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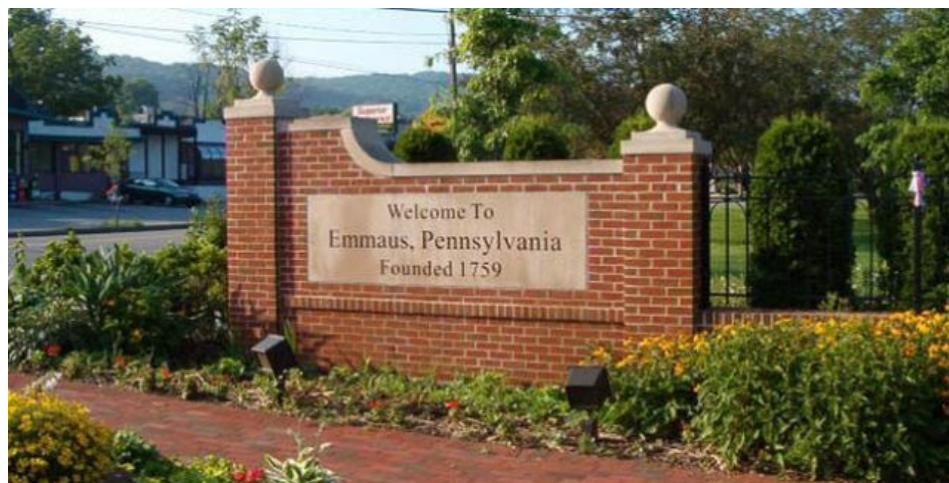# SW Lehigh County municipalities plan for smart growth

LVPC is leading process to set community development goals

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The most densely populated municipality in the region is Emmaus.

If you're going to do it, do it right.

That was the crux of Thursday night's discussion about what at least some of the 58,000 residents in the southwestern part of Lehigh County want to see when it comes to smart growth.

Hosted by the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission and held at the Lower Macungie Community Center, the event was described as part of a "process that determines community goals and aspirations" when it comes to community development," according to LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley.

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Those in attendance at the forum - which is part of developing the Southwest Lehigh County Long Range Development Plan - included developer David Jaindl, Lehigh County Executive Thomas Muller, Discover Lehigh Valley President Michael Stershic.

The meeting also included several of the region's municipal officials, such as Lower Macungie Township Commissioners Ronald R. Beitler and Ronald W. Beitler the township's Planning and Community Development Director Sara Pandl and Manager Bruce Fosselman.

Residents of six municipalities attended the roughly 90-

minute event.

The attendees were all asked to identify their primary regional issues and then sit at discussion tables where the individual topics would be talked about in depth. Those topic tables included transportation, historical resources, natural resources, housing, land use and development, civic leadership, economic development and community facilities.

From a numbers standpoint, the hot spot proved to be the land use and development table as about two dozen crammed around several tables placed together. Many of the individuals cupped their ear to hear the comments of others at the table in the noisy hall.

The general consensus proved to be that no matter their zeal to preserve open space and rural areas, that the marketability of the land to commercial development would ultimately carry the day.

Under that assumption, the group said in order to retain a good quality of life, there had to be a thoughtful, insightful, comprehensive and long-term plan in place to make sure that growth was done wisely. At least one of those around that table wasn't sure that had been the case in the past.

Ronald W. Beitler said he would like to see "more productive growth" in the future. Ronald R. Beitler, suggested that redeveloping around existing communities could be prudent. Others in the discussion added that there had to be a "balance" in retaining land and welcoming commercial development.

For example, those against commercial development had to be realistic about the fact they would see a higher tax rate than communities with more commerce. The same issue would manifest itself with land protected by open space initiatives that could be eligible for state grants. Those grants would not equal the value of the land on the open market.

Another plus for commercial development in the region, besides the increased tax base, is the fact businesses, unlike people, do not have families and children to educate, which increases costs. But one individual noted that commercial development comes with many legacy costs for a municipality.

Bradley expects another four or five meetings. She offered a project timeline of about six months, culminating in June when the LVPC would issue a plan to the six municipalities.

Bradley said "the teeth" behind enforcing the plan would ultimately be the responsibility of the individual municipalities, although the plan would be a legal document per the Pennsylvania Municipalities Code.

She was armed with an array of statistics about the region. Perhaps most telling is how much the area's population has swelled.

In 2000, a total of 46,000 called the region home, while about 58,000 reside there as of 2010. Of those roughly 58,000 people who live in the region - Lower Macungie, Lower Milford and Upper Milford townships and Alburtis, Emmaus and Macungie boroughs - about 87 percent of those employed work outside the region, making it a bedroom community.

About 12,000 people commute daily into the region for employment, in an odd contradiction.

The most densely populated municipality in the region is Emmaus, while the most populated is Lower Macungie.

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