



## Southwestern Lehigh County Multimunicipal Comprehensive Plan update

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The entire staff of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission has made remarkable progress in the last six months in advancing the update to the multimunicipal comprehensive plan for the Southwest Lehigh (SWL) Region. Consisting of the six municipalities of Alburdis, Emmaus, Lower Macungie, Lower Milford, Macungie and Upper Milford, this partnership first emerged over a decade ago, culminating in the region's first shared comprehensive plan, released in 2005. While this plan helped to galvanize collaboration and continued conversations among key issues that the six municipalities face, it is now showing its age, so inevitably it cannot account for some of the most prominent trends in land development and job growth over the last few years. Recognizing the need for an update, in 2014 the six municipalities cooperatively agreed to hire the LVPC to revisit the multimunicipal comprehensive plan, and through the help of substantive grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, the LVPC spearheaded an intensive community engagement process that began in earnest in late 2015 and continued to the present.

When we last reported on the SWL planning process in January 2016, the LVPC had just finished conducting a series of stakeholder roundtable discussions (miniature charrettes), followed by a community-wide listening session. Using the feedback collected through these meetings, the LVPC created a statistically valid survey that was mailed to a random sample of people living across the six SWL communities. Using the mailed invitation, households could link to the survey and answer a variety of questions in which they responded to which of several key statements they thought were the most important in their region. The survey period was open from February 11<sup>th</sup> through February 29<sup>th</sup>, and the process collected 750 responses. At the same time, in order to allow everyone to participate (including those who didn't receive the mailed invitations), the LVPC continued to promote the survey through a variety of media and allowed households to take an identical survey, with the results remaining sequestered from the statistically valid sample. This process collected another 550 responses.

The survey results proved that the six municipalities achieved representation proportional to their population sizes. Most importantly, the results determined that, while most residents still believe that SWL is a good or excellent place to live, over 50% also believe that the quality of life in the region is getting worse. The responses particularly articulated the importance of supporting farming as an industry, reducing freight traffic on local roads, addressing development impacts on natural resources, and supporting the three boroughs as the region's downtowns. Over two-thirds of the respondents opposed or strongly opposed the continued new development of warehouses.

Through these critical community engagement opportunities, the LVPC decided to modify the key themes. Up to this point, Agriculture had been a sub-topic within Land Use and Development, but SWL clearly valued it enough to earn its own separate consideration. Additionally, both Natural and Historic resources got split into separate themes, and the LVPC renamed Historic Resources to "Community Design", which still heavily acknowledged the importance of preservation as a potential design strategy. These themes served as the organizational cornerstones for the development of preliminary goals later in the spring.

After the February survey was complete, subsequent meetings offered a variety of interesting analyses that have helped drive the PlanSWL process closer to its conclusion. In March, Community Planner Gabe Hurtado—who designed and administered the February survey—presented the full range of survey responses, while disclosing some of the primary characteristics of the respondents. In April, Chief GIS Planner Dave Manhardt led a discussion and presentation on Land Use Conflict Identification Strategy (LUCIS), a method for helping to determine the best scenarios for modeling land use patterns into the future, based on the intersection of different harmonizing and competing current uses. Based on the results of the community surveys, Dave devised a LUCIS model that consistently encourages the preservation of natural features and agricultural lands, favoring those uses over continued growth in urbanized land development. This presentation elicited numerous ques-

tions and allowed the participants to draw their ideal map of what land uses patterns should look like in the decades ahead, as the population in the SWL municipalities continues to grow.

In May, the LVPC team took all the feedback they had gathered up to that point through the various surveys, listening sessions and presentations, and delivered to the attendees some early draft goals. These goals all fell within eight principal themes that earlier community engagement had determined to be the most important within the region: Natural Resources, Agricultural Resources, Land Use and Development, Economic Development, Housing, Community Utilities and Services, Community Design (Historic Resources), and Transportation. These goals elicited acclaim from the SWL participants, who found them to be balanced and showing a clear desire to meet all six of the municipalities' aspirations in equal measure.

Most recently, on June 21, the LVPC team presented to the SWL Steering Committee some strategies on Community Design, the one theme that up to this point had received the least amount of attention. Through this presentation, the team showed several examples of community types that form the basis of most contemporary settlements, including preserved open space, open farms, rural living, conservation-based subdivision and neighborhood commercial center, among others. The presentation provided key parameters to establish good form and pattern, and it included aerial photographs of examples within the SWL region.

The PlanSWL comprehensive planning process will continue through summer, resulting in a final document to be approved by each of the six municipalities later this year.