



CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

New Castle County, Delaware

About the Community

New Castle County in Delaware is part of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and is easily accessible from most of the major metropolitan areas of the Northeast. In the 1990s, Delaware's population grew faster than 37 other states and almost five percent faster than the national average. New Castle County took the lion's share of that growth and currently claims 63% of the state's population (500,265 in the year 2000) but occupies only 22% of its land.

The county is expected to grow by 20% in the first three decades of this century, gaining another 98,659 individuals by the year 2030.¹ The decade-on-decade growth rate is slowing, from a high of 13% from 1990 to 2000, slowing to a 4% between 2020 and 2030. Household formation in those three decades will grow at a faster clip (25%) as the population increase is accompanied by a decrease in sizes of households.

Between 1950 and 1970, suburban growth in New Castle moved north and west from Wilmington into Brandywine and Christina Hundreds. These places are still home to the county's most populous neighborhoods. Growth spread further west and south, reaching towards the C & D Canal in the 1980's and 90's.

Areas with denser development, such as municipalities and older parts of the county, have more multifamily dwelling units and a wider variety of household types and thus a smaller household size overall. Average household size is higher in the more recently developed areas of the county and these are dominated by single-family detached units. These areas also have lower overall densities.

¹ *Delaware Population Consortium (DPC)*



Residential development has steadily eaten up county land, rising from 13% of the total in 1974 to 28% in 1997. In the same period, agricultural land dropped from 45% of total land cover to just 29% while forested lands shrank from 25% to just 16%.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

New Castle County adopted a Unified Development Code (UDC) in 1998, compiling all development-oriented regulations under a single omnibus code. The county is revising the code to allow for smart growth and to encourage infill and redevelopment.

The county is also updating its Comprehensive Land Use plan. The county hopes that a smart growth oriented revisions to the UDC will support a more smart growth oriented comprehensive plan.

The county's biggest challenge in implementing smart growth is road design. The current road design prescriptions are set by the state DOT and are shaped, as in many other communities, by vehicle flow standards. The wider roads and wider turns are also prescribed for fire and emergency access.

Chris Coons, New Castle County Executive, is a vocal proponent of smart growth and Gov. Ruth Ann Minner is also supportive, having enacted a Livable Delaware program to support smart growth. Smart growth also has several strong supporters in the County Commission, including Commissioner Robert Weiner.

In July of 2006, New Castle County agreed to conduct a self-audit of the UDC using SGLI policy and code audit tools. SGLI's Technical Assistance team provided guidance to the County planners conducting the audit.

Lessons Learned

Familiarity breeds myopia

The self-audit in New Castle was conducted by the same planners who had been re-writing and applying the unified code. Being too familiar with the workings of the framework also meant they put more value in the workarounds they had developed. This translated to a myopia of the actual letter of the code –and what the codes provided as of right.

As users and keepers of the codes, the planners had to be coaxed into imagining how the codes would actually be read and implemented if it were in the hands of officers who were totally new to the job or the community.



Don't focus on what you can't do

The planners were very conscious of the effect on their built environment of segments of the public infrastructure that they had no control over. In New Castle's case, this was that all street design (including right-of-way standards) were exclusively administered by the state D.O.T. Focusing on what was outside their control could lead to inaction on what was exclusively in their control, and understanding how the processes in their control were also contributing to sprawl.

As the Audits are, by nature, instruments to help realign the regulatory framework, they were silent on the political process required to influence spheres that were not in the purview of the codes. (I.e. –the Audit will not tell you how to talk to the DOT to revise road design standards)

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Smart Growth Code and Zoning Audit
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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

Visit www.sgli.org for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Visit www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.