

FUTURE LAND USE PLANNING TECHNICAL BULLETIN

Current land use patterns serve as the foundation for directing future growth and development. A Future Land Use analysis offers a visual representation and strategic vision for how land within a municipality is expected to evolve. It includes summary descriptions detailing the projected types and forms of development, access to public amenities, infrastructure and services, and the integration of natural and historic resources.

Comprehensive Plans serve as a strategic guide for future land use decisions, aiming to balance thoughtful growth with the preservation of agricultural lands, open spaces, and the unique character of the community. They also emphasize safeguarding historic resources. It's important to note that a Future Land Use map is separate from a zoning map and does not dictate zoning regulations. After updating the Future Land Use map, a municipality may use the map to update their zoning ordinance to ensure there are no inconsistencies.

This technical bulletin summarizes the process and key elements involved in the development of a Future Land Use Map through the adoption of a comprehensive plan in Pennsylvania. While the purpose, benefits, and development are similar in Delaware, the adoption process may be different, due to the differences in local government structure.

PURPOSE

1. **Provides a Vision for the Future:** Articulates a long-term vision for the municipality's development, considering factors like population growth, economic trends, and environmental sustainability. It outlines where and how growth should occur in the coming decades.
2. **Guides Land Use Decisions:** Ensures organized development and zoning alignment with community goals.
3. **Supports Sustainable Development:** Promotes environmentally responsible and balanced development.
4. **Guides Economic Development:** Targets areas for economic growth, including commercial, industrial, and mixed-use development, supporting local job creation and economic resilience.
5. **Encourages Flood Resiliency:** Delineates areas that might be protected for floodplain resiliency through an overlay district or strengthened zoning provisions.
6. **Facilitates Public Participation:** The planning process includes public input from residents, business owners, and other stakeholders. It provides an opportunity for the community to express their concerns, needs, and desires for the future of land use within the municipality.
7. **Provides a Basis for Regulations and Policies:** Informs local zoning ordinances, building codes, and other regulations, ensuring they are consistent with the municipality's long-term goals. It helps planners make informed decisions about where certain types of development should occur.



8. Ensures Consistency and Coordination:

Helps coordinate efforts among different departments, levels of government and neighboring communities (e.g., local, regional, and state) and ensures that development decisions align with the larger regional goals and policies. The Future Land Use map should align with future land use designations of neighboring municipalities, along with the goals and future land use designations contained in the County's Comprehensive Plan.

9. Enhance Quality of Life: By planning for green spaces, recreational areas, public amenities, and transportation systems, the comprehensive plan aims to improve the overall quality of life for residents, enhancing livability and community cohesion.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Planning Process

- Involves surveys, data collection, analysis, issue identification, goal setting, option formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and updates.
- Addresses change due to anticipated growth or evolving community needs.

Zoning and Land Use

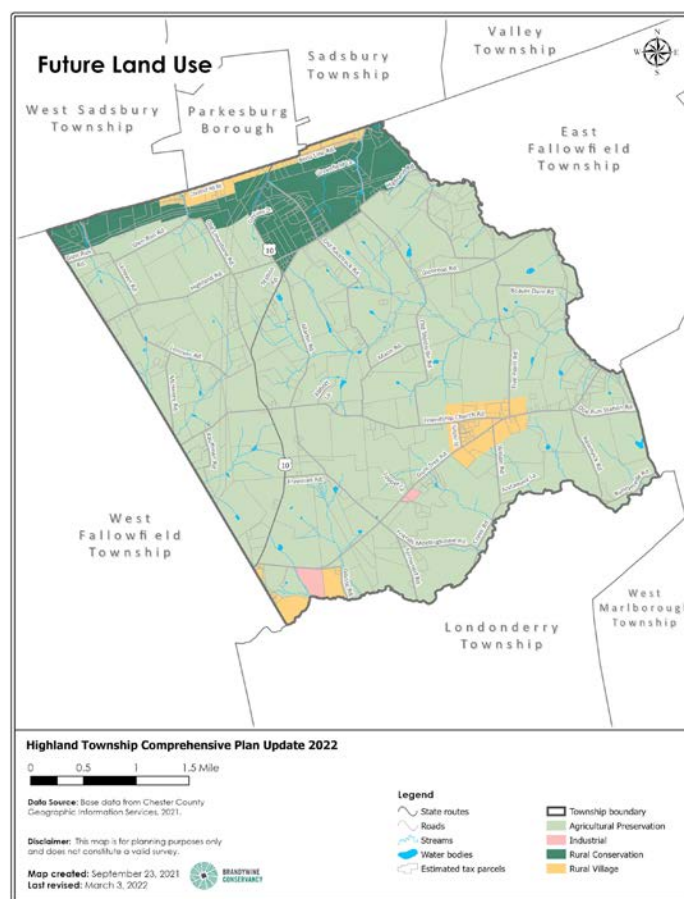
- Municipalities are not required to regulate land use, but if zoning is implemented, clear development objectives must be established.
- Objectives must be supported by sufficient analysis to defend land use ordinances against legal challenges.

Public Process and Regional Consideration

- Planning must be a public process and should consider factors beyond municipal boundaries.

Comprehensive Plan

- It is a non-legal document that outlines general goals and objectives for future growth.
- Not a land use ordinance but it should be adopted as a guiding framework for decision-making.



Highland Township, Chester County, Future Land Use Map (2022)

- Helps municipal leaders navigate future growth based on past trends and future needs.

ENABLING LEGISLATION

Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code

Article III of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) outlines the required elements and process for adopting a Future Land Use Plan as part of a comprehensive plan.

Delaware Code

Adoption of land use plans is outlined in Delaware Code Title 22 §702.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS

The Pennsylvania MPC outlines four criteria that all comprehensive plans must follow:

1. Contain nine (9) basic plan elements set forth in Section 301(a), including, but not limited to:
 - a. A statement of community development goals and objectives that charts the location, character and timing of future development.
 - b. A plan for land use identifying the amount, intensity, character and timing of land use.
 - c. A plan to meet housing needs of present residents and those families anticipated to live in the municipality as well as accommodating new housing in different dwelling types and at appropriate densities for households of all income levels.
 - d. A transportation plan evaluating the movement of goods and people through expressways, highways, local streets, pedestrian and bicycle networks, public transit routes, terminals, airfields, railroads, parking facilities and other similar facilities or uses.
 - e. A community facilities plan reviewing utilities and services, including but not limited to public and private education, recreation, municipal buildings, emergency services, libraries, hospitals, water supply, sewerage and waste treatment, solid waste management, storm drainage, and flood plain management.
 - f. A statement of the interrelationships among the various plan components which estimates the environmental, energy conservation, fiscal, economic development and social consequences on the municipality.
 - g. A discussion of short- and long-range plans implementation strategies.
 - h. A statement indicating that existing and proposed development is compatible with plans and development in contiguous municipalities. This statement should indicate that existing and proposed development is generally consistent with the objectives and plans of the county comprehensive plan.
 - i. A plan for the protection of natural and historic resources to the extent the municipalities are not limited by other federal or state statutes, these resources include wetlands, aquifer recharge zones, woodlands, steep slopes, prime agricultural land, flood plain, unique natural areas and historic sites.
2. Contain a plan for the reliable supply of water, considering current and future water resources availability.
3. Reviewed every 10 years.
4. Identify those areas where growth and development will occur so that a full range of public infrastructure, including sewer, water, highways, police and fire protection, public schools, parks open space, and other services can be adequately planned and provided as needed to accommodate growth.

Photo Credit: Above Ground Level Droneworks



DEVELOPMENT AND ADOPTION

Preliminary Steps

Assess Planning Needs

- Evaluate the municipality's planning issues, needs and resources.

Ensure Citizen Input

- Incorporate public input throughout the process to ensure community values are reflected.
- Use surveys and visioning exercises to gather public preferences for the future.

Planning Process

Development of Goals and Objectives

Future Land Use Goals and Objectives are critical for guiding policy decisions and can be legally examined in land use challenges.

- They are based on background studies, identifying constraints, problems, opportunities, needs, and future assumptions.
- Goals and objectives should be prioritized due to competition for land use and dwindling resources.
- While sometimes seen as idealistic or meaningless by developers and officials, they are critical for guiding policy decisions and can be legally examined in land use challenges.
- Goals and objectives should be clear, concise, specific, and unique to each community, not copied from other municipalities.
- They form the foundation for regulations, such as zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances, governing a community's growth and development.

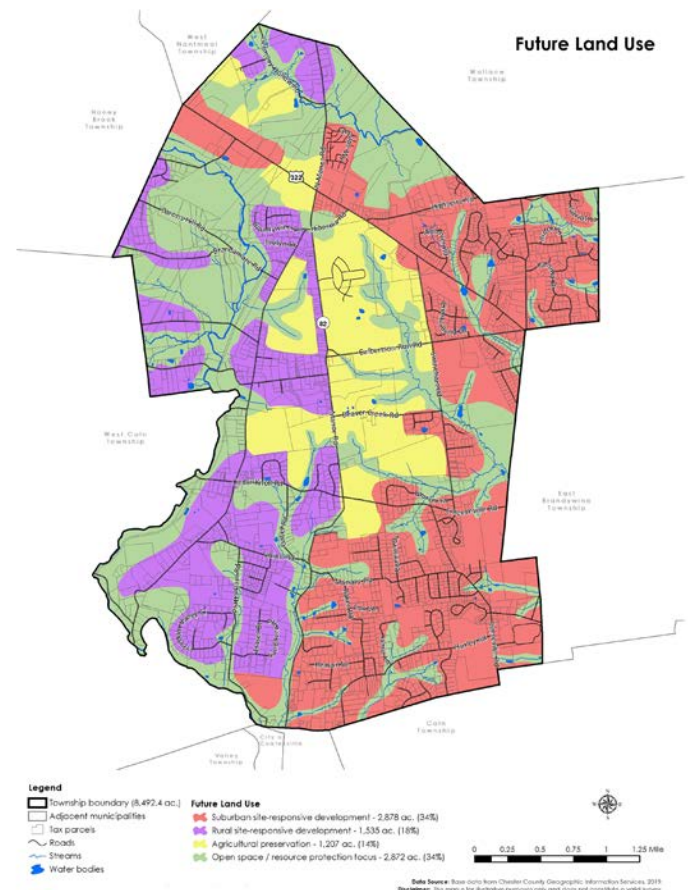
Plan Elements

The Comprehensive Plan should outline a strategy for various land uses, including residential, recreational, agricultural, open space, commercial, industrial, resource extraction, and institutional,

along with the necessary infrastructure to support these developments.

When reviewing the future land use chapter of a comprehensive plan, a municipality may focus on land use, housing, and community facilities and services to determine their goals for the next 10 years.

- **Land Use:** To promote a balanced and diverse mix of land use intensities that respond to the evolving needs of both current and future residents and property owners, while fostering compatibility among development, resource conservation, and the preservation of community character.
- **Housing:** Ensure the availability of safe, diverse, and sufficient housing options that meet the needs of both current and future residents, while maintaining compatibility with existing development patterns and supported by appropriate infrastructure.



West Brandywine, Chester County, Future Land Use Map (2019)

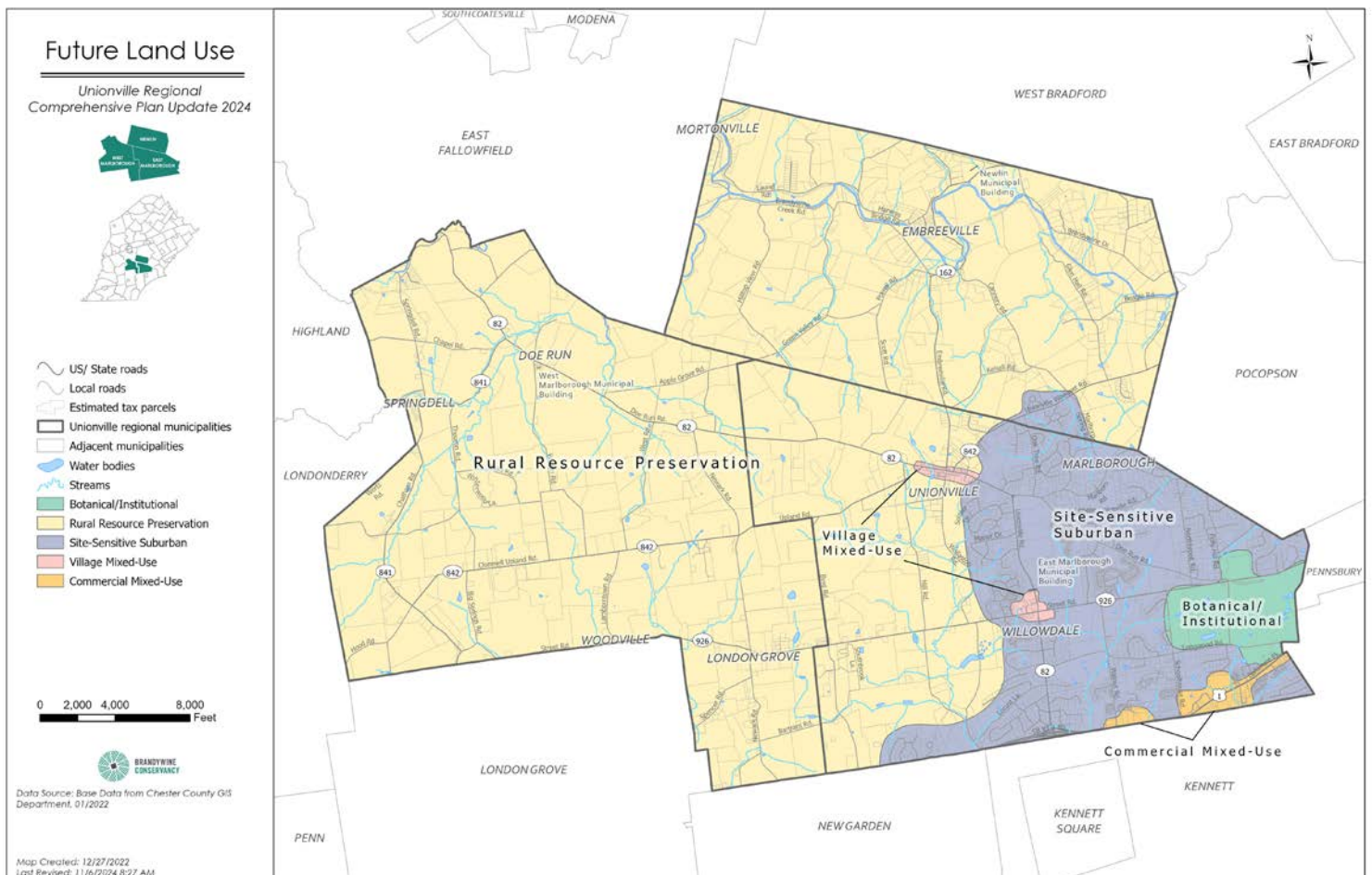
- **Community Facilities and Services:** Deliver community facilities and services that align with available financial resources, while effectively meeting the evolving needs of both current and future residents.

Future Land Use Map

A Future Land Use Map, a component of the Future Land Use Plan, is a general guide for land use in the Township for the next 10-20 years. It serves as a graphic vision for municipal policy and action as it pertains to land use, development, and preservation, helping to guide and shape the regulatory provisions of the Township Code. The map assumes that land currently developed with residential, public, or institutional uses will remain as such during the comprehensive planning period. Lands held by government entities, such as the Township or Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, or lands permanently protected through a conservation easement or other restrictive covenant, are also assumed to remain as such.

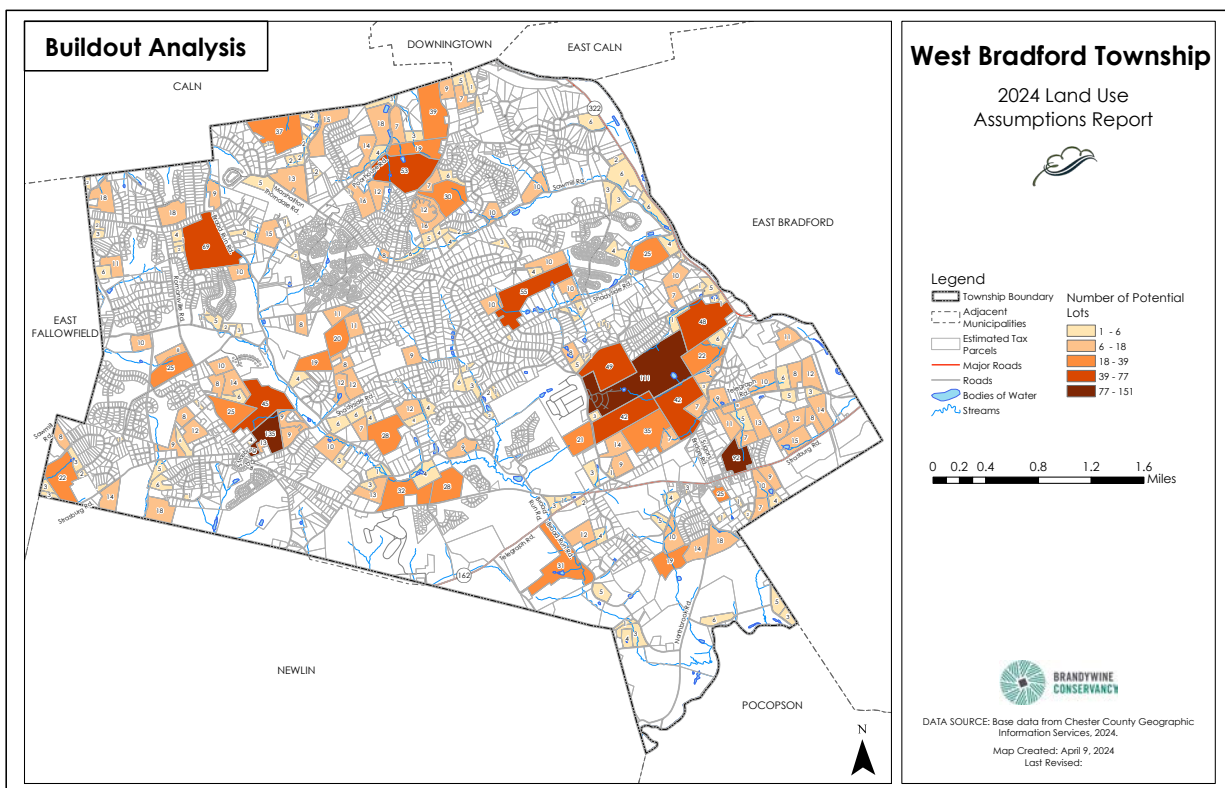
As part of the Comprehensive Plan process, municipalities may assess land status to identify developed, permanently protected, and undeveloped areas. This analysis helps determine remaining lands—typically vacant parcels or those in agricultural, woodland, or open space use without permanent protection. Additional development opportunities may include underutilized parcels with a single structure, or commercially zoned properties with potential for future development or redeveloped.

Identified on a Future Land Use Map are areas for future land use with descriptions, including information on density, character, and goals related to future development—preservation and stewardship of natural resources versus expanded infrastructure for housing or recreational opportunities. These future land use designations can include but are not limited to: Residential; Industrial; Institutional; Commercial; Resource Protection, Open Space, Recreation; Rural Resource Preservation; Town Center; Suburban Center; Sensitive Resource; Suburban; Suburban/Site Responsive; Suburban Employment; Village; and Rural Site/Responsive.



Unionville Regional Area, Chester County Future Land Use Map (2024)

West Bradford, Chester County, Buildout Map (2024)



Buildout Analysis

A buildout analysis estimates the development potential allowed by existing zoning regulations and can demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of those municipal regulations at the time of the comprehensive plan process. Conducting a buildout analysis can be an effective tool for demonstrating the importance of strong natural resource ordinances, appropriate zoning and proactive land preservation efforts at the municipal, landscape or watershed level. Not only can this tool reveal the effectiveness of existing zoning in guiding future development, but it also highlights land that may be more appropriate for land preservation. For a comprehensive plan and future land use plan, the analysis can evaluate existing residential/commercial zoning to estimate potential dwelling units or commercial square footage.

The buildout map shows existing protected lands, constrained lands, and developable lands. A corresponding chart provides additional details about each parcel identified through this analysis as developable, including the acres of constrained lands on each parcel.

A buildout analysis starts with an evaluation of developed and permanently protected parcels, highlighting those for development or redevelopment potential.

- **Permanently protected lands:** through conservation easement, agricultural easement, deed restriction, publicly owned land, and Homeowners Association (HOA) open space.
- **Developed land:** depending on land use intensity and lot size specific to the municipality being evaluated, parcels that have more than 30% of the land in intensive land uses, such as impervious surfaces, utility rights-of-way, and irregular parcels with existing development and/or limited access or opportunity for additional subdivision.

After developed parcels are netted out, natural resources, rights of way and other constrained land are removed. The following natural resource baseline regulations must be evaluated: wetlands, wetland buffer, woodlands, steep slopes, and floodplains.

Upon review of natural resource and constrained lands, a review of the municipalities zoning is con-

ducted for all parcels to determine the maximum impervious surface allowed by-right per zoning district. Finally, based on the local zoning, impervious surface estimates are calculated for each developable parcel to determine the maximum by-right development potential. Impervious surface estimates are calculated using the identified impervious coverage percentages for each zoning district within the local zoning code (including building footprint, accessory structures, and paved surfaces).

The final buildout calculation provides a visual for development potential throughout the municipality, considering the current municipal regulations for each zoning district.

Public Review and Input

The Future Land Use Map is adopted as a section of a municipality's Comprehensive Plan. To understand more about the Public Review and Input process for a Comprehensive Plan, see our technical bulletin on our website.

Implementation

Land use and other ordinances

Future Land Use plans are primarily implemented through municipal land use ordinances, including the subdivision and land development ordinance and the zoning ordinance, or other municipal ordinances authorized by the MPC. The Future Land Use Map, in the adopted comprehensive plan, should serve as the guiding document for revisions to these land use ordinances.

The following ordinance tools and zoning provisions can be implemented to carry out the goals identified in the land use plan chapter:

- Planned Residential Development (PRD) to direct mixed use or higher density development near existing infrastructure and community facilities, such as water, sewer and transportation.
- Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) to promote pedestrian oriented development.
- Transferable Development Rights (TDR) to allow development rights to be purchased and transferred from an area to be preserved to an area to be developed.
- The Official Map (see Official Map Toolkit for additional information).
- Open Space Referenda & Bonds (see Open Space Referenda & Bonds Toolkit for additional information).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *PA Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)*
- *Delaware Code Title 22 §702*
- *WeConservePA Library – Local Land Use Planning Controls in Pennsylvania*



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