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Strength Through Municipal Partnerships

Three years from now, more than half of Lehigh Valley municipalities could be in multi-municipal agreements that will help them save money and increase efficiency of services, while protecting their farmland and open space.

Twenty-six communities are currently building Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plans that are expected to be in place in by 2021, six completed one last year and four more are about to begin the process.

The Multi-Municipal trend prompted municipal leaders from across the region to gather Wednesday for the latest LVPC Planning & Pizza session, to discuss the benefits – and challenges -- of multi-municipal planning.

“This is about more than just planning for development and growth,” LVPC Director of Transportation Planning and Data Charlie Doyle told 18 people who gathered from more than a dozen communities across the region. “It’s about protecting your assets, developing regional efficiencies and establishing or preserving an identity.”

By joining together, communities can take advantage of their geographic similarities and address common priorities, while maintaining local autonomy and control. In some cases that means banding together to share costs for goods and services. In others it means making regional plans on things that have impacts spanning many municipalities, such as roads or economic development.

Perhaps the biggest benefit is the ability to take greater control of development. Under current state law, every municipality must have zoning that allows every possible land use. But communities in a multi-municipal plan need only plan for every use within their regional boundary. It not only allows them to manage their growth together, but it enables them to better handle large developments, such as warehouses or industrial parks. For example, if one municipality already has several warehouses, or has zoning where they make sense, another community in the plan can deny warehouse developers access.

“In many ways, this gives [them] a chance to control their future,” Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure said last month. “These communities have a chance to decide where business and growth will be located, and where they should preserve farmland and open space.”

Currently, ten municipalities are working to build Plan Slate Belt, ten in the Nazareth Area are creating NazPlan as an update to their original 2007 Multi-Municipal Plan, and six others are updating the Northern Lehigh Plan. All of those are expected to be in place by 2021.

In addition, the boroughs of Alburtis, Emmaus and Macungie and the townships of Lower Macungie, Lower Milford and Upper Milford completed the Southwest Lehigh Plan last year,

while Catasauqua Borough, East Allen Township, Hanover Township (Lehigh) and North Catasauqua Borough are in the initial stages of creating the River Central Multi-Municipal Plan.

The development pressure facing communities, particularly at the time when the region has become the fastest-growing freight corridor in the nation, has municipal leaders across the region considering the benefits of partnering with their neighbors.

Municipal collaboration is a key component of *FutureLV: The Regional Plan*, which sets land use, community, economic, natural resources, agriculture and transportation policy for the Lehigh Valley. The plan has been adopted by the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study and the LVPC and is up for adoption by Lehigh and Northampton counties.

“The future is collaborations and partnerships across communities, regions and megaregions,” LVPC Director of Development Tracy Oscavich told the group. “The great thing about planning together is that you don’t give up your municipal autonomy. It’s just a way for everyone to collectively plan their future.”

But Oscavich and community and municipal officials who met Wednesday noted that the legal process of partnering still comes with plenty of challenges.

“With our communities, some want the tax base and revenues first, and some worry about truck traffic and warehouses,” said Upper Mount Bethel resident Judith Henckel, who has been attending Plan Slate Belt meetings. “We haven’t even gotten to the hard part, but it’s clear there will be tension.”

Tension that can be overcome, said Sharon Trexler, Borough Manager of Alburtis Borough, which is part of the Southwest Lehigh Plan.

“There was a lot of anger at first, but we worked things out and now things are going well,” Trexler said. “It takes time and compromise, but it’s worth it.”

A large portion of the LVPC work plan for the next two years will be helping communities partner with each other.

“At the end of the day, this helps these communities reinforce the high quality of life they have all worked so hard to build,” said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. “Multi-Municipal Plans provide efficiency and prioritize what we collectively value most.”