

Writing Sample

Building a Green Infrastructure Plan for Worcester County, Maryland

Maryland's Eastern Shore, and Worcester County in particular, is an ecologically and culturally rich place as well as an area committed to strategic conservation and smart growth. Worcester County is home to some of the nation's earliest coastal settlements as well as some of her most important and sensitive habitats. The MD Department of Natural Resources (DNR) identified over 60 percent (approximately 182,000 acres) of the county as belonging to the state's green infrastructure network. Worcester County is also the second fastest growing county in Maryland (Calvert County, another coastal community along the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, is the fastest). The population, now 46,543 has doubled since 1950, and continues to grow (US Census Bureau 2000, Worcester County Comprehensive Plan 2006). Most of this growth (53 percent by 2020) is anticipated in the northern half of the county, where roughly half of the current population resides (approximately 24,800 in Berlin, Ocean Pines, West Ocean City and Ocean City). The local economy depends upon agriculture, retail/services, construction/manufacturing and tourism, especially along the coast.

Coordinated conservation and development planning in the region will help sustain a landscape and an economy that is historically, environmentally and culturally responsible. The state's green infrastructure network is presently being used to identify priority properties for acquisition through the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) program via a desktop parcel evaluation tool created by DNR (Weber 2003). A more detailed look into green infrastructure was also called for in the 2006 Worcester county Comprehensive Plan as well as the Land Preservation and Recreation Plan. Given this written support and the opportunity to serve multiple goals, green infrastructure planning in Worcester County should be considered a flexible and inclusive concept, one that embraces conservation of valuable natural resources, preservation of economically and historically important working farms, and provision of sufficient and high quality outdoor recreation areas for county residents and visitors. It can and should work well with the existing Comprehensive Plan, Land Recreation and Preservation Plan and the Hazard Mitigation Plan.

A green infrastructure plan for Worcester County will address several needs and threats the community faces, including a relative lack of protected areas and outdoor recreation in the northern part of the county. There are significant threats from global climate change predicted including more intense and/or frequent storms and sea level rise that may cause flooding, damage to habitat and developed areas and saltwater intrusion into aquifers that strategic conservation may successfully address. Maryland does not currently suffer from the worst of the hurricanes that hit the east coast (Nor'easters are more common), and storm control is not considered an economic threat (Ocean City Comprehensive Plan), but this is not reason to ignore protection of coastal wetlands for natural flood protection. As the Hazard Mitigation plan points out, sea level rise "will have implications for future land use planning and should be considered during policy development for the County's comprehensive plan" (Worcester County Hazard Mitigation Plan Draft, p.18).