

# Taking the Next Step:

Hillsborough Township  
Municipal Assessment

*Executive Summary*

October 2004

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# Introduction

**P**icture it: Autumn, 2024, Hillsborough Township, New Jersey. Main Street, Hillsborough is bustling with shoppers, visitors, and families. A visiting family decides to roam about town, while a resident family takes to food shopping at the local farm stand. After window-shopping along Main Street, shoppers duck into one of cafés on Main Street for lunch and an ice cream. Cheers and applause can be heard coming from the Park on the other side of the school, as residents make their way through the neighborhood to locate the festivities. There is a celebration going on to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of greenways, open space, the booming economy, and the historic presence preserved in the Township. Everyone is celebrating the healthy waterways, the clean air, and a sense of community spirit. Local officials have also set up booths to continue generating support and ideas for the incoming administration. At the end of the day, some folks ride their bicycles home or hop on a light rail train to their nearby neighborhood, picking up a couple groceries at the store on the walk home from the station.

*Sound like a Utopia? Maybe.* But the issues 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 or 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 are retroactive to preserving natural resources or enhancing 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. Hillsborough 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 Hillsborough Township for their ongoing projects and past accomplishments, which include:

- ⌘ Providing new services for residents in Hillsborough Township, such as the YMCA and a new Post Office.
- ⌘ Providing diverse services, and amenities for residents in the Township. Hillsborough, a community of about 35,000 people, offers a total of 8 schools, numerous recreational facilities, a variety of shopping outlets and community programs for every age and interest.
- ⌘ Recruiting leaders for Township Board and Committees that are committed to building a strong community.

After Hillsborough 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 Hillsborough 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 serve 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 Hillsborough Township are documented in this report, entitled “**Taking the Next Step**”. Outlined below, and in no particular order, are the 13 strategies for achieving Hillsborough Township’s goals. (Please refer to the report for more detail).

#### ☞ **Establishing a Town Center**

*Township Goal:* Create a Town Center with a Main Street core in the development area. Use development regulations to guide the development of the town center and main street and preserve open space through clustering of residential uses.

*Current Practices:* Hillsborough Township is currently going through Phase II of the Master Plan reexamination process which will be focused on the Town Center/Main Street concept.

*Recommendation:* Create design regulations and standards that allow for flexible densities and bulk regulations to obtain the town center vision that is desired.

#### ☞ **Protection of Critical Areas**

*Township Goal:* Protect environmentally critical areas. Environmental Committee is to ensure that protection of environmentally critical areas is consistent with its own goals.

*Current Practices:* Soil Erosion and Sediment Control regulations, protection for Natural Features and designation of Mountain Zone.

*Recommendations:* Create and adopt a Critical Areas Ordinance that protects environmentally sensitive places in the township.

#### ☞ **Stream Corridor Protection**

*Township Goal:* Protecting environmentally sensitive areas of the Township from destruction or degradation, including stream corridors, watersheds, aquifers, rivers, viewsheds, and other vegetation.

*Current Practices:* Currently, Hillsborough Township does not have a Stream Corridor Ordinance.

*Recommendations:* Adopt a comprehensive stream corridor ordinance.

#### ☞ **Groundwater and Wellhead Protection**

*Township Goals:* Limit development in the Mountain zone due to existing geology, the desire to protect water quality, and because of the presence of headwaters.

*Current Practices:* Efforts in the township do not include groundwater protection as an objective of open space preservation.

*Recommendations:* Adopt ordinances to protect ground water quality and educate the public about initiatives.

#### ☞ **Septic System Maintenance**

*Township Goals* More education about septic systems and protecting drinking water.

*Current Practices:* Board of Health regulations for Individual Subsurface Sewage Disposal Systems Ordinance.  
*Recommendations:* Adopt ordinances and policies to improve performance and monitoring of septic systems.

§ **Preservation of Rural Character**

*Township Goal:* Expand efforts to preserve open space and farmland and provide linkages with neighboring townships.

*Current Practices:* Open Space Tax, Right to Farm regulations, Tree Preservation regulations, and Optional Cluster Development regulations for the Agricultural zone district.

*Recommendations:* Develop language in the Phase II Master Plan that states the desire and objectives to protect the environs.

§ **Historic Preservation**

*Township Goal:* Historic and archaeological preservation and development that is consistent with community character.

*Current Practices:* Published a book that highlights the important historic landmarks in the township and details their origins and importance of the time.

*Recommendations:* Develop a program or materials for new residents that will spark an interest in protecting historic resources.

§ **Protection of Viewsheds**

*Township Goal:* Protect and maintain prevailing rural character, including scenic landscapes resulting from natural topography and agricultural lands. Also, retain attractive vistas from public rights-of-way including views of hills, valleys, ridgelines, farmlands and other natural areas.

*Current Practices:* Zoning designation for the mountain areas that is very detailed in limiting development due to environmental constraints.

*Recommendations:* Develop ordinances that protect views on a variety of levels.

§ **Soil Erosion and Sediment Control**

*Township Goal:* Using sensitive design standards to minimize any impact to critical soils.

*Current Practices:* Purpose is to control soil erosion and sediment damages and related environmental damage by requiring adequate provisions for surface water retention and drainage and for the protection of exposed soil surfaces.

*Recommendations:* Adopt a monitoring program to ensure soil erosion management and sediment control.

§ **New Construction Practices**

*Township Goals:* Provide development that does not impact the land or surrounding habitat.

*Current Practices:* Done in accordance with the approved plat that contains soil erosion and sediment control provisions.

*Recommendations:* Emphasize the importance of considering alternative construction practices, particularly in critical areas.

§ **Environmental Ordinance Enforcement**

*Township Goal:* To advance environmental projects through ordinances and by funding appropriate infrastructure.

*Current Practices:* Language in the Land Development Ordinance, or in individual ordinances, does not consistently require monitoring or enforcement of ordinances.

*Recommendations:* Enforce local ordinances through monitoring and education.

§ **Public Participation and Education**

*Township Goals:* To foster community spirit by encouraging residents to embrace the diversity of the township and its potential for growth and improvement.

*Current Practices:* Public work sessions and an informational website that includes the township's code.

*Recommendations:* Continue to encourage public participation.

§ **Municipal Official Education**

*Township Goals:* Better accessibility of local officials. Seek out interested and qualified residents to sit on boards and committees.

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

*Recommendations:* Require training and site walks for committee members.

Ultimately, Hillsborough Township must develop strategies that work toward achieving the current vision of the community and for future generations of residents. By committing to follow through on this report, the Association and Hillsborough 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 vision.

# Acknowledgements

We commend Hillsborough 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 Hillsborough Township.

Our hope is that Hillsborough 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 policies 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 Hillsborough 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 Mayor Steven Sireci, Planning Board Chair Marian Fenwick-Freeman, Planning Board member Lynn Winters-Mineo, Township Planner Robert Ringelheim, Township Administrator Kevin Davis, Health Officer Dr. Glen Belnay 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 Hillsborough Township Committee, 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 Township and that have created the unique place that is Hillsborough Township.

## **Good Things...**

Officially established in 1771, Hillsborough Township was a crossroads for travelers and originated as a farming community. Through the decades Hillsborough became a residential community that continues to support a strong farming heritage. Currently, Hillsborough Township has open spaces, farm fields, pockets of neighborhoods, recreation areas, a growing commercial market, and a few families who have remained in the Township for generations. All of these examples can be attributed to the Township's history of leadership in government positions, as well as in grassroots and community organizations that have helped to further protection efforts.

Some other examples of Hillsborough's work includes:

- ⌘ **Open Space Protection** - As of 1995, Hillsborough Township has 68 percent land use in open space (Agriculture, Forest, and Wetland areas). A majority of that land is in the Sourland Mountains where trails and streams wind through the forested hills to reveal a mysterious past. The Open Space Committee has also been diligently working to protect greenways along streams through the use of conservation easements.
- ⌘ **Farmland Preservation** - In 2002, Hillsborough Township joined the other Sourland Mountain municipalities in rezoning their Mountain District from 5 acres/unit to the current 15 acres/unit with options for clustering development on a lot. The nearby Agricultural Zone regulations also increased from 3 acres/unit to 10 acres/unit with development options that are intended to reduce sprawl and preserve the rural landscape.
- ⌘ **Duke Estate** - 1,200 acres of the 2,700-acre parcel, located in the northern portion of the township, was recently rezoned as an Open Space and Cultural Landscape District. Plans for outdoor events and tours are underway as the Township hopes to increase tourism and a community spirit, while protecting this large piece of land and the wildlife that resides there. This rezoning is seen as "a major step in (our) plans for open space preservation in Hillsborough" - Mayor Sireci.
- ⌘ **Tree Preservation Ordinance** - The Township Committee unanimously passed an ordinance that will establish a special advisory committee to advise the Planning Board on issues related to tree removal. The ordinance will help protect trees from unnecessary removal during a construction project and will help to replant trees elsewhere, should it be necessary to remove trees during a project.