Introduction

In October 2024, St. Mary's County launched the project to update the Comprehensive Plan that was adopted in 2010 by the Commissioners for St. Mary's County. The updated plan, entitled St. Mary's 2050: Charting Our Tomorrow, will establish a cohesive, countywide vision for future land use and an actionable strategy to achieve it. An important part of the plan update is learning the public's vision for the future.

From **January 16th to March 3rd, 2025**, all members of the community were invited to participate in **Community Engagement Window #1** (CEW #1). Residents, property and business owners, and community partners had the opportunity to share their thoughts and future vision for St. Mary's County by taking part in **12 Community Visioning Sessions** (10 in-person, 2 virtual). During the Visioning Sessions, which took places from January 16th to February 22nd, participants took part in small group discussions and completed surveys and mapping activities. The same Visioning Activities were available online from February 3rd to March 3rd.

In total, 288 community members participated in CEW#1. 139 participated at a Community Engagement Session (in-person or virtual), while 149 participated online, asynchronously. This report summarizes the results from all open-ended (free response) questions that were part of the Community Visioning Activities. The results are summarized by individual question.

See next page for the beginning of the report.

St Mary's 2050: CEW #1 Public Engagement Themes by Question

Note: Themes draw from all 288 PublicInput.com participant responses to the open-ended questions that were part of the Community Visioning Activities.

Topic #1 – Charting Our Tomorrow

Question Posed to Participants: "Think about what you value about living in St. Mary's County today. Now, imagine St. Mary's County in 25-30 years from now as you would like it to be. Please describe your future vision for St. Mary's County. What do we need to do today to achieve this future vision?"

Topic #1 Response Themes:

Environmental Protection & Rural Preservation

- Preserve rural character, open spaces, and farmland
- Protect waterways, shorelines, and the Chesapeake Bay from pollution, while maintaining and expanding public access to the water and shore areas
- Maintain and expand access to green spaces, parks, and trails
- Prevent suburban sprawl and limit higher density of housing in rural areas
- Retain and expand support for agriculture, including watermen/oyster farming and all aspects of the farming industry, including Amish and Mennonite farms, small organic farms, and traditional/conventional agriculture

Housing & Development

- Increase affordable housing options to support residents at all income levels
- Promote smart growth and limit excessive big-box commercial development
- Encourage mixed-use developments, walkable communities, and local business and entrepreneur support as an alternative to sprawl and big-box-type development
- Focus on redevelopment and reuse of existing structures, when possible, especially in older areas of the county
- Provide innovative septic systems to support sustainable growth

Transportation & Infrastructure

- Improve traffic management and road infrastructure
- Expand public transit options, including bus services, bike lanes, and ferry connections
- Support an expanded or new bridge to Calvert County and a potential connection to Virginia or the Eastern Shore

- Ensure infrastructure improvements align with population growth

Economic Growth & Diversification
- Reduce dependence on NAS Pax by encouraging diverse industries
- Support small businesses over large chains
- Promote tourism in historical, outdoor recreation, and agricultural sectors
- Incentivize tech and scientific advancements while maintaining rural character—many participants felt that these two unique aspects of the county can, and should, coexist

Community Services & Amenities
- An excellent educational system was seen as important
- Strengthen the public school system and address overcrowding
- Expand healthcare access, including urgent care centers and specialized medical facilities
- Provide more recreational facilities, including sports complexes, pools, and entertainment for youth
- Increase support for seniors, including housing and healthcare services

Public Safety & Quality of Life
- Improve law enforcement and emergency response capabilities
- Enhance community policing and crime prevention
- Ensure well-maintained infrastructure to prevent issues like aging plumbing and insufficient roadways
- Encourage community engagement and inclusivity in planning decisions

Topic #2 – Celebrating our Rural Character

Question Posed to Participants: "St. Mary's County is known for its "rural character." When you think of the County's rural character, what things come to mind? What aspects of the County's rural character are most important to protect?"

Topic #2 Response Themes:

Agriculture and Rural Preservation
- Support for local farmers, small farms, and agricultural land preservation; respondents strongly supported the county's preservation efforts and wanted to maintain and expand this
- Encourage local food processing and meat-packaging facilities
- Preserve historic tobacco barns and incentivize their reuse
- Promote agritourism and farm experiences
- Limit housing developments on farmland and provide incentives to keep farms operational

Waterways and Environmental Protection

- Protect shorelines, wetlands, and waterways from erosion and pollution
- Ensure public access to waterfront areas for recreation (boating, fishing, hiking)
- Enforce regulations to prevent land clearing and preserve tree canopy
- Support sustainable growth that conserves forests, fields, and open spaces
- Limit commercial and residential development near critical environmental areas

Community and Cultural Heritage

- Preserve and support Amish and Mennonite communities
- Promote and protect local traditions, including farming, watermen culture, and historic sites
- Encourage cultural learning programs, local history recognition, and community festivals
- Limit the expansion of chain stores and promote small, locally owned businesses
- Maintain and expand rural town centers and village gathering spaces—help rural center develop in a walkable, community-feeling way, like downtown Leonardtown

Growth and Development Management

- Encourage responsible growth that maintains rural character
- Focus development within existing growth areas and town centers instead of sprawling into rural areas
- Limit large subdivisions and high-density housing in rural zones
- Prioritize revitalization of underutilized properties rather than new development
- Invest in infrastructure improvements without over-urbanizing the county
- Maintain low-density housing and minimize light and noise pollution in rural areas

Recreation and Public Spaces

- Expand and maintain parks, trails, and public green spaces
- Improve access to outdoor recreation, including equestrian trails and community gardens
- Ensure equitable access to water activities, beaches, and fishing areas
- Help more places have walkable living, shopping, and communities, via public investment if necessary
- Support and expand local farmers' markets; extremely strong support for farmers' markets in general

Infrastructure and Transportation

- Improve road maintenance and rural broadband access
- Expand public transportation to serve rural communities
- Expand public transportation options in general across the county, to nearby Maryland counties, and to the D.C. metropolitan area

- Add more biking and walking trails connecting the county for both recreational and daily use (shopping, accessing services or amenities, commuting) purposes
- Improve pedestrian safety across the county; connect and expand sidewalks in places that already have them, and add more sidewalks in other places
- Reduce traffic congestion and prevent overdevelopment near key intersections
- Maintain scenic corridors in rural areas by limiting signage and clear-cutting for development

Question 11: 'Other' responses to top priorities for public spending

Question Posed to Participants: "Rank the following in order of priority for public spending by dragging and dropping the listed items into your preferred ranking order. The top item conveys your highest priority and the bottom item conveys the lowest priority. If you believe that an item is missing from this list, click on the word "**other**" and type your response" Below is a summary of 'Other' responses to this question. For reference, the options given to rank were:

- Development Plan/Permit Reviewers (staff)
- EMS/Fire/Sheriff (staff and equipment and vehicles)
- Land Preservation (conservation easements)
- Public Utilities (water and sewer)
- Public Schools (facilities and staff)
- Recreation (expanded programs and facilities)
- Road improvements (improvements to unsafe or high traffic areas)
- Zoning inspection and compliance (Staff)
- **Other**

Question 11 Response Themes:

Transportation & Infrastructure
- Add shoulders to Medleys Neck Road for walking and biking
- Improve pedestrian, bike, and public transportation options
- Increase access to public transportation
- Solomons Bridge and Thomas Johnson Bridge improvements
- Enhance road maintenance on rural and urban roads
- Expand fiber optic communication lines to homes

Housing & Community Development
- Increase affordable housing options at varying income levels
- Provide affordable housing in the north end of the county
- Ensure affordable housing does not consist solely of condos or apartments
- Support town center-style development

Public Services & Facilities
- Expand libraries and community services
- Increase support for public works (trash, recycling)
- Improve hospital and medical services, including hospital expansion
- Strengthen human services for the elderly and disabled
- Support small businesses
- Develop an event center and sports facility
- Offer more senior center activities

Education & Workforce
- Support independent schools and educational opportunities
- Preserve farm and trade careers in the county
- Encourage integrated planning across all county government offices

Environmental, Conservation, Health Initiatives
- Maintain a healthy environment with clean air and water
- Protect more state land for conservation
- Reduce the number of stores selling liquor, tobacco, etc.

Public Safety & Emergency Services
- Address Fire & EMS volunteer recruitment and support programs
- Consider transition to professional Fire & EMS services at a sustainable cost

Cultural & Recreational Development
- Increase public art installations in the county

Policy & Governance
- Improve county ordinances for better governance and community development

Question 12. What topics were not raised in this survey that should be priorities in the new plan?

Transportation & Infrastructure
- Expansion of public transportation access, including either bus or light rail/any form of rail transportation to either DC directly or at least outlying WMATA stations, airport connections, and improved STS services Consideration for multimodal transit options, including walking and biking infrastructure
- More active transportation (walking and biking) infrastructure
- Improving roads in the county generally
- Addressing safety in general and focus on unsafe roads, poorly engineered intersections, and congestion, especially at key intersections (e.g., Route 4 and 235)
- Concerns about excessive traffic lights and the proliferation of strip malls, gas stations, car washes, etc.

Housing & Development
- Support for affordable housing, workforce housing, and alternative housing types (e.g., tiny homes, manufactured housing)
  - General calls for specific call-outs on affordable housing
- Concerns about higher-density housing in rural areas and its impact on community character
- Calls for balanced development that prioritizes revitalization of aging or vacant buildings over new construction
- Addressing homelessness and housing insecurity through increased county support
- Concerns about overdevelopment, suburban sprawl, and the need to preserve the county's rural character
- Importance of clear zoning regulations and preventing unwanted development
- Calls for better enforcement of existing zoning ordinances and permit processes

Economic Development & Workforce
- Diversification of the local economy beyond NAS Pax to include more non-base high technology, unmanned systems, and small business growth
- Attraction of large businesses to strengthen the commercial tax base and provide job opportunities
- Incentives for small businesses
- Strong focus on incentives for farmers to stay in farming, including incentives for young people to enter farming professions
- Support for agricultural and forestry economic sustainability, including Amish and Mennonite communities
- Strategic business development to prevent oversaturation of specific types of businesses (e.g., gas stations, liquor stores)
- Calls for workforce development programs, including daycare accessibility

Healthcare & Human Services
- Need for expanded healthcare access
- Improved social services, including drug rehabilitation, mental health services, and support for the unhoused
- Addressing the needs of an aging population, including eldercare, senior housing, and medical transportation

Education & Community Services
- Increased funding and support for independent schools, libraries, and public education

- Better access to daycare and early childhood education services
- More youth entertainment and recreational facilities, such as an ice rink, arcades, and community centers
- Community engagement and transparency in government decision-making

Environmental Sustainability & Climate Resilience
- Coastal preservation and protection of wetlands
- Climate resilience strategies, including solar panel installations on public buildings and parking lots
- Smart growth policies to limit development in flood-prone areas
- Encouraging mixed-use developments with integrated green spaces

Cultural & Recreational Amenities
- Investment in arts, culture, and historic preservation
- Expansion of public waterfront access, beaches, and outdoor recreation options
- Support for sailing communities and water-based tourism
- More public art

Public Safety & Governance
- Increased funding for law enforcement and crime prevention
- Improved code enforcement to address litter, abandoned signs, and property maintenance
- Transparency in the planning process, including clearer zoning regulations

Interactive Map #1: Where to Grow (Growth Areas) - Comments appended to map pins
Question Description and Instructions Given to Participants:

Using the interactive map below, drag and drop pins onto places that, in your opinion:

1. Are in need of redevelopment/investment to improve the character, safety, and quality of development

2. Should be changed to a less intensive growth area category

3. Should be changed to a more intensive growth area category

4. Are in need of water/wastewater infrastructure investment to support future development or to alleviate problems with failing well and septic systems

For each pin that you put on the map, include a comment describing what the place is that you are identifying and why you placed a pin there.

Tech tip: If you are using a smaller screen to complete this survey, like a cell phone, make sure to zoom closer into the map to be able to drag and drop your pins.

Once you have selected a pin to drop on the map, note that the pin selection area will temporarily disappear until you drag and drop the pin on the map. Once you drop the pin, you will be able to see all types of pins again and select another.

Limit of 20 pins placed per survey-taker.

Interactive Map #1 Response Themes:

Transportation & Safety
- Concerns about dangerous intersections with frequent accidents
- Traffic congestion seen as worsening with increasing development
- Calls for additional vehicle lanes and new bridges before permitting further growth
- Need for improved pedestrian connectivity and walkability

Growth & Development
- Concerns about ongoing levels of residential and commercial growth, especially in Charlotte Hall and Lexington Park
- Some calls to halt new development in Lexington Park, Leonardtown, and Myrtle Point Peninsula
- Suggestions to focus on redevelopment rather than new construction
- Emphasis on preserving rural character and limiting sprawl
- Requests to balance growth with adequate infrastructure investments

Infrastructure & Utilities
- Need for improved water and sewer systems, particularly in Wildewood and Lexington Park
- Aging infrastructure in areas with high growth and rental rates
- Complaints about poor drainage and flood-prone areas (failing septic)
  - Requests for modernized septic systems

Housing & Community Needs
- Requests for more senior housing options
- Interest in mixed-use developments and walkable communities
- Calls for more affordable housing, particularly for students and staff at St Mary's College
- Concerns about new housing developments causing increased traffic and school enrollment

Economic Development & Business Support
- Calls for redevelopment in the Great Mills Rd. area
- Desire for locally owned businesses rather than chain stores
- Need for additional grocery stores in underserved areas

Recreation & Public Amenities

- Requests for more youth activity centers and recreational spaces (namely indoor)
- Need for improved parks and community gathering spaces

Tourism & Cultural Investment
- Desire to expand tourism southward to capture more travel dollars
- Emphasis on investing in Historic St Mary's City (HSMC) as a key tourism driver
- Interest in a new hotel in the northern part of the county

Environmental Concerns
- Calls to protect flood-prone areas from further development

Public Services & Institutions
- Need for additional libraries, particularly in high-growth areas; general support for public library services
- Interest in a second YMCA and upgraded community facilities
- Requests for more public services in Lexington Park and Great Mills

Crime & Neighborhood Stability
- Concerns about crime in certain areas of the county, and the perception that crime is getting worse in some areas (and focus on crime in those areas)
- Calls to revitalize Lexington Park
- Need for crime reduction efforts alongside economic redevelopment

Interactive Map #2: Getting Around (Transportation) - Comments appended to map pins

Question Description and Instructions Given to Participants:

Using the interactive map below, drag and drop pins onto areas on the map that, in your opinion, are:

1. Experiencing safety or high congestion issues that need to be addressed*

2. Opportunities for adding more biking or walking trails or sidewalks*

3. Locations that could benefit from expanded public transit service*

For each pin that you put on the map, include a comment describing what the place is that you are identifying and why you placed it there. _

Tech tip: If you are using a smaller screen to complete this survey, like a cell phone, make sure to zoom closer into the map to be able to drag and drop your pins.

Once you have selected a pin to drop on the map, note that the pin selection area will temporarily disappear until you drag and drop the pin on the map. Once you drop the pin, you will be able to see all types of pins again and select another.

Limit of 20 pins placed per survey-taker.

Interactive Map #2 Response Themes:

Traffic Safety & Congestion

- Dangerous intersection at St Andrews Church Road and Wildewood Parkway, particularly near Ballet Caliente and Lineage BJJ, with no traffic control and frequent accidents
- High congestion along key corridors, particularly Route 235, Route 5, and Great Mills Road. General concerns about NAS Pax traffic
- Requests for additional turn lanes, including:
  - Turn lane off Route 4 onto FDR
  - Right turn lane onto FDR at Chancellor's Run
  - Turn lane in front of Salsas shopping center for easier access
- Unsafe driving behaviors on roads from Charlotte Hall to Mechanicsville and Leonardtown/Hollywood, including excessive speeding, shoulder driving, tailgating, and aggressive driving
- Major congestion issues at key intersections, including:
  - Great Mills & Route 5 intersection
  - Intersection of Route 242 and Route 5, especially during school commute times
  - Intersection of Route 234 and Route 5, which needs a traffic light and merge lane removal
  - Route 4 bridge traffic, causing delays and preventing emergency vehicles from passing
- Additional traffic lights or roundabouts needed at key locations, including near the hospital and neighborhoods
- Afternoon traffic issues worsened by poorly managed light cycles and inadequate turning lanes

Public Transit & Alternative Transportation

- Lack of public transit access to key areas, including St Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) and surrounding communities
- Desire to add new STS routes
- Shuttle service proposed along Great Mills Road, Chancellor's Run, and Route 235 to improve mobility
- Expansion of public transit routes to include Route 238 and Route 242 for high school access
- Need for buses or shuttles for NAS PAX River base commuters to reduce congestion

- Bus-based park-and-ride expansion recommended to connect commuters to the WMATA's Green Line, etc.
- Consider an e-bike voucher program to promote biking as an alternative to short car trips

Pedestrian & Bicycle Infrastructure

- Wildewood neighborhood needs consistent bike lanes, sidewalks, and traffic law enforcement
- Gaps in sidewalks should be completed, particularly along Great Mills Road and major corridors
- Sidewalks on Great Mills Road are poorly maintained and not cleared after snowfalls
- Expansion and maintenance of hiking and biking trails, including:
  - Completion of the Three Notch Trail
  - Repairing asphalt damage on the Three Notch Trail caused by tree roots
  - Adding walking/hiking trails in various locations around the county, including/around existing parks and connecting to more key community destinations

Comments: 11 Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at the Community Visioning Session you attended (if applicable) or with completing these online activities?

Public Engagement & Outreach

- More advance notice for sessions would improve attendance
- Some participants only heard about the sessions a few days before they happened
- Would like sessions to be better publicized (county website, social media, Channel 95, commissioner meetings)
- More advertising and outreach needed to ensure broader participation
- Appreciation for the opportunity to provide input

Session Experience & Structure

- Sessions were well done, engaging, and informative (many responses mentioned this)
- Interactive activities and maps were helpful for visualization
- Some felt there was "too much talking" at the beginning of the session; felt more time should be allocated for discussion
- Some participants desired more interaction between attendees and staff
- Some felt that walking through a survey that's available online felt like a waste of time
- Some people are not comfortable with group sessions

- Appreciation for the availability of a Spanish-language session
- Gratitude for weekend session availability

Staff & Facilitation Appreciation
- County staff and consultants were helpful, professional, and knowledgeable
- Presenters were personable, engaging, and answered questions well
- Appreciation for staff's effort in conducting multiple visioning sessions

Technology & Accessibility Comments
- Mapping tools were difficult to use; pins were not user-friendly
- Online participation is a good option, but in-person interaction is still valuable
- Meetings should account for potential technology issues (e.g., Wi-Fi, website functionality)
- Some found it difficult to answer questions on maps
- Some attendees struggled with online inputs due to age-related challenges

Plan Content & Policy Concerns
- Some questions about growth and growth areas were perceived as biased by certain respondents
- Desire for more discussion on programs, land use planning, and zoning changes
- Concern over too much development changing the county's character
- Requests for more focus on transportation
- Some want less dense growth areas while preserving rural character
- Suggestions for including more community-building spaces, particularly for remote workers
- Concerns over overreliance on the state for infrastructure funding (e.g., bridges)

Community & Economic Development
- Desire for better shopping options for St Mary's College students
- Requests for businesses like Costco and Trader Joe's to located in the county
- Appreciation for small local businesses but concerns about variety and affordability
- Some miss traditional "Mom-and-Pop" stores and seek better promotion for existing businesses
- Calls for adaptive reuse of existing buildings rather than constructing new ones

Comments About Race & Inclusion
- A few respondents objected to the inclusion of questions about race and ethnicity
- Requests for inclusive, all-pen-friendly questionnaire formats
- Appreciation for efforts to make engagement sessions accessible to diverse communities

Future Engagement & Follow-Up
- Desire for more opportunities for larger group discussions and exchange of ideas
- Interest in receiving updates via email, text, or phone

- Requests for more transparency on how input will influence decision-making
- Suggestion to compare pre- and post-Return to Office (RTO) responses (related to NAS Pax) to assess impact