

Madison-Morgan Conservancy

Newsletter
Spring, 2024

Protecting Farms, Forests, and Front Porches for Future Generations

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Letter from the Executive Director

How to Reach a Critical Mass

The groundwork has been laid, and now we need your help.

Through discussions with the Board of Commissioners, the completion of two studies, two packed workshops, a Membership Supper that our State Commissioner of Agriculture attended, and hundreds of hours on the phone and in person with farmers, foresters, and other landowners wanting to protect their land, we see the momentum building.

Momentum towards what? Towards retaining a critical mass of land to sustain our existing agricultural and forestry industries. Towards stemming the sprawl that comes with all this development pressure. Towards clean water, clean air, beautiful vistas, stable property values, and a balanced tax digest.

Thanks to a cost-share agreement between the Conservancy and the Board of Commissioners, Morgan County now has two studies lighting the path forward. Those studies show us that:

- Morgan County should retain 75,000 acres of productive land to sustain its agricultural and forestry industries, and
- Farm/forestland pays more in taxes than it receives in services, balancing out the tax digest from all that new residential development, and
- Morgan County can still be one of those places in this country that saves its farmland, its quality of life, its environmental quality, its soul. It's not yet too late.

We are in a good place right now, working from a strong foundation:

- Morgan County ranks 34th in the state for

- total agricultural production.
- Morgan County has strong zoning that encourages farming.
- There are 6,000 acres of permanently protected land and approximately 3,000 acres of working forest in Hard Labor Creek State Park supporting the farm and forestry industries (9,000 acres total).
- There is a privately funded conservancy protecting land within the county (Madison-Morgan Conservancy is the first and, still, only countywide conservancy in Georgia).

But we need to do a good bit more right away to secure our future. The Critical Mass Study showed that 20,000 acres of protected land can stabilize a community from the development pressure. **So, we need to get to 20,000 acres ASAP (that's only 11,000 acres more than what is already protected).**



We need a local source of funding for farmland protection – funding that would pay farmers to sell

development rights to protect that critical mass of land required to keep farmers farming. The Conservancy has been working toward this goal in three ways:

- We are seeking private dollars from foundations and individuals to buy development rights (conservation easements).
- We are asking the Board of Commissioners to add a line item to their budget to match federal, state, and local dollars used to buy development rights (conservation easements) from Morgan County farmers. **This funding does NOT go to the Conservancy, it goes straight to the landowners.**

Continued on next page

Letter from the Executive Director, Continued...

- We are partnering with the Working Farms Fund, NRCS, American Farmland Trust, and Athens Land Trust to get the word out about the financially viable conservation opportunities for farmers and landowners.

This is where we need your help. **If you or someone you know is interested in protecting their land, please contact us.** And if you believe, as the Conservancy Board and staff do, that permanent protection of land is the only way to secure our future as a rural, productive, beautiful county, we are asking you to **convey that message to your County Commissioners.**

It's not too late, yet. Morgan County has the infrastructure in place to accomplish this monumental task. The only thing mi\$\$ing?

This conservancy follows on the heels of past leadership, of people who have made Morgan County what it is. We feel it is now our responsibility to be bold, to take the next big step forward. Some of those steps will be difficult, but if not us, who? We are committed and hope you will walk this path with us.

To the 600+ members and many other contributors who have kept this organization alive over the last 24 years, I thank you. If you aren't one of those and would like to be, please join the Conservancy as a member. We need all the support we can get to thrive in this work.

Sincerely,



Christine Watts
Executive Director

Organizational News

Welcome New Board Members and Staff



Meg Anderson, a Mississippi native, graduated from Emory University and Georgia State University. She first visited Madison in 2012 when her mom bought tickets to the Madison Spring Tour of Homes. Years later, wanting a part-time escape from big city Atlanta, Madison came to mind. Meg and husband Wyatt lucked into a beautiful pine and hardwood timber

property just off Highway 83. Meg serves on the board of her family's business in Mississippi, volunteers with several nonprofit groups, and is passionate about preserving rural farm and timberland for future generations. She and Wyatt have a 13-year-old Norwich Terrier named Howard. You can often find her in her big vegetable garden at Madison or making gumbo as soon as the weather gets cold enough!



Sherri Aynn Collins is a native of East Tennessee, moving to Atlanta to attend Emory University. While there, she fell in love with the stunning architecture of historic Druid Hills and quickly ditched her plans to study pre-law for a degree in Art History. She stumbled upon an incredible career in the tech startup world in Atlanta, where she also

met and married her husband Brian. They raised two incredible daughters, Ellie and Erin, in two historically significant homes in Druid Hills, both with their fair share of restoration efforts. The family discovered Madison after attending a wedding at Serenata Farm and were instantly smitten with the small-town charm and surrounding countryside. Sherri Aynn and Brian moved to Madison in 2020 and are honored to be a part of an incredible community that truly honors preservation.



Lissa Phelps and her husband, Garry, are both Morgan County natives as were their parents. Lissa graduated from Morgan County High School and the University of Georgia with a degree in education. She taught at Morgan County Primary for 23 years. Then she became the Instructional Technology Coordinator for the Morgan

County School System, a job she did for seven years until she retired in 2012. After retirement she managed the wedding venue she and Garry had at their barn until 2020. She and Garry have a daughter, Ryan Marbutt, and son, Grant Phelps. Their daughter and son-in-law, Casey, have one son, Jack. Lissa and Garry enjoy spending time with their grandson!



Wynn Howard: "I am thrilled to be serving as Land Protection Specialist with the Madison-Morgan Conservancy, an organization dedicated to preserving the heritage and natural landscapes of my hometown. Being born and raised here, my deep-rooted connection to the community fosters my passion for safeguarding our

county's invaluable assets for future generations. My excitement also stems from the enriching experiences I gained during my tenure with the Junior Conservancy in 2017-2018. The Junior Conservancy not only expanded my knowledge about conservation, but it allowed me to showcase my love for photography. By capturing the essence of our county's cultural and natural heritage, I was able to create a calendar which raised funds that were put towards the MMC mission. I look forward to lengthening my stewardship in the county as I continue contributing actively to the Conservancy's mission."

229 Acres to Be Protected by the 1st Working Farms Fund Project

229 acres will be protected in Morgan County by the Conservation Fund's Working Farms Fund program. Thanks to Lissa (Blackwell) Phelps and her family, a significant portion of her father's farm, the Blackwell Farm, will now be home to a local cattleman's operation and will be permanently protected as farmland.



then permanently protect the farm with a conservation easement, and then sell the farm to the next generation farmer for the reduced value (the eased value). That reduced value makes it affordable for the farmer to buy land for farming purposes.

The Conservation Fund is working to make farmland affordable. Through a buy-protect-sell model, they purchase farms at fair market value (think real estate developer prices), then lease the farm to a "next generation farmer" (not a "new" farmer but the "next" farmer on the land),

The Working Farms Fund is a Regional Conservation Partnership between the Conservation Fund, the Madison-

Morgan Conservancy, the Athens Land Trust, and others, which began five years ago as just an idea. We are thrilled that the Working Farms Fund has purchased their first ten farms, totaling over 1,000 acres, in their first three years.

Educational Programming

Land Stewardship Workshop Series IV

The 2024 Land Stewardship Workshop Series consisted of two workshops that educated our county farmers and County Commissioners on the various programs available for the sole purpose of conserving farmland and sustaining agriculture.

The workshops highlighted the big picture of farmland protection and how the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program/Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP/ALE) works, with presenters from American Farmland Trust and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Athens Land Trust, in partnership with the Oconee County Farmland Preservation Committee, also gave a brief overview of how Oconee County is helping fund farmland protection in their county. Both workshops were held at the Chophouse Grille in Madison and reached a maximum capacity of about 35 people each night.

Following the workshops, the next steps will be advocating to the Morgan County Board of Commissioners to help fund farmland protection in effort to protect a critical mass of farmland in the county.

Membership Supper with Tyler Harper and Tom Daniels

On Friday, March 22, the Conservancy held its Annual Membership Supper at the Malcom Crossroads. Despite the rain, the Conservancy was grateful to have hosted 116 people for a chili supper in the barn followed by two special presentations.

The Conservancy was fortunate enough to have both Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture, Tyler Harper, and Tom Daniels, author of the Critical Mass Study in attendance.

Commissioner Harper began the night discussing the importance of farmland protection and shared an update on Senate Bill 220, the Georgia Farmland Conservation Act, which provides farmers with a financial incentive to conserve their land.

Mr. Daniels presented his Critical Mass Study, reporting that Morgan County should ideally retain 75,000 acres for agriculture uses in the county to sustain its agricultural and forestry industries.



Morgan County Agriculture Type by Share of Value of Output, 2022. Total Value \$174 million



Join Us

Leaving a Legacy of a Critical Mass of Land Protected

We have an opportunity for you!

Help leave a legacy in Morgan County — the protection of a critical mass of farmland that future generations will continue to farm, profit from, hunt, fish, hike, and enjoy.

Morgan County is the only county in Georgia to have its own conservancy focused on protecting land. Like most nonprofits, the Conservancy fills the gap - providing services not already provided by government and private business.

That is what we are asking you to do: help us fill that gap by funding this local land conservancy so that it can have the capacity to go out there and protect land in Morgan County. We need your help to do so at a pace that will allow this community to combat the sprawl coming our way.



This year, we are asking, specifically, for you to consider joining or renewing at the Watershed Donor Level (see levels below) and commit to that level of support for the next five years. We ask that you dig deep, increase your level of support, and significantly invest in this community's future.

A Charter Member and Watershed Donor wrote in 2014: "What is accomplished in our community by such a small organization is nothing short of a miracle! What our county has accomplished in the area of conservation easements is the envy of our neighbors and could not have happened without the Conservancy. Our community is richer because of the Conservancy's leadership, and I am so proud to be a supporter."

– Christine Lambert, Watershed Donor

To be vigilant is our task in this Watershed Moment. We ask that you join us and take the leap with us. It's going to be a ride to remember and a legacy never to forget.

Join or Renew Your Membership Today!

Madison-Morgan Conservancy
P.O. Box 752, Madison, GA 30650

706-818-8046 | www.mmcGeorgia.org | info@mmcGeorgia.org

- Daniel Morgan Society - \$5,000+ (Watershed Donor Level)
- Sustainer - \$2,500+ (Watershed Donor Level)
- Benefactor - \$1,000+ (Watershed Donor Level)
- I would like to contribute an additional: \$ _____ to the Endangered Properties Revolving Fund.
- My Company has a matching gift program. Please send me information about matching gifts.
- Please send me information about including the Madison-Morgan Conservancy in my will.
- I would like to volunteer.
- Supporter - \$500
- Donor - \$250
- Preservationist - \$100
- Conservationist - \$50
- Naturalist - \$25

Name(s) as it should appear on the Membership list:

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone 1: _____ Phone 2: _____

Email 1: _____

Email 2: _____

Monthly Giving:

It's all about cash flow. If you would prefer to give monthly, it's easy to do online. Just go to the Membership page on our website, www.mmc-Georgia.org/membership, click the "Monthly Giving" button, and fill in the monthly amount you'd like to contribute. Monthly giving is a win-win:

- You can spread your contribution over 12 months.
- Monthly membership income helps the Conservancy budget for the year.

Daniel Morgan Society \$5,000+ | Monthly = \$417

Sustainer \$2,500+ | Monthly = \$209

Benefactor \$1,000+ | Monthly = \$84

Supporter \$500+ | Monthly = \$42

Donor \$250+ | Monthly = \$21



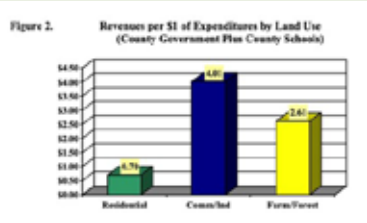
Why a Critical Mass of Farmland Is Important to Retain

Critical Mass is generally defined as the minimum number of acres of farmland and forestland that will maintain the farm and forest support businesses and the overall agricultural and forestry industries.

The recent Critical Mass Study for Morgan County found that this county needs to retain 75,000 acres in productive land to ensure the farm support businesses (feed mills, machinery dealers, veterinarians, processors, and transportation companies, etc.) continue to operate in this area.

If too much farmland is lost, the farm support businesses will relocate or go out of business, and then the rest of the farmers will not be able to farm efficiently or profitably, which will lead to the inevitable loss of the remaining farmland.

And because farmland pays more in taxes than it receives in services, protecting farmland also balances the county's tax digest.



As has been heard on the streets, **"Kiss a farmer, he keeps your taxes low."**

The additional benefits of retaining a critical mass of farmland is what draws people in the first place, making the balance even more tricky. The wide open

spaces, environmental quality, recreational lands on which families enjoy hunting, fishing, bird watching, hiking, riding their horses and ATVs are key to the quality of life found here in Morgan County. For the time being, anyway.

Of GA's 159 Counties in 2022, Morgan County ranked 34th in Total Farmgate Value (\$500 million agricultural industry), and more specifically ranked:

- 1st in Christmas Trees
- 2nd in Horses – Boarding/Breeding/Training
- 2nd in Field/Tree Nursery
- 2nd in Silage
- 3rd in Pork – Farrow to Finish
- 3rd in Total Livestock
- 3rd in Straw
- 4th in Dairy
- 4th in Greenhouse
- 4th in Hay
- 4th in Total Ornamental Horticulture
- 4th in Quail
- 4th in Turkey Hunting Leases
- 6th in Beef Cows
- 7th in Wheat
- 8th in Miscellaneous Row and Forage Crops
- 10th in Deer Hunting Leases
- 14th in Turfgrass



Junior Conservancy

Junior Conservancy Alumni Spotlight

Claire Coleman, Kansas City Farm Bureau

*JC Classes of 2017-2019
First JC President, 2017-2019*

Claire Coleman was president of the inaugural Junior Conservancy class back in 2017-2018. She served as president for two years before graduating and attending UGA's College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences.



During College, Claire served as president of the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow and was a member of the winning team of the Georgia Farm Bureau Advocacy in Action competition. After graduating from UGA, Claire was hired by the Kansas Farm Bureau.

Claire recently wrote to us, "I work for Kansas Farm Bureau as the Field Services Manager for the 4th District. I oversee 10 counties and work closely with their board of directors and county coordinators. In this position, I have the opportunity to work with farmers every day, be involved in ag advocacy and ag education, and support local communities."



Claire embodies all those qualities we hope to ignite in our Junior Conservancy members: love of the land and all its conservation values, passion for agriculture, and community service. We are so proud of Claire!

Conservancy Members

March 2023 - March 2024

ANONYMOUS	BRYANS FAMILY FOUNDATION	**BRENNA GARRETT	JACK'S CREEK FARM
THE 1772 FOUNDATION	**HARRISON BUCK	ERIN & JOHN GARRETT	KIM JACKSON
BEVERLY & BILL ABBOTT	ANNIE HUNT & JERALD "WOODY" BURRISS	JUDY & BRUCE GILBERT	ANNE LEIGHTON & PATRICK JACKSON
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Watershed Donors (bolded)

** Junior Conservancy Members

New Members (green)

Conservancy Members

December 2022 - December 2023

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* Charter Members

Watershed Donors (bolded)

** Junior Conservancy Members

New Members (green)



**MADISON-MORGAN
CONSERVANCY**

PROTECTING FARMS, FORESTS, AND
FRONT PORCHES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Madison-Morgan Conservancy
P.O. Box 752
Madison, GA 30650

(706) 818-8046

www.mmcGeorgia.org



Return Service Requested

Need to Renew? Check Your Mailing Label:

The date printed above your name on the mailing label is the last date on which you paid your annual membership dues. Please renew your membership annually to support the Conservancy's work and to expand its capacity.

Spring, 2024

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Critical Mass of Farmland Snapshot

Retain 75,000 Acres of Productive Land

Morgan County has about 145,000 acres of farmland and 65,000 acres in crop and livestock production. That's 92% of Morgan County's 228,000 total acres.

If Morgan County can retain 30% of its landmass as productive, its farm and forest support businesses (feed mills, machinery dealers, veterinarians, processors, and transportation companies) will most likely continue serving the county's farmers. But...

It's a balancing act. If we lose too much farmland, the farm support businesses go out of business or move away, at which point the remaining farmers cannot access those farm support businesses economically. THAT is when we lose the agricultural industry as a whole.

Protect 20,000 ASAP

Tom Daniels, author of the Critical Mass Study, reports that when a community reaches 20,000 acres of protected farmland, things stabilize: the culture of farming prevails, and the understanding of farmland protection is pervasive. Sprawl begins to be mitigated.

Farmers Keep Our Taxes Low

The recent Cost of Community Services Study by Jeff Dorfman shows that farmland, even in Conservation Use Valuation Assessment (CUVA), pays more in taxes than it receives in services.

Way more. Farmers pay \$5.08 in taxes for every \$1 in services they receive. As opposed to residential development that does not pay enough in taxes to fund the services it requires.

It's all about balance. Retaining farmland keeps our tax digest balanced and our taxes low.

Revenues per \$1 of Expenditures by Land Use
(County Government Plus County Schools)

