



THE SHENANDOAH COUNTY

Sentinel

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New Plan To Secure County's Rural Vision

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 strategies (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 need is urgent. Current housing trends and zoning will lead to significant losses of Shenandoah County's agricultural land base – 14 percent in the next 20 years and 28 percent in 40 years – if the revisions



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.

are not adopted. The rural areas plan could cut that loss to not more than two percent over time. (see maps on page 3)

Shenandoah County taxpayers would realize significant savings if the majority of new housing is shifted to the towns and surrounding county growth areas, where public services already exist or can be planned for most efficiently.

Directing growth to towns can increase housing affordability by providing a greater variety of options. It can strengthen local businesses on Main Street and beyond.

The rural areas plan also offers the farm sector greater stability and new marketing opportunities. A voluntary land conservation program would preserve productive farm and forest land, as well as battlefields and valued open space. A county agricultural economic development program would help local farmers build their businesses and

promote Shenandoah County products, markets and farm events.

Rural landowners would retain some flexibility. Those seeking to develop would receive incentives to preserve 80 percent or more of rural land by clustering houses on smaller lots on a portion of the property.

Finally, the rural areas plan promises to enhance the quality of life for all Shenandoah County residents. It would conserve tangible features, like rural character, working farm 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

Rural Area Revisions Eyed 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 estimates that more than 200 residents have participated in planning to retain the county's rural character.

In January 2006, Shenandoah County supervisors appointed nine farmers to the Agriculture Task Force. The group drew 60 residents to a workshop on purchase of development rights (PDR) and other agriculture vitality programs and engaged many other residents with the farm sector appointees.

The Agriculture Task Force's final recommendations, released in December 2006, are reflected in the new rural areas plan: amend rural zoning to minimize impacts on farming, work with towns to accommodate more growth, hire a county agriculture development director and launch a voluntary PDR program.

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 from the farm, real estate, business, education, arts, conservation and other sectors, who explored a variety of rural land use tools.

The CPP began its work in fall 2008 with four well-attended public forums on growth and development issues. The CPP Steering Committee includes BOS Chairman David E. Ferguson and Supervisor Conrad A. Helsley, Planning Commission Chairman Gary Lantz and Commissioner Russ Adams, and residents John Adamson and Deb Truban. County Planning Director Brandon Davis and Zoning and Subdivision Administrator Joyce Fadeley provided support, along with land use consultants from Leesburg, Charlottesville and Harrisonburg.



Shenandoah County Comprehensive Plan Vision Statement

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.
- Affords its students excellent and appropriate education.
- Serves its citizens with public facilities and services that enhance their quality of life.
- 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

EDITORIALS

Worth the Wait

Sometimes only a long, slow oven bakes 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.

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.



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 200 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.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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 immeasurable pleasure and pride in this wonderful place we call home.

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

Dee Hockman
Strasburg

To the Editor,

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 these landscape components can have serious implications in the functionality of the ecosystems, the management of the land, or the profitability of owning that land. Wildlife become 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 area. 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



Rosemary Wallinger

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 Lehnen
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



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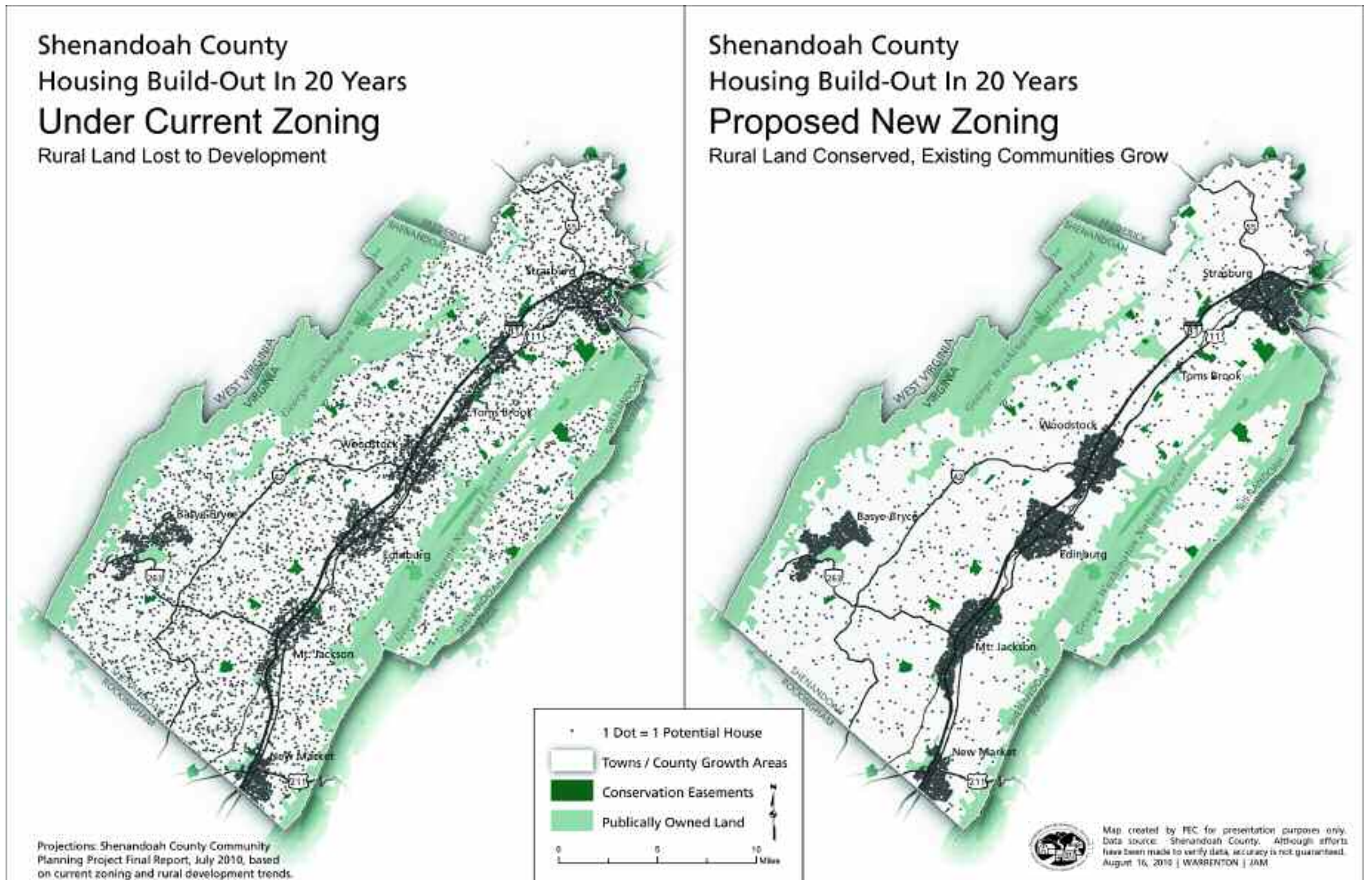


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Shenandoah Forum fosters informed dialogue on issues of growth and development in Shenandoah County.

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Looking at the Future: Two Scenarios



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, 50 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.

Adequate 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.

Traditional Neighborhood Design: The historic settlement patterns in Shenandoah County's towns reflect the mixed uses, human scale and connected streets, sidewalks, parks and other features that make small town living appealing to all age and income groups. State law now requires local governments to permit compact, people-friendly neighborhoods. To make traditional neighborhood design a reality, the towns and county must update their land use plans and zoning ordinances.

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 Program: 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 valued 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.

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 restore the current zoning density as a reward for using the cluster option.

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.



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Secure the Vision of Shenandoah's Future



Rosemary Wallinger

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

Let County Officials Know You Support The Rural Areas Plan!

District 1

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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.

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- Enclosed is my \$35 tax-deductible* gift to join Shenandoah Forum and support compatible growth and development in Shenandoah County.
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