

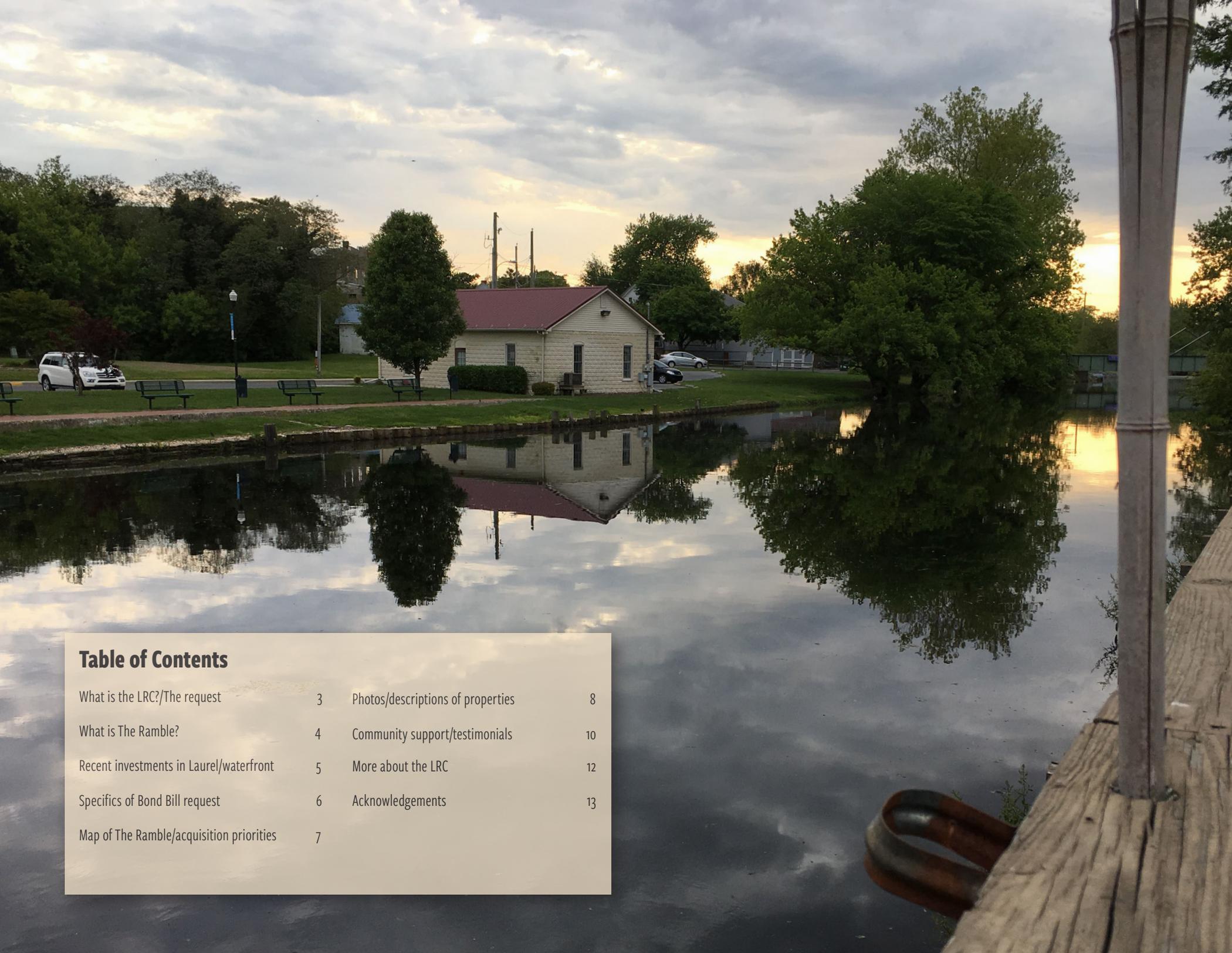
# Reimagining Laurel

CREATING A WALKABLE DOWNTOWN TO ANCHOR COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION



**Proposal to Joint Bond Bill Committee – May 2018**

THE LAUREL REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



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## What is the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation?

The mission of the nonprofit Laurel Redevelopment Corporation is to enhance the quality of life in Laurel by obtaining, rehabilitating and revitalizing properties to foster economic development for the town.

From a group of local citizens attempting to halt the deterioration of Laurel's commercial district in 1992, the LRC has evolved into an effective grass-roots organization striving to work cooperatively with government leaders, local groups, and private investors to make Laurel a better place in which to invest, live, work and visit.

The LRC has acquired and developed 30-plus parcels along Laurel's Broad Creek waterfront; established permanent public parks; stabilized the shoreline; rehabilitated historic buildings; and cleared blighted areas in downtown Laurel.

Along with the town, the LRC was a key player in the successful designation of 80 acres of Laurel's core downtown area, including the waterfront, as a state Downtown Development District. The organization is leading a home ownership and revitalization effort in Laurel's Old Town Neighborhood with a successful Strong Neighborhoods Fund application of \$500,000.

The organization is not a government body and pays all property and related local government fees. It currently has no debt.

For more information, including a short video, go to page 12 or view our website at [www.laurelredevelopment.com](http://www.laurelredevelopment.com)

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## The request

Since 2013, the Town of Laurel and its many partners have been envisioning a rebirth of the community's Broad Creek waterfront. Those partners include the nonprofit Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), the University of Delaware, the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, the former Delaware Economic Development Office and the Delaware State Housing Authority.

Laurel's waterfront redevelopment concept is called "The Ramble." The potential of the waterfront as a model for small-town viability, sustainability, walkability and nature and heritage tourism captured the interest and imagination of the community and these partners. The technical assistance and grants already received from the state, the University of Delaware and nonprofit partners are documented in this proposal.

The LRC has the long-term track record and has laid the groundwork for this Bond Bill request with the successful completion of previous work and continuing projects. This proposal will document the work that has been done and is ongoing.

**The Laurel Redevelopment Corporation respectfully requests \$530,000 for these purposes:**

- **\$165,000** to prepare construction documents for the trail network on the south side of Broad Creek; these documents would meet DelDOT specifications for its Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP);
- **\$335,000** for the acquisition of four strategic properties (*see pages 7-8*) within Laurel's Downtown Development District and adjacent to the waterfront—two of them are brownfield sites; and
- **\$30,000** for demolition of derelict buildings

These funds would help Laurel and the LRC continue to build on previous work related to The Ramble waterfront redevelopment initiative, encourage new businesses and residents to locate downtown, and attract additional dollars such as DelDOT funds for actually constructing the trails. For more specifics, please see page 7.



# What is The Ramble?

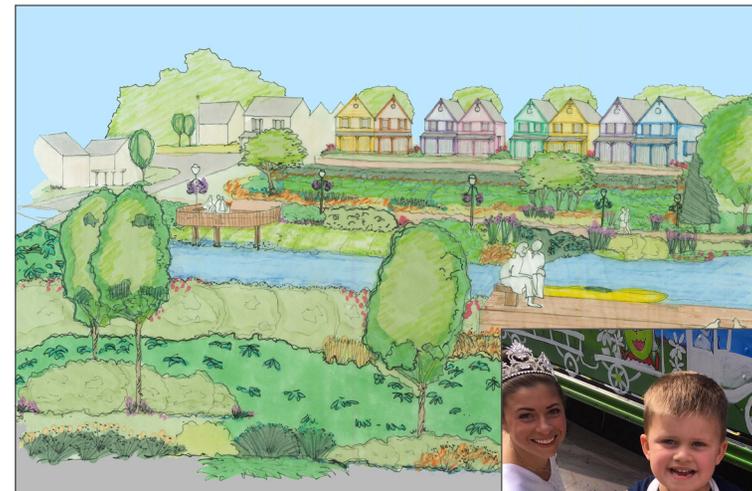
The Ramble concept (*see concept design on cover*) was a result of an extensive community engagement effort. The University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative came to Laurel on a federal grant to help develop a watershed implementation plan for the town - an effort to prepare for tougher federal water quality standards in the Nanticoke/Chesapeake watershed. UD engaged a landscape architect to help the town envision a waterfront that was dynamic—with trails, shops, waterfront cottages and a nature park—while protecting Broad Creek from pollution.

The trail system envisioned by The Ramble would link Roger Fisher Park on the western end of the waterfront to the fishing pier and Records Pond on the eastern end.

The Ramble plan came to life during a one-day festival in September 2016. A temporary brewpub with musicians, a farmers market, art galleries and temporary vendors popped up, and the proposed trail and crosswalks were marked off. Temporary plantings were brought in, and the brush around the railroad underpass was cleared to allow for easier passage. Bikes and kayaks were available for free.

The Ramble concept has received a number of matching grants, including investments from the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation, for environmental assessments; design of green infrastructure features; landscape design; development of The Ramble's nature park concept; community outreach and engagement efforts; and related efforts. Those contributions are documented on pages 6-7.

Funding includes \$200,000 for an innovative constructed wetland and fish habitat that will provide green stormwater management for the proposed nature park on the north side of Broad Creek. Tidewater Park is ready to be built, with construction documents prepared and all landscaping and equipment designed. The wetland will be built in 2018. One of the properties in this request includes a large wetland area that is targeted for a future outdoor education site.



**Top left, a fall festival brought The Ramble concept to life. Top right, US Senator Chris Coons gets a tour of The Ramble area. Above, The Ramble concept includes waterfront cottages. Right, the community helped paint watermelon buses with colorful local themes—an effort to bring attention and people to Laurel's waterfront.**



# Recent investments in Laurel

The town applied for and received a **Downtown Development District** designation in 2016; Laurel's DDD includes The Ramble area. The first large DDD project will complete The Villas on Broad Creek, upscale townhomes within The Ramble footprint. The Villas sit on the site of an abandoned cannery; the LRC purchased and cleaned up the site.



In 2017, Laurel was awarded a \$500,000 **Strong Neighborhoods Fund grant** to revitalize the Old Town section of Laurel, immediately adjacent to The Ramble. The LRC partnered with the town, Sussex County Habitat for Humanity, and Milford Housing Development Corporation to create more home ownership in that neighborhood through rehabilitation and new construction.

The former Delaware Economic Development Office funded a branding effort by Arnett, Muldrow and Associates. The result, embraced by the community, is "Laurel: Great Things Come Naturally." DEDO also funded an assessment of the potential for nature and heritage tourism in and around Laurel; the resulting report includes detailed recommendation for establishing Laurel as a gateway to tourism in the Nanticoke region. Using

**Gov. Carney announces Laurel's first large Downtown Development District grant, more than \$400,000 for developer Mike Meoli to complete The Villas on Broad Creek.**



USDA Rural Development grants, DEDO also helped Laurel plan for its 2016 Fall Festival that brought The Ramble concept to life for the community, as well as a Reimagine Laurel website to communicate about accomplishments and seek the community's input.

Funding for Laurel's DDD application and its comprehensive plan, adopted by Town Council in October 2017, came from Neighborhood Building Blocks grants.

For a more complete list of recent investments in Laurel, including cash contributions from the LRC, see the next page.



*Left, this boat launch was part of The Ramble concept plan. It was built by the Nanticoke Rotary Club. Below, a Habitat family moves into a newly renovated home, thanks to Laurel's Strong Neighborhoods grant.*



## Recent major investments in Laurel by its partners

- \$500,000 Strong Neighborhoods Fund grant to for rehabilitation and new construction of homes in the Old Town neighborhood adjacent to The Ramble.
- \$93,760 Community Water Quality Improvement Grant for constructed wetlands on town-owned lands (DNREC, \$74,900 and Community Transportation Fund, \$18,750);
- \$98,650 Chesapeake Bay Implementation Grant to LRC (\$93,650 from Community Water Quality Improvement grant above and \$5,000 from LRC) for installation of bioswale and constructed wetlands at Tidewater Park, an element of The Ramble (DNREC);
- \$74,067 Surface Water Management Planning Grant from DNREC to Town of Laurel (\$37,160 from state and \$37,160 from CTF), for ForeSite environmental studies and landscape design along the waterfront;
- \$58,145 Coastal Management Grant to LRC (DNREC, \$24,000 and CTF match \$33,146);
- \$68,390 to Dr. Jules Bruck and Evolution Landscape Design. Consultation with engineers and environmental firms, design of Tidewater Park;
- \$18,858 to Brightfields for Phase 1 environmental study of 30 parcels along Broad Creek;
- \$31,355 to ForeSite and Associates for engineering and design of green infrastructure treatments throughout The Ramble;
- \$80,000 cash contributions by Laurel Redevelopment Corporation towards The Ramble, Better Block, matching dollars for grants, and related efforts;
- \$15,000 DNREC grant awarded to Nanticoke Watershed Alliance for planting 300 shrubs and trees along Broad Creek;
- \$10,000 Neighborhood Building Blocks grant (DEDO) for successful Downtown Development District application;
- \$25,000 Neighborhood Building Blocks grant (DEDO) for Laurel's comprehensive plan rewrite;
- \$8,000 for branding by Arnett, Muldrow and Associates (DEDO/USDA);
- \$14,000 to Conservation Community Consultants to develop a nature/heritage tourism plan (DEDO/USDA);
- \$42,500 from University of Delaware for Chesapeake Watershed Implementation Plan that led to The Ramble concept and plan;
- \$6,000 from the University of Delaware for community painting of watermelon buses, 2016 and 2017;
- \$5,000 from University of Delaware for Laurel Library Arts Districts Feasibility Study
- \$3,000 for Reimagine Laurel website, social media platforms (DEDO/USDA)

# About the Bond Bill request

## Trail construction documents—\$165,000

\$165,000 is the estimate from ForeSite Associates for preparing a set of construction documents for a planned trail on the south side of Broad Creek. The trail would provide an amenity that links Roger Fisher Park on the west side of Laurel to Records Pond and the DNREC fishing pier on the east end of The Ramble.

The construction documents would be prepared according to DelDOT specifications. A team from Laurel met on the waterfront with administrators of DelDOT's Transportation Alternatives Program, who expressed enthusiasm about The Ramble project and the trail. Having the construction documents in hand would significantly help boost Laurel's TAP application to construct the trail.

Milford's Riverwalk helped regenerate that city's downtown. Building the trail and other elements of The Ramble could continue the transformation of Laurel's core business district and waterfront.

## Property acquisition/demolition—\$365,000

The Ramble cannot be fully realized without the acquisition, repurposing and (in some cases) demolition of strategically located properties along the waterfront. These are long-term vacant properties in various stages of disrepair; Priority 2 is a certified brownfield, and Priority 3 is a likely brownfield because it includes the site of an old town dump.

They are mapped and shown on the following pages. The LRC and Town of Laurel own most of the parcels along Laurel's waterfront in The Ramble area, with the exception of these properties. Priorities 1, 2 and 3 are located on the water; Priority 4 is one block south of the waterfront, but is located at a key intersection across from Priority 2.

Initial conversations with the property owners have led to this cost estimate, including \$30,000 for demolition—most likely of structures located on Priorities 2 and 3.



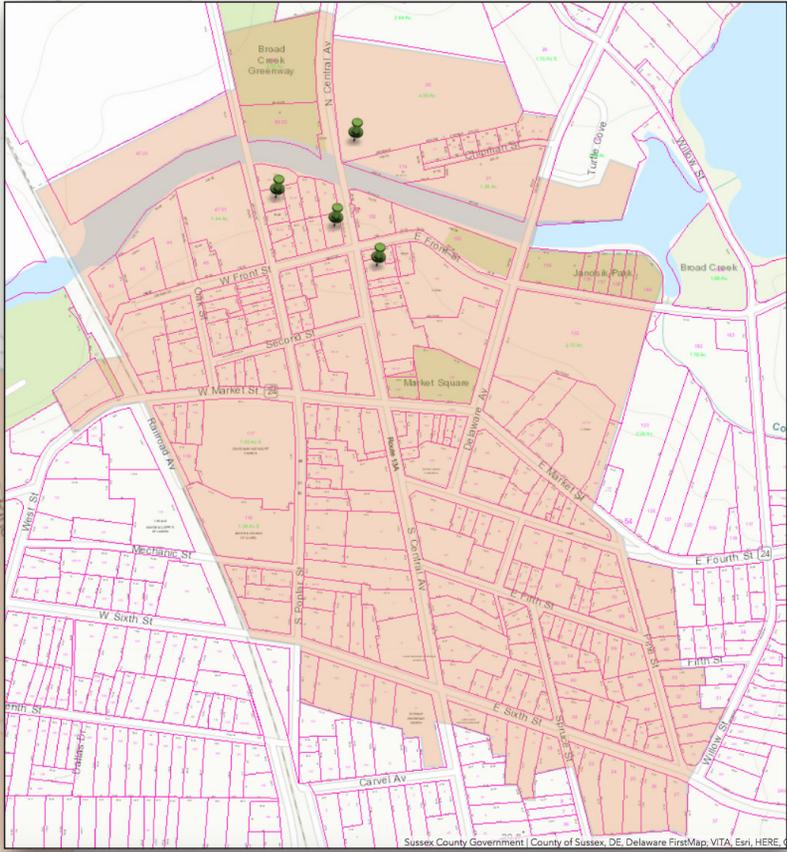
# The Ramble and Laurel's Downtown Development District

The large map shows The Ramble waterfront development plan superimposed on Laurel's Downtown Development District (light brown).

The targeted properties are prioritized at left and shown on inset parcel map below.

The green line indicates the approximate path of the proposed trail connecting Laurel's Roger Fisher Park on the west to the DNREC fishing pier on the east.

Photos and descriptions are on the next page.





## Targeted properties

*These are the four highest priority properties for acquisition.*



**Hudson property.** Key building and parcel along waterfront in center of Ramble plan. Could be converted to restaurant or other appropriate business.

**Pizza King.** This abandoned building on the creek includes wetlands, former town dump in rear.



**Thompson property.** Former gas station and certified brownfield. Roof caving in. Located along major road (Alternate US 13), adjacent to waterfront.

**125 North Central Avenue.** Long-term vacant and dilapidated property at strategic intersection.



# Community support

Before the founding of America, Native Americans crossed Broad Creek at a spot they called “The Wading Place.” Colonists soon learned the Creek provided water transportation for moving their agricultural products to market. In the 1800s, settlers named the Town “Laurel” after the beautiful flowering Laurel bushes along the shoreline. Now a new generation sees the promise of Broad Creek in “The Ramble,” a visionary project which includes development of new walking trails along the shoreline, a nature-based park for children and adults to enjoy the outdoors, new residential housing and new shops.



The new trails will connect the Laurel community from the Mill Dam on the East to Roger Fisher Laurel River Park on the West. These trails are the foundation for the other amenities and forecast economic development. As Laurel’s mayor, I am proud and honored to endorse the request for State of Delaware assistance to begin the process of transforming “The Ramble” from vision to reality. Governor Carney and members of the Delaware General Assembly, we have a unique opportunity to give Laurel’s residents and visitors a unique, beautiful, prosperous place to recreate, shop, and live. Working together we must make this happen!

**- Mayor John Shwed**



At a time when many small towns are in crisis—facing economic decline, drug addiction, despair, etc.—the University of Delaware strives to involve a broad cross-section of these community residents in determining and planning a brighter future. We believe that many of Delaware’s local municipalities, such as Laurel, can retain their small town values, historic character, scenic beauty and sense of community, yet sustain a prosperous economy.

This can be done without accepting the kind of cookie-cutter development that has turned many communities into faceless places that young people flee, tourists avoid and which no longer instill a sense of pride in residents.

**—Edward Lewandowski**  
*Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative*



As the developer of The Villas on Broad Creek in Laurel, Delaware, I am excited about The Ramble redevelopment project and the potential it brings to the revitalization efforts of the downtown waterfront district. Laurel’s rich history, proud citizens and picturesque location along the banks of the Broad Creek make it the ideal community to live, work and play.

More than a decade ago, I made the decision to invest in what was arguably the most prolific piece of waterfront property in town. But I knew that the Villas on Broad Creek community was only the spark for a Laurel resurgence. In order for a complete renaissance to occur, the surrounding waterfront properties needed the same revitalization efforts to fully achieve the noticeable change that would attract home buyers, businesses and patrons back to the town center. The Ramble offers the perfect mix of amenities, activities and business opportunities that can stimulate a change to the landscape of Laurel that is long overdue.

**—Mike Meoli, Developer of the Villas on Broad Creek**



# Community support

I am a lifelong resident of Laurel, and after 40 years in Seaford, I recently moved my business to the Laurel waterfront. It was the excitement and energy surrounding the proposed Ramble project that inspired my move. My business has operated in a shopping center and on a main street, but nothing is comparable to my location on Front Street in Laurel. It's walkable, it's beautiful, it's peaceful, and it's inspiring, not only my sentiment but those of my clients that travel from all over the area to meet with me. They want to know more about our town, and to see more and are as excited about the Ramble expansion as I am.

Imagine when it is complete! It's especially encouraging to me as I explore new business concepts for myself and with other entrepreneurs. I'm convinced the development of the waterfront will provide an opportunity for Laurel to attract new business and receive greater exposure, resulting in a boost to our economy. As a business partner, this is encouraging. The Ramble trails will enhance the well-being of our community members by inspiring us to get moving outdoors, provide more opportunity for events, and an increased interest in Laurel resulting in a greater sense of community pride. Broad Creek flows through the center of Laurel, and The Ramble trails and development will become the heart of our community.

**- Deborah Mitchell, Owner, TravelDebi**



**Photo by Paula Shannon**

Laurel is rich in heritage. The Broad Creek that flows through Laurel and eventually goes to the Chesapeake Bay is absolutely breathtaking. It is quiet, quaint and a great natural resource that is unprecedented in our state.

The proposed river walk with green infrastructure would be an asset to our Downtown Development District and to the redevelopment of downtown Laurel.



**-Rep. Timothy D. Dukes, Laurel**

Recognizing Broad Creek's importance, in 1992 The Laurel Redevelopment Corporation began acquiring parcels along its bank. This was largely done by using seed money raised from contributing members.

At present the LRC owns approximately 80% to 90% of the lands bordering Broad Creek, of which the entire direct waterfront has been dedicated to public use. The balance is owned by the town of Laurel.

With water quality being a huge issue with respect to Broad Creek, Nanticoke River and the Chesapeake Bay it is very important to plan for development along Laurel's waterfront in a way that is green, responsible, attractive, sustainable—generating economic development and jobs. These investments will create an opportunity for Laurel's downtown and riverfront to become a place that has “the cool factor” where people visit often, live long and work happily.

The creation and implementation of The Ramble with all of its green infrastructure will be one way that will surely make Laurel the place in western Sussex County where Great Things Do Come Naturally. The Ramble plan can be an example of how to “do it right the first time.” It can also be a demonstration project for other towns to learn from.

We strongly believe if you take care of your town center, a small town like Laurel can sustain a vibrant, thriving economic environment.

**- Brian Shannon, Executive Director, Laurel Redevelopment Corporation**



# More about the LRC

From a group of local citizens attempting to halt the deterioration of Downtown Laurel's commercial district in 1992, the nonprofit Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC) has evolved into an active and effective grass-roots community group of donors, workers, and leaders. It strives to work cooperatively with government leaders, economic development officials, local groups, and private investors to make Laurel a better place in which to invest, live, work, and visit. Its key accomplishments are:

- The purchase and accumulation of 30+ parcels in key Downtown and Creek side areas of Laurel, most having derelict commercial or residential buildings
- The clearing and/or cleanup of acquired properties, including the rehabilitation of vintage buildings when financially feasible
- The use of grants and LRC funds to stabilize the shoreline properties along LRC Broad Creek properties
- The use of grants and LRC funds to establish permanent public parks, with the purpose of protecting and beautifying the Creek side parks in perpetuity. (Developed parks have sometimes been gifted to the Town or other non-profit organizations.)
- The use of LRC funds and grants for economic development, including the construction of new commercial properties and the support of its Entrepreneurial Incubation Program.
- Beginning in 2016, the use of LRC funds and grants for neighborhood and residential redevelopment and revitalization, participating with the Town and additional non-profit organizations to develop a master plan for addressing this pressing community need.

The LRC is a private IRS-approved nonprofit 501(c)(4) corporation. It has more than 120 stockholders/members, and these private donors/families/businesses have charitably contributed nearly \$300,000 to date.

For more information, go to [www.laurelredevelopment.com](http://www.laurelredevelopment.com)



*Above, Abbotts on Broad Creek leases restaurant space built and owned by the LRC. Left, the LRC acquired and cleared this property, once a canning factory, paving the way for upscale townhomes. Below, Market Street Park was built on land acquired and cleared by the LRC, then dedicated to the Town of Laurel.*



# Acknowledgements

This proposal was assembled by a team that included:

- Rep. Timothy D. Dukes, Laurel
- Jamie Smith, Town Manager, Laurel
- Brian Shannon, Executive Director, Laurel Redevelopment Corporation
- Edward Lewandowski, University of Delaware Sustainable Coastal Community Initiative
- Dr. Jules Bruck, Associate Professor and director of Landscape Architecture, University of Delaware
- Dr. William McGowan, former State Director, USDA Rural Development and board member, Laurel Redevelopment Corporation
- Lee Ann Walling, AICP, Principal, Cedar Creek Planning and Communications

Thanks also to Ann Gravatt and Todd Pryor, DelDOT's Transportation Alternatives Program.



*Above, an out-of-state tour group tries paddling on Broad Creek. Right, enjoying ice cream during The Ramble Fall Festival. Below, Rep. Tim Dukes, Laurel Mayor John Shwed and Laurel Council President Chris Calio at announcement of Laurel's Downtown Development District designation.*



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