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Region to get new 6-county direction with comprehensive plan

Planners from czb will examine what has kept young people in Southern Alleghenies

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By William Kibler (bkibler@altoonamirror.com), The Altoona Mirror

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Each of the four times that Virginia-based community planner Charles Buki has visited Altoona, stopping at a doughnut shop on Pleasant Valley Boulevard, he's encountered a seriously senior clientele.

Ninety percent were older than 60, and 70 percent were older than 70, Buki estimated.

It's not a scientific assessment, but it's a fair indicator of one of the main challenges that Buki's firm, czb, will face soon, when it starts work on a new regional comprehensive plan for the six counties represented by the Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission.

That challenge reflects the economic condition of the Southern Alleghenies area - Blair, Bedford, Cambria, Huntingdon, Somerset and Fulton counties - which, like many places in the northeastern quarter of the continental U.S., has lost population during the past 50 years.

It's a condition that calls for the kind of non-traditional comp plan that czb intends to create, according to Buki, czb's president.

That non-traditional approach earned the firm the job, according to Blair County Planning Director Dave McFarland at a recent county Planning Commission meeting.

The old way, more in keeping with the term "comprehensive," surveyed the landscape of a growing community to figure out where to put additional roads, water lines, sewer lines, schools and libraries needed to make things work out best, Buki said.

But communities like those in the Southern Alleghenies - and in many places in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and elsewhere, have shrunk since the 1960s and 1970s, and the challenge now is not to build infrastructure to serve growth, but just the opposite, according to Buki.

Planning now is "more about marshaling scarce resources," Buki said. "How to figure out what to take care of and in what priority."

Cities with infrastructure that were built up by the mid-20th Century in expectation of continued growth have in many cases far more capacity than needed and - because there are fewer people - not enough income to support that infrastructure, he said.

Altoona had 69,000 people in 1960 - down from 82,000 in 1930. It has only 46,000 now.

Moreover, in many cities, the composition of the population has changed, with many of the economically strong households having moving to the suburbs, leaving inner cores with a high percentage of poor families, according to Buki.

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Places that have done well over time tend to have a diverse economy and a diversity of people, based on age, he said.

Diverse economies and diverse populations may not thrive initially like monolithic economies or monolithic populations, he said.

If your town has one dominant industry, like railroading in the early days of Altoona, it's vulnerable.

Likewise, if your town's population is skewed toward the elderly, its economy is not benefiting from high mid-life earnings, spent on mortgage payments, meals with all the kids at family restaurants, uniforms for sports and school, second cars, visits to the pediatrician, books and trips to the movies, Buki said.

That kind of spending is not happening now in many areas of Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan, he said.

But there's hope.

Among the Southern Alleghenies' main advantages are beautiful countryside and a potential source of young people in the college population - especially the students of Penn State, he said.

The professionals and volunteers who will work on the comprehensive plan would do well to examine what has kept a couple of the "crazy smart" young planners he's encountered at SAPDC in this area, Buki said.

"What do they love, and how do we do more of it?" he asked rhetorically.

Czb plans to try to find out that kind of information through an overall, regional steering committee and "kitchen table discussions" among groups, according to McFarland.

Those discussions could be specific to the counties or to topics, he said.

The planners aren't seeking to make the plan comprehensive by covering a full menu of topics, like transportation, infrastructure and economic development, but instead will "drill down" on a handful of the knottiest problems the area faces, McFarland said.

In addition to the excess urban housing problem, there is an excess rural housing issue beginning to crop up, after having invaded the Midwest, McFarland said.

"There are older people holed up in the mountain hollows," McFarland said. "They're going to be disappearing."

Abandoned housing happens in rural areas when the children of a family mature and - instead of remaining to farm, move away to obtain jobs and to raise families - while their parents, no longer able to keep up with their farms, move to retirement communities or nursing homes or just die, McFarland said.

The counties will soon start looking for people to participate in creation of the plan, McFarland said. The answers will come from those participants, Buki said.

"Some of my job is to unearth (them)," he said.

Ultimately, another challenge will be to convince the Southern Alleghenies communities to embrace the solutions that emerge, even though they won't take effect for a decade or two or three, Buki said.

"It's a little art and a little science," he said.

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