

Public Outreach

Introduction

From the very beginning of the planning process, the Township's Comprehensive Plan Task Force made repeated efforts to involve as many residents and business people as possible in the identification of general areas of concern and more specific issues. As the plan progressed, other actions were used to keep the general public informed.

The planning process began in November 2002 with the selection by Township Council of 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. Public outreach was among the first topics of discussion by the Task Force.

Public Outreach Efforts

The Township has gone well beyond the minimal public participation efforts required by the Municipalities Planning Code. Public input has been sought from the very beginning of the process, through every phase of the work, and up to the final hearing to present the complete document.

- **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. Representatives of these groups were included in the individual interviews, described further below.

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 received 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 nodes.

- 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 voting 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 - the central part of the Township - had the lowest response rate (16.6%) and District 5 - the northwestern area more or less bound by Sycamore Mills Road and Providence Road - 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.

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.

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.

A sample of the survey form as well as a detailed analysis of the responses have been provided in the Appendix of this document.

- 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 somewhat disappointing given 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. The findings of this meeting are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

- 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. Very few comments were received from this source.

- 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, all of which were held at the Township Building, were open to the public.

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, although the responses were reviewed by the task force.