

OCEAN CITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

*Ocean City,  
Maryland*



February 2003



**DOWNTOWN  
DESIGN  
GUIDELINES**

# Downtown Ocean City Should Have...

## DOWNTOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES



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- Pedestrian-friendly corridors
- Attractive buildings that reflect a traditional theme and are properly designed and maintained
- Mixed-use buildings
- Buildings that are adaptable
- A distinct character separate from the rest of Ocean City
- Landscaping that defines space, provides shade and improves air quality in public spaces and parking lots
- Identifiable neighborhoods or districts
- An incentive system for preserving special and historic buildings
- Attractively screened parking areas
- Multiple means of transportation
- A fee-in-lieu-of parking program to create centralized parking facilities
- An enhanced public stormwater management system

## OCEAN CITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

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### SPECIAL THANKS

TO THE OCEAN CITY LIFE-SAVING STATION MUSEUM AND  
SUE HURLEY FOR THE USE AND REVIEW OF ITS PHOTOGRAPHS  
TO THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF OCEAN CITY  
TO THE COUNTY COMMISSION OF WORCESTER COUNTY

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# Introduction

*"The downtown  
area needs  
to sustain its*

## unique

*tradition and  
architecture."*



**Ocean City  
Life-Saving  
Station Museum**

1890  
Boardwalk

**The Town of Ocean City is a nearly ten-mile-long** seaside resort located on a barrier island on Maryland's Atlantic Ocean coastline. The municipality is bordered to the north by the State of Delaware, to the south by the Ocean City Inlet, and on the east and west by the Atlantic Ocean and Isle of Wight and Assawoman bays, respectively.

**Ocean City has long been known as Maryland's** summer season playground. While the town's year-round population totals approximately 7,200 residents, during the June, July and August summer vacation season Ocean City's weekly population often swells to 300,000 people, making the resort Maryland's second largest city behind Baltimore. Ocean City has always been a premier vacation destination in large part because the resort continues to emphasize its family atmosphere, thereby attracting families from many different states who visit to enjoy the town's wide sandy beaches, fine restaurants, hotels and motels, and outdoor recreational amenities including fishing, boating, and golf.

**At the spiritual center of Ocean City lies its** historic downtown district. This area, 4th Street south to the Inlet, contains many of the features that visitors come to see each year - the fabulous Boardwalk, amusements, and Boardwalk treats like caramel popcorn, saltwater taffy, and french fries. The south end of the Boardwalk also provides a grand view of Assateague Island and, occasionally, the barrier island's wild ponies.

**While downtown Ocean City remains first in** the hearts of many resort visitors and residents, development and redevelopment pressures are challenging efforts to promote downtown revitalization while simultaneously maintaining the area's historic architectural attributes. Unfortunately, many of the downtown district's older buildings have already been demolished, while others have been modified and no longer convey their original grace and beauty. Additionally, many of the district's newer buildings have often been constructed without regard to providing aesthetic improvements to the area. As a response to this loss of "Old Ocean City," the Ocean City Development Corporation has created these design guidelines as a way to sustain the downtown's unique architectural traditions in future development and redevelopment projects. For it is these images of "Old Ocean City" that many visitors and residents want to retain and pass along to future generations.

# Vision

**“We envision an economically sound and socially healthy downtown Ocean City, Maryland where revitalization has capitalized on the positive aspects of the area to create a sense of character, charm, and community for both residents and visitors.”**

— OCDC Board of Directors’ vision for downtown Ocean City, Maryland.

## **The first step in the revitalization of downtown**

Ocean City is to create “interesting places” within the older downtown core. Providing enjoyable retail, restaurant, and accommodation experiences will attract visitors and residents to the downtown area which, in turn, will help create a strong economic base that encourages and supports additional quality revitalization efforts. Creating interesting places, however, is much easier when developers are able to take advantage of specific revitalization guidelines that not only honor architectural tradition and cultural flavor, but also have strong community support. These “cultural characteristics” are often the pillars that sustain the heart and soul of a community during the revitalization process.

## **A critical ingredient in any development and**

redevelopment process is the presence of strong urban design characteristics. Successful revitalization projects in cities that have created vibrant downtown areas have included four key elements:

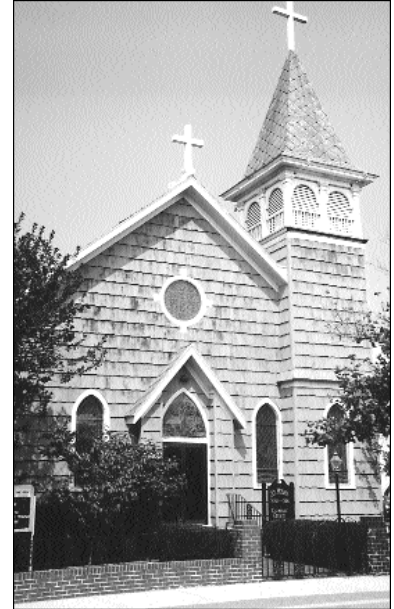
- Design guidelines
- Streetscape amenities
- A comprehensive theme
- Community consensus and commitment

## **The International Waterfront Group proposed in a**

1999 report that a “Downtown Village Overlay District” - i.e., Historic or Preservation District - be created for downtown Ocean City. The IWG study additionally suggested that the area have its own design standards and that economic incentives be offered to encourage compliance and reward projects that meet specific development guidelines. The report also recommended that revitalization policies be drafted to address density, zoning, noise, and building height.

## **Two earlier studies-completed in 1980 and 1992 -**

supported the IWG concept, and both recommended design strategies that would also address building facades, streetscape improvements, landscaping, and signage as well as architectural standards for any new structures. Guidelines for Ocean City must also consider other challenges unique to the area such as intense traffic flow and high parking demand during peak summer periods, creating a pedestrian friendly environment, flood elevations, and promoting the better use of interior city blocks.



## **Saint Mary's Star of the Sea**

circa 1880  
Talbot Street

The manual strongly encourages downtown redevelopment utilizing the principles of environmentally sensitive “green” development. The OCDC encourages owners, builders, architects, engineers, and developers to design buildings which are energy- and resource-efficient, durably built, transit-connected, and bioretentive, and which take full advantage of our moderate climate, including regular breezes and fresh air. We believe this is a significant marketable attribute of the overall improvement of the downtown.

# Historic Contexts



## The Nordica

An early Ocean City hotel on the Boardwalk.

The official founding of Ocean City on **July 4, 1875** by the Atlantic Hotel Company Corporation also marked the opening of the resort's first major tourist accommodation, the Atlantic Hotel on the Boardwalk south of Somerset Street. By **1880**, the original tract of land that included the resort's corporate limits was now home to three major hotels, a handful of cottages, a post office, two general stores, a railroad station, and the United States Life-Saving Station.

Transportation to the resort during this early period was primarily by railroad. The railroad line was laid to the west side of Sinepuxent Bay in **1874**; a railroad bridge coming into the resort at South Division Street was constructed across the bay in **1876**.

In **1890**, the Sinepuxent Beach Company purchased all the land available from South 7th Street (now part of Assateague Island) to North 33rd Street. The land was platted into lots, blocks, and streets for sale and development.

Ocean City's corporate limits were extended in **1898** from South 7th Street to North 15th Street. During the **1890s**, additional hotels, casinos, cottages and a power plant were constructed in the resort.

The resort's fishing industry began during the **mid-1890s** with fishing camps located between South 2nd Street and South 7th Street. It was during this era that pound fishing became a major source of income for Ocean City residents behind tourism.

During the early **1900s**, utilities (water and sewer) and streets were constructed, and the railroad lines were upgraded to meet increased demand.

By mid-year in **1910**, two additional land companies, the Fenwick Land Company and the Isle of Wight Land Company, had purchased the land to the Delaware State line and platted blocks and streets in the area that is now referred to as north Ocean City.



In 1917 a number of streets in the downtown area were paved, and an automobile bridge was constructed from Worcester Street across Sinepuxent Bay to the mainland.

Two major fires in Ocean City - one in 1925 and a second in 1929- destroyed twelve city blocks including major sections of the original town. Work began immediately on rebuilding the damaged area.

Ocean City experienced a period of growth during the Depression in the 1930s. The resort's municipal limits were extended from North 15th Street to North 26th Street, and construction of new tourist accommodations doubled the town's capacity for guests during the summer months.

In August 1933, a major northeast storm, not a hurricane, cut the present Inlet between Ocean City and Assateague Island. The storm destroyed fishing camps, but provided access from Sinepuxent Bay to the Atlantic Ocean, thereby helping create a new industry - sport fishing. The nor'easter also destroyed the railroad bridge at South Division Street; however, by this time more and more tourists were traveling by car to the resort. Coastal Highway, from the resort's northern limits to the Delaware State line, was completed in 1933.

## Streetscape 1915

Baltimore Avenue looking  
south from 3rd Street.

*Note:*

*Buildings were  
constructed using a  
consistency of scale  
that created a  
strong, cohesive  
visual impact.*

# Historic Contexts continued

Construction of public projects nearly ground to a halt during World War II. After the war, a new four-lane automobile bridge was constructed from North Division Street to the mainland. Sport fishing was beginning to become a major industry.

Ocean City's municipal limits were extended north to 41st Street during the 1950s. Completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1953 provided a major economic boost to the resort; more travelers were visiting the town which, in turn, created a need for additional tourist accommodations. Major hotel and motel construction from 15th Street north to 33rd Street began during this period.

The 1960s were a time of additional resort expansion that was fueled in large part by the influx of federal disaster funds that followed in the wake of the 1962 nor'easter. Major subdivisions in the resort were also created during the 1960s by filling in bayside wetlands. Ocean City's municipal limits were extended to the Delaware State line in 1965; water and sewer lines were installed to meet the town's expansion. The resort's first land use regulations was adopted in 1969.

The town's first high-rise oceanfront condominium, High Point, was readied for occupancy in 1969. A growth spurt in the late 1960s set the stage for the 1970s building boom, which lasted for three years and created north Ocean City's "High-Rise Row." It

was also during this period that Montego Bay, a major subdivision for mobile homes, and other bayside residential areas were constructed.

The Route 90 Bridge, built to accommodate the heavy traffic heading to north Ocean City, was completed in 1971.

During the mid- to late-1970s, Ocean City had become "overbuilt" for the second-home market. From 1975 to 1980 new construction was nearly at a standstill. By 1980, however, a renewed interest in purchasing second homes in the resort started yet another building boom which lasted through the mid-1980s.

Growth in Ocean City continued throughout the 1990s, with emphasis being placed on quality of life and community values. This trend continues into the new Millennium.

New development and redevelopment projects in the resort during the late 1990s prompted a number of Ocean City residents to have a strong interest in preserving the downtown district's unique architectural traditions and historic charm for future generations. The Ocean City Development Corporation, created in 2000, also saw this need and formed the Downtown Design Committee to develop a design manual that promoted traditional architecture and urban design principles.

## Weaver House

on North Division Street illustrates many traditional qualities such as

*Fish Scale Cedar Shingles,  
Symmetrical Window Openings,  
Hip Roof & Dormers*



# Use of the GUIDELINES MANUAL

The Downtown Design Guidelines manual is divided into Private and Public Improvement sections. Within these sections are goals and guidelines that are flexible and allow for creative design solutions that are consistent with the overall goal to revitalize downtown Ocean City. Many references are mandatory by using the words “shall” and “prohibit.” Other references are merely advisory and use the terms “encourage,” “discourage,” “should,” and “should not.”

Illustrations shown in this document exemplify the concepts described by the guidelines. The examples are just that - examples. They are not the only acceptable solutions.

The Downtown Design Guidelines were approved by the Mayor and City Council on November 18, 2002.

## APPLICABILITY

The manual applies to all land within, except the Boardwalk, the Downtown Ocean City District. The guidelines address site design, use, size, bulk, scale, signage, architectural design and landscape design. The guidelines apply to all construction, unless specifically referenced, including new buildings, rehabilitated buildings, and signs. These Downtown Design Guidelines are an overlay to six new zoning districts that are recommended in this manual. Whenever these guidelines conflict with these underlying codes and standards, the overlay standards shall supercede. When not specifically referenced, all other City codes and regulations shall apply.

The Town of Ocean City may grant special allowances to the requirements outlined within this document to encourage preservation, revitalization, and redevelopment within the area defined by these guidelines.

The Downtown District encompasses the area within the following locations: North - 3rd Street; East - Boardwalk; South - Inlet; West - Bay. The building facades that front the Boardwalk are exempt from the design guidelines of the District, but must adhere to the existing underlying zoning district. A map of the area can be found on page 60 (Exhibit 1).

The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage development which exemplifies the best professional design practices so as to enhance the visual quality of the environment, benefit surrounding property values, and prevent poor quality of design.

## Intent of the Manual

### Downtown Ocean City Should Have:

- PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY CORRIDORS
- ATTRACTIVE BUILDINGS THAT REFLECT A TRADITIONAL THEME AND ARE PROPERLY DESIGNED AND MAINTAINED
- MIXED-USE BUILDINGS
- BUILDINGS THAT ARE ADAPTABLE AND HAVE AN ARCHITECTURAL VARIETY
- A DISTINCT CHARACTER SEPARATE FROM THE REST OF OCEAN CITY
- LANDSCAPING THAT DEFINES SPACE, PROVIDES SHADE AND IMPROVES AIR QUALITY IN PUBLIC SPACES AND PARKING LOTS
- IDENTIFIABLE NEIGHBORHOODS OR DISTRICTS
- AN INCENTIVE SYSTEM FOR PRESERVING SPECIAL AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS
- ATTRACTIVELY SCREENED PARKING AREAS
- MULTIPLE MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION
- A FEE-IN-LIEU-OF PARKING PROGRAM TO CREATE CENTRALIZED PARKING FACILITIES
- AN ENHANCED PUBLIC STORMWATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM



## The Belmont Cottage

1912  
Dorchester Street

design projects that will be compatible with and improve the quality of the existing community

The Downtown Design Guidelines are intended to guide property owners, builders, engineers, and architects in designing projects that will be compatible with and improve the quality of the existing community in which they are sited. However, if a particular project is unable to meet the intent of these guidelines due to unique project issues, the Town of Ocean City may elect to work with the property owner to assure the project meets this manual's overall objectives.

All exterior renovation to existing structures, and new construction of commercial, office, residential, and mixed-use development, shall adhere to these guidelines. Nonconforming signage shall be brought into compliance.

Interior improvements as well as standard and necessary maintenance to a building or site shall be exempt from these guidelines.

Nonconformity or "grandfathering" relative to building "footprints" shall be permitted. Nonconformity relative to parking credits for buildings and properties shall be permitted.

## CITY REVIEW PROCESS

Prior to formal review, applicants shall meet with the Town's Department of Planning and Community Development to discuss the proposed submission. Once submitted to the Town's site plan process, the application will follow the regular Town review procedures as defined by Town Code 110-181 through 110-184. The Ocean City Development Corporation shall be provided an opportunity to comment on all site plans submitted under these guidelines as part of the Development Review Committee process of the Town. Such comments will be forwarded to the Department of Planning and Community Development.



## Henry Hotel

circa 1895  
Baltimore Avenue