

## Chapter 7

# Economic Development Plan

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### Goals and Objectives

- ◆ Create a healthy balanced economy, which provides necessary goods and services for North East's population, sufficient job opportunities for its residents, and sufficient tax base to finance necessary municipal improvements and services.
  - ❖ Objective: Encourage select employers providing skilled job opportunities commensurate with the abilities of the Town's local work force.
  - ❖ Objective: Expand the Town's tax base.
  
- ◆ Diversify and expand the Town's economic base to provide a broad range of employment and commercial opportunities within the framework of the Town and County's overall growth management goals and objectives.
  - ❖ Objective: Protect the historic character of North East and support projects and efforts that enhance the historic character.
  - ❖ Objective: Encourage the growth and diversification of the tourism industry in North East and promote additional tourism and travel-related development that complements the scenic and historic qualities of North East.
  - ❖ Objective: Upgrade, expand, and preserve the General Commercial/Central Business District so that it remains a viable economic unit.
  - ❖ Objective: Expand the Village Commercial District to provide additional opportunities for economic growth.
  - ❖ Objective: Review and update, the North East Zoning Ordinance to provide greater opportunities for infill and re-development of the General Commercial/Central Business District and Village Commercial District.

### **The Vision and Economic Development Plan**

The Town of North East's Strategic Economic Development Methodology is guided by a clear vision: to create a healthy financial ecosystem that enhances quality of life, expands opportunities for residents, builds a strong tax base to sustain a wide range of municipal services and programs, attracts high-value anchor businesses to drive economic growth, and preserves, cultivates, and effectively markets the unique Main Street experience through active support of local businesses.

Nestled along the I-95 corridor between several major metropolitan hubs, North East occupies a unique and charming location that offers an attractive balance of rural small-town character and commercial opportunity. This distinctive blend appeals to residents, visitors, and corporations alike, and requires careful planning to maintain the town's charm while fostering economic growth and tourism.

This vision embraces a nearly symbiotic relationship: through targeted investments in marketing, tourism, infrastructure, and flexible zoning of Downtown Main Street, the Town uniquely differentiates itself from other urban areas in the region. This strategic focus not only enhances the charm and accessibility of the downtown district but also positions North East as an appealing location for large businesses near the Route 40 and I-95 corridors. In turn, these larger employers attract a steady flow of employees, customers, and visitors—many of whom discover the town through their work or travel needs and then explore and support the vibrant local Main Street economy.

To effectively implement this vision, the Town of North East should actively pursue the development of an Economic Development Plan focused on four key priorities:

- promoting the town for business and investment
- growing and diversifying tourism
- strengthening and expanding Main Street
- planning for long-term growth and expansion

The Economic Development Plan establishes objectives and policies for preserving and strengthening retail service and industrial activities in North East. Well planned diversification and expansion of the Town's and region's economy provides North East and its residents a more stable and secure economic base. A successful economic development program creates jobs and income and bolsters the Town's tax base, providing funds for needed community facilities, services, and improvements. The Business Information Center, at the North East Library provides economic development opportunities through job, career and skill building education/tools.

This Plan will serve as a guiding framework, offering concrete, actionable steps for the Town to pursue-grounded in both regional insights and national best practices.

### **Current Conditions**

While a long-term vision and strategic plan are essential for future regional prosperity, current economic conditions continue to offer meaningful opportunities for both residents and commuters.

The economy of North East-and Cecil County as a whole-benefits from its strategic location between major economic centers such as Wilmington/Newark, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This positioning gives residents access to a wide range of employment opportunities while also linking the town to some of the most dynamic job markets in the region. Data shows that approximately 44% of North East's labor force commutes to areas such as Baltimore, Harford, and New Castle County, demonstrating both the mobility of the workforce and the strong regional connections that support the local economy.

Route 40 and MD 272, just north of Town, serve as key connectors to a variety of commercial employment opportunities for residents of the North East community. Between 2009 and 2023, approximately 79% of North East's labor force worked outside of Town. Major employers such as destination resort lodging, big box retail, chain grocery

stores, large warehouse retail/distribution and transportation logistics offer jobs across a range of skill levels and sectors. At the same time, the Town maintains a strong employment base along Main Street, supported by a vibrant mix of shops, restaurants, and specialty stores.

To the south of Town, privately owned marinas, camps, conference center, wedding venue, the State Forest and a State Park provide jobs and bring visitors and spending to North East, resulting in positive economic impact for the Town. The Town of North East should continue and further leverage partnerships with entities south of Town to promote greater regional tourism as a whole.

Visitors travel from across Cecil and Harford counties, as well as from Baltimore, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania-further strengthening the local economy through tourism and hospitality. Expanded partnerships with public entities-such as Cecil County Parks and Recreation, Cecil County Tourism, local Chambers of Commerce, and others-have helped routinely create events that diversify the Town's offerings and attract an increasing number of visitors, all of whom contribute to the Town's economic ecosystem.

The Town of North East has long envisioned itself as a maritime, water-oriented community. The Town's identity, parks, and gathering spaces are all intimately tied to the waterfront, and this connection plays a vital role in shaping our economy and lifestyle. Visitation, tourism, and food-based businesses all draw strength from this proximity to the water-whether it's dining with a view, attending waterfront events, or enjoying recreational opportunities at places like North East Community Park. Preserving and enhancing this relationship with the water is central to the Town's long-term economic vitality and quality of life.

Within North East, the commercial and employment base is concentrated in the General Commercial/Central Business District along Main Street. These businesses are small retail and service outlets catering to the local population and summer tourists. In addition, North East Station and North East Commerce Center also serve as an employment base.

The commercial area to the north of Town along US 40 is geared towards regional commerce and offers shopping, grocery stores and chain eateries. An industrial park, hotels and a travel plaza are located north of the MD 272/US 40 intersection and south of I-95.

## **Recommendations**

Promoting local businesses should be a cooperative public/private undertaking. Further cooperation with the Cecil County Office of Tourism, Office of Economic Development and the Maryland Departments of Planning and Commerce will help attract suitable industry to expand and diversify the economic base. Industrial prospects should be screened and evaluated to ensure the activity will be compatible with the Town's character.

## **Business and Redevelopment Opportunities**

The Town should continue to pursue opportunities to increase flexibility in zoning, allowing businesses and professional services to locate in appropriate areas beyond Main Street. This approach supports the evolving needs of modern enterprises. Additionally, the Town should explore adaptive reuse and strategic redevelopment of public properties to create new economic development opportunities-enhancing both commercial activity and the overall appeal of the community. Future development and redevelopment should explore opportunities to expand Class A office space, offering high-end facilities, as well as Class B office space, which provides quality yet more moderately priced options, often in older but well-maintained buildings.

One valuable tool, the Town leverages state and federal funding opportunities to provide communities with resources to support housing, infrastructure, and economic development projects that benefit low- to moderate-income residents. Most recently, CDBG funds were invested in a nearby quality housing project, demonstrating the program's potential to improve local infrastructure, support redevelopment, and strengthen the surrounding economy.

The Cecil County Public Library also provides valuable businesses resources to a variety of enterprises including the Business Information Center, job career and skill building tools.

### **Further Improve Tourism**

Tourism is a key driver of the economic well-being of local businesses, especially those in the General Commercial/Central Business District. During the peak tourism season, Main Street becomes a vibrant and bustling destination, attracting significant visitor activity. In response, the Town of North East has actively implemented policies to support and accommodate this increased visitation, including the creation of an overflow parking lot and collaboration with the State Highway Administration to ensure proper paving and maintenance of Main Street and Mauldin Avenue.

To build a more resilient economy, the Town of North East must implement a plan that brings year-round attractions and events. Through its Economic Development Plan, the Town aims to stimulate consistent foot traffic throughout all seasons, encouraging businesses to stay open longer and fostering a vibrant downtown that residents and visitors can enjoy year-round.

In support of this goal, the Town recently adopted a dedicated marketing line item in its budget for the first time. This investment provides an opportunity to develop visual assets and execute marketing to enhance our destination's visibility. Strategic partnerships, such as with Cecil County Tourism and others, will help expand our advertising outreach. The town should continue to update signage, establish a united wayfinding system, and link Main Street to our waterfront.

Maintaining a strong General Commercial/Central Business District as a viable economic center remains a top priority. The Town will continue fostering community partnerships,

improving the navigability of Main Street, welcoming new businesses through flexible zoning policies, and pursuing programs and events that create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

The North East Preserve will attract and further improve tourism in the Town. Designed to be a nature preserve focused on protecting habitats and native wildlife of the North East Creek watershed while providing waterfront access, passive recreation, and educational opportunities within easy walking distance, accessible to residents and the visitors of North East. The Preserve, an approximately 60-acre facility will include pedestrian walkways, bridges, bike racks and a parking area, the site is located west of the Town Center, abutting North East Isles Drive and Maryland Route 7. The property is framed by Stoney Run and North East Creek, near the confluence of North East Creek and North East River, a tributary to the Chesapeake Bay.

#### Leveraging Tourism Partnerships

The Town is working toward an improved relationship, working to facilitate/leverage a tourism partnership between the Town and Elk Neck State Forest. Exploring mutual interests and collaboration could lead to unique and robust programming that benefits both the community and visitors.

Maryland's 5 Star at Fair Hill, in the fall of each year which features multiple days of equestrian events, including dressage, cross country and show jumping along with special events like the Corgi Cup racing and children's events, is located within ten miles of North East. Held annually in the fall (October, 2025) it is one of only two 5 Star events in the United States. This prestigious event is an important sports and event tourism opportunity that North East can work towards benefitting from through collaborative visitor and accommodation opportunities.

#### **Further Explore Heritage Tourism:**

Heritage tourism is an economic development strategy that encourages visitors to explore a community's history, culture, and natural assets. In North East, this means drawing connections between our scenic landscapes-such as rivers, forests, and trails-and the stories embedded in our downtown, historic buildings, and local traditions.

Rather than promoting large-scale commercial attractions, heritage tourism supports a more authentic experience by celebrating what makes North East unique. It emphasizes preserving our character and enhancing the visitor experience through walkability, place making, and community events.

One opportunity for North East is to explore a formal partnership with the Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway. This designation could help unlock new funding sources for historic preservation, outdoor recreation, and cultural programming. It would also position North East to attract a broader audience interested in small-town charm, outdoor experiences, and Maryland history.

Investments in trails, parks, and downtown revitalization street or road improvements can strengthen our General Commercial/Central Business District as the core of our heritage tourism experience. Visitors drawn in by our environmental and historic assets are more likely to shop and dine locally, contributing to economic activity and supporting local businesses.

Heritage tourism benefits both residents and visitors by enhancing quality of life, boosting community pride, and reinforcing North East's role as a destination that honors its past while planning for the future.

### **Further Expand Sports Tourism**

Calvert Regional Park is a major asset for the Town of North East, offering basketball courts, turf fields, a disc golf course, playgrounds, a paved trail, and a concession stand. The park regularly hosts regional tournaments, attracting visitors from outside the area. These events generate foot traffic that can directly support the local economy, as families and athletes seek meals, recreation, and lodging after a long day of competition.

Turner Park is planned to become a premier destination for Pickleball, sporting events, and a dog park. The facility will provide parking and, if thoughtfully partnered with the future of the North East Middle School site, could evolve into a dynamic location for athletic events and community opportunities centered on health and fitness.

Another important sports-related asset for the Town of North East is its fishery. The upper Bay serves as a prime destination for both large and small fishing tournaments. Visiting anglers not only enjoy the water, but also contribute to the local economy by staying in hotels, dining at local restaurants and utilizing the area marinas

### **Pursue Downtown Lodging**

The Town of North East recognizes the need for additional lodging options to serve overnight visitors. At present, most accommodations are concentrated near I-95, which typically attract guests seeking nearby regional attractions. While larger hotels may be appropriate along Route 40 and the Route 272 corridor, north of the Amtrak rail, they are not consistent with the character of downtown North East. In the downtown area, the Town envisions smaller, independently owned boutique hotels that complement the scale, character, and appearance of Main Street. Expanding opportunities for Bed and Breakfast establishments would further enhance lodging choices and strengthen the welcoming atmosphere in the heart of North East.

In January 2025 the Maryland Office of Commerce, Maryland Office of Tourism, and National Park Service's Chesapeake Gateways Program conducted a Bay Way Workshop in Annapolis. A report was presented which noted that overnight visitors spend significantly more than day-trippers, meaning there's untapped economic potential in the overnight market. The Town should aggressively pursue the addition of downtown lodging including boutique hotels that reflects the authentic and unique character of the community.