

Land Use and Growth Management Profile

Blair County is located in the Ridge and Valley Province of south central Pennsylvania. It is bordered by Cambria County to the west, Huntingdon County to the east, Centre County to the north, and Bedford County to the south. Hollidaysburg is the county seat. Blair County is comprised of 25 municipalities, including 15 townships, 9 boroughs, and the City of Altoona. The City of Altoona is the County's largest city and is the substantial metropolitan services center for the south central region of Pennsylvania.

According to the 2000 Census, Blair County had a total population of 129,144. The County ranks 27th in terms of population among Pennsylvania's 67 counties, and it ranks 22nd in terms of density of population per square mile. Its population density was 246 people per square mile in 2000, and its land area is 525.8 square miles. County population density figures in Pennsylvania range from 12 people per square mile in Forest County to 11,234 in Philadelphia County. From 1999 to 2000, Census figures show a 1.1 percent loss in population for Blair County, placing it in 54th position among Pennsylvania's 67 counties in rate of population loss/gain.

There were 105 housing units per square mile in Blair County in 2000, compared to housing densities of 11 and 4,900 per square mile, respectively, for Potter and Philadelphia Counties. The number of households rose from 1999 to 2000 by 2.4 percent, ranking Blair County 56th among the 67 counties.

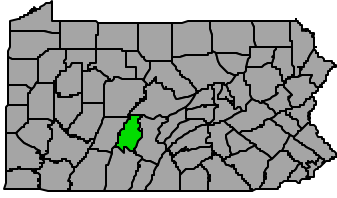
Existing Land Use Conditions

Blair County is predominantly rural with 90.4 percent of its total land area devoted to forest and agricultural uses.

Mountainous topography and a network of valley highway corridors have shaped Blair County's land uses. State game lands are prominent in the northwest part of the County, with smaller game land areas in the northeast and southern portion of the County. A mountain range separates urban Altoona from Morrison's Cove and Sinking Valley. This area is characterized by limestone geology and prime farmland.

According to 1997 USDA data, Blair County had 422 farms, ranking it 35th among the 67 Pennsylvania counties, and 83,813 acres in farm use, ranking it 55th among PA counties. As of December 2002, Blair County ranks 23rd in the state for the number of farms in the agricultural easement purchase program, with 23 farms enrolled and a total of 3,611 acres purchased. The total value of the easements to date is \$2,679,872, ranking Blair County in 25th position among PA counties. However, the average amount per acre is \$742.14, which ranks 44th among the state's counties in the cost of the easement per acre.

With the completion of the north-south I-99 interstate highway corridor through Blair County, ease of access to I-76 (the Pennsylvania Turnpike), has been substantially increased. While earlier business development had occurred in the area to the south between Altoona and



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Hollidaysburg, it is now beginning to push north towards Tyrone along the I-99 corridor.

A recently completed \$810,000, 18-mile installation of high-speed fiber optic infrastructure along the I-99 corridor is expected to attract additional business investment to the County, along with more skilled and professional employment opportunities. This project provides broadband network access to a number of strategic sites, including the school districts of Tyrone and Bellwood, the municipality of Bellwood, Tyrone Hospital, and four industrial parks. Completion of this project will permit development of a full-service business and educational resource center in Blair County.

Key Land Use Issues

- ☑ Like other land use indicators in Blair County, the rates of population change and household formation change are low at the present time. This is also true of rates of population change within the County, from Altoona to the surrounding communities. However, given a limited amount of developable land, a decreasing County population, and a slowly increasing rate of household formation, the present trend is in the direction of fewer members per household. Additional trends also indicate a larger number of houses and an increased amount of land devoted to meeting housing needs per one hundred persons.

- ☑ Extensive infrastructure investment, especially in highways and high-speed Internet networks, will make the I-99 corridor more attractive for sectors of business investment that create professional and highly skilled jobs. The resultant increase in purchasing power is likely to create additional demand for housing in the near term and for additional schools and other public facilities in the longer term. While there is no near-term shortage of developable land, over the longer term the County may want to examine the optimal balance between the amount of land developed for business and for residential uses, in particular.
- ☑ **At present, the County is experiencing growth in retail sectors, but losing employment in manufacturing.** The retail jobs gained are predominantly lower quality jobs than the manufacturing jobs lost. This has implications for household disposable income available for major expenditures, such as housing, and for the formation of additional complementary services businesses.

Land Use Planning Activities

- ☑ The Blair County Planning Commission is currently updating the County of Blair's Area wide Comprehensive Plan.