



GSC 2030

GSC 2030 is an attempt by the Greater Salisbury Committee (GSC) to do what it does best: take a critical look at the community, to evaluate its opportunities and its challenges, and present potential solutions that can point our community forward. GSC 2030 endeavors to identify what lies ahead, and to identify potential solutions that can best position this community to thrive and prosper in 2030 – and beyond.

The GSC 2030 Process:

Throughout 2023, GSC invited its 100+ members to attend three sessions that were designed to have open and candid discussions about the state of our community. Between 10 and 15 GSC members attended each session. In a roundtable format, members brought forth their ideas for the community and what it might look like in 2030, what challenges are present, and what solutions might be brought forward to address those challenges.

One General Membership meeting of GSC was dedicated to the GSC 2030 initiative. As with the smaller sessions, this gave GSC members a full opportunity to put any thoughts and ideas about the community on the floor for discussion.

These sessions generated a total of 52 distinct and separate ideas, thoughts, and concerns. Those concerns fell into a number of different categories, such as economic development, education, public safety, etc.

GSC's mission has always been to identify our region's challenges and opportunities, and then to act to bring about solutions or actions to address them. With that mission in mind, GSC has identified the following issues with recommended actions.

Top Ideas/Concerns/Opportunities:

Sustainable Funding for Education

With the Blueprint for Maryland's Future requiring significant financial commitments from all 24 jurisdictions in Maryland, there are serious concerns about how Wicomico County may be able to fully fund its Blueprint requirements. Separate from that, Wicomico has traditionally funded education at the "maintenance of effort" level, which is the lowest minimal funding required by the state. So, this additional Blueprint spending, on top of traditional school funding, creates financial stressors for our local government and our Wicomico County Public Schools. <https://blueprint.marylandpublicschools.org/>

Recommendation: Knowing there are challenges looming with regards to education funding, GSC is calling for the formation of a special Blue-Ribbon panel to take a comprehensive look forward. While fully recognizing that funding for education is a political decision, i.e. the funding is a budgetary process at the Board of Education, County Executive, and County Council levels, GSC believes a panel that's made up of educators, business leaders, parents – as well as



government representatives – should be convened. The goal? To take a serious, non-partisan look at the education funding needs, not only in the short-term, but in the long-term – and to make recommendations for the public and the elected officials to consider. Education is the number one economic development engine in any community/county. Doing all we can as a community to take a proactive look into the challenges, and making recommendations to meet those challenges, is paramount.

Housing

This one word says it all. The Salisbury/Wicomico area has serious housing challenges, across the board: soaring and unsustainably high rents; lack of affordable housing; affordability of all housing; lack of new neighborhoods being developed; quality of existing housing stock; lack of housing inventory. Simply put, if the Salisbury/Wicomico area is going to retain its quality of life, remain competitive, and provide housing solutions for ALL? Much work is needed.

Recommendation: In order to address this growing and complex challenge, GSC has already formed a Housing Task Force, chaired by Bill McCain, Founder/Chairman of W. R. McCain & Associates. The task force has representation from realtors, developers, engineers, investors, and economic development - as well as from those who are in the day-to-day trenches on the housing front: Salisbury Neighborhood Housing and Habitat for Humanity. The task force will engage with its governmental partners during the process.

Quality of Life

Wicomico is the only county in the State of Maryland that does not have a State Park. That should be addressed. Maintaining, promoting and taking full advantage of the excellent quality of life opportunities that Salisbury/Wicomico provides – from biking and hiking to access to our rivers and waterways, from golfing to our parks and recreation offerings – is key.

Recommendation: First and foremost, it is time for our community to work with the State of Maryland to rectify the fact that Wicomico County is the only county in the state without a designated State Park. County Executive Julie Giordano has made good attempts to raise awareness of this oversight with the state. We believe it's time for a concerted effort, involving many stakeholders, to start an effective, strategic initiative to identify the asset in Wicomico County that would be ideal for State Park designation. And then, to make this happen by 2030, at the latest.

Separate from this effort, we believe it's time for all of Wicomico County – from its smallest to its largest municipalities, from its unincorporated small towns and villages to our miles and miles of rural roads, byways and highway – to become litter free. Several citizen efforts over the last year or so have taken to our roads in an attempt to clear them of litter. Our litter problem must be addressed. It's a health and quality of life issue. We urge Wicomico County and its 7 municipalities to commit capital, i.e. money and manpower, to address our litter problem. We also urge the creation of a county-wide/community-wide awareness campaign. The effort can be led by the government entities, with the assistance of volunteer efforts that are already happening.



Fire/EMS in Wicomico County

This is a county that takes tremendous pride in the amazing efforts of the men and women of our volunteer fire and EMS companies. Wicomico's volunteer fire heritage is as strong as any in the state. It's a heritage that needs to be honored, always. We know that our volunteer fire companies in the county are facing increasing challenges in getting new volunteers to join their ranks. Wicomico will need to find a way forward on this front – with serious discussions to come. Discussions that need to include how/when/if paid fire and EMS become part of the county's public safety future.

Recommendation: Volunteer fire and EMS is as much a part of the Wicomico County fabric as anything. It's quite impossible to overstate just how much our Volunteer Fire Companies have, for generations, been the backbone of the fire and emergency services operations in this county. Moving forward? We know that, both locally and nationally, attracting men and women to the volunteer fire ranks is becoming more challenging. We also know that the EMS requirements and certifications are much more stringent than ever before. Both of these circumstances leave Wicomico County vulnerable in the future. We recommend this challenge be met head on. A proactive, comprehensive review of current operations, funding sources, and honest evaluations of current and future volunteer man/woman power is in order. We recommend a Blue-Ribbon panel be put together, to evaluate the pros/cons of moving some aspects of the volunteer fire and EMS operations into a full-time, paid, county-wide operation. Other counties in Maryland, and in many areas of the region and country, have transitioned into paid fire and EMS operations. We believe our volunteer fire companies should engage with their government and state partners to evaluate if/how/when paid fire and EMS should be considered for Wicomico County.

Wicomico County Water and Sewer

Wicomico County is facing serious septic issues, effecting all aspects of the housing market. Septic systems are failing across the county. Infrastructure solutions, i.e. public water and sewer, will need to be front and center in the short and long term. This will take tremendous coordination and collaboration with all levels of government, and with the private sector. It will also require a sustained and serious education and awareness effort by all to inform the public of the challenges ahead.

Recommendation: GSC has had a standing Water and Sewer Task Force since 2022. This committee is chaired by Rob Duma, PE, Associate/Senior Municipal Engineer at Davis, Bowen & Friedel. Its work has been productive and collaborative. Among its accomplishments: recommending that Wicomico County create a Sanitary Commission. This county had been the only one in the state without either a Sanitary Commission or a Water/Sewer/Wastewater Authority. That was rectified in 2023, thanks to legislation introduced and supported by the Wicomico County Executive and County Council, and passed by the Maryland General Assembly. Wicomico County now has a Sanitary Commission. The effort to improve our countywide infrastructure, and alleviate the failing septic systems challenge will be long, arduous, and expensive. We believe this county has taken enormous steps over the last year



(steps that have mostly been ignored for the better part of 50 years) to put water and sewer and failing septic as front and center issues. We are confident that remaining diligent and forward thinking on this topic will put this county and its municipalities in a much better position in 2030 than they are now. Continuing collaborative efforts by government partners, citizens, and dedicated professionals will help this county enormously moving forward.

Wicomico County Revenue Cap

Wicomico County remains one of only two counties in the State of Maryland that has a revenue cap. The revenue cap is seen by some as the panacea to prevent excessive government taxation. It is seen by others as an overburdensome policy that is preventing Wicomico County from keeping up and funding basic governing functions like roads, public safety, and education.

Recommendation: GSC believes that a thorough review and discussion of this policy needs to occur at the County Government level. The Revenue Cap was approved by Wicomico County voters via referendum back in 2000. Since that time, there has been little serious discussion about this policy – and whether it remains viable in 2024. GSC conducted a comprehensive study of the Revenue Cap back in 2017. The final report of that Task Force is available here: <https://greatersalisbury.org/news-releases/gsc-releases-revenue-cap-study-results/>

We believe that Wicomico County government officials and the public should revisit this policy. If the conclusion is that the Revenue Cap is still appropriate, so be it. However, alternatives to the Revenue Cap – such as a Tax Rate Cap – should be discussed at the highest level. There are significant revenue challenges facing Wicomico County – from needed infrastructure; to competitive salaries for County employees; to finding the funding necessary for the basic functions of government: paving roads, funding education and public safety. On top of these usual challenges lies the daunting local funding requirements of the Maryland’s Blueprint for Education. Further, relying on Disparity Grant funding from the state to help Wicomico County with its revenue shortfalls is becoming self-defeating. Why should other counties in the state be asked to support Wicomico and its revenue shortfalls – when Wicomico County has in place a Revenue Cap? Questions like these should be addressed.

Child Care

This challenge is both obvious and often overlooked. The cost and lack of child care are strangleholds on working families. This is a challenge that is impacting employers and all aspects of the workforce.

Recommendation: It is time to commit energies, from both the private and public sectors, to addressing this critical need. Simply put, the cost of child care, and the lack of child care, is an overwhelming burden for many employers and families. We must do better. To that end, GSC believes that a “Child Care Summit” should be held. This summit would bring together some of our largest employers like TidalHealth, Wicomico County Public Schools, Perdue Farms, Wor-Wic Community College, and Salisbury University, as well as small business owners and child care providers to hear the concerns, and to develop aggressive and strategic ways to address



them. Local government partners, who are also large employers, should be part of this effort as well.

Mental and Behavioral Health

The mental and behavioral health challenges facing so many in our region and across the country are growing in both scope and complexity. Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive and collaborative approach.

Recommendation: In 2023, GSC created a Mental and Behavioral Health Task Force, led by Dr. Samantha Scott, Psychologist & Clinical Director of The Child & Family Center. Its members: Salisbury University; TidalHealth System; TidalHealth Foundation; Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore; Chesapeake Health Care; The Henson Foundation; The Philip and Barbara Long Family Foundation; The Franklin P. and Arthur W. Perdue Foundation; private practitioners/clinicians; Wicomico County Public Schools; and Wicomico County Health Department. The goal? To identify 3-5 specific measures that could be undertaken in the next 3-5 years that can make a difference. This Task Force has resulted in the launching of “Healthy Minds for Shore” an initiative that will, among other things, provide local training for local clinicians, enabling them to obtain needed CE credits without having to travel to surrounding metro areas; and hold a recruitment fair for mental health professionals.

Maintaining “The Balance”

Wicomico has had remarkable success over its history as both a rural/ag center (Wicomico is always the #1 or #2 agriculture county in the state) and, with Salisbury as its County Seat, a burgeoning metro/urban area. Maintaining that balance between the rich rural heritage and the growth of the metro core will be critical moving forward. While the overwhelming majority of the Wicomico population lives in the Salisbury 21801/21804 metro core, the population that lives in our smaller rural towns and unincorporated areas are just as important to the success of Wicomico.

Recommendation: Please see below.*

Retain and Recruit a Strong, Vibrant and Diverse Workforce

This area has so much to offer. It’s close enough to the major metro areas that surround us – Baltimore/Washington/Philadelphia/Norfolk – but far enough away to take advantage of all the Chesapeake Bay Region has to offer – beaches and rivers and waterways. The need for a strong arts and cultural presence, the need to promote our quality of life, the need to grow our population in a logical and appropriate way will lead to making this a better area for employers – those who are here, and those who may wish to relocate here.

Recommendation: Please see below.*

Reaffirm and Support our Regional Assets

It is important that we continue to focus on and strengthen the many regional assets in the Salisbury/Wicomico area: Salisbury University; Wor-Wic Community College; UMES;



TidalHealth; Perdue Farms; Salisbury Wicomico Airport; a solid and thriving industrial base; Wicomico Youth & Civic Center and other Rec and Parks entities such as the Henry S. Parker Athletic Complex, the Harmon Field Pickleball Courts, and the Arthur W. Perdue Stadium (home of the Delmarva Shorebirds); the Salisbury Zoo; our strong retail presence; our thriving small business economy; as well as preserving our region's rich heritage of agriculture and waterways.

**Recommendation:* We believe the best way to maintain our region's wonderful balance of lifestyles, to more effectively recruit and retain a strong workforce, and to reaffirm and support our regional assets is to more effectively promote them. It is time for a comprehensive marketing and branding initiative to be undertaken. Bring together organizations like GSC, the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce, SWED, Wicomico County Public Schools, Wicomico County Recreation and Parks, City of Salisbury Arts Business and Culture (ABC) Department, Salisbury University, Wor-Wic Community College, UMES, Perdue Farms and TidalHealth as the drivers of this initiative. We need to create a comprehensive branding and marketing plan. Have it funded in a collaborative way by those partners, and begin a consistent promotional campaign of the region on digital media platforms. This is a low-cost, win-win for all partners. It will help employers with recruitment and retention efforts, and help those outside our immediate area see the strengths of Salisbury/Wicomico and the Chesapeake Region.

Conclusion:

Greater Salisbury Committee is grateful to its members for their engagement and contributions to the GSC 2030 initiative. We believe it is important to collectively take a step back occasionally to evaluate where we are and where we want to be as a community. This enables us the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, so that we can plan a path forward. However, the important work begins now as we start to outline ways to address these challenges. GSC looks forward to working with our members, business leaders, community leaders, and government officials to identify sustainable solutions to these challenges.