Much Progress Made on County Vision in 10 Years

As Shenandoah County this summer passed the 10-year mark since the Board of Supervisors adopted a broadly shared vision and plan for our future, Shenandoah Forum decided to take a look back to see how far the County has come in realizing our goals.

We analyzed decisions, policies and programs over the past decade with the outcomes contained in the 2005 Comprehensive Land Use Plan. We found much to celebrate. County leadership made good progress toward the vision goals, particularly in support for the farm community, cooperation with the six towns and expansion of economic opportunity in proven sectors. In turn, consistent budgeting throughout a worldwide economic downturn kept our taxes the lowest in the region and our public debt burden relatively flat. While still meeting community needs.

Shenandoah Forum offers this short summary of the County’s progress toward the vision. More details are available on our website, www.ShenandoahForum.org. We hope you take a moment to learn more about how these decisions have been key to sustaining the shared goals of the community for our abundant agriculture, rural heritage, historic towns and vibrant communities.

Rural Heritage
Shenandoah County supervisors balanced private property rights with concern for the tax burden from unplanned growth in a wide array of land use decisions made over the past 10 years. New planning tools, zoning limits and land use programs helped retain the County’s rural character, preserve natural and historic resources, and allow for compatible residential and business growth and development.

- The 2010 rural areas plan directed most new residential growth to the area around the existing towns, where the cost of providing public services is much lower, while also promoting agricultural vitality and farmland preservation.
- Supervisors approved a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) ordinance and created the Conservation Easement Authority, which has protected two farms totaling 494 acres of working lands. The County’s modest $100,000 investment in 2011 secured more than $1.5 million in conservation value in three years. Supervisors last year approved future PDR funding of up to $500,000 per year, sensibly drawn from the rollback taxes collected when farm and forest land is converted to development.
- Supervisors approved cooperative land use plans with the Towns of New Market, Strasburg and Timberville to coordinate growth and public services, at a tremendous savings to the county budget and taxpayers.
- Supervisors made numerous land use decisions that preserved lands on the County’s four nationally recognized Civil War Battlefields, as well as prime farm and forest land, from incompatible residential and other development.

Fiscal Responsibility
Shenandoah County supervisors exercised much fiscal caution over the past 10 years, providing needed public services while keeping county spending, taxes and debt service among the very lowest in a region of 7 localities, just one penny more than that in Frederick County.

- The County’s real property tax rate of .57 cents on $100 assessed value is the second lowest in a region of 7 localities, and just one penny more than that in Frederick County.
- Shenandoah County’s operating costs for general government administration, $52.09 per capita per year, is the lowest among the seven localities in the Shenandoah Valley and less than half of the statewide average of $119.68 per capita.
- Capital outlays and debt service for public service projects, like the county library and the Mt. Jackson wastewater plant represent just 13 percent of the County budget. Conservative planning resulted in debt service levels dropping nine years out of 11 from 2003 through 2014, even as needed new facilities like the Health & Human Services Building were constructed.

Shared Prosperity
County supervisors paid close attention to the 2025 vision statement in their work to expand economic opportunity, particularly in traditional rural sectors like farming and tourism, promote compatible energy and other industrial development, and plan for roads and other infrastructure.

- A new strategic plan for economic development, adopted in 2013, reaffirms the importance of agriculture and tourism, and focuses on ways to grow the County’s existing businesses and employers.
- Supervisors embraced new marketing efforts for agriculture and tourism in 2011, including the Fields of Gold regional agritourism program and the Shenandoah Artisan Trail. In 2013, visitor spending totaled $192M, up 3.5%, ranking Shenandoah County 23rd for visitor spending as compared to 134 other Virginia counties.
- Elected officials endorsed a resolution in 2011 opposing any shale gas fracking in the George Washington National Forest, to protect water resources and public lands from industrial energy development, and adopted a wind power ordinance in 2010 to regulate industrial energy facilities, with an eye to serving local needs with minimal impact.
- Supervisors adopted “Reasonable Solutions for the Future of I-81” in 2005 to address safety and congestion problems without major highway widening financed by tolls. These solutions are now well underway, with spot safety projects, enforcement of speed limits under way, with spot safety projects, enforcement of speed limits under way, and increased interstate freight diversion from trucks to rail.
- Supervisors made smart public safety investments that decreased EMS response times to less than five minutes for 67 percent of emergency calls in 2014.
- The County opened a new Health and Human Services Building with all offices under one roof, and a new District Court building with improved judicial facilities, and joined a Regional Jail Authority to save more than 25 percent annually on criminal justice costs.

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.
- Protects its natural resources.
- 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 and reaffirmed December 2010, Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors.
Our county has been going through some tough economic times recently. Through the foresight in planning and involvement of a broad spectrum of the community in developing a plan for our rural areas, Shenandoah County has fared relatively well. It is my hope our local leaders over the next 10 years will continue the steady and conservatory approach to economic development that has characterized the past 10 years -- investing in the county’s existing economic sectors like agriculture and tourism, and supporting traditional economic sectors like agriculture and tourism, and providing efficient public services at the second lowest tax rate in the region. While some citizens may not be happy with every action or decision by the Board of Supervisors or County staff, the record shows sustained, consistent and successful leadership toward our broadly-shared goals for Shenandoah County.

As a retired educator who has been actively involved in education my entire adult life, I believe the most important element is safeguarding Shenandoah County’s rural heritage while preparing its citizens for the future, is the protection of what is good within our rural and I encourage future leadership to make it a top priority.

As a member of the County’s Ag Task Force, I am pleased with how closely decisions made in the County have followed the vision and intent of the Comp Plan, particularly regarding agriculture. Decisions to amend the rural zoning, establishing how development might impact agriculture, establish a farmland protection program, which has already permanently protected almost 900 acres. The County is on the right track when it comes to preserving farms and farming.

Residents contributed time and ideas throughout the creation of the Shenandoah County 2025 Vision Statement and Comprehensive Land Use Plan, adopted in 2005. Members of a Citizens’ Advisory Committee met yearly thereafter to track the ways County actions advanced the goals of the vision and plan. Shenandoah Forum members participated in every step of this work, providing well-researched information to residents on the issues we face together.

Thomas Jefferson described an ideal – engaged citizens participating in a responsible government. We are proud that in Shenandoah County, our residents and public servants can clearly see the fruits of their lasting commitment to work together to secure the future for our prosperous rural community.

Seth Cuffman
Shenandoah Forum Board Chairman
Shenandoah County residents have among the lowest tax burdens and most conservative levels of government spending in the region, according to data provided by 7 local governments.

Per Capita Operating Costs - General Government Administration

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<td><strong>STATE AVERAGE</strong></td>
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2015 Real Estate Tax Rate

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<tr>
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Shenandoah County - 10 Year Debt Service History

Per Capita School Debt Service - FY2014-15

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READ MORE:
County Progress Toward Vision & Goals
Posted Online: www.ShenandoahForum.org

Shenandoah Forum has posted a more detailed analysis online about the ways the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors has made progress toward the community’s 2025 vision. Learn more about how specific County actions, funding and policies over the past 10 years helped to realize different aspects of the eight goals outlined in the County Comprehensive Plan.
Setting the Record Straight in Shenandoah County

Urban myths are notorious for their inexplicable content and the speed by which they spread: alligators in the sewers, Elvis sightings and free airline tickets at the end of a maze of internet links. Conversations that start with "I heard that..." spread faster than chickenpox used to spread through the third grade.

Shenandoah County currently is experiencing a rural myth outbreak. In statements by political candidates, speeches at civic meetings and personal reports submitted as "data" to county government, incomplete and inconsistent information is being presented as reliable fact.

Shenandoah Forum aims to set the record straight on some persistent rural myths.

**MYTH**
County spending is out of control.

**FACT**
Shenandoah County has the lowest rate of growth in government spending in the region and even managed to lower its debt service nearly every year since 2003. For six years through the recession the county did not raise taxes and our operating costs for general government administration are less than half of the statewide average and lowest in the region.

**MYTH**
Home and landowners are being taxed off our property.

**FACT**
Shenandoah County can claim the second lowest tax rate among 7 localities in the region, at 57 cents per $100 in 2015 and average annual wages are now over $32K, the highest average annual wage on record.

**MYTH**
We can’t afford to protect farmland.

**FACT**
Not so! Since the end of the recession, Shenandoah County’s unemployment rate has decreased at a faster rate than the state and national averages. Recent expansions at Route 11 Chips, Mercury Paper, Andros Foods and Shenandoah Memorial Hospital reflect much optimism about the county economy bringing more than 250 jobs and almost $117M of capital investment to the county in the last 2 years.

**MYTH**
Farmland Information Center, working and open land requires far less in public services, just $0.35 for every $1 in taxes collected, compared to the $1.16 per $1 for the schools, roads, EMS and other services needed to serve residential development. Farmland also contributes to two of the county’s largest economic sectors, agriculture and tourism, and is essential to our high quality of life.

**MYTH**
The vast majority of the school system expenditures go towards instruction.

**FACT**
Keeping the local jail was not a feasible option. It was antiquated, in poor condition and failing current state standards. Because of the significant savings in operating costs, localities across Virginia are opting to participate in regional jail facilities instead of upgrading local jails. Counties in our region that have made this cost-saving decision are Augusta, Clarke, Frederick, Rappahannock, Rockingham and Warren; and Page is currently considering it.

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