New Plan To Secure County’s Rural Vision

Shenandoah County’s proposed rural areas plan would promote voluntary land conservation, like the conservation easement on this farm near Edinburg, to strengthen agriculture and maintain the county’s rural character.

Rural Area Revisions Eved Since 2006

The Community Planning Project (CPP) is the third initiative to address the goals in the Shenandoah County vision statement since the comprehensive plan was adopted five years ago. Shenandoah Forum estimated that more than 200 residents have participated in planning to retain the county’s rural character.

This fall, Shenandoah County elected officials will take up a rural areas plan designed to stem the loss of more than a quarter of the county’s rural lands, while it strengthens towns and surrounding county growth areas. The plan seeks to support the farm sector, provide flexibility for rural landowners, secure long-term savings for county taxpayers and enhance the quality of life for all residents, all goals of Shenandoah County’s Comprehensive Plan.

The Board of Supervisors (BOS) and Planning Commission will hold a joint public hearing on the measure Thursday, October 7 at 7 pm at the county administration building in Woodstock. Both boards are expected to vote on the proposal in November.

The rural areas plan was developed by the BOS-appointed Community Planning Project Steering Committee, which was charged in 2008 with achieving the goals in the county’s comprehensive plan vision statement by preparing amendments to the comprehensive plan and zoning and subdivision ordinances.

“A broad consensus exists regarding the county’s vision and expectations for long-term population growth,” according to the Steering Committee’s final report, completed July 29. “There is no single magic bullet for achieving the vision,” the report continues.

Instead, “a combination of tools would balance the impacts and benefits among all citizens, landowners and taxpayers in the county and together offer the best prospects for success,” the report states.

The Steering Committee’s rural areas plan calls for the county to pursue three distinct strategy areas (see stories on page 3):

• Encourage most new housing growth in and around the towns.
• Invest in voluntary land conservation programs.
• Strengthen rural zoning ordinances.

The rural areas plan calls for the county to maintain three distinct strategy areas (see stories on page 3):

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The rural areas plan calls for the county to maintain three distinct strategy areas (see stories on page 3):

• Most new housing would be directed to the towns ensuring its open, agricultural character.
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In April 2007, Shenandoah Forum launched a year-long Community Dialogue Project, which included three public workshops that drew dozens of local residents. The Dialogue Project was led by a Consensus Committee of 21 residents. It would conserve tangible resources, like rural character, working farmland and forest land, historic battlefields, wildlife habitat, and scenic vistas on rivers and mountains. It also would protect the important environmental services provided by healthy rural land, such as clean water and air.

Copies of the rural zoning package are available in the county planning office or online at: www.shenandoahcountyva.us/committees/communityplanning/attachments/cpprecommend2010revised.pdf

Shenandoah County’s proposed rural areas plan would promote voluntary land conservation, like the conservation easement on this farm near Edinburg, to strengthen agriculture and maintain the county’s rural character.

In the year 2025, Shenandoah County will still be a primarily rural community that:

• Protects its natural resources.
• Directs its growth to the towns ensuring its open, agricultural character.
• Provides a variety of jobs in business, light industry, tourism, and sustainable agriculture.
• Maintains moderate growth of a demographically varied population.
• Supports safe and efficient interstate transportation and maintains the rural character of its primary and secondary roads.
• Ensures preservation of its natural beauty and unique, historical character by strictly adhering to the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

Adopted June 2005, Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors

ATTEND THE COUNTY’S PUBLIC HEARING OCTOBER 7 IN WOODSTOCK
Worth the Wait

Sometimes only a long, slow oven makes the best bread. That’s the best analogy for the five years it has taken to create the right tools for Shenandoah County residents to achieve our vision of a prosperous, rural county.

The Shenandoah Forum strongly endorses the new rural areas plan. The rural zoning package will preserve our irreplaceable agricultural land and give stability to our farm economy, as it also serves to strengthen our towns. The revisions are truly a compromise, designed to provide flexibility for rural landowners and long-term savings to taxpayers. Shenandoah County must act now to correct the disconnect between our comprehensive plan and outdated zoning rules, as Dr. Michael Chandler, professor emeritus at Virginia Tech, warned us in 2007. Existing rural zoning could lead to up to 40,000 new lots in the county’s rural area, with a loss of more than a quarter of prime farm land to housing in the next 40 years.

It’s taken a long time to create the practical tools we need today to realize the community’s vision for the future. It was worth the wait. We encourage Shenandoah County residents to join us in asking our elected officials to adopt the rural areas plan as recommended by the Community Planning Project.

To the Editor,

As a cattle farmer and rural landowner, I often consider how fortunate I am to live in this farming community. As a retired educator, it is important to me that we give our young people opportunities to experience the quality of life so many of us enjoy. To do this we must stabilize and strengthen Shenandoah County’s agricultural base by preserving the rural lands necessary for productive farming.

I support the zoning and subdivision changes in the proposed plan. In thinking beyond ourselves we can create a more economically stable future for the next generation, one that enables them, as it has us, to take immense pleasure and pride in this wondrous place we call home.

I hope that you will join me in supporting the rural areas plan.

Doe Hockman
Strasburg

The natural integrity and practical usefulness of a landscape is most often governed by its contiguous acres, its land cover and even its ownership status. Divisions in any of those landscape components can have serious implications in the functionality of the ecosystem, the management of the land, or the profitability of owning that land. Wildlfe became challenged to eek out an existence on fragmented acreage and often tend to be problematic to new residents who might move into what was once their habitat.

Forest lands of small acreages can fall below the critical mass needed to be effectively managed for either timber or wildlife resources. The parcelization of the land resource can create a situation where it is no longer profitable to farm or harvest timber thereby limiting the future economic viability of Shenandoah County.

For the past couple of years the citizens of Shenandoah County have come together to formulate a rural areas plan which would help to ensure the rural character, natural integrity and practical usefulness of the land resource in the county. The voices were many, the opinions at times were polar opposites, but in the end a rural areas plan was developed and now it awaits the approval of our County leaders. It is with great enthusiasm that I lend support to the citizenry of Shenandoah County as they seek final approval for their visionary rural areas plan.

Joe Lohmen
Woodstock

To the Editor,

The 2005 Shenandoah County Comprehensive Plan, a plan envisioning Shenandoah County’s future through the year 2025, was unanimously passed by the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors because they believed it reflected the needs of the community. I was a member of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan Review Committee and am very proud of the plan, because it was not created by a group of contracted, hired professionals. Instead, this plan was created by a group of thoughtful, informed and caring Shenandoah County citizens. I am proud to have been a member of this group.

I know firsthand, the 2005 Comprehensive Review Committee was comprised of an “ordinary” group of citizens who represented the people who live and work in Shenandoah County. My participation in this process was one of the reasons I decided to run for Supervisor of District Two.

For the past four years, citizens and their elected officials in Shenandoah County have worked together to realize the vision of the Comprehensive Plan: to remain a primarily agricultural, rural community. As a local farmer, I know we must find ways to preserve our critical, agricultural land base. As a taxpayer, I want our county to provide comprehensive services that are efficient and affordable to all. As a supervisor, I know we must plan for growth before it occurs. It would be beneficial and highly economical for growth to occur near our towns in Shenandoah County. As a result, we could preserve our agricultural base. This rural plan contains a set of tools that will serve our community and be a model for the Shenandoah Valley Region.

Steven A. Baker
Mount Jackson

Democracy at Work

A diverse group of committed Shenandoah County residents worked hard over the past five years—studying ways to best implement the growth and development goals in the county’s comprehensive plan. We estimate that more than 230 residents attended at least one of the workshops, forums, field trips, committee meetings or outreach sessions held by civic groups or county government on these issues since 2005.

To every one of you who touched this process, all of us at Shenandoah Forum extend our sincere thanks. Each one of you proved that in Shenandoah County, democracy is alive, well and hard at work. We applaud your willingness to meet, share ideas and come to constructive consensus on even the most complicated public policy issues. That is something to celebrate.

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Looking at the Future: Two Scenarios

Shenandoah County Housing Build-Out In 20 Years
Under Current Zoning

Rural Land Lost to Development

Shenandoah County Housing Build-Out In 20 Years
Proposed New Zoning

Rural Land Conserved, Existing Communities Grow

20,000 Rural Acres Lost or Conserved?

The Community Planning Project report makes clear that current housing trends would have a devastating impact on the county’s rural lands. Currently, 91 percent of new housing occurs in the rural areas, where more than 7,000 small lots (under 20 acres) already exist. Demand for rural housing under current zoning could generate up to 4,000 new rural lots in 20 years and up to 9,000 new lots in 40 years.

These trends would lead to significant losses of Shenandoah County’s agricultural land base – 14 percent in the next 20 years and 28 percent in 40 years. Under current zoning, the new houses likely to be built on rural lands in 20 years would consume up to 20,000 acres. The map on the left documents this outcome.

In order to realize the comprehensive plan’s vision of directing growth to the towns, the new rural areas plan offers a promising alternative. The plan would lower housing density on rural land, encourage the clustering of lots to preserve land and provide rural landowners with voluntary options to conserve their land, as it shifts 90 percent of new housing to the towns and surrounding county growth areas.

The rural areas plan would limit the loss of rural lands to not more than two percent, or about 3,000 acres, in the next 20 years. The map on the right documents this outcome.

Promote Growth in Towns

The rural areas plan seeks to direct most new housing development to the towns and the surrounding county growth areas. Three strategies would promote coordinated town and county planning.

Joint Comprehensive Plans

Town and county officials together would plan where and when public services, like water and sewer, would be provided as demand warrants. Town expansions would be planned through voluntary settlement agreements with the county.

Benefits would include significant savings to taxpayers in the cost of providing public services, more efficient and compact land use patterns and greater predictability for landowners adjacent to towns and county growth areas.

Adaptive Public Utilities

There is currently water and sewer capacity to serve the towns and county growth areas. But systems will need to be monitored, upgraded and expanded to meet demand over time. In order to provide services to new residents at the most affordable cost and scale, planning must begin now.

Invest in Land Conservation

Shenandoah County witnessed significant economic losses in the farm sector in the past 20 years, with a 20 percent drop in farm employment and loss of productive land to development. The rural areas plan would pursue two main strategies to strengthen the farm sector.

Agricultural Economic Development Programs

The county would fund a farm economic development director to help current and new farmers build their businesses, promote Shenandoah County products, local foods and farmers’ markets, and produce farm events, initiatives and marketing materials.

Purchase of Development Rights Program

The county would fund a purchase of development rights (PDR) program to buy conservation easements on prime farm lands from willing sellers. Voluntary easements extinguish housing and other development rights, keep land in farming, forestry and other traditional rural uses, and preserve valuable resources, like battlefields, open space and wildlife habitat.

Funding levels will determine how much land Shenandoah County can protect through a PDR program. Federal, state and charitable grants, and organizations like the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, can greatly leverage local funding.

Update Rural Zoning

Shenandoah County currently permits far more subdivision of rural lands than is needed to accommodate moderate growth rates.

With more than 7,000 existing unused rural lots smaller than 20 acres each, the county today has more than a 30-year supply of rural housing parcels. The pattern of housing development, mostly large-lot subdivisions, also consumes far more productive land than is necessary to accommodate growth.

The zoning revisions call for directing new housing towards towns by reducing the number of lots permitted on rural land when large-lot subdivisions are proposed and providing incentives for developers who cluster housing and preserve surrounding rural land.

Lower Density Zoning

The county would limit density to no more than one lot per 10 acres in the A-1 zoning district and one lot per 15 acres in the C-1 zoning district. Once land is subdivided, no further lots could be created from the parent parcel.

Reward Cluster Development

The county would encourage the preservation of at least 80 percent of a rural property with the conservation subdivision option. The lot sizes would be smaller and clustered to maintain productive land on the rest of the property. In return, the landowner would receive “bonus” lots that would not reduce the current zoning density as a reward for using the cluster option.

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Secure the Vision of Shenandoah’s Future

Make Your Voice Heard

Let County Officials Know You Support The Rural Areas Plan!

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The rural areas plan seeks to support the farm sector, provide flexibility for rural landowners, secure long-term savings for county taxpayers and enhance the quality of life for all residents, all goals of the Shenandoah County Comprehensive Plan.

Support Shenandoah Forum!

- Enclosed is my $35 tax-deductible gift to join Shenandoah Forum and support compatible growth and development in Shenandoah County.
- Enclosed is an additional contribution to support future issues of The Shenandoah County Sentinel.
- Please notify me of urgent local issues that affect my community.

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City/State/Zip:
Telephone Number: (Home/Work) ____________________ (Cell)

Please make check payable to Shenandoah Forum, P.O. Box 654, Woodstock, VA 22664

Contact us at: info@ShenandoahForum.org

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