

APPENDIX D--COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Citizen involvement is an essential part of writing a Comprehensive Plan. Several public forums were conducted to invite residents to comment on their vision for the Town. Below is a synopsis of each of the meetings that were held.

Kick-off meeting—January 28, 2008

This initial meeting was held in the Council Chambers to explain the process for updating the Comprehensive Plan and to receive comments from citizens. This meeting described the Comprehensive Plan as an official document adopted by the Council to guide and direct decisions regarding growth and development. The Plan is a statement about what the community is today and what it would like to be in the future.

Collecting Comments

Neighborhood maps were placed around the chambers so that each person could make specific comments about what they wanted to see in their neighborhood, or anywhere in Town, by placing a post-it note on the map in the area referred to in their comment. Along with the maps and post-its there were blank cards positioned around the room so that residents could write down their thoughts on development, drainage, traffic, or whatever their hot button topic was. These comments were recorded in a database to be included in the Comprehensive Plan.

Take the Plan to the Community—April 10, 2008

The Comprehensive Plan went on the road and its first stop was St. James the Less Episcopal Church. The participants in this forum were randomly assigned to groups of 5 and were given a set of questions regarding various aspects of the Town.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

What contributes to the best qualities of the identity of Ashland?

Many of the comments regarding the identity of Ashland were limited to the downtown area and included the train, the College, and the social gatherings that take place in the immediate area, such as the Street Parties and events sponsored by the Hanover Arts & Activities Center.

Ashland has many historic buildings that are still in use as homes and businesses today. The Town desires to maintain this character by avoiding cookie-cutter, homogenized subdivisions.

Ashland prides itself on being a caring and active community with many town-wide events that draw many people from the Town and surrounding areas. The Strawberry Faire, the Bluemont Concerts, and the Variety Show are all favorites among many of the Town's residents. They are concerned that if the Town is allowed to grow too quickly this small town atmosphere from a bygone era will disappear, as people may no longer get to know their neighbors.

Ashland Loves its Trains

Amtrak service figured prominently in all of the discussions at this meeting. Ashland owes its beginnings to the RF&P Railroad and it has remained a loyal train town since 1858.

Amtrak brings commuters, students and tourists to the Town. Many residents use the train for pleasure and business travel.

The centrally located train station is not only convenient; it provides an attractive centerpiece for the Town. It is one of the most photographed buildings in Ashland.

Ashland's Historic District, the College and the Town's geographic position in the County give Ashland a sense of place that many communities lack. One resident described it as "the prettiest place on Amtrak" and many people found Ashland for the first time because they rode through it on the train.

What can we do to maintain or get to the desired identity of Ashland?

There were many concerns that uncontrolled development around the Town would make Ashland a cut-through area as opposed to a destination place. It was believed that a good Comprehensive Plan and open communication with the County was needed to avoid this.

It is understood that growth will occur but responsible growth is needed to maintain a low crime rate and good Town services. The concern already exists that the identity of the Town is lost the further you move out from its core.

Many citizens were concerned with preserving their neighborhoods and believed this could be accomplished through design standards for both residential and commercial uses.

Redevelopment of vacant properties was recommended as a strategy for keeping a neighborhood vital.

New construction should not only reflect the neighborhood character but new street names should have a connection with the Town.

Ashland is a town within a county and even though the two work closely together there should be a geographic delineation of the two. The gateways and Town Center should be clearly defined to show the boundary lines of the Town.

What are threats to our identity?

Uncontrolled development was considered a threat to the identity of the Town.

The loss of Amtrak service would considerably alter the Town's identity as a train town and would result in loss of revenue for the businesses, restaurants and hotels.

Homeowners felt that an overabundance of rental properties affected the value of a neighborhood and that moving the schools out of the town would alter the character of the neighborhoods in which they were located.

Let Your Voices Be Heard

All of the participants in the meeting believed it was vital to continue these types of forums and neighborhood meetings, and to encourage others, especially the younger residents, to offer their opinions.

How do neighborhoods, the College, and the railroad contribute to Ashland's identity?

Collectively, they define the Town. The Town's traditional and cultural events have always been centered around the train and the historic neighborhoods. The College has contributed significantly to these events.

KEY RESOURCES

What are our key resources?

The people of Ashland were considered to be its greatest resource. The residents were described as people who care for their neighbors, their property and their Town.

The schools, The Hanover Arts and Activities Center, the College, and Ashland Coffee and Tea were among the cultural resources mentioned.

Government buildings, the street grid, and the Town pool were all resources that the residents believed were valuable to the Town's identity.

A much needed resource was recently added to the Town when a number of concerned citizens formed a free clinic in two local churches. The clinics are staffed by volunteer doctors and nurses and provide services for uninsured residents. A need still exists for medical specialists, urgent care facilities or a hospital.

Natural Resources

The Town has many passive parks and lovely old trees throughout the community. It is the residents desire to preserve as many of the older trees as possible.

It was pointed out that they needed to weigh trees and green space with economics. The town had to exist economically before it could exist physically, there had to be a balance.

What resources are missing?

Although there are many resources the Town does have, there are a few that are still needed. More senior housing close to downtown, museums, art galleries, an open-air amphitheater, community center and a conference center were among the items on this wish list.

It was agreed that there needed to be a balance of resources for all ages and that a retirement center as well as a venue for children's programs should be considered.

What are the threats to these resources?

Uncontrolled development is a threat to natural resources as well as producing increased traffic that threatens the walkability of the town. The residents were concerned that many small town traditions would disappear if the town grew too large.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

What types of commerce would you like to see in Ashland?

There was an immediate request for a bowling alley and similar family entertainment. High-end clothing department stores and shoe repair were mentioned, as well as an active movie theater; hobby and art supply store, a large bookstore, and a high-end restaurant, pub or grill.

Some residents expressed a desire for boutique style shopping, art galleries and an outdoor dance and bandstand area.

Businesses and services that couldn't be found in Ashland included non-chain restaurants that offer family style dining, organic or specialty grocery stores, appliance and furniture stores, camera shops, children's stores and Senior Day Care.

It was suggested that if the office buildings on the tracks were redeveloped as retail some of these types of businesses could locate downtown.

The residents believed that appropriate industrial uses for the Town would be clean industries, small companies that were energy efficient and provided high paying jobs.

What types of commerce would you not want to see in Ashland?

The residents believed that adult uses, pawn shops, strip development, truck stops, and industrial uses that created pollution and heavy traffic did not fit the small town character of Ashland. They also did not want to see large malls, named subdivisions or cul-de-sac development occur, as they believed these types of developments segregate sections of the Town.

What's exceptional about Ashland?

Tradition gives a community sense of place

The events that are held every year put Ashland on the calendar and the map. The Strawberry Faire, typically the 1st Saturday in June, brings people from all over the state. Other events, although smaller, are just as significant. The Railroad Run that benefits the Hanover Arts and Activities Center, a non-profit organization that sponsors many of the Town's local events, drew over 400 people in 2008. The 4th of July non-motorized parade grows larger every summer, and the Holiday Parade, held the Sunday before Thanksgiving, features over 100 units each year.

Diversity in Housing Stock

The stately homes of the Victorian era interwoven with modern 20th century homes depict the Ashland of yesterday and today. The residents expressed their desire to see this diversity continue in the subdivisions and infill housing that develop over time.

What brought people to Ashland?

Walkability. The number one answer to this question was that Ashland is a small town and many shops, schools and parks are within walking distance from the residential areas. It was noted that there are very few other towns where you can walk to the train station.

Some people were already familiar with Ashland and some found it by chance. Others married someone who lived here and then made it their home as well. Some came as students or teachers at the College. No matter how they found it, they quickly came to love it. Some who left it for a while came back and settled here with their children. Ashland becomes a part of everyone it touches.

Iconic Places in Ashland

When asked to name a place where they would meet someone coming to Town, something that everyone would be familiar with, most of the answers centered around the tracks.

The train station for its central location, and the Ironhorse Restaurant for its large windows that looked out on the Town were the two most mentioned, Suzanne's Homemades, Ashland Coffee and Tea and the Town Hall Green were also mentioned as places that were immediately associated with Ashland. The Library Plaza, with its benches and fountain, makes an attractive meeting place and Andy's Restaurant was noted as being a favorite with many of the locals.

What features do residents value in Ashland?

The residents believed significant features included the Victorian architecture, the train, Cross Bros. Grocery Store, the Library, parks, trees, sidewalks and trails.

Residents would like to see more involvement from the College.

There was a desire to see the College become a more active partner in the community. It was suggested that the College be open to different types of students, a specific request was made to provide “Empty Nester” courses.

It was also suggested that Randolph-Macon should put more effort into publicizing the cultural activities and events they sponsor.

Can we grow without change?

It was recognized that change will occur and the Town will grow. Responsible growth, creative thinking, and paying close attention to what develops around the Town are essential to maintaining the Town’s character.

Trying to never change may be as detrimental as changing too fast. The Town must stay current with transportation facilities, technology, services and amenities while phasing development to avoid too much pressure on an already expanding traffic network.

Where Are We Now? Defining Community Character

On Monday, September 29, 2008, a community workshop entitled “Where Are We Now? Defining Community Character,” was held at Gandy Elementary School. The workshop drew more than 50 community residents.

A detailed description of the planning process was given that focused on ways in which the community’s basic physical elements – open space, streets and buildings – affect its overall character. It was explained that the comprehensive plan would provide policy direction on how and where these physical elements could be enhanced or improved, with specific guidance on how future growth could be shaped in order to promote the desired characteristics of the community while optimizing economic development opportunities.

Participants then moved to facilitated breakout tables, sharing ideas on what they would want to preserve and what they would want to change within each of the Town’s eight focus areas. At the conclusion of the evening, the entire group reconvened to review the comments from each table. General themes and ideas that were raised throughout the evening’s discussions are summarized below.

Open Space: Preserve and enhance the Town’s natural beauty and community gathering places.

- Add more green space, parks, and recreational space for people of all ages, especially children and teenagers.
- Preserve trees and tree canopies.
- Improve town-wide landscaping, streetscapes, and lighting.
- Connect parks and pathways throughout the Town, linked to key locations such as schools, recreational facilities, bike parking areas.

Streets: Create complete grid networks and promote the pedestrian.

- Maintain the existing dense, walkable grid in older neighborhoods; discourage cut-through trips by installing traffic calming devices and promoting alternate routes.
- Build interconnected street networks in newer areas to improve town-wide circulation and reduce traffic congestion.
- Build a complete network of bicycle and pedestrian routes and paths, including strategically located, safe crossings on major roads, sidewalks and bike routes in commercial areas, and a mix of pathways in residential areas. Make it clear that the pedestrian has priority on residential streets.

Built Environment: Design seamless visual and physical connections that link revitalized core areas with newly developing industrial, commercial, and residential areas.

- Downtown: Increase the density and mixture of the downtown business district with carefully designed infill, redevelopment, and parking systems that preserve small-town, historic character. Improve accessibility to downtown (make England Street the “red carpet”) in order to promote it as a regional destination.
- Residential neighborhoods (old and new): Build and maintain neighborhoods that encourage a diverse mix of residents. Provide more multi-family options, particularly townhouses and condominiums. Encourage a mix of housing sizes within new residential areas.
- Emerging development areas: Establish local transportation networks that optimize the town’s proximity to Interstate 95 and major regional roads, attracting more attract major employers and industries to emerging commercial areas while preserving the historic and scenic quality of rural areas on the fringe of town.
- Gateways: Draw travelers from large-scale developing areas and major corridors to the small-scale core of the town. Use public art, landscaping, signage and icons to reinforce these connections. Encourage redevelopment and improve the appearance of existing commercial areas such as Route 54 between Route1 and I-95. Use traffic control measures to manage arterial corridor congestion rather than widening roadways.

2016 Comprehensive Plan Review

Community Engagement Process and Plan

In April 2016, staff and the Planning Commission developed an engagement plan to identify the outcome, principals, framework, and list out a schedule of deliverables. This plan borrowed from the City of Alexandria’s award winning “*Handbook for Community Engagement.*”

Essential to this process would be to develop high quality visual materials to help educate the community. Included on the following page is an education document used to describe Town-wide trends and Comprehensive Plan chapters. Similiar documents were created for each neighborhood. Additional community engagement materials and input summaries are displayed on the Comprehensive Plan review website (garetprior.wixsite.com/cotu16).

Round 1 of community input included 5 neighborhood meetings and 4 follow up meetings with specific groups (African Americans, apartment residents east of Route 1, a senior living facility, and downtown

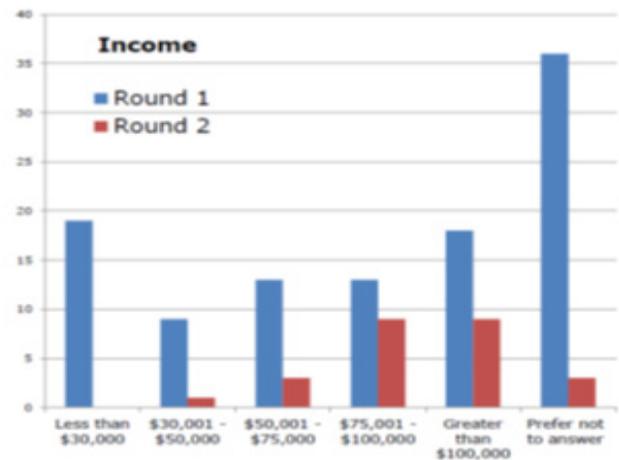
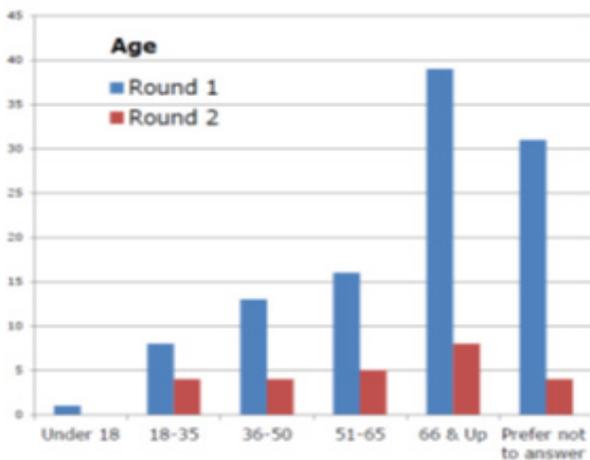
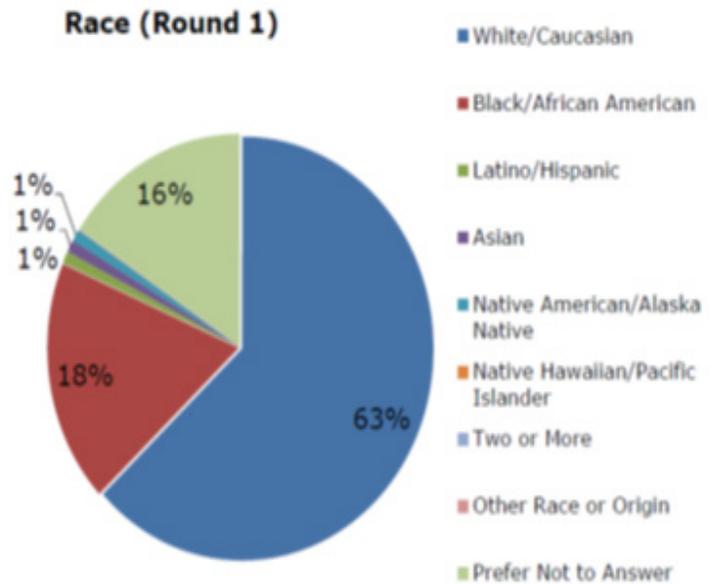
business/property owners) that included over 100 respondents. As seen on the following page, the representation of Ashland’s residents mirrored that of our community’s demographic and economic composition.

Round 2 included 2 community engagement sessions and encouragement of citizens to complete online surveys or paper input packets in town hall. We learned from the first round that additional “traditional” engagement meetings didn’t garner much additional input and would skew to an older and higher income demographic. To reach a more representative sample, staff learned that the satellite meetings where people already were gathered was much more effective.

Major Changes and Themes

Throughout the community engagement process, the existing Comprehensive Plan was viewed as a positive document. Also, changes needed to existing plans were consistent and fell into the following categories:

1. Ashland’s gateway from I-95 to downtown
2. New housing and redevelopment
3. Transportation and neighborhoods
4. High speed rail



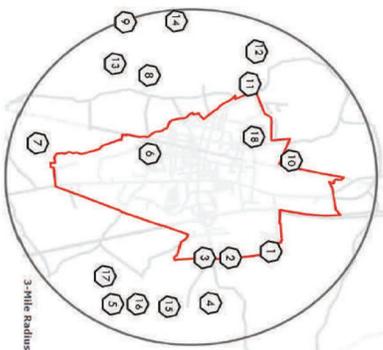
Comprehensive Plan Review: Overview

Guiding Principles

1. Preserve 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

Major Town-wide Trends

1. Booming housing market
 - Planned new homes within 3-miles will double number of households (approx. 2,000)
 - Capturing mid-higher income housing
 - Opportunity for commercial benefit
 - Aging road infrastructure and housing stock
 - Hesitancy to invest due to political history (private community feedback)
 - Access to safe and affordable housing



2. Commercial redevelopment with increasing competition

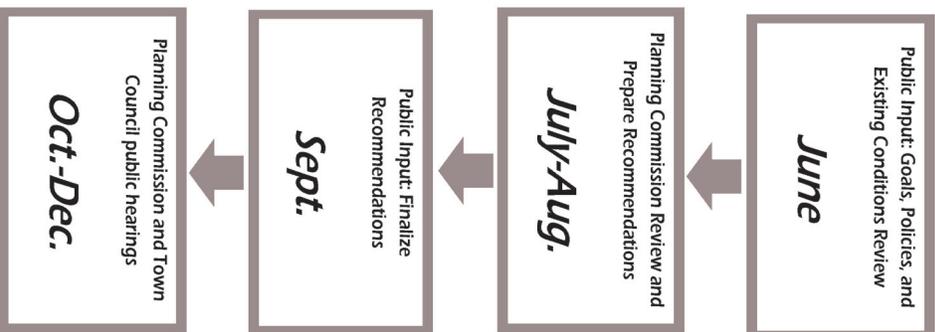
- Declining hotels and aging commercial areas
- Development occurring at Lewistown and regionally
- Major impact to town revenues
- Aging built environment, higher cost to redevelop
- Expansive transportation infrastructure
- Valued location on I-95 and Route 1
- High tech and entrepreneur growth via broadband
- Furthering manufacturing base and business diversity
- Questions with a few major undeveloped locations
- Incorporating R-MC growth with downtown



3. Maintaining small-town atmosphere and culture

- Importance of placemaking and continuing Ashland's unique sense of place
- Gateways and key undeveloped spaces facing development pressure
- Crafting new development to be compatible with traditional patterns
- Introducing new residents and visitors to Ashland's diversity
- Maintaining and furthering tourism with the region's growth
- Future of downtown, railroad, and RM-C as drivers of culture
- Quality of schools and maintaining Ashland location

Review Process



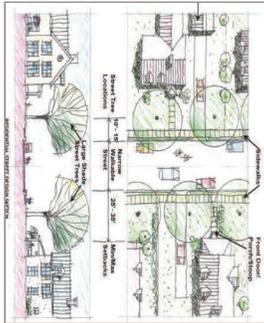
Planning and Community Development
 101 Thompson Street, Ashland, VA 23005
 (804) 798-1073
 gprior@town.ashlandva.us


Chapters of the Comprehensive Plan

Community Design

- Defined character areas (residential, downtown, RM-C, commercial service and industrial)
- Historic district preservation
- Gateways and key intersections shape perception
- Improvement with redevelopment

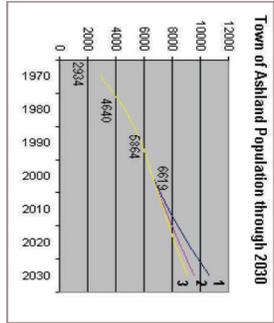
Role: Inform Design Guidelines Handbook which guides signs, lights, storage, landscaping, new streets, architecture, etc.



Land Use

- Future Land Use (FLU) map (Residential Low to High Density, Mix-Use Downtown, Industrial, Office, Commercial Neighborhoods to Interstate, Open Space and Government)
- Desired growth rate (Less than 2%)
- Identified policy areas: established, infill, developing, and redevelopment

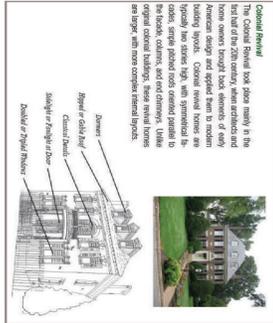
Role: Land use requests evaluated against FLU classification and policies.



Housing and Neighborhoods

- Attract middle/upper-income housing to balance market
- Preserve historic character
- Continue practice of traditional neighborhoods with new development requests
- Continue history of mixed-income housing
- Increase homeownership and meet growing age-wave

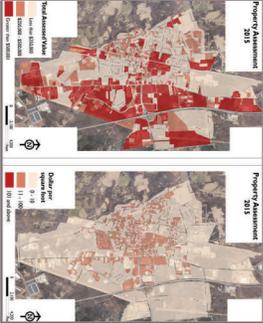
Role: Policies used to evaluate new development and guide programs to help residents.



Economy

- Build capacity to compete regionally (downtown retail, Rte. 1 & 54 commercial, Rte. 1 & Hill Carter Pkwy industrial)
- Preserve and enhance business diversity
- Attract high-tech, Class A office, and medical businesses
- Add middle/upper-income housing to attract business

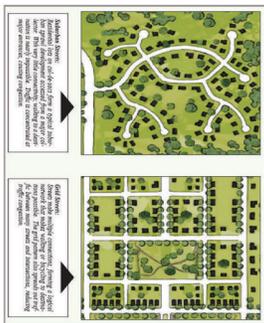
Role: Directs Town staff, EDA, businesses, and community partners to further economic development efforts.



Transportation

- Move residents, business, and visitors safely
- Coordinate with Hanover and new development
- Design standards per street hierarchy (local to interstate)
- Grid pattern, shared access, sidewalks, and parking policy
- Further East Coast Greenway and National Bike Routes

Role: 2020 Transportation Plan and design policies guide investment and requirements for infrastructure.



Environment

- Preserve and improve tree canopy
- Walkable development that furthers tradition
- Adopt regulations to limit light and noise pollution
- Improve water quality through green infrastructure mapping and enforcing regulations
- Quality design of stormwater features

Role: Directs staff to implement and update regulations to achieve environmental goals.



Parks and Recreation

- Preserve and enhance diverse offerings
- Accessible to all users (ADA, children, pedestrians, etc.)
- Coordinate with new development and Hanover
- Update Parks and Recreation Master Plan
- Continue diversity of active and passive offerings

Role: Level of service needs used in rezonings and planning to guide investment in facilities to meet demand.



Community Facilities

- Schools are essential to quality of life and housing market
- Ensure safety through quality investment in Police, EMS, and Fire
- Inventory and plan for Town services and facilities
- Coordinate with new development and Hanover

Role: Planning tool used to project financial needs for public services and facilities in budgeting.

