

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The 2027 Land Pres Rec and Park Plan (2027 LPPRP or 2027 Plan) builds on the 2022 Land Pres Rec and Park Plan (2022 LPPRP or 2022 Plan) and the – 2023 Maryland Land Preservation and Recreation Plan to further the goals of the County Comprehensive Plan and assess progress in both meeting the leisure needs of a growing population and helping to preserve land.

The 2027 Plan is prepared in response to the requirements of Maryland's Program Open Space (POS) and includes a complete discussion of relevant topics as prescribed in the guidelines from the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for POS plans. Sections of the plan are:

1. Introduction;
2. Framework;
3. Planning Areas;
4. Recreation, Parks, and Open Space;
5. Agricultural Land Preservation; and,
6. Natural Resource Conservation.

Wicomico 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, State, and federal lands (Map 4.1 in the Appendix and Table 4.5 below). The system includes six major park types which work together to provide residents with a variety of recreation opportunities within a reasonable distance from home.

Table 4.5
Recreation and Resource Land by Owner (acres)

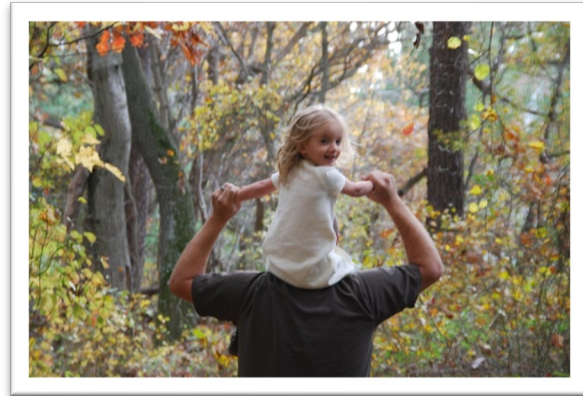
Owner	Recreation	Resource	Total
Wicomico County	1,839.1	0	1,839.1
City of Salisbury	275.7	0	275.7
City of Fruitland	42.7	0	42.7
Town of Delmar	5.0	0	5.0

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Town of Sharptown	4.3	0	4.3
Town of Mardela Springs	4.7	0	4.7
Town of Hebron	0	0	0
Town of Pittsville	0	0	0
Town of Willards	12.0	0	12.0
Board of Education	175.6	0	175.6
Quasi-Public and Private	59.9	0	59.9
Subtotal, Local Land	2,418.9	0	2,418.9
State and Federal Recreation and Resource Land			
State of Maryland	445		26,496
Federal Government	0	725.3	725.3
Subtotal, Local Land	445	32,260.3	32,705.3
Total, Recreation and Resource Land	2,863.9	32,260.3	35,124.2

[Source: Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism]

Increased public engagement in the 2027 Plan update, detailed further in chapter 4, was indicative of local and national trends that have demonstrated greater interest in outdoor recreation opportunities. These opportunities add “quality of life” value to the community, which includes: economic benefits; social benefits; environmental benefits and, personal benefits.



Economic: [Source: Outdoor Recreation Industry Provides \$10.6 Billion Impact on Maryland Economy]

Social: [Source: The Power of Parks to Promote Health - Trust for Public Land]

Environmental: [Source: Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces | Active People, Healthy Nation | CDC]

Personal: [Source: Doctor Recommended | NRPA Park Pulse Surveys | National Recreation and Park Association]

Framework

The framework for the 2027 Plan includes information on the physical characteristics, demographic characteristics, and current planning policies of the County. The following points summarize the key findings of the Planning policies of the County:

- Wicomico County is the heart of the Delmarva Peninsula. Located south of Delaware between the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, Wicomico County is within easy driving distance of the major cities on the east coast;

Map 2.1 Regional Location



- Natural features cover a significant amount of land in Wicomico County. The Nanticoke, Wicomico, and Pocomoke Rivers, large areas of woodlands, large tracts of Chesapeake Forest Lands and other woodlands, wetlands, and much agricultural land give Wicomico County a rural character outside the City of Salisbury and the other seven (7) incorporated areas;
- Development is centered on the Growth Area consisting of the Cities of Fruitland and Salisbury, Town of Delmar, MD, and the adjacent designated growth areas located in the unincorporated portion of the County;
- In recent decades throughout the Country, however, development has occurred in areas outside of urban cores, and Wicomico County is no exception. New development, exhibited by the number and size of final plats approved, has pushed against the boundaries of the Metro Core (Map 2.4). In the 6 years from 2021 and 2026, subdivision plats located in the unincorporated area of Wicomico and outside of the Metro Core accounted for just over 45 percent of all lots on 75.9 percent of the newly developed land (Table 2.1);

Table 2.1
Development within the Unincorporated Portion
Of Wicomico County, 2021-2023

Area	Final Lots Created		Acres		Average Lot Size
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Within Growth Area	80	54.8%	138	24.1%	1.72
Outside Growth Area	66	45.2%	434	75.9%	4.15
Total	146	100.0%	572	100%	4.15

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[Source: Wicomico County Department of Planning, Zoning, and Community Development (DPZCD)]

- Wicomico County population increased from 103,588 in 2020 and is projected to rise to 133,460 in 2055 a 28.8 percent increase in 35-years according to the decennial censuses; and,
- The Maryland State Data Center (MSDC) data indicates that the average Wicomico County household size in 2020 increased to 2.60 persons per household from 2.53 in 2010. Since the 1990 census, Wicomico County has had the highest persons per household figure of any county in the Lower Eastern Shore. (Table 2.5)

Table 2.5
Current and Projected Household Size of Lower Eastern Shore counties, 2010-2045

Jurisdiction	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050	2055	Change, 2020-2055	
									Number	Percent
Wicomico	103,588	106,960	113,120	117,960	121,870	125,930	129,800	133,460	29,872	28.8%
Dorchester	32,531	33,200	33,840	34,430	34,850	35,290	35,290	35,910	3,379	3.3%
Somerset	24,620	25,190	25,720	26,070	26,260	26,440	26,550	26,590	1,970	1.9%
Worcester	52,460	54,910	57,110	59,610	60,770	61,910	61,910	63,770	11,310	10.9%
Maryland	6,177,224	6,300,610	6,492,470	6,687,460	6,863,910	7,029,400	7,191,870	7,341,680	1,164,456	18.9%

[Source: Maryland Department of Planning, State Data & Analysis Center, Population Projections]

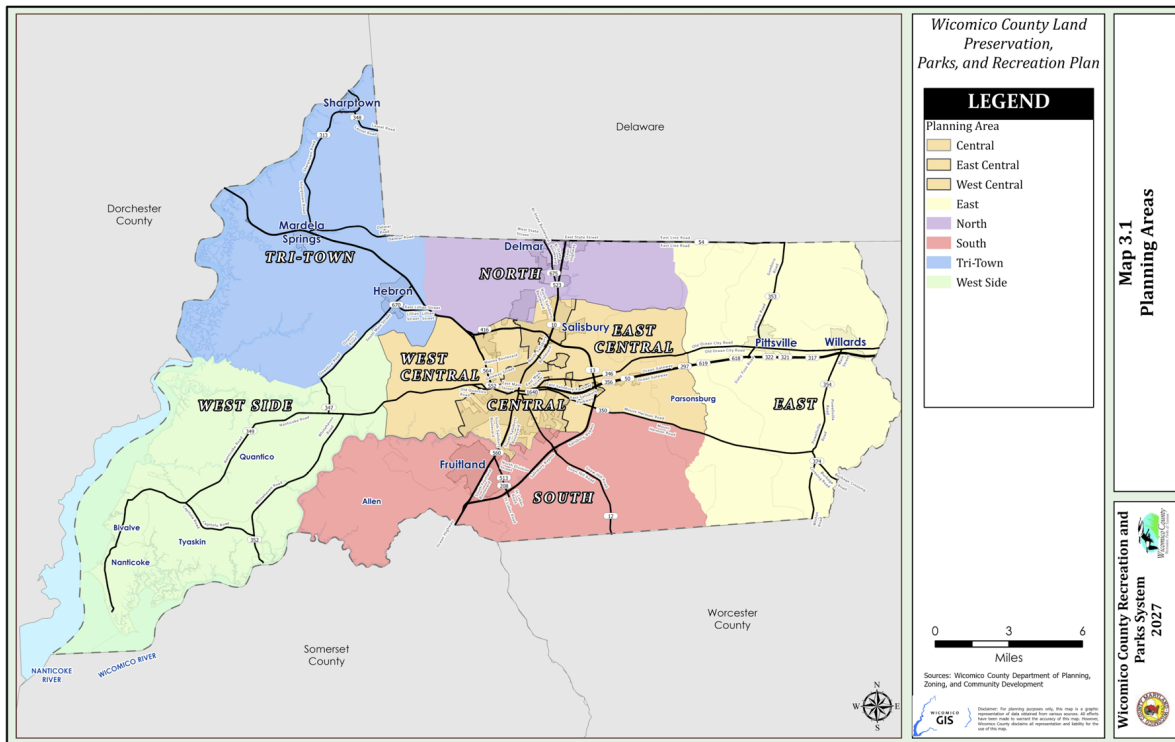
The Wicomico County 2017 Comprehensive Plan (2017 Comprehensive Plan), adopted March 21, 2017, contains objectives and policies relevant to the issues of land conservation, recreation, agricultural preservation, and natural resource conservation. A summary of objectives and policies are included in chapter 2 which include:

- Agricultural / Resource District Objectives;
- Natural Resources and Sensitive Areas Protection Objectives; and,
- Open Space and recreation Objectives.

Planning Areas

As with the 2022 Plan, the 2027 Wicomico County Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan divides the County into six planning areas: Tri-Town, West, South, North, East, and Central (including East Central and West Central)

Map 3.1: Planning Areas



Planning areas are important because recreation needs are different in various sections of the county. Chapter 3 contains detailed information for each planning area related to: existing and projected population, natural features and farmland, historic places, preserved land, existing recreations sites, and recreation land analysis per 1,000 people.

Recreation, Parks, And Open Space

Wicomico County residents enjoy a wide variety of leisure opportunities. Some of the opportunities are available through the Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism (DRPT) in cooperation with a Recreation & Parks Commission, local recreation councils, municipalities, as well as other special interest groups and organizations. The wide variety of parks in the County, ranging from large natural areas to small neighborhood play areas, offers many additional activities. Since the adoption of the 2022 Plan, participation trends in public recreation continue to rise.

Table 4.1
Public Recreation Registration 2022, 2025

Activity Category	2022	2025	Change 2022 – 2025	
			Number	Percent
Adult Organized Sports	2,488	1,906	-582	-23%

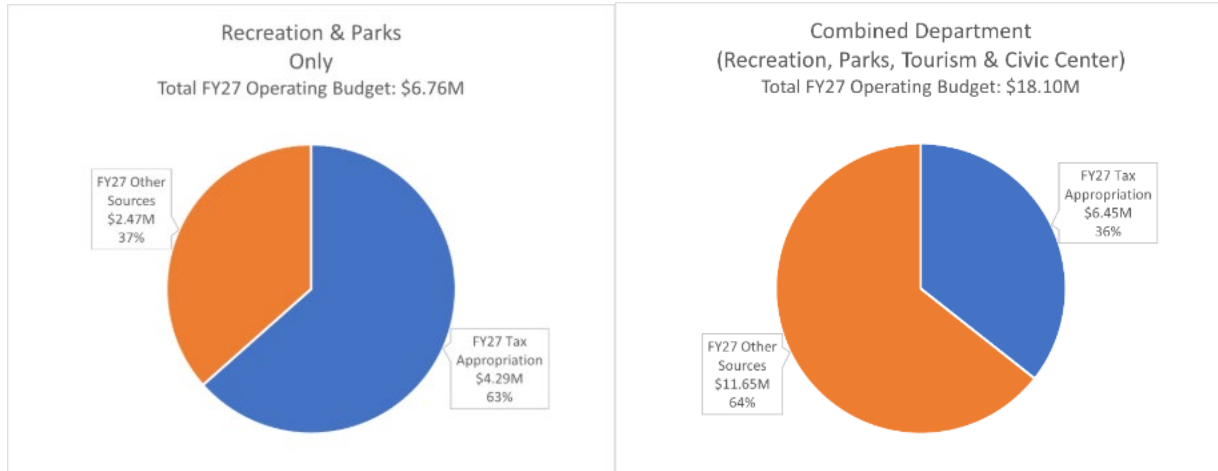
Youth Organized Sports	2,279	2,993	+714	+31%
Summer Camps	825	1,128	+303	+37%
Special Events	39,494	39,689	+195	+0%
Environmental Education / Outdoor Recreation	1,571	2,216	+645	+41%
Harbor Slip Rentals	103	83	-20	-19%
Pavilion Rentals	173	172	-1	-1%
Totals	46,933	48,187	1,254	+3%

[Source: Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism]

One of the ongoing challenges, for small Counties like Wicomico, is maintaining aging facilities while also trying to add new amenities to meet public demand. For this reason, it is critical for the County to maintain and incrementally increase funding levels in order for the Department to keep an aging parks system safe and functional, consistent levels of service while the cost of doing business increases.

This will become increasingly important as new parks come online and demand/public usage of parks increases (Pirate's Wharf, the Mason Dixon Athletic Complex, and Harmon Field are examples of recently expanded facilities; Connelly Mill and development of a new indoor recreational space are examples of potential new facilities that could be developed in the lifetime of this Plan). Another factor to consider is the dramatic increase in amateur sports tournaments. Though an economic engine, these events require significant financial and human resources from DRPT, which can detract from core services. To meet these maintenance challenges and to promote DRPT's ongoing directive to expand opportunities in recreation and tourism, the financial commitment of the County must remain vibrant. An expanded discussion on the economic impact of events held in the County parks system is included in Appendix ____.

As illustrated below, 36% of DRPT's overall budget is covered through tax appropriation while the remaining 64% is derived from other sources generated through user fees, rentals and other revenue generation. This could represent another emerging challenge as discretionary spending becomes more difficult for families as inflation concerns persist.



As noted, the entire public recreation system includes 114 recreation sites encompassing approximately 35,124 acres on County, municipal, Board of Education, State, and federal lands.

The DRPT directly maintains 38 of these sites with a wide range of recreational activities and supporting amenities for public use. These 38 sites, encompassing 1,839.1 acres, include athletic complexes, parks & playgrounds, boat ramps, marinas, a wharf, a minor league baseball stadium, community center and the Wicomico Civic Center.

To help assess recreation needs, public surveys were completed, and input was gathered from a variety of local stakeholders. The survey was initiated in November 2025 and concluded in March 2026. A total of 1,079 survey responses were received, which represents a 30% increase in public survey participation when compared to the 2022 Plan. In addition to public surveys, input was also gathered from the following stakeholders:

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

Of the 1,079 responses, approximately 95 percent of the participants indicated a member of their household visited a County park in the past 12 months. About 71 percent visited a County park at least once a month or more.

- The survey asked respondents to prioritize types of parks and facilities the County should consider for future upgrades and/or development. Respondents noted the following priorities:

- o Trail-based recreation (walking, running, hiking, biking) (5761% listed in the top 3 priorities);
- o Outdoor recreation (baseball fields, soccer fields, outdoor courts, etc.) (29% listed in the top 3 priorities);
- o Outdoor swimming or aquatic areas (beaches) (2023% listed in the top 3 priorities); and,
- o Indoor sports (18% listed in the top 3 priorities).

A total of 1,006 write-in comments or suggestions were included in addition to individual responses to survey questions. Like other findings, the most frequently mentioned write-in comments included:

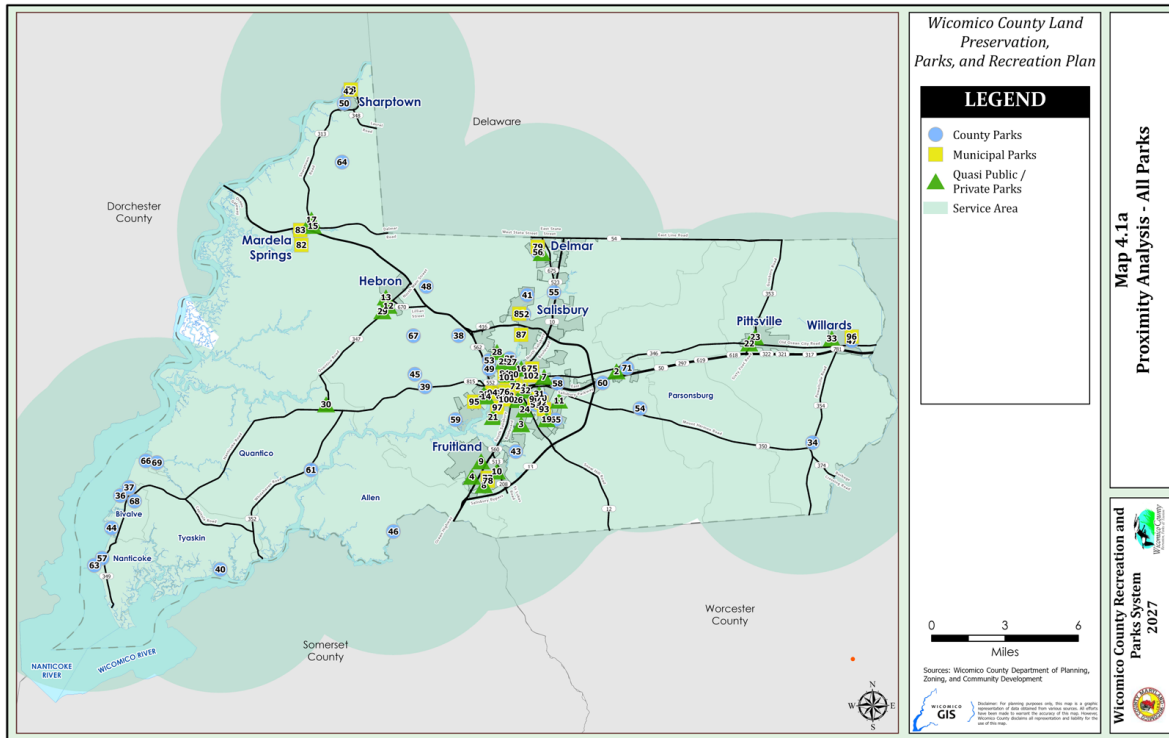
- Develop the Connelly Mill property into a public park;
- Develop indoor public recreation space;
- Construct more trails (hiking / biking / walking);
- Construct more pickleball courts (or a dedicated pickleball facility); and,
- Provide more opportunities for public access to water (i.e. kayaking, boating, public swimming pool).

Full discussion on stakeholder feedback is included in Chapter 4, and more formal stakeholder submissions are included in Appendix B.

In accordance with LPPRP Plan Guidelines, the County also conducted two additional analyses to assess its current progress to meet public demand: the Proximity Analysis and the Park Equity Analysis. A full discussion is included in chapter 4, and maps are included in the Appendix (Maps 4.1a through 4.2).

In summary and as depicted on Map 4.1a, the Proximity Analysis resulted in the entire Wicomico County area being served by the location of the existing parks and recreation system.

Map 4.1a: Proximity Analysis



The Proximity Analysis differs from the Park Equity Analysis, as the Park Equity Analysis considers the location and distribution of the county's park system in conjunction with environmental justice and climate vulnerability data from MDEnviroscreen. This analysis helps identify areas where environmental and climate-related conditions, combined with the availability and distribution of recreational resources, may indicate a need for additional consideration when planning future park and recreation facilities.

As a result of feedback gathered, the Plan includes a detailed list of future goals and objectives over the life of the Plan. Discussion also includes a review of major accomplishments since adoption of the 2022 Plan, including completion of 35 of 43 immediate range capital projects identified in the 2022 Plan (81% completion rate), along with 13 other recreation facility-based projects completed. The 48 completed projects totaled approximately \$59.5M in capital expenditures since the 2022 Plan was adopted, which included federal, state, county, and private funding sources.

While acquisition remains an important part of the future, the County continues to meet its established acreage goal by exceeding its 30 acres/000 target and by demonstrating adequate distribution of facilities and recreation opportunities illustrated through the Proximity Analysis.

However, the County should remain flexible and opportunistic with future acquisition and development projects that help meet goals and objectives outlined in the Plan. As a small County facing uncertain economic times, the County must continue to balance emerging future needs with its capacity to maintain such facilities with available resources.

The public engagement process and the above analyses resulted in development of a long-range capital improvements program for parks and recreation, which is detailed in chapter 4 and is organized by Planning Areas. The Plan recommends consideration of 56 projects totaling approximately \$79.4M; projects are classified in short-medium-long range timeframes.

Table 4.15
Summary of Capital Recommendations

Planning Area	Number of Projects	Est. Total Cost (\$000s)	Acres to be Acquired	Estimated Costs (\$000s)								
				Immediate (FY27 – FY31)			Mid – Range (FY27 – FY31)			Long – Range (FY37- FY41)		
				Acq.	Dev.	Reh.	Acq.	Dev.	Reh.	Acq.	Dev.	Reh.
Tri - Town	5	\$2,050	10.00	\$100	\$-	\$950	\$-	\$1,000	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-
West Side	12	\$9,075	5.00	\$75	\$2,800	\$3,750	\$-	\$300	\$150	\$-	\$-	\$2,000
North	10	\$11,620	0.00	\$-	\$3,600	\$820	\$-	\$5,000	\$1,200	\$-	\$-	\$1,000
Central	21	\$54,890	24.00	\$2,000	\$21,050	\$16,540	\$1,400	\$1,000	\$750	\$-	\$5,000	\$7,150
South	3	\$550	0.00	\$-	\$-	\$550	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-
East	5	\$1,265	4.00	\$40	\$-	\$1,025	\$-	\$200	\$-	\$-	\$-	\$-
Total	56	\$79,450	43	\$2,215	\$27,450	\$23,635	\$1,400	\$7,500	\$2,100	\$-	\$5,000	\$10,150

Source: Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism (DRPT)

Agricultural Land Preservation

Agriculture is the major industry in Wicomico County; therefore, emphasis on preservation of farmland is an integral component to the concept of sustainability. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 384 farms encompassing 69,906 acres (or 28.9% of the total land area) are located in Wicomico County. From 1978 to 2022, the market value of agricultural products produced in Wicomico County increased by roughly \$288 million or 267% from \$108 million to \$397 million, respectively (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Wicomico County Agricultural Characteristics, 1978-2022

											Change, 1978-2022	
	1978	1982	1987	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022	Number	Percent
Number of farms	920	842	774	684	624	512	508	510	494	384	-536	-58%
Acres of farmland	107,102	111,109	95,542	91,254	92,057	88,470	92,852	83,739	88,559	69,906	-37,196	-34%
Avg. farm size (ac.)	116	132	123	133	148	173	183	164	179	182	66	56%
Market value of products (\$000)	\$108,125	\$121,512	\$134,061	\$164,101	\$205,514	\$174,594	\$197,828	\$236,321	\$303,984	\$396,840	\$288,715	267%
Average market value of products per farm (dollars)	\$117,527	\$144,318	\$173,205	\$240,763	\$329,350	\$341,003	\$389,426	\$463,375	\$615,352	\$1,033,437	\$915,910	779%

Source: United States of Agriculture, 2022 Census of Agriculture

In consideration of Statewide goals, the County has also established its own strategies for agricultural land preservation. At the local level, agricultural land preservation activities in Wicomico are based on three critical elements:

- Public commitment to investment in land preservation indicated by the local legislation and the availability of State and local funding to support the County's Agricultural Land Preservation Program to purchase easements;
- Supportive local plans, zoning, regulations, and procedures, such as the Wicomico County Comprehensive Plan, Wicomico County Zoning Code, Wicomico County Comprehensive Water and Sewerage Plan, and agricultural preservation initiatives; and,
- Community support for the preservation strategy, indicated by a property owner's voluntary willingness to sell development rights consistent with the requirements and intent of the County's Transfer of Development Rights Program.

Based on the measurable and identified objectives for the County's local agricultural land preservation program and the Rural Legacy Program, Wicomico County is attempting to preserve 800 acres of undeveloped land and productive farmland annually.

Chapter 5 includes discussion of the various elements of the County's agricultural land preservation efforts including: Preservation Areas, Easement Acquisition Mechanisms, Agricultural Land Preservation Programs, and the Rural Legacy Program.

The Wicomico Agricultural Preservation Program must learn to compete with the development industry for the landowner's interest. Easement value alone may not provide an adequate level of compensation for certain landowners compared to the development value of the property. County staff should help local landowners make the decision to preserve land by illustrating the total value of preservation, including:

- Direct payment;
- Tax deductions for reduced value donation;
- Property tax credits;
- Land resale;
- Future owner/family lots; and
- Continued ownership and use.

Natural Resource Conservation

Wicomico County policies for natural resource conservation are rooted in the 2017 Comprehensive Plan. The 2027 LPPRP endorses the County policies from the Comprehensive Plan. In 2011, DNR revised and updated the ecological ranking of Green Infrastructure (GI) hubs and corridors to establish priorities for conservation and guide open space acquisition efforts and funding. Chapter 6 includes discussion of the many elements of the GI system in Wicomico County including its purpose, discussion on priorities and threats, and identification of best practices for conserving GI in the County.

Discussion includes the impact of sprawl development but also notes that invasive plant species is a growing threat to the natural environment. The number of invasive species entering Wicomico County is increasing annually. This is a growing problem and increasing risk to the survivability of native species and habitat integrity. Once invasive species become established and spread, natural ecosystems are compromised and reclamation costs increase. In contrast, early detection and eradication techniques are designed to decrease the extent of the impact and reduce removal cost.

To reduce or eliminate the negative effects to our local ecosystems, monitoring and identification of invasive species is important. Both early detection and eradication are key to prevent and reduce widespread damage from invasive species. In an effort to prevent the adverse effects from invasive plant species, the County should continue funding a weed coordinator position, as well as identify potential funding to prepare an Invasive Species Management Plan for Wicomico.

Chapter 6 also discusses the methodology developed for delineating "High Value Natural Areas" which consists of a three-tier ranking system that will guide the County in land acquisition efforts.

Identifying and securing funding for the future acquisition of vulnerable High Value Natural Areas is paramount to the sustainability of the land preservation effort. The ability to leverage funding from federal, state, and local programs, as well as the continued coordination with environmental and conservation groups is imperative to successfully enhance conservation and recreational opportunities in Wicomico County. In addition, the Natural Resources Conservation Advisory Committee will have an integral role in the continued update of the High Value Natural Areas, as well as tracking progress and recommending land use management techniques to achieve the desired outcomes.

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