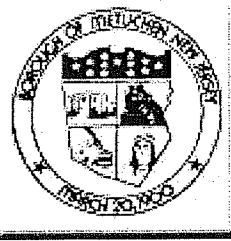


Master Plan Reexamination Borough of Metuchen

July 7, 2006

With Planning Board Revisions Adopted August 3, 2006



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1. Introduction

The *New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law*, N.J.S.A. 40:55D-1 et seq. requires that municipalities reexamine their master plans and development regulations at least every six years. Specifically, N.J.S.A. 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 report and resolution shall be sent to the county planning board. A notice that the report and resolution have been prepared shall be sent to the municipal clerk of each adjoining municipality, who may, on behalf of the governing body of the municipality, request a copy of the report and resolution. A reexamination shall be completed at least once every six years from the previous reexamination.

The reexamination report shall state:

- a. The major problems and objectives relating to land development in the municipality at the time of the adoption of the last reexamination report.
- 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 the master plan or development 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, disposition, 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 al.) 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.

The MLUL also provides that "the absence of the adoption by the planning board of a reexamination report shall constitute a rebuttal presumption that the municipal

development regulations are no longer reasonable". NJSA40:55D-89.1

2. Background Information, Existing Conditions and Present Master Plan Goals and Objectives

2.1 Planning Environment

This *Master Plan Reexamination* has considered the relevant planning documents at the state, county and local levels, and their implications for local planning efforts. The Borough's last complete *Master Plan*, which dates to 1983, has undergone reexaminations in 1988, 1994 and 2000.

Metuchen's comprehensive *Land Development Ordinance* was adopted in 1989 with subsequent amendments occurring periodically. The entire *Land Development Ordinance* was re-codified in 1997. A *Housing Element/Fair Share Plan (HE/FSP)* was adopted in 1989 and received substantive certification from COAH in 1992. In 1993 Metuchen received amended substantive certification to recognize environmental constraints on the former industrial Gulton, Oakite and Hampton tracts. The Borough adopted a new HE/FSP in 1998 and amended it in 2000. This plan received conditional certification from COAH in June of 2000. Most recently, the Borough adopted a new HE/FSP on 6/29/2006, responding to COAH's Third Round requirements.

Metuchen was designated a "Town Center" under the *New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP)* by the New Jersey State Planning Commission in 1997, and a "Transit Village" by the New Jersey Department of Transportation in 2003. The Middlesex County Planning Board recognizes the Borough as a "Town Center" in the *Middlesex County Strategic Plan*, which has been submitted to the State planning Commission for Plan Endorsement. The Borough has also participated, through Middlesex County, in the latest, on-going round of SDRP Cross-Acceptance.

The Borough has been the successful recipient of several grants designed to advance smart growth planning in tangible ways.

- Using NJDOT Transit Village and Local Aid to Centers capital funding, the Borough has upgraded the area around the Metuchen train station, one of the most important stations on the Northeast Corridor in terms of pedestrian access by transit patrons. According to NJ Transit ridership surveys, approximately 30% of the Metuchen ridership walks to the train station.
- With a Smart Growth planning grant from the Office of Smart Growth, the Borough developed the *South Main Street and Central Avenue Smart Growth Plan*, a plan that combines traffic calming measures (already implemented) along with

recommendations for possible urban design and redevelopment interventions in key locations along the important and busy Central Avenue axis.

- With a pilot “healthy communities” grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Borough developed an innovative color coded system of walking tours of the downtown and adjacent neighborhoods, identifying routes of various lengths, along with local landmarks and important businesses and community resources. The mayor has led numerous walking tours with local citizens, thereby promoting walking around town as a form of transportation and as a way of better becoming acquainted with one’s own community and its constituents.
- Most recently, a multidisciplinary team of faculty and staff of NJIT’s Departments of Architecture - Infrastructure Planning, Rutgers’s Voorhees Transportation Policy Institute and the Urban Land Institute has been working on a NJDOT-funded grant to assess parking strategies in transit-oriented locations. Metuchen is one of only four case studies selected under this grant.

2.2 The Region

The Borough of Metuchen covers 2.8 square miles in north-central Middlesex County, and is entirely situated within the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP) Metropolitan Planning Area (PA1). A highly urbanized, dense, metropolitan region, this planning area is typified by larger urban centers, a network of smaller, pre-WW II communities and post WW II suburban patterns. A key factor for Metuchen is the recognition that it is located entirely within a PA1 region and must manage all of the issues inherent to such a location, including aging housing and building stock, aging infrastructure and community facilities, and changes in regional employment and retail markets. As such, it is critical for the long-term stability of Metuchen to retain and reinforce those qualities which make it a desirable and unique place: an active and dynamic mixed-use downtown, stable residential neighborhoods, diverse housing markets and high overall quality of life.

2.3 Land Use

As noted in the 2000 *Reexamination Report*, Metuchen is a mature community with little vacant land available. As such, future growth will continue to occur primarily through adaptive reuse, occasional infill and redevelopment of previously developed parcels.

Metuchen has recognized the need to maintain its compact town center in order to better manage and maintain its regional image, quality of life for its residents, traffic, parking and economic development. The erosion of downtown retail activities that occurred in the early 1990s has been reversed. Traditional downtown retailers, such as hardware and apparel, have been replaced with cafes, restaurants and personal services.

The Borough has a longstanding policy of promoting downtown housing. As a result, the number of housing units in the downtown core and immediately surrounding area has steadily increased over the last 20 years, through adaptive reuse, upper story additions, and redevelopment. Several mixed-use projects are under construction and a significant mixed-use project on Middlesex Avenue has recently been approved.

- The Borough's D-1 Downtown Development zoning district, which lies entirely within a 1,500 foot radius from the Metuchen train station continues to be seriously under-utilized. The D-1 district contains approximately 34 acres of land, bounded by the Northeast Corridor line, the abandoned Lehigh Valley railroad right-of-way (future Metuchen-Edison Greenway), Main Street and Middlesex Avenue. With the exception of the Main Street frontage, the D-1 district contains the Pearl Street lot, a large surface commuter parking lot owned and operated by the Metuchen Parking Authority, along with several older and in some cases vacant larger format retail stores and associated surface parking, such as the defunct former Foodtown supermarket.

The current zoning for the D-1 district permits retail (but only fronting on New or Pearl Streets), personal services, offices, banks, eating and drinking establishments, apartments (except fronting on Middlesex Avenue), nursery schools and day care centers and public uses. Conditional uses include planned unit residential developments, dry-cleaning establishments, inns and hotels; with a 70% maximum lot coverage, 10% minimum open space and a 35 feet or 3-story maximum building height.

The Borough is aware of private sector interest in redeveloping this area, and that land assemblage has taken place through private sector transactions. The Borough is interested in creating a public process to help establish a public-private partnership with these development interests that would increase the likelihood of a successful redevelopment of the area consistent with the Borough's smart growth planning objectives and with good public policy.

The Borough has held two public forums in 2006, sponsored by the Borough Development Commission and assisted by Looney Ricks Kiss to initiate a public discussion on "The Future of Downtown Development". With hundreds of participants, the forums demonstrated the significant public interest in this topic. Among some of the views expressed at the forums was the need for additional affordable housing, the interest in attracting a smaller format specialty grocery store to the area and the desire to see pedestrian-oriented public improvements in terms of traffic calming, improved sidewalk connections, improved pedestrian access to the train station, and enhanced public spaces. However, the Borough is also aware of intermittent public concerns over additional development, over-development, additional public school children and perceived impacts to property taxes.

- A specific sub-area plan had previously been prepared for the area known as the Southwest Gateway. This plan has been followed and successfully implemented through several development applications. The possibility of a new full-service interchange between NJ Route 27 and I-287, currently under discussion, may require that certain aspects of this plan be reexamined, to better reflect the realities of the new access ramps.
- In 2005 Metuchen Borough Council adopted Ordinance 2005-11 amending the Land Development Ordinance (Chapter 110, Sections 110-72 and 110-91A) and deleting the R-5 residential overlay, for consistency with the Borough's Housing Element. This district applied to an area in the Northwest quadrant of Metuchen, commonly known as the Gulton tract. The R-5 overlay zoning applicable to Gulton was considered a remnant left over from an earlier planning strategy that relied on residential zoning to create incentives to clean-up and redevelop contaminated, industrial sites. The strategy had worked for one site (EFCO) closer to the downtown; it failed on two others (Hampton and Oakite) where the extent of contamination was greater than originally anticipated. And it had not to date produced the intended result in Gulton, the fourth site. In the meantime, the Borough's housing policies had shifted, with a refocusing on downtown housing. The 1997 Center Designation, the 1998 Housing Element / Fair Share Plan and the 2000 Master Plan Re-examination embody this shift in policy.

As a result, the R-5 overlay was no longer considered the appropriate designation for the site. That is not to say that the underlying zoning designations – LI and R-2 – constitute, by default, the appropriate zoning designations for the site. Indeed to the extent that there is new and more specific information available -- with respect to the site's environmental constraints and to its level of contamination, as well as renewed market interest in a non-industrial redevelopment scenario – it may be appropriate for the Borough to examine other options for this particular area.

2.4 Economic Development

Over the past 20 years, the Borough has focused on improving its economic base by coordinating and facilitating revitalization efforts in and around the downtown, with food and beverage and service uses replacing the more traditional retail uses. A strong demand for downtown housing has fueled new construction and upper-story conversions, thereby strengthening the local base for downtown retail.

In tandem with other comparable New Jersey communities, Metuchen continues to recognize the potential benefits in terms of both economic development and traffic mitigation of a small, specialty supermarket as an anchor to the downtown.

According to the New Jersey State Data Center, Metuchen had 5,785 covered jobs in 2003. Of the 6,744 Metuchen residents employed in the civilian labor force in 2000, 54 percent were in educational, health and social service occupations or in the construction, manufacturing, wholesale trade, retail and transportation fields.

2.5 Transportation

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronting Metuchen's development capacity are the constraints imposed on its transportation infrastructure by current patterns of circulation. The Borough recognizes that a certain level of traffic is inherent to being a central place that also serves the surrounding Edison Township, which has grown considerably in the last 20 years. 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 line creates frustrating levels of traffic congestion.

While there may be opportunities to improve the functionality of the street network through the redesign of key intersections or through the use of smarter signalization, these improvements must be accompanied and balanced by much needed improvements to the pedestrian realm. Better walkway and sidewalk connections and the judicious use of traffic calming measures, along with improved bicycle and greenway links offer the potential for much greater public benefits in transportation than conventional changes in the geometry of roadway intersections.

2.6 Population

The Borough's population declined steadily between 1970 and 1990. According to the 2000 US Census, the population of Metuchen increased very slightly from 1990 levels, from 12,804 to 12,840. This is still well below historic population levels.

In 2000, approximately 47 percent of Metuchen residents were between the ages of 25 and 54. A total of 3,206 residents or nearly 25 percent of the population were 55 or older. The aging of Metuchen's population mirrors broader demographic trends in the county, state and nation as a whole.

Exhibit 1
Population and Age Cohorts

	Number	Percentage
Population	12,840	100
Male	6,229	.49
Female	6,611	.51
Age		
	Male	Female
Under 5 years	397	406
5 to 17 years	1,221	937
18 to 20 years	101	160
21 to 24 years	167	197
25 to 44 years	2,012	2021
45 to 54 years	945	1070
55 to 59 years	329	439
60 to 64 years	326	259
65 to 74 years	377	583
75 to 84 years	321	425
85 years and over	33	114

Source: 2000 Census of Population and Housing

In the year 2000, there were 4,985 households in Metuchen, with a total household population of 12,840. Average household size was 2.57.

Exhibit 2
Household Type and Relationship

Total	12,840
In households:	12,812
householder:	3,593
Male	2,722
Female	871
Spouse	2,953
child:	3,804
Natural born/adopt	3,739
step	65
grandchild	176
other relatives	363
non-relatives	158
In non-family households:	1,722
householders living alone	1,148
householders not living alone	250
Non-relatives	324
In group quarters:	28
Institutionalized population	0
Non-institutionalized population	28

Source: 2000 Census of Population and Housing

Approximately 45 percent of households earned between \$60,000 and \$149,999, and median household income was \$75,546.

Exhibit 3
Household Income

Household Income	Number	Percent
\$0 -9,999	162	.03
\$10,000-\$14,999	163	.03
\$15,000-\$19,999	138	.03
\$20,000-\$24,999	120	.02
\$25,000-\$29,999	154	.03
\$30,000-\$34,999	178	.04
\$35,000-\$39,999	226	.05
\$40,000-\$44,999	157	.03
\$45,000-\$49,999	209	.04
\$50,000-\$59,999	367	.07
\$60,000-\$99,999	1,385	.28
\$100,000-\$149,999	1,040	.21
\$150,000-\$199,999	354	.07
\$200,000 or more	338	.07
TOTAL	4,991	100

Source: 2000 Census of Population and Housing

2.7 Housing

Metuchen has continued to provide a variety of new housing to meet the changing needs of its current residents and to respond to market demand. While $\frac{3}{4}$ of the 2000 housing stock was in the form of single-family detached houses, the other 25% of housing units are in either attached homes or multi-family buildings (Exhibit 4). A total of 306 certificates of occupancy were issued for new housing units between 2000 and 2006. During that same period, 47 residential units were eliminated through demolitions. This means Metuchen's housing stock has increased about 50 units/year in net terms since 2000.

Exhibit 4
Type of Housing Units by Structure

Units in Structure	Total Units
1, detached	3,704
1, attached	423
2	294
3 or 4	193
5 to 9	177
10 to 19	73
20 to 49	27
50 or more	213
Mobile home or trailer	0
Other	0
TOTAL	5,104

Source: 2000 Census of Population and Housing

2.8 Open Space and Recreation

Metuchen has approximately 5.5 acres of parks and open space per 1,000 residents. The Lehigh Valley railroad right-of-way (Middlesex Greenway) continues to present the most significant opportunity for Metuchen to increase its open space inventory. The southern portion of the Greenway, north to the intersection with Middlesex Avenue has been improved and Middlesex County has acquired a parcel between the Northeast Corridor rail line and Middlesex Avenue to create a trail-head. Once the entire Greenway is improved it will increase the amount of open space within the Borough by 40% and provide a link to the Dismal Swamp in the Borough's northwest quadrant, as well as furthering the Borough's stated goal of fostering bicycle and pedestrian mobility. As the portion of the Greenway North of Middlesex Avenue is acquired and improved, a roadway within the railroad right-of-way, separated from the new Greenway trails, should be explored, connecting north to New Durham Road and to the Liberty Street industrial district.

2.9 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 well maintained and capable of handling increased demand. However, the Borough also has a recognized need to improve storm drainage capacity along the Main and Lake greenway drainage system, and will seek to address this through innovative cost-sharing mechanisms with developers, and County and State government.

In 2006, the Borough adopted a new storm water management plan in compliance with NJDEP regulations.

2.10 Schools

The Metuchen Public School System manages three elementary schools and a high school. It is expected that the existing school facilities can accommodate any future growth that could occur in the Borough. The three elementary schools were upgraded and/or expanded in the last 10 years.

2.11 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. The Borough's Master Plan and Land Development Ordinance contain guidelines and standards specifically devised to protect and enhance community character. These guidelines and standards are carefully implemented by the Planning and Zoning Boards with each development application.

2.12 Land Use Patterns in Adjacent Municipalities

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, which both buffers adjacent land uses and creates a physical discontinuity between the two towns.

An aging suburbanizing municipality, Edison is now facing the same type of growth opportunities, through infill and redevelopment that Metuchen has been managing for 20 years. Large former industrial facilities in Edison, such as the Ford plant and Revlon site, are slated for redevelopment. As such, Edison has fresh opportunities to re-center its development pattern and create new mixed-use nodes that can lessen the traffic pressure on Metuchen's downtown, improve the potential for mass transit and improve vehicular traffic conditions in the region generally.

3. Changes in Assumptions, Policies, Objectives and Recommendations

Since the Borough's latest Reexamination Report was adopted in 2000, there have been a few changes in the assumptions, policies and objectives of the Master Plan, many of which are reflected in the preceding sections of this report:

- The Borough received Transit Village designation from NJDOT in 2003.

- The Borough has been participating, through Middlesex County in the 3d round of SDRP cross-acceptance.
- The Borough adopted a new *Housing Element / Fair Share Plan* in June of 2006, consistent with COAH's 3d round requirements, and adopted a growth share ordinance.
- The Borough developed a *South Main Street and Central Avenue Smart Growth Plan* combining traffic calming measures (already implemented) along with recommendations for possible urban design and redevelopment interventions in key locations along the important and busy Central Avenue axis.
- A private developer has assembled a majority of land in the D-1 district and has proposed a mixed-use project including housing, retail and a specialty grocery store.
- The R-5 residential overlay applied to the Gulton tract was removed in 2005.
- The Borough adopted a new storm water management plan, consistent with NJDEP requirements.
- The Borough has continued to upgrade its infrastructure capacity, including reducing infiltration of sewer lines.
- Amendments to the *Land Development Ordinance* addressed the design of additions to single-family housing.

The majority of the assumptions, policies, goals and objectives that formed the basis for the 2000 *Reexamination Report* are still valid to varying degrees in 2006, with the exception of the issues that have been addressed earlier in this report. There are certain issues that continue to be of concern or have arisen since 2000 that should be reviewed and studied further and which constitute the recommendations of this Reexamination:

- The Borough should evaluate the proposal for the D-1 district. The Planning Board should consider additional public meetings / visioning workshops as a prelude to a formal rezoning.
- The Borough should evaluate the impacts to the Southwest Gateway plan of the potential new interchange at Route 27 and I-287. The Borough should continue to pursue a full interchange at this location.
- The Borough should consider whether additional measures to control "over-sized" homes relative to the neighborhood context are needed, and consider whether current provisions in the Land Development Ordinance regarding design waivers and noticing requirements for pools, decks, sheds and garages should be reexamined.
- The Borough should consider whether the current zoning constitutes the most appropriate long-term designations for the Gulton site.
- The Borough should initiate the process that will lead to Initial Plan Endorsement under the State Development and Redevelopment Plan. This step is required within three years of filing the new Housing Element / Fair Share Plan with COAH, and also because the Borough's Center designation will lapse.

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