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Queen Anne's economic outlook shows 19% surge in businesses, population gains

ANDREA GRABENSTEIN agrabenstein@chespub.com

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Heather Tinelli showcases a map of Queen Anne's County while highlighting the past, present and future of local economic development.

ANDREA GRABENSTEIN

STEVENSVILLE — Celebrating the new year with progressive mindsets and forward thinking, the Queen Anne's County Economic Development Commission hosted its first economic outlook to highlight the county's progress and challenges and unveil strategic plans for the future at the Kent Island Resort Jan. 9.

Along with a breakfast buffet and networking, Queen Anne's County Economic and Tourism Development (QACETD) and the Economic Development Commission welcomed regional stakeholders and business leaders to explore economic growth, community development, and public services and sustainability to shape local tourism and business development.

Providing an economic development forecast and historical legacy of the area, QACETD Director Heather Tinelli noted Queen Anne's is the fastest-growing county on Maryland's Eastern Shore and the second-fastest growing in the state.

In 1970, Queen Anne's County had a population of about 18,000.

In 2001, the population was 41,000 and 50,000 by 2019. By 2028, the population is expected to be around 55,000, she said.

Moving forward, the largest industries in the county look to include wholesale trade, government, education, manufacturing and food services, according to Tinelli.

Agriculture and maritime industries continue to be foundational aspects of the county's economy and history that will always be supported, she said.

Highlighting key performance indicators, Tinelli noted year to date, Queen Anne's County has had approximately \$30 million in commercial property sales and \$77.8 million in new commercial construction. In 2023, the county had the fifth-highest per capita income in the state, she said.

The county saw a 19% growth in businesses overall in 2024, and Commissioner Patrick McLaughlin noted it is the resiliency of residents and local businesses taking risks that keeps the county thriving with jobs and revenue.

"You are the engine of our county, you create the jobs," he said.

Panels of experts led discussion on key economic development topics, including providing an overview of the recently adopted Queen Anne's County Economic Development Five-Year Strategic Plan.

Five priorities of the economic development commission include: maintaining a sense of community and enhancing quality of life; championing the increase of accessible workforce housing; diversifying and expanding transportation; facilitating business growth and attraction; and elevating tourism throughout the county.

Tackling infrastructure, housing, health care and education, another panel discussed the county's achievements, challenges and opportunities facing core priorities.

QACETD in partnership with Queen Anne's County Public Schools (QACPS) has implemented career development programs for students and established Direct Work Experience Curriculum. More than 145 businesses have provided career awareness learning opportunities through classrooms, career fairs, field trips and directed work experience.

QACETD continues to coordinate apprenticeships and internship opportunities for high schoolers in fields such as culinary, engineering, technology and trades with partnerships with QACPS career coaches.

Realtor experts led another roundtable addressing different types of future development in the county including commercial, residential and real estate and alignments with broader regional goals of infrastructure, housing and economic growth.

The demand for housing is strong in Queen Anne's County, with the median price of housing at \$543,000, said Barry Waterman of Waterman Realty.

The demand for office space is shifting away from just cubicles and more toward flexible and smaller spaces including lounges to both serve as an incentive to bring people into the office and address remote work, according to Mason Popham, commercial realtor.

County accomplishments include 4-H Park improvements, Kent Island branch library expansions, public sewer extensions and supporting local nonprofits, County Commissioner Chris Corchiarino said.

Future plans and developments of the region include supporting the state-of-the-art regional hospital, finalizing plans for a new Bay Bridge crossing, ratifying an agreement for the mid-shore regional detention center and expansion of pedestrian trail systems, Corchiarino said.

Jack Wilson, county commissioner and recently appointed Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) president, noted MACo is the largest lobbying group in the state and ensures rural counties have a voice across all jurisdictions.

From a legislative side, Wilson noted state budget shortfalls come from the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. MACo focuses on senate or house bills that directly affect the fiscal or autonomy of counties such as mandated policies or spending, he said.

The state is in a huge budget deficit going into the legislative session, and the governor has stated economic development as a priority to increase revenue, Wilson said.

Economic development takes into account who is moving to the area and what amenities and services resources are needed to continue to be a thriving community, Tinelli said.

Legislative leaders are now noting the crucial role economic development plays, and it is imperative to have tools to continually support these incentives, she said.

Queen Anne's County gets the best of both worlds, according to Tinelli, with an economy that more mirrors Western Shore neighbors while enjoying a quality of life that is all Eastern Shore.

For more information about QACETD and the Economic Development Commission, visit choosequeenannes.com.