

Valley Vision 2020: *A Plan for Pennsylvania's Heartland* Focus Group Summary Report

In February 2007, focus groups were hosted in each of the five sub-regions of the SEDA-COG regional plan study area. The following is a summary of the overarching themes heard in these focus groups.

Among the most heavily emphasized points in all five of the focus groups was the need for quality infrastructure to support economic development. These infrastructure elements ranged from maintaining an adequately functioning road and rail-based transportation network to the provision of broadband and WIFI access, particularly in the region's smaller core communities. Also emphasized across all five focus groups were concerns about the region's excessive number of local municipalities which present a significant barrier to effective planning at multiple scales. Redundancy, fiscal inefficiency, and a lack of inter-municipal cooperation and coordination were cited as common consequences resulting from the cumbersome structure of local government. Participants from throughout the region agreed that the state has a role to play in helping local government leaders focus on the benefits of thinking and planning regionally.

Comments were made in a majority of focus groups about the constraints that the state's tax structure places on economic development. Also mentioned were state permitting processes and regulations which tend to slow down and, in some cases, deter economic development projects altogether. Participants recurrently felt that the state must address these barriers in order to encourage desired development and redevelopment throughout the region's communities.

A common trend was noted across the region that young people are leaving the area to find better quality, higher paying jobs, often out-of-state, and that action is needed to create opportunities that encourage educated young people to stay and make a difference in their communities. Across the region, recurring concern was expressed over the growth of low paying service sector jobs. In two focus groups, a need for workforce training and re-training tailored to nationally growing and higher paying job sectors was mentioned as critical to creating a qualified workforce that will support the attraction and retention of these quality jobs. The role of the media in shaping positive perceptions of the region's quality of life was also noted as critical to attracting and retaining workforce numbers.

A recurring emphasis was placed on better coordination between public and private sectors when planning for large investments and developments. It was suggested that a core group of people representing a diversity of regional interests, including local municipal officials, county planners, RPO/MPO representatives, state legislators, and the Governors Action Team, come together to evaluate projects of regional impact.

Mountain Top Sub-Region

Much of the discussion in the Mountain Top sub-regional focus group centered on issues related to economic development. Participants discussed the need to provide and maintain quality infrastructure (including broadband & cell phone service) in core communities to support economic development, particularly for smaller-scale industries (employing around 15-20 people) and those in the nationally growing service sector. Locally, participants wished to curb the growth of the retail sector which typically generates lower paying jobs. Support was expressed for appropriate, context-sensitive economic development in rural areas and the adaptive reuse of brownfield sites.

Frustration was expressed about the impact of the sub-region's proximity to State College. Participants felt that the state's economic development funds are too often channeled to bring outside business interests into these higher-profile communities, while the business potential of outlying communities gets overlooked. A need was expressed for the state to target more of its resources to local start up businesses, particularly in those areas already served by some kind of infrastructure. A regional mechanism for communication about economic development opportunities of all scales was suggested, including access to information about funding and assistance available to start ups. Initiation of a parallel marketing and promotion campaign was also recommended to inform people of how they can access this information.

Among factors cited as barriers to economic growth and regionalization were inefficient functioning across levels of government, unions, the state's tax structure, and restrictive government regulations. In particular, a disproportionate amount of decision making at the local level was said to result in redundancy, inefficiency, and a lack of resources to support the appropriate functioning of local government. NIMBY responses to new development projects in the local community were also mentioned as a common occurrence that tends to inhibit economic development. Participants expressed a desire for incentives at the state level to encourage regionalization, including tying financial support to coordination and cooperation. Promoting the potential tax savings as a result of regionalization of services was cited as a good first step to encouraging regional thinking.

Primary concerns about land use related to the fact that zoning ordinances are often outdated and do not reflect local preferences with respect to growth and or mesh with the county comprehensive plan. A need for consistency in land use planning across municipalities was also expressed, especially in areas dealing with similar issues. Rural government consolidation was suggested as one approach to encourage consistency in land use planning, some arguing that it should not be state mandated and others feeling that it was the only possible way to make it happen.

Regarding state agency coordination, a comment was made that new programs are initiated and new priorities set with each new administration often resulting in inefficient services provided by individual agencies. Participants argued for an overall mission at the state level to better enable communities to plan and implement projects.

Central Valleys Sub-Region

Participants of the Central Valleys sub-regional focus group identified a number of issues relevant to housing, economic development, transportation and land use. The growing need for affordable housing was recognized as a priority issue throughout Centre County as land in and around State College is developed. Related to this trend is a transition in regional employment to lower paying service sector jobs. As a result, development pressure is expected to increase in Clinton County as demand for workforce housing extends beyond Centre County's ability to accommodate it. Concerns were raised about the lack of infrastructure to support this additional growth, particularly in the more rural communities.

The resulting commuting patterns from this spatial mismatch between jobs and housing is expected to place additional demand on existing transportation networks. It was noted that this trend places the rural elderly population at a disadvantage since they already have limited access to transportation options. Participants felt that as the region's population ages, the demand to transport people to services will increase, and not enough funding is currently being allocated to support this future need. The lack of funding to complete the I-99 corridor in Centre County and connect to I-80 was also cited as a significant transportation concern relating to future economic development.

This sub-region also noted a loss of jobs in smaller communities and concern about future decline in workforce numbers, attributable to a loss of young people and an aging population. A need was expressed for workforce training and re-training to competitively position the area to attract the types of businesses that bring higher paying jobs.

With respect to business attraction and retention, it was acknowledged that high-tech niche market businesses are attracted to State College, while outlying rural communities struggle to attract new development due to a lack of adequate infrastructure (broadband, etc). While brownfield redevelopment was acknowledged as a laudable goal, participants noted that businesses are generally not interested in dealing with the barriers and challenges associated with the adaptive reuse of these sites and are typically more inclined to develop at greenfield locations. As a result, antiquated industrial areas are often left vacant. Participants expressed a desire for state support to clear these sites and make them readily available for start-up businesses. In addition, a desire was expressed for heightened visibility of the state's inventory of available sites coupled with an inter-agency "fast track" system to help speed up permitting and implementation of quality development and redevelopment projects.

Better communication and coordination is desired between the public and private sectors when large-scale investments are being planned. A recommendation was made to assemble a core group of individuals, including local officials, county planning agencies, RPO's & MPO's, and the Governors Action Team, to evaluate and respond to these projects and opportunities as they arise. In addition, participants felt that a regional capital improvements plan was needed to help direct future economic growth and development. A desire for better coordination and cooperation between Chambers of

Commerce was also expressed, as was a recommendation that information from the state's Business Retention & Expansion Program (BREP) be better coordinated with the local Chambers.

In terms of land use, a lack of consistency between zoning and comprehensive plans was cited as a substantial barrier to achieving a preferred pattern of future development. This is complicated by fragmentation, parochialism, and competition between communities; a lack of professional planning capacity at the municipal level; and a general lack of awareness on the value of planning and regional thinking as it relates to quality of community and economic development. Creating incentives to encourage intergovernmental cooperation was cited as a fundamental need to achieve sound and effective land use planning throughout the region. Desire was also expressed for mixed-use zoning to support downtown development and redevelopment and developer incentives to invest in smart growth in the region's core communities. Improved public education, beginning in the schools, on the value of regional cooperation with respect to planning was also recommended.

Juniata Valley Sub-Region

It should be noted that representation and, therefore, the findings from the Juniata Valley focus group unintentionally favored Mifflin and Juniata Counties, despite the fact that Perry County is considered a part of this sub-region. Because of the notable differences in growth pressures among these counties, a subsequent interview was planned with representatives from Perry County.

Discussion about future economic development in the Juniata Valley sub-region ranged from the region's ability to attract and retain quality jobs to protecting quality of life in the face of the region's future growth. Although some in the group commented on a need to attract manufacturing jobs, a strong desire was expressed for economic development that focuses on local assets, noting that growth does not always have to entail bringing in something from the outside. Participants felt that state dollars could be used to leverage reinvestment and revitalization in the area's core communities by helping to absorb a share of the risk for these types of projects. A comment was made about the need to avoid attracting only low-paying service sector jobs to the area. It was also noted that currently the area's greatest job growth is in sectors funded by public sector programs, such as education.

Barriers to economic development cited by the focus group participants included a burdensome state tax structure and inconsistent broadband coverage across the region. Strategic WIFI locations and partnerships with local Intermediate Units to provide internet access were suggested as possible approaches. Cumbersome state agency regulations were said to deter a forward-thinking approach to good quality economic development projects (ex. stream dams for water recreation). It was also mentioned that competitive out-of-state wages tend to draw the trained local workforce out of the region. A desire was expressed for a community college to supply work force training and attract future employers and employees to area. Lewistown Hospital's successful creation of a nursing school in cooperation with St. Francis Hospital was cited as a major win on this front.

Scenery, a lack of a commute and affordable cost of living were stated as some of the area's more marketable qualities. Despite these assets, participants felt that negative attitudes in the community often act as a deterrent to attracting outsiders to the area. The group felt that local media could be better utilized to play up the region's strengths and improve the overall image of the community. In addition, participants noted that the area's lack of primary care services was another disincentive to attracting people to the area. A volunteer-based primary care center model employing a partnership between regional hospitals and doctors was suggested as a possible solution to this problem. Increasing the diversity of businesses in downtown Lewistown, including dining, lodging and entertainment was expressed as a win-win opportunity to generate desirable local economic development, while enhancing the area's quality of life. Participants also saw an opportunity to market Lewistown's affordable housing stock in response to growth pressure from State College.

As in the majority of sub-regional focus groups, duplication of services resulting from too many municipalities and agencies not working together was mentioned as a major barrier. Team Mifflin County has developed a strategy to address this duplication of effort to achieve common goals for the area. It was also noted that the state has a role to play in tackling this issue by tying financial incentives to inter-municipal cooperation.

Finally, some transportation issues were raised with respect to economic development. The completion of I-99 between State College and Lewistown was mentioned as fundamental to accommodating future economic growth in the region. Greenway and open space connections, specifically between Reidsville and Milroy were also noted as desirable to achieving both transportation and recreational goals. Participants identified an opportunity for reuse of existing rail infrastructure for a commuter rail line connecting Harrisburg to State College, offering the potential to tie the workforce and affordable housing potential of the area's existing core communities to the region's larger job centers.

Anthracite Sub-Region

In the Anthracite sub-regional focus group, the conversation began with the identification of the immediately noticeable problems in the physical environment. Participants spoke of the large number of illegal dumps in the region and tied this to a lack of respect for the environment. This disrespect for the physical environment was considered to be a learned behavior that has transcended several generations in this area. In addition, disinvestment in a significant amount of residential and commercial properties in the area has created what many referred to as a blighted situation. Participants of this focus group drew a connection between the physical state of their communities and the affect it has on the current and future economic health of the region. There was a strong feeling that the negative stewardship of the land has severely impaired the economic and tourism prospects for this area.

Participants of this focus group considered the Anthracite sub-region to have tremendous potential for outdoor recreation and wished to see the area's trails, stream corridors, and wildlife habitat cleaned up and marketed for recreational purposes. They mentioned a DEP clean-up program called COALS (Clean Up Our Anthracite Lands & Streams) that has started to remove trash from illegal dump sites and has established an environmental resource center at local schools. Participants felt these efforts have been worthwhile and that much more needs to be done to overcome negative perceptions about the area.

Frustration was expressed about how the communities have changed over the last several decades. This sub-region has not seen the development of sustainable business and industry after the decline of the coal industry. Today, although the school district is a tremendous asset and resource to the area, the fact that it is the second largest regional employer is a sign of economic depression. High quality jobs do not exist here; therefore, high school students are encouraged to leave the area after graduation in search of sound employment. The residential market has also suffered as a result of the area's economic decline. One participant remarked that housing is so affordable that in some cases, it is cheaper to buy a house than a car. This has caused property owners and real estate agents to market the area's low rents in cities like New York and Philadelphia. This has attracted an unemployable and service-needy segment of the population that places overwhelming economic burdens on the community. Participants felt that the needs of the changing population need to be assessed and programs need to be tailored accordingly to help this situation. Likewise, they felt that realtors and rental property owners should be discouraged from marketing the area's low rents outside of the community.

Although there was a sentiment that the core communities of Shamokin and Mt. Carmel should provide funds to assist in the removal of blighted properties, it was also suggested that they do a better job of enforcing ordinances to prevent future blight. In many areas, blight removal is needed to provide ground for new development and to enhance the surrounding property values. It was noted that core infrastructure is an asset (ie. roads, rail, sewer) to service new industry. If new industry can be enticed to locate in the area, focus group participants were very interested in seeing "green" businesses that process

wastewater on-site for reuse. The group believed that this kind of business activity would contribute positively to changing perceptions of the coal region. The recreational potential of reclaimed mining land was also noted. The group felt that these types of projects should be supported and promoted both regionally and statewide.

Better communication and coordination is desired between state agencies, the Industrial Development Corporations (IDC's), SEDA-COG, and others to identify and direct opportunities for economic development. The participants asked for a stronger unified voice between these entities that is supportive of quality redevelopment in the Anthracite region. They also asked that a clearinghouse for developable sites be advertised regionally and statewide. They want to be included in planning for the region's future. It was clear that this part of the SEDA-COG region feels very isolated due to the fragmentation of governmental bodies and other authorities.

With regards to transportation and land use, participants from this sub-region felt that its assets are underutilized and not recognized. For example, the existing rail lines are seen as an asset, but need to be expanded and utilized to attract new industry. Without rail improvements, existing transportation networks are inadequate to bring new economic development opportunity to the area. Likewise, the recreational potential of the area's waterways are not being tapped because of poor water quality that stems from acid mine drainage. Furthermore, a forest management plan was suggested to protect large tracts of undeveloped land from future development pressure. Participants felt that landscape conservation was integral to the sustained future and appeal of the Anthracite region and that local and regional entities must work together to plan for appropriate development, redevelopment, conservation and preservation.

Middle Susquehanna Valley Sub-Region

As with the other four focus groups, the participants of the Middle Susquehanna sub-regional focus group cited the lack of cooperation between municipalities and regional agencies as being a hindrance to quality economic development. In particular, this group felt that a myriad of local regulations discourages businesses from wanting to locate here. Conversation in this focus group progressed from discussion about the need for more shovel-ready sites for big business and industry to focusing on downtown and core community redevelopment and concluded with recognition that the region needs to have a unified vision to guide it toward the future.

This group advocated for breaking down agency and organizational barriers that contribute to poor coordination and duplication of effort. They spoke of government restructuring to eliminate excessive municipal boundaries and develop a climate of cooperation and coordination among communities and school districts. The group believed that there needs to be agreement about what kind of economic development is desired within the region, where it should be located, how to get it here and what quality of life people want. Once that is achieved, resources can go toward creating shovel-ready sites and spec-ready buildings in targeted growth areas. Until that time, there will continue to be competition between downtowns and greenfield business parks and between economic development organizations.

Several other barriers to sound economic development were identified in the focus group. It was acknowledged that the local municipalities often do not have the financial capacity to provide the appropriate infrastructure to attract business; therefore, decisions about business types and locations are often made by those outside of the community. Also, since municipalities are frequently small and understaffed, they are perceived as not having the capacity to make economic development happen effectively and efficiently. Regulations and permits are seen as confusing and burdensome, and businesses make choices based on what's easiest rather than what's best for the community. A need for a central clearinghouse of information and resources was encouraged, particularly when dealing with state agency processes.

Focus group participants wished to see the Commonwealth place more of an emphasis on downtown development and redevelopment. They acknowledged that the expense and complicated nature of downtown sites often inhibits their redevelopment. Participants wanted to see additional incentives and barriers removed to support the resurgence of the region's core communities. The contribution of small business to the region's overall economic health was also seen as underappreciated. Most DCED programs were said to focus on large scale job creation; however, increases in small business were seen by the group as a sign of community health and a future economic trend.

Participants believed that economic development in the region needs to shift from short-term strategizing about getting a tenant to a site to long range planning for sustainable economic growth. In addition, participants felt that community leaders need to be able to periodically revise their future vision based on changes that are occurring in the

economy, marketplace, and environment. They felt that these leaders must work to address the forces of change that compromise the quality of life of future generations. For example, a comment was made that all of the region's suburban areas look the same to the detriment of the area's unique historic communities; therefore uncontrolled and un-contextual growth must be better managed.

It was noted that national trends suggest that future job growth in this region will be in the technology, service, and health care industries. However, participants noted a deficiency in the skilled labor force as baby-boomers retire and young workers continue to leave the area. It was suggested that young people be involved in future economic visioning so they can help develop the potential growth areas and be more inclined to stay and contribute to the region. The schools and universities, among other great assets, need to be promoted as part of the identity and quality of life in central PA.

With regards to land use and transportation, discussion revolved mostly around the Central Susquehanna Valley Thruway (CSVT) project. For years, the future of the CSVT has been uncertain, and, to some extent, it is still not absolutely certain that it will be built. This uncertainty has slowed local development and redevelopment prospects. Although the CSVT will alleviate traffic congestion on several local arterials (US Rtes 11, 15, and PA 147), the anticipated growth and development associated with this project will likely cause transportation and development pressures in municipalities that aren't ready to handle it. In particular, the CSVT Bridge will have a major interchange in a township that does not have a zoning ordinance. Concern was expressed about the land use implications the CSVT will have on communities around this region if sound regulations are not put in place.

The final segment of this focus group session revolved around the development of a future regional vision. There was agreement that the region's scenic agricultural lands and historic communities are central to its quality of life. Downtowns and core communities continue to be major economic drivers, and participants felt that reinvesting in these places would have a profound impact on sustaining quality of life in the Valley. Many felt that a certain portion of all economic development dollars should be invested in revitalization efforts. They foresee an increase in people making location decisions based on where they want to live because they can work from home (telecommuting). High speed Internet infrastructure is needed in core communities to support the economic competitiveness of the overall region.

The group identified two potential niche markets for this region: high-skilled manufacturing and retirement communities, both related to the cluster of health and higher education institutions. It was envisioned that the region would someday have more jobs than available workforce and that people who come to the area to be trained for high-skilled jobs will be compelled to stay and make Central PA their long-term home.