

# Introduction

## Comprehensive Plan for the Town of Ocean City, Maryland

The Town of Ocean City Comprehensive Plan tells the story of Maryland’s seaside community and how it will respond to changing times over the next 10 to 20 years. Just like Worcester County and other communities across the state, Ocean City must regularly prepare and update a master plan based on a common framework of ways to manage growth and change over time. Each chapter describes an element of this management tool and includes recommendations for the future. This plan builds on the values and guidance of previous Comprehensive Plans adopted in 1969, 1989, 1997, 2005 and 2009.

First and foremost the Comprehensive Plan guides the general arrangement of land uses within the community such as: housing, commercial, recreation and public facilities. The Comprehensive Plan provides a way to communicate a shared vision of the community, and a common set of objectives for managing growth and change. Once adopted, these ideas are implemented through the Zoning Ordinance, Subdivision Ordinance and other City codes and public infrastructure investments.

Why does the Comprehensive Plan need to be updated?

- The Plan should respond to new trends or changes
- The Plan will incorporate new information such as Census data
- The Plan can align with County, State or National priorities

### *State of Maryland Requirements*

Maryland’s municipalities and counties use three basic powers to control land use within their boundaries: the power to prepare a comprehensive or master plan, a zoning ordinance, and subdivision regulations. Together these documents direct how land will be developed.

The State of Maryland entrusts local jurisdictions such as the Town of Ocean City with land use planning authority to guide growth and development through the Land Use Article of the Maryland Annotated Code. The state statute outlines the responsibilities, roles, and functions of the planning commission and sets the ground rules for planning and zoning powers.

Maryland’s Planning Visions law (from 2009) created 12 Visions which reflect the State’s overall goal to develop and implement sound growth and development policy in every community. Local jurisdictions are required to include the visions in the local comprehensive plan and implement them through zoning ordinances and regulations.

1. Quality of life and sustainability;
2. Public participation;
3. Growth areas;
4. Community design;

### Ocean City, Maryland 1969

*“The broad white beach had attracted bathers to the place where Ocean City now stands for some years before the first hotel was opened in 1875.*

*The automobile has virtually supplanted the railroad, but a continuing force nourishes the growth of the town. It is accessible to an ever increasing number of people. These people have a growing amount of leisure time. Many of them have funds to satisfy tastes formerly regarded as the whims of tycoons.*

*Thus there is not only a growth of the number of customers but a change in their achievable desires. Furthermore young people now have more money as well as more freedom than did their parents as youths.”*

- Introduction to the  
Comprehensive Plan  
In 1969

5. Infrastructure;
6. Transportation;
7. Housing;
8. Economic development;
9. Environmental protection;
10. Resource conservation;
11. Stewardship; and
12. Implementation approaches

The current 5-year review and update of the Comprehensive Plan is intended to comply with all applicable State of Maryland requirements as amended.

### ***Location, Population and Economy***

Ocean City is located on a barrier island 8.4 miles long in Worcester County, Maryland and was originally founded as a fishing village in 1875. Today, the Town has over 7,000 permanent residents, with over 6,000 registered voters and hosts millions of visitors annually to its beautiful wide beaches, 2.5 mile long boardwalk, coastal bays and natural resources. The Town also offers a wide variety of activities including festivals, fishing tournaments, amusement parks, golf courses, restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

Incorporated by the State of Maryland in 1898, Ocean City is located approximately 150 miles from Washington, D.C., and 135 miles from Baltimore, Maryland. It is bordered on the north by Fenwick Island, Delaware, on the south by an inlet which separates Ocean City from Assateague Island state and national seashore parks, on the west by the Maryland Coastal Bays estuary and on the east by the Atlantic Ocean.

Ocean City is one of the premier seaside resorts on America's east coast due to a variety of attributes including its convenience to major metropolitan areas and access by automobile using US Route 50 to the west and US Route 13 and Delaware Route 1 to the north. A destination resort, Ocean City is nationally recognized as a clean and safe community for its residents, vacation homeowners and visitors with tourism as the basis of its economy. On busy summer weekends, it is estimated that over 300,000 people visit the resort. Although the peak months are June, July and August, tourism is also strong in April, May, September and October. Depending on the weekend weather, these off-season months may average over 200,000 people.

The Town government, in conjunction with local businesses and non-profit groups, has sought to increase business with the use of festivals, entertainment, sporting events and key public investments in infrastructure and facilities. The Town also widely uses advertising, promotions, and social media to publicize the vacation and leisure opportunities in Ocean City, increasing from \$2.1 million a decade ago to \$6.5 million in 2015.

When the Roland E. Powell Convention Center was renovated in 1995, it led to two decades of improved hotel and restaurant sales. The Performing Arts Center, which opened at the Convention Center in December 2014, is anticipated to similarly increase economic activity and help to make Ocean City an even more attractive and lively year-round residential community. As Maryland's premier seaside resort, the Town of Ocean City is a major economic engine and recreational resource for the entire state and region.

## ***Overview of Comprehensive Planning***

Each section of the Comprehensive Plan will describe a different element of what makes up the overall community form, how it has changed over time, and what trends or needs must be addressed in the future. The plan will include goals and policies that will continue to guide the development and enforcement of codes and regulations regarding the town's physical features.

Changes in the overall concepts and major objectives of the Plan will be approached very gradually during at this time, if changed at all during the next 10 years. The purpose of this 5-year review is to identify the current and most important ideas for adapting to change and growth so that Ocean City will continue to be a first choice place to live, play, and invest in the future. The Comprehensive Plan will be evaluated and updated again in 2022 in order to coincide with the release of new Census information.

A few quick notes are offered to illustrate how the adopted Comprehensive Plan has helped to guide community development over the years:

**1969 Plan** – Annexation of undeveloped areas north to the Delaware State line after the 1962 storm was promoted in order to provide an adequate tax base for redevelopment of the resort community. Allowable density for residential high-rise development transformed the area between 94<sup>th</sup> Street and 118<sup>th</sup> Street into the current 'high rise row' along the ocean front. During the 1970s construction flourished, and there were more than 10,000 condominium units built on the beach. Significant land modification was permitted on the bayside prior to the adoption of statewide environmental controls which allowed the creation of single family neighborhoods with homes that back up to an extensive waterfront canal system. MD Route 90 was constructed as a two-lane expressway to provide one of the main access routes into Ocean City, especially the northern part of the resort. The state highway construction started in 1970, was opened west to MD 589 in 1972 and to US 113 in 1975. MD 90 was completed west to US 50 in 1976. Convention Hall opened under Mayor Harry Kelley's administration in April of 1970.

**1989 Plan** – Density reductions for residential development were adopted in 1986 which limited future ocean block development to mid-rise buildings. Under the administration of Mayor Powell, Phase I of the Beach Replenishment and Hurricane Protection Project began in 1988. Increased emphasis was placed on architectural review and issues of non-conformity as comprehensive zoning regulations were adopted in 1993 and enforced with infill and re-development of older properties.

**1997 Plan** - In 2001 Ocean City was named an All-America City, an award that recognizes communities whose citizen's work together to identify and tackle community-wide challenges and achieves uncommon results. In 2000 during Mathias' administration, revitalization of the Boardwalk included replacing the entire promenade from end to end entirely with wood. A much-needed expansion of Convention Hall was completed in 1997, and the building was renamed the Roland E. Powell Convention Center.

**2006/09 Plan** – New state requirements for adopting a Municipal Growth Element, a Water Resources Element and the 12 Planning Visions, reflected the current priorities for encouraging 'smart growth' in existing communities where adequate road, utilities and civic infrastructure already exists. Ocean City is designated as a Growth Tier One area that is intended to be served by public sewerage systems.

## ***Strategic planning***

In the spring of 2014, the Mayor and City Council updated their strategic plan which has a 15-year vision statement and 5-year goals for the Town. The strategic plan is designed to enable the Town government to focus its limited resources on the most important priorities as established by the Mayor and City Council and continue to improve our visitor experience and the high quality of life our residents enjoy. After engaging staff, residents and business leaders in the community, the Mayor and City Council determined their long range Vision for the community and established 5-year strategic planning goals:

### **VISION STATEMENT - 2029**

***Ocean City is a Vibrant Coastal Resort Community; with a World Class Public Beach and Waterways; and an Authentic Historic Boardwalk; and is the Choice of Today's Families.***

***Ocean City is Safe and Clean, has Quality Neighborhoods for Residents, is Accessible for Easy Travel, and is a place for Enjoyable Experiences for All.***



1st class resort and tourist destination



Financially sound town government



A more livable community for residents



Excellent service through a high performing town organization



Revitalized Ocean City: development and redevelopment

Many of the goals and priority actions outlined in the Town Strategic Plan align with the structure of the Comprehensive Plan and are incorporated in this review and update. Other goals and priorities are also included that traditionally look outside of the municipal boundaries to address how the Town will coordinate its management plan with County, State and National scale planning activities. The question of off-shore energy development provides a good example of how plans at all scales need to be coordinated to avoid adverse impacts and to provide community benefits.

### ***New Trends and Changes***

Each chapter of the Comprehensive Plan will focus on a separate planning element that will identify new trends or changes which need to be addressed through goals, objectives and implementation strategies. Based upon its history and patterns of growth over the years, Ocean City's new challenges for the future will likely be organized around the following common themes:

Redevelopment and Infill / Slow Growth

Next Generation of Family Demographics

Environmental Change and Resilience