

Existing Land Use

Introduction

The pattern of land use is a product of geography, history, and economy. Land use planning is what most people think of when the topic of community planning is raised, and with good reason, for it is a critical component of the community, the principal indicator of development, and a vital determinant of quality of life. The existing land use pattern is also where we start when we are planning for the future. In communities that are almost fully developed - like Upper Providence Township - there is a great temptation to dismiss the need for land use planning: if everything is already developed, then why plan for development? In such cases, development concerns less about building on vacant land, and more about observing, anticipating, and planning for *changes* in land use and in the intensity of land use. The strategic questions of “what do we want to become” and “how do we get there” remain valid ones.

Land Use Types

For the purposes of this document, we have established the following land use categories. These are based upon the conventions of land use analysis with some modifications that will assist the analysis of conditions most critical in Upper Providence. Figure 15-1, the Existing Land Use Map, shows how these uses are arranged in the municipality.

RESIDENTIAL - Upper Providence is overwhelmingly residential in character. In order to allow more meaningful analysis, we have introduced a density factor to the map. We have defined “low density” as single family homes on lots of two acres or more; “moderate density” as single family homes on lots of at least one acre, but less than two acres; and “high density” as single and twin houses on lots of less than an acre. Townhouses, apartment buildings, and other structures that contain more than one dwelling are shown as “multi-unit” residential buildings.

COMMERCIAL - Commercial use is defined as the sale of goods and services, although we have excluded professional services (doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, etc.). Our reason for doing so is that professional service providers typically see clients (or customers) by appointment whereas other service providers have customers that drop in as they need to. This results in a difference in the type and volume of traffic, and - most importantly for the purposes of this plan - a different impact upon the neighborhood and the larger community.

PROFESSIONAL OFFICE - Planning convention classifies professional offices as a type of industrial use, perhaps because the earliest offices were for the administration of industrial operations. Technological advances in transportation and communications have allowed many administrative offices to be geographically separated from their parent operations. As noted above, this category also includes professional service providers who tend to meet clients by appointment. Finally, this category includes offices used by consultants and other professionals (such as

information technology specialists) who meet their clients by appointment, off site, or electronically.

MANUFACTURING - This category is defined by the production of some product, either from raw materials or by the assembly of constituent parts produced elsewhere. In communities with a significant amount of manufacturing operations, the category may be divided into “heavy manufacturing” (the “smokestack” industries) and “light manufacturing,” which includes processes with less apparent environmental impacts. In Upper Providence, there are so few manufacturing operations that there is little point to making the distinction.

INSTITUTIONAL - Institutional uses provide some kind of service to the public and are usually open to the general public to some degree, although they are not necessarily owned by the public sector. Schools* and churches are prominent uses of this type, and they are indicated by separate categories on our map. Other institutional uses in Upper Providence include municipal offices, the fire company, cemeteries, and the sewage treatment plant. Note that the St. Mary Magdalene property is shown as *both* church and school.

OPEN SPACE - These are the Township’s protected green spaces and recreational areas. The critical aspect here is the degree of protection: this is not just vacant or unused land, but it has a purpose directly related to its open character and it is owned by some agency with an interest in maintaining it as open space. We have divided this category into two classes based upon the degree of public access permitted. The open spaces that allow public use will have a different impact upon their neighborhood than those where no such access is accommodated. Note that public ownership does not always translate into public access. Most prominently, the Springton Reservoir and the land immediately surrounding it is publicly owned, but public access and recreational use are prohibited. Conversely, the Taylor Arboretum in Middletown Township is privately owned but open to the public. These are, however, exceptions to the general rule: most publicly owned land is available for active use by the general public. Public open spaces in Upper Providence include Rose Tree Park, Glen Providence Park, a small portion of Ridley Creek State Park, a variety of smaller public playgrounds and parklets, and facilities owned by Rose Tree Media School District. Most of the private open spaces are associated with residential cluster developments: while their protection and maintenance are assured and there is an aesthetic benefit to the public, physical access is limited to residents of the attached development. In addition, we have shown some utility rights-of-way in this category.

TRANSPORTATION - The transportation category is divided into roads and rail facilities. “Roads” include all dedicated road rights-of-way, including lands occupied by the Route 1 expressway and its interchanges. The “rail” classification includes the land occupied by the tracks for the SEPTA R-3 line as well as the Media train station. There are no other rail lines in the Township.

VACANT - As noted above, vacant property is not synonymous with “open space.” Vacant land may be either publicly or privately owned. The critical factor is that there is no apparent public or private use. Lands placed in this category include

lots in residential areas that are not currently developed, land set aside for streets but not developed for this use (i.e., “paper streets”), and developed land that is not permanent open space. Vacant buildings are generally not included as their vacancy is typically short-term. We have made an exception to this by showing the Rose Tree Tavern property as vacant, as this is a prominently located structure that has been vacant for some time.

*We have included private schools in this category: Benchmark, PIT, St. Mary Magdalene, and Walden. While these are privately owned and are not necessarily open to the public, their impact upon the community is similar to that of public schools.

FIGURE 15.3: LAND USE DISTRIBUTION

Information in this chart is based upon Figure 17.1, the Existing Land Use Map. Types of use are classified as described in the preceding text. Total percentage exceeds 100 due to rounding error.

LAND USE TYPE	ACRES / SQUARE MILES	PERCENTAGE OF TWP.
Residential	2,543.1 / 3.98	67.0
Commercial	19.2 / 0.03	0.5
Professional Office	20.2 / 0.03	0.5
Industrial	6.4 / 0.01	0.2
Institutional	193.4 / 0.30	5.1
Permanent Open Space (incl. reservoir)	571.4 / 0.89	15.1
Transportation (incl. road rights-of-way)	428.0 / 0.67	11.3
Vacant	13.5 / 0.02	0.4
TOTAL	3,795.2 / 5.93	100.1

SOURCE: Spotts, Stevens & McCoy, Inc., 2004.

Observations

Analysis of existing land use patterns is a necessary first step in land use planning. A given arrangement of land uses exists for a reason - or, more correctly, a number of reasons. The existing patterns also create certain expectations among residents and others who have occasion to travel through the Township: putting office space in a disused school is far more palatable to most than erecting a new building in the middle of some cherished scenic vista. Understanding what exists and why it exists helps us to develop realistic plans and policies regarding future land use. The following observations are based upon our analysis of the land use patterns in Upper Providence Township.

- The map clearly illustrates what is already apparent to most residents: the Township is almost entirely built-out, with very little land left for new development.
- Residential use is by far the dominant land use in the Township, with many residential lots at or near the minimum lot size required by zoning.
- The development of increasingly less suitable land with single-family homes is evidence of the strong demand for this type of housing. We note that many newer homes are on lots as small as permitted by the applicable zoning regulations. Steeply sloped locations that would have been passed over in earlier years have been re-graded to accommodate construction and to maximize the yield of the site. Lands developed to this level of intensity often feature extensive retaining walls and steep yard areas.
- Relatively large lots, narrow roads, protected stream corridors, and the prominent

location of the parks and open spaces give much of the Township a quiet, almost rural character that is not apparent from the map.

- There are relatively few residences in multi-unit buildings, and all but two of them are south of the Route 1 by-pass. The examples on the north side are both cluster-type developments surrounded by wide buffer areas.
- Commercial areas are limited to the portion of Providence Road between the Media line and the Route 1 by-pass, a short stretch of Old State Road (also adjacent to Media), and a tiny stretch of Baltimore Pike. Demand for commercial space may be hindered by the proximity of the Borough and the shopping malls along Baltimore Pike: although the area of the Township zoned for commercial use is very small, it is far from being fully developed for commercial use.
- The Township has a limited supply of purpose-built commercial space. Old State Road has several small multi-tenant commercial buildings, and there are a handful of restaurants and gas stations, but much of the commercial activity in the Township is accommodated in converted dwellings. While this has helped the Township escape the visual blight of the typical suburban strip-mall with its large buildings separated from the street by huge parking lots, it has its down side. Many of the small yards that once separated the buildings from the street have been paved to provide customer parking, but the smallness of the lots results in this being a marginally adequate provision. Driveways are poorly defined or non-existent, and there is little or no provision for pedestrians. Furthermore, expansion of any kind is difficult for most of these sites.
- The Rose Tree Corporate Center is a modern office complex comprised of two buildings at the Route 1 / Route 252 interchange. It is by far the largest concentration of office space in the Township. Most of the remaining office space in the Township is in the form of adaptive re-uses of older buildings. There are a few, relatively small purpose-built office buildings along Providence and Old State Roads.
- Industrial areas in the Township are small and poorly located by modern standards: the few that there are tend to be environmentally constrained by floodplains or steep slopes and lack easy access to the highway network. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the land zoned for industrial use is occupied by the sewage treatment plant and therefore makes no contribution to tax revenue.
- Schools are the most prominent institutional uses, with both public and private institutions well represented. St. Mary Magdalene has the largest site of any of the houses of worship in the Township. The large cemeteries along Kirk Lane are shown here as institutional use, but also function as permanent open spaces, reducing the perceived density of development.
- Open space areas are distributed throughout the community. The largest facilities include Ridley Creek State Park at the Township's northwestern edge and two County-owned parks: Rose Tree Park near the center of the Township and Glen Providence Park along the Media Borough line. These parks provide Township residents with ample opportunities for passive recreation endeavors. Nearly all facilities for active recreation - such as improved ball fields, tennis and basketball courts, and playground areas suitable for young children - are owned by the Rose Tree Media School District. Township-owned facilities are limited to a few small playgrounds.

Planning Implications

- The current extent of development in the Township leaves little vacant land for new

construction. As a result, new development must be accommodated on lots carved from existing developed parcels, on lands previously deemed unsuitable for development, and on developed property that has been cleared.

- If the demand for housing in the Township remains strong, developers will continue to maximize the yield of available land, erecting new homes wherever physically possible, and expanding the definition of what is considered “developable land.” This is likely to result in increasing pressure upon the Township to raise allowable density and to relax restrictions based upon environmental considerations.
- Typically, residential uses do not generate sufficient tax revenue to pay for the municipal services that they consume. The converse is true for commercial, office, and industrial development, so municipalities rely upon these uses to balance their books. The preponderance of residential property suggests that the Township will find it increasingly difficult to sustain the current level and quality of municipal services.
- Although the Township has zoned only small areas for commercial, office, and industrial use, much of that land is used for other purposes. This is particularly noticeable along Providence Road in Rose Tree village: the entire corridor is zoned “Business,” but about half of the available frontage is occupied by residential uses. This suggests that, to date, demand has failed to absorb even the modest available supply. This may also suggest that this area is not well-suited for this kind of development: although it is readily accessible, lots are small and there is no readily developable land. As manufacturing is in decline nationally, there is little point in trying to attract new development of this type. However, the Township may wish to explore ways to accommodate and to attract office and commercial development.
- The commercial corridors along Providence Road and Old State Road would benefit from a comprehensive design strategy to improve pedestrian accommodation, to clearly define driveways and parking areas, and to provide for more consistent signage, lighting, and landscaping.
- Rose Tree Elementary School, Springton Lake Middle School, and St. Mary Magdalene School all draw many of their students from the immediately surrounding neighborhoods, but there is little provision for safe pedestrian travel in these areas. Better pedestrian connections to adjacent residential areas could reduce reliance upon motor vehicles, reduce traffic, and provide opportunities for recreation and exercise.
- With the exception of a few small playgrounds, all of the active recreation facilities in the Township are owned by the School District. While this technically makes them public facilities, the reality is that any use by the general public must be worked around the schools’ practice and game schedules. Issues of maintenance and legal liability further impede public use. The Township may wish to explore ways to increase the availability of playing fields and courts to its residents.
- Changes to land use must be done with consideration to the potential impact upon traffic. Wherever possible, land development projects should consider ways to facilitate alternate forms of transportation, mass transit, and generally reduced reliance on cars. Land use regulations should be implemented that will provide incentives for these considerations.