

Chapter 1 – Background & Introduction

Monroe County Today

Monroe County has developed a heightened awareness of its natural and cultural heritage. This heritage was taken for granted two decades ago when the population of the County was less than 60,000. Today, these natural and cultural resources are threatened by a doubling of the population to 120,000, as well as year-round increases in the non-residential population (tourists and day visitors) and a projected redoubling of the County population by 2020. County citizens have felt the impact both in terms of increased taxes and in the loss of natural and cultural assets that historically have made the County an attractive place to live and visit. These concerns have driven recent efforts to insure that Monroe County retains its remaining attractiveness while accommodating its growth, and have heightened the determination of its citizens to preserve, conserve, and enhance the County's resources that continue to provide such a rich quality of life.

A major milestone in this effort was the addition of the Monroe County Open Space Plan, within the context of the recent update of the Monroe County Comprehensive Plan hereafter referred to as "Monroe 2020."

Monroe 2020 highlights the County's unique open space assets and challenges the County to develop and execute planning processes that address threats posed by rapid growth and development. It also notes that these planning processes must aim not only to preserve and enhance the County's open space assets, but also the County's economic future. The *Monroe County Open Space Plan* is an important step in furthering a new planning vision called for and established in Monroe 2020. An overview of the Monroe 2020 plan is provided below. For a complete understanding, refer to the plan itself.¹

¹ *Monroe 2020, Comprehensive Plan*, Monroe County Planning Commission, March 1999.

Monroe 2020 Planning Process / County Comprehensive Plan

The County Comprehensive Plan was developed over three years and backed by an unprecedented broad public involvement and consensus-building process referred to as the “2020 Planning Process.” The circumstances leading to the success of this process had its roots in the early ‘80s. Over the last decade, interest grew as a result of several events that occurred in the County.

Brief History

The decade of the ‘80s saw a dramatic increase in Monroe County’s population. The pace and intensity of this development introduced the County to the perils of “urban sprawl” and the resulting losses to the environment and to the quality of life that had been taken for granted for many decades. Tax increases to accommodate this development pattern drove the problem home for many.

The situation in Monroe County caught national attention in the early ‘90s. Professor Carl Steinitz of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design (HGSD), with cooperation from the County Commissioners and many other County stakeholders, used Monroe County as a case study for his omnibus studio dealing with urbanization and change issues. This student project resulted in a report that served as a “wake-up call” for many in the County and demonstrated the usefulness of a Geographic Information System (GIS) as a tool for decision making. That project is documented in the student report, *Alternative Futures for Monroe County, Pennsylvania*.²

This report also served as a call to action. With development pressure slowing during an economic downturn in the early ‘90s, the Monroe County Planning Commission believed that the time was ripe to act. A window of opportunity existed to initiate positive changes to guide future development in the County. An update of the County’s comprehensive plan was in order.

The comprehensive plan update officially began in 1996 with the hiring of the lead consultant, Rivkin Associates. Three years later, in June of 1999, Monroe 2020 was officially adopted by the County Commissioners. During the three-year planning and development process, important interim goals were achieved and key results emerged. One of the most important of these achieved goals was the successful passage of a \$25 million open space bond referendum in May of 1998 and the resultant establishment of a County Open Space Advisory Board.

A subtle but profound result of the planning process was increased public awareness about the issues and concerns surrounding the County’s growth and future. The empowerment of citizens and municipal officials was key to the plan’s development and implementation. Five task forces of over one hundred citizens met on an almost monthly basis during the plan’s development. Four task forces were composed of a broad spectrum of citizens and municipal leaders from each of the four school districts. The school districts formed the four planning areas of the plan (See *Figure 1.1 – Map of Planning Areas*).

² Carl Steinitz et al, *Alternative futures for Monroe County, Pennsylvania*, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994.

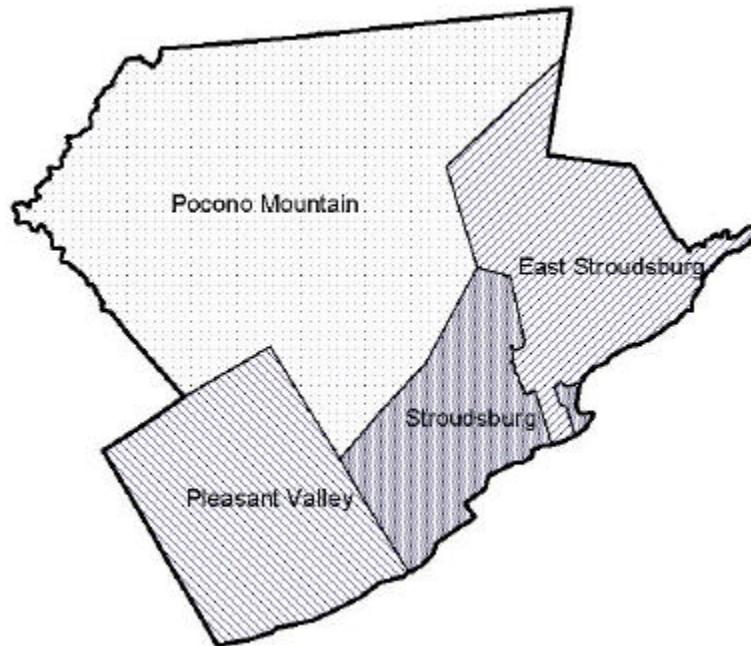


Figure 1.1 – Map of Monroe 2020 Planning Areas

The fifth task force was composed of stakeholders with a broader regional and countywide view. This task force was hence reformed into an “executive committee” that still meets on a regular basis and is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the plan with the assistance of the County Planning Commission.

Policy Recommendations

The Monroe 2020 plan developed policy recommendations and action proposals along four major functional lines:

1. Open Space Preservation
2. Economic Development
3. Legislative Change
4. Infrastructure and Community Character

While each task force developed a vision for its respective planning area, the principal consensus recommendations comprising the Monroe 2020 plan are to:

- Preserve and enhance the most environmentally valuable natural features, including:
 - Water resources, quality and quantity;
 - The best land for agricultural use;

- Critical wetlands and wildlife habitats; and
- Unique scenic views and visual quality.
- Establish more efficient, compact patterns of land use while maintaining and upgrading the County’s visual character;
- Diversify the County’s economy and support and upgrade the tourism industry;
- Attract new enterprises that support jobs with good pay, contribute to the tax base, and balance the burden homeowners and businesses now bear for financing public facilities and services, especially schools;
- Locate new development on sites served by existing infrastructure or capable of being served by economically feasible extensions of existing systems;
- Create more gathering places for community activities;
- Expand recreational opportunities and sites to accommodate and serve more local resident use;
- Create greenways and trails and more facilities for safe pedestrian and bicycle travel both on and off existing roadways;
- Maintain and enhance the school system as an organizing element and a focus for community activity; and
- Encourage multi-jurisdictional planning and zoning activity (aided by the County) and joint jurisdictional agreements in planning, zoning, and operation of services to form the basis of plan implementation.

Planning With Incentives

While the countywide plan helps define and establish roles and actions to be taken by the County, many of the outlined goals can only be achieved through the coordinated action of individual municipalities (as per the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code-MPC). Therefore, the plan must also serve as a guide for municipal action. Incentives must be provided and demonstrations made to elicit action from the municipalities in the form of detailed plans and instruments appropriate to the spirit and intent of the countywide view.

In terms of protecting the county’s open space, one of the most important steps that the County Commissioners took was establishing a twenty-five million-dollar open space bond through voter referendum. The Commissioners then appointed an Open Space Advisory Board. The Board is responsible, with assistance from the County Planning Commission, for the implementation of an open space program that would recommend further County action and provide incentives for municipal actions. That

Board is composed of a broad spectrum of citizens who contribute their unique views to the program's development.

Open Space Framework

The Monroe 2020 plan states that open space is “the most distinctive feature of Monroe County” and notes that close to 50% (approximately 193,500 acres) of the County has some form of open space protection in place; however, 60% (approximately 116,130 acres) of these “protected” lands are vulnerable to development. The open space framework is composed of:

- Publicly protected lands, including forests, state game lands, parks, and purchased agricultural easements (approximately 79,000 acres);
- Privately protected lands involving land trusts and conservancy areas (approximately 5,500 acres);
- Quasi-protected protected lands in the form of resorts and group camps in private ownership (approximately 16,700 acres); and
- Quasi-protected agricultural and forest reserve areas under the Commonwealth's Act 319 program (approximately 105,100 acres or 27% of the County's land area since a payment of back tax benefits can restore their former status).

Monroe 2020 also states that “further preservation of open space is both an objective of the Comprehensive Plan and a tool for obtaining other objectives of the plan” such as:

- Focusing development in centers to enhance their distinctive value as landmarks and strengthen them economically;
- Upgrading and containing arterial corridor development to make it more efficient, safe, and less congestion-prone; and
- Landscaping those corridors to make them more attractive and inviting.

Goals & Objectives of the County Open Space Plan

With Monroe 2020 as a backdrop, the newly appointed Open Space Advisory Board realized that it was critical to put forth a countywide open space plan. A plan was needed to further identify and prioritize the County's unprotected open space resources. A plan was also needed to help define the County's role in this effort and to establish guidelines for the County's municipalities in their efforts to preserve, conserve, and enhance open space within their jurisdictions in a manner that looks beyond their individual jurisdictional boundaries toward regional integration.

The primary strategic goal for the open space plan component of the County's Comprehensive Plan is to create "... *an open space system with a network of interrelated preserved lands and trails protected through various actions. Land suitable for public access will be acquired through various acquisition strategies. Other lands will be protected through land use controls or other non-acquisition techniques. These non-acquisition controls will be established through a partnership between the County, municipalities, and landowners.*"

From this goal, four major objectives were established for the Open Space Plan. These are:

- **OBJECTIVE #1** - Identify and set priorities for the most important and threatened open space areas from a countywide perspective (see Appendix B)
- **OBJECTIVE #2** - Demonstrate the application of the "Growing Greener" approach for putting conservation into local plans and ordinances as a means of building the open space infrastructure.
- **OBJECTIVE #3** - Assess open space needs for the County and develop appropriate park and recreation standards.
- **OBJECTIVE #4** - Advance the greenway and trail system, as put forth in the *Greenway Project Feasibility Study*, as a demonstration and model greenway initiative for the County.

Together, this goal and these four objectives form the basis of the Monroe County Open Space Plan.

Additional Related Plans & Planning Efforts

In addition to the Monroe 2020 Plan outlined above, several other plans and studies are pertinent to the evaluation of open space in Monroe County. These include the following:

Greenway Project Feasibility Study

The final plan for this study was completed in June of 2000 and was prepared by BLOSS Associates in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Toole Recreation Planning, and Strauss & Associates for the Monroe County Commissioners. The study evaluated the potential for establishing a greenway corridor and trail system along the south side of the Brodhead Creek, roughly paralleling the route of the historic Stroudsburg to Delaware Water Gap Trolley. Involving five municipalities, the study not only determined that a greenway and trail system is feasible at this location, but also determined that the proposed greenway is key to the development of a larger regional system of trails. The Executive Summary for this study is included as *Appendix A* in this Open Space Plan. A promotional video and brochure were also produced in conjunction with the study.

Multi-Municipal Open Space Plans

All twenty of Monroe County's municipalities have grouped themselves into six regional areas for the purpose of developing Open Space and Recreation Plans for these six regions of the County. A funding incentive for these plans was provided by the County as a match to an umbrella grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources under their Community Conservation Partnership Program. Completion of these plans will follow on the heels of the County Open Space Plan and is necessary in order for the municipalities to qualify for open space bond funds.

Northeast Pennsylvania Conservation Action Priorities (CAP)

The CAP plan was completed in December of 1999 and was prepared by the Heritage Conservancy in association with the Wildlands Conservancy, the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau, The Nature Conservancy, and the Natural Lands Trust. The project was funded, in part, by grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources – Keystone Land Trust Program, the USDA Forest Service – Economic Action Plan, the Sordoni Foundation, and the Northeastern Pennsylvania Conservancy.

The CAP plan examines three regions: Pike, Monroe, and Carbon Counties. The examination of these three counties is the first phase of a three-phase plan for the nine-county Pocono region of northeastern Pennsylvania. The plan aims to provide a comprehensive conservation plan that would enable trusts and municipalities to work together for regional resource protection.

Resource inventories focused on six major data sets: geologic features, natural and potential natural areas, protected land, flood-prone areas, riparian corridors, and assorted municipal resources. Information from the Monroe 2020 Plan was incorporated into this larger regional view.

The analysis resulted in ten areas of concentrated resources or conservation priority areas. Four of these ten areas are located or are partially located in Monroe County: Area 1, Area 3, Area 4, and Area 10 as illustrated in Figure 1.2 – Conservation Priority Areas.

The CAP plan recommends the following eight broad actions for the protection of identified resources: develop conservation plans; increase environmental education; leverage open space funds; promote smart growth; develop partnerships; actively manage for natural resources; promote land stewardship; and promote greenways and linkages.

Most of these strategies have been identified in the Monroe 2020 Plan and are also put forth in this Monroe County Open Space Plan.

³ Northeast Pennsylvania Conservation Action Priorities, prepared by the Heritage Conservancy in association with the Wildlands Conservancy, the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau, The Nature Conservancy, and the Natural Lands Trust, December 1999.

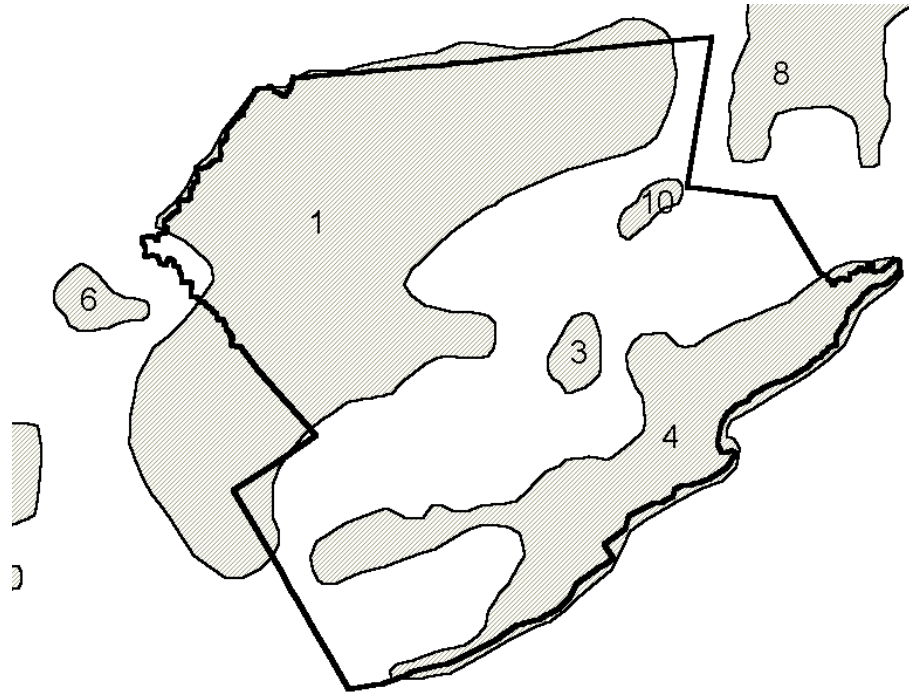


Figure 1.2 – CAP Conservation Priority Areas

DWGNRA Trail Plan

A *Final Trails Plan & Abbreviated Environmental Impact Statement for the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area* was released in November of 1999 by the National Park Service. The Preferred Alternative, “Alternative B: Multiple Linking Networks,” would almost double the mileage of trails in the park. The plan also includes the McDade Recreational Trail that would run the length of the Park in Monroe County. Public commentary focused on concerns related to the number of trails being managed appropriately, potential impacts on native plant and animal communities, and controlling access. Interest was also expressed for providing more linkage opportunities to local trails and communities. The Park Service has noted these concerns and has expressed a willingness to work with adjacent local communities. These opportunities should be explored in detail and examined in the development of municipal plans to best serve Monroe communities.

Brodhead Watershed Conservation Plan

The Brodhead Watershed Association is the organization leading a two-and-a-half year effort to create a conservation plan for the watershed. A \$56,000 grant from DCNR and a matching grant from local sources, including cash and donated professional services, fund the plan. Progress is guided by a steering committee of over thirty local, regional, and federal watershed partners. The plan aims to:

- Identify watershed problems & suggest solutions;
- Help protect water resources;

- Help protect open space and special places; and
- Bring state funding to the area.

Through meetings with the public and watershed partners, the conservation planning effort will identify significant natural, recreational, and cultural watershed resources and potential watershed threats. The conservation plan will recommend policies, actions, or projects that can be taken to restore, maintain, or enhance watershed resources. The ultimate goal is a conservation plan to guide and direct conservation actions in the Brodhead Watershed. The plan will include suggested projects to protect drinking water resources in the watershed. The plan will also help advance components of the County's Comprehensive Plan (Monroe 2020), the County Open Space Plan, and forthcoming municipal plans for open space. Once municipalities and the DCNR approve the conservation plan, the Brodhead Creek will be eligible for placement on the Pennsylvania Rivers Conservation Registry. Then, projects included in the plan will be eligible for implementation, acquisition, and development grant assistance from DCNR.

Figure 1.3 illustrates the extent of the Brodhead Watershed in Monroe County.

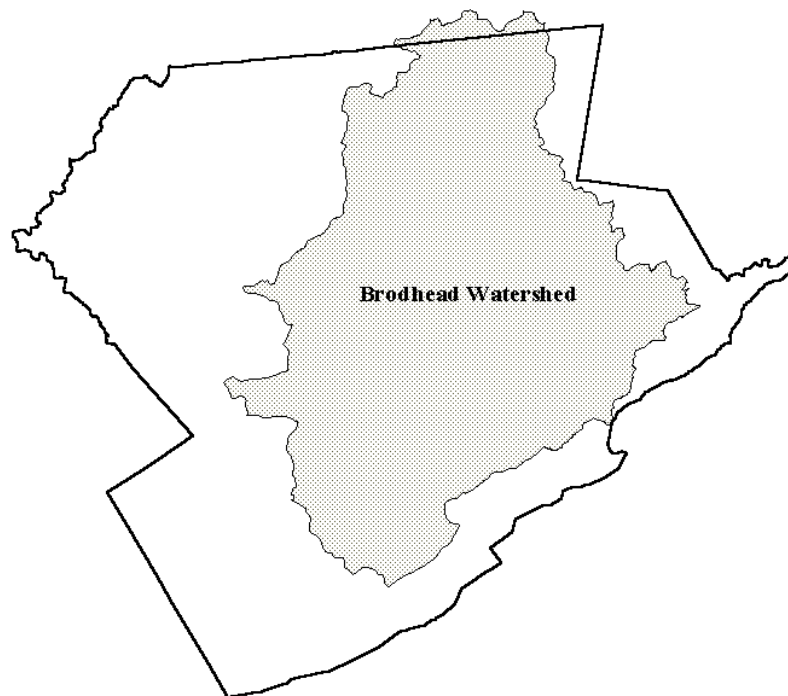


Figure 1.3 – Extent of the Brodhead Watershed

Lehigh River Conservation Plan

A river conservation plan for this watershed is being prepared by the Wildlands Conservancy and is ongoing and expected to be completed by September of 2002. The area of study includes the Tobyhanna Creek and Tunkhannock Creek subwatersheds in Monroe County.

Goal-Based Watershed Management – Pocono Creek Pilot Study

The Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) and the Monroe County Conservation District were recently awarded an Environmental Stewardship and Watershed Protection Grant by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's Growing Greener grants center. This study is a pilot study for the development of a methodology for flexible watershed management based on the establishment of specific environmental goals. The pilot study involves the Pocono Creek watershed.

Statewide Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan

The Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan was prepared for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) Bureau of Highway Safety and Traffic Engineering under the direction of the Department's Bicycle/Pedestrian Program Coordinator. The plan is a compilation of five documents, including:

- An Executive Summary;
- A Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan;
- Bicycle Planning and Design Guidelines;
- Pedestrian Planning and Design Guidelines; and
- Community Design Systems.

A shared vision for the future of bicycling and walking was developed as expressed in community meetings held throughout Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania is a place where residents and visitors of all ages can choose to bicycle and walk. People are able to bicycle and walk with confidence, safety, and security in every community, both for daily transportation and to experience and enjoy the remarkable natural resources of the state.

Five important policy goals were adopted by PennDOT:

1. Modify the existing transportation infrastructure to encourage bicycling and walking in targeted rural, suburban, and urban areas of the Commonwealth;
2. Plan, design, construct, and maintain new and improved transportation facilities to accommodate and encourage appropriate use by bicyclists and pedestrians;
3. Provide technical assistance, training, and leadership to support local jurisdictions in improving conditions for bicycling and walking;

4. Implement educational and enforcement programs to reduce crashes involving bicyclists and pedestrians by at least 10 percent over the next 20 years and to provide a better sense of safety and security for bicyclists and pedestrians; and
5. Promote acceptance and welcome bicyclists and pedestrians as users of the transportation system.

Additional Resources

One important technical assistance document assembled for PennDOT in August of 1998 was the *Pennsylvania Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety and Accommodation Workbook* used in a series of workshops held throughout the state for local municipalities and other stakeholders.

Locally, the Economic Development Council of Northeastern Pennsylvania is preparing a Bicycle/Pedestrian Action Plan for the region. The Northeastern Pennsylvania Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee meets regularly to help steer this plan and other related actions for the region.

In 1999, on the national level, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials published a *Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities*.

Report of the Pennsylvania 21st Century Environment Commission

This report, completed in September of 1998, addresses many environmental issues that are of importance to Pennsylvania residents, stressing the importance of a healthy environment to foster a dynamic economy. Highlighted in the report as the main environmental issue that Pennsylvania needs to take action on is responsible land use, especially concerning the threat of suburban sprawl. Citing the “fragmentation of decision making across agencies and through multiple levels of government” as a major cause of sprawl, the report calls on county and local governments to develop plans that target areas appropriate for development while setting aside other areas for environmental protection. The report recommends that the state’s Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) be amended in such a fashion as to give local officials the ability to work together on a regional basis. Also, the Governor’s Center for Local Government Services in the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) was advised to set up a source of information on model land use practices and ways to implement them. Other issues highlighted in the report as important for action were the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, bettering human health and environmental quality, improving the way industry, government, and citizens achieve environmental results, and advancing environmental stewardship.

Recent amendments to Legislation regarding Municipalities Planning Code

On June 22, 2000, Governor Ridge enacted significant changes to the Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), by signing House Bill 14 and Senate Bill 300 into law. The bills became Acts 67 and 68 of 2000, respectively. The MPC amendments were the product of intense negotiations between members of the state legislature and representatives of key stakeholder interest groups. In the end, the two bills received overwhelming bipartisan support in the state legislature. The amendments to the MPC became effective in 60 days. Accordingly, the planning and implementation

opportunities afforded by the amendments to the MPC became available on August 21, 2000.

Act 67 (prior to enactment, House Bill 14, sponsored by Representative David J. Steil (R-Bucks)) completely revises Article XI of the MPC. Article XI now specifically authorizes the development and implementation of multi-municipal comprehensive plans. Through these plans, the legislature hopes that land use planning will become much more regional in nature. Multi-municipal comprehensive plans are authorized to designate growth areas and rural resource areas. Among other things, the multi-municipal comprehensive plans specifically may plan for developments of regional or area-wide significance, and plan for the conservation of natural and historic resources. Act 67 specifically provides that all land uses need not be accommodated in every participating municipality. In addition, counties are specifically authorized to facilitate and enter into cooperative planning agreements with municipalities.

Where multi-municipal comprehensive plans exist, zoning hearing boards, governing bodies, and courts may consider land uses available throughout the participating municipalities in reviewing challenges to the validity of a specific municipal zoning ordinance in the jurisdiction where development is sought. In addition, state agencies are required to consider and may rely upon multi-municipal zoning and comprehensive plans when reviewing applications for funding or permitting of infrastructure or facilities. Municipalities are authorized to share tax revenues and may adopt programs regarding the transfer of development rights.

Specific authorization is given to municipalities to develop implementation plans for comprehensive plans which address nonresidential areas. Such implementation plans must be consistent with the comprehensive plan.

Act 68 (prior to enactment, Senate Bill 300, sponsored by Senator James W. Gerlach (R-Berks, Chester, Lehigh, Montgomery)) makes numerous changes to various sections of the MPC, and the amendments are designed to encourage and foster joint planning and implementation among counties, local municipalities, and municipal authorities. Of special significance are changes which require comprehensive plans to include statements which indicate that existing and proposed development is consistent with existing and proposed development in neighboring municipalities. Comprehensive plans must contain plans to protect natural and historic resources, include a plan for a reliable source of water, and may specify areas where growth will occur. Municipal zoning, planing, and subdivision regulations and capital improvement programs now must generally implement the comprehensive plan.

Multi-municipal comprehensive planning, zoning, and subdivision and land development ordinances are specifically authorized. All counties are required to develop comprehensive plans and the contents of those plans are specified in the MPC. Municipal comprehensive plans must be generally consistent with county comprehensive plans. Multi-municipal impact fee ordinances are authorized, and tax revenues may be shared among cooperating municipalities. Zoning ordinances must be generally consistent with comprehensive plans, and must promote and preserve prime agricultural land, environmentally sensitive areas, and areas of historic significance. Development rights will be transferable within the boundaries of cooperating municipalities. Importantly, government agencies specifically must give consideration to county and multi-municipal comprehensive plans and zoning

ordinances when reviewing applications for the development of infrastructure facilities.

Act 68 also adds a completely new section to the MPC, addressing the development of traditional neighborhoods. In traditional neighborhoods, the Commonwealth envisions a compatible mixture of residential, commercial, industrial, public, and open space uses in close proximity to one another. Special design standards will apply to the development of traditional neighborhoods.

As a result of these changes to the MPC, we anticipate that counties will play a much greater role in planning for existing and future development and in the encouragement of multi-municipal development planning and implementation activities. It remains to be seen whether the various incentives afforded to those municipalities which embark upon joint planning, zoning, and subdivision efforts will be sufficient to attract widespread participation.

We recommend that discussions be initiated with county representatives, as well as neighbor municipalities, to gauge what opportunities exist for joint planning, zoning, and land conservation efforts.

Another factor which underscores the new importance associated with the development of comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances which promote land conservation are the new obligations imposed on Commonwealth agencies by Acts 67 and 68 of 2000. Under Acts 67 and 68 of 2000, Commonwealth agencies must give consideration to local land use planning decisions.

Accordingly, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has announced the publication of interim guidance concerning how the agency's new obligations under Acts 67 and 68 of 2000 will be met. The interim guidance became effective on August 21, 2000, and requires DEP to give consideration to local or county comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances when making infrastructure decisions (e.g. New Land Development Plan Applications under the PA Sewage Facilities Act (Act 537)).

If no local comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances exist, DEP will not consider comments from local municipality representatives regarding infrastructure permits, approvals, or authorizations. Accordingly, in order to improve land planning decisions and achieve land conservation goals, local municipalities should consider revising (or, in some cases, enacting) comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances in line with our recommendations. When this is accomplished, DEP will be better able to make appropriate permitting decisions which have the potential to influence or strongly affect local land use planning goals and objectives.

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