

Isle of Wight County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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Peanut Harvest. (Livvy Preisser, Virginia Cooperative Extension)

Introduction

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) was established in 1914 and is a partnership between Virginia's two land grant universities: Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. There are 107 VCE offices around the state with several Agriculture Research and Extension Centers and 4-H Centers around the Commonwealth as well. Extension agents and Extension Specialists work to assist farmers, empower youth, and provide science-based knowledge to citizens. The Isle of Wight Extension Office houses two full time Extension Agents, a part time Program Assistant, and one full time Unit Support Staff. We are dedicated to serving the citizens and youth in Isle of Wight County with their growing programming needs.

The Isle of Wight County Extension Office conducted a situational analysis in 2023. This survey was used as a tool to understand what citizens view as a high priority issue in Isle of Wight County. The data and findings from this survey will be shared with the office and help guide our programs for future years. We collected data through an online survey and focus groups. We also utilized our community stakeholders and advisors for their input on the survey as well.

Using data and guidance from the VCE state Situational Analysis, a survey was developed to distribute to the residents of Isle of Wight County. The survey began with explaining the purpose of the survey, time requirement, risks & benefits, confidentiality, volunteer participation, and the state office contact for questions or concerns. From there an agreement to participate was asked along with background information about the individual taking the survey. From there, participants were asked to rate the importance of issues to them and their family. Participants could rate the issue as needing no effort to needing a very high effort. Some of these issues included preserving farmland and forest land, strengthening the local food system, helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills, supporting businesses which engage in agritourism, addressing adult and mental health, building healthy families, protecting the marine environment, and many more. After rating the issues, it asked if the participant had heard of organizations and groups within Extension including Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, Master Food Volunteers, etc. Then it asked for more individual information from the highest degree earned, employment status, time lived in Virginia, etc. The survey finished with a thank you message for the participant. The survey was available to the public through our social media accounts, sent through the county list serv, distributed to all volunteer groups and mailing lists, and advertised through the newspapers. It was available to complete on a computer or tablet, a cell phone, and printed copies were available if needed. We had 45 total responses to the survey. The results were analyzed and the key issues for Isle of Wight County were identified.

Isle of Wight County Unit Profile

Isle of Wight County is in Southeastern Virginia, approximately 75 miles from Richmond. It is located in the Hampton Roads region as well as in the Virginia Beach Metropolitan Area. Isle of Wight County is 319 square miles in size and houses 40,151 citizens within the county (118 people per square mile) based on the 2022 US Census Bureau data (United State Census Bureau). The county is included in the Virginia Beach Metropolitan Area which encompasses 15 other cities and counties (United State Census Bureau). The Hampton Roads area employs over 830,000 citizens and is situated close to several major interstates including 460, route 58, and interstates 64 and 664 (Isle of Wight Economic Development). The county offers the best of both worlds with opportunities for suburban and country living. There are single family subdivisions and apartments in the suburban areas. And if you prefer a calmer lifestyle, the county offers rural countryside with farmhouses and single-family homes. Isle of Wight County offers something for everyone to enjoy and is an attractive country for many to settle down and call home.

From the population of 40,151 citizens, 94% of Isle of Wight is employed. The median household income is \$84,673 per year from the 2019 Virginia Department of Health Data Commons which is a little over \$8,000 more from the 2015 data. The median home value in 2021 for Isle of Wight was \$295,500 dollars with a reported 16,441 housing units reported in the county. There are 15,063 households in the county with each household consisting of 2.53 individuals. According to the data from Virginia Department of Health, 12% of Isle of Wight

Citizens are food insecure and 9% are at the poverty rate. The county has 72% of households with broadband access in their homes and 62% of citizens have a post-secondary education. The 2020 data shows that 91% of Isle of Wight citizens have their high school degree or higher while 2.8% are unemployed. (U.S. Department of Education)

Isle of Wight has several employment opportunities in the county and within a short driving distance. The top seven employers (both private and public sectors) in Isle of Wight are Smithfield Foods (food manufacturing), Isle of Wight County School Board, Keurig Dr. Pepper, the County of Isle of Wight, Smithfield Support Services Group (management of companies and enterprises), International Paper Company, and Food Lion (Isle of Wight Economic Development). Smithfield Foods employees over 1,000 employees. The Isle of Wight School Board employs 500-999 employees while the rest of the top employment opportunities employ 250-499 employees. Isle of Wight also has numerous small businesses and attractions that employ many local citizens. Many of those businesses are family run and offer jobs to not only those families but other local families as well.

Isle of Wight is home to four preschools, five elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. These schools house over 5,500 students with the minority enrollment being 40% (Isle of Wight County, Virginia Schools). All elementary, middle, and high schools are fully accredited schools. Isle of Wight County Schools has a 92.5% on time graduation rate which includes: 52% of graduating seniors receiving advanced diplomas, 42% receive a standard diploma, 3.5% receive their GED, and a 2% drop out rate. The school system also prepares students for a wide variety of careers through their career and technical education programs (CTE). These courses are offered in Middle and High Schools. These courses include Agriculture, Culinary, Welding, Building, and more. Several Dual Enrollment programs are offered in the schools which allow students to obtain college credits while attending high school at the same time. Isle of Wight is home to Isle of Wight Academy which is a private school option for citizens. The Academy is a private pre-K through grade 12 school. (Isle of Wight County, Virginia Schools) Isle of Wight County has many opportunities for school aged children within the county for their education needs.

Isle of Wight offers several tourism attractions which bring many visitors to the area throughout the year. The Genuine Smithfield slogan is Savor Our Small-Town Southern Charm. According to the 2022 tourism data, the Smithfield Farmers Market had 26,906 visitors while the Smithfield and Isle of Wight County Visitor Center has 13,426 visitors. According to the Isle of Wight Economic Development office tourism supported 478 jobs and \$46.7 million in local tourism expenditures. Isle of Wight is comprised of two towns: Windsor and Smithfield. The towns offer several attractions including Windsor Castle Park, Isle of Wight County Museum, Fort Boykin, Carrollton Nike Park, Joel C. Bradshaw Fairgrounds and many more. Isle of Wight and the Town of Smithfield received numerous awards over the past two years. Some of these include #3 in Virginia- Best Places for Small Business Owners, 2022 Travel Attraction of the Year- Isle of Wight County Museum, and the 2022 Most Impactful Project Award- Windsor Castle Park Stormwater Retention Project (Isle of Wight Economic Development). The county and towns also offer numerous large events throughout the year for the public to come experience. These include the Isle of Wight County Fair, The Bacon, Bourbon, and Music Fest, BOB Fest, Wine & Brew Fest, Downtown Smithfield Restaurant Week, Spring Country Vintage Market, Farmers Markets, Mistletoe Market, Small Business Saturday, Witches or Elves Night Out, and many more! The Isle of Wight County Museum is available to the public to experience the history of the town and see the years of agriculture in the area. You can even see the world's oldest ham! No matter what you enjoy in your free time, there is always something to see or enjoy in Isle of Wight County.

Isle of Wight County is comprised of 85% Rural Agriculture zoned land. The county has 55,896 acres of cropland with the average farm size being 321 acres based on data reported to the Farm Service Agency in 2023. There are 237 farms in Isle of Wight County with the average size being 340 acres. In 2023, Isle of Wight farmers produced 12,069 acres of corn, 11,943 acres of cotton, 11,221 acres of soybeans, and 5,918 acres of peanuts. Other crops grown were sunflowers, grapes, pumpkins, watermelon, strawberries, oats, rye, and some fruit trees. Isle of Wight also produces a variety of livestock. Livestock production includes cattle, goats, alpacas, hogs, and backyard poultry. There is an estimated total of 3,700 head of cattle in Isle of Wight County. This number has increased since the 2012 reported data of 3,181 head of cattle (United States Department of Agriculture). The county is

home to several agribusinesses including International Paper and The Scoular Company. Several Virginia companies also call Isle of Wight home including Montague Farms, Franklin Lumber, and Commonwealth Gin. Agritourism is also a growing sector within the county. Isle of Wight has thirteen agritourism operations; Breezy Hill Meadworks, Browder's Fresh Pickins, Bullis Ostrich Farm, Central Hill Farm Alpacas Plus, Courthouse Pastures, LLC., Darden's Farm and Smokehouse, Goerger Farms Produce and Pumpkins, Hettie's Garden Vineyard, Oliver's Farm Produce, SummerWind Vineyard, Windhaven Farm, Zuni Tree & Alpaca Farm, and the Isle of Wight County Schools Agriculture Land Lab. (Isle of Wight Economic Development). The county has a rich agriculture history, and it continues to grow through diversification and additional agriculture opportunities.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Data was collected through the use of an electronic survey created through the Qualtrics System. It was then distributed through various groups within Isle of Wight County, including employees, agriculture mailing lists, 4-H mailing lists, social media, and other civic organizations. The link for the survey was posted on social media as well as in local newspapers. There was a total of 46 responses from the survey. Upon completion of the survey, the Isle of Wight VCE analyzed the data. Priority issues were identified from both a set of ranked questions and through stakeholder comments. Based on the survey results and unit profile, issues were prioritized to help guide Extension programming for the coming years.

Community Issues

Over forty issues were available to choose from in the survey. From the survey, there were ten issues that attracted the most attention from participants. Of those, the Isle of Wight Virginia Cooperative Extension Office will focus programming efforts on three of them in the coming years. The three community issues we are going to focus on include:

Issue 1: Strengthening local food systems

Description: Strengthening the local food system was the highest priority for Isle of Wight County citizens. Over 90% of responses listed this as needing to be a high or very high effort for programming focus. Due to Isle of Wight's geographic location and being in the Hampton Roads Region, we have a large need for this effort. Part of the county is urban with access to grocery stores and other shopping needs while the other end of the county is rural and has access to grocery stores and shopping needs within a short driving distance. After the pandemic, the local food system was brought to everyone's attention when grocery store shelves were empty. More people started turning to local food options including farmers markets, farm stands, and u-pick operations. Another area noted along with this need was the possibility for farm to school programming.

Virginia Cooperative Extension's Role: VCE has worked to aid in strengthening the local food systems through extension programming and educational opportunities. Our office holds annual meetings and educational opportunities for vegetable and fruit growers in Southeast Virginia. We also work closely with the Farmers Markets to assist with vendor training and outreach. Our office is very involved with the state agritourism efforts and holds agritourism workshops throughout the state annually. During the pandemic, our office worked with local agritourism producers to assist with promotion, grant applications, and more. Our 4-H program applied for a grant through Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom to develop a raised bed garden, and that was built several years ago by our office. Since building the garden, the program has worked to grow produce and herbs for donation and to utilize in other 4-H programs. This allows youth to plant and harvest something of their own and work on learning skills to grow their own garden at home. Our youth are active in the 4-H Food Challenge which is our version of "Chopped" from television. They work on food safety skills, learning how to cook, and presentation skills. Our office works with the Isle of Wight County Fair and the Isle of Wight County Schools Land Lab for outreach opportunities with youth. At the county fair, our 4-H youth showcase country hams they have cured and livestock projects they have raised and trained. These youth complete record books which include budgeting, basic animal care and knowledge, 4-H story, goals, and more. VCE has also worked with the state Extension Farm to School Program to offer meetings and interest conversations in our area. At this time, with the current regulations, it doesn't seem to be a great fit for Isle of Wight producers, but maybe in the future that may

change. We hope to instill the importance of local food and growing your own food in the youth of our next generation. In the coming years, we will continue to offer these programs and work on expanding opportunities to help strengthen our local food system to the best of our ability.

Issue 2: Preserving farm and forest land

Description: Stakeholders identified this as an important issue with over 87% reporting this was a top issue for them. Further in the comment section of the survey several stakeholders mentioned that they would like to see Isle of Wight's farm and forest land preserved and minimize developments including solar, housing complexes, and other developments. Preserving the land is important to citizens because it would provide future generations an understanding of where their food and fiber comes from and provide an opportunity for future generations to continue to farm their family's farmland.

Virginia Cooperative Extension's Role: Virginia Cooperative Extension offers educational programs for youth about agriculture and forestry and its importance. Many of the Virginia 4-H programs focus on teaching youth the importance of where their food and fiber come from. VCE has many program areas that offer programs and educational opportunities for farm transition plans, agriculture research advancements, and programs for beginning farmers and ranchers. Along with these educational opportunities, Extension specialists and staff create publications for the public on a variety of topics to help citizens with preserving farmland, learning how to grow a garden, raise backyard chickens, understand crop varieties and their differences, and much more. If citizens have specific concerns or questions, VCE is here to help in anyway we can. The local office may not have all the resources or all the answers, but we reach out to the state office and specialists when needed. Our office also serves on several boards and positions with different organizations to assist with this issue. These include; Virginia Farm Bureau, Soil and Water, School organizations, Career and Technical advisory boards, Leadership Councils, and more. Extension also offers volunteer organizations for citizens to join that focus on preserving land, waterways, and educate the public on protecting farmland and marine life. Isle of Wight VCE advises two volunteer groups, the Western Tidewater Master Gardeners and the Historic Southside Master Naturalists. Both groups have an application process and training class. They also have several projects in the community that include a community garden, pollinator garden, plant clinics, plant sales, and numerous projects with Windsor Castle Park and other local chapters. Each group is very involved in the local community and committed to assist with this issue when applicable. While this issue is more dependent on the county regulations, VCE assists with educational opportunities when available and needed.

Issue 3: Help youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills

Description: Over 82% reported this as a key issue for Isle of Wight County. Youth are the next generation and its important to invest in their futures to ensure they have a positive successful life. Some participants commented that many programs have been taken out of the school system curriculum due to SOL and other needs-based learning taking priority. Previous generations used to have home economics, shop, machinery, future farmers of America, and much more. Depending on their school system, the youth of today may have some of these classes or a form of these classes, but most areas do not offer these basic learning opportunities.

Virginia Cooperative Extension's Role: Extension is committed to helping youth develop in a positive manner through 4-H and Extension Programs. 4-H offers an annual summer camp for youth that allows a week-long overnight camp experience where they can unplug and focus on life skills. Campers are supervised by counselors and counselors in training (CIT) that have gone through extensive training on leadership, youth development, etc. Camp also allows adult volunteers and staff to oversee the counselors, CITS, and campers. Throughout Virginia, each locality or city has the opportunity to attend 4-H summer camp at one of the 4-H centers in the Commonwealth. Isle of Wight 4-H also offers numerous day camps or specialty camps through the year including; Winterbash, Summer Days Camps (previous themes & focuses- space, zoo, agriculture). Isle of Wight 4-H also offers an opportunity to join the Community Club or the Cloverbud Club. Each club is advised by two adult trained volunteers and elected youth officers. Officers are asked to give a speech and the club follows parliamentary procedure to elect officers each year. The club also participates in quarterly community service

projects to give back to the community. These have included volunteering at the animal shelter, adopting a family at Christmas, Thank a Farmer Lunch, and volunteering at the county fair. Many of these club members own livestock and compete at the fair as well as complete a record book that documents their budget, knowledge, and skills from the project. Isle of Wight 4-H is committed to supporting youth develop leadership skills, gain citizenship knowledge, and learn life skills through 4-H programs, camps, and other educational outreach.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Currently, VCE is offering several programs to help address these issues. VCE partners with grower's associations to offer production yearly meetings for growers to update them on current research. This past year we offered a produce safety class and an agritourism workshop for the niche market growers as well as a cattle production meeting based off of suggestions from stakeholders. VCE also works with specialists at the agriculture research stations to assist with field days, pesticide recertifications, plot research, and data collection. We will continue to address these issues and expand our workshops and education for the public.

We will work with our local farmers markets and niche agriculture producers to make sure we are meeting their needs for them to be successful. We will work with our local tourism and economic development departments to help promote agritourism and buying/supporting locally. Our office will continue to work in schools with agriculture education for youth. Educating youth on where their food and fiber comes from will not only help promote the local food system, but strengthen it. Being on the CTE advisory council will allow us to participate and partner with current youth educational programs within the schools and offer assistance where needed. Our office will incorporate education in the raised bed garden with our 4-H youth and share that with our local citizens. We will also work with the current volunteer groups to help expand knowledge on how to grow your own food and how to properly harvest and store it. The agriculture agent will work with local agents and agribusinesses to host a farm transition workshop or something similar to help local farmers prepare for the next generation of young farmers. We will continue to work as a resource for the county and the public to turn to with agriculture questions and advice. The 4-H youth program will work on offering more programs dedicated to this need. A program that could be offered would be Reality Store for youth. This is a real-life simulation of budgeting, paying bills, and deciding on what can be bought on a budget. The 4-H program will work with local youth to identify need areas to plan programming around. This could include bringing in speakers or having educational meetings or day camps for youth to gain and experience these skills firsthand. The Isle of Wight Virginia Cooperative Extension Office is dedicated to offering these programs in the coming years for our stakeholders.

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