

Taking the Next Step:

West Amwell Township
Municipal Assessment

Executive Summary

April 2003

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Introduction

The elected and appointed officials in West Amwell have a challenging task. They must balance natural resource protection with economic prosperity, encourage business, provide residential services, and determine where best to site residential, commercial and agriculture zones in the township. West Amwell Township's leaders also strive to ensure that the needs of current residents are met and that there will be high quality of life for residents in the future. To carry out this daunting task, officials look to their Master Plan to provide the vision for the future and use zoning, policies and ordinances as the tools to ensure the prosperity and health of their township.

The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association (the Association) recognizes the magnitude of the task that municipal leaders face and also realizes that the protection and health of a watershed relies a great deal on the land use laws and policies that govern development. Thus, we developed the Municipal Assessment Project to partner with municipalities to provide an outside evaluation of current practices and support proactive measures that protects the natural environment and ensures the vision in the Master Plan is achieved.

The Association was thrilled when West Amwell Township agreed to partner with us on this project. The Township is a rural community that has, thus far, missed the development boom of the 1990's and early 2000. The community clearly wants to preserve the agricultural, environmental, historical and visual attributes that make this community a unique oasis in central New Jersey. The challenge is in making this vision a reality as development encroaches. By developing a Master Plan that guides both growth and conservation, clearly states their goals and objectives and highlights the vision for the future, West Amwell can move forward in a cohesive manner and begin to implement this vision with the appropriate tools.

The leaders recognize their current position and are actively working to ensure that their community retains its rural character, sense of community and pristine environment. By compiling technical information and hiring expert consultants, updating their Master Plan, and developing an Open Space Plan, the Township is working towards their goals.

Another step in this journey was taken by choosing to participate in the Municipal Assessment Project that takes a comprehensive look at the municipality's vision and the current zoning, ordinances and policies meant to achieve it. The results of this analysis are documented in this report, entitled "Taking the Next Step", that highlights areas where the municipality has set positive examples in current practices and areas where planning strategies, already in place, could be enhanced or where new strategies could be developed.

This report outlines a list of areas where various tools could be implemented to help ensure the goals of West Amwell become a reality. The 11 areas include:

☞ **Master Plan Development**

Township Goals: This Master Plan is intended as a guide for community decision-makers on the public; and private policies and activities needed to steer pending change in West Amwell to a successful outcome

Current Protection: To ensure that this occurs, West Amwell must develop a clear blueprint that lays out the goals and objectives, the specifics of intended development and the strategies necessary for success.

Recommendations: Develop a Master Plan that describes the future of West Amwell Township

⌘ **Protection of Surface and Groundwater**

Township Goals: Protect the quality of environmental resources, especially groundwater. Further, the quality and quantity of groundwater resources should be one of the determinants of future land use plans.

Current Protection: Part V, Article I, Section A (1,2) deals with Stormwater Management and focuses on maintaining natural stream channels, enhancing the quality of surface runoff and protection from flooding.

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

⌘ **Preservation of Rural Quality**

Township Goals: Retain the rural character of West Amwell as shaped by farmland and natural wildlife habitats.

Current Protection: The Township has approved a \$0.04 Open Space Tax and is working to preserve farmland and surrounding open space. The Right to Farm Ordinance (§84-1) lays the foundation for preserving farming.

Recommendations: Adopt additional ordinances and policies to ensure further permanent protection of the Township's rural quality.

⌘ **Protection of Stream Corridors**

Township Goals: Provide for future growth and development but not at the expense of its environmental resources.

Current Protection: Where critical areas do not exist, a vegetative buffer of at least 50 feet on either side of the stream channel shall be established.

Recommendations: Adopt a comprehensive stream corridor ordinance and ensure an explicit description in the Master Plan and Conservation Element.

⌘ **Monitoring and Performance Standards for Septic Systems**

Township Goals: Assure the protection of the natural resources from the effects of improper wastewater disposal.

Improper disposal of sewage effluent can drastically degrade land and water resources.

Current Protection: Individual on-site sewage disposal systems and wells, when proposed by an Applicant and permitted under this Ordinance, shall be designed, tested and installed following the requirements of the WAT Board of Health, its agents, and the applicable State Statutes.

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

⌘ **Protection of Wetlands, Open Space Woodlands, and Wildlife Habitat**

Township Goals: Other features such as floodplains, steep slopes, wetlands, and prime agricultural soils should have protection policies and land use regulations.

Current Protection: Critical habitats are mentioned in Ordinance 01-03 that contains provisions for the disturbance of sloped areas, stream corridors and cluster development.

Recommendations: Adopt additional ordinances and land use policies to ensure further preservation and protection of wetlands, open space, woodlands, and wildlife habitats.

⌘ **Retaining a Sense of Community**

Township Goals: Retain the sense of community - "small-scale schools, country roads, and villages."

Current Protection: Historic Preservation Committee has completed a pictorial inventory of historic sites, a video that interviews Township citizens, participated in the County Fair, organized a tour of historic homes and has developed note cards, mugs and throws depicting the community of the Township..

Recommendations: Implement a plan that directs mixed-use development within village centers and develops clear design standards.

☞ **Specific Construction Guidelines**

Township Goals: To develop standards to ensure good visual quality and design for all land use categories.

Current Protection: Currently, West Amwell has checklists for pending development applications, a soil erosion and sediment control ordinance and requires preliminary site sketches.

Recommendations: Develop construction guidelines that ensure protection of environmental and public health.

☞ **Preservation and Protection of Historic Structures, Lands and Views**

Township Goals: To identify and protect historic sites, retain a sense of continuous community, and enhance Mt. Airy and Rocktown as community centers.

Current Protection: The Historic Preservation Committee advises the Planning Board on issues, as needed.

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

☞ **Resident Participation**

Township Goals: To increase public participation and awareness to preserve the local environment they care so deeply about.

Current Protection: The Township has developed a website, distributes a yearly newsletter, mailed notices inviting input in the Master Plan reexamination and developed news bulletins to help highlight issues of concern.

Recommendations: Continue to encourage public participation

☞ **Knowledge Base of Municipal Officials**

Township Goals: To increase expertise and understanding of the potential for poor planning to lead to deteriorating communities and environmental health.

Current Protection: Municipal officials receive invitations to workshops and programs that will help increase this understanding.

Recommendations: Encourage training and site walks for committee members.

The document is meant to be an interim step in the implementation of practices that work to balance land use planning with environmental protection. After the Township prioritizes the areas they would like to develop, the Association will provide support for implementation.

Acknowledgements

We commend West Amwell's leaders in 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, determine where and how to improve current systems or begin to develop a new strategy. We want the readers of this report to look at not only what can be done, but also what has already been accomplished in West Amwell.

Our hope is that West Amwell will learn from and expand on the experiences, challenges, and successes of surrounding municipalities, keeping in mind that zoning and policies should correspond with surrounding areas 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 that makes West Amwell 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 Township Committee, Planning Board, Environmental Commission and staff for their enthusiastic responses to our Framework Questions. We would also like to acknowledge the individual input of Peter Buchsbaum, Nancy Palladino, Betty Jane Hunt, Randy Hoagland and Robert Clerico for their time in helping us collect the necessary information.

Highlights of Your Town

When beginning this assessment, members of the West Amwell Township Committee, Planning Board, and Environmental Commission 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 character that is West Amwell Township.

Good Things...

The Township has a Historic Preservation Committee that is devoted to cataloging and passing on information about West Amwell's past. Mt. Airy and Rocktown villages are examples of the detailed documentation regarding building sites and history that have been collected. The Township also employs numerous activities that contribute to the health of the environment and to sound planning strategies. Some of those current practices include:

- ⊗ Working to create a Master Plan that is intended as a guide for community decision-makers on the public, and private policies and activities needed to steer pending change in West Amwell to a successful outcome.
- ⊗ The Township's natural resources protection policy works to preserve the ecological, agricultural, and scenic resources.
- ⊗ Making educational material about septic system maintenance for residents available at the municipal building.
- ⊗ Providing language regarding critical habitats in an ordinance that contains provisions for the disturbance of sloped areas, stream corridors and cluster development.
- ⊗ The Township has an historic district that overlays the area of Mt. Airy.
- ⊗ Using a checklist for pending development applications, as well as a soil erosion and sediment control ordinance and requiring preliminary site sketches.
- ⊗ The Historic Preservation Committee has done a pictorial inventory of historical sites, completed video interviews, participated in the County Fair and conducted historic homes tour.
- ⊗ The Township has developed a website, distributes a yearly newsletter, mailed notices inviting input in the Master Plan reexamination and developed news bulletins to help highlight issues of concern.
- ⊗ The Township also has enforced a \$0.04 tax rate for open space and an Open Space Committee to oversee its distribution.

West Amwell Township has participated in the fact finding of Matt Mulhall's Hydrogeological Report that describes the nature of the Township's (and surrounding municipalities) hydrogeological makeup. This information is very useful in determining necessary actions to preserve water quality and quantity.

In the midst of all the surrounding growth and development, West Amwell Township has managed to maintain a rural character. The Township has 8,570 acres of assessed farmland to support farming as a viable business. Critical habitats have also taken a front seat as 71% of West Amwell's land use is still in Forest and Wetlands.