

TO: Kurt Hodgen, City Manager
FROM: Brenda Black, Tourism Manager
DATE: March 11th, 2016
RE: Fields of Gold Farm Trail

Summary:

The goals of the Fields of Gold program are to market the Shenandoah Valley as a top agritourism destination, create and retain jobs on the farm, expand tourism jobs off of the farm, and nurture an environment for entrepreneurship. It is a regional agritourism program designed to collectively market and promote the region's agritourism sites and activities. The Shenandoah Valley is asset-rich in both quantity and quality of farms and farm businesses. Four of the top five agriculture-producing counties in the state of Virginia are located in the Fields of Gold region (Rockingham, Augusta, Page, and Shenandoah).

Currently the Fields of Gold has approximately 215 members spanning eight counties and five cities. Membership within the program is free. In order to qualify for membership, a farm business must (1) be located within the region, (2) must be open to the general public, and (3) the agribusiness must fall into one or more of the following categories: Agricultural Venue, Farmers Market, Farm Stand, Grocery/Retail, Pick Your Own, Christmas Trees/Nursery, Experience the Farm, Trout Farming & Fishing, On Farm Lodging, Farm to Table Restaurant or Winery/Brewery. The Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission administers the program.

Our members are promoted throughout the region and the state in a variety of ways. On our website, www.fieldsofgold.org, each member has their own profile page, there is a "Map Your Adventure" feature, a monthly events calendar, and more. Fields of Gold is also active on social media through Facebook and Instagram and regularly promotes its members via these platforms. The program has a brochure that is accessible at all member locations, several welcome centers, public libraries, inns, camp grounds, and many other venues throughout the region. We now also have bumper stickers at each member locality and identifying member signage. We send out "Adventure Awaits", a monthly visitors' newsletter, via Constant Contact highlighting many events going on each month on the Farm Trail. Members receive **Fence Talk**, a "members only" newsletter, every two months. This publication keeps members up to date on workshops, conferences, grant opportunities, marketing tools, events and much more. We develop a seasonal ad four times per year that is promoted on Facebook and goes out in a variety of magazines and news publications including Virginia Living, Shenandoah Living, Recreation News, Blue Ridge Outdoors, and Edible Blue Ridge. We hold regular member events in each region, called "Meet & Greets", as opportunities for networking and information sharing. We also regularly promote the Trail by having Fields of Gold booths at markets and events throughout the region. We partner frequently with others to bring our members many professional advancement and business support opportunities.

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Background:

The Fields of Gold agritourism program began as an economic development proposal by the Central Shenandoah Planning District (CSPDC) in late 2010. With the leadership of the CSPDC and the support of the Shenandoah Valley Partnership (SVP), the initiative quickly took hold as a partnership between local governments, tourism and economic development entities, and the farming community. The program was developed as a collaborative program to market the rich and diverse agritourism destinations throughout the Shenandoah Valley. This regional program provides the opportunity for stakeholders to leverage each other's participation to achieve economies of scale for marketing, education, networking, and industry monitoring that otherwise would not be possible. The following localities participate in Fields of Gold:

Counties: Augusta, Bath, Botetourt, Highland, Page, Rockbridge, Rockingham, Shenandoah

Cities: Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, Waynesboro

The CSPDC has successfully leveraged local and state financial support for the Fields of Gold program to lay the groundwork for a regional agritourism program. With this funding, Fields of Gold created an organizational structure; performed outreach, inventory, and data collection tasks; provided business support services; created marketing materials; designed an interactive website; and developed a 5-year strategic plan. The grant funding that supported this long list of achievements has effectively moved the Fields of Gold initiative from planning into implementation of its marketing and business support service roles.

Through the planning process, it was clear that the region had an economic opportunity to grow its agritourism industry. It was also evident that the program was two-sided. It needed to address, (1) marketing the program and its businesses to the visitor, and (2) building farmer capacity for those who wish to start up or expand their business to include agritourism.

Implementation activities are intended to achieve the program's overarching goals:

Goal 1: Boost rural economic development through regional collaboration.

Goal 2: Attain recognition of the Shenandoah Valley as the #1 agritourism destination in the nation.

Goal 3: Assist agritourism businesses with increasing their sales and achieving their mission and goals.

Key Issues:

N/A

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Environmental Impact:

Fiscal Impact:

Prior Actions:

Alternatives:

Community Engagement:

Recommendation: Program Endorsement

Attachments: Fence Talk and Adventures Await

Review:

The initiating Department Director will place in Legistar, in sequence of transmittal, the names of each department that must initial their review in order for this item to be placed on the City Council agenda. The completion of review only addresses the readiness of the issue for Council consideration. This does not address the recommendation for approval or denial of the issue.

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