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### **ASSISTANT COUNTY PLANNING DIRECTOR HONORED AS “OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTOR TO AGRICULTURE”.**

Mary K. George, Catawba County Assistant Planning Director, has been named Outstanding Contributor To Agriculture in Catawba County for 2012. The award, which is presently annually by the Hickory Kiwanis Club as a part of Farm-City Week activities, was presented to George during the annual Farm-City Week banquet on November 20, 2012.



George was recognized for a broad range of activities that have led to the preservation of open space and farmland, the creation of the Voluntary Agricultural District program to provide owners of agricultural land with opportunities to promote their work, an annual tour of agricultural businesses in the county, and more.

“Mary’s influence in preserving open space and farmland in Catawba County began in the early 2000s, while she worked for a five-year period with the Steering Committees for each of the County’s Small Area Plans,” said Susan Ballbach, Catawba County Senior Planner, who nominated George for the award. “Each plan identified the importance of preserving open space and agricultural land, which later led to the creation of the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Program. Mary helped guide the development of agricultural land preservation.”

During the past three years, Mary has used her expertise in spearheading the formation of the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Program,” Ballbach added. “She coordinated the development of an Agricultural Advisory Board and the VAD ordinance, and presented the proposal to the Board of Commissioners. After approval, she was instrumental in creating application forms, signage, publicity materials, and initiated public workshops and farm promotion events. She obtained grants to help with the expenses. Mary also conducted outreach sessions for the Board of Realtors and Bar Association on the new VAD program, demonstrating how they could access information on the County website. By the end of 2009, the VAD program was off to a successful start, with over 4,300 acres and 42 landowners.”

According to the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, North Carolina lost one million acres of forestland between 1990 and 2002, with three quarters of this loss to urban development. Since 2002, North Carolina has lost more than 6,000 farms and 600,000 acres of farmland. To date, the owners of over 8000 acres of land in Catawba County have volunteered to preserve their land for agriculture.

In June of 2011, George orchestrated Catawba County’s first Agri-Tourism Day. The event was comprised of self guided tours to nine participating farms, in order to give the public new perspectives on farming in the County. There were approximately 1,000 farm visits by people not only from Catawba County but as far away as South Carolina. George designed a brochure used for advertising prior to the event and provided driving directions during the event. The brochure included information on each location, so participants could determine which sites they wanted to visit, and also a map to guide participants to each location.

“In 2011, Mary compiled an application, delivered a presentation to the decision-makers from the Agricultural

Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, and obtained a \$15,000 grant from the State of North Carolina,” Ballbach said. “This money was requested to help cover the costs of State and National experts who will provide information on agricultural statistics and trends to be used by Ms. George in the development of the County’s first Farm and Food Sustainability Plan. ”

Ms. George is guiding the development of the Plan which is being formulated by a 20-member committee of citizens and officials, representing a variety of fields, who will recommend a series of action items to sustain agriculture and promote local food in Catawba County. Existing challenges to continued family farming in the County will be listed, along with opportunities for maintaining or enhancing small, family-owned farms and the local agricultural economy. A draft of the plan is currently being completed and will be the subject of a series of community meetings in late January 2013. The final Plan will be presented to the Board of Commissioners in spring 2013.

Mary George is a Wisconsin native who earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in geography and geology from the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point and obtained her American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) certification in 1993. Prior to her employment with Catawba County, beginning in 1988, she worked for the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources as an environmental engineering technician in the Land Quality Section, where she inspected erosion control measures on construction sites, mining activities and dams. George and her husband, David, live in Newton and have a son, Bryan, who is a graduate of UNC-Asheville and has a web and logo design business in addition to coaching soccer for the Highlands Football Club.

George serves on the Board of the Foothills Conservancy and is active with the Catawba Lands Conservancy, which also works to preserve farmland in the County. She is also involved in the Charlotte Regional Produce Assessment initiative, which is seeking a Specialty Crop Block Grant from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, designed to help match food production in the rural areas around Charlotte to the food consumers within the urban areas.

“I am very honored to receive this high award from the agricultural community” George said. “I began my career in Wisconsin working for a Soil & Water Conservation District so preserving farmland has definitely been a deep interest of mine.”

The agricultural community takes a lot of pride in giving this award and it comes with a lot of appreciation for a job well done,” said Jeff Carpenter, Director of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension- Catawba Center. “We are all very happy to recognize Mary for her service.”