

Chapter 6 - Community Identity



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Community Identity

A. Introduction

Many factors combine to create a community's distinct identity. The identity can be a blend of special geography, architecture, history, and economic activity. Pennsylvania's terrain and the extensive early transportation system that connected agricultural areas to urban areas led to a variety of building types and communities of different levels of complexity. Building materials were influenced by the type of resources that were locally available. The type and degree of economic activity determined building location, density and architectural style.

All too often our modern construction methods, retail chains, shopping centers and transportation facilities cause each community to look and feel the same. This problem is not confined to Berks County. A community's identity usually develops over time and is authentic. It is difficult to create this identity from scratch. Therefore, it is very important that a community understand and protect its important characteristics. The implementing actions may involve acquiring important properties, implementing appropriate development standards, or creating historic preservation districts.

Adhering to smart growth principles should be the central strategy for any community that wishes to maintain its identity. Re-enforcing existing architectural styles, landscaping, and road networks will better integrate new development into an existing community. Mature communities include essential retail stores, playgrounds and other community needs within walking distance of most homes. The County's goal is to maintain this sense of close community and extend that philosophy into new subdivisions.

The City of Reading is the most densely populated area of the County and is located at the center of the Schuylkill River and our transportation system. It contains a wealth of historic and entertainment highlights. Like many cities across the nation, the City of Reading is also presented with a number of serious challenges that impact the integrity of its neighborhoods and business activity. Planning and design issues that promote the City's history and a walkable environment will be very important features of any redevelopment activities in Reading.

Berks County's regional identity is a mixture of its Pennsylvania Dutch agricultural tradition and early manufacturing and transportation industries. This history and our geography strongly influence our development patterns, activities, and entertainment and tourism industry. It is important that we build upon these values while also incorporating new styles and technology into our local culture.

B. Historic and Cultural Resources

Berks County has a multitude of historic structures distributed throughout most parts of the County. Due to the sheer numbers, this document will focus only on those identified and registered on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the nation's cultural resources worthy of preservation. This list includes bridges, churches, homesteads, farms, furnaces, gristmills, schools, manufacturing buildings, and several historic districts, including the Township of Oley. Entry in the National Register gives recognition to the historical, architectural or cultural merits of the property.

Properties listed on the register receive consideration during the review of federal projects and may qualify for federal preservation tax credits or other preservation assistance when available. The efforts of numerous public and private agencies and individuals over the years have resulted in a substantial number of historic sites in the County being added to the National Register of Historic Places. Since 1989, listings of Berks County sites on the Register have increased from 78 to approximately 137, including multiple historic districts. Several historic sites have been restored to their original period appearance and have been opened to the public. Some of the sites, such as Hopewell Village, French Creek, Daniel Boone Homestead, Allegheny Aqueduct and the Gruber Wagon Works are significant components in the County's system of open space and recreation areas, as noted in the Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan. Appendix E identifies the sites, structures and districts that have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The County recognizes the importance of historic structures and the impacts associated with them. For example, historic resources provide a sense of place and identity within a community. Restored historic structures and areas attract visitors and can serve as educational resources. For these reasons, it is important to consider historically significant structures, sites, and districts in the planning process.

The County continues to work with historical societies, individuals, and organizations in an effort to develop a historic database. This historic database, once completed, may help municipalities and officials to better plan for these areas and incorporate guidelines to help minimize historic resource loss.

Community Identity Policies

Community Identity Goal:

To preserve and promote community, cultural, and aesthetic elements that identify Berks County as a special place to live and work.

a. Neighborhood Design

Goal:

To maintain and enhance the character of established villages, towns, boroughs, and the City. To welcome new neighborhoods that have their own sense of community while blending with existing surrounding development and open space.

Policies:

- (1) The County encourages municipalities to incorporate design regulations into their land use ordinances that will help maintain and enhance local character and prevent it from being degraded.
- (2) The County encourages municipalities to allow for appropriate mixed-use development in areas zoned for greater densities to promote walking, community identity, and a sense of place.
- (3) The County supports regulations for redevelopment and adaptive reuse that take into account surrounding land uses, impact on traffic and parking patterns, and maintenance/enhancement of properties.
- (4) The County will support regulations that promote new development that is visually interesting, blends with the surrounding landscape, and allows for the creation of neighborhoods, not just developments.
- (5) The County will encourage sign regulations that keep signs at a scale consistent with community character.
- (6) The County will encourage rural open space preservation, while at the same time allowing for new development that blends in with natural surroundings.

b. Community Awareness

Goal:

To promote and protect the people, places, and things that make Berks County distinctive to its residents and visitors.

Policies:

- (1) The County will promote its heritage resources as a destination for travelers and tourists through various forms of media.
- (2) The County will encourage local historic preservation organizations to identify historic resources and develop a plan for preservation of the resources.
- (3) The County will promote Reading and its surrounding urban area as the cultural, social, and economic center of Berks County.
- (4) The County will encourage new construction to be consistent with existing architecture and materials.

c. Historic and Cultural Resources**Goal:**

To recognize historic preservation and cultural resources as a means of retaining community character, providing affordable housing, and assisting economic development.

Policies:

- (1) The County encourages public and private entities to work together to identify and protect historic resources.
- (2) The County encourages economic development organizations to include historic preservation as a component of economic development strategies.
- (3) The County supports revision and enforcement of codes and regulations to promote the preservation of historic buildings.
- (4) The County will assist municipalities seeking information about historic preservation and, when necessary, refer them to the appropriate agencies.
- (5) The County will promote land use regulations that consider historic resources and help retain the character of rural villages.
- (6) The County encourages training for municipal officials in land use and historic preservation issues, and how they relate to economic development.
- (7) The County will continue to update the Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan, which includes recommendations regarding historic preservation.