

LIGONIER VALLEY JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
Focus Group Summary – Environmental and Open Space
January 16, 2017 – 6:00 PM

A total of fourteen (14) persons attended the session facilitated by Rick Truscello (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:

- Recycling
- Water quality/supply issues
- Integrated water resource management
- Sewage and associated issues
- Horizontal drilling/fracking issues
- Flood control
- Stormwater management
- Development regulations

After a brief introduction on the process and the purpose of this session, input on issues and recommendations were welcomed.

Water Resources

Issues and comments on various aspects were noted:

- Concern was expressed over potential sale of the Ligonier Township Municipal Authority (LTMA) to another supplier.
 - There is concern over the possible impacts on the water resource;
 - Potential for conflict of interest alleged by one commenter over discussions involving the Municipal Authority of Westmoreland County (MAWC);
 - There is a perception that MAWC would use local water to meet system-wide needs not local needs and current LTMA customers will get the water supplied from Johnstown;
 - Discussion on alternative costs in system upgrades associated with retaining LTMA, but comments noted MAWC or any other provider would face same costs; and
 - Another commenter noted that another potential buyer is a private company that is essentially a “business”, creating the potential for issues between a public and private transaction.
- Concern was expressed over potential impacts on water resources from fracking with the buffer areas in Township Zoning Ordinance along streams deemed to be too narrow and do not take topography and hydrology into account:
 - Stream buffer concept seems arbitrary – need for baseline water quality documentation on all water courses, including seasonal.
 - Loyalhanna Creek Watershed Association has an Assessment and Restoration Plan (circa 2006) that has been made available for this Plan. (Post-session Note: Actual stream assessments are of the “good”, “fair” and “poor” visual variety done in 2003)

- The Westmoreland Conservation District is carrying out an integrated water resources plan, holistically reviewing stormwater management, floodplain management and water resources management considerations. The plan should help identify water resource problem areas for the planning area.

Natural Resources in General

The preservation of a “rural atmosphere” should be specifically identified in the Plan and used in the development of Community Development Objectives for the future revision of the Township Zoning Ordinance.

- Comments noted that the “old plan” and prior zoning ordinance were perceived as emphasizing and protecting this concept well.
- Community Development Objectives in prior zoning ordinance used “character”, which is perceived as counter to heavy industry and drilling.
- Plan should identify need to inventory baseline environmental information (i.e. hydrology, air quality, etc.).
- Natural resource protection also affects public health and safety (i.e. statistics noted on relative health of Valley residents when compared to those of other nearby communities).
- Natural resource conservation is seen as having economic ramifications in terms of:
 - Reinforcing nature- and heritage-tourism; and
 - Maintaining property values.

Horizontal Drilling, Fracking and Other Mineral Extraction

There was a detailed discussion of the balancing act between uses involving fracking and the Township responsibility to provide for all “reasonable uses”, a land use term subject to legal interpretation and litigation

- Comments characterized fracking/drilling as an “industrial use” and even though the current ordinance enables drilling as a Conditional Use (i.e. after action by Supervisors) in the Agricultural District this still leaves too much land potentially eligible for this use.
- Comments characterize drilling/fracking as a use more suitable for an industrial area, not a use suitable for one characterized as agricultural.
- Comments also counter that resource preservation/rural atmosphere is also a “reasonable use” that should be accommodated in future land use regulations.
- Coal mining in area is generally seen as a past use, but mining is resuming in nearby Donegal area:
 - Mining has impacts on water.
 - Better due diligence for local advisory comments on mining permits should be encouraged.
- State preemption on permits noted with local zoning powers governing surface facilities only (i.e. affecting mining and gas well drilling).

Recycling

There was considerable interest in resurrecting some type of broader recycling:

- Township noted as offering collection point for paper, aluminum and cardboard;
- Expense and end of a grant terminated past effort by Loyalhanna Creek Watershed Association; and
- Provision by local government would entail costs. One commenter suggested a past analysis that recycling would only cost \$4 per household annually. (Note: No documentation provided at session.)

Air Quality

Air Quality is an especially salient issue since the area is a “valley”

- As such the area may be especially prone to pollution threats during the frequent inversions (NOTE: one attendee shared photos depicting inversion events).
- Carnegie Mellon University can provide air quality testing for a modest fee, as per one commenter.

General

The complexity of planning issues was recognized in discussion and the need for the “vision” for the area (i.e. one attendee noted it as the “green heart”) guiding the plan recommendations and subsequent implementation efforts:

- There is considerable concern over the concept of “reasonable use”.
- Interrelationships are recognized, specifically recalling the proposed truck bypass and the impacts on flooding, recreation, water resources, etc.
- While there have been some strides in educating the public, such as the Township newsletter, additional efforts should be explored, such as providing:
 - Information on streams;
 - Guidance and “hints” related to environmental issues and practices; and
 - Increased use of the Loyalhanna Creek Watershed Association’s education center.
- The Plan should include recommendations that provide linkages among environmental remediation, response, impacts and responsibilities.
- Plan should recognize multi-faceted heritage of the area – Forbes Road/Fort Ligonier era, mining era, railroad, seasonal cottage, Route 30 Heritage Corridor, etc.

Zoning

Plan recommendations will likely result in recommended revisions to the existing Borough and Township Zoning Ordinances. Specific ideas expressed by attendees include:

- Use of important sections of the prior Township ordinance;
- Greater differentiation between industrial and agriculture use zoning in the Township;

- Provision for conservation areas within the ordinances reflecting environmental/natural resource recommendations of the Plan;
- Revisiting concept of “suburban residential” in certain villages in the Township;
- Community Development Objectives form the philosophical underpinning of the Borough and Township zoning ordinances and should flow from the Plan; and
- A specific area in the Township zoning revision should focus on ways to encourage the reuse of the former Timberlink Golf Course property.