



Love of Nature Runs Full Circle with Myer Family Easement

"I can't even imagine three more houses here."

Looking out over the breathtaking panorama of the Blue Ridge Mountains behind their Boyce home, Joseph and Tamara Myer beam. "It's hard to find a better view than this," Joseph says proudly.

The Myers have owned Stubblefield Farm on Briggs Road for two years. They've quickly made it a comfortable home for them and their four children, as well as a small agricultural venture with an Angus cow/calf operation and several horses.

The 40.2-acre property includes the primary home, which over the years has grown around a log cabin built in 1792, now the dining room in the center of the home. The property also includes a lovely nearby guest cottage, The Hill House, built in 1979 but designed with an historic vibe. It's perfect for welcoming friends and family for long weekends, say the Myers. They also occasionally host short-term renters from Airbnb.

"I can't even imagine three more houses here," Joseph says, referencing the property's original three additional dwelling unit rights. "It would really change the farm."

Tamara agreed: "Even the road in front of the house would be different. There certainly would be more traffic. We knew from the beginning we wanted to maintain the farm just as it is."

The Myers' decision to place the land in conservation easement makes certain that is exactly what happens. As part of the easement agreement, two dwelling units were retired, leaving just one for potential future development.



Joseph & Tamara Myer are thrilled with their backyard view at Stubblefield Farm.

Starting the easement process soon after they purchased Stubblefield was natural for the Myer family.

Joseph and his four siblings grew up in Clarke County on Roseville Farm in Berryville. His late father, Eric, was a veterinarian and founded Roseville Veterinary Clinic in Boyce.

"Nature has always been part of my family's daily routine," Joseph recalls. "Animals were part of our life. With a rural life, you're always immersed in nature."

Tamara laughs, "It's who he is. When he's wearing his overalls, we call him Farmer Joe."

Indeed, they consider their farming adventures "life lessons for our children." The couple shares daughters Katherine, 19, Reagan, 17, Margaret ("Maggie"), 13, and son Eric, 10. (Katherine currently spreads the family's love of nature as an environmental science major at Virginia Tech.)

The Myers weren't strangers to conservation easements before they

inquired about the process, given their time spent in Clarke County's open spaces. Plus, Tamara once served as the town manager in Boyce, so she understood how easements work.

According to the Myers, the entire easement process for Stubblefield spanned from September through December 2023. "Alison (the county's easement specialist) was straightforward about the process," explains Joseph. "While it can be quite involved, the Easement Authority was a very good resource, striking a nice balance between achieving the mission of the organization and making the transaction practical for property owners."

"We're happy with how it turned out, from every angle," adds Joseph. "We're happy we did it. We still have plenty of control over the property."

"And everybody was always on the same page," Tamara points out.

Any advice for others considering a conservation easement? "Leverage the resources the Easement Authority offers,"

Joseph emphasizes. "Talk to people who have done it. Talk to people with financial expertise in this area. Get a full picture of what's involved. To permanently change property rights is a huge deal. Weigh the pros and cons. And know there are plenty of off-ramps if you start the process and decide against it."

Tamara suggests simply exploring the possibility of an

easement is worthwhile, even if a property owner isn't certain it will work: "Don't be afraid to start the process. It doesn't mean you have to follow through. The Easement Authority was clear with a timeline throughout for us. Remember, you control it."



Cheddar the cat & canines Corbet & Nellie are always around.

How Easements Influence the County's Composite Index (... and save taxpayers dollars)

With the recent conversations around Clarke County's *Composite Index of Local Ability to Pay* and the index's impact on property taxes, the Easement Authority stresses that conservation easements are a way to combat a rising index.

In short, land placed in conservation easement lowers the county's overall property values, which is a component of calculating the Composite Index. The lower property values result in increased state funding for education, because the Virginia Department of Education uses the index to determine how much localities can afford to spend on educating students, which influences how much funding the state receives – and potentially whether a county needs to increase taxes in some way to cover the gap.

Lorien Lemmon, Clarke County's Conservation Planner and GIS Coordinator, explains....

Easement News: Why are conservation easements important to lower the Composite Index?

Lemmon: A financial benefit of conservation easements is the reduction of the true value of real property used to compute the local Composite Index, resulting in increased state aid for schools. This index determines a school division's ability to pay education costs. The Composite Index is calculated using three indicators of a locality's ability-to-pay – the true value of real property (weighted 50 percent), adjusted gross income (weighted 40 percent), and taxable retail sales (weighted 10 percent).

Each locality's index is adjusted to maintain an overall statewide local share of 45 percent and an overall state share of 55 percent.

Clarke County received \$8.7 million in revenue from the Commonwealth for the

School Operating Fund, largely funding awarded through the state's Standards of Quality (SOQ) funding process. The latter program awards funds based (Over)

Composite Index = More Money for Schools

Without Conservation Easements in Clarke County:	County Spends on average
● Property values would be higher, reducing state funding for schools	\$120,000/year on easements
● State contributions would decrease by approximately	\$131,000 to \$147,000
\$131,000 to \$147,000 a year	– \$120,000
	= \$11,000 to \$27,000 net benefit from easements/year

(Data from Cost of Community Services Study, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, 2018)

Quarterly newsletter published by the Clarke County Conservation Easement Authority dedicated to preserving properties with natural, cultural or scenic resources worthy of protection

on local fiscal capacity. Hence, localities demonstrating greater fiscal capacity, holding all else the same, receive smaller transfers.

Easement News: How does the county save money with more acres in conservation easement?

Lemmon: Clarke County has 28,695 acres under permanent conservation easement with 689 acres added with the assistance of the county's Conservation Easement Authority funding in the past five years. The value of property rights

removed per acre is estimated at \$2,800 to \$3,132. Meaning, if Clarke County conservation easements had not been created, the county would have an estimated \$82.1 million to \$91.9 million in additional property assessment that would translate into higher composite indices of local ability-to-pay, varying from a low of .5603 to a high of .5615. Therefore, state contributions would decrease by approximately 1 percent, translating into lost funding of approximately \$131,000 to \$147,000. The average annual

appropriation by the Board of Supervisors for the County's easement program is \$120,000; therefore, the Authority actually generates income for the County.

According to recent reporting in the Winchester Star, "Clarke's Composite Index rose from 0.5728 to 0.6032 for the 2024-2026 biennium. Basically, that means the county's share of funding for its schools will increase from 57% to 60%. As a result, Clarke County Public Schools expect to see a reduction of about \$606,000 in state funding."

An interactive workshop

Conservation Easements for Small & Large Properties

Tuesday, May 14, 2024 | 7:00 – 8:30 pm

Blandy Experimental Farm
400 Blandy Farm Lane, Boyce, VA 22620
\$8 for Members of the Foundation of the State Arboretum & University of Virginia Alumni
\$12 for non-members

Learn About:

- Qualifying for state and federal tax deductions and Virginia's Land Preservation Tax Credits
- Protecting your property from residential, commercial, and industrial development
- Retaining ownership and rights to use the property, for yourself and future generations
- Protecting conservation values, including water quality, farmland, forest land, and wildlife habitat.

The presenters include:

- **Ashton Cole**, Director of Conservation and Stewardship for the Land Trust of Virginia

- **Leslie Grayson**, Deputy Director at Virginia Outdoors Foundation

- **John McCarthy**, Senior Advisor & Director of Strategic Partnerships at Piedmont Environmental Council

- **Alison Teetor**, Clarke County's Easement Authority Specialist

This workshop is designed primarily for landowners who own at least 20 acres of land. Registration is required. Please register on Eventbrite (www.eventbrite.com) by searching for "conservation easement" in Virginia.

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