

**STATEMENT TO JOINT PUBLIC HEARING
NORTHAMPTON COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS AND PLANNING
COMMISSION
JAY FORD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, VIRGINIA EASTERN SHOREKEEPER
MARCH 11, 2014**

"Good Evening, My name is Jay Ford and I am the Executive Director and Shorekeeper for Virginia Eastern Shorekeeper. Our mission is to protect, preserve, and enhance the waters on Virginia's Eastern Shore and that is why I stand before you tonight. The proposed zoning overhaul contains elements that put our Waters and our aquaculture industry at serious risk. The proposal to remove the Bay Protection Act from the seaside of the county is reckless at best, and in direct conflict with citizen opinion.

During the development of our current comprehensive plan Northampton citizens and stakeholders invested countless hours in shaping a road map for this county. The Citizens of Northampton made it abundantly clear they understand and appreciate the vital relationship between our land and our waters on the Eastern Shore and they chose to enshrine that principle into their comprehensive plan by including language not once, but twice calling for the entirety of the county to remain in the Bay Protection Act. That is why Virginia Eastern Shorekeeper has taken such a strong position regarding the county's decision to circumvent the Planning Commission and Comprehensive Plan. That is why our office has been inundated with phone calls and emails from confused citizens, and that is why over 400 residents and property owners signed our petition calling for this process to be slowed down. People want to know why their clear call to protect Water Quality Countywide is being disregarded.

County officials have pointed to public information sessions that were held and claim these should satisfy public participation concerns. However the proof is in the pudding. If these meetings were so informative and this process has been so transparent why do we have hundreds of citizens frustrated their input has been disregarded or unsolicited? I invite members of the board and planning commission to peruse the names on our petition and read their comments. These are business owners, members of town councils, and leaders of civic organizations. These are citizens and voters in the know and yet they feel disenfranchised.

A major source of the confusion has been the counties communication on this matter. In a letter to citizens it was stated that the new zoning codes are 'consistent' with our Comprehensive Plan. Officials later used the term, "general agreement" as well. I would challenge anyone to explain how a proposal to remove crucial water quality protections from half of the county could be labeled consistent or in general agreement. Misleading statements like these go a long way to explain why citizens feel conflicted about what is or is not in this proposed code.

As you know Virginia Eastern Shorekeeper has considerable reservations about the legality of the current process. However, legal staff may be able to argue it is technically legal to move ahead as planned with new zoning ordinances. Technically. And you may

technically have checked the box for public participation with the information sessions. Again, Technically. But forcing changes through on technicality despite popular opposition is no way to make sweeping countywide alterations that will have profound effects on the everyday life of Northampton citizens and our ecosystem. Citizens must be included in this process. They want to know that when they say, "maintain the Bay Protection Act across the entire county," that officials will not simply dismiss their opinions and their comprehensive plan.

Virginia Eastern Shorekeeper is here to reiterate our call for a new Comprehensive Plan allowing for citizen and stakeholder participation across Northampton before any new zoning ordinances. Give the people of Northampton the opportunity to remind you that protecting our delicate waterways, heritage, and aquaculture industries is a top priority. Give them a chance to develop a comprehensive plan that is not merely consistent or in general agreement with zoning code but rather in Actual Agreement.

If as County Officials have asserted, there is no development or major project waiting in the wings, then I ask you what is the rush? Clearly there are serious reservations amongst hundreds of your constituents. Would it not be best to dispel any notion of impropriety by first developing a new Comprehensive Plan? If the proposed changes are so clearly in the best interests of all Northampton county why not lay it out in a plan for all citizens to engage?

Without clear cut goals, enumerated in a citizen shaped comprehensive plan, this zoning overhaul is little more than a dangerous gamble; risking our booming aquaculture and ecotourism industries that have helped to stabilize this region, for vague and undefined promises of economic development. Northampton citizens deserve better than a roll of the dice. They deserve a comprehensive plan and a road map that they help to shape.

I truly hope that tonight is the first step in a more open and inclusive dialogue on the future of Northampton County. I also hope that as we move forward members of the Board of Supervisors will keep in mind the repeated expressed desires of Northampton Citizens that water quality be protected county wide for now and generations to come. Thank you all for your time and service. I will leave our petition with over 400 Northampton constituents with you to be included in tonight's public record."