Moving Fulton Forward:
A Multi-Municipal Plan for Fulton County

Planning Area

Moving Fulton Forward encompasses twelve of Fulton County’s thirteen municipalities: Ayr, Belfast, Bethel, Brush Creek, Dublin, Licking Creek, Taylor, Thompson, Todd, Union, and Wells, Townships and McConnellsburg Borough. Valley-Hi, a borough of only about 20 people, was the sole Fulton County municipality that declined to participate in the plan.

Located within central Pennsylvania's ridge and valley section, Fulton County is traversed by several steep ridges that run north and south. Two major highways (I-70 and I-76, the Pennsylvania Turnpike) cross the county and intersect just beyond its western border.

With roughly 14,200 residents, Fulton County has experienced modest growth in recent years, expanding its population by less than 3 percent between 1990 and 2000. The county is predominantly rural, with no cities or major towns. McConnellsburg, the county seat, has a population of just over 1,000.

Status

Initiated in June 2005, the plan was completed in late 2006. By January 2007 it had been adopted by all twelve participating municipalities. At present there are no plans to develop an inter-governmental implementation agreement.

Planning Process

Moving Fulton Forward represents a new direction for Fulton County, since most of its communities have had little experience with land use planning. Four municipalities — Ayr, Dublin and Todd Townships and McConnellsburg Borough — had adopted a joint plan in 1995, and these were the only ones with a comprehensive plan. McConnellsburg was, and still is, the only municipality with a zoning ordinance. However, there is a county comprehensive plan that was last updated in 2000, and the multi-municipal plan builds upon and adds detail to the county plan.
When McConnellsburg and neighboring townships began discussing the need to update their ten-year-old joint plan, several other townships expressed interest in joining the process. This led to a series of broader meetings and decisions by all but one of the county’s municipalities to participate in a regional planning effort. Staff of the Fulton County Planning Commission acted as facilitators.

Many participants were motivated by the realization that “change is inevitable.” Although Fulton County has so far avoided intense development pressure, counties to the east—Franklin, Adams and York—have experienced rapid development spurred by an influx of homebuyers from Maryland. Southern sections of Fulton County are already experiencing some in-migration from Maryland. Local officials hoped a regional plan could help them manage growth more effectively, prevent sprawl, and maintain the county’s rural character.

Nevertheless, some officials were wary of losing autonomy. Their concerns were eventually assuaged by county planning staff, who assured them that the planning process would not take power away from them. A few agreed to participate once they realized that comprehensive plans in Pennsylvania are just advisory documents, and that municipalities are not legally compelled to follow them.

Like most other planning regions, Fulton County created a steering committee composed of representatives from each participating municipality. While the county’s three school districts were not officially represented on the steering committee, the superintendents did attend meetings. Rettew Associates of Lancaster was chosen as the planning consultant. The planning process included a charrette with local residents and business owners and a bus tour of the county.

Funding for the project was provided by a LUPTAP grant from DCED, which covered 75 percent of the costs. Fulton County provided the 25 percent matching funds. In addition, DCED awarded a Shared Municipal Services grant that paid for a “circuit rider” who assisted with plan development. The municipalities contributed matching funds for the Shared Municipal Services grant in the amount of one dollar per resident—less than $2,000 for even the largest municipalities. The Fulton County Planning Commission acted as grant administrator.

**Features of the Plan**

Moving Fulton Forward presents a growth management strategy based on designating growth areas and rural resources areas. Like most of the plans reviewed, it places strong emphasis on “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision techniques to preserve land in rural areas. In keeping with the interests of the region, the plan also contains a significant economic analysis and economic development plan for the region. The future land use map directs future growth toward existing boroughs, hamlets, and villages.

The steering committee considered, but in the end rejected, a recommendation for county-wide zoning. As explained in the planning document,

The Steering Committee expressed some interest in regional zoning but the majority did not feel the growth pressures, as they exist at the time of the plan, necessitate the need for the development of an ordinance. Moving Fulton Forward recognizes that every community is unique, with distinctive characteristics. Therefore, the primary responsibility for land use decisions will remain with local governments. However, the County Planning Commission felt the Region needed some layer of protection against future development. This layer of protection will come in the form of many initiatives but namely a countywide official map, subdivision and land development ordinance updates, designated growth areas, master plans, continued monitoring of development activity and coordinating infrastructure investments with the established growth areas within the region.

**Implementation**

Although the participating municipalities have not created a new multi-municipal planning organization to guide implementation, the county planning commission and staff are filling this role. In addition, the Steering Committee has continued to meet on a quarterly basis. Among the items being discussed are official maps. While the plan recommended development of a county-wide official map, it now appears more likely that several municipalities will prepare individual official maps, with assistance from the county to assure that they are mutually consistent.

At present, none of the townships are ready to adopt zoning ordinances. According to county planning staff, most municipal officials in the region remain extremely reluctant “to tell neighbors what they can or cannot do with their land.”