

Land Use and Growth Management Profile

Susquehanna County is located in the Appalachian Mountains in northeast Pennsylvania, often referred to as the “Endless Mountains” region. Susquehanna County is surrounded by Lackawanna and Wyoming Counties to the south, Bradford County to the west, the New York state line to the north, and by Wayne County to the east. Susquehanna County has 40 municipalities comprised of 27 townships and 13 boroughs. Montrose Borough is the county seat, and it is a significant services center for Susquehanna County. Other core communities are Great Bend, Halstead, New Milford (Borough and Township), Forest City Borough, Susquehanna Depot Borough, Lenox Township, and Clifford Township.

According to the 2000 Census, Susquehanna County had a total population of 42,238, ranking it 52nd among Pennsylvania’s 67 counties. Its land area of 833.86 square miles makes the County the 22nd largest in Pennsylvania. The County’s population density of 51.3 people per square mile places it in 56th position. By comparison, the average population density for all 67 Pennsylvania counties is 274 people per square mile. Susquehanna County’s population grew by 4.6 percent from 1990 to 2000, the 26th fastest rate of gain among Pennsylvania counties.

Susquehanna County’s total of 21,829 housing units ranks 48th among Pennsylvania counties. In terms of housing density, the County’s 26.5 residences per square mile ranked it 53rd. By comparison, the Pennsylvania statewide average was

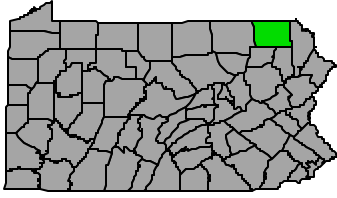
117.1 residences per square mile. From 1990 to 2000, the number of housing units in Susquehanna County grew by 7.5 percent, the 34th most rapid rate of increase. The number of households grew by 10.9 percent, the 19th fastest rate of increase. Household size during the same period decreased by 5.9 percent, the 6th largest decrease in household size among Pennsylvania’s 67 counties.

Existing Land Use Conditions

Approximately 97 percent of the County’s total land is undeveloped, with about 95 percent of this land devoted to forest and agriculture uses.

Susquehanna County remains predominantly agricultural. The Pennsylvania State University Extension Service places the number of farms at 185. According to USDA data, the average county in Pennsylvania has 678 farms. The average acreage, statewide, was 107,045 acres per county. Statewide, the average farm was 158 acres in size.

Conversion of agricultural land in Susquehanna County is tracked by the county assessment office. A low rate of residential and business investment is more of a concern in the County than the present very low rate of conversion of agricultural land. Nonetheless, dairy farming, in particular, is a substantial part of the County’s economy and there is a strong desire to preserve dairy farming. The County has purchased agricultural easements for 17 farms, ranking it 27th among Pennsylvania counties. The total



Land Use and Growth Management Profile

acreage for which easements have been purchased is 4,080, the 19th largest number of acres statewide. The average per-acre cost of the easements is \$639.49, placing Susquehanna County in 49th position. The total of \$2,608,925.50 expended for agricultural easements is the 27th largest amount among Pennsylvania's 67 counties.

I-81 is the principal growth corridor in Susquehanna County. Present development attracted by the corridor is quite moderate, although it does involve some agricultural land conversion. There is not much recent housing development activity, and housing development does not pose a threat to open space preservation. A lot of land is owned, but not currently developed, by older people expecting to build retirement homes.

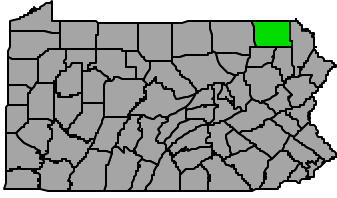
The dominant area of business growth is in small business startups and expansions, typically creating one to five new jobs per business. The County is seeking additional business investment with the understanding that some open space conversion may be required. As noted above, one-half of all residents commute to employment outside county boundaries. Unemployment levels are basically stable, except for seasonal variations.

Key Land Use Issues

- ☑ **Susquehanna County is experiencing a population influx from other urban areas**, primarily New York, New Jersey, and to a lesser degree, from southeastern PA. This situation

represents three groups. The first is a group of commuters employed in major urban centers who are attracted by the County's tranquility and cheap land. The second group represents retirees building new homes or converting existing second homes. The third group is purchasing and holding extensive amounts of land but not yet making significant development investments.

- ☑ **Many local governments in the County lack the essential planning tools needed to guide and manage the present and prospective growth.** Only eight of the 40 municipalities have comprehensive plans, six have zoning ordinances, and 11 have municipal subdivision and land development ordinances.
- ☑ **A County zoning ordinance is needed to discourage adjacent incompatible land uses, which are becoming a significant problem.** Examples are junkyards springing up in the middle of farmland, dirt track bike racing next to residential development. There is no county zoning ordinance, but there is a county subdivision and land development ordinance adopted in 1998.
- ☑ **Pennsylvania's Clean and Green Act has created incentives for sprawl development in Susquehanna** by providing tax incentives for parcels of a minimum of ten acres in size. Susquehanna County's minimum lot size is two acres. The tax incentive for 10 acre parcels has proved attractive to



Land Use and Growth Management Profile

subdividers, rather than to developers, and has led to what is termed “recreational mowing” as a significant recreational activity in the County.

Land Use Planning Activities

- ☑ **Susquehanna County is updating its 1992 comprehensive plan** and will include transportation and economic development planning, in coordination with Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission.
- ☑ **Intergovernmental cooperation is taking hold in Susquehanna County** as many municipalities have pursued regional planning initiatives. Currently, 12 municipalities comprised of 10 townships and two boroughs are developing a multi-municipal comprehensive plan. Another group of municipalities on the opposite end of the County are considering undertaking a similar joint comprehensive plan.
- ☑ **Watershed planning is important to Susquehanna County** as it is beginning to prepare Act 167 plans for three watersheds.