



Eyes on County Council – March 27, 2025

Land Use Reform Working Group – Meeting #1

Highlight comment: “This could be our last chance!” – comment by Christophe Toulou (Center for Inland Bays) suggesting that this Working Group may be the last opportunity to fix the land use problem in Sussex County.

Overview:

County Councils’ Land Use Reform Working Group held its initial meeting on March 27th – where the ten appointees were introduced and provided their respective priorities regarding land use reform in Sussex County. The group meeting was facilitated by Andrew Bing of Kramer & Associates – a consulting company who has experience with Delaware government. Additional consultants from McCormick Taylor (technical planning – worked on Comprehensive plans) were also hired for support.

The meeting objective was to provide background, set roles and deliverables, define issues and have members offer their initial positions/concerns. Bing drove the conversation by asking each member to present their thoughts related to the goals of the group.

The five primary goals of the working group are:

- Implement smarter and more sustainable development practices
- Ensure growth in Sussex County is supported by infrastructure (roads, schools, environment and public safety)
- Create an inventory of affordable and work force housing
- Preserve farmland and critical natural resources
- Prevent low density development in unincorporated areas

County Administrator, Todd Lawson, stated that Council has asked for recommendations from this diverse group that will improve the land use process. He added that there are no “guardrails”, that the team has no barriers on subject matter. Draft recommendations are expected by Q2 and finals by Q3. There should be collaborative effort to make Sussex a better place.

After the consultants provided some general history on growth trends, housing types, demographics, etc. to set the stage; members began to make their comments:

- **Jon Horner** (land use attorney for Schell Brothers/Ocean Atlantic), representing Home Builders Association of Delaware – we have unsustainable sprawl caused by the AR-1 base zoning (2 units per acre) which makes it difficult to try diverse housing types. No management of growth. Need to identify where growth zones are and then focus there. Must compensate land owners if we change their zoning. He feels we need more housing – demand is there.

Problem is type of housing. Create zoning for the higher density affordable/work force housing – a 12 unit per acre zoning may be too low.

- **Jill Hicks**, Sussex Preservation Coalition – development has outpaced infrastructure. We need to coordinate when and where development will happen. Need responsible land use ordinances, too much damage to environment. Curtail development in Level 4 (rural) where state does not support infrastructure.
- **Mike Riemann**, American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) - important to bring clarity to county ordinances and the development process. State/Comprehensive plan/County not in synch. The process encourages development that is away from people, discouraging higher density. Density can help environment, reduces sprawl. Try to expand on protected land, currently 30% of Sussex land is protected. Need to align where infrastructure is currently and definition of Levels.
- **Caitlin Del Collo** (Delaware State Housing Authority), Affordable Housing Advocate - we need to address the affordable housing crisis.
- **Jay Baxter** (Baxter Farms), Sussex Farm Bureau – gave impassioned talk regarding the multi-generational aspect of farming, must protect farmland!! Property rights are important, need flexibility in buying and selling farmland. Ag represents a large number of landowners in Sussex. Also, we need a demographic study – what type of housing do folks want? Retirees may not just want single family homes.
- **Dave Edgell**, Office of State Planning Coordination – 80% of residential growth in the state is in Sussex! The Sussex County comprehensive plan encourages annexation by municipal strategies, which has been a successful strategy. Cited the redevelopment of the Seaford/Laurel towns as a positive example.
- **Mark Luszcz**, DelDOT – provided a sober analysis of constraints/issues to development. DelDOT projects take a minimum of 10 years from conception to implementation. Funding is limited. Twenty years ago, development plans called for Route 24 to be a six-lane road – that is impossible today. Safety is a DelDOT priority – reduce crashes. Improvements to Level 4 intersections are geared towards making them safer, NOT towards making them more supportive of development. Changing development areas upsets DelDOT planning. Suggests creating long term plans and sticking to them, expand near municipalities, build better multi-use developments, and keep people near their homes and off Route 1. Transportation is a big factor for Sussex County – density will help create better transportation types.
- **Christophe Toulou**, Delaware Center for Inland Bays – the inland bays generate over \$4 billion in annual economic activity for Sussex County. Too much development will degrade the bays and strangle the “golden goose”. The Delaware inland bays are unique, one of 28 National Estuary Programs. This is an area with sensitive wetlands, and is vulnerable to sea level rise. There are places where we simply should not build. Protect sensitive land, develop to protect wetlands/forests/etc., don’t build in areas of climate concern – maybe density is an answer. Insure constituencies of each team member are supportive of the recommendations so recommendations are palatable to both Council and residents.
- **Matthew Padron**, Affordable Housing Developer – stressed need for both affordable and work force housing types. Currently limited and complex funding for a unique development process. Need maximum efficiency (density) and streamlined plan and execution timeline – time is money.
- **Doug Motley** (managing principle of Jack Lingo Asset Management), Local Residential Developer – core issues include clear rules, predictability, density and location. Multi-use developments can be more successful.

Public Comments: (time was available for some public comments)

- **Chris Weeks** – asked group to act as an employer – where do my employees live and how do they get to work

- **Jeff Siemens** – supported changes to ordinances and zoning codes. Possible use of cluster homes. Need environmental protections and protection of forests.
- **Johannes Sayre** – suggested there is a conflict between economic forces and physical limits. The hardest constraints are limits on natural and municipal resources, many of which are inelastic. Some say that if there is demand then you have to provide supply; this is not true – there are hard resource limits.
- **Justine Cuccia** – asked for more public involvement, no regular resident in the group.

Next steps:

- All group members will be interviewed by the consultants for a more in-depth review of their ideas, issues and concerns.

Next Meetings:

Location: Sussex County Public Safety Complex, 21911 Rudder Lane, Georgetown (near airport)

Date/Time: Thursdays, 10am - Noon

- April 10
- May 1
- May 29
- June 12
- July 10
- Future meetings TBD

Related Articles to Land Use Actions:

[Sussex Land Use Reform Group debates housing stock, density](#)

[No limits placed on Sussex land-use reform group | Cape Gazette](#)

[Sussex, state plan more coordination on development | Cape Gazette](#)

[Delaware Center for Inland Bays faces extinction | Bay to Bay News](#)