



Chatham County, NC

Legislation Text

File #: 19-3157, **Version:** 1

Vote on a request to adopt the revised Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance

Agriculture and agribusiness (food, fiber, and forestry) remain significant in the local economy, contributing an average of \$129M in annual total cash receipts (NCDA, 2018 Ag Stats) in Chatham County. As such, agriculture is viewed as a foundational piece of the livelihoods and lifestyles of many within Chatham County. Tasked with the need to preserve, protect, and enable agriculture, along with the rural character and lifestyle of the county, one such measure to accomplish these goals is to establish a sustainable Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program. With the establishment of a VAD program within Chatham County, active measures can be taken to preserve and protect farmland from non-farm development and provide benefits to producers that will contribute to the well-being of all county citizens. In order to enact such a program within the county, we seek assistance from the Board to adopt a VAD ordinance that will provide structure and a foundational basis for a viable program here in Chatham County.

Action Requested:

Vote on a request to adopt the revised Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance.

Introduction & Background:

The purpose of the Voluntary Agricultural District program is to encourage the preservation and protection of farmland from non-farm development. This is done in recognition of the significant importance of the role of agriculture to the economic and social well-being of North Carolina. In Chapter 106, Article 61 of the North Carolina General Statutes, the North Carolina General Assembly authorizes counties to undertake a series of programs to encourage the preservation of farmland. As a result of that action, counties throughout the state of North Carolina have adopted Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) ordinances. The ordinance provides for the creation of an Agricultural Advisory Board to administer this program. Chatham County already has a VAD ordinance and Agricultural Advisory Board, but changes are needed to bring the ordinance into compliance with state law.

Discussion & Analysis:

We ask that the Board vote on a request to adopt the Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance, enabling a structured VAD Program to be continued here in Chatham County to encourage the preservation and protection of the county's farmland.

Benefits to local producers include:

- **Recognition and public education about agriculture:** Members of the program will be given signs to post, identifying their farm as a member of a preservation district; this will indicate to any potential neighbors and the public that the land is committed to the

preservation of agriculture.

- **Increased protection from nuisance suits:** Notice on the property signaling Voluntary Agricultural District membership as well as a notice in the computerized land record system making those within 0.5 mile of a Voluntary Agricultural District farm aware of the potential for noise, odor, dust, or slow moving farm vehicles/equipment associated with farming will contribute to an “aware” public.
- **Waiver of water and sewer assessments:** Landowners within Voluntary Agricultural Districts who are not connected to water or sewer systems operated by the county will have the ability to have water and sewer assessments waived.
- **Public hearings required for proposed condemnation:** A public hearing will be held by the Agricultural Advisory Board if the land in a Voluntary Agricultural District is considered for a public project that may condemn land.
- **Eligibility for funding:** District members may be eligible for farmland preservation funds as local, state, or federal funds become available.

Benefits to the public include:

- **Preserving North Carolina’s main industry:** North Carolina agriculture contributes over \$84B to our state’s economy and is expected to surpass \$100B in the year 2020 (NCSU, 2018). The success of this VAD program will foster the growth, development, and sustainability of family farms as well as increase public awareness of agriculture in North Carolina.
- **Chatham County economic benefit:** Agriculture and agribusiness (food, fiber, and forestry) remain significant in the local economy, contributing an average of \$129M in annual total cash receipts (NCDA, 2018 Ag Stats). Within the state, Chatham County ranks 2nd in beef cattle production, 3rd in equine sales, 4th in sheep and goat production, 11th in dairy cows, 11th in hay sales, 14th in layers and 16th in broilers and other meat-type chickens. In addition to significant cash receipts, an American Farmland Trust study showed that for every dollar in taxes received from working land, only 58 cents in services is paid by the government. However, services paid to residential development average \$1.15 per dollar of taxes received. Thus, it is a net gain of revenue for the tax base and an economic benefit for any county to preserve working lands.
- **Quality of life:** When farms are kept in agriculture it maintains the quality of life that each North Carolinian enjoys. Fields and woodlands are a visual pleasure and contribute to clean air and water. Rural working landscapes are an integral part of our heritage that must be preserved for future generations. If we do not save our agricultural areas we will destroy the rustic landscapes that attract and retain both people and industry to North Carolina.
- **Ability to buy locally grown products:** Maintaining the agricultural industry in Chatham County allows citizens to purchase and consume products from local agricultural producers,

contributing to our local economy and toward a lifestyle of healthy living.

How does this relate to the Comprehensive Plan:

With required revisions to the VAD program within Chatham County, active measures can be taken to preserve and protect farmland from non-farm development and provide benefits to producers that will contribute to the well-being of all county citizens. This act will directly advance the following goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan:

- Preserve, protect, and enable agriculture and forestry.
- Preserve the rural character and lifestyle of Chatham County.

This act will also support the following recommendations and strategies:

- Recommendation #1 - Increase education, outreach, and training
 - *Strategy 1.1:* Assist operators of existing farms that are contributing to the economy to remain in operation even when faced with pressures to develop the land for other uses. This act will “encourage participation in the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program” and “raise awareness of the benefits of participating in VADs” (Plan Chatham, 2017, p. 94).
 - *Strategy 1.2:* Require the disclosure of the presence of VADs and/or other working lands to potential homebuyers and other investors.

If adopted, this ordinance would also have positive consequential effects on Agriculture Action Items #1 (Extension agent position tasked with assisting in farmland protection), #3 (coordinating with the Agricultural Advisory Board to establish or update utility extension policies for agricultural areas), #6 (evaluate real estate notification procedures near VADs and other working lands), #7 (updating the Farmland Preservation Plan), and #9 (determining the need or desirability of an Ag Zoning District).

Budgetary Impact:

At this time, there would be no budgetary impact as a result of adopting the revised Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance.

Recommendation:

Motion to adopt the revised Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance.