



## Pennsylvania at the Crossroads

**P**ennsylvania has been blessed with abundant land and precious natural, cultural, and historic resources. Because these resources are intrinsically linked to our economy and our daily lives, the land use policies and decisions we make today will affect how we live tomorrow. If we want to ensure that future generations enjoy a healthy and prosperous state, we must take the necessary governmental actions to preserve and protect Pennsylvania's valuable resources.

### Resources Worth Protecting

Farmland, forests, and water comprise the majority of Pennsylvania's landmass. Together, these prominent environmental resources help to drive the state's economy.

- Pennsylvania's farm and croplands make up 26 percent of the state's land. Some of the best agricultural soils in the world are found in the southcentral and southeastern portions of the state. With agriculture as the Commonwealth's No. 1 industry, Pennsylvania ranks fourth in the nation in the export of dairy products.
- Forests make up 54 percent of the state's land area, providing habitat for many plants and animals and contributing ecologically to clean air and water. Because residents and visitors alike are attracted to state-owned game lands and forestlands for their recreational and scenic value, forestland also serves as the economic backbone of the state's tourism industry.
- Water, one of our most essential and precious resources, covers 739,200 acres and makes up 2.6 percent of the state's landmass. In addition to the obvious environmental benefit that clean water provides, waterways attract outdoor enthusiasts and thus contribute to the state's thriving tourism industry.

We must protect these natural and environmental areas if we want to ensure a healthy state economy and maintain a positive quality of life for all citizens.

### At the Crossroads

This report identifies five land use issues that are symptomatic of what is ailing not only Pennsylvania but also other states across the nation. Each of the following issues has played a major role in how Pennsylvania's landscape has changed over the last half-century:

- Urban flight
- Loss of farmland and open space to development
- New highway construction
- Population shifts
- Regional economic decline

When massed together, these issues unquestionably have had a collective and interrelated impact on land use in Pennsylvania. Consider how the Commonwealth

has experienced a dramatic and unprecedented transformation of its landscape from the 1950s to the present day.

After decades of watching prime farmland, open space, and rural areas disappear, we now have reached a crossroads in terms of our land use policy decisions. Because of inconsistent land use decisions in the past, we can see how the resources that are tied to our economy and our very way of life are threatened. How we respond to this threat will determine what the future holds for Pennsylvania. Ultimately, as we come to this crossroads, we are faced with two choices: do nothing to reverse the current rate of land consumption or do something to ensure that smart growth occurs.

### *If we do nothing*

If state and local government officials do nothing to slow down urban flight or reduce the loss of farmland and open space to development and if they fail to consider the impact of new highway construction, shifting populations, and economic decline on a region, these issues will continue to harm the Commonwealth's physical landscape and diminish our quality of life.


**Urban flight** was recognized as far back as the 1950s when the exodus of residents from Philadelphia to adjacent neighborhoods began. This phenomenon, known as sprawl, has become a way of life in most urbanized areas throughout the Commonwealth. In the last 20 years, Pennsylvania's urban communities have gone from representing 52 percent of the state's population in 1980 to representing only 26 percent in 2000. However, the cause or reasons

that support this continued migration vary from region to region.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory, more than 1.16 million acres of rural land, mostly farmland, were converted to **development** between 1982 and 1997 in Pennsylvania. If we project this trend into the future, Pennsylvania will lose an additional 1.5 million acres of undeveloped land — the equivalent of Lycoming and Tioga counties — to development by the year 2020.

While the expansion of the Pennsylvania interstate highway system has led to many positive consequences, such as quicker and safer travel, **new highway construction** has also spurred much of this growth and development in rural areas. Throughout the Commonwealth, we are experiencing population shifts from one region to another as more people want to live in a non-urban setting close to where they work. The highway system has led to a more mobile society, resulting in low-density developments and large commercial enterprises paving over farmland and open space. Additionally, many large-lot developments occur quietly in rural areas





without much notice, but the cumulative effect of each of these developments contributes to the problem of sprawl.

Over the past few decades, Pennsylvania has experienced **major population shifts** as people are migrating out of urban areas and into nearby suburban and rural areas. **Regional economic decline**, often attributed to Pennsylvania's diminished manufacturing base, has also played a major role in population shifts across the state. More people are moving to less densely populated areas where they are supported by an efficient transportation system and have a better chance of finding a job in the state's growing service industry.

If state and local government officials do nothing to address these five issues with smart-growth solutions, we will continue to see more and more land consumed with little consideration given to preserving and protecting this natural resource so vital to our state's well-being.

### ***If we do something***

If we choose to respond to Pennsylvania's land use issues, state and local government officials, the general public, and the private sector must share responsibility for ensuring that smart growth occurs. Each stakeholder must participate in establishing policies and determining solutions that will mitigate or counteract the land use issues that are harmful to our environment, threaten our economy, and taint the future for our citizens.

Thanks to an executive order and state legislation enabling smart-growth policies and as a result of a citizen's constitutional right to participate in governmental activities, each of the stakeholders — the state, local governments, the general public, and the private sector — has a defined role in helping to make smart land use decisions.

### **The State's Role**

The Governor's Land Use Executive Order 1999-1 designated the Governor's Center for Local Government Services as the principal state agency to monitor land use and provide technical assistance. To exercise this authority, the Center established an Interagency Team on Land Use, which is comprised of the policy directors from all of the major state agencies. The team was directed to review and adjust all state agency program policies that may have an adverse impact on sound land use and to ensure that the programs of one state agency do not conflict with those of another.

**If smart growth is really to occur in Pennsylvania, coordination of land use policies must become the heart and soul of all land management efforts within the Commonwealth.** State agencies must develop consistent solutions to counteract current land use trends, and the Interagency Team must be able to review any controversial proposals to determine if any conflicts exist.

Within the framework of the Interagency Team, **state agencies also must recognize the importance of establishing a comprehensive urban agenda in which intergovernmental cooperation at both the state and local levels will help cities and boroughs redefine themselves within a regional picture.**

Acknowledging that local governments are often more effective when they work together, the Governor's Center for Local Government Services is striving to ensure that state agency programs that address smart-growth issues or land management measures are implemented under the umbrella of intergovernmental cooperation.

Currently, state agencies are sharing monies to jointly sponsor planning projects that address their agencies' program areas. While weighing the merits of whether a project should be funded, the Interagency Team must consider the potential impact of the project on the environment. By setting an example for fiscal leadership, participating agencies are helping to reinforce the principle of consistency between municipal plans and state land use policy.

Consequently, with its interagency approach to consistent policies, the Commonwealth is leading by example and has earned the right to play a stronger role in influencing the land use decisions made at other levels of government. The Interagency Team, without question, will continue to be state government's strongest tool in making sure smart growth occurs.

### Local Government's Role


While the discussion surrounding smart growth heats up in Pennsylvania, more and more emphasis has been placed at the local level, where many of the major decisions about land use and growth management are made. As a result of amendments to the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code in 2000, local governments now have a greater variety of planning tools at their disposal to tackle problematic land use issues.

The recently amended MPC gives local governments the benefit of two major policy initiatives that will help them successfully tackle growth management. The first addresses the goal of achieving general consistency whenever counties and local governments are preparing or updating their comprehensive plans and land use controls. General consistency requires that the land use plans of one community not conflict with the land use goals of another community. If planning efforts among all levels of government are to be coordinated, every governmental entity must support and implement this general consistency.

The goal of the second important policy initiative is to encourage greater multimunicipal planning through intergovernmental cooperation agreements. Article XI of the MPC allows planning to take place across municipal boundaries and thus frees up local governments to participate in multimunicipal planning efforts. For example, municipalities may now account for all zoning uses on a multimunicipal, rather than an individual, municipal level.

As more and more local governments implement these smart-growth tools, the Commonwealth, as represented by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services, must continue to educate municipal officials about the benefits of smart-growth policies.





Over the past three years, the Center has successfully provided financial assistance to many multimunicipal efforts. Thanks to the availability of state monies through the Land Use Planning and Technical Assistance Program (LUPTAP), the Center has been able to promote the two primary initiatives of the recently amended MPC — general consistency and multimunicipal planning.

One of the greatest challenges that local officials face when tackling smart growth is recognizing how land use decisions made at the state, regional, and local levels are interconnected. The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code now provides a process, through general consistency, in which local governments can communicate with one another and thus foster policies that result in sound land use decisions mutually beneficial to all. Because the value of intergovernmental cooperation historically has been overlooked in government, the Governor's Center for Local Government Services applauds recent efforts at both the state and local levels of government to work together to achieve smart growth.

When it comes to land use issues, Pennsylvania's charge for the future requires all levels of government to pursue intergovernmental cooperation and determine how to achieve true general consistency with one another.

### **The Role of the General Public and Private Sector**

An important, but often overlooked, cause of sprawl is that many people leave urban areas to seek a country lifestyle on a one- or two-acre piece of land. Unfortunately, as more and more people seek their haven in the country, the result is more sprawl and dispersed patterns of development. This statement embodies the cause and effect of the five land use issues that we discussed earlier in this chapter.

State and local governments, the general public, and commercial/industrial enterprises all share responsibility for how our land is consumed. Government must do a better job of making the general public more aware of the role each person and each business plays in our state's land use scenario. Sponsoring education programs aimed at the general public and encouraging public participation in the land use process are just two ways that government may involve the state's citizens in helping the Commonwealth to achieve smart growth.

Over the past few years, Pennsylvania has demonstrated a strong commitment to effective land use planning and growth management. The 2000 amendments to the Municipalities Planning Code have given communities access to a variety of planning tools to tackle smart growth and land management. However, to successfully address all issues related to land use, the general public, the private sector, and every level of government must make sure their program policies are consistent.

Pennsylvania has a rich history and proud heritage, all of which are directly linked to the use of our land. While we have begun to take positive actions to protect this valuable asset, we must do more. Only by collectively strengthening our current and future land use policies will we preserve Pennsylvania's valuable resources for future generations.