

Regional Community Forum Notes

Lackawanna/Luzerne Joint County Comprehensive Plan & Long-Range Transportation Plan	
Public Meeting #1	Regional Community Forum
Date	Wednesday, July 22 nd , 2020
Time	6:00 PM – 7:00 PM
Location	Zoom Meeting
Attendees	57

1. Welcoming Remarks

Steve Pitoniak, Lackawanna County Planning Department Manager, welcomed attendees to the meeting. He explained that federal regulations require metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to update transportation plans every five years. In addition, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania requires all counties to have a regional plan. Eleven years ago, both Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties decided to go through the planning process together and update both plans simultaneously. The same joint-planning process approach is being used for the 2020 update to the Lackawanna/Luzerne Joint County Comprehensive Plan & Long-Range Transportation Plan.

Steve then introduced Teri Ooms, Executive Director of the Institute since 2004. The Institute provides essential research, data analysis, and consultation to the private, public, non-profit, and institutional sectors, and several of The Institute’s research studies have served as a basis for new Pennsylvania legislation. Teri is responsible for research, development, and operation functions and is a Principal Investigator on many projects. Her expertise lies in data analytics and synthesis and identifying actionable solutions.

2. Keystone Speaker: State of the Region

Teri presented on demographic and economic data trends for the Lackawanna/Luzerne region. She explained that 2010 was the first time Northeast Pennsylvania saw a population increase in decades. While 2018 data showed a slight population decrease for the region, Teri anticipated that the 2020 Census would likely show slight growth compared to 2010.

Teri also described other trends in the region, such as the aging population, declining birth rates, an increase in male single parent households, the growth of grandparents raising grandchildren, and the steadily declining unemployment rate (until impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 caused the unemployment rate to spike). She also described how the region has a diverse base of occupations and how the pandemic may impact various sectors of the economy

different. Teri also described trends in other economic factors like household income, poverty rate, employment, gross domestic product (GDP), and exports.

Teri also described trends in education, housing, social services, health, public safety, and government. She explained how public school disparities are linked to socioeconomic factors, like the high percentage of low-income households that do not have internet access at home. Higher education institutions have also been significantly impacted by the pandemic with the move to online classrooms, which has demanded a reduction in fees and tuition without a change in overhead costs. She also explained that the region is relatively affordable, and the lower housing costs are an asset. Other findings included that the region has more recipients of social services than at a statewide level, and there has been an increase in drug abuse offenses over the past decade.

Teri concluded by summarizing several key take-aways, such as a vaccine being key to returning to pre-COVID-19 economic levels; the needs for the region to embrace growth, chance, and cultural diversity; the importance of industry diversification as an economic development goal; the need for more affordable housing, and the continued challenge to government finances at all levels.

3. Engagement Findings

Tina Roseberry, Comprehensive Plan Project Manager, shared an update on community engagement efforts to date. She noted that the online survey had 546 participants as of July 6th, and noted that the economy and jobs was the top priority for the region based on survey responses. In addition, other top land use and transportation strategies include retaining college graduates, downtown revitalization, increasing trail connections, maintaining roadway pavements, improving road and rail infrastructure, and enhancing bicycle and pedestrian accessibility. Tina also noted that focus group meetings were conducted in May to discuss priorities related to land use and housing; natural resource protection, recreation, and land preservation; active transportation and transit, and freight. She shared several key takeaways from each focus group meeting.

4. Land Use Findings

Tina discussed current land use patterns in the region and described how the central area of the region along I-81 is very developed and continues to experience new development. She also shared some facts about open space in the region but noted that some open space preservation funding could be at risk due to the financial impacts of COVID-19. Tina also shared development trends for Lackawanna County, which illustrated that multi-family residential had the largest share of new units between 2014 and 2018. In addition, there was significant subdivision activity in the county during this same timeframe.

5. Long Range Transportation Plan Findings

Brian Funkhouser, Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) Project Manager, shared several highlights from the LRTP transportation profile. This included describing how demand for travel has been consistent over the years in the region and is related to the ups and downs of the economy. Additionally, motor vehicle crashes are increasing, yet fatalities have decreased slightly. Brian also shared information about the state of the region's bridge, freight, and bicycle/pedestrian networks. He noted that a significant number of bridges were built in the 1950s and 1960s and are now in need of rehabilitation. Brian also shared maps to show gaps between the public transportation network and major employment centers in the region. In addition, he noted the significance of performance measures to help evaluate the impact of projects that come of the LRTP and to inform future decision-making.

6. Polling Results

Attendees were then asked to respond to a series of 20 polling questions. While 57 individuals attended the meeting, only 44 participated in the polling activity. The results of the activity are shown below.

Plan Vision/Major Theme:

1. Which slogan/tag line best represents the Region?
 - a. Collective Vision 2040: Preservation and Revitalization 18%

 - b. Live – Work – Stay 33%

 - c. Preserving our Cities, Preserving our Lands 39%

 - d. Beautiful...Rural Life, Urban Life 9%


Land Use Strategies:

1. Land preservation remains a priority in the region. What is the best way to retain valuable farmlands and/or significant natural areas?
 - a. Increase land preservation funding 19%

 - b. Through regional and municipal collaboration 44%

 - c. Regionally promote farming as a viable industry 14%

 - d. Create model guidelines for municipal zoning 22%


2. County Preservation boards have preserved over 8,000 acres of farmland in the region. Do you support the region's need to continue funding preservation?
 - a. Yes 85%
 - b. No 5%
 - c. No Opinion 10%

3. What is the best way to combat suburban sprawl? **Top 2 choices**
 - a. Set regional growth boundaries for development 16%
 - b. Strongly push increased density to urban areas 24%
 - c. Place greater protections on agricultural lands, forested lands, natural habitat areas, and river corridors 26%
 - d. Focus on city revitalization 50%
 - e. Invest in better public transit 26%
 - f. Create more integrated neighborhoods that include places to work, play and obtain services 53%
 - g. There are no residential sprawl issues 5%

4. Is broadband internet access an issue in the region? If it is, use the chat box to name where.
 - a. Yes 43%
 - b. No 16 %
 - c. I don't know 41%

5. Which housing issue is most pressing in the region?
 - a. Lack of affordable housing 20%
 - b. Aging housing stock 66%
 - c. Single-family home conversions into multi-family dwellings 6%
 - d. Single-family home development is consuming a lot of land 9 %
 - e. Increase of market-rate housing 0%

6. Which strategy is most effective in creating affordable housing? **Top 2 choices**
 - a. Establish a regional affordable housing funding program or land trust 22%

- b. Establish affordable housing incentives for housing developers 44%

- c. Provide municipal guidance on zoning codes that are affordable housing “friendly” 31%

- d. Increase household incomes through workforce training and new job opportunities 28 %

- e. Locate new housing near employment centers 33%

- f. Reduce utility costs (energy efficient appliances, new windows/roofs, lower energy costs) 17%

- g. Increase partnerships with non-profits (Habitat for Humanity, Housing Coalitions, etc.) 8%

- 7. What is the best way the region could retain its college graduates?
 - a. Downtown revitalization 28%

 - b. Support businesses in emerging industry sectors 44%

 - c. Encourage businesses to recruit locally first 19%

 - d. Increase opportunities for employees to work-from-home 8%

 - e. Provide lower cost housing options 0%
- 8. How can municipalities better plan for distribution/logistics centers?
 - a. Plan for transit connections for employees 16%

 - b. Enhance roadway networks 10%

 - c. Create multimodal access (transit, trails, pedestrian) 23%

 - d. Increased coordination with developers 16%

 - e. Create ways to regionally plan together 35%

- 9. Is renewable energy resource development such as wind, solar or hydroelectric power important?
 - a. Yes 89%

 - b. No 8%

 - c. I don't know 3%


Transportation Strategies:

- 10. How would you characterize the region’s transportation network of roadways and bridges?

- a. Just right 0%

 - b. Needs work 44%

 - c. Needs a lot of work 41%

 - d. No opinion 11%

11. What improvements are needed regionally relative to vehicular safety?
- a. Increased speed enforcement 9%

 - b. Reduced speed limits 9%

 - c. Improved roadway design 15%

 - d. Improved road surfaces and bridge conditions 68%

12. How can land use planning and transportation planning be better coordinated?
- a. Promote "PennDOT Connects" program that ensures local priorities are addressed within a road project 42%

 - b. Connect transit agencies with municipal land development review 30%

 - c. Implement more land use management tools such as Official Maps, roundabouts, traffic calming, traffic impact fees, and others 27%

13. I understand the transportation planning process of how roadway and bridge improvements are planned in the region.
- a. Yes 50%

 - b. No 50%

14. Which long-range project should the region prioritize?
- a. Passenger rail access to and from the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre International Airport 36%

 - b. Improve bus services to New York City 12%

 - c. Removing Turnpike tolls between Clark's Summit and Wilkes-Barre 33%

 - d. Develop a regional ridesharing program 33%

 - e. Create a collaborative management program for traffic signals to improve traffic throughput the region 30%

 - f. Assist local municipalities in replacing/rehabilitating substandard bridges 55%


- g. Extend Coal Street from Wilkes-Barre Boulevard to create a critical link to the downtown 18%

15. Is it important that the region’s municipalities implement a Complete Streets Policy (Promoting sidewalks, pedestrian pathways, bicycle lanes, traffic calming measures and crosswalks)?

- a. Yes 89%
- b. No 11%
- c. I don’t know 0%

16. How important is regional and local transit, bike, pedestrian connections?

- a. Extremely important 56%
- b. Very important 28%
- c. Important 14%
- d. Not so important 3%
- e. Not important 0%

17. What bicycle/pedestrian project should the region prioritize? **Top 2 Choices**

- a. Extension of the D&L Trail to Wilkes-Barre 49%
- b. Lackawanna River Heritage Trail - Trail gaps 31%
- c. Trail gaps from Taylor south to the Pittston waterfront 34%
- d. Trail connections to the Murray Transit Complex 20%
- e. Educate municipal officials on the benefits of bicycle/pedestrian amenities land development planning 63%

18. What future transit routes are needed most?

- a. Developing a transit center in the mid-valley that tie existing routes together 11%
- b. Fixed routes that serve major employment centers/industrial parks 57%
- c. Fixed routes that connect Jessup and Pittston 3%
- d. Fixed routes that connect Scranton and Wilkes Barre 29%

19. What is the most significant freight-related issues? **Top 2 choices**

- a. Large truck traffic in small boroughs and city downtowns 58%

- b. Safe places for trucks to park 36%

- c. Analysis of first- and last-mile connections and needs 25%

- d. Addressing low bridge clearances 14%

- e. Congestion bottlenecks 42%

- f. Resolving loading zone requirements/needs in downtowns 14%

- g. Traffic incidents on interstate roads 33%


7. Closing Remarks

Steve Pitoniak closed the meeting by thanking everyone for attending. He also reminded attendees to check the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO's website (www.lltsmpo.com) for additional project updates and to learn about additional opportunities to participate in the planning process.