

Land Use & Population



Seasonal visitors with vacation homes and new permanent residents have fueled development along the Inland Bays, as this aerial view of Rehoboth Bay demonstrates.

Sussex is Delaware's fastest growing county. Most of the development pressure centers on the Inland Bays/Atlantic Ocean Basin. Two very different land-use activities — poultry farming and second-home residential development — thrive in the basin.

Since the 1960s, a massive influx of people from neighboring states has continued to swell the basin's seasonal and permanent populations. At the same time, the poultry industry has experienced enormous growth. Some perceive the two as incompatible land uses; ironically, the rapid growth of both activities has contributed to dramatic changes in land use and degradation of the basin's land and water resources.

Sussex County's population is approximately 140,000. More important is the apparent rate of growth: between 1990 and 1999, the county experienced a 23% population increase; between 1990 and 2020, it's anticipated that the county will experience a 55% population increase. This rapid growth and the seasonal population swing — which can swell by more than 200% on summer weekends — make it difficult to maintain or expand the infrastructure at

an affordable level for the permanent population. Controversy, including court action over sewer rates, reflects this difficulty. In addition, as the year-round population and tourist industry grow, so does the number of automobiles. At times, highways in parts of the basin are so clogged that emergency vehicles have trouble maneuvering.

Urban land use now covers about 17% of the basin. From 1992 to 1997, residential and general commercial urban land use expanded by 3%. If this rate of urban growth continues to 2020, approximately 29% of the basin, excluding open water, will be in urban land uses. During the same five-year period, agricultural land decreased by about 2,327 acres and forest cover by about 3,200 acres. Most of the new urban growth has been along Route 1 near Rehoboth Beach and Lewes and in the Long Neck area.

Land-use planning and zoning authority rests with the municipalities and Sussex County government. The Coastal Zone Act prohibits new heavy industry and offshore bulk-product transfer facilities and requires state permits for new manufacturing plants in the basin prior to construction.

Sussex County has developed a comprehensive land-use plan for the non-incorporated portion of the basin, which addresses conservation, transportation, and economic issues. The plan also includes a growth management strategy that encourages new development in designated growth areas, most of them concentrated in the eastern portion of the basin.

In the past few years, some land along Route 113 has been down-zoned from commercial to agriculture. The state comments on proposed new facilities and most developments in the basin through the Land Use Planning Act (LUPA).

SHAPING DELAWARE'S FUTURE

In response to growing concerns about the viability of comprehensive planning to direct and manage new development and make land-use decisions, the Delaware General Assembly enacted Senate Bill 116 in June 1995. The Act, known as "Shaping Delaware's Future," sets forth 10 goals to improve the effectiveness of land-use decisions. Recently, the goals were modified, and there are now 11. Those most applicable to the Inland Bays/Atlantic Ocean Basin include the following:

1. Direct investment and future development to existing communities, urban concentrations, and designated growth areas.
2. Protect important farmlands and critical natural resource areas.
3. Encourage redevelopment and improve the livability of existing communities and urban areas, and guide new employment into under-used commercial and industrial sites.

In December 1999, the Governor's Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues adopted the report, "Shaping Delaware's Future: Managing Growth in 21st Century Delaware, Strategies for State Policies and Spending." This report notes that lands near the Inland Bays, "an area of unique and sensitive resources, are experiencing a variety of environmental problems because of significant development pressure." Three of the five management strategies listed below are prefaced in the report as follows:

"In these coastal areas, the state, county and local governments will work to cooperatively pursue creation of land-use techniques and development and infrastructure investment phasing agreements that:

1. Meet the need to provide necessary sewer and transportation improvements to achieve water-

quality objectives and provide safe, efficient transportation while ensuring the protection and enhancement of the bays' fragile resources and retaining the character and integrity of the area. Implement ordinances, as recommended in the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for the Inland Bays, that promote environmentally sensitive development; include design, density, or process incentives for such development; and incorporate zoning classifications and development standards (setbacks, buffers, tree protection, impervious cover limitations, etc.) to ensure environmentally sound land use.

2. Further the protection of important agricultural lands in the Inland Bays Watershed outside of the designated developing area through Transfer of Development Rights programs, Purchase of Development Rights programs, zoning, or other methods.
3. Protect areas designated as particularly critical or valuable natural resources or habitats."

On January 1, 2000, Gov. Thomas R. Carper signed a letter endorsing "Shaping Delaware's Future: Managing Growth in 21st Century Delaware." The Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues has requested that state agencies review their regulations and policies to bring them into compliance with the management initiative.

"One must cultivate a loving relationship with Mother Earth to be considered a true human being. That relationship should include respect, reverence, and care; it must acknowledge that every inch of her is sacred and irreplaceable, and that all things upon her are connected."

— Charles Clark IV
Assistant Chief, Nanticoke Indian Tribe