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Annual Report Reveals Development Year for the Record Books

More people. More homes. More industrial. And certainly, more partnerships. The year that was 2022 can best be described in one word: More.

As the Lehigh Valley experienced a year of transition when people, businesses and organizations settled into a new normal brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic, the region – and the LVPC -- had one of its busiest development years in more than a decade, according to the Annual Organizational Report of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission and its sister organization for transportation planning, the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS).

Released March 1, as required by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code, the Annual Report paints a picture of a region trying to address pent-up demand created not only by the pandemic that temporarily slowed activity, but even the Great Recession that made some developers hesitant to jump back into the market. As a result, 2022 was a year that saw the most homes proposed since 2007, and the most non-residential development proposed – ever. It was that kind of year as the LVPC returned in-person training, while bolstering its online offerings for planning, zoning and transportation classes.

“It was a very busy 2022, but I think the Lehigh Valley showed itself very adept at rising to the challenges of the new normal,” said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. “It’s an exciting time, but one that presents a lot of challenges, as well.”

That excitement comes from being one of the fastest-growing regions in Pennsylvania, a place where people and businesses increasingly want to be, but with that comes the challenge of preparing for that growth. It’s why the annual report was not only marked by population and development growth, but also growing housing attainability issues.

Just a few of the details from the annual report include:

- A preliminary Population and Employment Forecast done by the LVPC that projects that the Lehigh Valley will add nearly 100,000 new residents, and more than 74,000 jobs by 2050
- A Lehigh Valley Greenhouse Gas Assessment done by the LVPC, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and Moravian College, showing that the region emits nearly 10 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent a year, and population growth will cause that number to grow in the coming decades unless we take drastic actions to curtail emissions.
- Adoption by the LVTS of a \$485.6 million 2023-2026 Transportation Improvement Program that includes 108 road, bridge, trail, transit and safety projects in every corner

of the region.

- Performing more than 1,200 reviews including 547 subdivision and land development reviews – the most since 2008 -- and 223 stormwater management reviews, which is the most since 2006. Also performed were 52 municipal ordinance reviews and 50 traffic impact study or assessment reviews.
- An LVPC analysis showing that a regionwide housing shortage of 9,000 units, combined with a pandemic-accelerated population growth drove the median sales price of a home to \$280,000 by the close of 2022 – a 60% increase since 2015. Combined with rising interest rates, that put more than 78,000 Lehigh Valley households in a cost-burdened situation in which their housing costs are likely straining their financial stability. That's nearly 3 in 10 households, or 195,000 people regionwide. It's a condition that remains an issue in 2023.
- Reviewing more than 22 million square feet of proposed non-residential space – the most ever in a single year. More than 18 million square feet of that was for industrial, with roughly 17.5 million for warehouse, e-commerce or logistics space.
- Reviewing other non-residential development, including 1.7 million square feet of commercial, primarily because half of it is for self-storage facilities that represent our part in a nationwide trend. It also included 1.5 million square feet of public/quasi-public space, most of it for healthcare and education facilities, and 459,000 square feet of retail space, which was the most since 2015. Office space reviewed was 333,698 square feet, which is slightly less than in recent years.
- Advancing four separate multi-municipal comprehensive plans that will give 31 communities new tools to find new efficiencies and better control development.
- Leading two key freight initiatives in 2022. The Eastern Pennsylvania Freight Alliance is a multi-regional coalition, led by the LVPC, created to write a new freight infrastructure plan for the Lehigh Valley, Northeast Pennsylvania, Lackawanna-Luzerne, Berks County and Lebanon County areas. And the Freight-Based Land Use Management Guide, requested by Northampton County, will assist municipal governments in planning for and regulating the location and impacts of freight-based industrial development. The Guide includes an online Geographic Information System mapping tool to assess the zoning and land uses of all 38 Northampton County local governments.
- Leading the Lehigh Valley Passenger Rail Analysis, a partnership endeavor between the LVTS and PennDOT, that will analyze the potential for the restoration of passenger rail service between the Lehigh Valley and Northern New Jersey or Philadelphia. The analysis will be conducted in a manner consistent with federal regulations for potential future service, possible routes, rail implementation partners, ridership forecasts and costs for establishment and maintenance. The analysis is anticipated to be completed in 2023.

- Expanding training programs through the Lehigh Valley Government Academy, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Education Institute and PennDOT. The year included training more than 100 students during in-person planning, zoning and land development classes, performing 44 transportation tech assists in the community to improve pedestrian safety and offering online Local Technical Assistance Program classes for engineers, public works and transportation crews.

Those were just a few highlights of a busy year and 2023 figures to be just as frenetic with the update of the \$3.6 billion Long-Range Transportation Plan, partnering with the Urban Land Institute, Lehigh County and stakeholders from across the region to develop a Housing Supply and Attainability Strategy, developing a Freight-Based Land Use Management Guide for Lehigh County, finalizing the River Central and Slate Belt Multi-Municipal Plans, and creating the region's first-ever Climate Action Plan.

This year is expected to include slowing development growth, but with communities seeking more assistance in balancing that growth with the open space and natural resources that make the area so attractive.

"2023 will be a different kind of busy," Bradley said. "We'll be coming out of a growth, growth, growth environment and pivoting to a new normal that includes a technological revolution. It's a time of great transition for our nation, but the Lehigh Valley has always met the challenges ahead, adapted and thrived."