

Joint Meeting of Newtown Borough Council &
Newtown Borough Planning Commission
May 4, 2009
Ettenger Hall of the Newtown Presbyterian Church

A special meeting of Newtown Borough Council and the Newtown Borough Planning Commission was called to order at 7:00 P.M. on Monday, May 4, 2009, by Planning Commission Chairman Warren Woldorf.

Present: Councillors Craig, Jaslow, O'Malley, Sellers, Walker and Woldorf and Planning Commission members Woldorf, Salvatore, Lumpkin, Bauman, Heinemann, Donofry and Snyder.

Mr. Woldorf welcomed all those in attendance and explained that the meeting was for the public presentation of the draft 2009 Comprehensive Plan. Copies of the proposed plan are available at Newtown Borough Hall, a copy is at the Newtown Library and it is downloadable from the Newtown Borough website.

Gail Friedman of the Bucks County Planning Commission gave a Power Point presentation of the proposed 2009 Comprehensive Plan. In land use planning, a Comprehensive Plan is a tool that communities use to set goals, create a vision, assess issues and problems, involve the community, identify opportunities, guide decision makers and outline action steps. The Borough's first Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1999 and was a conservation/preservation oriented plan. The proposed plan takes into account changes that have taken place since that time, most notably rapid growth in the surrounding area and the emerging concept of sustainability. The plan brings together planning studies that have been done since 1999 and those that are recommended to be done in the near future. The majority of the recommendations in the proposed plan remain identical to the 1999 plan.

Retaining and expanding open space is a high priority. The Borough's total park acreage falls short of nationally recommended population based standards. Key to economic development is the central business district, a keystone of local economy and the plan recommends promoting cooperation with downtown stakeholders, which is increasingly important with Newtown Township redeveloping along Sycamore Street. With regard to land use, "teardowns" is a new issue that needs to be addressed. Another recommendation would be for mixed uses on State Street and the potential for public access to Newtown Creek when evaluating plans for redevelopment at the Stockburger site. Consideration should also be given to how, where and whether to provide for and retain intensive non-residential uses, such as light industrial and heavy commercial.

The top five priorities identified by the Planning Commission are acquisition of open space, management of traffic and parking, improvement of pedestrian circulation, retaining of historic character and addressing storm water management. Implementation and tracking of the implementation progress will be handled with an action plan matrix. To complete the review and adoption process, the draft plan will be circulated to the Council Rock School District and Newtown Township with a 45-day review period. Additional public meetings will be held and Council will consider adoption of the plan at the end of the public hearings. Chairman Woldorf commented that action has already started on the five priority items.

Mr. Woldorf then opened the floor for discussion. Resident Mary Alice Hagan thanked the Planning Commission noting that the plan represents a lot of work.

Eric Johnson, chairman of the Newtown, Bucks County Joint Municipal Authority, noticed some errors in the plan related to water issues, and Mr. Johnson provided paperwork to the Commission noting the information. Mr. Johnson said that he had served on the first planning committee and he appreciates what this Planning Commission went through.

Mr. O'Malley said the Planning Commission did a great job and the document reads extremely well. He particularly liked the chapter on sustainability.

Mr. Sellers remembers discussion about the resident/business survey and most importantly how to have a good response to the survey. In speaking to Lynn Bush of the BCPC prior to the survey, a 20-25% response would be considered statistically good and the Borough received a 33% response rate. Mr. Sellers feels that the response speaks to the interest in the community for being part of the Comprehensive Plan process. With regard to the matrix and the accountability that has been talked about, Mr. Sellers commented that the matrix would provide a scorecard for what achievement might be made in the coming years to reach the goals of the Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. Jaslow thanked the Planning Commission for their work. He found the idea of Conservation Districts very interesting, but living on Court Street, with residential on one side and commercial on the other, he feels that this type of area is not identified. In addition, there are similar areas that would fit into this type of Conservation District and should be addressed.

Mr. Walker asked if a cross section from all of the Borough volunteer boards and commissions was involved in the matrix that was created for accountability. Mr. Woldorf responded that only the Environmental Advisory Council and HARB were involved in the process and no committees were involved in the timeline.

Mr. Jaslow questioned the timing for updating the Comprehensive Plan since the census data is not current. He asked if it would be possible to reset the update timeframe to coincide with the 2010 census. Ms. Bush responded that updating the Comprehensive Plan at a 5-year point may make sense, as it takes 2-3 years for the actual census data to become available.

Mr. Craig asked if there was a way to measure the Borough's success in meeting the goals of the last Comprehensive Plan. He noted that the Zoning Ordinance was substantially amended, but wondered if there were other issues that had not been addressed or that should be removed from this plan because the community has changed since 1999. Mr. Woldorf suggested identifying those items that should be carried forward. He stated that some items were expected theoretically but not expected realistically, such as the creation of the Borough Industrial Zone at the former Frost Watson site, which was changed to the Traditional Neighborhood Development. Maureen Wheatley of the Bucks County Planning Commission commented that the 1999 objectives were reviewed to determine whether the individual items were still an issue and/or whether they had been addressed. That review helped frame the objectives for the 2009 plan.

The issue was raised by Mr. Jaslow of the future use of new options for energy savings, such as solar panels and more recently windmills. The potential impact on the historic district could be significant and Mr. Jaslow suggests the Borough being proactive and addressing this issue in the Comprehensive Plan. Ms. Bush noted that sustainability is addressed and she is not sure that specific language regarding windmills needs to be included.

In answer to Mr. Craig's concern about the ability to accommodate all potential land uses, Ms. Bush responded that the Comprehensive Plan cannot be challenged, only a zoning ordinance can be challenged, but she does not recall any challenge in Bucks County in the past 20 years to industrial ground. Although the Frost Watson property is a TND, the zoning use remains industrial.

Use changes were not recommended with this updated plan, as the existing uses appear to be working. Mr. Jaslow questioned the suggestion of mixed use in the business district. That change could create multi use on the same property which would necessitate a change in the zoning ordinance. Mr. Craig noted that State Street properties benefit from retail on the first floor with residential above and that has been traditional.

With regard to the process going forward, Planning Commission member Paul Salvatore said he would like to take pieces of this plan and have the various committees give their input. Planning Commission would then discuss those ideas, make changes, with Council ultimately voting to adopt the final document. Mr. Sellers' concern is to keep the process moving along and Mr. Craig feels that the committees should be approached by the Council liaisons to obtain their input.

Ms. Hagan said she felt the implementation matrix was a great addition to the plan and again thanked the Planning Commission and Planning Commission member Kris Bauman thanked the Bucks County Planning Commission for their assistance with this project.

Duane Buck commented that in discussion of "measurement," there are no specific timelines. There is a list of funding sources at the end of the document, but Council must prioritize in order to decide which sources to apply for first.

Bill Heinemann spoke about the 112 recommendations made in this Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Craig noted that recommended actions are summarized in the back of the Comprehensive Plan, but within the document there are a number of other recommendations that may not be included in that list. Since this is a policy document, Mr. Craig questioned whether there is a hierarchy of recommendations and Ms. Bush did recognize the five priority action items that the Planning Commission identified.

From an Open Space prospective, Mr. Craig questioned how the suggested 15 acre figure was arrived at considering the Borough is a one square mile community. Ms. Friedman explained that the figure is from the National Park and Recreation standards that are based on population, but do not take into consideration the actual physical size of the municipality. Mr. Craig felt that on that basis, the figure could be a little deceiving and there is significant open space adjacent to Newtown Borough.

Resident John Burke asked if there were benchmarks that could be used for communities the size of Newtown Borough and if a cost figure was attached to those benchmarks for comparison. Although not benchmarks, Mr. Heinemann noted that there is a list of funding sources attached to the Comprehensive Plan.

Eric Johnson made a general comment that given the current economy and the way funds have "dried up," implementing many of these items will be very difficult. It will be a challenge because the Borough tax base is not expanding and residents do not want higher taxes.

With regard to the process going forward, Mr. Craig reminded Council and the Planning Commission that the boards and committees will be asked for their input. It is incumbent upon Council to provide feedback so that the Planning Commission can incorporate those suggestions.

Ms. Bush suggested sending the proposed Comprehensive Plan to Council Rock School District and Newtown Township for its 45-day review, but not advertising the hearing date until Council is in agreement. Mr. Craig stated that another joint meeting will be scheduled approximately 60 days from now.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Marcia Scull
Borough Secretary

IN ATTENDANCE

Mary Alice & Phil Hagan	203 E. Washington Avenue
Marie Hutchinson	318 Centre Avenue
Duane Buck	113 Andrew Drive
Eric Johnson	242 S. State Street
Diane LeBas	104 Penn Street
Patty Lovi	151 N. State Street
Lynn Bush	Bucks County Planning Commission
Maureen Wheatley	Bucks County Planning Commission
Gail Friedman	Bucks County Planning Commission
Tom & Julie Tomlinson	156 N. Lincoln Avenue
Jennifer Pennington	524 Penn Street
John Burke	301 S. Norwood Avenue
Lorraine Pentz	98 Penn Street
Heidi Adams	212 E. Washington Avenue