MERCER COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

JANUARY 2001

REVISED MAY 2001

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OVERVIEW OF COUNTY

Harrodsburg, the county seat of Mercer County was founded in 1774 as the first permanent English settlement west of the Allegheny Mountains. Harrodsburg has a very proud and remarkable heritage. Old Fort Harrod State Park showcases Harrodsburg’s early history and Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill serves as one of the best examples of historic restoration in the country. Located near Lexington, Mercer County is nestled among the scenic Kentucky River palisades and gently rolling countryside.

Agricultural Statistics, Trends & Projections

Mercer County has a total land area of 160,588 acres. Historically, burley tobacco has been the dominant agricultural crop. Other major agricultural enterprises include: beef and dairy cattle, forages, row crops and other livestock. According to the 1992 Census of Agriculture, the acreage in farmland has declined from 144,404 acres in 1987 to 133,173 acres in 1992. The 2002 Census of Agriculture showed the farmland acreage had increased from 129,979 acres to 133,692 since 1997. The total harvested crop land has declined from 39,744 acres in 1987 to 36,717 in 1992. Total harvested cropland increased from 38,720 acres in 1997 to 42,663 in 2002.

The 1,086 farms in Mercer County have total cash receipts in the amount of $28,900,000 which ranks it 40 among all counties. Livestock accounts for 69 percent of the total revenue with the remaining 31 percent coming from crop enterprises. Total cash receipts have decreased significantly from previous years and livestock continues to account for an increased percentage of those receipts.

Demographic Data

Mercer County had a population of 19,148 people with 7,335 people residing in the urban areas of Harrodsburg and Burgin and the remaining 11,813 people in the rural areas of the county. The 2006 Census reported that Mercer County had a population of 21,818 with 8,888 residing in Harrodsburg and Burgin and the remaining 12,930 in the rural areas. The economy of Mercer County has been traditionally tied to agricultural production with tobacco being the main commodity produced on the average Mercer County farm.

In recent years, manufacturing has had an important impact on the
economy of Mercer County. Manufacturing did account for nearly 44 percent of nonagricultural employment in the county. This figure will likely increase with the recent completion of the Highway 127 bypass and the decline in tobacco production. The largest industries in Mercer County include Hitachi Automotive Products, Trim Master Inc., Corning Inc., Modine Manufacturing and Wassau Paper Corp. Unlike the assumption that manufacturing employment would increase, by 2004 it actually decreased to 38% of nonagricultural employment.

With the decline in tobacco quota and increase in manufacturing, both the number of farms and those persons engaged in farming as a principal occupation was declining. In 1992 the number of farms in Mercer County numbered 1,085. By 1997 those numbers dropped to 976, representing a 10 percent decrease. During the same period the number of farm operators for whom the principal occupation is farming fell from 498 to 389, a 22 percent decrease. However, according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture farms in Mercer County increased to 1,086 total farms, representing a net gain of 1 farm for the 10 year period. The number of people listing farming as their primary occupation increased from 413 in 1997 to 589 in 2002.

REVIEW OF THE PROCESS

To develop the comprehensive plan instrument, the Mercer County Agricultural Development Council has sought input from a variety of groups and individuals in the community. Two public forums were held September 21, 2000 at Mercer County Extension Office and November 30, 2000 at Anderson Circle Farm in Mercer County. Total attendance for these meetings totaled 47 people.

At the first public forum a presentation was delivered to introduce the Phase I Settlement program followed by a group discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of Mercer County. The second public forum consisted of handing out a survey to gain community input and to allow time for those in attendance to complete the survey instrument.

In addition to the public forums, several other efforts have been implemented to solicit community input into the process. These efforts included eight radio programs aired on Harrodsburg’s WHBN radio station, five newspaper articles appearing in the Harrodsburg Herald and the Danville Advocate Messenger and two newsletters sent to approximately 500
individuals each mailing. Presentations were also made to groups including the Mercer County Farm Bureau Board of Directors, Harrodsburg Kiwanis and the Mercer County Conservation District. Council members distributed flyers announcing the second public form meeting date throughout the community.

ASSESSMENTS

Strengths

One of the main strengths of Mercer County is its fertile farmland that allows for a diversity of farm enterprises. The 1997 Census of Agriculture shows a total of 129,979 acres in farmland with a median farm size of 73 acres. The 2002 Census of Agriculture shows land in farms increased 3% from 1997 to 133,692 acres in 2002. This diversity is also evidenced in the growing agritourism industry Mercer County has to offer.

Another strength is Mercer County and Harrodsburg’s location. Harrodsburg is conveniently located in the heart of Kentucky’s historic Bluegrass Region, 32 miles southwest of Lexington. Mercer County is easily accessible via US 127, US 68, Interstate 64 (32 miles to the north), Interstate 75 (34 miles to the east), and the east-west Bluegrass Parkway (15 miles to the north). The convenient location allows local farmers easy access to three livestock markets in Danville, Lexington and Stanford.

Two top quality public school systems and a vocational/technical training school provide secondary and post-secondary technical and continuing educational programs. Continuing education is an expanding area of need especially in the agriculture sector. The Mercer County Cooperative Extension Service continues to serve the needs of the clientele in all areas of agriculture including production, marketing, and rural economic development. Continued support of the Extension Service and the land grant university system will be vital to ensure that communities maximize the opportunities available through the Phase I tobacco settlement funds. The new Mercer County Cooperative Extension Service Office is a great strength for the county and will serve as a place for everyone to go and get an assortment of information on various aspects of the agriculture industry. Historical education about Harrodsburg and Mercer County is provided by Old Fort Harrod State Park and Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill. In the near future, Mercer County will have tremendous strength in being the home to
the Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center that will serve to educate everyone
about Kentucky’s agricultural past, present and future through a dynamic
center that will reflect the vision of Kentucky’s strong agriculture
community.

Weaknesses

One of the main weaknesses of Mercer County is the lack of a
marketing structure for agricultural products. The mainstay of the agriculture
economy for Mercer County has been burley tobacco, which has a traditional
“built in” marketing system. The marketing system created has provided the
farmers of the county an available and efficient marketing system over the
years. While the tobacco industry has developed this market structure, other
sectors of the agricultural industry have not. Mercer County is in need of
marketing education to help producers find markets for many different farm
products including crops and livestock. The climate, soils and location of
Mercer County favor a variety of farm enterprises. However, we lack the
market structure to get the products sold. The council now feels the lack of
markets is not as much of an issue anymore. The Mercer County Farmers’
Market is growing every year providing fruit and vegetable growers a local
avenue to market their products. Recently another livestock market opened
in nearby Stanford allowing our farmers easy access to another market.
Recent educational efforts and programs through the University of Kentucky
and Kentucky Cattlemen’s Association (CPH-45, PVP, etc.) have added
additional value-added market opportunities for livestock producers.
Additionally, the developing agritourism industry in the state has given
farmers who are diversifying their farm marketing options for both their farm
and their farm products.

Opportunities

The best opportunities lie in the further development of our livestock
and forage base in the county. The results of the survey instrument developed
and sent out by the county Agricultural Development Council rated the
livestock/forages category as a top area of interest. The second highest rated
area was that of agricultural education followed by interest in horticultural
crops and development of diversified enterprises.

Mercer County’s diverse landscape and good road access provides the
opportunity for the expansion of the livestock/forage industry. These same
qualities make possible the advancement of agriculture diversification through horticultural crops, specialty crops and other livestock enterprises. The educational interest shows a need for the development of an educational center that can provide a setting for educational programs to include training and instruction in the areas of production and market development. Recently, the Mercer County Cooperative Extension Service completed its new building. In addition, the Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center is scheduled to be completed in 2010. The combination of these provides excellent opportunities for education on various aspects of the agriculture industry and production for both farmers and non-farmers and will afford Mercer County the opportunity to provide education on past, present and future technologies. Given the current economic situation, other opportunities lie in providing farmers education on how to increase farm efficiency, increase net farm income and how to effectively use the improved market channels that are now available.

Threats

The continued loss of tobacco income is one of main threats to the economic stability of the agricultural sector of Mercer County. Another area of concern is how to transfer farm land from the older generation to those younger people interested in pursuing a farming vocation. Many younger farmers lack the capital necessary to begin a profitable farming operation. Lack of available labor and issues with the H-2A program has become a major threat to the agriculture industry in recent years. Farmers are also dealing with increasing input costs cutting the slim profit margins they were already operating on.

Restrictive environmental standards threaten the ability of crop and livestock producers in using normal farming practices. These restrictions will reduce the ability of the producer to choose cost-effective production practices such as the use of manures, tillage practices and chemical control of insects, weeds and disease.

COUNTY COUNCIL OBJECTIVES

The goals and objectives of the Mercer County Agricultural Development Council will be to serve as a catalyst for the development of projects that will further the economic welfare of Mercer County. The
council intends to solicit input from a diversified cross section of the farm and non-farm community to ensure that we reflect the interest and aspirations of the county. Our intent is to enhance existing farm enterprises and encourage the development of new enterprises that will expand and diversify our agricultural economy. We also encourage the development of projects that provide educational opportunities for the agricultural producers of the county. We hope to preserve the family farm structure as the means to provide opportunities for the next generation of farmers.

**Mission/Vision Statement**

The Mercer County Agricultural Development Council, working on behalf of the citizens of Mercer County and family farms, seeks to promote and encourage projects and programs that will improve and/or expand the agricultural base of the county. The council hopes to serve as a resource for farmers to explore new enterprises, preserve existing farming operations, and extend the marketing opportunities of the producers in the county. We seek to foster an atmosphere of cooperation and agreement in an effort to maintain our rural economy and its future for the next generation.

**Short Term Priorities**

Our short term priorities will be to support and encourage cooperation among individuals to come together to develop proposals that are broad-based in their scope and show benefit to multiple parties. Specifically, we hope to promote forage and livestock based programs. The county wide survey conducted by the Agricultural Development Council revealed the highest priority in the county was in the area of livestock and forages. The county council will promote the development of proposals that deal with cattle genetic improvement. Proposal that will allow farmers to participate in a cost share program to purchase beef and dairy bulls for herd improvement will be very beneficial to local producers.

Another area of major need for the county is forage improvement. The county council will look for proposals that will encourage a cost share program with farmers that include seeding, liming, fertilization, pasture water development, rotational grazing, summer grass establishment, round bale hay storage and possible purchase of forage machinery that can be rented to producers to improve their forage quality.

The council will only consider individual proposals that demonstrate
the potential for impact on multiple farms beyond the individual receiving the funds. The council also encourages proposals that are educational in nature that can lead to the better understanding of sound agricultural practices and development of new ideas and avenues for expanding marketing options. Since the original development of this Comprehensive Plan the State Agriculture Development Board has developed and implemented statewide model programs that specifically address these areas. Specific model programs that the Mercer County Agricultural Development Council has adopted and continue to support include: Agricultural Diversification, Cattle Genetics Improvement, Cattle Handling Facilities, Dairy Diversification, Farm Livestock Fencing Improvement, Forage Improvement & Utilization, Goat & Sheep Diversification, Hay/Straw/Commodity Storage, and Shared-Use Equipment. We have also funded several non-model programs to support the Mercer County Fair & Horse Show, Mercer County FFA, Burgin FFA and Mercer County 4-H among others.

**Long Term Goals**

The long term goal of the Mercer County Agricultural Development Council will be to encourage an atmosphere of cooperation among producers, rural and urban citizens, and public and private sectors toward efforts that maintain both the economic and historic aspect of Mercer County. The improvement of existing farming enterprises, expanding new enterprises, developing markets and providing educational opportunities will also remain of major importance to continue to strengthen the agricultural economy of Mercer County.

**Tactics for Leveraging Funds**

The board will expect proposals to show evidence of in-kind, matching money, or other support equal to 50 percent of the total cost of the project. Proposals should clearly outline whom the funds will be directed to and who will be responsible for the expenditures.

**EVALUATION AND REVIEW**

Groups or individuals interested in submitting an application for Phase I funds can download an application from the following web site: [agpolicy.ky.gov](http://agpolicy.ky.gov) or they can pick up one at the Mercer County Cooperative
Extension Office located at 1007 Lexington Road in Harrodsburg, KY.

Most applications received now are for model programs and are administered by one of three agencies: Mercer County Cattlemen’s Association, Mercer County Farm Bureau, or Mercer County Soil Conservation District. However, any interested party who wishes to apply for funds not covered under one of the existing model programs may do so by filling out a non-model application. Applicants/administrators for funds need to carefully read the directions listed on the application form and follow its guidelines in preparing the proposal. The Mercer County Extension Office stands ready to assist those needing help with any part of the proposal application. People needing help from the Mercer County Extension Office can stop by the office Monday thru Friday between the hours of 8:00am and 4:30pm. The Extension Office can also be reached by phone at 859.734.4378, or you can contact them at the following e-mail address: mercer@uky.edu.

When applications for model or non-model programs are received the county council has to act on the proposal within 30 days. The council will consider each proposal and award funding based on available funds in the county account. A County Agricultural Development Council Prioritization Sheet will be filled out for each model or non-model program application submitted. On June 2, 2008 the county council adopted a uniform producer application and score sheet to be used for all model programs.

The Mercer County Agricultural Development Council expects a copy of all reports that are sent to the Governor’s Office of Agricultural Policy.