

# BERGEN COUNTY MASTER PLAN



## Southern Visioning Workshop

December 5, 2009

Bergen County Administration Building, Hackensack

### Summary

#### Table I — Economic Vitality

There were 6 participants at the table, half of them former mayors and representatives from hospitals in the County.

The participants were asked to introduce themselves and identify the biggest issue for economic vitality in the County. The following views were expressed:

- The conversion of industrial activities to residential – it was felt that the county needed more (not less) industries and that the conversion of industrial lands to residential was detrimental to the well being of the county’s economy.
- Health issues were identified as the most pressing need, especially how residents access medical services.
- The economic vitality of Downtowns -- of special concern were the Blue Laws and the fact that you can’t shop on Sundays – as well as how to create urban redevelopment that helps ailing municipalities.
- The number of hospital beds per capita in the county and how to strengthen medical economic activities, which are major employers in the County.
- Healthy Main Streets and the need to “think out of the box” to make sure they are redeveloped and made thriving again.
- The Asian community and specifically the Korean population in the County, and how to better integrate these minority communities into the mainstream of economic activities in the County.

After the introductions and statements of major issues an open ended discussion took place regarding the questions outlined in the briefing book. Ideas expressed in this stage of discussion included:

- Health care industry jobs are very important for the county and hospitals are major employers. Facilities such as the Hackensack Cancer Center show how the health industry is a major pillar of the economy.
- The need to provide day care centers to support workers is an important type of public service to support the labor force.
- With the advent of health care reform there are nascent opportunities for gaining more economic activities given the strong medical presence in the County. There could be opportunities for expansion of jobs by leveraging the proposed federal changes in insurance and provision of health services.
- Hospitals need to provide more services to serve the community and those activities could generate employment and foster a better relationships between the facilities and residents.
- The need to encourage a transition of industrial activities to “green industries” was indentified as another area of potential growth for the County’s economy. Green industries could be a solution for the transition of industrial economic activities into the new century. It was pointed out that industrial lands have been redeveloped first as office uses and more recently as mixed use developments. These trends were seen as an example of the push for activities that brought more taxes to the detriment of the industrial basis of the economy. It was proposed that instead of zoning and developing mixed use activities incentives should be put in place for growing new types of industries.
- The group felt that health care was the basis of the economy in Bergen County, especially looking at the data presented in the briefing book.
- The need to “spin off” health care jobs building on the large number of health facilities was also identified as a potential economic strategy.
- As a matter of general policy it was stressed by the whole group that the appropriate economic role for the County was not to identify what types of jobs to locate in specific areas but to identify specific incentives and make them available to municipalities for them to decide what economic activities to attract. The strong “home rule” relation in New Jersey makes it important to let municipalities decide, and the role of the county should be to provide tools. In this respect the top priority is “what should be the incentives provided by the County to empower municipalities to attract jobs, industries and businesses”. It was stressed that targeted development by the County goes against home rule, and that the County should not dictate industrial activities. Economic policy should not be top down from the county to municipalities.
- Another idea was to reduce tax rates to nonprofits or ensure that nonprofits such as hospitals don’t get taxed through expansion of taxes to other economic activities. The value of nonprofits is relevant to the economic success of Bergen County, and the county shouldn’t tax nonprofits as a solution to revenue needs.

- The establishment of payments in lieu of taxes should be explored as an economic development finance tool.
- The next topic of discussion was the “Blue Laws”. Since small businesses and the self employed constitute the largest sector of the economy there should be another referendum to address the impact of these laws given that downtowns suffer by this policy. A question was raised about the impact of blue laws on business attraction and a suggestion was raised to conduct research to solve this question to identify if the laws impact business attraction. At the same time it was also asked if roads would be more crowded if you repeal the Blue Laws. The need to rationalize these laws was identified by the whole group as a compromise between repealing them and continuing them. Issues such as church attendance are also important for communities and the impact of repealing the laws could be a problem.
- The strategic location of Bergen County in the region given its proximity to Manhattan was also stressed as a competitive advantage that could be leveraged by economic planning. Specific economic activities to be leveraged are office buildings, given that offices are more appropriate than manufacturing.
- Asian immigration was identified as a positive trend in the County given that it has increased the labor force.
- There have been a lot of businesses lost in the last year and a specific policy for business attraction and retention needs to be put forward.
- Another economic strategy identified was international business attraction given the importance of globalization. It was felt that taking globalization as an opportunity for creating new businesses could be another vehicle for economic growth.
- High land costs and high taxes were identified as barriers in the county for new businesses.
- Incentives should be targeted including taxes, deferred tax payments, programs to reduce the cost of operations and opening new businesses.
- The need to study the competitive position of the county was stressed by the whole group to better inform decisions for economic planning. This should be complemented by a marketing plan for Bergen County that aims to attract and retain businesses.
- The relationship between South Korea and Bergen County should be explored as a potential avenue for economic vitality. Attraction of new talent would be an important factor in leveraging this existing relation given the demographic composition of the county and the large presence of South Koreans in the area. Attraction of Korean students to the County’s educational facilities could be another opportunity.
- The need to better train the labor force in research and development and the retail sector of the economy was identified as a possible tool for economic development.
- The need to better leverage arts and culture activities in downtowns was identified as a potential economic strategy.

- Needed improvements to intra-county mobility were identified as a major economic factor. The current barriers to intra-county mobility compromise further economic prosperity.
- Potential partnerships between medical institutions in the County and “Ivy League” schools could create new educational and economic opportunities for development. Another idea would be to create another big university of high standards in the County.

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

The following items were discussed at this table:

- No new development should take place along Bergen County’s waterways.
- Make preservation of natural areas and pristine open space areas along waterways a priority. Restore degraded river corridors to enhance ecological values, mitigate flooding impact and storm water quality.
- Do not develop natural areas, particularly those along waterways, for active recreation facilities, parking lots, walking paths, roads or other disturbance including pavers. All County parklands should be analyzed and boundaries should be drawn around park areas that are environmentally sensitive.
- Overpeck County Park was a major point of contention. There is a proposal involving a 40-space parking lot, the removal of trees for ball fields, and a road through the park which could become a traffic cut-through. The conflict is over the County’s view that Overpeck Park should be developed as Bergen County’s central park.
- Another issue is the County’s proposal for a trail along the Hackensack River. The group said that north of Route 4 the river corridor is largely undisturbed -- either undeveloped open space or densely vegetated residential backyards. The river corridor north of Route 4 should not be disturbed for the proposed path; the area should be left as a natural area.
- Reclaimed brownfield sites and areas that are not environmentally sensitive should be used for development of new recreation facilities.
- The County should audit the Hackensack River watershed and prepare a regional storm water and flood plain management plan. It was suggested the original 1969 Hackensack Meadowlands Master Plan, whose watershed management aspects were rejected by certain key municipalities, should be used as a model for this study. As the only agency with the ability to control drainage, the County should play a strong role in storm water, floodplain management and associated land use control such as limiting steep slope and headwater area disturbance using the County’s powers to regulate drainage.
- The mission and function of the County Parks Department should be expanded to include natural resource protection. The department should add environmental scientists and botanists to advise on development constraints and environmental education. County Parks should be viewed both in terms of recreation and as natural areas, especially in a County where the amount of open space is limited.

- It was recommended that a citizen advisory committee -- different from the Trust Fund committee -- be formed. This group would be briefed by environmental scientists to assure that plans with a preservation aspect are implemented.

### **Table 3 – Transportation**

The group stated that Transportation impacts various aspects of society including land use, economic vitality, public health (obesity -- because people don't walk enough), and the environment (climate change and excessive use of oil). The following comments were made:

#### General:

- Most gas is used for trips of ten miles or less.
- There is [too much] reliance on the automobile.
- Roads were built to 1950's specifications and are too narrow.
- County roads were built out of farm roads and tend to be too narrow.
- Most people in Bergen County drive; need to give people options so they are not forced to drive.
- Limited access highways should not serve only autos and trucks. There should be some form of public transportation there.
- Transit is very important to southern Bergen County. People would like to use transit when they can. But parking is the way to facilitate mass transit.
- Transit needs to be improved to be more reliable, safe, clean and economical.
- All roads and rails lead to New York City and all shopping is in Paramus, [transit] options for other trips such as school and shopping need to be available.
- The transportation system focuses too much on commuting and New York City. It needs to be better east-west, intra-county, and to shopping and cultural resources.
- Interconnectivity of the transit system is needed in payment systems. Fare integration is needed.
- Better mode integration is needed.
- Better transit access is needed.
- The George Washington Bridge was designed to carry trains on the second level.

#### Rail Transit

- The ARC project is desperately needed.

- The proposed service on the Northern Branch will not run late enough into the evening for riders to take excursion trips into NYC. NJ Transit should extend the proposed service hours.
- NJ Transit should electrify the Pascack Valley Line.
- Better mode integration and feeder service is generally needed at train stations.
- The forthcoming Passaic-Bergen (cross-county) Line has the possibility to serve as a good east/west connector in the county, but as currently planned it will not have good connections with the Pascack Valley Line and not enough stations are currently anticipated.
- Why is the Cross-County Line proceeding with a lack of stations in Bergen County? Transfers cannot be done. It is a “white elephant”.
- Cross-County Line is a “building block” for east-west movement in the future. It can be an important link.
- Bergen county towns -- specifically Rochelle Park and Saddle Brook -- did not express an interest in stations along this line. Hackensack wanted a station near the hospital but not near Essex Street Station.
- Hackensack does not support the currently proposed rail stops on the Cross-County Line because it is perceived that they will not bring economic benefits.
- A jitney is needed to make the HMUC stop on the Cross-County Line work better.
- NJ Transit should electrify Bergen County rail lines to make them better and faster than diesel, and more like NJ Transit’s Morris-Essex line, where there is better service.
- Light Rail is too expensive.
- The West Shore Line is choking with freight and there is little public support for opening it up to commuter rail. The greatest potential is to include Rockland County. There are two great stations planned for Teaneck and a better way should be found to get more riders on the line.
- Fort Lee Road has heavy congestion. Most residents are in favor of transit, just not a parking deck on parkland for a station.
- Parking should be limited in Oradell -- more centralized and integrated with transit feeder service so people from other areas can get to the station. More trains may be justified.

#### Amtrak

- Amtrak should stop at Secaucus Junction to provide access from the I I connecting lines without having to go to Newark or New York, giving Pascack Valley residents access to Philadelphia and Washington, DC.
- Amtrak doesn’t want to slow trains by stopping at Secaucus -- it is trying to eliminate stops to speed up trains, but there is no other reason preventing Amtrak from stopping there.

#### Bus Service

- Improved bus service is needed – the XBL is important and yet insufficient to get commuters into NYC from Bergen County. The XBL is at capacity.

- Bus Service needs to be clean, relatively fast, convenient and frequent.
- The County should explore BRT service along Routes 4 and 17 as well as to the Meadowlands (Xanadu). BRT lines should be focused along major population and employment corridors.
- As a general principal, new BRT service should be identified where there is a high volume of buses/traffic and where speeds are slow. This includes the river towns (Hudson and Passaic rivers), including Hackensack, Garfield and S. Hackensack.
- Enhanced jitney services that can be used to provide feeder services to the Main/Bergen and Pascack Valley lines should be explored.
- Suburban “cross town” green routes are needed.
- Buses do not run frequently enough in the Pascack Valley. Buses need to be safe, clean, fast and frequent.
- There is not enough parking at the Garden State Parkway Park and Ride lot in Paramus.
- Buses will always be slower than driving because they run in the same traffic and must make stops. Buses could overcome traffic congestion if they had their own right-of-way.
- Bus loading should be sped up.
- Once you get off a bus, where do you go? Bike racks, lockers are needed to get you the “last mile” to your destination.
- Buses need to move faster going up to the George Washington Bridge from Leonia.
- There are two kinds of bus riders – New York City commuters and bus dependent.
- There are three areas that are “high-density clusters” of bus service; Hackensack, the towns on top of the Palisades along the Hudson, and the Garfield/Wallington area.
- Bus route data from Coach USA/Red & Tan is needed.
- BRT could work on a route parallel to the NY S &W.
- BRT should run the entire length of Route 17 and Route 4. On Route 17, it should run from the Ramsey Station. Is it possible to take a traffic lane for BRT? The shoulder could be used.
- A BRT network for the County would cost about \$350 million. It is supported by the Sierra Club.

Shuttles/Jitneys:

- Jitney buses run to and from north Hudson County and on Bergenline Avenue and Route 4. It is not known if they are insured.
- NJTPA is doing a study of jitneys.
- Federal money should be used to hire drivers.
- TMAs such as Meadowlink should use jitneys to provide better feeder services to rail.
- The NJ Transit pilot program where three years of funding is provided does not work because towns are not willing to contribute.

## Pedestrian and Bicycle

- Bikes are the sustainable solution -- from every angle -- to our transportation problems.
- More bicycle parking is needed at train stations. Enclosed parking (bike lockers) is needed.
- Provide bike storage on the front of buses.
- Require bike parking at malls and other large trip generators.
- Provide bike shelters, and make them well-lit.
- Increase bicycle lanes along county roads.
- Some roads may have to be widened to accommodate bicycles.
- Bike route placards and signage are cheap improvements.
- Both the general public and the Police need to be educated on the use of bikes on roads].
- Bicycle and Pedestrian data collection, mapping and management are needed to be able to recommend where bike lanes should be and where there are gaps in sidewalks.
- Communities should take the lead in connecting to bike paths.
- Saddle River Park has an off-road bike path. It should be continued outside the park, possibly from Bergen Community College [in Paramus] to Maywood to form a north-south corridor to use as a commuting option.
- Pedestrian and bicycle accidents are on the rise. Many Hispanics ride bikes but do not use helmets.

## Policy

- The average road in New Jersey is off limits to everyone but motor vehicles; there is no room for bikes. Roads should be for everyone. Bike lanes and sharrows [are needed] on County roads. All new roads should be designed for all users (“Complete Streets”).
- The goal should be to design streets for all users. Complete Streets ordinances should be adopted by the County and municipal governments. Montclair, NJ has a good complete streets ordinance.
- County roads should be complete streets, because they connect towns. Municipal roads are subject to home rule -- one town may have complete streets while another adjacent town may not.
- Bergen County planners should require bicycle parking when reviewing site plans involving county roads.
- Local land development ordinances should be amended to promote increased pedestrian and bicycle use.

### Land Use / Transportation

- Development should be encouraged around rail stations.
- The County could require big developments to make them accessible to transit by requiring developments along County roads to do so. Transit should be accommodated well, by placing stops near doors, not at the outskirts.
- The County should have a role in major commercial development. As a neutral regional agency, the County should have input into each downtown and/or shopping area. Land use decisions are local, but for major redevelopment, that should change. There are large property tax benefits to having a large commercial area.
- The County should adopt an ordinance to impose County development review standards regarding transit oriented development. The Municipal Land Use Law and County Planning Act need to be amended to authorize that. A first step would be a recommendation of a Master Plan. Models from other States and Counties should be used.
- The county needs more mixed-use, center-based development. This is particularly relevant in Southern Bergen County where there are opportunities for redevelopment.
- River Edge is a good TOD location.
- NJ Transit does not propose TODs, the municipalities do it.
- There is a perception that TODs may present problems for municipalities, such as increasing school demand. This needs to be addressed.
- Towns need assistance in planning for TODs. They need consultants who know how to design TODs and answer relevant questions pose by the public and public officials.
- Essex Street Station in Hackensack has significant underdeveloped land. It has great potential to be a TOD as it could connect the “downhill” and “uphill” parts of the City. The parking lots at the station are always full, and parking would have to be addressed.
- The opportunities for TOD activity at Anderson Street in Hackensack are not obvious.

### Transportation Funding

- Capital funds [for projects] are difficult to come by.
- Lack of funding [for transportation] is causing a crisis.
- An extra five cents gas tax will fund transportation.
- NJ has the lowest gas tax [in the nation] and there have been numerous attempts to raise it.
- Transportation should be funded with additional gas tax.

### Data Management

- Better data management and better access to data is needed. For example, the County should provide a web-based tool showing all existing bike lanes/paths as well as sidewalks.

#### **Table 4 – Land Use, Housing and Neighborhoods**

- The County should be involved in projects of major impact — trust needs to be built between local governments and the County.
- Impact fees should be implemented to cover the cost of additional school children.
- The County should use Mayors' associations as vehicles to share information.
- Density is not always a bad thing and should be used to accommodate future growth. Following a smart growth strategy, it should be in appropriate areas where transit access is available and parking can be reduced or shared. Appropriate transit locations for increased density include:
  - Rail
  - Light Rail
  - BRT
  - Jitneys
  - Route 4
- The County should take the lead in helping municipalities figure out how to meet COAH requirements and help them avoid builders remedy lawsuits:
  - Limited equity ownership;
  - How do you build affordable units in communities that don't have multi-family housing?
- Regional Contribution Agreements should be restored by the State Legislature.
- A simple alternative to COAH would be to require that a fixed 20% of housing units in all developments over eight units be affordable.

#### **Table 5 – Property Taxes and Shared Services**

A basic itemization of the municipal tax base was discussed: approximately 80 – 85% of local property tax goes to municipal schools and services, and less than 10% to the county. Where would shared services make the biggest difference?

A brief discussion of how to initiate shared services began by using waste management / garbage collection as a good starting point. It was pointed out that while this was something that could be accomplished, the cost savings to the tax payer would be insignificant, but at least it would start to build a sense of trust and towns could tackle more difficult (and potentially more rewarding) areas later on.

Consolidation of School Administrations and Police / Fire Emergency services was considered a focal point. All felt this is where the true savings would be realized. There was agreement that the mergers should focus on the administrative layers and not the actual teachers / policemen.

And while merging administrative layers would yield noticeable results, it was thought that resistance by the current form of local government (i.e. Home Rule) would make this quite difficult to achieve. A potential solution might be to rotate administrative authority among participating towns to keep any one government from appearing to control.

The consensus at the table brought up the following points the County could examine and incorporate into the master plan, or more specifically, its resource toolbox.

- The master plan should address what is perceived to be the “core fear” of sharing services and attempt to diffuse this feeling through better education as well as financial incentives. Examples of how much can be saved without losing service quality should be more broadly publicized. A “monetary value” for shared service initiatives should be publicized to educate the public. Another core fear is the perceived loss of “power” -- local elected officials feeling they have lost control over the delivery of services in their town. A possible solution to this is to have the County be the negotiator and the facilitator of who controls what. The Library “BCCLS System” was used as a successful example; the New York Police Department’s precinct system was also mentioned, with the idea of a rotation of power to run services at the highest level. In the BCCLS system, the various member libraries take turns running the cooperative.
- The County should set up a model of a municipality being run similar to a business. This should include a non-profit business plan and a mission statement. The expectation is that this would show municipalities that if their towns were a “business,” they would not survive without making important adjustments.

The last point discussed is a deficiency in the dissemination of information between the County and municipalities, between the municipalities themselves and between Departments within County Government. Better and more current technology (e.g websites, streaming media, and newsletters) was discussed as the probable solution to this.

## **Table 6 – Water, Sewer, Utilities, and Energy Infrastructure**

### Water is a key problem

- Combined (sanitary and storm water) sewer systems are a big concern for Hackensack, Little Ferry, Teaneck and other Bergen county communities. Fixing the Hackensack system has been estimated to cost \$490 million. No one has the resources to meet the USEPA mandate. There are serious concerns that all development could be shut down if USEPA decides to enforce its rules.
- Aging infrastructure has caused street collapses in Hackensack.
- Recurrent flooding is also a concern. This is a prevalent problem in much of southern part of the county.
- It is difficult to get political traction with many infrastructure issues. “If you can’t see it, you can’t sell it” politically. The public needs to be educated as to nature and severity of the problem.

- Hackensack has been approached with the possibility of privatizing its sewer system and is currently conducting an evaluation.
- Older cities in the southern part of the county are particularly at risk because they are built out, with little opportunity to address storm water issues through new development or larger, corporate development.

#### Opportunities / Resources

- There are important interrelationships between storm water, flooding and issues raised by combined sewer systems.
- This is a regional issue the county can play a leadership role in. Better storm water management in the northern part of the county will help with south county flooding.
- Homeowners need to be better educated with respect to what they can do to help address storm water issues.
- The Hackensack Riverkeeper is building a model green roof in central Hackensack.
- DEP watershed planning / Rutgers / Northeast Watershed Alliance have identified many of the storm water/issues and opportunities in the county.

#### County Role

- The County can set a good example by retrofitting its own property and assets including buildings, roads, bridges and parks. These could be educational, demonstration projects. It should look to other counties that have taken this on.
- Right now the County is doing the opposite, ie looking to raise county roads (e.g. River Road in Bogota) which will exacerbate flooding elsewhere.
- The County could work with SWAN, Rutgers and others and sponsor educational efforts in selected neighborhoods, bringing together a variety of partners. While these efforts may showcase small solutions they will help identify the need to raise and allocate the resources required to address larger issues.
- The County could work with older malls and other large commercial properties to plant street trees and undertake other greening efforts that increase value and help reduce storm water issues.
- County could expand the Bergen County CAP program, which promotes energy efficient fixtures, to include water efficient fixtures. This could be focused in redeveloping older neighborhoods. There is a question of whether the BCUA is at capacity.

## Table 7 – Arts, Culture, and Historic Resources

This table had nine participants, including elected officials and a number of arts and culture professionals. The following items were discussed:

- Arts, culture and entertainment activities generate significant income. The tourism industry is the third largest employer in New Jersey. A number of recent empirical studies (the ArtPride study of New Brunswick and a number of South Jersey examples) document the important contributions this sector makes to the local economies. Perhaps a similar study specific to Bergen County would be helpful in further raising awareness and support.
- Bergen County provides no direct support for Arts and Cultural activities. Current funding available from the County is limited to “re-granting” of state funds (\$80,000 to \$100,000 per year). For example, the acclaimed Bergen Performing Arts Center receives no financial support from the County.
- The County should better promote the many existing arts and culture institutions and their activities:
  - Engage Art Pride to conduct study
  - Engage the Arts Build Communities at Rutgers Bloustein School - “Arts Build Communities is a new initiative led by Rutgers University’s Professional Development Institute to help public agencies, nonprofit organizations, funders and policy makers make better choices regarding arts and community and economic development.”
- The County should take the lead in establishing “Preserve America” districts (Nyack, New York has such a district):
  - Preserve America is a Federal program that makes available planning and promotional grants to preserve our cultural and natural heritage.
  - County Government has to designate the district(s).
- The County should undertake joint promotional and marketing efforts with Passaic County.
- There are perceived tensions between Historic Preservation and Arts and Culture activities, both in terms of competing for scarce resources and in navigating the often complex regulatory requirements associated with preservation.
- Improved way-finding is desperately needed in the County. People unfamiliar with the complex road system get easily lost. This discourages visitors from surrounding areas to visit the county and attend events. The NJ State Office of Tourism has a state-wide way-finding initiative that should be accessed for support.
- The County should serve as a user-friendly clearinghouse for local groups promoting events and for the general public seeking activities. This might include an easy-to-navigate web portal and support with the production of promotional materials.
- The County should establish an Office of Tourism -- Cape May County has a model program.
- The County should create a 501(c)3 non-profit subsidiary to facilitate fund-raising to support arts and cultural activities.

- Would a hotel tax be an appropriate mechanism to raise public funding to support the arts and culture? Perhaps the hospitality industry and hotel operators can be engaged to support this if they understand how they stand to benefit from a stronger arts and culture scene which would help increase the number of visitors and hotel stays.
- Even in the absence of a hotel tax, the hospitality industry can play a more active role in promoting arts and culture. Strong partnerships between arts and culture organizations and local hotels can lead to mutually beneficial and reinforcing outcomes, by increasing out of town attendance at events which in turn will increase overnight stays. Arts and culture organizations should be aggressive at using hotels as prominent outlets for their promotional materials and in developing package deals for visitors that combine hotel accommodations and preferential rates on event tickets.