Town of Easton Comprehensive Plan – Master Narrative of Material Changes (2010–2025)

Executive Summary

The 2025 Comprehensive Plan Public Hearing Draft represents the most significant evolution of Easton's planning framework since the 2010 Plan. While the 2010 Plan focused on containing suburban growth, preserving community character, and guiding expansion through Priority Growth Areas (PGAs), the 2025 Plan fundamentally reorients Easton's planning strategy toward sustainability, equity, financial resilience, and form-based growth management. It responds directly to shifts in regional dynamics, market pressures, state mandates, and environmental challenges that have emerged over the past 15 years.

At its core, the new plan reframes Easton's future around **sustainable growth principles** — emphasizing compact, mixed-use development, multimodal transportation, fiscal responsibility, climate resilience, and social equity. This approach is both proactive and pragmatic: it acknowledges the limitations of past growth strategies and leverages new tools, data, and policy frameworks to shape a more resilient, inclusive, and economically sustainable future.

Several key shifts distinguish the 2025 Plan from its predecessor:

- **Growth Management Philosophy:** The outdated system of ranked Priority Growth Areas is eliminated. Instead, annexation and growth decisions are guided by how well a parcel fits into the town's urban form, fills infrastructure or connectivity gaps, and meets functional needs. Little, if any, need for new Annexations during the life of the Plan is expected except for already developed areas or those covered by approved Small Area Plans. Infill, redevelopment, and adaptive reuse are the primary sources of future growth.
- **Land Use Strategy:** Traditional zoning approaches are replaced with a place-based framework that prioritizes walkable, mixed-use development, adaptive reuse of large retail sites, and form-based design standards.
- **Housing Policy:** The plan directly addresses affordability, housing diversity, and zoning reform, introducing policies to enable "Missing Middle" housing types and align development with real market needs.
- **Fiscal Sustainability:** An overview of a recent **Value per Acre (VPA)** analysis leads to the call for a quantitative tool(s) for evaluating the long-term fiscal impacts of land use decisions — a capability that did not exist in 2010.
- **Transportation and Mobility:** The plan integrates transportation and land use planning through a "Complete Networks" approach, prioritizing multimodal connectivity, safety, and access.

- **Climate and Sustainability:** A new Sustainability chapter outlines strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation, renewable energy, food security, and long-term ecological stewardship.
- **Implementation and Accountability:** A comprehensive implementation framework introduces measurable objectives, monitoring protocols, and design principles that apply across all plan elements.

Taken together, these changes move Easton beyond a reactive posture — managing growth primarily by controlling its extent — toward a proactive approach that shapes the *form*, *function*, and *fiscal health* of the town's future.

Introduction & Framework

The 2010 Comprehensive Plan was grounded in Maryland's **Twelve State Planning Visions** — a policy framework emphasizing compact growth, mixed-use development, natural resource protection, and efficient infrastructure. While those principles remain relevant, they no longer fully address the realities facing Easton today. Over the past 15 years, the town's planning context has evolved dramatically. Population growth pressures, shifting economic conditions, changing housing demand, climate challenges, and new state-level mandates have all introduced new dimensions that require a more comprehensive and adaptive approach to growth management.

The 2025 Comprehensive Plan reorients Easton's planning philosophy around a broader and more contemporary framework: **Sustainable Growth Principles**. These principles integrate the environmental, fiscal, and social dimensions of planning, placing equal emphasis on long-term resilience, equity, and economic viability. The plan also expands its alignment with state and federal policy contexts, including environmental justice requirements under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and new climate and water quality legislation enacted since 2010.

Public engagement also plays a more central role in the planning process than in the past. The 2025 Plan reflects extensive community input gathered through workshops, surveys, and public hearings, which helped shape priorities around affordability, mobility, climate action, and quality of life.

Finally, the plan's structure itself has evolved to support implementation. Whereas the 2010 Plan largely presented goals and objectives in isolation, the 2025 Plan organizes them within an actionable framework. Each chapter connects policy direction to specific tools — zoning reform, infrastructure planning, fiscal analysis, and design standards — that enable the Town to translate vision into results. This shift marks a move from a **policy-oriented document** to a **strategic action plan**, guiding decision-making at every level of municipal governance.

Land Use

The 2010 Comprehensive Plan approached land use primarily as a question of **where** growth should occur, using a ranked Priority Growth Area (PGA) system based on readiness for annexation and service availability. While this model was effective in its time, it focused narrowly on geographic priorities and offered little guidance on **how** development should occur or how its fiscal, design, and community impacts should be measured.

The 2025 Plan fundamentally reimagines this approach. The ranked PGA system is eliminated in favor of a **form-based, criteria-driven** framework that evaluates annexation and land use changes based on how well they integrate with the town's urban fabric, fill infrastructure gaps, and support long-term functional and fiscal goals. Growth is now guided as much by quality and form as by location.

A new **place-based land use framework** divides the town into distinct "place types" — such as Traditional Neighborhood, Mixed-Use Corridor, Employment Center, and Civic Core — each with its own preferred form, design standards, and performance metrics. This model shifts away from conventional Euclidean zoning toward a system that promotes walkable, mixed-use development and stronger fiscal returns per acre.

The 2025 Plan also addresses **big-box retail obsolescence** and corridor revitalization. Policies now encourage the **adaptive reuse** of underutilized commercial sites, transforming them into mixed-use nodes that include housing, small-scale retail, and civic spaces. Corridor overlays with new design standards guide the transformation of auto-oriented arterials like Route 50 into more connected, human-scaled environments.

In short, land use planning has evolved from a question of "how much" land to develop to "how" and "where" growth can best support the town's character, economy, and fiscal health.

Housing

The 2010 Plan identified housing affordability as a concern but provided limited data and few actionable tools to address it. It largely assumed traditional single-family and multifamily development patterns would continue to meet local needs.

The 2025 Plan takes a far more comprehensive and proactive approach. It begins with a **data-driven housing analysis** that highlights significant affordability challenges, cost burdens, and mismatches between supply and demand. Nearly half of renter households are cost-burdened, and moderate-income families increasingly struggle to purchase homes.

Central to the new strategy is a focus on **housing diversity**, including the reintroduction of "Missing Middle" housing types — duplexes, triplexes, ADUs, cottage courts, and small apartments — that historically defined Easton's neighborhoods but are now restricted by zoning.

These housing types offer naturally affordable options and broaden choices for seniors, young families, and workforce households.

Achieving this requires major **zoning reform**: reduced minimum lot sizes and parking requirements, legalization of multi-unit housing in more districts, and mixed-use allowances in strategic locations. The plan also emphasizes **infill and redevelopment** over peripheral expansion, focusing on adaptive reuse and small-scale additions to existing neighborhoods.

New tools — such as inclusionary zoning policies, nonprofit partnerships, and expanded down payment assistance — complement these regulatory reforms. Housing policy is now integrated with transportation, employment, and public service planning, ensuring new housing aligns with access to jobs, transit, and amenities.

Transportation

The 2010 Plan emphasized vehicle mobility, congestion relief, and roadway capacity. While it acknowledged walking, biking, and transit, these modes were treated as secondary.

The 2025 Plan replaces this model with a **Complete Networks** approach that integrates transportation, land use, and housing strategies into a single accessibility-focused framework. The goal is no longer just to move cars efficiently but to move people — safely, equitably, and sustainably.

Key strategies include expanding bicycle and pedestrian networks, improving transit service and infrastructure, and designing streets for safety and human scale. Transportation projects are now prioritized based on how well they support compact, mixed-use development and improve access to jobs and services.

Performance metrics shift from traffic volume to **accessibility, mode share, and safety outcomes**, while Title VI and environmental justice considerations guide investment priorities.

This integrated approach ensures transportation decisions reinforce — rather than undermine — Easton’s land use, housing, and sustainability objectives.

Community Facilities & Services

In 2010, community facilities planning focused narrowly on capacity needs and coordination but played a secondary role in growth decisions.

The 2025 Plan elevates facilities planning into a **core growth management tool**. Annexations, zoning changes, and major development proposals are now evaluated based on public facility adequacy, and new development may be phased or conditioned on infrastructure expansion.

The scope of services is expanded to include **broadband, healthcare, and emergency services**. Facility adequacy standards provide measurable thresholds for evaluating development impacts, and joint capital planning with county and regional partners ensures coordinated service delivery.

Public infrastructure is no longer a reactive response to growth — it actively shapes where and how growth occurs.

Parks & Green Infrastructure

The 2010 Plan treated parks largely as recreational amenities. The 2025 Plan integrates them into a **multifunctional green infrastructure network** that supports stormwater management, biodiversity, active transportation, and climate adaptation.

Connectivity is a central goal: parks, trails, and natural areas form a continuous system linking neighborhoods to schools, jobs, and regional destinations. Green infrastructure is also positioned as a climate resilience strategy, mitigating flood risks, reducing urban heat, and improving water quality.

New development is required to incorporate on-site green infrastructure, blurring the line between open space and public utility. Parks are now fundamental infrastructure — not optional amenities.

Ecology & Sustainability

The 2010 Plan focused on regulatory compliance and mitigation. The 2025 Plan adopts a **proactive, systems-based approach** that integrates ecological planning into every aspect of growth management.

A new Ecology chapter introduces nutrient modeling, watershed analysis, and habitat connectivity strategies. Natural systems are treated as essential infrastructure, and development is designed to **work with** — rather than against — ecological processes.

Climate mitigation and adaptation are embedded throughout the plan, from tree canopy expansion and green stormwater infrastructure to renewable energy and urban agriculture.

The introduction of **Value per Acre (VPA)** analysis represents a transformative shift: fiscal performance and ecological outcomes are now evaluated together, enabling growth that is both financially and environmentally sustainable.

Municipal Growth

The 2010 Plan's ranked PGA system has been replaced by a **criteria-based annexation framework** focused on form, infrastructure, and fiscal sustainability. Growth must connect logically to existing patterns, enhance infrastructure networks, and align with public facility capacity.

Regional dynamics — including large-scale projects like **Lakeside at Trappe** — are now explicitly factored into growth projections and policy decisions. Updated population forecasts use multiple models and scenarios, enabling more flexible and adaptive planning.

Infill and redevelopment are prioritized over outward expansion, and annexations must demonstrate their contribution to the town's long-term vision. Growth is now measured by **quality and value**, not just acreage or unit counts.

Implementation

The 2010 Plan's implementation chapter was largely a static list of actions. The 2025 Plan transforms implementation into an **iterative management framework** that links policy, zoning, capital investment, and performance measurement.

Comprehensive **zoning reform** is prioritized to align land use regulations with plan goals. The **Capital Improvement Program (CIP)** is integrated with plan objectives, ensuring infrastructure investments support long-term priorities.

Performance metrics track housing affordability, mode share, water quality, tree canopy, and fiscal yield, with regular progress reporting and a formal mid-cycle plan review.

Design principles — walkability, connectivity, housing diversity, environmental stewardship, and fiscal responsibility — now guide all decision-making. Collaboration with county, state, and private partners is emphasized to leverage resources and expertise.

Implementation is no longer an afterthought — it is the central mechanism through which the plan's vision becomes reality.
