

Marshall Township Implementable Comprehensive Plan

Steering Committee No. 1 – Tues., Sept. 22, 6 p.m.

Project contact person:

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Notes

WELCOME AND PURPOSE

1. Nicole Hanson, Marshall’s Director of Planning, thanked the steering committee for volunteering for this community project, and introduced the consulting team from Pashek+MTR: Jim Pashek, Founding Partner; Jenni Easton, Senior Planner, and Elaine Kramer, Director of Planning. Also attending were Brian Krul, Senior Associate/VP, and Sidney Kaikai, Senior Planner from TranSystems, which will provide transportation and traffic expertise as it proves needed. Also attending were Julie Bastianini, Township Manager, and Jean Hershberger, Planning Assistant.
 - A. Jim explained the process of developing an implementable comprehensive plan. A **comprehensive plan** is a long-term planning guide for the community. As Marshall is already a wonderful place to live, the job will be to find ways to make the municipality to be even better. The consultant, the steering committee, township staff, elected officials, business owners, residents and other stakeholders will all be on journey together – with public engagement, discussions, even arguments – to identify those objectives. An **implementable** comprehensive plan doesn’t focus on everything under the sun but tries to home in on a handful of issues that are extremely important to the community, and to truly make progress on those matters. These are called “Key Issues.” An **implementable** plan also changes the focus of the process from the basic act of creating a plan document/report to one of successfully making the community better; the improvements are the measure of success. Our work together will be to identify ways to improve the community, then to provide a specific policy guide with detailed next steps to help Marshall implement the improvements. This includes making sure the plan is realistic; it must be feasible in terms of political will, township resources, staffing and financial capacity.
2. Jim also set out the role of the Steering Committee:
 - A. We ask for a commitment that you try to attend all the meetings (we won’t meet just for the sake of meeting). The planning process requires your guidance throughout, for:
 - Engaging with the community
 - Determining whether the process and the contents are on the right track.
 - Later, garnering support for the plan so that it gets implemented.
 - B. We will ask you to give us honest and timely feedback via your reviews and comments when we send out materials for consideration. We want your thoughts and understanding of the community so that the resulting plan is the Marshall Township plan, not Pashek+MTR’s plan.
 - C. We will ask for steering committee members’ opinions as one form of public input and engagement, starting tonight with the question, “What are the Key Issues?” – what are the main things in Marshall that are problems to solve or strengths to build on?

KEY ISSUES

Jenni asked steering committee members to introduce themselves and to list problems that deserve attention. Each person offered an idea via a short statement. The following section “rolls up” those points into themes:

Community Identity and Sense of Community

- Marshall seems almost anonymous in Allegheny County. Can we find a stronger identity to proudly say where we’re from?
- Existing activities are terrific. But is there a way to unify the various districts/neighborhoods throughout Marshall to make the place more cohesive as a community?
- Could there be a summer jobs program for youth, which would help them learn to respect their community and give them more to do?
- Lack of a sense of community and community identity is a real problem, as in the “Welcome to Cranberry” sign that went up on a business in Marshall. People don’t know where Marshall is or what it is.
- Other places have a Community Building – would that create a “center?”
- One reason Marshall may lack a distinct identity is that we share/use facilities in other communities. Could we have a rec center? Pool?

Managing Growth and Development

- The Northgate Drive area in Warrendale isn’t truly a town center but more of a hodgepodge. Can this be solved?
- Some development has been fast and dense. This impacts all aspects of quality of life – schools, traffic, fire department and other services. Can this be managed better and in such a way that Marshall’s services, equipment, facilities and infrastructure are of very high quality?
- Marshall is in a sweet spot for its location – convenient to the airport, downtown, major highways, lots of commercial in Cranberry. Still, the rural nature of the community is very attractive. How can this be retained and at the same time balanced with a desire for development?
- Marshall is not a built-from-scratch “planned community,” and as a result, some of its facilities and equipment are not as high quality as those of its neighbors.
- Growth and community improvements can be scary: If people don’t know about us, they won’t move here ... and maybe that’s OK. We already have road capacity issues and are risking losing our ruralness. Sustainability is important too. Is there a way to maximize best practices for sustainable growth?
- The rural feel and convenient location clearly are attractive to many people. How can we build not just to build but also to maintain and conserve the Sewickley Creek watershed, state gamelands and our natural resources more generally?
- No. 1 priority is to make sure property values are not negatively affected by any contents in the comprehensive plan.
- No. 1 concern is finding a way to preserve our open space while understanding that property owners have the right to subdivide and sell their land for development. Whether single-family

homes or a town center idea with denser housing, we need to balance growth and preservation of open space, particularly in the western part of the township. As we guide growth, we need to establish a vision. Do we want more of the same or something different? The comp plan and land development ordinances should align with the vision.

- Pine is some years ahead of Marshall in how far it is built out – all the farmland in Pine is now gone. What lessons can we learn from them?
- Sustainability involves being inclusive and growing responsibly. We need to find a way to attract the 25-year-old to move here but also retain the aspects that make our community so desirable.
- “Tension” might be the better word for describing competing interests. Everyone should remember that at one point, Marshall Township was entirely farmland. Then, when I-79 and later I-279 came in, the suburbs grew out from Pittsburgh, and Cranberry started to grow as its own center. It can be easy for residents today to say they don’t want more land subdivision and growth. But residents who live in our neighborhoods need to remember that those very places were once farmland. This transition has played out around the township and now is moving to the western part of the township on land that previously didn’t see growth because of a lack of water/sewer infrastructure and the topography. In the early 2000s, the Sewer Authority put in a trunk line, and as a result there now are fewer impediments to development. Over the years, Marshall has engaged a number of consultants to manage development in west to protect trees, the open spaces, watersheds and to limit disturbance. Most consultants suggest a tradeoff of interior density of development in exchange for large buffers around the development. In practice, we’ve run into difficulties with this approach, resulting in enormous houses on small lots, which are possible only with massive regrading and tree removal. We have to get the ordinances right to try to do what we want to do in the western part of the township.
- From the perspective of a landowner who is not a tree-hugger, it appears zoning doesn’t always align with development and market realities. People who don’t want to see trees cut down or say “not in my back yard” live in developments that were clear-cut 20 years ago. Zoning should consider: When should water and sewer be extended? When should traffic have to be mitigated? When can tradeoffs be included, for example allowing more tree cutting if the developer commits to sustainability measures such as solar power or electric cars? Also, it seems like denser multi-family housing, senior housing is what is driving the market right now.
- North Allegheny School District feels the first wave of ramifications of everything the township decides: Development and growth affect student population size, district finances, transportation, real estate, redistricting, everything. Growth might force NASD to build another elementary school, as Marshall Elem is currently the third largest school in the whole district. The district has 21 acres available for development. District-wide finances are heavily dependent on real estate taxes. Could the base be diversified?

Traffic and Transportation

- While Marshall has really good walking trails, there is a lack of interconnectedness with nearby neighborhoods and communities for walking and biking.
- Some problems along Route 910 are caused by growth in Pine Township.

- We need an approach and solutions for traffic on the Route 910 corridor. This should include recognizing new development, including coordinating with Franklin Park and Pine.
- Additional trouble spots include:
 - I-79 interchange
 - Maple Drive
 - Northgate Drive

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

1. Jenni explained that the plan should represent community consensus, and to achieve that we will need meaningful public engagement from as many people as possible. This involves making sure people in Marshall know about the planning process and have convenient, accessible ways to contribute their ideas. The group then discussed ideas for engaging the community in the planning process.
2. Pashek+MTR would like to develop a **clearinghouse website** as a mechanism for providing regular updates and enable residents to interact with others about the plan. The steering committee preferred the domain name PlanMarshall.org. Ideas to include on the website:
 - Zoning map annotated to quantify the capacity of the land
 - Background information, such as growth projections, projects that are under way, traffic data
 - Historical milestones over the years, such as growth patterns, general facts.
 - Some easy-to-digest graphics that provide information by the numbers or via timeline.
 - Discussion board/forum with generated topics so it does not become a jumble of ideas.
 - A picture of what is coming up in neighboring communities so we understand the effects of development on our community.
 - Please use care with any open forum to ensure civility.
 - Try to give useful content and to encourage reasonable input. Some suggestions will be wildly impractical.
 - Drive traffic to the site by including reciprocal links to local businesses.
 - Be sure to understand the purpose of the website. Is it to inform people? Collect input? Then try to make it fun and colorful, such as via an interactive map where people can post comments about places. This would allow participants to see when they are agreeing with others, and to feel like they're being heard.
3. Pashek+MTR will devise a community quality of life questionnaire, mainly online but with printed copies available at certain locations. Pashek+MTR will develop the questionnaire and ask the steering committee to review. Jenni asked what information the steering committee would like to collect from respondents. Ideas included:
 - Age
 - Do you plan to stay in community, if so, how long?
 - Where is your employer located? Will you continue to work from home after the pandemic?
 - What brought you to Marshall Township?
 - Ask questions that are not too open-ended so the responses are useful

The steering committee discussed how many responses we hope to see – 5%? 12%? 20%? Jim said 12 to 18 percent would be great, but it will probably be less. The response rate is only as good as the efforts to publicize the questionnaire and encourage participation. The Township, the steering committee networks and all other publicity channels should be used. Tom Madigan noted that it would be imprudent for the Township to make a determination about any specific issue on the basis of what a small number of people said in a questionnaire.

Jim cautioned that this would be a self-selecting community questionnaire, not a statistically valid formal survey. We are looking for general themes and good ideas from people. Moreover, the contents of the questionnaire are combined with the content of other forms of public input so the consultant, steering committee and township staff can see ideas and trends.

4. Jenni noted that Township is tentatively willing to mail a postcard to every household to make people aware of the planning project and how residents can contribute ideas and opinions. Pashek+MTR will provide the steering committee with a draft to review. **Send feedback to Jenni.**
5. The consultant will conduct phone interviews with about 20 Key Stakeholders as another means of collecting information. We would like the steering committee to begin thinking of people who have important perspectives and insight. **Send ideas to Jenni.**
6. Are there community events coming up at which we could spread out and gather input from residents? A movie night? A Halloween event? **Please send ideas to Jenni.**
7. It would be nice if the process could include a traditional public meeting, but that may need to wait until pandemic restrictions are lifted or will need to be held via remote platform.

What's Next?

1. Jenni provided an overview of the project schedule. This should be a 18-month effort divided into two phases:
 - Phase 1 is “Listening to the community,” via all the means just discussed. We will identify about 4 Key Issues the plan will tackle. After the steering committee agrees on these, we will review in some manner with the public to see if we are on the right track. This should be completed in spring 2021.
 - Phase 2 is “Drilling down for solutions.” This is when Pashek+MTR does most of the lifting, identifying best practices and specific, realistic solutions to problems. This is when TranSystems will likely become most engaged regarding transportation-related issues. This should be completed at the end of 2021.

The draft then undergoes an official 45-day review period before the Supervisors hold an adoption vote. This should take place in early 2022.

2. Schedule Steering Committee Meeting #2 – to review results of the community questionnaire and other public input.