

Borough of Leetsdale

Executive Summary of Comprehensive Plan



August 2023

Acknowledgements

The 2023 Leetsdale Comprehensive Plan is a living and working document. Special thanks to the Project Committee, Borough Government, and community members of Leetsdale for creating a living-document and vision to help improve the community. The innumerable hours of research, interviews, and meetings informed the goals of this Comprehensive Plan.

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This Comprehensive Plan has been created solely by the volunteer work of the Project Committee, comprised of Leetsdale residents. Funding for the demographic data that supported a random survey was provided by the Borough of Leetsdale.

Project Committee

The people listed below did the research for and wrote the Comprehensive Plan.

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Additional Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

How to Use The Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan is intended to guide decision-making for the optimal use of land in the borough. It represents the culmination of research conducted by the Planning Commission, including,

- An analysis of demographic trends
- A study of physical and economic features
- A survey of the needs and wants of community residents.

From this research, the Comprehensive Plan lays out the borough's strengths and weaknesses, along with guiding principles. The plan presents a series of goals (the big principles that guide the development of Leetsdale) and objectives (specific actions that could help achieve the goals).

These goals and objectives serve as a map for action. Using it, borough council may choose to implement strategic plans, allowing the council to modify objectives on an ongoing basis. IN this way, as the borough strives towards the goals in the plan, its actions can continually reflect evolving conditions.

If during implementation of the plan, the borough council believes that the goals themselves need to be updated, a new planning exercise may be kicked off by the council. Many comprehensive plans are designed as one-time exercises - a state of the borough - repeated every decade or so. This document, in contrast, is meant to be a living. It is designed so that it can easily be updated on a rapid and regular basis as new information becomes available. The elements of the plan are clearly laid out and sources and methods are retained by the borough so that any piece can be easily repeated.

Previous Planning Documents

Past comprehensive plans were created for the Borough of Leetsdale prior to this project and were used to construct this document. The two plans used are:

- "SHALE Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan", July 2004. Pashek Associates.
- "Leetsdale Borough Riverfront, Greenway and Parks Master Plan", September 2007. J.T. Sauer & Associates, LLC

Additionally, an archive of drawings from prior planning exercises made for the Leetsdale Industrial Park was used during research and is referred to in this document:

- "Leetsdale Riverfront Greenway Site and Landscape Improvements Plan", May 2006. Chapman Properties / LaQuatra Bonci Associates. Provided by Nichols & Slagle Engineers.

Background to Study

Leetsdale lies on the northwestern edge of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania. Near the City of Pittsburgh, it began as an Indian-trade post. Later, it became the site of a brick manufacturing plant and eventually transformed into a steel-mill town. Today, the borough is turning its attention from its prior industrial focus toward a new residential one.

“Improving what we have is the most important thing we can do to improve Leetsdale.”

- Resident Comment

The borough’s history is deeply tied to its neighbors. At one time, called Sewickley Flats, the area of the borough was joined with that of Edgeworth and remained so until 1904. Today, the borough has an image of a heavily industrialized area. Within its 653-acre corporate limits lies 565 acres of non-residential use, of which 320 acres are used as an industrial park. Fortunately, unlike other industrial towns throughout western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and eastern Ohio, Leetsdale has adapted and evolved to save its industries. Today, Leetsdale provides more than 2,000 jobs.

Its more than 1,000 residents live on eighty-eight acres of the 635-acre borough, with the town divided lengthwise by both Route 65 (Ohio River Blvd.) and by three lanes of the Norfolk Southern Railroad. The town is dwarfed by the Buncher Company Industrial Park, the Leetsdale Industrial Park, and Hussey Copper. Residential use is primarily grouped to the east along Beaver and Broad Streets, Victory Lane, Breck Hill Drive, and Oak Drive and to the west, across Route 65, on Washington Street. Leetsdale housing is a combination of medium to low-density residential with one main commercial area.

Comparison Area

Throughout this document, the borough is compared to the neighboring municipalities from its historical and geographical continuum, as well as outlying areas, grouped as follows.

Comparison Area	Definition
Sewickley Valley	Continuous and historically linked area with most of the population settled around Beaver St. and Ohio River Blvd that includes Sewickley, Edgeworth, Leetsdale, and Leet. These municipalities offer the best demographic comparison to Leetsdale.
Quaker Valley	Contains additional municipalities of Bell Acres, Aleppo, Sewickley Hills, Sewickley Heights, Glen Osborne, Haysville, and Glenfield, which comprise the Quaker Valley School District. Their residents share many recreational and community amenities as well as travel patterns throughout the area.
Ambridge	A geographically adjacent municipality that belongs to Beaver County and a different school district; residential areas of the two towns are separated by a bridge and steeply sloped area. Ambridge has a similar industrial history and housing stock to Leetsdale, but distinct demographic trends and travel patterns of its residents.
Moon Township	An outlying large suburban municipality across the Ohio River with newer residential developments and big-box commercial retail complexes.

Compared to its neighbors, Leetsdale has notable constraints, including,

- Leetsdale is currently almost fully developed within its boundaries, in both residential and industrial zones.
- Most of the riverfront has been deemed off-limits for any public use by the property owner, except for a small parcel of Borough land, today crowded by truck parking.
- Any connection to the Allegheny County Trail System via a woodland trail would require 80% of the trail to lie outside of the borough; a trail would run along the borough's edge with Leet and Edgeworth, meaning it would mostly bypass the borough.
- Although an archaeological site is within the borders of Leetsdale, the property is not owned by the borough. A generous gift of the property by the landowner was at one time considered; the exit of the DEP and the State, however, became an opportunity to develop the property. Therefore, the archeological site is not available to the borough.

Summary of Study

In this executive summary, we detail the conclusions reached by each element of analysis and provide an overall conclusion, including a summary of goals.

Part I: Assessment of Existing Conditions

The study begins with a careful assessment of existing conditions, ranging from the demographic trends in the borough to an analysis of its infrastructure.

A. Demographics and Housing

The population of Leetsdale has declined by 16% since 1990, outpacing drops observed in neighboring areas. Current rates would winnow the borough to three-quarters of its 1990 level by 2050.

The fact that senior citizens living alone account for one-quarter of households undergirds this trend. The senior population - like the borough as a whole - is skewed female and many residents are widowed/divorced women and never-married men.

The percentage of households with children has remained stable over the last decade, suggesting the possibility of renewed growth. During this period, residents also became better educated while the incomes of wage earners increased. Nevertheless, the median income in Leetsdale remains below the region's average, partially due to the large number of residents relying on fixed incomes, and economic inequality between Leetsdale and its neighbors increased.

Overall, the borough is becoming home to an increasingly smaller and dichotomous population: older and younger; richer and poorer; more racially diverse; and smaller households.

Like the population, Leetsdale's housing stock is decreasing at an annual rate of 10%. Vacancy rates and rental percentages continue to climb: more than 40% of people living in Leetsdale now rent their homes. Vacant land accounts for 64% of back taxes in the borough, most claimed by the Quaker Valley School district, creating a barrier to re-development until a new owner remedies the tax delinquency.

This study modeled the impact of the ongoing population changes and degradation of housing stock, finding

- Owners will increasingly give up occupancy, going into 2030.
- A larger rental population will absorb the excess housing.
- By 2030, renters and owners will approach parity.

A larger rental population could change the character of the borough, including,

- Increasing levels of disrepair and neglect
- Decreasing the residential tax base

Leetsdale must prepare to accept the demographic shift or manage it.

B. Commerce & Industry

The borough's historic ties to the steel industry remain evident in its vibrant industrial zone. These areas, including the Buncher Industrial District, Leetsdale Industrial Park, and Hussey Copper Complex, have been the backbone of the local economy, contributing significantly to tax revenue. A deep dive into business activity reveals a diverse economic base in the borough. Major industries, including Metals, Oil and gas/Mining Products, and Medical Products and services, collectively make up approximately 40% of the borough's economic activity.

Through zoning legislation, Leetsdale has dedicated land for both commercial and industrial use. Such uses are designed to benefit the community by providing jobs, revenue, and a place for residents to obtain goods and services. Leetsdale's commercial activity is anchored by the Quaker Village Center, the largest shopping center for groceries in the Sewickley Valley.

The borough's industrial park dominates land use within the community by its sheer size. The park, however, has provided few jobs for residents. Analysis suggests local businesses account for only 10-14% of jobs held by people who live in Leetsdale. Moreover, although gross revenues from the park are significant, the net contribution, considering expenses incurred by the borough, is comparable to residential sources.

These discrepancies underscore the importance of the fair-share principle in zoning, meaning that each land use should be balanced, fostering symbiotic relationships between residents and businesses.

C. Environment Resources

Flora and Fauna

Leetsdale boasts invaluable environmental resources, offering both natural beauty and potential benefits for its residents, making their preservation for future generations a priority. Hydrologically, the borough lies within the Upper Ohio Watershed, encompassing southeastern Beaver County, northwestern Allegheny County, and the Ohio River Basin.

This area features the Sugar Maple-Beech Climax association, crucial for the region's aesthetic appeal, wildlife habitat, recreational value, and water retention. Leetsdale is home to a diverse array of trees, as evidenced by the 2023 Shade Tree Inventory; it identified two hundred sixty trees on borough property and public right-of-way, representing seventy-seven different species. The data revealed challenges too, including tree loss, poor tree health, overgrown trees, and issues related to species selection.

Leetsdale's location also fosters a diverse range of wildlife, showcasing the resilience of the local ecosystem within an urban setting. Small mammals like raccoons demonstrate remarkable adaptability to human habitats, albeit occasionally causing minor inconveniences. The borough is also home to deer, which traverse wooded areas and move between the borough and Edgeworth, as well as iconic bird species, such as bald eagles, great horned owls, and ospreys. The increasing prevalence of tick-borne diseases, however, presents significant challenges, particularly in wooded, hilly areas.

Recreational Assets

Leetsdale takes pride in its commitment to recreation and parks, with services standing as essential pillars, providing diverse programs that cater to all ages. This study highlights areas experiencing degradation: funding for parks and recreation represents a small percentage of the borough's overall finances; the equipment used is at least two decades old; existing facilities and green spaces show signs of wear in terms of functionality, safety, and attractiveness.

D. Historic Structures and Cultural Institutions in Leetsdale

Leetsdale boasts historic and potentially historic buildings, constructed between the 1880s and 1920s. Two recognized landmarks (Elmridge House and Lark Inn) reside within the borough. Prominent architectural styles include Tudor Revival and Craftsman while examples of Dutch Colonial and Palladian-derived Classical architecture are present. The borough, however, has not created a plan to protect its historic assets. As a result, some historic buildings and structures have been lost over time.

Similar towns have used Historical Architectural Review Boards to fight blight and attract new residents. Leetsdale should pursue this path, ensuring new land development respects our history.

The borough should also enhance its cultural institutions by building additional partnerships with arts, cultural, and heritage organizations, as well as by preserving resources within the borough's Parks.

E. Public Safety, Utilities, and Infrastructure

Leetsdale maintains public utilities for water and sewer services and emphasizes public safety, supporting a police force, a volunteer fire department, and emergency medical services to protect the well-being of residents.

As with any municipality, maintaining and enhancing infrastructure is a constant challenge. Roads and bridges require continuous attention but this analysis does not identify any significant infrastructure risk at this time. Aging roads will continue to need periodic maintenance and drainage pipes, particularly in the hill areas of Leetsdale, do require minor repairs.

Notable gaps highlighted by this analysis include,

- Expenditure on physical infrastructure and community institutions is the principal reason for government, yet Leetsdale is spending less as a percentage of revenue today than it did in the past.
- For infrastructure, the borough has neither prioritized a list of problems nor maintains such a list.
 - Road repair has proven a highly variable expense; after the borough identifies problems, a large expenditure is approved, potentially in the following year, to correct it. This approach is more expensive and certainly riskier than a proactive approach.

- Sewer maintenance and the function of Public Works would benefit from a proactive approach that sets priorities, develops a systemic maintenance plan, and keeps thorough records of work done and planned.
- Leetsdale's Zoning Ordinance was originally adopted in 1972 and updated in 1991. The ordinance does not identify Community Development Objectives and has not been updated to reflect comprehensive plans published between 2000 and 2010.
- Any future land use that relies on Beaver Street must contend with unknowns: the construction of a new high school on the hill above Beaver creates will impact traffic at Village Drive and Camp Meeting, but the extent of that impact has never considered a new use at the existing 625 Beaver Street site and was based on traffic volumes during the winter of the pandemic period when many residents and students worked from home.

This assessment underscores the importance of proactive planning, budgeting, and collaboration to address these infrastructure needs comprehensively.

Part II: Resident Outlook

This study made extensive efforts to talk with residents and understand their needs and wants, including holding four in-depth community forums, conducting individual interviews, and managing a random survey process. Results are grouped into two categories: future land use and borough policy.

A. Future Land Use

Leetsdale's future land use should encourage single-family homeownership to support property standards and the borough's character while enhancing the tax base. High-density development, like multi-family rental properties, is not ideal for redeveloping the existing High School site or for the borough as a whole. Instead, well-planned mixed development is viewed as desirable to both increase tax revenue and revitalize the area, potentially creating a new "main street" district.

Preserving green spaces, especially in Henle Park, is deemed essential. In Kohlmeyer Park, recommendations include fencing the picnic area and planting more trees for landscape buffering. Proper tree planting in all green spaces should involve professional arborists. Better and more timely maintenance of sidewalks, lawns, and amenities is desired. There's also interest in revitalizing the boat dock through a private-public partnership, following the model of New Brighton's Big Rock Park.

B. Enhancements to Borough Policy

Residents expressed concerns about habitual code violations and the effectiveness of complaint-based enforcement. The community prefers proactive code enforcement, possibly involving a dedicated code enforcement officer and collaborative efforts with neighboring boroughs. Historic preservation initiatives are seen as good policy, with suggestions for guidelines to maintain neighborhood character and address parking concerns in historic areas.

Residents also want policies to facilitate the purchase of blighted properties and address concerns related to flooding, landslides, and hazmat incidents. An alternate exit from the Washington St. area via Hussey Copper and the Big Sewickley Creek bridge is considered a priority. Traffic issues, including problems at the Broad St./Ferry St. intersection and vehicular speeding on Broad St., need attention. The community recognizes the borough's heavy reliance on industrial parks for tax revenue and sees the need for an infrastructure fund to prepare for major repairs.

Part III: Goals

The study concludes with goals that stem directly from the needs and wants expressed by residents (Part II) as supported by the quantitative and qualitative research performed in Part I.

Goal	Description	Rationale for Goal
Encourage Home Ownership and Low to Medium Density Development	Leetsdale should prioritize homeownership of low to medium density, single-family dwellings to support the character, property standards, and tax base of the borough.	Corporate landlords are increasingly common, and Leetsdale is facing a trend of reduced owner-occupancy. The borough could approach parity of renters and owner-occupants by 2030.
Protect Henle Park and Kohlmeier Park	Protect green space and improve facilities in our parks.	Residents expressed staunch support for the borough's parks and noted deterioration, highlighting poor maintenance, the loss of trees, and the degradation of playground equipment.
Bring Back the Boat Dock	Create a private-public partnership to bring the borough-owned boat dock back into use as a recreational area.	Leetsdale is a river town without access to the river. There is strong resident interest in cleaning up, expanding, and rebuilding the boat dock as a private-public partnership, following New Brighton's Big Rock Park as a model.
Fight Blight	Re-develop vacant land and protect properties slipping toward blight.	Leetsdale's housing stock is slowly decaying with about 10% of homes vulnerable to blight.

Preserve Leetsdale's History	Stop the degradation of Leetsdale's housing and historic features.	Leetsdale's housing stock is slowly decaying with about 10% of homes vulnerable to blight. Residents demonstrated an important attachment and respect for the history of the borough, believing that historic preservation initiatives are good policy.
Enhanced Cultural Amenities and Community Programs	Find ways to bring cultural amenities to Leetsdale and make new ones.	Over the decades, Leetsdale has lost most of its cultural institutions, the places that create a community, including its library and elementary school. Leetsdale's recreational programs are an asset to the borough and help make it a regional attraction.
Reclaim Leetsdale's Tree City Designation	Reclaim the title we once had: Tree City and bring back the canopy over Broad Street. Leverage the borough's Tree Inventory to create a strategy to green Leetsdale.	There is evidence Leetsdale has lost half of its trees over time in some areas.
Communicate and Enhance Preparation for Natural and Man-Made Accidents	Prepare residents for emergencies and ensure the best options are in place.	Residents see flooding, landslides, and hazmat incidents (in the railroad or the industrial parks) as key concerns for Leetsdale. The community expressed trust in the emergency services and stated a wish for more information about what to expect and what to do in case of an emergency.
Improve Defenses Against Traffic Accidents	Determine whether it is possible to put a left-turning lane at Route 65/Ferry or find ways to better communicate and enforce the left-turn prohibition and improve other traffic and parking issues.	Traffic patterns at the Broad St./ Ferry St. intersection continue to create concerns among residents who see the prohibition against left turns as confusing and dangerous. Vehicular speeding, especially through Broad St. and Washington St., is a concern.
Infrastructure Improvements	Determine whether Leetsdale is putting adequate resources into its Public Works department and help Public Works better prioritize resident concerns.	Expenditure on physical infrastructure and community institutions is the principal reason for government, yet Leetsdale is spending less as a percentage of revenue today than it did in the past. At the same time, road repair has proven to be a highly variable expense, suggesting a reactive approach to maintenance.

Update Zoning Ordinances	Review zoning ordinances to see whether they should be updated based on comprehensive plans.	Leetsdale's Zoning Ordinance was originally adopted in 1972 and updated in 1991. The ordinance does not identify Community Development Objectives and has not been updated to reflect comprehensive plans published between 2000 and 2010.
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The comprehensive assessment that follows this summary details the analysis performed and the conclusions reached.