

Taking the Next Step:

East Amwell Township
Municipal Assessment

December 2004



The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

Since 1949, our member-supported organization has worked on behalf of local residents to protect, preserve and enhance our local environment. We are dedicated to caring for the integrity of the natural ecosystems of the 265-square miles of central New Jersey drained by the Stony Brook and the Millstone River. We focus on environmental education, watershed stewardship and water resource advocacy – helping future generations understand the wonders and workings of the natural world we are preserving on their behalf.

We are headquartered on a 830-acre nature reserve in Pennington that includes a community supported organic farm, nature center, pond, and a 14-mile trail system that leads visitors through our woodlands, wetlands, and fields.

Many activities within our watershed affect the quality of streams, wetlands, ground water and forests. By changing how we carry out these activities, we can improve our environment and our quality of life. So whether at home, work or play, we can all make a difference.

If you have questions about this report or want to learn more about membership support, volunteer opportunities, and new programs please contact us at: (609) 737-3735.



Executive Summary

Picture it: Spring, 2025, East Amwell, NJ...Families and friends gather on a still crisp morning in historic Ringoes after patronizing the local bakery for hot coffee and fresh pastries. A group of friends decide to embrace the new season and head to the Sourland Mountain preserve for a hike with the hopes of spotting some of the returning migratory songbirds such as scarlet tanagers and chestnut-sided warblers. One family decides to attend the historic tour of East Amwell on which they will learn about the area's first residents the Lenni-Lenape, and how John Ringo was an early organizer of township residents who supported the Revolutionary War. As the spring sun vanquishes the last traces of winter chill, music can be heard coming from the Fairgrounds on the east end of town. Residents are gathering to purchase fresh strawberries from local farmers who have come to join the festivities. There is a celebration going on to commemorate the 20th anniversary of parks, open space, woodlands, and farmland preserved in the Township. Everyone is celebrating healthy waterways, clean air, and a sense of community spirit as local officials set up booths to continue generating support and ideas for the incoming administration.

Sound like Utopia? Maybe. The issues are real, however, and municipalities have the opportunity to make decisions that will lead to this heightened standard of living. Municipal officials can enact ordinances and educate the public, but they cannot do it alone.

The protection and health of the watershed relies a great deal on the land use laws and policies that govern development. The elected and appointed officials of East Amwell, who are responsible for those laws and policies, have a difficult job. They are charged with the tasks of balancing natural resource protection with economic prosperity, encouraging business while maintaining the rural, agricultural feel of the township, and determining where to site residential and commercial interest. The Township leaders also strive to ensure that the needs of current residents are met while planning for those of the future. To carry out this daunting task, officials look to their Master Plan for the Township's vision and to policies and ordinances as the tools to move towards the vision. The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association (The Association) realizes the magnitude of municipal leaders' responsibilities, and therefore, developed the Municipal Assessment Program.

The Association's Municipal Assessment Program is designed as a partnership between the Association and the municipality. The program aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of a municipality's Master Plan and how it is supported by the township's ordinances, policies, plans, and best management practices. The Association then produces a municipal assessment report that provides recommendations on additional proactive measures to ensure that the township's natural resources are preserved and the **Hunterdon County Fairgrounds** necessary regulatory structure is established. Through this partnership, the Association is then available to assist in implementing those recommendations.

When beginning the assessment, we reviewed East Amwell's Master Plan and amendments - as those documents lay the foundation for the Township's vision. Members of the East Amwell Township Committee, Planning Board, Environmental Commission, Health Department, Historic Preservation Committee, and several municipal staff members articulated their general goals and vision for the Township by answering our survey. After evaluating these responses and providing a memo to township officials summarizing the results of the survey, we reviewed East Amwell Township's land use ordinances, policies, and best management practices. The results of the assessment were then compared to the goals and vision of the Township, as articulated by its leaders. Inconsistencies between that vision and what was "on the books" - the local zoning and ordinances- were noted and recommendations drafted. These recommendations became the focus of the assessment report and a "step" toward successfully achieving the township's goals.

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. Each step focuses on *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. The *Did You Know* section offers information such as land use change within the Township and proactive measures initiated by surrounding communities. Finally, *Additional Resources* show where the Township can find additional materials to conduct further research.

The Association would first like to commend East Amwell Township on the success of a few of their recent and ongoing projects including:

- ⊗ Low density zoning in both the Amwell Agricultural and Sourland Mountain Districts
- ⊗ Enrolling Clawson Park into the Green Acres Program
- ⊗ Permanently preserving contiguous tracts of farmland running through the center of the Township
- ⊗ Mapping the Township's historic bridges

This report is a general guide as to what can be done and what has been done in this community to connect the Township's vision and goals with implementation projects. The results of this analysis for East Amwell Township are documented in this report, entitled "**Taking the Next Step**". Outlined below, and in no particular order, are the 15 strategies to achieving East Amwell's goals. (Please refer to the report for more detail).

⊗ **Master Plan Development**

Township Goal: The Municipal Land Use Law requires planning boards to reexamine the township's master plan every six years and to produce a report outlining their findings.

Current Practices: East Amwell produced periodic reexamination reports in 2003, 1999, and 1998.

Recommendation: Conduct a comprehensive master plan reexamination and produce a master plan report that incorporates all of the Township's Master Plan Elements.

⊗ **Open Space Preservation**

Township Goal: Develop "a Greenway system linking significant public open spaces along a network of pathways, waterways and significant natural features."

Current Practices: Farmland and Open Space Preservation Committee seeks preservation opportunities, advises the Township Committee, educates residents about the Township's preservation program, and maintains an inventory of preserved lands and conservation easements

Recommendation: Reexamine and update the greenways and open space element of the East Amwell Township Master Plan.

§ **Farmland Preservation & Support**

Township Goal: Maintain “the community’s prevailing agricultural character by promoting the industry of farming and preserving the productive agricultural land base.”

Current Practices: East Amwell has established low density (10 acre) zoning in the Amwell Valley Agricultural District that promotes open space conservation.

Recommendation: Encourage the Farmland and Open Space Preservation Committee to maintain agricultural master plans and maps that will support East Amwell’s vision.

§ **Stormwater Management**

Township Goal: Comply with the 2004 state stormwater regulations. Additionally, the township seeks to address stormwater on a regional scale for the Sourland Mountains.

Current Practices: The Township is working toward compliance with the 2004 state stormwater rules, including a municipal stormwater management plan and eventually a stormwater control ordinance. Additionally, the Township received a NJDEP grant to develop a Regional Stormwater Management Plan (RSWMP) for the Sourland Mountain Watershed.

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

§ **Septic System Maintenance**

Township Goal: “Require that wastewater treatment facilities do not compromise/affect groundwater quality.”

Current Practices: East Amwell has adopted "Standards for Individual Subsurface Sewage Disposal Systems" (N.J.A.C. 7:9A).

Recommendation: Adopt additional ordinances and policies to improve performance and monitoring of septic systems.

§ **Stream Corridor Protection**

Township Goal: “Protect and preserve the stream corridor systems and related water resources...”

Current Practices: The Greenways Plan (1993) recommends “a variable width of 200 feet be designated for the stream corridor greenways.”

Recommendation: Adopt a comprehensive stream corridor ordinance and ensure an explicit description in the master plan and conservation element.

§ **Groundwater Protection**

Township Goal: “Assure that the density of development in all locations throughout the Township does not violate environmental and other reasonable constraints with special consideration to groundwater quality.”

Current Practices: The Township’s Water Supply Ordinance aims to ensure an adequate, clean, and healthy water supply to new and existing wells. The ordinance also looks to provide a means to collect data about several underground aquifers within the Township.

Recommendation: Adopt ordinance language that sets minimum standards for wellhead and aquifer recharge areas.

§ **Woodlands Management and Protection**

Township Goal: Respondents to our survey indicated a strong desire to protect the Township’s forests.

Current Practices: Zoning in the Sourland Mountain region limits agricultural use to existing cleared areas, regulates tree clearing and prohibits clearing any forests or native vegetation in excess of 30,000 square feet.

Recommendation: Adopt additional ordinances and management practices to ensure further preservation and protection of woodlands.

§ **Critical Habitat Protection**

Township Goal: “Ensure the integrity of the fragile Sourland ecosystem and biological diversity (especially migrating birds) through the maintenance of large contiguous tracts of forest.”

Current Practices: The Land Management Ordinance definition of Lot Suitability states that “at least 30% of one acre which includes the building site shall consist of land less than 12% slope”.

Recommendation: Adopt additional ordinances and management practices to ensure further preservation and protection of critical habitats.

§ **Historic Preservation**

Township Goal: To preserve “the cultural landscape by recognizing historic structures and districts, and managing change within the historic villages.”

Current Practices: The Township has a very active Historic Preservation Committee, that has worked to ensure that every hamlet in East Amwell is listed on either the National or State Historic Register.

Recommendation: Adopt additional ordinances and policies to ensure further preservation and protection of historic structures and lands.

§ **Viewshed Protection**

Township Goal: Protect “scenic vistas of the rural countryside and the village and hamlets that impart the special character of East Amwell.”

Current Practices: Major site plans and subdivisions are subject to buffers and landscaping plans that “will reduce the visual impact of dwellings located on ridges or within unique viewsheds, promote environmental benefits, and preserve the rural character of East Amwell Township.”

Recommendation: Adopt a viewshed protection ordinance with specific language for height requirements.

§ **Appropriate Development**

Township Goal: Preserve “community character by carefully managing the scale and intensity of new development and retaining farmland and open spaces.”

Current Practices: Each of the Township’s zones have their own provisions that are tailored to address the unique cultural and environmental factors of their respective zones.

Recommendation: Adopt Design Guidelines and Low Impact Development Techniques that will compliment existing community design elements and enhance quality of life.

§ **Affordable & Senior Housing**

Township Goal: “Provide a variety of housing opportunities for the existing and future residents of the Township, consistent with the rural setting on which these are located. Affordable housing should be provided, and the township should comply with COAH regulations, choosing locations and types of housing that are appropriate and suitable for a rural town without infrastructure.”

Current Practices: East Amwell implements a variety of strategies in order to comply with its fair share housing obligations including a Regional Contribution Agreement (RCA), a mortgage assistance program, and a group home program.

Recommendation: Start an educational campaign to inform residents about affordable and senior housing.

§ **Public Participation & Communication**

Township Goal: Respondents to our survey said that they thought the Township was doing a good job communicating with residents and encouraging public participation.

Current Practices: The Township encourages participation through the monthly volunteer paper (VIP), township newsletters, the bi-annual environmental newsletter, and the website. A call for volunteers is included as a tax bill insert, and residents are targeted with postcards for specific issues. Also, every Township meeting is announced, open to the public, and minutes are available.

Recommendation: Create evaluation materials to measure the success of outreach and communication efforts.

§ **Education of Municipal Officials**

Township Goal: Several Respondents to our survey felt that the Township committee, and board members as well as Township employees are proactive and professional.

Current Practices: In understanding that local decisions are made through Township officials and staff, it is imperative to ensure municipal officials and staff are knowledgeable about environmental issues.

Recommendation: Encourage training and site walks for staff and commission members.

This document is an interim step that represents ideas for connecting and implementing the Township’s vision for its future. Now that the Assessment is complete, the next step is for East Amwell to prioritize a few of the recommendations in this report. The Association will work with Township officials to implement options the Township identifies, and enact ordinances, policies, or best management practices to allow East Amwell Township to move even farther to the forefront of preserving its rural character, planning for its future, and protecting the environment.

In performing the municipal balancing act, officials must employ sound planning strategies to provide a high quality of life for all residents. By committing to follow through on this report, the Association and East Amwell Township are achieving the mission of preserving and enhancing the watershed and the communities within it. This report is the next step in creating that healthy, livable community.

Acknowledgements

We commend East Amwell's leaders for participating in this program and for allowing the Association to evaluate the Township's current policies and practices. It is difficult for anyone—individual, municipality, or business—to submit to an evaluation and identify areas to build on what has already begun. East Amwell is in a fortunate position because of all that it has already accomplished. We now offer a myriad of choices for future endeavors and look forward to continuing to work with the Township in embracing new opportunities that support efforts in proactive planning.

We wish to thank the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for their generosity in funding this project, and the East Amwell Township Committee, Planning Board, Environmental Commission, municipal clerk and staff for their enthusiastic responses to our survey. We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Deputy Mayor Andrea Bonette, and Planning Board members Bela Kamensky, and Linda Lenox for guiding us through a tour of the municipality, and Joan McGee, Planning Board Administrative Officer and Terri Stahl, Township Clerk, for promptly and thoroughly providing answers to our questions.

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