

Garrett County Comprehensive Plan 2018

Comments of the

Garrett County Board of Realtors

Submitted to

Garrett County Department of
Planning and Land Management

October 8, 2018

The Garrett County Board of REALTORS® (GCBR) chartered in 1982, is a trade association representing more than 100 REALTORS® and affiliate-member service providers committed to providing professional service to home buyers and sellers in and around Garrett County. GCBR is a local affiliate of the National Association of REALTORS® and Maryland REALTORS®.

GCBR appreciates this opportunity to provide comments on the “Garrett County Comprehensive Plan 2018.”

Our comments below are directed to Plan chapters titled “Economic Development” and “Housing”

Introduction

Real estate is a primary contributor to the economic health of Garrett County and, though payment of property taxes, is the single largest contributor to County revenue. This will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

The performance of the real estate industry is also critical to the success of other economic sectors and serves as an employment multiplier. Demand for new homes has a direct, and positive, impact on the construction, retail, hospitality, transportation, utilities, and manufacturing industries; to name a few.

Moreover, real estate in Garrett County is closely tied to the County’s vital tourist economy. Tourism is major driver of demand for seasonal and permanent homes in the county. This in turn drives the need for new business and services.

Real property taxes

GCBR is concerned by the over-reliance on property taxes to support the lion's share of the county's operating budget. High property tax rates, combined with high state-level taxation, lead potential home buyers to seek property in other locations. County-level support for increased home ownership as well as new business construction can provide additional revenue without the need to increase rates. To ensure the continued success of the local real estate market, property tax rates should be maintained at the lowest level possible.

Tourism/second home market

Significant contributors to the economic health of Garrett County are tourism and the investment of non-residents in the vacation-home market. Garrett County is blessed with a wealth of natural resources to attract vacationers and second-home buyers. The county's state parks and forests, and lakes and rivers, with their hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, whitewater and other activities, offer excellent recreational opportunities. The state's only ski resort and the ASCI whitewater course are also significant draws, as are our historic downtown communities.

Efforts to promote Garrett County as a tourism and vacation-home destination should be continued and expanded; highlighting the county's many attractions and quality of life advantages (clean air, lack of traffic congestion, low crime rate, locally-sourced food options, community life, etc.)

Broadband quality and expansion

High quality broadband service in all areas of the county is a critical component to attracting new residents as well as businesses. Currently, high-speed broadband is either not available in many areas, or is prohibitively expensive to install. This is a significant hindrance to the county's economic growth. While there are several local, state and federal initiatives currently underway to advance broadband in underserved areas, it is not clear to what extent these disparate programs are effectively coordinated or will meet the comprehensive needs of the County. As new internet access technologies are introduced, every effort should be made to bring high-quality internet access to all area of the County. In addition to advancing current initiatives, the County should advocate for a state-level funding mechanism to assist home and business owners to pay for broadband infrastructure and installation; similar to the Maryland grant program for solar energy.

Moderate-income housing

The County and State currently have significant housing initiatives designed to benefit low to moderate-income individuals and families. However, more needs to be done to support the needs of prospective homeowners whose income levels are too high to qualify for these programs but who nonetheless lack sufficient resources to purchase a home. These are often young people with families; a demographic that is critical to the county's workforce and economic growth. Home ownership is out of reach for many of these people in Garrett County. While there are modest State and County programs available, including the First Time Home Buyer Program, the County should actively consider new ways to incentivize these prospective buyers. These could include some form of transfer or property tax relief; efforts to better educate buyers on existing assistance programs; and creation of a community development fund to assist with down payments or mortgage relief.