

## ***Future of Route 30: It's all about balance***

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About 60 people participated in a workshop last night to help drive the future of the Route 30 corridor in Westmoreland County. By the end of the evening, county maps studded with blue, red and green dots lined the wall of the Hempfield Room in Chambers Hall, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. Those dots represented where attendees felt jobs, homes and green space should be located in the corridor to balance those elements and maintain a desired quality of life. The workshop, facilitated by the Smart Growth Partnership of Westmoreland County, brought together consultants, engineers, local officials and residents of the 40-mile swath that Route 30 cuts through central Westmoreland County as its main east-west artery. Following overview presentations by Alex Graziani, executive director of Smart Growth, Hannah Twaddell and Amanda Taylor of Renaissance Management, and Carla Santoro of Baker Engineering, the audience was instructed to answer the question: Where do you want to be in 2030? The exercise comes about because of the prediction of 13,000 more people living in the county by that time, needing jobs, homes, education, green space and roads. The challenge is to balance those elements and avoid sprawl and congestion. "PennDOT is always behind," said Graziani. Widening roads or building new ones induces demand for development, leading to increased traffic that makes the new, larger roads full again. As for Route 30, "We love it and we hate it," said Graziani. "Barely a day goes by that we're not on it. It's the economic lifeblood for our region and has been for decades." The study is funded through a combination of local, state and federal money. Twaddell predicted, "There will be growth in jobs and population. The question is how to make sure Route 30 functions as well as it can, and what landscape do we want along the corridor?" She asserted that, "small but significant" decisions along the way will steer the course of the corridor over the next quarter-century, whether that be new development or creative reuse of existing structures. Priorities that were determined in the first workshop, held in October, indicated local residents put a high priority on safe intersections, walkable communities, connected streets, traffic access management and context-sensitive design. Possibilities offered as examples for future growth were to view downtown Jeannette as a mixed-use, interconnected city, with a river walk and public transit. Norwin Hills shopping center could use a block-and-roadway design, and develop an active pedestrian streetscape while providing connections to new residential areas and a golf course or other amenities, using a parallel network of streets. Improving parallel routes to Route 30 will help ease the demands on that highway. The automobile-oriented Westmoreland Mall with its interior Main Street could be a retail and office center with parallel connections off Route 30 and an outdoor Main Street with tree-lined public parks and plazas with a block network and reoriented parking. Or, it could become a mixed-use center with residences and retail spaces. Likewise, Wimmerton, with its single-family and multi-family residences with cul-de-sacs that limit connectivity and discourage pedestrian use, could become a mixed-use area with a small-scale local market or other shops to create a village that could be a regional destination with improved road network and greenways for pedestrians. Looking to the long range, planners could design new suburban centers or strengthen existing ones. Route 30 could be a Main Street or a throughway. Decisions made now will chart its future, Graziani suggested. He asked, "Who here in 1980 envisioned Greengate Mall not being there?" He said that looking at the Route 30 corridor necessitates looking at the

impact of decisions on the corridor as a whole. Historically, presenters showed, the corridor that touches 14 communities began in the 1700s with Fort Ligonier being the “key to the West.” The development of the railroad took transportation on a different route in the 19th century, but the 1913 establishment of the Lincoln Highway bypassed the towns the railroad went through and began sucking the population out of the older cities. The shift from the cities to the suburbs exploded between 1960 and 1980, with the population stabilizing in the next two decades. Now the shift is from the suburbs to the exurbs, but there are fewer people and more houses. Jobs are increasing but not the ones that attract young, educated workers, who are leaving the area. The overall population is aging. By 2030, projections are that there will be an additional 13,450 people in the region, 8,058 more houses and 3,392 more jobs. “Where will it go?” is the question workshop participants were asked to judge. Elements being considered for the future include not only traffic efficiency but also bike lanes, pedestrian access, aesthetics, economic impact, gateways, mixed use, redevelopment, infrastructure, and coordination of land use with transportation. Twaddell said, “You can do nothing and it will be more of the same.” Eventually, one more subdivision in a rural area, such as Ligonier Township, will suddenly render it suburban. “It’s incremental growth,” she said, so not noticeable until one day it’s everywhere. She advised that to avoid sprawl, local residents can, “Pay attention and intentionally make the shift” to manage increased development while maintaining vibrant cities and towns, healthy suburban communities and thriving rural areas. Some of the conclusions participants reached after the dot-the-map exercise were, as Kim Miller said, the need to improve or redevelop existing housing stock, keep green spaces and redevelop brownfields such as in Derry Borough, Jeannette and Latrobe. Another participant noted that the Westmoreland Airpark, an industrial park off Route 981 south of Arnold Palmer Regional Airport, is a logical place to bring jobs, especially as the planned traffic improvement project for Route 981 will take pressure off Route 30. Other ideas include to develop more mixed-use housing areas; expand bike trails; decide whether to make Route 30 more efficient or encourage it to become a Main Street, and develop a light rail system for commuters. The region’s job generators can be centered around universities and health centers. John Turack summarized his table’s approach to the mapping exercise by saying it tried to balance a better quality of life in urban centers with a nice mixed use, and linking old towns with feeder roads to keep Route 30 free-flowing. Barbara McMillen said her group put its dots to focus the jobs along Route 30 but use commutable distances to work to place residential hubs on the outskirts. Twaddell asked, “What is the right balance?” A meeting in March will look at the tabulated impact of the patterns the workshop devised, and discuss cost, land area and utility issues in deciding “How will we get there?” Time and location of the March 15 meeting will be announced. For more details visit [www.route30plan.com](http://www.route30plan.com).