

VIII. EXISTING LAND USE

For a land use plan to be practical, it must accurately inventory existing land uses and development characteristics. Then, with proper analysis, future land use schemes can reflect reality, and avoid the creation of nonconforming uses when implemented through zoning regulations. To determine existing land uses, two sources were consulted. First, the Berks County Planning Commission has prepared a land use GIS map coverage which blends tax parcel record information with land cover features as derived from aerial photograph interpretation.



Specifically, tax parcel data is used within “developed” areas while land cover data is used in outlying rural areas. This land cover data can “split” larger properties into several uses. For example, a farm with a house will depict the house as one use, and the farmland as another; this gives a truer picture of uses in outlying rural areas. Conversely, within Topton Borough, the County’s tax parcel information was used to determine land use. Here, the tax records list one predominate land use on the entire property, which is also more accurate than aerial photo interpretation when analyzing a “built” environment. Second, this GIS data was checked by the EBRPC during this update with corrections noted. Regionally, the existing land use pattern includes a very wide range of uses and settings which are depicted on the Existing Land Use Map, found following this section.

A. Rural – Open Space

Approximately 9,723 acres have been identified by the Berks County Planning Commission as rural in character. These areas are characterized by a lack of building development, non-tilled surface and woodlands. Typically these areas form the foothills, and more steeply-sloped woodlands. Also several of the Region’s major utility transmission lines appear as narrow and long bands of rural land use bisecting woodlands and agriculture.

As expected, the steep slopes of the Region’s mountains and hillsides are largely wooded, with only scattered rural residences on large lots. Many of the lots in this area are uncharacteristically deep when compared with other residences; this suggests that these lots may be used to harvest firewood. In addition, some of these lots are located away from any public road and appear land-locked; these lots would not be permitted under today’s subdivision regulations. This land use category includes brush-land, evergreen, hardwood, mixed, and wetland forests. District and Rockland Townships both have large swaths of woodlands.



B. Agriculture

Farming is a very important category of land use within the Region. About 3,936 acres comprise this use. Livestock farming was also observed to a lesser extent with cows, bulls and sheep. The Region appears devoid of large-scale intensive livestock and commercial produce operations.

C. Low Density Residential

Nearly 3,623 acres of land within the Region contain low density residential uses; this represents about 19.37% of the total land area. Given the way the County records its tax parcel data, this category includes all of the non-farm detached residences within the Region plus a couple of residences located within Topton Borough. Densities within this category range from about 1 to 5 acres per dwelling units. Clearly, most of the homes located within the rural landscape are vastly different than those located within the Borough.

Rural home sites are generally larger than one-acre and often have a deep driveway; however, at the crossroad villages homes can be located close together and near the road. In short development within the rural areas varies widely except within several of the more recent subdivisions that have more uniform layouts and appearances. Each township has considerable scattered “strip” roadside housing throughout its rural landscape. This rural housing also contains many home and rural occupations that provide for close-to-home employment opportunities. Generally rural homes are well-kept aside from an occasional mini- junkyard. Sidewalks are not provided within these settings.

D. Residential High

There are a few areas within the older developed region of District and Rockland Townships that are in this category. They include scattered crossroads, villages and the two mobile home parks. There are 151 acres in this category, a percentage of 1.63% of the area. On the other hand, a majority of the neighborhoods within the Borough are included in this designation and vary widely in style and density. Suburban style homes on ¼ acre lots with spacious front-yard driveways can be found at the Borough’s western periphery. In town, row homes and duplexes are located upon narrow yet deep lots with as little as 2000 square feet, minimal front and side yard setbacks and on-street/alley parking. Some denser neighborhoods also have rows of garages across an alley or street that appears to serve nearby homes. Within the Borough sidewalks are present in most neighborhoods.

To get a more defined sense of the characteristics of these varied residential uses “typical” residential uses were sampled and analyzed to determine relevant site traits. The locations of such settings are noted to verify their suitability. Because zoning requirements are generally expressed by minimum required standards, within each particular setting, traits that would be shared by most of the properties were noted. These traits often represent a low common denominator among the properties within the setting, so as not to suggest design standards that would create zoning non-conformity. The table below presents the results of this analysis.

“TYPICAL” DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCES								
Municipality/Setting/Location & (Unit Type)	Min. Lot Size	Min. Lot Width	Front setback	Side setback	Rear setback	Parking Location	Sidewalks	Notes
Rockland/Forest Ridge (SFD)	1 ac.	150 ft.	50 ft.	30 ft.	50 ft.	Front/side	No	
Rockland/Stony Ridge Estates (SFD)	1 ac.	200 ft.	75 ft.	50 ft.	50 ft.	Front/side	No	
District/Landis Store Rd. (SFD)	2 ac.	200 ft.	50 ft.	50 ft.	50 ft.	Front/side	No	
Topton/Hoch Ave. (SFD)	10,000 sf.	100 ft.	40 ft.	20 ft.	30 ft.	Front	Yes	
Topton/Center Ave (SFD)	4500 sf.	30 ft.	10 ft.	1 ft.	0 ft. garage	Street and alley	Yes	
Topton/Washington St. (2FD)	3600 sf.	24 ft.	5 ft.	2 ft.	0 ft. garage	Street & alley	Yes	
Topton/Washington St. (Rowhouse)	2700 sf.	18 ft.	5 ft.	0 ft.	0 ft. garage	Street & alley	Yes	Pedestrian access between units
Topton/Main St. North (Rowhouse)	2880	24 ft.	0 ft.	0 ft.	0 ft. garage	Street & alley	Yes	Front build-to-lines



E. Multi Family Residential

Different sites within the Region house multi-family residences. These range from converted farmhouses in the rural landscape to garden apartment complexes within Topton Borough. According to the US Census Bureau the Region had 149 multi-family housing units in the year 2010 comprising 20.3% percent of its total housing stock. However, it is important to understand that mobile home parks are not included within this category, but it does include two-family units.

Municipality	Multi-family units
Topton Borough	144 (19.4%)
District Township	5 (0.9%)
Rockland Township	0
Regional Totals	149 (20.3%)



An apartment building in Topton Borough

“TYPICAL” DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTI-FAMILY RESIDENCES							
Municipality /Location	Min. Lot Size	Min. Lot Width	Front Setback	Side Setback	Rear Setback	Parking Location	Sidewalks
Topton / Franklin St.	NA	200 ft.	35 ft.	25 ft.	30 ft.	Street/parking lot	Yes

F. Mobile Home Parks

One Mobile Home Park can be found within the Region. These sites differ from mobile homes that are located on separate lots which are considered single family detached residences. The Mobile Home Park about 27 acres of land and contain about 36 units. The Mobile Home Park is located within District Township with potential space for additional units depending upon infrastructure requirements.

G. Commercial

Just over 84 acres within the Region are devoted to commercial use; this represents about 0.45% of the total land area. Each municipality has some commercial development.

Topton Borough has the most defined central business area within the Region. This core area generally straddles Main Street North and South Home Street and hints of the small-town bustle



Aerial photo of downtown Topton Borough

of times past. In addition several scattered businesses line Weiss Street. Aside from several freestanding commercial buildings which have been built more recently (convenience store, drive-thru restaurant, offices, etc.) the uses within this area inhabit first-floor store fronts of 2 and 3-story historic buildings. Existing uses include a convenience store, bank, flower shop, beauty salons, barber shop, fast-food and sit-down restaurants, tavern, hardware store, sporting goods store, hotel, medical clinics, auto repair garages, beverage distributor, carpet store, Laundromat, funeral home, car wash and various offices.

On-street parallel parking spaces generally line both sides of the street, as do sidewalks with shade trees, banners and overhead street lights. While many of the buildings exhibit historic architecture, their commercial adaptations don't reflect the same integrity. Business signs are typically flat wall, wall projecting or canopy signs. Certainly, Topton Borough's CBD has enjoyed a more active and vital past when the train station was active; however, it appears to function quite well, despite today's more highway-oriented commercial economy.

District and Rockland Townships have very limited commerce. District has two historic hotels and one operating and another vacant auto repair garage. Rockland has several nodes of commerce within its villages and along its major roads. In New Jerusalem are a deli, auto dealership, and auto repair garage. In Dryville there is a restaurant/tavern. A rural convenience store and gas station and florist are located along Pricetown Road west of New Jerusalem. Another auto repair garage is located along Five Points Road. These rural businesses often lack contemporary design features (parking, loading, landscaping, screening, etc.) that improve site function and appearance.

H. Industrial

Just over 68 acres within the Region are devoted to industrial use; this represents about 0.37% of the total land area. Each municipality has some industrial development.

Topton Borough provides the greatest extent of industry within the Region. Within the Borough industry is principally located on the north sides of the railroad tracks along the eastern and western edges of the Borough. The Deka/East Penn Manufacturing Distribution Center is the largest industrial site within the Borough; however, its vehicular access is provided along Old Topton Road within Longswamp Township. Other uses include Electro-space fabricators, mill working, warehousing, Lehigh Industries, an embroidery shop, a contractor yard and mini-warehouses.



Electro-Space Fabricator in Topton Borough

As with commercial development, industry is limited within District and Rockland Townships. Within District Township is a factory-like building used to raise laboratory animals along Landis Store Road. Further south along Weil Road are a vacant garage and warehouse. An excavating contractor is located on the north side of Huffs Church Road to the west of Dogwood Drive. Likewise in Rockland Township industry is scarce and scattered. Two auto salvage yards are located on the south side of Five Points Road and in the Village of New Jerusalem, respectively. An ironworks shop is located along Pricetown Road just west of New Jerusalem and a vacant garage/warehouse is located within Dryville.

With the exception of Electro-space Fabricators in Topton Borough, many industries within the Region lack contemporary design features (improved parking, loading, landscaping, screening, etc.) that improve site function and appearance. However, these industries provide needed employment and tax revenue for the area.

I. Public / Institutional

Within the Region public and Institutional uses comprise 150 acres or about 0.80% of the total land area. Several of these are large parks and open spaces including the PA State Gamelands located within District Township and an adjoining quasi-public conservation area.

In addition to these open grounds this category includes properties owned and operated by the Brandywine Heights Area School District and each of the Region's municipalities.

Finally this category reflects many numerous governmental uses, post offices, public utilities, parks, maintenance sheds, communication towers, churches, cemeteries, and rectories.

J. Transportation - Roads & Railroad Rights-of-Way

About 640 acres are devoted to the Region's roads and railroad rights-of-way, which equals 3.42% of the area. More information about these is contained within Chapter XI (Transportation) of this Plan.

K. Water

This category depicts the Regions ponds and lakes. This category does not include streams and creeks. About 81 acres of the Region are within a pond or lake. This equates to about 0.43% of the area.

The above information is depicted on the Existing Land Use Map.

L. Approved Land Developments

In planning for future land uses and calculating acreage needed to accommodate projected growth, it is important to know the location and types of developments within the Region that have been approved for development, but have not yet been fully developed. This information will also ensure that future planned uses are consistent or compatible with those already approved for construction. The following lists, by municipality, those developments which have been approved but not yet constructed or still have buildable lots. Currently, there are 53 approved single family detached building lots approved.

Approved Development Plans		
Topton Borough		
Unknown	SFD	3, Freehall Street
District Township		
Weise Estate – 2013	SFD	2, Merkle Road
Forgedale Properties - 2010	SFD	2
Solt – 2008	SFD	1
Kegel – 2007	SFD	1, Deer Run Road
Fredericksville Farms – 2006	SFD	7, Huffs Church Road
Esterly – 2005	SFD	1
Fairhill Section II – 2004	SFD	1
Stonehedge -2002	SFD	1, (Lot #4), Groff Road
Luft – 1999	SFD	1
Gardner – 1999	SFD	1
Hobert – 1996	SFD	1, Baldy Hill Road
Hobert – 1990	SFD	1, Baldy Hill Road
Sycamore Hill II – 1996	SFD	2, Treichler Road
Gee-Elwell	SFD	1
Kegg – 1995	SFD	1, (Lot #8), Deer Run & Kegg Lane
Roscher – 1995	SFD	5
Smit – 1995	SFD	1
Jensen Estate – 1992	SFD	1
Pinder – 1991	SFD	1
Pinder – 1993	SFD	1

Harrowgate Farms – 1991	SFD	2, (Lot #3 & 6), Hardt Hill Road
Echo Glen – 1990	SFD	1
Meba – 1988	SFD	1, (Lot #2), Benfield Road
Greenwood – 1987	SFD	1, (Lot #4), Delong & Bitting Roads
Rockland Township		
Berkey – 2010	SFD	1, (Lot #2), Lobachsville Road
Schlegel – 2008	SFD	2, (Lot #3 & 4), Lake Road
JJB – 2008	SFD	1, (Lot#3), Mine Road
Stonefield Heights – 2006	SFD	2, (Lot #10 & 7), Steep Lane
FELD-3 – 2006	SFD	3, (Lot #22, 19 & 25) Cider Mill Road
Rockland Manor Estates - 2004	SFD	2, (Lot #15 & 7), Beaver Creek Road
Brandywine Crossing – 2003	SFD	1, (Lot #4), Black Bear Run
Total	SFD	53