

HOW WE USE OUR LAND



The Trend

Land use patterns shape both the physical and social landscape of a community, affecting its economic potential, environmental sustainability, accessibility, and overall quality of life. By carefully organizing how land is designated and used—whether for residential, commercial, industrial, or agricultural purposes – Carroll County can promote balanced growth, protect natural resources, minimize infrastructure costs, reduce traffic congestion, and preserve land.

Since the 1960s, Carroll County has been taking strides to manage growth and direct it to areas most suited to serve that growth. The resulting pattern has been that growth occurs in areas planned for higher **density**¹ and **intensity**² due to the provision of public water and sewer service, and areas outside of this remain relatively rural. Areas planned for growth are centered around the **County's eight municipalities**³ as well as Freedom and Finksburg. However, pockets of development in rural areas do exist in **crossroads villages**⁴ and on land dedicated to commercial and industrial use, especially extractive and heavy manufacturing uses. Over the past ten years, the most significant changes to how we use our land have been related to the adoption of the Freedom Community Comprehensive Plan in 2018, which introduced new land use designations and reduced the growth area, and the modernization of the Zoning Code- local rules regulating land use and development in specific areas- which eliminated many of the uses that undermined the intention of the **zoning districts**⁵.

Densities and intensities of development in the **growth areas**⁶ have been lower than those seen in other parts of the Baltimore metropolitan region. Overall, the development pattern established over the last several decades has followed what was envisioned when planning began in the 1960s. We now must ask whether these patterns are continuing to serve the County's interests. The following overview describes the land use patterns and changes that have occurred outside the municipalities and their significance. It is important to recognize, though, that Carroll's municipalities play a critical role in fulfilling the vision for how we use our land throughout the County.

Background and Impact

The 1960s marked a pivotal decade for County planning, with the adoption of the County's first interim zoning code, subdivision regulations, County master plan, water and sewer plans, and major road plans. During this time Designated Growth Areas (DGAs) were defined by places with existing or planned public services.

In the 1970s, there was growing recognition of the need to protect resources outside the DGAs. Master Plan amendments introduced the inclusion of three water supply reservoirs – Piney Run, Gillis Falls, and Union Mills –

¹ Density - the concentration of buildings or housing units within a specific area.

² Intensity - the scale and magnitude of structures and uses, including commercial, industrial, or residential buildings. This metric helps assess the impact of development on infrastructure, traffic, and community resources.

³ The County's eight towns or cities with their own governance are the municipalities Hampstead, Manchester, Mount Airy, New Market, Sykesville, Taneytown, Union Bridge, and Westminster.

⁴ Crossroads village - a small, rural settlement typically located at the intersection of key roads or paths.

⁵ Zoning district – a geographically defined area that has specific allowed land uses and development, and a zoning code is the set of rules regulating the land use and development in the zoning district.

⁶ Growth area – an area designated for higher density and greater intensity of uses.

leading to the zoning of these areas as Conservation. Additionally, a comprehensive rezoning of the Agricultural Zoning District addressed the rate at which farmland was being lost to development. The minimum lot size of ½ acre (established in 1965) was increased to 1 acre, and the density was set at one unit per 20 acres.

The 1980s saw a focus on lower-density land use in the Finksburg Area Plan, acknowledging that public water and sewer services would not be extended to Finksburg. This was also the start of our Ag Land Preservation Program to help attain the Master Plan goal and to sustain the industry.

The 1990s were characterized by growth management initiatives, including state legislation designed to curb sprawl, promote economic growth in existing communities, and protect natural resources. The Adequate Public Facilities and Concurrency Management Ordinance was adopted to ensure public facilities were available or planned to serve new development.

In the 2000s the first update the County Master Plan was adopted. This update retained the overall vision of the 1964 plan by continuing to direct growth to the DGAs. State legislation further promoted Smart Growth through the creation of Priority Preservation Areas and a required Municipal Growth element.

In the early to mid-2010s state legislation limited large-lot residential developments served by private septic systems. The 2014 Carroll County Master Plan reaffirmed the visions of previous master plans, targeting the DGAs to receive the majority of development by means of establishing Priority Funding Areas, while continuing to preserve productive farmland and protect natural resources.

Zoning divides a jurisdiction into designated districts, each with specific regulations governing *how land within those areas can be used*. These regulations typically define the types of activities—such as residential, commercial, industrial, or agricultural—that are permitted in a given area, as well as specific development standards like building height, density, lot size, and setbacks. The main changes that affect zoning in the County are annexations, rezonings, and amendments to legislative text or maps. Significant text changes made over the last decade in Carroll County include a full code rewrite for the Agricultural, Conservation, Residential, Commercial & Industrial Zoning Districts, and the addition of the Employment Campus District.

Zoning Changes 2014-2023

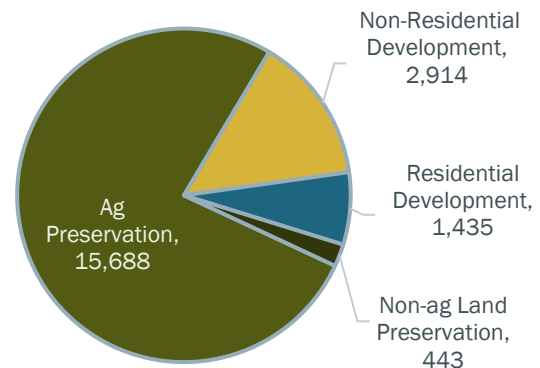
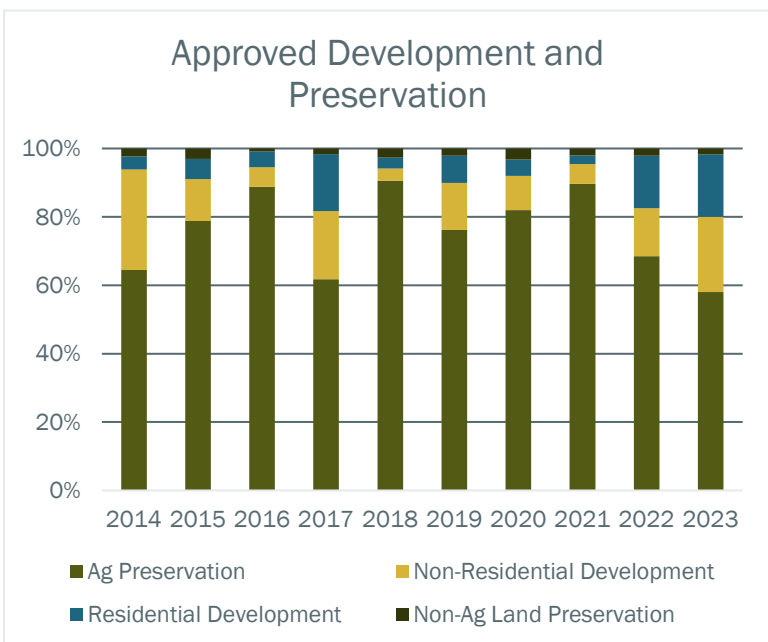
32 annexations converted 569.29 acres from county zoning to municipal zoning jurisdictions.

1371 parcels rezoned as part of the 2019 Comprehensive Rezoning.

6 Piecemeal rezonings

28 Text Amendments

Source: Carroll County Planning Annual Report, 2014-2023

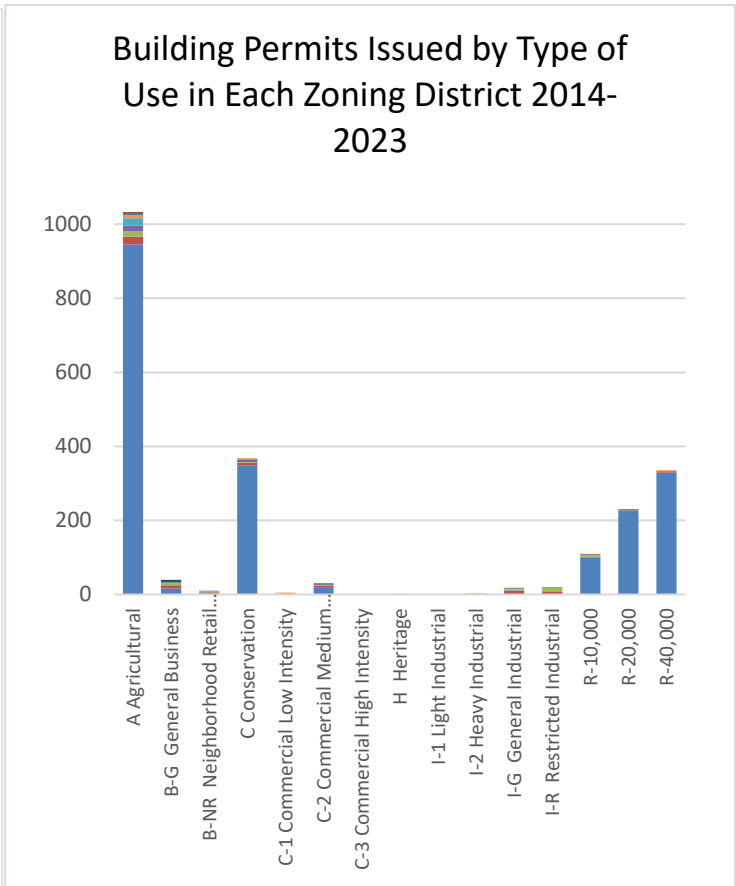
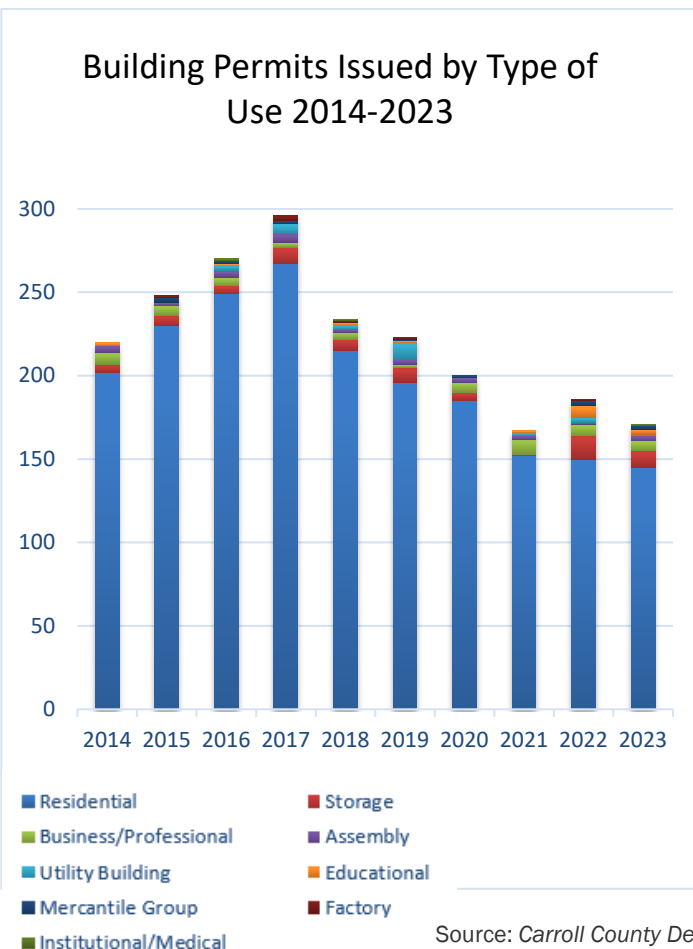
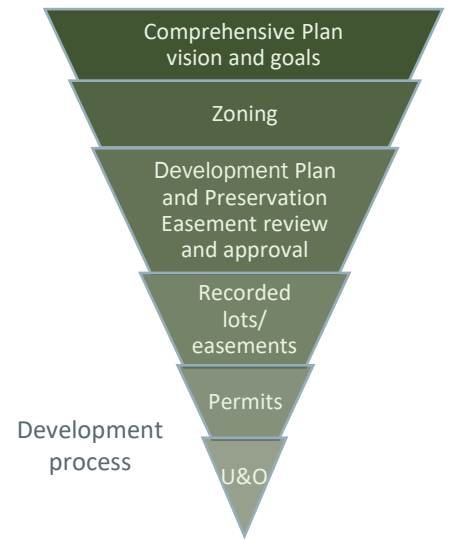


Source: Carroll County Planning Annual Report, 2014-2023

Land use patterns can be established both through development and land preservation. Permanently

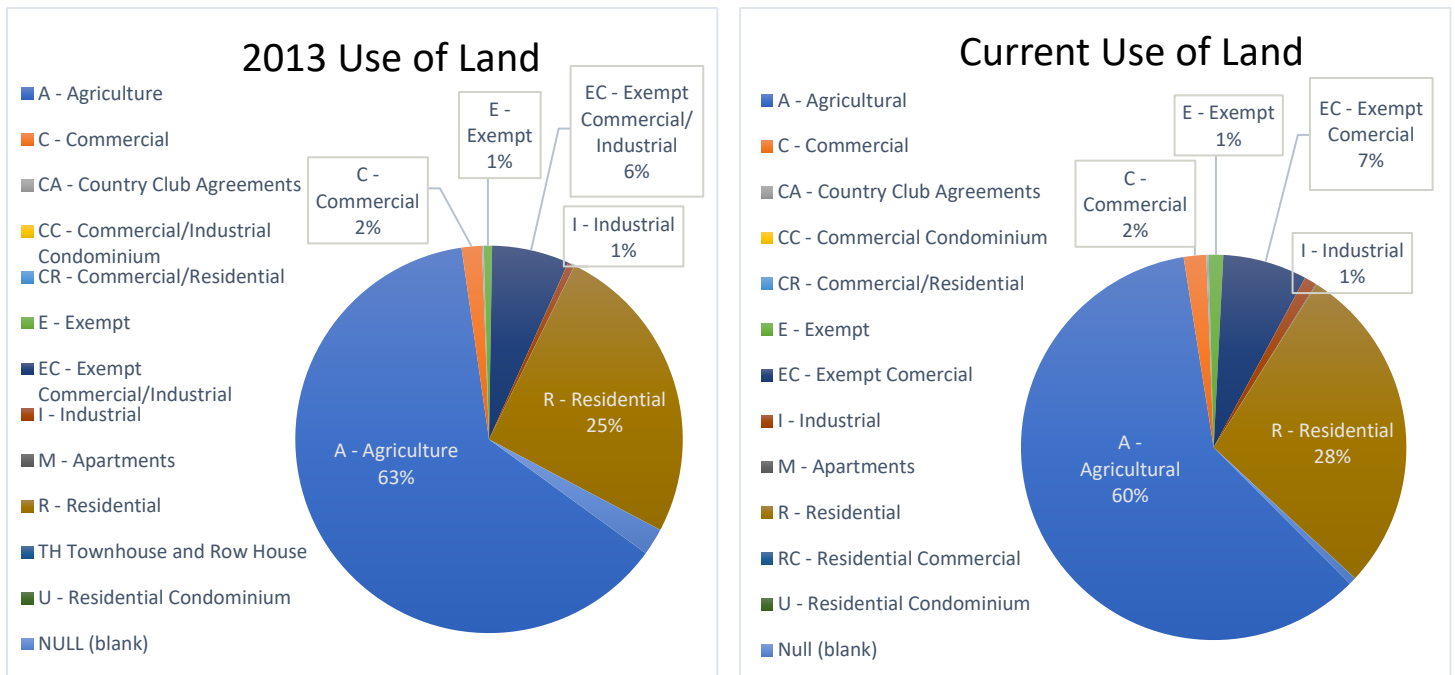
preserving land for a particular use or converting land from one use (such as farmland or forestland) to another (such as housing, schools, or parkland) have significant impacts on the County’s economy, environment, and quality of life. Over the past ten years, land use patterns in the County have most been influenced by the permanent protection of over 15,000 acres of agricultural land. Conversion or redevelopment of land to non-residential and residential uses has affected about 4,300 acres.

New construction building permits are approvals issued by the County and allow for the construction of new structures, such as homes, commercial buildings, industrial facilities, or infrastructure projects. These permits are a key regulatory tool in managing land development, ensuring that construction complies with zoning laws, building codes, and environmental regulations. They implement the density, type, and location of land use established by plans and zoning designations, enforce zoning regulations, and ensure the infrastructure is available to serve new development. By regulating development, building permits play a critical role in balancing economic growth with sustainability, infrastructure capacity, and preservation efforts. The charts shown below indicate that over the past ten years, the vast majority of building permits issued throughout the County have been for residential buildings. When compared with the statistics above related to acres converted for development, it should be noted that certain types of non-residential development occupy a large amount of land but may only be reflected in the building permit numbers by a single permit. Thus, while acres converted to non-residential outnumber those for residential, the number of residential building permits far exceeds the non-residential permits.



Source: Carroll County Department of Technology Services, Carroll County Permits and Inspections

How we use our land is a status that is constantly in flux. The County has been growing and changing over the past ten years, but general patterns of land use have remained fairly consistent. The following charts show the changes in the use of land between 2013 and 2024. Over this time period, the percentage of land in the County used for agriculture was reduced from 63% to 58% and land used for residential purposes changed from 25% to 27%. Other uses remained about the same, with all commercial uses growing by about 1%.



The pie charts above show land use in Carroll County Based on MD State Tax Assessment Land Use Codes for 2013 and 2024.

Source: Maryland Department of Assessment and Taxation 2014 and 2023, Carroll County Department of Planning & Land Management: GIS

Relevance to Carroll County

The zoning ordinance, subdivision regulations, permitting process, master and comprehensive plans, and various functional plans are tools designed to help the County manage growth effectively. These tools direct the patterns of how we use our land, helping to balance development and preservation while ensuring growth is well-supported and aligns with community needs and preferences. Carroll County will grow in a pattern as defined by land use and zoning. Over the next ten years, if we continue to use our tools with a similar approach to balancing land development and preservation, we can expect outcomes comparable to those noted above.

With very little changes in development over ten years, even slow growth can feel excessive to residents accustomed to little to no change. The majority of residential, commercial, and industrial development occurs within growth areas where infrastructure exists and is planned. This approach has resulted in the benefit of protection of sensitive areas, as well as rural and conservation lands. Even with very limited growth in the County, commercial and industrial development has lagged behind residential development, resulting in more housing without a corresponding increase in local places of work. This trend has contributed to Carroll County being known as a “bedroom community,” where most residents commute elsewhere to work. This not only results in a smaller commercial and industrial tax base, placing a greater burden on residents to fund County services, but also adds strain on infrastructure due to commuting and diverts spending to businesses outside the County.

References

Data for this report were obtained from the Carroll County Planning Annual Report (2014-2023), Carroll County Department of Technology Services, Carroll County Bureau of Permits and Inspections, Carroll County Department of Planning & Land Management, and the Maryland Department of Assessment and Taxation.