As a state, Delaware continues to experience rapid population growth. Since 1950, the population more than doubled in size, growing at an average annual rate of 2.7 percent. The growth in the number of households was much higher (nearly tripling in size over 40 years) due to both population growth and demographic changes in household composition, such as smaller household size, more single person households, a higher age at first marriage, and higher rates of divorce. While growth rates for the state have slowed in the 1970s and 1980s, evidence suggests that population growth is once again increasing. Forecasts for the future also suggest continued population and household growth.

As a result, parts of every county in Delaware are experiencing the effects of rapid population growth. These include traffic congestion, rising costs of providing services, over-crowding in school, and loss of farmland. From countless newspaper reports to small discussions among neighbors, Delawareans have felt the need to discuss new ideas about planning for growth in Delaware.

*Losing Ground: What Will We Do About Delaware’s Changing Landscape? The Results of Seven Public Conversations*

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Over three-quarters of the participants identified land use problems in Delaware as being serious or very serious.

Among the choices discussed, participants favored revitalizing cities the most (73.4% in favor).

The greatest opposition was for making minor adjustments to the status quo (58.9% opposed).

As a result of the discussion participants agreed that they increased their understanding of the issues and the viewpoints of others.

Delawareans want to continue the discussion on land use and want decision makers to hear what they have to say.

The rest of this report summarizes the issues facing Delaware, the strategy of public conversations, and the discussions that took place among the participants.
Figure 1. Population and Household Change in Delaware, 1950 to 1990

A Closer Look at Development in Delaware

Figure 1 depicts the rapid growth of population and households in Delaware. However, the distribution of this new growth reflected the marketplace of home buyers and developers. The resulting pattern of residential and commercial development in Delaware over the past 40 years has led to a sprawl of housing units and shopping centers across the landscape. Development typically bypassed existing urban and older suburban communities in favor of outlying suburban and rural areas. For example, most of the population growth in New Castle County over the past 40 years occurred outside of incorporated areas such as Wilmington and Newark. Much of what used to be farmland and open spaces has been converted into residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Since 1959, 165,193 acres or 22% of Delaware’s farmland was converted to other uses. During this period the number of households using septic systems increased, as did the number of cars and the average commuting time to work. For example, from 1970 to 1990 the number of households using a septic system increased by 34,681, or an 87 percent increase. Most of these impacts affect rural parts of the state the most, contributing to growth that is decentralized and inefficient in terms of providing needed services, such as water sewage, and fire protection.

Not all population growth can be considered bad. New residents bring new skills, new ideas, and new opportunities. However, many raise concerns about the way in which growth occurred and its impact on Delaware’s changing landscape. These include:

- Loss of community character and identity
- Continuous decline of older cities and towns
- Growing separation between city and suburb
- Adverse effects on older suburban areas
- Adverse effects upon the natural resources of land, water, and air
- Loss of productive farmland, the state’s leading economic sector

Delaware responded to some of these issues through several key pieces of legislation. The 1968 Farmland Assessment Act provided preferential tax treatment of land used in agricultural production. The Agricultural Lands Preservation Act of 1991 created the Agricultural Lands Preservation Foundation to develop a strategy for the preservation of agricultural land and to implement a purchase of development rights program in Delaware. Finally, a long dormant Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues was activated in 1993 to encourage discussion and debate on land use in Delaware. Supported by this committee the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension embarked on a series of public conversations on land use in Delaware.

What Is A Public Conversation?

Public conversations are a strategy to get people talking about important policy issues. The model was developed by the Kettering Foundation as a way to encourage citizen involvement in critical issues. The strategy is to build a deliberative discussion about what we ought to do about public issues. This approach differs from a debate in that participants are asked to weigh carefully the viewpoint of others and talk through the conflicting emotions that often arise in public discussions.

Public conversations begin with an important issue in a community, region or state. In the case of Losing Ground, the issue was land use planning in Delaware. A committee framed several choices
about the land use that reflected viable options or choices for the issue while maintaining a diversity of thought and a respect for sentiments within the community. These choices were based on previous research, expert testimony, and experiences in other parts of the country. The number of choices was limited to four to facilitate discussion. A short issue brief was written which described the problem and outlined the policy choices for addressing the problem. Each choice included a discussion of what should be done as well as a critique of the position (see Box for a list of the choices). The brief was easy to read and the presentation of the choices was balanced so as not to bias the discussion in one direction or another.

Seven public conversations were held throughout Delaware in public schools, community rooms, and libraries. Trained moderators, using principles developed by the Kettering Foundation’s National Issue Forums, led participants. The principles include: a set of ground rules for discussion, a focus on deliberative discussion rather than debate, listening to the viewpoints of others, and respect for others.

What Happened In The Meetings?

Seven public meetings were held in Bethany Beach (40 people), Brandywine (60 people), Dover (38), Georgetown (47 people), Glasgow (72 people), Middletown (58), and Milford (30 people) in January, 1996 (see Map). In total, 345 people discussed the four choices presented in the meetings.

A pre and post questionnaire was used and 294 people (85.2%) filled out the pre survey and 262 people (75.9%) fill out the post survey. Valid comparisons of pre and post survey results can be made for most of the participants. The pre questionnaire was administered prior to the discussion of the choices, while the post questionnaire was completed at the end of the meeting. Participation in the meetings was voluntary and thus the results of the questionnaires do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of all residents in Delaware. Nonetheless, the responses of the participants do give a reflection of what happened at the meetings and of the interest of Delawareans in this topic.

How Did They Feel Before The Meeting?

Over three-quarters of the participants identified land-use problems in Delaware as being “serious”. While over 63 percent of the respondents in each of the meeting sites felt land-use issues were a serious problem, those in the Brandywine area felt it was most serious (84.3%) while those in the Dover area felt it was the least serious (63.3%). Only a small percentage of the participants did not feel that land-use issues were “not serious” (2.7%). Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the these responses by each location.

THE CHOICES FOR THE LOSING GROUND PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

1. Encourage Private Responsibility for Land Conservation. This approach emphasizes private property rights and encourages conservation and planning through incentives and education for landowners.

2. Establish Permanent Protection for Special Lands. Approach two emphasizes more government involvement and regional planning as a mechanism to protect important lands.

3. Prevent Rural Land Conversion By Enhancing Urban Life. This approach promotes urban development as a strategy to limit growth in rural areas.

4. Centralize Land Use Control. The final choice promotes the need for state and regional control of land use decisions as the best strategy for future growth.
The respondents were asked to look at the four choices discussed in the meetings and rank them according to which one was the closest to their viewpoint and which was the furthest from their viewpoint. The viewpoints listed included:

1) All we need to do is make minor adjustments in our present system.

2) We need to establish permanent boundaries for special lands.

3) The best way to prevent rural conversion is to rejuvenate our urban centers.

4) Land use decisions need to be made at a regional or state level.

No single choice emerged as a dominant viewpoint across all the meetings. The largest percentage identified choice number 2, establishing boundaries to protect special lands, as the closest to their viewpoint (41.5%). (see Figure 3). Choices 3 (rejuvenate urban centers) and 4 (regional or state involvement) were the next highest choices (31.3% and 29.2%, respectively). The choice that was furthest away from viewpoint of the participants was choice number 1, making minor adjustments to the present system (60.9%).

The participants were asked whether they favored, opposed, or were not sure for each choice. The question also qualified the response to add extra emphasis of the meaning of the choice. For example, in choice 1 the participants were asked:

Should we make minor adjustments in the existing system, trusting that individuals will do the “right thing”, EVEN IF voluntary action thus far has shown no inclination to consider the long term, public good.

When put to a vote, the participants favored revitalizing cities the most (choice 3), with 73.4 percent favoring this choice. The second highest choice was number 2, preserving special lands with 40.8 percent favoring this choice. The greatest opposition was for making minor adjustments for the status quo (choice 1), with 58.9 percent opposing this approach.

What Happened During the Conversations?

The seven public conversations generally took about 2 hours to complete. Led by a trained facilitator, the discussions were lively, full of ideas, and civil. People were able to discuss their ideas and listen to those of their neighbors. A recorder at each session used flip charts to record comments and display a “group memory” of ideas.

People identified with land use issues in very personal ways. People expressed a range of concerns from their ability to continue farming, to concerns about traffic congestion, to “did I make
the right decision in moving to Delaware?” People overwhelmingly expressed the importance of quality of life and a love for the land which influenced their point of view. There seemed to be a sense of urgency and an awareness that the clock is ticking and something needed to be done.

Finally, there was an acknowledgment of the complexity of the issue and a willingness to learn more. Different viewpoints emerged that reflected differences among those that owned land versus those that did not, the government versus the private sector, new residents versus long-term residents, and urban residents versus suburban residents versus rural residents. The public conversations provided a means for people to recognize these differences and discuss them in a civil manner.

What Happened As A Result Of The Meetings?

Following the meeting the participants were asked to fill out a post-session survey which asked some of the same questions as the pre-session survey. After the session, the participants felt that land-use issues were more serious than before (81.7% serious versus 75.6% before the meeting). While the overall ratings of positions did not change much as a result of the meeting, there was greater support for choice number 3, The best way to prevent rural conversion is to rejuvenate our urban centers. In the post survey, 78.7 percent favored this choice. Furthermore, fewer people chose the “Unsure” category for responding to the choices. It appears that through the workshop the participants were better able to understand the choices and choose among them.

Perhaps more importantly, the participants indicated that through the sessions they increased their knowledge of the issues and of other people’s views (see Figure 4). One in five indicated that their understanding of the issue increased a lot, and nearly another two-thirds indicated their understanding increased somewhat. Similarly, nearly one-third indicated their understanding of other people’s views increased a lot, while another 59 percent indicated it increased somewhat.

Conclusions

The Losing Ground meetings showed that people in Delaware can come together and discuss important and sensitive issues in a deliberative manner. The discussions were lively and thoughtful, yet still maintained respect for the viewpoints of others. They learned more about the issue, their own views, and those of others through the opportunity to come together and talk.

When asked what should happen next, the participants wanted decision makers to know they are very concerned about land use in Delaware. Others thought these forums needed to take place in many other places, from downtown Wilmington.
to every homeowners association in the State. They wanted more people involved in this public conversation on *Losing Ground: What Will We Do about Delaware’s Changing Landscape.*

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