

Chapter 12: Rural Character

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Introduction

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines rural as “of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture.” Country is defined as “an indefinite usually extended expanse of land.” Character is defined as a “main or essential nature especially as strongly marked and serving to distinguish.” Therefore, the very nature of the term “rural character” is unique to each individual. While there is no single definition, overall rural character can mean the patterns of land use and development that feature open space, the natural landscape and vegetation as being predominant over the built environment; agrarian lifestyles, rural-based economies, and the opportunity to live and work in a rural area; visual landscapes that are usually found in rural areas; wildlife habitats; and/or very low-density development.

Regardless of how rural character is defined, as more people become interested in rural areas, preserving the unique character of these areas may become a challenge. Approximately 120,000 people are estimated to come into Forsyth County over the next 20 years; without proper planning and regulations, the rural character of the county may be lost. It will be up to our community to determine what Forsyth County's rural character is and ultimately, how it can be preserved. The

What the 2001 Legacy Plan says about rural character.....

Retain our distinctive community character and manage growth by protecting farmland and open space

Preserve our rural landscape as an important part of the community's quality of life

Acknowledge and continue to encourage working farms' viability to our local economy

Retain farmland and open space by reducing pressure for development in rural areas by directing growth to the developed areas of the county and away from rural areas

Limit public investment in the rural area including roads and sewer extensions to discourage new development and focus development where infrastructure already exists

Acquire valuable rural open space and farmlands as special agricultural and cultural districts

Use financing mechanisms to preserve farmlands and open space through the purchase of development rights programs (such as the Farmland Preservation Program), transfer of development rights programs, and/or the conservation activities of land trusts

Prepare a master plan that includes an inventory of potential farmland preservation sites and develop guidelines to preserve and enhance the county's rural areas

Revise policies governing the use of economic incentives for business development so that these funds are not available for proposed developments in the rural area

Limit the use of package treatment plants in the rural area

Adopt guidelines that define the conditions under which land in the rural area will be rezoned to more intensive zoning districts and which will preserve the county's rural areas

overall concept of rural character includes the following components:

- farmlands
- woodlands
- undeveloped open space
- natural streams
- outdoor recreation opportunities
- pastoral viewsheds
- historic resources

This chapter will discuss how Forsyth County's Rural Area has been addressed through planning, the tools currently available and the issues relating to the community's overall rural character.

Description of Forsyth County's Rural Area

Legacy defines the Rural Area as Growth Management Area 5 (GMA 5), which is located beyond the Future Growth Area (GMA 4) and outside the area that can be provided with public sewerage and other services in a cost-effective manner. From the region's earliest settlers, development has been related to the physical characteristics of what is today Forsyth County. The earliest inhabitants were Native Americans who settled along a river they called the “Yattken,” a Siouan word meaning “place of big trees.” Archaeological investigation of a rock shelter near the river's “Great Bend” revealed that the cave had been used for 8,500 years, initially by nomadic hunters and then by villagers who farmed the fertile flood plain. Around 1710, the Native American population began moving north to New York and Canada due

to increasing numbers of raiding parties and white trappers, traders and explorers. By the late 1740s, the Yadkin River valley began to fill with white immigrants moving south from Pennsylvania and Virginia along the Great Wagon Road. The region's abundant water supply, natural resources, and fertile soil proved attractive to English, Scots-Irish, and German settlers. In 1753, after six months of exploring North Carolina in search of suitable land to settle, a group of Moravians led by Bishop August Gottlieb Spangenberg purchased 98,985 acres in what is today Forsyth County. They found what they believed to be a suitable site "on the three forks of Muddy Creek" – encompassing almost all of present-day Winston-Salem.

Development since that time has been focused on this central portion of Forsyth County. The regions outside the Muddy Creek basin have been defined as rural due to topographic issues and the inability to provide gravity sewer. The Rural Area of Forsyth County is located largely outside of the incorporated jurisdictions and includes the western portion of the county following the Yadkin River and also the northeastern area of the county, in what is known as the Belews Creek area. The Rural Area also includes tracts of land in the Forsyth County Farmland Preservation Program.

How have programs since the adoption of *Legacy* worked?

There have been a number of successful actions supporting the preservation of the Rural Area since the adoption of the *2001 Legacy Plan*.

What Rural Area strategies/tasks have been completed since *Legacy's* Adoption in 2001?

- ❖ Revised Planned Residential Development (PRD) ordinance was adopted in 2007
- ❖ Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) provisions were adopted by the Forsyth County Commissioners in 2008
- ❖ Agricultural Tourism provisions were adopted by Forsyth County in 2008
- ❖ Planning staff conducted the Western Rural Area Study for Forsyth County in 2010
- ❖ Renewed interest in local agriculture as a way of providing greater access to healthy food across Forsyth County
- ❖ Increase in number of Farmers' Markets carrying local foods
- ❖ Reduced demand for subdivisions in the rural area due to rising energy costs and commute times
- ❖ Rural character has been addressed in Area/Comprehensive Plans including Walkertown, Tobaccoville, Rural Hall and Clemmons, and is in process in Lewisville



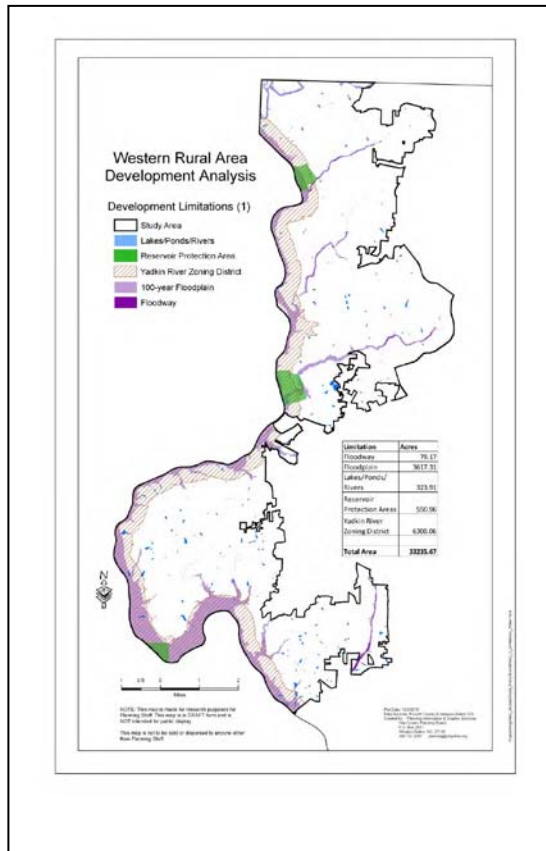
The Revised Planned Residential Development (PRD) ordinance increased the amount of open space required to be set aside as part of a PRD (a minimum of 45% of a development site in RS-30, RS-40 and AG zoning districts). The ordinance also requires different types of open space to be set aside, including passive open space (natural areas such as floodplains and steep slopes), active open space (such as neighborhood greens and playgrounds), and landscape buffers along major roadways. The new PRD regulations provide a way of implementing the Open Space Subdivisions recommended in the *2001 Legacy Plan* to preserve farmland and rural character.

The new Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) provisions encourage the economic health of agriculture, increase protection from non-farm development, provide increased protection from nuisance lawsuits and promote agriculture as a viable way of life in a heavily urbanized county. The VAD program is administered by the Forsyth Soil and Water Conservation District Board and staff. To become a VAD, an individual farm must contain a minimum of twenty acres and must participate in the County's present-use value taxation program.

Agricultural Tourism provisions provide a way of increasing the economic potential of agricultural land by allowing certain recreational, educational, entertainment or limited business activities to be operated on a bona-fide farm. These uses are allowed with certain limiting conditions, which are described in the *Unified Development*

Ordinances (UDO). To utilize agricultural tourism, a farm must be located in a Voluntary Agricultural District and contain a minimum of twenty acres. Additionally, the Agricultural Tourism provisions are only available for property zoned AG (Agricultural) and YR (Yadkin River).

The Western Rural Area Study was conducted in response to concerns about the potential loss of rural character in the western portion of the county.



Geographic Information System (GIS) filter mapping analysis (looking at different physical characteristics of the land) was used to determine the future development potential of the area. Land with development limitations such as steep slopes, poor soils, water features and existing development was mapped and separated from the remaining developable land. Based on this analysis, only 26% of the area could be easily developed in the future even if sewer were available. Through collaboration with the staffs of the City-County Utilities Commission and the Forsyth County Health Department, it was determined that the western rural area could not be efficiently served by gravity sewer, making suburban-density development not economically feasible. Due to these limitations, it was concluded that no additional regulations were needed at that time to maintain the current rural character of the area.

As community health has become a bigger concern since the adoption of *Legacy*, there has been renewed interest in local agriculture as a way of providing greater access to healthy food across our county. As Chapter 8 (*Healthy, Complete and Equitable Communities*) of this document illustrates, the major factors identified as important in ensuring a community's access to fresh, healthy food are protecting agricultural land on the edge of urban areas, facilitating forms of urban agriculture and establishing farmers' markets and retail establishments that carry a variety of healthy, locally grown food. Also mentioned in Chapter 8 is the new concept of

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which is a direct form of marketing where farms sell shares of their products to individuals, and distribute products either to designated drop-off sites or to customers' homes. Concepts such as this help increase the economic viability of agricultural production in Forsyth County.

Rural character has also benefited from the Area Plans which have been completed since the adoption of *Legacy*. The Rural Hall, Walkertown and Tobaccoville Area Plans, as well as the Clemmons and Lewisville Comprehensive Plans, all have some Rural Area within their Planning Area boundaries. Land use recommendations in these Plans are limited to very low-density and agricultural uses. Historic Resources staff has identified historic resources (both individual structures and larger districts) in each Planning Area, including the Rural Area. Recommendations exist for the preservation of these features, which helps ensure the long-term survival of rural character.



Huffman Farm Barn

Additionally, since the adoption of the *2001 Legacy Plan*, rising energy costs and commute times have led more people to desire living closer in to the urban core of Winston-Salem. This has reduced demand for subdivisions in the Rural Area, protecting the existing agricultural character and open space in the area. These trends are predicted to continue and become more prevalent in the future.

What Are Other Communities Doing?

There are various programs relating to rural character and preservation throughout North Carolina.

Chatham County addresses rural character through a section in its *Land Conservation and Development Plan*. This plan identifies four major principles to protect the rural landscape: 1) Support farming and forestry in predominantly agricultural and silvicultural areas; 2) Encourage rurally compatible residential development in rural areas; 3) Protect important natural areas and resource lands; and 4) Preserve scenic and historic landscapes. These principles recommend such actions as:

- Establishing an official county agricultural advisory board;
- Establishing a *Farms for the Future* program, which will have components including market studies and marketing assistance to promote agricultural economic development in the county and technical assistance on farm infrastructure financing;
- Creating a *Land Link* program to connect beginning farmers with experienced ones, and advocacy for

organic and specialty farming in the county;

- Developing qualitative standards such as design guidelines to take into account specific site characteristics when reviewing individual development proposals;
- Conducting an inventory of scenic and historic landscapes; and
- Educating landowners about the potential tax benefits of protecting scenic and historic resources.

Additionally, the County has a Farmland Preservation Plan, including a Voluntary Agricultural District Program. In 2011, Chatham County completed a Comprehensive Conservation Plan, which is a detailed document that addresses long-range development planning and the preservation of natural resources as a way to ensure the prosperity and health of Chatham County. Finally, through an active 4-H program, the County reaches out to young people to become involved in agriculture-related projects and programming.

Orange County works to conserve and manage the natural and cultural resources of the community through its Department of Environment, Agriculture, Parks and Recreation. Through various boards such as the Commission for the Environment and the Agricultural Preservation Board, programs and projects are in place which strive to recognize and protect rural areas. Specifically, the county has Voluntary Agricultural Districts and a Farmland Preservation Plan. Additionally, the

Department manages a Lands Legacy program, which is for acquisition and protection of highly important natural and cultural resource lands. This program leverages local funds with State and Federal dollars, and works with conservation partners. Since its inception in 2000, the program has protected over 2,500 acres. Additionally, Orange County has a nonprofit citizen organization, Preserve Rural Orange (PRO), which was established in 2009 to “preserve, strengthen and defend the viability of the rural community of watershed land, farms and woodlands” in the county. The group provides public education on potential impacts of development and has been influential in promoting constructive community dialogue on issues affecting rural residents, farmers, the environment and public health.

As with several other communities examined, Wake County features and participates in the NC Agricultural Farmland Trust Fund. Monies are allocated by the Wake County Soil and Water Conservation District for the purposes of agricultural agreements, sustainable agriculture, conservation easements, voluntary agricultural agreements and farmland preservation plans. Additionally it has an open space program, which is defined as protected land that is owned and managed in the public interest for things such as the protection of water quality, the preservation of natural resources, the managed production of forest and farmland resources, the preservation of historic and cultural property and the protection of scenic

landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Nearby Iredell County has an interesting dichotomy relating to rural areas. The southern portion of the county, which is adjacent to the outlying growth of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area, has largely given up on the protection of rural areas. However, the northern portion of the county is much stronger in programs relating to rural resources, largely dairy farming. The entire county does have a Countywide Farmland Protection Plan and there is a voluntary Farmland Preservation Program.

Buncombe County, located in the western portion of North Carolina, also features a Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program, which is defined as 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 protection from encroachment of development.

Recognition and Tools

Preserving the rural landscape and farming uses can be an extremely difficult task given economic challenges and development pressure. However, tools such as conservation easements, historic rehabilitation tax credits and tax deferrals provide some financial relief for property owners interested in perpetuating their rural areas' agricultural legacies. Designations such as National Register of Historic Places, Local Historic Landmark, Local

Historic District, Voluntary Agricultural District and Century Farm officially recognize the significance of historic rural resources and facilitate the use of other preservation tools. Escalating consumer interest in sustainability and locally-grown food has afforded farmers with increased visibility and led to broader markets for their products as well as agricultural tourism opportunities.

Conservation Easements

Local, state and federal government agencies and nonprofit organizations have successfully partnered to execute conservation easements to preserve Forsyth County's rural heritage for future generations. Such easements employ permanent deed restrictions to limit land use with the goal of protecting natural resources, conserving open space and maintaining ecological integrity through biological diversity and high air and water quality standards. Property owners may either sell or donate easements to an entity that will then monitor the land's use for compliance. Conservation easement donation is an allowable federal income tax deduction.

The Forsyth County Board of Commissioners created a Farmland Preservation Program in 1984 in an effort to lessen the rapid development threatening the county's rural character. The Forsyth County Soil and Water Conservation District Board administers the program, which facilitated the protection of 27 properties encompassing 1,622 acres through purchase, lease or donation of development

rights by 2002, primarily utilizing County appropriations to subsidize the \$2.6 million cost. The Federal Farmland Protection Program contributed \$338,000 to the initiative between 1998 and 2000. The North Carolina Farmland Preservation Program provided Forsyth County with \$167,000 for two easement purchases in 1999-2000, thus allowing the Conservation Trust for North Carolina to purchase additional development rights. Two property owners have also donated easements worth approximately \$46,000 on 17 acres.

Unfortunately, the recent economic instability dramatically impacted land conservation opportunities. Forsyth County's Farmland Preservation Program has not received local, state, or federal appropriations over the last ten years. In addition, development value is usually much higher than the potential tax deductions property owners might receive for donations, so farmers struggling to make ends meet are often forced to sell their land rather than to execute easements.



Piedmont Land Conservancy – Bethania

The Piedmont Land Conservancy, a Greensboro-based nonprofit organization, has continued to protect Forsyth County's open space and farmland, placing conservation easements on 11 tracts encompassing about 275 acres through bequests and purchases. The easements cover four broad property types: farmland, water resources, natural heritage areas and urban natural areas. The Conservancy's largest Forsyth County initiative, intended to safeguard natural resources associated with the historic Moravian village of Bethania (designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001), began in 1997. The Piedmont Land Conservancy partnered with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, the Town of Bethania, the Bethania Historical Society, Bethania A.M.E. Zion Church, and other local community members and property owners to acquire easements on seven tracts of land. These include Walnut Bluffs, Walnut Bottoms, Muddy Creek Floodplain, Muddy Creek Bluffs, Old Apple Orchard I and II and the former site of Cedar Grove School, which served African-American residents of Bethania and the surrounding area. Much of this acreage has been under cultivation since soon after the Moravians established Bethania in 1759.

The Piedmont Land Conservancy also holds easements on several other sizable Forsyth County parcels. In 1997, five neighbors executed a conservation easement on their jointly-owned, 56-acre natural area known as Camerille Farms, which includes a meadow, a branch of Muddy Creek and

densely-wooded areas within Winston-Salem's city limits. In 1998, the North Carolina Department of Transportation purchased 48 acres in the Friedburg community as wetlands mitigation, effectively preserving an almost four-acre habitat for the endangered bog turtle, a federally-protected endangered species. A family farm at the intersection of Silas and Muddy Creeks was protected through the donation of a conservation easement in 2001. Smaller protected Forsyth County tracts include the three-acre Lindheimer Riparian area, the six-acre Emily Allen Wildflower Preserve and the 18-acre Martin Muddy Creek Floodplain.

Tax Credits and Deferrals

The Forsyth County Tax Office permits three categories of property tax deferrals based upon use value: agricultural, forestland and horticultural. Properties must meet certain requirements in order to achieve these classifications. Owners may qualify for agricultural deferments for land that is encompassed within a commercial farm that contains a minimum of ten acres and generates at least \$1,000 of income from crop, plant or livestock production annually. The land may be cultivated, fallow or wooded. A forestland deferment necessitates that at least one 20-acre tract of an owner's property must be actively utilized for commercial tree farming. Horticultural classification requires that a minimum of five acres should currently be used to grow fruit, vegetable, floral or nursery products.

Property tax deferrals are also available for resources designated as historic landmarks by local ordinances.

Forsyth County's historic landmarks qualify for a 50% property tax deferral in exchange for an owner's agreement to maintain a resource's historic character-defining features. Such agreements are codified as permanent deed restrictions.

The National Register of Historic Places program, administered by the National Park Service in conjunction with State Historic Preservation Office, allows for honorary inclusion in the roster of the country's most significant historic properties. Resource owners who undertake sizable rehabilitations may qualify for financial incentives if the work meets certain federal standards. Owners of income-producing properties listed on the National Register individually or as contributing buildings within historic districts may be eligible for 20% tax credits at both the state and federal levels. Non-income-producing residential properties may apply for a state tax credit equal to 30% of the cost involved in their



Samuel B. Stauber Farm

building's rehabilitation. Tax credits are different than tax deductions, in that credits are applied toward the amount of state and/or federal income tax that the property owner is required to pay, while deductions lower the amount of income that is subject to taxation.

National Register properties that represent Forsyth County's agricultural legacy include the Moravian communities of Bethabara, Bethania, and Salem as well as rural properties such as the Clayton Family Farm, the Thomas A. Crews House, the John Henry Kapp Farm, the John Jacob Schaub House, the Christian Thomas Shultz House and the Samuel B. Stauber Farm.

Numerous other Forsyth County properties have been determined eligible for the National Register by their placement on the North Carolina Study List following historic resource survey update projects. At the conclusion of Phase II of the Forsyth County architectural survey update, 20 individual properties and two potential historic districts that reflect the county's agricultural heritage were added to the North Carolina Study List. The resources vary from farms with substantial acreage to properties with notable dwellings and/or outbuilding complexes, but little residual acreage.

Century Farms

North Carolina State Fair officials began identifying families who had continuously owned or operated North Carolina farms for at least 100 years in 1970. Over 800 farms met the qualifications at that time, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture

recognized Century Farm owners at that and subsequent fairs, as well as in a 1988



publication. The department still coordinates the Century Farm application process. In 2011, approximately 1,600 of North Carolina's 52,000 farms, including 18 in Forsyth County, had been documented as Century Farms.

Adaptive Reuse of Farm Buildings

Although most farmers seek advice from local cooperative extension service and United States Department of Agriculture offices, few have traditionally worked with historic preservation groups. Organizations including the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Park Service encourage collaboration between various entities interested in agricultural building and landscape protection. The fall 2010 edition of the National Trust's *Forum Journal*, entitled "Bridging Land

Conservation and Historic Preservation," discusses the challenges and opportunities such partnerships may present. The National Trust partnered with *Successful Farming* magazine to encourage agricultural building reuse by providing farmers with accessible training and technical assistance.

Aesthetically-pleasing farms with interesting and well-maintained outbuildings tend to draw more visitors. In *Historic Barns: Working Assets for Sustainable Farms*, also available as a free download from the National Trust's web site, author and small farmer Edward Hoogterp identifies economic benefits of the ongoing use of historic agricultural buildings. These include cost savings, energy efficiency, appropriate scale, organic materials and niche marketing opportunities. He suggests that preservation groups and farmers should work together to explore the relationship between the historic, esthetic and economic value of outbuildings. The goal is to achieve the most efficient, environmentally-friendly and cost-effective working landscapes.

Agricultural Tourism

The Forsyth County Board of Commissioners approved an ordinance creating Voluntary Agriculture Districts in January 2008. Property owners who acquire this designation benefit from the increased visibility through signage and neighbor notification regarding the nature of their agricultural activities. This provides farmers with some defense against nuisance suits. Unlike conservation easements, which are permanent deed restrictions that specifically

prohibit land uses, a property owner may request that Voluntary Agriculture District designation be removed with a 30-day notice.

Forsyth County adopted an agricultural tourism ordinance the following month, allowing farmers to market goods and services and to offer recreational and educational opportunities. The property must be within a Voluntary Agricultural District, encompass at least 20 contiguous acres, and be actively farmed. City-County Planning Board staff clarified the provisions of the ordinance regarding business uses and the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners adopted the changes in January 2011.

Quite a few Forsyth County farmers are now participating in agri-tourism, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture identifies fourteen Forsyth County farms that offer goods and services to the public. A very brief summary of these efforts are summarized below.

Alma and Mark Apple of Kernersville converted their tobacco farm to organic blueberry production in 1982 and will pick berries for customers or allow them to pick their own. Maurice Melton provides the same opportunity at the Melton Family Farm in Tobaccoville. Jennifer Jobe operates the Beaver Creek Farm and Nursery in Rural Hall, offering a wide range of produce and ornamental plants at the farm store. Cat McSwain runs Griffith Greenhouses, providing seasonal flowers, herbs, and vegetable plants.



Diastole Alpaca Farm

Cathy Tindall established Heaven Sent Roses in 1997 and currently grows and sells more than 500 varieties of roses. Mark Phelps grows cotton and sweet potatoes at Phelps Farm in Clemmons and offers landscaping services. Ken Vanhoy operates Rail Fence Christmas Tree Farm, which his family opened in 1967, and also keeps sheep on the Belews Creek farm. Mark Terry oversees Westbend Vineyards in Lewisville, a 60-acre property established by Jack Kroustalis in 1972 that currently produces around six thousand cases of wine each year. Karen Wagner manages Muscadine Naturals in Clemmons, a company that uses Muscadine grape skins as the primary ingredient in dietary supplements. Adam G. Ross manages the Children's Home farm, which includes a cattle herd and a large vegetable garden that produces produce and flowers for the residents and local customers.

Several Forsyth County farms provide educational and recreational opportunities.

Historic Bethabara Park hosts events that promote agricultural history and products and operates a community garden. This continues a collaborative practice that began with the Moravians settlers who planted the village's first shared fields soon after their arrival in North Carolina in 1753. Jim and Sandy Morris offer tours and other events at Diastole Alpaca Farm in Walkertown, which they established in 2007 on the residual 22 acres of property the Morris family has owned for approximately 250 years. They raise alpacas and chickens and sell alpaca fleece and yarn as well as woven rugs, blankets, socks, and other products.

Wayne and Riely Woosley offer visitors tours, demonstrations, hayrides and raise beef cattle at Woosley Farm near Pfafftown. Vern Switzer, one of Forsyth County's few African-American farmers and a fixture at local farmers markets, is often called the "Watermelon Man" due to the sweet watermelons and other produce he grows on his 19-acre Rural Hall farm. His story was the subject of a short documentary produced by Matt Morris Films in 2010. Mr. Switzer is also an ordained minister and has written three children's books—*Puffy the Watermelon*, *Lucy the Cantaloupe*, and *Hard Heads Make Soft Bottoms*— that teach life lessons in the context of agricultural settings.



Vern Switzer

The Local Foods Movement

Increased consumer interest in purchasing locally-produced food is creating market opportunities for Forsyth County farmers that have rejuvenated the traditional practice of growers bringing seasonal fruits and vegetables and fresh eggs and dairy products into towns to sell on a regular basis. Farmer's markets in downtown Winston-Salem, at the Dixie Classic fairgrounds, in Reynolda Village, and at many other locations throughout the Piedmont provide farmers with venues at which they can sell their produce from May until October. Restaurants and retailers purchase farm products in order to meet market demand for organic food grown in a sustainable manner.

Several entities have instituted Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. The Triad Farm to Table Cooperative, organized with the assistance of the Forsyth County Cooperative Extension Service, sold 12-week subscriptions for weekly or bi-weekly produce delivery to pick-up locations

throughout the county beginning June 1, 2011. Lowes Foods also sought to capitalize on demand for fresh produce by creating the Locally Grown Food Club, which offers consumers the opportunity to purchase subscriptions for weekly boxes of approximately 12 pounds of seasonal fruits and vegetables. Lowes partners with cooperatives including Pilot Mountain Pride, an organization of about 50 Piedmont farmers who have begun growing produce rather than tobacco, as well as other North Carolina growers.

Residents interested in learning more about growing their own fruits, vegetables and herbs in group settings have benefited from the Forsyth County Cooperative Extension Service's Community Gardening Resource Program, a training program funded by a Winston-Salem Foundation grant. The extension service mentors entities interested in establishing new community gardens or improving existing sites. So far, at least forty groups have availed themselves of the opportunity to plant gardens at locations ranging from neighborhoods to parks and churches.

These initiatives represent only a few of the many ways that Forsyth County residents continue to benefit from local farming and gardening endeavors. The area's lengthy agricultural heritage, ranging from the Moravian's communal eighteenth-century gardens in Bethabara to community-supported agriculture in the twentieth-century, is an integral component of the county's distinctive character.



Issues for Rural Character

Defining Rural Character

While everyone likely has a somewhat different definition of rural character, most citizens of Forsyth County view it as a significant component of our community. Because our ideas about rural character vary widely, our populace must determine which elements we value the most. Active agriculture can perhaps be considered the largest defining quality of rural character. However, to some the impacts of farming, including smells and noises, are invasive and unwelcome. The preservation of open space including farmlands, woodlands, historic/cultural resources and viewsheds are frequently mentioned as an important component of rural character. Recreation opportunities such as hunting, canoeing and hiking are enjoyed by many citizens.

How to prioritize all the things we value about the Rural Area will be a challenge in the future as we seek to maintain rural character.

Development in the Rural Area

Traditionally, rural development patterns consist of limited concentrations of residential development surrounded by working or natural open spaces. The conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development in the Rural Area is an ongoing challenge.

The **Legacy Update** recognizes Downtown Winston-Salem, our small Town Centers and Activity Centers as the best locations for significant commercial and office development. However, neighborhood-serving commercial and office uses are needed resources in rural communities. Locally-oriented services allow residents of the Rural Area to access basic services without having to drive great distances to larger activity nodes. Where these uses should be located is an important question.

New uses are now being proposed in rural areas across the country such as biodiesel production and wind and solar farms. Forsyth County may soon be faced with questions about new uses that don't currently exist in the Rural Area.

Package Plants

To locate subdivisions with suburban-style lots outside of the Muddy Creek Sewer Basin requires the use of package treatment plants. Unfortunately, a number of older private/subdivision package plants have failed. These plants represent tied up capital and operating management attention; neither of which are attractive to developers. Operation and maintenance of a package plant by a homeowner's association is

expensive and usually requires professional consultation and assistance. Such plants are not monitored by the County Health Department, but rather by the State, which has limited staffing.

Rural Character Issues for Community Discussion

Rural Character

How we define rural character in Forsyth County can help us develop a strategy for what we want to preserve. How strongly does our community support the concept of agri-tourism and active farming? How can viewsheds be identified and preserved in a way that is fair to property owners in the Rural Area? Are there additional recreational opportunities that could be developed? What is the role of parks in Forsyth County's Rural Area?



Development in the Rural Area

There will be continued pressure for development in the Rural Area. What is the best way to accommodate the scattered residential development that does locate in the Rural Area? Additionally, what services are most needed and where should they be located, and should there be standards for design? How does our community feel about uses for locally produced energy such as biodiesel or solar energy farming?

Package Treatment Plants

Package treatment plants used in the Rural Area to support subdivision activity have proven to cause environmental problems. How do we address development which plans to install



package plants and how do we address problems that arise with existing subdivisions utilizing package plants?

Conclusion

Forsyth County's natural beauty, rural character and agricultural resources are among its most important features. As population pressures from the more urban areas increase, it may become more difficult to preserve this area. Our existing rural character features an abundance of agricultural, forest and opens land. In order to be successful in retaining these most important assets, we must establish a clear vision of what is most important to our community and what needs to happen to help landowners keep those lands as economically viable rural uses. That vision can guide how rural character is defined and protected. Forsyth County needs to continue to be flexible and creative in how it addresses existing development patterns and how to provide for future development in the Rural Area. We must balance the needs of rural residents with the protection of those parts of the rural environment that contribute to every citizen's quality of life and economic and physical well-being.