

# Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

## SECTION 1.1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter One describes the context for the Scranton-Abingtons Planning Association (SAPA) multi-municipal Comprehensive Plan and documents recent planning initiatives within the SAPA area. It also outlines the planning process and work program, and highlights several major planning issues that the Plan addresses.

The Scranton-Abingtons Planning Association includes the City of Scranton, the boroughs of Clarks Green, Clarks Summit, Dalton, and Dunmore, and the townships of Abington, Glenburn, Newton, North Abington, South Abington, and West Abington. All eleven municipalities are in Lackawanna County in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The Scranton-Abingtons Planning Association was established so that the member municipalities could achieve the benefits of multi-municipal cooperation. Initiating multi-municipal planning required much serious thought and a commitment to work together, but the member municipalities saw much to be gained, including the following benefits:

- Enables neighboring municipalities to develop a shared vision of the future;
- Provides additional financial resources for plans, studies, and projects from state agencies and other sources;
- Supports cost-sharing and cost-saving arrangements for planning and plan implementation activities;
- Can facilitate economic development based on a coordinated and comprehensive strategy rather than competing for tax revenues;
- Provides a stronger defense from curative amendment challenges if there is a multi-municipal (rather than individual) comprehensive plan and cooperative zoning.

Having made the commitment to prepare a comprehensive plan together, the multi-municipal plan will provide SAPA municipalities with the opportunity to develop cooperative zoning, in order to allocate land uses to the most appropriate locations in the planning area instead of providing for all types of uses in each and every municipality. This strategy holds the great

## **Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues**

potential for effective long-term management of growth and development. Concurrently, the municipalities must plan for changing demands and costs of community facilities and services. In short, the municipalities must work together to manage growth and change in accord with well defined, yet flexible, goals and objectives aimed at achieving an overall vision.

The governing body of each SAPA municipality believes a multi-municipal comprehensive plan is vital to providing for coordinated and orderly growth and development. Local officials are committed to organizing under the terms of the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act and Article XI of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) to develop and adopt a multi-municipal plan in accordance with MPC Article III.

### **SECTION 1.2: PURPOSE OF THE NEW COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

The purpose in preparing the Comprehensive Plan is fourfold. First, a common planning data base for the SAPA area has been established. Chapter Two includes surveys of natural and cultural features, the current land use pattern, the road system, the systems of public services and utilities, analyses and projections of population and housing, and an examination of the rate and types of change in the SAPA area over the last twenty years. Second, the Plan identifies the basic direction and structure recommended for the future of the SAPA area, derived from explorations of alternative scenarios for development. Third, the Plan specifies the goals, policies, and individual elements that will form the basis for development, conservation, redevelopment, and preservation in the SAPA area. Finally, the Plan lays forth a specific implementation strategy and program to help achieve the goals of the Plan.

## **Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues**

A Comprehensive Plan for the SAPA communities can provide local officials with a highly-effective planning tool that will support day-to-day decisions about future development so that they may be thoroughly rational and consistent and at the same time move their communities together in a desirable direction in terms of revitalization, open space conservation, mobility, historic resource preservation, environmental protection, community facilities, and fiscal balance.

A Plan that is fully responsive to the needs of the residents of the SAPA area communities will contain both long-range and short-range programs, must balance local needs and perceptions with regional requirements and perspectives, and contain its own logic and strategy for implementation. A good Plan can also serve as a “road map” for the SAPA area, both in terms of informing and improving the process of reviewing and approving development plans, and in projecting a coherent and mutually agreed-upon development framework and visual image of the area.

The Comprehensive Plan should serve as an everyday working document to be referred to regularly in the review of development proposals and in the planning of long-range capital improvements. The Comprehensive Plan for the SAPA area also needs to relate to and be coordinated with the Bi-County Comprehensive Plan being developed for Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, but at the same time must reflect the unique characteristics and setting of the SAPA municipalities and the point of view of its residents. The Comprehensive Plan must meet the requirements of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s Municipalities Planning Code as to content and the procedure for the preparation and adoption of comprehensive plans.

### **SECTION 1.3: RECENT PLANNING ACTIVITIES**

SAPA member communities have comprehensive plans that range in age from several years old to over 30 years old. Recent plans include those prepared by Abington Township and a joint plan produced for Glenburn Township and Dalton Borough.

## Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

In 2004, an Open Space, Greenways & Outdoor Recreation Master Plan was adopted by Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, providing an overall framework and direction for recreation and preservation in these two counties. The intent was to provide guidance at the county scale and then for local municipalities and multi-municipal groups to adopt their own plans.

At the time that the SAPA Comprehensive Plan was being prepared, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties were also preparing a joint Comprehensive Plan, Long Range Transportation Plan Update, and a Hazard Mitigation Plan. Members of the SAPA communities were also involved in this effort.

In addition to providing their own funding for the SAPA Comprehensive Plan, SAPA communities received funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (PaDCED), Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), and local foundations, including the Scranton Area Foundation and the Willary Foundation.

### **SECTION 1.4: COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS**

In recognition of the need to develop a multi-municipal Comprehensive Plan and local interest in the location, pace, and character of recent and future development in the SAPA area, the elected officials of the SAPA area municipalities formed the SAPA Committee and agreed to participation in the development and implementation of a Comprehensive Plan. These elected officials appointed the SAPA Committee to guide the preparation of the Plan and oversee the work of the consultant.

Through the Comprehensive Plan preparation process, the SAPA Committee met on a regular basis with the consultant. The Committee has had several critical roles to play, including:

- Monitoring progress on the Work Program, including scheduling and coordinating all Workshops and Public Information Meetings according to the Plan's Work Program Schedule;

## Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

- Providing information and ideas to the consultant and providing data/contacts/leads and direction to the consultant for upcoming tasks in the Work Program Schedule as the process was underway;
- Reviewing study products of the consultant, providing feedback to the consultant, and participating in the consensus-building process;
- Publicizing the Plan, encouraging community participation and promoting the comprehensive planning process generally and the growth management ideas that emerged during the planning process.

Three Public Information Meetings were held during the course of the Plan preparation. The first Public Information Meeting, held in June 2007 at the completion of Phase A in the project, was an introduction to the process being undertaken and an opportunity for the SAPA Committee and consultant to present the range of issues and choices to be examined in the overall Comprehensive Plan preparation process. The second Public Information Meeting occurred in October 2007 at the conclusion of Phase B. The focus of this meeting was a review of the alternative concepts for the future that the SAPA Committee had explored and an emerging framework for the future of SAPA area. The third Public Information Meeting took place on July 16<sup>th</sup> 2009 in order to review the recommendations included in the Draft Comprehensive Plan and Implementation Strategy.

These Public Information Meetings served to update local residents, business operators, landowners, and other interested parties on the progress on the SAPA Comprehensive Plan, and elicited feedback on the ideas being put forward as part of the planning process.

A Public Hearing was held on the Draft Plan on *DATE PENDING*, for adoption action by the elected officials of the SAPA area municipalities. The formal review process of a Public Hearing rounded out the extensive community participation program, including the three aforementioned Public Information Meetings. Community participation was a hallmark of the planning process, in order to fully inform residents and to create a strong consensus as to the most desirable and achievable common future for the SAPA area.

# Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

## SECTION 1.5: COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING WORK PROGRAM

The Comprehensive Plan process consisted of four distinct phases that took place between 2006 and 2009.

Phase A was primarily devoted to background data collection and the documentation of change in the SAPA area during the last twenty years. Tasks within this phase included a review of earlier planning documents and data, creating the base maps of the SAPA area for the study, an inventory of natural and cultural features and development limitations, documentation and forecasts of demographics and development activity, a study area tour, stakeholder focus groups on a range of topics, and individual municipal meetings.

As a foundation for the work in Phase B, Phase A concluded with the setting of preliminary goals and objectives for the Plan. Phase B itself incorporated a systematic exploration of a variety of planning and development issues and alternative development patterns. It culminated with the development of a framework for future development and preservation that synthesized the best planning ideas that had emerged through the work of the SAPA Committee process.

The third phase, Phase C, focused on the actual preparation of the Comprehensive Plan document. The Plan was prepared as a preliminary draft, reviewed by the SAPA Committee, and revised to a final draft form that was ready for public review.

Phase D concluded the planning process and included a public review and hearings on the final draft of the Plan. Revisions were made based on those reviews and hearings and the Final Comprehensive Plan was prepared for printing and public distribution.

# Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

## SECTION 1.6: MAJOR PLANNING ISSUES

The SAPA communities have joined together to address common issues, establish area wide goals and objectives, and work together to accomplish their joint vision for the future. The SAPA area encompasses land uses ranging from agriculture and forestry, to borough and village centers, to suburban development and a central city. While very diverse in landscape, the planning area municipalities share issues including a shifting population, diverging land values, highway and transportation needs, and demands for community facilities and services.

While Lackawanna County as a whole has experienced a decline in population over the last few decades, some communities have had population increases. Essentially, a population shift is occurring in and around the City of Scranton, with older settlements losing population and new housing construction taking place in outlying areas. Abington, North Abington, South Abington, and West Abington Townships and Clarks Green Borough all gained residents in the 1990 to 2000 period, while other municipalities lost anywhere from 2.4 percent to 9.0 percent of their residents.

The effects of this population shift can be seen on the landscape, with housing development occurring in former agricultural and wooded areas, and in the pattern of commercial development, with new shopping centers and strip retail areas replacing central business districts of older settlements for local shopping and services. In general, problems associated with these trends include the lack of public services in rural areas, increased traffic on roadways that have not been substantially improved, increased costs borne by local governments, potential threats to environmentally-sensitive resources, visual intrusions into the countryside, a near-universal dependence on private vehicles for mobility, a decline of local business centers, and loss of the strong fabric inherent in traditional communities.

The population of the eleven-municipality planning area represents about fifty-three percent of the total population of Lackawanna County, while the land area comprises only about twenty-one percent of the county. At 3,200 persons per square mile, the highest population density is found in Clarks Summit Borough, with the City of Scranton and Clarks Green at 3,000 and

## Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

2,700 persons per square mile respectively. West Abington Township, at fifty-seven persons per square mile, is the most sparsely populated. The U.S. Census shows that the population of the planning area decreased between 1990 and 2000, with individual changes ranging from a decrease of nine percent in Dunmore to an increase of thirty-five percent in South Abington Township. During the same period the population of the *Abingtons* increased by nine percent. However, it is important to remember that the decreases in Dunmore and Scranton represent almost 6,800 persons while the *Abingtons'* increase represents about 1,900.

As the population of the *Abingtons* has increased, so too has the commercial development and traffic along US Route 6/11, which bisects the most densely populated areas of the *Abingtons* and serves as the one of the principal northwest-to-southeast routes. Other transportation issues include increasing congestion on Interstate Route 81, the major north-south route in Northeast Pennsylvania, and the potential of a passenger rail link to New York City.

A key issue for the Scranton-Abingtons Planning Association is the future role to be played by the City of Scranton and adjacent Dunmore Borough. Historically, these were the robust centers of commerce for the area. Lately each has faced declining population and a pattern of disinvestment. SAPA supports strengthening of these two municipalities; a healthy urban center can only benefit the entire area, resulting in less emigration, less development and loss of open land in the rural municipalities, and an improved quality of life for everyone who lives in the area.

While the historical importance of agriculture and forestry to the area has declined, many acres of open land remain. This open land is a key ingredient of the character of the entire SAPA area, not only for the less populated townships. Resource-sensitive local planning and land use management is critical to conserving the remaining open land, given shifting development patterns and the potential for sprawl.

# Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

## Costs and benefits of development

New development can cost communities more than it contributes, as demands for increased services exceed what higher tax revenue provides. Development that is commonly linked to this revenue-cost imbalance is residential, although commercial development is also suspect.

Residential development may directly affect property owners' municipal and school district tax bills and may mean additional community costs in the following ways:

- New and/or expanded schools;
- Additional road construction and maintenance;
- Additional policing; fire protection and ambulance coverage;
- Additional administrative and code enforcement;
- Waste management; and
- Other additional services and facilities (Senior transit, "meals on wheels", after-school community services, etc).

Commercial development may directly affect property owners' tax bills and may mean additional municipal costs in the following ways:

- Additional policing; fire protection;
- Additional ambulance coverage;
- Additional road maintenance;
- Additional administrative and code enforcement.

In some states, municipalities may impose impact fees on developers to help to offset increased costs due to development, although in Pennsylvania such "off-site" fees are generally limited to sewer tap-in fees and contribution of land or fees relative to park and open space facilities. Act 209 permits the proportional share of the costs of new roads or roadway improvements, community-wide or district-wide, attributable to new developments, to be passed on to the developments themselves, and such fees generally force builders to pass the cost on to new homebuyers. A comprehensive study of the current and projected roadway system and costs to implement the future system must be completed by the municipality before any impact fees may be imposed.

# Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues

## SECTION 1.7: PLAN CONTENT

The following Comprehensive Plan chapters were developed In order to address the issues outlined above and to provide a framework for the future of SAPA area:

*Chapter 2: Existing Conditions - Provides a snapshot of the SAPA area as it is today, examines recent trends and considers forecasts for growth and development.*

*Chapter 3: Growth Management Plan - Identifies goals and objectives for the future and establishes a policy framework for meeting those goals.*

*Chapter 4: Implementation Plan - Establishes an implementation framework of actions that SAPA municipalities will take cooperatively over time to translate the Plan into reality.*



# **Chapter One: Background and Planning Issues**