

The **INSTITUTE** for Public Policy & Economic Development

A partnership among Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, The University of Scranton & Wilkes University

Introduction

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development has created a policy statement on the Bi-County Comprehensive Plan (the “Plan”). The Plan will be a joint undertaking between Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, which involves key issues affecting county residents. Two of the most pressing issues facing the bi-county region are transportation and land use.

Findings

Deteriorating Transportation Conditions

Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties face significant problems related to the deteriorating condition of the region's transportation infrastructure, including roadways and bridges. According to The Road Information Program (TRIP), a Washington, DC, based non-profit research group, Northeastern Pennsylvania ranks poorly in terms of its local roadways. In addition, a recent study reveals that 69 percent of major roadways in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area are rated in poor or mediocre condition.¹ The study also indicates that only 13 percent of roads are rated in good condition. The region's bridges do not fair better, with 39 percent rated as either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. Many roadways and bridges are decades-old and are nearing the end of their useful life. Budget constraints, increased costs and decreasing revenue challenge transportation planners.

Commuter Rail

At present, the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton area lacks passenger rail service. In 2010, a study was proposed in the Pennsylvania State Senate to examine the feasibility of commuter rail service between Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. The study would also update a previous study for a rail link between the region and New York City via Hoboken, NJ. The benefits of such a link are numerous and include increased tourism, which could have a direct economic benefit to local businesses, reduced work and recreation commute/travel times, and less road congestion on I-80 in New Jersey.

¹ The Road Information Program. (2010). Retrieved from http://www.tripnet.org/state/PA_Scranton_Wilkes-Barre_PR_112310.pdf

Land Use

Sprawl, which is the movement of businesses and residents away from city centers, is a significant issue for the region faces.

Many factors contribute to the increased sprawl, including a lack of zoning law uniformity and a community's dependence on property taxes as a means of funding safety and other public services. In turn, this leads communities to encourage zoning for large commercial and/or residential projects, to increase tax revenue, regardless of whether it fits well into a community.

Sprawl can have many negative effects on a region. Farmland, forests, and wetlands are just a few of the natural environments that are irreversibly destroyed to make way for large development projects. Resulting environmental impacts include flooding and a loss of natural habitats for wildlife.

Lack of Uniform Zoning Laws

As Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties lack uniform zoning laws, local municipalities or towns make decisions on residential and commercial land use zoning and the scope of zoning laws. The lack of uniform zoning ordinances across a region often complicates efforts to establish better land use practices and preservation.

Issues

A region's transportation infrastructure and links are economic lifelines that provide for the safe and efficient movement of people and freight. Without these vital links, local economies and quality of life suffers. The maintenance and development of the region's transportation links will strengthen the local economy and help improve the quality of life due to increased safety and lower travel costs.

The Plan discusses a bus rapid transit system, which is a step in the right direction toward providing commuters with options for commuting between various recreation, shopping, and employment districts. According to one study, an individual can save nearly \$9,300 annually from using public transportation as a principal transportation mode.²

Transportation issues transcend communal boundaries. They do not stop at a designated line on a map or a marker on the side of the road. Therefore, it is necessary to work towards a

² Williams, Mantill. (2010). Riding Public Transit Saves Individuals \$9,293 Annually; Cost per gallon of gas increases 13 cents since last month. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from http://www.publictransportation.org/facts/100406_transit_savings.asp

commonality and better coordination of limited resources to make sure the region's transportation infrastructure meets current and future needs.

In order for communities to function in a more efficient manner, effective land use policies must be in place. Land use policies bring order out of chaos in terms of development and land preservation. They are essential in providing guidelines for how development and preservation of our natural resources are carried out.

Land use issues, including sprawl and zoning laws, affect not just the individual communities, but the entire bi-county region. While the consequences of sprawl, including destruction of environmental habitats, may appear to be local, it has a trickle down impact on almost everyone. An example is the increased amount of water runoff that occurs because of paved surfaces if proper watershed management is not enforced across municipal boundaries.

Policy Guidelines

- Support regional transportation planning to meet current and future transportation needs. Such planning will result in better utilization of existing resources and, in the future, expand the region's transportation links.
- The Bi-County Plan recommendations on regional land use planning proposals must be adopted by Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties to meet the current and future development and preservation goals.
- Communities in the bi-county region must buy into and support the Plan since it requires collaboration between the interconnected counties, if the common objectives are to be realized.

Regional Plan Outcomes

The regional transportation portion of the Plan should seek to:

- Document the cost of resources needed to maintain the existing transportation infrastructure through regular maintenance. This is especially relevant for the congested Interstate 81 corridor.
- Report safety needs along with recommended improvements and the associated costs of such improvements.
- Improve the connectivity of the mass transit system to reduce reliance on the interstate system for short distance commutes and single occupied vehicles; investigate impacts that a passenger rail system from New York City would have on the region.

- Create strategies to improve the transportation capacity of the system in place.
- Evaluate proposed projects and come up with innovative strategies to help fund such projects.

The land use portion of the Plan should seek to:

- Develop innovative strategies to promote development of downtown areas and attract interested developers.
- Investigate the possibility of changing current zoning laws to decrease sprawl outside of the community proper.
- Come up with ways to create uniform zoning laws to attract future development.
- Examine ways other than property taxes to fully or partly fund vital community services, such as schools.
- Offer incentives to businesses and developers who choose to locate within the community proper limits.
- Create incentives for sustainable development and encourage such practices.
- Focus environmental protection laws on preservation of natural resources.

Policy Statements

Transportation

1. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that result in a safe and reliable transportation system that form the backbone of the regional economy; this includes multimodal forms of transportation, such as air, car, bus, and passenger and freight rail.
2. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that improve the quality of the existing transportation system, while simultaneously efficiently expanding the infrastructure to address economic development opportunities.
3. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that encourage cooperation among municipalities and agencies, both in the sharing of resources and of ideas. Doing so would help increase efficiency and reduce the cost and the amount of time and effort required to make such plans a reality.
4. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports initiatives and programs that help the transportation infrastructure meet the needs of a 21st century

populace. This includes research into the viability of alternative forms of transportation including rail, bus rapid transit, and Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS).

Land Use

1. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that result in sustainable development and protection of our natural resources.
2. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that create incentives for developers to adopt environmentally sound practices. This includes green buildings and redevelopment in the traditional business districts.
3. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that combat sprawl by offering incentives for development within the core communities.
4. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that encourage cooperation among communities and agencies regarding land use issues. Accomplishing this task will make the implementation of plans, including those previously discussed, easier to achieve.
5. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development supports planning policies that will lead to a uniform regional zoning code. This proposal will steer future development towards efficient, sustainable development.

Policy Position

All stakeholders throughout the bi-county region must support the goal of providing and maintaining a safe and efficient transportation infrastructure that serves the needs of the populace. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports regional stakeholders working toward the development of policies and programs that strive to accomplish these goals. Fact-finding studies are needed to determine how much such maintenance and development programs will cost. In addition, perhaps even more important than figuring out costs, is the transfer of policy from the written stage to the implementation stage. This means that planners should come together to create innovative ways to implement these ideas.

Similarly, regional stakeholders in the bi-county region must support the goal of developing and implementing effective and reasonable land use policies that serve a dual purpose - the protection and preservation of our valuable natural habitats and undeveloped areas, and encouragement of future development to include sustainable commercial and residential projects. To accomplish this, additional planning and impact studies are needed.