

# COMPREHENSIVE PLAN V

## TOWN OF ST. JAMES, NC



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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### **PHOTOGRAPHS**

Courtesy of John Muuss, Photographic Artistic, Inc.  
(Cover photo—The Grove Entrance Gate House)



## FOREWARD

This fifth version of the Town's Comprehensive Plan follows the community wide Survey of residents and property owners conducted last October. About 28 per cent of St. James property owners and residents (approximately 1600 of 5800) responded to the Survey and gave high marks for the operational and life style characteristics of the community. More than 750 respondents provided comments and suggestions.

One of St. James' most admirable qualities is the level of collaboration exhibited among the leading players in maintaining and growing the community. For more than a quarter of a century the Town, the Property Owners Association, The Fire Department and the Developer have cooperated on the development of land, the maintenance of public areas, the management of zoning and building standards, the protection of our residents, and the building and management of the many amenities that make St. James unique. The Town and the POA operate on strict budgets using income from property and state sales taxes and POA dues.

As infrastructure and amenities age there will be the need to continue to budget income to keep up with maintenance, repairs and replacement when necessary. The continued need for volunteers to serve on our great many committees, the Fire Department and the Town and POA boards is fundamental to keeping operating costs at a minimum.

This comprehensive plan is both a report on the current status of St. James and a view to the future. Several major issues are addressed here: the current and forecasted housing units and population within the Town boundaries; where new development "within the gates" will likely occur; the prospect for additional development along the widened NC 211 in the years to come.

The Comprehensive Plan committee has followed the rapid pace of population growth in Brunswick County, recognized as one of the top 50 fastest growing counties in the nation. Much of that growth is occurring along the southern borders of the county, close to the ocean and beaches. The challenge of managing our internal growth is exacerbated by seasonal population surges catering to vacationers and visitors to our beaches that tax the regional infrastructure. St. James is in the very heart of the major growth region in the county, and it will take our very best efforts to maintain the qualities that make St. James a highly desirable community in which to live.

Becky Dus, Mayor

# SECTION 1

## INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive Plan Five for the Town of St James is a view of the future of the Town and the regional setting in which our community rests. Comprehensive Plan Four, published in 2014, focused on the responsibilities of the major entities in St. James and addressed specific issues raised by property owners.

This comprehensive plan addresses the outlook for the next several years as St. James comes closer to full build-out and the transfer—in 2020 or sooner-- of voting power on the POA from the Developer to elected board members. The widening of NC 211, which will spur further development around St. James, will occur at about the same time.



A quarter century of land planning and development finds, according to the fall 2016 survey of property owners, that St. James residents are, for the most part, satisfied with the work and leadership of the Town, the Property Owners Association, the Fire Department and the Developer. All four entities are key players in organizing and guiding quality infrastructure and development within the Town boundaries. Of lasting importance is that the amenities promised by the Developer long ago have all been completed, contributing to a rich St. James lifestyle.

This comprehensive plan reports on the quantity of property developed to date, forecasts the use of the remaining land yet to be developed within the Town boundaries, and estimates the likely total population in 2020 and beyond. It also discusses projects announced for areas outside of the existing Town boundaries, especially major projects planned along NC 211 and Middleton Boulevard.

To be sure, the next several years will require a heightened level of cooperation among our Town officials and the leaders of Southport, Oak Island and Brunswick County to assure that sound planning and aesthetic principles are enacted and enforced as projects impacting the Town of St. James and all other municipalities are planned and built.

## SECTION 2

### CONTEXT: BRUNSWICK COUNTY DEVELOPMENT

Brunswick County, NC ranks among the 50 fastest growing counties in the nation. The 1990 U.S. Population Census of Brunswick County counted 50,985 residents. The 2000 census saw our county population rise to 73,692, and by the April 2010 census the population had more than doubled to 107,431. In July of 2015, the population was estimated to be 122,622. In 2016 the county's population increased to 126,953 and Brunswick County's 2030 population estimate is now 170,230. Added to that dynamic quality is the fact that our seasonal population, as estimated by the Brunswick County Planning Department, is 2.6 times the year-round population.

In 2010, again according to Brunswick County estimates, 21.4 percent of the county population was 65 or older and in 2015 that figure had grown to 28 percent. According to the U.S. Census the Brunswick County median household income as of 2014 was \$46,955.

***Brunswick Vision***, published by the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners in 2016, reported the results of a survey of county residents. The survey received 3,971 responses, 40 percent of which came from residents of the St. James-Southport-Oak Island-Bald Head Island area. The Town of St. James alone accounted for 15.15 percent of respondents to the countywide survey. Seventy-six per cent of survey respondents had annual incomes of \$50,000 or higher. Significantly, 48 percent of all respondents were retired. Furthermore, an estimated 35.91 percent had bachelor's degrees, 26.8 percent had master's degrees, and 4.79 percent had a doctorate degree. In 2000, in contrast, only 16.1 percent of the county population had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Feedback from the county survey and resident meetings about the county vision plan noted that county residents *"...mentioned coming to Brunswick County because it was not like neighboring counties and large towns, and wanting to see it maintain its unique atmosphere. Maintaining that, while at the same time preparing for growth and ensuring adequate infrastructure for the rapidly growing population, was another common theme."*

That growth is being fueled by new residents who have higher than average incomes and significant educational attainments. The demographics of communities like St. James bear out that observation. Nearly all of our residents chose to move to St. James from outside the state and most have a personal vision of what they would like to see St. James be as we meet our development horizon. Meanwhile the development of the corridors around St. James are poised for new development and the challenge will be to work with the county and neighboring municipalities to assure that new projects not in the Town of St. James enhance the quality of the built environment around us and contribute to the economic and aesthetic components of our shared future.

## **MAJOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS**

Next up for the regional transportation system is the extension of I-140 from NC 421 to US 74-76 in Brunswick County. This section is expected to open in late 2017, completing the overall linkage of I-140 to US 17. This major project will change traffic patterns within Brunswick County. Traffic coming from the north and west will be routed further south relieving pressure on NC 133. St. James residents will benefit from a shorter route to I-40.

Construction should start in 2019 to widen NC 211 to a four-lane boulevard from Midway Road to the intersection with NC 87 in Southport. Even with careful sequencing this improvement will cause disruption to St. James residents for several years with construction scheduled to be completed in 2022. The widening plan may include an overpass to connect Midway Road with Middleton Boulevard, and a second overpass over NC 211 to route NC 133.

Other road improvements under consideration include extending NC 211 as a four-lane boulevard from Midway Road to US 17 in Supply, and widening Midway Road from NC 211 to US 17.

St. James input to state transportation planning impacting Brunswick County comes through the Rural Transportation Organization (RTO). The RTO establishes transportation priorities for parts of Brunswick and Pender Counties and all of Columbus County. For more than a decade, a St. James elected official has served on the committee. It is crucial to our future that the Town of St. James continues its involvement with regional transportation planning and implementation.

## SECTION 3

### ST. JAMES HOUSING AND POPULATION

Important milestones leading to the development of all available property within St. James are likely in the next five years. Even more dramatic changes can be expected in the areas around the plantation and outside the current Town boundaries.

#### INSIDE THE TOWN BOUNDARIES

Within the gates growth in construction and population is likely to continue the rapid pace of the past few years. Roughly half the people and houses in St. James have been added since 2010.

- The population of St. James, according to estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau, grew to more than 4,900 by mid-2015 and the Bureau has estimated that some 500 residents have been added annually in recent years. With approximately 200 new homes added each year, that Census Bureau number may be on the high side.
- St. James residents will probably number more than 6,000 by the end of 2017.
- We have no reason to doubt the Census estimates, but the 2020 Census will be the first actual count since 2010.

As of March 1, 2017 there were 3,192 completed residences in St. James and 1,608 unimproved lots available for new homes. Residences include 325 multifamily and attached units. The current estimate of housing units that could possibly be built after all lots are sold and all multifamily units are completed is 5,150 to 5,300 residences. It is likely that there will always be sold lots that will not see a new home erected for quite some time, if ever. Some estimate that as many as ten percent of lots sold will not be developed in the foreseeable future. Moreover, there will always be a certain percentage of completed residences that will be used as rental properties, or as seasonal residences.

**Extrapolating those numbers suggests that the population of the Town of St. James will reach about 6,000 by the end of 2017 and will top out at about 9,000 plantation residents within the next decade.**



The Woodlands and The Grove areas have surged with new construction in recent years and will continue for some time. The Developer holds several other parcels that could be developed. Future expansion of the Marshwinds and Club Villas is expected to yield more than 150 new residences.



Likewise, additional multifamily housing units may be constructed on Oceanic Drive near the last entrance (not yet built) to St. James from NC 211. More important, the majority of potential new houses will be built on lots already sold by the developer and held by current individual property owners. The final number of dwellings and the population at build-out will, to some extent, depend on whether residences are built on now vacant properties.

The Developer owns parcels of land near the gates to St. James on Middleton Boulevard and NC 211 that are not now in the Town. The likely use of these properties is for nonresidential or mixed-use purposes, catering to both St. James residents and nonresidents. One model for this kind of expansion is the Doshier Wellness Center outside of the Town boundary at the SeaSide Gate:



- An additional 11 acres of land at SeaSide gate will eventually hold the proposed 100 unit Liberty Commons of Brunswick County senior living center to be built as part of a future 50 acre project. A combination of mixed-use and continuing care/wellness services may be placed on the remaining acreage.
- The Main Gate at St. James Drive and the Regency Gate each have about ten acres of adjacent property outside the Town boundaries on the south side of NC 211 on which some type of commercial or mixed-use development could be built.
- An additional 20 acres will be available at the fifth gate yet to be constructed to Oceanic Drive from NC 211.
- Other substantial tracts of land available for future development include land that wraps around the Town Hall and the St. James Sales Center. This property might be used for multifamily housing and commercial development.

Our October 2016 survey of residents drew a wide range of responses to expansion of the Town outside the gates. Several respondents indicated that they needed more details about the purpose of expansion and its impact on Town finances. Many were not sure if the expansion should lead to more residential or nonresidential development. Others interpreted the expansion as an opportunity for new retail offerings, while some were concerned that expansion would cause unwarranted future growth of the community and increase the burden on infrastructure and amenities. Some encouraged and welcomed the opportunity for greater control of zoning and business permits that could impact the appearance and quality of life of the Town for its residents.

## SECTION 4

### NC 211 CORRIDOR DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS AND PROSPECTS

The development of land along the NC 211 and Middleton Boulevard corridors will be one of the biggest long-term changes in the area. Much of the land along Middleton Boulevard is in the Town of Oak Island, which understandably encourages future development to boost tax revenue. The widening of NC 211 will enhance the appeal of development on the north side of the new boulevard, although some planned projects may hold off until construction nears an end.

Two significant developments have already been announced for the north side of NC 211. The largest of these is the 2,200-acre **Pine Forest Plantation**, initially proposed as The Charles in 2014, in Oak Island. Pine Forest is planned to eventually include up to 2,850 living units—townhomes, multi-family units and single-family houses—and some commercial development. The first Pine Forest structure is the 10,500 square foot Novant Health primary care facility now under construction on a 50-acre medical campus near the entrance on NC 211. It is set for completion this year. Pine Forest developers have also announced plans to begin construction of a 160-bed Assisted Living facility by Meridian Senior Living later this year, and they plan to start mixed-use projects in 2018. The Developer has submitted site plans for the first 564 acres of the project.

The 136 acre **Mirasol** project preliminary site plan calls for several out-parcels on the north side of the widened NC 211 highway, and as many as 1,000 single family, multifamily and apartment residences plus commercial development. While the land has been cleared there apparently are no immediate plans for construction. This parcel is not in Oak Island nor the Town of St. James.

South of NC 211 and west of Middleton Boulevard is the **Williamson Tract**, which is a planned unit development within Oak Island's jurisdiction. The plan calls for 7,700 housing units and commercial and civic facilities such as a school and fire station. The Williamson Tract is the largest of developments adjacent to our Town border, and one which seems likely to follow a slower schedule. Oak Island expects that the project may take 20 or 30 years to build out.

Abundant vacant lands line the north side of NC 211 across from St. James and offer significant opportunities for development. The widening of the highway will take a substantial bite out of the properties on the north side of the future right-of-way. Some land owners, including the developers of Mirasol, may wait for the highway widening project to be underway before moving forward with development plans.

The announced widening of NC 211 has undoubtedly enhanced the development potential of vacant lands on the north side of the boulevard. The challenge will be to guide development to assure that new projects enhance the related communities and contribute to the appearance and quality of the region. Announced plans for major projects appear to call for well-planned and attractive communities with lots of open space and amenities. St. James, Oak Island, Southport and Brunswick County are all stakeholders in the process and share the goal of quality and planned development. A collaborative effort to unify development ordinances and to regulate development is important to our collective future.

## **SECTION 5**

### **IMPLICATIONS OF GROWTH**

In the next five years St. James will undergo a significant shift. The focus of the last quarter century has been on residential development and construction of amenities within the St. James gates. We are nearing the end of that phase, and, while full build-out will take us well into the 2020's, St. James is now a mature community with established governance entities that are well-prepared for changes in the next few years. By 2022, the horizon of this report and the likely completion of the widening of NC 211, St. James will be a nearly complete and quality community three-decades old. While other developments in the area will spring up, St. James will still boast the most complete set of amenities necessary to support a high-end residential enclave.

Taken together, the combination of the Williamson Tract, Pine Forest and Mirasol developments have more than 11,000 housing units on the drawing boards as well as abundant medical and retail offerings convenient to St. James. While the full impact on St. James of these developments will not be felt for decades, Pine Forest at least seems poised for takeoff in the next few years. The timing of all the projects discussed elsewhere in this report—those inside and outside the gates as well as those in the Oak Island jurisdiction—will depend on the national and regional economy and the strength of local demand for real estate.

Development outside our gates brings clear benefits to St. James residents. The ambitious projects proposed will serve to support medical and commercial enterprises that St. James residents have long sought. The market for most of these offerings has been dependent on a large enough residential base to support these investments. The long awaited 39-acre Midway Commons shopping center, which opened in 2016 at the intersection of NC 211 and Midway Road, may be a sign that the market for new commercial development is improving.

The prospect of additional large housing developments will eventually deliver the population threshold that retailers and commercial enterprises demand before they invest in stores and restaurants. Significantly, the area around St. James will offer substantial new employment opportunities in medical and other industries, and future employees may seek housing near their workplace.

The downside is that all of us will have to eventually deal with higher traffic volumes and congestion. In particular, the widening of NC 211 will lead to traffic difficulties for much of the 2019-2022 construction period. Over the longer term, the large developments planned along NC 211 and Middleton Road—on land that is now virtually uninhabited—will sharply increase the population.

## SECTION 6

### PROPERTY OWNERS ASSOCIATION

The St. James Property Owners Association (POA) deserves much of the credit for what makes St. James a quality community. The POA was formed as a private, non-profit organization effective October 2, 1990. The POA Board of Directors is composed of six members elected by St. James property owners serving three-year terms, and seven members appointed by the Developer. The POA currently has eight contracted management personnel as well as contracted services for landscaping and security. The POA Board is supported by approximately 115 resident volunteers on 13 committees.

Property owner dues collected by the POA fund its activities. The POA has been careful through the years to build and maintain financial reserves to meet the needs of immediate and long-term maintenance. For example, the next major project on which work has just begun is the rebuilding of the Polly Gully Causeway, a project which is in the POA budget. Continued residential growth in St. James, as well as an aging infrastructure, may increase future operating costs.

Key functions of the POA are maintaining the streets and common areas, security, setting and enforcing building standards, and maintaining the Beach Club. Respondents to the 2017 communitywide survey confirmed that the security of St. James residents and the appearance of the public domain remain high concerns and priorities. Thus far crime in St. James has been low. Security is provided by a private contractor with assistance by the Brunswick County Sheriff's Office.

Maintaining an open and transparent line of communication between residents and the POA is a major goal. POA communications to residents comes in several formats:

- Monthly open POA meetings begin with presentations on current projects and provides time for residents to voice concerns.
- Meeting announcements with agendas and minutes are posted on the POA website.
- *Cat Tales*, a monthly publication staffed by volunteers, is a quality publication that offers a wide range of articles about St. James that is mailed to every property owner and resident.
- *What's Up St. James?* is a weekly email sent to all residents.
- Blast emails are sent when necessary to alert residents of road closures and other important developments.

## TRANSITION PLANNING

A key milestone for St. James in the next few years will be the transfer of voting control on the POA board from the Developer's representatives to the elected members. The POA Master Declaration calls for the Developer control of the POA to continue until one of three conditions is met: (1) when the Developer holds title to fewer than 50 lots or dwellings; (2) on January 1, 2020; or (3) at the Developer's discretion with six-months advance notice. At that time, the elected POA board members will assume the obligation to maintain the physical assets for which the POA is responsible, for the acceptance of the common property, and for accounting for the assets transferred.

For the past 12 years the Transition Committee has been working to assure a smooth transition that occurs seamlessly. The Committee has developed a Working Plan that will ensure that all documents and permits are in order and up to date, and that all infrastructure is in good condition prior to receiving notification from the Developer that such transfer will begin.

While this transition is an important symbolic step in the progress of St. James, residents are not likely to notice much change. To date the development ownership group has allowed the elected board members to run the community's day-to-day operations. The transition is likely to occur in a consistent, coherent and integrated fashion, all to the benefit of St. James property owners.

Transition changes none of the best POA practices, policies and procedures that we have come to expect:

- Service, providing an environment that fosters volunteerism;
- Collaboration, empowering interaction among community groups;
- Stewardship, maintaining the quality of our natural resources and the character of our built environment;
- Leadership, providing a clear sense of direction and keeping the St. James community involved and informed.

The POA will face continued challenges as the community matures. The improvement of the Polly Gully Causeway is the next major road improvement that is underway and planned for completion by early summer in 2017. Attention to the quality of water in our many ponds and streams is the subject of significant attention by an expert volunteer committee.

## **SECTION 7**

### **TOWN OF ST. JAMES**

The Town of St. James was incorporated in 1999. The Town Council is composed of five elected councilors, and the Mayor is selected by the Town Council from the members. All elected officials and Town committee members serve without compensation.

Because of the beneficial operating and governance structure constructed between the Town of St. James, Brunswick County and the POA, the Town government has fewer responsibilities than most municipalities. Enforcement of the state building code is the only service mandated for North Carolina municipalities. However, municipalities can provide water distribution, sewage collection and disposal, garbage and refuse disposal, police protection, street maintenance, and street lighting. In St. James, some of these tasks are performed in cooperation with the county, others with the POA, and some are contracted out to service providers. Contracted services include curbside recycling which is provided by the Town of St. James under contract with Waste Industries. So also is the collection of yard waste provided by a private contractor.

The Town built, owns and operates the Community Center with paid staff. Furthermore, the Town of St. James contracts for Fire and Emergency Medical Services provided by the all-volunteer and independent St. James Fire Department, Inc. Additionally the Town provides Emergency Management Services supported by an all-volunteer team, closely aligned with the Brunswick County emergency management team.

Street lighting is provided by Brunswick Electric Management Cooperative under contract to the Town of St. James. Responding to resident concerns about neighborhood lighting, the Town commissioned a professional lighting study and hosted neighborhood meetings in 2016 which resulted in the commitment by the Town to accommodate almost every lighting recommendation made by residents. Installation of upgraded lighting sources and standards is underway in 2017.

The Town is fiscally strong due to the taxes paid by property owners and sales tax revenues from the state. The Town's professional staff and volunteer experts monitor, forecast and audit the cash resources necessary to meet the challenge of operating a growing community and an aging community infrastructure.

There are substantial tracts of land adjacent to the Town boundaries along Middleton Road and NC 211 which will be developed as the market for nonresidential commercial development expands. The Town may be asked to annex some of these parcels upon development that are not now in either Southport or Oak Island. Annexation of this improved land would increase tax revenues to the community to invest in future infrastructure and community improvements.

## **SECTION 8**

### **ST. JAMES FIRE DEPARTMENT, INC.**

The Fire Department, which protects residents from fires and provides emergency medical services, has long been a key asset to St. James. The St. James Fire Department, Inc. became operational in 1999 and is currently staffed by 37 firefighters, 21 emergency medical technicians, and 21 fire police staff—all unpaid and well-trained volunteers. Most operating and equipment costs are funded by a contract between the Town and the Fire Department, and by fundraisers organized by the Fire Department with assistance from volunteers from the community.

The growth in population and residences in St. James highlights the importance of the volunteer fire department to our safety and to the low cost of fire insurance within the Town boundaries. The development of The Reserve and SeaSide communities has put some of our community beyond the ideal one and one-half to two and one-half miles from the existing fire station. In response, the Town has approved construction of a substation on Oceanic Drive in the SeaSide area. The \$1.4 million, 7,000 square foot fire substation will house a pumper truck, an ambulance, and an emergency operations center. Funding resources have been identified and a 2017 start of construction is anticipated. Fire Department officials anticipate the need for 15 additional volunteers to staff the fire services and ideally another 15 to staff the emergency medical services component of the new fire house.

However, as our community expands and ages there may come a time when the department will require paid firefighters and EMS personnel. The new substation provides room for adding bunkrooms should that be required.

Brunswick County has 22 fire departments, many of them staffed by volunteers. The growth of population in the county has led to a discussion about how to fund fire departments countywide. Brunswick County is studying an option of creating a countywide or regional fire district funded through property taxes. At this time the St. James Fire Department does not anticipate becoming a paid or partially paid fire department. If the proposal becomes reality, St. James can opt out of a regional fire district if the St. James department believes it can attract enough volunteers.

## SECTION 9 THE VISION

Although not yet developed to its full potential, St. James is a mature community that has passed the test of time. Widely recognized as one of the most successful of its type, the Town of St. James has thrived on its diverse and attractive housing stock, the quality of our residents, the tradition of volunteerism, and the diligence of its leadership. St. James has benefited from the shared vision of its founder Homer Wright with the residents who have bought into and support this unique lifestyle. The Developer's early fulfillment of promises to build amenities earned the trust and respect of existing and prospective residents.

Early decisions made to bury all power cables allow for pleasant tree lined streets and more reliable services. Preservation of about one-third of its original more than 5,000 acres in wetlands, dedicated open space, the ponds, golf courses and marshlands provides for plentiful visual appeal. No other community in Brunswick County enjoys the magnitude and quality of our wellness and recreation facilities. The St. James Beach Club on Oak Island remains the only non-resident beach club on the island.

St. James is an economically viable community that is prepared to maintain and repair infrastructure as it ages. As a gated community, residents have a measure of safety. The design and siting of homes is regulated by the Town of St. James' Uniform Development Ordinance and by the diligent POA Architectural Control Committee which assure compatible and yet diverse housing types to be built to avoid the typical housing subdivision stereotype.

Now more than two and one-half decades in the making, St. James faces the dual challenges of balancing a growing community and aging infrastructure with major development outside the gates along Middleton Boulevard and NC 211. With all the promised amenities completed within the Town limits, continued population growth may call for some future expansion of the facilities which are already in place. The proposed Fire Department substation at SeaSide is an example of expanding Town services to a growing community.

Based on the responses of residents and property owners to our 2016 survey, population growth continues to concern some of our residents including our many golfers and tennis players. The need for more parking at the Beach Club during peak usage is apparent and requires resolution. With a network of narrow roads and a 20 mile per hour speed limit on most roads, traffic within the plantation was noted as a concern by some residents.

This Comprehensive Plan V is a call to complete the Vision of a community of excellence, inhabited by engaged residents providing creative leadership. The Vision will require an investment in visionary tactics, coupled with an even higher dose of expert volunteerism and diligent oversight, to assure that the next decade not only preserves the inherent qualities of our community but also enhances the property values and the quality of life that we now enjoy.



What we need:

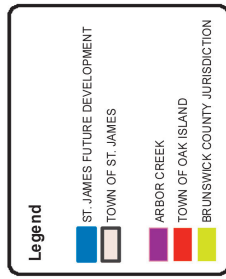
- Continued long-range financial planning for repair and maintenance of an aging road, storm water management, and thoroughfare infrastructure.
- Volunteers to man the expansion of fire and emergency medical services, as well as to serve and lead the Town and POA and their committees.
- Heightened level of interaction with our neighboring towns and Brunswick County.
- A consolidated view of development standards among municipalities and Brunswick County for NC 211 corridor projects.
- Personal involvement of St. James residents on county and regional transportation boards and commissions.
- A voice in the design and landscaping of the NC 211 median along the Town of St. James borders.

**MAP FOLLOWS ON PAGE 15**

APPENDIX—MAP



MAY 6, 2017



1 inch = 2,000 feet

