Planning Area

The Twin River Council of Governments Comprehensive Plan originally included twelve municipalities in Allegheny County—the city of McKeesport; the boroughs of Elizabeth, Glassport, Liberty, Lincoln, Port Vue, Versailles, West Mifflin and White Oak; and the townships of Elizabeth, Forward and South Versailles—as well as two boroughs in Westmoreland County—Madison and West Newton. McKeesport participated in plan development but did not adopt the plan. The planning area (including McKeesport) has a population of over 90,000 people, making this one of the larger multi-municipal planning efforts in the state.

This area, most of which lies between the Monongahela and Youghiogheny Rivers, encompasses much of the Monongahela Valley, a heavily industrialized region that suffered severe economic decline with the collapse of western Pennsylvania’s steel industry in the late 20th Century. All municipalities in the planning area have lost population in recent decades, though the most dramatic declines have occurred in the older communities along the Monongahela River. McKeesport for example, declined from a population of more than 55,000 in the 1940s to just over 24,000 in 2000. Communities in the area are quite diverse, ranging from urban neighborhoods in and around McKeesport to relatively affluent suburbs.

Status

The planning process began in 2001 and culminated in adoption of the plan by thirteen of the fourteen participating municipalities in 2004. There is no inter-governmental implementation agreement.

Plan Development

The planning process was led by the Twin Rivers Council of Governments (TRCOG) and included all municipalities that were members of TRCOG in the early 2000s. TRCOG had developed a joint plan in
1980, and part of the motivation for undertaking a new planning process was to update that earlier document. Municipal leaders believed a new plan would help them obtain state funding for local projects.

Tom Graney of GCCA, Inc. served as the planning consultant. A planning committee consisting of local elected officials oversaw the planning process, and TRCOG provided staff support. The cost of plan development was $75,000. LUPTAP funding was obtained from DCED, and Allegheny County provided matching Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. Municipalities also made modest contributions totaling less than $12,000.

Efforts to overcome the region’s long history of municipal rivalries included a series of 20 public meetings. According to the consultant, the plan was designed to be uncontroversial to help make it acceptable to a set of diverse communities. The fact that thirteen of the fourteen municipalities were willing to adopt the plan is considered a significant achievement.

McKeesport’s rejection of the plan can be explained by a political change during the planning process. The newly elected mayor and city council majority were unwilling to accept a plan that their predecessors had helped develop.

**Features of the Plan**

Because much of the housing stock in the region is relatively old and the boroughs are already developed, the plan focuses housing and future land use policies on infill and redevelopment, including brownfield redevelopment, and on measures to upgrade the existing housing stock through vacancy reduction, maintenance, and code enforcement. Because forecasted population growth in the region is low, little new housing construction is needed. And because the zoning ordinances of the municipalities already provided a wide range of housing choices and densities, the plan envisions no major changes in municipal zoning.

However, the plan does recommend updating zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances ordinances (SALDOs) to create common land use standards across the region “so the 12 contiguous Allegheny County communities can take advantage of land use sharing options now open to them.” (Land use sharing options would likely not be available to the two Westmoreland County municipalities because they are disconnected from the rest and within different school districts. This violates the MPCs directive that communities involved in multi-municipal planning should be contiguous or else part of the same school district.)

**Implementation**

After the plan was adopted by most of the participating municipalities, the TRCOG communities entered into Phase II of the planning process, which consisted of an analysis of existing land use ordinances and development of model zoning and SALDO ordinances. Tom Graney again served as consultant, and funding to cover the $98,000 cost of Phase II was provided by grants from LUTPAP, Allegheny County, and private foundations. During the process the consultant and TRCOG staff met with all planning and zoning commissions in the region.

Although the consultant found that most of the land use ordinances were out of date and included notable deficiencies that should be corrected, hardly any of the participating municipalities have updated their zoning and SALDO ordinances. Nor have they signaled their willingness to do so in the future, despite TRCOG’s offer to help them obtain funding. The only exception is South Versailles Township, which has updated its SALDO ordinance.

The option of sharing uses was discussed during Phase II, and many municipalities welcomed the idea of not having to provide for every land use. Some of the larger municipalities objected, however, fearing they would be used as “dumping grounds” for undesirable uses, so no land use sharing agreement was reached.

It is worth noting that an effort was made to take advantage of the MPCs authorization of specific plans for communities with multi-municipal plans. The borough of Versailles asked Tom Graney for assistance in dealing with a “problem property”— a long, narrow riverfront tract that was ill-suited for residential or commercial uses. Working with Senate Engineering, Graney developed a specific plan to reuse the property as an industrial park. However, Versailles’ borough council rejected the idea and decided to use the property as a recreational park.

A few of the plan’s recommendations have been adopted. For example, Elizabeth Township is raising money for a recreation center that would serve the entire region. For the most part, however, the municipalities have shown limited commitment to implementing the plan.