

Summary of Presentation for the Chatham County BOC Meeting on October 21, 2019

Members from the Agriculture Advisory Board and the Chatham Community Food Council have formed a Joint Committee to help develop strategies to strengthen Chatham County's agricultural sector. We appreciate the opportunity to address the Board of Commissioners at the October meeting.

Agriculture and agribusiness industries account for 33% of Chatham County's total income, yielding an average of \$125 million annually in total cash receipts. A 2007 study done for Chatham County by NC State University revealed that agricultural land generates income for the county while residential land costs money. The study found that agricultural land generates \$1.72 in revenue for every dollar of public services that it receives, while the residential sector contributes \$0.87 for every dollar it receives. Additionally, agriculture provides many more benefits to the county including improved air and water quality, carbon sequestration, open space, tourism, local food, and much more.

The benefits of agriculture are obvious to many residents and stakeholders in the community who provided input to the Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan and the Chatham County Comprehensive Plan. These two plans both provided a set of recommendations for farmland protection and agricultural development. The recently approved Chatham County Comprehensive Plan cited preservation of agriculture and rural character as two of the top goals. The Chatham County Farmland Preservation Plan is ten years old and has had few of the recommendations implemented. During the same period, state funding for land protection has been drastically reduced while development pressure in the county has increased significantly with the approval of Chatham Park and other developments.

Many of these goals and recommendations require financial investment and we are asking the County to consider a source of permanent funding to make progress towards implementing these goals. We propose a dual strategy to help the County achieve its stated goals:

- (1) Implement a working lands protection program to assist landowners that are willing to voluntarily protect their working lands in perpetuity
- (2) Implement an agriculture economic development grant program that helps farmers with innovative marketing and technical development to increase profitability

These strategies help balance assistance between large and small farms and have been used successfully in other counties with similar challenges. One strategy directly protects *farmland* while the other directly helps *farmers* stay in business. The Joint Committee will continue to meet to comprehensively evaluate the various options for implementing the two overall goals, providing recommendations to the Board of Commissioners on which specific strategies will provide the greatest benefit to the County.

We are asking the Board of Commissioners to consider allocating recurring funds to establish a Farmland Preservation Program. Working in partnership with existing agencies and non-profits,

a Chatham County program would leverage existing resources while demonstrating commitment and providing a vehicle for future investment in some of the county's most valuable long-term assets, its farmland and farmers.