



A Farmland Protection Plan

For Buncombe County,
North Carolina

Prepared for the Buncombe County Soil and
Water Conservation District and
The Buncombe County Agricultural
Advisory Board

With Assistance From
Smithson Mills and Taylor Sisk
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Acknowledgement

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David Lee, Terri Wells, Ed Bulluck, Loring McIntyre, Alan Lang,
Gary Roberts, Brandon Hensley, Amanda Sizemore, and Bruce Snelson

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01 - Executive Summary

In June 2019, the Buncombe County Soil & Water Conservation District Board commissioned Smithson Mills to provide research for an updated farmland protection plan (“Plan”) for Buncombe County. Mr. Mills was tasked with developing a new written report detailing an actionable Plan for the county and updating findings and recommendations from a Plan written in 2007 by Mr. Sam Bingham.

Counties with current plans in place are subject to reduced match requirements for North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Funds (NCDA ADFPTF) used to purchase conservation easements, implement projects that reduce loss of farmland, and support projects that increase economic viability of farming. Plans are useful tools for local leaders and public servants working to strike a balance between growth and preservation of open land.

In the past decade, Buncombe County has successfully executed proactive policies that have served to keep farmland intact. Present-use tax valuation, purchase of conservation easements, and promotion of voluntary agricultural districts have all contributed to keeping land in farms. From an economic standpoint, farm operations have diversified and regional infrastructure has developed to support continuance of some traditional farm enterprises. Many farms appear to have shifted from agricultural production to forestry, a less labor-intensive activity.

Proactive policies and shifts in production methods have supported a stabilization of farmland even in the face of steady population growth. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, from 2007 to 2017 land in farms stayed almost constant, rising incrementally from 72,087 acres in 2007 to 72,284 in 2017. Likewise, the total number of farms and the average size of farms remained constant.

Areas of the county that continue to have agricultural characteristics include Leicester, Sandy Mush, Barnardsville, and Alexander in the northern region of the county; Fairview, Cane Creek, and Avery’s Creek in the south; Hominy Valley to the west; and land along the Swannanoa River to the east. Development pressure in Buncombe County varies from moderate on the northwestern and southeastern corners of the county to extreme in areas near major transportation corridors and the city of Asheville.

Despite positive indicators for keeping land in agriculture, our farms continue to struggle economically, with overall farm income and per-farm revenues falling since 2012. Following a decades-long trend of decreasing economic activity, total farm income fell almost 12% between 2012 and 2017, and average sales per farm fell nearly 13% in the same period. The greatest decline was in animal agriculture. Sales of livestock, poultry, and related products plunged more than 28%, losing more than \$4.3 million. Dairy income dropped more than 47%, and sales of cattle and calves dropped 52%.

Buncombe County farms engaged in crop production fared much better than those involved in livestock. The nursery and greenhouse sector, devastated by the Great Recession of 2008, had fully recovered by 2017, with more than \$28 million in sales. Other sectors experiencing positive growth are agritourism, sales of value-added products, and sales of food directly to consumers. According to the Census of Agriculture, the latter rose from \$1.14 million in 2012 to \$1.58 million in 2017. With a dozen or more markets supported by thousands of consumers, this tally may well be an undercount.

A survey of landowners residing in Buncombe County with land registered under present-use valuation was conducted in late 2019. Survey results are discussed in this report to give a better understanding of how people use their farmland and to give policymakers a sense of landowners' attitudes towards managing and preserving farmland. Responses also help service providers know how well their programs are understood and what initiatives might be strengthened or created to better address landowners' needs. Survey results inform recommendations and next steps, which are included at the conclusion of this report.

This report also includes a profile of Buncombe County farmers who are engaged in land-based businesses representative of the local farming community. The six individuals featured demonstrate the wide variety of agricultural activities and the changing nature of farming, putting a human face on the struggles and opportunities in local foods, agritourism, organic farming, dairy production, and cow-calf operations.

About 5% of Buncombe County soils are classified as prime soils and about 11% are classified as soils of statewide importance. Such farmland should be prioritized when considering resource allocation for farmland-preservation efforts.

Buncombe County's Farmland Preservation ordinance was adopted in 1989, the first such local ordinance in the state. Buncombe's ordinance follows state-level guidelines for identifying lands most suitable for preservation through multiple tools, including voluntary agricultural districts, enhanced voluntary agricultural districts, agricultural conservation easements, and voluntary sale of development rights. Of these tools, the purchase of development rights for farmland *in perpetuity* is the most effective means of assuring such land is never removed from agriculture and put into residential or commercial development.

Since 1995, Buncombe County has directly funded transaction costs for purchase of conservation easements. Over that time, the county has spent more than \$7.7 million preserving 56 parcels of land totaling 8,129.22 acres. In recent years, county budgets have allocated \$150,000 in support of conservation easements, with funds used to cover transaction costs, such as surveying and legal fees. Other non-county funds have been used for the purchase of the conservation easements, with county appropriations serving to leverage funds from private foundations, state agencies, and individuals. A key recommendation of this research is to aggressively leverage local tax dollars to attract additional funding from state and federal sources, private and corporate foundations, land trusts, and wealthy individuals concerned about environmental stewardship.

Buncombe County is well positioned to maintain and enhance its existing funding for farmland preservation. This can be accomplished through continuance of its PUV taxation policies; identifying new public-revenue sources for purchase of conservation easements; and leveraging funds from state, federal, and private-foundation sources.

Over the next 10 years, we should assume that development pressures on land in Buncombe County will remain strong. As a result, the county must recommit to existing efforts to protect the best farmland and support new initiatives that will enhance efforts already underway. These recommendations fall into several categories:

- **Continue to support farmland protection through existing policies including present-use value taxation, voluntary agricultural districts, and enhanced voluntary agricultural districts, and agricultural conservation easements.**
- **Promote and implement outreach and education on land taxation, estate planning, farm-transition planning, conservation easements, and development planning.**
- **Increase county-level funding to support transaction costs for purchase of conservation easements.**
- **Work aggressively to leverage county funding for conservation easements and other projects in partnership with state, federal, and private resources.**
- **Design and implement outreach programs to educate and inform visitors, new residents, and residents living in urban areas of the importance of farmland to the region's culture, identity, and quality of life.**
- **Support marketing and production training and facilitate greater diversity in agricultural enterprises.**
- **Continue promotion of best management practices for conservation of land and natural resources.**
- **Strengthen support for agricultural economic development.**

These recommendations are discussed in detail in the final section of this report.

02 - Introduction to the Plan and Associated Research

In June 2019, the Buncombe County Soil & Water Conservation Board of Supervisors commissioned Smithson Mills to provide research for an updated farmland protection plan (“Plan”) for Buncombe County. Mr. Mills was tasked with developing a new written report detailing an actionable Plan for the county and updating findings and recommendations from a Plan written in 2007 by Mr. Sam Bingham.

Key components of the contracted research were as follows:

- Meet with project organizers and community stakeholders as needed to discuss farmland-protection strategies, research plans of action, and research progress.
- Read and analyze existing data supporting farmland protection in Buncombe County. These include the 2007 Plan, current and historical Census of Agriculture data; county GIS mapping with present-use valuation (“PUV”) and conservation-district designations; current land-use ordinance policies; and conservation-easement policies.
- Review recent county and private investments to protect farmland and open spaces, consider the cost of community-services analysis, and review or generate soil maps for productive farmland.
- Assess previous farmland goals and evaluate how well such goals have been met.
- Design, execute, and analyze a survey of county landowners with PUV-designated land.
- Conduct at least five one-on-one interviews with landowners and land managers to discuss issues of greatest importance as determined by survey responses.
- Prepare a comprehensive written report with analysis of all research and recommendations for an actionable farmland-protection plan for Buncombe County. This report is to include recommendations for new farmland-preservation goals with measurable outcomes.
- Give an oral presentation of findings and goals to project leaders and elected officials to secure local governmental approval of research.

Since passage in 2005 of the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Enabling Act, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services has encouraged county governments to develop farmland-preservation plans to help mitigate and reduce the loss of prime farmland due to housing and commercial development. Passage of this act was spurred by

North Carolina's rapid loss of farmland in the years leading up to the Great Recession. From 2002 to 2007, North Carolina lost approximately 600,000 acres of farmland to development, the fastest rate of farmland loss in the country.

The act describes requirements for a valid countywide Plan as follows:

- (1) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list and description of existing agricultural activity in the county.
- (2) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list of existing challenges to continued family farming in the county.
- (3) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a list of opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family-owned farms and the local agricultural economy.
- (4) The countywide farmland protection plan shall describe how the county plans to maintain a viable agricultural community and shall address farmland-preservation tools, such as agricultural economic development, including farm diversification and marketing assistance; other kinds of agricultural technical assistance, such as farm-infrastructure financing, farmland purchasing, linking with younger farmers, and estate planning; the desirability and feasibility of donating agricultural conservation easements; and entering into voluntary agricultural districts.
- (5) The countywide farmland protection plan shall contain a schedule for implementing the plan and an identification of possible funding sources for the long-term support of the plan.

Counties that have completed plans are subject to reduced match requirements for state funds allocated on a competitive grant basis by the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. Such funds can be used to purchase conservation easements, implement new projects that will reduce loss of farmland, and support projects that increase the economic viability of farming in a county or community.

While increasing access to grant funds is important, farmland protection plans are even more useful as planning tools for local leaders and public servants working to strike a balance between growth and preservation of open land. Including short-, middle-, and long-term goals in a Plan serves to set a course for policy implementation for many years to come.

A Plan also sets baselines with which to measure the future success of programs designed to preserve farmland. Data found in the plan on the rates of loss of farmland, enrollment of land into conservation districts, number of farms and farmers, and acres of land under PUV can be compared in future years to assess rates of change. Rates of change can then be compared with other communities to assess how well Buncombe County is doing in reducing the loss of prime farmland to development.

As of 2020, a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests that farmland in Buncombe County, and North Carolina as a whole, is again under extreme pressure. Important decisions must be made in regard to what kind of community Buncombe County will be in the future. Rapid urbanization without regard for preserving the most valuable farmland and prime soils threatens our ability to grow food locally, allow multigenerational farm families to remain in agriculture, and enable young and aspiring new farmers to find land on which to farm. Loss of locally produced food will also weaken the county economically, resulting in more retail dollars leaving the community.

The Plan outlined in this report should serve as a guide to elected officials, professional service providers, and the general public for preserving farmland in Buncombe County for the next decade. After 10 years, the researchers recommend development of an updated Plan.

03 - The Status of Farmland in Buncombe County

Agriculture in the year 2020 in Buncombe County is quite different from a generation ago. In 1997, burley tobacco, dairy, and cow-calf production were the main drivers of the agricultural economy. That year, according to the Census of Agriculture, 356 Buncombe County farms grew 1,182 acres of tobacco, 31 dairies held 2,434 milk cows, and 529 farms raised 8,165 head of beef cows. By 2017, tobacco was almost completely gone and only five dairies continued to operate. Among legacy agricultural activities, only beef cattle production remained strong, with 485 farms raising 13,764 beef cows.

The loss of tobacco and dairy production, along with a general delinking of local agriculture from nationally and regionally integrated production systems, dealt a major blow to farm families and agricultural ways of life that had remained constant for the better part of the 20th century. This story has already been well documented, with the most radical changes already apparent in the 2007 Census of Agriculture. Sam Bingham's November 2007 report, "An Agricultural Development and Farmland Protection Plan for Buncombe County," deftly described the challenges for farming in Buncombe County at the time. Bingham wrote:

Except for a vestigial tobacco market and one creamery, no markets or processing of nationally traded commodities survive in the county today. Thus, marketing against highly organized national distribution systems is difficult. Many specialty crops that might sell well are labor intensive, and legal labor costs have risen. Since the Asheville stockyards closed in 2004, the nearest places to buy and sell animals are outside the region (page 5).

Bingham's analysis identified two complementary strategies for preserving farmland, which remain valid in 2020: "[L]and preservation to defend the very possibility of keeping an agricultural landscape, and farm profitability to keep the present generation on the land and draw

in new blood to secure the future” (page 5).

In the past decade, Buncombe County has successfully executed proactive policies that have undoubtedly served to keep farmland intact. Present-use tax valuation, purchase of conservation easements, and promotion of voluntary agricultural districts have all contributed to keeping land in farms. From an economic standpoint, farm operations have diversified and regional infrastructure has developed to support continuance of some traditional farm enterprises. Many farms appear to have shifted from agricultural production to forestry, a less labor-intensive activity. The American Farmland Trust completed a study in 2020 titled *Farms under Threat*, this study explores the state of the nation’s farmland and evaluates each state’s farmland (see appendix for The State of the States, Agricultural Land Conversion Highlight Summary).

Despite these positive indicators, farms continue to struggle economically, with overall farm income and per-farm revenues falling since 2012. From 1997, when tobacco and dairy still contributed significantly to farm income, to 2017, average farm income dropped from \$54,327 to \$46,671 (in 2019-equivalent dollars), a 14% decline.

Current Conditions

Thirteen years after the release of its first farmland protection plan, Buncombe County’s agricultural landscape appears to have somewhat stabilized. The economic blow of losing tobacco has now been absorbed. While dairies have continued to suffer, Asheville-based Milkco, the region’s sole milk processor, remains in business. In 2011, a new stockyard was opened near Canton in Haywood County, serving to keep cow-calf production viable in the region. Fresh-vegetable production, historically an outlier in local agriculture, has become increasingly important for local farmers selling at a dozen or so farmers’ markets in the county. Local meat production, while challenged due to lack of close processing facilities, has taken off, with support of local residents with higher disposable income. Restaurants in Asheville now compete to have the most locally sourced farm-fresh ingredients.

All of that said, anecdotal evidence suggests that more farmland may be under greater threat in 2020 than ever before. Much of the data used for analysis lags a few years. The latest Census of Agriculture data is now three years old, and tax department data on land in present-use valuation for agriculture, forestry, and horticulture may not accurately reflect recent land transactions and current and planned development on land that until recently was used for agriculture.

Depending on the methodology used, between 17% and 22% of Buncombe County is in farmland. In 2017, the Census of Agriculture listed 72,284 acres of farmland on 1,073 farms in the county, comprising 17% of the county’s approximately 422,400 acres. In 2019, the county tax office reported approximately 94,824 acres classified under present-use valuation (PUV). Of those acres, approximately 34,511 are classified as agriculture, 57,096 as forestry, and 3,217 as horticulture. Collectively, PUV property classifications make up 22% of the county’s landmass.

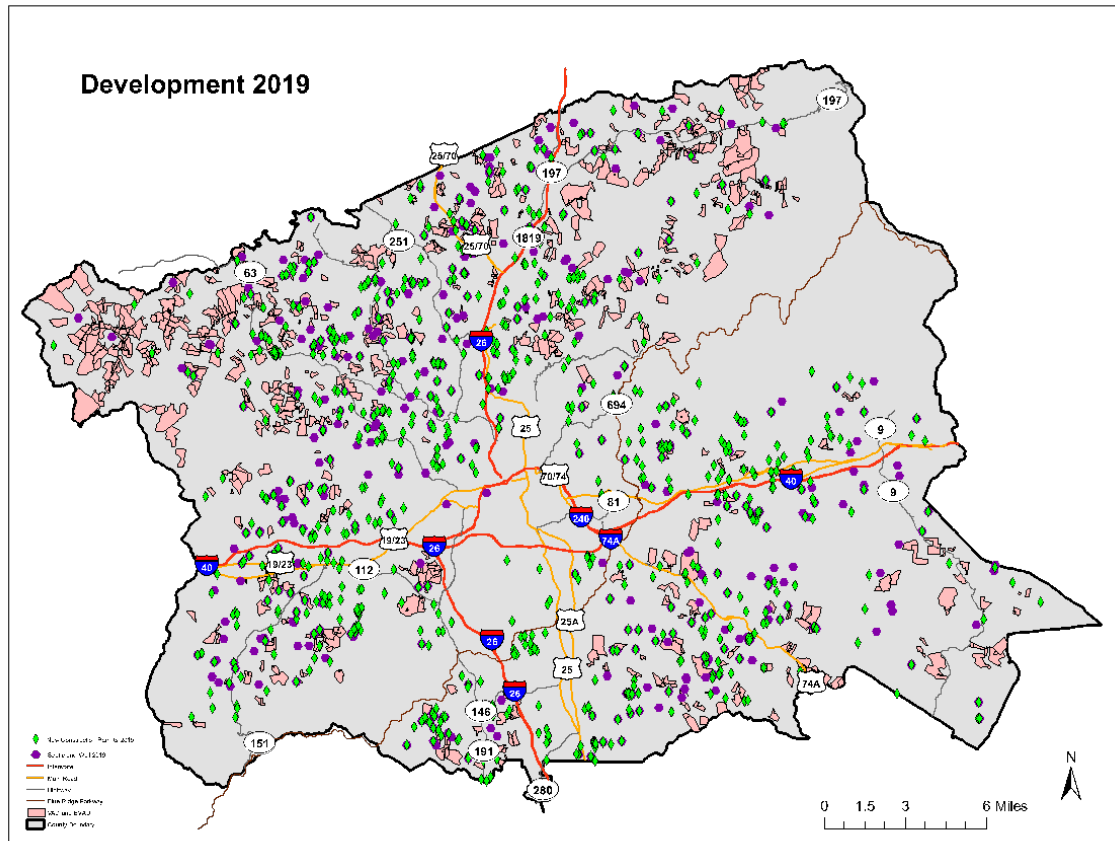
Most of Buncombe County lies within a mountain plateau surrounded by higher mountain ranges near the county borders and in adjacent counties. Much of the county is between 2,000 to 2,500 feet above sea level; almost all the land is below 3,000 feet. With the ancient and wide French Broad River intersecting the county from south to north, and with relatively gentle hills and gradual elevation changes, Buncombe has historically had large areas of fertile farmland. Outside of the city of Asheville and the incorporated towns of Black Mountain, Montreat, Biltmore Forest, Woodfin, and Weaverville, significant tracts of agricultural land remain. The massive Biltmore Estate contains the largest single tracts of land in both agriculture and horticulture. Despite record land prices and rapid development along major population and transportation corridors, the amount of recorded farmland has remained fairly constant over the past decade.

Areas of the county that continue to have agricultural characteristics include Leicester, Sandy Mush, Barnardsville, and Alexander in the northern region of the county; Fairview, Cane Creek, and Avery's Creek in the south; Hominy Valley to the west; and land along the Swannanoa River to the east.

Development pressure in Buncombe County varies from moderate on the northwestern and southeastern corners of the county to extreme in areas near major transportation corridors and the city of Asheville. Building permits for single-family residential housing have steadily increased over the past several years: from 699 in 2015 to 905 in 2018. In 2019, the number of such permits decreased slightly, to 877. Population growth has been steadily moderate, increasing from 238,737 in 2010 to 259,103 in 2018, an 8.7% change. Buncombe is now the 7th most populous county in North Carolina.

| Buncombe County Building Permits | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Year | Single-Family Residential |
| 2019 | 877 |
| 2018 | 905 |
| 2017 | 891 |
| 2016 | 827 |
| 2015 | 699 |

The following map of locations for new building permits issued in 2019 shows development is widespread throughout the county. Green diamonds indicate the sites of building permits, purple dots indicate septic and well permits, and pink areas indicate land in VAD or EVAD.



Stabilizing the Loss of Farmland

North Carolina as a whole has experienced dramatic decreases in farmland over the past several decades. This is especially true in western counties, where farm tracts are too small for realizing economies of scale, and in Piedmont counties, where population growth and residential development has replaced open farmland. Based on demographics and geography, one could easily assume that Buncombe County would have lost farmland at a rate far higher than the state average.

In fact, Buncombe County farmland has shown remarkable resilience in the face of steady population growth. According to the Census of Agriculture, from 2007 to 2017 land in farms stayed almost constant, rising incrementally from 72,087 acres in 2007 to 72,284 in 2017. The total number of farms remained largely constant, dropping by four, from 1,077 in 2007 to 1,073 in 2017. The average size of a farm remained at 67 acres, with median farm size changing slightly, from 27 acres to 28. But total cropland has shown a measurable decline, falling 12% from 2007 to 2017.

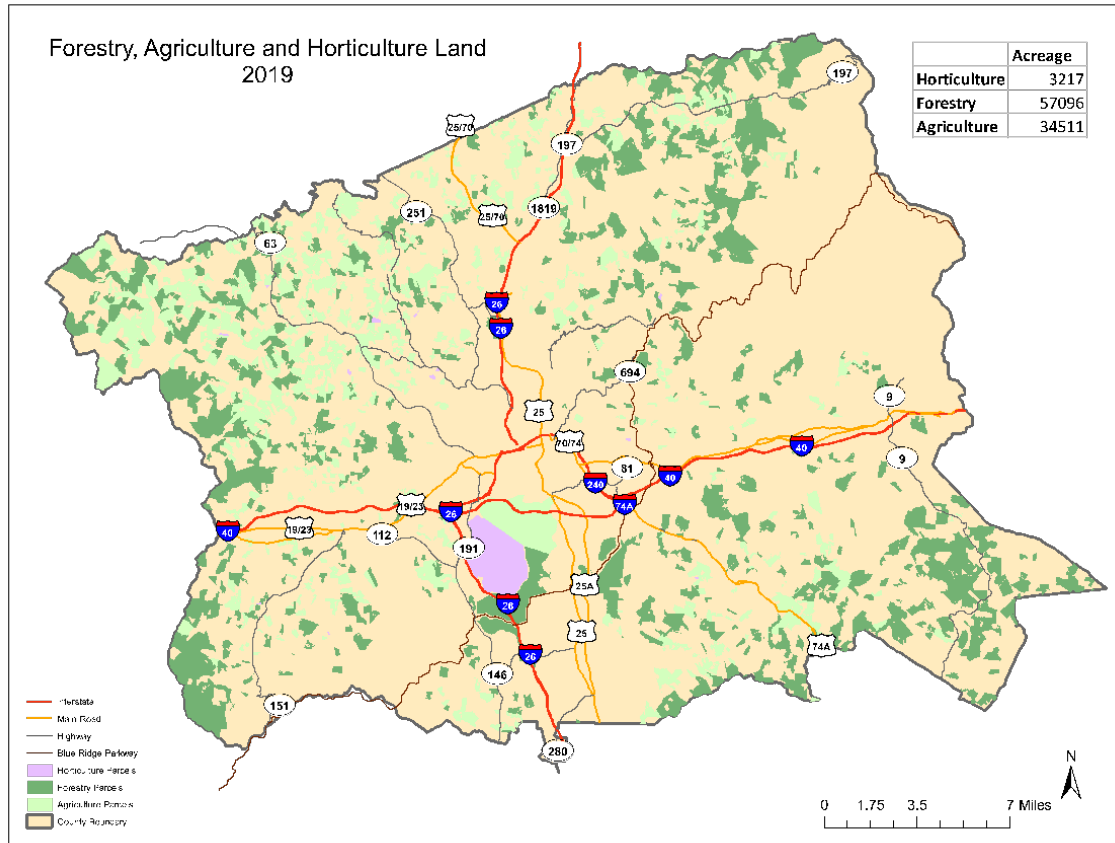
| | 2007 | 2012 | 2017 | % Change, 2007-2017 |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|------------------------|
| Number of Farms | 1,077 | 1,060 | 1073 | 0% |
| Land in Farms | 72,087 | 71,480 | 72,284 | 0% |
| Average Farm Size | 67 | 67 | 67 | 0% |
| Median Farm Size | 27 | 32 | 28 | 0% |
| Farms Less than 10 Acres | 198 | 146 | 250 | 26% |
| Farms 10 to 49 Acres | 526 | 541 | 472 | -11% |
| Farms 50 to 179 acres | 278 | 293 | 280 | 1% |
| Farms 180 to 499 Acres | 61 | 70 | 53 | -13% |
| Farms 500 to 999 Acres | 11 | 6 | 13 | 18% |
| Total Cropland | 20,338 | 17,212 | 17,847 | -12% |
| Harvested Cropland | 14,768 | 15,247 | 14,350 | -3% |

While average farm size remained unchanged, there has been some fluctuation in the distribution of the size of farms. From 2007 to 2017, farms reporting fewer than 10 acres increased from 198 to 250, a 26% change. Over the same time period, farms of 10 to 49 acres dropped by 11%, from 526 to 472, while those from 180 to 499 acres decreased by 13%, from 61 to 53.

A different methodology of measuring land in present-use valuation also shows little change over the past dozen years. From 2007, when Buncombe's first farmland protection plan was adopted, to 2019, the total amount of land registered in present-use valuation actually rose 1.3%, from 93,644 acres in 2007 to 94,824 in 2019.

| PUV Land in Buncombe County, 2007 and 2019 | | | | |
|--|----------|-------------|--------------|----------------------|
| | Forestry | Agriculture | Horticulture | Total PUV Acreage |
| 2007 | 42,769 | 47,548 | 3327 | 93,644 |
| 2019 | 57,096 | 34,511 | 3217 | 94,824 |
| % Change | 33.5% | -27.3% | -3% | 1.3% |

A closer look at PUV designation shows a marked shift from land in agricultural PUV to forestry PUV. Over a 12-year period, forestland increased more than 14,000 acres, while agricultural land decreased by about 13,000 acres. Agricultural leaders speculate this change is being driven by landowners aging out of active agricultural production, choosing to switch to forest management as the best option for keeping land in PUV. Forestland does not require the same amount of individual attention as agricultural land, allowing landowners to retire and live remotely if they choose, while keeping real estate taxes low.



Farm Economic Activity Continues to Decline

Buncombe County farms have followed a trend of decreasing economic activity for several decades. Dramatic swings in certain agricultural sectors, such as nursery and greenhouse production, have occasionally skewed results from one census to another, but the long-term trend is undeniable. Total farm income fell almost 12% from 2012 to 2017, and average sales per farm fell nearly 13% in the same period.

The greatest decline was in animal agriculture. Reflecting a decline from record-high beef-cow prices, sales of livestock, poultry, and related products plunged more than 28%, losing more than \$4.3 million. Dairy income dropped more than 47%, and sales of cattle and calves dropped 52%.

Crop sales declined at a less staggering rate, falling by a little more than \$2 million, from \$39.26 million in 2012 to \$37.18 million in 2017.

| Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| | Value, 2017 | Farms, 2017 | Value, 2012 | Farms, 2012 | \$ Value % Change, 2012 to 2017 |
| All | 48,013,000 | 1,073 | 54,413,000 | 1,060 | -11.76% |
| Avg Sales per Farm | 44,747 | N/A | 51,333 | N/A | -12.83% |
| All Crops | 37,180,000 | 553 | 39,258,000 | 475 | -5.29% |
| Livestock, Poultry, and related products | 10,834,000 | 629 | 15,155,000 | 613 | -28.51% |
| Vegetables, inc. Melons, Potatoes, and Sweet Potatoes | 6,142,000 | 137 | 6,361,000 | 114 | -3.44% |
| Milk From Cows | 3,603,000 | 5 | 6,851,000 | 13 | -47.41% |
| Cattle and Calves | 3,297,000 | 410 | 7,003,000 | 447 | -52.92% |
| Fruits and Tree Nuts | 569,000 | 31 | 647,000 | 24 | -12.06% |

Bright Spots: Greenhouse and Nursery, Fresh Vegetables, and Agritourism

Buncombe County farms engaged in crop production fared much better than those involved in livestock. The biggest category in terms of economic impact is nursery, greenhouse, flowers, and sod. This sector was devastated by the Great Recession of 2008 but appears to have fully recovered by 2017, with more than \$28 million in sales. Due to privacy concerns, data from 2012 was blocked by the USDA. However, researchers are confident this sector of the farm economy grew substantially as the overall economy improved.

The USDA has recently begun tracking agritourism, value-added farm processing, and sales of food directly to consumers. While data for agritourism and value-added products was not available in 2012, these sectors contributed \$1.9 million and \$873,000 respectively to overall farm income in 2017. Food sold directly to consumers, mostly at the many neighborhood tailgate markets in the county, rose by more than 39%, from \$1.14 million in 2012 to \$1.58 million in 2017. With a dozen or more markets supported by thousands of consumers, this tally may well be an undercount.

| Select Sources of Farm Income, 20012 to 2017 | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| | Value, 2017 | Farms, 2017 | Value, 2012 | Farms, 2012 | \$ Value % Change, 2012 to 2017 |
| Nursery, Greenhouse, Flowers, and Sod | 28,292,000 | 95 | * | 78 | * |
| Agritourism and Recreational Services | 1,878,000 | 34 | * | * | * |
| Food sold Directly to Consumers | 1,589,000 | 176 | 1,141,000 | 168 | 39.26% |
| Processed and Value-Added Agricultural Products Sold | 873,000 | 46 | * | * | * |
| Berries | 346,000 | 74 | 134,000 | 41 | 158.21% |

A closer look at vegetable production shows a growing and highly diversified sector. Despite an increase of 116 acres of vegetable production, traditional vegetable commodities – tomatoes, potatoes, and sweet corn – all dropped. Those declines were more than offset by a wide and diverse number of vegetables grown for direct sales to consumers. Peppers of all kinds increased from 37 acres in 2012 to 139 acres in 2017, lettuce acres increased from 9 to 43 acres, and squash grew from 20 to 27 acres. While the total number of acres in vegetable production remains small compared to all farmland, this sector shows significant growth in value and is contributing to farm profitability and stability. The number of farms harvesting vegetables for sale also increased, rising from 114 to 137 farms.

| Vegetables, Potatoes, and Melons Harvested For Sale, Buncombe County, 2012 and 2017 | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--|
| Commodity | Farms, 2017 | Acres, 2017 | Farms, 2012 | Acres, 2012 | Acreage, % Change, 2012 to 2017 |
| Vegetables Harvested for Sale | 137 | 846 | 114 | 730 | 16% |
| Tomatoes | 65 | 358 | 58 | 426 | -16% |
| Bell Peppers | 40 | 84 | 16 | 35 | 140% |
| Peppers, Other | 30 | 55 | 4 | 2 | 2650% |
| Lettuce, All Kinds | 39 | 43 | 12 | 9 | 378% |
| Potatoes | 54 | 28 | 64 | 44 | -36% |
| Squash | 45 | 27 | 23 | 20 | 35% |
| Pumpkins | 21 | 21 | 1 | * | * |
| Sweet Corn | 30 | 19 | 41 | 42 | -55% |
| Sweet Potatoes | 21 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 33% |

04 - Efforts to Preserve Farmland and Farming

Since developing its first farmland protection plan in 2007, Buncombe County has implemented a number of initiatives to keep land in farms and to support the economic viability of farming. In several cases, the county collaborates with area land trusts and the Buncombe Soil and Water Conservation District for purchase of conservation easements. Complementing these efforts at preserving farmland, numerous area nonprofits have executed projects that are designed to prevent farmland loss or to increase the profitability of farm-based businesses. This section identifies and describes such initiatives.

Buncombe County Soil & Water Conservation District

The BCSWCD is the lead county agency tasked with programs to support the protection of farmland. In 1989, the county adopted the Buncombe County Farmland Preservation Ordinance, the first such ordinance passed in North Carolina at the county level. The ordinance empowered the BCSWCD to put in place programs that encourage the voluntary preservation and protection of farmlands from nonfarm development. In addition, the ordinance created the county's **Agricultural Advisory Board**, which takes on practical responsibility for overseeing most county-led farmland-preservation activities.

In 2008, the BCSWCD created the position of Buncombe County Farmland Preservation Coordinator. This individual is responsible for overseeing key components of the county's Farmland Preservation Program, including:

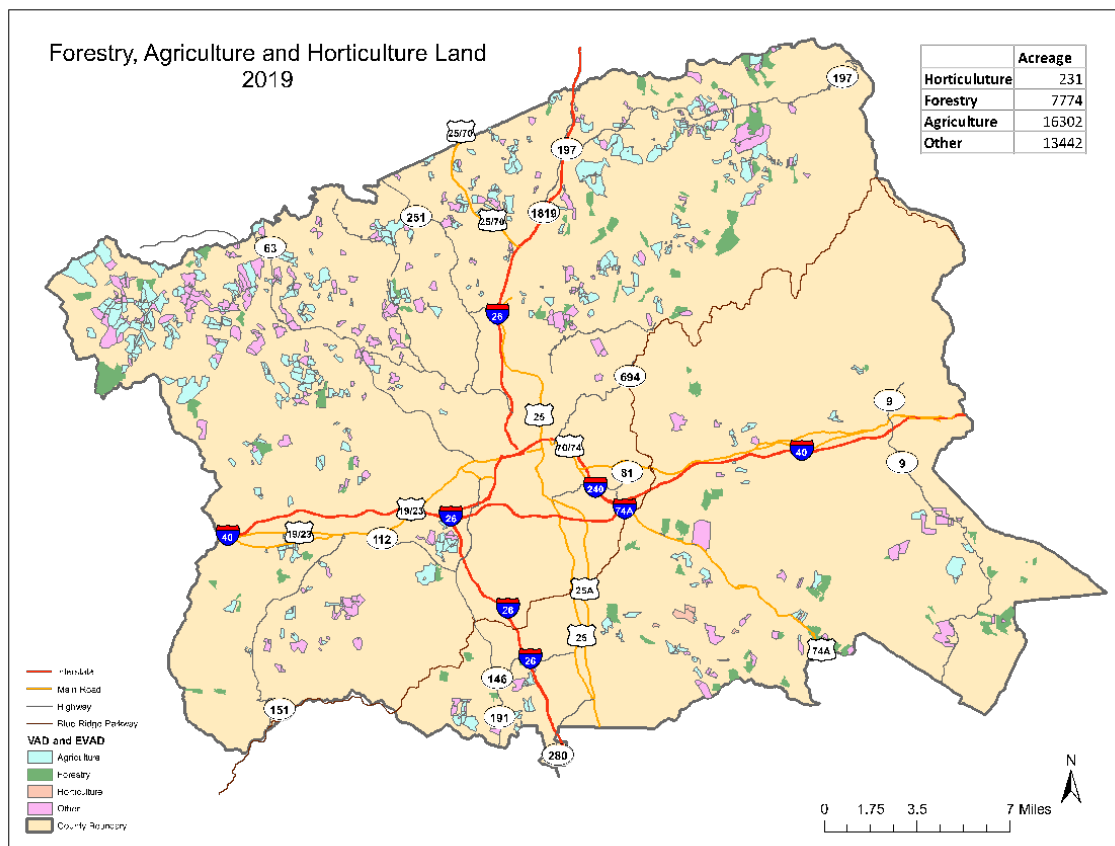
Voluntary Ag District Preservation program (VAD) - The Voluntary Ag District is a local government program that allows farmers to voluntarily enroll their farm property in an agricultural district. The purpose of the program is to slow the decline of farmlands in the county and offer operators of farms some nuisance suit protection from encroachment of development.

An agricultural district consists of at least 50 acres of qualifying farmland, individually or separately owned, which are located within one mile of each other. In order to be considered qualifying farmland, the land must meet a short list of requirements that almost all farms in the county meet. Participating landowners will sign a non-binding agreement to sustain, encourage, and promote agriculture. Maps designating participating farms that form agricultural districts are posted in the Register of Deeds office, Code Enforcement office, Land Records, Soil and Water Conservation District, and Cooperative Extension.

Enhanced Voluntary Ag District Preservation Program (EVAD) - EVAD gives the same benefits as VAD, but also allows for participants to receive up to 25 percent of their gross sales from the sale of nonfarm products and still qualify as a bona fide farm that is exempt from zoning regulations. EVAD lands are also eligible to receive a higher percentage of cost-share funds under the Agriculture Cost Share Program. EVAD requires an irrevocable 10-year easement prohibiting development of the land enrolled.

Buncombe County Conservation Easement Support – Buncombe County Conservation Support provides transaction costs and easement purchase funds. This funding is allocated by the Land

Conservation Advisory and Agriculture Advisory boards based on each board's ranking and project requests for the year. Buncombe County also works to secure state and federal funding for conservation easements through the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, which is administered by the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, ACEP-ALE, formerly known as the Federal Farm and Ranchland's Protection Program, FRPP.



Buncombe Conservation Easement Agreements - A conservation easement is a written agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization or public agency in which the landowner (also called grantor or donor) promises to keep their land in its original agricultural condition without extensive disturbance, and the conservation organization or public agency (also called grantee) has the right to monitor the property and enforce the terms of the agreement. The county's Farmland Preservation Ordinance has been revised to allow the county to hold permanent conservation easements on farms in the county. Other entities that hold conservation easements include the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Conserving Carolina Land Trust, and Riverlink.

In 2005, Buncombe County began directly supporting the purchase of conservation easements. In

most cases, the county was able to finance transaction costs including surveys, baseline documents, environmental assessments, closing costs, and attorney fees. When budgets allowed, the county was able to finance some or all of the costs of easement sales. Partnering organizations in these transactions have included the Soil and Water Conservation district, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Conserving Carolina, and Riverlink.

Since 2005, the county has assisted in conservation easement purchases and protection of more than 8,000 acres of farm and forest land. Total county expenditures were just over \$7.7 million over this 15-year period. County dollars have been leveraged at nearly \$2 of non-County funds for each \$1 of County funds. When factoring in the charitable gift value from landowners, the County is leveraging resources at a rate of 7 to 1. Appendix D details the funding leveraged by Buncombe County for Conservation Easement projects, the appendix is organized by funding by year, matching funds, and charitable donation.

Conservation Easement Funding Leveraged with Buncombe County Funds

| Total Funding | Total |
|---|------------------|
| Total Buncombe County Contributions | \$ 7,762,464.88 |
| Total Cash Leveraged By Buncombe | \$ 14,057,555.62 |
| Total Landowner Charitable Gift Leveraged By Buncombe | \$ 33,151,210.00 |
| Total Amount Leveraged by Buncombe | \$ 47,208,765.62 |

Buncombe County Strategic Plan 2020-2025 - In May 2020, Buncombe County Commissioners adopted The Buncombe County Strategic Plan 2020-2025, prioritizing Environmental and Energy Stewardship as one of the main 4 Community Focus Areas, with the vision of “high quality air, water, farmland and renewable energy for future generations”. One of the 2025 goals of this community focus area is to “preserve farmland and environmentally sensitive tract.” This goal aligns with the current work of the Buncombe Farmland Preservation Program and the recommendations of this Farmland Protection Plan.

For more information on the Buncombe County Strategic Plan 2020-2025:

<https://www.buncombecounty.org/governing/commissioners/strategic-plan.aspx>

Other County-led Initiatives - In addition to supporting the above key programs, the Farmland Preservation coordinator champions special initiatives that serve to raise awareness of the importance of farmland. In 2020, these include the Buncombe Friends of Agriculture breakfasts, which are held quarterly at the WNC Agricultural Center, and the creation of the nationally recognized and award winning Buncombe County Farm Heritage Trail, designed to entice

residents and tourists to get out and visit farms that receive guest visitors for agritourism and direct sales of farm products.

Land Conservation Advisory Board – The LCAB was created in 2004. It is authorized by Buncombe County to support conservation of undeveloped land through purchase of conservation easements that are not usually agricultural in nature. Conservation efforts of LCAB have tended to focus more on mountain ridgelines that are not usually agricultural in nature, however LCAB also has a strong record of funding significant farm focused lands including the preservation of Claxton Farm, Hickory Nut Gap Farm and several farms in the Sandy Mush Township among others, and sites that preserve the natural beauty and ecology of a given area. These include lands adjacent to the French Broad River, Swannanoa River, and Blue Ridge Parkway.

Buncombe County Tax Department PUV Policies

In 1974, the N.C. General Assembly enacted a voluntary program to allow certain lands to be appraised at their present-use value instead of at their potential commercial value. This legislation was enacted in recognition that many landowners using their property for agriculture, forestry, and horticulture purposes could not afford to pay property taxes based on appraised commercial value and would be forced to sell their land. PUV tax assessment is widely considered to be the most popular and important policy tool for keeping land in agricultural and forestry production.

In general, property owners with at least 10 acres in agriculture, 20 acres in forestry, or five acres in horticulture can substantially reduce their tax burden by enrolling in PUV. Additionally, certain lands that protect and conserve wildlife can enroll, with a minimum of 20 acres and a maximum of 100 acres.

The Buncombe Tax Department administers the present-use tax assessment program. The tax department prints brochures and gives public presentations on the benefits of PUV enrollment. Other county departments – in particular, the Soil & Water Conservation Division and the county's Cooperative Extension – promote PUV to property owners, thus ensuring that as many landowners as possible are aware of this beneficial policy.

Complementing local government programs in support of farmland, multiple agencies and nonprofit organizations manage programs that protect farmland from development or that contribute to the economic viability of farming in the county. These include:

N.C. Cooperative Extension - Buncombe County Center

Buncombe County Cooperative Extension shares offices with the BCSWCD in the Leicester community. Cooperative Extension has four full-time county agents for agriculture and natural resources and is further served by numerous area agents who provide outreach and education to Buncombe County landowners. Cooperative Extension has developed strong collaborative relationships with other WNC-based organizations focused on farms and farming. Program areas

include animal agriculture, commercial horticulture, farm health and safety, food safety and processing, local foods, pest management, and specialty crops. In 2020, Cooperative Extension created an infographic detailing changes and trends of agriculture in Buncombe County (attached in appendices).

Learn more at <https://buncombe.ces.ncsu.edu/>

Buncombe County Tailgate Markets

The past 20 years have seen a proliferation of pop-up tailgate markets throughout the city of Asheville and other municipalities and communities in the county. These markets, mostly run from about May to October, give dozens of farms opportunities for direct retail sales of locally grown meats, produce, flowers, and value-added foods. Farmers are able to realize significant profits that contribute to overall farm income and livelihood. Tailgate markets offer an opportunity to increase acreage of farmland engaged in vegetable production.

In 2019, there were a dozen or so tailgate farmers' markets operating in the county, including at least six within the Asheville city limits and one each in Enka-Candler, Weaverville, and Black Mountain.

WNC Farmers Market

The WNC Farmers Market is owned by the state of North Carolina and managed by the N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services. Founded in the mid-1970s, this facility was designed to function primarily as a terminal market where area farmers could sell their harvests at wholesale to produce distributors and retailers operating at the market. In recent decades, the market has come to support more direct-retail opportunities for local farms. The annual WNC Herb Festival, held in the spring, is typically the busiest retail weekend of the year.

The market is currently undergoing significant improvements thanks to more than \$3 million allocated by the N.C. General Assembly. Additional funds from the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority have funded improvements to retail buildings and a \$1.25 million grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission is funding a shared-use commercial kitchen to be built on the market grounds in 2020.

Learn more at <https://www.ncagr.gov/markets/facilities/markets/asheville/>

WNC AgOptions program

For more than 15 years, WNC Communities, a nonprofit organization based in Asheville, has managed the WNC AgOptions program. WNC AgOptions is a competitive grant program that awards matching funds to farmers in Western North Carolina that are executing innovative on-farm projects designed to make farms more successful. This program is funded by the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, which was created to provide funds to alleviate the negative impacts of the decline of the tobacco industry.

In 2020, the AgOptions program is providing grants of either \$3,000 or \$6,000 to farms located

in 21 WNC counties. Since 2005, dozens of Buncombe County farms have benefited directly from this program, with many more benefiting from lessons learned by grantees trying out new and innovative production and marketing ideas.

Learn more at: <https://wncagoptions.org>

WNC Livestock Center

WNC Communities also led efforts to re-establish a viable livestock market in Western North Carolina following the closure of a market on what is now the site of New Belgium Brewing in Asheville's River Arts District. The new WNC Livestock Center opened in 2011 near Canton, in Haywood County, with support from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and many local and regional partners. Availability of a well-functioning livestock market is crucial to the long-term viability of cattle farming in Buncombe County and has likely kept several thousand acres of land in rural Buncombe County in farming.

Learn more at <https://wncregionallivestockcenter.com>

ASAP Local Foods initiatives

For the past 20 years, the Asheville-based Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) has been a champion of locally grown foods and farming. Serving the entire WNC region, ASAP publishes an annual local-food guide, hosts a Business of Farming Conference, and executes multiple programs including cost-shares for agricultural inputs that support farms' economic viability. ASAP staff have developed expertise in local-foods marketing and support the organizational structure of local tailgate markets.

Learn more at: www.asapconnections.org

Blue Ridge Food Ventures (BRFV)

Located at the Enka campus of Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, this 11,500-square-foot food-processing facility serves as a business incubator for entrepreneurs making and selling value-added foods, cosmetics, and natural products. Since 2005, farm-based producers have accessed the BRFV kitchens to process hot peppers, wash greens, and make jams and jellies. While most clients are not farmers, entrepreneurial farm-based businesses are able to use the kitchens to tap staff expertise on formulations, label requirements, and regulatory compliance.

Learn more at www.blueridgefoodventures.org

NC FarmLink

NC FarmLink is a program of NC State Extension that connects farmers, landowners, and service providers across North Carolina, helping to grow the state's agriculture industry. NC FarmLink maintains databases of both available farmland and farmers looking for land, working with landowners and farmers to ensure an appropriate and lasting match is made. NC FarmLink has a western NC director and is actively engaged in Buncombe County.

Learn more at <https://ncfarmlink.ces.ncsu.edu>

Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC)

SAHC is an established land trust serving a 10-county region in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee. According to their website, since 1974 SAHC has conserved more than 75,000 acres in the region. SAHC directly supports farms and farming through its Community Farm & Food Program, providing access to land, livelihood, and learning for beginning and established farmers.

A key element of the program is SAHC's 140-acre community farm in Alexander, in Buncombe County. Among the projects at this site, SAHC leads an incubator program for aspiring farmers, provides educational workshops about sustainable and productive farming practices and land management, and operates a value-added kitchen for regional farmers to expand market season and profitability for their farm businesses. SAHC also works closely with Buncombe County Soil & Water in securing support for purchase of conservation easements in the county.

Learn more at <https://appalachian.org>

Conserving Carolina

Conserving Carolina is a land trust created in 2017 with the merger of Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and Pacolet Area Land Conservancy. This organization serves areas mostly in Henderson, Polk, and Transylvania counties but also has championed land conservation on properties in southern Buncombe County close to Henderson and Polk counties. Like SAHC, Conserving Carolina has worked with the Buncombe County government to secure conservation easements on private land in the county.

Learn more at <https://conservingcarolina.org/>

Buncombe County Schools

With six high schools, Buncombe County has the largest public school system in Western North Carolina. All high schools have agricultural-education programs, including active clubs for Future Farmers of America. Educational programming focuses on labs, hands-on agricultural training, and club activities. Courses available include agricultural science, horticulture, and agricultural mechanics. Buncombe County schools from kindergarten through high school participate in environmental-education programs in collaboration with Buncombe County Soil & Water, N.C. Cooperative Extension, and other partners with shared missions to preserve farmland and open space.

Conclusion

Buncombe County has an impressive array of programs available to landowners to help preserve farmland and proactively manage change in the face of growing development pressures. Collaboration between statewide, regional, and local organizations means that landowners and active farmers can find support for almost any initiative to keep farmland viable.

05 - Landowner Survey Responses

In October 2019, Smithson Mills conducted a farmland survey of landowners residing in Buncombe County with land registered under present-use valuation by the Buncombe County tax office. These properties were all listed as being engaged in agriculture, forestry, or horticulture. In all, 1,075 surveys were mailed, along with a cover letter signed by BCSWC director Gary Higgins and a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope.

The purposes of this survey were to gain a better understanding of how people use their farmland and to give policymakers a sense of landowners' attitudes towards managing and preserving farmland. In addition, responses help service providers know how well their programs are understood and what initiatives might be strengthened or created to better address landowners' needs.

The following is a summary of key survey findings. The full results can be found in the appendices of this report.

Who responded?

Researchers received 354 valid responses, for a total return rate of 32.9%. This response rate gives a confidence level of 95%, with a margin of error of plus- or minus-4.27%. These surveys were hand-entered into an online survey-compilation system and the results were quantified and graphed.

Survey respondents seem to reflect the greater population of Buncombe County residents who own farmland:

- A substantial majority (61%) of respondents said their land had been in their family for more than 50 years. Only 11 respondents (3%) said the land had been in their family for less than five years.
- 67% of respondents use their land for cattle or other livestock
- 60% use their land for hay, silage, or feed corn
- 60% use their land for forestry
- 25% use their land for vegetables
- 9% use their land for fruit trees

Other uses of land showed great diversity in farm activity, but no other single enterprise was identified by more than 5% of respondents. Among about 40 responses, uses include landscape ornamentals, honeybees and honey, wild-crafted herbs, hemp, mushrooms, agritourism, wildlife habitat, and Christmas trees.

When asked how many acres they had in forestry or agriculture, a plurality (37%) said they have fewer than 25 acres, while 33% have between 25 and 50 acres. Only 14% of respondents said

they have more than 100 acres in forestry or agriculture.

The vast majority (84%) said they either manage their land themselves or someone in their family manages it for them. Only 7.5% said they lease their land to someone not in their family.

Future plans and development pressures

When asked, “Do you expect to sell some or all of your land in the next five years?,” a large majority (84%) said no. Only 3% said yes; 13% were unsure.

When asked if they had been contacted recently about selling their land for development, 40% said yes.

Respondents were asked, “Do you have a transition plan for what will happen to your land after you pass on?” Just over half (52%) said they have everything in place, 40% said they have some ideas but have made no decisions, 4% said they had never thought about a transition plan for their land, and 3% said they don’t need a transition plan because they will sell their land before then.

Familiarity with conservation

Survey results indicate that about a third of Buncombe County PUV landowners are well informed on the most popular tools for preservation of farmland, but more than half of respondents said they would like to learn more. A little more than a third (35%) said they were somewhat familiar with voluntary agricultural districts but would like to know more, while 21% said they had never heard of VADs but would like to know more. Similar results were recorded for voluntary agricultural easements.

Obstacles to agriculture

Respondents were given a list of nine common obstacles to success in agriculture and were asked to select three that they considered the biggest hindrances in Buncombe County. In order of preference, these were as follows:

- High start-up costs of farming (56%)
- Costs of inputs – seed, fertilizer, etc. (43%)
- Finding farm labor (39%)
- Lack of young farmers (39%)
- Lack of affordable farmland (34%)
- Lack of public awareness and understanding of agriculture (21%)
- Availability of land with prime soils (20%)
- Fertility/erosion issues (7%)
- Lack of local markets (5%)

In addition, 49 respondents offered open-ended opinions about obstacles to succeeding in agriculture. These included:

- Low income of farming
- Low commodity prices, especially for cattle
- Taxes
- Invasive plants and depredation by wildlife
- Lack of local services such as lime spreaders, a local slaughterhouse, and feed mills

Recommendations and desire to learn more

Respondents were asked if they'd like to learn more about five topics pertaining to keeping farms and farming viable. In order of popularity, positive response rates were as follows:

- Planning of generational transition of my land to family members (58%)
- Developing new products that I can grow and sell (31%)
- Developing strategies to keep from selling my best farmland (20%)
- Marketing my agricultural production (19%)
- How best to sell my land for agricultural use (9%)

Respondents were encouraged to write in topics not included in the list that they would like to know more about. Twenty-eight open-ended responses were provided, including the following:

- Leasing land for agricultural production
- Hemp cultivation and processing
- Agritourism support
- Transfer of land to conservation easements
- Cost shares and grants for sustainable agricultural practices
- Preserving the mountain without development
- Establishing permanent wildlife habitats
- Benefits of forestry management

Recommended county activities

Respondents were asked to select two of five subjects that they would recommend the county engage in to help preserve agriculture and farmland. In order of preference, these were:

- Promote programs that lower taxes on agricultural land (85%)
- Educate the public on the importance of farming to our history and culture (49%)
- Promote local foods and farms (37%)

- Encourage participation in voluntary ag districts and conservation easements (29%)
- Include agricultural lessons in public schools (26%)

In addition, 38 respondents offered other suggestions for county activities, including the following:

- Support sustainable-agricultural practices
- Provide incentives for new land buyers to keep land in agriculture
- Educate about permanent conservation easements
- Free soil testing
- Promote forestry and forest-management plans
- Reinstate sales-tax exemption for small farmers
- Increase the penalty for change of use and allow the back pay to go into a special fund to increase farmland conservation

Interest in continued involvement

Respondents were asked if they would like to attend a dinner or breakfast to learn more about efforts to preserve farmland in the county. A total of 143 respondents said yes and included their contact information. This input should serve to identify landowners who may not know about or regularly attend the Friends of Agriculture breakfast held quarterly at the WNC Agricultural Center in Fletcher.

Final thoughts

The last question of the survey asked respondents if there is anything else they would like the researchers to know about agricultural and farmland preservation in Buncombe County. A total of 73 respondents offered their thoughts. Among them were:

- Protect forest and water resources as well as agricultural land.
- Tax exemptions for agriculture are the only thing that will stop the transition away from farming.
- Lower the state sales-tax exemption for farmers. With the fall in cattle prices, it is very difficult to meet the \$10,000 in annual sales to qualify, thus further burdening the farmers who are struggling.
- Reduce the paperwork and permits required to get things done.
- There is a lot of talk about “farm to table” but minimal purchasing of local products is really happening. Needs to be a focused effort to increase local use of local agricultural products.
- Please post specific info about topics covered in this survey on your website.

- Farms are vital to the resilience and well-being of the county. Waive all property taxes, provide grants for innovation and diversity, welcome workers and create affordable housing for them.
- Land stripping for housing is causing significant problems for wildlife habitat and erosion. Even smaller developers should be required to give something back to the area they've developed (to address road issues and landscaping).
- Educate real estate professionals on the dangers of land fragmentation. This might do a little bit to mitigate the damage. [paraphrased]
- It would be very difficult for my operation to survive without the present-use valuation.

Conclusion

The rate of survey participation, along with the hundreds of thoughtful comments and perspectives, indicate that Buncombe County's landowners have a high degree of engagement on the issue of farmland preservation. Responses help inform the researchers in making specific and actionable recommendations for education, outreach, and policy promotion that can make a meaningful difference for the future of undeveloped private land in Buncombe County. These are included in the Conclusions and Recommended Next Steps section of this report.

06 - Profiles of Buncombe County Farmers

Justin Dillingham's sons are at least the ninth generation of Dillinghams to call Barnardsville home. "We've been here for certain that long, perhaps a little longer," he says, "And my particular lineage, we've not moved more than two and a half miles from where the original Dillingham settled."

"We're pretty well entrenched," Dillingham adds, somewhat understatedly.



The first of that lineage was Absalom Dillingham. "He came from Virginia as a young man and married the daughter of one of the founders of Asheville. The Dillinghams were English, Scottish, a little Irish mix."

Absalom Dillingham farmed and logged on a small scale and passed his land down to his children. "He wouldn't divide it by acreage; he would give them a valley."

Justin's grandfather raised cattle, baled hay, and grew tobacco. "He was one of the first – perhaps the very first – to have a tractor and a hay bailer. "And that's really the farm that I was born on as well. It was about the same."

Dillingham knew from a pretty early age that he wanted to farm; that he wanted to maintain his family's tradition. He and his brother were the last of their generation to carry the family name.

Both now have sons.

Joel Mowrey grew up around farmers in Ohio; his grandfather worked in a grain elevator. Mowrey studied forestry and horticulture in college. He and his wife, Tara, made the decision to move down for the quality of life.

Mowrey took a job with NC State's horticulture science department, serving for 16 years as a research specialist. "All along," he says, "I had a desire to be a landowner and work my way toward the potential of being a career farmer."



In 2003, the Mowreys bought 10 acres in Candler. "My desire was to be a tree and shrub farmer. I was into exotic and rare plants. Our goal was to develop land for container plant production."

Janet Peterson moved down from New Jersey to Fairview with her parents in 1968. The 200 acres they'd bought looked a wreck – overgrown; pastures that no longer had animals; a four-acre abandoned cornfield; partially burned-over land from a brush fire; and an eroded, recently logged mountain. The Petersons built a house with a view, then spent years grooming the land, replanting pines and carving out a hobby blueberry patch in that old cornfield. Janet fell in love with the land.

"It was a glorious life for a young girl who liked to be a tomboy," she recalls. "My father taught me how to drive a tractor and I was his companion when he was fixing fence posts, plus I picked a lot of rocks out of planting fields, finding arrowheads, which made it fun.

“My father brought down blueberry cuttings from New Jersey in our old VW bus. We had a you-pick farm that was in full production in 1974. We’re now on the third generation of people coming to pick blueberries” on what she now calls Cloud 9 Farm.

“Our relatives told my parents, ‘You live on cloud nine. I bet you never want to leave.’ And that sort of stuck. So I decided to make it formal.”

In the mid-1980s, Tom Elmore and his wife, Karen Thatcher, were living in Colorado and in need of a change. “I came of age in the ’60s, and there was a back-to-the-land movement. Farming seemed to offer an alternative. But the area we were in had only an 11-day growing season.” They scouted locations, were drawn to Asheville, and settled down on a little piece of land in Leicester in 1987. They called it Thatchmore Farm.

Aubrey and Rieta Wells bought their land in Sandy Mush from Aubrey’s father, who had inherited it from his father. “I don’t know how far back we go,” he says, “but we know of six generations of farming here.” From 1957 until this past May, the Wells family ran a dairy operation.

His grandfather had raised and sold cattle and grown apples. “Then my father, when he came along, he was the one who got interested in the dairy business and started the dairy in ’57. I was three years old when my father started in dairy.”

Wells recalls that in 1972, the year he graduated from high school, there were 100 dairy farms in Buncombe County. Now there are only three.

“Dairy’s all I’d ever done – 61 years in dairy,” he says. “But now I’m coming back to what my grandfather did, backgrounding cows and some cow-calf operation.”

Mike Hutchinson was raised in Rhode Island. His parents were caretakers of what had been a colonial plantation. His family operated one of the first CSAs on the east coast and were certified organic in the early ’90s, when not many folks were.

“I learned how to drive a team of horses when I was maybe 11 years old,” Hutchinson says. “We had hay wagons, and we did a lot of small-vegetable stuff. It was a classical way to learn the ropes.”

Hutchinson was an ambitious, rebellious young man. Around the age of 15, he challenged himself to determine how to make a difference in the world. “My parents said, ‘Well, the most radical thing you can do is to be a farmer.’ And I was, like, ‘What do you mean?’ They said, ‘Think about it. Everything starts with the food you eat.’”

Changing times

Cloud 9 Farm, Janet Peterson attests, is another world. Though only 15 minutes from Asheville, “you’re a world away ... like going back in time.”

The farm’s slogan is “Conservation. Celebration. Relaxation.” In addition to growing blueberries, she raises chickens, turkeys, and Black Angus cows and has a small sawmill.

Peterson's a beekeeper, and sells honey and beeswax. She makes healing salves from wild herbs found on the farm. "I try to use all that the farm has to offer." Cabin rentals are a primary source of income.



"People can come here to celebrate the special events in their lives. But the 'celebration' is also about being able to keep this farm as a farm and not bow into the developers who are at my doorstep." Her land is enrolled in the county's farmland-preservation program.

Peterson has seen her Fairview community change quite a lot; there aren't as many farmers as there once were. Suburbia encroaches on the farm's perimeters. "The neighboring fields we used to cut for hay for our cows are all now divided into house lots," Peterson says with a sigh.

"This was an agricultural valley when we moved here," Tom Elmore says of Leicester. "Now it's mostly a suburban valley. Farmland protection is so important. I don't really want to be the last farmer in Leicester."

Elmore recalls that when he went into business, there were a lot of organic growers in the area but not much demand for organic. "Dinner for the Earth was a tiny little store with a small produce section. French Broad Food Co-Op had a produce section in a refrigerator. Things have really grown since then."

Thatchmore Farm has diversified its operations over time to meet that demand, expanding from three crops to about 30.

Just a dozen or so miles to the east of Elmore's farm, Sandy Mush remains largely rural. Nonetheless, Aubrey Wells, like Janet Peterson, has witnessed the crawl of urbanization. "It's unreal the number of houses that have been built, especially in the last 10 to 15 years."



The dairy business will probably never come back to this region of the state, Wells allows. "You can't put enough land together to meet market demands." Small-scale operations struggle. "People like to brag about how much they spent on their automobile but they don't tell you how cheap their groceries are."

Up in the northeastern corner of the county, Barnardsville is likewise relatively unchanged. "One thing that benefits us is that we're on the way to nowhere," Justin Dillingham says. Still, fewer of his neighbors are farming than once were.

Survival today mandates creativity. Dillingham practices regenerative agriculture. He hasn't used any chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides in several years. He does it for ecological as well as economic reasons. "Our customers are fairly knowledgeable concerning their food," he says.

Mike Hutchinson's Beacon Village Farm owns and leases plots of land from West Asheville to Old Fort, much of it along the Swannanoa River. He, his wife, Danielle, and their business partner grow kale, romaine lettuce, parsley, fennel, and more.

“Dandelion greens are a secret winner for us. You cut them and they keep coming back; they literally grow like a weed. They taste good and have some bitter alkaloids that are really good for certain liver and blood conditions.”

“People like to use us because we’ll pick to order,” Hutchinson says. “My crew can do that. We have this just-in-time, Lean manufacturing model.” Harris Teeter and Whole Foods are among their clients. “We’re in Whole Foods Global, which means that any customer could go to their produce guy in a Whole Foods and ask for our kale.”

Joel Mowrey was always interested in peppers, their many varieties. The tree and shrub business was hit hard with the Great Recession, and so he decided to develop his interest into a business and founded Smoking J’s Fiery Foods, a manufacturer of pepper mash, hot sauces, barbecue sauces, and spice rubs. Smoking J’s operates today from what was once the Upper Hominy Valley Volunteer Fire Department. The company grows all its own peppers, retails through its website, and wholesales to a co-packer. Smoking J’s has three full-time employees and as many as 30 seasonal employees.

“Because of the food scene here,” he says, “the great chefs and restaurants that we have, it really opened the door for a local market for our type of product.”

A range of resources. More required.

Buncombe County farmers are availing themselves of a wide variety of local resources.

Buncombe County Soil & Water helped Peterson with a conservation easement. “I will not be nervous about the future because the survey is done,” she says, “the appraisal is done. It’s acknowledged by the county and by the state that this will be preserved *in perpetuity*.”

Soil & Water also offered her a cost-share incentive to repair a leaking irrigation pond and to fence the creek that runs through Cloud 9 so that her cows don’t erode and pollute it.

Mowrey launched his operations at Blue Ridge Ventures in Candler, which provides infrastructure and technical assistance to start-up businesses. “We had a facility that we could utilize to make a legitimate for-sale product. We went there and trained and learned to scale it up.”

In the early days, Mowrey built his clientele on tailgate-market sales. “You get direct exposure to a customer base,” he says. “You get immediate feedback.”

The tailgate markets have been Thatchmore Farm’s primary source of sales for more than a decade, and Dillingham Family Farm has been selling at the Weaverville market for a number of years, steadily building a customer base. At one time, the Dillinghams ran their own market from their farm, with a local chef sometimes serving breakfast to more than a hundred people from all over the county and beyond.

Like so many of his colleagues, Elmore has taken advantage of services offered by the N.C. Cooperative Extension office. “Extension has changed quite a bit over the years,” he says. “In

the early years, the idea of growing organically was not well received. But since then, the folks that I was dealing with have aged out of the profession and their replacements are very progressive and open to organic. That's a big change."



Elmore has also taken advantage of grant opportunities. "We got notice the other day that the North Carolina Department of Agriculture has approved our organic-certification rebate. They'll pay three quarters of the cost of around \$1,000 to be certified. That's very helpful." He also takes advantage of a Duke Energy rebate for solar.

Such services and incentives are appreciated. But, local farmers agree, more is needed.

"The fact of the matter is that farmland is disappearing in North Carolina at an insane rate," Mowrey attests. "I believe that if our representatives desire any farmland to be left, they should be incentivizing people to keep their land in agriculture production."

"There are programs in place. 'Got to Be NC' is a marketing program. But what does it really do for us? We've gotten some signage, and we've gotten a few things that can help us market. But we do those things for ourselves anyway.

"If I had my state representative here right now, I'd say, 'Find a better way to incentivize the small farmer.' Because I could sell my property right now, and the crops that we grow on our farmland would be no more."

Challenges aplenty

While Census of Agriculture data indicates that the number of farms in the county under 10 acres increased from 2007 to 2017, the small farmer must think big to stay afloat.

“I could not survive on this farm with just the money I make from farming,” Peterson says. “I need agritourism dollars to make this work. If I want to build a new shed or a new barn for my cattle, I couldn’t do it on the money that I make from farming.”

Building from an eight-generation tradition, Justin Dillingham and his wife, Emily, have pursued new revenue streams.

“We have a Monday food drop, where we deliver to people’s homes within Buncombe County,” Dillingham says. “We have a delivery fee, which is pretty minimal, just to cover our fuel expenses and our time. People are expecting that kind of convenience these days.” Customers can also preorder food online and pick it up at the tailgate market.

Such initiatives, Dillingham says, are necessary. The challenges are many and varied. Property taxes, for example. “It seems like every few years, they decide our property’s worth more, so they need to get more money out of us. That’s a big issue.”

Present-use valuation has been a godsend for some, but eludes others.

“We currently receive no agricultural tax exemptions for what we do,” Mowrey says. “There are only two ways to achieve any agricultural tax exemptions: either have five acres of active horticultural production or 10 acres of contiguous cropland.”

“I own several different tracts of land,” Dillingham says, “and not any one of those pieces of land is over 10 acres. So even though I’m a full-time farmer, and even though off of my property I make a great deal more money than many people who get farm-tax exemptions, I can’t get exemptions.”

“If I own 10 acres, I can own another 10,000 acres in four- or five-acre tracts spread out over the entire county, and they will all piggyback on that one 10-acre property. It can all be farm-tax exempt. That’s not really a very judicious system.”

Elmore says he’s aiming to get his production up to five acres in order to be recognized as an “actual farm.”

“We have the biggest payroll in the valley,” he says, “but we’re not a real farm. When they wrote the law, they weren’t really envisioning small labor-intensive operations like what we run.”

Excessive bureaucracy, farmers attest, is another deterrent. Permits, for instance. “I can process a steer, and I can give you some meat,” Dillingham says. “But if you give me any money for it, I can’t do that. I would love to be able to process our own animals and not have to haul them two and a half hours away and pay money.”

Planning for the future

“Present-use value of the land for tax evaluation, agritourism dollars coming in from the vacation rentals on the property, and a former job’s monthly retirement check make this farm work,” Janet Peterson says. “We’d have to be a lot more creative in farming specialty crops to make a living in full-time farming.”

If Asheville is going to market itself as a prime tourist destination, Peterson asserts, it must invest considerably more in infrastructure:

“I see all the occupancy-tax money going for marketing, and all these beautiful videos that are bringing people here, and we’re building all these hotels, but people don’t have a place to park. People trip on the sidewalks.” Her vacation-rental guests are often reluctant to go downtown because it’s so crowded. “We need money to go to infrastructure.”

Hutchinson advocates for riparian buffers. “If you leave a piece of the riverbank to not be plowed, it’ll last a heck of a lot longer. We know this because we used to plow right to the riverbank and no longer do. And if you look at that land, there’s a pretty healthy riparian buffer.”

“I’m stubborn enough to believe that things do get better,” Hutchinson says. “Rivers can be protected; laws can be changed. Conservation takes time to work, but it does work.”

He’d also like to see an infiltration tax levied. “If you’re going to put a roof down, if you’re going to cut a road, you need to pay into a fund that will either repair or create infiltration zones.”

And he’s an advocate for up-zoning. “We don’t need single-family homes. We could put a lot more people on that footprint and save a lot more of these mountains. We can save more farmland, we can save riparian buffers, we can save the floodplains. But do we have the willpower to do it?”

“More farmland protection would be terrific,” Elmore avows. “There are some gorgeous farms being protected. I’d like to see a little more focus on our highly productive bottomlands, which are also productive for subdivisions. It would be good if we can get those set up.”

The next generation

“We have a sustainable model that has worked very well for us,” Mowrey says. “It’s allowed us to do a very good job at what we do. We’ve seen an increase in sales every single year since we’ve been in business, generally doubling each year. “Our model is working. We like the growth trend we’re on.”

But he questions whether he could find the same success if he were launching today. He, like many of his colleagues, cites the prohibitive cost of land. Ten farmable acres of land, with an affordable home, Mowrey says, is a rare commodity. “Extremely rare. It just doesn’t hardly exist. To be 20-something years old and find affordable property to buy like we did almost 20 years ago – well, even then we were fortunate.”

Justin Dillingham agrees: “I think it's an optimistic future for those of us in Buncombe County who are already in agriculture.” Getting in today though – a different story.

Tom Elmore considers leasing a viable option: “While it’s really challenging now to support a land purchase on farm production, land leasing is really quite a deal. For a few hundred dollars an acre, you can lease really nice land. Our vegetable production that largely drives two tailgate-market outlets is on an acre. So it doesn’t take much land to make a fairly reasonable living in agriculture, depending on what you’re growing.”

Dillingham sees a marked aging of those farming in his community. There are some young men roughly his age, in their 20s and 30s, who are “mainly crop farming, a lot of tomatoes – a very different type of farming than what I do.” Otherwise, most are in their 50s and beyond.

“When I started doing tailgating markets,” Mowrey says, “there was already a foundation of people doing them who were 10 years or more older than me. Now they’re 20 years older. Are their kids doing tailgate markets? Do they want to make jams and jellies?”

“Young farmers need help because land around here is priced for real estate,” Janet Peterson says. “I recently found out about the NC FarmLink program that connects farmers with landowners who see value in making their land productive.”

“That’s what I see for my future,” Peterson says, “a younger farmer family who could take over the blueberry patch or take over the harvesting of timber for a small sawmill operation. Hopefully, we could share our knowledge and history before we get too old.”

Elmore is on board with such initiatives: “There are a lot of young growers who are looking for a place to grow. We could lease our land or put in an incubator to launch new growers.”

He’s active with a group called Organic Growers School and they have a mentoring program. “I’ve mentored new growers over the last two years. One couple is just half a mile or so from here. They have a mushroom operation that appears to me to be thriving. They’re operating on a tiny land base, and it’s fun to see them have some success.”

Buncombe County farmers urge heightened investment in such mentoring initiatives.

‘A sense of community’

Not infrequently, people stop to ask Aubrey Wells if he would be interested in selling his land. He regularly hears from realtors. “We never respond to them,” he says. But certainly there are many who are tempted.

“Can you really fault a landowner who owns a property and has scraped by to make X-number of dollars when they could sell their property for \$40,000 an acre?,” Joel Mowrey asks.

Wells isn’t convinced that his elected officials truly appreciate the value of agriculture to the community as a whole. “If your stomach is full, you’re not worried about eating. Only 10 percent of our spendable income is spent on food. But that may change. We’ve passed seven billion in world population and it won’t be long before it’s eight. I would think that everybody should be

aware of the importance of keeping farms as farms.”

“We’re only 2 percent of the population,” Wells notes, “2 percent of the vote. But when farms fail, there’s a ripple effect. It affects a lot of things.”

Those interviewed agree on the importance of building awareness of where their food comes from.

“Our culture is becoming a little bit more food savvy and learning some of the problems with the industrial food system,” Justin Dillingham says, “but we’ve still got a long way to go.”

“One of the reasons that we moved here is that nearly everything will grow here in Buncombe, with the exception of a few tropicals, pineapples, avocados, and a few other things,” Elmore says. “I think over time, the pressure of climate change will more and more emphasize the need for a local food supply.”

Certainly, there’s a strong base to build from.

“There’s a small but strong contingent of family farmers here, people who live by farming who have been doing a good job for a long time and will continue to do a good job,” Hutchinson says.

There’s consensus on a spirit of community among Buncombe County farmers, and on its importance.

“I feel a sense of community with other farmers, especially experienced cattle farmers who let me borrow their bull for breeding or give advice for an abandoned calf we had to bottle feed,” Peterson says. “I’m very grateful to farms like Imladris Farm for sharing blueberry notes, Flying Cloud Farm for growing advice, and the Dillingham Family Farm because they shared knowledge on raising turkeys.”

Peterson sometimes takes Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project-sponsored farm tours to learn what other growers are doing and share ideas. She’s also learned what she doesn’t want to get into – goats, for example. “Goats *are* cute, but need a lot of daily attention and are susceptible to the coyotes and bears in our area. I don’t need to add anything more to my plate to worry about.”

There’s a genuine, enduring mutual respect within the farming community. Hutchinson calls dairy farmers “the saints of humanity; they buckle down and they just work their tails off.”

“I think it’s a lot easier now to find out how to grow organically,” Elmore says. “There’s a peer group and support structure that didn’t exist in the early years. “That’s all very helpful.”

Peterson attends the agricultural breakfasts the county sponsors quarterly. “I get to meet other farmers and 4H leaders and talk to legislators who often come to find out how they can support agriculture. I see great promise in getting 4H students involved in beekeeping.”

She encourages more such events. Educational opportunities are likewise appreciated – classes, seminars, workshops.

Buncombe County has put considerable investment in such resources, Elmore says, and it's appreciated. "But it's barely scratching the surface."

'In our blood'

"Most people said that you need your head examined to go into the dairy business," Aubrey Wells says. "It's long hours and hours and hours. You quit today and start back tomorrow. You never get done. But it's in our blood and we probably will farm till the day we die. I'd hate to break the family tradition."

He and his wife have two sons. "We didn't encourage farming because we knew that it couldn't support both of them. They went off to school and now one has his own business. But as the years go by and we get older, they may have interest in coming back and doing this, maybe just part time. We hope; but we don't know."

Elmore's daughter, Liz, was born on Thatchmore Farm. She studied biology in college and worked around the country. Now she's returning home to serve as farm manager. "It's very exciting to see that next generation coming along," her dad says.

Her motivation for coming back? "I have trouble answering that question for myself," he says. "Why would you ever work this hard for so little return?"

"It's just a calling," he concludes. "I think the key thing is having the passion to do it."

Janet Peterson's daughter, Mondy Lamb, who lives in Raleigh, loves to come home when she can. "She's very interested in preserving this farm in one piece and always remarks how quiet it is here."

Dillingham's 6-year-old son loves life on the farm. "We've got some baby lambs right now and he keeps track of them like a hawk. And my other son loves mechanical things; he loves tools, the tractors. Hopefully, one or both of them will have an interest."

Hutchinson also has young kids. He wants them to pursue their dreams – but can think of a whole lot worse ways to make a living than as growers. He loves his work; his role in society. And he's optimistic about the future of agriculture in Buncombe County. "I'm a boundlessly hopeful person," he says.

A bright future, though, he stresses, requires vision. His message to elected officials is to think big while taking incremental steps to realize that vision: "We need to have aspirational goals, and we need to take small, achievable steps for Buncombe County to get there. When you start innovating, solving problems in one area, you might inadvertently solve other problems."

"We're not looking for handouts," Wells says. "We're just looking for fairness. And we've got to remain open to change."

"It's incumbent on us as growers to make sure those urban populations understand where their food comes from," Elmore adds. "We're putting a lot of energy into that, and I think we're seeing some success. If we're successful over time at making that case, then I think we'll have

the votes behind us and the elected officials will continue to support agriculture.

“I’m optimistic.”

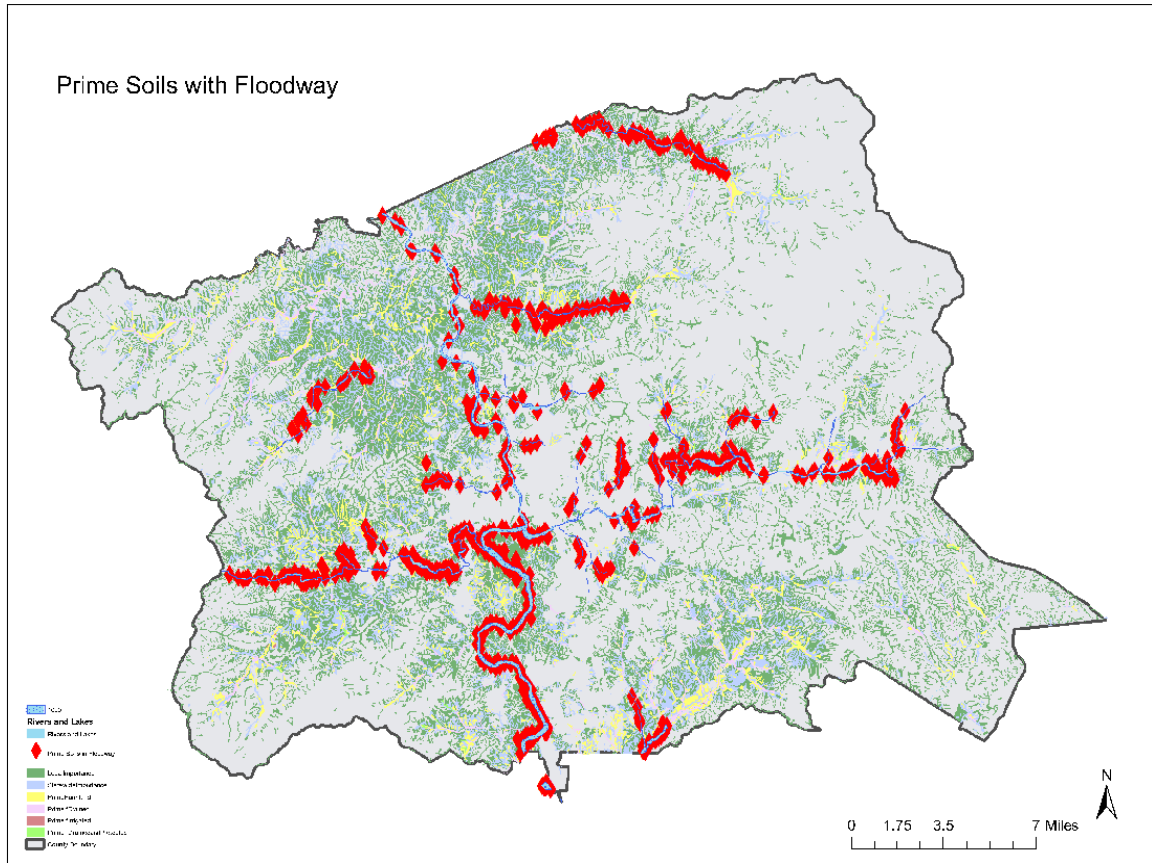
07 - Soils of Buncombe County

Information and maps regarding soils are from the Soil Survey of Buncombe County, North Carolina, a 1,223-page document published in 2009 by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. This resource is available online at:

www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_MANUSCRIPTS/north_carolina/buncombeNC2009/Buncombe_NC.pdf

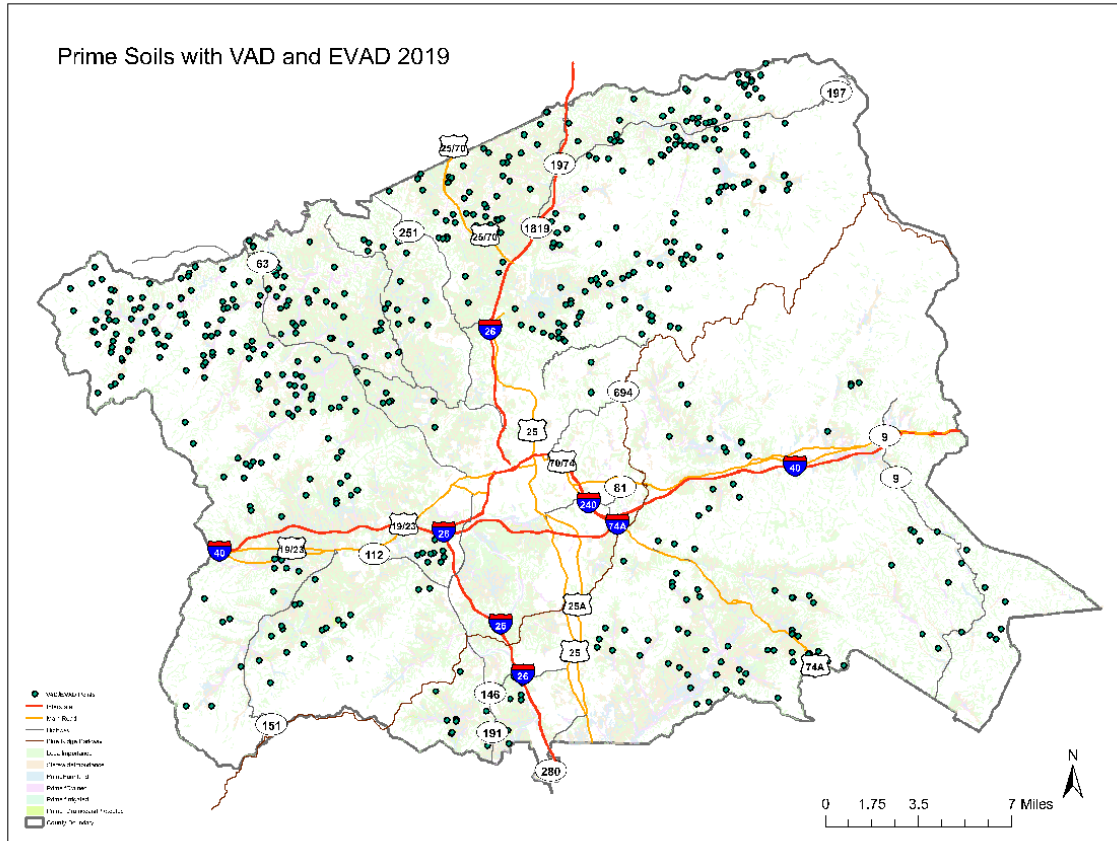
Specific area maps showing soil types are available in that document and should be consulted when determining soil qualities for specific areas of the county.

For a mountain county, Buncombe County possesses considerable amount of land with prime soils and soils of statewide importance. The county has 12 soil orders, with each possessing multiple subtypes. According to NRCS, Buncombe possesses 144 various subtypes of soils. Of those, 13 are classified as prime farmland in all areas and another five are considered prime if adequately drained or irrigated. A further 15 subtypes are classified as farmland of statewide importance



In most cases, prime soils are found in low areas along riverbanks and tributaries of the major waterways in the county. This is readily apparent from the map above, which highlights land that is both prime soil and in a floodway. The banks of the French Broad River, Hominy Creek, the Swannanoa River, Sandy Mush Creek, and Ivy Creek are all visible.

Many tracts of land in voluntary agricultural districts are prime soils. In addition, the presence of prime soils and soils of statewide importance are a factor when the county evaluates support for purchase of conservation easements.



Listings of all Buncombe County soil types of prime farmland and soil types of statewide importance are presented below.

| Prime Soils of Buncombe County | | |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Soil Symbol | Soil Name | Designation |
| BkB2 | Braddock clay loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes, moderately eroded | All areas are prime farmland |
| CkB2 | Clifton clay loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes, moderately eroded | All areas are prime farmland |
| CsB | Clifton sandy loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| DrB | Dillard loam, 1 to 5 percent slopes, rarely flooded | All areas are prime farmland |
| KsB | Kanuga-Swannanoa complex, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |

| | | |
|-----|---|--|
| RdA | Reddies sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | All areas are prime farmland |
| RsA | Rosman fine sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | All areas are prime farmland |
| StB | Statler loam, 1 to 5 percent slopes, rarely flooded | All areas are prime farmland |
| TaB | Tate loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| TwB | Tusquitee-Whiteside complex, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| UnB | Unison loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| WtB | Whiteside loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| ZcB | Zillicoa loam, 2 to 8 percent slopes | All areas are prime farmland |
| FrA | French loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | Prime farmland if drained |
| IoA | Iotla loam, 0 to 2 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | Prime farmland if drained |
| NkA | Nikwasi loam, 0 to 2 percent slopes, frequently flooded | Prime farmland if drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season |
| NkA | Nikwasi loam, 0 to 2 percent slopes, frequently flooded | Prime farmland if drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season |
| TsA | Toxaway loam, 0 to 2 percent slopes, frequently flooded | Prime farmland if drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season |
| BeA | Biltmore loamy sand, 0 to 3 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | Prime farmland if irrigated |

| Soils of Statewide Importance in Buncombe County | | |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| Soil Symbol | Soil Name | Acres |
| BkC2 | Braddock clay loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes, moderately eroded | Farmland of statewide importance |
| CkC2 | Clifton clay loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes, moderately eroded | Farmland of statewide importance |
| CsC | Clifton sandy loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes | Farmland of statewide importance |
| DeA | Dellwood-Reddies complex, 0 to 3 percent slopes, occasionally flooded | Farmland of statewide importance |
| FaC2 | Fannin-Lauada complex, 8 to 15 percent slopes, moderately eroded | Farmland of statewide importance |
| HpA | Hemphill loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes, rarely flooded | Farmland of statewide importance |

Dalton Buchanan, a soil agronomist with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, has identified percentages of Buncombe County's land that are classified as prime farmland, farmland of local importance, or farmland of stateside importance. His analysis of data in the Buncombe County Soil Survey identifies the breakdown of County acreage as follows:

| Rating | Acres | Percent of County |
|--|----------|-------------------|
| Farmland of Statewide Importance | 45019.1 | 10.7% |
| All Areas Are Prime Farmland | 15211.2 | 3.6% |
| Farmland of Local Importance | 88493.7 | 20.9% |
| Prime Farmland if drained | 7679.4 | 1.8% |
| Prime farmland if drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season | 390.4 | 0.09% |
| Prime Farmland if Irrigated | 559.4 | 0.1% |
| Not Prime Farmland | 265016.7 | 62.7% |

Conclusion

Only about 5.5% of all Buncombe County land consists of prime soils. These soils are of utmost importance to protect, as they can be plowed and managed over and over again. They have the least likelihood of erosion problems and are usually easily accessible. Soils of statewide importance are significant, as they represent most of our upland pastures and rolling agriculture land that is often in pasture or hay. As much as possible, land with these classifications should be given extra consideration when prioritizing for preservation efforts.

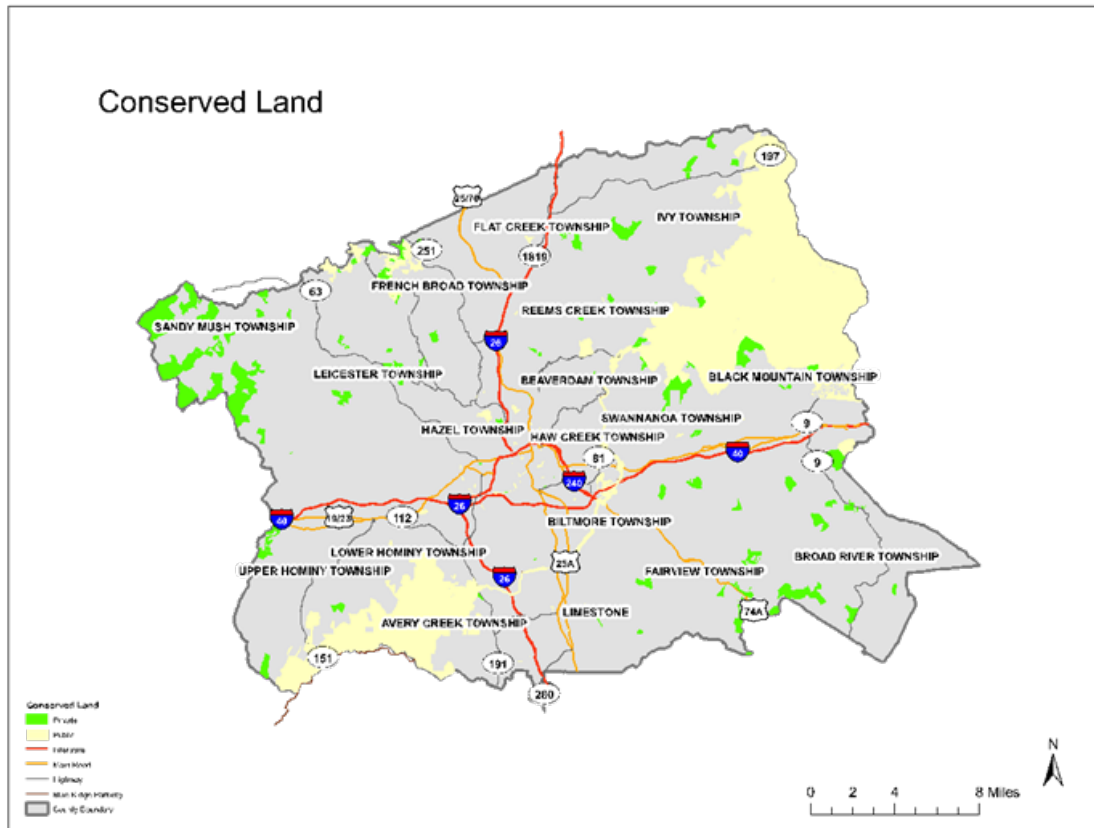
08 - Prioritizing Preservation

Buncombe County's farmland-preservation ordinance was adopted in 1989, pursuant to authority conferred in 1986 by North Carolina General Statutes §§ 106-735 through 106-744 and Chapter 153A. Buncombe County passed the first such local ordinance in the state. Both state-level and county-level laws have been updated and modified over the years, but the essential character and intent has remained the same.

Buncombe's ordinance follows state-level guidelines for identifying lands most suitable for preservation through multiple tools, including voluntary agricultural districts, enhanced voluntary agricultural districts, and agricultural conservation easements. Of these tools, the purchase of development rights for specific farmland *in perpetuity* is the most effective means of assuring such land is never removed from agriculture and put into residential or commercial development. The landowner voluntarily agrees to relinquish all rights to develop his or her land while retaining ownership of the property. The local ordinance makes allowance for limited residential housing while retaining the integrity of land most suitable for agriculture, forestry, or horticulture. Landowners may choose to sell their land, but future owners are subject to land-use limitations from the earlier surrender of development rights.

The complete Buncombe County ordinance is available at:

<https://www.buncombecounty.org/common/soil/buncombe-farmland-preservation-ordinance.pdf>



Buncombe County has directly funded transaction costs for purchase of conservation easements since 1995. Over that time, the county has spent more than \$7.5 million preserving 56 parcels of farmland totaling 7,095 acres. On the map above, those easements are highlighted in green.

The Buncombe County Agricultural Advisory Board is the entity that recommends expenditures for purchase of agricultural conservation easements. The Buncombe County Land Conservation Advisory Board recommends expenditures for purchase of land-conservation easements that preserve the scenic beauty and ecological integrity of lands. These lands are often primarily in forestry (rather than agricultural) present-use valuation. Recommendations from both committees must be approved by the county commission.

From FY2007 to FY2014, county funds were often used to purchase development rights, with direct purchase expenditures totaling just over \$5 million. In recent years, county budgets have allocated \$150,000 in support of conservation easements, with half allocated to the Agricultural Advisory Board and half to the Land Conservation Advisory Board. All of these funds have been used to cover transaction costs, such as surveying and legal fees, while other noncounty funds have been used for the purchase of the conservation easements.

In fiscal year 2018, the two boards supported transaction costs for purchase of four conservation easements. In fiscal year 2019, they supported the purchase of five easements. The average

amount of money allocated per transaction was just over \$33,000.

The Agricultural Advisory Board uses two measurement tools to prioritize land for support from county appropriations, as follows:

Site-assessment criteria: The focus of this system is to determine suitability of a particular farm parcel for conservation. Each factor is assigned a point value based on its relative importance to other factors.

Soil-assessment criteria: All soils in the county have been rated and placed into groups ranging from the most productive farmland to the least productive.

To determine the total value of a given parcel, the values for the site-assessment and soil-assessment criteria are added together.

Site-assessment criteria includes but is not limited to:

- Tract size
- Percentage of tract in agricultural and/or open-space use
- Proximity to public water and sewer
- Probability of conversion
- Proximity to planned development
- Proximity to land under conservation easement or conservation agreement
- Capital investment in farm operation
- Conservation program
- Historic, scenic, environmental qualities
- Specialty products

The site-assessment score sheet is included in the appendices of this report.

09 - Policy Tools and Funding

The many tools used to protect farmland in Buncombe County all come at some cost, whether it be to the landowner, county and state taxpayers, or concerned individuals and organizations. Some programs, such as voluntary agricultural districts and enhanced voluntary agricultural districts, come at very little cost to the public. Others, such as direct government appropriations for purchase of conservation easements, require a political will and community consensus that can be hard to come by, especially in times of economic uncertainty.

Not surprisingly, programs with the lowest costs tend to have the weakest long-term efficacy, while programs with tangible public costs tend to be more successful at long-term farmland preservation.

An often-overlooked part of this calculation is whether programs save taxpayers money after the fact. An example of this concerns property taxation at present-use valuation. A large body of research shows that there is net financial benefit to a community that keeps private land in farms and forests. Property-tax revenues from farmland exceed the public expenditures (think schools and emergency services) required to support developed land.

Mitch Renkow, a professor in the Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics at N.C. State University, has conducted several cost of community services (COCS) studies looking at this issue. In one report, done for Durham County, Renkow writes that two questions must be addressed in regard to COCS:

- (1) Do the property taxes and other revenues generated by residential land use exceed the amount of publicly-provided services supplied to them?
- (2) Does the fact that farm and forest lands are taxed on the basis of their Present Use Value – instead of their potential value in residential or commercial uses – mean that they are contributing less in tax revenues than the value of publicly provided services they receive?

The answer to both of these questions, Renkow asserts, is no. “Despite being taxed on the basis of current land uses,” he writes, “property in agricultural land uses is found to be a net contributor to the local budget, generating \$1.70 in revenues for every dollar of public services that it receives. (Renkow, Mitch The Cost of Community Services in Durham County, April 2010. Available at <http://www.dconc.gov/home/showdocument?id=1857>)

Similar results are found in other communities. A meta-analysis conducted by the University of Illinois Extension Service found that, on average, the cost of community services to farmland ranges from 30 to 50 cents of every dollar in property taxes levied. In other words, local governments “earn” between 50 cents and 70 cents from every dollar they generate from property taxes on agricultural land. (<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/lcr/cost.cfm>)

There are other, less quantitative benefits to having open land. Scenic view sheds with open

fields and forests contribute to the community both economically and aesthetically. Real estate prices can vary tremendously based on view shed. Buncombe County, which relies on tourism for jobs and income, has a clear economic rationale for preserving open land. Simply put, people prefer to look at natural scenery more than they do housing developments.

Even with a clear understanding that farmland is a net positive for the community, the argument for direct funding of preservation programs by local government will continue to be countered by calls for fiscal prudence. Two ways to address this are to (1) identify and designate dedicated sources of local-government revenue to be used for farmland-preservation efforts and (2) aggressively seek additional funding to complement local appropriations.

County support of the purchase of conservation easements has come from the county's general fund, with no designated source. One option to consider is to formally link a portion of taxes and fees derived from land in present-use valuation with an annual farmland conservation budget. Examples include:

- A land-use conversion fee charged on a per-acre basis whenever land is removed from present-use valuation
- Redirecting back taxes paid to the county when land is taken out of PUV to the purchase of conservation easements
- A voluntary checkoff on local property taxes, whereby a small portion (1% or less) of a person's property taxes can be directed into a farmland-preservation account

There are more robust funding mechanisms available for securing funds that do not impact local taxpayers. A policy allowing for transference of development rights (TDR) from one property to another has been used in other states, most famously in Maryland and Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association has an excellent website devoted to transfer of development rights, and describes the policy as follows (<https://conservationtools.org/guides/12-transfer-of-development-rights>):

“Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) is a zoning technique used to permanently protect land with conservation value (such as farmland, community open space, or other natural or cultural resources) by redirecting development that would otherwise occur on this land (the sending area) to an area planned to accommodate growth and development (the receiving area).

“TDR programs financially compensate landowners for choosing not to develop some or all of their land. These landowners are given an option under municipal zoning to legally sever the development rights from their land and sell these rights to another landowner or a real estate developer for use at a different location. The land from which the development rights have been severed is permanently protected through a conservation easement or a restrictive covenant. The development value of the land where the transferred development rights are applied is enhanced by allowing for new or special uses; greater density or intensity; or other regulatory flexibility that zoning without the TDR option would not have permitted.”

TDR has yet to be implemented in North Carolina. Conversations with smart-growth advocates

indicate that greater clarity at the state level is probably required to give local governments confidence that they may legally implement and enforce TDR policies. Local government should consider engaging state lawmakers in developing a clarifying bill that specifically allows for TDR policies in local jurisdictions.

There are ways in which local tax dollars can be leveraged to attract additional funding from state and federal sources, private and corporate foundations, land trusts, and wealthy individuals concerned about environmental stewardship.

At the local and regional level, organizations that can match county appropriations may include the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, the Dogwood Health Trust, and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority.

At the state level, the Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services houses the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund. The former supports direct conservation efforts, while the latter tends to support economic-development initiatives that serve to increase farm profitability. Likewise, the North Carolina Golden Leaf Foundation may be a partner for larger-scale agricultural economic-development programs that increase jobs and incomes at the farm level.

Buncombe County is well positioned to maintain and enhance its existing funding for farmland preservation. This can be accomplished through continuance of its PUV taxation policies; identifying new public-revenue sources for purchase of conservation easements; investigating transfer of development rights as a viable policy tool; and leveraging funds from state, federal, and private-foundation sources.

10 – Conclusions and Recommended Next Steps

Conclusions and recommendations are based on analysis of current development trends with significant input from farmers, landowners, service providers, and citizens interested in the future of agriculture in Buncombe County. This section recommends policies and actions that both protect agricultural land and improve the economic viability of agriculture.

This report documents many ways in which Buncombe County has committed resources and personnel to the protection and preservation of farmland. The county is indisputably a leader in North Carolina when it comes to proactive policies to keep farmland viable. That said, the county is also experiencing development pressures that put a significant strain on physical infrastructure, including roads, utilities, and open land. Historically high land prices are enticing many landowners, some of whom have had land in farming for generations, to put their property on the market. The pace of development, if left unchecked, will result in rapid loss of open land and could degrade quality of life for county residents.

Over the next 10 years, we should assume that development pressures on land in Buncombe County will remain strong. As a result, the county must recommit to existing efforts to protect the best farmland and support new initiatives that will enhance efforts already underway. These recommendations fall into several categories:

Continue to support farmland protection through existing policies including present-use value taxation, voluntary agricultural districts, and enhanced voluntary agricultural districts.

Several policy tools are available now that support new and continuing ways to earn income from the land. Chief among these is present-use value taxation, which serves to lower property-tax rates on land that is being used for production of timber, agricultural, and horticultural products. Under North Carolina General Statute 105-277, PUV lands constitute 10 acres or more for agricultural use, five acres or more for horticultural use, or 20 acres for forestry.

Buncombe County will support ongoing PUV valuation for qualifying lands and will inform landowners of such lands that they are eligible to pay taxes under PUV, provided that their land is being put to the stipulated productive use. The Buncombe County Soil & Water Conservation District will provide guidance to landowners seeking PUV designation for their land and will advise on the basic requirements for each type of PUV designation. The county GIS map will provide a layer indicating lands in present-use valuation for easy online reference.

Buncombe County has successfully implemented a policy for voluntary agricultural districts and enhanced voluntary agricultural districts. Participation in VAD and EVAD will continue to be promoted through the county's website through the Soil & Water Conservation District and postings in county permit offices. The county GIS map will provide a layer labeled Voluntary Ag Districts for easy online reference.

Additionally, the county will provide notifications of adjacent or nearby VAD lands when land transactions occur. Signage at the county Register of Deeds office will be posted regarding VAD policies that protect landowners from nuisance complaints or infringements on traditional agricultural-production activities.

The county will continue to promote enhanced voluntary agricultural districts (EVAD), allowing landowners to voluntarily enter their land into 10-year binding easements that preclude use of land for any purposes other than forestry, agriculture, or horticulture.

Promote and implement outreach and education on land taxation, estate planning, farm-transition planning, conservation easements, and development planning.

Survey responses from landowners indicate a large number are interested in learning more about conservation easements and estate planning. Others are interested in development options that also maintain the rural character and allow for some continuance of agricultural production. Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District will continue to host Friends of Agriculture Events and other community meetings that will give landowners practical knowledge of these options, as well as a pathway for executing their choices.

A particular focus should be given to helping landowners plan for transition of ownership from one generation to the next. Additionally, programs that help young and beginning farmer's access quality farmland from retired landowners will support the continuance of agricultural activity on the county's best farmland.

Increase county-level funding to support transaction costs for purchase of conservation easements.

The current funding level of approximately \$75,000 per year for transaction costs of conservation easements is only able to support approximately two purchases per year. The current funding levels are miniscule compared to 10 years ago, when the county had sufficient funds to contribute to conservation-easement purchases as well as the normal transaction costs of surveying and legal fees.

Additional funds could be secured through dedicated funding streams from development-related permits and fees. Some possibilities include a small premium added to building permits issued in the county, allocation of back taxes paid when land is removed from present-use valuation to farmland-preservation efforts, or a voluntary check-off on property taxes. These and other possible funding streams should be investigated further for consideration.

Work aggressively to leverage county funding for conservation easements and other projects in partnership with state, federal, and private resources.

Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District has established cooperative relationships with organizations that can bring significant resources to farmland-preservation efforts. Land trusts, farm-support organizations, state and federal agencies, and private foundations have all provided resources for purchase of conservation easements as well as

outreach and education efforts. BCSWCD staff should keep track of ways in which county resources are leveraged and magnified and help elected leaders understand how county funding attracts outside resources to farmland-preservation activities.

Design and implement outreach programs to educate and inform visitors, new residents, and residents living in urban areas of the importance of farmland to the region's culture, identity, and quality of life.

The majority of Buncombe County residents do not own farmland, and many of them are not well informed of the importance of preserving open land. Buncombe County has an opportunity to feature farmland as an important contributor to overall quality of life and an attraction for tourists.

The new Buncombe County Farm Heritage Trail is an innovative project that celebrates the rural agricultural communities of Alexander, Leicester, Newfound, and Sandy Mush in northwest Buncombe County. The trail, a leisurely two-hour drive, shows off some of the most scenic farmland in the region and gives visitors a chance to stop and buy local farm goods from participating farms.

Buncombe County's continued support for a county-wide development of the trail shows a tangible commitment to open farmland in rural parts of the county.

Support marketing and production training and facilitate greater diversity in agricultural enterprises.

Recent trends in the county's agricultural production towards diversification and niche-product development should be supported through county programs, including Cooperative Extension and the BCSWCD. County economic-development funds should be considered for support of local nonprofit efforts to support new food and farm enterprises.

Continue promotion of best management practices for conservation of land and natural resources.

Through the implementation of BCSWCD's NC Agricultural Cost-share Program, and the NC Agricultural Water Resource Program, the District will continue to provide support to farmers for conservation. The District continues to partner with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and NC Forest Service to incentivize landowners to implement conservation practices on farm and land. Promoting best management practices for quality conservation of land and natural resources are key to ensuring that while protecting the land, the District is also ensuring the protection of the county's natural resources.

Strengthen support for agricultural economic development.

BCSWCD continues to work with partnering agencies to locate grant funding opportunities to support agricultural economic development within Buncombe County. BCSWCD partnered with the foundation of Soil and Water Conservation to fund affordable rental agricultural equipment, and along with NC Cooperative Extension provides additional equipment. This provides opportunity for farmers to rent equipment and cut down on overall costs of equipment that they have to own. The Buncombe County Ag and Land Resources Department is made up of both Buncombe Soil and Water Conservation and NC Cooperative Extension. This department provides trainings, educational programs and workshops to help inform the agricultural community and encourage diversification of enterprises and niche markets. Through these offerings, the public is supported with opportunities for agricultural economic development. In addition to this, encouragement of Agritourism operations through programs like Farm Heritage Trail and ASAP's annual Farm Tour provide for additional revenue to support farm operations.