

# Farmland Preservation Plan for Mecklenburg County

## Executive Summary

Mecklenburg County understands the trade-offs between development and environmental protection. The establishment of the Environmental Stewardship Committee (ESC), development of the Environmental Leadership Action Plan (ELAP) and Meck Playbook demonstrate the political will for identifying and acting upon solutions that attempt to balance urban expansion with programs and policies that provide quality of life services. The policies increase park and recreational space, greenways, nature preserves and community gardens while also managing and protection natural resources.

Environmental impact is not the only quality of life indicator of urban expansion. Food security and food access is a key socio economic indicator. Mecklenburg County research indicates that 14.9% of county households experience “low or very low food security” characterized by “reduced quality or variety of diet and food intake of one or more household members.” It is also defined through “reduced and eating patterns disrupted due to lack of money or resources.” The county has responded aggressively by funding increases in the number and location of farmers markets, food pantries, and expansion in food benefit programs such as SNAP and double bucks. Growing fresh fruits and vegetables on small plots of land through the Edible Landscapes program fosters healthy eating, promotes master gardening skills and seeds community learning. Commercial partnerships pilots with Lyft, provides a creative and affordable transportation solution for families to obtain fresh produce from Loaves and Fishes pantries. Mobile delivery of produce to food deserts supplements these efforts. There has been no policy to date, however, that directly addresses increasing regional food production as an integral part of food security. Increased food production, as proposed in the Farmland Preservation Plan can strengthen current food security programs and improve regional food resilience.

Farmland, agricultural working land is the fulcrum for balancing urban expansion with environmental stewardship and food security challenges. Exhibit I, a map of farmland as of 2022 based on land use codes represents roughly 13,049 acres, less than 4% of the total county land mass (approximately the size of the Town of Matthews). County farmland is some of the richest soils in the state for growing crops, and raising livestock. According to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, agriculture contributes \$92.9 billion to the states economy and makes agriculture North Carolina’s #1 industry. The USDA 2020 agricultural census reports that Mecklenburg farmers also contribute to the state’s #1 national ranking for poultry and eggs. Mecklenburg County is home to some of the largest private greenhouses in North Carolina. This translates into agricultural revenue of \$178 million and has earned our county’s #1 ranking for “other crops”. Properly managed for conservation, farmland is the first line of defense for natural hazard mitigation with trees buffering severe winds and absorbing rain. Working lands protect water quality, providing buffers and filtering runoff into streams. Farmers are stewards for soil, air, and water quality in their care for and harvesting of trees. They maintain healthy soil for food production, open pastures, and forested land for timber and carbon capture to offset greenhouse gas emissions.

Mecklenburg County farmland is at risk. An analysis by the American Farmland Trust in their study, “State of the State: Farms Under Threat” found from 2001– 2016, North Carolina converted 572,000 acres of working agricultural land into industrial/ commercial/residential development. Growth trends demonstrate a strong correlation to loss of farmland during a similar time frame in Mecklenburg County. Farmers are aging and the number of farmers willing and/or able to succeed them is also decreasing. Legacy farm families, often in the 9<sup>th</sup> generation and owning 25 or more acres, admitted ambivalence over

the future of farming. New and beginning farmers, on the other hand, are seeking to buy land, but cannot find arable and affordable land.

Without farmland preservation policies in place, selling to a developer is often seen as the only outcome for some farmers. And without incentive programs for affordable land access for new farmers, the future of increasing local food production and building a sustainable and resilient food system is bleak.

Every acre lost to development reduces our resilience by decreasing land available for water quality and storm water management, local food production, reforestation for wood products, tree nurseries for urban tree canopy, and natural areas for future park and preserves. Farmers' decisions to keep or sell is being considered at the same time Environmental Stewardship Committee through the Environmental Leadership Action Plan is prioritizing land acquisition and environmental stewardship of county land. A successful plan will preserve and conserve working lands, invest in new farmers, and create a sustainable and resilient future for all.

MSWCD proposes the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners adopt the Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) that will link the limited, environmentally rich supply of farmland to the growing county demand for quality of life programs that support the food, land, and people of Mecklenburg County.

## **FPP Strategies: Driven by data and partnerships**

Proposed FPP strategies were developed in collaboration with farmers and other stakeholders. In person listening sessions were conducted along with virtual meetings and workshops. Information was also gathered from phone interviews with farmers, county personnel and other government entities. Table I "Farmer Challenges 2022 summarizes farmer concerns cited in these sessions. The strategies also reflect information from farmer interviews conducted by UNC Charlotte who partnered with MSWCD in 2017 as part of initial research into farmland preservation and the efficacy of establishing a Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance (VAD). A VAD would require farmers to define farmland clusters or "districts" which would declare the presence of farmland through road signage and land records and promote the farmers interests to county leaders. While that effort stalled in 2019, and the UNC Charlotte report was not completed, the information gathered during the process was considered in our recommendations. Other information sources included reviews of farmland preservation plans and discussions with county and District staff from Wake, Durham, Lincoln and Forsythe Soil and Water Conservation Districts whose plans have been in operation for 15 years or more.

The proposed Farmland Preservation Plan for Mecklenburg County identifies four strategies that when implemented will fund and prioritize agriculture, farmland and farmers in County Environmental Leadership Action Plans, Environmental Stewardship Committee agendas, and County economic development programs.

1. Protect farmland through voluntary programs that incentivize land preservation, conservation and succession planning
2. Promote agricultural workforce development of next generation farmers
3. Promote agricultural economic development
4. Promote farmland preservation, conservation and equity through innovative public private partnership programs.

## **Strategy 1: Protect farmland through voluntary programs to incentivize land preservation, conservation and legacy planning**

Exhibit I, “ Land parcels in Mecklenburg County for agricultural, conservation horticultural, forest, or woodland based on Present Use Value and Land use code” identifies farmland in active use and is the best estimate of actively farmed land. PUV eligibility is reviewed by the county tax assessor’s office on a regular basis and is the most accurate indicator of active agricultural land use. With that in mind, there are 13, 049 acres of agricultural land that the FPP hopes to preserve either through conservation easements or other voluntary programs that could encourage farmers to defer or delay consideration of selling their land to a developer.

The most effective, legal tool and one measure of success for farmland preservation is the establishment of agricultural conservation agreements also called conservation easements on farmland. As of 2022 there are no agricultural conservation easements in Mecklenburg County. Agricultural conservation easements are permanent and transfer to another party certain development and use rights of the property, eliminating the possibility of new development but allowing land ownership to remain with the farmer. In exchange, the farmer can receive a cash payment for sale of a conservation easement and a tax deduction for the value donated in the form of a reduced value sale or donation of a conservation easement. But are conservation easements right for all Mecklenburg farmers? For some, their land is their 401K and the bank account tapped for emergencies. Farmers shared stories of selling land to pay for hospital bills or long-term care. In situations like those, selling to a developer may be viewed as the only viable option. Other farmers interviewed, stated a desire to keep the land preserved, ideally in family farming. Overall, it is clear from our meetings with farmers that there is a significant information void regarding the types, costs and benefits of easement programs available.

FPP proposes conservation easement workshops to provide information that will empower farmers with knowledge on conservation easements, provide subject matter expertise and access to technical and financial assistance to navigate the easement process. These sessions will address conservation easements in conjunction with legacy land planning. The workshops will be conducted in cooperation with the County, land trust organizations and state and federal conservation partners, to help farmers understand their land succession and associated tax alternatives to development.

### **FPP Recommendations:**

- a. **Conduct Biannual ‘Your Land, Your Legacy’ workshops** in cooperation with NC State University Cooperative Extension and local land trusts. These half-day long sessions educate farmers and County tax officials on conservation easement types and programs and Present Use Value (PUV) tax implications.
- b. **Conduct Biannual USDA conservation workshops.** These allow farmers to understand the current programs that would install a temporary easement (10-30 years) on their farms and in some cases, provide annual rental payments as a financial incentive. Permanent Conservation easements programs will also be discussed.
- c. **Partner with local land trusts to advocate for a conservation easement matching fund program..** There are two non-profit land trusts operating in Mecklenburg County that acquire and hold permanent conservation easements and agricultural conservation easements. The organizational infrastructure and expertise exist within Mecklenburg County to acquire and preserve farmland. Land Trusts, however, provide farmers an alternative focused on the farmer retaining land ownership along with placement of conservation easements. The challenge in this scenario for the land trusts is funding to acquire conservation easements.

- d. **Establish a Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance (VAD)**, a legislative tool that facilitates to local farmers to geographically organize their farms into logical “districts” and foster solidarity on land preservation and other agricultural concerns. Farmers establish a VAD advisory council representing agriculture interests to the County. A VAD increases farm eligibility for state and federal farmland protection grant funding. To date, Mecklenburg is one of only four of the 96 counties in North Carolina to NOT have a VAD.

Of these recommendations, item “e”- establishing a Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) ordinance is the most direct approach to measuring farmer interest in potential land preservation. Approving the FPP will give farmers a clear signal of county support for farmland preservation and lay the foundation for establishing a VAD.

## **Strategy 2: Promote agricultural workforce development of next generation farmers.**

For Mecklenburg County farmers, farming is a family business. Farm skills are developed and transferred through family members. Three of the farm families interviewed are North Carolina Century Farms, who epitomize sustainable farm stewardship. Century Farms, as the name suggests are farms who have been under continues family ownership and stewardship for at least 100 years. The economic and environmental sustainability of these farms results from years of trial and error, experimenting with new practices, adjusting to severe climate and business changes and benefiting from mentoring and management oversight by experienced farmer family mentor.

Not all Mecklenburg farms interviewed are Century Farms. There are several new farms owning less than 10 acres of land and have been farming for less than 10 years. The training journey of these farmers is similar but on smaller acreage. These small farms find land and mentors through community networks. In many cases, these newer farmers started as apprentices and farm managers on other farms and augmented they’re learning with state sponsored agricultural programs.

The FPP recognizes the mentor/apprenticeship training model as a proven workforce development strategy for next generation farmers who will be the critical leaders in the expansion of local sustainable food production. The local interest in farming over the last few years has generated new online training venues, increases in farmer collaboration events and incubator farm programs. One Charlotte farm has developed an apprentice program that is now registered with the State. The FPP will serve as a focal point for farmers to keep abreast of training programs and apprenticeship and funding opportunities. The FPP goals are to create over time a pipeline of “next generation farmers”, farmers who are trained to succeed the aging farmers and continue agricultural production and land stewardship.

### **FPP Recommendations:**

- a. **Create “Next Generation Farmer Guide”** consisting of available and State sponsored and local agriculture programs, apprenticeship opportunities and recommended sample curriculums.
- b. **Create a mentor/apprentice program connecting new farmers with experienced farmers**
- c. **c. Use existing and apply for additional state/federal/private funding for the purpose of new equipment, supplies and educational courses. Appropriate seed or matching grant funding, if applicable. Conduct a study to evaluate the creation of teaching farm program on public land.**

Creating a teaching farm in Mecklenburg County can be the most important and strategic investment for agricultural workforce development. A teaching farm can be small-acre incubator providing new farmers a local venue on which to learn a variety of agriculture and conservation practices. Produce grown on a teaching farm can be sold at a farmers market co-located with the farm. A teaching farm teaches farmers

and also the community what is required to grow healthy food in an environmentally sustainable manner. A successful teaching farm requires the same long-term financial commitment in land care, skilled farmer labor, and farm business management. It also incurs the same environmental risks associated with severe climate as any farm. The cost of converting land to a farm depends on several factors such as available acreage, soil type, water infrastructure, road access, proximity to neighborhoods and other farmers markets. Several farmers expressed interest in having a local teaching farm as an alternative to other incubator programs located in other counties. These farmers also expressed an interest in operating the teaching farm and creating a farmers market as well. The FPP proposes the County work with MSWCD to create a working group to discuss teaching farm options and possibly fund a study to evaluate the costs to implement and support a teaching farm and farmers market for a location to be identified by Mecklenburg Park and Recreation.

### **Strategy 3: Promote Agricultural Economic Development**

Farmers spoke openly in the one on one interview about their love of farming and the challenges of adjusting to loss of farmland due to urban expansion. Farm supply stores that these farms relied upon either closed or relocated due to diminishing number of farm customers. The remaining farms now incur added cost of transportation to obtain supplies such as fertilizer and fuel already characterized by rising costs. Fertilizer prices are higher in 2022 than in 2021 and continue to fluctuate in response to the war in Ukraine. These high costs and in some cases the absence of affordable crop insurance put farmers' livelihoods, especially those of smaller farms, at risk. The pandemic, severe climate changes and global economic crises highlighted fragility of the global supply chain and its direct impact on the local food system. The disruptions not only manifested in empty shelves in retail food stores, it affected the very source of food production: the supply of and access to fertilizers, feed and other inputs farmers need to grow and harvest crops and feed their animals. The FPP cannot resolve global supply chain issues but can promote programs to help farmers, where possible, lower operational costs through soil and water conservation methods designed to increase farm productivity and profitability.

#### **Lower Operational Costs**

The mission of Soil and Water Conservation Districts is to conserve natural resources through locally led, voluntary programs. With historic roots in the Dust Bowl, conservation districts help farmers minimize soil erosion and conserve water, thus protecting their crops livestock and livelihoods. That mission has expanded to include urban landscapes also impacted by extreme weather with erosion exacerbated through the increase in development.

The FPP through the MSWCD will continue to provide the following incentive based, or cost share, state and Federal conservation programs. Eligible farmers receive up to 75% cost reimbursement for practices implemented under these programs:

- **AgWRAP** (Agriculture Water Resource Assistance Program)— helps farmers identify opportunities to increase water efficiency, availability, and storage for agricultural purposes. Some examples include installing wells, retention ponds and irrigation systems.
- **ACSP** (Agricultural Cost-Share Program)— addresses nonpoint source pollution by providing technical and financial resources through a voluntary, incentive-based program designed to improve water quality through the installation of various best management practices (BMP's) on agricultural lands directly involved with agriculture production. Improving water quality through stream bank stabilization is an important practice area for MSWCD. Ag cost-share may help install fences to keep livestock out of streams, protect heavy use areas where livestock feed, or improve grazing pastureland. We also provide wells and water efficient irrigation solutions.

- **CCAP** (Community Conservation Assistance Program)— focused on nonpoint source pollution in non-agricultural communities. For urban residents, the Community Conservation Assistance Program (CCAP) can help with practices as involved as major stream bank stabilization projects or as simple as a backyard rain garden.
- **EQIP** (Environmental Quality Incentives Program)—The USDA-NRCS program promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals for agricultural producers. This program is voluntary and provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers and non-industrial forest managers to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits such as improved water and air quality, conserved ground and surface water, increased soil health and reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, improved or created wildlife habitat, and mitigation against drought and increasing weather volatility.

The 2022 Farm Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act provide significant funding increases for EQIP and other voluntary programs administered by the local NRCS staff and with the assistance of MSWCD. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) in September 2022 is making \$500 million in grants available to increase American-made fertilizer production to spur competition and combat price hikes on U.S. farmers caused by the war in Ukraine. The MSWCD will serve as a focal point for farmers to learn about grant funding and will link farmers with state and federal resources for these funding opportunities.

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and the NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation (NC Foundation) are key conservation partners and primary sources for local conservation districts to build capacity through grant funding. The MSWCD will pursue a recently announced \$90 Million competitive grant funding through NACD. The NACD program prioritizes and encourages equity-focused conservation initiatives such as those proposed in the FPP.

### **Increase Revenue and Profitability**

Farmers also discussed their visions for increasing farm revenue and profitability through four primary expansion strategies.

1. Increase Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions and direct on-premise consumer sales.
2. Agritourism from wedding venues, tractor pull tournaments, pick your own pumpkins and more. According to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service farm agritourism revenue more than tripled between 2002 and 2017. Adjusted for inflation, agritourism revenue grew from \$704 million in 2012 to almost \$950 million in 2017. A virtual information session on agritourism was held in February 2022 where NCDA C&S presented agritourism to farmers and county personnel seeking to understand how best to facilitate that growing business.
3. Value added processing, or as one farmer phrased it, “getting pickles into jars” as a means to maximize the use of produce a creating additional products to sell, which minimizes food waste and maximizes profitability. Value added processing produce can be seen at famers markets in a variety of specialty value products like flower infused pastas, flavored honey, soaps, oils, pet food, candles and more.
4. Grant funding for innovative agricultural opportunities such as exploring solar farming and carbon market planning.

The Present Use Value (PUV) was frequently mentioned as the only state program that helps their farms remain in business. The PUV program, enacted in 1974 via North Carolina State Statute 105-277 appraises and therefore calculates property tax on eligible farmland at a “present use”, or lower valuation than traditional commercial/residential property. Not all farmers interviewed qualified for the PUV program. Those that did not qualify, did not meet the minimum acreage requirement and are challenged acquire

the needed acreage due to the cost of land. Those enrolled in PUV were clear that any effort to legislatively change the current program could have potentially disastrous effects on the sustainability of their family farm.

### **FPP Recommendations**

- a. **Include MSWCD conservation program reporting in County Storm Water monthly meetings,** Environmental Stewardship Committee meetings, as needed and other water quality events. This will highlight how MSWCD voluntary water quality programs contribute to achieving County Storm water goals in both agricultural and urban landscapes. It will further serve to illuminate the environmental stewardship practices of many county farmers.
- b. **Establish Agriculture Economic Mini Grant program.** This program would provide funding for farmers and not for profit organizations in support of local agriculture programs with special focus on supporting efforts that address food security. **Funding would come from a combination of state, national and private philanthropic sources.**
- c. **Provide tax rebate program for non-PUV bona fide farms.** **The FPP proposes to research best practices within the state and other conservation districts that provide incentives to farmers that do not meet the acreage minimums to qualify for the Present Use Value (PUV) program.**
- d. **Explore the feasibility of streamlining permitting process for value-added marketers/farmers.** Collaborate with farmers and “value added businesses”- businesses who source local produce to create specialty foods- and county regulators to create simplified permitting template and identify opportunities to streamline approval process. The District will Explore the feasibility of streamlining permitting process for value-added marketers.
- e. **Communicate funding opportunities to local farmers.** The FPP will provide an organizational focal point to Communicate funding opportunities to local farmers
- f. **Conduct biannual Agritourism Weeks** to celebrate local farmers. Weeklong festivities on local farm can be scheduled during National Agricultural Week (March) and National Farmer Day in October. Agritourism is an importance source of income for North Carolina farmers and specifically supported by state legislation.
- g. **Conduct bi-annual farmer showcase** for farmers and agricultural policy and business organizations to collaborate on best practices and explore solution to shared problem

### **Strategy 4: Promote farmland preservation, conservation and equity through innovative public private partnerships**

The Farmland Preservation Plan takes a holistic view of working land preservation and proposes program delivery through public/private partnerships. Executed over time, the FPP will significantly increase regional food production, protect soil and water quality, establish agricultural workforce development program, seed economic mobility and create pathways to land ownership that would not otherwise be possible. The success of the FPP is measured by the degree to which it helps the county achieve its environmental stewardship, equity and socio-economic goals.

Exhibits I and II serve as the baseline from which to design the FPP program strategy and success metrics for land preservation, conservation, agricultural production and food system expansion.

Exhibit I, Map of Agricultural Land based on Land use codes and Present Use Value enrollment, is a real time snapshot of farmland under active production. There are 13, 049.54 acres of agricultural land. In addition, there is 732 acres parkland with an agricultural component and a projection of 160 acres conservation land that could be impacted in the near term based on development plans.

This map serves two purposes. The first is a preliminary identification of farmland for increased food production and potential future conservation easements. The second use is to project the environmental impact that can result from loss of farmland through increase in run off should the land be developed and replaced with impervious surfaces. Current data suggests a conservative estimate of the loss of approximately 160 acres of agricultural land, which equates to 4.3 million gallons of additional storm water run off and sedimentation into our streams. The loss of trees from forested land and its impact on soil erosion and air quality is not represented on this map. Nor is the impact on the cost of increasing municipal services such as roads, schools needed to accompany population growth reflected.

Exhibit II, Food Desert and Food System map, identifies local food pantries, mobile food pantry stops, food banks, senior mobile markets, farmers markets and FreshList participating establishments. This map also serves two purposes. First, it clearly identifies the current food system that promotes grow local, buy local culture and a circular economy where farms and business donate excess produce to mobile delivery services like The Bulb who delivers donated produce to food desert communities. The second purpose of the map is to highlight where the food system services food deserts and where it does. It serves as a means to target substantial food access improvement.

FPP proposes two programs that will leverage both maps to build a strategy that over time will preserve farmland, increase green space, create teaching farms, increased food production and increase fresh food access. The FPP will create a model of Mecklenburg Resilience, a product of a well-executed Farmland Preservation Plan.

## **1) The Working Farms Fund (WFF)**

**The Working Farms Fund is an innovative farmland preservation program launched in 2021 by** The Conservation Fund (CF). The program preserves farmland, invests in agricultural production of that land and provides a patient pathway to land ownership for next generation farmers. The WFF model targets urban regions where farmland is under threat, demand for local, healthy food is increasing as rapidly as food insecurity, and where leadership is seeking transformational solutions for a more resilient food system. Currently, WFF is operating in rural Atlanta and Chicago. The program has a dual mission to address environmental and economic sustainability of the land. It employs a ‘Buy, Invest, Protect, and Sell’ model—buy land on behalf of the farmer in a lease to own scenario, invest in the farmer and on farm infrastructure with business, technical and market resources, and permanently protect the land with a conservation easement which lowers the price of the farm and facilitates the final land sale to the farmer with proceeds then reinvested in the next WFF purchase. The primary funding sources for WFF are Federal, State, and philanthropic funding. Any local government contributions would primarily be to provide matching funds to support the purchase of conservation easements – permanently protecting the farm and making it more affordable for the farmer.

The original pilot of the in the larger metro Atlanta area has in its first year purchased and conserved 6,478 acres of farmland and created farm ownership pathways for thirty new 30 next generation farmers. Eighty three percent (83%) of the farm businesses are minority/immigrant/women owned underscoring the value of the WFF as a solution for not only farmland preservation, but also equity in land access, social capital, and funding and land ownership.

The Conservation Fund worked with MSWCD to explore the efficacy of establishing Charlotte Mecklenburg region as an expansion site to include farmland in surrounding counties. Meetings with farmers and corporate sponsors were held from June through October. On October 31, 2022, Stacy Funderburke, Regional Counsel and Georgia & Alabama Associate State Director confirmed CF's intention to expand the WFF to Charlotte/Mecklenburg.



*“We anticipate the launch of Working Farms Fund Charlotte in 2023. We will need a number of key partnerships to make that launch a success. We believe Charlotte’s and Mecklenburg County’s support for a Farmland Preservation Plan is essential for our success, as we build a program for the larger Charlotte metro area. We look forward to working with you to build a more equitable, healthier and resilient local food system for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, as well as the surrounding region.”*

The WFF incorporates FPP key elements including land preservation, conservation and workforce and economic development. FPP recommends a WFF strategy where MSWCD and FPP stakeholders work with CF to **formalize farmland preservation, conservation, and equity through innovative public-private partnerships. Strategies to implement this include**

- a. Establish Five Year Plan that identifies and prioritizes potential farmland acreage for acquisition
- b. Develop Conservation easement funding strategy
- c. Develop Identifies soil and water conservation technical and financial assistance strategy
- d. Identifies next generation farmer pipeline and workforce development strategy
- e. Establish DEI partnership with Johnson C. Smith University

## **2). Food deserts and Equity in Mecklenburg County**

The FPP proposes a partnership with Johnson C. Smith University, Center for Renewably Energy and Sustainability, the Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District (MSWCD) and the NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation to promote sustainable agriculture conservation and production with and intentional focus on food security. This partnership will leverage the food desert location information from Exhibit II and build a strategy that addresses the unique challenges of sustainable agriculture and food access in an urban setting. The partnership will focus on three goals:

- a. **Support the development of future land ownership opportunities for next generation black farmers..** Johnson C Smith will be the DEI representative on the WFF stakeholder team. Black farmer operates North Carolina census data reports of 46000 farms only 2099 or 3%. Several factors contribute to this historical and continuous disparity of generational lack of land ownership including unfair distribution of resources and predatory lending. Equitable access to resources, capital and land are needed to level the playing field and help Black farmers prosper and lay the foundation for upward mobility for their families and the communities as a whole. Long-standing, critical issues of food insecurity and upward mobility can only be addressed with explicit policy change and intentional partnerships in strategic, economically viable areas of growth
- b. **Develop options to expand food access and combat food deserts, for Mecklenburg County residents.** Charlotte’s food desert communities in the historic west end has been a goal of Johnson C. Smith University. Sustainability Village is a JCSU initiative that was launched in 2013 to intentionally and inclusively address food insecurity in the Historic West End of Charlotte, NC, a predominantly Black residential and business area adversely affected by urban sprawl and gentrification.
- c. **Partner with the MSWCD and the NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation to pursue grants.** The hope is a grant can enable JCSU students to develop carbon capture and measurement skills to complement the JCSU agricultural sustainability conservation curriculum. The carbon farm planning skills will enable students to potentially play a role in the nascent industry of carbon farm planning for local farmers. JCSU students would be paid interns working with MSWCD staff earning valuable practical experience implementing soil and water quality best management practices on local farms and urban settings in the Mecklenburg County including he Historic West End.

## **Governance, Organizational Structure and Funding**

The Mecklenburg Soil and Water Conservation District (MSWCD) is a local government entity established by NC General Statute 139 shall be responsible for and will work in collaboration with Mecklenburg County, Office of the County Manager in the execution of the Farmland Preservation Plan.

### **Staffing**

The Office of the County Manager (CMO) shall establish a full time Farmland Preservation Plan Coordinator (FPC) position within the CMO. The FPC shall report to the CMO and collaborate with MSWCD on Farmland Preservation Program development.

### **Agriculture Advisory Board (AAB)**

The MSWCD and County Manager's office shall establish an **Agriculture Advisory Board**, comprised of local farmers who will advise on the development of Farmland Preservation Program priorities and be the voice of farmers to Mecklenburg County leadership.

### **Funding**

Funding for the Farmland Preservation Plan will come for three primary sources: Mecklenburg County, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and other granting organizations.

It is proposed that Mecklenburg County establish a Memorandum of Agreement with MSWCD to establish the Farmland Preservation Coordinator (FPC) position, FPC requirements and work plan. The MOA shall identify shared FPP goals as well as specific responsibilities for the FPC and the District to achieving those goals.

The MSWCD support for FPP will come from existing staff with increases in capacity obtained through partnerships and funding from the NCDA&CS and other sources outside of Mecklenburg County.

Funding for mini grant programs will be obtained from state and national granting organizations including the North Carolina Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation (NC Foundation) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). Both organizations are strategically chartered to support the Conservation Districts and provide competitive funding for capacity building, strategic planning and technical assistance. The MSWCD has worked successfully with both organizations.

## **Successful Farmland Preservation: Expanding regional agricultural production, resilience, and equity.**

A successful Farmland Preservation Plan is characterized by active participation of Mecklenburg farmers, Johnson C. Smith University and key partners such as The Conservation Fund in the execution of the FPP land acquisition, workforce and economic development strategies and defining how those strategies result in measurable outcomes that meet the County's goals for equity, conservation stewardship and food access.

### **More farms and farmers**

**The FPP will increase the number of new farms and farmers.** Mecklenburg farmers will work with The Conservation Fund and identify farmers willing to participate in the WFF program. They will influence how much of the remaining of farmland can be preserved and identify additional land that could be acquired for agricultural use. Farmers will also identify farmland in surrounding counties whose increased production will impact regional food access.

**Mecklenburg farmers will mentor new farmers** and help them with business planning and production expertise. Success will be measured by increase in farmer participation as mentor or new farmer mentee.

**Mecklenburg farmers will evaluate how best to establish a VAD** ordinance for Mecklenburg County, the clearest indication of the future success of a Farmland Preservation Plan

## **Equity**

**FPP success is defined by increased land ownership and economic development support for black farmers.** The FPP team interviewed two black farmers with farms in Charlotte. Both were on less than 10 acres and did not presently qualify for the Present Use Value Taxation program. One expressed frustration in barriers to expansion due to the cost and availability of arable land. Their frustration is not new. There has been acknowledgment of unfair distribution of resources and predatory lending against Black farmers. However, legislation that attempts to repair historical disparities in financing and funding are still being litigated delaying remedies that attempt to make Black farmers whole as it relates to access and opportunity in NC and other states.

In 2021, Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles announced to the community her strategy for intentional policy-equity and sustainability partners by creating the Mayor's Race, Equity, and Inclusion (MREI) initiative. Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU)\_Sustainability Village is one of those initiatives launched in 2013 to intentionally and inclusively address food insecurity in the Historic West End of Charlotte, NC, a predominantly Black residential and business area adversely impacted by urban sprawl and gentrification.

The FPP is an opportunity to align with Mayor Lyles' initiative and will include black farmers and JCSU as WFF candidate landowners as well as workforce development mentors and educators for new farmers. JCSU's Sustainability Village is particular, brings a uniquely urban profile to local agriculture and represents not only the next generation of black farmers, but with their focus on renewable energy, they also represent the next generation of sustainability professionals.

## **Conclusion:**

The Farmland Preservation (FPP) for Mecklenburg County is a strategic commitment to equity and protecting working lands—farmland, farm families, and their unique and significant contribution to the local economy and our social, cultural, and environmental quality of life. The Plan embraces and preserves agricultural land as a critical asset to be nurtured for current and future generations. We are the county with the fewest number of remaining farms, but likely the largest food demand hub in the State representing a level of economic power that can build a resilient regional food system.

The Farmland Preservation Plan is a BIG IDEA that invests in a very small community and exponentially increases environmental and quality of life service that benefits everyone. In the long run, farmland preservation will be the most cost-effective means to keep our streams clean, our air pure and our communities supplied with fresh food.