

# Latest Cumberland, Dauphin comp plans are streamlined, more flexible

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**Dauphin County officials would like to see more affordable housing projects, like Sunflower Fields in Susquehanna Township. The development, undertaken by Monarch Development Group LLC attracted about 800 applications for 35 single-family detached-rental units. - (Photo / Amy Spangler)**

In 15 years as a county planner, Kirk Stoner says he can remember only two or three people ever coming into his office to ask for a hard copy of Cumberland County's comprehensive plan.

Even though these long-range planning documents are designed to help steer future land use and development policies, they have never been must-have reading materials for most people, Stoner said.

It's not hard to understand why.

They have traditionally been hundreds of pages long and packed more with historical data about the county than with future goals and strategies.

Hoping to change that, Cumberland and Dauphin counties streamlined their new comp plans last year. The counties cut out many of the demographic tables and charts to focus instead on goals that people can relate to and actions they can take.

For example, actions specified in Dauphin County's plan call for identifying local regulations that add to home costs and proposing changes that could make housing more affordable.

"Regulations vary by municipality and our role is to facilitate the discussion and educate on the results," said Steve Deck, executive director of **the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission**, which oversees planning efforts in Dauphin County. "What we're asking developers to do is be part of that process."

The comp plan documents in Cumberland and Dauphin counties now run less than 100 pages and the printed versions have largely been replaced by **online versions**. As a result, they are now more flexible, with changes and additions able to be incorporated into the online documents. They are not just books on a shelf that get updated once every decade with new Census data.

The flexibility is important as technology evolves and counties adjust to changes on the ground, Deck said.

For county planning staff, being able to keep the plan current will help save time on future comp plan updates. It also makes it easier to do countywide updates more frequently, which should make planning more accurate.

"I think we can look up to five years out fairly easily, but planning 10 years or beyond is really taking a guess," Deck said.

## Shifting west

Hampden and Silver Spring townships have seen a lot of residential and commercial development on or near the Carlisle Pike over the last two decades. Large mixed-use neighborhoods like Walden in Silver Spring Township, which was recently approved for its final phase of development, have been a big driver of population expansion in that area.

"It won't be long until (Walden) is built out and then that growth will shift somewhere else," Deck said.

Builders already are looking farther west and pushing toward Carlisle with plans for more housing. Meanwhile, warehouse development has long been a staple around Carlisle, the county seat, because of Interstate 81 and the area's proximity to big cities along the East Coast.

And while big boxes continue to rise along the I-81 corridor, a key focus of the new comp plan in Cumberland County is finding balance. About 65 percent of residents responding to the county's comp plan survey said there is too much warehousing in Cumberland County; 81 percent said they would be willing to pay more in taxes to support greater farmland preservation efforts.

But balance can be tough to achieve when your county dons the fastest-growing label, which often attracts people and businesses who want to be where the action is already happening.

"Growth is not bad," Stoner said. "But it has to be planned."

## Affordable housing

Tied to future growth is a need for more affordable housing for lower-wage workers, including those working in service jobs.

As buyer demand has grown faster than homes hit the market for sale, home prices have been rising.

Officials in Cumberland and Dauphin counties both expressed a need for more affordable housing projects as part of their comp plan updates.

Developers like **Monarch Development Group** are more than happy to pursue projects that meet the need.

Monarch, based in Cumberland County, has experience building affordable housing in the Harrisburg area, including the Shepherd's Crossing project in Hampden Township.

Demand has been strong, but the supply is limited, partly because of how affordable housing is financed. The projects rely heavily on special federal tax credits, which can be hard to obtain as applications far exceed the available funds each year.

The Shepherd's Crossing project in 2015 had 300 to 400 applications for its 35 townhouses, said Brandon Johnson, development director at Monarch.

The company's latest project in Dauphin County, Sunflower Fields in Susquehanna Township, saw about 800 applications for 35 single-family detached-rental units.

Construction was completed last year and 200 people are still on a waiting list, Johnson said.

Monarch, which is seeking financing approval for three new projects, has nothing else under construction, but is open to more.

"Cumberland County is very strong. We'd love to be locating more projects there," Johnson said.

## New era for locals

Stoner and Deck often meet with local officials in both counties about updating their own planning documents to help ensure there is a more coherent vision across a county.

Unlike counties, local governments aren't required by the state to update their comp plans every decade. Most go much longer.

Susquehanna Township, for example, last updated its plan in 2000. But because most of its green spaces are filled, officials in the suburban Harrisburg municipality are likely to focus more on redevelopment as they gear up for a 2019 plan update, said David Kratzer Jr., the township's manager.

"We are competing for people, for jobs, for private investment. In order to be effective in competing, we need a planned strategy and be more deliberate in what we do," he said.

Older suburbs like Susquehanna Township are beginning to resemble boroughs and cities, meaning they have to look at ways to reinvent themselves.

At the same time, rural townships near rapidly developing places are starting to plan for how to address sprawl that could wash across their borders.

Some have already started to prepare. Areas west of Carlisle toward Newville have upgraded sewer, water and other infrastructure, which could attract development, Stoner said.

"The more rural ones, they look and learn from municipalities that have seen development," Stoner said. "They try and plan ahead and can learn from those municipalities."

Areas where housing developments already are popping up, meanwhile, need to be planning for future infrastructure changes if they expect or want more development, he said. That would include areas around Camp Hill and Mechanicsburg, such as Upper Allen and Lower Allen townships.

Cumberland County planners, meanwhile, also need to keep an eye on the area around Dillsburg in York County, which is growing thanks to its proximity to Harrisburg.

Many Dillsburg residents may be commuting to or shopping in Cumberland County, Stoner said. "It's a natural progression of growth."

## The county plans

To check out the new-model comprehensive plans for Cumberland and Dauphin counties, visit:

**Cumberland County:** <https://www.ccpa.net/3546/Cumberland-County-Comprehensive-Plan>

**Dauphin County:** <https://www.dauphincountycompplan.org>