

From: Delmarva Craft <delmarvacraft@gmail.com>

Subject: As we plan for the future...

Greetings,

I hope this message finds you well. I recently received an invitation to attend a "Town Workshop for Updating the Rock Hall Comprehensive Plan". This planning seems, to me, to be a very prudent thing to do. Having been involved in these sessions in other towns, at other times, experience tells me that there will be plenty of opinions about what we "need" and what we "want".

May I suggest that what follows are some facts we can not ignore as we plan for the future:

Population

1) a. With a 2020 census of 19,270, Kent County is the **least populated** and most sparsely populated county in Maryland.

b. **4.7% down** from the 20,213 who lived there in 2010.

c. For comparison, the US population **grew** 7.3% and Maryland's population grew 6.5% during that period.

2) a. The median average age in Maryland is 38.8 years

b. The median average age in Kent County is 48 years

c. The median average age in Rock Hall is **53.4** years

3) a. The **65+ group was the fastest growing in Kent County** between 2010 and 2021, with its population **increasing 17.3%**.

b. The **35 to 49 age group declined the most in Kent County, dropping 18.7%** between 2010 and 2021.

Housing

1) On October 11, 2022 Coldwell Banker Real Estates Kent County MLS listings displayed only 78 residences for sale, in the entire county.

2) 23 of these residences were already "Under Contract", leaving an available inventory of 55 homes.

3) Of these 55 homes, only 18 were under \$300,000 and still available.

- 4) Between 2012 and 2021, a ten year period, 363 homes (houses, condos and apartment units) were built in Kent County. That's only 3 per month.
- 5) I have been told by a county official that we need another 5,000 residents to sustain a healthy economy.
- 6) At current construction rates it would take almost 35 years to build enough housing, at 4 people per residence, to accommodate that many arrivals.
- 7) I recently checked AirBnB listings in Rock Hall and found that 37 houses are available for rent. This is 37 residences that spend quite a bit of time...**empty**.

Schools

- 1) Kent County has the smallest quantity of children in K-12 education in the state of Maryland, 2398 students.
- 2) The Maryland average for % of population in K-12 is 17.18%.
- 3) Kent County has the lowest % of population in K-12, **12.49%**
- 4) Kent County Public Schools are **ranked 23rd** among 24 school systems in Maryland.
- 5) Statewide, 16.09% of K-12 students attend private schools, charter schools, or are home schooled.
- 6) In Kent County, **24.44%** of K-12 students attend private schools, charter schools, or are home schooled.

Taxes

- 1) 89% of all land in Kent County is zoned agricultural.
- 2) That 89% pays only 14% of the property tax in Kent County.

Washington College

- 1) Enrollment has **decreased** from 1458 students in 2010 to just 1026 in 2022. Nearly a 30% decline.
- 2) Tuition + Room & Board revenues have declined by **\$13 MILLION** between 2017 and 2021.
- 3) Note: these declines started several years prior to the pandemic.

Transportation

- 1) Simply stated, for large areas of the county there is basically no public transportation.

- 2) The public transportation that is available, primarily in Chestertown, is limited to weekdays.
- 3) There is no ride share service of any significance operating in Kent County.

Entertainment Amenities

- 1) Movie Theaters - None
- 2) Bowling Alleys - None
- 3) Arcades - None
- 4) Mini-Golf - None
- 5) A pub that caters to football fans in the "off season" - None
- 6) You get the picture...

Shopping

- 1) Extremely limited options.

Healthcare

- 1) Extremely limited options.

So, what does all of this data mean?

We have an aging population, a shrinking 35-49 year old population, the smallest K-12 population in the state, little new housing development, a poorly rated school system, a shrinking college and virtually no transportation, healthcare, shopping or entertainment options.

So, I ask everyone, what do you want the future of Rock Hall to be? Is it a retirement town? Is it a tourist town? Is it a "Waterman's Town"? Whatever it is, requires people, people who can work.

As one of the oldest towns (demographically) in the state, we are approaching a critical mass of senior citizens who will need increased levels of assistance and care. As someone who spent 35 years working in the Long Term Care industry I can tell you that we are ill-prepared to deal with this. So, if it's a retirement town we'd better figure out how to handle the needs that come along with an older population. We have insufficient population under the age of 49 to sustain the economy as the older residents retire, and more retirees purchase the homes in Rock Hall.

If it's a tourist town, which I believe it has to be in order to survive, then we need people. During the 2022 tourist seasons, restaurants, shops, shuttle buses, etc. struggled to find staff. Why? Well take a look at those age statistics again. The employees just aren't there. Before anyone blurts out "people just don't want to work", I must laud the teenagers I see working very hard at places like Ford's Seafood, Fresh Start, Java Rock, Harbor Shack and Blue Heron Oyster House. They "saved the day" for a number of businesses. People need to understand that nearly 4 Million people retired during the pandemic. At the same time a huge % of hospitality workers lost their jobs and were desperate to find ways to pay their rent and to eat. Many of them moved into corporate jobs, with better hours, health insurance, 401Ks, etc. And...they aren't coming back. There are businesses here that have delayed expanding, or even opening, because they can't find labor.

We need people between the ages of 18 and 49, who are eager to work and build a thriving community. Those people need places to live...see the housing statistics. It should be noted that our county has high speed fiberoptic internet connectivity in many locations. The county has been marketed as a great place to live, where you can telecommute to work. This would be true, if there were actually enough homes available for sale.

If we are to attract working families, they'll want quality schools for their children. Are our schools as bad as the test

scores indicate? I don't know, but people considering a move to Kent County can only base their decisions on the data that is available...and it's not good. Notably, we have the highest percentage of K-12 students in **non-public** schools, an indication that parents who can afford it, do not send their children to Kent County Public Schools. A shrinking number of college students shrinks the potential labor pool as well. It also reduces revenues in the county since these students and their families will not be patronizing any local businesses.

It's not easy to get to Rock Hall. We're located at "the end of the line". With a small local labor pool and little available housing, we would need much better transportation to bring workers to our town. Unfortunately, that transportation is currently non-existent.

I point out the lack of healthcare, lack of entertainment options and lack of shopping options because these are factors that affect peoples' decisions on where to live. With huge swathes of land that pay a very small % of the property taxes, the tax burden will fall increasingly on the retirees who occupy Rock Hall and Chestertown.

Any initiatives that are undertaken based on this Comprehensive Plan will require people...so, we need to address the issues that prevent them from living and working here.

There is no bright future without figuring out ways to make Rock Hall and Kent County more appealing to people who aren't retirees or farmers.

As far as other items:

1. There is insufficient lodging capacity. We would have more visitors via land if there were more places to stay. It should be noted that festival weekends and weddings ...lots of weddings... consume almost all the available lodging space and a lot of the AirBnB houses. This keeps other people from coming to town those weekends. I know there are plans to promote heritage trails and scenic byways as attractions here. That is great, but, if these promotional efforts are successful, when those people arrive, where will they stay? Appropriately sized inns, with conference facilities can help attract visitors in the off-season.
2. There are insufficient activities. Many, many visitors ask me why there is no mini-golf or arcades or other sources of amusement. On rainy weekends, our buses take more people to Chestertown.
3. Hiking and biking trails, that are away from Rock Hall Avenue, would be nice.
4. **Develop ways of taxing tourism to help fund improvements.**
5. **Get serious about a ferry service to Rock Hall. Not only can it bring visitors...it can bring labor.**

I hope this information is helpful. We are hurtling towards being a town completely occupied by senior citizens, second homes and semi-empty AirBnB houses. We are in peril of being a community with no youth and not enough "working aged" residents. This can not be sustained when the available labor pool in the region is shrinking and there is no viable transportation to bring workers. We need people. We need housing. We need reasons for people who aren't retired to want to live in Rock Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

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