



# Shenandoah County Community Dialogue Project

## Consensus Committee Report on Project Goals and Recommendations

May 2008

Presented by



## Shenandoah County Community Dialogue Project Consensus Committee

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*More information about the members of the Consensus Committee appears in Appendix A.*

## Shenandoah FORUM

The Shenandoah County Community Dialogue Project was sponsored and coordinated by Shenandoah Forum, a non-profit citizens group that works to foster informed dialogue among diverse interests in the county to address issues of growth and development. The Forum's mission is to ensure that the county remains essentially rural, preserves a healthy environment, promotes a sustainable economy, and provides a high quality of life for the people who live in Shenandoah County.

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## BACKGROUND

The first issue of the Shenandoah County Comprehensive Plan was approved in 1978. It has been revised several times, but all versions of the plan have included preservation of agriculture and the rural character of the county as important elements of the vision expressed in the plan.

The revision of the comprehensive plan approved in June 2005 attempted through two recommendations to address how the preservation of agriculture and rural character could be achieved. First, the plan stated that the majority of growth should be directed toward the towns where public water and sewer exist, and second, that an examination of open space (“cluster housing”) development in rural areas be undertaken.

Since the approval of the 2005 revision of the plan, there have been continuing conversations about how to implement the agricultural and rural elements of the vision.

In particular, the Shenandoah County Farm Bureau, in cooperation with the county government, initiated an effort to examine one particular land use tool, sliding scale zoning. This effort and other subdivision and zoning conversations have expanded public awareness and knowledge of the issues, but have not yielded recommendations that the county government has confidence to enact.

Shenandoah Forum, aware of the vision of the comprehensive plan and the incomplete efforts to find the tools to implement that vision, began to search for a way to identify specific land use and subdivision recommendations appropriate for Shenandoah County.

Sponsored by the Forum, the Shenandoah Community Dialogue Project was initiated in April 2007 to develop a set of consensus recommendations for steps the county might take to implement the comprehensive plan vision for a rural, agricultural community that values its historic and natural resources.

A “Consensus Committee” was recruited by the Forum to review the options available to implement the plan vision. Membership of the committee was cast broadly to ensure representation of the diverse interests in the county (see Appendix A for committee membership).

With financial support from numerous county organizations (see Appendix B for list of donors), the Forum was able to contract with the University of Virginia Institute for Environmental Negotiation (IEN) to facilitate the committee’s meetings and workshops.

### Shenandoah County Comprehensive Plan Vision Statement

In the year 2025 Shenandoah County will still be a primarily rural county that:

- Protects its natural resources;
- Directs its growth to the towns ensuring its open, agricultural character;
- Provides a variety of jobs in business, light industry, tourism and sustainable agriculture;
- Maintains moderate growth of a demographically varied population;
- Supports safe and efficient interstate transportation and maintains the rural character of its primary and secondary roads;
- Affords its students excellent and appropriate education;
- Serves its citizens with public facilities and services that enhance their quality of life;
- Ensures preservation of its natural beauty and unique, historical character by strictly adhering to the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

## COMMITTEE PROCESS

The Consensus Committee began its work in February 2007 and over the next 14 months met 11 times, including three public workshops. These meetings spanned three phases (see Appendix C for a detailed description of these meetings):

- 1) Identification of concerns and needed information;
- 2) Education about existing conditions and ordinances, build-out scenarios, and innovative tools for managing growth and preserving rural character; and
- 3) Assessing and narrowing the tools that would best manage growth and preserve the rural character of Shenandoah County.

### **Committee Concerns and Issues**

Committee members expressed their central concern that current county ordinances will not manage growth in a manner consistent with the comprehensive plan vision. Specific concerns are summarized here:

- There is a need for more active, consistent coordination with the towns. This reflects a concern that the towns are growing in a manner that is not consistent with the comp plan. The towns and the county need to develop collaborative ways to preserve a rural, agricultural community with thriving towns that retain their individual character.
- There is a need to define “rural character” more precisely. Agreement on metrics and boundaries which define “rural character” would provide a gauge to ensure implementation of the comprehensive plan.
- Current subdivision ordinances will not successfully preserve or promote continued viable agriculture (e.g., the existing development potential of the rural area is too great to be consistent with promoting agriculture).
- Stronger mechanisms are needed to preserve historic and natural resources (e.g., historic overlay districts, fertile and sensitive soils mapping, etc).
- Stronger mechanisms are needed to preserve and promote active, viable agriculture (e.g., taxation, support and encouragement of agriculture-related businesses within the county, etc.).

## Education and Informational Needs

The committee requested a number of presentations on various topics, including the mechanisms for planning and growth management in the state of Virginia, current conditions in Shenandoah County, build-out scenarios, an analysis of the gap between the comp plan and its zoning and subdivision ordinances, and the range of tools available for growth management and rural preservation. These presentations are detailed in Appendices C and D.

## Assessing and Narrowing the Tools

In its final phase, Consensus Committee members spent some time discussing the range of tools that had been presented.

It should be made clear that the list of tools below does not represent consensus recommendations. Before reaching consensus on a list of recommendations, the committee suspended its work in lieu of the county’s announcement that it would pursue ordinance revisions to implement the vision in the comprehensive plan. But the list below does represent the tools that attracted the greatest interest and energy of committee members.

## POTENTIALLY USEFUL TOOLS FOR COUNTY CONSIDERATION

The complete set of tools recommended for county consideration are contained in Appendix E.

The committee arrived at this list by the following method: members were asked to identify, score, and comment on tools and planning concepts they deemed potentially useful for implementing the comprehensive plan vision of sustaining a rural, agricultural community that values its historic and natural heritage.

Sixteen of 18 committee members responded, identifying a total of 22 potentially useful tools. Each tool was scored on a scale of one to five, with one signifying “potentially useful” and five signifying “potentially most useful.”

When all member scores were aggregated, five tools clearly rose to the top, garnering the highest scores as the “most potentially useful.” These are listed in the table at right.

| <b>Most Potentially Useful Tools</b>   | Score for Potential Usefulness | # of Committee Members Who Identified Tool |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Tool   |                                |  |
| Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), Transfer of Development Rights (TDR), Conservation Easements | 49.0                           | 11 (68%)                                   |
| Sliding Scale (with incentives for cluster ordinances)   | 47.0                           | 11 (68%)                                   |
| Overlay Districts  | 46.5                           | 13 (81%)                                   |
| Large Lot Subdivision/Agricultural Zoning  | 31.5                           | 10 (62%)                                   |
| Cluster Housing  | 29.0                           | 7 (43%)                                    |

Equally if not more important are the reasons cited by Consensus Committee members for selecting these tools. (For details, see Appendix E.) Based on the information contained in their assessments of the tools, committee members believe that the use of the specific tools they have recommended will result in:

- provision of a future for agriculture in the Valley by allowing landowners to obtain equity from the land while continuing to farm and by preserving prime farmland for farming;
- protection of open and rural character while maintaining moderate growth: preventing sprawl; reducing the visual “footprint” and environmental impact of development;
- preservation of real estate values in a way that offers landowners a variety of options;
- use of a mix of tools, including market-based alternatives that are supported with adequate funding (e.g. TDRs, PDRs, etc.) that will help define how and where development can occur in a manner that is sustainable over a long period of time;
- direction of growth to designated areas supported by infrastructure, in coordination with the towns; and
- preservation and protection of the county’s historic and natural resources and scenic, cultural, and archeological assets, all of which support commercial and tourist enterprises.

## THE END OF THE DIALOGUE PROCESS AND NEXT STEPS

The Consensus Committee was pleased to learn of the county’s initiative to hire a planning consultant to assist with the revision and update of its ordinances. In light of this development, the committee decided to suspend its work and to present to the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission a written report of the project’s goals and the committee’s recommendations for tools worthy of consideration.

Consensus Committee members will continue to follow the progress of the county’s efforts and, should the county find it helpful, the committee and Shenandoah Forum are willing to provide logistical support for public meetings, use of the Forum website to disseminate meeting schedules and other information, identification of human and informational resources that advance the process, and other support as appropriate.