AC44
ALBEMARLE COUNTY 2044

RURAL AREA LAND USE

INTRODUCTION

Albemarle County's Rural Area encompasses a diverse landscape ranging from the low-lying valleys of the Rivanna and James Rivers to the steep ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Rural Area contains approximately 689 square miles or 95% of the county. Within the Rural Area, the County's Growth Management Policy prioritizes the preservation of agricultural, forest, historic, cultural, and scenic resources. The County equally prioritizes conservation and restoration of the natural environment and ecosystems within the Rural Area. These natural resources provide tangible ecological benefits to the community members of Albemarle in the form of clean drinking water and air quality, dark skies, and biodiversity preservation. Additionally, the Rural Area plays a critical role as one of our best defenses against climate change. These daily benefits are shared by rural and urban residents alike.

In 1971, when the County's first Comprehensive Plan was adopted, approximately 60 percent of new residential development occurred in the Rural Area. Since then, that figure decreased to 16 percent. This dramatic change results primarily from the land conservation policies and subdivision regulations developed in the 1970's to meet the preservation, conservation, and restoration objectives described above. While the rate of residential development within the Rural Area has significantly decreased over the past 50 years, it is essential to continually monitor the ratio of development in the Rural Area compared to the Development Areas and leverage land use and conservation tools in support of the Growth Management Policy. If the rate of residential development in the Rural Area starts to increase, especially in proportion to the Development Areas, then updates to these land use and conservation tools may be needed.

The Rural Area recommendations in this chapter are intended to balance the need for equitable access to services for the 43% of County's population (as identified by the 2020 Census) living in the Rural Area, while also being consistent with the Growth Management Policy. The farms, homes, and businesses owned by this population require some private and public services and facilities. Some of these services may be provided by small, rural scale businesses, such as country stores. Others are essential services, public safety, and community facilities, such as fire stations, community centers, and schools. Consistent with the Growth Management Policy, the level of public investments and services will vary between the Rural Area and Development Areas. This chapter prioritizes conservation of land in the Rural Area and provides policy guidance for residential uses in the Rural Area as well as the relative appropriateness for a variety of non-residential land uses. The Community Facilities chapter provides additional guidance on public facilities and services in the Rural Area.





RURAL AREAS LAND USE APPROACH

The County's Rural Area and Growth Management policies establish the following land use approach for the Rural Area:

1. *Conserve and restore the natural environment, with a focus on water quality, as well as historic, cultural, and scenic resources.*
2. *Maintain large and unfragmented parcels to support a strong rural economy and the Environmental Stewardship chapter objectives.*
3. *Discourage new residential development.*
4. *Support and promote primarily agricultural or forestry uses or supporting land uses to agricultural (e.g. food processing) or forestry. Other appropriate non-residential land uses are described later in this chapter (Objectives 5 and 7). Uses should also be evaluated based on their location and potential impacts.*
5. *Maintain distinct boundaries between the Development Areas and Rural Area without 'transitional' development to avoid sprawl.*

Consistent with this Comprehensive Plan, there will be future updates to the Zoning Ordinance for the Rural Area zoning district. Potential new permitted uses in the Rural Area Zoning District should be evaluated based on the following considerations:

- Maintain and enhance land for working farms and commercial forestry operations.
- Protect, restore, and maintain native ecosystems, aquatic ecosystems, and healthy water supplies.
- Maintain and enhance wildlife habitat connectivity.
- Preserve and enhance rural landscapes supporting historic resources.
- Support low-impact uses to encourage the economic viability of rural properties to help keep those rural properties intact.
- Discourage residential growth and development and the related demand for increased public services.
- Uses compatible in scale to the surrounding buildings, both in height and footprint.
- Reversible uses that allow land to return to agricultural/forestry or conservation use.
- Operate without public water and sewer.
- Minimize demand for groundwater.
- Service rural areas via existing rural roads.
- Encourage uses of distributed power sources to increase the reliability of power.

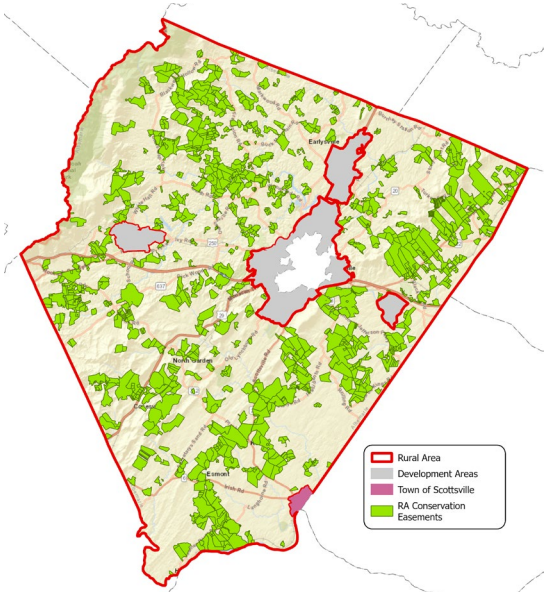
LAND CONSERVATION

Approximately two thirds of the Rural Area consist of forest cover. Between 2008 and 2016, forests and other natural land cover in the county sequestered an average of nearly one million metric tons of carbon dioxide per year, with forests contributing the most.

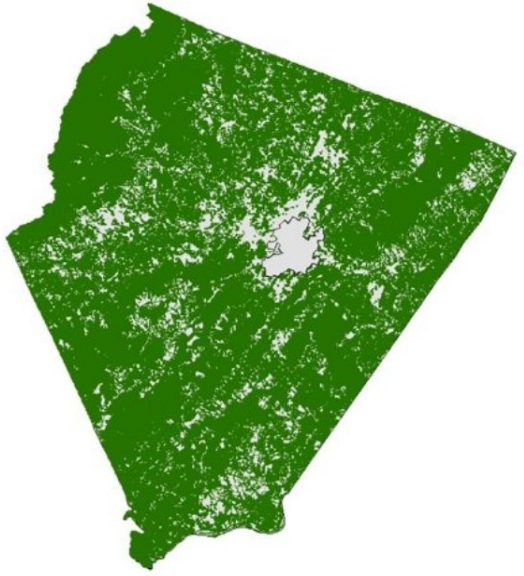
The Rural Area is also the source of most of the public water supporting the Development Areas and the City of Charlottesville. The watersheds of the reservoirs and river-water intakes that supply public water to our community cover about 319 square miles of the Rural Area.

Given the extent of important resources in the Rural Area, land conservation has become an essential tool for achieving the County's land use priorities and reducing subdivision and development of rural properties. Ten organizations, including the County and the County-appointed Albemarle Conservation Easement Authority (ACEA), hold voluntary permanent conservation easements that limit development and protect resources on rural land. A total of approximately 112,000 acres (about 25% of the Rural Area) has been protected by easements. Of that total, over 30,000 acres are easements held by the County and/or the ACEA. These conservation easements benefit all community members by helping to maintain a clean water supply and biodiversity. Land conservation also has fiscal benefits for the community, as land in open space uses requires less in public expenditures than the same land converted to residential uses.

Recommended updates to the County's land conservation programs are necessary to support the Growth Management Policy, preserve large tracts of land, make land conservation possible for lower-income rural landowners whose land is at most risk of sale for development, and to protect important areas identified in the Biodiversity Action Plan.



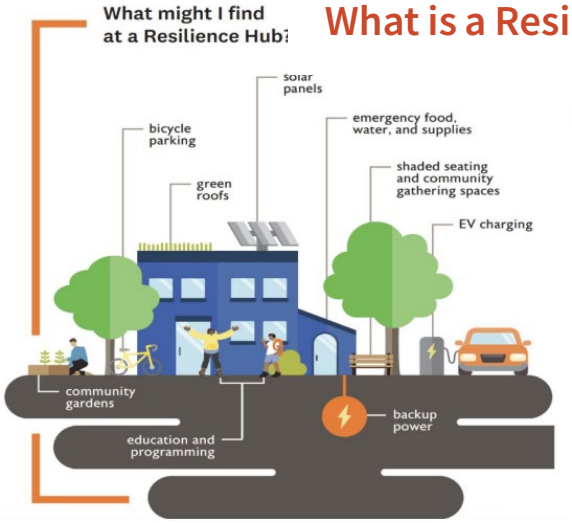
Map of existing conservation easements in Albemarle County (January 2024)



County Forest Cover Source: National Land Cover Database (2016)



Community garden at Yancey Community Center



What is a Resilience Hub?

Community-Serving Facility

- Support Residents
- Resource Distribution
- Neighborhood Revitalization
- Shelter

Image source: City of Austin

RURAL AREA LAND USE PLAN

In previous Comprehensive Plans, land uses in the Rural Areas have been treated as a single land use category and shown as a single land use type for all 689 square miles on Future Land Use Maps. A recommended action is to develop and adopt a Rural Area land use plan (see Action 1.1). Rather than a 'one size fits all' approach, a Rural Area Land Use Plan would recognize that the Rural Area is a mosaic of different land uses and natural areas, including biodiversity-rich areas, rural communities, scenic views, landmark properties, and historic districts. This approach for the Rural Area Land Use Plan would include conservation and restoration of natural, historic, scenic, and cultural resources and appropriate small and rural-scale land uses. Additional recommendations for protecting and restoring the natural environment are found in the Environmental Stewardship chapter.

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Based on the 2020 Census, approximately 47,713 community members live in the Rural Area, which entails about 42.5 percent of Albemarle County's total population. The level of public safety service delivery and availability will continue to vary between the Rural Area and Development Areas, consistent with the Growth Management Policy. However, there are rural scale land uses and public facilities that are appropriate in the Rural Area. This focus should include essential public safety services and daily needs that can utilize existing buildings, such as health care (including small-scale doctors/dentist offices and mobile clinics), fire/rescue and police services, job training programs, community gathering spaces, country stores/small-scale markets, daycare, post offices, emergency shelters, and access to affordable and healthy food.

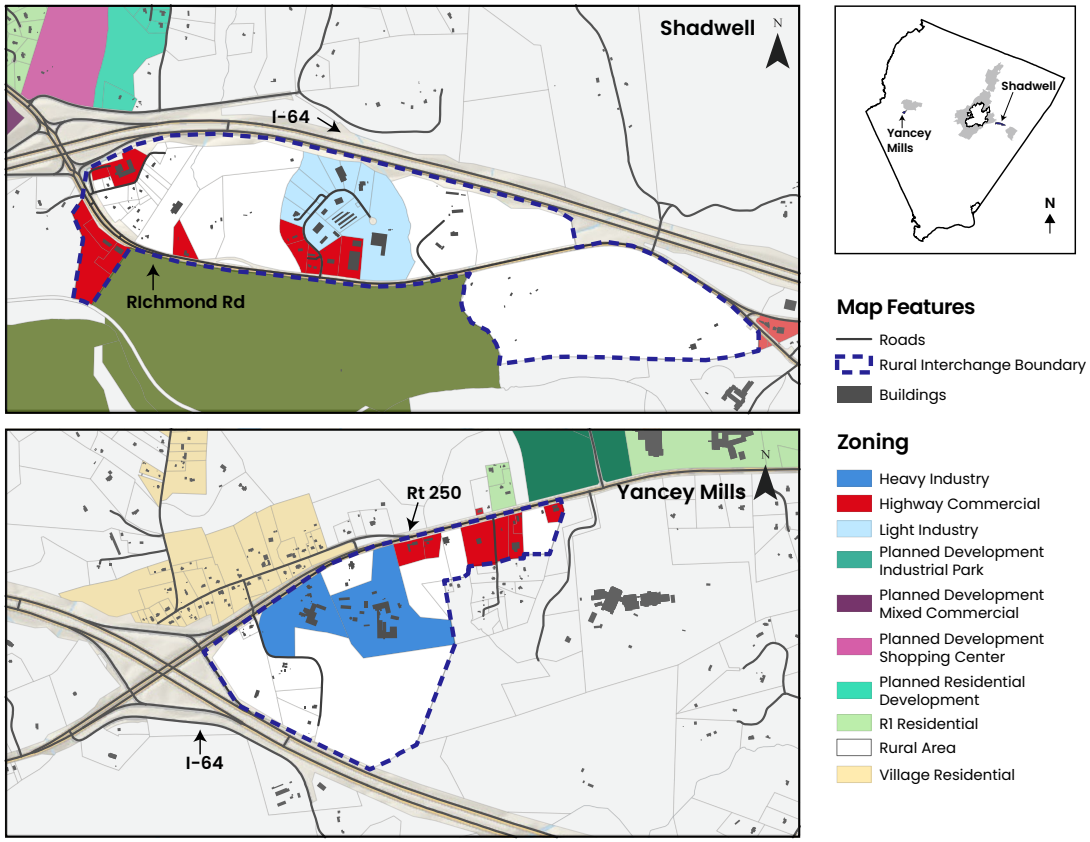
Community input supported the concept of community resilience hubs and emphasized the importance of identifying options for providing or supporting essential services such as food access, community gardens, emergency preparedness and response, and places for community gathering. Existing historic structures can provide opportunities for adaptive reuse and often have a building scale and footprint that is consistent with the surrounding rural character.

RURAL INTERSTATE INTERCHANGES

There are four rural interstate (I-64) interchanges in the county's Rural Area: Yancey Mills (Exit 107), Ivy (Exit 114), Black Cat Road (Exit 129), and the southern part of the Shadwell interchange by Exit 124. There is existing development and underlying by-right commercial and industrial zoning at the Shadwell and Yancey Mills interchanges, with the potential for additional by-right industrial/commercial/office uses.

Development at some of these rural interstate interchanges could provide spaces for local food systems and food processing/distribution, or for uses that may not be suitable for walkable and compact development in mixed-use Development Areas. Further, job opportunities consistent with the County's target industries for economic development could efficiently use land with existing infrastructure and development in these locations.

Based on evaluation of the four rural interstate interchanges, this plan recommends further study of the Shadwell (Exit 124), and Yancey Mills (Exit 107) interchanges is needed to determine what land uses may be feasible and desired. Small Area Plans are recommended for the Shadwell and Yancey Mills interchanges, prioritizing Shadwell to identify general land uses, transportation impacts, protection of environmental features, and infrastructure needs and feasibility. It is possible that no changes in recommended land uses would be identified, and that only land uses consistent with the Rural Area designation (mainly agriculture/forestry and supporting uses) would continue to be recommended.



Rural Interstate Interchanges at Shadwell (Exit 124), and Yancey Mills (Exit 107)

GOAL STATEMENT:

Albemarle County's Rural Area will have thriving farms and working forests, rural communities, protected water supplies, healthy ecosystems, and protected historic and scenic resources, with a land-use pattern based on large parcels that are suitably sized for agricultural and silvicultural production and for unfragmented habitats. Land use in historic rural communities will prioritize adaptive reuse, historic preservation, water supply protection, energy-efficiency, and businesses and services that support rural land uses and surrounding community members.

OBJECTIVES + ACTIONS

OBJECTIVE	RALU 1. *Develop and implement policies for protecting rural land-use patterns in the Rural Area.*
ACTION	
1.1	Develop and adopt a Rural Area land-use plan as part of the Comprehensive Plan that: • Recognizes multiple geographic areas within the Rural Area with specific conservation needs, rather than a "one size fits all" approach. • Provides recommendations for protecting the Rural Area to maintain and enhance land for working farms and commercial forestry operations; native ecosystems; wildlife habitat connectivity, aquatic ecosystems and healthy water supplies; and rural landscape contexts for historic resources. • Includes a map of rural focus areas and proposed land-use and conservation priorities for each. • Includes a geographic analysis of conservation needs in the Rural Area and identifies an approach for designating and protecting focus areas across the Rural Area. • Includes an overall acreage or percentage target for land under conservation in the County.
1.2	Develop location standards for renewable-energy projects in the Rural Area that make those projects possible while protecting forests and other important landscapes.
1.3	Coordinate with the University of Virginia on recommended land uses for Area B in the Rural Area.

OBJECTIVE	RALU 2. *Reduce and mitigate the impacts to natural systems and cultural resources from development when it occurs.*
ACTION	
2.1	Implement a maximum lot size for development-right lots in the Rural Area zoning district to significantly reduce the acreage used for residential lots compared to the current 31-acre maximum for five lots (6.2-acre average lot size).
2.2	Update ordinance requirements for permitted residential development to encourage maintenance and restoration of native forest vegetation and vegetated stream buffers.
2.3	Consider the presence of rare habitats and species during special use permit requests and require conditions minimizing impact on those sites and species.
2.4	Petition the Commonwealth for revised enabling legislation that would permit adoption of updated requirements for clustered subdivisions ("rural preservation developments") in the Rural Area. If successful, revise the rural preservation development design standards in the Zoning Ordinance to reduce the total area of these subdivisions used for residential lots, and to increase protection of soils and natural systems.
OBJECTIVE	RALU 3. *Improve the effectiveness of the County's land-conservation programs in implementing the objectives of the Rural Area and Environmental Stewardship chapters.*
ACTION	
3.1	Revise the ACE ordinance to: • Clarify scoring requirements for candidate properties. Complete the scoring-system update process reviewed by the ACE Committee in 2021. • Reactivate the ACE program to make land conservation possible for lower-income landowners whose rural land is most at risk of sale for development.
3.2	Conduct outreach to landowners in high-priority conservation areas to encourage and support voluntary land conservation through donated and purchased conservation easements.
3.3	Increase monitoring and enforcement capacity for County- and ACEA-held conservation easements by providing permanent, full-time field stewardship staff.
3.4	Provide landowner outreach and support and public education to increase awareness and understanding of the County's land-conservation programs.
3.5	Support partner organizations who are operating conservation-easement programs in the county.

OBJECTIVE	RALU 4. *Support local agricultural and forestal production and value-added processing.*
ACTION	
4.1	Use land-conservation tools to reduce the conversion of rural land with soils that are important for agriculture and forestry to other uses such as residential, commercial, and large-scale utility uses.
4.2	Update regulations to allow rural light Industrial and commercial uses that support local processing and retail sales on properties with agricultural and silvicultural uses.
4.3	Increase opportunities for by-right farm worker housing.
4.4	Allow collection and distribution facilities for local agricultural products in the Rural Area.
4.5	Revise the regulations for "special events" so they are only possible on registered historic properties or landmark properties with property ingress and egress onto public roads under VDOT supervision.
4.6	Support local production and value-added processing of agricultural and silvicultural products.
OBJECTIVE	RALU 5. *Increase the adaptive reuse of existing structures in rural communities for small-scale uses.*
ACTION	
5.1	Update the Rural Area Zoning District to allow small-scale professional offices with existing non-residential structures and uses, prioritizing adaptive reuse of historic structures.
5.2	Identify and implement options for permitting adaptive re-use of existing structures for small-scale commercial uses (including country stores) in rural communities.
OBJECTIVE	RALU 6. *Permit land uses that support maintenance of a rural land-use pattern and mitigate the impacts of permitted uses on the character of the Rural Area.*
ACTION	
6.1	Update noise regulations to limit the impacts of amplified sound from permitted events.
6.2	Add small-scale, low-impact outdoor recreation uses (not to include indoor lodging) to the list of uses permitted in the Rural Area zoning district, especially where these uses can co-exist with rather than replace existing agricultural and silvicultural uses.

There are several possible land uses present in the Rural Area requiring additional consideration for appropriateness and impact mitigation, including:

- *Rural interstate interchanges*
- *Adaptive use of historic or landmark properties*
- *Special events in the Rural Area*
- *Essential services and supporting uses for surrounding community members in rural communities*
- *Community resilience hubs*
- *Economic vitality for landmark properties*



Existing commercial use building, North Garden

OBJECTIVE	RALU 7. *Plan for and manage non-residential land uses and existing development in the Rural Area.*
ACTION	
7.1	Utilize existing buildings and community facilities as community resilience hubs. See the Resilient Community chapter for actions related to resilience hubs.
7.2	Provide spaces in existing structures and public facilities in rural communities for small-scale uses serving surrounding community members where proposed expansion of these structures includes community input on possible new structures and uses. This includes community feedback gathered through the special use permit review process for uses only allowed by SP in the Rural Area zoning district.
7.3	Review and update legacy commercial uses and/or zoning districts for properties within the RA, either inclusive of Shadwell/Yancey Interchanges or wholly separate.
7.4	Identify desired land uses (which includes the option of no change) and potential ways to support existing businesses and services, especially in the case of a community-identified need and desire for additional development and associated infrastructure improvements. This type of process allows for more focused and detailed study specific to an individual community.
7.5	Protect human health, property values, and ecosystem health from the impacts of extraction and recognize the economic value of the County's mineral resources.
7.6.	Develop Small Area Plans for the Rural Area portions of the following rural interstate interchanges: Exit 124/Shadwell and Exit 107/Yancey Mills. Prioritize the Shadwell plan and complete it prior to the Yancey Mills plan. The small area plan process includes identifying the following: recommended land uses, transportation networks, sensitive environmental areas to protect, historic, cultural, and scenic resources to preserve, landmark properties, and public water and sewer feasibility. The process should prioritize land use and zoning opportunities to support agricultural, silvicultural, and related/supporting industries at these locations.