

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

I. Introduction & Executive Summary

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan provides a guide for physical planning, development and conservation in the Town of Laurel and the surrounding Greater Laurel Area. The Plan focuses on physical growth and revitalization while considering social and economic needs. It expresses a vision for the future of the Laurel community, its neighborhoods, business centers, farms and countryside. Through this statement of planning and fiscal policy, the Town expresses its wish to participate actively in the growth of the world around it for the benefit of its citizens and future generations. The Plan contains goals and objectives, policies and programs and recommended action projects to implement a vision of Laurel as a:

Laurel of Delaware

Named for a flowering plant that has symbolized achievement since antiquity, Laurel will be a Garden City of Southwestern Delaware. It will build on its roots in agriculture. It will develop the quality of its municipal services for citizens, taxpayers, neighbors, businesses and visitors. It will grow in new ways. It will honor its character as a family town and its heritage as the capital of the Broad Creek Greenway. Its rich relationship with its farming countryside will be protected by a surrounding Greenbelt. Its legacy as a Town founded in the Nanticoke River Watershed will be honored. Its connection to Route 13 as a business boulevard will be realized. Its role as a residential center and marketplace in Sussex County will be fulfilled through good partnerships and planning. Its citizens will take pride in the way it maintains its legacy while it builds for a vibrant future. It will truly be a Laurel of Delaware.

As the sketch plan entitled **Framework for Future Land Use** (Map 9) illustrates, the vision is expressed in the Plan by seeing the Greater Laurel Area as a network of vital neighborhoods, growth centers and conservation areas focused on Laurel's historic Town Center on Broad Creek.

Ebenezer Howard's classic vision of **Garden Cities of Tomorrow** is relevant to planning for Laurel's future. Howard's model plan gives equal respect to each part of the community: its Town Center, historic neighborhoods, business areas, cultural facilities, waterways and parks, boulevards, suburban growth districts and farms in the countryside. Each helps the others. It offers the promise of a harmonious community with a sustainable economy and social institutions within a context of good design. These ideas are vital to the planning of Laurel and its surroundings.

Laurel is a **"Town of Two Doors."** One is Broad Creek, the place of its origin. Broad Creek was Laurel's arm to the sea. Bay Schooners built on its banks sailed to Halifax and Havana. In this sense, Laurel is a forgotten seaport. The modern door is Route 13, "The Divided Highway". US 13 connects Laurel with the modern world. The goal for Broad

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

Creek is to renew Laurel's connection with it through recreational boating and natural conservation. The goal for Route 13 is to more thoroughly connect the Town with it, as has begun to happen with development at Discount Land Road.

The Town of Laurel has a special relationship with Route 13 as its business boulevard. Laurel is surrounded by countryside that it has always served in the role of an agricultural market and processing town. Its transportation arteries include US 13 to Wilmington and Norfolk, US 9 to Georgetown, Delaware Route 24, the Southern Delaware Heritage Trail, to Indian River and the Norfolk & Southern Railroad as a focus for industrial development. The DART First State Route 212 Line traverses Route 13A, Central Avenue and Route 9, with several transit stops. The private Laurel Airport is located southwest of Town. Broad Creek is the waterway along which Laurel was first settled by the Nanticoke Indians and later by European and African American peoples. Its role as a recreational and historic waterway connecting Laurel with the Nanticoke River and the Chesapeake Bay should be revived.

Laurel is a beautiful Town in a varied setting. It has strong business and community relationships with the area around it, both the Broad Creek Greenway and Southwestern Sussex County. The Framework identifies "**Gateways**" as places where travel and community activity are centered and which should be beautified and made stronger. It defines a Broad Creek Greenway Trail that will reach from Laurel to the Nanticoke River on the west and Trap Pond on the east.

The Framework map shows individual parcels of property because private ownership is the basis of the community. Finally, it defines a "**Potential Growth and Annexation Area**" around the Town, within which contiguous private properties may elect to seek annexation. It identifies both growth and conservation areas which need to be evaluated and addressed.

The Comprehensive Plan has been developed in keeping with the **2003 Sussex County Comprehensive Plan Update** and with the **Governor's Livable Delaware Program**. The design goals of Livable Delaware are to coordinate development around existing centers, relate it to public transit, pedestrian and bicycling facilities, ensure the adequacy of public services, encourage mixed-use development, protect natural resources and create a growth boundary between urban centers and the surrounding countryside.

Since the passage of **House Bill 255** by the Delaware Legislature in 2001, Delaware has required that lands annexed in future years must have been evaluated in a State-certified Comprehensive Plan. The Plan addresses a twenty-year time frame. Some elements are immediate action projects, others would occur within 5-10 years, and others are 10-20 years in the future.

The focus of the Plan is on physical development and community design, all the while considering socio-economic, civic, cooperative, competitive and cultural factors in the life of Laurel. It addresses healthy population growth, jobs and economic development,

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

environmental protection, historic preservation and land conservation in the Greater Laurel Area. The **Greater Laurel Area** is the area included within a two and one-half mile radius around the crossing of Central Avenue and Broad Creek.

Laurel has significant problems in the areas of **Deteriorated Housing, Serious Crime Rates, A High Poverty Rate And A High Ratio Of Rental To Home-Ownership Housing**. The Comprehensive Plan recommends that the Town place a priority on rehabilitating deteriorated houses as well as attracting new investment in home ownership, new jobs and new business investment. Community social programs, local foundations, the Laurel Public Schools and the Police and Fire Departments need strong community support.

The plan endeavors to respect and protect the natural environment of the **Broad Creek Greenway Region** of which Laurel is a part. The Greenway is a natural corridor that focuses on Broad Creek. It reaches from the Trap, Raccoon, Pepper, Trussum and Chipman Ponds and Cypress Swamps on the east to Bethel, Portsville, Phillips Landing, Woodland Ferry and the Nanticoke River on the west, a distance of 14 miles. The Creek was Laurel's place of birth, for Laurel is an integral part of the Nanticoke River Watershed that flows to the Chesapeake Bay.

In accordance with Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities vision, the Plan recommends that these irreplaceable natural environments be protected through the creation of a **Laurel Greenbelt** and a strongly defined **Broad Creek Greenway**. These will be implemented through public enjoyment and education, cooperative land use planning, town and county zoning, the purchase of land conservation easements and the use of farmland preservation programs. In this manner, sprawl will be avoided and development encouraged at existing and defined new centers, while farming and natural areas will be protected for future generations.

The Comprehensive Plan identifies the following priority actions:

- ❑ Proceed immediately to complete major **Upgrades Of The Town's Wastewater Treatment And Municipal Water Systems** in order to protect public health and service future growth;
- ❑ Undertake a **Town-Wide Fix-Up, Rehabilitation And Renewed Code Enforcement Campaign** to protect property value and address future needs. A major part of this is a comprehensive upgrading of the Town Zoning Ordinance and related code provisions. Important objectives are to seek improvements for the Laurel Historic District, West Laurel and other neighborhoods.
- ❑ Work collaboratively with the State, County and conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy, to bring new investment to a better definition, interpretation and enjoyment of the **Broad Creek Greenway**, including designation of a **Broad Creek Greenway Heritage Trail**, new signage, trailheads, bicycle paths and well-defined linkages to scenic and heritage attractions in Laurel, Bethel,

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

Portsville, Phillips Landing and the Cypress Swamps between Laurel and Trap Pond.

- ❑ Develop **New Residential Areas** with good planning and design on a variety of sites, some in the Town Center, some on other Town sites and some in outlying areas. New **Infill Housing** would be pursued as appropriate. Different housing types and neighborhood styles are envisioned, within Laurel's traditions of design and architectural scale.
- ❑ Implement new **Transportation Programs and Improvements** including DelDOT's "Corridor Capacity Preservation Program" and new DelDOT intersection designs for four US Route 13 intersections and Five Points, planning for growth in transit service and renewing low-intensity recreational boating on Broad Creek between Records Pond Dam and the Nanticoke River.
- ❑ Work with The Nature Conservancy, The Nanticoke River Watershed Conservancy, The Sussex County Land Trust, Sussex County and the State of Delaware to implement **Land Conservation Programs Along The Broad Creek Greenway**.
- ❑ Create a **New Economic Development Program and Commission** to stimulate business growth and attraction, technology development, Town Center commercial revitalization, new initiatives for US Route 13 and creation of a progressive new Business and Technology Park.
- ❑ Implement measures for **Attractive Community Design** including new streetscape projects, open spaces, creation of dedicated, well-maintained 50' wide promenades on both sides of Broad Creek, a mixed-use town center revitalization project and neo-traditional neighborhood design.
- ❑ The **Population Growth and Land Absorption Projection** for the Town of Laurel is based on an average annual rate of growth of 1.08% per year during the first three years, the period of Wastewater Treatment Plant reconstruction, and a 2.8% rate of growth, consistent with the Delaware Population Consortium's population projection for Sussex County as a whole, during the following seventeen year period. This results in a population projection of 5,943 persons by 2024. The Land Absorption projection is based on a gross residential density of 3-4 units per acre, household sizes ranging from 2.5 to 2.3 persons per household over the twenty-year period, and continuing commercial and service development along US Route 13.

Important **Action Projects** are:

- ❑ Create a **Nanticoke Small Boat Harbor** for recreational boating on the Broad Creek site of existing Wastewater Treatment Plant Lagoon #3. This would solve a major environmental problem within the 100-year floodplain while rebuilding the Town's historic waterway relationship with the Nanticoke and the Chesapeake Bay.
- ❑ Initiation of a major municipal effort to gain **Site Control Over A Large Revitalization Area** of linked Town Center and Broad Creek sites and to attract a well-capitalized mixed-use developer to this site offering. The goal is to build on revitalization effort to date, including the Laureltown shops and Villas on Broad

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

Creek projects, and to further create an excellent mixed-use, higher density residential and business environment in Laurel's Town Center.

- ❑ Develop an exciting and beautiful **Laurel Gardens** park along the edges of Broad Creek between East Poplar Street and Central Avenue. Its design should use laurel plants as a motif. The park at the water will be the centerpiece of a system of **Waterfront Promenades** that run the lengths of both north and south waterfronts from Records Dam and Janosik Park to Laurel River Park and beyond. The Promenades would then connect with the **Broad Creek Greenway Trail** reaching from Trap Pond in the east to a retracing of the Old Sailor's Path to Bethel and the Nanticoke River in the west.
- ❑ Work cooperatively with the Delaware Department of Agriculture to plan, design and operate a fine, small weekly **Farmers Market in Market Square** in the Town Center, working in coordination with Laurel's existing market venues at the Laurel Farmers Market/Auction Block, the Route 13 Marketplace, the Dutch Country Market and Bargain Bill's. Bargain Bill's is now undertaking a major expansion and has become a vital institution on Route 13.
- ❑ Create excellent new Community Facilities and Services, including an expanded **Laurel Public Library**, a restored **Laurel Train Station** and a **Town Internet Center**.
- ❑ Planning has been initiated with Delaware DART for an **Improved Town Center Transit Stop** at the former Central Avenue Laurel Armory Building, the home of the Laurel Extension of the Western Sussex Boys & Girls Club.
- ❑ Establish a **Greater Laurel Business and Technology Park** on a suitable site accessible to the Town Center, the Broad Creek Greenway and US Routes 9 and 13.
- ❑ Implement a **Laurel Gateways** development program, which employs signage, streetscape design and development coordination to build strong relationships between the Town Center, Laurel's neighborhoods and the commercial bustle and vitality of US Route 13.
- ❑ Bring design standards to a variety of housing initiatives to demonstrate a new **Laurel Community Design** style of housing and neighborhood design.
- ❑ Work with the Delaware Archives to design and install a new "**Wading Place**" **Delaware Historic Marker** on Broad Creek between Delaware and Central Avenues.

The Comprehensive Plan will guide future planning and zoning decisions including land use and transportation changes, utility extensions, zoning, annexations, site selection for new facilities, State investment, capital improvement programming and public improvements. Two of the most important elements of the Comprehensive Plan are its exhibits entitled **Framework for Future Land Use** and **Future Land Use Plan**.

Other elements of the Plan include:

The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan

- ❑ Delineation of a **Potential Growth and Annexation Area** along the periphery of the Town in accordance with the requirements of Delaware's House Bill 255 and Livable Delaware Program. This is an area within which future annexation requests by contiguous property owners or groups of property owners may be considered by the Town.
- ❑ Recommended **Comprehensive Revisions To The Town Zoning Ordinance** designed to highlight key design measures (such as Town Center revitalization) and build confidence in Code Enforcement. The Comprehensive Zoning Revision Project has now begun.
- ❑ As part of the Comprehensive Plan project, a **Town of Laurel and Greater Laurel Area Geographic Information System (GIS)** of computerized mapping and related database information has been created. The GIS system can now be integrated with general Town Government, Planning And Zoning, Public Works and Police and Fire Department operations. It can also be used in conjunction with the new **Town of Laurel World Wide Web Page** scheduled to be operational this summer.
- ❑ Preparation of a **Town of Laurel Broad Creek Greenway, Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Program** to implement the Open Space goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan has been prepared with active community participation and through cooperation with Sussex County and the State of Delaware. After final citizen and agency comments were received and responded to, **The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan** was approved by Resolution of the Town of Laurel Planning and Zoning Commission and by Ordinance of the Mayor and Town Council. It will now be submitted for State certification. It will then be Laurel's vision and guide for planning, zoning and development. Delaware's Planning Laws require that the Comprehensive Plan be reviewed and updated every five years.

The **Implementation Section** of the Plan identifies actions to begin the implementation of the Plan. These include public-private partnerships for new development, creation of a new **Town of Laurel Economic Development Commission** and a comprehensive revision, now underway, of **Laurel's Zoning Ordinance**.

Thanks to all who gave their support to the development of **The 2004 Greater Laurel Comprehensive Plan!**