





# Welcome

## A letter from the Berks County Board of Commissioners

Dear Reader:

The Berks County Board of Commissioners is excited to unveil our first economic development action plan, IMAGINE Berks. Over the past several months, we worked on engaging stakeholders, community members, and businesses alike to help give feedback and input for our plan. Through these conversations, interviews, and surveys, the IMAGINE Berks plan took shape. In creating this plan, it has been our desire to be as inclusive as possible because we recognize that each municipality and community in Berks County is unique and is equally important in the success of this plan.

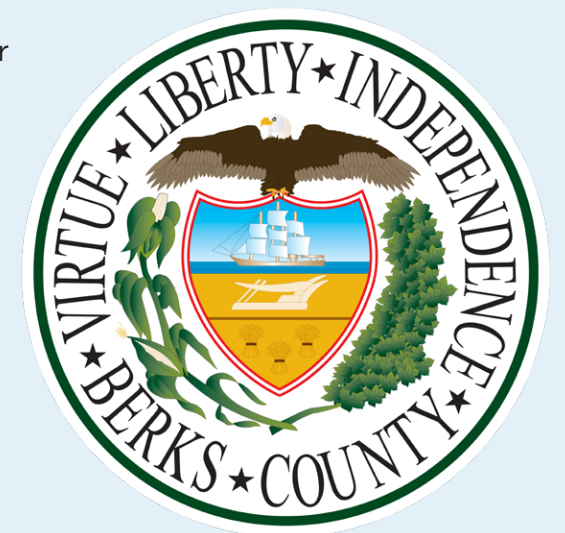
We are pleased to present the report to the residents of Berks County as our commitment to help make Berks a better place to live, work, and grow. The project team overseeing the planning process included: our Economic Development Director and Coordinator, Pamela Shupp Menet and Derek Harris; our Planning Director and Assistant Director, David Hunter and Ashley Showers; the Berks County Redevelopment Authority Executive Director, Ken Pick; and the Berks County Industrial Development Authority Executive Director, Jeremy Zaborowski. This team's time and energy focused on creating an achievable plan with measurable outcomes. Working with our business and community partners, we believe that this plan accomplishes both.

We would like to invite you to join us as we IMAGINE Berks. Over the next 5 years, we will report on our progress on an annual basis, in order to provide public accountability for the plan goals.

Commissioner Christian Y. Leinbach, Chair

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# Acknowledgements

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## Planning Support



## Community Leaders

This work would not have been possible without the contributions of the 75+ community members who participated in 18 hours of virtual workshops and whose input informed the strategies enclosed in this plan. Thank you to these passionate and generous community leaders.



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# Executive Summary

## Vision and Key Principles

**B**erks County is a welcoming community that supports an exceptional quality of life, including robust business and industry, rich cultural heritage, and a resilient economy. The county's unique mix of rural and urban spaces is enhanced by the people who join together to foster and share the community's assets.

The county's population is growing in size and diversity, creating momentum and a basis for a successful economic future.

*Through this strategic economic development plan, the community is asked to **IMAGINE** Berks County as a place where our diverse assets are recognized, uplifted, and celebrated to ensure economic prosperity for all. By joining together to champion and implement this strategic plan, Berks County will transform this vision into reality.*

The IMAGINE Berks plan is organized into six economic development focus areas, each defined by goals, strategies, and desired outcomes that were developed through data analysis and community engagement. While this report and its supporting analysis reflect a point in time, the planning team considered the ever-changing dynamics of Berks' economy. As such, the plan is designed with enough detail to guide and catalyze action, yet enough flexibility to meet the future needs of the county.

The following overarching principles are the foundation of the plan and inform the individual goals and strategies herein. As the County and its partners shift from planning to implementation, the team will measure progress and adjust the approach as necessary while maintaining these key principles to ensure the plan's long-term vision is realized.

# Key Principles



Invest in strategies that support the retention and creation of “opportunity jobs”



Ensure public accountability in plan implementation by reporting back on progress



Prioritize investment in redevelopment activities, including industrial, commercial, and residential projects



Leverage the County's position as a regional partner



Invest in development that increases the tax base of Berks County



Recognize and support the growing diversity of the Berks community

IMAGINE Berks defines “**opportunity jobs**” as jobs that provide benefits and a wage greater than or equal to the county’s living wage (\$63,546 annually or \$30.55 per hour in 2020).<sup>1</sup> Living wage reflects the amount a household must earn, before taxes, to support a family of three with two adults and one child, in which one adult is working.



# The Approach to Strategy Development

IMAGINE Berks utilizes a multi-faceted approach to economic development, which requires the contributions of a variety of organizations and individuals.

Some strategies call for the creation of new economic development initiatives, while others seek to leverage and amplify existing programs. The plan was developed with the contributions and guidance of community members representing a variety of backgrounds, including residents, business owners, municipal officials, and educational and nonprofit leaders. Continued collaboration will be critical throughout the implementation of this plan. To promote accountability throughout implementation, lead organizations and strategic supporting partners have been identified for each of the plan’s actions steps. The county government will lead many of the plan’s strategies, but will also serve the roles of facilitator and partner, convening stakeholders and supporting community organizations that are leading economic development efforts that align with the principles and goals of IMAGINE Berks.

Lead organizations and strategic partners were engaged during plan drafting to gain feedback and confirm alignment in their role. During the implementation phase, the County and its partners will convene to further develop the work plans and specific responsibilities for each strategy.

## Goals, Strategies, and Metrics

The IMAGINE Berks planning team gathered valuable insights and feedback from community members and reviewed this information in conjunction with quantitative data to form a comprehensive understanding of Berks County’s economy – both its current state and future outlook. The planning team used this information to assess the community’s strengths, challenges, and opportunities. Based on this analysis, six focus areas were identified:

- Business & Industry Growth
- Small Business & Entrepreneurship
- Infrastructure & Land Use
- Talent & Economic Mobility
- Housing
- Placemaking

For each of these focus areas, the project team prioritized goals and strategies based on their potential impact on economic development and feasibility for implementation. Metrics were assigned to each focus area to track the progress of implementation and the overall state of the economy over the course of this 5-year plan.

The following represents a summary of the plan’s goals, strategies, and metrics. Additional details about these strategies – including specific action steps, timing, and county and partner roles – are included in the “IMAGINE Berks Implementation Plan” section of this report.

Process metrics will be used to directly measure the progress of the IMAGINE Berks plan. Additional economic indicators will be tracked and assessed in relation to strategy implementation and external economic factors.

# Business Industry & Growth



**Goal:** Encourage industrial and commercial redevelopment

**Strategies:**

- Invest in site development where market and environmental conditions call for a public role
- Support growth in industries that offer opportunity jobs, particularly across the Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing sectors
- Support agricultural industry growth

**Metrics:**

Process Metrics

- Create priorities for a site reuse program to provide financial support for projects related to site rehabilitation and reuse
- Create a site reuse investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI)

Economic Indicators

- Decrease in business contraction and relocation
- Increase in real GDP

The IMAGINE Berks site reuse program will back the county’s future growth plans in designated growth areas and foster vibrant municipalities. The program will ensure the efficient completion of priority development projects with strong returns-on-investment.

The Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services sector in Berks County is a targeted area for growth. This sector spans industries and includes certain occupations and jobs in health care, computer systems design, and architectural and engineering services, for example.

# Small Business & Entrepreneurship



**Goal:** Support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurship to enable the creation of high-growth ventures, main street amenities, and wealth-building for residents

**Strategies:**

- Increase government and school district spending with local businesses within Berks County
- Support small business and entrepreneurial ecosystem resource mapping and strategic plan efforts that are underway
- Improve access to financial resources and market access for main street and high-growth-potential businesses
- Support small businesses working to scale their operations to increase efficiency and achieve exponential growth

**Metrics:**

Process Metrics

- Increase in the level of government purchasing from local small businesses

Economic Indicators

- Increase in the amount of capital deployed into small businesses and start-up businesses
- Increase in small business birth rate to at least be on par with the US average

Increasing market access for main street and high-growth-potential businesses means increasing the extent to which businesses can reach customers to sell their products or services.

Small business is defined as an entity with up to 250 employees. For the purposes of the IMAGINE Berks Plan, however, strategies to support small business and entrepreneurship will be focused mainly on entities with up to 50 employees, including microenterprises with up to 5 employees which account for roughly half of the county’s establishments. Business and Industry growth strategies will focus mainly on entities with more than 50 employees.



# Infrastructure & Land Use



**Goal:** Support land development that increases the tax base in Berks County

**Strategies:**

- Identify growth corridors and specific communities for development opportunities
- Examine existing and potential public transit and ensure it aligns with business and industry growth
- Support passenger rail expansion
- Support growth and positioning of the Reading Regional Airport as a critical economic development asset

**Metrics:**

Process Metrics

- Identify land or locations within Berks County best suited for development, emphasizing infill and places that have or are close to underused utilities and infrastructure
- Create an infrastructure investment program to support projects that provide a net revenue benefit for the county and an identified Return on Investment (ROI)
- Create incentives to increase inter-municipal planning and regional collaboration
- Co-host an annual workshop for the 5 regional planning areas to discuss benefits of multi-municipal planning

Economic Indicators

- Increase in rate of development within established growth areas, as measured by building permits by municipality
- Increase in percentage of households with broadband of any type

Through the IMAGINE Berks planning and analysis process, it was determined that any remaining land that is developed needs to be assessed at \$131,000 per acre on average to provide the county with tax revenues to maintain existing expenditures and service levels throughout the county.

# Talent & Economic Mobility



**Goal:** Invest in Berks County’s greatest asset – its people – by supporting structures to connect residents to opportunity jobs so that they may more fully contribute to and benefit from the Berks County economy

**Strategies:**

- Retain and add workers to Berks County, prioritizing retention and support for the unemployed and underemployed
- Invest in and support workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives
- Support businesses in recruiting talent for immediate hiring, retaining employees, and reducing the number of labor force exits
- Match disconnected youth and Latino talent with opportunity jobs and pathways to prosperity

**Metrics:**

Economic Indicators

- Increase in percent of persons age 25+ years with a high school diploma or its equivalent (increase in educational attainment)
- Increase in available workforce
- Increase labor force participation rate
- Decrease in unemployment
- Increase in number of jobs in Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing (the industries with the greatest potential to contribute to additional earnings and earned income tax revenue)
- Increase in median earnings
- Increase in median earnings (dollars) for full-time, year-round workers with earnings



# Housing



**Goal:** Address the county’s needs for new housing and redeveloped housing that is accessible and attainable

**Strategies:**

- Assess and address the mismatch between housing stock and housing demand, including age, price point, type, and location
- Promote adaptive reuse and redevelopment of obsolete commercial and industrial properties

**Metrics:**

Process Metric

- Prioritize a staff position to develop and coordinate housing strategies, plans, and rehabilitation programs
- Create a housing investment program to accelerate development of attainable and accessible housing and leverage other financial resources with an identified Return on Investment (ROI)

Economic Indicators

- Increase in total housing starts
- Decrease in the number of cost-burdened households (households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs)
- Increase in the total number of rental units
- Increase in higher-value owner housing in order to open up and create availability for mid-value and affordable housing, improving alignment between housing stock and earning levels of residents and prospective residents

# Placemaking



**Goal:** Invest in and highlight community assets that provide access to a variety of arts, culture, greenspace, and recreation opportunities for all residents and future residents

**Strategies:**

- Fund enhancements to new and existing public spaces located across the county, prioritizing greenspace and inclusive gathering spaces
- Support main street and commercial district revitalization programs
- Continue investment in the trail systems
- Develop a cohesive and collaborative Berks County message, along with shared marketing resources

**Metrics:**

Process Metrics

- Invest \$250,000 in the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan recommendations
- Convene community leaders to identify priority projects and collaboratively seek funding to support improvements and redevelopment of main streets, commercial district, and corridors
- Increase in trail system connections
- Create coordinated messaging across economic development, tourism, and any other communications supported by the County

Community assets are the collective resources within a community that promote the social and physical well-being of community members. Community assets are integral to a community’s overall quality of life. Community assets may include private, public, and nonprofit organizations, as well as physical places and structures such as parks, trails, and gathering spaces.





# Baseline Assessment

## Imagining Together: The Community Engagement Process

**B**erks County is comprised of 72 municipalities and is home to more than 428,000 residents. Its diversity of landscape and people are recognized as a strength of the community.

Yet this diversity also necessitates a nuanced approach to economic development that addresses the unique needs and opportunities across the county. This report was developed with the help of community members whose expertise and lived experience directly shaped the planning process and outcomes, including the vision, goals, and strategies within. Residents from various municipalities across the county contributed to the planning process.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with 42 key stakeholders representing varied backgrounds, including residents, small business owners, industry leaders, and elected officials. The information gathered during these interviews was used in conjunction with quantitative economic baseline analyses to understand the current areas of strength and opportunity across Berks County. The level of engagement demonstrated through these discussions was incredibly valuable to the plan and will continue to be integral during strategy implementation.

To expand outreach, the project team also conducted an online survey. Just over 440 people from 69 different municipalities provided important insights using this engagement channel. Many respondents mentioned the beautiful scenery and rural, natural landscape when they described why they love Berks County. Diversity, outdoor recreation, educational opportunities, and the low cost of living were also commonly mentioned. The most common economic strength mentioned by respondents is Berks' location. A significant number of respondents consider manufacturing as the county's greatest economic asset, as well as health care, farming, and small business. Participants suggested a range of improvements, but the need to improve roads, transportation, and housing were particularly common.

What do you love most about Berks County?



What is Berks County’s most significant economic asset?



If you had a magic wand, what would you improve in Berks County?



Cross-municipal collaboration will be key to the success of this plan and the county’s economic growth in general. As such, the Berks Municipal Partnership (BMP) was engaged throughout the planning process to solicit additional feedback and insight from elected officials across five planning regions. Established in 2005 by Albright College’s Center for Excellence in Local Government (CELG), the partnership is composed of one county commissioner and twenty-four township, borough, and city elected officials from both small and large communities.<sup>2</sup> BMP is a forum for addressing common issues at a regional or county level. It promotes intergovernmental cooperation, including knowledge sharing and resource pooling. The partnership’s involvement in the implementation of this plan will be incredibly valuable.

Additionally, the IMAGINE Berks project team worked with Fourth Economy Consulting and Connect the Dots to facilitate virtual “build sessions.” Through these interactive sessions, more than 75 community representatives worked together in small groups to begin building the strategies that have informed this plan.

Community engagement was a priority throughout the entire planning process in order to ensure the county’s economic development plan is representative of those who live, work, and recreate in Berks County. By offering multiple channels of communication, the County engaged with a diverse group of community members who helped identify the solutions that will address areas of challenge and opportunity in Berks.

County-wide support will remain critical as this work transitions from planning to implementation. Through continued collaboration, Berks County’s Strategic Economic Development Action Plan will serve as a catalyst for measurable, equitable growth throughout the community.



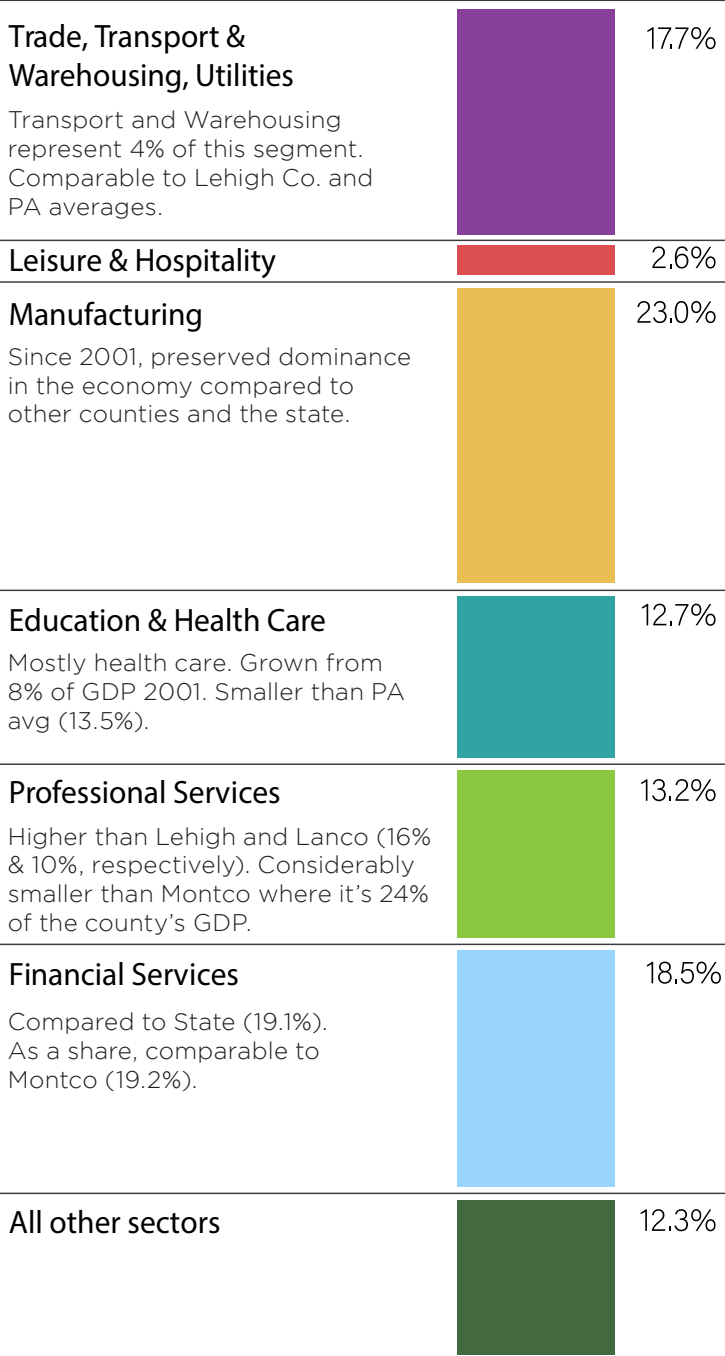
The Resilience of Berks County and its Economy Today

Business Sectors

Berks County has a highly competitive economy that has shown resilience through numerous economic cycles, including an economic rebound following the Great Recession and relative stability throughout the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The county has a stable employment base and strong growth trends relative to its neighboring counties. With an average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 1.4% from 2001 to 2019, Berks County has had greater GDP growth relative to Lancaster, Montgomery, and Lehigh counties. Historically, this economic strength has been anchored by two sectors: Manufacturing, reflecting 23% of GDP and 18.3% of employment; and Education & Health Care, representing 12.7% of GDP and 17.7% of employment.

While smaller-size ventures comprise a large portion of the county’s business community, Berks County has a lower business birth rate (7.8%) than many of its neighboring counties, as well as the state (8.5%) and the nation (10.2%). Business births in main street industries — such as Restaurants, Retail, and Arts & Entertainment establishments — lag births across other industry segments. The county’s diverse business ownership is also relatively low, with reduced female business ownership rates compared to neighboring Montgomery and Lancaster counties (17.3% of all Berks County businesses with employees are women owned) and low business ownership rates across race and ethnicity (6.6% of all Berks County businesses with employees are minority owned and 1.7% are Hispanic or Latino owned).

Sector Composition of Berks County



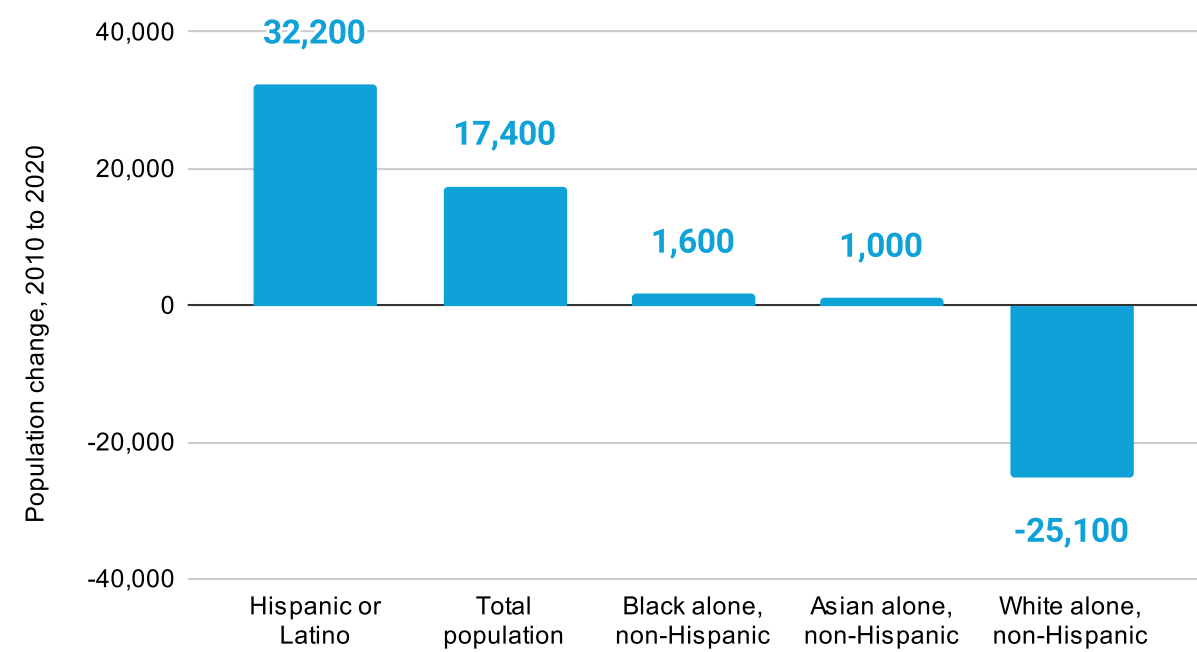
Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019

Population and Demographics

From a population perspective, Berks County has grown by 4.2% from 2010 to 2020, slower than its neighboring counties, especially those around the Philadelphia metropolitan statistical area (MSA). That being said, the majority of Pennsylvania counties declined in population during that same period, yet again highlighting the county’s relative economic strength and competitiveness. Much of this growth can be attributed to increases in the county’s Latino population, which grew by 48% in the same period.

These changes in population coincide with anticipated changes in available workforce over the course of the upcoming decade. We expect to see an increase in retirement along with a decrease in high school graduation rates, while postsecondary graduation rates remain roughly the same. These trends heighten the importance of population retention and workforce development to maintain an active pipeline of talent.

Population Change by Race/Ethnicity, 2010 - 2020



Source: Decennial Census

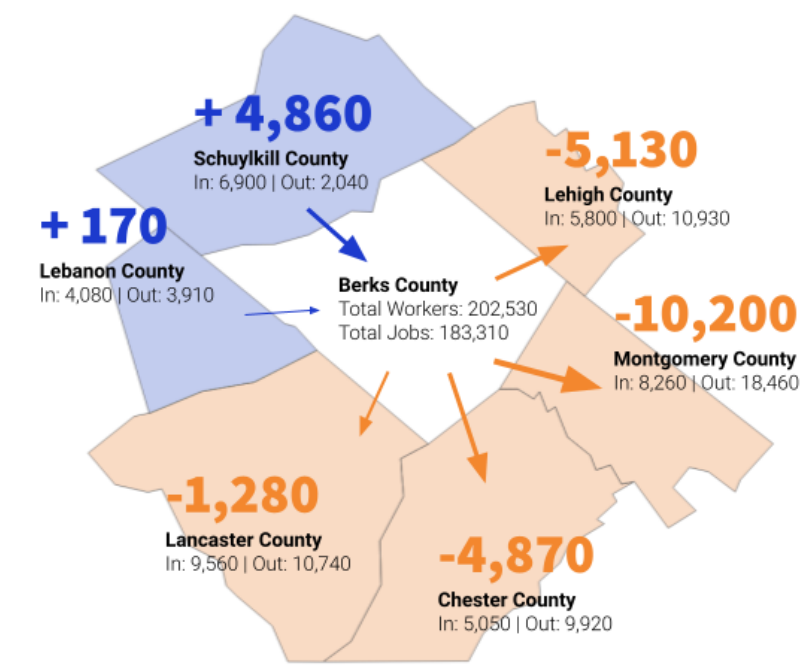
Workforce Characteristics

Employment in Berks County has been characterized by low density development with higher densities concentrated in relatively few census block groups, primarily in Reading. Outside of these areas, employment of less than 1 job per 10 acres is common. This correlates with trends that show Berks County as a net exporter of talent, with more workers leaving Berks County for work than commuting in. Of the 202,530 resident workers living in Berks County, more than 4 in 10, totalling 88,060, commute out of the county for work.

Much of this trend can be attributed to wages, with more than half of all outbound commuters leaving Berks County to work in jobs that pay above \$40,000. Improving overall wage competitiveness could increase the county’s capacity to attract and retain labor.

For example, the average annual wage in Montgomery County is \$72,000 – roughly \$20,000 higher than in Berks County – pointing to higher earning opportunities.

Labor Flow



Berks County exports labor, especially high skill/high pay workers.

Access to higher wage jobs is a determinant for outbound commuting. **More than half of all outbound commuters leave Berks county to work in jobs that pay above \$40,000.**

The largest flow out of the County is to Montgomery and Chester Counties which are tied to the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington MSA.

Source: Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics, 2018

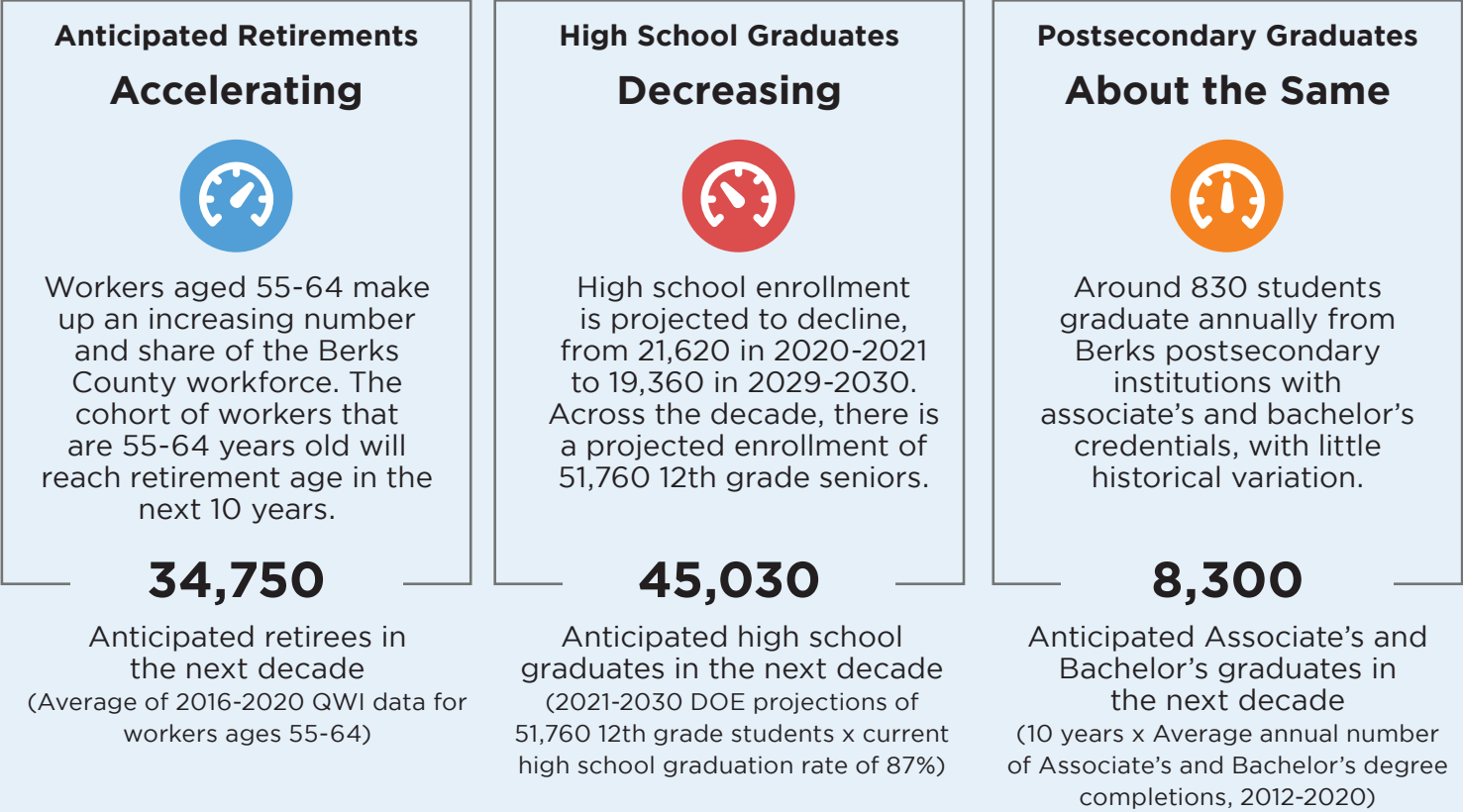
Wage Competitiveness by Sector

| Industry Sector                  | Annual Wage in 2019<br>(% difference from PA average) |                    |                    |                    |          |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------|
|                                  | Berks                                                 | Lancaster          | Lehigh             | Montgomery         | PA       |
| Education and Health Care        | \$52,800<br>-1.2%                                     | \$49,300<br>-7.8%  | \$60,600<br>13.5%  | \$52,500<br>-1.8%  | \$53,400 |
| Financial Activities             | \$77,000<br>-15.1%                                    | \$72,400<br>-20.2% | \$70,400<br>-22.5% | \$113,400<br>24.9% | \$90,800 |
| Leisure & Hospitality            | \$16,800<br>-23.8%                                    | \$18,400<br>-16.2% | \$19,800<br>-10.2% | \$21,900<br>-0.6%  | \$22,000 |
| Manufacturing                    | \$62,200<br>-3.2%                                     | \$57,600<br>-10.3% | \$73,600<br>14.6%  | \$94,500<br>47.1%  | \$64,200 |
| Professional & Business Services | \$62,700<br>-23.3%                                    | \$62,700<br>-23.2% | \$76,000<br>-6.9%  | \$97,400<br>19.2%  | \$81,700 |
| Total, all industries            | \$50,900<br>-11.1%                                    | \$47,300<br>-17.4% | \$56,700<br>-0.9%  | \$72,200<br>26.2%  | \$57,200 |

Wages are competitive in education/health care and manufacturing sectors relative to surrounding counties but remain below state averages

Source: Source: BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (2019 Private Employment).





Sources: Census Quarterly Workforce Indicators, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Berks County Community Foundation, National Education Center Statistics, IPEDS. Postsecondary credentials for Associate's and Bachelor's awards were tabulated using the following institutions: Alvernia University, Kutztown University, Platt College-Berks Technical Institute, Penn State Berks, Reading Area Community College, Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences, Berks Career & Technology Center

Berks County is trailing state and regional averages in tracking towards a pre-pandemic workforce. In 2021, Pennsylvania's labor force averaged approximately 3% fewer people (relative to 2019 levels). The gap for Berks County is larger. Its labor force is roughly 5% smaller than in 2019, reflecting 10,500 fewer people engaged in the labor market. This labor shortage has impacted the county's employment base at a time when key sectors are facing high demand. The shortage of workers is particularly acute in two sectors, Manufacturing and Health Care, collectively driving over 1/3 of the county's GDP and employment. Employment data shows both sectors struggling to return to 2019 workforce levels. Other sectors, such as Retail, Food Service & Accommodation and Transportation & Warehousing, are also struggling to rebuild their labor force despite strong demand. Across all service-providing sectors in Berks County, employment is down nearly 9%. These service industries are operating with roughly 12,600 fewer workers.



Unequal Dynamics Between Jobseekers and the Local Job Market

*For every one job created by industry growth, there are seven vacancies created by labor force exits, representing an estimated 4% turnover between 2018 and 2028.* With the number of retirements from the workforce accelerating, the number of post-secondary graduates holding steady, and the number of high school graduates declining, the demand for local labor is clear. Additionally, Berks County has a larger base of workers who live in the county than jobs available in each respective industry. If Berks closed the “out-commuting gap” and the total number of jobs available in Berks matched the number of resident workers, there would be \$1 Billion in additional earnings within the county. Further scrutiny of commuter patterns shows workforce integration into neighboring counties, with more than half of outbound commuters leaving Berks to work in jobs that pay above \$40,000. Nearly half (over 10,000) work in Montgomery County, with another 5000+ who work in Lehigh County and 4900+ in Chester County. These data realities indicate a need to prioritize workforce retention and the creation of opportunity jobs that will enable workers to successfully live, work, and economically progress within Berks County.



Land Availability is a Challenge

*Only 22% of Berks County's land supports commercial and residential activity, greatly restricting opportunities for development.* The majority of employment growth in Berks County has been low density and dispersed. Outside of the City of Reading and a few other census block groups, employment of less than 1 job per 10 acres is common. With a significant portion of land set aside for preservation and conservation, every land-use decision requires a trade-off between competing choices, such as using land for homes or businesses, continuing to prioritize land preservation, increasing the local tax base, or achieving other development goals.



Housing Stock is Not Meeting Housing Demand

A better alignment of housing is critical to any effort to retain or attract residents. In Berks County, we see a need for more affordable rental housing and more higher-value owner housing, bolstered by the county's employment gains in the past decade. When considering affordability, 63% of low-income renter households (those earning less than 50% area median income) live in units that are unaffordable to them. This totals 11,630 households in Berks County. *When considering higher-end housing, the county's proximity to the Philadelphia metro area keeps construction costs high while lower household incomes prevent builders from extracting the same value, which discourages new development.* Furthermore, current local planning and zoning has not allowed for the development of housing that matches new household formation patterns and housing demand, such as condos and attached developments. The lack of higher-value owner housing increases demand and cost of limited housing options in the middle of the market, increasing competition and exacerbating accessibility and affordability challenges.

These dynamics connect with the growing misalignment between housing and population growth. In terms of overall numbers, the county has seen 2.8% growth in housing units since 2010 compared with 3% population growth. Additionally, 10% of housing is efficiency or one-bedroom, yet nearly 26% of households indicate a person living alone. This trend is further indicated within the data, which shows the county never recovered new housing starts after the 2008 recession. The quality of housing in Berks County as a whole also needs to be considered. Berks County has the oldest housing stock in the region, outside of Schuylkill County. **Only 2.6% of all units in Berks County were built in 2010 or later, while 25% of all units were built in 1939 or earlier.**

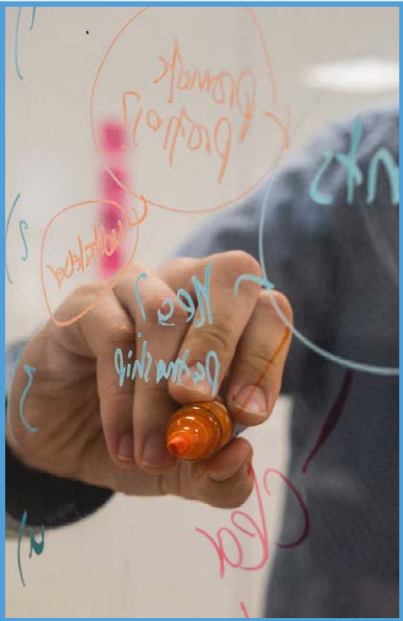
Diversity and Inclusion as Keys to Population Growth

In the decade spanning 2010 to 2020, Berks County’s population grew by 4.2%, making it one of the few counties in Pennsylvania to achieve population growth in this timeframe. This positive economic trend can be directly attributed to the growth of the Latino population, which grew by 48%, more than ten times the overall population growth rate; it is the largest ethnic group in the county. **Without this increase, Berks County would have seen a reduction in population by an estimated 14,800, or approximately 3%, of its residents, in the last decade.** Much of this growth was in and around Reading, where stark differences are seen in housing unit availability, job accessibility, and opportunities for economic mobility in comparison with the rest of the county. As the demand for talent increases and the importance of sustaining the local tax base is heightened, inclusion of this important, growing segment of the population will be key to the county’s economic future.



A Unified Planning Approach

Throughout the development of this strategic economic development action plan, the project team was dedicated to leveraging the county’s strengths and past successes, while also identifying solutions to address current challenges and opportunities. There was substantial past and ongoing economic development work to be considered during the planning process in order to ensure that this strategic plan both amplified and filled any gaps in existing economic development efforts. Some of the key initiatives that informed this report, and in some instances were directly incorporated into the plan’s strategies, include: the *Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategic Plan*; *Berks County Industrial Development Authority Action Plan*; *Berks County’s Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan Update*; *Broadband Feasibility Study*; the *Freight Rail Plan*; and the *City of Reading’s Downtown Plus* planning efforts.



Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategic Plan

The Berks County and Greater Reading Area Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Strategic Plan is bringing together nonprofit, for-profit, and government leaders with the ultimate goal of creating an entity to onboard, educate, and promote the entrepreneurial ecosystem amongst Berks County organizations, businesses, and individuals. Led by the Berks Alliance, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA), and Allium Development Group, this work includes data collection and ecosystem mapping, strategic planning, and a public launch. In order to assess existing resources and strengths of the ecosystem, as well as current and future needs, the planning team is engaging service providers, business owners, and other members of the entrepreneurial community through interviews and surveys. This data will be used to develop the mission, vision, and operating structure of the future entrepreneurial ecosystem entity. The planned public launch tentatively includes a website with local resources in addition to a live events structure.



BerksIDA Action Plan

The mission of the Berks County Industrial Development Authority (BerksIDA) is to generate revenue from land sales, interest income, financing fees, and government grants that will be used to create a continuously replenished resource for industrial park development that can be used by future generations. BerksIDA provides a variety of services to assist in the creation and retention of employment opportunities. It also provides financing options and technical assistance to developers, industries, and other economic development organizations. The goals of BerksIDA include: retention and strengthening of existing businesses; improved utilization and development of local infrastructure; creation of investment, employment and wealth in the community; recruitment of new business; and workforce development. In its 2022 action plan, the BerksIDA committed to further develop and market the county’s newest industrial park, Berks Park 183. In late 2021, SunCap Property Group acquired 35 acres of the park.

This investment is expected to exceed \$40 million and create approximately 200 jobs; once complete, the facility will generate \$1M in annual property taxes for Berks County, Bern Township, and Schuylkill Valley School District, as well as payroll tax benefits to the state and local taxing authorities.<sup>3</sup> Additionally the BerksIDA will continue to support various land development projects and foster relationships with banks and businesses to advance its financing programs, which include tax exempt and bond financing, short-term bridge loans, and grant writing assistance. Finally, the BerksIDA will optimize its marketing and business attraction activities.



### Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan Update

The Berks County Planning Commission, in partnership with the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, is updating the Berks County Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan. Early in the planning process, the team issued a public survey designed to evaluate the opinions and experiences of the public who engage in outdoor recreation throughout Berks County and to provide guidance in developing the Greenway, Park, and Recreation Plan update. At the conclusion of the data collection period in July 2021, a total of 1,009 respondents had completed the web survey.

Based on Pennsylvania’s comprehensive outdoor recreation plan, the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan will prioritize the following five areas:

- **Health and Wellness:** The plan will include strategies to increase awareness about the connection between good health and the outdoors. It will also leverage partnerships with the healthcare community to expand nature-based health and wellness programs.
- **Inclusivity:** The plan will ensure that all people feel welcomed and engaged in the county’s outdoor spaces by developing strategies to overcome barriers through enhanced access, amenities, and programs.
- **Conservation, Sustainability, and Stewardship:** The plan will help community members balance the needs of Berks County’s natural resources with the ever-changing demands of recreation enthusiasts through careful planning and design, innovation and partnerships, and an emphasis on stewardship by all.
- **Economic Development and Funding:** The plan will help safeguard and invest in the county’s wealth of outdoor assets in order to grow the outdoor recreation economy.
- **Technology:** The plan will evaluate how Berks can capitalize on technology to increase awareness and access to recreation without it being disruptive or destructive.

The planning team is drafting goals and strategies around these five areas of focus, with completion of the plan scheduled for the end of 2022.



### Freight Rail Plan

The Eastern Pennsylvania Freight Alliance (EPFA) has proposed a multi-regional freight plan for the 10-county area comprising Berks, Carbon, Lebanon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike and Schuylkill counties, encompassing 398 municipalities. The EPFA anticipates developing a plan that coordinates all modes of freight travel to create a robust mega-regional transportation network that is safe, convenient, and efficiently accommodates the growing industrial sector without jeopardizing system mobility, reliability, or security.

The EPFA is a group of metropolitan planning organizations including Lackawanna/Luzerne Metropolitan Planning Organization (LLTS), Lebanon County Metropolitan Planning Organization (LEBCO), Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVPC/LVTS), Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance (NEPA MPO), and Reading Area Transportation Study (RATS). These organizations have coalesced around the growing freight economy, and the freight plan will seek to coordinate multimodal freight travel and discuss multimodal travel to work for employees.

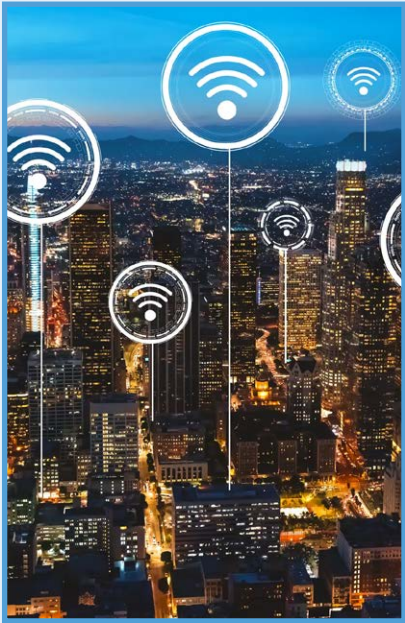
The project area includes key access points and corridors along the highway networks of interstates 76, 78, 80, 81, 84, 380, and 476 as well as the key state roads, such as routes 6, 11, 22, 33, 61, 72, 222, 309, 315, 322, 422, 501, and 924, and many other local and lower-order roads, bridges, freight rail, and air cargo systems. The project area also has direct connections to port facilities located outside of the region. The EPFA spans a region of nearly 2.2 million people, or over 17% of the commonwealth’s population. Its coverage includes 238,942 people employed in the ‘industrial sector’: transportation and warehousing, manufacturing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction and wholesale trades alone.<sup>4</sup>

The transportation infrastructure inherited from previous generations was built to improve efficiency and serve the needs of the past. In today’s global economy, freight movement is a complex and competitive component that is integral in all parts of society. Freight planning is an essential element of a region’s transportation planning effort, to ensure transportation is safe and efficient for all members of the community. Efficient movement of freight between markets is critical to the success and livelihood of the region’s and the state’s economies. Arguably, the freight moving through the mega-region supports the national economy and is evidenced by the total GDP of partner regions, which totals \$99,227,187 annually.<sup>5</sup> However, the rapid growth in new freight facilities across the region – currently the highest in the nation – is creating significant strain and new challenges for land use, infrastructure, equitable growth, government resources, local values, emergency management, the workforce and employers, housing, and the environment.

With over 100 million square feet of existing industrial space in the EPFA market today, and at least another 35 million square feet in planning or construction, the private sector continues to recognize the value of the mega-region’s location and proximity to market, labor force, industrial legacy, and available land, among other attributes that have caused this market to increase by at least a third in the last five years.<sup>6</sup> The time is now to manage, prepare, and grow multi-regional freight planning.

Regional freight planning is a community-based, data-driven, multimodal planning process specific to freight movement that delivers an intentional and implementable strategy for improving freight mobility and safety. Although the vision, goals, and actions will be developed as part of the planning process, anticipated objectives include identifying the origins, routes, and destinations of freight movement, assessing the existing multimodal infrastructure, communicating with stakeholders, and making informed decisions to support the EPFA’s vision for safety and the growth of its communities.

The project timeframe is proposed to be 12-18 months, with expected completion in the summer of 2023.



### Broadband Feasibility Study

The County is completing a network feasibility study in partnership with the Berks Alliance, the United Way of Berks County, and the Wyomissing Foundation. The County has contracted Lit Communities, a broadband infrastructure provider, to conduct a quantifiable assessment of broadband access and availability to residents and businesses across Berks County. This assessment will survey and engage residents to identify areas without coverage, understand any quality issues, and quantify costs. This work will also engage carriers to understand existing assets and capabilities. Once gaps and opportunities have been identified, the team will design solutions to increase broadband access and availability. The projects developed through this planning process will be matched with available public and private funding sources before implementation and construction begin. The plan is expected to be complete in 2022.

The Broadband Feasibility Study is especially important given the passage of the \$1.2 trillion federal infrastructure bill, which includes investment in broadband infrastructure that aims to narrow the digital divide across the US. Pennsylvania will receive a minimum allocation of \$100 million to help provide broadband coverage across the state, including access to the 394,000+ residents who currently lack it. Additionally, about 23% of people in Pennsylvania will be eligible for the Affordability Connectivity Benefit that helps low-income families afford internet access.<sup>7</sup>



### Downtown Plus Plan

The City of Reading is the fourth largest city in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and home to several nationally recognized companies such as Carpenter Technology, Sweet Street Desserts, DS Smith, and Reading Truck Body. It is also known for its several colleges, universities, governmental bodies, and healthcare facilities. The City of Reading Administration initiated the Reading Downtown Plus Plan in 2020, which established a core goal for Reading to attract and retain businesses, visitors, residents, and developers. To meet that goal, the municipal government is focused on the improvement of downtown by embracing the community’s diverse culture, rich history, and growth potential. This work incorporates and builds upon former planning efforts, but will also put forth a new comprehensive plan that creates a unified vision for the development and redevelopment of Reading’s downtown in both the near and long term.

While the Downtown Plus Plan was not released prior to the completion of this report, the IMAGINE Berks Plan supports economic development across all municipalities, including the city of Reading. Once the Downtown Plus Plan is complete, the IMAGINE Berks implementation team will work to find alignment and opportunities for collaboration across both plans.

### Other Existing Studies and Plans that Informed IMAGINE Berks

- Penn Ave and Park / North Park Road Master Plan (2021)
- Berks Alliance Reading Rail Service Summary (2021)
- Berks County Commissioners Letter of Support Passenger Rail Service (2021)
- Press Release: Commissioners Approve Support for Tri-County Rail Service (2021)
- Passenger Rail Information Sheet (2021)
- Advanced Manufacturing Skills Gap in Greater Berks (2021)
- Berks County Comprehensive Plan 2030 Update (2020)
- Berks County Workforce Development Best Practices Report (2020)
- Berks Alliance Reading Rail Business Plan (2020)
- Downtown West Reading Master Plan (2020)
- PA Economic Competitiveness Dashboard (2020)
- How Local Governments Can Emerge Stronger from COVID-19 Cities | US News (2020)
- 18th Ward Area Comprehensive Plan (2018)
- Greening Readings Penn Street Final Report (2017)
- Berks County Disconnected Young Adult Report (2017)
- Berks County Commercial and Industrial Land Suitability Tool (2015)
- Ride to Prosperity (2013)
- Ride to Prosperity (2010)
- PEL RiverPlace Presentation (2005)
- Initiative for a Competitive Greater Reading Full Report (2003)



# A Catalyst for Action: The IMAGINE Berks Implementation Plan

## IMAGINE Berks Goals

Imagine Berks County as a place that fosters economic growth for all its community members by working collaboratively to...

- Encourage industrial and commercial redevelopment
- Support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurship to enable the creation of high-growth ventures, main street amenities, and wealth-building for residents
- Support land development that increases the tax base in Berks County
- Invest in the county's greatest asset — its people — by supporting structures to connect residents to opportunity jobs so that they may fully contribute to and benefit from the Berks County economy
- Address the county's needs for new housing and redeveloped housing that is accessible and attainable
- Invest in and highlight community assets that provide access to a variety of arts, culture, greenspace, and recreation opportunities for all residents and future residents



The IMAGINE Berks Project team describes Berks County as “the keystone of the Keystone State.” The county is made up of unique regions, characteristics, and assets, which help the community serve as a central component to the regional economy.

The main building blocks of Berks’ economy include: business and industry growth, small business and entrepreneurship, infrastructure and land use, talent and economic mobility, housing, and placemaking. The IMAGINE Berks strategic action plan acts as the keystone that locks these building blocks in place, so that, together, the plan’s strategies form a strong path toward realizing the county’s vision for economic development.

For each of the plan’s six focus areas, the report includes the following:

-  **Summary of Strengths & Opportunities:** Quantitative and qualitative data that were used to identify the strengths and opportunities of Berks County and guide strategy development.
-  **Strategy Name & Action Steps:** A summary of the strategy is provided in addition to specific action steps that will guide decision making during the implementation phase of this work.



**County Role:** While the county government will lead many of the strategies in this plan, there are certain initiatives that will be led by other organizations and authorities. As such, the role of the County for each action step is defined as one of the following:

- **Lead:** Active manager, director, and coordinator of the IMAGINE Berks strategy and implementation
- **Facilitator:** Convener of stakeholders, and investor in the work of others, serving as a catalyst of economic growth
- **Partner:** Supporter of organizations that are leading efforts which align with the key principles and goals of IMAGINE Berks



**Lead Organizations & Implementation Partners:** Accountability and clearly defined responsibilities will be critical to realizing the IMAGINE Berks vision. As such, this plan identifies specific organizational leads and partners for each action step. Lead organizations and partners were engaged during the planning process to ensure their alignment on these strategies and their commitment to implementation.



**Implementation Year:** To ensure the feasibility and success of the strategic plan, each action step is assigned a timing goal indicating the year in which the work plan will be initiated. Some action steps will be completed in the same year that they are launched, while the implementation of some strategies will span multiple years.



**Process Metrics and Economic Indicators:** While this report and its supporting analysis reflect a point in time, the planning process considered the ever-changing dynamics of Berks’ economy. As such, the plan is designed with enough detail to guide and catalyze action, yet sufficient flexibility to meet the future needs of the county. Process metrics have been identified for each focus area so that the County can report on the progress of implementation. Economic indicators have also been identified to track the state of the economy over the course of this 5-year plan. While there are external economic factors that will impact these indicators, analysis of these metrics will help guide implementation. By reviewing these indicators in relation to internal and external factors, implementation teams may adjust specific action steps as necessitated by changing market conditions and community needs.



**Best Practices:** The strategic plan also includes promising practices from other communities that have proven successful in achieving goals similar to those in the IMAGINE Berks plan. They serve as inspiring, exemplary models that can be tailored and refined to leverage Berks’ existing assets and meet the community’s specific needs.



Manufacturing companies have expressed difficulty filling open positions – a trend that is consistent across the country – but they also recognize the county’s strong skilled labor relative to other regions. The size and diversity of the healthcare system in Berks County make it an important asset, as well as an ideal place to train and work for those in the industry.

Berks has a strong presence of educational institutions and offerings, including a medical school, pharmacy program, nursing curriculums, and career and technology center. Through partnership with employers and industry leaders, these institutions can ensure the necessary training is available to support targeted industry growth.

Berks County’s services sector also remains competitive relative to its neighbors. The Professional Services sector makes up 13.2% of GDP and 12.8% of employment. While the Financial Services sector accounts for 18.5% of GDP, it makes up only 3.3% of the employment base. Agriculture has also influenced the history, culture, and economy of Berks County.

The county has a total of approximately 555,000 acres, but 73% of that land is set aside for conservation, preservation, and open space. Existing and future growth will be concentrated on the remaining land, which amounts to nearly 147,500 acres. While Tourism & Leisure has a small GDP contribution, community members recognize the opportunity to leverage the county’s existing cultural and recreational assets to enhance this sector and improve placemaking as a result.

The county has one of the largest number of acres preserved by an agricultural preservation program in both Pennsylvania and the United States – an important consideration in planning for the future.

## Business & Industry Growth



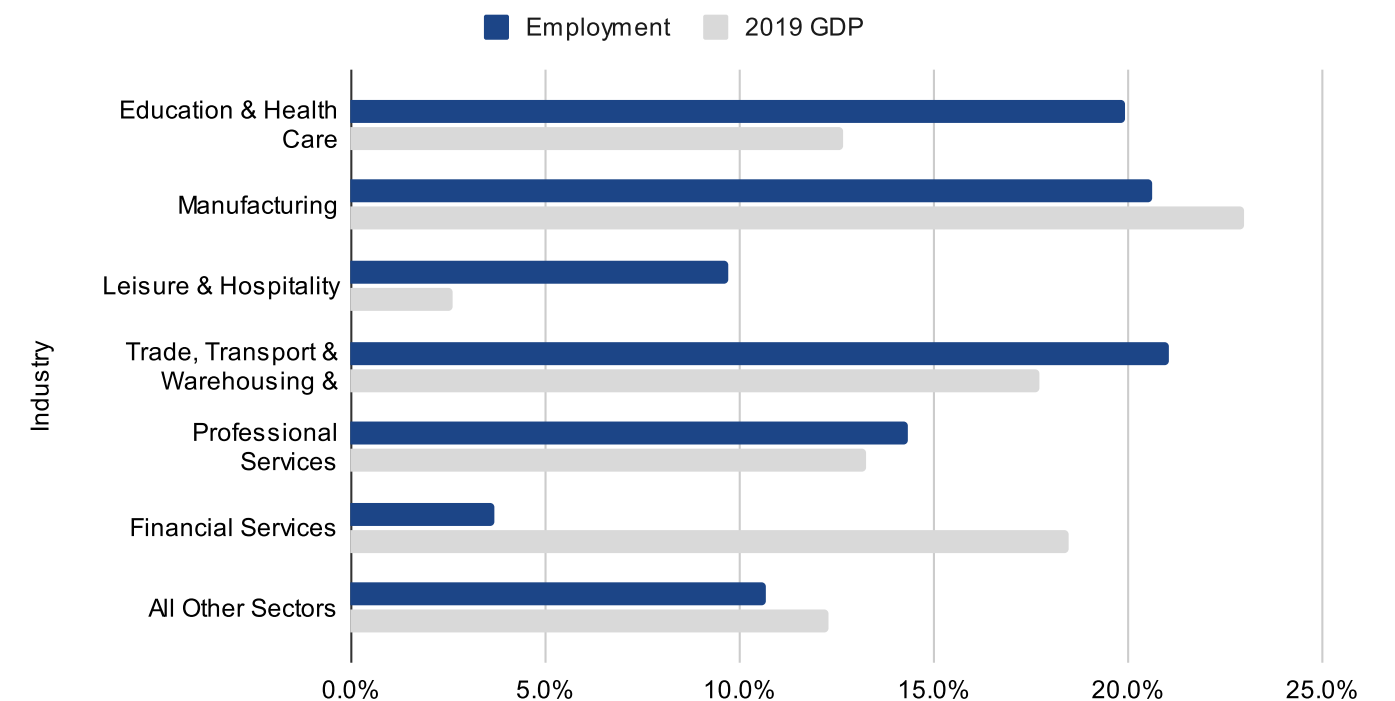
**Goal: Encourage industrial and commercial redevelopment**

### Business & Industry Growth | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

Berks County has a highly competitive economy, having a stable employment base, strong growth relative to its neighboring counties, and demonstrated resilience through business cycles. With an average annual GDP growth of 1.4% from 2001 to 2019, Berks County experienced greater GDP growth than Lancaster, Montgomery, and Lehigh counties. Historically, Berks County’s strongest economic sectors have been Manufacturing (23.0% of GDP, 18.3% of employment) and Education & Health Care (12.7% of GDP, 17.7% of employment). Berks County’s goods-producing sectors, predominantly manufacturing, have performed strongly since the Great Recession, especially relative to its neighbors. Looking forward, sector composition suggests Berks’ economy was less impacted by the pandemic than regions more reliant on sectors such as hospitality and food service.

While wage competitiveness in Berks County is below the state average across all sectors, Manufacturing and Education & Health Care are most competitive, down only -3.2% and -1.2%, respectively, relative to Pennsylvania. For these industries, the county needs to consider how it may support and facilitate investment to help align labor needs and technology integration with future demographic trends of labor supply.

### Employment by Industry Sector vs. GDP



Source: Employment data - Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages. GDP - Bureau of Economic Analysis.



Invest in site development where market and environmental conditions call for a public role

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | County Role | Lead Org(s)          | Partners                              | Implementation Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Promote and expand the JEAP process, which is available for developments that meet certain economic impact thresholds                                                                                                                                             | Lead        | BCED, GRCA, and BCPC | CELG                                  | 1                   |
| Map and track all Berks County infrastructure assets/gaps in water, sewer, electric, gas, and broadband                                                                                                                                                           | Lead        | BCPC                 | BCWSA, First Energy Met-Ed, UGI Corp. | 2                   |
| Support authorities to rehabilitate and reuse sites in the county. Create priorities for a site reuse program to provide financial support                                                                                                                        | Facilitator | BCRA, BerksIDA       |                                       | 2                   |
| Create a site reuse investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI) | Lead        | BCED, BerksIDA, BCRA |                                       | 2                   |

As part of this strategy, the County will promote and expand the Joint Economic Approval Program (JEAP). JEAP coordinates the permitting process for priority economic development projects by convening necessary parties, including county and local permitting agencies, to ensure timely review and approval for developments that meet certain economic impact thresholds. The JEAP program prioritizes projects that will create significant economic impact, for example, through job creation and tax revenue. To expand this program and its impact, the County will further develop project prioritization criteria. Through the IMAGINE Berks planning and analysis process, it was determined that for the county’s future growth to generate enough tax revenue to maintain current expenditure levels, new development in the county needs to be valued higher than \$131,000 per acre.

Future Land Use with Average Value per Acre

| Value per Acre                |           |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Agricultural Preservation     | \$3,370   |
| Designated Growth             | \$56,668  |
| Environmental Hazard          | \$19,378  |
| Existing Development          | \$147,046 |
| Future Growth                 | \$23,541  |
| Permanent Open Space and Rec  | \$5,058   |
| Rural Conservation            | \$6,737   |
| Transportation Network        | \$28,143  |
| Avg. for Total / All Land Use | \$42,433  |

Source: Geospatial data from the County of Berks.



Additional criteria will incorporate land use strategy, concentrating development in designated growth areas separate from land set aside for conservation, preservation, and open space. Berks County Economic Development (BCED), the Berks County Planning Commission (BCPC), and GRCA will lead this initiative, and CELG will serve as a planning partner. The work plan and implementation is scheduled to begin in year 1.

Additionally, BCPC will partner with Berks County Water and Sewer Authority (BCWSA), First Energy Met-Ed, and UGI Corporation to map and track all infrastructure assets to identify gaps in water, sewer, electric, and gas provision. A broadband study is already underway and its results will be used to inform this strategy. Infrastructure mapping will be used to inform the comprehensive plan and guide local planning efforts. This process is scheduled to begin in year 2.

In addition to process improvement and data provision, the County recognizes the need to financially invest in site development that will provide an economic return. To do so, the Berks County Redevelopment Authority (BCRA) and the Berks IDA will work to create priorities for a site reuse program, providing financial support to projects related to site rehabilitation and reuse. The specific priorities and funding amount will be determined during plan implementation.

The team will also create a site reuse investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI). This strategy will augment Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance (LERTA) and Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) to ensure projects that meet economic impact thresholds or address housing needs can be completed in a timely manner. Redevelopment of brownfields will be one criterion for prioritization. BerksIDA will be the developer of choice for projects funded through these programs. The funding amount will be determined during plan implementation, and returns on investment will be used to maintain the program in perpetuity. BCRA will also partner in this initiative.

As an example, this strategy could support Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) projects administered by BerksIDA and BCRA. Creation of these funds is scheduled for year 2.

The Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) guarantee program provides credit enhancement for projects to improve market access and lower capital costs through the use of guarantees to issuers of bonds or other indebtedness of up to \$5 million per project. Purposes of funding may be environmental projects, infrastructure, business site development, and local government site development, and specific project terms or criteria apply. The program assists in the development, redevelopment, and revitalization of brownfield and greenfield sites.

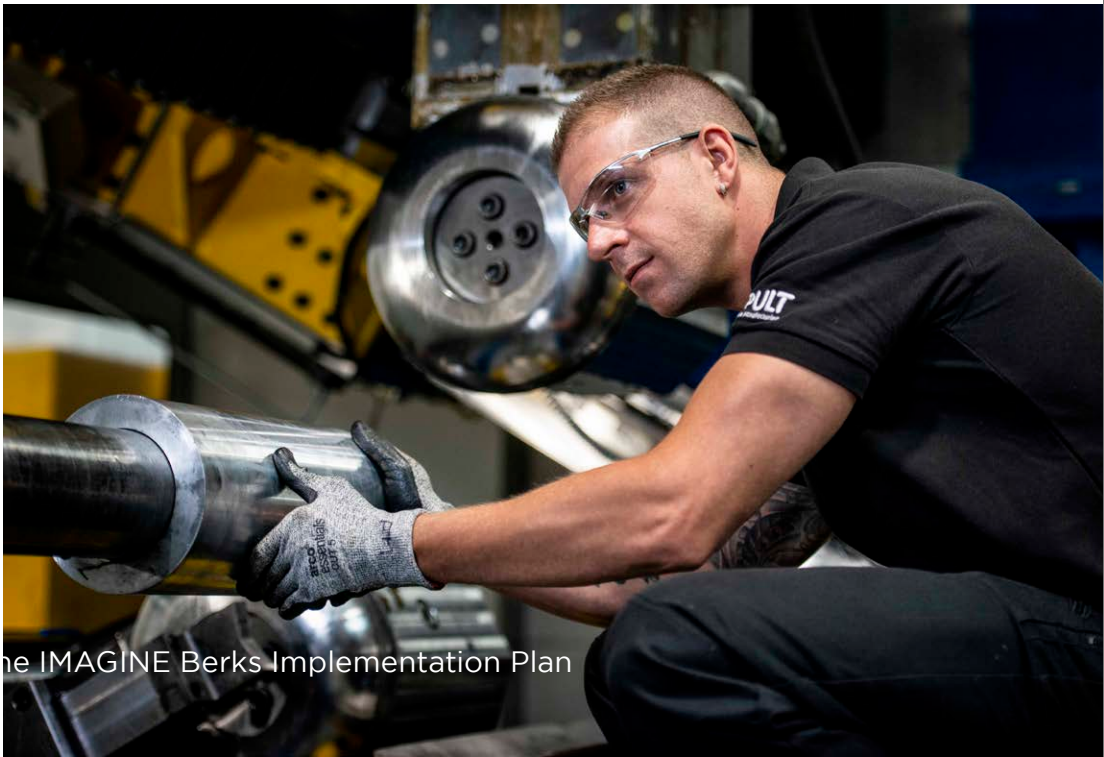
Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance (LERTA) is a tax abatement program created by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania authorizing local taxing authorities to provide tax exemption which may be used to incentivize redevelopment of aging or deteriorating properties.



Support growth in industries that offer opportunity jobs

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners  | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| Support growth in industries offering opportunity jobs, prioritizing Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing; promote succession planning and investment services, as well as the number of joint venture opportunities awarded through the Joint Venture Partnership program | Partner     | GRCA        | BCED, WDB | 2                              |

The IMAGINE Berks planning process identified the following sectors as the industries with the greatest potential to contribute to additional earnings and earned income tax revenue: Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (which spans industries and includes certain occupations and jobs in healthcare, computer systems design, and architectural and engineering services, for example), Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing. The County will assess opportunities for growth in these areas in order to increase opportunity jobs, which are defined as jobs providing benefits and a livable wage or higher. This work will promote an increase in succession planning and investment services, as well as the number of joint venture opportunities awarded to local companies through Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development's Joint Venture Partnership program, which partners international companies with Pennsylvania companies to bring them into the US. The County might engage with the [PA Center for Employee Ownership](#) to host information sessions for owners and employees about the process and opportunity of employee ownership during leadership transitions. In addition, [Ownership Works](#), a new national nonprofit aligned with a private equity fund, just launched and is currently identifying partner organizations and communities. Berks County Economic Development (BCED) will partner with GRCA and the Workforce Development Board (WDB) for this assessment, beginning in year 2.



Support agri-business industry growth

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                                                      | County Role | Lead Org(s)              | Partners                                                   | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Foster and support growth of agri-business and value-added production in Berks County to provide opportunities for advancing farm production and the financial resources to develop new products | Facilitator | BCED, Berks Dept. of Ag. | GRCA, O'Pake Inst., Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team, KUSBDC | 2                              |

Berks County Department of Agriculture will act as a facilitator, convening members of the Agri-Business sector to foster and support growth of agri-business and value-added production in Berks County. This can include promotion of the annual [Value-Add Producer Grants](#) offered by the US Department of Agriculture and the [PA Dairy Investment Program](#), and partnership with [PA Agriculture Business Development Center](#). Each of these provides value-added opportunities for advancing farm production and the financial resources to develop new products.

Berks County Department of Agriculture is developing strategies to support agri-business growth in Berks County, which will be incorporated into the IMAGINE Berks action steps upon its completion. This work is scheduled for year 2.





## Business & Industry Growth | Process Metrics & Economic Indicators

### Process Metrics

- Create priorities for a site reuse program to provide financial support for projects related to site rehabilitation and reuse
- Create a site reuse investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI)

### Economic Indicators

- Decrease in business contraction and relocation
- Increase in real GDP

### Business & Industry Growth | Best Practices

The Chicago Recovery Plan [includes funding and resources](#) for community development, vacant lot reduction, equitable transit-oriented development grants, and community wealth-building initiatives. The community development grant program welcomes all areas of the city to apply for funding to support local commercial, mixed-use, and light manufacturing development. Since its inception in December 2021, over 500 applications have been received. The plan also incentivizes putting city-owned vacant land to productive use by improving environmental conditions and, in certain instances, selling lots to residents. Under its Equitable Transit Oriented Development (ETOD) grants and technical assistance, the plan offers funding and resources to support community-driven ETOD projects that address public health, climate, and economic recovery goals as they relate to transit access.

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania is utilizing American Rescue Plan Act funding to support [a site development fund](#). This fund allows eligible nonprofits, municipalities, businesses, and private developers to apply for grants of up to \$3 million. Grantees can use the funds to prepare sites for shovel-ready development. This includes acquisition, building demolition, all infrastructure and services upgrades or new construction, and more.

The Farm Foundation's [Young Farmer Accelerator Program](#) is a year-long experience for farmers who are 21 to 40 years old, offering interactive learning and networking opportunities on a variety of agri-business, agriculture, and government topics. The program offers personal and professional development that helps build a strong network of peers within agri-business and government.

The State of Hawaii's [Agribusiness Development Corporation](#) (ADC) partners with farmers to acquire and manage selected high-value lands and infrastructure for commercial agricultural use. It also directs research related to new crop and market development and lowering production costs. The ADC leads diverse initiatives, including organizing farmers into cooperatives that benefit from the participants' collective efforts and interests, forming subsidiaries to create private and public partnerships, and improving access to processing and treatment facilities to enhance producers' ability to access export or value-added opportunities.

Photo: Alvernia University



## Small Business & Entrepreneurship



**Goal: Support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurship to enable the creation of high-growth ventures, main street amenities, and wealth-building for residents**

### Small Business & Entrepreneurship | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

As we continue to navigate COVID-19 and its economic impacts, which disproportionately affect small businesses, it will be even more critical to support Berks County's business community and provide entrepreneurs with the tools they need to succeed. Entrepreneurs and small business leaders help generate the kinds of innovation and new ideas that build a more vibrant community. A strong entrepreneurial ecosystem creates greater opportunities for wealth-building and economic mobility. It can also enliven main streets business districts and strengthen talent attraction and retention efforts.

Berks County has a lower business birth rate<sup>8</sup> (7.8%) than many of its neighboring counties, as well as the state (8.5%) and the US (10.2%). Business births in main street industries – such as Restaurants, Retail, and Arts & Entertainment establishments – lag births across other industry segments. The county's diverse business ownership is also relatively low, with reduced female business ownership rates compared to neighboring Montgomery and Lancaster counties (17.3% of all Berks County businesses with employees are women owned) and low business ownership rates across race and ethnicity (6.6% of all Berks County businesses with employees are minority owned and 1.7% are Hispanic or Latino owned).<sup>9</sup>



Business births in main street industries (Accommodation and Food; Retail; Arts, Entertainment and Recreation) lag overall business birth rates, with 7.6% in main street industries versus 7.8% overall (2010-2016 average). More main street businesses closed than were created, on average, during this same period, with the net increase in Accommodation & Food Service establishments being offset by the net decreases in Retail and Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation for this same period.

| Business Birth Rates |             |
|----------------------|-------------|
| United States        | 10.2%       |
| Chester              | 9.2%        |
| Montgomery           | 9.0%        |
| PA Statewide         | 8.5%        |
| Lehigh               | 8.3%        |
| Lancaster            | 8.1%        |
| <b>Berks</b>         | <b>7.8%</b> |
| Lebanon              | 7.2%        |
| Schuylkill           | 7.1%        |

Source: Census Statistics of U.S. Businesses (SUSB), 2010 to 2016 average



Increase government and school district spending with local businesses within Berks County

| Action Step                                                                | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                   | Implementation Year |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Promote bid opportunities for local businesses                             | Facilitator | CELG, GRCA  | BCED                       | 1                   |
| Make the bid process easier for local, small businesses to apply           | Facilitator | CELG        | Chambers across the county | 2                   |
| Support business-to-business procurement, including agricultural producers | Facilitator | GRCA, LBON  | Berks Dept. of Ag.         | 2                   |

Led by CELG and GRCA, in partnership with BCED, the team will convene partners and promote bid opportunities for local businesses to increase government and school district spending with Berks County businesses. The team will also assess how it can make the process easier for local, small businesses to apply for bid opportunities at the county and local level. This work is scheduled for years 1 and 2.

This strategy will also support business-to-business procurement, including agricultural producers. Led by GRCA and Latino Business Outreach Network (LBON), in partnership with the Berks County Department of Agriculture, the team will explore how it could facilitate the creation of a consortium or cooperative to reduce the barriers associated with the procurement of agricultural products, including quantities of scale, unpredictability due to weather, and more. This work is scheduled for year 2.



Support small business and entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping and strategic plan efforts that are underway

| Action Step                                                                                                                                    | County Role | Lead Org(s)                    | Partners                                                                                    | Implementation Year |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Raise awareness of entrepreneurial and small business opportunities in the county                                                              | Partner     | Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team | Berks LaunchBox, KUSBDC, O’Pake Inst.                                                       | 1                   |
| Identify pathways to engage the Latino community, increase participation, and expand entrepreneurial resources that meet the community’s needs | Partner     | Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team | KUSBDC, Centro Hispano, Berks Co. Latino Chamber of Commerce, Berks LaunchBox, O’Pake Inst. | 1                   |
| Celebrate successful small businesses through various media channels to raise awareness and provide inspiration                                | Partner     | GRCA                           | BCED, City of Reading                                                                       | 1                   |

The Berks Alliance and GRCA have launched an entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping and strategic planning process in order to find synergies across existing resources and providers and also identify any gaps in services. Following data collection informed by providers, business owners, and entrepreneurs, an entity will be formed to support the county’s ecosystem, connect residents with needed services, and raise awareness of entrepreneurial and small business opportunities in the county. The County will serve as a partner during the planning process, alongside the entrepreneurial ecosystem team and other ecosystem resource providers in order to raise awareness of existing business and entrepreneurial resources and support the development of this ecosystem overall.

The County will also act as a partner in helping to identify pathways to engage the Latino business and entrepreneurial community, increase participation in programming, and expand entrepreneurial resources that meet the community’s needs. This work will be led by the entrepreneurial ecosystem team in partnership with the County, Kutztown University Small Business Development Center (KUSBDC), Centro Hispano, the Berks County Latino Chamber of Commerce, Berks LaunchBox, and the O’Pake Institute.

Finally, the County will celebrate small business leaders and entrepreneurs through its various media channels to raise public awareness of the successes of Berks County community members, inspire and promote innovation, and increase opportunities for investment and funding. This work, led by GRCA in partnership with BCED and the City of Reading, began prior to the publication of this report and will continue throughout the IMAGINE Berks implementation process.

The implementation of this strategy is planned to begin in year 1.



Improve access to financial resources and market access for main street and high-growth-potential businesses

| Action Step                                                                                                                                             | County Role | Lead Org(s)                    | Partners                                   | Implementation Year |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Foster awareness of existing capital resources and convene providers to understand business trends and how the ecosystem can support increased activity | Partner     | Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team | Berks LaunchBox, KUSBDC, O’Pake Inst., CFF | 1                   |
| Create high-risk microlending fund for startups                                                                                                         | Partner     | O’Pake Inst.                   | Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team, CFF        | 1                   |
| Create an investors network of angel investors                                                                                                          | Partner     | O’Pake Inst.                   | Berks Alliance, GRCA                       | 2                   |

The County will act as a partner to foster awareness of existing capital resources. It will convene entrepreneurial service providers, including capital providers, to discuss business trends and determine how the ecosystem can increase capital support. The County will partner with the entrepreneurial ecosystem team, O’Pake Institute, KUSBDC, Berks LaunchBox, and Community First Fund (CFF) beginning in year 1.

Additionally, the County is supporting the O’Pake Institute, CFF, the entrepreneurial ecosystem team, and credit unions in their exploration and possible creation of a high-risk microlending fund for startups in year 1.

As part of this strategy, the County will support the goal of the O’Pake Institute to develop either a formal or informal investors network of angel investors. Partner organizations supporting this initiative include Berks Alliance and GRCA. This work is scheduled to begin in year 2.





Support small businesses working to scale their operations to increase efficiency and achieve exponential growth

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                                         | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                       | Imple-<br>men-<br>tation<br>Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Explore a partnership with the SBA and their Emerging Leaders Initiative that is a cohort-based model of supporting small business leaders who are looking to scale their business. | Partner     | KUSBDC      | Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Team | 2                                |

The County will work with KUSBDC and the entrepreneurial ecosystem team to explore a partnership with the Small Business Administration (SBA) and their Emerging Leaders Initiative and potentially establish a cohort-based model of supporting small business leaders who are looking to scale their business. The Emerging Leaders Initiative is an executive-level intensive with a comprehensive curriculum providing the tools for high-potential small businesses to scale their operations. To qualify, businesses must have annual revenues of at least \$250,000, have been in business for at least 3 years, and have at least one employee other than the business owner. Since the program’s inception in 2008, the SBA’s Emerging Leaders Initiative has trained over 5,000 small business owners, resulting in the creation of over 6,500 jobs, \$300 million in new financing, and \$3.16 billion in secured government contracts. Its success has led the SBA to expand the program across 60 emerging markets, most recently to Dayton, Ohio and Fairmount, West Virginia. The County will act as a partner with KUSBDC and the entrepreneurial ecosystem team as they determine if this program or a similar model can and should be launched in Berks County beginning in year 2.

Process Metrics

- Increase in the level of government purchasing from local, small businesses

Economic Indicators

- Increase in amount of capital deployed into local businesses
- Increase in small business birth rate to at least be on par with the US average



[Atlanta Technology Angels](#), which includes members and VC affiliates in Atlanta and across the Southeast, provides seed and early-stage capital to top-tier early-stage companies seeking between \$200K-\$2M. By providing an investment range not generally served by venture capital funds, ATA serves a specific niche in building the region into a center of technology and entrepreneurship.

[BuildNOLA Mobilization Fund](#), administered by the city-funded economic development agency New Orleans Business Alliance, helps businesses that would not otherwise be able to meet their expenses while awaiting payment on government contracts. In the fund’s first year, 5 businesses that won city contracts were offered lines of credit up to \$250,000 at an 8% interest rate plus a 1% commitment fee over a one-year term. That money was then used by those businesses for short-term costs related to the public contract they received. Recipients of the funds also received assistance such as training in bidding and contract negotiation.





# Infrastructure & Land Use



**Goal: Support land development that increases the tax base in Berks County**

## Infrastructure & Land Use | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

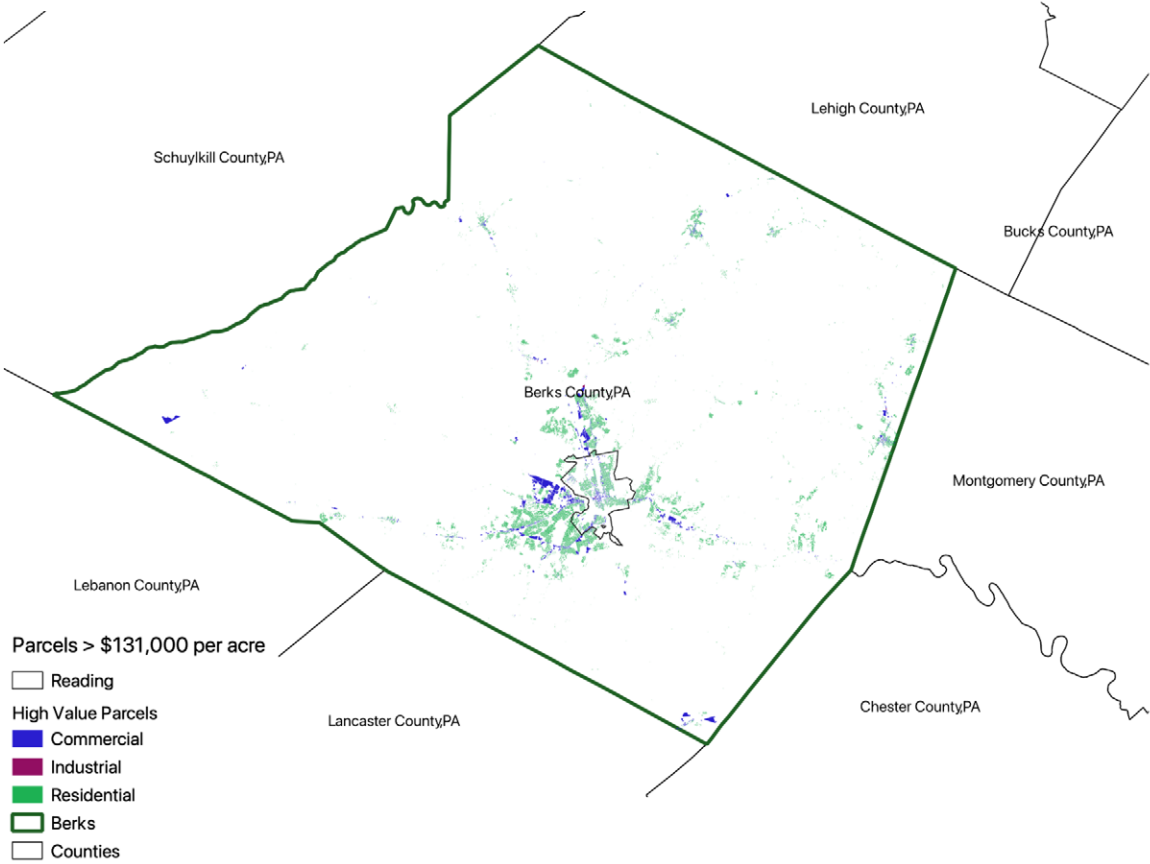
Infrastructure and land use improvements continue to be high priority topics for Berks residents and businesses, especially given their impact on economic connectivity within the county and the region. The County has and will continue to embrace Smart Growth principles, especially as they relate to infrastructure and land use development.

Employment in Berks County is characterized by low density development with higher densities concentrated in relatively few census block groups, primarily in Reading. Outside of these areas, employment of less than 1 job per 10 acres is common. Most of the county, and the region, is losing jobs per acre or gaining less than 10 jobs per acre. New growth hubs are not emerging; rather, there is a subtle shifting of economic activity. Public and private market forces driving development could be better aligned and focused into growth corridors, with a specific focus on land that will generate a sufficient ROI for the County in terms of tax generation.

Smart Growth is a development approach that prioritizes a mix of building types and uses, as well as diverse housing and transportation options, in order to encourage and focus growth within urban centers and existing communities. This approach concentrates development so that a larger share of regional growth occurs within specific hubs, thus reducing sprawl, preserving open spaces, and optimizing investments in infrastructure.

Total expenditures for Berks County government averaged \$556 million for 2019 through 2021. The county has a total of approximately 555,000 acres, but 73% of that land is set aside for conservation, preservation, and open space. Existing and future growth will be concentrated on the remaining land, which amounts to nearly 147,500 acres. For the county’s future growth to generate enough tax revenue to maintain current expenditure levels, new development in the county needs to be valued higher than \$131,000 per acre. Currently, the real estate tax base in Berks County rests on a narrow foundation – only 2% of the of the total acreage is valued above \$131,000 per acre.

Location of High Value Parcels (> \$131K per acre)



Source: Geospatial data from the County of Berks.

This analysis provides guidelines for evaluating development opportunities in the county. One criteria for consideration is the ability of a development to produce revenue beyond the expenses incurred by the county to provide services to that parcel: currently \$131,000 per acre. Monetary or other support for future projects that produce revenue below this threshold should be examined with scrutiny. However, the post-development value and the potential for tax generation should not be the only criteria for consideration. Other considerations may include infrastructure requirements, the build out of parcels aligned with designated growth or future growth areas, and goals articulated in prior planning processes. As the county considers its portfolio of development opportunities, it should seek a balance between projects that add to the tax base and projects that may serve other goals, such as attainable housing or opportunity job creation.

Lack of transportation options and limited walk or ride-to-work opportunities make it difficult for residents and job seekers to commute and move throughout the region. There are 12,917 households (representing 8.4% of households) that do not own a vehicle. Of the households without a vehicle, 75% are renters. As such, one strategy of the plan will examine existing and potential public transit in partnership with major employers to assess worker locations with respect to work centers and transit opportunities.

Newer modes of infrastructure, such as broadband access and childcare, have also been highlighted as areas needing investment to ensure long term economic stability for residents and the workforce. Broadband is of particular importance as diversified modes of employment, such as remote work, become the norm. When it comes to childcare, our analysis has shown that the largest share of Berks County’s workforce is women with school-aged children, who are at an increased risk of leaving the labor force.

It is also important to note the recent infrastructure bill signed into law in November 2021, which will funnel billions to states and local governments to improve roads, bridges, ports, and airports, expand access to clean drinking water and high-speed internet, and advance environmental justice. Particularly important to Berks County is the \$66 billion in additional rail funding set to eliminate the Amtrak maintenance backlog, modernize and connect the Northeast Corridor, and bring world-class rail service to areas outside the northeast and mid-Atlantic. In Amtrak’s June 2021 comprehensive plan, it proposed 3 round trips between Reading and Philadelphia/New York City. Berks County’s location and the recently signed infrastructure bill are two key considerations as the city builds solutions around infrastructure to drive economic development through enhanced connectivity – locally, regionally, and globally.



Infrastructure & Land Use | Strategies

Identify growth corridors and specific communities for development opportunities

| Action Step                                                                   | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners              | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Highlight the work of existing corridors implementing Smart Growth principles | Lead        | BCPC        | BerksIDA, R-BAR, GRCA | 1                              |
| Work with municipalities to identify specific barriers to development         | Lead        | BCPC        | BerksIDA, GRCA        | 1                              |
| Assist with multi-municipality zoning updates                                 | Lead        | BCPC        | CELG                  | 3                              |

As the County and its partners work to identify growth corridors and specific communities presenting strategic development opportunities, it will highlight the work and best practices of existing corridors exemplifying Smart Growth principles, including but not limited to Cumru, Wyomissing, and West Reading. BCPC, GRCA, BerksIDA, and Reading-Berks Association of Realtors (R-BAR) will work with municipalities to identify specific barriers to development and assist with multi-municipal updates. The team will identify land or locations within Berks County best suited for development, emphasizing infill and places that have or are close to underused utilities and infrastructure. Places identified will be consistent with the County Comprehensive Plan future growth and zoning recommendations. This is to encourage new investment in the county to support public services and amenities while maximizing accessibility and use of infrastructure resources. This strategy’s implementation will be phased across years 1 through 3.



Infrastructure & Land Use | Strategies

Examine existing and potential public transit and ensure it aligns with business and industry growth

| Action Step                                                                                                 | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                            | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Work with major employers to assess worker locations with respect to work centers and transit opportunities | Lead        | WDB         | BARTA/SCTA, Commuter Services of PA | 3                              |
| Support Amtrak bus pilot as a new model of transportation access                                            | Lead        | RATS        | BARTA/SCTA, Commuter Services of PA | 1                              |

The County and the Workforce Development Board will convene the Berks Area Regional Transportation Authority (BARTA), South Central Transit Authority (SCTA), and Commuter Services of PA, as well as major employers, to assess worker locations and density compared to available public and employer-sponsored transit options. Many career opportunities in Berks County are not within walking distance of prospective employees and certain municipalities have a high percent of households without vehicles. In 2019, for example, the percent of households without access to vehicles in Reading was 25.4%.<sup>10</sup> Given this reality, aligning public transit and other modes of transportation with worker needs is essential to expanding economic opportunities for residents and helping businesses find the talent they need. This action step is scheduled to begin in year 3.

Amtrak is piloting a new model of transportation access, an express bus between Reading and Philadelphia, to gauge ridership for the passenger rail service. Led by Reading Area Transportation Study (RATS) and supported by BARTA, SCTA, and Commuter Services of PA, the initiative to support this pilot as a new mode of transportation access is planned to begin in year 1.





## Infrastructure & Land Use | Strategies

### Support passenger rail expansion

| Action Step                                                       | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                              | Implementation Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Support the work of the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority | Partner     | SRPRA       | Berks Alliance, BCPC, GRCA, BCED      | 1                   |
| Assess opportunities for transit-oriented development             | Lead        | BCPC        | City of Reading, Berks Alliance, GRCA | 2                   |

The County will support the work of the newly formed Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority (SRPRA), a nine-member public authority – three members from the counties of Berks, Montgomery, and Chester – which acts to formalize agreements, procure funding, and can work with Amtrak, PennDOT, the Federal Railroad Administration, and other necessary partners. Recertification of the authority three years after its inception by all three counties will be required. Expansion of the passenger rail connecting Berks County to Philadelphia is expected to spur economic development, create new jobs, increase property values, and improve mobility and access to work and recreational activities. This work began prior to the IMAGINE Berks report publication and will continue throughout plan implementation in partnership with Berks Alliance, BCPC, GRCA, and BCED.

Additionally, the County will work with the City of Reading, Berks Alliance, and GRCA to assess opportunities for transit oriented development (TOD), particularly as it relates to passenger rail expansion. TOD may be used to create compact, livable, and sustainable communities centered around transit systems in order to increase access to jobs, schools, and recreation while simultaneously reducing dependence on driving. This assessment will be performed in year 2.

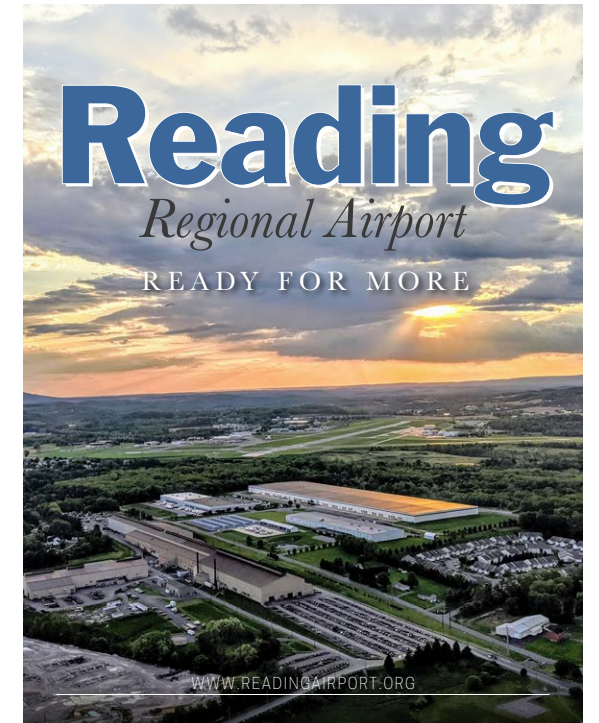
### Support growth and positioning of the Reading Regional Airport as a critical economic development asset

| Action Step                                                              | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners   | Implementation Year |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|---------------------|
| Proactively attract major users and tenants                              | Lead        | BCED        | GRCA, RRAA | 1                   |
| Drive increased use of the airport, including passenger and business use | Lead        | BCED        | GRCA, RRAA | 2                   |



## Infrastructure & Land Use | Strategies

The Reading Regional Airport, located in Bern Township, serves a metropolitan area upward of 440,000 people, which includes hundreds of industries and agricultural territory. It is equipped with a control tower, passenger terminal building, hangars, maintenance facilities, security, and aircraft rescue and fire fighting facilities. Its two ILS-equipped asphalt runways measure 6,350 feet and 5,151 feet, respectively. While the airport does not currently have passenger service, it supports corporate, cargo, general aviation, and charter operations. Fixed-base operators on the field include Millennium and Reading Jet Center. The County supports the Reading Regional Airport as a critical economic development asset, in part by helping to implement its strategic plan, which is currently underway. As such, it may assist in the attraction of aviation users and work to drive increased use of the airport overall, which may include the addition of commercial passenger air service. This strategy will be implemented in partnership with GRCA and Reading Regional Airport Authority (RRAA) in years 1 and 2.



### Enhance the permitting process and better preserve the county's natural resources, through Berks County Conservation District's expanding processing authority

| Action Step                                                                                                                    | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Implementation Year |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Increase the number of permits processed through Berks County Conservation District through their newly expanded authorization | Facilitator | BCCD        | 1                   |

The Berks County Conservation District (BCCD) was formed in 1946 and its Board of Directors consists of one county commissioner and six members who serve the mission of advocating stewardship of the soils and waters of Berks County. In April 2022, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) approved an update to the county's permit processing delegation, authorizing the BCCD to review and process the majority of new construction permits throughout the county. Previously, the BCCD reviewed a limited number of construction and stormwater permits, with the majority being processed by the DEP. This new authorization will allow BCCD to process general and individual post-construction stormwater reviews, which is expected to reduce the application review process time by about half. Reviews and decisions are now being conducted by people more familiar with Berks County, which will help the county better preserve its natural resources. While BCCD has implemented its new authority immediately, this initiative will work to enhance this transition of responsibility, ensuring more timely and effective development for agricultural, commercial, and residential projects.



## Infrastructure & Land Use | Strategies

### Process Metrics

- Identify land or locations within Berks County best suited for development, emphasizing infill and places that have or are close to underused utilities and infrastructure
- Create an infrastructure investment program to support projects that provide a net revenue benefit for the county and an identified Return on Investment (ROI)
- Create incentives to increase multi-municipal planning and regional collaboration
- Co-host an annual workshop for the 5 regional planning areas to discuss benefits of multi-municipal planning

### Economic Indicators

- Increase in rate of development within established growth areas, as measured by building permits by municipality
- Increase in percentage of households with broadband of any type

### Infrastructure & Land Use | Best Practice

[Massachusetts Department of Transportation](#) offers an implementation framework and guide for employer-based commute options. The framework helps employers identify their typology (land-use, density, transit access, shared-use mobility providers), prioritize the most effective strategies that match their needs, and educate their employees on available resources. The guide includes specific, yet wide-ranging, strategies such as bulk purchase programs, rideshare incentives, emergency ride home programs, and flexible work policies.



## Talent & Economic Mobility



**Goal: Invest in the county's greatest asset — its people — by supporting structures to connect residents to opportunity jobs so that they may more fully contribute to and benefit from the Berks County economy**

### Talent & Economic Mobility | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

As we consider the components that ensure a community's economic strength and resilience, strong talent pipelines consistently emerge as an area of critical importance. Access to a robust talent pipeline of individuals who can meet the needs of industry helps to ensure overall population levels and tax base growth, while also serving as a selling point for future attraction and retention efforts.

The story of Berks County's talent pipeline is mixed. While local industry is creating job opportunities, a gap is growing between the needs of industry and the realities of the local workforce. Areas like educational attainment, wages, and quality of life amenities emerge as factors, both positive and negative, on both sides of this dynamic.

The two largest employing sectors in Berks are Manufacturing (18%) and Health Care (17%). These two sectors are heavily weighted towards occupations for direct service or production activity, offering competitive wages and points of attraction for job seekers.



Berks County grew in population by 4.2% between 2010-2020, slower than its neighboring counties, especially those around the Philadelphia region. However, the majority of Pennsylvania counties declined in population during that same period. Across the county, the Hispanic or Latino population grew at more than ten times the overall population growth rate, growing by 48%. Without the gain in the Hispanic or Latino population, Berks County would have lost 14,800, or approximately 3%, of its residents in the last decade.

Employment Sectors and Wages, Berks County, 2019

| Sector                          | EMP     | Wage     | CAGR EMP (2001 - 19) | Share of total Employment |
|---------------------------------|---------|----------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Real Estate, Rental and Leasing | 1,734   | \$74,923 | 1.1%                 | 1.0%                      |
| Arts and Recreation             | 2,280   | \$17,492 | 0.1%                 | 1.3%                      |
| Finance & Insurance             | 4,076   | \$77,931 | -3.1%                | 2.3%                      |
| Other Services                  | 5,369   | \$30,359 | 0.3%                 | 3.0%                      |
| Wholesale                       | 6,369   | \$62,575 | 0.5%                 | 3.6%                      |
| Professional Services           | 7,087   | \$73,093 | 0.2%                 | 4.0%                      |
| Transportation & Warehousing    | 7,000   | \$49,386 | 1.4%                 | 4.0%                      |
| Construction                    | 7,228   | \$64,795 | -0.4%                | 4.1%                      |
| Administrative & Waste Services | 9,993   | \$32,856 | 1.5%                 | 5.7%                      |
| Accommodation & Food Service    | 12,886  | \$16,643 | 1.3%                 | 7.3%                      |
| Retail                          | 18,475  | \$29,562 | -0.4%                | 10.5%                     |
| Health Care                     | 29,232  | \$53,739 | 3.1%                 | 16.6%                     |
| Manufacturing                   | 32,248  | \$62,157 | -1.0%                | 18.3%                     |
| All Industries                  | 176,051 | \$51,180 | 0.4%                 | 100.0%                    |

Source: BLS Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

From a live-work perspective, labor flow in Berks County and the surrounding counties shows the interconnectedness of the region. Workers commute into Berks from throughout the region, with net imports from Schuylkill County (net +4,860) and Lebanon County (net +170). All told, 15 counties contribute 1,000 or more workers to Berks’ workforce. However, Berks County is, overall, a net exporter of labor, with more workers leaving Berks County for their jobs than commuting in. More than half of all outbound commuters leave Berks County to work in jobs that pay above \$40,000. The largest flow out of Berks is to Montgomery (-18,460) and Chester counties (-9,920), which are tied to the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington MSA.



The two largest employ- ing sectors in Berks are Manufacturing and Health Care (18% and 17%, re- spectively.)

These two sectors are heavily weighted towards occupations for direct service or production ac- tivity, offering competitive wages and points of at- traction for job seekers.

While Berks County is currently a net exporter of labor in the region, there are a great number of people commuting in both directions, with 69,800 people entering the county for work and 88,500 residents commuting out. This data suggests a possible mismatch between industry talent needs and employee living needs. If Berks closed the “out-commuting gap” and the total number of jobs available in Berks matched the number of resident workers, there would be \$1 billion in additional earnings within the county. The industries with the greatest potential to contribute to additional earnings and earned income tax revenue are Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing.

Berks is a critical talent hub, yet there are also challenges related to labor force exits to consider.

For every one job created by industry growth, seven job vacancies are created by labor force exits.

Labor force exits represent 4% of projected turnover between 2018 and 2028. With the number of retirements from the workforce accelerating, the number of post-secondary graduates holding steady, and the number of high school graduates declining, the demand for available local talent is clear.



17,842 Fewer jobs than resident workers

- **Bachelor’s or advanced degree holders are especially likely to leave the county for work:** 5,365 fewer jobs for those with bachelor’s or advanced degree holders than residents with those educational credentials. Residents of Berks with a bachelor’s degree or higher are 1.5x as likely to leave the county for work than workers without a college degree.
- **Hispanic or Latino workers are almost twice as likely to leave the county for work than their non-Hispanic counterparts:** 4,958 fewer jobs held by Hispanic or Latino workers in Berks than there are Hispanic or Latino workers. 31,718 Hispanic or Latino workers reside in Berks. 26,760 jobs in Berks held by Hispanic or Latino workers.
- **Earnings are a driving factor:** Of the 17,842 fewer primary jobs than resident workers, 63% of the difference comes from jobs earning \$40,000 per year or more. There are 11,298 fewer primary jobs located in Berks that pay \$40,000 per year or more than workers who hold jobs paying at that level: 100,957 Berks residents work in primary jobs that meet this threshold, but there are 89,659 of these jobs available.

Retirees and the Talent Pipeline: The Next Decade

- Workers aged 55-64 make up an increasing number and share of the Berks County workforce. The cohort of workers that are 55-64 years old will reach retirement age in the next 10 years.
- High school enrollment is projected to decline, from 21,620 in 2020-2021 to 19,360 in 2029-2030. Across the decade, there is a projected enrollment of 51,760 12th grade seniors.
- Around 830 students graduate annually from Berks postsecondary institutions with associate’s and bachelor’s credentials, with little historical variation.

Sources: Census Quarterly Workforce Indicators, Pennsylvania Department of Education, Berks County Community Foundation, National Education Center Statistics, IPEDS. Postsecondary credentials for Associate’s and Bachelor’s awards were tabulated using the following institutions: Alvernia University, Kutztown University, Platt College-Berks Technical Institute, Penn State Berks, Reading Area Community College, Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences, Berks Career & Technology Center



34,750

Anticipated retirees in the next decade

(Average of 2016-2020 QWI data for workers ages 55-64)



45,030

Anticipated high school graduates in the next decade

(2021-2030 DOE projections of 51,760 12th grade students x current high school graduation rate of 87%)



8,300

Anticipated Associate’s and Bachelor’s graduates in the next decade

(10 years x Average annual number of Associate’s and Bachelor’s degree completions, 2012-2020)

Berks County needs to own its role as a hub for regional talent and consider labor flow in the context of hybrid work options solidifying in the workplace.

Programs and initiatives can be developed that actively try to meet the needs of local employers, both large and small. Priorities should include: increasing connectivity with jobseekers; incentivizing local hiring; providing support in increasing wages; and increasing local educational attainment.

Additionally, more can be done to support local talent and create a more robust sense of career trajectory for current students and existing members of the labor force, including a specific focus on diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging.



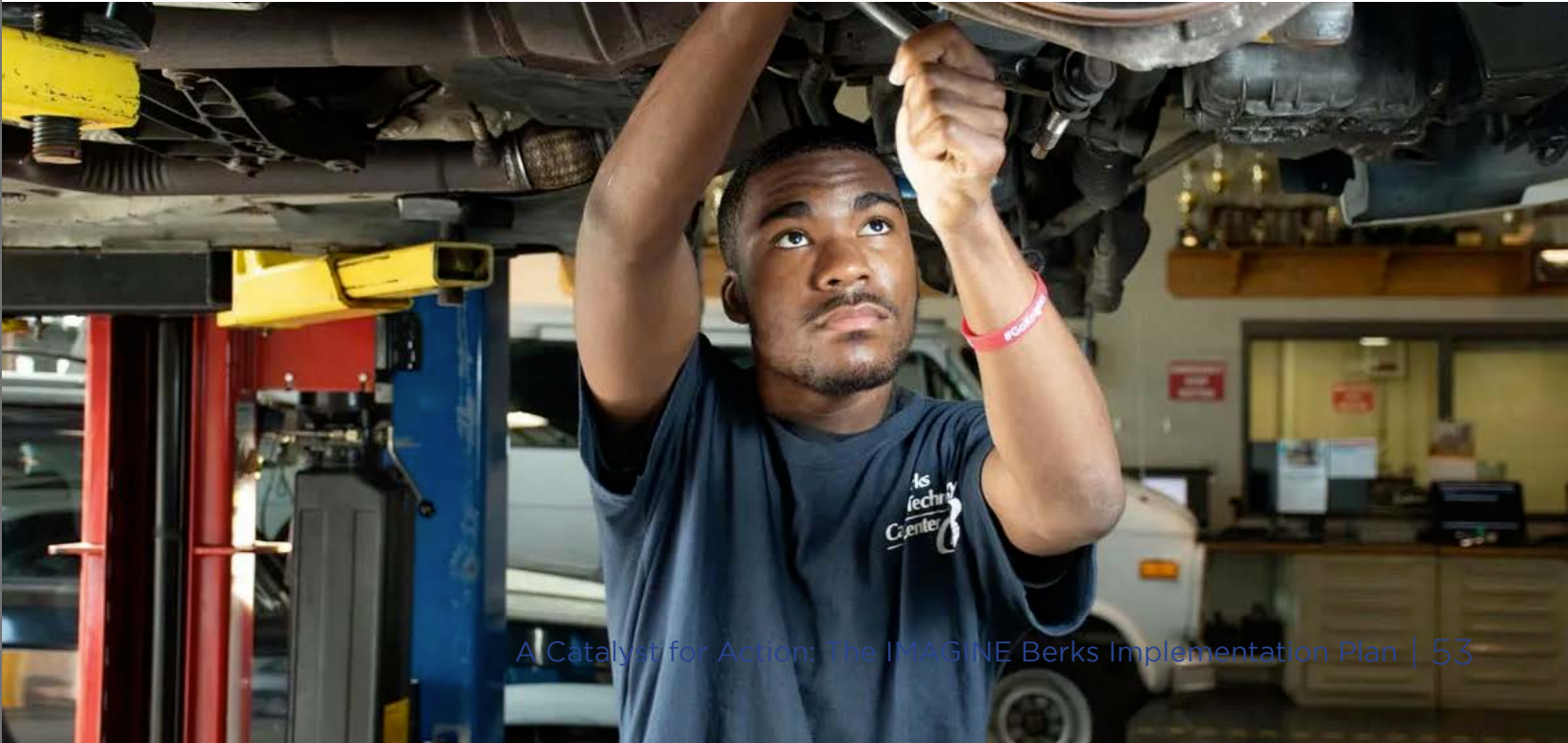
Talent & Economic Mobility | Strategies

Retain and add workers to Berks County, prioritizing retention and support for the unemployed and underemployed

| Action Step                                                                                                                              | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                         | Implementation Year |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Engage with and educate employers to increase connectivity with and utilization of workforce development resources                       | Lead        | WDB         | CareerLink, GRCA, Centro Hispano | 1                   |
| Create a more formal “front-door” to the workforce development support system, clearly mapping resources and entry points for jobseekers | Lead        | WDB         | BCPS, CareerLink, CTC            | 2                   |

The County’s WDB will lead this initiative to engage with and educate employers to increase connectivity with and utilization of available workforce development resources. This work will be particularly beneficial to the significant number of small to midsize businesses in the county, who may not have the resources to create or offer development opportunities in house. In partnership with Career Link, GRCA, and Centro Hispano, the team will leverage existing assets and increase impact. This strategy will begin in year 1.

Additionally, the WDB will create a more formal system of coordinated “front-doors” welcoming residents into the workforce development support system, clearly mapping resources and entry points for jobseekers. This work will be conducted in partnership with Berks Connections Pretrial Services (BCPS), Career Link, and Berks Career & Technology Center (CTC), with an expected start of year 2.





Invest in and support workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives

| Action Step                                                                                                       | County Role | Lead Org(s)           | Partners              | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Align identified employer hiring needs, including in-demand skill sets, with underemployed and disconnected youth | Partner     | WDB, GRCA, CareerLink | BCPS, BLWDC           | 1                              |
| Determine educational gaps in local training programs                                                             | Partner     | WDB                   | CareerLink, MRC, BFTP | 2                              |

Beyond connecting more jobseekers to the workforce development system, the WDB will partner with GRCA, CareerLink, BCPS, and Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation (BLWDC) to align identified employer hiring needs, including in-demand skill sets, with underemployed and disconnected youth. As part of this strategy, the team will compare employer needs with local training programs to determine any educational gaps. This work is scheduled to begin in year 1.

This information will be used to identify opportunities and needs in order to prioritize funding for high impact workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives and help employers and educators to scale solutions. In addition to supporting the needs of employers, this strategy focuses on economic mobility of community members, enhancing career paths and greater economic opportunities for residents. This work is scheduled to begin in year 2.



Support businesses in recruiting talent for immediate hiring, retaining employees, and reducing the number of labor force exits

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                  | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                                                     | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Engage employers and support-related organizations to develop workforce pipelines and targets.                                                               | Partner     | WDB         | BCPS, BLWDC, CareerLink, Career Ready Berks                  | 1                              |
| Create new structures to message and communicate career opportunities in Berks County                                                                        | Partner     | GRCA        | Career Ready Berks                                           | 1                              |
| Develop targeted attraction and retention programs to match employer needs, including retention of college graduates and retiree workforce re-entry          | Partner     | GRCA        | Berks Encore, Centro Hispano, Berks Co. Area Agency on Aging | 2                              |
| Market trades and other career opportunities to K-12 schools, including support for high school internships                                                  | Facilitator | GRCA        | BLWDC, CTCs                                                  | 1                              |
| Actively recruit new workers to Berks County from the surrounding region                                                                                     | Facilitator | GRCA        | PA Americana                                                 | 3                              |
| Support Berks County employers in developing inclusive and welcoming workplaces with company cultures that promote diverse employee attraction and retention | Partner     | GRCA, WDB   | Centro Hispano                                               | 1                              |



As part of this initiative led by the WDB, the County will partner to engage employers and support-related organizations to develop workforce pipelines and targets. BCPS, BLWDC, Career Link, and Career Ready Berks will serve as strategic support partners for this initiative. Additionally, the County will support GRCA and Career Ready Berks in creating new structures to message and communicate opportunities and pipelines in Berks County to ensure targets are being met and jobseekers are connected to strong career pathways. These initiatives are scheduled for year 1.

There are a significant number of small to midsize businesses in the county who are having difficulty filling open positions but may not have the resources to create formal talent pipelines or dedicated recruiting teams. As such, the County will act as a partner to develop targeted attraction and retention programs to match employer needs. Berks has a strong number of post-secondary institutions. This initiative will connect college students to local work and community engagement opportunities while they are in school, in order to increase retention of students upon graduation. Another area of opportunity, particularly given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, is to assist retiree workforce re-entry. Implementation partners will include GRCA, Berks County Area Agency on Aging, Berks Encore, and Centro Hispano. This initiative is scheduled to begin in year 2.

The county recognizes the need to market trades and other career opportunities to K-12 students, with an emphasis on outreach at the elementary and high school level. This initiative will support programs such as What’s So Cool About Manufacturing and job “signing days,” and MRC’s “Dream Team,” which markets manufacturing jobs to schools throughout the county. It will also work to better connect Berks County Intermediate Unit team members with the business community by exploring the creation of a leadership team led by a resourceful and connected executive. The leadership team can be responsible for engaging the business community, championing Berks County students, and creating mentorships, internships, and career exploration opportunities for all students. This initiative will focus on increasing opportunities for students to explore a variety of career paths in order for them to determine which match their skills and interests, encouraging them to stay and participate in the county’s workforce. By encouraging participation of students across all levels of academic performance, the county can increase workplace readiness and improve its workforce participation rate. The County will facilitate this work by convening GRCA, BLWDC, and CTCs in year 1.

While talent retention will remain a primary focus, the County will also pursue opportunities to recruit new talent from the surrounding region. The team will convene the GRCA and PA Americana to identify which type of recruitment strategies it should prioritize. The team will assess the potential benefits of recruiting remote workers and talent whose skills and responsibilities require in-person work or on-site presence. This strategy is particularly important given the pending expansion of passenger rail between Berks County and Philadelphia, which has the potential to greatly increase mobility and availability of new talent pools. This initiative is scheduled for year 3.

A company’s culture is a strong determinant of its attrition and retention rates. In 2021, the GRCA conducted a survey of Berks County businesses to understand how diversity and inclusion are being considered in organizations’ strategic plans. As part of this initiative, the County will act as a partner to the GRCA, WDB, and Centro Hispano as they establish a baseline understanding of company culture in Berks County. With this information, the team will share resources to support Berks County employers in developing inclusive and welcoming workplaces with company cultures that promote diverse employee retention. This work is underway and will continue throughout the implementation of this plan.



Match disconnected youth and Latino talent with opportunity jobs and pathways to prosperity

| Action Step                                                                    | County Role | Lead Org(s)                         | Partners             | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Increase awareness of career opportunities in the County of Berks              | Facilitator | WDB, CareerLink, Career Ready Berks | BCPS, Centro Hispano | 1                              |
| Create effective points of entry into the workforce development support system | Facilitator | WDB, CareerLink                     | Centro Hispano, BCPS | 2                              |

From 2010 to 2020, the Hispanic or Latino population across the county grew by more than 48%, more than ten times the overall population growth rate. Without the gain in Hispanic or Latino population, Berks County would have lost 14,800 residents in the last decade. Given demographic shifts and the importance of diversity to the future of Berks, this strategy aims to increase awareness of career opportunities in the County of Berks and better match disconnected youth and Latino talent to opportunity jobs with the county government. This work will be led by WDB, CareerLink, and Career Ready Berks in partnership with Centro Hispano and BCPS beginning in year 1.

While Berks County has been growing in diversity, Hispanic and Latino workers are almost twice as likely to leave the county for work than their non-Hispanic counterparts. There are 31,718 Hispanic or Latino workers who reside in Berks, yet only 26,760 jobs in Berks are held by Hispanic or Latino workers.<sup>11</sup> In other words, there are 4,958 fewer jobs held by Hispanic or Latino workers in Berks than there are Hispanic or Latino workers. As part of this initiative, the WDB will act as a facilitator, convening CareerLink, Centro Hispano, and BCPS to retain local Latino talent. The team will amplify and expand upon the work that is underway, for example, Tec Centro’s launch of a nursing assistants training course in collaboration with Reading Area Community College. It will also create formal and effective points of entry into the workforce development support system for Hispanic and Latino community members, establishing greater connections to opportunity jobs providing benefits and living wages. This initiative will also help solve for the large number of labor force exits seen throughout the county. This work is scheduled for year 2.





## Talent & Economic Mobility | Strategies

### Economic Indicators

- Increase in percent of persons age 25+ years with a high school diploma or its equivalent (increase in educational attainment)
- Increase in available workforce
- Increase in labor force participation rate
- Decrease in unemployment
- Increase in number of jobs in the Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing sectors (the industries with the greatest potential to contribute additional earnings and earned income tax revenue)
- Increase in median earnings
- Increase in median earnings (dollars) for full-time, year-round workers with earnings

### Talent & Economic Mobility | Best Practices

[Make It. MSP.](#) is a strategic initiative led by the GREATER MSP Partnership to attract, welcome, and retain community members in the greater Minneapolis-Saint Paul region. This includes a coalition of organizations and individuals who work in teams to welcome and connect newcomers, build more inclusive workplaces, and amplify the region's stories. The resources shared through Make It. MSP. celebrate the multifaceted culture and community of Minneapolis-Saint Paul by elevating the voices of its residents. Its resources, which include a job board and neighborhood guide, provide insights into life, work, and people across the region.

With the understanding that a diverse workforce is essential to the ongoing economic vitality of its region, [Vibrant Pittsburgh](#) is building a thriving and inclusive region by attracting, welcoming, retaining, and elevating a diversity of talent. This nonprofit organization accelerates the growth rate of diverse workers in its region by: (1) working with employers and community groups to organize, promote, and implement attraction and retention strategies, (2) conducting targeted initiatives at national conventions, cultural festivals, and career fairs, and (3) serving as a central resource, spokesperson, and convener on inclusion issues. Its members sign a pledge acknowledging their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), publicly establishing priorities, tracking demographic information, and incorporating dialogue about DEIB within workplace culture. Vibrant Pittsburgh also offers an index for benchmarking organizations' progress in DEIB and offers employee engagement networks. Those who pledge also commit to participating in these programs.

In 2019, the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings published [Talent-Driven Economic Development: A new vision and agenda for regional and state economies](#). The report provides a framework for action, guiding economic development organizations in supporting talent development and deployment. The report emphasizes an innovative approach built on the idea that "research has always shown that local economies develop only if their people do first, and today's tight labor markets have presented the case for inclusive talent development."

In 2018, South Central PA Manufacturing Partnerships launched its [Manufacturing Next Gen Industry Partnership](#), led by business leaders who define and address the most important industry issues in their region, including improving the workforce pipeline, aligning training with industry needs, improving infrastructure, addressing regulatory barriers, or facilitating business-to-business networking. Through this partnership, business leaders convene a broad team of public support partners including K-12 educators, community colleges, workforce development boards, economic development organizations, and other subject matter experts.



## Housing



**Address the county's needs for new housing and redeveloped housing that is accessible and attainable**

### Housing | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

The topic of housing affordability, availability, and development in an economic development strategy is a relatively recent area of discussion. Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding of the need for stronger alignment between what workers need and can afford and the proximity of housing to job centers. Early analysis and interviews with stakeholders in Berks County identified low housing supply, lack of quality housing, and affordability as issues that are holding back Berks' economy.

The quality of housing in Berks County as a whole needs to be considered. Current local planning and zoning does not allow for housing that matches new household formation patterns (e.g., condos, attached developments). Berks County never recovered new housing starts after the 2008 recession. These issues contribute to Berks County having the oldest housing stock in the region, outside of Schuylkill County. Only 2.6% of all units in Berks County were built in 2010 or later, while 25% of all units were built in 1939 or earlier. In the past decade, housing unit growth has not always aligned with population growth. Few new units were constructed across the county, with little housing unit growth relative to population growth, particularly in and around the city of Reading. Matching development with the housing needs and preferences of younger workers is especially needed to demonstrate a welcoming attitude and help attract and retain this valuable sector of the workforce.



## Housing

Analysis of the most recently available US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data, from 2014-2018, reveals a unit shortage of 45,605 higher-value housing units in Berks County. This means that owners who could afford higher-value housing units are living in lower-value homes. This shortage of higher-value owner housing units corresponds to a surplus of lower-value housing units, and suggests that Berks County has unmet demand for higher-value owner housing units and should pursue the conversion of low-value owner housing to higher-value owner housing.

In the last decade, employment gains in Berks County have bolstered the demand for housing within the County. At the same time, strong gains in employment within Health Care, Manufacturing, and Management of Companies and Enterprises among industries paying higher average wages has increased the demand for higher-value housing. In total, employment gains from 2010 to 2020 could have increased housing unit demand by as many as 3,281 to 6,561 units across Berks County (depending on if a household has a one adult or two adult household composition). Demand for higher-value owner housing units was especially noteworthy. Employment trends indicate that demand for higher-value owner units was the biggest contributor to the change in total unit demand, with demand for 80% to 100% area median income (AMI) owner units increasing by 2,914 to 5,827 units and demand for 101%+ AMI owner units increasing by 1,252 to 2,505 units due to employment gains in industries with higher average earnings. The lack of housing makes it more difficult to retain and attract workers.

2010 to 2020 Change in Housing Demand by AMI

|                   | Total Unit Demand Change | Owner Unit Demand Change | Renter Unit Demand Change |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 0% to 30% AMI     | -729 to -1,458           | -248 to -496             | -481 to -962              |
| 30% to 50% AMI    | -592 to -1,184           | -314 to -628             | -278 to -557              |
| 50% to 80% AMI    | -901 to -1,803           | -568 to -1,136           | -333 to -667              |
| 80% to 100% AMI   | 4,047 to 8,093           | <b>2,914 to 5,827</b>    | 1,133 to 2,266            |
| 100%+ AMI         | 1,456 to 2,913           | <b>1,252 to 2,505</b>    | 204 to 408                |
| All Income Levels | 3,281 to 6,561           | 3,037 to 6,073           | 244 to 488                |

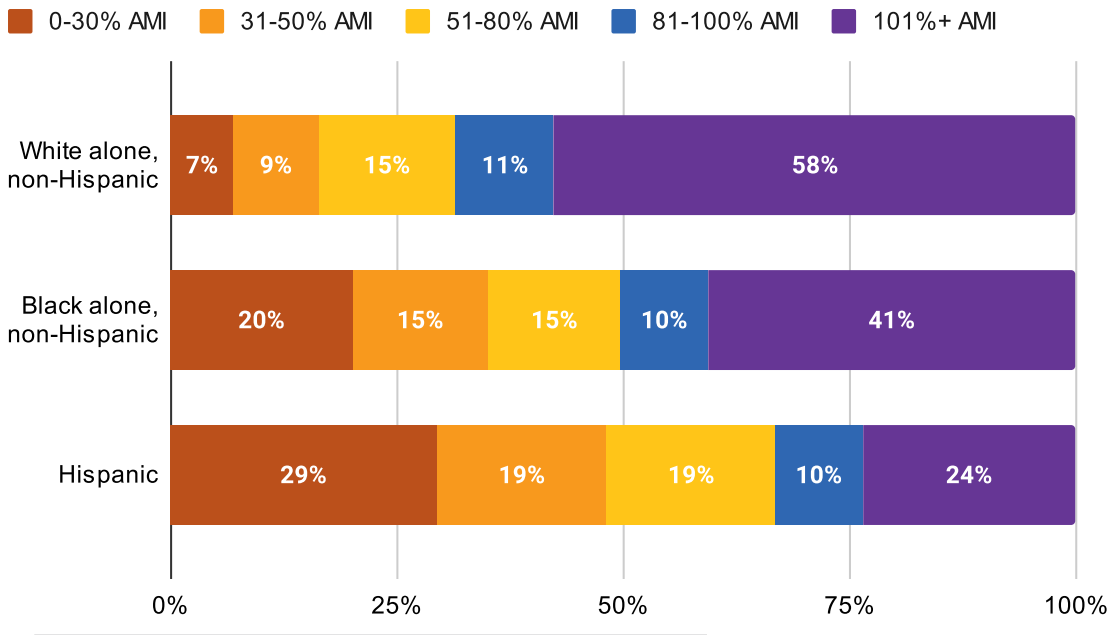
Source: Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data, 2014-2018

It is important to note that 11,650 households, or 63% of the 18,490 low income renter households, live in units that are unaffordable to them. Low income is defined as those earning less than 50% – AMI less than \$25,200 for an individual or \$35,950 for a family of four. For example, an apartment that costs \$890 per month in rent is unaffordable for a low-income family of four; an apartment that costs \$630 per month is unaffordable for a low-income individual. Black households are more than twice as likely as white households to be low income and Hispanic or Latino households are three times as likely as white households to be low income. Reducing the stigma that many in the community place on people who rent and ensuring affordable and accessible housing is important to equitable development.



## Housing

Household AMI by Race/Ethnicity

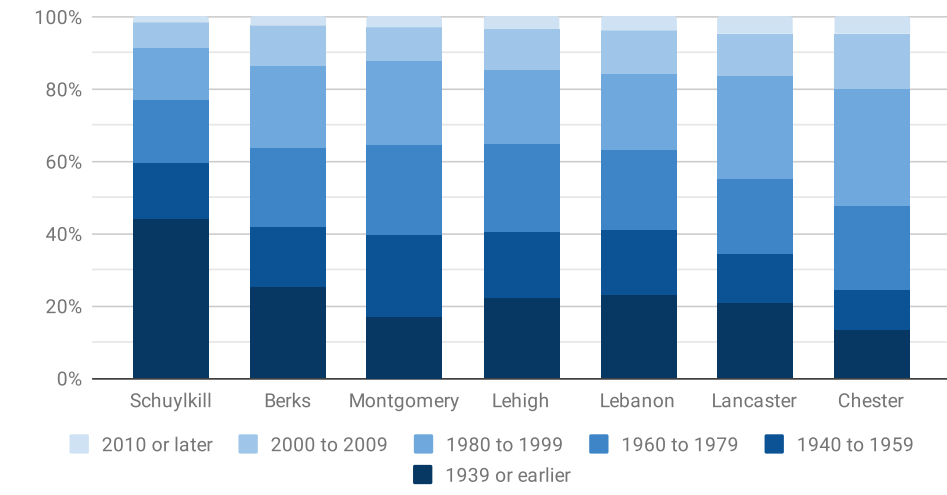


Source: Household Area Median Income (AMI) Category by Race/Ethnicity. HUD CHAS data, 2014-2018

Overall, Berks County is not replacing or upgrading its housing stock and much of it is significantly outdated. There is also a misalignment of housing stock with household formation and employment.

There is a need for a zoning and process approval environment that supports properties’ intended use and sends a clear message to developers and investors that Berks County is open to partnering with them. Prioritizing specific areas for development will focus investment in transportation infrastructure and limit the impact on agricultural land. There are tools that the County and partners like the City of Reading can pursue, including land banking, a land trust, support for small developers, owner-occupied incentives, and more.

Housing Units by Year Built



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates



Assess and address the mismatch between housing stock and housing demand, including age, price point, type, and location

| Action Step                                                                                                                                 | County Role | Lead Org(s) | Partners                                         | Imple-<br>men-<br>tation<br>Year |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Promote development in accordance with Smart Growth principles                                                                              | Lead        | BCPC        | R-BAR                                            | 1                                |
| Promote awareness of the housing gap, particularly for high-end housing needs                                                               | Lead        | BCED, BCPC  | R-BAR                                            | 1                                |
| Incentivize development and rehab of specific types of housing to match population trends and market demand and address aging housing stock | Lead        | BCED, BCPC  | City of Reading, BCRA, housing authorities, CELG | 2                                |
| Explore opportunities to implement best practices in zoning and planning                                                                    | Lead        | BCED, BCPC  | CELG                                             | 2                                |
| Prioritize a staff position to develop and coordinate housing strategies, plans, and rehabilitation programs                                | Facilitator | BCRA        | BCPC                                             | 2                                |
| Accelerate completion of already approved but stalled housing plans                                                                         | Lead        | BCPC, BCED  | BCRA                                             | 1                                |

In partnership with R-BAR, BCPC will lead this initiative to promote development in accordance with Smart Growth principles – prioritizing a mix of building types and uses, as well as diverse housing and transportation options – in order to encourage and focus growth within urban centers and existing communities. This approach concentrates development so that a larger share of regional growth occurs within specific hubs, thus reducing sprawl, preserving open spaces, and optimizing investments in infrastructure. This work is already underway and will continue throughout the plan’s implementation.

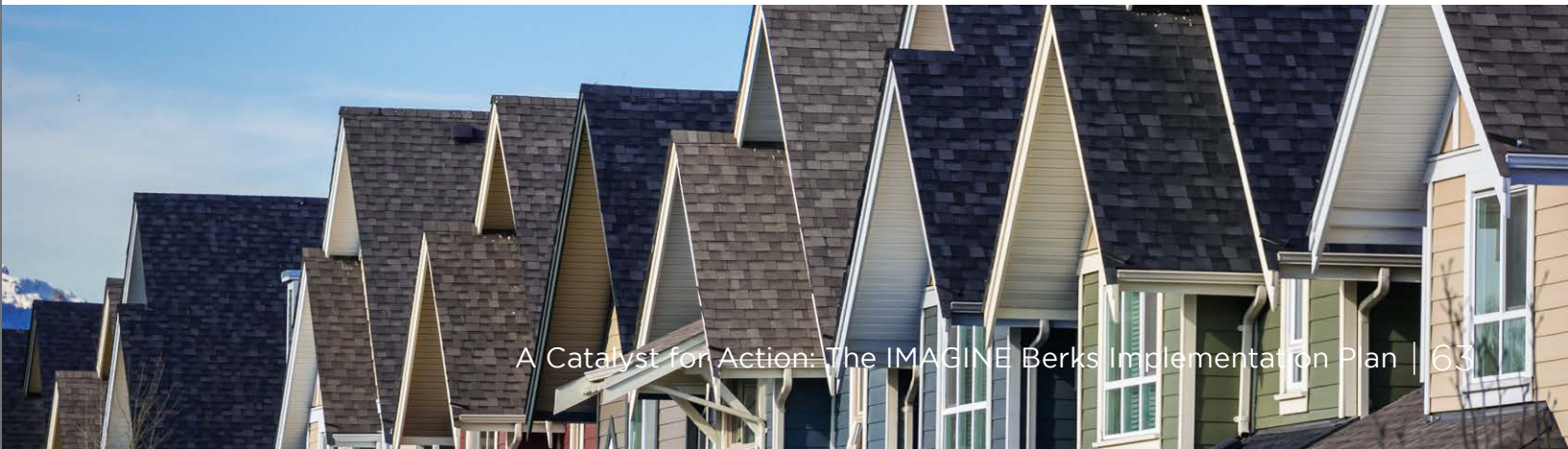


As part of the planning process, the project team analyzed county land use and housing data to determine areas of need and opportunity. This review indicated that the aging and low-value housing stock in Berks County is misaligned with household income. Trends in job growth over the past decade have contributed to an increased demand for higher-value owner housing, which is in relatively low supply. As such, residents who can afford high-value homes increasingly have reason to live outside of the county or purchase lower value homes. This decreases supply and access for those relying on the affordability of mid-value or low-value homes based on their income. As part of this initiative, BCED and BCPC will raise awareness of the housing gap, particularly for increased high-end housing, and its impact on mid-value to low-value housing supply. This work will be completed in partnership with R-BAR and is scheduled for year 1.

In addition to raising awareness of the housing gap in Berks County, BCED and BCPC will partner with the City of Reading, housing authorities, BCRA, and CELG to incentivize development and rehab of specific types of housing to match population trends and market demand. The team will explore opportunities to implement best practices in zoning and planning. The team will consider how LERTA and JEAP can be used to advance this initiative. It will also explore the benefits of offering municipal officials training through CELG. Programs might include resident beautification programs, aging-in-place efforts, and blight mitigation. This work is prioritized for year 2, with the goal of increasing new housing starts incrementally over the next 5 years.

Due to the importance of housing as it relates to talent attraction and retention and industry growth, this initiative suggests the creation of a new housing planner/coordinator role within the BCRA team to help identify pathways for increasing access to affordable and market rate housing for residents and prospective residents of all income levels. The housing planner and implementation team will also assess housing as it relates to remote workers and talent who are required to work in-person or on-site. The need for workforce housing will be assessed to ensure affordably priced housing conveniently located to workcenters, particularly for middle-income workers such as teachers, emergency responders, and agricultural workers. While Berks County was an exporter of labor prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the team will continue to track workforce trends and changes resulting from the pandemic. To advance housing strategies, particularly as it relates to talent attraction and retention, the team will explore the potential benefits of reconvening the community housing council. This initiative will be led by BCRA and convene in year 2.

Berks County Economic Development and BCPC will partner with BCRA to incentivize and accelerate the completion of already approved but stalled housing plans. The team will assess the existing process to understand reasons for delays and identify incentives for expediting the completion of projects. To facilitate this work, BCPC will provide housing report status updates and manage the database of this information. This work is prioritized for year 1.





### Promote adaptive reuse and redevelopment of obsolete commercial and industrial properties

| Action Step                                                                                                                                                                         | County Role | Lead Org(s)     | Partners                         | Implementation Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Utilize federal, state, and local programs for housing rehabilitation in main street corridors and municipalities throughout the county, prioritizing downtown revitalization areas | Facilitator | BCRA            | BCPC                             | 1                   |
| Review assessment requirements to minimize carrying costs for developers                                                                                                            | Lead        | BCPC            | R-BAR                            | 1                   |
| Participate in the land bank to prioritize the redevelopment of blighted properties in the city                                                                                     | Partner     | City of Reading | BCED, BCRA, Berks Alliance, GRCA | 1                   |

BCRA will partner with BCPC to increase the use of federal, state, and local programs for housing rehabilitation in main street corridors and municipalities throughout the county. Additionally, BCPC will work in partnership with R-BAR to review assessment requirements to minimize carrying costs for developers. This work is prioritized for year 1.

Berks County will also partner with the City of Reading in their land bank and prioritizing the redevelopment of blighted properties in the city and across the county. BCED, Berks Alliance, and GRCA will also serve as partners, with work is scheduled to begin in year 1.



### Housing | Best Practices

#### Process Metrics

- Prioritize a staff position to develop and coordinate housing strategies and plans
- Create a housing investment program to accelerate development of attainable and accessible housing and leverage other financial resources with an identified Return on Investment (ROI)

#### Economic Indicators

- Increase in total housing starts
- Decrease in number of cost burdened households (households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs)
- Increase in total number of rental units
- Increase in higher-value owner housing in order to open up and create availability for mid-value and affordable housing, improving alignment between housing stock and earning levels of residents and prospective residents

Chester County's [A+ Homes Initiative](#) calls for community partnership in advancing supportive policy and innovative regulation and design in order to increase housing that is attractive, affordably-priced, adaptable, aging-friendly, and accessible for all of its community members. The County provides a housing toolkit for its municipalities with resources to address issues such as green development, infill development, residential conversions, and farmworker housing.

Montgomery County's [Homes For All](#) has been a collaborative effort led by the County Planning Commission, Commerce Department, and Office of Housing and Community Development. With 62 municipalities ranging from rural to urban communities, all with varying housing needs and unique zoning, the County is working to consolidate data and plan for higher level housing needs. In addition to its analysis of current and future housing needs, the Homes for All Plan identifies policy and funding barriers to the creation of affordable housing as well as best practices for utilizing advocacy, partnership, and funding to increase affordability for all residents.

[Jumpstart Germantown](#) is a community development program initiated by [Philly Office Retail](#) that is working to revitalize the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia and its surrounding communities. Jumpstart Germantown offers training, mentoring, networking, and financial resources to aspiring developers. It uses a collaborative approach to real estate development, emphasizing the sharing of resources and information. Jumpstart's key initiatives include the support of scattered-site rehabilitation in place of urban renewal and a balanced approach to affordable and market-rate housing. The organization also improves neighborhood safety and raises property values through blight reduction and helps first-time investors become more attractive to traditional lenders.

[CHN Housing Partners](#) (CHN) is an affordable housing developer and housing service provider that helps more than 50,000 families each year – low-income individuals, seniors, the disabled, and the homeless – to improve their housing stability. CHN partners with cities and organizations, utility companies, financial institutions, and public agencies to manage and deliver large-scale housing resources to their communities. The organization has helped 2,700 new low-income homeowners, developed 7,000 homes, and contributed to an 80% drop in chronic homelessness counts.

[Atlanta's Community Land Trust](#) (ALT) delivers and stewards permanently affordable housing to support communities at risk of gentrification, promote equitable development, and reverse disparity trends through intentional growth. The number of public, private, non-profit, and community partners who collaborated to form ALT is unprecedented, with more than 30 collaborators. By the end of 2021, ALT had grown its pipeline of homes and homebuyers to 250+ and 175+, respectively. Their model ensures affordability in perpetuity for future homebuyers while still providing opportunities for homeowners to build equity.



Photo: Natalie Kolb

## Placemaking



**Goal: Invest in and highlight community assets that provide access to a variety of arts, culture, greenspace, and recreation opportunities for all residents and future residents**

### Placemaking | Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

Vibrancy and community identity are important components of pride for the places where we live, and they also play a critical role when it comes to talent attraction and retention within a region. Vibrant, walkable main street corridors with local businesses, for example, can greatly enhance quality of place.

Berks residents name quality of life and quality of place as two of the county's best assets. Berks has a welcoming small town feel and a unique combination of natural vistas and city amenities. Many community leaders note these characteristics as building blocks to attract further interest in the area.

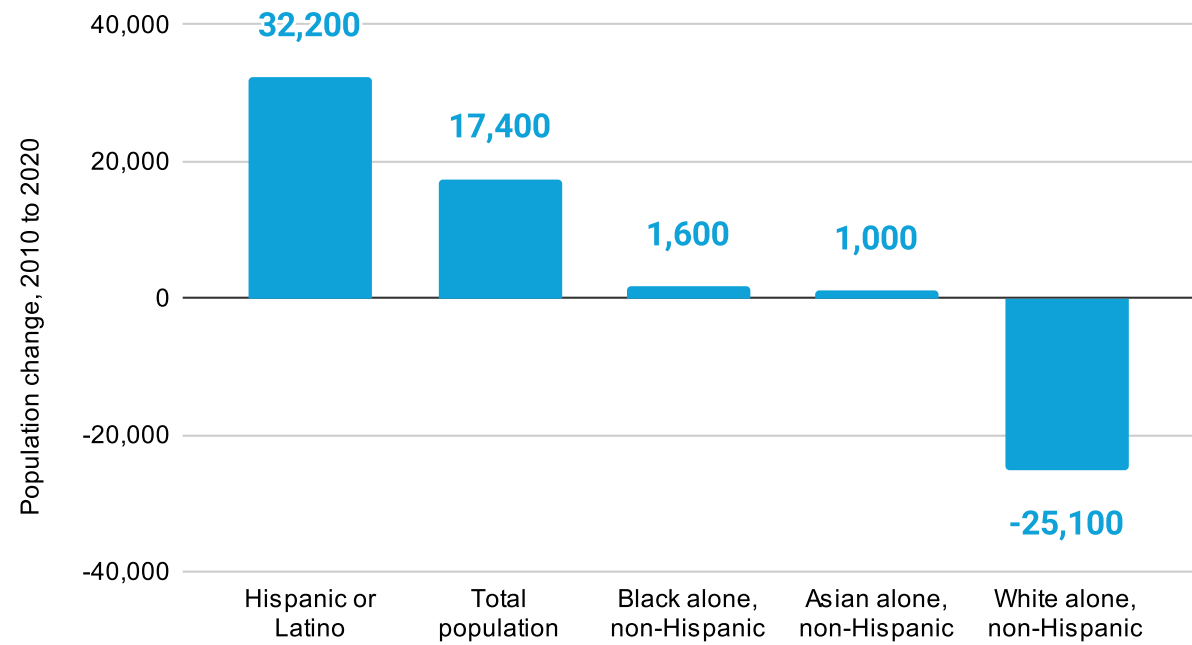
Business births in main street industries – such as Restaurants, Retail, and Arts & Entertainment establishments – lag births across other industry segments. Furthermore, compared to regional peers, spending and employment tourism is lower in Berks. According to the 2019 Economic Impact of Pennsylvania's Travel and Tourism Industry report, tourism employs 7,165 workers and generates \$950 million in spending. Berks has lower tourism spending than Lancaster (\$2.2 billion), Lehigh (\$1.4 billion), and Montgomery (\$1.4 billion) and lower tourism employment than Chester, Lancaster, Lehigh, and Montgomery counties. There is opportunity to invest in areas, like agritourism, and leverage existing assets to generate more tourism-based economic activity.

Lastly, it is important to ensure the accessibility and inclusivity of the county's quality of place assets. Berks County's population grew by 4.2% from 2010 to 2020. Across the county, the Hispanic or Latino population grew at more than ten times the overall population growth rate, growing by 48%. These demographic changes should be considered in developing quality of place initiatives so that they are inclusive and celebrate diversity as a strength

Investments in greenways, parks, and recreation are planned for the next decade. A recent survey completed for the Berks County Greenway, Park, and Recreation Plan update indicated that the highest priority for investment was for community or regional trail systems and regional parks: "Respondents indicated that walking/biking connections between schools/parks/neighborhoods and closing gaps between different trail systems and recreational areas were important to them." These quality of life investments are important to talent attraction efforts and, in some locations, could begin to include walk-to and bike-to-work connections.

To promote a strong identity necessary for talent attraction and retention, Berks County must further support and scale its existing assets. Promoting and revitalizing main street corridors, while also leveraging green space amenities, will be key to these efforts. The community also needs a cohesive marketing plan that amplifies the story, strengths, and successes of Berks. By effectively marketing the region's assets, the county can improve attraction and retention, generate further investment, and strengthen its diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

Population Change by Race/Ethnicity, 2010 - 2020



Source: Decennial Census

- » Berks County's population **grew by 4.2% from 2010 to 2020.**
- » Across the county, **the Hispanic or Latino population grew at more than ten times the overall population growth rate**, growing by 48%.
- » Without the gain in Hispanic or Latino population, **Berks County would have lost 14,800 residents in the last decade.**



Fund enhancements to new and existing public spaces located across the county, prioritizing greenspace and inclusive gathering spaces

| Action Step                                                                                               | County Role | Lead Org(s)                                        | Partners                                    | Implementation Year |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Use the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan to prioritize and fund improvements and new public amenities | Lead        | Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, BCPC | Berks Nature, Natural Lands                 | 2                   |
| Review accessibility and distribution of these assets                                                     | Lead        | Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, BCPC | Berks Nature, Natural Lands                 | 2                   |
| Develop plans for ongoing investment and maintenance of public spaces                                     | Lead        | Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, BCPC | Berks Nature, Natural Lands, municipalities | 3                   |

BCPC will work with the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, using the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan to prioritize and fund improvements to existing community assets and create new public amenities. As part of this work, the team will partner with all community partners to begin this work in year 2.

Another priority of the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan is promoting conservation, sustainability, and stewardship. As part of this work, BCPC will continue to coordinate and collaborate with the community partners to balance the needs of Berks County's natural resources with the ever-changing demands of recreation enthusiasts through careful planning and design.



Support main street and commercial district revitalization programs

| Action Step                                                                                                                  | County Role | Lead Org(s)                      | Partners                                                 | Implementation Year |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Identify promising practices, such as potential zoning updates, to encourage new models for revitalization                   | Lead        | BCPC                             | GRCA, CELG                                               | 1                   |
| Enhance commercial districts' connections with arts, culture, and recreation                                                 | Partner     | GRCA, PA Americana, main streets | Berks Arts, Berks County Parks and Recreation Department | 1                   |
| Bring together municipalities to make connections and provide support for main street and commercial district revitalization | Facilitator | GRCA                             | BCPC, PA Americana, CELG, BCED                           | 2                   |
| Support investment in safety measures and facade, lighting, and streetscape improvements                                     | Facilitator | Berks Alliance                   | South of Penn, Barrio Alegría                            | 2                   |

Main streets and commercial districts play an important role in the vibrancy of a community. As such, BCPC will partner with GRCA and CELG to create a revitalization program and corresponding working group that provides infrastructure and programming support to main street businesses, including Restaurants, Retail, and Arts & Entertainment establishments. The team will identify promising practices, such as potential zoning updates, to encourage new models for revitalization. This work is prioritized for year 1.

Additionally, the County of Berks will be a partner in the enhancement of commercial districts, increasing their connections with and use of arts, culture, and recreation. The County will convene GRCA, PA Americana, and main street district leaders, along with Berks Arts and Berks County Parks and Recreation Department to advance this work in year 1. The team will explore how it can engage younger community members in this process through internships and community leadership opportunities.

This strategy will also bring together municipalities to encourage connections and opportunities to share best practices and resources for main street and commercial district revitalization, such as facade, lighting, and streetscape improvements. GRCA will lead these working sessions in partnership with BCPC, PA Americana, CELG and BCED, with implementation to begin in year 2.

The County of Berks will facilitate the implementation of safety measures and facade, lighting, and streetscape improvements to main street and commercial districts. This work will be led by Berks Alliance in partnership with South of Penn and Barrio Alegría and is scheduled for year 2 of implementation.



Continue investment in the trail systems

|                                                                                          | County Role | Lead Org(s)                                                              | Partners                                | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Integrate trail system into the community and other arts, cultural, and economic centers | Facilitator | Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, PA Americana, Berks Nature | Berks Arts                              | 1                              |
| Analyze the possibility to expand trail system use beyond recreation                     | Facilitator | BCPC                                                                     | Berks Nature, Schuylkill River Greenway | 2                              |

Through the implementation of the Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation plan, the County of Berks and its partners will review the existing trail network to determine where connectivity between existing recreational assets and other arts, culture, and economic centers should be prioritized. Additionally, BCPC will work with its partners to improve and expand trails as a means for transit, improving mobility beyond recreational use. This work is prioritized for year 2.



Develop a cohesive and collaborative Berks County message, along with shared marketing resources

| Action Step                                                                                                                   | County Role | Lead Org(s)                                                | Partners                                    | Imple-<br>men-<br>tion<br>Year |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Clearly define and embrace Berks County’s identity, showing more diversity in the way the county and its assets are presented | Partner     | GRCA, PA Americana                                         | County businesses, social media influencers | 1                              |
| Create a unified talent recruitment message                                                                                   | Partner     | GRCA, PA Americana                                         | County businesses, social media influencers | 1                              |
| Cross-promote county attractions, events, and programming                                                                     | Partner     | Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, PA Americana | GRCA, BCED                                  | 2                              |

The County of Berks will partner with GRCA and PA Americana to define and embrace Berks County’s identity, showcasing the region’s diversity when it presents the county and its assets. Additionally, the team will create a unified recruitment message, showcasing the quality of life and work opportunities in Berks. To do so, the team will work with local businesses and social media influencers to create marketing assets that drive excitement and investment from people within and outside the community. This work is scheduled to begin in year 1.

The county’s recreational assets are as expansive as the Berks landscape itself. There are a variety of attractions and seasonal events for all ages. Through cross-promotion and increased collaboration, the County and its partners can raise awareness of these attractions, events, and programs and increase usage and attendance by residents and visitors. This initiative will be led by Berks County Parks and Recreation Department, and PA Americana. The team will partner with GRCA and BCED to begin this work in year 2.



### Process Metrics

- Invest \$250,000 in the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan recommendations
- Convene community leaders to identify priority projects and collaboratively seek funding to support improvements and redevelopment of main streets, commercial district, and corridors
- Increase in trail system connections
- Create coordinated messaging across economic development, tourism, and any other communications supported by the County

### Placemaking | Best Practices

[Toronto's Main Street Innovation Fund](#) is a grant that provides between \$25,000 and \$50,000 of funding for organizations with ties to the business community to test innovative solutions to local challenges and share their findings with others in the city of Toronto. The program supports new projects and innovation and expands the range of scalable community improvement strategies that are available to Toronto's main streets.

[The Main Street Bounceback Grants](#) program provides \$10,000 to new or existing businesses and non-profit organizations moving into vacant properties in Wisconsin's downtowns and commercial corridors. Funds can be used to cover costs related to the newly opened location, including leases, mortgages, and operational expenses. Grant funds are available as part of the American Recovery Plan Act and will be distributed by Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's regional partners.

[The Art of Community: Rural SC:](#) The Art of Community program, which was started by the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC) in 2015, has grown to serve 15 rural and tribal communities, nearly 1/3 of all counties across the state. SCAC provides grants to fund initiatives that address health care, education, public safety, housing, capital, and economic and community development issues. Through this program, each community is represented by a local cultural leader and a team of community members who are charged with identifying a current challenge and building an action plan for how arts and culture can solve the issue. Overall, the program promotes cultural exchange across the state, creating greater opportunities for communities to share best practices.

## Realizing the IMAGINE Berks Vision

County-wide support will remain critical as this work transitions from planning to implementation.

### Progress Reporting

The success of this plan relies on collaboration between community members, including county and municipal officials, educators, members of the business and workforce development community, non-profit leaders, and more. Through continued partnership, Berks County's Strategic Economic Development Action Plan will serve as a catalyst for measurable, inclusive growth throughout the community.

For implementation partners and supporting community members to work congruently – amplifying each other's work, minimizing duplicative efforts, and adapting to a changing economic environment – community members will need to convene and assess the progress being made to achieve the plan's vision, principles, and goals. Berks County Economic Development will lead this process through communications and reporting, hosting an annual IMAGINE Berks meeting to report on progress and impact, as measured by the plan's defined metrics.

The team will update the IMAGINE Berks Impact & Economic Indicators Dashboard, which will compare baseline and benchmark data with current data utilizing the metrics defined for each strategic focus area. The dashboard will show the year-over-year trend across metrics, as well as a comparison to neighboring counties. The two types of metrics being tracked include process metrics and economic indicators. Process metrics will directly measure progress of the plan's implementation. Economic indicators have also been identified to track the state of the economy over the course of this 5-year plan. While there are external economic factors that will impact these indicators, analysis of these metrics will help guide implementation.

By reviewing these indicators in relation to internal and external factors, implementation teams may adjust specific action steps as necessitated by changing market conditions and community needs.

Community engagement was integral to the planning process, and this involvement will remain critical throughout implementation. As the county government and its partners build their detailed work plans for each strategy, they will continue to use diversified channels of communication to ensure this process is informed by the community at large.

### From Vision to Reality

IMAGINE Berks is a shared vision that will solidify the community as a place where its diverse assets are recognized, uplifted, and celebrated to ensure economic prosperity for all.

As the County of Berks and its partners embark on this 5-year plan, continued collaboration will be necessary to meet the community's common goals. IMAGINE Berks calls for a balanced approach to economic development, with strategies spanning across Industry, Small Business & Entrepreneurship, Infrastructure & Land Use, Talent & Economic Mobility, Housing, and Placemaking. By joining together to champion and implement the breadth of strategies throughout this plan, along with the other many community-led initiatives underway across the county, the IMAGINE Berks vision will become reality.

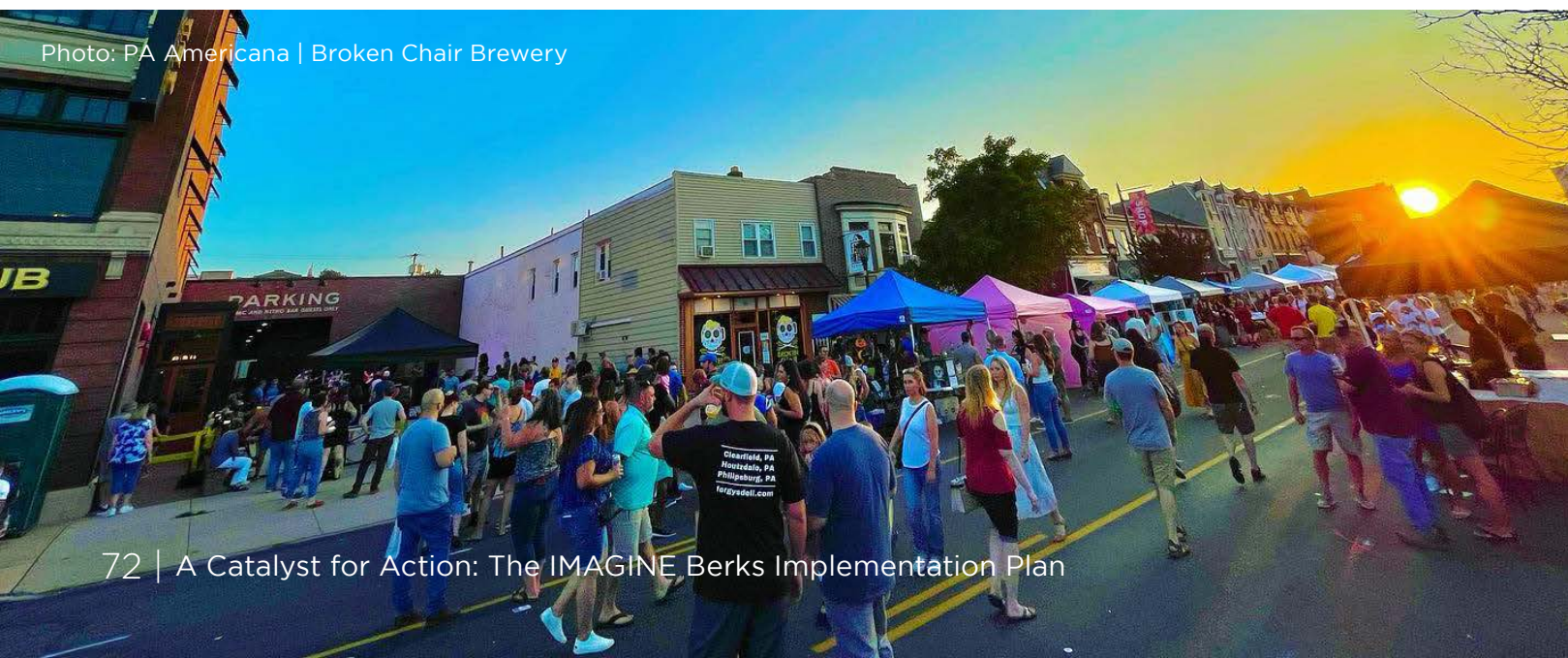


Photo: PA Americana | Broken Chair Brewery

| Impact & Economic Indicators Dashboard                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Berks<br>Plan Kickoff<br>Baseline | Data Sources                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Business & Industry Growth                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                   |                                                                  |
|    | Create priorities for a site reuse program to provide financial support for projects related to site rehabilitation and reuse                                                                                                                                       | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|                                                                                    | Create a site re-use investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI). | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|    | Decrease in business contraction and relocation                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 6.2                               | Census Business Dynamic Statistics, 2019                         |
|                                                                                    | Increase in real GDP in chained dollars                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | \$17,992,564                      | BEA CAGDP9 Real GDP iin chained dollars, 2020                    |
| Small Business & Entrepreneurship                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                   |                                                                  |
|    | Increase in the level of government purchasing from local small businesses *                                                                                                                                                                                        | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|    | Increase in the amount of capital deployed into small businesses and start-up businesses                                                                                                                                                                            | \$321,128,000                     | PolicyMap, 2019 aggregate amount of small business loans the CRA |
|                                                                                    | Increase in small business birth rate to at least be on par with the US average (increase from 7.8% to 10.2%, the 2010-2016 average)                                                                                                                                | 7.8%                              | Census Business Dynamic Statistics                               |
| Infrastructure & Land Use                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                   |                                                                  |
|  | Identify land or locations within Berks County best suited for development, emphasizing infill and places that have or are close to underused utilities and infrastructure                                                                                          | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|                                                                                    | Create an infrastructure investment program to support projects that provide a net revenue benefit for the county and an identified Return on Investment (ROI)                                                                                                      | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|                                                                                    | Create incentives to increase multi-municipal planning and regional collaboration                                                                                                                                                                                   | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|                                                                                    | Co-host an annual workshop for the 5 regional planning areas to discuss benefits of multi-municipal planning                                                                                                                                                        | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|  | Increase in rate of development within established growth areas, as measured by building permits by municipality *                                                                                                                                                  | NA                                | Admin/County                                                     |
|                                                                                    | Increase in percentage of households with broadband of any type                                                                                                                                                                                                     | 84.4%                             | Census American Community Survey                                 |

 Process Metric

 Economic Indicator

\* Baseline metric will be established during implementation of the plan.

Note, the Impact & Economic Indicators Dashboard will be updated on an annual basis throughout the plan's 5 years of implementation.

|                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                         | Berks<br>Plan Kickoff<br>Baseline | Data Sources                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Talent & Economic Mobility                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                   |                                      |
|    | Increase in percent of persons age 25+ years with a high school diploma or its equivalent                                                                                               | 87.2%                             | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
|                                                                                       | Increase in available workforce                                                                                                                                                         | 211,376                           | BLS LAUS, Labor Force, 2021          |
|                                                                                       | Increase in labor force participation rate                                                                                                                                              | 65.0%                             | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
|                                                                                       | Decrease in unemployment                                                                                                                                                                | 13,889                            | BLS LAUS, Unemployed, 2021           |
|                                                                                       | Increase in number of jobs in Finance and Insurance                                                                                                                                     | 4,452                             | BLS QWI, Average for 2021 Q1-2       |
|                                                                                       | Increase in number of jobs in Manufacturing                                                                                                                                             | 31,245                            | BLS QWI, Average for 2021 Q1-2       |
|                                                                                       | Increase in number of jobs in Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services                                                                                                          | 6,872                             | BLS QWI, Average for 2021 Q1-2       |
|                                                                                       | Increase in median earnings                                                                                                                                                             | \$35,933                          | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
|                                                                                       | Increase in median earnings (dollars) for full-time, year-round workers with earnings                                                                                                   | \$49,609                          | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
| Housing                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                   |                                      |
|  | Prioritize a staff position to develop and coordinate housing strategies, plans, and rehabilitation programs                                                                            | NA                                | Admin/County                         |
|                                                                                       | Create a housing investment program to accelerate development of attainable and accessible housing and leverage other financial resources with an identified Return on Investment (ROI) | NA                                | Admin/County                         |
|  | Increase in total housing starts **                                                                                                                                                     | 515                               | Census Building Permits Survey, 2020 |
|                                                                                       | Decrease in the number of cost burdened households (households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs)                                                                   | 44,148                            | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
|                                                                                       | Increase in the total number of rental units                                                                                                                                            | 45,300                            | Census ACS, 2016-2020                |
|                                                                                       | Increase in higher-value owner housing **                                                                                                                                               | 55,605                            | Census ACS 2016-2020                 |
| Placemaking                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                   |                                      |
|  | Invest \$250,000 in Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan recommendations                                                                                                                | NA                                | Admin/County                         |
|                                                                                       | Convene community leaders to identify priority projects and collaboratively seek funding to support improvements and redevelopment of main streets, commercial district, and corridors  | NA                                | Admin/County                         |
|                                                                                       | Increase in trail system connections *                                                                                                                                                  | NA                                | Admin/County                         |
|                                                                                       | Create coordinated messaging across economic development, tourism, and any other communications supported by the County                                                                 | NA                                | Admin/County                         |

\*\* Increase in higher-value owner housing in order to open up and create availability for mid-value and affordable housing, improving alignment between housing stock and earning levels of residents and prospective residents

Action Steps and Timeline

| Business & Industry Growth                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Implementation Year |   |   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 1                   | 2 | 3 |
| Invest in site development where market and environmental conditions call for a public role                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                     |   |   |
| Promote and expand the JEAP process, which is available for developments that meet certain economic impact thresholds                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                     |   |   |
| Map and track all Berks County infrastructure assets/gaps in water, sewer, electric, gas, and broadband                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                     |   |   |
| Support authorities to rehabilitate and reuse sites in the county. Create priorities for a site reuse program to provide financial support                                                                                                                                                                                       |                     |   |   |
| Create a site re-use investment program to support the expansion of existing or new business and housing projects that require investment in land acquisition, development and infrastructure, or utility investment with an identified Return on Investment (ROI)                                                               |                     |   |   |
| Support growth in industries that offer opportunity jobs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                     |   |   |
| Support growth in industries offering opportunity jobs, prioritizing Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Finance and Insurance, and Manufacturing; promote succession planning and investment services, as well as the number of joint venture opportunities awarded through the Joint Venture Partnership program |                     |   |   |
| Support agri-business industry growth                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                     |   |   |
| Foster and support growth of agri-business and value-added production in Berks County to provide opportunities for advancing farm production and the financial resources to develop new products                                                                                                                                 |                     |   |   |

Small Business & Entrepreneurship

|                                                                                                                                                |  |  |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Increase government and school district spending with local businesses within Berks County                                                     |  |  |  |
| Promote bid opportunities for local businesses                                                                                                 |  |  |  |
| Make the bid process easier for local, small businesses to apply                                                                               |  |  |  |
| Support business-to-business procurement, including agricultural producers                                                                     |  |  |  |
| Support small business and entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping and strategic plan efforts that are underway                                      |  |  |  |
| Raise awareness of entrepreneurial and small business opportunities in the county                                                              |  |  |  |
| Identify pathways to engage the Latino community, increase participation, and expand entrepreneurial resources that meet the community's needs |  |  |  |
| Celebrate successful small businesses through various media channels to raise awareness and provide inspiration                                |  |  |  |

Small Business & Entrepreneurship

|                                                                                                                                                                                     | Implementation Year |   |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
|                                                                                                                                                                                     | 1                   | 2 | 3 |
| Improve access to financial resources and market access for main street and high-growth-potential businesses                                                                        |                     |   |   |
| Foster awareness of existing capital resources and convene providers to understand business trends and how the ecosystem can support increased activity                             |                     |   |   |
| Create high-risk microlending fund for startups                                                                                                                                     |                     |   |   |
| Create an investors network of angel investors                                                                                                                                      |                     |   |   |
| Support small businesses working to scale their operations to increase efficiency and achieve exponential growth                                                                    |                     |   |   |
| Explore a partnership with the SBA and their Emerging Leaders Initiative that is a cohort-based model of supporting small business leaders who are looking to scale their business. |                     |   |   |

Infrastructure & Land Use

|                                                                                                             |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Identify growth corridors and specific communities for development opportunities                            |  |  |  |
| Highlight the work of existing corridors implementing Smart Growth principles                               |  |  |  |
| Work with municipalities to identify specific barriers to development                                       |  |  |  |
| Assist with multi-municipality zoning updates                                                               |  |  |  |
| Examine existing and potential public transit and ensure it aligns with business and industry growth        |  |  |  |
| Work with major employers to assess worker locations with respect to work centers and transit opportunities |  |  |  |
| Support Amtrak bus pilot as a new model of transportation access                                            |  |  |  |
| Support passenger rail expansion                                                                            |  |  |  |
| Support the work of the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority                                           |  |  |  |
| Assess opportunities for transit-oriented development                                                       |  |  |  |
| Support growth and positioning of the Reading Regional Airport as a critical economic development asset     |  |  |  |
| Proactively attract major users and tenants                                                                 |  |  |  |
| Drive increased use of the airport, including passenger and business use                                    |  |  |  |

| Infrastructure & Land Use                                                                                                                                      | Implementation Year |   |   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
|                                                                                                                                                                | 1                   | 2 | 3 |
| Enhance the permitting process and better preserve the county's natural resources, through Berks County Conservation District's expanding processing authority |                     |   |   |
| Increase the number of permits processed through Berks County Conservation District through their newly expanded authorization                                 |                     |   |   |
| Talent & Economic Mobility                                                                                                                                     |                     |   |   |
| Retain and add workers to Berks County, prioritizing retention and support for the unemployed and underemployed                                                |                     |   |   |
| Engage with and educate employers to increase connectivity with and utilization of workforce development resources                                             |                     |   |   |
| Create a more formal "front-door" to the workforce development support system, clearly mapping resources and entry points for jobseekers                       |                     |   |   |
| Invest in and support workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives                                                                                           |                     |   |   |
| Align identified employer hiring needs, including in-demand skill sets, with underemployed and disconnected youth                                              |                     |   |   |
| Determine educational gaps in local training programs                                                                                                          |                     |   |   |
| Support businesses in recruiting talent for immediate hiring, retaining employees, and reducing the number of labor force exits                                |                     |   |   |
| Engage employers and support-related organizations to develop workforce pipelines and targets.                                                                 |                     |   |   |
| Create new structures to message and communicate career opportunities in Berks County                                                                          |                     |   |   |
| Develop targeted attraction and retention programs to match employer needs, including retention of college graduates and retiree workforce re-entry            |                     |   |   |
| Market trades and other career opportunities to K-12 schools, including support for high school internships                                                    |                     |   |   |
| Actively recruit new workers to Berks County from the surrounding region                                                                                       |                     |   |   |
| Support Berks County employers in developing inclusive and welcoming workplaces with company cultures that promote diverse employee attraction and retention   |                     |   |   |
| Match disconnected youth and Latino talent with opportunity jobs and pathways to prosperity                                                                    |                     |   |   |
| Increase awareness of career opportunities in the County of Berks                                                                                              |                     |   |   |
| Create effective points of entry into the workforce development support system                                                                                 |                     |   |   |

| Housing                                                                                                                                                                             | Implementation Year |   |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
|                                                                                                                                                                                     | 1                   | 2 | 3 |
| Assess and address the mismatch between housing stock and housing demand, including age, price point, type, and location                                                            |                     |   |   |
| Promote development in accordance with Smart Growth principles                                                                                                                      |                     |   |   |
| Promote awareness of the housing gap, particularly for high-end housing needs                                                                                                       |                     |   |   |
| Incentivize development and rehab of specific types of housing to match population trends and market demand and address aging housing stock                                         |                     |   |   |
| Explore opportunities to implement best practices in zoning and planning                                                                                                            |                     |   |   |
| Prioritize a staff position to develop and coordinate housing strategies, plans, and rehabilitation programs                                                                        |                     |   |   |
| Accelerate completion of already approved but stalled housing plans                                                                                                                 |                     |   |   |
| Promote adaptive reuse and redevelopment of obsolete commercial and industrial properties                                                                                           |                     |   |   |
| Utilize federal, state, and local programs for housing rehabilitation in main street corridors and municipalities throughout the county, prioritizing downtown revitalization areas |                     |   |   |
| Review assessment requirements to minimize carrying costs for developers                                                                                                            |                     |   |   |
| Participate in the land bank to prioritize the redevelopment of blighted properties in the city                                                                                     |                     |   |   |
| Placemaking                                                                                                                                                                         |                     |   |   |
| Fund enhancements to new and existing public spaces located across the county, prioritizing greenspace and inclusive gathering spaces                                               |                     |   |   |
| Use the Greenway, Parks, and Recreation Plan to prioritize and fund improvements and new public amenities                                                                           |                     |   |   |
| Review accessibility and distribution of these assets                                                                                                                               |                     |   |   |
| Develop plans for ongoing investment and maintenance of public spaces                                                                                                               |                     |   |   |
| Support main street and commercial district revitalization programs                                                                                                                 |                     |   |   |
| Identify promising practices, such as potential zoning updates, to encourage new models for revitalization                                                                          |                     |   |   |
| Enhance commercial districts' connections with arts, culture, and recreation                                                                                                        |                     |   |   |
| Bring together municipalities to make connections and provide support for main street and commercial district revitalization                                                        |                     |   |   |
| Support investment in safety measures like facade, lighting and streetscape improvements                                                                                            |                     |   |   |

| Implementation Year                                                                                                           | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Continue investment in the trail systems                                                                                      |   |   |   |
| Integrate trail system into the community and other arts, cultural, and economic centers                                      |   |   |   |
| Analyze the possibility to expand trail system use beyond recreation                                                          |   |   |   |
| Develop a cohesive and collaborative Berks County message, along with shared marketing resources                              |   |   |   |
| Clearly define and embrace Berks County’s identity, showing more diversity in the way the county and its assets are presented |   |   |   |
| Create a unified talent recruitment message                                                                                   |   |   |   |
| Cross-promote county attractions, events, and programming                                                                     |   |   |   |

Glossary of Acronyms

|          |                                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| BARTA    | Berks Area Regional Transportation Authority          |
| BCED     | Berks County Economic Development                     |
| BerksIDA | Berks County Industrial Development Authority         |
| BCCD     | Berks County Conservation District                    |
| BCPC     | Berks County Planning Commission                      |
| BCPS     | Berks Connections Pretrial Services                   |
| BCRA     | Berks County Redevelopment Authority                  |
| BFTP     | Ben Franklin Technology Partners                      |
| BLWDC    | Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation        |
| BCWSA    | Berks County Water and Sewer Authority                |
| CELG     | Center for Excellence in Local Government             |
| CFF      | Community First Fund                                  |
| CTCs     | Career & Technology Centers                           |
| GRCA     | Greater Reading Chamber Alliance                      |
| KUSBDC   | Kutztown University Small Business Development Center |
| LBON     | Latino Business Outreach Network                      |
| MRC      | Manufacturers Resource Center                         |
| R-BAR    | Reading-Berks Association of Realtors                 |
| RRAA     | Reading Regional Airport Authority                    |
| SBA      | Small Business Administration                         |
| SCTA     | South Central Transit Authority                       |
| SRPRA    | Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority             |
| WDB      | Workforce Development Board                           |

# Project Timeline

## 2021

### August 2021: Planning Kickoff

A 17-person advisory committee was convened to guide the IMAGINE Berks planning process. The committee was made up of community, business, education, and government leaders from across the county. The project team and its planning partners participated in a county-wide listening tour, as well as an initial round of stakeholder interviews with residents, business owners, elected officials, and other community leaders. The IMAGINE Berks website and public survey were launched to ensure broad community engagement.

### September 2021: Baseline Analysis and Ecosystem Review

The team performed economic data analyses and reviewed prior community plans to determine areas of opportunity and improvement. Recognizing the considerable amount of planning that has occurred in the community, the team assessed prior efforts that could be leveraged or incorporated into the plan.

### October 2021: Interviews

42 community members, civic leaders, and subject matter experts were interviewed to identify strengths and opportunities for enhancing economic development and overall quality of life in Berks County.

### November & December 2021: Strategy Framework

Feedback from the interviews, survey, and community listening tour were reviewed in conjunction with quantitative data to form a comprehensive understanding of Berks County’s economy, both its current state and future outlook. Based on this analysis, the project team determined six areas of focus: Industry Growth, Small Business & Entrepreneurship, Infrastructure & Land Use, Talent & Economic Mobility, Placemaking, and Housing.

## 2022

### January 2022: Build Sessions

Separate working sessions were held for each of the plan’s six areas of focus. More than 75 community representatives worked together in small groups to begin building the strategies that have been incorporated into this plan.

### February & March 2022: Strategy Development

Review sessions were held with the project team to refine and further develop strategies based on level of impact and feasibility to implement. The team engaged implementation partners and reviewed best practices. Meetings with Berks Municipal Partnership were held to solicit additional community feedback and intergovernmental alignment during strategy refinement.

### April - June 2022: Final Plan Drafting and Approval

Community partners reviewed a draft of the plan’s strategies and confirmed their intention to support implementation. Key authorities and stakeholders – including the Berks County Board of Commissioners, BerksIDA, and BCRA – provided feedback to ensure alignment with the county’s overall goals. The plan was finalized by the Fourth Economy team and presented to BCED and the IMAGINE Berks project team for approval.

### June 2022 - April 2027: IMAGINE Berks Implementation

IMAGINE Berks is a 5-year plan. During the implementation phase of this work, county government and plan partners will convene to further develop the work plans and specific responsibilities for each strategy. BCED will lead an ongoing reporting process, including hosting an annual IMAGINE Berks meeting to report on progress and impact, as measured by the plan’s defined metrics. The team will update the IMAGINE Berks Impact & Economic Indicators Dashboard, which will compare baseline and benchmark data with current data utilizing the metrics defined for each strategic focus area.

# References

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