

Taking the Next Step:

Lawrence Township
Municipal Assessment

Executive Summary

February 2004

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Introduction

Picture it: Autumn, 2023, Lawrence Township, New Jersey. Main Street, Lawrenceville is bustling with shoppers, students, and families. One family decides to attend the Historic House Tour, while students take to apple picking at the local orchard just around the corner. After window-shopping along Main Street, shoppers hop on their bicycles to travel across town to the redeveloped Route 1. They leave their bikes at one end of the boulevard to walk up and down the tree-lined sidewalks, grabbing lunch and an ice cream on the way. Music can be heard coming from the Park on the other side of the canal, as residents make their way through the neighborhood to locate the festivities. There is a celebration going on to commemorate the 20th anniversary of parks, open space, and woodlands preserved in the Township. Everyone is celebrating the healthy waterways, the clean air, and a sense of community spirit, as local officials have set up booths to continue generating support and ideas for the incoming administration. At the end of the day, some folks take the southbound bus home to their apartments, picking up a quart of milk at the store on the walk home from the bus stop.

Sound like a Utopia? Maybe. But the issues are real and municipalities, in general, 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, the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association (the Association) had received numerous requests from municipalities who needed 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 Project. This project 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 a strong community to step back and evaluate their goals, policies and strategies and figure out how to connect them with their ultimate vision. Lawrence Township was ready for this challenge and the Association was, in turn, excited to work with such a dedicated and diverse community.

The process started with a collection of survey responses from the municipal officials, staff, and consultants. 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 four themes leads to determining where the vision cannot be implemented by what is on the books. These areas become 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* show where the Township can do further research about that particular area.

This report is a general guide as to what can be done and what has been done in a community to connect goals with implementation and implementation with vision. The results of this analysis for

Lawrence Township are documented in this report, entitled “**Taking the Next Step**”. Outlined below are the 13 strategies to achieving Lawrence Township’s utopia. (Please refer to the report for more detail).

§ **Land Use and Development**

Township Goal: “Retaining and enhancing existing patterns of development rather than encouraging major change in landscape.”

Current Practices: Directing new development and redevelopment to places in relation to transportation and environmental capacities.

Recommendation: Provide ordinances, such as a Mixed-Use Design ordinance, that allows for infill development projects with community design elements and will enhance quality of life.

§ **Business Rte. 1 Redevelopment Area**

Township Goal: Designing and building a boulevard that will enhance pedestrian and bicycle travel, as well as provide a treed median for a more inviting streetscape; Providing redevelopment and regional planning strategies, including mixed-use development.

Current Practices: The majority of Business Rte. 1 is located in the Highway Commercial (HC) district, which allows for a variety of commercial uses that differ from those of the Neighborhood Commercial district.

Recommendations: Implement a redevelopment plan that connects and integrates the surrounding residential areas to the highway commercial corridor.

§ **Stormwater Management**

Township Goal: Create a regional stormwater management plan with adjacent municipalities.

Current Practices: The Land Use Ordinance had language that allows for Best Available Technologies (BATs) to “minimize runoff, increase on-site infiltration, simulate natural drainage systems, and minimize off-site discharge of pollutants to ground and surface water...”

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

§ **Stream Corridor Protection**

Township Goal: “Protect natural features and resources such as... bodies of water worthy of protection for ecological balance and as a counterpoint to the built environment” and “Preserve and enhance stream corridors through Greenways Network using bike and pedestrian paths.”

Current Practices: The Master Plan defines Stream Corridors as the “watercourse or body, flood plain and flood fringe area, and often include freshwater wetlands and in some cases, associated uplands.”

Recommendations: Create and adopt a comprehensive stream corridor ordinance with language protecting water quality and related ecosystems.

§ **Groundwater Protection**

Township Goal: Lawrence Township’s area in particular relies heavily on groundwater supplies and the geology of the area makes recharge difficult. Thus, geological studies in determining the potential for groundwater recharge and therefore, protection of groundwater, must be conducted prior to development.

Current Practices: The Master Plan includes a map of Aquifer Recharge areas that are based on information from the Mercer County Soil Survey.

Recommendations: Adopt additional ordinances and policies to protect groundwater quality.

§ **Woodlands Protection**

Township Goal: Protect individual trees and woodland masses for retaining rural character and for maximizing aquifer recharge. Protect natural features and resources such as woodlands for ecological balance and as a counterpoint to the built environment and protect existing mature trees.

Current Practices: the Land Use Ordinance states its purpose as controlling and regulating excessive removal, cutting, and destruction of trees. It also speaks to preventing conditions that may lead to decreased water quality, air quality, and aquifer recharge. This section has very technical language for tree protection and removal, if necessary.

Recommendations: Create and adopt a Woodlands Protection/Management Plan and Ordinance.

§ **Conservation of Natural Features and Critical Areas**

Township Goals: Protect natural features and resources such as steep slopes, wetlands, and floodplains for ecological balance and as a counterpoint to the built environment. Restrict development in these areas. The conservation element of the Master Plan lists environmentally sensitive areas in the Township.

Current Practices: Although there is no formal Natural Resources Inventory, the Township's Master Plan has excellent documentation of existing critical areas.

Recommendations: Adopt ordinances and land use policies, such as overlay zones and monitoring, to ensure further preservation and protection of wetlands and critical habitats.

§ **Rural Quality**

Township Goals: Retain rural character and historic streetscapes and establish design guidelines for preserving significant views from public rights-of-way by using rural design techniques and standards for low intensity development in identified areas.

Current Practices: Open Space tax—\$345 million bond referendum. Redeveloping commercial core of village with parking, streetscape, signage, lighting, etc to promote historic character.

Recommendations: Adopt individual ordinances, such as conservation easements, that ensure the implementation of rural protection strategies set forth in Master Plan and Conservation Element.

§ **Historic Character**

Township Goals: Retain rural character and historic streetscapes and establish design guidelines for preserving significant views from public rights-of-way by using rural design techniques and standards for low intensity development in identified areas.

Current Practices: Township has a management plan for historic preservation on file.

Recommendations: Adopt individual ordinances, such as a Historic Overlay Zone, that ensure the implementation of historic preservation strategies set forth in Master Plan and Conservation Element.

§ **Construction Practices**

Township Goals: Encourage special precautions be taken to avoid excess removal or destruction of vegetative areas, as well as to control runoff.

Current Practices: The Township's Land Use Ordinance states the purpose of Soil Erosion and Sediment Control as preventing damage to soil and to control runoff, preventing flooding, preserving lands and the existing environment, protecting exposed soils, protecting people and property, and preserving public health, safety and welfare.

Recommendations: Develop construction guidelines that ensure protection of environmental and public health and require these guidelines be consulted with prior to every construction application.

§ **Traffic and Transportation**

Township Goals: Alleviate truck traffic through the Village. Coordinate with county and state organizations to implement strategies now and into the future. Connect communities across major highways.

Current Practices: The Master Plan's Circulation Element gives a good overview of traffic patterns, problem areas, and solutions. The Growth and Redevelopment Committee looks specifically at these issues and their goals parallel those of the Master Plan for this issue.

Recommendations: Create and adopt an ordinance that requires analysis of traffic generated by new development and solutions that minimize congestion.

⌘ **Resident Participation**

Township Goals: Encourage and promote social interaction of groups and individuals to maintain strength of the community.

Current Practices: Township has a well-informed and well-educated public.

Recommendations: Continue to encourage public participation and education through newsletters, workshops, and information sessions with Township officials.

⌘ **Education of Township Officials**

Township Goals: More efficient and economical governmental administration.

Current Practices: Officials are encouraged to expand their expertise and knowledge in order to better educate residents.

Recommendations: Encourage training and site walks for committee members prior to application approvals.

The Association also commends Lawrence Township for their ongoing projects and past accomplishments, which include:

- ⌘ Being recognized as a Tree City 8 years ago;
- ⌘ Embarking on a beautification project in the Eggert's Crossing community that will soon enhance the neighborhood park;
- ⌘ Taking on projects like tree plantings and streambank restorations to get residents involved and aware of their natural surroundings;
- ⌘ Preserving 30% of the land in the Township for parks, recreation, or natural habitat; and
- ⌘ Planning for the Redevelopment of Business Rte. 1 and the adjacent residential areas.

As a catalyst to achieve responsible planning and environmental quality, this report serves as an excellent guide and inspiration for work. 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 funded to help implement.

Ultimately, Lawrence 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 Lawrence Township is achieving the mission of preserving and enhancing the watershed and the communities within it. This report is the next step in creating that utopia.

Acknowledgements

We commend Lawrence Township's leaders and professionals for participating in this program and allowing the Association to evaluate current practices. It is difficult for anyone, whether an individual or a municipality, to have the courage to evaluate current work, to determine where and how to improve a current system, or to 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 Lawrence Township.

Our hope is that Lawrence 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, sensible regional 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 Lawrence a special place to live.

We wish to thank the William Penn and Geraldine R. Dodge Foundations for their generosity in funding this project, and the members of the Town Council, Planning Board, Environmental Resources Committee and staff for their enthusiastic responses to our survey. We would also like to acknowledge the individual input of Councilwoman Pam Mount, Environmental Resources Committee Chair Ken Najjar, Township Planner Andy Link, Health Officer Carol Chamberlain, Township Manager Bill Guhl and all those who responded to the survey. Your time and dedication to this project was greatly appreciated.

Highlights of Your Town

At the start of this assessment, members of the Lawrence 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 experience that is Lawrence Township.

Good Things...

Located in the “heart of Mercer County”, Lawrence Township’s Main St. or Rte. 206, including the homes, churches, and shops is listed on the National and State Historic Register for Historic Places. The Main St. is a unique experience in and of itself and the Township has created specific committees and programs dedicated to protecting this character. This is just one example of the proactive measures taken in the Township to enhance the already charming character, while allowing for commercial and industrial development in the appropriate places. Some other examples of Lawrence’s work includes:

- ⌘ Being recognized as a Tree City 8 years ago, the Township takes pride in the old and new trees throughout the community. With a street tree ordinance in place and efforts to protect mature trees, the Township maintains money in their budget for maintenance and planting.
- ⌘ In the midst of all the surrounding growth and development, Lawrence Township continues to focus on the existing communities and their residents. A beautification project in the Eggert’s Crossing community will soon enhance the neighborhood park, connecting it with the abandoned (but soon to be revived) trolley greenway.
- ⌘ Environmental education and protection has also taken a front seat in the Township. Projects like tree plantings and streambank restorations get residents involved and aware of the natural surroundings within Lawrence Township.
- ⌘ The Township has also preserved many open lands, farmland, and historic properties not directly in the Historic District. Having a Conservation Plan Element and an Open Space language helps to protect and enhance these features. As a result, 30% of the land in the Township is preserved for parks, recreation, or natural habitat.
- ⌘ Planning for the Redevelopment of Business Rte. 1 and the adjacent residential areas. The Township received a \$80,000 grant to rezone and redevelop this corridor and has a Growth and Redevelopment Committee that will oversee this planning process.