

NEW CASTLE COUNTY TRANSITION 2017

To: The Honorable Matthew S. Meyer, County Executive
From: Land Use and Economic Development Transition Committee
Re: Transition Team SWOT Analysis
Date: February 7, 2017

The Land Use and Economic Development Transition Committee is pleased to provide you this summary of our findings. You asked us to perform a SWOT analysis on New Castle County's land use and economic development activities to assist you in implementing policies and procedures over the next several years. Our challenge was to perform this analysis in a county that encompasses every type of development from very dense urban areas to rural agricultural lands and is home to a diverse population.

People come, stay, and live in New Castle County because of its exceptional quality of life. Residents value our urban centers, our agricultural communities, and our suburban neighborhoods. They enjoy clean air and clean water, along with many opportunities for recreation and the arts. They seek mobility through a greater variety of transportation options. Over time we will need to revitalize older communities, attract and retain quality businesses, provide adequate public facilities, and develop healthy and sustainable new communities. This cannot be achieved by the County alone. It will take the cooperation of many. We have identified a number of opportunities to achieve these goals, as well as some of the weaknesses that we will need to address.

Our committee met five times since December and held a public workshop on January 5, 2017 to solicit input on land use and economic development issues. As you are aware, this workshop was well attended and gave us guidance in preparing this report. Although we made every effort to incorporate public input, this short summary report cannot incorporate every comment. Therefore, we are attaching for your reference the committee meeting agendas and minutes, the full comment record from the public workshop, and additional useful materials. And although you requested a SWOT analysis, the committee kept coming back to a handful of key recommendations that we have also included for your consideration.

We hope that this report serves you well as you begin to guide New Castle County in a positive direction that promotes sound land use and economic development policies and practices for the benefit of all County residents. The committee agreed that we are facing many diverse and complicated development issues and economic constraints in the County's foreseeable future. We encourage you to create a transparent and open government that will help facilitate a healthy dialogue on these issues so that we may continue to move forward in a positive direction.

We also acknowledge that many factors remain beyond the direct control of the County Executive. Perhaps the greatest of these is related to demographics. The County's population growth is expected to end in about 25 years, with the addition of only about 45,000 new residents to our current population of 557,000. This will require fundamentally rethinking how we have planned and developed for generations.

Open communication and an environment that is open to all opinions will allow the creative process to succeed. We strongly encourage open relationships with municipal governments and strong lobbying efforts with state officials to ensure that local needs are met. Of critical importance, we urge you to expand opportunities for community engagement; improving our County for all will best occur when our residents, business representatives, and government work together.

We were honored to serve you and remain committed to your efforts to improve the County. Please do not hesitate to contact us to meet and discuss any of the findings in this report.

Strengths (Internal)

The New Castle County Department of Land Use provides a wide array of services including planning, zoning, transportation, historical, engineering services, building permit reviews and issuance, building inspections, assessments, code enforcement, and customer service. The Department has a large number of skilled and well qualified employees that provide excellent customer service, as well as several outstanding customer service tools including GIS maps and the online and searchable Unified Development Code. Department staff are currently attempting to implement new software and policies that will help provide a clear path for plan approval in a predictable and transparent manner.

The Department currently has a substantial number of staff vacancies. While such vacancies may not normally be considered a strength, in this case the vacancies create an opportunity for the County Executive and General Manager to hire additional staff to create a planning team within the Department.

The Hometown Overlay Planning process and Village and Hamlet regulations are two of the few tools available for local planning. Their purpose is to create more cohesive, walkable, and sustainable communities. Support for these tools by Department staff indicates that they may be receptive to similar efforts in the future.

Staff is generally receptive to be part of any outreach with other Departments and agencies. We encourage expanding the role of the Department to take the initiative in forming partnerships for economic development and enhanced collaboration with local, state and regional agencies. The Department also has the capacity to provide more staff participation in initiatives of agencies such as the Wilmington Area Planning Council or the Chamber of Commerce.

Weaknesses (Internal)

The Committee's primary concern regarding the Department of Land Use is the absence of a vision and planning efforts to integrate land use, development, and transportation in New Castle County. The Department eliminated long range planning in the late 1990s and has not refilled its previous community planning positions. Instead the Department has become deeply committed to a mode of reactive planning that leaves development initiative largely in the hands of private developers. Likewise, much-needed proactive planning of communities through sub-regional or corridor planning areas, especially with respect to redevelopment opportunities, is absent.

Another major concern is that County leadership has failed to provide adequate alternatives for open space and farmland preservation, open space management,

pedestrian friendly developments, and redevelopment opportunities. Senior staff appears not to have capitalized on opportunities to forge better relationships with our state agencies, particularly DeIDOT and DNREC. Over the last several years, public participation has also been diminished and/or marginalized in the planning process.

The Department has a particular deficit with regard to understanding the intersection between its activities and transportation, both failing to take an active role in discussing Level of Service options with DeIDOT, especially in Level 1 priority areas, and also not understanding the connection between the County's development regulations and pedestrian safety.

We are also concerned about the lack of implementation of the most recently adopted Comprehensive Plan, as well as disconnection between the Comprehensive Plan and the Unified Development Code. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the Department's role is now largely reactive and regulatory; it does little actual planning. Sub-regional planning and continued focus on keeping the UDC consistent with those sub-regional plans and the Comprehensive Plan are essential.

The committee spent a great amount of time discussing options for affordable housing as well as livable and walkable neighborhoods. Department staff should not only be engaged in this discussion but lead efforts to promote affordable housing. We acknowledged that past efforts for workforce housing did not always have the desired outcomes, and believe the Department must learn from this experience and develop better options. These efforts must also consider the total cost of housing and transportation; inexpensive housing coupled with expensive commuting is not a good combination for low-income households.

Finally, the Department does little to help promote economic growth throughout the County. This could be linked to the lack of long term proactive planning that could identify or help guide economic opportunities. Integrated transportation and land use planning on a smaller scale could help the approval process as well as working on pre-approval for larger sites and/or keeping an active inventory of available properties within the Department.

Opportunities (External)

Perhaps the greatest external opportunity that we can encourage is further discussions with DeIDOT on transportation infrastructure. Last year the Delaware General Assembly passed the Healthy and Transit-Friendly Development Act which, for the first time in Delaware, creates a simple roadmap in state law for local communities to partner with DeIDOT to obtain investments in local multimodal infrastructure in order to enable a much broader and more diverse menu of

development options than are normally available when such multimodal transportation investment is absent.

Effective partnership with DeIDOT can also offer other opportunities. Any discussion on expansion of rail service with SEPTA and MARC and the location of transit-oriented development will greatly increase the potential success of any economic development efforts. Increased bus service and the encouragement of complete streets would allow us to better market our strengths. Creation of safe facilities for bicycling in local areas and providing pedestrians safe havens while crossing major congested areas need to be closely examined and discussed with DeIDOT. While DeIDOT can provide the Department with great external opportunities, without engagement by all elected officials they also become the greatest external threat.

New Castle County and the Department of Land Use are in a unique position with new leadership at every level of government—local, state, and federal, as well as with the University of Delaware—to create economic development partnerships. Educational institutions and private enterprise should also be engaged in these partnerships as appropriate. While we value all municipalities, Wilmington has a unique role as the County’s core city. We cannot have the best possible county without a vibrant and healthy Wilmington. Newark also has special importance due to the vast research and educational potential of the University of Delaware, ongoing development of the STAR Campus, and the city’s focus as a transit hub.

The opportunity to improve intergovernmental coordination and to provide leadership in creating lasting partnerships also extends beyond Delaware. The County’s participation in State initiatives, such as a planned trade mission to Africa and ongoing efforts in Asia, Central/South America, and Europe, can increase our role internationally and open new doors of opportunity to the private sector as well.

The committee acknowledges that the demographics are changing for this area and most of our new growth through 2050 will be from inbound residents. This provides an opportunity to market and attract sustainable businesses. Our educated work force, historic and cultural amenities, and strategically important location along the Northeast Corridor are the County’s prime economic development assets, which can and should be leveraged.

Demographic changes are also expected to result in an easing of population growth among youth, but the continuation of growth in aging populations. Older suburban neighborhoods can become an area of focus for affordable units and walkable communities. Similar to affordable housing considerations, transportation needs of aging populations need careful consideration. Complete streets, designed for the safety and comfort of people

walking, bicycling, and using transit, need to be fully implemented into the Department’s design guidance.

Changes in retail, office, and commercial demands due to internet shopping and alternative work arrangements are an opportunity to create redevelopment plans for specific areas to remove development pressures from greenfield areas. In addition, these areas may become viable locations for integrating affordable and market-rate housing which could leverage existing infrastructure and transportation linkages. Community involvement in these discussions is absolutely essential to ensure their success.

Threats (External)

Anticipated changes in demographics through 2050 reveal some disturbing threats. It appears that in about 15 years the death rate in New Castle County will exceed the birth rate. Older folks will continue forming a larger percentage of our population. Unless this trend changes, New Castle County will find itself with a dwindling workforce while at the same time needing to provide more services. Older suburban neighborhoods will need additional funds to replace aging infrastructure. These communities may also become more blighted by a lack of home buyers to replace existing homeowners.

Much of the committee discussion focused on transportation obstacles throughout the County. High traffic volumes, inadequate rail options, limited bus services, high cost of private transportation and/or for-hire car service, lack of low-stress bicycle connectivity, damaged sidewalks, and the overall lack of pedestrian safety features (resulting in a pedestrian crash rate among the worst in the nation) all provide threats to good land use planning and economic development. All of these issues have been caused by the County’s auto-oriented historical pattern of development. In the absence of a political decision by the County and the State to choose a different pattern of development in the future, all of these threats will continue to worsen, with negative impact both to the County’s economic future and the quality of life of its residents.

The loss of the Port of Wilmington—or failure to appropriately expand the Port—would be extremely detrimental to economic development, adding social and economic stress to communities in New Castle County.

The committee also had great concern regarding the loss of banking, chemical and manufacturing jobs. This threat becomes two-fold: (1) a lack of well-paying jobs for our workforce and (2) the clean-up of older industrial sites. On the latter, the committee advises a strong relationship with DNREC and other state agencies to promote brownfield remediation and redevelopment. While many may list the Coastal Zone Act as a threat, the committee believes that, as written, this Act provides adequate safeguards and opportunities for development where

appropriate; focus should be placed on the broader opportunities for redevelopment and job creation.

While we find that the changes in retail, commercial, and office demands provide a great opportunity, these same trends, if not properly addressed, create threats. As older suburban malls, centers, and offices become vacant without a plan for redevelopment, the overall community will suffer from the blight and other negative aspects of abandoned buildings. This same scenario holds true for industrial areas that are not developed or maintained to attract new users.

The committee also discussed in great detail the rate of change in market demand for jobs and education. Working closely with the economic development experts and our school systems should help us identify these changes and adapt quickly based on defensible evidence. The Department should be given some flexibility to quickly address these changes in land use development and the authority to conduct due diligence reviews of politically popular economic development proposals based on evidence and thoughtful analysis, recognizing that there are few quick fixes available.

Finally, developing safe neighborhoods and redeveloped areas, creating a well-educated work force, promoting economic development, and better education should help alleviate the growing threat of crime and drug usage. The biggest threat facing our community of tomorrow is not addressing these concerns today. While many think that land use may not be the proper venue to address these social issues, studies have shown that not incorporating land use and development patterns to provide better living, working, shopping, and recreational opportunities creates the greatest threat to our citizens' quality of life.

Selected Recommendations

The Department of Land Use should:

- **Recognize that demographic trends will result in a likely leveling off of population growth and housing needs in the future.** Redevelopment of older communities that were a result of the post-World War II suburban and automotive dominated mindset should be carefully studied to identify opportunities to improve them in terms of enhanced pedestrian and bicycle friendliness, promotion of local shopping, and increasing local employment opportunities.
- **Re-establish a long range planning division** by filling existing vacancies. This division should focus on sub-regions or corridors that could be developed, through a form-based code, into more walkable and bikeable communities. This type of focused planning division could more effectively monitor and make any needed adjustments to local planning processes based on data and community guidance. In the right environment,

local residents and developers have the potential to collaboratively create highly desirable places to live that are both sustainable and vibrant. The ongoing efforts for the revitalization of Claymont are a good example. Opportunities for significant revitalization efforts that intensify land use are limited by demographic growth realities, physical land use patterns, infrastructure, and community context. It is vital that our planning staff study and identify the few opportunities for significant redevelopment through thoughtful evidence based planning to avoid misguided expenditure of county resources and the potential for strong public opposition in areas unsuited for this type of revitalization.

- **Take more responsibility for transportation by acknowledging the impact of local land use decisions on congestion and safety.** Work with DeIDOT to identify more refined traffic analysis methods—beyond the current LOS methods—that focus growth in desirable areas, not far-flung greenfield sites. Incorporate complete streets, designed for the safety and comfort of people walking, bicycling, and using transit, into the Department's design guidance. Identify where Delaware's new Complete Communities law could be implemented to spur economic development by making strategic investments in multimodal transportation infrastructure and services. Review the County's development policies for mid-block parcels to reduce the number of fatal pedestrian crashes at uncontrolled locations.
- **Take the lead in forming partnerships** for economic development and enhanced collaboration with local, state, regional, and international agencies, the cities of Wilmington and Newark, the University of Delaware, local high schools and technical schools, and private businesses.
- **Develop a land protection program** that is transparent, fair, and equitable to all landowners and the public. This program will need to 1) consider the diverse land protection and open space needs and varying goals throughout the county, 2) leverage existing state, federal, and nongovernmental organization program efforts, 3) fill gaps in the existing program while addressing recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan, and 4) have realistic annual funding that is stable each year due to the multiyear nature of land protection negotiations with landowners. These efforts should be an integral part of sub-regional planning efforts in the diverse districts of New Castle County.
- **Re-examine the public involvement process** to make it more understandable to residents. Provide resources to help people understand the process, write advertisements and documents in plain English, and explain when stakeholder input is most valuable.

SWOT Analysis Points as Prioritized by the Committee

Strengths (Internal)

- **Multiple vacancies in authorized positions, providing flexibility to create a new planning section**
- **Hometown overlay planning approach/process**
- **New leadership at the Department of Land Use**
- **Village and hamlet design, form based planning, encouraging walkability and bikeability (should be expanded)**
- **The county possesses a wealth of information about the people and the environment, which could be employed in actual planning**
- Good customer service
- Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit ordinance is a step in the right direction
- Several excellent public outreach tools including GIS Map Server, email list serve, and enhancement of partnerships with WILMAPCO and other agencies
- Exceptional geospatial data
- Merit Level Staff appear to work well across departments when needed
- Land Use has begun to implement more customer friendly processes such as Project Dox plan review software
- Well trained, professional staff

Weaknesses (Internal)

- **New Castle County has not developed a consistent open space protection program for Agricultural Lands, Natural Open Space, or Recreational Lands**
- **Absence of partnership with DelDOT enforces a highly restricted menu of development options in the County**
- **Disconnect between the Comprehensive Development Plan and the Unified Development Code**
- **Need to do more planning at the sub-regional or planning district level of geography/community**
- Dependence on an outdated Level of Service traffic assessment tool for plan review

- Lack of strategic or proactive vision for future land use, development and transportation in the County; reactive mode regarding private sector development
- Lack of well-coordinated comprehensive planning that includes broader considerations beyond just land use and zoning; need to coordinate across departments
- Need improved coordination with Wilmington / Newark / Middletown, etc.
- Level I (State Land Use Strategy) is too large for projected population; it should be reduced in order to encourage density and thereby walkability and bikeability
- No proactive planning of potential overlay areas that might include an easing of LOS requirements to achieve other desired community benefits
- No strategy to enable seniors to age in place
- Outdated and inequitable property assessment merit re-assessment
- Some environmental regulations and landscape ordinances are well meaning, but poorly written and ineffectual
- Acceptance of industry self-certification does a disservice to the residents of the County by creating a condition where substandard construction can be accepted
- Building affordable housing in a neighborhood without affordable transportation misses the point
- Greatly strengthen the message to set up shop in New Castle County and improve economic growth by improving the County website material
- High vacancy rate; need to adjust or fill needed positions promptly
- Limited if any specialized, proactive planning for underserved/low income communities
- Need to improve public engagement efforts
- No planning capacity in the Department of Land Use
- No vision for cities or economic development partnership with cities
- No vision for transportation except for level-of-service-based concurrency requirements
- Staffing is top heavy
- The perception of Land Use by the construction industry is of an unfriendly and uncooperative staff

Opportunities (External)

- **New state legislation regarding multimodal transportation and development**
- **Opportunity to improve intergovernmental coordination**
- **Changing demographics**
- Partnerships with the state, municipalities, UD, schools, etc.
- Location and connections to nearby destinations
- Opportunity to be more innovative with planning and economic development through a change in culture to accept use of new tools
- Strong congressional delegation can bring in international investment
- How does the County fit into the international, national, regional context?
- Changes in retail, office, commercial demand due to internet shopping and alternative work arrangements – redevelopment opportunity
- Blueprint Communities and Accelerate Delaware
- New State commitment to partnering with local governments to encourage high value economic development

Threats (External)

- **Pro-development interests focused on short-term profits and jobs rather than creating long-term assets contributing to long-term economic health**
- **Funds needed to replace aging infrastructure**
- **Schools/public education**
- **Transportation infrastructure is a major obstacle to redevelopment**
- Lower population growth than expected through 2040, actual decline after that
- Not capitalizing on the port
- Pedestrian safety on commercial corridors
- No incentives for companies headquartered in Delaware to have a physical presence in Delaware
- Mismatch of workforce skills with jobs available
- No revenue sharing arrangement with Wilmington and other municipalities
- Rapidly aging population
- Banking, chemicals, etc. no longer provide the backbone of the economy
- Changes in retail, office, commercial demand due to internet shopping, alternative work arrangements may create vacancies and require new planning approaches
- No strong town structure in much of the County
- Rate of change in market demand is so fast that it requires constant monitoring and agility
- Reduced funding from state (transfer taxes, etc.)