

Residential Site Improvement and Subdivision Design Standards: A Review

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This report is intended to promote and facilitate a discussion of standards or best practices for residential site improvement in Pennsylvania.

The project that resulted in this report was initiated as a result of a suggestion from Don DeLess, Chairman of the PHRC Operations Committee and Brad Elliot, a builder from Southeastern Pennsylvania. It was designed to be a fact-finding effort that would uncover and review the technical, the economic and—to some extent—the political issues associated with subdivision regulation and site improvement standards. The conclusions and recommendations presented in the report are intended to provide some guidance to the PHRC and others for future initiatives in this area.

Financial or other support for the project was received from the following groups:

- The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development;
- The Pennsylvania Builders Association;
- The individuals, associations, and corporations that are members of the PHRC; and
- The Pennsylvania State University

This report was researched and written by W. Roy Newsome Jr., AICP, for the PHRC. The project was managed and administered by Mark Fortney, Assistant Director of the PHRC.

Thanks are due to all of the individuals listed in Section 6 of this report who shared their time, knowledge and expertise with us. The assistance of Michelle McMullen and Angela Burnett in producing the final version of the report is appreciated.

The PHRC is responsible for initiating and producing this report. Two of our more general objectives are to stimulate discussion about housing and to promote the development of housing in Pennsylvania. We therefore encourage questions or other feedback regarding the report.

Eric F. P. Burnett
Director

Executive Summary

This report on residential site improvement and subdivision design standards was initiated by the Pennsylvania Housing Research Center in response to an identified need. The Pennsylvania Builders Association and others had expressed concern about the current manner in which local government is applying the subdivision regulation and land development provisions of the state's Municipal Planning Code. These standards, many of which appear in the subdivision regulations of municipalities, control how land is developed by establishing minimum standards for infrastructure such as road construction and sizing, parking, stormwater management systems, sanitary sewer, water supply, and other utilities. In addition there was considerable interest in the statewide, mandatory standards for residential site improvement recently established in New Jersey.

The **objective** of the study was to review the current use of subdivision regulations in the Commonwealth and adjacent states and to explore the feasibility of establishing statewide standards or "best practices" for residential site improvement that might have applicability in the Commonwealth. This report presents the results. It also suggests actions that might be taken to improve the way in which land development is regulated in the Commonwealth.

The review of current thinking and practices revealed that of the six states adjacent to Pennsylvania only New Jersey has adopted statewide site improvement standards. More than ten years of effort on the part of builders, engineers and others was necessary before New Jersey enacted the implementing legislation. Even the state's Department of Community Affairs was active in attempts to get the legislation adopted. The effort did not begin until after a model building code was adopted and implemented. Adoption of the standards came about only after efforts to encourage use of model standards had failed. The legislation was adopted over the strenuous objections of local officials.

Three issues were frequently encountered in current professional writing on subdivision regulation policy. The first of these, noted most often by conservationists and design professionals, was the general lack of creativity evident in the design and development of residential land. This shortcoming is widely considered to be the result of restrictions imposed by local government. The second issue, noted by builder/developers, is the need for uniformity of site improvement standards. The third issue, mentioned by every writer and virtually every individual interviewed for this report, dealt with the excessive street width required in most subdivision regulations. This last issue unites unlikely partners: builders and environmentalists. Because street width is universally recognized as the root cause of serious problems, and because of the high cost of street construction, this report places emphasis on street requirements.

A document titled *Performance Streets, A Concept and Model for Residential Streets* produced by the Bucks County Planning Commission in 1980 was found to be the standard reference nationally in discussions on the need to reduce street width. This is 20-year-old document presents the case for reducing street width and is cited throughout current literature but seldom applied to Pennsylvania subdivision regulations.

In reviewing Pennsylvania perspectives, it was found that the current state enabling legislation—the Municipal Planning Code—generally permits the flexibility needed to achieve creative design and more appropriate development standards. Those interviewed felt that significant amendments to the code are not required. They also believed there is no possibility that mandatory site improvement standards could be achieved in the state. Opposition from municipalities, particularly from townships, was cited as the reason mandatory standards will not soon come to Pennsylvania.

What about the question: "Does Pennsylvania need uniform, statewide site improvement standards?" The answer is no, or at least, not now. However, considerable support was found for the development of model standards for site improvement or "best practices." Such a model would serve to educate those involved and

would help to begin a discussion regarding the future of subdivision regulations in the Commonwealth. With regard to education, it was recognized that, despite the efforts of the Department of Community and Economic Development, many local officials and planning commission members are unaware of their responsibilities and opportunities vis-à-vis enforcement of subdivision regulations.

As with building codes, one would expect that the builder/developer's work would be more efficiently accomplished if the same set of site improvement standards applied in all municipalities. In addition to the builders, there currently appears to be considerable interest among the design, engineering and planning professions to move toward more uniform local requirements on this and other development and construction-related issues. However, most would agree a mandated, statewide standard will not soon come to Pennsylvania.

The *Conclusions and Recommendations* section of this report offers suggestions that might be taken up by the Pennsylvania Housing Research Center and others. A number of these recommendations directly address specific problems identified in the report. However, the most important impact of these suggestions, if they are implemented, will be to move this discussion into the political arena. It is there that significant change will occur.