

Dear Editor,

On September 13, the Shenandoah County Board of Supervisors voted to kick-start our county's conservation easement program, which allows property owners to protect their land from development for generations to come.

The board's vote, which came after years of deliberation regarding ways to provide local funding for the program, was based on a recommendation from the citizen-led Conservation Easement Authority, and was a wise decision for the future of our county.

Land conservation provides long-term savings to taxpayers by avoiding the need for additional costly public services in rural areas. The county will fund the program using "roll-back" revenue generated when land that is currently farmed or forested is changed to other uses, typically residential development. Using these revenues makes perfect sense as a way to preserve working farms and forestland throughout the county.

Additionally, the county funding for this program will immediately be matched dollar-for-dollar by the state's Farmland Preservation Program. The bottom line: This is a smart investment for the county, and it is possible for an even higher return on this investment, several times over, with other federal, state and private sources.

Most importantly, this decision helps achieve the goals of the county comprehensive plan: supporting the farm sector, providing flexibility for rural landowners, and enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

Shenandoah Forum believes Tuesday's vote is a critical first step in a successful and effective conservation easement program for Shenandoah County. We believe in this so strongly that the Shenandoah Forum Board of Directors agreed to contribute \$2,500 of our own funds to this program.

Again, we applaud the Board of Supervisors for taking this important step toward keeping Shenandoah County rural, keeping taxes low, and ensuring that our county preserves the backbone of our economy-- its farmland.

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