

**ICL Recommendations to the  
Berks County Community Foundation  
July 2023**

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## Executive Summary

The Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) worked from January to July 2023 on a process for the Berks County Community Foundation to assess the best ways to address environmental issues and climate resilience in Berks County.

At the heart of the process was the central question: Where are the key opportunities for the Berks County Community Foundation to provide the most value in the coming years to improve community and environmental health? Climate change impacts can and will have a direct impact on the quality of life in the county. Although there are organizations beginning to address the impact of climate change on the resilience of communities within the county, no one organization or government agency is positioned to take a leadership role in moving the issue forward. Without a coordinated and visible initiative to address climate resilience, it will be difficult to direct donor interest to support activities that make Berks County a more climate resilient set of communities.

Given the scope and complexity of community and environmental health, especially in light of climate change and its impacts, the Community Foundation believes that strategies based on collaborative thinking and action have the greatest potential for positive change. Accordingly, the process intentionally prioritized the perspectives and active participation of community leaders from across Berks County through a series of meetings, interviews, and data review.

Three meetings took place over March 2-3, 2023, with 45 leaders total. The intentions for the meetings were to invite the sharing of creative and unexpected ideas that could improve the community and environmental health of Berks County; to build new relationships and better connections across community leaders working in a range of areas; and to begin to identify the emerging themes of needs/visions/ideas to improve community and environmental health in Berks County. Meeting participants offered feedback through verbal shares, sticky-note reflections, and digital reflections using a tool called Mentimeter. Each feedback point was gathered and combined into a spreadsheet, and coded against themes.

During the community meetings, ICL was impressed by the energy of the people coming together to envision a stronger community. It was notable the number of people who were not well acquainted. And even more notable was the energy leaving the meetings – in each meeting a large number of participants lingered in conversation with one another. It seemed clear to participants that they had a shared vision. And, we were struck by the passion from participants in each meeting with a desire to build a better county.

Following the community meetings, ICL and Community Foundation staff conducted 11 interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and coded using the same methodology as the community meeting inputs. The interviews reinforced what other community leaders had pointed to—that there is a need to lean in more strongly to support collaborative thinking and problem solving. We heard clear recommendations for the Community Foundation to provide leadership in bringing diverse actors together, and also helping bring a needed focus to action steps (not more planning!).

ICL finally conducted a review of 24 existing reports and data analysis related to the themes from Berks County and beyond. Through review of existing data and reports, ICL was impressed by the depth of thought given from a range of actors across the county to the mechanics and needs present to improve community and environmental health. The data helped ICL identify opportunities where the Community Foundation could leverage its resources, and where planning and implementation processes were already well underway in the county.

In processing these valuable takeaways, ICL offers recommendations and options to the Foundation in the following categories:

- Supporting Collaboration
- Using an Innovation Fund
- Supporting Additional Inquiries or Research

## Supporting Collaboration

The findings from ICL’s work point most strongly to the need to connect leaders across the Berks County community, and intentionally work to support cross-fertilization and shared collective strategies. The image of the Community Foundation acting to bust silos and build bridges in the county was captured in a powerful drawing that resonated across each of the three community meetings. While there was consistent acknowledgement that significant silos and challenges exist, leaders expressed a deep hope and desire to address differences and create productive connections to benefit the community.

We encourage the following potential avenues of investment for the Community Foundation as ways to build relationships, networks and collaboration within the county:

- **Creating collaborative spaces** – Engaging meetings and events with plenty of opportunity for informal conversation creates space for collaborative work to emerge. This might be under a “big tent” of broad sustainability topics, or convening entities for specific topics to explore, or supporting informal networking among various types of leaders. Based on the response from the community, and the Foundation staff’s

significant relationships in the county, regular gatherings will be a critical piece to breaking down silos of work and strengthening relationships.

- **Intensive collaborative leadership skill development programs** – Our findings point to significant need and opportunity to build leadership and collaborative skills among leaders in the county. We recommend that the Foundation invest in a range of skill training that allows leaders to learn together, build connections, and be in proximity to each other without an overt expectation of a need to “collaborate with each other.”
- **Grant making strategies** – Grants that allow for building relationships, joint research and learning, or collaborative exploration and planning can be especially good investments that lead to solid collaboratively executed strategies. We encourage the Foundation to be open to a range of collaborative grants, including grants that merely allow for groups to build connections over a couple of years, or that create aligned and coordinated work within the collaborative’s groups.

We encourage the Foundation to “seed and water” collaboration, allow collaboration to evolve organically in the community, and selectively expect or ask for collaboration within strategies. This approach can be balanced with requirements for collaboration and the Foundation playing the role of “introducer” or “active matchmaker.”

## Using an Innovation Fund to Drive Issues That Rose to the Top

Often small amounts of money can be what is needed to support learning, investigation, planning, strategizing, collaborating, and creating approaches that lead to systems changing and new approaches. We suggest the broad concept of an “innovation fund” as a way to seed and support a range of these types of efforts to address the complex and interconnected set of issues identified by the Berks County leaders engaged in our discussions.

The word “innovation” conjures up concepts of new ideas, exploratory learning and creating, and break-through technologies. While those concepts are part of what may be imagined, we also know that “innovation” might also include weaving together current strategies and organizations in such a way that what is already in motion becomes enhanced, shifted and more impactful. Choosing how to frame such an innovation fund will be the work of the Community Foundation and its advisors, and we encourage that definition to be initially experimental and tested over time.

As a broadly defined concept, an innovation fund approach can give the Community Foundation enough structure with enough flexibility to respond to the identified needs in the county. It also



could, depending upon how it is structured, give the Foundation the opportunity to respond to the capacity, initiative and energy of organizations and collaborative efforts as they emerge.

The concept of the innovation fund has been fully supported by the advisory group and by the leaders who joined in the May Community Meeting. Specific concepts about the Innovation Fund concept are included in the full recommendations.

## **Supporting or Conducting Additional Areas of Study & Research**

Within both the collaboration and innovation grant areas, we see opportunities and need for deeper investigation and collective learning that will lead to thoughtful strategies for change and investment. As all of our research with the community and other sources points to, the issues are complex, systemic and gnarly. Many of the issues require a “go slow to go fast (and smart)” approach which will be supported by careful inquiry.

Examples, data, and experts from other parts of the Commonwealth, mid-Atlantic region, and the U.S. will likely help to spur on strategic thinking and collective action. We encourage this additional study and/or research to be as anchored in the Berks County reality as possible. If outside researchers do additional studies, every effort should be made to carefully integrate community leadership along the way—informing the research at the beginning, being updated and consulted as it proceeds, and having a range of ways to learn about and digest the findings in engaged discussions. Applied research and investigation by leaders in the community, especially using collaborative methodologies, is the most powerful way to have information be owned by the community, and therefore used to shift systems.

Based on our research, there are a raft of potential issues that need more thoughtful investigation, included in the full recommendations document.

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ICL has been honored to partner with the Berks County Community Foundation on this project. Our full report contains the wider context, deeper details, and illustrations we offer to the Foundation to support your goals of environmental and community health, and the mitigation of the coming risks of climate change impacts.

# Introduction

## Project summary

The Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) designed a process for the Berks County Community Foundation to assess the best ways to address environmental issues and climate resilience in Berks County. The Community Foundation initiated this effort to explore:

- 1) The ways the Community Foundation can fund and support environmental and community health, and especially to mitigate the risks of climate change impacts, and,
- 2) How to begin to lay the groundwork for a strong collaborative effort to address environmental and community health within the county.

The Community Foundation assembled an Advisory Group to provide input to ICL on the constituencies, issues, project process, and the final product for the proposed assessment. The Advisory Group included four local leaders with expertise in different elements of Berks County community and environmental health:

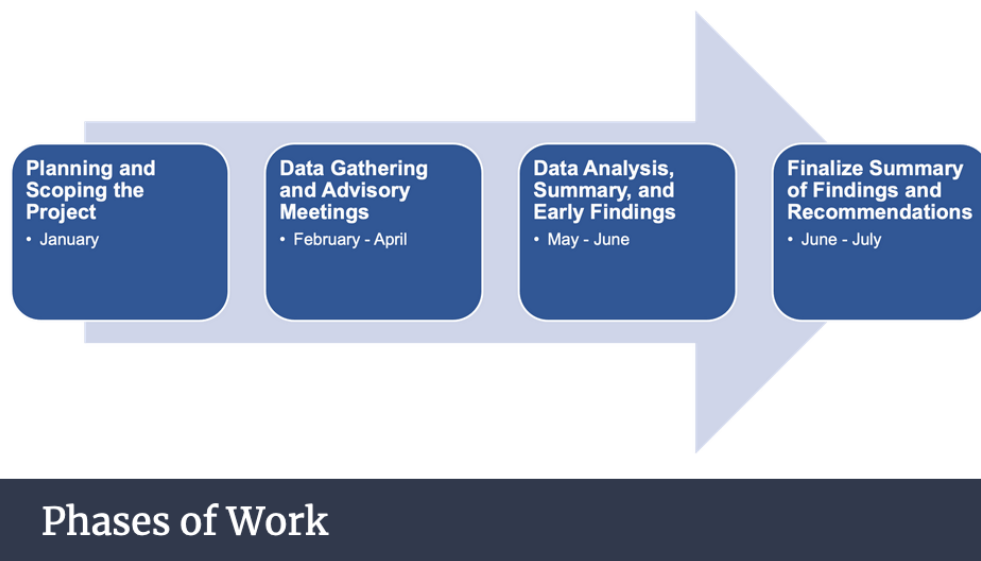
- Paul Janssen, Center for Excellence in Local Government
- Cathy Myers, a volunteer on Reading EAC and faculty at Alvernia University
- Ashley Showers, Berks County Planning Commission
- Spencer Stober, Alvernia University

## Phases of Work

ICL led a highly participatory research process that brought a range of leaders from Berks County together to share information, ideas, and their perspective on environmental and climate-related issues. The intention in doing so was to gather the community's wisdom and assets, identify specific gaps and missing pieces, and lay the foundation for any future collaborative work. The project took place in four main phases:

1. **Data gathering & advisory meetings:** From February to April 2023 the team gathered relevant data points through research and outreach to key community leaders for input. This included three community meetings with 45 people from across the community, and interviews with 11 leaders ([Participant list](#)). In addition, ICL compiled and reviewed 20 reports and research reviews recommended by the Community Foundation and Advisory Group as directly relevant to the project ([list of reports reviewed](#)).

2. **Data analysis, summary and early findings:** In May ICL shared a summary and early findings from the data gathering process with the Community Foundation and Advisory Group for feedback, input, and to test themes.
3. **Follow up community information gathering:** The group conducted an additional community meeting in May to gather early feedback on potential recommendations.
4. **Finalize summary of findings and recommendations:** In June and early July, the group revised the initial findings and recommendations to incorporate feedback from the community and presented their recommendations to the Berks County Community Foundation related to a giving strategy to address climate resilience.



The Advisory Group kicked off work January 19 and subsequently met on February 2, 24, May 4, and July 18. They participated in interviews with the ICL team during the month of April and joined in person meetings on May 18 and July 18.

## Methodology

During the data analysis and community meetings, ICL's intentions were to map initial themes through a process of listening, as well as identify potential avenues for grantmaking strategies that respond to these themes. The sources used for gathering data included three community meetings with 45 people, and 11 interviews with leaders from across Berks County. Throughout this phase, ICL requested and reviewed data analysis and reports related to environmental health in Berks County to supplement the understanding of the themes emerging from the

community meetings and interviews, as well as to check the viability of potential avenues against existing information.

To make sense of the information gathered throughout the process, ICL used a qualitative data analysis methodology with the following steps:

1. Identify the main topic areas and constituencies relevant to the project during the kickoff meeting with the Community Foundation and Advisory Group.
2. Gathered 411 inputs from community meetings via a digital survey collection tool, Mentimeter, through verbal-report-outs of group discussions, and through sticky note reflections on the group presentations.
3. Gathered 190 inputs from responses to questions from interviews gathered via Zoom transcripts and interviewer notes.
4. Gathered 41 inputs from follow up discussions on May 18 from sticky notes added to discussion prompts.
5. Reviewed 24 reports and data analyses, where we summarized data, pulled out key quotes, and coded against the original themes.
6. Coded each input against the original topic area. Examples of inputs coded along with screenshots of coded inputs can be found in the "[Methodology](#)" section.

# Findings

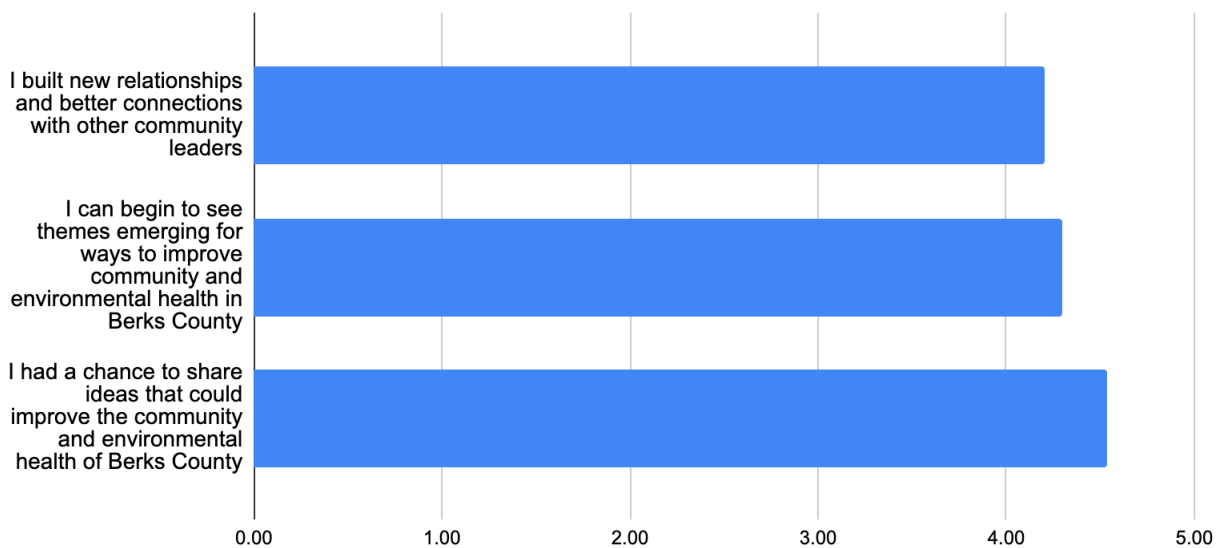


## Community Meetings

Three meetings open to a wide range of community leaders took place on March 2 and 3, 2023. The intentions for these meetings were:

1. Sharing of creative and unexpected ideas that could improve the community and environmental health of Berks County
2. Building new relationships and better connections across community leaders working in a range of areas
3. Identifying emerging themes of needs/visions/ideas to improve community and environmental health in Berks County

Following each session, participants agreed the meetings met their expectations of these outcomes:



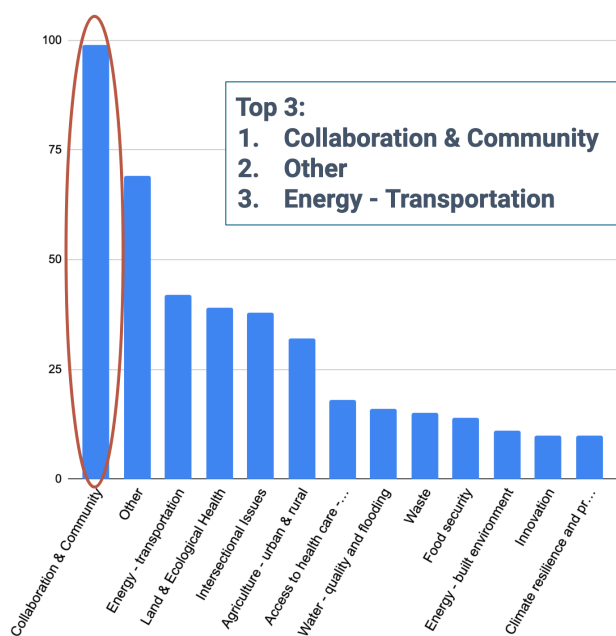
The meetings brought out three core takeaways:

1. There is a need for increased collaboration and coordination in Berks County.
2. Community and environmental health issues are viewed as integrated with safety, accessibility, economic development, and the need to connect Berks County with the wider region.
3. There are significant community assets and positive progress to build on in future strategies.

### Need for Increased Collaboration in Berks County

The most prominent issue raised during all three community meetings was a need for increased collaboration across Berks County. This came through in the group exercises, in the discussion prompts, and in the reflections at the end of the session about what stuck out most to participants.

The graph to the right depicts the 413 total coded inputs, 99 of which related to the need for increased collaboration in Berks County. There were also 67 coded inputs that did not fit into any of the topic categories. The “other” inputs related to the following sub-topics:



- 28% Meeting feedback (either on the content or the mechanics of the meetings) (19)
- 17% Affordability, poverty, or costs of transitions needed (12)
- 12% Diversity, equity, inclusion topics (8)
- 10% Mentioning a specific initiative in Berks County, such as the lead abatement program or youth outreach programs (7)
- 10% General reflections, such as “Where to start?” (7)
- Other sub-topics in this “other” category include: Policy, Youth, Education, Crises, Climate migration





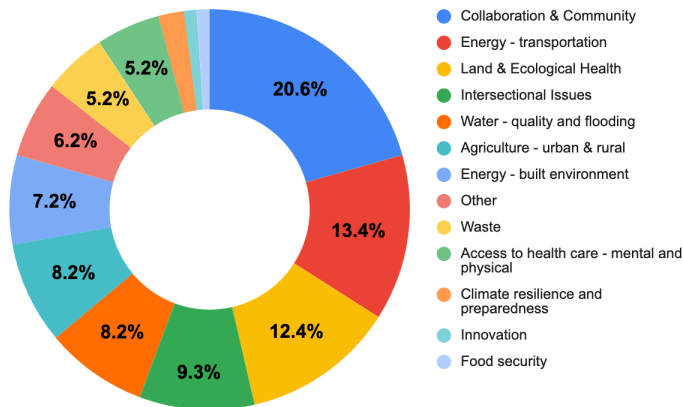
create efforts that bridge different demographics within the community across race, class, and language in order to make connections that build strength and community.

When asked, “What stands out to you most from your discussions today?” one participant responded:

“We need to address root causes by breaking down silos across our community to coordinate our efforts thus using our resources well and meeting the needs of our community members.”

**Community and environmental health issues integrated with safety, accessibility, economic development, and transportation.**

Participants in the meetings on March 2-3 also referenced a range of interwoven issues impacting community and environmental health in Berks County, as well as the need to better connect the county with the wider region—and the world. Participants in the meetings came from a wide cross section across the county, representing unique perspectives on how to improve environmental and county health. They brought forward rich reflections on the diverse



aspects required to weave together a good quality of life, including safety and accessibility, both to the services as well as to the built environment. Another prominent issue was the importance of economic security and development.

The interwoven list of issues raised is possibly most clearly seen in the chart to the left that shows the issues present in the report-outs from the group

discussions of the scenarios. While collaboration is the most prominent theme, the range of other interwoven issues does not fall far behind and is treated with near equal importance.

At the top of the list of interwoven issues leading to stronger community and environmental health in Berks County was that of transportation. From the group diagrams, to discussions, and closing reflections, it was clear that creating strong and environmentally conscious transportation solutions in Berks County is essential.

When discussing transportation topics, meeting participants raised a number of issues needing solutions in the sector, including how transportation supports other key milestones to reaching



community and environmental health. For example, several participants raised how transportation connects to access to health care, healthy food, employment, and safety.

**There are significant community assets and positive progress to build on in future strategies.**

ICL left the community meetings confident in the value of the existing resources in Berks County to find solutions that will create transformational progress on community and environmental health. The energy from participants to come together and create solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of climate change was inspiring. We heard the message loud and clear that the community is eager to come together and find solutions to make the scenario we posed to the group something within sight. One participant said it best:

“We all want the same things. How do we make them happen?”

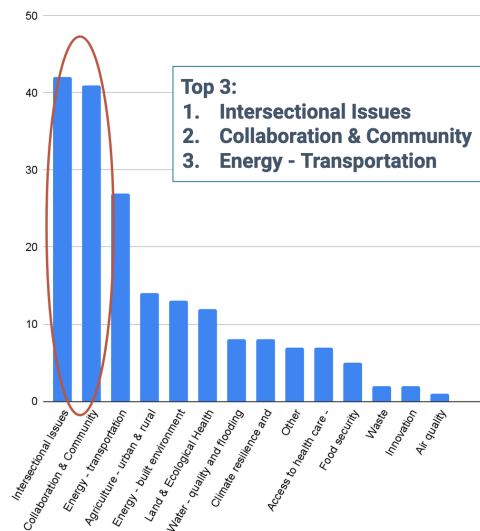
## Interviews

ICL and the Community Foundation staff conducted 11 interviews with participants from a range of expertise in Berks County. The interviews used a set of questions designed to dive deeper into the themes that came out of the community meetings, and also to explore potential avenues for solutions.

**Takeaway 1: Collaboration & Community continued to be prominent in discussions, at the same level as Intersectional Issues**

ICL coded 190 responses from the interviews against the same themes as the community meeting responses. In analyzing the themes from these responses, two prominent topics rose to the top: Collaboration & Community, and Intersectional Issues. This was consistent with the community meetings where the intersectionality of the range of topics came out in the group share-outs prominently. In the interviews, the participants were more explicit about intersectionality as a prominent area to pay close attention to.

- ***Biggest priorities are shared collective vision, education, and doing whatever possible to break down the silos that exist***



For example, Mike Toledo of the Hispanic Center of Reading and Berks said:

“I think it's collectively how we break down these barriers.

No one organization can do it. Each organization brings a certain strength, a certain skill set, that is important to come together.”

**Takeaway 2: Several interviewees shared barriers with pursuing green transportation as a target**

When probed about the transportation theme from the community meetings, interviewees were more cautious about pursuing solutions related to green transportation as a strategy for the Community Foundation. Interviewees listed several problems, including:

- BARTA is not meeting the community’s needs – including not giving easy access to warehouse jobs, and creating huge wait times for the routes that are in service; and needs to be electrified. And while current efforts are underway to improve passenger rail, making significant changes to the public transportation infrastructure could take years.
- The existing infrastructure does not support walkability, biking, or trail highways to allow better access to recreation. Several interviewees cited the city planning for connecting trailheads, referenced in the data analysis section below.
- Community members’ mindsets are attached to personal vehicles. One interviewee said, “Berks County drives more than any other county.” Shifting this mindset to one that prioritizes public transportation or biking/walking options is not a simple change, nor can it be shifted with individual actions alone.

Following these takeaways, one interviewee recommended conducting a study on how to properly finance green transportation and make that the baseline for infrastructure planning in the future.

**Takeaway 3: There is a need to adapt to changing demographics**

Many interviewees named the importance of the shifting demographics in Reading as an area of importance. This theme was also prominent in the community meetings, and something that is further addressed in the analysis of data reporting in the following section. This message came out prominently when interviewees discussed the intersectionality of issues, for example:

- Urban families are struggling and living in crisis --while green space may be helpful to them, it's likely the last thing on their minds.
- The City of Reading has changed from predominantly white males running everything to being a far more racially diverse community. The City has a very different demographic than the exurbs.
- There's a group of usual suspects that are traditional educated leaders, mostly white in the community. And then we have this massive demographic change over the last 10-15 years, where most of the community is Hispanic, everyone is trying to figure out how we create forums, community togetherness and bring in the people who aren't the usual suspects.

As one interviewee astutely noted: Sustainability requires it to be sustainable for everybody, and recommended the funding of a study of racism in the county as one avenue to address solutions that would ensure intersectionality and solutions created in service of environmental health are done in service of all demographics in Berks County.

#### **Takeaway 4: Challenge of addressing systemic issues with small units of government**

Finally, interviewees noted the structural issues innate to Pennsylvania that make systemic changes especially challenging, specifically:

- The local focus and structure makes changes that impact multiple townships difficult; interviewees cited challenges getting municipalities to agree to similar actions; and also noted the limitations of regulations in PA compared with neighboring NJ that make interventions such as requiring green roofs on warehouses difficult to implement.
  - One interviewee shared, "Getting a multi-county authority is nearly impossible in Pennsylvania. People have turned down entire drinking water systems because they don't want to connect to the neighboring municipality. 'Home rule' is a major problem here."
- Reports and recommendations don't always lead to the action required to see change:
  - Berks County government "has a recommending role" that depends on municipalities to act, and often depends on private-public partnerships to fund. "Municipalities are not always listening...what's the point of the county doing our work, making recommendations, and then having them not engage or ignore what we do...working together is the goal."

- The city has conducted and seen a wealth of plans and reports; one interviewee noted when he worked in local government he had at one point two-dozen reports with plans and recommendations for revitalizing downtown Reading and noted the issue was “a huge shortage of consensus and follow through.”

“We need to act. The environment is sending the signals all the time; we are seeing it in the shifts in biodiversity, the magnitude of soil loss, the continuation of food deserts right here in Reading, and the inability of a Reading native to be able to get good, healthy, reasonably priced food is horrible. There’s no reason it should be that way. We need to get moving.” – David Osgood

### **Additional Community Input and Thoughts**

ICL invited everyone who had participated in community meetings and interviews to review and share feedback on the topline takeaways above on May 10 and 18. The objective for the May 10 meeting was to share, via Zoom, the analysis, methodology and themes. On May 18, the focus was on eliciting discussion around the themes and also the emerging recommendations. ICL gathered 41 inputs from this meeting from sticky notes on discussion question prompts.

The discussions were centered around seeking additional input on the themes from the findings and the potential recommendations. As such, the themes from these inputs fell largely into the categories of:

- Intersectional Issues (18)
- Innovation (14)
- Collaboration (10)

Many participants discussed specific ways the Community Foundation could address the issues of community and environmental health identified throughout the process that would be supportive of building on existing strength, resources, and collaboration. This was in contrast, potentially, to starting brand new entities or projects not grounded in “what already exists.”

Related to strategies to increase collaboration in Berks County, participants suggested that the Community Foundation could propose a specific issue or challenge and create forums for Berks County leaders to come together and work on solutions in the community. They also encouraged the Foundation to seek intersectional challenges that would naturally bring players from different sectors together in coordination such as heat islands, forever chemicals,

stormwater management, or food security. Each of those topics presents a threat to the environment and community health and requires the problem-solving collaboration of leaders from different sectors.

When discussing the potential for an innovation fund to address systemic issues in environmental and community health in Berks County, many participants were clear that they wanted to make sure the Community Foundation was mindful of “when” funding was offered: Getting funding at an early phase can be transformational for groups who are used to receiving funds only once the project is designed and pitched. Some participants suggested getting support for grant writers or technical assistance to seek and secure additional funds that could leverage funding from the Community Foundation. Others suggested the importance of incentives to work with “unusual suspects” - partners who have not had as much of a chance to build relationships with traditional leaders in Berks County.

**“Collaboration and intersectionality run through it all; grants should encourage it”**

## **Review of Existing Reports and Data**

Throughout the process, ICL has sought and reviewed relevant data and reports to back up the recommendations and insights gathered from community members. Our intention with this review was to focus on information and data related to the themes we heard, and to look for additional gaps or opportunities that might present useful strategies and collaborative efforts.

As noted by interviewees, there is no shortage of government reports available making recommendations for improvements of Berks County. ICL did note some areas lacking from the reports, though. Many of the reports dealing with environmental or land use topics did not mention climate change or preparation for major climate events.

- All of the reports reference the changing demographics in Berks County, but few offer answers to integrate solutions and build leadership among Hispanic community; compared to food system reports or agricultural reports that address solutions on a national level and specifically call out opportunities to elevate minority-owned businesses and first-generation farmers of color, these solutions are notably absent from the recommendations in the reports for Berks County government.
- Berks County greenway plan lists many recommendations and touts the importance of public-private partnerships to implement; and the appendix linked from the report from

the business development agency also touts the importance of private sector financial support – but that report barely mentions environmental topics, only includes investment recommendations for passenger rail, and mentions nothing about tracking climate resilience measures or land preservation or protection.

- Berks County Comprehensive Plan has pages of goals and policies, and accompanying plans built on those policies with implementation plans.

### **Berks Nature - State of the Environment Reports**

Beginning in 2010, Berks Nature created a regular report to the citizens of Berks County they named the [State of the Environment](#). Using a panel of experts, Berks Nature began tracking and reporting the data and trends in five categories: Air, Energy, Land, Waste and Water. The panel chose five specific indicators in each of these five categories, resulting in 25 specific indicators. The first State of the Environment Report in 2010 provided a 60-page in-depth overview of the indicators, along with suggested actions needed to make Berks County “greener.” After the Volume 2 update in 2011, Berks Nature published a 5-year Report Card (2014) and a 10 Year Report (2018) tracking the same 25 indicators. In between these reports that focused on actions and progress on the indicators, the State of the Environment series created a range of educational documents and presentations covering issues like sustainable business, nature and health, and a notable set of resources about climate change and extreme weather.

ICL sees this intensive body of work created by Berks Nature as important framing and reporting to the citizens of Berks County. ICL reviewed and analyzed all the reports, giving special attention to the reports that tracked the 25 indicators. Based on our curiosity about “how does change happen?” and “what drives change in Berks County?,” we outlined some issues that stood out to us in the data across the years and we queried the Berks Nature staff to gain their perspectives. The following summary highlights what we noticed in the reports, and input provided by Berks Nature.

**Water protection plans for Berks County jurisdictions** – Over the 10-year period there was a marked increase in water systems having protection plans in place. We were curious about what caused the jump from only 6 communities having plans in 2009, and then to 72% of the county being covered by protection plans in 2014, to a full 96% of the county’s population in 2018 having plans in place. Berks Nature staff believe this increase was driven by their work. Key to the process was that the water and sewer providers got to know each other, and they began meeting as a water and sewer association for the county. As a result of Berks Nature calling out this indicator, the number of source water protection plans grew and it was a priority for the PA

Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The creation of the plans was also supported by the engineering firm that has a contract with DEP to write source water protection plans being based in Berks County.

**Lead air quality emissions decrease** – The original State of the Environment Report named that the air quality attainment at special purpose monitors found that lead-in-air was sometimes above standard near Berks lead factories. By 2014, lead-in-air levels had decreased and all of Berks County was following the lead standards for air pollution. We wondered how this specific point source of air pollution came into compliance from 2009 to 2014. The Berks Nature staff thought that the combination of air quality regulatory process, and a drop in production at facilities creating lead-in-air pollution, likely caused the drop in lead-in-air emissions levels.

**Vehicle miles and the use of public transit** – The 2018 State of the Environment Report concluded that especially compared to other counties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Berks County residents are not reducing vehicle miles traveled per year and they use public transportation less than the PA average. The Report cited these two energy indicators as big challenges for the county. As for ways citizens could support reversing these trends, the 2018 report pointed to a program with the Commuter Services and different personal choices residents could make to support change. We queried Berks Nature about their additional ideas about systemic changes, programs, or educational campaigns that might be employed to address these two measures. Berks Nature sees this as a set of tough indicators to turn around. The public transportation system is not convenient, and they expect this indicator to be the same in their upcoming report this year. Changes that will support reduced vehicle miles traveled in Southeast Pennsylvania include the upcoming rail service to several bike share programs.

**Waste Management** – The 2018 State of the Environment report noted that three of the five waste indicators were not moving in a good direction—waste generation is trending up, waste disposal in the county jumped up, and recycling rates fell below 30% and didn't meet state or local goals. Berks Nature staff sees this as an important and complex issue to address. While people care about recycling broadly, most people don't recycle properly, and consumption rates remain high. A few of the county's major trash haulers implemented single waste stream programs which appear to reduce recycling efforts and cause 'distrust' with residents--like, "why recycle, they just throw it into one truck anyway?" In addition, Berk Nature pointed out that several schools who had been doing well with recycling, stopped their recycling efforts for reasons unknown.

**Municipal joint planning and joint zoning** – The 2018 report highlights and lists jurisdictions that have done joint planning and joint zoning. Berks Nature shared that they lifted up multi-municipal cooperation in planning and zoning because it was a priority for the county planning office, and because they believe it leads to better land use. With 72 municipalities deciding Berks County’s land use planning there are many players making it difficult to achieve more consistency and positive planning and zoning. The increased number of joint plans means that most municipalities are now in a joint plan with their neighbors. Joint zoning has not come along as well as planning, and Berks Nature intends to work with the county Planning Commission to do a big effort on joint zoning. There is a new emphasis on housing in Berks County, and Berks Nature wants to be sure that municipalities have proper conservation zoning in place in addition to being prepared for the impact of solar.

**Climate change and extreme weather: HEAT** – The 2021 and 2022 State of the Environment reports have framed broad climate change educational data as well as specific data for Berks County. The data from Lauren Casey’s 2022 presentation especially focused on data about rising heat and the heat island effect. We were curious about how Reading, a Tree City with an active Shade Tree Ordinance, had been organizing efforts to mitigate the heat island effect with tree planting and other strategies, and who the actors were. In reflecting on their work with the City of Reading to do tree planting in the city, Berks Nature pointed to a need for policy change to support tree planting and maintenance. They cited the challenge of a current policy that gives individual residents the responsibility for the trees in front of their home and any damage that is done to sidewalks. While this current policy may not be enforced very often, it creates a disincentive for tree planting and tree care. Overall, Berks Nature saw the City of Reading as a thoughtful partner in the effort to increase shade trees in the city, fully supported by an arborist.

**Climate change and extreme weather: WATER** – The State of the Environment presentation and report in 2022 points to Pennsylvania data for increasing intensity of rain events and increased precipitation anticipated. With Berks County’s 12% impervious cover, this is important data to pay attention to for communities. In a couple of the State of the Environment reports across the years positive work with municipalities continuing to fix stormwater issues (e.g. the 2022 report highlights Bern Township’s stormwater ordinance, management plan, and emergency & disaster plans). We were curious if enough is being done to prepare for and mitigate the significant threat of increased precipitation and intensity of storm/rain events. Berks Nature does not think enough is being done on this issue as stormwater issues will continue to rise and require attention in this community. Berks County does have a committee that works with municipal separate storm sewer system communities (shorthand “MS4” communities; note that the storm system collects mostly rainwater and is separate from the sanitary sewer system). About



half of the county are MS4 communities and currently, the County MS4 Committee mostly focuses on compliance and education. Many municipalities indicate that flooding is their number one complaint from residents. However, Berks Nature thinks that few municipalities draw the connection between flooding and the amount of their hardscape and impervious surface cover. They point to the need for increased attention and programs to use infiltration as a significant mitigation strategy. Berks Nature sees a need for new and more intensive county wide efforts to reduce hardscape and create more infiltration.

## Cities and Sustainability

### *Reading Sustainability Plan*

The City of Reading has created the [Climate Resiliency and Sustainable Development Plan](#) to focus their efforts in creating a “clean, healthy, and prosperous future for all people who live, learn, work, and play in our community.” The three pillars of the plan include:

1. Social – improving the health, equity and quality of life for all Reading residents
2. Environmental – protecting and improving Reading’s natural resources and working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and pollution that contributes to climate change
3. Economic – encouraging business and job growth within the city

## FOCUS ON THE SUSTAINABLE 6



ENERGY & GHG



WASTE



WATER



MOBILITY



PUBLIC HEALTH & QUALITY OF LIFE



COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

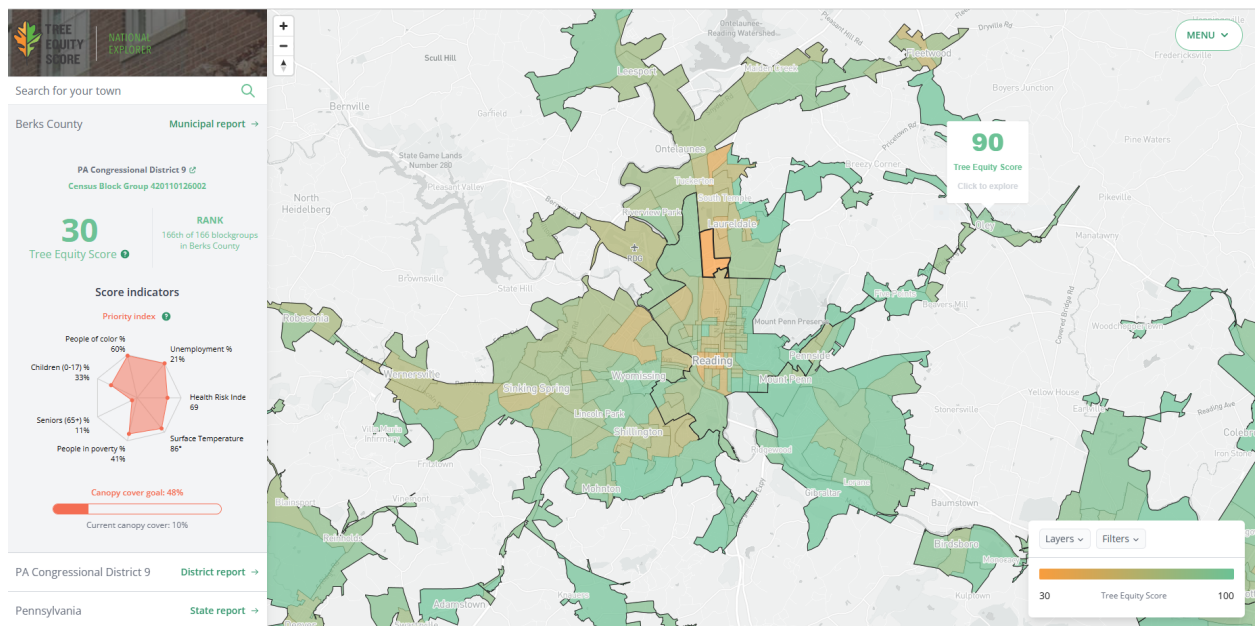
The graphic above illustrates the “Sustainable 6” or the focal areas of work to implement the plan. These focal areas of work by the City of Reading map well to issues highlighted by the community meetings and interviews. We expect the forthcoming City of Reading Climate Plan to point to the strategies for implementation by the City of Reading and its partners.

### Urban Heat Islands Data

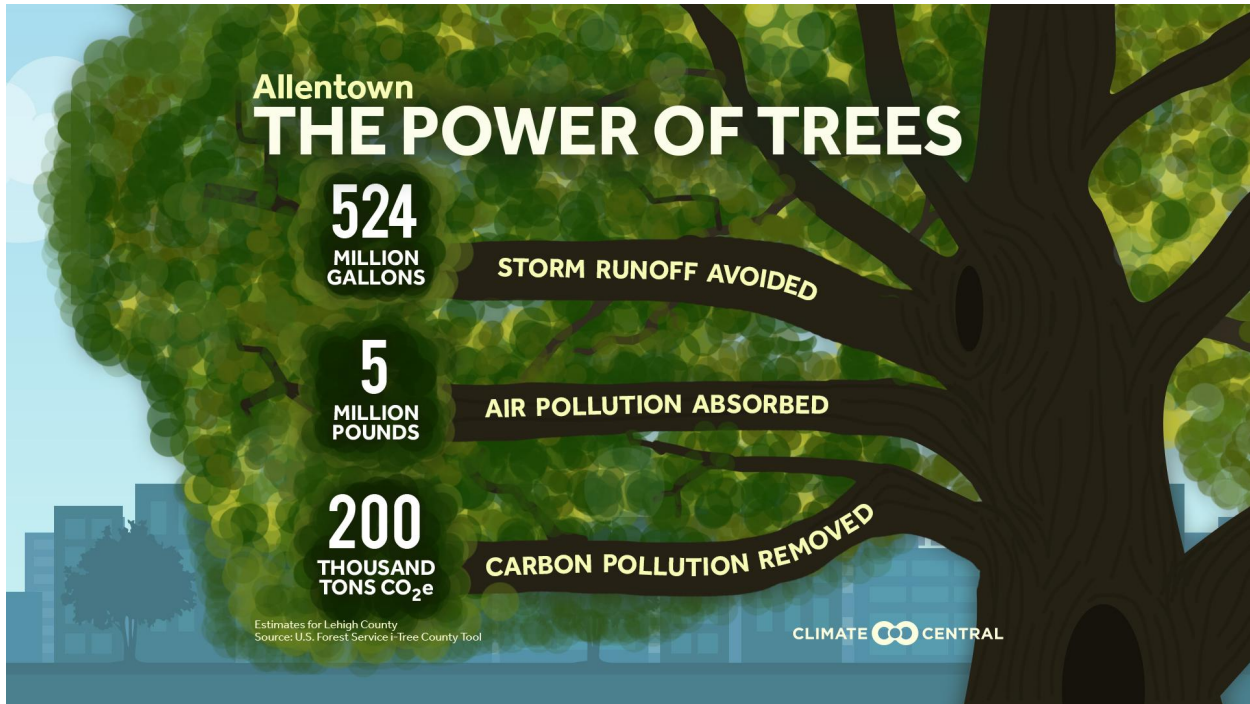
Based on the Berks Nature’s most recent State of the Environment Reports focused on extreme weather and heat, and many of the intersectional issues identified in the community meetings, we did a cursory look at national sources focused on heat, vulnerable populations, and heat mitigation strategies. Using the following three sources, we see a need for work in Berks County to take seriously the growing threat of heat in cities, and note that the biggest mitigation strategy – *tree planting and tree care* – has multiple benefits to the environment, community health, and carbon sequestration needs.

[Future Heat Events and Social Vulnerability](#) (Heat.gov - National Integrated Heat Health Information System) A detailed database search on this website shows that Berks County has a .62 SVI score, indicating a moderate to high vulnerability to future heat events

[Tree Equity Score](#) (American Forests) A map of tree cover in any city in the United States is too often a map of race and income. This is unacceptable. Trees are critical infrastructure that every person in every neighborhood deserves. Trees can help address damaging environmental inequities like air pollution. Six census blocks in the city of Reading have a Tree Equity score under 50 (desired range is 70+), and roughly another ten census blocks have scores under 60.



[The Power of Urban Trees](#) (Climate Central) This site has great general data about how urban trees can prevent runoff, create shade/cooling, and absorb CO. We found no specific data on Reading, but we did find data for eight other Pennsylvania cities including a few of comparable size. Additional data can be found in the addendum, and this graphic is an illustrated version of the data for Allentown, Pennsylvania.



### Land Use Considerations

In the [Berks County Comprehensive Plan 2030 Update](#) there are seven land use goals with 7 to 10 associated policies for each related to smart growth plans for the county, agricultural preservation, protection of open spaces and water and environmental resources, and more. The plan states, “As a founding member of the Smart Growth Alliance of Berks County, the Planning Commission has worked hard to instill the principles of smart growth into the plans and actions of a range of community groups and trade associations throughout Berks County.”

We did our due diligence in reviewing national and statewide recommendations for land use and feel that the Berks County plan covered the topline recommendations from those sources, as outlined in the addendum.

## **System Change through Network Design**

An Aspen Institute report authored by the Community Strategies Group focuses on building equitable food systems. The report emphasizes the role that collaborative networks across sectors can play “to transform engrained inequitable and unsustainable practices in agriculture and food production into equitable and sustainable stewardship of natural resources and fair worker and consumer policies and practices.”

The report acknowledges the important role sustainable food production and agriculture plays in environmental stewardship. But more importantly, the report offers a roadmap the Community Foundation could apply in building a regional network to address the topic of environmental and community health.

Please see Addendum 1 for specific recommendations from the report. The takeaways from this report, while targeting food systems, can be directly applied to the strategies needed to build a strong network in Berks County to address community and environmental health.

## **Reports to come in the next few months**

The timing of this report came before some additional research and reports were not completed that are relevant to this work. We encourage the Community Foundation to review and incorporate the findings from the following reports as they are released in the coming weeks and months:

- Berks County: Safety of the Transportation System
- Berks County: Quality of Roads and Bridges
- City of Reading: Climate Plan

## Recommendations

ICL has created recommendations to the Berks County Community Foundation based especially on the community meetings, interviews and feedback conversations. We used input from our review of existing reports and data to check and test issues identified by leaders from the community. Our recommendations are also informed by our experience in other communities, broad knowledge of environmental and community health, and our experience with other philanthropic institutions.

ICL offers recommendations and options to the Foundation in the following categories:

- Supporting Collaboration
- Using an Innovation Fund
- Supporting Additional Inquiries or Research

In the following section, ICL supports each recommendation with the why behind the recommendation, and potential strategy approaches or considerations in advancing the recommendation in the coming years.

### Supporting Collaboration

The findings from ICL's work point most strongly to the need to connect leaders across the Berks County community, and intentionally work to support cross-fertilization and shared collective strategies. The image of the Community Foundation acting to bust silos and build bridges in the county was captured in a powerful drawing that resonated across each of the three community meetings. While there were consistent acknowledgements that significant silos and challenges exist, leaders expressed a deep hope and desire to address differences and create productive connections to benefit the community.

We encourage the following potential avenues of investment for the Community Foundation as ways to build relationships, networks and collaboration within the county:

- **Creating collaborative spaces** – Collaboration and relationship building in Berks County will be greatly supported by bringing people together in highly engaging meetings, with plenty of opportunity for informal conversation (especially over food and drink). This might be under a “big tent” of broad sustainability topics, or convening entities for specific topics to explore, or supporting less formal networking among various types of leaders. The Foundation might work in partnership with organizations in the county to create these types of spaces, and/or utilize independent consultants or organizations to

organize and support these types of spaces. Based on the response from the community, and the Foundation staff's significant relationships in the county, we see the regular gatherings for learning and relationship development as a subtle and critical piece to breaking down silos of work and weaving together relationships to support creative and innovative solutions for community and environmental health.

- **Intensive collaborative leadership skill development programs** – Our findings point to significant need and opportunity to build leadership and collaborative skills among leaders in the county. We recommend that the Foundation invest in a range of skill training that allows leaders to learn together, build connections, and be in proximity to each other without an overt expectation of a need to “collaborate with each other.” ICL has experience with several different intensive learning programs that allowed for leaders to be in proximity to each other, and that allowed for a natural evolution in discussions and small and large collaborations to emerge. Given the demands on leaders' time, we think supporting awareness and skill development that is both “light touch” (virtual or in-person, 90 min to 3 hours) and “intensive” (a mix of in-person and virtual, 8-24 total hours, over several weeks or months) will be useful. We see great opportunities to provide learning spaces on collaborative leadership skills, network and collaboration theories, dialogue and communication skills, bias awareness, equity and inclusion capacity, meeting facilitation skills, and collaborative planning approaches.
- **Grant making strategies** – Within the broad environmental portfolio of grants, or within new grant making initiatives, we encourage the selective use of collaborative projects and initiatives. Grants that allow for building relationships, joint research and learning, or collaborative exploration and planning can be especially good investments that lead to solid collaboratively executed strategies. We encourage the Foundation to be open to a range of collaborative grants, including grants that merely allow for groups to build connections over a couple of years, or that create aligned and coordinated work within the collaborative's groups. Collaboration at the level of delivering a joint project or creating a joint product (requiring joint plans, joint budgets, intertwined deliverables) is the highest and most difficult form of collaboration, and it needs time and deep connections to mature and succeed.

We offer some final caveats about supporting collaboration. Not every strategy or need requires a collaborative approach, especially as supported by the Foundation. We encourage the Foundation to “seed and water” collaboration, and allow collaboration to evolve organically in the community. This approach can be balanced with requirements for collaboration and the Foundation playing the role of “introducer” or “active matchmaker.” Knowing the Foundation,



we believe maintaining this balanced approach fits with the philosophy and community engagement already in use. Yet, based on other patterns of action in the philanthropic community, we wanted to reinforce this posture of choosing collaboration when appropriate and following the lead of the community.

## Using an Innovation Fund to Drive Issues That Rose to the Top

Often small amounts of money can be what is needed to support learning, investigation, planning, strategizing, collaborating, and creating approaches that lead to systems changing and new approaches. We suggest the broad concept of an “innovation fund” as a way to seed and support a range of these types of efforts to address the complex and interconnected set of issues identified by the Berks County leaders engaged in our discussions..

The word “innovation” conjures up concepts of new ideas, exploratory learning and creating, and break-through technologies. While those concepts are part of what may be imagined, we know that “innovation” might also include weaving together current strategies and organizations in such a way that what is already in motion becomes enhanced, shifted and more impactful. Choosing how to frame such an innovation fund will be the work of the Community Foundation and its advisors, and we encourage that definition to be initially experimental and tested over time.

As a broadly defined concept, an innovation fund approach can give the Community Foundation enough structure with enough flexibility to respond to the identified needs in the county. It also could, depending upon how it is structured, give the Foundation the opportunity to respond to the capacity, initiative and energy of organizations and collaborative efforts as they emerge.

The concept of the innovation fund has been fully supported by the advisory group and by the leaders who joined in the May Community Input Meeting. Specific concepts about the Innovation Fund concept shared at that meeting included:

- Getting funding at an early phase of efforts
- Increased capacity to seek and secure significant additional funds
- Incentives to work with “unusual suspects” - partners who have not had as much of a chance to build relationships with traditional leaders in Berks County

Based on the community meeting input, interviews and review of research, we would lift up the following issues (*in rough order of importance*) as having high potential to increase the community and environmental health of Berks County over the next 5 years:

- Strategies to address increased community flooding
- Mitigating heat effects, especially within “heat islands”
- Stormwater management
- Green and multi-modal transportation systems
- Waste generation and management
- Forever chemicals
- Food security
- Well water testing

### Supporting or Conducting Additional Areas of Study & Research

Within both the collaboration and innovation grant areas, we see opportunities and need for deeper investigation and collective learning that will lead to thoughtful strategies for change and investment. As all of our research with the community and other sources points to, the issues are complex, systemic and gnarly. Many of the issues require a “go slow to go fast (and smart)” approach which will be supported by careful inquiry.

Examples, data, and experts from other parts of the Commonwealth, mid-Atlantic region, and the U.S. will likely help to spur on strategic thinking and collective action. We encourage this additional study and/or research to be as anchored in the Berks County Community as possible.

**If outside researchers do additional studies, every effort should be made to carefully integrate community leadership along the way – informing the research at the beginning, being updated and consulted as it proceeds, and having a range of ways to learn about and digest the findings in engaged discussions.** Applied research and investigation by leaders in the community, especially using collaborative methodologies, is the most powerful way to anchor future strategies to data and change strategies that are owned by the community and that shift systems.

Based on our research, there are a raft of potential issues that need more thoughtful investigation. We offer them below, and ultimately, research that is pursued will be best driven



by the energy and interests of community leaders. Some of the potential issues we see also mirror some of the issues we named for attention within the Innovation Fund, and they include:

- **Addressing demographic shifts** – Examples of medium sized cities that have addressed ways to reduce bias, or have sought to equip leaders with anti-racist awareness and skills
- **Environmental justice issues** – Including disproportionate burden on the poor and people of color from the impacts of pollution, poor land use choices, flooding, and access to health care and resources, including investigating federal funding opportunities to leverage, or leverage more
- **Mitigating the “heat island” effect** – Creative and collaborative ways to change policies and accelerate additions to the tree canopy and increase other access to cooling strategies, especially in neighborhoods with a high [Tree Equity Score](#) (American Forests)
- **Health and heat** – Methods for linking health care and education with awareness of the dangers of extreme heat, especially for medically vulnerable people
- **Warehouses impacts and opportunities** – Including issues of transportation accessibility for warehouse employees, and ways to use rooftops for solar energy
- **Green transportation planning** that also checks the boxes of safety, fewer vehicle miles traveled, storm water mitigation, and heat mitigation
- Building on cooperation and **collaboration among municipalities as they tackle land use planning and codes**

“Applied research and investigation by leaders in the community, especially using collaborative methodologies, is the most powerful way to anchor future strategies to data and change strategies that are owned by the community and that shift systems.”

# Addendum 1: Reports and Data Analysis Details

## Cities and Sustainability

### [The Power of Urban Trees](#) (Climate Central)

This site has great general data about how urban trees can prevent runoff, create shade/cooling, and absorb CO<sub>2</sub>; We found no specific data on Reading, but we did find data for eight other Pennsylvania cities and a few of comparable size.

<b>City</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Stormwater runoff avoided (Mil. of gallons)</b>	<b>Air pollution reduced (Mil. of pounds)</b>	<b>CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent absorbed (Mil. of tons)</b>
Pittsburg	Allegheny	4636	18	.4
Central PA	Blair	161	14	.5
State College	Centre	200	30	.2
Harrisburg	Dauphin	196	11	.2
Erie	Erie	327	17	.8
Allentown	Lehigh	524	5	.2
Wilkes Barre	Luzerne	259	21	.4
Philadelphia	Philadelphia	568	2	.04

## Transportation Considerations

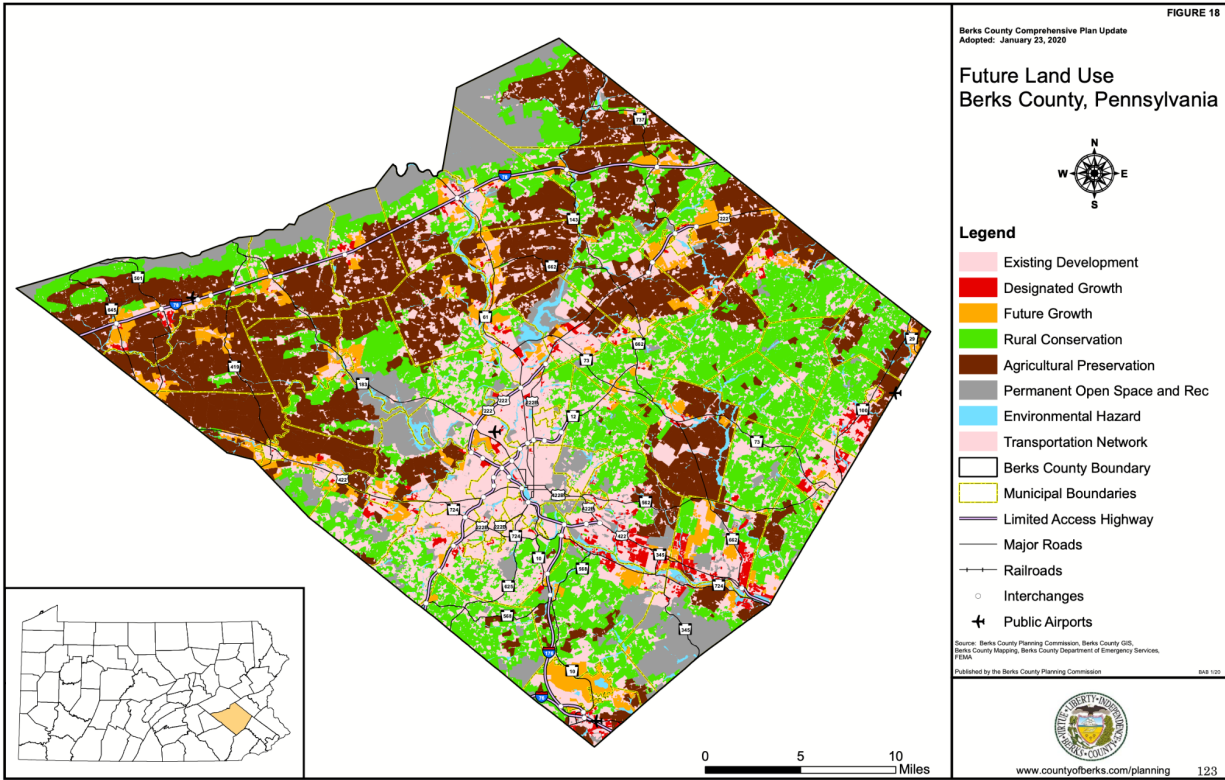
The [2022 Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan](#) focuses on connectivity and gaps between greenways in Berks County. The Plan recommends a system of interconnecting greenways throughout the County, illustrated with maps to connect recreational facilities with developed areas. The report notes that Berks County grew at a rate nearly double that of Pennsylvania overall from 2010 to 2020; by 2045 there are projected to be 477,000 people living in Berks County (up from 428,000 in 2020). The report identifies funding as a major barrier to development of park systems and recommends that the public sector must provide financial support, either letting them draw down more aggressively from endowment funds or exploring additional sources of funding. It concludes by noting the role of collaboration across

sectors to see the desired actions implemented: “The county must work with local municipalities, private and non-profit organizations, and other counties to preserve these corridors.”

The [Imagine Berks: Strategic Economic Development Action Plan](#) further identifies the specifics of the trail connectivity plan, indicating that in implementation year 2 (the implementation period began in July 2022), the County of Berks will work with Berks Nature and Schuylkill River Greenway to improve and expand trails as a means for transit, improving mobility beyond recreational use. The IMAGINE Berks report outlines a five-year vision on a number of topics to “solidify the community as a place where its diverse assets are recognized, uplifted, and celebrated to ensure economic prosperity for all.” In addition to outlining the train connectivity plan, the report makes recommendations for stronger zoning controls for land development and supports the development of improved passenger rail. The plan includes a proposed dashboard of success metrics and detailed implementation plan. Interestingly, the report has no mentions of climate change; the reporting dashboard tracks investments in trails and parks but otherwise does not track environmental health as a measure of progress for Berks County.

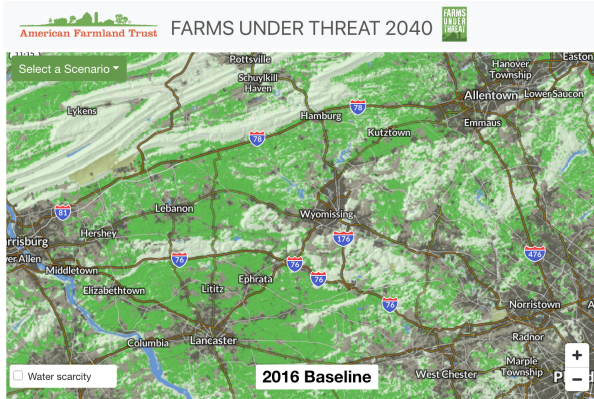
## Land Use Consideration

In the [Berks County Comprehensive Plan 2030 Update](#) there are seven land use goals with 7 to 10 associated policies for each related to smart growth plans for the county, agricultural preservation, protection of open spaces and water and environmental resources, and more. The plan further outlines the future land use, as seen in the map below:

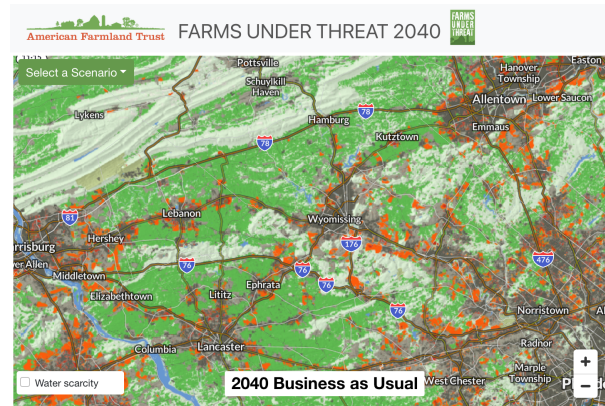


These policies and plans align with recommendations from The American Farmland Trust, who in partnership with Conservation Science Partners and the Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, projected nationally how development and climate change will impact agricultural land under three contrasting scenarios from 2016 to 2040. Their modeling predicts that “runaway sprawl” of residential development is the biggest threat to agricultural land in Berks County, PA. The report recommends land-use planners embrace smart-growth principles and protect agricultural land. This would have a significant impact on farmland in Berks County, based on their modeling ([Source](#)).

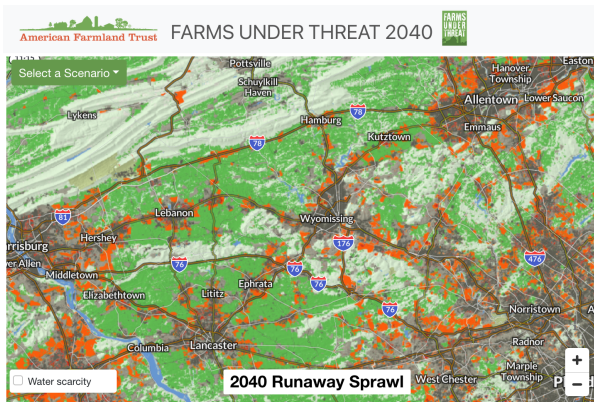




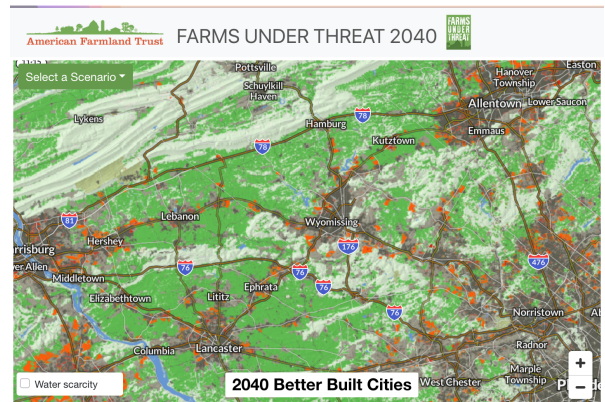
Screen capture of interactive map of Berks County, PA: 2016 Baseline. Green indicates farmland, dark gray indicates existing urban and highly developed land and light gray indicates existing low-density residential.



2040 projection if land development continues “business as usual” where orange indicates projected low-density residential and red indicates projected urban and highly developed land.



American Farmland Trust predicts that “without proactive policymaking and land-use planning, the relentless march of Business as Usual development across the American landscape will continue or accelerate into Runaway Sprawl” pictured above in Berks County.



Alternatively the report predicts, “if policymakers and land-use planners across the country embrace more compact development, it would slash conversion and keep up to 13.5 million acres of irreplaceable farmland from being turned into big-box stores and sprawling development scenarios from 2016-2040.” Pictured above the scenario for Better Built Cities in Berks County, PA.

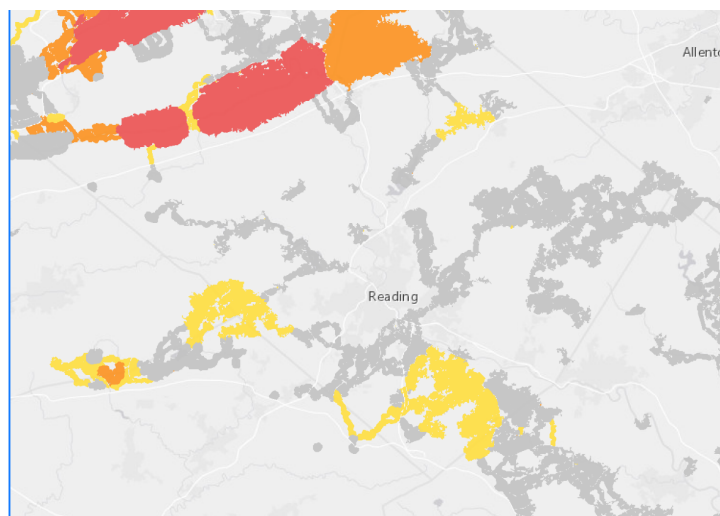
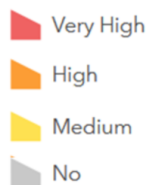
The report offers four recommendations to local governments:

1. Adopt **smart growth measures** including building comprehensive plans and adopting zoning measures that encourage compact growth and plan for agriculture. The [Smart Growth Network](#) has a set of ten principles to align growth with measures to protect farmland from conversion, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, maintain wildlife habitat, and reduce the costs of community services.
2. **Protect agricultural land** as a community priority.
3. **Incorporate smart solar** siting into local land-use decisions; develop solar land-use laws and permitting through inclusive processes; ensure solar strengthens farm viability; and ensure best practices for soil health are followed when siting solar on farmland.
4. **Make municipal and county-owned lands available for agriculture** and help match farm seekers with agricultural landowners. (Source: [American Farmland Trust](#))

The 2020 report [Priorities for Climate Change Consideration](#) by the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program details statewide recommendations for land conservation strategies. The report seeks to help conservationists identify high priority restoration, management, and land protection projects to support climate change connectivity in Pennsylvania. While the report emphasizes the value of employing all three strategies, it identifies the areas in the state where the strategy is most valuable. The mapping in the report indicates that Berks County would benefit most by a strategy of protection of land that is currently unprotected. Maps below:

The **Protection Priority** attribute in the data set focuses attention on overall high priority portions of the Climate Change Connectivity network which are currently unprotected.

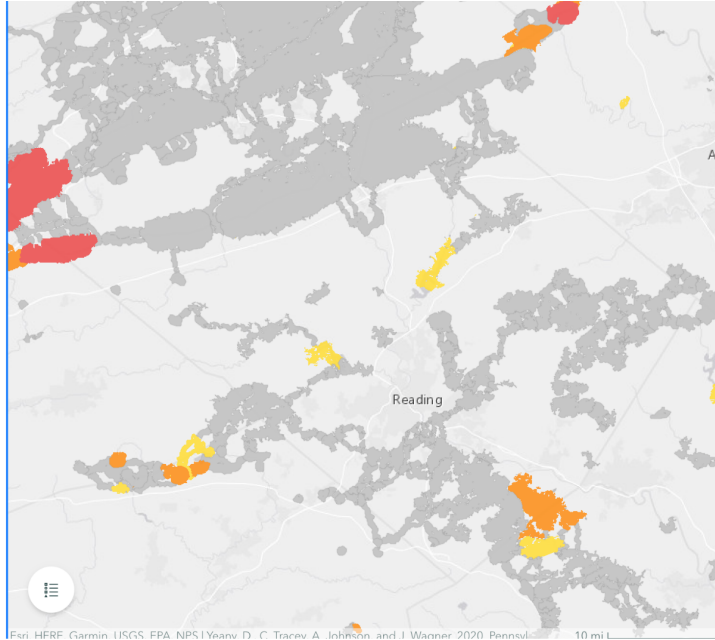
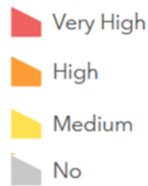
**Protection Priority**



*The report indicates that major sections of Berks County would benefit from increased land protection, particularly in the Kittatinny Ridge.*

The **Management Priority** attribute in the data set focuses attention on overall high priority portions of the Climate Change Connectivity network, which are also already protected. This represents somewhat of an inverse to Protection Priority. These are sites where the recommended primary conservation focus is to improve management strategies, to maintain high quality habitat, given that the majority of the habitat is already under some form of protection.

**Management Priority**



*The report indicates that the forests south of Birdsboro on the east side of the French Creek State Park in Berks County offer high priority land management strategies.*

The **Restoration Priority** attribute in the data set is a binary attribute, describing above average portions of the Climate Change Connectivity network which have received a below average landscape condition score. These are sites where the recommended primary conservation focus is to conduct restoration and mitigation strategies, in an effort to improve habitat quality.

**Restoration Priority**



*Very few areas of Berks County were identified as priorities for restoration.*

## System Change through Network Design

An Aspen Institute report by the Community Strategies Group on building equitable food systems emphasizes a roadmap the Community Foundation could apply in building a regional network to address the topic of environmental and community health.

“Networks are more likely to reach goals and influence systems change when they foster a culture that values complex reciprocity, which is best described as sharing information and resources with and assisting others without expecting direct reciprocation – helping others is the norm. Building, maintaining, and enhancing a strong collaboration infrastructure that values complex reciprocity has been an essential strategy in building food system networks to achieve important goals.”

The strategies to reach this state are detailed based on analysis of six food system networks in the U.S. The report notes the successful networks shared common attributes and presents recommendations related to these attributes.

1. **Shared leadership and decision-making power.** The authors recommend that funders offer financial support early on in the process to help leaders in the system begin to collaborate and connect even before they have come up with a strategy or proposal for funding. “All too often projects with specific program goals are funded where partners have not yet developed a strong collaboration infrastructure. Funders must be realistic about providing adequate time and funds to build this infrastructure before expecting program results.”
2. **Multiple avenues for urban and rural members to engage** and benefit from the network, and to gain a better understanding of their shared challenges and collaboration opportunities, thus helping bridge the urban-rural divide. “In a safe, power-sharing environment these leaders can discover and appreciate the mutual goals to develop thriving communities.”
3. **Cross-network functionality;** the authors found many examples where the networks were intentional about connecting to regional and national networks to develop strategies and solutions that are diverse and inclusive, especially in connecting to minority serving institutions.

The takeaways from this report, while targeting food systems, can be directly applied to the strategies needed to build a strong network in Berks County to address community and environmental health.



## Addendum 2: Funding Concepts to Spur Thinking

We know the Foundation will be able to sort the ideas out that make the most sense for strategies, but as we were working with the community from the report data, some examples of how grant making could be intersectional in its approach came to mind for us. We offer these starter ideas as examples of ways to seed potential small grants and spur innovation:

- Food security: offer grants for collaborations between rural/urban partners to design ways Reading residents living in food deserts could use SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps) to purchase CSA boxes from local farms.
- Pairings between different sectors with impactful intersections: improving walkability, preventing heat islands, and flood mitigation can all be addressed by complete streets planning. Consider an innovation grant for residents to come together to design complete street innovations for their block together with city planners and then submit joint applications for outside funding with the resulting plan.
- Environmental strategy that also creates jobs: often home energy audits initiate weatherization work, which can be funded by the Federal Government.
- Create home energy assessment training and a central database for the lead paint removal teams to report back known opportunities for weatherization, solar energy, and waste reduction for Reading residents.
- Invite students to design waste reduction communications campaigns with city officials and professional ad agencies. This could take place in a competition format or through a time-based hackathon where the winning ad receives placement on bus shelters around Reading.
- Cross-sectoral research: for example, a study to project the cost of health care for the county's most vulnerable residents during severe heat or extreme storms could help inform the value of increased county investment in tree planting and green roofs.