



Bedford 2023 Situation Analysis Report

Authored by:

Scott Baker, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent;

Susan Prillaman, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent;

Maribeth Martin, 4-H Youth Extension Agent;

Amanda Armstrong, Family Nutrition Program Assistant;

Sandy Seals, Unit Administrative Assistant;

Justin Stauder, Bedford County Deputy Administrator;

Denny Huff, Bedford Community Health Foundation Executive Director;

Cherie Daniels, Bedford County Public Schools Kindergarten Readiness Coordinator;

Travis Thomas, Town of Bedford Police Community Outreach Officer;

Mackenzie Mutter, 4-H Volunteer;

Mary Buchanan, Centra Health;

Melody Divers, Chapel Creek Farms;

Jennifer Kohn, Little Otter Flower Farm;

Jackie Wills, Retired Nurse and VCE volunteer;

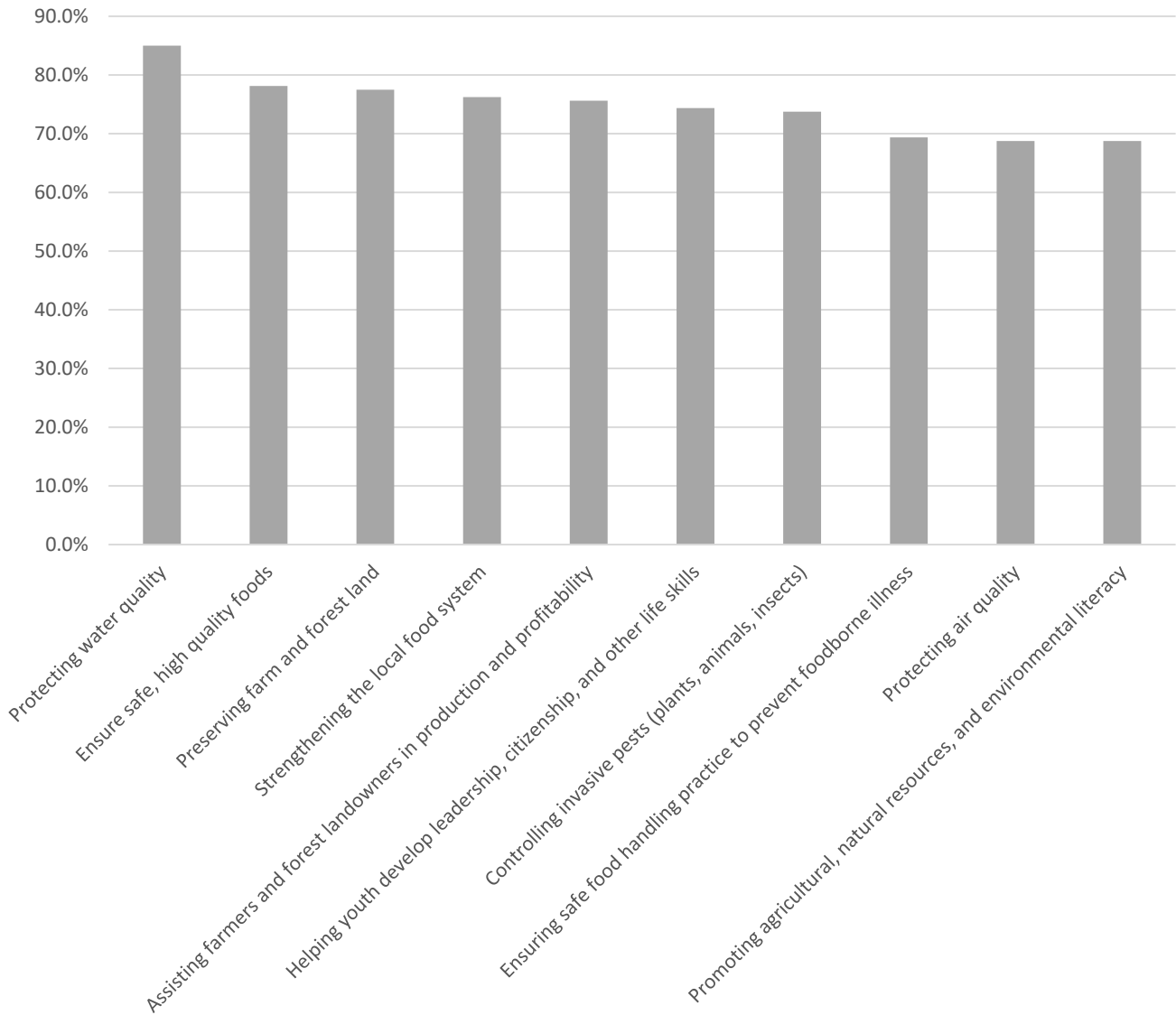


Peaks of Otter



The National D-day Memorial

Top Ten Issues Bedford County 2023 According to Percent of Respondents indicating the issue was a high priority need



Introduction



The Bedford unit conducted a situation analysis during the calendar year 2023. The situation analysis process, conducted by unit staff in consultation with key stakeholders and VCE volunteers involved reviewing data from the Unit Profile, VCE Data Commons as well as gathering community and resident perspectives on issues in the county. Data and information from these two activities were analyzed and priority issues were identified.

Unit Profile

Bedford Town/County is located in the central part of Virginia. The County encompasses 754 square miles, making Bedford the 5th largest county in land area. The proximity to two relatively large cities (Lynchburg on the east and Roanoke on the west) and a growing recreational and retirement area at Smith Mountain Lake has led to an increasing population that is on average older and more affluent. Many local attractions including the Blue Ridge Parkway, Peaks of Otter, National D-Day Memorial, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, and Smith Mountain Lake have made Bedford County a tourist destination.

Many of the aspects in the unit profile show similar trends to past analyses. The population continues to grow; however, the rate of growth is reduced compared with earlier time periods. In general, Bedford County has higher levels of household income and educational attainment and lower levels of poverty and unemployment than its peer localities in Planning District 11.

The total population for Bedford County is 80,131 individuals where 50% of the population is male and 50% is female. Approximately 23% of the service area population is 65 years of age or older which is higher than those 65 years of age or older living in Virginia as whole (16%). The increase in older age groups leads to questions about health care, lifestyle issues, and senior recreation activities in the county.

Compared with state and national averages, Bedford County has a higher percentage of the population who are white (85.27%), and less than state/national average percentages of the population who are African American (4.95%) Hispanic (2.72%) or reported being of two or more races (5.63%).

The median household income in Bedford County is \$66,415. Bedford households have a higher median income than many adjoining localities and above the national average but lags behind the state average (\$80,963).

Approximately 12% of Bedford children are living in poverty which is lower than the State and National average (13% and 17% respectively).

Bedford has a similar rate of residents who have attained a high school degree compared with state and national averages but lags both the state and the nation in percentage of residents attaining post-secondary graduation.

Unemployment rates are lower in Bedford (3.4%) than the State (3.9%) and National (5.4%) averages. Top employment sectors are health care, government, services and manufacturing.

According to the Bedford Area Health Needs Assessment Study, priority areas of need identified included mental health, chronic disease, childcare, aging and elder care. Diet and lifestyle choices affect health and well-being, as do food safety policies and practices. Providing education concerning diet, health issues and nutrition is key to well-being of young families as well as the elderly.

Agriculture and natural resource industries are important sources of economic activity in Bedford County. Agriculture and Forestry is by far the largest land use in the County. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture data, Bedford County ranks in the top ten among Virginia counties in beef cattle, horses, goats and hay production and generates \$26,470,000 annually in farm sales.

Bedford had a slight increase in farms and acres in farmland from 2012-2017 (the most recent period for which data are available). Land values were stable from 2012-2017 and are significantly above the national average. The average age of the farmer remained at 59 from 2012-2017. However, the number of farmers 65 years or older increased during this time frame and represented 36% of all farmers in 2017. This combined with the fact that only 18% of farmers were under 44 years of age leads to concerns regarding farm transition and where the next generation of farmers will come from. There has been a decrease in traditional farming enterprises such as dairy and orchards; however, non-traditional agriculture enterprises including farms focused on direct-to-consumer production are on the rise.

Community and Resident Perspectives

To assess resident perspectives, our unit utilized several strategies. We strive to continually assess needs through informal means as our staff interacts with the community. Specific and intentional efforts include the following:

- Community survey. This survey was distributed widely. In addition to being advertised in the local newspaper, we also posted the survey on the VCE-Bedford social media and the Bedford County government social media sites. We sent a survey request directly to the following – email listservs maintained by the unit; the Bedford County Board of Supervisors; Bedford County Administration; all Bedford County Department Heads; the County Agricultural Economic Development Advisory Board; the Bedford Area Resource Council; public school cafeteria managers; agency partners; and VCE volunteers. One hundred and five (159) surveys were completed. A review of the respondent characteristics confirms it was reasonably representative of the community with regard to race and gender. Demonstrating that we reached a new audience, over 40% of respondents indicated they had never attended a VCE educational program.
- A 3-year Strategic Plan for Bedford County adopted by the Board of Supervisors (2022-2024).
- A 3-year Bedford Area Health Needs Assessment conducted by the Centra Medical Group (2021-2023).

A trend identified in the responses illustrates that many of the top issues are linked and interdisciplinary. Protecting water quality; increasing access to safe, healthy, and local foods; youth life skill development; and land management practices are important issues in Bedford. VCE can provide expertise in addressing aspects of these top issues that cut across age and program area. With our history of interdisciplinary and regional programming, coupled with our capacity at grassroots community partnership development, VCE is uniquely positioned to respond to these complex issues at the local level.

Community Issues

The situation analysis committee met with VCE unit staff to review data collected during the Community and Resident Perspectives phase. The group determined that many of the top issues were linked and could be combined into three overarching priority areas. These are presented below.

Table 1. Needs Assessment Community Survey 2023. Top issues selected by respondents based on a series of choices provided in the survey.

Issue	Rank
Protecting water quality	1
Ensure safe, high quality foods	2
Preserving farm and forest land	3
Strengthening the local food system	4
Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production and profitability	5
Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills	6
Controlling invasive pests (plants, animals, insects)	7
Ensuring safe food handling practice to prevent foodborne illness	8
Protecting air quality	9
Promoting agricultural, natural resources, and environmental literacy	10
Reducing misuses and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers	11
Managing natural habitats and ecosystems	12
Assisting forest landowners with sustainable management practices	13
Getting more adults involved in mentoring youth	14
Protecting freshwater resources (lakes, rivers, springs, wetlands)	15

Table 2. Top five suggestions reported by respondents on an open-ended question where residents were asked what they thought was the most pressing need facing the Bedford community.

Issue Theme	Rank
Affordable, Healthy Foods to include nutrition education, cooking classes, larger urban and public gardens, strengthen the food supply.	1
Land Improvement and Conservation to include natural resources, natives, pollinators, invasive species, water quality.	2
Youth Programs including empowering youth, agriculture programs for youth, school gardens, and entertainment options.	3
Agriculture Support including saving farmland, education, cost shares for agriculture producers, farmer safety, support of new and young farmers.	4
Public Health and health resources for those in poverty	5

Priority Issues identified by the Situation Analysis Committee based on a review of community and resident perspectives.

Priority Issue #1 Enhancing access to safe, healthy, local foods

Priority Issue #2 Improving land management practices

Priority Issue #3 Increasing opportunities for youth to access positive natural resource-based experiences.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Priority Issue #1 Enhancing access to safe, healthy, local foods

Description: According to an article from Michigan State University Extension, eating locally grown foods has many benefits for the consumer, grower, and the community. Some of these benefits are:

- Locally grown food is full of flavor. When grown locally, the crops are picked at their peak of ripeness versus being harvested early to be shipped and distributed to your local retail store. Many times, produce at local markets has been picked within 24 hours of your purchase.
- Eating local food is eating seasonally. Even though we wish strawberries were grown year-round, the best time to eat them is when they can be purchased directly from a local grower. They are full of flavor and taste better than the ones available in the winter that have traveled thousands of miles and picked before they were ripe.
- Local food has more nutrients. Local food has a shorter time between harvest and your table, and it is less likely that the nutrient value has decreased. Food imported from far-away states and countries is often older, has traveled and sits in distribution centers before it gets to your store.

- Local food supports the local economy. The money that is spent with local farmers and growers all stays close to home and is reinvested with businesses and services in your community.
- Local food benefits the environment. By purchasing locally grown foods you help maintain farmland and green and/or open space in your community.
- Local foods promote a safer food supply. The more steps there are between you and your food's source the more chances there are for contamination. Food grown in distant locations has the potential for food safety issues at harvesting, washing, shipping and distribution.
- Local growers can tell you how the food was grown. You can ask what practices they use to raise and harvest the crops. When you know where your food comes from and who grew it, you know a lot more about that food.

Issue Status: This issue is being addressed by VCE resources. Through program offerings from Family Consumer Science, 4-H, and Family Nutrition Program, VCE implements unbiased education concerning diet, eating habits, and nutrition/food safety. This is key to the well-being of youth, young families, and the elderly. To better combat chronic health management, VCE partners with the Bedford Community Health Foundation to provide additional resources and opportunities for addressing this issue. Offerings include, but are not limited to Balanced Living with Diabetes, after-school and summer nutrition/cooking classes, community Nutrition and Health workshops, Eat Smart, Move More, Eat Smart, Be Active, and Lunch and Learns with local businesses. In addition to providing the public with food safety education, VCE implements educational opportunities and provides resources to ensure food safety with local businesses. Offerings include but are not limited to ServSafe, National Restaurant Association Education Foundation coursework and examinations, as well as home-based food business and food preservation techniques/workshops in partnership with the New London Cannery.

The ANR program area is also actively engaged in this issue at the residential level through our close partnership with the Bedford Urban Garden (B.U.G.) community garden. In addition to providing inexpensive garden beds for citizens to grow their own food, B.U.G. also maintains several beds where they grow food for distribution to limited resource citizens. Further, the Bedford VCE Master Gardener volunteers provide educational programming on food production through workshops, seminars, and one-on-one consultation. The VCE-Bedford unit also provides educational support to the agriculture-scale local food movement. Examples include support of the county's farmer's markets, workshops, seminars, marketing assistance and one-on-one consultation with producers.

Based on the findings from the situation analysis, it would appear more effort and collaborations can be explored to increase not only the production of local food but also the access and utilization of local foods. An example of this would be farm to school programming.

Priority Issue #2 Improving land management practices

Description: As our population grows, there is increasing pressure on our natural resources. The issue of protecting water quality is gaining more visibility with Smith Mountain Lake and tourism becoming growing influences in Bedford County. Residential development results in more fertilizers and pesticides being applied. Without adequate knowledge of proper use, the risk of excess nutrients and pesticides reaching our water is real. In the same way, agriculture can be a source of non-point source pollution. Improving land management practices also has an economic impact, specifically for agriculture. Agriculture is the largest land use in Bedford County and is a major economic driver for our community. As land management improves, land productivity improves through better soil health and decreased external inputs. This has the potential to either increase revenue or decrease costs. Both of which can enhance profitability and sustainability.

Issue Status: This issue is being addressed by VCE resources. VCE currently partners with other agencies including the Peaks of Otter Soil and Water Conservation District, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and non-profit organizations to provide homeowners, contractors and agriculture producers with information they can use to make safe and effective decisions that will help protect our natural resources. Recent examples designed for the agriculture community include educational programs on soil health, and management intensive grazing management. VCE agents in the region have been very successful in securing grant funds from the

Virginia Tobacco Commission for regional agri-business initiatives to improve management practices. The Bedford County Agricultural Economic Development Advisory Board, on which VCE has a permanent seat and plays an integral role, demonstrates that there is a desire among citizens and local government to work towards sustaining a viable agricultural industry in Bedford County.

We engage our Master Gardener volunteers to extend and enhance our educational reach to the residential community. Our volunteers provide many programs focused on improving land management and are highly visible in the community throughout the year. Examples include a daylong gardening seminar; on-going educational workshops at all library branches in spring and fall; and information booths at farmers markets and several community events.

Based on the situation analysis, it would appear even more effort and collaborations need to be explored to better address this issue.

Priority Issue #3 Increasing opportunities for youth to access positive natural resource-based experiences.

Description: While many youth are over-extended and involved with many activities, many of these activities do not provide youth with opportunities to engage with our natural resources. Environmental education is a critical aspect of learning that instills respect, admiration, and care for our natural world in children. Environmental education encourages children to ask questions and to think critically about the world around them. Environmental education is essential for children to understand the importance of preserving our natural resources and to become responsible environmental stewards. By learning about the environment, children develop critical thinking skills, become aware of the impact of their actions on the environment, and learn to appreciate the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Environmental education has been shown to improve academic performance. Studies have shown that children who participate in environmental education programs perform better in science, math, and reading. They develop critical thinking skills and learn to work collaboratively with others. These skills are essential for success in school and in life (Source: Lloyd Center for the Environment).

Issue Status: This issue is being addressed to some extent with VCE 4-H resources. Through 4-H community activities, youth are presented with the opportunity to develop leadership and life skills. Current opportunities specifically involving agriculture and natural resources include our special interest clubs for equine, agriculture, and shooting sports.

Additional programming related to this issue includes the STEM based programming currently being provided at three schools in Bedford County to 4th graders to enrich/enhance the Science based SOLs and learning.

Based on the situation analysis, it would appear more effort and collaborations need to be explored to provide youth across Bedford County with natural resource-based learning opportunities. Potential partners include FFA, Bedford County Public Schools, USDA, Peaks of Otter Soil and Water Conservation District, Virginia Department of Forestry, etc.). Specifically, more efforts are warranted to expand STEM programming for our youth.

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