

# **The Comprehensive Plan**

## **Introduction & Purpose**

Why create a Comprehensive Plan? A simple drive through Upper Providence Township reveals that there is very little developable land in the Township. So why do we need a Comprehensive Plan? Why should we bother?

A Comprehensive Plan is more than just a plan for development. A Comprehensive Plan is a means granted to the most local level of government by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania by which a community may create a vision of what it wants to become and how it intends to achieve that vision. While Upper Providence may have little opportunity to develop in a conventional sense, it is nevertheless in constant change. Our surrounding communities are changing as well, along with the Philadelphia metropolitan area as a whole. The Comprehensive Plan will help us to anticipate change, to identify community goals, and to examine our resources. It will give us a higher degree of control in *how* we change.

In 1968, the Pennsylvania legislature passed Act 247, the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code. This was the legislation that enabled local governments to develop Comprehensive Plans, Zoning Ordinances, Subdivision and Land Development Ordinances, and Official Maps. In the years since then, the Act has been amended numerous times, providing municipalities with more means to implement their plans, but these original document types remain the foundation of local planning.

## **Contents of a Comprehensive Plan**

The State allows local governments to address virtually any issue that is of municipal concern, but Act 247 established certain minimum requirements. According to §301 of Act 247, a valid Comprehensive Plan must include

- a statement of objectives concerning future development;
- a plan for land use;
- a plan to meet the housing needs of present residents and of any anticipated increase of population;
- a plan for the movement of people and goods, which may address automobile travel, parking facilities, non-motorized trail systems, and public transportation facilities;
- a plan for community facilities and services, which may address public and private education, recreation, municipal buildings, fire and police services, libraries, hospitals, water supply and distribution, sewerage and solid waste management, storm drainage, and utilities;
- a statement of the inter-relationships among the components of the plan;
- a discussion of short-range and long-range implementation strategies for the plan objectives;
- a review of how compatible the plan is with the existing and proposed development and plans in contiguous portions of neighboring municipalities;

- a plan for the protection of natural and historic resources; and
- a plan for the reliable supply of water.

In addition, a municipality may address virtually any area of local concern.

It is important to realize that this Comprehensive Plan does not have the force of law, although it provides the foundation for ordinances and regulations that do. In fact, a sound Comprehensive Plan becomes critical in the event that any Township ordinance is challenged in court: if the ordinance in question is shown to be consistent with a duly adopted Comprehensive Plan, a successful legal challenge is much more difficult than it would be otherwise.

### **Some Basic Terms**

Clear communication is essential to sound planning. A potential source of confusion lies in the meaning of basic terms. Many of these terms are commonly used words, and different individuals have different interpretations of their precise meanings and how they are meant to relate to each other. Planning terms tend to reflect the iterative process of revision and refinement that is planning itself. For the purposes of this document, the following terms shall be defined as follows. Note that the terms are arranged in ascending order of precision.

- An **ISSUE** is a particular topic to be addressed. It is value-neutral and can usually be expressed as a single word or phrase. Examples of **ISSUES** addressed in this Comprehensive Plan are “traffic” and “housing.”
- A **POLICY** expresses the Township position regarding a given issue. For purposes of clarity, it is ideal to establish a single **POLICY** statement for each issue, but this is not a strict rule. Depending upon the complexity of the issue, it may be necessary to define several policies, although it is critical to be sure that they are not in conflict. A **POLICY** statement relative to the issue of traffic would be “promote the smooth flow of vehicular traffic along major routes.”
- A **GOAL** is a statement of a long-term objective relative to a particular policy. While each policy should be supported by at least one **GOAL** statement, multiple **GOALS** may be necessary. A **GOAL** is always a qualitative statement. Continuing with our example, a sample **GOAL** for the policy could be “reduce congestion at the intersection of Route 252 and Providence Road.”
- **OBJECTIVES** are specific steps toward a goal. Typically, a single goal will be supported by multiple **OBJECTIVES**. **OBJECTIVES** are always quantitative. One possible **OBJECTIVE** for the sample goal could be “reduce rush-hour maximum wait time at the Route 252/Providence Road intersection to 45 seconds.”
- The **ACTION PLAN**, also known as the implementation strategy, will include a compilation of all the objectives identified in the Comprehensive Plan, setting forth specific steps to achieve each one. The **ACTION PLAN** will also identify who should be responsible to execute each step, including a time element. Obviously, financing is a critical part of implementation. An **ACTION PLAN** should include guidance on funding sources, but a comprehensive budget and financing strategy would be premature.

When the Comprehensive Plan is first adopted, the Action Plan is likely to be the most useful portion of the document, as it provides very specific direction. As time passes and objectives are (one hopes) achieved, the less specific elements will be more useful. Clear goals and policy

statements are particularly helpful as unforeseen circumstances arise, as they assist local decision-makers to determine what actions are in the best interest of the community.

## **Arrangement of This Document**

This Comprehensive Plan has been arranged in the manner of a research study. That is, conclusions and plan elements are presented *first*, with the research and documentation provided at the end. This arrangement may be confusing for someone attempting to read the Plan straight through - and it is certainly not the order in which the document was written - but we do not expect that anyone will read the Plan like a novel. Instead, the Plan should be a reference document that users will consult for guidance or research on specific topics. Also, since this document is a *plan*, it is logical to give the plan elements prominence rather than precede it with research about conditions that will change over time and become increasingly irrelevant.

- Part I is the Introduction and includes Chapters 1 and 2. This section is designed to provide the user with sufficient background on the planning process and planning terms to assure clear understanding of the document. A summary of Township-related information is provided to give a sense of the character of the community and of the issues that will be addressed by the plan.
- Part II, Issues and Policies, names the specific issues addressed by this Plan, reviews the procedure by which policies were identified, and then presents each of the policies that have been established. This Part consists of Chapters 3 through 6.
- Chapters 7 through 13 constitute Part III, which contains a detailed exposition of the plan elements arranged by topic. This part includes a chapter reviewing the interrelationships among the plan elements, which is required by Pennsylvania law. This analysis highlights how objectives may be mutually supportive as well as objectives that may be in conflict with each other. The latter is particularly critical as it allows us to anticipate such problems and consider how they may be addressed. This part also includes the Action Plan, which describes how to execute the plan.
- Part IV is made up of Chapters 14 through 19 and presents the research conducted in the course of the planning process, including a more detailed description of the public participation process, which is described below in brief.

## **Methodology**

The Upper Providence Township Council began the planning process in November 2002 by selecting Spotts, Stevens and McCoy as the Township's professional planning consultant. Council next named a thirteen-member Comprehensive Plan Task Force. A member of Council and the chairman of the Township Planning Commission were named co-chairs of this group, and members consisted of residents from each of the Township's five districts along with the Township Manager.

The Task Force held monthly meetings starting in February 2003 at the Township Building for the duration of the planning process. Among the earliest actions of the Task Force was to identify ways to gain input from Township residents and business owners regarding their

perceptions of the Township and critical issues. A three-pronged approach to direct public input was implemented.

- The Task Force convened and facilitated a series of focus groups designed to elicit opinions on issues facing the Township as well as possible courses of action for the future.
- Task force members and the consultant both conducted a series of interviews (some via telephone, others in person) with specific individuals identified by the Task Force. The selected persons were chosen due to their positions within the community and the particular insights those positions gave them. The interviewees included a variety of public officials, public and school district employees, and other local leaders. These individuals were questioned about their specific likes and dislikes in the Township, what they felt were the most pressing issues facing the community, what they would like the Township to become, and other questions more directly related to their particular areas of expertise.
- The Task Force prepared a written questionnaire that was mailed to every property-owner in the Township; copies were also hand-delivered to several apartment buildings to solicit input from residents who were not property-owners. The written questionnaires allowed the responders to be anonymous, but some personal information was asked in order to determine if there were concerns that were more prevalent among specific demographic groups. The questions were largely similar to those asked in the interviews, but were structured in a way that allowed for quantitative analysis of the responses. Questionnaire responses were reviewed and analyzed by a volunteer member of the Task Force with extensive professional experience in doing such analyses.
- Finally, the Task Force and the consultant facilitated a visioning session that was open to all interested residents. The session was in two parts, the first being a detailed presentation of the analysis of the survey responses and the second being a discussion about possible solutions to the principal issues identified by the resident survey: traffic and growth management.

Once the planning process was underway, Task Force meetings were largely occupied with discussion of the various plan issues and review of text as prepared by the planning consultant. Upon completion of the text and maps, the entire draft document was reviewed to assure that the plan elements created a coherent whole.

As required by Act 247, the complete draft was submitted to the Delaware County Planning Department, the Rose Tree Media School District, and each adjoining municipality in order to allow them to review and comment upon the Plan. Drafts were also available for public review. On October 17, 2005, the Township Planning Commission convened a public meeting for the purpose of presenting the draft as submitted by the Task Force to the public. Subsequent to this meeting, the Township Council held a public hearing on December 19, 2005 to solicit comments from the Township residents; following this hearing, Council passed a resolution to adopt this document officially as the Comprehensive Plan for the Township on December 19, 2005.