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## Project envisions Sussex of tomorrow

### Housing could increase eightfold

By *MOLLY MURRAY*  
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University of Delaware Cooperative Extension Agent William McGowan wanted to paint a picture of what Sussex County would ultimately look like under the current comprehensive land-use plan.

So he sketched out some numbers on the back of an envelope -- subtracting land for roads, open space, wetlands -- and came up with this: 854,000 residential housing units -- nearly eight times more than exist today. And here's the kicker: McGowan was conservative in his estimate.

"This number, it just doesn't hit people" when they look at the land-use plan, he said. "I think people have a hard time realizing it's a big number."

How long would it take to reach build out? No one is certain but with typical building rates of about 3,000 homes a year, it would take close to 250 years to reach that housing density.

"That's the subtle change," said former Sussex County Planner Rick Kautz. "That's what's happening day after day, year after year."

The problem, said McGowan, is that Sussex Countians need to plan -- really plan -- now for what they value in their county.

"Let's have the conversation" about the contentious issues of property rights and land equity and what makes the county special, he said.

"What do we really want because what we have now is not a plan," McGowan said. "And if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."

McGowan is part of a coalition of University of Delaware experts who make up the Coastal Community Enhancement Initiative -- a program to help local officials and residents plan for the future.

As part of that initiative, the coalition has been asking Sussex County residents to come up with a vision of what they value most about the county in a project called Heart & Soul of Sussex County.

This week, McGowan outlined a new computer tool that allows planners to color code the county in 100 acre blocks and get a picture of development trends.

The current map is mostly rural farm and rural areas -- places where the number of homes per 100 acres is between one and 20.

"It's a planning tool," McGowan said.

Even if one factors in the 54,000 homes that have been through the state's Preliminary Land Use Service review -- but not yet built -- the county remains largely rural and farm rural, he said.

But McGowan suggested that now is the time to begin asking questions such as: How much farmland needs to be preserved to maintain a sustainable agriculture industry? Or how to maintain small towns so they still look like small towns rather than development centers?

"This stuff impacts everyone in this county," he said.

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