

# *Caroline County*

## *Department of Planning & Codes*



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### **Planning Commission Staff Report, September 10, 2025**

**Staff Contact:** Olivia Vidotto, Long Range Planner

**Item:** Economic Development Chapter

#### **Summary:**

The Economic Development chapter is attached for your review.

Staff has provided a red-lined version of the chapter to reflect the edits to the in-house working document, along with a clean edited copy of the chapter – with no revisions shown – for your review. To assist in your review, the edits in the red-lined version are summarized below:

- Wording that is shown in red with a strike through line is from the 2010 Comprehensive Plan and is being deleted. Example: ~~Please have a nice day.~~
- Wording that is shown in red is new and proposed for the 2026 Comprehensive Plan update. Example: **We are going to have a nice day.**

**Request:** Each chapter of the Comprehensive Plan contains a substantial amount of information, but our key focus will be on two areas: the goals and objectives at the beginning of each chapter and the implementation strategies at the end of each chapter. These strategies are recommended actions to achieve the goals and objectives outlined at the beginning of the chapter. During your review, consider if the goals and objectives are appropriate and attainable, and if the implementation strategies are aligned with and support the goals and objectives. We will discuss the content and gather recommendations to finalize this chapter.

## CHAPTER 7: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Caroline County's economic development objectives aim to foster a thriving economy that enhances residents' quality of life while preserving the County's rural agricultural character. These objectives include supporting the growth of businesses, improving workforce development through partnerships with educational institutions, and directing economic activity to designated growth areas to prevent sprawl. The County also seeks to protect and promote its agricultural economy, invest in infrastructure to attract and retain businesses, and leverage its natural, cultural and historical assets to boost tourism. Sustaining a healthy economy is basic to the quality of life objectives embodied in this Comprehensive Plan. Objectives for economic development include:

- Actively support and strengthen the growth, innovation, and long-term sustainability of both existing and new businesses to create a stable and thriving economy that provides value for all residents.
- Support and promote the establishment of new businesses, with an emphasis on those that generate higher-wage employment opportunities for County residents. This effort should include targeted incentives to attract high-value businesses and organizations along with supporting the long-term success of existing companies.
- Promote the development of workforce training programs in coordination with local and regional partners, with a focus on high-demand sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing and technology. As labor market needs continue to evolve – and as employers continue to struggle to find qualified workers – it is essential to integrate career training into the public school curriculum, support dedicated training facilities, and foster partnerships with local businesses to create apprenticeship and work-based opportunities.
- Promote economic and tourism activities that attract visitors who contribute to the local economy while minimizing long-term impacts on community resources and quality of life.
- Foster economic growth that supports and enhances agricultural innovation, the agricultural community and its long-term sustainability.
- Encourage the growth of local and regional industries that prioritize and promote the use of locally grown and produced products.
- Ensure that the land designated for industrial, commercial, and institutional uses is appropriately located for the specific designations while allowing flexibility for complementary or related uses that enhance and support the primary use and functions.

- Promote economic development by ensuring adequate industrial and commercial zoning – especially in strategic locations such as railroad corridors – and by coordinating infrastructure investments with long-term land use planning.
- Expand the County's economic development staff and foster coordinated partnerships between the County, towns, and municipalities to support water and sewer infrastructure expansion, and collaboratively attract new businesses, promote tourism, and enhance countywide economic development.

The County should continue to collaborate with municipalities to advance key priorities such as growth management, development of community facilities, and community revitalization, all aimed at enhancing the economic prospects.

The most significant economic development constraints facing the County include:

- Inadequate infrastructure to support new business development including limited access to natural gas pipelines;
- A shortage of available commercial and industrial land which further limits the opportunities for business expansion, job creation and long-term regional competitiveness;
- Limited availability of skilled labor and nearby training facilities which hinder economic diversification and make the region less attractive to potential employers seeking a qualified work pool;
- A constrained local tax base restricts the funding available for essential public services, infrastructure improvements, and economic development initiatives, further limiting the ability for the community to grow and thrive;
- Insufficient access to basic and affordable housing, as well as a lack of new housing developments that would attract new large employers, and support sustained economic growth, workforce expansion and community revitalization.
- A lack of public transportation options limits access to employment and education opportunities and creates barriers to economic participation and regional connectivity

### **Agricultural Industries**

In 2017, according to statistics prepared by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and Agricultural Census, Caroline County had 588 farms with an average farm size of 229 acres and in 2022 the number of farms decreased to 525 with an average farm size of 212 acres.

As shown in Table 7-1, in 2022, Caroline County generated approximately \$371 million from agricultural industries, based on the total market value of production. This is a 34% increase from 2017 when the total was about \$277 million. On a per-farm basis, the average market value of production increased from \$471,535 in 2017 to \$707,303 in 2022, representing a 50% increase. It is also important to note that government payments decreased from \$3,028,000 in 2017 to \$859,000 in 2022 – a reduction of approximately 72%. Government payments

decreased between 2017 and 2022 due to changes in federal farm programs, reduced participation, and shifts in crop conditions. Some payments increased temporarily during COVID-19, but many of those relief programs phased out within a few years, contributing to the overall decrease. This funding remains critical to supporting and sustaining the County’s agricultural sector.

Table 7-1: USDA Census of Agriculture for Caroline County - 2022		
<b>Agricultural Classifications</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2022</b>
Number of Farms	588	525
<b>Land in Farms (Acres)</b>	<b>128,137</b>	<b>111,470</b>
Average Farm Size (Acres)	218	212
Total Farm Production Expenses	\$192,116,000	\$269,792,000
Total Farm Production Expenses - Avg. Per Farm	\$326,426	\$513,889
Market Value of Production – Avg. Per Farm (dollars)	\$471,535	\$707,303
<b>TOTAL - Market Value of Production (\$1000)</b>	<b>\$277,140,000</b>	<b>\$371,334,000</b>
Source: 2017 & 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture		

**New Industries Rooted in Agriculture**

**Agritourism**

Agritourism is defined as any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm. It combines elements of agriculture and tourism to provide experiences that connect people to rural life and farming practices. Examples include U-pick fruit and vegetable operations, corn mazes and hayrides, petting zoos, wine tastings at vineyards, educational farm tours or school field trips, and farmers markets held on farm properties.

Caroline County has several farms that fall under the category of agritourism, with existing operations expected to expand and new ones likely to emerge in the coming years.

**Cannabis**

The state of Maryland, under House Bill 881 in 2014 enacted the law for licensed cultivation, processing, and sale to medical patients which became active in 2017. Under House Bills 837 (2022) and House Bill 556 (2023), Recreational (Adult-Use) for cannabis the referendum passed November 2022 with the law taking effect and sales beginning July 1, 2023. This was for licensed cultivation, processing, and retail sales to adults age 21 and older and home growing

permitted (up to 2 plants). Caroline County Board of County Commissioners initiated emergency legislation under Legislative Bill 20-25-1 on April 8, 2025, designed to align with Maryland's statewide legalization framework. It defines where dispensaries, growers, and processors may operate (commercial vs. industrial zones), mandated setback adherence, and required site plan approval, all while ensuring regulatory fairness and compliance.

### **Industrial & Business Parks**

- Federalsburg Industrial Park – Encompassing 250 acres with existing industrial structures and several privately owned industrial building sites. The park is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection. The Maryland & Delaware Railroad line borders the park.
- Frank M. Adams Industrial Park – This park is adjacent to the Federalsburg Industrial Park and features existing structures along with three industrial sites on 22 acres. The park is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection. The park is served by the Maryland & Delaware Railroad line.
- Caroline Industrial Park – This park is near downtown Federalsburg consisting of 8 acres. This park is equipped with electricity, natural gas, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection.
- Denton Industrial Park – Located in Denton with 120 acres and equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection.
- Mid-Shore Regional Technology & Business Park – Located near downtown Ridgely, this park encompasses 72 acres and is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, sidewalks, streetlights, and fire and police protection.

### **Enterprise Zones**

An enterprise zone is a designated geographic area where governments offer special incentives and support to encourage economic development, business investment, and job creation. Caroline County has two enterprise zone areas.

- Federalsburg Enterprise Zone – This encompasses all three Federalsburg industrial parks, most downtown and commercial areas along with some industrial properties located just outside the town limits. Businesses within the Enterprise Zone are eligible for two powerful tax credits.
- North County Enterprise Zone – This encompasses most commercial and industrial property in the towns of Ridgely, Greensboro, and Goldsboro. Businesses within the Enterprise Zone are eligible for two powerful tax credits.

## **Mineral Extraction**

Caroline County's sand and gravel is a valuable non-renewable resource that should be extracted and used with careful thought regarding the future. The sand and gravel extraction industry in the County provides basic raw materials for the construction and paving industries throughout the region, primarily for construction outside of the County. The industry plays an important role in supporting local growth and development and is important to both the local and national economy. Section 15-802; Title 15; Subtitle 8: Surface Mining of the Annotated Code of Maryland states that "local jurisdictions must protect mineral resources from the encroachment of other land uses that could potentially make these resources unavailable for future use." In addition, surface mining laws require that land uses be balanced to ensure areas for mineral extraction. In 1975, Surface Mining Laws were enacted in Maryland, mainly for implementing environmental controls through State approved mining and reclamation plans and processes. A two-tiered process of State and local regulations assist in preserving mineral resources, while also allowing flexibility for the mining industry. As of May 2025, Caroline County had 21 active surface mining operations.

Growth and development should be located appropriately to protect our mineral resources. While the County should not prohibit or deter mining operations near municipalities or Transferable Development Rights receiving areas, careful consideration should be given to the impacts of mining operations on residents, roads and aesthetics. Surface mining should continue to be an accepted use in the County approved by "Special Use Exception" through the Caroline County Board of Zoning Appeals. Through this process, "quality of life" issues for nearby residents should be considered during Special Use Exception process. Reclamation issues and site specific conditions should be addressed at that time.

## **Surface Mining Performance and Site Mitigation Standards**

Caroline County has developed "Surface Mining Performance and Site Mitigation Standards" (Performance Standards) to guide all types of mining operations. Buffers are essential to alleviate public concerns, and landscaping should include indigenous vegetation suitable to existing climate and soil conditions. Tall story and under-story vegetation is required, and landscape buffers should be initiated before mineral extraction commences to provide suitable time for vegetation to grow. Regulations and requirements have been strengthened for mining projects to ensure greater oversight and accountability. The County will continue to review mining operation projects to minimize adverse impacts on adjacent properties and surrounding community. Furthermore, permit applicants must clearly demonstrate the intended end use of the property following the conclusion of mining activities.

## **Other Industries**

According to the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) for Caroline County's fourth quarter of 2022 the average employment with 9,643 workers between private and government sectors is shown in Table 7-2.

According to the earnings by industry prepared by Maryland Department of Planning (see Table 7-3), earnings by private industry are increasing overall. The industries that saw notable increases during the period between 2016-2022 were farm earnings, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and administrative and waste services. Finance and insurance are slow but steady.

Type	Number of Employees
Federal Government	64
State Government	217
Local Government	1,553
Natural Resources & Mining *	405
Construction	908
Manufacturing	1,103
Trade, Transportation & Utilities	2,797
Information	226
Financial Activities	176
Professional & Business Services	379
Education & Health Services	1,022
Leisure & Hospitality	533
Other Services	274
Source: Maryland Labor * Farming/Agricultural positions fall under Natural Resources	

The Trade, Transportation & Utilities category has the largest number of employees. This category is a broad industry group used in labor statistics that combines three distinct sectors:

**Trade (Wholesale & Retail)** – These are jobs related to buying and selling of goods – either to businesses (wholesale) or to consumers (retail).

### **Wholesale Trade**

- Sales representatives (B2B)
- Warehouse managers
- Logistics coordinators
- Delivery drivers (non-retail)
- Forklift operators

### **Retail Trade**

- Cashiers
- Store managers

- Sales associates
- Stock clerks
- Auto parts & tire shop workers
- Grocery, clothing, electronics store employees

Transportation and Warehousing – Jobs involved in moving goods or people by land, air, or sea and in storing goods.

### Transportation

- Truck drivers (local & long-haul)
- Bus drivers
- Delivery drivers (e.g., FedEx, UPS)
- Railroad workers
- Pilots and flight attendants
- Taxi/rideshare drivers
- Transit system workers

### Warehousing and Storage

- Warehouse workers
- Shipping and receiving clerks
- Inventory control specialists
- Forklift operators

**Utilities** – Jobs related to essential public services, including:

- Electric power generation/distribution workers
- Water and wastewater treatment operators
- Natural gas technicians
- Lineworkers/utility electricians
- Meter readers
- Utility engineers (e.g., power, gas, water systems)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Farm earnings	44,554	66,914	44,753	54,794	7,540	71,632	127,901
Nonfarm earnings	583,475	610,919	643,814	668,882	685,691	754,274	799,165
<b>Total</b>	<b>628,029</b>	<b>677,833</b>	<b>688,567</b>	<b>723,676</b>	<b>693,231</b>	<b>825,906</b>	<b>927,066</b>
<b>Private earnings</b>							
Construction	63,264	71,687	79,809	85,553	84,775	87,573	98,164
Manufacturing	63,807	69,024	72,974	79,267	73,819	97,359	108,227
Retail Trade	51,096	54,744	59,712	58,846	63,823	73,973	80,748
Transportation and warehousing	80,760	86,040	87,109	92,773	93,064	109,687	110,460
Finance and insurance	10,358	11,766	12,325	11,759	11,540	11,838	13,081

Real estate, rental and leasing	(D)	5,856	(D)	8,679	(D)	(D)	(D)
Administrative and waste services	16,399	17,572	19,455	21,860	26,513	33,228	(D)
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	(D)	(D)	1,963	2,589	2,033	2,723	(D)
Accommodation and food services	(D)	(D)	10,516	11,064	11,768	13,113	(D)
Other	34,062	35,843	36,577	37,723	38,928	41,381	45,431
<b>Government and government enterprises</b>	118,586	123,225	127,963	129,790	136,908	139,581	146,016
Prepared by the Maryland Department of Planning from U.S. BEA Table CA05N, 2023							
(D) = Not shown to avoid disclosure of confidential information but included in totals							

Government and government enterprises are the highest paying earnings and consistently rank among the top-paying sectors due to higher-skilled and credentialed positions, structured pay scales, strong benefits, and public service stability.

## Commuting & Employment Characteristics

As shown in Table 7-4, the County has exceptional access to regional markets. Transportation improvements, such as the dualization of MD Route 404, has greatly increased access for commuters. The final phase of the dualization of MD Route 404 is a high priority and has been formally requested for inclusion at the top of SHA's project list. Proximity to major U.S. cities and highways can create tremendous economic potential for the County in years to come. The closest cities are Annapolis and Baltimore, Maryland, and Dover, Delaware.

There is also a continuing concern that the number of jobs available in the County continually falls short of the number of people in the workforce. According to the 2023 U.S. Census Bureau data, 51.61% of the residents commute to work outside of the County with 39.57% working inside of the County. The average commute is 32.7 minutes and is the 9<sup>th</sup> worst commute in the state.

<b>Metropolitan Area</b>	<b>Distance</b>	<b>Approximate Travel Time</b>
Annapolis, MD	45 Miles	53 Minutes
Baltimore, MD	63 Miles	1 Hour and 20 minutes
Washington, D.C.	75 Miles	1 Hour and 20 minutes
Wilmington, DE	83 Miles	1 Hour and 40 minutes
Dover, DE	32 Miles	45 Minutes
New York, NY	197 Miles	3.75 Hours
Philadelphia, PA	110 Miles	2.25 Hours
Richmond, VA	175 Miles	3.5 Hours

Statistics prepared by the Caroline County Department of Planning & Codes using MapQuest and Travelmath – travel time based on non-stop driving and normal traffic conditions.

As shown in Table 7-5 the majority of workers (55%) commute less than 30 minutes to work. Most workers commuted to a job site (71%) with 7% indicating a home occupation (worked in place of residence). Forty-four percent (44%) worked in Caroline County and fifty-six percent (56%) worked outside Caroline in another County or State.

<b>Travel Time to Work</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Total “Out of Home” Workers	13,386	100%
Less than 30 minutes	7,345	55%
30 – 44 minutes	3,184	24%
45 – 59 minutes	1,245	9%
60 minutes or more	1,612	12%
<b>Place of Work – State/County Level</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Total Workers	14,093	100%
Worked in State of Residence	12,515	88%
Worked Outside State of Residence	1,578	11%
Worked in County of Residence	6,219	44%
Worked Outside County of Residence	6,292	45%
<b>Mean Travel Time to Work</b>	<b>Minutes Commute)</b>	<b>59 Minutes (Public Transportation)</b>

U.S. Census Bureau – Census 2020 Commuting & Workforce Characteristics – Caroline County, Maryland

<b>County</b>	<b>U.S. BEA</b>	<b>U.S. BEA</b>	<b>MDP</b>	<b>MDP</b>	<b>MDP</b>
	<b>2010</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2030</b>	<b>2040</b>
Caroline	13,307	14,370	15,200	16,600	17,200
Cecil	40,136	44,479	47,500	52,500	55,900
Kent	12,705	10,979	11,500	12,000	12,700
Queen Anne’s	21,964	23,928	25,400	27,400	29,500
Talbot	27,223	25,760	26,300	26,800	27,900
Dorchester	16,033	16,728	17,200	17,700	18,900
Somerset	10,497	8,949	9,400	9,900	10,700
Wicomico	55,799	56,347	57,800	59,800	63,200
Worcester	32,007	32,747	33,700	35,200	36,000

Source: Historical data from U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) through 2020, MDP after 2020 (updated October 2022)

## Income Characteristics

It should be noted that during the 2020 U.S. Census, 12.4% of Caroline County’s population were below the poverty line, about 1.3 times the rate in Maryland of 9.4% but the same rate for the United States. Per Maryland.gov information, Caroline County had an unemployment rate

of 3.0% in April, 2025 tied with two other counties as the second lowest among the nine counties of the Eastern Shore and the same as the State average.

As shown in Table 7-7, in 2023 Caroline County Median Household Income was \$66,368 and Per Capita Income was \$56,447. Caroline County income levels were significantly lower than both Maryland and national averages. County Median Household income was 52.5% less than the State average and 20.5% less than the national average. Maryland had the third highest median household income in the US in 2023. The Per Capita Income for Caroline County was 33% less than the State average and 21% less than the national average.

<b>Caroline County</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Median Household Income	\$69,663	\$66,368	-4.73%
Avg. Per Capita Personal Income	\$47,923	\$56,447	+17.79 %
<b>Comparison</b>	<b>Caroline County</b>	<b>Maryland</b>	<b>United States</b>
Median Household Income	\$66,638	\$101,652	\$80,610
Per Capita Personal Income	\$56,447	\$75,391	\$68,531
Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census			

These income projections are economic indicators of the amount of available capital for individuals and families to purchase goods and services, when compared with cost of living data. On the Eastern Shore, Caroline County’s cost of living index for 2023 compares most closely with the Lower Eastern Shore counties of Dorchester and Wicomico, both of which also have large agricultural communities. However, Dorchester and Wicomico both have a lower cost of living index than Caroline but Dorchester has a greater per capita income (see Table 7- 8). This can be attributed to Dorchester having an urban center located on Maryland Route 50. The metro core (Salisbury and the surrounding area) and Cambridge are very developed and defined growth areas and serve as major employment centers.

<b>County</b>	<b>Cost of Living Index</b>	<b>Per Capita Personal Income</b>
Caroline	92.7	56,447
Cecil	102.3	59,373
Kent	92.9	77,025
Queen Anne's	151.0	83,650
Talbot	93.8	98,166
Dorchester	92.5	57,060

Somerset	91.3	37,345
Wicomico	92.3	48,596
Worcester	83.3	68,163
Source: Cost of Living Index, Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, 2023		

## Economic Development Initiatives

Major economic development initiatives in Caroline County focus on enhancing regional infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale, expanding tourism opportunities and fostering the growth of new industry opportunities. These strategic and coordinated efforts are expected to significantly improve the economic prospects and long-term competitiveness for Caroline County.

Infrastructure includes roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, as well as technological infrastructure such as fiber optics and broadband. Adequate and modern infrastructure is essential to attracting new businesses and supporting economic growth. In addition to physical assets, access to reliable public and private services – such as healthcare, education, and workforce development – is also critical to make the County an attractive location for business investment.

Regional “economies of scale” strengthen interjurisdictional connections across counties, municipalities, and state and federal agencies by maximizing shared investments and reducing long-term costs. New economic development councils assist in facilitating regionalism. In Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties the regional economic development entity is the Mid-Shore Regional Council. The County helped the Council develop the *Midshore Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)*. Among the projects in the action plan were the North County Water and Sewer project and the Mid- Shore Regional Business and Technology Park located in Ridgely. The Maryland Broadband Cooperative is proposing to install fiber optical cables from Centreville, Queen Anne’s County to Ridgely, from Ridgely to Denton, and from Denton to Easton, Talbot County. Caroline County should plan for the potential industrial growth that may occur in areas where broadband will be available.

A variety of incentives are available to attract new businesses, motivate existing businesses to relocate and support the growth and retention of existing ones. These incentives should be implemented and utilized to maximize the opportunities for business growth and retention.

### Non-Financial Incentives:

- Streamlined permitting and licensing – Simplify applications and approval processes to reduce costs and delays for businesses.
- Technical assistance and training – Facilitate workshops, mentoring, and business advisory services by partnering with established companies to provide

expertise and networking opportunities. These initiatives would promote workforce development that can support the hiring needs of existing companies along with helping entrepreneurs to improve skills, learn business operations, and provide business relationships.

- Educational training – Offer training sessions focused on navigating funding available, to identify and apply for state and federal grants, as well as available tax credits for businesses. Provide guidance on financial assistance programs and understanding eligibility requirements. Additionally, conduct sessions that help entrepreneurs and small business owners understand county regulations, zoning requirements, and permitting processes – for traditional business locations and in-home occupations.
- Networking opportunities – Facilitate connections through business meetups, local Chamber of Commerce, or other business groups.
- Marketing support – Promote local businesses throughout community websites, social media, or local events.
- Access to Public Spaces – Provide free or low-cost access to public venues for pop-up shops, markets, or community events.
- Recognition Programs – Create awards or certification programs to highlight and promote local businesses.
- Zoning Code Update – Review the permitted uses and associated conditions for commercial businesses and consider incorporating additional predefined conditions for certain businesses that currently require review and approval by the Board of Zoning Appeals that could be approved administratively, provided they meet the established conditions.

#### Low-Cost Financial Incentives:

- Fee waivers or reductions – Reduce or waive local fees for licenses, permits or other required items for new or expanding businesses.
- Tax deferrals – Allow businesses to defer certain local taxes temporarily to assist start up and ease cash flow.
- Facilitate access to external funding – Help businesses with state or federal grant programs, nonprofit loans, or crowdfunding platforms.

#### Community-based initiatives:

- Business incubation support – Partner with nonprofits, universities, or regional organizations to provide shared workspace and resources at a low cost or at no cost.
- Volunteer support – Engage local professionals and retirees to volunteer time as mentors or advisors.
- Collaborative purchasing – Help small businesses band together to purchase supplies or services in bulk at discounted rates.

Tourism is a vital industry that supports small local businesses in Caroline County. Recent efforts to improve tourism in Caroline County have focused on promoting the county's rich history – most notably through the reopening of the Linchester Mill as a historical destination. A nature trail has been developed behind the mill providing nature pathways, linking visitors to historic Underground Railroad crossing routes and is the first Braille signed trail. Picnic tables have been added, and special events are hosted throughout the year. Additionally, the development of scenic byways aim to attract visitors by highlighting the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the region.

The Chesapeake Culinary Center - also known as Caroline Culinary Arts – was initiated by the Friends of the Grape, Inc., partnered with the Denton Development Corporation, Town of Denton, Caroline County, and Caroline County Board of Education to provide training opportunities for high school students and adults in the food service/tourism industry. It is a vibrant nonprofit culinary hub providing culinary education, community classes, a community kitchen for local entrepreneurs and farmers, along with a catering service. It is housed in the beautifully restored, historic Caroline County High School building that was originally built around 1901. In 2016, the Maryland Historical Trust awarded it the Project Excellence: Partnerships award for outstanding historic preservation efforts.

Denton was officially designated as the first American Discovery Trail “Trail Town” with a formal recognition by the American Discovery Trail Society for its unique relationship with the coast-to-coast Great American Discovery Trail. This emphasizes its role in supporting hikers, cyclists and equestrians along the roughly 6,800 mile national trail spanning 15 states from Delaware to California and will support increased tourism and trail-based recreation.

There should be a continued and expanded investment in arts and cultural programs that showcase local and regional artists – including live music performances – along with more annual events, festivals, and holiday-themed celebrations, all which will engage locals and attract new visitors.

The County should plan unincorporated growth near municipalities and invest in infrastructure and public services to support that growth. Growth within and around municipalities can attract new employers, stimulate the development of local businesses – particularly in downtown areas – and increase demand for service-sector jobs. Additionally, a growing population may boost the agricultural economy through an increased demand in locally grown produce and locally made goods. Strengthening the local economy may also attract or retain a younger population that will broaden the tax base needed to support essential public services, particularly those required by a growing elderly population.

## **Economic Development Implementation**

- To support and strengthen both existing and new businesses, the County should conduct regular business needs assessments through surveys and focus groups

- to better understand local challenges and opportunities. Provide financial incentives such as grants, low-interest loans, and tax breaks to help businesses grow and remain viable. Streamline permitting and licensing processes to reduce administrative and time burdens making it easier for businesses to open, operate, and expand. Additionally, the development of business incubators, shared workspaces and “pop-up” opportunities will foster entrepreneurship and provide critical support for startups and small-scale enterprises.
- Partner with economic development organizations to attract businesses in high-wage sectors. Evaluate the full range of available incentive options and implement all that will best support business growth and community development. Promote infrastructure investments – such as broadband expansion, utility upgrades, and transportation improvements – to ensure the County is well equipped to support new business development and long-term economic growth.
  - To strengthen the local workforce and align with industry needs, the County, in partnership with Caroline County Public Schools, should target funding for apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training programs. Hosting regular employer roundtables to identify current and future workforce skill gaps. Provide a centralized job and training resource portal for residents and businesses.
  - To attract visitors who contribute to the local economy while minimizing long-term impacts on the community, the County should develop and market unique local events, festivals, and cultural experiences throughout the year to attract both residents and visitors in every season. Invest in tourism infrastructure (signage, parking) that supports short-term visits. Encourage development of lodging, dining, and retail businesses that serve tourists. Promote agritourism, history and eco-tourism experiences that align with rural and natural settings. Collaborate with regional tourism boards to amplify marketing efforts, broaden outreach, and attract a wider range of visitors.
  - Protect prime farmland through conservation easements and zoning policies that preserve land for long-term agricultural use. Encourage agricultural related business ventures like processing, packaging and farm-to-table enterprises. Facilitate access to markets through regional food hubs and cooperative networks. Promote water and soil conservation practices that ensure long-term land productivity for future generations.
  - Create incentives for businesses that source raw materials or ingredients locally through tax deductions or credits. Support branding and certification programs and create a recognizable badge or certification for businesses that meet a local sourcing threshold. This helps increase visibility and consumer trust in local products. Assist in connecting producers with retailers, restaurants, and institutions along with promoting local goods at farmers markets, craft fairs, and online marketplaces.
  - With the review of the Zoning Code, ensure that zoning designations and requirements align with current and future land use goals and establish clear

zoning regulations that permit mixed-use development where appropriate.. Engage stakeholders in land use planning to balance economic goals with community character. Maintain buffer zones and allow flexibility to increase buffer areas and dimensions as needed to reduce conflicts between industrial, commercial and residential uses.

- As part of the review of the Zoning Code and the Zoning Maps, evaluate if there is sufficient industrial and commercial zoned land – including areas near railroad corridors – to attract businesses. Align infrastructure development – such as roads, public water and sewer, telecommunications, and other utilities – with long-term planning.
- Increase the County’s economic development staff and budget to lead and support collaboration with the towns and municipalities. A formal partnership framework should be established to coordinate water and sewer expansion projects and align infrastructure with business and tourism development. Tourism efforts should focus on attract visitors who contribute to the local economy short-term stays and day trips, minimizing long-term impacts on infrastructure, schools, and public services. Joint marketing efforts, shared incentives, and coordinated outreach will help attract new businesses, and promote the region. Progress will be tracked through measurable outcomes and reported annually to all partners.

DRAFT

## CHAPTER 7: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Caroline County's economic development objectives aim to foster a thriving economy that enhances residents' quality of life while preserving the County's rural agricultural character. These objectives include supporting the growth of businesses, improving workforce development through partnerships with educational institutions, and directing economic activity to designated growth areas to prevent sprawl. The County also seeks to protect and promote its agricultural economy, invest in infrastructure to attract and retain businesses, and leverage its natural, cultural and historical assets to boost tourism. Sustaining a healthy economy is basic to the quality of life objectives embodied in this Comprehensive Plan. Objectives for economic development include:

- Actively support and strengthen the growth, innovation, and long-term sustainability of both existing and new businesses to create a stable and thriving economy that provides value for all residents.
- Support and promote the establishment of new businesses, with an emphasis on those that generate higher-wage employment opportunities for County residents. This effort should include targeted incentives to attract high-value businesses and organizations along with supporting the long-term success of existing companies.
- Promote the development of workforce training programs in coordination with local and regional partners, with a focus on high-demand sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing and technology. As labor market needs continue to evolve – and as employers continue to struggle to find qualified workers – it is essential to integrate career training into the public school curriculum, support dedicated training facilities, and foster partnerships with local businesses to create apprenticeship and work-based opportunities.
- Promote economic and tourism activities that attract visitors who contribute to the local economy while minimizing long-term impacts on community resources and quality of life.
- Foster economic growth that supports and enhances agricultural innovation, the agricultural community and its long-term sustainability.
- Encourage the growth of local and regional industries that prioritize and promote the use of locally grown and produced products.
- Ensure that the land designated for industrial, commercial, and institutional uses is appropriately located for the specific designations while allowing flexibility for

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complementary or related uses that enhance and support the primary use and functions.

- Promote economic development by ensuring adequate industrial and commercial zoning – especially in strategic locations such as railroad corridors – and by coordinating infrastructure investments with long-term land use planning.
- Expand the County's economic development staff and foster coordinated partnerships between the County, towns, and municipalities to support water and sewer infrastructure expansion, and collaboratively attract new businesses, promote tourism, and enhance countywide economic development.

The County should continue to collaborate, with municipalities to advance key priorities, such as growth management, development of community facilities, and community revitalization, all aimed at enhancing the economic prospects.

The most significant economic development constraints facing the County include:

- Inadequate infrastructure to support new business development including limited access to natural gas pipelines;
- A shortage of available commercial and industrial land which further limits the opportunities for business expansion, job creation and long-term regional competitiveness;
- Limited availability of skilled labor and nearby training facilities, which hinder economic diversification and make the region less attractive to potential employers seeking a qualified work pool;
- A constrained local tax base restricts the funding available for essential public services, infrastructure improvements, and economic development initiatives, further limiting the ability for the community to grow and thrive;
- Insufficient access to basic and affordable housing, as well as a lack of new housing developments that would attract new large employers, and support sustained economic growth, workforce expansion and community revitalization;
- A lack of public transportation options limits access to employment and education opportunities and creates barriers to economic participation and regional connectivity.

### **Agricultural Industries**

In 2017, according to statistics prepared by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and Agricultural Census, Caroline County had 588 farms with an average farm size of 229 acres and in 2022 the number of farms decreased to 525 with an average farm size of 212 acres.

As shown in Table 7-1, in 2022, Caroline County generated approximately \$371 million from agricultural industries, based on the total market value of production. This is a 34% increase

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from 2017 when the total was about \$277 million. On a per-farm basis, the average market value of production increased from \$471,535 in 2017 to \$707,303 in 2022, representing a 50% increase. It is also important to note that government payments decreased from \$3,028,000 in 2017 to \$859,000 in 2022 – a reduction of approximately 72%. Government payments decreased between 2017 and 2022 due to changes in federal farm programs, reduced participation, and shifts in crop conditions. Some payments increased temporarily during COVID-19, but many of those relief programs phased out within a few years, contributing to the overall decrease. This funding remains critical to supporting and sustaining the County's agricultural sector.

As shown in Table 7-1, in 2022, Caroline County generated approximately \$371 million from agricultural industries, based on the total market value of production. This is a 34% increase from 2017 when the total was about \$277 million. On a per-farm basis, the average market value of production increased from \$471,535 in 2017 to \$707,303 in 2022, representing a 50% increase. It is also important to note that government payments decreased from \$3,028,000 in 2017 to \$859,000 in 2022 – a reduction of approximately 72%. Government payments decreased between 2017 and 2022 due to changes in federal farm programs, reduced participation, and shifts in crop conditions. Some payments increased temporarily during COVID-19, but many of those relief programs phased out within a few years, contributing to the overall decrease. This funding remains critical to supporting and sustaining the County's agricultural sector.

Table 7-1: USDA Census of Agriculture for Caroline County, - 2022

**Agricultural Classifications**  
2017

	<u>2022</u>
Number of Farms	<u>525</u>
<u>588</u>	
<b>Land in Farms (Acres)</b>	
<u>128,137</u>	<u>111,470</u>
<b>Average Farm Size (Acres)</b>	
<u>218</u>	<u>212</u>
Total Farm Production Expenses	
<u>\$192,116,000</u>	<u>\$269,792,000</u>
Total Farm Production Expenses - Avg. Per Farm	
<u>\$326,426</u>	<u>\$513,889</u>
<b>Market Value of Production – Avg. Per Farm (dollars)</b>	
<u>\$471,535</u>	<u>\$707,303</u>
<b>TOTAL - Market Value of Production <u>(\$1000)</u></b>	

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\$371,334,000

Source: 2017 & 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture,

## New Industries Rooted in Agriculture

### Agritourism

Agritourism is defined as any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm. It combines elements of agriculture and tourism to provide experiences that connect people to rural life and farming practices. Examples include U-pick fruit and vegetable operations, corn mazes and hayrides, petting zoos, wine tastings at vineyards, educational farm tours or school field trips, and farmers markets held on farm properties.

Caroline County has several farms that fall under the category of agritourism, with existing operations expected to expand and new ones likely to emerge in the coming years.

### Cannabis

The state of Maryland, under House Bill 881 in 2014 enacted the law for licensed cultivation, processing, and sale to medical patients which became active in 2017. Under House Bills 837 (2022) and House Bill 556 (2023), Recreational (Adult-Use) for cannabis the referendum passed November 2022 with the law taking effect and sales beginning July 1, 2023. This was for licensed cultivation, processing, and retail sales to adults age 21 and older and home growing permitted (up to 2 plants). Caroline County Board of County Commissioners initiated emergency legislation under Legislative Bill 20-25-1 on April 8, 2025, designed to align with Maryland's statewide legalization framework. It defines where dispensaries, growers, and processors may operate (commercial vs. industrial zones), mandated setback adherence, and required site plan approval, all while ensuring regulatory fairness and compliance.

### Industrial & Business Parks

- Federalsburg Industrial Park – Encompassing 250 acres with existing industrial structures and several privately owned industrial building sites. The park is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection. The Maryland & Delaware Railroad line borders the park.
- Frank M. Adams Industrial Park – This park is adjacent to the Federalsburg Industrial Park and features existing structures along with three industrial sites on 22 acres. The park is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved

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roads, and fire and police protection. The park is served by the Maryland & Delaware Railroad line.

- Caroline Industrial Park – This park is near downtown Federalsburg consisting of 8 acres. This park is equipped with electricity, natural gas, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection.
- Denton Industrial Park – Located in Denton with 120 acres and equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, and fire and police protection.
- Mid-Shore Regional Technology & Business Park – Located near downtown Ridgely, this park encompasses 72 acres and is equipped with electricity, water and sewer, broadband internet access, paved roads, sidewalks, streetlights, and fire and police protection.

### Enterprise Zones

An enterprise zone is a designated geographic area where governments offer special incentives and support to encourage economic development, business investment, and job creation. Caroline County has two enterprise zone areas.

- Federalsburg Enterprise Zone – This encompasses all three Federalsburg industrial parks, most downtown and commercial areas along with some industrial properties located just outside the town limits. Businesses within the Enterprise Zone are eligible for two powerful tax credits.
- North County Enterprise Zone – This encompasses most commercial and industrial property in the towns of Ridgely, Greensboro, and Goldsboro. Businesses within the Enterprise Zone are eligible for two powerful tax credits.

### Mineral Extraction

Caroline County’s sand and gravel is a valuable non-renewable resource that should be extracted and used with careful thought regarding the future. The sand and gravel extraction industry in the County provides basic raw materials for the construction and paving industries throughout the region, primarily for construction outside of the County. The industry plays an important role in supporting local growth and development and is important to both the local and national economy. Section 15-802; Title 15; Subtitle 8: Surface Mining of the Annotated Code of Maryland states that “local jurisdictions must protect mineral resources from the encroachment of other land uses that could potentially make these resources unavailable for future use.” In addition, surface mining laws require that land uses be balanced to ensure areas for mineral extraction. In 1975, Surface Mining Laws were enacted in Maryland, mainly for implementing environmental controls through State approved mining and reclamation plans and processes. A two-tiered process of State and local regulations assist in preserving mineral resources, while also allowing flexibility for the mining industry. As of May 2025, Caroline County had 21 active surface mining operations.

local regulations assist in preserving mineral resources, while also allowing flexibility for the mining industry. As of May 2025, Caroline County had 21 active surface mining operations. local regulations assist in preserving mineral resources, while also allowing flexibility for the mining industry. As of May 2025, Caroline County had 21 active surface mining operations.

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Growth and development should be located appropriately to protect our mineral resources. While the County should not prohibit or deter mining operations near municipalities or Transferable Development Rights receiving areas, careful consideration should be given to the impacts of mining operations on residents, roads and aesthetics. Surface mining should continue to be an accepted use in the County approved by "Special Use Exception" through the Caroline County Board of Zoning Appeals. Through this process, "quality of life" issues for nearby residents should be considered during Special Use Exception process. Reclamation issues and site specific conditions should be addressed at that time.

Growth and development should be located appropriately to protect our mineral resources. While the County should not prohibit or deter mining operations near municipalities or Transferable Development Rights receiving areas, careful consideration should be given to the impacts of mining operations on residents, roads and aesthetics. Surface mining should continue to be an accepted use in the County approved by "Special Use Exception" through the Caroline County Board of Zoning Appeals. Through this process, "quality of life" issues for nearby residents should be considered during Special Use Exception process. Reclamation issues and site specific conditions should be addressed at that time.

**Surface Mining Performance and Site Mitigation Standards**

Caroline County has developed, "Surface Mining Performance and Site Mitigation Standards" (Performance Standards) to guide all types of mining operations. Buffers are essential to alleviate public concerns, and landscaping should include indigenous vegetation suitable to existing climate and soil conditions. Tall story and under-story vegetation is required, and landscape buffers should be initiated before mineral extraction commences to provide suitable time for vegetation to grow. Regulations and requirements have been strengthened for mining projects to ensure greater oversight and accountability. The County will continue to review mining operation projects to minimize adverse impacts on adjacent properties and surrounding community. Furthermore, permit applicants must clearly demonstrate the intended end use of the property following the conclusion of mining activities.

**Other Industries**

According to the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) for Caroline County's fourth quarter of 2022 the average employment with 9,643 workers between private and government sectors is shown in Table 7-2.

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¶ Surface mining industries place burdens on local infrastructure, particularly large-scale operations ...
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According to the earnings by industry prepared by Maryland Department of Planning (see Table 7-3), earnings by private industry are increasing overall. The industries that saw notable increases during the period between 2016-2022 were farm earnings, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and administrative and waste services. Finance and insurance are slow but steady.

Table 7-2 Breakdown by Industry Category

<u>Type</u>	<u>Number of Employees</u>
<u>Federal Government</u>	<u>64</u>
<u>State Government</u>	<u>217</u>
<u>Local Government</u>	<u>1,553</u>
<u>Natural Resources &amp; Mining *</u>	<u>405</u>
<u>Construction</u>	<u>908</u>
<u>Manufacturing</u>	<u>1,103</u>
<u>Trade, Transportation &amp; Utilities</u>	<u>2,797</u>
<u>Information</u>	<u>226</u>
<u>Financial Activities</u>	<u>176</u>
<u>Professional &amp; Business Services</u>	<u>379</u>
<u>Education &amp; Health Services</u>	<u>1,022</u>
<u>Leisure &amp; Hospitality</u>	<u>533</u>
<u>Other Services</u>	<u>274</u>

Source: Maryland Labor \* Farming/Agricultural positions fall under Natural Resources

The Trade, Transportation & Utilities category has the largest number of employees. This category is a broad industry group used in labor statistics that combines three distinct sectors:

**Trade (Wholesale & Retail)** – These are jobs related to buying and selling of goods – either to businesses (wholesale) or to consumers (retail).

**Wholesale Trade**

- Sales representatives (B2B)
- Warehouse managers
- Logistics coordinators
- Delivery drivers (non-retail)
- Forklift operators

**Retail Trade**

- Cashiers
- Store managers
- Sales associates
- Stock clerks
- Auto parts & tire shop workers
- Grocery, clothing, electronics store employees

Transportation and Warehousing – Jobs involved in moving goods or people by land, air, or sea and in storing goods.

**Transportation**

- Truck drivers (local & long-haul)
- Bus drivers
- Delivery drivers (e.g., FedEx, UPS)
- Railroad workers
- Pilots and flight attendants
- Taxi/rideshare drivers
- Transit system workers

**Warehousing and Storage**

- Warehouse workers
- Shipping and receiving clerks
- Inventory control specialists
- Forklift operators

Utilities – Jobs related to essential public services, including:

- Electric power generation/distribution workers
- Water and wastewater treatment operators
- Natural gas technicians

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- [Lineworkers/utility electricians](#)
- [Meter readers](#)
- [Utility engineers \(e.g., power, gas, water systems\)](#)

**Table 7-3: Earnings by Industry (in thousands of dollars)**

		<a href="#">2016</a>	<a href="#">2017</a>	<a href="#">2018</a>	<a href="#">2019</a>	<a href="#">2020</a>	<a href="#">2021</a>	<a href="#">2022</a>
<a href="#">Farm earnings</a>		<a href="#">44,554</a>	<a href="#">66,914</a>	<a href="#">44,753</a>	<a href="#">54,794</a>	<a href="#">7,540</a>	<a href="#">71,632</a>	<a href="#">127,901</a>
<a href="#">Nonfarm earnings</a>	<a href="#">583,475</a>	<a href="#">610,919</a>	<a href="#">643,814</a>	<a href="#">668,882</a>	<a href="#">685,691</a>	<a href="#">754,274</a>	<a href="#">799,165</a>	
<a href="#">Total</a>		<a href="#">628,029</a>	<a href="#">677,833</a>	<a href="#">688,567</a>	<a href="#">723,676</a>	<a href="#">693,231</a>	<a href="#">825,906</a>	<a href="#">927,066</a>
<a href="#">Private earnings</a>								

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Construction

63,264  
71,687  
79,809  
85,553  
84,775  
87,573  
98,164

Manufacturing

63,807  
69,024  
72,974  
79,267  
73,819  
97,359  
108,227

Retail Trade

51,096  
54,744  
59,712  
58,846  
63,823  
73,973  
80,748

Transportation and warehousing

80,760  
86,040  
87,109  
92,773  
93,064  
109,687  
110,460

Finance and insurance

10,358  
11,766  
12,325  
11,759  
11,540  
11,838  
13,081

Real estate, rental and leasing

(D)  
5,856  
(D)  
8,679

	(D)
	(D)
	(D)
<u>Administrative and waste services</u>	16,399
	<u>17,572</u>
	<u>19,455</u>
	<u>21,860</u>
	<u>26,513</u>
	<u>33,228</u>
	(D)
<u>Arts, entertainment, and recreation</u>	(D)
	(D)
	<u>1,963</u>
	<u>2,589</u>
	<u>2,033</u>
	<u>2,723</u>
	(D)
<u>Accommodation and food services</u>	(D)
	(D)
	<u>10,516</u>
	<u>11,064</u>
	<u>11,768</u>
	<u>13,113</u>
	(D)
<u>Other</u>	34,062
	<u>35,843</u>
	<u>36,577</u>
	<u>37,723</u>
	<u>38,928</u>
	<u>41,381</u>
	<u>45,431</u>
<u>Government and government enterprises</u>	118,586
	<u>123,225</u>
	<u>127,963</u>
	<u>129,790</u>
	<u>136,908</u>
	<u>139,581</u>
	<u>146,016</u>

Prepared by the Maryland Department of Planning from U.S. BEA Table CA05N, 2023



45 Minutes

New York, NY

197 Miles

3.75 Hours

Philadelphia, PA

110 Miles

2.25 Hours

Richmond, VA

175 Miles

3.5 Hours

Statistics prepared by the Caroline County Department of Planning & Codes [using MapQuest and Travelmath](#) – travel time based on non-stop driving and normal traffic conditions.

[As shown in Table 7-5 the majority of workers \(55%\) commute less than 30 minutes to work. Most workers commuted to a job site \(71%\) with 7% indicating a home occupation \(worked in place of residence\). Forty-four percent \(44%\) worked in Caroline County and fifty-six percent \(56%\) worked outside Caroline in another County or State.](#)

**Table 7-5: Work Force & Commuting Characteristics – Caroline County**

**Travel Time to Work**

<u>Total</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<u>Total "Out of Home" Workers</u>	
<u>13,386</u>	<u>100%</u>
<u>Less than 30 minutes</u>	
<u>7,345</u>	<u>55%</u>
<u>30 – 44 minutes</u>	
<u>3,184</u>	<u>24%</u>
<u>45 – 59 minutes</u>	
<u>1,245</u>	<u>9%</u>
<u>60 minutes or more</u>	
<u>1,612</u>	<u>12%</u>

**Place of Work – State/County Level**

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Total Workers  
14,093  
100%

Worked in State of Residence  
12,515  
88%

Worked Outside State of Residence  
1,578  
11%

Worked in County of Residence  
6,219  
44%

Worked Outside County of Residence  
6,292  
45%

Mean Travel Time to Work  
30 Minutes (Public Transportation)

59 Minutes (Public Transportation)

U.S. Census Bureau – Census 2020 Commuting & Workforce Characteristics – Caroline County, Maryland

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Table 7-6: Historical and Projected Total Jobs by Place of Work for Maryland's Eastern Shore Jurisdictions

County

MDP  
MDP  
MDP

U.S. BEA  
U.S. BEA

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2010  
2020  
2025  
2030  
2040

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Caroline

13.307  
14.370  
15.200  
16.600  
17.200

Cecil

40.136  
44.479  
47.500  
52.500  
55.900

Kent

10.979  
11.500

12.705

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12.000  
12.700

Queen Anne's

21.964  
23.928  
25.400  
27.400  
29.500

Talbot

27.223  
25.760  
26.300  
26.800  
27.900

Dorchester

16.033  
16.728  
17.200  
17.700  
18.900

Somerset

10.497  
8.949  
9.400  
9.900  
10.700

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2020  
2023  
Percent Change

Median Household Income  
\$69,663  
\$66,368  
-4.73%

Avg. Per Capita Personal Income  
\$47,923  
\$56,447  
+17.79%

Comparison  
Caroline County  
Maryland  
United States

Median Household Income  
\$66,638  
\$101,652  
\$80,610

Per Capita Personal Income  
\$56,447  
\$75,391  
\$68,531

Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census

These income projections are economic indicators of the amount of available capital for individuals and families to purchase goods and services, when compared with cost of living data. On the Eastern Shore, Caroline County's cost of living index for 2023 compares most closely with the Lower Eastern Shore counties of Dorchester and Wicomico, both of which also have large agricultural communities. However, Dorchester and Wicomico both have a lower cost of living index than Caroline but Dorchester has a greater per capita income (see Table 7-8). This can be attributed to Dorchester having an urban center located on Maryland Route 50. The metro core (Salisbury and the surrounding area) and Cambridge are very developed and defined growth areas and serve as major employment centers.

Table 7-8: Cost of Living Index & Per Capita Income Per Eastern Shore County (2023)

County  
Cost of Living  
Index  
Per Capita Personal  
Income

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Caroline  
92.7  
56,447

Cecil  
102.3  
59,373

Kent  
92.9  
77,025

Queen Anne's  
151.0  
83,650

Talbot  
93.8  
98,166

Dorchester  
92.5  
57,060

Somerset  
91.3  
37,345

Wicomico  
92.3  
48,596

Worcester  
83.3  
68,163

Source: Cost of Living Index, Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, 2023  
2023

**Economic Development Initiatives**  
**Economic Development Initiatives**  
**Economic Development Initiatives**

Major economic development initiatives in Caroline County focus on enhancing regional infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale, expanding tourism opportunities and fostering the growth of new industry opportunities. These strategic and coordinated efforts are expected to significantly improve the economic prospects and long-term competitiveness for

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Caroline County.

Infrastructure includes roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, as well as technological infrastructure such as fiber optics and broadband. Adequate and modern infrastructure is essential to attracting new businesses and supporting economic growth. In addition to physical assets, access to reliable public and private services – such as healthcare, education, and workforce development – is also critical to make the County an attractive location for business investment.

Regional “economies of scale” strengthen interjurisdictional connections across counties, municipalities, and state and federal agencies by maximizing shared investments and reducing long-term costs. New economic development councils assist in facilitating regionalism. In Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties the regional economic development entity is the Mid-Shore Regional Council. The County helped the Council develop the *Midshore Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)*. Among the projects in the action plan were the North County Water and Sewer project and the Mid-Shore Regional Business and Technology Park located in Ridgely. The Maryland Broadband Cooperative is proposing to install fiber optical cables from Centerville, Queen Anne’s County to Ridgely, from Ridgely to Denton, and from Denton to Easton, Talbot County. Caroline County should plan for the potential industrial growth that may occur in areas where broadband will be available.

A variety of incentives are available to attract new businesses, motivate existing businesses to relocate and support the growth and retention of existing ones. These incentives should be implemented and utilized to maximize the opportunities for business growth and retention.

Non-Financial Incentives:

- Streamlined permitting and licensing – Simplify applications and approval processes to reduce costs and delays for businesses.
- Technical assistance and training – Facilitate workshops, mentoring, and business advisory services by partnering with established companies to provide expertise and networking opportunities. These initiatives would promote workforce development that can support the hiring needs of existing companies along with helping entrepreneurs to improve skills, learn business operations, and provide business relationships.
- Educational training – Offer training sessions focused on navigating funding available, to identify and apply for state and federal grants, as well as available tax credits for businesses. Provide guidance on financial assistance programs and understanding eligibility requirements. Additionally, conduct sessions that help entrepreneurs and small business owners understand county regulations, zoning requirements, and permitting processes – for traditional business locations and in-home occupations.
- Networking opportunities – Facilitate connections through business meetups, local Chamber of Commerce, or other business groups.

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- [Marketing support – Promote local businesses throughout community websites, social media, or local events.](#)
- [Access to Public Spaces – Provide free or low-cost access to public venues for pop-up shops, markets, or community events.](#)
- [Recognition Programs – Create awards or certification programs to highlight and promote local businesses.](#)
- [Zoning Code Update – Review the permitted uses and associated conditions for commercial businesses and consider incorporating additional predefined conditions for certain businesses that currently require review and approval by the Board of Zoning Appeals that could be approved administratively, provided they meet the established conditions.](#)

Low-Cost Financial Incentives:

- [Fee waivers or reductions – Reduce or waive local fees for licenses, permits or other required items for new or expanding businesses.](#)
- [Tax deferrals – Allow businesses to defer certain local taxes temporarily to assist start up and ease cash flow.](#)
- [Facilitate access to external funding – Help businesses with state or federal grant programs, nonprofit loans, or crowdfunding platforms.](#)

Community-based initiatives:

- [Business incubation support – Partner with nonprofits, universities, or regional organizations to provide shared workspace and resources at a low cost or at no cost.](#)
- [Volunteer support – Engage local professionals and retirees to volunteer time as mentors or advisors.](#)
- [Collaborative purchasing – Help small businesses band together to purchase supplies or services in bulk at discounted rates.](#)

Tourism is a vital industry that supports small local businesses in Caroline County. Recent efforts to improve tourism in Caroline County have focused on promoting the county's rich history – most notably through the reopening of the Linchester Mill as a historical destination. A nature trail has been developed behind the mill providing nature pathways, linking visitors to historic Underground Railroad crossing routes and is the first Braille signed trail. Picnic tables have been added, and special events are hosted throughout the year. Additionally, the development of scenic byways aim to attract visitors by highlighting the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the region.

Tourism is a vital industry that supports small local businesses in Caroline County. Recent efforts to improve tourism in Caroline County have focused on promoting the county's rich history – most notably through the reopening of the Linchester Mill as a historical destination. A nature trail has been developed behind the mill providing nature pathways, linking visitors to historic Underground Railroad crossing routes and is the first Braille signed trail. Picnic tables have been added, and special events are hosted throughout the year. Additionally, the development of scenic byways aim to attract visitors by highlighting the natural beauty and cultural heritage

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[of the region.](#)

[The Chesapeake Culinary Center, also known as Caroline Culinary Arts – was initiated by the Friends of the Grape, Inc., partnered with the Denton Development Corporation, Town of Denton, Caroline County, and Caroline County Board of Education to provide training opportunities for high school students and adults in the food service/tourism industry. It is a vibrant nonprofit culinary hub providing culinary education, community classes, a community kitchen for local entrepreneurs and farmers, along with a catering service. It is housed in the beautifully restored, historic Caroline County High School building that was originally built around 1901. In 2016, the Maryland Historical Trust awarded it the Project Excellence: Partnerships award for outstanding historic preservation efforts.](#)

[Denton was officially designated as the first American Discovery Trail “Trail Town” with a formal recognition by the American Discovery Trail Society for its unique relationship with the coast-to-coast Great American Discovery Trail. This emphasizes its role in supporting hikers, cyclists and equestrians along the roughly 6,800 mile national trail spanning 15 states from Delaware to California and will support increased tourism and trail-based recreation.](#)

[There should be a continued and expanded investment in arts and cultural programs that showcase local and regional artists – including live music performances – along with more annual events, festivals, and holiday-themed celebrations, all which will engage locals and attract new visitors.](#)

The County should plan unincorporated growth near municipalities and [invest in infrastructure and public services to support that growth. Growth within and around municipalities can attract new employers, stimulate the development of local businesses – particularly in downtown areas – and increase demand for service-sector jobs. Additionally, a growing population may boost the agricultural economy through an increased demand in locally grown produce and locally made goods. Strengthening the local economy may also attract or retain a younger population that will broaden the tax base needed to support essential public services, particularly those required by a growing elderly population.](#)

## Economic Development Implementation

- [To support and strengthen both existing and new businesses, the County should conduct regular business needs assessments through surveys and focus groups to better understand local challenges and opportunities. Provide financial incentives such as grants, low-interest loans, and tax breaks to help businesses grow and remain viable. Streamline permitting and licensing processes to reduce administrative and time burdens making it easier for businesses to open, operate,](#)

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and expand. Additionally, the development of business incubators, shared workspaces and “pop-up” opportunities will foster entrepreneurship and provide critical support for startups and small-scale enterprises.

- Partner with economic development organizations to attract businesses in high-wage sectors. Evaluate the full range of available incentive options and implement all that will best support business growth and community development. Promote infrastructure investments – such as broadband expansion, utility upgrades, and transportation improvements – to ensure the County is well equipped to support new business development and long-term economic growth.
- To strengthen the local workforce and align with industry needs, the County, in partnership with Caroline County Public Schools, should target funding for apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training programs. Hosting regular employer roundtables to identify current and future workforce skill gaps. Provide a centralized job and training resource portal for residents and businesses.
- To attract visitors who contribute to the local economy while minimizing long-term impacts on the community, the County should develop and market unique local events, festivals, and cultural experiences throughout the year to attract both residents and visitors in every season. Invest in tourism infrastructure (signage, parking) that supports short-term visits. Encourage development of lodging, dining, and retail businesses that serve tourists. Promote agritourism, history and eco-tourism experiences that align with rural and natural settings. Collaborate with regional tourism boards to amplify marketing efforts, broaden outreach, and attract a wider range of visitors.
- Protect prime farmland through conservation easements and zoning policies that preserve land for long-term agricultural use. Encourage agricultural related business ventures like processing, packaging and farm-to-table enterprises. Facilitate access to markets through regional food hubs and cooperative networks. Promote water and soil conservation practices that ensure long-term land productivity for future generations.
- Create incentives for businesses that source raw materials or ingredients locally through tax deductions or credits. Support branding and certification programs and create a recognizable badge or certification for businesses that meet a local sourcing threshold. This helps increase visibility and consumer trust in local products. Assist in connecting producers with retailers, restaurants, and institutions along with promoting local goods at farmers markets, craft fairs, and online marketplaces.
- With the review of the Zoning Code, ensure that zoning designations and requirements align with current and future land use goals and establish clear zoning regulations that permit mixed-use development where appropriate.. Engage stakeholders in land use planning to balance economic goals with community character. Maintain buffer zones and allow flexibility to increase buffer areas and dimensions as needed to reduce conflicts between industrial,

commercial and residential uses.

- As part of the review of the Zoning Code and the Zoning Maps, evaluate if there is sufficient industrial and commercial zoned land – including areas near railroad corridors – to attract businesses. Align infrastructure development – such as roads, public water and sewer, telecommunications, and other utilities – with long-term planning.
- Increase the County's economic development staff and budget to lead and support collaboration with the towns and municipalities. A formal partnership framework should be established to coordinate water and sewer expansion projects and align infrastructure with business and tourism development. Tourism efforts should focus on attract visitors who contribute to the local economy short-term stays and day trips, minimizing long-term impacts on infrastructure, schools, and public services. Joint marketing efforts, shared incentives, and coordinated outreach will help attract new businesses, and promote the region. Progress will be tracked through measurable outcomes and reported annually to all partners.

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Support the revitalization of rural villages.¶  
Revise Caroline County regulations for Home Based Businesses to encourage economic development, especially that development related to agribusiness, while minimizing the impacts of home businesses on neighboring property owners.¶  
Support municipal Smart Growth efforts.¶  
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Support historical tourism efforts.¶  
Support development of local and regional workforce training programs that target growing industry sectors.¶  
Support development of local and regional industries, particularly those that produce locally grown products.¶  
Develop detailed surface mining performance and site mitigation standards.¶

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