

**IMPLEMENTING A VISION
FOR
WICOMICO COUNTY GROWTH**

Submitted By:

Wicomico Visioning Committee

To

**Business Economic and Community Outreach Network
(BEACON)**

Salisbury University

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Origins of the Wicomico Visioning Committee

The Wicomico Visioning Committee has its origins in a regional visioning effort that was initiated by the Business, Economic, and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) of the Franklin P. Perdue School of Business at Salisbury University in fall 2002 with the support of the following organizations:

- ▶ Community Foundation of the Lower Eastern Shore (primary funder)
- ▶ Tri-County Council for the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland
- ▶ Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce
- ▶ Wicomico Partnership for Families and Children.

The intent of this visioning process was to shine a light on our region's most critical challenges and to advise BEACON in the creation of an action agenda for regional leaders. Representatives from Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester Counties formed three county-based visioning teams. Facilitated by BEACON, these teams met over the next twelve months to gather information, discuss the trends and challenges facing their counties, and identify priority issues. In a summary presentation to the Tri-Council in May 2004, BEACON reported on regional challenges and opportunities identified by the three teams across the following categories:

- ▶ Water/Sewer Infrastructure;
- ▶ Growth and Development;
- ▶ Demographic Changes;
- ▶ Economic Development and Workforce Readiness;
- ▶ Health;
- ▶ Child and Family Well-Being.

In Wicomico County, the home county of BEACON, the Visioning Committee has continued to meet regularly in an advisory capacity to BEACON, as a vital component of BEACON's ShoreTrends™ initiative. The group continues to educate itself about pressing issues facing the County, to help BEACON raise awareness about these challenges, and to help catalyze solutions.

Members Of Wicomico Visioning Committee

Mary Ashanti, Wicomico County NAACP
*Tom Becker, Becker Morgan Group Inc.
*Spicer Bell, Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore
Jim Biggs, Comcast
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IMPLEMENTING A VISION FOR WICOMICO COUNTY GROWTH

I. Introduction

Wicomico County is the regional hub of the Delmarva Peninsula. Recognized for its retail, service and manufacturing businesses, rich natural resources, working landscapes and a centralized urban core, the county's predominantly rural environment provides the basis for economic vitality and quality of life that is unique and highly valued by county residents. Historically, farming, fishing and forestry industries have played an important role in sustaining Wicomico County communities, and a growing amount of goods and services offered in the metropolitan core are now continuing to make the county a very desirable place to live. Surveys show that residents like Wicomico's rural atmosphere and want to ensure rapid changes in land use and impacts to open spaces are minimized.

Over the last several decades, population growth and demand for housing has contributed to a transformation in the county's character. Once largely defined by working lands and natural areas, the county is experiencing an unprecedented level of residential development that is changing how and where people are living. By 2030, official projections predict Wicomico County's population to nearly triple from 1950 levels to over 117,000 people. Citing our proximity to the millions of people in the megalopolis that arcs around us and other factors, the Wicomico County Quarter Century Committee predicted a population of between 128,000 and 150,000 by 2025 using a growth rate of 1.5% to 2.0% per annum. Since 2000, growth has been closer to 2% per annum, or 800 to 1,000 dwelling units.

Whatever vision we have had of the expected amount of growth, historically there appeared to be a community consensus in favor of growth at historic levels of 1% to 1.5% per year, an assumption that now would bring about 400-700 new residential units per year, or 900 to 1,350 additional people.

Today, we are faced with a new reality: an unprecedented 11,000 new dwelling units are in various stages of the approval process for Wicomico County –homes that would accommodate about 27,500 additional people. Of course, some of these projects may be abandoned or postponed and the build out period could take years in some cases, but other new projects can also be expected over the same time frame. And we are not alone – similar growth pressures are a peninsula-wide phenomena. While a majority of these 11,000 units are proposed for the metro core, the number that are proposed in the Agricultural-Rural District continues to meet or exceed the number that have been placed outside the metro core in years past.

It is not the purpose of this report to take a position as to what range of levels of growth are most appropriate, or to suggest limitations. Indeed, demand – from local birth rates, retirees and job seekers and other factors – plus our historic community acceptance of growth requires that we address where and how the level of growth the community seeks to attract is to be located.

In 1995, the release of the Wicomico County Quarter Century Committee’s landmark document known as the “Quarter Century Report” helped inform the debate over how to manage growth. The report served in part as the basis for revisions to the County Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 1998, which established a clear vision for Wicomico and set forth policies for directing growth and development to areas where infrastructure exists to support it and away from rural parts of the county.

More than ten years after the Quarter Century Committee published its findings, Wicomico County is still challenged by how to adequately manage growth. Changes in zoning laws and other government initiatives intended to implement the 1998 county comprehensive plan have had some impact on directing growth to appropriate areas, but residential development still occurs in a way that is inconsistent with the directives of the county comprehensive plan.

In 2005, the Wicomico County Visioning Committee determined to evaluate growth and development in the county and recommend policy options to encourage improvements in growth management. The outcome of the committee’s work on this subject is this report, which defines a vision for the county and provides substantive recommendations for protecting agriculture, sustaining rural landscapes and directing growth to the county Metro Core. The report also describes a process for encouraging inter-governmental cooperation and other changes in public policy needed to achieve a vision for growth in Wicomico County.

II Vision

In accommodating growth, it is important first to recognize the attributes we want our community to have over a long range span of time. We propose that:

1. Wicomico County remain the economic center of the Peninsula;
2. We maintain a diverse employment base with a variety of jobs for people of all occupational skill and wage levels. We need a variety of large and small companies to provide employment balance. In particular, we want to preserve and enhance agriculture and the poultry industry. We want business and industry to be located in areas providing a full array of infrastructure;

3. Wicomico County be home to people of varied ethnic and racial origins providing cultural diversity that enriches the lives of all people who live here;
4. Our urban areas be compact, but also of quality and safe places to raise our families and good places to grow old;
5. We offer housing for people of all ages, incomes and family size. We will have to develop strategies to keep housing affordable. We need to preserve historic properties;
6. Areas outside the metro core remain rural and not consumed by low density suburban development. Farming, including raising crops, trees, animals and poultry should continue to be a significant segment of the County's economy. Attention must be given to the economics of farming as we consider environmental factors;
7. We address the creation of quiet residential areas, streetscapes and quality of design. We need connected neighborhoods with a greater sense of membership in the larger community. While we pay attention to transportation networks for automobile travel, we will need to give more attention to public transportation;
8. Development incorporates appropriate measures to minimize environmental impacts. We will need improved stormwater management, improved sewage treatment, an ethic of resource conservation and other advances. We need to assure that our County's air and water is cleaner than it is today. We need more wildlife habitat areas to maintain a biologically healthy diversity of species. We need to still be able to find quiet places with scenic and restful views. We will need parks in neighborhoods to help awaken a new neighborhood spirit in the metro core and town centers;
9. We pay particular attention to the quality of our educational system which is not only important to those of us who live here, but is a major factor in attracting new residents and positive economic development; and
10. Wicomico County, Salisbury and the other municipalities be recognized as an increasingly united community, one which collaboratively seeks productive outcomes in the interest of all our citizens. We need to continually improve on the responsibilities of personal involvement in civic affairs that has been the hallmark of our community.

This vision will require difficult choices. Our modern lifestyle based on suburban sprawl is not suitable for carrying us into the future. Accommodating more population means higher density urban areas and towns than we have today.

III. Concentration of Growth in the Metro Core

A. Overall Strategy - A plan and strategy to concentrate growth in our urban areas where services are available and to preserve rural lands is not only not new, but has been incorporated in the County's comprehensive plans and documented in both the McCabe Report in 1957 and the Quarter Century Report in 1995 as the core policy for the County. However, scatterization of growth over the past 50 years has increased to the point where it could threaten the values and sense of community commonly accepted as both the reason for our choice of this County as a place to live and as the engine for our economic well-being. These patterns also add unnecessary costs¹ resulting in higher taxes, cause unnecessary environmental damage, and contribute to blight of our urban areas.

It is therefore vital that the County truly implement its existing Comprehensive Plan (1998) (and its prior Comprehensive Plan and the studies above referred to) and make a concerted effort to carefully regulate development in our rural areas consistent with those Plans.

Zoning ordinances in other counties of the State including the Eastern Shore have established true rural zoning areas, permitting from one house per fifty acres in Baltimore, Frederick and Montgomery Counties to one per thirty in Kent County and one per twenty in Caroline, Talbot, Queen Anne's and others on the western shore. Worcester County has long permitted a maximum four lots per old defined parcels in its Agricultural-Rural Zone. Restrictions on the acreage that can be included in a rural subdivision, impact fees and adequate public facilities ordinances are measures which many Maryland counties use to guide and help pay for infrastructure that development requires when it is permitted outside areas designated for growth.

We need to a) establish a rural zoning density policy permitting not more than one dwelling unit per twenty or thirty acres in the Agricultural-Rural District, b) delete the inclusion of a Planned Development District² in the Agricultural-Rural District; it is

¹ For police, ambulance, public works, sewer and water service, school transportation and the like, as has been documented in numerous studies.

² Although not provided for in the existing County Comprehensive Plan, the County Zoning Code permits the County Council to permit anywhere in the Agricultural-Rural District intense residential, commercial or industrial developments under vague criteria, avoiding the more stringent rules usually applicable requiring that an applicant for rezoning show a change in the neighborhood or mistake in the original zoning. This concept is generally known as a "floating zone", a management tool usually used to enhance the quality of development activity only in areas designated for growth.

incompatible with the Comprehensive Plan itself, c) reexamine minor subdivision provisions, d) provide for significant setback buffers and open space requirements in any subdivision in the Agricultural-Rural District, and e) further regulate strip development on rural roads.

Rural and farm property values have risen extensively in Wicomico County³ despite (or possibly aided by) the fact that the County moved from one house per acre in the Agricultural-Rural District in 1998 to one per fifteen today. Counties with one per twenty to even one per fifty acres have likewise experienced significant increases, a trend that will only continue as growth pressures intensify. A recent study⁴ done for the Maryland Center for Agro-Ecology concludes that increasing acreage required for a subdivided lot has not adversely affected land values in several Eastern Shore counties.

A transferable developments rights (TDR) ordinance⁵ should be adopted, but it should be one where rights are only transferable from the Agricultural-Rural District to the metro core, and not from spot to spot in the Agricultural-Rural District. A sophisticated workable ordinance would require a careful plan properly implemented in collaboration with local governments. While we recognize that under present circumstances the County is under severe constraints because of the existing revenue cap, funds need to be sought from both State and Federal levels and supplemented by local funds to assist in the establishment of a workable TDR program, and potentially a TDR bank. We also need locally derived funds to purchase development rights in conjunction with existing and future State programs, such as the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation and the Rural Legacy program, which can provide significant resources for land conservation. We should actively support programs to encourage donation of conservation easements. The County should establish a significant annual goal and implementation plan for preservation of agricultural land (e.g., Worcester is proposing to save 1,000 acres per year).

Clustering should be required in the Agricultural-Rural District without any increase in permitted density⁶.

In conclusion, we reiterate that achieving the vision set out herein requires true implementation of our Comprehensive Plan and closing the existing loopholes that continue to permit scatterization of growth.

³ Knowledgeable appraisers and realtors believe Wicomico County values have at least doubled since 1998, in line with overall state averages.

⁴ "Down Zoning: Does it protect working landscapes and maintain equity for the landowner?" (2003) by Sarah Taylor-Rogers, Robert Etgen, John Bernstein, Robert Gray, Elgin Perry, Peter Caldwell, Jonathan Chapman and Grant Dehart.

⁵ Attached is an explanation of the TDR concept taken from the Quarter Century Report.

⁶ A clustering provision should require at least 75-80% of the subdivided land to remain in open space, and include provisions from effective ordinances in other counties, both in Maryland and elsewhere.

B. The Metro Core Plan

The relevant jurisdictions – Wicomico County, Fruitland, Delmar and Salisbury should endorse the existing County metro core plan⁷ as the growth area and should work cooperatively to direct future growth within it. Our Comprehensive Plans should be updated within the six-year state requirements. Revision is now overdue.

It is important that the four governments concerned with the metro core area jointly discuss the level of growth they wish to see occur, place into effect jointly conceived plans so as not to exceed the maximum targets agreed upon, and plan for the necessary infrastructure needed for the desired level of growth.

Within the metro core, we need increased attention to issues of quality as well as provision of necessary services. Quality includes streetscape and site requirements for residential, commercial and industrial sites. Parks, recreation facilities and provisions to enhance real neighborhoods are essential. We need to provide for green space and attractive pedestrian and bicycle use. We need to recognize that growth will have to increase density in many areas with site and other requirements to integrate those areas as a neighborhood. Historic preservation is also important to our sense of community and continuity.

Density has to be tied to the future planned capacities of the water and sewer systems of Salisbury, Fruitland and Delmar, the interconnectivity of these systems for potential emergency use, and serious consideration of urban service districts, at least to areas where annexation is not practical.

We need to consider long range transportation needs such as the funding of a northwest extension of Naylor Mill Road connecting to Nanticoke Road and an additional crossing of the Wicomico River within Salisbury. Expanded public transportation will have to be considered.

We need to consider where government might assist in the needed expansion of private/public facilities such as Peninsula Regional Medical Center. We will need to expand and renovate our library and provide for capital improvements for public safety, roads, recycling, solid waste disposal, a cultural and arts center, and court facilities and government offices. Salisbury University and Wor-Wic Community College expansion needs must be addressed. Special attention to provision of affordable housing is now required. We need to build a senior center.

Lack of consideration for those services which contribute to the health, welfare, and general satisfaction of our citizens, even in the presence of an enlightened growth plan, will doom our efforts to create a positive sense of community.

⁷ The present metro core was significantly expanded in the County's 1998 Comprehensive Plan. The metro core boundaries are to be reevaluated in each Comprehensive Plan revision.

C. Municipal Centers Outside the Metro Core

Municipalities outside the urban core also have needs and roles to be addressed. For example, expansion and growth boundaries for these municipalities should be carefully considered in coordination with Wicomico County government and in context with the Wicomico Comprehensive Plan.

IV. Establishment of a Formal Organization to Further Intergovernmental Cooperation and Dialog.

There is a serious breakdown in cooperation and communication between local governments, notably between Salisbury and Wicomico County. All of us who live in Wicomico County spend an appreciable amount of time within the metro core and we are undeniably one community in most respects. Our vision of preservation of our rural areas and appropriate development in our urban areas requires intense, cooperative effort. Fortunately, we do have a planning department that services both Salisbury and Wicomico County. It should be the focal point for future cooperation.

The Quarter Century Report suggested the formation of a Council of Governments which is expressly authorized by State statute.

The creation of a formal mechanism for cooperation is no longer just useful, it is now an absolute necessity. We have a Tri-County Council to discuss common interests among the three Lower Shore counties, but lack similar arrangements among the three municipal jurisdictions in our metro core and Wicomico County.

The formation of a Council of Governments with set periodic meetings, preparation of agendas, and personnel to prepare reports, exchange data and facilitate dialog is not a threat to independent jurisdictions, but merely a necessary tool to serve the common good.

V. Bearing the Cost of Growth

Questions relating to the revenue cap and its potential removal or change must be addressed. Wicomico County will need more revenue to carry out its obligations, particularly, but not exclusively, for education. The principle of growth paying for growth is important but insufficient to meet the community's needs. Most important is the need for a collaborative discussion between the public and various governments on how to pay for the services and infrastructure required.

Impact fees, adequate public facilities ordinances and provision of water and sewer service all require that policies and ordinances be coordinated and considered as a whole. Otherwise, there is a risk actions could be counterproductive by driving up the difference in costs between development in the metro core and the Agricultural-Rural District. It must make economic sense for new home buyers and renters to live within the metro core or our other municipalities.

VI. Conclusion

This report is a call to action to take specific steps in response to the history of scatterization, need for improvement in our urban areas and the potential for significantly increased levels of growth, as evidenced by the unprecedented 11,000 potential residential units in various stages of application for approval and construction in the County.

We must truly implement the essence of the County Comprehensive Plan.

We must strictly limit development in the Agricultural-Rural District.

We need a sophisticated transferable developmental rights program with transfer only to the metro core.

We need to aggressively pursue funding for open space preservation programs.

We need a Council of Governments to promote interjurisdictional cooperation.

We need sophisticated, thoughtful planning and zoning to promote quality development, transportation, water and sewer service, and other facilities in the metro core.

We need a prompt cross jurisdictional study to support adequate funding for all jurisdictions in the metro core to provide our citizens the quality services needed.

We cannot afford to wait.

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This report was formally adopted at the February 2006 meeting of the Visioning Committee following lengthy discussion over many months of the issues, receipt of reports from Salisbury and Wicomico County officials, and discussion of numerous drafts of this report by a subcommittee. The committee as a whole strongly supports the thrust and specifics of the report as a necessary part of the needed public dialogue leading toward revision of the County's Comprehensive Plan, revision of the County zoning ordinance to conform with the Plan, and establishment of a Council of Governments for the metro core. Of course, some members of the committee feel stronger about some of the recommendations than others, but few evidenced reservations concerning any of the specific recommendations. A few members, notably those employed by some of the governmental agencies to whom this report is addressed, abstained from formally endorsing the report.

Hugh McLaughlin, Chair

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