



**Adopted
February 18, 2013**

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LEE COUNTY VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE

BE IT ORDAINED by the Board of Commissioners of the County of Lee:

ARTICLE I TITLE

An ordinance of the Board of County Commissioners of LEE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, entitled, "VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT ORDINANCE."

ARTICLE II AUTHORITY

The articles and sections of this program are adopted pursuant to authority conferred by the Farmland Preservation Enabling Act, Article 61, Chapter 106 of the General Statutes of North Carolina, sections 106-735 through 106-744, and Chapter 153A.

ARTICLE III PURPOSE

The purpose of this Ordinance is to promote agricultural values which include the protection of family farms, the general welfare of the county and more specifically, increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and its way of life; encourage the economic and financial health of agriculture, horticulture and forestry; and increase protection from non-farm development and other negative impacts on properly managed farms.

This ordinance establishes many benefits for participating farmers and other county residents. These benefits include:

- Participation in the program is voluntary and the farmer/landowner may terminate participation at any time;
- The program helps to preserve and maintain farmland areas within the county;

- The program informs non-farming neighbors and potential land purchasers that the participating farm may emit noise, dust, forestry operations and smells (this feature may help avoid conflicts between neighbors and potential nuisance claims);
- The program gives the farming community a better voice in Lee County Commissioners decisions affecting farmland through county-wide farmland protection planning and other means;
- The program requires the Lee County Commissioners to use farmland "as a last resort" if they are attempting to condemn county lands;
- The program would provide greenspace and natural resources as the county's population and development expands;
- The program maintains opportunities to produce locally grown food and fiber;
- An agricultural advisory board that represents the interests of agriculture in local government.

ARTICLE IV DEFINITIONS

The following are defined for purposes of this ordinance:

<u>Advisory Board:</u>	Lee County Agricultural Advisory Board
<u>Chair:</u>	Chair of the Lee County Agricultural Advisory Board
<u>District:</u>	Voluntary Agricultural District as established by this ordinance
<u>Board of Commissioners:</u>	Lee County Board of Commissioners
<u>Mile:</u>	An aerial mile, defined as the line between two points.
<u>Farmland:</u>	Land suitable for the production of food, fiber and timber products
<u>Agriculture:</u>	As defined in N.C.G.S. 106-581.1 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The cultivation of soil for production and harvesting of crops, including but not limited to fruits, vegetables, sod, flowers and ornamental plants. 2. The planting and production of trees and timber. 3. Dairying and the raising, management, care, and training of livestock, including horses, bees, poultry, and other animals for individual and public use, consumption, and marketing. 4. Aquaculture as defined in G.S. 106-758. 5. The operation, management, conservation, improvement, and maintenance of a farm and the structures and buildings on the farm, including building and structure repair, replacement, expansion, and construction incident to the farming operation.

6. When performed on the farm, "agriculture", "agricultural", and "farming" also include the marketing and selling of agricultural products, agritourism, the storage and use of materials for agricultural purposes, packing, treating, processing, sorting, storage, and other activities performed to add value to crops, livestock, and agricultural items produced on the farm, and similar activities incident to the operation of a farm.

ARTICLE V AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD

A. Creation

The Board of Commissioners shall establish an Agricultural Advisory Board to implement the provisions of this program.

B. Membership

The Advisory Board shall consist of no less than seven (7) members appointed by the Board of Commissioners and so distributed that each region outlined in Article VI, section A of this Ordinance has at least one (1) but no more than two (2) members.

C. Membership Requirements

1. Each Advisory Board member, except those serving in an *ex officio* capacity, shall be a Lee County resident or landowner.
2. A majority of the members shall be actively engaged in farming, horticulture and/or forestry. Of the members actively engaged in farming, horticulture and/or forestry there shall be at least one such member from each agricultural district in Lee County. This determination shall be made without reference to *ex officio* members.
3. The members actively engaged in farming, horticulture and/or forestry as well as other members, shall be selected for appointment by the Board of Commissioners from the names of individuals submitted to the Board of Commissioners by the Soil and Water Conservation District Board of Supervisors, North Carolina Cooperative Extension - Lee County, the U.S. Farm Service Agency County Committee, nonprofit agricultural organizations, conservation organizations, agribusiness, horticultural businesses, forestry businesses, and the public at large.
4. Additional members may be appointed to the Board in an *ex officio* capacity from the Soil and Water Conservation District, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the U.S. Farm Service Agency, or other agencies, as deemed necessary by the Board of Commissioners. Members serving in an *ex officio* capacity shall neither vote nor count toward quorum requirements.

5. An “Application To Serve on County Boards” must be submitted to the Clerk of the Board of County Commissioners prior to appointment.

D. Tenure

The initial board shall consist of 2 appointees for terms of one year; 2 appointees for terms of two years; and 3 appointees for terms of three years. Thereafter, all appointments shall be for terms of three years, with reappointment permitted.

E. Vacancies

Any vacancy on the Advisory Board is to be filled by the Board of Commissioners for the remainder of the unexpired term.

F. Removal

Any member of the Advisory Board may be removed by the Board of Commissioners upon a two-thirds vote of the Commissioners. No cause for removal shall be required.

G. Funding

The *per diem* compensation, if any, of the members of the Advisory Board may be fixed by the Board of Commissioners and funds may be appropriated to the Advisory Board to perform its duties.

H. Advisory Board Procedure

1. Chairperson

The Advisory Board shall elect a chairperson and vice-chairperson each year at its first meeting of the fiscal year. The chairperson shall preside over all regular or special meetings of the Advisory Board. In the absence or disability of the chairperson, the vice-chairperson shall preside and shall exercise all the powers of the chairperson. Additional officers may be elected as needed.

2. Determination of Procedure

The Advisory Board may adopt rules of procedure not inconsistent with this Ordinance or with other provisions of State law.

3. Advisory Board Year

The Advisory Board shall use the Lee County fiscal year (July – June) as its meeting year.

4. Meetings

Meetings of the Advisory Board shall be held at the call of the chairperson and at such other times as the Advisory Board may specify in its rules of procedure or upon the request of at least a majority of the Advisory Board Membership. A meeting shall be held at least annually and notice of any meetings to the members shall be in writing, unless otherwise agreed to by all Advisory Board members. Meeting dates and times shall be posted forty-eight (48) hours in advance of the meeting on the bulletin board at the county courthouse, government center and the McSwain Extension Education and Agriculture Center. All meetings shall be open to the public.

5. Majority Vote and Quorum Requirements

All issues shall be decided by a majority vote of the members of the Advisory Board present. A quorum is defined as a simple majority plus one of Board membership. No business may be conducted by the Advisory Board without a quorum present.

6. Records

The Advisory Board shall keep full and accurate minutes of all official meetings. The minutes shall state the date of the meeting, the members present, a general summary of all action taken, a specific statement of motions made or action taken, and an accounting of the vote of each member present. The records of the Board and other official actions shall be filed in the office of the Advisory Board or its designee and shall be considered a public record.

7. Administrative

North Carolina Cooperative Extension - Lee County Center will serve the Advisory Board for record keeping, correspondence, application procedures under this Ordinance, and whatever services the Advisory Board needs to complete its duties.

I. Duties

The Advisory Board shall:

1. Review and approve or disapprove applications of landowners for enrollment of farmland, horticultural land, or forestland in a voluntary agricultural district;
2. Make recommendations concerning the establishment and modification of agricultural districts;
3. Conduct public hearings;
4. Advise the Board of Commissioners on projects, programs, or issues affecting the agricultural economy and agricultural, horticultural or forestry activities within the county that will affect agricultural districts;

5. Review and make recommendations concerning proposed amendments to this ordinance;
6. Develop a draft countywide farmland protection plan as defined in N.C.G.S. §106-744 (e) for presentation to the Board of Commissioners, and review and revise such plan annually;
7. Study additional methods of protection for farming, horticulture, forestry, and the attendant land base, and make recommendations to the Board of Commissioners; and
8. Perform other agricultural, horticultural, and forestry-related tasks or duties assigned by the Board of Commissioners.
9. Present an annual report to the Lee County Board of Commissioners and to Commissioner of Agriculture, North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS).

**ARTICLE VI
CREATION OF VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS**

A. Regions

For purposes of this ordinance, Lee County is hereby divided into 7 Regions as defined by townships below:

Pocket	West Sanford	Deep River	Cape Fear
East Sanford	Jonesboro	Greenwood	

B. Implementation

In order to implement the purposes stated in Article III, voluntary agricultural districts must meet the following standards:

1. The District shall contain at least one of the following contiguous acreages of farmland:
 - a. 3 acres of horticultural land
 - b. 10 acres agricultural land: or
 - c. 20 acres of forest land
2. All land enrolled in a region, defined in section A, above, shall be part of a single District.

C. Education

The Advisory Board will encourage the formation of Districts. To further their purposes and objectives, the Advisory Board may implement public information programs to inform landowners of the voluntary agricultural district program.

D. Addition and Withdrawal

1. Qualifying land in a region with an existing District shall be added to the District as herein provided.
2. In the event that one or more participants in a voluntary agriculture district withdraws land from the program, the District will continue to exist so long as there is one qualifying farm.

**ARTICLE VII
CERTIFICATION AND QUALIFICATION OF FARMLAND**

A. Requirements

To secure county certification as qualifying farmland in a Voluntary Agricultural District, a farm must:

1. Be engaged in agriculture as defined in N.C.G.S. 106-581.1
2. Be managed, if highly erodable land exists on the farm, in accordance with the Natural Resources Conservation Service defined erosion-control practices that are addressed to said highly-erodable land; and
3. Be the subject of a conservation agreement, as defined in N.C.G.S. §121-35, between the county and the owner of such land that prohibits non-farm use or development of such land for a period of at least ten years, except for the creation of not more than three lots that meet applicable county zoning and subdivision regulations and except for certain mining or energy development activity which will co-exist with the stated farm use of such land; and
4. Be located in the unincorporated area of Lee County.

B. Public Documentation

1. The Conservation Agreement, which identifies farmland enrolled in a Voluntary Agricultural District, will be referred to the Land Records (GIS) office and to the Lee County Tax Office for registration on public documents.
2. Landowners may file their Conservation Agreement with the Lee County Register of Deeds Office. The Advisory Board will complete the filing. The landowner shall be responsible for all filing fees.

**ARTICLE VIII
APPLICATION, APPROVAL, AND APPEAL PROCEDURE**

A. Application Procedure

1. A landowner may apply to participate in the Voluntary Agricultural District program by submitting an application and fee to the Advisory Board or a designated staff person. The application shall be on forms approved by the Agriculture Advisory Board.
2. A conservation agreement (required by N.C.G.S. §106-737 and defined in N.C.G.S. §121-35) designated by the landowner to sustain, encourage, and promote agriculture must be executed by the landowner, notarized and submitted to the Advisory Board, which may submit the agreement to the Lee County Registrar of Deeds for recording.

B. Approval Process

1. Upon submission of the application to the Agriculture Advisory Board, the Board shall meet within thirty (30) days to approve or disapprove the application. The chairperson shall notify the applicant of approval or disapproval of participation in the district.
2. Upon receipt of an application, the chairperson will forward copies immediately to the following offices which shall be asked to provide comments, if any, to the Advisory Board prior to the date set for the Advisory Board vote on the application:
 - a. The Lee County tax assessor;
 - b. The Lee Soil and Water Conservation District office; and
 - c. The N.C. Cooperative Extension, Lee County Center

C. Appeal

If an application is denied by the Agriculture Advisory Board, the landowner may, within fifteen (15) days of notification of denial, request in writing that the Advisory Board reconsider its decision. The request for reconsideration shall state the reason(s) therefore. Upon either an initial denial, if no request for reconsideration was made, or denial after reconsideration, the landowner shall have thirty (30) days from the date of notification to appeal the decision to the Board of Commissioners. Such appeal shall be presented in writing. The decision of the Board of Commissioners is final.

**ARTICLE IX
REVOCATION, ENFORCEMENT AND RENEWAL OF
CONSERVATION AGREEMENTS**

A. Revocation and Enforcement

1. A landowner may revoke the Conservation Agreement or withdraw any or all of the land placed in a VAD by:
 - a. Providing 30 days advance written notice to the Advisory Board.

- b. Completing the Voluntary District Revocation/Nonrenewal of Conservation Agreement form.
 - c. Paying the current filing fee charged by the Register of Deeds (if property placed in a VAD was previously filed with the Register of Deeds).
2. The Advisory Board may revoke a landowner's Conservation Agreement based on noncompliance by the landowner, subject to the same provisions as contained in Article VIII(C). Such revocation shall result in loss of qualifying status and loss of eligibility to participate in a district. The landowner will be billed for the current filing fee for revocation documents charged by the Register of Deeds (if property was placed in a VAD and previously filed with the Register of Deeds).
 3. Absent noncompliance by the landowner, neither the Advisory Board nor the Board of Commissioners shall revoke any Conservation Agreement prior to its expiration.
 4. Transfers of land in a Voluntary Agricultural District due to death of the landowner, sale or gift shall not revoke the Conservation Agreement unless the land no longer meets the acreage needed to be qualifying farmland or for failure to continue to comply with the VAD rules.
 5. If there is water or sewer assessments held in abeyance, and the new owner(s) fails to agree in writing to accept liability for those assessments the land is withdrawn either voluntarily or involuntarily from the District. The landowner will be billed for the current filing fee for Revocation documents charged by the Register of Deeds (if property was placed in a VAD and previously filed with the Register of Deeds).
 6. Enforcement of the terms of a Conservation Agreement for land enrolled in a Voluntary Agricultural District shall be limited to revocation of the Conservation Agreement and the benefits derived there from. The landowner will be billed for the current filing fee for Revocation documents charged by the Register of Deeds (if property was placed in a VAD and previously filed with the Register of Deeds).

B. Renewal

A Conservation Agreement for land within a Voluntary Agricultural District shall be automatically renewed unless the landowner provides 30 day written notice to the Advisory Board of intent not to renew. Absent noncompliance by the landowner, neither the Advisory Board nor the Board of Commissioners shall fail to renew any Conservation Agreement unless this Ordinance or its authorizing legislation has been repealed.

**ARTICLE X
WAIVER OF WATER AND SEWER OR ALL UTILITY ASSESSMENTS**

A. No Connection Required

A landowner belonging to the District shall not be required to connect to Lee County or other jurisdictional water and/or sewer systems.

B. Abeyance

Water and sewer assessments shall be held in abeyance, without interest, for farms in a District, until improvements on such property are connected to the water or sewer system for which the assessment was made.

C. Termination of Abeyance

When the period of abeyance ends, the assessment is payable in accordance with the terms set out in the assessment resolution.

D. Suspension of Statute of Limitations

Statutes of limitations are suspended during the time that any assessment is held in abeyance without interest. The landowner may be required to sign an acknowledgement (that may be incorporated into the Conservation Agreement) of the abeyance of the statute of limitations upon collecting water and sewer assessments.

E. Other Statutory Abeyance Procedures

Nothing in this section is intended to diminish the authority of the County to hold assessments in abeyance under N.C.G.S. §153A-201, or other applicable law.

F. Conflict with Water and/or Sewer System Construction and Improvements Grants

To the extent that this section conflicts with the terms of federal, state, or other grants under which county utility systems are constructed this section shall not apply. This section shall not apply to utilities that are not owned by the County unless the County has entered into an agreement with the entity(ies) owning the utilities and that agreement provides that this Ordinance shall apply.

**ARTICLE XI
PUBLIC HEARINGS**

A. Purpose

Pursuant to N.C.G.S. §106-740, which provides that no state or local public agency or governmental unit may formally initiate any action to condemn any interest in farmland within a District until such agency or unit has requested the Advisory Board to hold a public hearing on the proposed condemnation.

B. Procedure

1. Within five (5) business days of receiving a request, the Advisory Board shall publish notice describing the proposed action in the appropriate newspapers of Lee

County and will, in the same notice, notify the public of a public hearing on the proposed condemnation to be held within ten (10) days of receipt of the request.

2. The Advisory Board shall meet to review:
 - a. Whether the need for the project has been satisfactorily established by the agency or unit of government involved, including a review of any fiscal impact analysis conducted by the agency involved; and
 - b. Whether there are alternatives to the proposed action that have less impact and are less disruptive to the agricultural activities of the District within which the proposed action is to take place.
3. The Advisory Board shall consult with the County Agricultural Extension Agent, the Lee Soil and Water Conservation District Soil Conservationist, and any other individuals, agencies, or organizations deemed by the Advisory Board to be necessary for its review of the proposed action.
4. Within five (5) days after the hearing, the Advisory Board shall make a report containing its findings and recommendations regarding the proposed action. The report shall be made available to the public prior to its being conveyed to the decision-making body of the agency proposing the acquisition.
5. There will be a period of five (5) days allowed for public comment on the report of the Advisory Board.
6. After the five (5) day period for public comment has expired, the Advisory Board shall submit a final report containing all of its findings and recommendations regarding the proposed action to the decision making body of the agency proposing the acquisition.
7. The total time period, from the day that a request for a hearing has been received to the day that a final report is issued to the decision making body of the agency proposing the acquisition, shall not exceed thirty (30) days. If the agency agrees to an extension, the agency and the Advisory Board shall mutually agree upon a schedule to be set forth in writing and made available to the public.
8. Pursuant to N.C.G.S. §106-740, the Board of Commissioners shall not permit any formal initiation of condemnation by local agencies while the proposed condemnation is properly before the Advisory Board.

ARTICLE XII NOTIFICATION

A. Record Notice of Proximity to Voluntary Agricultural District

1. Procedure: Upon certification of property as a District,

- a. Lee County Strategic Services shall identify the location of the District, with definable boundaries on the County's tax maps.
- b. The Lee County Tax Office will identify on the property record card that a Parcel is in the Voluntary Agricultural District.
- c. The Lee County Register of Deeds shall provide notice to alert a person researching the title of a particular tract that such tract is located within one-half mile of a Voluntary Agricultural District. Reasonable notice shall include: a county map pinpointing Lee County Voluntary Agricultural Districts placed on a bulletin board located in the Register of Deeds office; referral information to Lee County's Geographic Information System (GIS) interactive mapping website; and the Register of Deeds website.
- d. The Lee County Register of Deeds shall provide notice reasonably to alert a person researching the title of a particular tract that such tract is located within one-half mile of a Voluntary Agricultural District. Reasonable notice shall include a county map pinpointing Lee County Voluntary Agricultural Districts placed on a bulletin board located in the Register of Deeds office. In addition, the map shall include website addresses for the Lee County Register of Deeds and Lee County's interactive Geographic Information System (GIS).
- e. The purpose of notification is to inform current and potential residents and property owners within an agricultural district, that farming and agricultural activities may take place in this District any time during the day or night. These activities may include, but are not limited to the following: pesticide spraying, manure spreading, machinery, truck, tractor operations, livestock operations, timber harvesting and control burning, and similar activities.

2. Limit of Liability

In no event shall the County or any of its officers, employees, members of the Advisory Board, or agents be held liable in damages for any misfeasance, malfeasance, or nonfeasance occurring in good faith in connection with the duties or obligations imposed by this Ordinance.

3. No Cause of Action

In no event shall any cause of action arise out of the failure of a person researching the title of a particular tract to report to any person the proximity of the tract to a qualifying farm or Voluntary Agricultural District as defined in this Ordinance.

B. Signage

1. Signs identifying approved agricultural districts shall be placed along the right-of-way of major roads that pass through or next to those districts. Placement of signage

shall be coordinated with the North Carolina Department of Transportation. The frequency of signage shall be determined by the Advisory Board.

2. Signage will be provided by the Voluntary Agricultural District program for posting on land enrolled in the program. Cost for the first sign is included as part of the application fee. Additional signage may be purchased from the program by the landowner.
3. The Voluntary Agricultural District program may accept donations to purchase signage. Nothing herein shall require the program to provide signage until funding is available.

C. Maps

Maps identifying approved agricultural districts shall be provided to the following agencies or offices:

1. Planning Department
2. Register of Deeds
3. North Carolina Cooperative Extension-Lee County Center
4. Soil and Water Conservation District
5. Farm Service Agency
6. Building Inspections
7. Tax Office
8. Strategic Services
9. Sanford Area Association of Realtors
10. Any other such agency or office the Advisory Board deems appropriate, including maps denoting the location of agricultural districts within the Lee County planning jurisdiction.

**ARTICLE XIII
SUBDIVISION ORDINANCE AND ZONING ORDINANCE REVIEW**

Developers of major subdivisions or planned unit developments shall designate on preliminary development plans, the existence of the Districts within one-half mile of the proposed development.

**ARTICLE XIV
COUNTY LAND-USE PLANNING**

A. Duty of the Advisory Board

It shall be the duty of the Advisory Board to advise the Board of Commissioners or the agency or office to which the Board of Commissioners delegate authority to oversee county land use planning, on the status, progress, and activities of the county's agricultural district program and to also coordinate the formation and maintenance of agricultural districts with the county's land use planning activities and the county's land use plan if one currently exists at the time this is enacted or when one is formed.

B. Posting of Notice

The following notice, of a size and form suitable for posting, shall be posted in the office of the Register of Deeds, and any other office or agency the Advisory Board deems necessary:

Lee County has established agricultural districts to protect and preserve agricultural lands and activities. These districts have been developed and mapped by the county to inform all purchasers of real property that certain agricultural and forestry activities, including but not limited to pesticide spraying, manure spreading, machinery and truck operation, livestock operations, sawing, and other common farming activities may occur in these districts any time during the day or night. Maps and information on the location and establishment of these districts can be obtained from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension - Lee County Center, Soil and Water Conservation, Lee County Register of Deeds, the County Planning office, and Lee County Strategic Services.

C. Growth Corridors

At such time as the county might establish designated growth corridors, new agricultural districts shall not be permitted in the designated growth corridors, as delineated on the official county planning map without the approval of the Board of Commissioners. Existing districts located in growth corridors designated after such districts were established may remain, but shall not be expanded within the growth corridor area without the approval of the Board of Commissioners.

**ARTICLE XV
CONSULTATION AUTHORITY**

The Advisory Board may consult with North Carolina Cooperative Extension - Lee County Center, Lee County Soil and Water, the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and with any other individual, agency, or organization the Advisory Board deems necessary to properly conduct its business.

**ARTICLE XVI
NORTH CAROLINA AGENCY NOTIFICATION**

Annual-Report to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

A copy of this report shall be sent to the Office of the North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Board of Commissioners, the County Office of North Carolina

Cooperative Extension, and the Soil and Water Conservation District office after adoption. At least annually the county shall submit a written report to the Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services on the county's agricultural district program, including the following information:

1. Number of landowners enrolled
2. Number of acres enrolled
3. Number of acres certified during the reporting period
4. Number of acres denied during the reporting period
5. Number of acres for which applications are pending
6. Copies of any amendments to this Ordinance and
7. Any other information the Advisory Board deems useful.

ARTICLE XVII LEGAL PROVISIONS

A. Severability

If any article, section, subsection, clause, phrase, or portion of this ordinance is for any reason found invalid or unconstitutional by any court of competent jurisdiction, such decision shall not affect the validity of the remaining portions of this ordinance.

B. Conflict with other ordinances and statutes

Whenever the provisions of this Ordinance conflict with other ordinances of Lee County, this Ordinance shall govern. Whenever the provisions of any federal or state statute require more restrictive provisions than are required by this Ordinance, the provisions of such statute shall govern.

C. Amendments

This Ordinance may be amended from time to time by the Board of Commissioners.

ARTICLE XVIII ENACTMENT

This Ordinance shall be in full force and effect on or after the 18th day of February 2013.

ATTEST:

Chairperson,
LEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Clerk to Board of Commissioners

Approved as to form:

County Attorney