

Delaware sprawl: a collection of crises

By *Rethinking Delaware*

This article originally appeared in [Delaware Business Now](#)

November 12, 2024

Delaware confronts a collection of related crises: a shortage of affordable housing; a surge in unhealthy medical conditions; erosion of environmental resilience; and rising air and water pollution. While none of these have simple causes or solutions, public decisions over the past several decades have exacerbated them.

Delaware's sprawling development patterns force us to drive—to school, to work, to the store, to the fitness center and elsewhere—and often at considerable distances. Decades of piecemeal land-use decisions have made us totally dependent on our personal motor vehicles.

That dependence has cost us a great deal. It has compromised our health, created a shortage of diverse and affordable housing, gobbled up open space, farmland, forests and wetlands, increased pollution, escalated the public costs of infrastructure and services, driven climate change and eroded the sense of place and quality of life that makes strong communities.

Consider Delaware's elevated incidences of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, due partly to our sedentary lifestyle; the increase in pediatric asthma due partly to local air pollution; and the high cost of healthcare associated with all those conditions.

Consider, too, increased air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from traffic, the high cost of transportation as a percentage of household income, high rents and the continued building of homes at prices out of reach for too many Delawareans.

Our development patterns also compound the mobility and housing challenges faced by our large and growing older population, including the ability to age in place, which has downstream impacts on healthcare costs for state Medicaid and retiree programs and services.

All of these conditions hit our most vulnerable neighbors hardest. Their health is worse than the population overall, flooding of their neighborhoods is routine and more consequential, their housing options are more limited, and they are cut off from valuable resources and economic opportunities.

What's more, the loss of open space from new development has greatly diminished the land's ability to absorb stormwater, which has increased flooding during major weather events and extreme high tides, compromising our already compromised climate resilience and increasing the need for expensive infrastructure improvements.

And with every traffic study aimed at accommodating more cars and with every zoning change we approve—every subdivision, strip center or office park—we make the challenges harder to address.

Yet there is a simple solution: Address the challenges together by reforming our land-use strategies. In a nutshell, spur development where it makes real sense and discourage development where it causes the most damage.

The time has come. In Delaware, 60 government entities make land-use decisions under a structure designed when our state was 60 percent less populated and confronted fewer critical challenges. There is little coordination between those entities and there are no penalties for deviating from state planning guidance or county comprehensive plans.

We hope the incoming administration will recognize that smart land use is one of the most powerful and cost-effective tools for addressing our housing challenges, mitigating climate effects, building community resilience, and improving human and environmental health.

Shouldn't municipal, county and state governments be on the same page? Rethinking Delaware believes they should. Rethinking Delaware is an informal coalition of former state officials and nonprofit, non-governmental organizations that believe government at all levels, led by the state, should encourage development of compact, mixed-use, walkable, transit-supportive communities as a central part of the state's housing, transportation, health, environmental and climate priorities. Our recommendations to the new administration include:

- Review and amend all state and local land-use and infrastructure policies and funding for transportation, schools, and water and sewer systems that impede development of compact, walkable communities.
- In support of more compact development patterns, shift transportation investment to accommodate walking, biking and a new suite of transit services.
- Re-orient all comprehensive plans and zoning laws to prioritize mixed-use neighborhoods with places to live, work, shop, learn, and play while increasing the supply and diversity of housing and transportation options.
- Establish state- and/or county task forces to develop innovative proposals for specific areas that address the collective challenges of housing and transportation costs, our changing demographics and health challenges, and climate-related threats, all in ways that incorporate a sustainable economic strategy for the future.

Imagine what could be. Walk the kids to school or the bus stop, then walk to the local café for a coffee on the way to the co-op workspace or transit stop. It's right near the grocer,

pharmacy and cleaners. On the weekends, hike or bike the beautiful green trails around the neighborhood —the same trails others use to cycle to work. Walk or bike to the park and ball fields, the farm stand, to restaurant night.

The result: more physical activity that lowers health risks, which eases the cost of healthcare; better air and fewer respiratory ailments, which also eases healthcare costs; less valuable time spent in traffic; lower transportation costs (which translates to more discretionary spending for our households), more necessities readily available to seniors, and stronger communities; a more resilient environment.

That's a better Delaware for everyone. If you agree, reach out to your town council, county council representatives and state legislators and the governor-elect to urge action. Reach us at rethinkingdelaware@gmail.com.

Rethinking Delaware is an informal coalition of former cabinet secretaries and state officials including Anne Canby, Rita Landgraf, Christophe Tulou, Joseph Pika, Mark Chura, and Charles Salkin; New Castle County Council representative Dee Durham; and nonprofit, non-governmental organizations including Delaware Chapter of the Sierra Club, Delaware Nature Society, Healthy Communities Delaware, Housing Alliance of Delaware and The Nature Conservancy in Delaware.