



## Mecklenburg County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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## Summary of Community Issues and Extension Office Response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
Development of Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills in Youth	Through 4-H programming, agents will maintain and develop partnerships and empower volunteers to develop and implement research-based experiential programs that encourage sustained involvement.
Improving Agricultural and Environmental Literacy	Partnerships with VCE Volunteer groups (Southern Piedmont Master Naturalists and South Central Master Gardeners) will be developed and utilized to empower volunteers to deliver research-based experiential programs.
Improving Quality of Life by Encouraging Citizens to Adopt Healthy Lifestyles	The FCS agent will lead efforts to empower volunteers and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in research-based programs focusing on chronic disease prevention.
Profitable Agriculture and Natural Resources	The action plans for Soil Health and Cover Crops, Graze 300, Livestock Nutrition, Genetic and Health Improvement, Livestock Quality Assurance and Value-Added Marketing, and Pesticide Safety Education will be leveraged to provide extension programming in support of agricultural producers.

# Introduction

The Mecklenburg Office of Virginia Cooperative Extension, along with the Extension Leadership Council and key stakeholders, completed a Situation Analysis in 2023. Through focus groups, surveys, and input from key informants and stakeholders, several important issues were identified that will guide local programming efforts (not listed in priority order):

1. Development of Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills in Youth
2. Improving Agricultural and Environmental Literacy
3. Improving Quality of Life by Encouraging Citizens to Adopt Healthy Lifestyles
4. Profitable Agriculture and Natural Resources

## Unit Profile

Mecklenburg County is a rural county located in Southside Virginia. Mecklenburg borders North Carolina to the south (Warren, Vance, and Granville Counties), Brunswick County to the east, Halifax County to the west, and Charlotte and Lunenburg Counties to the north. Mecklenburg has five incorporated towns within the county: South Hill, Chase City, Clarksville, La Crosse, and Boydton. Mecklenburg County also has portions of Kerr Lake and Lake Gaston within its borders which attract vacationers and retirees.

## Population Data

The U.S Census Bureau estimated the population of Mecklenburg County as 30,347 in 2020. This number has fallen from 32,380 noted in the 2010 census. The Census Bureau predicts that the population of Mecklenburg County will continue to fall over the next decade, whereas the number of residents in the state is expected to grow.

The population of Mecklenburg County is older than the state average, with declining numbers of school age children. As a result, the school board is currently moving forward with plans to consolidate the two county high schools and two middle schools.

The County's racial make-up has undergone very little change in the last ten years. As of 2020, Mecklenburg County's population is 60.31% white and 33.89% African American. The Hispanic and Asian populations have grown somewhat, but still represent only 3.03% and 0.94% respectively.

## Income and Poverty Data

Median household income has increased from \$36,069 in 2011 to \$46,378 in 2021, but remains less than 60% of the state average. The number of persons living at or below poverty level has decreased in recent years to 15.7% of the population as a whole. However, 23% of youth are still considered to be living in poverty. In recent years, all students enrolled in Mecklenburg County Public Schools have received free lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Mecklenburg County employs a SNAP-Ed paraprofessional who focuses on nutrition education for elementary school students.

## Education

The Mecklenburg County Public School System has an overall student population of 3,937, down from 4,215 in 2018. In 2022, the county's two middle schools and two high schools merged, moving into the newly constructed secondary school complex. The county has four elementary schools, three of which are slated for major renovations in coming years. Currently, all of the county's schools are fully accredited. The school board has implemented changes to its curriculum in order to align with VDOE's Profile of a Virginia Graduate and has focused its efforts on expanding its career and technical education (CTE) offerings. While nearly 86% of Mecklenburg residents have at least a high school diploma, only 22% hold a Bachelor's degree compared to 41% of Virginians as a whole. Nearly 90% of Mecklenburg County students graduate on time, and 72% of graduates

continue their education in some form. There are two community colleges within thirty miles of the county, which also offer satellite classes in three of the county's five towns.

## **Economic Conditions and Employment**

Economic conditions are improving for Mecklenburg County residents. The unemployment rate hovers around 3%. This is slightly higher than the state average but down from over 10% in 2013. According to the Virginia Employment Commission, just over 5300 residents live and work in the county, while over 7300 commute to neighboring counties for work. Mecklenburg County Public Schools is the county's largest employer followed by VCU Community Memorial Hospital. The county has seen an economic boost from the construction of multiple Microsoft data centers. Microsoft is now the county's 3rd largest employer, recently announcing plans for continued expansion.

## **Community Health**

According to the 2022 County Health Rankings, Mecklenburg County ranks 108 out of 133 Virginia counties in health outcomes. This refers to how healthy Mecklenburg County is when compared with other counties within the state (#1 being the top-rated for health outcomes). Health outcomes are based on two measures: length of life and quality of life. Life expectancy for Mecklenburg County is 74.8. Premature age-adjusted mortality is at 500. This includes all deaths among people under age 75. As for quality of life, 18% of the population report poor or fair health. Frequent mental distress is reported at 15% and diabetes prevalence at 12%.

Mecklenburg County also ranks 104 in health factors (which includes health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment). Of note among health behaviors is food insecurity at 12%, limited access to healthy foods at 10%, adult obesity at 38% and physical inactivity at 27%.

## **Agriculture**

The agricultural trends in Mecklenburg County continue to mirror those at the state level. The number of farms and land in farms continues to decline, while the average size of farms has increased. The value of products sold increased 46% between the 2007 and 2012 Ag Census and 16% between the 2012 and 2017 AG Census. It is doubtful that the 2022 Ag Census will show further increases in value of products sold due to declining flue-cured tobacco acreage. Net farm income declined 14% between 2012 and 2017 and will likely continue this trend due to inflationary increases in production input costs and rising interest rates on operating capital. Beef cattle numbers declined 33% between the 2007 and 2012 Ag Census with further declines in the 2017 Ag Census. Beef cattle numbers in the county continue to decline due to farm consolidation and increased acreage of grassland being utilized for grain crops. As a result of increased soybean production, more corn is being grown for grain to provide a rotation to soybeans. Likewise, growers are increasingly adopting cover crops to improve soil health in an effort to improve yields. The increase in the availability of BMP cost-share funding recently has further increased the adoption of cover crops.

## **Community and Resident Perspectives**

The Extension Leadership Council (ELC) met for an overview and discussion for the 2023 situation analysis update. A survey was developed based on a template used for the overall Virginia Cooperative Extension state needs assessment. The survey was distributed by agents and ELC members to county residents at various informational and community outreach events. Participants were then asked to identify their top issues and explain why they felt that issue must be addressed. Unit ELC and staff members also conducted key informant interviews and small group discussions with stakeholders.

Based on the information collected through the above listed methods, priority issues were determined and strategies were developed to guide Extension's efforts to address these issues.

## **Community Issues**

### **Issue - Development of Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills in Youth**

Description: The results of the situation analysis survey indicated that the development of leadership, citizenship, and life skills in youth is a high-priority issue, with over 83% of respondents indicating that VCE should spend “high effort” or “very high effort” here. Discussions with program participants and stakeholders indicated that the pandemic negatively impacted the mental health of many young people, necessitating an increased focus on positive youth-adult partnerships and opportunities for social-emotional learning. Key informants pointed out that youth need opportunities for life skill development in areas such as money management, healthy living, and conflict management. Youth indicated an overall need for more positive outlets, recreational, and educational opportunities.

### **Issue - Improving Agricultural and Environmental Literacy**

Description: Even in a rural county like Mecklenburg, many residents are not knowledgeable of agricultural practices, or the diverse nature of the commodities produced. The non-farming public is becoming more interested and concerned with how and where their food is being produced. This can produce misunderstanding between the public and the agricultural producers, but also has the potential to stimulate interest by farmers to produce commodities locally for direct market. Mecklenburg is blessed to have several state parks, wildlife management areas and other managed natural areas for its residents to visit and volunteer.

### **Issue - Improving Quality of Life by Encouraging Citizens to Adopt Healthy Lifestyles**

Description: Over 77% of Situation Analysis survey respondents report that improving quality of life is a priority issue for Mecklenburg County. This is a very general assessment, but a closer look into survey comments and the health demographics of the county indicate that obesity (38%) and diabetes (12%) are comparatively high and of specific concern.

Program participants and stakeholders indicated perceived barriers associated with improving quality of life.

Barrier #1 - Limited knowledge of the correlation between nutrition and chronic disease prevention. Barrier #2 – Financial challenges that include higher costs associated with “healthy” foods (such as fresh fruits and vegetables and lean protein), costs of gym memberships and exercise equipment. Barrier #3 – Existing health issues that limit physical activity and, in some cases, meal preparation. Barrier #4 – Limited knowledge and application of basic nutrition in meal planning.

### **Issue - Profitable Agriculture and Natural Resources**

Description: Agriculture is Mecklenburg County’s largest industry. Mecklenburg County ranks second in flue-cured tobacco production in the state, while also producing significant acreage of soybeans and small grains. The majority of producers also raise beef cattle. The recent dramatic decreases in flue-cured tobacco production contracts and depressed commodity grain prices are pressuring farm income and profitability. Producers are aggressively searching for profitable enterprises to include in their farming operations.

# **Future Programming to Address Community Issues**

## **Issue - Development of Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills in Youth**

VCE's Role in Addressing the Issue: There are approximately 4,058 4-H age youth residing in the county. Mecklenburg 4-H will continue to build and maintain a positive working relationship with Mecklenburg County Public Schools. School personnel requested a focus on STEM skills as the schools incorporate "STEM Centers" in each of the newly renovated elementary schools. A continuing presence in the school system will encourage youth to participate in other 4-H programs and develop sustained involvement in clubs, camps, and other opportunities. Efforts to grow teen programming will continue with an emphasis on providing both in-unit and out-of-unit leadership opportunities for teens. Economic education will continue at both the primary and secondary levels. 4-H will explore new partnerships with volunteers and community organizations to increase the number of educational and recreational outlets available to foster positive youth-adult partnerships.

## **Issue - Improving Agricultural and Environmental Literacy**

VCE's role in addressing this issue: VCE Agents will collaborate with other agencies such as USDA FSA, USDA NRCS, local Soil and Water District, Southern Piedmont Master Naturalists, South Central Master Gardeners, producers, and interested civic groups to provide educational opportunities for residents on agricultural production practices and how these commodities are used in products that we use every day. Also, programs will be offered to better educate residents on local food production, preservation, marketing, and food safety. The Mecklenburg County Extension Demonstration Garden will be maintained to increase awareness of local food options in the county. The newly formed Southern Piedmont Master Naturists Chapter along with collaborations with the Lake Country SWCD will enhance VCE's efforts in providing environmental literacy programming to the residents of the county. As part of the county's planned consolidation of high schools, the school system is developing an agricultural learning lab at the new high school. VCE agents are actively involved in this development.

## **Issue - Improving Quality of Life by Encouraging Citizens to Adopt Healthy Lifestyles**

VCE's role in addressing the issue: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an increase in Type 2 diabetes is mirrored by an increase in the number of people who are overweight or obese. As mentioned previously, both the diabetes and obesity rates for Mecklenburg County continue to rise. This reality calls for Type 2 diabetes education.

In collaboration with Virginia Tech's Center for Public Health Practice and Research, Balanced Living with Diabetes programs will be conducted in Mecklenburg County and directed by the county Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension Agent. As ongoing support for program participants, additional opportunities for physical activity and hands-on meal preparation workshops will be available.

Master Food Volunteers under the leadership of the FCS Agent will play a major role in outreach and programming. Educational workshops focusing on basic nutrition and physical activity for chronic disease prevention and health maintenance will take precedence. Special emphasis will be placed on strategies to break the barriers to a healthy lifestyle.

## **Issue - Profitable Agriculture and Natural Resources**

VCE's role in addressing this issue: VCE can provide producers with unbiased information and to assist producers evaluating new enterprises for their operations. VCE can continue to assist producers in evaluating existing enterprises with the latest management research results allowing producers to reduce input cost while maintaining and improving yield. Grain producers are provided information on varieties and other production practices to improve yield while controlling costs and improving soil health thru adapting of cover crops. VCE assists beef producers in adding value to their feeder calves through local Virginia Quality Assured feeder cattle

sales and reducing the costs through education to improve grazing practices included in the Graze 300 planned program. Private and Commercial Pesticide applicators are provided educational opportunities to maintain their certification and comply with government and environmental regulations.

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