

Oriental's Long Range Vision-Introduction

Oriental, the *Sailing Capital of North Carolina*, is a friendly and welcoming waterfront community nestled among several creeks and the Neuse River in southeastern Pamlico County. From the beginning, the natural harbor attracted commercial interests and Oriental was incorporated as a town in 1899. In the early decades of the town, key industries were farming, fishing, logging and sawmills. Railroad and steamship services transported goods to markets. After the Second World War railroads to small towns virtually disappeared causing Oriental's economy and population to shrink in vitality and size. Commercial fishing and packing helped fill the void, providing employment for many.

As the last sawmill was closing, boaters cruising the new Intracoastal Waterway along with recreational boaters from central North Carolina "discovered" Oriental. In 1960 only a few sailboats called Oriental home, now there are thousands in the area. Eventually recreational boating joined commercial fishing as an important aspect of economic opportunity.

In the early 1980's the farmland on Ragan Road, Link Lane and Lupton Drive was subdivided into single family lots as was the land along Whitaker and Pierce Creeks where marinas and boat yards already existed. Many cruising sailors stopping on their travels ultimately bought or built homes in those areas. Boating, water vistas and small-town charm continue to attract newcomers.

By the end of the last century the local economy broadened beyond sailing and commercial fishing to include motor boating, kayaking, recreational fishing and related businesses. Restaurants, inns, shops and services developed to cater to residents and an increasing stream of visitors. Along with the enhancement of water-related activities, a growing interest in visual and performing arts and the pursuit of wellness activities helped stimulate Oriental's growing niche in tourism.

At present a variety of threats loom over the economic sustainability of the town. Challenging the fishing industry are a variety of natural and economic pressures. Conversion of working waterfronts, marinas and boat yards into residential developments potentially jeopardizes important marine-based businesses and services. Finding volunteers to work on town committees, support area non-profits, and run Oriental's popular annual events is becoming difficult. At the March workshop business owners expressed the need for more cooperation and partnership with the town. The vitality and sustainability of Oriental's future rests on the town's ability to meet these threats.

U.S. census data indicate that there has been a continuous decline in population from eight hundred seventy five (875) full time residents in 2000 to eight hundred fifteen (815) in 2008. Oriental's population swells on holidays, weekends, and especially during Croaker Festival, Spirit of Christmas, and New Year's Eve Dragon Run. Since the late 1980's and continuing to this day, the town's boundaries have grown through voluntary annexation of mostly residential areas off White Farm Road. Oriental's identity extends to a variety of surrounding neighborhoods whose residents consider Oriental to be "their town," too.

In 2007 the Town Commissioners appointed a Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC). After considerable work and research the LRPC proposed obtaining broad public input to define a community vision. The LRPC prepared a survey based upon comments and insights collected at a S.W.O.T. planning workshop (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) held in September, 2008. Invitees were members of the town's staff, elected officials, and volunteers serving on the many town boards and committees because among them they deal with the daily operations and governing aspects of Oriental. Of the forty-five (45) that were invited, thirty (30) participated. The extensive information gathered at that meeting was refined into the thirty (30) questions included in a survey which has produced public input organized into these areas of interest:

1. Community Identity, Waterfronts, Appearance and Lifestyle
2. Economic Opportunity, Development and Sustainability
3. Governance and General Operations
4. Growth and Expansion

The survey was circulated via mail, online, as an insert in The Pamlico News and at some businesses around town. Four hundred fifty-four (454) surveys were returned and entered by the town's staff into a database. Respondents were predominantly full-time residents of Oriental but also included part-time residents, "friends of Oriental", and non-residents.

In order to include the views of the local business community, the LRPC hosted a workshop of business owners and area non-profit board members. Seventy-six (76) invitations were mailed and the meeting was advertised on the front page of The Pamlico News. Twenty-one (21) participants attended the meeting and valuable information was obtained.

Upon comparing the information gathered at both workshops and studying the survey data, common hopes, concerns and themes emerged. Survey respondents and meeting participants painted a clear picture of being happy to be in Oriental and wanting the town to continue mostly as it is with changes in keeping with the current look and feel of the town. Many worthwhile suggestions were among the nearly two-thousand (2,000) comments made and helped guide the narratives and outcomes comprising the new long range vision.

To complete the work of creating a vision, members of the LRPC reviewed previously established long range planning documents including the *Oriental Planning Conference of 1988* and the *Waterfront Feasibility Study of 1996* and the committee has been mindful to respect Oriental's role as just one single municipality within the larger Pamlico County community.

The last planning document that was based on public input and adopted by the Town of Oriental was the *2007 CAMA Land Use Plan Update* which required a community vision statement. That vision was the LRPC's starting point and is included here:

People with diverse economic, cultural and regional backgrounds come to Oriental because of their love of the river and stream vistas, water accessibility and all the pleasures of being located in a community surrounded by water. Citizens look to preserve the natural resources and small town waterfront lifestyle that has prevailed for more than a century. ***The Community's vision is to preserve its waterfront personality by seeking to maintain historic access to the waterfront by commercial and recreational interests, and by supporting growth and development that is diverse, environmentally sensitive, economically sustainable, and consistent with the natural, historical and cultural character of Oriental.***

The new, more comprehensive, long range vision will put in place a means to allow the community to anticipate and respond to opportunities and threats. It solidifies a community identity and directs the efforts of the town's staff, various boards, committees and volunteers. The vision has a horizon of twenty years with a suggested review at five year intervals.

Data collected by the LRPC including meeting minutes, contents of every survey received by the cutoff date, plus graphs and charts depicting survey responses have been posted on the town's website. The data collected as part of the survey is a goldmine of public thinking on a broad range of issues and should prove of great value in planning efforts for years to come. In preparing the survey, steps were taken to ensure the data were reliable and represented a broad spectrum of interested parties.

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Long Range Planning Committee:

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