

A. ECONOMY

Kent County's economy is deeply rooted in the traditional livelihoods of farming, fishing, forestry, and hunting. Although many county residents still derive income from these industries, resource-based occupations provide full-time employment for a small and decreasing number of county workers. Alternative employment is available. Over fifty percent of Kent County's employment base is in the service industry. While some of these jobs have been created in the lower paying segments of economy-services and retail trade, many of these jobs are in education and health care. This job creation is essential in addressing the needs of an aging population for medical and personal services and convenient access to retail shopping in Kent County.

Many of our young adults choose to leave the county in search of alternative economic, social, and cultural opportunities. It is a county priority to create job opportunities for more young people in Kent County without sacrificing their opportunities to earn an income that will support a family. The median household income of Kent County would be improved by providing good quality employment opportunities for people who live in the County, including those who will move into the county.

This Comprehensive Plan reaffirms the importance of traditional occupations to the Kent County economy and seeks to develop its existing business base and strong entrepreneurial spirit. The County will seek a more diversified economy that will provide economic stability, better-paying jobs, and a tax base sufficient to support improved public services and facilities. We will assist in the expansion of existing employers, attract clean industry, promote the development of small businesses, and enhance tourism.

"Quality of life" is an important site selection criteria for many major employers and therefore, preserving Kent County's rural character and villages is an integral part of the economic development strategy.

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

GOAL: SUPPORT EXISTING BUSINESS

Strategy: Retain and promote existing businesses

Retention and expansion of local firms is key to the economic success of the County. The County will assist in their expansion where it is consistent with the goals and policies of this plan. The County will maintain an inventory of available commercial and industrial buildings and land to assist local firms in finding space for expansion within Kent County. The County will continue a program to achieve ongoing personal contact between Kent County businesses and representatives of County government.

Strategy: Support the County's Health Care Industry

Kent County is fortunate to serve as the home of the Chester River Hospital Center, as well as several other health care facilities. These health care providers are critical contributors to the overall economy, add positively to the medical employment niche of the community, and provide vital services to County's residents.

Kent County is committed to supporting its health care industry. The County will focus economic development efforts to support existing health care businesses and encourage the development of new health-related businesses, thereby reinforcing a strong economic base while meeting the needs of its community.

Strategy: Assist in the growth of existing small business

The Planning Commission will identify a contact person within the Department of Planning and Zoning to assist existing employers through the subdivision and building permit process. The County's Economic Development Office will assist such businesses through the transition from home-based business into the larger business community.

Strategy: Maintain and enhance a quality of life that is attractive to business

Kent County offers scenic qualities, water-based recreation, and proximity to metropolitan areas that are attractive amenities for business creation and relocation. The County will encourage private-sector initiatives to provide other desirable amenities. The goal is to provide the life style and amenities desired by employers while retaining small town character.

GOAL: EXPAND AND PROVIDE MORE DIVERSITY IN THE SIZE, NUMBER AND TYPE OF BUSINESSES IN THE COUNTY

Strategy: Promote development of small locally owned businesses

The County's Economic Development Office will act as an information clearinghouse to promote small and minority-owned business development by making entrepreneurs aware of state-sponsored small business loan, grant, and incubator programs, as well as assistance available from the federal Small Business Administration. The County will continue to support and encourage small and minority-owned businesses to use the local chapter of SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

Strategy: Encourage the development of cottage and home-based business

Cottage and home-based businesses provide opportunities for telecommuting, entrepreneurship and reuse of older buildings. The Planning Commission will evaluate current regulations that pertain to cottage and home-based businesses and recommend revisions to these regulations to encourage the creation of these low impact businesses. Likewise, the Planning Office will assist cottage and home-based businesses through the permitting process. The County's Economic Development Office will assist such businesses through the transition from home-based business into the larger business community.

Strategy: Recruit new businesses which are desirable to the community

The County will recruit environmentally sound, well-paying sustainable industries. Sustainable industries are defined as those which do not destroy or undermine the resources they are dependant upon, have some close or inherent link to the community and support other public goals and policies. In particular, the county will target businesses that support traditional life styles and in turn, maintain the character of the countryside. Examples are agricultural industries that use raw materials from area farms or agricultural research companies.

In order to recruit new businesses, the County must identify and promote its competitive market advantage and identify the County's most desirable assets through the collection and analysis of baseline economic data, community demographics, skills, life styles and trends. This analysis will also be used to focus the County's economic development efforts. An example of a possible business is one which meets the needs of the senior citizen population, which is projected to increase over the next twenty years.

The County's Economic Development Office will establish and publicize an Economic Development Hotline to facilitate local residents who have economic development leads or ideas and to assist new and existing businesses through the local, state, and federal permitting processes.

Strategy: Enhance the County's "Information Infrastructure"

Kent County is home to a broadband internet service provider which provides approximately 20 jobs. Not only is the company's focus broadband service to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, but also it is providing much-needed upgrades to Kent County's growing service industry. Under this plan, Kent County will have dependable county-wide high speed internet service. The County will promote the broadband internet service to attract clean high-tech businesses.

Strategy: Conduct research and analysis to better focus Economic Development Efforts

Kent County will explore options for funding on-going market and development research. The purpose of the research is to:

- ☞ Obtain a better understanding of the role of economic development in the County,
- ☞ Identify successful economic development strategies,
- ☞ Identify niche, new or emerging markets appropriate to Kent County,
- ☞ Identify the needs of the increasing number of retirement age residents,
- ☞ Identify the education and skills required by existing business and those new businesses appropriate to Kent County,
- ☞ Identify the skills of existing residents and local graduates,
- ☞ Identify opportunities for specialized business clusters such as medical or green business parks.

Strategy: Promote the development of the County employment centers

The County is developing two new business parks which will have the available infrastructure necessary to attract desirable businesses and assist existing businesses with expansions. The County will actively promote these employment centers as a means to develop a more diversified economy.

By designating suitable areas of varying size, location, and natural characteristics with appropriate zoning, the County can encourage potential employers to locate in areas where employment and industrial uses are desirable and compatible. The County can also provide a stronger commercial/industrial tax base in the county to help balance county tax revenues during a period of expected population growth.

Strategy: Assist employers through the permit process

The Planning Commission will identify a contact person within the Department of Planning and Zoning to assist a prospective employer through the subdivision and building permit process.

Likewise, the Economic Development Office will launch a public awareness effort to familiarize the people of Kent County with the need to support intelligent, planned economic development in the County. Economic development is a process of creating and utilizing physical, human, financial, and social assets to generate improved and broadly shared economic well-being and quality of life for a community or region.

Strategy: Support the efforts of the Upper Shore Regional Council

The Upper Shore Regional Council was created in October 2003 (Chapter 100, Acts of 2003). The Council is a regional planning and development agency for Cecil, Kent and Queen Anne's counties. It exists to foster the physical, economic and social development of the region. The Council initiates and coordinates plans and projects for the development of the area's human and economic resources.

Strategy: Work cooperatively with the incorporated towns and private sector economic development efforts

The County Commissioners and the Economic Development Office will work closely with the incorporated towns, the Chamber of Commerce and other private sector groups in developing an integrated and coordinated economic development strategy. Joint efforts could include assembling information for prospective employers and developing recruitment packages for businesses that are consistent with the goals and policies of this Plan.

Strategy: Encourage more young people to live and work in Kent County

Create opportunities for more young people to stay in or move back to Kent County without sacrificing their opportunities to earn an income that will support a family. Improve the median household income of Kent County by providing good quality employment opportunities.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

GOAL: DEVELOP AN EDUCATED WORK FORCE WITH THE SKILLS AND TRAINING REQUIRED TO SERVE CURRENT AND FUTURE KENT COUNTY EMPLOYERS

Strategy: Commit to excellence in the school system

Kent County should strive to have the best school system in the state and cater to the needs of all students. This will require innovative practices and outreach to business and community leaders.

Strategy: Develop secondary and post-secondary school training and apprenticeship programs that will train local residents and provide skilled workers

The presence of a skilled labor force is a critical ingredient in attracting new employers as well as satisfying the growth demands of existing businesses. Training and apprenticeship programs developed in cooperation with local businesses and non-profit organizations including resource-based business will help meet their needs, while also providing opportunities for Kent County workers to advance and obtain better-paying jobs.

Kent County Government will encourage a continued dialog between the business community and the various educational institutions, including but not limited to the Kent County school systems, Washington College, and Chesapeake College, to identify those skills needed by graduates to successfully compete in the job market.

Strategy: Re-emphasize trade education at Kent County High School and in the community

Job training in our public school system must meet the needs of our present and future demand. The County recognizes the need to strive for excellence at both the academic and the vocational level in our public school system. In cooperation with the local community, Kent County will identify jobs and special skills needed in Kent County, such as historic restoration and paramedical. The County will also seek to develop partnerships with local trade organizations to provide training for a variety of job opportunities.

Strategy: Increase involvement of local businesses in local education system

The Economic Development Office will foster a cooperative relationship among the Board of Education, private employers, community colleges and training facilities to establish and nurture vocational training programs. These programs that satisfy the training needs of local businesses will develop skills in younger workers and re-train existing workers. These programs will emphasize skills that will be needed in the future and training that enables workers to learn and adapt to new technologies.

Strategy: Work with Washington College and Chesapeake College to strengthen research-based job opportunities for graduates

The County will continue to work to provide a connection between Washington College's growing strength in the research field and the County's economic development. Likewise, the County will encourage County employers to recruit Chesapeake College graduates.

Strategy: Support development of marine trade programs

Marine trades offer well-paying, skilled jobs. Marinas require staff with specialized training to service, construct, repair, commission, and maintain boats. Currently, there is a need for these skilled employees and marine trade programs that can certify students in these specialized areas are important to the County's economy.

Strategy: Promote historic restoration education

Kent County's historic preservation not only promotes our sense of community, but also provides an economic niche market for heritage tourism and historic renovation. The County will support a variety of educational tools such as historic restoration training in the high school trade education program and apprenticeship programs.

RETAIL

GOAL: DEVELOP DIVERSE RETAIL OPPORTUNITIES THAT PROVIDE WIDE AVAILABILITY OF GOODS AND SERVICES WITH COMPETITIVE SELECTIONS AND PRICES

Strategy: Promote development of local shopping and family dining opportunities

Many Kent County residents want a better selection of consumer goods and prices within the county. Currently, many residents take advantage of neighboring Delaware, which does not levy sales tax, or travel to other locations in order to find greater variety in price and style.

The Economic Development Office will assess the existing merchant mix and retail offerings and identify retail gaps. Locations for retail activities also may be identified in the Village Master Plan for the larger communities. The Planning Commission will consider traffic and other secondary impacts. Any retail development in the villages or their designated growth areas must be compatible in size, scale, and architecture with existing development and proposed design guidelines.

Strategy: Promote locally owned business

The County will act as an information clearinghouse to promote small and minority-owned business development by making entrepreneurs aware of state-sponsored small business loan, grant, and incubator programs, as well as assistance available from the federal Small Business Administration. The County will continue to support and encourage small and minority-owned businesses to use the local chapter of SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and the Small Business Administration (SBA). In cooperation with the local business community, the County will look for ways to highlight the local shopping opportunities that exist in the County.

NATURAL RESOURCE BASED INDUSTRY

GOAL: MAINTAIN AND STRENGTHEN NATURAL RESOURCE-BASED INDUSTRIES

Strategy: Adopt a "Kent County Economic Resource Bill of Rights" that includes the right to farm, the right to fish, and the right to hunt

Farming, fishing, and hunting not only serve as the foundation of the County's economy but also of its culture. However, as the County continues to grow and diversify, the noise, odor and dust associated with these activities may be viewed as a nuisance. To avoid potential nuisance complaints and emphasize the importance of farming, fishing, and hunting, Kent County will review and strengthen, if necessary, the existing right-to-farm law and adopt right-to-fish and right-to-hunt regulations. In addition to limiting nuisance complaints, these ordinances will address zoning flexibility, equipment storage and other accessory needs of these natural resource-based industries. These will be compiled as a Kent County Economic Resources Bill of Rights and will be available to those purchasing property in Kent County.

Strategy: Promote Kent County as a boating center

Kent County has many of the basic ingredients for becoming an important boating center: an abundance of waterfront, proximity to major population centers, and existing marine infrastructure. The County's Tourism Department will promote all types of boating activity – large and small boats, boating business and industry, and tourism opportunities through boating.

Boating related businesses and industries not only include marinas, but sailmakers, yacht design and building, boat repair, yacht sales and charters. Kent County will promote use of its many assets to assure that a full range of boating related industries and businesses continue to be developed.

Boating plays an important role in the tourism efforts of the County. The County will work with the Chamber of Commerce, existing businesses, and boating professionals to identify ways to expand boating related tourism in the County. The upper reaches of the rivers, areas around Eastern Neck Island, and the county's many creeks

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provide unique opportunities for canoeing, kayaking, fishing, crabbing, rowing, and other water-related activities. The county will examine ways to promote boat rentals and other small businesses which capitalize on this asset.

Strategy: Support commercial fishing industry

The fishing industry is deeply rooted in Kent County's economy, history, and culture. The protection of the County's working waterfront and access to tidal waters are vital to the fishing industry. Kent County watermen must continue to have access to public docking facilities and vital waterways. To that end, the County is committed to providing loading and unloading access for finfish and shellfish and docking and mooring for commercial fishing boats and vessels. Kent County also supports finfish and shellfish processing.

Strategy: Reconcile the needs of both commercial and recreational interests for water access

Kent County watermen must continue to have access to waterways and places where boats and equipment can be loaded and unloaded. Currently, watermen share this access with an ever-increasing number of recreational boaters. In recognition of the importance of commercial watermen, the County will continue to provide conveniently located docking facilities through zoning and the public landings program and will establish a policy that grants priority use of public waterfront access to watermen.

Strategy: Promote agriculture as a viable industry and secure its future in the County

Economic development strategies should support agriculture as a viable and significant industry in the County. Effort should be made to attract agricultural related industries that not only provide job opportunities for county residents but also support the diversification of the agricultural industry and use raw materials from area farms.

The County will review plans, policies and regulations to ensure support for the continuance of agriculture in the County.

Strategy: Encourage the development of Farm-based business

Farm-based and value-added businesses are intended to expand the economic opportunities on farms while maintaining the agricultural character of the area. Agricultural related businesses include but are not limited to small packing/canning plants, dairies, roadside stands, crop genetic companies, and equipment repair.

Strategy: Participate in regional efforts to expand resource based economic opportunities

The county will support efforts to assist interested farmers with product diversification (including specialty and niche market development). The County will nurture entrepreneurial enterprises established by local farmers and community supported agriculture.

Strategy: Support the Chesapeake Fields Institute and other value-added initiatives

The mission of Chesapeake Fields Institute is to strengthen the profitability of traditional agricultural markets for family farms, while conserving the region's natural and cultural resources. "Preservation through Profitability" will be realized through collaboration among area family farmers, community, government, business leaders, and institutions of higher education throughout the Delmarva Peninsula. This collaboration will result in the development of a community-based food systems enterprise that is locally-owned and operated using environmentally sound practices. This will be promoted through health and education entities.

TOURISM

GOAL: ENHANCE AND EXPAND LOCALLY BASED TOURISM THAT IS ROOTED IN THE UNIQUE NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORIC FEATURES AND QUALITIES OF KENT COUNTY

Strategy: Develop a coordinated tourism marketing program

The abundance of natural, recreational, cultural, and historical resources in Kent County supports tourism as an important component of the local economy. Kent County should attract new visitors, extend the stay of visitors, and welcome repeat visitors with new attractions, events, and programs. Success will require a focused marketing effort that includes cooperation with towns, business associations, and local tourism-related businesses. This effort should encourage year-round tourist activities that promote the natural and cultural qualities of the County. History or natural resource-based tours and programs including cooperation with neighboring counties to market the Eastern Shore as a destination will help sustain year-round employment and economic opportunities.

Strategy: Integrate Kent County sites, facilities and activities with a coordinated regional tourism program

The County will actively participate in regional tourism efforts that link and promote the Eastern Shore's unique attractions and activities. This participation includes joint advertising and marketing, Civil War Trails, State Heritage Area and National Scenic Byway, theme events, and other programs that invite exploration of the Eastern Shore's historic and recreation sites. This would attract new and repeat visitors to our tourism-related businesses and encourage the visitor to stay longer by expanding the destination experience.

Strategy: Promote and expand facilities, services and activities that support natural resource-based economic development

The County will advocate the development of tourist facilities and activities that supports agricultural or maritime operations, arts and entertainment venues, eco-tourism sites and activities, and historic sites and museums, while retaining the unique character of the area and the quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors. These facilities and activities include:

- ☞ public restrooms
- ☞ adequate lodging and restaurant facilities
- ☞ arts and entertainment facilities and programs
- ☞ recreational opportunities, such as paddling, golfing, bicycling
- ☞ commercial campgrounds or primitive camp sites
- ☞ “night life” entertainment
- ☞ trail and park development
- ☞ appropriate retail and service operations
- ☞ coordinated directional signage
- ☞ interpretive historical, agricultural, cultural, and landscape markers

Strategy: Link cultural heritage and tourism

Projects and publications which link cultural heritage and tourism have the potential to become important components in the County's tourism program. For example, the County and local historic preservation organizations could develop self-guided tours, such as a farm and country tour, a waterways paddling tour, a church tour. These tours may be along designated scenic roads, roads with designated bicycle lanes, or separate hiker/biker trails. In many communities, simply providing these trails has attracted tourists.

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Strategy: Promote the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area

The County supports the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area's environmental, recreational, and cultural value, as well as its role in identifying significant historic sites and districts on the National Register of Historic Places. The Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area Management Plan enhances these resources, improves linkages, advances economic development strategies, and provides for stewardship and preservation.

Strategy: Promote the Chesapeake Country National Scenic Byway

The Chesapeake Country National Scenic Byway is one of the 70 Scenic Byways in the United States. It celebrates life on the Eastern Shore. Kent County is rich in agricultural, natural, cultural, and human resources. Quality soils, topography, climate, woodlands, the Chesapeake Bay with its tidal tributaries, wetlands, and marshes create an environment rivaled by few other areas. These natural features enrich our economy and the lives of our citizens. Kent County is also steeped in historic tradition. Towns and villages have a strong sense of identity, retaining their original design as a framework for their continuous and steady development. From these singular resources and features emerged our local culture, character, and economy.

Strategy: Identify and develop year-round attractions and events that increase the County's tourism-related economic development potential including historic, cultural and arts-related activities and venues

Strategy: Develop tourism management policies

The Tourism Advisory Board, in cooperation with regional partners, will investigate programs and policies that minimize the impact of tourism. These policies may include:

- ☞ Standards and guidelines for bus tour operators
- ☞ Outreach and education to bikers and boaters

Strategy: Identify and promote theatrical and cultural arts and entertainment districts

Artists and craftsmen are a vital part of the County's economy. Arts and entertainment activities stimulate business development and improve the quality of life for the entire community. There are a number of programs to help attract new artists or assist existing artists and some require the establishment of arts and entertainment districts. The County recognizes the contributions of its artists and craftsmen and will support efforts to encourage expansion or new growth in arts-related fields.