

Identification of Issues

Introduction

While state law requires that local Comprehensive Plans address every aspect of life and development in a municipality, local concerns and conditions will dictate which of these aspects receive the greatest attention. From the beginning of the planning process, the Township has made numerous efforts to identify the issues of greatest concerns to the various communities within the Township. This chapter includes a summary of these efforts and a roster of the issues identified. Additional detail and supporting information relative to the issues is found in Part IV of this document, "Background Studies."

Public Outreach Efforts

The Township has gone well beyond the minimal public participation requirements included in Act 247. Public input has been solicited from the very beginning of the process, all through every phase of the work, and up to the final hearing to present the complete document. These efforts are described below.

- **FOCUS GROUPS**

The initial outreach effort was to conduct focus groups in order to get a sense of the principal areas of concern. This information would be used to develop the written questionnaire that would be mailed to each household in the Township. The Task Force originally intended to have focus groups for homeowners, families, residents of rental properties, and business owners. During the week of July 21, 2003, three focus groups were held: two with homeowner groups and one with families. There were a total of nineteen attendees at these meetings. Due to scheduling difficulties, it was not possible to schedule focus sessions with renters and business owners.

Topics discussed at the focus group meetings included land uses, environmental concerns, natural and historic resources, local government, local infrastructure (principally utilities and transportation), recreational opportunities, the local economy, and the general quality of life in the Township.

The results of the focus group sessions were strongly indicative of the kind of input we would receive any time we asked for public input. Residents were generally very pleased with the quality of life in the Township, frequently citing the visual beauty of the area, the good schools, their appreciation for the parks (especially Rose Tree Park), and the quality of public services, particularly the work of the police and fire departments.

Principal areas of concern were the preservation of the remaining open space in the face of growing development pressures, motor vehicle traffic, and the lack of sidewalks and trails to provide pedestrian access to the business districts and transit.

- **INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Individual interviews were conducted throughout the research process. By the conclusion of the work, twenty-six individuals had been interviewed by the Township's planning consultant (usually by telephone), and one "group interview" had been conducted with Township Council.

The people who were interviewed included owners of local businesses (since it hadn't been possible to convene a focus group for them), representatives of local institutions, Township staff, and representatives from a few special interest organizations that are active in the community.

- WRITTEN SURVEY

The centerpiece of the public outreach process was two-page questionnaire that was mailed to every household in the Township early in January 2004. The questionnaire forms were color-coded by council district. The questions (which could be returned anonymously) asked for some basic personal information about the respondent, inquired about what aspects of life in the Township the respondent felt were attractive or unattractive, and invited respondents to list what they thought the Townships special treasures were. The survey also went into greater detail on the issues identified in the focus groups: traffic and growth management.

The Township mailed 4,258 surveys and 874 completed responses were received by the cut-off date, giving an overall response rate of 20.5%. Measured by district, District 4 had the lowest response rate (16.6%) and District 5 had the highest (24.5%).

The Task Force conducted a thorough analysis of the survey responses. The findings showed that the opinions expressed in the focus groups and individual interviews were indicative of those of the larger community:

The most appealing aspects of the Township were the fire protection services, public schools, law enforcement services, convenience to shopping, and its physical appearance, with particular mention of the green spaces and wooded areas.

The least appealing traits were traffic volume, road and sidewalk safety, social services, management of growth and new development, the lack of playgrounds, road surface conditions, and a weak sense of community.

Traffic volume was cited most frequently - by a substantial margin - as the least appealing aspect of living in the Township.

Growth management and traffic - obviously closely related - were named as the **most critical issues** facing the Township. This was completely consistent with the findings from the focus groups and individual interviews.

The most commonly cited "**treasures**" were **Rose Tree Park and Ridley Creek State Park**: the largest permanent open space areas in this extensively developed area.

- COMMUNITY VISIONING SESSION

On April 29, 2004, the Comprehensive Plan Task Force hosted a community visioning session at Springton Lake Middle School. There were several purposes to this meeting. First of all, there

was a desire to follow up on the results of the written survey and explore possible responses to the concerns that were stated. In addition to gauging response to possible actions suggested by the consultant, the Task Force wanted to determine what original solutions the residents might come up with. Other purposes included presenting the detailed analysis of the survey responses, publicizing the planning effort, and generally keeping the residents informed of progress on the plan.

Thirty-five residents attended the session. While the turnout was small relative to the high level of response to the written survey, most of those in attendance actively participated in the discussions, making for a productive meeting. During the discussion time, the group was divided in two in order to enable as many people as possible to express their opinion. Discussion was intentionally focused on the issues of traffic and growth management, since these were the most critical concerns as identified by the written survey.

Regarding traffic, the improvement (or provision) of **facilities for alternate modes of transit** was a clear favorite. It was noted that residents of the southern part of the Township favored **sidewalks**, while people living in the north wanted **pedestrian trails**. This suggests the need to accommodate pedestrian travel in a form that is sensitive to the context of the neighborhoods.

While structural solutions were favored to mitigate hazardous conditions at specific locations (such the intersections of Rt.252 with the by-pass and Providence Road), **most felt that widening roads was *not* a desirable solution**. While this could reduce congestion, it was noted that this relief would likely be only temporary and it would simultaneously increase both speed and volume.

It was stated that **much of the traffic in the Township is pass-through**: people from outside the Township going to someplace also outside the Township. This being the case, **meaningful, long-term solutions to the traffic conditions will require co-operation with surrounding communities, multi-jurisdictional agencies, and higher levels of government**.

There were fewer direct suggestions for the more nebulous issue of growth management. The group felt strongly that **Township officials needed to take a harder line about granting waivers from land development regulations and zoning variances**. There was also a desire to restrict the number of new homes permitted, but there are legal reasons why any such approach may not be as strong as the attending residents desired.

There was **strong support for keeping permanent open spaces in a more or less natural condition**, as formal recreational facilities attract more use and exacerbate the traffic problem.

There was ready assent to the notion that residential development typically did not pay for itself; that is, the cost of providing the additional municipal services exceeds the tax revenue generated. However, there was no strong support for potential solutions: cutting services, raising taxes, or encouraging more commercial and industrial development.

- WEBSITE

Immediately following the visioning session, the detailed responses from the written survey were posted on the Township's website (www.upperprovidence.org) along with a mechanism

to allow viewers to make comments.

- OTHER

All of the methods described above are in addition to the public meeting and hearing required by Act 247 as part of the adoption process. In addition, the monthly meetings of the Task Force at the Township Building were open to the public.

Issues Identified

In addition to the extensive public outreach described above, some issues were identified in the course of empirical analysis of existing conditions. More detail on these is provided in Part IV of this document. It is interesting to note that the most critical issues - growth management and traffic - appear a number of times, suggesting not only the complexity of these issues but also the diversity of ways that they may be addressed. The principal issues of concern are listed below. As noted in Chapter 1, an “issue” is simply a particular topic to be addressed. It is value-neutral and can usually be expressed as a single word or phrase. The issue statements are followed by a brief synopsis of how and where they were identified. The issues are listed in alphabetic order.

GROWTH MANAGEMENT

The closely related issues of growth management and traffic are cited by Township residents more than any others as their principal concerns regarding the future of Upper Providence. The development of new housing is the specific aspect of growth that is named exclusively.

The Regional Setting chapter observes that the high rate of residential development is characteristic of the region and is not limited to Upper Providence. The Existing Land Use chapter notes that there is little space left for new, large-scale development; new development is likely to be in the form of redevelopment or subdivision of lots from developed properties. This chapter also notes the small amount of land in non-residential use. The Population and Housing chapter observes that growth can be expected to continue at a modest rate through at least 2020. Two-thirds of all the housing units in the Township are single-family detached units, suggesting that this form will continue to be the preferred housing style for at least the immediate future. The Transportation chapter notes that the provision of new areas of high-density development may actually improve traffic concerns if it results in the provision of more transit alternatives. The Community Facilities & Services chapter notes that the high quality of municipal services is an important element in the Township’s quality of life and attracts people to live here. The chapter also observes that a growing number of residents is likely to strain municipal resources as the tax revenue from new homes is typically insufficient to pay for the required increase of municipal services.

INTERMUNICIPAL CO-OPERATION

There are few specific citations of intermunicipal co-operation as a major concern, but it is mentioned as instrumental in addressing those issues that are.

The Regional Setting chapter notes that most Township residents work and shop outside of the Township, thereby giving them an interest in issues that affect the whole region and not just the Township. The issue of intermunicipal co-operation really comes to the fore in the

Transportation and Community Facilities & Services chapters. In the former, it is noted that the traffic issues facing the Township are regional in nature and cannot be solved at just the local level. In the latter, intermunicipal co-operation is cited as a possible way to provide some municipal services more efficiently.

MUNICIPAL SERVICES / FISCAL HEALTH

Township residents are generally pleased with the quality of services provided by the municipality. However, there is concern that the rising cost of providing these services will soon exceed the tax revenue. The Existing Land Use and Community Facilities & Services chapters both observe that tax revenue generated by residential uses is typically insufficient to pay for the services that residents consume. This same observation was made to the attendees at the visioning session, who readily assented.

OPEN SPACE

The survey invited residents to identify places in the Township that they particularly valued: their treasures. The two places cited most often were both open space features: Rose Tree Park (part of the Delaware County park system) and Ridley Creek State Park. This clearly suggests a desire by the residents for additional facilities of this type, but other outreach efforts revealed a diversity of opinion about whether the diminishing supply of open space in the Township should be developed for active recreational use or left in a more natural state to accommodate passive uses such as hiking.

The Existing Land Use chapter notes that demand for new housing has occupied most of the developable land in the Township and that the supply of open space is shrinking. The same chapter, as well as the Community Facilities & Services chapter, notes that there are few facilities in the Township for active recreation, outside of those owned by the school district.

TRAFFIC

At every turn and at practically every opportunity, traffic - along with growth management - is cited as an overwhelming concern of Township residents. Within this broad topic, residents also cited concerns about road congestion, inappropriate speed, specific locations that are hazardous due to volume and/or design, and - less frequently - about the quality of the road surface.

Traffic is identified as a planning issue in the Regional Setting chapter, where it is noted that much of the traffic volume is generated by pass-through traffic and that the majority of residents drive to work. The Existing Land Use chapter notes that plans for new development should consider the impact upon traffic volume. The Transportation chapter provides specific traffic volume figures and identifies intersections and corridors that the residents consider hazardous. This same chapter includes an inventory of alternate modes of travel and notes that the provision of alternatives could help residents avoid congested roads.

The form stated that completed surveys were to be returned to the Township no later than January 23, 2004. All surveys received up to two weeks *after* this date were included in the analysis; the response rate shown here reflects that number. Several surveys were received after this two-week grace period and were not included in the analysis.

A detailed analysis of the findings may be found in the Appendix.

As noted in Chapter 1, Act 247 *requires* municipal comprehensive plans to address certain specific issues. This document does so, even though not all of those issues are listed here. This list identifies only those topics of particular concern to Township residents.