

BERGEN COUNTY MASTER PLAN



Northeastern Visioning Workshop

November 14, 2009

Northern Valley Regional High School — Demarest

Summary

Table 1 – Economic Vitality

Most of the session focused on issues particular to Woodcliff Lakes and the immediate area, due to the participants at this table, which also offered some perspective on county-wide economic development issues. In general, there was more concern with maintaining what currently exists and making it work more efficiently.

Three main impediments to further economic growth were cited:

- Deficiencies in East-West transportation, particularly north of Route 4, was offered as the primary infrastructure barrier. Limited access to Westchester and northern Manhattan over I-287 and Tappan Zee were also mentioned, as was overall congestion in the county.
- High housing costs and taxes were seen as limiting opportunities for young professionals in Woodcliff Lakes, and an endemic problem throughout the county.
- Few areas were seen as having more room for development. Paramus is a “logjam” and much of the remainder of the county is perceived as fully developed. The one area identified as having additional growth potential is the northern section of Route 17, particularly the former Ford plant.

Economic Issues in Woodcliff Lake

- The main focus was on the commercial corridor extending from Woodcliff Lakes into Montvale. In general, participants felt that this employment center is in good shape, particularly in Woodcliff Lakes. It was noted that 100 commercial tenants were added in the last 15 years, and that corporate anchors such as BMW and KPMG were showing no signs of leaving. Any corporate relocations, it was believed, would be driven more by macroeconomic forces than local deficiencies. However, both housing costs and transportation were cited as worrisome:

- A large house costs about \$800K, out of reach for most younger accountants, doctors, etc. There is little rental housing, and not much land appropriate for new housing development. Cost of living is a major barrier, and it's hard to see how young, college-educated professionals can live in the area.
- Traffic congestion is an issue, particularly in Montvale. There are no easy solutions, although the jitney service described below is one way to encourage transit use.
- Most of the attention was on retention, rather than new growth. Limits to growth included the following:
 - There is almost no space perceived as appropriate for new commercial development. The area developed in the early 1970s because of cheap farmland along with a high quality of life for corporate executives and relatively affordable housing for workers. None of that is left.
 - Few opportunities were seen for infill or redevelopment. Some of the office space in Montvale needs to be refurbished and possibly reused, but most in Woodcliff Lakes is OK.
 - Opportunities for new housing were seen as limited, although some opportunities exist along Broadway closer to the train. These could include apartments over stores as well as townhouses. However, these opportunities were seen as limited. There is resistance to higher densities, basically anything over 6 units per acre.

Infrastructure Needs

- A jitney service providing access from the commercial core to the Woodcliff Lakes train station is considered a high priority. There have been discussions with the county and local corporations and the jitney seems the only way to provide a transit connection between the train and employment centers. Station parking is limited and could get worse if gas prices rise.
- Road widenings are needed at Kinderkamack and Knickerbocker Roads.
- No more exits should be built on the Parkway.
- There are already bottlenecks at grade crossings, so no freight should be permitted on the train line.
- Waterway/reservoir flooding is an issue that requires more attention and resources.

Other Issues

- COAH requirements are seen as unrealistic and absorbing an inordinate amount of time and local resources. COAH mandates are perceived to lead to "ghettoization" of low-income residents and a flight of current residents from the area.

- The regional school system is unfair to Woodcliff Lakes and Montvale, costing them more in property taxes even though they send fewer students.
- The Pascack Valley Hospital is needed and should be reopened. There is no other full-service hospital nearby.

Table 2 – Open Space, Parks and Recreation and Natural Systems

Public Access to River Corridors

- Sierra Club is not in favor of a lot of access to riverfronts due to the presence of bird habitat.
- The general consensus was to provide enough access to appreciate the rivers but not so much as to impact environmental resources.
 - The goal should be to provide opportunities for waterborne recreation as well as to increase visibility of the waterway.
 - There was concern that expanded recreational opportunities especially along greenways, might damage waterways and habitat.
 - The County should be judicious in choosing areas for recreational opportunities and combine historic preservation, recreation and educational activities.
- The available access points should be better publicized.
 - The boathouse near Route 4 should be restored for canoe and kayak access.

Linear Pathways Along River Corridors

- There is (or is proposed) a paved pathway along the Hackensack River from Route 4 North. A pathway in this area is acceptable and endorsed. There was discussion of restoring a boathouse near New Bridge Landing.
- Sierra Club does not support riverfront access between New Milford Avenue and Oradell Avenue in New Milford and Oradell Boroughs due to valuable bird habitat.
- New pathways along rivers in urbanized areas should be proposed and created through redevelopment areas, ie along the Hackensack River south of Route 4.

Development on Lands Adjacent to Reservoirs

- There is a need to better establish the economic value assigned to the preservation of natural resources. ANJEC has a methodology to quantify the economic value of open space.
- Better protection of water quality in reservoirs is very important to maintain clean water and also reduce the costs of removing pollutants from drinking water.

Non-Profit Boards

- A good idea as long as they are accountable to County.
- The County should support a network of "Friends of" groups which could raise money for projects that would not strain taxes. The groups would remain accountable to the County.
- Use of grants for open space and recreation and where the grants go should be directed by the Master Plan. There was a sense that too much money goes toward active recreation and not enough toward open space preservation.
- Master Plan needs clarity and structured goals for open space preservation (habitat, recreation, etc).
- Passive lands are not currently recognized as having a tangible value.

Developer Contributions

- A good idea. Developers should contribute funds or contribute in some other fashion towards recreation needs.

Bergen County Recreation Center or Aquatic Center

- There are existing recreation centers that could better coordinate activities and share services. There is no need for a new County Center. YMCAs are limited in their resources.
- The County should evaluate existing resources and create a network of shared resources so towns do not provide duplicate facilities when they already exist within close proximity.

Public Space Within ¼ or ½ Mile of Every Resident

- Everyone should have a park within ¼ mile walking distance of their home.

Global Warming/Green Infrastructure

- There was considerable discussion about "oversized" residences and excessive impervious coverage. The public needs to be educated about the negative impacts of too much impervious coverage.
- In general, the County should make the public aware of climate change and green issues, with a focus on what actions individuals can take. The County should help municipalities educate the public, establish policies and perhaps provide incentives.

Preservation of Farmland

- Farms should be preserved as long as they are really used as farms and not as pseudo farms for tax purposes.

- The farmland assessment minimum requirement of \$500 in income and 5 acres is antiquated. The law allows for major tax incentives for farms of an insignificant size. How can the county re-evaluate its farmland preservation program and tools to better achieve the goals of food access and community participation?
- Restrictions should be placed on the type of farming allowed on preserved farms, limiting them to traditional farming or community farming.
- There should be a mechanism to convert preserved farms to open space if farming is no longer viable.
- Several active farms which are possible candidates for preservation were identified on the open space map. Farms surrounding reservoirs should be prioritized.
- Preserved agriculture should be better tied to the community through community supported agriculture, farm stands, farmers markets, community gardens, etc. (There is a farm in Closter where you can pick-your-own produce).

Shade Trees

- Shade trees in many communities are reaching the end of their life span; a "tree crisis" is on the horizon. This creates an opportunity to plant more sustainable species.
- Every municipality should have a shade tree commission (not committee) to apply for grants and advise on appropriate shade trees for planting.
- The County should support an environmental commission in every town and help educate municipal officials about the advantages of different types of trees.
- Too many male trees are planted to avoid the fruit borne by female trees and the mess that results. The large number of male trees also helps explain why there is so much pollen. There should be a better balance.
- Utility companies must be better stewards of trees.

Sidewalks and Bicycle Paths

- Bike lanes should be added to roads, rather than new paths.
- To encourage more biking, an appropriate bike infrastructure – conveniently located bike racks, bike lockers, showers at work and so forth – is needed.
- Generally in favor of continuous sidewalks on at least one side of road.

Green Infrastructure / Solar Energy

- The County should establish policies supporting LEED building, including municipal participation and tax breaks for LEED buildings.

- Solar energy should be placed on top of buildings, not in public open space.
- Use permeable pavements.
- Simple things like white roofs on large buildings would help to reflect heat.
- Mixed feelings regarding wind energy, which is seen as having the potential to threaten wildlife and ruin landscapes.

Table 3 - Transportation

Transit

The work session on regional transportation focused mostly on improving transit alternatives for commuters destined for jobs in New York City and within Bergen County. There were some specific examples of Northeastern deficiencies given, but most of the discussion was at the County level. The group members felt improved transit options that made transit more convenient to riders would be more effective in reducing road congestion than any approach that focused on the road system. Residents did note that east/west mobility in the County and sub-region was a major problem and that some transit improvements could potentially worsen these conditions, e.g. increased delays at at-grade rail crossings. They also recognized that current problems cannot be solved in the immediate future and the benefits from increased investments in transit will require a period of 5 to 10 years or longer to be fully realized.

The participants were either municipal/county office holders or planning professionals.

- All group members supported the Northern Branch extension of the Hudson Bergen Light Rail line, which will have eight new stations in Bergen County. NJ Transit has been working on the Environmental Impact Statement with the Federal Transit Agency. There was concern about how people would access the new service and about parking at the stations. It was suggested that NJ Transit should continue to look at extending the line North beyond Tenafly to Closter, as this might help reduce the number of commuters that would drive to terminus to access the light rail. Current forecasts show little potential ridership for service north of Tenafly.

Some felt the demographic analysis should be redone to determine whether an extension is warranted. NJT mentioned that their Environmental Impact Statement will use updated socio economic and demographic data and generate ridership estimates. The general consensus from the group was that the demographics probably still do not support an extension past Tenafly. However, NJ Transit should consider this as a phase 2. One complicating factor is that the northern segment beyond the state line in Rockland County, New York has been converted to a trail and the tracks have since been removed.

- Speed up bus service, increase frequency and improve coverage. Most agreed that buses on the Palisades Interstate Parkway would improve service to NYC, mostly to the George Washington Bridge Bus Station. There was little reaction to the possibility of Bus Rapid Transit in Bergen and the preferential treatments on local

roads that would be required to speed up bus service.

Participants said they would take local bus service to NYC instead of driving to a park-n-ride or getting dropped-off at the George Washington Bridge if bus service was more frequent. Many of the existing local bus services in the north have headways of 30 minutes or more.

Existing bus network coverage and the location of bus stops was also discussed. One participant explained that their partner could not commute to work in Bergen County, because although there is a bus stop next to their residence, there is no stop close to where this person works, and although the bus drives past the office the driver is not allowed to stop.

- NJ Transit should analyze existing rail schedules and look for opportunities to improve reverse commutation, especially on the Pascack Valley, but also on the Bergen-Main Line. Not everyone is destined to NYC for work (the numbers back that up) and efforts should be made to improve reverse-peak transit service for commuters within the county and for those who commute to the county from other parts of NJ and NY, as well as intra-county commuters. In Montvale employers would like to create a feeder service from the Pascack Valley station on Grand Avenue to the major office parks nearby. The tri-borough area in general (Montvale, Park Ridge, Woodcliff Lake) has a large reverse commuter population, with over 25,000 jobs in corporate offices and a swelling daytime population. Most of these commuters travel from the south by car on the Garden State Parkway. The current schedules of reverse commuter trains on the Pascack Valley line does not provide convenient service to reverse commuters.
- The possibility of engaging Meadowlink -- Bergen's Transportation Management Association -- to extend para-transit services to northern Bergen was considered. This might be helpful with the commuter issues in the tri-Borough area. Local corporate employers are said to be keen to participate and contribute. This could be a candidate for the NJTPA shuttle program if NJ Transit is able to adjust the reverse train schedules to better match business hours.
- In the long-term, NJ Transit should consider adding additional sidings or double-tracking the Pascack Valley line. This would create the operational flexibility to improve service dramatically in the reverse direction.
- Participants said taking a bus to the George Washington Bridge Bus Terminal to access midtown or northern Manhattan is not as far fetched now as in the past. Subway service (A train) from the station to the rest of the City has improved over the years; northern county residents tend to drive to the bridge and catch a bus over to the station and then connect to the subway. Better connections to the NYC transit system would help those northeast Bergen residents that commute to northern Manhattan, to work primarily in health care and higher education.
- Access to transit by the physically challenged was mentioned. It was considered very difficult (if not impossible) to access Manhattan in a wheel chair.
- The potential benefits of allowing bus service on the Palisades Interstate Parkway were discussed, although the participants were not sure how receptive the Parkway

Authority would be to this proposal. There was also concern that the geometry of the ramps to the George Washington Bridge from the Palisades might prevent or make it more difficult for buses to navigate this route. Work is currently underway by the Port Authority to redesign these approaches to the bridge; there might be an opportunity to make them more “bus friendly.” NJ Transit mentioned the idea of a George Washington Bridge express bus lane; the group was guardedly supportive.

- “Last mile” and transit parking issues – the need for feeder bus/shuttle services from train stations to local employment centers were discussed at-length and a priority for a number of participants. The need also exists to provide feeders from surrounding towns without rail service to stations. For example, the Westwood station is running out of parking and adding parking alone would increase traffic around the station. The community is concerned about congestion and the resulting environmental impacts. A feeder service from the surrounding municipalities that are not currently served by commuter rail was proposed as a solution.
- Many county residents are generally satisfied with existing express bus service to NYC and expanding commuter rail access to the City might not be a cost-effective proposal. Improved express bus service in Teaneck (Teaneck Armory on Teaneck Road) is an example where higher frequency of service has made this an attractive alternative.
- The Garden State Parkway and Route 17 are potential transit-ways; preferential treatments for transit should be considered and possibly park & ride facilities.
- While all felt that improving transit service was paramount, there was concern about worsening east/west traffic at railroad grade crossings, as a result of increases in both passenger and freight rail service. The solution would be to eliminate at-grade crossings within major east/west corridors but the costs associated with this have yet to be estimated.
- The need for more and better transit service to sports facilities was mentioned.
- Greater participation in the state’s Safe Routes to School program was mentioned as a way to alleviate peak school traffic.
- The increased popularity of transit-oriented development was acknowledged as were the benefits of mixed-use zoning. However in many towns there is resistance to taller buildings and a preference for three and four story buildings. Many towns are also still ambivalent about transit-oriented development, which they equate with increased density and traffic and which triggers additional affordable housing requirements which are difficult to satisfy.

Vehicular Transportation

- A countywide way-finding and signage program would be helpful.
- It was suggested that the County work with the Access Management Division of NJDOT to develop access management plans for Route 17 and Route 4 to improve mobility and safety along these two very busy corridors.

- Corridor studies are valuable – the Kinderkamack Road corridor study is an example.
- A significant amount of work needs to be done with respect to improved signal coordination -- a big problem in Bergen County. With recent legislative changes this relatively simple and inexpensive work can now be done locally as NJDOT no longer has jurisdiction over non-state highway signals. Better signal coordination can significantly improve roadway performance and alleviate congestion hot-spots.
- Participants generally favored slower speeds on local roads.
- Multiple jurisdictions pose significant challenges in terms of coordinating transportation improvements.
- Signal improvements require significant work to comply with standards.
- The county should consider creating a traffic signal operations center.
- Transportation Improvement Districts may be a useful tool for municipalities that anticipate significant new development or redevelopment.
- The county should revisit and reconsider the county route numbering system.
- The creation of “quiet zones” along active rail corridors should be encouraged.
- Carpooling and vanpooling should be encouraged.
- The feasibility of a roadway safety audit should be explored.
- Participation in the Safe Routes to Schools program is encouraged.

Table 4 - Land Use, Housing and Neighborhoods

Growth

- Bergen County is really three different Counties as far as development types.
- Growth is occurring around transit and this trend is expected to continue and intensify. But the term Transit Village is “tainted” – better call it something else.
- Four-story development is a “four letter word”; three-story development is only possible in downtowns.
- Municipalities should take an active lead with respect to future development. The County should take the lead with respect to new jitney and local circulator services.
- COAH:
 - The vacant land analysis is faulty.
 - The County should provide assistance in building/ maintaining affordable units.

- o The County should take the lead on helping municipalities meet COAH requirements.
 - o The County should produce detailed demographic projections.
- How can we incentivize builders to build more affordable housing?
- Some participants favored restoring Regional Contribution Agreements.
- The County should create more opportunities for mayors to work together and with the county. There should be monthly sub-county meetings between freeholders, mayors and administrators.
 - o The County should be seen as a partner with municipalities for development.
 - o The meetings could become a forum for how the County can address transportation issues.

Criteria for Development

- Available space trumps all other issues.
- Address parking and traffic issues.
- Build quality of life features into development.
- Make new development attractive to families.
- Maintain low density attributes that are attractive.
- Community facilities (parks, recreation, schools) must be available.
- Municipalities are targeting 2 bedroom housing units.

Table 5 - Property Taxes and Shared Services

The County's role should be to:

- BUILD TRUST on the "smaller things," leading to increased support on the "big ticket" shared services issues, such as school districts or emergency services;
- educate and facilitate; and
- provide economic incentives where appropriate to get things moving.

"The Art of the Possible" -- things the County does well:

- Shared sewer trucks.
- Health department services.
- Cooperative bidding road program.
- Senior van shuttle.
- Lending through the Bergen County Improvement Authority.

How can the County improve? Facilitate/consolidate:

- Facilitate leaf removal (support/replicate efforts of Pascack Valley Managers Association);
- Common permitting for de-snagging streams;
- Brine distribution;

- Bicycle/pedestrian best practices (sidewalk inventory, etc.); provide support for moving away from the “not in the NJDOT manual, therefore can’t be done” mentality;
- COAH clearinghouse;
- Open space acquisition along waterways; and
- Improve transportation options to transit stations.

Table 6 - Water, Sewer, Utilities, Energy Infrastructure

- The County should undertake a comprehensive environmental resource inventory.
- The County should prepare a Countywide build-out analysis, based on existing zoning and calculate the carrying capacity of the County as a whole.
- Green infrastructure -- street trees intercept rainwater and enrich home values.
- Use County capital funds to reduce CSOs (combined sewer overflows) and improve aging sewage infrastructure in existing communities.
- Population and housing density should maintain the variety of Bergen County. Reject a “one size fits all” solution.
- Open space should be increased along the riverfront.
- Public access to the waterfront:
 - Walkways are not always the best use.
 - Avoid inappropriate development on riverfront.
 - Avoid overcrowding.
 - Access should be site specific.
- The County’s role should be to act as facilitator, not as an authority.
- The County should lead by example in terms of energy conservation and renewable energy:
 - Solar roof on Courthouse parking garage
 - Green roofs
 - White roofs
 - Water use reduction and recycling
 - County wide bio-diesel collection
 - County fleet conversion
 - Open space should not be used for renewable energy generation.
- The County Master Plan should establish limits to impervious surfaces in redevelopment projects.

Table 7 - Arts, Culture and Historic Resources

- A booklet — similar to the open space booklet developed by the County and Hackensack Riverkeeper — should be developed, listing countywide arts and cultural resources:
 - Better publicize existing festivals.
 - Subdivide the County into smaller sub-regions/ groups of municipalities to better promote events in municipalities?
 - “Arts in the Park” — sponsored by County.
- Need better planning to more effectively integrate arts, culture and historic resources with downtown revitalization and redevelopment.
- In Asheville, North Carolina a non-profit group promotes and publicizes arts and cultural events very effectively. This model should be evaluated and possibly replicated by the County.
- Need to enhance the “image” of cultural activities.
- Better promote Asian cultural festivals and activities:
 - Korean Thanksgiving.
 - West meets East Festival in Leonia.
 - A site is needed for the Korean Centennial Memorial at Overpeck Park.
- County arts and culture grants are tiny and require huge bureaucracy — not worth the administrative costs.
 - The County should promote a greater transparency in the way funds for arts and culture are allocated.
 - Need to diversify sources of funding and financing for arts and culture.
 - Need to explore innovative funding techniques -- Certificates of Participation and Municipal Bond Financing are being used throughout New Jersey to fund projects.
- The County should create the Bergen equivalent of Liberty Science Center.
- PSEG and United Water have been supportive of the arts and culture.
- The Manhattan draw for arts, culture and entertainment is hard to compete with.