

## Mercer County Master Plan Update Process – Documentary

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### **A County-Wide Regional Perspective – “Multi-focal vision”**

*The human eye perceives dozens of images at any waking moment. The brain selects which image to focus on based on what is relevant and needed. When you're driving that might mean focusing on the storm clouds on the horizon, a car merging into your lane, or the speedometer on the dash. Though you consciously see what you most need, all that information is always available. We have the flexibility to shift focus among near, middle and far focal distances.*

*Working in collaboration across the County has a lot in common with this concept. Most of us have homes, jobs and interests that require a particular focus on our own municipality. Yet we can increase our flexibility and focus at various “focal lengths.” The Mercer County Master Plan Update process was designed to practice focusing not only from a municipal perspective, but from a county-wide perspective as well. In fact, a significant outcome of the process is the promulgation of a county-wide perspective and some truly regional thinking.*

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### **Overview**

Mercer County's Planning Division used an innovative process to engage stakeholders in updating their Master Plan. This process is based on the Regional Action Plan (RAP) model. A RAP seeks to plan growth that balances three regional systems – economy, transportation and environment – and incorporates both factual analysis and political choices. The Mercer County RAP process was particularly data intensive and was conducted in a compressed timeframe over four months. It quickly established a base concept plan that will be vetted and developed in greater detail with municipalities over the next year.

The County wanted to take a “big picture” regional perspective and try to find consensus on county growth goals. They conducted a series of public dialogues as a prelude to the formal decision process, using the expertise of The Regional Planning Partnership and Weiss Consulting. Officials and residents from anywhere in the county could advocate for their local interests – while working for the good of the entire county. The logic is that by balancing local and county perspectives, coherent aligned action can emerge.

Three public stakeholder meetings guided participants through a planning sequence. The first meeting identified county assets, agreed on measures of progress and located centers where growth could reasonably take place. The second meeting detailed housing and employment types and discussed implications for roadway, transit and environment choices. The third meeting focused on opportunities and constraints for linkages among centers, transportation and environment. These meetings utilized large, printed maps, push pins, colored markers, and visual illustrations of centers, roads and green spaces as tools to support the interactive planning tasks.

Stakeholder meeting materials, including concept maps, can be found in the Master Plan Appendix. *The Regional Action Plan Process Meeting Materials.*

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## Master Plan Goals

The County identified Master Plan goals and policies directly related to the successful integration of the fundamental systems – economy, transportation, and environment. The policies are:

**Promote appropriate location and design** of new development with opportunities for transit, regional equity, preservation

**Provide infrastructure** and other incentives that promote growth

**Promote housing choice** to meet the region's needs

**Direct growth** to transit corridors and centers

**Promote compact design**, walkable and mixed use centers

**Match jobs to housing** to reduce long auto commutes to work

**Promote access management** to enhance safety and capacity

**Promote land use patterns** that limit stormwater runoff and increase green infrastructure

**Promote redevelopment**

**Prioritize open space acquisition** to complete greenway networks, support compact development, and provide recreation opportunities to underserved populations

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## Goals and Outcomes of the Process

The RAP planning process was designed to provide a way for local stakeholders to contribute to a meaningfully updated Mercer County Master Plan, as a foundation from which to move forward together. It generated a concept plan (or growth scenario) that articulates choices for achieving balanced growth, including:

- General balanced growth goals previously agreed upon were confirmed
- Locations were identified for new development and redevelopment, including types and amount of residential and commercial development
- Transportation corridors were identified for investment, including transit
- Areas for preserving open land were identified, including links among natural areas.

Looking farther ahead, the process:

- Created a concept map that now becomes the basis for a series of group conversations with municipalities, to discuss locally relevant details of the County Master Plan update and local implementation possibilities.
- Provides the basis for Plan Endorsement at the State level.

Significantly, the process also:

- Generated a county-wide regional perspective that became understood, seen as reasonable, and largely embraced by people who primarily advocate only their local municipal perspective.
- Elicited an impressive list of natural features, enterprises and other resources considered to be “assets” or “treasures.”
- Provided a structure for lively and constructive public engagement, bridging across jurisdictional lines.

- Shifted the County planning experience into a highly interactive and creative conversation among partners with mutual concerns.

From the professional planner’s perspective, this RAP had several goals:

- Emphasize the importance of Regional Planning.
- Learn how to design a “work space” that focuses and guides participants so their suggestions and recommendations are successful. This entailed purposeful selection of data sets selected and the format in which the data was presented.
- Learn how to take many technical data sets and their complex interrelationships, and convey what the data is saying in an understandable way through mapping and discussion.
- Figure out how to use the visual materials to constantly make the connection with previously identified regional planning goals/assets.
- Emphasize the professional planner’s role as a “number cruncher” behind the scenes, developing information that creates meaningful discussion in public.

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**Process Sequence** – the pattern of activities for developing the process was:

- Technical data analysis and maps were created by RPP planners, with input and guidance from Mercer County planners
- Workshop agenda and facilitation was designed by Weiss Consulting
- Maps and interaction process were tested with an Advisory Group
- Materials and agenda were refined based on test feedback
- Public Stakeholder Meeting was conducted
- Inputs were incorporated into preparation for the next meeting

The Mercer County process moved fast, with three Stakeholder Meetings over a four month period. The team was heavily engaged, providing quick turnaround to create maps, synthesize and analyze input, check data, and deliver the next set of materials thoughtfully, accurately and clearly. The Advisory Group tested and vetted the maps and methods. The Stakeholder Meetings generated suggestions for locating growth, transportation and open space.

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### **Advisory Group**

A small representative group of local stakeholders was invited to serve in an advisory capacity to the project. About a half-dozen well-informed influence leaders represented a full range of interests and viewpoints; they were a microcosm of the total stakeholder group.

They came to a morning meeting about ten days before each Stakeholder Meeting to provide feedback on the maps, the presentations, and the activity designs. Their feedback at these “rehearsals” was invaluable. The Advisory Group improved the entire process with insight, sensitivity and the reality check of their layperson perspective. They helped refine pacing and sequencing and provided realism about how much could be done in the time available. In addition, as they realized this process was legitimate they became “ambassadors” for the process and encouraged their peers to participate.

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### **Stakeholder Meetings**

The D&R Greenway Trust’s Johnson Education Center provided a beautiful, functional and welcoming meeting facility. As participants entered the room they were greeted with light supper food, large display maps of the County, and round table seating. This room allowed for

informational presentations with PowerPoint slides, small group charrette-style working sessions at the tables, and full group discussion of their ideas.

Stakeholder Meetings (see appendix for agendas) were structured as highly participatory workshops. The meetings began with brief presentations on the maps and where the data came from. They quickly moved into mapping-oriented small group discussions. If participants arrived late, they found a very noisy room. People stood around their tables, leaned in, drew on the maps, discussed and decided what made sense to them. Many people wouldn't take breaks – they wanted to keep working. Engagement was successful because of careful design and planning, which included:

- Tasks were planned in detail, including steps for discussion and the scope of outcomes requested. The required type of input was specified (type of center, number of lanes) but not the content or direction of the ideas.
- County planning staff and RPP staff were assigned to tables and were prepared to guide the tasks, listen carefully and capture comments in detailed notes.
- The innovative use of pictorial representations of different levels of growth and different sizes of center types appealed to different learning and thinking styles. Center types are often explained with a chart of statistics and numeric ranges. In this process, participants were also given photographs showing attractive examples of each center type and transportation route type. Both matrices and cards with photographic images were crafted. The images went well beyond visual preferences. Technical data associated with the images was based on criteria from the state plan and is consistent with plan endorsement requirements.
- Simple tools and supplies were provided specific to the tasks at hand. Colored markers, stickers and post-it notes were provided for each task. Acetate overlays were created to make various mapping tasks more manageable.

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### The Proposed Process vs. the Actual Process

This regional planning process was planned to be innovative and engaging. It also turned out to be highly emergent – the approach shifted subtly yet significantly as the team responded to reality at each juncture. Participants seemed to accept and work well within this changing environment. Responsive and effective process shifts included:

- **From Technocratic to Consensus Building.** The role of the Mercer County planners shifted from a technological focus to an interpersonal and consensus orientation. The original approach would have demonstrated three growth scenarios, one each based on current zoning practices, on trend, and on strict environmental preservation. An interim approach emphasized existing regional infrastructure and systems, and focused on getting participants to visualize the future via either transit-heavy or functional suburban logics. The approach finally shifted **from prescribing types of scenarios to an open approach** where informed participants mapped what they actually wanted using the base map developed by the professional planners. Control was shared among participants who, it turned out, made logical and balanced recommendations.
- **Integration of Three Systems.** The RAP process attempts to balance the three systems of economy, transportation and environment. This process **shifted beyond balancing to integrating three systems.** The indicators used derive from a combination of data sets that consider all the systems. Measures of progress looked at the three systems as complementary, with no one system more prominent than the others. Every task involved choices within the bounds of sustainable economic, transportation and environmental options, interacting with each other.

- **Make Technical Data User Friendly.** A County-wide plan attending to three systems (economy, transportation and environment) requires a great deal of technical and measurable data. This process made a highly technical data-based planning process user friendly.
    - **Focus on a Few Telling Indicators.** The RAP process adopted four indicators – jobs and housing, housing affordability, transit score and impervious surface. Each measure of progress integrates information from multiple systems to indicate something meaningful to laypeople. No one system is more prominent than others, and the measures interact with and complement each other.
    - **Use Structure to Activate Participation.** Not only did the RAP make the technical information understandable, but the tasks were structured so laypeople could work with the data hands-on, could visualize possibilities, and could play with alternative configurations. They could understand the options and get excited about them. For example:
      - Color photographs of attractive communities of all different densities were developed and provided, along with push pins coded to match.
      - Sticky dots, post-it notes, and colored markers made notation clear and simple.
      - Since there wasn't enough time to think deeply about where to concentrate growth across the entire county, people worked on the part of the county that included their own municipality.
    - **Engage Intentions, Avoid Resistance.** Numeric targets tend to evoke resistance. The original process envisioned providing numeric targets to work toward, for instance, the number of housing units in a type of town or village. Instead, this RAP tracked numeric implications of growth intentions, but the **public process became less numeric** as it unfolded. The County was not perceived as forcing anything on municipalities. The next round of work with municipalities can re-introduce the numbers and show the impact of current density in relation to intended levels.
  - **Work at Multiple Levels.** This process promoted a County-wide or regional perspective while still acknowledging and valuing the local municipal perspectives. When structuring the interaction to fit the available time, the team decided to utilize both in concept and as a background document, a 1931 Master Plan map of Mercer County that showed a natural and enduring pattern of development along three corridors: – Routes 31, 1, and 130 – with Trenton as the hub. These corridors became the organizing principle that allowed people to focus first on the area they knew best and cared most about, and then to attend to linkages across the corridors to the full County level. Folks had to work regionally, not only in their backyard. Starting with their own neighborhoods made that shift easier.
  - **Flex in Response to Reality.** Originally the team expected to make faster progress in the first meeting, but testing in the Advisory Group demonstrated **a reasonable, methodical pace** was essential. The pace of the stakeholder meetings remained fast – three sessions were conducted in less than four months with the intention to avoid burn out and frustration and to sustain engagement. Conversations with municipalities will now continue, with County planners going “door to door” in meetings with groups of contiguous municipalities. These meetings will go to the next level of detail with specific local data, and will further strengthen cooperation among municipalities and between them and the County.
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## Participant Evaluation of Process Effectiveness

Participants offered feedback on the RAP process and stakeholder meetings. They were overwhelmingly, though not completely, positive about their experience and hopeful about the developing regional perspective.

- This process is a step in the right direction. The county will have to be very patient, and keep working it with people. It takes time for people to learn to work in this process.
- People enjoyed the small group format and felt it was useful.
- People felt they were listened to.
- This is working as an educational as well as a planning process.
- When there were no participants from a municipality, the absence of their input was felt.
- This provides good information for people because it is so well organized.
- This is creating a strong base from which to start conversations in the municipalities.
- This is identifying stakeholders who need to be educated and involved.
- It's obvious that there has been a diligent effort to engage people.
- This approach demonstrates effective understanding of groups and group process.
- I don't care what the County's process is, we are going to do what we want anyway.
- This regional process allowed us to discover that we need more opportunities like this to meet across municipal lines. Having discussions across regional lines would improve what we do within our own municipalities and would provide us with the impetus to do the right thing.
- We were able to achieve a regional perspective in this process because we started to perceive everyone is traveling everywhere across the county – there shouldn't be a boundary in our thinking because there isn't really a town boundary in our travel. We can see the connectivity.
- I am so happy to be part of a regional planning process. It is exciting to see how hard people in Trenton are working on the Assunpink stream corridor and we in Hamilton are also working on it. Sometimes you get a sense of fragmentation but this meeting produced a sense of connectivity.
- I think folks here are looking at the problem from a regional perspective. Municipalities are seeing the role we have to play. Will the regional assets we identified at the beginning of this process not be enhanced, or in fact be compromised, if we do not take a regional view of transportation?
- My whole Planning Board should go through this process so they have the chance to understand the map and provide input. The County could be a facilitator.

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## Lessons and Assessments

Analysis by the team and staff yielded these suggestions for improvements in a future RAP process:

- Incorporate and weave in references to identified assets more frequently throughout the stakeholder meetings.
- Help participants understand density more accurately by presenting examples through pictures, diagrams, emphasizing that they are already living in density.
- Make a more consistent connection between the indicators and the outcomes (for example, use verbal numerical indicators, even if not numerical ones, when comparing existing housing densities to proposed housing densities.)
- It is very difficult for people to imagine beyond today's reality. Begin with an interactive experience that opens people's minds to possibilities, desires and visions. Design a workshop that encourages out-of-the-box visioning, building on strengths that are in place today yet imagining possibilities different from how things are now.

- The planners are challenged to stay in the present situation and resist drifting into future possibilities; they are tempted to move faster than stakeholders can keep up. This process allows the team to have strategic conversations in team meetings before and after the public sessions. . The facilitation role helps the professionals accomplish the tasks at hand and work within the bounded timeframe and outcomes of the project.

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### **It's Still Complex...**

*Imagine a cone, a dunce cap-shaped object, sitting in a box. The box is opaque. The only way you can see inside is through one of two holes, one at the top and one on the side. People who look through one hole report that they see a circle. People who look through the other hole report that they see a triangle. Though they are all truthful and behaving with integrity, none of them has the full picture. None of them alone can perceive the reality of the cone in the box.*

*A cone is a complex geometric figure that requires non-defensive, open communication to accurately describe and understand. Growth in Mercer County is a far more complex reality. There are more than two perspectives on the County – all of them are valid, yet none of them is complete. The Master Plan Update process provided an opportunity to appreciate the validity of all perspectives, build respect for one another and for the complexity of the shared interests, and develop a plan forward that synthesizes and balances a multiplicity of factors.*