

**Amendment to the
Metuchen Master Plan
Related to the Downtown Area**



**Borough of Metuchen
Middlesex County, New Jersey**

**Prepared by:
James Constantine, PP
Borough Planner**

June 5, 2014

Amendment to the Metuchen Master Plan Related to the Downtown Area

June 5, 2014

Metuchen's last Master Plan Reexamination Report was in 2006. In the intervening years, much has happened in and around the downtown:

- the Borough hosted extensive public outreach and involvement in preparing plans to help guide redevelopment in the downtown from Main Street to the Middlesex Greenway
- a redevelopment project referred to as "The District at Metuchen" was approved and, subsequently, was not implemented, due to changing economic conditions
- the global economic downturn referred to as the "Great Recession" occurred, with lingering conditions still being experienced by some segments of the local economy
- the first leg of the Middlesex Greenway was opened
- a plan for the Extension of the Middlesex Greenway from the edge of the downtown to the Dismal Swamp was prepared
- the site of the former Suburban Dodge was redeveloped as "Suburban Square," a mixed-use project that in-filled the largest tract of land between Franklin Square and Central Square at the edge of the downtown
- the Borough prepared a "Reconnecting Your Community" Circulation Plan Element for the Master Plan
- the Parking Authority advanced the redevelopment of the Pearl Street Parking Lot by establishing financial, parking and design criteria and selecting a redeveloper for the project
- the Parking Authority was able to secure a state/federal grant to contribute to the cost of a parking structure in the Pearl Street redevelopment
- the Borough was awarded a county open space grant for the public plaza portion of the Pearl Street redevelopment
- the Borough adopted a Complete Streets policy
- the Parking Authority prepared and adopted a Downtown Parking Study
- Whole Foods Market recently announced that it planned to open a store in downtown

During the first half of 2014, the Mayor convened two meetings attended by the chairpersons, vice chairpersons and liaisons of the Planning Board, Zoning Board, Development Commission, Parking Authority and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce. The intent of these meetings was to review all of the changing circumstances in the downtown and discuss several potential policy adjustments to address both the existing and soon-to-be conditions in the downtown. The Master Plan policies outlined below represent many of the recommendations that emerged from these meetings and are consistent with and represent refinements of the major Goals and Objectives of Metuchen's adopted Master Plan.

Update Parking Regulations to Promote Downtown Business Recruitment and Reinvestment

Reinvestment is a sign of a robust downtown economy. Over the past three decades, Metuchen has seen some degree of reinvestment, in terms of façade improvements, conversions of upper floor warehouse space to apartments and infill construction. There are a host of public benefits resulting from reinvestment in centrally located downtown properties ranging from attracting strong retail tenants to increasing tax ratables.

One regulatory constraint that deters some potential retail, restaurant and service businesses tenants from occupying downtown commercial spaces is the current parking requirements. It is worth noting that prior to 30 years ago, when the downtown was at its peak as a retail center, Metuchen's zoning did not require the provision of parking for any downtown business located within 400 feet of a public parking lot.

The Metuchen Parking Authority recently completed a Downtown Parking Study prepared by Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates Inc. The Capacity Expansion and Demand Management portion of the Downtown Parking Study determined that there is a sufficient supply of downtown parking, however, there is a need to institute more progressive management strategies to help make parking function in a much more efficient and effective manner. The study's Parking Management Plan contained both "Transformative Strategies" and "Supportive Strategies". Several of the Transformative Strategies recommended that downtown zoning be amended to reduce minimum parking requirements, set maximum parking requirements and incentivize sharing of parking and are contained on pages 9 and 10 of the Parking Management Plan.

The Master Plan recommends the following:

- Adopt recommendations of the Parking Management Plan contained within the Downtown Parking Study to reduce the minimum parking requirements by 50% and to change the current minimum requirements to maximum requirements. This resetting of parking standards to better match the reality of how much parking is actually necessary can act as an incentive to attract businesses to existing downtown spaces located on lots that are constrained by having less parking than required by ordinance.
- Institute a Payment in Lieu of Parking (PILOP) provision as recommended in the Downtown Parking Management Study. This would allow uses that are short of required parking to pay the Metuchen Parking Authority an established fee for each space needed. The price for such a PILOP would be established at a rate that would allow the Parking Authority to build and maintain efficient, shared, public parking structures. This provision could help stimulate interest in properties that are too small or constrained to provide sufficient on-site parking on the property itself which acts as a constraint to reinvesting in these smaller properties.
- Apply the above recommended parking regulation amendments to properties located within the B-1 Central Business District, B-3 Office Business District and D-1 Downtown Development District which form the core of the downtown business and mixed-use zones. The properties in

these zones are also most proximate to and well served by numerous Metuchen Parking Authority lots, the planned parking structure on the Pearl Street lot and both bus and rail transit. Therefore, properties in these zones can most effectively take advantage of the recommendations from the Parking Management Study.

- Coordinate these regulatory changes with the Metuchen Parking Authority to ensure implementation is part of a comprehensive set of parking management strategies, as outlined in the Downtown parking Study.

Establishing a “Downtown Gateway” Overlay Zone to Promote Development of a Supermarket as an Anchor Use for the Downtown

In 1989, the Borough eliminated retail uses in numerous outlying zoning districts in an effort to concentrate retail in the downtown core along Main Street. This single policy most likely prevented the “strip malling” of Metuchen during the past 25 years. However, the community has time-tested experience demonstrating that the revitalization of Main Street will not necessarily result from a primarily defensive economic development strategy that attempts to protect Main Street. While Metuchen has implemented several components found in downtown revitalization programs, institution of a formal Main Street management program involving a Special Improvement District (SID), has never mustered sufficient support to be seriously considered.

The downtown retail environment will continue to struggle as long as there is an absence of retail anchors including national credit tenants. During its peak economic period, downtown was anchored by a 16,000 square foot multi-department clothing retailer located at the corner of Main and New Streets, two pharmacies, a smaller grocery in the A & P Liquor store space and a mid-size (26,000 square foot) supermarket located west of Lake Avenue. Two proposals in the 1990s by the former supermarket to expand by relocating outside of the downtown, along with satellite retail space, met with mixed reactions and were ultimately rejected by the community. Ultimately, the former supermarket moved to a Route One location just outside of town. Prior Master Plans and subsequent ordinances attempted to attract an “in-town” grocery as an anchor by limiting the size of a downtown supermarket to below 40,000 square feet and only permitting this use within a Mixed-Use Neighborhood containing a mix of other uses including residential.

The Borough has been working over the past year with the property owner of the former Stop and Shop and Cryan’s sites, totaling approximately eight acres, to advance the opportunity to attract a Whole Foods Market to serve as a supermarket anchor for the downtown. Establishing a quality brand supermarket anchor has the potential to send strong signals to the marketplace that Metuchen is a more secure retail environment in which to invest, thus enhancing recruitment potential for smaller retailers including those looking to locate on Main Street. The presence of a national credit retail tenant with a highly recognizable brand as an anchor can help improve the overall business climate for attracting and recruiting other regional and independent retailers, including those who will only locate in or near a retail center with a strong and reputable anchor.

The Master Plan recommends the following:

- Establish a “downtown gateway” overlay zone, by way of a permitted conditional use, that can extend over a minimum tract of five acres of properties assembled in the area from the existing and proposed extension of the Middlesex Greenway (Lehigh Valley Railroad right-of-way) to Lake Avenue encompassing both sides of Middlesex Avenue. Such an overlay could include properties in the D-1 Downtown Development District (the former Stop & Shop site), the B-3 Business District (the former Cryan’s site) and a portion of the B-4 Restricted Business District (Suburban Square).
- Require this downtown gateway overlay to be anchored by a supermarket and include other retail, personal service and restaurant space with frontage flanking both sides of Middlesex Avenue, between the Middlesex Greenway and Lake Avenue. Permitting this downtown gateway to span across Middlesex Avenue will accommodate the relocation of the existing hardware store, which is critical to the staging and phasing redevelopment on the south side of Middlesex Avenue for the anchor supermarket. The relocated hardware store and other new commercial space fronting on Middlesex Avenue will help integrate The Wine Chateau and Lola’s (at Suburban Square) into a more consistent “town center” mixed-use fabric defining this block as the edge of the downtown.
- Reduce the combined residential density of approximately 170 units, as previously approved on both the former Stop & Shop and Cryan’s sites, and relocate all remaining residential to the north side of Middlesex Avenue on the former Cryan’s site. Residential should be accommodated in one or more mixed-use buildings limited to three-stories in height fronting Middlesex Avenue, but allowed to step-up to four stories in height to the rear. This will help further “knit together” the pattern of redevelopment and infill that has been successfully implemented on the adjacent Suburban Square site (former Suburban Dodge car dealership) and Central Square (former EFCO industrial site). Relocating residential across Middlesex Avenue to this mixed-use block would help fill-in the gaps of this emerging “town center” neighborhood with neighboring residential uses to those at Suburban Square and Central Square, as well as providing a land use transition to the future extension of the Middlesex Greenway.
- The blocks south of Middlesex Avenue and bisected by Central Avenue would be redeveloped with single-story commercial buildings at a lower-density than currently zoned. A supermarket would be permitted to be developed up to a maximum size of 50,000 square feet, including mezzanine space. Ordinance modifications will need to recognize that an anchor retail use will require higher degrees of visibility, accessibility and customer-oriented parking than permissible under existing zoning. Modify ordinances to address mitigating the visual and spatial impacts of surface parking lots and to encourage on-site parking to be shared between adjacent properties and users as recommended in the draft Downtown Parking Management Study.
- Leverage redevelopment flanking both sides of Middlesex Avenue to contribute toward the transformation of the street and sidewalk space within the right-of-way consistent with the

vision established in Metuchen's Circulation Plan Element and the Borough's recently adopted Complete Streets policy. The downtown blocks of Middlesex Avenue should be transformed through the "road diet" envisioned in the Circulation Plan Element. These improvements should more safely delineate and channelize lane space, sidewalks, bicycle accommodations, crosswalks and landscaped medians serving as pedestrian shelter islands. A widened shared sidewalk/off-road bicycle trail that wraps the edge southern of Middlesex and Lake Avenues could create a safe and inviting pedestrian/bicycle linkage between downtown and the Middlesex Greenway.

- The "gateway" treatment along Middlesex Avenue should be more inviting for the pedestrian shopping experience, safer for bicyclists accessing the Middlesex Greenway and more visually attractive for motorists passing through town. Most importantly, these context-sensitive improvements will change the character, perception and function of Middlesex Avenue from a "highway that splits the town" to a "town center boulevard" that allows all users to safely and comfortably access and use the heart of town.
- Design guidelines should strive to establish a balance that requires single-story/single-use retail to be compatibly integrated into the overall fabric of a mixed-use town center in order to prevent the edge of the downtown from devolving into "typical strip commercial development". Prohibit buildings from turning their backs on Middlesex and Lake Avenue frontages which would perpetuate the long-standing unsightly and pedestrian-hostile conditions associated with the former supermarket and adjoining commercial strip on Lake Avenue. Recognizing that the majority of parking will be provided in off-street parking lots, the design of buildings facing these streets needs to pay careful attention to creating facades that engage and activate the streetscape. This will require using design techniques such as multi-sided pavilion buildings, wrap-around storefronts, large display windows to create interest along walls, overhanging awnings and canopies, front entries visible from the street, outdoor display space and café dining terraces lining the streetscape.
- Modify ordinances to require any free-standing monument signage to be visually compatible with the design characteristics of a town center by taking the form of unique monuments or kiosk-style structures, while strictly avoiding typical highway pylon or shopping center directory sign boards.

Leveraging Significant Public and Private Investment as a Catalyst for Reinvestment and Improved Connectivity along the New Street Corridor between Main Street and Lake Avenue

Main Street and Lake Avenue are presently separated by three blocks of New Street which is dominated by a sea of parking and very limited, low quality building frontage along the street. The Pearl Street redevelopment will effectively "complete" the southern side of New Street with high quality public space and streetscapes. The public plaza will act to enrich people's sense of community by enhancing and extending the length of time that people stroll and spend time downtown for reasons other than shopping and services. Designing and programming the public plaza properly will allow Metuchen's

“town square” to act as a non-retail anchor for social gathering, daily activities and special events that will help benefit businesses throughout the downtown.

Composed of four- and five-story buildings and a multi-level parking structure, the Pearl Street redevelopment should be integrated with more compatible with complimentary neighboring buildings and streetscape improvements on the opposite side of the surrounding streets. The exposed surface parking lots and low quality, blank wall, single-story buildings on the north side of New Street, and many other properties on Pearl Street and Center Street in this corridor, are underutilized and have been effectively “land banked” for decades. However, these properties will become more centrally located and valuable following significant public and private investment in the public plaza, Pearl Street redevelopment and parking structure. This is the opportune time to leverage and catalyze these public and private investments by working with those nearby property owners who are interested in “unlocking” the latent value of their properties through reinvestment.

The Master Plan recommends the following:

- On the north side of the New Street corridor and the east side of Pearl Street, encourage high quality infill and redevelopment to “fill in the gaps” and improve the connection between Main Street, the public plaza and Lake Avenue. This initiative involves further study of the redevelopment potential of the Borough owned parking lot at the corner of New and Center Streets and the A & P Liquor store site. These sites along New Street offer potential for recruiting additional retail anchors closer to Main Street to help round out a more complete shopping experience throughout the downtown.
- To maximize the benefits of public investment in the Pearl Street parking structure, permit infill development on properties located within 1,250 feet (approximately equivalent to a five-minute walk) of the Pearl Street parking structure, to utilize Payment in Lieu of Parking (PILOP) for up to 100% of required parking, provided that the developer has secured an agreement with the Metuchen Parking Authority indicating the required parking is available for such purpose. This will help “unlock” the development potential of vacant and underutilized properties in the heart of the downtown that are so small or constrained as to make it unfeasible to construct both a building and the required on-site parking. Another benefit of this policy is to promote pedestrian activity on the public plaza as tenants will have to cross the public space to access parked vehicles.
- To promote infill development more compatible in scale with the taller existing structures on Main Street and the proposed four- to five-story buildings in the Pearl Street redevelopment, the maximum permitted height should be increased from 35 feet/3 stories to 45 feet/3 stories for the B-1 Central Business District, the B-3 Office Business District and the D-1 Downtown Development District. Along Main Street, there are existing two- and three-story buildings that exceed 35 feet in height and approach 45 feet in height including landmarks such as Robbins Hall at #403, the Metuchen Bank Building at #406 and #439-443. Building elements and appurtenances such as chimneys, spires, cupolas, belfries, towers or flagpoles, designed for ornamental purposes, as well as functional elements such as elevator housing, roof-mounted

HVAC systems, and roof access stairwells should also be allowed to exceed the height requirements by up to 25 feet.