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# Southwestern Lehigh leaders want the public's help preparing for the future



Farmers, homeowners, elected officials and developers met last week to discuss future land use and development issues in southwestern Lehigh. The forum was at the Lower Macungie Community Center. (ANDREW WAGAMAN / THE MORNING CALL)



By **Andrew Wagaman · Contact Reporter**  
Of The Morning Call

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**L**OWER MACUNGIE TOWNSHIP — The substantial development in Lower Macungie Township has served notice to its rural neighbors: Change is coming.

Regional leaders want residents to help plan for it.

The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission is helping southwestern Lehigh County update its regional comprehensive plan, last revised in 2005. It hosted a public forum Thursday at the Lower Macungie Community Center to articulate regional planning priorities.

Southwestern Lehigh includes Lower Milford Township and the entire East Penn School District —

Lower Macungie and Upper Milford townships and Alburtis, Emmaus and Macungie boroughs.

About 80 people attended the forum, according to Becky Bradley, executive director of LVPC. After Bradley's initial presentation, attendees moved to tables representing a different priority. An hour-long conversation moderated by an LVPC official at each table followed.

Priority topics included transportation, housing, natural resources and historical resources. Most popular was the land use and development table, which drew about quarter of the crowd and led to a discussion about proactive planning, open space preservation and tax policy.

A farmer from Lower Milford said she wanted to see leaders do everything they can to preserve open space in the coming years, citing the fine quality of soil in region and the negative effects of development on surrounding soil.

Another resident said taxpayers need to be willing to cover preservation costs. He suggested holding a referendum on an open space tax, or something like it. If voters aren't willing to pay, he said, local governments need to be careful not to overreach and impede whatever kind of development the free market is demanding.

An Upper Milford resident questioned the benefit of more residential development, arguing that residential property taxes aren't adequately covering the added school districts costs more households bring.

Another farmer wondered if municipalities could find new ways to use taxes to encourage land uses. You can preserve farmland but not farmers, he said, and they'll go where they can afford to farm.

LVPC staff reviewed notes from the different discussions Friday morning, and Bradley said she was impressed by the sophisticated level of conversation.

"People are really interested in continuing the conversation and bringing other people into it," she said. "We're working on creating more opportunities for face-to-face engagement."

In addition to municipal officials, County Executive Tom Muller, developer David Jaindl and aides of State Reps. Ryan MacKenzie and Justin Simmons and State Sen. Pat Browne all attended. Also present was Bill Coyle, who recently announced he was running for Simmons' state seat.

LVPC will survey residents in early February and hopes to schedule public forums once a month over the next half-year.

For more information, including municipal profile pages, region trends and the 2005 comprehensive

plan, visit [planswl.org](http://planswl.org).

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## **SNAPSHOT OF SOUTHWESTERN LEHIGH COUNTY**

- In 2012, agricultural and undeveloped land made up 44 percent of the region's land use. It was 49 percent in 2005 and 60 percent in 1992.
- In 2012, residential accounted for 35 percent of land use. It was 32 percent in 2005 and 26 percent in 1992.
- 87 percent of southwestern Lehigh residents work outside the region.
- Alburtis residents have the youngest median age, 34.7. Upper Milford has the oldest residents, at a median age of 46.3
- As of 2013, Lower Macungie's approximately 31,000 residents made up more than half of the region's total population (56,700). By 2030, Lower Macungie is expected to have nearly 40,000 residents, and the region is expected to have nearly 70,000.
- Every municipality in the region has a higher median household income than the Lehigh County average, \$53,541. Lower Macungie's is highest at \$80,344.

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