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Interview with Page Price, Director of Knox County Regional Planning Office

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Event: interview with Page Price, Director of Knox County Regional Planning Office

Place: Knox County Regional Planning Office, 110 E. High St., Mt Vernon, OH 43050

Researcher: Todd Juengling

Co-workers present: none

[someone else in the office talks with Ms. Price for a moment]

Todd Juengling: So, I guess I just kinda wanted to start by I wanted to ask you like how long have you lived here, you know, how long have you been here at this job, stuff like that.

Page Price: I moved here, I lived here from [19]87 to [19]91, my husband's family had a large dairy farm, we got out of that and went back to school in Columbus. My husband went to vet school, and I went to graduate school in Landscape Architecture, and then we moved back her two years ago. So, lived here about five or six years, but on and off over the past ten years

TJ: Did you have family from this area originally?

PP: No, I'm from northwest Ohio, but my husband grew up here, my husband's from here so that's how I ended up here.

TJ: how long have you been working with the Planning Office?

PP: Two years. When I graduated from Ohio State and got my master's this was my first position.

TJ: So, can you just kinda give me a run down of what you, the duties you have working for the Planning Office?

PP: Yeah, as far as this office, I'm the county flood plain administrator, so we have special rules regarding development in a flood hazard are so they would have to go through a permit process here the insurance and appraisers also check that through this office. I'm the acting secretary and administrative support for the Regional Planning Commission which is made up of individuals from all the townships, the villages, and the city of Mount Vernon, and they're appointed by the elected officials basically to deal with rezoning issues and planning issues for the county. So, we work on that. I'm also directing the farmland preservation task force, which we got a grant from the department of development to prepare a long-range farmland plan for the county [telephone rings, Ms. Price's secretary answers] to kind of amend the comprehensive plan which was done for Knox County, which was *Focus 2100*. So those are the main things. Keeping basically like a library for all the township zoning and zoning regulations, it's kind of an information clearing house for everybody.

TJ: I know Howard [Sacks] mentioned, and you also mentioned that you're in the Scenic River Committee, and he told me you're also involved in, I don't know, he didn't know how many other things, and so I thought I'd just ask, you know, if you could run down all the other stuff you do.

PP: Yeah, the Scenic River Council, they're different members that are appointed by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and they wanted a representative from county government to kind of serve on their board and go to their meetings and I kind of was picked to do that. And basically what we do is it's just kind of an organization that keeps kind of a watch on the river. We each have different sections that we kind of keep track of, we come back and report any problems that need to be addressed as far as someone's encroaching on the flood plain, if there's some kind of digging or dumping going on that, you know, we could do something about. We also work with trying to develop programs for landowners along the river, as far as erosion control, and the state also has money for purchasing easements, buffer strips along the river so there's different programs that landowners may not be aware of that they could qualify for and actually get paid for that strip just to leave it alone along the river. So, that's kinda something we've been working on. There's also a land trust starting up in the county, that was kind of an offshoot of the work we've been doing with the farmland task force and the development that's going on. And there's kind of a need, there's a lot of landowners that are interested either in donating the development rights from their land, to keep an easement on their property and donating those to the land trust. There's also people interested in donating land so we needed to provide kind of an avenue for that. Also the Parks board is starting up, so it's kind of working in unison with the parks people to get something started. We've met with Nature Conservancy and there's actually some kind of retired and semi-retired individuals from Nature Conservancy that are starting to help us out with that whole project. And they have a big interest, the Nature Conservancy has a big interest in the Kokosing and the waterways and gathering information and research on monitoring the quality of the water and things like that.

TJ: So, when you say "that whole project," what does that encompass in terms of the river? Like what are the actual things that are being done? I know some of those are in *Focus 21[00]*. . .

PP: Yeah, one thing there has been a gauging station put in the river for water levels. I don't know if you know about the Del-Co water plant going in. That's an effort to monitor if actually when Del-Co starts pumping if it effects the level of the river. There needs to be, and I know there's a lot of independent people doing studies on the different species in the river, that's the kind of information that the Nature Conservancy is interested in, not just in the Kokosing, but also in the Mohican. That will have probably bearing on the Mohican gaining status as a scenic river also. It just gives you more weight when you're trying to work on these projects like buffer strips and education, trying to conserve and erosion along the river banks, you know. And then the land trust is kind of just parallel, working along with that. It's called the Owl Creek Conservancy, which is another name for the Kokosing, so everything's kind of working in tandem around the Kokosing, it's kind of the center point around, everybody's designing the land trust and their council, so.

TJ: I know the Nature Conservancy, generally I guess they buy land for the idea of protecting it. Is that kinda what they're doing?

PP: Really, we just met with them, and basically their funding for buying property is not in very good shape right now. And what they used to do is they'd concentrate on little pieces of unique properties all over the place and I think they're shifting their focus towards basing things on

larger things like corridors, like waterways, forest corridors, things like that, and I don't know how much they would actually be able to help with purchasing property, but they have a lot of advice and council they can give to groups, start-up groups like the land trust or the Scenic River Council, as far as maybe negotiating with landowners for different things. Or if the land trust is trying to buy a piece of property, helping and actually sitting in on those negotiations to help working with landowners. So they're kind of shifting their focus because they just don't have the funds to, you know, help everybody. But your organization at your local level and the information you have available really helps your chances for qualifying of course for other things, like any government funding or private funding or things like that, so the work that Ray Heithaus does and any other group does as far as information gathering we do on the county level is certainly helpful towards any efforts that anybody's trying to support conserving the river and any land, so

TJ: I guess: why?

PP: Why what?

TJ: Why all this effort to conserve the river?

PP: Well, there was a lot of effort that went into getting the river, I guess a could person to talk to would be Doug McLarnan about why there was even the whole effort to even get Kokosing as a scenic river. I guess, you don't just become a scenic river and then put a sign up, you have to have a lot of, you have to get all of your political entities that kind of buffer along that river to kind of go along with the program. After we've gone through all of this and this process, and being that some of the main features of our county, we've got the Kokosing Gap trail, you know there was all these things that kind of center around, you know, we capitalize on it, so if we want to keep it this way. Then, also, the practices along there, you're slowly gonna have all these problems and erosion and things if you don't keep watch on it and keep people educated on what's going on. And we're lucky I guess from what I understand that the quality of the water in this waterway is a lot better than a lot of other places in Ohio and that's one of the reason I guess that we're not on some kind of list of critical waterways, just because that water quality has been kept so high. If you want to keep it that way, there's got to be constant efforts to try to keep that going. That's from what I understand. I came in a little late on the game after it was already named a scenic river.

TJ: We're talking about erosion and basically problems that result from basically farming along the river.

PP: Right.

TJ: What kind of attitudes have you noticed from farmers?

PP: In this county in general, we have a really strong soil and water conservation effort and also Knox County is, the historic roots of this county are in no-till and contour farming, it's been on the cutting edge of a lot of conservation practices, and I think on the whole that a lot of farmers are very conscientious about it. They're also, if you're field's flooding every year because of the way the waterway's cutting in, and if you're losing half your crop in that field anyway, I think

they're looking for ways to combat that, and if you can get a buffer strip and get paid to put an easement on it, I think that farmers are pretty good business people. Of course, you always have your few people that are wary of government involvement and control and you've got to work with a little bit more, but I think for the most part that attitudes are really good about the river. The only place we've run into a little bit of, I think there's a lot of confusion about what you can and can't do as far as they think, sometimes they think they doing a good thing like cleaning the river out because it's clogging back. You have to go through certain processes, or you should be. You can't always just do whatever you want, because those waterways have some regulations on them, but I think it's more just not being aware of you know everything you can and can't do. But I think that attitudes on the whole are pretty good. I think a lot of it's education, because people think they're doing a good thing sometimes and they don't understand, you know, what's going to happen after they do that. If you straighten something out, you're just asking for more problems down the road, and I just don't think people realize that. And I think that's a lot of what the Scenic River Committee's trying to do, is educate people and if they see something going on or a landowner doing something that's you know questionable, one of the committee members or our coordinator who works with the Department of Natural Resources will actually go out and talk to the contractor or landowner and say, you know, explain to them what's going on. So, I think it's a good thing, but I really think that the farmers in this community have a really good attitude about soil erosion and practices, so we're lucky in that respect.

TJ: Are there any efforts to educate farmers along the river who you haven't noticed specific problems from?

PP: I think, I'm not sure of the particulars on that, and I think Doug or Bob Gable who's actually the coordinator through ODNR would probably give a better answer. I believe that through Farm Bureau and through some of the other organizations and through Soil and Water, who disseminates a lot of information and is in regular contact with farmers on other programs, it tends to do that. But I really am not aware of the process of what they actually do.

TJ: [several second pause while I try to think of a question]

PP: Good you've got a copy of the Comprehensive Plan, that's good. It'll help you kind of pull things together.

TJ: Right. Also, something else I guess was I know that the Planning Office, kind of one of your duties at this point is to implement some things that are in the Comprehensive Plan. I guess that's basically what we've been talking about, but another thing it says in there is it talks about extending the Gap Trail or a walk path along the river. What's been done with that?

PP: I know there's been some connections and extensions in the city. Right now I don't know of anything that's been done so far to extend the trail at all. I know, not the Kokosing, there's been work up at the Mohican valley trail, but not specifically the Kokosing yet. Doug will have a better handle on, being that he's involved with the Parks board, he'll have a better handle on where that's at. Good question, I don't know. But there is monies available every year through the Department, and actually it's kind of strange because I was just looking at one from Department of Natural Resources on trail extensions, and I was going to talk to the Parks board

and the commissioners about it. If we were ready for that yet, as far as extending the trail or doing anything more.

TJ: I know also the Parks board is working with this whole thing along the Kokosing, and I know it says in *Focus 2100* it talks about preserving the river as green space, and I was wondering what kind of I guess recreational development or parks are planed for that, or is it just mainly going to be . . . ?

PP: I think it really depends on the acquisition, like what they can. . . I think you can have green space, which can be buffer strips, but that doesn't necessarily mean it will be public, you know, public land for people to come on and off of. I know Parks board is, they don't have any projects going on right now. They're still trying to get, they basically don't have any money to acquire any land or anything like that at this point. They will need to pass some kind of a levy or bond issue or something to fund themselves. Right now they're in the stage of educating people. Like, from this point what's mentioned in *Focus 2100* can't go forward, because I don't think people really realize that we don't really have any park or open space [phone rings, Ms. Price secretary answers]. I think they're probably going to spend the next year working on that, and then go to the voters fr those issues. But there really is a need because we really don't have that much public open space in the county, so it is a problem.

TJ: Well what's been, I guess the indications of public support or not support at this point?

PP: Right now, probably wouldn't support it. There just hasn't been enough information. We did a land use survey kind of feeling that out a little bit as far as financial support, and people I just don't think are ready for that yet. When you get ready to ask them for money, you better have done a lot of groundwork first to get people going and on your side about it. So, I just think there's a lot of education that need to be done in pubic awareness, and I think that's the direction the Parks is working towards and also the land trust know that there needs to be a lot of public awareness. The land trust is trying to get their non-profit status and get up and running in that way before they start doing any public campaigns or anything, because they don't want to accept any funds or money or memberships without getting that straightened out. As far as where the parks are at, Doug will have a good idea. I don't sit on that board, so I'm not real aware of where exactly they're at right now.

TJ: [brief pause while I come up with my next question] So I guess, you were talking about educating people I guess the resources available, and why they should support this. How's that's going to be done?

PP: Parks and the land trust talked about sponsoring nature walks, lecture series, something like that. You need to start providing some kind of program that really doesn't cost a lot of up-front cost. As far as what I do with my office, I 'm working with trying to educate people on different kinds of development methods and involving the township and village officials and inviting them to different educational things this I go to, and then also sponsoring things where I actually bring the person to this county, kind of workshop type seminars. You get those people talking about it. I mean, when I first came here nobody was really even talking about planning that much. They

had done this plan but it was kind of like, well it's done and we're not doing it anymore, we don't have anything left to do. Well, now they're being made aware of different options they have, and I think it's just all educating them on options, and then they start talking about it and it disseminates that way. Trying to use the newspaper to get articles in and get the media involved in coming to your meetings, going on the radio and talking about it. And then the things like Howard's doing through the Rural Life Center, some of those things have paralleled some of the efforts we're trying to make here as far as land issues and things like that, and the importance of agriculture. Open space doesn't necessarily mean a park, it can be a farm, it can be, you know, open fields. And helping people understand that, just because you talk about open space and planning doesn't mean that there's going to be an entity that's going to come in and take everything over, you have options, and they can benefit you in different ways. I'm working with Extension on a seminar for continuing education for realtors and attorneys on all these issue on state planning and preservation issues and the tax benefits and things like that, so those are the kind of things you have to do. You have to hit it from all sides.

TJ: [I pause trying to think of sometime to say]

PP: I have e-mail and stuff, and I could give you my e-mail, and give me yours, and I think of things later, and I could just e-mail them to you.

TJ: There was something you said earlier about how no-till farming and contour farming kind of developed early in Knox County. I was wondering if you knew anything specific about that?

PP; I don't know anything specific, but Soil and Water would have all that history and I can give you a person to talk to there. There were like four things that we were just talking about: contour farming, no-till, there were two other ones. Basically, I think contour and no-till were basically invented in Knox County, as far as where they started. Somebody at Soil and Water would be more than happy to give you the background on that. So there's a lot of tradition of soil conservation and practices in this county, which, I go to other counties and it's like the soil and water's over here, and the farmers are over here, and here it just seems like there's a really good relationship with the different organizations and the farmers. A lot more so than in other counties, from what I can tell.

TJ: What do you see as kind of the most important goal in terms of conservation efforts for the river? Or another way of saying that is, why do we need to do that?

PP: I think that probably the biggest thing and what I'm probably going to be involved with is the whole issue of buffer strips and filter strips along not just the river but any waterways because water quality's just becoming such a big issue with everyone and everyone's concerned about water. And when this whole Del-Co thing happened it just got in people's minds about water really as a valuable thing, and our waterways are such a big part of that. Actually going to work in trying to design zoning that townships can adopt to kind of put that into their zoning codes to prevent erosion and things and get them thinking about that as far as not just letting anybody do whatever they want on the banks of a waterway because it has implications for the larger community. When it gets into ditches and things you're talking about roads and things,

that effects the township government and they're the trustees and the taxpayers are the ones who have to put the money into road crews and things to clean those things up and fix those problems. So, it's in the best interest of the whole community to think about that. It seems like such a little things, but then when you look at the bigger picture of all the things that it effects that eventually the township or the county government has to take care of and what it cost taxpayers. And that's where it kind of hits home with everybody. So, if you can hit that home with people that it's kind of a pay-now-or-pay-later thing, then you're also getting the bigger thing of your water quality and preserving that, which is kind of priceless. But, we'll get there, I think. It's just kind of a new thing, no one's really thought that . . . I think that probably years ago it was common sense maybe for a lot of people, but as you get different kinds of people moving into the community and different kinds of residential development, not everybody is aware of erosion control methods and different things like that. We actually have a, Soil and Water actually hired a staff person that's strictly going to be concerned with urban erosion issues which is also residential building and erosion issues. Before they traditionally just worked with farmers, but I think they're seeing that it's bigger than that now, and we're starting to see those problems so we needed somebody to help us deal with that.

TJ: I guess just kind of as a general question, what do you personally think of when I say 'Kokosing River'?

PP: I just think of the history and stuff for the county [phone rings, Ms. Price's secretary answers] and the Native American history and the wildlife. Having to drive along there to look at different things for this job, it's just, I get up in some of those parts and I just can't believe how beautiful it is, it's kind of like a hidden treasure. There'll be a heron or something in the river, and it's just like, you know, this is right in our back yard, and I just don't think some people know how lucky they are. Being that I didn't grow up anywhere near anything like that. Well, I guess I grew up near the Maumee River, but not close enough to enjoy it like I do here, so it's kind of just something in our community that we're going to want to keep . . . In planning you want to keep your positives as intact as you can and I think that's like a major positive and kind of like a lifeline of the county that we really need to be mindful of. So, I guess that's what I think of that.

TJ: In there, you mentioned the history of the river, and I know that in *Focus 2100* it says that one of the things we want to do is document the history. I know that it says in there that the Rural Life Center is part of that, but what else is there?

PP: There's just so many people that I've been involved with. One of the people on the Scenic River Council, and Doug McLarnan also, David Greer, who his family name, 'Greer,' is up there, and just the stories he can tell you about the history of the area and it would just fascinate you about, what happened here. One of the county commissioners, Alan Stockberger also has lived here forever and is just very educated about different spots where there were Indian burial ground and camps and things like that. It's just fascinating lore that revolves around that waterway. It could probably make a pretty interesting book or brochure for people coming into the county if you could get all these people together and write all this stuff down and research it, I think it would be interesting. And I don't know how much the historical society does in this

area, I think some of the efforts that Howard's been making, and Ray, and different people is trying to archive different things. I think the historical society's maybe concentrating a little bit on physical things like antique machinery or pictures or something, were I think there really need to be a good archive of some of this oral history and stories, I think can make a really big addition to the county.

TJ: Is that tape still going?

PP: Yeah, still going. So are you working on a study or a report, or are you just trying to investigate. . .?

TJ: Well, our project for at least this year, and I think for the next few years, for the fieldwork course is life along the Kokosing. We don't really know what our specific project is this year in terms of talking about life along the Kokosing, but that's what it's going to have something to do with.

PP: I think, one thing I have seen through Scenic River Council, is that the Kokosing is one thing that I think a lot of people can agree on no matter what walk of life they come from, and I think that's one thing interesting about it. Whether they're a farmer or live in the city, I don't think you'll talk to too many people who don't want to see the Kokosing kept in good condition. I think that's a good thing.

TJ: One of the things we were talking about was, you know, the biggest construction company, Kokosing, and then even Kenyon students the last things you do before you graduate is you sing the "Kokosing Farewell," so.

PP: Yeah, it's so much a cen [end of side A]

TJ: Anyway, Howard tells me you farm, as well as working here.

PP: A little bit. I keep sheep, and I'm trying to build a flock of sheep. It's more just hobby now than it used to be, I mean we have about forty acres of my husband's original family farm. It's still intact, most of it, my mother in law still; we lease out the farmland to another farmer, but my husband's a large animal veterinarian, so he keep very busy as far as farming. But we had a big dairy, and we would still be doing it if there was a family dynamic and a family business involved there. It wasn't a matter of it wasn't a good business to be in, but. I think that makes it easier to relate to a lot of people here, because I've been on both sides of the fence, take it from the farmer's point of view.

TJ: I didn't even know OSU has a landscape architecture degree?

PP: Mm-hmm. They have planning and a whole department under the school of architecture. Well, yeah, and it's in the college of engineering.

TJ: How does that play into what you do now?

PP: My focus was on kind of rural planning and traditional town planning. It's kind of a whole, a movement I guess I would say. I don't know if you're familiar with, there's an architect named Andre DeWaney [spelling?] that's done Seaside Florida. The Celebration Town that Disney did is kind of a takeoff on that, but it's kind of a stilted one. There's some community . . . they've gone back and basically found that basically the Mount Vernons of the world is what works. Mixed uses and different economic backgrounds of people living together. It really doesn't work with the suburban development with the people that make the same amount of money and the 2.2 kids, there's nothing to keep a community going. And then some of the work of Randall Arnt [spelling?] with rural planning and cluster and open space development was kind of an area that I worked on, so it kind of fits right in here a little bit. We're trying o make it fit here.

TJ: I just found that interesting, because over the summers I do landscaping.

PP: You do? It's a big field. When you get into landscape architecture there's a lot more of the technical part of it involved. You've got to be an engineer, an architect, a horticulturalist, you've got to kind of know a little bit about everything.

TJ: Is there anything else that I haven't brought up that you can think of?

PP: I think I pretty much covered it. Like I said, I think when you talk to Doug and if you can talk to David Greer, he's a good person. He's a science teacher up in Danville, and he's really active, he's also active in Soil and Water conservation and also on the Scenic river Council, so he's got, he knows the background of everything, he knows that whole area. Being that his family are basically some of the founding fathers of Knox County, so he's just got a lot of information. Like I said, he's ben one of the fascinating people as far as stuff I've found out that I would have never known. The guy needs to be writing it down.

TJ: I know we actually have somebody talking to Doug this week. And I interviewed him for the Kenyon newspaper, I guess a little over two years ago, when he was actually going through like the final processes of . . .

PP: Yeah, it was a hard, he basically had to go to all of these township meetings and try to, I don't want to say convince, but educate people on why we should do this, because anymore with this stuff it's not like you just go and fill out an application and they just give you a sign, you've got to prove that there's really a community commitment to it. Now they're doing the same thing with the Mohican, or trying. It's interesting.

TJ: Is it basically the same people involved?

PP: Yeah, almost that whole group, and some of the people involved in the Kokosing Scenic River are kind of working on the same thing to get theat designated.

TJ: That's all I can think of.

PP: If I think of anything else, I'll e-mail you.