

Land Use and Comprehensive Planning



The Delaware Memorial Twin Bridges - the world's longest twin-span suspension bridge - crosses the Delaware River connecting Delaware and New Jersey

Diversity best describes land use in the Delaware Bay and Estuary Basin. From the coastal marshes to rural farms and housing, to small towns and cities, the basin encompasses every type of land use. Balancing land development and the increasing population pressures at the northern and southern portions of the basin with development around the state capital at the basin's midpoint will be one of the most important land use planning issues for the next 20 years.

A critical point of land use change is evolving in this basin and throughout the state. For many years, this basin resembled a rural farmed landscape interspersed with small towns. Beginning in the 1960s, an influx of people from adjoining states seeking a less hectic living environment has added to a steady increase in Delaware's population. This influx of people has increased dramatically

since the 1980s. Most of the new residents have established permanent residency; however, within coastal communities in the southern portion of the basin, seasonal populations have evolved.

The population of the Delaware Bay and Estuary Basin is roughly 222,000 based on the latest 2000 census data. Population projections for Delaware's three counties show expected increases of 21% for New Castle County, 30% for Kent County, and 55% for Sussex County between 1990 and 2020. These figures translate into an estimated additional 100,000 residents to the Delaware Bay and Estuary Basin for the 30-year period.

These population changes can burden the infrastructure needed to support growth. New residents and developments often require more roads, shopping areas, police/fire/ambulatory services,

Livable Delaware

On March 22, 2001, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner unveiled a Livable Delaware growth initiative for the First State.

Livable Delaware addresses sprawl, congestion and other growth issues that ultimately affect the air we breathe, the water we drink, public health, recreational waters and fisheries, habitat protection, biodiversity, open space, recreational opportunities and many other "quality of life" issues.

Gov. Minner's Livable Delaware agenda began with an executive order that restates the goals and strategies in "Shaping Delaware's Future" to guide the state's overall development in the 21st century.

The executive order directs all state departments and agencies to examine their policies, programs and regulations and identify programs that are or can be utilized to direct growth and control sprawl.

Five Livable Delaware bills were signed into law by Gov. Minner in 2001:

- ◆ Graduated impact fees based on state investment strategies;
- ◆ Comprehensive plan implementation and annexation standards;
- ◆ Changes to the Open Space formula to allow acquisition for 18 additional years and provide funds for stewardship of acquired lands;
- ◆ Matching grants to encourage redevelopment of brownfields; and
- ◆ New Advisory Council on Planning Coordination with land use responsibilities that include developing a graduated impact fee structure and annexation standards, approving and monitoring "Livability Indicators" and facilitating governmental dispute resolutions.

schools, hospitals and other services. Proper planning at the county and municipal levels in coordination with state agencies has become a necessity to eliminate further sprawl and accommodate growth. While rapid increases in population and development can cause deterioration in air and water quality and natural habitat, increase pressure on water supplies and threaten preservation of open space, sound comprehensive land use plans for future development can mitigate negative environmental impacts.

Urban land use now covers about 18% of the basin, which includes residential, industrial, com-



Sanitary sewer lines being installed, part of the wastewater infrastructure in the basin

mercial, and transportation land uses. Between 1992 and 1997, an approximately 3% increase in urban land use occurred in Delaware. If the trend continues, by 2020, the Delaware Bay basin urban land use will be approaching 30%. Urbanization has caused losses primarily to farmland, forestland and wetlands. Land use decisions that provide protective mechanisms and steer development to pre-determined growth areas could slow down these losses caused by urban development.

Land-use planning and zoning authority in Delaware resides with the three county governments and individual municipalities. Each county and some municipalities develop land use plans in 5- or 10-year increments to help guide development to desired areas based on input from government agencies regarding issues such as agricultural preservation, infrastructure and the environment. Other planning and review processes allow input from various agencies on development projects and requests for zoning changes. These processes are extremely important in protecting exceptional forest and wetland habitat that may harbor state or globally rare species, and in helping to achieve the state's goals of protecting the quality of our air and water.