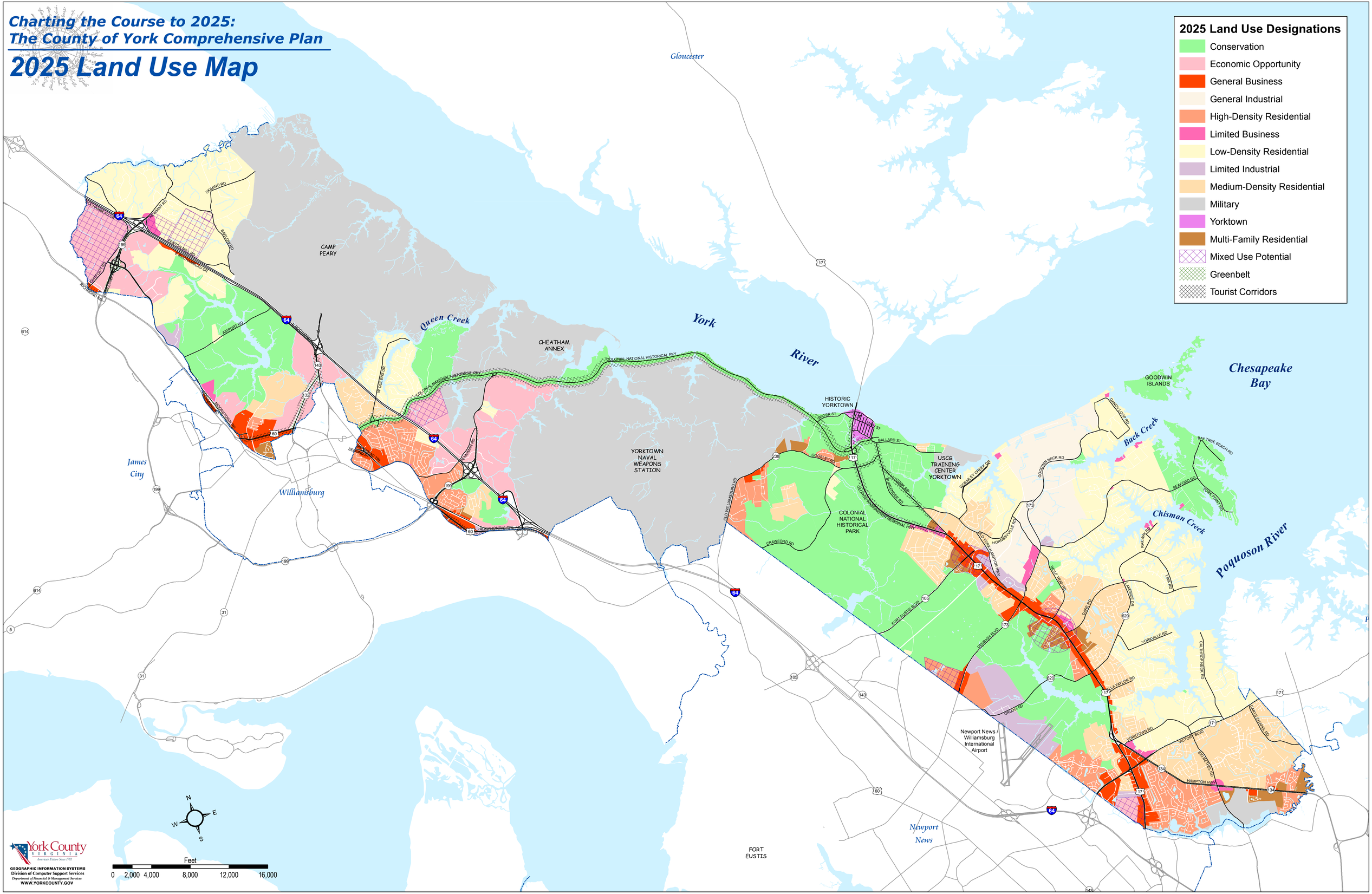
Charting the Course to 2025:
The County of York Comprehensive Plan

2025 Land Use Map



Charting the Course to 2025: The County of York Comprehensive Plan

Adopted December 6, 2005

York County is best defined by its quality of life. Mild temperatures, a low crime rate, hundreds of miles of coastline, and abundant flora and fauna contribute to the County's reputation as a pleasant place to live. To preserve and enhance this high quality of life is the overriding purpose of the York County Comprehensive Plan, which is the long-range plan for the physical development of the County. Like all localities in Virginia, York County is required by Section 15.2-2223 of the *Code of Virginia* to adopt a comprehensive plan, but the reasons for having a plan go well beyond fulfilling this mandate. The Comprehensive Plan is necessary to ensure the efficient use of land in recognition of environmental constraints and the capacity of the public infrastructure. It seeks to provide for an appropriate mix of residential, commercial, and industrial development; to guide such development to appropriate areas of the County based on the carrying capacity of the land, the existing development character, and the presence of infrastructure and public facilities; to preserve the County's natural and historic resources and aesthetic quality; and to prevent the overburdening of the County's roads, utilities, facilities, and services. The Comprehensive Plan enables a community to protect and work toward a desirable future land use pattern that will be efficient and economical in terms of provision of public services. At the same time, Comprehensive Plans help to preserve and protect property values and the particular characteristics or resources that contribute to the character of the community.

Although mandated by state law, a comprehensive plan does not have the status of law. Rather, it is a policy document intended to provide direction for present and future policy makers in making the laws and setting the policies to guide the County's development. The Comprehensive Plan is implemented by the County's various development ordinances – particularly the Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances – as well as the Capital Improvements Program and the Six-Year Primary and Secondary Road Plans. The comprehensive planning process is not intended to chart a rigid course that the County is expected to adhere to for the next 20 years. This would not be possible or desirable since community conditions and attitudes are constantly changing. It is for this reason that the *Code of Virginia* requires that comprehensive plans be reviewed, and revised if necessary, at least every five years. York County's current comprehensive plan, titled *Charting the Course to 2025*, was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on December 6, 2005, is the second major update of the County's first true comprehensive plan, which was adopted in December 1991. It represents the combined efforts of York County's citizens, elected and appointed officials, and staff to analyze present conditions in the County, identify present and future needs, and devise strategies for meeting these needs consistent with shared community goals and objectives. It is the County's vision for its future, specific enough to provide clear guidance to present and future policy makers yet broad and flexible enough to be adapted to account for changing circumstances.

The Comprehensive Plan is divided into chapters or elements dealing with various aspects of the County's physical development: community facilities, economic development, environment, historic resources, housing, transportation, and land use. The Land Use element incorporates information from all the other elements of the Plan describes the distribution of existing land uses and the potential for future development and also identifies the policies that will guide the arrangement and intensity of future additions or changes to existing land use patterns. While residential densities and use characteristics are generally described in the Land Use element, specific standards, such as minimum lot sizes and permitted uses, are set forth in the County's Zoning Ordinance and Zoning Map.

LAND USE

York County covers approximately 108 square miles (including the bodies of water within the jurisdictional limits), about 37% of which is owned by the federal government. These federal landholdings include the various military installations – the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center, U.S. Naval Weapons Station, Cheatham Annex, and Camp Peary – which total approximately 20,400 acres, and the 3,900-acre Colonial National Historical Park. In addition to these large federal landholdings, the Cities of Newport News and Williamsburg each own reservoirs and watershed property in the County encompassing a total of 6,600 acres. The combination of federal and watershed property accounts for 30,900 acres, representing almost half (47.5%) of the land area in York County. While presenting a number of constraints for the County, these landholdings do ensure that a relatively large amount of open space will be perpetuated, thus contributing positively to the County's quality of life and the perception of a rural atmosphere.

"Rural" is an adjective that is often used to describe York County. Many residents who were not born in the County say they moved to York County to get away from more urban environments. They like the fact that York County is less "built up" than other communities. They like the slower pace, the lush vegetation, the open space, and the less congested atmosphere. York County tends to attract more than its share of families with children because it is a good environment for raising children.

Maintaining this "rural" character in the face of continued development and striking a balance between the citizens' desire for a high quality of life and landowners' rights to develop their property are the sorts of challenges that the County will face in the years ahead. These challenges were addressed in the 1991 *Comprehensive Plan*, which cites the following characteristics that contribute to the perception of a "rural" character in the County:

- Retention of natural physical features,
- Retention of forest and woodland areas, both along roadways and within developed areas,
- Protection of existing agricultural areas,
- Protection or installation of landscaping and open space in all development, and
- Protection or enhancement of open space areas at strategic, highly visible locations throughout the County.

This is as true today as it was in 1991, and, thanks largely to the approach the County has taken in its development rules and regulations – most notably the Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances – measures are in place to allow the County to continue to develop without losing these rural characteristics. These measures include tree preservation standards, landscaping requirements, lower residential densities, larger lots, open space requirements in housing developments, greenbelts along major roadways, and natural resource management and protection standards. The citizens have affirmed their support for these measures, expressing strong support for protecting the environment, keeping the overall population density low, purchasing and preserving open space, enhancing the appearance of major commercial corridors, and requiring landscaping in all new development.

Although "rural" probably is not the best word to describe a county that, with approximately 600 persons per square mile, is the sixth most densely populated county in Virginia, many of the things people think of as rural – trees, open space, and low densities – are still applicable to York County and, through appropriate development techniques, can be maintained without causing undue hardship on the landowners.

Traditionally the term *land use* has been fairly narrowly construed to encompass the basic category of use – i.e., residential, commercial, or industrial – that describes how land is or will be developed. More appropriate, however, is a broader definition encompassing not just the type of use but how it will be designed and what it will look like. Just as most County residents take pride in the character and appearance of their homes and properties, so too do they have keen interest in the overall character and appearance of the County in which they live. Whether one's interest is in preserving the County's "rural character" (a term that has various definitions), seeing vacant commercial buildings occupied, having architecturally attractive commercial and residential buildings, living on tree-lined residential streets, or a host of other objectives, there is a strong desire to preserve and improve York County as a pleasant and attractive place to live, work, and recreate.

Although development has altered much of the County's natural landscape, policies and regulations put in place nearly 50 years ago (with the adoption of the County's first Zoning Ordinance in 1957), and improved upon since, have helped to minimize the *character-altering* impacts of that development. Now, as the County is about to enter its second 50 years of planning and zoning history, citizen responses indicate a desire for the bar to be raised to a higher level to ensure that the inevitable growth and development that occurs has a positive *defining* effect on the character and appearance of the County.

LAND USE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Goal

Provide for orderly and efficient land use patterns that protect, preserve, and enhance the natural and physical attributes of the County that define and contribute positively to its appearance and character.

Objectives

1. Provide for residential growth that would allow the County population to reach a maximum of approximately 80,000 residents.
2. Establish and maintain a balanced diversity of land uses, with minimal conflicts among different uses, in recognition of the physical characteristics of the County and the capacity of the land and public services and infrastructure to host different types of uses.
3. Consider development patterns and plans established in adjoining jurisdictions when making local land use decisions and designations.
4. Preserve open space throughout the County such that these areas will become an integral part of the community.
5. Preserve and protect certain lands near the shoreline that have intrinsic value for the protection of water quality in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.
6. Enhance the visual appeal of the County's major transportation corridors
7. Encourage the adaptive reuse of existing blighted properties.
8. Encourage beautification of existing development to improve its visual quality and appeal.
9. Preserve, protect, and enhance cultural, environmental, and historic areas.
10. Protect unspoiled vistas and views of the water.
11. Minimize the visual obtrusiveness of telecommunications towers.
12. Pursue and/or continue regulatory, non-regulatory and incentive-based programs that help preserve and enhance the positive character-defining attributes of the County such as abundant open space, tree-lined road corridors, attractive "gateway" entrances, well-landscaped commercial areas, and pleasant residential settings.
13. Encourage the use of cluster development techniques and conservation easements to help preserve open space.
14. Maintain higher development performance standards at major "gateway" entrances and along major "gateway" corridors.

LAND USE DESIGNATIONS

The following land use designations have been used in developing the Land Use element and the 2025 Land Use Map. Although general in nature, these designations will provide guidance for any changes to the more specific zoning regulations and zoning district locations and boundaries that implement the *Comprehensive Plan*. It must be clearly recognized that development in accordance with these designations, as they apply to a specific area, may be appropriate not at this time but only after certain improvements and infrastructure are completed. Since some of these improvements may require public investment, the appropriate timing for development will be closely related to capital improvements programming by the County and state.

Conservation

The Conservation designation is intended to recognize the vast amounts of parkland, watershed areas surrounding current or potential public water supply reservoirs, and similar reserved areas and ensure their protection. For the most part, these areas are in a natural state and contribute positively to the perception of a rural atmosphere. The Conservation designation is intended as a policy statement to indicate the County's commitment to the proper management and protection of these sensitive and unique areas. While many of these areas are controlled by the Federal or state government and are not subject to local land use regulations, such areas should in most situations be placed in the least intensive zoning classification in order to ensure their proper management and protection. This will ensure that almost any development, unless it is of extremely low intensity, will be reviewed by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors through the rezoning process.

Military

This designation recognizes the vast amounts of military property in the County even though such installations are not subject to local land use regulations. Several of these installations also have environmentally sensitive areas that would limit development opportunities if transferred to private ownership. Consequently, such areas should be placed in the least intensive zoning classification to emphasize the County's interest in ensuring their proper management and protection.

Single-Family Residential

The three single-family residential designations are based on density (number of housing units permitted per acre of land) and are intended to recognize and continue the existing range of single-family densities in the County. This plan has defined allowable development density in terms of gross acreage; however, since undevelopable areas such as water bodies, wetlands, marshes, major power transmission rights-of-way, steep slopes, and other similarly situated areas should be excluded from single-family lots, the use of clustering is preferred to conventional subdivision. This technique will preserve the environmental amenities that make York County special while maximizing open space retention, reducing impervious surface, and providing efficiency and cost savings in infrastructure construction. and can be accomplished by establishing appropriate lot size criteria for conventional subdivisions while controlling cluster subdivisions through density.

- **LOW DENSITY:** This designation is intended to provide opportunities for single-family detached housing having a maximum density of **1.0 dwelling unit per acre**. Low-density development is appropriate in areas where physical or environmental constraints are prevalent and/or public services and facilities are limited.
- **MEDIUM DENSITY:** This designation is intended to provide opportunities primarily for single-family detached housing having a maximum density of **1.75 dwelling units per acre**. Medium-density development typically generates moderate demands on public services and facilities and should be located in areas where such services will be adequate and environmental constraints will not present development problems.
- **HIGH DENSITY:** This designation is intended to provide opportunities for single-family housing having a maximum density of **3.0 dwelling units per acre**. The high-density development envisioned by this designation can be expected to generate intensive demands on public services and facilities and should be located with careful consideration given to the availability and adequacy of public services, transportation facilities, and commercial centers.

With respect to the establishment of specific residential zoning classifications, it is intended that a range of residential density opportunities be made available. In this regard, the density guidelines established herein should be interpreted with a degree of flexibility when determining the range of lot sizes that are consistent with and can implement a particular density designation. Furthermore, the definition of permitted densities should not be construed to preclude consideration of higher-density single-family detached housing through the planned development process, subject to public hearing requirements and review by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

Flexibility is also appropriate with respect to the development of small vacant "infill" parcels that are essentially surrounded by development having a density in excess of that prescribed. Such "infill development" flexibility should be exercised only in situations where logical and efficient subdivision and provision of public utilities would be difficult in strict accordance with the established density designation. In no case should such an interpretation be made that would circumvent the overall Land Use goals and objectives or allow the extension of inconsistent development densities into essentially undeveloped areas.

Multi-Family Residential

This designation is intended to recognize and encompass those areas of the County that are particularly suitable for residential development at a maximum density of **10.0 units per acre**. The high-density development envisioned by this designation can be expected to generate very intensive demands on public services and facilities and should be located accordingly. This designation is intended to provide opportunities for a variety of multi-family housing types such as garden apartments, townhouses, duplexes, quadruplexes, etc. In addition, it is the intent of this designation to provide opportunities for the establishment of manufactured home subdivisions through use permit provisions or other appropriate review techniques intended specifically to evaluate the impact of such development on the surrounding area.

Limited Business

The Limited Business designation is intended to provide opportunities for commercial activities of low to moderate intensity such as business or professional offices, and research, development and training facilities and commercial activities oriented primarily toward serving the day-to-day needs of residents of nearby areas. The scope of permitted commercial activities should be limited so as to discourage substantial traffic from outside the immediate neighborhood. Because of this limited scope, this designation is appropriate within, or in close proximity to residential neighborhoods. This designation is also intended to recognize and continue to provide opportunities for various types of activities requiring access to the water. These types of activities have historically been conducted in such areas as Waterview, Seaford, Dandy, and Dare, and their locational requirements often dictate that they be within or in close proximity to established residential neighborhoods or in areas with limited surface transportation access.

General Business

The General Business designation is intended to provide opportunities for retail and other commercial uses oriented primarily toward supplying goods or services for a community or regional market. The scope of commercial activities envisioned by this designation would include uses that need access to arterial highways. The high intensity activity levels envisioned by this designation dictate that it be located with a full understanding of the potential impacts on adjacent residential and commercial development and traffic and circulation patterns.

Economic Opportunity

This designation is intended to guide a mix of office, light industrial, commercial, and tourist-related uses to certain portions of the County that have or are planned to have the access and infrastructure necessary to support both capital- and labor-intensive uses. The imposition of open space, landscaping, and buffering requirements that exceed the otherwise acceptable levels may be appropriate in order to foster a superior development character. The employment benefit to the County should be positive and enhance the tax base by increasing the County's fiscal strength. The unique nature of the Economic Opportunity designation excludes uses that may conflict with or detract from the activities proposed.

Limited Industrial

This designation is intended to provide opportunities for a variety of industrial activities of low to moderate intensity whose operations will have relatively low impacts in terms of smoke, noise, vibration, or similar factors. Desirable features of areas encompassed by this designation include full transportation access (highway, rail, water, air), available utilities, and favorable soil conditions.

General Industrial

This designation is intended mainly to recognize the County's existing heavy industrial base, while providing opportunities for additional industrial activities whose operations and characteristics may necessarily involve significant levels of odor, noise, vibration, traffic and other conditions that may adversely impact surrounding land uses. As with the Limited Industrial designation, desirable features of areas encompassed by this designation include full transportation access (highway, rail, water, air), available utilities, and favorable soil conditions.

Mixed Use

A Mixed Use overlay designation has been applied to certain areas of the County that have been identified as being potentially appropriate for a master-planned development approach that includes some type of mixed use development. This overlay designation is intended to create well-designed communities in which people can live, work, and recreate by providing opportunities for a mix of commercial and residential uses – and different types of residential uses (i.e., detached, attached, and apartments) – within a single, relatively compact development under a unified, coherent master plan. Proposed uses should have a high degree of physical and functional integration with one another, including extensive pedestrian and bicycle connectivity.

The range of permitted uses envisioned within any given mixed use development includes but is not limited to homes, senior housing, hotels and motels, offices, retail shops, restaurants, and, depending on the location, even light manufacturing. The balance of residential and commercial uses should generally reflect the underlying land use designation(s) and be compatible with adjacent land uses. Care must be exercised in evaluating any proposed mixed-use development to ensure that the introduction of a residential component into areas where the underlying designation is not residential will not significantly increase the County's maximum build-out population of 80,000. Likewise, care must be exercised in evaluating a proposal to introduce a commercial component into an area with an underlying residential designation to ensure compatibility with the surrounding area and the scale of the mixed-use project. It is also critical that any proposed mixed-use development be designed, through proffered conditions, to mitigate public service and infrastructure impacts. Furthermore, in areas with an underlying commercial and/or industrial designation, the mix of uses must have a positive fiscal impact; in other words, the balance of nonresidential and residential uses must be such that the net revenues generated by the former more than compensate for the net expenditures generated by the latter.

While the Mixed Use overlay designation is applied to several locations, the County's ability to accommodate mixed-use development will be limited not just by market forces but also by the availability of infrastructure and public services. The identification of specific areas for mixed use should not be construed as excluding other areas from consideration for mixed-use development, nor should it be construed as a guarantee that a mixed-use development, if proposed in one of these areas, would necessarily be approved. Because of their uniqueness, it is critical to require that any proposed mixed-use developments be individually approved by the Board of Supervisors with Planning Commission review and public hearings.

2025 Land Use Summary

Land Use Designation	Gross Acreage	Undeveloped Acreage
Low Density Residential	11,830	4,030
Medium Density Residential	4,770	1,170
High Density Residential	2,710	330
Multi-Family Residential	590	40
RESIDENTIAL TOTAL	19,900	5,570
General Business	1,500	370
Limited Business	560	330
Economic Opportunity	3,640	2,750
Limited Industrial	1,010	90
General Industrial	2,180	950
COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL TOTAL	8,890	4,490
Conservation	15,560	1,080
Yorktown	120	10
Military	20,960	NA
TOTAL	65,430	11,145