

# Phoenixville Region Comprehensive Plan

## Planning Area

This plan includes six municipalities in northwestern Chester County—Phoenixville Borough and the townships of Charlestown, East Pikeland, East Vincent, West Vincent, and Schuylkill.

Located on the Schuylkill River, Phoenixville is a town of about 15,000 people and a former industrial center. Like other Schuylkill River towns, Phoenixville lost much of its manufacturing employment base during the late 20th Century. The site of Phoenix Iron Works, which ceased operations in the 1980s, dominates the downtown waterfront and has been the focus of recent revitalization efforts. Surrounding townships are largely affluent and have experienced rapid growth in recent years. The region as a whole grew by more than 15 percent during the 1990s, though Phoenixville's population declined slightly (by about 2 percent) during the same period.

## Status

The plan was completed in February 2006 and

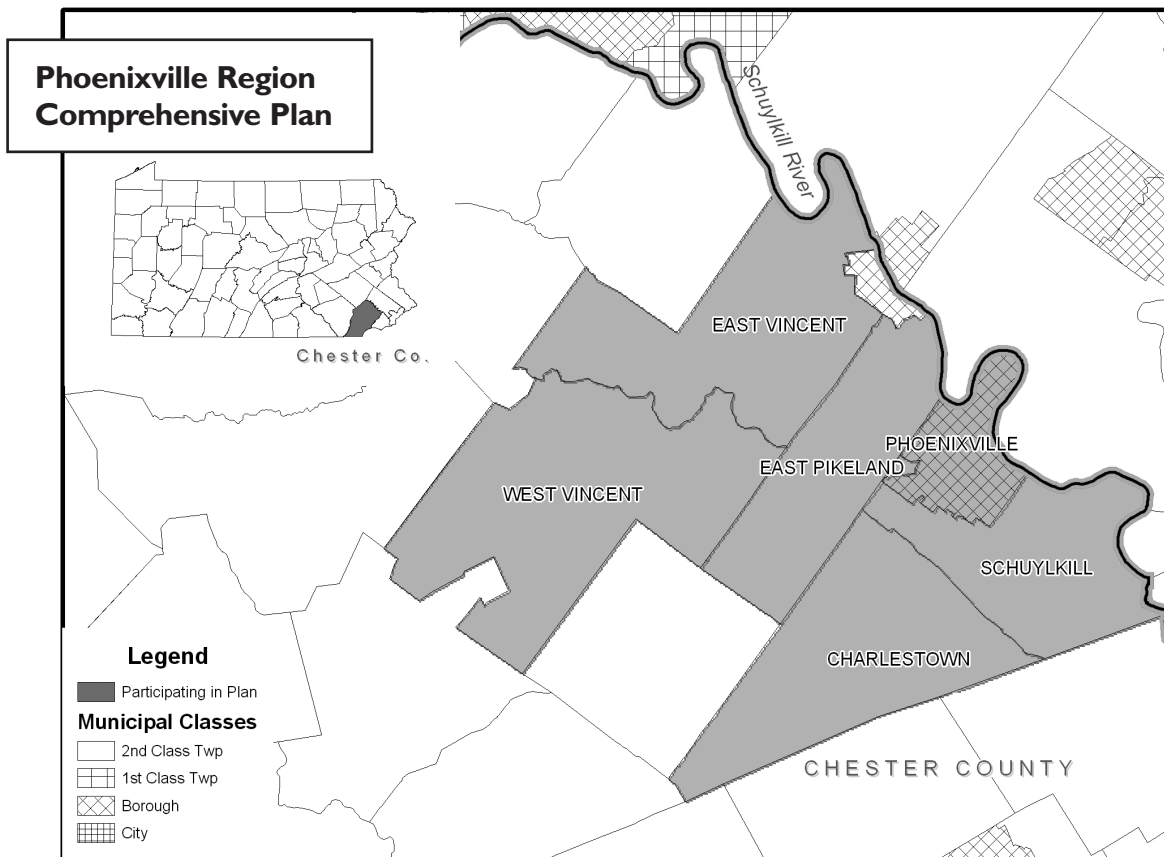
subsequently adopted by all six municipalities. They signed an implementation agreement in March 2008.

## Plan Development

The motivations for launching a multi-municipal plan are summarized in the introduction to the plan document:

The primary impetus for this comprehensive plan is the desire to end the existing pattern of growth that is consuming the area's natural resources and straining the transportation network. Instead, the Region's citizens and policy makers seek to preserve remaining natural and agricultural resources while investing in the Region's traditional downtown, villages and commercial centers to enhance community character and maximize the use of existing infrastructure while augmenting the local economy and tax base.

The idea of a regional plan emerged from a 2002 Countryside Exchange project involving communities in the Phoenixville area. Individuals who were active in the Countryside Exchange took the lead in applying for



funding and identifying consultants. The Philadelphia-based consulting firm of Kise, Straw & Kolodner, Inc., was chosen to assist in plan development in the summer of 2004. Most of the \$250,000 cost of the plan was covered by grants from LUPTAP and Chester County, although participating municipalities also made modest contributions.

The steering committee for plan development consisted of elected officials and alternates from each of the six municipalities. As in other planning processes reviewed here, there were some logistical challenges to be overcome. Since most of the participants were elected officials who were, for the most part, volunteering their time, basic organizing tasks—developing agendas, sending out meeting notices, taking notes—proved to be problematic. In one township, lack of communication between the steering committee representative and the municipal planning commission led to some confusion and the risk that the commission would reject the plan, though the commission eventually was persuaded to recommend adoption. One of the planning consultants noted that such problems might have been avoided had the steering committee included municipal managers (who in this area are usually full-time paid employees) in addition to elected officials.

Since legal challenges from landowners have been common in Chester County, some participants were concerned that the multi-municipal plan could render the municipalities more vulnerable to legal challenges. Charlestown Township, for example, wanted to make sure the plan avoided language implying that the region was in the path of growth, since Pennsylvania courts have held that communities “in the path of growth” must provide their fair share of higher-density multi-family housing.<sup>73</sup> In addition, township officials did not want to be dependent on neighboring municipalities to meet their obligation to provide for the full range land uses.

To a large extent, these concerns turned out to be moot. While the final plan did not explicitly state that the region was in the path of growth, it did include a housing needs analysis to demonstrate that fair-share housing requirements were being met. And it contained few explicit provisions for shared uses, since most municipalities were already providing for a wide range of land uses.

### **Features of the Plan**

The consultants employed a build-out analysis to show that the residential and commercial development that could occur under current zoning was more than the region’s infrastructure and natural resources could sustain. This approach and technique, in keeping with best planning practice, helped focus community

visions on alternatives to current zoning. The analysis included a “preferred alternative” that incorporated relatively stringent environmental standards, such as 50-foot buffers for floodplains, 100-foot buffers for surface waters, and prohibition of development on slopes of 15 percent or more. The results showed that such rigorous standards would allow for ample development and would be defensible in court.

In developing the future land use map and policies, the plan calculates the number of housing units that can be produced and the land area available for multi-family development. In addition, the plan specifies how growth areas were derived, and it enumerates specific policy goals for each area. It also contains an excellent and detailed implementation matrix.

### **Implementation**

To reach consensus on an implementation agreement, it was necessary to address a number of issues raised by municipal officials and solicitors. A fundamental question was how much authority the new regional planning committee would have relative to the municipalities. Officials concerned about losing autonomy were satisfied once they understood that the committee’s advisory opinions would be recommendations only, comparable to recommendations of a county planning commission, and that municipalities would retain ultimate control over land use.

Municipalities were reluctant to make future financial commitments to support the regional planning committee and other shared costs. This was especially a concern for Phoenixville, which was facing fiscal challenges. In the end, the municipalities agreed that budget decisions would be made on a year-to-year basis and would have to be approved by unanimous votes. As in the Pottstown area, there was discussion about creating a regional legal defense fund. But instead of requiring contributions to a pooled fund in advance, the implementation agreement simply states that the member municipalities “agree to consider from time to time providing financial or other assistance to each other” to defend implementation of the regional plan.

Among the first items on the agenda for the regional planning committee is the creation of a multi-municipal transfer-of-development-rights (TDR) program. Phoenixville is interested in using development rights purchased from a neighboring township to permit increased development density for a proposed mid-rise residential project. West Vincent Township already has its own bank of development rights and would like to extend that to serve the entire planning region.