

Land Use and Growth Management Profile

Mercer County, located in northwestern Pennsylvania, has an excellent highway network providing easy access to the Pittsburgh and Erie metropolitan areas and major employment centers in nearby Youngstown and Cleveland, Ohio. It is bordered by Crawford County to the north, Venango and Butler Counties to the east, Lawrence County to the south, and the Ohio counties of Ashtabula and Trumbull to the west.

Mercer County was established in 1800 from part of Allegheny County. Its early economy relied upon agriculture and extractive industries, such as lumber, coal, and iron mining. Steel manufacturing was particularly important to the County's economy throughout most of the 1900s, particularly in the communities of Sharon and Farrell. The County's economy is diversifying, but the majority of business continues to be based on manufacturing and agriculture.

Mercer County is comprised of 48 municipalities, including three cities, 14 boroughs, and 31 townships. In 1980, the County's population peaked at 128,299 residents. Population in 2000 was 120,293. At 672 square miles, Mercer County ranks 33rd in size among Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

Existing Land Use Conditions

Mercer County includes a mix of urban and rural land uses with the majority of the

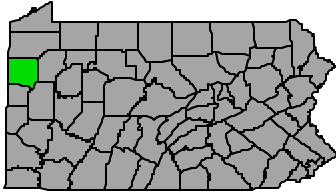
residential, commercial, and industrial development located in or surrounding one of several small cities and boroughs. Over 280 square miles – or 42 percent of the County's total land area – is dedicated to farming activities. Principle products include livestock, dairy, and grain. Today, Mercer County has over 1,000 active farming operations, some of which have been in the same family for over a century.

While farming remains an important component of the County's economy, the sustainability of farming is being threatened by residential and commercial development. The table below reflects a pattern of farmland conversion that was particularly rapid in the 1970s. Since that time, total acreage devoted to agriculture has stabilized somewhat due to easement programs and the establishment of Agricultural Security Areas.

Mercer County Land Use (% of total) 1973-1993

Land Use Category	1973	1993
Residential	4.76	6.96
Commercial	0.34	0.45
Industrial	0.52	0.64
Public & Semi-Public	0.44	0.48
Recreation & Public Open Space	3.09	3.53
Woodland	35.97	52.36
Mineral Extraction	0.66	0.22
Other (inc. agriculture)	54.22	35.35
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Source: Mercer County Comprehensive Plan (1995-96)



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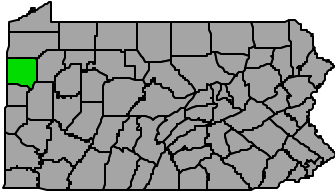
Woodland comprises over half (52.36%) of the County's total land area. Nearly all of the County's forestland is under private ownership. Development is primarily concentrated around the County's three major urban centers: Sharon, Greenville, and Grove City.

Key Land Use Issues

- ☑ **Mercer County's population and economy remain stagnant, keeping growth and development pressure minimal.** Despite this, population and businesses continue to shift from urban centers to suburban and rural areas. The land use table documents this trend. Short-term effects are minimal, but long-term cumulative impacts are noticeable. These include growth in traffic on non-urban arterial and collector roads, an increase in storm water runoff and associated problems and proliferation of on-lot sewage systems, often followed later by costly extensions of public systems.
- ☑ **Lack of overall economic growth and shifts in population and businesses continue to worsen the plight of older urban centers.** Communities such as Sharon and Farrell suffer excesses of blighted property and deferred maintenance of critical infrastructure and lack fiscal capacity to address either problem. This further contributes to the communities' lack of attractiveness for private residential and business investment needed for revitalization.
- ☑ **The County is embarking upon a major effort to identify one or a few sites to generate 1,000 acres of economic development in the near future.** As part of the County Comprehensive Plan update, the County and its lead economic development organization are beginning to assemble funds to enable financing of site development. Site selection will be market based and, as such, will likely result in an interstate corridor location not immediately adjacent to an existing urban center. The County Comprehensive Plan update will address planning linkages and further targeting of development to benefit nearby existing communities and minimize impacts from the development.
- ☑ **Improved economic conditions are expected to result in development in southern Mercer County.** While the slow economy has quieted development interests moving north out of Pittsburgh and its northern suburbs, it is assumed that an improved economy will again present potential for large-scale development in southern Mercer County, particularly in the I-79 corridor.

Land Use Planning Activities

- ☑ **The County has designated "growth target areas" - regions of the County where future development should be concentrated.** Concerns about the rapid pace of land consumption and the lack of economic growth led the County to undertake a community-driven



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visioning process that resulted in the County's most recent Comprehensive Plan – *Planning for Livable Communities*. The plan emphasized the need to concentrate new development around existing population centers where infrastructure can be reasonably extended. Interstate interchanges were identified as priority sites for installing public infrastructure because they have the greatest potential to support business investment and resultant job creation.

- ☑ **Mercer County's new Comprehensive Plan will be integrated with several multi-municipal planning initiatives.** The new plan will redefine targets for growth, revitalization and rural conservation. It will identify a next generation of infrastructure improvements – water, sewer and transportation – needed to serve designated target areas. The plan will recommend a greenways/open space network and a “livable communities” design guide for future building and development, both designed to enhance “quality of place” in Mercer County. The new plan will also build upon Strategy 1000. This joint effort of the Mercer County Regional Planning Commission and Penn-Northwest Development Corporation seeks to achieve 1,000 acres of economic development by the year 2006. This effort will be integrated with five multi-municipal comprehensive plans being prepared simultaneously, involving 25

municipalities in each of the County's five socio-economic regions.

- ☑ **The widening of PA Route 18 led the City of Hermitage to adopt land use plans for the Route 18 corridor.** Next to Interstate 79, PA Route 18 is the most important north-south connector in Mercer County. Over the past several years, PennDOT completed improvements to this roadway, which is now expanded from two to five lanes in the City of Hermitage. Concerned about the resale value of their homes, many property owners have requested zoning changes that would encourage commercial development within the corridor. In response, the City of Hermitage completed land use plans for the corridor and adopted a policy favoring “quality” of development over “quantity.” Large-scale commercial development is confined to areas reflecting realistic market demand, and larger parts of the corridor allow small-scale and mixed-use development with design enhancements of landscaping and access management.