

Summary: Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program Update Outreach

Prepared by Anne Arundel County Office of Planning and Zoning
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Introduction

This report summarizes the methods and results of public outreach conducted in 2025 on potential updates to the Anne Arundel County Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program. The proposed changes are intended to align the program with changes in the County Zoning Code, to make the program more attractive to landowners, and provide flexibility for properties currently under Agricultural Conservation and Woodland Preservation Easements.

Background

Anne Arundel County established an Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program in 1993 to provide financial incentives for landowners to voluntarily agree to maintain their property as working farms and forests and forgo the potential for future development. The County established two programs in the County Code and in Program Regulations:

- Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easements - The County buys the development rights, and the land stays in private ownership as farm or forest. The easement is perpetual and runs with the deed when the land is transferred.
- Tax District Agreement - The property owner makes a commitment to keep the land in agricultural use and not subdivide for 10 years and receives a credit on the County portion of their Real Property Tax Bill. The District Agreement can be renewed every 10 years.

The County and similar State Programs have preserved over 14,600 acres of working farms and forests in Anne Arundel County. The County has a goal to preserve 20,000 acres of agricultural lands. In recent years, participation in the program has slowed.

The Regulations for the Anne Arundel County Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program were adopted in 1999. The program regulations need to be updated to adjust to changes in the County Zoning Code and to meet the changing landscape and operations on farms. While the success of the program is fundamentally based on the success of the agricultural economy, improving the regulations can make it a more effective tool for farmers and for conserving land.

The County's latest update of the General Development Plan, Plan2040 and the Region 9 Plan as well as the draft Region 8 Plan highlight the need to update the program requirements.

Plan2040 Goal NE3: Expand, enhance and continue to protect the County’s greenways, open space, rural areas, including the Priority Preservation Area (PPA).

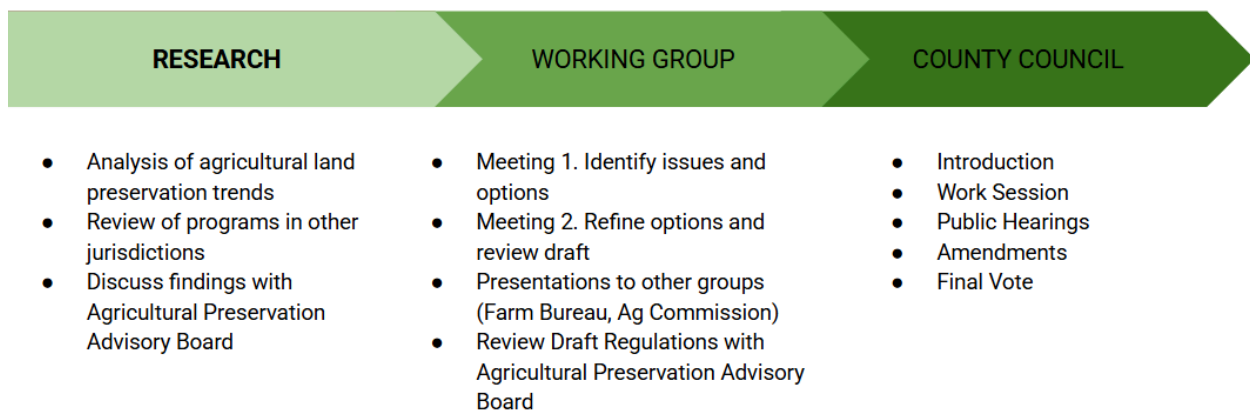
Strategy NE3.3.e. Update program regulations for the Agriculture and Woodland Preservation Program to correct outdated Code references, and to revise the permitted uses within the Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program to include accessory uses on minimal acreage that will not interfere with farming operations, as well as other rural economy uses.

Region 9 Plan Strategy NE4. Evaluate and, if feasible, revise the County Agricultural Preservation Program to support farms under 50 acres and allow more flexibility of uses, like agri-tourism.

Planning Process and Outreach

County staff have developed recommendations for updating the Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Program by reviewing past plans, conducting research on trends and conditions and engaging in collaborative discussions at four meetings with the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board and two meetings of an ad hoc Working Group (July 30, 2025 and September 3, 2025) including large landowners, small farmers, environmental, and community organizations (see appendix). County staff also presented information and received feedback at meetings of the Anne Arundel County Agricultural Commission (May 15 and September 18, 2025) and the County chapter of the Farm Bureau (June 9, October 13, and November 10, 2025). The County Council has the final authority to make revisions to the program as it will require changes to the County Code and the existing program regulations.

Figure 1. Planning Process



The recommended changes to the program were also made available online for public review and

comment from October 13 to November 17, 2025. Letters were sent to owners of property currently in agricultural preservation easements or districts in the County notifying them of the recommended changes and opportunity to provide comments. Notice was also provided through email and social media posts through the County Office of Planning and Zoning to the Region 5, 6, and 8 mailing lists and the Soil Conservation District and Arundel Ag. Consistent with other engagement efforts with the agricultural community in Anne Arundel County, the number of online responses was low, but they provide important additional perspective to complement feedback heard from in person meetings. Sending letters and posting the materials on the County website also ensured transparency that interested parties could review the potential changes in writing.

The public discussions and the questionnaire focused on five key areas of potential regulatory change:

1. Eligibility Criteria (Minimum Size)
2. Purchase Price for a County Agricultural Preservation Easement
3. Easements on Properties that Cannot be Subdivided
4. Agricultural Preservation Subdivision
5. Release of One Unrestricted Lot

Key Findings by Topic

1. Eligibility Criteria: Minimum Easement Size

Currently, the minimum size for properties to be eligible to enter into a preservation easement is 50 acres for agricultural land and 25 acres for woodlands. The median size of a farm in Anne Arundel County is 25 acres based on the latest Agricultural Census. The minimum size to subdivide a property in the RA zoning district is 30 acres. Some agricultural preservation programs allow easements on farms as small as 10 acres, which can help support beginning farmers.

The topic of the minimum size for properties to be eligible for an agricultural or woodland preservation easement has generated the most feedback in the planning process. Some people state that it is important to conserve productive farmland even at small size, especially since young and beginning farmers often can only afford to buy smaller farms. Some people expressed concern about whether there is a enough public benefit to justify the use of public funds to purchase easements on a property if it does not have potential for subdivision.

Most of the responses to the questionnaire supported setting the minimum size at 10 acres. The ad hoc Working Group also recommended setting the minimum size at 10 acres.

Proposed Minimum Size	Number of Respondents
10 acres	5
25 acres	0
30 acres	2
40 acres	0
50 acres	2

2. Purchase Price for a County Agricultural Preservation Easement

The County currently pays 60% of the fair market value of the land for an Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easement. The fair market value is established by an appraisal. A similar State program, the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) pays up to 75% of fair market value. For MALPF easements, the State pays most of the price and the County provides matching funds. With the rise in property values, the 15% difference means the County program typically offers landowners about \$2,000 less per acre than the MALPF program.

The consensus of the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board and stakeholders who have been engaged so far is that the County should increase the price it pays landowners for an Agricultural Conservation Easement. The majority of questionnaire responses supported increasing the price the County pays for an Agricultural Conservation Easement to 70% of fair market value.

Proposed Purchase Price	Number of Respondents	Key Reason for Choice (Summary)
60% of fair market value (no change)	2	Fair; landowner keeps the land so a heavy discount is appropriate.
70% of fair market value	6	Fairer price to owner; would attract more landowners; capitalize on State funding by staying below MALPF rate.
75% of fair market value	1	Same as MALPF program.

3. Easements on Properties that Cannot be Subdivided

If smaller properties become eligible, that will lead to paying for Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easements on some properties that are too small to subdivide into more lots in the RA (Rural Agricultural) zoning district. Some other counties allow that, but pay a lower price for properties that cannot be subdivided, since buying the right to further subdivide is one of the fundamental purposes of an Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easement.

The ad hoc Working Group recommended paying a lower price for easements on properties that do not have subdivision potential. The feedback from meetings of the Agricultural Commission and Farm Bureau generally supported this idea as well. Almost all of the responses on the questionnaire supported acquisition of easements on properties without subdivision potential, but were split on the appropriate price to pay.

Preferred Option	Number of Respondents	Key Reason for Choice (Summary)
Pay the same price	3	Better to have balance to incentivize all to participate.
Pay a lower price (e.g., 50% FMV)	5	Lower price is appropriate; zoning laws can and do change.
Do not buy Easements if no subdivision potential	1	Avoid a windfall.

4. Agricultural Preservation Subdivision

While an Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easement limits subdivision for houses, there are times when subdividing a farm is important for succession and transferring agricultural operations. The recommendation is to allow subdivision of property under easement for agricultural purposes with the following criteria

- A. The original parcel must be at least 60 acres
- B. After subdivision, each lot is at least 30 acres; an exception to this limit may be made based on physical characteristics such as separation of land by a public road
- C. Subdivision plan must be reviewed and recommended by the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board
- D. The subdivision does not create a new right for additional dwelling units; and
- E. Updated agricultural preservation easements are recorded on both of the newly created lots.

The Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, ad hoc Working Group, and feedback from meetings of the Agricultural Commission and Farm Bureau all recognized the need for this

provision and supported it. The majority of responses to the questionnaire also supported the recommendation.

Response	Number of Respondents	Key Reason for Choice (Summary)
Agree	5	Preserving agricultural nature; only change ownership.
Neutral	1	
Disagree with allowing subdivision	3	Creates a problem for the County to oversee and keep in the proper guidelines.

5. Release of One Unrestricted Lot

This clarifies an existing option allowed in Anne Arundel County Code, but was complicated by the Zoning Code update in 2005 that removed family conveyance lots. Release of a limited number of residential lots is allowed under MALPF and Rural Legacy easements and in some other Maryland counties.

The recommendation is to allow one residential lot to be subdivided and taken out of the Agricultural and Woodland Preservation Easement under the following conditions:

- A. The original parcel must be at least 60 acres (this ensures that there is subdivision potential for at least 3 lots in an RA zoning district).
- B. The new lot shall be limited to 40,000 square feet, and be located to minimize impacts on the agricultural operation. The lot size may be increased if necessary to meet requirements for septic systems and drinking water well.
- C. Lot size and location must be reviewed and recommended by the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board.
- D. The landowner must repay the County for the value of the land released from the preservation easement based on the same percentage of current fair market value of the land they were originally paid.

The ad hoc Working Group supported this recommendation. Opinions on allowing release of a residential lot were split in feedback from discussions at Farm Bureau meetings and in responses to the questionnaire.

Response	Number of Respondents	Key Reason for Choice (Summary)
Agree	5	Allows for fair agricultural use and promotes sustainability; one lot size/location concerns noted.
Neutral	1	
Disagree with allowing release of one lot	3	Defeats the purpose of the easement; more houses.

Respondent Demographics

Of the nine respondents to the online questionnaire, eight of them self-identified as agricultural landowners whose property is mostly cropland or pasture. Eight of the respondents also self-identified as owners of land currently in an agricultural preservation program. Participants in the Farm Bureau and Agricultural Commission meetings also were farmers, many of whom own land under agricultural and woodland preservation easements.

Appendix

Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board Members

- Steve Hopkins, Chair
- Rick Catterton
- Kayla Griffith
- John Houser
- Emily Wilson

Ad Hoc Working Group Members

- Gerardo Martinez, Wild Kid Acres
- VK Holtzendorf, Growth Action Network
- Josh Falk, Executive Director, Scenic Rivers Land Trust
- Hamilton Chaney, Land Preserve LLC
- Shelley Garrett, Agriculture Business Development Director, Anne Arundel Economic Development Corporation
- David Scheler, District Manager, Anne Arundel Soil Conservation District
- Michelle Cable, Executive Director, Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation