8. Lower Dauphin Area Regional Comprehensive Plan  
(Dauphin County)

Planning Area
The Lower Dauphin Area Regional Comprehensive Plan encompasses three municipalities in southern Dauphin County—East Hanover and Londonderry Townships and Hummelstown Borough. The Lower Dauphin School District, which includes these three municipalities plus Conewago and South Hanover Townships, played an important role in plan development.

The region spans portions of Harrisburg’s outer suburbs as well as some rural and agricultural areas. It has experienced relatively rapid residential development in recent years, growing by 7.5 percent during the 1990s.

Status
The plan was completed in 2005 and adopted by the three municipalities in the summer and fall of that year. No inter-governmental implementation agreement has been signed.

Planning Process
In March 2000, representatives of Lower Dauphin School District met with the governing bodies of the five district municipalities, the Dauphin County Commissioners, and three local legislators to discuss matters affecting the region. An issue of major concern was the fact that the area had experienced substantial residential growth without a corresponding increase in commercial or industrial development to boost the property tax base. This was putting stress on the school district, whose tax revenues were not keeping pace with its growing student population.

Meeting participants appointed a regional study group which, after a series of further discussions, recommended development of a comprehensive plan for the five municipalities in the school district. A steering committee, known as the Lower Dauphin Area Regional Planning Group, was created and began regular meetings in January 2001. The group consisted...
of one elected official and one planning commissioner from each municipality, as well as the school district superintendent, who served as the first chair of planning group. Staff of the Tri-County Planning Commission (serving Dauphin, Cumberland and Perry counties) attended meetings in a non-voting capacity and provided fund-raising and technical assistance. Urban Research and Development Corporation, a consulting firm based in Bethlehem, was hired to assist in plan preparation. The five municipalities made modest contributions ($500 each) to cover start-up costs. The balance of the funding was provided by LUPTAP and Dauphin County.

The fact that Lower Dauphin is a non-contiguous school district presented a challenge, since the MPC originally required that municipalities participating in a multi-municipal plan be contiguous. On behalf of the planning group, Representative Ron Marsico introduced legislation to remove this constraint, and in 2004 the MPC was amended to drop the contiguity requirement for municipalities that are within the same school district.

Near the beginning of the planning process, South Hanover Township decided to withdraw from the multi-municipal plan. Facing development pressure, township officials were eager to revise their land use policies and felt they could proceed more quickly by preparing a comprehensive plan on their own.

A second township, Conewago, withdrew at a later stage, after the plan had been sent out for public review and comment. Communication problems within the township were partly to blame. Although the planning group was supposed to include representatives of township planning commissions, the Conewago planning commissioners were taken by surprise when they were asked to review the draft plan. Their negative reaction, combined with objections from some vocal community activists, led to Conewago Township’s rejection of the plan.

**Features of the Plan**

The final version of the plan includes only the three municipalities that remained in the process until the end. It identifies the distribution of land uses expected throughout the region and includes specific density standards for residential areas as policy standards.

Like most of the plans reviewed, it recommends strong environmental protection ordinances for sensitive features and the use of “Growing Greener” conservation subdivision techniques in areas designated as rural or agricultural preservation.

While the planning group originally hoped to identify shared land uses, in the end the planners assumed that all three municipalities would provide for the full range of land uses. For that reason, Conestoga Township’s late-stage withdrawal did not require the other municipalities to alter their future land use plans. Staff of the Tri-County Planning Commission liken this regional plan to a set of three municipal comprehensive plans, each of which would be legally defensible on its own.

**Implementation**

Solicitors from the three municipalities that adopted the plan could not reach agreement on the language of an implementation agreement. However, because each municipality is already providing the full range of land uses and no land use sharing arrangements are envisioned, an implementation agreement is not necessarily needed. Nevertheless, the regional planning committee has continued to meet periodically on an informal basis. Among the items discussed have been options for farmland preservation, including a transfer-of-development-rights program.

Because future land uses were based mainly on existing land use policies, few, if any, zoning changes are needed to implement the plan.

Although the plan has not resulted in a formal intergovernmental implementation agreement, it has improved communications among the participating municipalities and, especially, between the school district and the municipalities. Lower Dauphin’s superintendent reports that municipal officials now routinely seek her input on proposed development projects that may affect the school district.