

Comprehensive Planning

During the development of the county comprehensive plan, *Cultivating Community: A Plan for Union County's Future* from 2007 through 2009, and three concurrent multi-municipal plans there was an extensive public involvement component. Various techniques such as focus groups, stakeholder interviews, meetings in a box, a random household survey, project website, school student survey, community interviews, open houses, municipal officials meetings, public meetings, and plan advisory teams were used among other methods to solicit input. This public involvement is what informed and shaped the plan and its goals and recommendations including the primary and secondary growth areas and future land use which is aimed at maintaining a large percentage of the county as forest and agricultural lands.

The public participation was intended to be broad due to the comprehensiveness of what has to be addressed in such a plan. With the exception of the household survey many of the questions were intentionally open ended to encourage discussion, dialogue and sharing of ideas. While this led to participants offering opinions noting general support for open space conservation it did not typically produce feedback on detailed greenway and open space implementation. The one exception was the rail trail from Mifflinburg to Lewisburg which was mentioned by both supporters and opponents.

For example 375 community members were interviewed and asked questions such as *“What is something you like about the community? What is something you dislike about the community? What is something you would like to see changed?”* This returned answers to the first question such as small town character, abundance of open space, peace and quiet, and ample recreation while growth and development, loss of farmland and open space, and increased traffic were noted as dislikes. And finally more recreation programs, preserved farms, and less growth in response to the last question.

The random survey completed by 600 households throughout the county asked respondents to rank the importance of issues facing the county, what were the most important issues to address, and what are the most important reasons for living in the county. Energy conservation, managing future growth, improved transportation, and maintaining a low tax rate were cited as the most critical issues facing the county with each having 84% or more of respondents ranking them as important. In comparison 79% felt more agricultural preservation was important, 66% for expanding parks, recreation and open space and 66% for expanding walking and biking trails. Managing future growth and more agricultural preservation were two of the top five issues participants felt were most important for Union County to address. The most important reasons for people deciding to live in the county were low crime rate, small town/rural atmosphere, appearance and county beauty, quality of education, and taxation level.

Union County Future of Agriculture Program

In parallel with the county comprehensive plan the Union County Conservation District, Union County Planning Commission and a group of volunteers known as the Future of Union County Agriculture Task Force partnered with Pennsylvania State University and the Cooperative Extension Service in an effort to

obtain direct input from Union County's agricultural land owners and producers. In 2007 Let's Talk Sessions were held where 110 people participated in a discussion on the opportunities, challenges and future of farming in the county. This was followed by personal interviews conducted on 72 randomly selected farms. Farmers noted rising property taxes, sprawling development, loss of neighbor farms, increase in non-farm neighbors and rising farmland prices as the main threats to their operations and livelihood.

In terms of future farming plans 41% of those interviewed intend to stop farming in the next 10 years due to age and retirement and of those 33% plan to transfer farm ownership to a relative. When asked about the sale of development rights for farmland preservation 64% indicated they would consider it to prevent the farm from being developed and 23% said they would even consider donating the development rights for the same purpose. However only 6% would sell their land for development and 48% supported the idea of the county issuing a bond to raise money for agricultural preservation with 15% opposed and 35% unsure.

Lewisburg Area Comprehensive Park, Recreation, Open Space & Greenway Plan

During the development of this multi-municipal plan by the Lewisburg Area Recreation Authority (LARA), now Buffalo Valley Recreation Authority, residents of East Buffalo Township, Kelly Township and Lewisburg Borough were engaged through a plan advisory committee, over 25 key person interviews, focus groups and work sessions, and a direct mail survey that netted 283 responses. Findings related to greenways and open space included the following being noted as needs:

- Multi-use trails (top priority)
- Maintaining existing parks
- Riverfront park and trails
- River access points

In addition 91% of survey respondents use local parks and 70% indicated a willingness to pay \$10 (2007 dollars) more per year per person to support parks, recreation, open space and greenways. Protecting farmland was important to 88%, 90% felt protecting wildlife habitat was important, and there was strong support for river related conservation.

SEDA-COG MPO Initiatives

Long Range Transportation Plan

The SEDA-COG Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is required by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) to develop a long-range transportation plan for the eight county MPO region of which Union County is a member. The plan is to consider all modes of transportation including automobile, rail, freight, transit, air, and bicycle and pedestrian. For the current plan the Susquehanna Greenway, including the Union County portion, is the only greenway and bicycle and pedestrian project recommended as a result of that planning process and input received.

TIP Update Process

Every two years the MPO and PennDOT prepare an update to the Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) for the MPO region and the Commonwealth. Input was solicited in 2013 for development of the next TIP via public meetings, webinars, and an interactive website made available via PennDOT. Based on the feedback from the SEDA-COG region Northumberland and Union Counties had the most individual comments in support of walking and biking trails. For Union County 58% of all the entered comments were about biking and walking trails, the majority of which focused on extending the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail across US 15 into downtown Lewisburg and to the river. However one Winfield resident suggested a trail from Lewisburg to Winfield and two East Buffalo Township residents mentioned the need for a trail along River Road to address safety issues caused by joggers and bicyclists being in the road. A Lewisburg Borough resident also proposed that trails be developed along the West Branch Susquehanna River.

PA DCNR SCORP Survey

Every five years the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is required to prepare a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) to establish future outdoor recreation goals and priorities. During 2014 the Pennsylvania State University administered a survey on behalf of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) for the purpose of gathering citizen input for the new SCORP. A total of 161 Union County residents participated in the survey and the Union County Planning Commission obtained a summary of the results from PA DCNR. Below are the highlights from the data.

- 70% stated they were satisfied with the outdoor recreation amenities in the area
- 88% indicated outdoor recreation is important in their everyday life
- Trails, natural areas, waterways, local parks, public spaces and farmland are what people value the most about the community, ranking much higher than highway commercial corridors, downtowns, industrial areas, residential neighborhoods, and other public/institutional areas.
- Community or regional trails were ranked as the highest priority in terms of what the local community should invest in over the next five years followed by water access for boating and kayaking, community and regional parks, and neighborhood parks.
- The lowest support for community investment over the next five years was for motorized trails and parks, skate parks, dog parks, and team sports facilities.
- The following were the top outdoor recreation and conservation funding priorities:
 - Restore damaged rivers and streams
 - Protect wildlife and fish habitats
 - Maintain existing park and recreation areas
 - Acquire and protect open space as undeveloped land
- 73% felt providing outdoor recreation is a core function of local government
- Very few felt they could not afford to participate (3%) in outdoor recreation or had physical limitations (4%) that prevented participation.

- 52% cited inadequate funding for outdoor recreation and conservation as the biggest challenge while 21% said the lack of public and political support for outdoor recreation

Linn Conservancy/Union County Hike

On September 27th, 2014 the Merrill W. Linn Land & Waterways Conservancy in conjunction with Union County sponsored a hike at the Hook Natural Area within the Bald Eagle State Forest. The purpose was to raise awareness about natural resources and open space in the county and to provide an opportunity for participants to provide early input into the topic of greenways and open space planning. Twenty of the hikers stayed to participate in a discussion after the hike. Slightly more felt there is too much development in the county and the rest thought it was about right except for two people that believed more development is needed. The group was fairly evenly split in terms of whether or not greenway and open space resources are adequately protected today. Another interesting response was that everyone was willing to walk at least a half mile from their home to access public open space such as a greenway, park or trail and the majority were willing to walk up to a mile.

Lewisburg River Town Community Planning

In early November 2014 the Lewisburg Neighborhood Corporation and Susquehanna Greenway Partnership held a River Town Community Planning Meeting in Lewisburg Borough to engage residents concerning their relationship to and with the river. Participants were given an opportunity to note what their two favorite and two most frustrating areas were in the town. After a presentation people split into focus groups on “Community Life”, “Downtown Lewisburg”, “Built Environment”, and “Natural Environment” where they identified the top two priorities for the River Town. The major priorities related to greenway and open space planning were the following:

- Connect the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail through the borough to the river, US 15 trail crossing
- Increase pedestrian and biking infrastructure
- Enhance Soldiers and Sailors Park with river access, seating, overlook, amphitheater, picnic tables, pavilion, and interpretive signage
- Trail connections along river to Milton and Northumberland
- Have a connecting trail between all riverfront green spaces and along Buffalo Creek
- Pedestrian walkway on old railroad bridge with canoe/kayak launch area in park

Implications for County Greenway & Open Space Plan

The extensive public participation undertaken for the county and various multi-municipal comprehensive plans, along with the Future of Agriculture program, resulted in a framework for balancing conservation and future growth and development. The public has shown a strong preference for preserving large areas of open space. So in general it is known how people feel about retaining farmland, forests, and other open spaces and this most likely does not need reestablished as part of this greenway and open space planning process as the future land use maps and growth areas capture this public sentiment.

Based on the LARA plan and more recent input received for the SEDA-COG TIP update, the PA DCNR SCORP Survey, and Conservancy hike we can make further assumptions and generalizations about what people are interested in and hold as important. We know people value outdoor recreation and that greenways and open spaces are needed in order for people to participate in those activities. There seems to be support for greenways, trails, creating water access points, watershed restoration, and protecting more land as permanent open space.

However it is difficult to draw conclusions about specific priorities with such a relatively small sample size (328 people) and when respondents are likely from a limited area of the county. For example of the 142 people that engaged in the PennDOT Online Transportation Survey 86% were from the 17837 zip code and the input for the LARA plan was exclusively the greater Lewisburg area.

Public involvement for the greenway and open space plan would most likely be useful to augment what is already documented and known. Such efforts could be structured to obtain more specific input regarding greenway and open space priorities (such as was done by the Lewisburg Neighborhoods Corporation) and it would also be useful to reach a more diverse representation of the citizenry on these issues since preferences are likely to vary across the county based on the unique needs of each region. Furthermore since the majority of land in potential greenway corridors, like along the Susquehanna River for example, is in private ownership it would be important to assess property owner attitudes about such concepts and their willingness to participate in their implementation.