

## *Land Use and Growth Management Profile*

**C**olumbia County is located in the northeastern section of the state and is bordered by the counties of Sullivan, Luzerne, Schuylkill, Northumberland, Montour, and Lycoming. Columbia County is predominantly rural with its main population centers located in town of Bloomsburg and the Borough of Berwick. In addition to these municipalities, the County has seven other boroughs and 24 townships, for a total of 33 municipalities. Bloomsburg, the county seat, suffered from the relocation of retail business to shopping centers and malls, but has since revitalized its downtown to attain a commercial and social viability.

Columbia County experienced only modest population growth in the 1990s. Its population grew by 1.5 percent to 64,151 in 2000. This is Pennsylvania's 39<sup>th</sup> most populated county with a land area of 486 square miles. Its density, according to the 2000 Census, was 132 persons per square mile. Centralia Borough is an anomaly in the County, experiencing a complete exodus of residents through a U.S. Government buyout program due to the unsafe conditions from a continuously burning underground mine fire.

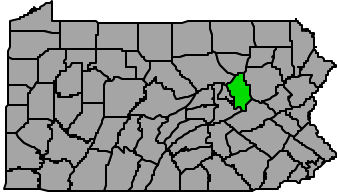
### **Existing Land Use Conditions**

Approximately 96 percent of the County's total land area is undeveloped with 93.8 percent of this total devoted forest and agricultural uses.

Columbia County is entirely located in the Appalachian Mountain Section of the Valley and Ridge Physiographic Province. Much of the region's picturesque beauty is due to the mountains that partition the County. Berwick and Bloomsburg lie in the most level area of the County, a 3,000-foot wide strip along the northern side of the Susquehanna River. Development, which comprises 4.2 percent of the area in the County, is determined largely by the sloping contours of much of the land. Only about 29% of land has a slope of seven percent or less. Development and agriculture are vying for these "flatlands," especially along the Susquehanna River.

### **Key Land Use Issues**

- ☑ **Columbia County's increase in housing units significantly outpaced its population growth in the 1990s.** This can be one of the indicators of sprawl. Housing units increased by 8.3 percent while population increased by only 1.5 percent. The actual numbers though, are relatively small. Housing units increased by 2,135 according to the 2000 Census and population grew by 949.
- ☑ **Columbia County is concerned about open space preservation.** This is evident from its participation in Pennsylvania's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. To date, 14 farms and 1,585 acres have been preserved. Additionally, with support from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Conservation Fund has acquired over



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9,000 acres in the Brush Valley area of Columbia and Northumberland counties for open space protection, recreation and watershed protection. Protecting natural resources and open space are seen by the County as directly tied to quality of life and economic prosperity.

- ☑ **Columbia County has experienced an influx of residents from Luzerne County.** The county border between Columbia and Luzerne Counties is very fluid, with numerous residents of Luzerne relocating in Columbia County and vice versa. The net difference of migration between the two counties, results in residents leaving the more congested Wilkes-Barre/Scranton area and taking up residence in the more rural Columbia County. The ease of access provided by I-80 has facilitated this migration, as well as the open countryside of Columbia County, a trend likely to continue for many years.
- ☑ **Columbia County has several municipalities with a high percentage of mobile homes and others with over-crowded multi-family units.** According to the 2000 Census, mobile homes comprised a substantial portion of the housing stock in three of the County's municipalities. While mobile homes are more affordable, their quality and durability tend to be below that of stationary, permanent housing. Additionally, mobile homes located on leased parcels within a park are sometimes subjects to unreasonable rents and regulations. In Columbia

County's Briar Creek Borough, approximately 57 percent of the housing stock is comprised of mobile homes. A little over 30 percent of North Central township and South Central township's housing stock is made up of mobile homes. Additionally, for some time, Bloomsburg has experienced over-crowded multi-family housing units. The continuous growth of Bloomsburg University may attribute to this issue. Several projects are underway that address the need for additional multi-family housing units near the university.

### **Land Use Planning Activities**

- ☑ **The majority of Columbia County's municipalities have adopted comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances.** Twenty-six municipalities out of the 33 in the County have implemented a zoning ordinance, and 20 municipalities are being guided by a comprehensive plan. These planning efforts are significant given the modest growth pressure on the County when compared to other regions in the state.
- ☑ **Bloomsburg's central business district revitalization has become a model for other communities.** The revitalization has been both aesthetic and economic. A section of the town has been designated as a National Historic District, providing opportunities to restore and rehabilitate some of its architecture.