

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Municipal #2: Engaging in additional meaningful regional planning, ideally incorporating all of the municipalities in the heart of York County.

Why is this a recommendation?

- From 1970 to 2000, the amount of urbanized land in York County grew by 155 percent while the population grew by 40 percent – a ratio of 3.9 to 1. This compares poorly to other places (the average ratio was 2.2 for the 100 largest metropolitan areas).¹
- Between 1980 and 2000, the number of rural acres in York County fell from 293,000 to 68,000 – a 77-percent decline in rural land.²

Those are the numbers. Why do they matter? One reason is best expressed by the Brookings Institution: “[U]nique, historic urban centers...rural towns...[and] pastoral countryside are all under threat.” The assault on the physical place where we live is affecting our overall quality of life. Members of the Workgroup believe strongly that the distinction between urban and rural places – and the traditional small-town and rural aspects of York County that we are losing – contribute immensely to making York County a special place to live.

It’s also about economic prosperity. Brookings describes current conditions as a “spreading zone of distress” – economic competitiveness countywide inherently depends on the competitiveness of municipalities, “as manifested by their ability to deliver top-quality services [and] desirable amenities.” The more that infrastructure and public service demands are out of line with the capabilities of municipalities to meet them, the less desirable any place in York County looks to potential residents and employers.

The fiscal health of every single suburban community in metropolitan York is *already* declining,³ even as taxes are going up to pay for schools, roads, sewers and other infrastructure that would not even be necessary if development patterns were not so unbalanced. Municipalities are doing everything they can to cope with these problems on their own, but it’s not enough. Collaborating will enable the Metro-York communities to *take advantage of growth and* preserve the natural beauty and livability of York County.

How did Metro-York reach the decision to include it?

The Municipal Workgroup was very encouraged by the strong work that has already been done – both by municipalities on their own and as the result of inter-municipal cooperation – on everything from land use and zoning to water, sewers and other infrastructure. Now, it’s time to coordinate those efforts so that municipalities can learn from each other and growth is channeled to where existing infrastructure can support it. The Workgroup also discussed the need for an emphasis on workforce housing and housing affordability. Participants saw the lack of regional planning as a primary reason for shortcomings in these areas.

What else can you tell us about it?

Regional land use planning used to be next to impossible – but *not anymore*. In June of 2000, Governor Ridge signed into law Act 67 and Act 68, also known as the “Growing Smarter” initiatives. These laws facilitate consistent planning at the local, metropolitan and county levels while retaining local control.

Where else is it being tried?

To cite just one example: in Delaware County, at least 20 communities have taken advantage of the Growing Smarter legislation, preparing at least seven multi-municipal comprehensive land use plans.

What happens next?

The champions of this recommendation will be doing more research – with YorkCounts staff support – and conducting some one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders before deciding on the best next step.

What are, realistically, some obstacles this idea faces?

Since state law no longer presents the challenges it once did, the main obstacles relating to regional planning are inertia and support for the status quo. The champions of this idea will surely face resistance from individuals who will want more evidence that regional planning is in the best interest of their constituents.

1. Orfield, Myron. *Fiscal and Social Trends in the York Metropolitan Area*. Slide presentation delivered in 2006 and available at yorkcounts.org/metro.
2. *Committing to Prosperity: Moving Forward on the Agenda to Renew Pennsylvania*. Brookings Institution. March 2007. See pages 20-24 specifically. Available at <http://www.yorkcounts.org/learn/resources/20070301%20Committing%20to%20Prosperity.pdf>.
3. *Structuring Healthy Communities*. Issues PA/Pennsylvania Economy League. March 2007. See page 21 specifically. Available at <http://www.yorkcounts.org/learn/resources/20070301%20Pa%20Economy%20League%20Structuring%20Healthy%20Communities.pdf>.