

Planning Commission

2019 Annual Report

COUNTY of UNION

PENNSYLVANIA



County Commissioners

Preston R. Boop, *Chairman*
Jeffrey P. Reber, *Vice Chairman*
Stacy A. Richards, *Secretary*
Susan A. Greene, *Chief Clerk*

Commission Board Members

Donald Bowman, *Chairman*
Susan Benfer, *Vice Chairman*
Sally Farmer
Anthony Mike
James Murphy
Gregory Prowant
Benjamin Ranck
Alan Zeigler

Professional Staff

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



From the Director's Desk

This Annual Report, required by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code, summarizes the activities of the Union County Planning Commission for 2019. The past year involved transportation planning, recycling coordination, administering the first-time homebuyer program, economic development, trail authority support, subdivision and land development plan review and approval, county bridge management, technical assistance to municipalities, and education and outreach among others.

The 2019 calendar year provided new challenges for the Planning Commission and the county. None was more evident than the unexpected loss of long-time county Chief Clerk Diana (Dee) Robinson. In the spring the Commissioners appointed me to fill the role of Acting Chief Clerk which lasted through the end of the year and consumed a significant amount of time. I first met Dee 25 years ago as an eager college graduate having been hired as the county Recycling Coordinator and Environmental Planner. Over the last 19 years as the Planning Director she served as a mentor and was always supportive of the Planning Commission mission. It was a humbling experience, yet awkward assignment, trying to fill in for someone that was a key part of county government for over three decades.

The Planning Commission also saw a couple of long-term board members and a staff person retire. Jeff Koppel and Alan Grundstrom had a combined 30 years of experience as Planning Commission members and Pamela Mabus spent 20 years as our land use planner. Their knowledge, professionalism and personal relationships will surely be missed heading into 2020. Fortunately our staff has had low turnover and this is the first time in over a decade we will need to fill a vacancy.

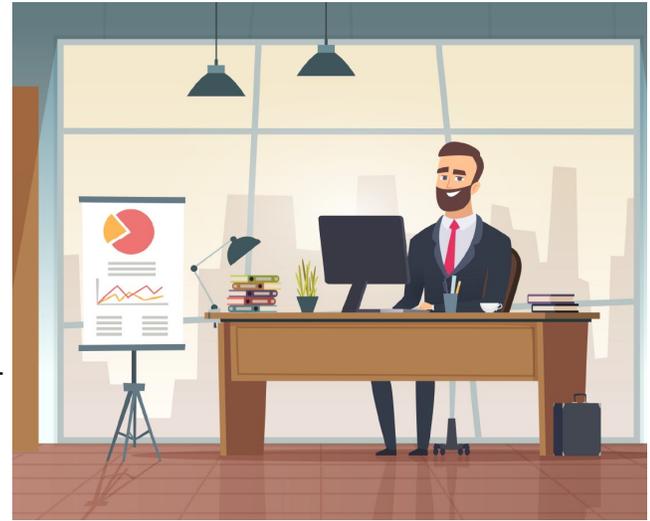
The County Board of Commissioners will be transitioning as well with two new Commissioners set to take office as we look ahead to 2020. Commissioner John Showers decided to conclude his second tour of duty and did not seek reelection. Commissioner Showers served as the liaison to the Planning and Economic Development Office and was a valuable resource for the Planning Commission during his tenure. Staff worked very closely with Commissioner Showers on several special projects including the county Bicentennial celebration, the Shikellamy State Park expansion to protect Shikellamy Bluffs and the formation of the Union County Trail Authority. Commissioner John Mathias also concluded his service to the county. Commissioner Mathias was instrumental in creating the trail authority and was a strong advocate for the county taking an active role in expanding broadband service.

Commissioner Preston Boop will return for another term and is set to be joined by Jeffrey Reber and Stacy Richards. We will have to see what priorities the new Board of Commissioners will have. The Planning Commission and staff look forward to working with the Commissioners and our other partners in 2020 as we strive to keep Union County a great place to live, raise a family, recreate, visit and work.

Sincerely,

Shawn McLaughlin

Planning & Economic Development Director



COUNTYWIDE PLANNING

Broadband Internet Expansion

At the request of the County Commissioners planning staff participated in discussions and studies that investigated how to expand the availability of high-speed broadband Internet service to county residents. Although citizens may have Internet access it often does not meet the modern definition of broadband and in many cases is inadequate and



unreliable.

Penn State University research analyzing 11 million speed tests results across Pennsylvania found that Union County's average download speed is 6.2 Mbps with an average upload speed of 0.8 Mbps. These are both far below the minimum levels set by the Federal Communications Commission which defines high-speed broadband as having at least speeds of 25 Mbps down and 3 Mbps up..

A four-county study involving Clinton, Lycoming, Northumberland and Union Counties was led by SEDA-COG and also identified significant deficiencies in broadband access. The lack of sufficient broadband creates economic inequities between rural and urban areas.

Based on the study findings and discussion with Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs) the county believes improved broadband availability can be achieved through a public-private partnership. Using a combination of existing 911 emergency communication towers, and up to two strategically placed new towers, many rural households could gain access to high-speed broadband that currently do not have the option. The county will be seeking funding and private sector partners to expand broadband service to homes and businesses.

Trail Authority Update

In June 2019 the Union County Trail Authority (UCTA) accepted ownership of the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) and began tackling maintenance needs in earnest. Crosswalks were repainted, restrooms were repaired and cleaned, signs re-installed and vegetation control got underway to remove hazard trees and encroaching brush. The county's Community Service Program, managed by the Probation Office, contributed significantly to the effort by designating the trail as a permanent work site and placed volunteers on the scene for most of the summer.

In the fall a contract was issued to have all the drainage cross pipes flushed, sediment removed from outlets and missing and/or damaged signs replaced. Also UCTA began working with the Union County Conservation District to address erosion and drainage issues on and adjacent to the trail.



The trail hosted various events throughout the year but none bigger than the Unpaved Susquehanna River Valley race. Over 800 hundred avid bicyclists from around the country made the trek to the county in mid-October and were seen riding the trail. The event, in its second year, was organized by the Susquehanna Valley River Visitors Bureau. Funding for the rail trail comes from a partnership with the Susquehanna River Valley Visitors Bureau as a portion of the hotel tax is shared for trails.

Planning Commission staff provide administrative support to the UCTA and the Planning Director is currently a UCTA Board member having been appointed by the County Commissioners.

COUNTYWIDE PLANNING (Continued from Page 2)

Transportation

During 2019 the staff assisted Kelly Township with submitting a Green Light Go grant application to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT). The purpose of the grant, which was partially awarded, is to improve the coordination and operational efficiency of the seven signalized intersections through the use of new signal controllers, radio communication and video detection.

In 2019 the county launched an aggressive bridge bundle project that when completed will result in the full replacement or complete rehabilitation of five county owned bridges. County Bridge #9 the Factory covered bridge in White Deer Township will be rehabbed while County Bridge #25 in Hartley Township on Palman Road will be replaced. These projects are being funded by \$2 million of federal funds provided by PennDOT.

Using restricted local dollars the county will also do a superstructure replacement on County Bridge #1 in Gregg

Township on Masser Road, rehab Hassenplug Covered Bridge (County Bridge #13) in Mifflinburg Borough and replace County Bridge #21 in West Buffalo Township on Shuck Road. Staff continues to represent the county on the SEDA-COG MPO and has taken over administration of the county's bridge program.



Countywide Planning

RECYCLING PROGRAM



Program Performance

In 2019 there were 1,762 tons of materials recycled from county residences., an 8.9% decrease from the prior year and 5% below the five-year average. Curbside single-stream recycling accounted for 64 percent of all residential recycling which is slightly higher than 2018. Since 2012,

when single-stream residential service first became available in the county, there has been more than a 60 percent increase in the amount of residential material recycled. The convenience of single-stream recycling attracted new customers and has resulted in significantly more materials recycled.

Grants & Other News

The staff administered Act 101 Section 902, 903 and 904 Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recycling grants totaling \$126,572 to support recycling equipment purchases by municipalities, education and outreach, and staff.

For over 17 years Lycoming County serviced Union County recycling drop-off centers for free. That changed midway through 2018 where hereby Union County had to pay each time a full roll-off container is taken to the Lycoming county recycling center. In 2019 the hauling fees totaled \$36,525 to serve the municipal drop-offs.

Recycling Program

SUBDIVISION AND LAND DEVELOPMENT

County Ordinance Administration

The County Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance was in effect in Hartley, Lewis, and West Buffalo Townships and Hartleton and New Berlin Boroughs. Nine plans were approved resulting in one new lot involving two acres. These figures do not include the acreage of the parent tract remaining after subdivision. Of the plans approved seven were single lot subdivisions or lot addition plans, three were multi-lot plans, and four were land developments. The number of plans increased by five from the prior year.

42 new lots were created countywide in 2019



Non-Jurisdictional Plans

The Planning Commission reviews all other non-jurisdictional plans as per the PA Municipalities Planning Code. During 2019, a total of 45 plans were reviewed and comments were provided to the municipalities as applicable. A total of 41 lots were created on 349 acres in these municipalities from 30 subdivision plans and 15 land developments. The table on Page 6 shows 2019

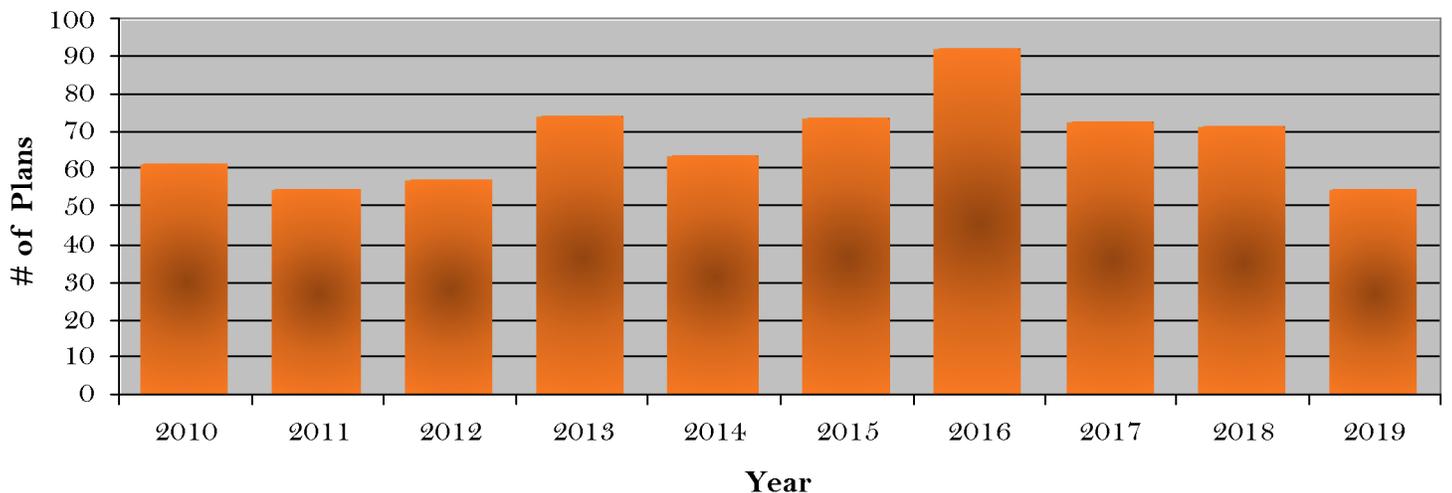
countywide subdivision and land development activity in more detail.

Trends

The total number of plans decreased significantly, down 31%, while the number of new lots decreased by 38% from 2018. Single lot, add-on plans, and land development plans with no subdivision occurring accounted for 85% of all plans submitted. The total number of plans is 20% less than the 10-year average of plan volume processed and 47% lower than the number of plans from 20 years ago.

Since 2010 an average of 67 plans per year have been processed.

Total Plan Submissions 2010-2019



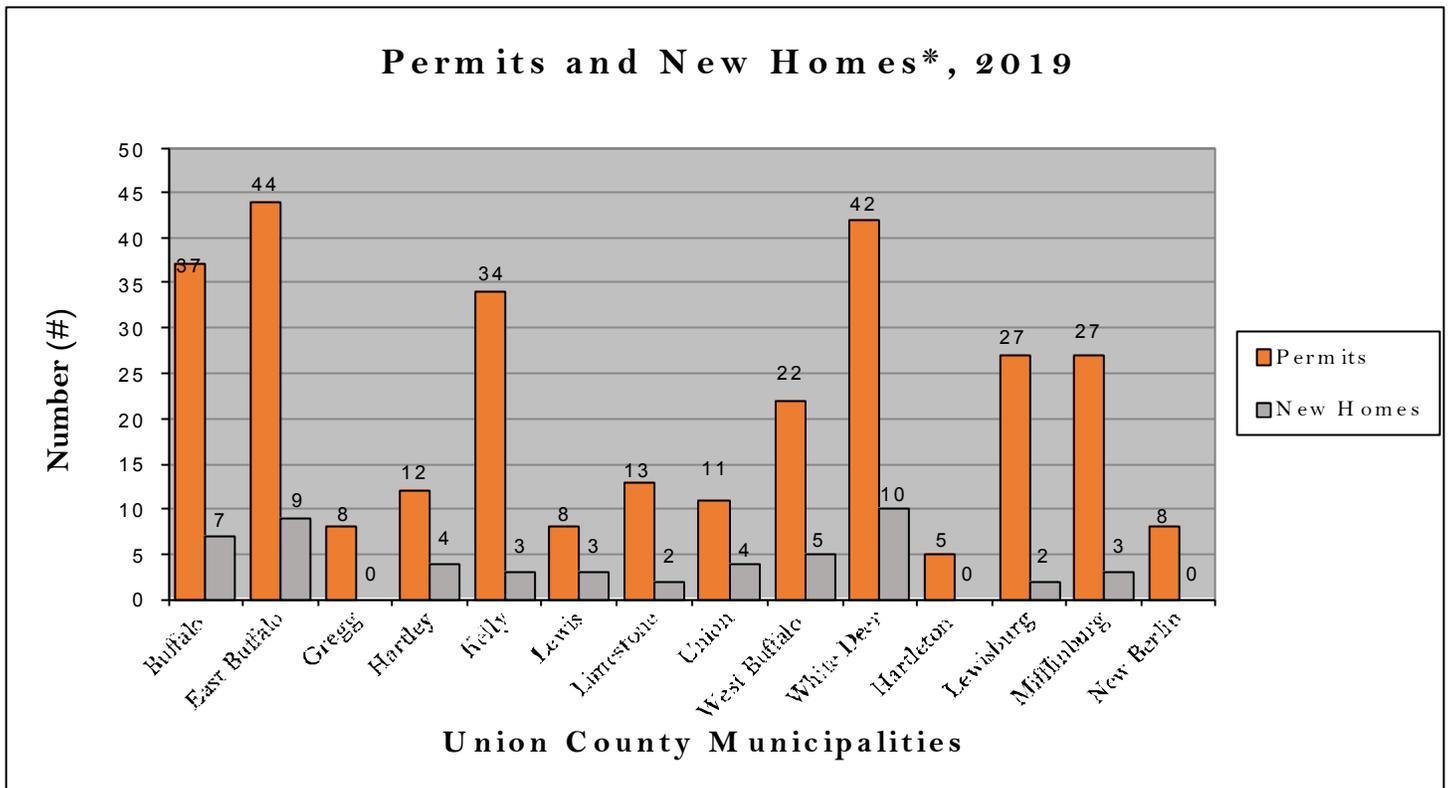
DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY



There were 52 new homes permitted for construction in 2019 within the county, which is a 17% decrease from the prior year. The estimated total value of these new homes was \$13.6 million or an average of \$261,538 each. This is for the structures only and does not include the cost of the building lot. Total new home investment declined by 9% from 2018 but the average home cost climbed \$23,273. From 2010 to 2013 the average cost of new residential homes was \$124,422; however, from 2013 to 2019 that figured jumped to an average of \$220,960. Even controlling for inflation this represents a 56% increase, which is an indication of escalating housing costs. Since 2010 \$110 million has been invested in new residential construction within the county.

White Deer Township and East Buffalo had the most new homes with 10 and 9 respectively, followed by Buffalo Township with seven. The other 11 municipalities all had five or less with three seeing no new home construction. The average new home cost was highest in Kelly Township at \$365,970 followed by Buffalo Township at \$352,308. There were also 118 home additions constructed in 2019 for a total estimated value of \$4.6 million or an average of \$39,983 per addition.

Business, commercial, industrial, institutional and agricultural construction is estimated to have been \$113 million during 2019, \$80 million higher than a year ago. The majority (92%) of this construction occurred in East Buffalo, Kelly and White Deer Townships.



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

2019 SUBDIVISION & LAND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

<i>County Ordinance</i>	<i>Plans</i>	<i>Single ☺ Add-on Lot Plans</i>	<i>Multi-lot Plans</i>	<i>Land Develop- ments</i>	<i>Number of Lots *</i>	<i>Area * (in acres)</i>	LAND USE (Lots)							
							<i>Res.</i>	<i>Ag.</i>	<i>Indust.</i>	<i>Comm.</i>	<i>Rec.</i>	<i>Other</i>		
Hartley Township	2	2	-	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lewis Township	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
West Buffalo Township	5	3	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hartleton Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New Berlin Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL COUNTY ORDINANCE	9	7	-	2	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Municipal Ordinance</i>														
Buffalo Township	9	3	1	5	4	8.4	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
East Buffalo Township	6	2	1	3	2	20	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gregg Township	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kelly Township	5	3	-	2	2	96	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
Limestone Township	7	5	1	1	4	6.6	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Union Township	4	1	3	-	9	80	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
White Deer Township	10	8	1	1	8	9	6	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lewisburg Borough	1	-	-	1	12	4.7	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mifflinburg Borough	2	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL MUNICIPAL ORDINANCE	45	23	7	15	41	349	37	3	-	1	-	-	-	-

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

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FUND



In 2019, five applications were approved for funding totaling \$61,940. 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 the 2019 income eligibility levels for program participants based the number of family members. Since its inception the fund has helped over 100 applicants with first-time home purchases in 13 of the 14 county municipalities.

2019 INCOME ELIGIBILITY

Number of Family Members	Income Limits
1	\$ 47,390
2	\$ 54,160
3	\$ 60,930
4	\$ 67,700
5	\$ 74,470
6	\$ 81,240
7	\$ 88,010
8	\$ 94,780

Affordable Housing Fund

MISCELLANEOUS

Planning Commission Member Attendance, 2019 (P=Present)													
Member	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Susan Benfer	P	P	P					P		P			5
Don Bowman	P	P	P		P	P		P		P	P	P	9
Sally Farmer	P	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P	P		8
Allan Grundstrom		P			P	P		P	NO MEETING	P	P	P	7
Jeff Koppel	P			NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING				4
Anthony Mike	P	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING		NO MEETING	P	P	P	8
James Murphy	P	P	P		P	P					P		6
Gregory Prowant					P	P		P		P	P	P	6
Benjamin Ranck	P	P	P		P	P				P	P	P	8

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



Jeff Koppel of Limestone Township retired from the Commission after serving more than 18 years. Allan Grundstrom who represented Buffalo and East Buffalo Townships during his tenure retired after serving 12 years. The Planning Commission appreciates the contributions both these individuals made as volunteers.

The Union County Commissioners appointed Gregory Prowant of White Deer Township and Alan Zeigler of Lewisburg to fill Commission vacancies. Welcome aboard Gregory and Alan!

Long-time staff member Pamela Mabus called it a career after 20 years as the Land Use Planner primarily overseeing plan reviews, graphic design and document layout. Congratulations Pamela!

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

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Staff continued to serve on the board of FOUCS Central Pennsylvania, a seven county marketing consortium, and participated in the PREP network of partners across the region to attract new economic investment. This included assisting existing businesses with expansion.

The county decided to go in a different direction with real estate brokerage representation at Great Stream Commons. Lee & Associates of Mechanicsburg, which is led by a Union County native, is now assisting with the marketing of the business park. Staff worked with Lee & Associates to update concept plans and marketing materials. In addition staff participated in a number of property site visits with representatives from companies looking to potentially locate in the region.

One of the biggest challenges being faced by county employers in 2019 centered on workforce availability. The state and local unemployment rate hovered around four percent or below which made it difficult for businesses to find skilled workers. Given the aging population in our region this trend is likely to continue unless new families move into the area seeking available job opportunities. Employers could also pursue automation.



Economic Development

TREND WATCH—Alternative Energy

Counties to our north have experienced the Marcellus Shale gas boom along with wind energy development. Several residents and municipal officials have asked whether or not Union County is a location for utility scale wind turbine development, also known as wind farms. We cannot say with 100 percent certainty that wind energy development will not happen in Union County but it is unlikely. In order to be feasible a location needs to have minimum sustained winds of 14.5 miles per hour, typically found at higher elevations. This is the reason you see wind turbines high on ridgetops in Bradford, Lycoming and Tioga counties. In Union County the areas where we have the highest sustained winds are within the Bald Eagle State Forest. St. Francis University of Pennsylvania has developed a website with information on wind energy including a map of average sustained wind speeds. See <https://www.francis.edu/Pennsylvania-Wind-Maps/> for more information. In Union County it is more likely we would see smaller scale accessory wind turbines for individual home or farm use if anything.

Solar energy up until this point has largely been harvested through solar panels on rooftops or via a small solar array accessory to residential uses. In 2019 that changed within the region as a 700-acre utility scale solar farm was proposed in nearby West Chilisquaque Township, Northumberland County. Then a month later Bucknell University was the first to publicly announce plans to install a larger scale solar array in Union County near the existing Bucknell Golf Course driving range in East Buffalo Township. The proposal was met with questions and a degree of opposition from neighborhood residents.

Shortly thereafter rumors began circulating that utility scale solar projects were targeting Union County and solar energy developers were approaching farmland owners about long-term leases. In fact the county received a call about the availability of Great Stream Commons; however, the solar company eventually determined there was not enough acreage as they wanted a minimum of 400 usable acres.



Most municipal zoning ordinances do not address utility scale solar. East Buffalo Township and Buffalo Township were the first to draft zoning amendments related to solar energy development. There are a number of factors beyond zoning that also come into play with these projects. Currently non-agricultural development is limited to one percent on farms that are preserved through the county Agricultural Land Preservation Program. In addition a farm enrolled in the county's Clean and Green preferential tax assessment program would face rollback tax penalties if the land were developed for non-agricultural uses.

The best way for a municipality to protect its interests and to ensure it is getting the right type of development in proper locations is through local zoning. Zoning remains the most effective tool that municipalities have for influencing future growth and development even though it may not be popular with all constituents.