

AGRIBUSINESS

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Frederick County's rural character is a key component in its identity and one of the key aspects that draw visitors and new residents to the area. Historically, these rural areas have supported a wide array of agricultural uses, which at one time was the primary industry in the County. Today these agricultural and forestry activities generate roughly \$33 million per year and preserve close to 110,000 acres of rural land. From 2012 to 2017, the total acreage in Frederick County farms grew by over 9,000 acres.

Agritourism continues to be a growing sector within the County's rural areas. Agritourism is a term that is applied to activities that allow visitors to tour some or all of an operational farm, participate in the cultivation or harvest of farm products, purchase and consume products grown directly on the farm, or participate in festivals or activities related to significant agricultural seasons or events. Examples include farm tours, pick-your-own farm operations, roadside farm-stands, wineries, or fall harvest festivals.

The County in recent years has also seen increasing interest in the development of utility-scale photovoltaic energy generation facilities (i.e., solar farms). Due to the large land area assemblage needed to develop these facilities, the rural areas of the County have been the primary target. Utility scale solar facilities are typically passive uses with limited impacts to the environment and the rural character. Additionally, implementation of this use can facilitate the preservation of agricultural and rural land for future use once these sites are decommissioned, although the extent to which the use removes agricultural and rural land from current use should also be considered. Utility-scale solar facilities, when located in appropriate areas, can provide opportunities for landowners to recoup value from their property without subdividing. The Code of Virginia also enables localities implementing solar facilities to tax this utility infrastructure through the machinery and tools tax or revenue-share agreements with utility operators, generating additional tax revenue beyond the land use assessment. This additional revenue can help the County offset impacts from residential development.

To protect the amount of land available for agricultural use, the County provides variety of tools and programs for landowners. The County continues to offer the Land Use Tax Deferral Program which allows taxpayers to apply for reduced assessments, for qualifying agricultural, horticultural, and forestry uses. Participation in one of the County's many Agricultural and Forestal Districts is also available to County property owners. As of 2021, there were ten districts covering approximately 13,000 acres.

Frederick County has worked to implement new tools which not only help protect the agricultural lands in the County but at the same time also help rural landowners realize economic return from their property without developing or selling the land. These programs include the Purchase of Development Rights Program and the Transfer of Development Rights Program. These programs are discussed further in the Rural Areas chapter.

FOCUS FOR THE FUTURE

Agricultural operations in Frederick County will continue to evolve. As such, the County should be prepared to respond to new rural related business and agricultural models including new agricultural techniques, value-added farm products, on-site events, sales, and services. These business opportunities can allow rural landowners to diversify their sources of income and engage niche agricultural and tourism markets.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Once land is converted from agricultural use it is unlikely that it will ever be reclaimed. The rural economy of Frederick County plays a significant role in the life and livelihood of its inhabitants. In addition to providing food products for the region, agriculture is a revenue generator which requires very few local services. Agriculture contributes to Frederick County's extraordinary viewsheds while providing a living to its farmers, citizens, and a place of enjoyment for its visitors. Most importantly, active, profitable agricultural operations reduce the amount of land converted to more intensive uses. Diversification of land used for agricultural purposes not only generates notable income and drives more tourism dollars to the County, but it can also offer protection for the land from potential conversion to residential uses.

GOALS/STRATEGIES

GOAL1: THE COUNTY SHOULD CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ITS AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIES WHILE ALSO RESPONDING TO INDUSTRY CHANGES

STRATEGIES:

- Diversified uses such as farm markets, alternative fuels, animal boarding, Pick-Your-Own operations, agritourism, vineyards, wineries, distilleries and micro-breweries and specialty crops, etc., should be encouraged to help preserve farming and agricultural uses in Frederick County.
- Ordinances should be reviewed to enable a wide range of agriculturally related activities. Care must be taken to ensure that such activities are compatible in scale, size and intensity with surrounding land uses and the rural character.
- Value added processes and support businesses should be examined for location within the Rural Area. These processes currently are permitted in the business districts.
- Continue to encourage use of the Land Use Tax Deferral Program, Agricultural and Forestal Programs, Purchase of Development Rights Program, and the Transfer of Development Rights Program.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

- Continue to regulate solar facilities through the Conditional Use Permit process to protect adjacent properties and the agricultural/rural character of these areas.
- The County should ensure that the siting of new solar facilities do not detract from the agricultural and rural character within its rural areas and will protect agricultural and rural land for future use once decommissioned.