

12. Citizen Action

Getting Involved and Making it Happen in Your Community

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“Healthy communities need involved citizens. A civil society depends on citizen concern and citizen action as its lifeblood.”

~Grassroots Leadership Development
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Pike County is at a crucial point in its history. Ever-increasing growth pressures will continue to present many challenges. Rapid rates of development raise several important questions about the future including:

Residents, both long-term and the newly arrived, can make an important contribution in planning for the future of Pike County communities.

What will Pike County communities look like 10, 15, 20 or even five years from now?

Will residents retain the quality of life the County offers including the highly valued water resources, the many miles of streams and rivers as well as the abundant lakes and wetlands, found here?

Will groundwater resources remain abundant and clean and continue to meet the needs of residents and businesses?

Will Pike County suffer the fate of so many other areas of Pennsylvania as “sprawling” growth patterns dominate the development of communities?

The Window of Opportunity is Still Open

Despite these challenges and unanswered questions, opportunities still exist to address continuing land development pressures while conserving the natural resources that support the quality of life that Pike County residents enjoy. While local, state and fed-

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eral agencies, the business sector and environmental organizations all have a significant role to play in charting a course for the future of the County's communities, residents – both long-term and the newly arrived – also have an important contribution to make.

Bringing about positive change and making a difference may seem like a daunting task. But when people as individuals, and as a community, begin to look at what they collectively bring to the process of community planning and development, they begin to see that any number of options and possibilities exist. Each person brings his or her own unique perceptions, knowledge and concerns. By coming together to share concerns and visions for the future, residents can begin to build on the expertise and talents of the group as a whole.

Where resources are limited, including constraints on time, finances and experience, citizen volunteers can help fill the vacuum and make a significant contribution to meeting community needs. Citizens groups can also play an important role as a voice for the concerns of residents, bridging the gap between residents and community associations and municipal, county, state and even federal government agencies.

Getting Involved

Listed below are volunteer opportunities for residents interested in getting involved in the conservation of the natural resources of their community. If you see something that you'd like to get involved in, but that has not yet been started, don't wait for someone else – take the initiative!

Municipal Government

Pike County is divided into thirteen local government entities – eleven townships and two boroughs – referred to as **municipalities** (Appendix B). Elected municipal officials – Township Supervisors and Borough Council Members – are empowered by the Pennsylvania **Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)** to provide for the protection of the natural resources of their respective communities. This is accomplished primarily through adoption of comprehensive plans and land use regulations (zoning laws, subdivision regulations, etc.) that incorporate natural resource protection.

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Through participation in the democratic process of local decision-making, firmly rooted in Pennsylvania communities, citizens have the right

and the ability to influence the decisions that municipal officials make in planning for the future, including planning and land use decisions that affect the natural resources of their community. Residents have various options from voting in local elections to attending monthly public meetings of local officials and Planning Commissions, participating in an Environmental Advisory Council or joining a watershed group (see below) that is working cooperatively with local officials.

Unfortunately, residents often do not get involved in their community until a proposed land development project is announced and concerns arise over potential environmental impacts. Residents may demand that officials stop a development or at least “do something about it.”

Attempting to protect community natural resources by taking a reactive, “development-by-development” approach is much less effective than getting involved & staying involved in the overall community planning & development process.

However, without the appropriate land use regulations already in effect, to minimize the environmental impacts of a development, there is often little public officials can do by the time a proposed project is on the table. Citizen attempts at protecting community natural resources by taking a reactive, “development-by-development” approach is much less effective than getting involved as soon as possible and staying involved in the overall community planning and development process, including supporting and working with local officials to plan for “smart,” environmentally sustainable development of communities (Chapter 11).

Environmental Advisory Councils

The role of an Environmental Advisory Council (EAC) is to advise the planning commission, park and recreation board and elected officials of a municipality, on issues related to the conservation of the natural resources within the municipality’s borders. EACs are established by enactment of a municipal ordinance. Once established, municipal officials select residents to serve on an EAC.

EACs may be tasked with identifying community environmental problems and making recommendations, promoting environmental programs or creating an inventory of open, undeveloped lands and sensitive natural areas in the municipality to prioritize for protection. It is often up to residents of a community to propose to their elected officials that an EAC be established. Residents can offer to volunteer their time on the EAC

established by the municipality in which they reside. As this publication goes to press, Delaware Township is the only Pike County municipality that has created an EAC.

Community Associations

Most Pike County residents live in a residential development represented by a community association (CA) (also referred to as a property owners' association). The typical CA consists of an elected board of directors and officers, answerable to all community residents.

CAs have the ability to create committees to help residents address particular issues and concerns including Environmental Committees tasked with examining and developing ways of protecting community natural resources. Committees, or sub-committees, can also be created to look at specific natural resource concerns such as stormwater management, water supply protection, lake management or open space conservation.

Utilizing covenants, codes and restrictions, a CA can also create rules and regulations for natural resource protection including provisions to address stormwater impacts, provide for groundwater protection as well as the conservation of community lakes, streams and wetlands.

Citizens of lake-based communities can also participate in water quality monitoring programs that keep tabs on lake health. The information collected can be used to support efforts to identify and correct pollution problems affecting a lake.

Pike County Watershed Organizations

Watershed organizations strive to protect the natural resources, particularly the water resources, of the watershed they represent. As this publication goes to press, there are four major watershed groups active in Pike County:

- Bushkill Watershed Conservancy
- Lake Wallenpaupack Watershed Management District
- The Lackawaxen River Conservancy
- Twin and Walker Creeks Watershed Conservancy

For more information on Pike County watershed groups and how residents can get involved and lend their support, refer to Chapter 1 and Appendix A.

Additional Conservation Groups Offering Volunteer Opportunities

Listed below are additional agencies and organizations committed to the conservation of Pike County's natural resources that offer volunteer opportunities:

- Alliance to Keep Pike Green
- Delaware Highlands Conservancy
- The Eagle Institute
- Grey Towers National Historic Site
- Pocono Environmental Education Center (P.E.E.C.)
- Promised Land State Park/Varden Conservation Area

For more information on these organizations and how residents can get involved, refer to Appendix D.

Summary

Increasing growth pressures will continue to present significant challenges to creating and maintaining economically viable communities while maintaining Pike County's high quality natural resources. However, a window of opportunity still exists for residents and local officials to act.

An involved and active citizenry plays an essential role in creating communities that reflect their shared vision. Residents individually, and collectively as a group, bring their own unique perceptions, knowledge, and concerns to the planning process.

Where resources are limited, including constraints on time, finances and experience, citizen volunteers can help to fill the vacuum and make a significant contribution to meeting community needs. Community volunteers can also provide a vital voice for citizen concerns on environmental issues bridging the gap between residents and local, state, federal and regional governments, the business sector and non-governmental groups.

Many opportunities exist for citizen involvement including attending public meetings, volunteering for local environmental organizations, getting active in a community association or supporting a local watershed group. For anyone who doubts how effective local residents can be in shaping the future, recall the words of Margaret Mead:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has!"



Citizen participation in an educational workshop on non-point source pollution

Action Steps for Citizen Involvement

- ☞ Get involved with your community association. Options include volunteering to serve on a committee, starting a lake monitoring program and supporting association efforts to protect community natural resources.
- ☞ Let your municipal officials (Appendix B) know you support their efforts to enact regulations to manage stormwater, protect groundwater, and conserve streams, lakes and wetlands.
- ☞ Read local newspapers and attend public meetings to stay up-to-date on what is happening in your community.
- ☞ Join and volunteer for a local organization (Appendix A & D) that reflects your concerns and the direction you want for your community's future.
- ☞ Voice support to your local municipal officials for the formation of an Environmental Advisory Council and volunteer to participate.

Resources for More Information

PA DEP Update, electronic environmental newsletter: www.dep.state.pa.us/newsletter/

Pennsylvania League of Women Voters: <http://www.pa.lwv.org>

Pennsylvania Environmental Council: www.pecpa.org/index.htm

Pike County web site with links to local municipal sites: www.pikepa.org/

10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania: www.10000friends.org/