



Marshall Township Implementable Comprehensive Plan *Phase 1 Executive Summary*

Introduction

Phase 1 of the Implementable Comprehensive Planning process has focused on public and stakeholder engagement to identify and frame the key community issues around which the plan will be built. The project's appointed steering committee interpreted the results of various forms of outreach and staked out a set of key issues with guidance from Pashek+MTR. This sets the stage for the next step in the planning process – drilling down for solutions.

Public Engagement

Steering Committee

The project's steering committee met four times between Sep. 22, 2020, and April 29, 2021. At this group's first meeting, members identified potential key issues that included:

- **Sense of community:** Exploring how to fortify civic belonging and carve out a distinct Marshall Township identity
- **Managing growth and development:** Establishing a long-term vision and tools to effectively address the tension between development interest on the Township's western side and local will to preserve green space and rural character, address the "hodgepodge" of the Northgate Drive area, ensure that services and facilities keep pace with growth.
- **Traffic and transportation:** Increase interconnectedness of neighborhoods and communities for walking and biking, address traffic issues along Route 910 in the context of growth in neighboring communities, address other traffic "trouble spots."

Project Website

PlanMarshall.org is project's central clearinghouse, a place where residents can go for project updates, ways to be involved and an ongoing discourse. The site is regularly updated with news and items for review. It currently features the YouTube video of the recent Key Issues Open House. It also has ongoing tools for discussion, including a message board and a Wikimap tool that can be updated at various stages of the project to crowd-source ideas that are specific to locations within the Township.

Community Questionnaires

The initial community questionnaire was available to the public from mid-October through Dec. 1, 2020 and received 907 responses, which represents exceptionally good participation by comparison to similar exercises in other communities. The diligent efforts of staff and the steering committee (detailed in the attachment) helped deliver a large pool of responses that provides valuable insight on the questions asked.

Issues that ranked the highest on the community questionnaire included balancing growth/development with preservation of existing rural character; finding solutions for traffic problems, particularly along the Route 910 corridor; increasing safe connections within and beyond neighborhoods for walking and biking; and preserving and enhancing environmental quality.

In order to collect feedback on the draft key issues, Pashek+MTR opened and advertised a second survey during the month of June. It received 290 responses, many of which included detailed comments offering suggestions or context. In summary:

- **92%** agreed that **green space preservation** is an important issue in Marshall Township.
 - **88%** agreed with the suggested vision for this issue.
- **80%** agreed that **traffic on Route 910** is an important issue in Marshall Township.
 - **74%** agreed with the suggested vision for this issue.
- **71%** agreed that **meeting recreation needs** is an important issue in Marshall Township.
 - **75%** agreed with the suggested vision for this issue.
- **53%** agreed that **sense of place/identity** is an important issue in Marshall Township.
 - **71%** agreed with the suggested vision for this issue.

Key Person Interviews and Focus Groups

Pashek+MTR conducted 13 one-on-one interviews with individuals who the steering committee suggested could provide perspective and/or expertise that could benefit the plan. This initial group included western-side landowners, land development professionals, RIDC, business owners, farmers, the fire department and North Allegheny School District. Interviews will continue during Phase 2 of the project as the consultant seeks input on potential solutions.

Phase I also included four focus groups that involved business owners, local sports league leaders, nonprofit agencies and residents. Phase II will include at least one additional focus group to consult large landholders and developers with interests in the Township's western side.

A summary of themes that surfaced in interviews and focus groups is attached. In addition to discussing the Township's strongest assets and advantages, participants provided perspective on economic development, traffic problems, connectivity, zoning and land development both generally and on the western side, Warrendale as a town center, stormwater management, local identity and housing.

Community Events/Public Meetings

Trick-or-Treat – October 25th, 2020

Pashek+MTR conducted socially distant outreach at the Township's Trick-or-Treat in the Park event in late October, which was primarily a way of distributing information about the website and questionnaire, but also allowed for some conversations about the project and what people would like to see it accomplish. The handful of attendees who formally offered comments praised the Township's recreation facilities (trails, disc golf course) and expressed a desire to see preserved green space, traffic and pedestrian improvements, horses on trails and a dog park.

Land Use and Development Forum – February 24th, 2021

On February 24th, 2021, Pashek+MTR and Township leaders invited members of the Marshall community to attend an expert panel event regarding development and conservation on the western side of Marshall Township. The main purpose was educational, to provide answers to questions on the process of planning, land use regulation and zoning, and to describe available tools that the Township may want to consider. A summary of major takeaways from the discussion is attached.

Key Issues Virtual Open House – June 15th, 2021

On June 15th, 2021, Pashek+MTR hosted a public open house on Zoom to solicit public feedback on the draft key issues. The 91 unique users who attended could move among four breakout rooms that each represented a key issue, in addition to a fifth room for any other issues. Attendees provided valuable feedback on each draft issue that will be incorporated into the way the plan frames and addresses the issues.

Key Issues

Based on feedback from the steering committee, community questionnaires, key person interviews, public events and local leadership, four key issues rose to the surface. These issues appear below.

Route 910 Traffic and Land Use

- A. Road capacity, speeding and traffic calming
- B. Connectivity for non-motorized use along the corridor
- C. Access management and zoning

Vision

People can travel along this corridor safely in a vehicle, on a bike or walking. Land use and road facility design reflect local intentions for the corridor's future character and function

Green Space and Future Development

- A. Zoning strategies to preserve natural resources and open space while respecting the rights of property owners

- B. Promote redevelopment where appropriate
- C. Promote green infrastructure in all development and redevelopment

Vision

Local policy and ordinances effectively balance the rights of property owners to develop with the strong public interest in protecting natural resources and the attractive experience of living in and travelling through Marshall Township.

Recreation Facilities and Connectivity

- A. Continue to enhance recreation offerings to serve the full range of demographics within the Township.
- B. Anticipate whether future needs can be met through the use of existing facilities or additional land will be required. If additional land is required, secure land or easements for new facilities or trail corridors.

Vision

Exceptional recreation facilities and programming meet the needs of current and future residents, including an interconnecting pedestrian network and a variety of recreational experiences.

Sense of Place and Identity

- A. Enhance Township communications within the framework of a branding/marketing strategy
- B. Eliminate barriers to realizing the local vision for a walkable downtown in the Northgate/Warrendale area. Evaluate the feasibility of a “public square” type feature.

Vision

The reputation of Marshall Township grows as an ideal place to live, visit and do business. Residents feel a strong sense of belonging to a distinctive community and appreciate its many assets. Warrendale’s value grows as a known walkable mixed-use destination.

Other topics to be covered in less detail:

- 1. Ensure that zoning regulations appropriately respond to housing market conditions, including demand for a diversification of types in supply
- 2. Explore alternative land uses and potential zoning changes for the Innovation Ridge area
- 3. Other topics as they arise during the process

Next Steps

- Update Board of Supervisors June 28th
- Phase 2: Identify and vet detailed specific strategies to address the four key issue areas. This effort will include research and continued public and stakeholder engagement, steering committee review and consultant application of best practices, including contributions from transportation consulting engineer TranSystems. Our approach emphasizes recruiting partners, building capacity and building community ownership and commitment to facilitate implementation.
- Develop a comprehensive plan workbook/report for review, adoption and use by Marshall Township.

How the questionnaire was created

At the first meeting of the Marshall Township Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee in September 2020, the group identified potential key issues and questions that should be asked of the community to help inform direction for Marshall Township's future.

A draft questionnaire was developed in SurveyMonkey. The Steering Committee and staff reviewed and provided feedback that was incorporated in the final version. The questionnaire was open from mid-October through December 1, 2020.

Distribution

Township staff printed and mailed to every address a postcard introducing the project and providing a link to the questionnaire and project website, planmarshall.org. The SurveyMonkey link also appeared on the Township's website and was promoted via its social media accounts and Savvy Citizen, as well as circulated by Steering Committee members among their own networks. Local businesses, including T-Bones, distributed postcards to customers. Notice appeared in the North Hills edition of the Tribune-Review and at triblive.com. Pashek+MTR distributed flyers with the survey link at a community trick-or-treat event. For residents who preferred to complete a paper questionnaire, the Township provided hard copies upon request. Staff also provided hard copies for residents at The Waters. Staff manually entered all received hard copy responses into SurveyMonkey.

Response rate

The questionnaire received a total of 907 responses. In validating the data, we flagged any IP address (the address of an individual device) associated with four or more responses, acknowledging that multiple members of a single household could respond using the same computer. There were five such instances. However, a detailed review of the responses seems to indicate that all are unique and unlikely to be the result of any effort to unduly influence results. We also examined the 20 responses that indicated that respondents do not live in the Township but are interested in its future planning. We reviewed these responses and decided that they were appropriate and included them in the questionnaire totals.

This questionnaire was not intended to achieve statistically valid results. We find value in qualitative information generated by the questionnaire, especially the responses to open-ended questions, and typically use this data to identify trends. That said, if this were a random sample distribution, the response rate of 907 for 9,355 would represent a 95% confidence level of accuracy within a 3.1% margin of error. The diligent outreach efforts of staff and the Steering Committee helped deliver a large pool of responses that provides valuable insight on the questions asked.

The results

Pashek+MTR summarized the most important responses to the questionnaire. For additional tabulations and *much* more detail in qualitative comments, see the full questionnaire printout.

Q1 How long have you lived in Marshall Township? (886 responses)

Age range	Respondents as %
Less than 5 years	23%
5 to 20 years	42%
More than 20 years	33%
I do not reside in Marshall Township but am interested in planning for its future	2%

Q2 What are the best features of living in Marshall Township? Please rate the importance of these factors, with 1 being very satisfied and 5 being not satisfied. (890 responses)

The highest-ranking four features were, in order:

1. Safe and healthy place to raise children (Weighted average: 1.47)
2. School district quality (1.50)
3. Open space and natural scenery (1.57)
4. Convenient access to major highways and destinations (1.61)

Q3 If a Township quality or feature is important to you but was not listed in Question 2, please list it here. (187 responses)

Rural character was by far the most frequently mentioned quality or feature mentioned.

Q4 How satisfied are you with the following aspects of life in the Township? Please rate your satisfaction, with 1 being very satisfied and 5 being not satisfied. (879 responses)

The highest-ranking five aspects were, in order:

1. Public safety (police, fire and emergency services) (Weighted average: 1.60)
2. Township road snow clearing (1.69)
3. General maintenance of Township property (1.88)
4. Park facilities within the Township (1.90)
5. Township road maintenance (1.94)

For context, 87% of respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with public safety, while 44% felt the same way about connectivity. This question received 193 comments.

Q5 If a you have strong feelings about a Township service and/or facility not listed in Question 4, please explain it here. (194 responses)

Lack of connectivity via bike/hike was the most frequently mentioned issue.

Q6 Initial conversations among Township officials and residents suggest some issues that may be especially important to the community. Please rank the following issues in order of importance. (701 responses)

Where respondents are asked to rank various options, SurveyMonkey provides an overall score for each option by weighting the responses. The highest score reflects the highest overall ranking across responses.

1. Balancing growth/development with preservation of existing rural character (7.31)
2. Finding solutions for traffic problems, particularly along the Route 910 corridor (6.12)
3. Increasing safe connections within and beyond neighborhoods for walking and biking (5.97)
4. Preserving and enhancing environmental quality (5.38)
5. Building a cohesive sense of close-knit community (4.99)
6. Further developing Warrendale as a walkable town-center neighborhood (4.65)
7. Increasing resilience (ability to endure, adapt and recover from adverse situations, such as infrastructure failure or severe weather) (4.16)
8. Defining a unique identity and branding for Marshall Township (4.02)

Q7 Does Marshall Township have other issues that are important to you but not listed in Question 6? Please explain. (174 responses)

The most frequent “other” comment was the need to limit development in the future.

Q8 What do you think distinguishes Marshall Township from neighboring communities? In other words, if the Township ought to be known and appreciated for something, what would that be? (367 responses)

The top three most frequently mentioned characteristic that distinguishes Marshall Township is:

1. Rural, quiet community
2. Good access to roads and shopping
3. Greenspace and trees

- Q9 The availability of utilities like sanitary sewage and public water on the western portion of the Township has provided an opportunity for development. What kind of development would you prefer to see happen in this area? (656 responses)**

	Respondents as %
Single-family homes with large private lawns	42%
Other (please specify, including any combination of the above)	20%
Accessible, low-maintenance independent living options for seniors, such as a patio home village	17%
Single-family homes clustered on smaller lots with preserved open space	15%
Continuing care facilities for seniors that combine housing with health services	4%
Townhomes	2%
Apartments and/or condominiums	0.5%

In the “others” comments, the top three most frequently mentioned preferences for development were:

1. No development
2. Various combinations of Single Family homes
3. Homes for seniors and empty nesters

- Q10 Which of the following represents the best future land use scenario for the area along Route 910 within the Township? (Wexford Bayne Road roughly between the I-79 interchange and Blue Heron Dr.) (663 responses)**

	Respondents as %
This area should remain single-family residential	48%
This area should be mixed-use with neighborhood-scale retail and services	27%
Other (please specify, including any combination of the above)	11%
This area should be residential with some multi-family options	10%
This area would be appropriate for commercial development.	4%

When looking at the entire 910 corridor within Marshall Township, the most frequent suggestion was to maintain green space and to not develop the land along 910.

Q11 What is/are the most serious problems when thinking of traffic generally within Marshall Township and specifically on Route 910? (669 responses)

Respondents could select multiple options.

	%
Too much traffic/congestion	70%
Lack of pedestrian and bicycle amenities	28%
Speeding	24%
Pedestrian routes/safety	19%
Bicycle routes/safety	15%
Other (please explain)	11%

Lots of suggestions regarding traffic. Most frequently mentioned were:

1. Widen 910
2. Add left turn lanes
3. Better enforcement of regulations by police and more regulatory signs

Eight people said that the congestion was a perception and not a reality.

Q12 Would you walk and/or ride a bicycle along Route 910 if pedestrian/bike facilities were added? (678 responses)

	Respondents as %
I would not walk or bike along Route 910	39%
I would both walk and bike on a shared path	23%
I would walk on a sidewalk or shared path	14%
Not sure	14%
Other (please explain)	8%
I would bike on a shared path	2%

The “other” comments were roughly split between willing to walk/bike and never interested in walking/biking.

Q13 Township leaders intend to fully study demand and feasibility for a community center facility as part of an upcoming Comprehensive Recreation, Parks and Open Space Plan. At this point, do you feel that finding a way to build and operate a community center in Marshall Township should be a priority? (673 responses)

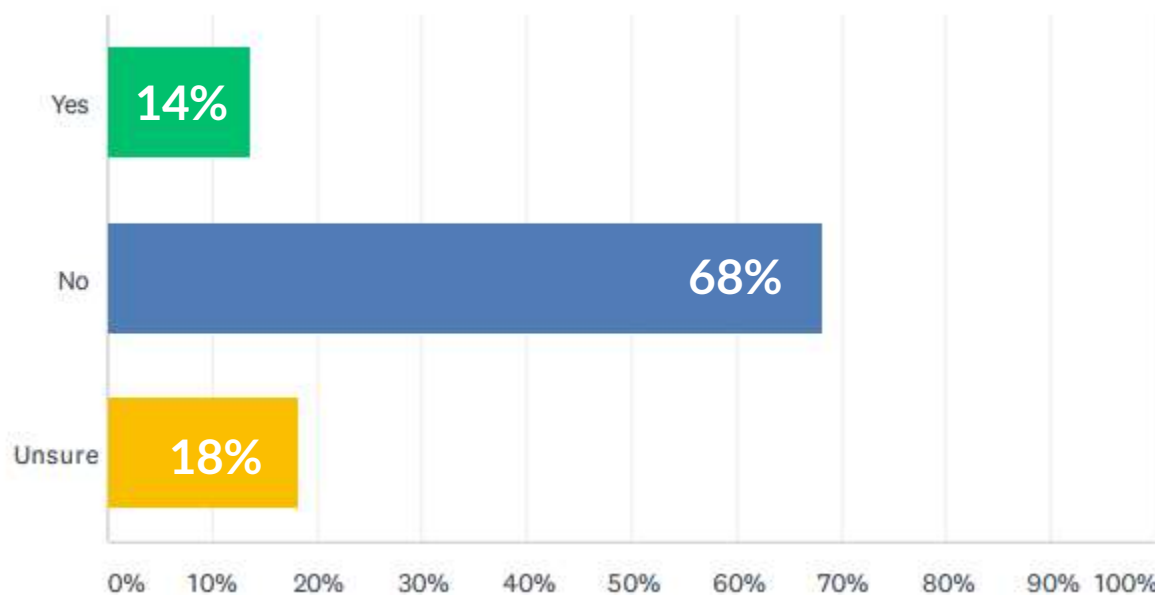
Yes: 37.3%
No: 37.9%

Unsure: 24.8%

The “other” comments were also roughly split between supporting and not supporting a community center.

Q14 Marshall Township’s population (currently about 9,355) is below the traditional National Recreation and Park Association standard for a community center (20,000 residents), which suggests that financing this type of facility may require an additional funding effort of some type. Generally speaking, would you support a property tax rate increase to finance development of a community center in Marshall Township? (678 responses)

Most of the “other” comments were against a tax increase for a community center.



Q15 Benchmarking: If you've seen a community feature, neighborhood or entire community elsewhere that you would like Marshall Township to emulate, please name and describe it here. (201 responses)

The two most frequently mentioned “other” comment were park and recreation facilities other communities have (Pine, Cranberry, Hampton) and communities that do a good job of preserving nature (Fox Chapel, Bradford Woods, Hilton Head).

Q16 Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns about Marshall Township not addressed in this questionnaire? (183 responses)

The top five “other” comments were:

1. Concern with future development – don’t allow or slow down
2. Poor internet/cable service
3. Speeding
4. Lack of trails
5. Need for more parks and recreation

Q17 In what age range do you fall? (677 responses)

	Respondents as %	TOTAL Township Residents as %*
19 or younger	0%	-
20-34	8%	15%
35-54	49%	46%
55-64	24%	19%
65 to 74	15%	13%
75 or older	4%	6%

*The census information by age group was prorated to not include ages less than 20 for a more accurate comparison. This suggests that the respondents were similar in age range to the community as a whole.

Q18 How many children under the age of 18 live in your household? (675 responses)

	Respondents as %
None	51%
1	15%
2	22%
3	9%
4 or more	2%

Q19 The Covid-19 public health crisis may have long-term implications for commuting patterns, traffic, shopping habits, home design and other aspects of daily life. The following questions will help us learn how these changes will impact Marshall Township. If you are employed, where was your primary work location prior to the Covid-19 public health crisis? (661 responses)

The top five locations were, in order:

1. In or close to the City of Pittsburgh (26%)
2. Not applicable (21%)
3. I was working remotely prior to the Covid-19 crisis (12%)

4. Other North Hills community (Pine, McCandless, Hampton, Ross) (10%)
5. Within Marshall Township (9%)

Q20 If you are employed, do you expect that your primary work location will change in the long term from the location selected above as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic? (660 responses)

No: 42%
N/A: 23%
Maybe: 8%
Yes: 23%

Q21 Do you expect that your daily habits have been permanently changed as a result of new routines developed since the beginning of the Covid-19 public health crisis? Please check all that apply. (666 responses)

Respondents could select multiple choices.

The top five selections were, in order:

1. I anticipate spending more time using local parks and trails (46%)
2. I anticipate getting more of my shopping done online (44%)
3. I expect that my daily habits will all return to normal once the crisis is over (44%)
4. I would still prefer to shop in-store once the crisis is over (41%)
5. I anticipate making trips to the grocery store less often (39%)

Q22 395 respondents submitted contact information to be kept in the loop on as the project develops.

Marshall Township Implementable Comprehensive Plan Key Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups (12/10/21 to 3/17/21)

Summary of Input

GREAT THINGS ABOUT MARSHALL

- The most commonly mentioned high-value aspects of Marshall Township were the quality of the school district and the convenience of the Township's location with regard to the airport, Pittsburgh and other commercial centers.
- Multiple interviewees mentioned that the Township is extraordinarily good at maintaining streets and clearing snow.
- Stakeholders seemed to appreciate the Township's efforts to expand the walking trail network and improve recreation facilities. Multiple people praised the available activities and opportunities for young families.
- Those who have dealt with Township staff characterized staff as professional, fairly sticking to transparent, predictable rules.
- Some appreciated that Marshall is not a busy retail center but is close to amenities, has a "quieter atmosphere."
- One focus group member who moved back to Marshall after more than 20 years said: "Beyond the school district, the people we had growing up here were amazing. I wanted to give my children what I had growing up."

POST-COVID CHALLENGES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Regionally, job numbers are "very bad," said local experts interviewed. Of 25 peer cities, Pittsburgh was third to last in job growth even prior to Covid-19. Our biggest job growth engines are health systems and universities, to some extent natural gas industries. The north hills do well writ large, but employees commute to Oakland or the Strip District.
- Covid-19 accelerated commercial real estate trends already happening.
 - The big question: What's the future of office space?
 - Warehouse demand will grow and sustain.
 - If technology (3D printing, etc.) is translated to end uses, we could see micro-fulfillment near population centers. Cranberry is now the center within the north hills, with nodes in all major suburbs. This could evolve during the next 10 years.
- Warehouse modernization will impact places like Thorn Hill Industrial Park. Over 60% of U.S. warehouses have no automation, just racks. Only 1-2% are fully automated. The remaining warehouses are somewhere between, with minimal automation or mechanical systems. Just as we've seen with autonomous vehicles exploding onto the scene, technology is getting layered in, creating a major transformation of warehousing and logistics.
 - There needs to be flexibility in how places are defined and used.
 - Electric utility infrastructure could be a major issue for Thorn Hill down the road. running high-transmission power lines can be a challenge.
- The Marshall portion of Thorn Hill is pretty much developed, with the exception of a few challenging parcels (slope, water). It could see some future redevelopment.

- If there were more warehouse or light industrial space, it would be full. The Cranberry side is full. If there were another Thorn Hill, it would be full. There's a lack of space for light industrial close to I-79 and the Turnpike, which pushes demand out in other directions.
 - We hear about a lack of amenities (coffee shops, restaurants) near Thorn Hill, though it can be hard to support those.
 - The workforce is coming from the northern suburbs.
- Innovation Ridge was planned to be more office. Unless there's an individual user coming in to build an operation, it will be "tough sledding" in the near term. The office market does not seem like it will rebound anytime soon. There is no clear path in the next several years for office development in Marshall.
 - Empty, beautiful brand-new building: If it were tech flex, it would be occupied.
 - 20,000 acres of prepped pad for office or tech flex
 - Some activity in medical offices, etc., but a lot of space off of Route 19 directly competes.
- Transportation improvements are an important priority for economic development. Route 910 is a top item. People consider things like backups on I-79 when they make housing decisions. Would be great to have public transit.
- Local business owners identified "traffic, traffic, traffic" as a major issue, while acknowledging that this corner of the county seems better than the others.
- A focus group member suggested that "the way of the future is mixed use retail with green space."

TRAFFIC ISSUES

- Route 910 was far and away the focus among stakeholders who mentioned traffic issues.
 - School buses avoid the intersections of Route 910 with Mingo Road and Wexford Run Road and get backed up at the transition from Marshall to Pine.
 - Route 910 intersection with I-79 ramp backs up all the way onto the highway, especially in afternoon outbound rush from the city. Drivers sometimes have to slam brakes in traffic to pull over and get in line to exit.
 - A nearby property owner suggested that it would be "great to widen it," but difficult, as it would require takings. Also, adding lanes would change the character of the area, "then it turns into Route 228," a higher speed road that is harder to cross. "Does that fit into the rural feel of the Township we want?"
 - Multiple stakeholders mentioned avoiding Route 910 with alternate routes. Is there a viable bypass to improve and promote?
 - Would stacking lanes a little longer help?
 - It is very difficult to pull out of Davidford Drive, particularly turning left. Installing a light there is complicated by topography.
- A business owner estimated that 50 percent of backups on I-79 are due to the split from I-279, with confusion and accidents as people choose lanes. Would an overhead sign help?
- The intersection of Northgate Drive with Maple Drive in Warrendale was identified as a problem.
- A traffic engineer in a resident focus group expressed hope that any new signals will include pedestrian accommodation.

CONNECTIVITY

- Multiple stakeholders mentioned the isolation of individual neighborhoods and a need to better connect them for walking. Some suggested that increasing connectivity would help build a better sense of community.
- A resident described Marshall as very car-dependent and scary for cyclists.
- North Allegheny School District struggles sometimes to get students to bus stops safely in neighborhoods without sidewalks.
- A property owner praised a plan to link Altmyer Park downhill to Shenot Farm and potentially to Bradford Woods. “Maybe people will walk to get groceries.”
- A focus group member mentioned the need to connect Warrendale to Route 228 in Cranberry.
- The Venango Trails focus group identified a desire for walking routes to places nearby, such as the commercial area of Route 19 where restaurants are located (“It’s not far in mileage; we could easily walk there. But Freeport Road has no shoulder.”) A developer interviewed separately suggested that this connection is needed and that it could support higher density.

GENERAL COMMENTS ON LAND USE AND ZONING

- An interviewee with deep experience in the local development process described conflict between anti- and pro-development crowds as not unique to Marshall Township, but perhaps worse today than ever, reflecting the overall polarization of society.
 - Social media activates people but does not always adequately inform them.
- A member of the 2006 Comprehensive Plan steering committee said: “Our thinking at that time was to keep Marshall from becoming another Cranberry with development seemingly without thought. We wanted to keep the township with a feeling of openness and keep the uniqueness of our township. The area around the game lands was to be a conservative district to keep that area as close to unique as possible, developing the area around Warrendale and Route 19 as the commercial area.”
- A resident focus group discussed feeling “surprised by development that have moved into our backyards on every edge of our community.”
- Multiple stakeholders suggested that the township is not fully grown up, in terms of infrastructure and amenities keeping pace with population growth.
- North Allegheny School District would benefit from further development of the commercial tax base, as 81% of its base districtwide is residential. Potential areas to focus additional commercial development could include Marshall’s portion of the Route 19 corridor and near I-79 ramps.
- A property owner praised the way that Sterling Woods and Rolling Ridge fit into the existing natural landscape: “You don’t see those houses all summer until the leaves come down. Driving down Wexford Run, don’t even know those homes are there. That developer could have jammed more houses in by clearing the hill, but they didn’t.”
- Multiple interviewees suggested that smaller, more local builders and developers do better work and respect the land to a greater extent than larger outfits.
- Most interviewees who discussed development acknowledged that it’s not possible (or entirely desirable) to stop all future development, but seemed to agree that there’s a way to do it responsibly, striking a balance of progress with the identity of township.

LAND DEVELOPMENT ON THE WESTERN SIDE

- Many stakeholders discussed the importance of natural features on the western side to the Township's overall identity and a factor in residents choosing Marshall as a place to live, "the uniqueness of the space here."
- A popular sentiment was: "Nobody wants this to turn into Cranberry." People appreciate the rural feel of the western side.
- Some discussed how the Township could move away from its agrarian roots and respond to demand for higher-density housing, with careful respect for "what specifically it is we value about being 'pastoral.'"
 - An interviewee pointed out that it's possible to have development and sustain rural character; "people don't understand that or choose not to."
- A long-time homesteader suggested that the western side should have large lots of three to five acres, sold at a high price and taxed accordingly, but get away from the luxury home model. Instead, accommodate biodiverse homesteads/farmsteads where people can cohabit, build tiny homes.
- An interviewee was very concerned that leadership will disregard questionnaire results that she felt sent a strong message: "We don't want development," or at least development that is in conflict with the rural setting "most people want."
- An interviewee familiar with the Township's ordinances noted that restrictive, prescriptive regulations add cost that can be prohibitive, which can limit investment by small developers who care about the community.
- A different interviewee had specific suggestions for the Township's conservation subdivision regulations, feeling that some hard-lined code elements "were meant to be guidelines." This, he said, puts developers in a pinch because anti-development activists use the standards as absolutes, "thou shalt not." Example: Conservation subdivision site capacity analysis, areas with a slope of 25%+ become primary conservation. "It's good to avoid 25%, but sometimes you can't." The lack of flexibility comes at the expense of design excellence.
- Some stakeholders expressed strong support for regulations requiring green space in future development, given the importance of green space and fresh air. Others expressed frustration with specific landscaping regulations, such as parking lot landscaping that reduces the space available for parking stalls.

WARRENDALE AS A TOWN CENTER

- One interviewee who has lived in the Township for 15 years was surprised to learn that Warrendale is part of Marshall. "I had no sense of that."
- Stakeholders mentioned that the history of the area as an "old town" could inform its redevelopment as a traditional business district.
- A developer with interests in the area identified the sewer moratorium issue with Cranberry as a critical barrier to Warrendale developing, given the sense that negotiations have stalled. "Where is the urgency to resolve this?" Developers, he said, need confidence that sewer capacity won't disappear in the future.
- Some envisioned Northgate Drive becoming something special in time, a walkable area with local businesses and distinct character. Sidewalks have helped to get this started.

- A Warrendale business owner: “Build as much as you want, bring as many to this area as you can!”
- Independent restaurateurs are a significant asset for this area. From Robinson to Wexford along I-79, all exits are characterized by chain restaurants. Local restaurants are a reason to exit at Wexford and Warrendale. Trend among younger people not to visit chains, increase in popularity for independent restaurants.
- A focus group member pointed out that an affluent neighborhood of 25-30 homes is connected to Warrendale, though it is cut off by new Turnpike construction. “A smart, dense development down there could be good for community.”

WHEN IT RAINS...

- A handful of stakeholders offered insight on stormwater issues in the Township:
 - If it doesn’t already, the Township should require retainer ponds to be located where water will go, not split up and put where a developer wants. The right location can be tough to predict if the lot to be developed is wooded and biodiverse and being recontoured.
 - The standards for weed control and insecticide are much higher for farmers than for the luxury homes next door where owners douse their lawns with chemicals. Those chemicals end up in source water, retaining ponds, creeks.
 - Communities imposing stormwater impact fees based on *total* impervious coverage punish people who represent the solution. If Marshall is considering this, it would be more fair to levy based on a percentage of impermeable coverage.
 - More attention should be paid to major water runoff problems during storm events. Most of us in Marshall are at top of watershed. We could say “not our problem,” but we are responsible for what happens downstream.
 - Protecting Brush Creek will increasingly become an issue as development occurs.

COMMENTS ON COMMUNITY FACILITIES

- Stakeholders seemed to agree that demand for athletic facilities exceeds their current availability.
 - A resident suggested a need for more basketball courts and soccer fields. “Do you Do we need facilities to be a community? No. Do we need some anyway? Yes.”
 - The school district’s facilities are overbooked, overused and worn out. The district is the only game in town for large facilities, provides the only swimming pool of size anywhere around and the only artificial turf fields. These facilities get so much use that there is insufficient time for proper rest and maintenance.
 - Marshall families are extremely engaged in the sporting community. The community’s courts, fields, parks and playgrounds see a lot of use.
 - North Allegheny Soccer Club’s biggest desire/need is access to turf fields, particularly a central field complex with one or more turf soccer fields.
 - Leaders from both nonprofit youth baseball leagues emphasized the importance of supporting community baseball as a way to reinforce local identity and relationships. The leagues appreciate their working relationships with Marshall and would like support in pursuing funding for additional improvements and facilities.

- The overall enrollment trend for North Allegheny School District is growth, particularly at the elementary level. The district recently finished an expansion of Franklin Elementary designed to meet current and projected capacity needs. Some students will shift out of the Marshall and Bradford Woods schools to use the larger Franklin space.
- North Allegheny School District owns 22 acres along Spang Road that would be a great location for an elementary or small middle school if growth continues and Marshall builds out to a density similar to Franklin Park.
- The school district recently adopted a closed campus policy, which will represent a major change for dog walkers and bike riders who are used to being able to access school property during the school day.
- Multiple stakeholders suggested adding heat to Altmeyer Barn so that it can be used year-round.
- The local business focus group discussed the need for a community center, citing limited meeting space in the area. They would like to see “a place with facilities, a kitchen, air conditioning.”

LOCAL IDENTITY

- One stakeholder felt that Marshall’s *most* critical priority should be creating an identity.
- There was general consensus among all who discussed identity that Marshall is lacking in this sense. “What values bind us together? What is our common purpose?”
 - “We are a collection of neighborhoods and families living very busy lives.”
 - “I don’t know what the identity of Marshall is. For me, it was location, but they don’t do location; they just *are* location.”
 - “Marshall Township is not a community, it’s a township. Same with Franklin Park. Ingomar is a community.”
- Some felt that community in Marshall exists primarily around schools and activities.
- Multiple interviewees suggested that creating more central gathering spaces or a town center could help develop a sense of shared identity.
- One interviewee suggested that the community is very welcoming, but people are insular. “Covid made us get to know our neighbors.”
- Interviewees offered ideas:
 - Brand the township as forward-thinking, supportive of a sustainable, resilient lifestyle. This world exists; people are looking to do this.
 - Look for best-of-class peers. Don’t use neighboring communities as a peer group. “When people move to Marshall, it’s not from Pine or Hampton, it’s from Virginia, Atlanta, big-city suburbs.”
 - Natural constraints on western side represent an identity.

TOWNSHIP SERVICES

- An interviewee suggested that the Township’s priority should be sustaining tax base and meeting infrastructure needs.
- A few stakeholders noted that the Township’s growing population is increasingly diverse, though its leadership has remained stable over time and does not yet reflect new demographics. “The community is developing away from its leadership.”

- Multiple interviewees would like more communication from the Township.
 - “I know more about what is happening in Franklin Park and Cranberry than about what happens here, mostly via monument signs.”
 - Email blasts? A newsletter?
 - One suggested that once the Township determines its plan for development in the long range, it should clearly communicate the plan to business owners.
- Marshall VFD has a hard time getting necessary volunteers. The propensity to volunteer is less than it was 50 years ago. The Township needs to think about how to replace volunteer groups. (Barbell demographic – older and younger)
 - Surrounding departments very generous with mutual aid (Franklin Park, Cranberry, Adams, Pine, Bradford Woods). Someone responds quickly 24/7.
 - In 10-20 years, we may see a perfect storm of the growth and type of challenges departments are having. How do we compensate firefighters? Should we consider organizing something like the regional police?
- A sustainability expert interviewed suggested that the Township consider a LEED for Communities checklist to evaluate what it is and isn’t doing well, identify ways to improve environmental impact of operations, transportation, quality of life. “What defines us as a high-performing community?”
- Stakeholders offered some specific suggestions for services:
 - Enforce controls for noise and light pollution
 - When a tree falls, the fire department is called – it should be public works instead.
 - Unlike surrounding communities, Marshall doesn’t have an Environmental Advisory Council. This is surprising. There are really clear state guidelines for EACs, their structure and what they give advice on.
 - Recycling is a mess. The Township should collect leaves or have a place where people can drop them, process them into mulch for residents.
- A regional economic development expert described Marshall as professional, “not the hardest, but not an easy place to develop.” He suggested finding ways to make regulation more consistent, straightforward and easy. “Flexibility in zoning is probably biggest thing in the post-Covid world.” Modifying, repurposing things will be important.

HOUSING

- Townhouses on the back end of Innovation Ridge have been very popular, as has Venango Trails. Additional townhouses and apartments “would go like hotcakes.”
- Multiple interviewees identified demand for broader housing options for seniors, particularly smaller low-maintenance units such as patio homes in walkable clusters.
- One stakeholder identified affordable housing as an important issue for the future.
 - There’s a perception in the market that this is a desirable place, and the economic consequence is that it’s expensive, politically/financially segregated. What percentage of Allegheny County could buy a home in Marshall?
 - There has been a desire to have big, wealthy homes to build the tax base, but what affordable housing has been provided?
 - Existing homes filter, become affordable – 50-100 years old.
- Multiple interviewees mentioned that families with children are a growing demographic. The Township populace is known for above-average education, connections to health industry. The Township may be short on housing for unmarried younger people, who are less likely now to purchase homes. Rentals are “few and expensive” in Marshall.

Top Eight Takeaways

Marshall Land Use and Development Forum
February 25, 2021

Panelists: Ann Hutchinson, Natural Lands Trust
Roy Kraynyk, Allegheny Land Trust
Susan J. Smith, Law Office of Susan J. Smith

In no particular order:

1. The Township cannot officially “close its doors” to development or growth.

Marshall Township’s remarkable growth during the previous decade has not been free of growing pains, including increased traffic volume and the perception that the continued consumption of undeveloped land will alter the rural character of the Township’s western side. This begs the question: What is the carrying capacity of Marshall Township, in terms of public infrastructure, facilities and services? Does there come a point at which the Township can determine that it has reached its limit and cannot support further expansion, lest it be caught in a cycle of investing in infrastructure upgrades that spur additional land development?

Susan clarified that “technically, a community should never articulate that it’s closing its doors to development or growth; that’s a line courts have clearly drawn.” In setting zoning standards to lawfully accommodate growth over time – for example, in considering amendments for Marshall’s Conservation Residential district – a community needs to have done the homework in advance to justify decisions, such as analyzing the facts and figures on growth rate, land use, internal and external growth generators.

2. Marshall Township’s approach to conservation subdivision zoning is generally consistent with best practices across the state, though the Township could review and adjust the requirements to ensure that they effectively implement local land use policy.

In its 2008 zoning ordinance, the Township created a Conservation Residential (CR) district to accommodate housing development in the form of conservation subdivisions. Conservation subdivisions are *density neutral* compared to traditional subdivisions, meaning that the same number of lots and homes would exist either way. The key difference is that homes and infrastructure in a conservation

subdivision are arranged in a cluster to minimize the footprint of development and permanently preserve environmental features.

To determine the buildable lot area of a site in the Township's CR zoning district, the Township requires the "net out," or subtraction, of certain environmentally constrained land, such as steep slopes, flood plain or wetlands. The resulting "adjusted tract area" is used to determine how many homes may be built on the site. For instance, a developer who has a flat 10-acre site will base the number of homes on 10 acres, while a developer whose site includes three acres of steep slopes will base the number on seven acres.

Ann verified that this approach is an effective conservation practice supported by law, particularly the court case *Reimer vs. Upper Mt. Bethel*. Based on a cursory review of the Township's CR district, she found the regulatory approach to be generally consistent with best practices she has seen in her work with more than 140 townships across Pennsylvania.

This is not to say that adjustments aren't worth considering: The Township could look into reducing the base density or otherwise reviewing its requirement calculations. Ann would not recommend a "ring around the collar" approach of requiring new developments to include a large perimeter setback, as this would compromise higher priorities for resource preservation. The Township's CR district already requires all homes to be set back 100' from external roads, 50' from all other tract boundaries, 100' from cropland and 150' from any active recreation areas. The Township could consider requiring more intense buffer screening along major roads if reducing the visibility of development is a priority.

Susan agreed that net-outs have been established as a defensible strategy in Pennsylvania as long as a community articulates reasons for carving out environmentally sensitive lands and does not apply excessive limits. For example, an excessive limit could be requiring that all 5% slopes are subtracted from the buildable lot area.

3. Zoning is the first line of defense in preserving open space, but it is only one tool of many that could help the Township in this regard.

The communities that have most successfully created permanent protection for open space have "more than one arrow in their quiver," as Ann said. Panelists described the following tools:

- **Conservation easements or deed restrictions** – Voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and a land trust or government agency in which land continues to be privately owned but its uses are permanently limited for conservation purposes

- **Fee simple acquisition** – A land trust or government agency acquires land with conservation value via donation, sale or a fundraising campaign. Susan noted that there’s nothing to stop a municipality from investing local revenues in acquiring property with conservation value. Roy noted that potential revenue sources that Marshall could apply to conservation projects include real estate transfer fees or Regional Asset District allocation.
- **Conservation referendum** – Residents may vote to establish a tax specifically dedicated to open space protection in their municipality or approve municipal borrowing for conservation projects. Roy noted that 86% of PA DCNR grants in any given year go to the eastern side of the state, where townships and counties have passed bond referendums generating revenue that they use to match DCNR grants. In 2019 and 2020, six Eastern PA townships passed referendums for bonds totaling \$42.4 million for land protection. Closer to home, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy was successful in passing a referendum to increase city taxes by 1 mill to generate \$10 million annually for conservancy to improve city parks. Put up for a vote, Roy said, such referendums tend to pass.

Roy described some of Allegheny Land Trust’s 25 projects in Northwest Allegheny County that have preserved 857 acres with an appraised value of over \$14 million over 20 years. He noted that the level of participation by municipalities varied widely, in terms of fundraising/financial support, public works assistance with on-the-ground work and involvement in acquisition. Some parcels were 100 percent donated; in other cases, owners agreed to bargain sell a property at 50 percent of value.

Most notably, Roy pointed out that a donation of land value can be leveraged to win grants from PA DCNR. Allegheny Land Trust has in some cases more than doubled the money on local projects, depending on timing and whether a project resonates with funders. Resources are out there.

4. **The Big Sewickley Creek Watershed study includes insights and recommendations that Marshall Township should consider incorporating into its comprehensive plan.**

The new Rivers Conservation and Stewardship Plan for the watershed, prepared by Allegheny Land Trust, identified:

- Species of special concern in the creek that deserve protection
- Conceptual greenway ideas that the Township can examine and refine, which represents a solid start for a greenway plan that would ultimately connect with other municipalities
- Recommendations for maintaining water quality and reducing flood events

- Findings from stakeholder interviews, such as the revelation that downstream communities (Ambridge, Leetsdale, Leet) experience flash floods when it's not raining due to rain somewhere upstream (Bell Acres, Franklin Park, Marshall)

Roy emphasized the value of strategic land conservation in absorbing precipitation. On average, one acre of woodlands can absorb about 800,000 gallons of water per year, based on 40 inches of rainfall. Protected woodlands in strategic areas can intercept runoff from non-point sources. The report has recommendations for this and other issues that can add value to the Township's new comprehensive plan.

5. Extending sewer infrastructure intensifies development pressure.

As Susan explained, certain conditions in a community drive interest in land development: Roads, public water, public sewer. Extension of a public sewer line requires revenue to support the line and the maintenance of associated facilities and infrastructure. This often depends on additional customers who will use that line and pay tap-in and user fees.

In Pennsylvania, lot size in rural areas is often related to ensuring that land capacity is available for the installation of on-lot septic systems. In areas served by public sewer that have no need for on-lot system, the question becomes: What justification remains for large lot sizes?

Ann added that Pennsylvania courts have not supported arbitrarily large minimum lot sizes in areas with public sewer. So, she said, the best we can do is to establish a reasonable underlying density and then subtract out constrained land.

6. Drastically downzoning the Township's western side represents a considerable legal risk.

Were Marshall Township to decide to rezone the western portion to require, say, a minimum lot size of 10 acres per house, the first challenge is one that will be the subject of litigation: Where did you get that number? What supports the number? Is it reasonable?

Courts, Susan explained, are not comfortable with large-lot zoning that involves numbers without justification. In the eyes of the law, there is always tension in balancing an owner's right to develop private property as he or she wishes with the public interest in setting limits.

In the case of the 10-acre-lot rezoning, courts would require justification for the burden the minimum would represent for affected property owners. Susan advises

following the path of: Is the number reasonable and not excessive? Do I have reasons to support the selection of that number? The larger the minimum lot size in question, the more trouble it may be to satisfy the courts on a challenge to that ordinance. Generally across Pennsylvania, any lot size minimum above two acres starts to get into the territory of potential challenge as an undue restriction.

In the case of considering downzoning to reduce the density in areas of, say, a community prone to landslides, Susan explained that carving out environmentally sensitive areas from buildable area calculations is easier to defend than increasing a district's minimum lot size for environmental protection purposes.

7. Variances are less of a judgment call than you may think.

A variance from the zoning ordinance is a mechanism by which someone can seek relief from one of its requirements. A comparable relief mechanism for a Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance (SALDO) is a modification (partial relief) or waiver granted by elected officials. Such relief is governed by very specific standards articulated in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code and by courts.

The only body that can issue a variance in Pennsylvania is the Zoning Hearing Board, and as Susan explained, the ZHB issues variances not by discretion, but by the application of standards.

In order to obtain a variance, an applicant must demonstrate **all five** of the following requirements to the ZHB:

- That there are unique physical circumstances or conditions peculiar to the particular property which create an unnecessary hardship
- That because of such physical circumstances or conditions, there is no possibility that the property can be developed in strict conformity with the zoning ordinance, and that the authorization of a variance is therefore necessary to enable the reasonable use of the property
- That such unnecessary hardship has not been created by the applicant
- That the variance, if authorized, will not alter the essential character of the neighborhood or district in which the property is located, nor substantially or permanently impair the appropriate use or development of adjacent property, nor be detrimental to the public welfare

- That the variance, if authorized, will represent the minimum variance that will afford relief and will represent the least modification possible of the regulation in issue.

Susan explained that the standard of proof may be lesser (though still specifically established) for certain dimensional requirements, or for “de minimis” very minor deviations from dimensional standards. Finally, a use variance must meet the above five criteria plus a few additional.

At the Commonwealth Court level, there is an expectation that the record clearly establishes that the ZHB applied these standards. If the ZHB did not grant the variance based on these standards, the court will reverse the decision granting the decision.

8. The best basis for good land use regulation is good land use policy.

In terms of what happens next: Panelists advised carefully articulating a land use policy, which will be part of the ongoing conversation shaping Marshall Township’s Implementable Comprehensive Plan. It can be a difficult conversation, Susan said, balancing competing interests in envisioning a collective land use future. “But what doesn’t work is dodging the conversation altogether,” in which case nobody really knows what the ordinances are intended to do.

With a clearly articulated land use policy, the Township can examine the tools in its toolbox – zoning and subdivision regulations, the capital budget and other options – and devise an efficient, effective strategy for using them to achieve its vision for the future of the western side.