

UNDER ONE ROOF

White Paper

June 1, 2004

A bright history has been written in the areas of open space and farmland protection since 1996 when Chester County's comprehensive plan, Landscapes, was adopted. While substantial work remains to be done in these areas, the reality is that strong support for livable communities offers the double benefit of making existing municipalities more attractive residential choices while relieving the pressures for sprawl on rural areas.

Chester County has the opportunity to establish a dramatic record in addressing the challenges of revitalization of our urban centers and providing adequate housing for the County's current and projected workforce by:

- Creatively using infill and density in and around already existing boroughs, towns, and villages.
- Making the most of transportation nodes.
- Upgrading solid, older housing stock.
- Developing walkable, neo-traditional communities with adequate affordable housing.
- Fostering diversity to create vital, livable communities.

Progress in this area not only will help preserve the quality of life that attracts thousands of new residents to Chester County, but will also make it easier to protect the natural green spaces and valuable farmland by providing appealing options within the urban/suburban environment.

The County's continuing commitment to open space preservation was well established during the 2003 election campaign. The challenge will be to assign the proper balance of funding among the various activities that currently include:

- The highly successful county-state Agricultural Preservation Program through which Chester County has maximized opportunities for matching funds.
- The northern Chester County program funded with County dollars and a matching component from municipalities.
- Provision of green space for valuable passive and active recreation within the urban/suburban communities.

The manner in which housing is provided and revitalization accomplished – or not accomplished — will determine the county's future quality of life and economic vitality. By adopting bona fide revitalization plans and taking an advocacy position on housing, the County enhance the ability to attract state and federal funds.

In response to the interest generated by the Under One Roof summit in June 2003, the expanded planning committee has held regular meetings to address the recommendations, sustain a high level of multi-constituent cooperation, and develop a series of initiatives to deal with the County's housing issues. These initiatives offer opportunities to make progress in:

- nurturing more livable communities through improved approval processes, better communication, and conflict resolution,
- dealing with the concerns of residents, municipal officials, homeowners, developers, and employers,
- making the most of available financial resources to benefit municipal governments and taxpayers, and
- supporting the goals of good development, open space conservation and environmentally sound land stewardship.

This is not a call for County government to take on a host of new responsibilities. It is a proposal for cooperation among the government, private and non-profit sectors in developing solutions to environmental, social and economic concerns that center around housing issues and impact the entire County. The following initiatives are intended to contribute to and provide information for the development of a sound housing policy for the County. The full committee signed as sponsors of the initiatives, committed to participating in the research and development of each task.

SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

HOUSING: Redefine and address housing as a regional issue, not a responsibility solely of individual boroughs, cities and townships. Address housing in its broadest sense, that is, a mix of housing that offers affordable options for County residents.

- Provide planning solutions to counteract the tendency to locate "lower priced housing sites" in former

- brownfields or adjacent to commercial or industrial uses, solely in urban areas.
- Identify and provide the facts rather than the myths about higher density affordable housing. Examine the perceived impediments to affordable housing and the reasons they exist. Explore incentives for affordable housing, especially approaches that have worked in other places.
- Gather and disseminate ideas used in other areas to provide incentives for lower priced and/or higher density affordable housing. For example, explore establishment of a policy that provides incentives for an affordable housing component for new development and, when possible, for those already under construction. Focus on areas where there is an existing or reasonable expectation of future transportation networks, particularly public transit.
- Engage in a dialogue with current and prospective employers and financial leaders to determine their needs for workforce housing.
 - a) What are the needs of their employees?
 - b) What can their employees afford?
 - c) What amenities are important: for instance, easy commuting, good schools, open space, and recreation? Consider new construction that includes a mixed use component on the corporate campus. Address communities that “work,” analyze their strengths.
- Encourage Chester County bankers to work together to develop a model approach for an affordable housing initiative that will leverage existing programs available through PHFA, the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh and other government resources. By combining these tools with a pool of pledged financing, affordable housing can be made more economically attractive to developers.
- Examine the real estate tax implications for homeowners and buyers across the board. The tax burden hits first time homebuyers and those on fixed incomes especially hard in revitalizing municipalities where the tax base hasn’t caught up with the population growth, and also in municipalities where property values are rapidly rising,
- Support Pennsylvania’s Elm Street Program as a neighborhood revitalization program and determine the best way to utilize it in the County. It is a model being developed by the Department of Community & Economic Development and the Pennsylvania Downtown Center to provide funds and technical assistance to distressed neighborhoods to reverse blight and enhance quality of life aspects in older urban neighborhoods.

2. **DIVERSITY:** Provide tools to help municipal officials deal with residents’ fears of diversity, which is often coupled with density.

- a) How can they be defused? Are there specific approaches that respond to varied demographics?
- b) Find examples where diversity exists and identify the pros and cons. Look nearby first. Identify usable models for Chester County.

3. **IMPACT OF HIGHER DENSITIES ON SCHOOLS:** Address problems relating to the attitudes surrounding acceptance of higher housing densities in terms of the impact on school districts. Assemble the relevant data and present it in a readable form.

4. **THE APPROVAL PROCESS:** Develop a model for simplifying the approval process and utilizing resources more effectively, working with all parties involved in the process, with the ultimate goal of gaining broad support for the improved process. The tools that could be developed in the process include:

- a) an expanded list of incentives for good planning and easier permitting that involves all the approving authorities.
- a vision forum to test support broadly for the improved process.
- c) county-wide recognition of laudable individual development and revitalization plans that would encourage effective cooperation with municipalities and planning commissions, developers and individual landowners.

5. **FUNDING URBAN PROGRAMS:** Continue and expand communication with state and federal agencies to increase funding for urban center programs that address transfer of development rights, revitalization, under-utilized land and properties, sewer and water infrastructure and main street management. Chester County’s boroughs and third class city can clearly benefit from increased revitalization assistance, substantially available under the Vision Partnership, Tier I and Tier II programs.

6. **INVOLVE THE PUBLIC:** Encourage municipal planning commissions to meet with their constituencies and neighboring municipalities in the vision forum mode before embarking upon new comprehensive plans, rezoning,

and major land developments. This approach in Kennett Township provided an excellent example of the benefits of allowing the community to participate in the planning. Direct participation dramatically enhances the approval procedure as has been demonstrated through the Chester County Planning Commission's work under the Vision Partnership Program. Provide a how-to guide and hands-on assistance.

7. TRANSFERABLE DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS: Research the potential for a County-wide system for purchasing development rights and banking them for future use in creating density in appropriate locations through multi-municipal cooperation. Community revitalization goals differ according to size and demographics, and the flexibility of a County-wide bank would create new incentives for utilizing the transfer of development rights (TDR) concept. Develop a model for discussion.

8. OPEN SPACE AND DEVELOPMENT CONFLICTS: Explore conservation-oriented plans where the topography and natural resources dictate site-appropriate development that can combine housing diversity and good land stewardship with realistic economic return. Also address cluster planning that establishes useful, well-maintained open space and, in some instances, may provide land for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations that provide locally grown food to local residents.

NEXT STEPS

The Under One Roof committee proposes to work to research and develop information focused on the initiatives. The already demonstrated ability of the committee members to cooperate in dealing with controversial topics offers optimism for outcomes that include tangible models and productive recommendations.

The members of the on-going, diverse Under One Roof Committee, all of whom are signers of this white paper, include:

Robert F. Adams, Chairman, Government Affairs Committee, Chester County Chamber of Business & Industry

Philip W. Cotter, Borough Manager, Parkesburg

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Paul Finley, President, Home Builders Association of Chester/Delaware Counties

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Richard Lysle, Executive Director, Kendal-Crosslands Communities

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