Chapter 12.
Rural Character

Goal:
Recognize, preserve, protect, and enhance the character and quality of Forsyth County’s Rural Area (GMA 5) in a manner that promotes traditional rural lifestyles, farmland and agricultural enterprises, open space, scenic vistas, recreation, and historic resources, while also allowing for compatible limited residential development and service areas.

Introduction
Rural character refers to the patterns of land use and development where open space, natural landscapes, and vegetation are predominant over the built environment. Agrarian lifestyles, rural-based economies, and agricultural landscapes are usually found in rural areas, as are wildlife habitats and very low-density development. Regardless of how rural character is defined, as more people become interested in rural areas, preserving the unique character of these areas may become a challenge. Forsyth County is expected to grow by approximately 120,000 people by the year 2030. Without proper planning and regulations, Forsyth County’s rural character may be lost, including farmlands, woodlands, undeveloped open space, natural streams, outdoor recreation opportunities, pastoral viewsheds, and historic resources.

In 1753, after six months of exploring North Carolina in search of suitable land to settle, a group of Moravians purchased 98,985 acres in what is today Forsyth County. They found what they believed to be a suitable site “on the three forks of Muddy Creek,” encompassing almost all of present-day Winston-Salem. Development since that time has been focused on this central portion of Forsyth County.

What the 2001 Legacy Plan says about Rural Character...

- Retain our distinctive community character and manage growth by protecting farmland and open space
- Preserve our rural landscape as an important part of the community’s quality of life
- Acknowledge and continue to encourage working farms’ viability in our local economy
- Retain farmland and open space by reducing pressure for development in rural areas by directing growth to the developed areas of the county and away from rural areas
- Limit public investment in the Rural Area (GMA 5), including roads and sewer extensions to discourage new development and focus development where infrastructure already exists
- Acquire valuable rural open space and farmlands as special agricultural and cultural districts
- Use financing mechanisms to preserve farmlands and open space through the purchase of development rights programs, such as the Farmland Preservation Program, transfer of development rights programs, and/or the conservation activities of land trusts
- Prepare a master plan that includes an inventory of potential farmland preservation sites and develop guidelines to preserve and enhance the county’s rural areas
- Revise policies governing the use of economic incentives for business development so that these funds are not available for proposed developments in the Rural Area
- Limit the use of package treatment plants in the Rural Area
- Adopt guidelines that define the conditions under which land in the Rural Area will be rezoned to more intensive zoning districts and which will preserve the county’s rural areas

Legacy defines the Rural Area as Growth Management Area (GMA) 5, which is located beyond the Future Growth Area (GMA 4). The Rural Area (Map 12-1) of Forsyth County is located largely outside of the incorporated jurisdictions and includes the western portion of the county following the Yadkin River and the northeastern area of the county, in what is known as the Belews Creek area. The regions outside the Muddy Creek basin are defined as rural due to topographic issues and the inability to cost-effectively provide gravity sewer.
Map 12-1. Growth Management Area 5 Rural Area
How Have the 2001 Legacy Plan Strategies Worked?

There have been a number of successful actions supporting the preservation of the Rural Area since the adoption of the 2001 Legacy Plan. The revised Planned Residential Development (PRD) Ordinance increased the amount of open space required to be set aside as part of a PRD (a minimum of 45 percent of a development site in RS-30, RS-40, and AG Zoning Districts). The ordinance also requires different types of open space to be set aside, including passive open space (natural areas such as floodplains and steep slopes), active open space, such as neighborhood greens and playgrounds, and landscape buffers along major roadways. The new PRD regulations provide a way of implementing the open space subdivisions recommended in the 2001 Legacy Plan to preserve farmland and rural character.

Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) provisions support the economic health of agriculture, increase protection from non-farm development and nuisance lawsuits, and promote agriculture as a viable way of life in our heavily urbanized county. The VAD program is administered by the Forsyth County Agricultural Advisory Board and staff. To become a VAD, an individual farm must contain a minimum of 20 acres and must participate in the County’s present use value taxation program.

Agricultural tourism provisions provide a way of increasing the economic potential of agricultural land by allowing certain recreational, educational, entertainment, or limited business activities to be operated on a bonafide farm. These uses are allowed with certain limiting conditions, which are described in the Unified Development Ordinances (UDO). To use agricultural tourism provisions, a farm must be located in a Voluntary Agricultural District. Additionally, the agricultural tourism provisions are only available for property zoned AG (Agricultural) and YR (Yadkin River).

The Western Rural Area Study (Map 12-2) was conducted in response to concerns about the potential loss of rural character in the western portion of the county. A geographic information system (GIS) filter mapping analysis found that due to development limitations such as steep slopes, poor soils, water features, and existing development, only 26 percent of the area could be easily developed in the future even if sewer were available. Since running sewer into these areas would be very expensive with only a small return, the study concluded that no additional regulations were needed to maintain the current rural character of the area.

Rural character has also benefited from the area plans completed since the adoption of Legacy. The Rural Hall, Walkertown and Tobaccoville Area Plans, as well as the Clemmons and Lewisville comprehensive plans, all include Rural Area within their boundaries. Land use recommendations in these plans are limited to very low-density residential and agricultural uses. Historic Resources staff have identified historic resources (both individual structures and larger districts) in each planning area, including the Rural Area in those planning areas. Preserving these historic resources will help ensure the long-term survival of rural character. The Town of Lewisville and the Village of Clemmons would like to continue proactive coordination with the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners to protect and maintain the rural character of unincorporated areas in the western fringes of the county.

Additionally, since the adoption of the 2001 Legacy Plan, rising energy costs and commute times have led more people to choose to live closer in to the urban core of Winston-Salem. This has reduced demand for subdivisions in the Rural Area, protecting the existing agricultural character and open space in the area. These trends are predicted to continue and become more prevalent in the future.
Objectives, Policies, and Action Agenda

Objective 1: Farmland/Agricultural Enterprises
Preserve, protect, and expand Forsyth County’s farmlands and agricultural enterprises.

Agricultural enterprises and rural farmland bring not only monetary, but also intrinsic value, to Forsyth County. Tools such as conservation easements help to preserve and protect our rural areas from development by restricting development. Other programs, like Forsyth County's agricultural tourism provisions, help protect rural areas by making them more economically viable by providing goods and services, as well as educational and recreational opportunities.

The local foods movement also plays a strong role in preserving Forsyth County’s rural character. As community health has become a bigger concern, there has been renewed interest in local agriculture as a way of providing greater access to healthy food across our county. As Chapter 8, Healthy, Complete and Equitable Communities illustrates, the major factors identified as important in ensuring a community’s access to fresh, healthy food are protecting agricultural land on the edge of urban areas, facilitating forms of urban agriculture, and establishing farmers markets and retail establishments that carry a variety of healthy, locally-grown food. Additionally, community supported agriculture (CSA) is a form of direct marketing in which farms sell shares of their products to individuals to be delivered on a regular basis.

Legacy Themes Advanced in Policies and Action Agenda Recommendations

- Fiscal Responsibility
- Livable Design
- Sustainable Growth

Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Policies</strong></th>
<th><strong>Agricultural Land Conservation</strong></th>
<th>Protect and conserve agricultural land in Forsyth County.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Farm and Agricultural Development</strong></td>
<td>Promote and support land use measures that support farm and agricultural development as part of Forsyth County’s economy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Farm-Friendly Regulations</strong></td>
<td>Create a farm friendly regulatory and community environment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Agricultural Enterprises</strong></td>
<td>Promote agricultural enterprises as a component of Forsyth County’s economic development program.</td>
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<td><strong>Land for Farming</strong></td>
<td>Support incentives that encourage the continued use of land for farming.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Agricultural Tourism</strong></td>
<td>Encourage and promote Forsyth County’s agricultural tourism provisions as economically viable alternatives to large-scale agriculture and farming.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Community-Supported Agriculture</strong></td>
<td>Support community-supported agricultural programs.</td>
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*Policies continued on next page*
Policies

**Agricultural Education** Support agricultural education programs and events.

**Farmland Outside GMA 5** Support the efforts of Forsyth County property owners who desire farmland in areas outside of GMA 5.

**Agricultural-Related Businesses** Encourage farm and agricultural-related businesses to locate in the rural areas of the community, such as equipment/feed and seed establishments and other supply and service providers.

**Voluntary Agricultural District** Support the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) provisions adopted by Forsyth County that identify farms and farmers who want to keep their land in agriculture.

**Priority to Farming** Give agriculture priority over other uses on land suitable for farming.

**Conservation Easements** Support the placement of conservation easements restricting development on farmland.

**Farmers Markets** Promote and support the establishment of farmers markets and food cooperative facilities in commercially attractive locations to help create new markets for locally grown agricultural products.
Action Agenda

12.1.1. Agriculture in Rural Areas Continue to allow and encourage farming and agricultural activity in the Rural Areas of Forsyth County.

12.1.2. Agricultural Ordinances Review the UDO to ensure flexibility in zoning for agricultural uses and related activities.

12.1.3. Agriculture and Economic Development Conduct a study to demonstrate the economic value of agriculture to the community.

12.1.4. Agricultural Tax Credits Continue to allow tax credits and deferrals on property that is determined to be agricultural.

12.1.5. Barriers to Agriculture Review Forsyth County’s regulatory environment to minimize potential barriers to agriculture and farms.

12.1.6. Agriculture Viability Initiate a dialogue with farmers and agricultural property owners about how the community can enhance the viability of agriculture in Forsyth County and recommend possible changes.

12.1.7. Farmland Protection Review the UDO and investigate alternatives to further protect important farmland and recommend appropriate revisions.

12.1.8. Farms for the Future Program Establish a Farms for the Future program that provides assistance to farmers in the areas of marketing, land acquisition, estate planning, and specialty farming.

12.1.9. Agricultural Outreach Enhance public outreach programs and activities to inform the public about the benefits of farmland and agricultural activity to the community.

12.1.10. Farming Education Support public educational programming, such as the Piedmont Farm School, that trains new and transitioning farmers to operate successful, small scale and sustainable farms.

12.1.11. Connect Farmers Create a program to connect beginning farmers with experienced ones.

12.1.12. Local Foods Movement Promote the existence and expansion of the local foods movement in Forsyth County.

12.1.13. Local Food Sales Identify strategies that encourage locally grown food to be sold to area residents and restaurants.
Objective 2: Open Space and Scenic Vistas
Maintain open space and scenic vistas as part of the rural character of Forsyth County.

The preservation of open space, including farmlands, woodlands, historic and cultural resources, and viewsheds are frequently mentioned as an important component of rural character. Several tools to conserve open space and protect agricultural land are outlined in Chapter 7, Environmental Quality and Sustainability, including the outright purchase of land by the public, the purchase or donation of conservation easements, purchase of development rights (PDR) programs, and transfer of development rights (TDR) programs. These tools have varying levels of feasibility.

### Policies

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<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value of Open Space</strong></td>
<td>Enhance the community’s knowledge about the value of open space.</td>
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<td><strong>Open Space Preservation</strong></td>
<td>Encourage the preservation of open spaces and passive land uses through public and private programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Farmland Preservation Program</strong></td>
<td>Continue to support Forsyth County’s Farmland Preservation Program and identify additional sources of funding.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nonprofit Land Preservation Organizations</strong></td>
<td>Support the mission of the Piedmont Land Conservancy and other nonprofit organizations in preserving farmland and open space.</td>
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### Action Agenda

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>12.2.1. Open Space Informational Materials</strong></td>
<td>Create informational materials about open space and scenic vistas in Forsyth County to introduce citizens, including school children, to the community’s resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12.2.2. Scenic Resources Plan</strong></td>
<td>Consider the preparation of a scenic resources plan that identifies Forsyth County’s scenic rural landscapes and addresses such elements as the general scenic qualities of Forsyth County, scenic roadways and waterways, landscape features, woodland, and open spaces.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12.2.3. Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Plan</strong></td>
<td>Update the Comprehensive Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Plan for Forsyth County that identifies existing and potential agricultural and farmland resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12.2.4. Farmland Preservation Funding</strong></td>
<td>Seek private and public funding to renew the successful programs run by Forsyth County to purchase development rights in key agricultural lands under the Farmland Preservation Program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12.2.5. Tax Benefits Education</strong></td>
<td>Educate property owners about available tax benefits for protecting rural open space and scenic vistas.</td>
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Objective 3: Development Recommendations

Preserve the form and function of rural character in Forsyth County, while allowing for sensitively and compatibly designed residential and service area development.

The conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development in the Rural Area is an ongoing challenge. The Rural Area is a limited resource that is better suited to agricultural uses than residential development. The higher expense of expanded road networks, sewer infrastructure, and other public facilities into the Rural Area should be a concern for taxpayers and utility ratepayers and be minimized or avoided.

Suburban-style development in the Rural Area requires the use of package treatment plants to process sewage. Unfortunately, a number of older private subdivision package plants have failed. These plants represent tied up capital and operating management attention; neither of which are attractive to developers. Operation and maintenance of a package plant by a homeowners’ association is expensive and usually requires professional consultation and assistance. Such plants are not monitored by the County Health Department, but rather by the State, which has limited staffing.

Legacy 2030 recognizes Downtown Winston-Salem, town centers, and activity centers as the best locations for significant commercial and office development. However, small scale, neighborhood serving commercial and office uses are needed resources in rural communities. Locally-oriented services allow residents of the Rural Area to access basic services without having to drive great distances to larger activity nodes. Where to locate these uses is still an important question. However, locational and design criteria need to be established to assure compatibility with the rural character.

Forsyth County may soon be faced with questions about new uses that don’t currently exist in the Rural Area. New land uses are now being proposed in rural areas across the country, such as biodiesel production and wind and solar farms.

### Policies

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Undeveloped Land Conversion</strong></th>
<th>Minimize the conversion of undeveloped land into residential development in Forsyth County’s Rural Area.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rural Residential Development</strong></td>
<td>Encourage rurally compatible residential development to minimize the impact on the community’s rural character.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Package Treatment Plants</strong></td>
<td>Limit the use of private package treatment plants in Forsyth County’s Rural Area.</td>
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<td><strong>Open Space and Scenic Assets</strong></td>
<td>Encourage residential developers to strongly consider farmland, scenic views, open space, wetlands, stream corridors, and steep slopes when planning residential development and work to incorporate these features into site plans.</td>
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Objective 4: Recreational Opportunities

Provide for improved and additional low-intensity recreational opportunities in the Rural Area.

One of Forsyth County’s advantages is its large areas of wilderness that residents can use for recreation such as hunting, canoeing, and hiking. See Objective 2, Open Space/Scenic Vistas.

Action Agenda

12.3.1. Rural Residential Development Plan Study and develop a plan for rural residential development options.

12.3.2. Residential Development Regulations Revise residential development regulations as necessary to provide greater protection for the community’s rural character.

12.3.3. Package Treatment Plants Research package treatment plants to determine if there have been technological and related advancements that result in improved systems. Consider whether regulatory provisions/revision are needed to limit their use or require plants that use the latest system advancements.

12.3.4. Rural Commercial/Service Locations Identify appropriate areas of the county to locate rural commercial/service areas. Analyze uses appropriate to those locations and develop design standards that will relate to the surrounding rural character.

12.3.5. Limit Public Investment Limit public investment in the Rural Area, such as roads, schools, and the extension of sewer services to discourage development in the Rural Area.

12.3.6. Commercial Use Compatibility Carefully review commercial uses that, due to scale or function, may be inappropriate for a rural setting.

Policies

Outdoor Recreation Areas Support the establishment of additional outdoor recreation areas in Forsyth County’s Rural Area.

Action Agenda

12.4.1 Maintain Recreational Facilities Maintain existing recreational facilities, and improve them as necessary.

12.4.2 New Recreational Sites Investigate the establishment of new recreational sites in Forsyth County.

12.4.3 Agricultural Tourism and Recreation Use the provisions of Forsyth County’s Agricultural Tourism Ordinance to provide additional recreational opportunities.

12.4.4. Passive Outdoor Recreation Expand opportunities for passive outdoor recreation, such as hiking and fishing.
Objective 5: Historic Rural Area Resources
Preserve and protect Forsyth County’s rural historic resources.

Historic preservation is not limited to neighborhoods and small towns. Many historically significant farms and rural areas have been identified throughout Forsyth County. In fact, North Carolina’s Century Farm Program has documented families in the community that have continuously owned or operated farms for at least 100 years. Local tax deferrals are in place that assist not only agriculture, forestland, and horticulture, but local historic landmark properties as well. Additionally, there are income tax credits available for the rehabilitation of properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These tax credits can often provide financial incentives toward the adaptive reuse of historic farm buildings. Historic preservation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, Community Character.

Policies

Rural Historic Resources  Preserve, protect, and promote significant rural historic resources in the community.

Financial Incentives  Support financial incentives that retain rural historic resources.

Historic Farm Buildings  Encourage the reuse of historic farm buildings.

Action Agenda

12.5.1. Education Programs  Initiate local education programs outlining and supporting the value of Forsyth County’s historic rural character.

12.5.2. Identify Historic Resources  Identify the extant rural historic resources of Forsyth County, including historic farms, landscapes as well as prehistoric and historic archaeological sites.

12.5.3. Rural Historic Preservation Programs  Sponsor programs and workshops that directly address the preservation of rural historic resources.

12.5.4. Rural Historic Preservation Plan  Create a master plan for the preservation of Forsyth County’s rural historic resources.

12.5.5. National Register Nominations  Continue to support and assist property owners when requested in the nomination of eligible rural historic properties to the National Register of Historic Places.

12.5.6. Local Landmarks  Continue to assist property owners who seek the designation of eligible rural historic properties as Forsyth County Local Historic Landmarks.

12.5.7. Rural Historic Districts  Consider the establishment of rural historic districts where significant rural farmlands and resources exist and property owners express interest.

12.5.8. Rural Historic Easements and Covenants  Promote the placement of conservation easements and protective covenants on rural historic properties.

12.5.9. Tax Credits  Encourage the use of federal and State income tax credits for the rehabilitation of Forsyth County’s rural historic resources.
**Action Agenda**

12.5.10. Century Farms Identify eligible properties as North Carolina Century Farms.

12.5.11. Historic Farm Buildings Assist property owners interested in the retention of historic farm buildings.

12.5.12. Rezoning and Subdivision Effects Consider the impact of rezoning/subdivision petitions on Forsyth County’s rural historic resources and identify conditions that could ensure their protection.

12.5.13. Rural Historic Outreach Develop public outreach programs that explain the importance of rural historic resources in Forsyth County.

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**Conclusion**

Forsyth County’s natural beauty, rural character, and agricultural resources are among its most important features. As population pressures from our urban areas increase, it may become more difficult to preserve this area. Our existing rural character features an abundance of agricultural, forest, and open land. To be successful in retaining these important assets, we must establish a clear vision of what is most important to our community and what needs to happen to help landowners keep those lands as economically viable rural uses. That vision can guide how rural character is defined and protected. Forsyth County needs to be flexible and creative in how it addresses existing development patterns and how to provide for future development in the Rural Area. We must balance the needs of rural residents with the protection of those parts of the rural environment that contribute to every citizen's quality of life and economic and physical well-being.