

INTRODUCTION

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The Sussex County Landscape

Sussex County has the largest land area of Delaware's three counties and has long been the State's leading agricultural producer. In addition to its large farming regions, Sussex County's diverse landscape also encompasses small towns, growing population centers, and renowned ocean-side vacation areas. Transportation routes in Sussex County range from country roads to major highways. Nearly all public roads in Sussex County are administered by the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT).



Today, Sussex is the fastest growing county in Delaware because of its popularity as a primary and second home destination. This new development, in combination with agriculture and a booming tourism industry, continues to generate substantial economic activity. The County's active economy and cost-conscious public sector management continue to permit the favorable real tax rates for which Sussex County is also noted.



Sussex County's varied geography and diverse population mean that government officials, business leaders and other residents will continue to consider many inter-related issues in planning for the future. Sussex County will continue to develop. The question for local decision makers is how to make room for growth and still conserve the assets that make Sussex County a unique place to live, work and visit.

Comprehensive Plan Update

Sussex County published its last Comprehensive Plan in January 2003. Delaware law requires County Council to update the plan every five years. This newest updated plan addresses opportunities and challenges the County continues to face in the following areas:

- Land Use
- Housing
- Community Design
- Economic Development
- Transportation
- Water and Wastewater
- Conservation
- Recreation and Open Space
- Historic Preservation
- Intergovernmental Cooperation

Sussex County’s newest Comprehensive Plan focuses on each of these topics in a separate chapter. The highlight is on how trends in these areas are likely to impact future growth and preservation. Each chapter also identifies how Sussex County government should respond to these emerging trends, and influence their direction, where appropriate.

The Sussex County Government’s Approach

Because this Plan is an update, the focus is on refining, not reinventing, the County’s approach to planning. Sussex County encourages appropriate types of development in compatible locations at suitable densities. The County also emphasizes quality of life and promotes conservation in community design. The Sussex County government encourages economic growth, strongly respects private property rights, and is committed to maintaining a viable climate for preserving agriculture.

Big Picture Trends

Sussex County will maintain its roles as Delaware’s agricultural leader, Delaware’s tourism center and the State’s major growth center for the foreseeable future. New full-time residents, second home growth and seasonal tourism will continue to drive the local economy, and test the capacity of certain local infrastructure. More racial diversity and continued “greying” of the County’s population will continue to be local facts of life. The statistics that follow highlight these trends.

Recent Population Patterns

As of July 2006, Sussex County was home to 180,275 residents, according to recent estimates by the Delaware Population Consortium. The County added population steadily throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s. During the next decade growth accelerated and County population increased by 38%. Sussex County grew by 15% between the 2000 U.S. Census and July 2006. This recent pace is more moderate than County growth in the 1990’s but is still the highest growth rate among Delaware’s three counties.

U. S. Census population statistics do not provide a full picture of County growth because the Census Bureau does not count seasonal residents. This is particularly important in Sussex County, which had 24,906 seasonal housing units in 2000, according to the Census. At an average of 2.5 persons per household, these seasonal homes could be accommodating over 62,000 additional people in prime vacation season.

Sussex County welcomes seasonal visitors and other tourists. Tourism is an indispensable part of the local economy. At the same time, growth management policies in Sussex County consider how tourists impact the County’s housing supply, roads, utilities, and natural environment. As prime coastal areas have become more developed, both the benefits and costs of growth have spread to the County’s inland bay areas and into parts of central and western Sussex.

Table 1
Sussex Remains Delaware’s Most Rural County Despite Strong Growth

Area	July 2006 Population	1990-2006 Percent Change	July 2006 Persons Per Square Mile
Kent County	147675	33	250
New Castle County	527027	19	1237
Sussex County	180275	59	192
Delaware Total	854977	34	438

Table 2
Sussex County Population Rates

Year	Population	Percent Change
1970	80356	--
1980	98004	22
1990	113229	16
2000	156638	38
July 2006 Estimate	180275	15

Population Projections

The Delaware Population Consortium projects that Sussex County will continue developing but at a somewhat slower rate in the future. The Consortium predicts County population will grow by 24% between 2000 and 2010, compared to the 38% gain experienced during the 1990's. The Consortium forecasts that Sussex County growth rates will then continue to moderate in each of the next two decades following 2010.

Natural increase (births minus deaths) and migration are the two components of population growth. The Consortium expects migration to account for a growing share of Delaware’s new residents between now and 2020, particularly in Sussex County. Migration creates a greater immediate impact than gaining population via natural increase. Most migrants to an area arrive as people who need housing and municipal services right away.

Table 3
State Predicts Slowing County Growth Rate

Year	Population	Percent Change
2000	156638	--
2010	194422	24
2020	226758	17
2030	253226	12

Composition of County Residents

Growth is bringing greater diversity to Sussex County. The U.S. Census reports that the County’s white population and black population each grew at rates similar to the County’s overall population between 1990 and 2000. During this same period, the number of Hispanic residents and residents from other racial backgrounds (such as Asian) grew at several times the overall County rate. According to the Consortium, Delaware’s Hispanic population grew almost three-fold between 1980 and 1996, with half of these persons settling in Sussex County.

Table 4
Sussex County Is Becoming More Diverse

	1990 Population	2000 Population	1990-2000 Percent Change
White	92395	125857	36
Black	18995	23319	23
Others	1839	7462	300
Hispanic of Any Race	1221	6915	466

Sussex County’s age profile is also changing. Sussex County’s lower tax rates, natural environment, quality of life and housing opportunities are attracting retirees, owners of second homes, and other older householders in great numbers. Many persons buy a second home with the intent that it will become their regular retirement home. A number of new housing developments are specifically limited to persons age 55 and older. Between 1990 and 2000, the fastest growing age groups in the County were the 45 to 64 year olds, which increased by 67%, and people 65 years and older which grew by 53%. During the 1990's, each of the other age groups shown on Table 5 grew at rates less than the County’s overall 38% population increase.

People 65 years and older made up 19% of all Sussex County residents in 2000, according to the Census. By comparison, this same age group comprised only 12% of Kent County’s total population and 12% of all people in New Castle County according to the 2000 Census. Sussex County’s median age in 2000 (41.1 years) compared to median age in Kent County (34.4 years) and New Castle County (35.0 years) also illustrates Sussex County’s older age profile.

The Delaware Department of Labor’s Office of Labor Management forecasts that a growing proportion of Sussex County’s new residents will be people 65 years and older, with potential implications for the following services, among others:

- Health care
- Eldercare
- Transportation
- Social services
- Lifelong learning
- Job retraining

**Table 5
Sussex County Population is Getting Older**

	1990	2000	1990-2000 Percent Change
Under 18	27088	35305	30
18 - 24	9569	10950	14
25 - 44	33590	41236	23
45 - 64	24051	40125	67
65 and Older	18931	29022	53

Implications of Population Growth

The previous sections of this chapter quantify current population trends and describe the Delaware Population Consortium’s population projections for Sussex County. Patterns such as continued growth in seasonal housing, more racial diversity, the “greying” of the population base, and ongoing pressure on community services and infrastructure are noted. This section takes a closer look at the components and implications of population growth.

The second half of the 20th century saw a great migration from Delaware’s urban areas to regions in the State that were once largely farms and forests. The American Farmland Trust has noted that while 50% of Delaware’s population lived in Wilmington in 1920, only 9% lived there by 2000. These growth patterns and land consumption trends created a strong demand for public infrastructure such as roads, schools, and public water and sewer facilities. In turn, this demand caused state spending and the state’s bonded indebtedness to skyrocket (even after adjusting for annual inflation).

Sussex County has been the state’s fastest growing area and is forecasted to remain in that position for the foreseeable future. In-migration, rather the increase of births over deaths is responsible for almost all of this growth. To grasp what continued “in-migration” means for Sussex County, local officials, business persons, full-time residents, and seasonal visitors need to understand potential impacts. While growth has significant positive effects on the local businesses, public impacts are also likely to include the following:

- ***The need for more new schools and school expansions.*** While the State has traditionally footed most of this bill, State financial resources are currently under great strain. Furthermore, the provision of these resources by area is subject to State policies associated with Level 1 through Level 4 designations regarding the expenditure of State funds on infrastructure. Much of Sussex County’s undeveloped land slated for possible growth is now designated as Level 4, the areas the State views as least appropriate for State capital spending. The State desires better coordination with Sussex County on matching County land use policies with the State’s infrastructure spending plans. Among other actions, Sussex County will need to coordinate with the State in possibly updating some Level 1 through Level 4 designations once this Comprehensive Plan Update is officially adopted by Sussex County Council.

Fortunately for Sussex County schools and for the State’s school funding situation, many new Sussex County residents are retirees or other older people without school-age children. Despite Sussex County’s rapid overall population growth, the County’s public school enrollment grew by only 7.7% between 1997 and 2007. During this same period, school property tax revenues increased by a disproportionate 122%.

- ***The need for more central water and sewer services.*** More growth, increased density, and a heightened concern for surface and groundwater quality means that individual wells and on-site septic systems will be less prevalent in the future. Through studies in several areas of the County, Sussex County Council and staff have been actively examining who should

fund central water and sewer facilities, where should they be constructed, and under whose oversight. Between 2002 and 2007 Sussex County built sewer facilities that replaced nearly 3,000 on-lot septic systems. Sewer projects now under construction will replace an additional 2,130 septic systems. New sewer projects approved in 2007 will replace 2,482 more septic systems. As Sussex County's population continues to grow, this work will continue, as scheduled in Sussex County's Five Year Capital Improvement Program.

- ***More traffic congestion.*** Traffic follows growth, particularly growth in low density areas that depends entirely on automobiles. Daily commuting to Sussex County's job centers is also on the increase, including cars with one-person driving alone. The County and DelDOT have coordinated on studying the busiest part of the SR 1 corridor, US 113, and other locations. More locally-focused, sub-area planning will be done to anticipate the future road and intersection improvements needed most to preserve both north-south mobility and east-west mobility. Such plans can also examine what road and intersection improvements could potentially be funded by developers, either in part or in full. The County's request for enabling legislation to authorize special development districts is another example of how Sussex County is dealing with growth-related traffic issues.
- ***More demand for health, social, and para-transit services.*** As median age continues to increase in Sussex County, more health services will be needed, affecting both hospitals and other health care providers. Sussex County's large poultry producers and its growing seasonal tourism sector provide many lower paying jobs. More lower income households create more demand for publicly-funded social services and non-traditional para-transit services. County grants have helped fund human services, a senior center and para-transit programs. However, the County will need to do more follow up on these and similar needs, as identified in the Sussex County Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan.
- ***Demand for affordable housing.*** Prices for recently built Sussex County homes and apartments have been at or near all-time highs. This reflects the County's popularity as a first home and second home destination. Over the long-term, housing cost increases will continue to price certain low and moderate households out of the market. This in turn will further exacerbate the area's affordable housing shortage, particularly in the County's job centers. In response to its growing population, Sussex County must continue and expand its recent successful efforts aimed at encouraging construction of more affordable housing.

The County will continue to solicit bids for a new round of its Moderately Priced Housing Unit (MPHU) program. This will augment the contracts to provide affordable housing the County now has with developers who have received County approval to construct development that will include affordable units.

- ***Demand for more wastewater treatment.*** Statistics provided elsewhere in this comprehensive plan describe the funding and other resources Sussex County has devoted to providing central sewer service to: a) serve new growth; and b) replace failing on-site septic systems. These large increases in central sewer connections demonstrate the County's serious commitment to dealing with the infrastructure demands created by growth. The County's 2008-2012 capital improvements schedules shows the County's official commitment to ongoing expansion of central sewer service in the future.

Public Involvement

Using the following techniques, Sussex County reached out for meaningful public involvement in preparing this Comprehensive Plan revision:

- The County introduced and described the purpose of the plan on its website. Public comments were sought and received on the County website throughout the process. Recordings of all public meetings were posted on the website shortly after these meetings were held.
- The County held an opening round of public meetings at five different locations during January and February 2007. Meetings were held in Greenwood, Lewes, Seaford, Selbyville, and Bethany Beach. The purposes of the meetings were to describe the planning process, identify topics the plan would be covering, and hear what the public perceived to be the important development and preservation issues facing Sussex County.
- County staff members and the County's planning consultant met in one-on-one interviews and small focus group sessions with key persons representing many different points of view on the future of Sussex County. These persons included realtors, developers, utility companies, conservationists, farmers, manufactured housing representatives, and concerned citizen committees, among others.
- The County hosted two public meetings in September 2007: one in Rehoboth Beach and one in Laurel. At these meetings, County staff members and the planning consultant summarized the draft plan's key findings, overall strategies, and specific recommendations. Public discussion featuring a question and answer period then followed.
- County staff members hosted similar meetings to further describe the draft Plan to the incorporated municipalities located in each of Sussex County's five councilmatic districts. Officials from Sussex County's 25 incorporated municipalities were directly invited to attend one of five joint municipal meetings held between October and December 2007. Special contacts were also made to obtain input from the officials of certain municipalities who were unable to attend the officially scheduled meeting in their region.

Most public meetings were well-attended. The public meetings and the smaller group sessions each featured lively discussions about growth trends and future prospects in Sussex County. Different strains of thought were aired at these forums. Several people expressed their belief that Sussex County needs to focus more on controlling growth, reducing traffic congestion, and better preserving the natural environment. A large contingent of participants expressly rejected the notion of regulations or policies that would further constrain private property rights, particularly with regard to the future development potential of farmland.

Regarding State initiatives, the meaning, implementation and implications of Delaware's State Resource Area (SRA) legislation were much discussed. Future protection of the inlands bays, affordable housing concerns, community design principles, and infrastructure planning were among the other topics most frequently mentioned by people who attended meetings, wrote letters, sent e-mails, or otherwise communicated with the County about this comprehensive plan update.

The County's meetings with officials from the individual municipalities focused primarily on coordinating County growth zone boundaries with each jurisdiction's plans for internal growth and future annexation intentions. Some of this discussion revolved around the implications of future growth on private, municipal, and County-owned water and sewer facilities. The County emphasized how each municipality's adopted comprehensive plan was reviewed and taken into account in preparing the County's draft Future Land Use Plan, including the draft Future Land Use Plan map.

Sussex County gave genuine consideration to points of view expressed during the public participation process. The issues raised during that process are addressed in detail in the various individual chapters of this plan. Each chapter contains recommended strategies for addressing one or more of these topics and other closely related subjects.

Supporting the County's Growth and Preservation Strategy

The section of this Comprehensive Plan Update entitled A Summary Overview of Sussex County's Growth and Preservation Strategy explains how the County's future Land Use Plan interrelates with the County's strategies for preserving the rural environment, conserving more open space, and dealing with the impacts of growth. The County's intention to do more comprehensive sub-area planning and the County's updated policy of better controlling the expansion of private sewer providers in County sewer service areas are two additional examples, among others, of how policies identified in the various elements of this Comprehensive Plan Update are intended to work hand-in-hand with the County's Future Land Use strategy. Together all of these policies are part of the County's multi-pronged approach to steering appropriate types of growth to appropriate locations at appropriate densities.

Sussex County recognizes that implementing a growth management strategy requires more than well-intended policies. Often a specific County ordinance is key to providing the "teeth" needed to support a particular County policy. The following list itemizes the recommendations made in the various chapters of this Comprehensive Plan Update that call for the County to adopt a specific new or revised ordinance. It is not possible to guarantee with certainty that each and every one of these ordinance will be adopted into law in the future. Changes in local conditions, the public review process, staff review and further consideration by County Council may ultimately cause the County to follow other courses of action. However, each ordinance on this list will receive meaningful evaluation.

Ordinances To Be Considered:

1. Agricultural Zoning District
2. Remove Barriers to Manufactured Housing
3. Definition of “Superior Design” for purposes of cluster subdivisions in the AR-1 zoning district
4. Density Bonus for Cluster Development
5. Revised Community Design Standards
6. Revised Definition of Allowable Open Space with a specific method of calculating open space acreage
7. Locally Formulated TDR
8. Green Stormwater Management
9. Wildlife Habitat Protection
10. Added Environmental Protection for the ES-1 Zoning District
11. Revised Forest Buffers
12. Requirement for Recreation Facilities and/or Trails in Larger Developments
13. Wellhead Protection
14. Public Sewer Providers in Designated County Sewer Service Areas
15. Reauthorize and Revise Moderately Priced Housing Unit Program
16. Agribusiness Zone
17. Demolition of Historic Structures
18. Traditional Neighborhood Development
19. Development Standards Re: Maximum Building Setbacks, Buffering and Landscaping Green Site Design
20. Strengthened Cluster Development Regulations
21. Sign Controls
22. Incentives to meet Center for Inland Bays buffer recommendations
23. Incentives in developing areas for green communities, LEED certification and ENERGY STAR compliance