

Built Resources in Sussex County



Rock Ledge – Quarry in Hampton

“Push for a balance—we have houses, commercial areas; we need open space.”
Mayor Clifford Morgan of Green Township at a municipal outreach meeting on March 19, 2003.

Residential and commercial centers provide resources and income for the community. These centers establish the neighborhoods upon which the infrastructure is laid. Future development stems from population centers, transportation routes, and employment opportunities. A planned system of open space preservation will complement the existing built areas of the County by linking recreational resources, communities, and transportation corridors. Establishing a strategically organized network of preserved spaces will provide direction for future growth while retaining the rural and picturesque identity of Sussex County.

Population Growth

The first official census of 1900 recorded a total population of 24,134 individuals in the County. From 1900 until 1950, Sussex increased steadily in population at an average rate of around 10% over each ten-year period. From World War II until 1980, Sussex County tripled its population, growing nearly 50% over each ten-year period.¹

The 2000 census reported a population of 144,166 individuals in Sussex County. This reflects a 10 percent increase since the 1990 census adding over 13,000 new residents.² This is well over the 1.6 percent growth rate that the state experienced as a whole during the same ten-year period. Somerset County grew at the greatest rate (nearly 24%) while Salem County experienced a 1.5% decrease in population. Sussex County retained the 5th smallest population in the state.

Sussex County has a population density of 277 persons per square mile making it the second least dense county in the state. Salem County is the least dense with 190

individuals per square mile. The densest county in the state is Hudson County with 13,043 individuals per square mile of land area.³ There are 108 housing units per square mile in Sussex County compared to 77 in Salem and 5,154 in Hudson. Neighboring Morris County has 372 housing units per square mile of land area.

Among the 24 municipalities of Sussex County, Vernon Township is the most populous with 24,686 individuals.⁴ Between 1990 and 2000 Hamburg Borough had the greatest rate of increase (21%), gaining 539 individuals. Vernon and Sparta Townships experienced the greatest growth in the number of residents adding 3,475 and 2,923 individuals respectively.⁵ The land upon which Walpack Township is incorporated is federally owned. The municipality in 2000 had 41 individuals and experienced a 40% decrease in population between 1990 and 2000, losing 26 individuals.

Housing

According to the 2000 census, the County contained 56,528 housing units with an 83% rate of home ownership. Close to 14% of these housing units were in multi-unit structures and the median value of owner-occupied housing units was \$157,700 (versus \$170,800 statewide). The greatest number of housing units was constructed between 1970 and 1980, with 11,809 units built.⁶

A large number of residents (64%) have lived in the same homes for more than five years. There are 50,831 households in the County and the average household size is 2.80 persons.⁷ The mean travel time to work for commuters living in Sussex County is just over 38 minutes.

Andover Borough has the smallest number of housing units in the County (273) and Vernon Township has the greatest number (9,994 units). (Walpack Township has 34 housing units). Vernon Township is also the largest municipality in the County (71 square miles). The densest community in terms of population and housing is Sussex Borough having 3,598 individuals and 1,612 housing units per square mile. Sussex Borough is one of the smallest municipalities in Sussex County, at 0.62 square miles.⁸

Sparta Township issued the greatest number of building permits in Sussex County between 1990 and 1999 (914 permits), while Branchville Borough issued only one permit (Walpack Township did not issue any permits)⁹. In 2000-2001, Hardyston Township authorized 376 new residential building permits, the highest in the County. Branchville, Ogdensburg, and Walpack did not authorize any new residential units.¹⁰

Education

The public schools in Sussex County are spread over 22 of its 24 municipalities with a combination of municipal and regional districts. Currently, there are 46 elementary and secondary schools in the County's 22 municipal and 4 regional education districts serving nearly 28,000 students. There are also a variety of pre-school and private education options in Sussex County with over 40 pre-kindergarten programs and 10 private schools including one regional high school. A number of special education and technical academies are available as well including the county-run Sussex Technical School.¹¹

Countywide, school enrollment is increasing. Based on the data reported by 40 schools, 28 anticipated enrollment to rise while 10 foresaw a decrease in the student population (**Table 8. Sussex County School Enrollment – Survey Results**). Schools expecting a decrease projected an average change in enrollment of 18%, while those expecting it to increase predicted an average change of 15%. Overall, the schools reporting anticipate that the county’s student enrollment will be 6% higher in five years.

Since most schools in the county are expecting student enrollment to increase, classroom space and school budgets are two issues expected to garner increased attention in the near future. Eight of the schools in the county anticipate a need for school expansion within the next five years. Within the county, 14 schools have recently passed a referendum for school expansion and/or renovation.

The school systems expecting the greatest percent-increase in their student population are Andover Borough/Township and Lafayette Township. Stanhope Borough also reported a 30% increase for the Valley Road School, but that is due to the closing next year of the Linden Avenue School (and subsequent consolidation in the Valley Road School). Both the Andover and the Lafayette districts expect student enrollments to be about 30% greater than their current population. Both the Byram Township schools and the Newton schools are redistributing their student populations this coming year to take advantage of recent facility expansions.

Drinking Water Supply

Roughly 95% of Sussex County’s water is obtained from individually dug or drilled wells.¹² Some communities, especially in Sparta Township, are supplied in part by private companies or community wells. However, the Highlands-Appalachian province that Sussex County exists in has the least favorable conditions of any in the State for reliable groundwater supplies. The water resources are considered acceptable only as “potable supplies for small municipalities and farms”.¹³ The remaining 5% of the County’s water comes from its lakes, most notably Lake Rutherford in Wantage and Morris Lake in Sparta.¹⁴

Sewer Service

Most of Sussex County is serviced by individual, on-site septic systems that are adequate to sustain their lot sizes. The Sussex County Municipal Utilities Authority also maintains an infrastructure that operates throughout the County along with treatment plants that use surface water discharge into the Wallkill River. Two municipalities, the Town of Newton and Sussex Borough, operate their own sewerage facilities while Stanhope and Byram use the Morris County-based Musconetcong Sewerage Authority. In addition, multiple “package treatment plants” are run by private organizations that service various developed complexes. These use a combination of surface and groundwater discharge methods with treatment plants across the county.¹⁵ Future additions to organized sewer service include areas of Hopatcong Borough, Wantage Township, Byram Township, Sparta Township, and Fredon Township. Sewer service promotes development and the challenge to preserve open space in these areas becomes greater.

Dams

Sussex County's dams, like many of its bridges, offer a unique combination of historical value and structural utility. They ensure drinking water resources for some residents and recreational opportunities for many others. Unfortunately, heavy rainfalls in past years have overwhelmed some of Sussex County's oldest dams causing downstream flooding and the drainage of multiple lakes. In particular, Seneca Lake and Franklin Pond were severely damaged by an August 2000 storm. According to New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, "It is estimated that 95% of New Jersey's dams are in need of repairs and restoration...The Franklin Pond Dam, which was originally built in the 1850's, is not only a source of water, but is also a historic site."¹⁶ The integrity of the County's dams may depend on minimizing the sediment load and runoff that enters its lakes.

Transportation

Sussex County offers the unique combination of charming rural communities and accessibility to the conveniences of urban living, referred to by some as "rurbia".¹⁷ Although a close proximity to two major interstate highways (Interstates 80 and 84) is conducive to such a setting, it is primarily through a developed, accessible transportation infrastructure that such conditions are made possible. Internally, the health of local businesses and industries depends upon the integrity of the county road system in particular, as do existing residential areas and communities.

Federal and state highways provide the most heavily traveled roadways in Sussex County. Among them, U.S. Route 206 and NJ Routes 94, 23, and 15 are the major thoroughfares. Route 206 enters Sussex County from neighboring Morris County in the south and passes through Byram, Andover, and Newton before merging with Route 94 and then continuing north through Branchville, Sandyston, and Montague into Pennsylvania. Route 94 enters the county from New York through Vernon and continues south into Hamburg, Lafayette, Newton and Fredon before exiting into Warren County. Route 23 originates in the north at Montague near Interstate 84 and winds south through Wantage, Sussex Borough, Hamburg, Franklin, and Hardyston before entering Morris County and connecting with Interstate 80. Route 15 is a major artery for commuter traffic that connects to Interstate 80 in Morris County and runs north through Sparta, Woodruffs Gap, and Lafayette before merging with Route 206 near Branchville.

Beyond these, smaller and less heavily trafficked county roads crisscross the remainder of Sussex County. They connect the principal commuter highways to local communities and neighborhoods. Major roadways include County Roads 620 (Glen Road), 607 (Lackawanna Drive), 609 (Lakeside Avenue), 517 (Decker Pond Road), and 650 (Deckertown Turnpike).

Sussex County is currently planning and undertaking several projects to improve its roadways. In many spots, commuter traffic has strained the infrastructure of the existing thoroughfares and the County is actively researching possible alternatives. Sections of Route 206 through Andover, Byram, and Sandyston as well as parts of Route 15 in Sparta and County Route 560 in Sandyston are slated for improvements and preliminary analysis. Other improvements include highway rehabilitation projects on Route 23

through Hardyston and Franklin, Route 94 in Hardyston and Vernon, and County Route 565 in Frankford and Wantage. Two bridge projects are also anticipated in Sparta Township and on County Route 605 in Stanhope.¹⁸

Several single-lane bridges exist in Sussex County. Some of these bridges have historic or community values. The twin bridges in Hampton Township, for example, were mentioned in a municipal outreach meeting as community landmarks. Balancing transportation needs with historic value of these structures is a challenge as more of Sussex County becomes developed.

Railroad service has been offered in Sussex County since the mid 1800's, and although many of the rails are now out of service, they still provide a great potential for both transportation and recreation. Expanding on the County's existing rail service has been proposed as a method for reducing the commuter burden on local highways. In addition to the NYSW Main Line that runs through Sparta, Franklin, Hardyston, and Vernon, significant federal funding has recently been acquired for the reinstatement of the Lackawanna Cutoff. Service could begin as early as 2006.¹⁹ The line would run from Scranton, Pennsylvania through Andover and Stanhope to Hoboken.

Apart from their obvious use, the miles of abandoned rail corridors throughout Sussex County have the potential to serve the recreational needs of Sussex County citizens as well. About one-third of these paths that were originally cleared for rail lines exist today as "rail-trails." These often run through natural areas, providing a variety of recreation activities--biking, hiking, equestrian riding, and other outdoor exercise.

Commercial Development

Historically, agriculture and mining have been the principal commercial enterprises in Sussex County (see the Historical Resources in Sussex County section). Due to the County's proximity to New York City and the transportation routes that lead to New York, Sussex County historically has been an excellent source of raw materials for the larger markets to the east. In the early 1800's, non-perishable products such as iron ore and cereal grain were sent from the County via wagon trails and water corridors, like the Morris Canal. As the market demands and transportation methods matured, the exports of Sussex County did as well. Beef, poultry, and dairy became the dominant industries with the completion of the County's intricate, efficient railroad system. Many of these industrial rail lines have since been abandoned, however, as the commerce of Sussex County has continued to evolve.

Sussex County's expanding residential neighborhoods have become bedroom communities for the employment markets of neighboring counties and metropolitan centers, such as New York City. The existing road system, that connects the County to major transportation routes, accommodates 60% of the resident labor force who commutes to jobs outside of Sussex.²⁰ This represents the highest such figure in the State. Most of the County's commuters are employed by businesses and corporations, especially pharmaceutical companies, located in more developed areas in Morris, Essex, and Passaic Counties. This occupation dynamic leads to extensive automobile congestion during rush hours.

The availability of economically sustainable jobs in Sussex County has not kept pace with its increasing growth in population. Many of the positions that have come about within the County are associated with its growing tourism industry, and are occupied primarily by students and young adults who do not yet support families.²¹ The same can be said for many of the retail positions necessary to support the County's rising population. Agriculture still occupies some of the domestic labor force, but has become less widespread and labor intensive, due to changes in the agricultural industry in the County. Many Sussex County farmers supplement income from their agricultural activities with other sources.

There is a strong need to create more employment opportunities for skilled labor within the County itself. Promising employment trends found in the service and high-tech industries, providing a much-needed balance between residential and occupational opportunities in Sussex County.²² Increasing the market for locally based labor will reduce the time residents spend commuting outside of the County and perhaps ease the existing heavy congestion on the gateway transportation corridors and municipalities.

Future Growth

The Sussex County Smart Growth initiative has compiled population and build-out projections based on current development trends and local geography. This data predicts that Sussex County, as a whole, will continue to increase its population by 15-20 percent in the next ten-year period. This corresponds to an additional 20,000 to 30,000 citizens. From 2010 to 2020, the growth rate is expected to be between 5 and 12 percent corresponding to an increase in population between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals.²³

The localized growth in Sussex County's municipalities can be attributed to three particular aspects: proximity to transportation corridors, location of established commercial hubs and acreage of developable land. Transportation corridors are attractive to new residents because they provide convenient connections to more urban areas and centers of corporate and industrial employment. Commercial hubs are locations of existing development such as supermarkets and local attractions that encourage residential development. Vacant land surrounding transportation routes and commercial areas offers the room and economic incentive to build the suburban-style housing typical of modern development.

The municipalities that experienced the most growth in terms of population are Sparta and Vernon. Sparta Township is bisected by Route 15, a major commuter connection to Interstate 80, and is home to the Lake Mohawk business district. Vernon Township, on top of housing the Mountain Creek Ski Resort and over seven miles of Route 94, has nearly 19,000 undeveloped acres within its borders, the second most in the County. The more developed boroughs and towns tended to experience low or negative population increases. Notable exceptions occurred in Hamburg Borough and Newton Town- both established commercial centers and crossroads for the County's largest transportation corridors.²⁴

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