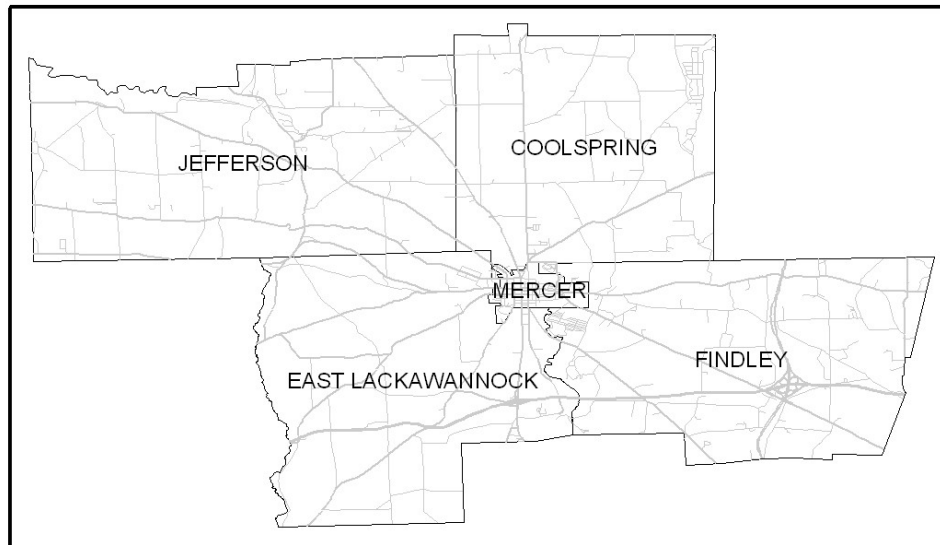


## *Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan*

# Executive Summary



### **Introduction**

The Mercer Region is located just south of the geographic center of the Mercer County. Four Townships—Coolspring, East Lackawannock, Findley and Jefferson—and Mercer Borough comprise the Mercer Region. The townships are predominantly rural in character, and the small, historic Borough of Mercer serves as the regional center for commerce and government.

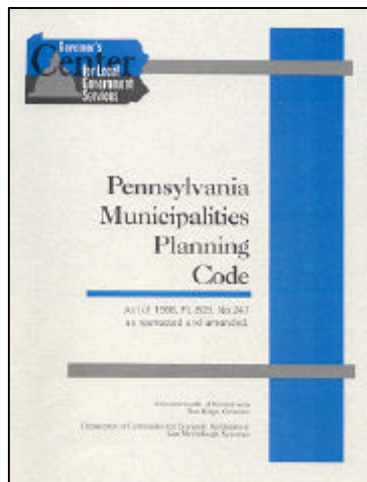
The region's population is growing at a modest rate as people move from other areas of Mercer County and beyond. Though most of the region is rural, it is very convenient to other, more developed regions of the county. Additionally, the number of major roads and interstates that traverse the Mercer Region make for a quick and easy commute to larger metropolitan areas such as Pittsburgh, Erie, and Youngstown (OH).

The following paragraphs highlight the main findings of the Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan. This includes planning goals and the proposed strategies to achieve them, as well as background trends and indicators of the region. It is hoped that the components of this plan will lead to successful plan implementation that will benefit the Mercer Region and its population for years to come.

## What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is an official municipal document. The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (PA MPC) regulates its preparation and contents. The plan itself serves several roles:

- State agencies rely on the plan in making a variety of funding decisions, ranging from competitive grants to highway permits.
- Any decision relative to public property such as extension of water/sewer lines, construction, demolition or sale of municipal or school district buildings/land, and adoption of land use ordinance amendments must be reviewed for consistency with the plan. (This review is non-binding, and conducted by the municipal planning commission.)
- Zoning ordinances and subdivision and land development ordinances must be generally consistent with the comprehensive plan. Beyond the consistency requirement, the plan is important as a place to explain these laws in easy to understand terms. This helps citizens and can also be very useful in a dispute between a developer and a community.



## Why a Multi-Municipal Plan?

When municipalities embark together on a multi-municipal plan, several potential advantages and incentives exist. A few of these advantages are listed below:

Higher priority is given to grant applications for municipalities involved with multi-municipal planning.

Zoning can be regionally-based, as opposed to each municipality zoning for each lawful use.

Can provide a cooperative agreement for the sharing of tax revenues between the participating municipalities.

Moreover, the five municipalities in this plan act as one region. The four townships surround Mercer Borough and the Mercer Area School District encompasses these five municipalities.

This plan is part of a larger effort of multi-municipal planning in Mercer County. The Shenango Valley, Wolf Creek COG, Greenville/Hempfield, Sharpsville Region, and Lakeview Region multi-municipal plans are all completed or in the process of being completed, and some of the plans have been implemented. In addition, the recently updated Mercer County Comprehensive Plan serves as a more general guiding document for all of these region-specific plans.

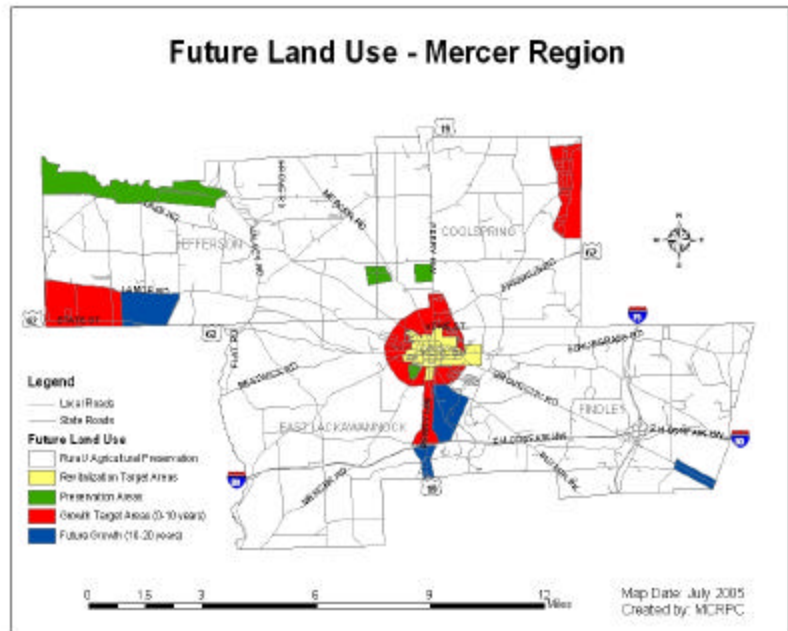
## Acknowledgements

This plan was prepared by the Mercer Area Council of Governments (COG)—which comprises all five municipalities—with assistance from the Mercer County Regional Planning Commission. The goals and objectives found in this plan arose from the input of both elected officials from the Mercer Area COG and residents of the municipalities at multiple public meetings.

# Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan

## Land Use

The predominantly rural landscape of the Mercer Region contains significant amounts of farmland and forests. Population is spread across the region in low-density settings and in small villages within the townships. The Borough of Mercer has the highest population density of the region, and also contains a considerable proportion of commercial activity within the Mercer Region.



Each of the five municipalities have zoning ordinances in place, though some of them have not been revised in several years—or even decades—and therefore do not always reflect modern planning techniques or powers that are available.

The underlying vision for the land use plan is that the region should grow strategically, targeting areas for growth and preservation. In light of this, a future land use map has been created, consisting of five designations: Rural/Agricultural Preservation Areas, Revitalization Target Areas, Open Space Preservation Areas, Growth Target Areas (0-10 years) and Future Growth Areas (10-20 years). These categories are explained within the plan.

## Land Use Goals

- Adopt the proposed Future Land Use Map for the Mercer Region
- Target areas for future redevelopment and growth management
- Target areas for agricultural preservation

## Strategies

Base extension of target growth areas on the availability and/or planned expansions of sewer and water services.

Where appropriate, encourage landowners to enroll properties in existing Agricultural Security Areas, or to be considered for the county's conservation easement purchase program.

Utilize the Future Land Use Map as a basis for developing a joint zoning ordinance to guide new development to targeted growth and mixed use areas.

Explore the feasibility of developing a multi-municipal Transfer of Development Rights Program as a means of protecting agriculture and open spaces.

# Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan

## Transportation

The transportation network in the Mercer Region is predominantly automobile-oriented, though transit services do exist.

Several major roads emanate from Mercer



Borough, which is the County Seat and is a central hub in Mercer County. Additionally, Interstates 79 and 80 intersect in the region and are accessible to Mercer Region residents. These Interstates, federal and state highways and the local roads that make up the road system generally provide a convenient, relatively congestion-free transportation system. The exception to this is in the Borough of Mercer, which, because of the convergence of major roads within its boundaries, has moderate congestion problems that are further exacerbated when detours occur on the Interstate system.

### Transportation Goal

*The municipalities of the Region work together to manage growth along the transportation corridors in the region so that they remain viable connectors in and out of the Borough and the Region*

#### Strategies

Pursue designation for US 62's inclusion in the Congested Corridor Improvement Program.

Develop a joint subdivision and land development ordinance that includes strict access management standards along all of the planning area's roads.

Develop and enforce a joint zoning ordinance that includes a Community Gateway Overlay district to encourage limited, high quality development along the region's primary transportation routes (i.e. US 19, US 62, PA 58).

Work together to identify opportunities for developing bike/pedestrian facilities within the region.

## Housing

The 4,169 housing units in the Mercer Region (2000 Census) presents a nine percent increase from 1990, making this one of the fastest-growing housing



markets in the County. The vast majority of dwellings in this region are single-family, owner-occupied units. Many of the multi-unit and renter-occupied units can be found in Mercer Borough, which has a denser and older housing stock than the surrounding townships.

Though the region's median-housing value is higher than the county's median rate, affordable housing is widely available. The diversity in the housing stock and the landscapes that surround it are an asset to the Mercer Region. The Housing plan outlines several strategies that will ensure that housing will remain viable and that new development will not threaten the existing character of the community.

### Housing Goal

*Promote housing development and renovation*

#### Strategies

Review existing zoning and land development ordinances and amend as needed to eliminate barriers to developing a variety of housing types in the region.

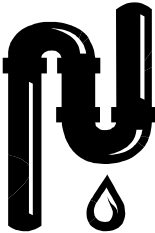
Adopt land use regulations that allow for flexible housing development techniques, particularly conservation developments.

Conduct a multi-municipal housing market analysis to identify gaps in the existing housing stock, particularly housing for seniors, young adults, and those with low-moderate income levels.

Continue to identify, prioritize and obtain funding for housing rehabilitation and renovation.

**Community Facilities**

This broad category includes public services such as police and fire protection as well as publicly or privately owned utilities (e.g. water, sewer, gas, solid waste disposal).



All of the fire departments in the Mercer Region operate on a volunteer basis. Mercer Borough and Jefferson Township have police departments; the remaining townships are served by the Pennsylvania State Police. There are not any hospitals in the Mercer Region, though several are located nearby.

Mercer Borough and a few adjacent areas are served by public water and sanitary sewer systems. Sewer lines also exist in a few other portions of the region. Plans are in the works to extend water and sewer lines in some of the more populated areas, though most of the region will continue to be served through wells and on-lot sewer systems.

**Community Facilities Goals**

*Provide residents with community services that are efficiently managed and cost-effective*

Strategies
Establish a regional cooperation sub-committee that would be responsible for identifying opportunities to work together to improve public safety, road maintenance and other services. The committee would also investigate gaps in existing services.
Coordinate with Mercer County Solid Waste Authority to ensure current regional practices are consistent with the County Solid Waste Management Plan.
Include state of the art storm water management standards within local/regional subdivision and land development ordinances.

*The Region has safe and adequate water supplies, as well as sufficient capacity for the collection, treatment and disposal of wastewater*

Strategies
Identify and prioritize needed improvements to the existing water and sewer infrastructure within the planning area.
Work together to develop a regional infrastructure expansion plan that is consistent with the Future Land Use Map and does not encourage sprawl development.
Update Act 537 Sewage Facilities Plans as necessary



*Findley Township Recycling*

**Natural Resources, Recreation and Historic Resources**

The Natural Heritage Inventory for Mercer County (2003) was completed by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to identify the most significant natural areas within the county.



Several of these areas pertain to the Mercer Region and are included in the plan. *(continued →)*

# Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan

## Natural Resources, Recreation and Historic Resources (continued)

The Mercer Region contains a number of recreational facilities. Shenango River Lake, golf courses and community parks are all located within its boundaries.

There are a wealth of historical buildings and features in the Mercer Region that play a significant role in the county's development, particularly in the Borough of Mercer. Furthermore, there are a handful of National Register properties that are either listed or eligible, including the Mercer County Courthouse, which is a key landmark in the region.



## Recreational Facilities and Services Goal:

*Identify and designate areas that provide recreational opportunities*

### Strategies

Organize a Regional Recreation Commission or similar organization that would be responsible for developing and implementing a regional recreation plan.

Encourage improvements to and increased usage of recreational facilities.

Develop greenways along the region's waterways. Neshannock Creek Cool Spring Creek and Otter Creek would be ideal for active greenways that could include hiking/biking trails

## Economic Development

The diverse economic base of the Mercer Region contains a variety of commercial and industrial uses.

Education/health and social services, manufacturing, and retail trade are the three



leading employment sectors in the region. The majority of commercial and industrial uses can be found within or adjacent to the Borough of Mercer.

With its close proximity to Interstates 80 and 79, the region has access to regional markets for employment and economic development opportunities. The greater Pittsburgh and greater Youngstown, OH areas are easily accessible via the Interstate system.

## Economic Development Goal:

*Provide a combination of business opportunities that will retain and attract businesses and services to the Region.*

### Strategies

Implement the strategies recommended for the revitalization and continued development of downtown Mercer.

Work with the Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau to promote the region's historic, cultural, and recreational assets as part of a diversified economic development plan.

Continue to work closely with the region's farmers to identify and promote additional opportunities to enhance and improve their economic viability.

Organize a regional economic development committee that would work closely with Penn-Northwest Development Corporation to promote sustainable development that is compatible with the revitalization of downtown Mercer.

# ***Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan***

## **Downtown Development Goal:**

*Provide a downtown environment that is attractive and inviting to residents, visitors and new investment in the downtown.*

### **Strategies**

Organize a Downtown Mercer Revitalization Team to coordinate and develop a comprehensive strategy for revitalization.

Review Borough ordinances to identify potential obstacles to downtown improvements, e.g. the re-use of vacant buildings and the development of living quarters above ground floor store fronts. Amend as appropriate.

Regularly analyze the amount, type and use of the Borough's parking facilities to ensure adequate parking both on- and off-street.

Establish a façade improvements and maintenance fund to assist local businesses and residents

Target historic buildings for preservation and improvement



*Mercer County Courthouse*

**The Mercer Region Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan is available at each municipal building and online at [www.mcrpc.com](http://www.mcrpc.com)**