



# *Sewickley Heights Vision Plan*

2010

*Fulfilling the Vision of the Borough's Founding Fathers*

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*“WHEREAS, We, the undersigned Owners, desire to guide and encourage future residential development in such channels as to preserve the natural and aesthetic qualities of the land and water resources, open space, wildlife, and beauty, and to prevent the over-development of the land in a manner not in keeping with the traditional residential and semi-rural character of the Community;”*

Excerpt: Land Compact and Declaration of Restrictions  
Borough of Sewickley Heights  
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania  
Recorded January 31, 1969

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Philip Hundley, Council President  
Fitzhugh L. Brown, Parks  
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# PREAMBLE

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By: Harton S. Semple, Jr.

The most excellent quality of life to be found in Sewickley Heights Borough is not an accident. Instead, a whole series of circumstances, with husbandry as a theme, people watching and preserving, combined to make it so.

The valley of what would be called the Little Sewickley Creek and surrounding hilltops was cherished by the Native-Americans from time immemorial. The last native custodians, as the Europeans poured in, French and English and Americans struggling for dominance, were the Six Nations of the Iroquois. Their homeland was up north nearer the Great Lakes, but this territory to the north of the Ohio River was theirs. They had been allowing refugees from the East such as the Delaware and the Shawnee and the Wyandot to live here. These were prime hunting grounds. The Europeans, who had by then settled in some numbers to the east and south of what would become Pittsburgh, had been kept out.

The new American nation, after the American Revolution in the mid-1780s, was desperate to obtain land with which to pay its veteran soldiers, the Continental Currency having greatly depreciated. The Iroquois were pressured to yield their lands in Western Pennsylvania. Treaties at Fort Stanwix, New York, on October 23, 1784, with the Six Nations and at Fort McIntosh in Beaver, Pennsylvania, in January 2, 1785, with the Delaware and Wyandot extinguished the Indians' claims to the territory north of the Ohio River and to the west of the Allegheny River. The amounts paid to the Indians were \$5000 and \$3000 respectively. The land was immediately surveyed beginning in the summer of 1785 and made available to veterans in exchange for Certificates of Depreciation at the Old Coffee House in Philadelphia. Most veterans did not wish to move to the wilds of Western Pennsylvania, which were by no means totally pacified, with many Indians continuing to resist the inexorable encroachment. They would not be subdued until the victories of General "Mad Anthony" Wayne a decade later and the signing of the treaty at Greeneville, Ohio in 1795. So, in fact, much of the new purchase ended up in the hands of speculators.

Several thousand acres in the heights were purchased by Thomas McKean (1734-1817). Thomas McKean signed the Declaration of Independence, was a member of the Continental Congress, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania's first Governor. He kept the land hoping to resell it at a later time for a profit. Instead, McKean gave the land to his daughter, Sarah Maria Theresa,

Machioness de Casa Yrujo, who had married the Spanish ambassador to the United States. She in turn left the property to her daughter, Narcissa Maria Louisa Martinez de Yrujo de Pierrard. Both women remained in Spain. These absentee landlords left the land untouched. It was occupied only by wildlife and a few squatters for much of the 19th century, a time of rapid development elsewhere, especially in the nearby valley of the Ohio River. Because the ladies kept their American holdings, they remained pristine. Locally, the acreage was known as the “Spanish Tract.”

The Spanish Tract was purchased in the 1890s for \$50,000 by Cochran Fleming (1828-1917). Fleming had made a fortune partnered with his brother John in Fleming Brothers, manufacturers of patent medicines such as McLane’s Celebrated Liver Pills. He lived in the town of Sewickley and was much involved in its affairs. His grandiose scheme was to clear the hilltops and build fences and buildings to sustain a dairy operation called The Sewickley Dairy Company, which he hoped would supply all the milk and butter Pittsburgh could consume. It was not to be. The operation went bankrupt before livestock was even purchased. Then followed a foreclosure sale at which four Pittsburgh businessmen, David Park, William Witherow, John Bell and D. T. Watson, who had organized themselves into The Tuxedo Land Company, named after a similar venture in New York State, and purchased 2200 acres from Fleming for \$38 an acre. The new owners retained acreage for themselves, and some of the land was then sold to carefully chosen men of wealth, who found the rolling hills and spectacular views perfectly suited for summer estates.

This was a time when most of Pittsburgh’s industrial elite made their homes in the East End of Pittsburgh or on Ridge Avenue in Allegheny City, today’s North Side. They spent their summers at Cresson Springs and Bedford Springs and, before 1889, at the South Fork Club near Johnstown, but were looking for new diversions. Allegheny City was becoming crowded and there was talk that Pittsburgh was going to annex Allegheny City (which subsequently happened in 1906). Henry W. Oliver (1840-1904), winding down his numerous business affairs after a long career, was one of the first of this group to spend summers in Sewickley, and he recruited others. In 1896 Oliver purchased 65 acres, today the valley above the YMCA to the crest of Blackburn Road. He remodeled a small farmhouse there and built a barn for his driving horses and a garden. These structures are located just behind the Rea Gatehouse that is on Blackburn Road today. Soon his son-in-law, Henry Robinson Rea, was erecting a large house on the hilltop above, which would be called “Farmhill.”

Shortly, magnificent estates covered the hilltops: James Stuart Brown’s “Uplands,” Henry Lee Mason, Jr.’s “Oak Ledge,” William Penn Snyder’s “Wilpen Hall.” Benjamin Franklin Jones built a house for himself called “Franklin Farm” and, ultimately, houses

for each of his three daughters. These and others who followed were some of America's most wealthy individuals. Many of the estates were splendid farms, and the owners competed with one another to produce the finest stock, produce, fruits and flowers. Allegheny Country Club was moved to 150 acres on the heights from its original location near Allegheny City, where it had been founded in 1895, and an 18-hole golf course was constructed. The social life was greatly stimulated thereby, but only in the summer season. These were all summer homes, and with the coming of Fall, it was back to home in the city and work.

It was a climb to get to the heights from the train station in the valley, but as roads were improved and the automobile made access more convenient, some of the great houses were converted for year round use, and a permanent community grew with Allegheny Country Club as a focus. The residents had their own police force and a fire truck, and for the most part, managed their own public works. The large amount of land that was not carefully developed was kept private and untouched to maintain space and exclusivity.

It was easy to preserve the area at first, but times changed. The Gilded Age society withered with the coming of income tax and the First World War. The Great Depression forced further austerities. Some of the great houses were razed. One of the former Jones properties fell into the hands of a family that was not able to sustain itself during the hard times. They decided to try to subdivide their property and develop 11 acres of it into a tract of homes, this right next door to the Snyder's' "Wilpen Hall" and across the road from B. F. Jones, Jr.'s "Fair Acres." The Union National Bank stepped in to buy the property, and the alarmed residents, most by then living there year round, having moved from their homes in Pittsburgh, banded together and in November, 1935, formed Sewickley Heights Borough to organize and preserve the community through the establishment of ordinances.

After World War II, higher and higher property taxes, levied to pay for an ever more expensive Allegheny County, infrastructure improvements and first class schools, challenged the residents of Sewickley Heights as they tried to retain the extensive undeveloped land in the Borough, by now grown into fully mature forest clothing steep hillsides and nourishing Little Sewickley Creek. Various strategies were employed to pay the taxes and keep the sylvan nature of the place intact, in time generating increasing dissatisfaction among the shareholders who had taken over the conservation duties of the original Tuxedo Land Company. The only way to keep the land and deal with the tax issue was to make it public, and then there are no taxes. Some land was saved in this way in the 1960s. Part of the Lewis Park estate in the heart of the heights was coveted by an expanding Quaker Valley School as the site for a new high school. Whitney

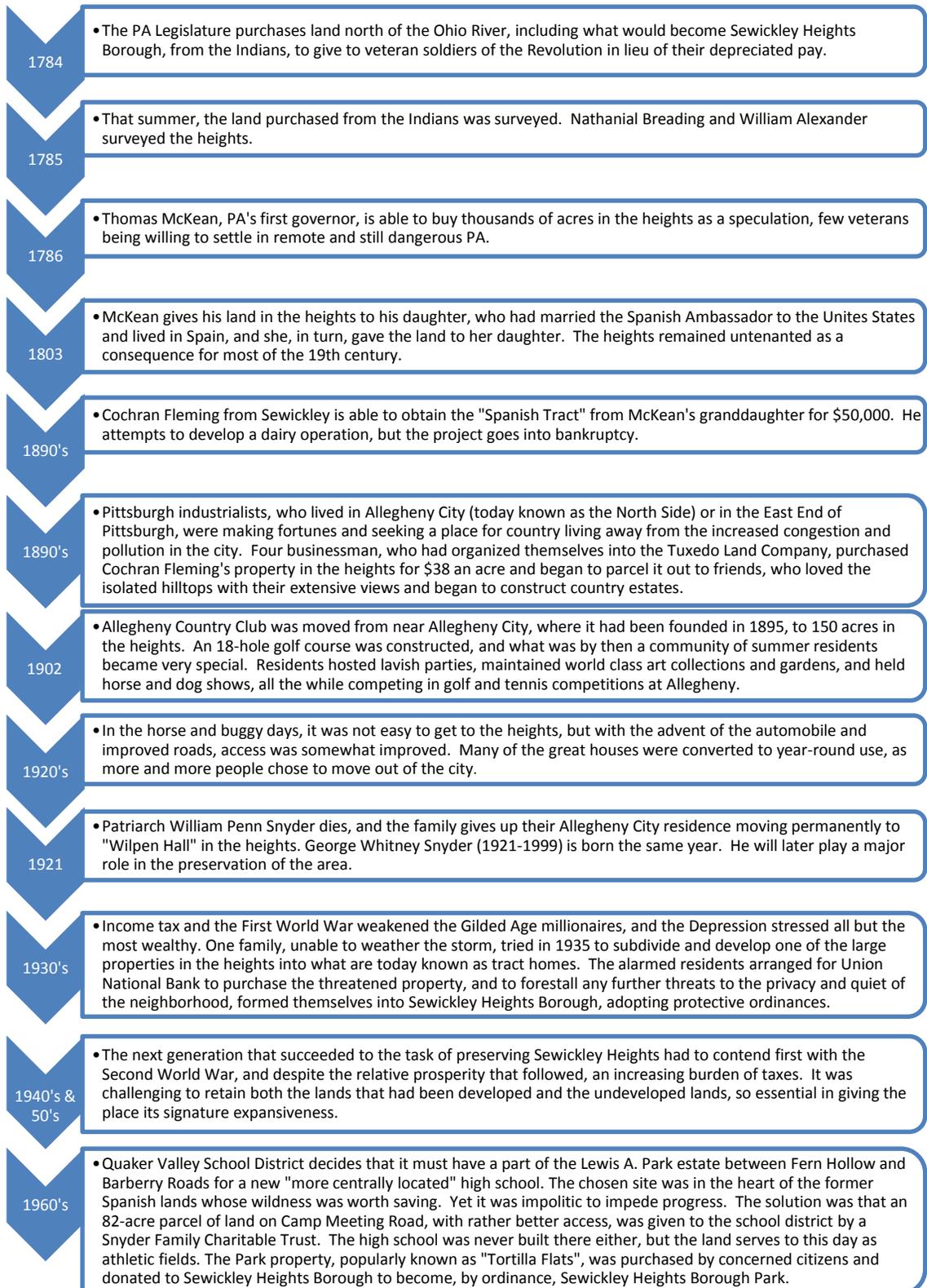
Snyder’s Charitable Trust gave the school an alternative tract in Bell Acres Borough (currently being developed into an athletic complex), and the threatened property was purchased through donations and given to the Borough as a park.

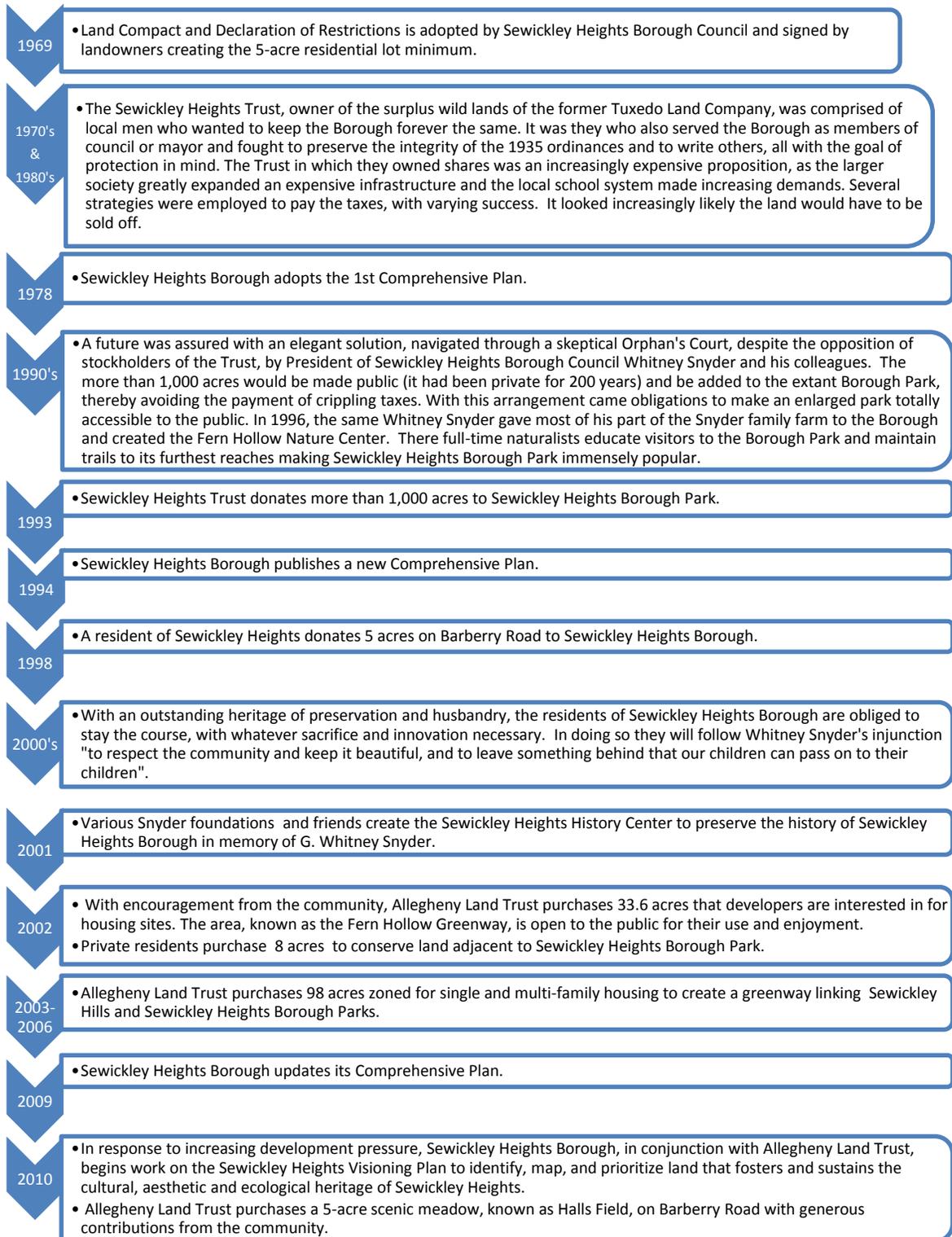
However, that still left more than 1000 acres, prime for development. A square mile is 640 acres. In 1996, through unyielding determination and careful lobbying, the Borough was able to add these Trust lands to the extant Sewickley Heights Park. The result is that an essentially whole Sewickley Heights, not that much changed from the days of its first settlement 100 years ago, survives to face the challenges of the 21st century. The prospects seem hopeful, if the residents continue to keep watch and step up when necessary to defeat the powerful forces that would make this most delightful suburb of Pittsburgh like all the rest.



Original survey monument delineating Depreciation Lands

# Sewickley Heights Timeline





# Executive Summary

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Sewickley Heights is rich in history, scenic beauty and natural diversity. A tradition of land stewardship throughout its history has cultivated a cultural landscape unparalleled in the region. Borough leaders and many residents sense the fragility of the Borough's distinct character and an urgency to protect it. The Sewickley Heights Vision Plan establishes a shared vision, with equally important roles for the Borough and its citizens, that is designed to maintain the cultural landscape that defines Sewickley Heights.

The Borough's role is to maintain and enhance the cultural landscape through local ordinances. The footprint of new development needs to be consistent with the Vision. To complement the Borough's efforts, a strong landowner commitment to the Vision Plan is very important for it to succeed. A renewed conservation ethic will foster voluntary actions by current landowners to carry on the legacy of conservation.

The vision planning process led by Allegheny Land Trust involved a Stakeholder Committee, public survey, one-on-one interviews with key individuals, analysis of current ordinances and mapping of natural, recreational, scenic and historic amenities. The primary objective was to identify, map and prioritize iconic landscapes for conservation that harbor and sustain the distinctive cultural, aesthetic and ecological heritage of Sewickley Heights. Forty parcels totaling 222 acres were identified as conservation priorities. Existing ordinances were reviewed to determine whether or not they protect the natural and cultural features that define the Borough's historic rural character.

For the Vision to be realized the following actions are necessary:

- 1) Update and revise the Comprehensive Plan, Zoning and Subdivision and Land Development ordinances to protect and enhance the rural and historic character, iconic landscapes and natural assets such as Little Sewickley Creek, mature woodlands, scenic steep slopes, ridgelines and meadows
- 2) Use conservation easements or direct acquisition of iconic landscapes for permanent green space
- 3) Maintain the uniqueness of four existing development patterns – Rural, Suburban, Private Lanes and Farm Settlement with Overlay Ordinances
- 4) Secure the 18 miles of equestrian trails on private property with voluntary written agreements with landowners, and secure permanent trail easements when possible

- 5) Protect the integrity of the biological diversity by controlling invasive species and educating landowners about using native plants in landscaping
- 6) For those design elements that are difficult to legislate, develop guidelines perhaps contained in a Pattern Book so new development enriches rather than dilutes the Borough's character
- 7) Foster a community-wide ethos of protecting the cultural (historic and natural) landscape by celebrating successes
- 8) Establish a Land Protection Fund to leverage other funds to conserve priority lands, and establish an Agricultural Security Area
- 9) Develop a brochure that tells the Sewickley Heights story featuring its place in history, legacy of land conservation and commitment to preserve its rural and historic character

For more than 100 years, a tradition of thoughtful land development balanced by equally thoughtful land conservation has transformed a western Pennsylvania wilderness into a prosperous, historic and beautiful community. It is incumbent upon the leaders and landowners of today to collaborate on this Vision Plan to ensure that Sewickley Heights reflects its past while shaping its future.

# Sewickley Heights Vision Plan

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*The next best thing to living in a beautiful setting is protecting it*

## Introduction

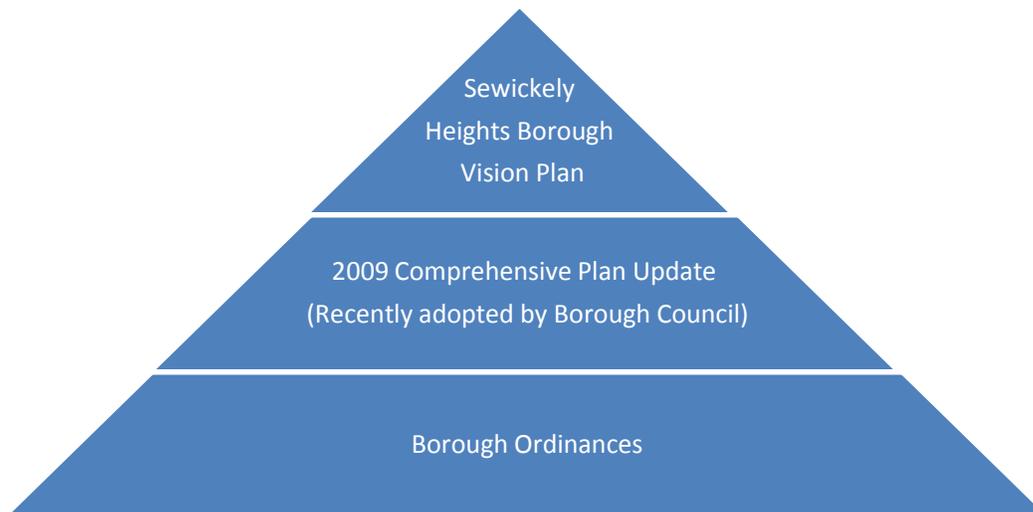


The Borough of Sewickley Heights' distinctive history and character makes the community one of the most unique and prestigious in Pennsylvania. Captains of the Industrial Revolution settled the community in the early 1900's with grand, self-sufficient estates that provided respite away from the heavily industrialized city during the summer months. The cultural landscape is rich with history, including several remnants of this period and earlier times that, when combined with pastoral vistas of abundant green space, contribute to the rural and historic ambience which prevails.

Dedication of 1,000 acres for a public park and avoidance of typical patterns of residential development common over the past 60 years has left much of the natural topography, indigenous plant and animal species and good water quality intact. Abundant green space contributes to the private and rural character, while also supporting many recreational activities such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting and fishing. Together, these biological, recreational, scenic and historical amenities create a rich and unique cultural landscape.

Foreseeing a future demand on the landscape for new housing that can jeopardize its unique qualities, the Borough is acting now so its distinctive and prestigious place in the history of southwestern Pennsylvania is not lost to homogenous suburban sprawl.

This Plan establishes the vision for the future – something to point to, saying this is what we want. The Comprehensive Plan, Zoning, and Subdivision and Land Development ordinances must work together to see the vision to fruition.



The following mission statement for the Sewickley Heights Vision Plan was adopted by the Stakeholder Committee, who worked closely with Allegheny Land Trust over nine months to develop the Vision Plan.

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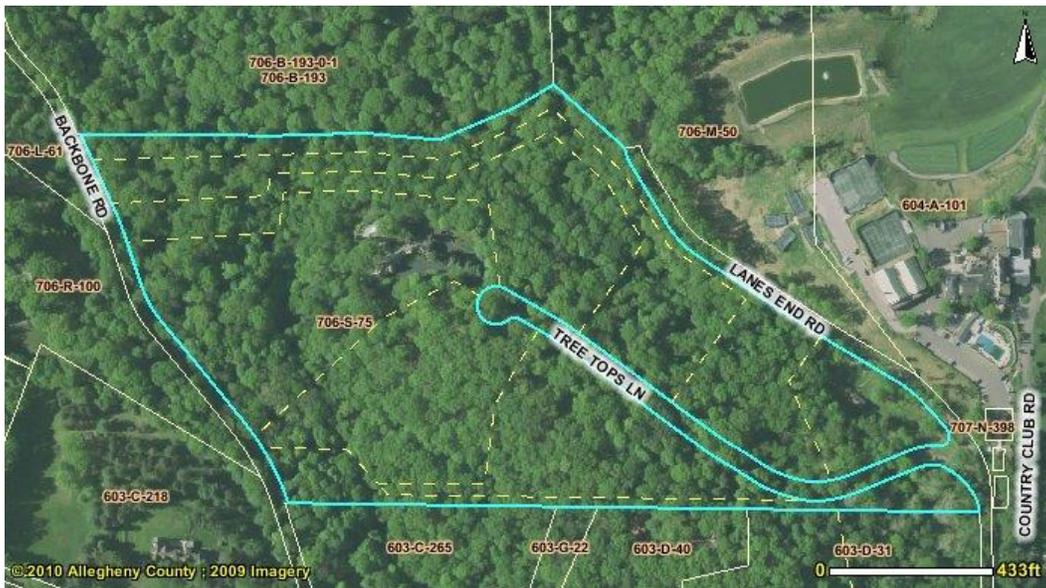
*The Sewickley Heights Vision Plan will identify, map and prioritize land for conservation that harbors and sustains the distinctive cultural, aesthetic and ecological heritage of the Borough of Sewickley Heights.*

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## Build Out Analysis

The Southwest Regional Planning Commission states the 2010 population of Sewickley Heights is 949 persons. They predict the population will be 995 in 2020 and 1122 in 2025. An analysis was conducted to quantify the amount of available land with the potential to be subdivided into new 5-acre home sites. This analysis was not a detailed site specific analysis of physical, access or sanitary system constraints that may exist and impede development. This is rather a simple mathematical exercise of dividing available acreage by 5 – the minimum lot area required by zoning. There are a number of vacant parcels without any structures and several parcels with an existing structure and sufficient excess acreage to enable subdivision into one, or more, 5-acre lots. As shown on the next page, a maximum in the range of 271 new 5-acre lots are mathematically possible in Sewickley Heights.

A similar analysis, prepared by Gateway Engineers and appearing in the 2009 Comprehensive Plan Update, estimates a potential of 92 new 5-acre lots. Gateway's analysis considered topography and assumed that each 5-acre lot would be completely comprised of land with slopes less than 25%. However, the Borough does not restrict development of 25% slopes, and it is common for developers to maximize lot yield by concentrating building sites on the developable area and utilizing surrounding steeply sloped acreage to create a 5-acre or larger lot. Lots on Treetops (shown below) and Winterberry Lanes are examples of this.



The limited available land and prestige of a Sewickley Heights address will likely incent developers to apply this technique in order to leverage more building sites. Therefore, a number between Gateway Engineer's estimated 92 and this report's estimated 271 is likely.

### *Vacant Parcels*

There are 156 privately-owned vacant parcels in Sewickley Heights, totaling 753 acres. Excluding the 94 existing lots less than 5 acres in size, a maximum number in the range of 123 new 5-acre lots are mathematically possible to be created on privately-owned vacant land. More detailed analysis of access, topography, perk-ability, lot configuration and other factors is necessary to accurately quantify the number of new developable lots that could be subdivided from these parcels.

VACANT LAND		
# of Parcels	Size	Total Acreage
13	< 5 acres	56.8
27	> 5 < 10 acres	172.3
17	> 10 < 30 acres	235.7
3	>30 acres	157.3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>
60		622.1

*Partially Developed Parcels*

There are 43 partially-developed parcels, totaling 962 acres, which are at least 10 acres in size with one existing structure. These parcels have the potential to be further subdivided and developed, solely based upon the amount of excess acreage that exists. A maximum number in the range of 149 new 5-acre lots are mathematically possible to be created from the 747 excess acres these 43 parcels contain. More detailed analysis of access, topography, perk-ability, lot configuration and other factors is necessary to accurately quantify the number of new developable lots that could be subdivided from these parcels.

PARTIALLY DEVELOPED LAND		
# of Parcels	Size	Total Acreage
17	> 10 < 15 acres	197.4
7	> 15 < 20 acres	113.6
5	> 20 < 25 acres	113.9
4	> 25 < 30 acres	107.8
4	> 30 < 35 acres	129.3
1	39.9 acres	39.9
1	46.1 acres	46.1
1	59.3 acres	59.3
1	71.4 acres	71.4 acres
1	78.9 acres	78.9 acres
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>
44		957.9

## Ordinance Review

“Sewickley Heights is a very special place because of the stewardship practiced by caring people dedicated to preservation. We must continue to be worthy stewards of our irreplaceable natural resources.”  
Survey respondent, George Borowsky

Today’s landowners are beneficiaries of a long legacy of decisions, which prevented Sewickley Heights from becoming just another Pittsburgh suburb. Although the topography is similar to that of neighboring municipalities, which have been subjected to the sprawling development pattern so typical of southwestern Pennsylvania municipalities, the Borough has escaped this destiny.

At this point in time, Borough leaders in concert with the community need to act boldly in the tradition of their predecessors to protect an unparalleled quality of life and prestige, and a future that embraces and celebrates the past.

The Zoning, and Subdivision and Land Development ordinances and amendments were reviewed. In summary, these ordinances need to be updated to eliminate inconsistencies, limit disturbance of the Borough’s natural attributes and work as a blueprint to support the Sewickley Heights Vision Plan. Existing ordinances provide no limit to disturbance of steep slopes and clear cutting of woodlands, nor are there development buffers near streams. Limits to development in these areas are very common in municipal ordinances. A detailed commentary on existing Borough ordinances and recommendations that the Borough should consider when updating and revising current ordinances appears later in this document. Sample language from several ordinances in effect in other municipalities is also attached.

### *Overlay Districts*

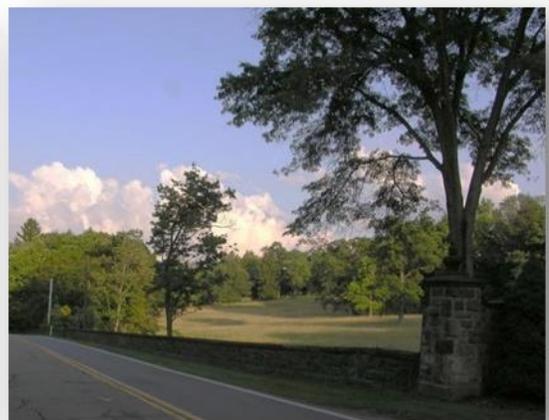
Within its borders, the Borough has diverse landscapes and development patterns. These include: narrow, winding, brook-side country roads under a shady canopy of trees reminiscent of a forested valley in the Laurel Highlands; sunny, open, ridge-top vistas of surrounding woodlands; meadows and pastures with horses or sheep that echo a rural past; wider arterial roads with frequent curb cuts and ornamental gateways that offer a more suburban feeling; and occasional nodes, frequently at intersections, that offer iconic views of wonderful historic structures embraced by an expansive landscape. There are also farm settlements with clusters of barns, farmhouse and outbuildings as well as charming private lanes such as Pink House Lane that could be models for new development.

The challenge for the Borough will be to draft and adopt ordinances and guidelines that work in unison to maintain the integrity of these distinct patterns throughout the community. Four overlay districts, as shown on the following Overlay

District Map, are proposed to maintain four existing development patterns - Rural, Suburban, Private Lane and Farm Settlement. Each overlay district could have their own distinct set of design standards contained in an Overlay Ordinance and perhaps a Pattern Book for standards that are difficult to legislate. The Pattern Book should contain images of desirable features, architectural details and material samples to guide and promote a particular character, ambience or “feel” for the district. The Pattern Book can underscore the community’s commitment to maintaining the integrity of the district and may promote voluntary actions by existing and new landowners.

The Borough currently has a Historic District and a Historic and Architectural Review Board (HARB) that could be a model for these new proposed districts. The following design elements should be addressed for each of the four districts:

- > Road design specifications including width, materials, drainage and horizontal and vertical curve minimums. The Fire Department should be consulted before new specifications are adopted
- > Building setbacks and dimensions such as bulk and height
- > Landscaping and screening
- > Lighting and entry monuments
- > Walls, fences and other ancillary architectural elements



*A section of Blackburn Road with suburban and rural character*

## The Cultural Landscape

An inventory of natural, scenic and historic features, recreational activities and results of a public opinion survey were compiled and grouped into three resource categories representing the cultural landscape; Biological, Recreational, Scenic and Historic. Using Geographic Information System (GIS) methodology, the information was translated to maps, which illustrate resource locations and concentrations. Following is a description of the maps and their contents.

## Biological Resources

### *Woodlands & Vegetation*

The Borough covers an area of approximately 4,745 acres, of which 80% is covered in woodlands, 19% is open meadow and grasslands and only 1% is covered in impervious surface. 3,065 acres, or 65%, of the Borough is classified as biologically significant in the *1994 Allegheny County Natural Heritage Inventory* prepared for the Allegheny County Planning Department by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. This abundant and relatively intact natural land cover represents some of the highest quality examples of a Mesic Central Forest Community in the county. The following is an excerpt from the *Allegheny County Natural Heritage Inventory*:

[A large area north of the Ohio River that encompasses portions of the Big Sewickley Creek Watershed and the entire Little Sewickley Creek Watershed has been designated the Big and Little Sewickley Creek Landscape Conservation Area. This Landscape Conservation Area (LCA) is not only significant as the largest tract of a relatively contiguous, undeveloped “green space” in the county, but also as an area that contains a large Biological Diversity Area (BDA) and four managed lands. A large part of the protection focus of this LCA is the Little Sewickley Creek Watershed. The Little Sewickley Creek has been designated a high quality trout-stocked fishery by the D.E.R. Presently, this stream is believed to be the highest quality stream in the county and is also the best example of a Medium-Gradient Clearwater Creek Community of all the river tributary streams in its size class in the county.

The southern portion of the Big and Little Sewickley Creek LCA includes a large Biological Diversity Area, known as the Camp Meeting Woods BDA. This BDA is recognized as both a High Diversity Area and a Community/Ecosystem Conservation Area, which encompasses a significant forest and stream community on the north and south sides of Camp Meeting Road in Bell Acres Borough and the Borough of Sewickley Heights. Portions of both the Big Sewickley Creek and Little Sewickley Creek Watershed are included in this BDA. The primary focus of the BDA is the Mesic Central Forest Community that covers

most of the area within the BDA boundary; however, also included within this BDA are sections of Little Sewickley Creek, a Medium-Gradient Clearwater Creek Community. The highest quality examples of the Mesic Central Forest Community exist in the more protected, steep walled valleys within the site. Some of the exceptional examples of this forest community are located in the stream valleys and some slope areas off of Turkeyfoot Road and off of Sevin Road. The north facing slopes and tributary valleys, as well as the north tributary known as Wagner Hollow along Little Sewickley Creek provide other highly significant examples of this forest community within the BDA.

Aside from general restriction of the forest to the slopes and valleys, use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides related to the maintenance of the golf course turf could potentially impact the quality of the streams and associated soils in the forest. Evidence of some of the disturbances related to this type of upland development include erosion of stream beds which is due to increased runoff from pavement and storm water diversion, both of which result in an unnatural influx of water into the valley. Erosion has resulted in tree falls and destabilized stream banks.

The natural qualities exhibited within the Camp Meeting Woods BDA can best be protected by allowing the forest and stream to continue through successional stages without alteration or disruption caused by future logging, development or infrastructural development related to residential development (i.e. sewer lines, utility right-of-ways, roads, etc.). Maintenance of a buffer zone is recommended which should include any upland or upper slope area that is presently forested or has the potential to revert back to forest.]

Large lot zoning and a desire for privacy has prevented the loss of substantial tracts of woodlands that is common to most residential development. Much of the open grass and meadowlands present today are remnants of prior agricultural uses. Woodlands seem to be considered by most Borough landowners as an asset, and voluntary commitments to protect and maintain them are evident. However, as much of the remaining developable lands are wooded and sloped, substantial woodland losses could occur over the next 10 – 20 years. Development of steeply sloped land impacts an area much greater than the actual footprint of structures, access drives and utility corridors. Unsightly and frequently eroding steep cut and fill slopes result when flat building pads are benched into sloped land. Reasonable limitations on woodland removal and replacement standards can help to reduce and mitigate woodland losses, without creating a hardship for the owner. Municipalities commonly manage and steward woodland resources with ordinances for the host of public benefits they provide. Examples of ordinances to limit removal of woodland types and unique or aged specimens appear at the end of this report.

One important public benefit provided by the dense woodlands and low percentage of impervious surface is good water quality in Little Sewickley Creek Watershed (LSC) and its tributaries, which comprise 64% of the Borough. Mature

woodlands can intercept up to 76% of annual precipitation, which reduces flooding and promotes the replenishing of groundwater that provides a source for private wells and streams during dry spells. Woodlands comprised of the tree canopy, understory plants and herbaceous groundcover layers absorb rainfall, stabilize slide prone slopes that exist in the Borough and reduce erosion. Erosion carries silt that reduces the carrying capacity of streams making them more prone to flooding, and also reduces the ability of a stream to harbor a full diversity of aquatic life, from tiny benthic organisms to game fish. Little Sewickley Creek is one of only three watersheds in Allegheny County that supports stocked trout. It has been reported there may be a breeding population of brown trout in Little Sewickley Creek. Community groups are building rock weirs and deep pools to improve the fish habitat of LSC, which is a popular destination especially on Opening Day of Trout Season.

Natural land cover also filters impurities found in runoff, such as lawn and garden chemicals, and salt and automobile fluids from roads. Vegetation buffers along streams help to stabilize the banks and shade water from the sun, keeping it cool and oxygen-rich for the more sensitive species of aquatic life. Sediment is the worst pollutant in many streams and rivers. Seth Wenger describes the benefits of stream buffers for the Office of Public Service and Outreach's Institute of Ecology at the University of Georgia in *A Review of the Scientific Literature on Riparian Buffer Width, Extent and Vegetation*, the Revised Version, dated March 5, 1999:

[Sediment is the worst pollutant in many streams and rivers. Scientific research has shown that vegetative buffers are effective at trapping sediment from runoff and at reducing channel erosion. Studies have yielded a range of recommendations for buffer widths; buffers as narrow as 4.6 m (15 ft.) have proven fairly effective in the short term, although wider buffers provide greater sediment control, especially on steeper slopes. Long-term studies suggest the need for much wider buffers. It appears that a 30 m (100 ft.) buffer is sufficiently wide to trap sediments under most circumstances, although buffers should be extended for steeper slopes. An absolute minimum width would be 9 m (30 ft.). To be most effective, buffers must extend along all streams, including intermittent and ephemeral channels. Buffers must be augmented by limits on impervious surfaces and strictly enforced on-site sediment controls. Both grassed and forested buffers are effective at trapping sediment, although forested buffers provide other benefits as well.]

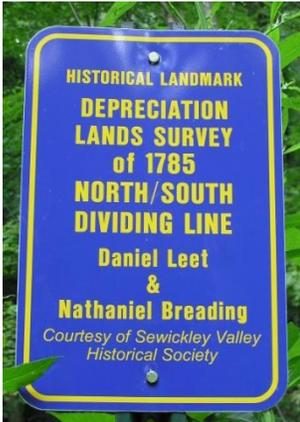
### *Soils*

Hydric or permeable soils can act like a sponge and promote the percolation of surface water into the ground, or slowly release water directly into streams. Hydric soils are found at the headwaters of Little Sewickley Creek's tributaries and should be protected from encroachment to ensure that the functions they provide continue. The Pittsburgh Red Bed clay seam is notorious for its instability in this region. It is a

suspected cause of the catastrophic landslide, which occurred in nearby Kilbuck Township, where mass grading for a Wal\*Mart store was occurring.

### *Topography*

The relief of the Borough ranges from a low point of 805 feet above sea level at the border of Sewickley Heights and Bell Acres near the intersection of Little Sewickley Creek and Sevin Roads, where the pictured plaque can be found, to a high point of 1,245 feet at the border of Sewickley Heights and Sewickley Hills near the intersection of Magee and Parkview Drive.



The landscape ranges from flat floodplains along creeks and ridge tops to very steep slopes that can exceed 40%. Land development on slopes exceeding 20% requires a substantial amount of earthwork that results in engineered cut and fill slopes in the range or 33% to 50%. Land development, access roads and utility easements on steep slopes usually disturb more land than the infrastructure actually requires, leaving unsightly scars that are difficult to restore.

### *Hydrology*

As previously addressed in the vegetation section, the Borough is host to one of the highest quality streams in Allegheny County. This natural resource deserves proper stewardship so it may continue to be a community asset, rather than a liability, like so many other impaired and flood-prone streams have become throughout the region. The Little Sewickley Creek Watershed Association and other groups and individuals deserve credit for their work over the decades, raising public awareness, providing education and caring for this natural community resource that provides recreation, beauty and wildlife habitat. A multi-municipal stormwater management planning effort called the Sewickley Valley Rivers Conservation and Management Plan involving 15 Quaker Valley municipalities and 13 separate watersheds has been ongoing for several years to address downstream flooding. Conservation of land in headwater communities such as Sewickley Heights will help to prevent an increase in the volume of stormwater downstream. A stream buffer is recommended (See Ordinance Review, Stream Buffer) to reduce siltation, and maintain the water quality and stream capacity necessary to accommodate high water from storm events. The following Biological Resources Composite Map represents the natural features described above.

## Recreational Resources

Equestrians, hikers and mountain bikers enjoy 43.56 miles of trails that meander throughout the Borough and beyond on public and private lands. Many are used by the Sewickley Hunt, an organization running drag hunts in the Quaker Valley for 88 years. The hunt was founded in 1922 by John and Adelaide Burgwin, prominent Sewickley Heights' residents. The Sewickley Hunt is one of only ten remaining fox hunts in Pennsylvania that are recognized by The Masters of Foxhounds Association of America, the governing body of organized fox, coyote and other acceptable legal quarry and drag hunting in the United States and Canada. The Sewickley Hunt is the second oldest in southwestern PA. The Rolling Rock Hunt in Ligonier was founded one year earlier. The Saxonburg Hunt in Butler County wasn't founded until 64 years later. The traditional Thanksgiving Day Hunt attracts most of the 60 riding members of Sewickley Hunt Club and is enjoyed by spectators who watch the riders of all ages mount their horses at

“Sewickley Heights is, and was, developed as a farming and equestrian community. It is fundamental that this is continued.

The unique sport of fox hunting is continued and all efforts should be made to preserve this sport. This is only one of the special events that make our community so special.”

Survey respondents, Frank & Susie Simons

Rockledge Farm in bright red, white and black riding outfits, and then weave through the autumn woods following the eager hounds in chase of the elusive fox. The “fox” is actually only a scent sprayed by a volunteer who runs ahead of the yelping group of frustrated hounds that never catch, much less see, the “fox”.

The Sewickley Hunt's future is dependent upon access to the trails it uses. The trails are a fragile network with 25.14 miles existing on public land,

and 18.42 miles on private lands where a “handshake agreement” with landowners allows access. The security of the trail network, and therefore the future of The Hunt, is vulnerable to changes in land ownership. An effort to secure access to, and use of, trails on private land is critical to ensure a future for the Sewickley Hunt and recreational mountain biking.

Fishing, hunting, hiking, mountain and road biking, dog walking and bird watching round out the recreational benefits provided by Sewickley Heights Park and its greenways.

## Scenic and Historic Resources

“People want to live in Sewickley Heights because of its elite reputation and are willing to pay a premium price for it. They crave privacy and the flexibility of owning a large tract of land while living proximal to a metropolitan area. Subdivisions and impaired water quality would significantly erode the very essence of these unique attributes.”

Joseph Zemba, Realtor

The prior Biological Map is a product of the compilation of scientific data. For example, the water of Little Sewickley Creek can be evaluated to determine its quality, slopes can be measured to determine their steepness and trails can be located.

However, data for the Scenic and Historic Resource Map is admittedly more subjective because it involves an emotion or opinion, rather than a scientific result or physical evidence. Beauty is in the eye on the

beholder. In the spring and summer of 2010,

a 14 question public survey was distributed to 301 landowners to develop scenic criteria, determine what features support scenic landscapes, what terminology landowners use to describe Sewickley Heights and their attitudes towards ordinances aimed at protecting woodlands and water quality.

102 of 301 Borough landowners (33.8%) responded to the survey and in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 key individuals. The Survey identified the most popular vistas which include: The field at Fern Hollow Nature Center and Fern Hollow Road; the trees and woodlands as seen from Way Hollow, Blackburn, and Pony Hollow Road; Tortilla Flats and the meadow at Sewickley Heights Park; Chalfont Farm with sheep grazing in the meadow; the forest around Little Sewickley Creek; Fox Hill Farm with a view of the pasture, hills, and woodlands; the fields at the corner of Blackburn and Scaife Roads and of the Snyder Property – Wilpen Hall. These are the highest priority to protect because they define the Borough’s image and are most visible from public rights-of-way.

“New construction, renovations and landscaping can all be done sensitively, in order to maintain the unique, historic quality of Sewickley Heights.”

Survey respondent, Mary Barbour

Publicly visible walls, fences, gates, lighting and other architectural elements can contribute to or compromise the integrity of the Borough’s character. There is question regarding jurisdiction the Borough has over the historic stone walls within the county and state public rights-of-way, and whether the Borough wants, or has, the authority to legislate and/or maintain these elements.

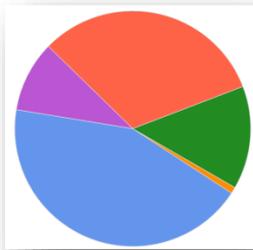
Several other top line results of the public survey included the terms that best describe the character of Sewickley Heights as “Rural” (49.5%) and “Historic” (36.4%). When asked what natural features supported the rural character, and therefore were most important to protect, 50% of respondents selected trees and woodlands, and 25% chose open fields and meadows. Combined, 75% of the respondents believed it is important to protect trees, woodlands, streams, open fields and meadows to maintain the Borough’s rural character.

- > The top 3 scenic roads identified by respondents were Fern Hollow, Blackburn and Pony Hollow.
- > 67.4% of respondents believe that certain trees should be replaced when removed.
- > 83.2% of respondents would seem to support local ordinances such as “setbacks from streams” and “limitations on certain land uses” in order to protect water quality and reduce stormwater runoff.
- > 76.9% of respondents support the idea of creating a Land Protection Fund if the money was matched by other public funds.

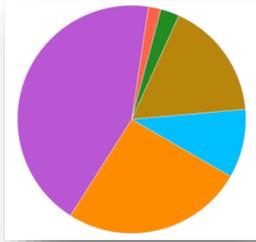
Details of survey results and transcripts of interviews appear as an attachment the end of this report.

## Public Survey Results

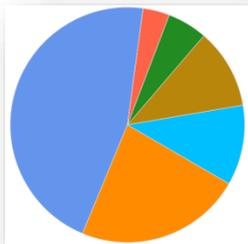
### 1.) Which of the following best describes the character of Sewickley Heights?



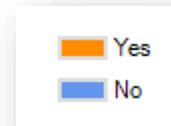
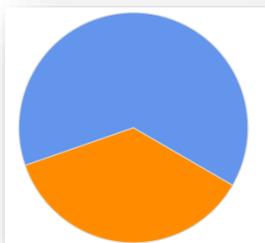
2.) Which of the following has the most influence on that character?



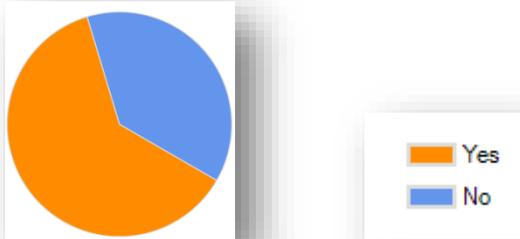
3.) Which is most important to protect and maintain the Borough's character?



4.) Split rail fences are the dominant type of fence currently used. Apart from deer fencing, should all new publicly visible fences be required to be split rail?

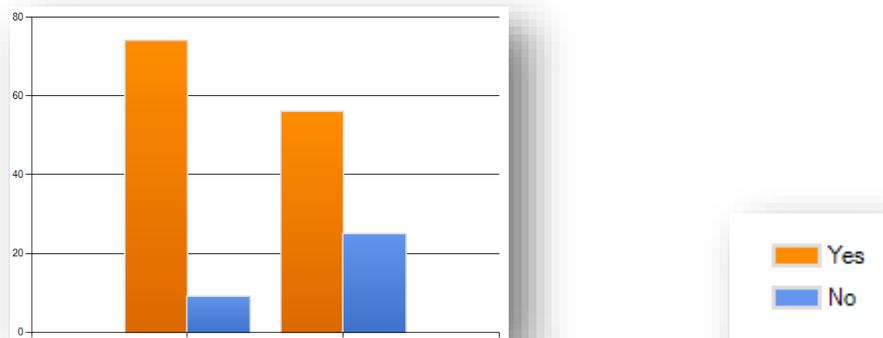


5.) *Stone walls are a unique feature throughout the Borough. Should all new publicly visible walls be required to be of similar scale, size and material as the historic stone walls?*

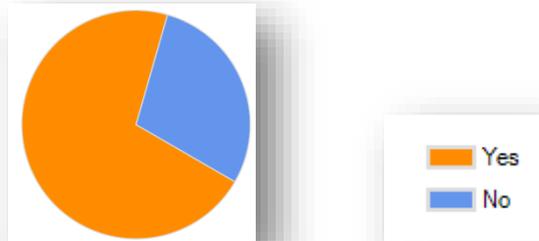


Note: Questions 6, 7, and 8 were open ended questions. Those responses appear at the end of this document.

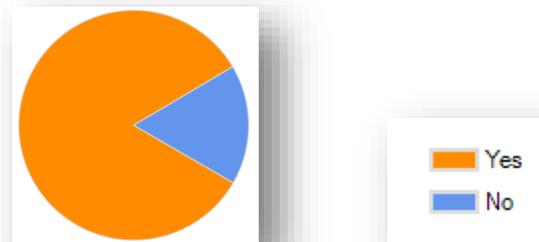
9.) *Is it important to protect certain trees and woodlands? (Results on left) Should it be required to replace certain trees when they are removed? (Results on right)*



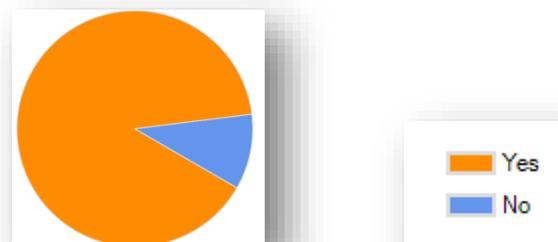
10.) *Is it important to restrict the use of certain invasive plants to control their spreading and impact on the biological diversity of the area?*



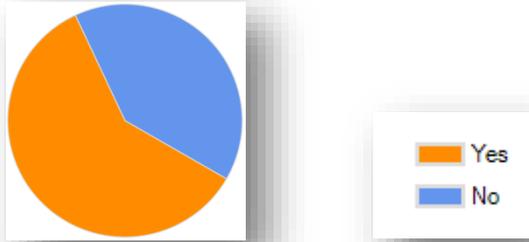
11.) *Should the Borough consider new land use ordinances such as setbacks from streams and limitations on certain land uses to protect the water quality and reduce stormwater runoff?*



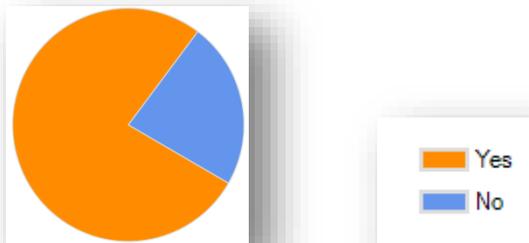
12.) *Is protecting undeveloped land necessary to maintain the current character and quality of life in Sewickley Heights?*



13.) *Is the Borough doing enough to protect land as permanent green space?*



14.) *Would you support the idea of creating a Land Protection Fund if the money was matched by public grants?*



Considering the public attitudes derived from this survey, there seems to be public support for land conservation and for the Borough to consider new or revised zoning and subdivision and land development ordinances to guide design and manage new growth while maintaining the Borough's rich natural resources, beauty and cultural landscape. Acknowledging there are limits to what can be legislated, public awareness about the purpose of the Vision Plan can lead to voluntary actions, and collaboration with nongovernmental organizations can help the Borough implement this Vision Plan. The results of the public survey and interviews were translated and mapped to create the following Scenic and Historic Resources Composite Map.

## Prioritizing the Cultural Landscape for Protection

All parcels comprising the Cultural Landscape were prioritized for protection. Criteria included the parcel size, whether it was vacant or partially developed, whether or not it was enrolled in Clean and Green, and Stakeholder input. Several additional parcels were added due to a particular attributes existence, such as scenic views or trails that could be protected by an easement.

The identified top-priority parcels are subject to change due to outside influences. For example, local land transactions and the condition of the real estate market will affect the urgency for protection. In addition, the ebb and flow of development pressures will determine the areas of the Borough most vulnerable and in-turn most imperative to conserve.

Conservation of the cultural landscape must be done strategically. Strategic conservation focuses limited available resources and protects the lands most suitable for conservation, while also taking into account competing values, needs and opportunities. These factors must be evaluated simultaneously to develop the most efficient and effective land conservation strategies.

To encourage land conservation, donors of land easements or substantial funding should be publicly recognized for their contributions (unless they wish to remain anonymous) and successful land conservation campaigns should be celebrated. Making land conservation fashionable may engender similar action in the community and motivate others to preserve the unique and exceptional characteristics of Sewickley Heights. Borough Council resolutions, high-profile dinners and other special events can be used to grow awareness, momentum and foster a conservation ethic.

## Vision Plan Implementation

For the Vision to be realized the following actions are necessary.

### Education and Outreach

- Groups such as Allegheny Land Trust, Fern Hollow Nature Center, LSC Watershed Association could offer workshops on how to maintain the community's biologically rich landscape
- Programs and lectures on historic preservation, structure maintenance and funding could be offered through the History Center or Sweetwater Center for the Arts
- Literature on conservation options and associated tax benefits for landowners could be made available at the Country Club, Borough office, Nature and History Centers
- Public Survey follow-up to further explore the community's interest in establishing a Land Protection Fund
- Produce and distribute a promotional brochure of the Vision Plan through realtors, chambers of commerce and executive search companies

### Land Conservation

- Create a funding mechanism to protect properties recommended for permanent green space
- Establish an Agricultural Security Area which makes participating farms eligible for the easement purchase program of the PA Department of Agriculture.
- Establish a program to secure trail easements on private property.
- Use conservation easements or direct acquisition of iconic landscapes for permanent green space

### Legislation

- Update existing Zoning, and Land Development and Subdivision Ordinances for consistency and to clearly support the goal of maintaining the Borough's distinctive character
- Establish tree protection criteria and replacement standards
- Establish stream setbacks and steep slope restrictions

- Create “Rural”, “Suburban”, “Private Lane” and “Farm Settlement” Overlay Districts with development guidelines, Pattern Book or covenants that maintain, enhance and restore the development pattern of each respective district. For example, rustic entrance features and deeper front yard setbacks with a woodland buffer could be required in the Rural District.
- For those design elements that are difficult to legislate, develop guidelines perhaps contained in a Pattern Book so new development enhances rather than dilutes the Borough’s rural and historic character



## Ordinance Review

### Disclaimer

The following is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the Borough of Sewickley Heights ordinances for compliance with the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code. The review is focused on specific codes that are intended to manage and sustain resources such as woodlands, water and steep slopes. Recommendations and examples of adopted codes from other Allegheny County municipalities are provided for consideration

### Comprehensive Plan

In 2009, an “update” to the Borough’s 1994 Comprehensive Plan was adopted.

This plan follows a traditional format including being heavy on description and light on analysis.

### Environmental Assessment Ordinance #145

In 1976 Borough Council enacted an Environmental Assessment Ordinance.

Demolition should be added to the definition of “development”.

The role of the Planning Commission should be clarified.

### Zoning Ordinance #213, 219, 223 and 225

#### *Definitions:*

Define “landslide prone soils”. The Gilpin Upshur Complex is prevalent in the Borough. These soils can be found on slopes exceeding 25% to 80% that parallel the streams and are susceptible to landslides.

Define “steep slopes”. “Excessive Slope” is defined in Grading Ordinance #220 as slopes over 25%, but the term “steep slopes” is used in the ordinances. *[No steep slope protection ordinance exists, but has been discussed. The Borough is*

*relying on the premise that the cost of developing steep slopes restricts their development]*

“Demolition should be added to the definition of “Development”. Add demolition to Section 2.2.28 of Zoning Ordinance.

“Net acre” should be defined (*see proposed calculation table below under Calculating Density*)

### *Section 1.6 – Community Objectives*

Ordinance lacks specificity as to how to meet these objectives, such as preservation of steep slopes, landslide prone soils, significant mature woodlands aquifer recharge areas (1.6.2) and “prohibit land development where there is a high percentage of certain soil types” (1.6.3).

### *Sections F.1 (a) and F 3. (a) 1 – Calculating Density*

It is stated in the Net Density definition that slopes of 25% and greater and **common open space** are not to be included in the site area, only land to be developed for residential use, roads, **open space**, yards and courts that abut and serve residences can be used. First, the use of “open space” in this context can be confusing. Perhaps create new definition for “open space” to avoid confusion with “common open space”. Also, can required 30% common open space as per *Section F 3. (a) 1* include 25% of site when slopes are greater than 25% as per *Section F. 1. (a)*? It is unclear whether required Common Open Space can include 25% slopes or greater. A definition of “Net Acre”, or a sample net acre calculation as shown below, would help resolve confusion about how to determine Net Density.

### **Sample Net Acreage calculation**

<b>Total Sample Site Area</b>	<b>100 ac</b>
<b>Required 30% Common Open space</b>	<b>-30 ac (as per Section F 3. (a) 1)</b>
<b><u>Slopes in excess of 25%</u></b>	<b><u>-15 ac (as per Net Density definition)</u></b>
<b>Net Acreage</b>	<b>55 ac</b>

*Sections 8.3.1, 8.5, 9.3.1* The main ordinance and Section 8.5 in the amendment should be revised to reflect the recent state legislation dealing with home occupations.

*Section 10.4.4* Should require that stormwater to be infiltrated into the soil on site.

*Section 11.7* Uses the phrase “unreasonably noxious or offensive” but does not state who makes this determination.

Throughout the ordinance the pronoun “he” is used. Section 2.1.4 should state that the use of any pronoun includes both genders.

### Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance #218 & 261

Comment: The organization of the Borough of Sewickley Heights Land Development Ordinance includes outdated and amended design standards. This creates confusion for the designer and potential for more demand on Borough staff time working with designers to be sure they are using the most current standard/amendment. The document should be reprinted with current design standards and amendments only.

For example, *Section 5.2.1 B(1)* States that a 400 foot minimum horizontal curve radius is required. However, two amendments were made to reduce the minimum horizontal radius to 175 foot (*Exhibit SH 151*) and *Ordinance #261* amending *#212* allows a 125 foot horizontal curve radius when the road serves from 2 to 5 lots with a combined total acreage of less than 30 acres. Then *Section 5.2.1 B(2)* states that “long radius curves shall be used rather than a number of short radius curves connected by short tangents”. By comparison, Borough of Sewickley Hills allows a 100’ minimum horizontal radius for local streets where the speed limit is 25 MPH.

*Section 5.2.1 B(4)* States that additional pavement width is required for curves with a radius of less than 600’. To reduce impervious surfaces and runoff, this requirement should be evaluated to determine if the extra pavement is actually necessary.

Comment: The reduction of the minimum horizontal radius by *Exhibit SH151(as revised)* and *Ordinance #261* could impact other Sections of the code, such as *Section 5.2.3 Sight Distance (as revised)*, which should be reviewed by the Borough engineer to avoid conflicts between ordinances.

*Section 8.3* The requirements for plantings may not be strong enough to ensure they are maintained or replaced. Specifically, Section 8.11 does not identify vegetation among the various improvements to be maintained. This will be especially important if the Borough adopts codes to require specimen tree or woodland replacement in the future.

## Erosion and Sediment Pollution Control #211

*Section 3.01 A and B* There are no General Requirements stated to meet stated objectives “to prevent and control development within environmentally sensitive areas including wetlands and watercourses of the Commonwealth” or “to restrict and control development in areas with naturally occurring steep slopes or highly erodible soils” or “to regulate development resulting from subdivisions and land development within the Borough”.

## Grading #220

There is no maximum height for cut slopes.

Recommendations:

Require 6’ – 8’ wide bench every 10’ of vertical of cut and fill slopes

Require re-vegetation of cut and fill slopes with native non-invasive vegetation

Provide flexibility and where possible do not require entire width of public right-of-way to be graded on steep slopes.

## *Landscaping Vegetation*

Prohibit invasive plants such as crown vetch and other invasive plants identified by PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and PA Department of Agriculture.

Increase property line buffer to 50’ to be consistent with neighboring Sewickley Hills

## *Site Plan*

Require to show total area of disturbance, grading, cut and fill, vegetation removal and existing trails

## *Conflicts of interest*

Require disclosure by Borough Council, Planning Commission, Zoning Hearing Board consulting engineer, solicitor and others that they have no business relationship with developer

## Stormwater #210

*Pg. #6 Release Rate Percentage* Might there be occasions when the discharge rate must be reduced relative to the pre-development peak? As per a 167 Plan for example.

*Pg. #9 A1* Delete “no” before word “greater” (logic – larger watershed can handle more runoff before being impacted)

*Pgs. #10, #1* Insert “runoff” before word “calculations”, and replace “which” with “and”

*Pg. #11 F* Make consistent with grading ordinance

*Pg. #21 Section 8.02* Consider adding green roofs as a method of stormwater management

*Pgs. #23, #7* Performance standards for landscaping should be considered, such as detention facility shall not be visible from any public right-of-way

Replace “DER” with “DEP” throughout

Detention design standards – require pond to blend into natural contours and that it not be visible from the public right-of-way

## Floodplain #221

*Section 7.02 A.* Perhaps add reference to requiring Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) and/or DEP permit prior to adding fill to floodplain. Fill may increase the height of a 100 year flood event, which is prohibited by this ordinance Section 7.01 B. C.

*VariANCES 9.02* Should be stated that a variance if granted does not eliminate the need for DEP and ACOE approval /permit.

## Following are recommendations relating to resource protection ordinances

### Steep Slopes

From Borough of Sewickley Hills (Subdivision and Land Development Regulations, Part 7 Natural Resource Protection Standards, §702 Natural Features, Section 5)

- Steep Slopes, 15 to 25%, total disturbance will not exceed 25% of total area
  - where the steep slope area contains landslide prone soils no disturbance is permitted
- Very steep slopes, 25% or more, no disturbance is permitted

### Stream Buffer

100' buffer from top of bank of all intermittent and perennial streams. (From "Option Three" in *A Review of the Scientific Literature on Riparian Buffer Width, Extent and Vegetation* by Seth Wenger, Office of Public Service and Outreach, Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia, 1999.)

### Woodlands and Trees

Specimen trees: Restrict the removal and disturbance of large or unique specimen trees over 18" diameter at breast height (DBH) to cases where removal is unavoidable. If the tree is removed, require replacement of the same or similar species.

Woodlands: Limit removal of woodlands to the area of disturbance necessary for the structure, a reasonable envelope around the structure for lawn, access and utilities. Prohibit clear cutting of the entire lot. Require all engineered cut and fill slopes to be planted with a mix of native species similar to those removed for the development. Minimum density requirements for replacement vegetation should be established to accelerate and ensure the restoration of engineered slopes. Invasive species should be prohibited to sustain the rich biodiversity of the area.

Adopt sustainable forestry standards to regulate logging in a manner that helps to manage and sustain the diversity of the woodlands, protect water quality and control introduction and spread of harmful invasive plants.

## Sources

*Allegheny County Assessment*. Web. 2010. <<http://www2.county.allegheny.pa.us/>>.

Hopewell, Alisha. "Despite Development, Sewickley Hunt Carries on Tradition with Hounds, Horses but No Quarry." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 10 Nov. 2005. Print.

*MFHA - Masters of Foxhounds Association*. Web. 22 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.mfha.org/>>.

Semple, Harton, and Susan C. Holton. *Sewickley Cemetery: History of the Sewickley Valley Found in Sewickley Cemetery*. Sewickley, PA: Sewickley Cemetery, 2009. Print.

United States of America. Borough of Sewickley Heights. *Land Compact and Declaration of Restrictions*. By Evans Rose. Vol. 4696. Pittsburgh: Rose, Schmidt, and Dixon, 1969. Print.

Wenger, Seth. *A Review of the Scientific Literature on Riparian Buffer Width, Extent, and Vegetation*. Rep. Athens: Institute of Ecology, University of Georgia, 1999. Print.

## Attachments

Public Survey responses to Open Ended Question

Transcripts from Individual Interviews

Sample Ordinances

Land Compact

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**For More Information**

**Sewickley Heights Borough**

**Borough Hall**

**Country Club Lane**

**Sewickley, PA 15143**

**[www.sewickleyheightsborough.com](http://www.sewickleyheightsborough.com)**

**Allegheny Land Trust**

**409 Broad Street**

**Suite 206 A**

**Sewickley, PA 15143**

**[www.alleghenylandtrust.org](http://www.alleghenylandtrust.org)**