



4. Comprehensive Plans



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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/>

The comprehensive plan is one of the most important tools municipalities and counties can use for land use planning and local governance. The plan serves as an official public document that guides public and private decisions about physical development in the community. It is an explicit statement of future goals for the community, and serves as a formal vision for the planning commission and other public agencies, elected officials, private organizations, and individuals. The comprehensive plan also is a measuring tool for evaluating specific development proposals and their impact on the general public welfare.

Comprehensive plans provide the organization framework for the other community land use planning tools such as zoning or subdivision and land development ordinances, as well as for infrastructure development, capital budgeting, and other governance issues. If the comprehensive plan is not used or is out of date, or if other land use planning tools are not based upon the comprehensive plan, it will not be a very effective planning tool.

Municipal Comprehensive Plans

About half (52 percent) of all municipalities responding to the survey report having a comprehensive plan. This includes 48 percent of boroughs, 94 percent of townships of the first class, and 52 percent of townships of the second class. Municipalities in urban counties (72 percent) are far more likely to have a comprehensive plan than are municipalities in rural counties (33 percent).

The presence of a comprehensive plan also varies by region and by size (see Figure 1). Municipalities in southeast Pennsylvania are the most likely to have a comprehensive plan (96 percent), while those in the northwest are least likely (32 percent). Municipalities with a larger population are more likely to have a comprehensive plan than are smaller municipalities. Only 18 percent of municipalities with fewer than 500 residents have a comprehensive plan, compared to over 95 percent of municipalities with 10,000 or more residents (see Table 1).

The pace of population change and building development also is associated with whether a municipality has a comprehensive plan (see Table 2). Municipalities with more population growth pressures are more likely to have such a plan than are municipalities with less population and building pressures.

Figure 1. Percent of municipalities with a comprehensive plan.

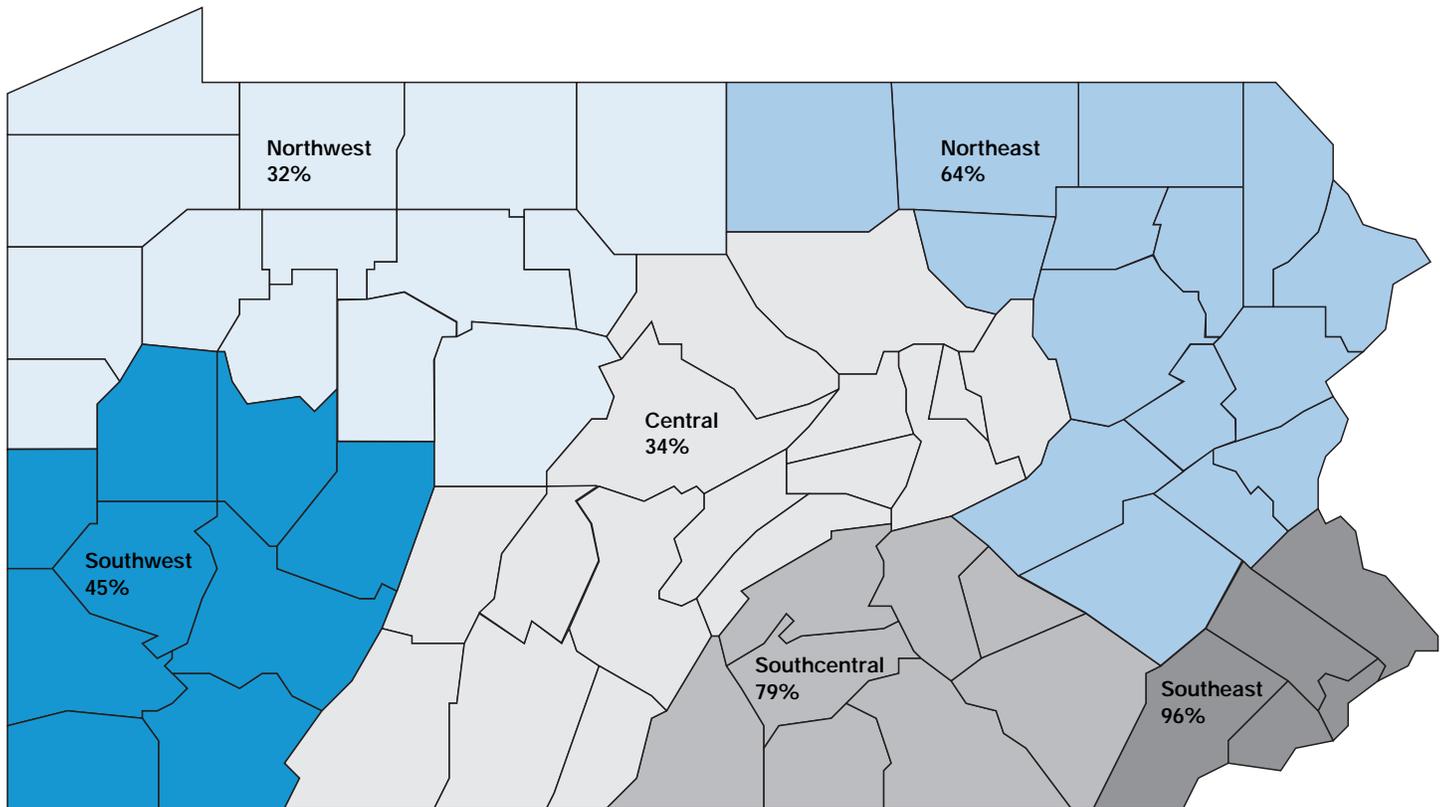


Table 1. Comprehensive Plan by Population Size (percent of municipalities in population)

Population Size	Have Comprehensive Plan	No Comprehensive Plan	Don't Know
Less than 500 residents	18%	78%	4%
500 to 999 residents	26	69	5
1,000 to 2,499 residents	47	52	1
2,500 to 4,999 residents	78	24	1
5,000 to 9,999 residents	83	15	2
10,000 to 14,999 residents	97	3	0
15,000 to 19,999 residents	95	5	0
20,000 or more residents	95	5	0

Table 2. Comprehensive Plan by Population and Building Development (percent of municipalities)

Pace of Population and Building Development	Have Comprehensive Plan	No Comprehensive Plan	Don't Know
Fast growing	84%	15%	1%
Moderate growth	75	25	0
Slow growing	46	52	3
No change	35	61	4
Declining	37	59	5
Don't know	50	50	0

Creation of the Comprehensive Plan

The comprehensive plan officially has been adopted in the vast majority (94 percent) of municipalities that report having such a plan. Federal or state grants were used to prepare the plan in about 33 percent of the municipalities with a comprehensive plan, though this number likely is larger because 22 percent of the municipalities report they do not know whether such grants were used. (Many comprehensive plans are quite old, so respondents may not be aware of a grant obtained several years ago.)

Most plans were prepared solely by the municipality. Only 14 percent of the municipalities—a relatively small percentage—indicate their plan was prepared jointly with another municipality. Of these 14 percent, only 19 percent (one in five) report they still work closely together with the other municipality(ies) on planning; 31 percent report they sometimes work together on a common problem; 24 percent report they seldom work together; and 22 percent say they never work together (3 percent do not know). After having worked intensively on developing a plan, it might be expected that the effort would be sustained and the municipalities would continue to plan together. Apparently this is not the case.

Are Municipal Plans Updated?

About 39 percent of the municipalities with a comprehensive plan say the plan has been updated substantially since it was originally completed. These responses generally follow the same patterns across municipality type, region, and population size differences. The most common reasons for updating the plan include new issues or problems that must be addressed, and needing a new plan to update zoning and/or subdivision ordinances (see Table 3). About 88 percent of the municipalities that have updated their plan did so within the past 10 years. Nevertheless, three of five comprehensive plans are substantially the same as when they were originally prepared. The older a plan is, the less likely it is to help decision makers. Plan age and usefulness are inversely proportional.

Table 3. Rank of Reasons for Substantially Updating the Comprehensive Plan (percent of each response on a scale of one to five)

	Not Important				Very Important	Don't Know
	1	2	3	4	5	
Plan was too old to be useful	7%	11%	28%	26%	28%	0%
New issues/problems needed to be addressed	1	2	8	34	54	1
Grant was available	41	11	14	10	10	14
Neighboring municipality asked us to undertake joint planning	75	8	7	4	2	5
Needed a new plan as basis for updating zoning and/or subdivision ordinances	9	5	19	34	31	2
New provisions in the Municipalities Planning Code	15	9	29	22	16	8

Are Municipal Comprehensive Plans Used?

One of the most obvious measures of planning effectiveness is whether or not the comprehensive plan is used to guide municipal decisions. Only 32 percent of the municipal planning commissions and 24 percent of the boards of supervisors and borough councils use their plan “often” to guide decisions (see Table 4). About 29 percent of planning commissions and 35 percent of the boards and councils say they “hardly ever” or “never” use the plan.

Not surprisingly, newer plans are more likely to be used frequently than less recently updated plans. About 43 percent of the planning commissions with plans created or updated in the 1990s use them “often,” as do 33 percent of the governing bodies with recently created or updated plans. (An additional 28 percent of the planning commissions and 43 percent of the governing bodies with recently created or updated plans use them “once in a while.”) In contrast, only 15 percent of the planning commissions and only

8 percent by the governing bodies with plans older than 1970 use them “often.” (An additional 18 percent of the planning commissions and 19 percent of the governing bodies with older plans use them “once in a while.”)

The conclusion must be drawn that comprehensive plans, the centerpiece of all land use planning activity, are not being used much in Pennsylvania municipalities. This makes effective planning difficult, because the comprehensive plan is supposed to provide context and consistency to a community’s plans and land use regulations. The ideas in the comprehensive plan ideally are reflected in the community’s zoning and other ordinances—but such ordinances are relatively inflexible. Ordinances merely ask the question “does this proposed change meet the standard?” rather than considering the cumulative effect of changes in the community. The latter broader view is one of the major roles of the comprehensive plan, which then helps guide necessary changes in the community’s land use regulations.

In some ways, the relative lack of use of comprehensive plans should not be surprising, because there is neither statutory obligation nor responsibility to use comprehensive plans after they have been developed. MPC section 303 (c) states, *“Notwithstanding any other provision of this act, no action by the governing body of a municipality shall be invalid nor shall the same be subject to challenge or appeal on the basis that such action is inconsistent with, or fails to comply with, the provision of the comprehensive plan.”* This statement almost guarantees the irrelevance of comprehensive plans when it comes to local decision making.

Table 4. Frequency of Comprehensive Plan Use to Guide Decisions (percent of municipalities with a comprehensive plan)

Frequency of Use	Municipal Planning Commission	Municipal Governing Body
Often	32%	24%
Once in a while	27	36
Hardly ever	20	23
Never	9	12
Don't know	12	4

How are Municipal Plans Used?

The purposes for which the governing body uses the comprehensive plan also vary across the municipalities (see Table 5). The most common use is to consider zoning amendments or rezonings (65 percent), and to review land development proposals (60 percent). These usually are immediate situations that must be handled; to some extent, they are reactions to a proposed change. When it comes to advanced planning such as budgeting and water and sewerage planning, the comprehensive plan is used far less. To some extent, this illustrates a lack of understanding of how comprehensive plans and planning should be part of municipal governance.

Table 5. Uses of the Comprehensive Plan (percent of municipalities with comprehensive plan)

Use	Percent
Considering zoning amendments/rezonings	65%
Applying for government grants	30
Conducting hearings on conditional uses	37
Reviewing land development proposals	60
Conducting hearings on curative amendments	16
Preparing the annual budget	8
Preparing municipal water system plans	16
Preparing municipal sewer system plans	26
Preparing municipal capital improvements programs	19

Country Comprehensive Plans

The age of county comprehensive plans varies across the Commonwealth. About one-third of the counties (33 percent) have not substantially updated their comprehensive plan since 1989, which is when the Municipal Planning Code was significantly revised to give counties a larger role in comprehensive planning. About 23 percent of the counties last substantially updated their plans in the 1970s, which means their plans are quite out-of-date. Ten counties (20 percent) updated their plans in 1999.

There are regional differences in how recently the plans have been updated (see Table 6). In general, counties in northcentral and northwest Pennsylvania are more likely to have older plans. Only 57 percent of counties in each of these two regions updated their plan in the 1990s.

Creation of the County Plan

The current version of the county comprehensive plan was prepared most often by planning agency staff (44 percent) or a combination of planning agency staff and a planning consultant (another 44 percent). Only 12 percent of the counties report that their plan was prepared entirely by a consultant.

A range of different agencies and groups participate in developing the county comprehensive plans. County departments participate in 65 percent of the counties, for example, and stakeholder and citizen groups offer comments in 76 percent of the counties (see Table 7). (Note that these percentages likely are somewhat higher because a relatively high number of the respondents lacked the information to answer these questions.) Municipal planning commissions comment on plan elements in only 63 percent of the counties, and participate in plan preparation in only half of the counties.

Why Was the County Plan Updated?

The two most common reasons for updating the county comprehensive plan include the age of the previous plan and new issues or problems to be addressed (see Table 8). Until the recent passage of Act 67 and 68, the Municipal Planning Code did not stipulate when plans must be updated. Now, the Planning Code requires county comprehensive plans to be updated at least every 10 years.

Table 6. Year County Comprehensive Plan Most Recently Updated Substantially, by Region

	Statewide	Southeast	Northeast	Southcentral	Northcentral	Southwest*	Northwest
Before 1970	2%	0%	0%	8%	0%	—	0%
1970 to 1979	21	20	0	15	36	—	29
1980 to 1989	10	0	25	8	7	—	14
1990 or after	67	80	75	69	57	100%	57

* Southwest results based on the response of only one county.

Table 7. Participation in Developing the County Comprehensive Plan

	Yes	No	Don't Know
County departments participate in plan preparation	65%	22%	12%
County departments comment on draft plan elements	61	27	12
Municipal planning commissions participate in preparation	50	38	13
Municipal planning commissions comment on plan elements	63	23	15
Municipal officials participate in plan preparation	62	18	20
Municipal officials comment on draft plan elements	78	6	16
Stakeholder/citizen groups offer comments	76	6	18

Table 8. Rank of Reasons for Substantially Updating the Comprehensive Plan (percent of each response on a scale of one to five)

	Not Important				Very Important	
	1	2	3	4	5	Don't Know
Mandate in MPC brought attention to need	24%	19%	22%	8%	22%	5%
Previous plan was too old to be useful	3	3	17	17	58	3
New issues/problems needed to be addressed	0	8	14	24	49	5
Grant was available to prepare plan	22	3	22	30	19	5
Needed a new plan as basis for new or updated land use regulations	11	17	25	19	22	6
Needed plan as requirement for grants	30	24	19	14	5	8

Are County Plans Used?

Perhaps the most important measure of a plan's effectiveness is whether it is used by the governing body and other county agencies in guiding decisions. Only 16 percent of the planning directors report that their county's comprehensive plan is used "often" in decision making (see Table 9). It is "hardly ever" or "never" used by 44 percent of the counties. Thirty-three percent indicate that it is used to guide decisions "once in a while." (On the other hand, 91 percent of the counties say their board of commissioners refers issues and problems to the county planning agency.) The county comprehensive plan is used by other county departments in a little less than half of the counties (45 percent).

The county planning agencies vary in how actively they advocate the comprehensive plan to municipal officials, the general public, and others. Only 20 percent say they are "very active," and another 22 percent say they are "active." About 18 percent of the counties report they are "not very active" advocates of the plan; 16 percent say they are "somewhat active" advocates; and 25 percent say they are "moderately active" advocates.

Like the boroughs and townships in the state, counties also are not using comprehensive plans to a significant degree. It is obvious that mandating comprehensive plans and using them are distinctly different.

How Are County Plans Used?

County comprehensive plans are used most commonly for reviewing zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, and amendments referred by municipalities (76 percent); reviewing municipal actions regarding streets, water, sewer, and public structures (70 percent); and reviewing subdivision and land development applications referred by municipalities (69 percent) (see Table 10). They are used much less frequently for county activities such as county bridge replacement (24 percent) and open space acquisition (31 percent).

Table 9. Frequency of County Comprehensive Plan Use by the Board of County Commissioners to Guide Decisions

Frequency	Percent of Counties
Often	16%
Once in a while	33
Hardly ever	20
Never	24
Don't know	8

Table 10. County Planning Agency Uses of the Comprehensive Plan (percent of counties)

Use	Percent
Review subdivision and land development applications referred by municipalities	69%
Review zoning and S&LD ordinances/amendments referred by municipalities	76
Comment on new or 7th-year review of Agricultural Security Areas	50
Set county highway priorities	65
Comments to county Ag Land Preservation Board on agricultural conservation easement purchases	44
Open space acquisition	31
Prioritizing replacement of county-owned bridges	24
Review municipal actions regarding streets, public grounds, public structures, water, sewer lines, or sewage treatment facilities as per MPC Section 304	70

Conclusions

The survey responses suggest that comprehensive land use planning is not being addressed effectively in Pennsylvania. Only a little more than half of the municipalities have a comprehensive plan. Smaller municipalities and those in rural areas are much less likely to have a comprehensive plan, even though in such communities a given land use change or decision often has a greater impact on property values, the real estate tax base, and municipal revenues and expenditures than it would in a larger municipality.

Comprehensive planning with an adjoining municipality is quite rare, with only 14 percent reporting joint planning activity with a neighbor. Of even greater concern is that only one in five municipalities that developed a joint plan still continue to work together. Cooperation in plan preparation has not carried over into long-term planning relationships. Regional planning is not a common practice in Pennsylvania.

A large number of municipal and county comprehensive plans are quite old and in need of updating, which makes them less effective. Furthermore, many of the municipalities and counties are not even using their comprehensive plans. Those municipalities that do use their plan typically are more likely to use it for immediate issues (such as specific land development proposals) than for long-run purposes such as capital budgeting and infrastructure planning. This suggests that many officials do not understand the value of the comprehensive plan nor how to use it to best advantage.

References

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. "Planning Series #3: The Comprehensive Plan." Harrisburg: Department of Community and Economic Development.

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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/>

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