

METUCHEN MASTER PLAN REEXAMINATION

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This Master Plan Reexamination has been divided into three sections:

- Introduction
- Background Information, Existing Conditions and present Master Plan Goals and Objectives
- Changes in Assumptions, Policies, Objectives and Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law, NJSA 40:55 D-1 et seq. Stipulates that each municipality in the State of New Jersey reexamine its Master Plan and development regulations at least every six years. Specifically, NJSA 40:55D-89 states:

“The governing body shall, at least every six years, provide for a general reexamination of its Master Plan and development regulations by the Planning Board which shall prepare and adopt by resolution a report on the findings of such reexamination, a copy of which shall be sent to the county planning board and the municipal clerk of each adjoining municipality.”

This reexamination of the Borough of Metuchen Master Plan conforms with the requirements of the Municipal Land Use Law and addresses the requirements of the Municipal Land Use Law and addresses the requirements of NJSA 40:55D-89 by including the following:

- a. The major problems and objectives relating to land development in the municipality at the time of the Master Plan adoption, or last revision or reexamination.
- b. The extent to which such problems and objectives have been reduced or have increased subsequent to such date.
- c. The extent to which there have been significant changes in the assumptions, policies, and objectives forming the basis for such plan or regulations as last revised, with particular regard to the density and distribution of population and land uses, housing conditions, circulation, conservation of natural resources, energy conservation, collection, deposition and recycling of designated recyclable materials, and changes in State, County and municipal policies and objectives.
- d. The specific changes recommended for the master plan or development regulations if any, including underlying objectives, policies, and standards, or whether a new plan or regulations should be prepared.
- e. The recommendations of the planning board concerning the incorporation of redevelopment plans adopted pursuant to the “Local Redevelopment and Housing Law,” P.L. 1992, c. 79 (C.40A:-12A-1 et seq.) into the land use plan element of the municipal master plan, and recommended changes, if any, in the local development regulations necessary to effectuate the redevelopment plans of the municipality.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION, EXISTING CONDITIONS AND PRESENT MASTER PLAN

Planning Environment

This Master Plan Reexamination has considered the relevant planning documents at the state, county, and local levels, and their implications for planning efforts. The Borough's last complete Master Plan in 1983 has undergone Reexamination in 1988 and 1994.

Metuchen's comprehensive Land Development Ordinance was adopted in 1989 with subsequent amendments occurring periodically. The entire Land Development Ordinance was recodified in 1997. The Housing Plan Element/Fair Share Plan was adopted in 1989, received substantive certification from COAH in 1992 and, in 1993, received an amendment to substantive certification due to environmental constraints on the Gulton, Oakite and Hampton tracts. The Borough adopted a new Housing Element/Fair Share Plan in 1998 and amended it in 2000. This plan received conditional certification from COAH in June 2000.

Metuchen was designated a "town center" by the New Jersey State Planning Commission in 1997. Middlesex County places the Borough as a "town center" in its I-287 Strategic Planning Corridor.

The Region

The Borough of Metuchen covers 2.8 square miles in north-central Middlesex County, situated in the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP) Planning Area 1 (PA1). A highly urbanized, dense, metropolitan region, this planning area is typified by larger urban centers, a network of smaller pre-WWII communities and post-WWII suburban patterns. A key factor for Metuchen is the recognition that while it is located fully within a PA1 region and must manage all of the issues inherent in such a region, it is also close enough to the PA2/PA1 boundary that it runs the risk of losing "market share" to this nearby growth region should it fail to retain its residential character, quality of life and sense of place.

Land Use

Metuchen is a mature community with little vacant land available and is likely, therefore, to experience any new growth in the form of redevelopment, infill and adaptive re-use rather than new development. As a stable, developed community, the Borough has experienced many of the issues confronting any established central place. In fact, the goals of its Master Plan remain essentially the same through each revision. The 1967 Master Plan espoused many policies later endorsed by both the 1976 Amendment to the Master Plan and the 1983 Land Use Plan Element. Both the 1988 and 1994 Reexaminations again identify many central goals and objectives significant to Metuchen for decades.

Metuchen is clearly a central place which owes much of its compact, traditional form to the period in which it originally developed, its rail station and downtown area, and its confined municipal boundary with Edison Township. It serves as the focal point for many activities including employment, recreation, entertainment and commerce. The municipal government offices and a variety of business and professional services are located adjacent to the central business district. There are numerous residential neighborhoods extending outward from the central business district which offer a variety of housing types and choice for individuals and families of a wide range of incomes, ages and life cycles.

Metuchen has long recognized a need to maintain its compact town center in order to better manage and maintain its regional image, quality of life for residents, traffic, parking and economic development. Unfortunately, Metuchen has witnessed a significant loss of its retail base since 1990. This has been due to a variety of factors, ranging from the recession that began in the late 1980s to intense retail competition from numerous strip centers, major shopping malls, power centers and big box retailers in Edison and Woodbridge. When the Borough adopted a new comprehensive Land Development Ordinance in 1989, retail uses were eliminated from numerous outlying zoning districts and concentrated in the retail core along Main Street. While Metuchen has undertaken several components of downtown revitalization, implementation of a "formal" Main Street management program, especially involving a Special Improvement District (SID), has never mustered sufficient support to be seriously considered.

A compact, fully integrated and efficient central business district is not only possible, but necessary and desirable. While the Borough is aware that it may not recapture the retail base it has lost during the past three decades, it views the downtown business district as a key amenity in the desirability of the Borough as a residential community and as an economic anchor for its tax ratable base. It is well recognized within the community and the region that the downtown contributes significantly to what makes Metuchen unique among its neighbors.

The Master Plan identifies a mixed-use downtown which seeks to focus development, redevelopment and job growth centered around and extending from Main Street and the NJ TRANSIT train station. Metuchen remains committed to a centralized focus for future development and redevelopment of commercial and residential uses. During the past several years, Metuchen has continued to struggle with the issue of maintaining a compact central business district. New housing being completed on the northwest edge of the downtown is projected to have an impact on the development or redevelopment of a supermarket and other commercial uses. Two proposals for relocating the existing supermarket to outside of the downtown area were ultimately rejected by the community, and the Master Plan targets a supermarket of limited size as a critical "anchor" use within the downtown.

The compact arrangement of neighborhoods surrounding the downtown provides many opportunities for people of all ages and incomes to live and work in Metuchen. It is possible to live in a condominium flat, townhouse, small starter Cape Cod, restored Victorian residence, spacious executive home on a large lot, or senior citizen apartment, all within a five minute walk of Main Street. Metuchen's neighborhoods also contain a variety of parks and recreational amenities easily accessible to neighborhood residents. These range from the tennis courts of Oakland Park on the north side of town to the municipal pool on the south side, as well as Tommy's Pond where Metuchen families bring children to feed the ducks and experience other simple pleasures of small town life.

In addition, each neighborhood to the north, south, east and west of downtown contains a smaller neighborhood business district with a limited number of services easily accessible by foot. These neighborhood convenience stores, dry cleaners, sandwich shops and other services are sufficient for a portion of residents' daily needs, providing an opportunity to accomplish some errands without driving a great distance. In fact, many residents have the option of walking to pick up a container of milk, newspaper or a sandwich. Located along county arterials, these business districts can also draw on the pass-by traffic generated by major roads.

One problem noted in earlier Master Plans is the extent to which non-residential uses encroach upon residential areas. This issue was partially addressed through the 1989 Land Development Ordinance, which reviewed and revised the comprehensive land development regulations of Metuchen. The amendments served to limit further expansion of neighborhood commercial areas outside the center of town, while encouraging the location and expansion of such uses in the downtown. In addition, planning efforts to maintain a supermarket in the downtown area should alleviate concerns expressed by several neighborhoods over previous proposals to relocate the supermarket outside the downtown.

Southwest Gateway

For the area of the Borough known as the Southwest Gateway, a specific sub-area master plan amendment was prepared and adopted. The Southwest Gateway Plan contains the following goals and objectives:

1. Improve the visual quality/image of the Route 27 corridor.
2. Develop a set of specific land uses for each residential, business, and industrial zone that will promote appropriate future development.
3. Revise existing zoning district boundaries to reflect existing land use patterns and provide direction for future redevelopment.
4. Limit future residential development to the area defined by existing residential land uses.
5. Promote planned development opportunities for vacant and underutilized land in accordance with an overall urban design plan.
6. Improve existing traffic conditions on Route 27 and at the Middlesex Avenue/Bridge Street intersection.

Metuchen in Relation to the State Plan

As a model community in regard to the concepts promoted by the State Plan, continued support from various State and County agencies in the areas of transportation infrastructure improvements, housing programs, streamlined permitting and economic development will assist the Borough in reaching its goals. Designation as a Town Center by the State Planning Commission in 1997 has contributed toward the realization of this vision with projects such as the Station Area Improvement Plan being implemented through the award of a state grant under the Local Aid to Centers Program.

Economic Development

Metuchen attributes much of its economic stability to its desirability as a residential community. Commercial development is, therefore, desirable to the extent that it does not conflict with or blight existing residential areas. The Borough envisions economic development as a synthesis of development and redevelopment supporting an efficient, compact commercial core.

In 1980, the Rutgers Urban Design Studio undertook an extensive study of Metuchen's Central Business District called Metuchen 2000. The study developed five alternative, scaled proposals for the redevelopment of the blocks bounded by the Northeast Corridor rail line, Main Street, Middlesex Avenue and Lake Avenue. The results of the study provided useful information on the impacts produced by redevelopment of varying types and scope and provided a foundation for many strategies set forth in the subsequent 1983 Master Plan.

Over the past 15 years, the Borough has focused on improving its economic base by coordinating revitalization efforts on its downtown area. Efforts to develop a synergistic mix of viable commercial uses has remained flexible as traditional retail uses have given way to the service sector - particularly restaurants and other food and beverage uses. New residential units have also been constructed or converted on the upper floors of downtown buildings. These units have demonstrated a strong market for downtown housing within a short walk of the train station. Leveraging the additional disposable incomes of downtown residents to support new business ventures has helped inject additional vitality into the central business district during the past few years.

Metuchen recognizes potential benefits in terms of both economic development and traffic mitigation in maintaining a supermarket as an anchor within the downtown area. It is anticipated that effectively linking a supermarket anchor to the central business district will foster spin-off development in the process. By locating a supermarket in proximity to other businesses, trip generation for the supermarket could also be reduced by as much as 25% as shoppers utilize nearby businesses as well. In addition, since most vehicular trips traversing the Borough pass through the downtown, new trips and the length of trips to a supermarket can be minimized by locating this high traffic-generating use at the center of town.

Support for public improvements and cultural events is critical to the economic health of the Borough. Improvements in circulation, parking capacity, visual and streetscape identity, directional signage, and cultural programs and special events are all crucial elements in an overall effort to provide an accessible, user-friendly downtown which supports and, in turn is supported by, Metuchen's residential base. In recent years, Metuchen has implemented improvements and programs sponsored by agencies and organizations including the Parking Authority, Development Commission, Senior Citizens Commission, Cultural Arts Commission and Chamber of Commerce.

Transportation

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronting Metuchen's infrastructure and development capacity are the constraints upon its existing transportation infrastructure and current patterns of circulation. Borough officials and residents recognize that a certain level of traffic is inherent to being a central place of commerce. However, the convergence of significant volumes of traffic at six different three-way "T" intersections within 1,200 feet of each other, combined with the joint funneling of both Route 27 and County Route 501 under the Northeast Corridor rail line creates, intolerable traffic congestion detrimental to the healthy function of the town center. It is important to note that the center of Metuchen bears a greater share of traffic generated by the region, due to its "hub" location at the center of Edison Township, which has grown tremendously during the past 25 years.

Additional growth in this region will bring additional "background" traffic through Metuchen, whether or not Metuchen experiences any development. How the growth in background traffic is accommodated within a system constrained by limited railroad underpasses is a continuing challenge and threat. Standard engineering solutions of widened roads and expanded intersections are out of scale and character with the Borough, as well as beyond the capacity of the roadway system in most places. Developing solutions in keeping with Metuchen's town center character has required an innovative process of design, public involvement, investment and compromise. Most critically, Metuchen is continuing to explore transportation infrastructure improvements to facilitate improved circulation within the Borough and to better serve the downtown area, however, not at the cost of injuring the character of the community. The NJDOT has worked with the Borough on two forthcoming improvements along Route 27: restoring on-street parallel parking and a new traffic signal at the Lake Avenue/New Street intersection.

The principal arterial route serving the Borough is Interstate Route 287. New Jersey Route 27 (Middlesex-Lake-Essex Avenues) also serves in an arterial capacity and US Route 1 runs just outside of the eastern municipal boundary, providing access to the north and south. Metuchen is also directly served by NJ TRANSIT train service between New York and Trenton on the Northeast Corridor Line, and Amtrak service via MetroPark, in the Boston to Washington, DC corridor. Several NJ TRANSIT bus routes cross Metuchen, with the downtown area serving as a multi-modal hub between these routes and rail service. In this capacity, the Borough functions as a multi-modal hub for regional transit. Further, Metuchen's prime location as a desirable residential community with close proximity and direct access to Manhattan has meant that it is home to many commuters and acts as an intermodal "park-and-ride" destination for many more. This position within the vast, New York Metropolitan commuter shed gives the Borough access to the demand-side of a large and affluent market.

In a somewhat ideal fashion, the Metuchen train station is located near the geographic center of the community on Main Street. Surrounded by a fairly compact, residential neighborhoods, the train station is situated within reasonable walking distance of virtually every residence in town. The value of rail transit as an amenity for the community cannot be overstated. The optimal location of the station for local residents increases the likelihood that travelers will choose transit for trips within the county to New Brunswick, Edison and MetroPark, as well as within the region to Newark, New York, Princeton and Trenton. By transferring in New Brunswick or MetroPark, riders can easily board Amtrak for destinations such as Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. The Borough is in the process of improving the function of the station area as a multi-modal transit hub, with the assistance of NJ TRANSIT and other state and county agencies. It is worth noting that NJ TRANSIT considers Metuchen to be one of the more "transit-friendly" communities in its rail system, in terms of land use and design. This has led to the designation of Metuchen as the second community in the state for a rail station concierge program.

The Borough's compact, high-density settlement pattern provides residents and visitors the choice of walking to many destinations within the community. The proximity of many daily services combined with the presence of pedestrian walkways maximizes the benefits of the community's compact form. In doing so, the Borough also provides opportunities for the elderly, children and other residents who cannot drive to have independent mobility. Metuchen has embarked on a long-term strategy of improving and enhancing pedestrian and bicycle linkages throughout the community as a result of being designated a center. To this end, traffic calming strategies, sidewalk improvements and the installation of bicycle racks at destinations within the community will encourage pedestrian and bicycle usage. In a larger context, Metuchen is a participant in the Route 1 Collaborative Study and is supportive of "The Bicycle and Pedestrian Corridor Plan" which seeks to make Route 1 more bicycle-friendly. Early action on projects for the plan include intersection improvements in Woodbridge and the widening of Route 1 in Edison. Linkages to such improvements should help to reduce a small portion of the "background" traffic anticipated from additional growth in the region.

Regionally, the Borough is hindered by traffic issues which are larger than its own jurisdiction and which will likely require cooperative solutions including, perhaps, substantial state and county investment in critical infrastructure improvements. For example, the location of existing interchanges with Route 287 pose a problem for the Borough, particularly in the northwest quadrant where regional traffic uses residential streets to bypass the difficult Middlesex Avenue/Central Avenue/Lake Avenue intersection. Most of this pass-thru volume is generated as traffic attempts to access employment centers in Edison and South Plainfield and is largely unrelated to Metuchen as a destination. Metuchen plans to continue working cooperatively with NJDOT, Middlesex County and Edison Township in developing innovative solutions to the congestion problem. A certain level of congestion is expected in a town center, but accommodating that traffic without detrimentally impacting the quality of life in the Borough is a challenge that Metuchen can not solve on its own.

Similarly, the railroad rights-of-way have had a serious impact on the flow of traffic within the Borough. The Northeast Corridor Line runs northeast to southwest through the Borough, Conrail's Perth Amboy branch cuts the town from its northeast to its southwest corner and the Port Reading line runs parallel to the Borough's northern boundary. Throughout the Borough vehicles are funneled through a limited number of rail crossings. For example, the Route 27 right-of-way is fully interrupted by the Northeast Corridor main line, diverting traffic through two jogs in the roadway before realigning. The impact from this arrangement is profound, both in terms of quality of life and sense of place. Historically, the Borough has had repeated difficulty in effectively communicating with the entities which own and control the railroad rights-of-way that cut several swaths through the heart of town. However, in recent years these problems involving the maintenance of railroad overpasses, enforcing commuter parking violations and rebuilding the Graham Avenue pedestrian bridge have finally begun to be addressed through creative interjurisdictional strategies.

The advantages of providing rail service is offset by certain disadvantages and impacts. In addition to the adverse impact on traffic circulation by the railroad rights-of-way, the need to provide parking for rail commuters has meant the commitment of significant acreage in the downtown for the provision of parking spaces. Metuchen is also near capacity in terms of commuter parking at its rail station; however, there is adequate capacity to handle additional commuters who walk or reach the station by modes of transportation other than private vehicles. The corresponding peak period trips contribute to congestion in the Borough which, in turn, limits economic development, as the transportation infrastructure has less capacity to accommodate additional trips.

As a small municipality situated at the center of a heavily urbanized region, and a town center that accommodates the convergence of a complex network of transportation routes, Metuchen bears more than its share of regional transportation costs and impacts. This is particularly true with respect to expenses for servicing, policing, maintaining and administering transportation-related functions. In addition, Metuchen's local road network is placed under greater stress due to the disproportionate volume of pass-thru traffic that filters through the Borough. This has secondary impacts of noise and air pollution, and general congestion, all of which have a negative impact on Metuchen's residential quality of life. One of the biggest challenges facing the Borough is the ability to adequately fund transportation-related improvements that have a regional benefit. Although the Borough is interested in exploring a host of improvements, it should not be expected to capitalize improvements that benefit the entire region at the expense of local taxpayers alone.

Population

The population of the Borough has declined steadily since 1970, though the rate of decline has slowed in the last decade. Between 1970 and 1980, the population declined by 14 percent, a loss of 2,300 residents. Since 1980 the decline has slowed to an additional loss of 6%. In 1990, Metuchen has a population of approximately 12,804 residents and a density of approximately 4,572 persons per square mile. County projections indicate that the Borough will maintain the 1990 level through 2010. This loss generally results from a decrease in household size related to overarching demographic trends, including the aging of the population and declining rates of household formation, as opposed to an out-migration of residents.

This trend runs counter to the expected rise in population county wide, yet it mirrors the pattern seen in similar municipalities in the region, such as Highland Park and South River. With a median age of 35.1, the Borough is approximately six years older than the county, where the median age is 29. Metuchen is 91% white, mirroring the county exactly. Metuchen's average household size of 2.77 persons is slightly less than that of the county at 2.93 persons.

Population Projections

	Metuchen	Middlesex County
1990 Count	12,804	595,893
2010 Projection	12,758	795,920
Net Difference	- 46	+ 200,027
Percent Change	< 1%	+ 34%

(Sources: Middlesex County Planning Board and 1990 US Census)

Housing

Despite a reduction in household size and a consequent decline in population, Metuchen has provided a variety of new housing during the past decade. Earlier Master Plans note the balance which must be struck between the need for new development and the recognition that such development must serve a valid market. Metuchen has provided new housing to meet the changing needs of its current residents and work force. These shifts in demographics and lifestyle patterns reflect broader trends at the regional and national levels.

The Borough has recognized the potential benefits of additional housing as a means of creating an expanded market for existing businesses and future development. If managed properly, the secondary effects of new housing can be beneficial for economic development efforts in the downtown. In particular, the Master Plan has promoted new housing as a redevelopment strategy with a focus on the downtown area. Developing new housing at these locations within the density range permitted under the Borough's zoning (4 to 18 dwelling units per acre), yet high enough to attract private investment, has been a major goal of the Master Plan since 1983. These areas are logical for housing because they connect to a pedestrian circulation system linked to the downtown and the rail station. As of 2000, the substantive portion of proposed housing is being completed in and near the downtown and the Master plan does not propose any substantive new housing development.

There is some indication that the quality of Metuchen's housing stock may be declining as a function of population demographics and economic trends. It is not uncommon in an aging population with smaller household size and fixed income to forego improvements and, in some cases, basic maintenance. This deferred maintenance is being addressed through increased efforts to promote the Borough's rehabilitation program which uses CDBG funding distributed by Middlesex County. In the case of housing maintenance and rehabilitation, any improvements are overwhelmingly positive for the Borough.

The Fair Housing Act N.J.S.A. 52:27D-301 et seq. enacted in 1985, created COAH, an agency responsible for determining each municipality's low and moderate income housing obligation; evaluating proposed compliance strategies; and enforcing these strategies. COAH has calculated that the Borough of Metuchen has an obligation to provide low and moderate income housing for the first and second rounds/cycles for the years 1993 through 1999.

The Borough's 1989 Fair Share Plan was involved in mediation before COAH in 1990 and 1991. As a result of mediation, the Fair Share Plan was amended with respect to the Lawler tract (Homestead at Metuchen) in 1991. In 1992, the Fair Share Plan received substantive certification from COAH. An amendment to substantive certification was granted by COAH in 1993 and three sites (Gulton, Oakite, and Hampton tracts) were excluded from the Fair Share Plan due to environmental constraints. Consequently, the Borough will not see as many units developed as projected in 1983. The Borough's 1998 Fair Share Plan was conditionally certified by COAH in June 2000. To date, Metuchen has since made significant progress toward meeting its fair share obligation of rehabilitation and new construction affordable housing units.

Metuchen's housing policies respond to several key issues:

1. The Borough's "Town Center" designation by the New Jersey State Planning Commission which promotes development in the center of the community where infrastructure, including transit, is readily available and any new housing will help support downtown businesses and employment opportunities with a minimum burden on existing municipal services.
2. Changes in market demand which have established a strong downtown housing market which attracts smaller households, typically without children, who are attracted to the convenience of easily available mass transit and downtown services.
3. Increased concern over preserving the character and quality of each established neighborhood. Metuchen's special community character is based on a diverse mix of housing types, lot sizes, house and lot characteristics, and neighborhood patterns. Within some neighborhoods, a key element contributing to this character is a neighborhood pattern composed of a variety of lot sizes, house and lot characteristics, and housing types. In other neighborhoods, this character is derived from a pattern of consistent lot sizes, house and lot characteristics, and housing types.
4. The need for selective, additional senior housing to serve Metuchen's growing elderly population.

5. Paralleling national trends, a local demographic shift toward smaller household size due to and aging population, later age of marriage, low birth rates and other factors.
6. Environmental constraints on the Gulton, Oakite and Hampton tracts that limit the ability for future residential development on these sites, as recognized by COAH in its 1992 substantive certification of the Borough's Fair Share Plan and its 1993 amendment to substantive certification.
7. A desire to continue seeking available federal, state and county funds to encourage private reinvestment in home improvements and rehabilitation in established neighborhoods.
8. Increased pressure to develop infill housing, often as a result of subdivision applications involving variances.

The Housing Goals and Objectives of the Master plan are the following:

1. To protect the character and quality of existing neighborhoods.
2. To preserve and improve the existing housing stock.
3. To direct the development of new housing in centralized locations convenient to shopping, the railroad station, and employment opportunities in and near the downtown area, consistent with Metuchen's "town center" designation in the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan.
4. To limit housing in areas of the Borough that are better suited for other land uses.
5. To foster the development of selected housing for the elderly.
6. To ensure new infill housing, particularly where variances are requested, does not detrimentally impact the established character of a neighborhood as defined by the existing pattern of lot sizes and dimensions, and housing types.
7. To discourage the demolition of structurally sound dwellings in order to create one or more new lots by subdivision.
8. To limit applications classified as minor subdivisions to the creation of not more than one additional lot.

Open Space and Recreation

A *Natural Resources Inventory* (NRI) was prepared for the Borough by Candeub, Fleissig and Associates in 1976. The NRI documented all natural and man-made environmental features located in the Borough. The most environmentally sensitive area in the Borough is the vicinity of Dismal Brook located in Metuchen's northwest corner. The area is the uplands of the Dismal Swamp located in Edison. It is low in elevation, flat, has a high water table and acts as a natural detention basin during heavy rainfall and receives much of the Borough's storm drainage. Any development considered for more environmentally stable portions of this area would require access through streets intersecting with, or properties fronting on, Durham Avenue to avoid encroachment on Dismal Brook. Such development should be designed to densities appropriate for this environmentally sensitive area.

At present, the Borough of Metuchen contains 14 parcels of land totaling approximately 70 acres which are either municipally owned parks and open space or privately held, deed restricted open spaces. This translates to the provision of approximately 5.5 acres of parks and recreation area for each 1000 residents. The Lehigh Valley Railroad right-of-way presents a significant opportunity for Metuchen to increase its open space inventory. The parcel would increase the amount of open space within the Borough by approximately 40% and would bring Metuchen much closer to the Recreation and Parks Association standard of 8 acres of parks and recreation area for each 1000 residents.

The Lehigh Valley Railroad is the most significant opportunity for the Borough to reclaim and foster natural open space areas . There are portions of this right-of-way on which railroad uses have been terminated and the space may be reclaimed as a "Rails to Trails" recreational use. Portions of the right-of-way in the Borough's northwest quadrant contain specimens of Red Maple and Ash trees, indicating the wet nature of the land at the uplands of the Dismal Swamp. This rich variety of tree, shrub and herb species would provide balance to the Borough's ecology and connection to the Dismal Swamp, a unique wildlife ecosystem in the region. The Lehigh Valley Railroad can also link many diverse areas of the Borough, including developed neighborhoods, parks and open spaces, thus enhancing their value. This type of use, which places a premium on pedestrian and bicycle access, is in alignment with the Borough's stated goal of establishing alternate transportation modes which reduce traffic, noise and air pollution.

The Recreation/Open Space Element of the Master Plan has the following goals and objectives:

1. To provide adequate and accessible active and passive recreation area for use by Borough residents and others throughout the region.
2. To provide for safe accessible neighborhood playgrounds for the youth of the Borough.
3. To increase the number, size, type and variety of open space and recreation opportunities for the residents of the Borough.
4. To provide additional open space parcels with appropriate vegetation necessary to reduce noise, traffic and air pollution, in closer compliance with the Clean Air Act of 1990.
5. To provide for the establishment of alternate transportation modes (bicycle/pedestrian) to reduce traffic, noise and air pollution in compliance with requirements of the Clean Air Act of 1990.
6. To provide for pedestrian and bicycle connections between the various recreation and open space parcels in the Borough, thereby providing additional recreational opportunities to all residents.
7. To utilize the unique characteristics of all specific open space parcels to further the goals and objectives of the Borough Master Plan for environmental, land use and circulation issues.

Utilities, Public Facilities and Services

The Borough's infrastructure is fully developed and has been maintained and upgraded, within the resources available, to support projected development and growth, primarily in the downtown area. Water, storm water and sewage systems are all well maintained and capable of handling increased demand.

Metuchen is entirely serviced by a privately held water utility, The Middlesex Water Company, which owns and maintains the water distribution system. The company has indicated that there is no future constraint on the Borough in terms of water supply. The Middlesex County Sewage Authority (MCSA) treats the sewage from Metuchen. The Authority has undergone an expansion of its treatment facilities and claims that there would be no difficulty providing additional capacity. The sewage collection system is maintained by the Borough and has been upgraded during the last decade.

The Borough of Metuchen is committed to the provision of high quality infrastructure systems and the elimination of any deficiencies in such systems. The Borough has consistently moved to address any infrastructure issues which have arisen over the years. These programs include a systematic inspection of water and sewer lines using remote cameras and sensing equipment which has provided information leading to reduced infiltration in the Borough's sewer lines. An on-going capital improvements program of street reconstruction also includes the replacement of water and sewer lines in need of repair. In the past decade Metuchen has improved its water and sewer system and has worked with Middlesex County as part of the county's TOPICS program to plan and implement a number of intersection improvements within the Borough.

Schools

The Metuchen Public Schools System consists of 1,699 students who attend three elementary schools and a high school. Moss School serves pre-kindergarten and kindergarten; Campbell School serves grades 1 - 4; Edgar School serves grades 5 - 8; and Metuchen High School serves grades 9 - 12. This system of entire grades in different schools is designed to handle the peaks and valleys of enrollment as the population ages and the children of the baby boomers have children themselves. It is expected that the existing school facilities can accommodate any future growth that could occur in the borough. Moss, Campbell and Edgar Schools have each recently, or, are presently, in the midst of facilities expansion and upgrading.

Community Character

Metuchen has always been a community concerned with preserving its unique character. The Borough has been proactively addressing community design issues since the *Metuchen 2000* study was completed in 1980. As outgrowths of that initiative, the following urban design efforts were undertaken:

- A community character study using a visual preference survey.
- Pedestrian-oriented streetscape improvements in the downtown, such as decorative street lamps, banners, benches and trash receptacles.
- Downtown facade renovations, upper story conversions, infill development and redevelopment.
- Design guidelines and standards for residential redevelopment projects. These guidelines require that new units relate to the surrounding street, not locate parking in front yard areas, provide articulated facades, and utilize high-quality materials.
- Design guidelines and standards for all land developments, with more stringent standards that apply to the downtown area. These policies encouraging quality design and improvements have led to projects that meet with greater community acceptance and long-term value.

All of the Borough's community design efforts have promoted a desirable development pattern with a special focus on creating higher-quality design and greater real estate value within Metuchen's compact, mixed use downtown core.

Growth Management Mechanisms

As a mature community with little available vacant land, Metuchen will experience most new growth in the form of infill development, adaptive re-use and redevelopment. In a developed municipality like Metuchen, concerns of preserving the character and scale of the community, maintaining levels of municipal services and retaining a unique identity in the region are more critical than the "growth management" issues of developing municipalities. In fact, the Borough has used its town center designation by the State Planning Commission as a key element in its planning/economic development strategy by focusing development toward the center of town, primarily within the downtown area.

The Borough adopted a "user-friendly" zoning and development permitting process in 1996 that has proven highly-effective. The code amendments were designed to promote appropriate, permitted development in targeted locations, such as the Central Business District, the Downtown Development District and the Office Business Districts that ring the downtown area. This shift from "restricting" to "streamlining" permitted development has contributed to the economic viability of Metuchen's town center within the region.

Land Use Patterns in the Adjacent Municipality

Edison Township completely surrounds Metuchen. Generally, land use policies in both municipalities are consistent with respect to adjoining areas. In addition, the two municipalities are separated along Metuchen's eastern border by the Northeast Corridor rail line, thus helping to buffer any conflicting land use patterns.

Edison's most significant impact on the Borough comes in the form of traffic. During the past several decades, while Metuchen has lost population, Edison has grown dramatically in terms of residential population and commercial development. Due to Edison's auto-oriented land use pattern and a limited focus on mass transit and, Metuchen's hub location at the center of Edison's crossroads, the Borough has seen its traffic conditions grow worse as Edison has grown.

Goals and Objectives

The 1994 Master Plan Reexamination Report basically affirms, and elaborates upon, the goals and objectives of the 1983 Master Plan:

1. To provide a variety of housing types to serve the residents of the Borough.
2. To preserve and enhance the residential character of the Borough.
3. To maintain the Borough's physical and visual identity in the region.
4. To improve the competitive position of Metuchen's downtown area.
5. To encourage new industrial development, but not at the cost of blighting residential areas.
6. To improve the efficiency of the major street network in Metuchen.
7. To provide quick and convenient access to the downtown area for the people who desire to use the facilities of the business district.
8. To develop and sustain a compact, efficient, and viable shopping area within the central business district.
9. To improve the overall appearance of the business district.
10. To provide a circulation system which brings into balance the needs of the pedestrian and the needs of cars, trucks, and buses.

These goals and objectives were elaborated upon as follows:

In a developed municipality such as Metuchen, the principal goal is one of preservation: preservation of the Borough's essentially residential character, of the integrity of its neighborhoods, of the viability of its central business district and other commercial uses, of levels of municipal services, of fiscal stability and, ultimately, of its desirability as a community in which to live. Maintaining service levels while preserving a community's desirability as a place to live generally requires an expanding tax base, so that consistent levels of service can be provided without creating an unreasonable property tax burden. However, Metuchen has little vacant land which is suitable for new development. In addition, traffic and parking problems exist and inhibit the ability of the community to absorb new development and redevelopment.

Achieving the preservation goal outlined above necessitates compromise in both the magnitude of what is sought and the balance among the components of the preservation goal.

The following objectives have guided the selection of the land use policies expressed in the Land Use Plan Element:

1. Although it is recognized that traffic and parking problems already exist in Metuchen, any development or redevelopment of the central business district should not intensify traffic problems beyond acceptable levels and should be undertaken only in conjunction with the provision of adequate parking.
2. Land uses to be encouraged in any development or redevelopment strategy should be appropriate to the area in which they are proposed, should represent an economic benefit to the community, and should serve a valid market to ensure the likelihood of their realization.
3. Areas of environmental sensitivity, such as floodplain areas, should be protected from development, but surrounding lands uses should be planned to ensure maximum benefit from the resultant open space.
4. Opportunities to meet the housing needs of Metuchen's residents and work force, such as those outlined in the Housing Plan Element, should be encouraged. In addition, housing should be considered as a means of creating an expanding market for existing businesses in Metuchen.

CHANGES IN ASSUMPTIONS, POLICIES, OBJECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the Borough Master plan Reexamination was adopted in 1994, there have been several changes in the assumptions, policies and objectives of the Master Plan, many of which are reflected in the preceding section of this report:

- The Borough received Town Center designation from the New Jersey State Planning Commission in 1996.
- An area in the northeast quadrant along Middlesex Avenue, adjacent to Edison's JFK Hospital, previously zoned for single family homes and containing a variety of non-conforming uses was rezoned as G-2 Gateway District.
- The Borough has targeted the B-1 District or D-1 District in the downtown to permit a new supermarket not to exceed 40,000 square feet in size.
- The Borough adopted a new Housing Element/Fair Share Plan in 1998 and amended it in 2000. This plan received conditional certification from COAH in June 2000.
- A significant portion of the residential redevelopment identified in the Housing Plan Element has occurred, including the provision of affordable housing to meet state-mandated requirements.

- The Borough has seen dramatically increased demand for new infill housing located in established neighborhoods which has been strictly limited by amendments to the Housing Plan Element and Land Development Ordinance to maintain density levels within existing established neighborhoods.
- New development and economic reinvestment has been focussed on the downtown area, including the implementation of "streamlined" permitting for land uses allowed by zoning.
- The Borough has prepared a Station Area Improvement Plan and implemented the first phase of improvements through a Local Aid to Centers grant from the state.
- Traffic calming and pedestrian safety devices have been introduced on Main Street.
- The Parking Authority completed a parking study to help plan for future needs.
- The industrial area in the northwest quadrant has been re-identified as the Liberty Street Industrial Park.
- The Southwest Gateway area has seen continued development and improvement pursuant to the basic plan for that area.
- The South Main Street Corridor is in the midst of a long-term transition in land use within the B-2 Neighborhood Business District. Development pressures and associated land use, traffic, parking and aesthetics are concerns have led to the initiation of a special planning study for this corridor.
- The Borough has maintained and upgraded its infrastructure capacity, including reducing infiltration of sewer lines.
- Amendments to the Land Development Ordinance addressed the definition of fast service restaurants.

The majority of the assumptions, policies, goals and objectives which formed the basis for the 1994 Reexamination report are still valid to varying degrees in 2000, with the exception of the issues that have been addressed earlier in this report. There are certain issues which continue to be of concern or have arisen since 1994 that should be reviewed and studied further and, which constitute the recommendations of this Reexamination:

- Traffic congestion and safety as it impacts the livability of the community.
- A sub-element of the Master Plan addressing the South Main Street corridor.
- The location and marketability of industrial zones.
- New uses or redevelopment of the existing supermarket site.
- Improvements to the New Street Corridor, particularly in coordination with the installation of the new traffic signal at the Lake Avenue intersection and any improvements or redevelopment on the west side of Lake Avenue.
- Continued efforts to convert the Lehigh Valley Railroad into a regional "greenway", including exploring utilizing a portion of the right-of-way between Durham Avenue and Liberty Street as a roadway linkage.
- Discuss plans for the future of the municipal building and grounds.

At this time there are no specific recommendations for the incorporation of redevelopment plans pursuant to the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law.