



ST. MARY'S 2050

CHARTING OUR TOMORROW

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.

See next page for the beginning of the report.

St. Mary's 2050: CEW #1 Public Engagement Overall Themes

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

Environmental Protection & Rural Preservation

The county's rural character was highly valued by respondents, with strong calls for preserving its natural beauty and open spaces. Participants emphasized the importance of protecting waterways, forests, and farmland, alongside preventing overdevelopment and pollution in rural areas. There was particular concern regarding the erosion of traditional rural landscapes due to suburban sprawl, though some felt the county's rural areas are already not very "rural" compared to decades past. Protecting farming in the county to keep it sustainable, including supporting Amish and Mennonite communities, was seen as integral to the region's rural identity. A diverse income base for farms, including maintaining and adding local sales and processing infrastructure, was mentioned by a number of survey-takers. There was also support for maintaining the county's unique watermen culture and oyster farming + aquaculture. Additionally, a large number of participants emphasized expanding protection of the county's shoreline and shore-adjacent natural areas, while pointing out a strong desire for greater public access to the water and shore areas.

Housing and Growth Management

A significant theme revolved around the challenge of balancing new development with maintaining the county's rural character. There was strong support for expanding affordable and workforce housing to address housing insecurity, but not at the expense of the environment. Participants called for stricter zoning regulations to guide responsible development, with a focus on expanding compact, walkable town centers in a Leonardtown-like development pattern. Many saw adaptive reuse and redevelopment of existing buildings as a solution to expanding housing options, rather than suburban sprawl. Addressing homelessness and ensuring equitable access to housing resources for everyone in the community were also top priorities.

Transportation and Infrastructure

The community expressed a need for improvements in transportation infrastructure, particularly regarding road safety, congestion, and traffic flow in certain areas. Improving multimodal transportation options, such as the bus system, bike lanes, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, were frequently mentioned by participants as something they'd support. There was also support for expanding the bridge between St. Mary's County and

Calvert County, plus the idea of adding a bridge to Virginia. Enhanced broadband infrastructure was noted as a key component for boosting economic development, particularly in rural communities.

Economic Diversification & Small Business Support

Economic diversification emerged as a central concern, with many participants calling for reducing reliance on only a few key industries, such as the Navy base. Though they expressed great appreciation for what NAS Pax has brought to the county, there was a collective desire to encourage growth in high-technology, general tourism, and partnering with institutions like St. Mary's College. Strengthening the rural and agricultural economy—particularly through agritourism and simply supporting the continued existence of farming as a way of life—was seen as crucial. There was a strong interest in ensuring that small, locally owned businesses can thrive, with a push to limit the encroachment of national chains throughout the county.

Community Services & Quality of Life

Survey-takers repeatedly highlighted the need for expanded healthcare services, particularly for urgent care, elder care, and mental health resources. There was a robust desire for more recreational amenities, including outdoor spaces like parks and trails, but especially indoor (winter) recreational and cultural spaces/opportunities for children. Many respondents mentioned a lack of indoor recreational opportunities for children in the colder months. Improving education and workforce training was a priority, with a focus on providing better access to early childhood education. There was also strong support for strengthening public services like public libraries and community centers to improve quality of life, especially for underserved areas of the county.

Public Safety & Governance

Public safety emerged as a critical theme, with many residents calling for improvements in emergency response systems and law enforcement. There is a concern about recruitment and retention of emergency responders, and several respondents emphasized the need for better coordination in disaster preparedness. Governance issues were also highlighted, with a desire for more transparent decision-making and accountability in county planning and zoning.