

Draft Implementation Plan for Natural and Cultural Assets of James City County Updated 08/05/22

This document lists the existing goals and objectives and a recommended implementation plan. These strategies also need timeframes, benchmarks, and responsible parties. Review and edit ideas and add new implementation recommendations or funding sources. This is a “draft” starting point for input. New ideas may still be added from the public meeting, James City County staff or the NCAMC group.

Goal 1: Conserve and protect highest valued natural habitat cores and connecting corridors to support wildlife, trails and greenways, scenic vistas, and cultural and recreational values.

Rationale: Landscapes that are large and intact can support a multitude of native species. These larger habitats are known as habitat cores and they not only protect native species and biodiversity, but they also help recharge groundwater and support healthy surface waters that are used for water supply and buffer inland communities from storms as cost-effective stormwater management and hazard mitigation measures. The better connected these large blocks of habitat are, the more resilient they are to impacts such as invasive species encroachment, storms, and other disturbances. Connecting natural corridors also support these habitat cores. If one area is disturbed, connecting corridors allow species to move and repopulate the disturbed area over time. These connecting corridors also can provide future opportunities for trails and greenways if they are suitably located and available for public access.

Objectives:

- a. Update the greenway plan to include key corridors identified in this plan.

Recommendation: James City County will update and renew the County’s Greenway Plan and utilize the maps of cores and corridors to inform potential greenway locations and connectivity.

- b. Conduct an education campaign for landowners.

Recommendations: The County will create a webpage for landowners with links to local conservation project ideas including planting native plants, creating a pollinator garden and links to the Colonial SWCD (Soil and Water Conservation District) page and the Plant Hampton Roads Natives Page. The County can also highlight existing demonstration gardens (e.g., Freedom Park pollinator garden) and consider planting additional demonstration gardens at the County offices or parks. The County can also promote membership and participation in the John Clayton Chapter of the Native Plant Society.

- c. Publish the map of high value cores and corridors and provide design guidance for developers about how to conserve them.

Recommendations: The County can provide new design guidance on its development webpage along with guiding principles for minimizing habitat disturbance. See appendix XX of this report for examples. New development proposals can be examined for how well they support these design principles.

The County should examine its codes to determine whether exceptions can be offered in any County codes to allow for minimization of habitat disturbance. Examples include but are not limited to narrowing sidewalks, allowing natural areas to count for required open spaces (as long as some uses are allowed such as trails or

wildlife viewing), allowing for density bonuses for leaving more acreage in natural open space and other tools.

- d. Add conservation cores and corridors as additional criteria for County Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program.

Recommendations: Adopt a new standard and associated points for sites considered as for the County's PDR program. Example: add XX points to the scoring for sites that include 30% or more of an existing habitat core and 30% for sites that support a key connecting corridor. Add XX additional points for properties that support 50% or greater of natural and cultural assets.

- e. Use the natural and cultural assets maps and their rankings as highly valued or at risk to inform the County's Greenspace Program acquisitions or plans.

Recommendations: Utilize the maps to 1) inform the County of opportunities for the Greenspace Program and 2) evaluate proposals as to whether they include highest values cores and corridors.

- f. Use Assets Risk Map to identify areas where public access or parks will be flooded and may need expansion.

Recommendations: James City County Parks and Recreation Department to create plans for each park that may be impacted. Plans may entail moving boat ramps or parking, applying for funds to restore living shorelines in encroachment areas or in some cases, finding new access areas to make up for lost shoreline access.

- g. Work with the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation, Preservation Virginia, and the National Park Service at Jamestown, the 1607 Fort and Town Archaeological sites on work to protect Jamestown Island.

Recommendations: Continue dialogue with these organizations to determine their plans for relocating archaeological assets and refuge areas for displaced wildlife. Determine which, if any, strategies require the support of James City County and develop recommendations for next steps. As this area is a major tourist attraction and holds invaluable resources, it is in all parties' best interests to identify strategies to adapt to future changes.

- h. Develop zoning tools and guidance for siting large-scale solar sites to avoid disturbing habitat or culture assets.

Recommendations: Create a staff working group to investigate ways to amend the County ordinances to address large-scale solar sites. Evaluate existing related guidance and processes for permitting large utility-scale solar sites and amend ordinances or include special use permit conditions that protect or enhance natural or cultural resources on such sites.

Draft new ordinance/siting policy for review by Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to adopt.

- i. Investigate ways to compensate landowners for keeping their land in forest cover.

Recommendations: Evaluate suite of tools that are legal to use in Virginia such as purchase of development rights, tax credits for forest conservation near important resources, technical assistance, planned forestry rotations to allow land to be re-grown and timbered where appropriate to facilitate continued forest cover over the long term, or fee simple purchase.

- j. Encourage land trusts to seek voluntary conservation easements for properties with natural and cultural assets.

Recommendations: Meet with local land trusts to educate them about the high value landscapes (cores and corridors) and provide them with data to use in setting strategies to enlist landowners in adopting conservation easements.

- k. Incentivize developers to conserve substantial amounts of high-quality habitat cores or conservation corridors.

Recommendations: Evaluate potential incentives such as density bonuses, expedited permitting, and other tools to help the development community conserve high value habitats when creating subdivision plans.

Develop a fact sheet of benefits for conservation design and preservation of open spaces (see Conservation Development guidance from county consultants).

Provide a workshop on design options and offer professional credits (CE, AICP, LAR credits) to engage local engineers and designers in preferred layouts and conservation design.

- l. Use maps to inform the County's Long Range Transportation Plans to inform road siting and design.

Recommendations:

Work with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to utilize the habitat cores and corridors maps in updating six-year road plans and utilize maps when siting future roads.

Share habitat corridor restoration opportunities with VDOT to consider for road project mitigation, as the state needs sites to offset construction impacts to waterways and wetlands. Evaluate whether any already planned roads (not yet fully sited or designed) might be modified to reduce impacts to cores and corridors.

Goal 2: Conserve and protect high value agricultural soils and historic farms to support the agricultural economy and continue the County's agrarian heritage.

Rationale: Agricultural soils support local food production and the local agrarian economy. As the County continues to grow, protection of high value soils which are location specific is more important than ever. Many of the iconic views and historic places are supported by the many farms and fields that spread across this historic landscape. Farms also provide habitat for birds such as quail, owls, amphibians, small mammals, and beneficial insects such as butterflies and dragonflies. These landscapes need additional support to continue to thrive as pressures from growth encroach on their borders. Helping farmers find other ways to subsidize their incomes through heritage tourism (e.g., pick-your own or pet-your-own farms) can assure that farms can weather economic downturns or losses of markets. Farms also provide avenues for species to move across the landscape and provide bridges between high value habitat cores.

The County can play a role in helping farmers realize more economic values from their lands and minimize costs for farmers for their land's value through programs such as Purchase of Development Rights or Use Value Taxation. In addition, as "farm to table" has expanded as a desired marketing tool for restaurant and hotels, there may be more smaller farms that come up and also need help developing farm plans and marketing of goods and services. A great challenge is the aging of farmers (a national problem) and the lack of investments for retirement such that there may be no next generation to take over the family farm. The average age of a Virginia farmer is 58 years old (Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services). Programs such as farm link help link new farmers who lack land and resources with soon-to- retire farmers who want to pass their land and equipment to those who want to maintain the farm into the future. The more the County can support its farms the more it will continue to have a healthy landscape and a diverse economy.

Objectives:

- a. Include high value agriculture soils maps in County Geographic Information System layers and property information and recommend minimal disturbance of those soils during development (especially for utility solar sites).

Recommendations:

As part of solar utility siting guidance/requirements, include avoidance of disturbance of high value soils as well as standards for stormwater management to avoid erosion.

Incentivize developers to conserve areas with high value agricultural soils.

- b. Facilitate continued agricultural uses by promoting the farm link program to help young farmers and retiring farmers connect and make plans to keep the land in agriculture
<https://virginiafarmlink.org/>.

Recommendations: Work with the Colonial SWCD to host an education campaign about farm link and host an educational workshop. Attend events such as Farm Bureau Annual meeting to discuss and promote farm link and steps to enlist more farmers.

- c. Promote expansion of existing agricultural and forestal districts (AFDs) to those farms with highest value agricultural soils that are not currently within the district.

Recommendations: Create an outreach campaign to landowners who meet this criterion and promote their inclusion in the districts.

- d. Create a heritage tourism route (map and application) to direct visitors and residents to current agritourism sites and promote this through <https://www.virginia.org/places-to-visit/regions/hampton-roads/williamsburg/> and on the County's website <https://explorejccva.com/2928/AgritourismFarming>.

Recommendations:

Post the existing recreation and culture maps on the County's website so people can navigate to these locations.

Explore options to better promote these sites (beyond only visiting Jamestowne and the national battlefields). Create a local brochure (see examples from Lancaster County, Virginia). Explore and promote grants available from the state at <https://www.vatc.org/grants/>. Obtain funding to develop an app.

- e. Host a workshop on agritourism to bring more farms into the tourism network to provide additional revenue for farms to keep them in business.

Recommendations: Work with the local farm bureau, Colonial SWCD and interested residents to design and implement a curriculum for how to start or enhance an agritourism business. Provide the steps for zoning (if any), crowd management, sales, advertising, and revenue types (e.g., pick your own, farm stands, day on the farm festivals etc.) Note that several County residents have expressed interest in helping put this together and hosting the event.

Use the workshop to develop an on-going committee to continue to support and promote agritourism.

Consider applying for a grant to support this work. <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/agriculture-afid-planning-grants.shtml>

- f. Prior to future Agricultural and Forestal District (AFD) renewals, continue to explore lengthening the AFD terms with property owners in order to promote the long-term stewardship of highly valued landscapes.

Recommendations: Form a staff working group to evaluate the pros and cons and share information on pros/cons with property owners and AFD committee before next renewal period. Survey property owners and present results for the AFD committee and Board of Supervisors to consider.

Goal 3: Facilitate voluntary planting projects to extend the width of vegetated buffers to serve as wildlife corridors along the County's waterways and to protect water quality.

Rationale: Stream buffers can remove 85% or more of the nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment from reaching river tributaries. The wider the buffer, the more pollutants are removed. Vegetated stream buffers also serve as key corridors for wildlife movement to facilitate local species abundance. They also can buffer shoreline properties from storms and wind and wave impacts (fetch). Vegetated buffers also stabilize banks preventing excessive erosion which can cause sediment pollution and clog waterways, making them difficult to navigate. Better water quality also supports other uses such as fishing, aquaculture, boating, and swimming. The Commonwealth of Virginia also needs to plant tens of millions of new trees along streams to meet its goal to protect the Chesapeake Bay and James City County can be a key partner in this effort. There are also many programs available to pay landowners to leave riparian areas forested such as from the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) which pays for land that is not harvested for forestry along rivers, streams, and bays. The USDA also provides funding to fence cattle from streams and restore streamside forests through its CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program).

Objectives:

- a. Educate landowners on the importance of healthy vegetated buffers for both water quality and wildlife.

Recommendations:

Provide a fact sheet or link from the County's website to educational materials about buffers.

Host a local workshop with VDOF for landowners interested in having buffers on their properties. Target landowners with property along identified habitat corridors that could benefit from additional forested buffers.

Promote the Virginia for Clean Water grant program that funds buffers and consider applying for forestry planting funds from VDOF <https://dof.virginia.gov/urban-community-forestry/urban-forestry-community-assistance/virginia-trees-for-clean-water-grant-program/>.

Partner with the James River Buffer program to conduct additional outreach to riparian landowners. <https://www.jamesriverbuffers.org/> They are currently intensively working in the upper and middle watershed. Consider working with them in the future to bring this effort to the lower James watershed.

- b. Partner with VDOF to plant stream buffers along streams and prioritize those that serve as connections between highly valued landscapes.

Recommendation: Meet with staff from the VDOF to determine who to outreach to landowners engaged in forestry to use the states buffer funding program. Target those properties that serve as main corridors or habitat cores.

- c. Seek an increase in the County's Community Rating System points to allow for discounted flood insurance premiums for landowners.

Recommendation: Evaluate the Recommendations that this plan includes to determine whether and how they can meet criteria to lower the county's flood risk. Note that this plan itself may qualify for points reduction. To do so also requires adding protection of RTE (Rare, Threatened and Endangered) species as a goal. For more see: <https://wetlandswatch.org/crs-guide>

- d. As per new Virginia Department of Environmental Quality requirements, create and adopt guidance/ standards for stormwater management for utility-scale solar developments to prevent new stormwater impacts.

Recommendation: This effort is currently underway (note to County: status unclear).

Goal 4: Promote biodiverse landscapes to improve habitats within the built environment.

Rationale: Naturally healthy landscapes in the coastal plain are also biologically diverse and support a multitude of native species. However, when developments are built, they usually remove the first 1-2 feet of topsoil resulting in poor quality and less supportive soils, while replacing lost forested areas with only a few different types of trees. To support native insects such as pollinators that promote healthy landscapes and food, local native birds, and to ensure that neighborhoods and developed areas are well shaded and pleasant and healthful for residents, the County should upgrade its requirements for tree planting. Well-treed neighborhoods also hold their financial value. Lower tree diversity can result in problems later on. When there are only a few species of trees and one tree gets diseases (e.g., Dutch elm disease, or Emerald Ash Border, crepe myrtle bark scale) then a development may be left with few or no trees. Trees also need adequate soil volume to provide structural support and nutrients. Trees planted in shallow areas may only live 9 years (the average age of an urban tree). This may result in treeless, and hotter neighborhoods of the future. Trees also uptake stormwater and reduce flooding. Trees also support home values and clean the air of pollutants, so having well treed neighborhoods is important for community well-being.

Objectives:

- a. Consider updating the existing code for street tree requirements in new developments to specify biodiverse street tree plantings of at least five different species of street/yard trees are planted, to be varied at the block level.

Recommendations:

Amend the County code to add a tree diversity requirement.

Develop a brochure for residents about the importance of healthy trees and how to care for newly planted trees.

- b. Add a soil volume requirement to tree planting strips (currently specified as only 5 feet wide) to ensure adequate planting depth and tree survival.

Recommendations:

Research soil volume requirement and develop new code and illustrations.

Consider including planting specifications on site plans to ensure that trees are planted properly.

Also continue to promote existing option to bond landscaping to defer planting times to allow a developer to plant trees in the ideal timeframes (e.g., dormant seasons).

- c. Review the recommended tree list to ensure it includes suitable species by locations (streets, yards, parking lots).

Recommendations:

Work with the VDOF's Forestry's Urban and Community Forestry Program to develop a tree list suitable for the coastal plain and code the trees by suitability for locations.

Consult with TreesVA and other local experts to develop the final list. Ensure that the list contains species that can be easily obtained from local or regional nurseries. Consider hiring an outside contractor to complete the list.

Publish the new list on the County's website and conduct outreach to local landscape designers, engineering firms and developers to make them aware of the list and how to utilize it in developing tree specs for site plans.