
Chapter 1 Introduction and Summary

The Comprehensive Plan is the result of thoughtful discussions and effort by many citizens to focus on the County's long-range future, balancing many desires with what is in the best interest of the community. The Comprehensive Plan is a guide for public officials and citizens who will guide the County's growth and development over the next twenty years. The Plan presents a future vision for Talbot County in 2024 and beyond, and outlines a framework for consistent decision making to bring that vision to fruition. The Plan presents recommendations that are well reasoned and feasible. It gives citizens an active role in planning, encourages greater cooperation between the County and Towns and provides strong recommendations for the protection of the county's key assets, its sensitive environmental resources and rural lands.

I. Purpose of the Comprehensive Plan

The Talbot County Comprehensive Plan is an official public document adopted by the County Council. The Plan is a long-range guide for growth, land use and development decisions in the County. It is also a guide for other decisions that are related to growth and development and will help the County determine when and where new public facilities and improvements are needed.

The Plan is comprehensive because it covers a broad range of elements that are related to growth and development. The Plan is general because the recommendations are broad, rather than narrowly defining specific land use decisions. The Plan is long-range because it outlines a vision of what the County should be like in twenty or more years and sets out a framework for how that vision can be implemented.

The majority of the Plan policies focus on the next twenty years and provide guidance for investment and development decisions. These policies can be amended as new information is available, or to address a specific change in circumstances without straying from the basic goals of the Plan. The plan is not a static document and should be updated on a regular basis.

Although the Comprehensive Plan is adopted as an official public document, it is not a development ordinance. The Plan sets the framework and basis for the County's Zoning Ordinance, Subdivision Ordinance and other development regulations. The Plan will also serve as the basis for amendments to the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Ordinance to ensure that the County's goals are implemented through the regulatory process.

II. Legal Basis for Planning

Talbot County is a Charter County and as such derives its authority for planning from Article 25A of the Annotated Code of Maryland and the County Charter of 1974. In addition, certain provisions of Article 66B of the Annotated Code of Maryland (Zoning and Planning) also apply to the County. Portions of Article 66B set forth the minimum requirements for a Comprehensive Plan which shall include, among other things:

- A statement of goals and objectives, principles, policies, and standards;

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- A land use plan element;
 - A transportation plan element;
 - A community facilities plan element;
 - A mineral resources plan element, if current geologic information is available;
 - An element which shall contain the Planning Commission's recommendations for land development regulations to implement the Plan; and
 - Other elements, such as community renewal, housing, conservation, and natural resources, at the discretion of the Commission.

The context for planning for future development in Talbot County must also take into consideration the role that the County will play in implementing the overall growth management policies established by the State of Maryland in the State's Economic Growth, Resource Protection, and Planning Act of 1992. These policies, stated as "Visions" for the future, are:

- Development is concentrated in suitable areas;
- Sensitive areas are protected;
- In rural areas, growth is directed to existing population centers and resource areas are protected;
- Stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay and the land is a universal ethic;
- Conservation of resources, including reduction in resource consumption, is practiced;
- To insure the achievement of 1 through 5 above, economic growth is encouraged and regulatory mechanisms are streamlined;
- Funding mechanisms are in place to achieve all other visions; and

The Maryland Economic Growth, Resource Protection and Planning Act of 1992 requires inclusion of a Sensitive Areas Element describing how the County will protect the following sensitive areas:

- Streams and stream buffers;
- 100-year floodplains;
- Endangered species habitats;
- Steep slopes; and
- Other sensitive areas the County wants to protect from the adverse impacts of development.

Under the Talbot County Charter, the Planning Commission makes advisory recommendations to the Planning Officer and the Council relating to the Comprehensive Plan. The Planning Officer also has the continuing responsibility and duty of making recommendations to the Council for the revision of the Comprehensive Plan. The Council has the ultimate authority to determine the content of the Comprehensive Plan, taking the Planning Commission's advisory recommendations and the Planning Officer's recommendations into account.

III. Relationship to Other County Planning Documents

Talbot County's first major Comprehensive Plan was prepared in 1973 and was updated in 1990 and again in 1997. The 2004 Comprehensive Plan replaces the County's 1997 Comprehensive Plan as the guiding document for the County's planning effort.

The Comprehensive Plan serves as the framework for other plans and ordinances relating to the management of growth and development in Talbot County. It is not a stand-alone document, but is supported by (and, in turn supports) related Planning Program documents such as the ones listed below.

- Chesapeake Bay Critical Area Plan
- Comprehensive Sewer and Water Plan
- Land Preservation and Recreation Plan
- Floodplain Ordinance
- Zoning Ordinance
- Land Subdivision Regulations
- Roads Ordinance
- Forest Conservation Ordinance
- Building Code
- Livability Code
- Stormwater Management Ordinance

These and other plans and ordinances should be in general conformance with the Comprehensive Plan. However, as with any update or revision of a major planning document, conflicts may arise between previously adopted policies and newly proposed policies. The policies and guidelines contained within the 2004 Comprehensive Plan supersede any conflicting policies and/or guidelines contained in any of the above mentioned plans.

In addition, the Talbot County Comprehensive Plan takes into consideration the comprehensive development plans and ordinances of the incorporated municipalities within the County. The Plan also refers to applicable State plans and ordinances which affect the growth and development of Talbot County. It is recommended that the Comprehensive Plan be reviewed and, if necessary, revised as needed at least once every five to ten years.

IV. Talbot County 2004

Talbot County is a predominantly rural county located in the west-central portion of Maryland's Eastern Shore. Surrounding counties include: Queen Anne's County to the north; Caroline County to the east; and Dorchester County to the south (see Map 1-1). The area of Talbot County is approximately 171,000 acres, of which approximately 110,000 acres are farmland, 40,633 acres are forested land, and 4,637 acres are wetlands. The underlying geology is typical of coastal plains and the topography is flat to gently rolling.

Talbot County has approximately 600 miles of shoreline and is almost entirely surrounded by the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The County is principally bordered by the Chesapeake Bay to the west, the Choptank River to the south and east, and the Tuckahoe River to the east. On its western edge, the County is defined by numerous peninsulas or “necks”. Major tributary and tidal waterway systems which border these necks include Wye River, Miles River, Harris Creek, Broad Creek, Tred Avon River and the Choptank River.

The County is divided into five election districts — Easton, St. Michaels, Trappe, Chapel and Bay Hundred (see Map 1-2). There are five incorporated towns within Talbot County. The Town of Easton is the County seat and is centrally located along U.S. Route 50 which serves as a major east-west highway for the Eastern Shore. Easton is the major residential, commercial, and employment center of the County. St. Michaels is located along Route 33 on the shores of the Miles River. Oxford is located at the end of Route 333 along the Tred Avon River. The Town of Trappe is located in the south-central portion of the County along U.S. Route 50. The Town of Queen Anne straddles the Talbot County and Queen Anne’s County border along Route 404.

Over time numerous waterfront and crossroads settlements have evolved into rural villages of various characters and sizes. County villages include: Wye Mills, Longwoods, Skipton, Cordova, Unionville, Copperville, Tunis Mills, Bellevue, Williamsburg, Royal Oak, Newcomb, Bruceville, Ivytown, Bozman, Neavitt, Claiborne, McDaniel, Wittman, Sherwood, Tilghman, Fairbanks and Bar Neck.

Talbot County’s land and waterways are intertwined in a unique mosaic of tidal waters, streams, farmlands and forests. The historic settlement patterns of this rural landscape have created a scattered patchwork of farms, estates, subdivisions, villages and towns. The natural and built environments of Talbot County blend together to form a pleasant rural character where residents enjoy a generally high quality of life.

Over the years Talbot County has grown from an isolated rural community with a population of 20,342 in 1900 to a growing and diverse community of 33,812 in 2000. In the early 1900s Talbot County saw a loss of population, as families moved to more urban areas such as Baltimore, Dover and Philadelphia. The opening of the first Chesapeake Bay Bridge in the early 1950s marked the beginning of change for Talbot County and many of the other Upper Eastern Shore counties.

The second half of the 20th century also saw a change in County’s economy as it shifted from agriculture and seafood, to a more diversified economy, particularly in the areas of construction, real estate, light manufacturing, trade, tourism and service industries.

Talbot County remains rural in character despite subtle changes in development patterns. The County is still known for its open rural landscape, woodlands, rivers, streams and wetlands and abundance of wildlife. Agriculture and tourism account for a significant portion of the County’s business economy.

The County has successfully encouraged residential and commercial growth to locate in the incorporated town or villages. In keeping with the County’s historic settlement patterns, most residents live in villages, waterfront subdivisions and in scattered locations in rural and waterfront

areas. Easton, Trappe and St. Michaels are expected to grow more rapidly in the future as planned sewer and water expansions are completed.

The County is at an important decision point. Population projections predict that Talbot will continue to attract more residents at a less than 1% annual rate of growth. Many of the new residents will be retirees and empty nesters. In fact the long range population projections indicate that by the year 2030 nearly one-third of the total County population will be over 65 years of age.

Never before in the County's history has citizen concern about growth, environmental protection and future development patterns been so great. Increased traffic from a growing tourism industry and summer beach traffic on US 50 frustrate permanent residents. Rural roadways have become congested and cross county travel becomes nearly impossible. As the demographics have changed, the County has captured the attention of national retailers. An older, wealthier population represents new market opportunities for retailers, restaurants, home improvement, automobile sales and other consumer services. The County is experiencing increasing pressure for both residential and commercial development targeted to this growing market segment.

The Comprehensive Plan addresses these complex issues and concerns, striving to balance the values of preservation of the quality of life and rural character of the County while accommodating and guiding future growth. The Plan seeks to meet the challenges of protecting and preserving the fragile environmental resources of the County's tidal waters, streams, shorelines, forests and open space; continue the support and encouragement of the active and economically vital agricultural and maritime industries; and provides guidelines for residential and commercial development at a scale and location that benefits all County residents.

V. A Vision of Talbot County 2024

If the goals and policies of the Plan are upheld and implemented, the following description might apply to the County in 2024:

In 2024, Talbot County's sensitive environmental areas are protected from encroachment and damage. The shoreline, rivers and creeks and the many fragile ecosystems are protected from upland impacts. Very sensitive areas are in public ownership or protected through permanent easements. The wetlands, rivers, bays, creeks and tributaries are protected by vegetated buffers creating a series of corridors that connect to large forested areas and allow for enhanced water quality, ecological balance, and biological diversity. Safe and adequate water supplies are available from protected groundwater and surface water sources.

Resource industries such as agriculture and quarrying are protected from encroachment by incompatible uses. These industries are important parts of the local economy. Protection of farmland and mineral resources through effective land use controls, reasonable incentives and innovative funding mechanisms ensure a lasting, diverse economy.

Transfer of development rights from one land parcel to another that is better suited for development is a common practice and has proved to be an effective growth and resource management tool. There has been an increase in the number of acres of agricultural lands and wildlife habitat that has

been protected by the purchase or donation of development rights. Funding for the purchase of development rights program has been significantly increased.

Growth in rural areas takes place in compact nodes. Towns are defined by Countryside Preservation Areas, and land is available within these areas for an appropriate mix of land uses. Large tracts of undeveloped land are being placed into conservancy, preserving the County's open spaces for future generations. Residential development in the western rural conservation area is limited to retain economic, ecological and scenic value.

The County enjoys a strong and diversified economy, successfully retaining existing businesses and attracting new environmentally oriented businesses and industries. The well trained and appropriately educated workforce is fully employed, and many of the people who work here also live in the County.

The County's tourism industry captures a year-round market, drawn by the ambiance of the small towns, rural character, diverse recreational opportunities and rich cultural life. Through careful planning and cooperation between the State and the County, many of the traffic bottlenecks on US 50 and MD 33 have been resolved. Highway beautification projects and entrance corridor projects are underway to ensure views from the road are attractive for both residents and visitors.

Thriving towns and villages accommodate the diverse needs of residents. Growing areas have existing or planned facilities. Prudent public and private investments keep the towns prosperous. Infrastructure supports public transportation, van pooling, or other forms of ride sharing to reduce traffic. County residents enjoy the active and passive recreation opportunities provided by the county parks, greenways network for walking and biking, and at the waterfront parks and public landings. Affordable housing is available so those who work in the County are able to own or rent a home here. Higher density developments within our incorporated towns provide a range of housing choices that are close to employment centers.

The County has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the many historic and culturally significant buildings in the towns, villages and rural areas. Every year several properties are added to the National Register of Historic Places, and newly discovered archaeological resources have been protected by private preservation easements.

Talbot County continues to project the image of a rural but sophisticated region – proud of its legacy and committed to protecting its future. Attention to community design and appearance has enhanced the image of the County. New residential and commercial developments, blend into the landscape at a scale and density that is appropriate to their location. New more urban communities are located in the towns, while infill development in the villages has been maintained at an intimate, domestic scale consistent with the village character.

Talbot County residents continue to be actively involved in planning and decision making for the future of the County. Land use policies and decisions, based on full participation of residents, support preserving and enhancing the rural character and natural resources. Stewardship of the land and water is practiced daily by ordinary citizens aware of how their actions affect these resources.

VI. Comprehensive Plan Process

The Comprehensive Plan was developed during 2001- 2004. The Plan is the product of citizens, the Planning Commission, County Council, county staff and consultants. The Plan evolved through a series of citizen committees, Planning Commission work sessions and public hearings.

Citizen Participation Process

The citizen participation process for preparation of the Plan began in September, 2001 with appointment by the County Council of some 84 County residents to 7 regional committees and a central Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. Regional committees ranging in size from 8 to 21 members each represented the following geographic regions within the County: Easton, St. Michaels, Trappe, Oxford, Tunis Mills, Bay Hundred, and Chapel District.

During this public process, citizens identified major planning issues, goals and possible implementation concepts. Each regional committee reviewed and commented on each element of the 1997 Comprehensive Plan and offered recommendations for deletions, additions, or changes to each element. The draft plan recommendations were developed by the Steering Committee which reviewed and evaluated regional committee recommendations.

More than 100 citizens participated in the extensive review and comment process, a reflection of the growing county-wide concern of citizens about the rate of growth and change that is occurring. The committees reaffirmed the County's long term commitment to protection of the natural environment and critical areas. In addition, they articulated the desire to retain the rural character of the community by managing the location of growth to prevent sprawl and to protect agriculture as a primary resource industry. Several important themes emerged from the public process:

- Conservation and protection of natural resources and open land is of the highest priority;
- Residential and non-residential development should occur primarily in the towns or as infill in village centers; and
- Community appearance and design should reflect the rural character of the County.

Several new concepts emerged from the citizen process to implement the preferred development pattern of compact towns and villages surround by open space and farm land. The citizen process recommended the concept of establishing "Countryside Preservation Areas," permanent protected areas around the towns. The Countryside Preservation Areas would establish an outer growth boundary for the towns and would physically and visually define the limits of urban growth, preventing sprawl into the rural areas. The Countryside Preservation Area concept encourages greater inter-jurisdictional cooperation between the County and towns to permit the transfer of development rights from this outer ring into appropriately serviced land within the Towns or their designated growth areas.

The committees recommended the creation of a new planning district that would include the non-critical area portions of western Talbot County. The new Western Rural Conservation planning district includes the non-critical area portions of the narrow necks of western Talbot County. The Western Rural Conservation district would be targeted for development controls and natural

resource enhancement programs designed to protect natural resources while providing for limited low-density residential development.

Citizen concerns over the cost of growth resulted in recommendation to strengthen the County's ability to more fairly distribute the cost for new or upgraded infrastructure and services between the county and the developer. Tools that were suggested included adoption of an Adequate Public Facility Regulations; and levying development impact fees for various community services and facilities.

The committees called for greater cooperation and joint planning between the towns, villages and County. To fully realize the vision and goals of the plan it will become increasingly important to pay careful attention to the form, density and character of development that occurs within the designated growth areas, along entrance corridors and at the outer edges of the Countryside Preservation Areas. The committees recognized that implementation of the plan will take the concerted effort of both the County Council and the Town Councils.

A. Public Review and Adoption

The Steering Committee draft of proposal for the Comprehensive Plan was delivered to the Planning Commission in August, 2003. The Planning Commission held a series of discussions with the Town Planning Commissions, agencies, civic organizations, and County departments to hear comments on the draft proposals for the Plan. The Planning Commission held a series of work sessions between November 2003 and May 2004 to consider the comments and review the draft document. Prior to the public hearing, informal meetings were held with the Steering Committee and County Council. In July 2004, the Planning Commission scheduled public hearings on the revised proposals. Following the public hearings, the Planning Commission made additional revisions before forwarding their advisory recommendations to County Council on August 4, 2004. The 2005 Comprehensive Plan was adopted on February 15.

VII. Comprehensive Plan Goals

The Comprehensive Plan goals and polices are based on goals and policies developed by the citizens who participated in the regional committees and central Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. The goals in combination with the policies are the foundation of the Plan.

The overriding goal of the Talbot County Comprehensive Plan is to:

Preserve the Quality of Life and Rural Character while protecting the health, safety and well being of its citizens. Recognizing that the overall environment is an economic asset of the County, protection of our agricultural lands and waterways, and their harvests, is a high priority.

Under the umbrella of this theme, the citizen committees developed more specific goals to manage growth and development.

Land Use

Promote and maintain a well-planned pattern of compatible and efficient utilization of land and water resources which concentrates development only in areas where environmental impacts will be minimized.

Transportation

Insure the safe and efficient movement of goods and people.

Community Facilities and Services

Provide an equitable system of public facilities and services that effectively meets community needs and is consistent with planned land use patterns.

Rural and Agricultural Conservation

Conserve the agricultural land base of the County and preserve rural character in predominantly rural areas of the County by directing growth to existing population centers.

Natural Resource Conservation and Sensitive Areas Protection

Conserve and protect Talbot County's most valuable and attractive assets, its natural resources and Critical Areas. Establish and enforce mandatory programs and regulations, and provide tax, financial, and any other incentives to insure their preservation, while allowing for moderate planned growth and development.

Mineral Resources

Conserve major accessible mineral resource deposits for future extraction while safeguarding the public by minimizing environmental impacts resulting from extraction and transport of resource deposits.

Parks, Recreation, and Open Space

Provide an improved system of parks and recreation facilities based on surveys of residents.

Housing

Develop policies, initiate programs and acquire funding to help alleviate substandard housing conditions and provide, in appropriate locations, residential areas which can accommodate a variety of housing densities, types, sizes and costs to meet existing and future needs.

Economic Development

Diversify and expand the County's economic base to provide a broad range of employment opportunities resulting in a strong tax base

Historic and Cultural Preservation

Preserve and enhance the County's rich cultural and historic heritage.

Community Appearance and Design

Design development to preserve and enhance the appearance and Rural Character of Talbot County.

VIII. Organization of the Plan

The Comprehensive Plan is organized into thirteen chapters. Chapters One and Two provide the context and background information for the Plan. Chapters Three through Thirteen contain the plan elements and include the goals, policies and implementation recommendations.

Chapter 1.	Introduction
Chapter 2.	Plan Assumptions and Background Data
Chapter 3.	Land Use
Chapter 4.	Transportation
Chapter 5.	Community Services and Facilities
Chapter 6.	Rural and Agricultural Conservation
Chapter 7.	Natural Resource Conservation and Sensitive Areas Protection
Chapter 8.	Mineral Resources
Chapter 9.	Parks and Recreation
Chapter 10.	Housing
Chapter 11.	Economic Development
Chapter 12.	Historic and Cultural Preservation
Chapter 13.	Community Appearance and Design

IX. Implementation

The Comprehensive Plan is a policy document guiding public and private land use decisions over the next twenty years. The plan will be implemented through a variety of regulatory and financial tools.

Typically, comprehensive plans are implemented primarily through the Zoning Ordinance, and other county planning and regulatory documents, the Capital Improvement Program, State and Federal regulations and funding, and non-regulatory programs, such as easement donation and acquisition programs, and transferable development rights programs.

Over the past fifteen years, the County has implemented a number of progressive growth management strategies that have begun to change the pace and location of development. The Plan recommends a number of implementation strategies to better manage the density and location of growth, improve environmental quality, and ensure the provision of public facilities that meet the changing needs of residents and to reduce the burden of expanding public infrastructure on existing residents. To monitor progress in achieving the Plan's goals and strategies, the Planning Commission should establish a process to review the effectiveness of regulatory and non-regulatory tools, and make recommendations to the County Council when appropriate which the Council may, or may not, approve as it sees fit.

The Planning Commission and Planning Officer should establish a schedule to review and update indicators of change. As information becomes available, the data should be updated. On an annual basis, the Planning Commission and Planning Officer should assess changes to growth projections, location and rate of growth both in the County and towns.

With the adoption of growth boundaries in the form of the Countryside Preservation Area, the Planning Commission should maintain a dynamic relationship with the incorporated towns to review proposed developments in the designated growth areas. Managing the density and design of growth in the incorporated areas is critical to the success of the Plan's overarching goal to protect the rural character of the County by directing growth into areas that can provide the services and facilities needed by a growing population.

As with any document, amendments may be needed over time depending on new initiatives, more detailed planning, changes in growth projections, or changes in government policies. While annual review will provide indicators of short term changes, significant changes in development trends frequently take ten or more years to become apparent. The Comprehensive Plan is intended to be long-range, establishing goals, policies and implementation strategies that will be accomplished in five to twenty years. Review and analysis of short term changes is an important step in evaluating and predicting potential shifts in the Plan's assumptions.