Planning Area
This plan encompasses the borough of Grove City and four nearby townships—Liberty, Pine, Springfield and Wolf Creek. Grove City is the largest of the five communities and the core of the planning area, which has a combined population of more than 16,000. These municipalities form a single school district and are all members of the Wolf Creek/Slippery Rock Creek Council of Governments.

While Mercer County has lost population in recent decades owing to the decline of steel and other industries, the population of the planning area has been stable, growing by 2 percent between 1990 and 2000. This modest growth is partly attributable to two interstate highways (I-79 and I-80) that cross the region and provide easy access to other population centers, especially to Cranberry Township, a rapidly growing suburb of Pittsburgh 30 minutes to the south. Although the townships have been growing, Grove City, a borough of about 8,000 people, lost 3 percent of its population between 1990 and 2000. Nevertheless, this college town, home of Grove City College, remains relatively prosperous compared to many older communities in western Pennsylvania.

Status
The planning process began in 2002, and the plan was completed and adopted by all municipalities in 2005. As of this writing an implementation agreement has not been signed, though negotiations are continuing.

Plan Development
The multi-municipal plan was initiated after Grove City began updating its comprehensive plan and the borough manager (now retired) realized that a regional plan would more effectively address the community's concerns. He invited the four townships to join in the planning process, and they responded positively, in part because they belonged to the same COG and
already had a history of cooperation. An important selling point was the expectation that a multi-municipal plan would help them qualify for state funding.

A planning committee consisting of elected officials from the five municipalities was created to guide the process. The Mercer County Regional Planning Commission, which was in the process of updating the county comprehensive plan, provided staff support. Rick Grossman of GCCA, Inc. served as planning consulting. A LUPTAP grant covered half the costs of plan preparation, which amounted to $69,000. The county planning commission contributed $24,500 in in-kind services, and the five municipalities made cash contributions totaling $10,000.

The planning process included a citizen survey of more than 1,000 residents, town hall meetings in all five municipalities, and a visioning process involving elected and appointed officials from the local governments and the school district. Thanks to strong leadership and a shared sense of community, the planning process proceeded smoothly, with relatively little controversy.

Features of the Plan

The plan presents specific zoning and land use goals for each municipality consistent with the overall plan vision. It identifies growth areas, where water and sewer services will be provided, as well as rural resource areas, where infrastructure extensions are not planned. Outside of growth areas it recommends the use of design standards such as those included in the “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision technique. The future land use plan targets growth in the vicinity of Grove City and along selected transportation corridors, and recommends new agricultural protection zoning districts in the outer townships. The plan also suggests a procedure by which the COG, tasked with ongoing implementation, would review and comment on “developments of regional impact.”

The plan recommends regional distribution of selected land uses (mobile home parks, high-density multi-family dwellings, independent elderly housing, farms and agriculture, mineral extraction, regional retail facilities, and non-taxable institutions) and provides a chart suggesting which municipalities could best accommodate these uses. The participating municipalities, however, have so far shown little interest in implementing shared land uses.

Implementation

Since adoption of the plan, county planning staff have been urging the five municipalities to sign an intergovernmental implementation agreement, but two townships have been unwilling to do so because of objections raised by their solicitors. Their concern is that the proposed agreement, as required in the MPC, would establish a process for reviewing any change in a land use ordinance to ensure it is “generally consistent” with the plan, and that the decisions of the reviewing body would be binding on the municipality — unless, of course, the municipality would choose to withdraw from the regional planning organization. The two townships want the flexibility to change zoning ordinances to accommodate development and are afraid the implementation agreement would restrict their ability to do that.

However, the current draft of the agreement helps preserve municipal autonomy by requiring a waiting period of only 60 days for a municipality to withdraw from the plan (compared to a one-year waiting period in other implementation agreements we have reviewed). That means that any municipality wishing to make a zoning change deemed inconsistent with the plan would be able to withdraw quickly and proceed with its desired change. County planning staff believe the short waiting period will assuage the townships’ concerns and help convince them to sign the implementation agreement soon.

The plan does not recommend major changes to existing land use ordinances, but it does call for some modifications. So far, only one township, Springfield, has amended its zoning ordinance and SALDO to make them consistent with the plan. Further changes are expected once an implementation agreement is signed.

Expectations that the plan would help the region gain access to state grant money have not yet been realized. Community leaders have been disappointed by the recent rejection of two grant requests — one for funding from PennWorks for water and sewer improvements and another for Enterprise Zone funding from DCED.

The most significant follow-up to the plan has been an intermunicipal agreement for upgrading Grove City’s sewage treatment plants. The upgrade will be needed to accommodate planned sewer extensions in neighboring townships. In an agreement brokered by the COG, Liberty, Pine, and Springfield Townships have committed to financing the construction costs