INTRODUCTION

Wicomico County (County) residents enjoy a wide variety of leisure opportunities, which includes an extensive inventory of parks, recreation facilities, and other leisure sites. The entire system includes 114 recreation sites encompassing approximately 35,124-acres on County, municipal, Board of Education, quasi-public and private schools, state, and federal lands (See Map 4.1, Tables 4.4 through 4.10 and Appendix C). The system includes six major park types (See Table 4.3) which work together to provide residents with a variety of recreation opportunities within a reasonable distance from home.

For the past several decades, the County's system of parks, recreation, and open space has become a model for small counties nationwide. Aided by state and federal funding programs and strong partnerships with other public and private organizations, the County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism (DRPT) has increased leisure services to residents and tourists far beyond County resources.

To fulfill the requirements of Maryland's Program Open Space (POS local), the 2027 County Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan (2027 LPPRP or 2027 Plan) update builds on the County's 2022 LPPRP, describing the County's ongoing efforts to better serve the needs of residents through recreation and parks. The 2027 LPPRP presents the County's intentions to preserve Green Infrastructure (GI), prime agricultural lands, and important natural resources. In addition, the Plan includes need and demand assessments, park equity analysis, and a geospatial proximity analysis for specific recreational facilities and amenities. The following introduction to the Plan presents the context for the Plan, including local policies that have directed land preservation, parks and recreation efforts and other circumstances that had significant impacts on the County's leisure services.

Purpose of the Plan

The 2027 LPPRP is important and timely for several key reasons. In addition to continuing the County's eligibility for annual POS funding, the LPPRP:

- Assesses the County's progress in:
  - Meeting the leisure service needs of County residents;
  - Preserving open space, agricultural land and activities, and important natural resources in a system of GI;
  - Identifies any impacts on County services caused by changes in local funding mechanisms; and,
  - Illustrates the combined effect of County, state, and federal land preservation programs on the landscape and future character of the County.

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Regulations for POS require counties to prepare a LPPRP every five years. In accordance with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) 2027 guidelines, three major goals of the plan are:

- Comply with the State of Maryland mandate, per Section 5-905(b) (2) of the Natural Resources Article – Annotated Code of Maryland, requiring that all local jurisdictions adopt recreation and land preservation plans to qualify for Maryland Program Open Space local funds;
- Guide the development of recreation and park services, and direct County efforts to conserve and protect GI (e.g., wildlife corridors), the natural environment, and farmland; and,
- Advance goals set forth in the Maryland the Beautiful Act of 2023, which established ambitious land conservation goals of 30% of the state by 2030 and 40% of the state by 2040.

The guidelines also establish the following objectives for the Plan:

- Review goals and objectives of state and local programs for three principal elements: parks and recreation, agriculture, and natural resources;
- Identify where these goals and objectives are essentially the same, where they are complementary or mutually supportive, and where they are merely different;
- Evaluate the ability of implementation programs and funding sources for each element to achieve related goals and objectives;
- Identify desirable improvements to policies, plans, and funding strategies to better achieve goals and improve return on public investment;
- Recommend to state and local legislatures, governing bodies, and agencies any changes to the current comprehensive plan needed to overcome any shortcomings in meeting local program goals and, ultimately, to ensure good return on public investment;
- Identify the outdoor recreation needs and priorities of current and future state and local populations; and,
- Achieve legislative goals for both state and local land preservation programs.

Guiding principles of the Plan also reflect the “Sustainable Growth Planning Principles”, signed into law in 2025, which replaced the 12 visions of the Maryland Economic Growth, Resource Protection, and Planning Act of 1992 (Planning Act), as amended). Each of the 8 Planning Principles are presented with the corresponding principles of the 2022 Plan:

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- Land - Optimize productivity of working landscapes, including farms and forests, and fisheries, and prioritize development within population centers that are in proximity to existing infrastructure and facilities;
- Transportation - Prioritize transportation networks that create energy efficient, affordable, and reliable access to jobs, housing and services;
- Housing - Enable a mix of quality housing types and affordability options to accommodate all who want to live in the state;
- Economy - Allow for adaptive reuse, mixed-use, and context appropriate new development that responds to changing markets and innovations;
- Equity - Engage all sectors of the community in plan development to ensure diverse voices are heard, and the needs of underserved populations are prioritized;
- Resilience - Integrate resiliency measures that will minimize the impacts of rapid and unexpected natural and human-caused threats on communities;
- Place - Provide public spaces that encourage social interaction and value cultural, historical, and natural resources; and,
- Ecology - Protect and restore sensitive ecological systems and conserve natural resources, including forests, agricultural areas, and waterways.

Local Preparation of the Plan

The DRPT is the lead agency behind the development and implementation of the 2027 LPPRP. The DRPT has the primary responsibility for implementing recommendations related to recreation and park services. DNR and MDP Guidelines for the 2027 LPPRP update require information regarding agricultural preservation and natural resource conservation, which is primarily taken from existing sources and county policies. Implementation of the recommendations regarding agricultural preservation, GI, and natural resource conservation is coordinated with the County Department of Planning, Zoning, and Community Development (DPZCD)

The 2027 LPPRP is based on the 2022 LPPRP, Wicomico County 2017 Comprehensive Plan (2017 Comprehensive Plan), revised state guidelines, and public input. Furthermore, the update was prepared in large part, on the ideas and concepts found in the following sources:

- County trends and user demand survey;
- Maryland Land Preservation and Recreation Plan; and,
- 2017 Comprehensive Plan.

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In addition to the aforementioned sources, concepts and recommendations contained within the Plan are in response to stakeholder input with ideas derived from ongoing coordination efforts with the following interests:

- DRPT Staff;
- DPZCD Staff;
- Local Recreation Councils;
- Recreation & Parks Commission;
- County Council work sessions;
- Municipalities; and
- County Public Schools Administration.

Stakeholder feedback, in combination with the various needs analyses detailed in Chapter 4, were used to form capital recommendations to guide the County in future planning efforts.

Relationship to the Comprehensive Planning Process

The 2017 Comprehensive Plan was adopted unanimously by the County Council on March 21, 2017. The Plan can be viewed or downloaded from the County's website under the DPZCD subpage. The adopted 2017 Comprehensive Plan, a companion document to this Plan, consists of the following 14 major elements:

Plan Introduction	Agricultural	Housing and Community Development
Development Goals and Objectives	Land Use	Economic Dev. and Financial Sustainability
Community Profile	Transportation	Mineral Resources
Sensitive Areas	Community Facilities	Plan Implementation
Water Resources Element	Historic and Cultural Resources	

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The goals and objectives contained in the 2027 LPPRP, prepared as a requirement of Program Open Space, are consistent with the County's adopted 2017 Comprehensive Plan.

Recreation and Quality of Life

"Quality of Life" is an ordinary phrase for an extraordinary concept. What determines a community's "quality of life"? What allows one place to offer a better quality of life than another? Public services often make a difference in the locational decisions of both residents and employers. Public schools are important to families with children. Libraries are important for people to continue pursuing education. Parks and recreation are important to occupy leisure time in healthy, productive ways. Open space adds to the visual character of the community and supports habitats for plants and animals. In the competition for residents, tourists, and jobs, recreation, parks, and open space are among the County's strongest assets.

According to a 2023 National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) survey, 84% of respondents indicate that having a high-quality park, playground, public open space or recreation center nearby is an important factor in deciding where they want to live. [Source: Home Is Where A Park Is: October 2023 Park Pulse]

Economic Impacts

Leisure service is an industry business that generates billions of dollars each year in the United States. According to the DNR, Maryland's outdoor industry generated $10.6 billion of consumer spending in 2024, accounting for 1.9% of Maryland's GDP, through boating, hiking, hunting, fishing, cycling, RV-ing, camping, skiing, and other outdoor activities.[Source: Outdoor Recreation Industry Provides $10.6 Billion Impact on Maryland Economy]

Land and natural resource preservation are also significant contributors to a strong economy, particularly in agriculture, forestry, and commercial fishing. Since the advent of Program Open Space in 1969, the DRPT has successfully positioned itself to be a major contributor to the local economy.

Signature special events and sporting events generate significant revenue for the County's local businesses and tax base. In FY 2025, Wicomico Tourism hosted 46 events, most of which were held at outdoor parks located in the County (30 County-operated facilities), infusing $64.9 million into the regional economy. Over seventy-one% of the total economic impact from tourism events came from events staged in outdoor recreational facilities. Events included:

- USSSA Girls Softball World Series (323 teams);
- Athletx Youth Baseball Nationals; and,

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- Good Beer Festival.

A more in-depth perspective of the County's tourism efforts tied to public recreation facilities is included in Appendix ____.

Social Benefits

Recreation and leisure services contribute directly to quality of life. Research shows that a community's recreation amenities strongly influence the feelings of both residents and workers about an area. A survey conducted by the "Trust for Public Land", confirmed that "parks provide a platform to bolster social connections through structured group activities and informal encounters" and noted that such social connections contribute to both mental and physical health [Source: The Power of Parks to Promote Health - Trust for Public Land].

Activities such as hunting, golf, and recreational fishing offer a chance to develop valuable friendships and partnerships. Leisure events frequently leave participants with an enhanced sense of community spirit. Certain forms of recreation also give the physically disabled a chance to become more involved in community activities. Youths who participate in organized recreation are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior, need social services, or become involved in the criminal court system. Furthermore, recreation programs are much less expensive than $575-$1,000 per person per day to incarcerate troubled youth. [Source: Maryland Office of the Public Defender Detention and Youth Jails Recommendations]

Environmental Benefits

Protecting our natural environment is of upmost concern of people throughout the Country. Sustaining open space in its natural state avoids the interrelated ecological consequences of disturbing sensitive environmental features like steep slopes, flood prone areas, and woodlands. Conserving natural areas by preserving land safeguards the habitat of native and exotic flora and fauna, especially those with a limited niche that need specific localized conditions to flourish. Also, preserving forests and farmlands improves water quality.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), parks can "provide environmental benefits by reducing air and water pollution and mitigating urban heat islands", among other environmental benefits, [Source: Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces | Active People, Healthy Nation | CDC] Preserving farmland adds another dimension to the benefits of land preservation. In addition to the economic importance of agriculture, saving farmland helps sustain rural landscapes. The scenery and pastoral environments rural areas provide are often irreplaceable.

Personal Benefits

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Healthy people usually live longer, tend to have positive mental attitudes, and often develop better self-esteem. According to a 2023 National Recreation and Parks survey, 86% of US adults report that they or a family member have had a doctor suggest methods such as improved eating, daily movement and/or spending time outdoors as a means to improve mental and/or physical health. Nearly 60% of U.S. adults indicated that their healthcare provider recommended moving their body daily. [Source: Doctor Recommended | NRPA Park Pulse Surveys | National Recreation and Park Association]. Recreation can deter substance abuse and help develop interpersonal skills. Older people who participate in leisure activities are frequently happier and less lonely than those who do not, thereby reducing the need for professional care. Intergenerational recreation activities give young and older people the chance to learn from each other.

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