

A Vision for Lancaster County

Lancaster County: A Snapshot

A vision for Lancaster County's future must reflect the history and heritage of its people and the bounty and beauty of its natural resources. Situated at the mouth of the Rappahannock River and occupying the southeastern corner of the Northern Neck, Lancaster County comprises 133 square miles of forest and farm land and is bordered by 280 miles of shoreline on the Rappahannock River and Chesapeake Bay and their tributaries. Many families in the county boast a history dating to the seventeenth century and own land that has been in their family since that time. Lancaster County's proximity to the water has strongly shaped its history. Before roads were easily passable, travel and trade were accomplished largely by boat. Watermen and fishermen have made their livings from the bounty of the waters in and surrounding Lancaster County. This continues today, although much abated because of the outside pressures of pollution and development. Farming, hunting and forestry have also played a substantial role in shaping the county. Lancaster's unique proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and neighboring rivers and its extensive water, agricultural and forestry industries have culminated in a rich cultural past and a charming rural environment. It is the sweeping farmland views, historic sites and beautiful river and bay vistas that are uniquely Lancaster County.

Demographics vary widely throughout the county ranging from families living below the poverty level to high-income retirees. Needs of the lower income residents include improved access to affordable housing, jobs and social services. Some families still need assistance in acquiring indoor plumbing for their homes.

Retirees have been drawn to the area because of its proximity to the water and the county's unique rural quality of life. The retiree population has brought specialized skills to the area and has played an integral part in the development of the county and the services that the citizens of the county have come to rely upon. Examples are the Middle School Auditorium, Free Clinic and library. Retirees and working people, including those in water-and agricultural-based industries provide a wide range of business and residential development opportunities. These opportunities could come at a high cost to county residents and to the environment if growth out-paces required services and infrastructure and negatively impacts or detracts from the natural surroundings of the county. County officials, however, are committed to retaining the county's rural character by implementing the Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan and encouraging growth that is compatible with the needs of both the citizens and the environment.

Development Pressure

There is a tremendous amount of development taking place in Virginia and throughout the United States. Small towns are losing their individuality as corporate America moves in and pushes family-based businesses out. Until now, the four counties that make up the Northern Neck have retained their rural character and uniqueness. Some amount of development is inevitable, but as long as it is not already in place it can be done with care, taste and sensitivity. To accomplish this, county citizens and government officials will oversee and guide growth to ensure that it enhances the quality of life for those already residing here, and does not overtax existing services or result in unplanned sprawl that creeps across the county landscape. To fairly and comprehensively oversee future development, the following vision and goals have been developed by Lancaster County citizens and Lancaster County officials.

The Vision

Lancaster County will remain a rural county with its farmland, forests, woodland and river vistas as its signature features. To protect its rural character, county officials will encourage small businesses and services to locate in the existing towns of Kilmarnock, White Stone and Irvington as well as the unincorporated villages. This will preserve the county's overall rural character and allow the towns to grow, while still retaining their individual identities. County officials will evaluate the creation of proposed businesses and services to ensure compatibility with the needs of county residents and existing businesses. Officials through the use of ordinances will require businesses to reflect the history, culture and aesthetics of the county in their architectural designs. They also will encourage and work with officials of the towns and villages to achieve similar architectural continuity throughout the county.

Development for the county will be sustainable based upon current water supply and challenges presented by the areas soils that have shrink-swell characteristics and low percolation rates. These factors will be the basis in calculating the "build out" capacity of the County, thereby reducing the risk of over-development of the area and overuse of its resources. While construction of reservoirs may be explored, development of the county will not be based upon reservoir capacity until such time as a reservoir is built and available for use by county residents.

Part-time residents and tourists will continue to be an economic factor, so development of public water access and recreational facilities for residents and tourists will be a priority.

Lancaster County will continue to be a diverse population with a mixture of high-, middle-and low-income residents.

Planning Principles and Guidelines

To achieve this vision, the following planning principles and guidelines will be utilized as decisions are made regarding future growth, development and redevelopment in Lancaster County:

1) To maintain the rural character of the county, all development proposals will be required to include an open- space component. Other alternatives to preserve open space could include government acquisition or private preservation trusts. The county will explore alternatives that will provide incentives to landowners to preserve their land as open-space.

2) All planning for future development must be limited by current water supplies (shallow and deep wells), not the expectation that a future reservoir will provide water.

3) Development will be accomplished in an environmentally-sensitive manner in accordance with the spirit and the letter of all County, State and Federal laws and requirements.

4) Environmental regulations will be strictly enforced and willful violations vigorously prosecuted.

5) The county will seek to attract socially responsible and compatible businesses that will provide meaningful employment opportunities and meet the retail and service needs of its residents.

6) The county will encourage preservation of its traditional farming, hunting, logging, and seafood industries while paying particular attention to the impact such industries have on the environment.

7) The county will actively seek out and procure public access and recreational areas for residents and tourists.

8) The county will identify and preserve historic sites and encourage the redevelopment, restoration or reuse of existing homes and buildings in an effort to preserve the county's history and architecture.

9) The county will ensure that a balance is maintained between growth and the services needed to maintain that growth (e.g., schools, medical facilities, emergency services, roadways).

10) The county will encourage businesses to use architectural, low impact and consistent details reflective of the area's culture and history.

11) The county will encourage use of Rappahanock Community College and private training programs to generate a skilled indigenous work force.

Conclusion

This Vision Statement is meant as overall guidance for the future development of the county to be used in conjunction with the county's Comprehensive Plan and its ordinances. Many of the principles outlined in this document may require financial incentives or proffers by developers or expenditures by the county. Other items will require a change or update to the ordinances. Lancaster County in the future can be all of these things: beautiful, rural, prosperous and well-planned. It will take governmental leadership, community involvement and vision to accomplish that goal.

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