

Marshall Township Implementable Comprehensive Plan

Steering Committee No. 2 – December 8, 2020, 6:00 to 7:30pm, Zoom

SETTING THE STAGE

Jenni Easton reported that progress is consistent with the project schedule, noting that since the Steering Committee's first meeting, Pashek+MTR:

- Prepared a draft questionnaire, then published a revised version based on comments received from the committee
- Provided support for staff's exceptional efforts to publicize the questionnaire
- Completed a review of prior planning efforts
- Designed and launched the project website with guidance from the committee and staff
- Initiated key person interviews, and
- Conducted plan outreach at the family trick-or-treat event at Knob Hill Park.

As Phase I continues, the consultant will work with the committee to collect and synthesize additional community input.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Project Website

Jenni highlighted features of *planmarshall.org*, which is intended to be a central clearinghouse for the project, a place where residents can go for project updates, ways to be involved and an ongoing discourse. Noting that the discussion forum and wikimap have not seen much activity so far, as promotional efforts have been focused on the questionnaire, Jenni encouraged committee members to seed discussion by adding their own wikimap points and discussion forum comments.

The wikimap topic will change at various stages of the project to ask different questions. It's a way to crowd-source ideas that are specific to locations within the Township.

Pop-Up Events

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.

With recognition that Covid-19 will necessarily limit in-person events, Pashek+MTR will continue to seek ways to find and engage people who might not otherwise know about the project or be able to attend meetings.

Key Person Interviews

Jenni sought feedback from the group on interview and focus group outreach. Typically, Pashek+MTR's process identifies an initial list of 12-15 people to contact for in-depth interviews, leaving the remaining 5-8 for interviews later in the process when we are looking for detailed, topic-specific information on our identified key issues. Additionally, we will coordinate at least two focus groups.

In addition to the six interviews scheduled or complete, which included long-time residents as well as professionals with expertise in sustainability and land development, Jenni showed a list of potential stakeholders and asked the group who should be a priority and whether anyone was missing. The group mentioned youth sports organizations (including Brad Mar Pine Baseball, youth soccer, North Pittsburgh Wildcats Group Hockey/Baierl Ice Complex), Marshall Middle School student government, teachers and principals, large landowners and real estate professionals, with an ultimate goal of representing all perspectives.

Questionnaire

Jim Pashek presented key takeaways from Pashek+MTR's analysis of the questionnaire results, which included 907 responses between mid-October and December 1. The strong response rate is a result of diligent outreach efforts on the part of staff and the Steering Committee. Both a summary of the questionnaire results and a full output including all comments received (with personal identifiers removed) appear on planmarshall.org.

One theme that stood out to committee members was a high number of residents expressing a preference to completely prevent further development, which is not legally possible. Jim noted that approaches exist to fit future development within the context of rural landscape preservation, also that this planning process represents an educational opportunity.

Points offered during the ensuing discussion:

- Citizens do not expect the Township to dictate private land rights. This appears to be a wish list representing what people would like to see.
- There may be solutions that represent economic gain for large landholders as well as consistency with Township goals.
- There may be ways to have both density and green space.
- Rural character is already compromised by sewer extension, stoplights being installed to control traffic from neighboring communities.
- Pashek+MTR should examine questionnaire responses by location to determine how many represent the Township's western side. Additionally, results should be cross-tabulated on some questions to break down response by age category and households with children.

- An intention to “preserve” rural development patterns would set us up for failure, as decades in the future, the Township will be significantly less rural. The committee will need to be careful about wish lists and manage expectations.
- We do not yet know what post-Covid conditions will be.
- The trend is not lots getting *larger*. (Regarding single-family homes on large lots rising to the top of respondent preferences for development on the Township’s western side)
- As much as three quarters of land on the western side is completely unusable due to slope and other development challenges. Required density calculations should account for this.
- The Township has struggled to balance density with preservation of acreage, conservation of sensitive areas. It’s possible that the formulas are not working as intended, possibly due to the way they can be manipulated. Taking stock of this is a priority for this plan.
- The Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance should be better calibrated for local slope conditions.

Other observations on questionnaire results from the committee:

- Traffic volume emerging as the primary problem along Route 910 is not surprising.
- The many complaints about internet service are valid, but the Township’s ability to improve it is limited, with population considered insufficient to attract a competitor that would install its own infrastructure. The Township does not have an exclusive agreement and would welcome competitors.
- With six ZIP codes, there is little sense of community.

Recommendations from Previous Plans

Jenni briefed the group on the review of recommendations from previous Township planning efforts, which will help evaluate progress and identify goals and lessons that should be carried forward. The review acknowledged the Township’s accomplishments in implementing the 2006 Comprehensive Plan, including a 2007 zoning ordinance enactment that addressed multiple goals related to land use and environmental protection. The Parks, Recreation and Open Space plan helped measure need and demand for facilities and services that set into motion the creation of Altmeyer Park, bringing access to a relatively underserved part of the Township. The regional trail plan and pedestrian network master plans help meet goals for the trail system and transportation options within the Township.

Some goals in prior plans may no longer be feasible, relevant or desirable for various reasons, while others may have been successfully reached. Outstanding goals and action steps that have continued relevance will factor into Steering Committee conversations moving forward. A committee member requested a short report on items accomplished from previous plans, which Pashek+MTR will add to planmarshall.org.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Public Event: Zoom Panel Discussion and Q&A

The project schedule includes a January public meeting. To both sustain project momentum and respect public health concerns, Pashek+MTR suggested advertising a topic-specific Zoom forum and inviting a few subject-matter experts to help frame the discussion. Based on questionnaire results, land use and development would be a prime topic. PMTR has held similar workshops in other communities and has found that this format can be a useful platform for public education as well as fostering insightful public conversations.

Committee members suggested the following:

- Community relations and communications will be highly important to the event's success as a productive conversation, as opposed to a platform for specific complaints.
- There may be two different discussions needed at some point: One high-level *conceptual*, involving non-local experts, and one *specific*, grounded in local processes and decisions, involving local staff and appointees. The latter would increase understanding of how discretionary decisions are made.
- Panelist selection is important:
 - o A land use attorney (not the Township's) could provide authoritative insight that would help the education component. On the other hand, we should avoid recruiting panelists who may sound pedantic to the audience.
 - o A panelist from a comparable community successful in implementing best practices could be insightful, as long as the peer community faces similar challenges.

Jim clarified that Pashek+MTR's intention is a forward-looking panel: The event would begin with a brief presentation of facts and realities concerning land use and development, followed by a panelist discussion of best practices, then a back-and-forth discussion. It would provide a framework for what zoning is, how it can address goals and trends.

The committee expressed interest in sharing a simplified version of the Township's zoning map with the public to increase understanding, showing what types of development are permitted where with representative images. This may be possible as a Wikimap update with other suggested layers. It would be helpful to clarify what's included in the "western side" and what is there now.

Pashek+MTR will work with staff to sketch out a plan for the event and report back to the committee.

Event promotion will include an email blast to the nearly 400 questionnaire respondents who indicated that they would like updates, as well as social media outreach. A raffle prize for registration could help bolster participation.

Steering Committee Meeting #3

The next meeting of the Steering Committee will be scheduled following the public event to evaluate input received from multiple sources and begin defining the plan's key issues.