

Lancaster County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
Protecting Water Quality/Protecting the Coastal Environment	Education, training, and consultation provided through the Master Gardeners including their Shoreline Program.
Agricultural Sustainability/Preservation of Farm and Forest Land	Education, training, and consultation through ANR Extension Agent.
Access to Safe and Nutritious Foods	Education, training, and consultation through FCS Extension Agent.
Helping Youth Develop Leadership, Citizenship, and other Life Skills through STEM	STEM education led by unit faculty and Master Gardeners through public schools, community library, and youth organizations.

Introduction

Lancaster County conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during fall 2023. The process was led by unit extension faculty including 4-H, FCS, and ANR. It involved the creation of a Lancaster County unit profile as well as gathering community input on issues in the county. Data and information from these activities were analyzed and priority issues were identified.

The unit profile was developed using the data from the VCE Situation Analysis Resource website, the 2020 US Census, the Virginia Employment Commission Community Profile, USDA National Agriculture Census Data, and the VDH American Community Survey. It was determined that the best way to gather perspectives from residents was to solicit input through electronic and paper surveys. Finally, key findings from the unit profile and surveys were discussed and the top priority issues for Lancaster County were identified, including those that could be addressed with current VCE resources and those that were outside the scope of current VCE resources.

Unit Profile

Lancaster County is at the southeastern tip of Virginia's Northern Neck peninsula, approximately 75 miles east of Richmond and 120 miles southeast of Washington, D.C. It is bordered on the east by the Chesapeake Bay and on the south by the Rappahannock River. The port of Hampton Roads is 70 miles south. The county comprises 136 square miles of land and 330 miles of shoreline.

The overall population of the county has decreased by 1.8% since 2019. 35.7% of the county population is age 65 or older, while only 18.4% of the population of Lancaster County is under age 19. The median age of residents is 57. 70.6% of the population is Caucasian, while 26.7% is African American.

Data on household composition indicated that 39% of children live in single parent households.

Another significant factor affecting the youth in Lancaster County is that 23% live in poverty. The state percentage is 13%. 14% of the overall population in Lancaster County lives in poverty.

Health data shows that the teenage pregnancy rate has decreased by 2% since 2018, but it is still significantly higher than the state rate of 25%. The adult obesity rate has increased by 6% to 36%. Alcohol-impaired driving deaths are accountable for 67% of driving deaths which is more than double the state rate of 30%.

The unemployment rate is 5.3%, which is down by 2.4% since 2018. The top three employers are Bon Secours Health System, Rappahannock Westminister-Canterbury, and Manufacturing Techniques Incorporated. The median income is \$53,711. 46% of the adult population is currently in the workforce.

The high school graduation rate is 86%, while 32% of adults have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Data gathered from the 2017 Census of Agriculture indicated that at that time there were 80 farms involved in active agricultural production on 16,238 acres in Lancaster County. The number of farms has increased by 31% since the 2012 Census. Grain and soybean production accounted for most of the acreage reported. The Lancaster census report specified that 4,791 acres had been planted in beans, and 5,102 acres in grain corn. Lancaster County also houses several direct market vegetable operations and cow calf operations totaling 361 head.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Community surveys were distributed via several means to reach as many residents as possible in all segments and demographics of the population. Distribution was through email, social media promotion, and US Mail.

Specific issues identified were protecting air and water quality, preserving farm and forest land, assisting farmers and forest landowners in production and profitability., strengthening the local food system, helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills, protecting the coastal environment, promoting agricultural

opportunities, promoting agricultural, natural resources, and environmental literacy, youth and adult financial education, promoting STEM among youth, controlling invasive pests (plants, animals, insects).

The top two local responses were also high on the list of priorities for the state situational analysis. Environmental issues were mentioned more often than others in both cases. Also, while food safety did not land in the top ten issues for Lancaster County, it was still listed as a “high effort” and is replicated in the state assessment as well.

Community Issues

Based on the unit profile and resident perspectives data, the following top priority issues were identified for Lancaster County that can be addressed with the current VCE resources.

Issue 1 – Protecting Water Quality / Protecting the Coastal Environment

Respondents to a countywide survey indicated in the results, that protecting water quality and the coastal environment is one of the most pressing issues currently faced in Lancaster County. Lancaster County is bordered to the east by the Chesapeake Bay and to the south and west by the Rappahannock River and their tributaries. According to the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, these bodies of water accumulate 330 miles of tidal shoreline within the county, most of which lies on private property. It is the responsibility of landowners with waterfront property to manage their shorelines in a manner that promotes stability and prevents runoff and erosion that lead to water quality issues. Many residents of Lancaster County who own waterfront property are retirees from non-riparian areas and are not familiar with the unique challenges associated with appropriate shoreline management. Shorelines are dynamic and can be affected by the features of the nearby landscape such as areas of pavement and even invasive species. Without careful planning and maintenance, shorelines can erode, which poses a potential threat to inland properties and structures, as well as the bodies of water they encompass.

Issue 2 – Agricultural Sustainability / Preservation of Farm and Forest Land

Through countywide survey results, the preservation of farm and forest land was identified as one of the highest-ranking agricultural issues in Lancaster County. The 2017 census of Agriculture reported that at that time there were 80 farms operating on 16,238 acres within the county. 72% of the land was reported to be in crop and pastureland with an additional 20% in wooded forest acres. When compared to Lancaster County Census of Agriculture conducted in 2012 there was a 3% increase in the number of agricultural operations operating within the county and 52% increase in land involved in agricultural production over the 5-year period. Though agricultural production remains one of the county’s most productive industries, there remain concerns around alternative land uses on productive agricultural and wooded acres within the county. To maintain the acres of farm and forest land within Lancaster County, agricultural producers must remain profitable enough through agricultural production and forest management to outweigh considerations of alternative land uses. On farm profitability can be maintained and improved through the adoption of sustainable management practices, efficient production techniques and strategic marketing.

Issue 3- Access to Safe and Nutritious Foods

Chronic disease and health risk factors plague Lancaster County and affect all ages, races, and income levels. The county’s risk factors (obesity, diabetes) are all higher than the state averages due to factors including the high concentration of residents aged 65 and older, high percentage of residents living below the poverty level, lack of transportation to healthcare facilities which are also not accessible within the immediate area, and lack of healthy food options. Another factor contributing to this is the high rate of free and reduced lunch eligible youth in the public schools. Residents have had increased interest in learning how to procure, prepare, and preserve safe and nutritious foods. The combined interest and need make this an issue of high importance within the community.

Issue 4- Helping Youth Develop Leadership, Citizenship, and other Life Skills through STEM

A need exists to develop and implement programs for youth that promote positive youth development while engaging them in STEM activities. The rate of youth living in poverty and the number of single parent households in Lancaster County is higher than the state average. The majority of working adults commute outside of the county for work. These factors may contribute to a lower rate of parental involvement, and a need for positive role models for youth. It is difficult for many youth to be involved in outside organizations that are not connected to school, because of lack of transportation with parents/guardians working and no public transportation in the county. Teachers report that funds are not available for the hands-on, experiential lessons that they would like to do with their students.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Issue 1- Protecting Water Quality / Protecting the Coastal Environment

The Northern Neck Master Gardeners, a volunteer organization that operates through Virginia Cooperative Extension, working closely with partners at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and county governments, have built the Shoreline Evaluation Program. The program is an educational outreach effort designed to provide property owners with recommendations for improving upland stormwater management, pollutant and sediment runoff, and shoreline erosion. The Shoreline Evaluation Program provides both traditional education on shoreline management through public seminars, as well as private shoreline consultations to waterfront property owners. Through shoreline consultations, volunteers evaluate the current health of shorelines and provide property owners with personalized property reports that address individual, unique needs of each property they evaluate. The Shoreline Evaluation Program has also developed a publication titled “Homeowners Guide to Shoreline Management”, a detailed shoreline management resource used along with evaluation reports to remediate shoreline issues and improve shoreline health. To date the shoreline Evaluation program has completed approximately 230 evaluation reports, with additional evaluations and reports completed annually.

Issue 2 – Agricultural Sustainability / Preservation of Farm and Forest Land

Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) Extension Agents of the Northern Neck work as a team to provide education, training, and consultation to agricultural producers to increase production efficiency and profitability with the goal of on-farm longevity. ANR Agents host annual Crops Conferences, Vegetable Meetings, and field days at which producers are presented information and research on new production practices, products, equipment, and technology, efficient management options, and commodity marketing strategies. Agents also offer individual assistance to producers with support from university specialists at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, utilizing on campus diagnostic laboratories to address on-farm needs. ANR Agents aid in identifying alternative crops that may provide farmers the opportunity to obtain premium returns for their product, as well as spread risk by diversifying their cropping system. Outside of assistance with on-farm production, agents work with landowners through programs such as GenerationNext to assist with the transition of agricultural and forest lands to following generations to ensure these lands remain in production. Through cooperation with partners like the Northern Neck Land Conservancy VCE educates landowners on the process of placing land into conservation easements that would ensure that land would remain in agricultural production. Finally, agents work to strengthen relationships between farmers and residents of the county through educational programming with the goal of establishing a positive perception of agriculture within the community.

Issue 3- Access to Safe and Nutritious Foods

Lancaster Extension Agents in both Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development have teamed to provide education and training in healthy food choices, growing foods at home, and managing personal finance to

allow for adequate food spending. Youth education taught within the schools includes nutritional programs such as Teen Cuisine, agricultural programs such as Ag in the Classroom, and financial literacy such as Kids Marketplace and Reality Store. Adult programming is being developed to offer Chronic Disease Self-Management, Balanced Living with Diabetes, Home Food Preservation, and Personal Financial Literacy. Empowering youth and adults to have better access to healthy foods and know how to preserve them allows the community to reduce chronic disease and have better health outcomes.

Issue 4- Helping Youth Develop Leadership, Citizenship, and other Life Skills through STEM

STEM opportunities will be offered to teachers throughout the school year, led by unit faculty as well as the Northern Neck Master Gardeners. These will be VA Standards of Learning correlated and free of charge. These will include the National 4-H STEM Challenge each fall and agriculture in the classroom programs. The school enrichment delivery mode is the best way for 4-H to reach youth in Lancaster County, as the barriers of cost and transportation are eliminated. Partnerships will continue with the Lancaster Community Library to provide hands-on lesson kits related to the Storytime theme each week.

References

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