

CHESTER COUNTY  
**Agricultural  
Economic  
Development  
Strategic Plan**  
2022

**Strategies**

- Agricultural Markets
- Business & Financing
- Education & Outreach
- Labor & Workforce
- Land Access
- Zoning & Land Use

[www.chescofarming.org/AgPlan/](http://www.chescofarming.org/AgPlan/)

## ACTIONS FOR **Chester County Municipalities**

Chester County municipalities are critical partners in implementing the *Agricultural Economic Development Strategic Plan*. Enclosed are the specific actions listed in the plan that municipalities could play a key role in implementing. Some of these actions are intended to be led by municipalities, and others may involve a partnership with another organization.



Please contact the **Ag Council** with questions.

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# Agricultural Economic Development Strategic Plan

## Executive Summary

Agriculture is a significant part of Chester County's heritage, culture, and landscape. It is also part of the county's identity and sense of place. Despite intensifying competition for land uses over the years, agriculture has continued to be vibrant and strong. It not only is a major contributor to the local economy but provides environmental and social benefits.

With the county becoming even more developed over the last decade, agriculture faces continued growth pressures and new challenges. These issues include a lack of understanding or support from the public, difficult municipal regulatory environments, lack of a ready workforce, high costs of doing business, limited access to agricultural land, and more.

At the same time, there are opportunities that can spur growth and innovation. These opportunities leverage the county's existing assets and competitive advantages to strengthen the workforce, modernize infrastructure, attract and grow new businesses, and increase access to agricultural markets.

Some of the exciting ideas include creating a culinary center that draws tourists and the public to learn about food and agriculture through experiences; developing industrial hemp products through partnerships with universities and farmers; exploring opportunities for timber and biochar; helping farms prepare for ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) mandates and enhancing their ability to sell carbon credits; and forming collaborations between farms, land trusts, and environmental groups to demonstrate agriculture's positive environmental contributions.

Whether it is mitigating concerns or making the most of opportunities, the county needs a plan to guide its agricultural economy into the future. The *Chester County Agricultural Economic Development Strategic Plan (AEDSP)* is that guide. It is a comprehensive plan that outlines how to sustain and grow a successful agricultural economy in the face of growth pressures, industry challenges, and limited resources.

This plan focuses on six strategic areas:

- Agricultural Markets
- Business & Financing
- Education & Outreach
- Labor & Workforce
- Land Access
- Zoning & Land Use

While each strategic area is distinct, there are overlaps among the 32 total recommendations. Altogether, these encompass a holistic and integrated approach that reflect what matters to farmers and agribusinesses. The strategies also align with several fundamental goals:

- **Mitigate issues that limit industry growth.**
- **Harness opportunities that grow the agricultural economy.**
- **Increase employment opportunities at all skill levels.**
- **Remain a top agricultural-producing county in PA for years to come.**
- **Maximize county, local, and regional resources to support industry growth.**

It is important to note that partnerships, collaborations, and leadership in addition to county government are essential for the successful implementation of the plan. Farms, private businesses, industry associations, non-governmental organizations, and research institutions all have significant roles to play.

Moreover, several recommendations will create impacts that go well beyond the county's borders. As such, the plan proposes the notion of developing a new entity that will have greater flexibility to coordinate implementation.

After reading the plan, we hope the reader will better understand the issues and challenges that affect agriculture, appreciate its multifaceted contributions, and recognize why it needs to be supported. Finally, we hope the opportunities and recommendations inspire action to ensure agriculture remains a leading sector in Chester County for years to come.

# Actions for Municipalities



## Agricultural Markets

Recommendations to increase access to existing and new markets.

### Recommendation #7

#### Support Growth of Urban Agriculture

Support the growth of urban agriculture through infrastructure, technical assistance, workforce development, and cooperative efforts. In particular, there should be a focus on urban farms engaged in hydroponics, aquaponics, horticulture, beekeeping, mushrooms, small livestock, and composting.

#### Why Now:

Urban agriculture, indoor farming, and vertical farming are expected to be important parts of the urban food system in the future. Indeed, interviews indicate that there is interest from large indoor farming operations that are looking to locate in Chester County. There are also existing urban farms that are looking to expand. Attracting and keeping these businesses will require ensuring that zoning codes and incentives are aligned. Moreover, there is a need for workforce development programs that prepare people for work in these operations.

ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities	Lead Partners	Priority
<p>A. Modify zoning codes to allow for urban agriculture in existing zones or as an overlay zone. See <i>Urban Agriculture - A Guide for Municipalities</i> prepared by the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CC Planning Commission and Ag Council</li> <li>• Municipalities</li> </ul>	<p>Moderate</p>
<p>B. Modify comprehensive plan to incorporate urban agriculture as part of the landscape and mixed-use development.</p>		



## Business and Financing

Recommendations to increase the success and profitability of farms and agribusinesses, as well as ways to build an innovation culture.

### Recommendation #4

#### Support Municipal-Level Agribusiness Retention, Expansion, and Recruitment

Ensure cluster of support services are available for farms to build an attractive business environment.

#### Why Now:

It is important to retain and attract businesses that provide support services for farms. This includes tractor dealerships, farm equipment repair, farm supply stores, food processors, and logistics services. This can be accomplished by creating an attractive local business environment through the following action items.

ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities	Lead Partners	Priority
<p>A. Support the improvement of local traffic conditions through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic alerts for agricultural activity.</li> <li>• Large farm equipment escorts.</li> <li>• Road and parking solutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCEDC / AgConnect</li> <li>• CC Planning Commission</li> <li>• <b>Municipalities</b></li> </ul>	<p>Moderate</p>
<p>B. Streamline zoning, permitting, and licensing processes to expedite project development.</p>		
<p>C. Identify suitable locations for siting processing, distribution, and logistics infrastructure.</p>		
<p>D. Conduct analysis to determine strategic locations for infrastructure.</p>		



## Labor and Workforce

Recommendations that improve workforce opportunities, capacity, availability, and readiness in the agricultural sector.

### Recommendation #5

#### Address Agricultural Labor Availability

Improve conditions of chronic labor shortages by addressing issues related to labor housing, transportation, recruitment, and resource sharing.

#### Why Now:

The cost of housing and renting in the region is high. This is another factor that makes it difficult to attract agricultural workers. In addition, those that hire H-2A workers may have trouble providing housing, which can limit the number of seasonal workers. For some sectors, this leads to workers living farther away from the place of work. Unfortunately, some of these places have few public transit routes, which can increase commuting costs. As such, strategies should be employed to make it easier to establish temporary housing, increase access to agricultural labor housing, or improve transportation options.

ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities	Lead Partners	Priority
A. Simplify process or offer exemptions for developing housing for agricultural labor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chester County Workforce Development Board</li> <li>• Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission</li> <li>• CC Planning Commission</li> <li>• SEPTA</li> <li>• CCEDC / AgConnect</li> <li>• TMACC</li> <li>• <b>Municipalities</b></li> </ul>	Moderate
B. Improve transportation accessibility.		



## Zoning and Land Use

Recommendations that address challenges associated with active agriculture, the impacts of local regulations, and the conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses.

### Recommendation #1

#### Encourage Ag-Friendly Development Policies

Minimize development pressure on highly productive agricultural soils, reduce farmland fragmentation, and support farming as an important part of the landscape.

##### Why Now:

The amount of farmland is in decline. The situation is driven by economics, business decisions to close, and development pressure. Between 2002 and 2017 there was a 14% decrease in the number of farms and a 10% drop in farmland acres. As available farmland decreases, it becomes increasingly difficult to find land for expansion or for rent. As such, there is a need for policies that help preserve highly productive agricultural soils and reduce farmland fragmentation.

ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities	Lead Partners	Priority
A. Encourage high-density along designated growth and urban areas.	• CC Planning Commission and Ag Council	High
B. Encourage cluster development that leaves agriculturally productive parcels.	• CCATO • Municipalities	
C. Encourage greater mixed-use zoning.		

### Recommendation #2

#### Encourage Ag-Friendly Zoning Appropriate for the Community Context

Support flexible and appropriate zoning at the community level that also accommodates current and future needs of agriculture.

##### Why Now:

Zoning can either create opportunities or place barriers to farming. When zoning ordinances are onerous and inflexible for agricultural operations, it makes it more difficult for these businesses to thrive or adapt. For example, farms looking to engage in value-added processing or agritourism activity may be limited in places where farms are in a R or AR zone.

ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities	Lead Partners	Priority
A. Expand the definition of agriculture.	• CC Planning Commission and Ag Council	High
B. Encourage expanded allowed uses and accessory uses (e.g., processing, forestry, bioenergy, agritourism, labor housing, retail, etc.).	• CCATO • Municipalities	
C. Support greater right-to-farm protections.		
D. Encourage greater use allowances for CEA, indoor agriculture, and urban agriculture.		
E. Minimize process for standard agricultural infrastructure.		
F. Simplify process for developing agricultural labor housing.		
G. Identify NAOs (normal agriculture operations).		
H. Cooperate with home builders and the agriculture industry.		

### Recommendation #3

#### Incentivize Inter-Jurisdictional Collaboration

Induce inter-jurisdictional collaboration using economic incentives to reduce conflicting land-use regulations and improve the use of agribusiness retention, expansion, and attraction tools.

##### Why Now:

Land-use regulations, business support practices, and messaging about agricultural practices vary widely across municipalities. Since many farms operate in more than one township, these differences can cause significant disruption to both community relationships as well as farm operations. Multi-municipality planning has also proven to be effective in the region and is applicable in this setting.

<b>ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities</b>	<b>Lead Partners</b>	<b>Priority</b>
A. Encourage inter-jurisdictional agricultural overlay zones, pioneering the practice in the county.	• CC Planning Commission and Ag Council • CCATO	High
B. Collaborate with Chesapeake Bay programs to increase plain sect participation.	• CC Parks + Preservation • <b>Municipalities</b> • SWCD	
C. Develop shared tools and guidelines to assist with agritourism and neighbor relations.		
D. Collaborate to improve equine trail access.		

### Recommendation #5

#### Improve Road Conditions

Enable a safer road environment for both agricultural and non-agricultural vehicles.

##### Why Now:

Agriculture faces various challenges regarding road conditions. Narrow roads or turns, roadside trees, and solid curb sides make it difficult for farm equipment to maneuver safely. Also, when drivers do not understand or respect the nature of rural roads, accidents are prone to occur. Numerous interviews confirm that farms frequently deal with road issues, which will require concerted and collaborative efforts to resolve.

<b>ACTIONS for Chester County Municipalities</b>	<b>Lead Partners</b>	<b>Priority</b>
A. Develop standards for accommodating modern agricultural equipment and needs of the plain sect community.	• PennDOT • CC Planning Commission and Ag Council • CCATO • <b>Municipalities</b>	Medium



Chester County  
**Ag Council**

