What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A vision for the future.

In New Castle County, a comprehensive plan is more than a casual guidebook; it is intended to provide legal justification for our government’s decisions regarding our natural and built environment. New Castle County will undergo a full update to the Comprehensive Plan starting in 2020 to complete by the end of 2022.

A Comprehensive Plan is a forward-thinking, legislatively adopted strategy that:

- Shapes the places in which we live, work, learn, and recreate.

- Directs the public services, infrastructure (e.g. streets, sidewalks, sewer services) and capital investments that make our communities livable.

- Guides the use, density and design of homes and buildings, directly shaping the physical appearance of our neighborhoods while simultaneously preserving environmental, historical, and cultural assets.
Ideally situated in the Mid-Atlantic Region, New Castle County is a vibrant and desirable area, home to over half of Delaware’s population. County assets include: a high quality of life, lower property taxes than surrounding states, ample access to recreational and cultural activities, a large county and state public park system, and a great interest in mixed-use walkable neighborhoods. To maintain and improve our quality of life we need to develop differently in the next 30 years than we have in the past.

How are we projected to grow?

New Castle County has experienced steady population growth since 1990 and well before. The County is expected to continue to see a net increase in population through 2045, although the rate of increase in population slows significantly after 2030. The Delaware Population Consortium projects that deaths begin to outnumber births around 2035; job growth is also projected to slow over the timeframe. Part of the outcome of the plan should be to better position the County to attract well-paying jobs in the future and be a place where people want to live, work, and play. As with all projections, they are estimates and many factors can change them. While New Castle County will have an older population in the next thirty years and therefore natural increases in population will decline, it is possible that domestic and foreign migration may add to the population, especially given our location in the middle of the Mid-Atlantic Region.

![Population Trends: 1990 - 2050](image)

![Average Annual Population Growth](image)

Sources: *US Census Bureau 2018 Population Estimates; +Delaware Population Consortium Projections

Sub-Area Planning

The County has matured to the point where we need more community-based, fine-grained planning. New Castle County is changing every day and needs a current plan that reflects the evolving physical landscape, diverse community needs and priorities, and global pressures of the 21st century.

Accordingly, the County began a strategic mid-cycle comprehensive plan enhancement in 2017 to include subarea plan implementation components for areas with recently completed studies. This effort was concurrent with the re-establishment of a comprehensive planning unit within the Land Use Department, which had not existed for nearly 20 years. The updated approach to planning includes leveraging more modern tools, data, and public engagement. In doing so, we can make better informed and more effective plans and decisions. This will translate to overcoming the challenges and seizing the opportunities we face now and in the future.
Housing Development Trends

Historically, over 90% of Single-family Dwelling development in the County has taken place north of the C&D Canal, surrounding the cities of Wilmington and Newark, and radiating out from major transportation corridors, such as Routes 1, 13, 202, and 195.

However, between 2002 and 2018, development largely shifted to south of the C&D Canal, where more than 46% of all single family detached dwellings in the county were constructed. Most of this development was in Middletown and suburban development in previously rural areas. Southern New Castle County’s population (including incorporated areas) increased from 19,000 (4% of countywide population) in 1990 to 55,000 (10% of countywide population) in 2016. This high level of residential growth has begun to change the rural communities south of the C&D Canal. Notably, the significant increase in population and developed lands has come with a corresponding loss of resource lands.

Are we supporting communities that need reinvestment and revitalization?

Typically these are areas where business and other community activity flourished in the past, but have lost residents, jobs, and other development activity for various reasons. These places are generally recognized by aging buildings and older infrastructure, and underused assets. The Route 9 Corridor and the North Claymont Area are examples of such. Both communities have recently undertaken planning processes to identify a desired future and create revitalization plans to capitalize on their assets.

The Route 9 Corridor between Wilmington and New Castle was mostly developed in the mid to late 20th Century. Haphazard development is reflected in the tangle of heavy industry, residential neighborhoods, highways and local streets, and the resultant development has made it difficult for residents to access jobs and other services without a personal vehicle. The physical environment of the Route 9 corridor has contributed to instances of financial instability in the area. The County worked with residents and community groups to create a robust plan for revitalization. The Route 9 Corridor Community Area Master Plan lays out shared strategies for community partners, government agencies, and other stakeholders to collaboratively overcome the area’s challenges and build opportunities for growth and economic advancement.

The North Claymont Area encompasses the former Claymont Steel site and Tri-State Mall and is located adjacent to the Delaware River, major highways and commuter rail. There are tremendous opportunities for the County to capitalize on the site’s proximity to transportation features, water features, and major employment and housing areas. Using the completed area plan, the County is working with the community to support economic development and reinvestment. Plan implementation will create a vibrant place that will better meet the needs of residents and serve the wider population.
Findings & Recommendations

Key actions that should be taken include:

**Modernize the Overall Planning Approach** – The County must plan for the future by developing innovative ways to build attractive communities and facilitate business opportunities in locations that complement and stimulate economic development. We also need to plan for complete communities where there are housing options for all residents. At the same time, the County needs to protect valuable natural and cultural resources. Recognizing changing preferences in development for more connected, mixed use, walkable communities, the County needs to better enable and promote this type of development. Strategies should include infill and redevelopment. Areas such as North Claymont, the Route 9 Corridor and Concord Pike/US 202 present an extraordinary opportunity for innovative, adaptive reuse and reinvestment. Southern New Castle County can also be planned in ways that allow for growth and development – including attractive, mixed use, walkable centers – while preserving the natural and agricultural resources that have defined the community.

**Plan for Employment** - Average annual job growth in New Castle County has been moderate as compared to other counties in the region as well as within metro counties nationwide since 2011, and WILMAPCO projects that the County will begin to see a slight decline in total jobs between 2030 and 2040, with the trend continuing out to 2050. The County should continue its efforts to ensure adequate locations for employment-based land uses, promote attractive development that employers often seek, and encourage enhancement and expansion of public transit and complete streets. Although transportation is not a direct responsibility of New Castle County, promoting transportation options for the full range of travelers and supporting safe, comfortable, and attractive streetscapes are important ways to support the workforce and economy.

**Limit Sprawl & Preserve Land South of the Canal** - Since 2002 nearly half of all single family detached dwellings have been constructed in Southern New Castle County; the consequence of this was the conversion of 3,392 acres from farm and forest land to development. Preliminary analysis shows that there are approximately 29,000 acres of developable resource lands (agriculture, forest and rangeland) that could be at risk for conversion to future development. Over the past 18 months, developers have proposed the construction of more than 900 homes south of the C&D Canal outside of areas currently planned for sewer service. The County needs to better direct development to growth areas with infrastructure. It also needs to limit development in non-growth areas – including enhancing its land preservation efforts – and partner with the State and other stakeholders to augment existing programs.

New Castle County must grow and develop in new, strategic ways so it can remain economically competitive, conserve natural and agricultural resources and assets, and maintain the high quality of life to which our residents are accustomed.

The comprehensive plan update process will get underway in early 2020. Visit newcastlede.gov/LU to get updates and stay tuned for activities for how to be part of shaping the plan and the future of NCC.

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