

Planning in Rural Pennsylvania in 2020: Analysis of the Use and Effectiveness of Municipal Land Use Tools

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This study analyzed the use of planning tools across rural and urban Pennsylvania municipalities and counties in 2020. Using data from two separate surveys, one of municipal officials and one of county planning directors, and supplemented by key person interviews, the research examined the extent to which land use planning and regulation is occurring, the character of the tools and how they are being used, the extent to which planning influences local decision-makers as they manage their built and natural environments, the perceived effectiveness of land use planning efforts, and barriers to planning.

This research provides an update to a similar study published by the Center in 2001. Since 2001, several changes in Pennsylvania have impacted local planning environments, including statewide demographic and economic shifts, and several major state-level legislative actions aimed at strengthening local planning capacity. Since 2001, there has also been increased attention to smart growth, sustainable development, and hazard mitigation planning. The study examines the extent to which these changes impacted the use and character of planning and land use regulatory tools, and other municipal approaches to managing the physical environment.

Key Findings:

- Use of primary planning tools across Pennsylvania has increased since 2001. Notably, comprehensive plan use has increased 12 percent, and the use of joint comprehensive plans has also increased. Larger, faster-growing municipalities in urban counties and more urbanized regions are more likely to use planning tools than municipalities in rural counties.
- Use of comprehensive plans to inform decision-making has increased overall, but plans remain underused: 35 percent of municipalities and 38 percent of counties reported not using plans at all to guide decision making. Plans are underused in planning for infrastructure and capital budgeting.
- Since 2001, inter-municipal interaction increased, and counties play important roles in facilitating these interactions. There was also greater interaction between municipal governments and water and sewer authorities, and more coordination with PennDOT.
- There was a notable increase in the use of “other” types of plans, including emergency management plans, hazard mitigation plans, and stormwater management plans since 2001. These plans are generally not coordinated with comprehensive plans.
- The biggest barriers to effective planning include lack of funding and resources, lack of professional staff, limited support by elected officials, limited support by the public, and lack of training in planning and land use by elected officials.

Policy Considerations

- **Support for multi-municipal planning and land use regulations:** Encourage efforts to implement multi-municipal plans, including research to understand implementation barriers and special grants to create joint planning commissions and regional zoning ordinances; encourage additional multi-municipal interactions by enhancing requirements for the review of plans, regulations, and development proposals by neighboring municipalities. Strengthen the role of county planning agencies in facilitating inter-municipal reviews.
- **Increase funding for rural planning and plan updates:** Create special rural planning grants for qualified communities to increase planning capacity and grants targeted to updating plans and regulations. New programs can be coordinated through existing funding programs or targeted to counties and other state providers of planning services.
- **Municipalities Planning Code Amendments:** Heighten the standing of comprehensive plans relative to land use regulations. Require comprehensive plans to include an assessment of inter-relationships across all municipal plans (such as sewage facilities plans, hazard mitigation plans, and others) to better integrate all planning activities. Make capital improvement plans a required element of a comprehensive plan.
- **Raise awareness of the value of planning and provide training for local leaders:** Provide resources to support training for elected and appointed local officials on the planning process, planning and regulatory tools, and use of plans in decision making. Consider requiring training in land use planning for local elected officials, planning commissioners, zoning hearing board members, and zoning officers, as well as for municipal solicitors and municipal engineers.

Scan the QR code for a copy of the report, *Planning in Rural Pennsylvania in 2020: Analysis of the Use and Effectiveness of Municipal Land Use Tools*.



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