

8. Barriers to Effective Planning in Pennsylvania



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, 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/>

Land use planning and regulation is an important concern in many Pennsylvania communities. Planning can help local jurisdictions manage conflicts over land uses in their community, provide public services in a cost-effective manner, maintain the local quality of life, and create an environment that allows businesses to grow and thrive.

There is widespread recognition that land use planning and regulation in Pennsylvania is not as effective as it could be. Policy discussions at the state and local level have focused on trying to improve local land use planning. In 2000, the Commonwealth modified the Municipalities Planning Code (which provides the general rules and framework for planning in Pennsylvania), through Acts 67, 68, and 127, to address some perceived land use planning problems. Such policy discussions and actions must recognize and understand the barriers currently limiting the effectiveness of land use planning, or they likely will have minimal effect.

The perspectives of planners and local officials are crucial to understanding the barriers to effective land use planning and regulation in Pennsylvania. These individuals are in a unique position to consider the effectiveness of land use planning, and to know why it may be constrained or ineffectual. Land use planners and local officials have direct experience with developing and implementing plans under the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC). Furthermore, planners' professional training gives them additional insight into the constraints on improved planning in Pennsylvania.

The potential barriers to effective planning fall into a variety of categories. There are statutory barriers related to the authority granted under the MPC. Another barrier category is planning operations, such as the relationship of plans and ordinances. Some barriers involve resources for planning, such as funding for planning programs. Lack of knowledge of planning practice and local attitudes are other categories of potential barriers.

The three surveys described at left provide a composite overview of planning effectiveness from a variety of perspectives. As part of the surveys, county planning directors and American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) members were asked to score the barriers they saw to effective planning and land use regulations in the Commonwealth. In addition, all three survey groups were asked to score the usefulness of actions that could be taken to overcome the barriers they saw.

Despite this publication's focus on county planning directors and AICP members, it is important to recognize that planning is a collaborative activity that involves multiple stakeholders, such as service providers, local businesses, developers, and interested citizens. These various stakeholder groups likely view the barriers to effectiveness from different perspectives.

What Are the Barriers? County Planning Directors' Perspective

The county planning directors were asked which factors they believed to be barriers to effective planning, and

then which of these were the most significant, second most significant, and third most significant. The 54 directors were most likely to identify as barriers limited funding of planning operations, and limited support, understanding, interest, and demand

for planning by elected officials, with each being mentioned by 70 percent of the respondents (see Table 1). The county planning directors viewed limited support, understanding, interest, and demand for planning by elected officials as the more critical of

Table 1. County Planning Directors: Barriers to Effective Planning, and Ranking of 3 Most Significant Barriers

Barrier	Percent saying it was a barrier	How significant a barrier is it? (Percent of all respondents)			
		Most Significant	Second most significant	Third most significant	Among top 3 barriers
Limited support/understanding/interest/demand for planning by elected officials	70%	23%	13%	4%	40%
Limited funds for planning	70	15	12	12	39
Limited support/understanding/interest/demand for planning by general public	69	2	8	10	20
Lack of training in planning & land use regulations by elected officials	65	2	8	2	12
Lack of leadership from elected officials	61	15	6	10	31
Distrust between municipalities	57	2	12	6	20
Failure to use the comprehensive plan in making decisions	56	6	0	4	10
Distrust between municipalities and the county	54	2	4	0	6
Lack of training in planning & land use regulations by planning commissioners	54	0	2	10	12
Lack of professional staff	50	13	6	10	29
Lack of training in planning & land use regulations by zoning hearing boards	50	0	0	2	2
Strong property rights attitudes	48	6	10	8	24
Lack of training in planning & land use regulations by zoning administrators	48	2	0	2	4
Lack of other assistance to support planning	44	6	12	2	20
Poor administration of zoning ordinances	39	2	0	0	2
Lack of coordination with water & sewer authorities	39	0	2	6	8
Poor advice from solicitors, managers, professional planners, other advisers	33	0	4	8	12
Inconsistencies between county & municipal comprehensive plans	28	0	2	2	4

these two barriers. Twenty-three percent of all respondents said it was the most significant barrier to effective planning. Only 15 percent of all respondents, in contrast, identified limited funding as the most significant barrier (see Table 1). These two barriers are undoubtedly intertwined; lack of interest by local officials leads to lack of funding. The county planning directors may be sensitive to funding issues because, as mentioned in the bulletin on county planning agencies, 69 percent of the county planning directors thought their agency was understaffed.

Lack of leadership from elected officials is related to limited support for planning, and was cited by 61 percent of the directors. It was rated as the most significant barrier by 15 percent of all respondents (another 16 percent rated it as the second or third most significant barrier). Similarly, lack of professional staff was rated significant by a relatively large number of respondents.

The general public's lack of support and demand for planning was identified as a barrier by 69 percent of the county planning directors. Such support does not appear to be a critical barrier, however, despite this wide recognition by the planning directors. Only 2 percent of the directors thought this was the most significant barrier, and only another 18 percent thought it was the second (8 percent) or third (10 percent) most significant barrier to effective planning.

Another commonly cited barrier was lack of training, including training of elected officials (65 percent), planning commissioners (54 percent), zoning hearing boards (50 percent), and zoning administrators (48 percent). Yet, the county planning directors did not view these barriers as the most significant.

What Are the Barriers? *AICP Members*

The Pennsylvania members of the American Institute of Certified Planners also were asked to rate the importance of different barriers to planning effectiveness. Their responses were somewhat similar to those of the county planning directors. The AICP membership rated the lack of leadership by local officials as the top barrier to effective planning (see Table 2). Elected officials' lack of understanding of how to use planning and regulations was second. The third and fourth highest-rated barriers, planning not being integrated with the local decision-making process, and planning not being tied to the budget process, can be considered the result of local officials' not understanding how to use planning (which was the serial barrier). These responses are consistent with the low frequency of use of comprehensive plans reported by the municipal officials (see extension bulletin no. 4, "Comprehensive Plans").

Inadequately trained elected officials was also viewed as a major barrier. It is worth noting that the major barriers AICP members identified are human factors, and that AICP members viewed financial and legal issues (such as statutory authority under the Municipalities Planning Code) and intermunicipal cooperation issues as of lesser importance.

What Actions Would Make Planning More Effective?

All three groups surveyed were asked to rate the potential usefulness different actions would have for making planning and land use regulations in Pennsylvania more effective. There is a fair degree of consistency among the three groups of respondents. Several actions received high ratings, including requiring consistency between plans and land use regulations, requiring that infrastructure and municipal services be in place before or at the same time development occurs (this is sometimes called “concurrency”), and requiring training for those involved with land use planning (see Table 3).

There are some interesting differences in the responses, however, that likely reflect the experience and perspective of the different groups. Municipal officials and county planning directors rated increased funding (grants) for planning and updated plans as very important, which is consistent with the high percentage of respondents who said limited funds for planning was a major barrier to effectiveness. The AICP respondents rated funding much lower than did the local officials, and instead viewed technical details of planning as more useful; four of their top five actions involve requiring consistency between plans and regulations, updates of plans, and requiring infrastructure to be in place before or at the same time development occurs. Part of this difference likely occurs because the municipal and county respondents must deal with budget realities, and thus face the question of where to find the resources for updating comprehensive plans or regulations.

Table 2. AICP Members: Barriers to Effective Planning (1 is “not important” to 5 is “very important”)

	Statewide
Lack of leadership by elected officials	4.61
Elected officials' lack of understanding of how to use planning & regulations	4.31
Planning not integrated with decision-making process	4.30
Planning not tied to budget process	4.09
Inadequately trained elected officials	4.03
Comprehensive plans out-of-date	4.03
Land use ordinances out-of-date	4.01
Lack of inter-municipal cooperation	3.96
Planning commissioners don't understand planning & regulations	3.92
Lack of professional planning staff	3.89
Limited understanding by the public	3.88
Poor/ inconsistent administration of land use ordinances	3.88
Inadequately trained planning officials	3.85
Lack of statutory authority	3.85
Land use ordinances poorly written	3.82
Municipalities Planning Code is inadequate	3.82
Lack of coordination of planning with water & sewer authorities	3.72
Strong property rights attitudes	3.68
Lack of funds/grants for planning	3.57
Inconsistency between county & municipal comprehensive plans	3.54
Limited citizen participation	3.53
Poor advice from solicitors, managers, professional planners, & other advisors	3.46
Failure to involve the private sector	3.44
Inadequate instructions to planning agencies from elected officials	3.30
Difficulty dealing with state agencies	3.19
Overemphasis on land use regulations relative to planning	3.08

Table 3. Usefulness of Actions to Improve Planning and Land Use Regulations, on a scale of 1 (“not at all useful”) to 5 (“very useful”). Top 5 rated items are highlighted and in bold.

Action	Municipal officials		County planning directors		AICP members	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Special grants for rural planning	4.23	1	4.42	2	3.49	13
Require infrastructure to be in place before or at the same time development occurs	4.20	2	4.26	6	4.18	5
Grants to update plans	4.15	3	4.33	4	4.08	8
Require training for zoning administrators	4.13	4	4.55	1	4.39	3
Require plan/regulations consistency	4.07	5	4.38	3	4.49	1
Require training for zoning boards	3.90	6	4.30	5	4.15	7
Require training for elected officials	3.89	7	4.15	7	4.16	6
Require training for planning commissioners	3.83	8	4.00	9	4.01	9
Reduce complexity of transportation impact fees	3.68	9	3.64	10	3.73	12
Impact fees for other services/facilities	3.63	10	3.56	12	3.81	11
Update regulations to conform to comprehensive plan	3.49	11	4.02	8	4.46	2
Mandate planning & land use regulations	3.46	12	3.66	9	3.92	10
Permit sketch plans as part of subdivision review process	3.44	13	3.23	15	3.49	13
Regular update of comprehensive plan	3.36	14	3.63	11	4.30	4
Eliminate “curative amendments”	3.07	15	3.32	14	3.19	16
Require adjacent municipality review	3.01	16	3.15	16	3.48	15

Note that due to the size of the survey samples, relatively close scores are not statistically significantly different. This means the absolute rank (“is this rated number 2 or 3?”) is less important than whether there are large differences in the scores themselves.



Implications

The survey responses indicated that the majority of county planning directors and AICP members believe the barriers to effective land use planning in Pennsylvania are people-oriented, rather than stemming from a lack of planning and implementation tools or constraints imposed by the MPC. Both the county and AICP respondents viewed the understanding of elected officials as one of the most significant barriers to effective land use planning. Lack of leadership was similarly highly rated by the AICP members. Requiring training for land use planners was also among the highly rated actions for improving planning.

Funding clearly is an issue of concern to those who must deal with budgets at the county and municipal levels. And yet, as with solutions to the communication and collaboration issues (see no. 9 in this series, “Collaboration and Communication”), many of these barriers can be overcome at little dollar cost. The people-oriented barriers—including leadership by local elected officials, using plans in decision making, training, and distrust between municipalities—are problems of attitude and commitment rather than of financial resources.

Prepared by Timothy W. Kelsey, associate professor of agricultural economics; Stanford M. Lembeck, AICP, professor emeritus of agricultural economics and rural sociology; and George Fasic, AICP.

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*.

Visit Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences on the Web: <http://www.cas.psu.edu>

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.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802-2801, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2001

Produced by Information and Communication Technologies in the College of Agricultural Sciences

CAT UA357 3M9/01ps4418H

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