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Executive Director

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LEHIGH VALLEY GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
Discussion Summaries

### Introduction

The Lehigh Valley General Assembly brings together representatives from each municipality, school district and legislative district in the region to discuss the important policy issues that impact every community. During the October 29 General Assembly attendees from 18 municipalities, four school districts and two legislative districts formed six interactive break-out groups that discussed the Regional Housing Supply, a Global Watershed Management Update and regional development trends. Each topic included interactive question and answer discussions. The results of the group discussions are below.

## 1. Regional Housing Supply and Attainability Strategy

### Presentation Synopsis

The LVPC presented an update on the current data and analysis effort that will inform the upcoming Housing Supply and Attainability Strategy engagement series. Attainable housing refers to housing for *everyone*, and it evaluates whether households of any size or income level can find housing they need in their desired locations. To evaluate whether or not housing is attainable, the analysis includes factors of quantity, diversity and price points of housing. The preview of LVPC's analysis is at the regional level broken down into cities, boroughs, suburban township and rural townships, but ultimately the LVPC will be releasing an Attainable Housing Dashboard where municipalities and school districts can see data specific to their jurisdictions.

### Discussion Questions

The LVPC opened small group discussions and asked the following questions:

- What are your Attainable Housing concerns?
- What are your expectations from the project?

Each small group then reported their discussion topics to the rest of the participants. Below is the summary of responses we received. The LVPC is committed to working through these challenges as we work through the project:

### Response Summaries – What are your Attainable Housing concerns?

- **Rural Area Challenges**
  - Limited land is available for housing development due to the amount of preserved farmland.
    - Land with residential development potential is competing with other land use types, such as industrial demand.
  - For households looking to downsize, very few housing type options are available.

- Infrastructure is limited, making residential developments more costly for developers, municipalities and property owners, and posing challenges for long-term maintenance.
  - Limited housing opportunities have gone hand-in-hand with declining school district enrollment, which affects district funding.
  - Communities need support in balancing rural character retention with meeting housing needs.
- **Developed Area Challenges**
    - Limited greenfield land is available to develop, which gives the perception of communities being “out of space”.
      - Developed communities, including boroughs, need creative solutions to strategically accommodate additional housing.
    - As developable land becomes more limited, developers look to brownfield redevelopment which can pose challenges through remediation and location.
      - Some projects are viable, like the Dixie Cup Factory redevelopment.
- **New Construction Challenges**
    - The prices of new construction homes limit how attainable they are to much of the population.
    - Housing developments often lack resident support and face pushback.
    - Communities have identified issues with development quality in some new residential developments, increasing maintenance costs for homeowners and impacting the long-term usability of housing units.
    - Zoning regulations that prohibit multiple uses in one lot can result in accessory dwelling units not being permitted.
- **Meeting Community Needs**
    - Vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities, veterans, and seniors, often have significant difficulty finding attainable housing and also encounter additional procedural or regulatory barriers.
    - Developed areas often have a higher percentage of rental units, and provide fewer homeownership opportunities.
      - Apartments are often the new housing types developed, rather than condominiums that would provide ownership opportunities.
      - Rental pricing makes it difficult for households to build financial equity to purchase a home, especially in a competitive market.
    - Developed areas face challenges with short-term rental units, which reduce homeownership or rental opportunities for long-term residents.

### **Response Summaries – What are your expectations from the project?**

- Data and analysis to inform municipalities and community members when making housing policy decisions.
- Assistance for local governments to take a cooperative approach to addressing housing needs.
  - Guidance on communicating good information, including with developers and members of the public.

- Strategies for updating comprehensive plans, land use policies and zoning regulations to permit alternative housing options.
  - Model ordinances or templates to illustrate possibilities for strategically increasing density in zoning districts.
- Resources for adaptive reuse and to repurpose existing structures for housing.

## **2. Lehigh Valley Watersheds Assessment & Act 167 Plan Update**

### **Presentation Synopsis**

The LVPC presented an overview and status of the project to update the Lehigh Valley's existing watershed-based stormwater management plans for its 15 watershed areas encompassing all the Lehigh and Northampton County's 62 municipalities. This project, supported by funding from the PA Department of Environmental Protection, PA Department of Community and Economic Development, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Administration and Lehigh and Northampton Counties will support LVPC to update technical studies, plans and ordinances for each of the watershed stormwater plans, that were developed between 1989 and 2018 under the State's Stormwater Regulation, known as Act 167. Using models that predict how rainfall travels through the landscape after storms, and in collaboration with municipal partners, LVPC will develop standards and criteria that are reflected in an updated stormwater management ordinance, that is adopted and then implemented at the municipal level. This effort is a necessary step to understand how our region has been impacted by intense development and will be impacted by the pressure of future growth.

### **Discussion Questions**

The LVPC opened small group discussions and asked the following questions:

- What are your stormwater management concerns?
- What are your expectations from the project?

Each small group then reported their discussion topics to the rest of the participants. Below is the summary of responses we received. The LVPC is committed to working through these challenges as we work through the project:

### **Response Summaries – What are your stormwater management concerns?**

- **Resources and Funding**
  - Lack of funding resources to support regulatory compliance:
    - Staff
    - Project design, construction
    - Oversight, inspection and enforcement
    - Overall costs to manage stormwater program
    - MS4 reporting and approvals
  - Funding support needed for engineering/technical consultants.
  - Need for steady funding source to update stormwater management infrastructure.
- **Capacity/Timelines**
  - MS4 has aggressive expectations for compliance which are difficult to meet in some communities, such as those with smaller staff resources.
  - Difficulty in finding consultants or contractors, especially in areas with limited development.

- **Ordinance and Stormwater Management Technical Criteria/Standards**
  - Current ordinance needs to include emerging issues such as how to treat solar fields/arrays (pervious vs. impervious).
  - Updated ordinance should clarify design criteria for pervious pavement and include design criteria for Managed Release Concept Basins.
- **Infrastructure Issues/Problems**
  - Management of runoff from state roads (PennDOT)
  - Stormwater infiltration into wastewater sewer infrastructure
  - Aging infrastructure repair/replacement
- **Education**
  - Importance of working with surrounding municipalities on stormwater issues because activities, and land use decisions that occur in upstream municipalities affects downstream municipalities.
  - Information to better understand the correlation of increased impervious coverage in a community (development intensity) to increasing stormwater runoff volume and velocity to municipal infrastructure and nearby streams.

#### **Response Summaries – What are your expectations from the project?**

- Additional guidance, educational and technical resources on stormwater management program implementation that can be shared with municipalities to help in meeting its regulatory requirements.
- General Roadmap for MS4 Compliance.
- Help with seeking funding or support for grant applications.
- Updated ordinance standards/criteria that are easier to understand, implement and enforce.

### **3. Regional Development Trends**

#### **Presentation Synopsis**

As the primary plan reviewer for much of the Lehigh Valley region, a summary of development review trends through the first three quarters of 2024 was presented. Higher interest rates have slowed new construction, but the amount of development proposals is still higher than pre-pandemic levels. Residential proposals have already passed 2023's totals with over half being apartments. Non-residential has slowed compared to the past few years largely due to rising cost of construction and the industrial market approaching demand/supply equilibrium. Development reviews have become increasingly complex as less open land is available and more challenging parcels remain.

#### **Discussion Questions**

The LVPC opened small group discussion and asked the following questions:

- What is changing in your community?
- What support do you need?

Each small group then reported their discussion topics to the rest of the participants. Below is the summary of responses we received. The LVPC is committed to working through these challenges as we work through the project:

### **Response Summaries – What is changing in your community?**

- **Procedural**
  - Participants said that the land development review process is complicated, and the public and municipal officials often lack the necessary training.
    - Participants expressed interest in seeking education about the land use process and better communication to residents about pertinent local developments.
    - Many municipal boards or commissions are unaware of what is required of them per the Municipal Planning Code (MPC).
- **Best Practices**
  - It was discussed how to best combat stagnant Municipalities who may not want to change their zoning or potential ways to stop more industrial development. Down-zoning was a particular concern that was brought up and the solicitor's trepidation from being sued.
  - Newer, unique developments like data centers and cryptocurrency mining present challenges that municipalities are often unable to face alone. Continued warehouse encroachment was a concern of multiple participants who spoke on limiting their sprawl and infrastructure impacts.
  - There was a concern that solar and wind farms impact available farmland in rural areas.
- **Housing**
  - It was noted that there is a lack of supply of affordable housing units across the Valley and that newer construction often fails to meet architectural standards.
  - AirBnBs were brought up as a hinderance to housing supply

### **Response Summaries – What support do you need?**

- **Zoning**
  - Municipalities face difficulties accommodating every conceivable use which led to a conversation of the strengths of multi-municipal comprehensive plans. Nuisance buildings were a specific concern brought up by participants.
  - Updating and modernizing zoning ordinances were support requested.
- **Education**
  - It was asked how to encourage green infrastructure, and specifically, solar panels on warehouses.
  - There are abundant educational opportunities for local officials to better understand the MPC and its requirements.