

Planning Trends Westmoreland

Westmoreland County Department of Planning & Development

January 2014

Transportation Bill Recap, Act 89 of 2013

On November 25, 2013 Governor Corbett signed the most comprehensive transportation legislation in years.

The \$2.3 billion annual plan makes considerable changes to the way the State funds our transportation system. Among other measures, the bill lifts the oil franchise tax and replaces the 12-cent state retail gas tax. For municipalities, the 1/2 cent tax will be changed to a dedicated 4.17 percent allocation to liquid fuels. This means municipalities will have an enhanced and more consistent funding stream for local roads and bridges.

Changes to prevailing wage provisions raises the point at which they kick in on transportation projects from \$25,000 to \$100,000.

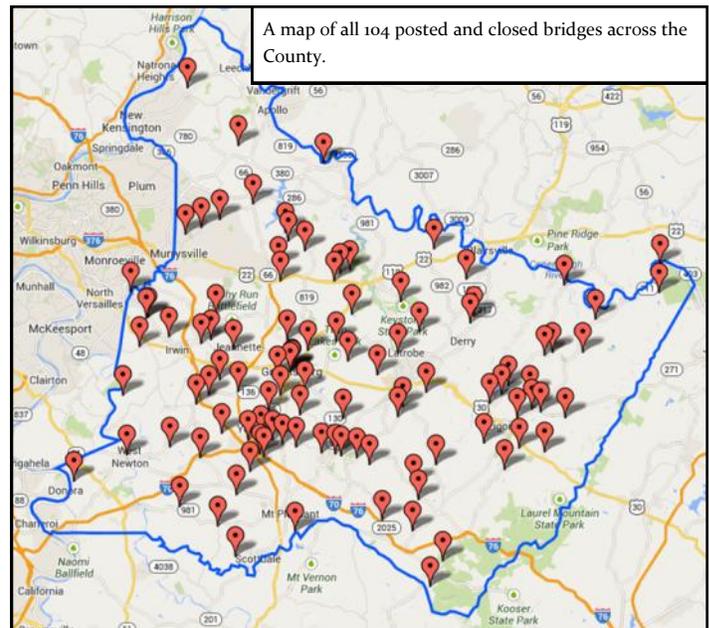
Of the annual total, \$1.65 billion will be directed to highways and bridges, \$476 million to mass transit, and \$144 million for a new Multimodal Transportation Fund.

By the fifth year, an additional \$220 million per year will be added to Liquid Fuels allocations that municipalities use for local roads and bridges. \$40 million in grant money is available to local governments to coordinate traffic signals, alleviating congestion and saving fuel.

Bridge bundling allows the state to sign one contract for multiple local and state owned bridge construction and restoration projects. Savings from streamlined administration will allow local bridges to be exempt from the 20% local match, with some caveats.

All in all, funding increases at the state level will improve our ability to deliver projects, yet issues remain with federal funding formula changes and the status of the highway trust fund.

To learn more visit, www.pacounties.org.



New, Local Planning Assistance Program Being Developed

At the local level, planning for the future can be quickly overshadowed by solving today's issues. And, with many of the County's municipalities lacking professional staff dedicated to planning roles, that function becomes even less apparent. That's why the County Planning Department is looking to supplement the ability of local governments to do planning.

Over the past several years, the Department has realized that municipalities in the County might benefit from a municipal planning assistance program.

Our first step in developing this program is to understand what services are needed among our local communities. Attached, you'll find a

survey that asks to identify the services in which your municipality would be interested. Please complete the survey and return it to us. From there, we can develop programs to help our communities plan for their future.

To be effective in implementing the County's Comprehensive Plan, we need to have closer working relationships with municipalities. Through that relationship, we hope to offer help implementing the local comprehensive plan, as well.

We've taken some initial steps with a number of communities over the past year and our experiences have been beneficial to both the Department and the local community.

For instance, in New Stanton we've

completed a build-out analysis to visually depict future development as a result of the I-70 interchange replacement project. In the coming months, we will be assisting the Borough in the completion of a comprehensive plan update, pending grant funding.

Whether it's revitalization or blight, zoning or economic development, we are able to offer our skills and expertise to local planning issues. Ultimately, our aim is to implement the Comprehensive Plan and improve the Department's presence in our communities.

For more information on the Technical Resources and Municipal Services Program, contact Brian Lawrence at 724-830-3772 or by email at blawrenc@co.westmoreland.pa.us

Downtown Destinations Website Revamp Now Live



After a year of work with three interns, the site is now live with great features based on Google Maps. The site now features a filter function based on the property's size, price, sale or lease, and its location in a Keystone Innovation Zone. Also, the new site allows users to get personal with Google Street View in certain locations.

More importantly, Authority staff can update a property's availability or features as easy as changing values in a spreadsheet.

The site has proven its value by the number of visitors. From May to October 2013, the site saw 452 visitors, nearly three per day, from across the country.

To visit the site yourself, go to www.co.westmoreland.pa.us/downtown to view an instructional video and browse available commercial properties.

Beginning in 2010, the Redevelopment Authority created a website to help local downtown communities highlight and market available commercial properties.

By 2012, it was clear that a new structure was needed to make the site more useful. Updating property availability and the maps that coincided with data was cumbersome. Interactivity was an issue as users couldn't zoom or pan static maps. In a town with a high number of available sites, a filter function was also needed to make finding a location more user friendly.

Troubled by how best to improve the website, the Authority was approached by the Planning Department with some options to improve the site's function.



Green place markers identify the locations of visitors to the website

County-wide Bicycling and Pedestrian Committee

Sometimes called active transportation, walking and biking are becoming more attractive modes of transportation, especially for our urban communities.

For such communities, walking and biking help improve the health of residents, reduce costs of traffic congestion, improve downtown businesses and enhance sense of community.

For all those reasons and more, the County has heard from a number of

municipalities and local groups about developing a county-wide bike and pedestrian committee. The committee would help provide guidance to communities on ways to reduce barriers to walking and biking, and make the connections that are necessary for active transportation.

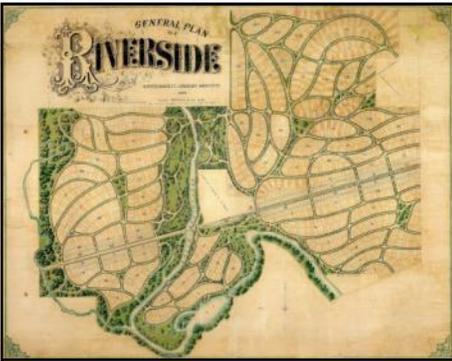
Many comprehensive plans across the County establish the goal of encouraging walking and biking. The committee will help make practical recommendations and align resources to meet that goal.

While the committee is still being developed, we'd like to hear from local municipalities about the help they need with biking and walking issues. And, we will be looking for local representatives to serve on the committee.

For more information, contact Assistant Deputy Director, Brian Lawrence at 724-830-3772 or by email at blawrenc@co.westmoreland.pa.us.

Design Discussion: Setback Distances

The County's Comprehensive Plan encourages alternatives to conventional site designs. One of the more ubiquitous and conventional elements of zoning ordinances is the hallowed front setback distance. Front setback distances establish the distance beyond the street right-of-way where no buildings can be erected. It is an aspect of site design that deserves reassessment.



General Plan of Riverside, Illinois. The curvilinear street network shown here is evident in Olmsted's design for Vandergrift Borough, as well.

The history of front setbacks can be traced back to the design of Frederick Law Olmsted's Riverside, IL in 1869. Olmsted's design prescribed that each home would be set 30 feet from the road creating the effect that all of the homes were set in a single park.

In many post-war subdivisions, setbacks of 30, 40 or even 50 feet are very common, a call to Olmsted's Riverside. Yet, new single-family residential districts are changing across the country.

Take for instance, Summerset at Frick Park, the area's most successful traditional neighborhood development, in Allegheny County. With setbacks of about 15 feet from the edge of the street, the homes, sidewalks, on-street parking and street trees add a sense of enclosure and safety for pedestrians.

Safety from wayward vehicles is an oft-cited concern for large minimum setbacks. The thought is that a speeding vehicle which leaves the roadway will stop before hitting a home setback 30 or more feet from the road. However, a study from the Connecticut Department of Transportation (*Designing Roads that Guide Drivers to Choose Safer Speeds*, 2009) concluded that deep building setbacks are factors significantly associated with higher average vehicle speeds, regardless of posted speed limits, which, of course, would lead to vehicles plunging deeper into residential lots upon leaving the roadway. In a way, deep setbacks actually encourage speeding.

From a developer's perspective, setbacks may reduce the profitability of a new development. For instance, imagine on a one mile stretch of road homes on either side with minimum lot widths of 50 feet and front setbacks of 30 feet. Over that one mile stretch, over 7 acres of land is ruled effectively and utterly useless, except for a front lawn. Which, leaves the developer

with fewer options for site design, as each sites' buildable area is reduced by at least 1,500 square feet, given the figures above.

From a home buyer's perspective, 1,500 square feet of lawn may be better used in the privacy of one's backyard for a garden or children's play set or maybe an addition for a mother-in-law suite as an alternative to retirement communities.

It seems then, that shallower setbacks improve sense of place and comfort for pedestrians; constrain motorists in residential neighborhoods to drive at lower speeds; allow for more innovative site designs; and use land more efficiently allowing for greater profitability for developers and greater value for homeowners.

A number of options to minimum setbacks are available. Some communities are considering maximum setbacks in place of minimums. In the County's newly adopted subdivision and land development ordinance, a conservation development option establishes maximum setbacks ranging from zero to 25 feet from the edge of road rights-of-way.



Overton Lane, named after HC Frick's birthplace in Westmoreland, in Summerset
Image Credit: Google Earth

Another option is a setback ratio, that expresses the relationship between the height of a building and its distance from the road. Other municipalities are requiring retail commercial development to place parking to the side of buildings and moving buildings closer to the street. Some places are even offering developers the option to determine setbacks within a range, say from 5 to 20 feet so that each building isn't built to the edge of the setback line creating "cookie-cutter" land development.

As development and design trends change over time, it's important to consider whether local design standards are flexible and whether they meet the needs of future residents.

To learn more, contact Brian Lawrence at 724-830-3772.

Westmoreland County Department of
Planning and Development

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County Land Bank in the Works

Throughout Westmoreland County, in our cities, boroughs and townships, there are abandoned and dilapidated structures. Properties like these present numerous public safety hazards and hurt property values. However, some of these properties also show enormous potential for renovation, remodel or even demolition and reconstruction.

Many times these buildings, because they have no economic value to their owners, become tax delinquent. When they enter tax delinquency it often makes them much more difficult to redevelop.

Enter the Westmoreland County Land Bank.

New state legislation allows municipalities of populations greater than 10,000 to establish land banks to acquire, rehab and transfer property that might otherwise continue to drag down the community.

The County's soon-to-be-established Land Bank will allow for public control of abandoned property and the assembly of parcels for residential, recreational, commercial and industrial redevelopment.

It will empower communities to reverse the negative economic impact of neglected properties. Reuse options will include commercial redevelopment,

affordable housing initiatives, side-lots, green space and parks, and economic development projects.

The County's Redevelopment Authority is the lead agency on this exciting new Land Bank initiative. To learn more, including how your municipality can participate, contact the Redevelopment Authority Executive Director April Kopas at 724-830-3366 or akopas@co.westmoreland.pa.us.

Planning Trends Westmoreland aims; to inform local officials and planning commissions about current planning initiatives in the County, to educate about new developments and techniques in the planning field, and to empower local planning that improves the quality of life for the residents of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.