



**Chatham County, North Carolina
Farmland Preservation Program**

**FARMLAND
PROTECTION
BLUEPRINT
(2025-2028)**



Farmland Protection Blueprint 2025-2028

for Chatham County, North Carolina

Welcome to the Chatham County Farmland Protection Blueprint, an overview of Chatham County's farmland preservation efforts and short-term strategies for prioritizing local farmland preservation objectives for the period of 2025-2028.

This document was prepared with editorial oversight and guidance by the Chatham County Agricultural Advisory Board, which advises the Chatham County Board of Commissioners on agricultural issues within the county.



Introduction

This document serves as an overview of the state of Chatham County's farmland preservation efforts and a strategy for prioritizing local farmland preservation objectives for the period of 2025-2028.

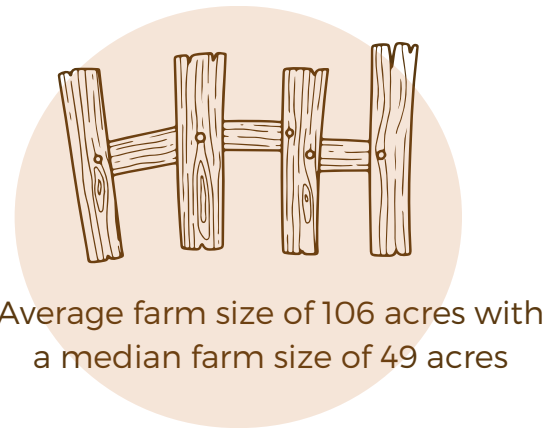
The county's first "Farmland Protection Plan" was published in 2009. The 2009 plan gave a snapshot of the state of Chatham's local agricultural economy, identified current issues, and recommended actions for developing policies and programs to support then further develop the agricultural economy of the county. With increasing residential and industrial growth since 2009, new threats and opportunities face the county that affect the agriculture community. In 2017, Chatham County approved the "Plan Chatham" Comprehensive Plan, which includes several strategies for preserving the county's agricultural and rural landscapes.

In 2024, an update to the original plan "Farmland Protection Plan" was produced in cooperation with the Lois G. Britt Agribusiness Center of the University of Mount Olive. The "2024 Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan" is a comprehensive analysis of the county's farming and forestry infrastructure, based on a process that included interviews and surveys with Chatham County farmers, agribusiness operators, government officials, and citizens. The updated "Farmland Protection Plan" reflects the importance of Chatham County's agriculture and forestry resources and assesses the opportunities, challenges, and issues they currently face, leading to recommendations for strategic consideration. It also strives to align farmland protection initiatives with the "Plan Chatham" Comprehensive Plan.

The purpose of this "Blueprint" is to summarize farmland preservation efforts to date and identify short-term priorities for the Chatham County Farmland Preservation Program. Although all the "Priority Recommendations" identified in the 2024 Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan are significant, county resources and capacity are limited. Therefore, this "Blueprint" focuses on a three-year horizon for strategic plan implementation, based on an assessment of program capacity and input from other county planning initiatives and documents, including Chatham County's "Plan Chatham Comprehensive Plan."

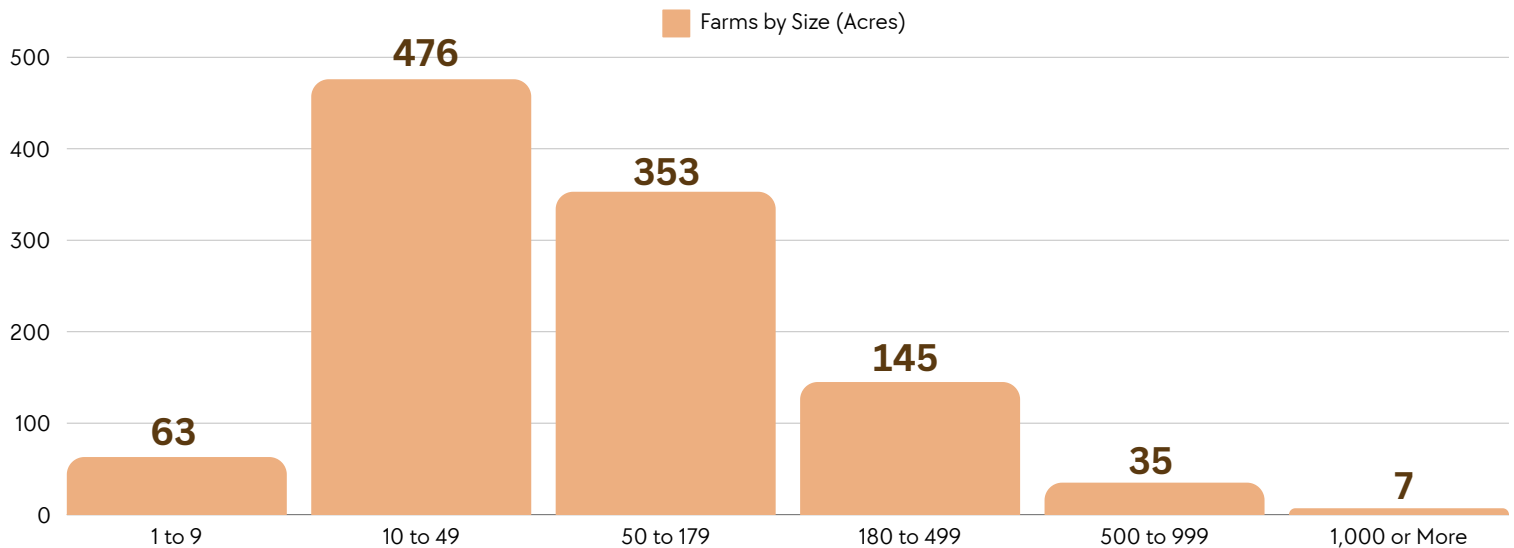
Chatham County: Farming Overview

The impact of agriculture in Chatham County is significant.



"Plan Chatham envisions a future where a network of agricultural fields, pastures, timberland, rural homesteads, and natural areas still dominate the County . . . Agriculture is thriving. The form and function of rural character is preserved."
-Plan Chatham

Gross Market Value of Sales (Farms)	
Less than \$2,500	402
\$2,500 to \$4,999	115
\$5,000 to \$9,999	127
\$10,000 to \$24,999	147
\$25,000 to \$49,999	100
\$50,000 to \$99,999	53
\$100,000 or More	7



*Rankings compared to other North Carolina counties.



Survey and Interview Results

The methodology employed to access information, perceptions, and attitudes related to agriculture and agribusiness in Chatham County consisted of written surveys and interviews with three target audiences—agriculture producers, agribusiness owners, and non-farm residents of Chatham County. Surveys were distributed by the Chatham County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension and the Chatham Soil and Water Conservation District. A total of 334 surveys were completed for the 2024 farmland protection planning process.

In addition, select Chatham County individuals from all three targeted groups were interviewed on an anonymous basis to better identify challenges and opportunities that exist in the county's agricultural and forestry segments. All calculations and recommendations in the "2024 Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan" were formulated using data obtained from these processes. Survey and interview information revealed pertinent information on the state of agriculture in Chatham County from the perspectives of farmers, agribusinesses, and non-farm residents as well as from data sources such as USDA and NCDA.

Following is a summary of survey and interview results from the "Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan." Full results can be accessed in the complete version available at the Chatham Soil and Water Conservation District Website: <https://www.chathamcountync.gov/swcd>



Agricultural Producer Summary

Survey

A total of 97 agricultural producers completed the survey.

- 35.11% indicated that farming or forestry was their primary occupation.
- 60% planned to transfer their farm to family members. However, 65% still need a farm transition plan.
- 23% experienced problems with neighbors over farming operations.
- 78% expressed an interest in programming on estate and farm transition planning.

Interviews

Collected feedback from the agricultural producer interviews included the following observations:

- Development is out of control in the entire county.
- Development is driving up land prices, making it difficult for farmers to expand operations.
- Development is leading to the loss of history and historical places.
- There is a need for a mentor program between experienced and new farmers.
- There is concern that the county does not have enough water supply to support farms, industrial expansion, and residential development.
- The county needs to do more to preserve farmland, including more funds for conservation easements to incentivize landowners to enroll.
- More county support is needed for youth and adult agricultural education.

Agribusiness Owners Summary

Survey

Ten agribusiness owners completed the survey.

- 89% increased business operations over the last five years.
- 56% said their businesses face labor issues.
- 100% said estate and transition planning was an issue facing their business.
- 88% were seeking ways to expand business to non-farm operators.

Interviews

Collected feedback from the agribusiness owner interviews included the following observations:

- Development is out of control in Chatham County.
- Chatham County government leaders need more education about the economic importance of the agricultural industry.
- The county needs to do more to preserve farmland, including more funds for conservation easements to incentivize landowners to enroll.



Non-Farm Residents Summary

Survey

218 non-farm residents completed the survey.

- 49% described agriculture in Chatham County as an expanding industry with growth potential.
- 94% had purchased local agricultural goods. 41% have participated in local agritourism activities.
- 100% believed that Chatham County should help preserve farms and forests.
- 100% believed farms and forests enhanced the scenic beauty and rural character of Chatham County.
- 94% indicated that farmers are good neighbors.

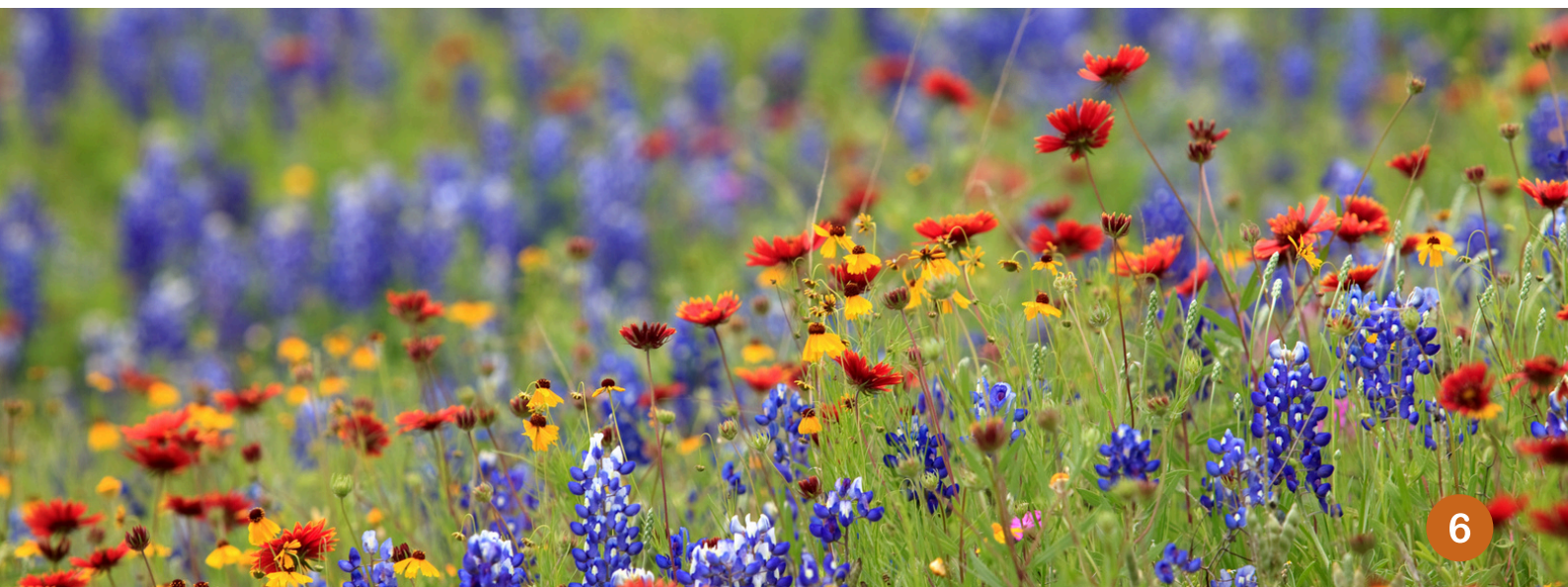
Interviews

Collected feedback from the non-farm resident interviews included the following observations:

- Farmland preservation efforts should be supported by local government funding.
- More agricultural educational programs are needed.
- Non-farm residents are concerned about losing the rural culture and environment of Chatham County.
- There should be more emphasis on farmers' markets. Farmers' markets need more locations and longer hours.

"Preserving rural character was identified as the most important goal during the (Plan Chatham: Comprehensive Plan) planning process. Rural character means different things to different people. For some, it is clean water, forests, and wildlife. For others, it is scenic beauty or a lifestyle that includes privacy, peace, and quiet. For many, it is simply the ability to farm."

-Plan Chatham



Cost of Community Services Study

A Cost of Community Service (CoCS) study was completed in conjunction with the “2024 Farmland Protection Plan.” The CoCS determines contributions made to the Chatham County economy by three main land uses: commercial and industrial, working and open land, as well as residential. Agricultural and commercial land uses require fewer public services than residential land uses, saving money for the county.

For each \$1 of revenue received from each land use:

- Residential land costs \$1.18 in public services.
- Commercial and industrial lands costs \$0.29 in public services.
- Agricultural land and forestland costs \$0.35 in public services.

Residential land uses created a net loss of \$17,751,200.06, while the other two land use categories generated surpluses of \$27,456,459.24 from commercial and \$2,228,403.82 from farmland.

Studies indicate that when a rural community broadly converts farm and forestland into residential development, the local government experiences deteriorating financial stability and increasing local property tax rates. The Chatham County CoCS supports these findings, indicating that farmland preservation is an effective strategy for sound fiscal management.

A CoCS Study measures the direct economic benefit to a county based on dollars. It does not include indirect benefits such as ecosystem services. Ecosystem services include farm and forest land benefits such as improved water quality, flood prevention, and carbon sequestration. Historically, landowners have not been paid for ecosystem services for various reasons, including the difficulty in measuring them.

Chatham County Cost of Community Services Study Findings

	FY2021-22 Actual	Residential	Commercial	Farmland
Total Revenues	\$138,341,515.00	\$96,384,743.90	\$38,537,115.17	\$3,419,615.93
Total Expenditures	\$126,407,852.00	\$114,135,983.96	\$11,080,655.92	\$1,191,212.11
Net Contribution	\$11,933,633.00	(\$17,751,200.06)	\$27,456,459.25	\$2,228,403.82
Land Use Ratio* Expenses:Revenue		\$1 : \$1.18	\$1 : \$0.29	\$1 : \$0.35

*The cost of services provided for each \$1 of revenue.



Priority Recommendations

The major result of the “2024 Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan” is a set of 18 recommendations with action steps that, if implemented, can bring about desired changes. These steps are based on input from citizens affected by the plan as well as other agricultural sources. The recommendations were extrapolated from data obtained through the interviews and surveys of Chatham County farmers, agribusinesses, citizens, and data from USDA, NCDA&CS, N.C. State Cooperative Extension, and others. Timelines, responsible parties, and priority levels are suggested based upon the best information available as of the time of writing the plan.

These recommendations reflect three basic tenets upon which this plan is based:

- Agriculture is an important part of Chatham County’s economy.
- Preserving farms and forests is in the public interest.
- Farms and forests are sustainable natural resources.

For this plan to be effective, Chatham County citizens, leaders, local, state and federal agencies, and outside organizations must follow through with support and collaboration of these recommendations. The Farmland Protection Plan needs to be evaluated regularly to remain current and viable. A regular update will ensure that recommendations are being accomplished and new ones are added as needed.

A full list of recommendations with timelines, responsible parties, and priority levels are available in the full “Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan,” available online at the Chatham Soil and Water Conservation District Website: <https://www.chathamcountync.gov/swcd>

“Chatham farmers and other residents frequently mention a desire to protect farmland and timberland from incompatible uses nearby. They also mention the desire to maintain the ability of farmers and rural residents to have farm-related small businesses and home occupations to provide additional income.”

-Plan Chatham

2025-2028 Blueprint Priorities

The following "Blueprint Priorities" were selected from the "Priority Recommendations" identified in the 2024 Chatham County Farmland Protection Plan. They represent the Chatham County Farmland Preservation Program's short-term priorities based on an assessment of program capacity and input from other planning initiatives and documents. The Farmland Preservation Program will update the "Blueprint Priorities" regularly based on feasibility assessments, capacity, and funding opportunities.

1. Develop sustained and committed funding for farmland preservation.

Action Steps

- Develop funding priorities for the 2025-2028 period.
- Secure Article 46 tax revenue for the CAPD Trust Fund.
- Dedicate rollback taxes from the PUV program to farm and forest land preservation through the CAPD Trust Fund.
- Develop partnerships with local, regional, and national land trusts and farmland preservation organizations to leverage resources.
- Identify outside grants and other funding sources available to Chatham County and farm and forest landowners that can promote farm and forest land protection.

2. Coordinate farmland protection outreach and education.

Action Steps

- Utilize all available media outlets to inform county leadership and the public about the plan's progress and successes.
- Develop and implement an educational program for farmers and landowners regarding available farmland preservation tools, such as working land conservation easements and incentives suited for Chatham County.
- Develop programs on farm transition, estate planning, and taxation.
- Develop an annual "Keeping the Farm" workshop that provides presentations and resources to landowners.

Plan Chatham Agriculture Goals

- **Primary Goal: Preserve, protect, and enable agriculture and forestry.**
- **Secondary Goal: Diversify the tax base and generate more quality, in-county jobs to reduce dependence on residential property taxes, create economic opportunity, and reduce out-commuting.**
- **Secondary Goal: Preserve the rural character and lifestyle of Chatham County.**

2025-2028 Blueprint Priorities (cont.)

3. Strengthen the Chatham County Farmland Preservation Program through policy development.

Action Steps

- Update 2019 Chatham County Voluntary Agriculture District Ordinance to include other Farmland Preservation Program initiatives.
- Strengthen the Voluntary Agricultural District Program with current NC General Statute language. Identify other needed ordinance updates.
- Adopt the Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District program to expand farmland preservation options for landowners.
- Update the IT functionality of the VAD and Farmland Preservation Program to compile and display information about farmland protection activities in a more concise and visually appealing manner.

4. Develop a strategic farmland preservation map.

Action Steps

- Work with Chatham County Geographic Information Systems (GIS) staff to develop a publicly available strategic farmland preservation map, combining relevant data sources into one map viewer.
- Using GIS technology, develop a scoring criterion for evaluating farmland protection priorities within Chatham County utilizing a strategic farmland preservation map for the CAPD evaluation processes.

5. Emphasize equity and inclusion in farmland preservation initiatives.

Action Steps

- Develop outreach programs focused on the needs of underserved, small, and limited-resource farmers.
- Partner with organizations and institutions that are working with underserved, small, and limited-resource farmers.
- Work with USDA to develop an outreach plan to improve awareness of USDA socially disadvantaged audiences, beginning farmers, and veterans' programs.



Acknowledgements

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Chatham Soil & Water Conservation District Board of Supervisors:

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Diana May

Jeff Vaughn

John Headen

Plan Chatham Agriculture Recommendation #2

"Promote agriculture as a key feature of the county and component of the local economy and discourage development conversion of areas with viable agricultural operations.

-Plan Chatham

References

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3. Plan Chatham Comprehensive Plan (2017): Available online at <https://www.chathamcountync.gov/government/departments-programs-i-z/planning/adopted-plans/comprehensive-plan>
4. 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture: Available online at https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/North_Carolina/
5. Chatham County Voluntary Agriculture District Ordinance (2019): Available online at <https://www.chathamcountync.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/45262/63766082276510>



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Produced in Collaboration With:



Chatham Farmland
Preservation Program

