

Town of Awendaw Comprehensive Plan

Town Council – First Reading

Thursday, May 2nd, 2024

7:30 PM

Awendaw Town Hall

6971 Doar Road, Awendaw, SC

PLAN DEVELOPMENT:

In the context of approving a comprehensive plan, consensus typically refers to a general agreement or harmony among the various stakeholders involved in the planning process. Different viewpoints are heard and discussed. Ultimately however, only items receiving general consensus are included in the Plan. Here's how consensus was developed in the Draft Comprehensive Plan:

1. **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:** The planning process included extensive public engagement to gather input from residents, businesses, community organizations, and other stakeholders. This included town hall meetings, surveys, workshops, and online forums. All of these tools, plus a Comp Plan Steering Committee formed to guide the development of the Plan.
2. **STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION:** Local government officials, planners, and consultants worked closely with residents and the Steering Committee to understand their concerns, priorities, and aspirations for the town's future development. This was part of the public engagement process described above.
3. **DRAFTING THE PLAN:** Based on the input received, COG planners drafted a comprehensive plan that outlines policies, goals, and strategies for various aspects of community development, such as land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental conservation.
4. **REVIEW AND REVISION:** The draft plan was circulated for review and feedback from the community and other stakeholders. This iterative process allowed for adjustments and revisions to address any concerns or suggestions raised during the review period.
5. **CONSENSUS BUILDING:** Through ongoing dialogue and negotiation, efforts were made to reconcile divergent viewpoints and interests to achieve a shared vision for the town's future. This involved compromise, trade-offs, and creative problem-solving to find solutions that are acceptable to the broad majority of stakeholders.
6. **FORMAL ADOPTION:** Once consensus is reached, the comprehensive plan is presented to the Town Council and planning commission, for formal adoption. This typically involves public meetings and a public hearing where stakeholders have an opportunity to express their support or opposition to the plan.
7. **MONITORING AND EVALUATION:** After adoption, the plan is implemented, and its effectiveness is monitored and evaluated over time. Periodic reviews may be conducted to assess progress, identify emerging issues, and make adjustments as needed to ensure that the plan remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

Overall, consensus-building in the approval of a Comprehensive Plan for Awendaw involved a collaborative and inclusive process that strives to balance competing interests and aspirations while promoting the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

PLAN FRAMEWORK

The proposed Comprehensive Plan update outlines the goals, vision, character, and lifestyle of Awendaw residents. In short, the Comprehensive Plan is a long-range planning document that highlights the shared vision of a community and outlines strategies and recommendations that work to achieve this vision. When implemented, these strategies and recommendations can work to improve the quality of life of residents, cultivate community pride and character, foster economic growth, protect cultural, historic, and natural resources, and invest in human and capital infrastructure.

As with any comprehensive plan's development, the planning process was key to enabling the community to create a plan that embodies the vision and character of the community. Awendaw, being a mostly rural community, has created a plan focused on preserving and enhancing the rural character, identity, and lifestyle that the community has cultivated over time, while still addressing some of the key issues, like the environment, overdevelopment, and housing affordability. The first half of the planning process (Jan-June 2023) focused on gathering Town Council and the Steering Committee's input and insight on what they think are the key issues facing Awendaw. Through these exchanges and discussions, 10 Guiding Principles were drafted to frame the remainder of the plan and once adopted, guide any future policy and development decisions within the Town. These guiding principles along with an inventory of existing conditions were then used in drafting the final sections of the comp plan, particularly the implementation strategies and action plan.

The public participation and vetting process began on June 22, 2023 at the Public Open House and continued for three months through an online public participation survey. During this time, the remaining sections of the comp plan were drafted in preparation for the first round of reviews at the third and final Steering Committee Meeting (held in Oct 2023). Following that meeting, outstanding revisions were made to the draft plan including major discussion topics and/or recommendations. These topics and recommendations are summarized in this report for consideration.

Key Components, Discussions, Strategies, and Recommendations

Throughout the planning process, it became clear through the various interviews, conversations, and survey responses that the preservation of Awendaw's rural character is one of, if not the top, concern facing the community now and in the future. As discussed in the Introduction Section of the Comp Plan (page 7), the Town of Awendaw is at an inflection point. The Town's long-standing synergy between man and nature has been a calling card for the community as many of Awendaw's most unique and character-defining features revolve around the rural nature of the community and the rural lifestyles of the residents. However, as noted in the Population and Housing Elements (in Appendix A), the Town of Awendaw has experienced an unprecedented amount of growth since the turn of the century (a 38% population increase between 2000 and 2020). The strategies and recommendations outlined in this Plan are intended to steer policy decisions toward creating a more sustainable rural community which maintains the Town's character-defining rural lifestyle. In the case of Awendaw, the primary method for accomplishing that is through the strategic use of conservation, land use, and design policies, guidelines, and regulations.

Implementation Strategies 1 and 2: Environmental Stewardship and Enhance what is Existing

Oftentimes, land use patterns and regulations are heavily influenced by other elements of a community, including its natural resources, community facilities, and economic development, hence the purpose of Implementation Strategies 1 and 2. These strategies identify complementary policies and recommendations centered around the natural environment, community identity, and cultural resources, that would enhance or work alongside land use and growth policies to preserve Awendaw's rural character and achieve the vision of the community. Some of the topics discussed include:

- **Conservation of Land and Resources** – Currently, about 30-35% of land within the Town of Awendaw is protected through various conservation methods. Protecting natural resources through conservation efforts, best management practices, and resiliency planning will be crucial in maintaining and enhancing the Town's rural character. Partnering with and supporting various agencies and organizations in their conservation efforts can have lasting impacts on the rural landscape and character of Awendaw.

- **Conservation Subdivision or Cluster Developments** – Being a good steward to the environment requires the use of sustainable growth and development practices as well as conservation efforts. This land use tool/policy is an effective strategy used to prioritize conservation and open space while still allowing growth and development. This strategy, coupled with character-preserving design guidelines, provides Awendaw a means to gradually transition from the village nodes to rural countryside. It is important to note that current zoning regulations do not support Cluster Developments unless the developer opts to prepare a Planned Development which would allow for a slightly higher density in exchange for larger conserved areas and the ability for the Town to better negotiate in regards to design guidelines, amenities, and other character defining features.
- **Invest in Parks and Recreation** – Awendaw’s potential for outdoor recreation is virtually unparalleled in the Lowcountry. A top priority for the Town moving forward should be the completion of the Awendaw Town Park and adjacent Wappetaw Trail. These projects could be used as a catalyst for economic development, particularly in the eco-tourism/outdoor recreation industry.

Implementation Strategy 3: Strategic Growth

Over the past 2 years, the Town of Awendaw has approved nearly 800 new single-family housing units for development, effectively doubling the population and number of households in Awendaw by 2030. This has likely bolstered a growing opposition to and concern about overdevelopment in Awendaw. This strategy focuses on the quality of growth rather than the quantity of growth.

- **Quality Development** – Through the use of targeted architectural design guidelines and land use regulations, future development can draw upon the existing rural character of the community to enhance the Town’s sense of place. These policies, guidelines, and regulations would prioritize compatible land uses, complimentary density, and quality building design. An example of this would be the Sewee Outpost and the Dollar General in McClellanville.
- **Environmental Sensitivity** – There is a growing concern over the environmental impacts that new development may have on the abundance and quality of the adjacent natural resources. Based on the public survey results, there was support for an environmentally sensitive district which resulted in the creation of the Conservation Residential future land use designation.

Future Land Use Map and Designations

The primary tool for preserving Awendaw’s rural character is through strategic land use planning and zoning regulations. Due to the oftentimes contentious nature of development decision making, it is important that the Town’s top priority – the preservation of rural character- is clearly reflected in both name and description. It is important to note that the proposed land use designations are intended to simply describe general land use activities that should be encouraged within those areas, rather than specific uses. Using current land use patterns as a starting point (see Land Use Element in Appendix A), the future land use designations take into consideration the existing or current conditions of the community, input from the public, stakeholders, and various committees and commissions, modern planning practices, and the goals and strategies outlined throughout this plan.

Based on these considerations, seven future land use designations are identified, each focusing on different character defining features of the community.

- | | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Conservation | 2. Parks | 3. Conservation Residential | 4. Rural Residential |
| 5. Village Residential | 6. Village Center | 7. Town Center | |

Steering Committee Discussion Topics:

- **Conservation Subdivision** - This topic was discussed at length during the final Steering Committee Meeting. Although committee members were initially confused at the concept, purpose, and applicability of this tool/policy, once a general understanding of the strategy was achieved, it received overall support.
- **Separation of Commercial Services** – The Steering Committee generally agreed that businesses oriented towards travelers and truckers (US 17 traffic) should be focused in the Village Center nodes rather than the Town Center node.
- **Creation of a Town Center** – The concept of creating an Awendaw Town Center received overall support. Land uses ideal for a Town Center would be local service-based businesses like restaurants, retailers, and other service-based businesses. Additionally, eco-tourism-based businesses should be promoted everywhere.
- **Land Use Density** – While going over the different Future Land Use designations, some questions regarding the density numbers were brought up. It is their thought that if some residential districts have a density range within the description, then they all should which would require Planning Commission and/or Town Council to choose a density or density range.
- **Affordable/Attainable Housing** – Likely the longest discussion, the Steering Committee and Staff discussed options on how to promote affordable housing while also decreasing density (and therefore increasing housing value). Accessory Dwelling Units were brought up as a potential solution, however, no definitive direction to provide for attainable housing was agreed upon.
- **Continued Support for Heirs Property** – While on the topic of housing, a question was raised regarding heirs' properties. A primary issue is the inability of these properties to subdivide into smaller properties due to the uncertainty of legal ownership. Adding a policy reinforcing support for the continuation of heirs' property was recommended.
 - Recommended Strategy – Upon proof of legal heirs' property, the Code could be amended to permit more than two dwelling units upon a single unsubdivided property assuming the overall lot dimensions and density is not exceeded

Planning Commission Action:

In February 2024, Awendaw's Planning Commission passed a resolution to formally recommend the plan for approval by Town Council.

Next Steps:

The process is now at the stage for Town Council to discuss any questions, comments, or general concerns. As per State Code, the first of at least two readings of the draft Comprehensive Plan update will occur at the May 2nd 2024 Town Council Meeting. After this meeting, the Plan will enter a final Public vetting period, which must last for at least 30 days. During this time period, members of the public as well as Town Council and any other public official may submit their comments to Town Staff (either Mark or Takeya) for consideration.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Comprehensive Plan is based on Ten Guiding Principles that will protect and enhance the natural beauty and rural lifestyle of the Town. The Comprehensive Plan elements directly support and implement these principles:

1. COMMUNITY CHARACTER

The Awendaw Community is dedicated to preserving, enhancing, and restoring the Town's character as a rural, coastal, and forest community.

2. RURAL LIFESTYLE

The Awendaw Community recognizes and supports the fishing, wildlife, and forest lifestyles including the historic Gullah/Geechee people of the Town as unique and defining attributes.

3. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Awendaw Community seeks to preserve, protect, enhance, and restore the Town's riparian corridors, woodlands, and wetlands to protect its wildlife and natural habitat, and to maintain its scenic bay vistas and tranquil environment.

4. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The Awendaw Community believes that the built environment should be subordinate, sensitive, and complementary to the natural environment, setting, and, specific site conditions to minimize disturbance to terrain, conserve visual resources, and protect open space. The Community supports low-country architectural and site design requirements that set forth community expectations and ensure quality.

5. RURAL DENSITY

The Awendaw Community strives to avoid the suburbanization of its Town by limiting rural residential density to a maximum of three units per acre in the densest locations at major roadway intersections called "village nodes" and then decreasing sharply as you move toward town peripheries. Planned communities will incorporate considerable open space and natural areas into their designs and will reflect the density of the underlying land use zoning.

6. CIRCULATION

The Awendaw Community promotes safe and convenient circulation for all modes of travel throughout the Town; on Town roads, trails, and paths.

7. COMMERCIAL SERVICES

The Awendaw Community desires commercial services and facilities that meet the frequently recurring needs of the residents and the occasional needs of highway travelers. The Community feels that a key economic driver for the sustainability of the Town will be eco-tourism and businesses that support this endeavor.

8. SAFETY

Awendaw strives to protect persons and property from unreasonable exposure to natural hazards, such as hurricane activity, fire, unstable terrain, storms, and flood, by continuously improving regulations, policies, and procedures to reflect current best management practices

9. COMMUNITY CULTURE

Awendaw favors a community culture that encourages citizen involvement, individual expression, and diversity, and recognizes the interdependence with neighboring communities and responsibility as good citizens within the region, State, and nation.

10. SUSTAINABILITY

The Awendaw Community seeks to be a good steward of the land. The goal is to promote the conservation of resources and utilize sustainable practices that recognize the connection to, and interdependence with, the natural environment.

FUTURE LAND USE ELEMENT

The primary tool for preserving Awendaw's rural character is through strategic land use planning. Due to the oftentimes contentious nature of future land use planning, it is important that the Town's top priority – the preservation of rural character – is clearly reflected in both the name and description of the future land use designations. However, it is important to note that these designations are intended to simply provide recommendations on general land use activities that should be encouraged within those areas, rather than specific uses. Like most other recommendations outlined in this plan, future land use designations will work to help preserve the rural character of the community.

Future land use planning is heavily influenced by the different elements of the community, particularly its natural resources, community facilities, infrastructure, and transportation network. Using current land use patterns as a starting point (see Land Use Element in Appendix A), the future land use designations take into consideration the existing or current conditions of the community, input from the public, stakeholders, and various committees and commissions, modern planning practices, and the goals and strategies outlined throughout this plan. Based on these considerations, there were seven future land use designations identified, each focusing on different character defining features of the community.

Conservation/Protected Lands: The Conservation/Protected Lands designation includes all properties owned by the National Forest Service, National Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Avian Conservation Center.

Parks: The Parks land use designation includes the Awendaw Town Park site and the property owned by the Charleston Parks Foundation.

Conservation Residential: This land use designation is intended to prioritize the preservation of natural resources and the community's rural character. Common land uses include single-family homes, manufactured homes, and agriculture. Conservation Subdivisions would be permitted in this district only. This would be the least dense residential district recommended in this plan.

Rural Residential: The Rural Residential land use designation serves as a transitional district between the Conservation Residential and Village Residential. This land use designation comprises mostly of smaller parcels concentrated along local streets or driveways. The most common land uses include single-family and manufactured homes. Ideal lot sizes would be anywhere between 1 to 2 acres.

Village Residential: The densest residential land use designation, Village Residential includes areas along the periphery of the Town's Commercial Nodes. Most of the recently approved residential subdivisions were included in this district largely due to the density of the development. Ideal lot sizes would be anywhere between 30,000 sf to 1 acre.

Village Center: This land use designation is primarily along US 17 and is intended to allow for certain commercial development that provide goods and services to residents and visitors.

Town Center: Similar to the Village Center, the Town Center area is almost entirely focused around US 17. It is recommended that permissible land uses be slightly different than the Village Center, with the Town Center focusing specifically on small shop service and retail units that serve residents and travelers.

