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2016 Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award

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TITLE:

Assessing Opportunities for Agriculture and Agritourism at Montpelier

1. OVERVIEW:

In early 2015, Orange County in collaboration with The Montpelier Foundation, was awarded a Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund (AFID) grant, in the amount of \$20,000. The purpose of the grant was to fund a study, headed by Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development, in coordination with the Orange County Ag-Ventures Working Group, to assist the County and Montpelier in exploring alternative revenue streams through agritourism and hospitality on the grounds of Montpelier. The overall goals of the collaborative project were to find creative ways to increase visitation, diversify Montpelier Foundation's revenue stream away from philanthropy, and spur job creation all while enhancing the visitor experience at Montpelier.

2. PROBLEM/NEED FOR THE PROGRAM:

Montpelier is a natural partner for agritourism and hospitality opportunities in Orange County. The Montpelier Foundation recently evaluated all its 2,600 acres and identified six (6) parcels, outside the historic core surrounding President Madison's home, that could be used to promote and support different kinds of revenue producing uses. It was known, that further assessment of all six (6) sites would be required to better understand the appropriateness of specific agritourism or hospitality uses. As the largest tourism attraction in Orange County, Montpelier serves as an excellent agritourism asset, promoting a variety of agriculture industries to visiting tourists by connecting them with the growth of on-site crops and teaching visitors how and what Mr. Madison farmed on his property over 200 years ago. Thus, this professional study and assessment conducted through the use of AFID Grant dollars, was a dire need for Orange County and Montpelier. The full report titled, *Assessing Opportunities for Agriculture and Agritourism at Montpelier*, accompanies this submission as a supplemental document.

3. CHALLENGE/SITUATION FACED BY THE COUNTY:

Orange County is currently part of three (3) growing trends in the Commonwealth of Virginia associated with agritourism and hospitality—spirits (including wine, beer, distilleries & cider), farm-to-table dining and the hospitality & event industry. All three trends support local sourcing for agricultural goods as well as local business services. The trend of spirits regarding wineries in Virginia has grown from 29 to 250 wineries in less than 30 years. Orange County has six well-established wineries and ranks third in the state for grape production. Compared to wineries, craft breweries have just begun to grow in the state and at a significantly faster rate. A few years ago there were a handful of breweries in Virginia and today there are well over 100 craft breweries. The craft brewing industry regularly uses local agriculture, requiring hops, barley and other ingredients for flavor. To date, Orange County does not have a brewery however the county is surrounded by breweries in other regions of Culpepper, Charlottesville, Fredericksburg and Richmond and is prime for one to locate in the county.

The farm-to-table movement is a growing effort to support and cultivate local organically grown food sources for households and restaurants, leading to a more sustainable, way of life. Historically this movement has been for the more bohemian lifestyle or wealthier demographic of consumers since the produce is generally more expensive. Orange County is blessed to have a large number of farm establishments but limited on organically grown products. The growth of demand for locally organic grown products may soon change the practices of many Orange County farmers or perhaps spur the entrepreneurial farmer looking for a market niche in untapped areas such as Orange. Correspondingly the number of unique farm-to-table dining experiences are limited in Orange County and could be another major niche market to take advantage of for the entrepreneurial restaurateur.

Thirdly, the State of Virginia has seen significant growth in the hospitality industry ranging from smaller non-franchise boutique hotels and high end camping facilities to outdoor scenic event space. The visitor experience in Orange County is no exception and has recently exploded with weekend travelers from spring to fall as a major wedding destination. To support the growth, the opening of numerous bed & breakfasts and outdoor event locations continue to grow each year. However, guests attending larger events are still forced to find accommodations as far as Fredericksburg or Charlottesville. Thus regularly bringing up the need to find another accommodation provider to locate

in the county. In addition to weekend pleasure travelers the growth of workday retreats and educational activities has begun to grow at locations throughout the county as well however has stunted with limited meeting space for small conferences and meetings.

4. THE COST OF THE PROGRAM:

The cost of the project was funded through a grant awarded from the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund (AFID), in the amount of \$20,000, which required an equal match from the County.

In addition to the financial cost there was a human capital cost. Through a coordinated effort of planning by County leaders and Montpelier executives, an Ag-Ventures Working Group was created. This group consisted of 23 stakeholders, representing various agricultural and tourism industries throughout the region, all who generously volunteered several hours of their personal time to participate. Representatives from Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development facilitated three (3) separate focus groups of the Ag-Ventures Working Group, over a five (5) month time frame.

These focus groups yielded a wide range of possible opportunities for agriculture and tourism related development at Montpelier.

5. THE RESULTS/SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM:

The collaborative efforts of all parties involved helped Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development identify and assess numerous development opportunities fit for Montpelier's mission and Orange County's rural character. Specifically, three (3) short-term economic and agritourism related opportunities. Those opportunities, as directly presented by Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development, are as follows:

- 1. Developing a Farm Brewery with small-scale events space with the use of grain, hops and other ingredients harvested on the grounds of Montpelier.*
- 2. Formalize a processes of continual assessment for agricultural use on the grounds for the local organic food movement by an established farmer or entrepreneurial farmer and work with local restaurants and/or dining facility on site to incorporate those products grown.*

3. *Explore lodging opportunities ranging from boutique hotel development with event and meeting space to high end camping facilities, associated with outdoor recreation opportunities.*

6. IN SUMMARY:

In March 2015, Orange County, in partnership with The Montpelier Foundation, was awarded a \$20,000 Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) grant from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). The grant was awarded to evaluate potential business opportunities in agritourism and hospitality within the grounds of the Montpelier estate. The study was conducted by Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development (VTOED). Throughout the course of this project, VTOED staff worked closely with a working group made up of various stakeholders; the Orange County Ag-Ventures Working Group. The Ag-Ventures Working Group consisted of several high-level county leaders, county department heads, Montpelier executives, regional winery representatives, brewery representatives, hospitality professionals, agricultural professionals, developers and various other consultants.

VTOED presented their report and final recommendations to the County Board of Supervisors in early, 2016. The report titled, *Assessing Opportunities for Agriculture and Agritourism at Montpelier* was presented by staff of VTOED. During their presentation, VTOED highlighted viable program ideas for specific parcels on the Montpelier estate. Three (3) short-term economic and agritourism recommendations were presented and included; opportunities for a boutique hotel with event space, a farm brewery, and continual assessment of agricultural and agritourism concepts.

Respectfully Submitted Electronically By:
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