

Vision Statement for the Talbot County Comprehensive Plan

This Vision, and the vision statements that introduce each chapter, reflect the intended focus of Talbot County land use decision-making.

The primary goal of Talbot County's Comprehensive Plan is to promote a high quality of life, to preserve the rural character of our County and to protect the health, safety and well-being of its citizens, in a resilient community.

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. Our rivers, creeks, 600 miles of shoreline and fragile ecosystems are valued and protected with zeal and vigilance. The high quality of the County's infrastructure (including schools, roads, sewer and water) is maintained as the County's needs change and grow. The livability and economic vitality of our towns, along with our historical treasures and cultural amenities, are highly valued.

Talbot County affords those who live here an unusually high quality of life. Our comprehensive planning, our land use decisions, and our growth management strategies are all completely oriented to sustaining and enhancing this remarkable place "where land and water intertwine." To handle the development pressure in Talbot County we blend state-of-the-art planning tools, strong coordination with and support of our municipalities, and effective legislation to ensure that the quality of life associated with our rural character is maintained. We cooperate fully with other counties in the midshore area in dealing with common concerns that cross county lines.

Measurably positive results are required, and Talbot County's progress toward achieving the vision is monitored. A monitoring program compares baseline data and the goals and objectives of the plan against actual and proposed land use changes.

Talbot County, 2015

Talbot County is a predominantly rural county located in the west-central portion of Maryland's Eastern Shore. The 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.

The land area of the County is approximately 171,000 acres. The underlying geology is typical of coastal plains and the topography is flat to gently rolling. Approximately 95,000 acres are farmland, over 40,000 acres are forested land, and 3,650 acres have been developed.

On land, Talbot County is surrounded by Queen Anne's County to the north, Caroline County to the east and Dorchester County to the south. The County has approximately 600 miles of shoreline and is almost entirely surrounded by the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The waters that border the County are the Chesapeake Bay to the west, the Choptank River to the south and east, and the Tuckahoe River to the northeast.

On its western edge, the County is defined by numerous peninsulas, or necks. Major tributary and tidal waterway systems which border these necks include the Wye, Miles, Tred Avon and the Choptank Rivers, as well as Harris Creek and Broad Creek.

The County is divided into five election districts — Easton, St. Michaels, Trappe, Chapel and Bay Hundred. There are five incorporated towns within Talbot County:

- Centrally located along U.S. Route 50, the Town of Easton is the County seat and 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 in the northeast.

Other clusters of settlement are the County's villages, with histories ranging from 100 years to over 300 years. Over time, waterfront and crossroads settlements have evolved into 22 recognized villages of various characters and sizes. These unincorporated communities include: Wye Mills, Cordova, Unionville, Royal Oak, Bruceville, Claiborne, and Tilghman.

Over the years Talbot County has grown from an isolated rural area 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. The opening of the first Chesapeake Bay Bridge in the early 1950s began to reverse the population trend. This engineering feat marked the onset of substantial change for Talbot and many of the other Eastern Shore Counties, as the area became less isolated.

Greater accessibility led to some changes in development patterns over time, the waterfront subdivisions of the 20th century represent the greatest departure from prior settlements, expressing a changing relationship with the Bay and rivers, from commerce to recreation.

The second half of the 20th century also saw a change in County's economy, as it shifted from agriculture and seafood production to a more diversified base, particularly in the areas of construction, real estate,

light manufacturing, trade, tourism and service industries.

Today, 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.

Through coordinated land use policies, the County has successfully encouraged residential and commercial growth in the incorporated towns or villages. Easton, Trappe and St. Michaels are expected to grow more noticeably in the future, as planned sewer and utility expansions are completed.

Talbot County is at an important decision point. The population is projected to continue to grow at an annual rate of 1 percent. Many of the new residents will be retirees and empty nesters. Already, 23 percent of the County population is 65 years of age and above, and the median age is ten years older than the State average.

The County has also captured the attention of national retailers and travel related businesses. An older, wealthier population represents attractive market opportunities for restaurants, home improvements, automobile sales and other consumer services. The County is experiencing increasing pressure for both residential and commercial development, with some attendant problems.

As US Route 50 becomes an increasingly used route through the County, increased traffic frustrates permanent residents. Rural roadways have become congested and cross county travel becomes nearly impossible at times.

Finally, citizen concerns about rural character, environmental protection, growth and future development patterns loom large.

The Comprehensive Plan attempts to address these and other complex issues and concerns, striving to balance quality of life and retaining rural character with the obligation to accommodate and guide future growth.

This Comprehensive 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; continuing to support and encourage the active and economically vital agricultural and maritime industries; and providing guidelines for residential and commercial development at a scale and location that benefits all County residents.

Definitions

Vision Statement is a statement that communicates a compelling vision of the future, is critical to implementing strategy, and that answers the question ‘What will success look like in the effective implementation of the Talbot County Comprehensive Plan?’

Quality of Life is a condition of one’s existence that can be affected by the land use decisions based on this Comprehensive Plan. For the purpose of this document, quality of life includes:

- abundant fields and forests, wildlife, clean water in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries;
- clean air, sufficient potable water in our aquifers;
- a low level of crime;
- the relative absence of traffic congestion and excessive noise;
- a diversity of economic and employment opportunities for individuals and businesses;
- good educational, social and community service systems;
- access to an adequate supply of affordable and workforce housing opportunities for residents of all ages and incomes;
- access to diverse cultural, recreational, and entertainment activities;
- convenient access to goods and services; and
- an ethic of personal involvement.

Rural Character is a predominance of farm fields and woodlands; the visible presence of wildlife; an abundance of thriving rivers, streams and wetlands; large, open spaces separating functional towns; rural villages reflecting County history; low speed roadways which are uncongested; access to farms and other private properties; a minimum of light pollution in the night skies; the absence of strip malls or retail outlets, large and prominent names or logos on building exteriors, and large commercial or residential development.

Designated Growth Areas are those areas identified in this plan and the County Zoning Ordinance as anticipated for major subdivision and development within the planning period. These are between incorporated towns and the County’s Countryside Preservation (CP) zoning designation.

Population Centers are areas settled at a substantially greater concentration than the surrounding land, consisting of a mix of residential and non-residential uses and community services. Incorporated towns are all population centers, as are those rural villages with the greatest populations, widest diversity of land uses, and the presence of public facilities.

Infill, Redevelopment and New Development in Talbot County consists of minor development projects within existing developed areas.

As defined by the Maryland Department of Planning, infill in a rural village is characterized by new development on vacant parcels typical in size and shape to developed parcels in the community.

Redevelopment means building or rebuilding on parcels that have been previously developed. Typical examples will be vacant lots in rural villages, replacement of deficient buildings and adaptive reuse of obsolete structures.

New development includes subdivision, revisions and site plans on or creating parcels previously not developed.

Village Planning Areas are Master Planned areas within Village Centers and Village Hamlets with suitable land available for infill, redevelopment and new development that shall mirror and complement the historic fabric of the respective village. The County or a developer may initiate the Master Planning process. County-initiated Master Plans will be commissioned and paid for by the County. Developer-initiated plans shall be subject to the third party review as described in the policies defined in the *Talbot County Code*.

Master Plans include a comprehensive study to evaluate the compatibility and suitability of existing and proposed land uses, infrastructure, facilities and services associated with new development and redevelopment, and assist County planning efforts. Master Plans, or small area plans, are required to evaluate traffic, emergency response and other infrastructure impacts of development on village character. The plans also provide a general understanding among residents on the nature and scale of proposed development.

Introduction

The Talbot County Comprehensive Plan is the result of thoughtful discussions and effort by many citizen and stakeholder groups to focus on the County’s long-range future. The Plan presents a range of visions for Talbot County in the coming decades and outlines a framework for consistent decision making to bring those visions to fruition.

The Comprehensive Plan provides policy guidance for public officials and citizens who will shape the County’s growth and development over the next twenty years. This Plan is an update of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan. The format and some content have been reorganized and there are a few new items that have been adopted by the Talbot County Council as amendments to the 2005 Plan.

Maryland’s HB 297 Smart, Green and Growing—Smart and Sustainable Growth Act of 2009 requires that in order for an action to be consistent with a comprehensive plan:

“the term shall be defined to mean an action taken that will further, and not be contrary to, the following items in the plan:

1. *Policies;*
2. *Timing of the implementation of the plan;*
3. *Timing of development;*
4. *Timing of rezoning;*
5. *Development patterns;*
6. *Land uses; and*
7. *Densities or intensities.”*

This act requires implementation measures to be consistent with the above components of this plan.

The Plan encourages citizens to take 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 including sensitive environmental resources and rural lands. The policies outlined in each chapter attempt to strike a balance between competing interests for the community’s best interest.

I. Purpose of the Plan

The Talbot County Comprehensive Plan is an official public document created by the community and adopted by the County Council. It is the policy guide for public officials and citizens who will oversee the County’s growth and development. It is also the guide for other public policy decisions 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 related to growth and development, preservation and sustainability. Its recommendations are broad, rather than narrowly defining specific land use decisions. Policies may be amended as circumstances change over time, without straying from the basic goals of the Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan is not a development ordinance, but sets the framework and basis for the County’s Zoning Ordinance and other development regulations, including amendments to existing ordinances.

Talbot County's first major Comprehensive Plan was prepared in 1973 and was updated in 1990 and again in 1997. The 2005 Comprehensive Plan replaced the County's 1997 Plan as the guiding document for the County's planning efforts. This document is based on the 2005 Plan and this review began in 2011.

II. Comprehensive Plan Process

The 2005 Plan was the product of citizens, the Planning Commission, County Council, County staff and consultants and evolved through a series of citizen committees, work sessions and public hearings.

This edition reviews the extensive document adopted in 2005. Committees comprised of stakeholder organizations and citizens reviewed the contents of each chapter and assessed the County's progress towards achieving the goals of the Plan.

For the 2005 Plan, over 100 citizen committee members expressed growing County-wide concerns about the rate of growth and change that had been occurring. The committees reaffirmed the County's long term commitment to environmental and critical area protection and articulated the desire to retain the rural character of the community by managing growth to prevent sprawl and to protect agriculture as a primary industry.

III. Organization of the Plan

The Comprehensive Plan is organized into nine chapters. Chapters One provides context and background information. The remaining chapters contain plan elements organized in related topic areas. In practice, concerns and topics overlap and may not be thoroughly discussed in a single chapter.

Each chapter begins with statements of visions and goals followed by a discussion of existing conditions, circumstances and programs. Policies are listed under major sections of each chapter.

IV. Legal Basis for Planning

Talbot County is a Charter County and as such derives its authority for planning from the Annotated Code of Maryland and the County Charter of 1974.

The Land Use Article, revised, clarified and passed by the Maryland General assembly in 2012, enables local governments to guide growth and development; outlines the responsibilities, roles and functions of the Planning Commission and Board of Appeals; and sets the 'ground rules' for planning and zoning.

The *Smart and Sustainable Growth Act of 2009* clarifies the requirement for consistency between local comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. The definition of consistency applies to zoning ordinances, special exceptions, annexations, water and sewer amendments and Critical Area growth allocation. All must be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

The Land Use Article requires that comprehensive plans address certain components of the jurisdiction's vision, including:

1. Goals and Objectives as a guide for the development and economic and social well being;
2. A land use element which outlines the most appropriate and desirable patterns of growth and development;

3. A transportation element describing the entire spectrum of transportation facilities applicable to the jurisdiction;
4. A community facilities element which identifies public and semi-public buildings, lands and facilities;
5. A mineral resources element including land use policies to balance resource extraction with other land uses;
6. A development regulations section that identifies development tools to implement the plan;
7. A section which includes recommendations for areas of critical State concern and a sensitive areas element to protect sensitive areas from the adverse effects of development;
8. A fisheries element designating areas for loading, unloading, and processing finfish and shellfish, and for docking and mooring commercial fishing boats and vessels;
9. A water resources element to identify drinking water supplies needed, suitable receiving waters for wastewater and stormwater management and a development capacity analysis; and
10. An implementation section to recommend regulations for land development and encouraging streamlined review of applications for development in areas designated for growth.

The planning context 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 Planning Act of 1992 and subsequent legislation.

V. Maryland's Twelve Planning Visions

As part of the 2009 *Smart, Green & Growing* legislation, the General Assembly modernized the state's previous planning visions with 12 new visions to more broadly represent state policies. The following visions provide the framework for this Plan:

1. Quality of Life and Sustainability--A high quality of life is achieved through universal stewardship of the land, water, and air resulting in sustainable communities and protection of the environment;
2. Public Participation--Citizens are active partners in the planning and implementation of community initiatives and are sensitive to their responsibilities in achieving community goals;
3. Growth Areas--Growth is concentrated in existing population and business centers, growth areas adjacent to these centers, or strategically selected new 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 and preservation and enhancement of natural systems, open spaces, recreational areas, and historical, cultural, and archeological 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--Economic development and natural resource–based businesses that promote employment opportunities for all income levels within the capacity of the State’s natural resources, public services, and public facilities are encouraged;
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 are responsible for the creation of sustainable communities by collaborating to balance efficient growth with resource protection; and
12. Implementation--Strategies, policies, programs, and funding for growth and development, resource conservation, infrastructure, and transportation are integrated across the local, regional, state, and interstate levels to achieve these Visions.

VI. Relationship to Other County Planning Documents

The Comprehensive Plan is not a stand-alone document, but is supported by (and, in turn supports) related planning program documents including:

- Chesapeake Bay Critical Area Plan
- Comprehensive Water and Sewer Plan
- Land Preservation and Recreation Plan
- Floodplain Ordinance
- Zoning, Subdivision and Land Development (Zoning Ordinance)
- Septic Tier maps (SB 236)
- Roads Ordinance
- Forest Conservation Ordinance
- Building Code
- Livability Code
- Stormwater Management Ordinance

These and other plans and ordinances must be in 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 this Comprehensive Plan supersede any conflicting policies and/or guidelines contained in the above mentioned plans. See the list of links to related State regulations and other guidance, at the end of this chapter.

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.

Under the Talbot County Charter, the Planning Commission makes advisory recommendations to the Planning Officer and the County 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 Talbot County 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.

VII. Implementation

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

Comprehensive plans are implemented 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 voluntary land management programs.

Talbot County has, over time, implemented a number of progressive growth management strategies that have begun to direct the pace and location of development. This Plan recommends further 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 reduce the burden on existing residents of expanding public infrastructure.

To monitor progress in achieving the goals and strategies of this Plan, the Planning Commission and Planning Officer may 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, in the course of their duties, periodically review and update indicators of change. On an annual basis, the Planning Commission and Planning Officer reports on indicators of growth to the Maryland Department of Planning and to the public. Review and analysis of short term changes is an important step in evaluating and predicting potential shifts in the Plan's assumptions.

The Planning Commission and Planning Officer 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 population centers is critical to the success of the Plan's overarching goal to protect the rural character of the County.

Amendments to the Comprehensive Plan 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 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. Further, within ten years this edition of the plan will be reviewed and updated as circumstances require.

Chapter 1 follows and provides the demographic and statistical background which provides some basic parameters and projections for this plan.

VIII. Comprehensive Planning Resources

The references below are provided for informational purposes and are not part of this Comprehensive Plan. Rather, the sites may supplement the information found in this document.

Maryland Department of Planning, *Local Government Planning*

<http://planning.maryland.gov/OurWork/localplanning.shtml>

Maryland Department of the Environment, overview of regulatory authority
<http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/regulations/Pages/index.aspx>

Maryland Department of Natural Resources, *Sustainable Maryland*
<http://dnr.maryland.gov/sustainability/>

Maryland Department of Agriculture, *Resource Conservation*
[www.mda.maryland.gov/resource conservation](http://www.mda.maryland.gov/resource%20conservation)

Maryland Historical Trust
<http://mht.maryland.gov/governments.html>

Maryland Emergency Management Agency
<http://memm.maryland.gov/pages/default.aspx>

Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development
<http://dhcd.maryland.gov/website/programs>

Maryland State Highway Administration
www.roads.maryland.gov

American Planning Association,
community planning
www.planning.org/community