

F R O N T L I N E S

'Livable Delaware' Offers Solutions to Complex Environmental Issues

HOW WE HUMAN BEINGS use our land has involved an incommensurate amount of energy over the centuries and a quick look around us confirms that we have learned little about land use over the years and may, in fact, have regressed substantially.

Remember that the production of food consumes the largest portion of Delaware land and that farms are most often our standard of unspoiled land. It is worthwhile to note that farming, even with a bag of environmentally protective tricks called, awkwardly, "Best Management Practices", is a far cry from an ecologically pristine practice. It is only on the edges of farm fields, lowlands and in wooded tracts that anything like a pre-columbian environment has survived man's pervasive presence, yet farming is far preferable to its alternative development and the accompanying commercial use in support of all those new people.

It is in these uses of land that Delawareans have failed to protect their most important values. When asked, the majority of us support a clean and uncluttered environment, yet when it comes to land use, we seldom exercise ourselves in land protection.

The Los Angeles Basin was once as ecologically rich an area as can be found in our nation. And the folks out there have willingly bound themselves to a formidable array of environmentally protective regulations and laws. Few states can claim to approach California's body of environmental law, yet they have lost their environment to bad land use while they desperately seek to protect themselves from its effects. To find their lost environment, one must travel east, high into the mountains, to find the remnants of the biological diversity that once existed. A sad and tattered reminder of what might have been.

Delaware's land use problems seem simple in comparison, yet they seem as resistant to resolution as the worst of Los Angeles.

The solutions seem to be just out of our reach, decade after decade. Route One from Rehoboth to Five-Points is a summer nightmare and a winter visual assault, yet its proud merchants are prospering by rendering needed products and services – even to those of us who may lament its visual sameness with strips of a similar lack of imagination across the country. Thirty years ago it was farmland, with plenty of room for access roads. Now in 2003, very few properties remain undeveloped and our new buildings are formulaic and

undistinguished. Interconnections are few and no provision for access roads has been made. Locals encapsulate themselves in their neighborhoods on weekends, bicyclists constitute high value road kill and that which serves us simultaneously oppresses us.

Nor are we guiltless in our collective self. It is we who made commercial successes of housing which manages to consume inordinate amounts of land while offering no redeeming environmental or social benefits. Cookie cutter construction on lots too big to mow and too small to farm may satisfy septic and wellfield separation guidelines, but at a punitive price in land consumption. Smaller, less expensive developments on quarter-acre +/- lots typically make no provisions for open space beyond the mandatory stormwater pond. Delawareans as a whole seem to be unaware of the merits of compact development, with its low land use, stronger sense of community and opportunities for interconnected open spaces which would have true habitat value. Instead, we have focused, inappropriately, on density as if land were something we have in unlimited quantities.

Somewhere between our own tolerance of the loss of the environment that brought most of us here in the first place and the disinclination of some developers to look beyond the bottom line, and the lack of a clear call to our elected officials, city, county and state, to lead us out of the morass they and we have placed ourselves in, there lies a way out.

Governor Minner's "Livable Delaware" is an important first step, with a core concept that we don't want a Delaware 98 percent built out, we can save room for prosperous and valued farm community, abundant open space and natural habitat and an investment in "Green Infrastructure" commensurate with our outstanding investment into grey infrastructure. For the first time a governor has tackled this most resistant of all our environmental issues head on with a clear call to save our land for prosperity, to manage growth in a way that preserves the elemental human values we all hold dear and to allow nature room to prosper from the whole body of environmental protection DNREC occupies itself with from day to day. I encourage all our readers to involve yourselves more deeply in this most subtle but important environmental issue and to support the concept of a "Livable Delaware" for our future.



John A. Hughes
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Secretary