

Cherokee Scout

Farmers discuss prevention of vanishing county farmland

Group discusses ways for growers to enhance income

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Peachtree – Farmland in Cherokee County is being lost as developers gobble up farms, and few farmers make enough money to sustain themselves.

Those were identified as two of the most prominent problems as about 50 people, most of them local farmers, met Thursday night at McGuire's Millrace Farm to discuss ways farmland can be protected. The meeting was hosted by the Cherokee County Farmland Preservation Advisory Board.

"Transition from one generation to another is probably the most critical [problem] we have right now," said Debra Sloan, with the N.C. Department of Agriculture.

"A lot of farmland in North Carolina is lost due to no planning."

Keith Wood with the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service in Cherokee County said the county commissioners passed a Farmland Preservation ordinance in 1995. In 2008, a \$33,500 grant was awarded to come up with a plan. The Farmland Protection Plan is about 95 percent complete. Some main points of the plan were presented at the meeting.

The plan identifies different steps landowners can take to voluntarily preserve their farmland. When completed, the entire plan will be made available to the public.

The purpose of the plan is to help farmers preserve valuable farmland and to enhance the viability of farming by making it more profitable, Wood said.

"A lot of times farms are sold off because someone is tired of it or they are tight on money," he said.

Threats to farmland come from condemnation suits such as an interstate running through farm property and because of not enough estate planning. Often, siblings differ on what they want to do with farmland with some wanting to sell it off.

In 1940, Cherokee County had 2,000 farms. The N.C. Agricultural Census shows that the number of active



DWIGHT OTWELL/Cherokee Scout
 Audrey Ware, Bill Tipton, Johnny Shields and Jamie Cook (from left) discuss ways to make farming more profitable and how to preserve farmland. A group of Cherokee County farmers and landowners met Thursday to discuss the future of farming in the county.

farms had declined to 288 as of 2007, Wood said.

Farmers at the meeting came up with a few ideas, including:

- u Create a sale barn for produce and livestock.
- u Find funds for purchase of development rights for farmers' property.
- u Market produce with schools, hospitals, nursing homes, etc.
- u A lot of restaurants would love to buy locally if they can get what they want when they want it.
- u Set up a marketing network.

“Farmers need to stick together and work together [to make farming more profitable],” Wood said.

Most farmers present said they must work another job to make ends meet because there is so little money to be made from farming.

The Farmland Preservation Plan states that \$452 million a year is spent on food in western North Carolina but only 1 percent is spent on locally grown food. If each Cherokee County household spent just 10 percent on local food, it would mean \$3,565,920 to local farmers.

Some recommendations by the plan include:

- u Tax relief through present use value, which lessens property taxes for farmers
- u Creation of voluntary agricultural districts, which raises public awareness of local agriculture and slows the decline of farmland in the county and offers landowners some protection from encroachment of development. Enrollment in the program prohibits non-farm use or development of the farmland for a 10-year period, although landowners can withdraw without penalty.
- u Enhanced voluntary agricultural districts, in which a farmer will not sell the land or develop it for 10 years
- u Sell development rights to the land, but the land can still be farmed and the value of the land for development will be taken off the books, saving on taxes.
- u Market directly to local people instead of wholesalers.
- u Educate farmers to use new methods and marketing.
- u Work with the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee to promote easements in targeted areas
- u Promote conservation-based development by setting aside areas of the property for development around the rest of the land, which will still be used for farming.
- u Develop a monthly program for farmers such as the program in Polk County, Tenn., in which 40-60 farmers meet once a month for breakfast and discuss ways to enhance farming and profits.

“Farmers markets are one of the hottest things going now,” Wood said. “There is one in Murphy and one in

Andrews, but they often sell out by 11 a.m. I suggest having [a farmer's market] more than one day a week.”

The plan suggests setting up a Web site so that farmers could list what they will sell to the public. He also talked of hiring a marketing person to work for area farmers. He said they may be able to convince county commissioners to find funding for a marketing person if they can convince them that the position would pay for itself.

A number of the farmers indicated that they are interested in putting their land in voluntary agricultural districts.

“This meeting is important to see how many farmers are interested,” said Ernest Jones, a former Cherokee County commissioner and county manager.