

## **INTRODUCTION & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The purpose of this comprehensive plan, as set forth in the Code of Virginia, is to “guide and accomplish a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the territory which will, in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants.”

Shenandoah County’s first comprehensive plan was prepared in the early 1970’s by the staff of the then Division of State Planning and Community Affairs for the recently formed County Planning Commission. It was adopted November 13, 1973 with little public input or comment. It covered the period 1973-1990. At the time, growth and development were new for the County. Its population had remained almost constant at approximately 20,000 for the preceding century. Development of the interstate highway system, however, opened the County to north-south interstate commerce and to retirement and second home development from Washington, DC and other metropolitan areas of Virginia and Maryland. The comprehensive planning process and implementing ordinances offered the County a way to deal with impending growth.

A second County comprehensive plan, covering the period 1991-2010, was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on December 10, 1991. Unlike the first plan, this plan had the benefit of extensive involvement by County officials, a review by an appointed citizens review committee, and a series of public meetings and hearings. Much of the Vision statement and the General Development Goals espoused in the 1991-2010 Plan remains valid to this day.

In the fall of 2002, the County sponsored a series of three public meetings distributed throughout the County for the purpose of soliciting citizen inputs for an update to the comprehensive plan, such plan to cover the period to 2025. As a direct product of those public meetings, a Citizens Advisory Committee was appointed by the Board of Supervisors. The mission of the Citizens Advisory Committee was to update the 1991-2010 Plan, chapter by chapter, under the guidance and direction of the Director of Planning and Code Enforcement. Meeting on a monthly basis, the Committee completed a draft of the new comprehensive plan in October 2004. At that time the Committee hosted a series of six public meetings, one in each electoral district. Public response was spirited and constructive. Comments from the six public meetings were then assessed by the Committee and, where appropriate, became revisions to the draft. The Committee then proceeded to prepare the Implementation chapter. Following completion of the draft plan update, a joint workshop was held on April 7, 2005 between the Board of Supervisors, the Planning Commission and the Citizens Advisory Committee where consensus on the Plan’s goals, objectives and strategies was obtained.

## SHENANDOAH COUNTY 2025 – “THE VISION”

The following Vision Statement describes in a broad sense what we as a county want to be twenty years from now. It is based on a consensus of popular aspirations and a realistic projection of current socio-economic trends. The Vision Statement provides the framework for formulating a meaningful set of goals and policies for Shenandoah County over the next 20 years.

In the year 2025, Shenandoah County will still be a primarily rural community that:

Protects its natural resources

Directs its growth to the towns ensuring its open, agricultural character

Provides a variety of jobs in business, light industry, tourism, and sustainable agriculture

Maintains moderate growth of a demographically varied population

Supports safe and efficient interstate transportation and maintains the rural character of its primary and secondary roads

Affords its students excellent and appropriate education

Serves its citizens with public facilities and services that enhance their quality of life

Ensures preservation of its natural beauty and unique, historical character by strictly adhering to the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Plan.

## MAJOR ISSUES

During the series of public meetings held in October-November 2004, the Citizens Advisory Committee identified the following seven major Comprehensive Plan-related issues that the County leadership will need to deal with over the course of the Plan years 2005-2025:

1. Protecting the quality of our wells and streams. The limestone geology of the Valley, and particularly the fractionated limestone (karst) that characterizes much of Shenandoah County, puts the quality of our groundwater at substantial risk. The fractured bedrock, sinkholes, caverns and caves of karst terrain mean that surface contamination is easily transferred to underground water supplies. Several tributary streams and portions of the North Fork are “impaired,” meaning that they are sufficiently polluted that swimming in them or eating fish caught in them is unsafe. This condition results from such causes as failed septic systems, improper manure management, runoff from farms and urban areas, and even wildlife. Surface water and groundwater are interconnected throughout much of the region. Sample testing indicates that a significant percentage of septic systems are failing (21%) and that many private wells do not meet safe standards for bacteria and nitrates (38%). The Implementation chapter contains a number of recommendations, some voluntary and some regulatory, for ensuring that the quality of the water supply is adequate for the foreseeable future.

2. Attracting quality business and industry. The median family income in Shenandoah County of \$45,000 is \$3,500 below that of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Planning District (of which Shenandoah County is a part) and \$9,000 below that of the Commonwealth of Virginia. This relatively low figure is due largely to the predominance of manufacturing in the County. These industries require mostly semi-skilled labor and pay relatively low wages. Daily some 6000 residents of the County commute elsewhere to jobs that pay more than they could earn here. During the past decade there have been few new jobs created in the County that pay more than the average. If the County is to break out of the current cycle of low-paying jobs, it will need to attract a different kind of business and industry – ones that require a better educated workforce, a more highly skilled workforce, a more technically oriented workforce, a more knowledge-based workforce. Such companies hire mostly college graduates, and they pay substantially higher wages and salaries. Recruiting such companies requires a collective community effort to create a business-friendly climate and a targeted effort to recruit the right kind of companies to build or relocate here. With a more highly educated workforce, new companies will look closely at the quality of the public schools in the county. Shenandoah County schools currently spend over \$1000 less per student than the state average, have a significantly higher student/teaching position ratio in grades 8-12 than the state, show lower average SAT scores than the state average, and otherwise show indications that the quality of instruction offered to high school students who aspire to four-year college degrees needs improvement. See the Implementation chapter for specific recommendations related to attracting quality business and industry to the County.

3. Promoting and protecting farming as an occupation. Farming is the traditional economic lifeblood of the Shenandoah Valley and also the foundation of much of its culture. The County ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the state in agriculture. However, there are many current trends that are slowly but surely eroding the agricultural orientation of the County. Since 1980 there has been a 20.7% reduction in farm employment. In just the last five years some 52 new housing subdivisions (565 lots) have been created in rural areas. The farm acreage lost during that period is the most in the Valley over the same time period. Younger generations are reluctant to continue in farming; the average age of farmers is approaching 60. Preserving farmland and farming as an occupation is becoming a challenge of major proportions. The County has several tools at its disposal to promote farm preservation, such as conservation easements and purchase of development rights. The former has been sparsely used; the latter has yet to be used in this County. As for promoting farming as an occupation, there is no easy solution. Maintaining agricultural programs in the schools, promoting an emphasis on agriculture in the media, promoting new markets, exploring further agricultural tax relief, and promoting the health and growth of agriculture as an industry---all of these and more will be required.

4. Balancing residential growth in rural areas of the county. While a stated Goal of this Plan and its predecessor is to guide and direct future growth in and around the towns and other areas served by public utilities (primarily water and sewer), there is no legal mechanism to preclude development in the rural areas of the County. The challenge is to control growth so that it does not lead to endless sprawl and so that it preserves as much open space and rural ambiance as possible. To that end, and as a first step, in 2003 the County increased the minimum lot size in Agricultural districts (A-1) to 3.5 acres and to 10 acres in Conservation districts (C-1). In 2004 the County created two new rural residential zones (RR-A in Agricultural districts and RR-C in Conservation Districts). Developers wishing to convert a parcel of land to a subdivision will be required to go through the rezoning process with the County. Subdividing is thus no longer a “by right” action. A distinctive feature of this Comprehensive Plan is the re-introduction of Open Space or Cluster Development. Under this provision, a rezoning to RR-A or RR-C would require that the homes be clustered and that a majority of the acreage of the parcel be preserved as open space in perpetuity. Minimum lot sizes would be reduced so as to preserve the same density as at present. The Implementation chapter provides further details.

5. Community facilities to meet growing needs. Shenandoah County’s population has nearly doubled since 1970 –from 20,000 then to over 37,000 in 2004. It is forecast to increase by another 12,000 by 2025. Growth since the 2000 census, however, suggests that the forecast for 2025 may be too conservative. In the 20-year period between the 1980 Census and the 2000 Census, the median age increased from 33.9 to 40.9, reflecting the large influx of older families and retirees. School-age children increased only 3% during that entire period while the overall population increased 27%. However, since the 2000 census, school enrollment has increased **by 2% per year**, so the demographics are changing. As the population continues to grow there will be increased demands for services and facilities. Some of these demands can be met from the private sector, some from tax-supported public sources, and some through a partnership of private and public entities. In the last decade the County has added \$40 million in school capital improvements, and has added a new government center, a new county library, a new landfill cell, and the North Fork Wastewater Treatment Plant. Nevertheless, outstanding facility requirements remain, including over time new school construction, upgrading the county jail, public safety, and court facilities, creating a cultural arts center at the former Edinburg school, implementing the County’s Master Indoor/Outdoor Recreation Plan, and as part of the latter, opening a county-wide wellness center. More details on these and other initiatives are covered in the Implementation chapter. As the County moves further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, balancing the cost of increased facilities and services with tax revenue policy will be a major challenge for the County’s leadership.

6. Transportation for the Future. Shenandoah County is in need of a county-wide transportation plan. I-81 is far and away the major transportation artery through the county, with truck traffic alone accounting for 14,000 vehicles per day. Issues such as widening the interstate and/or providing a rail solution to reduce I-81 traffic can only be addressed on a regional multi-state basis, but Shenandoah County needs to have a voice in this process. Locally, vehicle traffic has increased dramatically. Between 1980 and 2000, the population increased 27% but vehicle miles traveled increased by 190%. With the exception of I-81, all of the primary and secondary roads in the county are basically two-lane roads and are destined to remain so for the foreseeable future. Many of them need safety improvements, such as straightening out dangerous curves, installing larger culverts, and providing shoulders where none currently exist. These and other considerations need to be addressed by a professional transportation study. Any county-wide transportation study and plan should be coordinated with the towns. See the Implementation chapter for additional details.

7. Accountability. A comprehensive plan should be a “living” document in the sense that it needs to guide the decisions of the county leadership on a regular basis and it needs to be updated to reflect the inevitable changes that occur in the physical, economic, social and cultural fabric of our society. To that end, this Plan recommends that the Board of Supervisors establish a permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to support the Board and the Planning Commission and to function under the direction of the Director of Planning and Code Enforcement. The committee would propose updates and revisions to the Plan as they are needed and, on an annual basis, review the actions of the previous 12 months and report its findings to the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.