

Regional Planning in the Upper Perkiomen Valley

Julie E. Clipp

Senior Seminar in Political Science

Professor G. Richardson

April 17, 2007

The Upper Perkiomen Valley is located in the Northern-most corner of Montgomery County in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Although it is comprised of six separate municipalities, it is a homogeneous area. It is likely that someone unfamiliar with the region would drive through the three central boroughs without realizing these were distinct towns. The citizens of this bucolic valley are also homogeneous; mostly middle-class, over 98% white, and nearly 50% of German decent.<sup>1</sup> There is a widespread desire among the residents to maintain the rural feel and small-town culture in the region. To this end, The Upper Perkiomen Valley was the first region in the state to form a regional planning commission to anticipate future needs and direct future growth. Planning has also led to conflict, as citizens do not always agree among themselves, or with governing officials as to what the future of the valley should look like. There is an undercurrent of fear as well. There is fear development is causing the valley to be overrun with “outsiders” who are changing the culture. Some feel that their ability to participate in local government is at stake. In the past citizens of the valley felt that they had a voice in governing, but many fear their voice is lost among the layers of government that regional planning has created. Some question the performance of their non-professional government officials in increasingly complex matters. The future success of the region depends on the ability of the six municipalities to look beyond their borders and consider the needs of the region as a whole. However, considering the region

---

<sup>1</sup> US Census 2000

as a whole seems to be difficult for people who value highly their autonomy. In a sense, it represents the challenges of globalization writ small.

The valley is approximately 36.22 square miles in size and includes six municipalities: Marlborough and Upper Hanover Townships and the four Boroughs of East Greenville, Green Lane, Pennsburg, and Red Hill. At the present day citizens express ambivalent feelings about the multiple governing bodies. Aristotle advocated small governing bodies that allowed all citizens to take part for the common good. But perhaps even Aristotle would find the divisions in the Upper Perkiomen Valley to be too small. According to Aristotle, the ideal Polis should consist of an area no larger than that which can be seen from a hilltop. Most of the valley can be seen from any one of the surrounding ridges. Multiple governing bodies in the valley led to the need for another over-arching governing body; the Regional Planning Commission.

The valley municipalities entered into regional planning in order to comply with Fair Share rules. Municipalities must zone for all types of residential and non-residential uses. Unpopular zoning cannot be excluded simply because a region does not desire it. Pennsylvania courts have forced municipalities to change zoning to allow for a use. One such case occurred in Williston Township in 1975. Chesterdale Farms, Inc. proposed building a high-density apartment complex in the township. The Township's zoning allowed for apartment development on only .7% of its total land area, an area much too small for the high-density housing proposed by Chesterdale Farms. The court ruled that this amount was token, and therefore exclusionary. The developer was allowed to proceed.<sup>2</sup> Municipalities of a region can plan together to allow for regional Fair Share usage, and the Upper Perkiomen Valley was the first in Montgomery County and one of

---

<sup>2</sup> Regional Plan p. 132

the first in Pennsylvania to plan regionally. However, Fair Share compliance was not the only reason for cooperation, and planning did not always go smoothly. Once the plan was agreed to, all municipalities would need to give consent for any other to change zoning or approve a major development. This did not sit well with some citizens and elected officials, and at one point the regional alliance was almost destroyed.

In order to understand the present conditions in the valley and predict its future, it is necessary to understand a little of its history and geography. William Penn purchased the land of the region from the Lenni Lenape Indian tribe in 1684. German settlers were attracted to the valley for the rich soil and freedom from religious persecution. The culture that these farmers brought with them- of hard work, independences and self-sufficiency- still permeates the region. Nearly half of the Valley residents still claim German ancestry.<sup>3</sup>

Encompassing 12.64 square miles situated in the Southeastern section of the valley, Marlborough Township is the second largest municipality. Although the rest of the Valley is excellent farm land, a major part of Marlborough Township is underlain by bedrock. The bedrock is resistant to erosion, and much of the area is steeply sloped, wooded, and littered with large boulders. Some farming and industry developed in the region, but the landscape is difficult for development. Small farms, small trades and cigar factories were the major industries in the past. In acknowledgement of the difficulty it took to make a living in this type of landscape, the residents of the area were pejoratively known as “creek freaks”, the equivalent of modern-day survivalists. Today, recreation is a major land use. Several camps and parks are located in the Township, including a camp owned by the Boys Scouts of America, and Green Lane Park. The Borough of Green

---

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census 2000

Lane is a small community of only .3 square miles that developed in the middle of Marlborough Township.

In 1851, running north to south through the middle of the two townships, the Goshenhoppen Turnpike was completed. The Turnpike, now known as Route 29, led to the development of the boroughs within the two townships. The turnpike, and later the railroad, led to rapid development and increased commerce, requiring municipal governments to provide services. The boroughs of Red Hill, Pennsburg and East Greenville developed next to each other along the path of the turnpike. By the end of the nineteenth century, farmers began to face increased competition from Lancaster County, and many farmers were drawn to the boroughs by industry, primarily cigar manufacturing. The turnpike, and later the railroad, brought more people, products and trade to the area. The needs of the people for services such as water, street lights and schools dictated the divisions into boroughs.

The largest municipality in the valley, encompassing 21 square miles, is Upper Hanover Township. It was established in 1741 as primarily an agricultural area, but industry was important as well. Granite boulders provided building materials, and water power from the many creeks powered saw mills and grist mills. Today, 30% of the land in Upper Hanover Township is classified as industrial use, and 32% is agricultural.<sup>4</sup> Thirty percent of the residents in Upper Hanover are employed in manufacturing. Although one-third of the land is in agricultural use, fewer than 2 percent of residents are employed in agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Today, the other municipalities in the valley need Upper

---

<sup>4</sup> Reg. Plan, P 92

<sup>5</sup> US Census (Upper Hanover)

Hanover more than Upper Hanover needs the rest of the valley. The township has the greatest area of developable land.

The 1950s saw increased co-operation between the boroughs. In 1954, the municipalities of the valley drew together to face what was perceived to be an assault on the water rights of the region. The Philadelphia Suburban Water Company proposed building a dam on the Perkiomen Creek to supply water to the residents of the Eastern part of Montgomery County. Valley residents felt their water rights were being seized. The citizens of the valley municipalities organized and took the issue to court. They lost, and the dam was built. Today the lake formed by the reservoir and the parkland that surrounds it are defining features of the valley. Also in 1954, the area municipalities consolidated their school districts into the Upper Perkiomen School District. Three years later, the Upper Perkiomen Chamber of Commerce was formed.<sup>6</sup>

The forty year period of the fifties through the nineties is now seen as a sort of “golden age” of government in the valley. There was widespread participation in both civic and government organizations and people felt that government was responsive to the preferences of citizens. There was plenty of cheap open land in the townships, and basic goods were available locally. The area was not in the path of development for any major city. Crime was not a major concern

Larry Roeder is a local historian, editor of the *Hearthstone Town and Country* Newspaper, and has served on various governing bodies and volunteer organizations. His ancestors immigrated to the Upper Perkiomen Valley in 1727, and he is a life-long valley resident. In an interview, Roeder offered a critique of the performance of the governments of the three central boroughs. He noted that the three boroughs and Upper

---

<sup>6</sup> History compiled from Larry Roeder interview, Regional Plan and municipality websites

Hanover Township cooperated well during the 1970s and 1980s. He attributed this to the fact that most officials had grown up in the area and everyone knew each other.

Familiarity and a common background bred trust. The elites in government were accessible to the citizens, because they shared a common background.<sup>7</sup> Roeder spoke nostalgically of the Perkiomen Valley's golden age of government. He believes all of the governing bodies were responsive to the citizens, and the valley was well-run. He recalled the period during the 1980s when Pennsburg mayor James Mullen would spend his evenings sitting in the little park named for his wife. Residents knew they could stop by the park and have the mayor's ear on any issue. Roeder also spoke proudly of a time when he was Pennsburg Borough Council President during the blizzard of 1996. The incident is described in his biographical sketch:

He "Administer(ed) the Pennsburg Borough 'Storm Command Center' from behind the wheel of one of the boroughs two snowplows during the historic 'Blizzard of 1996' that dumped more than two feet of drifting snow on the community in less than 24 hours. His early decisions and actions provided the borough with additional equipment and personnel to keep all major roadways open during the storm, and allowed all secondary streets and alleys to be opened within forty-eight hours after the storm ended. The actions and decisions aided in the later recovery, from the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, of over 75% of the snow cleanup costs."<sup>8</sup>

Roeder's assessment of the performance of the past government assumes a certain degree of interest in the common good. The question remains as to how responsive governing bodies were to those who had not grown up in the area. However, the local governments at the time seemed to meet the immediate needs of the citizens. As Joseph A. Schumpeter noted, it is human nature that people will be concerned with their own interests, and a government that meets those interests will be considered to be performing well:

---

<sup>7</sup> Roeder interview

<sup>8</sup> Larry J. Roeder, Biographical Sketch

And so it is with most of the decisions of daily life that lie within the little field which the individual citizen's mind encompasses with a full sense of its reality. Roughly, it consists of the things that directly concern himself, his family, his business dealings, his hobbies, his friends and enemies, his township or ward, his class, church, trade union or any other social group of which he is an active member—the things under his personal observation, the things which are familiar to him independently of what his newspaper tells him, which he can directly influence or manage and for which he develops the kind of responsibility that is induced by a direct relation to the favorable or unfavorable effects of a course of action.<sup>9</sup>

Today the region faces several common challenges that have perhaps led the citizens to feel that government is not performing as well as it did in the past. School funding is a primary concern in the valley, and this concern grows as more housing is built in the area. In conjunction with the school funding is a concern over high and growing property taxes. This is of particular concern to the elderly of the area. As property values increase, taxes increase. Retirees do not have a comparable increase in income. The growing population and increased development has caused traffic congestion that was previous unknown in this rural area. There is concern over funding police protection in the region. Those who live in more rural areas with low crime rates have balked at sharing the cost of police coverage for areas in town. Citizens in each municipality have complained of the cost of running the local government. Nearly every week there is a letter to the editor in the Town and Country expressing dissatisfaction with some municipal decision or another.

As the township that almost dissolved the regional plan, Upper Hanover is the lightning rod for disharmony in the valley. Within two years of completion of the regional plan, Upper Hanover tested the strength of the alliance. One section of Upper Hanover on the border of Pennsburg Borough had been zoned for high-density housing. Next to this area was a golf-course. The golf course was sold to TH Properties along with the open land that had previously been zoned high-density residential. The company planned a 739 unit

---

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary Theories of Democracy, p 145

development. This proposal was frightening to Pennsburg. In 2000, the entire borough had only 1078 housing units. A development of this size on its border would place a tremendous burden on the borough roads, businesses, and the school district. The Planning Commission threatened to veto the development. Upper Hanover claimed that it would simply pull out of the planning commission and allow the development anyway. The commission grudgingly approved the development, but the hurt feelings remain, and fear grows as people feel they have lost their hometown to “outsiders.” The resentment towards development is visible in the frequent vandalism of developer’s signs. It is also evident in the local newspaper. Recently an anonymous Upper Hanover citizen wrote to the paper and complained to the editor that TH Properties had been granted a waiver to build a temporary sales building new a pond, but she had been required to move a structure built on her property next to a waterway. She noted that she and her husband had grown up in the region, and had always followed the rules. She concluded by saying, “Isn’t that scary, what’s happening to our Valley? Are we selling out to the outsiders?”<sup>10</sup>

As John Dewey wrote, “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.”<sup>11</sup> The valley residents feel that the shoe pinches, but they do not have faith in their elected officials to remedy the issues. Benjamin Barber acknowledges obstacles to citizen participation in a representative form of government. “Representation is incompatible with social justice because it encroaches on the personal autonomy and self-sufficiency that every political order demands, because it impairs the community’s ability to function as a regulating instrument of justice, and because it precludes the

---

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous letter to editor, Town and Country April 12, 2007, p C3.

<sup>11</sup> Contemporary Theories of Democracy, p 169

evolution of a participating public in which the ideas of justice might take root.<sup>12</sup> The Upper Perkiomen Valley could find resolution to its conflict in Barber's concept of strong democracy. The very act of participation leads people to trust and work together. "To participate *is* to create a community that governs itself, and to create a self-governing community *is* to participate."<sup>13</sup>

The future success of the Upper Perkiomen Valley rests in part in how well the region works together. Economically, the region would do well to merge its smaller boroughs. Micro-municipalities lead to micromanagement, costly redundancy of services, and inefficiency. Perhaps in the next ten or twenty years this could become a reality, once the "newcomers" have a greater say in government.

One fact is certain; the region will continue to grow. More people will move into the valley as more services are provided and houses are built. The Upper Perkiomen School District must plan for future increased enrollment. Planning for increased school enrollment is one weakness of the Regional Plan. Although housing in the valley is expected to increase, the regional plan states that school enrollment will stay the same or decline slightly in the future. Therefore, the school district dropped plans to build a new middle school. Whether property taxes become an unbearable burden depends on the state's ability to provide more equitable means of funding schools, particularly if the need for a new school becomes apparent in the near future.

If one can assume that the rest of Pennsylvania and the country do well over the next ten years, one can assume the Upper Perkiomen Valley will thrive as well. Although the region is feeling uneasiness because of its recent growth, there is no reason to believe

---

<sup>12</sup> Theories of Democracy, p171,172

<sup>13</sup> Theories of Democracy, p 176

the region will fair poorly. The poverty rate in the valley is far below the national average, therefore crime rates are low. Racial and ethnic tensions do not exist simply because the region is 98% white. A great deal of undeveloped land has been preserved as open space, so the region should retain its rural feel. The area should continue to attract middle class families, so the region should remain relatively free of the problems brought by poverty, crime and racial tensions for the foreseeable future.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle, The Pocket Aristotle. Edited by Justin D. Kaplan. New York: Pocket Books, 1958
- Barber, Benjamin. Jihad Vs. McWorld. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.
- Miller, Randall and William Pencak. Pennsylvania: a History of the Commonwealth. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press. 2002.
- Patterson, Thomas. The American Democracy. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- Putnam, Robert. Bowling Alone. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2000.
- Roeder, Larry, Editor, Towne and Country, and Local Historian. Interview, February 28, 2007.
- Terchek, Ronald and Thomas Conte, Eds. Theories of Democracy. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001.
- <http://montcopa.org>
- [www.pennsburg.us/](http://www.pennsburg.us/)
- <http://redhillborough.org>
- Upper Perkiomen Valley Regional Comprehensive Plan, 2001. Upper Perkiomen Valley Regional Planning Commission.
- <http://Upperhanovertownship.org>
- <http://upvchamber.org>
- <http://Upvnews.org>
- <http://USCensus.gov>
- <http://Upperperk.org>
- Wood, Rod, "A Local Opinion." Hearthstone Town & Country (Vol 108, No. 52) March 29, 2007.