

Part I Overview

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The Challenge

Introduction

Monroe County's Commissioners and Planning Commission started the Monroe 2020 planning process in Spring 1996, and concurred that this time it had to be different. The "it" was planning for future economic development and environmental conservation in Monroe — a county with 20 independent municipalities, almost all of which were experiencing pressures of population growth, loss of open land, and severe strains on the tax base. Joining the County officials were most municipalities, the four school districts, Pocono Mountains Chamber of Commerce, Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau, East Stroudsburg University and Northampton Community College, business, environmental, and public interest groups, and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. This was the first occasion in recent memory that so many and diverse interests came together with a common mission.

A 1981 County plan, prepared in house, went largely unheeded because it failed to involve the municipalities or to provide incentives for their cooperation. An early 1990s plan, prepared largely by the business community, suffered a similar fate. This time it had to be different, because the stakeholders agreed that the very features that attract visitors in the millions to Monroe County, and drew over 20,000 new residents since the 1990 census, were under siege.

The Assets

Many speak in superlatives about the Monroe County setting. Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, in selecting Monroe for a 1993 pilot study to demonstrate the value of a Geographic Information System as a tool for decision makers, called "the exceptionally diverse biological landscape of Monroe County" of great scenic and environmental value."¹

And the Pocono Heritage Land Trust has added yet more praise claiming that "the natural beauty and diversity of the Poconos — the waterfalls, mountain trout streams, scenic vistas, dense forests, rare pine barrens, unique boreal bogs, black bears, otters, deer, bald eagles, and countless other wildlife — are what has attracted people to this region for over 100 years."²

Each year, the U.S. Department of the Interior tallies more than four million visitors to the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. And all this a little more than 90 minutes via Interstate 80 to the Lincoln Tunnel, and a lot less to employment centers in Northern New Jersey.



¹ Carl Steinitz et al, *Alternative Futures for Monroe County, Pennsylvania*, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge 1994, p 14.

² Brochure from the Pocono Heritage Land Trust, undated and unpagged.

Meeting the Challenge

Before deciding on a design for a new and different planning process, the County and its consultants reviewed extensive studies of environmental and fiscal conditions and interviewed a wide variety of citizen, business, and institutional leaders for their suggestions on how to proceed. The design team produced two crisis warning documents, publicized in the media and widely distributed within the County: an *Environmental Alert* and a *Fiscal Alert*. These documents portrayed where the County was heading and why a new, participatory planning process was essential:

“Environmental: Monroe County’s natural environment is in jeopardy. If the environmental quality which sustains both the Poconos’ recreation industry and the county’s attractiveness as a place to live and work are to be maintained, past practices cannot be continued. New approaches to conservation and development are essential. We now have ample data on which to base these new approaches.” (p. 15)

“Fiscal: . . . recent land development trends — residential patterns especially — are creating a serious fiscal imbalance. If these trends continue, local taxes will have to rise dramatically to close the fiscal gap. Otherwise school districts and municipalities will not be able to maintain their current levels of service. Local governments can alter this dire picture, but they will need public support for major changes in the way they manage land use and development.” (p. 1)

The challenge to head in a new direction was posed in the Fiscal Alert:

It is precisely because fiscal, environmental, traffic and other problems affect all of Monroe County that a new planning vision may be the first step. County, municipal and school district officials and concerned citizens can come together to establish such a vision to guide Monroe County into the 21st Century.” (p. 11)

Monroe 2020 was the County’s answer to the challenge.

The Monroe 2020 Process

For almost three years, the Monroe 2020 process has been formulating the basis for a Comprehensive Plan to guide further economic development and environmental conservation in the County and its 20 municipalities.

The County Commissioners appointed five task forces of close to 100 people to help form long and short-term visions for the future to be reflected in the plan. One task force focused on county-wide matters. The others represented groups of municipalities that comprise each of the four school districts: East Stroudsburg, Stroudsburg, Pleasant Valley, and Pocono Mountain. In the summer of 1997 the task forces, after many public forums for even broader citizen review of recommendations, presented their proposed goals and implementing actions to the County Commissioners and the municipalities. Proposals were organized in four broad categories of *Land and Water Resources; Economic Development and Fiscal Balance; Community Character and Community Life; and Public Facilities, Infrastructure, and Services.*

By October 1997, most of the municipalities and school districts as well as the County Commissioners endorsed the Goals and Actions statements.

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Next, the process was reconstituted along functional lines. Task force members formed working groups to prepare detailed policies that would further shape the Comprehensive Plan. These policies were tested within the four area task forces and gained their endorsement by Fall 1998. They addressed:

- Open Space Preservation - this was the basis for the successful \$25 million open space referendum in May, 1998 and is now being refined by the Open Space Advisory Board.
- Economic Development - identifying for the first time the full array of economic activities to be appropriately promoted and accommodated.
- Legislative change - at both the Commonwealth and municipal level. Task force members presented these recommendations to a committee of the State Legislature and to the Governor's 21st Century Environment Commission.
- Infrastructure - policy statements were issued on essential roadscape improvements and on arts and cultural facilities.

These policy recommendations, along with action proposals from the task forces are directly included in this Comprehensive Plan.

Meanwhile, technical work on data presentation and plan elements proceeded into the winter of 1998-99. Parcel data from all the properties in Monroe County have been incorporated into the Planning Commission's Geographic Information System (GIS) which is now able to display (and provide quantitative information on) a host of environmental, regulatory, and functional features of Monroe County and its municipalities. The GIS has become a superb means of testing plan options (See Chapter on the GIS). Projections have been made, and shared with the task forces, on potential population and employment growth, their implications for building and land requirements, and basic options for accommodating this growth.



Goals that Can Be Implemented Form the Vision

Monroe 2020 has set lofty goals. But throughout the nearly three years of deliberations, task force members have insisted on tangible links between goals, plan recommendations, and implementing actions to be taken as soon as possible. Many of these actions have already been initiated. While some proposals differed among the various task forces and highlighted unique features of the school district planning areas, the principal consensus recommendations that comprise Monroe 2020's vision are:

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- 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
 - 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.
- Pursue as a priority the retention and expansion of existing Monroe County businesses.
- Locate new development on sites served by existing infrastructure or capable of being served by economically feasible extensions of existing systems or by alternative systems.
- Create more gathering places for community activities.
- Expand recreational opportunities and sites to accommodate and serve more local resident participation.
- 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.
- 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

This last goal, establishing a framework for cooperative effort among municipalities and between municipalities and the County, is the core of the Comprehensive Plan. In reality, the county-wide plan must be a guide to municipal action, not a dictate. The county-wide plan must deal with general principles, not site-specific prescriptions. Under the Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), individual municipalities in Pennsylvania have the final power on planning and zoning. The County, by virtue of its ability to examine issues and options for the municipalities as a whole and by its access to technical capabilities, can chart a course and provide some resources. The County, must, however, rely on the individual municipalities, linking with one another, to prepare detailed plans and instruments.

Pennsylvania offers some fine examples of how county-wide planning has been effective, with municipal cooperation. Chester, Lancaster, Bucks, and Montgomery have success stories. Their plans are compelling. In each case, moreover, the County was able to provide incentives to

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municipalities to support plan recommendations, alter ordinances and regulatory procedures, and establish joint agreements. Incentives ranged from direct financial support for municipal undertakings in accordance with the plan to administrative and technical assistance in obtaining external grants, performing studies, and drafting ordinances. Heeding these successes, Monroe County has also elected to sponsor and champion an incentive based Comprehensive Plan.

