

Summary of the Draft Lehigh Township Comprehensive Plan

This Comprehensive Plan is an overall guide for the development and conservation of Lehigh Township over the next 10 to 15 years. It is not a regulation by itself, but is intended to provide the rationale for development regulations. The Comprehensive Plan includes background information about existing conditions and trends, mapping and a set of recommended policies. The Comprehensive Plan primarily addresses: 1) Land Use and Housing, 2) Transportation, 3) Community Facilities and Services, 4) Natural Feature Conservation, and 5) Ways to Carry Out the Plan.

Major Benefits of the Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan offers many benefits, including the following:

- Addressing land uses in coordination with transportation issues, to avoid future traffic problems;
- Avoiding conflicts between different types of development, such as not allowing intense business uses adjacent to a residential neighborhood;
- Considering development policies in a comprehensive and coordinated manner for an entire area, as opposed to piecemeal review of individual parcels or lots;
- Recommending ways that natural features should be preserved and conserved; and
- Suggesting improvements that should be the basis of future grant applications.

MAJOR GOALS

The following major goals are intended to provide the overall direction for this Plan.

- Maintain the rural residential character of most of Lehigh Township.
- Protect the natural resources of the Township, particularly including the Blue Mountain and the Lehigh River, Bertsch Creek, Indian Creek and Hokendauqua Creek corridors.
- Limit development on steeply sloped lands and encourage proper management of woodlands.
- Promote a continuation of agricultural activities, and encourage additional permanent preservation of prime agricultural lands.
- Work to attract additional business activity to designated areas, to provide additional tax revenue to the Township and the School District, and to provide wider close-to-home employment opportunities.
- Achieve compatible land use patterns that protect residential areas from incompatible development.
- Allow a range of different types of housing to meet the needs of various types of households, as well as older persons.
- Promote the preservation of landscaped common open spaces and trails in larger new residential developments, by offering an Open Space Development (clustering) option in selected areas.
- Direct most new development to locations where public water and sewage services can be efficiently provided, in order to minimize the amount of land consumed by new development.
- Promote the sensitive rehabilitation and reuse of historic buildings and barns.
- Work to improve safety for motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Properly manage driveway access along major roads to allow the roads to safely and efficiently carry traffic.

- Provide high quality cost-efficient community services, including fire protection, police and parks and recreation.
- Further expand cooperative efforts between Lehigh Township, adjacent municipalities, the county and regional organizations.

LAND USE AND HOUSING PLAN

A series of maps have been prepared as part of the Comprehensive Plan, including a map showing prime agricultural soils and preserved farmlands, an existing land uses map, natural features maps, and the Comprehensive Plan, which shows the land use recommendations. The Comprehensive Plan Map includes the following land use categories:

Blue Mountain Conservation Areas

The Blue Mountain Conservation areas includes the Blue Mountain, which forms the northern border of the Township. The majority of the Mountain in Lehigh Township is comprised of State Game Lands. However, there are still many privately owned lots in the southern part of the district.

Ideally, steep sloped woodlands along the Mountain should continue to be added to the State Game Lands. This may involve partnerships between the State Game Commission, the Wildlands Conservancy and local sportsmen's organizations to provide the needed funding. The State makes funding available each year for the preservation of conservation areas, including one program that requires that a conservancy must apply for the funding.

These areas should continue to only allow for very low intensity development, including single family detached houses on large lots. The current zoning requires 10 acre minimum lot sizes.

A variety of low intensity outdoor recreation uses can also help to maintain land in privately owned open land. This could include horse riding stables, day camps for children, archery ranges and similar uses.

Uses that are incompatible with these sensitive natural lands should no longer be allowed, such as oil and gas wells. The total number of communications towers should be minimized by encouraging co-location of providers on a few towers. The Blue Mountain is not an appropriate location for wind turbines because of the importance of the ridge for migratory bird movements.

Agricultural/Rural Residential Areas

This land use category is proposed to continue to include most of the Township, including most of the land in the eastern and southern parts of the Township. It relates to the current A/RR zoning district. These Agricultural/Rural Residential areas are intended to continue to allow for various types of agricultural and recreational uses, as well as single family detached dwellings on one acre minimum lots.

Ten farms have been permanently preserved in Lehigh Township through the County's agricultural easement program. These farms total 945 acres, and are identified on the Land Use Plan Map. The program encourages preservation of contiguous farmland, to increase the viability over the long-term of farming and to minimize conflicts with residential development. It may be desirable to require a setback for new homes from preserved farms.

Consideration should be given to providing a modest incentive for developers to provide public water service. For example, the zoning could allow a 0.9 acre lot if public water service is extended, while using an on-lot septic system, versus 1.0 acre with a well and septic system. Alternatively, the minimum lot size could be 1.0 acre with public water and 1.1 acre without public water service. There currently is no reduction in lot size if central water and/or sewage services are provided in the Agricultural/Rural Residential areas, unless the Open Space/Cluster Development option is used.

In many cases in practice, a lot size larger than one acre is needed in order to accommodate a well site, an approved primary septic system, an approved alternative drain field site. Stormwater infiltration areas

(such as for roof drains) or vegetated rain gardens can also result in larger lot sizes to meet State and Township stormwater requirements. The Township's steep slope regulations also may require a larger lot size.

Open Space Development/Cluster Housing involves allowing homes to be placed on smaller lots than are normally required, in return for permanent preservation of a substantial percentage of the land. Currently, the Open Space Development/Cluster Housing option needs a 30 acre minimum tract size. The density can be limited to a maximum of 30 percent higher than the density that is achievable with conventional (one acre minimum) lots. With a cluster development, it could be appropriate to allow 12,000 square foot single family detached house lots, if 60 percent of the total tract is preserved in permanent open space, or 15,000 square foot single family lots with 45 percent of the tract preserved.

The Open Space/Cluster option is likely to only be used on an area of land that can be efficiently connected to the Walnutport or Danielsville treatment plants or a replacement of the Pennsville plant. However, this type of development might also make it cost-effective to offer central sewer service to Treichlers or Cherryville.

Under these suggested policies, if a 30 acre property of buildable land would be proposed for development, it could be subdivided into 25 one acre minimum lots. Under an open space option, it could include 35 single family detached homes on 12,000 square foot minimum lots with 18 acres of open space, or 35 single family homes on 15,000 square foot minimum lots with 13.5 acres of open space. While the developer would be able to build additional homes, they also would have substantial added expenses to extend central water and sewage services and to pay connection fees.

As part of any Open Space/Cluster Housing development, the developer should be required to prove that the open space will serve an important public purpose, and not just be leftover fragments of land. The preserved open space in most cases would be maintained by a homeowner association as well-landscaped recreation areas or as woodlands with trails. If the Township and developer mutually agree, the open space could be dedicated as a Township Park. Clustering can also result in a wide open space buffer alongside an adjacent farm, which can reduce conflicts between the homes and the agricultural activities.

VR Village Residential District

This district consists of mostly residential areas around Cherryville, Treichlers, Pennsville and Danielsville. If there is on-lot well and on-lot septic service, then construction should continue to require a one acre minimum lot size. A 0.9 acre lot may be possible with public water service. If central water and sewage services are available, it would be appropriate to allow a mix of housing types at up to 4 homes per acre.

Standards should be reviewed for townhouses. The goal is to avoid the construction of new townhouses in which almost the entire front facade consists of garage doors and almost the entire front yard consists of driveways. That arrangement is not only unattractive, but it also leaves no room for on-street parking. Incentives can also be used to promote townhouse designs that keep most of the front yards green and minimize conflicts along sidewalks with turning cars. The widths of townhouses are important. The townhouse widths should vary by whether there will be parking and garage doors in the front yard. For example, if there are garage doors for 2 vehicles in the front, a minimum width should be established, such as 24 feet. If there is only a one car garage or no garage in front, then the minimum townhouse width could be more narrow, such as 18 feet. Parking courts can be one alternative to two car garages on the front of townhouses, and those parking courts could include carports.

Density bonuses make sense for housing that is limited to persons age 55 and older, with no residents under age 18. Age-restricted housing has a very positive financial impact upon the school district. Age-restricted housing bonuses can also be justified because statistically it generates less traffic, less need for parking, less water use, less sewage use and less crime than other types of housing.

The Pennsville area includes narrow roads, some of which are steep. The Township should limit the density of development that can occur on these narrow roads, unless the roads would be improved to

handle two-way traffic. Existing lots should be allowed to be built upon for single family detached houses, but apartments and denser housing would not be suitable along a one lane road.

MDR Medium Density Residential Area

These areas include the larger manufactured home developments in the Township. The intent is to allow a mix of housing types at up to 5 or 6 homes per acre. The zoning ordinance should encourage the upgrade of existing older manufactured homes with newer homes. Because the newer homes are often longer and wider, that may require some flexibility regarding dimensional standards.

NC Neighborhood Commercial Residential Areas

The Neighborhood Commercial areas are intended to only allow types of commercial uses that would be good neighbors for nearby residents. These include banks, retail sales, offices, personal service uses, day care, and restaurants without drive-through service, as well as single family detached houses.

The Neighborhood Commercial areas include most of Danielsville and an area along Mountain View Drive east of Route 248. Additional areas that are mostly residential are proposed to be changed from the General Commercial to the Neighborhood Commercial zoning district, including along parts of Route 248. A new area of Neighborhood Commercial development is proposed along the east side of Route 145, north of Alder Drive.

GC General Commercial Areas

The General Commercial Areas are intended to allow for a wide range of commercial uses, including retail stores, personal services, gasoline stations, convenience stores, auto repair shops, and car washes.

The current GC zoning district includes extensive commercial areas along most of the Route 248 corridor. The GC district also includes land along the north side of West Mountain View Drive and along Route 145 south of Walnutport. This Plan recommends that commercial areas that are close to existing residential areas or that involve a mix of residential and scattered commercial uses be changed to the Neighborhood Commercial zoning district. The intent is to limit commercial areas near homes to uses that would make a good neighbor for homes. Where there are steep hills, limited sight distances and few existing businesses, consideration should be given to removing commercial zoning. That includes an area on the southwest side of Route 248 northwest of Maple Drive.

It will be a challenge for find a new retail occupant for the K-Mart building on Route 145, because few large retailers are expanding. The building could be divided into multiple different business spaces or be redeveloped for health care uses. It would be physically possible to connect the property to properties to the east without excessive re-grading, if the connection is made on the north side of the property.

Outdoor storage of junk and junk vehicles should be required to be screened by landscaping along roads and residential lots.

BP Business Park

There currently is an "Office/Business" zoning district west of Route 248 and south of West Mountain Drive. Because of the limited demand for office space, this area might be better positioned as a Business Park district, to allow a wider range of light businesses. The intent is to allow clean light manufacturing uses such as food processing, offices, hotels, service businesses and flex space buildings.

There has been strong demand in the region for very large warehouse/distribution buildings, which are not recommended in the Business Park area. These projects can generate tremendous amounts of tractor-trailer traffic over 24 hours a day. Many distribution centers are being built along two lane roads that are far from expressways. Care is needed to make sure that a large distribution center is not built in a location where the road system cannot handle the truck traffic and where there may be conflicts between nearby homes and the 24 hour operations.

This area west of Route 248 and south of West Mountain Drive has the potential of having sewage and water services extended from Walnutport. A sewage extension would be efficient because the area flows by gravity towards Walnutport.

I Industrial/Commercial Area

The Industrial/Commercial area includes land west of Route 145 north of Walnutport. These areas are intended to allow for most types of industrial and manufacturing uses, as well as most commercial uses. It would be desirable to generate additional tax revenue from the Industrial/Commercial and General Commercial areas by encouraging the construction of buildings instead of open storage.

RC Resort Commercial Area

The Resort Commercial zoning district currently includes an area along Blue Mountain Drive north of Danielsville, which is a route over the Mountain to the Blue Mountain Ski Area. The current zoning district mainly allows retail sales, motels, restaurants and commercial recreation uses. It was intended to take advantage of traffic headed to the Ski Area, which is developing into an all-season resort.

PRCC Planned Resort Residential Community

This area includes property around the former Mary Immaculate Seminary between Cherryville Road and Indian Trail Road. The intent is to provide for a mix of single family detached houses, townhouses, apartments, offices and outdoor recreation. A portion of the site, including the former Seminary building, is intended to allow for a hotel, offices, personal care residences, restaurants, retail and taverns. A minimum of 50 percent of the tract is currently required to be permanently preserved. The area is intended to be served by the Pennsville wastewater treatment plant.

Sewage and Water Services

Currently, portions of the Township are served by two public sewage treatment plants, which are operated by the Lehigh Township Municipal Authority (LTMAP). The Danielsville area plant is currently operating at 38 percent of its rated capacity of 325,000 gallons per day. The Pennsville plant is much smaller with a capacity of 60,000 gallons per day. The remaining capacity in the Pennsville plant is proposed to be used for the first phase of the development of the former Mary Immaculate Seminary property. Later phases of that development are proposed to be served by a replacement plant that would be built next to the current Pennsville treatment plant.

Eventually, it would be desirable to have public sewage service in the Cherryville, Berlinsville and Treichlers areas. If new development occurs close to existing development, it may fund much of the cost of constructing a new sewage treatment plant, and thereby make it affordable for existing homes and businesses to connect into the system. For that reason, an expansion of the Village Residential area has been proposed in Treichlers.

Walnutport is served by the Slatington sewage treatment plant. Many nearby areas of Lehigh Township could potentially connect to the Walnutport sewage lines, particularly areas that naturally flow by gravity to Walnutport. That includes areas north of Walnutport along Route 145, areas east of Walnutport along Mountain View Drive, and additional areas southeast of Walnutport along the Route 145 corridor. However, Lehigh Township would need to negotiate with Slatington to obtain additional wastewater treatment capacity allocations.

The LTMA also provides water service to parts of Cherryville and Treichlers, using a well on Blue Mountain Drive and a well in Treichlers. Ideally, it would be valuable to have a connection to a backup well or to the Bethlehem water system, in case of contamination. Water is being extended to additional parts of the Cherryville area as part of the development of a new convenience store.

The Walnutport water distribution system uses 5 wells, including 4 located in Lehigh Township. The Walnutport water system could potentially be expanded into adjacent parts of Lehigh Township.

The City of Bethlehem's Water Treatment Plant is located in southern Lehigh Township. It is connected to pipelines from Bethlehem's reservoirs in the Poconos. The Bethlehem water system is proposed to be extended to serve the development of the former Seminary property east of Cherryville Road.

Eventually, it may be desirable to extend central water service into additional portions of the Township, such as Berlinsville, development areas surrounding Walnutport, Pennsville, and Danielsville. If lots would use on-lot septic systems, a developer could be offered a minor lot area and a lot width reduction if they extend central water service. The goal is to provide an incentive for a developer to agree to pay for a water service extension. Water extensions are much more cost-effective than sewage extensions.

A public water service extension can reduce public health problems from malfunctioning septic systems and other types of water contamination, and can free up land to install a replacement septic drain field. A public water extension can also provide a water supply for firefighting, as opposed to needing to rely upon tanker trucks. Moreover, public water service can allow a wider range and taller heights of business development, because it is easier to provide sprinkler service inside buildings. Public water systems can also be extended to replace small private water systems, and thereby provide a more reliable and financially sustainable source of water.

Natural Features Conservation

The 100-year floodplain includes land areas expected to be flooded during the worst storm in an average 100-year period. Lehigh has zoning regulations that meet the minimum federal and state regulations on development in the 100-year floodplain. The "floodway" is the main channel that carries the deepest flood waters. The rest of the floodplain is known as the "flood-fringe" and may be covered by less deep flood waters. These areas function as "overlays" to the regular zoning districts, which means they apply more restrictive provisions for certain matters.

It is recommended that the floodplain regulations be revised to prohibit new buildings within the 100 year floodplain. This is particularly important because the frequency and severity of flooding events have been increasing, with supposed 40 year storms occurring two years apart.

Also, a building and paving setback should be established from the banks of a waterway, such as a minimum of 75 feet from the top of the primary bank of the Lehigh River and 50 feet from the top of the primary bank of perennial creeks (which usually have year-round flows of water).

Consideration should be given to establishing a minimum building and paving setback from a wetland, such as 25 feet. The goal is to provide a vegetated buffer next to wetlands, and to avoid the intrusion of construction equipment into the wetland.

The intensity of development should continue to be limited where there is a concentration of naturally steeply sloped lands.