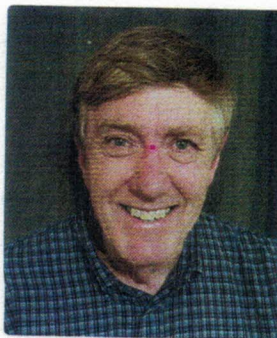


Continue the Fight



Tom Tracy, Ph.D.
VTC Executive Director

The one hundred year lease was ending. Since the early 1920's, what is now the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center (HR-AREC) served the industry from its 80 acres on Virginia Beach's Diamond Springs Road. World class research on insects, diseases, preferred plant varieties, and much more poured out. Our state's thriving green industry owes no small debt to that great facility. But the lease was ending.

City of Virginia Beach's political leaders and other persons in the southern portion of the city saw the lease end as the once in a lifetime opportunity to develop prime real estate. These leaders approached the HR-AREC with an ultimatum: at the end of the lease, move the facility to the undeveloped southern portion of the city. Word on the streets was that a national corporation was considering building a major distribution center in eastern Virginia. They needed acreage next to interstates and an international airport. Those 80 acres on Diamond Springs Road checked all the boxes. Unfortunately for the land grabbers seeking to develop the property, the original contract had a renewal clause. Officials in Blacksburg read the contract and legally renewed the lease for another century.

I thought the issue was settled. Foolish me.

A year after the failed attempted land seizure, members of the General Assembly representing Hampton Roads signed a letter declaring the HR-AREC was not fulfilling terms of the original contract – seeking to force the relocation by declaring the lease void because of noncompliance. That attempt failed.

In the latest development, an amendment to the state budget included funds for moving the HR-AREC: "\$500,000 the first year from the general fund is designated to begin planning the relocation of the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center."

What happens next? We are actively pursuing options and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of relocating – and rebuilding – an established facility to the rural southern part of Virginia Beach.

Allow me to close with an undisguised plea for VTC membership and for donations to the VTC Environmental Institute. We need both to continue the fight!

Tom Tracy, Ph.D.
VTC Executive Director

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Century-old agricultural research center in Virginia Beach could be moving

By Katherine Hafner • This article was originally published on whro.org and is reprinted with permission.

For over a century, the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center has served those interested in growing.

Farmers from across and sometimes beyond the region travel to the 70-acre property on what's now Diamond Springs Road in Virginia Beach to drop off seeds and plants for free testing.

Local Master Gardeners help maintain public gardens on the grounds. Faculty and staff at the facility research topics including invasive pests and fruit production.

But the center may have to relocate, and some worry about what that would mean for the community.

The state gave Virginia Tech half a million dollars this year to study what it would take to decamp from their current location and set up elsewhere in the city.

Developers have long eyed the spot, one of the few remaining large parcels in the urban corridor with development potential.

It's along the border with Norfolk and near major transportation hubs such as the Norfolk International Airport, Interstate 64 and Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel.

According to the most recent city property assessment, the part of the land owned by Virginia Beach – 58 acres of the total 70 – is worth about \$5.1 million.

"This is very valuable property," said Jeff Derr, a weed sciences professor and director of the Hampton Roads center. "There's always been developers and others interested that would love to develop the site."

What did come as a surprise to the center was the state-mandated moving study.

Virginia Beach Del. Barry Knight introduced it as a budget amendment allocating \$500,000 "to begin planning the relocation" of the extension center.

Virginia Tech has until mid-December to produce the study, for which it's hired an outside consultant.

Public gardens at the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center on Diamond Springs Road in Virginia Beach. Photo by Katherine Hafner



The Hampton Roads extension center started as a vegetable co-op in the early 20th century when vegetables were a more common crop on the Southside, Derr said.

It became part of the Virginia Tech network of 11 extension centers throughout the state in the 1980s.

In 1920, the co-op had ceded the land to the state to serve as a research station focused on improving local crop production. They then leased it for 99 years, which ended a few years ago.

Around then, city officials met with Virginia Tech and center leaders about moving to rural southern Virginia Beach. It was rumored a major company wanted the spot on Diamond Springs for a warehouse.

City spokespeople did not respond to WHRO's multiple requests for comment for this story.

Ultimately, the extension center renewed its 99-year lease.

That settled the issue until this year's budget amendment, which Knight said followed economic development discussions over the years with city staff.

Derr said center staff and faculty have enjoyed the location because of the easy access but also the land itself.

"This is prime farmland," he said. "Our soils here drain well. ... It's a good soil type for growing crops for doing the types of research that we do here."

That allows researchers to set up experiments on which turfgrass variety fares best under certain conditions, for example, or how nurseries can control weeds.

There are also a host of old buildings and greenhouses on the site.

The Virginia Turfgrass Council, an industry association, does a lot of work with the extension center, said executive director Tom Tracy. He said he and others around the region want it to stay put.

That includes a nursery owner on the Eastern Shore who told Tracy they value being able to drive just over the bridge-tunnel, drop off a diseased plant and have answers about it within days to save their field.

"What would happen if somebody says, you know, 'the Norfolk Botanical Gardens — we can develop that land, it's much more valuable,'" Tracy said.

"I think to the industry and to the Master Gardeners, it's at that level. And I think that people don't understand what a gem, what a treasure we have."

Tracy added he thinks the current location is also important for researching greenery and water management in the urban setting. It's surrounded by businesses and homes.

Del. Knight said he has not directly heard any concerns over a potential move, and that the feasibility study is simply to research the option. He thinks it could be smart to move the agricultural center to an agriculture-heavy part of the city like Pungo.

"Nothing's been decided," he said. "I don't understand why anyone would object to looking at a study to see if you could locate it on land that's worth a lot, lot less."

Testing of turfgrass varieties at the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center on Diamond Springs Road in Virginia Beach in August 2022. Photo by Katherine Hafner

