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WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

Municipalities develop comprehensive plans to assess their current situation, consider what they would like to see for their community in the future, and formulate strategies to achieve that vision. Comprehensive plans consider many aspects of life: jobs and the economy, housing, new development, transportation, utilities and the area's natural and historic resources. The comprehensive plan itself is a thick document filled with data, maps, goals, and objectives. Its core is a Recommendations Section with chapters that address each of the above issues, and an Implementation Plan that succinctly describes the steps needed to move forward.

The Plan is used by municipal staff, advisory boards, elected officials, private citizens and the business community to guide decisions about investments in and the regulation of land use, transportation, environmental protection, infrastructure and community facilities.

*A comprehensive plan is a tool, not a regulation. Instead it is **a framework for future decision making** over a 10- to 15-year time period. Recognizing its long time frame, it needs to be **a living document** – one that can evolve over time to reflect changing needs.*

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Upper Dublin was founded by a late 17th century William Penn land grant and was incorporated as a Township in 1719. Originally established as a farming community, it later came to be a center for limestone mining. Most of the community's goods were carried to the Port of Philadelphia via the Limekiln Pike, which remains an important regional transportation route today. The original land grant consisted of several villages, including what is now the Borough of Ambler and "Lower Dublin," which later became part of the City of Philadelphia. Ambler was incorporated independently in the mid-1880s when a Pennsylvania Rail Road depot was established there.

When the Pennsylvania Turnpike was extended from Valley Forge to the New Jersey border in the early 1950s Upper Dublin began its transformation from an agricultural community, with a few thousand people living in Old Fort Washington, into the established suburban bedroom community we know today. With the expanded access and the construction of vast tracts of single-family housing, surges of Philadelphians seeking the suburban lifestyle that swept through the United States in the postwar era began moving to Upper Dublin.

In the mid-1950s, as the popularity of the automobile grew and development moved away from the cities, one of the nation's first "offices in a park," the Fort Washington Industrial Park, opened its doors. Also in the mid-fifties, with the construction of the 309 Expressway, the first suburban-only limited access highway in Pennsylvania, Upper Dublin had its own school district and its own high school. By the 1960's our agricultural community had become a maturing suburban community. The public school system, nurtured by the influx of middle-class home owners, was then and remains today one of the best in the area. Our population eventually grew from five thousand to its present population of about 26,000.



WHY PLAN?

When this explosive growth occurred, few if any local communities understood or were concerned about controlling the details of where and how development occurred and “suburban sprawl” was an unknown concept. Commercial buildings, residential subdivisions and small, auto-oriented shopping centers dotted the landscape. This scattered, largely unplanned development quickly overtook the road system initially built to support an agricultural, pre-Turnpike era community. Residential and commercial construction occurred without considering the dangers associated with disrupting ecosystems or understanding the cumulative effects of

developing on high, dry land, or the associated potential to create terrible flooding conditions in lower, wetter areas of the Township. Once this building boom slowed by the beginning of the 21st century, the Township was faced with considering the environmental, social, economic and traffic consequences of its pattern of development and determining how to move forward.

Despite these challenges, Township residents enjoy the quality of life and high level of services provided by the Township. The residents’ dedication to the community is unique among Pennsylvanians and was clearly demonstrated in 2007, when voters adopted a referendum to fund the purchase of land to preserve for open space. As we move further into the 21st century, the costs of maintaining high-quality services and an aging infrastructure will continue to grow. These increased financial needs for the Township are occurring just as the Township’s population growth has slowed to a crawl and little ground is available for new tax-generating development.

Our challenge now is to find the tools needed to create an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable community, particularly when projected municipal costs will exceed the projected growth in revenues. In a world where local governments and school systems still overwhelmingly depend upon property taxes, Township Commissioners understand that the need for long-range planning is paramount. Without it, Upper Dublin risks a tax tsunami, where increasing tax burdens and changes in suburban lifestyles would make it difficult to maintain the quality community which we all have worked so hard to maintain.

COMMUNITY GUIDANCE

The comprehensive planning process that led to the development of this plan has shown a considerable spirit of cooperation and enthusiasm shared by Upper Dublin’s leaders, residents and partners. This Comprehensive Plan is the end product of more than a year’s effort by dozens of individuals. It contains a set of initiatives proposed by residents, business owners, elected officials and Township staff.

A Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee made up of residents, business owners, elected officials and members of Township boards and commissions guided the planning process with technical and administrative support from Township staff and the Montgomery County Planning Commission. The Committee met regularly in open public meetings during the planning process to review

MEETINGS	
Project Kick-off	February 2009
Stakeholder Interviews	March 2009
Community Visioning Workshop	June 2009
Board of Commissioners, Planning Commission, Steering Committee Joint Work Session	July 2009
Planning Trade-offs Workshop	August 2009
Community Prioritization Workshop	November 2009
Board of Commissioners, Planning Commission, Steering Committee Joint Work Session	June 2010
Planning Commission Public Meeting	July 2010
Board of Commissioners Public Hearing	October 2010

information, develop goals and objectives and, ultimately, set the recommendations presented in this document. In addition to the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee meetings, community input was sought through stakeholder interviews, an on-line community survey, four community meetings and a Comprehensive Plan brochure that was mailed to every household in the Township. The chart above summarizes the public outreach process for the Comprehensive Plan.

From the very beginning, a major focus in this planning effort has been to enhance Upper Dublin’s sense of identity, understanding what makes it an attractive place to live and do business. The Township has very little vacant land remaining, making it increasingly concerned with ensuring that any new development is high-quality and contributes to the local tax base, while preserving the strong residential neighborhoods and the natural and historic features that contribute to the identity and appeal of the Township.

This Plan recognizes that many future opportunities during the planning process to build the tax base will come from reinvestment in existing commercial properties, so we worked with residents to identify desired and acceptable types of development that could facilitate reinvestment in existing commercial areas. During the planning process, residents were clear that despite tax pressures, future development must be balanced with preservation of open space and natural resources. The Comprehensive Plan seeks to balance preservation with the need to grow the tax base in order to afford to continue to provide excellent services to its residents.



LEGAL AUTHORITY

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) establishes the basic framework for a municipality to plan for community development. It provides for preparation of a comprehensive plan and regulation of development through zoning and subdivision ordinances.

The MPC benefits municipalities that carefully develop comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances by dictating that state agencies must consider local land use in relation to state permitting and funding for infrastructure and facilities. To obtain state consideration, comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances must be generally consistent with each other. If the consistency requirement is met, the MPC mandates that state agencies “shall consider and may rely upon comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances when reviewing applications for the funding or permitting of infrastructure or facilities.” (47MPC, 53 P.S §§ 10619.2 and 11105.)

For this Comprehensive Plan to be authoritative in its objectives to guide future growth, it must be closely tied to Upper Dublin’s zoning and land development ordinances, municipal actions, and state, county and local infrastructure improvement plans. Recommendations for changes to land use standards must be supported by coordinated changes to land use laws.

IMPLEMENTING THIS PLAN

This Plan has been organized to facilitate implementation. This has been done by separating the plan sections, particularly the Recommendations and the Implementation Plan, which will serve as important tools to achieve Plan recommendations. The Plan recommendations provide clear guidance on individual actions, while the Implementation Plan details the steps needed to put the recommendations into action. Both of these sections should be referenced often by elected officials, the Planning Commission and citizens as they consider revisions ordinances and policies.

The Implementation Plan should be used as a stand-alone document by the Township Manager, Board of Commissioners, Planning Commission and staff to prioritize changes to ordinances, capital improvements and other planning documents.