

**AGRICULTURE TASK FORCE PRESENTATION
BY BRAD FOSTER, CHAIRMAN
TO THE SHENANDOAH COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
DECEMBER 12, 2006**

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and Supervisors. I am Brad Foster, chairman of the Agriculture Task Force. I am accompanied by a number of the other Task Force Members that you appointed 11 months ago. All of us are active in some aspect of agriculture in the county and we were both honored and challenged with the assignment you gave us when we were appointed.

To help achieve the County's comprehensive plan vision of our county, you asked us "To develop a plan to be submitted to the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors with specific recommendations for strengthening the ability to sustain agriculture as an industry in Shenandoah County." We have spent the time since our appointment in gaining more in-depth knowledge about the current situation and challenges facing agriculture in our area, as well as learning what other counties around the State are doing to support their agriculture sector. We have met at least twice monthly. We visited Clarke and Fauquier Counties, held a public forum and met with officials from other localities who are dealing with similar challenges.

Based on our own understanding and what we learned from others, we have developed the report which we are submitting today. The Agriculture Task Force is making 13 recommendations to you that we feel will achieve the goal of sustaining agriculture in our County.

Before I get into the recommendations, I would like to share with you some of the key points that we learned about the role of agriculture in our County.

Key Points re Agriculture in Shenandoah County

Agriculture and Tourism are the top economic sectors for the County. It could be argued that tourism receipts are directly related to the rural character of our area and thus dependent to a high degree on a strong agricultural sector. In other words, keeping our agriculture strong will help reinforce our other top economic sector.

Shenandoah County ranks fifth in the State in terms of agricultural production; three other counties in the Shenandoah Valley occupy first, second, and fourth positions (Rockingham, Augusta, and Page). Thus, the Shenandoah Valley region continues to be a significant "bread basket" for the state as well as the nation.

The cost of county services (e.g., roads, schools, emergency services) required by agricultural landowners is much less than the taxes they pay on agricultural land; conversely, services required by residential developments cost as much as 25% or more than the taxes they pay. Numerous studies have consistently shown that residential development in rural areas lead to higher taxes for everyone to provide the essential services. Maintaining our agricultural base is good fiscal policy.

The County is losing its agricultural base each time land is converted to residential or commercial development. If no action is taken to change the current zoning, as many as 43,000 additional homes could be built in our County in areas with agriculture or conservation zoning. If that happened, it would seriously erode our ability to farm, and we believe it would harm the tourism industry.

We also learned that in several other Virginia Counties (including some with much less significant agricultural economies), a number of strategies are being pursued to maintain their agriculture base. These strategies include such efforts as more restrictive zoning, purchase of development rights programs, agricultural marketing services, and assistance for beginning farmers. Currently, there are 15 Virginia localities with purchase of development rights programs.

Our Recommendations

With that as a backdrop, I will now highlight a few of our recommendations, which fall into 4 categories: Land Use – 6 recommendations; Education and Information – 1 recommendation with 5 target audiences; Economic Development – 4 recommendations; and, County Commitment to Agriculture – 2 recommendations.

Under Land Use, we want to acknowledge several current policies or activities that are effective and recommend they be continued, such as adhering to the comprehensive plan vision. We strongly encourage that you continue to look at zoning options in our rural areas that would limit and manage the placement of residential developments. We are asking for strengthened promotion of enrollment in agricultural/forestral districts as a ‘temporary’ farmland protection measure. We recommend that the Planning Commission specifically identify impacts on agriculture of proposals as part of their final recommendations to you. And, perhaps most importantly for the long term, we recommend the County establish and fund a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program. A PDR program can be designed in which dollars spent both protect farmland and energize or revitalize agriculture.

Under the Category Education and Information: We recognize that Education and Information is a cornerstone of an ongoing effort to sustain agriculture. The effort must include our school-aged children, rural and ‘newly rural’ residents, tourists, and our farmers. We recognize that for farming to continue we need new generations of farmers, and we need neighbors who understand the role of agriculture in our county and what farming practices include (yes, sometimes, noise, dust and smells!). We believe that farmers can help diversify their incomes from agri-tourism, and finally, we recognize that our farmers need access to specialized information and assistance.

Under the Category of Economic Development: Agriculture is not only a way of life, it is a business. We have several Economic Development recommendations to enhance the agriculture related business community, which can have positive impacts on our area. And, again, we recommend continuing the current county tax policies related to farm machinery, livestock, agricultural and forest land.

Under the Category County Commitment: We recognize that our report will only be as good as the follow-up actions you take; that leads to our last category of recommendations,

County Commitment to Implement our Recommendations. We realize that there are many priorities, issues and challenges pulling you in many directions. We strongly believe dedicated leadership is necessary to achieve our goal and request that you establish a full-time permanent Agriculture Development Director staff position (we have even drafted a position description to help make that decision easier!). The recommendations we made require someone to follow through to make them a reality and to implement them. And although our Task Force members look forward to having two Wednesday evenings each month to do other things, we are so strongly committed to this effort, we are willing to continue in a supportive role as you proceed with our recommendations.

IN CONCLUSION, we were honored to be given this assignment and believe in the importance of our recommendations. Our county is at a cross-roads regarding the future of agriculture – your decisions and commitment are critical in continuing the legacy and sustaining agriculture as a key component of our rural character.

If you have any questions, our Agriculture Task Force members here today will be happy to respond. Thank you.