

MATTHEWS, NC – ALLOWING ROOM FOR DESIRABLE GROWTH

A COMMUNITY GATHERING AROUND FOOD

Walking around downtown Matthews, NC, you'd serve yourself well to keep your eyes peeled.

Otherwise, you might miss the cucumbers growing just beside Town Hall or the sunflowers that are perched to greet you as you approach Town Hall and the Matthews branch of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library. The cucumbers and sunflowers, inconspicuous they may be, were planted with great care by Public Works employee Mario Rmah and embody a growing undercurrent by which food is bringing the community together. Four blocks away, bordering both sides of West Charles Street, you'll find seasonal flowers, fresh produce, and raw honey enveloping the road and stocking the shelves of the Renfrow Farms Market. Local food is a valued asset to the physical and economic landscape of Matthews, NC.



Once a wooded outpost between the larger towns of Charlotte and Monroe, Matthews has largely been absorbed into the Greater Charlotte area, though it remains distinct in its own character. Matthews' small town feel and family-friendly character are evident in the preservation of its Main Street area of North Trade Street within the bounds of its historic downtown. Now a town of 30,010¹, the local government and its planning department are being strategic in how the town responds to increased development pressures and community needs. One aspect of that strategy is an innovative approach to land use flexibility coded within the town's Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

"We want to be sure we're not restricting something that's good for the entire community." – Kathi Ingrish, Town of Matthews Planning Director



Photo courtesy of Kathi Ingrish

Critical to any town's approach to growth and development, the UDO determines zoning and subdivision regulations alongside design guidelines, stormwater management standards, and other development directives. As such, the UDO translates the community's values into what type of development is allowed.

Initiated by Town Council approval in 2008, Matthews' Planning Department has been updating its UDO incrementally with Planning Director Kathi Ingrish leading the effort. Concurrent to this update, Renfrow Hardware – the anchor tenant of Matthew's Main Street corridor – was also undergoing changes. With the passing of Frank Renfrow in 2010, the Renfrow home estate on

¹ N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. (2014). July 2014 Municipal Estimates by Municipality.



Photo courtesy of Jane Smith

West Charles Street was left to hardware store owner David Blackley, who began working for Mr. Refrow when Blackley was just a teenager. Blackley decided to extend the operations of Renfrow Hardware, a store which offers seeds and supplies for farmers and home gardeners alike, into the venture that is today Renfrow Farms. The farm venture stands as “the agrarian facet of the Renfrow Hardware business and physical embodiment of the gardening knowledge (Renfrow) share(s) with all who seek to learn.”²

Throughout the UDO update, Ingrish and other town leaders were aware of an established and growing interest in urban farming and home gardening practices. In addition to the Renfrow Farm venture, Matthews plays host to several community gardens including the Matthews Community Garden adjacent to the property of Christ Covenant Church and the Crestdale Community Garden. Crestdale is a historically black neighborhood having been established as a settlement for freed slaves. Today the community is one of varied racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds as it is also the location of homes built by Habitat for Humanity

and owned by many families of Southeast Asian descent. The Crestdale Community Garden, especially, functions as a space of cultural exchange and community engagement across the neighborhood’s demographic diversity.

Ingrish readily acknowledges that the Town of Matthews land use code is pretty restrictive on most accounts. So when approaching the update, she wanted to ensure that the economic vitality of urban farming at Renfrow Farms, the community development happening by way of Crestdale Community Gardens and other local food endeavors would not be unduly burdened by development pressures or zoning restrictions moving forward. To provide for this, the planning department added new language to the UDO to explicitly define “Urban Farm” and allow for its use in nearly every zoning district. The revised regulations also feature relaxed restrictions for fencing, minimum yards, and accessory uses.



View of Renfrow Farms on West Charles Street.
Photo courtesy of Jane Smith

Ingrish remarks, “the intent was to allow significant flexibility in how a small farming effort may operate within a neighborhood. We have a private school that has delved into aquaponics, and a local business and property owner (Renfrow Hardware and Refrow Farms) who offers classes and boxes of freshly

² Renfrow Farms. (2016). Our Story. <http://www.renfrowfarms.com/about/our-story>

harvested items for sale to the public.” Town leadership appreciate the economic benefits these endeavors offer to the Town of Matthews and are committed to the positive social outcomes of local food and community gardens.

Town employee Rmah, Renfrow Farms, the community gardens, and backyard farms are all helping shape the present character and future direction of Matthews. For Rmah, the planting is in part a tribute to his homeland of Vietnam, with Vietnamese elephant ears gracing the town square, and in part an effort to share the fruit of the land with passersby – any one is welcome, and expected, to take home a harvest-ready cucumber. For Renfrow Farms, the farm and hardware store preserve the historic agricultural tradition while also anchoring the downtown area and energizing the local food movement with its classes and market offerings. And in the community gardens, cross-cultural exchanges and neighborhood conversations are both building community and enhancing healthy offerings on the dinner plate. And all this work is now codified as permissible for present and future town development thanks to a thoughtfully considered and well-guided Unified Development Ordinance.

To access the UDO for the Town of Matthews (see Chapter 5: Use Districts):

<http://www.matthewsnc.gov/pview.aspx?id=20754&catid=0>

MORE INFORMATION

Town of Matthews, NC | <http://www.matthewsnc.gov/>

Kathi Ingrish, Planning Director

Renfrow Farms | <http://www.renfrowfarms.com/> |

[409 West Charles Street](#) Matthews, NC

NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: RESILIENT LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

Local economies benefit in a number of ways from revitalizing small agriculture and food entrepreneurship in their communities. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu or 828.399.0297.

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