Group attempts to find the 'heart & soul' of Sussex

By Bruce Pringle
Staff Writer

MILTON -- Darlene Cronic didn't have to think long to describe Sussex County, where she has lived all her 50 years.

From her desk behind the counter at Boulevard Appliance, she said, "quiet, laid-back, slow," but also "growing -- too fast."

Farms and farmers represent what she values about Sussex, she said. They are, for her, the heart and soul of her home county.

And a new University of Delaware program -- "Heart & Soul of Sussex County" -- aims to collect observations like hers from across the county, get residents talking about them, evaluate them, and use them to try to come up with a description that encapsulates what makes Sussex special.

"If you don't know what you are," said Bill McGowan, the university agent heading the program, "it will go away."

McGowan said he described Heart & Soul at a couple recent meetings, where residents at each session mentioned one thing in particular they had valued, something they thought helped define Sussex, something they regret has largely been eliminated: dirt roads.

Heart & Soul aims to help identify what Sussex Countians want to keep: things, people, attitudes -- whatever they regard as genuinely part of the county's character.

Residents' opinions will be sought through newspaper ads and a Web site, ccei.udel.edu. Drop boxes, where written responses can be placed, will dot the county. And a public meeting, perhaps in mid-June, will be scheduled to try to reach consensus.'

An easy-to-read report on the process is to be published by fall, McGowan said, but the effort may not end there.

"I think this is just a starter event," he said. "This sets the stage for an ongoing dialogue."

He noted that such a dialogue has gone on for many years, on a more local level, in Lewes. There, residents agreed in 1992 on a set of "core values" -- that traditional local architecture should be preserved, for example -- and have incorporated them into city ordinances aimed at maintaining Lewes' character. Without its core values, McGowan said, "Lewes loses its heart and soul."

McGowan, who moved to Laurel from New Castle County in 1980, looks at Sussex and sees determination.

"Sussex Countians are tough people, independent-minded," adventuresome, imaginative sorts who make successes of off-beat events such as Punkin Chunkin and Apple Scrapple because of "that
independence, that 'Hell, it'll work. We'll just find a way to make it work'' approach to life.

Lifelong Milton-area resident Eddie Pettyjohn may embody much of that. He spent decades finding ways to win on local speedways, becoming one of the most successful race drivers in Delaware history. Now 62, he's mostly content to run his auto-repair shop on Federal Street and watch his sons win races. What he values in Sussex is all around him: his hometown, its longtime residents, its newcomers, its eating places, its rhythms.

"I like the small town," Pettyjohn said, "I know how it goes here."

But down the street at Quillen's Signs, Margaret Quillen and her husband, Pat, suggested that life in the local area isn't going as pleasantly as it once did.

Asked what she what comes to mind when she thinks of Sussex, Margaret began, "I think of close-knit, family people." But then she turned to the past tense: "Everybody knew one another and cared about one another.

"In the past 10 years," she continued, "things started changing. The farms are being taken away because the County Council is letting too many developments be created, and we're losing our identities as Sussex Countians."

But she said, "We still have our neighbors who help one another."

Pat recalls that as a young man he could have worked at any of a number of jobs in the port town of Marcus Hook, Pa., where, he said, Sussex Countians were valued because of their work ethic. And while he shares his wife's doubts about the county's direction, he said it remains home to "honest, hard-working people."

"We haven't lost that completely, thank goodness," he said.

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