1.0 GETTING STARTED

What is the Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is a statement by the community of what it is today, and what it would like to be in the future as depicted through a series of policies and maps. The plan is an official public document that serves as a decision-making guide for elected officials and the private sector. The policies in the Town of Ashland's Comprehensive Plan are intended to reflect enduring community values and the aspirations for the future. The Plan will be used as a means for coordinating projects for future development and the built environment such as capital improvement projects, economic development activities, transportation improvements, green infrastructure planning and the fulfillment of housing needs. The Plan contains a series of recommended actions necessary to achieve the desired outcomes. These actions focus on the physical development of the community, and envision the full build-out of the planning area. The policies, maps, and recommended actions contained in the Plan work in concert to explain where, when and how to build or rebuild the community.

Early in the planning process, a set of six Guiding Principles were established as an answer to the question "What makes Ashland *Ashland*?". It was through answering this question that two key themes emerged: 1) the value of the character of our neighborhoods and our Downtown, and 2) the intention to raise the overall level of quality of development in a way that supports our civic life and our requirements for economic development. It is the intent of the policies included in this Comprehensive Plan to address these two main themes.

What Makes Ashland *Ashland*?

We are quite serious when we refer to Ashland as "*The Center of the Universe*". Therefore, this Comprehensive Plan intends, at its most basic level, to value and protect our hometown. We realize that Ashland will grow, and even change in some ways, but no matter what happens, we must continually answer the question "What makes Ashland *Ashland?*".

We must carefully define those characteristics that make us love Ashland, so that as growth comes and when change takes place, the fundamental qualities that make our town what it is will remain. As a result, the recommendations and details of this Plan are very specific in identifying what we have now - from the smallest characteristic to the broadest – in a way that will set a firm and clear precedent for what should happen in the future.

The Great Small Town

Ashland is a town that appreciates and embraces its strong sense of community identity; diverse population; natural, historic, cultural and educational resources; human potential; economic vitality, and interdependence of citizens and businesses. Ashland takes great pride in its unique identity. This unique identity is based on:

- The beauty of our historic neighborhoods, historic railroad downtown, and historic college campus.
- The quality of our neighborhoods, their scale, density, walkability, compactness, and relationship to downtown.
- Our existence as a great, American small town.
- Our rural setting. As a town in the Richmond region, Ashland also acts as a service center for more outlying rural areas.
- Attractive centers of commerce that provide a diverse job base and a variety of shopping opportunities.
- Our transportation links to the wider region and the nation: the train, Interstate 95, and Route 1 all run right through town.
- The presence of Randolph-Macon College, the broad range of cultural opportunities and educational resources available to the community.

To protect these values, we will adhere to the following fundamentals:

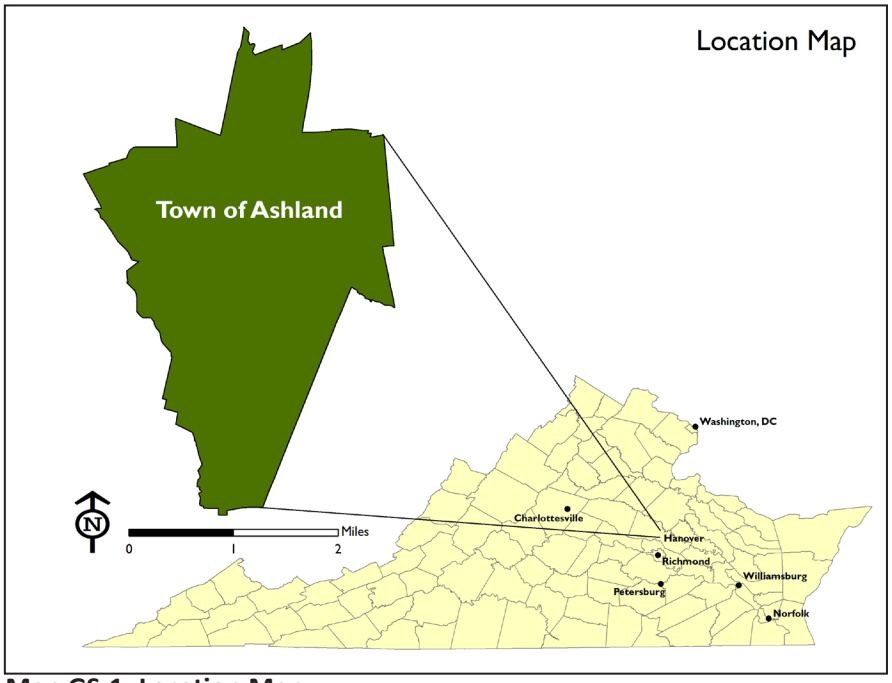
- We value planning, and in looking forward to the future, we will adhere to the guidance set forth in our Comprehensive Plan for decision-making. We also value the energy and inventiveness of private initiatives, so we seek a balance and collaboration between

community planning efforts and the initiatives of residents and businesses. In doing this, we will also maintain a strong relationship with Hanover County government in its planning processes.

- We will be a community that accepts reasonable change and growth, however we will be careful to ensure that change and growth will not harm the quality of life or community character that contribute to our identity. We will preserve or enhance the sense of place within our existing developed areas. We will ensure that newly developed areas are interconnected with the existing town, are based on the very qualities that make us special, and create a positive link to our edges.
- We will continue to encourage variety in the housing stock constructed in Town to ensure the availability of housing choices for young families, seniors, executives and first-time homebuyers.
- We will continue to have a diverse and thriving business environment, with emphasis on making the best use of our location, tourism, quality job creation, and providing needed services, goods and customer service.
- We will manage our transportation network to minimize congestion, and make every effort to ensure that our community continues to be walkable, bicycle-friendly, and accessible to passenger rail.
- We will be a community that acts as an environmental steward to sustain our environment for future generations and preserve the natural beauty that exists in our Town.
- We will provide opportunities for our residents to experience the many benefits of leisure and recreation activities. The ability to experience recreation outdoors will promote health and wellness and build a stronger community as the parks become a hub for community life.
- We value the quality schools located in the Town and educational opportunities provided to our residents. We will continue to work with Hanover County and the School Board to ensure this quality education remains available to the children of our Town.

1.1 Location

The Town of Ashland is centrally located within Hanover County on the northern fringes of the Richmond Metropolitan area, just 15 miles north of the state capital, Richmond. Covering an area of 7.12 square miles, Ashland is the only incorporated town in Hanover County and in the entire Richmond region. Interstate 95 and U.S. Route 1, major north-south transportation routes along the east coast, run through Town as well as through Washington, DC (92 miles north), Boston, MA (530 miles north) and Miami (966 miles south). Ashland's central location along the east coast is important to the Town's economy. Interstates 64 and 295 are also nearby and easily accessible to the Town.



Map GS-1: Location Map

Another mode of transportation that has been integral to Ashland's development since the Town's inception is the railroad. Currently owned by CSX, the rail corridor passes through the center of Town. In addition to the daily use by freight carriers, Amtrak provides passenger service with its Northeast Regional trains. This route provides service from Newport News, VA to Boston, MA with stops in cities such as Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York. The train station in Ashland, aside from serving as the Ashland-Hanover Visitors Center, consist of a platform with shelter and no ticket office, but serves 12,000 to 15,000 passengers annually, with ten weekday and six weekend trains. The presence of this passenger rail service contributes to the unique character of the Town, enhances the local economy and provides a service to the citizens of the Town and Hanover County.

Ashland is considered part of the Richmond Metropolitan area, the

Richmond-Petersburg Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and is a member of the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission.

1.2 Comprehensive Planning Process & Organization

In creating this plan, the Planning Commission began by developing an overall structure for the final document. The Plan is structured as two parts: Part 1 (Policies) and Part 2 (Focus Area Studies). This document is Part 1 (Policies) and sets forth the guiding principles for the physical development for the Town. Policy statements say, in effect, "When we encounter *this* situation, we will act in *this* way for *these* reasons." The Policy areas include and set forth the chapters as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Guiding Principles
3. Community Character and Design
4. Land Use
5. Housing & Neighborhoods
6. Economy
7. Transportation and Circulation
8. Environment
9. Parks and Recreation
10. Community Facilities

Appendix: Administration

Part 1 of the Plan specifically makes recommendations for all areas of town and intends to provide:

- Clearly articulated policies.
- An emphasis on excellence in construction and design, with a focus on preserving and enhancing the physical elements that contribute to Ashland's small town character.
- Recommendations based on an understanding of the market and physical forces that are affecting Ashland, particularly with the potential for new development on the outskirts of the Town in Hanover County.

In effect, it is a Plan for full build-out that intends to keep Ashland *Ashland*. Therefore there are no time-horizons; development will take place as the market demands and as the Town and County can provide the needed services.

Part 2 (Focus Area Studies), applies the Policies outlined in Part 1 to envision the ultimate build-out of specific areas, or Focus Areas. These studies will allow for a greater level of detail, study, analysis and geographic specificity in deciding the appropriate balance of land use. The entire land area of the Town will be divided into Focus Areas. The Focus Area Studies will be completed in the next portion of the Comprehensive Planning process.

1.3 Neighborhood Planning Areas as the Basis of the Public Process:

For the purpose of the public participation process, the Town was divided into eight Neighborhood Planning Areas that range from the historic downtown, to the various residential neighborhoods, to the areas of commerce and industry. In late 2008 and early 2009, a series of public workshops were held to gather input on various topics such as: defining community character, channeling growth, and "where do we want to be in the future?". The public workshops, attended by neighbors, business people, home and land owners, focused attention on each of these designated geographic areas. After hearing presentations about the comprehensive planning process, the participants viewed and wrote suggestions on maps of the Town's eight Neighborhood Planning Areas, sharing thoughts on what they would like to preserve and what they would like to change. General themes and ideas surfaced throughout the series of workshops. As a result of this process, many details listed in this Plan grew out of the small-scale discussions that took place, and are based in the observations of the various neighbors.

As a part of the five year review of the Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Commission and Town staff established an engagement plan for input based upon best practices. The review process started during the spring of 2016, included two round of public input during the summer and fall, and culminated with public hearings at Planning Commission and Town Council. The engagement plan, along with input gained at the community meetings, can be found in the Appendix and on the review website (garetprior.wixsite.com/cotu16).

1.4 Guiding Principles as the Framework of this Plan

The Planning Commission developed the following six Guiding Principles, which are reflected throughout this document, based on the general themes that emerged from the workshops. These principles are based on long discussions at public meetings, on Planning Commission workshops, on discussions within Town Council, and on conversations with each other as neighbors. The Principles therefore represent our most basic beliefs about our town. The six Guiding Principles are:

1. Preserve Ashland's Small Town Character
2. Protect Ashland's Unique Features
3. Manage and Enhance Our Green Town
4. Encourage Continued Variety
5. Promote Continued Economic Development
6. Provide a High Level of Government Services

As basic values, the Guiding Principles summarize our aspirations for the future as they are rooted both in our past and present. The Guiding Principles are described in detail in Chapter 2, each followed by the supporting details that we believe answers our basic question: "What makes Ashland *Ashland*?". All policy recommendations made here and future decisions made for the Town of Ashland by both the private and public sector should be firmly based on these Guiding Principles.

1.6 Ashland's Character, and its Aspirations for Quality:

At the root of the Principles listed above are two aspirations that are necessary to determine just what is *Ashland*?: 1) the character of our neighborhoods and our Downtown, and 2) the intention to raise the overall level of quality of development in a way that supports our civic life and our requirements for economic development.

One of Ashland's greatest assets is its wonderful small town character. Small town refers to more than the number of residents or the geographic size of our town. Our small town character is distinguished by high quality, distinctive and well-integrated neighborhoods, attractive public spaces, a historic downtown and locally-owned businesses of all types including small and large scale retail and industrial. Equally important is the character of the people who call Ashland home and have become an integral part of our community. Many residents chose Ashland because it is a truly beautiful place and stay in Ashland because of the kindness of neighbors and its accessibility to shopping and everyday needs. Chapter 3, Community Character and Design is included to deal with the standards that are necessary to maintain this way of life in our small town. The details of this chapter evaluate the form and location of neighborhood homes, the visual nature of the historic Downtown, the beauty of Randolph-Macon College, and the great canopy of shade trees. This is important: any use of this Plan must notice this aspiration, and balance it with the needs for guiding land and building uses.

In addition to identifying our aspirations for what Ashland looks like, the process of researching this Plan has found that the character must also be based on a high level of quality of development and improvements. As explained in Chapter 6, Economy, Ashland's economic success in many ways is based on its level of quality. Based on figures from surrounding localities and similar towns, we have an ample supply of starter homes, affordable homes, rental homes; we have an ample supply of discount stores. To thrive as the town grows, legitimate needs and uses must be balanced with others that address different markets. Many have heard the old adage "retail follows rooftops." Quality of

construction and design affects the bottom line. In this case, to attract a more diverse selection of retailers to meet our consumer and shopping needs, the Town will need the addition of higher-value "rooftops" (otherwise known as housing.) The added buying power provided by the high-value rooftops will attract the desired retailers. In addition, by introducing a high-quality design standard in construction, design, landscaping and various amenities, it can ultimately affect the Town as a whole by creating an expectation of higher community standards.

1.7 Other Applicable Plans

Finally, in addition to these basic parts of the Comprehensive Plan, other various plans are included, and are adopted by reference such as: the Hanover County Comprehensive Plan 2007-2027, Town Council adopted Strategic Plan, Randolph-Macon College Master Plan, an economic development strategic plan, a design guidelines document, a parks and recreation plan, a bicycle and pedestrian plan, and a Route 1 design overlay district plan.