

[http://www.myeasternshoremd.com/news/caroline\\_county/article\\_4b479a3a-e18e-5d44-a5d5-9a990d89e4f5.html](http://www.myeasternshoremd.com/news/caroline_county/article_4b479a3a-e18e-5d44-a5d5-9a990d89e4f5.html)

FEATURED TOP STORY

# State approves Denton visitors center, funding

By DUSTIN HOLT dholt@chespub.com Feb 3, 2016



The new Choptank River Heritage and Visitors Center in Denton would be built at Crouse Park, here, along the Choptank River waterfront.

PHOTO BY DUSTIN HOLT

DENTON — A project 14 years in the making took a major step forward in January when the state of Maryland approved the town of Denton's plan to build the Choptank River Heritage and Visitors Center along the Choptank River at Crouse Park in Denton.

The visitors center's construction and improvements to Crouse Park will be fully funded by state and federal money. The 2,500-square foot visitors center will cost about \$1.5 million with an additional \$600,000 for site work. Much of the state and federal funding comes for gas taxes set aside for visitors centers.

The new visitors center, a first for Caroline County, will be the headquarters for the Caroline County Office of Tourism along with an interpretative center, heritage display and restrooms for tour buses. The center will be built on stilts and have three exterior decks for a panoramic view of the Choptank River waterfront in downtown Denton.

Improvements to Crouse Park include rebuilding the park ground by raising it almost a foot to curb a flood hazard. The park also will feature a nature trail, children's play area, rain garden, native plants and access to the Choptank River for water sports.

Funding for the project includes \$976,000 from Federal Highway, \$450,000 from the Maryland State Highway Administration, \$310,000 from Community Legacy and a state bond bill for \$196,000.

The town put the project, known as the Wharves at Choptank Crossing, out for bid at the end of January. Interested contractors may obtain a copy of the contract documents during normal working hours at the Office of the Town Administrator, 4 North 2nd Street, Denton, Maryland 21629.

The Wharves at Choptank Crossing began in 2002 with the town of Denton working with Caroline nonprofit Denton Development Corporation to come up with a plan for the Choptank River waterfront. The project has faced many hurdles since 2002 with trying to secure funds, getting environmental approval from many state and federal agencies and having permits and grants expire while new permits and grants were being applied for.

"I've worked in economic development for 31 years and the best way to describe this project is to say it was a 14-year crucible," said J.O.K. Walsh, who worked on the project from its inception as a member of the Denton Development Corporation. "I have never ever seen a more difficult project to accomplish.

"We have been so close so many times," he said. "We had an enormous reversal back in 2008 when the whole funding environment changed so drastically. We've worked on this for so long that you become cautiously optimistic when you get the approval and funding from the state."

Walsh said the idea for the visitors center is to attract visitors to Caroline County and generate a new customer base for small businesses.

"We need customers for small businesses in Caroline County, particularly in the historic business districts. The future of all these downtowns are small mom and pop businesses. They need customers.

"The visitors center is about getting people in and sending them to Greensboro, and Federalsburg, and Preston and exploring Denton," he said.

"Caroline is the only county without a visitors center.

"This project can facilitate and direct people into the county and explore what Caroline has to offer," he said. "This county has many businesses, five historical societies and many nonprofits that will benefit with new people stopping in Caroline. That is what this is all about, assisting small businesses and assisting nonprofits. That is why we absolutely have to have this visitors center.

"We are not going to sit around and watch our small businesses struggle," he said. "We are going to do this to help them. I don't care what the public thinks about this project. It is a great project.

"It makes me sick watching a small business fail because they don't have enough customers," Walsh added. "We want this project to help that issue. We have to bring people into this county and support these great small businesses and nonprofits.

"If people don't understand it is being done for the benefit of the Caroline County businesses and organizations, then I'm sorry. I don't care," he said. "If they were out there watching these small businesses go out of business over the last 14 years or 20 years, maybe they would want to do something about it too."

Denton Mayor Abby McNinch said the Muldrow Study in 2008 recommended waterfront development as a way to boost the local economy, and the 2010 Denton Comprehensive Plan also includes waterfront development.

"Our waterfront is an underused resource right now," she said. "Providing a visitors center would really enable more people to come and enjoy the space and learn about the area at the same time.



"The visitors center will connect the waterfront and the downtown business district," she said. "Denton is a very walkable community. The town has a lot of momentum on its side with the success of the Chesapeake Culinary Center, the expansion of the Arts and Entertainment District, which would include the visitors center, and the new businesses that are thriving like Turnbridge Point Bed and Breakfast and the work being done in the Art District.

"All of those components together, along with our existing businesses downtown make for an appealing trip to Denton," she said. "While at the visitors center, you would get information about the Rural Life Museum in in town, but also about all the other great businesses and organizations in Caroline County. The visitors center can bring everything together to promote the entire county."

The initial project plans included a restaurant next to the visitors center, but the restaurant has been put on hold for the time being. The town had a signed letter of intent for a restaurant the first few years into the project, but the owner died and plans did not move forward.

Walsh credited Denton Town Manager Don Mulrine for bringing the project to fruition in the last four years.

"He was that critical person that kept the project moving forward," he said. "Don Mulrine really took the bull by the horns, just like he did on the culinary center. Don is really, really good at project management.

"The town of Denton is really lucky to have him," he said. "These major projects, such as the visitors center, the Chesapeake Culinary School and assisting with the arts district expansion all have been helped with Don's expertise. The Chesapeake Culinary Center would have never, ever, ever happened without Don coming in there. Don was just masterful at getting to where construction could get started."

Walsh also credited former Sen. Richard Colburn for pushing the project on the state level and Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio for supporting the project.

"It took 13 or 14 years to navigate this whole thing," he said. "What it really needed was an absolute determination that we are going to do this thing. Former Sen. Richard Colburn really helped push this for us at the state level. We would not have made it this far without his support for the project. He just pushed on the State Highway Administration. Jeanie Haddaway-Riccio has come along and really helped out."

---

Follow Caroline/Dorchester Editor Dustin Holt on Twitter @Dustin\_StarDem.

