



# *Comprehensive Development Plan*

## *Shenango Township, Lawrence County, PA*

## Chapter 12 – Implementation Plan

### Overview

Shenango Township is situated in an area of Lawrence County with access in the two northern quadrants, from a high volume arterial roadway, US 422, and on the east from a suburban collector roadway, SR 65. Most of the higher density residential and more intensive commercial and light industrial development has occurred within or in close proximity to these transportation corridors. The southwestern quadrant is predominantly rural with no projected time frame for the introduction of public utilities.

The Township's geographic location on the southern and western approaches to the City of New Castle has made the extension of public utilities to support both residential and nonresidential development since the 1950's a matter of necessity. In 1980, the Township's population was nearly 8,000 (7,937) people following several decades of sustained growth. The collapse of the region's steel industry in the early 1980's and the recent recession have both affected local population growth negatively, but projections for a return to the 1980 population by 2020 and continuing growth through 2040 indicates the presence of an attractive residential development market.

At this point in the Township's evolution, a well-supported comprehensive plan with achievable community development objectives is needed to guide growth and protect natural and man-made assets. To that end, the Board of Supervisors created a Steering Committee to prepare a plan for the community's future. This group of volunteers consisted of residential property owners, real estate professionals, business owners, concerned residents, and Township staff. A recognition of Township assets as well as competitive deficiencies was undertaken to better understand the Township's role within the region and to increase opportunities for sustainable development in the near future and for the long term.

In the Spring of 2014, a community survey was distributed to property owners in Shenango Township. This was an effort to gain insight from taxpayers on issues of concern, both socio-economic and quality-of-life issues. Further, by seeking input from Township

citizens, elected officials can make informed decisions with the support of residents and commit assets to programs and services identified as essential or as preferred.

## **Opportunities**

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There are opportunities in Shenango Township to initiate a more proactive growth management program which could result in increased sustainability for businesses and an expanded revenue stream for locally designated capital improvements. These opportunities rely on the leadership of elected and appointed officials and the continuing input of property owners. An engaged Planning Commission is a valuable asset in terms of local planning initiatives and can also function as a monitoring agency as well as a promotional and advocacy tool. Our recommendation is to increase the current three (3) member board to either a five (5) member or seven (7) member board in order to consolidate Township activities and objectives under one designated group of volunteers which has direct contact with the Board of Supervisors. Citizen planners can bring a variety of perspectives to the table and often members of Planning Commissions are realtors, business owners, contractors, and retired professionals. The key is that most members are also homeowners. Continuity of purpose is an important element when a community's planning philosophy becomes proactive, and the preparation of a long range comprehensive plan provides needed benchmarks for progress.

With a committed Planning Commission in place, tasked with implementing the adopted Comprehensive Plan, Shenango Township's elected officials can focus on governance, revenue streams, administrative accountability, public outreach and capital improvement projects. Communities with effective working relationships between their Planning Commissioners and elected officials are more likely to achieve community development objectives, especially when those objectives have evolved from a community planning process. Adoption of the 2014 Comprehensive Plan will provide a degree of credibility to future efforts to improve service delivery and respond to neighborhood concerns following a period of uncertainty regarding municipal finances and a lack of oversight.

A policy of support for both new commercial development in the US 422 and SR 65 corridors and residential development in suburbanized areas starts with the introduction of flexible options to land use regulations. The adoption of a revised and restated zoning ordinance should follow adoption of the Comprehensive Plan. Zoning is the primary implementation tool used to realize a community's plan for the future through achievement of its community development objectives. Secondly, improving communication with Township homeowners and business owners with a biannual newsletter will also provide a framework for increased visibility within the region. A designated staff person responsible for direct

communication with the Lawrence County Economic Development Corporation on a regular basis can lead to more efficient process to identify business prospects considering the region. This will require a restructuring of municipal staff responsibilities to include economic development as well as community planning as primary concerns. Response to the community survey indicates that this commitment of staff resources by the Board of Supervisors would be well received.

As the Township Supervisors make the commitment to improve community relations and establish growth management policies which support sustainable development, there should be increased interest from Township residents and business owners to participate in strategic actions to accomplish community development goals. The key is continuity. Elected officials, Planning Commission members and staff need to set progress meetings at regular intervals to discuss development opportunities and monitor outcomes. This is a role traditionally held by a Township manager or administrator, but can be coordinated through other staff persons or even consultants. It is important to follow through on the original initiatives to maintain both momentum and credibility.

## **Incremental Approach**

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The community planning process in Shenango Township began with a group of citizens asked by the Supervisors to explore options to improve socio-economic conditions in the Township. Initial work sessions focused on defining the role of the committee and resources available to prepare a plan for the future of the community. This group, initially called the Shenango Township Planning for Economic Development Committee, began meeting in the Summer of 2012 as a volunteer group, and invited a variety of business owners, economic development professionals, revitalization specialists, residents and developers to discuss issues relating to improving the community. Initial discussions involved defining the role of the committee and resources available to prepare a plan for the future of the community. The need for primary data regarding measurable trends both locally and in the region from recognized data sources was agreed upon. The dynamics of revitalization as envisioned by this volunteer group is summarized as follows:

1. Reasons for living in the Township.
2. Benefits of location.
3. Components of an ideal community.
  - A gathering place.
  - Appearance of cleanliness and pride.
  - An array of retail choices.

- A reason to travel through the community.
4. How will the committee initiate change?
- Think big, start small.
  - Copy what has worked elsewhere.
  - Build momentum.
  - Choose opportunities for success.
  - Inspire a mindset for change and growth.

A consensus on two issues, an appearance of cleanliness and pride, and an array of retail choices, was established by the committee as initial goals for consideration by the Supervisors. That discussion produced a mission statement which would be used to monitor future progress. That statement is as follows: “The mission of the Shenango Township Planning for Economic Development Committee (STPEDC) is to achieve and maintain a robust business climate by attracting new business and aggressively pursuing all avenues for retention and growth of existing businesses in Shenango Township with the further goal of maximizing local employment opportunities, tax base, and quality of life for Shenango Township residents.”

This mission statement, prepared by the Board of Supervisors, and submitted to the committee in December of 2012, reflects the elected officials’ expectations for the Committee’s work and the identification of goals and objectives relating to the statement should be considered in that context. Following are the goals or strategies relating to the Committee’s work proposed by the Board of Supervisors:

- Data
- Resources
- Newsletter/Website
- Business Directory
- Contact businesses for input/needs
- Ways to promote the Township in order to attract new business opportunities.

A review of progress toward achieving the Committee’s original goals and objectives starts with data collection. This recognition for the need for current data led the Supervisors to retain a professional planning consultant to assist in the preparation of this Comprehensive Plan. Primary and secondary data sources have been mined and socio-economic information has been prepared for discussion. Further, a comparison of metrics from three (3) growth areas in the region was prepared and discussed to discern the Township’s profile and general competitiveness. Further initiatives which focus on job creation could improve the overall socio-economic climate locally, and as an indirect result, reduce the percentage of households

reporting incomes beneath the poverty level guidelines issued by the Federal government. This was a tenet of the mission statement and should be a priority.

Resources including the Lawrence County Economic Development Corporation, County Chamber of Commerce and Lawrence County Tourist Promotion Agency have been identified in an effort to become more competitive regionally. In addition, with the inclusion of agritourism and agribusiness options in the revised Zoning Ordinance, that sector of the local economy could actually provide employment opportunities, at least seasonally. The term partners is related to public resource agencies and specific private sector organizations such as local homebuilders/contractors groups and retailers associations and should be integrated into the process for future coordination.

Response from the community survey regarding the preparation of a biannual newsletter and improved Township website was clearly supportive. These are effective tools used by more municipalities to promote community initiatives, special events, and services provided by the Township. These media options can also be a source of information regarding issues of concern to property owners and help to clarify misperceptions. Whether the Township Board of Supervisors provides funding during the budget preparation process, calls for volunteers to assist with these public outreach strategies or chooses an option previously discussed such as utilizing a local University's intern program, the key will be accountability and a continuity of effort. The Committee's guests consistently mentioned preparing a proactive plan to address concerns raised during work sessions and setting planning objectives which can be monitored and revised as opportunities arise or threats are identified.

The creation of a business directory complete with contacts and future business plans of local commercial developments in operation can be assigned to a Township employee in conjunction with the Board of Supervisors' review of administrative responsibilities. Much of the data can be acquired on line from agencies previously identified and tailored to fit Shenango Township's needs. In addition, depending on its use, the Township could issue a narrowly focused business survey which seeks input from existing and prospective business owners locally and countywide. A weakness brought to light during a recent work session was the lack of space for start-up businesses in the 10,000 square feet range. An inventory of available facilities, related zoning, site access, utilities, and structural conditions would be helpful to prospective commercial developers if kept up to date in a Township database. Coordination with economic development agencies and lending institutions is still essential, however, information available locally for interested parties making inquiries at the Township offices could be packaged in a way that encourages further investigation from private sector representatives.

This database can also be utilized to accomplish the final goal on the Committee's agenda, marketing the Township's assets. Clearly, Township property owners have identified the Shenango Area School District, the rural character and regional access, as recognized assets. The first two assets will continue to appeal to home owners and residential developers, while the third can be used to attract commercial developers and business start-ups. The Township's natural environment can be captured with digital photography for reproduction and a transportation network map with destination sites within the Township as well as employment centers beyond the municipal boundaries could be included in a marketing brochure. Striking a balance between a desire for new home sites without a strong local employment prospective will be a challenge, however, most participants in the preparation of this document recognize the Township as predominantly a bedroom community with amenities attractive to continuing residential development. The presence of two high volume transportation corridors can be identified as an asset, but commercial property maintenance issues are a threat to successfully enticing new business development. The promotion of preferred site design and aesthetic standards and regularly scheduled maintenance should be pursued.

## Property Maintenance

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In rural municipalities, the issue of property maintenance evokes strong opinions on both sides. For property owners who have neglected maintenance, it is sometimes the freedom to do what they want with privately owned land without local or Commonwealth government interference that becomes the cause they defend. For other property owners whose lives are affected by living or working in close proximity to poorly maintained land, it becomes a health and safety issue. We have found that a straight forward program with reasonable standards and flexible enforcement options can be successful if crafted carefully. In order to defend such a program, especially in a rural area, the offending characteristics must be defined clearly and the link between the lack of maintenance and the health and welfare of Township residents made unambiguously.

A primary component of a municipal-wide property maintenance program is consistency of enforcement. The enforcement mechanism must be applied to violations without exceptions depending on the scale of the problem. An initial nonconfrontational contact with the most recognizable violators by telephone or uncertified mail should be considered, in conjunction with a summary of the Township's goals in a newsletter or on the website. Prior to initial contact, however, a review of current ordinances adopted through the authority of the Second Class Township Code or the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code should be conducted. In addition, previous enforcement activities based on these special purpose ordinances should be

researched, as well as any Commonwealth enforcement actions initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

If the Township establishes credible community objectives and involves the property owners from the outset, when they are willing to participate, the potential for success is increased. The local Magistrate could be an ally to the Township also and the program goals and enforcement procedures should be clearly presented to the Magistrate when the effort is launched. Overly aggressive enforcement without reasonable opportunities for the offending landowner to comply may involve legal fees to defend Township enforcement activities. The goal should be compliance, not punishment. This area of local government administration is logically assigned to a code enforcement officer and may only require a part-time commitment, depending on the scope of the problem. Some municipalities have created a combined zoning and code enforcement officer position, but the Board of Supervisors needs to determine staffing levels.

## Appearance Codes

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Another option available to communities promoting quality development, an iteration of the Committee's "appearance of cleanliness and pride" goal, is adoption of an appearance code, or inclusion of architectural and site design standards in the Zoning Ordinance or land development section of the Township's Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance. Many rural communities in the path of growth or transitioning from rural/agrarian roots to suburban development trends utilize these regulations to achieve sustainable development which continues to increase in valuation. Each rural community has a unique mix of residential, commercial, service, agricultural and in the Township's case, industrial land uses, so an appearance code must reflect existing architecture, development patterns, landscaping or indigenous growth and a vision of what developing areas or corridors should represent. A typical set of appearance standards includes the following:

- Building design;
- Relationship of building to site;
- Relationship of project to adjoining area;
- Signs;
- Lighting;
- Street hardware;
- Miscellaneous structures; and
- Maintenance.

We have found that these types of exaction standards are more successful when the applicant/developer is offered an incentive to provide the Township with a preferred design. One option to induce compliance includes creating an expedited approval process that requires the applicant to address only the most impactful land disturbance activities with the potential

to negatively affect abutting properties, and includes a thorough administrative review allowing the Planning Commission to recommend approval in a more timely manner. The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code specifies that an applicant is responsible for professional consultants' fees. Another option is to provide development incentives or bonuses for compliance with the preferred architectural and site design standards. These include a reduction in required parking or shared parking, an increase in lot coverage for buildings or impervious surfaces, an increase in total square footage per site, or a reduction in required landscaping where existing vegetation accomplishes the goal of screening and buffering.

These incentives provide a quid pro quo to private sector interests and provides attractive development sites which address the Committee's goal for achieving an "appearance of cleanliness and pride." This approach can be applied to both new development and the construction of additions or expansions to existing development where the increased footprint represents fifty percent (50%) of the existing square footage. A change of occupancy could also trigger the appearance standards, however in Shenango Township, a slow roll-out of these requirements is recommended. Basic property maintenance for existing commercial development is the primary objective and the next logical sequence of an effective growth management plan following the enforcement of property maintenance standards would be adoption of an appearance code.

## Focus Issues

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The link between land use and transportation was discussed at length by members of the Steering Committee and the competitiveness of Shenango Township to attract quality development projects was examined utilizing current socio-economic data from primary data sources. Comparisons to development trends in Neshannock Township, Cranberry Township and Boardman, Ohio provided an objective assessment of the Township's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This exercise was conducted as members of the Steering Committee sought to characterize the Township's role within the region.

An earlier focus group exercise conducted with members of the Economic Development Committee listed the appearance of the US 422 and SR 65 corridors, vacant stores, lack of public utilities, restrictive zoning regulations and an aging population as weaknesses. Assets (strengths) included regional access, available land for both residential and commercial development, the school district, and good emergency services including police protection. These are the issues that most Steering Committee (formerly Economic Development Committee) members said best reflected the negative and the positive attributes of Shenango Township. While socio-economic indicators for comparable communities were prepared and

discussed, key data for median age, household type, housing value, employment, occupation, and household income demonstrated that most economic metrics were not as negative as some perceived.

One statistic that drew attention, however, was the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau) estimate of families living below the poverty level. At 9.1%, Shenango Township was substantially higher than either Cranberry or Neshannock Townships and moderately higher than Boardman, Ohio. Further, a higher percentage of families in Shenango Township made less than \$35,000 annually by significant margins when compared with both Neshannock and Cranberry Township and a slightly higher margin than families in Boardman, Ohio. The attraction of well-paying, full-time jobs to the Township would seem to be a priority given the data reviewed. However, each of the destination communities reviewed are competing for the same employment opportunities within the region.

## **Community Objectives and Strategic Actions**

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Community objectives and strategic actions recommended in this Implementation Plan are based on response to the community survey, public input, evaluations of current land use, transportation and access, assessment of the current housing stock, demographic characteristics and an analysis of socio-economic data from both primary and secondary reporting agencies. Further, response to the community survey distributed in late Spring of 2014 was assigned a high degree of value in the preparation of the recommendations which emerged from the planning process.

Both policy objectives and strategic objectives have been articulated by topic or theme in order to present a broad perspective on the more complex issues identified. A policy objective is a broad approach to achieve a positive resolution, while a strategic objective recommends actions which can be taken to address the issue identified. The responsibility for the achievement of the objectives lies with the elected officials, Planning Commission, and Township staff. Where the Board of Supervisors has directed the preparation of revisions and amendments to current land use regulations, the Zoning Hearing Board will also play a role. The commitment of revenues to the process of studying or designing future infrastructure improvements lies with the elected officials and their appointed engineering consultants.

A priority ranking system has been established in regard to the community objectives. This ranking proposes three implementation phases of three (3) to four (4) years each over the subsequent ten (10) year planning horizon. Objectives marked "H" for high priority are recommended to be addressed or commenced within three (3) to four (4) years of plan adoption. Objectives marked "M" should be addressed during the succeeding three (3) to four

(4) year period and objectives marked “L” during the final three (3) to four (4) year phase. A ranking of “C” for continuing action is also provided where the policy or action recommended overlaps and is considered a long term objective.

When a land use or socio-economic issue arises quickly and requires Township officials’ attention, the recommendation is to evaluate its impact on the community expeditiously and to initiate the appropriate action as deemed necessary. There may be opportunities unaccounted for and threats not addressed in the Implementation Plan which should be addressed by the Board of Supervisors in the best interests of the Township. Building a foundation of local, county and Commonwealth resources provides for better outcomes but there is no substitute for effective local leadership, which is responsive to residents’ concerns and aware of opportunities to improve the quality of life in the Township through long-range planning, communication, research, and fiscal responsibility.

## Implementation Objectives

### Housing

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| H | Strategic Objective | Complete a comprehensive revision of the current Zoning Ordinance in order to provide for a wider variety of housing. |
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| H | Strategic Objective | Introduce mixed-use housing and service options in areas where the infrastructure can support more dense residential development. |
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| C | Policy Objective | Monitor housing availability for senior residents as the population ages in place. |
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### Transportation

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| M | Policy Objective | Encourage safety improvements to intersections of PennDOT roadways with Township-owned and maintained roadways. |
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| H | Strategic | Prepare a roadway sufficiency analyses of Township-owned and maintained roadways including a determination of weight restrictions, |
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|  | Objective | safety and capacity improvements. |
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**Recreation**

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| H | Strategic Objective | Invest in improvements to existing public parks and fund active recreation in residential growth areas. |
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| L | Policy Objective | Support the construction of bicycle and walking trails linking public parks and school district facilities. |
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**Education**

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| H | Strategic Objective | Promote the Shenango Area School District as a Township asset in marketing material. |
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| M | Policy Objective | Support the mission statement of the Lawrence County Career and Technical Center in regard to training for local employment opportunities. |
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**Community Utilities and Facilities**

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| H | Strategic Objective | Conduct an inventory of Township owned facilities, equipment, material and land to provide a benchmark for future service delivery costs. |
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| M | Policy Objective | Promote the extension of public water and sanitary sewerage lines on land designated as Future Growth Areas with the New Castle Municipal Authority. |
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| L | Policy Objective | Consider acquiring land for active and passive public recreation in areas with growth potential. |
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**Socio-Economic**

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| H | Policy Objective | Support the introduction of small scale commercial and service businesses in the designated growth area. |
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| H | Strategic Objective | Identify demand for new and expanded nonresidential development with a business/service survey. |
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| M | Strategic Objective | Coordinate need for senior housing in a variety of configurations with area human resource agencies. |
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| C | Policy Objective | Encourage the location or relocation of advanced technology businesses where adequate infrastructure can support such uses, through a marketing initiative. |
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**Land Use**

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| H | Strategic Objective | Update current zoning ordinance to provide additional options and incentives for nonresidential development. |
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| H | Policy Objective | Consider adding land designed for small scale commercial and service uses to current zoning district categories through overlay or transition districts. |
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| H | Strategic Objective | Provide mixed-use compact development model options in areas with adequate infrastructure. |
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| H | Strategic Objective | Introduce agritourism options in rural areas to support sustained agricultural production. |
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| M | Policy Objective | Continue to participate in Agricultural Security Area and easement programs administered at the County level. |
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| C | Policy Objective | Monitor extractive industry activities in close proximity to higher density residential areas and commercial corridors. |
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**Environmental**

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| M | Policy Objective | Consider conservation subdivision approach to multi-lot residential developments to protect environmentally sensitive land. |
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| C | Policy Objective | Continue to emphasize the use of best management practices for stormwater control to mitigate the impacts of intense development. |
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**Historic**

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| M | Strategic Objective | Recognize early settlers families and early industries at a future community days event. |
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**Administrative**

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| H | Strategic Objective | Solicit contributions from residents and business owners for material to be included in a biannual newsletter. |
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| M | Strategic Objective | Update the Township’s website with links to extractive industry information, future Township initiatives and marketing features. |
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| M | Policy Objective | Monitor adequacy of Township facilities for consolidated public services, recreational opportunities and housing assistance. |
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## Summary

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Shenango Township is projected to experience moderate, steady growth through 2040 based on current development patterns and permit trends. While a predominantly residential moderate growth scenario is forecast due to the absence of public utilities in the southern half of the Township, where home construction still relies on on-lot septic and private well service, continued increases in service delivery costs will become more of a burden to property owners without an expanded tax base.

Designating the US 422 corridor as a growth area, and the SR 65 corridor as a future growth area (Pennsylvania Municipality Planning Code definitions) are recommended as strategic objectives designed to increase nonresidential development opportunities. This in turn could broaden the Township’s tax base and provide for some relief to individual taxpayers as service delivery costs increase. A related strategic action is the launch of a concerted property maintenance effort to provide private sector interests with an incentive to invest in Shenango Township’s future.

Another recommendation stemming from an analysis of the current land use characteristics involves enhancing the viability of active agricultural operations in the Township’s southwestern quadrant. A relatively new category of uses supporting agriculture is agritourism. This approach to zoning permits a wider variety of ancillary uses on land used for agricultural activities. Accessory or permitted uses in the Township’s A-1 Agricultural District and R-1 Rural Residential Districts could include the processing of agricultural products for wine, grain or vegetable based products or herbs, in addition to the sale of locally growth produce. Educational tours, seasonal events and the use of existing code-compliant structures for weddings, family gatherings, or even lodging, could also generate revenue for farm owners. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

The ability to finance new development or renovate or expand existing development is a key component to any community revitalization effort. Grant writing and economic development (and redevelopment) have been topics of discussion at several work sessions. While there have been opportunities in the past to direct staff to seek available funds for capital improvement projects and improve public facilities, a more focused effort is needed. During the preparation of this Comprehensive Plan document it became clear that perhaps the Township’s greatest asset is the quality and dedication of its volunteer citizens. The skill sets

possessed by members of the Steering Committee and their willingness to critique the community's strengths and weaknesses with the only reward being the possibility of a better quality of life for their families, friends and neighbors, speaks volumes.

At this point in the Township's evolution it is important to maintain the energy and commitment shown by the Committee's volunteers and to utilize their expertise to assist the Board of Supervisors in their effort to achieve a set of community objectives which will guide the Township into a future facing a variety of challenges. To that end, we recommend that the Board of Supervisors appoint an ad hoc subcommittee of the Steering Committee with the sole purpose of identifying candidates for a Township staff position which includes municipal management, as well as economic development skills. Potential candidates with community planning, engineering and grant writing backgrounds would be preferable, but the ad hoc committee with the elected officials' direction, can provide a job description that fits the Township's needs. This process should be given an abbreviated time line, but the end result should be a group of candidates for the Board of Supervisors to consider.

Shenango Township has invested time and money to prepare a plan to improve the quality of life of its' residents and business owners. Achieving the community objectives listed in this Implementation Plan are the keys to reaching those goals. These objectives should be reviewed at select intervals and revised or expanded as deemed necessary. Policy objectives may change over time which will affect the strategies used to achieve certain goals, which is why continuity of effort is the key. Community planning is a process and with the support of Township residents, business owners, boards and commissions, staff and most importantly, the elected officials, that process can result in positive outcomes if approached as a set of incremental tasks, each providing the next step toward the future envisioned.