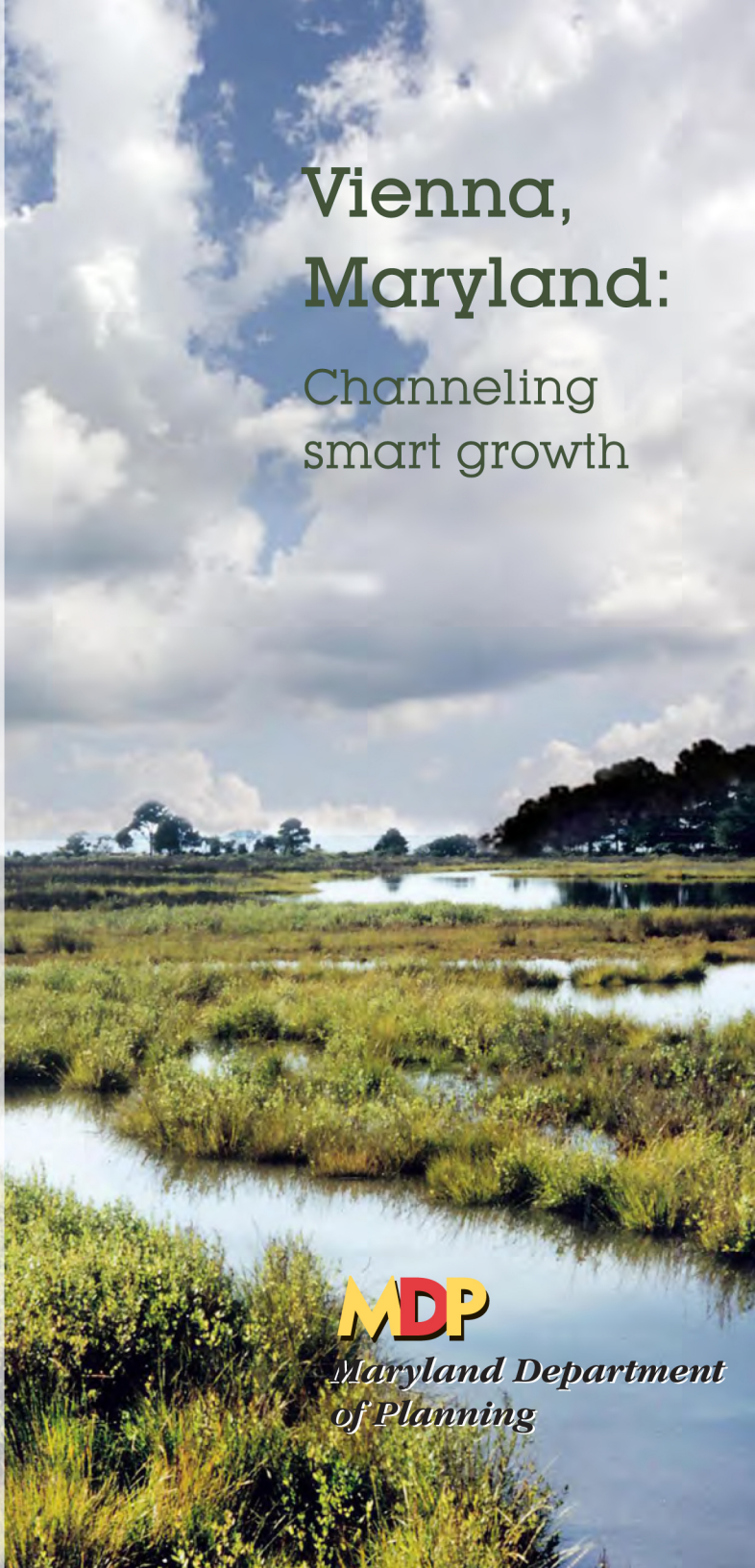
Planning Counts

Vienna, Maryland:

Channeling smart growth



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Smart, Green & Growing

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Cover photo: Nanticoke River

Vienna, Maryland:
Smart growth on the Nanticoke

Vienna is a small municipality in the rural, coastal region of Maryland, on the banks of one of the state's most scenic rivers, the Nanticoke. The name of the river, explored by Capt. John Smith in the early 17th century, evoked the Indian tribe that once lived near it and has been translated as "those who ply the tidal stream," "seashore settlers" and "tidewater people." In recent years, Vienna sought to nurture its history and character in preparing a direction for its future. Growing smart and sustainably in Vienna will not only make the best use of existing investments in infrastructure and human and cultural resources, it is a better development pattern for the health of the Chesapeake Bay and for the environment in general, with less land consumed, less natural resources lost and less septic-based development fouling the water.

The Vienna example is part of a larger story in Maryland, which continues to be a leader nationally in its approach to smart, sustainable growth. The state is in the process of implementing its first statewide growth plan known as PlanMaryland. The state legislature just approved new laws to curb large residential subdivisions on septic systems, the last major unchecked source of nitrogen pollution into Chesapeake Bay, as well as increases in fees to account

for storm water runoff and sewage plant upgrades. Advocates described it as the most significant environmental session of the Maryland General Assembly in a quarter-century. Maryland is also working aggressively on its Watershed Implementation Plan to restore the Chesapeake Bay. In recognition of the state's efforts, Governor O'Malley received a National Planning Leadership Award this spring from the American Planning Association, the first governor in eight years so honored by the 40,000-member organization.

We need more growth to occur in places like Vienna and less of it on septic systems and large lots clotting agricultural lands. Assistance, direction and programs from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are vital to help foster a smart approach to growth. Future assistance should be customized to the community and comprehensive.

Vienna Waterfront before improvements

Establishing a vision

Planning for a sustainable future in Vienna began in 2002. The town partnered with The Conservation Fund, a non-profit group, to create a community vision plan. Given Vienna's Census 2000 population of 280 people, it was impressive when 110 individuals turned out for the first visioning meeting in October 2002. Additional input was gathered through community interviews with 29 residents and an opinion survey conducted by Salisbury University.

Vienna established several guiding principles:

- Accommodate future growth and appropriate economic development.
- Maintain the small town character and setting of Vienna.
- Enhance quality of life by providing community amenities.
- Protect the significant cultural and natural resources within Vienna as well as the significant scenic vistas and farms and forests surrounding the town.

Vienna Waterfront after improvements

A consistent focus

The Vienna Community Vision Plan was adopted in January 2003. It framed Vienna as a model Chesapeake Bay community, a gateway to the Nanticoke and a conservation-oriented town. It also introduced the concept of a "protected lands" greenbelt ringing the town.

The town then embarked on an update of its comprehensive plan to align with the vision plan. The Greater Vienna Comprehensive Plan, adopted in December 2003, placed a high priority on implementing the recommendations of the vision plan.

Interpretive Signage

Shortly afterwards, the town began a comprehensive re-write of its zoning ordinance. With technical assistance from the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP), Vienna drafted and adopted a Planned Development District Floating Zone to better accommodate planned development in Vienna's designated growth area.

The town also worked with MDP and Dorchester County to amend its water and sewer plans to more accurately reflect the growth and annexation intent outlined in the Vision Plan and the Comprehensive Plan.

In the midst of this process, the town was approached by a developer who wanted to purchase the only two farms included in Vienna's designated growth area. Development of this land would fully implement the town's future growth plan. Vienna began to work with the developer on an annexation agreement that specified all of the town's desires, such as environmental protection in the form of a greenbelt, dedication of the waterfront for public use, a trail system and additional amenities such as community greens, street trees and sidewalks.

Due to the constraints of a small-town budget, the agreement also required the developer to complete an analysis of fiscal impact and of infrastructure upgrades for which the developer would be responsible. The developer conducted a well-attended, multi-day charrette. It resulted in revisions to the concept plan and the development of a "pattern book" that set aesthetic and architectural guidelines for development.

The planned residential development was to reflect traditional neighborhood design with rear-loaded access via alleyways; a walkable community with sidewalks and trails that connect to "Vienna proper" and a nearby elementary school; a continuation

of the block and grid street pattern where feasible, and a variety of housing types and price ranges to accommodate singles, families and retirees alike. The architectural style of the proposed development was in keeping with the history and character of the Eastern Shore.

Establishing a "greenbelt"

Turbulence in the economy stalled the annexation and the planned development. Town officials responded by seeking assistance from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to use Program Open Space (POS) money to purchase easements to establish the desired greenbelt on the two farms in the growth area.

The two farms are also adjacent to tidal waters and subject to Maryland's Critical Areas law. The 1984 law restricts development on all land within 1,000 feet of the tidal waters of Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. One of the farms is also directly adjacent to the Mill Creek Natural Heritage Area, which has numerous rare, threatened and endangered plant species. The town worked with the Critical Area Commission, MDP, DNR Wildlife and Heritage and DNR POS staff to negotiate

Vienna Natural Buffer Project

environmental protection measures for the sites. They also worked to determine what portions of the sites could be acquired for permanent protection through POS funds and what portion would remain for future development.

The collaboration between local and state officials resulted in the establishment of environmental buffers and resource protection. DNR purchased 275 acres of the roughly 400-acre site. The $4.6 million POS acquisition re-emphasized Vienna's desire to make preservation a priority while allowing for modest future growth in the town. Since the property's acquisition in 2008, the town has continued to work with DNR to establish a resource enhancement plan for the greenbelt. It includes a 300-foot buffer along the Mill Creek Heritage Area; a 100-foot tidal buffer along Trunk Creek; a 50-foot buffer along existing drainage ditches; areas for non-tidal wetland restoration; areas for "pocket" wetlands to further improve water quality, and additional forest connections.

Interpretive Signage

The greenbelt has been deeded and annexed into the town and includes ownership of the waterfront for future public use. In addition, Vienna has worked with MDP to establish the future development portion of the annexed lands as a municipal Priority Funding Area (PFA) in keeping with the original municipal PFA boundary. MDP worked closely with the town to assure that the annexation was consistent with the PFA law with respect to permitted density, sewer service, growth area designation and development capacity analysis. Several state Smart Growth programs are available to help Vienna pursue its preservation goals and objectives. They include the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF), the Rural Legacy Program and Priority Preservation Areas, all of which are linked in PlanMaryland (http://plan.maryland.gov/).

Nanticoke River area

Lessons learned

Given that Vienna has no full-time staff, the town was able to accomplish its substantial planning efforts and vision with financial and technical assistance from federal, state and county agencies.

The federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities currently focused on metropolitan and regional planning needs to broaden its application to support efforts by state governments to foster sustainability.

As the economy improves, Vienna is poised to entertain development proposals with consistency in its planning and vision in place. The town's elected officials, its planning commission and citizens were steadfast in their commitment to effectively plan for a sustainable future. In its quest to manage growth and protect natural resources, Vienna has been a model of innovation, proactive community planning and inter-government cooperation.

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