



**Draft Final**

**2016**

**Loudoun County Comprehensive Plan Update**

**Position of the  
Loudoun County Preservation and  
Conservation Coalition Committee  
On the Revision of the  
Comprehensive Plan**

**(February 2016)**



## Introduction

As Loudoun County seeks to update and revise its Comprehensive Plan, the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition Committee on the Revision of the Comprehensive Plan offers its initial views and recommendations for the plan and for the planning process.

The Coalition consists of 30 local and regional organizations whose representatives meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern. This report was developed by a committee formed by the Coalition members to address the County Comprehensive Plan and planning process.

Members of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition Committee on the Revision of the Comprehensive Plan include:

Al Van Huyck (Chair)	Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition
Jean Brown	Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition
Gem Bingol	Piedmont Environmental Council
Katherine Daniels	Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy
Mitch Diamond	Unison Preservation Society
Jeff Freeman	Mosby Heritage Area Association
Ard Geller	Lincoln Preservation Foundation
Ed Gill	Mosby Heritage Area Association
Nicole Hamilton	Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy
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## **(1) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **The Current Situation:**

Loudoun has experienced high population growth and prosperity for several decades. These results, we believe, are based upon a unique combination of:

- Attractive suburban communities
- An easily accessible beautiful and historic rural landscape
- An advantageous location
- Good schools
- A skilled workforce
- Modern conveniences

### **The Challenge:**

Loudoun's focus on land development and our service primarily as the regions' "bedroom" severely strains our transportation, education and public safety infrastructure and tax base and cannot be sustainable. Our landscape continues to experience development stress as does our transportation system. Relentless development puts our competitive advantage at risk and constrains our ability to provide essential government services.

### **Our Vision:**

To build and enhance Loudoun's unique competitive advantage in order to create opportunities for appropriate growth that improves our quality of life and reinvigorates County economics. The strategy we see includes:

#### **(A) Rebalancing our local economy:**

- Toward more local high value long term business and job creation and
- Less dependency on residential and commercial land development and associated businesses

#### **(B) Strengthening our competitive advantage by supporting:**

- A more resident friendly and fully integrated transportation system,
- More workforce-oriented housing,
- Walkable and appealing "urban" centers
- Recreationally and commercially enhanced suburban communities
- Protection of our historic rural landscape and regional environment
- A rural economy sustained by environmentally compatible businesses

**The Planning Process:**

We need a participative, open and patient planning process built upon the best features of the current Plan while embracing needed change.

**The Plan:**

The Plan should provide sufficient detail, analytic support, specific direction and metrics so as to provide practical guidance for future decisions

**Our Role:**

The Coalition and its 30 member organizations look forward to providing a valuable perspective to the Plan and participating in the planning process

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**(2) THE CURRENT SITUATION:**

Loudoun has enjoyed a long period of very fast population growth, high prosperity and good quality of life. This growth and prosperity stems from advantages enjoyed by Loudoun including an environmentally and economically attractive location, strong suburban neighborhoods, excellent schools, a skilled workforce and a unique and attractive mix of small towns and historic and beautiful rural landscapes. Loudoun has a large and growing data center industry, a vibrant rural economy and a substantial tourism industry. Loudoun’s attributes have attracted many families with high household income; for much of the last decade Loudoun has consistently rated among the fastest growing and most affluent counties in the United States.

**(3) THE CHALLENGE:**

Loudoun’s rapid growth in its suburban residential population – doubling in size in the last ten years - has created rapidly growing needs for improved infrastructure and support services including schools, roads, health and public safety facilities. However, as recent research reveals, taxes at current levels from residential housing cannot pay for the County infrastructure services required to support them. The following table (based on figures from Loudoun’s Economic Development studies) shows how residential housing results in net costs to County revenues while commercial and rural businesses relieve the pressure. And, residential housing represents a very high share of Loudoun’s general tax revenues.

Loudoun			Fauquier	Alexandria	Arlington	Fairfax	
Tax Base Source	County Services Cost per \$1.00 Tax Revenue	Contribution to County Services	Current Share of Tax Revenue				
Residential	\$ 1.62	\$ (0.62)	75%	66%	58%	41%	78%
Commercial	\$ 0.38	\$ 0.62	25%	34%	42%	59%	22%
Rural	\$ 0.79	\$ 0.21					

(Source of Tax shares : Study by George Mason University on Property Tax Revenues)

Further, as the table indicates, Loudoun’s current commercial/business base does not provide sufficient tax revenues to compensate totally for the increasing needs of its suburban residential residents.

Loudoun currently has 126,000 housing units, having added over 17,000 new residences in the last five years, and 30,000 more units are already approved. The result of this unbalance severely strains current transportation facilities, schools, public safety and other support services. The need to expand these services puts additional pressure on tax levels for both residences and businesses. And the rapid growth in population and residential housing without integrated transportation planning has led to severe

congestion and high pressure to add capacity to overloaded arteries. Loudoun's service primarily as the region's "bedroom" cannot be a sustainable economic model for the future.

Exacerbating the problem, vacancy levels in Loudoun's available commercial office space have risen from about 10% in 2004 to almost 20% today according to the latest Cushman and Wakefield survey (3<sup>rd</sup> Q 2015). The increased development of mixed-use projects with the potential for increases in projected residential units further complicates planning. And, the intense development of data centers has led to additional tax revenues, but little new local employment, and high demands for power and water resources.

Finally, efforts to enhance Loudoun's tax base through business friendly policies has sometimes eroded several important safeguards for our quality of life and community values. These reduced safeguards endanger our attractive suburban neighborhoods, our appeal to new high quality businesses, our rural economy and our \$1.5 billion tourism industry

Clearly, developing more land and building more homes, building more offices and retail facilities and damaging our important quality of life safeguards does not offer a practical answer to Loudoun's challenges.

To improve the situation, the County must continue to put extra emphasis on creating high wage and strong tax revenue producing businesses and jobs and more emphasis on value producing rural business while reducing the County's dependence on land development, residential development, population dependent businesses and low employment businesses.

Since Loudoun will be competing for these future economic opportunities with other local jurisdictions it needs to protect and enhance its real competitive advantages for this economic development strategy to work. The County must balance the desire for economic growth with protection of those community values and mix of suburban amenities, small towns and rural landscapes and heritage that Loudoun's residents and its business leaders value so highly.

#### **(4) OUR VISION:**

The County can continue to be one of the most attractive locations in this area to live and work by reinforcing its already strong competitive assets, rebalancing its economic business base and taking care that current pressures do not lead to destroying the very special attributes and quality of life which have led to its current success. We believe strongly that by protecting and adding to its unique blend of modern convenience and

historic beauty and charm, Loudoun can enjoy a high quality of life and an attractive economy. In particular:

**(a) Economic Development Should Aim to Create More Local High Value Employment and Reduce Dependence on Land and Residential Development and Associated Businesses [Primary Impact: All Areas]**

Currently over 50% of Loudoun residents work outside Loudoun but rely on Loudoun to provide needed services, according to the most recent UVA Weldon Cooper Center survey of Loudoun residents. And by far the largest employment sector available in Loudoun is the Loudoun government itself (schools, public safety and other government functions).

More high-wage opportunities for employment within Loudoun, especially of highly-educated high-skill workers, would diminish significant critical pressures on the infrastructure and tax base.

In our view the County should enhance and protect its natural competitive advantage arising from its unique combination of modern amenities and historic rural charm and use those advantages to reduce its overdependence on land development and low employment businesses. Increased high value-added, high-wage-level local employment would draw business income into the County and provide increased tax revenues while offering the opportunity for local residents to work closer to home and reduce commuting pressures. This policy would help change the basic nature of the County from a “bedroom” community to a more balanced community where workers can both live and work. In Loudoun’s rural areas, rural business opportunities compatible with their rural neighborhoods including both agricultural production and tourism related activities will add economic value and protect rural land and values as well.

**(b) Loudoun should encourage more workforce and urban style housing and development of “urban style” neighborhoods [Primary Impact: Suburban Area]**

To support the new emphasis on local high value business opportunities, Loudoun would benefit from rebalancing its primarily suburban traditional housing stock with the addition of more urban style housing that is more affordable for young single residents and attractive to potential employees for Loudoun’s new high wage growth businesses.

This housing, linked to walkable and “chic” neighborhoods close to Metro, would offer an increasingly popular alternative lifestyle to both rural and suburban neighborhoods. It would support more urban style amenities for all residents as well as reduce, over time, the volume of Loudoun’s commuter traffic and transportation infrastructure expansion costs.

**(c) Transportation Priorities Should Favor Workforce Transportation Over Increased Residential Development [Primary Impact: All Areas]**

Transportation and commuting difficulties have long been high on the list of public concerns. The County needs to integrate transportation approaches into its most basic and early planning, design future transportation systems primarily to serve the much-neglected requirements of existing and future residents, workforce and new high- value businesses, not to support yet further suburban development in our valued landscapes.

This investment requires transportation planning closely linked to land use planning, more use of mass transportation and incentives for car-pooling, more development close to transportation hubs, better links to higher density housing, more focus on offloading local traffic from major east-west commuting arteries, e.g. Rt 7, Rt 50, etc. by linking side and secondary roads into an effective local traffic network thereby providing more capacity to business, workforce travel, and easy access to mass transit hubs. And, major east-west arteries need strengthening to deal with the continuing commuter and commercial traffic.

Alternatively, creating new major north-south routes into undeveloped areas would only encourage additional residential development, possibly redirect existing commuting traffic from other areas and further aggravate Loudoun’s current east-west transportation and commuting problems.

**(d) Open Space and Parkland is Critical to Good Suburban and Other Neighborhoods [Primary Impact: Suburban Area and Transition]**

The County needs to pay particular attention to the protection and enhancement of open space, parkland and recreation facilities in the suburban and new “urban” areas. Numerous studies have shown how proximity to open space and parkland increases suburban property values. In many cases the increase in property value and tax revenues equals or exceeds the costs associated with creating and maintaining the parkland. And, easy access to open space, passive habitat, parkland and recreation will retain and enhance Loudoun’s much valued quality of life.

	Share of Public Parkland
Loudoun <i>Suburban area only</i>	5%
Washington DC	30%
New York City	20%
San Francisco	19%
Boston	17%

However, as shown in the Table (Source: Study of The Trust for Public Land published in the Washington Post), Loudoun currently devotes a substantially lower amount of land to public parks in the Suburban Policy area than communities elsewhere.



Publicly accessible recreation facilities, passive parks, trails, bicycle paths and green spaces are already scarce in much of Loudoun, yet pressures to develop our available open space continue to rise.

We badly need new and innovative policies and regulations to protect, preserve and increase our parks, open space and recreational amenities for our towns and neighborhoods. As one example, open space zoned for future commercial development, but stranded by regional commercial overcapacity, might be considered for preservation as open space and recreational parkland rather than residential development.

**(e) Businesses in Our Rural Area Must be Compatible with Our Rural Landscape**  
***[Primary Impact: Rural Area]***

One of the County's most important yet fragile advantages, and one that is almost impossible to reproduce elsewhere, remains its beautiful and historic rural landscape and its easy access by our own residents and travelers for recreation, shopping and tourism.

These rural areas support an economically-significant tourism industry and a growing and increasingly diverse rural agricultural sector including equestrian activities, wineries, farm breweries, B&Bs, farm markets and specialty producers. Residents and business leaders cite Loudoun's rural landscape as one of the most important features that draws them to this area. And, as the REDC April 15, 2013 report to the Board of Supervisors indicates, Loudoun's rural policy area requires only \$.79 in County services for every \$1.00 provided in tax revenues.

However, as recent events have shown, care must be taken to avoid the expansion of the rural economy in ways that stress historic rural roads and neighborhoods without providing sufficient safeguards for sustaining rural and community attributes. Commercial enterprises sited in essentially rural residential areas can add undesired noise, lights, traffic and stress on water resources. And dense suburban style development in rural areas puts severe pressure on historic roads, affects traditional landscapes reducing their attractiveness to potential visitors and raises demands for increased supporting public infrastructure and services.

Strong safeguards include protection of streams and ground water, regulation of water and air pollution, noise, traffic and light pollution. Continuous monitoring of the impact of the new and rapidly growing rural economy must be put in place to ensure that these new businesses are good neighbors, do not actually

diminish the net contribution the rural area makes to Loudoun’s tax base and do not adversely diminish the very attributes that attract tourists and customers to our rural landscape – and which are greatly valued by current residents.

**(f) Protecting the Transition Area Preserves Resources and a Needed Buffer**  
***[Primary Impact: Transition Area]***

The County’s Transition Policy Area was created to create a green belt between intensely developed suburban areas and more rural and historic areas and to protect a variety of important natural and cultural resources. The Transition, or Green Belt, Area provides a wonderful opportunity to provide creative “village” approaches to housing which includes well-defined residential housing areas surrounded by large areas of open parkland, punctuated by farms, estates and vineyards.

But pressure for more intense and dense development in the transition area is increasing.

In our view this development is neither needed nor appropriate. It will simply reduce the already-scarce recreation and open space opportunities close to suburban neighborhoods, add to needs for more roads, infrastructure and support services, increase pressure for higher taxes, draw resources away from projects to increase suburban amenities and damage the fragile buffer and entry to our valuable rural lands. Preservation of this green belt has been a foundational element of the County’s long range planning. It should not, and need not be eroded through incremental increases in development density, provision of utilities and construction of access roads.

**(g) Our Clean Water, Air and Natural Spaces Must be Protected as We Grow**  
***[Primary Impact: All Areas]***

Pressure for more intense land development, either commercial or residential, puts severe pressure on our natural resources of clean air and water and on habitat for our local wildlife. In its efforts to become more business friendly the County faces desires to reduce protections and encroach on sensitive places that will inevitably increase local noise, lights and other intrusions. However, these fragile elements of our landscape are an essential part of our unique charm and competitive advantage, and once lost, are lost forever.

It remains essential for the County to embed guarantees in its plans to enforce reasonable protections for our natural space, our surface and ground water and our air, our floodplains and steep slope areas and our habitat for local wildlife.

As we have frequently seen recently in the news, it only takes one serious incident to incur high cleanup costs with lasting impacts that, in some cases, are irreversible.

**(h) Loudoun's Vast Cultural Heritage is a Significant and Valuable Asset to be Treasured [Primary Impact: All Areas but Mainly Rural Area]**

Loudoun County's significant attributes include its long and rich engagement in our nation's history. The memorials to that history remain accessible in our many historic sites, villages, churches, farms, battlefields and rural roads. Loudoun offers over 80 sites listed on the US National Register of Historic Places, five recognized Civil War battlefields and almost 300 miles of beautiful and historic country roads. This accessible history provides our residents with a strong sense of living in a special and unique place and it attracts many visitors to our County which helps support our \$1.5B hospitality industry.

The Plan should make special note of our valuable heritage and continue to provide for the honoring, preservation and effective reuse of our historic places, roads and buildings. Loudoun's rich and accessible history and heritage should be considered an integral part of our competitive assets for attracting new business, new members of our workforce and significant tourism.

**(5) THE PLANNING PROCESS:**

**(1) The Process Should Include All Relevant Constituencies from Start to Finish**

It is critical that the Plan provide a sound basis for guiding policy and project decisions in the years to come. The Plan, therefore, needs to be a strong and credible reflection of the desires and goals of Loudoun's many different constituencies and diverse population and provide a direction that balances the desires of many different interests.

We strongly believe that the update of our Comprehensive Plan requires openness and transparency, frequent opportunities for early public review of the foundational assumptions and forecasts that will underlie the plan. This open process and active participation of relevant constituencies from the outset should shape the emerging concepts, policies and alternatives being evaluated.

To enable the largest participation in this process by Loudoun's diverse constituents, the County should deploy social media and other electronic communication methods, such as structured discussion boards and online surveys on specific topics. The result will ensure an ongoing and wide

representation of opinions and potentially valuable ideas from a community of interested constituents that may not always be able to attend public hearings.

**(2) The Process Should Provide Time for Reflection**

The Plan and the planning process is an important time for representatives of all of Loudoun’s diverse constituencies to come together and work to agree on an overall direction.

It is essential that the process allow sufficient time early and throughout the process for reflection, review, consensus-building and adjustment. This process, we believe, will result in an improved, robust and useful framework on which we can build for the next decade.

**(5) THE PLAN:**

**(a) The Revised Plan Should Use the Existing Plan as a Foundation**

Fortunately our existing Plan itself is based on a strong, broad and frequently reaffirmed consensus developed over many years. It has provided a solid foundation for County decisions and policies. The new Plan should reflect this strong expression of consensus, and incorporate changes, new ideas, and lessons-learned into this strong foundation.

It makes good sense to revise, amend, append and adjust elements of the existing Plan. It makes no sense, nor will it be practical and conducive to a smooth, consensus-driven planning process, to launch into an entirely new Plan. The recommended revision/addition process will demonstrate continuity and allow the Plan to reflect long established consensus as well as current realities, future trends and the latest objectives of Loudoun’s residents.

**(b) The Plan Should be Based on a Clearly Articulated Vision and Goals**

The Plan should clearly reflect a vision for the County’s future and the means to accomplish that vision and not merely be an extrapolation of trends and accommodation to those trends.

This course suggests that the Plan include clear and measurable goals, and define the broad policies and programs needed to accomplish those goals, given reasonable assumptions about our future.

**(c) The Plan Should Be Based on Well Defined Assumptions and Analysis of Likely Impacts**

The Plan should be largely evidence based and analytic, including clear, visible and reasonable assumptions and scenarios and assessments of potential outcomes/impacts based on those assumptions and scenarios.

**(d) The Plan Needs Detail and Depth to Guide Future Decisions**

In our view the required Plan must be more than a statement of broad County goals and direction if it seeks to provide meaningful guidance for future policy decisions and for assessments of specific proposals and projects.

The Plan we support and recommend needs to include enough clarity and detail to guide specific future assessment of policy and decisions about projects, give clarity to residents and others about what to anticipate in the future and provide a sound basis for future staff recommendations on particular programs and projects.

Such a plan will avoid the “tyranny of small decisions” in which a series of modest incremental decisions, taken one at a time without sufficient planning guidance or concern for their cumulative effects, leads to an undesired outcome. A sufficiently clear set of guidelines and detail will help to keep us from going to a place we never intended to go. It will provide a Plan that actually works and is useful, not just a well intentioned document to put on a shelf.

**(e) A Robust Plan Requires Consideration of Possible Changes in Future Conditions**

No matter how well planners and forecasters do their work, things change. We suggest that the Plan be evaluated under a variety of potential scenarios so it will be robust and flexible enough to reasonably accommodate unexpected changes in the economy, regulatory situation, technology and other hard to predict factors

**(f) The Plan Should Include Useful Measures of Success**

For the Plan to continue to serve as a guide to our decisions, it needs clear and measurable metrics linked to the Plan’s goals which can be tracked so we can understand progress toward our goals and, in a timely fashion, alter policies and decisions to allow us to better meet those goals. These metrics should also be used for regular monitoring, not only of progress, but also of the degree of compliance of decisions and actions to the spirit of the plan.

## **(6) OUR ROLE**

The Coalition Committee, through regular conversations and active engagement with the thirty member organizations in the Coalition, and through the uniquely experienced members of its Comprehensive Plan Committee, can be an active partner with the County. It stands ready to offer efficient and useful capability for responses, reactions, insights and guidance to the Loudoun Board of Supervisors, its planners and consultants, on the emerging plan and the particular issues and policies under consideration.

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