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Daron Culbertson on why he's selling his family farm for a data center

Fauquier farmers face a changing landscape with shrinking margins

By Tate Hewitt Staff Writer
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Supervisor Daron Culbertson at his farm in southern Fauquier County.

Staff photo by Tate Hewitt

Daron Culbertson has been a cattle farmer most of his life.

The Lee District supervisor works two family farms, runs a livestock fencing business and is a vocal supporter of Fauquier County farmers — which is why his **decision to sell his family's fifth-generation farm** to a data center developer was surprising to some, and a betrayal to others.

There's an open secret with his, and Fauquier County's, rural identity: Most farmers can't survive off their land alone. They need to subsidize their rural lives or sell up, as real estate values outpace the profits of farming.

"People have watched me weed-eat this fence row all the way this mile road frontage since I was 6," Culbertson said, pointing along Remington Road. "You know, all the people that live here and have been here … everybody understands you can't make a living farming."



Pinned between shrinking margins, a housing shortage and an AI-powered data center boom, Fauquier farmers are struggling to hold on to rural lands. Culbertson thinks that selling his ancestral farmland could turn that tide, and in the process help close Fauquier County's northern/southern divide.

Rising costs and shrinking profits

When his grandfather, Alton Willingham, died on Christmas Eve of 2012, Culbertson inherited some of the land and almost all of the burden of keeping his family's Remington Road farm afloat.

It had been in the family since before the Civil War, but it didn't come with a trust fund. He had to sell cows just to cover the inheritance tax.

That year, he worked from sunup until sundown until Mother's Day. The work was relentless, but the bills were his biggest problem.

"When I took over, I went pretty gung-ho on farming," Culbertson said. "I realized pretty quickly that it wasn't going to be enough to provide a good living for myself, my wife, my kids, my mom."

Culbertson looked into carbon credits or putting the property into a conservation easement to lower the tax burden. But he said people told him that those programs didn't make sense for him — so close to other developed properties, his land was considered too valuable.



Fauquier supervisor defends decision to sell family farm for data centers

Instead, he set up a livestock fencing business, hoping he could subsidize his farm by working on others.

"It's worked to a point," Culbertson said, "but my mother and I went through the records and since we took over … in 12 years, the tax on this (land) has doubled. The farm insurance has doubled."

He's not alone; the latest **USDA farm census** found that the average farm in Fauquier County is just over 180 acres and loses $20,000 a year. Culbertson said his farm is no exception.



"This is 173 acres. Last year I sold about $30,000 worth of cattle," Culbertson said.

He said he could run a few more cattle, but stretching the capacity of the land would take more hours than he has left in a day — managing farm work, a business and his responsibilities as supervisor, not to mention spending time with his two kids and one on the way.

His taxes, he said, are immense. He lives on a separate farm closer to Remington, nearly 120 acres that his grandfather bought for $1,500 when he returned from World War II.

"I pay more in like one month of taxes than he paid for the whole parcel," Culbertson said.



Daron Culbertson, a lifelong cattle farmer, represents the Lee District on the Fauquier County Board of Supervisors. Staff photo by Tate Hewitt

A changing landscape

With rising costs and diminishing returns, Culbertson said he thought about selling the property for years — considering housing and solar before making a deal with Ron Meyer, a data center developer.

Culbertson, whose family is likely to make millions on the sale, declined to comment on how much he has been offered for the farm.

The farm is in a neighborhood that Culbertson described as an “industrial pocket,” running adjacent to a freight railroad and across the street from the Luck Stone quarry, a site slated to host the second solar farm along Remington Road. Dominion Energy has

already built one on the adjacent property, which is in front of a Dominion substation and power plant that was just approved to be the new site of the county's first battery energy storage center.

Culbertson said his farm has been a holdout, along with an industrial-zone property next door that was used this year to grow corn. He expects it will be developed soon.



Residential development is also encroaching. Ashley Glen, the subdivision behind the Culbertson property, was built on land where Culbertson grew up farming.

"My grandfather and I made hay on that," Culbertson said.

It was one of many properties rented to grow hay on, making for a bigger operation. From his truck, Culbertson pointed out the developments that now stand on those properties.

The nearby industrial development also brought utility easements, running power lines across the farm that make it an ideal site for a data center, according to Ron Meyer, the data center developer who hopes the land will be the future site of the Remington Innovation Center.

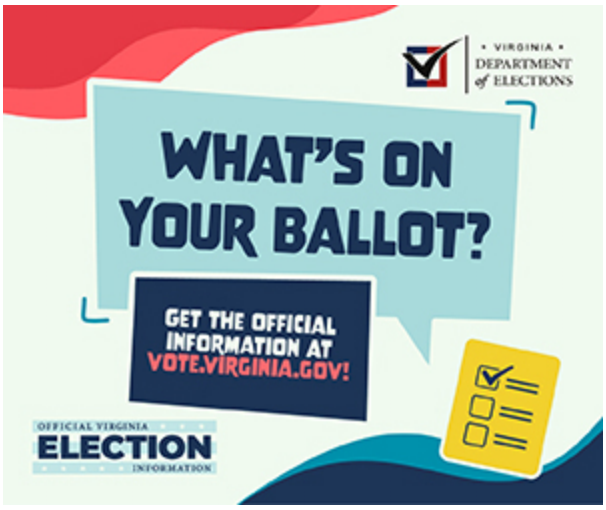
Culbertson said those power lines trace a divide across Fauquier County, separating a conserved northern Fauquier from the increasingly industrial south.

"They did a tremendous job stopping power lines and protecting their area. And it's beautiful up there," Culbertson said of northern Fauquier County. "I noticed that every time I go to church, I drive past Warrenton and you don't see a line anywhere. Remington was not so lucky, and it's something that we can't change now. The damage is done. The power plants are here, the lines are here, solar is here, everything."

An industrial future for an industrial town?

The news of Culbertson's plan to sell the farm for a data center sparked an instant backlash online and spurred some citizens to address him in person — especially during the July 10 board of supervisors meeting.

Some spoke with anger or told him he should be ashamed of himself. Remington's Mary Root, a local historian, chose a history lesson.



Root mapped the community's change from Bowensview to Millville to Rappahannock Station, 200 years of change from a mill town to a canal town and finally a railroad town. She said the community changed its name to Remington during the golden age of farming.

"That's when downtown Remington was built — all those fabulous brick buildings and Victorian homes," Root said.

She argued the town could return to that period of prosperity by building a tourist economy on the town's architecture and natural resources.

Across the dais, Culbertson said he wondered if **data centers might be the next big thing** for a small town characterized by tides of an ever-changing economy.

"She kind of made the point I've been trying to make," Culbertson said. "All these things that she spoke about when Remington was thriving, it wasn't tourism; it was an industry."



Daron Culbertson, a Fauquier County supervisor, says economics prompted his decision to sell his family farm on Remington Road to developers of a data center campus.

Photo by Coy Ferrell

He gave a more contemporary example: Trinity Plastics, a plastic bag manufacturer that opened up in the 1970s, hired hundreds of residents, including Culbertson's grandfather — who worked there after he retired.

Though a data center will not provide as many jobs as a factory, Culbertson hopes that over 200 positions at the data center would employ locals who would otherwise have to leave the county for work.

“We've got a program at Laurel Ridge. You can get certified in nine months to have a job making, you know, $80,000 to $120,000 close to your home,” Culbertson said. “I think the people that live in Remington are willing to take a chance on some of this development to lead to jobs and lead to some security.”

Closing the northern/southern divide

But jobs are not the only item on Culbertson's wish list. The Remington Innovation Center proffers — that is, legal promises made by a developer — are packed with items he has long wanted for the southern end of the county. Among them are new sports facilities for kids.

"I can name you 10 baseball fields that are all gone. The Hugo skating rink is gone. Everything that we had as kids growing up here is all gone, and it was never replaced," Culbertson said.

In the meantime, he's seen the Northern Fauquier Regional Park and the Central Sports Complex built — examples of county amenities not easily accessible to Lee District residents. While a southern sports complex has long been a dream, Culbertson said it's a luxury the county can't afford.

"It's really hard to fight for sports complexes and sports fields when fire and rescue needs money, the sheriff's department needs money, teachers need money, and the school system," Culbertson said. "So, I'm going to be the guy that wants, you know, a playground, right? You know, when are you supposed to fight for that?"

Those properties are on land donated by wealthy families — respectively, the Mellon and Rogers families — which Culbertson says are in short supply in blue-collar southern Fauquier.

He said that was why he asked Meyer to set aside 50 acres of the property to build a park or a farm that would follow the model of the Fauquier Educational Farm outside Warrenton. Besides training new farmers, the site would contribute $4.2 million to the county's conservation program. Culbertson said that, by sacrificing his farm, he hopes to save 20.

"Everybody wants to drive around and see all the beautiful farms. If you're not owning the farm or working on the farm, you know, there's got to be money somewhere to help that guy," Culbertson said. "It can't be his responsibility to work two jobs, farm every night, farm every weekend and never go on vacation because you like to drive by and see it's pretty."

Editor's note: *This story was updated to correct that Daron Culbertson's grandfather, Alton Willingham, died on Christmas Eve in 2012 and to add additional details about the potential sale of his farm.*

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