



Building an Effective Community Task Force: Addressing Natural Gas Exploration and Development in Your Community

Introduction

Increasingly, the exploration and development of Marcellus shale in Pennsylvania poses challenges and opportunities for both individual landowners and our communities.

Recent Penn State research estimates that the Marcellus shale play contains approximately \$2.1 trillion in recoverable gas in Pennsylvania. As most Pennsylvanians are now aware, gas companies, landowners, businesses, and rural communities are scrambling to tap into the potential income opportunities this provides.

Based on these projections, gas companies have quickly moved into Pennsylvania to purchase lease agreements from landowners for the rights to explore and drill for gas on their property. In many parts of the state drilling and pipeline construction projects are well under way. Depending on the level and type of development activity in an area, these projects can possibly have profound implications for the economic, environmental, social, infrastructure, revenue, and groundwater and surface water conditions in Pennsylvania communities. Residents in our communities, watersheds, municipalities, counties, and school districts all have a stake in minimizing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities of these developments for current and future generations.

The locally specific nature of many of these issues requires that local communities take a proactive and participatory approach to ensure that all interests and perspectives are considered as decisions are made.

One important way to meet these challenges is the creation of a local task force to guide community discussions, information gathering, and decision making.

As of this writing, approximately 20 counties in Pennsylvania have formed local task forces to address gas exploration and development issues in their communities. These experiences and recent research, both here in Pennsylvania and across the country, provide us with wide range of lessons and options for effective action. These lessons point to key elements of success for communities pursuing similar efforts.

This brief publication highlights a few of the best practices for developing an effective community task force to address these important issues while building trust and communications.

Task Forces: Meeting Local Challenges and Opportunities

Economic, environmental, infrastructure, and other local conditions all influence the pace and impact of gas exploration and development. These conditions vary considerably from one location to another. This



means that while different communities may face similar challenges and opportunities, the specific options for addressing these concerns will very likely be different from community to community.

Perhaps more important, addressing these impacts will fall into multiple jurisdictions with different levels of authority, control, and resources. In some cases, it will be municipalities that face the greatest challenges and have the most authority to address a particular issue. In others, the authority and resources to effectively address the issues may rest with the state or county government or a related agency. Other issues may be in the control of private businesses, both those in the energy industry and those in the broader business community. For this reason, effective public decision making requires the participation of representatives across these jurisdictions and organizations to provide multiple views, perspectives, experiences, resources, and authority. Task forces provide a structure to engage these organizations and groups and increase the level of communication, information sharing, and productive dialogue specific to the local context and issues.

Marcellus-related task forces are coalitions of key stakeholders with interest in understanding and planning for the impacts of Marcellus shale development. Most of the task forces to date are ad hoc and advisory. Most Marcellus-related task forces in Pennsylvania are organized at the county level, with leadership and support provided by the office of the county commissioners. This provides staffing, coordination, and access to resources as well as the “ear” of local decision makers and authorities. Some county commissioners lead the task forces directly, while others delegate responsibility for managing the task forces to a county agency, such as the planning office. In general, task forces have a central leadership group with subcommittees that focus on specific topics such as public education, workforce development, economic development, environmental issues, and local government issues.

Activities of task forces include information sharing and communication among elected and appointed officials, local businesses, natural gas industry representatives, and representatives of government, human services, educational, and environmental organizations. This is especially important for counties without a history of natural gas development. Task forces have allowed local leaders to develop an understanding of the industry, practices/procedures, and regulations. They have also created opportunities to coordinate across agencies and businesses, making these responses more efficient and effective. Task forces have become key resources, information bases, and points of contact in their communities. Some task forces have focused on developing effective public engagement opportunities in order to share information and perspectives and identify needs and concerns within the community.

The presence of a broad range of stakeholders creates opportunities to consolidate expertise and resources and coordinate activities across individual municipalities, organizations, and private businesses. Task forces have used these conversations to identify local needs and concerns and then develop a number of specific projects to address them. For example, task force projects have included:

- Emergency response training and 911 addressing of well sites
- Development and sharing of model ordinances
- Identification of office/industrial spaces for the energy industry
- Public education and engagement
- Workforce education
- Coordinated transportation and infrastructure planning

Keys to Successful Task Force Efforts

Get Organized

Quite simply, have a plan. Regardless of who is coordinating or participating in your task force efforts, determine your goals early in the process. Focus on these key issues: Why do you want to form a task

force? What goals do you seek to achieve? What outcomes would you like to see as a result of your efforts? What information will you need? Who should be part of your discussions? You may also be well served to reach out to other task forces around Pennsylvania, many of which have already gone through a number of stages in both natural gas and task force development.

Establish a Leadership Team

Create a representative and dedicated leadership team to help guide the process. A diverse, representative leadership team with a wide range of perspectives will provide credibility, be able to communicate broadly, explore options creatively, and foster buy-in for the process and outcomes you hope to achieve. It is also important to ensure that your leadership team has the skills required to guide the process effectively. Members with strong skills in collaborative leadership, facilitation, effective communication, problem analysis, and participatory decision making will enable your group to be more effective in the long run.

Identify Appropriate Stakeholders

Think broadly when identifying stakeholders, which are often defined as all those who will either be affected by the decisions or outcomes you will come to, or all those who can or should affect or influence those decisions. A broad stakeholder base is especially important because the potential local impacts are likely to involve a wide range of changes to our environment and natural resources (water, forests, wildlife, etc.); local infrastructure (roads, housing, sewer, etc.); social and demographic characteristics (population growth, quality of life, etc.); business opportunities, employment, and workforce; health and safety (fire and other emergency services); consumer protection (leasing, safety, etc.); and local government responsibilities and regulatory structures. In these early stages, it might be especially useful to assess the interests of the stakeholders through confidential, face-to-face

interviews. The concerns and interests described in these interviews can then be summarized without attributing them to a specific person or group and will lay the foundation for identification of common ground, opportunities, and potential obstacles. These interviews also provide the opportunity to discuss participation in the task force and expectations for the outcomes.

Representative stakeholders might include the following:

- County and municipal planning staff
- State legislators and staff
- County and municipal elected officials
- Local government agencies
- State regulatory agencies
- Natural gas companies and related businesses
- Industry and business associations
- General public
- Citizen, homeowner, environmental, and other interest groups
- Natural resources agencies
- Conservation district
- Local economic development interests
- Local entrepreneurs and business leaders
- Watershed associations and other resource interests
- Hunting, fishing, and other sportsman's groups
- Farmers groups
- Fire, police, and emergency service providers
- Human service agencies
- Relevant federal agencies

Create a Transparent Process

Make sure that the entire process is—and is seen as—open, well-publicized, and inclusive. Nothing will undermine your success faster than the public perception (whether real or not) of a closed-door, secretive, or exclusive process.

Ensure Discussions Are Facilitated by a Neutral Party

While this may not always be possible, ensure that whoever is leading your discussions has the ability, skills, and reputation for doing so fairly and objectively. Efforts driven by those who are perceived to have a particular agenda are much less likely to succeed. If no one in your community can effectively play this role, you may want to consider utilizing an outside facilitator.

Gather Reliable and Objective Information Early in the Process

Whether this is related to economic development, social issues, legal or jurisdictional considerations, or environmental concerns, your efforts will be more successful if you continually seek the most complete, reliable, and recent data and information you can acquire. While this takes effort, it will pay off in the long run as your time together can be spent creating effective solutions to genuine problems and not debating competing opinions and perceptions.

Keep Discussions Focused

A carefully crafted agenda—developed around the most important issues you have to address—will help you maintain the focus you need to progress toward your desired solutions. Focus on facts, information you need, and the essential questions you want to address. While there is a legitimate role for emotion and beliefs in these types of discussions, it is important that these not become the central or even dominant aspect of your discussions.

Identify and Prioritize Issues

In other words, be strategic. While your discussions may focus on a wide range of concerns or issues, you will be best served by developing immediate action steps around (a) the most important and immediate needs in your community; (b) the issues that can have greatest return on your time and effort; and (c) those over which you have the most direct control or authority. While there may well be legitimate issues that go beyond these criteria, focusing on these initially will provide you with identifiable accomplish-

ments you can celebrate as well as the credibility needed to address future issues successfully.

Organize Goals and Tasks According to Project Needs

Your task force will be much more successful if you start by identifying desired solutions and goals, and then clearly defining the implementation steps, responsibilities, and timelines to achieve those goals. An important element of this process is to determine how you will measure success. This assessment should occur periodically throughout the duration of the task force (e.g., semi-annually, annually).

Establish Decision-making and Accountability Mechanisms

At the outset, agree to operating protocols so that participants have clear roles and common expectations. These protocols include how decisions will be made, what responsibilities participants have to one another, the ground rules by which discussions will occur, and how information will be shared both within the group and with external groups. Build into your process well-publicized timelines and accomplishments to which individuals and committees will be held accountable. This may be regular updates or reports, an annual summit, or other opportunities to describe accomplishments, remaining tasks, and emerging new issues or information.

Keep the Public Informed

Have a communication plan and someone who is responsible for media relations and communications. This will ensure that the public is kept informed about the activities of your task force and will continue to learn about the issues and implications of gas exploration and development.

Recognize and Celebrate Successes

This is an important and often overlooked aspect of the work of many groups. While this can be elaborate or simple, it is worth taking the time to publicly note both the achievements of your task force and the individual contributions of partici-

pants who have played a key role in those accomplishments. Recognizing achievements is an important part of the evaluation and adaptation process. Completing projects creates the opening to examine what is working well and what needs to be changed. Is the task force making progress toward its goals? Are the goals still relevant, especially in relation to a dynamic, rapidly changing industry? This kind of regular self-assessment can help the group adapt and change so that resources are used effectively.

Paying attention to these strategies will enable your task force to successfully address the numerous and often complex issues that surround gas exploration and development.

Assistance and Additional Information

Penn State Extension has a long history of helping communities undertake a wide range of community decision-making projects and has been extremely active in providing educational programs to help Pennsylvanians understand the issues related to Marcellus shale exploration and development. As well, several community task forces are currently operating in the state. A list of these groups can be found at extension.psu.edu/naturalgas/service-directory/county-natural-gas-task-forces.

Depending on the needs of your community, we have professionals around the state prepared to work with you to accomplish your particular goals. Specific assistance available includes:

- Assisting with organizing your task force, identifying appropriate stakeholders, facilitating meetings or the process, and strategically designing goals and objectives
- Educational programs related to a wide range of community natural-gas-related issues
- Leadership programs involving meeting management, conflict resolution, communication, and decision making (visit extension.psu.edu/leadership)

- “Building Strong Communities” educational programs, including training in facilitation, public engagement, and effective organizational management

Reference

McKinney, Matthew J., and Shawn Johnson. *Working Across Boundaries: People, Nature, and Regions*. Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2009.

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We would like to acknowledge Jim Ladlee, Penn State Extension, and Lisa Shaefer, County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, for their valuable insight and contributions. We also want to thank the many county task force members from across the state who spoke with us and shared their experiences.

Put Our Experience to Work for Your Community

The Penn State Extension Marcellus Education Team strives to bring you accurate, up-to-date information on natural gas exploration and drilling in Pennsylvania. Learn about your rights and choices as a landowner, a businessperson, a local official, or a concerned citizen. Discover the resources available to you.

Visit naturalgas.psu.edu.

Penn State Extension

Penn State Extension has a special mission—to enable individuals, families, communities, agriculture, businesses, industries, and organizations to make informed decisions. Through a system of county-based offices, we extend technical expertise and practical, how-to education based on land-grant university research to help Pennsylvanians address important issues, solve problems, and create a better quality of life. From improving agriculture and building stronger communities, to developing skills with today's youth, we are dedicated to giving Pennsylvanians the means to grow, achieve, compete, go farther, and do more. Learn what extension can do for you. Contact your local extension office or visit extension.psu.edu.

The Agricultural Law Resource and Reference Center

The Agricultural Law Resource and Reference Center is a collaboration between Penn State's Dickinson School of Law and Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. Located at both the University Park and Carlisle facilities and funded in part by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the center is designed to provide the highest-quality educational programs, information, and materials to those involved or interested in agricultural law and policy.

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Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Produced by Ag Communications and Marketing

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Code EE0015 7/17pod