



## **Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities: Building Blocks**

### **Technical Assistance Tool: Implementing Smart Growth 101**

Dauphin County, Pennsylvania  
September 18 – 19, 2013

To: Leah Pearlman-Storch, Timothy Reardon  
From: Elizabeth Schilling, Ilana Preuss  
Date: November 26, 2013  
Re: Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

### **Background**

Dauphin County Planning Commission hosted two presentations on Smart Growth Implementation intended to lay the groundwork for a Comprehensive Plan revision process. Dauphin County is committed to creating an implementable plan focused on specific issues rather than a more traditional plan based on functional areas. This new approach relies on greater public involvement in defining a community vision and identifying priority issues and solutions.

The County used our workshops to kick-off broader public engagement and new partnerships with municipal officials. In an evening meeting, we presented an overview of smart growth and implementation strategies for all interested parties. In a longer workshop the next day, we worked with planning and economic development professionals from local governments in the County. After a discussion of smart growth principles and implementation strategies as they pertain to Dauphin County communities, the group directly addressed the next County Comprehensive Plan and how the planning process could better engage local governments. This memo is based on those discussions.

### **Key issues addressed during the workshop**

#### **Municipal participation in development and implementation of the County Comprehensive Plan**

The Dauphin County Planning Commission wants to develop an implementable Comprehensive Plan that will coordinate the actions of multiple partners to focus on solving specific problems identified through a public process. Local municipalities will be crucial partners as they make significant investment and policy decisions that shape growth and development outcomes.

Implementation of the County Comprehensive Plan has always depended on municipalities, who can choose whether or not to align their enforceable municipal plans and ordinances with the advisory County plan. While concurrency between plans remains important, the County needs to establish very different relationships with municipal officials in order to work as partners in developing and implementing this new type of plan. This shift was not articulated during the discussion, though it should be made explicit as the planning process moves ahead (see below).

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### **Relevance of smart growth in different parts of the County**

Early during the first presentation, participants from some municipalities voiced concern that smart growth was irrelevant to them because existing development is meeting current demands and undeveloped land is scarce. Later in the day, other participants suggested that the Comprehensive Plan was irrelevant in the northern part of the County because those areas did not want growth.

The very limited definitions of smart growth and land use planning behind these concerns need to be addressed throughout the comprehensive planning process. Where new growth should go is only one of the relevant questions in a smart growth planning process. Smart growth also addresses the other interconnected investments and decisions that protect undeveloped areas and critical resources, add or enhance transportation and housing choices in existing communities, and nurture economic diversity across the region.

### **Importance of Harrisburg to the economic health of the rest of the County**

Attendees thought about the importance of the County's largest municipality in different ways. Several people noted the importance of Harrisburg's role as the state capital in supporting a relatively stable economy. Right before our visit, the City of Harrisburg had concluded a deal that was expected to avoid a fiscal crisis that would have impacted the rest of the County. Some participants noted that they loved living in City neighborhoods, or biking along the riverfront trail. In spite of the central role the City plays, few people thought about how municipalities' decisions supported the City or enhanced connections to it. A Comprehensive Plan may fruitfully address this gap.

### **Targeted policies/ideas/strategies**

Dauphin County officials and staff should aim to *successfully deploy new comprehensive planning techniques to create popular, actionable solutions to problems shared by multiple jurisdictions.*

There is great potential value in the new comprehensive planning techniques described in *Creating an Implementable Comprehensive Plan*, a 2012 publication of the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development's Governor's Center for Local Government Services. The new techniques' reliance on public engagement and focus on specific issues can result in a more constructive planning process and more relevant final plan.

The biggest challenge for the County will be in engaging municipal officials. In Pennsylvania, as in other states where counties have extremely limited powers, the success of a county comprehensive plan depends on municipalities. Municipal officials can choose whether or not to participate in the process and whether or not to implement adopted plans through their own plans, ordinances and investments. By emphasizing implementation, the new planning techniques raise the stakes for municipal participation. If municipal officials and others with the power to implement solutions participate up front, they are more likely to follow through on the plans they create. If they do not participate, it will be difficult to have a full discussion of the issues and available solutions.

The critical importance of municipal engagement suggests the need to selectively deploy the new comprehensive planning techniques to ensure success, thereby generating demand for comprehensive planning as a cost-effective problem-solving tool. This strategy is possible because the new techniques allow for new issues to be incorporated into the plan as needed, rather than the ten- or twenty-year timeline of more traditional comprehensive plans.

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## Actions to address policies/strategies

### **Explain the differences between the old comprehensive planning process and the new one.**

The workshop did not include a detailed discussion of the new comprehensive planning process, and many of the concerns raised during the meeting were based on the older process. The new plan is likely to be radically different from these professionals' expectations of its scope, purpose, and form. A more complete discussion of these differences, including explicit discussion of the importance of municipal involvement, is an important first step.

**Lead with issues.** One way to communicate the relevance of the new planning process will be to put the important issues to be addressed up front. For instance, rather than introducing a meeting by saying, "We are updating our comprehensive plan," the lead sentence might be, "Fixing \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are critical to the economic strength of our region, so we will be working together to address them in the new comprehensive plan."

This recommendation should extend to the entire communications strategy. The relevance and importance of the issues being addressed should be a constant theme in all speeches and communications in support of the comprehensive planning process. One significant way to achieve this will be to work with business and civic leaders (ie. not elected officials) to identify spokespeople and supporters who are willing to speak or write in public fora.

**Work with citizens, non-governmental organizations and interested officials first.** While it may be difficult to engage all municipal officials at the outset, there are many engaged citizens, officials and organizations with an existing interest in effective planning. There are likely to be many more when specific issues are on the agenda. Public engagement processes can be sequenced to build on existing interest, drawing in more reluctant participants by publicizing initial meetings and discussions. Interested community members can invite/request their elected leaders' participation. Non-governmental organizations can write op-eds that increase pressure to be engaged.

## Measuring progress

Dauphin County Planning officials have already committed to an extensive planning process. Rather than recommending distinct actions to undertake in the next 3-, 6-, and 12-month periods, we propose that the County measure success during the planning process and after plan adoption.

During the planning process, participation will be a key indicator of success. Measures may include:

- The number of citizens, organizations and elected officials participating in the process;
- Consistency of participation by municipal officials (ie. are the same officials or municipalities participating consistently?);
- Efforts of non-governmental organizations – non-governmental organizations with related interests can provide support for the process, whether through outreach to members or visible public endorsements.

After the planning process, adoption and follow-through will be the indicators of success. These measures may not be visible within one year of our engagement.