10. Northern Tier Coalition Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan
(Susquehanna County)

Planning Area
The Northern Tier Coalition plan includes ten townships (Apolacon, Bridgewater, Choconut, Forest Lake, Franklin, Jessup, Liberty, Middletown, Rush, and Silver Lake) and two boroughs (Friendsville and Little Meadows) in northwestern Susquehanna County. Although Montrose, the county seat of Susquehanna County, is within the planning area, that borough chose not to participate in the plan.

With a combined population of just over 13,000, the region grew by about 10 percent between 1980 and 2000, but it remains predominantly rural. Most recent growth has been in the form of scattered housing with some accompanying retail and service development, much of it concentrated in Bridgewater Township surrounding Montrose.

Status
The planning process was initiated in 2003 and completed in the latter part of 2005. The plan was adopted by all twelve participating municipalities in 2006. The municipalities have also signed an implementation agreement.

Plan Development
Shortly after passage of Acts 67 and 68, officials from several Susquehanna County municipalities decided a multi-municipal planning process could benefit their region. As other communities expressed interest in the idea, the number of interested municipalities expanded to twelve, at which point the group decided that additional participants could not be accepted without making the planning region unmanageably large. The group adopted bylaws, elected officers, and called itself the Northern Tier Coalition. Most members of the coalition had previously worked together through the Susquehanna County Council of Governments.
Although Susquehanna County had experienced only moderate growth pressure, participants wanted to take steps to avoid the sort of haphazard development that was occurring in neighboring parts of Pennsylvania and New York. Their main interest was in preserving the region’s rural character and quality of life.

While none of the communities previously had zoning ordinances, coalition members agreed in advance that they would adopt zoning once the plan was completed. In fact, they took the unusual step of including a commitment to cooperative zoning as part of the inter-governmental agreement that established the planning process.

Planning consultant Carson Helfrich of Paupack, Pennsylvania was hired to assist with plan development. The costs, which amounted to $55,000, were covered by a LUPTAP grant and municipal contributions. In-kind services were provided by staff of the Susquehanna County Planning Commission and by students from Cornell University, who contributing mapping and background research as part of their class work for a course on conservation planning.

**Features of the Plan**

The main emphasis of the plan is to preserve the rural character of the region and to manage rural development. Following recommendations in the Susquehanna County plan, it seeks to concentrate development in a single growth area in Bridgewater Township, where water and sewer services are available. The plan also establishes a number of village areas. It recommends using the “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision technique to manage rural development and preserve land. It is one of the few plans we reviewed that also includes a capital improvement plan, with detailed cost estimates of needed equipment and an analysis of municipal fiscal positions.

The plan incorporates land use sharing, concentrating nearly all commercial and industrial development in Bridgewater Township. Participants discussed the use of revenue sharing to help equalize the distribution of tax benefits from future development, but the municipalities showed little interest in this idea. Most municipalities want to avoid commercial and industrial development, even at the cost of foregoing future tax base growth.

**Implementation**

After the plan was adopted, the coalition obtained LUPTAP funding to develop zoning ordinances based on the plan. At the time of our site visit (April 2008) a model zoning ordinance had been developed, and the municipalities were expected to adopt it in the summer. If all goes as planned, eleven of the twelve municipalities will all adopt the same zoning ordinance, the only differences being the zoning districts designated for each municipality. (The one exception is Silver Lake Township, which has requested some minor changes to the model zoning ordinance.)

The coalition originally envisioned that a single planning commission and a single zoning hearing board would be created for the entire region. Once the plan was completed, however, the group decided that such an arrangement would be unmanageable given the region’s large size. Instead, they agreed to divide the region into five sub-regions, four of which will have their own planning commissions and zoning hearing boards. The fifth sub-region (consisting of Liberty and Silver Lake townships) has indicated that it will attempt to create a single zoning hearing board, but the two townships will retain their own planning commissions.

The coalition will maintain a region-wide “Northern Tier Planning Committee” consisting of elected officials from each municipality. According to the implementation agreement, the region-wide planning committee has responsibility for reviewing developments of regional impact and reviewing municipal land use ordinances for consistency with the plan.

The implementation agreement requires a one-year waiting period before a municipality can withdraw from the plan. This allows time for revising the plan and zoning ordinances, should the withdrawal compromise the region’s ability to provide for the full range of land uses.

The collaborative planning process has led to further inter-governmental cooperation among members of the Northern Tier Coalition. For example, most of the municipalities are now participating in a joint leaf composting operation. Meetings of the coalition are well-attended and include time for socializing after the official business is concluded. Participants report that these events have done much to strengthen inter-governmental relationships within the region.