

# STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

• BERKS COUNTY, PA •



THE BUSINESS OF NATURE



# STAYING IN THE know AND MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Unfortunately, municipalities and residents alike have limited ability to significantly alter, control, or prevent development once an application for a specific project is submitted.

Instead, the most effective way for community members to significantly influence local land use is by promoting and supporting the adoption of good land use ordinances. Here's how:

Attend a planning commission meeting and suggest ordinance changes or amendments during the public comment period. Most governing bodies hold public meetings at the same time each month.

Encourage municipal officials to use **model ordinances** which provide customizable language addressing specific land use topics.

Contact your municipality to find out where they publish their legal notices of meetings and hearings! Law requires municipalities to publish notice of meetings and hearings in a newspaper of general circulation.

Check your municipality's website! Each website is different, but up-coming meetings, hearings, and events may be published here as well.

## DID YOU KNOW...?

Municipal land use decisions can be made during public meetings or hearings and while these two gatherings are different, both are open to the public! A hearing is a quasi-judicial proceeding in which the decision-making body gathers and examines evidence before making certain land use decisions, whereas a public meeting is simply a gathering held for deliberation or to take an "official action".

Unless required by a local ordinance, a governing body is NOT required to hold hearings on subdivisions or land use applications. Which means tuning in to your municipality's monthly, public meetings are one of the best ways to participate in local land use decision-making.



## RESOURCES

There's more to learn about your local land decision-making!



Scan the code above to explore a list of additional resources for Berks County!

# THE PLAN FOR OUR land

In Pennsylvania, the power to govern land use and development resides almost entirely at the local level; municipal governing bodies wield the power to regulate land use and thus manage our impact on the environment. But local residents too have substantial power to influence these decisions, if they know how.

Enter PennFuture and their new guidebook, *Public Participation, Public Power*. Below are a few key inserts from this guidebook to provide a “Land Use 101” introduction to municipal land decisions. Scan the QR code to access the full guidebook to empower and inform your participation in local land use governance!



## DID YOU KNOW...?

Pennsylvania is one of only three states where the people have a constitutional right to a healthy environment? Thanks to Pennsylvania’s Environmental Rights Amendment of the Pennsylvania Constitution, all state government bodies (including municipalities!) must conserve and maintain public natural resources “for the benefit of all the people.”



## THE WHO’S WHO OF LAND USE DECISIONS

In Pennsylvania, local laws, known as **ordinances**, are the focal point of land use decision-making. Under the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), local governments – **municipalities** – have been granted the power to enact and amend ordinances which, among other things, dictate the amount of land that can be developed and for what purpose, the location of various land uses, and the extent to which developers can build near sensitive natural resources and whether the environmental disturbances from these activities must be limited.

### GOVERNING BODY

Local city council, borough council, or township board of supervisors.

#### Responsible for governing the municipality

The governing body adopts and amends ordinances, appoints advisory councils, and have the final say in approving or denying ordinance- and development-related applications.

A governing body DOES NOT hold hearings to approve or deny applications that fall within the zoning hearing board (ZHB) jurisdiction.

### PLANNING COMMISSION

Group that advises governing body in matters related to land use and development

#### Responsible for collecting and reviewing information to make recommendations to the governing body.

Planning commissions prepare comprehensive plans, review ordinances, and make recommendations on land development

A planning commission DOES NOT make any final decisions.

### ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COUNCIL (EAC)

Advisory group that provides guidance to the governing body on matters dealing with the protection, conservation, management, and promotion of natural resources.

EACs do NOT make the final decision on any action.

### ZONING HEARING BOARD (ZHB)

Appointed by governing body to conduct hearings and render decisions on certain land use matters. Includes a **zoning officer** who is responsible for interpreting and administering zoning ordinances on a day-to-day basis.

The ZHB has power to make final decisions on certain land use matters.

# WHAT IS NATURE Worth?

"The environment, after all, is where we all meet, where we all have a mutual interest. It is the one thing that all of us share."

— LADY BIRD JOHNSON

Nature has been part of Berks County's heritage, culture, and economy for over 300 years. Rolling farmlands, lush river basins, and rugged forested ridgelines are the backdrop to our lives.

These open spaces – the forests, meadows, creeks, and wetlands – are working behind the scenes, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to filter our water, clean our air, control flooding, and sustain wildlife. Moreover, natural areas and open space contribute significantly to the local economy through avenues such as outdoor recreation revenue, healthcare savings, and property value premiums.

Nature does this work for free, but the work is not without value.

The Return on Environment (ROE) evaluations performed by Greener Planning, describe these natural services in economic terms and the cost we pay when these services are lost, demonstrating the integral value of nature for our economy, cost of living, and quality of life.

By understanding nature's financial value, we are better equipped to make balanced decisions about our natural resources to both protect our open spaces and support smart economic growth.

## METHODS FOR CALCULATING BERKS COUNTY'S ROE

The value of natural system services is a reflection of what price people and governments are willing to pay to conserve, restore, and expand natural resources. This method is known as eco-pricing.

Since most services are natural functions, markets for these services do not exist. Instead, estimates for Berks County's natural resources were derived primarily from peer-reviewed studies, as well as data from regulatory fines, nutrient trading, forest replanting, habitat replacement costs, tax benefits, and conservation easement values.

The economic value of Berks County's open space was estimated by measuring impact in five areas:

Avoided costs associated with natural system services provided by open spaces

Avoided costs associated with air pollution removal

Value of open space related to outdoor recreation (e.g., sale of goods and services)

Avoided healthcare costs associated with healthy lifestyles

Impact of open space and water on property values (e.g., higher property values and earnings from open-space-related activities)



REVIEW THE ROE'S DETAILED METHODOLOGY HERE!

# ACCOUNTING FOR nature



## **\$853M** ANNUAL COST SAVINGS BENEFITS PROVIDED BY NATURE

Forested areas constitute 40% of Berks County's land area, and these woods provide a majority of our region's environmental value. To preserve and maintain Berks County's remaining forests, our community should prioritize permanent protection of our forests and open space.

### **AT RISK IN BERKS:**

Without healthy forests and street trees our quality of life would decline substantially. Berks is home to two internationally recognized migration areas for birds and wildlife and is considered the most climate resilient landscape in the state. Losing any amount of forest in our community will negatively impact people and wildlife.



## **\$128M** ANNUAL SAVINGS DUE TO HEALTHY RIPARIAN AREAS

Berks County's water resources provide drinking water for residents and businesses, support ecosystems and wildlife habitats, and mitigate safety hazards and property damage during extreme weather events.

Protecting forested areas next to streams significantly reduces the costs of treating drinking water.

### **SO WHAT?**

Riparian buffers mean healthier water. They cool streams, provide food and shelter for wildlife, filter pollutants to protect the stream, and provide flood control.



## **\$701M** ANNUAL MARKET VALUE OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Thirty-five percent of Berks County's land is used for agriculture.

The County's farms not only contribute to the local economy, but also provide natural system services that support water quality, pollinators, and open space.

### **AT RISK IN BERKS:**

Losing this farmland to development will negatively impact our agricultural economy and will be detrimental to the environment leading to increased flooding, reduced air quality, and loss of wildlife habitat.



## **\$938M** ANNUAL OUTDOOR RECREATION REVENUE

Interest in outdoor recreation is on the rise, emerging as a significant factor in maintaining quality of life and attracting and retaining local business activity.

The top three activities generating the most economic benefit for Berks County are camping, snow sports, and jogging.

### **SO WHAT?**

Maintaining and protecting Berks County's popular trails and natural resources is important to our economy and our environment. More connections between these resources are important to increase accessibility so more people can enjoy the outdoors close to home.



## **\$134M** ANNUAL SAVINGS IN REDUCED HEALTHCARE COSTS

Walking, biking and other outside activities are good forms of exercise that offer numerous health benefits such as reducing heart disease, losing weight, and maintaining good mental health. Berks County is fortunate to be home to abundant natural resources for people to enjoy while improving their health.

### **AT RISK IN BERKS:**

The physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of children and adults is at risk as humans become less connected with nature. The average American child spends only 1% of their time participating in unstructured outdoor play. Access to our plentiful parks and greenspaces fosters increased physical activity, and social skills.

# EXECUTIVE summary

Nature is essential to our quality of life. Clean water, open space, trails, trees, and healthy natural systems are all fundamentally important to the health of our community. Berks Nature's annual State of the Environment program provides a status report of these local, important resources, which has been evaluating environmental indicators representing Berks County's air, energy, land, waste, and water resources for over 15 years.

As we consider the importance and status of our region's natural resources, we have come to realize that the roles our trees, fields, and forests play in providing environmental services – from flood mitigation to air purification – are too often taken for granted. While these vital services are provided freely, they would be costly to replace. The new analyses and planning tools developed by Greener Planning for this report have positioned the Berks County community to better understand the economic value of nature and plan for a sustainable future.



## TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A difference

Berks Nature is a non-profit organization committed to protecting our natural resources and to connecting people to nature. Donations from people like you make our work possible.

### BECOME A CHAMPION OF NATURE

Any donation made to Berks Nature will qualify you as a Champion of Nature. Champions of Nature receive recognition in our annual report, regular Berks Nature mailings, digital updates, and more!

Your contribution will stay in Berks County to help us protect nature!

**LEARN MORE AT [BERKSNATURE.ORG](http://BERKSNATURE.ORG)**

