

OFFICIAL MAP TECHNICAL BULLETIN

An “official map” is a tool used by municipalities to guide future growth, incorporating a map and ordinance that align with the goals of their Comprehensive Plan. The official map, as defined by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), legally designates the locations of current and proposed streets, waterways, parks, and other public lands or facilities. It serves as a notification system for future public improvements, preventing construction in areas identified for future rights-of-way or public spaces. When a property owner plans to develop or subdivide land shown on the official map, the municipality has one year to negotiate the purchase of the property or acquire an easement.

This technical bulletin summarizes the process and key elements involved in the adoption of an official map in Pennsylvania. While the purpose and benefits are similar in Delaware, the development and adoption process may differ due to the differences in local government structure.

BENEFITS

- **Fosters cooperation:** Official maps inform property owners and developers of a municipality’s long-term goals before they make development plans, helping to clarify municipal interests. This proactive approach encourages cooperation between municipalities and private parties.
- **Saves time and money:** By informing property owners of public land needs early on, official maps can save time and money, allowing development plans to be prepared with a clear understanding of municipal plans. This prevents situations where developers invest in expensive engineering plans, only to later find that the municipality has different plans for the land.
- **Focused plan for resources:** By developing an acquisition plan for the elements on the official map, a municipality can allocate its limited resources to the projects that will most effectively further its long-term objectives.
- **Buys time:** An official map allows up to a year for a municipality to confirm its acquisition interest and negotiate land acquisition once the landowner intends to develop reserved land. If the landowner does not receive a reasonable return due to the reservation, they can apply for a special encroachment permit to build.
- **Implements municipal plans:** The official map helps implement municipal plans, including the Comprehensive Plan and Open Space Plan. It complements Zoning and Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance (SALDO) controls, which are limited in guiding the placement of public spaces and infrastructure placement.
- **Codifies public improvements:** Official maps enhance the credibility of planning efforts by codifying public improvements from the municipal comprehensive plan.
- **Can be linked to Zoning and Subdivision and Land Development ordinances:** Municipal land use ordinances should include regulations that link proposed development or subdivision to the official map. This ensures



that potential conflicts with future streets or other mapped features are addressed during the plan review stage. It can also ensure setbacks of buildings from future rights-of-way. In cases where only a building permit is needed, the code enforcement officer can review plans to prevent construction within reserved areas.

- **Supports grant funding:** Official maps support grant applications by providing a competitive advantage, showing a municipality's cohesive plan and technical readiness for implementation.

MISCONCEPTIONS

- **Is not considered a taking of land:** Establishing an official map does not mean the municipality takes ownership of the mapped areas. The expression of intent does not affect existing property ownership; landowners still own and control their land. If the owner plans to subdivide or develop land shown on the official map, they must notify the municipality in writing. The municipality then has one year to negotiate the purchase of the land or acquire an easement and may, in rare cases, use condemnation proceedings if the public need is great enough. When creating the official map, the municipality should avoid dividing a tract into irregular or unusable portions.
- **Not a Zoning Map:** The official map is a distinct, legally adopted document that requires a formal process, guided by the MPC, for its development and adoption. A municipal zoning map or future land use map in the municipality's Comprehensive Plan does not substitute for an official map.
- **Does not have to be the entire municipality:** If a municipality does not need an official map for the entire municipality, an official map can be created for critical portions of the municipality.



Official maps are commonly used to identify intersection and roadway improvements.

- **Does not imply responsibility for maintaining, improving, or opening of mapped facilities or lands:** According to Section 404 of the Municipalities Planning Code, including streets or other public lands on the official map does not mean the street is opened, the land is taken or accepted, nor does it require the municipality to improve or maintain those areas. The municipality's responsibility only begins once the street or property is formally purchased or accepted.

WHAT CAN BE INCLUDED

- Existing and proposed public streets, watercourses, and public grounds, including widenings, narrowings, extensions, diminutions, openings or closing
- Existing and proposed public parks, playgrounds, and open space reservations
- Pedestrian ways and easements
- Railroad and transit rights-of-way and easements
- Flood control basins, floodways and floodplains, storm water management areas, and drainage easements
- Support facilities, easements, and other properties held by public bodies undertaking the elements described in the municipal Comprehensive Plan and Comprehensive Plan elements required by the MPC (Section 301 of the MPC)

Additional features supported by the municipal comprehensive plan:

- Bikeway routes (both separate trails and those proposed along existing roads)
- Potential public well sites or groundwater resource areas
- Historical and archaeologically significant areas
- Stream valley corridors and other environmentally sensitive areas, such as unique and scenic areas, or habitats of endangered species
- Sites planned for public facilities such as municipal buildings, police and fire stations, libraries, community centers, and schools

- Additional plans and studies may be needed to supplement the Comprehensive Plan, such as traffic studies, or open space and recreation plans.
- Robust public engagement and education should be included during the development of the map to address misconceptions about this process and provide for public and stakeholder input. It can be helpful to engage property owners whose properties are identified on the official map early in the process. Proactive transparency is important during this process.
- Official maps typically take 6 months to a year to develop.
- Financial and technical support may be offered through county planning commissions.

WHAT NOT TO INCLUDE

Only those areas the municipality is willing to purchase or acquire easements for should be included. The need for preserving natural or cultural resources, rights-of-way, easements, or other features should be thoroughly documented in the comprehensive plan or a related study.

Unless the municipality intends to purchase or acquire an easement when development is proposed in these areas, these features should not be included on the official map.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- The official map should be supported by an adopted and current Comprehensive Plan.

ENABLING LEGISLATION

Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code

Article IV of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) allows municipalities to adopt official maps that designate areas for potential future rights-of-way (such as roads and trails) and public grounds (like parks or flood control lands).

Delaware Code

The adoption of an official map is outlined in 22 Delaware Code Title 22 §704.



Official maps often designate proposed trails and parkland.

EXAMPLES

Chester County

- East Bradford Township, Chester County (updated 2021)
 - Includes proposed trails, sidewalks, bike routes, future conservation easements.
- East Brandywine Township, Chester County (updated 2023)
 - Includes proposed trails, road realignments, parking improvements and conservation easements.
- East Caln Township, Chester County (updated 2016)
 - Includes proposed bike routes, trails, road widening, open space and pedestrian improvements.
- East Fallowfield Township, Chester County (updated 2018)
 - Includes proposed trails and proposed pump station.
- Kennett Township, Chester County (amended 2018)
 - Amendment included two open space properties.
- Newlin Township, Chester County (2013)
 - Includes proposed open space and historically and archeologically significant sites.
- West Brandywine Township, Chester County (2024)
 - Includes proposed parkland, agricultural easements, conservation easements, trails and intersection improvements.

Lancaster County

- Mount Joy Township, Lancaster County (2016)
 - Includes intersection and roadway improvements, proposed roads, trails and parks.

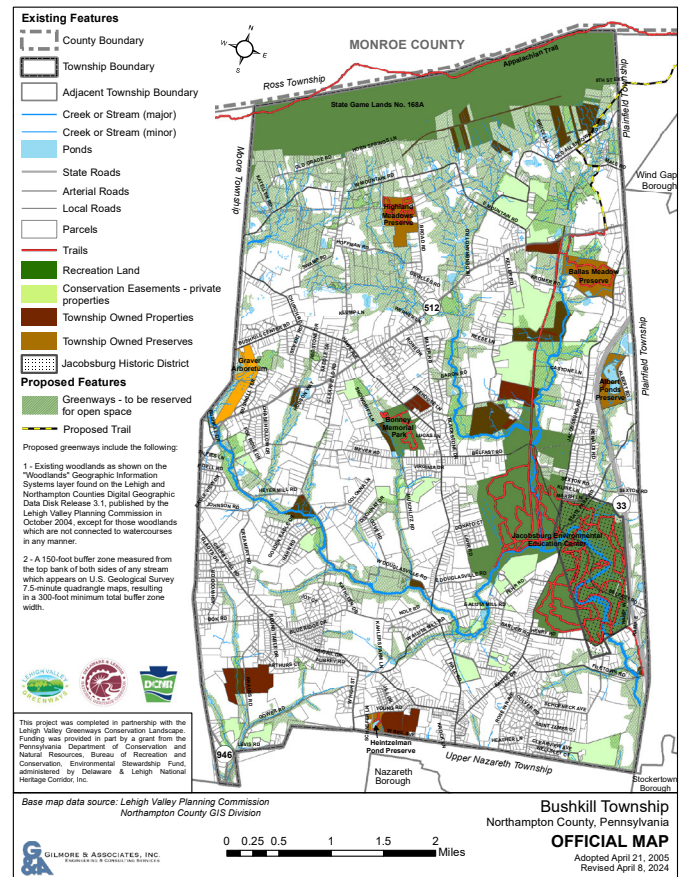
- Warwick Township, Lancaster County (2020)
 - Includes traffic improvements, proposed roads, trails and greenways.
- West Donegal Township Lancaster County (2010)
 - Includes intersection and roadway improvements.

Monroe County

- Chestnuthill Township, Monroe County (2015)
 - Includes intersection and roadway improvements, proposed parkland/ open space, private recreation & Water Authority, agricultural easements.

Northampton County

- Bushkill Township, Monroe County (2024)
 - Includes proposed greenways reserved for open space.



The Bushkill Township Official Map was updated and adopted in 2024 and focuses on recreation, land preservation and natural features.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADOPTION

Identify Goals

- Determine whether the official map will focus on a specific area or feature (e.g., a specific intersection, hamlet, village, or natural resource) or if it will be a broad map covering the entire municipality.

Preliminary Steps

- Identify a budget and potential funding sources.
- Determine whether the governing body will oversee this process or if it will be delegated to the Planning Commission or a project task force.
- Assess whether a consultant will be needed to assist in the creation of the official map and ordinance.
- Ensure that planning team has reviewed the MPC's guidance on the development of an official map.
- Engage and consult with the municipality's solicitor throughout process.

Identify Features to be Mapped

- Determine the most critical features to include on the map. These features should be well documented in the Comprehensive Plan and other planning documents.
- The municipality should be willing and prepared to act on all features presented on the official map if and when they become available, including identifying potential grant funds to assist in the implementation of identified public benefits.

Draft Official Map Creation

- The official map should include up-to-date base map features, including current parcel and road information. Some official maps also represent existing protected areas, such as floodplains, protected land, and municipally-owned land.
- An engineer, planning consultant, or surveyor can assist with producing the map.



Public and landowner input is essential for an effective Official Map and Ordinance.

Draft Official Map Ordinance

- The ordinance should clarify the intent of the official map, specify the categories represented on it, and detail its intended application.
- It must also incorporate the relevant provisions from the Municipalities Planning Code regarding the map's time limitations and its impact.

Landowner Outreach

- Engaging landowners of properties proposed for the official map early in the process is essential for promoting transparency and fostering a clear understanding of the process.
- Holding dedicated meetings with landowners provides an opportunity for them to ask questions and fosters open dialogue between landowners and the municipality, especially if such communication has not yet been established.

Public Review and Input

- The MPC stipulates that the municipal planning commission must have 45 days to review the document; however, if the commission is the one that created the document, this review may not be required.
- During this 45-day review period, the official map and ordinance must be submitted to the County Planning Commission and surrounding municipalities for a 45 day review.
- The official map and ordinance should also be available for public review.

Adoption

- Once the 45-day review period is over and comments are collected, the municipality is required to hold a Public Hearing prior to adoption.
- If the Public Hearing does not lead to any changes or only minor corrections to the map, the governing body can proceed with adopting the official map, contingent on any minor corrections.
- If significant revisions are proposed, such as substantial additions or deletions of features, the Act 247 Review and Public Hearing should be conducted again before adoption.
- Upon completion of the Public Hearing, the governing body may vote to adopt the ordinance and map.
- Within 30 days of adoption, the official map and ordinance must be sent to the surrounding municipalities.
- After adoption, the official map and Ordinance must be submitted to the county recorder of deeds within 60 days of adoption.

Next Steps

- Amend ordinances to reflect and reference the official map.
- Incorporate the official map into the standard review process for Subdivision and Land Development applications and approvals.
- Display the official map in a prominent location within the Township's municipal offices, public meeting spaces, and on its website.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *PA Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)*
- *Delaware Code Title 22 §704*
- *The Official Map: A Handbook for Preserving and Providing Public Lands & Facilities*
 - *Developed by DCNR, PENNDOT, DCED and WeConservePA*
- *WeConservePA Library - Official Map*
- *Chester County Planning Commission eTools*

