Worcester County

Smart Growth Successes
Cover image: Innovative zoning, façade renovations and a focus on walkers and cyclists has helped revitalize downtown Berlin (see p. 4).

Opposite: Worcester County has adopted effective farmland protection strategies (see p. 14).
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Smart Growth Successes

Worcester County, comprising the entire length of Maryland’s Atlantic coastline, is perhaps best known for the popular vacation resort of Ocean City. The county, named for an Earl of Worcester, was established in 1742 when Somerset County was divided. The county is home to the town of Snow Hill, the county seat, as well as the historic municipalities of Berlin and Pocomoke City.

Over the past 45 years, Worcester County has been a leader in smart growth, accommodating twice the number of people who lived there at the mid-century while retaining its agricultural heritage. County and municipal leaders have directed most growth to municipalities and promoted agricultural zoning and a variety of land protection programs.
The map above illustrates the promotion of Smart Growth in Priority Funding Areas and the protection of land outside of Priority Funding Areas. It illustrates where to grow and where not to grow to adhere to environmentally sound Smart Growth principles.

The map is indexed to examples in this booklet (approximate location):

1. Worcester County Land Protection
2. Historic Downtown Berlin
3. Downtown Pocomoke Economic Development
4. Rain Gardens
5. Infill Development in Berlin
6. Byrd Park
7. Sturgis Memorial Gateway Park
8. Delmarva Discovery Center
9. Mar-Va Theatre
10. The Ocean City Development Corporation (OCDC)
11. Ocean City Mini-Grants
12. Rural Cluster Subdivisions
1. Worcester County Land Protection

Worcester County’s population has doubled from 21,000 year-round residents in the 1940s to more than 46,000 today. Most growth has occurred in and adjacent to municipalities. To help maintain the county’s agricultural economy and retain its rural landscape, the county relies on agricultural zoning and a variety of land protection programs.

Worcester County’s comprehensive plan was amended in 2010 with a Priority Preservation Area (PPA) element that targets 200,000 acres, 64 percent of the county. The PPA includes most of the county’s prime farmland and the Coastal Bays Rural Legacy Area, where more than 8,000 acres have been easement-protected.

The PPA program contributes to an ambitious land protection strategy in Worcester County, where 17 percent of the county is protected by conservation or agricultural easements or owned by the state or conservation groups. From 1999 to 2011, 13,134 acres were protected with easements in the agricultural zone.
2. Historic Downtown Berlin

The visual appeal and economic success of historic downtown Berlin represents more than two decades of effort from local business owners, residents and elected officials. Thanks to zoning allowing dwellings above first-floor commercial uses, façade renovations and an emphasis on pedestrian needs, the Berlin central business district has prospered during an era of enclosed malls and big-box shopping centers. Town officials invigorated Berlin’s downtown by encouraging property owners to establish businesses as well as create livable downtown spaces in single buildings. Many business owners capitalized on the tax incentives afforded through an Arts and Entertainment District designation, creating galleries, shops and studios. Others took advantage of historic designations to protect their structures and retain businesses and residences within the downtown. The historic district’s pedestrian-friendly nature attracts residents to patronize local shops, promoting a sense of pride and place.

Special downtown events coordinated by local organizations and supported by the town contribute to Berlin’s reputation as a destination for thousands of visitors.
A public/private partnership resulted in the Riverside Grill, a major boost to the downtown Pokomoke City economy.

3. Downtown Pocomoke Economic Development

Seeing a need to create jobs and stimulate business development in Pocomoke City’s downtown district and waterfront, city officials launched an unusual project that has spurred economic development in less than a year. Wanting a restaurant as a lure for residents and visitors, city officials in 2011 hired architects and put out a solicitation for restaurateurs. The 150-seat Riverside Grill, built and owned by the city, has created 35 jobs and drawn new visitors to the downtown business district. The new waterfront restaurant opened for business in July 2012 under a lease agreement. Since then, two new businesses have opened on Market Street. The venture was funded by a combination of federal and state grants and city funds totaling $1 million.
To help residents learn about the benefits of rain gardens, Worcester County officials developed a how-to guide for homeowners.

4. Rain Gardens

Over the past few years, Worcester County has encouraged the use of rain gardens as part of environmental site design, which mimics natural systems in treating stormwater. Rain gardens feature native plants that collect, absorb and clean runoff that flows off impervious surfaces like rooftops, driveways, roads and sidewalks. Rain gardens also help replenish groundwater resources, protect structures and landscaping, enhance the beauty of yards and provide wildlife habitat.

To help residents learn about the benefits of rain gardens, Worcester County officials developed Rain Gardens Across Maryland, a 52-page how-to manual for homeowners. They also provided examples of area gardens, including one recently installed at the Delmarva Discovery Center in Pocomoke City (see page 10) with cooperation from the Worcester County Natural Resources Division, Pocomoke City Middle School students and volunteers.
A partnership between Berlin officials and the nonprofit Habitat for Humanity is bringing energy-efficient new homes to the Flower Street neighborhood.

5. Infill Development in Berlin

Thanks to a partnership between Berlin and a nonprofit organization, the town’s Flower Street neighborhood is seeing residential growth despite the slow housing market facing many communities. With help and support from town officials, Habitat for Humanity purchased three lots and, in less than 12 months, completed construction of its first home and is at work on a second, all with green construction methods.

To gain water, sewer and other municipal services, Habitat worked closely with town staff, receiving a waiver on fees during construction. Green construction includes a LEED-certified designation, passive solar heating and energy-efficient appliances. The Mayor and City Council secured grant funding to purchase the land and provided site preparation services, expecting the project to stimulate infill redevelopment in the community.
Popular Byrd Park contains many environmental features as well as Goat Island, home to bearded ruminants as well as peacocks.

6. Byrd Park

Located along the Pocomoke River in Snow Hill, the 16.5-acre Byrd Park provides both a recreational and social focus for the community. Park development, which occurred on a former landfill site, began in 2005 by town officials who kept environmental needs in the forefront. Construction included digging a series of shallow grass channels lined with native plants funded by the Treemendous Maryland program, planting trees from the Department of Natural Resources, and environmental site design, all to help to meet stormwater regulations intended to control runoff. A unique feature is a submerged gravel wetland, Worcester County’s first.

Byrd Park’s bandstand, concession stand, playground, boat launching ramps, picnic pavilions, public fishing areas, basketball courts, dog park and foot bridge help draw many visitors. Byrd Park’s many amenities make it a premier location for outdoor events such as the Worcester County Fair.
This riverside park transformed an 8,000-square-foot municipal parking lot, protecting water quality in the Pocomoke River.

7. Sturgis Memorial Gateway Park

Sturgis Memorial Gateway Park, with native plant species, public walkways, a boardwalk and a canoe and kayak launch, was once a Snow Hill municipal parking lot paved to the edge of the Pocomoke River. As part of a stormwater management project intended to reduce pollutant loads by 10 percent, the riverside park slows and treats runoff through buffer plantings and an infiltration trench. The project is part of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network and is located within the Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Area and the Chesapeake Bay Critical Area, Intensely Developed Area (IDA).

The park replaced about 8,000 square feet of impervious parking with an attractive, user-friendly park that invites Snow Hill residents and visitors to enjoy the scenic Pocomoke River.
The Discovery Center draws crowds for its exhibits but also provides an example of sensitive historic redevelopment.

8. Delmarva Discovery Center

The Delmarva Discovery Center in Pocomoke City represents an adaptive reuse of a 1920s-era commercial building into a learning center focused on river ecology and the human history of the Pocomoke River and Delmarva Peninsula. Located on the Pocomoke River, the Discovery Center features exhibits on river ecology and Native American culture, an aquarium, touch tanks and a history of commercial fishing on the Chesapeake Bay.

The Discovery Center has been recognized and supported by environmental and tourism groups since it opened in 2009. It is part of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, a system of over 130 Chesapeake Bay-area special places, is located within the Maryland Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Area and has received funding from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority.
Roy Rogers was among the performers at the historic Mar-Va Theater, restored and modernized for 21st-century residents.

9. Mar-Va Theater

In 1927, the Mar-Va Theater was built on Pocomoke City’s main street as a 720-seat vaudeville theater. In its heyday, the Mar-Va was played by many famous performers, including Roy Rogers, Hop-a-Long Cassidy, Tom Mix and Smiley Burnett.

A preserved and restored Mar-Va Theater re-opened in 2007 after a 14-year hiatus. The Maryland Historical Trust, which provided two Capital Historic Preservation grants for the restoration work – $40,000 in 1998 and $18,250 in 2002 – was one of several granting agencies and donors. The theater now is operated by the Mar-Va Performing Arts Center, Inc., which runs a unique arts center that enhances culture and education for the community. The theater shows plays and movies and is rented out for events.
Thanks to effective improvement programs, OCDC has helped raise the total taxable value of downtown properties.

10. The Ocean City Development Corporation (OCDC)

The Ocean City Development Corporation (OCDC) was formed in 2000 as a nonprofit organization charged with revitalizing downtown Ocean City from 17th Street to the Inlet as well as the boardwalk. OCDC has made great strides in improving the look and feel of the downtown with efforts like a façade improvement program, which, since 2002, has helped renovate close to 150 downtown businesses and residential properties. Funded by the Maryland Department of Housing & Community Development’s Community Legacy Program, the program has channeled more than $4.8 million of private investment into restoring aging buildings, from funding new siding and porches to installing windows, railings and doors.

Thanks to the façade work and other downtown improvement programs, OCDC has helped raise the total taxable value of downtown property south of 4th Street by 139 percent, from $210 million to $502 million between 2000 and 2012.
A fund built from developer contributions bankrolls a mini-grant program aimed at environmentally oriented community projects.

11. Ocean City Mini-Grants

Ocean City town officials have established a mini-grant program to support environmental projects and education throughout the town. Aided by a mitigation bank developers pay into when projects do not meet the requirements of the town’s stormwater or critical area ordinances, the grant program has funded a variety of projects, from habitat protection to water quality improvement measures.

In four years, the program has funded 130 rain barrels, 70 beach district plantings and 40 BayScape gardens. One grant paid to print a rain garden how-to manual for homeowners. Thus far, about $46,000 has been expended in direct grants and cost-share projects.
Compact development is especially important in agricultural districts, which Worcester commissioners codified in 2009 through rural cluster provisions.

12. Rural Cluster Subdivisions

Worcester County, with its rural lands and strong agricultural heritage, has made great strides in farmland protection through effective planning and zoning. The Maryland Department of Planning rates the county’s agricultural districts – with a one unit per 20 acre limit and a five-lot subdivision limit– as one of the most protective in the state.

In 2009, the Board of County Commissioners incorporated rural cluster provisions that group residential uses into a compact arrangement with contiguous lot lines, minimum and maximum lot areas, and a requirement that development occur 200 feet from the roadway. To encourage the use of clustering, a sixth bonus lot is permitted. The clustering provision reduces fragmentation and inefficient use of farmland, prevents stripping of lots along roadways, and preserves the open vistas and rural character of Worcester County’s landscape.
Assist the State Growth Plan process at:

Plan.Maryland.gov

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