



Pittsburgh, PA MSA

Regulatory Order/Family: Traditional/Middle America

Summary

Dominated by very small townships and boroughs, metropolitan Pittsburgh lacks the substantial local government institutions, and its rapid population decline has limited the incentives for strong growth management.¹ Consequently, it has both a high prevalence of low-density-only zoning and a few jurisdictions without zoning at all; a quarter of the jurisdictions lack comprehensive plans. The region's fragmented and weak land use planning institutions did not stop, and likely contributed to, rapid sprawl in the 1980s and 1990s as the region lost over 8 percent of its population.

Governance Framework and Growth Trends

The Pittsburgh MSA is a curiosity among the 50 largest metropolitan areas. Its population declined by 175,000 residents (6.9 percent) in the 1980s and another 35,000 (1.5 percent) in the 1990s, but it still had over 2.3 million residents in 2000, making it the 23rd largest metro area in the U.S., in the same range as Tampa and Portland. Pittsburgh also has an extraordinarily large number of local governments—414 in all—only one of which, Pittsburgh itself, had over 50,000 residents in 2000. Another 32 townships and 20 cities and boroughs in the region had between 10,000 and 50,000, and a staggering 361 townships and boroughs had fewer than 10,000 residents. Despite metro Pittsburgh's steady population decline in the 1980s and 1990s, it still managed to urbanize over 200,000 acres of land between 1982 and 1997, a 39 percent increase when its population declined 6.6 percent. Its density dropped from 4.8 to 3.3 persons per urbanized acre, as a consequence.

Regulatory Environment

We received responses from 29 of the 54 jurisdictions with over 10,000 residents, but not from the city of Pittsburgh itself. We also received responses from 26 of the 50 jurisdictions under 10,000 that we sampled. This response includes a reasonable range of jurisdictions by size and type, but it still accounts for only 17 percent of the land area and 29 percent of the population, and therefore must be taken as indicative rather than definitive of the Pittsburgh metro area's regulatory structure.

Based on the responses, we estimate that about 89 percent of the jurisdictions have zoning, and that about 55 percent of all jurisdictions—less populous townships, mainly, with an estimated 37 percent of the metro area's population but 55 percent of its land area—have low-density-only zoning. About 30 percent of the jurisdictions would prohibit our prototype apartment development, but these tend to be even less populous jurisdictions, containing only 18 percent of the region's residents and about a quarter of its land area. Only 17 percent of the jurisdictions, with a third of the population and 7 percent of the land area, have a residential zoning category allowing densities to exceed 15 dwellings per acre.

¹ Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, "Back to Prosperity, A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania: A Profile of the Pittsburgh Area," (Washington, 2003). Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/publications/pa.htm>



Planning is weaker in metropolitan Pittsburgh than in many other regions, with only about three quarters of jurisdictions estimated to have a plan. Growth management and affordable housing programs are scarce, with impact fees being the only common tool (used in an estimated 23 percent of jurisdictions); APFOs, containment tools, and regulatory affordable housing incentives are present in fewer than 5 percent of jurisdictions. None of the jurisdictions reported permit caps or moratoria.