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FALL 2019

Development on the Edge of Town: Tools to Shape Desired Community Character

Most rural communities in Pennsylvania want to maintain their rural character while also strengthening their economies. Fast-growing rural areas at the edge of major cities face metropolitan-style development pressures, while slow-growing or shrinking rural areas often suffer from faltering economies and population decline. Fortunately, with the right planning and zoning, rural communities can attract the type of development that works best in a rural context.



A view of Milford from "The Knob," looking east down Broad Street.

Establish a Vision

Every local government should take the time to establish or revisit and update its vision for the future — what does it want to be in 10 to 20 years? (See Visioning on page 7.) Comprehensive plans that have a vision statement clearly articulating what a community values, coupled with goals and action-oriented strategies, are the planning foundation for modifying your local development policies and ordinances.

Density and Design

Once a new community vision is established, municipalities will need to plan for the associated development types and densities to achieve the desired change. By itself, density expresses a numerical ratio (typically measured by dwelling units per acre), but it does not tell us anything about physical form of the residential development or whether there are uses other than residential in the proposed mix of development. Encouraging a mix of uses (residential and commercial) and a variety of dwelling types can add to the quality of a place as long as the right design guidance is provided.

One way to deal with this density context challenge is for communities to make sure that their local comprehensive plans direct new development to areas that are within a natural edge to the community. A major road or a river might provide a

A PennDOT Connects Knowledgebase **GOAL** **TECHSHEET** Accommodating Growth within the Transportation & Natural Environments

Tools to Achieve Common Comprehensive Plan Goals 2018

Many counties and municipalities face growth pressures that are putting undue strain on transportation and other public infrastructure as well as natural and cultural resources that are an integral part of a community's identity. Failure to identify and plan within such limiting factors is likely to lead to congestion, public sewer and water capacity issues, unwanted environmental impacts, and a loss of a municipality's character and sense of place.

The land use and transportation system controls presented in this tech sheet can be used to maintain adequate infrastructure and protect environmental resources by accommodating growth pressures in more compact areas, managing access to the transportation system, preserving key corridors, encouraging infill and reuse of existing buildings, acting regionally, and reducing sprawl.

Access Management and Coordinated Highway Occupancy Permit (HOP) Processing

- Access management begins on reducing the on-ramp — vehicle mobility and accessibility to surrounding land use. An effectively implemented access management program can bring a number of positive impacts, including improving public safety and reducing traffic congestion, thereby leading to accelerated growth.
- Reduces fuel consumption and air emissions.
- Improves roadway efficiency.
- Allows PennDOT standards and municipal issues and concerns to be jointly addressed through the HOP process.

Download the **Accommodating Growth within the Transportation and Natural Environments** tech sheet for land use planning techniques that help to maintain adequate infrastructure and protect environmental resources, manage access to the transportation system, preserve key corridors, and encourage infill and reuse of existing buildings.



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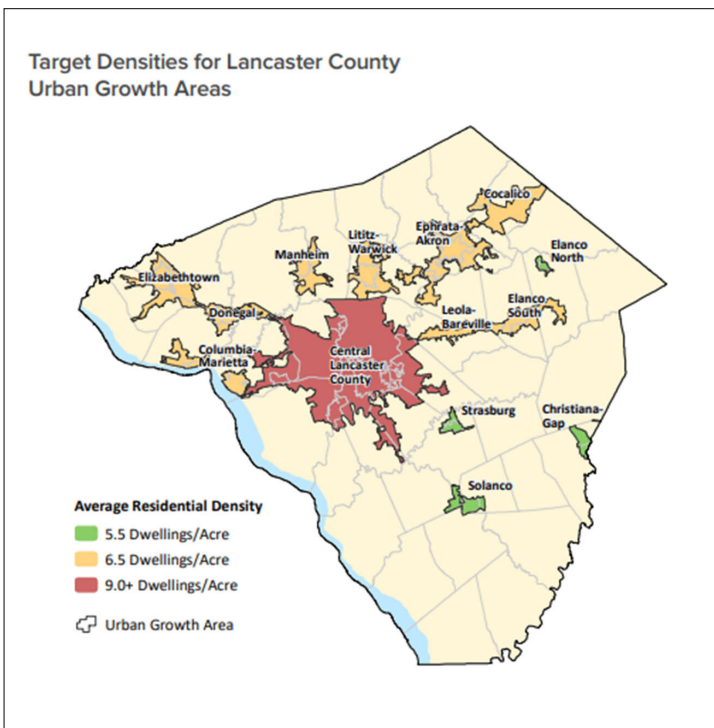
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barrier to expansion and clearly define an edge to the community. Another idea is to expand the town's street pattern while using existing infrastructure capacity, with development ending at an agricultural zone on the community's edge.

In communities surrounded by open space that are not experiencing much growth, the edge can be a transition zone where clustered homes on small lots give way to agricultural uses. Some communities reinforce this approach by limiting utility extensions and prohibiting septic systems in the undeveloped land beyond the edge of town.

These remedies address only the properties at or near a town's edge. In more rural areas, lower densities — 1- to 5-acre lots — are often encouraged in the belief that they will help preserve an area's rural character. These densities, however, most frequently translate into low-density, cookie-cutter subdivisions, with streets and homes that are more typical of suburban, rather than rural, communities.



Lancaster County's comprehensive plan, *places2040*, encourages municipalities to implement ordinances that support targeted growth areas in both urban and rural settings. Though progress has been made, the county has updated its plan, calling for more incentives for developers to convert underused properties, reserving areas over 40 acres as "growth opportunity areas" for mixed use and non-residential uses, and limiting large-lot suburban development in rural areas.

This type of rural development leads to expensive infrastructure to serve a minimal number of units, reliance on septic systems (which have a limited capacity over time), a land use pattern that is difficult or impossible to intensify later, and farmland that becomes fragmented by large-lot homes, which means little possibility of carrying on true agriculture or maintaining farm animals in these areas. One exception where this pattern can work is in some areas near cities, where 5 to 10 acres can support a productive farm-to-market business.

To slow the pace of agricultural and other natural lands being lost to low-density development and to preserve your community's rural sense of place, consider targeting new mixed-use development in close proximity to historic villages or existing hubs of economic activity and public resources in the community.

If your community is struggling with these challenges, consider the following modifications to your planning and ordinances:

Density and Design Adjustments

- Develop design regulations that require street connectivity with adjacent neighborhoods and create land use district transitions to adjacent agricultural or undeveloped areas.
- Allow and incentivize cluster or conservation subdivisions at the edge of town to transition to true rural areas.
- Designate locations for small hamlets in rural areas to serve as local service centers for residents. Focus small business development efforts in these areas.
- Allow for mixed-use development, taking cues from existing historical development patterns.
- Prioritize public works improvements and investment in existing town or village centers. Create incentives to encourage well-designed development adjacent to town to make the best use of these investments.
- Adopt true agricultural zone districts (one unit per 20 to 80 or more acres). The size of these districts can vary somewhat depending on geographic region, sites, soils, and the type of agricultural business. Encourage use of conservation easements in these districts.
- Set minimum, rather than maximum, densities in areas designated for growth.

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Right-size Rural Roads

Rural roads help define rural character and community image — from a narrow, winding road through the mountains to a walkable, tree-lined neighborhood street to a bustling downtown Main Street. Many residents in rural areas want safe roads that also maintain a rural character and avoid the uniformity frequently imposed by conventional roadway design standards.

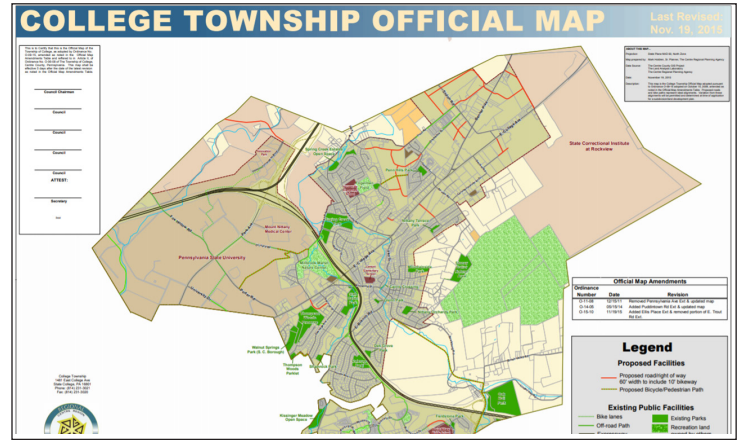
Under PennDOT Connects, local governments have a greater opportunity to work with PennDOT to use transportation funding to modify the road right-of-way so that it works better for the community and accommodates multiple modes of travel.

This can be particularly true for a town's Main Street, which is often a state road and under state control. Many communities are finding new approaches to balance the needs of pedestrians, shoppers, employees, business owners, and residents with the need for through traffic. They are finding ways to make streets public spaces that are both enjoyable and functional.

Narrower cartways with ample sidewalks for pedestrians naturally calm traffic, while wider streets



Pottstown, Pa., put one of its main streets on a road diet. The original roadway was four lanes wide, with parallel parking on each side and no turning lanes at intersections. The roadway was redesigned as two through-travel lanes, two bike lanes, and angle parking on one side. Turning lanes were added at intersections. The improvement allowed more parking and more multi-modal access to the main street businesses in Pottstown.



Though underutilized by municipalities, official maps are a great tool to communicate plans for road and trail linkages. The official map of College Township identifies proposed roadways/rights-of-way and proposed bicycle/pedestrian paths in addition to typical existing natural and built features of the township.

encourage faster driving regardless of posted speed limits. The same street design changes that calm traffic also make streets more attractive, are safer for pedestrians and bicyclists, and can help protect a historic Main Street's distinctive character. Complete streets — those designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, and drivers — provide these options for residents.

A good walking environment in rural areas and around towns can include trail networks that are fully integrated with the on-street pedestrian and bicycle network, so that residents can use trails and greenways from outlying areas to and from town, not just for recreation. An integrated network of complete streets and trails should connect rural and in-town neighborhoods, transit routes, downtown, neighborhood parks, and recreation areas, so that walking, biking, and transit are fully supported transportation choices.

The network should include safe street crossings using techniques appropriate to the town's character and context, such as mid-block crosswalks, median islands, curb bulb-outs to shorten crossing distances, or roundabouts at key intersections. A well-connected network gives people more route choices instead of forcing all traffic onto one wide arterial street, so streets can be narrower. Typically, allowing narrower streets requires adjusting the subdivision ordinance and street specifications. Making sure that streets are right-sized — in other words, only as big as required — can save on construction and operating costs.

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Design Elements

New development in Rural landscapes should have a limited impact on rural vistas and character and should include the following design elements:

BUILDING CHARACTER

- Clustered residential development screened by open space, woodlands, and natural land form
- Retention and reuse of existing historic buildings, hedgerows, tree lines, stone walls, and fences

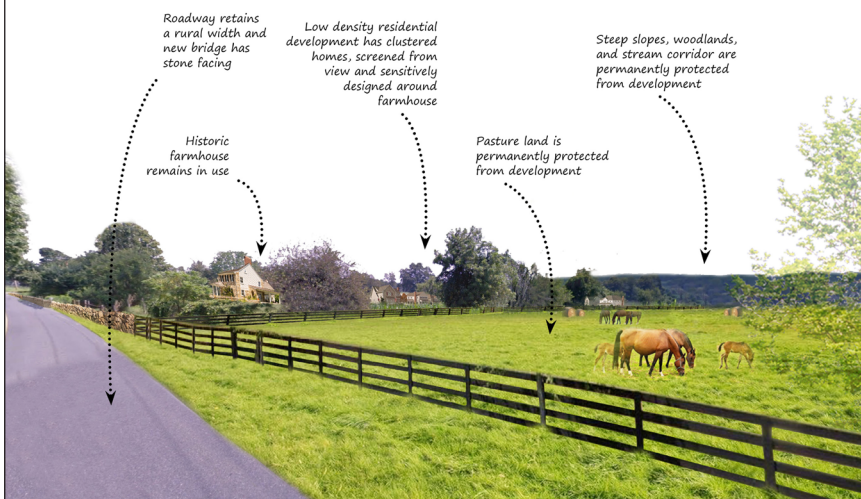
SITE AMENITIES

- Large areas of open space with stream valleys, woodlands, wetlands, steep slopes, viewsheds, historic landscapes, and agriculture
- In larger developments, usable open space with recreational amenities

TRANSPORTATION

- Rural lanes and narrow streets
- Roads, bridges, fences, signs, and walls that fit rural character
- Trails and pathways within developments connecting to local and regional trail networks

Example Scenario: In this Rural scenario, most of a large property is preserved as agricultural fields and environmentally-sensitive land, while new homes are clustered together and screened from view.



For rural areas, Chester County's comprehensive plan offers visual guidance on designing roads that are conducive to use by bicyclists but not widened to suburban or urban standards.

Credit: Lanscapes3, Chester County Planning Commission

Outside of the downtown, many rural towns have corridors of spread-out stores and other commercial uses. In many places, the streetscape is designed for cars to move quickly, not for people to walk. Redeveloping these corridors is an effective way to add new housing, shopping, and community facilities near existing neighborhoods.

Road Design Adjustments for People and Cars

- Explore a complete streets policy. Urban, suburban, or rural municipalities may adopt such a policy that requires the consideration of all modes of transportation. Such a policy might require bike, pedestrian, and transit facilities on all new or rebuilt local roads.

- Conduct a walking audit of neighborhood streets, reviewing the street widths and other characteristics, including those that seem to work well, as a first step in developing new street design guidelines based on the existing characteristics.
- Conduct a parking survey to count all available public and private parking spaces in the downtown area as a first step in developing a parking strategy. This strategy should look realistically at the amount and location of parking needed for the entire district, rather than requiring each property to provide all of the parking spaces potentially required for its operations.
- Conduct a planning study for a major corridor to re-engineer the roadway and plan for development that will be "transit ready" when bus or other transit comes. Communities can implement this approach gradually through site-planning requirements, modifications to mixed-use requirements, density requirements, and parking regulations as the transit system is enhanced and extended.
- Create a bike/pedestrian plan to identify ways to make walking and bicycling safer and more appealing. Larger-scale improvements are often needed to improve cycling conditions along rural roads. These improvements include signage for vehicles and bicyclists,

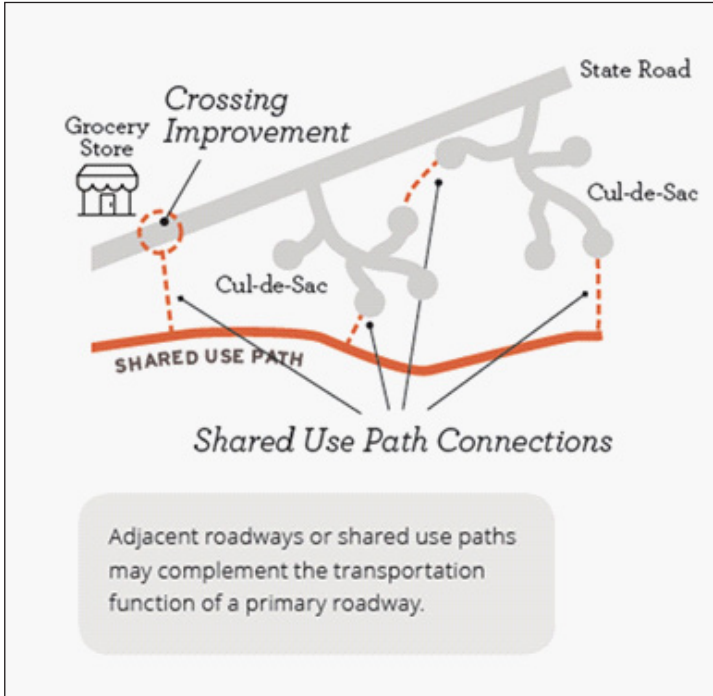
bridge repairs and replacements, shoulder repairs and adequate pavement widths, and rumble strip repairs. Work with PennDOT to explore funding these investments along state-owned roads.

Design Standards

- Develop and adopt street connectivity regulations for new development areas. Require that all new roadways and trails follow design and connectivity standards and that any new development reserve terminus points to adjacent undeveloped property for future required connection.
- Start a street tree-planting program, since shade and buffering from vehicles are critical to pedestrian

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Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks is a guidebook by the Federal Highway Administration that provides design information on bicycle and pedestrian facilities specifically applicable to small towns and rural communities.

comfort; street standards could encourage or require tree-lined streets.

- Encourage alleys in compact, walkable residential districts but with a narrower paved or graveled width (usually 10 to 12 feet) and an easement for utilities (usually 20 feet overall). In a residential grid, alleys should connect across blocks to make garbage pickup easier. In commercial areas, most communities that have alleys require them to be at least 24 feet wide to allow dumpster access and deliveries.
- Require shared parking for commercial businesses, public and community facilities, and downtown developments. Develop a parking management plan to take advantage of existing supply and reduce parking requirements for new buildings and redevelopment accordingly.
- Convert one-way streets to two-way streets to improve walkability and mobility and make it easier for customers to reach businesses in the town center.

Source: Article includes excerpts from “Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Rural Planning, Zoning and Development Codes” (EPA).

FEATURED RESOURCES

Adaptive Reuse — Repurposing Old Buildings

Adaptive reuse is a land use term for an old adage — make the most from what you have. It involves the creative reuse and repurposing of older buildings while maintaining selected architectural features. It’s one way to manage growth by redirecting it to already established areas and thereby reducing the burden of providing public services to undeveloped or less developed land.

A number of PennDOT planning partners have excellent resources that can be used to introduce adaptive reuse to your municipality:

Montgomery County Planning Commission’s [Rethinking Institutional Properties — Embracing our Past and Investing in our Future](#) is available as both a guidebook and online story map (great for sharing at a municipal or public meeting or workshop). These tools provide best practice guidelines and resources that can be used by communities to prepare for changes in institutional land use.



Chester County’s online planning toolbox includes a section on adaptive reuse that outlines its advantages, limitations, and process for municipalities to consider when looking at adopting new ordinances governing the reuse of older buildings and properties.

Adaptive Reuse Projects in the City of Lancaster provides case studies with information on property selection and acquisition, architectural design challenges and innovations, and financial tools and incentives used to make the projects economically viable.

FEATURED DISTRICT: DISTRICT 4

Flexibility is the Key

PennDOT District Planner Steve Fisher promotes PennDOT Connects with a dose of practicality. Given its highly rural character in northeastern Pennsylvania, District 4 includes many municipalities that have limited staff — there may be one or two people on the roads and a part-time secretary who wears five other hats.



PennDOT District 4

“That can make coordination efforts difficult,” says Fisher. “The biggest service I can offer them is information sharing and accessibility.”

At PennDOT Connects meetings, Fisher shares

information on project details and training and funding opportunities. MPO and RPO staff routinely participate to help address planning concerns. As a liaison, Fisher directs concerns to the right people, whether they are within or outside PennDOT; he increasingly refers land use concerns or questions to the Department of Community and Economic Development’s regional planner, who attends local meetings when the need arises for land use planning expertise.

In Fisher’s experience, there’s no cookie-cutter approach to the PennDOT Connects process. “Especially in this area, you need to be flexible so it can fit the uniqueness of the region and project type,” he says. “On some projects, you’re going to get a whole checklist of issues; other projects are rural bridges on a four-digit state route, and you may not have any issues at all.

“We are a small fraction of their (municipalities’) everyday business,” Fisher says. “If we can be another name, face, and point of contact to make their lives easier, they will continue to have an open dialogue with us. If we start to become a nuisance or add red tape to the process, we won’t hear from them anymore. I think Connects is working in the capacity that it exists now. Municipalities appreciate the meetings we’ve had, and we’ve heard positive things about our approach.”

FEATURED PROJECT: DISTRICT 4

New Bridge Avoids Bike/Ped Conflict

SR 407 – Benton Township, Lackawanna County

A bridge repair project along State Route 407 in Benton Township, Lackawanna County, will soon accommodate access to surrounding bike/ped trails.

With guiderails extending beyond the ends of the existing structure, access to adjacent trails is totally impeded. So PennDOT reached out to the Lackawanna State Park and Countryside Conservancy, whose suggestions led to a design in which the guiderails flow off the bridge and allow free access to a path beneath the bridge.

The project exemplifies the intent of PennDOT Connects that if the possibility exists to avoid conflicts between users, then do it. The project is expected to be constructed in mid-to-late 2020.



The dotted red line is the potential trail connection from parking lot to a main trail.

Guiderails along an existing bridge that crosses Lackawanna Lake along State Route 407 prevent access to adjacent bike/ped trails in Benton Township.



The Importance of Visioning

What would you like your community to be in 10 years? What does that look like?

Many municipal officials cannot answer that question, often because they are not aware of past visioning efforts or they are mired in the day-to-day administration of municipal life. But having and articulating a clear vision is important.

“Vision statements help your organization focus on what is really important and provide a basis for developing other aspects of your strategic plan,” says Sally Holbert, a member of PennDOT Connects outreach team.

A vision statement is a clear, definitive statement of what you want to accomplish over the next 10 to 20 years and what the world will look like once you've accomplished your mission. It reflects community values as they relate to sense of place and the cultural, environmental, and economic health that is truly unique to every community.

“Your community’s vision statement becomes like a sign post or target,” says Holbert. “When you have decisions to make, whether it is new policy or reviewing a development proposal, your vision statement is something to check in with to see if the decision or the proposal to be made is fitting within the community’s vision.”

Conducting visioning at the start of the planning process establishes a foundation upon which to build and evaluate the rest of the process. Because the focus is on what is possible (desirable), it is POSITIVE and can be energizing for the rest of the process to come.

“So often, we approach our daily work from a problem-solving perspective, and we ask the question ‘what’s not working?’” explains Holbert. “Then we try to figure out how we are going to fix it. The problem-solving approach, while practical and effective in certain contexts, is too negative and narrow for visioning.”

There are many community engagement techniques that can be used to conduct a visioning workshop. If you would like assistance on how to plan a visioning exercise for your community, call PennDOT Connects at 717-710-2090 or email paconnects@pa.gov.



Visioning workshops can be casual and fun. Have lots of graphics around the room showing pictures of pleasant places, visually appealing streetscapes, beautiful architecture, important historic areas, and maps of your community.

Visioning Resources

Using Visioning in a Comprehensive Planning Process
Area Plans

What is visioning?
Visioning is a process by which a community defines the future it wants. Through public involvement, committees identify their purpose, core values and vision of the future.

TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS

- Economic sectors: agriculture, manufacturing, services, tourism, others.
- Organizations: art and culture, unions, churches, environmental, youth others.
- Local government: elected officials, public transportation, housing, others.
- Personal characteristics: age, ethnicity, sex, income level, homeowners/tenants, others.
- Political views: conservative/liberal/moderate and pro- and anti-growth.

This [six-page guide](#) provides an overview of visioning as it relates to local government comprehensive planning. (University of Wisconsin Extension)

**Planning for the Future:
A Handbook on
Community Visioning**
Fourth Edition

This fourth-edition [guidebook](#) by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania provides basic information on creating a vision. Worksheets are included.

Community Heart & Soul
Guided by What Matters Most
FIELD GUIDE

[Heart & Soul](#) is a method developed by the Orton Family Foundation aimed at engaging everyone in laying the foundation for what’s most important to communities. This field guide provides a four-phase methodology.

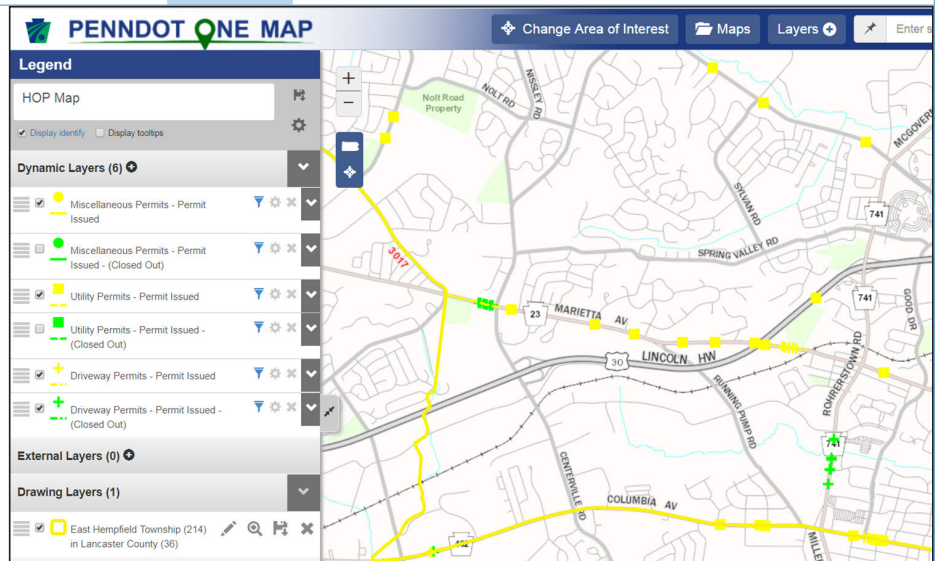
TECH ASSIST FEATURE QUESTION

How can my community view HOP permits?

PennDOT issues a variety of highway occupancy permits (HOPs) to property owners, developers, utility companies, municipalities, and municipal authorities that require access to a state road.

For permits in the process of being approved, early coordination between municipalities and PennDOT is strongly encouraged to improve access management opportunities at both the corridor and community levels. Municipalities may have the opportunity to influence mitigation options and alternative transportation plans through their coordination with the department. PennDOT encourages municipalities to participate in the permitting process for applications within their jurisdictions. Contact your local [PennDOT district office](#) to be placed on its contact list.

Municipalities can also view issued HOPs using [PennDOT's One Map](#), a web-based GIS mapping



[PennDOT's One Map](#) can be queried to show HOPs and other permits by location.

application for accessing highway and bridge project data for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Once online, simply choose your area of interest and select the HOP map template. To see the permits clearly, you must zoom into the map. You can toggle the data layers on and off (left-hand side of the screen) to see various permit types.

PennDOT and its Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Rural Planning Organization (RPO) partners have a long-standing relationship jointly preparing transportation studies, plans, and programs to make the best possible transportation project investments with available resources.

This strategic alliance is now of even greater importance for implementing PennDOT Connects. Together, the MPO/RPO planning partners and PennDOT can effectively collaborate and communicate with municipalities — and other community stakeholders (e.g., transit operators, economic development agencies, etc.) — to improve transportation system performance and achieve more livable communities.

Municipalities, MPO/RPO planning partners, and PennDOT must collaborate to ensure that opportunities to improve transportation and communities are realized. MPO/RPO contacts can be found at:

www.penndot.gov/ProjectAndPrograms/Planning/Pages/MPO-and-RPO-Contact-List.aspx.



Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
 Web: paconnects.org
 Email: PAConnects@pa.gov
 Phone: 717-710-2090



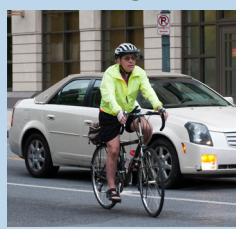
Transportation Planning: Connecting with Community Priorities



Mobility & Efficiency



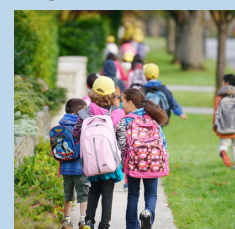
Multimodal Transportation



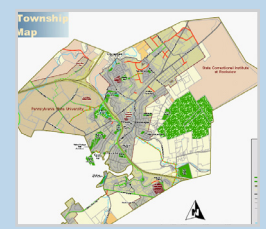
Safety



Community Character



Project Funding



Accommodating Growth