

EMERGING ISSUES

UPPER DUBLIN TOWNSHIP COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

LAND USE AND ZONING

- Upper Dublin Township is largely built out. According to Montgomery County Tax Assessor’s data, developed land accounts for 95% of total acreage. Six percent of developed land is in open space or recreation uses. A breakdown of existing land use is shown on the table below:

Existing Land Use	Parcels	Percent of Parcels	Acres	Percent of Acreage
Single Family Residential	8484	87.3%	4151	54.7%
Multi-Family Residential	87	0.9%	39	0.5%
Institutional	188	1.9%	1236	16.3%
Commercial	197	2.0%	610	8.0%
Open Space/Recreation	51	0.5%	458	6.0%
Vacant	306	3.1%	380	5.0%
Industrial	34	0.3%	127	1.7%
Utility	13	0.1%	70	0.9%
Not Classified*	361	3.7%	522	6.9%
Total	9721	100.0%	7593	100.0%

* Some parcels are not classified in the Montgomery County Assessors’ data. They will be classified through a map review by staff.

- A common theme in the stakeholder interviews was the need to balance the tax base, with many stating that the current mix of land uses relies too heavily on single-family residential. While nearly all stakeholders identified reinvestment in the Fort Washington Office Park as critical, there was less agreement on other strategies to balance the tax base. Some felt that senior housing was a strong option that would add to the tax base without placing a large strain on services. Others had concerns about seniors’ interests in investing in the schools, parks and community services that attract so many to the township today.
- During stakeholder interviews, one participant succinctly stated the sentiments of many who spoke to us in saying, “Upper Dublin Township needs less defense and more offense.” The thinking behind this statement was that the township needs to understand what it wants for future development and create the tools to get it. Many perceive the township as currently spending a lot of time and energy saying “no” without understanding what the township and community do want for the future.
- A review of the township’s Zoning Ordinance and Map reveals a strict approach to managing specific uses and locations for commercial/retail development. It would not be difficult to make the case of “spot zoning” for a number of commercial sites if someone were to challenge the zoning. Such an approach is often perceived of as protecting a community from negative change, but the inherent inflexibility – or need to obtain major variances or zoning changes – can discourage new development and ultimately result in disinvestment. The Comprehensive Plan needs to consider changes to the Zoning Ordinance that will make it consistent with modern development patterns in a manner that protects community vision and values.

- Other zoning issues that could be considered in the Comprehensive Plan include:
 - Managing traffic impacts on residentially zoned properties located along major traffic corridors – For existing homes, options could include more liberal home occupation standards or permitting limited office uses.
 - Adaptive reuse standards for historic homes – Many larger historic homes are expensive to maintain. Limited office or institutional uses for such homes could make it more economically feasible to reinvest in them. Any proposal for non-residential adaptive reuse would need to include use and performance standards to limit impacts to surrounding residential development.
 - Infill development – As a largely built-out community, an increasing proportion of new development will come from infill. The Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances need to be able to effectively manage development on parcels that may be “challenged” by factors related to issues such as size, location, access or adjacent uses.
 - Redevelopment – Many of the township’s commercial areas require reinvestment and/or redevelopment. The Comprehensive Plan will need to be able to provide policy direction on standards for redevelopment.
 - Zoning for remaining vacant land – Recent development applications including residential development proposals at the Prudential Office Campus and Celebration at Upper Dublin indicate an uncertainty to the best use of key parcels of remaining vacant land.
 - Overlay Districts – The township has several overlay districts in its Zoning Ordinance, some those intended to implement local community plans including:
 - Dreshertown Triangle Plan
 - Jarretstown Action Plan
 - Maple Glen Master Plan
 - Fort Washington Village Master Plan

While the scope, scale and specific uses for desired future development in each of the plans vary, a key theme is the need to create pedestrian-friendly centers within the township. Some, particularly the Dresher Overlay and the Maple Glen Overlay, have not been successful in facilitating the development patterns desired in their respective plans. Understanding the “disconnect” between the community’s vision as expressed in a master plan and its potential for implementation through the zoning and development process will be an important issue for the Comprehensive Plan.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Upper Dublin Township offers businesses many advantages:
 - A central location to conduct business within the Philadelphia metropolitan area and the broader mid-Atlantic region.
 - Excellent access highway access and options for high visibility sites
 - Public transit service

- An educated workforce
- The opportunity to both work and live in the same community, one with a high quality of life
- Reasonable tax structure
- Responsive township professional staff and emergency services functions
- Excellent school system
- Existing business parks with both small and larger spaces that allow new businesses to grow and remain in the same general location.
- Opportunities for continuing education: Temple and DeVry

As a result of these advantages, over time the township has developed a ratable base that in turn supports the quality of life in the community. The challenge is to leverage these advantages over the next two decades in a way that is responsive to the changing needs of businesses.

- Temple Ambler is likely to make changes to its existing campus in the short to medium term. State budget cuts make it likely that most current campus programs will move to Center City Philadelphia. Adult learning programs currently renting space in the Fort Washington Office Park will likely move to the Ambler Campus, which is not currently well-designed for this use. The University is likely to seek to redevelop portions of the campus to make it work better. Options could include structuring parking to provide spaces closer to classrooms, which would free up the current parking lot for redevelopment. Development of a bio-tech campus would be possible in partnership with a private firm. Such an approach could create revenues to the University and ratables for the township.
- The demographic profile of Upper Dublin Township—including high levels of daytime population (employment in the township) should be extremely appealing to quality retail, entertainment and restaurant operators. There is a mismatch between the demographic profile of the area and the amount and quality of retail and service establishments that are present. The lack of appropriate, convenient restaurants is an impediment as well as a productivity issue for area businesses. The Comprehensive Plan will address conditions that are impeding a better retail climate to serve both residents and employees of area businesses.
- Fort Washington Office Park was consistently identified in stakeholder interviews as a critically underutilized asset. Many see it as key to improving Upper Dublin's non-residential tax base. Flooding, substandard street infrastructure and the fragmented ownership in the business park, has lead to a number of problems as the park has aged including:
 - Varying levels of maintenance between buildings
 - Poor road condition
 - Inability to address the worsening flooding
 - Lack of a sense of place/identity that could be used to attract new tenants
 - Hodge-podge of leasing signs; poor directional signage

Temple University's *Out of the Water a Revitalization Plan for the Fort Washington Office Park* lays out an ambitious strategy for redeveloping the Office Park. Its updated floodplain mapping from the study increases the limits of the 100-year floodplain and the depth of the floodwaters. The Comprehensive Plan will need to use The Office Park Plan recommendations together with the township's current plan implementation initiative lead by Steve Lester to set realistic strategies for implementing the Office Park Revitalization Plan.

- A common theme in the stakeholder interviews was a sense of frustration that – although businesses generate significant ratables for Upper Dublin – the township does not seem to be responsive to or engaged in the issues of the business community. Large issues will influence the viability of the Office Park going forward including resolving the flooding issues, addressing the need to enhance the retail/service climate in and around the park, improving the roads throughout the park and addressing traffic bottlenecks and Turnpike access. These “big fix” issues require an effective working relationship between elected officials and property owners in the Fort Washington Office Park.
- The Prudential tract is one of the few areas remaining in the township where new business development can take place. Significant retail office and residential development has taken place in the surrounding area, but largely across Welsh Road in adjoining townships. At the same time the Prudential Campus remains underutilized. Opportunities for mixed-use development are present in this location. The Comprehensive Planning process should address what, if any, zoning and land use changes should be enacted to ensure that this parcel contributes more effectively to Upper Dublin’s economic base and the quality of life for surrounding residents.
- To facilitate real estate investment and business expansion in the township, the land development and approvals processes need to operate without excessive uncertainty. At this time, significant uncertainty exists in Upper Dublin, which ideally the comprehensive planning process will help to dispel. Specifically, stakeholders cited the magnitude of the Temple recommendations for the Fort Washington Office Park. Now that the recommendations are public, impacted owners are reluctant to invest in their properties until it is clear how these recommendations will be implemented. Similarly, shopping center owners are reluctant to invest in upgrading their properties to more appropriately serve the township’s demographic base, without a better understanding of what types of improvements will be approved. As a result, commercial properties deteriorate and tenants are frustrated with what they perceive to be the landlord’s failure to maintain and upgrade the property.
- Upper Dublin residents value open space. The township maintains and number of parks and is actively working to develop a continuous trail system linking township neighborhoods and connecting to a broader network in adjacent municipalities. A recent resident-initiated referendum authorizes the township to borrow up to \$30 million to acquire open space. The Comprehensive Planning process should help balance the need for recreational and open space resources, the need to maintain ratables to support township and school district operations and the impact on the township’s operating budget of maintaining this public space.
- The township owns three former school buildings. Are the current uses of these buildings optimal or are there other reuse options? What are the advantages and opportunity costs of the township retaining ownership?
- Upper Dublin’s educated workforce is a significant asset for business attraction. At the same time, businesses report that it is difficult to find and retain quality entry-level employees. Businesses that have been located in the township for some time report that while they used to hire high school students, fewer teens seem interested or able to commit to a work schedule. The overall affluence of the surrounding central Montgomery County communities limits the pool of lower-wage workers.

HOUSING

- The township's existing housing stock is largely made up of single-family detached housing on generous lots. This type of housing is very attractive to families with children, a household type that is attracted to Upper Dublin by the excellent school system. One of the most consistent comments in the stakeholder interviews was the genuine affection individuals have for living in the township. Households would like to be able to stay in the township as they age and would like their children to have the option to live in the township as young adults. To accommodate households at various life stages, the housing stock needs to be more diverse. Homebuyer and renter preferences are changing, and those changes will be reflected in the type of housing units demanded in the region over the next two decades. In order to serve the needs of current residents and maintain its reputation as a community of choice, Upper Dublin will need to plan to accommodate some high density/lower maintenance housing ideally within walking distance of shopping, transit and other services.
- The Comprehensive Plan will include a "fair share" housing analysis to determine whether Upper Dublin has housing options for a proportionate share of lower income households. This issue is directly related to ensuring the availability of an entry-level and lower-wage workforce as well as creating opportunities for young adults to purchase a first home in Upper Dublin.

TRANSPORTATION

- Upper Dublin Township has a good system of roadways that are well maintained. There are however several areas for improvement. The following transportation improvements are examples of enhancements that may provide some relief of traffic and provide for a more safe system:
 - Construction of an east bound Turnpike slip ramp at the Fort Washington Office Park
 - Retimed and synchronized traffic signals on main corridors (Pennsylvania Avenue, Welsh Road, Limekiln Pike, Susquehanna Road)
 - Improvements to the Drescher Triangle area choke point
 - Facility design requirements for new development that support multi-modal access and reduce maintenance costs
 - Traffic calming or other measures to reduce through traffic
- The community as a whole is not very walkable. Sidewalks are not continuous and unsafe pedestrian crossings are common in commercial areas. The township's trail plan is addressing some sidewalk deficiencies; however, a holistic look at pedestrian access needs is needed to identify critical locations where connections are missing. The township may also need to coordinate with its neighbors on unsafe locations that cross into neighboring municipalities.
- Transit exists within Upper Dublin but there appears to be a need for better signage and amenities such as sidewalks and shelters at stops. There is an opportunity to use the train station as a hub and develop more routes emanating from this point into the community. To determine possible routes, URS will look at journey to work data and major activity centers within the township.
- There is a potential for transit oriented development at the train station, though reaction to the idea was mixed during stakeholder interviews. SEPTA, DVRPC and PennDOT should be involved as partners in this element of the comprehensive planning process. There were a couple comments from stakeholders regarding the Cross County Train project which would be a potential project to connect Upper Dublin to other communities.

- The emerging emphasis of sustainability and reduction of green house gas emissions will play a role in the transportation element in that we will develop strategies to reduce emissions. Some of these strategies could include:
 - Travel demand measures
 - Parking for electric vehicles and carpools
 - Telecommuting pods
 - Carpool incentives

INFRASTRUCTURE

- As the importance of effective stormwater management grows for the township, it will need to consider funding alternatives for improvements and maintenance of facilities. Many communities throughout the county are turning to stormwater authorities as a mechanism to fund the cost of services directly related to the control and treatment of stormwater. The authority is administered and funded separately from the revenues of the general fund, ensuring a dedicated revenue source. Revenues can be generated through sources including service fees, system development charges (connection fees) and special assessment districts.
- With the exception of a small area in the Craig y Nos subdivision, the entire township has public water and sewer service. Water is provided by the Ambler Borough Water Department. In 2001, Upper Dublin sold its wastewater treatment facility to Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority, which provides service to the township today. Sale proceeds were used first to retire the debt on the system at the time of closing. This left a net of roughly \$16 million. The Board of Commissioners used these funds to establish a township capital improvement fund to be used to address future capital improvement needs of the township.
- During stakeholder interviews, enhanced technology infrastructure was identified as a tool for supporting environmental, transportation and land use goals for the township. Specific initiatives discussed included community broadband, electric car parking and demand-responsive bus dispatch. From late 2005 to 2008, the township investigated and pursued establishing a municipally-owned broadband network. Though it was unable to reach an agreement with a vendor, the research can lay groundwork for future initiatives.
- As a part of the ongoing development of the Upper Dublin Municipal Campus, the Public Works Department transportation facility may be moved to another location. The Fort Washington Office Park has been considered as at least a temporary location. The school district recently obtained a five-year lease to store its buses at a site there. There have been preliminary discussions between the township and the school district about developing a shared facility.

NATURAL RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

- Upper Dublin Township prides itself as an environmental leader and has demonstrated its role at the forefront of considering environmental impacts of its future development choice through some of the following accomplishments:
 - Purchasing 100% of Township electricity from clean energy sources
 - Completion of a Greenhouse Gas Emissions Audit

- Focus and investment in stormwater management
- Being the first municipality in area to have RecycleBank
- Development of a natural resources inventory
- Considerable investments in open space preservation

The Comprehensive Plan can further facilitate a green approach to the township's future development and infrastructure with sustainability goals, objectives and strategies in each plan element. An issue to consider is the role of environmental sustainability in the Comprehensive Plan's development. Does it become a framework around which the plan is built, or is it one element that is integrated into the overall planning initiative?

- The use of Green infrastructure such as rain gardens, permeable pavements, and green roofs can help reduce stormwater runoff by absorbing precipitation where it falls. Green infrastructure represents a new approach to stormwater management that is cost effective, sustainable and environmentally friendly. Green infrastructure techniques utilize natural systems, or engineered systems that mimic natural landscapes to capture, cleanse, and reduce stormwater runoff using plants, soils and microbes. On the regional scale, it consists of the interconnected network of open spaces and natural areas including forests, floodplains and wetlands; that improve water quality while providing recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat. Many communities have found Green Infrastructure to be a cost effective strategy for reducing combined sewer overflows. A growing number of cities are now required to achieve 15% of their combined sewer overflow reduction using Green Infrastructure measures.
- A Greenhouse Gas Emissions Audit was conducted in 2008, and the audit will be used to develop the next steps and a priority action plan. Sustainable Upper Dublin (SUDS) is taking the lead in developing the action plan.

OPEN SPACE & RECREATION

- The township's 2005 Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan is a model for effective open space and recreation planning in the region. The Parks and Recreation Department continues to make impressive progress in implementing the plan's recommendations. In November 2008, township voters approved a \$30 million bond measure for open space acquisition to protect vulnerable land identified in the plan. With the purchase of the Braccia site and Dillon Road parcel, nearly all township homes north of the Turnpike will be within one-half mile of an active recreation facility – an important goal identified in the Plan.
- Looking forward, facilities are a critical issue for the Parks and Recreation Department. It offers programs at multiple sites in township – the EPI-Center, Fort Washington School, and Township Building. There has been some discussion of consolidating facilities to increase operational efficiencies. If this were to occur, the Parks and Recreation Department will need to begin planning for transitioning programs from existing facilities to new ones.
- Trail connections are a top priority for the Parks and Recreation Department. The Montgomery County Green Fields/Green Towns Program has committed \$1.4 million to trail improvements in Upper Dublin, and \$700,000 has already been authorized for expenditure. The current County commitment is expected to fund four out of 17 identified trail segments.
- Another priority for the Parks and Recreation Department is maximizing the impact of open space bond fund acquisitions. The Open Space Plan identified 51 open space parcels as vulnerable to

development and prioritized protections for each, placing them in one of four categories (in declining order of importance) “conservation/protection easements,” “action,” “interest” and “watch” depending on their significance to meeting the open space needs and objectives. While this is a somewhat fluid list, care should be taken to focus on primary conservation and recreation needs when purchasing properties or easements.

SCHOOLS & COMMUNITY SERVICES

- The Upper Dublin School District offers an excellent education and is an important asset that attracts residents to the township. The district enjoys stable enrollment with about 4,300 students in the district. Only about 16% attend private and parochial schools, fewer than in comparable suburban locations, again attesting to the quality of education. The township & school district boundaries are the same, which is somewhat unusual in Pennsylvania. This has provided opportunities for the township and school district to work together in facilities, recreation and youth programs.
- The district base budget is among lowest in Montgomery County's 21 districts. Residents have demonstrated support for investment in the district's facilities through the passage of two recent bond measures to fund specific capital improvements – one for the new Upper Dublin High School and a 2006 maintenance bond, which is funding capital improvements in the district's other schools.
- The Upper Dublin Public Library has two branches, the main branch at the Township Building and the North Hills Community Library on Girard Avenue in the North Hills Neighborhood. The Library has implemented most of the recommendations in its *Future Focus 2004-2009* long-range plan, which focused on enhancing Library services. Library usage and circulation have increased, and further growth is limited by space needs. In 2008, the Library began a comprehensive facilities plan to identify facilities needs over the next 30 years.

POLICE & EMERGENCY SERVICES

- The Police Department was highly praised during stakeholder interviews. Upper Dublin's Police Department is one of only 63 accredited forces in the Pennsylvania Commonwealth (out of about 1,200). Accreditation is a rigorous process and must be renewed every three years. The Department is committed to the community-oriented policing philosophy. It hosts several outreach programs each year, operates bike patrols and a medical unit with officers who are EMT certified. The Department includes 41 officers and nine civilian full and part time employees.
- Fire protection is provided by the Fort Washington Fire Company, a volunteer company providing services to Upper Dublin Township surrounding communities. In 2006 the township hired a professional Fire Services Administrator who manages community fire protection planning, public safety and fire protection issues. The Fire Services Administrator is the liaison between township fire and EMS service providers, township administration and departments, businesses, civic groups, and local, state and federal agencies.
- The major issue related to fire services is planning for a new fire station. The current main firehouse at 220 Summit Avenue no longer meets the needs of fire and rescue service in the upper-end of the township. The new station will be located at Fort Washington Avenue, commonly referred to as the Bonsell Site, adjacent to the Upper Dublin High School. The township has engaged an architectural and engineering firm to evaluate the property and develop conceptual plans for the new station and any other civic uses that could potentially be located on the site.

HISTORIC RESOURCES & COMMUNITY CHARACTER

- The Upper Dublin Historical Commission was established in November 2006. Initial efforts focused on updating the township's historic resource survey, which was amended by ordinance in March 2008. As a relatively new Commission, its top priority for moving forward is education of the public and other township boards and commissions about their existence and location of historic resources, their cultural and economic importance to the community and options for preservation. Funds from the open space bond measure passed in 2008 can be used to purchase historic properties or easements to protect them.
- Upper Dublin Township has had a Shade Tree Commission since 1994. Since its formation it has provided or planted more than 1,400 trees and has worked with property owners to plant several hundred more.
- Pennsylvania Avenue was repeatedly identified during stakeholder interviews as an area that needs attention in terms of appearance, pedestrian safety and traffic calming. It is an entry point into the township for people traveling on the Turnpike and Route 309 and does not provide an attractive gateway into the community. PennDOT, the township and Fort Washington Rescape have worked together to design and implement a number of streetscape and pedestrian improvements between the Turnpike and Bethlehem Pike. Additional improvements will be needed to facilitate the creation of a village center in the commercial area adjacent to the Fort Washington neighborhood as described in the Fort Washington Village Master Plan. The East Orland and North Hills portions of Pennsylvania Avenue need attention as well. The street forms the township's western boundary, so effective solutions will require the participation of Whitemarsh and Springfield townships.