

The more steps we can take today to protect the land for agriculture, the better off the industry and our society will be."

- Matt Lohr, former Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture, during a 2013 visit to Shenandoah County.

April 22, 2016

Dear Shenandoah County Supervisor,

Since Shenandoah Forum was organized in 2001, we have worked to support the community's vision for our county. We have engaged and collaborated with individuals, organizations and town and county governments about public policies and long-term plans that will maintain Shenandoah County's heritage, build a brighter future and preserve the things that make our county a great place to live and work.

Over the past decade, a broad constituency of residents has contributed their time and ideas to the development of the Shenandoah County Vision Statement and Comprehensive Land Plan, first adopted in 2005 and reaffirmed in 2010 after more than two years of open and inclusive community meetings.

Proposals put forth on April 19th by some of the current Supervisors to undo a decision made in 2014 to earmark rollback tax receipts to fund the Shenandoah County Conservation Easement Authority undermine this vision and the long-term goals of our community. Elimination of these local funds would mean no access to the extensive state and federal matching funds, which result in an 8-fold increase in total funding for a land conservation project – a wise investment in purpose and financial management.

Land protection programs are proven to keep counties rural, strengthen agriculture, keep taxes lower and give landowners options to retain their land. We are not aware of any other financial action available to local government that can generate as much in matching funds and ensure as many long-term benefits. It is well documented that when farmed and forested lands are preserved and new housing channeled into existing towns, taxpayers benefit from significantly lower costs for public services, such as schools, utilities and roads.

But land protection is not just about a rural landscape, it is an investment in the local economic development, an investment in maintaining current jobs, diversifying our #1 industry – farming -- to create new jobs.

Developing and adhering to a long-term and comprehensive strategic plan is essential to our county's success. Arbitrary cuts will result in a community that can claim the lowest tax rate at the cost of the well-being of our county for future generations.

We hope you will reconsider the rash proposal to eliminate local funding for the Conservation Easement Authority and instead look to the future and continue to support Shenandoah County's progress in preserving our rural character, strengthening our farm sector and maintaining our standing as Virginia's fifth largest agricultural producer.

Sincerely,
Joan Comanor, Chair