

The Northern Lehigh Multimunicipal Comprehensive Plan

December 1, 2020 at 5:30 pm, Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic the meeting was held virtually.

Steering Committee Attendees:

Dawn Didra – Heidelberg Township
Janice Meyers – Heidelberg township
Robb A. Werley – Lowhill Township
Brian Carl – Lowhill & Weisenberg Townships
Brian Dietrich – Lynn Township
Jason Ruff – Slatington Borough
Todd Weidman – Washington Township
Linda Gorgas – Weisenberg Township
Tony Werley – Weisenberg Township

Members of the Public in Attendance:

Teena Bailey
Forrest Westner
Greta Kistler
Rich Whooley
David Fink

Planning Partners in Attendance:

Bethany Vazquez – Lehigh Valley Planning Commission
Charlie Doyle – Lehigh Valley Planning Commission
David Towsey – Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

Minutes:

Introductions

Steering Committee attendees took roll call.

Courtesy of the Floor

None this month.

Farmers Group Outreach Presentation

Mr. Doyle began the presentation by explaining the purpose of the NL Plan as well as provided the attendees with a timeline and list of accomplishment of the planning effort thus far. Mr. Doyle then continued with an overview of the Northern Lehigh Region's Issues and Opportunities Report's findings.

The following information was presented:

- Anticipated population group projects for 2040 and percentage growth by municipality as well as by county
- Land analysis of the natural resources of the region
- Land analysis of the agricultural resources of the region
- Municipal zoning district
- Water and sewer infrastructure by municipal
- Community priorities which identified that protecting farms, preserving open space and protecting natural environment as the top community priorities

After the conclusion of the presentation, Mr. Doyle opened the floor for a question and answer session with the Farming Community. The following questions were posed and the following answers were given:

- The community is changing, what opportunities and challenges does this create for you?
 - I would like to add that with the development growth that is in our region, even though we have a lot of preserved land, with development it brings a lot of traffic which makes it hard for us to move our equipment from field to field. It is a lot more dangerous with increased traffic
 - Really in the last 5-6 years, we take the time to have an escort vehicle and we still have close calls. We try to be careful, but it has definitely gotten more dangerous. And yes it equipment is getting more foldable and manageable but that can be very expensive and a challenge.
 - I just moved here 3 months ago and with the Bake Oven Knob being so close to our farms people do not listen to traffic signs like stop signs. They have gotten worse especially this year and you can tell they are not from the area and it becomes very dangerous.
 - For us one of the things we have dealt with is residential encroachment, that can be cumbersome. We do not really have in our zoning code a “buffer zone” for such zoning issues. You can slap a house next to a farm and then start to get complaints because the farm is making too much noise. The other thing to think about is stormwater management and the new regulations. It is so hard and expensive to get those engineering plans I do not see farmland lasting much longer.
- What are the biggest obstacles to farming over the next 5 years?
 - As previously pointed out, the residential pressure
 - Being profitable, right now the way farming is evolving you must have more land to be profitable. It is tough as it is to get more land and it is very competitive. The cost of land is also a big obstacle, trying to purchase land is costly.
 - There are a lot of studies about farming grossing over half a million with large but your small farms are doing small vegetables (those that are niche) that are doing well but a lot of those “middle sized” farms are not surviving.
 - For those small farmers, the younger that are getting interested, that size parcel (5-10 acres) are hard to come by and often when they are available, they are bought as residential. Availability is limited and the price is very high.
- What advancements or new technologies do you think would be beneficial to farmers in the region?
 - They have a website where you can find vegetables, grains, etc.
 - The Greater Lehigh Valley also has that for Northampton and Lehigh County farms
 - Broadband connection is okay but it could be better

- We have some dead spots but we have a yield monitor in our combine and a lot of really good environmental programs that identify wildlife habitats that buy land from farmers that are non-yielding for farming but that are good for preservation.
- Outside of the support of your tight-knit agricultural community, what resources would best assist you in maintaining or growing your business?
 - There are programs that help with the assistance of farm purchases to foster farming in the younger community
- Is there a created interest in farming?
 - Here at our farm people aren't too interested in doing work at the farm as much as to fishing by our farm or hunt. People seem more interested in the outdoor entertainment of it.
 - There is a lot of pressure to allow for those entertainment aspects and it becomes too much of a demand and liability, so we posted signs up. I'm glad people want to get outdoors but here we have a lot of broken parcels that do not allow for such recreational uses
 - Overall there is a high demand and need for open space recreation. And because there are not that many spaces many opt to come into the rural areas because they don't want to be surrounded by so many people in those very few areas
- How often do you purchase supplies or equipment? Are they mostly outside of our region or within? Where are your preferred places to buy supplies and equipment from?
 - As far as seeds for farming, I buy them from a mill in Germansville and also in Berks county. Vegetable seeds I get in the mail and they come from all over. For equipment, it depends some items come from Lancaster and others come from local the local feed mill in Germansville. We have a few places in Carbon County that sell equipment. In either Berks or Lehigh County there are equipment repair places. But equipment usually comes from online sales that can come from anywhere. There is my experience as a very small farmer. It would be great if there were more local places. There used to be a place in Neffs a while ago as well as off 309 but they are no longer around.
 - We also go to Lancaster a lot and a lot of equipment purchases are online.
 - With our dairy supplies we get it delivered from Lancaster. Our milking equipment we have also be dealing out of Lancaster but our new equipment is from Kutztown which is very beneficial.
- Where do you sell you products and produce?
 - We sell our grain and seeds locally mostly in Kempton
 - People have interest in forming a food hub that would be a central area where local farmers would drop their food and market themselves.
- What school district programs would improve the entry of young farmers into the industry? Are those programs available now? Were these programs formerly available?
 - Back in the dark ages when I was in school I went to LTCI where they had an Ag. Program. I am not sure what they have now but they had a program for three different cultures. And I think back in the 60s and 70s they used to have an chapter at the schools. But I do not think they are around anymore because of cost cutting. We also have a 4-H program in Lehigh County that is very successful and a dairy club.
 - With tuition rising there is a lot more opportunities for the trades
- How many acres of land do you farm? Do you believe your farm is a typical structure within the Northern Lehigh community?
 - I only have an acre and a half at home and we rent property for the grain.

- We farm close to 2000 acre in Lehigh county and another 2000 in Porters County. There is also something to be said about “Value added processing” and different avenues to help the local production.
- Are there key partners and/or other people that you would suggest we speak to?
 - The Lehigh County Association of Township Officials
 - Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation
 - The Fry Farm
- Do you experience points of conflict or discrepancies with the non-farming community?
 - Just get a little more respect regarding land use and the idea that every plot of land should be developed
 - We do raise quite a few pumpkins and vegetables and there are some people who feel they can “help themselves” to our products which always happens but we have noticed it quite a bit this year
 - Last year I raised some hemp and because it looks like marijuana some went at night and helped themselves.

Mr. Doyle thanked the public for their time and stated that if they have any additional comments, questions, etc. to reach out to the NL Plan steering committee or the LVPC staff. Ms. Kistler asked if the committee will be providing additional meeting information to be shared with additional farming groups to increase involvement of the community. Mr. Doyle stated that the LVPC will be re-vamping the previously released Farmer’s Survey to increase response and gain additional input from the community. Ms. Bailey stated that she was grateful for the opportunity to speak with the committee.

Zoning Diagnosis Analysis (Web Application Review)

Mr. Towsey took the Committee through the draft of the Lehigh Valley Zoning Dashboard for the Northern Lehigh Region. This is a compilation of all the zoning codes and districts in the region (every township and borough).

2021 Meeting Dates

Mr. Doyle asked the Committee if the first Tuesday was good for the Committee. Brian Carl stated that for January the first Tuesday will not work for Weisenberg so that another day in January might need to be selected. Mr. Doyle stated that the team will work on the 2021 dates and send it out to the Committee for review before the new year. Mr. Carl asked if the Committee would like to skip the January meeting and meet in February on the first Tuesday at 5:30 pm and that he would get the advertisement out.

Adjournment