



DELAWARE COASTAL RESILIENCY - Why Is It Necessary in 2025 and Beyond?

GROWTH

Rapid development throughout Sussex County has created increased problems for environmental resiliency. Ms. Amy Marasco, Councilperson and Environmental Subcommittee for Lewes, made a critically important point at a 2024 coastal towns meeting - *“make room for the water.”* The Delaware Office of State Planning Coordination (OSPC) discourages development in Investment Level 4. Level 4 is where state policies will support agriculture, protection of natural and cultural resources, and open-space activities including the promotion of agriculture industry support activities. However, as seen in the [OSPC dashboard data](#), Sussex County has approved residential and non-residential building permits at an accelerated rate in recent years.

The data tells the story on growth. For instance, the OSPC Development Trends Data, published 2023, indicates nearly 40,000 people migrated to Sussex County between 2020 and 2023. In addition, building permits granted for Sussex County between 2017- 2022 far exceeded the other 2 counties (60% in Sussex; 24% in New Castle; 16% in Kent). The population for Sussex County was **157,307** in 2000; given the tremendous growth, the projected number for 2030 is **290,861**.

A major impactful issue is that the coastal towns have no direct, regulatory control over development consequences generated outside of coastal towns. Over-development, loss of forests and wetlands, filling of low areas that used to hold stormwater, the barrier effect of new and increasingly higher/larger roads, and the historic actions of the Sussex County Council are creating the coastal towns as enclaves under serious attack. Flooding has been made worse; water quality has declined; unacceptable amounts of natural and open area have been lost; forests and trees have been the victim of clear-cutting for development projects; birds and fish are disappearing; various “environmental mitigation projects” are poorly designed or subject to failure; and, overall the very special environmental, cultural, and social values that brought people to the coastal towns are being lost or degraded. On the other hand, coastal towns are vital to Delaware’s economy. In fact, according to a Sea Grant presentation, tourism and recreation support about 104,500 jobs with \$8.3 billion in annual revenue.

CLIMATE & WEATHER HAZARDS

Overcrowded coastal towns and the surrounding areas are greatly affected by current climate and weather conditions. In the mid-east coastal region, the trend is increasingly warm temperatures, more frequent/powerful storms and floods, and less predictability in terms of weather patterns. Using Bethany Beach as an example, the dune and beach protection system requires renourishment more often and with greater volumes of sand required to restore the original design. Costs have escalated due to inflation, the high cost of sand, increases in construction and labor

costs, and the fact that more sand and work is required to maintain the authorized federal project design.

The top 5 Natural Hazards in Delaware according to the DE Hazards Mitigation Plan (2023), are as follows:

1. Coastal Flooding
2. Tropical Cyclones (hurricanes & tropical storms)
3. Inland Flooding (riverine, flood, flash)
4. Severe Winter Weather (blizzard, freezing fog, heavy snow, ice storm, sleet, winter storm)
5. Coastal Erosion

Does Delaware Have Plans and Resources Related to Resiliency?

Yes, there are several agencies working on these issues and resiliency planning:

1. DNREC has in place [Delaware's Climate Action Plan](#) - Delaware Climate Resilience Actions Summary 2013-2020
2. DOT [Transportation Resilience and Sustainability](#)
3. Delaware Emergency Management Agency - [Details on Natural Disasters](#)
4. University of Delaware Sea Grant Program - [Coastal Hazards](#)

Utilizing federal best practices and resources as well as seeking coordination of state agencies and other experts at the state and local levels, is what coastal towns rely on for potential solutions for local emergency and disaster preparedness. However, the specific issues of coastal towns need coordination of emergency operations, hazard mitigation, and recovery plans. With climate change and sea level rise being fundamental threats to the health and well-being, economic survival, and preservation of coastal communities and properties, collaboration among the coastal towns is an important strategy that will facilitate success, along with identifying opportunities to share ideas, resources, staff, equipment, and facilities. It is also important for coastal town governments to figure out what towns **need** versus what towns **want** to help with prioritizing and budgeting.

Recommendations for Coastal Communities to Address Together in 2025:

- Recognizing dredged material as “soil” (a resource) not “spoil (to be wasted) and use it beneficially in natural shoreline and restoration projects
- Pointing out to decision makers that some federal authorities, regulations, and funds are primarily reactive, not preventative (Congress can address this issue with new or amended law)
- Addressing social vulnerability, some groups are disproportionately impacted --- the aging population presents challenges during disasters due to mobility, health, income and other issues
- Recognizing that many current challenges are caused by a lack of staff and funds; lack of support from state, county, and federal governments

- Addressing deferred maintenance of stormwater infrastructure, cleaning out drains and swales, installing check valves
- Using the [Delaware Flood Planning Tool](#) to visualize the flood risk, development patterns, etc. (keeping in mind the dataset does not reflect the more recent development plans); and the [NOAA Sea Level Rise Tool](#) for visualizing risks of sea level rise

CONCLUSION

BBLA is exploring ways to encourage necessary coordination of the coastal towns to benefit the property owners who want to feel confident that when extreme conditions and/or disasters occur, a coordinated plan is in place. Federal agencies like FEMA and Homeland Security have worked in recent years to provide communities with best practices and resources for communities that want to be proactive in their actions to mitigate certain situations whenever they might occur. With all levels of government working with local communities to address Delaware's current day coastal communities and committing to create strong plans and agreements based on data and climate science, the future of resilient coastal towns will be promising.

Chip Smith, BBLA Board Member
Mary Louise Embrey, BBLA Executive Director

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