



# Smith Island Vision Plan

A Vision for how Smith Island will look, feel, and thrive in the coming decades.



# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Smith Island community for their support and participation in the creation of this Vision Plan, first published in August 2015. The contributions they made during Visioning Forums form the basis of many of the recommendations and strategies in this document. We also received valuable input and ideas from the outside experts who participated in our Steering Committee Workshops – Mike Vlahovich, Julie Widdowson, Tony Stockus, Peter Bozick, and Woody Barnes, Shey Conover, Nick Battista, and Sherri Marsh Johns. In addition, we would like to thank the facilitation team from the Consensus Building Institute and Horsley Witten Group– Catherine Morris, Nathan Kelly, and Tushar Kansal – for their support and guidance throughout this process. This process would not have been possible without the financial support of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, and the in-kind support of the Maryland Department of Planning and Somerset County. Finally, we thank the Smith Island Ladies Auxiliary for providing refreshments for our Visioning Forums.

## The Smith Island Community Vision Steering Committee

Suzanne Baird	Martin National Wildlife Refuge (ex officio)
John DelDuco	Smith Island Representative
Susan Evans	Smith Island Representative
Tracey Gordy	MD Dept. of Planning (ex officio)
Zoe Johnson	MD Department of Natural Resources
Mark Kitching	Smith Island Representative
Duke Marshall	Smith Island Representative
Gary Pusey	Somerset County Planning Department
Eddie Somers	Smith Island Representative
Cindy Stone	MD Dept. Housing and Community Development (ex officio)
Betty Jo Tyler	Smith Island Representative
Janet Tyler	Smith Island Representative

Cover photos courtesy of Jay Fleming

*"This report was prepared by CBI and HWG under award number NA13NOS4190136 from the Office of Coastal Management (OCM), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), through the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Chesapeake and Coastal Service. The statements, findings, conclusions and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of NOAA or the U.S. Department of Commerce."*



# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	ii
LOCUS MAP .....	iii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THE VISIONING PROCESS .....	2
Community Survey.....	2
Steering Committee .....	2
Community Meetings.....	2
Information from Experts .....	3
Vision Plan Development.....	3
VISION SUMMARY .....	4
ACHIEVING THE VISION .....	5
Goal #1: Sustain and grow the watermen’s livelihood as the foundation of the economy, tourism, and a traditional way of life .....	5
Goal #2: Build a more diverse local economy for Smith Island that leverages the island’s tourism potential.....	9
Goal #3: Develop and maintain infrastructure that is resilient, supports the local economy, and increases the quality of life .....	14
Goal #4: Develop and maintain a reliable and sustainable transportation system that meets the needs of residents and increases tourist opportunities.....	21
Goal #5: Grow the population of Smith Island’s villages with a focus on year-round residents .....	25
CONCLUSION .....	28
Vision Plan Summary Table.....	29
Appendix: Results of Community Survey	



# LOUISIANA MAP

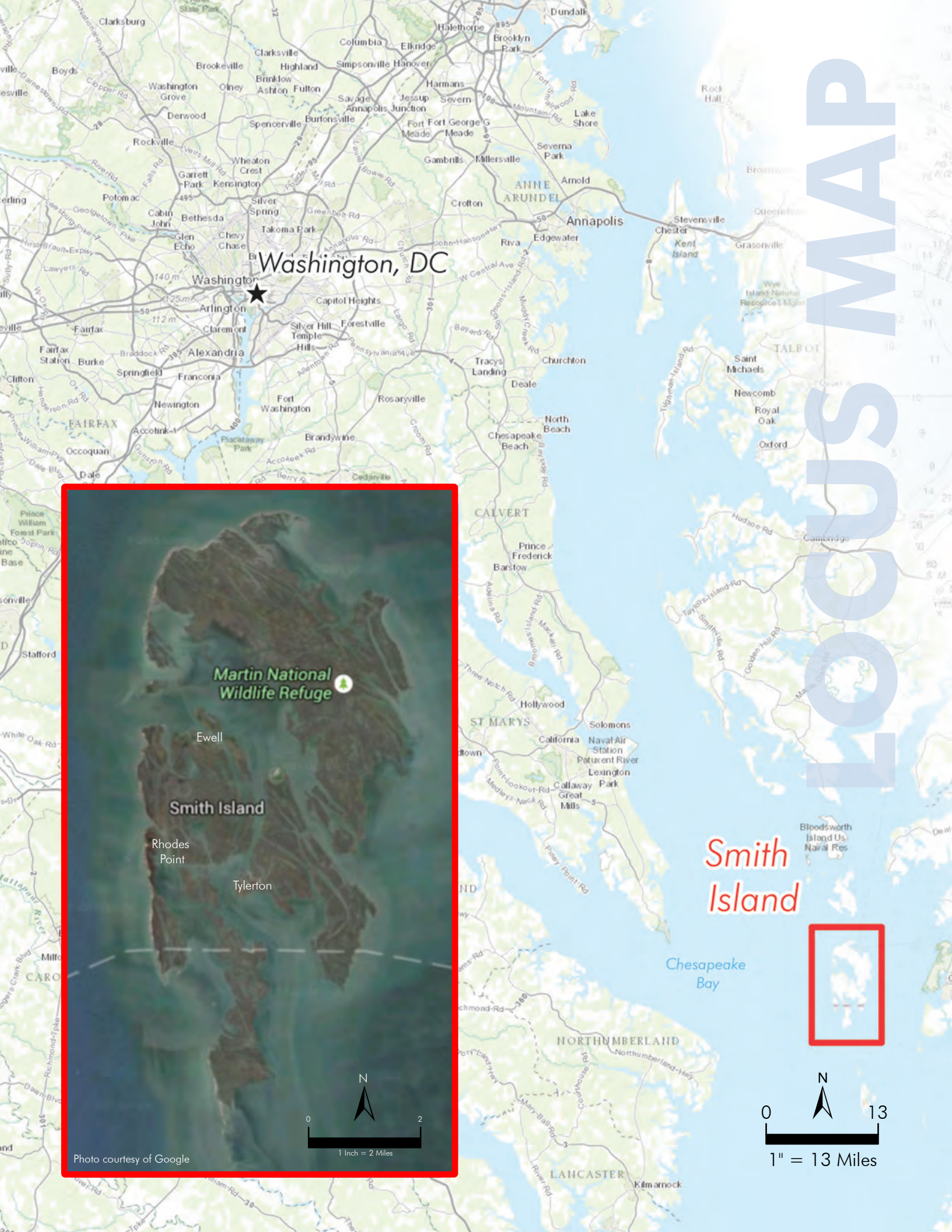


Photo courtesy of Google

## Introduction

There are many possible ways to describe Smith Island to someone who may never have been to this special place. You might simply start with its physical characteristics, saying Smith Island is actually a collection of islands located near the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, accessible only by boat. Or perhaps you might say that Smith Island is actually a collection of three villages—Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton—where a few hundred people live year-round in a quiet setting surrounded by amazing natural beauty. Smith Island Cake, the crabbing industry, and the Martin National Wildlife Refuge may be a few items one might point out as examples of what the island is most noted for. But to get to the heart of Smith Island, you would have to speak of it as a community of people bound together by their faith, their work, their connection to the water, and a rich history that lives in the landmarks, surnames, and working waterfronts that are still present today.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming

In many ways, Smith Island is a profound cultural success story. The legacy of the watermen's way of life is still alive today and is the backbone of the community's identity. The residents are part of a tightly knit community that cares for one another and maintains a high quality of life on an island where there is no law enforcement and few social services. However, Smith Island, as a community, is facing challenges. These challenges are diverse—some are old issues that seem to be getting harder to address, while others are unfamiliar and require new ideas to overcome. The purpose of this Vision Plan, and the process from which it was created, is to lay the foundation for meeting these challenges.

### ***A Snapshot of Smith Island***

- The earliest inhabitants of Smith Island date back to the early 1600s. A number of the families now living on the Island can be traced back to the first permanent settlers.
- Located 12 miles from Crisfield, MD in the Chesapeake Bay, Smith Island is accessible by a 45-minute boat ride.
- According to the 2010 Census, there are 276 year-round residents, which can double with part-time residents from May to November. There are approximately 255 houses; 137 are occupied year-round.
- The median age of Smith Island residents is 58 years old. The median family income is reported as \$33,000, compared to \$38,500 for Somerset County as a whole. Approximately 15% of Smith Island households are living below the poverty line.
- The primary school children attend the local elementary school located in Ewell and high school students take the boat to Crisfield High School.
- Health care is provided by a visiting nurse and dentist, and residents travel to the mainland for more involved or urgent health care needs.
- The Methodist Church is an important part of the community life, and the Island hosts an annual, week-long Methodist camp meeting that draws many visitors.
- Smith Island is under the governance of Somerset County and does not have any formal local government.



# The Visioning Process

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, local residents, federal and state agencies, and county officials collaborated on the idea of developing a Vision Plan for Smith Island. While Hurricane Sandy certainly raised awareness of how natural hazards can threaten coastal communities, the agencies and individuals that conceived of this process understood that there are many other threats to Smith Island's way of life. Therefore, the design of the Visioning process, from the outset, specifically recognized the need for a community-driven dialogue that considered all aspects of life on Smith Island. As the Maryland Department of Natural Resources acknowledged in describing this effort:

*"...it is the community that will drive a path forward based on their culture, heritage, sense of place, values, and priorities."*

The nine-month process for creating a vision for Smith Island had five key elements:

## Community Survey

In advance of the Smith Island Visioning Process, a survey was developed by the State of Maryland to gather opinions related to some very basic, but important, questions. Some of these questions included:

- What are your favorite and least favorite things about living on Smith Island?
- What do you think is the island's number one challenge or concern that must be addressed?
- What are your hopes for the future of Smith Island?

The survey results were instrumental in letting the community see where they agreed and disagreed on priorities for change and in shaping early public discussions. (Survey results are provided in Appendix.)

## Steering Committee

Local leadership for the visioning process was provided by a 12-member Steering Committee. This group was comprised of a mix of community members (homeowners, business owners, and watermen) from each of the three villages,

along with representation from county, state, and federal government agencies (including three non-voting members from the state). The Steering Committee provided feedback to the facilitation team on public meeting agendas and served as spokespersons and points of contact for their constituencies. The Steering Committee members participated in all the public meetings and met many times throughout the process to review what was learned from the public meetings and talk about the opportunities for addressing issues raised. This Vision Plan reflects the Steering Committee's consensus recommendations based on community input about the priorities and strategies that will lead to a sustainable and vibrant future for Smith Island.

## Community Meetings

The first public meeting for the visioning process occurred on November 17, 2014 and took place in the Smith Island United Methodist Church in Ewell. The purpose of the Town Hall Meeting was to explain the Visioning Process, the role of community input, and how the Smith Island Vision Plan would be considered in the County Comprehensive Master Plan.



This meeting was also the first opportunity for the community to review the survey results, share some of their personal experiences and hopes, and develop a common understanding of each other's concerns and priorities. Large and small group discussions were used to explore the key issues raised in the survey.

Following the Town Hall meeting, two Visioning Forums took place as part of the visioning process: Ewell (December 15, 2014), and Tylerton (March 28, 2015). These

forums were used to explore key challenges around the sustainability of watermen culture, transportation, infrastructure, tourism, and growing a local economy. Building on the introductory discussions in the Town Hall Meeting, these Visioning Forums explored concrete solutions to many of the challenges faced by Smith Island. Summaries of the Steering Committee and public meetings can be found at:

<http://www.cbuiding.org/project/smith-island-community-visioning-process>

## Information from Experts

Several local and outside experts were asked to come and talk to the Steering Committee and the community about their work on individual issues. These discussions allowed the committee members to receive updates and information directly from leaders and decision makers. Several of the plan strategies emerged directly from these interactions.

## Vision Plan Development

The development of the Vision Plan was an iterative process that drew on the input from the public meetings, deliberations of the Steering Committee and drafting by the facilitation team. The draft plan was presented to Smith Islanders at the June 17th Open House (the final public meeting), where they had an opportunity to review the recommended goals and strategies, ask questions and make suggested changes. The community approved the Vision Plan as a reflection of their aspirations and a plan for investing in the future of Smith Island.



### ***Invited guests and experts for technical presentations included:***

*Mike Vlahovich, Founder and Director, Coastal Heritage Alliance*

Mr. Vlahovich shared his organization's role in providing training and other support for watermen interested in sharing their stories with visitors in a variety of ways, including working boat trips and on land educational experiences.

*Julie Widdowson, Director, Somerset County Office of Tourism*

Ms. Widdowson spoke about the experience of visitors to Smith Island and the resources available to build on the tourist economy.

*Tony Stockus, Sanitary District Board and Peter Bozick, GMB Engineers*

Mr. Stockus and Mr. Bozick attended a Steering Committee meeting and a Visioning Forum to share information about the current status of the two wastewater treatment plants.

*Woody Barnes, Somerset County Director of County Roads*

Mr. Barnes explained the options for addressing the problem of flooded roads and poor drainage.

*Sherri Marsh Johns, Director of the Smith Island Cultural Center*

As the recently appointed Director, Ms. Marsh shared plans for improvements to the Center that are being considered.

*Shey Conover, COO, and Nick Battista, Marine Program Manager, Island Institute in Maine*

Ms. Conover and Mr. Battista attended the final Steering Committee meeting to discuss similar challenges facing unbridged islands off the coast of the Maine and successful strategies to address them.

# Vision Summary

Over the course of the Visioning process, discussions within the community quickly revealed several common themes that are integral to the future success of Smith Island. These themes include:

- The Sustenance and Growth of the Watermen Culture
- The Viability of the Local Economy
- The Development and Maintenance of Infrastructure
- The Development of Reliable and Sustainable Transportation
- The Need to Grow the Year-Round Population of the Island

One of the most important things to understand about these themes is that they are interdependent. Issues that fall within one of these themes simply cannot be addressed without successfully addressing challenges within other areas. For example, to sustain the watermen's way of life, broader economic success across the island and the condition of marine infrastructure must be improved. Expanding Smith Island's tourist economy will require greater integration of the watermen's

heritage, improved transportation to and from the island, and more tourist-friendly services. And to leverage investment in sizeable infrastructure projects, a long-term, organized commitment to the island's heritage and unique economic opportunities must be in place.

These themes led to the Vision's goals, which are presented in the next section. The discussion at the Vision Forums of Smith Island's strengths, challenges, and opportunities gave rise to the strategies for attaining these goals. Strategies are provided under each goal in the next section and are also summarized at the end of the plan where a conceptual timeline is provided. The strategies are a mix of short (1-2 years), mid (2-5 years), and longer-term (5-10 years) actions that will help move the community toward its goals, and will take a combination of local leadership, financial resources, and support from others outside the community. Smith Island United, an organization created by Smith Island community members in 2013 to promote the preservation of the island, has been and will continue to be a central hub for coordinating activities around the Vision Plan.





# Achieving the Vision

**Goal#1:** Sustain and grow the watermen's livelihood as the foundation of the economy, tourism, and a traditional way of life.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming

## Challenges to Sustaining the Watermen's Way of Life

Becoming a waterman requires a significant financial investment in a securing a license, a boat, fishing gear, dock space and the services needed to get the crabs and oysters to market, such as picking co-ops or shedding "shanties." Crabbing is seasonal, limited to the months between April and September, and then many watermen use their boats to harvest oysters during winter months. Days are long, management regulations restrict the volume of harvests, and sales revenues fluctuate with market prices. In addition, environmental impacts in the Bay—reduced oxygen levels, high nitrogen from run-off, depleted underwater grasses and loss of wetlands—have caused declining crab population and lost revenue for Smith Island watermen.

Smith Island's economy has been anchored in the harvest of crabs, oysters, and fish from the Chesapeake Bay since the 1800s. The island's location has historically provided watermen with easy access to these fisheries. In fact, Smith Island has been at the center of the Chesapeake Bay soft-shell crab industry for nearly 100 years. In the past several decades, however, the number of watermen living and working on the Island has been declining because of better paying jobs on the mainland, and fluctuating fish, shellfish, and crab stocks. Authors of *Turning the Tide: Saving the Chesapeake Bay*, Tom Horton and William Eichbaum, estimated that working watermen in the Bay fell from 14,000 in 1993 to 10,000 by 2003.

The declining watermen economy has ripple effects on the rest of Smith Island. Some businesses have closed or reduced operating hours. Soft shell crab operations are decreasing, and more and more Smith Island family members are taking jobs on the mainland.

The watermen's history and way of life is one of the things that sets Smith Island apart. Finding ways to strengthen and build on the watermen economy and culture will be critical to building a sustainable future for Smith Island.

## Strengths:

- Smith Island offers visitors the unique experience of both island living and an authentic watermen's life.
- A number of watermen are making a good living crabbing and oystering and are passing on their way of life to younger watermen interested in staying on Smith Island.
- The location of the Island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay offers easy access to crab and oyster habitats.
- The long-standing history and culture of the watermen's way of life is integral to the community's daily and seasonal pattern of living.

## Challenges:

- Regulatory restrictions on crabbing have increased in recent years because of declining crab populations. The reduced crab population, combined with restrictions, places increased short-term pressure on watermen's income.
- Habitat for crabs and oysters is, in some places, damaged by erosion or polluted from adjacent land use.
- Some watermen find it hard to make a living solely with watermen's income.
- Fewer young adults are choosing to become watermen. The upfront investment needed, the cost of housing, the cost and limited availability of Tidal Fishing Licenses (TFLs, see sidebar), the additional cost of health insurance, and the demanding nature of the work can all play a role in this decision.

## Opportunities:

- Industry and scientific research are uncovering new techniques for improving oyster and other aquaculture opportunities.
- Visitors are interested in learning about watermen's history, daily life and operations, which provides the opportunity to develop new tourist businesses built on sharing this culture and heritage.
- Efforts to reduce pollution in the Bay may eventually lead to increased crab and fish stocks, and relaxation of restrictions and licenses.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming

## Strategies:

- A. Expand opportunities for new watermen to enter the trade. [Near Term]

### Next steps:

- Work through MD Fisheries Advisory Committee to develop recommendations for increasing licenses, training and support for new and current watermen.

## Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Population Shows Modest Improvement

April 27, 2015 The Maryland Department of Natural Resources today released the 2015 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey results, which showed the abundance of spawning-age females was 101 million, a 47% increase from 2014 when adult females were considered depleted. Despite the increase, the number of adult females remains well below the peak abundances observed in 2010 and 2011 and below the established target level of 215 million crabs.

<http://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2015/04/27/chesapeake-bay-blue-crab-population-shows-modest-improvement/>



- Meet with MD Department of Natural Resources Division of Fisheries Service to explore ways to increase flexibility in obtaining TFLs exclusively for Smith Island. Some approaches may require legislative changes.
  - Conduct a detailed inventory of vacant houses and their current status in terms of ownership and payment of taxes.
  - Explore the possibility of tying a TFL to the purchase of an affordable home on the island, with the provision that the TFL would stay with the resident if they lived 5-10 years on Smith Island.
  - Investigate funding for incentives to recruit, teach and mentor men and women (of any age) interested in the waterman trade (crabbing, oystering, fishing, eeling, picking/packaging, etc.) These apprenticeship opportunities could be packaged as “settlement” support (e.g. subsidies and low-interest loans on boats, housing, shanties, docks, fishing licenses, real estate tax abatement and credit incentives, and affordable property and liability insurance) for individuals and families who want to make a long term go of it on the island.
- B. Increase opportunities for current watermen to supplement and diversify their income. [Near to Mid Term]

Next steps:

- Work with Chesapeake Conservancy and Coastal Heritage Alliance to investigate training and other support needed to start a viable Watermen’s Heritage Tour program leaving from Smith Island. Target Date: Fall 2015
  - Investigate opportunities to expand aquaculture; learn more about the costs and benefits from existing operations in the region.
  - Develop a plan for increased facilities for waterman, including dock space in Ewell and crab shanty cooperatives.
  - Develop one new event around the watermen culture to attract visitors (e.g. a Chesapeake Bay Watermen’s Festival).
  - Expand machine services at the boat yard in Rhodes Point to allow more boat repairs locally.
- C. Address the needs of watermen’s families, including improving job opportunities for spouses and teenagers, increasing access to groceries and other shopping needs on the Island, and creating more activities for children and families. [Near to Mid Term]

### **MD Tidal Fishing Licenses (TFLs)**

- TFLs are needed by both commercial watermen and for recreational charter fishing boats.
- TFLs are capped in number and new licenses can be released only as existing licenses are retired.
- If licenses are in short supply, individuals are placed on a waiting list and receive a TFL on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Licenses can also be sold or transferred privately between individuals, but typically these are more expensive than obtaining a license from the waiting list.
- Requesting the state to set aside a number of TFLs for Smith Island would require the agreement of the broader Chesapeake Bay watermen community through the MD Watermen’s Association and the Fisheries Advisory Commission, which advises the MD DNR Fisheries Division.
- The Steering Committee agreed that providing a TFL to an aspiring waterman would not be adequate incentive for a waterman and his family to move to Smith Island; there are other factors that are likely more important to existing watermen who might consider relocating.

#### Next Steps:

- Promote the availability of quality education and individualized attention from quality teachers at the local elementary school.
- Create a coop to acquire affordable health insurance for self-employed watermen.
- Expand and improve internet and cell phone service to allow for more remote job opportunities (see the Infrastructure goal, below).
- Work with the State and County to develop incentives for watermen's families to purchase and improve vacant houses.
- Provide training to spouses and teenagers to develop the skills needed to fill unmet needs on the Island, such as home health care and assisted living care for the elderly, carpentry, electrical work, and grant writing.
- Explore opportunities to establish telemedicine services in order to allow more Islanders to receive healthcare on the Island and age in place.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming



# Achieving the Vision

## **Goal#2:** Build a more diverse local economy for Smith Island that leverages the Island's tourism potential.

Since transitioning from a largely agricultural economy based on raising cattle in the 1800s, the watermen industry has been Smith Island's economic mainstay. In recent decades the number of people who are making a full-time living on the water is declining in the Chesapeake Bay region. As part of this regional trend, more people have been leaving Smith Island to pursue other employment opportunities. Strengthening the Island's overall local economy will require diversifying seasonal and year-round job opportunities and creating businesses that can generate revenue that stays on the island.

that make Smith Island unique – a quiet, safe, church-centered community. Smith Islanders want to attract tourists and provide the services and amenities that will encourage them to spend money on the Island, while maintaining Smith Island's current "working watermen" culture. It is also important to create year-round job opportunities that are not dependent on tourism and provide families with more steady income. This idea is explored under Goal #5 – Grow the year-round population of the Smith Island villages.

Increasing visitors to the Island and providing more services and attractions to increase the length of their stays seems like an obvious answer. Many natural, historical and cultural aspects of the island draw visitors during the warmer months, for the day or the week, for getting away or for hunting and fishing. Various businesses have emerged over time as part of the tourism economy such as restaurants, short-term house rentals, and the Smith Island Bakery. However, Smith Islanders have made it clear that they are concerned about becoming a tourism-centered island where outsiders have a negative impact on the values and culture

### ***The Challenge of an Island Economy***

A robust economy is critical to Smith Island's survival. Without it, residents – especially younger ones – will leave for places offering more promising opportunities. Catalyzing economic growth on Smith Island will require creativity, persistence, and a vision that grows the economy without jeopardizing the things that make Smith Island unique.



Photo courtesy of The Chesapeake Bay Foundation

## Strengths:

- Smith Island provides a one-of-a-kind experience, giving visitors a window into what it is like to live on a Chesapeake Bay island with a rich history and watermen's culture.
- Smith Island's natural environment and ecology, including proximity to Martin National Wildlife Refuge, attract tourists interested in eco-tourism activities like birding and kayaking.
- There is an established set of kayak trails and an annual birding event on Smith Island in April.
- Smith Island Cakes, the official Maryland State Dessert, are known in the mid-Atlantic region and bring visitors to the Smith Island Cake Factory.



## Challenges:

- Passenger boat service from Crisfield can be limited and sometimes unpredictable; public ferry service between Ewell and Tylerton is non-existent.
- Limited attractions and activities for tourists to enjoy on Smith Island can discourage longer stays.
- Lack of outdoor public space, such as a beach, park, or town square, can make it difficult for tourists to find a place to relax on the Island.
- Limited hours of local restaurants can make it difficult for tourists to find a place to eat in the evenings.
- Limited dockage for tourists who want to visit in their own boats results in lost revenue opportunities.

- Debris, unkempt grounds, and open ditches in some places on the Island can give an unfavorable impression to visitors. Mosquitoes in the summer can be bothersome.

## Opportunities:

- Outdoor spaces exist in Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton that could serve as public spaces, if developed appropriately.
- Increased tourist services could provide jobs and income for Smith Island families.
- The Island has a unique Chesapeake Bay ecosystem that is ideal for eco-tourism, which could be encouraged with enhanced canoeing and kayaking facilities and guided tours; a sea life museum; wildlife and hunting tours; trails for bird-watching and walking; and a campground.
- Increased advertising in Crisfield and elsewhere on the mainland could attract more tourists to Smith Island.
- Maryland Small Business Development Center of the Eastern Shore and Maryland Capital Enterprises, located in Salisbury, offer support for establishing and expanding small businesses, including micro loans.



- The operating boat yard in Rhodes Point provides another watermen-related experience for visitors that could be part of an overall package of activities (which might also include a visit to the picking co-op in Tylerton, land-based and water-based Watermen Heritage tours, a visit to crab shedding operations in Ewell, and more).



## Strategies:

A. Help tourists access Smith Island's tourism opportunities. [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Conduct a survey of existing services, businesses, and historical or cultural sites on the Island. The Somerset County Office of Tourism, working with the businesses, could compile and publish this information as a "Guide to Tourist Opportunities on Smith Island," both available online, printed hard copy and at the tourism offices on the Eastern Shore and elsewhere. The same types of information included in the "Guide" can also be promoted through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
- Create tour packages that bundle multiple, diverse activities and services (e.g. ferry service, lodging, walking tour, waterman tour, crab steaming and picking tutorial, etc.) to create "all inclusive" packages that make it easier for tourists to access diverse opportunities and encourage them to stay on the Island for longer periods of time.
- Establish a robust online presence for Smith Island's tourism opportunities and advance on-line ticketing/booking. Take advantage of support from the Somerset County Tourism office or consider organizing the Island's tourism businesses to jointly hire a professional to enhance the Island's online presence. Use newer platforms such as AirBNB to reach new and younger potential visitors.
- Explore support services and resources from the Somerset County Tourism Office, the Smith Island Cultural Center, the Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore, the Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Foundation, the Sultana Education Foundation, and others.

B. Increase services or amenities that support or "wrap around" the tourist experience on Smith Island. [Mid to Long Term]

Next steps:

- Increase access to dining opportunities later in the day to encourage longer stays and greater local spending from visitors.
- Provide more visible access to basic amenities like restrooms, shaded areas with benches, and camping or cookout areas.
- Improve access to the Island by boat and the ability to move between villages (see Goal #4).
- Address the flooding of the road between Ewell and Rhodes Point to increase access to Rhodes Point and provide tourists with more to do on the Island. (See Goal #3)
- Improve coordination and communication among different service providers on the Island (e.g. the boat captains, lodging, tour operators, restaurants and stores) about the arrival of tourists and groups on the Island so that tourists can easily be linked to additional services.
- Develop a "fellows" program in collaboration with regional and state colleges and universities that provides internship opportunities for students willing to assist with economic development planning, research, and implementation. This model could be used to recruit help for other goals.

### **The Smith Island Cultural Center**

The Smith Island Cultural Center opened in 1997 and since that time has served as a gateway to Smith Island for visitors. Located adjacent to the tourist pier in Ewell, the Cultural Center features exhibits and a film about Smith Island. Declining membership has made it difficult to make major new investments, but looking to the future, the Cultural Center director is considering hosting events, connecting tourists with other services on the Island, and featuring rotating exhibitions to encourage repeat visits.

### C. Create the best first impression of Smith Island for visitors (Also Goal 5). [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Work through Somerset County or Smith Island United to develop a more formal maintenance plan for infrastructure (docks and ditches), untended properties, and marsh areas to ensure the Island makes the best possible visible impression on visitors.
- Design improvements to the boardwalk, marsh area, and streetscape surrounding the Cultural Center in Ewell.
- Identify people, such as Cultural Center staff members and other residents, who can serve as greeters for visitors arriving by boat to provide orientation (e.g., pamphlets, informational signs, coupons, etc.).
- Develop a community-driven plan for addressing trash and debris clean up and maintenance of untended properties.
- Create large boards or site-specific signs to inform tourists about the history of the Island and specific locations – pictures of what it used to look like, improvements that have been made, and plans for the future. This sort of information can communicate Smith Island’s vitality and could solicit support from visitors for improvement projects.
- Work with the county to establish a regular barge schedule that brings equipment and large loads and takes away debris.

**Before**



**After**



## Dock Repairs

Creating a good first impression for visitors is critical to creating a strong “word of mouth” tourist economy. Maintaining infrastructure like the dock area shown above shows attention to detail and sends a strong message of local pride to visitors.



D. Provide tourist opportunities that play to the Island's physical and cultural strengths. [Mid to Long Term]

Next Steps:

- Consider waterman heritage tours or similar opportunities to directly involve tourists in the waterman experience (see also Goal 1).
  - Expand tourism opportunities around unique cultural strengths, such as crab shedding operations, the crab picking coop, and boat building and repairs.
  - Expand access in public spaces to eco-tourism activities such as kayaking and bird watching, as well as information about how to access remote points like beaches.
- Collaborate with the Cultural Center to create a walking tour, including a map and a printed and/or audio guide that explains the history of different buildings and other sites on Smith Island.
  - Investigate the viability of building an "eco-bridge" between Tylerton and the other villages.

### Ewell Center Public Spaces Concept

This conceptual plan is not a proposal, but just an illustration of how the public space could be expanded and enhanced around the museum.



# Achieving the Vision

**Goal#3:** Develop and maintain infrastructure that is resilient, supports the local economy, and increases the quality of life.

The term “infrastructure” here refers to the engineered systems used to provide the most basic services to a community. Traditionally, these include roads, storm drainage, water supply systems, and wastewater systems, which are typically developed and maintained with public funds (see sidebar). In addition to these traditional systems, communications infrastructure like towers, dishes and cables, and energy infrastructure are part of this discussion. Another infrastructure element addressed under this Goal, one that is unique to waterfront communities, is shoreline and flood protection.

The condition of each of these infrastructure elements on Smith Island is described briefly below.

## *The Challenge of Infrastructure*

Hard infrastructure is critical to the safety, success, and quality of life on Smith Island. Perhaps more than any other issue in this Vision Plan, infrastructure requires significant levels of funding and cooperation between local residents and all levels of government.

## *Snapshot of Smith Island Infrastructure*

- Water is supplied from wells maintained by local cooperatives in each village.
- Electricity is provided by A&N Electric Cooperative based in Virginia through underwater and above-water transmission lines, with emergency diesel generators on the island serving as backup.
- The County maintains two sewage treatment plants – one in Tylerton and one on the road between Ewell and Rhodes Point.
- Verizon provides Internet and cell service. Internet is limited to a certain number of households because of limited broadband capacity with the existing equipment.

## 1. Shoreline Protection

The configuration of smaller islands that make up Smith Island creates a network of channels and currents that have shaped how residents connect with the water. Crab shanties, piers, docks, moorings and other marine features were all established based on where watermen could find shelter, safely dock, and handle their catch. These channels and work areas are part of a larger system of shorelines, points, and barriers that experience erosion either slowly over time or quickly during large storms. Even small changes to this network can alter conditions in traditional watermen work areas to the point where they would no longer be viable. Increased erosion also leads to loss of valuable and protective marshland, loss of crab

habitat, and increased flooding of roads and inundation of other public and private property. In discussions with the Steering Committee and members of the community, shoreline protection consistently rose to the highest priority level for infrastructure investment.

To date, Tylerton has taken the most aggressive steps toward shoreline protection through a combination of bulkhead installation and shoreline hardening with riprap. Ewell and Rhodes Point also have similar installations, but not nearly at the same scale. Moving forward, the next major shoreline protection project involves the Martin National Wildlife Refuge, located northeast of the inhabited portion of the Island. The Hurricane Sandy Resiliency project will use a combination of headland control



## Shoreline Protection (continued)

structures and sand nourishment to protect and restore wildlife habitat at the refuge. Semi-continuous breakwaters will be used where necessary to protect fragile shorelines. The project is expected to slow shoreline erosion, providing benefits to fish and wildlife as well as the human community. The most important projects to follow will be the construction of the Rhodes Point jetty – which has been in the planning stages for over a decade – and the replacement of the Rhodes Point pier.

### Erosion and Flooding

Increased erosion and inundation of Smith Island is part of a larger phenomenon. Local tide-gauge data shows an increase of “relative” sea level over the last 100 years. The mid-Atlantic region as whole is slowly sinking in response to land movements associated with post-glacial rebound, faulting associated with the Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater, local groundwater withdrawals, and other factors. A study by the Virginia Institute for Marine Science (VIMS) based on a detailed analysis of 35-year records from 10 tide gauges between Norfolk and Baltimore, concluded that “on average, about 50% of the relative sea level rise measured at Bay water level stations is due to local subsidence.”

<http://phys.org/news/2010-12-sea-level-good-bad-news-chesapeake.html#nRlv>

To reduce or abate the impact of these trends will require a combination of projects such as the Rhodes Point Jetty and planning to protect property and infrastructure from increased vulnerability to storms.

### Strengths:

- There is broad consensus and support among residents regarding the high priority of future shoreline protection efforts.
- The islanders have the support of the County and the State for future shoreline protection efforts.
- Work is underway to complete the survey and design related to the Rhodes Point jetty.

### Challenges:

- Shoreline protection projects are generally expensive and logistically complex.
- Multiple funding streams and permitting processes will need to be coordinated to undertake construction of these larger infrastructure projects.

### Opportunities:

- Some of the funding required for the Rhodes Point jetty is in place through the Continuing Authorities Program (CAP) and the State funding.

### Strategies:

- A. Establish a direct line of communication with State level officials, politicians, and the US Army Corps of Engineers to advocate for necessary funding and construction of the Rhodes Point jetty on the fastest possible timeline.  
[Near Term]

Next steps:

- Identify a lead point of contact within Smith Island United to maintain this regular communication and report back to the islanders.

- B. Work with the State and Army Corps of Engineers to develop an alternative erosion control plan using existing State funding, if federal funding for the Rhodes Point jetty is not approved by the end of 2015.  
[Mid to Long Term]

Next steps:

- Investigate and prioritize alternative erosion control projects in the event that the Rhodes Point jetty project does not move forward. Compile recommendations and send them to County and State officials, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and newspaper outlets.

## **2. Wastewater**

Wastewater disposal on Smith Island is a challenge due to the high water tables across the entire island. In this type of environment, centralized wastewater plants provide the most efficient means of treatment and disposal. Two plants currently service Smith Island, one in Ewell (which includes service of Rhodes Point), and one in Tylerton. These plants were both constructed in 1977 with some periodic upgrades since then, and neither is in very good condition today. Looking forward, engineers are investigating the possibility of closing the Tylerton plant and connecting that system to an upgraded facility in Ewell.

### ***Strengths:***

- The existing systems provide much of the infrastructure already required (e.g., the collection system).

### ***Challenges:***

- The wastewater treatment plants have reached a point where minor maintenance or improvements will not be satisfactory; significant investment is required.
- Until upgrades are made, the existing facilities are exceeding allowable standards for discharge and contributing to pollution in the Bay. The water quality goals set by the State will require the use of advanced technology; which may add to cost of construction.
- The cost of construction on Smith Island, due to transportation costs, inflates the price of building a new facility.
- Costs associated with developing a new plant would significantly increase the “per household” assessment for sewer service.
- Plants must be designed to service a particular population level for efficient performance. It is difficult to predict future population numbers for Smith Island and incremental upgrades are difficult.

### ***Opportunities:***

- Federal agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) offer competitive loans for rural communities to develop wastewater infrastructure.

- The Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) provides the expertise to coordinate funding sources toward the reduction of pollution into the bay. These efforts could include wastewater treatment upgrades.
- Potential MDE funding sources include the Water Quality Revolving Loan Fund, Sewerage Facilities Supplemental Assistance Program, Bay Restoration Fund, and Biological Nutrient Removal Cost-Share Program

## ***Strategies:***

- A. Develop a wastewater solution for the Island that meets goals for service, population growth, environmental protection, and resilience to natural hazards. [Mid to Long Term]

Next steps:

- Identify the lead individual(s) on Smith Island who will serve as a point of contact and provide assistance moving forward on this issue. This person will serve as a liaison to the residents and business owners of Smith Island.
- Convene a small team to work with the County Sanitary District, the MD Planning Department, MDE, and the contracted engineers to evaluate the alternative design options and apply for funding to upgrade wastewater infrastructure.

## **3. Stormwater Management**

Stormwater management on Smith Island is shaped by a complex combination of factors, including weather conditions, soil and land cover, topography, high water tables, and roadway design. However, most residents experience stormwater management fairly simply in their everyday lives as the drainage ditches they see on the side of the roadways and periodic, localized flooding. Drainage ditches and roadways could be improved to better manage stormwater runoff and create more attractive conditions on the Island for residents and visitors. A major source of stormwater runoff and localized flooding is from roads, which are under the jurisdiction of Somerset County. Funding, equipment, and manpower needed to maintain and repair roadways comes from the County Budget.



## Strengths:

- Other counties in Maryland have been working on solutions to drainage design to address issues that are very similar to those on Smith Island.
- Drainage problems, and the catchment areas contributing to those problem areas, are easy to identify.

## Challenges:

- County staff and funding are stretched very thin, making it extremely difficult for Somerset County to cover all roadway maintenance needs.
- Smith Island is, overall, very flat. This limited topographic relief makes it difficult to convey stormwater away from roads and people's yards.
- Drainage ditches require maintenance to remain clear of debris and to maintain a gradient that keeps stormwater from settling and flooding.
- Drainage ditches often contain standing water in otherwise dry conditions, which can be unsightly, create unpleasant odors, and harbor mosquitoes.
- Roadways may sag over time, creating areas that pool with standing water even during small rain events.
- Stormwater can be a significant source of pollution for the Chesapeake Bay.

## Opportunities:

- A large amount of research exists regarding "best practices" for ditch design and maintenance.
- Existing ditches can be retrofit with low cost solutions to improve floodwater storage, water quality and aesthetics.
- The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has worked with several county governments to educate them on best practices and to implement some corrective designs. Some of these projects may be transferable to Smith Island.

## Strategies:

- A. Enhance stormwater management to use more attractive and effective best management practices. [Mid to Long Term]

### Next steps:

- Engage the MDNR and Somerset County to identify a pilot project candidate for retrofitting a specific ditch on Smith Island.
- Engage with the MDNR and MDE to determine which funding sources might be viable for this work.



Drainage ditches on Smith Island can hold standing water for long periods of time.



This shallow tidal ditch may be the type of ditch that could improve some areas of Smith Island.

## 4. Water Supply

Potable water is provided to Smith Island residents by a series of wells in each village managed through a cooperative organized by residents. As with much of the development on Smith Island, the construction and organization of the different water supplies (seven public wells and two private wells in total) has been informal and evolved to meet emerging needs. Depending on the sources of money for construction or the preferences of different consumer groups, the water providers associated with an individual well may or may not be incorporated. The public wells are registered with the state and are monitored for water quality in accordance with state-level requirements. Fee structures vary from one cooperative to another and collections are used to cover daily operations (e.g., electricity), regular expenses (e.g., water quality monitoring), and periodic repairs or upgrades.

### Strengths:

- The existing systems provide much of the infrastructure already required (i.e., the collection system).
- Islanders communicate and organize effectively around issues related to maintenance and repair.

### Challenges:

- The wells and distribution systems may be vulnerable to impacts from severe storms or normal breakdown over time.
- Knowledge of the location of distribution lines is inconsistent, which could make future maintenance or upgrades challenging.
- Stormwater can be a significant source of pollution to Chesapeake Bay.

### Opportunities:

- Funding related to hazard mitigation efforts, storm recovery, or road repair could be leveraged to make improvements to water supply infrastructure.
- University engineering programs could be engaged to perform mapping, assessment, and inventory work on the island, simultaneously exposing emerging young professionals to the island.

## Strategies:

- A. Seek funding to continue mapping of the water supply system infrastructure in a digital format compatible with engineering design software. [Mid Term]

Next steps:

- Engage with Somerset County and the Maryland Emergency Management Agency to identify potential funding sources related to hazard mitigation planning.
- B. Develop contingency plans and funding sources for each well and distribution system depending on the results of the mapping exercise. [Mid Term]



### Somerset County's Hazard Mitigation Plan

Hazard mitigation planning and actions reduce the risk of damage to human life and property from hazards such as major storms. Outreach programs that increase risk awareness, projects to protect critical facilities, and the removal of structures from flood hazard areas are all examples of mitigation actions. Somerset County has a FEMA-approved Hazard Mitigation Plan, which makes the County eligible for FEMA emergency disaster funds. The plan is updated every five years. The next update to Somerset County plan will be in 2017.



## 5. Roads and Bridges

The road network on Smith Island is small and is laid out in a way that reflects the traditional settlement patterns on the island. Because of the small number of cars, low travel speeds, and general lack of car traffic, Smith Island roads do not experience a lot of wear and tear from heavy use and are constructed with packed stone. However, exposure to salt water and regular flooding from heavy storms does take its toll on the roadways and associated drainage systems (see Stormwater Management above). The roads on the island are maintained by Somerset County primarily on an “as needed” basis.

### Strengths:

- The roadway network in all three villages is very small and therefore there is simply not a lot of pavement to manage.
- Small number of cars makes biking and walking very safe.
- Roadway layout is conducive to walking and experiencing the different villages on foot.

### Challenges:

- Maintenance of roadways needs to be coordinated from the mainland and is therefore more resource intensive and logistically complicated.
- County staff and funding are stretched very thin, making it extremely difficult for Somerset County to cover all roadway maintenance needs
- Many roadways flood regularly in response to unusually high tides and/or heavy rain. Standing water can remain for many days.
- The roadway between Rhodes Point and Ewell can be un-traversable during high tides or storm events.
- The cost of transporting maintenance and repair equipment/materials to the island is high.
- Drainage issues that go outside of the right of way and onto private property require additional coordination with the Public Drainage Association (PDA).



### Opportunities:

- Residents have organized effectively in the past to advocate for roadway projects designed to mitigate impacts from flooding.
- Cold pack tar treatment at Ewell landing has exceeded performance expectations for a larger application (cold pack is usually used for small “patch jobs”).

### Strategies:

- A. Continue to advocate in an organized manner for critical roadway improvements, particularly flood mitigation measures. [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Have the county perform subsurface investigations on the roadway between Rhodes Point and Ewell to determine the composition and condition of the base material as the first step in estimating the cost of raising the road bed.
- B. Couple roadway improvements with other infrastructure projects, like sewer system installation, water supply network repair, and/or ditch upgrades, to mitigate the costs. [Mid to Long Term]

## **6. Communications**

Communications on Smith Island are provided through standard telephone service and cellular phone service. Almost all television service is typically provided through individual contracts with satellite providers (a.k.a. “dish”), although a small cable provider exists on Tylerton. Internet service is provided through a single carrier and connections are currently limited due to broadband limits. This situation is viewed by residents and business owners as a significant impediment to local economic development and general quality of life.

### **Strengths:**

- The island does have a basic level of service today that allows for at least partial access to all forms of communication.

### **Challenges:**

- Access to local television is very limited and requires individual investment in strong antennae to receive signals that would provide these channels.
- Cellular phone service is not strong in most areas of the island.
- Terminal boxes for “land line” telephone services can be compromised by water intrusion causing interruptions in services or poor connections.
- Limits on internet broadband capacity are an impediment to local business development on the island.

### **Opportunities:**

- Residents of Smith Island have recently organized to facilitate stronger advocacy for infrastructure improvements with communication companies.
- Additional providers of cellular and Internet service have shown interest in competing for service.
- Upgrades to the sewage treatment plant may provide an opportunity to co-locate new internet and cell tower infrastructure, including the necessary power and battery storage.

### **Strategies:**

- A. Continue to support local efforts to advocate for cell and Internet improvement and explore alternative service providers. [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Designate a Smith Island resident to join the on-going discussion with the county and providers on expanded Internet service.

# Achieving the Vision

**Goal#4:** Develop and maintain a reliable and sustainable transportation system that meets the needs of residents and increases tourist opportunities.

Developing and maintaining robust transportation to and from Smith Island, and between the Island's three communities, is critical for the wellbeing of Smith Island's residents and for the Island's economic health, in terms of supporting the tourism industry.

Going back and forth between Smith Island and the mainland is critical for residents' quality of life and the success of local businesses. For the residents, access to groceries, household supplies, healthcare, and other services depend on water transport, whether goods and services come to the island or they travel to the mainland to purchase them. Reliable and affordable transportation back and forth from

the mainland is also critical for tourists. Most tourists that visit the island do not use their own boats and rely on ferry or charter transport to provide access to all that there is to see on the island.

Once on the Island, transportation is generally adequate for residents. Visitors to the island can easily navigate within each community on Smith Island, but it can be challenging for them to move from one village to another. Business owners rely on frequent boat transportation to bring needed supplies to support their customers and watermen require boat transportation to get their fish and shellfish to markets beyond Smith Island.

## ***The Challenge of Transportation***

Because it is 12 miles from the Eastern Shore, Smith Island requires boat connections to the mainland as well as ways to move around the island day to day. The small scale of these systems, the limitations related to weather, and the logistics of coordinating repairs all create challenges for supporting this unique transportation system.

## **Connections between the Mainland and Smith Island**

Three passenger ferries provide shuttle services and, between the three boats, a ferry is scheduled to perform two round-trip excursions. The current schedule during the tourist season is advertised on the website [www.visitsmithisland.com](http://www.visitsmithisland.com) as leaving Crisfield at 12:30 and 5:00 pm, returning from Tylerton at 7:00 am and 3:30 pm and returning from Ewell at 4:00 and 5:00 pm. The evening schedule tends to vary depending on the number of passengers seeking transport. During the Fall, Winter and early Spring months, the schedule is more limited. A roundtrip boat trip costs approximately \$60 in fuel. With other operating costs, boat captains need about six passengers (at \$20/one-way trip) to make the trip profitable. It was noted that the boat crews also earn additional revenue by charging for baggage, kayaks, bikes and other equipment.

Another source of transportation is the school boat providing regular service to the mainland. This service is provided exclusively for school age children and the service does have permission to transport island residents if necessary. Tourists are not allowed to use the school boat for passage.

During summer months, there are additional cruise boats that leave from Crisfield and from the western shore for daily or overnight trips.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming





### Strengths:

- Ferries are privately owned and provide income to boat captains.
- These smaller ferries provide a more “authentic” experience for visitors.
- Local/private control of ferries can allow for greater flexibility.

### Challenges:

- Service on Sundays is virtually non-existent in the off-season and is inconsistent in the summer. This creates issues for tourists who may wish to spend a weekend on the island. The Sunday boat leaves the Island at 7:00 am, eliminating the opportunity for visitors to stay for the day.
- Running ferries is expensive and, without a certain number of passengers, it is not worth the investment for boat captains to make a trip. This can lead to inconsistent service and a lack of predictability for potential visitors and residents.
- Ferry operators charge different fares and fares are not posted at the docks, making it difficult for visitors to plan. Extra fees charged for carry-on items are determined ad hoc.

### Opportunities:

- The establishment of a reliable service that operates more frequently in the spring, summer, and fall months could significantly increase local economic activity.
- More reliable and affordable service is also seen by many who live on Smith Island as the key to keeping elderly members of the community and attracting new residents.

### Strategies:

- Explore options to provide additional service to and from Crisfield while mitigating the risks and added expense borne by the ferry captains. [Near Term]

#### Next steps:

- Add an evening run Wednesday through Sunday. Friday and Sunday evening runs are particularly important because they would allow visitors to come later on Friday and spend the day on Sunday on the Island (a typical weekend trip).
- Create a rotational system among the ferry captains for supplemental service. For example, evening runs (especially on Fridays and Sundays), and other runs when there are fewer passengers, could be operated by the captains on a rotational basis.
- Create a Ferry Cooperative to share the proceeds of all ticket sales and share the risks. A ticket agent would collect the fees and split the revenue according to an agreed-on allocation formula.
- Incorporate the ferries as nonprofit entities in order to reduce their costs and potentially secure grants and subsidies. This strategy could be combined with the creation of a Ferry Cooperative.

- B. Introduce policies to make ferry service scheduling and costs more standardized, dependable, and transparent. [Near Term]

Next Steps:

- Implement evening runs, through a rotational arrangement, as suggested above.
- Post the ferry timetable and fare schedule in Crisfield, Tylerton and Ewell docks, including discount fares for homeowners and residents and additional fees for luggage, kayaks, and other equipment.

- C. Explore ways to make expanded ferry service financially sustainable. [Near to Mid Term]

Next steps:

- Investigate the creation of a transportation fund that could be used to help subsidize boat travel. Funding sources could include visitor fees, regular County contributions, contributions from Smith Island tourism businesses and Crisfield businesses. The fund would be distributed to ferry captains on an equitable basis each month.
- Initiate discussions with the Office of Local Transit Support of the Maryland Transit Administration about securing grant funding to support ferry service to Smith Island. Such funding will likely need to go to either a local government agency or to an incorporated nonprofit that provides or coordinates ferry services. The Tri-County Council of the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland will also need to be included in these discussions.

## **Transportation on the Island**

Transportation on the island is generally adequate for residents and business owners. A small number of automobiles, golf carts, bicycles and walking take care of everyday needs and residents often share rides where it is helpful. Transportation between islands can occur informally on private boats or by using kayaks.

Generally speaking, visitors to the island can find ways to get around and see many of the attractions. However, if they are not familiar with the services and options, visitors may find it challenging, particularly if they want to get from one village to another. The road between Ewell and Rhodes Point is probably seen by many visitors as too far to walk; however, rented golf carts are often not allowed to travel this road due to the potential for damage from flood waters. This situation can limit tourist travel to Rhodes Point for people unable to make the trek, or who may not have investigated other options. It also discourages the start-up of new tourist attractions and services in Rhodes Point.

### ***Strengths:***

- Local transport is part of the character and charm of Smith Island. The golf carts and the scale of the experience make most of the Island very accessible.
- The low number of automobiles creates a very comfortable and inviting pedestrian experience.



## Challenges:

- Golf cart rentals often cannot travel between Ewell and Rhodes Point. When tides are, or will be high, or when weather creates wet conditions, golf carts risk significant damage crossing flooded roads.
- Even with such a small amount of ground to cover, it may not be immediately apparent where to walk to reach certain attractions.
- Lack of well-publicized boat service between Ewell and Tylerton makes it difficult for visitors to see the whole Island during a visit.

## Opportunities:

- Walking or biking to Rhodes Point, for those that are able, can be a beautiful experience. Once in Rhodes Point, the scale of the village is very accessible.
- Shielding the burn pile, incinerator, recycling drop off, and the sewage treatment plant from public view along the road would enhance the experience of traveling between Ewell and Rhodes Point.
- Creating a walking/biking bridge connection between Tylerton and Ewell was strongly supported at the Tylerton Visioning Forum as way to better connect residents and provide tourists with more opportunities to view wildlife and the natural marshlands.



## Strategies:

- A. Develop a better understanding of residents' and visitors' needs to get around on the Island and address the impediments. [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Survey visitors during 2015 tourist season on their transportation experience and needs.
- Set reasonable expectation about travel to and around the island in all tourism materials and websites.
- Anticipate days where visitors will not have golf cart access due to flood conditions and coordinate alternate transportation options, such as car shuttles.
- Explore development of local water taxi service to provide residents and visitors with expanded opportunities to travel between villages, extend their stays, and patronize more businesses.
- Address flooded roads (See Goal #3).





# Achieving the Vision

**Goal#5:** Grow the population of Smith Island's villages with a focus on year-round residents.

## *The Challenge of Growing the Population*

While the addition of only a few families makes a big difference to Smith Island population numbers, connecting people who might want to live on Smith Island with job and housing opportunities can be a challenge.

The population of Smith Island has decreased significantly over the past several decades. Data varies on the exact population numbers, but reasonable estimates show a decline from close to 500 people (1990 Census) to just under 300 people today. The population numbers have dropped to a point where planning for basic services and infrastructure is challenging. For example, the number of children in the schools has dropped to the point where there soon may not be enough to keep the existing elementary school open. Another example of where population levels are important is with the current wastewater planning efforts. The number of residents that is anticipated for sewer service is a critical piece of the planning and design effort for any future system upgrades. From an economic perspective, the declining number of residents makes it more difficult for local businesses (e.g., stores, restaurants) to remain viable. Residential population, therefore,

is inextricably woven into all of the planning, economic, and cultural aspects of this Vision Plan.

Residents and business owners are committed to working proactively to increase the population of Smith Island to previous high levels. But even a few new families could make a significant difference in the next five years. While the importance of seasonal residents to the island economy and community is well-recognized, the hope is to increase the year-round population as much as possible and to attract younger individuals and families. Strategies related to waterman viability, infrastructure, and diversifying the economy will all contribute to increasing population. Other strategies presented under this goal focus on improving first impressions of the island and fostering a more intimate experience between current residents and people who may be interested in buying a home.



Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming

## Strengths:

- The experience of living on Smith Island is truly unique and attracts a special type of person.
- Part of the unique experience of Smith Island is the school experience where:

Students work in small classrooms;

Special needs are more easily addressed;

Education curriculum can be woven into the environmental issues experienced every day;

Older children take a boat to the mainland for school every day.

- Smith Island provides immediate access to outdoor amenities that are unparalleled in their scenic beauty, recreational opportunity, and wildlife biodiversity.



- Housing on Smith Island would be considered “affordable” by outsiders shopping for waterfront/island real estate.
- The villages provide closely knit communities and a culture of self-determination.
- The quality of local education is good and classroom size is small.

## Challenges:

- The Smith Island lifestyle represents a special niche in real estate sales and it may be more difficult to find people looking for this type of lifestyle.

- There are some existing problems that can lead to a poor first impression for visitors. Examples include lack of amenities, poor cell phone service, the presence of vacant homes/unkept property, trash and debris at the dock area and elsewhere, and other similar situations.
- Small population does not provide “critical mass” for efficiently providing public services (e.g., health care) or expanding some year-round business opportunities (e.g., grocery, restaurant).
- Limitations on the ability to travel to and from the mainland and access to internet and reliable cell service may discourage people from considering residency.
- Job opportunities are currently limited.
- Everyday costs of living are higher due to the remoteness of the island and associated shipping and travel required to move goods, provide services, and (for many people) access jobs.
- There is a perception that environmental challenges are an impediment to long-term quality of life.

## Opportunities:

- Long-time residents can share their own personal history with visitors or prospective buyers to provide them with a greater appreciation for the history associated with the Island.
- Recent residents can share their stories about what drew them to the island and the quality of the experience.
- Current marketing efforts for Smith Island are limited and could be significantly augmented.
- For potential buyers interested in the faith community, representation from the church can engage these families to share the role of the church in the larger community.
- Changes can be made to the appearance of the island to improve first impressions and better convey the local sense of pride already part of the community.
- Unoccupied houses present an immediate stock of affordable homes for potential new residents.

## Strategies:

- A. Make Smith Island's uniqueness and charm a strong selling point for newcomers. [Near Term]

Next steps:

- Create the best first impression of the island to visitors and potential home buyers (see Goal 3 above).
- Develop a public relations campaign around the quality of education and the unique experience of students in the local school.
- Identify opportunities to have young professionals and college students visit the island and, if possible, perform paid or volunteer work. Apprenticeships for trades (electricians, plumbers, etc.), volunteer programs (e.g., Americorps), and academic or scientific programs (e.g., Chesapeake Bay Foundation) can significantly increase students and young professionals' exposure to the island.

- B. Make the experience of buying a home and moving to Smith Island understandable and easy to navigate. [Near Term]

Next Steps:

- Coordinate with realtors to connect prospective buyers directly with residents/members of the church for face-to-face conversations.
- Develop educational materials on hazard planning, emergency response and evacuation plans and the requirements and costs associated with flood/hazard insurance. Coordinate with lenders and real estate professionals to ensure all of these "touch points" for potential new residents are providing the same information.
- Consider the development of a local Housing Land Trust for moderate and low-income housing.

Work with the MD Energy Administration to identify resources to improve energy efficiency of homes and businesses which will reduce energy bills.



- B. Address the problem of vacant housing. [Near to Mid Term]

Next Steps:

- Coordinate with Somerset County to create an enforcement program for payment of taxes, sewer fees and upkeep for properties that are vacant.
- Create a fund supported by contributions from homeowners or voluntary contributions from tourists dedicated to year-round upkeep. Use fund to pay residents willing to maintain vacant properties.
- Create a centralized website for both rental and home purchasing opportunities on Smith Island.

### Putting Properties in Trust

It is not uncommon for houses on Smith Island to become abandoned for a variety of reasons. These occurrences may provide an opportunity for converting these homes into deed-restricted housing that would be made available to working families that might not otherwise be able to afford to own a home on Smith Island. A Housing Land Trust is an example of an organization that can take control of a property, provide resources for repairs, then transition the home to a qualified family. Housing Land Trusts provide resources and technical expertise that help the layperson navigate a complex situation.



## Conclusion

Our vision for the future of Smith Island embraces the best of who we are and how we live. Our tightly knit community moves to the seasonal and daily rhythms of a waterman's life, the spiritual and social ties of the church, and the day-to-day lives of multi-generational families. We are part of the 400 years of history and culture shaped by the water around us, which make this a truly unique place and an experience we want to share with others. These qualities represent what is most important to us and lie at the foundation of this Vision Plan.

An important part of our vision for Smith Island is to recognize that we are entering a new chapter in our local history. We understand that there are uncertainties for the island, even in the near future, and that we must take action to ensure our stories and way of life remain accessible to future generations. Problems must be named, resources must be identified, and solutions must be acted on.

Reliable travel to and from the Island and between villages will become a part of everyday affairs. New families will come to know the beauty and simplicity of this place, move here, and add their own stories to our history. In the years to come, we will see to it that our elementary school will fill with children, residents will find new ways to support their families, and visitors will begin to plan their next trip to Smith Island on the boat ride home. Our partners at Somerset County, the State of Maryland, and the federal government must be engaged in order to build and maintain infrastructure that serves us day to day, but is also capable of protecting our shores and well-being for the long haul.

All of these achievements are within our reach, and our community stands united in our commitment to make this vision reality.

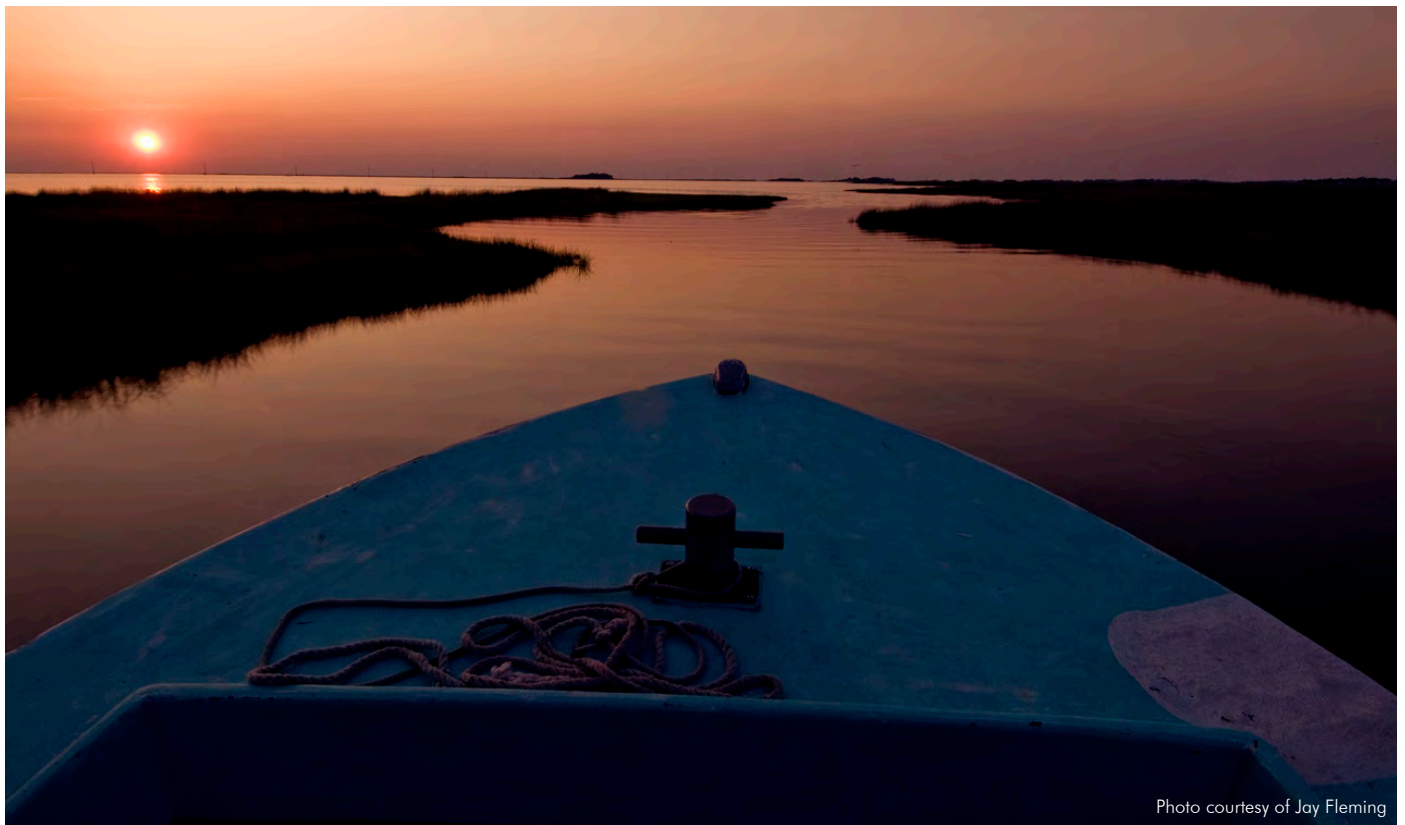


Photo courtesy of Jay Fleming

# Vision Plan Summary Table

Goals	Strategies	Timeframe
<b>1. Sustain and grow the watermen's livelihood as the foundation of the economy, tourism, and a traditional way of life.</b>	<p>A. Expand opportunities for new watermen to enter the trade.</p> <p>B. Increase opportunities for current watermen to supplement and diversify their income.</p> <p>C. Address the needs of watermen's families, including improving job opportunities for spouses and teenagers, increasing access to groceries and other shopping needs on the Island, and creating more activities for children and families.</p>	<p>Near Term</p> <p>Near to Mid Term</p> <p>Near to Mid Term</p>
<b>2. Build a more diverse local economy for Smith Island that leverages that island's tourism potential.</b>	<p>A. Help tourists access Smith Island's tourism opportunities.</p> <p>B. Increase services or amenities that support the tourist experience.</p> <p>C. Create the best first impression of Smith Island for visitors.</p> <p>D. Provide more tourist opportunities that play to the Island's physical and cultural strengths.</p>	<p>Near to Mid Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p> <p>Near Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p>
<b>3. Develop and maintain infrastructure that is resilient, supports the local economy, and increases the quality of life.</b>	<p><i>Shoreline Protection</i></p> <p>A. Establish a direct line of communication with State level officials, politicians, and the US Army Corps of Engineers to advocate for necessary funding and construction of the Rhodes Point jetty on the fastest possible timeline.</p> <p>B. Work with the State and Army Corps of Engineers to develop an alternative erosion control plan using existing State funding if federal funding for the Rhodes Point jetty is not approved by the end of 2015.</p> <p><i>Wastewater</i></p> <p>A. Develop a wastewater solution for the Island that meets goals for service, population growth, environmental protection, and resilience to natural hazards.</p> <p><i>Stormwater Management</i></p> <p>A. Enhance storm water management to use more attractive and effective best management practices.</p> <p><i>Water Supply</i></p> <p>A. Seek funding to continue mapping water supply in a digital format compatible with engineering format.</p> <p>B. Develop contingency plans and funding sources for each well and distribution system depending on the results of the mapping exercise.</p> <p><i>Roads</i></p> <p>A. Continue to advocate in an organized manner for critical roadway improvements, particularly flood mitigation measures.</p> <p>B. Couple roadway improvements with other infrastructure projects like sewer system installation, water supply network repair, and or ditch upgrades to mitigate costs.</p> <p><i>Communications</i></p> <p>A. Continue to support local efforts to advocate for cell and Internet improvement and explore alternative service providers.</p>	<p>Near Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p> <p>Mid Term</p> <p>Mid Term</p> <p>Near Term</p> <p>Mid to Long Term</p> <p>Near Term</p>

# Vision Plan Summary Table (continued)

Goals	Strategies	Timeframe
<b>4. Develop and maintain a reliable and sustainable transportation system that meets the needs of residents and increases tourist opportunities.</b>	<i>Connections between the mainland and Smith Island</i>	
	A. Explore options to provide additional service to and from Crisfield while mitigating the risks and added expense borne by ferry captains.	<i>Near Term</i>
	B. Introduce policies to make ferry scheduling and costs more standardized, dependable, and transparent.	<i>Near Term</i>
	C. Explore ways to make expanded ferry service financially sustainable.	<i>Near Mid Term</i>
	<i>Transportation on Smith Island</i>	
	A. Develop a better understanding of residents' and visitors' needs to get around on the Island and address the impediments.	<i>Near Term</i>
<b>5. Grow the population of Smith Island's villages with a focus on year-round residents.</b>	A. Make Smith Island's uniqueness and charm a strong selling point for newcomers.	<i>Near Term</i>
	B. Make the experience of buying a home and moving to Smith Island understandable and easy to navigate.	<i>Near Term</i>
	C. Address the problem of vacant housing.	<i>Near Mid Term</i>

Near Term: Next two years

Mid Term: 2-5 years

Long Term: 5-10 years



# Appendix:

## Results of Survey of Smith Islanders, 2014

### Summary of Demographics of Respondents

Gender	51% Female
	41% Male
	8% No answer
Age	1% under 20
	1% 30-40
	15% 40-50
	23% 50-60
	27% 60-70
	24% 70-80
	8% 80-90
# in household	15% 1 in household
	60% 2 in household
	9% 3 in household
	8% 4 in household
	3% 5 in household
	4% 6 in household
	1% n/a
# in household under 18	80% 0 in household
	13% 1 in household
	3% 2 in household
	3% 3 in household
# in household retired	59% 0 retired
	23% 1 retired
	15% 2 retired
	4% n/a
Live at SI year-round?	32% do NOT live year-round
	4% not yet
	64% yes, live at SI year-round

On a scale from 1-4: how significant is this issue to you?	Ditch maintenance/									
	Transportation to Mainland	Personal Safety	Road maintenance	Flood prevention	Drinking water quality and quantity	Sanitary sewer service	Recreation areas	Access to the water	Services/activities for adults	
Fine as is	11% ONE	<b>71% ONE</b>	8% ONE	3% ONE	<b>67% ONE</b>	<b>53% ONE</b>	21% ONE	<b>49% ONE</b>	31% ONE	
Some improvement needed	28% TWO	11% TWO	35% TWO	19% TWO	17% TWO	29% TWO	<b>35% TWO</b>	15% TWO	<b>39% TWO</b>	
Much improvement needed	<b>51% THREE</b>	10% THREE	<b>51% THREE</b>	<b>67% THREE</b>	8% THREE	11% THREE	<b>35% THREE</b>	15% THREE	21% THREE	
No Opinion	6% FOUR	3% FOUR	6% FOUR	10% FOUR	6% FOUR	6% FOUR	8% FOUR	14% FOUR	8% FOUR	
	4% OTHER	4% OTHER	0% OTHER	1% OTHER	3% OTHER	1% OTHER	1% OTHER	7% OTHER	1% OTHER	

On a scale from 1-4: how significant is this issue to you?	Communication with State government							
	Services/activities for children	County government	Communication with State government	Bugs/pests rodents	Property maintenance	Storm and disaster preparedness	Cleanliness of island	Tourism opportunities/activities
Fine as is	11% ONE	19% ONE	11% ONE	4% ONE	11% ONE	25% ONE	8% ONE	7% ONE
Some improvement needed	<b>32% TWO</b>	<b>40% TWO</b>	<b>36% TWO</b>	32% TWO	<b>35% TWO</b>	<b>39% TWO</b>	<b>42% TWO</b>	<b>43% TWO</b>
Much improvement needed	<b>39% THREE</b>	<b>31% THREE</b>	<b>39% THREE</b>	<b>56% THREE</b>	<b>49% THREE</b>	18% THREE	<b>43% THREE</b>	<b>40% THREE</b>
No Opinion	14% FOUR	8% FOUR	10% FOUR	7% FOUR	4% FOUR	8% FOUR	4% FOUR	6% FOUR
	4% OTHER	1% OTHER	4% OTHER	1% OTHER	1% OTHER	10% OTHER	3% OTHER	1% OTHER
								21% ONE
								<b>39% TWO</b>
								<b>31% THREE</b>
								8% FOUR
								4% OTHER

On a scale from 1-10: how important is it to preserve:	the island's history and culture?		historic buildings on the Island?	
	Average			
	<b>9.9</b>	1% ONE	<b>9.2</b>	1% ONE
		1% SEVEN		1% FIVE
		4% EIGHT		3% SIX
	<b>89% TEN</b>	4% SEVEN		15% EIGHT
	2% OTHER	<b>68% TEN</b>		

## What types of businesses would you like to see on the island?

### (Number of similar responses)

- Keep the bed and breakfast here/more bed and breakfasts, lodging **(6)**
- Gym **(1)**
- Walmart/retail **(2)**
- Sports coach for youth/studies for young people/activities for kids **(3)**
- Home care for elderly **(1)**
- Passenger boat to make 2 scheduled evening trips a week **(2)**
- Show people how to make Smith Island cake, get crabs, etc. **(1)**
- Ecotourism (waterman taking people out oystering crabbing, etc) **(4)**
- Restaurants (better, with alcohol sales and/or longer hours) **(6)**
- Someone to clean up all old shanties and houses **(1)**
- Make better use of camp meeting building - such as gospel singing **(1)**
- Whatever it is, businesses that serve both men and women **(1)**
- Seafood restaurant/ business for the men/seafood processing plant/fish market **(5)**
- Fishing and hunting **(3)**
- Employment and jobs on island, not mainland **(3)**
- Production of "island-made" item or souvenir/shop to sell them **(2)**
- Drug store **(1)**
- Post office **(1)**
- Tourism opportunities, example more cafes, shops/someone to develop a package that includes rentals, ferry and lunch/gift shop/fishing and crabbing lessons **(8)**
- Hardware store/machine shop and/or repair shop/appliances **(8)**
- Aquaculture **(1)**
- Beach area **(1)**
- Anything to get young people **(1)**
- Grocery store (and general) with necessities at reasonable prices **(8)**
- Blacksmith **(1)**
- Art galleries **(1)**
- Organic farmers market or produce co-op **(1)**
- Outdoor outfitters **(1)**
- Bird watching tours **(2)**
- Health clinic/eye doctor/home health for aging community **(6)**
- Piano lessons **(1)**
- Exercise leader for adults **(1)**
- Windmill or tide energy **(1)**
- Snowball/ice cream stand, weekend tiki bar **(1)**
- Cottage industry, finance - work from home jobs. **(1)**
- Small museum with history **(1)**
- Incentives to attract young watermen **(1)**
- I don't feel we have the number of residents/visitors needed to support a business in order for it to be successful. (e.g. fuel/propane, soft freeze, jet ski rental) **(1)**







