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#### NEWS

Mon, Jun 29, 2009

## Sussex County in danger of losing its rural character

*Conference predicts 850,000 units at build-out*  
[heartandsoulofsussex.org](http://heartandsoulofsussex.org)

By Ron MacArthur

What do Sussex County residents want their county to look like in the future?

Although development issues are always front and center, the county is still rural with the vast majority of land still undeveloped.

As part of the University of Delaware's Coastal Community Enhancement Initiative, Bill McGowan, a cooperative extension agent, wanted to paint a picture of what the county would look like in the future using the current county comprehensive land-use plan as a guide.

What he and his staff came up with is dramatic: Without significant changes in zoning, the rural nature of the county could change to suburban.

Using a formula that deletes about 30 percent of the available land for roads, wetlands and open space, under current zoning permitted in the 2007 county comprehensive land-use plan, as many as 850,000 residential housing units are possible, McGowan said.

On a regional basis, that build-out means Sussex County, with only 20 percent of the land among 10 Eastern Shore counties, would contain 65 percent of the region's population. The nine other Eastern Shore counties' combined build-out, based on current zoning regulations, would total 466,000 units.

McGowan said many people dispute the numbers. "That's what the comp plan says. Those are the numbers," he said.

McGowan used the AR-1 base zoning of two units to one acre with some cluster zoning of four units to one acre with 500,000 buildable acres remaining in the county.

Rick Kautz, a retired county planner who is under contact to the university, said if no changes are made in zoning there is no disputing the build-out number.

"We are ag green," said Carol Bason, a member of the university initiative team, referring to a county map filled with green tiles representing agricultural lands. "It's part of our lives. We have an opportunity to preserve ag lands, but we can't use our existing densities."

At the current level of 3,000 houses being built per year, it could take as long as 250 years to achieve that build-out, but it's almost impossible to predict building trends.

"That's the subtle change," Kautz said. "That's what is happening day after day, year after year."

Andrew Homsey, with the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration, said some people might call that large total a scare number. "But it points to a fundamental problem that exists," he said.

McGowan said residents and officials need to take a serious look at the numbers. "We need to have conversations about the character of the county. With this scenario, will we be able to maintain who we are? Will there still be small towns if we get all this growth into the towns?" he asked. "This is a conversation we still need to have."

The time to plan is now, with conversations about land equity and property rights issues that are at the forefront of all land-use issues, he said. "We are in a down time and we need to have conversations, and character has to be part of those conversations, even though it's hard work," McGowan said. Over the past two years, McGowan has led the Heart & Soul of Sussex County effort to initiate those conversations to get people talking about what they value.

He unveiled a new sophisticated computer program June 22 and June 23, that allows

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planners to paint the county with colors representing different zoning districts in 100-acre blocks. There are 6,006 tiles in the program.

The current map is filled with green tiles, depicting farm or rural areas where the number of homes per 100 acres is between one and 20.

Carol Bason, who was part of the university team along with Kautz, who developed the program, showed a group on Tuesday, June 23, maps with all of the current projects in the pipeline totaling about 51,000 units. Most of those in the pipeline are in the Cape Region, but there are many proposed projects in the area west of Laurel.

In the more immediate future, McGowan's group estimates by 2030, if current population projections are correct, the county will need 139 additional police officers, three more paramedic units and 147 more hospital beds. Population is expected to increase from 190,000 to 270,000.

Bason said so far just a few people have worked with the computer program. She said more county residents should get involved to paint a picture of what they want the county to look like in the future.

Throughout the presentation, those in attendance offered their own comments on growth and development in the county.

Bob Slavin of Lewes said looking at the growth potential, he couldn't see a way to maintain the character of the eastern side of the county. He said changes over the past 30 to 40 years have been so significant it may be too late.

"Sussex County is nice and cheap, but it's not going to be either if we don't plan better," Slavin said.

Sally Boswell, education coordination for the Center for the Inland Bays, said Sussex County has become a free zone where people escape high property taxes and restrictive zoning regulations. "And we have to take into consideration that not all time is created equally," she said. "Between 1850 and 1950 there was practically no change, and the last 20 years there has been an explosion."

Opportunity was a key word that kept surfacing among the participants in the seminar. "If we sit back we could lose it all. We have the opportunity now to plan for the county we want our kids to grow up in," said Nicole Minni, with the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration.

After looking at the data, Homsey asked the question most were thinking. "Is the county actually willing to listen to this?" he asked.

#### **Future of sussex by the numbers**

850,000  
Possible buildout of residential housing units under current zoning

500,000  
Remaining acres available for building

270,000  
Estimated population in 2030

51,000  
Number of building units in the immediate pipeline

*Source: UD Coastal Community Enhancement Initiative*

For more information: [heartandsoulofsussex.org](http://heartandsoulofsussex.org)

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