

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Call for Action

Cities and regions that thrive in the 21st Century will be identified by their lively neighborhoods and business districts, cultural and recreational attractions, great sense of place, protected natural areas, and pride in local character and products. In the down economy that is now gripping our country, it is tempting to cut back on planning and caring for our communities, thinking it is frivolous in the face of foreclosures and lost jobs. But disregarding the fundamental idea of thinking about the future in the name of thrift can create a downward spiral that causes a local economy to lose its edge and its citizens to lose their interest.

The current slowdown in development offers the perfect occasion to revisit our community's values, do some visionary thinking about where we want to go, and set our own course instead of being driven by outside development and political forces. Success in the future will probably not be defined in terms of an ever expanding Gross National Product. Instead, we must learn to live better with less, by focusing on creating great communities and emphasizing quality over quantity – quality of life, place, environment, and society. Investing in the culture and character of our community will assure that the quality of Rehoboth Beach will rise even if the national economy continues to fall.

Now is the time to plan for the next twenty years, build on our achievements, and search for new opportunities. Our 2004 Plan brought many successes in environmental protection, residential preservation, and continued the groundwork for the renewal of Rehoboth Avenue and its businesses. This was achieved through an open collaborative planning process with the citizens of Rehoboth Beach. To flourish in the coming years, we must increase this collaboration and form even more community partnerships. Only its citizens, be they full or part-time residents and/or business people, can assure that Rehoboth Beach remains a comfortable, small town and an active, prosperous resort. Only its citizens can keep these seemingly opposing aims in mind and build a place of natural beauty and intense activity as well as a place of stability for its residents and a community of opportunity for its businesses.

Rehoboth Beach is now and will remain a town within a town. It has two sets of active users-- residents and visitors. It has two physical identities -- residential community and resort. And it has two levels of municipal service -- local and regional. Maintaining balance among these various identities is a continuing challenge of managing traffic, parking, oceanfront land use, municipal service, business stability, commercial and neighborhood appearance, and governance. Rehoboth Beach will achieve this balance by using the Comprehensive Development Plan to give constant attention to the long-term foundations of our community – the ocean, beach, and waterways; the parks; the residential and commercial neighborhoods, the transportation network; and our public and private services.

Rehoboth's 2009 Comprehensive Development Plan puts forth dozens of interrelated ideas to move our community toward its vision of the future. Given the nature of bringing about change in our city and in acknowledgement of the new realities of our economic climate, the Plan cannot suggest that carrying out its recommendations falls to the traditional parties – its elected and appointed leaders and its boards, commissions, and committees. The time when a few could shoulder the responsibility for all has passed with the days of easy credit and massive leverage. To be sure, this Plan calls for increased partnerships among the City, its many

organizations, and its citizens but this call can too easily be laid aside in the name of relying on experience and practical expediency. We must not let this occur – leadership and financial support need not come solely from conventional sources and we should look to new ways to deal with our issues and their solutions.

The 2009 Comprehensive Development Plan focuses on four key areas:

Focus: Stewardship of our natural resources and the unique environmental demands of a coastal community.

One of the strongest themes found in the public workshops was the need to set a “green” tone for the 2009 CDP. One of the major opportunities in previous Plans was commercial revitalization, one of the main opportunities of this Plan is to give more emphasis to correcting environmental problems, understanding the environmental impacts of change, and promoting environmentally responsible construction and development practices.

Overall, a very high priority is given to “everything related to health of our waterbodies” including stormwater management, wastewater effluent treatment and discharges, buffer zones around the lakes, dune protection, green architecture, protection of our urban forest, and management of developments outside of the City that impact our aquifers and water quality,

This Plan issues an important first call to install a City-wide stormwater management system. Such a system should include runoff quality control retrofits to the existing system, solutions that curtail as much urban runoff as possible and redirect the remainder into the soil, consideration of new regulations to control runoff from individual lots, and City enforcement of its own state-of-the-art stormwater management ordinances. Dewey Beach, Sussex County, and the State are asked to partner in developing these plans and commit to their share of the costs. Rehoboth is within the "environmentally sensitive development areas" established by Sussex County, so everyone has an impact and should participate.

If we allow a lessening of the scenic and natural qualities of Rehoboth, we weaken our ability to attract new residents and visitors and undermine our capacity to build a strong, sustainable economy.

Priority Actions:

- Select and fund a wastewater discharge method.
- Install uniform wayfinding signage for the oceanfront and the facilities supporting use of the oceanfront.
- Begin Silver Lake recovery using buffer planting, dredging, and regulatory buffer zones.
- Continue to refurbish the Boardwalk and continue regular beach replenishment.
- Prepare a City-wide stormwater management plan.
- Investigate a City policy of requiring that all municipal facilities, City-funded projects, and City infrastructure projects be constructed, renovated, operated, maintained, and deconstructed using Green Building, Low Impact Development, and Conservation Landscaping principles and practices.

Focus: The City's resource and service capacities and the demands placed by residents and visitors.

Comments were offered during preparation of the Plan suggesting that Rehoboth was losing residents because of a lack of “community.” Community was defined in this regard as more than the popular image of beach and Boardwalk, it was provision of local shopping for everyday needs; support for the elderly; availability of more suitable, more affordable housing for employees; mixed use developments that include housing to compete with the projects along SR1; and better harnessing of technology by the City so that all segments of Rehoboth are served.

This definition of community calls for a better understanding of how Rehoboth Beach “works.” For example, as Rehoboth’s population changes (e.g. more retirees, more permanent residents) what impacts may be expected on social services, on a tourist-based economy, and on the blend of housing types required? Do ways need to be found to either decrease the burden on Rehoboth’s infrastructure from “day visitors” or gain revenue from these visitors to support the expense of our infrastructure and, at the same time, benefit local businesses? In other words, what is the price to enjoy Rehoboth Beach?

Several spending priorities are called for by this Plan and, taken as a whole, they form the basis for a short-range Capital Improvement Program (CIP) which identifies capital projects and equipment purchases, a schedule, and financing options. As the suggested actions are moved from the Plan to active community consideration, their impacts and interrelationships must be examined. For example: How would a Canal Park and water taxi impact transportation access? What is the cost for policing, lighting, and trash pickup? What is the appropriate timing for such a project? These are the types of questions that must be asked in preparation of a Capital Improvement Program where dozens of projects are examined alongside each other, priced, ranked, and timed.

A draft and unofficial CIP was prepared by the City in 2008 to gain an initial understanding of the magnitude of capital outlays to 2013 as seen by the heads of City departments. This is an excellent beginning and future preparation of such a document should require extensive community involvement to generate ideas and priorities but also to gain access to the wisdom and professional experience of Rehoboth’s residents. This is even truer in times of economic uncertainty. The process of developing a CIP must tap into the skills and resourcefulness of motivated citizens removed from, but aware of, the political consequences of proposing spending plans for government. An effective CIP process will develop a course of action from the bottom up and make use of the human “capital” of Rehoboth Beach.

Community partnerships offer the best way forward. To succeed, all projects must become working partnerships with the people of Rehoboth and their organizations e.g. SOLA-3, Main Street, the Chamber of Commerce, the Historical Society, the Village Improvement Association, the several local service organizations, homeowner’s associations, etc. Creating a community consensus around economic development, workforce housing, and the many other issues will ultimately speed up action and attract more partners, funders, and the help of individuals who want to be part of the Plan. Too often citizens are treated as rivals. If we are to maintain our town as a great place to live and visit, then we need to build upon a vision of the future that is shared by all.

Priority Actions:

- With Main Street and the Chamber of Commerce, encourage and assist interested property owners in the creative redevelopment of properties on Rehoboth Avenue and its connecting streets.
- Establish a Canal Park along the entire western boundary of the City and, in collaboration with its neighboring jurisdictions, the City will work with federal and State agencies to ensure the maintenance, bank stability, and navigability of the Lewes and Rehoboth Canal.
- Plant and maintain curbside trees on all side-walked streets within the City and assure the connectivity and “walkability” of all sidewalks.
- Prepare a Community Forest Plan designed to increase public support and public involvement, make the best use of available land, promote the best technical forestry practices, increase afforestation efforts, reduce undesirable and invasive species, and secure the long-term management of its urban forest.
- Prepare a long range development, renovation, and maintenance plan for Rehoboth’s parks and recreation spaces.
- The City will refine and communicate its capital needs through preparation of a Capital Improvement Program.

Focus: The continued residential ambiance, resort attractiveness, and favorable business climate of the City.

This focus speaks to the “character” of Rehoboth Beach and a comment from a Workshop attendee captures its fragility: “Residents place the highest value on the current character of the City and the most discordant note in that character is traffic and automobiles. Increasing traffic should not be an invariable truth, we should not facilitate the automobile. Let’s think of a series of circulation measures to return Rehoboth Beach to a walkable community. Let’s change the paradigm and dictate our terms to our visitors, not the other way around.” The idea of weaving Rehoboth together in a different manner recalls a different time, maybe when high tea was available at the Carleton Hotel, or a time when “walkable, bikeable, pedestrian-friendly” weren’t parts of our vocabulary, or a time when Rehoboth was a destination vastly different from home but very familiar anyway, or, finally, a time when our town wasn’t viewed by some frustrated travelers as just another roadblock on the way to the beach.

Although the City is laid out in a way to make walking and biking feasible, our current policies and their enforcement do not encourage it. We need to find ways to make this vision a reality. Can we develop some visionary goals regarding Rehoboth as a special place for walking and cycling in terms of its street designs, its external and internal connections, and its non-auto preferences? Can we make sure that our roads and walks take people where they actually want to go? Can we make sure that people have a variety of transportation options – bus, tram, car, bicycle, etc. - to reach their destination?

Yes, we can take over the streets. Streets are the most prominent and prevalent public space next to our beach, and making them more pedestrian-friendly is the closest thing we have to a silver bullet for improvement. A walkable downtown Rehoboth and pedestrian-oriented

neighborhoods will quickly become magnets for enhanced public life and economic expansion that will enrich our community in several ways at the same time. Transportation budgets are one of the best tools we have for making positive change now that DeIDOT and the federal government understand that street projects have to benefit people as much as automobiles. These projects, much like the Rehoboth Avenue streetscape, should be planned and waiting on the shelf when funding assistance is available.

Priority Actions:

- Develop clear, well-defined, publicly supported policies for traffic management based on the following principles:

(1) Access for people should not be inhibited; rather access by people must be increased while traffic is decreased. In other words, Rehoboth will accept more people, it will not accept more cars.

(2) Rehoboth is essentially built-out; traffic management must rely on improving connections within and without the City and improving knowledge and acceptance of how to use the connections.

(3) The overall aim of traffic management in Rehoboth is to get cars off the streets and let people use alternate means of moving about the City such as walking, biking, and shuttle services.

- Adopt a “Complete Streets” policy to assure that as opportunities to revamp streets occur such streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users and connected in a City-wide integrated network.
- A Plan will be prepared defining City-wide alignments for a connected bikeway system.
- The Emergency Operations Plan should be adopted and the appendices that spell out specific responses to public emergencies should be completed, kept updated, widely publicized, and made readily available.
- Explore the creation, possibly as a public-private joint venture, of a water taxi connection with Lewes.

Focus: Planning for physical and functional change in Rehoboth.

This is a dynamic target for the City; traffic waxes and wanes, property owners seek new and creative ways to use their property, and development in the County pushes and pulls at the resources of Rehoboth. Responding to these pressures is a matter of up-to-date development ordinances, growth management tools that are flexible and responsive, and, very importantly, a working relationship with the State and the County that allows open discussion of all concerns and opportunities, a means of reaching consensus, and a means of carrying out joint decisions about growth. Managing change will require developing a new attitude toward the benefits of urban planning and an expanded capacity to perform urban planning within City government. Planning should not occur once every five years with a Comprehensive Plan update. It can and should occur on a daily basis.

Key areas for physical change are our downtown commercial streets - Wilmington, Baltimore, and First. To avoid outsized and inappropriate development that can crush the fine-grained

urban fabric that makes downtown Rehoboth attractive in the first place, a “design image” is proposed to be developed for these areas that would describe an architectural and street character in drawings and models to be used as a source of ideas when individual properties are improved. The design image is an excellent opportunity to bring the business community, the downtown property owners, and interested residents together in common cause.

Priority Actions:

- Adopt the Official Zoning Map
- Conclude an agreement on the rezoning of the school property that preserves its essential open space and recreation functions.
- Thorough enforcement of the vacation rental housing regulations, health and safety inspections, and licensure.
- Institute an architectural review procedure as a limited time pilot program within the normal permitting process. Acceptance of the recommendations of architectural review will be voluntary during this period.
- Examine establishing a mixed use zone allowing a blend of residential and nonresidential uses as a means of encouraging the development and redevelopment of selected commercial areas along major commercial streets.
- Study how to physically upgrade the first two blocks of Baltimore and Wilmington Avenues and First Street to improve their commercial viability, safety, ambiance, and access by pedestrians. Include creation of a “design image” that would describe an architectural character for each block to be used as a source of ideas for owners when individual properties are modified.
- Undertake a thorough review of all development regulations not only for opportunities to streamline but for clarity and consistency with this Plan.

The full 2009 Comprehensive Development Plan addresses these and related issues in much more detail and provides background and rationale for the use of land in Rehoboth Beach into the future. It is designed as a policy and action statement that should remain valid in the face of change over the years by describing a set of visions and recommending specific actions to achieve these visions. Properly used, the Plan is the basis for decision-making at all levels of government and will guide the public and private sectors, working together in new and old patterns and organizations, toward successful maintenance of Rehoboth’s invaluable natural and human resources.