

Rethink Delaware leader calls for change at state, county levels

Housing, healthcare, transportation, environment among issues



Anne Canby, a former state transportation secretary and a leader of Rethink Delaware, speaks Jan. 15 at a meeting of the Sussex Preservation Coalition. Her group and the coalition have parallel goals, such as protecting the environment and improving housing, transportation and healthcare. KEVIN CONLON PHOTO

Kevin T. Conlon

January 21, 2025 Cape Gazette

A newly formed statewide group formulating a strategy to lobby the state for policies focused on transportation and climate change found an ally Jan. 15 in Sussex Preservation Coalition, which has similar goals at the local level.

The coalition hosted former Delaware Department of Transportation Secretary Anne Canby, a leader of Rethink Delaware, which hopes to sway state leaders on a wide range of interrelated issues, including housing, transportation and the environment.

"I wish a group like the coalition existed 30 years ago," Canby told an audience at the Lewes Public Library, alluding to her tenure as transportation secretary from 1993 through 2000.

"Maybe we have some chances now."

With the incoming administration of Gov.-elect Matt Meyer and a group of three newly elected Sussex County Council members calling for limits on development taking a majority on the five-member council, both groups hope the ground may be fertile for change.

While coalition President Jill Hicks emphasized that her group does not support candidates, but rather emphasizes provides education on issues, Canby said its efforts contributed to changes on the Sussex County Council.

"It was noticed upstate, fairly seismic changes down here," Canby said.

Sussex County's upcoming process to draft a new strategic plan will offer local residents and organizations a chance to help influence the direction for local development for years, residents said.

"I think we have a golden opportunity coming up," said Keith Steck of Milton, who is active in local advocacy groups, including Sussex 2030. "It's called the comprehensive plan. It's got to be worked on and it's got to be developed. And there's the opportunity to iron out some of the problems."

The plan is a blueprint for development and the basis of possible zoning law changes.

The state, meanwhile, is updating its five-year strategies plan that addresses similar issues.

"I'm glad to see there's a collaborative effort for rethinking Delaware, to bring the parties together, specifically the county and the state," Canby said.

She said she had concerns about transportation and land use and began to expand into related issues, creating an informal group of people with experience in different areas to develop goals and lobby for action. These included affordable and diverse housing, transportation options, public health outcomes, climate resiliency and other environmental protection issues.

"It's all about land use and transportation," Canby said. "Every single one of those issues I mentioned before all has a connection with land use and transportation. In some way or another, they are barriers to achieving the outcomes of whatever that organization may be."

Hicks said her group needs to get facts and data together and figure out the will of the government and the public and how they can do a better job working together.

"We don't have a lot of land, so we've got to be careful how we take care of it," Canby said.

"Smart land use, we think, is a good policy to think about."

Rethink Delaware wants the state to reverse decades-old growth trends and begin to emphasize more compact, mixed use, walkable, transit-supported communities.

"That's where we need to go because it's much more efficient," Canby said. "That's where we're trying to get the conversation started."

Change is needed to protect Sussex County's quality of life, which benefits long-time residents, people moving to the county and tourists, Canby said.

"That's why everybody came here," she said.

Canby said 43,000 acres of woodlands in Sussex County were lost between 1998 and 2021, while the population nearly doubled. Housing in the county has become unaffordable for many long-time residents, low-income people and others, she said.

Canby displayed some troubling statistics on a screen behind her as she spoke. She noted Delaware had the fifth-highest healthcare costs per capita in the country, the highest rate of death by stroke, the eighth-highest obesity rate and the 11th-highest diabetes rate. She attributed much of the problem to sedentary lifestyles fostered by community development built around reliance on automobiles, and an aging population.

Hicks agreed with Canby that the government needs to emphasize walkable and bikable communities, especially near areas that are already developed. Housing sprawl into rural areas of Sussex County has been a move in the wrong direction, she said.

Rethink Delaware will approach the governor and his cabinet to discuss strategies for the state, Canby said. They may also need the support of the state General Assembly.

“Recognizing the interdependence of all these things on each other brings together a set of interests and people that we hope – this is a test, we have no idea – will get attention in Dover,” Canby said. “We have health people, housing people, environmental people, older people and we’re going to get some equity people into this, and others to rethink how we think about all this stuff.”

She said she hopes residents of Sussex County will be successful in their similar goals.

“Could SPC pull together that same diverse coalition of people here? Canby asked. “Get as many political interests as you can to come together because I think that gives you political legs.”