

## CHAPTER 7

### ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

*“...the simultaneous goals of environmental quality, personal and community well being and economic prosperity – goals that are not in conflict but, we recognize, mutually dependent.”*

--Report of the Pennsylvania 21<sup>st</sup> Century Environment Commission

#### **Introduction**

As more development has occurred in the municipalities, concerns have increased over the costs associated with that development. One way to address the issue of increased costs is more cooperative efforts of the municipalities and volunteer organizations to try to control costs of services.

Another approach to addressing increased costs is to try to increase the tax base within the area. Some residents have expressed an interest in seeing additional industrial development, and to a lesser extent commercial development, in the area in order to increase the tax base. The Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension has published a study entitled, "Fiscal Impacts of Different Land Uses, the Pennsylvania Experience." Eight Pennsylvania Townships were studied to determine the potential fiscal impact of land uses. For residential, commercial, industrial and farm and open land uses, the ratios of revenues to expenditures were calculated. Residential land, on average, contributed less in revenue to the municipality and school district than it required in expenditures. Much of the negative fiscal impact was because of school expenses. Commercial, industrial and farm and open land provided more revenue than they required in expenditures. The study also indicates that these results are consistent with other states' experiences. In all but one Township, farm and open land had the best ratio of income to expenses among commercial, industrial and farm and open land uses. Periodically these studies are revisited to ensure accuracy. The ratio of revenues is still accurate and studies that have addressed the benefit of revitalizing downtown areas, rather than expanding strip malls, have shown that the downtown revitalization projects carry a better tax benefit to the local tax base.

The Joint Planning Committee has recognized the important role that agriculture plays in the economy of Southwestern Berks County, and agricultural preservation areas are proposed in the Future Land Use Plan. In addition to encouraging the continuation of an important part of the area's economy, this also makes sense from a fiscal point of view. Farm supply and processing-marketing activities should also be encouraged.

In the Future Land Use Plan, provision is made for industrial development in the western portion of Lower Heidelberg and South Heidelberg Townships and the eastern portion of South Heidelberg. Provision is made for commercial and office development along Route 422, though

the Plan provides for consolidation of commercial and office uses, rather than their continued spread along the entire length of Route 422. A mixed use area, including provision for commercial uses, is established in the center of Wernersville along Route 422. This is a key area of redevelopment for potential mixed uses with the closing of the two car dealerships. This would be a great opportunity to encourage additional small businesses in the center of Wernersville.

### **Encouraging Economic Vitality**

While economic vitality can be approached directly, such as providing land zoned for commercial and industrial development, providing opportunities for adaptive reuse of older buildings, fostering municipal/business partnerships to support the business community, marketing opportunities within the area, strengthening the streetscape of the commercial areas along Route 422, and strengthening entry images at entrances to the municipalities, this is not the entire solution, however.

It is important to preserve residential neighborhoods which support the commercial areas and provide a workforce and the interconnection between these areas. Planning to achieve a desirable quality of life makes economic sense, as it can encourage additional investment in the area. Preserving community architecture, history and culture helps maintain a sense of place and attracts people and businesses to the area. "A sense of place" is a term used more and more in community planning. To say that there is a sense of place is to say that there is a location which is distinctive; to which people attach meaning, where there is a sense of a physically defined area, and where past and future experiences can be shared with other people.

To maintain a sense of place, it is necessary to maintain human scale and provide places for people to live, work and play safely and securely. Particularly in the Borough, this involves maintaining pedestrian scale, recognizing streets are for people not just for cars, providing adequate parking opportunities, providing for trees and attractive streetscapes, and encouraging architecture which is pleasing to and does not overwhelm people. Throughout the area, it is necessary to provide safe neighborhoods; provide convenience to jobs and necessary services; provide opportunities for human interaction by providing for open space, recreation, public places, pedestrian ways and sitting areas, community facilities and special events; providing diversity and experience in sensory involvement; providing awareness of history; maintaining unique characteristics; and recognizing the boundaries of the community.

### **Route 422 Corridor**

Encouraging development that enhances the visual character of the Route 422 Corridor makes economic sense, as it can help prevent decline of the area in the future. Attention should be given to the entrances to the communities as well as aesthetic treatments along the length of the corridor. Design principles for commercial and industrial development can be established. Such design principles would result in continuity in the design of development along the corridor and

take into account such factors as signage, screening, landscaping, setbacks, architecture and streetscape improvements, access management and walkability.

## **Downtown Wernersville**

Wernersville has historically been an important business center in Southwestern Berks County. The traffic on Route 422, including large volumes of truck traffic, and new competing development such as the Sinking Spring Marketplace, can adversely affect maintaining a viable economic center in the Borough.

The new ice cream stand in Wernersville is an exciting development, a true destination, and a place for the meeting of neighbors and human interaction. It is the type of use that has historically been found in downtowns, and should be encouraged. The informal "plaza" in which people can gather and eat is attractive, and it is a pattern which should be encouraged within the Borough, as well as commercial development in the Townships. To carry the concept further, the Borough could consider planning for a village green/community center within the Borough which would provide a larger community gathering place and place for community functions. Depending upon location, a "green" could provide an area around which to cluster small commercial uses. Potential locations could be along Route 422 where land not covered by buildings exists, in the area of the eventual fire company-library-borough hall complex, or vacant lot in the vicinity of the ice cream stand or next to the train station.

Pedestrian scale and additional human interaction can also be fostered by development of the trail system throughout the area. The trail system can provide bicycle and pedestrian access to downtown Wernersville as well as to commercial destinations within the Townships. It would be desirable to have appropriate bicycle and pedestrian-friendly facilities, including bike racks, sitting places, and plazas at the destination points.

The Borough should review its sidewalk policy that gaps in the sidewalk system are constructed only when a property is sold, rather than on a proactive basis. The Townships should also address any gaps within their sidewalk system. As fill-in development occurs a plan should be devised for developments that did not originally have sidewalks to interconnect them with those that do.

Currently, the Borough does not have parking problems, but this should be monitored to determine if problems develop in the future. The lack of on-street parking on the south side of Route 422 affects potential for increased commercial development of that side of the street, but at the current time, the Borough believes that it is important to keep available traffic lanes open to facilitate traffic flow because of the congestion which occurs on Route 422 in the Borough. The Borough should look at its pedestrian crossings to make sure that they are adequate for this area.

The chapter on traffic circulation will discuss some approaches to improving traffic flow on Route 422. If the situation can be improved in the future, the Borough should revisit the issue of whether parking should be provided along the south side of Route 422.

If the Borough takes a proactive stance in strengthening its commercial core, the following should be the key elements in its efforts:

- **Improving the image by enhancing physical appearance**

This includes enhancing the appearance of buildings, street lights, window displays, parking areas, signs, sidewalks, benches, landscaping, trash receptacles, utility poles and lines, graphics and public phones. Design in the area should recognize existing desirable physical elements, be compatible with the area's character, and be unified. The Borough should look into the Traditional Neighborhood Design option, which allows for some control over architectural design.

- **Securing a consensus and cooperation among the groups that are involved in Downtown**

Parties which should be involved include Borough officials, businessmen, bankers, real estate agents, customers, the media, residents of the downtown and civic groups.

- **Promoting the Downtown Area**

The unique characteristics should be promoted to customers, investors, existing businesses and potential new businesses. A positive image can be fostered through appropriate special events, and other programs. A brochure promoting the businesses downtown could be prepared.

- **Strengthening the Economy of the Commercial Core**

If the economy is strong, it is possible to maintain and upgrade the buildings in the Borough. Existing businesses should be helped to expand, new businesses should be recruited, and increased use of any underutilized buildings should be promoted.

- **Affecting Attitudes towards the Commercial Core**

Consumers and investors have more positive attitudes toward downtown as they see changes taking place such as building improvement projects and new street furniture. Owners of buildings will be more likely to make improvements to their buildings.

Specific tasks to help maintain economic vitality can include:

- Helping businesses identify new sales opportunities
- Promoting the downtown as a cohesive shopping area to market groups

- Listing potential new businesses
- Keeping track of prospective businesses
- Improving the quality of downtown businesses by helping them be more customer responsive and competitive
- Having coordinated business hours that meet consumer needs
- Encouraging attractive window and interior merchandise displays
- Maintaining information on the downtown
- Marketing and promoting downtown businesses
- Helping to maintain existing businesses and encouraging patronage of those businesses
- Working with financial institutions to establish loan pools
- Working to maintain realistic rent structures
- Maintaining a good working relationship between public and private sectors
- Finding new uses for any underutilized or vacant downtown buildings
- Improve the facades of vacant buildings so that they appear to be inhabited
- Recruiting businesses to complement the downtown's retail and service mix
- Identifying sources of grants for physical improvements or providing matching grants for such improvements
- Assuring promotional activities create a consistent, positive image for the downtown, consistent with community characteristics and history
- Understanding downtown's history
- Managing parking spaces

## **Balance**

In the report of the Pennsylvania 21<sup>st</sup> Century Environment Commission, sustainable communities are encouraged. Sustainable communities are those that provide for a good

economy while protecting the environment and consider issues of social equity and quality of life.

The overall goal of this Plan is to preserve the quality of life and conserve and enhance the special features of the Borough and the Townships, assuring that they will remain attractive communities in which to live and work. This will be accomplished by managing the pace, quality and location of development, while preserving natural features, open space, buffers and stream corridors. The intent of the Plan is to balance growth with providing open land, maintaining the quality of life and managing traffic. The municipalities wish to retain and enhance their character and uniqueness in the face of impacts of growth in the region, while providing for reasonable and appropriate development at locations designated in the Future Land Use Plan.