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Living in Bloomsburg

Bloomsburg offers a unique lifestyle in Central Pennsylvania. As a 19th century town with prominent architectural character and state university, the Town has a strong identity. It is home to a working class community with deep Columbia County roots while students, faculty and staff represent much wider origins. This mixture, at times, creates difficulties but overall it adds to the diversity of the Town. Residents and students alike enjoy a high quality of life with easy access to a variety of cultural and community facilities.

Summary of Public Input on Current Conditions

Positives

- The Town is safe today, however some residents anticipate increased crime and violence from drug trafficking along I-80.
- Coordination between the Town and the University has improved in recent years.

Negatives

- The lifestyles of off-campus students and residents often clash.
 - Bloomsburg University has grown and continues to grow. Its policy supports on-campus residency for approximately half of the student population. The remainder creates a significant demand for off-campus student housing.
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Goal

Bloomsburg is a community where citizens of all ages and stages of life find affordable, quality housing and neighborhoods.

We will achieve our goal if we...

1. Provide housing choices that meet residents' needs through all stages of individual and family life.
2. Protect public safety through Town, community, volunteer, and regional services.
3. Extend the walkability of downtown throughout the town.
4. Build Community from Diversity

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Provide Housing Choices for all Stages of Life

Towns across the country are being revitalized by increases in the availability of downtown housing according to a study by The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. This strengthens the downtown economy by having people in the area 24 hours a day. A key factor behind the recent increases in downtown housing is a change in demographics.



According to Census Bureau estimates, the number of households without children is expected to represent 72 percent of all households by 2010—up from 66.4 percent in 1990. Individuals are marrying later and postponing families. By 2010, only 20.1 percent of U.S. households will be married couples with children, down from 25.5 percent in 1995. These are precisely the type of households that are driving the renewed interest in living downtown.

Findings from the housing profiles indicated that most of the homes in Town are over 50 years old. The age of these structures alone begs the question, whether they have been well-maintained. Some residents have suggested that property maintenance regulations should be more stringently enforced.

Findings also indicated gaps in the Town's available housing stock. Townhouse and condominiums, appropriate for smaller households with little interest in yard work, are very limited. This, in conjunction with maintenance concerns, may explain why few professionals desire to live in Town.

Another finding related to housing is that student housing dominates new construction in the housing market. Quality varies but often doesn't convey a sense of permanence or contribution to the quality of the neighborhood.

One final finding is the need for housing for seniors and the elderly that meets their housing and health care needs.

Recommendations

- L.1. Promote housing maintenance and renovation.** Preserve neighborhood quality through public investments and incentives for private investment (maintenance, renovation, rehabilitation).
- L.2. Continue to enforce property maintenance throughout Town.**
- L.3. Consider methods to encourage landlords to improve renter housing stock.** The intended outcome is well-constructed, well-maintained properties that meet the needs of student and non-student renters.
- L.4. Limit conversion of single family dwellings to multi-family units.**
- L.5. Develop and adopt design and/or performance standards for student housing.** Design standards that control the building form (what it looks like) could be accomplished through form-based codes, an innovative approach to land use and land development regulations. Performance standards could address screening, noise, light, parking, and other factors by requiring that the construction meet established minimum thresholds. Under performance standards, the means of meeting the threshold is not regulated, simply the outcome.
- L.6. Increase development of housing options suitable for young adults, “empty nesters”, seniors, persons with disabilities and traditional families.** The predominant type of housing is single-family detached. The Town currently lacks housing types such as townhouses and condominiums. The Town also lacks housing for continuum of care from independent living to assisted living to skilled care units. This could be accomplished through revised zoning, specific initiatives with the private housing sector, or public redevelopment.
- L.7. Identify potential sites for infill housing or redevelopment.** Infill and redevelopment are closely related, especially in well-established communities. Infill can mean the development of vacant parcels within the established development pattern. It can also imply taking advantage of multi-level development when existing conditions are just a single story. However, if the existing structure was only designed for single story, infilling above may require strengthening the foundation or

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redeveloping the property from scratch. In either case, the new construction should be sensitive to and compatible with the character of the existing neighborhood.

Redevelopment projects take advantage of underutilized properties to meet needs or create opportunity. They can be led by the public or private sector and can serve public or private sectors. They can rehabilitate existing structures or they can clear blighted properties and build new. Redevelopment projects evolve through a process:

- a. Site Assessment and Market Study
- b. Master Plan
- c. Zoning revisions, if needed
- d. Plan Review and Approval
- e. Permitting and Construction

Redevelopment Targets:



- Bloomsburg Mills for commercial/industrial, senior housing, or mixed use
- Lightstreet Road from Main Street to the Hospital for multi-family residential use with special attention given to sidewalk layout to accommodate pedestrians comfortably along Lightstreet Road.
- Commercial strip along US Route 11 for mixed commercial/residential use.

Lead Partners: Town of Bloomsburg officials and staff

Supporting Partners: Bloomsburg University, Columbia County Housing Authority, Residential real estate community and private property owners.

Funding Sources: General Fund, CDGB funds, Columbia County Housing Authority, HOME Investment Partnership Program (PA DCED), Elm Street Program (PA DCED) and Rural Housing Program (USDA)

Protect Public Safety

Nothing else matters if you don't feel safe where you live. Feeling safe (not threatened or at risk) while at home or in public places is vitally important. If people don't feel safe, they will either stay in their homes or move from the area, so ensuring the safety and well being of the public ensures the health of the community.

Bloomsburg takes a proactive approach to safety. The Town has dedicated police, fire and emergency response teams. Fire response is so fast, in fact, that residents receive a reduction in their homeowner's or renter's insurance rates. Bloomsburg University also has a police force to ensure the safety of the students and the public on its campuses.

There is a strong linkage between neighborhoods that are safe and neighborhoods that residents take pride in. Residents, who enjoy where they live, and ordinarily feel safe, will be most vigilant in working to maintain the safety of the neighborhood. This is one of the strongest deterrents of crime because criminals generally don't disturb areas that are well monitored. A mixed use community keeps people out on the street for a longer period of time each day, deterring criminal activity. Of course, residents can't



handle all safety issues and must rely on the local police, fire, and EMS services. A strong and trusted police department with good equipment is essential, as is reliable EMS and Fire protection.

There is growing concern for "gang activity" traveling the I-80 corridor and coming into Bloomsburg. This issue is being addressed among the cities of Lancaster, York and Harrisburg by a movement called the Route 222 Corridor Anti-Gang Initiative. Though officials say gang activity in Columbia County isn't as severe as in many comparable communities nationwide, they aren't ignoring the danger. The Columbia County Sheriff's Office is taking a two-pronged approach to curb gang activity: tracking gangs as part of a recently formed federal task force

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and teaching gang awareness in schools. This helps to curb the problem while it is still at manageable stages.¹

Recommendations

- L.8. Continue to promote and permit mix of uses appropriate to neighborhoods and downtown districts, respectively.** These efforts will keep the neighborhoods vibrant and well used while deterring crime.
- L.9. Establish community policing programs, such as neighborhood watch programs.**
- L.10. Conduct an (annual) initiative to lock homes, vehicles, and valuables.**
- L.11. Continue to work cooperatively with the Bloomsburg University Police Department.** The two police forces already meet regularly for the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) programs and should continue to develop strategies that address common problems. Explore a cooperative agreement with the Town of Bloomsburg for off-campus police services should the need arise for occasional increases in manpower.
- L.12. As the Bloomsburg area grows, explore the feasibility of a regional police force.** A regional police arrangement with neighboring Townships may be beneficial to save on resources and revenue.
- L.13. Work with the Fire Department on public programs to prevent and reduce fire damage, such as providing free smoke alarms.**
- L.14. Upgrade traffic signals with preemptive signals for emergency vehicles.**
- L.15. Install street lights at locations where dusk to dawn lighting could reduce vandalism and other criminal or mischievous activity.**
- L.16. Continue to promote flood preparedness among citizens.** While flood protection via the levee and floodwall system is a high priority, it will take several years for its final design and construction to be complete. In the meantime, the hazard of flooding along the Susquehanna River and Fishing Creek will remain. Town officials and staff should continue to

¹ 2-24-07 News-Times article.

emphasize the need to be aware of flood watch/flood warning status and to prepare to respond appropriately. The Town has made information on flood damage reduction available on its website. Additional steps should be considered:

- a. **Prepare and distribute flood preparedness and damage reduction information in a brochure.** Online information is helpful in advance of flood events, but during a flood when electric service may be interrupted, a brochure provides direct, tangible assistance. The brochure could be laminated for water-resistance prior to distribution. Copies should also be made available at the Bloomsburg Public Library.
- b. **Hold annual flood preparedness outreach meetings to inform new residents and update residents on the status of the Town's early warning system and flood protection efforts.**
- c. **Conduct an annual flood awareness campaign.** As conducted in other communities, the campaign is kicked off with an official Executive Proclamation designating a given week as Flood Awareness Week. This campaign typically includes a press release to local television, radio, and print media to help focus attention on flood and winter storm hazards. The campaign encourages citizens to become familiar with expected local flood conditions near their home and work locations and to prepare in advance.
- d. **Hold multi-agency meetings at the beginning of the flood season, or at other times in compliance with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) programs, to coordinate flood response activities and procedures and to update priority call lists that are used for early flood notification.** Request attendance by all first response agencies, including Columbia County Emergency Management Agency, staff from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, fire and police departments, the Red Cross, local public works and/or roads maintenance staff, the National Weather Service and local school districts.

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Lead Partners: Town of Bloomsburg officials and staff

Support Partners: Bloomsburg University, Adjacent Municipalities

Funding Sources: General Fund, Bloomsburg University

Extend Walkability throughout Town

At one time, communities were built for pedestrians, but communities today are usually designed around the automobile. For this reason, the once common features that make a community walkable, sidewalks, street trees, street lights, etc. are viewed as amenities today. These features include:

- Relatively short distances between origins and destinations that make walking feasible.
- A well-connected network of sidewalks throughout the community.
- Mixed uses, including retail and service establishments, that create a variety of destinations and routes.

The frequency or density of historic/cultural features and attractions make the walk interesting and enjoyable. The condition of the sidewalks, crosswalks, crossing signals, and street lights are important safety elements for the pedestrian as are the slope or grade of pedestrian routes.

The benefits of walkable communities include: improved fitness, reduced risks of health problems, cleaner air, and a greater sense of community. In Bloomsburg, walking also serves as a viable means of transportation. There is a well linked network of sidewalks and the Town is relatively compact. Because the sidewalks are so well used in the Town, they are an integral part of Town life. There are many beautiful and interesting neighborhoods to walk through in Town and the Town Park has trails to enjoy as well.

Recommendations

- L.17. Expand the mission of the Shade Tree Commission, making it responsible for sidewalks and trails.** Alternatively, a new volunteer committee could be appointed to monitor sidewalk/trails conditions and connectivity.

- L.18. Enforce sidewalk maintenance by property owners.**
- L.19. Enhance pedestrian comfort with streetscape improvements:**
- a. Improvements on East Street**
 - b. A Neighborhood Street Tree Program.** Where grass strips are wide enough to accommodate street trees, the Town should install trees at regular intervals. Where there is no grass strip or it is too narrow, the Town should make trees available for willing property owners to plant in their front lawns, or offer to have trees planted.
- L.20. (Work with Scott Township to) Construct a walking path from Bloomsburg between Rte 11 and 5th Street Hollow Rd eastward, more or less following property lines, to Central Rd in the Zeisloft development, ending at the AAA office.** This would enable people (especially teens) to get to retail jobs in this area, and to entertainment destinations like the movies and restaurants on foot or bicycle. Much of the land there is hard to develop fully because of waterways but might accommodate a pathway for bicyclists and pedestrians. A pervious surface material is preferred. A paved path would be worse environmentally, but would certainly be better for older people and people with strollers.
- L.21. Explore options to make Country Club Drive and Lightstreet Road areas of Town more accessible by foot or bicycle.**
- L.22. Explore options to make the development at the top of 5th Street Hollow Rd (at Central Rd) accessible by foot/bike.** An undeveloped woodlot on the south side of 5th St Hollow could perhaps accommodate a walking path. Alternatively, if a walk or pathway out to Central Rd parallel to Rte 11 is established, the path could follow Central Rd. Pedestrians regularly walk on both Central Rd and Fifth St Hollow Rd, even though there are no shoulders.



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- L.23. Make the southeastern part of Town (7th street extension) friendlier to pedestrians and more clearly linked to the rest of Town, perhaps through sidewalks.
- L.24. Explore options to make the Sunview Terrace and Arbutus Park developments accessible by foot or bicycle to the downtown.

Lead Partners: Town of Bloomsburg

Supporting Partners: Bloomsburg Hospital, Community organizations sponsoring special events

Funding Sources: General Fund, CDGB funds

Build Community from Diversity

According to Merriam-Webster, a community is “people with common interests living in a particular area.” Bloomsburg is a complex, mixed community of long time residents and short term students. This creates an interesting mix of people and lifestyles, but also has led to some issues between the populations.



The residents of Bloomsburg are primarily blue collar workers, living as families or retirees. Bloomsburg is a family town and also has a lot of retirees. The students are four-year community “residents”. In relative standards, they are considered low income residents. Off campus students primarily live in groups in apartments. Many have a lifestyle that involves late night hours and parties on weekends, which doesn’t fit with more traditional residential neighborhoods.

This mix of lifestyles provides an active, vibrant downtown that most other small towns lack. Bloomsburg certainly would not be the town that it is without the University. One benefit of the student lifestyle that is often overlooked is that students’ late night hours provide “eyes on the street” when others have long retired for the evening.

Residents need to work with the students and understand that disturbances will occur at times. At the same time, the students need to realize that Bloomsburg is more than a college town and be respectful of the Town's residents and their differing lifestyles. Maintaining an open and ongoing dialogue among the diversity of the community will help to alleviate tension.

Recommendations

- L.25. Continue to promote an integrated or mixed land use approach.** In the downtown, business and residential uses are successfully mixed. In residential neighborhoods, housing types can be successfully mixed.
- L.26. Promote volunteerism to support the Fire Department.** Establish a junior firefighter program. Recruit volunteers from the University; some may come with previous training.
- L.27. Promote desired community service projects to civic, high school, vo-tech, and University service clubs and organizations.** There are far more community initiatives than the Town can afford, some may be suitable for volunteer groups to complete or to begin. For instance, if the Town wanted a better understanding of its senior citizens' housing needs, vo-tech students from Health Occupations Students of America or from the University's Allied Health and Nursing programs may be interested in research experience. If the Town wanted to understand how other communities had determined the best location for their farmers' markets, it might approach students of the Future Farmer's of America about the topic. University students in creative writing, theatre arts and music could be engaged to produce a short performance on the need for flood preparedness. The intent of this recommendation is to identify opportunities for youth and adults to root themselves in Bloomsburg and connect with its history in the making.

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