

## Survey Says PWC Residents Want Rural Crescent Preserved

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### The Survey

Approximately four hundred residents participated in the [online survey](#) posted on the [Prince William County government website](#) from late August through late September of 2013. The survey meant to advise the Board of County Supervisors on how to preserve or develop the rural crescent in the future. County planners will present that information to the supervisors tomorrow at their meeting, along with suggestions to meet the needs of farmers and those who wish to develop parts of their land.

Most survey participants answered that they want the nearly 100,000 acres of Prince William County south of Vint Hill and Bristow Road, designated the "Rural Crescent" in 1998, to remain a place for agriculture, forestland and low-density agricultural development. A minority thought [11 strongly agreed, and 20 agreed] that it should become a place for future suburban development.

### Reconsidering 10-Acre Lot Mandate

Although 61 percent of participants said that the current 10-acre lot regulation is "a good way to protect rural character," county planners also considered residents who said they were dissatisfied with that regulation.

While the 10-acre rule allows landowners to sell off some of their land for profit without sacrificing the rural character of the area, farmers had said that commercial agriculture requires more than just 10 acres of land. By selling off land, they would be limiting the amount of commercial agriculture they could do and inviting in new families that could only do small-scale on the land.

The 10-acre regulation is a sore point for many who want to sell their land for profit. At both the initial rural crescent informational meeting held in Nokesville in August and the Jan. 23 one at 5 County Complex announcing the results of the survey, the most outspoken attendees advocated for more development.

Some said they were hoping to sell their land and use the money to retire. Others felt the county had no business restricting their land rights, especially with so much development going on at the edge of the rural crescent in places such as suburban Bristow and Gainesville.

### "Clustering" of Homes

At the Jan. 23 citizens' meeting, advisor to the county Clive Graham, a planner with the Environmental Resource Management Co., along with Prince William County Long Range Planner Ray Utz presented the idea that instead of parceling land into 10-acre chunks, ten homes could instead be "clustered" on 10 acres.

The proposed configuration would allow landowners of multiple acres to profit on the land they do not need for farming. Per density, the profit is greater, but it also allows for a greater number of acres to be preserved as green space or agricultural. At an average of one home per acre, the new parcels would still have more green space than

the typical single-family suburban lot.

### **Purchasing of Developer Rights**

Another suggestion made by citizens was that developers could purchase developer rights from rural landowners, and apply them to building in urban or suburban areas. That would ensure the rural character of the southern part is preserved, while rural landowners can also profit on their preserved lands.

“If the county does want this area to remain rural, you have to compensate the farmer in some way,” said an audience member.

While that suggestion was discussed, Utz said it is not currently working well in other areas that have tried it. Although it is not an option they will be strongly advocating, it is one they are considering.

### **Most Citizens Want Preservation**

While the most vocal attendees said they wanted more development, their point of view did not match the overall sentiment of most who took the survey. The survey shows that 42 percent of people thought the county land preservation was “too low” while 37 percent thought it was “just right.” Only 8 percent said it was “too high” and 2 percent “much too high.”

Utz and Graham relied on these numbers as evidence that they would not advocate for outright development of the rural crescent, but would advise supervisors to legislate with the objective of maintaining its character as per the desire of the electorate.

### **Rural Area Negatively Affects Businesses**

However, even among those in favor of preserving the rural crescent, residents were concerned that the rural crescent limits businesses along Fitzwater Drive, which has many businesses, some of which are struggling.

“Businesses are dying. All businesses in Nokesville, and Manassas are dying. There are not enough people living on this end of the county. We have been victims of this board’s direction for too long,” one man said.

Another citizen said the rural crescent model is not sustainable for businesses.

“I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to satisfy a lot of different people across the county, but it’s still going to come down to economics what drives the economy.”

### **Open Responses Support Keeping the Crescent Rural**

Open-ended answers at the end of the survey revealed that approximately 85 percent of those taking the survey live somewhere within the rural crescent. Almost unanimously, these people said they chose to live in the rural crescent for its rural character and did not desire to live among urban/suburban sprawl. They cited traffic, close proximity to neighbors and lack of nature/ open-spaces as unappealing aspects of urban/suburban life. Many said they are willing to sacrifice being further from shopping and businesses to live a more rural lifestyle.

### **Development Declines in Prince William**

Despite county officials looking into the possibility of bringing new development to the rural crescent, developers might not be all that interested. At the last BOCS meeting, it was announced that [development planned for 2015 is down](#) in the county as developers have cited there is not enough money to be made on new developments, competing with relatively new existing homes on the market. Whether this would be different in the rural crescent, where there are fewer new homes, remains to be seen.

