

**THE SOMERSET COUNTY
REGIONAL CENTER VISION INITIATIVE**

**Co sponsored by
The Somerset County Regional Partnership
Regional Plan Association
Lincoln Institute of land Policy**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Somerset County Regional Center is an incredibly diverse and interesting landscape. It is also fractured. However one defines sprawl, surely the essence of it is discontinuity - of built form, of open space resources, of the pedestrian experience and ultimately, of community. There are many wonderful pieces in the Regional Center landscape – beautiful residential neighborhoods, lively downtown shopping streets, stately corporate campuses. The problem is that the total is less than the sum of the parts.

“Sustainable development” in a maturing metropolitan area such as New York, is not only a matter of how new “greenfield” development takes place, but even more a matter of retrofitting and completing places like the Regional Center. The goal should be to do this in ways that create a sense of place and community while maintaining the unique suburban character and quality of life that developers, retailers, local officials and homebuyers seem to demand.

The results of this Workshop, as well as Regional Plan Association’s work elsewhere in the region, underscores two of the fundamental issues with retrofitting edge cities: the scale of these places defeats any attempt at a uniform and comprehensive build-out; and, sprawl patterns do not support significant transit improvements.

The Regional Center Vision Initiative

The Regional Center of Somerset County consists of the Borough of Raritan, the Borough of Somerville and portions of the Township of Bridgewater. These municipalities jointly received official center designation from the State Planning Commission in 1996. The Regional Center was the first tri-municipal center in the State. The Regional Center Partnership of Somerset County Inc., a non-profit organization, was established to provide a coordinated planning framework for the center so as to enhance the quality of life for its residents while providing a favorable environment for business.

The Regional Center Partnership is made up of representatives from the three communities, Somerset County, Somerset County Chamber of Commerce, Somerset Alliance for the Future, Somerset Coalition for Smart Growth, Somerset County Coalition on Affordable Housing and the private sector.

The Regional Center Vision Initiative brought together a broad cross section of design professionals, planners, elected officials and civic associations for an intensive five-day workshop. The purpose was to envision the next twenty years of growth according to principles of sustainable and centered growth, principles that are already described in the various planning and policy documents. Interdisciplinary teams of architects, landscape architects and urban designers addressed design issues from different points of view:

points – reinforcing existing concentrations of uses and the connections between them

Lines – reexamining the role of the major and minor highway corridors in sharing development

planes – reexamining the role of the natural systems in shaping future development

While design of the center was the primary focus of this workshop, two other parallel working groups were convened: one focusing on transportation issues and another focusing on implementation and policy issues. Jeff Zupan, Senior Fellow for Transportation at RPA, chaired the transportation working group and explored the limitations of transportation improvements in the Center. Robert Yaro, Executive Director of RPA, explored the policy side of implementing the vision including transfer of development rights and revenue/service-sharing. This Report summarizes the results of all of these efforts.

We intend for this project to be a model for other places in the County and region, not only in terms of the design principles that we hope to illustrate, but in terms of the process - a process that has brought together in a creative and cooperative environment the broadest possible array of civic, government business, design and technical resource people. The sustainable growth of the region will depend on our success with places such as the Somerset County Regional Center.

This is only the first step in a twenty-year process. The public presentation at the end of the workshop only initiates what must be an on-going dialog and outreach effort. The ideas explored here will only have meaning if they have the support of the communities, neighborhoods and public and private interests that comprise the Regional Center. We hope that by helping the community envision possible futures, we can help facilitate a process that will ultimately result in a Regional Center where the total is greater than the sum of the parts.

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II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS: THE DESIGN CHARRETTE

Policy Focus #1: Develop connections between three centers

There are three principal sub-centers within the larger Somerset County Regional Center: downtown Somerville, downtown Raritan and the Bridgewater Commons Mall Environs. Although these three points are relatively close to each other, there are barriers between them, especially between the Mall and the two traditional downtowns. Presented here are a number of strategies for reinforcing the connections between them. Some of these strategies involve the strategic configuration of future development to reinforce connecting corridors or develop links between development parcels, and to reinforce the existing downtowns. Elsewhere, transportation improvements are suggested, in particular a rubber-wheeled trolley between the three sub-centers.

Create a town center at the Bridgewater Commons area.

The area around the Bridgewater Commons Mall, including the large parcels to the west, the “municipal complex” to the north, and the uses to the east can be consolidated, and new ones introduced, to create a town center environment in place of what is currently a dispersed, auto-dependent “edge city.” There are precedents, throughout the county, for re-making malls into pedestrian-friendly, “downtown” environments. Unfortunately the scale and configuration of the Mall property does not lend itself to that kind of makeover, and so it will remain an automobile environment. Nevertheless, the designs demonstrate that this area can be re-connected to itself and to the other town centers.

Future planning should exploit opportunities to connect the Mall itself to the adjacent developments. The Somerset Corporate Center properties to the west of Somerville Road are at the same elevation as the 1st floor of the Mall. This creates the possibility for an at-grade connection between these two major properties by passing underneath US 202/206. This connection could be a number of things: an open-air drive, pedestrian or bike-way, or an enclosed arcade lined with stores and services or the next generation of office development.

A number of strategic road realignments will help connect these areas that are currently separated by the highways and highway interchanges. These public infrastructure improvements could become the armature for the future build out of the mall environment as town center. The key new alignments are between Vogt Drive, Prince Rodgers Avenue and Commons Way.

Develop the landfill site as an extension of the Somerville downtown.

Redevelopment of the Somerville landfill should take place by mapping a street and block system that will allow incremental, mixed-use development of this area. The scale of the blocks and tax lots should mirror the scale of the traditional Somerville context. The plan would promote higher density, mixed-commercial and multi-family residential development in the area adjacent to the train station. Connections to downtown Somerville would including a new underpass at the rail line between the land fill site and the parking lot behind the Landmark Mall. New development within the parking lot of the Landmark Mall itself would be used to reinforce connections between downtown Somerville, the landfill site and the Bridgewater Commons Mall area.

The configuration of this site suggests that this new block and street pattern should have a southwest, diagonal orientation towards the Raritan River. This facilitates connections to the River, to Raritan and would enable some commercial development along Route 206.

Redevelop the Raritan Woolen Mills as a mixed-use destination that both reinforces the downtown and provides a gateway to the Raitan River Greenway.

The Raritan Woolen Mills buildings should become the central feature of a new “village green” enclosed by the existing mill building, a new and more architecturally distinguished post office and two or more new buildings. The new buildings could be the proposed elderly housing which would flank this new public space. A theme or focus for the Woolen Mills would solidify its role as a new destination. This might include, for example, arts and crafts, specialty restaurants and retail, or a community theater. The architectural restoration of the Woolen Mills should

include the clock tower, which could become a focal point for the park and a symbol of a rejuvenated downtown and restored Raritan River Greenway.

Policy Focus #2: Exploit the potential of the road network to connect communities.

At present, the roads that slice through the Regional Center divide communities rather than connect them. In particular, the US Route 22/202-206 corridor, currently the sponsor of high-speed traffic and sprawl, should become an armature for sustainable future development. There are also major redevelopment opportunities at the east and west boundaries of the regional center that can anchor a redesigned highway corridor.

Route 22 and Route 202 should be redeveloped as a suburban boulevard.

A suburban boulevard would have a unified and architecturally pleasing treatment for lighting, curbs, signage and other road-related elements. This would be accomplished through design standards for developments along the boulevard, including height and setback and the location of parking and driveways. Parking lot design would be rationalized to promote pedestrian and automotive connections between developments, to minimize car trips, and make transit connections feasible. Key intersections with north-south streets would be redesigned in order to connect the new boulevard to the Somerville and Bridgewater neighborhoods. These intersections should be significant events along the way with well-designed and clearly articulated pedestrian crossings connecting the north and south sides of Route 22. Speed would be reduced to 40 mph, accomplished through signalization and other traffic calming measures.

Finally, the significant landscape resources within the highway corridors should be designed and managed in such a way as to realize their potential as “green infrastructure.” This would include a system of retainage basins and plantings to “scrub” hard-surface run-off.

Redesign local arterial roads to reinforce community character and development.

Use the developments around the former American Cyanamid properties and the Chimney Rock Road corridor to connect new development around the train station, the baseball stadium and future sports park to the residential neighborhoods west of Chimney Rock Road.

As with the Bridgewater Commons Mall, these properties, because of their proximity to, and easy access from Route 287, will continue to be developed for larger-scale commercial and retail uses. Nevertheless, future development can be shaped in ways that will create new connections and sponsor the redevelopment of the adjacent neighborhoods.

These designs anticipate the future subdivision of these properties to allow for intermediate scale redevelopment of the parking fields. This will create new pedestrian connections and shared public spaces which can then be connected to each other and to the surroundings. Easements for these connections should be discussed with the current and future developers. Three of the most significant connections are a) from the center of the retail center to Kline Place b) from the north end of the retail center to Union Avenue and c) an arc-shaped connection from the train station/stadium area to the intersection of Chimney Rock Road and Union Avenue.

Despite the tendency to think of the Chimney Rock Road corridor in terms of its significance as a north-south axis, the emphasis should be on the potential for development in this area to reinforce the east-west connections between Bridgewater and Bound Brook along West Union Avenue and Main Street.

The scale of development should be graduated, decreasing from east to west in order to create a transition from the large-scale commercial development along the highway to the smaller scale, in-fill development of the residential neighborhoods. This can be accomplished through height, bulk and coverage restrictions. Chimney Rock Road should be developed at an intermediate scale: commercial buildings arranged in campus-like settings and low-rise to mid-rise garden apartments.

The residential neighborhoods to the west, particularly the areas between Chimney Rock Road and Funderne Avenue, should be restored through new in-fill development. The street, block and

lot patterns here suggest that this area could become as vital and attractive as the best neighborhoods in Somerville. Creation of a greenway along the Cuckholds Brook could provide the same kind of neighborhood amenity that Peter's Brook provides for Somerville, albeit at a more modest scale.

Future development of the Harris Semi-Conductor and Fischer Scientific sites at the west end of the Route 202 Corridor should create connections between a new, train station, the Vandever Farms residential neighborhoods, and the large corporate campuses along Route 202.

A new station should be established here or the North Branch Station should be relocated to this area. A station here will be within walking distance of the Vandever Farms houses and the other new developments at the west end of the Route 202 Corridor. A park-and-ride facility could also capture transit users who would otherwise have to drive through the Regional Center to get to the stations in Raritan or Somerville.

As with the American Cyanamid properties in the Chimney Rock Road area, development should anticipate the future subdivision of these properties to allow for intermediate and small-scale redevelopment of the large-scale (Big Box) developments that are currently proposed. Building on the proximity to Vandever Farms houses, mixed-use redevelopment could include housing. Mixed-use redevelopment would support pedestrian connections between the two large parcels, including connections across and along Route 202, connections to the corporate estates and connections to the western-most residential sections of Raritan.

Policy Focus #3: Reinforce the role of natural resources

The natural systems should play a major role on shaping future development. Opportunities should be identified where greenways, stream and river corridors can knit the Regional Center together, provide neighborhood and regional scale amenities, sponsor new forms of development and restore the ecology of the area.

Create a new “Riverfront Parkway” along a new Raritan River Greenway and park.

Key components of this strategy include the following:

- Promote new development between the railway and the new Riverfront Parkway including residential buildings along the Parkway frontage overlooking the new Riverfront Park, flex office-warehouse space behind the residential development along the railway, a school site, plus neighborhood commercial locations along Finderne Avenue.
- Provide a bikeway along the proposed Riverfront Parkway as well as other pedestrian connections to the neighborhoods north of the railroad tracks.

VI. THE TRANSPORTATION WORKSHOP

Transportation and Land Use Issues

The Somerville/Raritan/Bridgewater Central Area (dubbed here as Central Somerset) offers a microcosm of transportation and land use issues in suburban America. Somerville and Raritan are older towns that grew up around railroad stations built near the turn of the last century. Each had a commercial center a short walk from the railroad station and an industrial base tied to the railroad and homes within walking distance of the station. Shopping was done in town. Commuting by rail was possible to Newark 30 miles away and to New York ten miles farther.

After the Second World War auto ownership grew rapidly after years of being stifled by the Great Depression and the war. Urban residents moved to single-family suburban housing lured by the G.I. Bill of Rights' low interest mortgages and the promise of open space. Automobility made every piece of land with a road accessible and therefore developable. In Somerset County, areas beyond the town centers, such as Bridgewater became options for development. Housing on larger lots could be built in undeveloped and formerly inaccessible areas, consuming forest and farms. Commercial strip malls were built along highways such as Route 22 as new-found customers could drive. These strip malls were each designed for their own vehicular access, reducing traffic capacity and adding accident-inducing conflicts. The strips' individual establishments, each seeking to lure the high-speed motorist, scream for attention with a cacophony of ugly signs. Later came the Bridgewater Commons, a large shopping mall, made possible by the new interstate highways built in the 1970s, I-287 running right alongside it and I-78 just a few miles away.

Sprinkled throughout the new suburbs are "single-family office buildings" (SFOBs), designed for easy auto access with enough free parking for every employee to drive alone, with room to spare. These employment sites are located in Bridgewater and in other new suburban towns along the I-287 corridor in communities such as Parsippany to the north and Piscataway to the southeast, clogging I-287 and connecting roads such as Route 22 in morning and evening peak periods. There are now signs that locally bound traffic is beginning to avoid these main roads and insinuating themselves into residential streets, causing safety concerns. New SFOBs are

mushrooming along I-78 to the west too. SFOBs are almost always isolated from each other and from other land uses that its occupants might use, such as shopping or restaurants, ensuring more auto trips and inhibiting the “muscle modes” of walking and biking.

The effect of the shift to the new suburbs has been to weaken the ability of local transit to function effectively. Fewer people are riding local buses to reach jobs, school or shopping. And the buses themselves are less convenient as most destinations are separated from each other and are back from the main roads. Buses cannot circulate efficiently to serve potential riders and riders have difficulty negotiating the last (or first) segment of their trip, the walk to or from their destination. Often sidewalks are absent, crossing streets is dangerous and walking routes are circuitous. In residential areas, sinuous street patterns ending in cul-de-sacs extend walking (or biking) distances.

Initially, the shift of employment sites and retail establishments to the new suburbs weakened the older centers of Somerville and Raritan. With fewer potential customers, many shops closed, initiating a downward cycle of dis-investment. Fortunately, because Somerville is the county seat, new county offices located there helped to stem the tide. Streetscapes were upgraded with pavement treatments, new lighting, plantings and benches. Somerville has also been helped with a wider range of restaurants and more interesting and unique stores than the mall’s national chains, serving the walk-in employment base within an easy drive or walk of downtown.

The juxtaposition of the three corridor towns and their relation to the highway network has created still another problem. Raritan and Somerville are south of both Route 22 and I-287. This has the effect of cutting them off from the Bridgewater Commons mall to the north. A walk to the Commons from Somerville is a dangerous and circuitous adventure across high-speed on ramps and over unpaved, often muddy footpaths formed by the repetition of adventurous (and autoless) pedestrians. Moreover, much of the new construction of community facilities, such as the library and the senior center, has been located to the north, isolating them from many of their clients. Even when these community facilities have been located in Somerville they have been placed at sites removed from the downtown, such as to the east off Route 22 in the vicinity of the

lightly used Bridgewater (formerly Calco) railroad station, where the new baseball stadium is under construction.

The net result of these developments has been to isolate those who cannot use an automobile, either for reasons of age, infirmity or income. One in ten Somerville and Raritan residents do not have an auto available. One in six persons in those two towns are above the age of 75, for whom driving is no longer the safest option. One in twenty persons are disabled. One in twenty are also adolescents too young to drive and too independent to prefer parental chauffeuring. While there is some overlapping of these categories, a good guess is that one in four residents of our subject towns are disadvantaged by the absence of quality alternatives. To be sure, it is possible to take a bus to some places in the three towns, and it is possible to walk or bike. But transit service is infrequent and pedestrians and cyclists are faced with long distances and unsafe conditions. Regular route transit services are limited to about once an hour over the course of the day. NJ TRANSIT's #114-117 stops at the Commons and Main Street but not at the Somerville rail station. It runs express to New York and has five morning runs that reach New York before 9:30am and runs about once an hour at other times. The #88 WHEELS route connects Somerville to points west as far as Clinton, and has three peak period services and operates less than once an hour through midday. It stops at the Commons, and both downtown Somerville sites – Main Street and the railroad station. The #989 WHEELS route has a similar frequency, connecting Hillsborough with a number of corporate campus SFOBs to the north, stopping at Somerville's Main Street along the way. The local #65/66 to Newark is barely a factor for Central Somerset residents or workers. The amenities for transit riders are scant. Shelters are absent and ticket sales limited to the Hotel Somerset on Main Street in Somerville, separated from the Somerville railroad station, leaving much of the bus and rail service uncoordinated. Only one route stops at both places.

The three existing railroad stations in Central Somerset are along NJ TRANSIT's Raritan Valley Line in Somerville, Raritan, and in Bridgewater, with about 550, 500, and 45 round-trip riders per weekday, respectively. Somerville and Raritan have 26 trains stopping on weekdays, but Bridgewater has somewhat fewer. Most riders arrive at the station by automobile. Parking at Raritan is scarce and those arriving after the morning peak period are often without a legal place

to leave their car. Raritan Valley riders do not have a one-seat direct ride to Manhattan because the line is not electrified, preventing trains from entering the City. Those destined for midtown Manhattan must transfer in Newark to reach Penn Station-New York, and those destined to Lower Manhattan must transfer to PATH.

Central Somerset is the sight of a convergence of major roads. In addition to Route 22 and I-287 and nearby I-78, US 202 and 206 pass through the area. Combined they create a jumble of highway connections and choices bewildering to the unfamiliar driver. The result is undoubtedly unnecessary circuitous routings, hesitant motorists, and more accidents. Arriving motorists are met not only with a profusion of confusion, but have little idea that they have arrived at a single place.

With this recitation of the transportation and related land use problems in Central Somerset behind us, we now turn to what could be done about.

Findings

1. Setting Priorities:

Focus Somerset County's development in Regional Center

Hierarchy within Regional Center

-- Somerville Center is the first among equals

--Raritan Center, Bridgewater Commons, Route 22, two Gateways equal
among seconds

2. Design Principles

The Center can have one identity, but is many places.

The Center is a place where people should work, live, play.

Transportation and land use must be dealt with together.

All modes must be more attractive and improve quality of life.

Connect natural resources in and around regional center.

Natural resources are a shaper of development

Exploit transit resources

Shape development using non-residential activities

Tailor modal hierarchy to locations

Transit should be planned as part of regional center, not as an afterthought

3. Transportation Principles

Separate local from through traffic

Make safer roads with fewer curb cuts and weaving

Promote intermodality

Promote access to transit

Recognize that walking is an integral part of transit

1. Standards

All centers should be walk-able

All neighborhoods should be walk-able

All schools should be walk-able

The Regional center should be bike-able

Promote access to greenways and greenlinks:

by walk

by bike

by auto trailhead

4. Transit Recommendations:

Relocate a new station at Route 202 with walk and auto access

Design rail stations as front doors, not back alleys

Consider supplementary service on the Raritan Valley line within the center

Start a bus circulator or shuttle connecting destinations

5. Road Recommendations

Study a Route 206 connector to Somerville through landfill site

Calm the streets and add the amenities

Provide gateway signing

Upgrade signing in Raritan

Reinforce connections between Bridgewater and Somerville

Undertake an access management study of offending portions of Route 22

Employ parking management strategies – park & rides and on-site shared parking

6. *Bikeway and Walkway Recommendations*

Complete the bikeway network and add complementary facilities

Complete the walkway network

7. *Land Use Recommendations*

The Landfill site is a great opportunity for extending the grid and connecting the stations and the greenway

Rethink the Landmark mall to make traditional-scale spaces

Participate in the “transit village program” of DOT

Participate in the “model stations program” of NJT

A Vision of What Could Be?

Is it possible to eliminate or at least to alleviate these problems? That remains to be seen. But what is not possible is to seek change without a prospect of what could be. If the local citizenry is to be convinced that remedies to these problems are worthwhile, then they have to see that it possible to have something different and better. Only then will they work to influence their elected and appointed officials to put the necessary changes in place.

What might that vision of Central Somerset be? It would be a place where the arrangement and design of land and the mixes of its uses would make transit, walking and biking easier and safer. Buildings would be clustered and located close to streets. Uses with a natural affinity for one another would be closer to each other. Offices would be a short walk to shops, and housing near community facilities. Housing choices would include medium density units, clustered in nodes of activity that included the services needed by residents, making transit more feasibility.

Transit service would be frequent enough to be attractive, even to those with automobiles. Routes would be added to stop at more places – shopping, community facilities, and schools, with connections to other regional centers such as Morristown and New Brunswick. “Reverse” commute services would be put in place. Bus routes would all converge at one location, making transferring a real possibility. Mid-day service connecting the Commons with Somerville would be instituted. Every bus stop would be well lighted with a shelter, an up-to-date schedule and route map. Bus fares would be paid electronically or with a proof-of-payment system, to eliminate inconvenient and costly ticket selling. Bike racks and storage facilities would be in place at all rail stations and bikes allowed on buses and trains. Walking paths to the stations would be clear, direct, and obvious. With better options to reach the railroad station, parking expansion would be unnecessary.

Sidewalks would be continuous, well lighted, provided with benches and connected to adjoining land uses. There would be a bike network throughout the area to serve both the recreational user and the traveler.

Central Somerset would be a place with less traffic congestion than today. Employers would offer its employees choices, including flexible work hours, telecommuting, transit checks, carpooling matching services, and cashing out of free parking to level today’s uneven playing field. Employers would run vans to meet each train arriving at the Somerville rail station. If employees must work late or leave early in a family emergency, employers would guarantee a ride home, eliminating a psychological (and real) barrier to using transit or pooling.

Developers, with the support of lending institutions, would provide fewer parking spaces at their sites, anticipating the success of alternatives to the single-occupant vehicle. Parking requirements would be keyed to the availability of transit; the more transit available, the less parking required. Shopping malls would offer their customers a discount if they arrived by transit.

Zoning policies and land use ordinances in the three communities would be established to support these land use policies. Transfer of development rights would be made easy to accomplish. Parking ratios would be set at a maximum rather than at a minimum and they would be tied to transit availability. Setback requirements would be reduced and clustering required. Walk-in retail would be zoned at ground floor levels in non-residential buildings. Height restrictions would be eased to promote modest increases in density, while still offering the suburb advantages of open space. Zoning would encourage clustering around the three rail stations, added walk-in riders to the rail network without the need for more parking. All new construction and expansion projects would be required to install sidewalks, bikeway links and transit amenities, such as bus pull-outs.

Central Somerset's highway would look better and operate safer and more efficiently. Low cost improvements such as median barriers, left turn lanes, jughandles and ramp metering would be installed. Through traffic would be separated from local traffic in boulevards. Highways would be designed to provide "optic" widths, to reduce the sense of a monolithic and all-consuming concrete juggernaut. Strip malls would be cleaned up to eliminate the almost continuous and unsafe access and egress points of today. Design standards for commercial signs would be enforced. Calming features, such as neck-downs and speed humps would slow residential street traffic. Truck traffic would be discouraged from roads where they were a visual blight or compromised safety. Cul-de-sac and mid-block cut-throughs would shorten walk and bike trips. Signs would help "foreign" drivers sort through the confusing web of highway "spaghetti" and direct motorists to key destinations in the area. Arrival in Central Somerset would be obvious to all.

In short, Central Somerset would be a place that was recognizable as one place, but with distinguishable, yet coordinated parts, a model for New Jersey, the most suburban state in America. New Jersey, in turn, would be a model for suburban America.

VII. THE POLICY WORKSHOP

Implementation Issues

The overall goal of the Somerville workshop is to recommend ways that this sprawling suburban center can be transformed into a place with a greater sense of place and the capacity for sustained growth. The designers and planners working on the project have developed strategies to:

- make the regional center more transit and pedestrian friendly and less congested,
- create mixed use centers within the center, and
- promote greater density in some areas and to less density in others.

If these strategies are to be implemented, new forms of inter-municipal cooperation and tax base sharing will almost certainly be required. New approaches to zoning and subdivision review may also be needed. And new state and county incentives may be required to encourage towns to participate in these mechanisms. Our job will be to develop proposals for these and other policy initiatives required to achieve the goals of the workshop.

Specific questions that the Policy Group should address include the following:

1. What is the most effective mechanism to achieve inter-municipal coordination?
2. How can shared services and concepts like regional tax base sharing be advanced? Further, how can a regional tax sharing system be designed to discourage the “race for rateables.”?
3. How can better state agency buy in and cooperation be achieved to advance the center’s agenda?
4. What types of model ordinances and other implementation tools should be made available to the towns? How can these ordinances be designed to promote mixed-use centers, and provide the flexibility required to induce developers to build them?
5. What state incentives will be needed to promote adoption of these innovations? Can the state plan and related incentives help steer growth into the regional center and discourage it in other locations? Can development consistent with the regional center strategy be pre-approved through state environmental and other reviews?

6. How can we get the marketplace to site development in locations and densities and mixes of activities that are desired? How can we discourage development in places where its is not needed?
7. How can the models proposed here be incorporated into the new State Plan and other state policy, tax, regulatory and incentive programs to promote similar outcomes in other suburban centers?

Finally, the success of all these initiatives will depend on our ability to explain them to local officials, residents, developers and other stakeholders in terms they can understand and that address their needs and concerns. The designers working on the project have prepared visual images of the desirable outcomes they are looking for. This policy report sets out an equally clear, well defined description of the planning, regulatory and tax changes needed to make these outcomes possible.

Findings

Building on a Foundation of Regional Cooperation and Economic Strength

The *Somerset Regional Center* has one of the strongest networks of government, business, and civic leadership of any similar suburban center in the country. For more than a decade, these groups have been collaborating to create regional institutions and strategies. This area is also extremely prosperous, with one of the highest per capita incomes in the nation and a significant number of Fortune 500 company headquarters.

It is recommended that this strong foundation be built upon, by utilizing existing institutions. This includes the non-profit organizations such as the Regional Center Partnership (RCP), Somerset Alliance for the Future (SAF), the Somerset County Chamber of Commerce, the Somerset County Coalition on Affordable Housing (SCCOAH), the Somerset County Coalition for Smart Growth, and County and municipal governments .

The Policy Focus Group has discussed providing a broad framework in which future development, redevelopment, open-space and infrastructure investments within the *Somerset Regional Center* should take place. This framework identifies three connected levels of issues,

with each contributing to the strategies and investments that would further the policy objectives. Taken together, these three levels of consideration, described as follows, provides a broad framework for the work of the Design Teams, Transportation and Policy Focus Groups and the success of the Regional Center Vision Initiative:

The Edge of a Metropolis

The Somerset County Regional Center is at the edge of the greater Metropolitan Area – RPA’s Tri-State Region centered on New York City and including northern New Jersey, the Hudson Valley, southwestern Connecticut and Long Island. Competition for major regional facilities in nearby communities outside of the Regional Center should be discouraged. The Regional Center is poised to accept facilities of regional significance, such as the new minor league ballpark and the regional Bridgewater Commons Mall.

The Center of a Region

This area is also the center of a smaller regional area comprised of Somerset County and surrounding communities. The Regional Center includes the county seat Somerville; the older developed Borough of Raritan and portions of rapidly developing Bridgewater Township. Quality of life is one of the Regional Center’s major assets. It offers historic, cultural and recreational activities, and a strong and growing employment base. The *Somerset Regional Center* includes diverse residential neighborhoods and a variety of housing types. The traditional neighborhoods surrounding the downtown areas of Raritan and Somerville benefit from the diversity, density, mix of uses and pedestrian and transit amenities these communities offer, and should be preserved and enhanced. The Regional Center has a wonderful open space network centered on the Raritan River and its tributaries. The river greenways, together with the Duke Estate (Somerset’s Central Park) which borders the Regional Center to the south provide recreational opportunities, unify the center and contribute to its sense of place. Local, state and federal open space acquisition programs have been utilized along the Raritan River corridor to enhance these connections. It is recommended that further enhancement of this greenway system be vigorously pursued.

The Connection of Three Municipalities

The three communities that comprise the Regional Center must coordinate their planning efforts. The unique character and identity of each of the communities should be strengthened, and at the same time, the identity of the Regional Center should be reinforced. To accomplish this, an appropriate economic function or role for each community must be identified within the regional center framework. A Public/Private Partnership for coordinating planning efforts– or at least a foundation for it – exists in the form of the newly incorporated non-profit organization – The Regional Center Partnership (RCP). The municipalities comprising Somerset Regional Center need technical assistance, resources and leadership to aide them in planning, identifying, and prioritizing development and redevelopment opportunities, infrastructure improvements, greenway enhancements, and neighborhood revitalization within the context of the larger whole. There is also the need for certain investments in infrastructure, human capital and redevelopment to be planned and prioritized at the regional center level.

The Policy Focus Group recognizes that the potential to enhance and define the identity and character of the Regional Center and its communities offered by the Focus Sites identified through the Regional Center Vision Initiative is significant. They are comprised primarily of brownfield and redevelopment sites for which complex financing, planning, engineering and remediation issues may be involved. It is vital that a coordinated approach amongst the municipalities comprising the Regional Center be taken when determining which sectors they will attract, how they will develop, and how they can be integrated into their communities and the regional center as a whole - and that there be regional center-wide commitment and support for these projects.

A PLAN FOR ACTION

Regional Center Strategic Plan

As a follow-up to the Regional Center Vision Initiative, a Regional Center Strategic Plan should be developed which will shape the next generation of development within the Regional Center. The plan should provide that growth takes place within the capacity of the center’s man-made and natural infrastructure, prescribe how growth can be sustained, the densities and mix of uses

that should occur, connectivity and linkage enhancements within the center and to the region as a whole, include a watershed planning dimension, and be responsive to demographic changes. The plan should be developed within the framework of the County as whole, and its relationship to the Tri-state Metropolitan Region. The Strategic Plan should be consistent with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan, and Plan Endorsement by the State Planning Commission should be pursued. It is important that the Regional Center Strategic Plan identify opportunities for immediate action in order to build support for this initiative.

The Strategic Plan should identify new investments in open space, infrastructure, recreational and cultural amenities from both public and private (corporate, philanthropic, individual, etc.) sources. The Plan should also identify development and redevelopment projects in all three communities that have implications for and can shape the success of the Regional Center and its three municipalities, and the region as whole. The Plan should include detailed development strategies and design standards for these principal sites. Development or redevelopment of these sites should be prioritized to reflect the goals outlined in the Vision Initiative Briefing Book.

The development of the plan should be an intensively public process. The master plans and zoning ordinances of the municipalities of Bridgewater, Raritan and Somerville should be made consistent with the Regional Center Strategic Plan. Likewise, the County Master Plan, and county policies and programs should be supportive.

It is important that the plan be both proactive and selective regarding redevelopment. The region's current economic strength provides us with a unique set of opportunities that allows us to be selective in the kinds of development we wish to attract to the Regional Center. However, unless there is continued public attention to these opportunities, market forces will prevail and these opportunities may not be maximized in favor of the interests of the host communities and the Regional Center.

Inter-local Agreements

It is recommended that the three municipalities comprising the Regional Center, and Somerset County enter into one or more inter-local agreements whereby proportional commitments are

made by each toward the development, promotion and implementation of the Regional Center Strategic Plan. In accordance with the agreements, each municipality would adopt consistent master plans, zoning ordinances and permitting processes. They would collectively agree to utilize one redevelopment entity that can provide the technical, leadership and financial resources necessary to develop and carry out the Regional Center Strategic Plan. They would agree to pursue financial support through Governor Whitman's recently adopted REAP and REDI Program which provides \$10 million for studying shared services, consolidation and regionalization initiatives and \$25 million for implementation at the local, county and school district levels. They would also agree to jointly participate in the development review and approval process for projects of regional significance and with impacts that extend beyond municipal borders.

Redevelopment Entity

The Policy Group does not support the creation of new layers of government or bureaucracy. However, it recognized a number of deficiencies in the current local land use planning, zoning, regulatory, review and permitting processes which would seriously hinder implementation of the Regional Center Strategic Plan. As a way of overcoming these deficiencies, it is recommended that the Regional Center Partnership (RCP) be utilized as the entity for developing, building support for and implementing the Regional Center Strategic Plan, based on the outcomes of the Regional Center Vision Initiative. RCP, which is comprised of leaders and decision-makers from County Government, Raritan, Bridgewater and Somerville, and private sector representatives, has successfully demonstrated its commitment to furthering the interests of the Regional Center, the communities of which it is comprised, and the county as a whole. The RCP is willing to act in this expanded capacity. The options as to how the RCP can be legally and administratively structured, and its capabilities expanded as such should be explored.

In this capacity, RCP would assume many of the responsibilities traditionally carried out by a redevelopment entity. It would strengthen relationships with various State agencies to maximize access to state programs and resources. RCP would facilitate the establishment of Special Improvement Districts where appropriate, as well as facilitate in the establishment of a TDD, currently proposed in the Regional Center Traffic Study undertaken by the County Planning

Board. RCP would facilitate the development and redevelopment of major sites by identifying and packaging financial resources, facilitating with site assembly, clean up, and infrastructure enhancements, including parking, roads and utility links. The RCP would facilitate municipal and developer access to state brownfield and redevelopment programs and resources, and provide the necessary coordination and technical assistance. The RCP would also aid in the establishment of an expedited permitting and approval process, as in Red Bank, acquire sites for redevelopment, and apply for pre-approval from state agencies as in Long Branch. RCP should also identify and encourage changes in state and local regulatory requirements and processes necessary for the successful implementation of the Regional Center Strategic Plan.

In the longer term, the County, RCP and the Regional Center communities it represents should engage other county municipalities in a dialogue about future cooperative land use planning efforts required to focus regional facilities and development projects with regional significance in the Regional Center.

Financing

At the completion of the Regional Center Strategic Plan, a series of phased investments in sites, facilities and management improvements that would benefit the entire Regional Center would be financed through SIDs, shared resources or other mechanisms. The Policy Group discussed ways that the local share of infrastructure costs could be addressed with regional center-wide resources.

It was estimated by one of the Policy Group participants that the total ratables for the three towns is close to \$6 billion, of which \$3 billion to \$4 billion are located in the Regional Center, and \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion are non-residential. These ratables provide an enormous foundation for a regional Special Improvement District or other regional management and financing district.

A further consideration for financing capital investments would be the establishment of a pilot program for a Tax Increment Financing district, which would dedicate the increment of new property tax revenues to finance infrastructure investments.

Building Community Support

The benefits of regional planning and cooperation must be explained to local officials in a compelling way. RCP should bring their ideas to the municipal officials by presenting at regularly scheduled municipal council and planning board meetings.

Developed through an intensive, inclusive public process, the Regional Center Strategic Plan will be advocated and communicated in various forms. Presentations of the plan could be made using videos, multi-media, and simulations. These presentations could be incorporated into a variety of forums, including curricula in regional public and private schools, public presentations, and other activities. The use of 3-D and GIS models was also discussed.

At least one short-term project with highly visible results, identified in the Regional Strategic Plan should be implemented successfully in each of the municipalities comprising the Somerset County Regional Center.