

Accomack County Comprehensive Plan

Executive Summary

Introduction

Accomack County is a unique place – a historic, coastal community with cultural roots in early settlements of Native Americans, Europeans and Africans; a fragile, ecologically rich, and productive natural environment of national and international significance; a highly productive and innovative agricultural and seafood economy; a popular and widely known destination for tourism, recreation, and retirement; and a place with huge potential for future economic productivity and innovation in terms of sustainable natural resource and technology industries.

Through a series of studies, meetings, and work sessions during 2005, 2006, and 2007, the County Planning Commission, Stakeholder Group, County staff, consulting team, and local citizens created this updated plan, in accord with the requirements of the Code of Virginia.

Vision for the Future

The updated Comprehensive Plan supports a vision for the future of Accomack County that recognizes the County's unique qualities and outstanding potential as a leading agricultural and seafood producer, as well as an excellent place for families and retirees to live, and for tourists to visit. If the policies of this plan are successfully implemented, the County will achieve its vision and have a future in 20 to 30 years that could be described as follows:

Accomack County is a tranquil, rural community of small towns and villages set in a rural landscape of farms, forests, creeks, wetlands, and shorelines. Agricultural activities are productive, and profitable, yet are managed to limit impacts on the County's fragile and valuable groundwater and surface water resources. Clean water resources support seafood and shellfish industries, vibrant tourism, and healthy rural settlements and downtowns. The local economy is based on adding value to local natural resource products. All land use activities follow best management practices to maintain the health of the natural systems that underpin the local economy and culture.

The number of people and jobs continues to increase gradually, through new development and revitalization. Growth occurs mainly in and around the towns and villages where public facilities and services are most efficiently provided, as well as in small residential subdivisions clustered on farmland. Limited development occurs along the shorelines to protect water quality and quantity. Employment continues to grow, producing a range of jobs at all levels of skill and income, in small and medium-sized enterprises that are compatible with the County's fragile natural systems. The housing supply expands to match the job growth, and provides adequate housing for the full range of household income levels in the County.

In making investments and applying regulations to achieve this vision of the future, the County balances the desire for individuals to develop land as they wish, with the essential need to protect the natural, cultural and economic resources that provide sustenance to the entire

community, thus ensuring that the County's overall wealth and well-being continues to steadily increase in a manner that is sustainable for future generations.

As the County grows and changes, it maintains the essential natural and cultural qualities that both natives and new arrivals cherish: an agricultural landscape, clean air and water, healthy and expansive wildlife habitats, historic neighborhoods and downtowns, efficient government services, friendly and helpful neighbors, and a strong sense of community.

Defining the Problem

The fundamental problem facing the County is that the demand for growth is coming from outside economic and demographic pressures that are beyond the County's direct control, yet the County has very fragile, finite and critical natural resources, and very limited fiscal and infrastructure resources, to accommodate those pressures. Thus, in order to support existing and new residents with adequate public services, the County also needs to expand its economy and employment base in a manner that supports its other goals. Further, the short-term individual economic interests of landowners (such as groundwater withdrawals, sewage disposal and development opportunities) often conflict with the long-term sustainability of the natural resources countywide.

Major Planning Issues

Agricultural and Forestal Land Preservation: Agriculture is a major element of the County's culture and economy. In 1997 There were approximately 82,560 acres of land in 22 Agricultural and Forestal Districts. In 2007 there are approximately 80,215 acres in the 22 districts, nearly a 2.8 percent decrease from 1997. The best farmland is also the best land for development. Conflicts occur between home owners and farm operators, and between agriculture and fisheries.

Groundwater Protection: Groundwater is the only drinking water source for Accomack County. The aquifer is recharged by rainwater infiltration. The area that recharges the deep aquifer is in a strip of land that runs along the central portion of the peninsula. There is a limited supply of groundwater and it is prone to contamination from land uses and saltwater intrusion.

Natural Resource Preservation: The County's natural resources base, including forests, fields, marsh, creeks, bays, and barrier islands, has economic, aesthetic, and recreational value, as well as being valuable habitat for a variety of wildlife.

Physical Constraints to Development: The main physical constraints to development in Accomack County are soil suitability for septic systems, flood hazard, and shoreline erosion.

The Route 13 Corridor: The mix of local and through-traffic creates a dangerous situation. Route 13 is a major thoroughfare and part of the National Highway System. Maintaining capacity and safety as traffic increases is critical to the county's future.

Central Water and Wastewater Treatment: The prospects for achieving a compact, traditional growth pattern that protects agricultural and environmental resources will be greatly increased if central water and wastewater facilities are available to more areas, in concert with the overall future land use plan.

Character, Pattern and Form of Development: Many of the county's goals can be achieved or enhanced if new development occurs in a compact, traditional pattern and form, similar to what

exists in the County's existing historic towns and villages. Expansion around towns is often difficult due to the pattern of land use regulation and overall lack of infrastructure.

Affordable Housing: Most new housing is built for incoming residents and the second-home market, and does not meet the need for adequate housing for the existing population.

Economic Development: Better economic development efforts are needed to expand existing businesses and industries, including aerospace, tourism, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, to provide more jobs, better wages, and a increase the tax base.

Fiscal Impacts of Growth: As residential growth and population expand, the demand for services expands. Job growth and economic development must keep pace in order to maintain a reasonable fiscal balance.

Balance of Needs: Short-term individual desires must be balanced with long-term community needs.

Analysis and Forecasts of Change

Analysis. Substantial analysis of available data was carried out during 2005-07, including many hours of public deliberation in a series of work sessions conducted by the Planning Commission, Stakeholder Group and Board of Supervisors. Analytical work included:

1. Analysis of land use, environmental and demographic data
2. Forecasts of future population and land development needs
3. Detailed examination of the major environmental and cultural elements of every area of the County, using the County's GIS data base
4. Preparation and evaluation of alternative future land use scenarios
5. Creation and evaluation of updated policies and actions to achieve the goals of the plan in light of the forecasts of future needs

The updated plan maintains many of the overall goals, policies and actions of the 1997 plan, but provides additional and updated analysis of the County's current conditions and projected future needs. Thus, it also contains new policies and actions, including a refined Future Land Use Map and a clear growth management strategy for achieving the County's desired future.

The key element of the updated plan is the revised Future Land Use Map, which will better help the County successfully manage development and accommodate population growth while enlarging the local economy and preserving key resources.

Forecasts. Driven by outside growth pressures, current trends indicate that the County will add between 7,900 and 15,300 new people by the year 2030, requiring between 2,000 and 5,000 additional acres of land to be converted to residential and civic uses. This plan provides policies to guide that development so that it has maximum benefit and minimum impact on the County while still balancing the various desires of individual property owners with the broader public good. The aim of this plan is to provide a policy framework for the County that will accommodate expected population and employment growth while also achieving the County's vision.

Growth Management Strategy

The policies and actions set forth in Chapter 5 of the plan, as well as the Future Land Use Map and supporting policies set forth in Chapter 6, provide a strong framework for managing growth in the County during the coming years. Taken as a whole, these policies and actions create a planning framework with the following *key strategic objectives*:

1. **Natural Resources.** Conserve natural resources, including farmland, forests, tidal and non-tidal wetlands, surface water, fisheries, and ground water.
2. **Economic Development.** Promote compatible economic development and job growth, including the agriculture, seafood, and tourism industries.
3. **Affordable Housing.** Maintain an adequate the supply of affordable housing.
4. **Rural Character.** Preserve the county's small-town feel and rural character.
5. **Public Services.** Provide efficient and cost-effective public service delivery.

In order to achieve these objectives, the *overarching, cohesive growth management* strategy is to:

- *Conserve the County's finite and fragile groundwater supply by accommodating new development near the central spine and northern portions of the County where groundwater withdrawals have the least impact, while limiting new development near the shorelines.*
- *Conserve the County's fiscal resources by locating new development and infrastructure in well-designed, human-scale, compact, mixed-use developments in and around existing towns and villages, as incremental, natural extensions of existing settlements.*
- *Enhance the County's economic base by expanding compatible and sustainable natural resource industries, and compatible, low-impact industries.*
- *Provide adequate housing for all households in the County by facilitating well-designed, higher density housing in and around existing towns, facilitating incremental expansions of existing rural villages, and providing incentives for affordable housing development.*

Major Actions to Implement the Plan

The key strategies will be implemented through several major methods:

1. **Future Land Use Map.** The County will use the Future Land Use Map to guide all decisions regarding growth, development, and public infrastructure. This will focus public infrastructure investments in and around existing towns and villages, including central water and sewer service, and limit development in outlying areas through zoning regulations and operational programs (such as agricultural and forestal districts).

2. **Rezoning Decisions.** The County will use the specific criteria set forth in Chapter 6 for making decisions about rezoning property.
3. **Natural Resource Conservation.** The County will enact a variety of policy, regulatory, and program tools to preserve farmland, shorelines, water resources, and other natural resources. These tools include adopting a Planned Unit Development (PUD) district to ensure coordinated development in and around designated communities, encouraging rural cluster development for residential growth that occurs on farm and forest lands, revitalizing Agricultural and Forestal Districts (AFD), promoting best management practices (BMP) for agricultural and forest uses, applying Chesapeake Bay protection standards to the Seaside areas, and adopting the state's stormwater management code for new development.
4. **Affordable Housing.** The County will encourage expansion of existing communities in a compact, mixed-use pattern, and will adopt an Affordable Dwelling Unit ordinance (ADU).
5. **Economic Development.** The County will encourage compatible economic development through ensuring that prospective industrial sites are properly zoned for development, protecting water quality to support aquaculture and other marine industries, and promoting the expansion of the "distributed workforce" (using broadband internet access).

The Planning Commission recommends the following priorities for implementation actions:

1. Zoning Ordinance Amendments (Actions 1-a, 2-a, 4-b)
2. Groundwater and Surface Water Protection (Actions 5-b, 5-g, 6-b, 6-1, 6-f)
3. Affordable Housing (Actions 11-a, 11-b, 11-c, 11-d, 11-e)
4. Transportation (Actions 10-a, 10-f)
5. Recreation (Actions 4-e, 9-e, 9-f, 10-c)

Future Land Use Categories

Conservation Areas: will preserve and protect Accomack County's areas of ecological importance on which development of any intensity would be damaging or unsafe. Areas in the conservation district include marshland and the undeveloped barrier islands.

Agricultural Areas: will provide an area for the production of agricultural and forestry products. The County's target outcome for this area in the long-term is to have as little new non-farm development as possible, through zoning regulations, Agricultural and Forestal Districts, cluster development, conservation development designs, and conservation easements. Cluster development is a technique in which a tract of land is subdivided into roughly the same number of lots as would be permitted under regular zoning, but the cluster lots each have a smaller area, so that they can be located on a small portion of the tract, leaving the remainder of the tract in open space or in lots that are larger than the average size.

Rural Settlement Areas: will allow for low density, rural residential development to provide home sites for those who chose to live on relatively large tracts of land outside of the County's villages and towns. Clustering options could be provided to allow smaller individual lot sizes if a portion of the development site is set aside as open space.

Residential Areas: will allow for new residential development in existing communities for those who chose to live on moderately sized lots. New Residential Areas should be located adjacent to existing residential areas located outside of flood zones that have roads with adequate capacity and soils with good septic suitability.

Village Development Areas: will allow for a mix of residential and commercial uses in keeping with the traditional development pattern of Accomack County's villages and towns (subject to wastewater treatment capability). These areas should be compact, with interconnected street networks, parks, sidewalks and a mix of uses, convenient to both motor vehicles and pedestrians.

Commercial Areas: will provide appropriate locations for a broad range of business activities which may be characterized by heavy traffic, noise, or other factors that could be considered a nuisance to residential uses.

Industrial Areas: will provide suitable locations for industrial activities with minimal interference from, or impact to, adjacent land uses.

Further, more than 60 discreet actions for implementing the plan are identified. These are organized under each major policy in Chapter 5, and at the end of the chapter are also organized as a list of four types of actions:

- Zoning and Regulatory Actions
- Planning and Research Actions
- Operational Programs
- Capital Investments and Construction

In addition to these four categories, specific actions are identified for implementing the Transportation and Affordable Housing plans.

Summary and Conclusion

The updated Comprehensive Plan clarifies Accomack County's vision for the future, and affirms the long terms goals for future change. It calls for a strategy of focusing growth in and around existing communities and away from the shorelines and farmland in order to conserve important agricultural and natural resources. It also proposes a variety of policies and actions to implement that strategy. These strategies include making land use and public facility decisions in accord with the new Future Land Use Map, adopting new zoning districts to accommodate expected development needs (including affordable housing), identifying and rezoning key industrial sites, and promoting the construction of new and expanded central water and wastewater systems in specific areas.

If followed, the updated Comprehensive Plan will enable the County to achieve its vision to conserve natural resources, provide expanded opportunities for jobs and housing, and sustain Accomack County's rural way of life.