



Chapter 3. Community Character

3.1 Introduction

A major consideration in community planning is to define and maintain the character of a community. The character of a town gives it a unique identity. It is created from both physical characteristics, such as buildings and roads and the actions of the people who live and work there. The ocean, beach, and bay bordering the town also contribute to its character. Defining and maintaining community character is an essential goal of this comprehensive plan. This chapter describes the community character of Fenwick.

3.2 Fenwick Is a Community First



The town was established as, and remains, a quiet, family-oriented, primarily residential community with a well-defined business district. Historical records reflect a consistent effort by the town to emphasize lower density, with low rise residential and commercial development, in a well-established and harmonious pattern in a relatively natural landscape. Details of this history are included in Chapter One. The importance of maintaining the small-town character of the community was noted in the original Comprehensive Plan developed in 2007 and in all revisions since.

From the time that Fenwick was incorporated in 1953, the town had distinctive features that distinguished it from other coastal communities, even those in proximity, including Ocean City, Maryland, which has greater density, greater height of buildings, less separation between commercial businesses and residential uses, and more extensive paving. Ocean City's summer population exceeds 320,000, which is greater than the population of Sussex County, Delaware.

The town was designed to be a community rather than a commercial resort. Many residents and visitors view it as a cherished respite that provides a safe place for family and friends to gather.

The commercial component of the community was originally developed with the intent to serve residents and visitors rather than to create large commercial tourism facilities that attract visitors from the wider region. This is a significant reason for the distinct character of Fenwick.

Support for this character remains strong today. As part of the development of the Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Commission conducted a survey of the community to elicit key values and priorities. The survey was distributed through email and U.S. mail to residents, property owners, businesses, and others and available on-line and in paper format. Over 500 responses were received by the deadline in February 2023. One of the top priorities was to maintain the character of the community.

3.2.1 Nature is Integral to Our Community Character

Protecting natural habitat is important to many in Fenwick Island. The Commission recommends the town consider a campaign to educate our residents and business owners about “Dark Skies”. The Dark Skies movement simply means reconsidering the use of artificial light and reduction of light at night.

Curtailing over illumination has many benefits for humans, animals, and the environment. Dark skies help regulate our circadian clock, which affects our sleep patterns and other physical reactions. Seasonal changes such as length of nighttime darkness help plants prepare for spring and fall. Natural dark nights provide important signals to various animals that trigger events like amphibian breeding and bird migration.

Dark Skies practices prevent the wasted energy of light shining where it is not needed or wanted. Light can be invasive. Things as simple as using exterior motion sensors rather than steady all-night lighting, curtailing the use of landscape and porch lights and operating dock lights at night, can make a difference to the fish, birds, crabs and animals that share our town.

There is much more about our natural environment in the Beach and Bay chapters.



3.3 Small Lots and Grid Layout of the Town Design Promote Community

Several features of Fenwick promote community. Both residential and commercial areas are organized in a compact and clearly identifiable traditional town pattern. Two key elements that contribute are:

- a hierarchy of gridded streets and a system of blocks and lots; and
- relatively narrow dimension of the municipal streets, and the small scale of the blocks that encourages walking.

The primary use of single-family homes that reflect the block and lot pattern reinforces a traditional town design. Houses have a consistent setback from the street that established a rhythm of structures along the streetscape that echoes the rhythm established in the block and lot layout.



Aerial highlighting Fenwick Island block and lot layout

3.3.1 Bunting Avenue

The construction of Bunting Avenue west of the first line of cottages served to create a public space that has been used as a key walking, biking, and visiting space for the people of the town. Though Bunting Avenue carries vehicular traffic, it is at low speed. Groups of families and friends ride their bikes together and often walk together up and down the street. Many times, people stop to chat and exchange information. While there can be some conflict between motorized vehicles, bikes, and walkers, overall, the people of the town value the space created on this road.

3.3.2 Residential Areas Support Community Connection

Residential areas are generally organized around a central commercial core fronting SR 1 between Lewes Street to the north, Delaware Avenue to the southwest and Atlantic Avenue to the Southeast.

Single-family detached residential uses stretch east and west of the commercial area before reaching Little Assawoman Bay to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east.

3.3.3 Residential Architectural Character

The residential areas are characterized by a mix of architectural styles. Small beach cottages built during the early years have often been modified over time to reflect changing use patterns and style trends. Later homes— one- to one and one half-stories with simple rectangular forms, were constructed between 1950 and 1980. The 1980s and 1990s saw the construction of many two- to three-story custom homes with articulated forms reflecting the post-modern and neo-traditional architectural styles.



Traditional beach cottage

Many residential buildings are elevated on pilings to address flooding potential. The town has adopted designations related to the National Flood Insurance Program. These currently require that the lower floor of a building be elevated above the level of a 100-year flood at about four feet. The extensive use of pilings contributes to the town’s architectural character.



Newer home elevated on pilings

Two strategies have been used to manage the size and scale of buildings – height limits and maximum size. The height restriction and gross floor area are the main parameters that regulate the design of bulk and scale of residential homes.

The height of residential buildings had been set at 30 feet for many years, as measured from the crown of the fronting street. In 2018, an ordinance amendment was made to allow two feet of additional height to be added to homes if the construction incorporated “freeboard.” Freeboard is additional height above base flood elevation that the lowest level of a house or structure is encouraged to be built above in order to further reduce the potential impacts of flooding. However, an unanticipated result of this ordinance change was that many property owners used the additional height to raise the roofline of the house rather than elevating the grade of their lot using fill, as the town had hoped. This unanticipated result will have to be reviewed when addressing resiliency issues and sea level rise, particularly on the west side of town.

The size of buildings, both commercial and residential, has been a concern to some within town. The size of homes has steadily increased over the last several decades. One

step taken by the town was to limit the size of new homes through the zoning ordinance by metrics related to the total allowable floor area and amount of a lot that can be covered by a house. The current code limits the maximum house size either to 7,500 square feet or to the percentage of a lot that can be covered by a house to 70% which is also described as a floor area ratio of 0.70, whichever is less.

A strong concern of residents is the loss of the older structures as properties are redeveloped. To address this concern the town altered code provisions that will allow the older structures to be redeveloped within the footprint of their current configuration.

While still maintaining the small-town feel, the architectural character of the town is shifting as more homes are elevated onto pilings, older homes are redeveloped into larger modern homes, and the tree canopy and naturalistic landscape are increasingly removed. The loss of trees and naturalistic landscape should be addressed in the coming decade. Zoning ordinance provisions that maintain the size and height of residential buildings should be maintained to ensure the historic character of the Town.

3.4 The Commercial and Business District in Fenwick

The commercial district in Fenwick is centered around SR 1. The properties fronting SR 1 are zoned for both residential and commercial use. All of the business district in Fenwick is found along the SR 1 corridor. Today, six commercial zoned lots fronting SR 1 remain vacant and available for development.

Some properties fronting SR 1 have been developed for residential uses. These lots are desirable for residential builds because they are less than two blocks from the beach. Seven commercially zoned properties have been developed as residential homes.

3.4.1 Commercial Architectural Character

The commercial area of town generally consists of one- to two- story masonry structures. The earliest buildings were constructed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Several buildings of architectural significance are iconic and contribute to the Town's diverse architectural character. Examples include Warren's Station (located between Indian and Houston Streets), Seaside Country Store (located between Georgetown and Farmington Streets), and the Fenwick Village (located between West Virginia Ave and Maryland Ave).



- Warren's Station has been a family restaurant in Fenwick Island, since 1960. The building was re-designed in 1983 to replicate a historic Lifesaving Station that existed along the Delaware coast after the formation of the United States Life-Saving Service in 1871.

- Seaside Country Store or “The Big Red Barn” has a design that seeks to reproduce an old time New England store. This design element is in keeping with the agricultural heritage of Sussex County. The “antique” candy store and cheese counter offer a glimpse of such shops, in small towns during the era of Fenwick’s incorporation.



- The Village of Fenwick has been home to many retail shops and eateries over the years. The design concept of small, intimate structures encourages a pedestrian quest to find the perfect accoutrement, refreshment, or experience. Its design concept is similar to the Country Store and represents a small scale, family-oriented character.



- The Bank of Ocean City is a newer addition to the Fenwick townscape; however, in the design, the building retains the charm of a small-town coastal cottage including a red roof. The bank provides year-round services to the town which were lost after two other banking institutions left the area.



3.4.2 Vibrant Business District

Fenwick seeks to maintain and enhance a vibrant business district. In the past, most businesses in Fenwick were primarily oriented toward serving visitors and residents in the summer season, generally from May to September.

Today, Fenwick’s businesses realize a relatively strong off-season market as the population of surrounding Sussex County full-time residents has increased and part-time residents and tourists visit more frequently during the non-summer season. As a result of the new off-season draw, many of the Town’s businesses remain open for much, if not all, of the year and draw shoppers and diners from the larger Sussex County region. The work from home and shorter work-week trends also added to the frequency of visitors during the

traditional off-season. Even more significantly, the entire coastal community around Fenwick has experienced tremendous new housing growth, particularly with retirees. Businesses in town stand to benefit from these changes.

As Fenwick transitions into a more year-round business community, serving more and more patrons who reside outside of the corporate limits, the town will be challenged by increased traffic on the roadways which, in turn, will lead to greater pedestrian safety issues as well as business patron parking demands. Balancing the need to provide infrastructural support that flows from the transition of becoming a more year-round community without losing Fenwick's desired small-town identity and charm will be an important part of the next decade of the Town's growth. Moreover, as with the residential zone, ordinances should be maintained that place limits on the size, height, density and parking requirements in the commercial zone as necessary to maintain the historical character of the Town.

3.4.3 Restaurants and Eateries

The town takes pride in the fact that Fenwick boasts several excellent restaurants. As part of the "culinary coast" we have become a dining destination. Upscale restaurants and more casual "grab and go" establishments draw from the local population as well as the coastal region.

Like the residential zone, there are gross size and parking limits to existing strip mall structures and free-standing commercial buildings. In February 2023, the town changed building codes for new commercial development to ensure on-site delivery areas and to provide for more adequate patron parking. These code changes will not affect existing businesses as they are grandfathered. This code change was designed to respond to the shifting paradigm of a need for parking from those who travel into Fenwick to benefit from the offerings of the commercial district.

3.4.4 Retail

There are local, regional, and nationally owned retail shoppes. Several shops offer a wonderful array of maritime artifacts and coastal inspired goods. Specialty stores include apparel, salons, surf and swimwear, pottery, home entertaining and decorative, beach equipment, children's clothing and a convenience store. A growing component of the retail mix is home furnishings and improvements, including furniture, mattress, paint, window coverings, and flooring stores. The presence of this retail segment corresponds with the growth of residential construction and a shift for businesses in the town's commercial district that remains open all year.

3.4.5 Professional Services

Communities with many professional services tend to have growing or stable year-round economies, depending on the service focus. Fenwick has a small number of professional

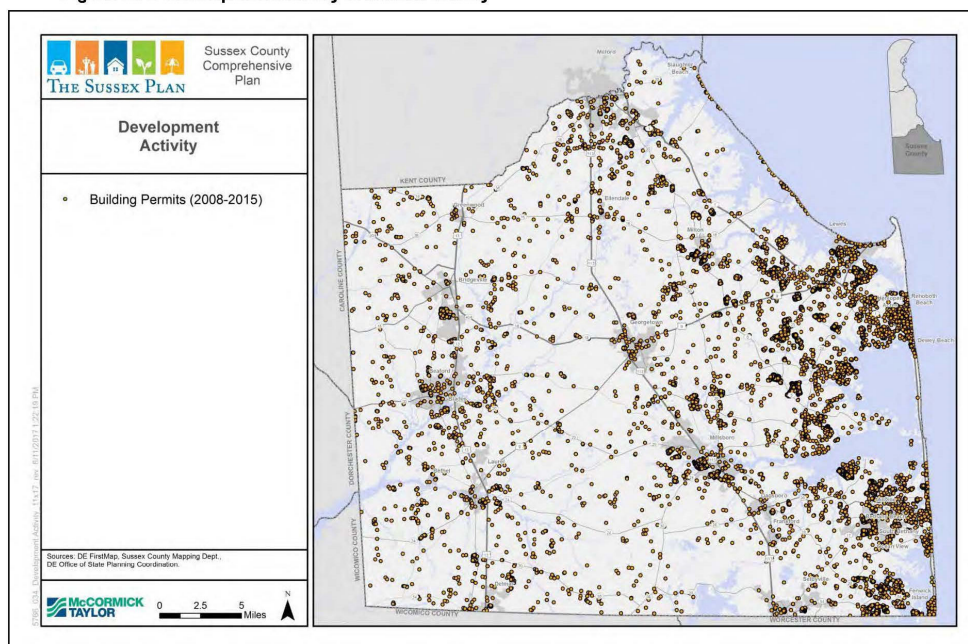
services geared to real estate and construction and to personal care, such as hair and nail salons. There is one primary care physician office and a bank.

The town lacks a post office and other professional services that are typically found in mature communities. As the year-round population increases these services may find the demand to locate in town. The high real estate prices and lease rates may discourage the development of these community amenities.

3.5 Development Pressures Intensify

The town is affected by strong development pressures that exist along the entire shore of Delaware. In particular, extensive rezoning of agricultural properties for residential and commercial uses in Sussex County is leading to development of many thousands of new housing units, many of them along the SR 54 Corridor that links Fenwick and Ocean City to Route 113. Although still relatively “affordable” by east coast beach town standards, as of 2022, Sussex County was one of the fastest growing areas in the Mid-Atlantic for residential pricing, with a year over year price increase of 21.2%.

Figure 4.3-2 Development Activity in Sussex County



Source: Sussex County Comprehensive Plan, 2018

Areas immediately adjacent to Fenwick along SR 54 are affected as well. As of 2022, according to the Delaware Office of State Planning, in the area west of incorporated Fenwick, more than three-million square feet of commercial space has been approved for development. This is coupled with the approval of 9,000+ residential units to the west.

The town is almost fully built out, both on properties zoned for residential uses and those zoned for commercial uses. The demand for redevelopment is strong. There is

interest in expanding the capacity of buildings when redeveloped in both residential and commercial uses; however, resources available to respond to such demand is finite whether the intended purpose is residential or commercial. Responsible and responsive community development reflects constraints and applies due diligence to achieve effective stewardship of natural resources and community character.

Maintaining appropriate constraints on the scale and scope of new residential and commercial development and redevelopment is essential to sustaining the character of the town. Limiting activities and development that might harm or degrade the environment is vital to preserving a healthy family-oriented community and is important to town stakeholders, residential owners, commercial property owners/developers, and commercial tenants. Consistent enforcement of existing code regulations is essential. In some areas, code provisions may need to be strengthened.

These growth issues pose major challenges to the town to maintain its desired character and vitality for future generations.

3.6 Goal

Protect and maintain the quiet, low-scale, and primarily residential character of the town for future generations while maintaining a well-defined and vibrant business district along SR 1.

3.7 Direction for the Town

- Maintain and enhance zoning provisions that protect the town's character, particularly in regard to building height, lot coverage, floor area ratio, and parking ratios.
- Maintain the single-family detached use as the permitted use within the residential district.
- Consider a campaign to educate our residents and business owners about "Dark Skies".
- Consider a campaign to educate residents and business owners about the benefits of natural and restorative landscaping, including the preservation of mature trees.