

COUNTYWIDE FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN FOR GASTON COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA¹

Adopted by the
Board of County Commissioners,
Gaston County
_____, 2024

ARTICLE I: STATEMENT OF NEED FOR ACTION

Agriculture makes a major contribution to the wellbeing of Gaston County residents, both those living within and outside the county's cities and towns. In addition to direct contributions to the local economy in the form of product sale receipts and expenditures on farm services and inputs, along with employment on farms and farm support businesses, farmers also make significant contributions as stewards of the remaining amounts of undeveloped land (often called "open space") in the county. Their stewardship protects the county's soil and water resources, recharges groundwater and abates storm water runoff, connects wildlife habitat, and safeguards the scenic and historic vistas that have defined our county's character. For these reasons, it is in the county's interest to promote the local agricultural industry and protect farmland. Enabling farmers who want to continue to farm to do so is a cost-effective way of maintaining the quality of life of everyone in Gaston County.

As demonstrated by data supplied below, Gaston County is growing rapidly, causing the direct loss of farmland. Farming faces a unique set of stresses, Gaston County with thoughtful action can help to mitigate. To better understand these stresses, and the steps the county can take to reduce them, it is helpful to first understand the history, geography (including the soil resource), economic trends, and regulations governing farming. It is also important to understand the values and concerns of the farmers themselves.

ARTICLE II: AUTHORITY FOR COUNTY ACTION

In 1986, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the North Carolina Farmland Preservation Enabling Act.² The stated purpose of this Act is "to authorize counties to undertake a series of programs to encourage the preservation of farmland as defined herein."³ In addition to enabling counties to create Voluntary Agricultural District ordinances, which Gaston County adopted in July 2004, the Act also created the North Carolina Farmland Preservation Fund and enabled counties to develop purchase of agricultural conservation easements (PACE) programs. By later amendment, the General Assembly created a matching mechanism for distribution of Farmland Preservation Trust Fund monies, with preference to counties adopting a countywide farmland protection plan.⁴ The Act declares that a countywide farmland protection plan shall:

1. Contain a list and description of existing agricultural activity in the county.
2. Contains a list of existing challenges to continued family farming in the county.
3. Contain a list of opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family owned farms and the local agricultural economy.
4. Describe how the county plans to maintain a viable agricultural community and shall address farmland preservation tools, such as agricultural economic development, including farm diversification and marketing assistance; other kinds of agricultural technical assistance, such as farm infrastructure financing, farmland purchasing, linking with younger farmers, and estate planning; the desirability and feasibility of donating agricultural conservation easements, and entering into voluntary agricultural districts.
5. Contain a schedule for implementing the plan and an identification of funding sources for the long-term support of the plan.⁵

The statute suggests that such a countywide farmland protection plan may be formulated with the assistance of an Agricultural Advisory Board, which Gaston County appointed as part of its Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance (Article V; A-E). That board will take the lead role in administering this plan and reporting to the Board of County Commissioners on its progress.⁶

ARTICLE III: OVERVIEW OF GASTON COUNTY AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY⁷

A. Agricultural and Forest Production

Gaston County's family farms produce a diverse array of agricultural products. These products include fruit and vegetable produce, ornamental plants, small grains, corn for silage and grain, hay, soybeans, broilers, and cattle (including beef and milk cows). Additionally, Gaston County's timber industry contributes secondary solid wood products, and secondary paper and paperboard products.

B. Economic Impact of Agricultural and Forest Production

In 2022, Gaston County agricultural producers contributed to a total market value of \$26,940,000 for products sold, with farm production expenses of \$24,546,000 illustrating agriculture's importance to the local economy. Agriculture is much more than farming in that a substantial number of non-agricultural businesses supply the needs of farmers. These include processors, vehicle and equipment dealers and other enterprises. Gaston County farmers, for example, own and must maintain and replace equipment essential to their trade. According to the USDA National Agricultural Census of 2022, farmers purchased approximately \$947,000 of petroleum products, \$7,584,000 of feed, \$3,626,000 of hired farm labor, and the remaining figure of approximately \$12,389,000 being utilized for products and services from

Gaston County and other nearby enterprises, many of which would not be considered farm supply businesses. For these businesses to survive and prosper, a core critical mass of farmers must be preserved and vice-versa.⁸ Though difficult to measure, these many businesses supporting agriculture undoubtedly account for a significant portion of Gaston County's employment base. In 2020 the forest sector contributed approximately \$59,000,000 of added value to Gaston County's economy. Total industry output for the forest sector in 2020 was approximately \$225,000,000. In the same year the forestry sector in Gaston County employed 722 individuals, contributing a total of \$50,000,000 to those employed in this industry.

C. Family Farm Statistics

Family farms make up the majority of agricultural production in the county. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, Gaston County's agriculture industry consisted of 412 farms owned by individuals, families, and corporations. Most farms in Gaston County classify as family farms with 96% of the farms falling under this classification. Of the 724 producers represented by the census data 60% have a primary occupation other than farming. A majority of these producers' farms serve as the location of their primary residence, with 78.6% of Gaston County producers living on the farm. As of 2022, 37.9% of Gaston County farmers were over the age of 65 and only 10.6% of the farmers were under the age of 35. Land market values have more than tripled for these farm owners from 1992 to 2022. As the market value for farmland has increased, the average acreage of a Gaston County farm has decreased by 29 acres over the same time period, moving from 118 acres to 89 acres. The median farm size in 2022 for Gaston County is 49 acres

D. Farmland and Timberland Use Trends

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, Gaston County had 36,859 acres in farms, representing 15.8% of the total county land base. These lands included harvested cropland, pastureland, forestland, and land enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. In the 2017 Census, the county had 37,695 acres in farms or 16.1% of the land base. Farmland decreased 0.3% during that five-year period; however, total farmland acreage has experienced similar fluctuations over the past 30 years. Forage crops make up the largest portion of farm acreage in Gaston County, with 22% of the farmland being dedicated for growing forage. As of 2020 private timberland covered 81,116 acres of land area in Gaston County, which makes up 35% of the county's total land area. The total land area occupied by private timberland has decreased by 6.5% from 2012.

E. Agricultural Soils

Most of the total land area in Gaston County consists of mineral soils (95.7%). These mineral soils vary in soil taxonomic classification across the county. Soils in Gaston County are for the most part well suited to agricultural uses. Of the total land area, 49.6% of Gaston County is prime farmland and 18.1% has been classified as farmland of statewide importance (Web Soil Survey; NRCS (2023)). Prime farmland, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops and is available for these uses. It could be cultivated land, pastureland, forestland, or other land, but it is not urban or built-up land or water areas. The soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply are those needed for the soil to economically produce sustained high yields of crops when proper management, including water management, and acceptable farming methods are applied. The criteria for defining and delineating farmland of statewide importance are determined by the appropriate State agencies. Generally, this land includes areas of soils that nearly meet the requirements for prime farmland and that economically produce high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. Some areas may produce as high a yield as prime farmland if conditions are favorable.

ARTICLE IV: CHALLENGES TO AGRICULTURE IN GASTON COUNTY

To determine challenges and opportunities for agriculture in the county, a producer survey, non-farmer resident survey and a community meeting were utilized. Surveys were distributed electronically and in hard copy form at public facilities. A public community meeting was used to capture additional issues and/or concerns from land/homeowners pertaining to farmland protection. All responses to the surveys and community meetings were confidential.

While the agricultural industry remains an important part of Gaston County's economy, both farmers and farmland owners believe issues such as taxes, lack of market infrastructure, low commodity prices, high input costs, development pressures, unpredictable weather, and lack of support all have a significant impact on the future of agriculture within the county. The data collected from the surveys and community meeting clearly depicts the state of agriculture and the future needs of Gaston County. This data was used to develop recommendations which will assist county leadership in keeping farm and forest land viable now and in the future. The following are the specific challenges that have been identified:

A. Local Policies

Growth in the county has produced two major trends: more people and less farmland. From 1991 to 2021, Gaston County's population has increased by 32%,

currently standing at approximately 230,856. The current Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) was developed to promote more quality, uniformity, and consistency in development standards. Though there are existing exemptions for agricultural, the UDO is outdated overall and does not identify any agricultural zoning within the county. Nor does Present Use Value (PUV) support small farms, even if they are a bona fide farm according to N.C.G.S. §§ 160D-903. The UDO is going to be rewritten in the next few years and will incorporate protections and regulations for farmland preservation.

Producers also see an influx of new housing developments taking over prime farmland. Development is causing land prices to increase and making it hard for farmers to hold on to existing farmland. Increased land prices also lead to higher property taxes. The other issue producers face with increased development is the ability to harvest and move products to market in a timely and safe fashion. Often these schedules are based on the farmer's reliance on corridors of transportation between fields, services, and markets. If poorly planned development encroaches into farming areas, these corridors between fields or other necessary destinations can be disrupted, increasing farmers travel time, safety, and operating costs.

Lack of agricultural zoning could result in an increase in potential neighbor conflicts. Maintaining a lower density of development in a known farming area may be beneficial to farming and good neighbor relations. For example, fewer neighbors mean fewer potential conflicts. Furthermore, the promotion of thoughtful land use planning could be used to mitigate conflicts between farmers and neighbors.

B. Lack of Market infrastructure

Farming is a business driven by individual investments and profits generated. Profits are linked to marketing outlets and sales. An absence of nearby processing facilities, lack of marketing support and outreach to customers, need for improved public transportation to area markets, and a shortage of understanding on how best to implement and promote food voucher programs has put a drain on potential profits that can be made.

C. Farm Succession

In North Carolina, the average age of a farm operator is fifty-eight, which is 18 years over the median age of residents of Gaston County. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, only 8.6% of producers are less than 35 years or age and 57% of producers range between 35 and 65 years or age. Thirty-four (34%) percent of producers are 65+. This indicates that with fewer younger farmers available to take over production on these farms, may fall out of production and be divided up and sold through estate settlement processes. This is further confounded by producer survey results indicating that farmers have limited knowledge of farmland preservation tools, have a need for estate planning, require additional training for new and beginning farmers, and have a need for additional agricultural education in public schools.

D. High Input Costs

Lower commodity prices, coupled with rising costs of production/equipment, elevated labor costs, market variability, and increasingly variable weather patterns have resulted in low profitability and inadequate farm income for farmers across North Carolina. This affects the farmer's cash flow, receivables, return on investment, and incentive and ability to invest in continued operations, thus making the farmer's hold on his or her business untenable.

E. Lack of Support for Small/New Farmers

Present-Use Value, or PUV, is a program established by N.C.G.S. §§ 105-277.2 to .7 and administered by the county assessor through which qualifying property can be assessed for property tax purposes, based on its use as agricultural, horticultural or forest land. PUV has a limited acreage requirement of production land: ten acres for agricultural use, five acres for horticulture use, and twenty acres for forestry use. Unfortunately, small Gaston County farms do not meet the minimum acreage requirement; and therefore, do not qualify for PUV status. The Voluntary and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District, or VAD/EVAD, also has an acreage requirement, which limits enrollment into these beneficial programs to only those producers that meet the production acreage requirements. Furthermore, producer survey results suggest that 33% of respondents were not even aware of the Voluntary and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District and the benefits provided by enrolling in these programs. Another issue noted by producers was lengthy turn-around times for cost-share funding, which is especially challenging for beginning farmers.

ARTICLE V: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCING AGRICULTURE IN GASTON COUNTY

A. Existing Efforts and Agricultural Protection Tools

1. Gaston County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

The goals for protecting agriculture are well documented in the Gaston County Comprehensive Land Use Plan adopted September 27, 2016. Under Small Area Planning Districts, the following is stated: *"Preservation of agriculture and maintaining the rural 'feel' of the community."* Under Environment and Natural Resources, the following is stated: *"Agriculture is declining, due to rising land prices, which makes development a more financially attractive option. Efforts to protect agricultural lands are underway, especially in conjunction with protecting natural buffers along waterways."* This

demonstrates the importance of planned growth in conjunction with agriculture.

2. Voluntary Agricultural District

As noted above in Article 11, the North Carolina General Assembly enabled counties to adopt Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) ordinances to effectively create areas "to increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and its way of life and to increase protection from nuisance suits and other negative impacts on properly managed farms."⁹ On September 13, 2005, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation that enabled counties to expand their Voluntary Agricultural Districts with the addition of an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD). Farmers, by enrolling their farm in a VAD/EVAD enjoy certain protections of their operation, including waiver of sewer and water assessments, record notice to non-farm neighbors of proximity to a farming operation, and public hearing before condemnation of farm property by eminent domain. On July 22, 2004, Gaston County passed a VAD ordinance (Article XIII and Article XIV) whereby the above protections were adopted. Also pursuant to the ordinance, the Board of County Commissioners appointed an Agricultural Advisory Board to represent agricultural interests in the county. On March 22, 2007, Gaston County passed an updated ordinance, (Article 111) that incorporated the EVAD option into the county's Voluntary Agricultural District. While the VAD/EVAD ordinance encourages investment in agriculture, it does not represent a permanent (10 years) land protection measure as districts rely heavily on voluntary enrollment and allow for withdrawal in the case of the VAD option of the program. The Agriculture Advisory Board will review the acreage requirement EVAD in 2024.¹⁰

3. Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE)

Purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE) programs (also known as purchase of development rights or PDR programs) compensate property owners for keeping their land available for agriculture. Typically, PACE programs consider soil quality, threat of development and future agricultural viability when selecting farms for protection. They are usually administered by state or local governments but may also be operated by private conservation organizations.¹¹

4. State Conservation Funding Tools

- a. Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
The ADFP Trust Funds mission is to fund projects to encourage the preservation of qualifying agricultural, horticultural, and forestlands to foster the growth, development, and sustainability of family farms.¹² Their purpose is to support the purchase of

agricultural easements, fund public and private enterprise programs that will promote profitable and sustainable family farms, and fund conservation easements.

b. North Carolina Land and Water Fund

The NCLWF, formerly known as the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, has conserved well over one-half million acres, and protected or restored 3,000 miles of streams and rivers. The program helps finance projects that enhance or restore degraded surface waters; protect and conserve surface waters, including drinking supplies, and contribute toward a network of riparian buffers and greenways for environmental, educational, and recreational benefits; provide buffers around military bases to protect the military mission; acquire land that represents the ecological diversity of North Carolina; and acquire land that contributes to the development of a balanced State program of historic properties.¹³

c. Agricultural Cost-Share Program

The North Carolina Agricultural Cost Share Program (ACSP)¹⁴ helps address nonpoint source pollution by providing technical and financial resources through a voluntary, incentive-based program designed to improve water quality through the installation of various best management practices (BMPs) on agricultural lands directly involved with agriculture production. Applicants can be reimbursed up to 75 percent of the predetermined average cost for each BMP installed (90% if a member of EVAD). The applicant is responsible for 25 percent of the costs (10% if EVAD).

d. North Carolina Conservation Tax Credit

North Carolina law allows a credit against individual and corporate income taxes when real property is donated for conservation purposes. Interests in property that promote specific public benefits may be donated to a qualified recipient. Such conservation donations qualify for a substantial tax credit.¹⁵

e. Forest Development Program

The Forest Development Program (FDP) is a reforestation, afforestation and forest stand improvement cost-sharing program run by the North Carolina Forest Service (NCFS). The goals of the program include timber production and the creation of the benefits associated with active forest management.¹⁶

f. N.C. Prescribed Burning Cost Share Program

The N.C. General Assembly has appropriated funds to the North Carolina Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for a prescribed burning matching cost share program.

- Silvicultural Burning - The use of prescribed fire to prepare areas for natural pine or oak regeneration, pre-commercial thinning to reduce competing tree density of undesirable species and the use of prescribed fire to manage for insects or disease concerns to promote forest health.
- Hazard Reduction Burning - The use of prescribed fire for the purpose of mitigating forest fuels to reduce the forestland risk from potential damage from wildfires.
- Wildlife Habitat Burning - The use of prescribed fire for the purpose of maintaining or creating improved forest, or open field conditions for desired plants, species, and habitat.¹⁷

5. *Federal Conservation Funding Tools*

Below are the voluntary federal programs that are part of The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (commonly known as the 2018 Farm Bill) and administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). They are designed to compensate farmland owners for the conservation value of their land. The programs have the dual effect of safeguarding the environmental benefits of farmland as open space while injecting dollars into the local economy via the farmland owner.¹⁶

a. Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, and shrubland. Eligible partners include Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs. Under the ALE component, NRCS may contribute up to 50 percent of the market value of the agricultural land easement. Easement values for ALE are based on a fair market appraisal.

b. Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP)

The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program provides federal funds to help purchase development rights, keeping productive farmland in agricultural use while compensating the farmland owner for the conservation value of his or her land. The FRPP program matches state and local PACE programs up to 50% of the easement purchase price, working through state, tribal and local governments, and land trusts.

- c. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)
The Conservation Reserve Program is a land conservation program administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). In exchange for a yearly rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP are from 10 to 15 years in length. The long-term goal of the program is to re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat.
- d. Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
The Conservation Stewardship Program offers technical and financial assistance to help agricultural and forest producers take their conservation efforts to the next level. The program is designed to compensate agricultural and forest producers who agree to increase their level of conservation by adopting additional conservation activities and maintaining their baseline level of conservation. CSP is for producers who are enthusiastic about conservation and environmental stewardship. If an applicant is selected for funding, CSP offers annual payments for implementing enhancements and maintaining existing conservation efforts.
- e. Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)
Wetland Reserve Easements component of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program provides habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wetland dependent wildlife, including threatened and endangered species; improves water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reduces flooding; recharges groundwater; protects biological diversity; provides resilience to climate change; and provides opportunities for educational, scientific, and limited recreational activities. Wetland Reserve enrollment options include Permanent Easements, 30-year Easements, Term Easements, and 30-year Contracts.
- f. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
NRCS collaborates one-on-one with producers to develop a conservation plan that outlines conservation practices and activities to help solve on-farm resource issues. Producers implement practices and activities in their conservation plan that can lead to cleaner water and air, healthier soil, and better wildlife habitat, all while improving their agricultural operations. EQIP helps producers make conservation work for them. Financial assistance for practices may be available through EQIP. Producers may also qualify for advance payment.
- g. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary conservation program that issues cost-share payments to program participants to develop upland wildlife habitat, wetland wildlife habitat, habitat for threatened and endangered species, fish habitat, and other types of wildlife habitat approved by the NRCS.

6. *State Right-to-Farm Law*¹⁹

The right to farm statute continues to focus on four barring principles: 1) the freedom of the farm to make changes to its operation; 2) a limitation on the time to bring a lawsuit²⁰; 3) a limitation on how nearby a complaining landowner must be to the source of the offending activity; and 4) a limitation on extent and type of damages a successful plaintiff may claim.

7. *Present-Use Value Program*²¹

Present-use value (PUV) is the value of land in its current use as agricultural land, horticultural land, or forestland, based solely on its ability to produce income and assuming an average level of management. A property that qualifies for present-use value classification is appraised at its present-use value, rather than its market value. The present-use value is usually much less than the market value and qualifying tracts are appraised at this lower value. The tax office also establishes a market value for the land, and the difference between the market value and the present-use value is maintained in the tax assessment records as deferred taxes. When land becomes disqualified from the present-use value program, the deferred taxes for the current year and the three previous years with accrued interest will usually become due and payable.

8. *County Farmers Markets*

There are two active farmers markets in Gaston County: the Gastonia Farmers Market and the Mount Holly Farmers Market. Each market provides an excellent selection of high-quality fresh produce and frozen meats, and the opportunity to know the people who grow your food. All markets are non-profit organizations whose purpose is to provide a site where farm and home-produced items can be sold directly to the consumer. Local producers bring items such as vegetables, fruits, potted plants, jams, jellies, frozen meats, and honey for sale to the public.

B. Opportunities for Enhancing Local Agricultural Economy

1. *Implement sound land use policies and ordinances that encourage agriculture and do not inhibit or discourage farming operations.*
 - a. Identify productive areas of agricultural land, and direct residential and industrial growth away from productive agricultural areas.
 - b. Encourage protection of farmland located in public water source areas, including reservoirs, streams, and water recharge areas.
 - c. Educate local government and landowners on planning techniques and tools that reduce pressures on farming operations.
2. *Strengthen the agricultural economy by promoting the development of market infrastructure in the agricultural sector.*
 - a. Maintain and enhance local market infrastructure and support services.
 - b. Provide farmers and agribusiness investors with business planning and development assistance.
3. *Encourage farm succession to maintain existing farmland in agricultural use.*
 - a. Promote existing farm transition networks.
 - b. Provide and promote training in estate planning.
 - c. Support and promote agriculture conservation easements.
 - d. Develop the agriculture workforce through education programs.
4. *Provide resources to offset high input costs.*
 - a. Continue support of existing programs that reward farm practices that maintain and improve land, water, air, and wildlife habitat quality.
 - b. Provide resources that lower barriers to accessing expensive farm equipment.
5. *Support small and beginning farm operations through favorable policies, training resources, and technical assistance.*

- a. Review policies with acreage requirements to evaluate opportunities to support smaller farms.
- b. Provide training and cost-sharing resources to develop the capacity of young and start-up farmers.
- c. Provide farmers with technical assistance related to conservation planning.

**ARTICLE VI:
ACTION STEPS TO ENSURE A VIABLE
AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITY IN GASTON
COUNTY²²**

A. Implement sound land use policies encouraging agricultural production.

1. *Present Farmland Protection Plan to city councils and municipal planning boards.*

Partnering with municipalities is necessary to conserve remaining farmland through smart growth as opposed to urban sprawl. Presenting the Farmland Protection Plan will help inform local decision-makers about the benefits of supporting the agricultural economy in their communities, such as increased quality of life, food security, property values, and water quality.

2. *Incorporate input from the agricultural community into the comprehensive land use plan update.*

The comprehensive land use plan is developed by the Department of Building and Development Services in partnership with municipalities. The plan offers long range guidance for future physical, social, and economic development in Gaston County. Agriculture needs to be intentionally considered during the update process due to the high percentage of agricultural land remaining in the county, as well as the projections for loss of agricultural land to residential development in the future.

3. *Incorporate input from the agriculture community into the Unified Development Ordinance update.*

The Unified Development Ordinance is developed by the Department of Building and Development Services with approval from the County Commissioners. One purpose of the Unified Development Ordinance is to maintain orderly and compatible land use and development patterns.

Agriculture needs to be intentionally included during the update process.

4. *Develop a proposal for an agricultural conservation easement fund.*

A growing number of NC counties are establishing conservation easement funds. These incentivize farmland preservation by assisting landowners with costs associated with easements, such as surveying and legal fees. Easements under the program can be drafted to offer farmers maximum flexibility to continue to profitably work their land, and change their operation as their needs dictate, if they meet the requirements of state law regarding the purpose of agricultural conservation easements. Sources of funding include deferred taxes from landowners leaving the Present Use Value program²³, development fees, and grants.

B. Strengthen the agricultural economy by promoting the development of market infrastructure.

1. *Coordinate a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program to improve access between local farmers and their markets.*

Marketing their products is critical for farmers. CSA programs are designed with farmers in mind. Customers prepay for an entire season's worth of food, then share in the harvest weekly. Gaston County government could partner with local farmers to offer CSA drop-off points in their county buildings. Potentially, this could be in partnership with employee wellness initiatives. Non-employees could also use the CSA drop-off point. While Gaston County buildings serve low-income citizens, there is potential for a subsidized CSA program.

2. *Establish a committee across Farmer's Markets.*

Farmer's markets provide critical marketing infrastructure for farmers. There is a need to strengthen our existing farmers' markets. One way to achieve this goal is by establishing a committee across regional farmer's markets. A committee would facilitate greater cooperation in initiatives, events, and knowledge-sharing.

C. Encourage farm succession to maintain existing farmland.

1. *Promote NC Farmlink and the Working Farms Fund.*

Promotion of existing farm succession organizations will ensure these resources get utilized to their full potential in Gaston County. Currently,

farmers do not know about these resources. NC Farmlink maintains databases of available farmland and farmers looking for land and collaborates with landowners and farmers to ensure an appropriate and lasting match is made. The Working Farms Fund purchases farmland in growing metro regions and creates a pathway to affordable land ownership for the next generation farmers. Increased utilization of these resources will help preserve working land.

2. *Provide and promote training in estate planning.*

Estate planning is a vital part of maintaining current agricultural acreage. Sometimes farms are unable to remain viable if the business, property, and other assets are divided between multiple heirs. Cooperative Extension should continue to offer opportunities for training in estate planning in a variety of formats, including virtual and in-person. Different methods of promotion should be used to attract the highest numbers of participants.

3. *Rebrand the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) program as an entry point to permanent conservation easements.*

The VAD and EVAD are existing programs that provide short-term easements. Participation in VAD and/or EVAD can give farmers experience with easements before making a permanent commitment. Re-branding these two programs will make them more understandable and enticing to landowners. Wake County's marketing for their VAD and EVAD programs can be looked at as a guide.

4. *Pursue opportunities for more comprehensive agriculture education.*

A healthy agricultural industry in the long term depends on future generations understanding the source and value of agriculture as it affects our quality of life. Agriculture education opportunities need to be available at multiple grade levels. Increasing the number of schools with gardens, expanding the existing Lowell School Nutrition Project, and investigating the possibility of a farm apprentice/internship program would increase opportunities for agriculture education at multiple levels. The possibility of re-establishing a Future Farmers of America program in Gaston County should also be investigated with Gaston County Schools' Career and Technical Education Department.

D. Provide resources to offset high input costs.

1. *Cross-promote cost-share programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, Cooperative Extension, and the NC Forest Service.*

The NC Cooperative Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, NC Forest Service, and Gaston Natural Resources Department, with the support of the Soil and Water Conservation District Board, collectively offer a wide variety of services and cost-share funding to promote best management practices on farmland. Increased collaboration between agencies will facilitate the best public service to the farmer. A better understanding about the programs and services offered by other agencies will allow staff to recommend the best program to interested landowners.

2. *Promote existing sales tax waiver for farm equipment purchases by bona fide farms.*

North Carolina Farmers who qualify are exempt from paying sales tax on certain farm supplies and equipment. To qualify, farmers must have an average annual gross income of \$10,000 from farming operations for the three preceding years. Those who are new to farming may apply for “conditional” status, but there are extensive record keeping and reporting requirements. This program is administered by the North Carolina Department of Revenue (NCDOR).

3. *Evaluate the need for and feasibility of providing additional equipment rental options.*

The Gaston Natural Resources Department and Cooperative Extension have existing rental programs for equipment like a no-till seed drill and a fire ant bait spreader. Farmers should be surveyed to identify needs for other types of equipment that could be similarly rented at low cost. Grants could be pursued to fund the purchase of this equipment.

4. *Investigate the implementation of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in the Catawba River basin.*

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the country's largest private-land conservation program. Administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), CREP leverages federal and non-federal funds to target specific State, regional, or nationally significant conservation concerns. In exchange for removing environmentally sensitive land from production and establishing permanent resource conserving plant species, farmers and ranchers are paid an annual rental rate along with other federal and

non-federal incentives as specified in each CREP agreement. Participation is voluntary, and the contract period is typically 10-15 years.

E. Support small and beginning farm operations.

1. *Investigate tax reduction possibilities for farms that do not meet the PUV acreage requirement.*

To qualify for a reduced property tax rate under the Present Use Value program, a farmer needs a minimum of either twenty acres of forestry land, ten acres of crop or pastureland, or five acres of horticultural land. There are bona fide farms in Gaston County who do not meet these acreage requirements, and overall farm sizes are continuing to trend down based on recent statistics. Gaston County's Department of Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension office should work with the Tax Department to identify other opportunities for tax relief for small farms.

2. *Review acreage requirement for the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District.*

Current acreage requirements for the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District match the requirements for the Present Use Value program. To qualify, a farmer needs a minimum of either twenty acres of forestry land, ten acres of crop or pastureland, or five acres of horticultural land. These requirements are at the discretion of the Agricultural Advisory Board and should be reviewed due to the high number of bona fide farms that do not meet these acreage requirements in Gaston County.

3. *Offer an online, recorded workshop series designed for small and beginning farmers.*

Traditionally, most farmer educational events are in-person. However, with busy and often unpredictable schedules, attending these meetings is a challenge for young and beginning farmers. In our community meetings, young farmers requested more recorded and on-demand training. These could be available through YouTube or another appropriate platform. With young and beginning farmers being comfortable with technology, recorded workshops targeting this population would be helpful.

4. *Promote and provide whole farm conservation plans.*

Conservationists with Gaston's Natural Resources Department provide free technical assistance in the form of conservation planning. A whole

farm conservation plan lays out long term implementation of conservation practices for an agricultural operation based on the farmer's priorities. Small and beginning farms can benefit from this guidance, which could identify projects for cost-share programs. Small and beginning farms should be a priority when writing whole farm conservation plans.

5. *Investigate opportunity for a mini-grant program for start-up farmers.*

Funding opportunities for start-up farmers can be limited due to eligibility requirements, such as minimum acreages or years of experience. Mini grants for start-up farmers can be an opportunity to support newcomers to the farming profession, which can help grow agriculture as an industry in Gaston County. Potential sources of funds and a host agency need to be identified.

**ARTICLE VII:
SCHEDULE TO IMPLEMENT THIS PLAN**

A. Implementation Tasks and Timeline²⁵

1. *The Natural Resources Department Head will propose an agriculture fund utilizing deferred taxes from acreage leaving the Present Use Value program by FY26.*
 - a. Natural Resources staff will meet with tax, finance, and legal staff to discuss a framework for an agriculture fund by the end of FY24.
 - b. The Agricultural Advisory Board will devise a list of allowed uses for the fund, such as support for the establishment of Conservation Easements on working lands or a mini grant for beginning farmers, by December 2024.
 - c. A representative from the Agricultural Advisory Board will present a proposal for the agriculture fund to County Commissioners by the end of FY25.
 - d. Natural Resources Staff will also work with the Tax Department to investigate tax reduction possibilities for farms that do not meet the PUV acreage requirement by FY25.
2. *Natural Resources staff will rebrand the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) program as an entry point to permanent conservation easements by FY26.*
 - a. Contact Wake County regarding new logo, advertisement of longevity, and sign installations by FY25.
 - b. Investigate possibility of Public Works helping with installation of signs by FY25.

- c. Create pathway where VAD participants are contacted about interest in EVAD, and EVAD participants are contacted about interest in Conservation Easements after a given number of years in each by April 2024.
 - d. Create priorities for Conservation Easements by April 2024.
 - e. Create process for entering Conservation Easements by FY25.
 - f. Create new signs by FY26.
- 3. *Natural Resources staff will promote and provide whole farm conservation plans by FY26.*
 - a. Natural Resources staff will be trained in conservation planning by FY25.
 - b. Natural Resources staff will set a protocol for how and when to create whole farm conservation plans for interested landowners by FY25.
 - c. Natural Resources staff will discuss and implement promotion of farm conservation plans with the Public Information Office by FY26.
- 4. *Natural Resources staff will investigate the implementation of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in the Catawba River basin by FY26.*
 - a. Natural Resources staff will contact the NC CREP Program Manager to discuss the feasibility of implementation by FY25.
 - b. Natural Resources staff and Gaston SWCD supervisors will reach out to other SWCDs in the Catawba River basin to gauge interest in the watershed wide CREP by December 2024.
 - c. If most Districts are interested, Natural Resources staff and Gaston SWCD supervisors will lead the process to implement CREP for the Catawba River basin by FY26.
- 5. *Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension will offer an estate-planning workshop series for Gaston farmers and landowners between February and April 2025.*
 - a. Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff will meet to confirm the topics to include by September 2024, such as the Farmland Protection Plan, Conservation Easements, NC Farm Link, and the Working Farms Fund.
 - b. Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff will meet to confirm how to market the series in December 2024, highlighting broad issues such as land use and resources for landowners; farm succession; and/or the Present Use Value program.
 - c. Cooperative Extension staff will advertise the series by January 2025.
- 6. *Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff will evaluate the need for and feasibility of providing additional equipment rental options by FY26.*
 - a. Cooperative Extension staff will survey attendees of the Farm Bureau annual meeting about additional equipment rental needs in November 2024.

- b. Natural Resources staff will ask farmers who use the No-till Seed Drill if they have additional equipment rental needs by December 2024.
 - c. Depending on survey responses, Natural Resource and Cooperative Extension staff will investigate the availability of grants to purchase of this equipment by FY26.
 - d. Dependent on grant funding, any additional equipment needed will be purchased by FY27.
- 7. *Natural Resources staff will work with the Agricultural Advisory Board to review acreage requirement for the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District by FY 26.*
 - a. Natural Resources staff will research NC Districts with EVAD acreage requirements by December 2024.
 - b. Natural Resources staff will research the legality of having smaller acreage requirements by December 2024.
 - c. Natural Resources staff will propose new acreage requirements to the Agricultural Advisory Board by June 2025 for a vote.
- 8. *Cooperative Extension staff will coordinate a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program to improve access between local farmers and their markets by FY27.*
 - a. Cooperative Extension staff will identify one to two farms to pilot a CSA drop-off location for county employees by FY25.
 - b. Cooperative Extension staff will communicate with the Wellness Department to coordinate marketing of the program to county employees by FY25.
 - c. If successful, Cooperative Extension staff will apply for a grant for refrigeration by December 2024.
 - d. If successful, Cooperative Extension staff will expand the CSA to other farms, adding options for meat and eggs in the CSA boxes by FY26.
- 9. *Natural Resources staff will work with Building and Development Services staff to incorporate input from the agricultural community into local government policies by FY28.*
 - a. Natural Resources staff will provide mapping data (VAD/EVAD parcels; soil classifications) to Building and Development Services staff to create a base zoning overlay for an Agriculture Zoning District by FY25.
 - b. During the update process for the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations will be tailored to guide growth away from farming areas and buffer farms from neighboring land uses.
 - c. During the update process for the Unified Development Ordinance, Natural Resources staff will work with Building and Development Services staff to develop farm-friendly regulations such as buffer requirements between residences and agricultural fields and buildings as part of new subdivisions.
 - d. Natural Resources and Building and Development staff will share these model zoning and subdivision ordinances or principles with municipal planning staff by FY28.

10. Gaston's Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources Department will present the approved Farmland Protection Plan to all city councils and municipal planning departments by FY28.

- a. Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources staff will develop and share a virtual presentation for municipal planning departments to introduce the Farmland Protection Plan by FY25.
- b. Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources staff will develop a presentation for city councils aligned to each municipality by FY26.
- c. A representative from Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources will introduce the Farmland Protection Plan to half the city councils in Gaston County by FY27.
- d. A representative from Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources will introduce the Farmland Protection Plan to remaining city councils in Gaston County by FY28.

11. Partner agencies will cross-promote cost-share programs available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, Cooperative Extension, Farm Service Agency, and the NC Forest Service.

- a. Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources staff will coordinate an inter-agency training where each organization shares the resources they offer to landowners by August 2024.
- b. Cooperative Extension staff will develop a brochure of resources, categorized by type, available to the agricultural community to make it easy to identify what services federal, state, and local agencies can provide by December 2024.
- c. NRCS and Gaston County Natural Resources will present cost share program opportunities to the Gaston County Cattlemen's Association by 2025.

12. Cooperative Extension and Natural Resources staff will promote the NC Farmlink and the Working Farms Fund.

- a. Natural Resources staff will coordinate a speaker/presentation about Working Farms Fund at the NC Association for Soil and Water Conservation District's Area VIII Fall Meeting in October 2024.
- b. The Commercial Horticulture agent will post quarterly Facebook post to market NC Farmlink in 2024 and 2025.
- c. Cooperative Extension will host one online seminar (recorded) and in person program to introduce Gaston County farmers to NC Farmlink by 2025.

13. Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension will work with the Public Information Office to create a landowner video series to increase awareness of existing programs by FY28.

- a. Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff will meet to confirm the topics to include by May 2025, such as: the Present Use Value program, land

protection (Voluntary and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts, Conservation Easements), cost-share programs for agriculture Best Management Practices, and the sales tax waiver for farm equipment purchases by bona fide farms.

- b. Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff will coordinate with the Public Information Office to establish a timeline for the release of the video series.
- c. The video series will be posted on Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension's website by FY28.

14. Cooperative Extension will offer an online, recorded workshop series designed for small and beginning farmers by FY28.

- a. Cooperative Extension will host NC Farm School to increase business education amongst local farmers by FY28.
- b. Cooperative Extension will work to further develop and implement a small farm curriculum for local farmers by FY28.

15. Cooperative Extension will develop policies and marketing strategies to address farmer-neighbor relations.

- a. Create an easy-to-understand brochure on the realities of living in agricultural areas and make this available for distribution (Farm Bureau, Cattleman's Association, Chamber of Commerce, Travel and Tourism, Tax office); and add such information to the county website.

16. Cooperative Extension staff will pursue opportunities for more comprehensive agriculture education.

- a. Apprenticeship/mentor program: Continue identifying farmers who are willing to mentor other farmers.
- b. Continue presenting research-based best management practices through agricultural programs.
- c. Utilize a minimum of one local farm per year for local demonstration and research to educate local producers.

B. Key Stakeholders and Their Roles in Implementing the Plan

1. *Municipal Governments:* Issues affecting agriculture such as land use planning and zoning actions within a municipality's Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ), municipal service plans and local business promotion are best addressed at the municipal level.
2. *County Government:* By adopting the plan, the Gaston County Board of Commissioners has made agricultural protection the official county policy. The county, through the Soil and Water Conservation District Board²⁶, has committed to

take the lead role in implementing this plan and drawing together the key players to coordinate its efforts and policies. The county Board of Commissioners bears the responsibility for approving funding to help implement this plan.

3. *State Agencies:* Key agencies aiding agricultural producers in the county are the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University, and North Carolina A&T State University. The Soil & Water Conservation District provides technical support and cost-share funding to farmers for adopting certain conservation and water quality improvement practices. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services provides data on Voluntary Agricultural Districts throughout the state, as well as marketing advice to agricultural producers.
4. *Federal Agencies:* USDA has a strong presence in Gaston County with its local NRCS and FSA offices. NRCS administers financial and technical assistance programs for farmland protection and conservation initiatives, including grants for best management practices, habitat improvement and purchase of development rights. FSA lends money to operators and provides credit counseling and farm business consulting.
5. *Business and Industry:* Participation by local farm businesses in this plan is critical to its implementation. Private industry, both farm supply and non-farm businesses, and the Chamber of Commerce play a key role in promoting the agricultural sector of the county's economy. These organizations should also help in developing new markets such as tourism that will benefit agricultural producers.
6. *Non-governmental Organizations:* Organizations such as land trusts, historic preservation groups, and groups dedicated to assisting agriculture, provide necessary advocacy and other services necessary for implementation of this plan.
7. *Residents:* The success of this plan relies on the participation of county residents in the local agricultural market. The proximity of their purchases to the producers ensures more of each dollar paid for an agricultural item will return to the farmer, thus increasing his or her profitability and increasing the likelihood that he or she will continue to farm their land. Residents of the county can also acknowledge the importance of working farms to the local economy and environment and heritage of Gaston County by supporting an effort to establish and subsequently support a program for funding for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements.

¹ This countywide Protection Plan is a suggestive model based on North Carolina statutory law and county agricultural protection plans (called farmland protection plans under NC law) from other states, primarily New York, which has a statewide program whereby the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets awards grants to counties to formulate such plans. Certain narratives, structures and ideas have been borrowed from these plans, and are noted accordingly. The various descriptive narratives contained in this model plan are suggestions and can be changed to meet the exceptional circumstances of an individual county.

² NCGS § 106-735 "Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Enabling Act."

³ NCGS §106-735(b). "Qualifying farmland" is defined in §106-737.

⁴ NCGS §106-744 (c)(1). "North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund"

⁵ NCGS §106-744(e)(1-5)

⁶ Such a plan might also be formulated by a planning agency or other advisory board such a soil and water conservation district that has responsibility for land preservation in the county.

⁷ Counties in other states that have formulated county farmland protection plans first compiled data from agricultural censuses, real property tax rolls, planning departments and soil and water conservation districts. This data collection reveals information about changes in the number of farms in the county, their ownership structure, soil types, number, and value of agricultural assessments and on amount of land, and planning and zoning regulations, all of which sketch the background needed to put the issue of agricultural protection in perspective.

⁸ This narrative model is adapted from the Steuben County, New York Agricultural Development and Farmland Protection Plan. The specific economic figures demonstrated in the narrative are supplied by the Census of Agriculture. The USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Services (NASS) conducts the national agricultural census every five years. Currently, data is available from the 2022 census, with statewide and county-level data available for North Carolina at <http://www.nass.usda.gov/census>. Forestry contributions figures in this narrative are supplied by NC State Extension Forestry Impact Reports, data is available from 2020 for Gaston County. State and county Forestry Contribution Report data are available at <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/catalog/series/133/>.

⁹ NCGS §106-738(b) "Voluntary agricultural districts."

¹⁰ NCGS § 106-738. (a)(5)

¹¹ NCGS § 106-744. Statutory authority for municipalities is outlined in §106A 401 through 407. North Carolina's conservation easement statute can be found at §121-34 through 42.

¹² NCGS §106-744(c).

¹³ NCGS § 113-145.1 et seq. More information on the fund is available at www.cwmtf.net.

¹⁴ NCGS § 106-850

¹⁵ Consult NCGS §§105-130.34 and 105-151.12 for the specific requirements of the CTC Program. For more information see www.enr.state.nc.us/conservationtaxcredit.

¹⁶ NCGS § 113A-180.1 "Forest Development Act"

¹⁷ NCGS § 106-965 "NC Prescribed Burning Act"

¹⁸ For more program information and legislative authority, see www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmland/2002.

¹⁹ NCGS §106-700 et seq. "Nuisance Liability of Agricultural and Forestry Operations"

²⁰ NCGS §7A-38.3. "Mediation of public records disputes"

²¹ NCGS §105-277.2. "Agricultural, horticultural, and forestland"

²² These action steps should directly address the challenges outlined in Article IV.

²³ Internal Revenue Code §170(h). The United States Internal Revenue Code also has certain legal requirements for the easement to qualify for income tax benefits.

²⁴ NCGS §106-744. Statutory authority for municipalities is outlined in §106A 401 through 407. North Carolina's conservation easement statute can be found at §121-34 through 42.

²⁵ Drafting this schedule will depend entirely on when this plan is approved, considering the counties fiscal cycle, and particularly county farmers' seasonal availability to participate in the workshops and other implementation elements of this plan. Though the schedule here is for one year, it should look to the long term as well. It will be incorporated in the plan itself as it is part of the plan described in the Farmland Preservation Enabling Act.

²⁶ Or equivalent body.