

Planning Commission

COUNTY of UNION PENNSYLVANIA



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John Del Vecchio, AICP, *Community Planner*
Robert Huntington, *Recycling Coordinator*
Lauren Russell, *Community Planner*
Janice Wagner, *Administrative Assistant*
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2021 Annual Report



Chesapeake Bay Program



From the Director's Desk

This past year, while not completely back to normal, was a marked improvement over the operating conditions and challenges faced in 2020. COVID-19 unfortunately did not go away as we endured waves of the new Delta and Omicron variants, which resulted in staff engaging in a high percentage of virtual meetings for most of the year.

2021 could be viewed as the year of the bridge, or the year of the closed road if your daily commute was interrupted by construction activity. In total four coun-

ty bridges were replaced and one underwent a major rehabilitation. Another structure, the Hassenplug covered bridge in Mifflinburg, would have been under construction as well but had to be delayed until the spring of 2022 due to material supply issues. The structural analysis of County Bridge #23, the closed covered bridge over Penns Creek, continued throughout the year and staff worked with SEDA-COG and PennDOT on the regional 12-Year Transportation Plan update. Staff also monitored progress of the Central Susquehanna Valley Thruway project and a new report sponsored by SEDA-COG was released that projects traffic on US 15 in Lewisburg could be reduced by as much as 40% once the new highway is opened.

The US Census Bureau finally released limited data from the 2020 Decennial Census for congressional redistricting purposes during 2021. For Union County the data showed a countywide population decrease for the first time in over a century. At the local level 10 of 14 municipalities experienced population declines while only four had gains. This topic is explored further under *Trend Watch* on the last page of this Annual Report.

Despite nationwide labor shortages, increasing material costs, and supply chain issues economic development and housing construction had gains across the county. Subdivision and land development plan applications also reached the highest level in five years which will result in, barring an economic recession, additional residential and non-residential development. Also mirroring national trends the local housing market tightened even further over the past year. The lack of supply and escalating costs have resulted in less than desirable conditions for those seeking housing and optimal conditions for sellers.

This annual report highlights the major activities of the Planning Commission during 2021. Looking ahead to 2022 the Planning Commission intends to embark on starting an update to the county comprehensive plan. The current county plan was adopted in 2009. As a general rule, and according to state law, county comprehensive plans should be revisited every 10 years. The plan update was intentionally delayed in anticipation of the new Census. In addition we will also be working with regional partners in 2022 to begin the process of refreshing the multi-county solid waste plan which includes municipal waste and recycling components.

Sincerely,

Shawn McLaughlin

Planning & Economic Development Director



COUNTYWIDE PLANNING

COVID-19 Response

Unfortunately COVID-19 and the negative impacts associated with it did not disappear in 2021. In the spring staff worked with SEDA-COG to design a local program to deliver funding to businesses in the hospitality sector through grant dollars provided to the county by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. This COVID Hospitality Industry Relief Program (CHIRP) resulted in SEDA-COG disbursing \$502,354 to 19 eligible Union County lodging establishments and restaurants. The



money was for the purposes of offsetting the negative financial impacts of COVID-19 that hit these businesses particularly hard.

As a result of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Union County was awarded \$8.7 million through the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund. Additionally county municipalities were collectively provided with \$4.4 million from this same program while the Lewisburg and Mifflinburg School Districts received a combined \$6 million.

Throughout the year we continued to monitor the US Treasury Department's Interim Rule and Frequently Asked Questions which governs how the ARPA funding can be used in anticipation of the final rule being released in early 2022. To date the county has not expended any of these funds and staff will continue to assist the Commissioners office with developing a strategy to invest these resources during the upcoming year. This may include a grant program for outside entities to submit applications for funding consideration.

Trail Authority Update

Planning Commission staff continued to provide administrative support to the Union County Trail Authority (UCTA). As noted last year trail use spiked considerably in 2020 at the peak of COVID-19 restrictions. However in 2021 trail use still remained high and did not experience a significant drop off.

With hotel tax revenues rebounding the Authority undertook much needed maintenance activities that included a contract to cut trailside brush back and to reclaim the overgrown Vicksburg trailhead. In addition a contract was issued to correct a drainage problem and to improve the trail surface adjacent to Fogle's near Hoffa Mill Road.

UCTA also worked with East Buffalo Township and its engineering consultant in evaluating safety enhancements for the Fairground Road Trail crossing. Subsequently the Township and Authority submitted a Multi-Modal Transportation Fund grant application seeking money to install safety features such as a Rapid Flashing Beacon system, enhanced pavement markings and new advanced warning signs. The project, if selected, would also fund improvements at the nearby State Route 45 and Fairground Road signalized intersection.



The Union County Community Service Program, managed by the county Probation Department, once again provided support for maintenance needs. Participants put wood preservative on the pavilion at Vicksburg, mowed along the trail, and cut weeds among other tasks.

Thanks to Samantha Pearson there was also a spring clean-up on the trail for trash and litter pick up that brought out 50 community volunteers.

COUNTYWIDE PLANNING (Continued from Page 2)

Transportation

In 2021 the county continued advancing bridge replacement and rehabilitation projects. Construction was completed on Bridge #1 in Gregg Township on Masser Road, Bridge #12 in Limestone Township on Long Road, County Bridge #19 in West Buffalo Township on Walbash Road and Bridge #21 in West Buffalo Township on Shuck Road. In addition Bridge #15 on Green Ridge Road in West Buffalo Township underwent a full deck replacement.

Final engineering design was started for County Bridge #9 on Gray Hill Road in White Deer Township and for County Bridge #25 on Palman Road in Hartley Township. These two projects are on schedule to be bid in 2022 with construction in 2023.

Engineering analysis on Bridge #23 in Hartley Township on Covered Bridge Road continued in an attempt to determine the cause of structural problems and viable solutions.

The Planning Commission participated in the SEDA-COG

TIP update process and provided information on county-wide priorities. Monitoring of the Central Susquehanna Valley Thruway(CSVT) continued. A study jointly released by the SEDA-COG and WATTS MPO's suggests there could be a 40% reduction in vehicular traffic volume north of the State Route 45 intersection on the US 15 corridor when the bypass is opened.



Countywide Planning

RECYCLING PROGRAM



Program Performance

In 2021 there were 1,738 tons of materials recycled from county residences, a 10.3% increase from 2020, but in line with the five-year average. Curbside single-stream recycling accounted for 65 percent of all residential volume which has remained consistent the last several years. As

previously noted it appears residential recycling in the county has plateaued as the volume has remained relatively flat since 2017. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the amount of municipal waste, more commonly referred to as garbage. Trash landfilled in 2021 was significantly higher than the preceding five years and represents a 15% increase. As we embark on an update to the regional solid waste plan these trends will be further evaluated in addition to exploring feasible electronics recycling.

Grants & Other News

The staff administered Act 101 Section 903 and 904 Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recycling grants totaling \$39,700 In 2021 the county continued to provide transportation services for the municipal drop-offs. The one time free service from Lycoming County Resource Management Service now costs \$51,000 a 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. Thirty plans were approved resulting in 15 new lots involving 122 acres. These figures do not include the acreage of the parent tract remaining after subdivision. Of the plans approved 15 were single lot subdivisions or lot addition plans, five were multi-lot plans, and ten were land developments. The number of plans was up 66% from the prior year and over 200% since 2019.



nine multi-lot plans and 18 land developments. The table on Page 6 shows 2021 countywide subdivision and land development activity in more detail.

Trends

The total number of plans increased by 26, while the number of new lots dropped by 34 or 33% from 2020. Single lot, add-on plans, and land development plans with no subdivision occurring accounted for 84% of all plans submitted. The total number of plans was significantly higher than the 10-year average for plan volume processed. As can be seen in the chart below plan submissions have rebounded from the 10-year low experienced in 2019 and just fell short of the decade high mark set in 2016.

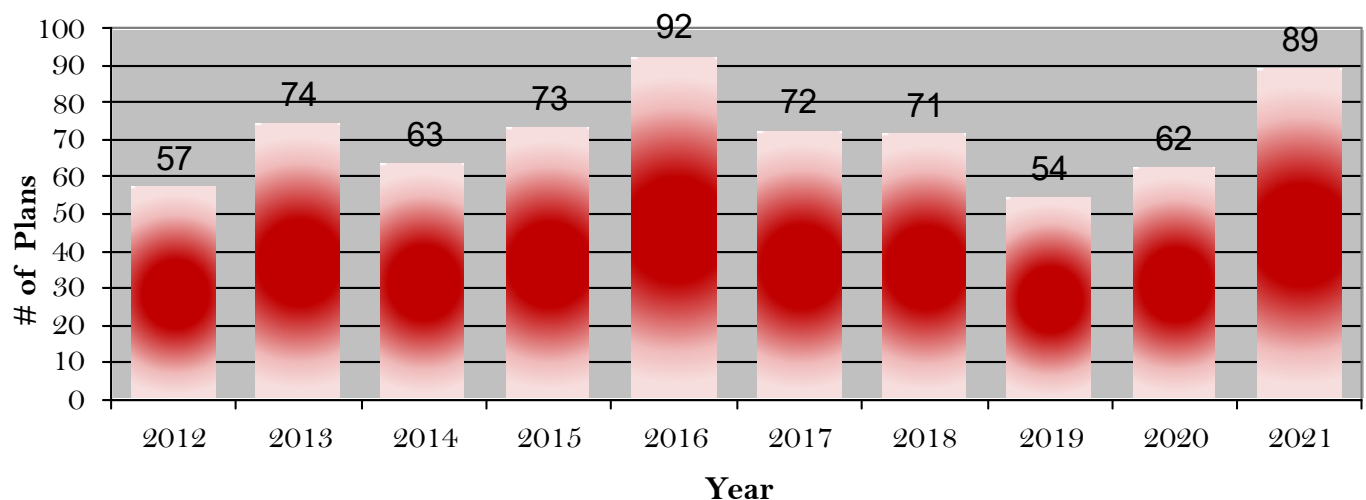
Non-Jurisdictional Plans

The Planning Commission reviews all other non-jurisdictional plans as per the PA Municipalities Planning Code. During 2021, a total of 59 plans were reviewed and comments were provided to the municipalities as applicable. A total of 53 lots were proposed on 620 acres in these municipalities from 32 single-lot and lot addition subdivision plans,

68 new lots were created countywide in 2021

Since 2012 an average of 70 plans per year have been processed.

Total Plan Submissions 2012-2021



DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

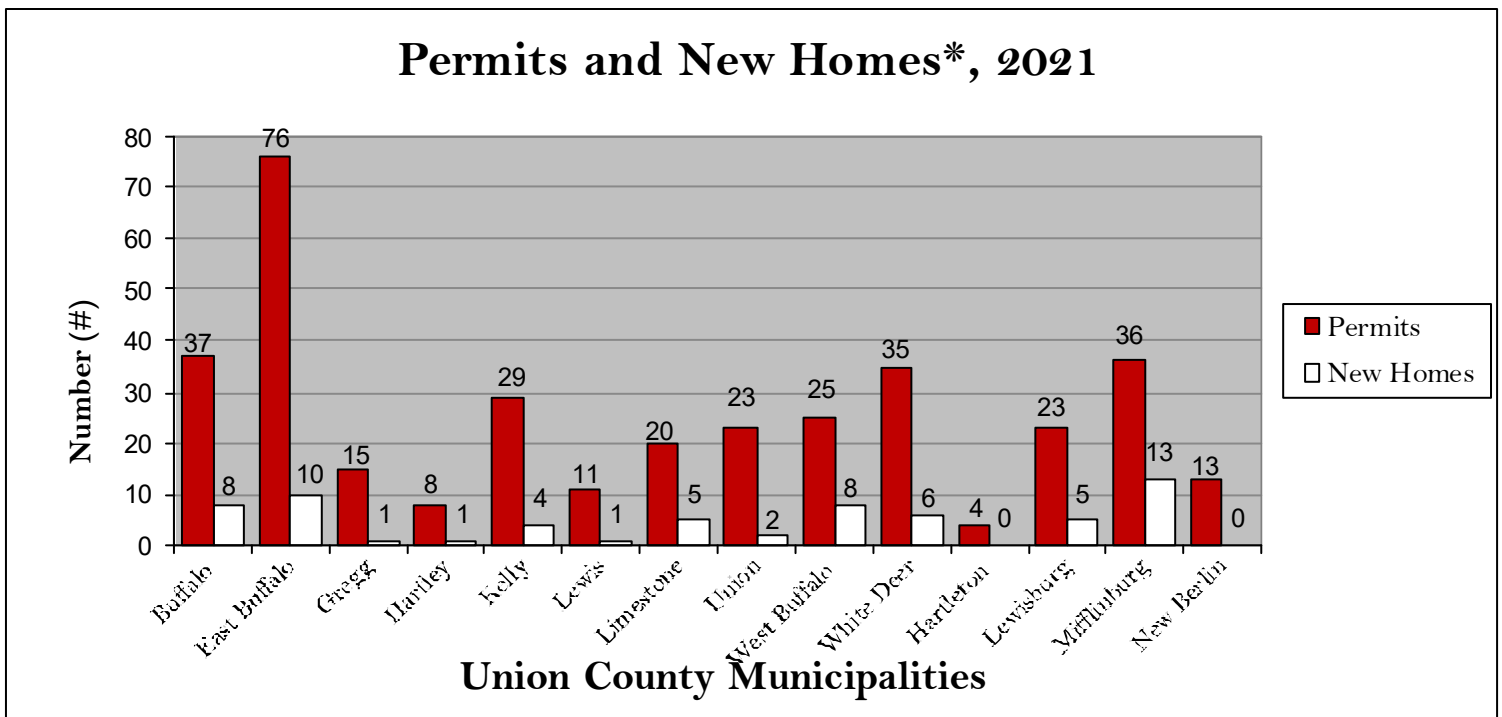


There were 64 new homes permitted for construction in 2021 within the county, which is up four from 2020 and represents growth of 23% since 2019. The estimated total value of these new homes was \$17 million or an average of \$266,067 each. This is for the structures only and does not include the cost of the building lot. Total new home investment rose by \$3 million, 21% above 2020, and the average home cost increased \$28,144 per unit. Rising housing costs continue to price people out of the market, and not just first time homebuyers.

Mifflinburg Borough and East Buffalo Township had the most new homes with 13 and 10 respectively, followed by Buffalo and West Buffalo Townships with eight. Lewisburg and Mifflinburg Boroughs accounted for 28% of new homes permitted.

The average new home cost was highest in Kelly Township at \$355,971 followed by White Deer Township at \$347,623. There were also 143 home additions constructed in 2021 at a total estimated value of \$11.2 million or an average of \$77,388 per addition. While the number of additions only increased by 11 over the prior year the dollar amount was nearly double.

Business, commercial, industrial, institutional and agricultural construction is estimated to have been \$73 million during 2021, \$29 million higher than in 2020. Over 65% of this construction occurred in Gregg Township at Great Stream Commons while 16% occurred in Lewisburg Borough and 5% in East Buffalo Township.



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

2021 SUBDIVISION & LAND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

LAND USE (Lots)												
	Plans	Single [§] Add-on Lot Plans	Multi-lot Plans	Land Develop- ments	Number of Lots *	Area * (in acres)	Res.	Ag.	Indust.	Comm.	Rec.	Other
<i>County Ordinance</i>												
Hartley Township	7	4	-	3	1	1.7	1	-	-	-	-	-
Lewis Township	5	3	1	1	2	4	2	-	-	-	-	-
West Buffalo Township	14	6	3	5	9	11.5	5	4	-	-	-	-
Hartleton Borough	3	2	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
New Berlin Borough	1	-	1	-	2	.38	2	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL COUNTY ORDINANCE												
	30	15	5	10	15	12.2	11	4	-	-	-	-
<i>Municipal Ordinance</i>												
Buffalo Township	14	10	2	2	12	144.3	9	1	2	-	-	-
East Buffalo Township	4	2	-	2	1	21.2	1	-	-	-	-	-
Gregg Township	6	2	1	3	7	199.5	-	-	6	1	-	-
Kelly Township	5	1	1	3	3	30.6	-	3	-	-	-	-
Limestone Township	11	7	2	2	14	-	9	4	-	1	-	-
Union Township	2	1	1	-	-	1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
White Deer Township	8	6	-	2	3	1.2	3	-	-	-	-	-
Lewisburg Borough	2	-	1	1	10	4.6	10	-	-	-	-	-
Mifflinburg Borough	7	3	1	3	3	-	2	-	-	1	-	-
TOTAL MUNICIPAL ORDINANCE												
	59	32	9	18	53	620.2	34	8	8	3	-	-

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

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FUND



In 2021, four applications were approved for funding totaling \$53,200 or an average of \$13,300 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 2021 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	\$ 51,300
2	\$ 58,600
3	\$ 65,900
4	\$ 73,200
5	\$ 79,000
6	\$ 84,900
7	\$ 90,800
8	\$ 96,600

Affordable Housing Fund

MISCELLANEOUS

Planning Commission Member Attendance, 2021 (P=Present)													
Member	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Susan Benfer	P		P	P		P			P		P	P	7
Don Bowman	P		P	P		P	P		P		P	P	8
Sally Farmer	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	P	NO MEETING	P	NO MEETING	P		7
Anthony Mike	P		P	P		P	P		P		P	P	8
Gregory Prowant	P		P	P			P		P		P	P	7
Benjamin Ranck	P		P	P		P	P				P	P	7
James Sanders	P		P	P		P	P		P			P	7
Mark Wehr	P		P	P		P	P		P		P	P	8
Alan Zeigler	P		P	P		P	P		P		P	P	8

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!

Thank You!

A WORD ABOUT THE COMMISSION & STAFF



In 2021 Community Planner Lauren Russell joined the Planning Commission team and filled a vacancy that was created by a retirement just prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lauren is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a degree in Community Environment and Development with a concentration in Economic Development. She also minored in Sustainability Leadership and earned a Smeal College of Business undergraduate certificate.

Staff continued to pursue professional development almost exclusively through virtual conferences, workshops and webinars during the year.

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

In 2021 increased activity continued at Great Stream Commons. Construction started on two lots that were previously sold and three additional parcels were put under sales agreements. River Run Foods is planning an expansion of manufacturing capacity on 36 acres at the southern end of the park and JM Industrial Realty of Watsonstown, an affiliate of Moran Industries, purchased 9 acres at the northeast corner of US 15 and Russell Road. PNK P2, LLC, an international developer, also put 200 acres under agreement. If all pending sales become final only two lots would remain in the business park.



Meanwhile existing county businesses continued to recover from the pandemic. Some, like GAF, were able to open new facilities to increase production capacity but many struggled to return to pre-pandemic operations due to staffing shortages. Throughout the year employers across all sectors experienced difficulty finding employees to fill vacancies. This was particularly evident in the service industry where many restaurants have not been able to get back to standard hours. This trend will likely continue in the foreseeable future due to new COVID-19 variants and mass numbers of workers exiting the workforce with no intention of returning. Employers will need to develop creative solutions, increase automation or scale back operations accordingly.

Economic Development

TREND WATCH—Population Decline?

According to the 2020 US Decennial Census Redistricting Data Union County experienced a 5% decrease in population, or a loss of 2,266 persons, from 2010 to 2020. During the same time period the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had a statewide population increase of 2.4%. This would be a reversal of recent trends where Union County has traditionally exceeded the statewide population growth rate by a significant margin. In fact county population has been growing at least twice as fast as the state overall since 1980.

The last time a decennial census indicated a population decrease for Union County was during the William Howard Taft presidency. The 1910 Census showed a 2.5% decrease in the county population. Since 1820 Union County population had only declined three times in 1890, 1900 and 1910. Therefore the current Census, which indicates a 5% decrease, would appear to be an exception and not the norm.



By taking a deeper dive into the 2020 Census numbers we have been able to isolate where some of the specific population loss occurred within the county. Ten of fourteen county municipalities lost population while only four had increases (Buffalo, East Buffalo, Limestone and Union Townships). Kelly Township (-27%), Gregg Township (-18%) and Lewisburg Borough (-11%) saw the most significant losses. Interestingly Gregg and Kelly Townships are the home of federal correctional facilities. For the county as a whole 78% of the total population loss can be explained by the reduction in group quarters population at the two federal correctional facilities and at skilled nursing centers. Factoring out declines in group quarters the county population loss would stand at 495 persons or 1.1%.

Looking at other local information beyond the Census data can also shed light on trends that could be influencing population. Building permit data shows that 669 new homes were permitted in the county from 2011 to 2020. It is generally recognized that population growth leads to an increase in housing demand. Conversely when population declines housing demand recedes and the number of housing unit vacancies increases and new housing starts diminish. We know based on the low vacancy rates for both rental and owner occupied units that the county is not experiencing a housing oversupply. Vital statistics can be an indicator of population trends by comparing birth and death rates. Data from the Pennsylvania Department of Health shows that from 2011 through 2019 births in the county outpaced deaths by 300.

Housing and vital statistic trends would point toward an expanding population, a decrease would have been the result of out-migration. It is possible a net loss of almost 500 people occurred due to people moving out of the county but it is also equally likely that Union County experienced an undercount in the 2020 Census given the complications that COVID-19 introduced to the Census process. As more Census data is released the reasons for this statistical anomaly may become clearer. In the meantime as you look around the county what do you think? Does the number of people living in our communities appear to be declining, staying about the same or growing?