

Planning Commission

2015 Annual Report

COUNTY of UNION
PENNSYLVANIA



County Commissioners

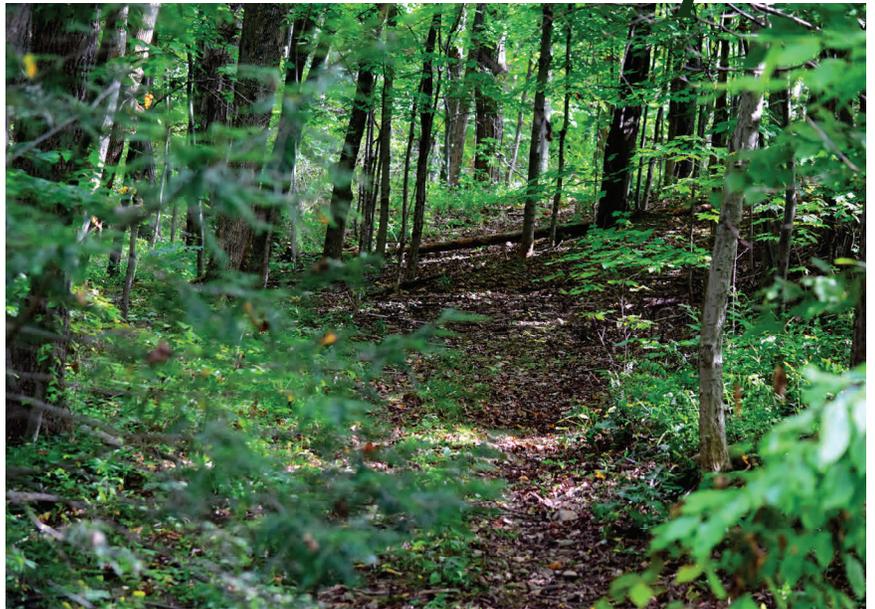
Preston R. Boop, *Chairman*
John R. Showers, *Vice Chairman*
John H. Mathias, *Secretary*
Diana L. Robinson, *Chief Clerk*

Commission Board Members

Donald Bowman, *Chair*
Susan Benfer, *Vice Chair*
Jeff Koppel, *Secretary*
Sally Farmer
Allan Grundstrom
Justin Keister
Anthony Mike
Benjamin Ranck
Jeff Thompson
Jeremiah Runkle, *Solicitor*

Professional Staff

Shawn McLaughlin, AICP, CPRP *Director*
John Del Vecchio, AICP *Community Planner*
Robert Huntington, *Recycling Coordinator*
Pamela Mabus, *Community Planner*
Janice Wagner, *Administrative Assistant*



From the Director's Desk

This annual report provides a summary of the Union County Planning Commission's major activities for 2015 including a review of greenway and open space planning, transportation, rail trail expansion, recycling, affordable housing program administration, and subdivision and land development plan review. Also included is a description of technical assistance provided to the Merrill Linn Land & Waterways Conservancy on a conservation project and a note on changes to Planning Commission membership. Lastly under *Trends Watch* we discuss affordable housing since that became a hot button issue in 2015.

Overall the past year was productive as significant progress was made on developing the greenway and open space plan. Public meetings were held, a survey was issued, and the steering committee worked with staff to evaluate data and the input received in order to start formulating the physical plan which includes an inventory of existing resources and assets, a proposed greenway and open space framework, and specific recommendations for the future. The remaining tasks are to finalize the implementation component of the plan, set priorities for projects, and release the draft plan document for public review and comment.

In terms of other accomplishments the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) was a 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania 2015 Commonwealth Award winner in the category of public infrastructure. The Commonwealth Awards honor projects that utilize best practices promoting more walkable, sustainable, healthy and equitable communities. The Buffalo Valley Recreation Authority, East Buffalo Township, Lewisburg Borough, Larson Design Group, Inc. and Union County were recognized for their efforts and partnership in developing this high quality recreation and transportation corridor. The Planning Commission has been heavily involved from the onset having been assigned to lead the trail feasibility study that was completed in the early 2000's and played a significant role in the acquisition, design, and construction of the trail including authoring all the grant applications that have secured funding to date. It is very rewarding to see our local community and trail recognized on a statewide level.

Last year at this time when I sat down to write this column there were a number of questions about where Pennsylvania and the new administration in Harrisburg might be headed in terms of planning and community development. Unfortunately a year later we are faced with many of the same questions due to the inability of the Governor and Legislature to agree on practically anything, including a complete state budget. So far funding from the Municipal Assistance Program (MAP), which is the successor to the once popular and more robust LUPTAP program, remains essentially non-existent as it did under the previous administration. The most recent application round yielded an allocation of \$354,000 from the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) for 11 projects statewide with less than 50% going toward planning efforts. None of the awards were for our region of the state. The chances of securing assistance from DCED through this program are not encouraging given the limited resources and the thousands of eligible applicants. Of the handful of planning projects that were funded all but one were for multi-municipal efforts. On a more positive note the Governor did appoint Leslie Richards who has a planning, transportation planning and local government background to lead the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and Cindy Dunn, a long-time conservationist, to lead the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DNCR). Secretary Dunn was very supportive of Union County in the past while serving as Deputy Secretary for DCNR under Governor Rendell.

Sincerely,

Shawn McLaughlin

Planning Director



COUNTYWIDE PLANNING

Greenway & Open Space Plan

In 2015 progress continued on the Union County Greenway and Open Space plan. Early in the year five public meetings were held in Allenwood, Laurelton, Lewisburg, Mifflinburg, and Winfield to share information about the project such as why the plan was being done, its purpose, the benefits of greenways and open space, and the project schedule. Most importantly the meetings were structured to hear from residents about their thoughts, ideas, concerns and desires concerning the future of greenways and open space in the county.

Common themes that emerged were the following:

- ◆ Support exists for continued land preservation
- ◆ Riparian buffers needed to improve stream quality
- ◆ Desire for more trail opportunities
- ◆ Community parks to support growing population
- ◆ More access to streams and the river

Later in the spring an on-line survey was made available to accommodate citizens that could not attend the public sessions. The findings were very consistent with the meeting results noted above. Overwhelmingly 94% of respondents felt it was important to protect Union County's natural and open space resources with stream corridors, critical wildlife habitat, forests, and agricultural lands noted as the types of lands most critical to protect. Bicycle and pedestrian trails were reported as the most needed outdoor recreation opportunity and 98% said greenways, open space, and trails are important for community health and wellness. When it comes to funding people felt it is appropriate for local government to use tax dollars for farmland and natural resource preservation, community parks, greenways, trails, riparian buffers, and water access areas.

A number of specific projects were frequently mentioned in the public meetings and through the survey. Completing the US Route 15 crossing of the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) was one along with exploring the potential to extend this trail west beyond Mifflinburg. Converting the open space lands in

Great Stream Commons to public use with a trail connecting Allenwood village to Montgomery Borough and having a canoe and kayak launch was also popular. Improving canoe, kayak and fishing access to Penns Creek was another repeated request as was installing riparian buffers along the county's impaired streams. These are just a handful of examples from the many projects suggested.

The plan Steering Committee continued to meet during the year and reviewed the public input and worked with staff to use this information to shape the vision and goals for the plan. Several chapters of the plan were also drafted and reviewed by the Committee. Looking ahead to 2016 the plan should be available for public review and comment by early summer.

Buffalo Valley Rail Trail

Thanks to funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) a new paved section of the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) was constructed and opened in Lewisburg Borough between 5th and 8th Streets. In addition a connector was also built from 5th Street to Market Street paralleling the active railroad.

On the west side of US 15 in East Buffalo Township the trail was extended from the existing 12th Street trailhead toward US 15 where it now links with the sidewalk network that was installed as part of the Penn House Commons development. This section of trail was funded through a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of

Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). These same funds were

used in 2014 to create the new trailhead at Vicksburg in Buffalo Township. The Planning Commission staff authored both the TAP and DCNR grant applications mentioned above that secured \$1 million dollars for the Buffalo Valley Rec-

reation Authority (BVRA) to complete these expansion projects. Funding is also in place

to conduct preliminary engineering design of a US 15 crossing for the BVRT.



COUNTYWIDE PLANNING (Continued from Page 2)

Transportation Planning

In Spring 2016 the Planning Director participated in a tour of all 27 county owned bridges with the County Commissioners and the consulting bridge engineers. The purpose was to review the condition of the structures in order to evaluate maintenance needs and bridge replacement priorities. Staff also provided assistance on advancing the Iddings Bridge in Mifflinburg closer to construction and coordinated with various parties regarding the Nogle Bridge replacement on Strawbridge Road and the design of the Laurel Park Bridge in Glen Iron.



Other transportation news included PennDOT awarding construction contracts for the northern section of the Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation Project (CSVT) which includes the bridge over the river and interchange south of Winfield in Union Township. This section is estimated to be completed in the 2019 to 2020 timeframe.

Staff continued to represent the county on the SEDA-COG MPO and participated in developing the next long-range transportation plan for the eight county region. Lastly assistance was provided to a bicycle and pedestrian advocacy group that formed for the greater Lewisburg area to raise awareness about non-motorized transportation issues.

Countywide Planning

RECYCLING PROGRAM



Program Performance

In 2016 1,805 tons of materials were recycled from county residences. This is a 33% increase from the prior year and the volume of single-stream recycling collected by private service providers accounted for 50% of all residential recycling

which is a 20% increase. It would appear the convenience of curbside single-stream and the wider range of materials accepted has resulted in greater participation.

In past years the county and municipal partners had sponsored special collection events for electronics, appliances and clothing. However those events have become cost prohibitive. Fortunately the Hand Up Foundation of Milton will likely host future events in the county.

Technical Assistance

Planning staff prepared and submitted a PA DEP Section 902 recycling grant application for nearly \$250,000 on behalf of the county and municipalities for equipment purchases and upgrades. If awarded the money would be used to rehabilitate containers at the regional drop-off centers, that are in need of repairs, expand sites, purchase brush chipping equipment, update signage, and cover the costs of public education.

Recycling Program

SUBDIVISION AND LAND DEVELOPMENT

County Ordinance

Administration

The County Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance is in effect in Hartley, Lewis, and West Buffalo Townships and Hartleton and New Berlin Boroughs. Fifteen plans were approved resulting in 11 new lots involving 191 acres. These figures do not include the acreage of the parent tract remaining after subdivision. Of the plans approved ten were single lot subdivisions or lot addition plans, three were multi-lot plans, and two were land developments. The number of plans was up slightly from the prior year.



in these municipalities from 29 subdivision plans and 28 land developments. The table on Page 6 shows 2015 countywide subdivision and land development activity in more detail.

Trends

In 2015 the total number of plans increased by 14% but the number of new lots decreased by 31% from 2014, but was consistent with 2013 figures. Single lot, add-on plans, and land development plans with no subdivision occurring represented 82% of all plans submitted. Only three plans involved the creation of 3 lots or more and the largest subdivision was six lots.

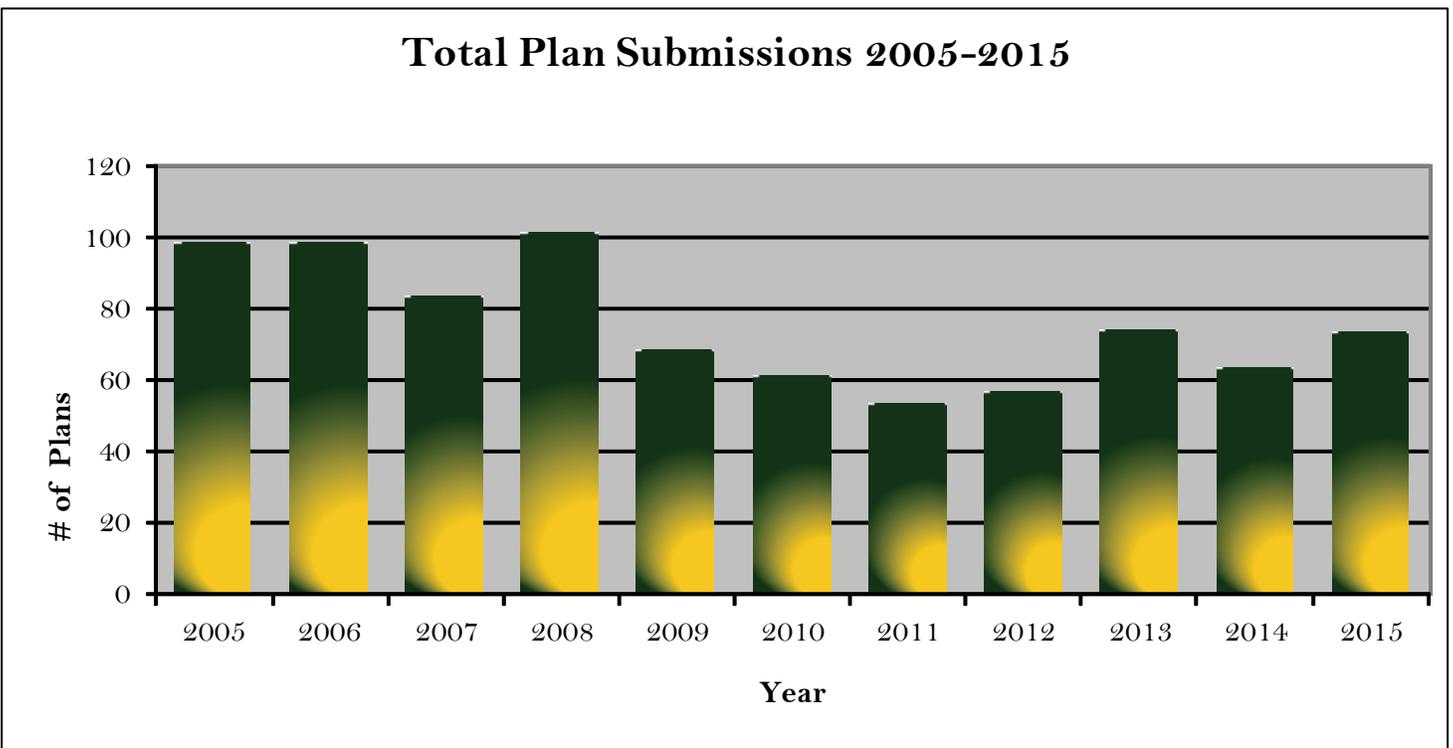
Non-Jurisdictional Plans

The Planning Commission provides ordinance administration services for Mifflinburg Borough and staff reviews all other non-jurisdictional plans as per the PA Municipalities Planning Code. During 2015, a total of 57 plans were reviewed and comments were provided to the municipalities as applicable. A total of 26 lots were created

37 new lots were created countywide in 2015

Since 2005 an average of 75 plans per year have been processed.

Total Plan Submissions 2005-2015



Subdivision and Development

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY



There were 62 new homes permitted for construction in 2015 within the county, which is eight less than the prior year, and well below the early 2000's when 150 plus homes a year were built. The estimated total value of these new homes was \$14.2 million or an average of \$229,176 each. This is for the structures only and does not include the cost of the building lot.

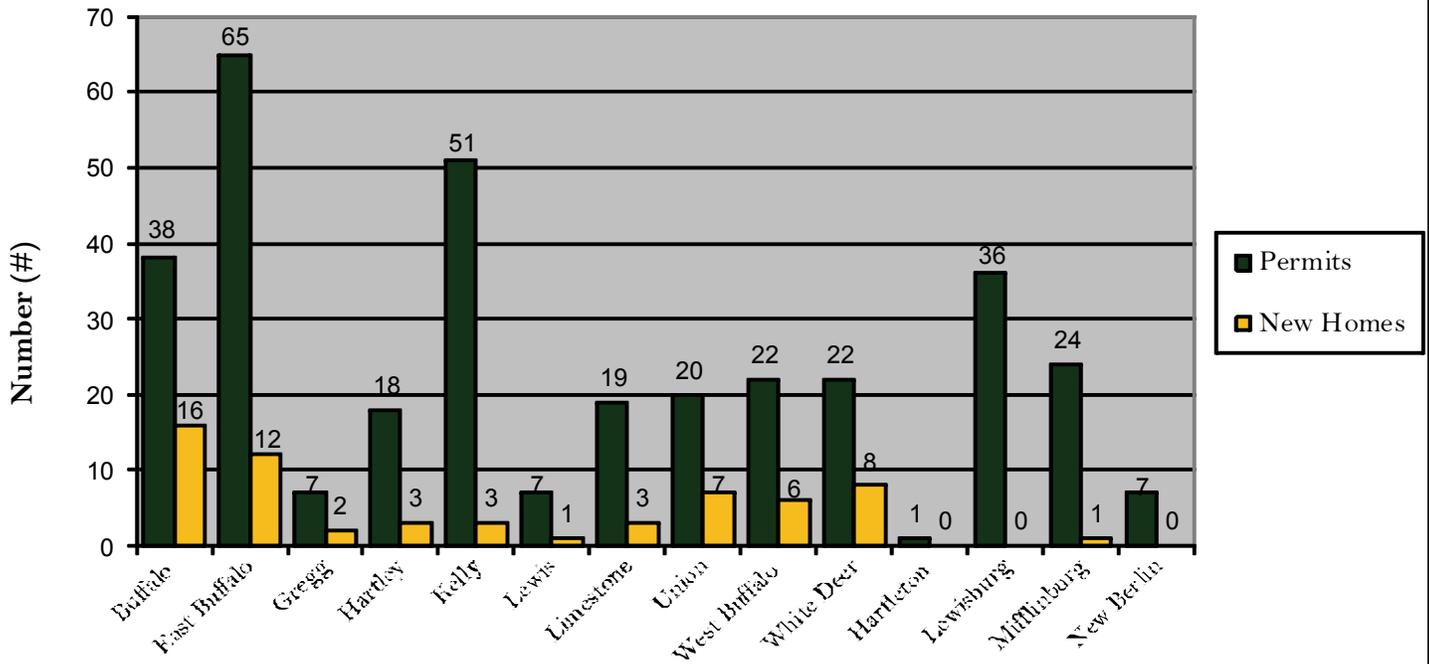
Buffalo Township saw the most new homes with 16, followed by East Buffalo Township with 12, and White Deer Township with 8. Nine municipalities had had less than five new homes constructed and Mifflinburg was the only borough with a new housing start.

The average new home cost was again highest in East Buffalo

Township at \$391,878 followed by Kelly Township at \$283,830 and Buffalo Township at \$243,044. There were also 111 home additions constructed in 2015 for a total estimated value of \$6.9 million or an average of \$62,795 per addition. The number of additions decreased by 10 but the value increased by 34%.

Business, commercial, industrial, institutional and agricultural construction is estimated to have been \$61.9 million during 2015, which is the second highest amount of investment in this category over the last 16 years. Only 2014 had more nonresidential development during the same time period. A significant amount of this construction occurred in Kelly Township (\$27.6 million) and 89% of the total was in East Buffalo and Kelly Townships and Lewisburg Borough.

Permits and New Homes*, 2015



Union County Municipalities

*Figures were taken from building permit applications and are to be used as a fair estimate of activity that occurred during the year.

2014 SUBDIVISION & LAND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

<i>County Ordinance</i>	<i>Plans Approved</i>	<i>Single Add-on Lot Plans</i>	<i>Multi-lot Plans</i>	<i>Land Developments</i>	<i>Number of Lots *</i>	<i>Area * (in acres)</i>	LAND USE (Lots)					
							Res.	Ag.	Indust.	Comm.	Rec.	Other
Hartley Township	4	3	1	-	4	5	3	-	-	-	-	-
Lewis Township	5	3	1	1	4	123	3	2	-	-	-	-
West Buffalo Township	6	4	1	1	3	63	-	3	-	-	-	-
Hartleton Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New Berlin Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL COUNTY ORDINANCE	15	10	3	2	11	191	6	5	-	-	-	-
<i>Municipal Ordinance</i>												
Buffalo Township	6	1	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
East Buffalo Township	9	4	-	5	1	44	-	1	-	-	-	-
Gregg Township	2	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kelly Township	14	4	-	10	2	2	2	-	-	-	-	-
Union Township	6	1	4	1	10	22	10	-	-	-	-	-
White Deer Township	10	4	3	3	6	22	6	-	-	-	-	-
Lewisburg Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Limestone Township	8	4	2	2	5	40	2	-	-	-	-	3
Mifflinburg Borough	2	-	1	1	2	.31	2	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL MUNICIPAL ORDINANCE	57	19	10	28	26	130	22	1	-	-	-	3

* DOES NOT include add-ons, tract residual or land development area.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FUND



In 2015, four applications were received with one approved for \$8,300. The Union County Affordable Housing Trust Fund supports first time home purchases. The program, which is administered by Commission staff and an advisory board, provides down payment

and closing cost assistance to those who qualify. The accompanying table lists income eligibility levels for program participants. Since 1996, nearly 80 applications have been approved, providing assistance in 13 municipalities for first time home purchases, housing rehabilitation and senior housing opportunities.

INCOME ELIGIBILITY

Number Of Family Members	Income Limits
1	\$ 41,438
2	\$ 47,313
3	\$ 53,250
4	\$ 59,125
5	\$ 63,875
6	\$ 68,625
7	\$ 73,375
8	\$ 78,063

Affordable Housing Fund

MISCELLANEOUS

Planning Commission Member Attendance, 2015 (P=Present)													
Member	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Susan Benfer		P	P	P	P	P	P	P		P	P	P	10
Don Bowman	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P		P	P	P	11
Sally Farmer		P	P	P	P	P	P	P		P			8
Allan Grundstrom	P	P	P	P	P	P	P			P	P	P	10
Justin Keister	-	-	-	P	P	P	P	P		P		P	7
Jeff Koppel	P		P	P	P	P	P	P		P	P	P	10
Anthony Mike	P	P		P	P	P	P	P			P	P	9
John Pyper	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P			P	P	10
Jeff Thompson		P	P	P		P				P		P	6

Thank You!

Commission members represent different regions of the county and collectively make recommendations to the County Commissioners and Planning staff. The Commission meets the 2nd Monday of each month at 4:30 PM in the Union County Government Center. Many thanks to these individuals for their commitment and hours of volunteer service!

A WORD ABOUT THE COMMISSION & STAFF



In April 2015 Justin Keister joined the Planning Commission to fill a vacancy created by the departure of Wes Stahl who moved to Juniata County. Justin, a civil engineer, resides with his family in Limestone Township.

Also at the end of 2015 it was learned that Jack Pyper would retire after two terms and would not seek reappointment. The Commission extends its sincere appreciation to both Wes and Jack for their years of service.

Staff participated in training opportunities during the year on planning, recycling, and transportation and was represented at the American Planning Association (APA) Northeast Regional Conference in upstate New York, the APA-PA Chapter conference in Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Greenway and Trail Summit in Warren.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Planning Commission mission is to foster quality planning that promotes orderly growth and development by balancing competing community needs such as economic expansion to retain viability, with the protection of the built and natural environment.

Staff & Commission

DESTINATION CONSERVATION

Last year in this column we reported how the Planning Commission assisted the Merrill Linn Land and Waterways Conservancy with a successful grant application to the Commonwealth Finance Authority to fund a land acquisition on Shikellamy Bluffs in Union Township. In 2015 staff once again provided technical assistance to the Conservancy which resulted in the award of a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) for this same project. As a result 36 acres of critical habitat for rare, threatened and endangered plants and wildlife will be permanently protected on a site bordering Shikellamy State Park, which has been ranked as Union County's highest conservation priority since the early 1990's. The Conservancy will ultimately be donating the land to the Commonwealth as an addition to the Shikellamy overlook which provides public access.



THE CONSERVATION FUND

Also in 2015 The Conservation Fund, a non-profit national conservation organization, purchased an additional 82-acres on Shikellamy Bluffs adjacent to the tract the Linn Conservancy acquired. The Linn Conservancy also contributed financially to this acquisition and the parcel was subsequently transferred to DCNR by the Conservation Fund as an addition to the state park. These two parcels will more than double the size of the Shikellamy State Park overlook and conserve for future generations the last undeveloped portions of this unique landscape and its breathtaking views of the Susquehanna River valleys.



Destination Conservation

TREND WATCH—Affordable Housing



During 2015 a community debate emerged centered on the topic of “affordable housing” or specifically the “workforce housing” units proposed by the Union County Housing Authority at Penn House Commons in East Buffalo Township. Affordable housing is a term often used by planners, government officials, fair housing advocacy groups, bankers, and others but how many people in the general public really know what it means? According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing is affordable if the occupants are paying 30% or less of their income on monthly rental or ownership costs. Those paying more than 30% of their income are considered cost burdened and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, transportation, and medical care. Today in Union County, according to US Census Data, there are approximately 23% (2,748) of

homeowners and 43% (1,793) of renters paying more than 30% of their income for housing needs. Almost 30% of all households in Union County then have some level of cost burden that exceeds recommended levels for affordability.

In recent years the Center for Neighborhood Technology, HUD, and researchers have suggested that a better measure of affordability is an index that considers both the cost of housing and transportation within a neighborhood since car ownership is yet another drain on household resources if the community is not walkable and public transit is not available. In the 1930’s Americans spent about 8% of income on transportation, compared to 17% today. Most places in Union County, with the exception of the core downtowns of Lewisburg and Mifflinburg, score even worse for affordability using these metrics. Countywide renters and homeowners are paying an average of 57% of their annual income on combined housing and transportation costs according to the Location Affordability Portal.

Given that nearly one third of all households are dealing with housing affordability challenges the odds are high that we all personally know or interact with someone on a daily basis who is being counted in these statistics. There is also a good chance they are employed full-time but are not earning enough to afford the cost of living. There are however individuals in need of affordable living space that are not employed for one reason or another such as age or physical disability. It is also likely that housing will continue to become more unaffordable for a growing number of Union County residents and families in future years as housing costs escalate at a higher rate than earnings for average workers. There really is not a question as to whether affordable housing is an issue in Union County. The data bears that out as does our history administering the county first-time homebuyer program. The question is what are the solutions moving forward that will create an environment that allows senior citizens on fixed incomes that have spent their entire lives in Union County and young families just starting out that work here to have affordable and quality housing opportunities. As one might imagine there are no simple answers but a healthy community dialogue should be established to collectively and creatively address our current and future housing needs in a manner that is appropriate for the context of our county and neighborhoods.

Union County Planning Commission 2015 Annual Report

Union County Planning Commission
Union County Government Center
155 North 15th Street
Lewisburg, PA 17837

Telephone: 570-524-3840 Fax: 570-524-3850

www.unioncountypa.org

www.ucgreenway.org