



2. Municipal Planning Commissions



This Penn State Cooperative Extension publication is one in a series of bulletins intended to help you better understand the current use of land use planning tools in Pennsylvania. The series uses information from a comprehensive study of Pennsylvania land use regulation and planning, which was made possible in part by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

The comprehensive land use study involved three separate but related surveys that were conducted in late 1999. The first and largest survey was sent to all 2,511 boroughs and townships in Pennsylvania. Forty-two percent, or 1,057 of these surveys were returned. The second survey was sent to all 65 planning directors in Pennsylvania (with the exception of Philadelphia County). Fifty-four surveys were returned, for a response rate of 83 percent. The third survey was sent to all 395 members of the American Institute of Certified Planners who are listed in Pennsylvania. Of these, 181 were returned, for a response rate of 46 percent. The three surveys provide a composite overview of planning effectiveness from a variety of perspectives.

Most of the tables in this publication use data from the state or regional level. For county-level results, visit the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania Web site at <http://cax.aers.psu.edu/planning/>

Planning commissions play a vital role in planning and land use regulation in Pennsylvania. Planning commissions are advisors to their elected governing body concerning the physical development of the community. They provide policy advice on land use regulations such as zoning and subdivision controls, and they may have some jurisdiction over the administration of applications to subdivide and develop land in the community. Plans for recreation, open space, greenways, environmental protection, natural resources, agriculture, and forestry are prepared by planning commissions.

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code uses the blanket term “planning agency” to describe the three main types of planning organizations: (1) planning commissions, composed primarily of citizens with a possible minority representation of elected or appointed municipal officials; (2) planning departments, composed of professional staff including planners, landscape architects, economists, and others who provide technical services to the planning commission; and (3) planning committees made up of members of the elected governing body. Planning commissions are the predominant form of local planning organization in Pennsylvania, and it is possible under the Planning Code for two or more municipalities to form joint planning commissions.

In Pennsylvania, there currently is renewed interest in finding ways to slow sprawl or create alternatives to current land use patterns, and in using land use planning to help communities deal with land use conflicts, farmland preservation, and residential development. What has been unclear during these discussions is how well planning commissions are being used throughout the Commonwealth. This includes how many municipalities

actually have a planning commission, what activities those commissions actually perform, how they interact with neighboring municipal planning commissions, and how effectively planning commissions are being used by municipal officials.

Who Has a Planning Commission?

About 62 percent of Pennsylvania municipalities say they have a planning commission, committee, or department. This includes 56 percent of boroughs, 97 percent of townships of the first class, and 62 percent of townships of the second class. Municipalities in urban counties are much more likely to have a planning commission (80 percent) than are municipalities in rural counties (44 percent).

The presence of planning commissions varies dramatically by region; 98 percent of municipalities in southeast Pennsylvania have such a commission, for example, compared to only 39 percent in the northwest (see Figure 1). Southeast and southcentral municipalities are the most likely to have a planning commission.

Municipal size also is a factor; smaller municipalities are much less likely to have a planning commission than are larger municipalities (see Table 1). Only 25 percent of municipalities with a population of less than 500 have a planning commission, for example, compared to over 90 percent of all municipalities with more than 5,000 residents.

Municipalities that have been experiencing more population and building pressures are more likely to have a planning commission than are municipalities that have had little population change or that have been losing population (see Table 2).

Figure 1. Percent of municipalities with a planning commission.

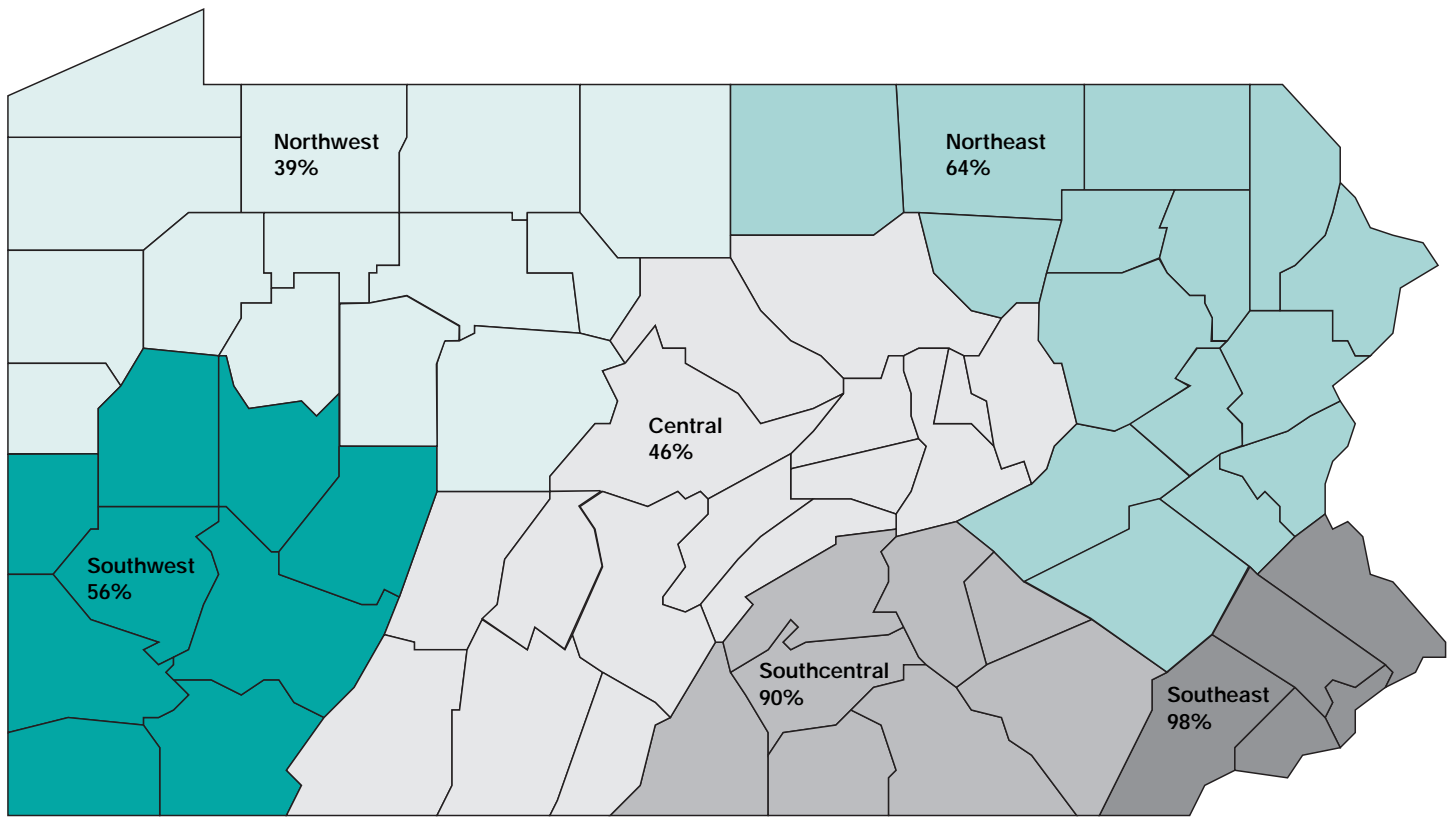


Table 1. Planning Commission by Population Size (percent of municipalities with that population)

Population Size	Have Planning Commission	No Planning Commission	Don't Know
Less than 500 residents	25%	73%	2%
500 to 999 residents	35	63	2
1,000 to 2,499 residents	58	42	0
2,500 to 4,999 residents	86	13	1
5,000 to 9,999 residents	95	5	0
10,000 to 14,999 residents	97	3	0
15,000 to 19,999 residents	100	0	0
20,000 or more residents	95	5	0

Table 2. Planning Commission by Population and Building Development (percent of municipalities)

Pace of Population and Building Development	Have Planning Commission	No Planning Commission	Don't Know
Fast growing	93%	7%	0%
Moderate growth	85	15	0
Slow growing	55	44	0
No change	42	56	2
Declining	48	51	2
Don't know	0	100	0

Membership of the Planning Commission

In 26 percent of the municipalities with a planning commission, at least one elected official serves on that commission. Having an elected official on the planning commission is useful because it helps maintain closer contact and communication between the planning commission and the elected governing body.

Assistance Given to the Planning Commission

The municipalities vary in the amount and type of assistance they provide to their planning commission (see Table 3). The most common assistance is from the municipal solicitor (68 percent) and municipal engineer/surveyor (63 percent). Less than half provide paid secretarial assistance, and only 29 percent contract services with the County Planning Commission. It is important to recognize that planning commissions need supporting services to be most effective. Using a member of the commission to take minutes, for example, instead of having a paid secretary, reduces that member's capacity to participate in the work of the group.

Activities Performed by the Planning Commission

The activities of the planning commissions vary across the municipalities. Planning commissions provide information to the governing body, which is their most frequent involvement in the day-to-day operations of the municipality. In 78 percent of the municipalities with a commission, the commission provides information to the governing body (see Table 4), most often related to subdivision plan approvals and zoning changes. Other activities are much less commonly performed.

Forty percent of the planning commissions send a representative to the meetings of the governing body on a regular basis, but only about half that amount meet regularly with the governing body to discuss planning and land-use issues. Only about one-third report the planning commission makes recommendations on capital projects, which means that most commissions are not involved in the municipal budget-making process. Only about one in four planning commissions provide the governing body with an annual report, even though this is mandated by the MPC (Section 207).

Table 3. Assistance Given to the Planning Commission by the Municipality (percent of municipalities with a planning commission)

Type of Assistance	Provides	Doesn't Provide
Paid secretary	47%	53%
Municipal planning staff	20	80
Consultant planner	24	76
Municipal engineer/surveyor	63	37
Other engineer/surveyor	11	89
Municipal solicitor	68	32
Independent lawyer	12	88
Contract services from county planning commission	29	71

Table 4. Activities Performed by the Planning Commission (percent of municipalities with a planning commission)

Activity	Performs	Doesn't Perform
Meets on a regular basis with the governing body	23%	77%
Representative attends regular meetings of governing body	40	60
Provides information to the governing body	78	22
Submits a written annual report to the governing body	26	74
Recommends improvements or capital project for comprehensive plan	33	67

One of the clearest measures of planning effectiveness is to what extent the planning commission uses its comprehensive plan in decision making and formulating recommendations. The survey responses indicate that comprehensive plans are underutilized, however, suggesting this is a major weakness in many communities. Only about one in three commissions use their comprehensive plan “often” to guide decisions (see Table 5). About 9 percent reportedly “never” use the comprehensive plan, while 12 percent “don’t know” how often it is used. The occasional use categories, “once in a while” and “hardly ever” make up the largest group of responses. These responses suggest land use decisions and recommendations are not being made in a coherent, cohesive, or coordinated way.

Considering the large investment in time, manpower, and money the plans represent, their underutilization is disappointing. But some plans may be too old to provide meaningful guidance for decisions. In addition, planning commissions may not know how to use the comprehensive plan for decision making, or they may believe land use ordinances are more important (even though the comprehensive plan should drive land use ordinances, rather than vice versa).

Table 5. Frequency of Comprehensive Plan Use by the Planning Commission to Guide Decisions (percent of municipalities with a planning commission)

Frequency	Percent
Often	32%
Once in a while	27
Hardly ever	20
Never	9
Don't know	12

Contact with Planning Commissions in Adjacent Municipalities

The Municipalities Planning Code encourages interaction among planning commissions, but the initiative must come from individual municipalities; interaction is not mandated by the MPC. Joint planning commissions and joint municipal zoning are authorized, as are provisions in subdivision and land development ordinances to solicit reviews and reports from adjacent municipalities and other government agencies affected by the plans. These all were authorized even before the most recent amendments to the MPC, so they have been options available to municipalities. The survey responses indicate, however that few planning commissions are interacting, either formally or informally. The lack of interaction could be due to lack of awareness of the benefits of collaboration, uncertainty about how to develop such links, historical conflict, or political rift.

A relatively small number of municipalities have a joint planning relationship with other municipalities. Even though joint planning has been authorized under the MPC for years, and incentives for joint municipal planning have been provided through the state planning assistance grant program (which has given priority to funding municipalities with cooperative planning arrangements), few municipalities have taken advantage of the opportunity. Only 8 percent of the municipalities report they are members of joint planning commissions.

The most common type of contact between planning commissions (see Table 6) is either informal (29 percent) or through the county planning commission (26 percent). It is unclear whether the latter contact is made through the sharing of project information by the county agency or through meetings and other events called by the agency. More than one-third of the municipalities with a planning commission report that their commission does not interact with other planning commissions. Referral of development plans to other municipalities occurs with only 13 percent of the commissions, and meetings with other commissions seldom occur.

The overall impression these responses give is that most planning commissions and municipalities have a narrow view of planning that focuses solely upon their municipalities and is unrelated to adjacent communities and the region. The lack of cooperation cannot be blamed simply on legalisms, because interaction has been authorized for years under the MPC. Other reasons such as parochialism, a lack of long-term incentives for cooperation, or unfamiliarity with the need for cooperation should be considered.

Interactions with Water and Sewer Authorities

About 62 percent of the municipalities with a planning commission also have a water or sewer authority (either by themselves or jointly with other municipalities). The interaction between the planning commission and authority is vitally important, because infrastructure decisions by the authority can affect development pressures and the pattern of development. Because water and sewer authorities

plan, construct, finance, and operate infrastructure projects independently of the municipality, special efforts are needed to integrate their activities with the rest of local government operations.

About 40 percent of these municipalities report they send their local authority subdivision and land development plans for comment (see Table 7). Other potentially useful interactions are even less frequent, suggesting that this is a missed opportunity for improving planning.

Table 6. Contact with Planning Commissions in Adjacent Municipalities (percent of municipalities with a planning commission)

Type of Contact	Does	Does Not Do
Member of a joint planning commission	8%	92%
Planning commissioners occasionally meet together	7	93
Commissions send representative to each others' meetings	2	98
Development plans are referred to other municipalities	13	87
Informal communications	29	71
Contacts are through the county planning commission	26	74
Does not interact with other planning commissions	36	64

Table 7. Contact with Water or Sewer Authority (percent of municipalities with a planning commission and a water or sewer authority)

Type of Contact	Does	Does Not Do
Sends authority subdivision and land development plans for comments	40%	60%
Requests input from authority to develop new plans and ordinances	28	72
Provides authority copies of new plans and land use ordinances	26	74
Meets authority to discuss water and sewer needs in the municipality	25	75

Conclusions

The survey responses suggest that municipal planning commissions generally are not being used effectively in Pennsylvania. The limited extent of planning activities performed by the commissions suggests that many planning commissions are reactive to changes in their community instead of proactive to help control or mitigate those changes. It appears that most of their time is spent reviewing and processing subdivisions rather than dealing with broader issues.

The relatively low level of direct contact between planning commissions and their municipal governing body diminishes the coordination between the two, making it difficult to accomplish planning goals. Most planning commissions (76 to 80 percent) do not have professional planning staff or consultants, which is problematic when technical tasks are necessary. Lay planners' attempts to perform technical tasks can cost the municipality time and possibly lead to errors.

In general, planning commissions appeared to have a narrow, municipality-level focus, even though many land-use decisions affect neighboring municipalities. Contact between neighboring planning commissions is extremely limited, even though coordination across municipalities (or at a minimum, awareness of others' activities) often is vital. This parochialism extends to water or sewer authorities, where little integrative planning occurs between agencies. Failure to coordinate land-use and infrastructure planning creates inconsistencies, missed opportunities, and inefficient planning.

Most troubling is how relatively infrequently the planning commissions use their comprehensive plan. Only 32 percent of the commissions do so regularly, suggesting that the majority of land use decisions and recommendations are not being made in a coherent, cohesive, or coordinated way.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are solely those of the authors. The authors would like to thank the Center for Rural Pennsylvania and the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania Advisory Committee members for their insights and assistance with the project. For a full listing of the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania advisory committee members, see *Land Use Planning #1: An Inventory of Planning in Pennsylvania*.

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Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research, extension, and resident education programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This publication is available from the Publications Distribution Center, The Pennsylvania State University, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802. For information telephone (814) 865-6713.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of Congress May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Pennsylvania Legislature. T. R. Alter, Director of Cooperative Extension, The Pennsylvania State University.

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CAT UA348 3M6/01ps4418B

The Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania series will help you better understand the current state of planning and land use regulation in Pennsylvania. It is based on a comprehensive study of municipal and county planning and land use regulations, conducted by Penn State Cooperative Extension with the financial support of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The study included surveys of municipal officials, county planning agencies, and members of the American Institute of Certified Planners who reside in Pennsylvania.

Through a series of 15 meetings, a project advisory committee of 29 professional planners from throughout Pennsylvania provided feedback during the survey development, assisted with reviewing the preliminary results, and reviewed the investigators' findings and commentary.

The publications in the series focus on state- and regional-level information. County-level information from the study that corresponds to the publication series is available at the Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania Web site at <http://cax.aers.psu.edu/planning/>

Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania: Materials List

1. An Inventory of Planning in Pennsylvania
2. Municipal Planning Commissions
3. County Planning Agencies
4. Comprehensive Plans
5. Zoning
6. Subdivision and Land Development Ordinances
7. Training for Local Government Officials
8. Barriers to Effective Planning in Pennsylvania
9. Collaboration and Communication
10. How Effective is Land Use Planning in Pennsylvania?
11. How to Make Land Use Planning Work for Your Community