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The 2024 Comprehensive Plan is an update to Worcester County’s 2006 Comprehensive Development Plan.

Worcester County is located on the eastern shore of Maryland and is the only Maryland county that borders the Atlantic Ocean. The northern side of the county is adjacent to Delaware and the southern is adjacent to Virginia. **Figure 1-1, the Regional Location Map**, shows Worcester County within the geographic context of the region.

Planning Vision

During the public engagement process in 2023 that preceded the development of this plan, the Worcester County community provided input to help the County identify the issues and priorities that are most important for the County to address through this plan. A vision statement was developed using this engagement and work sessions with the County’s Planning Commission.



Worcester County is committed to our diverse rural and coastal heritage and historical roots, as we strive to create an inclusive and secure community that offers ample opportunities for residents and visitors alike. We seek sustainable economic growth by supporting and recognizing the important role of agriculture and tourism in our local economy, while we work to preserve and protect our vital natural resources.

Comprehensive Plan Role

This Comprehensive Plan is a guide for the County to make future land use decisions. It addresses environmental resources, demographics and population trends, transportation, water resources, wastewater infrastructure, community facilities, housing, economic development, historic resources, and the impacts of growth and change over the next decade.

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This Plan establishes priorities to help the County achieve its desired future land use goals. It identifies goals and recommendations to implement this vision and is intended to guide future County decisions about land uses, infrastructure needs, and the need for capital projects and other measures that will help make this vision a reality.

Policy and Legal Context

The Maryland General Assembly has delegated planning and land use regulatory authority to the State of Maryland to oversee all non-charter counties and incorporated municipalities through the Local Government and *Land Use Articles of the Annotated Code of Maryland*. This requires that local jurisdictions prepare comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision regulations to help guide growth and development. The Worcester County Planning Commission reviews the Comprehensive Plan to make necessary updates at least once every ten (10) years to follow the intent of this legislation.

Economic Growth, Resource Protection and Planning Act

In 1992, the Maryland General Assembly adopted the Economic Growth, Resource Protection and Planning Act. This policy established the State's growth through seven visions that focused on reducing sprawl, concentrating development in suitable areas, and protecting sensitive areas. It requires that comprehensive plans include these vision statements as general goals for comprehensive plans. The vision statements were amended to eight in 2000 and 12 in 2009.

In 2024, the State of Maryland indicated an intent to review these visions in 2024 and beyond, and potentially, to update and reframe its Smart Growth goals into Sustainable Growth outcomes. This plan has been developed in light of these ongoing actions.

Priority Funding Areas Act

In 1997, the Priority Funding Areas Act directed State funding for smart growth-related infrastructure to Priority Funding Areas (PFAs), providing a statewide focus for investments in growth. This designated certain areas as PFAs and established criteria for locally designated PFAs. The criteria included permitted density, water and sewer availability, and designation as a growth area in the comprehensive plan.

Smart, Green and Growing

In 2009, the Maryland General Assembly passed three planning bills as part of the *Smart, Green and Growing* legislation act to protect environmental resources and promote sustainable growth in Maryland. This act is an initiative to advance the State's shared vision of a healthy environment and natural resources to support a strong economy and quality of life.

The Twelve Visions

The state of Maryland's twelve Planning Visions (Twelve Visions), outlined in the *Land Use Articles of the Annotated Code of Maryland*, are incorporated throughout the Plan:

1. **Quality of Life and Sustainability:** A high quality of life is achieved through universal stewardship of the land, water, air, and protection of the environment.
2. **Public Participation:** Citizens are active partners in the planning and implementation of community initiatives.
3. **Growth Areas:** Growth is concentrated in existing population and business centers.

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4. **Community Design:** Compact, mixed-use, walkable design, consistent with existing community character and located near available or planned transit options, is encouraged to ensure efficient use of land and transportation resources.
5. **Infrastructure:** Growth areas have the water resources and infrastructure to accommodate population and business expansion in an orderly, efficient, and environmentally sustainable manner.
6. **Transportation:** A well-maintained, multimodal transportation system facilitates the safe, convenient, affordable, and efficient movement of people, goods, and services within and between population and business centers.
7. **Housing:** A range of housing densities, types, and sizes provides residential options for citizens of all ages and incomes.
8. **Economic Development:** Promoting job growth, business vitality, and employment opportunities is essential to continue our prosperity.
9. **Environmental Protection:** Land and water resources, including the Chesapeake and coastal bays, are carefully managed to restore and maintain healthy air and water, natural systems, and living resources.
10. **Resource Conservation:** Waterways, forests, agricultural areas, open space, natural systems, and scenic areas are conserved.
11. **Stewardship:** Government, business entities, and residents create sustainable communities by balancing efficient growth with resource protection.
12. **Implementation:** Strategies, policies, programs, and funding for growth and development, resource conservation, infrastructure and transportation are integrated across local, regional, state, and interstate levels.

Comprehensive Planning History

Worcester County began formal planning in 1965 with the first comprehensive plan. This plan was in place until the mid-1970s when a new plan was adopted. A third comprehensive plan was approved in 1989 and updated in 1997. In 2001, the Planning Commission determined that the 1989/97 plan should be updated, leading to the 2006 Plan. Each successive plan has been crafted to address the County's changing growth and needs. The County's planning philosophy has evolved from a development focus to resource conservation to protect its rural and coastal character.

The Plan's purpose is to provide a framework for jurisdictions to protect and enhance their community character and natural and cultural heritage, preserve environmental resources, and foster economic development by planning for their long-term land use, transportation, housing, water resources, and other public infrastructure needs and identify the actions the County will need to take to meet these needs and achieve the planning goals that relate to them.

Community Outreach for This Plan

In January 2023, the County initiated a Public Engagement process. This project served as the first phase of the comprehensive planning process, by serving as the first effort to identify the community's needs, desires, priorities, and expectations for future development and to help to guide the update to the Comprehensive Plan. A range of outreach formats and tools were used as part of this engagement process, including an online community survey and pop-up booths at community events. The full results

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of this engagement campaign are summarized in the *Comprehensive Plan Update Public Engagement Report (2023)*. The following key issues were identified from the outreach:

Preserving Community Character – Focus on enhancing what already exists within Towns (infill) as well as building community through the support for small businesses.

Loss of Natural Features – Encourage the preservation of farmland, waterways, and open space, benefiting residents as well as the environment overall.

Retention of Local Businesses – There is a need for pedestrian walkways and bikeways for accessibility – encouraging walkable communities and downtown areas would allow for smaller businesses to successfully remain open. More businesses would encourage more full-time residents.

Season Traffic/Congestion – Adequate infrastructure would allow for the potential for more full-time residents, as well, as current infrastructure was not designed to handle the current loads.

Too Much Growth/Growth Pressure – The pressure to allow for sprawl is something that residents would like to see handled responsibly and with an organized plan.

School Facilities/Education – Communication between local governments and the schools is a concern. Necessary funding for materials and support staff will need to be supported at a government level.

Loss of Farmland – There is a need for a focused approach to sprawl and development through a Comprehensive Plan.

Affordability of Housing – Concern is growing for those who may not be able to afford to continue to stay within the County after graduation, etc. because of the lack of housing available to them.

Sea Level Rise – Concern for the next 10-20 years and the significant issues this could cause if it is not addressed now.

Plan Elements

The 2024 Comprehensive Plan outlines the goals, objectives, and recommendations needed to achieve the County vision and guide future growth and development for the next decade and beyond. The elements of the Plan were prepared following all Comprehensive Plan legal guidance and requirements and contain the following chapters:

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Chapter 1 – Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning Background • County Vision • Legal Context • Public Outreach
Chapter 2 – County Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geography • History • Demographic Characteristics
Chapter 3 – Community Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Facilities & Services • Open Space, Parks, & Recreation
Chapter 4 – Land Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing Land Use • Future Land Use
Chapter 5 – Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Stock & Market • Work Force Housing
Chapter 6 – Economic Development & Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce & Employment • Economic Centers • Development Regulations
Chapter 7 – Natural Resources & Sensitive Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Resources • Fisheries • Sensitive Areas • Areas of Critical State Concern • Mineral Resources
Chapter 8 – Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation System • Multimodal Facilities • Related Projects
Chapter 9 – Water Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water & Wastewater Resources
Chapter 10 – Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals, objectives, and strategies