

# ORANGE COUNTY

HILLSBOROUGH  
NORTH CAROLINA

*Manager's Office*

*Established 1752*

## Memorandum

**To:** Steve Stewart, Manager, Town of Carrboro  
Roger Stancil, Manager, Town of Chapel Hill

**Cc:** Willie Best, Assistant County Manager/Interim EDC Director  
Craig Benedict, Planning Director  
David Stancil, Environment and Resource Conservation Director  
Orange County Board of County Commissioners

**From:** Laura Blackmon, County Manager *LAB*

**Date:** August 13, 2007

**Subject:** Agricultural Support Enterprises

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### **Background**

At a March 2004 Joint Planning Area Planning Public Hearing, Orange County Planning Staff presented information on an on-going initiative hosted by the Economic Development, Planning, and Environment and Resource Conservation departments to provide more business opportunities for local farmers in the rural parts of the county. The project continues to be part of the County's effort to preserve farmland and farming as a viable economic pursuit. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide our Joint Planning Area (JPA) partners with an update of this project and to begin a dialogue on the future of farming in the Rural Buffer.

### **Agricultural Support Enterprises (ASE)**

Agricultural support enterprises are becoming increasingly important to the survival of our local farms. The focus of the agricultural support enterprises project is to add new farm-related uses to our zoning ordinance that would provide farmers with opportunities to gain more revenue from their farms. These new uses would be logical extensions to existing farm operations, such as corn mazes (agritourism), roadside stands (direct marketing) and small-scale processing facilities to make sauces (value-added), as well as services related to farming such as feed stores and large animal veterinary services.

### **Process**

Farmers would be required to go through a standard process and obtain a permit like any other development project. (Bona fide farm purposes, which are exempt from zoning per the North Carolina General Statutes, would remain exempt.) Staff is reviewing the existing permit process, as part of this initiative, and is considering ways to streamline at least making the process more user-friendly. While most of the potential changes to our zoning ordinance would only affect the rural parts of the county, it is possible some changes may have implications within the Rural Buffer. With that in

mind, County staff wanted to provide our JPA partners with an update on the project prior to any formal consideration of amendments.

### **Rural Buffer Intent**

The second component to this memorandum is to revisit the original intent of the Rural Buffer and begin a dialogue with our JPA partners to determine if this intent is still valid/appropriate as it pertains to agriculture and related agricultural enterprises. When the Joint Planning Land Use Plan was adopted in 1986, the state of local farming was very different from what it is today. It was assumed that the area within the Rural Buffer would gradually phase out of traditional farming and develop into low-density residential uses. The actual pattern of development is subject area for later discussion. The amount of land in the Rural Buffer enrolled in the present use value program for agriculture, forestry and horticulture, today, is approximately 28 percent.

Two things have changed during the last twenty years. One is the emergence of organic farming as a popular alternative to traditional farming. Organic farming typically requires less land than traditional farming and can occur as a compatible neighbor to residential uses. Second is the trend of connecting urban residents to local farms, which is linked to food sustainability issues, supporting local growers, and buying locally produced goods.

### **Agricultural Sustainability**

The agricultural support enterprises proposal is designed to keep farmers farming by making agriculture profitable. Should this program extend into the Rural Buffer, it would likely encourage the continuation of the existing active farms. It could encourage new smaller-scale and organic farmers to consider starting operations in the Rural Buffer. It could also encourage new farm businesses to develop, such as farm stands and “pick-your-own” operations.

Promoting new agricultural operations and agricultural support operations may be seen as inconsistent with the intent of the original Joint Planning Area Land Use Plan. But as residential development continues to occur in Orange County and its municipalities, many town residents are seeking a farm connection (as evidenced by the recent Piedmont Farm Tour when approximately 6,500 individuals visited farms in Orange County on two afternoons in late April.) Residents in Chapel Hill and Carrboro seem to enjoy not only the rural character of places like Dairyland Road but also the potential link to the farming community. Operations such as Maple View Farm illustrate the potential for successful relationships between urban residents and local farmers; one that provides the farmer with supplemental income and one that provides residents with a rural experience and a locally grown product.

### **ASE Consistency with County Land Use Plan**

The agricultural support enterprises proposal is designed to allow selected farm uses to occur in a way that is consistent with our overall land use plan. The proposal provides more opportunities for advisory board input and public comment during the approval process. In addition, Staff’s recommendation to develop a conditional district process for rezoning property to Agricultural Services for specific agricultural support enterprises provides a mechanism for the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) to limit the extent and intensity of an enterprise as part of the approval. Unlike general rezoning, property

subject to the conditional district rezoning process may only be used for a specific land use(s) based on a site-specific development plan. Since applications are site specific, the BOCC can consider the suitability of the proposed use based on its location within the county. In other words, the BOCC could approve a rezoning for a certain use in a rural area in northern Orange County and deny a rezoning request for the same use in the Rural Buffer. The location factor will become increasingly important as sections of the county transition from active farming to low-density residential.

### **Rezoning JPA Process**

Rezoning is a legislative decision reviewed by governing boards in accordance with existing joint planning agreement procedures. Any rezoning application would be considered through a public hearing process, neighbors would receive notice and members of the general public would have an opportunity to comment. If the tract in question were located in a joint planning area, the appropriate governing board(s) would have an opportunity to provide input on the request as well. The proposed process to rezone to the Agricultural Services District includes opportunities for the town governing boards to comment on any agricultural support enterprise project early in the process.

### **Summary**

In summary, the agricultural support enterprises proposal is an agricultural economic development program. Staff's proposal to allow farmers more value-added options places no long-term obligations on their land. It is designed to keep farming an economically viable business by permitting farmers to explore more innovative farm operations.

Planning, Economic Development, and Environment and Resource Conservation staff would like to begin a dialogue with town staff before it is further discussed by elected officials, possibly at the fall JPA.

Please share this memorandum with your governing boards and staffs as you deem appropriate. Thank you.