



# FY25 Durham County Farmland Protection Advisory Board Report



Photo above is of Herndon Hills Farm, a permanently protected NC Bicentennial Farm located in Durham County on Massey Chapel Rd. Herndon Hills Farm is a certified-organic u-pick operation.



# Message from the Chair

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The Farmland Protection Advisory Board (FPAB) is very happy to share the 2025 Annual Report with you. In this report we provide an update on how our board has been working in partnership with multiple city, county, and federal agencies and the community to support the preservation of our Durham County farmland and the prosperity of our Durham farmers.

As in previous years, we have focused on our primary objective of protecting Durham County farmland by partnering with our Durham County Open Space group to approve five conservation easement applications to protect a total of 121 acres of farmland. Jointly our county was able to secure \$769,400 in funding to support more than 50% of easement value. It is anticipated that between 4-5 working lands conservation easement projects will close in the next fiscal year. Additionally, we approved 506 acres of new or renewed acreage into the Voluntary Agriculture District (VAD) program and partnered with Southern High School construction class to construct signs to mark these and existing VAD farms.

Critically, in addition to protecting farmland, we partnered with the Durham County Soil and Water agency on the Durham Agricultural Economic Development Grant process which saw the distribution of \$250,000 to support Durham County farming capacity. This grant process has enabled 28 farmer led projects and 3 school projects. These investments in the community are enabling infrastructure projects including school gardens, coolers, and wildlife exclusion fencing.

The Farmland Board was very grateful to partner with Durham County Soil and Water to host two educational breakfasts for our farming community this winter. These breakfasts were attended by 65 farmers and landowners with a focus on farm insurance and farm law. The Farmland Board also provided funding to four Durham Public School student-led agricultural projects helping to bring agricultural capabilities and awareness to our students and communities.

Another important area of focus for the FPAB this year has been engaging with the Durham City-County Planning Department as they have been translating the Durham County Strategic Plan into the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). We have been pleased with the partnership to support integration of our Strategic Plan inputs into the UDO – specifically around protecting the Urban Growth Boundary and ensuring that Durham City and County citizens can engage in agriculture across land use types. As the UDO is finalized this year, we will remain engaged to ensure that agricultural use definitions are inclusive and clear.

Finally, we partnered with Foothills Regional Commission to engage Durham County farmers and community stakeholders in surveys and public meetings to inform our update of the Durham County Farmland Preservation Plan. This plan will guide our Board's focus in the coming years as we continue to work with our Durham County partners to ensure we best support agriculture and meet the rapidly evolving future needs of our vibrant community. We are excited to finalize and approve this plan by the end of 2025. We have also been engaging with Durham Cooperative Extension and Open Space to provide input on how best to shape the Durham County Farm Campus to further support farming in Durham County; we expect great synergies in our Farmland Plan and the work of the Farm Campus.

~ This letter continues on page 2 of this report ~



As we look to 2026, we remain focused and excited to support the preservation of Durham County farmland and the success of the Durham County farmer. We are asking this Board for ongoing investments in the Agricultural Economic Development Grant Program, the funding of new farmland conservation easements and the funding of Voluntary Agricultural District signs, farmer breakfasts and discretionary support for community education and engagement.

We continue to believe that Durham is a unique place, and that our vibrant and diverse farming community holds special promise with our farmers and our farmland simultaneously connected to a deep agricultural history and to an exciting and innovative farming future. We believe that the investments our county makes in agriculture provide a critical path for our farmers, important support to our local economy and food security, and a point of pride and beacon of hope for our citizens. We remain deeply grateful to serve our community in partnership with this Durham Board of County Commissioners, Open Space, Soil and Water and Cooperative Extension to help fulfill this promise.

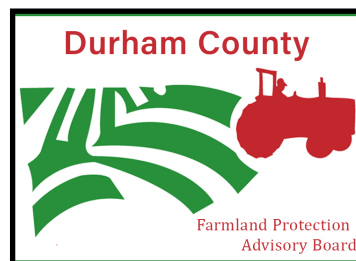
With Gratitude,

*Nicole Connelly*

Durham Farmland Protection Advisory Board Chairperson and  
Little River VAD Representative

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## MISSION

The Farmland Board shall foster the wise use of our farmland resources by working with farmers, the community, government entities and agencies, and other resources to identify and implement strategies for the preservation and enhancement of our farming community while protecting the land and soils for future generations.

## FY 2025 FPAB Budget Highlights

FPAB Budget	VAD Supplies	Farmer Breakfasts	Ag Program School Donations	Farmland Plan Revision Contractor Fee
\$3,375.00	\$982.63	\$334.22	\$1,029.13	\$1,000



Southern School of Energy and Sustainability's Construction Class under the guidance of Benjamin Rathnow continues to build VAD signs for the Farmland Board. The students learn another skill during their class on sign building. This year, the Farmland Board treated the class to pizza and dessert as a token of their appreciation.



## FY 2025 FPAB Budget Highlights (cont.)



24 students from Jordan High School participated in the Central Piedmont Junior Livestock Show. Funds supported clippers to prep



Northern High School Horticulture program is expanding their growing area.

Donation from the FPAB supported the purchase of fruit trees.



Supplied for RN Harris for students to have an opportunity to plant seeds to take home.



Riverside High School EC program used funds to purchase pots and soil for planting seeds for a large plant sale. The students were able to experience planting, caring for plants, and the marketing of the plants.



## Farmland Protection Plan Revision Underway



Durham County Soil & Water Conservation received a grant through the NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund to revise Durham's 2009 Farmland Protection Plan. The 2009 plan provided an extensive, detailed map of the direction the county wanted to take to best support the agricultural economy and landowners of Durham. The updated plan will provide insight to what

is needed by the ag community in 2025 and into the future.

The contractor hired for this task is Foothills Regional Commission. This group has utilized a farmer survey, interviews with stakeholders and farmers, and a community engagement event to learn more about the needs and desires of the agricultural community. This community input plays a vital role in the development of this plan. The FPAB and staff, have worked diligently throughout the year with Foothills Regional Commission to provide information and collect resources and photos to create an updated version of Durham's Farmland Protection Plan Revision. This plan will be made available Spring of 2026.



## Farmer & Landowner Breakfast Series

Each year the FPAB hosts breakfasts offering information for farmers and landowners on various topics. This year, 65 attendees heard from three presenters on topics useful to owning and operating a farm.



December Breakfast presentation on farm insurance.

The January Farmer Breakfast topic on farm law.



### **Breakfast #1** - Thursday, December 12th, 2024 from 8-10am

Farmers and Landowners met at Durham Farm Bureau to hear a presentation from a Farm Bureau agent and underwriter on farm insurance. This was a great conversation that brought many questions and laughs.

### **Breakfast #2** - Thursday, January 16th, 2024 from 8-10am

Landowners joined the Farmland Board members at the Durham Farm Bureau meeting room to hear a presentation on farm law from Annette Hiatt, Senior Attorney with the Land Loss Project.

## Board Participation in UDO

The Board strives to engage and learn from other county departments, nonprofits, state and federal agencies, etc. to stay abreast of new findings, proposals, and opportunities. The board invites speakers to their board meetings to present on current issues related to their mission.

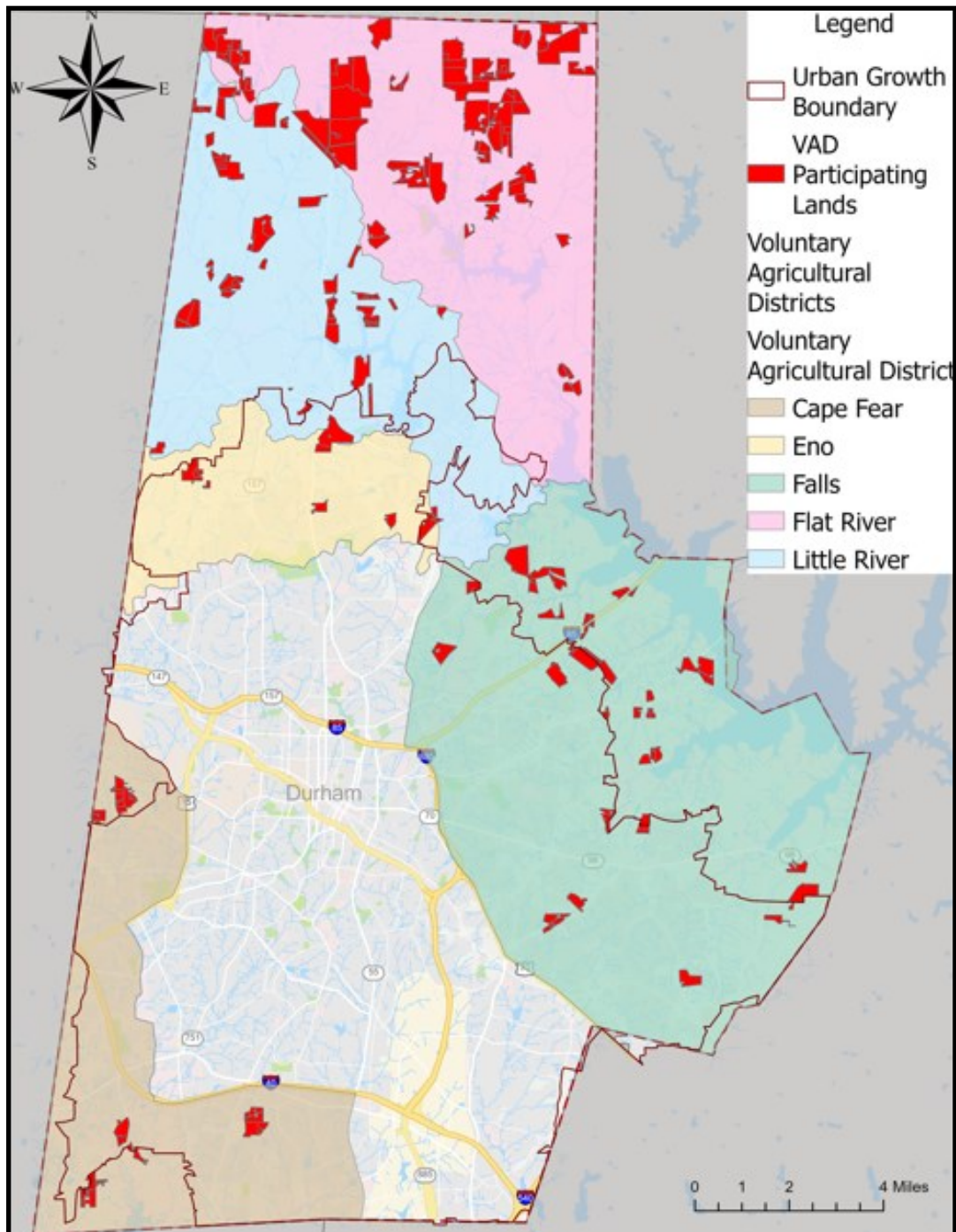
Recognizing the need for involvement in the UDO this past year, the Board not only heard from City-County Planners but attended numerous public meetings and office hours to best explain and educate the planners on the needs of the agriculture community.





## 2025 Voluntary Ag Districts

110 VAD participants; 251 land parcels; 9,101.37 acres



*Participation in the VAD program is voluntary. It provides recognition and public education of Durham's farms and encourages the economic and financial health of farming areas.*



## Farmland Protection & Conservation Easements

Farmland preservation is a significant part of Durham County's Open Space Program, led by the County's Open Space Division in the Engineering and Environmental Services Department. Since 2001, Durham County, with guidance from the Durham Farmland Protection Advisory Board, has preserved farm and forestland by purchasing development rights through conservation easements that permanently protect the land. County staff work with interested landowners and seek outside funding and donations that keep the program affordable. The land stays privately-owned for farming and/or forestry uses, but cannot be developed.



McFarland Farms is surrounded by ecologically-significant protected lands owned by the State for restoring unique diabase plant habitats and by the Army Corps for the protection of Falls Lake. This farm was protected in two phases over several years. 98 acres near Penny's Bend will forever remain undeveloped.

In August 2024, Durham County's Open Space program was invited by USDA-NRCS to become a "certified entity." This designation recognizes the County's good record working with landowners and federal partners to protect working lands, and may simplify administration of current and future grant awards. Additionally, in early 2025, Durham County Open Space secured funding from Army National Guard to protect farmland around Camp Butner. A third source of funding includes support from the City of Durham's Watershed Protection Program which will support the protection of a 19-acre farm property upstream of the Little River Reservoir.

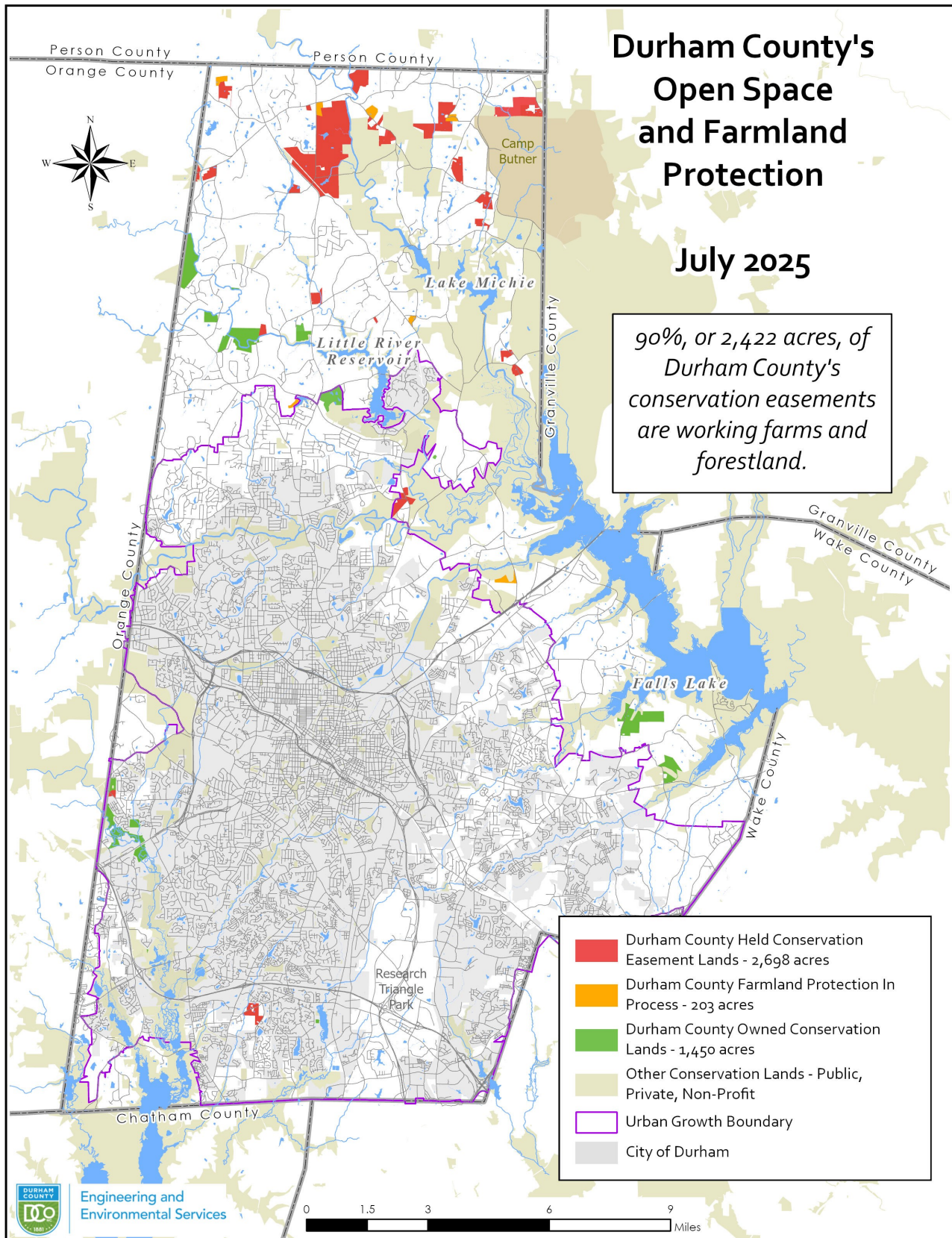
### Protected Farmland . . .

- provides farm and forest land for future generations.
- supports demand for local produce and products.
- provides valuable wildlife and native plant habitats.
- requires sound and sustainable farm management practices.
- preserves a significant part of Durham's history and way of life.
- is a significant and attractive part of our community's rural character and scenic values.
- provides opportunities for 'agri-tourism' that attract visitors from the greater Triangle area and beyond.
- makes economic sense: protected farmland does not create demand for

**In 2024-25 Durham County secured \$769,400 (55% of easement value) in outside grants to support five farm protection projects (121 acres) valued at \$1,381,000.**



# Farmland Protection & Conservation Easements







## Agriculture Economic Development Grant

The Durham County Board of County Commissioners has supported an Agricultural Economic Development Grant Program since 2018. Funding has increased over the years with a 2025 allocation of \$250,000. This program is administered by Durham Soil and Water Conservation. A nine member committee oversees the program through staff support. The program purpose is to offer cost share and financial support to farms, new and beginning entrepreneurs and to support agriculture education in schools.

Program Impact & Data	FY 25
Funding level	\$ 250,000
Request for funding from applicants	\$ 389,381
Number of applications	47
Number of farm applications	44
Number of M/WBE farm applications	35
Number of non profits that applied	8
Number of Schools that applied	3
Number of farm projects funded	28
Percentage of M/WBE contracts awarded	79%
Number of Farms funded for Food Safety Compliance	2
Number of schools funded	3

Break down of Project types	FY25 Applicants	Funded
Number of farm operations that raise live-stock only	11	8
Number of farm operations that raise live-stock & produce	7	7
Number of farms that grow produce only	14	12
Projects that improved access/equity/non profits with direct sales	8	4
Schools supporting Agriculture Education	3	3
Other Agriculture Commodities produced (Hay, flowers, compost, etc.)	8	6

## Agriculture Economic Development Grant Program

### Project Examples:



Cold Storage



Tower Garden in School



Moveable Poultry Coop



Growing space improve-

### Program Goals for Calendar Year 2026

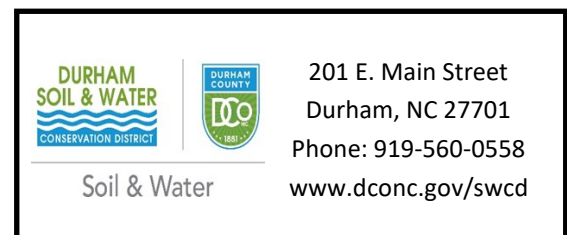
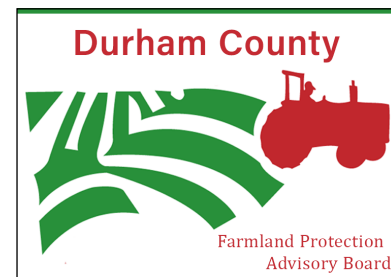
1. Continue to support and promote the Voluntary Ag District (VAD) Program, Conservation Easement Program, and the Agricultural Economic Development Grant Program.
2. Continue to support agricultural education through adult programming and in Durham County Schools.
3. Update the 2009 Farmland Protection Plan, including ordinance, through grant funding.
4. Continue to Engage in the new UDO process, ensuring agriculture is included in the Use Table.
5. Investigate Durham's PUV Rollback payments and the opportunity of funding agriculture programs.

### Funding Requests for FY 2026

1. Agricultural Economic Development Grant Program – Through this program, the Farmland Preservation Board assists local farmers and schools by providing cost-share grants for projects.
2. Conservation Easements – The FPAB requests the BOCC continue funding the county's Farmland Protection Easement Program through the Capital Improvement Plan.

### FY 2025 Members:

<b>Nicole Connelly</b> Chair/Little River VAD	<b>Mark Waller</b> Vice Chair/Farm Bureau Representative
<b>Kenny Browning</b> 2nd Vice Chair/Eno River VAD	<b>John Cowan</b> Cape Fear VAD
<b>David Harris</b> SWCD Board Representative	<b>Talmage Layton</b> Falls VAD
<b>Samantha Gasson</b> At Large ( <i>Farmland Board appointed</i> )	<b>Douglas Daye</b> Flat River VAD
<b>Michelle Burton</b> County Commissioner	<b>Chris Young</b> Business Representative
<b>Deborah Luecken</b> Open Space & Trails Representative	<b>Matthew Eagle</b> At Large ( <i>Farmland Board appointed</i> )
<b>David Heeks</b> At Large ( <i>Farmland Board Appointed</i> )	<b>Neil Frank</b> At Large ( <i>Farmland Board appointed</i> )
<b>Helena Cragg</b> At large ( <i>Farmland Board appointed</i> )	



Staff support provided by Soil and Water Department, Open Space and Real Estate Division, and Cooperative Extension.