

Planning Commission

COUNTY of UNION PENNSYLVANIA



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John Del Vecchio, AICP, *Community Planner*
Robert Huntington, *Recycling Coordinator*
Janice Wagner, *Administrative Assistant*
Beau Hoffman, *Solicitor*

2020 Annual Report



From the Director's Desk

To say 2020 was unlike any we have previously witnessed as a staff and Planning Commission Board would be an understatement. Heading into the year we anticipated that adjusting to a new county administration might be the biggest change we encountered. If only that had been the case. Our staff, with nearly a century of combined experience in local government, for the first time saw mandatory stay at home orders and nearly a complete economic shut down. This included a halt to the subdivision and land development process and the closure of recycling centers as part of the Governor's mandated pandemic response. Planning staff were sent home in early March and business was conducted remotely until mid-June so we could continue serving the public. When we returned to the office things were quite different as new health and safety protocols were in place. Hiding ones face behind a mask, temperature checks, forgoing the customary hand shake, frequent hand washing and lathering with hand sanitizer became the new normal as did the need for all visitors to have appointments. While we were able to be in the office through the summer and early fall we were once again sent home and requested to work remotely to the greatest extent possible from after Thanksgiving until the New Year.



These were (and still are) certainly unprecedented times and we often found ourselves adjusting on the fly. This included holding a board meeting offsite at a park in order to comply with the county and state requirements for social distancing and learning to become more technologically savvy through the use platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom. A record number of Planning Commission meetings were cancelled due to a lack of pressing business and to avoid health and safety risks. Ironically though the number of subdivision and land development plans submitted increased by 15% and the number of new lots created rose by nearly 150% from 2019. Also the number of calls fielded from companies interested in Great Stream Commons was the highest it has been since our office took over that responsibility a few years ago.

We continued our traditional activities during 2020 such as transportation planning, recycling coordination, administering the first-time homebuyer program, economic development, trail authority support, subdivision and land development plan review and approval, county bridge management and technical assistance to municipalities among others. However COVID-19 resulted in new short-term responsibilities as the Planning Commission was tasked with overseeing the administration of new pandemic related grants. Specifically staff played a fairly large role in the small business and not-profit grant assistance program that was designed to provide economic relief to county small businesses and non-profit organizations that were negatively impacted by COVID-19.

This annual report summarizes the major activities of the Planning Commission during the previous year and concludes by taking a look at future trends in transportation where technological advances continue, and in some cases, have been accelerated by the pandemic. Perhaps it might have been more fitting to compare and contrast planning during the current pandemic to what it might have been like during the global influenza outbreak in 1918. Hopefully next year at this time the public health crisis will be behind us and life will return to normal. Until then stay safe!

Sincerely,

Shawn McLaughlin

Planning & Economic Development Director

COUNTYWIDE PLANNING

COVID-19 Response

At the request of the County Commissioners the Planning and Economic Development Office administered the \$4.3 million County COVID-19 Relief Block Grant. These funds could be used to: offset the county's costs directly related to COVID-19 planning, outreach and response; provide assistance to municipalities and school districts for COVID-19 expenses; grants to non profit organizations and small businesses and broadband internet deployment.



In partnership with the Central Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce, Greater Susquehanna Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way the county developed a non-profit and small business assistance grant program. The goal was to quickly get working capital in the hands of these entities to offset the financial strain caused by COVID-19. Overall 215 applicants received \$2.6 million of assistance. Seventy five percent of grant recipients had less than 10 employees and 34% were women owned business enterprises. The hospitality sector was awarded the most grants followed by retail.

The other major undertaking financed with these grant funds was a \$600,000 investment in broadband internet infrastructure. DRIVE, a regional economic development provider based in Danville, PA, was contracted by Columbia, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties to design and deploy a multi-million dollar wireless broadband network intended to provide service to underserved and unserved areas in the region. The project sought to utilize existing infrastructure such as 911 communications towers and farm silos to rapidly build out the system.

Trail Authority Update

Planning Commission staff continued to provide administrative support to the Union County Trail Authority (UCTA) during the second year of operation. In 2020 the Authority felt the impact of COVID-19 along with the hospitality businesses. The Authority is funded by a share of the hotel tax revenue that is collected by the Susquehanna River Valley Visitors Bureau. Revenues were down significantly due to travel restrictions, the cancellation of major events across the region that annually draw visitors and people traveling less in general. This caused UCTA to focus mainly on routine maintenance needs while other desired improvement projects had to be scaled back or delayed. UCTA did move forward with completing engineering design work for addressing drainage issues and trail surface rutting in the area behind Fogle's Forest Products just east of Hoffa Mill Road. That is expected to be constructed in 2021.

The other major impact of COVID-19 was the significant increase in trail users. During the spring months when Union County was in the red phase with the stay at home order the number of trail users was up 75% over the prior year. Residents turned to the trail as an outlet for close to home recreation which continued throughout the summer and early fall.



Additionally UCTA began dialogue with East Buffalo Township concerning making safety enhancements to the trail crossing on Fairground Road given the vehicular traffic and trail user volumes at that location. UCTA will partner with the Township on a grant application to address upgrading the crossing along with the adjacent intersection of State Route 45 and Fairground Road.

COUNTYWIDE PLANNING (Continued from Page 2)

Transportation

This past year was marked by a continuation of the county's aggressive bridge investment program that was launched in 2019. Final engineering design and bidding was completed for County Bridge #12 in Limestone Township on Long Road and County Bridge #19 in West Buffalo Township on Walbash Road. Final engineering design was finished for County Bridge #1 in Gregg Township on Masser Road, County Bridge #13 in Mifflinburg Borough on North 4th Street and County Bridge #21 on Shuck Road in West Buffalo Township. All five of these projects will be constructed in 2021.

In addition preliminary engineering was completed for County Bridge #9 on Grey Hill Road in White Deer Township and County Bridge #25 on Palman Road in Hartley Township.

Maintenance and preservation work in 2020 included concrete deck sealing on multiple structures, repairs to the

deck on County Bridge #3 on Harberson Road in White Deer Township and concrete deck repairs and a bituminous overlay on County Bridge #11 on Zimmerman Road in Limestone Township. The Union County Commissioners also approved allocating funds toward replacing the superstructure on County Bridge #15 on Green Ridge Road in West Buffalo Township.



Countywide Planning

RECYCLING PROGRAM



Program Performance

In 2020 there were 1,577 tons of materials recycled from county residences., a 10.5% decrease from the prior year and double the reduction from 2018 to 2019. Curbside single-stream recycling accounted for 63 percent of all residential volume which has remained consistent the last

several years. The lower volume of recycled materials in 2020 is most likely attributed to the extended closure of drop-off centers and single-stream service due to COVID-19. Even without COVID it appears residential recycling has plateaued in recent years. Commercial businesses also reported recycling 2,425 tons during 2020.

Grants & Other News

The staff administered Act 101 Section 903 and 904 Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recycling grants totaling \$40,090 and was successful in applying for a DEP Section 902 grant of \$101,708 to support recycling equipment purchases by municipalities, education and outreach.

In 2020 the county continued to provide transportation services for the municipal drop-offs. The one time free service from Lycoming County Resource Management Service cost \$38,222 for the year.

Recycling Program

SUBDIVISION AND LAND DEVELOPMENT

County Ordinance Administration

The County Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance was in effect in Hartley, Lewis, and West Buffalo Townships and Hartleton and New Berlin Boroughs. Eighteen plans were approved resulting in seven new lots involving 18 acres. These figures do not include the acreage of the parent tract remaining after subdivision. Of the plans approved 11 were single lot subdivisions or lot addition plans, two were multi-lot plans, and five were land developments. The number of plans doubled from the prior year.



velopments. The table on Page 6 shows 2020 countywide subdivision and land development activity in more detail.

Trends

The total number of plans increased by eight, while the number of new lots rose by 148% from 2019. Single lot, add-on plans, and land development plans with no subdivision occurring accounted for 77% of all plans submitted. The total number of plans was slightly below the 10-year average for plan volume processed, which is surprising it was not lower given the public health pandemic and the several months of state mandated shutdowns in the spring that closed surveyors, engineering firms and construction companies.

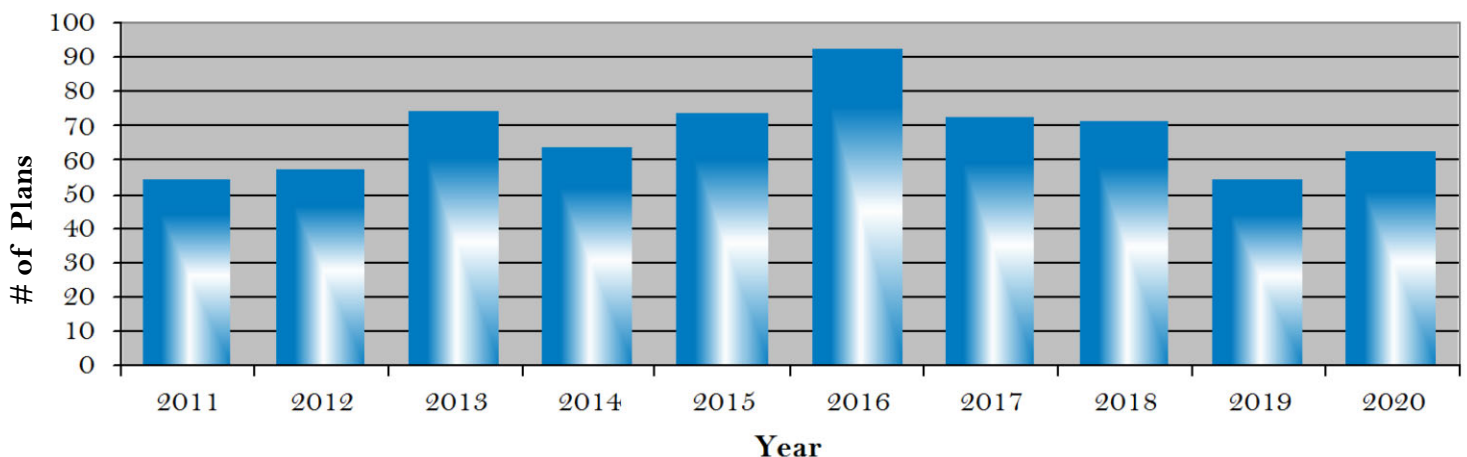
Non-Jurisdictional Plans

The Planning Commission reviews all other non-jurisdictional plans as per the PA Municipalities Planning Code. During 2020, a total of 44 plans were reviewed and comments were provided to the municipalities as applicable. A total of 95 lots were proposed on 593 acres in these municipalities from 18 single-lot and lot addition subdivision plans, 12 multi-lot plans and 14 land de-

102 new lots were created countywide in 2020

Since 2011 an average of 67 plans per year have been processed.

Total Plan Submissions 2011-2020



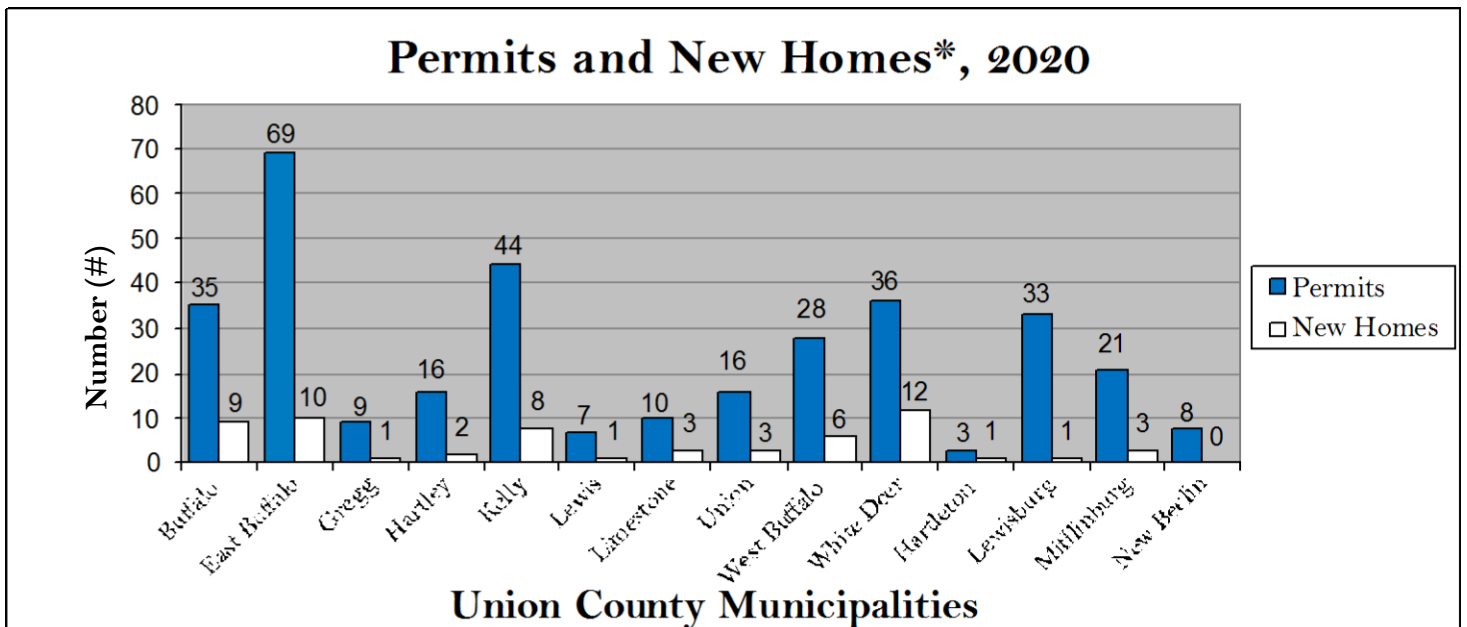
DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY



There were 60 new homes permitted for construction in 2020 within the county, which is eight more than the prior year. The estimated total value of these new homes was \$14.3 million or an average of \$237,923 each. This is for the structures only and does not include the cost of the building lot. Total new home investment rose by 5% above 2019 but the average home cost dropped by \$23,615 per unit. From 2010 to 2013 the average cost of new residential homes was \$124,422; however, from 2013 to 2019 that figure jumped to an average of \$220,960 and continues to rise. When controlling for inflation housing costs have experienced a 56% increase, which is an indication of escalating housing costs, while wages during the same period have not kept pace, only increasing by 12%.

East Buffalo and White Deer Townships again had the most new homes with 10 and 12 respectively, followed by Buffalo Township with nine. Only New Berlin Borough did not have any new home construction. The average new home cost was highest in Limestone Township at \$372,891 followed by Union Township at \$310,828. There were also 134 home additions constructed in 2020 at a total estimated value of \$5.8 million or an average of \$43,904 per addition.

Business, commercial, industrial, institutional and agricultural construction is estimated to have been \$44 million during 2020, \$69 million lower than in 2019. Over 50% of this construction occurred in Kelly Township; however, for the first time in recent memory Mifflinburg and Lewisburg Boroughs had significant activity at 16% and 9% respectively.



**Figures were taken from building permit applications and are to be used as a fair estimate of activity that occurred during the year.*

2020 SUBDIVISION & LAND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

LAND USE (Lots)												
<i>County Ordinance</i>	<i>Plans</i>	<i>Single & Add-on Lot Plans</i>	<i>Multi-lot Plans</i>	<i>Land Develop-ments</i>	<i>Number of Lots *</i>	<i>Area * (in acres)</i>	Res.	Ag.	Indust.	Comm.	Rec.	Other
Hartley Township	5	2	1	2	2	3	2	-	-	-	-	-
Lewis Township	4	3	-	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-
West Buffalo Township	8	6	-	2	3	7	3	-	-	-	-	-
Hartleton Borough	1	-	1	-	2	4	2	-	-	-	-	-
New Berlin Borough	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL COUNTY ORDINANCE	18	11	2	5	7	18	7	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Municipal Ordinance</i>												
Buffalo Township	8	3	1	4	6	149	3	3	-	-	-	-
East Buffalo Township	6	1	1	4	2	5	2	-	-	-	-	-
Gregg Township	1	1	-	-	1	57	-	-	1	-	-	-
Kelly Township	8	3	2	3	8	91	4	1	-	3	-	-
Limestone Township	4	2	2	-	5	120	2	2	-	1	-	-
Union Township	7	3	3	1	9	27	9	-	-	-	-	-
White Deer Township	7	4	3	-	63	143	61	2	-	-	-	-
Lewisburg Borough	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Mifflinburg Borough	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL MUNICIPAL ORDINANCE	44	18	12	14	95	593	82	8	1	4	-	-

* DOES NOT include add-ons, tract residual or land development area.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FUND



In 2020, six applications were approved for funding totaling \$62,390 or an average of \$10,400 per applicant. The Union County Affordable Housing Trust Fund supports first time home purchases. The program, which is administered by Commission staff and an

advisory board, provides down payment and closing cost assistance to those who qualify. The accompanying table lists the 2020 income eligibility levels for program participants based the number of family members. Since its inception the fund has helped over 100 applicants with first-time home purchases in 13 of the 14 county municipalities.

2020 INCOME ELIGIBILITY

Number of Family Members	Income Limits
1	\$ 50,100
2	\$ 57,200
3	\$ 64,400
4	\$ 71,500
5	\$ 77,200
6	\$ 82,900
7	\$ 88,700
8	\$ 94,400

Affordable Housing Fund

MISCELLANEOUS

Planning Commission Member Attendance, 2020 (P=Present)

Member	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Susan Benfer			P			P		P	P		P	P	6
Don Bowman	P		P			P		P	P		P	P	7
Sally Farmer	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	7
Anthony Mike	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P		NO MEETING	P	P	6
Gregory Prowant	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	7
Benjamin Ranck	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	7
James Sanders			Appointed in June			P		P	P		P	P	5
Alan Zeigler	P					P		P			P	P	5
Vacant													

Thank You!

Commission members represent different regions of the county and collectively make recommendations to the County Commissioners and Planning staff.

The Commission meets the 2nd Monday of each month at 4:30 PM in the Union County Government Center. Many thanks to these individuals for their commitment and hours of volunteer service!

A WORD ABOUT THE COMMISSION & STAFF



James Murphy had to step away from the Commission during 2020 after serving for two plus years. The Planning Commission appreciates the valuable contributions that Mr. Murphy made.

The Union County Commissioners appointed James Sanders of Lewis Township and Mark Wehr of Buffalo Township to fill Commission vacancies. Welcome aboard James and Mark!

Staff continued to pursue professional development exclusively through virtual conferences, workshops and webinars throughout the year due to limitations placed on in-person gatherings.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Planning Commission mission is to foster quality planning that promotes orderly growth and development by balancing competing community needs such as economic expansion to retain viability, with the protection of the built and natural environment.

Staff & Commission

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The 2020 calendar year was marked by economic ups and downs. On a positive note interest in Great Stream Commons was the highest since this office took on the task of helping oversee the park. Two sales agreements were executed that could eventually culminate in the sale of over 60 acres to support a convenience store at the corner of US 15 and Russell Road in Gregg Township and a 400,000 square foot industrial building also adjacent to Russell Road. Staff participated in multiple site visits with representatives from other companies looking to potentially locate in the region as well.

The major challenge faced across the economy in 2020 was the impact of COVID-19 on businesses of all sizes. The mandated shutdowns had a crippling effect on many small business operations, especially hit hard was the hospitality sector which includes hotels and restaurants. Governmental assistance from the Federal, State and local level helped offset some of this but unemployment reached a high of 13.9% during the year. This is a level that has not been seen in over a decade. Fortunately some businesses were able to adjust by operating remotely while others were able to implement COVID-19 safety protocols that allowed workers to return to their vocations. By year end unemployment receded back to 4.9%.



Economic Development

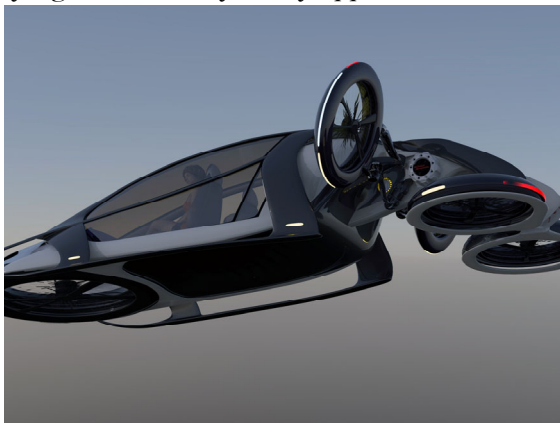
TREND WATCH—Transportation Future

Societal changes and technological advances are having significant impacts on our transportation systems and future. Even prior to the pandemic people were driving less across the nation and that, combined with more fuel efficient vehicles, equated to declines in the gas tax, which is the major funding source for all modes of transportation infrastructure maintenance and new construction. In addition online shopping has led to an increase in the number of delivery trucks traversing neighborhood streets and rural roads. The volume of which has only grown exponentially due to COVID-19. In some areas, particularly older downtowns, the presence of added delivery trucks has created problems due to double parking and blocked traffic.



These trends combined with emerging technologies such as autonomous vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV- aka drones), personal delivery devices (PDD) sometimes referred to as ground drones and advanced air mobility (AAM)), also known as flying vehicles creates an uncertain future in terms of trying to plan for accommodating what may lie ahead. If we thought managing increasing volumes of traffic on local roads, improving intersection efficiency and regulating parking were difficult just imagine how vehicles without drivers, unmanned delivery drones and devices and airborne vehicles will be to address via local planning. To some these advances may seem far fetched but companies are working to perfect these technologies in urban areas which will eventually reach Union County. Drones are being used to deliver packages, PDD's were the subject of PA Act 106 of 2020 and PennDOT has recently published a draft policy on PDD's and has a section of its website dedicated to this technology. How long will it be until you see a PDD rolling down a road shoulder near you in route to make a delivery to your home or that of a neighbor? Or a drone delivering a box from your favorite online retailer?

Flying vehicles may really appear to be a stretch of the imagination and could bring back thoughts of childhood cartoons for some. However NASA predicts that advanced air mobility (AAM) is likely to be a commercially viable transportation option by the year 2028. Given the number of drivers that have not mastered operating a car it could be quite interesting when they take to the sky!



What do all these transportation advances mean for local communities and planning? That is a question we may not be able to answer until we can see how things unfold in urban areas and adjacent suburbs first. One thing is certain change is on the way for our transportation systems but what we do not know is when it will arrive in our corner of the world. Will it be next year, in five years, 10 years or longer? In the

meantime we can all think about what the transportation future in Union County and the surrounding region will look like and what we can do to prepare for it. Presently though it is rather difficult to visualize.