

Rural Future Alliance of Loudoun County

Comments on Envision Loudoun's Topic Paper, Rural Policy Area and Existing Villages,

December 18, 2017

The Rural Future Alliance (RFA), a recently established non-partisan advocacy alliance representing concerned citizens of rural Loudoun County, submits the following comments on the Envision Loudoun Topic Paper entitled "Rural Policy Area and Existing Villages," dated December 13, 2017.

The Topic Paper is disappointing and alarming in that it:

1. Fails to recognize the disastrous loss of rural lands to suburban development that has taken place over the course of the last few decades, and that continues today;
2. Fails to respond to the concerns that Loudoun citizens have expressed about this trend, or to the concrete actions they would like to see implemented (as described on pp. 2-3 of the Topic Paper);
3. Fails to propose any significant new actions to reverse the current trends and preserve Loudoun's agricultural and rural heritage.

The Topic Paper, for example, does not mention that, since 2000, Loudoun has lost more than one-third of its remaining agricultural lands (they have shrunk from 200,000 acres to less than 134,000 acres).ⁱ It notes that 5,653 new residential units have been constructed in the RPA during that period, but omits the critical context: that those new units represent an 80% increase in allowed residential development in the RPA, facilitated primarily by the County's "clustered subdivision" zoning regulations. It does not supply critical data needed to analyze the current trends, such as the rapid increase in housing densities in the RPA and Existing Villages. It takes no notice of the fact that many clustered residential subdivisions now sit on previously arable land and occupy highly locations along our scenic byways and within our scenic viewsheds.

Further, the Topic Paper fails to identify and respond to existing opportunities. The current demand for locally grown produce exceeds our remaining farms' existing supply, offering great potential for new, profitable agricultural investments. Young people and the newly retired are interested in becoming farmers, creating the potential to expand local employment and reduce our workforce's dependence on long-distance commutes.

Having failed to describe the disastrous trends and the potential opportunities, the Topic Paper proposes no significant changes in County policies, programs or actions. The recommendations labeled "New Rural Policies" (p. 7) are simply ambiguous re-statements of existing policies that the County has not yet implemented. The remainder of the Topic Paper just "cuts and pastes" language from the current, failed policy regime.

In view of the strong public support for preserving Loudoun's rural attributes, as noted in the Topic Paper,ⁱⁱ deep concerns expressed regularly by citizens and most recently by Loudoun's Farm Bureauⁱⁱⁱ the County's citizens and the demonstrated inadequacy of current policies to achieve the County's preservation objectives, the Topic Paper's acceptance of the policy status quo is unacceptable. A range of strong and concerted County actions are urgently needed to preserve our remaining farms, re-build a

robust agricultural and rural economy, and preserve our open spaces and environmental resources. Significant policy changes are needed, for example, in the following three areas.

Cluster Housing Provisions: The Topic paper distorts the impacts of present cluster provisions, “the preferred development pattern in the RPA”. The experience of the last few decades clearly demonstrates that cluster housing does NOT in fact ensure that a “substantial amount of the remaining land is available for rural economy uses, traditional agriculture, and/or open space.” Rather, present cluster provisions exacerbate the destruction of landscapes critical to our tourism industries, destroy prime farmland, break up farms so that they are not profitable to operate, and create traffic congestion. Finally, they cost taxpayers money, since the cost to the County of providing education and other public services to new residential subdivisions in rural areas is 60% greater than the revenues generated.

Instead, what Loudoun requires are clear limits and criteria for housing clusters that will protect prime farmland, constrain the growth of rural traffic, conserve our unpaved roads and historic byways and protect viewsheds critical to the growth of rural tourism. The County also should resume funding for, and implement with strategic geographic analysis, its Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program to protect the landscapes and farmland critical for tourism and sustainable rural businesses, and should consider the establishment of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. These programs should actively encourage and support the establishment of permanent conservation easements for targeted farmland and open spaces. In implementing these programs, the County should aggressively leverage matching efforts and contributions from the state and interested non-governmental organizations.

Agriculture Profitability: The Topic Paper notes that Loudoun’s traditional farms have declined in profitability, but it offers only generalities in response to this critical economic and commercial challenge. It provides no specific recommendations on how to guide or create incentives for profitable agricultural investment, or how to assist more effectively in the marketing of Loudoun’s agricultural products. It does not address the recent controversy over the County’s increased tax assessments on farm structures.

Instead, Loudoun needs to act immediately and decisively to create specific incentives that will improve the profitability of our farms. Those incentives should include material support for local food and meat processing, reduction in land use taxes, elimination of farm structure taxes, incentives for long-term leasing to attain productive use from neglected or fallow land, and actively encourage development of management plans promoting farming best practices. The County can and should play a much more active role in helping the agricultural community market its products, especially by encouraging, connecting and supporting small producers. Loudoun further needs to leverage its role in public education to promote agriculture based careers and to support means of ensuring a stable agricultural work force.

Integration of farmland preservation with other rural economic activities: The Topic Paper emphasizes the importance of programs to promote and strengthen rural businesses, but it neglects the corresponding need to integrate rural business development with land preservation. The Rural Economic Development Council has appropriately focused on promotion of rural businesses, but that strategy cannot succeed without equal emphasis on protecting and enhancing the underlying farming and land conservation essential to tourism, visits to Loudoun’s wineries, breweries, Bed and Breakfasts, and restaurants and other recreation.

The REDC strategy needs to be amended to include farm and land conservation. To gain better understanding of the economic importance of these lands to Loudoun’s tourism, the county should support a detailed survey of all Loudoun residents on their perception of the importance of these lands to them and to Loudoun County generally. In addition, the County should work with the REDC and Visit Loudoun to study the economic value of these lands for tourism.

Loudoun has the potential to sustain a rural economy with viable policies that preserve its farmland, enhance the productivity and profitability of farming, support its tourism to enjoy Loudoun’s rural landscapes and other attributes, and encourage new rural businesses that are compatible with our rural attributes and a vibrant rural economy. The Topic Paper’s conclusions and recommendations about preserving rural Loudoun do not suffice. In fact, they inhibit progress. The 2003 Comprehensive Plan, developed to achieve these objectives failed to do so, and we do not want repetition of that failure. Updated and expanded analysis and good leadership will bring those results that Loudoun residents want and that the Topic Paper itself describes.

Signed by:

John Ellis
Charles Houston
Randy Ihara
Mavis Tainter
Donald Ulmer
Tia Walbridge

Malcolm Baldwin
David Hubbuch
Ryan Siemers
Zeb Tainter
Chris Van Vlack

ⁱ The REDC Business Strategy, 2013, (https://biz.loudoun.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/REBS-Final-Report-02-20-13_201307291413094469.pdf) reported the first three figures up to the present. The US Census data for Loudoun’s agriculture in 2012 reported the 134,000 acre figure. Whether the *rate* of farm decline is diminishing or not, we’ve seen steady farm acreage decline that will continue for decades given economics and demographics – unless county responses change.

ⁱⁱ Reinforced by a recent University of Virginia survey, that identified “Rural/Open/Country” and “Beauty/Scenic Views,” together, as the things Loudoun citizens most liked about the County.

ⁱⁱⁱ Resolution on Farm Protection, passed unanimously at the Loudoun County Farm Bureau Annual Meeting, September 19, 2017 and submitted to the Board of Supervisors.