

# **Taking the Next Step:**

## Franklin Township Municipal Assessment

### *Executive Summary*

October 2005

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# Introduction

**Picture it: Summer 2025.** School is out and the community parks are buzzing with activity. The downtown is bustling, as well. Visitors are stepping off the trains and busses to take in some window-shopping and to run errands in town. Shops and businesses have their doors open and restaurants are seating people as quickly as they can. Along the newly rehabilitated Hamilton St, a festival is in progress, celebrating the diverse cultures in Franklin. Amateurs and professionals alike whip up some of their famous dishes to share the delectables from their native countries. On the other side of town some families are enjoying a quieter afternoon as they walk out of their homes and onto a path leading them to the Canal. A stroll along the water with the historic colonial homes nearby proves to be very relaxing and picturesque. Still, in Franklin Township on this hot summer day, a farmer's hay field needs to be mowed and baled, as son and daughter pitch in to get the job done.

*Sound like a Utopia? Maybe.* But the circumstances are real and municipal officials have the opportunity to make decisions that will lead to this heightened standard of living. They can enact ordinances and educate the public, but they can't do it alone.

Over the years, municipalities have been contacting the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association (the Association) requesting guidance with various planning and environmental issues. The Association decided that responding to these issues comprehensively would be most effective. Thus, the Association created the Municipal Assessment Program. This program is designed to identify the issues in a municipality that either hinder or enhance the preservation of natural resources and quality of life in and around the community. It takes strong community leadership to step back and evaluate goals, policies and strategies and figure out how to connect them with their ultimate vision. Franklin Township was ready for this challenge and the Association was, in turn, excited to work with such a dedicated and open community.

The Association would first like to commend Franklin Township for their ongoing projects and past accomplishments, which include:

- Maintaining Tree City USA status for the fourth year in a row.
- Dedicating the time and effort to update the Township Master Plan and create a redevelopment plan for a good portion of the more urban areas of the Township.
- Protecting farmland and open space through state, county and local programs.

After Franklin Township formally partnered with the Association through a resolution, we began the municipal assessment process with a collection of survey responses from municipal officials, staff, and consultants to determine the community's vision. The Association then reviewed the Township's Master Plan, land use ordinances, policies, and best management practices. These two steps guided the evaluation, which is divided into four major themes: Land Use Planning Techniques, Land Conservation Techniques, Direct Municipal Responsibility for the Environment, and Watershed Stewardship Projects. Using the Master Plan and survey responses as the Township's overall vision, the evaluation of the Township's ordinances and best management practices led to determining areas that need to be strengthened so that Franklin can realize its vision. These areas became the focus of the assessment report and a "step" toward making the connection.

Each chapter - or "step" - in the assessment report lists the Township's *Goal* according to the Master Plan and survey responses and the *Current Protection* the Township has on the books. The heart of each step focuses on the *Options* for new opportunities, as suggested by the Association.

Here the municipality is given a menu of choices for planning and conservation projects to implement now and in the future. In the *Did You Know* section you can read about information such as population change within the Township and what surrounding communities are doing. Finally, *Additional Resources* provide additional information or guidance about that particular subject.

As a catalyst to achieve responsible planning and environmental quality, it is the Association's intention that this report serves as a guide and inspiration for work, such as the aforementioned accomplishments. Future boards and committees should refer to this document for ideas and guidance and to make connections with other communities and local organizations. As an interim step in the implementation of these practices, the report offers a variety of recommendations, which the Association is partially funded to help implement.

This report is a general guide to current and future projects for this community that will connect goals with implementation and implementation with vision. The results of this analysis for Franklin Township are documented in this report, entitled "**Taking the Next Step**". Outlined below, and in no particular order, are the 13 strategies for achieving Franklin Township's goals. (Please refer to the report for more detail).

⌘ **Establishing Greenways**

*Township Goal:* To "maintain open space and link to other open space and community resources".

*Current Practices:* Township provides parkland through residential development and specifically for recreational uses.

*Recommendation:* Develop and insert into the Conservation Plan, goals and policies for identifying areas to connect open spaces and parkland.

⌘ **Agricultural Viability**

*Township Goal:* Encourage the continuation of farming as a viable land use.

*Current Practices:* Township development ordinance permits farming in all zones and allows for clustering development to protect farmland.

*Recommendations:* Identify and utilize outdoor experiences to harness the market for farm products and services.

⌘ **Scenic Corridor Protection**

*Township Goal:* To conserve open space, rural character, scenic vistas, sensitive environmental areas and farmland.

*Current Practices:* Scenic Corridor District Overlay regulates uses that are visible from scenic roadways and are within 1,000 linear feet in both directions from the centerline of the roadway.

*Recommendations:* Preserve scenic landscapes with the support of the township, the residents, and the landowners.

⌘ **Natural Resources Protection**

*Township Goal:* In the Township, natural resources such as woodlands, waterbodies, wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, scenic corridors, groundwater and habitat are recommended for conservation, as is the continuation of agriculture.

*Current Practices:* Natural resources are considered in the regulations for a clustering option for development.

*Recommendations:* Update the Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) to guide development of ordinances in preparation for developing vacant lands.

⌘ **Groundwater Protection**

*Township Goal:* Conduct a professional assessment to help answer questions about impacts of future development on ground water.

*Current Practices:* Natural Resources Preservation Cluster Option works to preserve areas containing natural resources including large contiguous parcels.

*Recommendations:* Adopt additional ordinances to protect critical recharge areas and update mapping database.

#### ☞ **Stormwater Management**

*Township Goal:* Understand the balance between runoff and groundwater recharge on Township soils and subsurface, particularly in areas with wells and in flood-prone areas.

*Current Practices:* Regulating ownership and maintenance of detention/retention basins in the Township.

*Recommendations:* Create and adopt a stormwater management plan that includes an ordinance, BMPs, implementation and enforcement.

#### ☞ **New Construction Practices**

*Township Goal:* Protecting soils and geology through mapping and inclusion in the Open Space Plan.

*Current Practices:* Any disturbance of more than 5,000 square feet needs to provide language on the plans for controlling or preventing erosion and other provisions for maintaining the safety of the site as well as prevention of degradation.

*Recommendations:* Emphasize and encourage sensitive construction practices through a municipal checklist, particularly focused on critical areas.

#### ☞ **Developing Vacant Lands**

*Township Goal:* Balance of uses throughout the Township, but especially on lands that are not developed and not preserved through open space.

*Current Practices:* The Township's Housing Element of the Master Plan provides support for ordinances that balance development.

*Recommendations:* Include language in the township's Master Plan update to provide for a mix of uses where vacant lands are considered for development.

#### ☞ **Downtown Revitalization**

*Township Goal:* Maintaining affordability and diversity of housing, encouraging development in redevelopment and developed areas - including senior housing - and allowing for higher density where services exist.

*Current Practices:* The basic revitalization strategy is to reinforce existing residential, educational, recreational, cultural, employment, transportation and human services systems by adding needed new facilities, jobs and services to create a balanced new community.

*Recommendations:* Reinforce existing residential, educational, recreational, cultural, employment, transportation and human services systems by adding needed new facilities, jobs and services to create a balanced new community.

#### ☞ **Traffic and Transportation**

*Township Goal:* Establishing a circulation system which recognizes the high level of through-Township traffic and minimizes its negative impact on Township residents and promoting safety.

*Current Practices:* Franklin Township currently has a circulation plan that includes facilities for park-n-ride, train stations, and bus stations.

*Recommendations:* Implement ordinances and traffic circulation devices that allow for steady movement within and through the township.

#### ☞ **Enforcing Local Ordinances**

*Township Goal:* Follow up with conservation easements and ordinances put in place to ensure landowners are complying with the provisions set forth in those regulations.

*Current Protection:* A governing body in New Jersey has the legislative power to pass ordinances governing issues such as land use and police enforcement.

*Recommendations:* Enforce ordinances through monitoring and education, especially at the onset of a development project.

§ **Public Participation and Education**

*Township Goals:* Participation within the community needs to come from all residents no matter their ethnicity, neighborhood, or occupation.

*Current Practices:* All Township Council and Planning Board meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the website.

*Recommendations:* Continue to encourage public participation

§ **Municipal Official Education**

*Township Goals:* To establish a better working relationship between the Township Council and the various committees within the Township.

*Current Practices:* Ensuring municipal officials and staff are knowledgeable about environmental issues, as well as other township issues.

*Recommendations:* Encourage training and site walks for committee members to better understand how decisions made in the municipal building will look on the ground.

Ultimately, Franklin Township must develop strategies that work toward achieving the vision of the community and for current and future generations of residents. By committing to follow through on this report, the Association and Franklin Township are achieving the mission of preserving and enhancing the watershed and the communities within it. This report is the next step in realizing that vision.

# Acknowledgements

We commend Franklin Township's leaders and professionals for participating in this program and for allowing the Association to evaluate current practices. It is difficult for anyone, whether an individual or a municipal body, to have the courage to evaluate current work, determine where and how to improve a current system, and if necessary develop, a new strategy. We want the readers of this report to look at not only what can be done, but what has already been accomplished in Franklin Township.

Our hope is that Franklin will learn from and expand on their own experiences, challenges, and successes, as well as those of surrounding municipalities, keeping in mind that zoning and policy should look regionally to provide comprehensive and sensible growth. We also look forward to partnering with the township in embracing new opportunities that protect and enhance the character and natural environment that makes Franklin a special place to live.

We wish to thank the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and the U.S. EPA for their generosity in funding this project, and the members of the Township Committee, Planning Board, Environmental Committee and staff for their responses to our survey. We would also like to acknowledge the individual input of Ted Chase, Ellen Ritchie, Cheryl Bergailo, Khalilah Stewart and all those who responded to the survey. Your time and dedication to this project was greatly appreciated.

# Highlights of Your Town

When beginning this assessment, members of the Franklin Township Council, Planning Board, Environmental Commission, and various staff and consultants articulated their goals and vision for the Township by responding to our survey. We feel it is important to note the proactive measures that have been implemented within the community and that have created the unique place that is Franklin Township.

## **Good Things...**

Franklin Township's website states the vision for the township as follows:

**“Residents will live and thrive in a community that values community pride and spirit, celebrates diversity and creates an environment that provides opportunities for all people so that they develop as healthy, caring, positive, educated and responsible members of the community.”**

Some examples of Franklin's ongoing work to implement this vision includes:

- Franklin Township is home to many large industrial campuses and buildings. In an effort to maintain a natural feel in the community and allow for this large-scale development, the Township has put Open Space preservation and Stream Corridor Protection to work.
  - Open Space Protection is high on the list of priorities for Franklin Township. The Open Space Advisory Committee works diligently to protect as much open space as possible.
  - On our tour around Franklin Township, officials pointed out the use of the 300-foot buffer wherever possible. This type of dedication to protecting stream corridors will lead to a heightened level of water quality as well providing a natural buffer to large-scale development.
- Historic preservation throughout the Township, especially in small historic hamlets. There are a number of small historic enclaves that are reminders of Franklin's past. While they retain their own identity, they also blend into the fabric of the surrounding community.

Franklin Township a Tree City USA in recognition of Franklin's program to care for community trees. It is the fourth year Franklin Township has received this national recognition. To become a Tree City USA, a community must meet four standards: a tree board or department, a tree care ordinance, a comprehensive community forestry program, and an Arbor Day observance. For this year's Arbor Day, the Shade Tree Commission will be landscaping detention basins to demonstrate the benefits trees provide for stormwater recharge and filtration.

In addition to the many environmental efforts in the Township, Franklin provides opportunities for enhancing the more urban communities. Some of these examples include:

- The Renaissance 2000 project will provide more opportunities in many areas including housing, jobs, cultural enhancement, and transportation. This project has strong support throughout the area to provide affordable amenities to residents and businesses alike. The supporters in this effort consist of a variety of organizations, including Franklin Township, the City of New Brunswick, the First Baptist Community Development Corporation, and New Brunswick Tomorrow.
- Many local officials, along with the residents of the different neighborhoods feel that the cultural diversity is a special attribute of the Township. In developing the Renaissance 2000 Plan and in planning for new development throughout the

Township, forethought was given to support and implement co-mingling of not only ethnic differences, but lifestyles as well. Senior citizens live near the young professionals who live next to the families, some of whom are new to the area, and some of whom have been in the Township for generations.

It is evident in these examples that while Franklin Township cherishes its open spaces and important history, it also plans to retain and celebrate its unique, urban atmosphere.