

Environmental Sustainability Committee January 9, 2025 Meeting Minutes

Members Present: Leslie Kepler (Chair), Rich Sampson (Vice Chair), Dan Fogel, Dana Hicks, Trisha Knight, Anne Marie O'Neill, Jeremy Shook, and Mary Ann Sprung

Members Absent: Kerem Saral

Commissioners: Mayor Pro Tem Jennifer Hunt (board liaison)

Staff: Bobby Williams, Assistant Town Manager (staff liaison)

Chair Kepler called meeting to order at 3:31.

Discussion of minutes – no changes proposed. Jeremy Shook made comment regarding the Carbon Tax legislation and asked if there was a plan going forward, that Mary Ann could continue to work behind the scenes as this was an initiative she'd previously brought before the committee.

Mayor Pro Tem Hunt replied that the ESC's goal is to have more of a local focus, and to work on things we can control locally in Huntersville. There was discussion last time that the ESC could do both – taking direction from the board and bring ideas forward with a need for balance. It was noted that the carbon dividend act has been a priority for one member but not the focus of the entire committee and that's why it was removed from Old Business.

Approval of November Meeting Minutes – Dan Fogel motioned to approve, Rich Sampson seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

No agenda changes.

Next, the committee received a presentation from Erin Stanforth and Kathleen Reed with Mecklenburg County on the County's Farmland Preservation Plan and proposed Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program. If passed, Mecklenburg County will become the 92nd of NC's 100 counties to have such a program.

See Copy of Presentation.

The step needed and support being requested from the ESC is for their support for the Town Board to execute a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to allow the VAD program to operate within town boundaries. Benefits of the VAD include:

- Voluntary and low-cost way to support land conservation,
- Promotes agriculture within the County,
- Maintains agricultural areas for the benefit of all Mecklenburg County residents, and
- Supports environmental sustainability and resiliency by preserving clean air and water.

County staff presented information about the VAD, as well as the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) program, which requires a 10-year irrevocable conservation agreement and

entitles farmers to all benefits of the VAD plus up to 25% of its gross sales from nonfarm products without losing zoning exemption, higher percentage cost share funds under NC Agricultural Cost Share Program and may receive priority consideration for grants from State departments.

Responding to a question, it was noted the County has a goal of 500 acres in the program by 2026 and has a minimum size requirement for those to participate, with goal of being as accessible as possible, so sizes are smaller than typical present use value (i.e. 5-10 acres). Currently, there is more than 10,000 acres of land in Mecklenburg County with an agricultural tax exemption (present use value).

Slides depicted a variety of benefits, among them giving a greater voice to farmers when potential impacts of road projects might infringe upon their property boundaries. The intent is for MOUs to begin in Spring of 2025.

A number of other questions were asked. Among answers were this would not apply to solar farms; livestock and other state rules would still apply. Concerns were expressed about larger commercial farms not being as friendly to the environment due to water use and being less sustainable farming option.

Chair Kepler made a motion to support the establishment of a Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) program. Dan Fogel seconded. Motion carried 7-1, with Trisha Knight opposed due to sustainability concerns due to animals, size of farms, water use, etc.

OLD BUSINESS

Community Engagement – ESC members resumed discussion about an event for Earth Day. Member Shook encouraged everyone to be intentional and clear about the goal to get what the committee wants out of an event. Knight also offered some suggestions for increased tabling events over the next six months.

It was noted that Earth Day provides an opportunity to be actively doing something in the community and to interact with members of the community so they know the ESC exists.

Potential Dates for an event were discussed as either the day of Earth Day or the following Saturday.

Everyone agreed to commit to April 26th as the working date.

Member contributions / suggestions were as follows:

- **Shook – recycling/waste reduction**
- **O'Neill – downtown area clean up**
- **Sampson – Home energy audits**
- **Hunt – Pollinator Garden**
- **Fogel – Reaching out to Dearness Gardens and possibly Barnes and Noble to highlight books around "Earth Day"**
- **Sampson – Reaching out to Raptor Center about a program and/or release of a bird**

- **O'Neill – reaching out to Metrolina Greenhouses**
- **Sprung – reaching out to Discovery Place Kids**
- **Knight – reaching out to plant based food trucks**

Location of event is TBD, but may be opportunity to coordinate with Huntersville Parks and Recreation or other partners (Charlotte Water, local garden club, Waste Connections, ElectriCities, Mecklenburg County recycling, etc.). Could be an opportunity for different educational booths and food trucks.

Chair Kepler offered to create a worksheet for everyone to enter into so each idea and progress could be tracked. She will email to committee members.

Meeting conversation wrapped up.

Motion to adjourn, made by Fogel, seconded by Sampson. Motion carried unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 5:02

VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE

**PRESENTED TO THE TOWN OF HUNTERSVILLE
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEE
JANUARY 9, 2025**



AGENDA

- Farmland Preservation Plan Connection
- Ordinance Overview
- Benefits of Agricultural Districts
- Program Measurement and Next Steps

MECKLENBURG COUNTY FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN

Farmland Preservation Plan Strategies:

1. Protect farmland through voluntary programs that incentivize land preservation, conservation, and succession planning.
2. Promote agricultural workforce development of next generation farmers.
3. Promote agricultural economic development.
4. Promote farmland preservation, conservation, and equity through innovative public-private partnership programs.

The Farmland Preservation Plan was endorsed in March 2023.



MECKLENBURG COUNTY FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN



Establishment of a **Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance** in Mecklenburg County is a direct recommendation of the Farmland Preservation Plan.

This falls under Strategy One of the plan:
“Protect farmland through voluntary programs to incentivize land preservation.”



VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS



- A Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance is adopted by the Board of County Commissioners to establish a County's Voluntary Agricultural District program.
- This ordinance, and subsequent program, is a way that local government can recognize and support local producers.
- Bona fide farms voluntarily apply to take part in the program and receive benefits from their participation.
- An 'agricultural district' is each parcel that is approved as part of the program.

VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS ORDINANCE PURPOSE



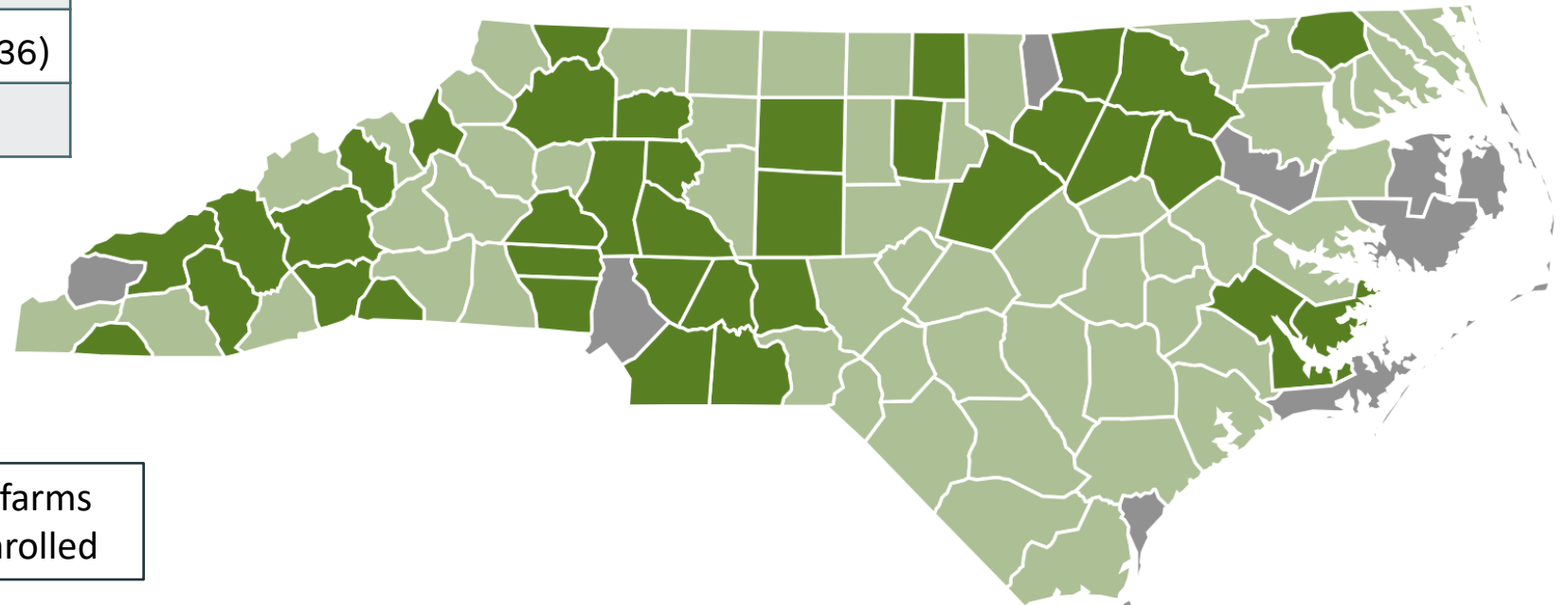
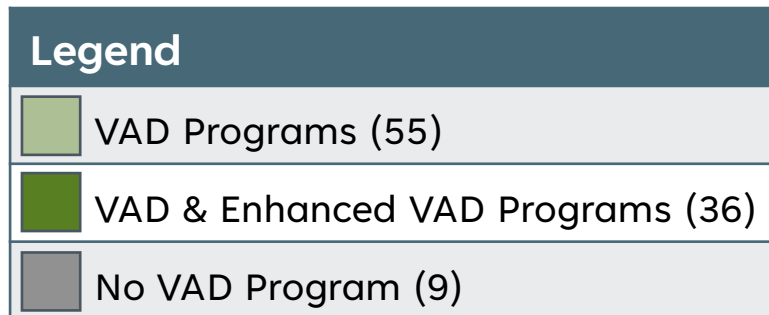
Purpose of the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Ordinance:

- To promote the values and general welfare of Mecklenburg County agriculture by increasing the identity of, and pride in, the agricultural community and its way of life.
- To decrease likelihood of legal disputes, such as nuisance actions, between farm owners and their neighbors.
- To increase protection from non-farm development.

(NC GS Article 61, 106-738)

VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS THROUGHOUT NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD) by County



Total farms enrolled statewide: 10,895 farms
Total acres statewide: 899,931 acres enrolled

WHO QUALIFIES FOR VAD?

Bona fide farms are eligible for participation.

Any of the following are sufficient evidence of bona fide farm status:

- A farm sales tax exemption certificate issued by the Department of Revenue.
- A copy of the property tax listing showing that the property is eligible for participation in the present use value program.
- A copy of the farm owner or operator's Schedule F from their most recent federal income tax return.
- A forest management plan.

VAD-eligible farms must have production and activities relating or incidental to the production of:

- Crops, Grains, Fruits, Vegetables, Plants, Dairy, Livestock, Poultry, Forestry, Horses, Bees, Aquaculture, Agritourism, and all other forms of agriculture.



ADDITIONAL FARM QUALIFICATIONS



Highly-Erodible Land

- If the applying farm is designated by the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) as highly-erodible land (HEL), the land must be managed in accordance with NRCS best practices for highly-erodible land.

Farm Size

- Within Mecklenburg County, farms of one acre or larger will be eligible to apply for inclusion in the VAD.

VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE REQUIREMENTS

Required in the local VAD ordinance:

- Agricultural Advisory Board
- Conservation agreement
- Notice of proximity to farmland



Austin-Kidd Farm

AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD



- An Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB) must be established as part of the Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance.
- A majority of the AAB must be comprised of residents who are actively engaged in agriculture. Members will, to the extent possible, represent all geographical areas of the County as well as all sectors of agriculture.
- Confirmed ex officio members of the AAB will include NC Cooperative Extension – Mecklenburg County Center and Mecklenburg Soil & Water Conservation District.

AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD

Responsibilities of the Agricultural Advisory Board may include:

- Review and make recommendations concerning the establishment and modification of Voluntary Agricultural Districts,
- Review and make recommendations concerning any amendments to the VAD ordinance,
- Hold public hearings on public projects involving condemnation of all or part of a VAD-enrolled farm,
- Advise the BOCC on issues affecting the agricultural economy or way of life, and
- Perform other related tasks or duties, as assigned by the Board of County Commissioners.

CONSERVATION AGREEMENT

- The overall goal of the conservation agreement is to prohibit nonfarm use or development.
- Conservation agreement details:
 - Agreement between the landowner and County government.
 - 10-year agreement, automatically renewed until landowner ends participation.
 - May include restrictions on nonfarm construction; removal or destruction of vegetation; activities detrimental to water or soil conservation.
 - For VAD, the agreement is not required to be recorded with Register of Deeds. Enhanced VAD agreements are recorded.
 - VAD agreements are revokable with written notice, EVAD agreements are irrevocable for 10 years.
- Formation of a 'district' is triggered by the execution of a conservation agreement between the landowner and County.



NOTICE OF PROXIMITY TO AN AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT

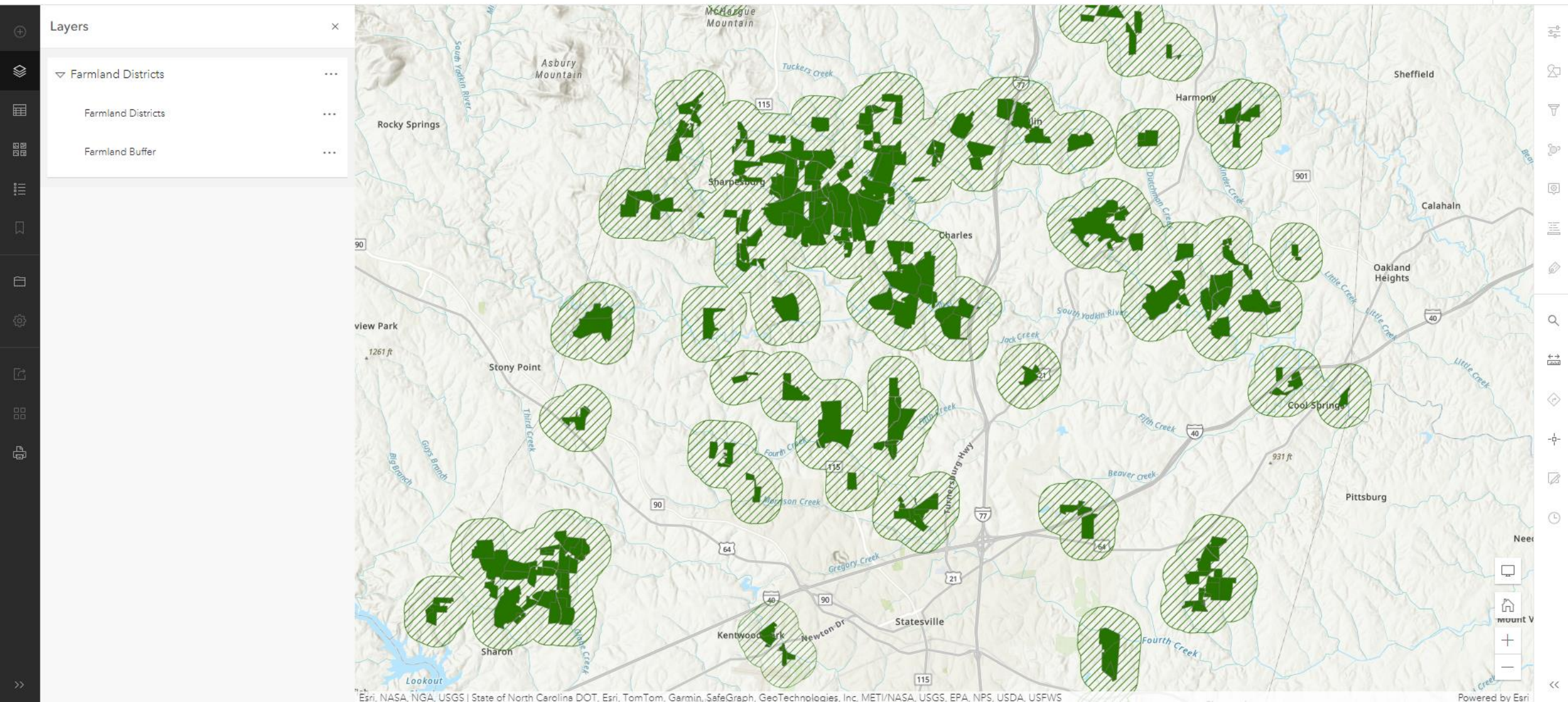


Public Record Notice of Proximity

- Land records must include some form of notice to alert a person researching the title of a particular tract that the tract is within one-half mile of a property line of a VAD-enrolled farm.
- This may be through:
 - Geographic Informational System (GIS)
 - Signage
 - Deed notation (Enhanced VAD)

Iredell County GIS

Voluntary Agricultural Districts Layers



ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF A COUNTY VAD ORDINANCE



- Memoranda of Understanding
 - A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) must be established with each town and the City of Charlotte to allow farms within their corporate boundaries to take part in Mecklenburg County's VAD.
 - Without MOUs established, only farms situated in ETJ are eligible.
- NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCDA)
 - The County will record the passed ordinance with NCDA.
 - The County must report to NCDA once a year on our farmland preservation program progress, including the number of enrolled farms and total acreage within the VAD program.

TOWN AND CITY COLLABORATION

- In November 2024, County Sustainability staff had meetings with each of the seven municipalities for an initial conversation around the VAD.
- Each municipality will have the opportunity to nominate an individual actively engaged in agriculture to the AAB.
- Once VAD is established and MOUs in place, there are no additional requirements for municipalities in the running of this program.
- There are no costs or financial benefits to municipalities associated with the VAD.



BENEFITS OF AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS



BENEFITS OF THE VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE



VAD Benefits for Mecklenburg County include:

- Voluntary and low-cost way to support land conservation,
- Promotes agriculture within the County,
- Maintains agricultural areas for the benefit of all Mecklenburg County residents, and
- Supports environmental sustainability and resiliency by preserving clean air and water.

OPTIONAL BENEFITS FOR INCLUSION IN THE VAD ORDINANCE



Benefits to VAD-enrolled farmers that may be included:

- Public hearings required for condemnation of farmland
- Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts

Austin-Kidd Farm

OPTIONAL BENEFITS FOR INCLUSION IN THE ORDINANCE

Public Hearings for Condemnation: Option to include in the ordinance that no State or local public agency or governmental unit may formally initiate an action to condemn any qualifying farmland within a VAD until a public hearing request has gone through the Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB).

Additional details:

- An appeal must be made to hold a public hearing.
- AAB has 30 days after receiving a request to hold the public hearing and submit findings and recommendations to the agency.
- Agency may not formally initiate a condemnation action while the proposed condemnation is moving through this process.
- AAB would take all factors into account, including timeline, whether proposed condemnation directly affects agricultural production, whether alternate options had been considered by the agency, etc.

(NC GS Article 61, 106-740)

OPTIONAL BENEFITS FOR INCLUSION IN THE ORDINANCE



Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD):

- Requires a 10-year **irrevocable** Conservation Agreement.
 - This agreement automatically renews for three years after the initial period unless notice is given by the landowner and will continue to automatically renew in three-year increments until the landowner submits written notice.
- All benefits of the VAD, plus additional benefits:
 - May receive up to 25% of its gross sales from nonfarm products without losing zoning exemption,
 - Higher percentage of cost-share funds under the NC Agricultural Cost Share Program (GS 106-850), and
 - May receive priority consideration for grants from State departments, institutions, or agencies.

(NC GS Article 61, 106-743.1-5)

PROCESS FOR VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ESTABLISHMENT

1
VAD Application
by Landowner

2
Verification of
bona fide farm
and HEL status

3
Application
Approval by
Agricultural
Advisory Board

4
Execution of
Conservation
Agreement

5
VAD is
Established

6
Compliance with
Record Notice

7
Other Benefits of
VAD

8
Ongoing
Verification of
Conservation
Agreement

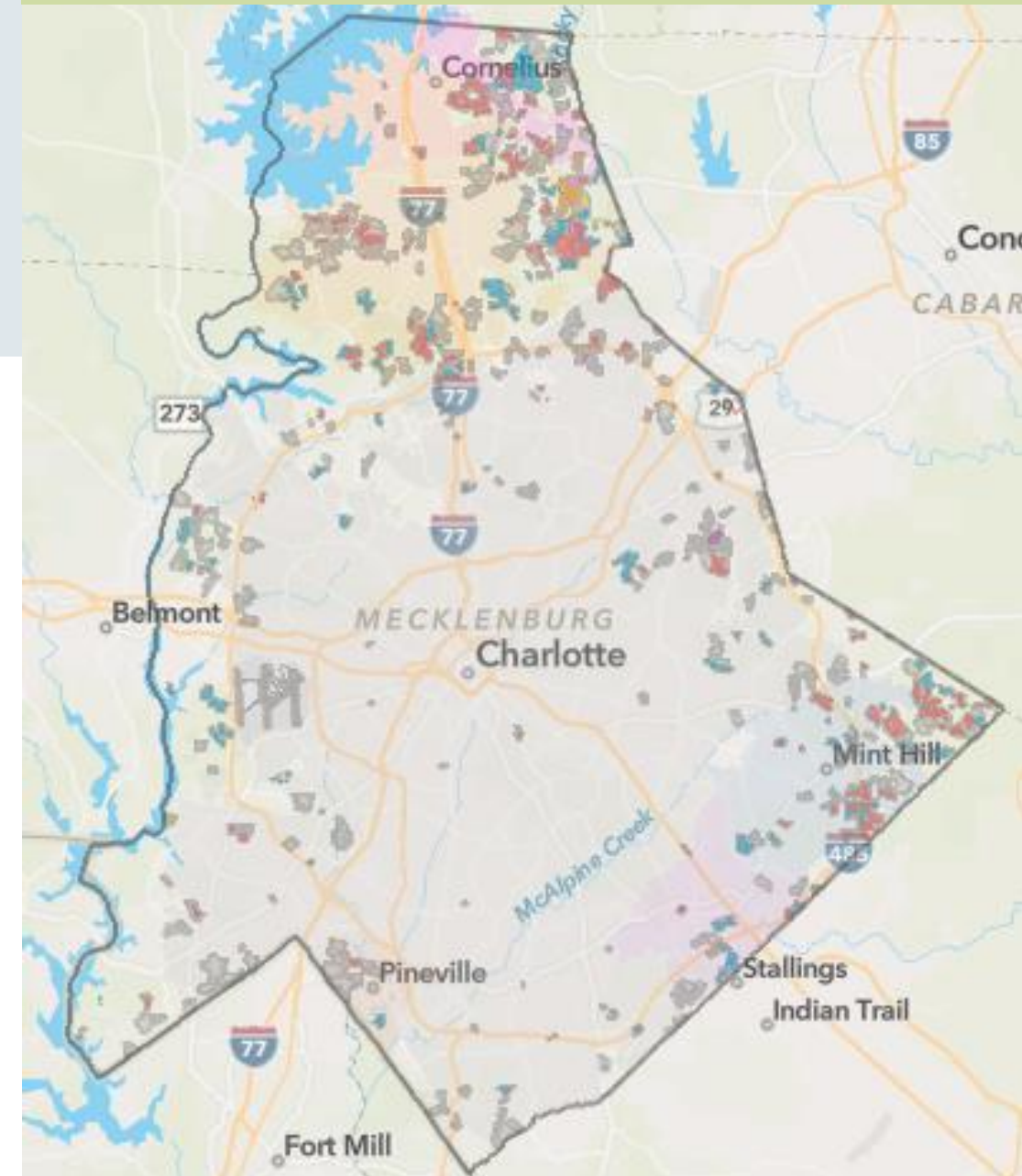


PROGRAM MEASUREMENT AND NEXT STEPS

TRACKING VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT PROGRAM PROGRESS

- Online application and tracking system established
- Regular reports from the Agricultural Advisory Board on the number of:
 - VAD/EVAD Applicants
 - Approved farms
 - Approved acreage
- GIS layer for VAD enrolled parcels
- Outreach events for VAD promotion

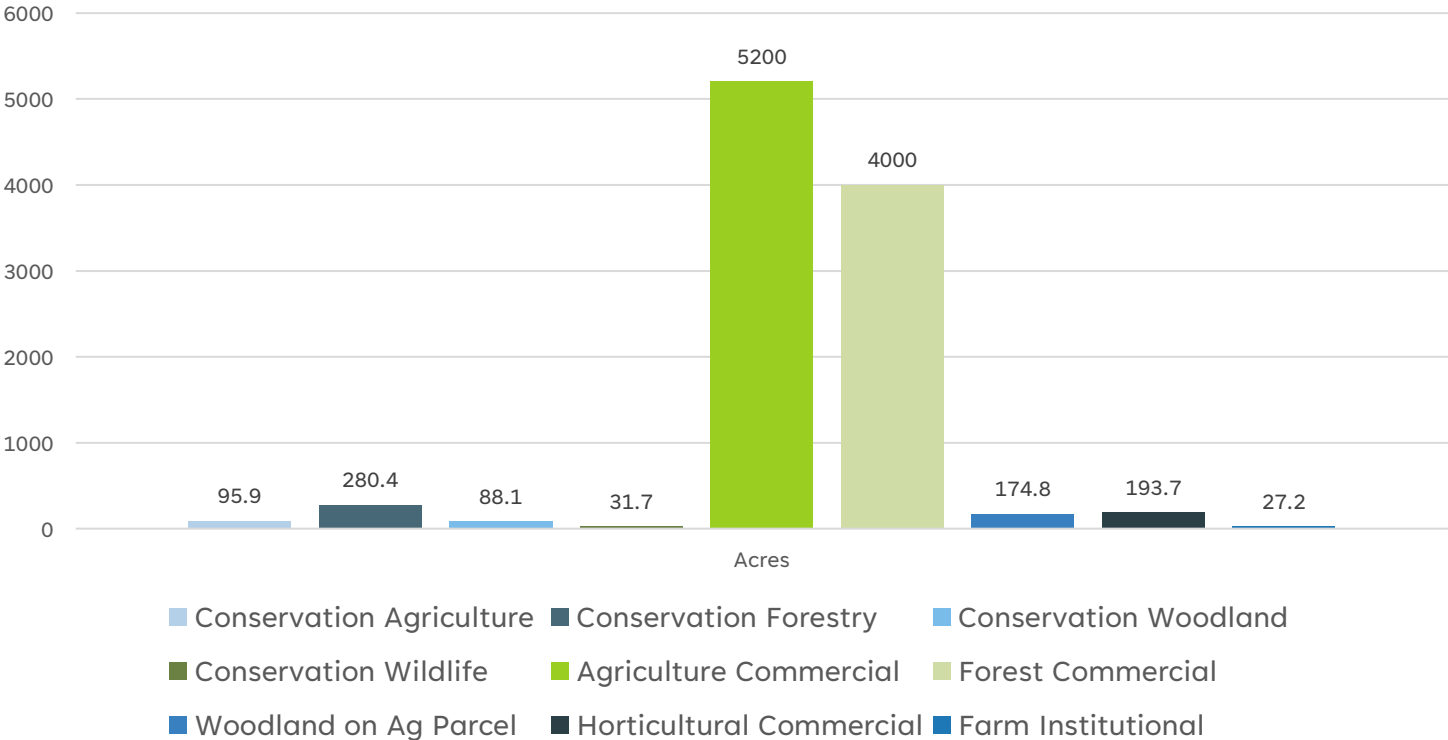
Agricultural Land in Mecklenburg County



Gray areas on the map are parcels that were previously coded as agricultural lands but are no longer coded as such. Parcels with color are current agricultural acreage.

VAD PROGRAM GOALS

Agricultural Land Acreage in
Mecklenburg County by Land Use Type



10,096.8 acres

Current Denoted Agricultural Land Acreage
in Mecklenburg County

VAD Program Goal:
500 acres enrolled in
VAD/EVAD by June 2026

TIMELINE AND NEXT STEPS



- Municipality collaboration
 - **November 2024:** Presentations to staff of all seven municipalities within Mecklenburg County
 - **January / February 2025:** Additional presentations to Huntersville, Davidson, Mint Hill and Cornelius
 - **Spring 2025:** MOUs in place with municipalities opting to take part in the VAD
- Board of County Commissioners Endorsement
 - **December 10, 2024:** Presentation to BOCC Environmental Stewardship Committee
 - **February / March 2025:** Presentation at BOCC general meeting
 - **Spring 2025:** Ordinance passed via consent item at BOCC general meeting to establish the VAD
- Formation of Agricultural Advisory Board
 - **Spring 2025:** Applications for AAB open once VAD Ordinance passed by BOCC
 - **Spring 2025:** AAB Bylaws passed by BOCC
 - **Spring 2025:** AAB members appointed by BOCC
- **Summer 2025:** Open Voluntary Agricultural District program for applications



QUESTIONS?



Environmental Sustainability Committee

Community Outreach





Possible Tabling Events

- **February 17th - Black History Celebration**, David B. Waymer Rec Center, 1 pm - 5 pm
- **March 15th - Huntersville's Car/Truck Show**, Veterans Park, 9 am - 12 pm
- **April 22nd - Earth Day** (this is a Tuesday)
- **April 25th - Adult Recess**, Athletic Park, 6 pm - 9 pm
- **May 3rd - Opening Day for Growers' Market**, Veterans Park, 8 am - 12 pm
- **May 4th - Hello Huntersville Music and Arts Festival**, Veterans Park, 1 pm - 6 pm
- **June (every Saturday) - Growers' Market**, Veterans Park, 8 am - 12 pm
- **June 12th - Just Kidding Around**, Veterans Park, 10 am - 11 pm
- **June 13th - Movie in the Park**, Veterans Park, movie begins at dusk, so an hour prior?
- **June 19th - LaLaCaboosa Summer Kick Off Celebrating Juneteenth**, Veterans Park, 6 pm - 9 pm

Possible Table Needs

(* denotes cost, ** possible cost):

- **ESC Tablecloth*** - printed with the town's name (ESC? Catch phrase or quote??)
- **Each event:**
 - (1) event appropriate piece of information/tip/statistic/activity*
 - (2) event appropriate survey
 - (3) general sustainability/environmental information
- **iPad for surveys****
- **Signage**** for QR Code - survey
- **Signage**** for QR Code - to follow Huntersville and Parks & Rec
- **Other visuals*** for ESC related encouragement (tips, facts, checklists, etc)
- **Town updates?** (ex, tree ordinances, new sustainability consultant coming, etc.)

** Perhaps USB powered monitors in lieu of paper signage and per event poster creation*



For ALL Events...

Perhaps the ESC can make a general recommendation checklist for more climate-forward operations

(not a complete list and some of this may already be encouraged):

- **NO single-use water bottles for sale** - refilling stations available instead
Can purchase a reusable water bottle, if one has been forgotten at home.
- **Solar-powered**
- **Activities that don't create waste**
- **Plant-based food items** (food trucks)
- **Encourage sustainable transportation** - carpooling, walking, biking, bus, etc.
- **Recycling/separated waste receptacles**
- Announcement 15 minutes before the end of an event, thanking folks for coming and to help the planet and our community by looking around where you are and picking up any trash.



Next Steps

- **TODAY: Committee to choose at least 4 events to table**
- **Sign up to volunteer - each member to assist with at least one event**
 - Please keep an eye out for Sign-Up Genius (platform for volunteers)
 - *Of course, please feel free to sign up for more!*
- **Volunteer groups to brainstorm their tabling ideas:**
 - Event appropriate facts, tips, information, and/or activity
 - Event appropriate survey – approximately 3-5 questions
 - Any additional resources needed? Please reach out well in advance to be sure if available or possible
- **Please have ideas ready before next meeting: Thursday, February 13th**
- **Assemble “Tabling Box”**
 - Tablecloth
 - Ipad
 - Any additional materials



Thanks, Everyone!!