

**The promise.  
The need.  
The plan.  
The perks.**

Please view our interactive [story map](#).

Our website, [Reimagine Laurel](#), includes information and public engagement features about redevelopment efforts, the comprehensive plan and the Downtown Development District.



# **Downtown Development District Plan**

Town of Laurel





# The promise.

**Laurel** has the lowest Median Household Income (\$33,387) of any town in Delaware, according to the U.S. Census' 2010-2014 American Community Survey. Despite its very attractive waterfront and the redevelopment activities along it, the overall economy remains somewhat stagnant. Sandwiched between Seaford and Salisbury, Md., the town is not enjoying the retail growth leaders seek along its U.S. 13 corridor.

Only three residential dwellings have been built in Laurel over the past three years - a Habitat for Humanity home and two rental units. Like most towns in Delaware and elsewhere, a once thriving downtown where locals gathered and shopped is just a faded memory for older residents.

As a symptom of downtown malaise, recent market data demonstrate that the second largest income generator within the municipality is alcohol sales, representing more than 12 percent of the town's total annual economic impact.

The town struggles with vacant homes, among them some of Laurel's Victorian gems, as residents grow too old to care for them and move away. Almost half of the residential properties within the proposed DDD are rental units, and many are owned by absentee landlords who are difficult to hold accountable.

While this paints a rather dismal picture of the town's fortunes, Laurel has taken significant steps forward in recent years. Since its inception in 1992, the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation has acquired 30 properties along Broad Creek and in the downtown business district; built and managed new commercial space; constructed upscale villas after purchasing and clearing an old industrial site; established public parks; and stabilized the Broad Creek shoreline.

Their work has made it feasible to envision and design The Ramble, a mixed-use project on either side of Broad Creek; it will include a pocket cottage neighborhood, village shops, a network of trails, a nature-based playground and a wetlands education area. The LRC intends to acquire more properties to make The Ramble a reality.

## Table of Contents

The promise - introduction	2
The need - impact of a DDD	3
The plan - DDD district plan	8
The perks - DDD incentives	18
The public - engagement	20
Implementation timetable and capacity	22
Acknowledgements	22

## Links to reports mentioned in the plan and application:

- The [Ramble Redevelopment Proposal](#)
- [Growing While Protecting Our Water Quality](#)
- Ramble Phase One [Environmental Assessment](#)
- Ramble Green Infrastructure [Assessment](#) (ForeSite)
- Nature/Heritage Tourism [Assessment and Recommendations](#)
- DDD Housing Rehab/Home Ownership [Program](#)



The town recently adopted the branding recommendations of Arnett, Muldrow and Associates. “Laurel: Great Things Come Naturally” reflects the town’s setting along Broad Creek and its intention to become a launching point for nature and heritage tourism throughout the Nanticoke region.

If Laurel were just a collection of gloomy statistics, there would be no hope and no rationale for seeking a Downtown Development District designation. However, Laurel does have hope, a sense of its future and definitive plans to realize that future.

A Downtown Development District designation would reduce the risk and improve the attraction for redevelopment in Laurel’s core. It doesn’t necessarily mean that new investors would suddenly flock to Laurel. In spite of the long-term investment in the area by the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and the town’s efforts to address substandard rental properties, the area is still blighted, and The Ramble parcels still have an industrial feel. Amenities such as the planned trail network need to be installed, some demolition needs to occur, and contaminated sites need to be cleaned up.

But given the relatively small size of the area, the excitement about The Ramble’s progress, and the incentives that will be available within the DDD, the designation would definitely create momentum for the type of transformational investment that could change Laurel’s destiny and attract residents, jobs and visitors to the town. The comprehensive plan could help embed this transformation in the town’s future.

Laurel is a cohesive community with citizens actively committed to making the community a livable destination for new residents, employees in new jobs, and visitors. With the LRC, the town has a track record of revitalization and consistent economic accomplishment over time. The DDD designation would be the catalyst to complete Laurel’s transformation.



# The need.

On the ground in Laurel and reviewing the town’s Census data, the need is evident – and acute. At \$33,387, Laurel’s median household income is 55 percent of Delaware’s (\$60,231) and 62 percent of Sussex County’s (\$55,305).

Laurel has a poverty rate of 25 percent, and 43 percent of its residents receive food stamps. Almost half of the residents (49.1 percent) are paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing and related costs – an indication that they are struggling to make ends meet.

The median home value in the town is \$131,300 vs. \$231,400 for Sussex County and \$232,900 for Delaware.

Almost 40 percent of the housing stock was built in 1949 or earlier; in fact, one third dates to 1939 or earlier. In Sussex County at large, only 7.5 percent of housing dates to 1949 or earlier. About 44 percent of the dwellings in town are rentals, and an estimated 21 percent of the housing units within the proposed DDD are considered vacant.

The median monthly rent in Laurel is \$661, compared to \$965 for Sussex County. The rental vacancy rate in Laurel is only 2.7 percent vs. 8.7 percent for Sussex County.

The town, despite an aggressive inspection and enforcement program especially

Laurel Income Statistics		
Category	Laurel	Delaware
Median Household Income	\$33,387	\$60,231
% of families/people below poverty level	24.7%	8.2%
% receiving food stamps	42.6%	12.7%
% unemployed	10.2%	8.5%

Source: 2010-2014 American Community Survey (US Census)





Laurel Housing Statistics		
Category	Laurel	Delaware
Built 1939 or earlier	33.3%	9.1%
Renter-occupied	43.9%	28.4%
Median home value	\$131,300	\$232,900
Paying more than 30% on housing costs	49.1%	33.4%

Source: 2010-2014 American Community Survey (US Census)

with regard to rental properties, has difficulty dealing with the large number of absentee landlords – many of whom bought properties on line and have never set foot in Delaware, let alone Laurel.

**Demographics.** Laurel, according to Census data, has a minority white population. Whites make up 44 percent of the town’s population, and African-Americans comprise 44 percent. The Hispanic population is estimated at 11 percent.

Laurel also has a surprisingly young population. According to the 2010-2014 American Community Survey (U.S. Census), the median age in Laurel is only 27.7 years, compared to 46.5 for Sussex County and 39.1 for Delaware. The largest single age cohort in Laurel is 0 to 5, at 14.5 percent. Only 8.5 percent of Laurel’s population is 65 or older, compared to 15.4 percent for Sussex County and 22.5 percent for Delaware.

This age data surprises many in Laurel. Many of these poorer, younger residents are “invisible” citizens because they live in the town’s subsidized housing or relatively cheap rental units and work outside of Laurel; 44 percent of Laurel residents drive 25 miles or more to work every day. Only 78 persons both live and work within Laurel’s town limits, according to the U.S. Census; 1,688 residents leave Laurel every day to work somewhere else.

Many homes, including some of the large Victorian homes that front Laurel’s main streets, are in disrepair. A few are abandoned, as their aging occupant lost control over maintenance and moved out. The town’s building and inspections department conducted an assessment of building conditions within the proposed DDD and rated the structures on a scale of 1 to 5; the results are included in the DDD [story map](#). There are 10 vacant homes within the DDD.



**Code violations.** The town pulled a report of code violations for the period April 1, 2013 through April 11, 2016. The software the town uses does not enable further breakdown or mapping of the violations, but the breakdown for that period is:

- Housing violation notice – 947
- Code violations – 137
- Mow property – 994
- Unlicensed rental – 221
- Vehicle expired (no tag) – 175
- Tow vehicle - 15

The violations relate to either the 2012 ICC International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) or the town’s own code. Laurel’s chief building inspector estimates that about 25 percent of these violations occurred within the proposed DDD. The town maintains an aggressive posture toward enforcement, especially of rental properties.



**Building activity.** There were only three new residences constructed in Laurel between January 2013 and March 2016; one was built by Sussex County Habitat for Humanity, and two were rental units. A second Habitat house is currently under construction.

A review of permits issued for the town and the specific DDD area during that period show minimal activity. The largest projects over the last three years are the fitout of a new renal dialysis facility on US 13, the planned demolition of the old Laurel Central Middle School and the construction of a new Family Dollar store (all outside the DDD area). Most of the projects were window and roof replacements, installation of solar panels, and other repairs and minor additions.

Over the last 15 years, Sussex County’s Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program spent \$969,144 to rehabilitate 78 properties within Laurel. According to the program, 25 homes in Laurel are on a waiting list, although the county does not know exactly how much it will receive this fiscal year for projects in Laurel.

**Crime.** The Laurel Police Department pulled crime statistics for the proposed DDD area over the period from January 1, 2013 through April 24, 2016. They indicate a fairly high level of criminal activity in this 71-acre area:

- **Crimes against persons (121).** Includes domestic offenses (55), intimidation (10), aggravated assault (4), rape (2), robbery at gunpoint (3), robbery at knifepoint (1), simple assault (25) and stalking (1).
- **Crimes against property (129).** Includes burglary, embezzlement, fraud, larceny, vandalism, motor vehicle theft and trespassing.
- **Crimes against society (54).** Includes drug violations (29), disorderly conduct (16), drunkenness, intimidation, liquor law violations and weapons offenses (5).



See crime data displayed graphically on next page.



Above, rental properties along Spruce Street within the proposed DDD. Top, the parcels in red are rental properties, according to the Town’s Building Inspection department. The dots represent commercial properties. There are about 10 vacant homes within the DDD, such as the one pictured at left.







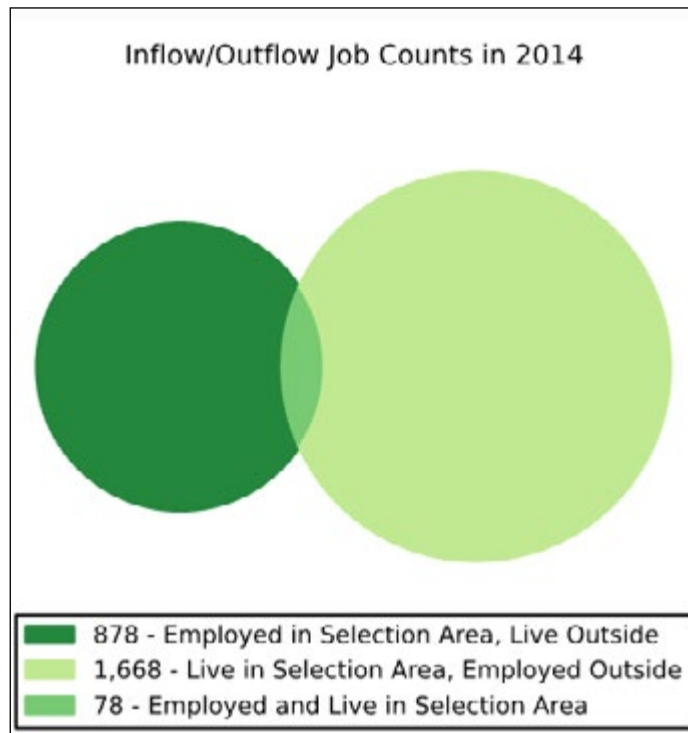
## Census template for Laurel

Statistic	Delaware	Sussex	DDD*	Laurel Town	Tract 518.02	Block 1	Block 2
Total Population	917,060	203,737	352	3816	4337	2918	1419
Median Household Income	\$60,231	\$53,505	\$43,294	\$33,387	\$39,428		
Poverty Rate, All People	8.2%	9.1%	13.3%	24.7	23.0		
% Housing Built 1949 or earlier	13.7	7.5	38.5	38.5	39.5		
% Homeownership	71.6	78.1	62.7	56.1	67.4	61.3	79.3
% Rental	28.4	21.9	37.3	43.9	32.6	38.7	20.7
% Vacant Housing Units	17.6	37.8	20.7	11.3	8.6	12.8	15.5
Median Home Value	\$232,900	\$231,400	\$151,786	\$131,300	\$148,600		
% Low / Mod Income	37.8%	36.1%		50.0%	43.5%	43.3%	44.1%

\*Information for DDD is from ESRI Community Analyst, 2009-2013 American Community Survey estimate. Reliability of data within this polygon is considered low. Remaining data from 2010-2014 American Community Survey. % Low/Moderate Income from HUD Exchange.

## Income comparisons- Sussex County

Town	Median Household Income
Laurel	33,387
Blades	34,286
Seaford	35,813
Delmar	35,938
Selbyville	40,195
Greenwood	41,500
Ellendale	41,563
Frankford	42,396
Millsboro	46,403
Georgetown	47,525
Dagsboro	47,614
Milton	49,615
Milford	52,274
Bridgeville	52,639
Lewes	55,917
Rehoboth	79,297



## Age distribution in Laurel

	Laurel	Sussex	Delaware
Median age	27.7	46.5	39.1
Under 5	14.5%	5.7%	6.1%
25 to 34	15%	10.5%	12.8%
65 and older	8.5%	15.4%	22.5%

All Census data from 2010-2014 American Community Survey unless otherwise noted. Left, an inflow/outflow analysis from the U.S. Census Bureau's Center for Economic Studies shows that only 78 people both live and work in Laurel - 44 percent of Laurel residents drive 25 miles or more one way to work every day, with 26 percent driving more than 50 miles each way.





# The plan.

The plan for the 71-acre Downtown Development District will be included as an element of Laurel's comprehensive plan update this year. The district plan's overall vision is to enhance the commercial viability, walkability and livability of Laurel's core. The following key priorities will help Laurel achieve that vision:

1. Ensure that zoning and permitted land uses, as well as design standards, further the vision of a commercially viable, walkable and livable town core;
2. Bring The Ramble waterfront redevelopment initiative to life and attract businesses that will further Laurel's goals for sustainable economic development;
3. Improve the condition of both owner-occupied and rental housing and encourage home ownership; and
4. Ensure that the town's key natural asset, Broad Creek, is protected from pollution, erosion and uses that devalue it.

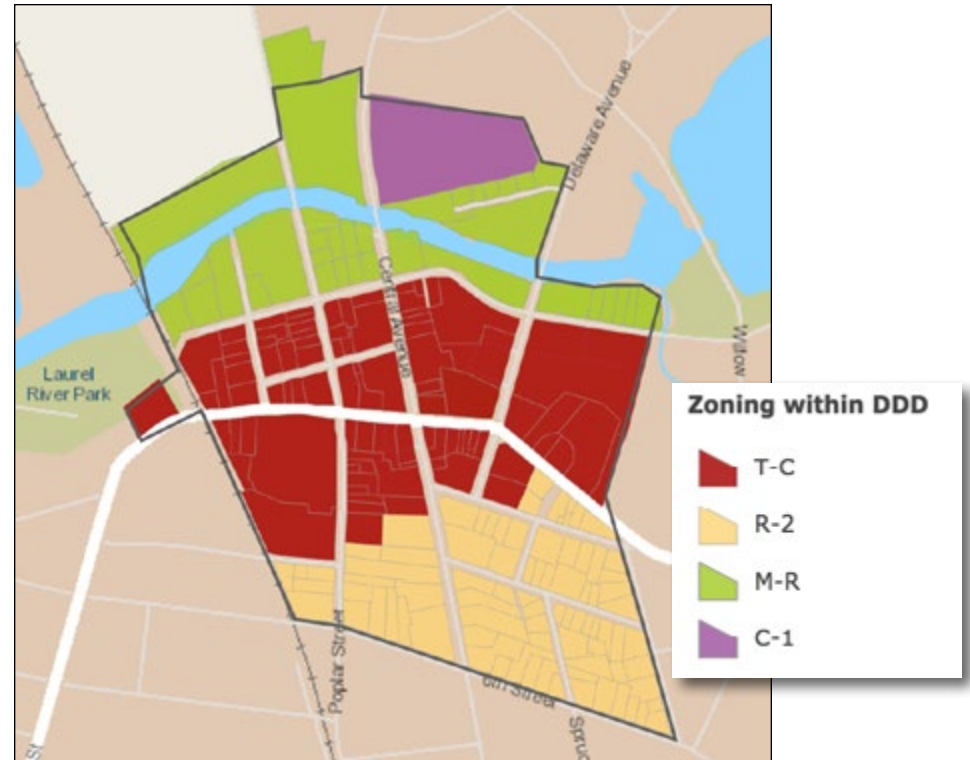
Each of these priorities has several supporting objectives. While they are detailed, there is a public engagement process associated with the update of Laurel's comprehensive plan. Since public work on the plan just began in April, this district plan will get as specific as possible while still allowing room for further public input. That includes members of council, as three of Laurel's four council wards overlap the proposed DDD.

## Category 1: Adjust zoning and permitted land uses

After Laurel's comprehensive plan was updated in 2011, the town adopted a more modern zoning code. With a few adjustments, the zoning categories and permitted uses work well in the proposed DDD.

The mixed-use core of the DDD is zoned Town Center, which is a mixed-use category "historic and pedestrian in nature," according to the town's [Zoning Ordinance](#). "It is a district that is utilized for an intensive and traditional mixture of small-scale retail, cultural, conference and meeting, lodging, business, personal service, financial, institutional, office, residential and governmental uses."

The area that includes the proposed Ramble is zoned as a Marine Resources district, which also fits the planned land use for this area. This district "recognizes the



unique role which Broad Creek and its waterfront areas have played in the formation, growth and life of The Town of Laurel," the town's code states. The purpose is to preserve the view and tree canopy, buffer property and residents from flooding, protect water quality, and control erosion along the shoreline.

One property within the Downtown Development District is zoned commercial (Pizza King). Medium-density residential zoning is south of the Town Center district. The uses allowed and not allowed within T-C and M-R zones need to be modified to ensure that they do not present barriers to redevelopment or allow uses incompatible with redevelopment goals.

For example, Town Center allows stand-alone bars and nightclubs. The permitted uses should be changed to exclude those and allow brewpubs, wine bars or similar establishments that serve meals.

Liquor stores should be explicitly prohibited within T-C and M-R. If and when the grandfathered liquor store currently located on Front Street goes out of business, the town and LRC should take steps to prevent another one from locating there.





## Category 1 recommendations

- Align the permitted uses within the Marine Resources district with its stated purpose in the zoning ordinance. Some uses appear to be incompatible with the protection of Broad Creek and its viewshed.
- Rezone the one property zoned Commercial to Marine Resources, or at least a subdivided portion of that property.
- Review the permitted uses within each DDD zoning classification to ensure that they do not present barriers to redevelopment or permit uses that are incompatible with redevelopment.
- Take steps to ensure that the commercial center along Market Street is attractive and welcoming to visitors and walkers. Present these establishments with options and give them a reasonable timetable to comply.
- Develop and adopt landscaping and building design standards and a pattern book to preserve the character and look and feel of the T-C and M-R districts.
- Pursue funding for a facade improvement program that will offer incentives for building owners to participate (such as a low-interest loan or matching grant).
- Adopt an ordinance regarding consistent signage requirements within the DDD.
- During the comprehensive plan update process, work with DelDOT to develop a "Complete Streets" approach to circulation in the area.
- During the comprehensive plan update, revisit the size of Laurel's Historic District and the purpose and requirements of the district - especially within the DDD area.

*Laurel has vacant and unsightly storefronts that make walking downtown undesirable.*

Other uses currently permitted within T-C such as self-service laundries and amusement centers should be reconsidered.

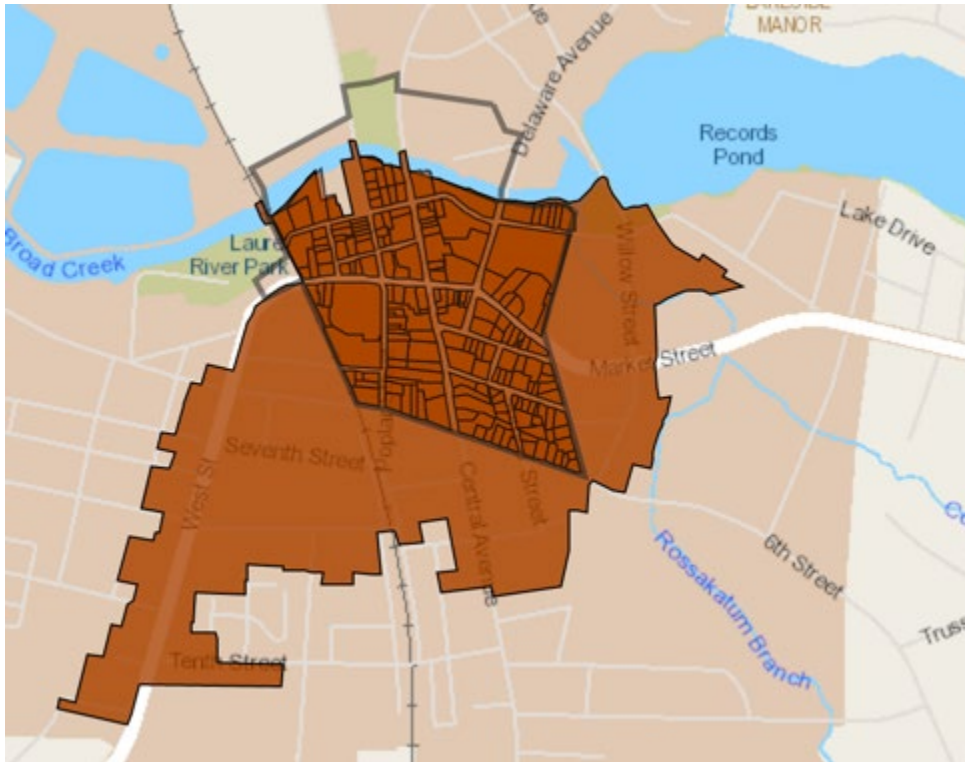
Uses such as pocket neighborhoods and bed and breakfast establishments should be allowed as a special permitted use subject to adopted design and landscaping standards. The town should consider allowing but regulating short-term vacation rentals, such as Airbnb.

The designer of The Ramble project, Dr. Jules Bruck of the University of Delaware, has drafted landscape design standards for those parcels. They should be reviewed and implemented along with building design standards that reflect the character of Laurel's downtown and promote walkability. For example, metal buildings should not be permitted, and parking requirements should be revised to reduce paved surfaces.

A UD intern studying Landscape Horticulture will be developing these standards during summer 2016.

Laurel boasts the largest historic district in the state - with almost 800 structures. Except for The Ramble area, all of the proposed DDD is within the Historic District. The comprehensive plan update should review the size and purpose of Laurel's district and what inclusion in it means for the property owner, the town and the cause of historic preservation.





*Except for The Ramble area, the entire DDD is included within Laurel's Historic District.*

The commercial district within the DDD includes some vacant storefronts, churches and other uses that do not maintain regular business hours. These buildings make the area unattractive to passersby and contradict the stated purpose of the Town Center district.

Building facades are in need of restoration and more attractive and consistent signage. The town can adopt a vacancy treatment standard governing empty storefronts, consistent signage requirements, and require uses in these buildings to maintain regular business hours. An implementation schedule would give these establishments time to adapt.

Permitted uses within the Marine Resources district should be reviewed to ensure they are compatible with the stated purpose of the zone. Uses such as a marina, boat refueling and watercraft sales are likely incompatible and would be difficult to permit under the state's Watershed Implementation Plan for the Chesapeake Watershed, which includes Broad Creek.

With some adjustments to its zoning ordinance, the town would ensure that its code is conducive to achieving the goals of the Downtown Development District. A district overlay and/or form-based code is not necessary and, in fact, would require outside resources to develop, implement and maintain. An objective of this district plan is to scale DDD implementation for a small town such as Laurel.

As the comprehensive plan process continues, the town should work with DelDOT to identify and implement a "Complete Streets" approach to traffic in the area. "Complete Streets" ensure that mobility is planned and effective for more than motor vehicles and that walkers, cyclists, handicapped persons and transit riders can easily get around.

## Category 2: Bring The Ramble to life

A robust public engagement effort gave birth to The Ramble. The University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative was asked to facilitate a community visioning process focusing on the Broad Creek waterfront in Laurel's downtown commercial district. UD initially became involved to lead a land use/growth scenario process and recommend nutrient reduction strategies to protect water quality in the Broad Creek, a tidal tributary to the Chesapeake Bay. However, this effort took an unusual twist when community leaders asked for help bringing people and jobs back to downtown Laurel.

When asked to reimagine a viable waterfront area 20 years in the future, a stakeholder committee offered a grand vision, which included elements such as a pocket-style neighborhood, mixed-use commercial development, a kayak launch, a children's play area, and a brewpub just to name a few, all of which might be found along a beautifully landscaped riverwalk.

Subsequently, a unique partnership orchestrated by UD between the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Delaware and her graduate and undergraduate students resulted in a conceptual site plan and artist renderings offered in a sustainable waterfront redevelopment proposal called The Ramble (see next page).







*Environmental and green infrastructure assessments for The Ramble can be found on page 16.*

**Design plan for The Ramble**

This proposal featured green infrastructure that supported many of the design elements the stakeholder group had suggested for the available properties, 95 percent of which are owned by the LRC or the town. The plan was enthusiastically endorsed by the LRC, the Town council and the Laurel Chamber of Commerce as well as numerous local business and civic organizations.

In September 2015, the community and visitors had a chance to plan and envision what The Ramble would look, feel and taste like with an event patterned after the “Better Block” approach - activating a vision for a block or site without waiting for local planning efforts and approvals to occur.

In response to the community’s desire to add value to the economic development goals of The Ramble by attracting paddlers, cyclists, birders, and heritage tourists,

the planning team secured a \$14,000 grant from DEDO Downtown Delaware to support development of a nature-based and heritage tourism plan for Laurel. Sea Grant also contributed \$5,000 towards implementation of the final plan.

A 1.5-day workshop was convened in November 2015 to seek input for this plan and was attended by a stakeholder group comprised of community leaders, tourism professionals, state resource planners, conservationists, and business owners. The final plan was released during a May 2016 event celebrating Laurel’s natural resources and ecotourism opportunities. This event also dedicated the new kayak launch, the first constructed component of the proposed The Ramble design.

Two studies funded with matching grants from DNREC were completed: 1) a Phase One environmental assessment of the entire proposed Ramble area; and 2)



## Category 2 recommendations

- Acquire strategic parcels that are key to successful implementation of The Ramble plan.
- Complete low-impact green stormwater installation for nature-based playground.
- Work with DNREC Site Investigation and Restoration program to secure brownfield cleanup funds for appropriate site *before* any acquisitions are completed.
- Continue to activate The Ramble site for festivals, paddling events and other public gatherings.
- Secure funding for and install nature-based playground and planned trail network, including connection under railroad trestle to Roger Fisher Park.
- Attract quality developer for planned pocket neighborhood of cottages. Have design standards in place (see Category 1).
- Attract signature commercial enterprises that further town's nature and heritage tourism objectives - such as a brewpub or outfitters.
- Adopt landscape architecture and design standards (see Category 1).
- Work with DeDOT to ensure context-sensitive design and pedestrian element of bridge rehabilitation project.
- Ensure that the Marine Resources zoning category provides the appropriate framework for The Ramble to build out (see Category 1).



a feasibility report proposing specific low-impact green stormwater infrastructure installations throughout The Ramble.

Community leaders and DNREC are actively pursuing funding for The Ramble's nature-based playground and proposed network of trails, including a link to Roger C. Fisher Park at The Ramble's western end, as well as the stormwater installations.

In addition, the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation wants to acquire at least two strategic parcels within The Ramble footprint: One, a former gas station, is already a certified brownfield; the other is mostly wetlands but covers a former town dump. The sites are eligible for up to \$625,000 in state investigation and cleanup funds.

The Ramble plan includes a pocket neighborhood of 12-13 camp-style cottages, and project leaders have met with a well-known high-end residential developer to assess the feasibility of the parcel and area for such a community.



Above, Town officials and citizens help plan the Fall Ramble event in September 2015. Left, the annual Broad Creek Bike and Brew ends in The Ramble area with music, food and festivities.





He suggested appropriate incentives, developer costs and price points for the cottages, recommending that the trail network be installed in advance as an amenity to entice a quality builder. In a bit of a Catch-22, he suggested that the area still needed to lose its “industrial” feel to be attractive to residential development.

The recommendations on page 12 continue the forward momentum of The Ramble and are a key element of the District Plan.

### Category 3: Improve community housing and home ownership

Improvement of the Downtown Development District community must include a focus on residential housing. As noted, one-third of Laurel’s housing dates to 1939 or earlier, compared to 9.1 percent for the state and 6.6 percent for Sussex County. Laurel’s DDD includes about 81 housing structures.

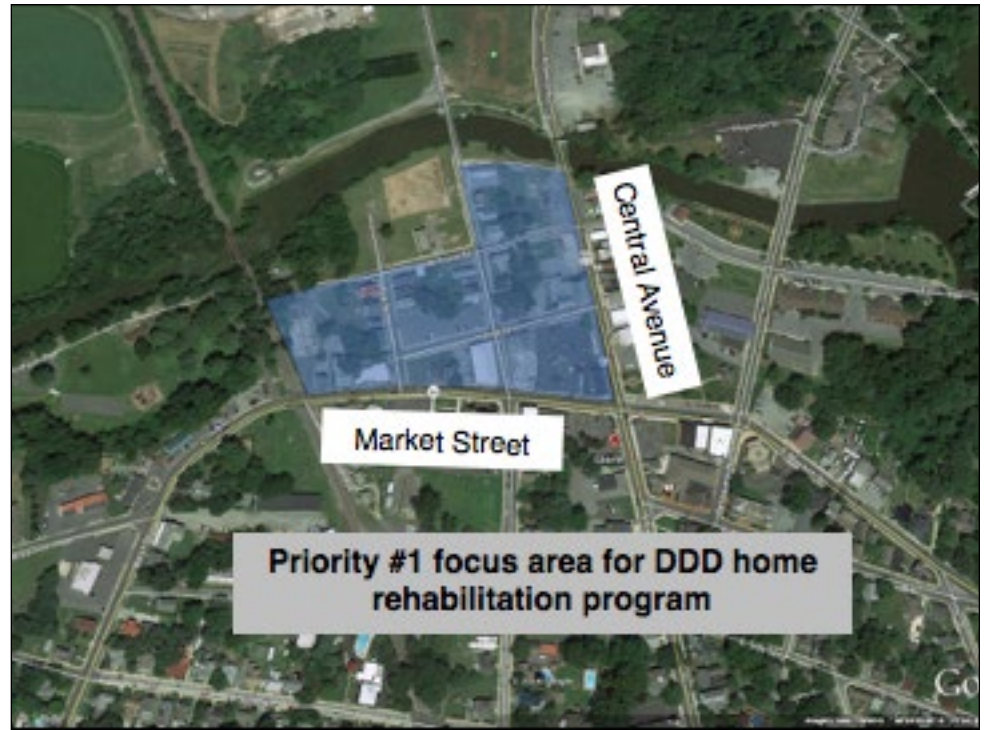
Within the DDD and throughout town, about 45 percent of the residential units are rentals. The town aggressively inspects and enforces against building and town code violations, but aging structures and absentee landlords make their jobs difficult.

Also, Census statistics indicate that almost half of Laurel’s residents struggle with housing affordability, spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing-related costs.

Some larger homes have been vacated as owners age and become unable to maintain their properties. Many once grand Victorian-era homes have fallen into disrepair, although a couple of homeowners already are planning significant renovations.

In April, the town and Laurel Redevelopment Corporation met with representatives of USDA Rural Development, Delaware State Housing Authority, NCALL and Sussex County Habitat for Humanity to discuss a planned, coordinated rehabilitation effort within the DDD. For example, Sussex County Habitat already has \$100,000 available for rehabilitation west of Central Avenue, an area that includes a high priority neighborhood for the town and LRC.

Other potential sources of funding and coordination would include the Community Development Block Grant program operated by Sussex County, the Sustainable Energy Utility’s DDD energy efficiency audit and rebate program, and the priority state Historic Tax Credits earmarked for DDDs. All of the properties within the DDD also are in Laurel’s Historic District.



*This “Old Town” neighborhood between The Ramble and Market Street and directly west of Central Avenue is a priority for rehabilitation.*

Banks that perform community lending also are being approached.

This program would be available only to residents within the DDD and, as such, is a significant incentive. In addition, the LRC has agreed to fund a position that would bring the program to life in a user-friendly format that would coordinate the various programs and make it seamless to the applicant.

This one-time position would:

- Secure community agreement on a name for the program
- Further assess the condition of rental and owner-occupied housing, including vacant properties, within Laurel’s Downtown Development District.
- Coordinate with all participating nonprofit programs to design a program that is easy for a variety of residents to access and participate in
- Apply for additional funding, such as NCALL and the Strong Neighborhoods



## Category 3 recommendations

- Design and implement a comprehensive home rehabilitation and homebuyer program with nonprofit partners.
- As an element of this program, address vacant properties to stabilize the neighborhood through a combination of enforcement, acquisition and rehabilitation appropriate to the property owner's circumstances.
- Provide a coordinator to design and launch the program, including initial outreach to all affected residents, in collaboration with nonprofit partners.
- Set priorities for the program, beginning in the mixed-use neighborhood west of Central Avenue and between The Ramble and Market Street.
- Ensure that owners of larger homes along Central Avenue and Market Street, who may not be income-qualified for other programs, are aware of the state Historic Tax Credit and other options.
- Secure low-interest loan availability from community lenders such as NCALL.
- Adopt an ordinance that requires absentee landlords to have a local property management company with whom tenants and the town can communicate.
- With increased attention to absentee landlords, provide assurances that tenants are not improperly displaced or subjected to unfair rent increases.
- Ensure that town codes are consistently and fairly enforced.
- Consider ordinance(s) permitting accessory dwelling units and short-term rentals such as Air B&B.

**For more information on Laurel's proposed DDD Community Improvement Program, visit this [link](#).**

Housing Fund (DSHA) to address related problems such as vacant and commercial properties

- Communicate in various ways, including door to door, with residents, homeowners and landlords within DDD
- Develop web portal for the program
- Develop informational and promotional materials, including in Spanish
- Work with the town to identify a permanent administrative "home" for the program and hand it off

The program also would encourage home ownership and provide links to appropriate programs. It would be designed and prepared in a manner that after it is launched and initial outreach occurs, the town could operate it.

Other recommendations in this category include adopting an ordinance that addresses the problems created mostly by absentee landlords. The town already requires a rental license and now prohibits subdividing single-family homes into rental units. Many jurisdictions require absentee landlords (e.g., living outside Sussex County) to have a local property management firm that can handle rentals, repairs, complaints and respond to enforcement actions.

Also, the town should ramp up enforcement against owner-occupied homes if those homes are vacant, derelict and/or create public safety or health issues. For whatever reason —outright neglect, aging owners, lack of resources—these properties are eyesores that damage the town's image.

To enhance affordability and encourage residents to stay in their homes, the town should consider ordinances that would permit accessory dwelling units, conversions to bed and breakfasts and short-term rentals such as Air B&B.

While the comprehensive plan likely will support the location of a chain hotel or motel along US 13, nature and heritage tourism visitors generally appreciate more authentic, local accommodations.

## Category 4: Protect Laurel's most valuable natural asset

Broad Creek is the focal point of Laurel's proposed Downtown Development District. It has been a magnet over the centuries - starting with the "Wading Place," a fording point used by Nanticoke Indians, located between where Delaware and Central avenues are today.



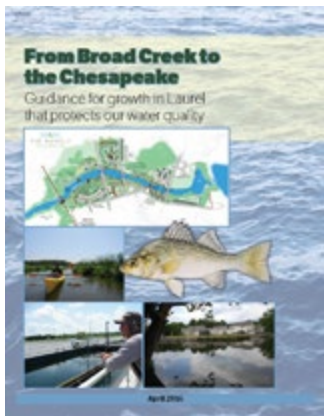


Broad Creek carried shipments of cucumbers and cantaloupes down to the Nanticoke River and out to Chesapeake Bay. In the 19th century along Broad Creek, shipbuilders were constructing three-masted schooners in Bethel, and canning and basket-making operations flourished in Laurel.

Today, barely a remnant of industry remains. With the efforts of the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation, the waterfront has been cleared and cleaned up—with parks, a restaurant, villas and office buildings replacing warehouses, a basket factory, and a tomato cannery.

Rather than industry, Laurel is now looking to Broad Creek as a source of scenic views, relaxation and low-impact tourism, such as kayaking and birding. Residents fish all along the shoreline. The Ramble redevelopment project features Broad Creek while avoiding its floodplain and protecting its water quality through green infrastructure practices.

The Ramble complements efforts to prevent nutrient pollution, such as nitrogen and phosphorous from entering Broad Creek. As a tributary of the Nanticoke River, which flows into the Chesapeake Bay, Broad Creek is subject to federal limits on nitrogen and phosphorous and is expected to meet these water quality goals by



[Click to view the report](#)

2025. The town is expected to maintain a baseline allocation of these pollutants that was established in 2011.

If new development projects an increase in nitrogen and/or phosphorous entering the watershed, that increase must be offset through installation of best management practices - for example, constructed wetlands, filter strips, minimizing paved and other man-made surfaces, and controlling Canada Geese droppings.

Cedar Creek Sustainable Planning Services, the same consultant that is preparing this DDD application and the Comprehensive Plan update, also completed

a detailed assessment of steps Laurel can take to meet the water quality standards and still grow. The report was prepared for the University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative with DNREC/EPA funding.

Some of those steps include measures that can be taken within the Downtown Development District area. The report was released to the town in May 2016 and includes eight pages of recommendations.



*Industry used to thrive along Broad Creek in Laurel (Delaware State Archives)*

As mentioned earlier in this plan, permitted uses and requirements in the Marine Resources zoning district do not always align with the stated purpose of the district, which is to preserve the view and tree canopy, buffer property and residents from flooding, protect water quality, and prevent erosion along the shoreline.

The Ramble, with its planned sustainable and low-impact practices, can be used as a “credit bank” to offset growth in other areas of Laurel. The cottages, when built, could be models of sustainable design with a “net-zero” (or better) effect on water quality. The cottages are a signature element of The Ramble and should be built to a level of superior design.

The footprint of any commercial or residential development within The Ramble and the Marine Resources district should be built to minimize its impact within the riparian area. In fact, the requirements of the imminent Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) program (*see report*) likely will require low-impact development practices in the area.

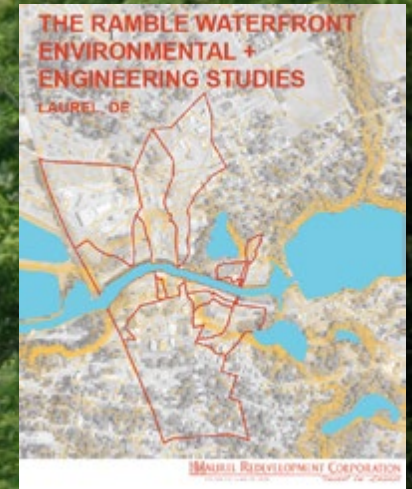
**Note:** See next page for environmental and green infrastructure assessments.







Estimates for Green Infrastructure	
Cypress Bridge North	\$146,300
Governor's Park and Independence Playground	\$123,100
Janosik Park	\$107,000
The Cottages at Laurel Mills	\$151,000
The Village Green	\$56,800
Cypress Bridge South	\$68,800
Source: BrightFields	



*Above left, suggested green stormwater installation for The Ramble cottages. Center, cost estimates for all Ramble stormwater installations. Above, the feasibility report from ForeSite Associates. Far left, the Phase One Environmental Assessment from BrightFields.*





## Category 4 recommendations

- Align the permitted uses within the Marine Resources district with its stated purpose in the zoning ordinance. Some uses appear to be incompatible with the protection of Broad Creek and its viewshed (same as Category 1).
- Make The Ramble a model of sustainable, low-impact development practices and perhaps a “credit bank” to offset development projects elsewhere in Laurel.
- Ensure that the cottages are built to superior design standards with at least a “net-zero” impact on water quality in Broad Creek.
- Construct the various proposed green infrastructure techniques proposed by ForeSite Associates along the length of The Ramble.
- Continue to partner with DNREC to identify sources of funding green stormwater installations throughout The Ramble.
- Ensure that, as planned, new development avoids the floodplain.
- Maintain and grow Laurel’s tree canopy, setting a goal in the Comprehensive Plan update.
- Adopt a goose-control program (see “Broad Creek to the Chesapeake” report).
- Clean up contaminated sites that are targets of acquisition by the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation.
- Adopt landscaping and design standards that protect both the historic character of the area and water quality (also mentioned in Categories 1 and 2).



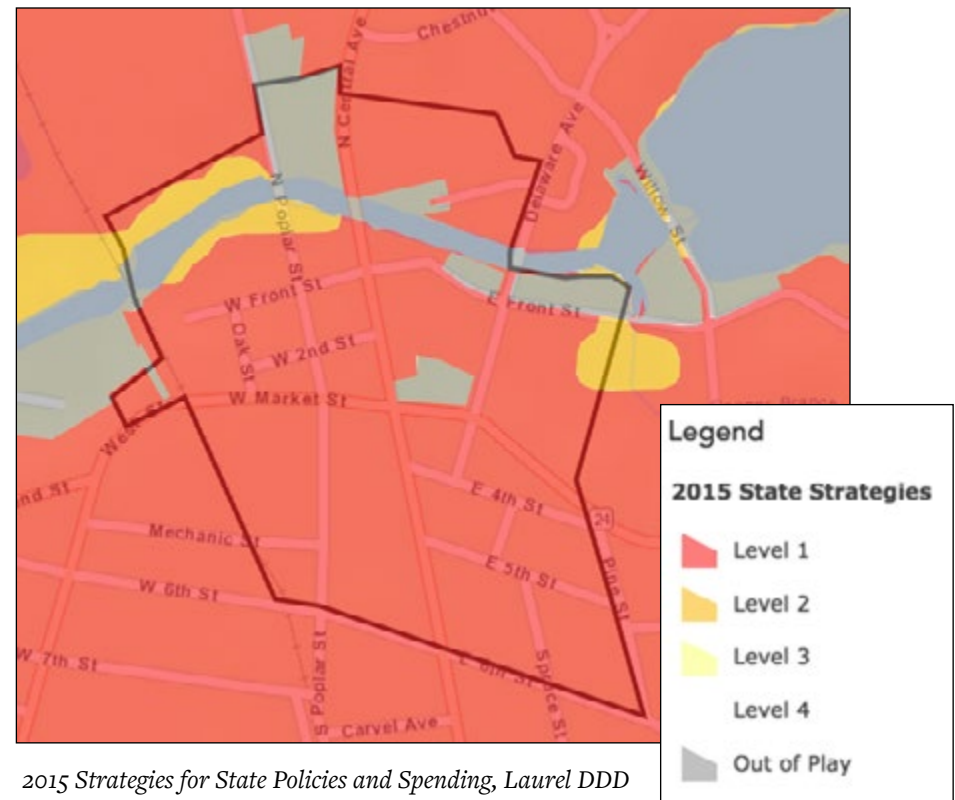
*A Canada goose can produce 1.5 pounds of feces a day, creating health, safety and water quality concerns.*

## Compatibility with State Strategies

The Downtown Development District Plan is compatible with the 2015 [Strategies for State Policies and Spending](#). As shown below, the area is almost all Level 1, a mixed-use and denser development area within a municipality.

Riparian areas on either side of Broad Creek are mapped as either Level 2 or Out of Play.

All of the recommendations within this plan will correspond with the state’s investment strategies for Level 1 while protecting the riparian corridors and parkland that is mapped as Level 2.



# The perks.

## Proposed incentives for the DDD

The town and Laurel Redevelopment Corporation have teamed up to provide a robust menu of incentives designed to attract quality commercial development and improve the condition of housing and quality of life for residents.

Despite being maxed out on debt and hungry for new revenue, town leaders recognize the promise of a Downtown Development District in Laurel. Unique among small towns in Delaware, the LRC provides a means of offering incentives that would otherwise be unavailable to a town of Laurel's size and financial challenges.

Those incentives are described in tables on pages 19-20. Among the principal incentives:

- No town property taxes on commercial improvements for five years.
- A minimum discount of 25 percent on available land owned by the LRC for commercial projects, including the proposed cottages.
- A graduated reduction in the town's sewer and water impact fees based on the number of Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDUs).
- The comprehensive community improvement program to rehabilitate residential structures within the DDD—a partnership with the USDA Rural Development and several nonprofits (described on pages 13-14).
- A vacant lot on Market Street, in the commercial district, that the town owns and will deed to an appropriate enterprise that furthers Laurel's economic development goals.
- Purchase and cleanup of strategic parcels within The Ramble redevelopment area. One is a certified brownfield, and the other adjacent lot will be appended to the existing brownfield.
- Social media training for businesses within the DDD to learn how to reach people and organizations involved in nature and heritage tourism, kayaking, birding, cycling, etc.

Other up-front costs already managed by the LRC include a Phase One environmental assessment of the entire Ramble area and a feasibility study that recommends specific green stormwater practices throughout The Ramble.



*Top, looking west along Market Street in Laurel downtown. Above, Dr. Jules Bruck's rendering of the cottages planned for The Ramble.*





## Proposed incentives within Laurel Downtown Development District

Incentive	Description	Comment	Source
<b>Community improvement: Housing rehabilitation, rental and owner occupied (see link)</b>	Targeted one-stop, no-wrong-door program to rehab homes and promote home ownership within DDD	Addresses critical issue within DDD - coordinate with USDA, DSHA and various nonprofits to fund loans and grants for owner-occupied and rental properties	LRC, Sussex County Habitat for Humanity, USDA Rural Development, NCALL, Historic Tax Credit, Town, SEU Energy Credit
<b>Community improvement program creation, development and marketing (one-time cost)</b>	Position that will create and launch the above program, conducting initial outreach	This program will involve loans and grants from many different sources, with different qualifying incomes. This position would develop, coordinate and market the program	\$12,900 (estimate)  LRC board has approved funding contingent on DDD designation (one time, this person would create and implement a program that could be handed off to town, LRC, nonprofits)
<b>Discounted land/ leases on parcels owned by Laurel Redevelopment Corporation</b>	A minimum 25 percent discount on land owned by Laurel Redevelopment Corporation, including waterfront	Will help attract targeted development to DDD area, reduce risk of redevelopment	LRC board has approved contingent on DDD designation. Parcels identified and displayed on interactive map.
<b>Purchase and cleanup of key strategic sites within Ramble</b>	LRC has identified at least two sites (one a certified brownfield, the other a former town dump underneath wetlands) that it intends to purchase and clean up.	Brownfield cleanup funds not available to current landowners.  Acquiring these sites and cleanup would make them available to commercial enterprises within DDD	Phase I environmental study completed for \$50,000 along the entire Ramble, another cost savings for future developers.  Funds from LRC, NCALL, Bond Bill, DNREC

Incentive	Description	Comment	Source
<b>Building lot(s)</b>	Free lot to business that meets commercial development goals within DDD	Town will donate lot on Market Street to business that meets DDD goals	Town Council approval contingent on DDD designation
<b>Project Pop-Up</b>	Free short-term commercial space within DDD	The LRC participated in this program in 2015 and intends to continue the commitment	LRC, DEDO
<b>Sewer/water connection and impact fees</b>	Waive or reduce these fees within DDD - \$7,000 per EDU combined water/sewer impact fees	These are high relative to most Delaware municipalities - significant up-front cost that will be a barrier	Town Council to approve graduated fee reduction based on number of EDUs contingent on DDD designation  1-3 EDUs: 40% 4-7 EDUs: 50% 8 or more EDUs: 60%
<b>Property tax abatement on improvements</b>	Town will waive property taxes for a period of five years on the value of improvements	Will provide another incentive for commercial redevelopment	Town Council approval contingent on DDD designation
<b>Business technical assistance</b>	Social media training focused on the nature and heritage tourism industry	Many local businesses, including potential B&Bs, are unfamiliar with social media and how to reach potential nature and heritage tourists	LRC will issue request for proposals contingent on DDD designation
<b>Install nature-based playground and trail network within Ramble</b>	Installed infrastructure and amenity for developer/builder and community	Trail network would be a valuable amenity for current and new residents, as well as visitors	Town, LRC, Bond Bill, DNREC, Community Transportation Fund  (Funding not ID'd yet)



Incentive	Description	Comment	Source
<b>Facade improvement</b>	Improve commercial building appearance along Market Street	Only 6-8 facades - architectural consult and actual matching funds or loans for rehab	LRC, NCALL  (Funding source not identified yet)
<b>Green stormwater infrastructure</b>	Developer will not have to pay these costs (see chart below)	This is a major up-front cost that needs to be done right - LRC has paid for initial feasibility study for various sites along Ramble	DNREC, Bond Bill, Community Transportation Fund  Feasibility study paid for - \$75,000

If Laurel receives a Downtown Development District designation, the incentives will be loaded into an interactive Geographic Information Systems (GIS) application specifically geared toward local economic development, such as ESRI's [Live, Work, Locate](#) and/or [Incentive Zones](#) web applications.

Any resident or potential business will be able to click on a parcel and see what incentives are available for it, as well as other information about Laurel's DDD.



*This building and the wetland area behind it are within The Ramble footprint but not yet owned by the LRC.*

# The public.

## Engagement in The Ramble, DDD and comprehensive plan processes

Public engagement with a series of projects related to this Downtown Development District application date to the fall of 2012. The University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative, Office of State Planning Coordination, and DNREC staged a series of meetings with the town and stakeholders to propose a growth scenario that would be appropriate given Laurel's location within the Chesapeake Watershed.

A first public forum on the project that eventually became The Ramble was conducted in June 2013. Work continued with the town and the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation, and Dr. Jules Bruck of UD completed the initial Ramble design, which was unveiled at a public meeting in September 2014.

During 2015, the community was involved in efforts to bring The Ramble to life with a Fall Ramble event patterned after Better Block. The Better Block philosophy is to help the community envision the transformation of a blighted block or neighborhood by bringing a sampling of the planned amenities and uses to that area. During the summer of 2015, a diverse group of Laurel citizens and officials met almost weekly and helped plan the September 26 Fall Ramble event along the waterfront. The venue featured a temporary brewpub, food and baked goods, a farmer's market, Vanderwende's ice cream, kayaking and cycling, an art gallery, and other activities along The Ramble area.

### Nature-based tourism engagement

As mentioned earlier in this document, in response to the community's desire to add value to the economic development goals of The Ramble by attracting paddlers, cyclists, birders, and heritage tourists, the planning team secured a \$14,000 grant to support development of a nature-based and heritage tourism plan for Laurel. Delaware Sea Grant also contributed \$5,000 toward the implementation of the final plan.

A 1.5-day workshop was convened in November 2015 to seek input for this plan and was attended by a stakeholder group comprised of community leaders, tourism professionals, state resource planners, conservationists, and business





owners. The final plan was released during a spring 2016 event that celebrated Laurel's natural resources and ecotourism opportunities.

In March, the University's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative served as client contact for the Town of Laurel to organize and host a three-day community imaging design charrette conducted by Arnett Muldrow & Associates. The purpose was to create a consistent image package for Laurel and its partners to use to continue to build local pride, recruit investment to the community, and market the town to visitors. This was supported by an \$8,000 grant secured from the USDA and DEDO Downtown Delaware.

## Social media and website

To get the word out about initiatives such as The Ramble, Downtown Development District and comprehensive plan, Cedar Creek Sustainable Planners received \$3,000 from the Delaware Economic Development Office to build a colorful, non-governmental website, [www.reimaginel Laurel.net](http://www.reimaginel Laurel.net). The website includes a blog, videos, photos, discussion boards, presentations and an event calendar for activities related to Laurel's redevelopment. Cedar Creek also has built publicly accessible story maps via ArcGIS Online to highlight Laurel and the DDD.

A Reimagine Laurel [Facebook page](#) received more than 100 likes in 24 hours and now has more than 500 likes. A Reimagine Laurel [Twitter account](#) began Tweeting news about downtown Laurel and planning trends.

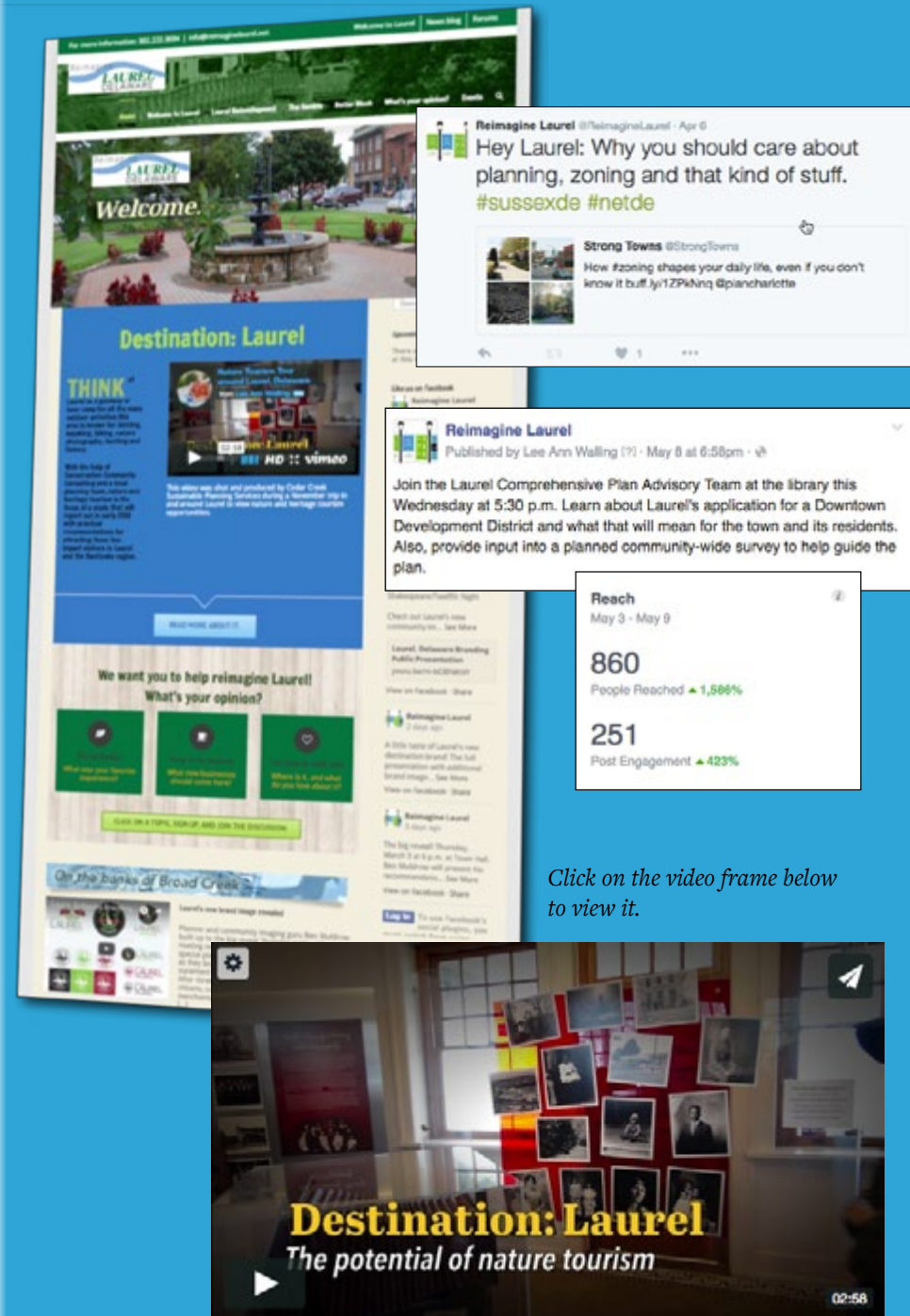
Outreach has included several visits to Laurel Chamber of Commerce meetings to discuss The Ramble and related projects.

In March 2016, Laurel Town Council appointed a Comprehensive Plan Advisory Team of citizens and business people to provide input to and feedback on the town's plan update. That group is meeting monthly and has heard presentations on Downtown Development District progress.

A community-wide online survey is scheduled for June to gather opinions on growth issues in Laurel. Information about the DDD will be included. Creative efforts to publicize the survey are expected to boost participation from throughout the town and greater community.

The public engagement process will continue into the fall with feedback from the survey being converted into guiding principles for Laurel's comprehensive plan. A video will be produced featuring residents talking about their experiences living in the Laurel community and what they value about it.

*Right, the Reimagine Laurel website and social media provide up-to-date information on redevelopment activities.*



*Click on the video frame below to view it.*



# Timeline

Laurel’s Town Council has reviewed this timeline and believes it is reasonable. The council and Laurel Redevelopment Corporation board of directors have agreed to provide the incentives for which they are responsible (*see resolution and support letters*).

This district plan contains many specific recommendations that will be fed into the comprehensive planning process, during which some of these recommendations may be refined. It is important for the town’s citizens, business owners and other stakeholders to have meaningful input into the comprehensive plan, including this very important element of it.

## Capacity for implementation

The town’s leadership has discussed and believes it has the capacity to implement the district plan. The consultant preparing the DDD application and comprehensive plan also will be developing the proposed community improvement program and will be available into 2017 to provide implementation assistance.

A high-level staff person has been identified to manage the community improvement program once developed. Officials involved in the town’s budget also are considering the creation of a position to shepherd plans and activities related to the DDD and economic development.

The LRC will be pursuing land acquisition and site cleanup. It retained Dr. Jules Bruck to continue with The Ramble site design. A paid UD intern working under Dr. Bruck and the consultant will develop design standards for the DDD.

Also, UD’s Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative and Delaware Sea Grant remain committed to providing continuing leadership on projects and activities that support Laurel’s community redevelopment efforts.

Proposed timeline after DDD designation	
60 days	Council adopts incentives
90 days	Funding secured for green infrastructure, property acquisition, facade improvements and other community lending projects
120 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ LRC pursues parcel acquisition and cleanup</li> <li>➤ Comprehensive rehab program is launched</li> <li>➤ Zoning changes, design standards recommended via comprehensive plan process.</li> </ul>
180 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Comprehensive plan adopted with DDD district plan included</li> <li>➤ Zoning code updates begin</li> </ul>

## Acknowledgements



**Cedar Creek**   
Sustainable Planning Services

