

Communities in Transition: **Anticipating Restoration of Passenger** **Rail Service on the West Trenton Line**

The **October 2005** New Jersey Mayors' Institute on Community Design

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Regional Plan Association

Regional Plan Association (RPA) is an independent, not-for-profit regional planning organization that improves the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region through research, planning, and advocacy. For more than 80 years, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region's continued growth. We anticipate the challenges the region will face in the years to come, and we mobilize the region's civic, business, and government sectors to take action.

The nation's most influential independent regional planning organization since 1922, RPA has a storied history but is more relevant than ever in the 21st Century. RPA's First Plan in 1929 provided the blueprint for the transportation and open space networks that we take for granted today. The Second Plan, completed in 1968, was instrumental in restoring our deteriorated mass transit system, preserving threatened natural resources and revitalizing our urban centers. Released in 1996, RPA's Third Regional Plan, "A Region at Risk," warned that new global trends had fundamentally altered New York's national and global position. The plan called for building a seamless 21st century mass transit system, creating a three-million acre Greensward network of protected natural resource systems, maintaining half the region's employment in urban centers, and assisting minority and immigrant communities to fully participate in the economic mainstream.

RPA's current work is aimed largely at implementing the ideas put forth in the Third Regional Plan, with efforts focused in five project areas: community design, open space, transportation, workforce and the economy, and housing.

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The New Jersey Mayor's Institute on

Community Design is a program organized by RPA with the assistance of the N.J. Office of Smart Growth (OSG) to promote and implement better design and planning in communities throughout New Jersey. Major funders include the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and the Bunbury Company. Additional support was received from the N.J. State League of Municipalities, and the N.J. Chapter of the American Planning Association. We also thank Merrill Lynch for providing financial assistance for the publication of this report.

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Special thanks go to Keynote Speaker Shelley Poticha, President of Reconnecting America, and the Resource Team members for the October 2005 Mayors' Institute: Vivian E. Baker, Assistant Director for Transit Friendly Land Use & Development Capital Planning, and Senior Director for Project Development Jack Kanarek, New Jersey Transit; Brent C. Barnes, AICP/PP, Director of Transportation Systems Planning, NJDOT; Alan R. Goodheart, ASLA; Mark W. Gordon, Gordon Consulting Services; Anton Nelessen, Principal, A. Nelessen Associates, Inc.; Carlos Rodrigues, AICP/PP, Director – Princeton Office, Looney Ricks Kiss Architects; and Darius Sollohub, Assistant Professor & Associate Director – School of Architecture, Masters of Infrastructure Planning Program at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

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PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Modeled on the national Mayors' Institute on City Design, the New Jersey Institute provides a multi-day retreat for six mayors and a resource team of design and planning professionals. The mayors present planning and design issues that each community is facing, and then participate in a wide-ranging discussion. While addressing the specific concerns raised by the mayors, the resource team members also describe in broader terms how they have approached similar problems. Using examples from other communities, the mayors and resource team members learn from each other.

The Mayors' Institute offers public officials the rare opportunity to discuss a planning issue facing their communities with a group of peers and some of the most respected designers and planners in the country. These institutes focus particular attention on the relationship between community planning and public health, and how better design and development can create healthy, livable communities. Experts in public health participate in the Institute discussions, providing presentations and analyses of how alternative development patterns impact the health of communities.

This N.J. Mayors' Institute program was held at Princeton University on October 20th – 23rd, 2005. Organized specifically for neighboring towns along the West Trenton Rail Corridor (also known as the Somerset-Mercer Extension), this special Mayors' Institute focused on opportunities for better land-use planning and design in anticipation of potential reactivation of passenger rail service on the West Trenton Line. This Institute focused particular attention on the challenges and opportunities such transit service poses for these municipalities, as well as how changes in zoning, planning and design guidelines can generate the ridership necessary to support mass transit, while preserving the unique character of each community. Prior to the Institute, RPA and the Municipal Land Use Center at the College of New Jersey held a meeting of mayors to review federal and state procedures for considering passenger rail reactivation, as well as prepare the mayors for planning and design considerations at the Institute.

The Mayors

To date, mayors from fifty municipalities throughout New Jersey have participated in the program. These communities include: Asbury Park, Buena Vista, Bordentown, Bridgewater, Burlington City, Collingswood, Commercial, Denville, East Orange, Eatontown, Ewing Township, Fair Lawn, Greenwich, Hackensack, Hillsborough, Hopewell Borough,

Hopewell Township (Mercer County), Highland Park, Hightstown, Hope, Lambertville, Lawrence Township, Lindenwold, Lumberton, Maplewood, Merchantville, Metuchen, Montgomery, Mount Holly, New Milford, Old Bridge, Oxford Township, Paterson, Plainfield, Pleasantville, Princeton Borough, Princeton Township, Prospect Park, Red Bank, River Vale, Rutherford, Somerville, South Amboy, South Bound Brook, Stafford, Tinton Falls, Vineland, Washington Township (Bergen County), West Amwell, and West Windsor.

June 2005 Mayoral Participants

Hon. Patricia Flannery, Bridgewater Township
Hon. Wendell Pribila, Ewing Township (represented by James McManimon, Township Administrator)
Hon. Paul Drake, Committeeman, Hillsborough Township
Hon. David R. Nettles, Hopewell Borough
Hon. Arlene Kemp, Hopewell Township
Hon. Louise Wilson, Montgomery Township

Resource Team Presentations

Each Institute includes presentations by members of the resource team. These presentations introduce the mayors to the concepts of community design, educate them in the tools employed by professional planners, and frame the subsequent discussion.

Anton "Tony" Nelessen leads the Princeton-based firm A. Nelessen Associates, which provides planning and architectural design services around the world. Tony's presentation acquainted the mayors with key concepts of community design, as well as the trend for communities around the world to plan for higher density development around transit facilities. In growing countries like China and Japan, high-quality, high-density residential development is being constructed at transit stops, enabling people of various ages and incomes to live, work and play in vibrant, attractive places. Tony cautioned the group that this global competition must be given serious attention and responded to in a positive fashion, or our economic future could be in jeopardy.

Alan Goodheart, a landscape architect based in Princeton, highlighted the importance of contextual design in the planning of public space. Goodheart encouraged officials to approach public space planning by enhancing the inherent qualities of a space rather than imposing designs that make the space "what it is not." Goodheart offered successful examples that embody this ideal such as Monterosso al Mare and the Piazza del Campo in Italy as well as his own project, Agabiti Plaza in Trenton, New

This report was written by Thomas G. Dallessio. Special thanks to RPA interns Brian Engelmann, Jacob Fry and Peter Lombardi for all of their contributions to this program.

Jersey. Modeled after traditional European squares or plazas – particularly Italian piazzas – Goodheart explained how Agabiti Plaza complemented this urban neighborhood by creating a paved pedestrian square punctuated by trees, shrubs and other natural elements, while referencing both Trenton’s rich manufacturing tradition through the use of metal and masonry, and the diverse immigrant history of the community with the “piazza” design.

Elise Bremer-Nei, of New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT), discussed NJDOT’s Transit Village Initiative. The program’s inception in 1999 marked a formal response to increasing traffic congestion, loss of open space due to sprawl, and the deterioration of older towns and cities. The goal of the Transit Village Initiative is to redevelop and revitalize communities around transit facilities to make them an appealing choice for people to live, work and play. Bremer-Nei spoke to the importance of taking steps through zoning to ensure that all new developments incorporate appropriate design of the pedestrian realm and that planners implement smarter form and orientation of new buildings as well as transit-supportive uses within the district and parking layout and design.

Mark Gordon, a planning, implementation and outreach consultant and former Senior Director of Real Estate for NJ Transit, offered successful case studies of Transit-Oriented Development in New Jersey and discussed the characteristics behind these projects that led to their success. Citing examples from Rutherford, East Orange and others, Gordon underscored transit-oriented development design ideals that include a higher density and multiple-use approach to building. Gordon also warned of the pitfalls of overambitious planning and partnering with the right developer, pointing to Elizabeth and South Amboy, where planned housing and mixed-use development around station sites have stalled. It was his belief, though, that transit-oriented development may play a significant role in providing healthy and sustainable growth options for the future.

Jeffrey Zupan, Senior Fellow for Transportation at Regional Plan Association, considered measures municipalities could take to realize passenger service along the West Trenton Corridor. Zupan highlighted the Federal Transit Administration’s New Starts program as a potential source of funding for the West Trenton Line. The FTA’s discretionary New Starts program is the Federal government’s primary financial resource for supporting locally planned, implemented and operated transit capital investments. Using a cost-to-benefit ratio analysis, Zupan noted that potential ridership would have to double from 2,840 to at least 5,000 one-way riders to qualify for federal funding consideration. Zupan suggested municipalities bolster West Trenton corridor and station land uses through design, zoning and coordination to achieve the ridership growth necessary to be competitive for New Starts funding.

Action steps that could be taken to be “highly recommended” for New Starts funding:

- Ensure station areas are transit-friendly and easily accessible for both pedestrians and commuters.
- Adopt and enforce growth management and land conservation policies.
- Ensure compatibility with existing and planned densities and trends.
- Create conceptual plans for the corridor and station areas, and garner support and adoption of the vision from transit agencies, the local private and public sectors, and local jurisdictions.
- Zone to support higher residential densities in transit station areas.
- Transform the area into a transit-friendly environment.

- Reduce parking allowances and take traffic mitigation steps.
- Ensure that there are regulatory / financial incentives and supportive investments in place.
- Establish “real projects” for housing and employment.
- Be sure that there is enough station-area land available for these purposes.
- Demonstrate the stability of the operating agency and its potential for long-term and stable financing to operate and maintain the project.

Keynote Addresses



The highlight of the Mayors’ Institute is the keynote address, delivered by a distinguished figure in the field of planning and design. Open to the public, the address draws a wide audience of elected officials, business leaders, civic activists,

experts and the media, in addition to the Institute’s participants and resource team. Its goal is to introduce the mayors to the best design practices in the world.

This Institute’s keynote address was delivered by Shelley Poticha, President and CEO of Reconnecting America, a national non-profit organization working to integrate transportation systems and the communities they serve. As an advocate for mixed-use developments and centers-based transit-oriented developments (TODs), Ms. Poticha has promoted the principles of New Urbanism: walkability; connectivity; quality architecture and urban design; increased density; smart transportation; and quality of life.

By way of example, Ms. Poticha recounted the week-long charrette for eleven towns in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where she and 150 New Urbanists from the United States and Europe were invited by Governor Haley Barbour to help the Gulf Coast think through how it should respond to Hurricane Katrina. Encouraging people who had their homes destroyed and were still trying to run their businesses to envision a new future for the Gulf Coast and think about the best practices in urbanism, sustainable development, architectural codes and permitting was a daunting task.

From this charrette came a new approach to development that reinforces the existing towns in that region by linking them via a multi-layered transit network. Since there is currently no transit in the

Mississippi Gulf Coast region, this development will be a whole new undertaking and a set of solutions that may actually mean something to people's lives.

At Reconnecting America and the Center for Transit-Oriented Development, Ms. Poticha partnered with two other groups: Strategic Economics and the Center for Neighborhood Technology, taking a market-based approach to promote transit-oriented development. A key question is: "How can we unlock this tremendous opportunity in the next twenty years – to rethink how we rebuild our regions and our towns and take advantage of a series of trends that are already underway?"

In looking around the country, a few meta-trends are gaining momentum, such as a building boom in various types of transit as evidenced by the line up of communities seeking funds from the federal government to help build transit systems. A network of 70 cities called the Streetcar Coalition is interested in building smaller-scale transit networks. In addition, there are a number of cities experiencing a renaissance, with significant development gravitating towards cities and inner suburbs. And some communities built in the 1940s that did not have downtowns are now harnessing economic trends to create new downtowns and focus growth in ways that make walkable communities a possibility.

Looking to the future, Ms. Poticha sees an aging population that is getting more diverse; however, much of the planning to date does not reflect that very well. The building blocks of this rethinking require decision makers to "get in the shoes" of the people that will be living and working in these places. What kinds of amenities and quality of life do they want? The development industry has recognized that higher returns and more value can be achieved if development promotes high-quality public spaces. As evidence, studies show higher returns for projects that pay attention to the public realm.

A lot of people talk about transit-oriented development, and in a book Ms. Poticha co-authored with Peter Calthorpe, *The Next American Metropolis*, is a set of design guidelines for transit-oriented development – a set of defined ingredients. As this movement grows, moving towards a more performance-based definition rather than a "cookie-cutter" recipe will better prepare us to deal with the multitude of different types of places that transit touches. We will be able to build regions that reflect the complexity of places that we want to have and end up with better outcomes.

In the book *The New Transit Town*, which looks at transit-oriented develop-

ment projects built over the past twenty years, the big findings were that while there have been some interesting projects, the movement has not succeeded in providing places that people want to walk in, places that are truly integrated, and that have uses that relate to each other. Much of the development around transit has been plopped down without a lot of thought about whether the result is a successful attractive place. Ms. Poticha's emerging definition is that transit-oriented development has to be, above all, a place where people want to be. It has to encourage activity and socializing – more opportunities for mobility, shopping and housing. It must also be recognized that TODs should be profitable. There's much evidence to demonstrate that a tremendous amount of value has been created by development that is organized around transit. Leaders should think about how to capture some of that value to achieve some of the goals that all want to see in a community.

Reconnecting America is collecting information on how to tap into that value to make wonderful public spaces, to build affordable housing, to open up green spaces and bike connections, and knit together the surrounding communities into these station areas. According to Ms. Poticha, the notion of transit-oriented development is stuck in small, isolated developments around the station; but a transit system is infrastructure that allows us to connect our regions. Therefore, leaders must explicitly recognize the importance of building corridors and networks, and plan for pedestrian circulation (e.g., 1/2 mile circles) that make sense in terms of how people actually get around – can they get to their jobs, daycare, shopping, the university, the hospital, etc.? How are these linkages made? When you look at the system as a whole, does it add up to connecting the dots between the places that people want to go to? That is one of the biggest challenges we all face. In Ms. Poticha's eyes, the transit world has done a fairly good job of communicating this concept, but the urban design world has a way to go toward achieving it on the ground.

Thus, the building block is creating walkable places around transit, with a range of activities, networks of streets rich and complex, all inside that walkable area but linked to the surrounding area with many different connections. An idealized world would see the construction of a series of walkable neighborhoods for supporting transit (because there is strong evidence that people living within walking distance of transit are five times as likely to use transit as people who live outside that circle). The park and ride model has achieved limited transit success, but there is evidence that ridership will increase if leaders focus on making the places around stations walkable, vital, complex, and dense.



Currently, there are few models of transit development that adequately relate to the present and future functions of towns. Many different kinds of places should touch the transit system, relating to the types of service that we have without being idealistic. As the cost of the transit service is lowered, we ought to be able to link many different kinds of places to various regional destinations. The challenge to this Mayor's Institute is to step back and look at that totality – does it add up to more than the sum of its parts?

Ms. Poticha found that in many places we have not determined the implementation mechanisms to allow these projects to be easily implemented. Parts of the transit-oriented development model need a lot of public attention – for example, wheelchair accessibility. As one gets further from the stations, there is a need for more examples of how to let the market shape development. It is important to communicate very clearly to the development community what leaders are trying to achieve and set rules or guidelines for how that gets executed.

Lastly, Ms. Poticha noted that too many projects have been conceived with the notion that by simply building transit, the market will materialize. Hidden in Plain Sight is a GIS database showing every fixed transit system in the U.S. as well as additional stations that the FTA predicted would be built in the next 15 years. The database contains approximately 4,000 stations. Using this information, Ms. Poticha and her staff drew a 1/2 mile circle around each station and collected demographic and land use information for each site. This rich database contains information from 40 regions around the country that helps us better understand how different types of transit networks attract real estate and how people respond to different transit networks. Instead of making global statements, decision makers can qualify them based on the type of system in place or under consideration.

Reconnecting America is also studying the question of who lives near transit. Nationally, in the 40 previously identified regions, about 12% of the population and 1% of the planned area is in compact development; that equals 6 million households. They are also looking at car ownership to answer whether people who live within walking distance of transit have fewer cars. The answer is “yes” — car ownership decreases as the transit system becomes more connected.

Shelly Poticha provided the Mayors, Resource Team, and the rest of the audience with principles, data and analysis, and examples that prove transit and land use can be designed to improve the quality of life of existing and potential residents, commuters and visitors. With new technology and information, decisions regarding transit-oriented development can produce tangible results.

The West Trenton Line: A Brief History



“Railroads played a vital role in the development of the United States during the nineteenth century, promoting agricultural expansion, industrial growth, and residential development.”¹ Indeed, the maps on the next page show how in 1887 private rail lines criss-crossed New Jersey, providing a wealth of options for residents and workers to travel. While the last decades of the twentieth century saw a decline of passenger rail lines, what could be in store for America in the 21st Century? Could increased demand for transit fuel growth in areas experiencing traffic gridlock? In order to better understand the potential for transit-oriented development

along the West Trenton Line, it is important to know how rail changed the landscape of this area of Central New Jersey, and contemplate how reactivating passenger service could promote smart growth and a higher quality of life.

During the late nineteenth century, significant railroad expansion took place, with powerful railroads absorbing smaller lines and competing intensely. In the 1880's, the rivalry between the Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia & Reading railroads magnified as both sought to extend service across New Jersey to New

York City. The Mercer and Somerset Railroad, which began operations in 1870 and was acquired a year later by the Pennsylvania Railroad, took passengers from Somerset Junction on the Delaware River through Hopewell Township and Somerset County to New Brunswick.² In 1876, a competing railroad began operations on what would become the West Trenton line, transporting commodities as well as passengers between Philadelphia and New York, but not before the construction of a rail crossing, or “frog,” over the Mercer and Somerset Railroad. This crossing led to a skirmish (the “Frog War”) – a stalling of rail service when one train was deliberately halted across the rail crossing, preventing the competing rail line from crossing – requiring the Governor to call in the militia. A judicial decision later that day ensured the Delaware and Bound Brook Railroad the right to install the frog. The completion of this line brought about the almost immediate demise of the Mercer and Somerset Railroad, whose parent company, the Pennsylvania Railroad, decided that its Northeast Corridor and Camden and Amboy lines were more than sufficient to handle transit demand.

At each stop along the Reading's Delaware and Bound Brook line, buildings were constructed to serve the railroad. With Hopewell Borough serving as the center of local activities along the Reading line, a Second-Empire-style brick passenger station (circa 1880) provided not only a formal place for passengers, but also an apartment for key rail workers. A similar station was built in Pennington, which also still stands today. These two train stations, along with a facility in Ewing (which hosts a planning firm) and two shuttered buildings in Montgomery, provide reminders of the importance of rail to these communities. For many of the towns along this line, the railroad provided the stimulus for economic growth.

Legend has it that passengers on the Reading line experienced first-class transit service, with continental breakfast served in the morning, and a bar car providing drinks for commuters returning from a long day's work on Wall Street. The Crusader locomotive, which traveled the West Trenton rails during the mid-20th Century, remains the envy of many a rail buff, and a miniature scale exhibit every Christmas at the Hopewell Museum provides a welcome reminder that transit service can enhance quality of life.

The railroads remained strong during the early twentieth century, but declined after the Second World War as competition from automobiles, trucks, and busses captured much of their traffic. Pennsylvania Railroad merged with the New York Central Railroad in 1969 to form Penn Central, but even this could not save the rail system. Both the Penn Central Railroad and the Reading Railroad were absorbed by the consolidated system of northeastern rail lines operated by Conrail. Shortly thereafter, Conrail turned over responsibility for passenger operations to New Jersey Transit, which stopped service on the West Trenton Line in 1982 due to declining ridership. With only freight service currently in use, what was once an asset that promoted growth in the communities from Ewing to Bridgewater Township became a reminder of lost equity. While the Ewing, Hopewell and Pennington Stations are experiencing a new life, the areas around these stations show evidence

¹ Hopewell: A Historical Geography, Richard W. Hunter and Richard L. Porter, 1990, p. 92 Hopewell Valley Heritage; Alice Blackwell Lewis, 1973, p.18.

² Hopewell Valley Heritage; Alice Blackwell Lewis, 1973, p.18.



Mercer and Somerset Counties: Rail in 1887

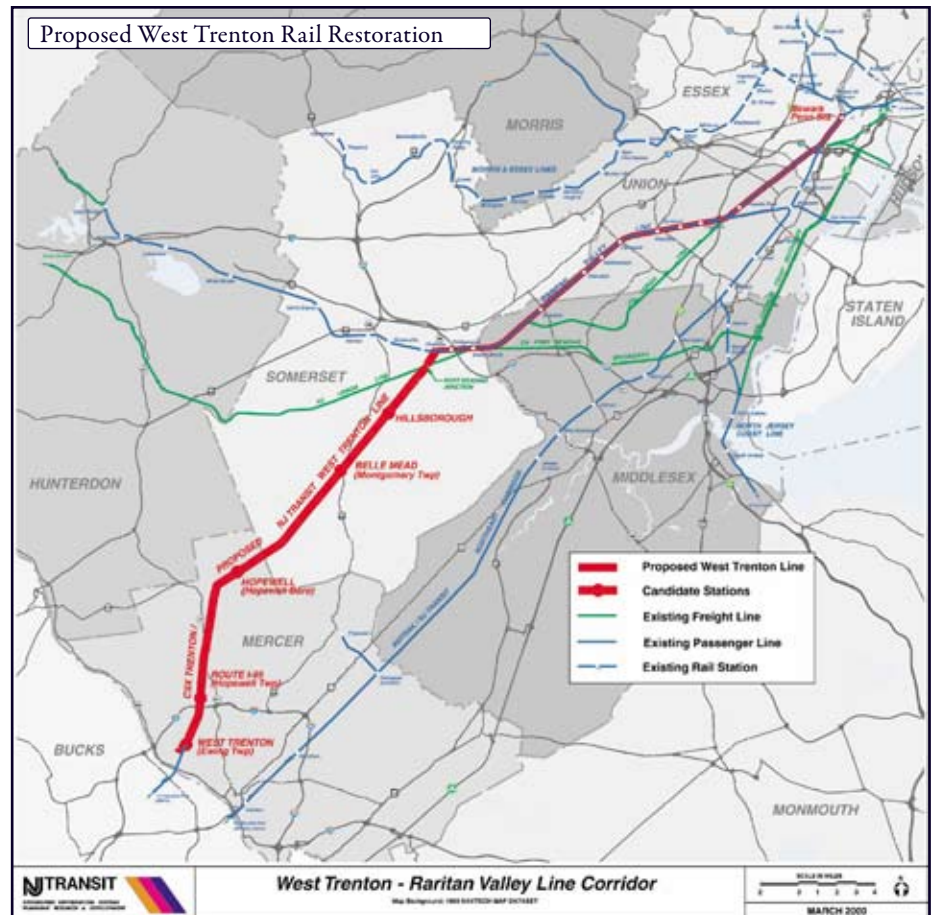
of decline, lacking maintenance and functional use. These sites have become ghosts of former glory days.

With the highly anticipated construction of the Trans-Hudson Express Tunnel (THE Tunnel), which will enable more trains to travel from New Jersey to New York City, there will be new potential to reactivate or establish new rail lines in Northern and Central New Jersey. The West Trenton line is one of a number of options currently under review. Reestablishing service on the West Trenton line will require federal and State funding, along with a local commitment to promote compatible land uses to leverage these highly scarce resources.

This Mayors' Institute begins with the premise that rail service is desirable; yet it requires a change in land use patterns to ensure adequate ridership. Time will tell whether federal, state and local leadership, and intermunicipal cooperation will result in new glory days for the West Trenton Line. The one certainty is that in the absence of proactive leadership on all levels of government and with the private sector, passenger rail service on this line will remain a remnant of history.

Background New Jersey Transit is currently investigating whether to restore commuter rail service for 27 miles on the West Trenton Line between the existing Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) West Trenton Station in Ewing, Mercer County, and Bridgewater Station in Bridgewater, Somerset County, where the line would connect with the existing Raritan Valley Line providing service into Newark Penn Station.

Project Scope The proposed project would include re-installation of previously removed track and installation of 12.8 miles of new track within the existing rail right of way, signal improvements, restoration of the at-grade crossing of the Lehigh Line at Port Reading Junction, four new



stations and parking facilities, a train storage yard, and acquisition of additional rail rolling stock.

Project Cost Approximately \$197 million (2004 estimate). Construction of the project is not funded.

Current Status Public open-house information sessions were held in Mercer and Somerset counties in December 2004, to present project status and receive community feedback. The draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was submitted to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for review in the spring of 2005.

Next Milestone Subsequent to receipt of FTA comments, and following the revision of the draft EA as appropriate based on the FTA comments, the next milestone will be the submittal of the final EA, and a request to the FTA for issuance of the finding of no significant impact (FONSI).

Benefits Construction of the project would provide a new transit option in central New Jersey.

CASE STUDIES:

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The six case studies are presented as if the reader were a passenger on the West Trenton line, traveling north from the West Trenton Station in Ewing Township, through stops in Hopewell Township, Hopewell Borough, Belle Mead in Montgomery Township, Hillsborough Township and finally to Bridgewater Township, where the line connects with the Raritan Valley Line to Newark and eventually New York City. In each of the case studies, mayors were challenged to think beyond the confines of his or her own area – beyond the boundaries of the individual development sites to the larger neighborhood or community-planning framework. The recommendations seek to implement the vision of a comprehensive approach to creating healthier, more active communities and a higher quality of life.

Each case study began with the train stop proposed in the West Trenton Rail Line Environmental Assessment, which is an analysis of the potential positive or negative impacts of the construction and operation of the proposed passenger service. The EA complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which establishes specific requirements for projects that might be implemented using federal funding. According to NJ Transit, an important goal of the environmental review process is to provide a forum for the public to learn about, and react to, a proposed project. In the course of the Institute, each mayor considered the possibility of moving the train station to meet community goals, as well as rethinking zoning and development proposals for sites adjacent to the rail line. Recognizing that moving the site of the train station could require additional environmental review, all participants were careful to avoid unnecessary delays.

Ewing Township The West Trenton stop, already home to SEPTA service to Philadelphia, provides the opportunity to reuse parking lots, redesign linkages between residential and office developments, and consider the potential redevelopment of brownfields.

Hopewell Township Just off Interstate 95, the potential exists to serve major corporate facilities, as well as attract automobiles that might otherwise clog major highways. In addition, enhanced service could create a market for the reverse commute, providing greater efficiency in the system.

Hopewell Borough Preserving the historic character of this town, promoting pedestrian and bicycle movement, and providing transit service while avoiding large parking lots is the challenge.

Montgomery Township Redesigning the Belle Mead stop into a transit village to take advantage of market forces and a Transfer of Development Rights program without significantly increasing congestion.

Hillsborough Township Creating the potential for a transit village that supports the reactivation of the West Trenton Line requires considering future pedestrian and bicycle connections between the proposed station and nearby neighborhoods, businesses, and public facilities.

Bridgewater Township This case study explored options for land use and infrastructure changes around the station area and suggested creating a “Special Events” stop that builds on the nascent retail/entertainment/health district through appropriate land uses and infrastructure investments that encourage transit use.

Major Issues Raised at the Institute

- Proposed Route 206 by-pass in Montgomery Township, near Belle Mead train station.
- Coordination of concurrent development plans.
- Life-span of specific types of development models.
- Corporate and residential community buy-in.
- Density.
- Property taxes.

Next Steps

- Establish an inter-municipal compact among the towns along the West Trenton Line to develop and implement land use policies and practices supportive of mass transit.
- Educate officials on the use of Transfer of Development Rights to advance development projects and protect environmentally sensitive lands in the region.
- Educate officials on the benefits of residential development, and provide drawings and data to encourage mixed-use development in downtowns and at rail stops.

CASE STUDIES

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS





EWING TOWNSHIP

Mayor Wendell Pribila
Mercer County

1

Square Miles
Population

15.6
35,707

KEY ISSUES

- Promote residential development at the transit stop.
- Improve sidewalks and bicycle lanes to encourage alternative modes of travel from adjacent neighborhoods to the station.
- Link any new development at the GM or Navy sites to the station.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Create opportunities for transit-oriented development at or near the West Trenton Station by encouraging increased residential and commercial density, creating pedestrian and bicycle linkages with existing neighborhoods and businesses, and providing adequate parking for both commuters and residents.

BACKGROUND As a major hub for transportation, employment, and education in Mercer County, Ewing Township is a mature suburban community of 36,000 residents with a diverse economy and a wide assortment of residential environments. Established in 1834, the township transitioned from a farming center to a residential and industrial suburb of Trenton in the early 20th century. For a time, Ewing was a center for heavy industry, with the Trenton-Mercer Airport and major rail connections attracting plants for General Motors and the Naval Air Warfare Center.

Although the heavy industrial presence has declined in recent years, the township has witnessed growth in its light industrial and financial services sectors. Also important to Ewing's economy are several state institutions. Residential areas remain the dominant land use feature of the township, and range from recently-built subdivisions to pre-Depression urban neighborhoods.

One of Ewing's older neighborhoods is West Trenton, an original transit village that developed around West Trenton Station, which currently offers SEPTA rail service to Philadelphia. Also near West Trenton Station are the former sites of the General Motors plant and the Naval Air Warfare Center. In collaboration with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Ewing is in the midst of studying opportunities for transit-oriented development around West Trenton Station, particularly at the sprawling GM site.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The current SEPTA service at West Trenton Station and the presence of large developable sites nearby offer significant opportunities for transit-oriented development in Ewing. The creation of a 'downtown' for the township, a desire aired by residents and township officials, is a particularly appropriate vision for the station area. Key issues, therefore, are the location of the downtown, the arrangement of an expanded West Trenton Station to accommodate NJ Transit, and the establishment of connections between the station and adjacent areas of old and new development.

As the largest development-ready site near the West Trenton Station, the former GM site is an obvious place to focus new development and establish a true town center for Ewing. Designing an environment that is well-populated, walkable, and encourages

pedestrian activity—laid out, ideally, on a traditional street grid—is the key to a successful downtown that supports public transit and is attractive for commercial and residential users. Ground-floor commercial activity, upper-floor residential units, and amenity-filled public spaces and sidewalks can create the desired 'downtown' atmosphere to attract users and provide the density necessary to sustain retail activity. The residential development must be of a sufficient density to meet transit services and retail needs. Development on the GM site would be supplemented by mixed-use development on the Naval site and infill development in underutilized areas, such as parts of the West Trenton neighborhood immediately adjacent to the train station.

To ensure that people can easily access the new downtown from the train station and surrounding neighborhoods, care must be taken to provide attractive pedestrian connections. As the GM site is developed, it would make sense to consider moving the West Trenton Station northward to be closer to the new downtown. This might be accomplished by having NJ Transit and SEPTA share a single station or, more likely, by having two back-to-back stations service SEPTA's electric trains and NJ Transit's diesel trains.

In the short term, without NJ Transit rail service, the station will remain where it is presently, a quarter-mile south of the GM site. An attractive path for bicycles and pedestrians should be established to mark a clear connection between the station and the new downtown. A recent residential development to the east of the station is currently cut-off from the station and the GM site, and the rail line serves as a barrier between the historic West Trenton neighborhood and the GM site. These connections must be made. A shuttle or jitney service between the station and the GM site should also be established, and potentially serve adjacent neighborhoods and major area employers and the Trenton Train Station for connections to Northern New Jersey, New York, Southwestern New Jersey, and Philadelphia.

Because proper connections between the various components of the West Trenton Station area are crucial for suitable access to transit, it is important to consider the infrastructure needs of the entire area, including the nearby airport. An infrastructure development and financing plan should be developed for the station, streets, and pathways, pinpointing sources of both public and private financing. Considering the added value that improvements to transit service lend to private development, developers of the new downtown should be required to contribute funds toward station enhancements.



SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop linkages from the station area to existing resources including new residential development within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of the station. Reinforce connections to Grand Avenue and make pedestrian improvements along it.

Promote compact mixed-use infill development within the existing $\frac{1}{4}$ mile station area and immediately around the existing SEPTA station.



Create a robust connection from the existing SEPTA station area to the GM site, a major redevelopment opportunity.

Consider compact redevelopment on that portion of the Naval Air Warfare Center site that is within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of the station.



HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP

Mayor Arlene Kemp
Mercer County

Square Miles 58.66
Population 17,500

2

KEY ISSUES

- Identify opportunities for higher density development at the train stop through the Transfer of Development Rights from other portions of the Township.
- Create pedestrian and bicycle linkages between the stop and corporate and residential development, public health and recreational uses, and existing neighborhoods.
- Re-imagine the corporate campus of the 21st century to include mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly development.
- Consider opportunities for shared parking by commuters, corporate offices, and future residents.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Envision opportunities for transit-oriented development at the proposed Hopewell Township train stop by considering higher-density, mixed-use development and redevelopment that respects neighboring communities, and makes the most of the station's proximity to existing and planned corporate and public facilities.

BACKGROUND Covering over 60 square miles of northwestern Mercer County, Hopewell Township is a large and predominately rural community. As the place where Washington landed his troops after crossing the Delaware on Christmas night in 1776, the township played an important role in the American Revolution. Washington-Crossing State Park on the township's western edge commemorates the event and serves as Hopewell's largest park.

For nearly two centuries, Hopewell Township was sparsely populated and dominated by farms and forests. Sizable residential development was largely confined to the township's eastern half, particularly in proximity to the boroughs of Hopewell and Pennington—both of which are surrounded by the township—and along the West Trenton rail corridor. In recent years, residential development has sprouted near I-95 at the township's southernmost end, and has continued to spill over from the two interior boroughs. The township's population grew by nearly 40 percent during the 1990s and in 2004 numbered 17,500.

In addition to new residential development near I-95, significant new commercial developments have quickly turned Hopewell Township into a major employment center for the Trenton region. The expansive new campus for Merrill Lynch on Scotch Road at I-95 is by-far the largest such development, employing thousands of workers. The Merrill Lynch campus is located adjacent to the West Trenton Line and next to the proposed location of Hopewell Township's station, posing a tremendous opportunity for reverse-commuting along the rail line. An abundance of land in the station-area has the potential to accommodate further commercial or even residential development. General Development Plan (GDP) approvals for the site as well as corporate and local concerns with the proposed stop have constrained, for now, consideration of this area for transit-oriented development.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

At first glance, the proposed station in Hopewell Township appears to be an ideal location for a train stop and transit-oriented development. The thousands of workers who occupy the new Merrill Lynch corporate campus as well as employees in existing and proposed nearby corporate facilities (with tens of thousands of square feet of development already approved) provide a considerable market for potential residential and commercial uses connecting the campus and the station.

Civic and public health uses could also provide this area with needed amenities compatible with transit use. Before the area's potential for transit-oriented development can be considered, however, key questions must be answered regarding the function of the proposed station and how the Township envisions its future.

For the station itself, it must be decided how the station can meet the ridership goals of NJ Transit and the needs of area residents. Should the station serve primarily as a park-and-ride station where Trenton-area commuters catch a northbound train to get to work? If so, stronger ties should be made between the station and I-95, such as the construction of a road to connect the station to the highway's Scotch Road exit. If not a park-and-ride station, should it serve as a destination station for workers commuting to Merrill Lynch and other area businesses, thus providing the West Trenton Line with reverse commuters? Or should the overriding purpose of the station be the creation of a new town center around which to expand the Township's residential, commercial and community facility options while providing the rail line with potential riders and serving the needs of adjacent developments? One other idea brought to the table was the possibility of locating the proposed station closer to the existing Borough of Pennington or to the Mercer-Trenton Airport, either of which will require considerable planning and coordination with adjacent towns, businesses and residents.

Ideally, the proposed station in Hopewell Township will effectively serve many of these functions. Interests in the Township, however, must come to a consensus on these questions regarding the function of the station before a true vision of the station can be established. A key to answering these questions is for the Township to determine its future direction. As it accommodates new development, does it want to focus that development around the proposed station in order to maintain the rural character of the rest of the Township—possibly by transferring development rights from congested or environmentally-sensitive areas—or does it want new development to spread itself out? The new station could play an important role in a comprehensive vision for the Township's future, but the Township must establish that vision for the future before plans can be made for the station.



SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS



Develop connections from a future station area to the existing high concentration of Merrill Lynch office buildings.

Reserve portions of the large, yet-to-be-developed landscape for open space amenities and greenways.

Create a corridor of development from Scotch Road to a future station area.



HOPEWELL BOROUGH

Mayor David Nettles
Mercer County

Square Miles .69
Population 2,035

3

KEY ISSUES

- Increase densities near the train station, possibly by transferring development rights from nearby open land.
- Promote redevelopment consistent with the Borough's historic character.
- Identify ways to create safe pedestrian and bicycle connections between the train station, Broad Street, and adjacent neighborhoods.
- Develop a well-coordinated parking plan that serves the needs of commuters while promoting commercial activity and smoother circulation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Establish transit-oriented development opportunities to promote the restoration of passenger train service and a stop in Hopewell Borough that builds on the historic strengths of the town by catering to the pedestrian's needs, including mixed-use development, slower car traffic, pleasing streetscapes, safe sidewalks and crosswalks, and linkages to community facilities and retail establishments.

BACKGROUND At less than a square mile, Hopewell Borough is a small municipality with a long history. Surrounded by Hopewell Township, the Borough was officially incorporated in 1891, but was originally settled over 300 years ago. Hopewell Borough began as a small farming village in the heart of Hopewell Valley, and has, over the years, become a tight-knit community where people live, work, and raise families.

While much of the region has grown rapidly in recent decades, the Borough has managed to maintain a stable population for almost half a century, allowing it to preserve its unique character. With slightly over 2,000 people and 900 homes, Hopewell hosts a mixture of residential, retail, and commercial uses. It is not uncommon to find multi-family housing, businesses, and public buildings next to single-family homes. Open space and farmland surround the Borough, with local officials working for over a decade to establish a greenbelt to preserve land and protect the community's character.

Designated as the first "village center" in the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan, much of the Borough is identified in its own Master Plan as an historic district. Victorian homes sit side-by-side more recent construction, all along a network of interconnected and tree-lined streets. To recognize and sustain this ambiance, Hopewell was recently designated as a Tree City USA. Broad Street - County Road 518 and the Borough's main thoroughfare - lives up to its name, having once served as the bed for a trolley system. To preserve and share its history, Hopewell has a community museum and a restored train station on the state and national historic registers. This Station served rail commuters to New York City and Philadelphia for almost a century, until the service was discontinued in 1983.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

As it currently exists, Hopewell Borough embodies many of the characteristics of transit-oriented development. Walkable streets and mixed land uses make the Borough a model that many communities and developers are attempting to reproduce today. Therefore, plans for the restoration of train service and related development in the Borough should do everything possible to maintain and strengthen Hopewell's present character. The restoration of passenger service to Hopewell's historic train station,

rather than the establishment of a new station nearby, should be the key component of any planning effort. Returning the historic station to service would make a strong statement about Hopewell being both an historic and a functional community in the 21st century.

An important aspect of preserving the character of the station and its surroundings is sensitive planning for parking. As much as possible, parking associated with the new rail service should be accommodated through on-street spaces—land near the station is too valuable to waste for a parking lot. Diagonal on-street parking for visitors and commuters can be established on Broad Street and the nearby vacant lot that has been discussed as the site of a new train station. By requiring railroad users to park on the street, the Borough will encourage pedestrian activity that can add to the vitality of its retail establishments. It will also encourage Borough residents to walk to the station, and therefore highlight Hopewell's status as a walkable and active community.

Careful planning for parking should be accompanied by careful planning for underutilized properties near the historic train station, especially the properties of former lumber businesses that have been eyed for redevelopment. The Borough should develop specific area plans for these properties, drawing on the input of Borough residents. Ideally, any redevelopment near the station should reflect the architectural quality and mixed land use patterns of the Borough. New residential units can provide commuters for the railroad, while commercial spaces can serve the needs of passengers and residents and strengthen Hopewell Borough's status as a destination for those in other communities along the West Trenton Line. Critical mass in the station area can also be reached by developing housing on the vacant site to the east of the historic station, rather than the new station parking lot that is currently planned for the site. The Borough should also consider opportunities to improve the land to the north of the station, including recreational, civic and other uses compatible with the character of this historic village.



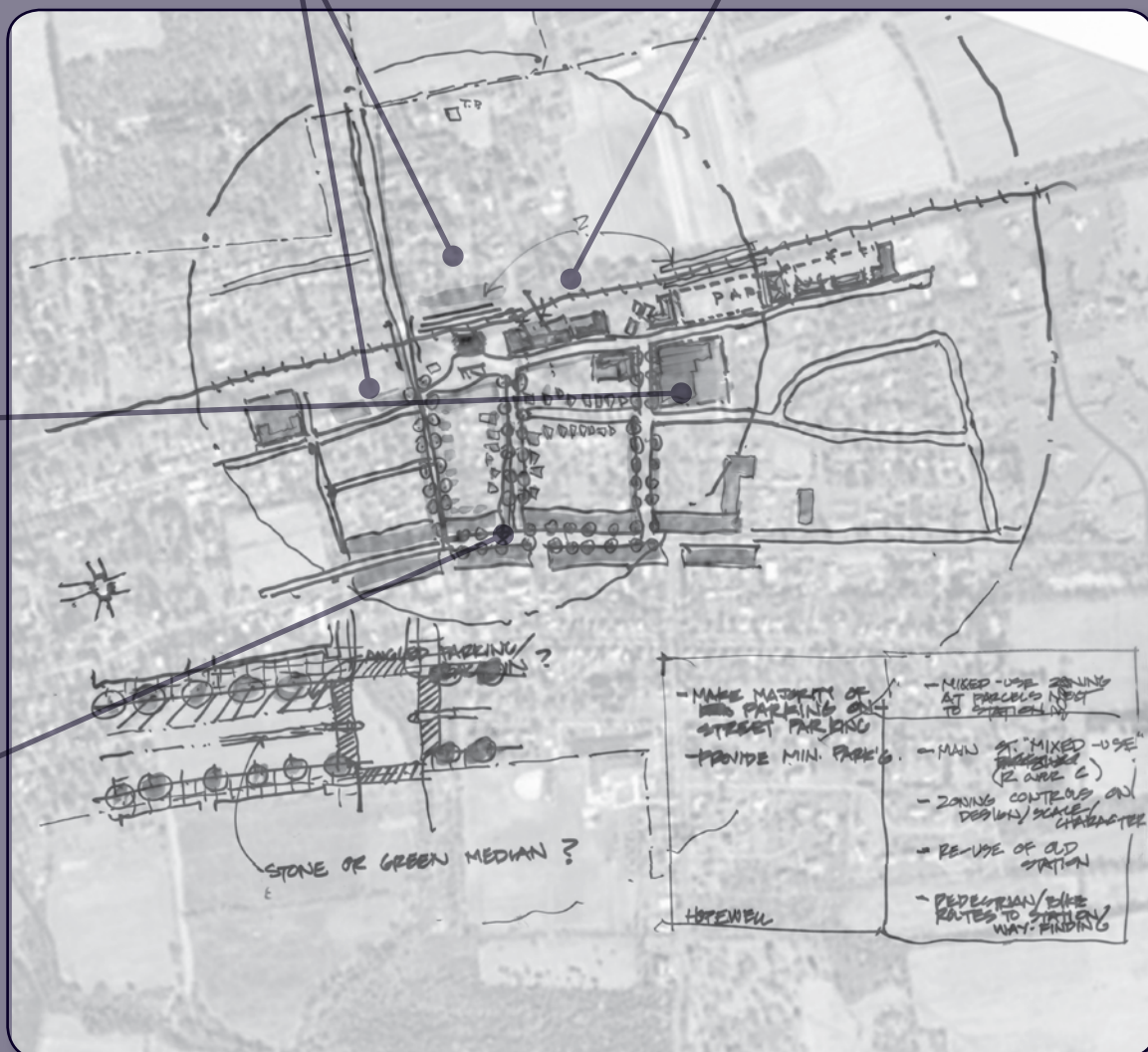
SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Build neighborhood-scale infill housing on underutilized sites west and south of the station.

Create a fine-grained parking strategy that avoids large surface lots and instead uses on-street parking in scale with the Borough.

Develop zoning and design guidelines for compact mixed-use development on the several redevelopment opportunities, like the lumber yard, that are proximate to the station.

Provide pedestrian improvements throughout the larger station area.





MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP

Mayor Louise Wilson
Somerset County

Square Miles 32.62
Population 17,481

4

KEY ISSUES

- Identify opportunities for development or redevelopment by transferring development rights from the Sourland Mountain region to the proposed Belle Mead stop.
- Devise pedestrian and bicycle connections to the new transit stop that enhance existing neighborhoods.
- Ensure that Route 206 contributes to the success of the rail stop and transit village, in addition to providing sufficient capacity for through-traffic.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Create a vision for a new transit village at the proposed Belle Mead stop of the West Trenton Line by encouraging a mixture of residential, commercial and retail development, adequate commuter parking, and a pedestrian experience that welcomes potential transit users.

BACKGROUND Fifteen years ago, Montgomery Township was primarily an historic agrarian community dotted with Revolutionary-era homes, farms, and stone bridges. Tucked away at the southern tip of Somerset County, fewer than 10,000 people called the predominately rural township home. Today, many of those attributes still apply: it is still an historic place with a decidedly rural flavor. However, Montgomery is no longer a secret. After growing by a blistering 86 percent during the 1990s and adding another 25 percent during the first half of the present decade, the township is now home to nearly 23,000 residents.

Much of the township's new residential development has occurred in proximity to Route 206, which bisects Montgomery's eastern half. Corporate office and light industrial development has also risen along that corridor in recent years, some of it related to the township's proximity to Princeton. With this growth, traffic along Route 206, County Routes 518 and 601, and other local roads has increased significantly. NJDOT's plans to improve these conditions through a new Route 206 by-pass have raised concerns among local officials and residents.

Despite the township's rapid growth, farmland is still a significant part of the land-use mix, and much of Montgomery's western half—particularly around the Sourland Mountains—remains sparsely populated. To preserve the township's agricultural and environmental resources, steps are being taken to protect such land from future development. To date, the township has nearly 8,000 acres of existing or proposed open space, representing 40 percent of its land area. Among its efforts to preserve open space, one of the most ambitious is the township's status as a demonstration community for the state's Transfer of Development Rights program. Montgomery hopes to send credits from the Sourland Mountains to bolster commercial development around the proposed rail station in the township's historic Belle Mead section. Although considerable residential developments have taken place in Belle Mead recently, numerous opportunities exist for development in the proposed station area. Upgrades to Route 206 in Belle Mead are planned for the near future.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Having already pursued a variety of growth management initiatives, from open space preservation to transferring development rights, transit-oriented development is a natural extension of the Township's existing land-use policies. Through its participation

in the 2003 New Jersey Mayors' Institute, and with help from RPA, Somerset County, North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority and the N.J. Office of Smart Growth, Montgomery has looked at various options for organizing growth near its proposed West Trenton Line station, located south of the Route 206 overpass and the historic Belle Mead Station.

Regardless of the future status of service on the West Trenton Line, mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly development in Belle Mead is worth pursuing, both as a means of focusing future growth and creating a distinctive 'place' to enhance the character of new development and the Township's quality of life. Ideally, development should be clustered on the east side of the railroad tracks where land exists for large-scale development, while the rural character on the west side of the tracks should be preserved to provide an appropriate interface between the station area, the town's recreational fields, and the historic Belle Mead hamlet.

With the likely scenario that initial development might consist of big-box retail uses and horizontal—as opposed to vertical—mixing of uses, the Township should carefully consider the layout of buildings and parking lots so as to facilitate future infill development as the market demand calls for more intense use of the land. To ensure that commuter parking does not dominate the station area or overwhelm design considerations, the Township and NJ Transit should develop shared parking agreements with new developers to maximize the usage—and minimize the footprint—of land devoted to parking. If the intensity of development and the volume of commuters are high enough to warrant structured parking, a public-private venture to develop that structure should be considered. Although parking is important, it should never be allowed to consume the precious land adjacent to the train station. To establish that area as the core of the transit village, and set the tone for future development, the Township may wish to pursue a 'cultural district' concept immediately surrounding the station.

Perhaps the single biggest issue at the proposed Belle Mead station is the state's proposed Route 206 by-pass project. With or without a by-pass, NJDOT should consider building two new bridges over the West Trenton tracks: one to replace the existing Route 206 bridge and handle the highway's through-traffic, and another—to the south of the first bridge—to connect residents of Belle Mead and other neighborhoods directly to the new transit village, thus reducing congestion on the highway bridge. If the by-pass is not built, the right-of-way, already set aside, should become a pedestrian and bicycle greenway to connect the station with other parts of the Township.



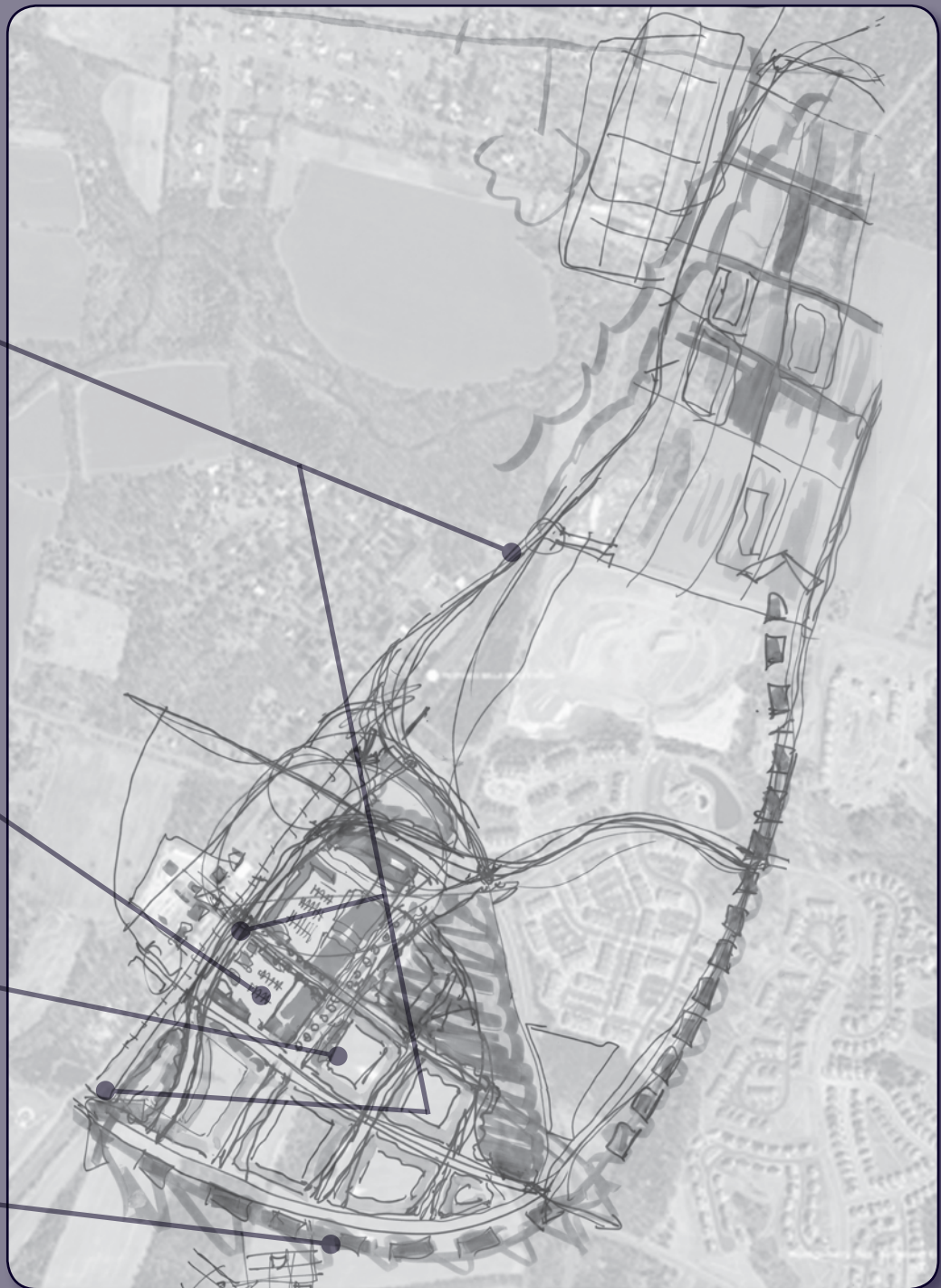
SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Create one or more pedestrian connections across the tracks to link to the recreation area and old Belle Mead. One of these connections would be built in conjunction with the new station.

Zoning and design guidelines should create the planning framework for a new compact, mixed-use station area. Consider mapping a “cultural district” here.

Plot a street and block pattern that insures connectivity and anticipates more intensive development over time.

Create new greenway connections, perhaps using the Route 206 By-Pass right-of-way.





HILLSBOROUGH TOWNSHIP

Township Committeeman Paul Drake
Somerset County

Square Miles 54.79
Population 36,634

5

KEY ISSUES

- Increase residential densities and mixed-use development opportunities at the station, possibly by transferring development rights from other parts of the Township or County.
- Design parking to meet commuter and neighborhood needs.
- Design a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly station area.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Create the potential for a transit village that supports the reactivation of the West Trenton Line. Consider future pedestrian and bicycle connections between the proposed station and nearby neighborhoods, businesses, and public facilities.

BACKGROUND Covering fifty-five square miles of southwestern Somerset County, Hillsborough Township is the county's largest municipality (in terms of land area), and possesses a wide variety of landscapes. The township's eastern half is dominated by a mixture of residential subdivisions and farms, with major commercial activities concentrated near the crossing of Route 206 and Amwell Road. Providing a very rustic contrast are the Sourland Mountains in the township's western half and the farms that dominate their foothills.

Though Hillsborough has retained much of the rural character that has defined it since its founding in 1771, it has grown rapidly in recent decades. During the 1990s, the township's 27 percent growth rate propelled its population to almost 37,000 residents, most of whom are located to the east of the Sourlands. Though some older neighborhoods exist next to the boroughs of Manville and Millstone and in the historic villages of Flagtown and South Branch, much of Hillsborough's population inhabits subdivisions and planned-unit developments dating from the 1960s-onward.

Seeking to protect the township's considerable inventory of undeveloped land from haphazard growth, Hillsborough's Master Plan encourages the transfer of growth from farms and open areas to defined centers and corridors through the Transfer of Development Rights. The township's Town Center & Main Street Plan pinpoints the area surrounding the intersection of Route 206 and Amwell Road as the key receiver of future growth in order to establish a Main Street atmosphere on what is currently Route 206 and cultivate a transit village near the proposed location of Hillsborough's West Trenton Line station. In addition to commuter rail service, NJDOT has proposed a Route 206 by-pass, to steer through-traffic away from the current Route 206, enabling it to become a main street.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

With its plans to create a Main Street atmosphere along the present Route 206, Hillsborough has already taken strong steps toward managing growth in a way that adds value to the Township and establishes a strong sense of place. Supplementing those plans with rail service and transit-sensitive planning will reinforce those efforts by adding to the Township's base of potential users of residential and commercial space. That being said, there are critical design issues regarding the proper meshing of the Main Street and transit station development areas that could maximize

or limit the success of future development.

The most critical design issue facing the station area is the proposed Route 206 by-pass, which currently calls for a limited-access roadway to pass between the current Route 206 and the West Trenton Line. As currently planned, the by-pass, and its interchange at Amwell Road, would form a significant barrier between the future Main Street (on the current Route 206) and the proposed train station, thereby limiting the potential for interaction between these two critical development nodes. For that reason, it is vital that the design of the by-pass, if built, balances the demands of a high-capacity highway with the need to form strong physical and psychological connections between the areas to the east and west. Possible solutions include an at-grade, boulevard-style intersection with Amwell Road; one-way streets forming a pear-shaped intersection, with minor streets and development in the middle of a very wide median; or depressing the by-pass and establishing the Amwell Road overpass as an attractive east-west link, while creating a park-like atmosphere alongside the by-pass. Whatever the solution, the Township should demand that DOT adhere to its own context-sensitive design principles.

After ensuring high-quality pedestrian and bicycle connections across the by-pass, the Township must develop a strategy for prioritizing development between Main Street and the train station. Plans for the Main Street redevelopment area anticipate that support for the higher-density commercial development on the current Route 206 will come from existing residential areas to the west, as well as new residential development on the Main Street itself and vacant land between the Main Street and the proposed by-pass.

Therefore, the Township should concentrate early development efforts to the west of the by-pass in order to reinforce redevelopment along the current Route 206, with designs for new neighborhoods reflecting the traditional atmosphere that the Township is advancing with its Main Street plans. The much smaller area between the by-pass and the train station should be reserved for commuter parking for the time being, until development pressures call for real development. Again however, it is crucial that the pedestrian connections across the by-pass encourage movement between the train station and existing residential areas, and the new residential and commercial areas west of the by-pass. Shuttle or jitney service to connect the new Main Street, the train station, and areas in-between, will assist in highlighting the presence of rail service and encouraging movement by means other than private autos. And, any new development on Main Street or at the Station should utilize a Transfer of Development Rights program that takes advantage of State incentives to protect environmentally-sensitive areas and promote sufficient new residential development to sustain reactivation of passenger rail service.



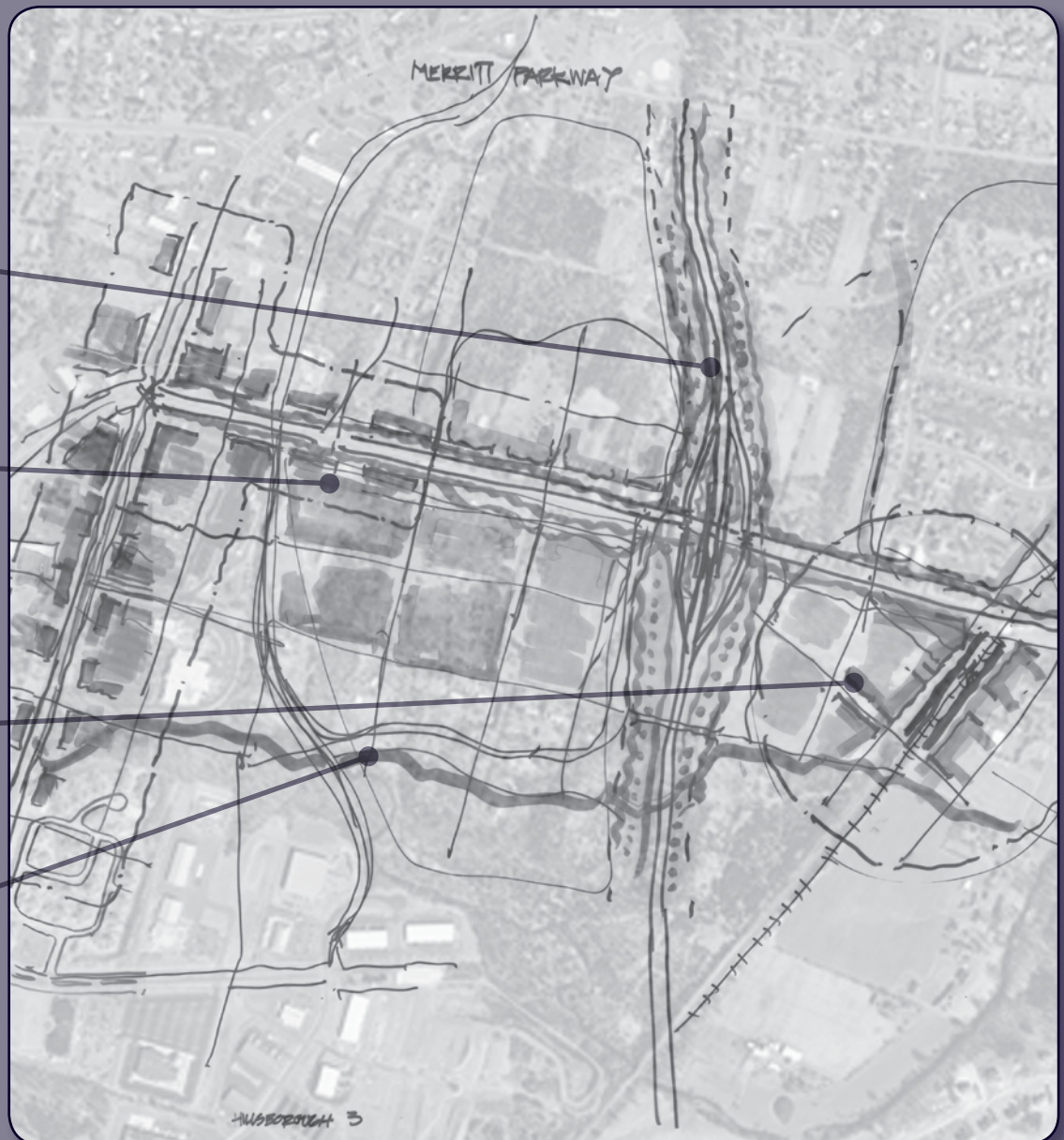
SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Design the Route 206 By-Pass so that it does not become a barrier between the future station area and the future "Main Street" on Route 206.

Direct more intensive development to the area west of the proposed Route 206 By-Pass, where it can reinforce the proposed Route 206 "Main Street."

Reserve land between the Route 206 Bypass and the tracks for future compact, mixed use development.

Building on existing natural resources – the stream and wetlands corridors - create greenway connections between the future station area, surrounding neighborhoods and the Route 206 corridor.





BRIDGEWATER TOWNSHIP

Mayor Patricia Flannery
Somerset County

Square Miles 32.54
Population 42,940

6

KEY QUESTIONS

- Link adjacent commercial development (e.g., big box retail and baseball park).
- Consider commercial, retail and entertainment development to support transit as well as accommodate future growth trends for the region.
- Find appropriate new uses for brownfields and underutilized parking lots.
- Recognize environmental and fiscal constraints, traffic congestion and regional housing needs.

PROBLEM STATEMENT Explore options for land use and infrastructure changes that will enhance the likelihood of the West Trenton Line's restoration by considering the redesign of parking lots and existing development. Create a "Special Events" stop that builds on the nascent retail/entertainment/health district through appropriate land uses and infrastructure investments that encourage transit use.

BACKGROUND As one of the fastest growing places in Central New Jersey, Bridgewater Township has experienced a rapid conversion in the past few decades from a rural township to a modern and mature suburban community. Incorporated in 1899 and located in the middle of Somerset County where I-287 intersects Routes 22, 202 and 206 (and just south of the I-287/I-78 interchange – the Edge City made famous in Joel Garreau's book), a great deal of Bridgewater's recent growth can be traced directly to its extensive highway connections. Shopping malls, including Bridgewater Commons, and big-box retail centers anchor several points of commercial activity in the town's southern half, as do several corporate office parks. This scattered development pattern, with uses that attract consumers from well beyond the municipal border, has exacerbated traffic congestion.

Despite the multitude of recent commercial development, Bridgewater can largely be characterized by its diverse residential neighborhoods. These include quaint older neighborhoods on streets adjacent to the boroughs of Somerville and Raritan, as well as postwar housing tracts in southern Bridgewater and newer subdivisions in the north and west, where large homes line the Watchung Hills and condos are clustered off the highways. Bridgewater also contains several prominent parks, including Duke Island Park along the Raritan Canal and Washington Valley Park. Preserving the quality of its residential and recreational environments while addressing growth is a key part of the township's Master Plan and its involvement in the Regional Center Partnership of Somerset County.

Finderne, the neighborhood in southern Bridgewater through which NJ Transit's Raritan Valley Line passes, has a long history of industrial and residential development. In the past decade, development has surged with the addition of major retail centers and the completion of Commerce Bank Park (a minor league baseball park that is home to the three-time Atlantic League champion Somerset Patriots) near NJ Transit's Bridgewater Station, the point at which the West Trenton Line merges with the Raritan Valley Line. With the ballpark and big box retail across the street, a new retail/entertainment/health district has been proposed. Part of Finderne's industrial legacy is the nearly 400 acre American Cyanamid

(now Wyeth) brownfield site to the south and west of Bridgewater Station. The site is currently in the midst of a long-term remediation process. The remediation process will determine what future development can be appropriate. Adjacent to Finderne is the town of Bound Brook, which is developing transit village plans.

RESOURCE TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the Resource Team, in terms of opportunities for investments in infrastructure and development that support mass transit, Bridgewater is better positioned than most of the towns on the West Trenton Line. First, the Township already has rail service on the Raritan Valley Line, with the potential for a one-seat express ride to Newark and New York upon completion of the anticipated Trans-Hudson Express (THE) Tunnel. Additionally, there has been a great deal of new development near the station, including a baseball stadium and a large retail complex, albeit in a development pattern that challenges the rail passenger. For the most part, recent development has paid attention to the needs of cars—not transit users or pedestrians—resulting in a train station that is largely isolated from its surroundings. Nonetheless, numerous opportunities exist to orient future investment toward the station.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity to shape future development in a transit-friendly way is by focusing on parking lots. The cluster of "big box" retail outlets that arose north of the station in recent years has acres of parking, much of it underutilized. With the shelf life of such retail centers ranging between ten and twenty years, the Township should start planning today for the eventual redesign of the retail complex. By penciling a traditional street grid over the site, the Township can begin to identify opportunities for infill development on present-day parking lots. As those parcels are developed with new uses, and as the older single-use buildings are converted, a more human-scaled environment will slowly reveal itself. Adjacent to the Station and with a mixture of uses and pedestrian-friendly streets in place, an area currently devoted to the car will become complementary to the adjacent train station. The development of shared-parking strategies with present and future occupants of the site will be a key to advancing this type of incremental redevelopment.

Adjacent to the Station and the ballpark are other parking lots worth considering for more intensive and productive use. Converting key lots into parking structures for commuters and consumers, and lining those structures with related commercial and civic uses could provide the Township and region with facilities and services that meet local needs. By way of



example, surrounding parking structures with buildings that house a health club and retail on lower levels, and offices above that attract young professionals, empty nesters or retirees can improve the design of the community and boost the local economy. A “Special Events” stop could be created by encouraging land uses and infrastructure investments that complement the proposed retail/entertainment/health district. Planning and marketing this area as the “next hot spot” for 24/7 activity could enhance Bridgewater’s image as the place to live, work and enjoy the good life.

In the minds of a number of planners and designers, the largely empty brownfield south of Bridgewater Station would be an ideal place to plan transit-oriented development from scratch; however, the site’s contamination limits its potential uses. Recent proposals suggest the site’s reuse as a golf course. While

a golf course will do little to encourage transit use, it can be a part of a wider strategy of “Special Events” to connect the station to adjacent areas through the establishment of a green corridor for pedestrians and bicyclists. This corridor can begin at the Raritan River and wind through the proposed golf course before passing the train and baseball park. It could then traverse the redeveloped retail complex before passing the town open space (north of the retail complex) on its way to residential neighborhoods to the west. By connecting these diverse and presently isolated components of the broader station area and reassigning development expectations to lands closer to the Bridgewater Station, this green corridor can encourage the pedestrian movement and human-scaled development that support transit use.

Editor’s Note: The Resource Team strongly supported residential development for this area, in ways that would enhance the transit stop. In particular, the Team thought that redevelopment of big box development and associated parking lots provided ample opportunity for apartments, condominiums and town houses that could enhance the financial viability of the area and promote transit use. The Team held that without residential development, this site would not be mixed-use, and would suffer from a lack of vitality often seen in downtowns or corporate facilities after business hours. For various reasons, including environmental constraints on brownfields and property tax burdens associated with residential development, Mayor Flannery felt that residential development was not appropriate for this area.

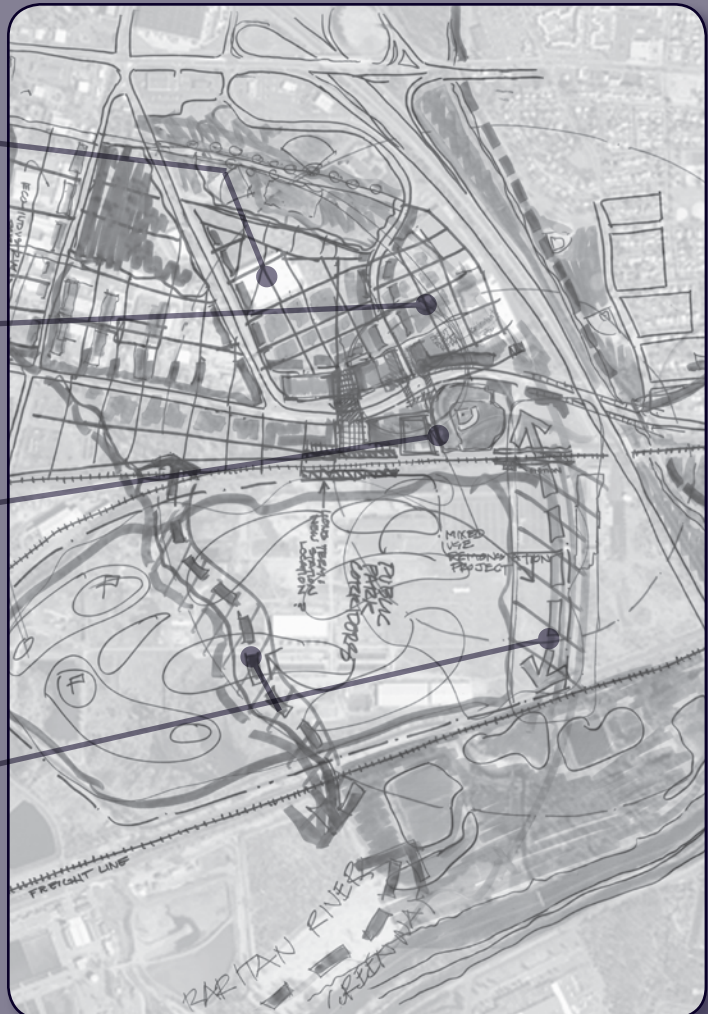
SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Overlay on top of the many surface parking lots a street and block network that anticipates the long term redevelopment of big box retail for more intensive mixed-uses.

Consolidate surface parking lots into structures to make better use of the land.

Building on the presence of the baseball stadium and the soon to be completed golf course, create a compact station area with a “Special Events” or entertainment focus.

Incorporate into the golf course reclamation project, several greenways linking the larger station area to the Raritan River Greenway.



EPILOGUE

Following this Institute, a graduate Land Use Planning class at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Spring 2006 further investigated the challenges, constraints and opportunities of lands surrounding the potential stops along the West Trenton Line. Student teams were organized around each potential stop, and the charge was to apply land-use planning principles and architectural design skills to propose land use planning ideas for consideration. Through field visits, a review of State, county and local master plans, programs and ordinances, and interviews with key officials, a variety of recommendations and proposals were put forth. Some of the key ideas for consideration included:

Ewing – Connecting a mixed-use transit village with Trenton via an extension of the River Line

Hopewell Township – Mixed-use development with signature train station, bus stop and below-grade parking for commuters

Hopewell Borough – Three alternatives that respect community character and enable mixed-use development to grow with transit service

Montgomery (Belle Mead) – Renovation and restoration of current structures and a pedestrian bridge to connect station, retail and residential development and parking

Hillsborough – Multi-modal transit center, phasing parking and bus service with commercial and residential development until transit is feasible

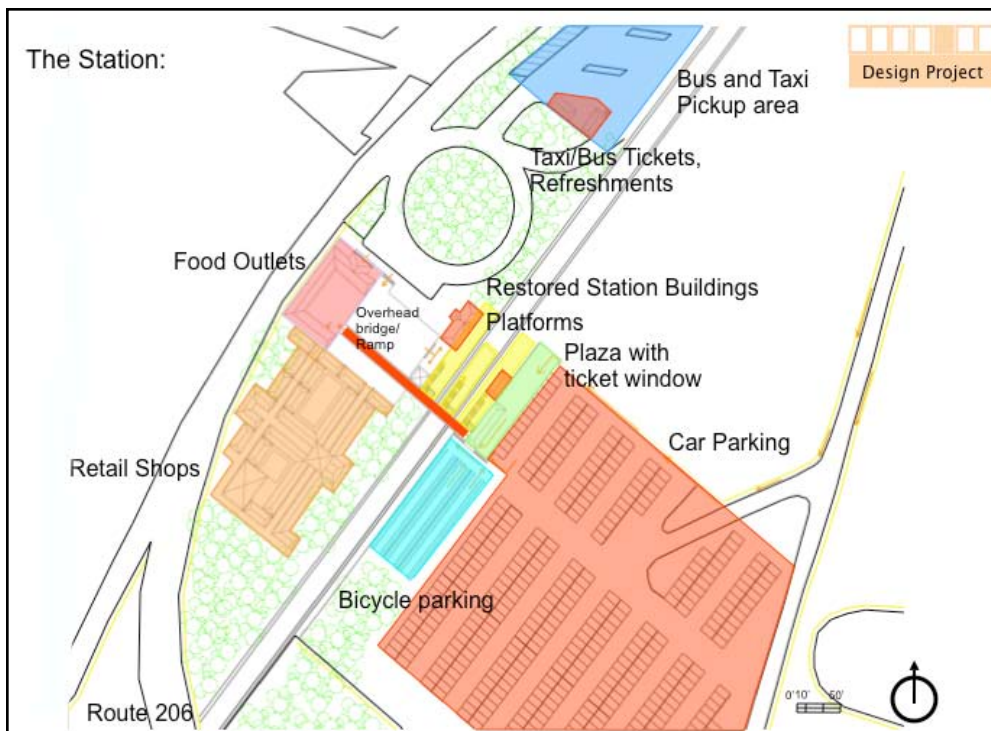
Bridgewater – Connect event-based development (baseball park, retail and restaurants, potential greenway along river) to the station through high-quality design and art

These ideas and others can help inform local, county and State officials to consider the possibilities of enhancing the areas around potential train stations along the West Trenton Line.

Hopewell Township

Hopewell Township: Building on existing rail and road infrastructure, this proposal would enable residents in the region to park above or below the station and take the train to the New York or Philadelphia metropolitan area, as well as create new commuting choices for employees at Merrill Lynch and other corporations along the I-95 corridor. Incorporating commercial, retail and recreational uses along with a multi-modal station can help create a new center of activity for the community and take hundreds of cars off of local and regional roads.





Montgomery (Belle Mead)

Montgomery Township: Creating a new destination through a vibrant rail station, interconnected bus and taxi stops, attractive retail and food establishments, and adequate parking for commuters, this proposal seeks to satisfy the unmet needs of present and future generations.



Hopewell Borough

In a phased approach, this proposal would enable public transportation services to grow with increased demand and new development. Mixed-use buildings and a revised street system that encourages pedestrian and bicycle use would revitalize this neighborhood and build on the town's historic community character.

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Regional Plan Association (RPA) is an independent regional planning organization that improves the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the 31-county, New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region through research, planning, and advocacy. Since 1922, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region's continued growth. We anticipate the challenges the region will face in the years to come, and we mobilize the region's civic, business, and government sectors to take action.

RPA's current work is aimed largely at implementing the ideas put forth in the Third Regional Plan, with efforts focused in five project areas: community design, open space, transportation, workforce and the economy, and housing. For more information about Regional Plan Association, please visit our website, www.rpa.org.

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