres, with a minimum lot size of 5 acres. For projects less than 25 acres in area, lots as small as 2 acres are permitted (based on a sliding scale). No open space is required. Internal subdivision roads are not required (new lots can have direct access to existing public roads). Lots can be accessed from public or private roads. This development option requires rezoning (public hearing process). |

Note: In addition to these development options, landowners may divide their property as part of a family division, which allows newly-created lots to be transferred to an eligible family member with less stringent review standards.

Integrating Rural Residential Development into Rural Areas

Even at very low densities, residential development within the rural areas (if not properly situated) can erode the rural character and negatively impact nearby agricultural operations. Different strategies can be used to mitigate potential negative impacts residential development may have on these areas, including:

- Maintaining wooded buffers along rural roadways to screen development from view.
- Providing greater setbacks along rural roadways to minimize the visual impacts of residential development.
- Maintaining protective buffers between residential lots and abutting agricultural operations.
- Clustering residential development to preserve prime agricultural soils, viewsheds from scenic roadways and historic properties, and sensitive environmental features (wetlands, riparian corridors, critical habitat, etc.) within protected open space.
- Minimizing the “stripping” of lots along existing roadways.
- Minimizing access points to existing rural roadways by utilizing shared driveways and/or internal roads to access individual lots.
- Preserving existing trees to the greatest extent practicable.

Chapter **XX3**: **Land Use and Growth Management** provides complementary recommendations regarding residential development within rural areas.

Commercial Development in Rural Areas

In the rural areas, small-scale commercial businesses are typically located at rural crossroads and within villages, providing services to the surrounding community. Except for agribusiness and tourism uses that complement agricultural operations and other traditionally-rural uses, small-scale commercial uses in the rural areas should generally only occur within rural crossroads and villages. These areas have historically served as hubs for the surrounding rural communities. Rural crossroads include Rockville, Vontay, Goshen Cross Road, Hewlett, Barkers Mill, and other key intersections. Rural villages include Beaverdam, Montpelier, and Hanover Courthouse.

See Chapter **XX3**: **Land Use and Growth Management** for recommendations regarding the form new commercial development should take within these communities. For new development in Montpelier and Hanover Courthouse, also reference Chapter XXX: History and Culture, as those parts of those villages are within historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Integrating Rural Character into the Suburban Service Area

During the planning process, residents expressed interest in incorporating characteristics of the County's rural areas into new development within the Suburban Service Area (SSA). The following strategies could be integrated into suburban-style development to reflect the County's predominately rural character:

- To help preserve viewsheds and the rural character of the County, minimize the visibility of new residential development by providing landscaped buffers at least 100 feet wide along major thoroughfares (enhanced buffers and greater setbacks along scenic roads). In open areas, narrower buffers may be appropriate if berms that have natural-looking landforms are provided and landscaped with a mix of native trees and shrubs in varying heights in a naturalistic, informal pattern. Decorative fencing with a rural character could be incorporated into the buffer areas.
- Large, continuous open space areas should be provided.
- Incorporate single-loaded streets into new developments, so that preserved open space areas are easily visible and accessible to the public.
- Terminate streets in views of open space or other scenic features.
- Retain existing trees and vegetation throughout the site (to the greatest extent practicable).

During the public engagement process, some participants expressed interest in having more *agrihoods* like Chickahominy Falls, where there is an agricultural component integrated into the development. Vegetable farms, orchards, community gardens, and other agricultural uses could be incorporated into the open space set-aside, provided such uses do not generate excessive noise and odors that would negatively impact adjacent residential uses.

Rural Economy

Agriculture

Historically, the economy and culture of Hanover County have both been centered on agriculture. While the agricultural industry and its impact on the local economy have changed over time, agriculture is still an important part of the County's identity and its rural landscapes. The County is known for the Hanover Tomato, which is a celebrated part of the community and is highlighted each year at the Tomato Festival.

Different entities provide technical assistance and support to the agricultural industry, including the Hanover-Caroline Soil and Water Conservation District and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Rural Tourism

Agritourism, ecotourism, and cultural/heritage tourism can complement existing agricultural uses and create additional revenue streams for landowners, while allowing residents and visitors to enjoy Hanover County's rural landscapes. Agritourism uses should be monitored and conditional uses should be carefully reviewed, so that these operations do not have negative impacts on nearby farms or residences. Such uses should:

- Relate to and complement existing agricultural uses on the property;

- Be compatible in scale and intensity to surrounding agricultural uses;
- Pose no threat to public health, safety, and welfare;
- Further local goals of preserving farmland, open space, and the County’s scenic beauty; and
- Not result in the degradation of critical environmental resources.

There should be a strong relationship between the success of the use and its rural location. For example, a farm winery where most of the grapes are grown on-site is appropriate for a rural location, while a retail wine shop that sells wines produced worldwide would not be appropriate in the rural areas.

For tourism-related uses that require a special exception or a conditional use permit, conditions should be put in place to ensure that the size, scale, and location of these uses is appropriate for the rural areas.

| Examples of Different Types of Rural Tourism | |
|---|---|
| Agritourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm wineries • Farm breweries • Farm tours • Seasonal farm activities (pumpkin patches, hay rides, corn mazes, Christmas trees, pick-your-own operations) • Horseback riding • Petting zoos • Equine and agricultural events, shows, competitions, and races • Bed and breakfasts |
| Ecotourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishing • Hiking • Canoeing • Kayaking • Camping • Recreational outfitters/recreational equipment rental |
| Cultural/Heritage Tourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking scenic drives in rural areas • Bicycling in rural areas • Visiting rural historic landmarks |

§ 15.2-2288.6 of the Code of Virginia limits localities’ ability to regulate agritourism activities (as defined in § 3.2-6400 of the Code of Virginia) and other types of activities that occur at agricultural operations. Such uses may only be regulated if they have a substantial impact on the health, safety, or general welfare of the public.

Overall Objectives and Strategies for Rural

Objective R.1: Support land preservation within rural areas.

- **Strategy R.1a:** Continue to direct higher-intensity development to the Suburban Service Area (SSA) to reduce development pressures on the rural areas.
- **Strategy R.1b:** Continue to support the work of conservation organizations in acquiring conservation easements or fee interest on properties within rural areas.
- **Strategy R.1c:** Focus on the protection of prime agricultural soils, viewsheds from scenic roadways and historic properties, and sensitive environmental features (wetlands, riparian corridors, critical habitat, etc.) as a distinct priority in the implementation of open space protection policies, aiming to create large contiguous blocks of protected open space.
- **Strategy R.1d:** Maintain the land use taxation and AFD programs as tools to protect agricultural land and production within the County.
- **Strategy R.1e:** Educate property owners about conservation easements, land use assessments program, and other land conservation programs that could help provide the financial relief necessary to avoid the subdivision of their properties.

Objective R.2: Ensure development outside of the Suburban Service Area (SSA) reflects the community's rural character and does not negatively impact agricultural operations.

- **Strategy R.2a:** Review zoning and subdivisions regulations applicable to the County's rural areas to determine how they align with recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan regarding rural character and growth management.
- **Strategy R.2b:** Encourage or require new development outside of the SSA (and outside of *Villages* and *Rural Crossroads*) to provide landscaped buffers along rural roadways to screen new development from view. Existing vegetation should be preserved and supplemented, with new any new plantings consisting of native trees and shrubs placed in a naturalistic, informal pattern.
- **Strategy R.2c:** Encourage or require vegetated buffers, increased setbacks, or other design techniques during the zoning process to minimize potential negative impacts proposed development may have on adjacent agricultural operations and Agricultural and Forestal Districts (AFDs).
- **Strategy R.2d:** Encourage or require new development outside of the SSA to avoid prime agricultural soils, maintaining these areas as open space that could be used for agricultural purposes.
- **Strategy R.2e:** Encourage or require new development outside of the SSA to avoid mass grading, working with existing topography and site features to minimizing clearing and land disturbance.

Objective R.3: Incorporate characteristics of the County's rural areas into the Suburban Service Area (SSA).

- **Strategy R.3a:** Encourage new development inside of the SSA to provide enhanced landscaped buffers that exceed current zoning requirements to screen new development

from view. Existing vegetation should be preserved and supplemented, with any new plantings consisting of native trees and shrubs placed in a naturalistic, informal pattern.

- Strategy R.3b: Encourage new development to situate open space so that it is highly visible to residents, helps shield new development from view, and is easily accessible, incorporating the County's rural character into the SSA.

Objective R.4: Foster the local agricultural economy.

- Strategy R.4a: Conduct periodic reviews of zoning regulations to ensure they address and adequately support the overall agricultural economy, including agritourism and the processing of agricultural products.
- Strategy R.4b: Promote context-sensitive agritourism, eco-tourism, and cultural/heritage tourism within rural areas.
- Strategy R.4c: Encourage creative, unique, and niche forms of agriculture that are compatible with and highlight the County's unique assets.
- Strategy R.4d: Discourage rezonings or CUPS for land uses incompatible with adjacent ag that would have an adverse effect on the continued viability of the uses.
- Strategy R.4e: Consider the impacts to environmentally-sensitive areas and prime agricultural soils in land use decisions.
- Strategy R.4f: Evaluate opportunities for housing for farm workers
- Strategy R.4g: Help connect local farms with local consumers.
- Strategy R.4h: Develop a database of agricultural operations.
- Strategy R.4i: Complete a study of the impact agriculture plays in the County's economy in order to determine how this economic sector may be best support, encouraged, and promoted. This study should specifically analyze food and fiber production in the County and how that component of the agricultural economy can best be supported.
- Strategy R.4j: Investigate the feasibility of creating a Rural Support Program position that provides agricultural assistance, community education, marketing strategies, information on agricultural support businesses, and information about alternative agricultural uses.