Planning Area
The Penns Valley region encompasses seven communities in southeastern Centre County: the boroughs of Centre Hall and Millheim and the townships of Gregg, Haines, Miles, Penn and Potter. It consists of a long, narrow agricultural valley between two mountain ranges. Predominantly rural, the region has escaped the rapid growth that has occurred in the Nittany Valley just to the west, home of State College. The seven municipalities had a combined population of about 11,400 in 2000 and have experienced steady but modest population growth since 1970. Among the region’s greatest assets are its environmental amenities — pristine trout streams, limestone caves, and forested ridges.

Status
The planning process began in the spring of 2004, and the plan was adopted by all seven municipalities in January 2006. No implementation agreement has been signed.

Plan Development
Inspired in part by a multi-municipal plan for neighboring Nittany Valley, the Penns Valley communities began discussing regional planning in 2003. Three municipalities had comprehensive plans that were in need of updates, and others were interested in developing comprehensive plans for the first time. Staff of the Centre County Planning Commission took the lead in preparing a LUPTAP application for a multi-municipal planning grant.

One township, Haines, had already applied for LUPTAP funds to prepare an individual comprehensive plan. At the request of county planning staff, Haines Township was included in the Penns Valley plan even though it proceeded to prepare its own comprehensive...
plan concurrently. In the end, Haines Township adopted the multi-municipal plan along with its own comprehensive plan.

Harry Roth, a Lancaster-based planning consultant, was hired to coordinate plan development. Total costs amounted to about $100,000, of which half was covered LUPTAP grants. The Centre County Planning Commission contributed in-kind services worth about $22,000, and the remaining $28,000 was covered by cash contributions from the six of the seven municipalities. (Haines Township was exempted because it was financing its own comprehensive plan.)

The planning process was overseen by a steering committee composed of elected officials and planning commission members from the municipalities. Penns Valley School District, which encompasses the seven participating municipalities, was also represented on the steering committee.

**Features of the Plan**

Steering committee members shared the goal of maintaining the region's rural character. Although growth pressure has so far been limited (except to some extent in the western section of the valley near State College) participants believed the region's rural way of life could be threatened by the eventual reconstruction of Rt. 322, which would improve access to points south. They wanted to develop a plan that would help the region accommodate its fair share of growth while preventing sprawling development patterns.

Consequently, the plan is designed to concentrate future growth around the edges of existing boroughs and villages and where public utilities can be provided. It limits much of the development to small nodes that would accommodate small-scale, locally owned businesses. It also recommends the use of “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision techniques for rural housing development in areas designated for agriculture and conservation.

However, participants balked at some measures to concentrate growth and protect rural land. In an initial draft the consultant proposed the use of effective agricultural zoning that would restrict residential development to one unit per 20 acres, but that idea provoked an outcry from some landowners and municipal officials and was eventually removed from the plan. In addition, all municipalities wanted to accommodate light industrial development to attract jobs and build their tax bases, and as a result the future land use map includes some light industrial areas that are not served by sewer.

The plan provides specific design guidelines (density, setbacks, etc.) for the various categories of residential land uses and provides very specific calculations for projected housing needs and for the amount of land dedicated to different housing categories.

While the plan does not assume that all municipalities must provide for all land uses, it does not recommend specific land use sharing arrangements.

**Implementation**

The participating municipalities would not agree to proposed language that would have committed them to implementing the plan through zoning ordinances. Nor were they interested in signing an implementation agreement.

Nevertheless, some municipalities have moved forward with implementing aspects of the plan. For example, Potter, Gregg, and Haines Townships are modifying their zoning ordinances to make them more consistent with the plan, and Millheim Borough is working with county planning staff to develop a zoning ordinance that incorporates elements of Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND).

In addition, the steering committee has continued to hold bimonthly meetings and has become a forum for broader discussions about regional collaboration. Items on the group’s agenda include recreation, economic development, emergency management, and an equitable means of funding the region’s volunteer fire companies.