

Land Use and Growth Management Profile

Lehigh County is a growing community in eastern Pennsylvania that is attempting to manage growth pressures brought about by shifting development patterns, population growth, and demand for housing in rural areas. The County is bordered on the east by Northampton County and is provided good access to the metropolitan areas of New York and New Jersey via Interstate 78, which began construction in the mid-1950s. The City of Allentown is not only the county seat, but also the region's largest population center. It joins the cities of Bethlehem and Easton to form the Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton (A-B-E) metropolitan area, a U.S. Census designation that reflects a strong degree of social and economic integration between these central cities.

To this day, Lehigh and Northampton Counties are collectively referred to as the "Lehigh Valley." The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) has overseen county planning since 1961. Over the years, the Commission, encouraging compatible development in these two counties, has advanced a series of comprehensive plans.

The Lehigh Valley's population continues to increase, but the population gains have not been felt in the region's cities and boroughs. In 1960, the A-B-E metropolitan population (215,710 persons) represented 50 percent of the region's total population (428,948 persons). By the year 2000, the metropolitan area represented only 35 percent of the Valley's total population (579,156 persons). In contrast to many third-class cities, Allentown experienced

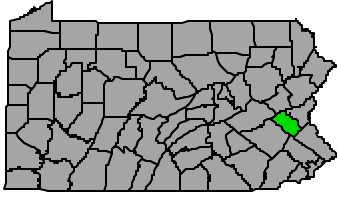
modest population growth in the 1990s. However, residential and commercial development in outlying townships have primarily driven Lehigh County's growth trend. All areas of the County have experienced ever-increasing levels of population growth, with the exception of its older core communities.

In Lehigh County, population gains have been steady for the last 30 years, averaging a seven percent decadal growth rate. Projections prepared by the LVPC indicate that the County's population will continue to increase through 2030. A combination of net migration and natural increase will result in a five percent decadal growth rate. The aging of the baby boom generation is anticipated to be a factor in the County's modest population outlook.

Existing Land Use Conditions

There has been an increase in built-up land, bringing developed land coverage to 20.7 percent. Agriculture remains a dominant land use within this County as it consumes 47 percent of the total land coverage.

The *Lehigh Valley Comprehensive Plan* (1993) attributes this high rate of farmland consumption to low-density residential development. Indeed, housing construction activity has been brisk, particularly in the County's rural townships. In 2001, 1,553 new housing units were constructed in Lehigh County. A majority of these units were built in Upper Macungie, Lower Macungie, and Upper Saucon Townships. In Lehigh County, single-family detached housing is the predominant housing type, representing



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nearly 66 percent of all new units built in 2001.

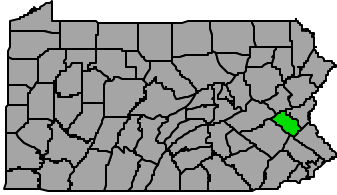
Residential development is the second largest land use, comprising 24 percent of the County's total land area. U.S. Census data suggests today's population consumes land at a very high rate. While the "persons per household" continues to decline, the number of housing units in the County has continued to increase – and at a faster rate of growth than the population. From 1990-2000, the number of housing units in Lehigh County increased by 8.9 percent; yet the County's population increased by only 7.2 percent. As the County's population continues to migrate away from the central cities, a low-density development pattern predominates. Increased traffic congestion can be anticipated on area highways and arterial roadways.

Key Land Use Issues

- ☑ **The growing distance between employment centers and population centers is contributing to increased traffic congestion on U.S. Route 22.** Built in the early 1950s, Route 22 is the County's principle transportation artery, connecting residential areas to major employment centers located within the Lehigh Valley. A growing percentage of the County population lives in the outer suburbs and rural areas. This development pattern has contributed to increased peak hour traffic congestion on U.S. Route 22, which is used heavily by commuters working in the Lehigh Valley. As a result of these travel patterns, the LVPC and PennDOT have

launched efforts to widen Route 22 from Interstate 78 to the City of Easton.

- ☑ **As the rate of farmland and open space consumption increases, it becomes more difficult to preserve the character of Lehigh County's rural areas.** The LVPC estimates that suburban sprawl has consumed 3 square miles a year over the past 30 years. Although Lehigh County has made strides to preserve farmland, land under easement represents a small percentage of the County's total land area.
- ☑ **There is strong public support for farmland preservation in Lehigh County.** In a 1999 public opinion survey, the County found that 61 percent of registered voters "strongly agreed" (another 30 percent "agreed") that farmland should be preserved in the Lehigh Valley. And nearly half felt that the quality of life in the Valley had declined over the last 10 years. Loss of open space and traffic congestion were identified as the most significant consequences of growth in the Lehigh Valley.
- ☑ **There has been a tremendous increase in industrial park development.** The County's first industrial parks began to appear in the mid-1980s. Today, the Lehigh Valley Industrial Park, Inc. maintains a system of five industrial parks totaling 1,300 acres. In addition to LVIP, Inc., smaller business parks have been developed in the outer suburbs.
- ☑ **A growing percentage of the County's workforce travels in and out of the region for employment.** In 2000, U.S. Census data indicated that 23 percent of



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the County's workforce traveled outside the County to work – as compared to 21 percent in 1990. Of the resident workforce traveling outside the County, a small, but growing number are commuting to counties in southeastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey. In turn, Lehigh County does receive a small influx of commuters from these areas – most notably from Carbon, Berks, and Northampton Counties. U.S. Route 22 and Interstate 78 provide excellent access to these metropolitan areas. In fact, a *Needs and Planning Study* conducted for the Route 22 corridor estimated that 80 percent of all motorists traveling the corridor during morning peak hours were traveling to or from their place of employment. These commuting patterns, when combined with the low-density development patterns that predominate, have increased automobile dependency and reduced the opportunity for alternative transportation solutions (e.g., rail transportation).

Land Use Planning Activities

- ☑ **Concerns about the loss of open space prompted the County to issue a referendum to establish a \$30 million bond pool – the Green Future Fund – to preserve green space.** This proposal was supported by 64 percent of the voters.
- ☑ **The County has a very aggressive farmland and open space preservation program focused upon acquisitions outside the path of future growth.** As

of June 2003, the Lehigh County Agricultural Land Preservation Board had protected 154 farms with permanent conservation easements totaling 13,925 acres – or about 6 percent of the County's total land area. The highest concentration of preserved farmland is located in the northwestern part of the County.

- ☑ **Regional planning is being used by a handful of municipalities to combat sprawl.** Seven municipalities in northern Lehigh County have hired a consulting team to develop a multi-municipal comprehensive plan. Municipalities in the southern portion of the County have also joined in a multi-municipal plan effort.
- ☑ **Lehigh County actively promotes multi-municipal planning initiatives.** Lehigh and Northampton Counties adopted their first regional comprehensive plan in 1964. The two counties are currently preparing the fourth major update to the plan. The joint county comprehensive plan will further support multi-municipal planning through the existing network of active council of government (COG) organizations. Cities have not been involved to any extent with new multi-municipal initiatives because of the few incentives to participate provided in the current enabling legislation.