

Agenda for Livable Communities – Question Response
Jane Gruenebaum – Candidate for Sussex County Council – District 3

1. What can elected officials do to preserve open spaces including forests? Are new ordinances or legislation needed? What should be the priority?

The first step is acknowledging the importance of open spaces and forests. Currently, of all our neighboring jurisdictions, we are the only one that lacks a clear, compelling statement on the importance of forests.

We must recognize that forests are not luxuries useful only for screening one neighborhood from another and that not every unbuilt space should be counted as “open space.” Healthy, contiguous forests are essential to human life through their ability to store carbon, mitigate flooding, support biodiversity, and cool temperatures. Open space adds to the health and vibrancy of the community - if it is useable and not only a bit of land around the edge of a community.

Forests are great economic investments. In 2016, the Outdoor Industry Association concluded that 467,000 people in Delaware participated in recreation activities such as bicycling, camping, fishing, hunting, paddling, hiking, and wildlife viewing, and contributed \$3.1 billion and 29,000 jobs with \$959 million in wages to the region. According to the Chesapeake Tree Network, the tree cover in Sussex County provides \$76.1 million in reduced air pollution, stormwater and carbon dioxide.

Yes, we need new ordinances. We need ordinances and enforcement mechanisms to protect existing forests and to reforest or afforest where possible. If we look to the other two counties in Delaware, we can find examples of codes that protect forests and promote useful open spaces. We do not have to reinvent the wheel; we just need the commitment to put on the books stronger laws protecting our forests and open spaces.

2. What do you consider the most critical infrastructure problems facing Sussex County, and how do you propose to address those problems?

There are several infrastructure problems facing Sussex County and, if current practices are followed, they will get worse.

Roads are top of the list. Growth has so outpaced the state's ability to build roads that traffic slows to a near standstill at peak times on many roads. Crowded roads keep people in their cars longer – adding to pollution and stress – and imperil our health and safety by slowing EMS and other safety vehicles. Building roads are the responsibility of the state but allowing the creation of communities before roads can reasonably be built is a Council decision. Council should embrace strategies that ensure that home development is parallel with road creation. An improved partnership with state officials can inform decisions and explore options.

Affordable housing is another infrastructure concern as too many people who work here can't afford to live here. Health providers, schoolteachers, and service workers all need affordable housing. This is a complex issue that must be approached by partnerships between local and state authorities and with cooperation among public, private, and non-profit entities. Tax incentives, investments, and code revisions are all part of the solution. But, as with all the problems we face, it begins with a firm commitment to addressing the problem and creating affordable housing for all.

Crowded schools is another infrastructure concern. The County Council had the opportunity to provide much needed funds to the schools when it considered the Voluntary School Assessment option. This fee would have been applied to buyers of new homes, often the most affluent in the region, and would have pertained only to homes over a certain value. Instead of supporting the VSA, a policy used in other jurisdictions, the Council unanimously turned it down. We must reconsider the VSA.

Safety is another infrastructure issue that needs to receive full attention. Our public safety services -- fire, police, EMS -- are high

quality and the Council has been supportive of necessary upgrades to facilities and improvements in training. However, every safety department, like every resident, is plagued by intense traffic that makes getting to emergencies harder and more treacherous. Every safety department is stressed by needing to meet the needs of a rapidly growing community. Keeping our communities safe is the highest priority that Council has and allowing growth to outpace this element of infrastructure is a serious dereliction of duty.

3. Do you think Sussex County has a good balance between personal rights and community rights? If so, please explain your thinking. If not, how would you work to create a better balance?

I do not believe there is a good balance between community and personal rights. At the same, I recognize that creating a good balance is neither easy nor obvious. Balancing rights is always complicated. Yet too many of the problems we face -- from crowded roads to polluted water -- can be solved *only* if we lift up the rights of the community. You cannot dirty water *only* on your own property; you cannot pollute the air *only* on your own property; you cannot destroy healthy biodiversity *only* on your own property -- water, air, and wildlife all cross personal boundary lines.

Individual rights are the cornerstone of any democracy and separate democracies from other forms of government. But individual rights do not exist in a vacuum. Just as you can't have day without night, you can't have individual rights without community rights.

Sussex County is experiencing problems created by growth that has outpaced infrastructure. Put another way, our problems stem from deference to personal rights over community rights. We must create a healthier balance.

5. Can and should the working relationship between state and local officials be improved? If so, why and how?

Absolutely. The relationship with state officials and local officials is too often one of confrontation rather than cooperation. Delaware is a small state, the distance between Dover and Georgetown is not great, and the concerns of one county are not wholly different from the concerns of the other counties. The more we can find common ground and cooperate to find ways of improving the lives of all Delawareans, the better we all will be.

The State builds our roads and our schools, it sets environmental standards and protects civic rights. Failure to create and maintain strong relationships between county officials and state officials heightens problems; it doesn't solve them.

I believe strongly that we can develop better working relationships across all governmental boundaries. As with so many things, it starts with respect for each other and with forming the personal relationships that make working together possible.

Throughout my professional career and personal life, I have found helpful ways to bring people together, to form effective and efficient coalitions and alliances.

I know the individuals who represents the area encompassed by District 3. I can build on those relationships to strengthen the relationship between the state and Sussex County and in so doing bring new ideas and more resources to the county.