

Executive Summary

Purpose of the Plan

In accordance with Title 5, Subtitle 9 of the Natural Resources Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland (also known as the Program Open Space Law), this plan has been prepared to inventory and assess the county's recreational, agricultural, and natural resources and the programs and policies that affect them. The plan seeks to identify the extent to which these programs and policies are helping to reach state and local goals for preserving and enhancing the resources. Finally, the plan recommends actions that Carroll County and the State of Maryland can take to reach these goals more quickly and more effectively. Completion of this plan not only meets the requirements of state law, thereby making the County eligible for Program Open Space funds, but also will serve as a useful planning tool for recreational, agricultural, and natural resource programs and policies.

Principal Findings

The 2005 Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan examines the County's policies and programs that relate to parks and recreation, land preservation, and natural resource conservation. This examination includes an analysis of the effectiveness of these policies and programs to meet state and local goals, and recommendations to more effectively meet these goals. The principal findings summarized below establish the basis for the recommended policies and implementation strategies that follow.

Land Use

Carroll County has had a long-standing policy of directing growth towards its municipalities and the surrounding community planning areas, but a large portion of the county's residents live in rural or suburban areas that lack a centralized or connected system of recreational facilities. With the exception of the town parks and school sites, most recreational facilities must be reached by automobile. As a result, it is beneficial for users to have access to parks with multiple recreational opportunities in one location, so that an entire family's recreational needs can be met in one trip. Dispersed development also can have an effect on the protection of natural resources and the preservation of land. Efforts to promote environmental conservation during development and to cluster new development away from natural resources and productive agricultural land recently have been enhanced and will continue to have a positive impact on the protection of the county's resources.

Demographics

A number of demographic statistics are presented in the plan, but two in particular have relevance to planning for parks and recreation and land preservation. The first is that the population will, without a doubt, continue to grow. This growth will mean that additional parks and recreational facilities will be needed to meet the demands of additional residents. It also means that there will be greater stress placed on land preservation efforts, with the demand for land to accommodate housing and businesses competing with efforts to preserve land from development. The second is that the number of seniors in the county will continue to grow. The senior population will require different types of facilities and programs, and as their numbers grow new or expanded facilities will be needed.

Planning Framework

Carroll County's 2000 Master Plan affirmed the pattern of development in the county that has been followed for decades: focusing growth in and around the municipalities (an area known as the community planning area) and retaining the rural nature of the outlying areas. Emphasis will continue to be on directing growth in this manner, and the community planning areas (CPAs) are where the greatest investments will continue to be made in providing facilities and services, including recreational resources. Conversely, efforts also will continue to be focused on preserving the land outside of the CPAs. Natural resource protection will continue to be pursued both in the developed areas and in the rural areas.

Parks, Recreation and Open Space

Using the information contained in the plan about the number, type, and location of recreational facilities, it is clear that the County does a good job of providing recreational facilities that are both convenient to the largest areas of population and are dispersed throughout the county in order to be accessible to everyone. A combination of Program Open Space funds, development impact fees, and General Fund monies are used to provide recreational facilities, ensuring that the County is not dependent upon any one source of funding.

The needs analysis for recreational facilities conducted as part of this plan compares an inventory of the supply of recreational facilities with the current and projected demand for those same facilities. The results show either a current or projected shortfall for nearly every facility examined. It is evident that the projected increases in population, in combination with existing shortages of certain facilities, will mean that additional facilities will need to be provided well into the future. The needs analysis, in combination with input from area recreation councils, towns, and general citizens, informed the following list of the County's priorities for recreational facilities:

1. Soccer fields
2. Softball/baseball fields

3. Lacrosse fields
4. Hiker/biker trails
5. Basketball courts
6. ATV park
7. Ice skating rink
8. Equestrian trails
9. Community centers
10. Picnicking facilities

The priorities are further refined into short-, mid-, and long-term priorities. The short-term projects are those listed in the 2006-2010 CIP and generally reflect the needs identified in the needs analysis and through observation. They include playing fields, trails, picnic facilities, and the maintenance and upgrade of existing facilities. Mid- and long-term priorities focus on the on-going need for playing fields and hiker/biker trails predicted by growth projections and past trends. They also reflect the expressed and/or anticipated desires of a diverse population. Facilities such as an ice-skating rink, an ATV park, and equestrian trails exemplify the breadth of interests in the county and the County's desire to provide opportunities for a wide range of recreational activities.

The short-, mid-, and long-range priorities aim both to keep up with traditional demands and maintenance obligations and to fill existing or emerging gaps in the number and variety of recreational opportunities that exist in the county. In keeping with established policy, the bulk of the projects in all time periods are or are expected to be in the areas where the largest populations exist – the towns and community planning areas. The exception to this is with facilities that, by their nature, require large amounts of open space or are to be located in already established parks outside of the towns and community planning areas.

The County is making an effort to maximize public investment in facilities by developing full-sized facilities at schools and senior centers (so others can use them after regular operating hours), constructing new schools with restroom facilities that can be accessed from the exterior even after the schools are locked, and integrating trails into all new parks.

Land Preservation

Carroll County is one of the leading counties in the state in terms of land preserved. This is reinforced by the County Master Plan goal to preserve 100,000 acres by 2020, and by overwhelming public support for continued agricultural preservation investment. In a recent effort to accelerate land preservation, the Board of County Commissioners recently approved a \$34 million bond to purchase more easements in the immediate future. This continues a tradition that the County has had of contributing additional funds and creating innovative programs (such as the Critical Farms Program and an Installment Purchase Agreement program) to acquire as many easements as possible, even when state or other funds and programs are not available.

In addition to land preservation funding, many resources are available to farmers that promote the continued viability of the farming industry in the county. These include the Cooperative Extension, Soil Conservation District, and a marketing specialist that resides within the county Department of Economic Development to promote the county's agricultural products and link buyers and sellers of agricultural products.

Land use, zoning, and subdivision regulations in the county support the preservation of large blocks of farmland, but development pressure continues to build in rural parts of the county. This is evidenced by the average per acre costs associated with preservation easements over the past five years, which have escalated from \$2,000 to \$3,600. These increasing land values present a major challenge to achieving the 100,000 acre goal, since the higher the land value is, the fewer acres can be preserved with the same amount of money.

Natural Resource Conservation

A major overhaul of the County's environmental ordinances was completed in 2004. The new and revised regulations will help the County implement some of its goals and objectives related to natural resource protection. With the revisions:

- New ordinances were created to address storm sewer discharges and water resource management;
- Major revisions were made to the ordinances regulating floodplain management and landscape enhancement of development; and,
- Updates were made to the forest conservation, grading, erosion and sediment control, and stormwater management ordinances.

Also adopted were a new Water Resource Management Manual and a new Landscape Manual. The Development and Subdivision of Land chapter of the Carroll County Code of Public and Local Laws was revised as well, and replaces the Environmental Element review with an Environmental Site Delineation (ESD), which is to be performed as the first step in any development proposal.

In order to evaluate how well the regulations and other efforts to protect natural resources are working, regular monitoring and reporting for a number of critical watersheds is conducted. These watersheds include the tributaries for the planned Gillis Falls and Union Mills reservoirs, Liberty Reservoir, and Piney Run Reservoir.

The County is preserving and creating blocks of connected forestland through the development process as a result of the forest conservation ordinance. In fact, today Carroll County is one of the few counties in the state that is adding forest cover rather than losing it. Because so much of the original forest cover already has been cleared for agriculture and most of the county's developing land is farmland, the reforestation requirements of the ordinance help add forest cover where there was none. Carroll County is third in the state in terms of acres of forest planted, is one of the leaders in

forest retention with 82 percent of on-site forest retained, and had 6.9 times as much forest planted as was cleared.

The County also is a leader in the state when it comes to soil conservation. The County Code's Grading, Erosion, and Sediment Control chapter requires a soil erosion and sediment control plan and a grading permit for all forest harvest operations. Carroll County is one of the few counties in the state that require this, both ensuring that an opportunity exists for a viable timber industry while reducing the potential effects it might have on surrounding environmental resources. The County has a valuable partner in the Carroll Soil Conservation District, which works with property owners to minimize agricultural runoff and erosion so that water quality is protected. This is a way to protect environmental resources outside of the development process, and the District is one of the leading districts in the state in terms of numbers of best management practices implemented for protecting water quality and natural resources.

Provisions in the County Code pertaining to the subdivision of land, especially in the Agricultural and Conservation zoning districts, help to ensure that agricultural and natural resources are protected to the greatest degree possible throughout the development process.

Public access to and appreciation of the county's natural resources is not promoted as an organized eco-tourism effort, but there are many publications that highlight the county and state parks, bicycle routes, and trails.

The two greatest challenges facing the county in its goal to protect its natural features are to proactively promote environmental resource protection on a larger, system-wide scale and to figure out how to restore or mitigate the environmental damage inflicted by past development.

Policies and Implementation Strategies

Each of the main chapters in the plan (Chapters III, IV, and V) contains a set of recommendations for how the County and the state can both help to achieve their goals for recreation, land preservation, and natural resources conservation. These are listed below.

Program Development Strategy for Recreation, Parks and Open Space

1. The County will continue to use the County master plan, community comprehensive plans, and capital budget as the primary tools for achieving its parks and recreation goals and priorities. Each of these tools are reviewed on a regular basis, and adjustments made accordingly based upon County priorities.

Fiscal Note: Refer to the Acquisition, Development, and Rehabilitation Priorities table for additional information regarding the fiscal implications of planned or recommended capital projects.

2. The County will continue to maximize its return on investment by incorporating full-sized gymnasiums and activity rooms into new schools and senior centers and constructing trails in conjunction with the development of new parks and playing fields.
3. The County will seek certification under the Natural Resources Article §5-905 c (1)(ii) as qualifying to use more than 50 percent of its POS allocation for development projects. This will better enable the County to develop the facilities it has identified as priority projects, while at the same time still allow it to pursue land acquisition for future projects.
4. The County has projected gradual increases in POS funding over the next several years, despite the sharp decrease in funding experienced recently due to budgetary constraints. The State will need to work towards returning POS funding to previous levels if the County is to have any prospect of achieving its short-, mid-, and long-range goals for parks and recreation.

Program Development Strategy for Agricultural Land Preservation

1. In order to achieve the 100,000 acre goal, Carroll County must acquire easements on 60 percent of the 89,000 acres of unprotected land that is in parcels greater than 20 acres. The best strategy to accomplish this is to make as many easement offers as possible to the owners who apply. For the past three years, offers have been made to all applicants in the MALPF, Rural Legacy, and County easement programs. Restoring the Program Open Space funding and implementing the funding recommendations of the MALPF Task Force are essential for this strategy to continue.

Fiscal Note: Assuming a constant price of \$4,000 per acre, \$220 million will be required to purchase easements on the 55,000 acres remaining to meet the goal. \$34 million was bonded for agricultural land preservation from FY05 through FY10.

2. Designated preservation areas in Carroll County are the Little Pipe Creek Rural Legacy Area and the Upper Patapsco Rural Legacy Area. The strategy is to promote easement acquisition within these areas and to provide County matching funds for State Rural Legacy grants to acquire as many easements as possible within these areas.
3. The County Critical Farms Program is best described as a “fast-track preservation program that guarantees at least minimum easement funding and enables a preservation buyer to acquire the farm”. Farms being marketed are at the greatest

risk of development, and it is the County's strategy to continue allocating a portion of preservation funding to this program.

4. The County recently strengthened the clustering provisions of the Rural Development Guides and Standards by adopting them as a County ordinance rather than operating under guidance. The strategy of clustering lots to preserve the maximum tillable ground will continue.
5. The County has adopted a strategy to contain easement costs by adopting maximum easement values as a percent of the appraised fair market value. Currently, the County does not offer more than 70 percent of fair market value for an easement in the County and Rural Legacy Programs, and for MALPF easements with 100 percent County funding. To date, the competitive bidding has held the State-funded MALPF offers to less than 70 percent of fair market value but this may not always be the case. The MALPF law should be amended to allow counties to establish a maximum value for all offers.

Program Development Strategy for Natural Resource Conservation

1. Carroll County is doing a number of things to achieve state and County resource conservation goals. Its primary methods of achieving these goals are and will remain the County master plan, community comprehensive plans, capital funding of land preservation and other natural resource-related projects, and development regulations. Each of these are reviewed on a regular basis (some more frequently than others), and adjustments made accordingly based upon County priorities.
2. At the same time, a number of improvements can be made to make achievement of the goals more feasible more quickly. State funding for the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation and Rural Legacy programs can be increased to bolster the number of acres in any given year that have the potential to be preserved. Because resource conservation plans are requirements of these programs, the more landowners who participate the more conservation measures are implemented.
3. Along the same lines, continued state and federal funding for the Maryland Agricultural Cost Share Program, USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and other environmental enhancement programs used by farmers in the county will ensure that effective resource conservation measures continue to be within the financial reach of the agricultural community.
4. County staff and other resources could be directed towards working with landowners, business owners, environmental groups, outdoor sportsmen, and tourism professionals to develop a cohesive, marketable eco-tourism and eco-education program for the county.

