

**NORTH EAST PLANNING COMMISSION WORKSHOP
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN STEERING MEETING
North East Town Hall Meeting Room
106 South Main Street
North East, Maryland 21901
Wednesday, August 20, 2025 / 6:30-8:30 PM**

-CALL TO ORDER-

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie opened the workshop at 6:36 PM.

Present for the meeting included Planning Commission Chairman Mark Dobbins, Commissioner Hilary Crothers-Moore, Ex-Officio, member, Judy Duffy; Melissa Cook-Mackenzie, Town Administrator, Betsy Vennell, Director of Planning, and Lisa Rhoades, Planning and Zoning Assistant. Also in attendance was Alan Simpson, EPR-PC, Consultant for the Comprehensive Plan. Absent from the meeting were Mayor Kelly Benson, Calvin Wilson, Planning Commission member, Amy Yackanech, Grant-writer, and Grant Handley, Assistant Town Administrator.

-APPROVAL OF MINIUTES-

July 30, 2024

Ms. Duffy made a motion to approve the July 30, 2025 minutes as presented. Commissioner Crothers-Moore seconded the motion and the motion was approved by all.

-REPORTS-

None.

-NEW BUSINESS-

North East Comprehensive Plan-Revisions/Amendments

Economic Development Plan

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported Mr. Handley has created a draft Economic Development Plan (EDC). Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that the previous Economic Development Committee had reviewed this section in 2022 and made a few revisions which will be included in the final draft, as well. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that Mayor Benson has a couple of comments regarding this element however, he was unable to attend this evening's workshop.

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that the Planning Office heard back from Stacy Dahlstrom, EPR Consulting, regarding Mr. Handley's draft. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that this evening, this draft is being reviewed for the content only, and the formatting language including the goals and objectives would be put in by the consultant. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented there was some confusion created as the entire 2012 element had been deleted and was not written in the typical format with the

APPROVED

September 2, 2025

goals and objectives bulleted. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the format of utilizing goals and objectives is in accordance the Annotated Code of Maryland. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that it is more convenient for the Grant-writer to have the goals and objectives in one section when applying for grants as opposed to having to flip through the Comprehensive Plan to look for information.

Chairman Dobbins stated that although the document was not in the typical format, Mr. Handley created a well written document. Chairman Dobbins also inquired if there is currently an EDC Committee. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that the EDC is not currently functioning. Chairman Dobbins inquired if the group was functioning would this draft element have been given to them for review and Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie replied yes. In addition, the previous EDC comments will be included in this element. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie also reported that when our new Mayor Kelly Benson took office he shared some of his visions, goals and objectives for the Town and these were incorporated into Mr. Handley's draft for review this evening.

Draft Page 7-1

Chairman Dobbins commented on the four key priorities listed: promoting the town for business and investment, growing and diversifying tourism, strengthening and expanding Main Street and planning for long-term growth and expansion and stated that these four priorities should be bulleted.

Draft Page 7-2

Ms. Duffy inquired about the business names specifically mentioned. It was determined that the specific business names would be removed and the type of business would be referenced. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that specifically stating the names of businesses would be acceptable in areas of the Comprehensive Plan when referring to demographics of larger employers.

Draft Page 7-4

Paragraph 2:

Ms. Duffy inquired if the paragraph about the Community Development Block Grant should be this specific. It was agreed that the wording should be changed to State and Federal funding opportunities vs. a specific grant program being called out.

Paragraph 4 and 5:

Chairman Dobbins was concerned about the wording "decline of foot traffic in the winter months" as it seems as though it has significantly increased in comparison of previous years. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that she had recently met with a potential business owner who inquired about the winter months in Town and patrons being able to support a business. Chairman Dobbins also stated that many visitors he has spoken to believe that the Town starts at Cecil Avenue and South Main Street and typically do

not venture north of the Pier One Restaurant. Chairman Dobbins stated that language needs to be added to more clearly define the Towns whole business district, on page 7-4.

Chairman Dobbins commented that the Town is beautiful even in the winter months. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that adding the Winter Lights event was an attempt to market the Towns during the winter months. The residents in Town were encouraged to keep the outdoor lights on in January and February but take down the Christmas decorations, however, not many residents participated.

Draft Page 7-5

Paragraph 1:

Chairman Dobbins commented on the wording “Lack of partnership with Elk Neck State Forest” sounds negative and should be changed. Mrs. Vennell suggested changing this into a goal for the Town. For instance, improve partnerships with Elk Neck State Park or improve partnerships with businesses and tourist areas south of Town. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Town has reached out to the entities south of Town so that the Town could post their events on the Town website, however, there has been little to no response. In the last year the Town has reached out to the new owners of Blue Elk Vineyard and the business does participate in 2nd Fridays however, still does not contact the Town in regards to their events. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie also reported having conversations with Sandy Cove about better partnership with the Town. However, until the businesses have a staff member designated to keep in contact with the Town in regards to their events, the Town most likely will not here from them.

Paragraph 5:

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the word “Streetscape” needs to be removed as that specific word refers to a past Town project, therefore, the wording should be changed to “street improvements”.

Draft Page 7-7 and 7-8

Chairman Dobbins commented on the content about sports tourism and concurred that this was a good idea to add this into the document, however, he was concerned when thinking about where people would stay for lodging. Chairman Dobbins reported the next section was pursuing downtown lodging and commented how nicely that content flowed. Chairman Dobbins stated that he recently travelled to Easton, Maryland and inquired if anyone in the group was familiar with the Tidewater Inn. The Tidewater Inn is a boutique hotel with approximately 100-150 rooms and it is also an event center but the concept, smaller in size, may be compatible with the Town of North East. Chairman Dobbins inquired what was the Town considering for downtown lodging in the future and asked if this has been a previous topic of conversation as there is a big need for

lodging within the town. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie replied that there has been some conversation with the Mayor on several possible sites for lodging facilities, however, the Mayor's vision of the downtown area, is all of the area South of Route 40, not just the area South of Cecil Avenue. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Mayor is also looking at the growth area and potential areas for annexation. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie inquired if Chairman Dobbins was referring to a smaller boutique type of lodging for downtown. Chairman Dobbins concurred and added, lodging that would fit into the character of the Town. The old Dollar General being a chain or franchise with a corporate facade was not a compatible fit with the character of the Town. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie concurred that a small boutique type of lodging for downtown would be more compatible than a larger five story hotel and commented that the boutique hotel language could be added to the document. Commissioner Crothers-Moore concurred. Chairman Dobbins added that if the Town does build develop Turner Park as planned and brings people in for tournaments, not only will they need lodging but they will also walk to shopping and restaurants. Chairman Dobbins commented on other larger events held in the county such as Maryland Five Star and inquired where all of the participants stay. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie replied that many stay in Newark, Delaware as it is close to the location of the event. Chairman Dobbins stated that is the reason the Town needs some type of lodging, so we can attract tourists to North East to support our stores and restaurants. Chairman Dobbins commented on the existing chain hotels north of Route 40 and stated that they are a significant distance from downtown and not within walking distance. Chairman Dobbins commented that the space with the old Dollar General seemed like an opportunity for development.

Ms. Duffy commented that the document mentions a pickle ball court and Turner Park which have not yet been developed, and the North East Preserve which will offer walking trails was not mentioned. Mrs. Vennell replied that we can add the Preserve language into this section. Ms. Duffy inquired why would Calvert Park be mentioned and Mrs. Vennell replied that the sporting events held at the park bring thousands of people to the area, all of who need restaurants to eat at and places to stay overnight. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Town has been advertising the North East Preserve as a tourist attraction and therefore it should be added to this document. Ms. Duffy commented that if Calvert Park is in the document than the Maryland Five Star and Fair Hill Races should be added, as well.

Chairman Dobbins added that in reviewing the EDC element it does bring a really important issue to light which is the town does need to focus some kind of lodging and marketing overnight stays. Chairman Dobbins also stated that the Town also has to be sensitive to the surrounding residents who live in Town and quality of life. Chairman Dobbins stated that when planning for North East's future, it is important to focus on what makes North East unique. Chairman Dobbins referenced Easton, Maryland, stating they have clearly defined residential, business and commercial areas with lodging and although this group may want the Town of North East to have all of those elements, the Town is still quite small. Should the Town annex some property into the Town limits that may create more opportunities?

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie inquired if Sandy Turner, Cecil County Tourism had an opportunity to review the Tourism portion of the Economic Development Plan. Mrs. Vennell replied that Ms. Turner had previously reviewed the section however, would forward the document to Ms. Turner for re-review.

Future Land Use Map

Chairman Dobbins reported that he was not here for the last Comprehensive Plan Workshop, and would like to share his comments regarding the Future Land Use map and proposed land use/zoning changes which occurred during that meeting. Chairman Dobbins also requested to know and understand what the thoughts were behind the proposed land use/zoning changes and was concerned about how the residents would react to the changes. Chairman Dobbins commented that he believes that the volume of properties proposed to rezone to Village Commercial is excessive and reported that he would not want to live next door to a barber shop. Changing these properties to Village Commercial would have a negative impact on the residents. Chairman Dobbins stated that fully understands that a public meeting is planned to invite the property owners and the public will have an opportunity to speak at that meeting. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Mayor was surprised that the area proposed for rezoning had not only been approved but expanded at the last meeting

Chairman Dobbins mentioned the proposed "Riverwalk" project and that downtown residents were not favorable of that project. Ms. Duffy replied that was a different situation as the Riverwalk would have cut through resident's rear yards. Ms. Duffy added that the steering committee discussed putting some safeguards in place by requiring the potential business owner to have to come before the Planning Commission depending on the business type. If they came before the Planning Commission, the Planning Commission could put restrictions or requirements on the approval. Chairman Dobbins stated that if the committee members look at Main Street, there is a lot of turnover in businesses. Therefore, asked if it is necessary to sprawl businesses around to areas other than Main Street. In addition, concerning North Main Street, since patrons do not currently realize that there is another business past Pier One Restaurant, how would they know there are businesses on Mauldin Avenue? Therefore, Mr. Dobbins expressed concern whether the Town should allow businesses to spread out or should they be confined to a defined area. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that when the Town loses a business it is not being replaced with a new retail business.

Chairman Dobbins wanted to know what kind of marketing analysis or data does the Town have that justifies there is a demand for all of the proposed properties on Mauldin Avenue to be rezoned to Village Commercial. Chairman Dobbins commented again that the amount of proposed properties being changed to Village Commercial seems excessive and wondered what was trying to be accomplished with the proposed rezoning. Chairman Dobbins stated that the Town has trouble keeping stores filled currently and inquired why would there be a need to sprawl them out onto Mauldin Avenue where

there are residential homes. Chairman Dobbins stated he would not buy a home next door to a business and he prefers that the Mauldin Avenue area remain residential.

Commissioner Crothers-Moore stated that generally commercial properties have more opportunity for grant funding for property and façade improvements and there are quite a few properties that are proposed for rezoning that do need sprucing up. Fixing up the façade makes the property not only more appealing in general but also to a business or restricted use. Chairman Dobbins concurred and stated that does make a lot of sense. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that Mauldin Avenue actually looks better than it has in years. Chairman Dobbins stated that there are vacancies on Main Street that businesses could go into. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Mayor had asked her opinion about the rezoning changes and Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that she does not agree with the proposed changes because it is unsafe, and believed the West side and the right side should not be considered for rezoning. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie mentioned when looking at Mauldin Avenue from an aerial photograph, a significant curve in the road can be seen and was concerned about individuals having difficulty in exiting from the driveways along Mauldin Avenue. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie also reported that at the previous Comprehensive Plan meeting there was discussion about a requirement that there would need to be a parking area with a turn around so that vehicles would be pulling out onto Mauldin Avenue not backing out onto Mauldin Avenue. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that is not a bad idea and suggested information be gathered to see out of the proposed properties, how many either have enough space to install this parking area with a turnaround or currently already have it. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that the Town has not had anyone come into the Town Hall to request a rezoning because there is no place for the business. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that there has been no interest in property owners opening a business on West Cecil Avenue and Race Street since those properties were changed to Village Commercial in 2012. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that on East Cecil Avenue, Kirsh Title took advantage of the zoning change to Residential Office and this has been a successful location for them. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that just because the zoning designation has been changed, does not mean that a business is going to be opened there. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie also stated that she understands that Chairman Dobbins is concerned that home buyers may not be interested in a property because of the potential of a business opening adjacent to the property.

Chairman Dobbins stated the Town already has a defined business area. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that at the previous meeting it was discussed that changing the zoning would provide property owners more uses and thereby providing more opportunities. Therefore, someone that wanted to buy or invest in a property within the town would have the ability to have more flexibility. Chairman Dobbins stated that the proposed rezoning would hurt Main Street and the marketing is not going to be the same for Mauldin Avenue because there is not going to be the pedestrian traffic in the foreseeable future.

Ms. Duffy stated that she would still recommend rezoning West Cecil Avenue on both sides as people are currently walking down Main Street and could continue to walk down West Cecil Avenue. In addition, Ms. Duffy still agrees with rezoning properties on Mauldin Avenue from Cecil Avenue to West Street on the West side of Mauldin Avenue. That would be 3 Mauldin Avenue to 15 Mauldin Avenue. Chairman Dobbins commented these are not places you would go for a walk to or would drive to them for an appointment. Ms. Duffy responded that businesses in the Village Commercial could be anything from a lawyer's office, a doctor's office, not just commercial.

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that a Comprehensive Plan review can be done more frequently than every 10 years. Ms. Duffy inquired if a property owner wanted to apply for a change of zoning would they be able to. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie replied that there would have to be a change in the neighborhood since the approval of the last comprehensive plan, and that would be difficult. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated what concerns her is State Highways response, time wise, for any requests regarding improvements to Mauldin Avenue. Chairman Dobbins commented that changes like this can get people voted out of office if not handled correctly. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented, and stated that this idea has not been proposed, but the idea of making Mauldin Avenue one lane with sidewalks on both sides and a bike lane on both sides then, the area would be different when considering the rezoning of the properties along Mauldin Avenue. Mrs. Vennell stated that if a boulevard was constructed that would constitute a change in the neighborhood and at that time a rezoning request would be justified. Chairman Dobbins again stated that there are not enough businesses on Main Street now and the proposed rezoning will change the dynamic of Main Street. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated there needs to be a balance, live, work and play. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie also stated that most of the properties proposed for rezoning are owner occupied. Chairman Dobbins stated that by adding additional Village Commercial properties, it is not fixing a need and the Town is not expecting any new changes to the Mauldin Avenue area that would increase pedestrian traffic in the area. Another concern Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated is the infrastructure in place and in the previous meeting it was discussed to have the Planning Commission review businesses, depending on the use, and have the ability to say these are the requirements necessary should you wish to open this business or no this business is not compatible. Mrs. Vennell stated that the current zoning ordinance permits certain uses by right in the Village Commercial District, however, if you require all of the uses to come before the Planning Commission it will become more burdensome on the applicant who can now come in by right and start their business.

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie reported that she asked the State Highway Administration, that if a property that is currently zoned residential, on a residential street, owned by the State, was rezoned commercial, what would trigger a commercial entrance and their response was that 5 vehicles or more are going to into the use, it would require a State Highway driveway entrance permit and reconstruction of the driveway and entrance, which is wider than a regular driveway.

Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that if there is going to be a public meeting for the proposed rezoning than there needs to be a concerted effort to get the property owners to the meeting.

Mrs. Vennell inquired if the group would like to revisit the proposed rezoning. Commissioner Crothers-Moore commented that Chairman Dobbins has stated some points to consider and as of today the demand for more Village Commercial properties may not be there yet. Commissioner Crothers-Moore stated that maybe it is best to table this chapter, especially Mauldin Avenue, until the next meeting. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie stated that Mauldin Avenue is not an area needing redevelopment and reported that West Cecil Avenue and Race Street are the areas the Town should focus on next.

Mrs. Vennell commented that the property owner at 23 North Main Street did request their property be rezoned Village Commercial and would the group have any objections to rezoning this property? The Planning Commission had no objection to rezoning 23 North Main Street.

Mrs. Vennell reported that since the last comprehensive plan in 2012, a new sidewalk has been installed on Mauldin Avenue at the South end of Town, reporting that Robert McKnight had also inquired about rezoning his property to Village Commercial, which is on the corner of Mauldin Avenue and Thomas Avenue. Ms. Duffy also mentioned the fire company property was discussed at the last workshop as well.

Chairman Dobbins commented on parking issues within Town are more perceived than fact because there is parking along Mauldin Avenue. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie concurred and mentioned that she has been waiting since 2022 on a response from State Highway about stripping parking spaces along Mauldin Avenue, however, reported that now a study is being requested.

The Planning Commission revisited the discussion regarding the section of properties on the West Side of Mauldin Avenue from Cecil Avenue to West Street and determined that there is sufficient parking in the rear of those properties and all concur that these properties could be rezoned Village Commercial.

Mrs. Vennell inquired about the area on Mauldin Avenue North of Cecil Avenue. Mrs. Cook-Mackenzie commented that the group had decided not to rezone that area and that the only area for consideration was from Cecil Avenue to West Street.

Conclusion:

Chairman Dobbins, Ms. Duffy and Ms. Crothers-Moore would like to proceed with rezoning the following properties to Village Commercial:

- 23 North Main Street

- The West Side of Mauldin Avenue from Cecil Avenue to West Street
- West Cecil Avenue changing the properties which are zoned Residential to Village Commercial, traveling west to the North East Preserve, both the north side and south side of West Cecil Avenue.

Chairman Dobbins would like to table all other areas proposed for rezoning.

- No land use/zoning changes to the north side of Route 7/East Cecil Avenue on North Main Street or Mauldin Avenue.
- Rolling Mill Lane Neighborhood: Ms. Cook MacKenzie confirmed with Ms. Crothers-Moore whether she is interested in an overlay district/redevelopment district for Rolling Mill Lane area. Mrs. Crothers-Moore indicated that she would definitely be interested at looking into this in the future, but, not at this time.
- Race Street: Ms. Cook-MacKenzie reported that the owners from Race Street want to stay Village Commercial.
- North East Fire Company: Mrs. Vennell reported that she had discussion with the North East Fire Company and provided zoning regulations to differentiate between residential and Village Commercial, and requested feedback, however, the North East Fire Company has not gotten back to the Town. Therefore, there will be no zoning change to Village Commercial or an overlay district at this time.
- North East Middle School: Mrs. Cook-MacKenzie stated that she would like to see the North East Middle School stay the same land use/zoning district, with no overlay district at this time.
- McKnight property Thomas/Mauldin: Mrs. Cook-MacKenzie stated that the property should stay residential and should the property owner desire to change their property land use/zoning they can submit a letter.

Property Owner request for Land Use/Zoning change: Mrs. Cook-MacKenzie passed out a draft letter which she prepared to be provided to property owners who desired a land use/zoning designation change. The letter would be available at an open house on the Comprehensive Plan and be located on the town's website when we go through the public hearing process.

Mr. Dobbins asked if there could be a new map provided outlining this evening's decisions concerning the Future Land Use Plan. Mrs. Vennell reported that a map showing tonight's decisions would be provided with the minutes.

Mrs. Cook-MacKenzie provided a status update of the Comprehensive Plan (attached) and commented that all of the changes discussed this evening will be brought back to the September meeting and then the Chapter will be sent to the consultant for updating.

Ms. Duffy inquired about what the property was zoned across Route 272 from Walmart. Mrs. Vennell reported it is zoned Highway Commercial with the Highway Commercial Overlay District.

Mrs. Vennell reported that there is a scheduled Planning Commission Meeting on September 2, 2025. Directly after the meeting the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee will meet to review Comprehensive Plan amendments.

Ms. Duffy made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:37 p.m. Ms. Crothers-Moore seconded the motion and the motion was approved by all.

Attest:

Approved:

Lisa Rhoades
Planning and Zoning Assistant

Mark Dobbins
Chairman

STATUS OF COMPREHENSIVE PLAN REVIEW 8-20-2025

COVER: APPROVED WITH CHANGE TO THE PICTURE (USE KELLY'S DRONE SHOT)

TABLE OF CONTENTS AND INTRODUCTION: RECEIVED 4-21-2025

CHAPTER 1 COMMUNITY PROFILE: PLANNING COMMISSION REVIEWED AUGUST 2024.
STACEY SENT FINAL JUNE 2025

CHAPTER 2 LAND USE: REVIEWED SEPTEMBER 2024. IT IS NOT COMPLETE. STACEY NEEDS
INFORMATION FROM THE FUTURE LAND USE PLAN MAP TO COMPLETE.

EXISTING LAND USE MAP: FINALIZED BY PLANNING OFFICE JULY 2025 AND ALAN/EPR.
WE WILL GET STACEY'S FINAL VERSION OF CHAPTER 2, WHICH WILL CONTAIN THE MAP
FOR THE PLANNING COMMISSION TO REVIEW

CHAPTER 3 TRANSPORTATION: STARTED REVIEW 10-2024. FINAL VERSION RECEIVED
JUNE 2025, PLANNING OFFICE REVIEWED AND SENT MINOR COMMENTS BACK 7-8-2025
WITH SOME CHANGES AND COMMENTS.

TRANSPORTATION MAPS ARE COMPLETE. SOME REVISED BY EPR CONSULTANT AND
OTHERS PREPARED BY JAKE/WILMAPCO

CHAPTER 4 COMMUNITY FACILITIES: COMPLETED SEPTEMBER 2024.

CHAPTER 5 NATURAL RESOURCES STACEY SAID SHE WOULD HAVE ALAN TRY AND DRAFT
FOR THE SEPTEMBER MEETING.

CHAPTER 6 HOUSING ELEMENT NOT STARTED

CHAPTER 7 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN - 8-20-2025

CHAPTER 8 IMPLEMENTATION NOT STARTED

CHAPTER 9 MUNICIPAL GROWTH ELEMENT - NEARLY DONE (BY ENTECH) STACEY HAS
UPDATED SOME DATA BUT STACEY CANNOT COMPLETE UNTIL THE FUTURE LAND USE
PLAN IS COMPLETED

CHAPTER 10 WATER RESOURCE ELEMENT - NEARLY DONE (BY ENTECH) STACEY HAS
UPDATED SOME DATA BUT STACEY CANNOT COMPLETE UNTIL THE FUTURE LAND USE
PLAN IS COMPLETED

APPROVED
September 2, 2025