



3. County Planning Agencies



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/>

County governments in Pennsylvania can implement planning and land use regulations. Like boroughs and townships, they receive this authority from the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC). For the purposes of the Planning Code, counties are identified as “municipalities,” and with few exceptions, the grant of planning powers to counties is the same as for other municipal entities. Unlike in many other states, when Pennsylvania county plans conflict with municipal plans, the municipal plan overrides the county plan. Thus, counties generally must either play a supporting role, assisting municipalities with their own planning, or be a persuasive leader that directs by bringing municipalities together cooperatively.

County planning agencies engage in a variety of activities; no set of expectations is outlined for them in the Planning Code. Some function as the planning arm of county government; others provide technical assistance to municipalities; others have only minimal resources with which to carry out rudimentary functions. Staffing is quite variable, ranging from a one-person staff with part-time secretarial aid to those with over fifty professionals and support personnel.

Many recent policy discussions about land use planning have focused on trying to give county planning agencies a greater role or authority in planning. The challenges such agencies might face in performing this role—including staffing concerns, limited available resources, and the current use of planning tools—have not been directly examined. All are important issues to consider.

Who Are the County Planning Directors?

Surprisingly, some of the county planning directors do not have much planning experience (see Table 1). Nine percent (5) have 3 or fewer years of total planning experience, and about 21 percent have less than 10 years of planning experience. Three of the directors with 3 or fewer years of experience are in northcentral Pennsylvania, and the other two are in southcentral and southwest Pennsylvania. Only one of these five directors identifies his/her county as “fast growing,” and all describe their counties as rural. County planning directors in the southeast have more experience, on average, than do directors in other parts of the Commonwealth.

Most planning directors (64 percent) had been a staff member before becoming director. Their tenure as a staff member ranged from 1 year (two directors) to 24 years (one director). Half had been on staff for 5 or more years before becoming county planning director. About 35 percent of the directors are members of the American Institute of Certified Planners, which is the major certification organization for professional planners.

Population and Building Development Pressures

The amount of population change and building development varies across the counties. Ten of the county planning directors (19 percent) describe their county as “fast growing,” 14 (26 percent) say their county is experiencing “moderate growth,” 22 (41 percent) report “slow growth,” three (6 percent) see no change, and four (7 percent) say their county’s population is declining. More than one-third (37 percent) say the current rate of population and building development is a problem, while 65 percent say that it will be a problem in the next 10 years.

These responses vary by the amount of current population change and building development (see Table 2). Counties that see themselves as either “fast growing” or “declining” are more likely to say the current rate of change is a problem than are the other counties. Significantly, most of the counties that are currently undergoing no, slow, or moderate growth are likely to foresee future problems with population change and building development.

Table 1. Average Tenure and Experience of County Planning Directors

| Region | Number of Planning Directors (54) | Average Years as Planning Director in This County | Average Years of Total Planning Experience |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Southeast | 4 | 6.0 | 27.0 |
| Northeast | 12 | 8.8 | 18.7 |
| Central | 14 | 12.4 | 26.4 |
| Northcentral | 9 | 15.6 | 21.2 |
| Southwest | 2 | 3.5 | 12.0 |
| Northwest | 13 | 7.5 | 14.2 |

Table 2. Problematic Population Change and Building Development, By Rate of Population Change (number of counties)

| Rate of Population Change and Building Development | Current Rate of Population and Building Development a Problem | Rate of Population and Building Development Likely To Be a Problem in the Next 10 Years |
|--|---|---|
| Fast growing | 90% (9) | 90% (9) |
| Moderate growth | 21% (3) | 86% (12) |
| Slow growth | 18% (4) | 50% (11) |
| No change | 33% (1) | 67% (2) |
| Declining | 50% (2) | 25% (1) |
| Other | 100% (1) | 0% (0) |

County Planning Agency Characteristics

There are a variety of planning agency types in Pennsylvania. Twenty-six percent of the counties have only a planning commission; one has a county planning department only; 68 percent have both a planning commission and a planning department; and two counties (4 percent) have some other arrangement. A departmental arrangement is far more typical in counties than in municipalities, although most counties have both a department and a commission. This joint arrangement consists of a commission composed of laymen and a department staffed with professionals. To a large extent, the professional staff works for the planning commission.

Most counties with a planning commission (87 percent) have a nine-member board. One county has six members, three counties have seven members, one county has eight members, and one reports thirty-seven members. Most county planning commissions (72 percent) have municipal elected officials as members, while relatively few (13 percent) have county elected officials. About 23 percent have appointed county officials as members.

More than two-thirds of the county planning directors (69 percent) consider their planning agency to be understaffed. Eleven of the counties (20 percent) report no full-time professional planners in addition to the county planning director, while ten counties have ten or more such planners. Thirty-nine percent of the counties have either one or two full-time professional planners.

Half of the counties have no other full-time professionals on staff in the planning department. (Only 6 percent of all counties have other part-time professionals.) Sixty-one percent report no full-time technical support persons, while only 4 percent have part-time technical support personnel. About 76 percent have no full-time GIS support staff (about 9 percent of all counties have part-time GIS support). About 22 percent have no full-time clerical support, 88 percent have no part-time clerical support, and 16 percent (8 counties) have neither type of clerical support. The number of such staff varies across the regions (see Table 3). County planning agencies in the southeast average a much higher number of professional planners than do counties in the other regions.

Turnover of planning staff is a problem for many of the county planning agencies. About 40 percent of the counties report a problem with turnover of professional planners on their staff, while 31 percent of the counties with GIS support staff indicate similar turnover problems. Counties in the northeast and southwest are least likely to have turnover problems for professional planners, while those in the northcentral and southcentral regions are most likely to have problems.

Planning Tools Used by County Planning Agencies

Use of planning tools by county planning agencies varies across the regions (see Table 4). The most common tools include county comprehensive plans (96 percent of counties), solid waste management plans (100 percent), and emergency management plans (87 percent). Since 1989, counties have been mandated to prepare and adopt a comprehensive plan. Other planning functions such as stormwater management planning, sewage facilities, and solid waste management planning also are mandated.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are quite prevalent in county planning. Not only does GIS have useful planning applications, but the maps and materials produced also are useful to the county assessment office and for agricultural preservation work, among other activities. Metropolitan Planning Organizations, which really are transportation planning units, are found in metropolitan counties and deal with the prioritizing of federal highway funds.

Two tools that focus directly on county government operations are county services facilities planning and capital improvements programming. These are two areas where county planning can be most advantageously used. In most cases, counties are not engaged in community infrastructure building, as municipalities are. Rather, they provide various services to citizens, some of which require buildings or facilities. Because county planning agencies are first in line to receive information about growth trends in the county, they can provide valuable advice regarding facility locations. Capital budgeting, also a potential county planning activity, is

Table 3. Average Staffing of County Planning Agencies (maximum number in a county in parentheses)

| | Statewide | Southeast | Northeast | Central | Northcentral | Southwest | Northwest |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Professional planners | | | | | | | |
| <i>Full time</i> | 4.8 (28) | 20.3 | 3.0 | 9.7 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| <i>Part time</i> | 0.1 (1) | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.14 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Other professionals | | | | | | | |
| <i>Full time</i> | 1.5 (12) | 3.5 | 0.8 | 3.8 | 0.8 | 2.0 | 0.8 |
| <i>Part time</i> | 0.1 (4) | 0.25 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.3 |
| Technical support | | | | | | | |
| <i>Full time</i> | 0.6 (5) | 2.0 | 0.6 | 1.2 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.2 |
| <i>Part time</i> | 0.1 (2) | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| GIS support | | | | | | | |
| <i>Full time</i> | 0.4 (3) | 1.3 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.0 | 0.1 |
| <i>Part time</i> | 0.1 (1) | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.5 | 0.0 |
| Clerical | | | | | | | |
| <i>Full time</i> | 1.6 (11) | 4.3 | 1.2 | 3.0 | 1.1 | 1.0 | 0.9 |
| <i>Part time</i> | 0.1 (1) | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Table 4. Percent of Counties Using Various Planning Tools, by Region

| Land Use Planning Tool | State-wide | South-east | North-east | Central | North-central | South-west | North-west |
|---|------------|------------|------------|---------|---------------|------------|------------|
| County Comprehensive Plan | 96% | 100% | 100% | 89% | 93% | 100% | 100% |
| County Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance | 79 | 50 | 75 | 89 | 75 | 100 | 85 |
| County Zoning Ordinance | 12 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 17 | 50 | 15 |
| County Official Map | 16 | 0 | 17 | 0 | 8 | 50 | 33 |
| Geographic Information System (GIS) | 73 | 100 | 100 | 75 | 79 | 50 | 38 |
| Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) | 36 | 75 | 17 | 88 | 29 | 50 | 15 |
| Storm Water Management Plan | 69 | 75 | 75 | 100 | 79 | 0 | 42 |
| Sewage Facilities Plan | 54 | 100 | 50 | 57 | 54 | 0 | 55 |
| Solid Waste Management Plan | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Emergency Management Planning | 87 | 100 | 82 | 100 | 85 | 100 | 100 |
| County Services Facilities Planning | 13 | 0 | 20 | 0 | 18 | 50 | 10 |
| Capital Improvements Program/Budget | 21 | 67 | 36 | 14 | 0 | 50 | 22 |

related to the financing of county facility locations. The results of the survey show that a large number of county planning agencies engage in neither of these activities. Statewide, only 13 percent of planning agencies do county facilities planning, and only 21 percent do capital improvements programming.

Planning Assistance Provided to Municipalities

Almost all of the county planning agencies provide planning assistance to municipalities (see Table 5). This includes technical planning assistance and consultation (98 percent of the counties) and data and information (96 percent). The vast majority of counties (81 percent) sometimes provide this assistance to municipalities at no cost. About 39 percent provide it on occasion in a cost-sharing arrangement, and 39 percent sometimes contract directly with municipalities. There are major regional differences in the assistance provided. County planning agencies in the southeast are much more likely to provide a wide range of planning assistance than are agencies in other regions.

Subdivision and land development applications received from municipalities are subjected to a variety of different reviews in the counties. A little more than half of the county planning agencies (52 percent) provide an overview to assure compliance with municipal regulation requirements, while 39 percent perform a full technical review using municipal regulation standards. Twenty-two percent review the application against county standards, and 50 percent review it against the county plans.

Municipal zoning ordinance and amendment reviews similarly vary across the counties. About 53 percent of the counties provide an overview to ensure compliance with the municipality's comprehensive plan. Fifty-nine percent provide a full technical review with suggested revisions and modifications. Two-thirds (66.7 percent) review the ordinances and amendments against the county comprehensive plan, while 33 percent review them against other county regulations and plans.

Table 5. Percent of County Planning Agencies Providing Assistance to Municipalities, by Region

| Type of Assistance | State-wide | South-east | North-east | Central | North-central | South-west | North-west |
|---|------------|------------|------------|---------|---------------|------------|------------|
| Provide technical planning assistance/consultation | 98% | 100% | 100% | 89% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Provide data and information | 96 | 100 | 100 | 89 | 93 | 100 | 100 |
| Prepare special studies | 56 | 100 | 50 | 78 | 50 | 50 | 38 |
| Attend meetings of municipal planning commissions | 85 | 100 | 83 | 89 | 86 | 100 | 77 |
| Prepare comprehensive plans | 56 | 100 | 42 | 56 | 43 | 0 | 77 |
| Prepare zoning ordinances | 48 | 100 | 33 | 56 | 57 | 0 | 38 |
| Prepare zoning amendments | 48 | 100 | 33 | 56 | 43 | 50 | 46 |
| Prepare subdivision and land development ordinances | 46 | 100 | 33 | 44 | 43 | 0 | 54 |
| Prepare SALDO amendments | 44 | 100 | 25 | 56 | 36 | 50 | 46 |

Communication with Municipalities

An important role of county planning agencies is to help individual municipalities understand (and hopefully consider) the regional impacts of municipal planning decisions. Part of this is done through review of ordinances and other formal assistance, but another component involves just communicating information to the municipalities. This can be done in a variety of ways. The majority of county planning agencies (70 percent) always or frequently send municipalities their annual report, and a similar percentage (66 percent) meet with municipal officials (see Table 6). Only about 21 percent of the county agencies always or frequently conduct training programs for municipal officials and planners (though another 58 percent report they sometimes conduct such trainings).

Conclusions

The results of the survey suggest that the ability of Pennsylvania county planning agencies to play an increasing leadership role in regional land use planning varies dramatically. Some county planning agencies, particularly in the southeast, are well staffed, use a wide variety of planning tools, and provide a full range of services to municipalities. Other county planning agencies will have a more difficult time accommodating new roles and responsibilities for regional planning because their director either lacks basic planning experience or is the sole full-time planner in the agency. More than two-thirds of the county planning directors already consider their planning agency to be understaffed, and turnover of professional planners is high in 40 percent of the counties. These factors suggest it will be difficult for counties to assume new planning duties and responsibilities without more resources.

Table 6. Frequency of County Planning Agency Communication with Municipalities, by Method

| Method of Communication | Always | Frequently | Sometimes | Never | Don't Know |
|---|--------|------------|-----------|-------|------------|
| Send county planning agency annual report | 58% | 12% | 14% | 16% | 0% |
| Attend regular municipal planning commission meetings | 6 | 10 | 78 | 6 | 0 |
| Meet with municipal officials | 9 | 57 | 33 | 0 | 0 |
| Send county planning agency newsletter | 25 | 2 | 14 | 58 | 0 |
| Send updates on grant opportunities, MPC amendments, etc. | 16 | 39 | 39 | 6 | 0 |
| Hold group meetings for municipal officials on special topics | 9 | 25 | 66 | 0 | 0 |
| Conduct group training programs for municipal officials and planners | 2 | 19 | 58 | 21 | 0 |
| Presentations at annual meetings of borough and township associations | 20 | 37 | 35 | 7 | 0 |

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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