

# Summary of Focus Groups

Lycoming County 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update  
April – May 2016



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## **Focus Group Overview**

As part of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan community outreach strategy, Lycoming County conducted a series of focus group meetings with key stakeholders representing a cross-section of the County. Each meeting concentrated on a specific subject area and included participants from organizations with relevant subject matter expertise, including: local governments, County government, emergency service providers, utility providers, municipal authorities, non-profits, for-profit businesses, community leaders and others.

Focus Group meetings were conducted as facilitated open discussions to foster meaningful conversation related to current trends, issues and areas of focus relevant to the development of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan. The Lycoming County Planning Department opened each meeting with participant introductions followed by an overview of the Comprehensive Plan including its purpose, planning process and intended outcomes. The remainder of each meeting was used for open discussion among participants, guided by a consultant team utilizing targeted questions relevant to each topic area. The findings of these meetings were incorporated into the identification of thematic local and county-wide issues and the development of priority projects and initiatives to be included in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan and Multi-Municipal Plans.

Each Focus Group was conducted over 2 hours and was held at the Lycoming County Executive Plaza Building in Williamsport, PA. Included below is an overview of each focus group including summaries of key discussion topics.

## **Economic Development**

The Economic Development Focus Group included participants representing a range of organizations invested in the County's local and regional economies. Invitees included small businesses, chambers of commerce, real estate developers, manufacturers, the regional workforce development organization, trade unions, hospitals, local colleges, and business associations, among others. The primary purpose of this group was to identify key challenges currently facing short and long term economic growth, opportunities to leverage existing economic assets and successes, and ideas for improving business retention, recruitment and expansion. Specific discussion topics included: key economic drivers; connections between local industries and the current and future workforce; workforce trends; small business challenges; job training; barriers to recruitment and retention; long-term economic resilience; housing needs of current and future populations; infrastructure and utility needs; intergovernmental coordination; regulations; growth areas; access to new activities and amenities; opportunities to leverage the larger employers in the county; and a variety of quality of life improvements.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- There is a need to support new and better access to assets and amenities including: more amenities to attract and retain young professionals; strengthening partnerships among cultural/arts/entertainment assets and organizations; improving access to and leverage of key assets/amenities; finding new uses for vacant or underutilized sites; and improving the airport as an economic driver.
- A key to economic growth and development is capitalizing on the County's primary drivers including manufacturing and food processing, higher education institutions, healthcare facilities, hospitality and tourism businesses, and arts and entertainment industries.
- It is important to improve connections between key industries and the current/future workforce including: creating additional employment opportunities for under-educated or under-trained workforce; better connect with changing work expectations of younger workforce; addressing a perceived or real lack of work ethic in the current workforce; addressing drug use among the workforce; finding ways to help new residents adjust to rural lifestyle; increase opportunities for minority workers across more industries.
- There is a need to ensure that housing stock meets current or future population needs. In particular a need was identified to increase the diversity of housing type and housing cost and to promote housing development that aligns with future population projections.

### **Community Facilities and Infrastructure**

The Community Facilities and Infrastructure Focus Group included participants from numerous groups and organizations with expertise or interest in the County's infrastructure systems and community facilities. Invitees included representatives from County government, local government, Pennsylvania state agencies, utility providers, recreation organizations, resource management and protection organizations, private engineering firms, healthcare providers, correction facilities, wireless providers, regional organizations, public authorities, institutions of higher learning among others.

The purpose of this group was to discuss the condition of critical infrastructure systems and community facilities throughout the County including recent projects, existing deficiencies, emerging challenges, and opportunities to improve overall service, functionality, public safety, and quality of life. Discussion topics included: current state of roads and bridges; needs and challenges related to service expansions; regulations and approvals processes; improved wireless and internet communications; coordination between service providers; opportunities to improve service quality; traffic and circulation; access to healthcare facilities and other critical facilities; population and growth projections and related future demand for services and facilities.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- There are opportunities to improve coordination and predictability with utility providers. This includes better coordination between utility providers and ensuring all services are available in growth areas.

- The major challenges facing infrastructure expansion and improvement projects include securing necessary funding and navigating complex and uncoordinated regulations and approval processes.
- Infrastructure growth planning can be difficult due to a lack of predictability in population changes and uncertain service demands. Utility providers find it challenging to build infrastructure speculatively without confidence that there will be customers.
- There is a need to improve the quality of and access to several key services in the County including natural gas and natural gas infrastructure, cellular and broadband internet service, healthcare facilities, and recreation facilities.
- Inadequate cellular and broadband service creates numerous challenges in the County including impediments to utility service, decrease in economic competitiveness, lack of access to online education, and emergency service constraints.
- The County contains numerous important recreation and community assets, however, many are underutilized. Needs identified include: stronger marketing and information dissemination; additional recreation facilities (pools, indoor basketball gyms etc.); new connections for bike trails; improved safety for bicyclists; additional access to the Riverwalk, increased integration between the Colleges and the community among others.

### **Public Safety**

The Public Safety Focus Group included participants from municipal and County emergency service providers and first responders. Invitees included representatives from fire companies, local and state police, emergency medical technicians, emergency management, among others. The purpose of this group was to discuss the current state of these essential services throughout the County including pressing needs, challenges, and opportunities to improve public health and safety. Discussion topics included: current service areas and difficult areas to serve; specific challenges faced by each organization; trends in volunteering and recruitment; training requirements; frequency and types of calls for service; key crime statistics, injury and emergency response trends and implications; opportunities for shared services, collaboration or improved service capability; budgetary needs and fundraising; and primary hazards that may cause major emergency service needs in the future.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- Participants indicated that it is becoming difficult to attract and retain capable volunteers. The lack of volunteers is believed to be due to a combination of factors including increasing training requirements, associated costs of training and certifications, changing family dynamics, transient populations among other factors.
- Participants indicated that it is also becoming difficult to attract and retain qualified career-based staff. Challenges for career-based recruitment include: a multi-tiered intake process (written test, physical fitness, background checks test etc.); EMS wages and benefits are typically lower than other fields; lack of volunteers placing additional strain on full time service providers; changing work ethics and expectations of younger workforce; and increasing cross-over of services create the need to have additional skills/training.

- There has been an increase in the frequency and volume of calls for service which exacerbate staffing and volunteering shortages.
- Traditional funding is limited and emergency service capability/capacity would benefit greatly if they were supported financially as essential infrastructure. Emergency services have assumed additional roles in recent years (e.g., snow clearing, setting up generators, responding to the needs of changing or new industries etc.) but have not received a matching increase in funding. Lack of funding impacts numerous areas including: service quality; implementing necessary technology upgrades; providing regional services; replacing equipment among others.
- There is a need to capitalize on opportunities for improved efficiencies and operating procedures. Current service providers and resources are not located proportionate to population or need. Some areas with more need for service currently rely on State police and some areas have long service response times and are difficult to serve due to their distance from population centers. Paramedic services are provided to larger region but is not supported financially by municipalities. Consolidation may improve efficiency of services but has challenges including funding, Pennsylvania regulations and political support.

### **Heritage, Culture and the Arts**

The Heritage, Culture and the Arts Focus Group included participants representing organizations with widespread interests in culture and the arts within Lycoming County. Invitees included representatives from historical societies and organizations, theaters, art galleries and artists, recreation organizations, heritage groups, institutions of higher learning, preservation organizations among others.

The purpose of this group was to discuss topics and trends impacting local and regional heritage, arts and culture organizations. This group brought together leaders from diverse cultural organizations to foster open discussion related to opportunities for collaboration, protection and leverage of local and regional assets, creation and growth of programs, and methods to reach a wider audience. Specific discussion topics included: opportunities for coordination between organizations to improve staffing and volunteer capacity and improved marketing and branding; leveraging of existing historical and cultural assets; connecting a wider audience with the County's heritage, arts and cultural assets; the integration of heritage, culture and arts into economic development; impacts of current federal, state and local regulations; and funding to support ongoing operations and future expansions.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- There is a pressing need for increased organizational capacity and coordination in order to protect and continue to grow a strong arts community in the County. Participants cited a number of specific needs and opportunities including: development of a clear goal for the arts/heritage/culture initiative in the County; opportunity for greater coordination between the various organizations through an umbrella organization or renewed Arts Council; need for a more comprehensive inventory of cultural and heritage assets; need to address current staff capacity issues and lack of volunteers; and increased access to funding.
- There are opportunities to implement improved marketing initiatives. There is a need for a coordinated overall marketing effort to link the organizations and events together. Need to

capitalize on opportunities for cross-marketing between organizations and with other local businesses. There are also opportunities to better capitalize on Little League visitors/events.

- The County's arts, cultural and heritage programs should improve accessibility to a wider audience. Participants cited a need to be more inclusive in what is offered to align with the preferences of a more diverse audience. It was noted that connections with college students have improved but could become stronger. In addition, greater cellular and internet coverage is needed to capitalize on opportunities for expanded technology integration with the arts/heritage throughout the County.

### **Natural Resources, Agriculture and Forestry**

The Natural Resources, Agriculture and Forestry Focus Group presented a unique opportunity to bring together stakeholders with a wide range of interests in the County's natural resources. These natural resources provide widespread benefits to the region and local communities including economic growth, recreation, food production, natural hazard protection, clean drinking water, and improvement of overall quality of life. To ensure that these diverse topics were included in the conversation, invitees to this focus group included representatives from outdoor recreation organizations, natural resource management and conservation organizations, state agencies, advocacy groups, recreation clubs, agricultural and forestry businesses of various size, among others.

Discussions during this focus group centered on the management of and access to the County's natural resources and recreational infrastructure, emerging threats to conservation and preservation, as well as opportunities for economic growth and improved quality of life. Specific discussion topics included: ecologic services provided by natural resources; water and stormwater management; challenges facing farmers and agricultural support industries; land use planning; state and local regulations and permitting; education; access for recreation among others.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- Economic /Community development and the environment should be viewed and planned for as mutually supportive to one another. Needs and opportunities identified include: a need to better understand the potential impacts of natural resource extraction; need to prioritize the wise and prudent management of our commonly owned natural resources at all levels of government; opportunity for outdoor recreational and eco-tourism to be a focal point of economic and community development efforts.
- There is a need to better integrate resource management with land use planning and development practices. Participants cited a number of specific needs and opportunities including: land use management and development that supports water reclamation; land use management that supports agricultural viability and flexibility; need to keep the developed areas attractive to allow for the un-developed and natural areas to remain undeveloped.
- Farms should to have the dependability, freedom and flexibility to ensure that they can adapt and remain viable through changing circumstances. This includes: addressing shrinking income and lack of long-term business planning which deter farming as viable for future generations; need to support the agricultural industry's ability to diversify to adjust with cyclical prices of agricultural products; need to encourage more businesses that support the agriculture industry;

need for consistent and legal enforcement of regulation by municipalities; ensuring that the cost and time of permitting and development approval is not a challenge for farmers; impacts of the loss of vocational-agriculture and home economics programs in schools.

## **Transportation**

WATS, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) representing the county was used as the Transportation Focus Group. The MPO includes participants from transportation agencies, local governmental departments as well as other organizations with expertise or interest in the County's transportation network. Invitees included representatives from County government, local government, Pennsylvania state agencies, regional transit organizations, SEDA-COG Joint Rail Authority, utility providers, and recreation organizations.

The purpose of this group was to discuss the location, condition and functionality of current transportation infrastructure and facilities. Some of the discussion focused on the challenges and opportunities related to the provision of transportation service to meet the needs of the current and future populations and the trends and needs related to multiple modes of transportation including automobile, rail, public transit, pedestrians, bicyclists, air traffic, and hikers among others. Other areas of focus included: current state of roads and bridges; challenges related to infrastructure expansions; funding for infrastructure maintenance and improvement; economic potential of rail infrastructure; public transit service areas; changing preferences in transit options; traffic and circulation; population and growth projections and related future demand for services and facilities.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- Opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian improvements were identified such as the need to better identify the most used/desired bicycle routes and invest in improved access and safety including additional connections, outreach to the cyclist community, new bike lanes and signage, public education, among others.
- Participants indicated that funding for the ideal level of road maintenance and addition of new road related features/amenities is limited. There is a need to focus on realistic improvements in most appropriate areas. There is also a need to focus on a balance between different transportation modes and to promote "complete streets" designs and best practices where appropriate.
- Needs and opportunities for public transit improvements were identified including: additional public transit is sometimes requested however it is not always feasible to provide service to meet every person's individual needs; opportunities to better connect with the larger region and "outside world" including connecting current buses with Rt. 80 and Express Bus service.
- Participants indicated that there are opportunities to capitalize on great rail infrastructure/system in the County to drive economic development.
- The airport could be improved with the completion of the proposed new terminal building, through additional funding for an improved access road to the airport, and establishing an additional destination with excellent connections.

## **Community Development**

The Community Development Focus Group covered a broad range of topics and included participants representing an equally broad range of organizations and stakeholders. Invitees included community housing organizations, social services, youth and elderly organizations, property owners and landlords, real estate professionals, workforce and labor organizations, healthcare organizations, mental health organizations, and real estate development organizations.

The primary purpose of this group was to identify current conditions, emerging trends and challenges related to a number of topics impacting local and regional community development. Key topics of discussion included the relationship between current and future populations and the County's housing stock, social services, healthcare access and a variety of quality of life and social needs. Specific discussion topics included: provision of safe housing and choice in housing type for all income groups, current housing market demand; crime trends; specific social service needs and opportunities for new or expanded programs; workforce trends; funding and staffing for community organizations; needs of seniors and youth populations; and transit needs.

The key findings of this group are described below:

- Participants indicated that there is a need for additional high quality market rate housing stock and more housing choices (locations, types, amenities). Current housing stock in the County is outdated and lack some amenities that people desire. Specific housing needs include: additional senior housing choices (not only low income senior housing); large single family homes for large families; condominiums and townhouses; and transitional homes for baby-boomers looking to downsize.
- There is a need for more housing choices for vulnerable populations including low-income residents, seniors, and people with criminal backgrounds among others.
- There are opportunities to rehabilitate existing housing stock in many communities.
- Opportunities were identified for better transit connections between housing areas and employment centers. Currently people without private vehicles may feel forced to live where they work.
- There is a need for better coordination and collaboration between landlords and local government.
- There is a need for more investment in and expansion of and coordination between educational and social programs for children, families and vulnerable populations. Specific needs identified include: assistance to children at a young age to provide a solid developmental foundation; more adult volunteers to support social programs; need for case workers to have better access to caretakers and the household of those assisted through social services; need for more comprehensive support for the homeless beyond just rental assistance; support for more seniors remaining in their homes; programs to support a viable path to self-sufficiency for transitional age youth (ages 18 to 25); additional support for drug prevention and treatment programs; and skill building resources for youth.