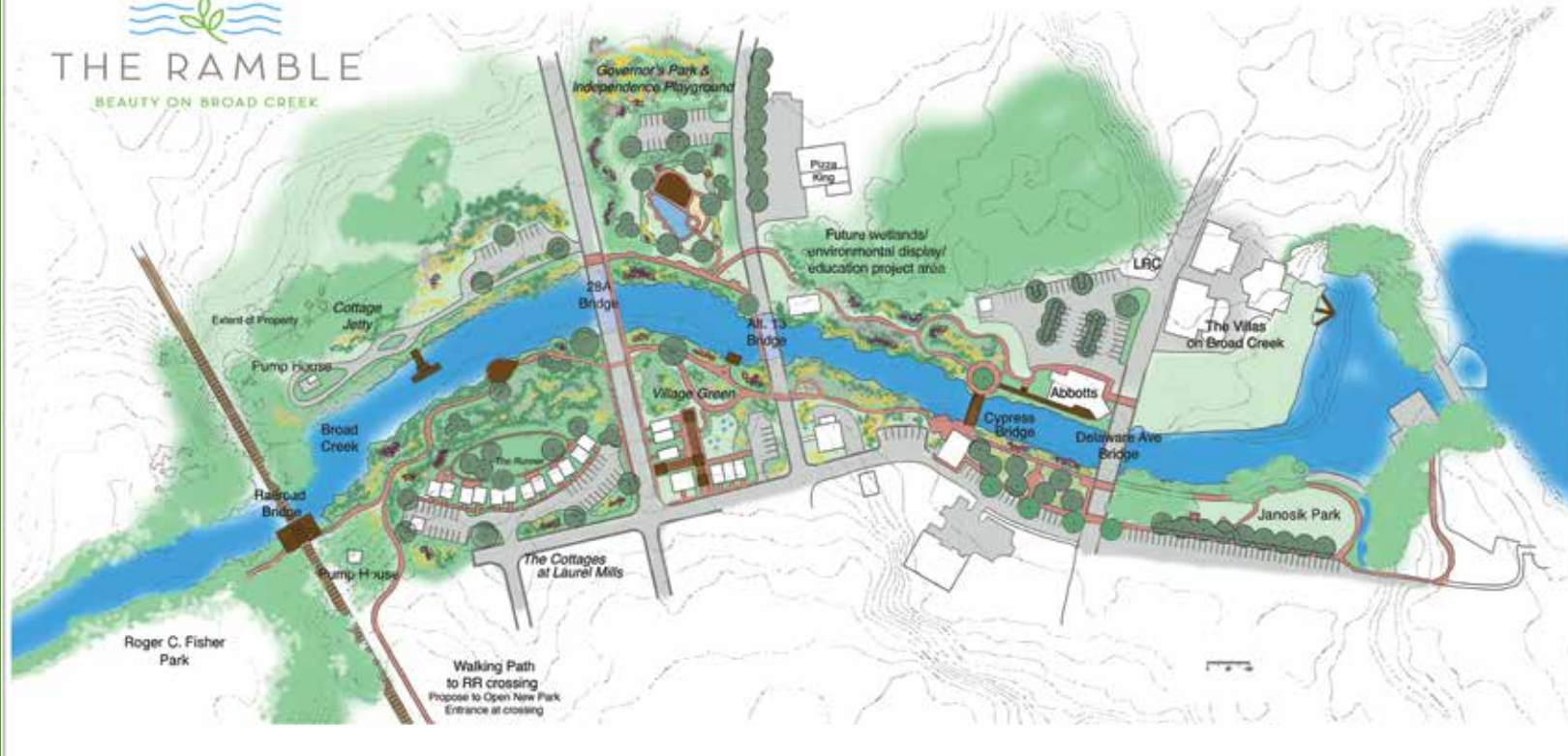


THE RAMBLE
BEAUTY ON BROAD CREEK



Laurel, Delaware

Base Camp to Nanticoke Country

A Nature & Heritage Tourism Plan for Laurel, DE

2016



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This project would not have been possible with the very generous support of the Laurel Community and the state of Delaware. Thanks especially to the partners below for their time, energy, funding, and additional contributions to this report.

PROJECT SPONSORS



PROJECT PARTNERS



STATEMENT OF OPPORTUNITY

Laurel, Delaware, a historic Sussex County town of 3,983 on a tributary of the Nanticoke River, is surrounded by valuable natural and historical assets. Despite economic challenges, the town's Broad Creek waterfront has recently awoken from its idle slumber.

To revitalize Laurel's waterfront, the successful Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC) and local stakeholders, including town leaders, have partnered on a sweeping plan and proposal known as the Laurel Ramble.



The brainchild of this effort was on display in September 2015 with the "Fall Ramble along Broad Creek" where the sights, sounds, tastes and experiences of a revitalized waterfront along Laurel's Broad Creek were offered to residents and visitors to the town.

But the effort's tendrils extend beyond the waterfront's bricks and mortar. A key component of economic revitalization is tourism and the infusion of dollars it brings to local communities. Laurel's location in the mid-Atlantic, with its abundance of nearby natural assets, render the town uniquely positioned to become the region's next "Trail Town." For this reason, a significant component of this unified effort includes a nature and heritage tourism assessment and implementation plan for the once vivacious village.

With a unified strategy, Laurel can reap the economic rewards generated by the increasingly rare beauty of the area's parks, farms, and fields and their associated rich history. Visitors to Sussex County list cycling, historic sites, museums, boating, and paddling in their top 10 activities. In Delaware, outdoor recreation generates \$4 billion annually in spending, and wildlife watching generates \$169 million.



Launching from your base camp in Laurel

You can explore by boat or bike from a quaint, small town with more than 800 buildings on the National Historic Register, and travel along a beautiful creek and river with connections to both Captain John Smith and Harriet Tubman.

A beginning kayaker can get some practice on a quiet millpond, and a more advanced paddler can launch from the headwaters of Broad Creek to tour the Nanticoke River.

A cyclist can explore flat, scenic roads through the rural Sussex County landscape, and stop to rest in historic Bethel, the Woodland Ferry, or at Trap Pond State Park.

A birdwatcher can tally more than 130 species just by visiting the nearby birding hotspots at Trap Pond and the Nanticoke Wildlife Area.

With the Laurel redevelopment effort in full swing, the time to tap this lucrative tourism market is now. Paddlers, cyclists, birders, and heritage tourists have options. One of their best options is Laurel, Delaware. Showing this to them with planning, teamwork, and determination can help return the town to its former grandeur.



Harriet Tubman



PROCESS

With assistance from the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and the University of Delaware Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative, Conservation Community Consulting, LLC was tapped in the fall of 2015 to initiate a process to explore nature and heritage tourism opportunities within and around Laurel.

The process began with a questionnaire delivered to a large cross section of Laurel residents and visitors during the “Fall Ramble along Broad Creek” on September 26, 2015. Participants detailed what they liked and disliked most about Laurel and helped map locations they visited most by pinning them on a 3’x5’ map.

Using this information along with substantial input provided by town leaders and Ramble organizers, 14 local stakeholders and regional tourism professionals joined forces on Nov. 10–11 to participate in a 1.5-day workshop.



A Fall Ramble participant points out some of her favorite spots around Laurel. During the event, visitors were asked to pinpoint three things they liked and three things they didn’t like in and around Laurel. See results on p. 12.

PARTICIPANT	ORGANIZATION
Brian Shannon	Laurel Redevelopment Corporation
Ed Lewandowski	Sustainable Coastal Communities, Delaware Sea Grant
Jamie Smith	Town of Laurel
Don Dykes	Laurel Chamber of Commerce
Lee Ann Walling	Cedar Creek Sustainable Planning Services
Dan Parsons	Sussex County Historic Preservation
Will Koth	Trap Pond State Park
Beth Wasden	Nanticoke Watershed Alliance
Gareth Deitzel	Coldwell Banker Resort Realty
Lisa Challenger	Worcester County (MD) Tourism
Michael Day	Snow Hill (MD) Economic Development
Chris Bennett	DE Dept. of Natural Resources & Environmental Control
Debbie Mitchell	Travel Debi
Dave Wilson	Conservation Community Consulting
Jim Rapp	Conservation Community Consulting



Laurel tourism stakeholders, left to right: Lee Ann Walling, Jamie Smith, Gareth Deitzel, Don Dykes, Lisa Challenger (kneeling), Beth Wasden, Dan Parsons, Michael Day, Ed Lewandowski, Brian Shannon, Dave Wilson, and Will Koth.

The group boarded a bus from Trap Pond State Park and started their tour in town along Broad Creek. From there, they were delivered to museums, historic buildings, boat ramps, millponds, and birdwatching sites around Laurel. The bus served as a mobile brainstorming office, with ideas and opportunities shouted from every seat throughout the day. A video summary of the day can be watched at www.ReimagineLaurel.net.

The rigorous multi-day event also included:

- an audit of existing trails, resources, and marketing tools
- a mapping charette of Laurel's nature & heritage tourism resources
- recommendations for new themes, trail and

resource enhancements, development and redevelopment opportunities, and marketing strategies

- a rough final presentation to the workshop participants of all findings and suggestions, which were used to inform this final report

The affair was capped off by a visit from Berlin, Maryland Mayor Gee Williams who enjoyed a dinner with Laurel Mayor John Shwed and the tour participants at Abbott's Grill. There, Mayor Williams relayed success stories that helped Berlin become "America's Coolest Small Town," a recognition the town earned in 2014 from Budget Travel.

After numerous additional stakeholder meetings and a presentation to the Laurel Town Council,

this final report was created to detail the objectives, goals, stakeholders, process, and recommendations from the group.

The goal of the final report is to:

- identify existing trail and marketing themes and connections between Laurel, the Nanticoke River, and natural and historic resources in Sussex County and beyond.
- recommend enhancements to existing trails and resources for paddlers, cyclists, birders, and heritage tourists.
- ensure long-term stakeholder-based involvement through a core committee of decision-makers who commit to an implementation timeline and at least quarterly follow up with Conservation Community Consulting, LLC in 2016.

- recommend development or redevelopment opportunities to support nature & heritage tourism.
- recommend marketing strategies to help Laurel attract nature & heritage tourists.
- provide information that will support a branding strategy for Laurel.
- seek consultative, organizational, and grant seeking support.

This report includes an implementation schedule and funding mechanisms. Presentations on the final report will be provided for the Town of Laurel, the University of Delaware Sea Grant College Program, and the Delaware Economic Development Office.



Berlin, MD Mayor Gee Williams (left) speaks with Laurel Mayor John Shwed (center) and workshop participants.

LAUREL HISTORY/BACKGROUND

Laurel, Delaware was founded in 1683 and plotted in 1802 after the sale of an Indian reservation on the current site. The site had been a Nanticoke Indian settlement known as Broad Creek during most of the eighteenth century. Incorporated in 1883, the town was named for the Laurel trees growing along the creek's banks under the giant cypress and deciduous trees that once lined its banks.

With nearly 2,500 residents through most of the second half of the nineteenth century, Laurel was then considered one of the wealthiest towns in the state. As late as 1899, the town consisted of eleven general stores, seven grocery stores, five millinery, three clothing, three drug and two furniture stores, one carriage factory, one sawmill, two blacksmith shops, two wheelwright shops, two butcher shops, two shoe shops, two barber shops, two hotels, five physicians, one dentist, and three churches. Not surprisingly, Laurel also is home to more historic

buildings than any town in Delaware with 800 structures on the National Historic Record.

This is despite several tragedies. In the summer of 1899 a lighted kerosene lamp was overturned in a stairway near Central Avenue and Market Street. Without fire-fighting apparatus, the entire section of the north side of Market Street was destroyed.

Then in 1904, one of the most unusual and oft recounted train accidents took place over Broad Creek when the engineer of the Norfolk Express failed to yield to the open draw bridge and smashed through the draw, landing on top of a schooner. The engineer was killed, but the legend says a quick-thinking baggage handler uncoupled the passenger cars to save all onboard.

But the town remained resilient.



A stunned Laurel citizenry emerges after the Norfolk Express failed to yield to an open drawbridge and landed on top of a schooner over Broad Creek in 1904. The unique incident has a historic allure which the town should capitalize on.

Over Laurel's years of existence, the town has had five persons from the area serve as governors of the state. Nathaniel Mitchell (1805–1808); John Collins (1821–1825); William Barkley Cooper (1841–1845); William Ross (1851–1855); and Elbert Nortrand Carvel (1949–1953 and 1961–1965).

Laurel's current population stands at 3,983 residents. The racial makeup of the town is approximately 55.6% White, 39.4% African American, 2.3% Latino, and 2.8% other ethnicities.

There are around 1,400 households with an average household size of 2.64 and an average family size of 3.19 people. Some 33.2% are under the age of 18, 10.6% from 18 to 24, 26.5% from 25

to 44, 16.7% from 45 to 64, and 12.9% who are 65 years of age or older. The median age is 30 years. For every 100 females there are 83.1 males.

The median per household income is \$28,321. The per capita income for the town is \$13,589. About 18.7% of families and 21.2% of the population are below the poverty line, including 33.6% of those under age 18 and 11.4% of those age 65 or over.

The 2013 U.S. Census data for Laurel indicates that 891 people drive into Laurel for work from outside communities, and 2,038 Laurel residents leave Laurel to work outside the town limits. Only 87 people both live and work in Laurel town limits.



Old Christ Church, c. 1772. Located beside Chipman's Pond two miles east of Laurel, this historic church is one of the few remaining unaltered wooden structures of its vintage in the United States.

THE LAUREL REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



The Fall Ramble on Broad Creek was designed to give town leaders and residents an idea of what is possible in their town, including a creek-side walking path.

In 1992, a group of community-minded citizens and business leaders formed the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC) specifically for the purpose of rehabilitating and revitalizing the creekside and blighted areas of downtown. Within months of its founding, the LRC removed the worst of the derelict buildings on Market Street and initiated projects and improvements in cooperation with the town.

During the ensuing years, the LRC purchased extensive property along Broad Creek, in the Oldtown residential neighborhood, and in commercial Downtown Laurel, replacing them with parks and new office space. Where vintage commercial buildings were salvageable, they were renovated and leased to small entrepreneurial firms.

Today, all property along the Broad Creek waterfront is owned by either the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation or the Town of Laurel. Walkable parks, entrepreneurial jobs, and upscale villas have replaced run-down buildings and blighted areas. The LRC has been an integral partner in efforts to brand and revitalize the central business area.

In 2014, LRC, Town of Laurel and the University of Delaware joined forces to create the Laurel Ramble project and its “Fall Ramble Along Broad Creek” on September 26, 2015. The day-long festival recreated the experience of a revitalized downtown with pop-up shops, artists, food vendors, a playground, and winding walking path along Broad Creek.

The project's purpose was to work with the community to suggest ideas for the revitalization of the downtown and to provide specific landscape design recommendations for the waterfront. The event was designed to bring attention to the proposed redevelopment plan for Laurel's downtown commercial district.

Three specific objectives for the project were:

- To improve the sense of connectedness through a user-friendly greenway extending between existing parks.
- To design a highly visible residential project, consistent with the architectural style of the town and ecological restoration values.
- To propose a mixed-use design alternative for Thompson Block, to be included in the long-term vision of the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation.

The group's vision embraces the asset Broad Creek but also takes into account its challenges, e.g., location in a floodplain. Goals include a nature-based park for children, cottage-style homes, a kayak launch, village green area, emphasis on nature tourism, and new businesses that support the vision for the project and town.

The project continues to attract funding for continued planning, design of green infrastructure best practices, branding, nature tourism marketing potential and other supportive activities. The current amount of energy and resources coming to and flowing from the town bodes well for its future.

For more Laurel redevelopment, the Ramble, and Better Block, including Story Maps about infrastructure, zoning and locating a business in Laurel, please visit www.ReimagineLaurel.net.

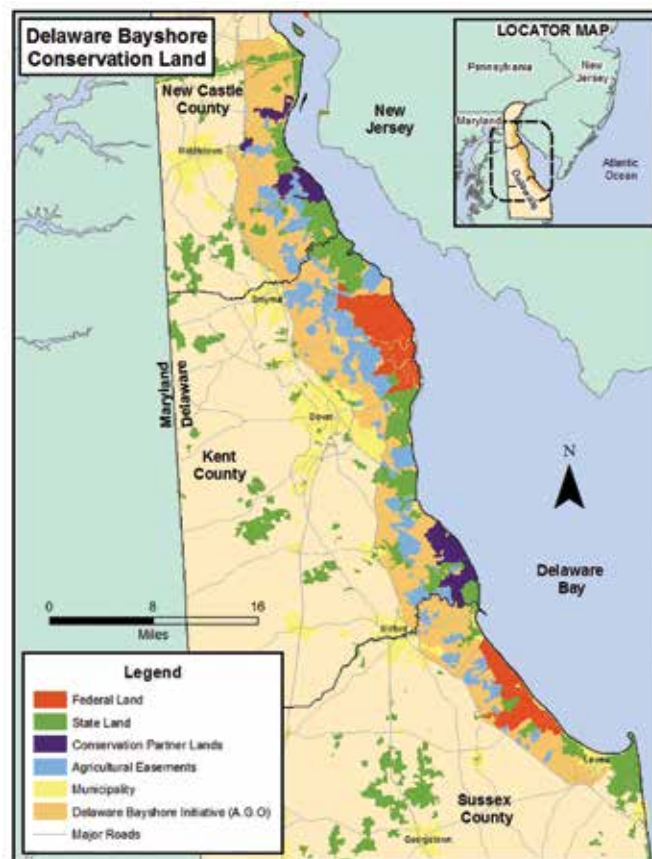


REGIONAL CONTEXT

Laurel is included in the Salisbury-MD-DE Metropolitan Area, newly created with the 2010 Census. It is an area of almost 375,000 people surrounding an urban center and adjacent areas that are socioeconomically tied to the center by commuting. The area spends over \$155 million annually on recreational pursuits. Recreation here includes fishing, boating, paddling, camping, cycling, and horseback riding. The town is well-known for its historic homes and nearby water recreation opportunities.

Laurel is 30 to 40 miles from the resorts of Lewes, Rehoboth Beach, and Bethany Beach. These coastal communities welcome millions of tourists

each summer to enjoy some of the finest Atlantic beaches in the U.S. Laurel is 30 miles from Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge and Slaughter Beach on the Delaware Bayshore. A collaborative effort known as the Delaware Bayshore Initiative has been built on the region’s reputation as a unique and beautiful natural resource, and to help improve the shoreline economy by encouraging more Delawareans and visitors to enjoy it through activities such as recreational fishing, hunting, boating and ecotourism. The Delaware Bayshore is one of the best locations in the Western Hemisphere to witness shorebird migration and horseshoe crab spawning.



Extending from Pea Patch Island to the City of Lewes, the Delaware Bay shoreline is recognized as an area of global ecological significance.

NATURE & HERITAGE TOURISM ASSESSMENT

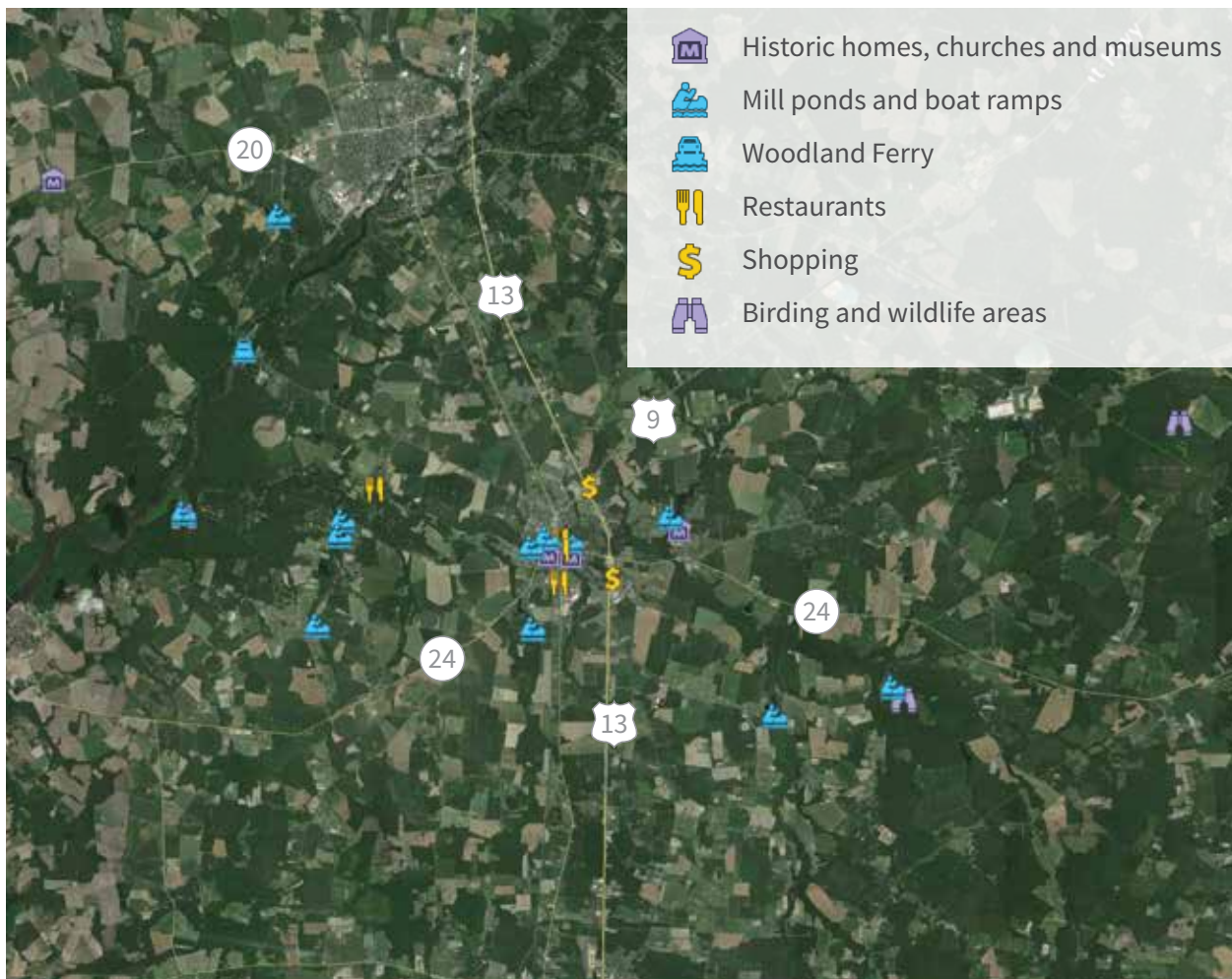
Conservation Community Consulting assessed the potential for nature and heritage tourism experiences in and around Laurel at the Fall

Ramble “Better Block” event on September 26, 2015, and during the 1.5-day workshop held with Laurel stakeholders on November 10–11, 2015.

Results from Fall Ramble “Better Block” survey

Conservation Community Consulting interviewed 46 visitors to the Laurel Ramble “Better Block” event between 11 am and 4 pm. Visitors were asked to pin interesting nature and heritage sites to a map of Laurel and the surrounding region.

This is available in a separate Google Map link:
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zsYFyVvXY9-U.ksfQXq5v6VyE&usp=sharing>



The Google map of Laurel and the surrounding region visually displays the rich array of nature and heritage tourism resources.

Visitors were asked the following questions. Answers were recorded using hash marks for each category:

- 1) If you had a friend or relative visiting Laurel, what are three things you would want to show them, or three things you would want to do, or three places you would want to visit?



POPULARITY RANKING BASED ON NUMBER OF TIMES LISTED	ACTIVITY
1	Lunch at Abbott’s on Broad Creek Walking tour of Laurel’s historic homes/architecture
2	Visit Trap Pond State Park, take pontoon boat trip Tour Bethel
3	Kayak Trussum Pond Launch boat or kayak at Phillips Landing Woodland Ferry Visit Old Christ Church Laurel Flea Market
4	Launch boat or kayak at Fisher Park boat ramp Walk along Laurel Ramble/Broad Creek Explore trains and railways Walk wooded trails Shop at Johnny Janosik and furniture stores Kayak from Abbott’s to Phillips Landing
5	Visit Craigs Mill Pond Walk from Laurel to nearby natural areas Eat at Laurel pizza shops Laurel Train Station & Seaford Train Station Hope House on 6th Street Breakfast at Britt’s Dutch Inn Turtle viewing on local waterways Fishing Bike path along Sharptown Road Patty Cannon House Watch Bald Eagles

2) If you had a friend or relative visiting Laurel, what are three things you would want to avoid, or three things that might be an impediment to their experience?

POPULARITY RANKING BASED ON NUMBER OF TIMES LISTED	ACTIVITY
1	Corridor along Route 13 is an eyesore
2	Boat launch at Records Pond behind truck stop is unsafe Hudson Lane in Burnt Swamp is a party spot Some sections of Laurel are run down Getting stuck in boat above train bridge in Blades Spillways around mill ponds need to be cleaned Trails on some DNREC properties need to be mowed more Too many goose droppings along Broad Creek Some parts of Laurel feel unsafe



Market Street in downtown Laurel.

STRENGTH/WEAKNESS/OPPORTUNITY/THREAT (SWOT) ANALYSIS

Laurel stakeholders completed a SWOT analysis on November 10–11, 2015:



STRENGTH

- Partners at table: town, state, business
- Ramble & Better Block event: community buy-in
- Control of town assets & property
- Largest density of historic structures in DE (800)
- Flea Market, Johnny Janosik
- Trap Pond
- Mill ponds
- Broad Creek
- Shipbuilding history, Windjammers: Bethel
- Public access point in Bethel
- Halfway point at Koch
- Existing events: Bike & Brew, weddings, Woodland Ferry Festival, Strawberry Festival,
- 4th of July, Riverfest



OPPORTUNITY

- Position Laurel as center for nature & heritage tourism
- Beauty on Broad Creek
- Gateway/Base Camp to Nanticoke Country
- Vacant houses that could be converted to B&B
- Improve Route 13, direct tourists to Ramble Eat.Drink.Buy Art. - DE involved already through DEDO
- Zoning ordinances to balance growth
- Other existing resources: online, print Laurel Comp Plan
- Training for local planners (planning concepts, best practices, design guidelines) - consult Glenn Irwin/Ocean City Development Corp.
- Shipbuilding property for sale
- Old Sailor's Path: Laurel to Bethel trail
- Boundless Playground (ADA accessible)
- Improved signs
- Graduated paddling opportunities
- Historic weddings
- Ghost tours
- Agricultural Tourism
- Delaware Bayshore Initiative
- Harriet Tubman connection along Nanticoke
- Stargazing



WEAKNESS

- Overnight accommodations
- Route 13 corridor
- High housing rental rate in historic district (absentee landlords)
- Code enforcement
- Current wayfinding signs (200 heritage signs are coming this spring)
- Relationship with state fish & wildlife
- Broad Creek needs cleaning up between Laurel & Bethel (downed trees)
- No infrastructure for heritage tourism



THREAT

- Bad development that doesn't fit this vision (County-wide)
- Politics, getting in line with what town residents want
- Tubman Byway is mostly upstate
- County zoning
- Segregated areas
- Residents leave Laurel to work
- National Bass Tournament at Phillips Landing

LAUREL'S TOURISM ASSETS & THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Tourism assets: Within a one-mile radius around the Laurel Ramble

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Abbott's Grill	Nestled downtown on Broad Creek, Abbott's Grill serves fresh, locally sourced American cuisine. The restaurant is a destination, not a convenience stop, and should be used heavily in marketing to draw traffic to the town. During the ramble survey, Abbott's won the top spot for number one reason people visited Laurel.
Record Baldcypress	A beautiful, giant Baldcypress tree is located on Broad Creek next to Abbott's Grill. Locals may take it for granted, but tourists would come to town just to see it.
Cook House Museum/Laurel Historical Society	Owned by the Laurel Historical Society, the Cook House on East 4th Street makes up part of Laurel's rich history. In addition to being the Society's home, it is a well-restored part of the town's more than 800 historic structures. The importance of having a Historical Society in town for both marketing and tourism information cannot be understated.
Hitchens House	According to the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design, this historic structure is one of Delaware's most significant Gothic Revival cottages after the style of Andrew Jackson Downing. Finding information on the home is difficult as it is not marketed but it provides the kind of story and rich history Americans yearn for.
Studley House	Dating as far back as 1830, the Historical Society-owned house with the three-stepped, telescopic frame is a site to see. Once restoration is complete, the house will provide another draw to the town for heritage tourists.

1
MILE



Cook House.

1
MILE

ASSET

DESCRIPTION

Laurel Heritage Museum

A historic gem, the Laurel Heritage Museum, housed in the Laurel Train Station, boasts an incredible collection of artifacts and photos dating back more than 200 years. The Waller Photographic Collection alone provides one of the best reasons to visit Laurel. The museum should be a focal point of tourism efforts.

Historic homes

The 800 historic homes that line the streets of Laurel comprise what should be a lucrative tourism draw. Unfortunately, the town struggles to keep historic homes viable due to renters occupying the structures. The town should consider updating building codes and renter occupancy laws to ensure the long-term protection of the town’s heritage. Few things are more critical to the viability of downtowns than investment in appearance. The historic homes walking tour brochure provides an excellent marketing piece but needs to be available electronically.



Laurel tourism stakeholders visited the Laurel Heritage Museum on Nov. 10, 2015.

**1
MILE**

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Fisher Park Boat Ramp	Named after the second African American to serve as a mayor in Delaware, this recreational jewel should be a focal tourism lure. However, its location behind a car lot and cryptic entrance should be improved with signage and an effort to work with the car lot owner to make the area more inviting. The park is ripe for additional town-sponsored and regional events, should such improvements occur.
Records Pond	Replete with boat ramp and kayak launch, the pond represents an essential element of the town's history, its natural assets, and thus its tourism draw. The unique story of the train derailment alone could bring thousands to the town annually should more effort be put into advertising and on-site guideposts or waymarkers. The new kayak launch could be fused with this effort and should be heavily promoted.
Laurel Coffee Shop	People, especially locals, love the Laurel Coffee Shop for its fresh, home-made donuts and friendly service. Its East Market Street location makes it a convenient stroll from almost anywhere downtown. Home-made donuts should be an essential part of marketing Laurel's authenticity to would-be tourists.
Britt's Dutch Inn	This quaint diner on the south side of town is known for its big portions of comfort food. Its quintessential Eastern Shore fare has been fattening up locals for years, but its marketability comes from its authentic Sussex County dishes and seasoning that you can't truly get in Philadelphia or D.C.
Pizza shops	Buttressed by Laurel Pizzeria and Pizza King, the town is famous for its pizza offerings. Brothers Pizza, Junction 9 Pizza & Grill and Domino's add to the delectable pie offerings. The town may be able to work with all six to coax motorists from US 13 or visitors from all over Sussex County into the town.



Kayaking on Trap Pond.



ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Laurel Farmers Auction Market	Since 1940, “The Block” has been famous for the quantity and quality of its fresh produce. It is one of the oldest and most established produce markets on the East Coast. The market operates six days a week from July until mid-September of each year, opening at 7 a.m. It is busiest during the Delaware-Maryland watermelon harvest, when about 2.3 million watermelons are sold.
Johnny Janosik’s World of Furniture	Normally the first thing that comes to mind when marketing a town for nature and heritage tourism is not furniture. But like Abbott’s Grill, Johnny Janosik’s World of Furniture on US 13 is a hub that draws a large cross section of the population from hundreds of miles around. Every effort should be made to work with the furniture giant to extend their patrons’ stay and convey to them the natural, cultural, and culinary assets that Laurel boasts.
U.S. 13	Route 13 presents a challenge to those trying to market Laurel as a unique, small town destination. While common and uninviting, its heavy traffic, and destinations like Johnny Janosik’s and the Laurel Flea Market (Rt. 13 Outlet Market) can be tapped to direct traffic downtown. While unnecessary and perhaps ill-advised to market US 13 as part of Laurel, large and inviting signage advertising Laurel’s natural and historical attractions and directing folks into town should be utilized.
Delaware Avenue	The appearance of a town’s ingress and egress is critical to how they are perceived. Delaware Avenue is the preferred thorofare into Laurel but it could use some TLC. Adjusting planning and zoning codes and finding state and federal dollars to improve this street would be a prudent long-term investment.
Paddling	Laurel should set its sights on being a Delmarva paddling hub. With a river running through town, Laurel has everything it needs to be the next paddling destination. The new kayak launch is a good first step but better accommodations, trail maps, and marketing of a “Cypress Paddling Trail” or “Delmarva Paddling Convention” could transform the town into a must-visit installation for the burgeoning mid-Atlantic paddling crowd.
Commercial District (in town)	Like Delaware Avenue and the town’s historic district, the commercial district is not particularly inviting to tourists. Unsightly structures and permissive building and zoning codes have rendered the area unfriendly to pedestrians or would-be tourists looking to stroll a quaint commercial district. Since commercial areas provide significant revenue for municipalities, Laurel should investigate how to improve this area with better zoning, streetscapes, and local businesses immune to U.S. 13 big box competition.

Tourism assets: Within a one- to five-mile radius around the Laurel Ramble

5
MILES

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Mr. Peppers Pumpkin Patch (3.4)	Just a few miles east of Laurel, Mr. Peppers Pumpkin Patch provides an on-the-farm experience perfect for families. The property includes a dozen varieties of you-pick pumpkins, a corn maze, hayrides, a barbeque shack, a picnic area and other agricultural attractions. It's an example of another nearby cultural asset that Laurel should associate with.
Old Christ Church (2.2)	Built in 1772, this historic Episcopal church sits at the edge of Chipman's Pond and is on the national historic register. One of the few remaining unaltered wooden structures of its age and type in the US, this gem should serve as a focal point of Laurel's heritage tourism efforts.
Bethel Shipyard (3.3)	Located in a perfect spot for a Nanticoke boat launch, this historic property is currently for sale. The state of Delaware should look closely at this economic development opportunity.
Bethel Store (3.5)	Built in 1900, the Bethel Store is a family-owned treasure tucked in quaint Bethel, Delaware along the Nanticoke. While the store has no website of its own, it provides another layer of originality for Laurel to market. Here, food orders still must be made in person.
Ed Koch Park (3.5)	This quaint launch provides a much-needed midway spot for paddlers from Laurel to the Nanticoke River. This fact should be advertised by the town in its efforts to attract both paddlers and providers.



Laurel tourism stakeholders visited Old Christ Church on Nov. 10, 2015.

**5
MILES**

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Historic Mill Ponds	The historic mill ponds surrounding Laurel are a tourism marketers dream. Combining both nature and history, the more than a dozen mill ponds within 10 miles of the town are perfect for curious birders, cyclists, or country road drivers. This is a huge tourism draw and Laurel is uniquely positioned to capitalize on it. Popular ponds within five miles of Laurel include: Trussum Pond (2.3), Horsey Pond (1.8), Portsville Mill Pond (3.6), Chipman Pond (2.2), Hitch Pond Road Launch (4.8) and Tussock Pond (4.5).
Phillips Landing (4.7)	This unspoiled landing by the Nanticoke Wildlife Area has numerous boat ramps and a floating pier. There is a Capt. John Smith monument here which is part of the Chesapeake Bay Historic Water Trail. Its picnic tables and restrooms are perfect for picnicking. However, due to stringent federal guidelines DNREC does not allow large gatherings at this launch. In many cases, they may not even allow birding or kayaking. This needs to change if Laurel is going to adequately market this underutilized asset.
Nanticoke Wildlife Area (4.9)	This 4,400-acre wilderness at the intersection of Broad Creek and the Nanticoke is replete with hiking, biking, and birding trails that can serve day-long adventures. For nearby urban dwellers looking for an adventure in nature, this is the place to reconnect. Visitors can park at Phillips Landing.



Captain John Smith historic marker at Phillips Landing.

Tourism assets: Within a five- to ten-mile radius around the Laurel Ramble

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Nanticoke River (5.8)	In addition to Broad Creek, Laurel’s other nearby liquid currency is the wildlife and heritage-rich Nanticoke River. Few rivers in the mid-Atlantic are as wild and scenic or can boast such a rich history. From Capt. John Smith to Harriet Tubman, stories are as fecund as the birds and fish that live in this beautiful place. As part of the Capt. John Smith National Historic Trail, a new kayak launch was also recently built at the site.
Tilly Site in Seaford (6.3)	Seaford’s Gateway Park is the former site of a hotel where Harriet Tubman and an escaped slave named Tilly spent the night. An historic sign marks the site.
Williams Pond & Soroptomist Park (6.5)	An historic mill pond and park near Seaford, DE, complete with a playground and a pavilion for parties.
Trap Pond State Park and Trussum Pond (6.7)	Perhaps one of Sussex County’s most beloved natural assets, Trap Pond State Park and Trussum Pond bring thousands of people to southern Delaware every year. The park’s ample opportunities for camping, fishing, hiking, stargazing, cycling, and kayaking fit nicely into Laurel’s desire to be a nature tourism destination. At less than 15 minutes from the park, Laurel provides the perfect small town setting for the outdoor-minded. In addition to enticing the park’s visitors to the town, the addition of paddling and cycling trails that traverse both the town and the park could prove lucrative.
Raccoon Pond (8.7)	Adjacent to Trap Pond, this 13.5-acre pond is not suitable for motorboats which renders it a particularly peaceful place to canoe and kayak. Its cypress-filled, shallow waters should be marketed as an essential stop for paddlers stationed in and around Laurel.
Patty Cannon House (8.5)	Reliance, Maryland, less than nine miles from Laurel, is home to the infamous Patty Cannon, the ruthless kidnapper, smuggler, and murderess whose early nineteenth century gang kidnapped and sold blacks back into slavery. She also allegedly killed her husband and more than a dozen other people whom she buried in her yard. Today, only a historic marker at the site recounts the decades-long villainous deeds of this wanton criminal. However, the story remains and Laurel is well-positioned to use this unfortunate slice of American history to its advantage.
Bethesda Church (8.5)	Owned and operated by the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation, this masterfully restored 19th century church sits along the park’s Loblolly Trail on Wootten Rd. The beautiful interior and bucolic setting is perfect for weddings or social gatherings. Whether courting guests from church events or simply adding it as a place to visit, Laurel should include the revered sanctuary in its heritage tourism efforts.



**10
MILES**

ASSET	DESCRIPTION
Hearns Pond (9.0)	Located three miles from Seaford, anglers will find a variety of fish here including white perch, pickerel, pumpkinseed, and largemouth bass.
Woodland Ferry (9.8)	This 200-year old tradition provides a great way to cross the Nanticoke River near Bethel. The breathtaking beauty of the crossing and its old-fashioned rustic feel make it a good selling point for heritage tourists.
Craig's Pond (9.6)	This 16-acre pond on Craig's Mill Rd is another paddling addition to the myriad water assets that Laurel can market. The pond has easy, convenient access nestled amidst stunning bald cypress and loblolly pines.
Midlands Wildlife Area (9.4)	This 2,100-acre wilderness area about nine miles east of Laurel on Jones Store Rd boasts miles of wooded hiking trails through a mosaic of wetlands and forested dunes. It should be an essential part of any effort by the town to market nature tourism to Laurel visitors.



Trap Pond State Park is one of Sussex County's most beloved and lucrative natural assets.

EXISTING ONLINE RESOURCES FOR NATURE & HERITAGE TOURISM

Many organizations promote Laurel and the surrounding region as a destination for cycling, paddling, hiking, birding and heritage tourism.

LAUREL TOWN RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Town of Laurel	www.townoflaurel.net
Laurel Redevelopment Corporation	www.laurelredevelopment.com
Reimagine Laurel	www.reimagine-laurel.net
Laurel Chamber of Commerce	www.laurelchamber.com
Laurel Historical Society	www.laureldehistoricalsociety.org
Southern Delaware Tourism	www.visitsoutherndelaware.com/our-towns-map/laurel
Delaware State Tourism	www.visitdelaware.com/search/?q=laurel%20
TripAdvisor	www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g34027-Activities-Laurel-Delaware.html



CYCLING	WEBSITE
Broad Creek Bike & Brew	www.broadcreekbikeandbrew.com
MapMyRide	www.mapmyride.com/us/laurel-de/
Bike Delaware	www.bikede.org
DelDot Cycling: Sussex County	www.deldot.gov/information/community_programs_and_services/bike/biking_in_delaware/pdfs/maps/SussexMapSide2.pdf?11th%20Nov%202012%2004:45:21%20PM
Southern Delaware Tourism: Cycling	www.visitsoutherndelaware.com/outdoor-recreation/outdoor-adventures/cycling
Delaware Outdoor Trail: Biking	www.visitdelaware.com/outdoor/locations/biking/
Biking and Mountain Biking in Delaware State Parks	www.destateparks.com/activities/trails/biking/index.asp





PADDLING	WEBSITE
Find Your Chesapeake (NPS)	www.findyourchesapeake.com/places
Paddling in Delaware State Parks	www.destateparks.com/activities/trails/paddling/locations.asp
Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail	www.nps.gov/cajo/index.htm
Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail: map	www.smithtrail.net
Trap Pond: Paddling & Boating	www.destateparks.com/park/trap-pond/activities/boating.asp
Paddle the Nanticoke	www.paddlethenanticoke.com
Chesapeake Conservancy: Nanticoke River Conservation Corridor	www.chesapeakeconservancy.org/Nanticoke-River-Conservation-Corridor-Initiative
Paddling.net - Trussum and Trap	www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?1733
Southern Delaware Tourism: Paddling Adventures & Boat Tours	www.visitsoutherndelaware.com/outdoor-recreation/outdoor-adventures/paddling-adventures-boat-tours
Delaware Outdoor Trail: Water Activities	www.visitdelaware.com/outdoor/locations/water-activities/
Delaware Public Ponds	www.dnrec.delaware.gov/fw/Fisheries/Pages/DelawarePondBooklet.aspx



HIKING	WEBSITE
Delaware Outdoor Trail: Hiking-Walking-Running	www.visitdelaware.com/outdoor/locations/hiking-walking-running/
Hiking in Delaware State Parks	www.destateparks.com/activities/trails/hiking/
Trap Pond: Trails	www.destateparks.com/activities/Trails/locations/trap-pond/index.asp





HERITAGE	WEBSITE
Nanticoke Heritage Byway	www.deldot.gov/information/community_programs_and_services/byways/sussex.shtml#byways_page
Trap Pond: Baldcypress Nature Center	www.destateparks.com/park/trap-pond/nature-center.asp
Bethel, DE	www.betheldel.org
Woodland Ferry	www.woodlandferry.net/Introduction.html
A History of African Americans of Delaware and MD's Eastern Shore	www.udel.edu/BlackHistory/
Nanticoke Indian Association	www.nanticokeindians.org
Laurel Historical Society	www.laureldehistoricalsociety.org



BIRDING/WILDLIFE WATCHING	WEBSITE
Delaware Birding Trail: Nanticoke Wildlife Area & Chapel Branch	www.delawarebirdingtrail.org/cp4.html
Delaware Birding Trail: Trap Pond State Park	www.delawarebirdingtrail.org/cp2.html
Delaware Outdoor Trail: Wildlife Viewing	www.visitdelaware.com/outdoor/locations/wildlife-viewing/
Southern Delaware Tourism: Birding	www.visitsoutherndelaware.com/outdoor-recreation/outdoor-adventures/birding
Birding in Delaware State Parks	www.destateparks.com/activities/birding/index.asp
Delmarva Ornithological Society: A Guide to Finding Birds in Delaware	www.dosbirds.org/delaware-birding-sites-maurice-barnhill/
DNREC: State Wildlife Areas in Sussex County	www.dnrec.delaware.gov/fw/Hunting/Documents/WMA%20Maps%202015/SC%20Combo.pdf



REGIONAL RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of DE Sustainable Coastal Communities	www.scc.udel.edu/economic-prosperity/heritage-tourism
Delaware Geocaching Trail	www.visitdelaware.com/geo/
EcoDelaware	www.ecodelaware.com
Delmarva Paddling Weekend	www.delmarvapaddling.com
Delaware Sea Grant	www.deseagrants.org
Delaware and Maryland Rural Development	www.rurdev.usda.gov



NATURE & HERITAGE TOURISM PLAN

Following the 1.5-day workshop, stakeholders reviewed the notes taken and suggestions provided to prepare recommendations to help position Laurel as a Trail Town for exploring Nanticoke Country.

It was obvious that early in the workshop, participants unfamiliar with Laurel were impressed with the plans for the Laurel Ramble and the incredible assemblage of historic and natural assets that exist today. The most often heard quote during the bus tour was “I just didn’t realize...” Many locals and travelers travel through the U.S. Route 13 corridor on their way to points north and south, but don’t have a clue about

nature and heritage tourism experiences that exist just a few miles off the highway.

Protect Laurel’s tourism assets

Laurel must protect its natural and historical assets. The Ramble is tagged as “Beauty on Broad Creek,” and Laurel’s 800 buildings on the National Historic Register position the town as a unique hub for travelers exploring the Nanticoke Heritage Byway, the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, and the land and water known to Harriet Tubman and to those escaping slavery on the Underground Railroad.



Tourism stakeholders on the Nov. 10, 2015, bus tour around Laurel.

Protect Broad Creek. Arguably the town's biggest lure and most important economic asset is Broad Creek. The town should aggressively restrict development in its watershed and limit impervious surfaces. Similar to Maryland's Critical Areas Program, existing forests should be protected and riparian areas planted with trees. Laurel's Enhanced Nutrient Removal (ENR) wastewater treatment plant meets the Chesapeake Bay water quality requirements.



Broad Creek.

Update building and zoning codes and seek state and federal assistance to reflect the town's vision of how it should look and be more enticing to potential visitors. The town should consider updating building codes and renter occupancy laws to ensure the long-term protection of the town's historic homes. Likewise on Delaware Avenue, adjusting planning and zoning codes and finding state and federal dollars to improve this important thoroughfare would be a prudent long-term investment. Partnerships should be developed with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity to rehabilitate buildings in disrepair. Since commercial areas provide significant revenue for municipalities, Laurel should also investigate how to improve its downtown commercial district with better zoning, streetscapes and local businesses immune to U.S. 13 big box competition. State and federal grant programs should be shared with property owners looking to improve their building facades. Few things are more critical to the viability of downtowns than investment in appearance.



Upgraded housing and zoning laws combined with financial incentives and state and federal assistance are key to Laurel's revitalization.

Revitalize Market Street. The Ramble is an excellent start to reimagining Laurel, and implementation will take the full attention of

the Town of Laurel, the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation, Sustainable Coastal Communities and partners. After the goals for the Ramble have been reached, the downtown area along Market Street should be considered as Phase 2 for reimagining Laurel.

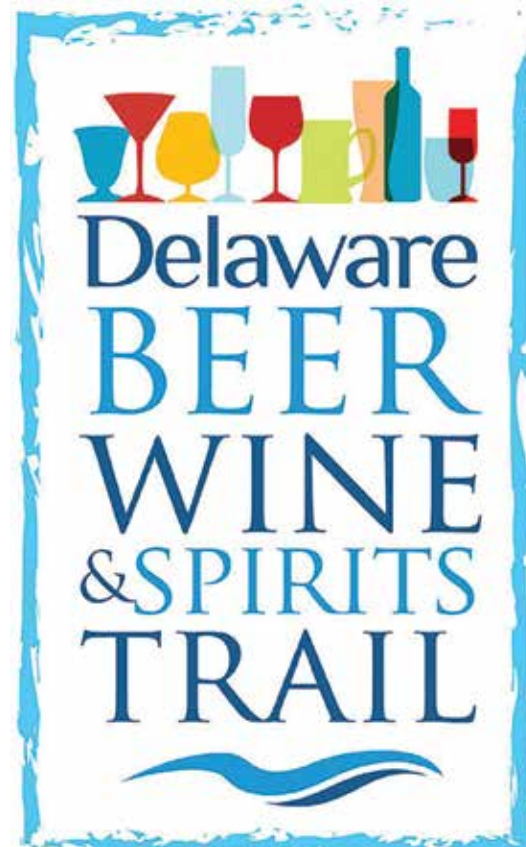
Beyond the town limits, Laurel’s leadership should advocate for added acreage and protections around the natural assets that make the region unique and worth visiting.

Expanded protected areas around Broad Creek, the Nanticoke River, Trap Pond State Park and the Nanticoke Wildlife Area will only add to Laurel’s nature tourism assets and improve the experience for those exploring Nanticoke Country. Plans for the Ramble and this Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan should be infused in the Town of Laurel’s comprehensive plan.

Connect Laurel to the surrounding region through interpretation and wayfinding efforts

Use U.S. 13 to Laurel’s advantage. While unnecessary and perhaps ill-advised to market U.S. 13 as part of the Laurel nature and heritage tourism experience, large and inviting signage advertising Laurel’s natural and historical attractions should be utilized to draw people and ultimately investment in town. Nature and heritage tourism kiosks can be added, where permissible, at Laurel businesses with high visitation, such as destination retailer Johnny Janosik’s World of Furniture.

Tell the region’s nature and heritage story when promoting activities with action words that end in “-ing.” It’s not enough to tell travelers that Laurel has paddling, cycling, birding, hiking, and dining opportunities. Every town and region has that—why should a traveler explore Laurel? Attach authentic stories about Laurel and the region to these activities to enrich their experience. This won’t be difficult, as experts are already hard at work crafting these stories and sharing them with travelers. Connect Laurel to the current efforts to promote the Nanticoke Heritage Byway, the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad, and the Delaware Birding Trail. Build off of existing resources created by the Laurel Historical Society and Laurel Chamber of Commerce, such as the historic walking tour of Laurel. When new resources or attractions are developed, such as



a craft brewery along the Ramble, make certain to link that to existing tourism programs such as Delaware’s Beer, Wine and Spirits Trail and regional efforts supporting craft beer tourism.

Tell stories unique to the Laurel region. The one-of-a-kind story of the train derailment alone could bring thousands to the town annually should more effort be put into advertising and on-site guideposts or waymarkers. Laurel is also well-positioned to use the unfortunate slice of American history that is Patty Cannon to its advantage. Balance this with the Harriet Tubman connection and another enticing story evolves.

Promote the journey *and* the destinations with new branding and marketing strategies

Phillips Landing, significant for its connection to Captain John Smith’s explorations of the Chesapeake in 1607–1608, is today a boat ramp at the mouth of Broad Creek. By itself, it is not a destination, but getting there from Laurel by kayak on Broad Creek or by bike passing through historic Bethel and the nearby mill ponds is a journey worth taking. The magic of travel can be found floating in solitude on Broad Creek or cycling through farms and forests.

Trap Pond State Park is a destination, and should be promoted as such. Trap Pond has more opportunities to explore nature and heritage than many realize. Delaware State Parks have been recently recognized by the National Recreation



The story of the notorious Patty Cannon, while grotesque, is part of Sussex County’s rich history that can lure heritage tourists.

and Park Association (NRPA) with the 2016 National Gold Medal Award for Excellence. This is certainly due in part to the creative ways that Trap Pond and other parks use their resources to



Kayaking on Broad Creek from Fisher Park in Laurel.

provide quality outdoor experiences for visitors. For all the “-ing” words we use to attract nature and heritage tourists to Laurel, all exist at Trap Pond State Park: trails for cycling, paddling, hiking, and birding; a museum experience at the Baldcypress Nature Center; plus camping, pontoon boat rides, disc golf, and stargazing at Cypress Point. Laurel is extremely fortunate to have Trap Pond State Park within its 10-mile radius.

Utilize existing popular destinations to market the town. Abbott’s is a destination, not a convenience stop, and should be used heavily in marketing to draw traffic to the town. The Laurel Coffee Shop’s home-made donuts should be an essential part of marketing Laurel’s authenticity to would-be tourists. In addition, Laurel should work with all six pizza joints to coax motorists from US 13 or visitors from all over Sussex County into the town. Conversely, every effort should be made to work with Johnny Janosik’s World of Furniture to extend the stay of their thousands of annual patrons and convey to them the natural, cultural, and culinary assets that Laurel boasts.

Improve accessibility to touristic assets. Fisher Park’s location behind a car lot and cryptic entrance should be improved with signage and an effort to work with the car lot owner to make the area more inviting. The park is ripe for additional town-sponsored and regional events, should such improvements occur. Broad Creek and Record Pond should be easily accessible from a variety of locations.

Now is the perfect time to capitalize on the March 2016 branding exercise to help Laurel and the region promote the area as “The Gateway to Nanticoke Country.” Utilizing branding strategies must be an early priority for Laurel tourism stakeholders. Branding strategies and tools should be fully utilized by the Town of Laurel, Chamber of Commerce businesses, cultural institutions, and regional attractions around Laurel.

Beyond Laurel and Nanticoke Country, partner with other regional towns and cities positioning themselves as Trail Towns

for paddlers, cyclists, and birders. The Town of Snow Hill, MD, located on the Pocomoke River, is working to attract nature and heritage tourists to that region of Worcester County. Efforts to collectively market Delmarva’s Trail Towns could prove beneficial for all.

Attract tourism outfitters and providers to set up shop along The Ramble

Lure businesses that support the traveler experience. Abbott’s on Broad Creek is already a destination dining experience, but two or three more businesses will add to the buzz about Laurel. Visitors to September’s Better Block event and Laurel tourism stakeholders all mentioned the desire to see a craft brewery, ice cream shop and kayak outfitter on Broad Creek.

While Laurel currently lacks a bed & breakfast, new options may exist for Laurel to open up rooms for travelers who choose to stay in Laurel while they explore Nanticoke Country. Business training can be provided to encourage interested residents to participate in the share economy through enterprises such as AirBnB. Local homeowners willing to share a spare bedroom through AirBnB may be a start to putting “heads in beds” within the town limits, and may attract the type of visitor interested in exploring Nanticoke Country from their base camp in Laurel.



The historic Bethel Store is the perfect spot for lunch on a Broad Creek paddle.

Promote Laurel’s nature and heritage tourism resources to the beach hotels in Sussex County’s coastal resorts. Guests to the Delaware beaches are always looking for new activities and opportunities to explore. Laurel and Nanticoke Country can lure vacationers by promoting paddling experiences in cool, forested cypress swamps, biking between the mill ponds, and dinner and drinks at Abbott’s at the end of the day. The more visitors talking about Laurel and Nanticoke Country, the more visitors Laurel will attract.

Unparalleled paddling opportunities: “Bunny Slopes to Black Diamond”

If there is one experience that Laurel can promote above all others, it is the opportunity to explore by kayak, canoe and stand-up paddleboard.

For beginners who may need a “Bunny Slope” experience, you can start on the gentle waters at Trap Pond or one of the nine other mill ponds within the 10-mile radius of The Ramble. After learning the basics of paddle safety, you can graduate to a paddling experience on Broad Creek from The Ramble to Ed Koch Park near Bethel or all the way to Phillips Landing at the Nanticoke River. For the expert distance paddler, you can continue on the Nanticoke to Seaford and Blades, or explore the waters known to both Captain John Smith and Harriet Tubman all the way to the Chesapeake Bay.

Paddling outfitters can design experiences for all levels of expertise. Paddling tourists can be shuttled to and from launch sites, or start their journey on Broad Creek in Laurel by boat, and return to The Ramble by bike. Finish the paddle



Paddlers enjoy a day on Broad Creek. If there is one experience that Laurel can promote above all others, it’s the opportunity to explore by kayak, canoe, or stand up paddleboard.

and pedal adventure on the deck at Abbott's with a pint of craft beer and a 5-star meal. No other town on Delmarva can provide this experience!

Become a “Paddlers Trail Town” by creating water trails connecting Laurel to surrounding tourism assets. The new kayak launch at The Ramble is a good first step to lure paddlers, but better accommodations, trail maps, and marketing of a “Cypress Paddling Trail” or “Delmarva Paddling Convention” could transform the town into a must-visit installation for the burgeoning mid-Atlantic paddling crowd. The addition of paddling and cycling trails that traverse both the town and Trap Pond could prove lucrative given the number of people that visit Trap Pond every year. The Old Sailor's Path (Laurel to Bethel walking path) could also be capitalized on.

Tackle access problems. Access for paddlers and paddling events through boat ramps at local mill ponds and Phillips Landing is currently a challenge due to the interpretation of restrictions associated with federal funding sources such as the Wallop-Breaux Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Act. Wallop-Breaux funding has been used in Nanticoke Country to improve access to the local mill ponds, Broad Creek and the Nanticoke River, but other funding sources were often used as well. This issue must be researched and solved before Laurel can promote these experiences to tourists and outfitters, or host large paddling events.

Try creative new ways of sharing Laurel's authentic experiences and stories

Much of what has been written and celebrated about Laurel and the region needs to be updated and shared beyond print brochures and paid advertisements. Interpretive signs should be installed, where feasible, along The Ramble to tell the story of the 1904 train accident, the Wading Place known to the Nanticokes, and the 800 homes on the National Historic Register.

Following the creation of a branding strategy, new wayfinding signs should be installed to help travelers locate such gems as Fisher Park.

A new website should be developed, with stunning imagery and video of the nature and heritage experiences in and around Laurel. Events, such as the successful Broad Creek Bike and Brew, should be continued, but new events can be added to showcase the connection to the area mill ponds and heritage sites. Laurel can add to other local events with regional itineraries, such as Laurel-based field trips for the Delmarva Birding Weekend.

Travel writer “fam” tours can be hosted in Laurel, to encourage writers to share these stories through print articles and travel blogs. Use popular tourist towns like Rehoboth, Bethany, Dewey and even Ocean City to bring visitors to town for day trips.

Ghost tours can be created to provide a fun and entertaining educational program to interpret Laurel's historic assets. Historic and outdoor weddings can be promoted at Bethesda Church and other venues.

Promote seasonal campaigns, such as an autumn “Kickoff to Trail Season,” to encourage visitors to explore paddling, cycling, hiking and birding trails while the days are still warm, the nights are cool, the birds are migrating south, and the bugs are fewer.

As often as possible, celebrate each and every success and milestone achieved with the Ramble and this Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan. Invite elected leaders to ribbon cuttings, send out press releases and photos to local media, and share the good news on the www.ReimagineLaurel.net website and associated social media.



Brochures from previous marketing campaigns will serve as excellent models for new approaches to promoting Laurel as a Trail Town.

Goals for first six months of the Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan:

GOAL: FIRST 6 MONTHS	DESCRIPTION
Community imaging & branding workshop	Ben Muldrow of Arnett Muldrow & Associates worked with Laurel stakeholders in a community imaging and branding workshop March 1-3, 2016. This is an excellent first step.
Promote existing nature & heritage tourism events	<p>Trap Pond hosted a Jeep Rally on April 8-9, 2016. The Delmarva Birding Weekend expanded into Laurel on April 23, 2016 with field trips around Trap Pond. The Laurel Chamber of Commerce hosted the Broad Creek Bike & Brew on June 4, 2016. The Nanticoke Watershed Alliance hosted an eco-paddle on Broad Creek in 2016.</p> <p>Each of these events can be used to highlight the nature and heritage tourism assets that make them attractive to participants and can demonstrate how cycling, birding and paddling events can drive tourism dollars to Laurel.</p>
Partner with towns in the region	Provincialism can be the death knell of rural towns. Partnering with regional municipalities marketing themselves as trail towns for paddlers, cyclists, and birders collectively brings travelers to specific regions. A unified approach by small Delmarva towns can more readily raise the peninsula's tourism destination status on a national level.
Take advantage of the lucrative beach markets	Beach hotels and businesses are always looking to extend stays by offering more to do. Devise winter, spring, and fall day trips packages for them and let them do the marketing for you.
Explore state and federal funding sources to support projects with the Ramble and this nature and heritage tourism plan	<p>Lee Ann Walling of Cedar Creek Planning Services is investigating the following grant sources to help determine if Laurel projects are eligible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delaware State Housing Authority • Neighborhood Building Blocks • USDA Rural Business Development Grants • USDA Intermediary Relending Program • USDA Housing Preservation Grants • USDA Single Family Housing Repair Loans & Grants • Federal Planning Assistance for Broadband <p>Additional grant and private funding avenues should be explored.</p>





GOAL: FIRST 6 MONTHS	DESCRIPTION
Develop leadership to support the Nanticoke Heritage Byway	Dan Parsons with Sussex County Historic Preservation has requested assistance and leadership with moving Nanticoke Heritage Byway projects forward.
Promote the nature & heritage tourism plan	This document will be available for public review at www.ReimagineLaurel.net . A “soft” release will take place in late winter, but a special event to showcase Laurel as the “Base Camp to Nanticoke Country” will be planned for 2017.
Plan a FAM tour for outdoor travel writers	Debbie Mitchell is working with the Chambers of Commerce and towns of Western Sussex County (aka “Nanticoke Country”) to organize a FAM, or familiarization, tour for outdoor travel writers. A FAM tour should take place in 2017.
Infuse the Town of Laurel comprehensive plan with key elements of the nature & heritage tourism plan	Much of what the tourism stakeholders recommended for the Laurel Nature & Heritage Tourism plan has direct relevance to the Laurel comprehensive plan. Laurel can retain its uniqueness and tourism appeal by allowing for higher density closer to town, limiting the size of commercial parcels, and encouraging mixed use. Use these tools to protect Broad Creek, historic structures and to update antiquated building and zoning codes, especially in the business district and on Delaware Avenue.
Improve access to Broad Creek and local mill ponds	A kayak dock was installed on Broad Creek in 2016. Research and address the access issue with Wallop-Breaux funding and public boat ramps. Paddlers and paddlesport outfitters need access to these incredible outdoor opportunities to put Laurel on the map as a paddlers’ Trail Town.

Goals for Years 1–2 of the Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan:

GOAL: YEARS 1–2	DESCRIPTION
<p>Develop new marketing and promotional tools using existing resources, branding strategies, and links to existing nature & heritage tourism programs</p>	<p>Update and digitize existing brochures that promote Laurel historic sites, walking tours, and outdoor experiences. Take full advantage of the branding strategies and tools provided by Arnett Muldrow & Associates. Host everything on an exciting, robust website that is easy to use for visitors. Make certain that all Laurel nature & heritage tourism promotional efforts are linked to regional, state and federal tourism programs.</p>
<p>Develop new wayfinding signs and interpretive exhibits</p>	<p>Wayfinding signs are needed to attract potential tourists off Route 13. Such signs must follow DelDOT and Delaware Tourism guidelines. Better signage is also needed in Laurel to improve access to sites such as Fisher Park. Interpretive panels about Laurel history and nature can be designed and installed at key locations, such as along the Ramble and Broad Creek waterfront.</p>
<p>Attract nature & heritage businesses to the Ramble</p>	<p>Laurel has an incredible attraction on the waterfront in Abbott’s on Broad Creek. Complementary businesses include a paddlesports outfitter, craft brewery, and locally-made ice cream shop.</p>
<p>Identify popular locations to market nature & heritage tourism options</p>	<p>Simple kiosks with tourism brochures and information can be installed at retail giants like Johnny Janosik’s World of Furniture, and other destination attractions with high visibility. Utilize the captive audience at the Laurel Coffee Shop, Britt’s, the pizza shops, and Abbott’s to sell the Laurel recreational and cultural assets that would otherwise remain unexplored by their patrons.</p>
<p>Design and host new events that highlight Laurel’s position as a “Paddle Trail Town” and help tell the story of Laurel’s history</p>	<p>Laurel should host a Delmarva Paddler’s Convention or Paddler’s Weekend, with guided field trips, workshops, and outdoor retailers. In addition to attracting tourists, the event may have a secondary effect of showcasing Laurel to a future outfitter looking for a new location. Laurel should host an event to commemorate the incredible 1904 accident at Records Pond between the Norfolk Express train and schooner.</p>



Goals for Year 3+ of the Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan:

GOAL: YEAR 3+	DESCRIPTION
Design new hiking, biking, and paddling experiences and trails	Work with providers and tourism professionals to make fun twists to existing hiking, biking, and paddling trails and to create new ones. This creates new opportunities, provides great new material for media outlets, and keeps travelers wanting more. It also entices more providers.
Protect the countryside	What makes Laurel special is its bucolic feel. Few things can decimate this feel faster than sprawling growth, cookie cutter subdivisions, chain restaurants and shopping centers on the town’s borders. “Visit Anywhere USA” is not a marketable slogan. This is why Laurel should lobby Sussex County to improve its permissive zoning and call on the state of Delaware to protect and expand natural areas surrounding Laurel.
Make a concerted effort to protect cultural and historic assets.	The preponderance of old churches, homes, mills, and historical sites are what make Laurel so special. But nationwide, towns have allowed such assets to fall into disrepair, be adulterated by uncaring property owners, or be bulldozed for development. Laurel should inventory its assets and set mechanisms in place to protect them.
Promote seasonal campaigns	Creating campaigns for each season can serve as an excellent marketing tool and bring tourism dollars at an otherwise slow time of year. Hiking, biking, cycling, fishing and heritage tourism could fit snugly in a season and Laurel offers all of these. The seasons simply need to be named and marketed.



Long-term sustainability of the Laurel Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan will be ensured by the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation and the Sustainable Coastal Communities program of the University of Delaware Sea Grant.

Northern red-bellied cooters



The Laurel Nature and Heritage Tourism Plan was prepared by Dave Wilson and Jim Rapp of Conservation Community Consulting, LLC. Photos courtesy of Laurel Historical Society, Frode Jacobsen, Ed Lewandowski, Dan Parsons, Jim Rapp, and Dave Wilson.



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