Greater Williamsport Alliance Multi-Municipal Plan (Lycoming County)

Planning Area
The Greater Williamsport plan includes the city of Williamsport; the Boroughs of Duboistown and South Williamsport; and the townships of Armstrong, Loyalsock and Old Lycoming. These six municipalities have a combined population of about 55,000 and encompass the urban core and suburbs of Williamsport, a city of roughly 30,000. In addition to urban areas and suburbs, the landscape covered by this plan includes farmland; the forested northern face of Bald Eagle Mountain; and portions of the Susquehanna River, Loyalsock Creek and Lycoming Creek watersheds.

The Williamsport area has lost population in recent decades, declining about 11 percent between 1970 and 2000. Most of this decline occurred in the city of Williamsport, which lost 19 percent of its population during the same period, although the two boroughs and Armstrong Township also lost residents. The region’s population decline has leveled off in recent years, thanks in part to flood hazard mitigation and downtown revitalization efforts.

Status
The greater Williamsport planning process began in 2001 as part of a county-wide regional planning initiative. The plan was completed and adopted in 2005. There is no inter-governmental implementation agreement.

Plan Development
Lycoming County has a history of county-wide land use management that dates back to the early 1990s, when a county zoning program was initiated. (Under the MPC, municipalities without zoning in counties with county-wide zoning ordinances are covered under the county ordinance.66) While zoning has long been a
familiar concept in Lycoming County, at the start of the current decade many municipalities lacked comprehensive plans or had plans that were badly in need of updating.

In 2001, the Lycoming County Planning Commission initiated a county-wide planning program that included the development of six regional multi-municipal plans and a concurrent update of the county comprehensive plan. The multi-municipal planning regions included all the county's growth areas and more than 80 percent of the population. The six communities of the Williamsport region had previously worked together through the Greater Williamsport Alliance, an inter-governmental group that helped prioritize regional projects.

Within each region the multi-municipal planning process was guided by a Planning Advisory Team (PAT), consisting of local elected officials, local planning commission members, school district representatives, representatives of municipal authorities, and members “at large.” Each PAT met on a monthly basis.

The Lycoming County Planning Commission coordinated the county-wide process and managed the contract with the firm of Gannet Flemming, which assisted in preparation of the six multi-municipal plans within the county and the county plan. The cost for all seven plans was $650,000, of which the municipalities contributed 30 percent. The six municipalities of the greater Williamsport region contributed a total of $25,000. Additional funding was provided by Lycoming County (using CDBG funds), PennDOT, and DCED (LUPTAP). We found the six multi-municipal plans in Lycoming County to be of very high quality.

According to county planning staff, the municipalities generally supported the planning process, though their reasons for doing so varied. For Williamsport, the primary concern was downtown revitalization and attracting commerce and industry. Boroughs wanted to find ways to stem population loss. And townships, along with many boroughs, were interested in preserving their rural character and quality of life.

**Features of the Plan**

The greater Williamsport plan is thorough and complete, articulating a clear vision and objectives. Its goals include concentrating development in and around the existing developed areas, strengthening the downtowns of the city and boroughs, and utilizing “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision techniques to preserve land in designated rural development areas. Growth areas, future growth areas, and rural resource areas are clearly identified, with clear standards and policies to govern each area. The plan specifies the amount of developable land within its designated growth areas and demonstrates that all future residential and non-residential development needs are adequately accommodated.

**Implementation**

The greater Williamsport plan, like the other five multi-municipal plans in Lycoming County, lacks an inter-governmental implementation agreement, though such an agreement might be developed in the future. County planning staff believe an implementation agreement is unnecessary in the absence of an explicit land use sharing arrangement. Despite considerable discussion about land use sharing, none of the Lycoming County planning areas have reached agreement on such arrangements.

The greater Williamsport municipalities have recently received LUPTAP funding to update their zoning ordinances to make them consistent with the plan, and a land use sharing agreement could result from that process. If so, it will likely be limited to “undesirable” land uses, such as adult entertainment. County planning staff have already developed a model implementation agreement for municipalities that engage in land use sharing.

Williamsport’s zoning ordinance revision is expected to contribute to the city’s revitalization. For example, the plan recommended rezoning the area around the Williamsport Hospital and Medical Center to accommodate future expansion of that institution. Without such rezoning, the city could risk losing one of its most important employers.