Planning Area
This multi-municipal plan includes Pottstown, a borough of about 22,000 people on the Schuylkill River in western Montgomery County, and seven surrounding townships—four in Montgomery County (Douglass, Lower Pottsgrove, New Hanover, Upper Pottsgrove, and West Pottsgrove) and two in Chester County (East Coventry and North Coventry).

Formerly a manufacturing center whose plants included Bethlehem Steel and Firestone Tire, Pottstown has lost most of its industry during the past few decades, though its population has remained stable. The region as a whole grew by 11 percent between 1990 and 2000, with most of the growth concentrated in the townships northeast of Pottstown—Douglass, New Hanover, Upper and Lower Pottsgrove. Because it is on the edge of the Philadelphia suburbs, is easily accessible via Routes 100 and 422, and contains substantial undeveloped land, the region is expected to receive significant new development during the next two decades. The plan projects a population increase of 32 percent by 2025.

Status
The plan was completed in August 2005 and adopted by all eight municipalities. All the municipalities have signed an inter-governmental implementation agreement.

The Planning Process
The eight participating municipalities have a history of working together and are members of the Pottstown Area Council of Governments (PACOG), a body created in 1972 that consists of the chief elected officials of the local governments. Prompted by concerns about sprawling development in the townships, rising school taxes, and the decline of the borough, PACOG members began discussions about multi-municipal planning shortly after passage of Acts 67 and 68. They...
chose as their planning consultants the Montgomery County Planning Commission, which already had substantial experience with inter-governmental planning processes and provided planning staff and planning assistance to many of the municipalities in the county. Commission staff played an active role in all phases of plan development and have remained involved as advisors since the plan was completed.

Funding was provided by LUPTAP grants from DCED, but the municipalities had committed to pay for the plan with their own money if the application was not successful.

Participants report that plan development proceeded smoothly, with few disagreements among participating municipalities. They attribute the lack of conflict to sound guidance from Montgomery County Planning Commission, as well as to broad consensus on two main goals – limiting development in the suburbs and revitalizing the borough of Pottstown. In particular, plan participants wanted to reduce residential density in less developed areas and to stimulate economic development in the borough by limiting commercial development in surrounding townships. They also wanted to avoid having to provide for land uses considered undesirable (mobile home parks, quarries, junkyards and landfills) in all eight municipalities.

The planning area spans portions of four different school districts. Because there was interest in limiting the need to expand school facilities, school district personnel initially participated in the planning process; but they soon lost interest and stopped attending meetings.

The fact that the planning area included two municipalities in Chester County presented few problems, since the Chester County Planning Commission was open to Montgomery County taking the lead. The two planning commissions cooperated with each other in the review and final production of the plan.

**Features of the Plan**

The Pottstown Regional Metropolitan Comprehensive Plan is an excellent example of the high-quality plans prepared by the Montgomery County Planning Commission, with thorough and detailed analysis of land use and housing needs. The plan clearly calculates fair share housing requirements and demonstrates that adequate land is made available for “fair share” housing and states which municipalities will accept which land uses.

The plan also clearly identifies growth areas and rural resource areas, and sets specific standards for use and density within its seven designated planning land use categories. For each land use category, specific goals and objectives are identified. Planning commission staff feel such specificity is needed to ensure that multi-municipal plans are legally defensible, an important consideration in area where legal challenges from landowners have been common.

**Implementation**

The implementation agreement, which conforms to a model developed by Montgomery County Planning Commission, was adopted with only minor revisions suggested by municipal solicitors. In addition to specifying municipal land use commitments as noted above, the agreement establishes the Pottstown Metropolitan Regional Planning Committee (RPC) as an advisory body to oversee implementation of the plan. Composed of two representatives from each municipality (including at least one member of the governing body), the RPC comments on developments of regional impact and reviews zoning codes, subdivision, and land development ordinances (SALDOs), and master plans and specific plans for general consistency with the regional plan. The implementation agreement also describes a procedure by which a municipality may withdraw from the regional planning organization and stipulates a one-year waiting period to allow time for any necessary plan revisions.

An unusual provision of the implementation plan is the establishment of a regional legal defense fund to assist municipalities with litigation related to plan implementation. Currently the participating municipalities are each contributing $4,000 annually to the fund.

One municipality, West Pottsgrove, has already faced a minor legal challenge from a landowner disputing the township’s prohibition of billboards. The application was denied by the zoning hearing board on the grounds that billboards were permitted elsewhere in the planning area. The decision has been appealed to the Court of Common Pleas, but so far the landowners have not filed a brief, and the appeal will be denied after two years if no action is taken. No costs have been incurred since pro bono legal assistance was provided.

Some municipalities have made zoning changes pursuant to the regional plan. For example, North
Coventry Township was able to downzone its rural resource area from one unit per two acres to one unit per ten acres because there are ample opportunities for residential development elsewhere in the planning area. In addition, North Coventry Township is currently preparing a master plan to guide commercial development along a two-mile stretch of the Rt. 100 corridor.

While the plan has not yet resulted in concrete benefits for the borough, Pottstown's Economic Development Director is confident that the borough will eventually benefit from efforts to direct economic activity into the core community. Suburban commercial development continues, however, despite the plan's goal of limiting commercial development outside of Pottstown. Revitalization advocates are particularly concerned about the construction of a major shopping center just outside Pottstown, in neighboring West Pottsgrove Township. While regional planning has not prevented such development, it has fostered greater inter-governmental cooperation. Three municipalities that will be affected by the new shopping center are working with a single traffic consultant to mitigate the impacts of the development.

Other collaborative projects include an effort to refurbish bridges leading into Pottstown and steps toward creation of a regional recreation commission. The Pottstown Metropolitan RPC is expanding its role beyond the duties enumerated in the implementation agreement and is becoming a forum for development of regional initiatives. As one member explains, simply reviewing ordinances and developments of regional impact is not enough to sustain a RPC; a broader program is needed to maintain participants' interest over time.

The Pottstown Metropolitan RPC has recently joined with four other RPCs that are implementing multi-municipal plans in western Montgomery County and northeastern Chester County. Convened by Rep. Bob Mensch (Schwenksville) and the Montgomery County Planning Commission, the Inter-Regional Planning Cooperative is meeting regularly to identify common infrastructure needs, highlight best practices, and develop initiatives to support regional planning and cooperation.