

LIGONIER VALLEY JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
Focus Group Summary – Agriculture
January 18, 2017 – 6:00 PM

A total of thirteen (13) persons attended the session facilitated by Mark Lazzari (EADS). Suggested topics as per input received from field work, the prior workshop and the community survey included the following, but these were noted for guidance only:

- Agri-tourism
- Farm-to-market products
- Land use/development conflicts
- Development regulations

An additional topic of agriculture/farmer/farming preservation was also discussed by attendees. After a brief introduction on the process and the purpose of this session, input on issues and recommendations were welcomed.

Agri-tourism

Issues and comments on various aspects were noted by attendees:

- In the Valley, participants suggested that agri-tourism has been equated with creating alternate/unique event spaces, wedding locations, horse riding and Bed & Breakfasts, rather than the uses so classified under this term in other areas.
- It was noted that Foxley Farms recently attempted to create a Bed & Breakfast with a wedding space – idea failed due to neighbor and Township concerns.
- Clarification is needed on if agri-tourism uses are included in the Agricultural district. Attendees believe they are not.

The following recommendations were made by attendees:

- Review the Zoning Ordinance and define agri-tourism and consider revising regulatory impediments to establishing event spaces, wedding venues, public horse riding and Bed & Breakfasts on agricultural land; and
- Encourage the Township to better support farmers who want to include agri-tourism offerings on their farmland.

Farm-to-Market Products

Issues and comments on various aspects were noted by attendees:

- Agreement that the area could support a smaller scale farmers market as long as it was not held on a Saturday (i.e. do not compete with Country Market). This type of market would also fill the gap of having one supermarket in the area.
- There are no Community Sustained Agriculture (CSA) in the area (i.e. closest one is in Greensburg) – identified this as a much needed offering in the Valley.
- Country Market – largest and one of the oldest markets in Western PA. There is additional room for more local growers to vend at the Market. Will require local growers to contact the Market to participate.

- Reported that many local growers do sale to local restaurants.

Land Use/Development Conflicts

Discussion on the Agriculture Zoning District dominated the discussion during the session. Several key points and areas of concern were expressed by attendees:

- Reported that the zoning for several properties was changed from a Residential use into the Agricultural district – a property owner now in an Agriculture district expressed concern that their residential area will now be transformed into unwanted agriculture/industrial uses. Noted that the Agricultural District presently allows many Industrial uses.
- Agreement amongst the attendees that the significant conversion of land into the Agriculture district was done to purposely promote gas drilling. Reported that 85% of Township is now in the Agriculture district.
- Concern over the new President and his administration being pro gas drilling and this will raise natural gas prices which will lead to more gas drilling in the Agricultural district.
- Extreme frustration was expressed over what the attendees described as an 'irrational' Agricultural District that did not seem to consider topography, air quality, hydrology and compatible land uses when the boundaries were set.

The following recommendations were made by attendees:

- The Plan should identify revisions to the Zoning Ordinance that would revert back all land that was not previously Agricultural to their original district.
- Industrial uses such as those involving fracking should not be permitted in the Agricultural District.
- Suggested that the Zoning Ordinance immediately be suspended until the Comprehensive Plan is completed and 'rational' zoning revisions are made to the Ordinance.

Agriculture/Farmer/Farming Preservation

Discussion on this topic focused on attracting new and younger farmers to the Valley, how to encourage more farmers to enter into conservation easements and how to help older farms maintain their farmland. Several suggestions were made regarding:

- The Plan should identify ways to make it affordable and attractive for new and younger farms to start farms in the Valley.
 - Directly coordinate with agricultural schools (examples Penn State, Delaware Valley) to promote/market the availability of quality farmland for purchase in the Valley and opportunities to lease farmland cheaply.
 - Connecting older farmers who are no longer able to farm their land or who are close to this point with new emerging farmers – suggested this could take the form of a farming internship or farm apprenticeship type program.
- In general, encourage more farmers to enter into conservation easement and/or into the agricultural land preservation program – coordination with Westmoreland Conservation District and USDA is vital.

- Educate existing farms on new markets by promoting locally wanted crops, organic farming opportunities and other opportunities such as agri-tourism.