

6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM



Introduction

Worcester County's geographic position as the easternmost county in the state of Maryland, and the only county in Maryland to border the Atlantic Ocean, presents unique economic opportunities. The county is home to the popular vacation resort area of Ocean City, founded in 1875, as well as wild habitats on the primitive wilderness areas on Assateague Island and in the Pocomoke River and Swamp. Additionally, Worcester is the only county in Maryland that borders both Delaware and Virginia. It offers ready access to major metropolitan markets, including Washington D.C., Baltimore and Philadelphia. This resulting regional connectivity is an advantage for residents and visitors alike.

Worcester County's economy is in an era of growth and diversification, with key elements like supporting small businesses and fostering tourism remaining highly relevant. Promoting a diverse economy and creating opportunities in higher-wage industries continue to be critical goals.

Since the County's last Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 2006, the economic landscape has undergone dramatic shifts, particularly with the rise of remote work, the increasing importance of digital infrastructure, and the growth of agritourism. These changes should be integrated into this plan.

Currently, Worcester County faces several economic challenges, including seasonal dependence on tourism, workforce retention, the need to attract skilled talent, limited affordable housing for workers, and threats to agriculture and fisheries from environmental changes, such as the potential displacement of commercial fishing due to wind farm development.

Moving forward, strategic land use and infrastructure planning will be essential to balancing economic expansion with the preservation of the county's rural and coastal character. By focusing on higher-wage job creation, workforce development, and sustainable tourism, Worcester County can work towards long-term prosperity. Efforts to foster balanced growth, support small businesses, and create living-wage opportunities while investing in affordable housing and infrastructure will be vital to the County's continued prosperity.

Goals and Objectives

A primary goal of economic development is to foster a resilient and inclusive economy by driving sustainable growth in tourism, small business, technology, agriculture, and light industry. In Worcester County, this includes preserving and celebrating the County's unique rural and coastal heritage while creating opportunities for year-round employment, innovation, and community well-being.

The following general objectives have been specifically identified as critical to the ongoing success of Worcester County and its residents. These are grouped by category:

1. Business Retention and Expansion (BRE)

- Support existing businesses with resources, guidance, and financial support.
- Conduct regular outreach meetings to identify challenges and growth opportunities and provide connections and resources.

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- Continue collaboration with local chambers of commerce, county and town communication, and legislative officials.

2. Economic Growth and Employment

- Seek to raise the County's median income to meet the state average by increasing access to higher-paying, year-round employment.
- Diversify the economic base by extending the tourist season and fostering growth in emerging industries, such as technology and health care.
- Increase employment opportunities to retain talented young workers and attract new talent to the county.
- Align vocational education and workforce development programs with current and anticipated employment demands, including technical and soft skills training.
- Support the expansion of existing employers and encourage entrepreneurship to grow the local economy.
- Reduce unemployment by targeting job creation efforts to underserved populations and regions.
- Promote southern Worcester's potential for housing employees and allied businesses of NASA and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport at Wallops Island.

3. Entrepreneurship and Innovation

- Establish small business incubators and co-working spaces to support startups and small enterprises.
- Provide resources for grants, loans, and incentives for innovative projects and new businesses.
- Continue to host workshops, business roundtable discussions, business groups, and networking events to foster a culture of entrepreneurship.

4. Tourism and Hospitality

- Strengthen the tourism and hospitality industry by supporting towns and cities that define the County's character.
- Promote the creation of sports, cultural, and major attractions to boost visitation and increase tax revenue.
- Develop attractions and initiatives to encourage visitation during off-peak seasons.
- Highlight eco-tourism through environmental, heritage, and cultural attractions in partnership with heritage areas and museums.
- Support programming in sports tourism and arts and entertainment industries.

5. Engagement and Collaborative Development

- Collaborate with towns, chambers of commerce, and local partners to advance tourism and business initiatives.
- Partner with state-level entities to advocate for increased funding for economic development and tourism programs.

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- Address the needs of agricultural and agri-tourism sectors to ensure their continued growth and success.
- Involve residents and stakeholders in decision-making processes.
- Strengthen partnerships with state and regional economic development organizations.
- Recognize and celebrate the achievements of local businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Collaborate with businesses in the Aerospace industry to support sustainable expansion of operations and employment opportunities.

6. Community and Sustainability

- Develop and support facilities catering to the county's aging population, including health care and accessible housing options.
- Ensure economic development aligns with the county's rural and coastal sustainability goals.
- Address the needs of the agricultural and agri-tourism sectors to ensure their growth and continued contribution to the local economy.

Economic Markets

Worcester County's economy is a dynamic blend of tourism, agriculture, and small business entrepreneurship. Anchored by Ocean City, a premier East Coast vacation destination, the County benefits from a robust hospitality sector that drives seasonal economic activity. Beyond tourism, the region boasts a thriving agricultural industry, including poultry farming, crop production, and agritourism ventures that connect local farms to visitors.

Small businesses and local artisans play a significant role, supported by a business-friendly environment and community-focused initiatives. Emerging sectors, including renewable energy and technology, add to the County's economic diversity. With its unique combination of natural beauty, vibrant communities, and strategic location near the Atlantic coast, Worcester County continues to grow as a hub for business and leisure.

The resort industry, construction, real estate, the public sector, agriculture, and an evolving focus on workforce development are the county's largest employers. These sectors employ a significant portion of the workforce and depend on the county's natural resources, rural charm, and coastal character for their success. For this reason, growth and economic development must be pursued in a manner that preserves these unique characteristics.

Year-round and seasonal population growth has expanded the market for the county's businesses. Service industries, including health care and technology, are expected to lead economic growth. Economic development efforts should focus on nurturing existing local industries, attracting higher-wage industries, and investing in workforce development to support a skilled and adaptable labor force.

See **Table 6-2, Employment by Industry with 10-year forecast** for the complete breakdown.

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Table 6-1. Largest Employers in Worcester County (2024)

Employer	Location	Product/Service	Employment
Harrison Group*	Ocean City	Hotels & Restaurants	975
Atlantic General Health Systems	Berlin	Medical Services	970
Blue Water Development / Blue Water Hospitality*	Ocean City, Berlin	Hospitality Management & Real Estate Development	608
Bay Shore Development*	Ocean City	Amusements & Hotels	600
Fagers Island*	Ocean City, Berlin	Hotels & Restaurants	600
O.C. Seacrets*	Ocean City	Restaurant, Distillery & Liquor Store	487
Ocean Enterprise 589 / Ocean Downs Casino*	Berlin	Casino gaming	349
Ashore Resort & Beach Club*	Ocean City	Hotel & Restaurant	300
Dough Roller*	Ocean City	Restaurants	275
91st Street Joint Venture / Princess Royale*	Ocean City	Hotels & Restaurants	250
Real Hospitality*	Ocean City	Hotel Management	215
Ocean Pines Association	Berlin	Nonprofit civic organization	190
Sunsations*	Ocean City	Beach Wear / Products & Souvenirs	180
Bel-Art Products/SP	Pocomoke City	Scientific & Lab Products	164
Carousel Resort Hotel & Condominiums*	Ocean City	Hotels & Restaurants	150
Trimper Rides*	Ocean City	Amusements	145
Berlin Nursing & Rehabilitation Center	Berlin	Nursing & Rehabilitation	127
Harrison House Senior Living¹	Snow Hill	Nursing & Rehabilitation	85
Hardwire	Pocomoke City	Protective armour products	83
Dolle's Candyland*	Ocean City	Candy	50
Benelli	Pocomoke City	Firearms	40

*Reflects summer employment levels

Source: Maryland Department of Commerce Brief Economic Facts sheet on Worcester County

¹ This facility is no longer owned or operated by Harrison Senior Living and is operating under the ownership of Snow Hill Nursing and Rehabilitation.

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Table 6-2. Employment by Industry with 10-year forecast, 2024-33

Industry	Employment	Current Avg. Annual Wages	10-yr. Forecast Employment
Accommodation and Food Services	7,919	\$33,275	14,474
Retail Trade	3,987	\$35,934	5,150
Health Care and Social Assistance	2,412	\$59,965	2,579
Public Administration	1,839	\$60,449	1,682
Educational Services	1,743	\$62,415	1,686
Construction	1,658	\$50,044	1,475
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	1,308	\$36,837	1,951
Other Services (except Public Administration)	1,170	\$33,506	1,381
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1,132	\$61,925	992
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	956	\$47,197	1,135
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	909	\$53,683	875
Manufacturing	812	\$54,667	821
Finance and Insurance	472	\$83,076	393
Wholesale Trade	352	\$50,529	348
Transportation and Warehousing	297	\$47,351	321
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	280	\$107,255	328
Information	190	\$53,961	172
Management of Companies and Enterprises	67	\$66,461	61
Unclassified	9	\$56,225	11
Utilities	7	\$66,288	6
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	5	\$19,029	5
Total - All Industries	27,524	\$45,865	30510

Source: JobsEQ 2024Q2

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Construction and Real Estate

Worcester County has had a growing construction and real estate industry, driven by both residential and commercial development. Worcester has seen significant interest from both investors and developers due to its desirable location as the only coastal county in Maryland. In recent years, residential construction has been robust, with both new homes and housing renovations in high demand.

The commercial construction in Worcester has been similarly active, with developments focused on tourism-related infrastructure, retail spaces, office buildings, and mixed-use projects. Waterfront properties and developments catering to hospitality and leisure industries are key contributors to the local economy.

The construction and real estate industry can encounter challenges such as rising material costs, labor shortages, high interest rates, and the economic cycle. Additionally, balancing development and environmental factors has proven to be difficult, especially in waterfront areas where sea level rise adds to the pressure. While some challenges may be unavoidable, careful planning can support the local construction and real estate industries. As long as demand for growth and/or redevelopment is strong in the County, these industries will continue to be viable.

Recommendations for Construction and Real Estate in Worcester County should focus on the following:

- **Stable Growth:** Leverage planned population growth to sustain the construction sector while balancing affordability and rural character.
- **Workforce Housing:** Prioritize affordable housing projects to support workforce retention and attract new residents.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of Construction and Real Estate in the County:

1. Ensure the land use plan provides adequate land for growth to meet housing, commercial, and support service demands.
2. Continue to provide workforce training programs to supply skilled labor to the construction industry.
3. Offer continuing education opportunities to keep construction and real estate professionals informed of county policies and market trends.

Tourism and Hospitality

Worcester County has longstanding ties to the tourism and hospitality industry based on its geographic location as Maryland's only point of access to the Atlantic Ocean through the town of Ocean City. Ocean City is one of the most well-known resort towns on the East Coast, making it a vital part of not just the county's tourism and hospitality industry but also the states. With 11,000 hotel rooms and more than eight million visitors each year, the economic potential Ocean City brings to the County cannot be understated.

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Tourism in Worcester County is not limited to the beach, boardwalk, and other oceanfront and resort amenities in Ocean City. Along with Ocean City's allure, Berlin, Pocomoke and Snow Hill also provide opportunities for tourism. The County and the towns should continue to expand their cooperative tourism efforts.

Berlin is a historic community known for Victorian architecture and eclectic shops and restaurants. Snow Hill offers two museums, bustling streets filled with art and antique vendors, restaurants, and small shops. Pocomoke City is home to the Delmarva Discovery Museum and the historic Mar-Va Theater. Worcester is home to the only casino on the Eastern Shore, the Casino at Ocean Downs, nine championship golf courses, several state parks and forests, and Assateague Island National Seashore. The County's commitment to the protection of public and private open space has created opportunities for a plethora of recreational activities such as hiking, biking, kayaking, bird watching, golf, marine mammal tours, and more.

Worcester County is home to a wide variety of events throughout the year, enhancing its appeal to tourists. Notable annual events include:

Ocean Pines

- Bay Day in Ocean Pines
- Arts Day in the Pines
- Classic Car & Jeep Show
- 4th of July Fireworks Celebration
- Summer Series

Berlin

- Jazz and Blues, Wine & Brews
- Bathtub Races
- Smalltown Throwdown
- Fiddler's Convention
- Oktoberfest
- Ice Ice Berlin
- New Year's Eve

Pocomoke

- 4th Friday Street Festivals
- Concerts in Cypress Park
- Great Pocomoke Fair
- Boat Docking Challenge

Snow Hill

- Annual Oyster Roast

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- Blessing of the Combines
- First Fridays - Arts on the River
- Worcester County Fair
- Dicken's Holiday Weekend
- Iron Furnace Fifty
- Furnace Town Renaissance Faire

Ocean City

- Ocean City Music Festivals, Oceans Calling, Country Rock, Boardwalk Rock, Rising the Tides Festival, drawing in crowds from all across the country.
- Home of the White Marlin Open, largest billfish tournament in the world
- Summer Concert Series at Sunset Park
- Annual Springfest, Sunfest, and Winterfest
- Dreamfest
- Sundaes in the Park
- OC Film Fest
- OC Air Show

These events, along with the region's history, culture, and recreational offerings, contribute to making Worcester County a vibrant destination year-round.

Based on summer employment numbers, three of the top five employers are in the tourism and hospitality industry – Harrison Group, Bay Shore Development, and Fagers Island.

Tourism and the Hospitality industry in Worcester County should focus on the following planning considerations:

- **Tourism Diversification:** Build on the success of outdoor recreation by expanding eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and off-season events to lengthen the shoulder seasons.
- **Protecting Rural and Coastal Character:** Prioritize natural resource stewardship and sustainable growth to differentiate from competing resorts and prevent sprawl.
- **Collaborative Marketing:** Strengthen partnerships with towns to promote distinctive attractions like Ocean City, Berlin, Snow Hill, and Pocomoke as complementary destinations.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of Tourism and Hospitality in the County:

- Invest in marketing campaigns to promote Worcester County's unique attractions, including Assateague Island, Ocean City, and Pocomoke River State Park.
- Expand off-season tourism by creating and promoting events, festivals, and eco-tourism opportunities.

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- Partner with local businesses (outfitters, retail, restaurant), attractions (museums, historical sites) and other organizations such as the Heritage Area to enhance visitor experiences, encourage guests to have multi night stays and increase repeat visits.
- Support the traditional resort industry while diversifying offerings with high-quality recreational, cultural, and heritage experiences.
- Encourage the development of large-scale attractions, including sports, cultural, and environmental venues, to enhance the County's appeal.
- Continue support for beach replenishment projects to preserve coastal attractions.
- Collaborate with towns to strengthen their tourism efforts.
- Expand eco-tourism opportunities by leveraging the county's environmental, cultural, and heritage assets.
- Facilitate year-round recreational and resort-oriented developments to mitigate seasonality.
- Address the needs of hunting, fishing, and boating sectors as part of the county's tourism strategy.

Industrial

Industrial attraction and location are a challenge. Successfully recruiting compatible industries requires a strategic approach that ensures access to the necessary utilities, transportation, and infrastructure. With limited opportunities for industry relocation and intense competition from neighboring regions, offering incentives such as tax abatements, below-market land prices, and other financial advantages is often essential. Therefore, economic development efforts should focus on supporting and expanding existing industries by providing the fundamental infrastructure they need to grow. Heavy industry and the hospitality sector can be incompatible. For this reason, both the type and location of industrial development must go through an intensive planning process. In addition to tactical site selection, adhering to architectural design standards and ensuring adequate public services, including reliable electrical, natural gas, and other utilities, is vital. Given this, industrial development should focus on light and heavier industry in the Pocomoke area and light industry in the existing industrial areas near Berlin and near the Village of Showell. Ongoing economic development efforts should continue to focus on attracting higher-wage jobs and industries that align with the county's infrastructure and regional characteristics.

Neighboring Accomack County is home to Wallops Flight Facility (WFF), located on Wallops Island, Virginia, a prominent rocket launch site operated by NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. The anticipated growth of this facility in upcoming years presents a tremendous opportunity for southern Worcester to house Wallops employees and allied businesses. Additionally, the aerospace industry attracts a skilled workforce with higher-wage jobs and capitalizing on the expanding market would help advance the County's economic development efforts.

The recommendations for the Industrial industry in Worcester County should focus on the following:

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- **Strategic Industry Development:** Focus on light and medium industries in Pocomoke, Berlin, Bishopville, and Showell, emphasizing industries that align with the county's rural character and existing infrastructure.
- **Incentives and Infrastructure:** Continue offering competitive incentives (tax abatements, land subsidies) alongside investments in utilities, transportation, and broadband to attract compatible industries.
- **Design Standards:** Continue to enforce architectural and site design standards to ensure industrial development aligns with the county's aesthetic and environmental values.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of industrial activity in the County:

- Identify and promote available industrial sites for immediate development.
- Maintain an inventory of suitable industrial sites and infrastructure to support business relocation and expansion.
- Focus industrial development efforts in designated industrial parks.
- Conduct a feasibility study for upgrading broadband and natural gas infrastructure in key industrial areas.
- Upgrade industrial infrastructure, including electrical supply, natural gas, and broadband connectivity.
- Develop industrial parks with state-of-the-art infrastructure to attract advanced manufacturing and technology firms.
- Offer short-term incentives, such as reduced fees or expedited permits, to attract light industries.
- Retain existing industries while attracting light industries in technology, research, health care, and advanced manufacturing.
- Identify and rehabilitate "brownfields" for potential industrial use.

Health Care

Worcester County has several major healthcare assets that serve the community and the surrounding region. Some notable ones include:

- **Atlantic General Hospital (AGH):** Located in Berlin, Atlantic General Hospital is a major healthcare provider in Worcester County. It offers a range of services, including emergency care, surgery, diagnostics, cancer care, and outpatient services. AGH serves as the primary hospital for many residents of Worcester County and the surrounding areas.
- **TidalHealth Worcester:** Located in Berlin, MD, this facility is an important extension of the TidalHealth network, based out of Salisbury, Maryland in Wicomico County. This TidalHealth campus providing both inpatient and outpatient services to residents of Worcester County. It

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offers emergency care, diagnostic services, and specialized medical care, helping to improve healthcare access in the area.

- **Chesapeake Health Care:** This organization operates multiple healthcare centers in Worcester County, offering a wide range of services including primary care, mental health, and dental services. It has a focus on underserved populations and provides services across various locations.
- **UM Shore Regional Health:** While located primarily in the neighboring counties, UM Shore Regional Health extends its healthcare services to Worcester County as part of its regional healthcare network. It provides access to specialists, emergency services, and other advanced medical care in the region.
- **Health Departments and Community Clinics:** The Worcester County Health Department operates multiple clinics and community outreach programs to support public health initiatives, preventive care, and access to healthcare for vulnerable populations.
- **Veteran's Administration Outpatient Clinic in Pocomoke:** This is the only United States Department of Veteran Affairs outpatient clinic in all of Wicomico, Somerset and Worcester Counties and Virginia Eastern's Shore, servicing veterans from 5 counties.

These assets contribute significantly to the healthcare infrastructure in Worcester County and support the local community's healthcare needs. Additionally, TidalHealth, AGH, and other medical facilities significantly contribute to the local economy through sustainable job creation and regional economic growth by contributing to an environment conducive to business expansion and development.

The recommendations for the Health Care industry in Worcester County should focus on the following:

- **Healthcare Workforce Growth:** Collaborate with Atlantic General Hospital and TidalHealth to expand services and attract skilled healthcare professionals through targeted incentives and community integration initiatives.
- **Aging Population Needs:** Enhance healthcare infrastructure and services to cater to the county's growing senior population.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of Health Care activity in the County:

- Work with Atlantic General Hospital and TidalHealth to expand recruitment efforts for health care professionals.
- Launch a public awareness campaign showcasing Worcester County as an attractive place for health care workers to live and work.

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- Support Atlantic General Hospital and TidalHealth in growing and expanding as they consolidate systems across the region. Provide health care employees with collateral information to assist in their decision to relocate to the county to live, work, and play.
- Anticipate growth in health care needs and work to expand the health care sector, addressing both service provisions and employment opportunities.

Agriculture

The recommendations for Agriculture in Worcester County should focus on the following:

- **Sustainable Farming:** Support local farmers through incentives for value-added products, alternative crops, and agricultural tourism.
- **Right-to-Farm Policies:** Preserve rural character by protecting farmland and encouraging innovative income streams for farmers.
- **Infrastructure Investments:** Address challenges in the grain supply chain and support local processing facilities to bolster agricultural viability.

Agricultural operations in Worcester County continue to face significant economic pressures due to fluctuating commodity prices, rising input costs, and global market competition. The past decade has also seen the effects of climate change, such as more frequent extreme weather events, including flooding and drought, impacting yields and increasing operational risks. Inflationary pressures have further compounded these challenges by raising the costs of fertilizer, fuel, and equipment.

The poultry industry remains a cornerstone of the local agricultural economy, though it has undergone notable changes. While the county continues to be a major player in poultry production, consolidation in the industry has led to fewer processing plants, further reducing competition. This dynamic continues to exert downward pressure on grain prices and limits profit margins for grain farmers. However, recent investments in renewable energy by some poultry companies have created potential opportunities for farmers to partner on sustainability initiatives.

Field crop production, primarily corn and soybeans, continues to serve as a critical input for poultry feed. While the County remains a net importer of grains for feed, some local farms are exploring diversified cropping systems, including specialty grains and organic production, to meet growing demand for high-value, sustainable products.

To bolster farm income, there has been a significant push toward value-added agriculture and agritourism. Local farmers are increasingly embracing opportunities to process and market their products directly, such as producing artisan cheeses, craft beverages, and packaged goods. Agritourism ventures, including pick-your-own farms, farm-to-table events, and educational tours, have grown in popularity, driven by consumer interest in local food and experiences.

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According to the most recent USDA Census of Agriculture (2017), the value of agricultural products sold in Worcester County was approximately \$141 million, reflecting modest growth compared to previous decades. Average sales per farm increased to \$340,000. The diversification of products, alongside higher-value ventures, has played a key role in maintaining this growth despite challenges.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of Agriculture in the County:

- Preserve farming and enhance its economic viability by promoting agricultural tourism, value-added products, and alternative crops such as hemp, organic vegetables, and wine grapes.
- Support agricultural infrastructure and marketing cooperatives to improve profitability.
- Implement zoning and preservation programs to reduce farmland fragmentation.
- Enforce the “right-to-farm” policy to protect agricultural operations.
- Encourage educational and recreational agricultural initiatives to enhance public awareness.
- Preserve forestry by limiting fragmentation and supporting related industries.
- Organize workshops for farmers on value-added products and sustainable farming practices.
- Launch pilot programs for alternative crops, such as hemp or organic vegetables, with funding from state and federal grants.
- Establish partnerships with local retailers to market locally produced agricultural goods.
- Create a regional marketing cooperative to sell local products directly to consumers and retailers.

Commercial Services

Retailing is one of the largest employers in the county and is a significant contributor to the economy.

The Ocean City Boardwalk in Ocean City provides a vibrant space for businesses to cater to tourists. Shops selling souvenirs, apparel, and beach gear contribute to local sales tax revenue and support seasonal employment for residents.

The Outlets Ocean City in West Ocean City are a major shopping destination for both locals and tourists. This retail center attracts a range of retail, home accent stores, and restaurants and generates sales tax revenue, drawing in consumers year-round. These outlets not only support retail jobs but also create demand for maintenance, logistics, and service roles.

Downtown Berlin is known for its charming historic district and eclectic small shops, restaurants, and art galleries. These businesses boost sales and generate local tax revenues, while also enhancing Berlin’s reputation as a popular destination for day-trippers.

Downtown Snow Hill offers a mix of locally owned boutiques, antique shops, and seasonal markets, providing a unique shopping experience in this historic town. As part of an ongoing effort to revitalize, Snow Hill is a Main Street Affiliate. That is a community that is approved by the State to work on Main

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Street Designation but has not yet achieved that status. Main Street Maryland oversees and awards grants to Main Street efforts such as Snow Hill's.

Downtown Pocomoke City is a treasure trove of independent boutiques and antique shops. Like the downtown districts in Berlin and Snow Hill, downtown Pocomoke City has the potential to attract tourists with its unique selection of local businesses and reputation as a quaint and charming.

The recommendations for Commercial Services in Worcester County should focus on the following:

- **Right-Sized Development:** Reassess commercial zoning to align with actual demand, reducing traffic congestion and underutilized spaces.
- **Mixed-Use Planning:** Encourage local commercial services in new residential developments while imposing strict design standards for large-scale commercial projects.
- **Support Small Businesses:** Provide resources and programs to nurture entrepreneurship while balancing the need for higher-wage industries.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of Commercial Service activity in the County:

- Locate commercial centers in major communities to serve as retail and service hubs.
- Encourage mixed-use developments that integrate commercial, office, and residential spaces.
- Balance commercial land supply with demand to prevent underutilization and over-congestion.
- Continue to implement design standards for commercial developments to ensure they enhance community aesthetics and functionality.
- Continue to implement siting and design standards for large-scale and commercial developments to ensure compatibility with community character.
- Continue to discourage "franchise architecture" in favor of unique, community-oriented designs.
- Host workshops for small business owners on digital marketing and e-commerce strategies.
- Offer grants to businesses that embrace mixed-use development and innovative designs.
- Collaborate with local chambers of commerce to identify underserved areas needing commercial development.

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Employment

The County's labor force stands at approximately 24,600 with an unemployment rate of 3.3 percent (2023), the lowest unemployment rate on record for Worcester County in at least 20 years ([Maryland Unemployment Rates - by County](#)). This percentage was slightly higher than the State unemployment rate of 2.1 percent but lower the national rate of 4.1 percent. See **Table 6-3, Employment Status** for the comparisons.

Table 6-3. Employment Status (2023)

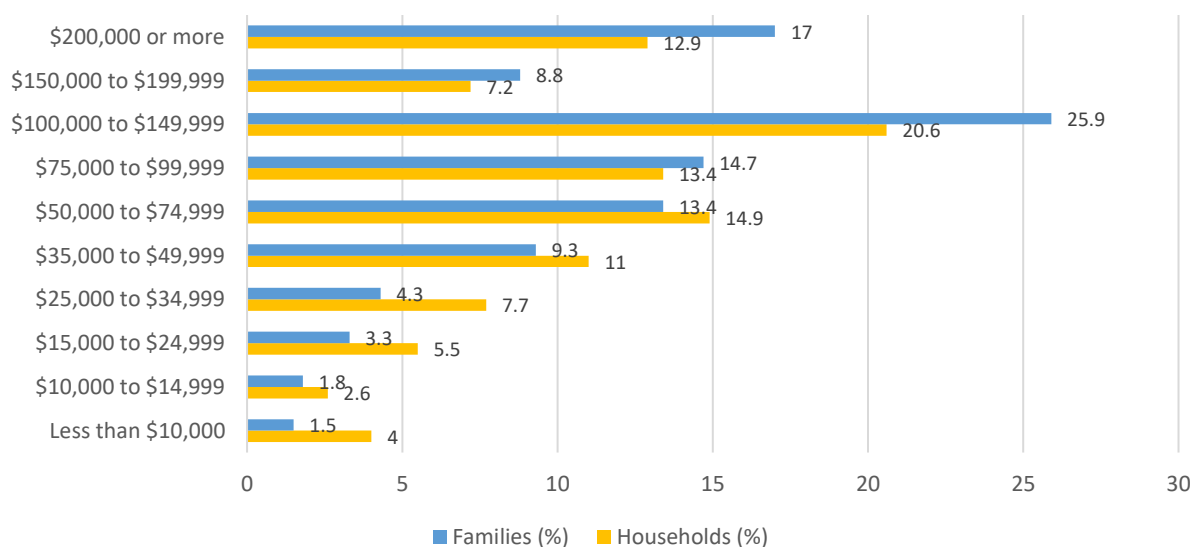
	Worcester County		Somerset County (MD)		Sussex County (DE)		State of Maryland	
	Estimate	%	Estimate	%	Estimate	%	Estimate	%
Civilian labor force	26,736	59.1	9,787	46.8	121,901	54.7	3,326,225	66.8
Employed	25,012	55.3	9,226	44.1	116,521	52.3	3,194,028	64.1
Unemployed	1,724	3.8	561	2.7	5,380	2.4	132,197	2.7

Source: 2023 ACS 5-year estimates

Income and Poverty

As of the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS), the County had a total of 23,827 households and 15,341 families. Of those, 12.1 percent of households and 6.6 percent of families had annual incomes less than \$25,000, while 40.7 percent of households and 51.7 percent of families had incomes greater than \$100,000. The income range of \$100,000-\$149,999 accounts for the largest single income range for households (20.6%) and for families (25.9%). (See **Figure 6-1. Worcester County Income Ranges**).

Figure 6-1. Worcester County Income Ranges (2023)



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Source: 2023 ACS 5-year estimates

Table 6-4, Annual Income, shows the median household, family, and per capita income for the County, in comparison to neighboring counties and the State of Maryland. Worcester’s median household, family, and per capita income was lower than the State but consistently higher when compared to neighboring counties, Sussex County (Delaware) and Somerset County (Maryland). Household income is typically defined as the total gross income received before taxes in a 12-month period by all members of the household above age 15, regardless of whether the individuals are related to each other. Family income measures the income of all people living in one household and that are related to each other through blood, adoption, or marriage.

Table 6-4. Annual Income (2023)

Income	Worcester County (MD)	Sussex County (DE)	Somerset County (MD)	State of Maryland
Median Household Income	\$81,455	\$78,162	\$52,462	\$101,652
Median Family Income	\$102,724	\$95,047	\$70,366	\$124,487
Per Capita Income	\$51,620	\$44,963	\$26,031	\$51,689

Source: 2023 ACS 5-year estimates

According to the 2023 ACS, 5.2% of families and 8.1% of all people in Worcester County had incomes in the past 12 months that fell below the poverty level, as depicted in **Table 6-5. Poverty in Worcester County**. More than a quarter of families with a female head of household and related children under 18 years old were considered to be living below the poverty level in the County.

Table 6-5. Poverty in Worcester County (2023)

	Total	% below poverty level
Population for whom poverty status is determined	52,574	8.1
Families	15,341	5.2
With related children of householder under 18 years	5,136	10.5
Married Couple Families	11,815	2.7
Female Householder, no spouse	2,601	16.1

Source: 2023 ACS 5-year estimates

Incentive Zones

Worcester County is committed to creating a business-friendly environment and assisting businesses in their growth and location in the County. To assist in this area, several incentive programs are available for assistance. The following are several of the programs available in support of sustaining and creating new opportunities for providing additional services to the residents of Worcester County.

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Opportunity Zones

The Opportunity Zone program is a nationwide initiative administered by the U.S. Treasury created under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. This program provides federal tax incentives for investment in distressed communities over 10 years. Areas designated as opportunity zones will be able to reap the benefits of capital gains to help redevelop underserved communities. Snow Hill, Berlin, and Ocean City (from the inlet to approximately 33rd Street) are designated Opportunity Zones here in Worcester County ([link to map in Appendix](#))

Enterprise Zones

Businesses locating within an enterprise zone may be eligible for real property and state income tax credits. Upon application and approval, the zone offers a ten-year credit against local real property taxes on a portion of real property improvements. Credit is 80 percent for the first five years and decreases 10 percent annually to 30 percent in the tenth and final year. The zone also offers a one-time \$1,000 credit per new worker on state income taxes. In Worcester, the County has Enterprise Zones within the Berlin, Snow Hill and Pocomoke regions ([see attached or see Appendix? On website: Enterprise Zones – Worcester County](#))

The Enterprise Zone program provides real property and state income tax credits for businesses located in a Maryland enterprise zone in return for job creation and investments. Businesses located in Focus Areas may be also qualified for personal property tax credits on new investment in personal property and enhanced income tax credit for creating new jobs.

Business and Industrial Property

Worcester County offers a diverse range of commercial and industrial spaces across its regions, spanning 2 to 80 acres. The presence of three designated Maryland Enterprise Zones (as outlined above) provides new and expanding businesses with access to crucial property and job tax credits. Additionally, the county takes pride in its two Arts and Entertainment Districts, actively fostering and supporting diverse artistic and cultural initiatives.

Pocomoke City serves as the county's central manufacturing hub, housing the expansive 175-acre Pocomoke Industrial Park, with continued growth. Also, a designated SBA HUBZone, small and medium-sized businesses gain a competitive edge in government contracting. Additionally, there are three federally designated Opportunity Zones located in Snow Hill, Berlin, and downtown Ocean City, aiming to stimulate economic growth by offering tax incentives to investors. The VLT (video lottery terminal) program utilizes slot machine proceeds from Ocean Downs Casino to assist small, minority, and women owned businesses throughout the County.²

Arts and Entertainment (A&E) District

An Arts and Entertainment District is a geographically designated area in which a high concentration of arts and entertainment facilities serve as an anchor attraction. The intent of the A&E District is to

² Source: *Brief Economics Facts // Worcester County, Maryland*
(<https://commerce.maryland.gov/Documents/ResearchDocument/WorcesterBef.pdf>)

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stimulate neighborhood revitalization, improve the attractiveness and safety of areas, stimulate business activity (particularly in the evenings and on weekends), attract residents and visitors and build the tax base.

The tax incentives available upon the designated Arts and Entertainment District include: an income tax subtraction modification for qualifying residing artists; a property tax credit; and an exemption from the Admissions and Amusement Tax.

Worcester County is home to two A&E districts with a concentration of cultural venues and arts activities: Berlin and Snow Hill. The program stimulates revitalization and business development, attracts residents and visitors, and builds the tax base.

The designation offers incentives to artists, arts organizations and creative businesses:

- Artist Income Tax Subtraction Modification
- Property Tax Incentives
- Admissions & Amusement Tax Exemption

Strategies supported by the A&E Districts program include:

- Creating accessible and unique arts destinations
- Leveraging the state's regional identities, natural resources, and heritage
- Facilitating dynamic arts experiences that engage community and attract visitors
- Enabling artists of all disciplines to live, work, and prosper
- Investing in the power of place

Financial Resources and Incentives

Working with state, federal, and non-profit partners, business owners on Maryland's Coast have access to targeted resources to start or expand in Worcester County. From farming and fishing to technology and manufacturing, these programs incentivize job creation, innovation, and expansion.³

The Maryland Department of Commerce

The Maryland Department of Commerce offers programs including venture capital investments and tax credits, direct loans, grants, and loan guarantors. These programs work together to attract new companies to the state, encourage expansions and job creation and revitalize our economy.

- Enterprise Zone Property Tax Credits
- Biotech Investment Incentive Tax Credit
- Buy Maryland Tax Credit
- Job Creation Tax Credit

³ Source: Choose Maryland's Coast - Economic Development Collateral Piece (<https://www.flipsnack.com/MarylandsCoast/choose-maryland-s-coast/full-view.html>)

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- Maryland R&D Tax Credit
- One Maryland Tax Credit
- Partnership for Workforce Quality
- Video Lottery Terminal Fund (VLT)

More financial resources and incentives include:

- **Advantage Maryland** – Provides below-market, fixed-rate direct assistance to growth-industry-businesses.
- **Eastern Shore Entrepreneurship Center** – Loans from \$10,000 to \$100,000 for small business startups.
- **ExportMD** – Grants of up to \$5,000 to help offset international marketing costs.
- **Manufacturing Machinery Tax Exemption** – County tax rebate on new machinery and equipment of \$10,000 or more annually.
- **Maryland Agricultural & Resource-Based Industry Development Corp** – Assists farm, forestry, and seafood businesses.
- **Maryland Business Works** – Offers 50 percent reimbursement for worker training programs.
- **Maryland Capital Enterprises** – Funding for small and micro businesses to start or expand.
- **Maryland Industrial Partnerships** – Matching funding program for university-based research projects.
- **Maryland Industrial Development Financing Authority** – Ensures repayment on percentage of principal and interest for loans.
- **Maryland Economic Development Corporation** – Assists in the expansion, modernization, and retention of MD businesses.
- **MidAtlantic Trade Adjustment Assistance Center** – Provides technical assistance and grants to businesses impacted by foreign competition.
- **Neighborhood BusinessWorks** – Flexible financing loans to new or expanding small businesses and non-profit organizations.
- **Small Business Development Center (Eastern Shore Region)** – Located at Salisbury University, SBDC offers no-cost consulting to help startups refine business plans.
- **TEDCO** – Manages multiple programs designed to invest in and support entrepreneurs.
- **USDA** – Rural Development Business Programs provide technical and financial assistance.

Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development Office

In March 2023, the Department of Tourism and the Department of Economic Development completed a rebranding process and were combined into one office – the Worcester County Tourism and Economic Development (WCTED).

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Located in Snow Hill, WCTED serves business owners, employers and entrepreneurs throughout the county. Under the direction of the County Commissioners and Chief Administrative Officer, the office develops partnerships and programs to support businesses on Maryland’s Coast. The Economic Development team has established their mission, “to improve the quality of life for county citizens by increasing employment opportunities, expanding the tax base, protecting our environmental assets, and creating full-time, family supporting jobs.”⁴ Services and technical assistance include:

- Manufacturing Machinery Tax Exemption
- Site Selection & Real Estate
- Small Business Development and Financing
- Start Up & Entrepreneurial Assistance
- Tax Incentive Navigation
- Workforce Development & Training

While Economic Development focuses on county residents, Tourism’s objective is to increase visibility to outsiders and promote travel to the area. The Department maintains its own website, with information on lodging options, local businesses, entertainment, and an events calendar. The “Towns” tab allows users to explore what town in the County has to offer, highlighting the unique features of each community and further promoting regional connectivity.

⁴ Source: Maryland’s Coast Worcester County (<https://choosemarylandscoast.org/about-us/>)