

## **Agricultural Zoning**

### **What is it?**

Most zoning ordinances specify minimum lot sizes for each type of zoning district. For example, an R-4 residential zoning district might allow four units per acre (or a ¼ acre lot size), while an R-1 district might limit residential development to 1 unit per acre. Establishing an agricultural zoning district can be an effective tool for limiting development density and maintaining farmland, simply because minimum allowed lot size is set large enough to ensure that agriculture remains an economically competitive use of the property.

This approach does not necessarily prevent new development in an area where maintenance of farmland is desired. Limited residential or commercial development can take place, its just required to locate on very large parcels of land. It is important to establish minimum lot sizes of 10 acres or more (preferably 20 to 25 acres) in your agricultural zoning district in order to achieve the desired result of preserving farmland.

### **How to do it**

1. **Involve stakeholders.** Identify stakeholders likely to be affected by agricultural zoning requirements and representing various points of view in the community. Stakeholders may include:
  - local farmers
  - agricultural associations like 4H, Farm Bureau, and Cooperative Extension Service
  - property owners
  - realtors
  - home builders and commercial developers
  - bankers
  - local government representatives

Educate these stakeholders about the purpose of adding agricultural zoning provisions to your development regulations.

2. **Determine appropriate locations** for agricultural zoning districts. Review the resource inventory (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Resource Inventory) with the stakeholder group to defining specific areas in your community where the new zoning district should be applied. Identify areas where farming is presently taking place, or that are otherwise well suited for agricultural zoning. Avoid including environmentally sensitive areas (such as wetlands or steep slopes) where the low density development or farming permitted under this type of zoning would not be appropriate.
3. **Define specific zoning requirements.** Enlist the stakeholder group to define the specific lot size minimums and other development restrictions to apply within the agricultural zoning district. Use images or examples to help

stakeholders grasp concepts being discussed. Remember that the purpose of agricultural zoning is to preserve the maximum possible amount of farmland.

4. **Adopt new zoning requirements.** Identify the specific provisions of local zoning and development ordinances that must be amended to establish agricultural zoning districts as recommended by the stakeholder group. Present these amendments to local elected officials for official adoption. Abide by the notice and public meeting requirements of the Zoning Procedures Act, O.C.G.A. 36-66-4 [http://www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2003\\_04/gacode/36-66-4.html](http://www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2003_04/gacode/36-66-4.html). Ensure that these new land use provisions are consistent with your local comprehensive plan and amend the plan if needed.

#### **Things to consider before using this tool**

- If your community has already "overzoned" areas to be included in the new agricultural zoning district (by previously allowing densities higher than allowed under the new requirements) you may be faced with highly controversial down-zoning. Possible legal challenges to this rezoning may occur.

## **Additional Information of Farmland Protection**

### **Background**

- Is farmland disappearing in your community as development moves further out?
- Does agriculture support your community's economy?
- Do the farmlands in your community serve as a tourist attraction?
- Is your community character at risk due to a loss of farmland to encroaching development?

Georgia farmlands are disappearing at an alarming rate. Prime agricultural lands are constantly gobbled up by new development. In 1997 a study "Farming on the Edge: Sprawling Development Threatens Our Best Farmland" conducted by the American Farmland Trust [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org) found that the state of Georgia paved over 184,000 acres of high quality farmland, ranking third nationally in prime acres lost to development. The loss of these lands is felt statewide, even in rural areas outside of smaller cities. "The problem has spread to some of the more economically depressed areas of the state that you wouldn't normally think of as suffering from runaway growth." (Gerry Cohn, American Farmland Trust) [http://www.farmland.org/farmingontheedge/map\\_georgia.htm](http://www.farmland.org/farmingontheedge/map_georgia.htm)

Georgia's loss of farmland is more than just a loss of undeveloped acreage. These agricultural lands offer a variety of public benefits:

- Open Space
- Scenic vistas
- Wildlife habitat
- Food and crop production
- Agriculture related industries, jobs, and tourism
- Protection of environmentally sensitive areas (such as ground water recharge areas)

Farmland protection programs direct growth to areas with existing infrastructure such as paved roads, water, and sewer and away from areas used in farming operations. A variety of methods may be used singly or in combination to preserve agricultural lands. Some of the most important are addressed in this toolkit. The most important consideration in developing any program is the specific needs of the farmers in your area. Before any program can be successful, it must start with the support of those it is intended to benefit. Farmers should, therefore, be participants in developing any farmland protection program from the inception.