



CENTER FOR COALFIELD JUSTICE

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Washington County Planning Commission
100 West Beau Street
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RE: Washington County Comprehensive Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the June 2023 draft of the Washington County Comprehensive Plan. The Center for Coalfield Justice (“CCJ”) respectfully submits the following comments.

CCJ is a Pennsylvania-incorporated not-for-profit organization with federal Internal Revenue Service § 501(c)(3)-status recognition located in Washington, PA. Our mission is to “improve policy and regulations for the oversight of fossil fuel extraction and use; to educate, empower and organize coalfield citizens; and to protect public and environmental health.” CCJ has over three thousand members and supporters and is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors.

Many CCJ’s members and supporters live and work in Washington County and will be affected by the plan and its outcomes. Generally, this plan is a significant first step into the future. It recognizes the County’s need to use our resources to develop tourism and recreation, fix housing issues, and reinvest in our downtowns. This plan is also being developed at a time when state and federal resources are becoming increasingly more available to support taking on ambitious projects and programs. However, to ensure the county’s strategy for the next decade aligns with community needs and wants, CCJ offers the following comments.

1. Washington County Needs a More Diverse Economy

As mentioned in the plan, most of our top 5 clusters will have flat job growth over the next ten years, meaning these industries will only add a few new jobs. Thus, Washington County must invest in different sectors and businesses - not only those already present within the county - to bring more opportunities. Various positions in more sectors will bring a more diverse workforce to our communities, an essential part of becoming a “Complete Place.”

a. Rely on and Invest in Small Businesses

Part of creating a diverse economy is to invest in small businesses rather than large corporations. County investment in small businesses would support local families and workers rather than millionaire CEOs living outside the county.

Investing in small businesses is especially important to consider when reinvesting in downtowns. Residents of a community know the gaps in amenities available and often have ideas to fill them, but they need more resources to make their dreams a reality. The County should leverage funds to support community members who want to open or keep open a small grocery, farm, or retail store; water-sports rentals; family restaurants; etc.. This tactic puts taxpayer dollars toward our friends and neighbors rather than people just trying to profit from us.

Small businesses are also necessary to build a circular economy¹, a critical part of a sustainable future. A circular economy is one where we produce, consume, and waste less and reuse, refurbish, and repair more. To get there, we will need local infrastructure such as bulk/refill stores, dishwashers, delivery people, etc., and small business owners should have the opportunity to take the lead. Investing in a circular economy will bring jobs to the county and reduce our reliance on single-use plastic² which would benefit the health of communities across the region.

b. School Partnership

Partnering with schools to promote jobs within our county is essential to retain young people. However, investing in things that attract and retain young people is only possible by knowing what they want. In these school partnerships, students should give feedback on what they want to see out of the County and their communities, and the County should incorporate the feedback into future comprehensive plans.

Additionally, schools should promote various employment options, from education to trades to healthcare to renewable energy. Exposure to multiple pathways will allow the students to choose what's right for them rather than choosing a job because they think they should. In promotion, presenters must have honest conversations with the students about potential job drawbacks, including health and safety risks. When fully informed, students can make the best choice for their future.

2. Renewable Energy and A Just Transition For Fossil Fuel Employees

c. Renewable Energy & Brownfield Remediation

CCJ applauds the County's strong support for brownfield redevelopment and renewable energy deployment within the comprehensive plan. However, the County should go further and recommend that municipalities approve zoning for renewable energy projects before supporting additional fossil fuel projects to spur the clean energy transition. Additionally, the County should do a full analysis and comparison of fossil fuel projects, including carbon capture and sequestration projects, to other industry projects to better understand which would benefit the community's health, environment, and economy better in the long term.

d. Employees in the Fossil Fuel Sector Need a Just Transition

During the clean energy transition, workers in the fossil fuel industry are at risk of being left behind. To avoid this outcome, fossil fuel workers should have the opportunity to be trained and placed in new positions in the renewable energy field. The County should take advantage of the monies they are eligible for under the federal Infrastructure dollars and partner with organizations eligible for funding under Governor Shapiro's new Commonwealth Workforce Transformation Project³ to fund the transition.

¹ *Circular Economy*, American Sustainable Business Network, <https://www.asbnetwork.org/circular-economy>

² *Plastic & Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet*, Center for International Environmental Law, <https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Plastic-and-Health-The-Hidden-Costs-of-a-Plastic-Planet-February-2019.pdf>

³ *Governor Shapiro Signs Executive Order Creating New, First-in-the-Nation Workforce Training Program to Take Advantage of Historic Federal Infrastructure Funding*, Governor Josh Shapiro (July 31, 2023), <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-shapiro-signs-executive-order-creating-new-first-in-the-nation-workforce-training-program-to-take-advantage-of-historic-federal-infrastructure-funding/>

3. EV Infrastructure is Necessary for Rural Communities

The Comprehensive Plan includes the promotion of EV charging infrastructure to make the county more connected. While the priority appears to advocate for placing the infrastructure along major highways such as Interstates 70 and 79, EV charging infrastructure is crucial in rural areas. Because of the lack of public transportation in rural areas, people there rely on cars and will for the foreseeable future. To ensure rural communities are included in the clean energy transition, they need access to basic infrastructure such as EV charging stations. Increasing EV infrastructure in these communities also removes one barrier that low-income residents may face if they are interested in purchasing an EV - the cost of installing and running an EV charger in their own homes. However, because there are many barriers to low-income persons purchasing an EV, the County should expand public and alternative transportation options to ensure everyone is well connected.

4. The County Must Commit to Targeted Outreach, Education, and Public Input

Over the next decade and beyond, Washington County will run dozens of programs intended to help the people and businesses in the county. To ensure these resources benefit their intended recipients, the County must target outreach to the appropriate parties. Often, many don't know about grant and loan programs, education opportunities, and other services and amenities the county offers, so they aren't taken advantage of. Additionally, the County must provide more educational opportunities on resources so that the average person understands what the resources are, how they work, and how to apply.

Finally, for every new program or project, the County must provide an opportunity for public input so it is designed to benefit the most people. Without this input, the County is only guessing at what its constituents want. Part of the public input process should be to partner with state and local non-profit and community-led organizations. Such organizations already have connections to community members and provide valuable information on how to implement programs and funds to best serve the community.

Only when the County commits to targeted outreach, education, and public input will our resources reach and be used to their full potential.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me anytime.

Respectfully,

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