

MULTIMUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2021-2031



BRIAR CREEK TOWNSHIP AND NORTH CENTRE TOWNSHIP

COLUMBIA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OVERVIEW

Briar Creek Township and North Centre Township came together to develop a multimunicipal comprehensive plan. A comprehensive plan is a tool that communities use to plan for their future. It starts by describing a community's vision for their character and quality of life. The plan is a policy guide for land use, development, and land conservation that aligns with the community's ten-year goals. The plan identifies goals and strategies to implement the vision. The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) is the enabling legislation that allows municipalities to develop comprehensive plans.

A multimunicipal plan allows communities to work together to coordinate and jointly

implement strategies that will fulfill the community's vision. By working together, each municipality will leverage their limited resources and unique assets to address challenges and create opportunities. This plan is based on both Townships' commitment to preserving their semi-rural community and existing quality of life. The plan will facilitate regional planning related to land use and zoning while also favorably positioning the community for state funding programs.

The plan will be implemented based on the availability of resources, including time and funding. The Townships have the ability to amend the plan as priorities and circumstances change.



COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

Briar Creek Township and North Centre Township are adjacent second-class townships in Columbia County, Pennsylvania. The area is bordered by Luzerne County to the east, the Borough of Berwick, Borough of Briar Creek, and South Centre Township to the south, Fishing Creek Township to the north, Orange Township to the northwest, Fishing Creek Township and Scott Township to the west.

This mostly rural community is close to the Boroughs of Briar Creek, Berwick, and Orangeville as well as the Town of Bloomsburg, and offers a peaceful quality of life defined by friendly neighbors, low crime, and abundant farmland. Geisinger – a health system that includes nine hospitals, a medical school, two research centers, and 16,000 physicians – is within and surrounds the area’s footprint. The entire area is served by the Briar Creek Township Police Department and several small, volunteer-based fire companies. Students attend Berwick Area and Central Columbia School Districts. The residents enjoy the parks located within the Townships, Briar Creek Lake Park and Natural Park.

This plan takes into consideration the region in which the Townships are situated. The nearby Borough of Berwick has a population of 10,167 and the Town of Bloomsburg has 14,275 residents. These communities have a defined downtown and a variety of densely populated residential areas. The municipalities located along the State Route 11 corridor – Berwick Borough, Briar Creek Borough, South Centre Township, Scott Township, and Town of Bloomsburg – offer more amenities such as supermarkets and restaurants. The area also offers many natural resources including Ricketts Glen State Park, the Susquehanna River, State Game Lands No. 55, and Jonestown and Knob Mountains. All of these resources are available to the residents of Briar Creek and North Centre Township.

The population of the Townships has increased 7.1% since 1990; however, there has been a slight decline in population in Briar Creek Township (-1.9%) since 2000. The population is expected to decline between 0.32% and 8.7% through 2040.



VISION STATEMENT

Our community provides a peaceful quality of life in a uniquely beautiful setting.

Our land use policies align with our semi-rural landscape.

We preserve our farmland and promote our agricultural economy.

We protect our natural resources.

Residents enjoy the availability of modern community and municipal services such as reliable broadband and cellular connectivity, access to local recycling, well-maintained roads, safe pedestrian and bicycle routes, and well-designed and active parks.

We collaborate with partners in our region to coordinate and enhance services that contribute to our sustainability and economic vitality.

PRIORITY ISSUES

The plan identifies four priority issues:

**RURAL CHARACTER
AND AGRICULTURE**



**RECREATION,
COMMUNITY,
AND YOUTH**



**GOVERNMENT
AND SERVICES**



**CONSERVATION,
NATURAL RESOURCES,
AND OPEN SPACE**



PRIORITY ISSUE 1

RURAL CHARACTER AND AGRICULTURE



VISION

The community maintains its rural character and agricultural resources through proactive smart growth land use and development policies.

RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

GOAL 1

The majority of the residential lots in the Townships will continue to be one acre or larger. Provide for the community's changing housing needs by providing limited opportunities for new housing on smaller lots and permitting accessory dwelling units.

STRATEGIES

1. Keep most of the residential zoning district locations and regulations the same.
2. Identify areas on the zoning map to change the zoning district and decrease the minimum lot size requirement when public water and sewer are available for the purpose of permitting housing that is more affordable on smaller lots with less outside maintenance responsibilities.
3. Identify opportunities for in-fill development where public water and sewer lines exist.
4. Develop a plan for extending existing water and sewer lines to provide for limited small lot housing development.
5. Define standards for and permit attached and detached accessory dwelling units.

COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

GOAL 2

Meet the community's limited need for development opportunities, including commercial services and industrial space.

STRATEGIES

1. Review the commercial district zoning locations in both Townships and consider permitting more commercial activities along State Route 93 and changing some of the existing commercial districts to residential or agricultural zoning districts.
2. Identify appropriate locations for small convenience stores.
3. Identify appropriate locations for additional light industrial development.

AGRICULTURAL LAND PRESERVATION

GOAL 3

Preserve and protect prime agricultural land.

STRATEGIES

1. Continue to promote the agricultural security area program.
2. Promote the agricultural conservation easement program (farmland preservation program) in partnership with the County Conservation District.
3. Consider amending the Briar Creek Township zoning ordinance to balance protecting farmland, open space, and residential subdivision opportunities.
4. Continue to ensure the agricultural district subdivision regulations in North Centre Township protect enough agricultural land to preserve the semi-rural character of the Township.

GOAL 4

Promote agricultural economic sustainability and growth through agritourism and farmers' markets.

Strategies

1. Promote existing farmers' markets and work with farmers to create a new and larger community farmers' market.
2. Permit agritourism in the Briar Creek Township zoning ordinance.

PRIORITY ISSUE 2

RECREATION, COMMUNITY, AND YOUTH



VISION

The residents enjoy abundant active outdoor recreational opportunities and feel a strong sense of community. The youth are engaged with programs that promote positive development.

RECREATIONAL AMENITIES

GOAL 1

Improve the park amenities in the Townships to offer more opportunities for recreation, enjoyment of the outdoors, and environmental education.

STRATEGIES

1. Advocate for the development of a Briar Creek Lake Park master plan to improve the park and promote utilization.
2. Develop a Natural Park master plan to improve the park and promote utilization.
3. Meet with the owners of the former Camp Louise to learn about their plans for the property.
4. Require the dedication of recreational land or a fee in-lieu of recreational land or facilities in the SALDO.

WALKING AND BIKING SAFETY

GOAL 2

Create new safe opportunities for walking and biking and improve connectivity to regional trails.

STRATEGIES

1. Create a multimodal master plan for the Townships. Identify roads where walking and biking paths can safely be created. Acquire land/easements to expand road widths. Connect new walking and biking paths along roadways to the regional trail network.
2. Support implementation of the Middle Susquehanna Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (2019). Participate in the Middle Susquehanna Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee and advocate for the needs of the Townships.
3. Adopt a complete streets policy to require bike and pedestrian infrastructure, such as wider shoulders on roads and bridges and rumble strips along the edge of the travel lane, on all new or rebuilt local roads.

4. Consider installing and/or improving curbs and sidewalks in the Avenues in Briar Creek Township.

ALL-TERRAIN VEHICLES

GOAL 3

Increase opportunities for riding All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) in Briar Creek Township.

STRATEGIES

1. Work with PennDOT and/or traffic engineers to develop a safe plan to permit ATVs to travel on some roads in Briar Creek Township.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

GOAL 4

Increase opportunities for community engagement and youth development.

Strategies

1. Increase opportunities for youth activities and engagement in the community. Promote and support the activities at the For the Cause Teen Center, including assistance with fundraising. Identify other development resources for children and teens. Coordinate transportation so that more children and teens can participate in activities.
2. Create new – while expanding and promoting existing – community events, such as the events that take place at the wineries.
3. Evaluate the need for a community building/community space to host events and provide opportunities for children, teens, and adults to gather.

PRIORITY ISSUE 3

GOVERNMENT AND SERVICES

**VISION**

Government is financially sustainable, proactive, and efficient in its coordination of services desired by the residents.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**GOAL 1**

Ensure financial sustainability through a responsive budget that reflects the Townships' priorities.

STRATEGIES

1. Develop a long-term financial plan to understand revenue and expenditure targets and challenges.
2. Explore economic and housing development initiatives that will generate tax revenue while maintaining the community's rural character and quality of life.
3. Explore the feasibility of additional cooperative municipal purchasing programs and services with the other Township and with other municipalities throughout the region.
4. Develop a Capital Improvements Plan.
5. Research and apply for relevant state and federal funding opportunities.

MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL COLLABORATION**GOAL 2**

Strengthen services and reduce costs through municipal and regional collaboration.

STRATEGIES

1. Evaluate existing and new opportunities for sharing resources and services. Develop a plan for expanding opportunities for collaboration. Execute intergovernmental agreements.
2. Develop a road maintenance plan that addresses staffing and equipment needs, and a sustainable funding strategy to support road maintenance and paving responsibilities.
3. Meet with Susquehanna Economic Development Association – Council of Governments (SEDA-COG), the Berwick Industrial Development Association (BIDA), and Driving Real Innovation for a Vibrant Economic – Council of Governments (DRIVE) to communicate needs and explore opportunities for partnership.

HIGH SPEED AND RELIABLE BROADBAND INTERNET AND CELLULAR SERVICE

GOAL 3

All residents and businesses have access to high speed and reliable broadband internet and cellular service.

STRATEGIES

1. Identify areas in the Townships that lack access to mobile broadband services and mobile wireless networks.
2. Identify and engage with an organization to advocate for and develop a plan for expanded mobile broadband services and mobile wireless networks in the Townships. This may include pursuing assistance from the Governor's Office, Columbia County, the U.S Department of Agriculture, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and other government agencies working on expanding mobile broadband services and mobile wireless networks.

CONVENIENT RECYCLING

GOAL 4

Provide affordable recycling drop-off services in each Township.

STRATEGIES

1. Explore the feasibility of partnering with the Borough of Berwick or the Town of Bloomsburg to pick up recycling in the Townships.
2. Identify the costs involved with reinstating local recycling services and pursue funding sources, which may include grants, tax revenue, or fees to residents to pay for the service.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

GOAL 5

Support local and county emergency management planning and response.

STRATEGIES

1. Participate in the county's hazard mitigation planning and implementation process to reduce vulnerabilities to natural and human-made hazards and enable a more resilient community.
2. Promote disaster-resistant future development.

GOAL 6

Maintain community safety through a responsive and sustainable regional police force.

STRATEGIES

1. Develop a long-term plan for financial sustainability of the police department.
2. Develop a long-term plan for officer recruitment and retention.

3. Explore the feasibility of joining a larger, regional police force.

GOAL 7

Improve the sustainability of local fire departments.

STRATEGIES

1. Advocate for state-level funding to support local fire companies.
2. Support the fundraising activities of local fire companies.
3. Increase municipal allocations for fire companies.
4. Partner with surrounding municipalities to explore the feasibility of regionalization and to jointly apply for funding opportunities.
5. Support volunteer recruitment and retention efforts.

CONTEMPORARY MUNICIPAL CODE**GOAL 8**

Amend ordinances in a timely manner to reflect the community's vision and regulate new uses. Collaborate on land use planning.

STRATEGIES

1. Revise the SALDO, zoning ordinance, and other relevant ordinances to align with the multimunicipal comprehensive plan.
2. Keep ordinances current by reviewing the ordinances for deficiencies and proposing amendments in a timely manner.
3. Consider adopting joint zoning, either through one zoning ordinance or two separate ordinances that are coordinated through an intergovernmental cooperative planning and implementation agreement. Review opportunities for sharing land uses, especially commercial and industrial uses.
4. Zone for all new uses and update existing use regulations, as needed. Both Townships should consider zoning for short-term rentals, accessory dwelling units, and expanded home occupation allowances. Briar Creek Township should consider updating the zoning ordinance to regulate digital signs and permit agritourism.

ACTIVE CODE ENFORCEMENT**GOAL 9**

Strengthen code enforcement and eliminate blighted properties.

STRATEGIES

1. Explore the feasibility of merging code enforcement efforts between the Townships, including adopting the same property maintenance ordinance and standardizing property maintenance priorities and procedures.

2. Actively address property maintenance code and zoning violations by issuing violation letters and filing citations with the district magistrate's office.
3. Collaborate with a nonprofit housing developer, such as Community Strategies Group and the Columbia County Redevelopment Authority, to develop a plan to remediate blighted properties. This may include property acquisition, demolition, and rehabilitation.

PRIORITY ISSUE 4

**CONSERVATION, NATURAL RESOURCES,
AND OPEN SPACE****VISION**

*Natural resources and open space are conserved and protected.
The preserved ecosystem contributes to the community's health, quality of life,
and enjoyment of the region's natural beauty.*

GOAL 1

Conserve and protect natural resources and open space.

STRATEGIES

1. Complete a Growing Greener Ordinance Assessment as recommended in the Columbia County Great Outdoors Plan and make modifications that promote natural resource protection and open space preservation.
 - a. Use “The Growing Greener – Conservation by Design” planning steps which include a community assessment, conservation planning, changes to the SALDO, and changes to the zoning ordinance.
 - b. Steer development away from sensitive natural resources.
 - c. Create buffer and development setbacks from sensitive resources such as wetlands, stream corridors, steep slopes, and riparian areas.
 - d. Establish overlay zoning provisions for specific natural resources such as woodlands, prime agricultural soils, steep slopes, stream buffer areas, and wetlands.
2. Consult with the Columbia County Conservation District and the Briar Creek Association for Watershed Solutions (BCAWS) to implement best practices for natural resource conservation, preservation, and restoration.
3. Promote the establishment of “no mow zones.” Align property maintenance ordinance with “no mow zone” policy.
4. Limit development in areas that would diminish scenic views or negatively impact woodlands, recreational, or agricultural uses.
5. Support applications for funding to support environmental restoration projects.
6. Support environmental education programs organized by the Columbia County Conservation District, BCAWS, and other organizations.
7. Consider adoption of an official map to conserve and protect natural resources.
8. Develop and implement an open space plan.