

Don't ignore the mandate for change in Sussex County

To change or not to change, that was question at Sussex County Council's January 14, 2025, meeting.

Arrayed on one side was an overflow crowd arguing against Councilperson Matt Lloyd's proposal for a limited, targeted moratorium on new proposals for development of 5 and more residential units in Level 4 state investment areas of the county, agricultural lands needing protection but where much of the county's development has occurred over the past two decades. Builders, developers, engineers, realtors, bankers, a hospital system CEO, workers, and advocates for affordable housing had mobilized at the mere mention of "moratorium," almost none of whom understood the targeted, limited scope of the proposal.

On the other side were a few voices suggesting that action was needed, possibly a moratorium if Council fails to act. My own argument, more nuanced than reported in the *Cape Gazette*, was that Mr. Lloyd's proposal was welcome because it forced everyone to focus attention on the central issue of the 2024 election, the urgent need for change.

Absent from the discussion were the thousands of Sussex County voters who had voted for change in 2024. Those voices should not be ignored.

The 2024 election produced a clear mandate for change. Three times as many votes were cast against incumbents than for them, an indictment of past performance. The three challengers who defeated Council incumbents received a combined total of 59,978 votes. Three incumbents received a combined total of 20,178. These totals include votes cast in both primary and general elections.

Some readers might object to this way of looking at the results. We can also focus on the margin of victory in the direct face-off between incumbents and challengers in each of three contests. Challengers won 57.8 (Lloyd), 58.5 (McCarran) and 54.7 (Gruenebaum) percent of the vote in the decisive election, the two Republican primary contests in Districts 1 and 2 and the general election in District 3. Voters chose the three new members of Sussex County Council by decisive majorities—the smallest margin of victory was ten percent.

Although the successful challengers did not have a coordinated campaign message, each criticized overdevelopment and argued that Sussex County needs to make dramatic changes in how it makes land use decisions.

Sussex voters delivered a resounding message: Enough is enough. Stop doing business as usual. Exercise control over land use decisions and produce different results.

County Council, including the two incumbents who were not on the ballot, need to take the election results seriously, prepare a plan, and act.

Many speakers who argued against the moratorium pledged their willingness to help find solutions to the environmental and infrastructure problems that they acknowledged are real. By raising the moratorium, Mr. Lloyd has managed to bring key players to the table and lay the foundation for discussions that will help Sussex address the problems it's now experiencing.

County Council needs to make a commitment to that effort, make a plan with an ambitious timeline, and get solutions in place. That's what the public demanded.

Joseph A. Pika

Lewes