

Land Use and Growth Management Profile

Schuylkill County is located in the heart of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region. Created in 1811 from portions of Berks and Northampton Counties, the County takes its name from the Schuylkill River, which flows from its headwaters in Tuscarora Springs (just outside Tamaqua) to join the mighty Delaware River 130 miles downstream in Philadelphia County. With the discovery of coal in the early 1800s, the Schuylkill River became a focal point for commercial development. At one time, the river supported an extensive network of dams and locks, only to be supplanted by the railroad in the 1880s. Today, the waterway is no longer suitable for commercial navigation, but its importance to the regional economy is evident in the location of major population centers and transportation corridors. Many of the region's largest cities, including Reading, Pottstown, and Pottsville, are located along the main stem. The County's primary north-south highway – State Route 61 – parallels the Schuylkill River as well.

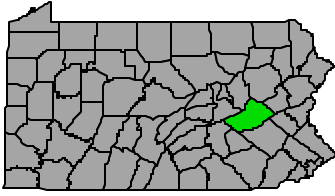
At the industry's height, Schuylkill rivaled Lackawanna County as the State's largest producer of anthracite coal. The County's largest coal seam is located in a two- to six-mile-wide band that extends from Tower City Borough in the southwestern corner of the County to Coaldale Borough in its northeastern end. Portions of this coal belt are actively mined today. Schuylkill County's population peaked in 1930 at 235,000 persons. Since that time, the

County has steadily lost population, which is presently at 150,336. These population losses have been most keenly felt in the County's coal patch communities, such as Mahanoy City Borough, Shenandoah Borough, and Port Clinton Borough. The decline of the coal industry and restructuring of the manufacturing economy have both influenced the population patterns seen in Schuylkill County today.

Existing Land Use Conditions

Schuylkill County's land area is 778 square miles. It is comprised of 67 municipalities – 30 boroughs, 36 townships, and one city. The City of Pottsville is the county seat and the largest population center. With a population of 15,549 persons, it represents roughly 10 percent of the County's total population (150,336). Tamaqua Borough is the County's second largest municipality, with 7,174 residents.

Topography has had a significant influence on development patterns in the County. Situated in the Ridge & Valley Province of the Appalachian Mountains, it has a landscape characterized by steep forested ridges and fertile, limestone valleys. Development has concentrated in the low-lying valleys, particularly along the Schuylkill River and its major tributaries. Woodland is the most predominant land use, comprising nearly 67 percent of the County's total land area. Although the Commonwealth owns a portion of the County's forests, a much larger percentage is under private ownership. The second

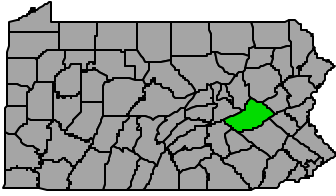


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largest land use is agricultural land, which comprises another 22.7 percent of the County's land area. The majority of agricultural land is located in the southern half of the County. Residential and commercial developments have largely concentrated along the County's principal transportation corridors, which include State Route 61 and Interstate 81.

Key Land Use Issues

- The decline of manufacturing employment has led to population decline and a reduction in municipal tax bases.** Although the apparel industry sustained the County's economy through the decline of coal, foreign competition eventually led to the death of this industry. When plants closed, many municipalities saw their tax bases dwindle. Unable to find family-sustaining jobs, many people left Schuylkill County, which may be attributed to the five percent drop in population since the 1980s.
- Acid mine drainage (AMD) has contributed to waterway pollution. It has also created hardship for communities served by onsite water and sewage facilities.** Past mining activities, both strip and deep mining, have contributed to pervasive AMD problems in Schuylkill County. The County estimates that roughly 50,000 acres of land in central Schuylkill County are restricted to new development due to outstanding remediation requirements associated
- with past mining activity. In areas subject to deep mining, subsidence is also a growing concern. In Spring 2002, Pottsville received a Growing Greener grant to help stabilize Sharp Mountain, an abandoned underground mining site that threatens the safety of City residents.
- New development has concentrated along major highway interchanges.** Development pressures are particularly strong along the County's southern rim, due to the abundant availability of farmland and the proximity to primary traffic corridors. The County's newest industrial park – Highridge Business Park – was built along Interstate 81 in Cass, Foster, and Butler Townships. The 1,800-acre site has become a strong draw for warehouse distribution facilities. The anchor tenant, Lowe's Companies, Inc., will be joined by Wegmans which announced in the fall of 2002 that it would build a 320,000 square foot regional distribution facility – the company's only distribution facility located outside Rochester, New York (their company headquarters).
- The State Route 61 corridor is poised to become a new growth corridor in southern Schuylkill County.** In 2002, the premier outfitter, Cabela's, announced it would build its first East Coast store in northern Berks County. Located near the intersection of Interstate 78 and State Route 61 in Tilden Township, the 250,000 square



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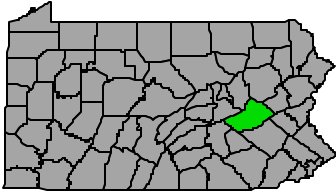
foot mega-store caters to a host of outdoor interests, particularly hunting, fishing, and camping. In anticipation of additional tourist traffic, the Schuylkill County Visitors Bureau moved its visitor center closer to Route 61. Since the store's Fall 2003 grand opening, two of the region's public transportation providers, Berks Area Reading Transportation Authority (BARTA) and the Schuylkill Transportation System (STS), announced plans to establish bus service along the Route 61 corridor. Some new businesses appear to be taking advantage of Cabela's heightened visibility and the transportation improvements along Route 61. Based upon its success in other states, Cabela's is expected to be a major tourist destination, attracting an estimated seven million visitors annually. The visibility of the site and the presence of this major anchor tenant are already attracting interest in the S.R. 61 corridor. Improvements are being planned to allow the highway to carry more traffic. It is the County's principal north-south highway and provides key access to many locations. Easier access may be a significant factor in encouraging more economic development.

- ☑ **Poorly planned development has contributed to sewer problems in some of the County's residential communities.** Many of Schuylkill County's residential areas were established before modern sewer and

water standards were implemented by the Commonwealth. Outdated forms of sewage management, such as cesspools and wildcat sewers, were not uncommon in the 1800s. Until quite recently, the County's largest residential community – Cass Township – did not have a public sewer system. It has since secured State funding to construct a sewer collection system and wastewater treatment plant, which it will administer through a joint authority. The situation in Cass Township is not unique. Other municipalities have combined sewer systems, which are an inefficient means of conveying waste. These systems become inundated during wet weather events, leading to combined sewage overflows (CSOs) – a significant water pollution problem in the Schuylkill watershed. Public utility constraints contribute to environmental degradation and limit economic development opportunities.

Land Use Planning Activities

- ☑ **Schuylkill County has an active farmland preservation program.** Since 1989, the County has administered a conservation easement program recognized by the PA Agricultural Land Preservation Board. County and/or State funds are used to purchase development rights on qualifying farmland. The program keeps ownership of the land intact, but precludes future development of the land, thus maintaining critical farmland



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and preserving open space. To date, Schuylkill County's Agricultural Land Preservation Board has protected over 5,000 acres through the easement purchase program. In addition to conservation easements, many property owners within Schuylkill County participate in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This voluntary program administered by the U.S. Farm Service Agency provides rental payments – via multi-year contracts – to landowners who implement approved conservation practices on environmentally sensitive land. Since 1986, the Farm Service Agency has enrolled over 7,800 acres of erodible Schuylkill County lands into the CRP. Because the program is cost-shared by the federal and state government (80:20 match), continuation of the CRP is dependent upon federal appropriations and the future competitiveness of CRP rental payments. The viability of Schuylkill County's farming economy is also being affected by low-density residential development, which is beginning to appear in once rural areas along the County's southern rim.

- ☑ **Coal refuse is finding new life in co-generation plants.** Co-generation facilities utilize coal waste (i.e., culm) to generate electricity. Due to the tremendous volume of coal waste in Schuylkill County, a number of co-generations facilities have been established. Because these modern operations often remine abandoned

mine sites, such facilities are contributing to the restoration of the County's environment.

- ☑ **In 1997, Schuylkill County initiated a visioning process aimed at identifying the community's core values.** Schuylkill County's VISION has received support from both the County Commissioners and the State legislative delegation. The community-driven planning process has encouraged the public to get involved with issues impacting Schuylkill County regardless of their status in the community. Major accomplishments of Schuylkill County VISION include launching the Pottsville Schuylkill Technology Incubator, development of the Highridge Business Park, and establishment of a satellite CareerLink center in Tamaqua.
- ☑ **Schuylkill County is currently updating its countywide comprehensive plan.** The County is working to build consensus on its planning priorities through the ongoing comprehensive plan update. *Schuylkill 2025* may significantly increase interest in more coordinated land use planning initiatives. As part of its data analysis, *Schuylkill 2025* will thoroughly examine all related environmental constraints and produce a detailed land use strategy for utilizing former mining areas.