

CITIZEN INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Community planning is a community effort, and citizen input and participation are vital to the success of that effort. As the principal policy document guiding a community's future growth and development, including not just private development but also public services and infrastructure, a comprehensive plan has a major impact on the residents' quality of life. It is important, therefore, that the plan reflect the citizens' vision for their community. Consequently, public outreach was a major component of the process of preparing this *Comprehensive Plan* update. These efforts and the results they yielded are described below.

CITIZEN COMMITTEES

To oversee this project, the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission formed a Steering Committee made up entirely of County citizens, including 4 Planning Commissioners and representatives of various County boards and commissions, each of which was asked to name a representative. In addition, the York County Chamber of Commerce was invited to select a representative, and one representative was selected at random from among the various neighborhood and homeowners' associations in the County.

In addition, a second committee was formed consisting of volunteers representing homeowners' and civic associations and assorted groups. This Communications and Outreach Group, or COG, was established to function essentially as a team of neighborhood liaisons, each serving as a conduit of information between the Steering Committee and staff and his or her neighbors. The only eligibility requirements for membership were an email account, Internet access, and a desire to serve. A total of 38 groups were represented on the COG, including homeowners' associations and other community groups such as the Senior Center Board, Peninsula and Williamsburg Associations of Realtors, Peninsula Housing and Builders Association, Williamsburg Hotel & Motel Association, and the Williamsburg Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The basic purpose of this committee was to stimulate citizen interest and participation in the plan update by assisting with planning, organizing, and publicizing neighborhood meetings; soliciting ideas and comments on the plan from neighbors; disseminating information to their neighbors; and serving as a spokesperson for the project in the community.

Comprehensive Plan Review Steering Committee Representation

- Board of Supervisors
- Planning Commission (4)
- School Board
- Beautification Committee
- Chamber of Commerce
- Economic Development Authority
- Homeowners' Associations
- Parks and Recreation Advisory Board
- Transportation Safety Commission
- Youth Commission

NEIGHBORHOOD OPEN HOUSES

The Comprehensive Plan Review Steering Committee conducted a series of 15 "Neighborhood Open Houses" in various locations all over the County (see **Table 1**). These open houses, which took place in September and October of 2004, were intended as an opportunity for citizens to learn about current plans for both the County as a whole and their particular neighborhood and to have a voice in shaping any proposed changes to those plans. The intent was to give all citizens an opportunity to attend a meeting very near their homes, or, in the event of schedule conflicts, in reasonable proximity.

These sessions were publicized as “Open Houses” to stress their informal format, and citizens were encouraged to come anytime between 4:00 and 7:00. On display were large presentation maps depicting existing development, land use designations, vacant land, planned bikeways and road improvements, flood and storm surge zones, and archeological sites. Meetings were staffed by members of the Steering Committee and staff who were available to talk with the citizens to answer their questions and take their comments and suggestions. Everyone who attended was given a questionnaire on which to record his or her comments and suggestions for the *Comprehensive Plan* review. Flip charts were also provided on which people could write their comments. There were also large-scale laminated maps on which citizens could write their comments and suggestions relative to a specific geographic location – such as an intersection that needs to be widened, a road that needs a bikeway, an area that needs streetlights, etc.

The Neighborhood Open Houses were publicized largely through the Communications and Outreach Group members, who were provided with full color brochures and custom fliers designed to promote the open house(s) in their particular area of the County. In some neighborhoods these fliers were distributed door-to-door, and some homeowners’ and neighborhood associations printed the fliers in their newsletter. One neighborhood printed the entire questionnaire in its newsletter, allowing members to tear it out, fill it in, and submit it. Some neighborhoods utilized their association web site to publicize the meetings and provided a link to the *Comprehensive Plan* web site. The County’s Public Information Office issued a news release that resulted in articles in the *Daily Press*, *York Town Crier*, and *Virginia Gazette*. In addition, the *Virginia Gazette* included each of the 15 open houses in its “Out and About” page. Large display ads with meeting dates and locations were published in all three local newspapers, and an article was published in the July 2004 issue of the *Citizen News*, which is mailed to every home and business in the County. The Steering Committee Chairman recorded a video public service announcement that was broadcast on Channel 46, and a special project web site was developed.

Neighborhood Open House Schedule	
Date	Location
Thursday, September 9	Magruder Elementary School
Wednesday, September 15	Grafton Bethel Elementary School
Monday, September 20	York Hall
Wednesday, September 22	Kiln Creek Recreation Center
Thursday, September 23	Tabb High School
Wednesday, September 29	Waller Mill Elementary School
Thursday, September 30	Tabb Library
Monday, October 4	Environmental & Development Services Building
Wednesday, October 6	Grafton High School
Thursday, October 7	York High School
Tuesday, October 12	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
Wednesday, October 20	Seaford Elementary School
Thursday, October 21	Yorktown Middle School
Wednesday, October 27	Running Man Swimming Pool Community Center
Thursday, October 28	Griffin-Yeates Center

Table 1

A total of 215 people attended these sessions, slightly over 14 per session, on average. Of these, 206 were York County citizens, with 8 from James City County and one from the City of Newport News. Turnout ranged from a low of three at Tabb High School to a high of 67 at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the upper County. A total of 93 separate comments – both written and oral – were recorded, not including the questionnaire responses. Comments covered a range of issues, with transportation dominating (44 comments), followed by land use (21 comments). There were 9 comments of a general nature on planning and

development and 6 each on community facilities and economic development. There were 5 comments on environmental issues, 2 on historic resources, and 1 on housing. By far the one comment that was made more than any other was that no commercial development should be permitted on the east side of the I-64/Lightfoot interchange. A large number of citizens who attended the open house in the Lightfoot area made this comment either orally or in writing. Six citizens commented on the need for subdivisions to have multiple points of ingress and egress. Six citizens expressed a desire for more pedestrian facilities (sidewalks and walking trails), and five for more bike paths. Three said more parks are needed.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

The questionnaire that was given to everyone who attended the Neighborhood Open Houses was also posted on the project web site. A total of 107 questionnaires – paper and electronic – were completed and returned. In evaluating the questionnaire responses, it is important to recognize that although they give an indication of citizen opinion, they do not reflect a scientifically selected random sample of the population and therefore do not necessarily reflect the views of the larger population.

The questionnaire asked citizens what they want York County to look like in 20 years, which is the fundamental question of any comprehensive plan. The top five responses to this open-ended question, listed below, were similar in that they all reflected a concern about growth and urbanization and a desire for green space:

1. Green, open space, trees (24 responses)
2. No growth, less growth (22 responses)
3. Rural, semi-rural, suburban (11 responses)
4. More parks (10 responses)
5. Less traffic (9 responses)

More than anything else, the questionnaire respondents indicated that they want the County to look “green,” with trees and open space. This desire was reinforced by the citizens’ response to another question that asked if the County should purchase undeveloped land for open space, which was supported by more than two-thirds (70.1%) of those who responded. Only 5.6% were opposed, and the rest had no opinion or gave responses that could not be categorized.

Not surprisingly, what the questionnaire respondents said they like most about living in York County was its rural or small town qualities and its schools, and what they like least is traffic. The County’s natural environment, convenience to amenities, low crime rate, and sense of community were also highly favored, while growth and development, a lack of things to do, unattractive businesses were cited as negative attributes.

The questionnaire asked citizens to name examples of particularly attractive development in the County; Running Man, Yorktown, the Tabb Library, and the Kiln Creek area received the most responses. Asked to cite examples of unattractive development, the questionnaire respondents named Route 17, with particular emphasis on empty stores and shopping centers, salvage yards, and abandoned gas stations. This concern about vacant commercial properties was also reflected in the strong positive response to whether or not the County should purchase blighted commercial properties, which was supported by 71.0% of the questionnaire respondents and opposed by 12.1%.

With regard to future growth and development, most of the questionnaire respondents (53.3%) felt that the County’s “maximum build-out population” should remain at 80,000 residents; this is the theoretical point at which the population would level off if all residential land in the County were developed at its maximum allowable density. There was very little public support for raising the build-out population, favored by only 5.7% of those who responded, while another 19.0% indicated that it should be reduced below 80,000.

In the area of housing, a 39.3% plurality of the respondents felt the County should do more to encourage moderately priced housing; however, a majority (53.3%) rejected the notion of making more land available for townhouses and apartments, which historically have provided a more affordable alternative to single-family detached housing. Slightly less than a third of those who responded (31.8%) felt the County should not do more to encourage moderately priced housing. Asked whether or not the County should encourage the construction of housing designed specifically for seniors, 47.7% responded affirmatively while an almost a quarter (24.3%) had no opinion. Only 17.8% of the respondents were opposed to encouraging senior housing.

The questionnaire asked if the neo-traditional mixed-use development concept (residential, commercial, office, and public uses arranged in a compact, comprehensively planned, pedestrian-scale development) should be encouraged in the County. Port Warwick in Newport News and New Town in James City County were cited as two local examples of this design concept, which was supported by a 47.7% plurality of the respondents and opposed by 22.4%. Another 16.6% had no opinion, and 13.1% of the responses could not be classified.

Since traffic was cited as the County's most negative attribute, it is not surprising that most of the respondents (54.2%) do not feel the existing road system is adequate. Also not surprisingly, Route 17 was cited overwhelmingly as the citizens' major traffic concern; it received almost three times as many "votes" as its nearest competitor, which was Victory Boulevard (Route 171). Several citizens also expressed support for the extension of Fort Eustis Boulevard and improvements to Big Bethel Road.

A series of questions asked about new facilities, services, programs, and recreational or cultural facilities that should be provided or encouraged. In addition, there were questions about the types of businesses that should be encouraged or discouraged. The responses appear below.

What new services, programs, or facilities should be provided?

1. Recreation facilities/fields (18)
2. Parks/green space (12)
3. Public transit (9)
4. Bike paths (7)

What new recreational or cultural facilities should be encouraged that are not currently available in the County?

1. Theatre, concerts, art shows (11)
2. Recreation center (10)
3. Bike paths (7)
4. Youth programs/facilities (7)
5. Athletic facilities/fields (6)

What types of businesses should be encouraged?

1. Sit-down restaurants – not fast food (15)
2. Grocery stores (9)
3. Shopping mall, department stores (3)
4. High-tech businesses (2)

What types of businesses should be discouraged?

1. Gas station/convenience stores (23)
2. Junkyards (16)
3. Car sales, auto parts and repair (11)
4. Bars, clubs, liquor stores (7)
5. Fast food restaurants (6)
6. Tattoo parlors (6)
7. Mini-storage warehouses (6)
8. Adult businesses (6)

In addition to asking about new programs and facilities, the questionnaire also asked if there are any existing public services, programs, or facilities that should be discontinued. This question yielded only twelve responses, only one of which – the Zweybrucken exchange program – was cited by as many as two people. Similarly, there were few responses to a question about historic resources outside of Yorktown that should be protected by the County

Finally, in response to whether or not there is more the County should do to mitigate the effect of storm events, about half of the respondents had nothing to recommend. Of those who did have specific suggestions, the most frequent responses were 1) cleaning ditches/improving culverts, and placing utilities underground (tied for first place), 3) public information and education, and 4) preventing or limiting construction in flood-prone areas.

TELEPHONE SURVEY

In order to obtain statistically valid data regarding general community goals relating to the physical development of the County, a telephone survey of County residents was conducted in early 2005. Continental Research Associates, Inc., a marketing research firm based in Norfolk, conducted the survey and tabulated the results on the County's behalf. The survey questions were developed by the Steering Committee and the Planning staff with input from Continental Research. A total of 406 interviews were conducted, yielding a margin of error of $\pm 4.9\%$. The survey sample was geographically stratified (i.e., divided into zip codes to mirror the geographic composition of the population).

The survey consisted of 46 questions, 9 of which were questions asking for information about the interviewee (gender, income, age, etc.). Of the remaining 37 questions, 30 asked people to consider various potential *Comprehensive Plan* goals and initiatives and rank the importance of each on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents "Extremely Important" and 1 represents "Not Important." There were also 5 "yes or no" questions, one multiple-choice question, and one open-ended question asking people to identify any additional goals not mentioned in the survey. The results were tabulated by the research firm in a report titled *County of York Comprehensive Plan Opinion Survey* and dated February 2005.

The responses to the 30 goal-ranking questions provided the Comprehensive Plan Review Steering Committee with a framework for identifying and prioritizing the comprehensive plan goals and objectives. For each of these questions, an average score was computed: the higher the average score on an issue on a scale of 1 to 5 (i.e., the closer to 5 or "Extremely Important"), the more important that issue is, according to the citizens. Since 3 represents the mid-point of the scale, any average score of 3 can be thought of as a fairly neutral response – not much strong feeling for or against, or if there is strong feeling it is evenly divided. Any score below 3 is an indication that citizen support is relatively weak compared with other goals.

The 30 goals are listed in priority order, as ranked by the citizens, in **Table 2**. The overall average score for each goal is included along with the upper and lower County averages, which are provided for purposes of comparison.

Citizen Rankings of Potential Comprehensive Plan Goals

Goal	Lower County	Upper County	Total
1. Protect the natural environment	4.58	4.49	4.56
2. Preserve historic sites and structures	4.55	4.40	4.52
3. Preserve open and green space	4.47	4.38	4.46
4. Encourage new businesses to move into empty commercial properties	4.31	4.27	4.31
5. Purchase undeveloped land, or the rights to the land, for the purpose of preserving open space	4.12	4.12	4.12
6. Ensure that all new businesses have attractive landscaping	4.13	4.00	4.10
7. Purchase and tear down vacant, rundown business properties along major roads to improve the area's appearance	4.10	4.04	4.09
8. Improve the appearance of the properties along major roads in the County	4.08	4.04	4.07
9. Require new business or those being renovated along major roads to meet certain architectural design standards to make sure they are visually attractive	3.96	3.90	3.95
10. Build new roads and widen the existing ones to reduce traffic congestion	3.95	3.74	3.91
11. Build more schools	3.84	3.63	3.80
12. Bring in better-paying jobs for County residents	3.63	4.22	3.75
13. Build more fire stations	3.78	3.54	3.74
14. Encourage the construction of housing specially designed for seniors	3.63	3.64	3.64
15. Create more parks for hiking, biking, picnicking, or playing	3.43	3.38	3.42
16. Open more satellite Sheriff's offices in different areas	3.34	3.63	3.40
17. Pay to move utilities underground along major roads like Route 17	3.29	3.53	3.34
18. Build more ball fields for organized sports	3.19	3.01	3.16
19. Build walking trails in natural areas	3.12	3.20	3.13
20. Encourage mixed-use developments	3.01	3.42	3.09
21. Encourage more restaurants to locate here	3.13	2.56	3.02
22. Build more libraries	2.93	3.37	3.02
23. Encourage the construction of new single-family homes that are priced for people earning below average incomes	2.88	3.40	2.98
24. Build bike paths	2.88	2.86	2.88
25. Open satellite County offices for paying taxes, car registrations, or County bills	2.70	3.49	2.86
26. Encourage more tourist-oriented businesses or attractions to locate here	2.88	2.73	2.85
27. Encourage more retail stores to locate here	2.73	2.75	2.74
28. Encourage more offices to locate here	2.73	2.78	2.74
29. Encourage more light industry (such as a distribution center or the Canon Copier plant) to locate here	2.66	2.93	2.71
30. Encourage more heavy industry (such as manufacturing plants for large machinery) to locate here	1.91	2.31	1.99
Source: <i>County of York Comprehensive Plan Opinion Survey, February 2005</i> , Continental Research Associates, Inc.			

Table 2

The telephone survey results demonstrate a clear consensus among the citizens about the importance of preserving and improving the County's visual quality. Green space is important in terms of both the preservation of existing green space and the landscaping of new commercial sites. Four of the seven top-ranked goals address this issue. Two of the remaining three top seven goals also address aesthetic concerns, as do eight of the top ten ranked goals.

With regard to public services and facilities, the citizens place a particularly high priority on transportation improvements to reduce congestion. Schools were also deemed to be of high importance, followed by fire stations, parks for passive recreation, satellite Sheriff's offices, ball

fields for organized sports, and walking trails. Bicycle paths and satellite County offices are considered low priorities, while the citizens are neutral about construction of additional libraries.

Survey questions pertaining to economic development produced mixed results. Most of the citizens (52.7%) consider it extremely important for the County to encourage new businesses to move into empty commercial properties. This was the 4th highest ranked goal overall with an average rating of 4.31. Bringing in better-paying jobs for County residents also received a positive response, considered an extremely important goal by a 36.0% plurality of the population, who gave it a relatively high average rating of 3.75. However, support for development of the type that would produce higher-wage jobs was relatively weak.

Responses to the five “yes or no” questions on the survey appear in **Table 3**. Only two of these questions elicited a strong response. By a wide margin the citizens do not believe there is enough quality housing in the County for people who earn below average. However, by an even wider margin they do not believe the County should allow more high-density neighborhoods to address this deficiency. Much slimmer majorities oppose the expansion of Newport News/Williamsburg Airport runways further into the County,

Telephone Survey Responses to “Yes” or “No” Questions		
Question	Yes	No
Should the County allow more higher density neighborhoods to be built in some areas as a way to provide more affordable housing for people who earn below average incomes?	29.8%	70.2%
Is there enough quality housing in York County for people who earn below average incomes?	33.0%	67.0%
Should the County work to attract businesses that will pay a lot in taxes to York County even if it may cause more traffic on the roads?	46.8%	53.2%
Should the Newport News-Williamsburg Airport runways be extended further into York County so that airlines can offer more direct connections to more cities?	46.8%	53.2%
Should York County help certain businesses pay for emergency generators so that pharmacies, gas stations, and grocery stores can be open after a major storm?	48.5%	51.5%
Source: <i>County of York Comprehensive Plan Opinion Survey, February 2005</i> , Continental Research Associates, Inc.		

Table 3

The 80,000 “maximum build-out population” (the population level that would be reached if all residential land in the County were developed at its maximum allowable density) has been one of the guiding principles of York County planning and zoning efforts since 1991. The survey asked if this is still an appropriate target, but it did so by focusing on the number of households rather than the number of people. Not surprisingly, the results indicated very little support for increasing the 80,000-resident population threshold, supported by only 14.5% of the citizens. A 48.0% plurality feels it should be further reduced, while 37.4% feel the maximum build-out population should remain at 80,000 (or 8,000 additional households, as the question was worded).

There was one open-ended question in the survey that asked people to identify the main reason they first chose to live in York County. The top response, given by 34.5% of the interviewees, was the quality of the schools, followed by the County’s quiet “rural” character (13.1%). The #3 response, given by 11.1% of those interviewed, is that they live in York County because they were born there. Other reasons that were given include good housing, low taxes, and convenience to work.

CONCLUSIONS

Simply put, York County's residents like the County the way it is and, apart from removing blighted commercial structures, do not want it to change very much. The citizens care deeply about the appearance of their community. They like green space and want to see it preserved, even if it means having the County purchase land, or the development rights to the land, for the purpose of preserving open space. Similarly, the citizens believe it is important for the County to ensure that all new businesses have attractive landscaping. This concern about the appearance of the County is also reflected in strong support for encouraging new businesses to move into empty commercial properties and for purchasing and demolishing vacant, blighted commercial properties along major roads such as Route 17.

With regard to public facilities and infrastructure, the citizens' top priority is the road network, but they are generally supportive of building more schools and public safety facilities (fire stations and satellite Sheriff's offices) and establishing more parks for hiking, biking, picnicking, and playing. There was less support for building more ball fields, perhaps because of the knowledge that the County recently entered into an agreement with the City of Newport News to lease Waterworks property for construction of an athletic field complex.

The citizens recognize the lack of affordable housing in the County but generally do not feel the County should do anything to address it. They are concerned about residential growth in general and want to retain the County's low population density relative to neighboring localities; however, they support the construction of age-restricted housing for the County's senior citizens.

Citizen concerns about growth and development are not limited to housing; commercial growth is also a concern. The citizens do place a high priority on bringing more high-paying jobs into the County, but attracting new retail, office, and industrial development is not viewed as an important County goal. Rather, they feel the County should focus on attracting new businesses into existing commercial buildings that are vacant.

In general, upper and lower County residents agree on the major goals for the County to pursue over the next 20 years, but there are some differences. Support for building more libraries and satellite County and Sheriff's offices is stronger in the upper county, where there are no York County libraries, Sheriff's offices, or offices for tax and bill paying, car registrations, etc. Upper County residents are more supportive of extending the runways at Newport News/Williamsburg International Airport, which is not surprising since the airport and the aircraft noise it generates are in the lower County. Support for the "neo-traditional" mixed-use development concept is also stronger in the upper County, where growth and development pressures have been generally less prevalent. Lower County residents – most of whom probably have to use Route 17 on a daily basis – are more concerned about traffic congestion, and are less supportive of County efforts to encourage the construction of moderately priced housing.