

### Priority Issue #5



#### **Current land use regulations and enforcement do not consistently and adequately meet community visions and respond to changing conditions.**

**Back Story** All 52 municipalities within Lycoming County have either adopted their own zoning ordinance or have opted to join the County Zoning Partnership. Collectively, these designated land uses are intertwined with every aspect of our residents’ daily lives and the community’s lifestyle. Land use influences where we live, work, play and recreate. Because of the significance of sound land use planning, it is equally evident that a failure to plan for and mitigate potential negative impacts of incompatible land uses will likely degrade a neighborhood or an entire municipality. In order to have effective land use regulations, local government leaders need to:

- Update their knowledge of land use planning, practices, and regulations on a regular basis through tools that are being provided through membership organizations like the American Planning Association, PA State Association of Township Supervisors, PA State Association of Boroughs, County Commissioners of PA, and other helpful sources of land use information.
- Amend their municipal ordinances, as needed, to ensure consistency with their comprehensive plan.
- Examine and streamline their ordinances and find ways to minimize the cost of development without sacrificing safety, the environment, community character, or the community’s quality of life.
- Encourage desirable development practices.

Over the past 10 years, land use regulations have been well-implemented throughout Lycoming County. However, elected, as well as appointed officials, need to stay abreast of changing trends which may affect land use such as new industry practices, new markets, and new infrastructure projects which change the development potential of previously undeveloped land.

From a development perspective, land use ordinances set the stage for economic development and community development opportunities. Community leaders must ensure that public infrastructure planning and land use planning are aligned. Moreover, community leaders must carefully evaluate the impact of land use decisions on the area’s scenic beauty and natural resources—a factor deemed very important by all County residents. Natural Beauty received the most positive comments of any topic in the 2016 Public Outreach Survey conducted for this plan. Additionally, the Youth Focus Group and Young Professionals Focus Group both identified Scenic Beauty as something which will encourage them to stay in the County.

Lycoming County’s principal land use tools include its *Zoning Ordinance* (ZO) and its *Subdivision & Land Development Ordinance* (SLDO). On behalf of the

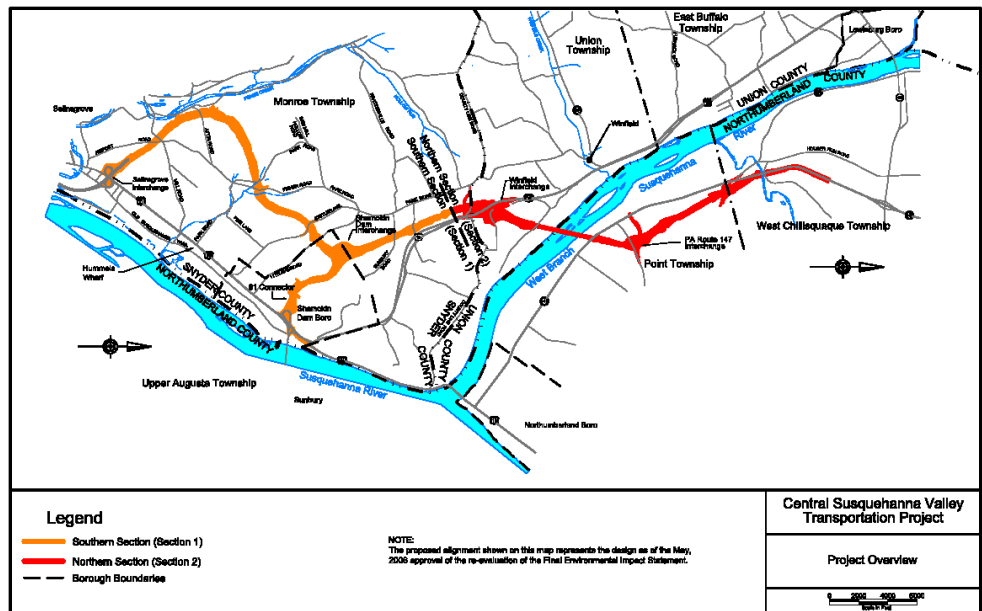
*Since the adoption of the 2006 County Comprehensive Plan, the County has experienced considerable development pressure primarily due to the arrival of the natural gas development industry. PCD led a 24-month effort to revise and update the County ZO to account for this new industry that has the potential to impact our community’s character. That ordinance amendment has been successfully implemented since its incorporation in 2011.*

County Commissioners and County Planning Commission, the Planning and Community Development (PCD) Department has been charged with administering, maintaining, and updating both the County ZO and County SLDO.

**Priority Issue Overview** There are a number of significant changes on the horizon that may have a profound impact on Lycoming County, such as:

- Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation Project (CSVT)
- Changing landscape of the retail market and its impact on the Lycoming Mall
- Extension of utilities into the US 15 South Corridor and the resulting increase in development potential
- Continuation of Brownfields Redevelopment
- Cyclical nature of the natural gas industry
- Shifting paradigm for land use planning

**CSVT** South of Lycoming County in neighboring Northumberland and Snyder Counties will be the forthcoming Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation Project (CSVT). In short, the CSVT project will create a bypass for U.S. 15 near Shamokin Dam, Snyder County, and divert traffic across a new bridge over the West Branch Susquehanna River on to State Route 147 in West Chillisquaque Township, Northumberland County, which becomes I-180 north of I-80. Because U.S. 15 is a major north-south route through central Pennsylvania and central New York, the CSVT project may shift traffic patterns and create both development opportunities and pressure in the Montoursville–Muncy & Muncy Creek Planning Areas while potentially reducing traffic in the U.S. 15 South Planning Area.



**Figure 29: Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation Project**

**Source:** [www.CSVT.com](http://www.CSVT.com)

When completed, this project will provide a high-speed access to destinations in central Pennsylvania and central New York. The perceived impact of CSVT on Lycoming County includes:

- Increased traffic along I-180
- New development opportunities in Muncy Creek, Muncy, and Fairfield Townships, and Muncy Borough
- Potential for decreased truck traffic along US 15 South through Brady, Clinton, and Gregg Townships

An Environmental Impact Study, produced for the CSVT project, provides traffic projections for this project south of I-80. Based on these projections, it is possible that I-180 may experience a 100% increase in vehicles per day by 2044. Within Lycoming County I-180 has a total of 12 interchanges, ranging from the Muncy Main Street to the US 15 North in Williamsport. Nine of these exits have issues involving existing development, floodplain, or unsuitable topography. The four interchanges that are most likely to experience development pressure include: Exit 13 Muncy (Route 405), Exit 15 (Pennsdale US 220), Exit 17 (at the Lycoming Mall), and Exit 20 (Fairfield Road). While it is anticipated that the CSVT project will increase development pressure within I-180 Corridor, the extent and nature of that development is hard to accurately define. To better prepare for these anticipated development pressures, it will be increasingly important to evaluate land use regulations in each municipality to ensure that development practices are sustainable, protect local assets, and align with community values. In order to plan for and implement any coordinated proactive measures in response to this potential increase in development pressure, it is important to continue to foster strong regional multi-municipal partnerships with open lines of communication and a shared vision for future development.

**Lycoming Mall** The changing retail environment throughout the United States is a trend which is impacting local retail locations throughout Lycoming County, most notably the Lycoming Mall. By 1990 big box stores such as Walmart (ranked as America’s number one retailer) began drawing business away from malls and locally owned retail establishments. Around the same time, e-commerce started to emerge as an alternative to brick and mortar stores and, according to the US Census, has steadily grown to 8.5 % of the total retail market share as of the first quarter of 2017 and shows no sign of slowing in the near future. The diversity of options that a consumer now has, combined with the oversaturation of retail establishments (see Table 9 for more information), changing preferences with regard to where and how we socialize, and the stagnation of income nationwide all contribute to the changing landscape of the retail market and the struggles that malls across the United States now face. Real estate experts contend that as much as 15% of the 1,500 U.S. malls currently operating may be closed within the next decade as the market corrects for oversaturation and the structural changes occurring within the industry, specifically among fixed point-of-sale locations.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Lycoming Mall is not immune from these market forces. Four anchor stores have announced closures within the 2 years (JC

	Shopping Center		
	GLA (sq ft, MM)	Population (MM)	GLA Per Capita
U.S.	7,567	321	23.5
Canada	589	36	16.4
U.K.	299	65	4.6
France	254	66	3.8
Spain	157	46	3.4
Italy	169	61	2.8
Germany	191	81	2.4

\*France & Germany 2014

**Table 9:** Gross Leasable Area (GLA) Per Capita  
**Source:** [brownfieldlistings.com](http://brownfieldlistings.com)

Penney, Sears, Bon-Ton, and Macy’s). In addition to the 2015 closing of the showroom and distribution center properties owned by Grizzly Industrial, Inc. – two other major outparcel owners (Gander Mountain and Toys“R”Us) have claimed bankruptcy. While the Gander Mountain has recently been reopened as “Gander Outdoors” by a new managing company, Toys“R”Us has closed their Muncy location. Given this trend, the mall will need to accommodate a more innovative mixed-use approach to sustain itself as a viable enterprise.

**US 15 South Corridor** This corridor represents one of Lycoming County’s last remaining underdeveloped gateway corridors, which includes a combination of cultivated/open space land; sporadic commercial

development; a KOZ industrial park (the future Timber Run Industrial Park); and Government owned installations such as the Lycoming County Landfill, Allenwood Federal Prison, and White Deer Golf Course. Water and sanitary sewer infrastructure are being designed to support this corridor. Since this corridor is likely to experience an increase in development in the coming years, it is important to plan for suitable types, locations, and densities of development in this area. Careful planning will allow these municipalities to capitalize on economic potential while also preserving quality of life and local character of the surrounding communities.

**Brownfields Redevelopment** A brownfield is any property underutilized for various reasons such as abandonment, obsolescence, tax delinquency, and/or blight and whose redevelopment is inhibited by real or perceived presence of hazardous substances and environmental contamination. In many cases, these underutilized brownfield properties are impediments to economic growth and reinvestment. In response, community leaders can take a comprehensive look, analyzing and exploring redevelopment options for all underutilized and abandoned commercial, industrial, institutional, and residential properties.

An effective redevelopment tool to date has been the Lycoming County’s Brownfields Program. Initially funded by a US EPA grant, this program promotes the reuse and redevelopment of properties through the identification of potential environmental concerns via environmental assessments. This is typically the first step in determining the reuse potential of brownfield sites. More specifically, during the period between 2013 and 2016 there were over sixty potential brownfield sites identified. Many of these sites are being actively redeveloped. Others will need public/private partnerships in order to realize their full potential. It is acknowledged that there are still more unidentified sites within the County and this offers an opportunity to the community to reconsider the highest and best use for these lands.

At the local level, municipalities can adopt regulations that encourage the reuse and rehabilitation of brownfield sites in their communities. This includes evaluating existing regulations governing downtowns to ensure old structures and underutilized land provides opportunities for retail establishments and other relevant uses. The objective is to identify the optimal use of all available land and remove any unnecessary roadblocks that might prevent the property from realizing its highest and best use.

**Return of Natural Gas Development** When the 2006 County Comprehensive Plan was adopted, the natural gas industry was long aware of the gas in the Marcellus Shale Formation; however, they viewed the formation to have inconsequential natural gas potential due to the presence of low permeability shale. In 2003 Range Resources unsuccessfully drilled a well into the Oriskany Sandstone Formation but through doing so discovered that Marcellus Shale had some of the same properties of the Barnett Stale Formation in North Texas. In order to salvage their investment, Range Resources successfully completed the well in the Marcellus Formation utilizing hydraulic fracturing



*Natural Gas Well Pad, Cogan House Township  
Source: PCD*

techniques similar to those developed for the Barnett Formation. To extract the shale gas at more commercially viable rates, horizontal drilling through the vertical fractures in the formation was combined with hydraulic fracturing and enabled the industry to double gas production with slightly lower overall costs. These innovations made natural gas extraction from the Marcellus Shale Formation profitable enough for a drilling boom to occur from 2007 to 2013. Drilling activity began to subside in 2014 due to a glut of natural gas in the market, limited end users due to lack of supply infrastructure, and lower natural gas trading prices which made drilling less profitable. However, these factors are changing and the forecast for 2017 and beyond suggests that a resurgence in gas drilling activity in the County is likely, but perhaps not as robust as the 2012-2013 peak periods. Each zoning jurisdiction within Lycoming County should be prepared for this uptick in activity by maintaining an understanding about the operations of the industry and how to appropriately regulate its activities.

***Shifting paradigm for land use planning*** Many municipalities enforce a zoning ordinance which perpetuates unintended forms of development by:

- Rigidly separating types of land uses into different zoning districts; and
- Overprescribing inflexible standards for things like parking, setbacks, road design, and lot sizes which have the potential to increase development costs and limit the creativity of the developer. This is of particular concern with stormwater regulations where developers are required to build stormwater facilities to accommodate the structures and appurtenant facilities, as well as additional impervious surfaces generated due to meeting excessive parking and road design standards.

Many jurisdictions take a “set it and forget it” approach to zoning by not amending their ordinance until the ordinance becomes overly problematic or its legality is challenged. Having said that, it should be noted that no zoning ordinance will ever be perfect, but it is a useful tool which serves an important purpose. This tool is an often overlooked and undervalued implementation mechanism of the Comprehensive Plan.

Moving forward, land use planning should consider the concepts encouraged by the Congress for New Urbanism and Strong Towns, which are further exemplified through initiatives, by advocating a framework for fiscally sound municipal investments, resilient communities which are scaled appropriately for their surroundings, ecologically beneficial recreational spaces, and positioning our communities in a way to maximize our economic development potential. The land use planning paradigm continuously shifts and our implementation tools should be expected to shift to meet these paradigms when the community deems it necessary. Figure 30 highlights this shift over the past 75 years.

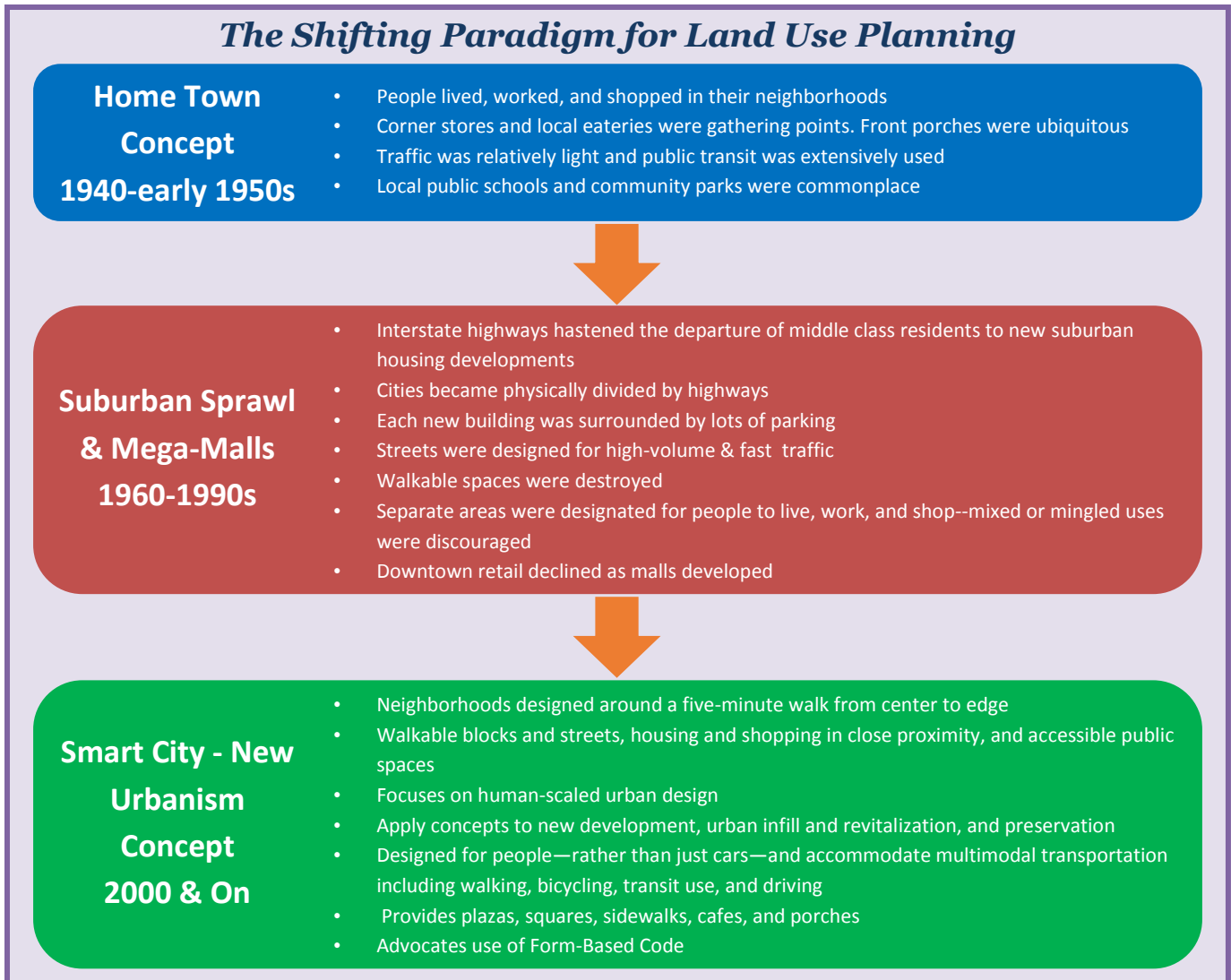


Figure 30: The Shifting Paradigm for Land Use Planning

**Key Implications** Failure to implement and enforce land use regulations will result in uncoordinated development and land use conflicts. Land use conflicts could cause decreases in property values which hurts the economic prosperity of the municipality. Additionally, uncoordinated development could result in public safety hazards and unintended municipal fiscal burdens. Land use regulations also protect local resources such as our community character and help to coordinate new development with existing/planned infrastructure and utilities.

In 2006, local zoning ordinances of most municipalities did not contain guidance regarding Natural Gas development. If the County and municipalities had not responded as quickly as they did with this industry, then many of the County’s most spectacular landscapes may have been scarred for the foreseeable future.

If land use regulations are not regularly reviewed for streamlining purposes, then municipalities may continue to impose development costs and burdens that add little to no value to the ultimate outcome. When land use

regulations are based on the “objectives to be achieved,” then the rationale for those ordinances are bolstered significantly and the general public’s support is more forthcoming.

Additionally, it is imperative that the existing vacant retail spaces within the County be refilled or repurposed. Vacancy will negatively impact the tax base for the municipal, school, and County governments and may even impact adjacent property values. These large businesses also make up a significant portion of the customer base for the local water and sewer provider. If these large spaces are not filled then water and sewer rates may rise as a result.

The implication of failing to keep up with the shifting paradigm within land use planning is the unavoidable lost opportunity to revitalize and redirect our communities. Our community’s ideal vision is best achieved when leaders are exposed (educated) to the best practices being experienced across America and can then translate those ideas into a local formula that is tailored to their community.

**Projects of Regional Significance for this Issue**

**EXPLORE RE-USE OPPORTUNITIES FOR VACANT COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL PROPERTIES**

With Macy’s, Sears, Bon-Ton, and JC Penny’s having closed their stores in the Lycoming Mall it has become apparent that the long-term viability of the mall is at risk. The adjoining parcels of the Grizzly Industrial property and Toys R’ Us are also currently vacant. The County working in partnership with the governing municipal leaders, the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce (WLCC), and the Lycoming County Water and Sewer Authority (LCWSA) should proactively deal with the economic impacts of losing these stores and to encourage re-use of these buildings and others which are currently vacant or may be vacant in the future.

- Work with the WLCC to engage current Lycoming Mall ownership and owners of other vacant properties to determine the needs of the mall and to consider innovative methods for making the Lycoming Mall and the other properties a place for vibrant business.
- Evaluate zoning use standards surrounding the mall and in other locations of the planning area where other vacant commercial and industrial structures are located to ensure that all practical uses are allowed within the district and any revisions that could be made to the ordinances to incentivize redevelopment. Innovative uses, such as conversion of large retail spaces into smaller specialty boutiques or even more flexible pop-up retail locations may create increased interest, foot traffic, and might possibly serve as a business incubator for new retail ventures. Redeveloping the mall into a mixed use asset featuring innovative commercial/light industrial space, entertainment venues, residential living space, improved public transit options, and passive recreational possibilities may also yield a positive outcome.
- Work with the Williamsport Lycoming Chamber of Commerce to identify potential businesses to locate within these structures.

When a mall starts losing anchor stores, it significantly increases its probability that it becomes a dead mall. Changes to the Lycoming County Zoning Ordinance could allow a wider variety of uses on the Mall parcel to encourage long term viability of this property. Parking standards could potentially be reduced to encourage re-use of the property. Mall ownership should be engaged early in the process. The discussion with mall ownership should identify potential future uses which the owners envision along with other potential compatible uses. Other land use controls which restrict re-use of the property should also be discussed. In addition to reviewing the zoning ordinance requirements surrounding the mall, municipal leaders, the County and the Williamsport Lycoming Chamber of Commerce must join the mall in recruitment and retention efforts for business and industry. Significant financial investment has been made in public infrastructure to include public sewer and water in this growth corridor. It is imperative that new business and industry is recruited.

**CSVT – I-180 INTERCHANGE ZONING REVIEWS AND TRAFFIC IMPACT STUDY**

The CSVT transportation project may create additional development pressure in this corridor of I-180. To proactively deal with the potential development pressure, the applicable municipalities should review their current ordinances and determine if changes are needed to accommodate development pressure including the possibility of creating interchange overlay zoning districts. As part of their ordinance review, typical interchange



uses should be examined and the municipalities should decide which uses they want to allow near interchanges. Additionally, the infrastructure needs should be reviewed at these interchange locations and catalogued for near term improvements if needed. With the completion of CSVT a large proportion of central Pennsylvania north-south through traffic may choose to re-route through the PA State Route 147/I-180 corridor (which will offer uninterrupted, four-lane limited access freeway travel) instead of the US-15 corridor (which is two-lane highway with numerous access points and intersections and far more prone to congestion). This potential shift of traffic volumes (and the attendant possibility for commerce) from one corridor to another could provide some communities with additional economic development opportunities while reducing those opportunities in others. To better determine the impact of the CSVT project on these two corridors, PCD is pursuing funding to perform a Transportation and Land Use special study. However, such opportunities also pose challenges that will need to be addressed:

- Mitigate potential negative impacts such as drawing commercial investment away from downtowns.
- Provide sufficient infrastructure to accommodate this growth.
- Once the results of the Transportation and Land Use special study have been prepared a corridor master planning exercise will need to be undertaken in the US-15 South planning area. For a more complete scope on this project, reference the top viable project for Priority Issue # 6 of the US-15 South Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan.

Current land use regulations do not specifically deal with highway interchange development activities. By creating interchange land use regulations, local municipalities can provide for development of land near interchanges and ensure that negative impacts from growth near interchanges are mitigated. If interchange zoning districts are created, interchange zoning districts should be limited in size and scope as to protect the rural community character.

### **ZONING REVIEW PROCESS**

- Evaluate existing zoning, subdivision and land development, stormwater, and building codes to ensure they promote a vibrant and livable community and take into account future growth
- Evaluate the potential for multi-municipal zoning partnerships between neighboring municipalities, such as shared or joint zoning ordinances (as allowed under the PA MPC, Article VIII-A) or as part of the County's Zoning Partnership
- Consider the appropriateness of allowing "Tiny Houses" as dwelling units on individual properties, in cluster developments, or possibly in mobile home parks
- Employ effective code enforcement to maintain and enhance property values
- Evaluate the redevelopment opportunities of vacant Brownfield commercial/industrial sites to determine the redevelopment cost to make the sites viable for new development
- Evaluate areas in the municipalities for potential agricultural and conservation protection
- Identify areas for development of more concentrated and diverse developments where infrastructure is available or planned
- Evaluate future highway and municipal infrastructure needs on a regional basis related to the anticipated growth and development as part of the completion of CSVT

**ENSURE ADEQUATE LAND USE EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Continuous education of elected and appointed officials is prerequisite to forward-looking decision making as the development paradigm shifts. It is equally critical to enlighten the general public about zoning and development processes. PCD should take lead on this initiative.

**SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING PEDESTRIAN/BIKE FRIENDLY ROUTES**

Recreation is important to the citizens of Lycoming County. Pedestrian and Bike friendly routes will connect neighborhoods and communities together as well as providing access to local amenities such as parks, schools, and libraries. Equally important are the improvements to neighborhood walkability. At the larger scale, improvements may need to be made to primary routes throughout the County to make them safer for pedestrians and cyclists. These improvements should be targeted along collectors and arterial roadways as these roadways usually provide the best connectivity but also the greatest risk of accidents. Roadway designs could include narrower lanes, lower speed limits, and clearly marked bicycle lanes or wide shoulders for cyclists. The County will work with PennDOT and our municipalities to emphasize the importance of these facilities when roads are being re-designed or renovated.



*Wide shoulders allow cyclists to travel outside of the main travel lane.*  
Source: [thirdwavecyclingblog](http://thirdwavecyclingblog.com)