

## *Land Use and Growth Management Profile*

**E**lk County is located in north central Pennsylvania and has common borders with Clearfield and Jefferson Counties to the south, Forest County to the west, McKean County to the north, and Cameron County to the east. The County is predominantly rural, although a recent merger between St. Mary's Borough and Benzinger Township created a third-class city with the largest land area of any of Pennsylvania's third class cities. Elk County has nine townships, two boroughs, and one third-class city. The Borough of Ridgway is the county seat, and it is a substantial employment and services center for residents of this rural county.

Elk County's population of 35,112 ranks it 60<sup>th</sup> in the state. With an average of 42.4 people per square mile, Elk County ranks 61<sup>st</sup> in population density. Its land area is just under 829 square miles. From 1990 to 2000, Census figures show a population gain of 0.7 percent.

Elk County had a total of 18,115 housing units in 2000. The County experienced a 5.0 percent increase in housing supply from 1990 to 2000. During the same period, the number of households grew by 7.6 percent; however, the average size of a household in Elk County decreased by 7.6 percent, the second greatest decrease in size of household in the state. The County's low-to-moderate income housing rehabilitation program has a long waiting list.

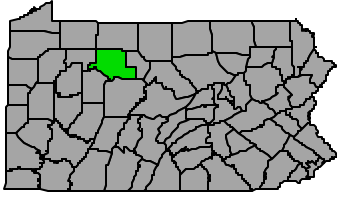
### **Existing Land Use Conditions**

Approximately 94 percent of the County's total land is undeveloped, with about 93.6 percent of this land devoted to forest and agricultural uses.

Elk County is located in Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains Region. Elk, and Cameron County to the east, are the primary location of Pennsylvania's only wild elk herd, from which the County derived its name. A significant amount of the County's land area is state or federal forested land, state park, or game land. Immigrants from Baltimore and Philadelphia settled the County in 1787. Although the citizens established farms, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become apparent that the County was not going to prosper agriculturally.

In succeeding years, the County's economy evolved from logging, lumber and mining, to a carbon graphite or powder metals manufacturing base. Elk County is the center of the largest concentration of powder metals firms in the United States. Although some firms are sizeable with the latest in sophisticated production equipment, including robotics and CAD-CAM, many are small shops which retain some manually operated equipment.

Recent offshore competition for equipment contracts has resulted in a loss of business and employment among the County's powder metal firms. Other manufacturing plants located in the County are no longer locally owned, and are perceived as being less interested in local civic involvement.



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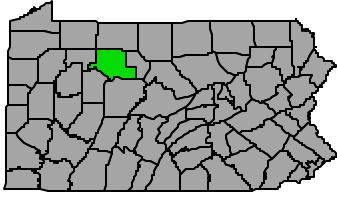
However, some, like Weyerhaeuser Industries in Johnsonburg, exhibit a strong sense of civic responsibility. The processed water released by Weyerhaeuser is of such high quality that it supports a fish hatchery.

U.S. Route 219 (north-south) has been the dominant highway artery and transportation concern for two decades. Presently, it is a two-lane highway with significant logging, coal, and other truck traffic. Long-standing advocacy groups in the region would like to see Route 219 enlarged to four lanes, from central Cambria County north to Buffalo, NY. State Route 255, a much smaller two-lane highway from St. Mary's to Dubois, is the only other nearly countywide route out of the region, and connects to I-80 (east-west).

According to the Census of Agriculture, in 1997 Elk County had 145 farms, ranking it 61<sup>st</sup> in the state in the number of farms. The average size of an Elk County farm is 118 acres. Average income per farm was \$14,221, which ranks it 65<sup>th</sup> among Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

### **Key Land Use Issues**

- Some existing water and sewer lines are collapsing from age.** The County is using federal Rural Development and Community Development Block Grant funds to address the problem. In some locations where infrastructure has been repaired and modernized, some residents are experiencing financial difficulty in paying the higher service fees required to finance the cost of the improvements.
- There are pockets of demand for rural lots in Benazette Township.** These are now resort types of homes built in a remote area by individuals wanting more land and lower density. These houses are located near a more recent tourist attraction, Elk County's elk herd. This had been predominantly a retirement community, and these residents are concerned about the growing level of tourist traffic on township roads.
- Housing first built as somewhat isolated vacation or second homes is now being winterized.** With additional homes increasing density sufficiently to make such areas housing subdivisions, there is increasing demand for infrastructure and other municipal services. Local governments lack financial capacity to build or extend infrastructure and provide other services, and construction on old strip mine soil is not well served by on-lot water and sewage disposal.
- A pattern of the use of eminent domain in some areas of the County has resulted in the taking of privately owned parcels to facilitate development of 'big-box' retail, including grocery chains.** Those who have noted this pattern are concerned that it will accelerate the demise of downtown retail, and that it may not meet the criterion of "highest and best land use."



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- ☑ **There is prevalent suspicion concerning the purpose of government action to regulate land use.** This is especially a concern in regards to the federal government, and it extends to actions such as the “Wild and Scenic Rivers” designation of the Clarion River, as well as the formation of the Lumber Heritage Region. Education and public relations at the local level to explain the purposes, scope, and benefits of land use planning could alleviate some of these misunderstandings, but resources for such activities are not available.
- ☑ **Specialized agricultural land uses, such as wineries, are becoming increasingly popular in Elk County.** Wineries, for example, are well suited to the County’s glaciated topography and benefit from the region’s tourism industry.

### **Land Use Planning Activities**

- ☑ **The County’s comprehensive plan was adopted in 1999, and it is responsive to recent amendments of the Municipalities Planning Code.** Currently, seven of Elk County’s twelve municipalities have municipal comprehensive plans, eight have municipal subdivision and land development ordinances, and four have municipal zoning ordinances. The availability of additional technical assistance in updating these plans and ordinances, and drafting plans and ordinances for additional municipalities requesting them would make land management and development

opportunities more consistent throughout the County. At present, the County lacks countywide zoning, subdivision and land development ordinances.

- ☑ **Elk County has prepared a new countywide subdivision and land development ordinance, effective October 2003.**
- ☑ **Much of the County’s planning activity is conducted in coordination with other functional planning efforts.** The County planning office participates with the North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission for transportation planning. Watershed planning is integrated into the planning and subdivision plans and ordinances. Economic development planning is integrated with the County comprehensive plan and is a responsibility assigned to the County Planning Commission.