

**NEW JERSEY SMART CHOICES** Creating Great Streets & Great Community Spaces

# **Workshop #2**

## ***Reclaiming our Main Streets***

*Friday, October 14, 2005*

*New Brunswick, New Jersey*

**SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS**

## Welcome and Overview

*Caroline Armstrong, Special Projects Planner, Municipal Land Use Center at the College of New Jersey* welcomed workshop participants. She explained that New Jersey Smart Choices consists of four workshops hosted by the Municipal Land Use Center and the Project for Public Spaces with funding from the New Jersey Department of Transportation. New Jersey Smart Choices addresses the need to reconnect neighborhoods and important public places, to provide choices in how people travel – choices that include walking, bicycling and using transit facilities - and to create vibrant streets and public places. It stresses the importance of forging partnerships between the State and municipalities in the pursuit of integrating land use decision making with transportation investments. Through New Jersey Smart Choices workshops, attendees will hear about New Jersey Future in Transportation – or NJFIT. NJFIT, a new approach to transportation planning spearheaded by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, puts the principles articulated through New Jersey Smart Choices to practice. Attendees will also hear from a variety of public and private sector representatives that are advancing similar goals, many in partnership with NJDOT. All workshops provide participants the chance to interact with speakers and to share suggestions and ideas with NJDOT’s leadership.

*Andy Wiley-Schwartz, Vice President, Project for Public Spaces (PPS)* introduced the audience to the work of PPS. PPS is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities. Its staff conducts training programs, provides planning and design consulting services for communities, produces publications, conducts research, maintains an extensive resource center, and does advocacy work and outreach not only in United States but throughout the world. Its four focus areas include transportation and livable communities, public markets and local economies, public buildings and civic design, and parks, plazas and civic squares. In New Jersey, it has undertaken community-based projects involving transit stations, main streets and downtowns. Through these projects, PPS helps forge relationships between municipalities and state agencies and through this process, create and implement a successful community vision. This is the type of work being advanced by the New Jersey Department of Transportation through NJFIT.

*Martin A. Bierbaum, Director, Municipal Land Use Center at the College of New Jersey* acknowledged elected and public officials present at the workshop. He explained that the workshop format is intended to provide a “safe space” for dialogue and exchange of ideas among multiple levels of government, elected officials and private consultants. He asked that at the end of the day, attendees offer suggestions for changing or improving the format for the benefit of subsequent New Jersey Smart Choices workshops.

## Introducing NJFIT

*Jack Lettiere, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Transportation* noted that these workshops are a great forum in which to unveil NJFIT. NJFIT redefines transportation in New Jersey.

In the past, NJDOT’s mission was simply to move people from place to place as efficiently as possible. When highways filled to capacity, more lanes were added. Eventually, it became apparent that the more lanes built, the more quickly they filled up with cars. Congestion is a function of land uses and connectivity. Today, with limited resources and growing congestion, NJDOT realizes it must confront transportation problems in a

different way. Solving the problem using traditional solutions of the past would be cost prohibitive and fail to solve the problem in the end.

New Jersey Future in Transportation (NJFIT) links the potential source of the problem – namely land use – with the method of solution. Land uses are the origins of automobile trips. If you locate a convenience store next door to a home, you create a walkable environment, reducing the need for an automobile trip. If you connect streets, children can walk to their friends' house, eliminating the need for parents to transport them via the highway.

NJFIT encourages local decision makers to give equal consideration to transportation as they do water, sewers and ratables in the early stages of the local decision-making process.

Through NJFIT, NJDOT reaches out to communities, working with them to identify their goals and problems that need to be solved. But NJFIT does not just focus on how to move people. It also focuses on the local desire to create vibrant, livable communities.

NJDOT is working with Pennsylvania on these efforts. A conference was held in Philadelphia on linking land use and transportation. More recently, NJDOT participated in a conference in California on the same issue. Other states are looking to New Jersey to lead the way.

Through NJFIT, NJDOT is reaching out to more and more communities. Communities in turn are collaborating with each other, recognizing that they share similar ambitions. NJDOT is reaching out to audiences like those here today to work with the Department.

## The Nuts and Bolts of NJFIT

*Gary Toth, Director, Division of Project Planning and Development, NJDOT* explained that NJFIT addresses congestion in a way that considers the multiple users of streets, including pedestrians, bicyclists, residents and business owners. According to the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), over the past 20 years, in spite of one of the biggest public works efforts in the world's history, congestion is skyrocketing. The length of the peak hour period plagued with congestion grew from 32% in 1982 to 67% in 2003. The percentage of major roadways considered congested rose from 34% in 1982 to 59% in 2003. In the New York metropolitan area, population grew by 8.5% between 1996 and 2003. Yet, during the same period, vehicle miles traveled increased by 18%, hours of delay due to congestion rose by 58%, congestion costs grew by 62%, while transit ridership declined by 2.5%. Between 1982 and 2003, state agencies were able to build less than half of the roadway needed to maintain a constant level of congestion. The USDOT and Texas Transportation Institute have concluded that it is virtually impossible to keep congestion at current levels with road construction alone.

Several factors contribute to congestion. First, we separate land uses into distinct zones, forcing traffic onto state roads. Second, we intentionally design streets without interconnections, again, forcing traffic onto state roads. Third, each time we build a new highway further out in the countryside, we open up new land to development. Eventually, this creates congestion. Fourth, we create barriers to pedestrians and bicyclists by designing streets strictly for cars. Fifth, we use traffic volume to highway capacity ratios to design roads for congestion relief. The idea behind this philosophy is that adding more lanes provides a certain amount of capacity and years of congestion relief. But the result is that the congestion curve skyrockets, dictating further widening.

**“There is no physics, there is no algorithm that creates ...congestion. We create congestion. How we use the land, what we put on the land, how we connect things creates this phenomenon of traffic congestion”**

***Jack Lettiere***

Congestion burdens the state financially, adversely impacts businesses, and compromises public health. NJDOT has to stretch its limited resources more and more because as congestion increases, demands for the money grow. At the same time, money is needed to maintain existing highways and bridges. Congestion also creates costs in terms of lost time. The Texas Transportation Institute reported that it cost \$63 billion each year to 83 urban areas in lost time. At the same time, the Centers for Disease Control classified obesity and diabetes as an epidemic. People living in sprawling counties are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions, according to a 2004 report.

To address this growing problem, NJDOT developed NJFIT as a new way to combat congestion. This is based on a set of five principles. NJFIT calls for downsizing the state highway system to make it affordable; leveraging private sector investments; promoting network connectivity; working with communities on land use planning; and creating context sensitive street designs. Because funding is so limited, NJFIT seeks to invest in areas where sound land use planning will support the state's transportation investments. Since most municipalities cannot afford the high cost of planning, NJDOT offers help to those willing to work in partnership. The Office of Smart Growth is another critical partner that can lend planning assistance in this effort.

Through some dozen or more pilot projects currently underway, NJFIT demonstrates how these principles are being applied in real life case studies. One example of a project that demonstrates how NJDOT is **downsizing the state highway to be affordable** is the South Branch Parkway project in Flemington Borough and Raritan Township, Hunterdon County. Originally, NJDOT was going to construct a four-lane limited access bypass to help relieve mounting congestion along a stretch of existing Route 31. The original project was estimated to cost \$125 - \$150 million. The South Branch Parkway plan proposes an alternative to the bypass. The new proposal calls for a two-lane at grade roadway (South Branch Parkway) that will be connected to a street network with intersections at key locations. The parkway design eliminates the need for structures and grade separated overpasses. The new design will fit better within the existing contours, necessitating fewer cuts and fills.

**Leveraging private sector investments** is demonstrated by the South Branch Parkway proposal. The total project cost will amount to only \$90 million, compared to the original bypass, estimated to cost \$125-\$150 million. Of the total cost of the new proposal, \$20 million will likely be secured from developers who will help construct part of the local street network. Improvements will be phased in over 15-16 years, allowing funding to be spread out over a longer period of time compared to the construction of one major highway which must be built and funded in two or three years.

An example of **network connectivity** is the new integrated street network proposed in Trenton. The network of streets will connect to Route 29, providing multiple points of entry and multiple parallel paths, reduce traffic on Route 29, and enabling people to walk. Route 17 in Bergen County is plagued with traffic congestion. NJDOT has identified a parallel access road, pieces of which have already been built through industrial complexes and campus developments. Since Route 17 could not be widened without tremendous expense and elimination of numerous viable businesses, NJDOT hopes that the parallel access road can be completed. This would remove some of the pressure from Route 17.

In Manalapan Township, Monmouth County, NJDOT is working with the Township and developers to redesign a series of four residential developments and a commercial development. The original layout provided virtually no connections between the residential developments and the commercial development. Thus, traffic would have been forced onto one of two county roads and then onto State Route 33, placing enormous pressure on a few key intersections. The redesign includes new roadway connections between the developments, thereby reducing pressure on the county and state roads.

In Flemington and Raritan Township, a network of connected streets will decrease pressure on Route 31 by offering alternative routes for local traffic. Additionally, it will be designed to encourage walking and bicycling.

NJDOT will assist communities like Flemington and Raritan Township and Manalapan Township, with **land use planning**. Since municipalities often lack adequate resources to undertake the necessary comprehensive planning, NJDOT is willing to lend support. In Manalapan Township, NJDOT is helping the Township to develop a mixed use center. The original plans for a commercial development now features residential units above retail. The center will provide multiple destinations that can be reached by foot, taking the pressure off of the highway while also creating a community asset.

NJFIT embraces **context sensitive design (CSD)** because CSD helps accomplish several important goals. First, because the public is engaged throughout the planning process, it decreases the likelihood of public opposition and helps move projects to completion. Second, it strikes a critical balance between transportation, human, economic and environmental factors. CSD is not simply about aesthetics or “dressing up your project.” It is about fundamentally fitting a project into the local context. CSD focuses on the planning process and not on a specific outcome or product.

CSD consists of three components: 1. defining the problem before designing the solution (i.e. defining the context); 2. listening and reacting to the community; and 3. being more flexible about design. Community, environment and transportation are the elements that define context. All must be weighed and integrated into the decision making process.

The American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) “green book” provides plenty of design flexibility. NJDOT’s procedures manual also provides flexibility. People often ask if NJDOT will be held liable if it fails to design to the maximum or desirable desired targets. If decisions are not reasonable and sound engineering principles are arbitrarily dismissed without good reason, liability will be an issue. If reasonable decisions are made after considering not only roadway safety and efficiency, but also social, economic and environmental impacts, then chances are that liability will not become an issue.

NJDOT’s leadership embraces NJFIT. But the Department employs 3,800 people. At this time, some have been more exposed to NJFIT than others. Institutionalizing change is a challenging process. But it is one that must continue in the future.

## ***NJDOT Context Sensitive Solutions Policy***

The New Jersey Department of Transportation hereby makes it policy that all future NJDOT projects will adhere to a philosophy of Context Sensitive Design (CSD). Broadly speaking, it is now NJDOT policy to conceive, scope, design and build projects that incorporate design standards, safety measures, environmental stewardship, aesthetics and community sensitive planning and design. In doing so, the NJDOT will consider the needs of all road users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, and neighbors such as residents, and businesses, as well as drivers. Transportation both shapes the growth of our communities and affects the quality of life statewide, so all future NJDOT projects will strive to improve the overall quality of life in our state; mobility and safety is just part of that picture.

## Reclaiming Community Friendly Main Streets

*Steve Davies, Senior Vice President, Project for Public Spaces* suggested that main streets are the fundamental public places within our communities because they are where people gather. Transportation is a vital component of disciplines affecting main streets and cities. Transportation pulls together issues of public health, historic preservation, livability and smart growth.

Over the past 30 years, we have given over communities to the automobile. The roadway system is experiencing pressure because land use strategies are not working. According to the New York Times, the average household in the United States traveled a total of 3,482 miles in the year 2000 to shop. When we design communities around cars, we have more cars. On the other hand, when we design communities around people, we have more people on the streets. This is the way to create great places.

Placemaking is defined by four key attributes: 1) sociability, 2) uses and activities, 3) access and linkages, and 4) comfort and image. Each of these attributes is characterized by a series of criteria or “intangibles.” (fig. 1). Great places provide many positive outcomes. They help renew downtown neighborhoods. They capture growth that would otherwise sprawl out toward the edge of the city. They create a wonderful sense of community. The more people present, the safer and more secure the place becomes.

PPS applies the placemaking process to a variety of public places including parks, schools, libraries, and main streets, among others. Main streets are often state highways. But through design treatments, we can convert automobile-oriented main streets into bicycle and pedestrian friendly places.

We can create a successful place in a very small space. Two parking spaces can be eliminated and replaced with a café or a newspaper stand, where people will gather. By identifying ten such small spaces on a street and converting them to public places, we create a cluster of destinations.

Placemaking involves multiple partners and collaborations. By doing this, no two places will be the same. Each will have its own identity. It takes a place to create community and it takes a community to create a place.

## Smart Land Use and Transportation Efforts in Highland Park

*Meryl Frank, Mayor of Highland Park* described the Borough’s efforts to revitalize Raritan Avenue, its downtown main street. She provided background context on the community before workshop participants toured Raritan Avenue where they conducted a placemaking audit. After participants returned to the classroom and discussed ideas for possible streetscape improvements, the Mayor described the Borough’s plans.

Highland Park is a community of 14,000 residents. It is very diverse racially and ethnically. Between Orthodox Jews, children and seniors, there is a large pedestrian-oriented population. Although walking is strongly encouraged, Highland Park does not have a place to gather. State Route 27 – Raritan Avenue – is its main street. Raritan Avenue faces a number of safety challenges. For instance, the numerous curb cuts create confusion for pedestrians. Because walking is such a fundamental part of life for so many residents, they must feel safe. If they don’t feel safe, they will not want to shop. This in turn will negatively impact downtown. In addition, a number of developments have been proposed which are not considered to be in the community’s best interest.

In an effort to develop a long term vision for the community, the Borough convened a meeting with a number of relevant state agencies. Out of the discussion emerged a vision plan for the community called *Highland Park 2020: A Sustainable Community*. The plan calls for redevelopment that is economically,

environmentally and socially sustainable. Economic sustainability means being self-sufficient instead of relying on the State for most of its funding needs and a place affordable to businesses and residents. Environmental sustainability encourages redevelopment that is “green.” Social sustainability means a community that gives sustenance to its residents by becoming walkable, diverse, healthy, accessible and by maintaining its historic integrity.

Several years ago, the Borough participated in the Mayors Design Institute hosted by the Regional Plan Association. Out of this emerged a number of recommended actions that the Borough should pursue, including the suggestion that it conduct a design workshop. In response, Highland Park convened a three-day workshop in 2003, drawing professional architects with a Smart Growth Grant from the Office of Smart Growth, as well as pro bono assistance for resident planners in town. The public was invited to attend the event and provide input on appropriate ways to redevelop the downtown, building on the earlier Vision 2020 plan. One hundred and fifty people participated.

The design workshop led to the decision to declare areas in need of redevelopment, to create a distinctive streetscape and to calm traffic along Raritan Avenue. Highland Park is now engaged in simultaneously pursuing redevelopment and streetscape improvements along Route 27. Plans call for mixed use buildings, structured parking, and consolidation of existing small parking lots. Driveway access onto Route 27 will be replaced with entrances from the rear of buildings. Buildings will be built to a national environmental certification standard called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). Plans also include the creation of a new public space on Raritan Avenue, with indoor and outdoor venues that will become the featured gathering spot for residents. Street lamps will be replaced with lamps that are more historically compatible. Sidewalks will be widened in areas of redevelopment.

The development community will cooperate in the construction of environmentally friendly buildings. New Jersey’s rebate programs are so aggressive that it should not increase costs to the developers.

The Borough’s redevelopment agency is securing private monies to help fund this effort. The Business Improvement District helps provide public funding. The Borough is hopeful that developers will begin construction by the spring of 2006.

The New Jersey Department of Transportation has been very cooperative and supportive of the community’s vision.

## Wrap-up

*Caroline Armstrong* thanked participants for attending the workshop. She observed that “community” was a term used throughout today’s workshop. It has become a common term shared among municipal representatives, professionals and transportation planners. It is important to share success stories around creating “community” at the workshops but equally important that those in attendance help deliver this message to others.