

Chapter 1 - Introduction

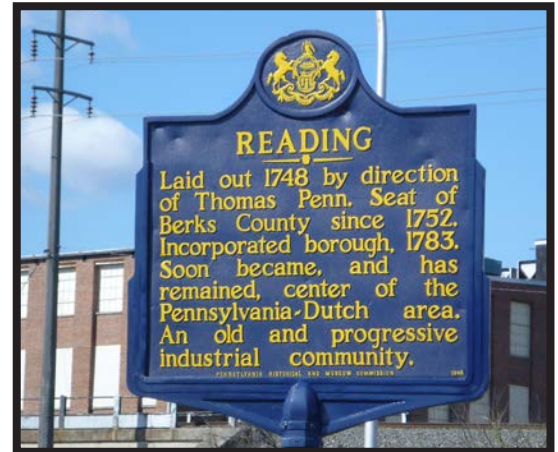


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INTRODUCTION

A. History

At the start of the Eighteenth Century, the mild climate, fertile soil, and the Schuylkill River combined to attract European immigrants to Berks County. While Berks County was inhabited by the Lenni Lenape, the area was settled by Swedes in 1701, followed by Germans, English, Welsh, and French Huguenots. Most of the county's eastern section was settled by people migrating inland from the Philadelphia area. In 1752, Berks County was incorporated from parts of Lancaster, Chester, and Philadelphia Counties. In 1772, Berks gave up territory for the formation of Northumberland County, and again in 1811, for the formation of Schuylkill County. Berks County was named for Berkshire, England, home of William Penn's family. Likewise, Reading was named after the main town in Berkshire, England. In 1790, the first Federal Census of the county reported 30,189 residents, 22,345 of whom were of German descent. Reading Town, the only sizeable settlement, had 2,225 residents.



Reading's early growth was largely influenced by the Schuylkill River which was navigable by flat-bottom boats that carried products, mainly agricultural, to the markets of Philadelphia, and later by the county's early lead in steam railroad growth. Reading's industrial complex attracted a considerable amount of immigrant labor during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an era of great industrial growth for Berks County. At one time, the county was the largest manufacturer of full-fashioned hosiery in the world.

Since 1900, the county's population has nearly tripled, with concentrated development in the City, its urban area, and the larger rural boroughs. In 1951, Berks County became a third class county. The development pattern reflects continued suburban growth outward from Reading, as well as development in rural land beyond the suburban areas in the direction of Philadelphia, Allentown, and Lancaster. Growth trends in the past several decades indicate that the county should continue to grow at a moderate rate. It is the county's goal to promote a more consolidated development pattern instead of the scattered pattern occurring now. New growth is encouraged to occur within natural service areas of existing and proposed public water and sewer systems, where higher densities and greater variety can be provided.

Today, the City of Reading is still the county's largest municipality, with a 2015 US Census American Community Survey (ACS) estimate of 87,879 persons. Other municipalities include 28 boroughs (not including a small part of Adamstown Borough that extends into Berks) and 44 townships. About half of these boroughs lie within the Reading Urbanized Area, and the other half are spread throughout the county. On July 1, 2016, Strausstown Borough merged with Upper Tulpehocken Township and as of 2018, there are now 27 boroughs.

B. Location and Setting

Berks County is an urban area consisting of 415,271 persons situated in southeastern Pennsylvania. The county is a diamond-shaped area of 864 square miles (Figure 01). The county seat, which is the City of Reading, is 56 miles northwest of Philadelphia. Berks County is bordered by Schuylkill County to the north, to the west by Lebanon and Lancaster Counties, to the east by Lehigh County, and to the south by Chester and Montgomery Counties. Despite its closeness to the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area, it is considered part of Pennsylvania's Dutch Country (Berks County Pennsylvania, Economic Resource Profile). Through numerous Federal and State highways and turnpikes, the county is linked to other major cities such as New York (125 miles) and Baltimore (97 miles). Sections of the Blue and South Mountains, which are ridges of the Appalachian Mountain chain, form its northern and southern boundaries with elevations averaging about 640 feet above sea level. The mean annual temperature is 52.3 degrees Fahrenheit. The average rainfall is 47.2 inches and the average annual snowfall is 21.3 inches.

Physical Geography

Berks County is rich in historical, scenic and natural resources. These assets are a result of the diverse physiographic regions that are present in the area, as visible on the Physiographic Provinces Map (Figure 02). These regions support a variety of topography, soils, vegetation, wildlife, water resources, and scenery.

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Sections of the Blue and South Mountains, which are ridges of the Appalachian Mountain chain, form Berks County's northern and southern boundaries. The Blue Mountain, also known as the Kittatinny Ridge, forms the northern boundary of the County reaching elevations over 1,600 feet above sea level. This ridgeline is pierced by the Schuylkill River and Route 61 at Schuylkill Gap above Hamburg and is crossed by only four other roads. The South Mountain ridge reaches elevations between 800 and 1200 feet above sea level. It enters the county from the west, south of U.S. 422, and extends in two directions through Berks County. The primary ridge encircles Reading, including Neversink Mountain and Mount Penn and then extends northeast into Lehigh County, forming the Reading Prong. The secondary ridge extends southeast along the south side of the Schuylkill River. Extending the entire width of the county, between the Blue and South Mountains, is the Great Valley Region. This limestone section is predominantly rolling farmland, containing rich agricultural soil with elevations of 200 – 500 feet above sea level. The shale section of the Great Valley, occupying higher elevations between 400 – 800 feet above sea level, is located next to the Blue Mountain. The Lowlands are located in the southernmost part of the county and are comprised of lower mountains and rolling hills. It is, however, crossed by the Schuylkill River as it flows toward the Delaware River.

C. Government (County and Local)

County:

Berks County is made up 72 municipalities. Each municipal entity has jurisdiction over its own area within the county. There is no formal county oversight with regards to general government. This is the typical arrangement throughout the Commonwealth of PA. County government provides the residents of Berks County with different types of assistance on a daily basis. These can include law enforcement, and judicial administration. Elections are also handled at the county level. Berks County Government also oversees property assessment, and redevelopment efforts. Some of the welfare functions that are performed by Berks County Government include caring for those with mental handicaps as well as physical handicaps, care for those aged and in the Berks County Nursing Facility, local college assistance, and lastly, support of the Berks County Library System.

Berks County is at the leading edge of the Commonwealth in regards to joint planning. It has one of the highest percentages of municipalities involved in joint planning. The benefits of this practice have been supported by recent revisions to the PA MPC that promote joint planning.

Local:

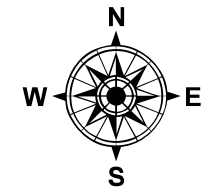
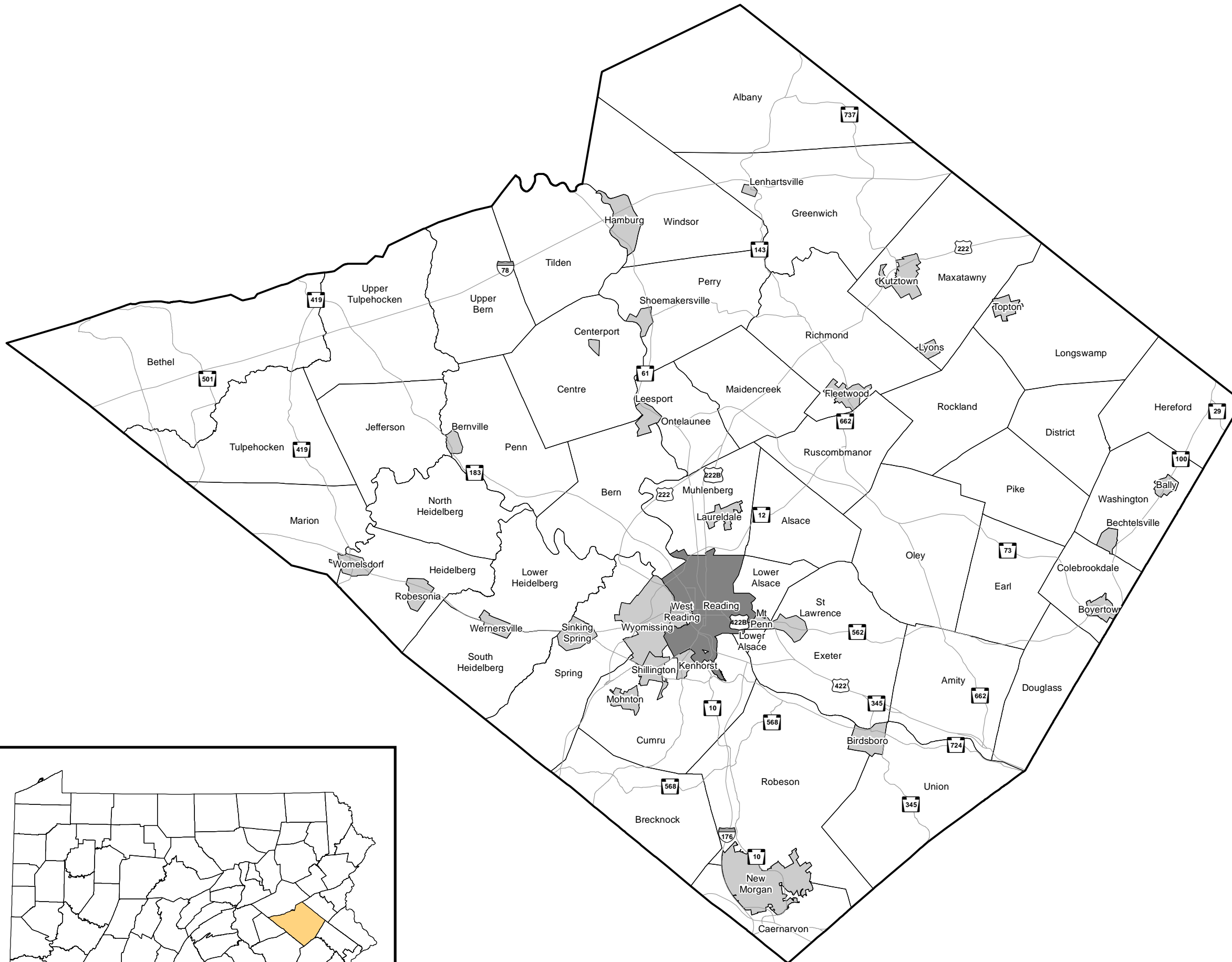
Berks County has four types of local government present within its boundaries. Reading is the only city in Berks County. It is a Third Class city and has a population of 87,879 persons. This municipality has a mayor that is elected as well as a city council. It provides a full range of services to its residents including police and fire protection, as well as garbage collection. Virtually all of Reading has public water and sewer service.

The majority of local governments within Berks County are townships. Nearly all of these townships are of the Second Class. The exceptions to these are Muhlenberg, Colebrookdale and Cumru Townships which are First Class townships. Many townships provide police and fire protection. In many cases, these services are handled by multi municipal organizations that have jurisdiction in whatever municipalities are involved in the agreement.


The last type of governmental entity within Berks is the borough. These are not classified like townships and cities are classified. These typically have a mayor and a borough council that is elected as opposed to a board of supervisors like a township has. Like the townships, it is typical for each borough to provide for basic police and fire protection. As stated earlier, there are multi municipal agreements to provide these services between neighboring townships and boroughs.

Berks County Comprehensive Plan Update
Adopted: January 23, 2020

Municipal Boundaries Berks County, Pennsylvania



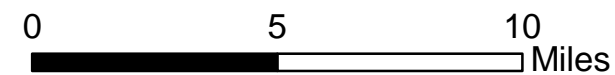
Legend

-  Berks County Boundary
-  Township
-  Borough
-  City
-  Major Roads

Source: Berks County Planning Commission, Berks County GIS, Berks County Mapping, Berks County Department of Emergency Services

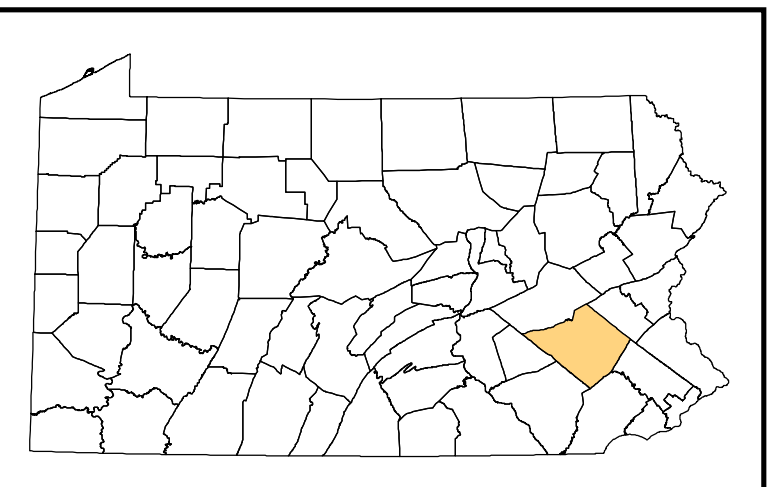
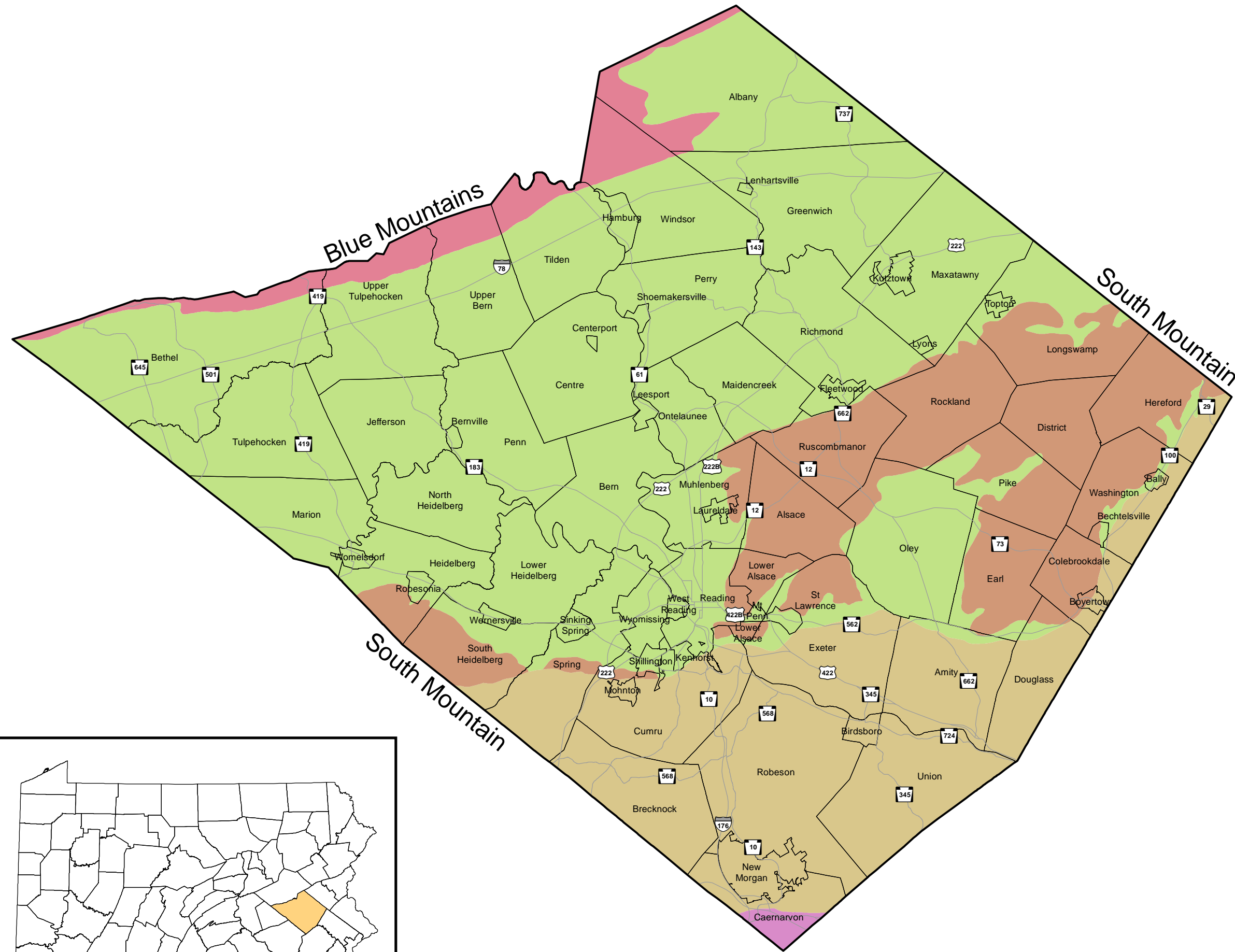
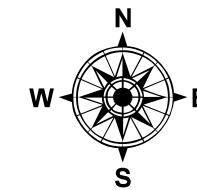
Published by the Berks County Planning Commission

BAB 1/20



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Physiographic Provinces Berks County, Pennsylvania



Legend

- Berks County Boundary
- Municipal Boundaries
- Major Roads
- Ridge and Valley Province**
 - Appalachian Mountain Section
 - Great Valley Section
- New England Province**
 - Reading Prong Section
 - Gettysburg-Newark Lowland Section
- Piedmont Province**
 - Piedmont Lowland Section

Source: Berks County Planning Commission, Berks County GIS, Berks County Mapping, Pennsylvania Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
Published by the Berks County Planning Commission BAB 1/20

