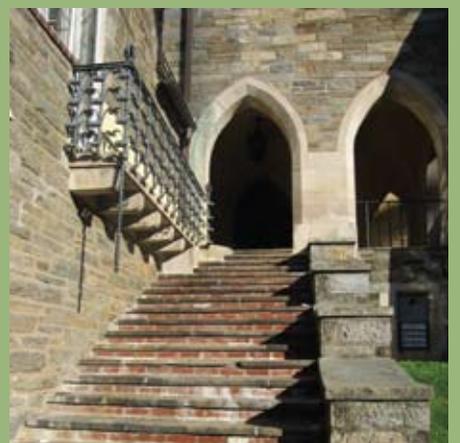
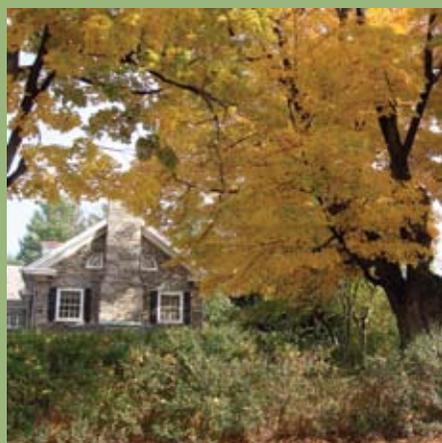


THE ISSUE

THE ISSUES REPORT







A Comprehensive Plan is a generational document prepared by a community to address current issues and to meet future opportunities and contingencies. Comprehensive Plans define a community in time and reflect the past history and current character. In its best sense, the Comprehensive Plan process is advanced civic housekeeping; an opportunity for a community to work together to establish goals, evaluate resources, identify issues and then to prepare a plan to meet those challenges in the most efficient manner.

Since its incorporation as a First Class Township in 1900, Lower Merion has continually engaged in coordinated, long range planning to ensure that the Township remains a premier residential community. This tradition of proactive, anticipatory planning is evident today in the high property values, strong public school system, rich and diverse social services and attractive natural and built environment enjoyed by the residents of Lower Merion Township. However, these social values and physical qualities that define the Township in 2010 are not just the result of continual plan implementation; rather this advantageous situation reflects a complex relationship between the residents and the municipal government to confront challenges and to seize opportunities through large and small efforts.

A high degree of civic engagement and public participation is one of the characteristics that define Lower Merion Township. In 2010, this civic activity includes actions of the municipal government directed by the Board of Commissioners and their Advisory Boards, efforts of non-governmental business, institutional

and non-profit organizations, as well as actions of individual residents to improve their community. The level of interest in civic affairs is evidenced by the dynamics of public meetings, the high demand for public information provided on the internet and the government access cable channel as well as an increasing level of public participation via various information technologies.

The Comprehensive Plan is not a single document, but rather a central organizing structure necessary to identify, evaluate and address a wide variety of land use, transportation, housing, community facility, economic development and historic challenges facing the community. This Issues Report is the first part of a process to coordinate planning activities to meet the specific challenges of this community.

The Issues Report is the first step towards developing a new Comprehensive Plan. It explains the consequences of recent growth and redevelopment in the Township and outlines the specific program for the various elements of the plan.

## **THE ISSUE**

### **REAL AND PERCEIVED EXTERNALITIES RESULTING FROM NEW DEVELOPMENT**

Planning issues are the real or perceived problems associated with the physical, social and economic development and sustainability of a community. Planning issues involve a wide range of topics including land use, housing, stormwater management, historic preservation, transportation and economic development. Planning issues are also geographical; some issues impact specific neighborhoods and some affect the entire Township. The physical size (23.64 square miles) and population (58,740) combined with the level of development of the past decade has created a number of issues that must be addressed. Lower Merion Township is a fully developed, affluent, residential suburb with a well established land use pattern and transportation network. New growth primarily occurs through various levels of redevelopment, infill or expansion. Such growth is an indicator of a healthy community and the level of construction investment is a sign of economic prosperity and social desirability of a community.

However, growth, redevelopment, infill and expansion can create tension within established communities because of the replacement of existing natural and built features with newer elements, often with increased densities. Existing residents often associate increased density with increased urbanization, which includes a host of real and perceived changes which could potentially compromise the established suburban pattern. Increased density is not necessarily undesirable because new growth provides an opportunity for improvements and also to introduce new uses and patterns to meet changing circumstances. The purpose of community planning is to direct new growth to appropriate locations at appropriate levels and to also develop strategies to mitigate negative externalities resulting from changes to the established physical and natural pattern. The challenge of community planning is to ensure that growth is managed appropriately.

#### NEED TO COORDINATE PLANNING ACTIVITIES TO AVOID UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Lower Merion Township is a very well planned community and the planning process is extensively used to solve problems. Because of the inherent complexity of many of the issues facing the community there is an emphasis upon preparing detailed plans addressing specific concerns. Over the past decade the Township has found itself in a unique situation where numerous detailed efforts are simultaneously being undertaken to address multiple complex projects. This has resulted in concerns about too much change in a short period of time.

With the current volume and pace of planning activity, there is a potential for the Comprehensive Plan to better coordinate planning efforts, improve efficiencies and reduce unintended consequences.

#### MAKING CHOICES BETWEEN COMPETING COMMUNITY GOALS AND POLICIES – THE NEED FOR A COORDINATED COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

This report reviewed current and past Township land use related goals and policies that would commonly be included within a Comprehensive Plan. The review of the land development activity, ordinance amendments, and planning studies conducted reveals that the Township has been implementing strong, progressive goals and policies regarding sustainable land use, transportation, housing, open space, historic resources and community facilities. These goals and policies are a solid basis to support future community planning efforts.

Future years will see an increasing overlap between different land use issues. Plans are public documents designed to solve problems or issues, and this plan was prepared so that the community can begin to comprehensively understand the complex interrelationship between issues and to make the increasingly hard choices between competing solutions.

This report was also prepared to assist the community in preparing a Comprehensive Plan that ensures that Lower Merion Township remains the community of the highest qualities and values; a community where people want to live and spend their time. While this report doesn't provide all the answers, this report helps us understand the complex and difficult problems to be addressed in the future.

#### THE ISSUES REPORT

The Montgomery County Community Planning Assistance Program provides technical assistance in the fields of comprehensive planning, zoning, land use, transportation, landscape design, economic development and other disciplines on a fee-for-service basis. Lower Merion

Township entered into a planning assistance contract with Montgomery County in 2007 for assistance in the preparation of the Issues Report.

Issues serve as the basis of plan development; issues are the problems and opportunities that the Comprehensive Plan will address. This Issues Report presents a comprehensive inventory and analysis of the wide range of issues currently and potentially facing the Township for the next generation. The issues identified within this report serve as the program for the development of a series of coordinated, comprehensive elements or action plans, which when completed over the next several years will result in a Comprehensive Plan.

This Issues Report also provides much of the technical background necessary for all members of the community to participate in the planning process so they may effectively understand and evaluate issues. With the goal of developing an organizing program, this report is structured into the following three sections: a **background** section outlining the purpose of the Issues Report and its relationship to a comprehensive plan, an **analysis** section compiling the development activity, planning activity and community input, and a **recommendations** section which synthesizes the information to present a program for addressing specific issues in subsequent Comprehensive Plan Elements.

Despite its length and technical subject matter, this report is intended to be a user-friendly resource for all participants in the planning process. Towards that end, this report includes detailed explanations of planning and land development related terms and processes in addition to the history of planning and zoning in Lower Merion Township. The purpose of this report is to assist the community by providing each participant with detailed information necessary to make informed planning decisions about the future of the community.

## THE BACKGROUND SECTION

The Background Section provides an overview of the Issues Report and its relationship to the Comprehensive Plan. This section also evaluates significant changes at the local, county and state levels that have occurred since the adoption of the 1979 Comprehensive Plan that may impact the goals and objectives of the community. This section includes:

- Significant Changes/Trends Necessitating a New Comprehensive Plan;
- Major Issues and Objectives of the 1979 Comprehensive Plan;
- Impact of Long-range Regional Plans on Lower Merion Township; and
- Changes to the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)



## THE ANALYSIS SECTION

This section of the Issues Report provides a quantitative and qualitative record regarding the type, nature, location and impact of recent development and planning activity within Lower Merion Township. This section includes:

- An inventory and analysis of land development activity between 2003 and 2008, including a review of;
  - Zoning Hearing Board applications;
  - Planning Commission applications;
  - Building permit activity;
  - Historical Commission applications; and
  - Board of Historical Architectural Review (HARB) applications.
- An inventory and analysis of planning studies of all Township departments from 1998 until 2008;
- An inventory and analysis of regulatory efforts through proposed ordinances to address land development issues between 1996 and 2008; and

- Compilations of issues and themes identified by stakeholders, including:

- Input from six advisory bodies;
- Public input obtained at a series of Community Workshops and Regional Civic Association meetings hosted by the Planning Commission during the fall of 2007; and
- Input obtained through over 30 stakeholder interviews.

This section reveals what is happening in the Township, why it is happening and how people feel about it. This section resulted in the identification of 11 broad issues and four integrated themes which were more fully explored in the staff analysis of the identified issues and themes.

The Analysis Section concludes with a staff analysis of the identified issues and themes, which is the core of this document. This section explores the complexity and inter-relationship of issues and identifies what can be done to address each of the issues through the following five steps:

1. Exploration of the larger market forces, lifestyle choices and development patterns contributing to the issue;
2. Explanation of the impact of the issue upon the particular character of the Township;
3. Exposition of the legal framework in which the issue can be addressed;
4. Identification of the local regulatory and capital investment efforts undertaken to address the issue; and
5. Understanding of the local non-regulatory efforts undertaken by advisory bodies, non-profits and individuals to address issues.

## THE RECOMMENDATIONS SECTION

### Initial Recommendations

The synthesis of identified issues and themes resulted in a list of initial recommendations that will become the program of the Comprehensive Plan. The Issues Report proposes that the new Comprehensive Plan will

consolidate and coordinate existing departmental, topical and geographic plans into eight strategic plan elements, in accordance with the provisions of the Pennsylvania MPC. The Plan Elements will include:



#### Land Use Element

The Land Use Element is the core of the Comprehensive Plan and will include three focus areas: residential land use, commercial land use and institutional land use. The Land Use Element will comprehensively coordinate existing planning studies and evaluate strategies for addressing identified issues. This report has identified the following core issues to be addressed by each section:

##### *Residential Land Use Chapter*

The primary issue is to sustain the existing residential land use pattern while permitting reasonable growth in appropriate locations. The chapter will evaluate utilizing tools provided in the MPC, such as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) provisions to promote compatibility between new construction and existing residences. This chapter will also explore ways to permit logical expansions of existing residences in older, denser neighborhoods.

##### *Commercial Land Use Chapter*

The form and scale of the redevelopment of the Township's primary commercial areas of Ardmore, City Avenue, Rock Hill Road and Bryn Mawr is one of the most significant planning challenges to be addressed by the Comprehensive Plan. Currently each of these areas is being planned at a level of detail far exceeding what is normally addressed in a comprehensive plan. The Commercial Land Use Chapter will coordinate existing planning efforts undertaken by the Economic Development Division to evaluate the cost/benefits of different build out scenarios of commercial areas upon the Township fiscal structure. This chapter will also evaluate issues associated with mixed-use residential development in commercial areas.

##### *Institutional Land Use Chapter*

Institutions are permitted by special exception in all residential districts and comprise approximately 13% of the land area of the Township. The loss, change of use or expansion of institutions has a significant impact upon the residential neighborhoods in which they are located. The chapter will explore logical means for institutional uses to grow without negatively impacting surrounding properties. This chapter will focus on evaluating the existing special exception process, what if any modifications should be made, as well as the feasibility of utilizing an Institutional zoning overlay.



#### Housing Element

The Housing Element will inventory and evaluate the existing housing stock to identify areas prone to teardown/rebuilds, infill and redevelopment. The Element will include a survey of neighborhoods which may benefit from the implementation of zoning tools available through the MPC to preserve the existing form and scale of the built environment. The Housing Element will also evaluate policies to address specific housing populations within the Township including elderly, student and special needs. The primary focus of this element will be to evaluate ways to expand affordable and workforce housing within the Township by providing inclusionary incentives in historic and mixed use zoning districts. The Housing Element will also evaluate the potential to utilize accessory dwelling units (ADU's) to allow older residents to age in place by providing extra income and providing workforce housing opportunities.



### Historic Preservation Element

The Historic Preservation Element will fully evaluate existing and potential historic processes, regulations and programs, including an assessment of the existing historic resource inventory. This plan will identify and evaluate potential locations for additional historic districts. This plan will be prepared in conformance with the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission guidelines for municipal comprehensive plans.



### Circulation Element

The Circulation Element will explore the capacity of Township transportation infrastructure to absorb various levels of new development.

The Circulation Element will also explore ways to integrate different modes of transportation together, including biking, walking, public transportation and automobiles with the intent to alleviate traffic congestion by reducing unnecessary trips. The Circulation Element will explore the impact of automobiles on other Township planning goals, such as enhancing the pedestrian scaled, village character of commercial areas and making residential neighborhoods safer through traffic calming.



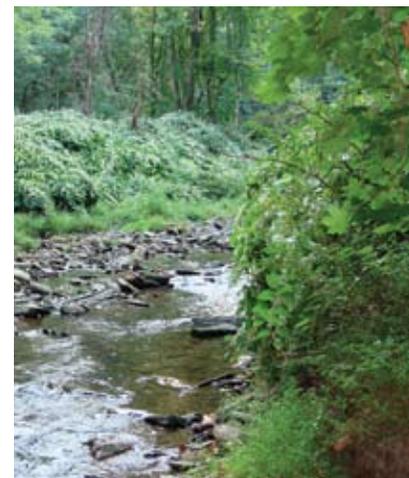
### Economic Development Element

The Economic Development Element will integrate the Township's recent economic plans and evaluate the broad based commercial revitalization initiatives to form the core of the Element. The Economic Development Element will also evaluate existing and proposed levels of Township revenue in relation to land use. This section may analyze the potential revenue generated by different levels of commercial and mixed-use redevelopment and the impact of increased commercial and residential revenue on reducing the burden of residential taxes to support Township services.



### Community Facilities and Infrastructure Element

The Community Facilities and Infrastructure Element will consolidate and coordinate the various departmental plans into individual chapters and will evaluate the short and long range recommendations proposed by each plan. The idea is to create a long range matrix of community facilities to assist with long range budgeting. The Community Facilities Element will include different chapters incorporating plans from Parks and Recreation, Libraries, Parking Services, Public Safety and Fire Services.



### Energy and Water Resource Conservation Element

The Energy and Water Resource Conservation Element will address the two most important environmen-

tal challenges facing the Township in the immediate future. The Water Conservation Chapter will incorporate existing stormwater management plans and will evaluate existing regulations to determine potential cost savings and environmental improvements associated with zoning changes and/or zoning incentives. This chapter will also incorporate the Environmental Action Plan prepared by the Environmental Advisory Council (EAC) and explore ways to promote implementation of small scale best management practices (BMPs) such as rain gardens and rain barrels to reduce stormwater runoff.

The Energy Conservation Chapter will address the use of energy at the Public and Private level by exploring policies, programs and projects which can reduce the use of fossil fuels and promote full cycle recycling of all forms of waste including construction debris. Energy oriented green initiatives being undertaken by the Township will be consolidated into this chapter.



#### Open Space and Natural Resource Protection Element

The Open Space and Natural Resource Protection Plan was completed and adopted by the Board of Commissioners in August 2006. The recommendations of this plan will be integrated with other plan elements.

#### Implementation Matrix

The Recommendations section includes a matrix identifying a proposed program of implementation to prepare the plan elements and plan chapters over the next several years based on Township priorities as time and resources become available.

It is understood that the Comprehensive Plan is a work in progress and will take several years to fully complete. This report presents a program identifying issues that should be addressed in a Comprehensive Plan. The draft report will be publicly reviewed by the Planning Commission and forwarded to the Board of Commissioners for consideration.

