

ENVISION Front Royal

A Vision for the Town of Front Royal, Virginia



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Prepared by



RENAISSANCE PLANNING GROUP

hpd
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Acknowledgements and Contact Information

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important things a community can do to ensure a high quality of life for its citizens is to plan for its future. Planning helps to prepare for inevitable change. Like all communities, the Town of Front Royal and its surrounding region face continuous change – economic, environmental, and cultural. In Virginia, the primary method for doing long-range planning is to prepare and adopt a Comprehensive Plan, as required by the Code of Virginia. The first step in creating or updating a comprehensive plan is to define a preferred future, as well as positive pro-active ways of achieving that future.

The most effective way to envision the future is through a citizen-based, collaborative process. From May through November 2013 the Town conducted a visioning process called Envision Front Royal. With the assistance of planning consultants from Renaissance Planning Group and Herd Planning and Design, the Town officials, planning staff and hundreds of citizens worked to develop a clear and compelling vision, and supporting elements, to shape the future of the Town.

The vision and supporting narrative as presented in this report are intended to guide the update of the Town’s Comprehensive Plan. (The Plan was adopted in 1998 and has had several revisions and addendums since then). The seven month visioning process included focus group sessions, an interactive website (www.EnvisionFrontRoyal.com), and two public workshops, which are documented in the appendices of this report. The vision statement below is presented to the Town Council for consideration. Following the vision are more detailed descriptions of the themes, supporting elements and associated actions/ideas for consideration as the Town proceeds with updating the Comprehensive Plan in the coming months.

VISION

As Front Royal approaches the middle of the 21st century it

*Will be a **vibrant town** which will serve as a well-connected hub of the county and surrounding region, with a strong and well-preserved historic core focused on arts and cultural amenities, a diverse economy, and benefits from continual collaboration between the Town and the County.*

*Will have **preserved** its historic character by preserving, rehabilitating, and restoring its historic buildings, and natural environment.*

*Will be a popular and unique tourist and travel **destination**, linking the mountains, the river, history, and the National and State Parks and forests.*

*Will be a **lifelong community** for people of all demographic groups, with a small town character, quality jobs, opportunities for business growth and attractive, affordable housing.*

The graphic below was created to visually communicate the four themes of the vision.



THEMES

DESCRIPTION OF THEMES

The visioning process produced volumes of ideas and concepts from which four themes emerged. The themes are logical groupings of the ideas and aspirations expressed by citizens for their Town's future. The vision statement was written after the four themes were reviewed, vetted, and approved by participants during the first public workshop. In essence these four themes are the cornerstones - the foundation - of the Town Vision. The themes are described in more detail below.



A LIFELONG COMMUNITY. *Front Royal will be a popular place for people of all ages to live and work. Young people will return to the community because of the job and recreational opportunities and good schools.*

The theme of a lifelong community began with discussions about desiring a community where one can live, work and play. A lifelong community takes that concept just a step further to emphasize that it's a community where people of all ages and backgrounds will want and choose to live. Citizens expressed the aspiration that Front Royal is a place where their children will want to choose to live and can find meaningful and rewarding employment. It's a place where seniors feel comfortable and can afford to retire, with good access to quality health care, and shorter transportation trips. Creating a lifelong community that caters to all ages also means that children have options to walk or bike to school safely, to get around on trails safely, and have opportunities for active recreation in ball fields, play grounds, and other public spaces.

Opportunities for rewarding and higher paying employment is another major component of building a lifelong community, and provides incentive for young adults to remain in and build their careers from Front Royal. A future Front Royal was envisioned that had a strong and diverse economy, providing a range of job opportunities for its citizens. It is recognized that the Washington, DC area employment centers will continue to be a draw for many living in Front Royal, but to the extent that new businesses and opportunities can be cultivated locally and regionally it would help achieve the theme of a lifelong community. Opportunities for business attraction include the redevelopment of the Avtex site, and attracting businesses to or enhancing the downtown commercial areas. It was recognized that good schools are important to attract and retain young families, and workers for future businesses. Creating a quality place to live was recognized as an economic development activity. Businesses will want to locate where employees desire to live, recreate, and raise their children. Businesses desire places with high transportation

access, lower energy costs, and land availability, which are all elements that Front Royal has. In summary, the theme of creating a lifelong community is a popular and well supported vision concept. It envisions a place with a high quality of life of all citizens of all ages, as measured by many interlocking elements such as quality schools and healthcare, attractive design, high public safety and security, connectivity, beauty and recreation, and access to higher wage local and regional jobs.



A POPULAR DESTINATION. *Front Royal will be a popular and unique tourist destination, especially for day trips from and to Virginia and the DC region. The visitors will boost the local economy and downtown.*

Front Royal stands to benefit from its strategic location at the convergence of roads, rail, rivers, and historic events. It is a gateway to Shenandoah Valley, Skyline Drive, and Shenandoah National Park, with close access to the Appalachian trail and many other nearby state forests. Its strategic location resulted in a number of Civil War events.

There is potential to enhance its destination appeal as a ‘base camp’ to these many natural and historic amenities. The proximity of the Northern Virginia and DC metropolitan markets presents tourism potential both from people visiting from the DC area, as well as people from elsewhere visiting DC and using Front Royal as a base. The popular destination vision theme aspires to build on these tourism related assets and opportunities to enhance and leverage the economic potential of Front Royal as a desirable destination. A well curated tourism destination will result in a more pleasant and attractive place to live for residents, with improved access points to these amenities. When one lives in a place that is a well known and popular destination it motivates pride, care, and a sense of ownership of the community’s resources and reputation.



PRESERVED ASSETS. *The Town’s historic buildings will be restored for new uses, natural assets will be preserved, and the Town will be clean and attractive.*

Front Royal’s has many assets, both historic buildings, and natural and civic assets. This theme envisions a future where Front Royal has succeeded in preserving, protecting and enhancing its many physical assets. There are a number of historic structures in various states of use, non-use or repair or disrepair in the Town. Challenges identified include absentee ownership, or lack of maintenance and upkeep,

which were issues not just with historic buildings but in some other areas of the Town. The restoration, re-use, rehabilitation of historic structures and façades was a dominant and popular

topic of conversation throughout the visioning process, thus warranting prominence as a theme. The Town's natural assets were equally discussed as important for preservation and protection. Natural assets included such features as rivers, tree canopy, parks, open space, natural areas, wetlands and floodplains. The ideas of a riverwalk, increased access via trails and greenways to better access the natural assets were popular concepts during the process. The civic assets identified were the existing popular public spaces, community places such as libraries and parks, and ball fields.



A VIBRANT TOWN. *Downtown will be the vibrant hub of Front Royal, showcasing the region's culture and heritage.*

Front Royal is envisioned to be a vibrant town comprised of many unique and attractive neighborhoods unified by an active and prosperous downtown core. Downtowns and Main Streets are the living and breathing hearts of small towns. It is where the activity occurs, goods and services exchanged, parades, events, gatherings happen, and where legal and government decisions are made. Vibrant places present opportunities for increased economic exchange,

business growth and attraction, which will lead to increased employment opportunities and greater financial stability for citizens. The vision theme of a vibrant downtown recognizes the importance of maintaining and improving the vitality of Front Royal's downtown, including its historic districts and adjacent neighborhoods.

Walkability is a key factor in making any downtown place vibrant, known as "place-making". If people are not comfortable getting out of their cars, walking, being outside or mingling, then there will be little chance of having a vibrant downtown or main street district. High walkability requires street designs that are "pedestrian-friendly", smaller blocks, sidewalks that are maintained and pleasing, landscaping and lighting. Trail connectivity, and bike facilities that link the downtown to popular destinations and neighborhoods are also important in place making. Walkable places are designed for human scale and comfort first, and cars second.

Having more residential rooftops downtown, or near downtown is also desirable for vibrancy. A diversity of housing options, styles, and price ranges will help with both affordability and vitality. Attractive destinations present a variety of choices, retail, shopping, and services, so diversifying and attracting different types of businesses to the downtown core is important to cultivating a vibrant, active downtown for Front Royal. People involved in this visioning process recognized that Front Royal has been working and has had considerable success over the years in revitalization efforts downtown. This vision aims to build and increase those successes in the future. Regional cooperation with Warren County and with other nearby jurisdictions was identified as an important and necessary ingredient for improving the vitality of Front Royal as a regional hub and community.

PRIMARY SUPPORTING ELEMENTS

The visioning process solicited more than big picture aspirations and themes. From the focus group interviews, the workshops and the interactive website emerged a number of supporting elements. These elements are contributing concepts or factors necessary to make the themes and vision a reality. These primary supporting elements and actions represent the detailed narrative behind the spirit of the vision, and as such provide more substantive guidance for specific objectives and actions of the Comprehensive Plan.

There is a list of additional secondary elements included in Appendix A. The secondary elements are still important contributing factors to the vision themes, but did not get assigned actions or ideas during the second public workshop. They are included in the Appendix and remain worthy of further consideration when updating the Comprehensive Plan, but simply lack the detail of the primary supporting elements below.

1. Restored historic buildings; restored façades

Front Royal has a wealth of historic buildings. But many, such as the Afton Inn downtown, are in a state of disrepair. Restored, these buildings can be a beautiful entrance to the town and downtown. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 1.1 Restore or simply build more attractive buildings in town and entering town.
- 1.2 Establish a local non-profit development corporation in the near-term. Front Royal staff may work with citizens to identify talented people to lead the organization.
- 1.3 Establish a revitalization fund in the near term to assist historic preservation efforts, façade improvement projects, local transportation projects, and other community improvements. The fund may help property owners establish new businesses downtown by helping them overcome the gap between what it costs to rehabilitate buildings and the lease revenue. The fund also presents an opportunity for the town and county governments to cooperate.
- 1.4 Find a new use for the Afton Inn so that it may be an attractive gateway to downtown.
- 1.5 Improve energy efficiency in all town buildings and structures. The Town's Electrical Services Department can take the lead on this action in the near term.
- 1.6 Retrofit older motels along the northern entrance to Town.
- 1.7 Develop a hostel for international travelers, young travelers, and Appalachian Trail hikers.
- 1.8 Expand the historic district to the south.

2. It is easy to walk and bike; there are good connections to regional trails, and expanded greenway systems; the downtown core has high pedestrian activity and amenities.

Front Royal's residents expressed a clear desire for more comfortable, safe, and connected walking and biking routes. The routes will connect major destinations, connect the Town and County, and be clearly marked with wayfinding signs. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 2.1 Build a system of greenways in town extending out along major corridors and connecting destinations.
- 2.2 Build a shared use path from Front Royal to the Appalachian Trail via Route 522 in order to strengthen the bicycle and pedestrian connection to Shenandoah National Park and improve conditions for through-hikers that want to spend time in town. The Town and County governments may collaborate with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club to build the path in the near term.
- 2.3 Create a Riverwalk along the South Fork of the Shenandoah River between points on the southern and northern ends of Town.
- 2.4 Build sidewalks on residential streets where they are lacking. The Town will be responsible for leading this action.
- 2.5 Build a safe walking path on Criser Road. The Town may take the lead on this project with assistance and cooperation from the National Park Service, which abuts the road.
- 2.6 Add bike parking downtown and at shopping centers. The Town can implement this action through an ordinance and collaboration with businesses through an adopt-a-rack program.
- 2.7 Extend Virginia Railway Express commuter rail service to Front Royal in the long term (35 years plan).
- 2.8 Add a regional bus connector to the Washington metropolitan area.
- 2.9 Add pedestrian signals at all intersections in Front Royal.
- 2.10 Connect neighborhoods and schools via walking routes and sidewalks. The state's *Safe Routes to School* program is a potential funding source.

3. Shopping and dining downtown with diverse choices that appeal to both visitors and locals.

More shopping and dining options will contribute to a more vibrant downtown that is a destination day and night. The new options will appeal to a wide range of people including hikers that are passing through Town on the Appalachian Trail and are looking for an affordable place to eat, rest, and resupply. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 3.1 Establish a *Buy Local* campaign that encourages residents to shop at locally-owned restaurants and stores.
- 3.2 Recruit more local and ethnic restaurants.
- 3.3 Add a grocery store in the downtown area and/or on the north side of town.
- 3.4 Encourage businesses to remain open after 5:00 PM
- 3.5 Add a Ferris Wheel downtown (or similar attraction). The idea could be tested as a rental at the Caboose location.

4. Affordable and diverse housing for many income levels, with accountable landlords.

A wide range of housing options contributes to Front Royal's vision as a lifelong community where people of all ages and stages in life can meet their housing needs. The options should include a wide range of housing types from single-family homes to apartments above downtown stores. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 4.1 Enforce maintenance standards for rental properties .
- 4.2 Promote new housing types that are attractive to seniors, making it possible for them to age in place rather than leaving Front Royal.
- 4.3 Purchase the "Silk Mill" for preservation. It may be used as a public amenity, such as a museum, or a private use such as outlet stores or housing.
- 4.4 Encourage the return of old houses from business use to housing use.
- 4.5 Increase single-family housing in the greater downtown area.
- 4.6 Encourage energy efficient rental housing development.
- 4.7 Encourage construction of more affordable apartments.

5. Small town character - develop a sense of pride in community

Front Royal's size nurtures close community bonds and mutual support among neighbors. The community welcomes growth that is well designed, contributes to social connections, and fosters pride in Front Royal. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 5.1 Promote more community use projects that connect residents, such as community gardens and adult education programs.
- 5.2 Build a cultural arts center or space for local artists to exhibit their work.
- 5.3 Involve high school students in Town and County community development projects. School administrators will play an important role launching such a program in the mid term.
- 5.4 Initiate a program to organize volunteers that will help senior citizens with home maintenance and repairs.

- 5.5 Develop more events for children and families, such as parades and festivals.
- 5.6 Organize holiday walking tours of historic homes.
- 5.7 Reach out to existing communities of color to participate in town planning. It requires special effort.

6. Safe and family friendly

Front Royal's residents value safety and family-friendly programs. Safety can be improved through better street design that slows traffic and makes walking and biking more attractive, and through actions to reduce drug use and drug-related crime. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 6.1 Increase youth sports, arts, and service programs. Groups such as "Street Wize" should be involved.
- 6.2 Emphasize drug law enforcement and support programs to reduce drug use.
- 6.3 Improve lighting around town and on major corridors into Town.
- 6.4 Establish a program to improve relationships between police officers and citizens.
- 6.5 Invest in improving the schools and retaining good teachers.
- 6.6 Address problems caused by aggressive dogs and nuisance animals.

7. More professional jobs in Front Royal

Adding professional jobs in Front Royal will support a strong economy by retaining young adults that leave in search of jobs, providing local employment options for people currently commuting to the Washington metropolitan area on Interstate 66, and increasing local spending. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 7.1 Transform the Avtex site into a productive use with jobs in clean energy, research and development, or light industry. The Front Royal-Warren County Economic Development Authority and Town may cooperate on this action step.
- 7.2 Identify target sectors in an economic development plan, identify infrastructure needs that will support these sectors, and market Front Royal to them.
- 7.3 Create a vibrant arts and music scene, and build new outdoor amenities to make Town attractive to tech start ups and their employees.
- 7.4 Attract a brewpub.
- 7.5 Start a dialogue and conduct interviews with existing businesses about how to grow the local economy

8. More support and space for arts, culture, and theatre, and public spaces

Tourism is another important element of Front Royal's economy. Additional venues for art, culture, and theatre will attract tourists while enriching quality of life for residents. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 8.1 Launch a year-round market downtown for farm products and crafts in a permanent space.
- 8.2 Continue with music festivals at the Downtown Gazebo
- 8.3 Develop a unique festival closely linked to the community's brand. This can help the town "get on the map". The Town should look to a private promoter to develop the festival in the short-to-mid term.
- 8.4 Find novel uses for empty buildings while they wait for a permanent use. Examples include temporary demonstrations, pop up stores, and cultural events.

9. Attractive and beautiful gateways

Attractive and beautiful gateways send a message to visitors that Front Royal cares about community and takes good care of its assets. This is an important message for tourists, prospective employers and employees. It also contributes to community pride among existing residents. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 9.1 Launch a "Clean Up Our Town" program to organize volunteer help.
- 9.2 Add inviting wayfinding signs and landscaping to downtown. The Planning Commission will play an important role in determining the design and location of signs.
- 9.3 Prioritize improvement to the gateways from North Front Royal and the National Park (Route 340 and Route 522). Potential improvements include distinct gateway arches over the streets and attractive flowers, bushes, and signage.
- 9.4 Install overhead sign at entrance of the first bridge into Town with space for banners promoting special events.
- 9.5 Increase the number of street trees.

10. Enhanced active recreation opportunities such as canoeing, biking, hiking with strong connections to Shenandoah National Park

Front Royal has extraordinary access to natural assets including the Shenandoah River and the Blue Ridge Mountains of Shenandoah National Park. The Town can tap into these resources even

more to increase recreational opportunities for residents and attract tourists and new businesses. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 10.1** Host more events, such as long-distance running and bike races. For example, the Town could host a triathlon with biking on Route 522, running in Town, and canoeing on the River. The Appalachian Trail Committee and a local outdoor retailer could take the lead on this event in the mid term, once construction of multi-use path on Route 522 is complete.
- 10.2** Construct a second boat launch and exit. An ideal location is near the VFW because it would allow one-way trips through town. This action would require cooperation among the Town, VFW, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and Shenandoah River Keeper. The project could be completed in the near term.
- 10.3** Promote outdoor events to attract visitors. The National Park can help market the events. The Town and County tourism and parks offices could promote any events with assistance from private sector organizers. This can be accomplished in the near term.
- 10.4** Promote the Discover Front Royal website.
- 10.5** Add wayfinding signs to the Shenandoah River and Dickey Ridge Trail.

11. Increase day and night activity

A vibrant downtown is active day and night. Front Royal can increase evening activity through more music events and venues, educational and cultural events, attractive and diverse restaurants, safe and well-lit streets, and more festivals. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 11.1** Open a building downtown for dances or gatherings following the Gazebo Gatherings. Floyd, VA is an example to study. The Town and County will need to collaborate with the private sector. It may be possible to implement in the near term.
- 11.2** Consider making Main Street a pedestrian mall or shared street, and enhancing downtown parking. This was among the most discussed topics with many views for and against, but it is worthy of further discussion due to the high interest.
- 11.3** Add a downtown theatre.
- 11.4** Add a venue for music and shows that can be used outside of the summer months when Gazebo Gatherings are held.
- 11.5** Encourage development of a hotel or other accommodation space in the downtown area.
- 11.6** Add a cultural arts center or space for local artists to exhibit work.
- 11.7** Encourage new housing development in the downtown area with an emphasis on more owner-occupied units.

12. Market assets and history

Front Royal's assets and history are well known to residents, but awareness is poor outside of the area. Increasing awareness of the assets and history throughout the state and in the Washington metropolitan area will strengthen the local economy by increasing tourism and the demand for business and residential properties. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 12.1 Develop a consistent message and brand for Front Royal. For example, "Base Camp for Shenandoah" or "Canoe Capital of Virginia". The Town and County may take the lead with support from local businesses that stand to benefit.
- 12.2 Market the Town's Civil War history. Bob Meadows and the Warren Historic Society are knowledgeable and can assist in this effort.
- 12.3 Hire a marketing and/or tourism staff person within the Town to organize and executive these efforts.
- 12.4 Identify a revenue source for marketing and tourism promotion efforts.
- 12.5 Market a Skyline Drive/Shenandoah Valley Scenic Byway. Partner in the branding with National Geographic.
- 12.6 Blog about events in Front Royal.
- 12.7 Research the history of Front Royal architecture, black history, and black churches.

13. New growth areas have been well planned

Front Royal desires new growth that is consistent with the characteristics of traditional neighborhoods, which include well connected streets, sidewalks, and the potential for mixed use. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 13.1 Create more coherent clusters of development. This can be accomplished by the Town and local businesses studying the community's needs and the most suitable places to develop in order to meet those needs. This can be accomplished in the near term.
- 13.2 Focus on where to place new housing and local/unique retail while continuing to concentrate big box retail in existing locations.
- 13.3 Increase density in areas that are an easy walk or bike to downtown, creating a population that will demand services downtown. The Town and County can help implement this action through zoning ordinances.
- 13.4 Redevelop the Town in a manner that accommodates the population's changing needs. For example, the desire for older residents to "age in place" is an emerging concern.
- 13.5 Seek a new interchange on Interstate 66 that will serve new growth.
- 13.6 Start a broad-base community discussion about the future of Happy Creek.

14. Clean rivers

A clean Shenandoah River supports healthy people, fish, and wildlife and outdoor recreation. The Town can clean the river through cooperation with other towns, the state, and residents. Public education is also an important element. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 14.1 Update zoning to protect riparian buffers, promote permeable pavements, and other strategies that protect rivers. The Town and County can make these changes in collaboration with upstream communities.
- 14.2 Work with surrounding communities to limit pollution runoff into the River from stormwater and agriculture into the River. The Town, soil and water conservation boards, and land owners are all key stakeholders that will need to work together.
- 14.3 Recruit groups that promote clean rivers, such as Potomac Watershed Alliance, to locate in Front Royal.
- 14.4 Invite scientists involved in clean water to hold conferences in Front Royal.

15. Diverse mix of uses and retail

A more diverse mix of stores is needed to support a vibrant downtown. A safe, comfortable, and walkable downtown area will contribute to the success of these new stores. Possible supporting actions or ideas include:

- 15.1 Establish a fund that can help people launch new businesses downtown. The fund will help investors overcome the near-term gap between what it costs to build or rehabilitate a building downtown and the rent that can be achieved. The Town and County can cooperate with the private sector to initiate such a fund in the near term. However, this will require more community discussion as views for and against such a fund were expressed in the vision process.
- 15.2 Establish a “Buy Local” campaign that encourages residents to shop at locally-owned restaurants and stores.
- 15.3 Set design standards that encourage walkable development. The Town and County can accomplish this action in the near term through zoning and development codes.
- 15.4 Recruit an outdoor sports store.
- 15.5 Consider the charrette results for Happy Creek as a possible guide for development.

NEXT STEPS

LINKING THE VISION TO THE PLAN

The next step in the Town's planning process is to draft an updated Comprehensive Plan, using this Vision as the foundation. The Comprehensive Plan will include goals, policies, and implementation actions for all of the major elements of the Town, including housing, transportation, economy, environment, etc. The goals and policies of the Plan should reflect the themes and ideas emerging from the Vision process, as summarized in this report.

The process of drafting the full Comprehensive Plan will be headed by a volunteer project Steering Committee with technical support from the Town staff, and is expected to be completed during 2014. The Planning Commission is responsible for overseeing the preparation of the Plan and recommending a draft to the Town Council, which will have final authority for approval and adoption. Key aspects of the process of creating the Plan will be to:

- Connect the themes of the Vision with the specific topic components of the Plan (housing, transportation, etc.),
- Refine and expand the various supporting action items for achieving the Vision, and
- Choose priorities among a host of excellent potential supporting actions, and set out a detailed implementation program for the coming years.

MINDMIXER (INTERACTIVE WEBSITE)

The website www.EnvisionFrontRoyal.com was created for purposes of providing an on-line base for the visioning process. Renaissance Planning Group retained the vendor services of MindMixer to set up and host the site for the duration of the seven month visioning process. The site has proven an effective communication tool for the visioning process, allowing hundreds of ideas and comments to be put forward. Comprehensive Plans benefit from continued public engagement throughout their development, not just at the outset. The Town could benefit from retaining the site either by continuation of contract through Renaissance Planning, or by setting up an on-going contract directly with MindMixer to keep the site operational for the duration of the Comprehensive Planning process, or as long as the Town staff and leadership believe the site useful.

APPENDICES

- A. ADDITIONAL SUPPORTING ELEMENTS
- B. ASSET MAP, WORKSHOP 1
- C. WORKSHOP 1 SUMMARY
- D. WORKSHOP 2 SUMMARY
- E. THEMATIC SUMMARY - FOCUS GROUPS
- F. THEMATIC SUMMARY - MINDMIXER