



SECTION 2: BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 3: INTRODUCTION AND STUDY METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

Muhlenberg Township, Berks County, PA has a population of about 17,000 and encompasses approximately 12.19 square miles of land area. While the population of the Township has been growing moderately over the past decade, the employment opportunities within the Township have dwindled significantly largely due to the shrinking of industrial and manufacturing jobs during the past decade.

The Corridor which is the traditional commercial center of the township and the “gateway” transportation route into the Township is at a crossroads between the potential for redevelopment and the potential for the further decline. The Corridor today is marked by vacant properties, struggling business clusters, Brownfield’s and former industrial areas.

This project serves to create an overall vision and implementation strategy for the Corridor’s transportation system and land use that is designed to bring economic vitality and jobs back to the community.

APPROACH

The approach for developing the revitalization plan for the 5th Street Highway / Allentown Pike Corridor included a series of progressive and interrelated work activities. A market-based approach was employed to support the Township’s objective of providing the highest and best use development / redevelopment strategy (cost –benefit analysis) for the corridor. This strategy ensures a sustainable land use and infrastructure system congruent with the Township’s fiscal capacity and service delivery requirements (i.e., operating and capital improvement budgets). The strategy was based on a preferred strategic growth and urban design scenario and has been used to develop recommendations for Muhlenberg Township’s short-, mid-, and long-term land use and zoning, transportation, infrastructure, operational, governance, and economic development needs for the corridor.

PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

The project team included the following members:

1. Herbert, Rowland, & Grubic Inc. (HRG) – HRG was the prime consultant for the project and oversaw / coordinated the entire project in addition to completing the transportation elements and providing GIS information.
2. Delta Development Group, Inc. (Delta) – Delta was responsible for market identification and development of funding and implementation strategies.
3. EDSA, Inc. (EDSA) – EDSA was responsible for the urban design and land use planning.
4. Olszak Management Consulting, Inc. (Olszak) – Olszak was responsible for public outreach.
5. Vernon Land Use (Vernon) – Vernon assisted Delta and acted as an environmental consultant.

STUDY PROCESS

Preliminary analyses / studies were completed by the members of the project team in order to identify existing conditions / characteristics along the corridor. The following tasks were completed:

- A Market Assessment Report
- A Framework Analysis Diagram
- A Land Use and Development Assessment Exhibit
- A Baseline Traffic Report
- A Natural and Cultural Resources Report
- Various public outreach tasks (see following section)

Based on the above information:

- Revitalization Objectives and Performance Measures were defined
- Corridor Economic Development Alternatives were developed
- Conceptual Redevelopment Scenarios were developed
- An Economic Impact Summary was completed

With the use of the above Objectives and Performance Measures and Economic Impact Summary, the Economic Development Alternatives and Redevelopment Scenarios were refined to establish a Preferred Framework Plan. A Preferred Framework Traffic Impact Assessment was completed in order to determine projected operational conditions and recommend future transportation improvements. A Strategic Action Plan and Implementation

Narrative were completed based on the Preferred Framework Plan. The final Revitalization Plan was then completed.

Throughout the study process, each of the above tasks was completed through consultation with the Steering Committee appointed to this project. Composition of the Steering Committee is outlined below.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The steering committee included the following members:

1. Michael Golembiewski, Berks County Planning Commission
2. Pamela J. Shupp, Berks Economic Partnership
3. John Hlis, Boscov’s
4. Walter S. LaSota, Muhlenberg Township Planning Commission
5. Michael Malinowski, Muhlenberg Township
6. Steve Landes, Muhlenberg Township
7. Jamal Abodalo, Muhlenberg Township
8. Steve Willems, NAI Keystone Commercial & Industrial
9. Glenn A Yeager, Esquire, Stevens & Lee

This report could not have been prepared without the dedicated participation efforts of the Steering Committee. This group provided critical insight, guidance, and feedback in the creation and development of this plan.



PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SUMMARY

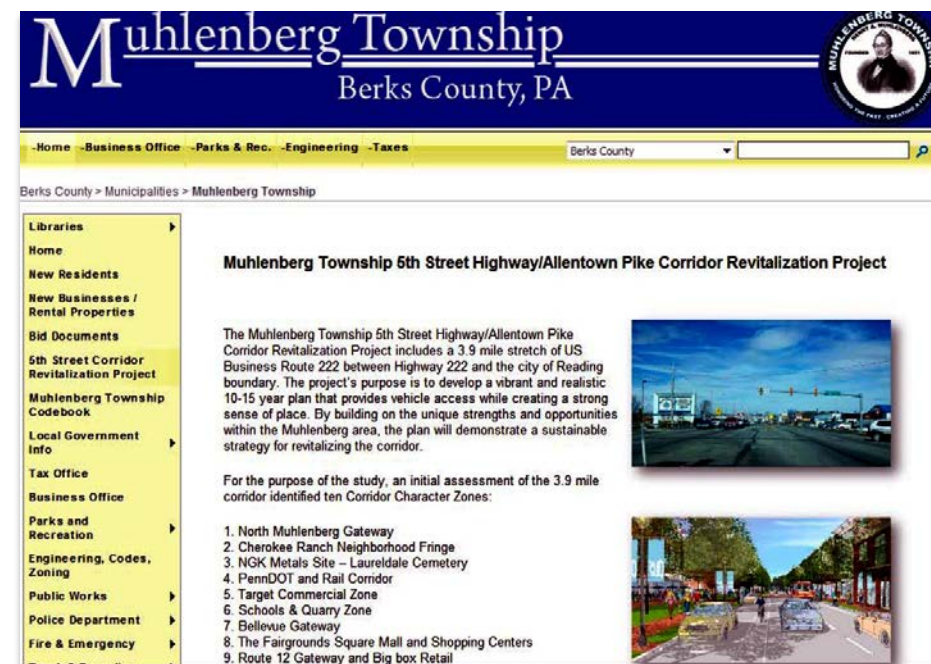
Public outreach was incorporated throughout each phase of the study and included:

1. A Project Website
2. One Town Meeting Held on April 3, 2012
3. An Online Survey
4. Key Stakeholder Interviews
5. Interviews Regarding Market Development Potential, and
6. A Focus Group

The following sections provide a summary overview of each effort and its results.

PROJECT WEBSITE

<http://www.co.berks.pa.us/Muni/Muhlenberg/Pages/5th-Street-Highway--Allentown-Pike-Corridor-Revitalization-Project.aspx>



The project website was a component of Muhlenberg Township's web pages and provided a one-stop shop for project information and meeting announcements. Content also included the Project Schedule, Steering Committee Membership, Project Team and Feedback Opportunities (via an email link or Comment Form).

TOWN MEETING (APRIL 3, 2012)

The project's public meeting occurred on Tuesday, April 3, 2012 from 7:00 – 8:00 PM at the Muhlenberg Township Recreation Building, 3025 River Road, Reading, PA 19065. The meeting was advertised through the distribution of a meeting announcement flyer. Twelve members of the public attended.

During the meeting, the study and its eleven Corridor Character Zones were introduced. Major issues identified through this process included:

- The corridor is severely lacking in walkability and mixed-use developments.
- The Fairgrounds Market should be emphasized as a strength of the corridor.
- The mall theater is a significant attraction and should be emphasized as a part of other corridor destinations. Walkability is key.
- Unique Pretzel is regionally known with national potential given its current expansion proposal. This provides an opportunity for tourism that increases its notoriety (ala Del Grosso's in Tipton, PA).
- The Township could increase interaction along the corridor by organizing a Community Day Celebration.
- Better utilize the tracks for a kid's train ride or "Breakfast with Santa".
- The corridor is lacking employment opportunities, leading to a lack of retention of residents in their 20s.
- The area is a blue-collar community. An increase in office-space would attract a "white-collar" workforce to support more up-scale development.
- Higher-end stores are lacking along the corridor, but it is recognized that they are not sustainable under current conditions.
- Redevelopment of the NGK site could stimulate higher-paying jobs and increase young-resident retention.
- The area is severely lacking in sit-down restaurants and chains, although there are an abundance of fast-food restaurants.
- Though there are some motels in the area, there are no hotels.
- Identify a niche opportunity that this area can offer that is not already available in the region (i.e., a race track, medical complex, etc.).
- In order to revitalize the mall, consider:
 - Infusing the Fairgrounds Market
 - Removing or revamping portions of the buildings to increase open area and improve the aesthetics
 - Increasing green areas between buildings
 - Integrating and interconnecting with the Muhlenberg Shopping Plaza (Weis development)
- Most of the higher-income households reside west of Route 61 and generally do not use the 5th Street Highway corridor.
- Most young professional couples do not move into the houses east of 5th Street Highway, except for short-term starter-homes.
- A condominium or senior living development would be beneficial.

- Walkability and mixed-use developments would increase visitor's time spent within the corridor.

A Comment Form distributed at the meeting, through the website and email resulted in 14 forms being received, 11 of which were from residents of Muhlenberg Township. Highlights from the Comment Form include:

- Critical issues are Improving pedestrian access and traffic flow and safety; providing higher end or specialty retail and more family focused activities; and beautifying the area and fill vacant buildings.
- Best-case scenarios focus on improving the appearance, traffic flow, safety and pedestrian access throughout the corridor.
- Major uses are shopping, a pass through, work, and dining out.
- are lacking are upscale shopping, restaurants, entertainment and pedestrian Opportunities that access.
- General comments focused on the evolution of a blight demographic, the need to attract high-end business and retail, improving traffic flow, beautification, and providing middle income housing.



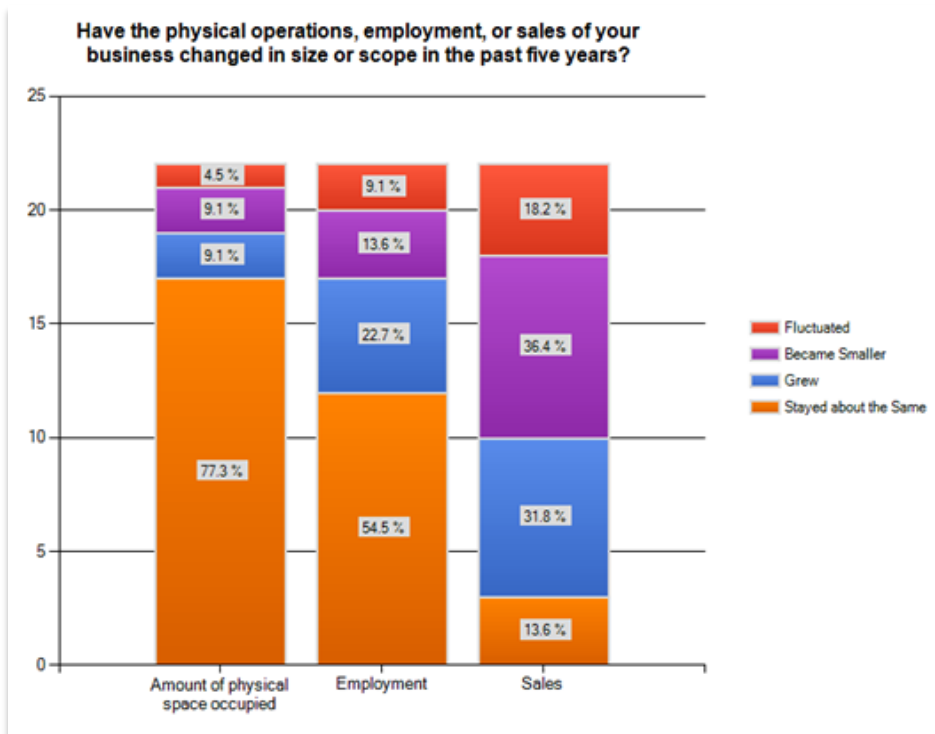
During the Town Meeting, the consulting team provided an overview of the project. Following this initial presentation, attendees (who were seated at three tables) utilized a project map to discuss, draw and indicate their perceptions of the corridor, vision and what they would like to see incorporated.



ONLINE SURVEY

The results of the online survey revealed:

- 55% of the businesses have been located along the Corridor for more than 10 years;
- 52% of these businesses have 1-4 employees;
- The majority of the respondents operate a business in the retail trade sector;
- 71% of customers travel up to 10 miles to services along the Corridor;
- 36% of respondents report a decrease in sales over the past five years while 32% reported an increase in sales over the past five years;
- 55% of the business had gross revenues of less than \$500,000 in 2011;
- Businesses use a variety of mediums to advertise, including weekly circulars, trade shows, and a combination all of the options offered in the survey;
- The majority of respondents reported that they are located in a single business building;
- 68% of the businesses plan to maintain current operations, while 9% are looking to relocate away from the Corridor.



An online survey of the businesses located along the Corridor was conducted using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). A letter was mailed to 300 business inviting participation in the survey. A total of 22 responses were collected between April 12, 2012 and May 3, 2012.

KEY STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A fourth component of the public outreach process for the Muhlenberg Township 5th Street Highway/Allentown Pike Corridor Revitalization Project included interviews of the following key stakeholders:

- Dennis Louwerse, Executive Director, BARTA
- Gregory Schneider, Transportation Coordinator, Muhlenberg School District
- John Krafczyk, Maintenance Manager, PennDOT County Maintenance
- Michele Barrett, President, Walk-Bike Berks
- Chris Brasler, Principal, Brasler Properties
- Kathy Galbraith, Director of Marketing, Rittenhouse Senior Living
- Darryl Schoff, Retired, Commercial Developer
- Tony Forino, Owner, Forino Co., L.P.
- John Connors, Managing Partner, The Brickstone Companies
- Scott Schell, Owner, Schell's Restaurant and Miniature Golf

Interview discussions focused on individual's perceptions of Corridor transportation and use issues, solutions, priorities and developers interest in revitalization efforts. While the perspectives of each interviewee differed relative to their industry focus, highlights of responses included:

CORRIDOR STRENGTHS

- A great commercial asset and a draw for local residents and the region
- New retail development (e.g., the new Town Square Plaza)
- Redevelopment opportunities along Tuckerton Road (particularly the NGK site) and along Rt. 61
- The future potential with the connection of Rte 222 to the Turnpike
- Local official cooperation with business
- Fairground Farmer's Market unique atmosphere
- A main thoroughfare connecting Allentown and Reading

REDEVELOPMENT BARRIERS AND WEAKNESSES

- Funding and the economy
- Traffic
- Too much commercial development
- Safety and accessibility for public transit users
- Disconnect between east and west side communities
- The length makes it difficult to create a sense of connection throughout

REDEVELOPMENT KICKOFF AND FOCUS

- Improve signalization
- Build on the commercial aspect with new and specialty businesses
- Redevelop along Tuckerton Road, particularly the NGK site
- Create mixed use at the Fairgrounds Square Mall
- Collaborate with neighboring towns: promote development across areas
- Connect the communities on the east and west sides of Route 222

- Improve the look and feel of the Corridor by starting with no or low-cost strategies such as repainting the Corridor to provide access/lanes for bike, pedestrians, lane use in a way that communicates, "People belong here".
- Provide transit accessibility on both sides of the highway
- Cluster development with an interior access road so there are less lights and turns

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

- Traffic congestion
- The Town Square Plaza shopping center: a new positive development
- Tired, commercial development: "There is nothing attractive with utility poles, wires and establishments set up in a straight line."
- There is good commercial variety

CREATING A SENSE OF ARRIVAL

- Add new streetscapes and signage
- Create a pedestrian access and a walkable community

AREAS TO PROTECT

- The potable water source at the quarry
- The entrance to the Fairgrounds

CORRIDOR NEEDS

- Focus on attracting a critical mass of new jobs beyond retail
- Consider new cultural amenities
- Provide a facelift to shopping centers
- Add new hotels if a critical mass of businesses, employees and customers are located in or travel to the corridor
- Redevelop the Fairgrounds Square Mall into a mixed use development
- Provide tourist opportunities such as a craft brewery located adjacent to the quarry
- Provide passive and eco-friendly recreational uses such as kayaking or wall climbing

FUNDING PRIORITIES

- Improve roadways and streetscapes
- Transportation improvements only
- Tourism uses
- A coordinated multi-modal effort

TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

- Traffic signalization and calming
- Transit use

CORRIDOR REDEVELOPMENT EXAMPLES

- West Reading
- Wyomissing Square
- Broadcasting Square Shopping Center
- Hershey



INTERVIEWS REGARDING MARKET DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

A second set of interviews was conducted with professionals who represent development interests and expertise. These individuals were asked a number of questions in order to gain greater insight into the existing conditions and future plans of the Corridor. Interviewees included:

1. Maria Crespo, Manager, Fairgrounds Square Mall
2. Mary Ann Chelius Smith, Manager, Fairgrounds Market
3. Steve Willems, Keystone Commercial Real Estate Broker, Commercial and Industrial
4. Theresa Haight, Ed.D., Superintendent, Muhlenberg School District
5. Crystal Seitz Berks, President, Convention and Visitors Bureau

STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Potential ▪ Known as business friendly ▪ Known for retail ▪ Farmer’s Market ▪ Good tourism base (bus trips, indoor soccer tournaments, baseball tournaments, Kutztown College visitors, etc.) ▪ Target/Giant development ▪ Neighborhoods 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Traffic ▪ Walkability Issues ▪ Existing retail options ▪ Public transportation issues ▪ Choices and variety of stores ▪ Housing stock ▪ Perception/degrading image ▪ Lack of landscaping/ green space ▪ Lack of hotels and motels
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Need for indoor arena space for sporting events ▪ Need for additional hotel with family friendly amenities ▪ Additional indoor sporting arena space ▪ Increase in small businesses ▪ Additional sit-down restaurants ▪ Nice apartments/condos ▪ Improve traffic flow and integrate side streets 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Competition (Wyomissing, Exeter) ▪ Safety/Accessibility of Corridor is a deterrent ▪ Not adjusting to the changing demographics ▪ Lack of investment in current shopping centers

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

A focus group session was held on Thursday, March 29th from 8:30am – 9:30am at the Muhlenberg Township Building. Discussion analyzed specific areas within the corridor and their potential for residential growth, neighborhood and business revitalization and other development trends.

Invitations were sent to eight local community and economic leaders. The following individuals attended the meeting:

1. Ellen Horan President & CEO Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce and Industry
2. Ed McCann COO Berks County Workforce Investment Board
3. Tom McKeon Executive Director Berks County Industrial Development Authority
4. Ed Swoyer President Greater Berks Development Fund

Discussion topics included:

- Market Area
- Demographic/Industry Trends
 - Residents
 - Workers
 - Consumers
- SWOT Analysis
- Specific Project Ideas

STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Central location; high density markets ▪ Good access ▪ Established ▪ Increasing income in areas ▪ Small number of tax exempt properties ▪ Strong manufacturing base ▪ Ample parking ▪ Pro development ▪ Latino professionals ▪ High traffic counts ▪ Good school district 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cluttered ▪ Blue collar feel ▪ Oversaturated ▪ Traffic/transportation network ▪ Lack of land mass (other than NGK site)
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Industrial north of Wal-Mart shopping center ▪ Healthcare/training ▪ Higher end retailers ▪ Incentives ▪ Well-done apartments (little interest in residential development in Township due to current market experience) 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Land Owners ▪ Perception

Specific project ideas that were discussed and included the possibility of an incubator at the Kmart site, co-generation place at NGK site, age-restricted housing, additional entertainment option within the Corridor such as a casino, and the involvement of the local universities on the Corridor.

SUMMARY

Whether input was received from the general public, transportation professionals or developers; or during the focus group, interview or survey, similar themes emerged:

- Pedestrian safety and transit access are lacking, yet paramount (on both sides of the highway)
- Improving traffic flow and increasing neighborhood connectivity with side streets and traffic calming strategies are key
- An abundance of big box retail exists yet upscale retail, office space, hotels and sit-down restaurants are absent
- An identify that welcomes visitors, employees and local residents should focus on increased green space, beautification and family-focused activities
- Build upon and emphasize the Corridor’s strengths (Unique Pretzel, Fairground Market and Town Square Shopping Center)

These core themes were key elements in advancing the Revitalization Plan and establishing goals and methodologies for revitalization of the Corridor.