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PRACTICE **RURAL PROTECTION**



Planning Outside the Growth Boundary

By Dean S. Severson, AICP

What is a rural area, and how do you know when you get there? Planners have attempted to define and label rural in a number of ways.

All photos courtesy Lancaster County Planning Commission



➡ It's not unusual to see Amish students commuting to school on in-line skates in Upper Leacock Township in Lancaster County.

One of the most common is to indirectly define these areas as “not urban.” Implicit in this indirect definition is that rural areas are those places beyond the suburbs that we haven’t subjected to close scrutiny. These areas have been called the urban fringe, exurbia, or even the hinterlands.

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, has adopted a strategy intended to define the rural character of the county and to sustain and connect the rural community, resources, and economy. The rural strategy is based on three basic principles: minimize the amount of new residential development and employment growth and direct appropriate forms of development to existing rural centers; maintain the viability of the traditional rural economy; and protect rural resources.

The key to this strategy is the creation of designated rural areas, which are equivalent to and complement the county’s designated growth areas where future growth is to be directed and managed.

The following sections will detail the policies and implementing actions Lancaster County has adopted, as well as provide examples from around the country of other places that have also adopted a more fine-grained approach to rural planning.

RURAL AREA PLANNING IN LANCASTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

Lancaster County has long been a leader in agricultural production. The value of agricultural products produced in the county is the highest among all nonirrigated counties in the United States, and its total output would

place it among the top 15 states in many agricultural categories. This productivity, combined with the county’s large population of Amish and other Plain Sect communities, creates an instantly identifiable image of Lancaster County.

What’s not so readily apparent to county visitors is the more intricate, varied, and interconnected rural landscape supporting these agricultural activities. There are numerous unincorporated small towns, some dating back to the Revolutionary War, that were initially laid out as railroad stops, mill locations, or markets for the surrounding farms. The county also has exceptional resource areas, admittedly greatly reduced over the last three centuries, reflecting the original Penn’s Woods. Postwar residential subdivisions and rural economic centers dot the landscape as well.

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Go online during the month of March to participate in our “Ask the Author” forum, an interactive feature of Zoning Practice. Dean S. Severson, AICP, will be available to answer questions about this article. Go to the APA website at www.planning.org and follow the links to the Ask the Author section. From there, just submit your questions about the article using the e-mail link. The author will reply, and Zoning Practice will post the answers cumulatively on the website for the benefit of all subscribers. This feature will be available for selected issues of Zoning Practice at announced times. After each online discussion is closed, the answers will be saved in an online archive available through the APA Zoning Practice web pages.

About the Author

Dean S. Severson, AICP, is a principal agricultural and rural planning analyst for the Lancaster County (Pennsylvania) Planning Commission. He has spoken at APA national and chapter conferences on a variety of rural planning issues. Severson is also a member of APA’s Small Town and Rural Planning division. He holds a bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics and master’s degree in urban and regional planning, both from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

It is in this context that the Lancaster County Planning Commission (LCPC) created its Rural Strategy in an update to its comprehensive plan in 2006. The goals of the Rural Strategy are to protect natural and agricultural resources, focus growth in rural centers, and support the rural economy.

The county was among the first in Pennsylvania to adopt a growth management strategy in the early 1990s focusing on the adoption of urban growth boundaries (UGBs) centered on the City of Lancaster, the incorporated boroughs, and suburbanizing portions of incorporated townships. These early growth management efforts did not focus on areas outside of the UGBs.

The updated comprehensive plan recognizes the need to look closer at the other side of the land-use coin and calls for the creation of both Designated Growth Areas (DGAs) and Designated Rural Areas (DRAs). DGAs are the successors to the UGBs, but DRAs are a new concept that formally recognizes rural areas as worthy of planning attention. These new designations are intended to address a concern often expressed by the public that planners only look at rural areas, and particularly farmlands, as holding areas for future expansions of the DGAs. Designating an area of a municipality for long-term rural use, whether agricultural, resource, or rural center, connotes a sense of permanence in both policies and actions.

DESIGNATED RURAL AREAS

In order to implement the vision for the county’s rural areas, the LCPC has established a three-step planning process for each component of the DRA—agriculture, natural lands, and rural centers—to be implemented by the municipal planning partners. In Pennsylvania, local municipalities are enabled to adopt their own land-use regulations, and all 60 of the county’s municipalities have adopted a local zoning ordinance, while 41 have adopted a municipal subdivision and land-development ordinance.

AGRICULTURAL AREAS

The first step is to identify agricultural resources with GIS mapping. Because much of



➡ Approximately 75 percent of Lancaster County has soil classified as prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance.

Lancaster County contains prime agricultural soils, this cannot be the sole determining factor for an Agricultural Area designation. Other factors considered during the analysis include the size of farms in the study area and whether or not these farms are included in a block of currently farmed parcels, permanently preserved for agricultural use through conservation easements, or included in the locally designated Agricultural Security Area.

Lancaster County's Agricultural Preserve Board and the private, nonprofit Lancaster Farmland Trust have jointly permanently preserved over 90,000 acres of farmland, often in large contiguous blocks. These preserved farms have been mapped and form much of the foundation of Agricultural Areas at the municipal level.

Other resources that should be considered are the presence of agricultural support businesses that can be identified through economic census data and local land-use inventories. The goal is to identify an area where the long-term sustainability of agriculture as a thriving economic enterprise can be maintained.

Natural Areas

Delineation of Natural Areas at the municipal level in Lancaster County has been greatly assisted by the creation of the county's first green infrastructure plan, Greenscapes. This element of the county's comprehensive plan seeks to establish a network of natural areas, conservation lands, and working landscapes. The Natural Areas component of the DRA, like the Agricultural Areas, looks to identify and protect large blocks of resource lands while accommodating appropriate forms of rural development at appropriate scales.

A vital part of Greenscapes is the Natural Heritage Inventory of Lancaster County completed at the same time. The inventory is based primarily on a "hubs and corridors strategy" identifying the highest priority natural habitats in the county and the greenways that connect them. Greenscapes includes a goal to preserve the



- ➞ Many rural centers in Lancaster County include historic resources such as the Bangor Episcopal Church in unincorporated Churchtown, listed on National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

most exceptional natural resources in the county, including large forest blocks, high-quality streams and riparian buffers, and unique geologic features, as well as supporting natural features such as wetlands, floodplains, and groundwater and wellhead protection zones.

Rural Centers

Rural Centers are an important part of the heritage and identity of Lancaster County. These are primarily unincorporated small

towns, centered around mills, railroad stops, and post offices, which were some of the earliest areas of permanent European development in the county. Many of these communities still exist today.

The county's comprehensive plan identifies four types of Rural Centers. The first are villages, communities with well-defined edges typically consisting of 50 or more dwellings. Villages are usually designated as Village Growth Areas (VGAs) by the local municipality and the county and may be



- ➞ Many rural centers in Lancaster County also include agricultural-support businesses, such as this blacksmith in unincorporated Churchtown.

suitable for additional development if public sewer service and water supply are available. However, the county's comprehensive plan calls for 85 percent of new dwellings and 66 percent of new employment in the county to be located in the county's Urban Growth Areas (which includes the City of Lancaster and the 19 incorporated boroughs). Therefore, VGAs are only intended to capture a portion of the development that would otherwise occur in rural areas and are not meant to spur new areas of rural residential growth.

Crossroads communities are, like villages, historical in character but smaller than villages and are not usually appropriate for additional growth. The final two types of

Designated Rural Area Adoption

Once a community's rural resources have been identified and delineated, the second step is to formally adopt a DRA. The DRA concept, while similar to a future land-use designation found in all comprehensive plans, is intended to convey a longer-term perspective for rural land use. There is a sense of permanence to the rural resource and historical development patterns that won't be affected with the next update of the comprehensive plan. Ultimately, the intent is to assure citizens that agricultural and natural resources aren't on hold until something better comes along.

However, this doesn't mean that a community can't include areas for future

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DESIGNATED RURAL AREA

Once the resources in the DRA have been identified, delineated, and adopted by a municipality as part of its comprehensive plan update, the next step is to take action on policies that will sustain and support these resources. The Lancaster County Planning Commission has created a series of implementing tools to provide guidance to municipal planning commissions and governing bodies. These tools have been placed on the commission's website (www.co.lancaster.pa.us/planning) and have also been distributed via CD-ROM to each of our municipal planning commissions with a sampling of model ordinances, com-



In addition to preserving prime farmland, Lancaster County is also focused on protecting natural resource areas, such as the forests along the Susquehanna River.

Rural Centers are rural neighborhoods and rural business areas. Typically, these areas have been developed post-World War II, prior to effective planning and zoning controls. The rural strategy for these areas is generally to acknowledge the development that has occurred and to permit some limited additional development to occur only on undeveloped infill lots. Once again, the intent of these areas is not to attract additional rural residential and business development but to acknowledge their existence and plan for any utility or infrastructure needs.

development in their DRA. These areas may lack a concentration of higher-value natural or agricultural resources. They may be located next to an existing DGA and be a logical place if future expansion of the DGA is warranted. Alternatively, lands located next to rural centers may be appropriate to accommodate some of the future residential needs of the DRA. The undesignated area may also be determined to be appropriate for expansion of neighboring farm uses. At present, however, the preferred future use is undetermined.

prehensive plan elements, and links to the website.

Two examples of local planning assistance prepared by the LCPC are (1) the Natural Resource Protection Standards and Model Conservation Zoning District and (2) Planning Strategies for Lancaster County's Rural Centers. The protection standards and model zoning district are a direct outgrowth of Greenscapes discussed above. Once a municipality has identified the hubs and corridors of natural resources within its community, the model ordinance provides defin-

The overarching goal is to protect Lancaster County's individual resources in addition to entire landscapes through a holistic approach to conservation.

ing criteria, performance standards, and mitigation standards for each of the specific resources. The overarching goal is to protect Lancaster County's individual resources in addition to entire landscapes through a holistic approach to conservation.

The protection standards and model zoning district go far beyond what is typically included within municipal zoning ordinances, which primarily address federally designated floodplains, wetlands, and areas with steep slopes. The guide also includes recommended protections for forest blocks and interior forests, areas with karst topography, riparian corridors, and unique geologic features.

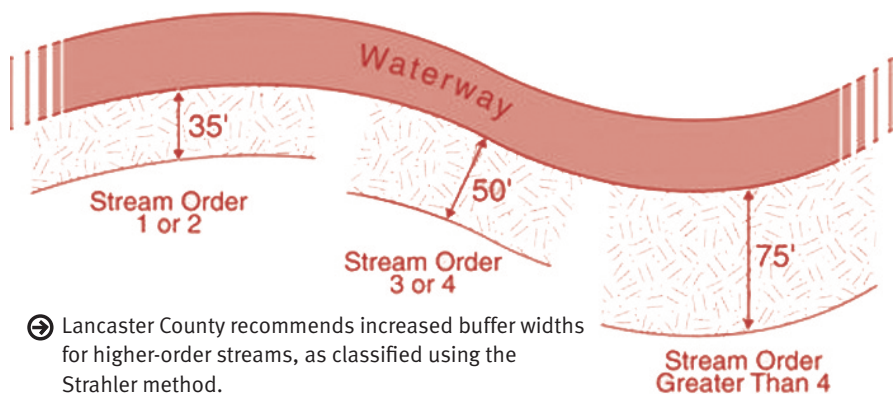
As an example, the guidelines use the Strahler method to categorize streams. First-order streams are the smallest streams that typically feed into larger streams. First-order streams have no tributaries or branches. When two first-order streams merge, a second-order stream is created. Any stream ordered higher than six is considered a river. Streams ordered one and two together represent the headwaters of the stream. The recommended protected riparian corridor widths are based on the stream order (see illustration). Riparian corridors shall, at a minimum, encompass the entire 100-year floodplain and any wetland areas.

The Rural Centers guide was created to help local communities define, plan for, and better regulate the historical unincorporated communities within their municipal boundaries. One of the unique characteristics of Lancaster County is that, by and large, these rural communities are still recognizable places. Too often in communities across the nation these places have been swallowed up in the ever-expanding creep of highway commercial development.

The first part of the guide helps local communities research why a place came into being and investigate the spatial form of its early development. The second—and perhaps most important—part of the guide as-

sists with a community inventory. Municipal officials and citizens are advised to form teams and walk the streets observing the development pattern. A community inventory cheat sheet is included in the guide for team members to check boxes and write notes while they are walking. The guide also includes an identification guide to illustrate key concepts, such as good and bad examples of on-street parking, a strong and poor gateway presence, and complete or incomplete sidewalk connections. The guide

development look like? For instance, if the original form of the rural center is characterized by one-third- or one-quarter-acre lots with houses built up to the road, the municipality may wish to use architectural form or lot dimensional standards in conjunction with lot size requirements to maintain the distinct character of the town. The municipality should only permit commercial and industrial uses that serve the needs of the surrounding community. Because these rural centers are often located on roads that have evolved into major thoroughfares, the municipality should avoid permitting highway strip nonresidential uses that detract from the local orientation of the rural center. In addition, the municipality needs to coordinate the delineation of the rural center with planning for existing or future infrastructure needs. In many areas of the country, rural centers are characterized by older homes with older, often deficient on-lot sewage disposal systems on lots too small to adequately provide an alternative.



recommends that team members take time to sit down for coffee or lunch immediately following the walking inventory to compare notes. This allows team members a chance to discuss the findings of the walking tour while it is still fresh in their minds.

The final step in the creation of the rural center guide is to take all of the assessment information gathered in the second step and answer some basic questions: Do we want our rural center to grow? If so, should it expand outward or only through infill and redevelopment? Questions for municipalities with older small towns include the following: Do we have the infrastructure to permit additional development? Do we already have existing problems with failing on-lot sewer systems or inadequate well water quantity? Finally, what will the new

Too often in the past, rural communities have adopted “off the shelf” zoning ordinances and other land-use regulations that were written primarily for post-World War II rural subdivisions. The building setback and density requirements, street widths, and accessory building standards bear little resemblance to the actual communities that were built prior to the adoption of zoning ordinances. Communities have to identify the specific elements of the community they have and ensure they don't get a community they don't want.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF RURAL AREA PLANNING

The state of Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA) has also focused on providing direction for counties in plan-

ning for existing rural areas with more intensive development, such as unincorporated hamlets and villages, shoreline developments, and resorts built or vested prior to the adoption of comprehensive plans prepared under the GMA. Aptly titled Limited Areas of More Intensive Rural Development (LAMIRDs) generally allow a greater amount of rural development than is ordinarily permitted outside of planned growth areas. The GMA states that measures controlling rural development should, among other objectives, be visually compatible with the surrounding rural area, reduce sprawling, low-density development, and protect critical resource areas.

However, many counties in Washington, as elsewhere in the United States, have areas of existing rural residential development and rural nonresidential land uses that play an important role in the local economy. Therefore, the GMA permits LAMIRDs in three separate scenarios. The first is for the infill, development, or redevelopment of existing commercial, industrial, residential, or mixed use areas. The other two instances are for the intensification or expansion of residential, tourism, or nonresidential uses on existing lots. For instance, LAMIRD designation allows rural businesses to expand on existing lots.

King County, Washington, has established a Rural Economic Strategies (RES) program to support rural businesses that are compatible with the rural character of the region. They have created six rural economic clusters and recommended specific strategies to strengthen each cluster's economic base. These clusters are agriculture, forestry, home-based businesses, tourism and recreation, rural towns and neighborhoods, and rural cities. Recommended strategies include reviewing county regulations and procedures governing agriculture-related businesses, exploring options to prepare business plans for farm and forest businesses, and creating a model to promote tours of working farms, heritage sites, and habitat restoration sites.

Scott County, Minnesota, has also faced the question of defining what is rural. Its comprehensive plan identified roughly one-quarter of the county's land base as permanently rural. County planners and the Center for Rural Design at the University of Minnesota then engaged the public in a series of public meetings using visual preference surveys and roundtable discussions to create a more fine-grained description of the elements of a rural landscape. A rural charac-

ter map was then created to identify four rural character areas: mixed land rural residential, natural land cover residential, lake country residential, and farm country. Finally, these maps were used, along with visual preference surveying, to garner the community's feelings on the appropriate types and patterns of development in each of these rural character areas as well as how planning and design guidelines could be useful in directing development in these areas.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The rural areas of your community should not be viewed simply as "those areas outside of where we plan to grow." Too often in the past planners have principally focused on houses, industry, and civic institutions within adopted growth boundaries and viewed the areas outside the growth line as static, monolithic areas of natural resources and agriculture. Even worse, they looked at these places as merely holding areas until development arrived. The following points should be considered by communities as they plan for their rural areas' community character and economic health:

Too often, planners
have looked at rural
areas as merely
holding areas until
development arrived.

Identify the specific components of your rural areas. What is the form and character of existing villages as well as postwar residential development? Identify all of the small businesses and the associated tax base and employment that exist in your community. Inventory all of the various farm-support businesses in your community. Work with a local university or state geographic information office to map all of the natural resources in your community. Assess the agricultural economy in your community: What is the average size of farms? What are they growing? What is the average age of farmers in your community?

Craft plans and land-use regulations that reflect and recognize the unique development patterns of your rural area. Don't borrow someone else's suburban residential zoning regulations or economic development plan. Engage your citizens in identifying how your community first came about and how it evolved to what it is today. Obviously, a town founded as a mill center in the 1800s is most likely no longer serving that function. However, if it was laid out in a linear pattern parallel to a major stream, future development should reflect this pattern.

Foster existing economic activities that benefit and are compatible with the local community. Washington's LAMIRD provisions illustrate the importance of locally based commerce and industry. In Lancaster County, many of the farm-based businesses operated by the county's Plain Sect Amish and Mennonite farmers provide goods and services used by their Plain neighbors. Examples include blacksmiths, farm equipment manufacturing, and small machine repair.

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HOW DOES YOUR COMMUNITY MANAGE GROWTH IN RURAL AREAS?

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