

The Need for a Statewide Conversation On The Future of Rural Virginia

by David Bearinger

Today, throughout many parts of Virginia, rural lands and communities are under stress. Since mid-century, the Commonwealth has been transformed, from a rural, primarily agricultural state to one that is increasingly urbanized and suburbanized. Rapid population growth in Northern Virginia, Metro Richmond, Hampton Roads, suburban Charlottesville, and other areas has put increasing pressure on local governments, straining their ability to provide roads, schools, and other services.

Many of these communities are currently struggling with the loss of open space and family farms, the transformation of agriculturally-based economies, and the disappearance of skills and traditions that have long been associated with rural life.

At the same time, other rural areas of the state are experiencing significant population loss and diminishing economic opportunities. Mines are closing; fisheries are in decline; and farm families are farming part-time, often with one or both spouses taking jobs off the farm to make ends meet. The national and global marketplaces strongly favor large-scale farming and fishing operations or demand that individual producers be connected to a major "vertically integrated" corporate production network.

At the state level, population shifts have changed the balance of political power in the General Assembly, which is no longer dominated by rural interests. Rural localities are limited in their ability to prevent unwanted growth; they frequently suffer from high rates of local taxation to pay for basic services and from disparities in education funding which in turn limits their ability to attract new employers. New technologies are decentralizing work, allowing people to live in rural areas and "telecommute" to jobs in urban and suburban centers, but this trend may also contribute to suburban sprawl and to the cultural transformation of rural communities.

Should Virginians be concerned about these changes? Is the loss of rural lands, communities, and cultures inevitable? What is lost when these lands and cultures disappear? Will Virginia need its rural lands and communities in the future? And if so, what must be done to guarantee that they remain viable and intact?

The search for answers to these questions reaches deep into the history of Virginia, where almost 400 years ago one idea of land was replaced by another, and a landscape with only natural borders was overlaid with boundaries of private property. In Colonial Virginia, there was broad access to what was then considered a "minimum stake" of 50 acres -- far broader access than there was in England, where English law had sought to keep property in relatively few hands.

In Virginia, the land resource appeared infinite, and to ensure the success of the Colony, it became both necessary and desirable to broaden the base of land ownership insofar as possible. Much of 17th century colonial legislation dealt with Real Property, with developing the legal framework that defined the nature of landownership, and by the mid-1600s the concept of property ownership had been sanctified in Virginia. The ideas of "land as liberty" and of nearly-sacred property rights have been basic to rural life in Virginia ever since.

It is also worth noting that Virginia has the longest agricultural history of any state, with almost 400 years of farming tradition, of raising tobacco and livestock, of harvesting abundant fisheries and forests to create wealth -- as well as more than a century of extremely profitable mining. All of these activities have provided a foundation for Virginia's rural economies, and each is less likely to support a family in rural Virginia than it was just a few decades ago.

In 1900, approximately 81% of Virginia's population lived in what were then defined as rural areas. By the mid-1980s, that figure was 34%; today, it is less than 25%. Economic forces partially explain this trend, but another part of the explanation lies in the realm of culture and values. In many ways, at the close of the 20th century, such basic American ideals as **Prosperity**, the **Free Market**, and **Progress** seem to be at odds with the goal of maintaining strong rural communities, leading some to question whether rural life in Virginia can -- or should -- be preserved at all.

Prosperity

Intensive harvesting of natural resources has produced considerable wealth from Virginia communities in the past, though sometimes only for brief periods, or with unacceptable long-term costs. Otherwise, rural areas are not typically seen as primary centers of wealth and prosperity, except in the prospect of their being converted or developed into something else -- a suburban neighborhood or commercial center, for example. Agriculture is in decline throughout the state, and except for tourism and recreation there are not yet many ways to produce wealth from open space. It seems clear that in the future, rural areas will have to

produce wealth -- or to store it in extremely compelling ways -- or else they will be developed in ways that do generate wealth. **How can the prosperity of Virginia's rural areas be enhanced without destroying their rural character or depleting the vital resources they contain?**

The Free Market

The free marketplace is a value as sacred as private property, and government intrudes here at great peril. Market-based valuation often forces the conversion of prime farmland (rightly, in the view of many people) to more intensive uses. It also frequently favors development rather than conservation near water resources, along ridgetops, and in scenic viewsheds. **In the future, will markets create and support the kinds of relationships between people and the land that preserve rural character?** Much recent evidence suggests that it will not. Increasingly, preservation advocates are using incentive-based tools such as voluntary land conservation easements that are more compatible with free-market principles and private property values. But opponents argue that even these measures interfere too much with market forces. **How will we resolve this apparent conflict between the impulse to protect rural areas and our tradition of relying on the free market to dictate land use?**

Progress

Progressive and reform movements have tended to see rural areas and ways of life as "backward" and as obstacles to progress. Even some well-intentioned initiatives -- like the "Country Life Movement" early in this century -- that were intended to support rural communities were founded on the belief that rural life had fallen too far behind. Today, many people identify progress with land development, with new road construction, job creation, and commercial activity. **Is the idea of progress compatible with rural preservation?**

Some people see hope in the advent of "decentralized work" that allows people to live in rural areas and "telecommute" to jobs elsewhere. This trend provides jobs for people who value a rural lifestyle, and it can help to repopulate communities that have suffered population loss. It may also increase the demand for locally-oriented businesses, bringing new employment opportunities. Critics argue that it also increases the demand for services; that it can create community divisions by bringing to rural areas people with differing values and expectations; and that it tends to increase suburban sprawl and exacerbate "edge issues" along the rural/urban interface.

Obviously, there are many other factors that influence the patterns of change in Virginia's rural communities. Some of these are:

- **Mistrust of government** and its "intrusions" on private property rights. This feeling is deeply ingrained in many rural Virginia communities.
- **The real problems facing urban areas**, and the perception that cities are becoming unlivable. These factors increase growth pressures in suburban and "ex-urban" communities, some experts argue -- persuasively -- that the future of rural Virginia will be determined by the fate of Virginia's cities.
- **Negative stereotypes** of rural life. In the popular media, rural people and places have often been portrayed -- and are still portrayed -- as foolish or dangerous. At the same time, the scarcity of good jobs and poor quality of public education in some rural areas strain the social fabric, contributing to a negative image of life beyond the suburbs.
- **A romantic or nostalgic idea of rural life.** The notion of rural life as idyllic or as "paradise lost" tends either to ignore or to trivialize the real problems rural communities face, freezing these communities in an imagined past and working against the adaptations they will have to make in order to survive.
- **Cultural homogenization.** Through a variety of influences, the distinctiveness of Virginia's local cultures has been diminished over time.
- **Globalization of the economy**, especially the agricultural economy. This trend has made small-scale farming and timber operations generally less viable than they were a few decades ago. At the same time, exemplary "sustainable" farming and logging operations have emerged in recent years throughout Virginia, successfully marketing their products to a local or "boutique" national clientele.
- **Petroleum costs.** In 1998, gasoline prices are lower, in constant dollars, than they were in the 1960s. Low fuel costs enhance the competitive position of national and international distribution networks, increasing pressure on local growers and producers. It also increases the demand for new highway construction and contributes to suburban sprawl.

- **Diversity among rural communities.** Rural Virginia is not a single place with a single set of problems. It is many places, with complex, interlocking matrices of problems that often seem to demand contradictory or incompatible solutions. It is extremely difficult to create one coherent set of policies for rural Virginia as a whole.

Two key questions emerge in thinking about the future of rural Virginia. Are there good reasons why all Virginians should seek to protect the state's rural lands and communities? And how can we begin to define, then to create a viable future for rural Virginia? Obviously, any approach will be immensely complex, but it is worth noting at the outset that -- as different as Virginia's rural communities are from one another -- there are some similarities, some common or at least parallel histories and patterns of transformation that can be explored as a starting point. For example, the experience of many coal-mining communities in Southwest Virginia bears a striking resemblance, in all but their superficial particulars, to the experience of traditional fishing communities in the Eastern part of the state.

In addressing the question of whether Virginia's rural communities will be sustainable in the next century, it is important to acknowledge that -- given current pressures -- these communities almost certainly will not be sustainable unless we as Virginians can articulate in very concrete terms the values that make us want to sustain them.

The first step is to begin a sustained, in-depth, statewide discussion exploring the histories of Virginia's rural communities, the current stresses these communities are facing, and the prospect of recovering vital, sustainable links between Virginia's cities, suburbs, and countryside.

How can Virginia's rural communities create for themselves a future that is healthy, prosperous, and just? What tools do they need to create it? Where is the proper balance between the desire to protect natural resources, to preserve open land and rural character, and the pursuit of economic vitality and opportunity? Can Virginia's urban and rural communities discover a compelling mutual interest in the future? And can they work together to achieve it?

To be truly effective, this discussion must take place in both rural and urban communities. One of its central goals should be to define the ways in which our individual and collective choices today are shaping the future of rural Virginia. Another goal should be to create a vision of rural Virginia in the next century

that grows from a thorough understanding and appreciation of the past but that is free from out-dated, limiting definitions.

Rural Virginia in the 21st century must be more than an artifact of the 19th. We will have to find a way to align the values we invest in rural Virginia with other basic values, like prosperity, progress, and economic freedom. In the end, the purpose of this conversation -- and its ultimate benefit--is not to protect Virginia's rural communities from change -- that is impossible in any case -- but to ensure that they change in ways that do not imperil their existence or impose on future generations of Virginians losses they cannot afford.