

CHAPTER 6: THE REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code enables municipalities with the ability to plan for future growth and development within their jurisdiction. Proactive planning is important for local governments because without it, the ability to plan is given to others who may not have the best interests of the municipality in mind. All land-use decisions begin with a plan and in the Centre Region, the six municipalities have cooperatively planned for land uses since the mid-1960s. The Centre Region was ahead of its time when it first began this endeavor and changes to enabling legislation over the past 50 years have strengthened the purpose and need for this ongoing relationship. This cooperative approach has helped shape the region today and has made a lasting impact on future generations.

Although regional planning began in the mid-1960s, the first Centre Region Comprehensive Plan wasn't adopted until 1976. The plan was amended in 1990, 2000, and most recently in 2010 (adopted 2013). This chapter provides details on the purpose and benefits of multi-municipal plans, the 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan, and methods for implementing plan recommendations.

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

The term "comprehensive plan" is not defined in the MPC, but is more or less defined by its contents. A comprehensive plan is a recommending document that provides a reference for governing bodies when making decisions related to development, capital improvements, and timing. A comprehensive plan also provides guidance to the private sector and citizens as well. It indicates how the community plans to grow in the future, what obstacles it wishes to overcome, and what improvements it plans to make. The comprehensive plan is the basis for land-use regulations within a municipality.

It is important to remember that a comprehensive plan and a zoning ordinance are two separate tools that are used in conjunction with one another. A comprehensive plan acts in a guiding role and provides recommendations on how land should be utilized to meet the needs and desires of the community, where a zoning ordinance regulates land uses as recommended by the plan.



As its name implies, a comprehensive plan should comprehensively address the community's future. In the Centre Region, this vision is outlined and reinforced through goals and policies that comprehensively address future growth and development in the six Centre Region municipalities.

Comprehensive Plan Types

The MPC outlines four different types of comprehensive plans including municipal, multi-municipal, county, and specific plans. These plan types are defined as follows:

- Municipal –A plan that is limited to a single municipality.
- Multi-municipal – A plan developed and adopted by any number of contiguous municipalities, including a joint municipal plan as authorized by this act, except that all of the municipalities participating in the plan need not be contiguous, if all of them are within the same school district.
- County – A land use and growth management plan prepared by the county planning commission and adopted by the county commissioners which establishes broad goals and criteria for municipalities to use in preparation of their comprehensive plan and land use regulation.
- Specific - a detailed plan for nonresidential development of an area covered by a municipal or multi-municipal comprehensive plan, which when approved and adopted by the participating municipalities through ordinances and agreements supersedes all other applications.

All comprehensive plans must meet the same four criteria. Those criteria include:

1. Contain basic plan elements set forth in Section 301(a) of the MPC.
2. Contain a plan for the reliable supply of water, considering current and future water resources availability.
3. Be reviewed every 10 years.
4. Identify those areas where growth and development will occur so that a full range of public infrastructure, including sewer, water, highways, police and fire protection, public schools, parks open space and other services can be adequately planned and provided as needed to accommodate growth.

Legal Effect of the Comprehensive Plan

One of the common criticisms of comprehensive plans within Pennsylvania is that they have no “teeth.” Because comprehensive plans are guiding documents, municipalities are not required to implement them nor can elected officials be forced to follow the recommendations contained in the plan. While comprehensive plans are essentially a compilation of recommendations on how the community should grow, they do have legal standing that should not be overlooked.

Although the MPC does not mandate that municipalities follow the recommendations within the Comprehensive Plan to the letter of the law, it does require general consistency with the plan in some cases and conformance in others. Section 303 (4) (d) states that “municipal zoning, subdivision and land development regulations and capital improvement programs shall generally implement the municipal and multi-municipal comprehensive plan or, where none exists, the municipal statement of community development objectives.” Section 603 (j) further states that “Zoning ordinances adopted by municipalities shall be generally consistent with the municipal or multi-municipal comprehensive plan or, where none exists, with the municipal statement of community development objectives and the county comprehensive plan. If a municipality amends its zoning ordinance in a manner not generally consistent with its comprehensive plan, it shall concurrently amend its comprehensive plan

in accordance with Article III.” These two sections state that municipalities are expected to follow the general intent of their comprehensive plans.

The Process of Creating a Comprehensive Plan

Creating a Comprehensive Plan can be a daunting task that requires adequate research, discussion, and public input. Plan development requires research on existing planning issues within the community; background studies to compile data on existing conditions; projection of future conditions; development of plan goals and objectives; public input through meetings, surveys, and open houses; and implementation plans.

Despite the fact that new editions of the Centre Region Comprehensive Plans are considered “updates” by the MPC, these updates essentially require all of the same steps and processes that would be conducted if a new plan were being created. Fortunately for municipal planning commissioners, most of the planning process is coordinated and completed by regional and municipal planning staff.

While professional staff play a role in coordinating and drafting the contents of the plan, municipal planning commissioners play an important role in identifying planning issues relevant to their municipality or the region as a whole, in reviewing and providing feedback on the contents of the plan, and by providing a public forum for citizens to provide input on the plan. Municipal planning commissions also play an important role in defining future land uses through the comprehensive plan’s future land-use maps. Identifying future land uses requires looking ahead to the needs of the municipality and region and identifying where future growth should occur.

Required Elements of Comprehensive Plans

Section 301 (a) of the MPC requires that each municipal, multi-municipal and county comprehensive plan to have nine elements. These elements should present a composite vision of private and public development for the future through community development goals and objectives. These required elements all share some relationship to one another and typically contain complementary recommendations. While these elements are required by the MPC, there is no requirement that each be addressed through separate sections of the plan itself. Chapters of the plan can address one or more of these elements as is deemed appropriate. The required plan elements found in Section 301 (a) of the MPC are as follows:

- A statement of community development goals and objectives that chart the location, character and timing of future development.
- A plan for land use identifying the amount, intensity, character and timing of land use.
- A plan to meet housing needs of present residents and those families anticipated to live in the municipality as well as an accommodating new housing in different dwelling types and at appropriate densities for households of all income levels.
- A transportation plan.
- A community facilities plan.

- A statement of the interrelationships among the various plan components which estimates the environmental, energy conservation, fiscal, economic development, and social consequences on the municipality.
- A discussion of short- and long-range plans implementation strategies.
- A statement indicating that existing and proposed development is compatible with plans and development in contiguous municipalities. This statement should indicate that existing and proposed development is generally consistent with the objectives and plans of the county comprehensive plan.
- A plan for the protection of natural and historic resources to the extent the municipalities are not limited by other federal or state statutes, these resources include, wetlands, aquifer recharge zones, woodlands, steep slopes, prime agricultural land, flood plain, unique natural areas, and historic sites.

Additional Elements (and Benefits) Permitted in Multi-municipal Plans

In addition to the elements required by the MPC, multi-municipal plans may include additional elements at the discretion of the municipalities participating in the plan. These optional elements allow municipalities to harness greater benefits through multi-municipal planning than could be achieved through a single municipal comprehensive plan. The optional elements are summarized as follows:

- **Designate Growth Areas:** Multi-municipal plans are permitted to include the designation of growth areas. Growth areas are locations where “orderly and efficient development to accommodate the projected growth of the area within the next 20 years is planned for residential and mixed use densities of one unit or more per acre. Designated growth areas are also where commercial, industrial, and institutional uses to provide for the economic and employment needs of the area and to insure that the area has an adequate tax base are planned for”. The Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes a designated regional growth boundary which identifies where the majority of the Centre Region’s growth should be directed.
- **Designate Future Growth Areas:** In addition to growth areas, multi-municipal plans are also permitted to designate future growth areas. These areas are where future development is planned for at densities that will accompany the orderly extension of services.
- **Designate Rural Resource Areas:** Rural resource areas are where rural resource uses are planned for. Development within rural resource areas would be limited to densities that support rural resource uses. Infrastructure extensions or improvements are not intended for these areas with the exception of villages or in areas where participating municipalities agree that extension of such services is vital for health or safety reasons.
- **Plan for All Categories of Uses:** One of the key benefits of multi-municipal planning is that participants can provide for land uses across the entire planning area rather than within each individual municipality. Where municipalities are required to provide for all land uses within

their jurisdiction, this benefit allows for land use types to be shared and helps prevent exclusionary zoning challenges. The Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes a plan for land uses however does not specifically list which municipalities will provide for specific uses. This limits the effectiveness of sharing land uses but does not prohibit a municipality with the Region from relying upon another’s permitted uses in the event of a legal challenge.

- **Plan for Developments of Area Wide Significance and Impact.** The Centre Region Comprehensive Plan does not have a specific plan for developments that are considered of “area wide significance and impact”. The Centre Region municipalities did enter into an implementation agreement in 2006 which identifies how developments that propose the expansion of the Regional Growth Boundary and Sewer Service Area are to be evaluated and acted upon.
- **Plan for the Conservation and Enhancement of the Natural, Scenic, Historical and Aesthetic Resources within the Plan Area.** The Centre Region Growth Boundary provides goals and policies related to the preservation and protection of natural, environmental, and historic resources.

Implementing the Plan

Creating a comprehensive plan is a monumental undertaking that is both costly and time consuming. Creating a comprehensive plan that provides value to the municipality, Planning Commissions, and technical staff, professional staff must spend countless hours studying the issues, formulating solutions, vetting proposals with the public, and meeting with elected officials. A common criticism of comprehensive planning efforts is that once adopted, these documents are placed on the bookshelves of municipalities only to be dusted off when it’s time to complete the next ten year update.

In order for a comprehensive plan to provide value to a municipality or region, it must be implemented. The MPC requires that all comprehensive plans discuss short- and long-term implementation strategies to emphasize that the planning process does not end with adoption of the document.



Comprehensive plans should not only provide a vision of the future of a community, but also a means of achieving that vision. Comprehensive plans must be implemented in order to provide the maximum amount of benefit to the municipality.

The primary tools used by most municipalities to implement the comprehensive plan are the subdivision and land development ordinance and zoning ordinance. While comprehensive plans rarely provide specific requirements that should be included within these two documents, the

guidance provided by the plan should result in ordinances that meet the intent of the plan.

Comprehensive plans often transcend land use issues alone, resulting in implementation actions that take place outside of municipal codes. A good example in the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan is the encouraged cooperation between the Centre Region and the Pennsylvania State University on a variety of issues. While some of these policies would require changes in municipal regulations, many require actions outside of municipal land use ordinances.

The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan

In 2010, the six Centre Region municipalities began the process of updating the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan. This updated plan was adopted in November of 2013. As mentioned throughout this handbook, the Centre Region Comprehensive Plan qualifies as a multi-municipal plan as identified in the MPC. Multi-municipal plans provide additional benefits to municipalities beyond those that can be achieved through a single municipal plan, including legal protections against zoning challenges, cost savings by planning for infrastructure at a multi-municipal scale, orderly growth and development that transcends municipal boundaries, etc. As required by the MPC, this plan will need to be updated again in 2020. The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan is broken into nine different chapters, referred to as elements, which focus on the following topics:

- Land Use
- Transportation
- Open Space, Conservation, and Recreation
- Housing
- Community Services and Facilities
- Sustainability
- Natural, Environmental, Cultural, and Historic resources
- Community and University Relations
- Economic Development

This section provides details on key recommendations included throughout the 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan:

Regional Growth Boundary/Growth Management Policies

The Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes numerous long-term growth management policies and strategies that will impact how the region grows and develops over the next 20 to 30 years. The tool that will have the greatest influence on where growth occurs is the Regional Growth Boundary. This boundary is coterminous with the Sewer Service Area, which identifies where public sewer is planned for. The Regional Growth Boundary, as identified in the plan, is a growth area where the majority of future development will be directed. Growth is directed into the boundary through municipal zoning ordinances, which should be generally consistent with the growth management policies outlined in the plan. The boundary can be

expanded at the request of a municipality or the public, but only if five of the six Centre Region Municipalities agree to the expansion. Growth is permitted outside of the Regional Growth Boundary, but public sewer service will not be provided which generally limits development densities.

In 2012, the Centre Regional Planning Agency (CPRA) completed a study on the amount of vacant land remaining within the Regional Growth Boundary. This study analyzed the development capacity of the remaining properties in conjunction with growth forecasts completed by the CRPA in 2009. Based upon these two studies, vacant land within the Regional Growth Boundary and Sewer Service Area should be able to meet both residential and non-residential growth demands in the Centre Region for the next several decades.



The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes goals and policies that direct the majority of future growth into a Regional Growth Boundary. Growth is permitted in areas outside of the Regional Growth Boundary, but such growth should be consistent with the rural character of the area.

Preservation of the Agricultural Industry

Long-term effective protection of the agricultural industry is an important policy issue in the 2013 Comprehensive Plan. Agricultural and protection has a direct influence of the regional economy, job and economic growth, the location of future development, and overall quality of life. Preservation of agricultural lands has been an ongoing policy in both the current and previous comprehensive plans.

Protection of Natural Resources

Air, water, wildlife habitat, soil, forest, and mineral resources are important natural elements that the comprehensive plan seeks to protect. The plans includes various policies that seek to protect vulnerable environmental resources that provide natural habitats, such as wetlands, forests, and waterways. Numerous policies seek to balance development patterns with the protection of prime agricultural and other important soil types. The plan recommends the responsible management and preservation of natural resources that play a key role in the health, safety, and welfare of Centre Region residents.

Transportation

The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes a variety of goals, objectives, and policies that focus on transportation related issues including traffic congestion, bike and pedestrian pathways, and access to other communities throughout the State. The plan provides recommendations such as balancing transportation projects and programs with the Region's future land use plans and adopting a complete streets policy that would provide encourage use of all modes of travel.

Protection of Established Neighborhoods

The region contains many mature, diverse, and unique neighborhoods that vary in size, character, and composition. The plan promotes the preservation of existing neighborhoods and provides policies that focus on buffering them from negative impacts from incompatible uses.

Housing

The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan provides a number of goals, objectives, and policies related to housing variety, supply, and affordability. The plan encourages a variety of housing types that will meet the changing demographics within the region and also stresses the need for affordable housing options for all income levels.

Economic Development

The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan stresses implementation of the results of the Centre Region Economic Development Assessment which provided recommendations that would help support and further a vibrant local economy. Additional policies focus on assisting in the recruitment of businesses to the area, by partnering with the Chamber of Business and Industry for Centre County (CBICC), the Centre County Industrial Development Corporation (CDICC), and the Pennsylvania State University.

2013 Comprehensive Plan Implementation Strategies

The 2013 updated Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes several short and long-term implementation strategies as required by the MPC. Policies in the plan may require implementation at the regional level (COG), municipal level, or both.

Every year, the Centre Regional Planning Agency prepares a list of Comprehensive Plan Implementation Priorities (CHIP) for review and approval by the COG General Forum. This is a key strategy in ensuring that the comprehensive plan remains fresh in the minds of appointed and elected officials and that its recommendations are not “placed on a shelf.” The CHIP provides an opportunity for the region to come together and identify which policies in the plan should be implemented, beginning at the regional level. Municipal Planning Commissions should feel free to forward items that they feel should be implemented at the regional level in the short term. Ultimately, the elected officials of the Centre Region will prioritize which items should be completed first, but this collaborative process ensures that the most important projects and issues are addressed in a timely manner.



The 2013 Centre Region Comprehensive Plan includes goals and policies related to providing infrastructure for multiple modes of transportation.

Much of the Comprehensive Plan’s implementation also takes place at the local level. Any time an ordinance is proposed or amended, a zoning designation is changed, or a study is undertaken, the municipality should ensure that it implements or is at least consistent with the recommendations of the Comprehensive Plan.

The 2013 Comprehensive Plan also recommends the use of implementation metrics as a way of ensuring that regional and municipal actions are having the desired impacts and are achieving the goals identified. These metrics, along with general reports on comprehensive plan implementation, are included in the CRPC Annual Report.

