Planning Area
The Nazareth Area multi-municipal plan encompasses a group of communities in northern Northampton County, directly north of the city of Bethlehem. The participating municipalities originally included five boroughs (Bath, Chapman, Nazareth, Stockertown, and Tatamy) and five townships (Bushkill, East Allen, Lower Nazareth, Moore, and Upper Nazareth), but Stockertown Borough and East Allen Township declined to adopt the plan. Although the area is largely rural, like the rest of the Lehigh Valley it is experiencing substantial growth pressure, especially along Rt. 33, a major highway that runs along the eastern fringe of the planning area. Blue Mountain, a steep, wooded ridge, forms the northern boundary of the planning area.

Status
The plan was completed January 2006 and adopted by eight of the ten participating municipalities. An implementation agreement was signed by the eight municipalities in early 2007.

The Planning Process
The plan was initiated in 2002 by the newly created Nazareth Area Council of Governments (NAZCOG) in order to “guide more sensible growth, development and redevelopment of the area.” The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC) served as the consultant and took the lead in preparing the plan. Funding was assembled from various sources, including DCED (LUPTAP), the Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), Northampton County, and the Keystone Nazareth Charitable Foundation. In addition, the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission contributed substantial in-kind services. Generous
external funding permitted preparation of an unusually thorough plan worth roughly $400,000. Yet contributions from the ten municipalities were modest, totaling approximately $45,000.

Despite broad consensus that the plan should help conserve farmland and open space, proposals for agricultural preservation proved controversial. The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission favored “effective agricultural zoning” that would limit housing development to ten percent of a parcel, but some landowners and local officials objected on the grounds that such zoning would be too restrictive. As a compromise, LVPC presented several additional options for areas designated for farmland protection, including transfer of development rights and conservation zoning and subdivision design. So far, none of the municipalities have shown an interest in either effective agricultural zoning or transfer-of-development-rights programs.

Even though the plan gave municipalities broad latitude in protecting farmland, East Allen Township supervisors declined to adopt the plan because, in their view, the agricultural preservation provisions were too restrictive. In a series of meetings organized late in the planning process, many East Allen farmers argued that the proposed agricultural preservation plan would compromise their property rights and reduce the value of their land. Township supervisors responded by rejecting the plan outright, without proposing any changes that would address the farmers’ concerns.

Another controversial issue involved traffic congestion along the eastern edge of the planning area. Heavy traffic between Rt. 33 and new developments in Forks and Palmer Townships (which are not included in the planning area) has created chronic congestion in the borough of Stockertown. Representatives from Stockertown advocated the construction of a new interchange on Rt. 33 that would have diverted traffic away from their borough. But the redirected traffic would have created congestion problems in the borough of Tatamy. For that reason, and also because the proposed road improvements would have been outside the planning area, the planning committee decided not to include a recommendation for the new interchange. In reaction, Stockertown withdrew from the planning process.

Because neither East Allen Township nor Stockertown Borough were expected to play a crucial role in providing for the full range of land uses, their rejection of the plan did not necessitate significant plan revisions.

Stockertown’s withdrawal has left Tatamy unconnected to other participating municipalities, but participants do not consider that a problem, thanks to a 2004 amendment to the MPC that dropped the requirement that municipalities must be contiguous if they are within the same school district.

The planning area actually spans two school districts. It includes all six municipalities within the Nazareth Area School District (Nazareth, Stockertown, and Tatamy boroughs and Bushkill, Upper Nazareth, and Lower Nazareth townships) as well as part of the Northampton Area School District (Chapman and Bath Boroughs and Moore and East Allen Townships). Although efforts were made to involve both school districts in the planning process, neither played an important role in plan development.

Features of the Plan

Nazareth Area … 2030 is a thorough plan, providing a comprehensive assessment of future land use needs, and providing clear standards for implementation through individual municipal zoning ordinances. The plan designates growth areas in and around the boroughs and in places served by water and sewer infrastructure. Much of the future growth is to be directed to two townships, Upper and Lower Nazareth, primarily because public sewer service is available in those communities and will soon be expanded in Lower Nazareth Township. In contrast, the plan designates Moore and Bushkill Townships as mostly rural.

The plan designates twelve land use categories and provides detailed standards, uses, and densities for each land use category that serve as the basis for cooperative implementation. It recommends using “Growing Greener” conservation techniques in areas designated as rural.

One unique feature of the plan was the use of CommunityViz, a land use planning visualization tool, to develop three alternative future land use scenarios and calculate key indicators associated with each scenario. The three scenarios were current zoning, enhanced farmland preservation, and the recommended conceptual land use plan. The alternative scenarios were helpful in building consensus regarding future land use policies.

Like the comprehensive plan for the Lehigh Valley, on which this multi-municipal plan is based, the “smart conservation” model from Natural Lands Trust is used...
to calculate the conservation potentials for each parcel. These are then weighted and the highest priority areas for preservation are identified.

**Implementation**

The eight municipalities that adopted the plan had relatively little difficulty reaching consensus on an implementation agreement. Some solicitors raised minor concerns, but all municipalities were willing to sign the agreement after only three drafts.

The implementation agreement designates NAZCOG as the advisory body for implementation of the plan and requires municipalities to submit zoning and SALDO ordinances and capital improvement plans to that organization for general consistency review. NAZCOG also has responsibility for reviewing “developments of regional significance,” which are defined in the agreement.

Under the terms of a separate agreement, however, NAZCOG has delegated consistency review to LVPC. The planning commission has also agreed to prepare three annual reports on activities pursuant to the plan and to provide training to municipal officials on how to make their ordinances generally consistent with the plan.

As of early 2008, only one of the eight participating municipalities had changed its land use ordinances to conform with the plan. Upper Nazareth Township adopted a zoning ordinance update in July 2007 that the LVPC found to be generally consistent with the Nazareth Area…2030 plan. Further, Moore Township has asked LVPC for assistance in updating its zoning ordinance, and NAZCOG has expressed interest on obtaining DCED funding to help all eight municipalities update their ordinances.