

Albemarle's program to acquire conservation easements celebrated in the face of major budget cuts
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Albemarle County spent \$1 million or more per year between 2000 and 2008
on a program designed to permanently protect rural land from
development through

conservation
easements

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"After 10 years running the [

Acquisition
of Conservation Easements

] program, we've protected 37 properties
and 7,200 acres from future development," program coordinator Ches
Goodall told county supervisors at a recent meeting. "Seventy percent
have been working family farms. For many of these landowners, I feel
like ACE has been a real godsend for these people."

The economic downturn, however, has reduced the overall level of funding
for ACE.

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Hughes Farm; an Albemarle County property protected by ACE
Source: Albemarle County

According to county officials, the budget for next fiscal year only includes \$366,000 for ACE, which is coming from the county's capital improvements funds.

The easements are voluntary agreements that allow landowners to permanently limit the type and amount of development on their property while retaining private ownership and gaining access to state tax credits.

"At the state level, the General Assembly made this Virginia land preservation tax credit program, a program that was explicitly designed to be able to benefit landowners across the economic spectrum by making these tax credits transferable," said Rex Linville of the

Piedmont Environmental Council

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"If you don't have a high income, you are actually able to sell your tax credits to somebody else who might have a high income and might be able to use them," added Linville. "So even landowners of lower income levels are able to get a lot of benefit out of putting a conservation easement on their properties and selling those tax credits to other landowners."



Vieille Farm

; an Albemarle County property protected by ACE

Source: Albemarle County

In the year 2000, there were only 17,000 acres of permanently protected private land in the county. Ten years later there are more than 81,000 acres of protected land.

"That's largely as a result of great financial incentives either through sale of easement, through the ACE program, or for donated easements," said Linville.

"We can't use that success to think that we can now sit back ... and say we've done a great thing," said Linville. "Virginia is losing farm and forestland at the rate of 50,000 acres per year... . Permanent conservation easements are one of the few tools that we have available to preserve those resources."

At last week's board meeting, Goodall said the county had received an additional grant of \$61,000 from Farmland Preservation to supplement efforts to obtain easements.

Properties that qualify for easements are chosen by a ranking evaluation system created to award

points for a number of different values such as open space resources and threat of conversion to development. There are a number of options available for a person to do a conservation easement.

“The ACE program is a means-tested program. You get more money if you’re in a lower income bracket than if you’re in a higher income bracket,” said Supervisor

Dennis S. Rooker

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However, there are generally more applicants for the ACE program than money. County staff recently wrote in a report that the program will suffer if additional funds cannot be found to accommodate demand.

The county’s goal is to qualify 90,000 acres of public parkland and conservation easements by June 30, 2010. There are currently 81,000 acres in conservation easements alone.

“I think we feel confident that we will be very close to the goal when we take everything into account,” said county spokeswoman Lee Catlin.