

# A HOME IN THE COUNTRY?

*LIFE IN ADAMS COUNTY*

## **COUNTRY WISDOM**

**What are some things you need to  
know before moving to the country?  
Read on and find out!**

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## *A Land of Surprises*

The morning began well enough. The sunrise over the orchard was spectacular and so peaceful. It was a welcome reminder of why we moved to the country in the first place.

That evening, we were having friends over for dinner, six of them. We arrived home from work and heard our water pump roaring like a jet. Of course, we had no water. Then there was yesterday's little surprise: a tax bill. "A mistake!" I roared. "I paid my taxes four months ago. It's not time for another bill yet."

"Here's today's surprise," I thought as I studied the pump. I made a hasty call to the hardware store, which is 20 minutes away. Closing time was in 10 minutes, but the owner stayed open so I could pick up the parts needed and even took the time to give me clear instructions on how to complete the job at home. It was a pleasant surprise. Dinner was only an hour late; the neighborly store owner helped keep disaster at bay. I wish I had followed my friend Bob's advice when I told him we were leaving the city for the country. "You'll love it," he said. "But the surprises are in the details. There were just too many details. That's why we moved back to the city."



“Well, I’ve learned two details in two days,” I mused. “Number one, my water supply comes from a hole in my back yard, and it’s my money that keeps it flowing. Second, my taxes come in installments. Besides the taxes taken from my paycheck, there are municipal, county, and school taxes, billed at different times and they can be for thousands of dollars. Well, I can still learn, I guess, and I’m still glad we moved to the country, but I wish I’d known about these little details ahead of time.”

## Buying a Country House

Many houses across Adams County are relatively old, a century or more. They are lovely places. Some are in good repair. Others have “a lot of potential” or “need a little fixing up.” Before buying, it’s a good idea to have a reputable inspector check out major systems in the house, such as plumbing, heating, appliances, the septic system, the well, and the roof. This can help stave off some of the surprises that make country living a challenge. Forewarned is, well, forewarned.

## Local Government

**Government Structure.** Pennsylvania has a localized government structure where decisions are made by elected officials in over 2,500 cities, townships, and boroughs. There are 21 townships and 13 boroughs in Adams County. Permitting and decisions on utilities and facilities are often made by other governmental bodies, including state agencies, counties, special districts, and water and sewer authorities. Because the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vests so much power in local government, ordinances and regulations can be very different from place to place.

The most common forms of local government in Pennsylvania and Adams County are boroughs and second class townships, often referred to as municipalities. Boroughs are the older more urban areas – in the case of Adams County, our small towns. Townships were traditionally agricultural areas but many have evolved into suburban areas with both residential and commercial development.

Each township or borough has the power to govern its residents through permits, zoning, ordinances, and other tools. This may be important to you, so you need to check on how the municipality handles its affairs. Information on contacting municipalities can be found at the back of this brochure.



**Road Care.** The township or borough cares for locally-owned roads, including snow plowing, repairing potholes, roadside brush removal, and road safety signs. PennDOT, the State Department of Transportation, maintains state-owned roads. Unfortunately for you, snow from the road will probably be pushed into the end of your driveway. This is not malicious. It's just the way snow plows work. You're responsible for removing the snow from your driveway. Here's a helpful tip. When you're near the road, put the snow on the right side of your driveway as you face the road to keep the plow from pushing it back where you've cleaned. Please don't endanger others by throwing snow into the road. In some places, it's illegal!

**Land Use and Building Permits.** All but one of Adams County’s municipalities has subdivision and zoning ordinances that control the allowed use and development of land. Contact your municipal office for information about regulations prior to any changes you plan to make on the use or structures on your property. This might be a consideration if you’re buying property. Each municipality requires a building permit, and the county requires a building permit as well, so you need to check with officials before doing any construction.

In Pennsylvania, zoning law requires adjacent property owners to be notified about any request for a zoning change on a neighboring property, so you might be invited to make comment on a zoning application by attending a public hearing. This is an optional activity, but consider it as an opportunity to stay informed about local development.

**Burning.** Check with the Adams County Department of Environmental Services, your municipal office, and your local fire company about burning regulations before you burn. State law prohibits burning without a permit. One exemption is the burning of domestic (residential) refuse by two families or less occupying the same dwelling. Refuse does not include furniture, mattresses, tires, construction debris, appliances, etc. Domestic refuse must be burned in a container with an approved cover.

Also in Pennsylvania, there is a regulation prohibiting “malodors” from activities other than agriculture, as well as a prohibition for smoke crossing over property boundaries. Some townships prohibit any type of burning. If you plan to have a “controlled burn”, notify the 911 Non-Emergency Center (717-334-8101) in advance to prevent an unnecessary dispatch of fire apparatus which you might have to pay for.

Never burn when it is dry or windy. Keep a hose nearby and use a container covered with a grate. Setting your neighbor’s property on fire won’t make you popular and could result in legal action or a fine.

**Weeds.** The municipality has authority concerning weeds. If your property becomes unkempt, you may receive a notice requiring you to cut it.

## Taxes

You will be entered into the real property tax rolls when your deed is recorded. To be sure that you're entered properly on the tax rolls, call the Adams County Tax Assessment Department at 717-337-9837.



If your lender on your house is collecting funds in an escrow account for real estate taxes, it is your responsibility to send the tax bill to the lender for timely payment.

Property owners can expect to receive two tax notices. The first tax bill, issued in March, is for county and local government taxes combined on one tax bill. The largest is the school real estate property tax sent out in July by the county's six school districts

School districts and municipalities also tax your earned income. Most assess an earned income tax which is levied similar to federal and state income taxes through payroll withholding. One school district – Bermudian Springs – levies an occupational assessment tax paid by all persons who live in the district. You'll file your earned income tax return with your federal and state income taxes by April 15 of each year.

Another tax assessed by some school districts and municipalities is a per capita tax. The levy ranges from \$2 to \$10 and is assessed on persons 18 years and older.

Municipalities can also levy a local services tax of up to \$52 per year on people who work within their jurisdictions. This tax helps recoup the costs of services that boroughs and townships provide for non-residents and is collected through payroll withholding.

## Schools

Adams County has six public school districts. There also are a number of private schools. The Gettysburg Adams Chamber of Commerce has information about private schools. The school bus routes and schedules are individually set by each school district. Academic activities, sporting events, drama, and music all make these schools places where you can meet your friends and neighbors.

## Septic Systems

If you live in a borough or a large development in a township, you may have public sewer service. If you live in the country, your house probably has an on-site sewage treatment system. This septic system has three components: septic tank, distribution system, and absorption field. These components are underground and may be hidden. Find them and keep a record of their location. Things may seem to be working normally, but invisible problems could develop if you don't maintain the system.

**Septic Tank.** Unless you have sewer service, all wastewater from your home must be directed to the septic tank. Septic tanks prevent absorption field bed clogging by holding back grease and grit. That's why it's important to pump the tank every two to three years. It can be really costly to repair or replace a system, so make sure you pump regularly. Some municipalities may require regular pumping. Contact your township to see if this is required. Beware of additives that claim pumping is unnecessary. Pumping typically costs about \$150. For a list of licensed septic haulers, contact the Adams County Department of Environmental Services.



Here's a helpful hint: Don't dump grease, paints, oil, solvents, chemicals, unused medications, or other hazardous materials into your system unless you have deep pockets and like to see your yard full of construction equipment.



Installing, repairing or replacing your septic system requires a permit from your local Sewage Enforcement Officer (SEO). Contact your township office for the name of your SEO. A permit is not required for routine maintenance like tank pumping or distribution pipe flushing.

## **Water Systems**

Where city water is unavailable, water systems are made up of a well, pump, pressure tank, and plumbing. Depending on how deep the well is, the pump may be inside the house (shallow) or at the bottom of the well (deep). Pumps and pressure tanks usually last about 10 years. You may want to have your well inspected to make sure it has enough flow to supply your household needs.



There are no regulations governing private water well quality. It's your responsibility to maintain your well. At a minimum, you should have a total coli form bacteria test done each year. You also can have tests done for metals and other contaminants. The Adams County Conservation District does these tests for a fee.

You should protect your well by practicing good sanitation in your yard: 1) make sure your well is located the required distance from your septic system; 2) keep oil, gasoline, pesticides, fertilizer, and other chemicals away from it. More information on well protection can be obtained through Penn State Cooperative Extension in Adams County.

If you are on a well, even when there's enough rain, it's a good idea to practice water conservation. In times of drought, you'll be glad you learned to stretch your water use to lessen the chance that your well might run dry. And no matter what type of water service you have, rain barrels are a great way to capture and reuse rain. The Adams County Conservation District can show you how to make and maintain your rain barrel.



## **Trash Removal**

**Trash Collection.** There is not a community landfill in Adams County. Check with your township to see if there is a contracted trash hauler. You may have to contact the hauler directly to arrange to have your trash removed. The Adams County Department of Environmental Services has a list of licensed haulers serving the area. The cost ranges from \$120 to \$200 a year.

Large items, such as old furniture and appliances, may be removed as part of a municipal trash collection contract or once a year by the township. Contact your township office for more information. You can also contact the Department of Environmental Services for more information on disposing of these items.

**Recycling.** Pennsylvania law currently requires recycling in some municipalities depending on their size. In Adams County, recycling is required in Gettysburg Borough and Conewago Township.

Recycling programs vary by municipality. Some have contracts with trash haulers who provide recycling for a fee. The Adams Rescue Mission serves most municipalities by conducting free drop off and curbside recycling for county residents and businesses. Contact the Adams County Department of Environmental Services for a list of recycling programs, dates, times, and accepted materials.

If you'd like to try backyard composting to reduce your waste, contact Penn State Cooperative Extension in Adams County. It's rewarding to compost. It's a great way to improve your garden.

## **Emergency Services**

The Adams County Department of Emergency Services is responsible for direction and control of all emergencies in the county. It also is responsible for operating the Adams County Communications Center. This emergency dispatch center processes all 911, police, fire, and ambulance calls from across the county. Remember, emergency personnel can find you more quickly if your address number is clearly visible. Place 3-inch reflective plain numbers on both sides of your mailbox or yard sign or beneath a light fixture on the front of the house. All municipalities have laws requiring address numbering and can help you get approved address signs.

Police services are provided by municipal police departments or, if the township or borough doesn't have a police department, by the Pennsylvania State Police. In areas with part-time local forces, the state police provide coverage when local police are off duty. Check with your municipality to see who provides police protection in your area.

Fire protection in Adams County is provided by volunteer fire companies. They are funded primarily through donations and fundraisers, and usually receive only minimal support from your tax dollars. You can expect to receive a solicitation notice once a year. In addition, many companies sponsor meals and other social activities that allow you to support the fire company and get to meet some of your neighbors. Better yet, consider becoming involved as a volunteer – there are many ways to help besides fighting fires.

Many fire companies have an associated ambulance service that works cooperatively with a medic unit from Gettysburg Hospital. Contact your township office to determine which fire company and ambulance services cover your area.



## Agriculture

Agriculture is a major industry in Adams County, which ranks first in the state for apple and peach production. We also rank high in livestock, poultry, and dairy products. Farmland creates open space and adds interest, variety, and beauty to the landscape.

This may have been what attracted you here in the first place. To maintain these areas, it is important to preserve farmland and keep agriculture profitable.

Apple blossoms are pretty, but the fruit that follows has many enemies, such as fungi, insects, hail, and drought. The grower protects the crop whenever possible, including the use of crop protection sprays to hold pest populations in check. Growers must follow the law when spraying. They keep records, including dates, amounts, and locations. Spraying is done when needed, often outside of normal work hours. Expect to see and hear tractors and sprayers at various times of the day.

Dairy cows are a sight to see as they graze in a pasture on a sunny morning. What would Thanksgiving be without a turkey? These animals make appetizing contributions to our daily diet. The less pleasant side of raising livestock and poultry is the manure they produce. Manure handling is a necessity for fertilizing fields on farms and sometimes causes odors and flies. Most farmers must use public roads to move farm equipment and crops between fields. Be cautious when passing farm machinery on the road. Always watch carefully to make sure the machinery is not about to turn left and there are no oncoming vehicles before you pass. Losing a few minutes on the road is a small price to pay for safety and for the other benefits of living in a rural community.

Pennsylvania has laws protecting the right to farm. One law allows Agricultural Security Areas (ASA). An ASA gives farmers protection from nuisance lawsuits that might interfere with normal farming operations. New residents unfamiliar with farm operations must understand that farming produces sights, smells, and sounds that they may not have experienced in urban settings.

Difficulties or worries associated with manure and crop sprays are best handled among friends instead of in court. If you are thinking about living next to a farm or orchard, why not take a plate of cookies over to your farm neighbor and say hello. Get to know your farm neighbors. Knowing your farm neighbors makes it more likely that they will listen to your concerns about the farm operation and prevents problems from becoming intense community conflicts. Many farmers are willing to give you a call before they spray or spread manure, so you can bring in the laundry and the kids.

You also can help maintain neighborly relations with the farmers around you by respecting their property rights as much as you expect them to respect yours. Farms are private property and you should not be on farmland unless the owner has specifically given you the right to use it. Riding motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, or snowmobiles through fields can damage soil and crops.

## **Shopping**

Adams County has a variety of good shopping opportunities, ranging from small shops to large national stores. But if you're living out in the country, don't expect to have a store "down at the corner." You may have to drive 20 minutes or a half an hour for shopping. It's a good idea to plan your shopping trips, and you may want to consider stocking up on goods to avoid running out at an inconvenient time. Many of our towns have wonderful specialty shops not to be missed!

## **Public Utilities**

In Adams County, Met Ed, a First Energy Company, distributes electricity to about two-thirds of homes and businesses. The Adams Electric Cooperative distributes electricity to customers that Met Ed doesn't serve. Allegheny Power serves a very small portion of southwestern Adams County.

Other utility companies include local telephone service provided by Century Link; cable television for most of the county by Comcast; and natural gas to parts of the county by Columbia Gas of Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania law requires that you call 800-242-1776 or 811, three business days before you dig anywhere that there may be a buried utility line. Since the facilities are buried they may be hidden in surprising locations on your property. All utility companies are notified with this One Call system and will advise you if you are planning to dig close to a buried line. For more information, visit [www.paonecall.org](http://www.paonecall.org).



### ***Helpful Reading***

#### *The Joys of Farm Watching*

Here's everything you ever wanted to know about farms, equipment, livestock, crops, and more in a fun take-off on bird-watchers guides.

#### *So, You Live Near An... Orchard; Hog Farm; Dairy Farm; Chicken Farm*

These extension fact sheets can help you understand what to expect if you decide to purchase a home in a farming area.

#### *Country Living: A Homeowner's Guide*

This extension booklet details wells and septic tanks and briefly outlines local government.

Available from Penn State Cooperative Extension in Adams County

## Important Contact Information

### ***Local Government***

The Adams County website, [www.adamscounty.us](http://www.adamscounty.us), has comprehensive up-to-date information for each township and borough, including a listing of elected officials, meeting dates and municipal office hours. Or you can call the County Office of Planning and Development at (717) 337-9824 for the same information.

### ***Other Helpful Agencies***

The [www.adamscounty.us](http://www.adamscounty.us) web site also has information on these agencies:

Adams County Department of Environmental Services

717-337-9827 or 888-337-9827

Adams County Tax Assessment Office

717-337-9837 or 888-337-9837

Penn State Cooperative Extension in Adams County

717-334-6271 or 888-472-0261

Adams County Conservation District

717-334-0636

Adams County Department of Emergency Services

717-334-8603

Penn Dot District 8 Road Maintenance

717-334-3155



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