

Cape Charles, Virginia – Working Harbor & Coastal Economic Development Brief

This paper is intended to stimulate the thinking of the Town Council about which three (3) localities it wants to be evaluated as peer comparables. The Rural Resilience Advisors team has researched localities on both the east and west coasts of the US. Ultimately RRA recommends that the Town Council select from the list of thirteen (13) in this report.

Before the upcoming Council work session, we ask that Council members take time to do their own research on these localities. At the Council meeting, RRA will facilitate input from Council members to understand their priorities for selecting three localities. If there are other localities that Council members would like to consider that are not in this list, it would be helpful for the member to come prepared with information on the locality that is similar to the evaluation criteria used in this report

Executive Summary

Cape Charles is a historic bayside town of roughly 1,250–1,300 residents on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. It combines a walkable main street, a public beach, and a true mixed-use working harbor that hosts commercial watermen, industrial vessels, and recreational boaters. The town’s economy is built around tourism, accommodations and food service, retail, health care and social services, and transportation-related activity, with the harbor and marinas serving as critical economic and identity anchors. Compared with a curated peer set of small coastal towns and working harbors from Maine to Georgia, Cape Charles scores highly on overall comparability with places such as St. Michaels (MD), Rockport (MA), Beaufort (NC), Lewes (DE), and Boothbay Harbor (ME). These communities offer useful benchmarks for harbor management, tourism strategy, resilience planning, and historic district preservation.

Working Harbor Profile Definition & Purpose

A **working harbor** is a waterfront area whose primary function is to support **commercial, industrial, logistical, and water-dependent economic activities**. Unlike recreational marinas or scenic waterfronts, a working harbor is defined by **active maritime operations**, movement of goods and vessels, and infrastructure that enables commerce. Its identity is shaped by the industries it serves, the vessels it hosts, and the economic value it generates for the surrounding community and region.

Working harbors typically include **commercial docks, shipyards, cargo facilities, fuel terminals, fishing piers, and industrial waterfronts** that rely on direct access to navigable water. They serve as operational hubs where marine transportation, seafood industries, shipbuilding, maintenance services, and water-dependent industries converge.

Top Comparable Locations to Cape Charles (qualitative summary)

Top 10 Comparable Locations to Cape Charles (qualitative summary)

| Location | Similarities to Cape Charles | Key Differences / Risks |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| St. Michaels, MD | Very close match on scale, historic harbor, mixed commercial/recreational fleet, tourism intensity. | More upscale lodging/dining profile; higher tourism price point. |
| Rockport, MA | Similar walkable village, arts + tourism, active harbor with strong visitor economy. | Larger arts/gallery cluster; New England climate and context. |
| Beaufort, NC | Harbor town with maritime history, tourism, research presence; similar mixed economy. | More exposure to hurricanes; larger marine science footprint. |
| Lewes, DE | Historic coastal town with harbor, ferry connection, retiree + tourism mix. | Denser development, more established tourism and retiree population. |
| Boothbay Harbor, ME | Working harbor with fishing fleet + tourism; similar harbor operations + seasonality. | Colder climate; stronger lobster fleet orientation; more seasonal closures. |
| St. Marys, GA | Small historic coastal town with marsh/river access, ferry connections, visitor appeal. | Stronger marsh/island tourism dynamic; part of Lowcountry environment. |
| Southport, NC | Historic harbor town with strong maritime identity, festivals, and visitor traffic similar to Cape Charles. | Greater exposure to Atlantic hurricane impacts; higher peak-season congestion. |
| Port Royal, SC | Historic waterfront community with redevelopment efforts, small-town coastal scale, and growing marina assets. | Greater regional competition (Beaufort/Lowcountry); warmer climate and higher hurricane risk. |
| Crisfield, MD | Strong watermen heritage, seafood identity, working harbor, and Chesapeake cultural parallels. | Economic distress, declining population, higher climate and subsidence vulnerability. |
| Wickford (North Kingstown), RI | Historic harbor village, walkable district, marinas, boutiques—close feel match. | New England climate; different tourism seasonality; higher cost base. |
| Old Saybrook, CT | Historic coastal town at river-mouth setting, boating/marina amenities, tourism + residential blend. | Larger community scale; stronger commuter influences; higher housing costs. |
| Exmore, VA | Nearby Eastern Shore town with corridor role, some tourism/retail parallels. | Less direct waterfront presence; fewer destination amenities than Cape Charles. |

Comparative Scoring Index

To make peer comparisons more actionable, each location has been scored on five qualitative dimensions relative to Cape Charles (1 = low similarity, 5 = very close match):

- 1) Scale / population fit
- 2) Working harbor profile
- 3) Tourism & seasonality match
- 4) Historic / character match
- 5) Risk / resilience profile similarity

Comparative Scoring Index – Cape Charles Similarity

| Location | Scale | Harbor | Tourism | Historic | Resilience | Overall Score |
|--------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|----------|------------|---------------|
| St. Michaels, MD | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5.0 |
| Rockport, MA | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 4.5 |
| Beaufort, NC | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4.0 |
| Lewes, DE | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4.0 |
| Boothbay Harbor, ME | 3 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4.0 |
| Southport, NC | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3.75 |
| Wickford (North Kingstown), RI | 4 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 3.75 |
| St. Marys, GA | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3.5 |
| Old Saybrook, CT | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3.5 |
| Crisfield, MD | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3.5 |
| Georgetown, SC | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3.5 |
| Port Royal, SC | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3.0 |
| Exmore, VA | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2.5 |