

Delawareans' Attitudes Toward Economic Growth

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Executive Summary

In any investigation of choices for Delaware's future, it is imperative that some understanding of the views of current residents of the state be obtained. To that end, a public opinion survey was undertaken by the Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research. More than eleven hundred households participated. While these results are a statistically reliable measure of the views of the current residents, it should be remembered that in another ten years more than 20% of today's Delawareans will not live here, and, in fact, 20% of those interviewed did not live here in 1990.

The survey instrument was designed to capture information that reflects public opinion on diverse issues such as economic growth, public policy priorities, factors that affect an individual's quality of life, and reactions to a variety of potential public policy actions. In some cases, the same information was gathered in 1995 and 1997 and will be reported in this summary where it is available. In general, the results reported are accurate within +/- 5%

Overall Satisfaction

More than 72% of respondents felt that the economy of Delaware was growing. That feeling was essentially the same across all three counties. More than 61% of adults reported that job opportunities were also expanding and once again that finding applies equally well in all three counties. Less than 10% thought that job opportunities were declining. In the end, 80% of those questioned thought Delaware was going in the right direction, and there was no statistically significant difference between the counties.

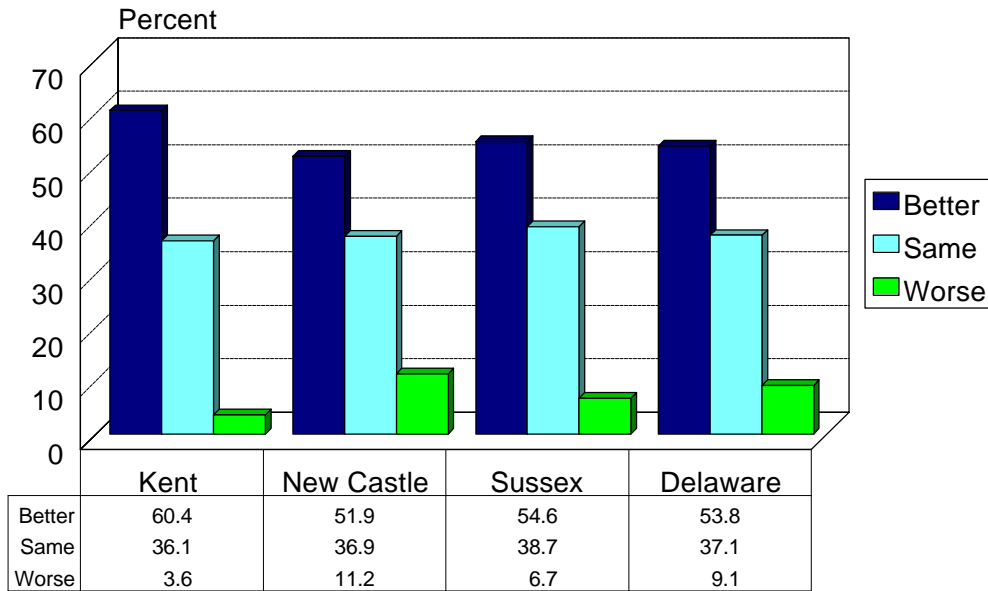
In Figure 1 below, more than 53% of adult Delawareans reported that the state is better off than it was five years ago and less than 10% have a decidedly negative view of what has occurred in the recent past. The same question was asked with respect to the respondent's personal circumstance and the response was similar, if not even more positive.

Those interviewed were also asked to speculate about the likely quality of life in Delaware five years hence (see Figure 2 below). The results were quite positive in that about half of the respondents thought that the quality of life would be even better. Still, the negative result was significantly higher than for other questions in this series. Most of that difference is attributable to New Castle County, where the negative response reached almost 20% and was statistically significantly higher than that observed in Kent and Sussex counties. The often heated debate about development, traffic congestion, and some recent environmental events probably account for that view.

These results are, in general, quite positive and upbeat. As such, they compare very well with the findings of recent national polls that have asked similar questions. This undoubtedly reflects the now eight year old economic expansion that has only recently begun to slow.

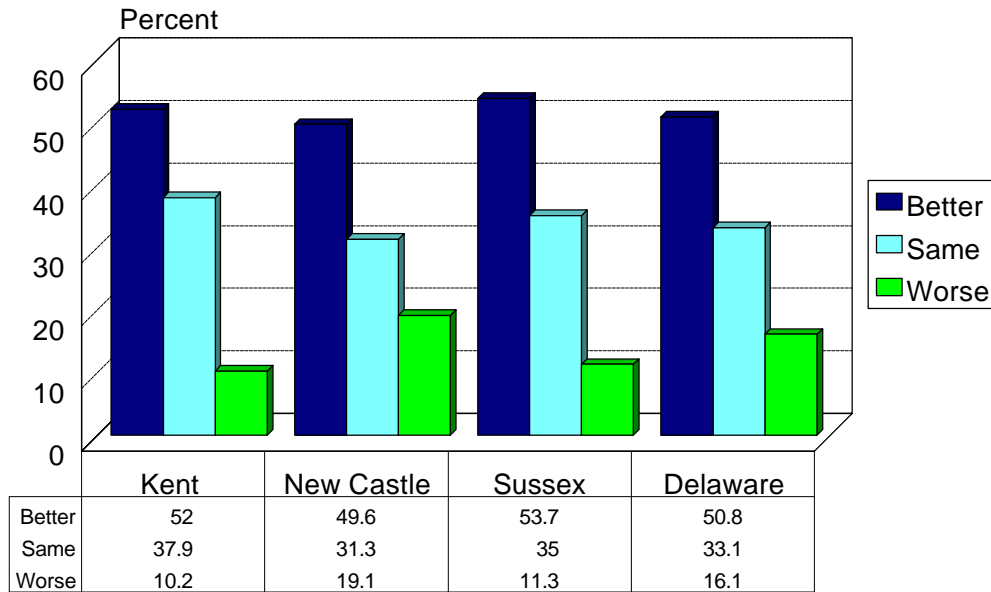
Looking at this question in more detail, the most optimism was exhibited by those under 40 and the most pessimism by those from 40-64. Women were significantly more optimistic than men on this question. African Americans and Asians were considerably more optimistic about their prospects in five years than were Caucasians. There were no significant differences by income class; however, those with incomes in the \$100,000-\$150,000 group seemed less sanguine about the future.

Figure 1
Delaware Today Compared to Five Years Ago
by County



Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

Figure 2
Quality of Life in Delaware in Five Years
by County



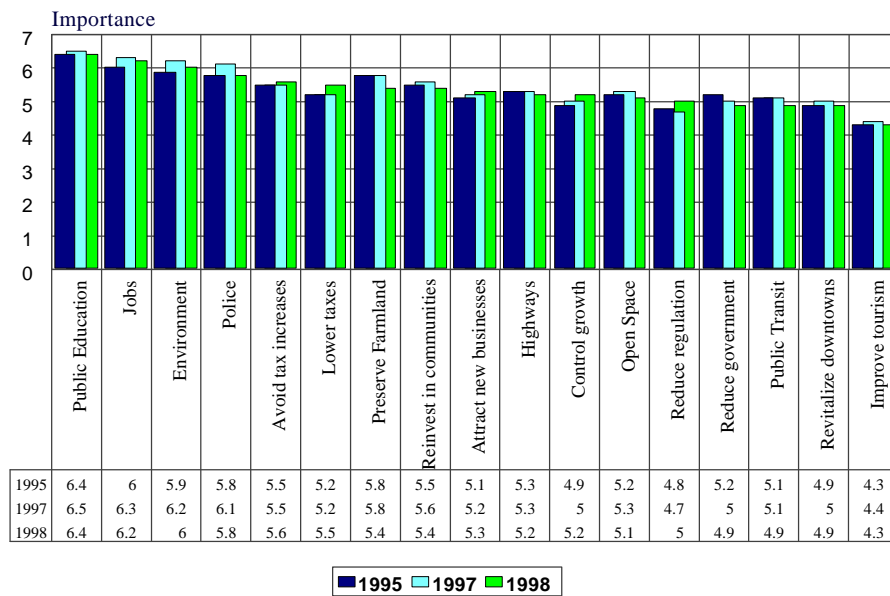
Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

Finally, those who have moved to the state since 1990 were significantly more optimistic about the future of Delaware than those who lived here at that time. This is an important point since more than half of Delaware's population growth stems from people who move here. They bring with them the perspective of their previous residences. For a person moving to Delaware from northern New Jersey, for example, the idea that Delaware has traffic congestion is greeted with some skepticism and even amusement.

State Priorities

Respondents were given a list of potential public policy actions that could be pursued. They were asked to prioritize each item by rating it on a scale from 1 (not a priority) to 7 (high priority). Since the same questions were asked in 1995 and 1997, the results for all three years are shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3
Priorities for Delaware



Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

The perennial one-two punch of *Improving Public Education* and *Developing and Keeping Jobs* are also linked. In order for the economy of the state to keep growing, there needs to be a continuous supply of new and well-trained (or at least trainable) workers. Many of the new workers will be recent graduates of the Delaware public schools. It is crucial that these graduates have the tools to fill these new positions. Further, employers must be convinced that Delaware's labor pool is large enough and sufficiently well trained to support their growth plans. According to the survey respondents, there is work to be done. More than 45% of those responding thought public schools were worse today than five years ago. This is one reason this issue is ranked number one on the priority list. In a related question, more than 60% thought parents should shoulder all or most of the responsibility for a student's academic performance.

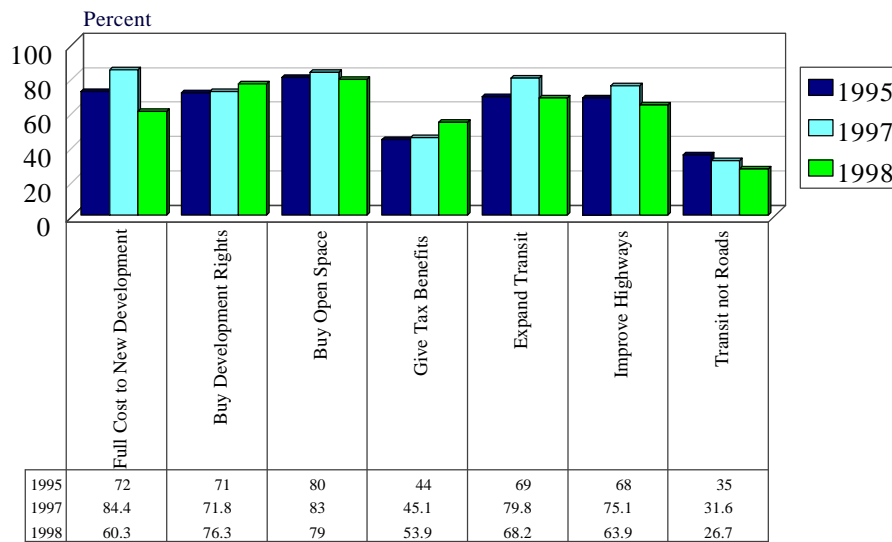
Improving the environment is ranked third among the listed policy actions. This result is also consistent with the first two. Many employers have concluded that the quality of life available to their employees is important if the company is going to grow. However, this does not mean that this priority should take precedence over all others, but rather should be managed in concert with these other areas. Currently, about 40% of Delawareans are less than enthusiastic about the health of the state's environment. On a related topic, the participants were asked if industry should be allowed to expand into the Coastal Zone if there was no environmental impact. Delawareans were split almost equally between agreeing and disagreeing with the proposition. However, more than 56% thought that business was over-regulated by the government.

There were also interesting differences between the counties. For example, respondents from Sussex County were far less concerned with *Preserving Farmland, Improving Tourism, Improving the Environment, Controlling Growth, and Buying Open Space/Parkland* than participants in New Castle or Kent counties.

Selected Policy Options

In surveys conducted during 1995 and 1997, the latter of which was part of the Shaping Delaware initiative, a series of potential and actual policy options were addressed. Those same questions with one exception were asked again this year. The results for all three years are shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4
Percent Favoring Selected Policy Options



Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

In recent years, the policy debate about population growth has, in part, focused on who should pay for the infrastructure needed to support that growth. Respondents were asked if the full cost of the new infrastructure should be assigned to new development. In 1995 and 1997, an overwhelming majority agreed that it should. In 1998, the wording was changed to better define development as “new homes.” The positive responses dropped by nearly 25%. Not only does this drop in support show how crucial the wording of a question is, it also illustrates how support can change when there is a more direct potential negative consequence in the respondent’s mind.

Support continues to be high for both the purchase of development rights from farmers and the outright purchase of land by the state for use as open space or parkland. While less than half of adult Delawareans support giving individuals and businesses tax breaks if they locate in designated growth areas, support seems to have increased in the past year by 9% and that shift is statistically significant.

The last three areas are related. About two-thirds of the respondents favor more resources for both public transit/bikeways/walkways and highways. However, those supporting the expenditure of funds on transit instead of highways are in the minority and the trend seems to be lower.

In related questions, participants were asked if they would choose higher gasoline taxes or more traffic congestion. A resounding 82% selected the higher taxes. In 1997, 72% selected the first option. Given a

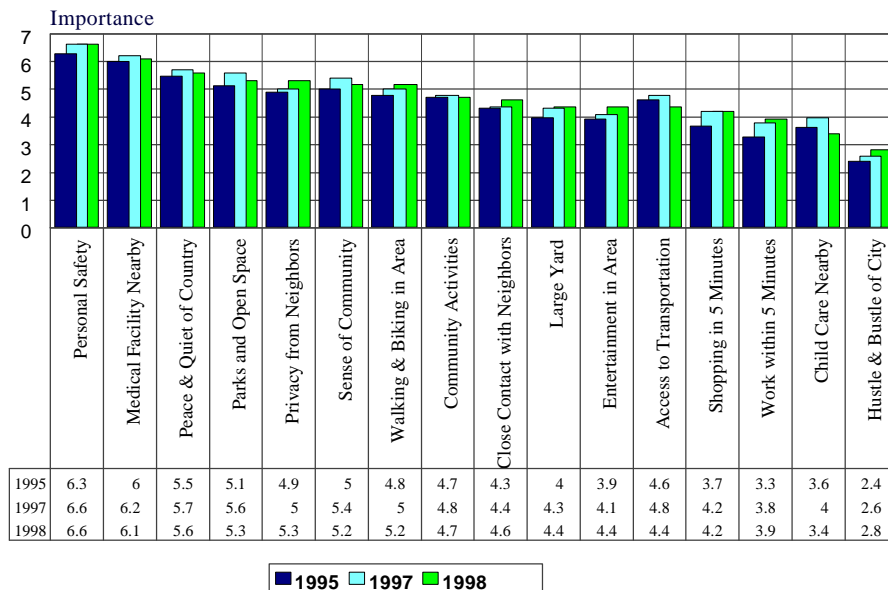
choice between higher quality jobs and more traffic congestion, jobs were selected by 97% of the respondents.

Finally, more than 72% of those responding think that the counties and municipalities should continue to control land use decisions. This represents an 18% increase since the question was first asked in 1995.

Quality of Life

Respondents were asked to evaluate a list of factors that might affect their quality of life. The same formulation of the questions was used in 1995 and 1997 as well. The scale varied from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important). The results for all three years are shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 5
Importance of Selected Quality of Life Factors



Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

In general, the ranking of the items has remained fairly stable over all three periods. *Personal Safety* remains atop the list and has increased in intensity over time. The desire to have a *Medical Facility Nearby* is not unexpected and probably is related to the same underlying theme of security as the previous factor. In a related question, about 92% of Delawareans felt that their neighborhoods were either fairly or very safe. However, 12% sensed that their neighborhoods had become less safe in the past year. This also is consistent with the stable 4th place priority given to *Improving Police Protection* (Figure 3).

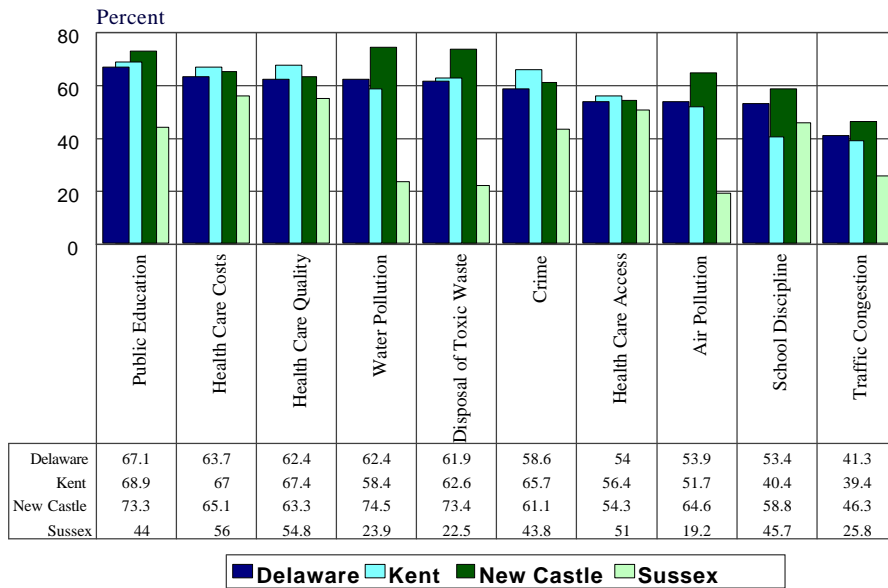
The next three items -- *Peace and Quiet of the Country*, *Parks and Open Space*, and *Privacy from Neighbors* -- address a common theme, which is personal space. All have increased in importance since 1995, although marginally. The importance of maintaining control over one's time and space is probably derivative of the relatively complex and time-pressured lives common in the 1990s. This idea is further supported by the fact that only 6% of Delawareans want to live in a city and 37% would most like a home in the country. Support for priorities like state acquisition of open space and farmland preservation (Figure 3) are consistent with these views. This also is consistent with the 3rd place priority given to *Improving the Environment* (Figure 3).

The next group -- *Sense of Community, Walking & Biking in the Area, and Community Activities* -- addresses the theme of social interaction. All are rated lower than the contrasting theme of personal space, although the differences are small. The remaining factors, except for *Large Yard*, are generally related to increasing population density, particularly the lowest rated item, *Hustle & Bustle of the City*.

Top Ten Issues

Respondents were asked to grade the importance of a list of issues from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). The ranking below is based on the percent responding *very important* (Figure 6). It does not mean necessarily that these areas are seen as problems. In prior years, when respondents were asked how serious a problem each area represented, a very different profile resulted.

Figure 6
Top Ten Issues: Percent Responding Very Important by County



Source: Center for Applied Demography & Survey Research, University of Delaware

This profile, with the exception of the school issues, is very much in tune with the quality of life issues addressed earlier. All of the items selected relate very much to personal safety and well being. Noticeably absent are all of the issues like *economic growth, job creation, and unemployment*. Also missing are issues like *loss of farmland, open spaces, and population growth*. Water pollution is an interesting case. Several incidents in New Castle County in the past year have evidently heightened people’s interest. However, the discussion about pollution in the Inland Bays did not seem to have had an appreciable affect in Sussex County. This suggests people were concerned primarily by the safety of the supply of drinking water.

New Castle County respondents generally responded with greater intensity: on six out of the ten issues more chose the highest rating. In contrast, Sussex County respondents were much less likely to assign the highest weight to an issue. Consistent with concerns about the availability of primary care physicians in both Kent and Sussex counties, respondents from southern Delaware were more intense on the health care issues. Of those issues that did not make the top ten list, *Unemployment* and *Job Creation* stand out in Kent County with more than 60% classifying both as a very important issue. Currently, the Kent County economy is lagging the rest of the state.