

# LOUDOUN COUNTY RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

December 6, 2019

Dear Chair Randall and Board of Supervisors:

Loudoun Rural Economic Development Council (REDC) has been studying the loss of Loudoun's prime farmland soil resources. The Loudoun 2019 Comprehensive plan explicitly states the importance of protecting the prime farmland soils when properties are subdivided. (See Appendix (1) Comprehensive Plan) The current state situation is troubling as the cluster development concept is supposed to preserve prime farmland soil by creating larger farmable rural economy lots. Few cluster developments achieve this goal. This letter is to advise the Board of Supervisors (Board) as to REDC's perspective on the importance of prime farmland soils, this resource/asset's contribution to the rural economy and the time sensitive need to expedite changes in Loudoun's Zoning Ordinances and in the Facilities Standards Manual to protect and preserve this valuable resource.

## **Background:**

Loudoun instituted a cluster development ordinance in 2003 that was intended to preserve farmland and prime farmland soils instead of continuing to develop in accordance to the A-3 zoning district that had been in place (Appendix(1) Comprehensive Plan). Cluster developments are incentivized with additional housing unit densities and use of smaller lots to increase revenues for developers with trade off being a larger rural economy lots preserved for the purpose of farming. What is actually occurring is that Loudoun provides a benefit to the Developer while incurring the capital infrastructure liability associated with higher "by-right" housing densities **without the intended rural economic benefit.**

The source of this misalignment is that the zoning ordinances have never been updated to reflect the absolute critical importance of soils when setting aside the rural economy lots and open space parcels during the subdividing of the property using the Cluster option in AR-1 and AR-2 zoning districts.

## **Why Are Prime Farmland Soils Important?**

Loudoun Valley has some of the best farmland soils in Virginia and the nation. These "Prime" or "Class 1" farmland soils as defined by the USDA, have constituted the backbone of what we now call Loudoun's rural economy for centuries (*appendix (5) definition*). Prime soils such as Purcellville Silt Loam, are well suited to a wide variety of agricultural and horticultural uses including fruit and vegetable production, pasture, grains, and more. As Loudoun's agriculture has transitioned to a small acreage, high value, and a direct market model, the protection of these soils for today and tomorrow's future agricultural entrepreneurs becomes all the more critical. Note: Non-prime soils cannot be amended to become prime soils, as soil structure, water retention along with other elements are part of the characteristics of prime soils.

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A hypothetical example is offered to understand the impact of the difference in soil types in economic terms:

*An acre of 23B, Purcellville Silt Loam (Ag class I/Prime) soil is twice as productive for growing a hypothetical crop of soybeans as an acre of 4A Hatboro Loam (class IV). This means that even with excellent weather, good management, and similar infrastructure costs, a farmer relying on 4A soils can only ever hope to be ½ as productive as a farmer with 23B soils (Appendix for additional comments).*

With Loudoun agricultural businesses already operating in a unique environment due to our extremely high land costs, the loss of Loudoun's prime farmland forces our agriculture businesses to farm marginal soils making the path to an economically successful farming operation next to impossible. Preservation of prime farmland soils should have a high if not the highest priority.

### Current State

***The majority of the acreage in cluster developments set aside for the Rural Economy lots is land that is difficult or virtually impossible to utilize for the rural economy.*** In many cases, the open space parcels in many cases are encumbered with the onsite sewage treatment drain fields for the clustered lots or are shaped in a way rendering them difficult or impossible to use for the Rural Economic purposes. Attached is a case study of a recent cluster development where the rural economy lots have extensive floodplain, hydric soils, and steep slopes and are heavily forested while resulting in a significant increase in the number of houses with limited agricultural potential on the rural economy lots (Appendix 2 & 6 cluster development case study).

### Conclusion

REDC, concluded based on the importance to the rural economy, that time sensitive action must be taken to preserve and protect this diminishing resource – the prime farmland soil. Rural businesses such as Bed and Breakfasts and other tourist destinations that do not rely on onsite agriculture as part of their operations are still directly impacted by the health and success of Loudoun's agricultural economy. Our rural Loudoun brand is supported by the ecosystem that has agriculture at its roots.

Without our vineyards, our wineries would fail. Without our livestock and fruit and vegetable producers, our farmers markets, retailers, and restaurants would be devoid of locally raised meat and without our lush pastures, our equine operations would cease to be viable. If western Loudoun's vistas were to be packed with clustered housing developments instead of some of the most beautiful vistas in the nation, our rural tourism economy would come crashing down. No one drives two hours to sit in a winery and view a scene they could see from their condo balcony in Fairfax.

More cluster developments are on the horizon. As time passes Loudoun loses the opportunity to preserve a portion of its valuable prime agriculture soil. This loss is forever. This is why aligning the zoning ordinances with the Loudoun Comprehensive Plan is time sensitive.

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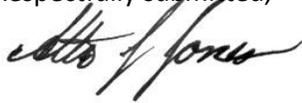
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**Recommendation:**

**We recommend that the Loudoun Zoning Ordinances and Facilities Standards Manual be amended to enhance protection of Loudoun prime farmland soils. This action aligns with the Comprehensive Plan and achieves in practice the original benefit for cluster subdivisions – the retention of prime farmland. We understand a Board Member Initiative (BMI) will be presented to the Board in January. REDC supports this initiative for a Zoning Ordinance Amendment (ZOAM) and Development Ordinance Amendment (DOAM) to resolve the misalignment of the current Zoning Ordinances with the Loudoun 2019 Comprehensive Plan.**

Respectfully submitted,



Alta J. Jones, Chair  
Rural Economic Development Council  
Attachments: 1. Appendix 2. Case Study

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