



TICKET TO TOMORROW

A Pennsbury
Community Conversation
November 8, 2007

*A partnership program of
Chester County 2020 and the
Pennsbury Supervisors and
Planning Commission*

Community Conversations and Productive Partnerships

Community Conversations are Chester County 2020's hallmark approach to encouraging community cooperation at many levels. We often work with diverse interests with a history of experiencing difficulty in searching out areas of common ground. A major strength of any Community Conversation is the element of the unexpected that emerges in the process. When individuals of varied backgrounds and experience come together, the dynamics are always surprising and generally productive.

In approaching a Conversation for Pennsbury Township, I felt mildly uncomfortable, well aware of past and present conflicts that might not heal easily. Fortunately, there were significant indications that common ground could be found and developed into a rewarding sense of cooperation. Discovering that my emailed program file (including a list of county-wide critical issues that was intended to launch the evening) had apparently vanished into cyberspace on the way to the township office was hardly reassuring. It is rather daunting to stand in front of a large audience without one of the major tools in hand. Fortunately, an earlier-than-planned supper call served as distraction while we reorganized.

As you read this report, my heartfelt plea is for *everyone* to avoid approaching each issue as part of a game plan to gain ground on the "opposition" – especially in regard to the well-publicized disputes over the village plan. It may well be wise to defer any anticipated strategic planning until that issue is resolved and the baggage can be left behind. Remember that Chester County 2020's goal is to help uncover areas of easy agreement that can eventually support a cohesive, highly cooperative plan to move ahead. We do not do the planning and implementation; you, the community, are responsible for that.

Naturally, any large gathering will produce disparate views. Some may be reconciled in the interest of a producing a cohesive plan. Others may have to be debated more fully until compromise is reached, or even set aside as unworkable; the debate itself is a worthwhile exercise. In addition to the group contributions, ideas and opinions were extracted from individual work sheets; they didn't make it to the report level, but illustrate the wide variety of input. One evening does not produce a definitive action plan, but reveals how truly broad the concerns may be. The additional worksheet comments follow the materials from the group reports and are identified as such.



Setting the Scene

The scene was set for *Ticket to Tomorrow* with a reference to *Landscapes*, the county's award winning comprehensive plan — currently undergoing a ten-year review as *Landscapes2*. An important ground rule centered on recognition that all municipal planning in Pennsylvania is guided by the Municipal Planning Code (MPC). The MPC, created by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1968, sets the standards for action by the Planning Commission and Supervisors. Creative non-conforming ideas always surface, but the MPC has the final word.

This Conversation offered the opportunity to discuss a variety of challenges ranging from open space to traffic within a single forum. Additional CC2020 staff was available to provide assistance to the discussion groups. 130 residents responded to the invitation. Breakout groups of 8-10 were pre-assigned to reflect a mix of experience and representation, and also to introduce newer arrivals to long-time residents. An informal tally of residential longevity indicated the largest representation was from the 30-year and over group with the smallest in the 10-year category.

Rating the Issues

The Conversation began with identification of issues the residents considered important to the township's future — recorded on large sheets of paper, taped to the wall for easy viewing. Participants indicated personal priorities by placing a colored dot next to their top five choices. (Placing all the dots on a single issue – not allowed) With only five dots to spread around over 36 issues, some difficult choices had to be made. “Most important” doesn't mean that other issues don't resonate; they just earn a lower place on the list of “pay attention to this - now.”

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Each issue had its supporters, but six highly interrelated items attracted the largest concentration of dots. * indicates issues that were added by Pennsbury residents to a basic list generated over the past two years at similar meetings.

- | | |
|---|----|
| • Management of development * | 51 |
| • Open space preservation | 49 |
| • Increased property taxes | 49 |
| • Ground water * | 36 |
| • Commercial/light industrial building in Residential zoning area * | 34 |
| • How to manage growth | 31 |

The additional issues with their ratings appear below. The six highest ranked topics were available for discussion. Usually several issues are addressed in the same evening. This time, however, all but one table chose Management of Development. This may sound like a single issue but ultimately encompassed several others. Each group tailored the “others” to reflect their particular interests. The remaining group decided to work with Ground Water. The breakout report organization revolves around 1) regional & local trends and their potential impacts on these issues, 2) priority values, 3) important players, 4) opportunities to work together, 5) anticipated accomplishments and benefits, 6) potential barriers and how to deal with them, and 7) action Items.

How to manage growth and still preserve the traditional Chester County lifestyle	31
Supervisors' and Planning Commission accountability re: development	30
Sewage management policy	26
Historical preservation	22

Increased flooding and pollution caused by overdevelopment	21
Loss of rural character *	20
Importance of multi-municipal planning and cooperation	15
Fulfillment of recreational needs for all ages	13
Walkability *	12
Less government intervention *	9
Desire for sense of community out of balance with willingness to participate	8
Traffic safety	7
Affordable homes	7
Too little informed voter participation	7
More recycling opportunities *	7
Obstacles to connecting trail systems	6
Public transportation: supply and willingness to use	5
Scarcity of civic leadership	4
Apathy as a negative force	4
Infrastructure - all of it! *	4
Connecting greenspaces *	4
Township response to global warming *	3
Reduction of automobile dependency	2
Decision making in the hands of a few *	2
Crime spill-over *	2
Linking landscapes *	2
Generational diversity *	2
Resistance to economic and cultural diversity	0
Shortage of long range vision in expanding urban centers	0
Diminishing sense of community throughout the County	0

Regional and Local Trends

The most significant trends county wide — increased development with accompanying costs to existing homeowners, traffic and safety issues, resistance to density, higher taxes, and storm water problems — are difficult to address. Historically, the most effective option, regional planning, has encountered the strongest resistance. It is only recently that regional or joint planning has gained more appeal because multi-municipal planning allows more flexibility under the MPC. A repetitive challenge in considering cooperative planning is the tendency for one municipality to assume another more urban neighbor will accept most of the density, allowing the partner to exist as a bedroom community. Pennsbury responses mirror this attitude.

The following is the summary of the perceived trends in the township and immediate region – contributed by the working groups. That some of them are not on target is an indication that information is not easily available, that frequently conclusions are made on the basis of sound bites, or that it can be difficult to accurately grasp the wide-ranging changes.

- Pennsbury is becoming an oasis in a rapidly growing region.
- An increasing amount of traffic passes through Pennsbury on the way to somewhere else. (more of a fact than a trend)
- Proposed development is becoming ever more contentious.
- Development in neighboring communities results in increased land values for Pennsbury.
- Older residents are being forced out by rising taxes.
- Affordable homes are difficult to find. The short supply prevents young people from moving into the township.
- Apathy is pervasive.

- Developers have financial strength, the deep pockets that makes them difficult to oppose. (fact more than trend)
- Scarcity of quality time for families erodes the participation of residents in township matters and volunteer activities.
- Pennsbury has an “immigration problem”; people moving into the township from other communities.
- Traffic safety is a growing issue.
- Increased noise and light pollution.
- High property taxes encourage preservation of open space.
- Growth is inevitable.
- Growth changing the character of the community.
- The attitude seems to be “let other townships provide recreational space, density or any of the municipal resources that we don’t want to have in our township.”

Priority Values Translate into Common Ground

The participants exhibited strong agreement about the following priorities:

- Maintain appropriate economic development on open ground: nurseries, horse farms, vineyards.
- Identify and protect cultural resources
- Improved communication
- Improved dialogue between elected and appointed officials and the residents
- Recognition of landowner rights
- Preservation of rural environment
- Provide housing diversity
- Traffic safety
- Increased transparency.
- Consider the impact of growth on residents, environment and sense of community
- Allow development in appropriate locations; safe developments that do not require much in the way of municipal services. (no definition of appropriate)
- Preserve Pennsbury’s existence as an oasis between Route 202 and Kennett Square.

Additions from individual worksheets

- Maintain diversity of housing.
- Increased housing costs are keeping young families out

Important Players

- Residents
- Participants in multi-municipal cooperation
- Township supervisors
- Planning Commission
- Community input
- Developers
- Major landowners

Preferred Future

- Keep Pennsbury an “oasis” community, a bedroom community.
- Control growth, realizing that growth is inevitable.
- Protect the environment.
- Protect the quality of life
- Better education regarding land preservation. Involve the land trusts.
- Protect open space.

- No commercial/light industrial development in residential zones.

Anticipated Accomplishments and Benefits

- Improved strength of community.
- Increased communication.
- Increased participation.
- Pennsbury kept as an oasis between Route 202 and Kennett Township, mostly a bedroom community.
- Less diverse bedroom community.
- Preservation of rural character and open space.
- More resident involvement.
- Moderate tax increase.
- Developments that are safe and not in need of additional services.
- Good quality of life; closer knit community because shared values are realized.



Additions from individual worksheets

- The idea of a community center looks good.
- Township events increase the sense of community.

Barriers

- Apathy is still a barrier.
- Lack of communication.
- Web not always up to date.
- Incentives for individual to keep land open.
- Tax burden.
- Developers are strong; landowners are vulnerable.
- The Municipal Planning Code can be an obstacle.
- Antiquated PA law.
- Federal Government.
- Neighboring townships.
- How to publicize and educate?
- Lack of citizen involvement.
- Legal/financial influence of developers.

Additions from individual worksheets

- Erosion of diversity
- Taxes going up
- Little or no knowledge of the township or county comprehensive plans.
- Lack of community involvement = vulnerability

Unresolved differences

From individual worksheets

- MPC restricts the desires and power of the community.
- Not enough people care to become educated.
- Value of creating a village development area.
- A place for Pennsbury like Centerville where people could park, walk around and shop.
- Something to stop motorists from whizzing through on Route 1.

Suggested Action Items

- Develop “Core Value Structure.”
- Diversity of housing.
- Senior citizen development.
- Improve communication.
- Better website, email contact.
- Set up a war chest to fight developers. Are there public funds for “zoning defense?”
- Maintain a safe community.
- Support multi-municipal action like the Kennett Regional Planning Commission.
- TDRs between municipalities.
- The community needs to work with DEP, PennDOT.
- Do not dilute current zoning.
- Elected and appointed officials should reach out/communicate with non-property owners.
- More township-based events.
- Reach out to various segments of the community.
- Work with adjoining townships.
- Continually and creatively educate.
- Send out draft minutes of meetings.
- Use advisory groups of residents.
- Eliminate property taxes.
- Spread sales tax to include services.
- Pay tuition in lieu of school tax.
- More community involvement at inception of planning.
- Take surveys. Share the results, and act on them.
- Insist that infrastructure be provided by developers.
Do not put infrastructure in place to encourage additional growth.
- Require infrastructure to support growth within zoning.
- Go to voters for approvals.
- Manage traffic.
- Establish and maintain a Core Value Structure.
- Recognize what has to happen for controlled, intelligent development.
- Explore tax relief/reform.
- Require TRANSPARENCY!
- Encourage appropriate development while preserving all resources.



Commentary

Community Conversations repeatedly demonstrate their value in bringing sometimes contentious representatives of diverse constituencies together to set aside differences in the interest of finding common ground. The key is acceptance of the guidelines to:

- Seek common ground and action
- Listen to each other — carefully
- All ideas are acceptable
- Differences of opinion are acknowledged - but not debated.

Participants generally expressed appreciation for the opportunity to voice their concerns.

1. Residents consider the important players to be primarily elected and appointed officials at both the local and county levels. One report recommended that residents be allowed to vote on all development projects and changes in zoning ordinances. Election of officials did not necessarily equate with substantial confidence in decision-making that might affect the township's future. There appears to be a disconnect about the best means of moving forward

with a sense of cooperation and trust. Suggestions surfaced that sound appealing but cannot be implemented by the elected and appointed officials.

2. The term “oasis” was repeatedly applied to the preferred future. Residents wanted to stabilize Pennsbury’s existence as it is today; adding few if any homes, ensuring a protected environment with little or no change in the quality of life, and acceptance of multi-municipal planning as long as Pennsbury needn’t provide density or regional recreational facilities.
3. The vision of Pennsbury as a bedroom community, an oasis untouched by the changes around them, has a certain commonality with *The Village*, the movie that was filmed only a few miles away Chester County that lies in the path of development is going to change. The choice lies in the degree of change, perhaps with a conscious effort to maintain healthy diversity. It is often our differences that make us think and perform at the highest level.
4. Effective understanding of the Municipal Planning Code tends to be minimal except for the Planning Commission members and supervisors with a background in planning and/or architecture. It is challenging to grapple with the complexities of the MPC without having been involved with a committee or group that must work with the code.
5. Expressed interest in expanded residential involvement provides opportunities to explore a wide range of engagement. Time may be scarce, but choices are possible and some of the best revolve around contributing to the valued quality of life that survives best when energy and good will are invested. The land trust, the goals for the township park, involvement with the schools, and the conservation non-profits in the area represent choices. Some residents will volunteer because they have the time; others will make the time and teach their children the responsibility to give back to the community that nurtures them. Simplistic? Pie-in-the-sky? Possibly, but look at the long history of supervisor commitment and the nearly endless evenings of planning commission meetings. These are serious “professional” volunteers, hardly in it for the small stipend they earn. If they care enough to serve, to try to live up to high standards of performance, then the other residents should at least consider matching their commitment. That’s what truly strengthens “community.”
6. There is reluctant acceptance that taxes will increase, accompanied by the desire that the increases be moderate. Resistance to density seems to be expressed most often in the assumption that families with children will be attracted to townhouses and single houses on small lots because they may be less expensive –translating into more children in the schools and increasingly higher taxes. And yet, much of the demand for this level of home ownership is from entry-level professionals and empty nesters for whom adult communities hold little appeal.
7. Repeatedly the perceived absence of effective communication and education was seen as a barrier to positive action. “Transparency” was a word that resonated with the Conversation participants. “Apathy” plays a role, too. Suggestions were made for more timely updating of the township website. Potential decisions by large landowners – whether to donate conservation easements, sell development rights, or sell to a developer – are a critical unknown.





8. The MPC is considered a barrier because of the fair share zoning requirements as is the absence of effective multi-municipal cooperation. A regional plan such as the one developed by the Kennett Area Regional Planning Commission is a fine document, but has no “teeth” until each member township creates supporting ordinances. And the “nimby” factor (not in my backyard) as well as “banana” (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything) make planning decisions difficult.

9. *Landscapes* recommends placing density near existing infrastructure. And yet, consistently, density initiatives tend to generate contention. Pennsbury is no stranger to that type of controversy. It takes impressive objectivity to study proposals, weigh the pros and cons, and act in the long-term best interests of the community.

10. In the search for common ground, some initiatives will have to be evaluated by the supervisors. For instance, the suggestion to establish a defense fund to defend zoning ordinances may be one. A major task will be weighing the benefits of working within a system of cooperation against the potential outcomes of courting contention.

10. *Landscapes*, Chester County’s comprehensive plan, proved to be a far from familiar document for many of the participants in the Conversation. This may be traced partially to the fact that a considerable number of Pennsbury residents work (and formerly lived) in Delaware – and still look toward Wilmington as “their community.”

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11. Within the traffic discussion, valid concern arose about increasingly crowded highways resulting in spillover onto secondary roads. This is an unwelcome reality encountered across the county and beyond. Timing of traffic lights was recommended as one element of smoothing out traffic congestion.

12. The ground water group easily targeted their priorities, including clean streams and water supply. They concluded that, in the context of watershed protection, it was necessary to work with the larger landowners to encourage the completion of conservation easements where possible. This approach preserves the scenic values at the same time that ground water resources are protected. A recommendation was made to recharge old wells in developments, a suggestion definitely requiring expert response.

13. The luxury of just saying no to development does not exist. And yet, the preference for that message came through loud and clear in the Community Conversation. The Municipal Planning Code, however, does not provide the option. As a number of individuals mentioned, there are choices but they are not necessarily easy.

14. Cooperation assumes a willingness to become well-informed. Residents are far too vulnerable to the adult version of the childhood game, “whisper down the lane.” One rumor feeds another, emotions run high, and no one wins. In a society where sound bites are a common source of information, it takes conscious effort to resist their influence. How many of us really wait to hear the whole story before we choose sides?

15. Frustration about change often results in a search for someone to blame. The elected officials are easy targets, even though they function under specific legal constraints and guidelines – especially in dealing with new development proposals.

16. Consider the definition of community: “a group of people living in the same locality under the same government.” That dry definition fails to express what most people think of as “community:” friendliness; neighborhoods where people get to know one another; help when it is needed; children visiting back and forth; pot luck suppers; waving as you pass by in a car or on a bike; being there, being an active member of the community. The more traditional aspects of community are increasingly inaccessible in a society that is constantly on the move. Today, a sense of community shouldn’t be taken for granted; it requires personal investments of time and commitment. Consistently, a welcome outcome of a typical Community Conversation is a renewed sense of community.



Opportunities

1. Pennsbury officials can take advantage of the wealth of planning tools permitted by the MPC, from piecemeal planning to capital programs. The Chester County Planning Commission has produced an excellent “toolbox” to support municipal planning commissions and the supervisors. There is a tool for nearly every challenge.

Typical considerations:

- Does Pennsbury use the “official map?”
- Do you have “timed development” in the zoning ordinance?
- Does Pennsbury have mandatory dedication of open space?
- If the Comprehensive plan is not being used in decision making for the township, it needs to be institutionalized, taken off the shelf. Access training on how to incorporate it in the daily activities and decision making.
- “Town meetings” (not monthly supervisor-official meetings) can provide continuing education and mandatory training for volunteer ABC members.

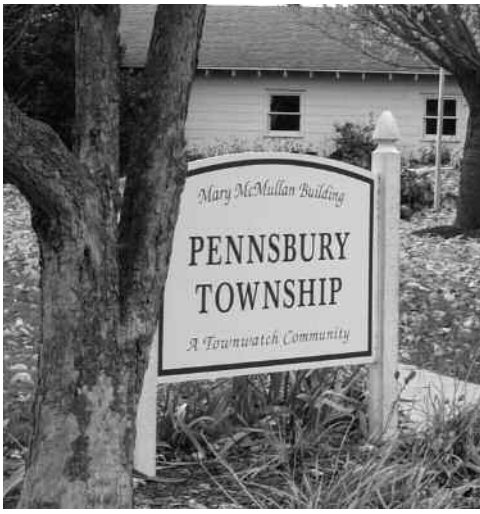
It is possible that Pennsbury officials have already explored the rich collection of useful options, but it is well worth revisiting. The Master Planner Program sponsored by CC2020, CCATO, the CCPC, and West Chester University is another source of information and support for understanding and utilization of the MPC. The courses may be taken by anyone interested in municipal planning; they offer associated continuing education credits. The details are available at www.CC2020.org

2. Every person at *Ticket to Tomorrow* attended by choice. They also chose to live in Pennsbury, whether as the latest in a multi-generational family or to write a new family chapter. These decisions are worth supporting by contributing personal energy and good will toward the maintenance of a healthy, friendly community.

Specific Action Items

The majority of these action items came directly from the group reports. Others have been embraced successfully by other municipalities.

1. Advocate adoption of a multi-municipal zoning ordinance
2. Promote open space preservation by working closely with major landowners on conservation easements, grants, or purchase of development rights and acquire the funding capability to implement the program. Larger tracts offer more flexibility and opportunity to gain open



space. Perhaps fee in lieu of dedicated open space in each land development is worth thinking about. Also consider renewing the Open Space Task Force to consider sources of funding for open space acquisition.

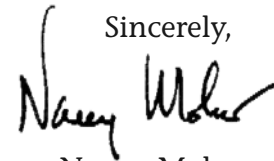
3. Develop a strategic plan for each issue or objective that you plan to implement.
4. Transmit the on-going status of major development proposals underway or anticipated as well as the status of related issues such as sewer, traffic, litigation, school tax impact and the means of effectively weaving their residents into the community fabric.
5. Complete the work already underway in reviewing the township's comprehensive plan and share it on the website.
6. Strengthen communication with residents by:
 - Placing drafts of meeting minutes on the website within 3 days of the meeting.
 - Expand the email list serve to reach a majority of the households (upwards of 75%). Add a "read receipt" so the mailing list can be kept up to date.
 - Periodically conduct topical resident surveys by regular mail and email. For instance, test support for expansion of recreational facilities or the need for affordable homes.
 - Create additional township activities that provide appealing opportunities for volunteers (a good community-building tool).
 - Improve the quality and frequency of the newsletter. Add an email newsletter for timely notices.
 - Organize a local continuing education program for training in planning, not just a once-and-done, perhaps a follow up of this community conversation. Access grants for local citizen training, and planning courses. Learn what the limits are in Pennsylvania, who is responsible for what.
7. For the residents: Become more involved in community activities. For example:
 - Attend one township, planning commission or school board meeting a month.
 - Invite a new neighbor over for coffee or potluck supper.
 - Share the ride to work.
 - Tour your township web site.
 - Volunteer for an open space task force or the township park committee. Join a clean-up day.
 - Don't rely on "sound bites" when you weigh in on an issue. Take time to get the whole story.
 - Say good morning to a neighbor you don't know – and smile.
8. The Township should work to involve volunteers providing activities that appeal to all ages, such as:
 - A kite flying contest in the township park
 - An Easter egg hunt
 - A bicycle safety class on a Saturday morning
 - A plan for student community service, followed by a picnic, a softball game – something recreational
 - And on and on ... you'll have lots of good ideas. And there are plenty of good people to help out – if you make the effort to enlist them, one on one.

In summary, this is the third township with which we have conducted a Community Conversation in 2007, with several more in the planning stage. Most welcome the exercise because of a perceived need to improve performance and/or relationships. In the context of Pennsbury's past history, I was pleasantly surprised by the manner in which most of the residents focused on the issues. However, Pennsbury would do well to develop a "healing plan" and make a concerted effort to implement it; wipe the slate clean of contention and move on to write a new bright chapter in the township's history. There should be no insurmountable barriers to the municipal officials and residents developing the common ground that every healthy community must have to flourish.

In the same way that you can't just say "no" to development, it is impossible to say "go away and let us be." Outside influences will come to bear, but the community needs a fully developed, long-term vision for the quality of life to survive. Short-term decisions that fail to assess unintended consequences have a history of coming back to bite.

I appreciate having had the opportunity to support the residents of Pennsbury in planning for the future – and also the willingness of several group leaders and individuals to review and comment upon their reports before the information was finalized: Carol Aitken, John Blankenbaker, Rich Steel, Scotty Scottoline, Bob Welch, Ed and Mary Toole, Alma Forsyth, Aaron McIntyre, and Scott Fichter. Chester County 2020 wishes the township officials and residents on-going success as they move forward with well-considered choices. Pennsbury is an oasis — for the moment. For the residents, the ability to take part in the process, to serve as contributing, functioning members of the community, is a treasure well worth preserving. Guard it well.



Sincerely,


Nancy Mohr
Executive Director
Chester County 2020

The Pennsbury Community Conversation is the first in a series to be held in Pennsylvania State Senate District 9. Financial support is provided by State Senator Dominic Pileggi through a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Economic and Community Development.

Landscapes, Chester County's comprehensive plan, is the product of a county-wide vision for the future, one that set benchmarks for progress in saving open space and farmland as well as support for sustainable urban centers. Critical components still remain to be addressed, including urban center revitalization, affordable homes, infrastructure, transportation, and long-term environmental outcomes. Few municipalities have escaped the impact of population increases. Between April 2000 and June 2006, more than 49,000 new residents arrived in the county, considerably ahead of projections and increasing the financial challenges for municipalities, the County, school districts, and Pennsbury, too. Every county resident can keep track of the progress of the Planning Commission staff and steering committee by visiting www.Landscapes2.org



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