

Montgomery County

Townships

Marlborough
Upper Hanover

Boroughs

East Greenville
Green Lane
Pennsburg
Red Hill

Berks County

Township

Hereford

Bucks County

Township

Milford

Lehigh County

Townships

Lower Milford
Upper Milford

INTRODUCTION

The Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley is a quiet, rural oasis spanning 10 municipalities in four counties of southeastern Pennsylvania. Nestled among some of the fastest-growing communities in the Commonwealth, the region offers a wealth of natural and cultural resources, a small-town atmosphere, and a desirable quality of life for those who live, work, and visit there. In early 2007, in response to growth pressures precipitated by a rapidly changing economy, the Upper Perkiomen Valley Chamber of Commerce embarked on a grassroots effort to assess the current social and economic environments in the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley. This initiative, appropriately dubbed “PERK UP,” is a two-part effort that initially involved more than 120 participants among public input sessions, focus groups, personal interviews, and workshops. These participants expressed their individual and collective visions for the PERK UP region’s future.

Ultimately, the goals of the Community Assessment and accompanying Economic Development Plan are to identify options and opportunities for the region to attract measured, deliberate, coordinated growth that expands economic opportunity, while retaining the quality of life that distinguishes the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley.

The PERK UP project represents the best of public-private partnerships, demonstrated by the state, municipal, organizational, institutional, and industry participation and funding it has received to-date. The preparation of this aggregated report was financed, in part, through a Land Use Planning and Technical Assistance Program grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), as administered by the Governor’s Center for Local Government Services, DCED. The generosity of time, talent, and treasure shared by individuals, companies, and organizations made the PERK UP Initiative possible thus far, and will be instrumental to its continuing implementation success.

VISION TO MOVE FORWARD

Several themes emerged that underscore and amplify participants’ vision for the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley moving forward. This collective vision culminated in options and opportunities identified in the accompanying Economic Development Plan. Below is that “PERK UP Vision Statement,” as expressed by Chamber leadership.

- **“STRENGTHEN** the small-town environment by providing broader quality-of-life amenities for all members of the community;
- **CONFIRM** the value of our open space, natural resources, and agricultural heritage;
- **INSTILL** a sense of community pride and stewardship that leads to a wider commitment to civic involvement;
- **MARKET** the region’s assets to residents, visitors, and potential employers;
- **DEVELOP** a favorable climate for low-impact businesses that provide family-sustaining jobs;
- **SUPPORT** planned growth through regional planning;
- **PROTECT** and enhance community and cultural events, open spaces, parks and natural areas, and recreational and fitness opportunities unique to the Upper Perkiomen Valley;
- **COOPERATE** through active intermunicipal collaboration and public involvement for the shared success of the region.”

VISION

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT SNAPSHOT

UNDERSTANDING GROWTH

Understanding the demographic characteristics and trends in the PERK UP region is critical for future economic development planning. Residents of the region are the primary consumers of goods and services that will attract new retail and service sector businesses to the area; they are also the workforce that will attract new employers to the region.

With a total population of just under 40,000 residents who live in the 10 municipalities in the PERK UP region footprint, the region has grown at nearly four times the rate of growth in Pennsylvania since 2000, and that trend is expected to continue. It is projected that by 2012, over 1,000 additional housing units will be required to accommodate new growth, primarily expected in Milford, Pennsburg, Red Hill, Upper Hanover, and Upper Milford.

Earnings and Spending in the Region

Like many areas across the Commonwealth, the Valley is transitioning from a manufacturing-driven economy to a service-driven economy. While service jobs offer employment opportunities to local residents, earnings in this sector are typically lower, and opportunities for “ripple effect” growth are limited.

It is estimated that nearly 90 percent of employed residents, many of whom are “white collar” professionals, work outside the PERK UP region. This skilled workforce can be a competitive advantage when marketing to attract new business to the PERK UP region.

The Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services sector is the top “high growth” business sector in Montgomery County, which is home to the greatest population and number of municipalities in the PERK UP region, ranking second in new hire earnings. There is a potential opportunity to attract Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services sector employers to locate operations in the region, evidenced by the increasing number of jobs added locally in this sector in recent years.

The PERK UP region is home to some 300 retail businesses, primarily small, locally owned stores. The \$491⁺ million PERK UP residents are estimated to spend each year on retail goods and services suggests they are spending outside the region; if redirected, more of those retail spending dollars could remain in the region. Local residents consistently expressed a desire for smaller, specialty establishments, as opposed to “big-box” retail development. A complete market assessment would need to be performed to pinpoint specific spending patterns.

Balancing Growth with Green Space

The PERK UP region’s natural resources and open spaces offer unparalleled recreational opportunities in southeastern Pennsylvania. In many ways, however, these are hidden treasures



to both local residents and potential visitors. Similarly, the region offers a wealth of arts, cultural assets, and amenities without established collaborative networks to harness, enhance, and promote their collective strengths and marketing prowess.

Throughout the public input process, residents clearly indicated their desire for economic development in the region that yields higher-paying, family-sustaining jobs, yet is balanced with preserving the region’s natural beauty, cultural heritage, open spaces, and small-town atmosphere.

LOCAL RESOURCES AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

The Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley is replete with local resources that can be harnessed for economic growth and community planning efforts, and which give the region a competitive advantage to attract employers. Among them (but not necessarily limited to this list) are:

- richness in culture and heritage;
- increasing cultural diversity;
- economic development, community planning, and industrial development organizations and departments within the four counties of the PERK UP region, along with the 10 municipalities in the region, as geographically defined;
- an expansive list of police, fire, and emergency response services;
- a wealth of public and private primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions in the region and in close proximity to the region;
- a strong local work ethic;
- an expansive list of parks and recreational amenities; and
- convenient proximity to urban amenities.

MAPPING OUT AN ECONOMIC BLUEPRINT

After combining the results of the statistical assessment, the public input sessions, municipal interviews, and a “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats” (S.W.O.T.) Analysis, potential initiatives surfaced that can render measured economic growth, while maintaining the qualities residents find desirable. The resounding preference to preserve many of the features and nuances that distinctly characterize the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley is sure to be challenged by some initiatives that may alter the status quo. These initiatives are necessary, however, to avoid “brain drain” by younger residents and workers, and to attract new employers to expand the local economic base. It is clear that the type of collaboration and cooperation that characterized this process necessarily must be replicated to ensure successful implementation of any initiatives pursued.

Three overarching initiatives were identified as “thematic” opportunities to strategize local economic development, consistent with the values expressed in the Community Assessment.

These overarching initiatives are summarized in this Executive Summary, and are supplemented by corresponding action items that are identified and described in detail in the Economic Development Plan. Estimated durations of time, potential partners, and potential funding sources for each action item are also outlined in the more expansive Economic Development Plan document.

Stakeholder cooperation and collaboration in launching economic development initiatives on a regional scale will be key to effectuating positive change.

Overarching Initiatives

- 1. Leadership Structure Initiative** – An organizational structure is essential to enhance communication and collaboration among all stakeholders. Without clear direction, roles, and accountability, the effectiveness and efficiency of implementation may be compromised.
- 2. Outdoor Recreation and Nature Tourism Initiative** – Known in some venues as “ecotourism,” this initiative suggests the development and promotion of outdoor recreational and nature tourism as a target business sector by enhancing the region’s cultural, recreational, and retail / restaurant / service amenities.
- 3. Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services Initiative** – This initiative aims to attract a blend of professional, technical, and skilled jobs. This can be accomplished through: the identification of potential business site locations; an assessment of infrastructure needs; the creation and maintenance of partnerships; and the development and continuing education of a skilled workforce.

Action Items

Delta has suggested 27 action items among the three overarching initiatives summarized above. These action items address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in the Community Assessment in ways that can leverage positive change in the region. Moreover, the action items serve as a “menu of options” for leaders and stakeholders in the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley to prioritize, launch, and execute.

Establishing an ongoing leadership structure is an essential first step. Without a clear understanding and agreement about expectations, tasks, roles, and responsibilities among leaders and partners, action items will remain little more than good ideas and not commitments to leverage positive change.

There are a variety of potential partners and potential funding sources to team with each of these action items; partners and funding will likely vary, depending on the nature of the action item. Some of the action items suggest sequential order; many do not, however. Absent an expansive business plan for this leadership structure, which is not yet in place, it is premature for Delta to suggest priority order for these action items at this time.

Funding Action Items

Funds necessary to staff, coordinate, execute, and implement action items are identified and discussed at greater length in the Economic Development Plan. Potential funding will rely on a variety of factors, including: the continuing availability of programs; the point in the fiscal year when applications are submitted, reflective of remaining funds (Pennsylvania’s fiscal year is July 1 – June 30, while the federal fiscal year is October 1 – September 30); the quality and compelling nature of the application; partnerships demonstrated; the availability of matching funds (required by many grants); duration of the application review process; competition for a limited pool of funds; local / state / federal political champions; and demonstrated breadth of community support, to name a few factors.

CONCLUSION

HOMERUNS ON THE HORIZON

In this context, the term “conclusion” erroneously suggests completion. Relative to the PERK UP Initiative, the Community Assessment and Economic Development Plan are actually a collective energy of a much greater effort, that is, taking an initiative from conceptual strategy to local economic stronghold.

The success of any one of the initiatives and the corollary action items will require a concerted effort by many to share their time, talent, and treasure to effectuate meaningful, lasting improvements throughout the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley. Success will require citizens and community leaders to harness their collective vision and resources in ways that are all-inclusive, yet target measurable goals. Success will require patience with sometimes stubborn government processes; openness to embracing the greater good over parochial interests; and partnerships otherwise unexplored by conventional means. No report, no study, and no consulting firm can effectuate positive community results. We can merely offer knowledge, insights, professional experience, and seasoned judgment. The choice for change, however, depends on hometown champions from a variety of venues.

Each stakeholder in the Greater Upper Perkiomen Valley will have an opportunity to “score for the team” somewhere along the implementation path of this planning exercise. Coined appropriately in the February 14, 2008 issue of *Town and County*, “Developing a Community Development Plan will be a hit. Having a majority of the local citizens buy into it will be a homerun.”

‘Calling all team players ...