

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2026 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 a public engagement process in 2023 that preceded the creation of this plan, the Worcester County community helped 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 input and refined through work sessions with the Planning Commission.

Figure 1-1: Regional Location Map



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.

This Vision Statement is carried through this plan and was used to guide the individual chapters.

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.

1. INTRODUCTION

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 use, infrastructure, 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 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 in keeping with the legislation outlined below.

The Worcester County Planning Commission reviews the Comprehensive Plan at least once every ten (10) years to make necessary updates and 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 law established the State's smart growth approach through seven visions that sought to reduce sprawl, concentrate development in suitable areas, and protect sensitive natural areas. It also required that comprehensive plans include specific vision statements as part of the Plan's general goals. The visions were amended to eight in 2000, 12 in 2009 and then reframed as eight sustainable planning principles in 2025 (see section below on the Planning Visions/Principles).

Priority Funding Areas Act

In 1997, the Priority Funding Areas Act was enacted to require that State funding for growth-related infrastructure be directed into designated Priority Funding Areas (PFAs). PFAs are established and amended through the comprehensive planning process based on established criteria for permitted residential densities and water and sewer availability. PFAs are established through Growth Areas designated in the comprehensive plan and can be updated based on changes to these Growth Areas in comprehensive plan updates.

Smart, Green and Growing

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

Maryland's Twelve Visions/Eight Sustainable Policy and Planning Principles

Smart Growth principles have guided comprehensive plans in Maryland for more than a generation. This plan was developed as the State of Maryland's framework for comprehensive plans was changing from an emphasis on Smart Growth to one of Sustainable Growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

This plan has been developed in light of these ongoing actions. Maryland's 12 Planning Visions, outlined in the *Land Use Articles of the Annotated Code of Maryland*, include:

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.
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.

In April 2025, Governor Moore signed legislation creating the Sustainable Growth Planning Principles. Sustainable Growth focuses on policies that address economic, social, and environmental factors for current and future generations.

The eight Planning Principles aim to make sustainable growth policies simpler, clearer, and easier for everyone involved in planning and development to use effectively. They will be used to guide Worcester County in implementing this comprehensive plan. The County also recognizes that the State of Maryland will provide additional guidance on these principles as this Comprehensive Plan is implemented in future years.

1. INTRODUCTION



Optimize productivity of **working landscapes**, including **farms** and **forests** and **fisheries**, and prioritize **development within population centers** that are in proximity to existing infrastructure and facilities.



Prioritize transportation networks that create **energy efficient, affordable** and **reliable access** to jobs, housing and services.



Enable a mix of **quality housing types** and **affordability** options to accommodate all who want to live in the state.



Allow for **adaptive reuse, mixed-use** and **context appropriate** new development that responds to changing markets and innovations.



Engage **all sectors of the community** in plan development to ensure **diverse voices** are heard and the needs of **underserved populations** are prioritized.



Integrate resiliency measures that will **minimize** the **impacts** of rapid and unexpected **natural- and human-caused threats** on communities.



Provide for **public spaces** that encourage **social interaction** and value **cultural, historical** and **natural resources**.



Protect and restore **sensitive ecological systems** and conserve **natural resources**, including forests, agricultural areas, and waterways.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive Planning History

Worcester County adopted its first comprehensive plan in 1965. 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 focus on development to resource conservation as the need to protect the County's rural and coastal character has become more pronounced.

Community Outreach for This Plan

In January 2023, the County initiated a Public Engagement process. This effort 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.

Several types of outreach tools and platforms were used for this engagement process, including an community survey and promotion of the process at community events. The full results 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.

Seasonal 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.



1. INTRODUCTION

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 2026 Comprehensive Plan outlines the goals, objectives, and recommendations needed to achieve the County’s 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:

1. INTRODUCTION

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 – Fisheries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commerical Fishing • Promoting and Protecting the Seafood Industry
Chapter 8 – Natural Resources & Sensitive Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Resources • Sensitive Areas • Areas of Critical Concern • Mineral Resources
Chapter 9 – Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural Zoning • Priority Preservation Areas
Chapter 10 – Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation System • Multimodal Facilities • Related Projects
Chapter 11 – Water Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water & Wastewater Resources
Chapter 12 – Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals, objectives, and strategies