

NEW JERSEY SMART CHOICES Creating Great Streets & Great Community Spaces

Workshop #1

Working with NJDOT's new Future in Transportation Policy

Friday, October 7, 2005

North Branch, 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

Dennis Keck, Assistant Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) explained that NJFIT represents a new direction in addressing the State’s transportation needs by integrating land use and transportation. At the project scale, it seeks solutions that are sensitive and respectful of community and environment. It solicits partnerships with the community to collaborate on appropriate and agreed-upon designs. At the corridor and regional scale, NJFIT recognizes that successful solutions demand coordination of land use and transportation.

Thirty years ago, congestion was limited to rush hour and manifested itself on highways. Today, congestion has spread to back roads, despite major investments in highway construction and expansion. Furthermore, congestion no longer limits itself to the morning and evening rush hour. It is happening during non-peak hours as well. This is a problem that plagues not only New Jersey but the entire nation. Congestion costs Americans \$63 billion, 3.7 billion hours of delay, and 2.3 billion gallons of gasoline each year. Since 1996, vehicle miles traveled in New Jersey have grown more than twice the rate of population growth. The cost to the consumer in terms of delays has grown seven times the rate of population growth. Highway construction costs in a state like New Jersey become astronomical in part due to the extent of environmentally sensitive areas. Even if NJDOT had the funds needed to solve congestion problems, they would yield short-term benefit at best. As long as sprawling patterns of development continue, New Jersey will face the same problem, despite continually trying to build its way out of congestion.

“We’ve been at it for 30 or 40 years, trying to build more and build our way out of congestion and, quite frankly, are we really solving the problem?”
Dennis Keck

Developing partnerships with land use decision makers will help reduce demand on the highway system. NJDOT is pursuing this in a number of project areas through NJFIT. Early results reveal that virtually every community is excited about working with the Department to create communities where citizens have a choice to walk instead of drive or to take shorter vehicle trips. Communities welcome the opportunity to work with the Department on creating mixed use, walkable environments. The need to address land use and congestion is at an all time high right now. NJFIT seeks to shorten trips and to shift trips out of the car by locating new commercial development and employment closer to where people live.

The health industry spends billions of dollars every year on programs designed to keep people well. The way roadway access is managed has a huge impact on public health. Walkable communities translate into healthier communities. This is in part what NJFIT is all about.

NJDOT Commissioner Jack Lettiere has made NJFIT a priority. He also serves as President of the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO). In this position, he has made integrated land use and transportation a national priority. A number of interstate conferences have been held featuring this very topic. It is the first time that states from across the country are discussing land use and transportation.

The Nuts and Bolts of NJFIT

Gary Toth, Director, Division of Project Planning and Development, NJDOT explained that NJFIT represents a major culture change within NJDOT. NJDOT had become so entrenched in its beliefs that it kept training new employees on an old way of doing business. This went unchallenged for years. The beliefs were that 1) we can build our way out of congestion with wider, faster and straighter roads; 2) community needs are secondary to the greater good; 3) non-automobile travel is not viable; 4) land use is not NJDOT’s business; and 5) public involvement hinders the planning process.

During the interstate era of the 1950s and 1960s, these principles prevailed. NJDOT paved the state with more and more highways, insisting that land use was not its business and that its job was strictly to accommodate traffic. Roadway expansion was the primary weapon against congestion.

In recent years, however, these beliefs and principles have been challenged by a growing body of evidence. According to the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), in spite of one of the biggest public works efforts in the world's history, congestion has increased exponentially over the past 20 years. 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.

Smart Transportation Principles

- ***Downsize state highway to be affordable***
- ***Leverage private sector investment***
- ***Network connectivity***
- ***Help communities with land use design***
- ***Context sensitive street design***

It is not just the health of the transportation system that is deteriorating. So, too, is public health. The Centers for Disease Control classifies obesity and diabetes as an epidemic. In 2000, the cost of obesity in the United States was over \$117 billion. Research suggests that the US could save some \$77 billion in direct health care spending if more Americans met the government's daily recommended physical activity, including a regular walking regimen.

Several factors contribute to congestion. First of all, the separation of land uses into distinct zones forces traffic onto state roads. Second, streets are designed without interconnections, again, forcing traffic onto state roads. Third, each time a new highway is built in the countryside, it opens up more land to development. Eventually, this creates congestion. Fourth, streets are designed strictly for the car, creating barriers to pedestrians and bicyclists. Fifth, the need for widening cannot keep up with congestion caused by induced growth and increasing number of trips deposited onto the state highways.

NJDOT realized that there were lessons to be learned from the health industry. The health sector figured out that the demand for their services was soaring because of poor personal behavior. In reality, it could not raise its insurance premium high enough to cover the cost. The challenge for state transportation departments across the country is to determine how to alter the behavior of their customers to prevent the onset of health problems and to reduce the cost of services to a manageable level.

NJFIT is premised on a set of principles that depart from past thinking. 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. By contrast, the bypass would have been 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 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.

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.

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 that can function as the Township's downtown. 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.

A mixed use development is being designed in Trenton as well. This is being done in concert with the creation of an integrated street network and traffic calming along Route 29. NJDOT and the City are exploring opportunities to link this area to existing light rail as well.

At the same time, NJDOT is advancing **context sensitive street design** through the development of new design templates for state highways. Templates will reflect land use distinctions between various settings, such as urban, suburban, commercial and rural settings. This is a distinct departure from the traditional approach to roadway design, which focuses exclusively on how to move traffic from place to place. NJDOT, PennDOT and Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) are collaborating on this effort.

NJFIT also promotes communication. Thus, NJDOT invites communities to work with the Department during the conceptual phases of the design process. The key is to involve the public in real decision-making rather than providing mere lip service.

The transportation system helps shape communities. In turn, the shape and physical form of communities influence walkability and public health. NJFIT is important not just for the sake of relieving congestion, providing access to goods and offsetting rising fuel prices. It is also good for public health. The average 11 year old weighs 11 pounds more today than 15 years ago. There is overwhelming evidence suggesting a strong link between the transportation system and development patterns and public health.

Questions and Answers for Gary Toth

Question: If developers are not available to help build local street networks in particular NJFIT project areas, will NJDOT commit the funds to do so?

Answer: Yes, the State recognizes that it must be a team player. Commissioner Lettiere is working with the federal government to make sure that existing rules and regulations allow the State to fund construction of the local system.

Question: How do you convince a community that interconnected roads are beneficial? How do you convince the public that it will not induce more traffic through neighborhoods?

Answer: When people see how the proposed system relates to the entire community and that the impacts are spread out, they are more open to considering this option. People must realize that many of the trips generated in a community are made by local residents. If you provide connectivity, you reduce the need for people to make some of those trips by car. They also must recognize that people are already using many back roads to avoid congested state highways. Providing connections is a way to proactively determine where the traffic will and should go.

Question: What mechanism is in place to ensure that regional impacts of NJFIT principles are considered?

Answer: Regional dialogue varies from place to place. Some counties and communities are more supportive of intermunicipal coordination and regional dialogue than others. NJDOT has learned the importance of regional planning from past experience.

Smart Land Use and Transportation Efforts in Raritan Township

James Humphries, Planning Director, Raritan Township, spoke about the South Branch Parkway Integrated Land Use and Transportation Plan, previously described by Gary Toth as one of several NJFIT projects. Originally, NJDOT had planned to construct a 3.3 mile limited access four lane bypass circumventing a section of existing Route 31 in the Flemington/Raritan area. This would help alleviate traffic congestion on Route 31 by separating local and regional traffic. In the 1980s, NJDOT began to acquire right of way for the future bypass. More recently, the project was halted due to the high cost and a determination that it would have limited success in addressing congestion in the area. These issues led NJDOT to initiate a new study of the area. The South Branch Parkway project was premised on the importance of addressing not only congestion issues plaguing Raritan Township and Flemington Borough but also responding to other community needs and priorities.

NJDOT's consultants interviewed all stakeholders within the study area to identify issues. They included landowners, business owners, community organizations, local and county officials, and developers, to identify key issues. The Department conducted public meetings and design workshops in the study area. Community outreach not only helped to shape a vision but also fostered a feeling of ownership by the public.

The resulting vision reflected a number of themes that are important to the region. These include the need to 1) celebrate existing cultural and historic resources in the study area; 2) respect existing environmental resources including farmland, waterways and wetlands; and 3) plan for future development by respecting existing land use patterns. Together, these themes helped generate a framework plan for the region.

The framework plan calls for a down-sized, two-lane roadway (South Branch Parkway) in lieu of a four lane, limited access bypass. The South Branch Parkway will provide a regional alternative to existing Route 31. Unlike a limited access highway, it will connect to a network of local streets at key intersections. Since the Parkway will be smaller than the originally conceived bypass, some of the previously acquired right of way for the bypass will be used to create green spaces and pedestrian and bicycle routes. A series of interconnected local streets will help carry local traffic through the area and reduce pressure on the major highways (Route 31 and the South Branch Parkway).

Although the planning process is still underway, a number of challenges have already been identified. First is the number of entities involved. While the goals of each area similar, there may be subtle but important differences as well. Second is the complexity of implementing a network of local streets. This will be affected by the timing and willingness of developers in the study area to accommodate the network design into their projects. Third is the need for the political will to ensure success. Fourth is the perception that NJDOT has reduced the amount of funding allocated to the project and local and county concerns about the costs of maintaining the roadway system. Fifth is

the “not in my backyard” sentiment among some residents that has already affected the layout of the framework plan. Finally, some view the status quo as fine and resist change of any sort.

The local perspective on the South Branch Parkway project reflects both optimism and skepticism. Some people are skeptical that the project will ever come to fruition, given the long time frame in which the original bypass scheme was conceived but never built. However, NJDOT has been able to defray this concern to some degree by moving the planning process along, providing some short-term improvements, and demonstrating the advantages of integrating land use and transportation in the area. Raritan Township appreciates NJDOT’s assistance not only in showing the value of linking transportation and land use, but also in bringing together the myriad groups, residents and stakeholders into the planning process. This was very labor intensive, certainly beyond the capacity of the Township, given limited resources and staff.

Several important lessons have emerged through the planning process. First, participants must develop trust in each other. For example, communities must learn to partner with developers for mutually beneficial purposes. NJDOT’s consultants have worked with key developers to encourage them to change their site plans to conform to the framework plan. To do so, however, the developers need the assurance that the Township will help facilitate redesigns through the planning process. Second, when a project involves a large group of stakeholders, it needs a smaller steering committee to help oversee the process. Third, the process must continually move forward, given the potential for political changes and other dynamics that can set the process back. Finally, stakeholders must be reminded that the project takes time – sometimes decades – to complete. This is not a short-term fix, but rather a long-term plan to positively impact the area.

In the end, the South Branch Parkway Integrated Land Use and Transportation Plan does not facilitate growth; the area is already zoned to allow large scale growth. More likely, the plan will decrease the growth that is permitted but refocus it to areas and uses that are appropriate and can be supported by the existing infrastructure.

Smart Land Use and Transportation Efforts in Stockton Borough

Gregg Rackin, Mayor, Stockton Borough, described a traffic calming plan for Route 29, the main thoroughfare in Stockton. Stockton Borough is one of the State’s oldest and smallest communities and host to the oldest continuously operating three-room schoolhouse. The Borough is traversed by important transportation infrastructure, including the Delaware & Raritan Canal, a rail line, and Route 29, New Jersey’s first designated Scenic Byway. Stockton faces several challenges. Traffic speed and volume pose issues on Route 29, including safety concerns for drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists and for children at the school crossing. Truck traffic is also a concern on the highway.

Through a collaborative process between the Borough and NJDOT, an exciting series of recommendations have emerged to address the above-described issues. Initially, NJDOT was brought into the discussion to address a safety issue at the northern end of Route 29 within the Borough limits. From there, NJDOT and its consultants expanded the study area to encompass the entire length of the highway within the municipal boundaries. The resulting traffic calming plan is now complete. It calls for a variety of innovative traffic calming solutions such as roundabouts, bump outs and raised cross walks. Stockton Borough is seeking funding from the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission to construct the proposed improvements.

Smart Land Use and Transportation Efforts in Somerville Borough

Bernie Navatto, Chairman, Somerville Borough Planning Board, described a local redevelopment project to revitalize downtown Somerville. The Landmark Shopping Center was built in the 1970s as a large strip shopping center on 14 acres, situated along West Main Street in downtown Somerville. Despite its proximity to the train station, the shopping center is automobile-oriented with vast parking lots that are generally empty for most of the year. (Fig 13). Over the years, stores became less desirable and began to deteriorate. In the 1990s, the Borough developed a vision plan to redevelop the site. In the meantime, it also had plans to redevelop a former landfill site on the other side of the railroad tracks from the Landmark Shopping Center as a mixed use center. The Borough hoped to connect downtown Somerville to the landfill site with a new street connection through the Landmark property and to create a transit village for the nearby train station.

The Landmark Shopping Center contains 140,000 square feet of retail space. The proposed plan retains or slightly increases total retail space. In addition, it includes 272 residential apartments. Some are located above retail space along West Main Street. The remaining units are situated above retail space in a building that wraps a parking garage. Surface and structured parking are screened behind storefronts. The plan proposes a roadway and pedestrian connection under the rail line to the landfill site. Buildings along the street front are scaled to be consistent with existing nearby development. Designed in this manner, the plan introduces residential units into a single use development, creating a walkable environment and pedestrian connections both to downtown Somerville and the future mixed use center at the landfill site.

Parking and taxes are development issues that frequently raise concerns. Parking needs associated with the redeveloped Landmark Shopping Center are based on shared parking. Designed this way, the Borough anticipates a reduction of 200 spaces. Impacts of the new development on school costs were carefully studied by the Borough. Out of the 272 residential units, the Borough projects a total of 16 children. Somerville conducted a study of existing residential units in town to assess anticipated impacts of 272 units, using data from the school district.

Somerville Borough is using revenue allocation financing (also called tax increment financing) to help finance the redevelopment. RAF is a tool available to communities undertaking redevelopment. They need to establish a Revenue Allocation District within the redevelopment area. Once this is done, municipalities can use the tax increment, realized from new projects in the designated Revenue Allocation District, to fund bonds underwritten by the Economic Development Authority. This in turn can be used for infrastructure improvements.

Although redevelopment of the Landmark Shopping Center does not involve NJDOT, it reflects many of the principles embedded in NJFIT. This includes the need for interconnected transportation networks, pedestrian-friendly streets, and creative land use planning – in this case, mixed use environments that promote more foot traffic and less dependence on cars.

Using Transportation to Create Great Places

Cynthia Nikitin, Vice President, Project for Public Spaces

Small Group Discussions

The audience was divided into break-out groups to discuss and report back on a series of questions designed to inspire dialogue among workshop participants. The following are comments reported out at the end of the day:

Question: Based on what you learned this morning, what is the most important message you would like to convey to your municipality? To NJDOT?

- Municipalities need to plan and educate themselves
- Municipalities need reassurance that NJDOT is maintaining open lines of communication and staying the course
- Municipalities need to examine land use impacts on transportation systems and plan developments to minimize impacts
- Municipalities must educate residents that an integrated system of streets is appropriate
- Municipalities should communicate their vision to developers
- Municipalities should be reassured that NJDOT is not the enemy
- NJDOT needs to continue to get its message out into the public realm
- NJDOT must continue to maintain a consistent message through changes in administration
- NJDOT must retrain its staff to understand and implement NJFIT principles
- NJDOT must provide financial resources to municipalities
- Political leaders need a strong vision and sense of direction to stand up to dissent and controversy
- Promote the regional perspective; create opportunities for collaboration
- Raise awareness of the need for mass transit, especially given the rising price of gasoline; mass transit must be funded

Question: How can municipalities work better with NJDOT to achieve NJFIT objectives? How can municipalities work better with each other to do the same?

- NJDOT and municipalities must be equal partners
- Municipalities should share their plans with NJDOT and with other municipalities
- Municipalities must support NJFIT vocally and visibly
- NJFIT needs to work effectively in developed areas
- NJDOT must institute cultural change from within
- NJDOT must be a partner to municipalities
- Like-minded municipalities and counties need to partner on projects
- Resolve conflicts between adjacent communities along roadway corridors
- Make local street networks work
- Develop a process that allows a variety of local interests to participate
- Counties need to provide assistance

- Need to figure out ways to draw people to meetings
- Identify the issues NJDOT faces when working with municipalities

Question: What are three short-term and three long-term action steps municipalities can take to improve coordination between land use and transportation at the local level? What are the main obstacles to implementing these action steps? How can they be overcome?

- Empower local aid offices to serve as embassies that provide resources and expertise to municipalities
- Mediation is needed to help bordering municipalities work together on land use planning; the obstacle is home rule
- Long-term actions for municipalities include the need for municipalities to develop master plans and land use plan elements and the need to work with NJDOT to ensure that the local vision is consistent with NJDOT's access management plan
- Long-term actions for NJDOT include the need to develop design templates for state highway cross sections
- Short-term actions include reviewing local master plans to ensure the vision is still relevant and identifying redevelopment needs
- Short-term actions include the need for local circulation elements and land use plans that are consistent with the State Plan. In turn, site plans should be consistent with the local land use plans.
- The obstacle to implementing coordinated land use and transportation locally is funding shortages

Wrap-up

Caroline Armstrong remarked that the groups shared important comments and recommendations. The concepts shared today by NJDOT representatives, PPS, and workshop participants are critically important and must be conveyed not only through New Jersey Smart Choices workshops but also by participants when they return to their own respective communities. She also mentioned that workshop proceedings will be prepared and posted on the New Jersey Smart Choices website.