

New Kent County's *Envision New Kent County Strategic Plan* and Data Centers

New Kent County's *Envision New Kent County Strategic Plan* was developed by consultant Arnett Muldrow (with Hill Studio) and a citizen steering committee. It was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on June 30, 2021.

The plan's Vision statement explicitly centers on this priority:

"New Kent County will remain a diverse community that values its outstanding rural character, history, natural environment, and quiet community lifestyle. We will maintain these values through thoughtful planning and managed economic development, with continued responsive and accountable governance supportive of our residents."

This is reinforced throughout the document:

- Preservation of community identity and rural character is repeatedly identified as a **top priority** for residents and stakeholders.
- Goals under Growth Management and Quality of Life explicitly address preserving rural character (visual, environmental, social) through targeted development, high-quality design that complements rural character, and protecting/maintaining the "cherished rural character."
- SWOT analysis lists "unparalleled rural character" and related natural/historic assets as key strengths, while uncontrolled growth is framed as a primary threat to that character.
- Community Design principles and Character Boards focus on concentrating development to protect the countryside and rural landscapes.

Survey and public input validation

A community input survey (conducted February–June 2020) received **1,035–1,037 responses** (roughly 5% of the then-population). Open-ended responses on county character most frequently cited "rural," "friendly," and "quiet," with other common terms including "historic," "country," "peaceful," "natural," etc. Visions for 2040 commonly emphasized preserving rural character while managing growth.

Additional engagement (kickoff, visioning workshops, design workshops, draft plan workshop) produced over 5,800 total public engagements. The plan states that the Vision and priorities were built directly from this input (survey, workshops, and committee discussions).

The publicly available plan text summarizes the importance of preserving rural character and historical legacy. The emphasis on this as a strong citizen bias is clearly validated by the volume and consistency of qualitative and thematic input, the ranking of rural character as a top priority, and its central placement in the adopted Vision and goals.

In short, the Strategic Plan does identify and elevate a strong citizen preference for preserving New Kent County's rural character and historical legacy, grounded in extensive public input including the large community survey. Over 85% of the citizen sample confirmed this preference.

The full online community input survey results are published as **Appendix A** of the *Envision New Kent County Strategic Plan*. The County makes this available on its official website as part of the Plan Appendices (Document Center / View / 6064 / Appendices FINAL).

Key details from the survey

- Conducted February 24 – June 19, 2020 via SurveyMonkey (and paper versions).
- **1,035 responses** (nearly 5% of the County's population at the time).
- ~93% of respondents lived in New Kent County.
- Strong geographic coverage, including your zip code (23011 – Barhamsville had a high response rate per population).

The appendix contains detailed results for each question, including:

- Word clouds and frequency counts for open-ended responses (e.g., words describing the County's character/personality — “rural” was by far the most common, followed by “friendly” and “quiet”; “historic” also appears frequently).
- Ratings on quality of life, cultural opportunities, governance, etc.
- Perceptions of outsiders' views of the County.
- Visions for New Kent in 2040 (themes strongly included preserving rural character while managing growth).
- Needs related to retail, services, housing, public spaces, etc.
- Demographic and connection-to-County questions.

The main Strategic Plan document summarizes these findings and states that the complete results are in Appendix A. The Vision statement and many goals (especially around rural character, history, and growth management) were directly informed by this survey plus the other public engagement activities.

In **Appendix A** of the Envision New Kent Strategic Plan (the full Arnett Muldrow online survey results), **Question 3** asked:

“Please give three words or phrases that you feel best describe the personality of New Kent County.”

The published results state:

- **Rural** was the top response, mentioned **250+ times**.
- **Friendly** was next, mentioned **150+ times**.
- **Quiet** was third, mentioned **100+ times**.

“Historic” (along with terms such as peaceful, beautiful, country, community, growing, natural, quaint, charming, clean, location, convenient, family, safe, and small town) is listed among the **other common responses**.

Related context

- “Rural” also appears frequently in other open-ended responses (e.g., visions for 2040 and comments about growth/character).
- “Historic” (or historic sites) is mentioned in the word cloud for recommended places to visit (Question 5) and in the overall narrative of the plan as a valued community asset.

These approximate counts (especially the strong lead for “rural”) were used by the consultants and steering committee to support the plan’s heavy emphasis on preserving rural character and historical legacy.

The Arnett Muldrow community survey and the broader Strategic Plan process included discussion of preferred commercial activities, retail needs, services, and economic development priorities.

From the Online Survey (Appendix A)

Several questions directly addressed desired businesses and commercial activities:

Question 19 – Types of retail businesses needed Respondents most strongly supported:

- Family-friendly restaurants
- Grocery stores
- Family-friendly entertainment

Other categories listed (with lower support) included fine dining, clothing stores, coffee shops, bars/breweries, pharmacies, boutiques, sporting goods, wine shops, nightlife, and fast food.

Question 20 – Types of services needed

- Medical services (doctor, urgent care) ranked as the top priority.
- Senior services, public transportation, gyms, and personal care/salons also ranked relatively high.

Question 17 – Biggest weaknesses Common themes included a lack of businesses, restaurants, grocery options, shopping variety, and broadband. Some respondents specifically criticized an overabundance of dollar stores and chain businesses.

Question 18 – Vision for 2040 Sample comments included desires for more businesses, hotels, restaurants, skilled/professional labor opportunities, balanced tax revenue from residential/commercial/industrial uses, “large clean/green businesses,” and amenities while still preserving rural character.

Economic environment ratings (Question 11) Shopping, dining, and employment opportunities received relatively low ratings, and comments noted leakage of spending outside the county, limited lodging, and a desire for more variety beyond chains and Colonial Downs-related activity.

From the Strategic Plan (Market Research + Goals)

The plan included a market analysis (summarized in the main document; full report in the appendices) that quantified retail leakage and identified opportunities in categories such as:

- General merchandise
- Grocery stores
- Restaurants
- Home centers
- Pharmacies/drug stores
- Clothing and accessories

Economic development strategies emphasized:

- Recruiting commercial businesses based on the market analysis.
- Establishing a signature Economic Opportunity Business Park (guided by Character Boards that envision clean industry, corporate/tech uses, and support businesses).
- Diversifying employment (small business, entrepreneurs, small-scale manufacturing, trades).
- Targeting higher-wage industries.
- Tourism- and recreation-related businesses (e.g., outdoor recreation, agritourism, “Made in New Kent” products).
- Lodging strategy.

Overall, the preferred commercial direction that emerged was **resident-serving retail and services** (especially grocery, restaurants, medical, and family entertainment) plus **managed, higher-quality economic development** (business parks with clean/tech/corporate uses, tourism/recreation, and some light manufacturing) that supports the tax base without undermining rural character.

There were many data centers operating in Virginia at the time of the survey (February–June 2020). Northern Virginia (especially Loudoun County’s “Data Center Alley” around Ashburn)

was already the largest data center market in the United States and one of the largest in the world by then. Key points:

- Data center development in the region began in the late 1990s / early 2000s, tied to early internet exchange points (MAE-East) and companies like AOL and Equinix.
- By the late 2010s, Loudoun County alone had tens of millions of square feet of data center space. One 2019 estimate put Virginia at roughly 186 data centers, with the vast majority concentrated in Northern Virginia (Loudoun, Fairfax, Prince William, and Fauquier counties).
- In 2020 itself, demand continued to surge (accelerated by the pandemic and remote work). Northern Virginia accounted for a large share of U.S. data center absorption, with major leases by companies including Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, and ByteDance (TikTok's parent). Virginia also set a record that year for data center sales-and-use tax exemptions (over \$110 million).

These facilities were heavily concentrated in Northern Virginia. They were not a significant presence in the rest of the state at that time. **The 2020 Envision New Kent survey and Strategic Plan do not reference data centers as a local issue or preferred industry.**