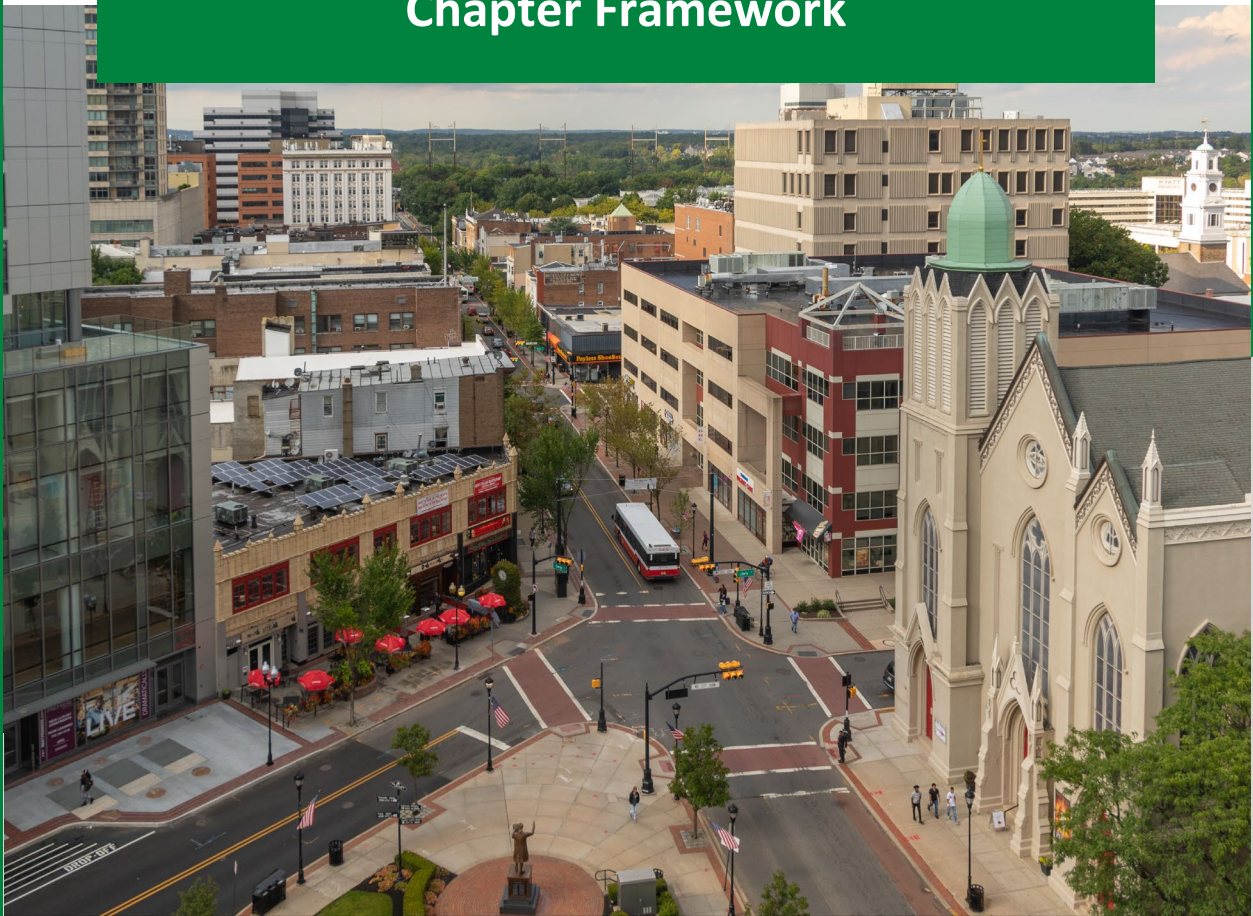


DESTINATION 2040

MIDDLESEX COUNTY ♦ NJ
STRATEGIC PLAN

Land Use and Development Chapter Framework



MIDDLESEX
COUNTY ♦ NJ

middlesexcountynj.gov/destination2040



Land Use and Development

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The year is 2040. Over the past two decades, the population grew, and the economy flourished. Middlesex County is known regionally and nationally for its many vibrant, walkable, and bustling downtowns, town centers and waterfront districts. Safe, walkable residential neighborhoods boast new housing options and well-maintained community facilities and parks. At the same time, investments in farmland and open space have preserved and enhanced the County's more rural heritage and natural landscape.

Commercial areas along major roads – characterized 20 years ago by traffic congestion, aging, and poorly planned land use – have been transformed into pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use shopping districts. Industrial areas are now better connected to highways, rail networks and public transportation services. Across the County, residents and visitors can conveniently access various local services, amenities, and employment and educational opportunities without driving. Most live and work within walking distance of public transit stops – rail, bus, or ferry – that provide access to a variety of local and regional destinations.

Over the past twenty years, municipal and County decisions about growth and development have been well-coordinated. County and local governments have worked collaboratively with state and federal agencies and the private sector to shape new development purposefully. These efforts have helped to protect and enhance the environment and improve economic and social sustainability County-wide.

Twenty years of investing in existing communities have resulted in a period of inclusive, economic prosperity. The County has attracted sustained business investment, spurring the growth of living-wage jobs. Local businesses and large companies alike are thriving. More efficient land use has reduced County and municipal infrastructure and service costs while enhancing the local tax base. Communities that have suffered from a legacy of disinvestment and segregation are empowered and have secured the resources needed for neighborhood revitalization.

More and varied housing, mostly built within walking distance of transit, has made Middlesex County an increasingly affordable and convenient place to live. Throughout the County, suitable and affordable housing is easy to find, and communities are more equitable. People of all life stages, races, ethnicities, incomes, and abilities can find the type of housing that meets their needs and preferences in the community of their choice. Thanks to increased economic opportunities, new housing development, and investments in affordable housing, housing costs are no longer the crisis it was 20 years ago.

Encouraging development in walkable centers has allowed communities to preserve natural and agricultural land, minimize the environmental impacts of new development, and avoid development in flood zones and other hazardous areas. Shorter distances to destinations and the availability of alternative modes of transportation have significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants from vehicular traffic, making the County more environmentally sustainable.

By carefully planning where and how development has taken place over the last 20 years, Middlesex County communities have ensured a high quality of life for residents of all backgrounds.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Four overarching principles have been identified to guide Destination 2040 planning and implementation.

Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Marginalized groups exist everywhere. This means that some people are excluded from or have limited access to traditional or “mainstream” economic, political, cultural, and social activities. This exclusion or marginalization can have significant impacts on individuals, families, and communities. Middlesex County is recognized as one of the most diverse counties in New Jersey and perhaps even in the United States. Destination 2040 seeks to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion by: 1) making marginalized groups, in particular Black and Brown people, feel welcomed and have access to the resources and opportunities necessary to connect, belong, grow and improve the quality of their lives; 2) acknowledging and eliminating disparities along race, class, gender, disability status and other dimensions of diversity; 3) expanding choice and opportunity for Black and Brown people, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of those who have been historically discriminated against and to promote racial and economic integration; and 4) ensuring diversity and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Support COVID-19 Response and Recovery. New Jersey and Middlesex County were particularly hard-hit by COVID-19 during the pandemic's first wave. Between March and November 2020, more than 25,000 county residents have tested positive for COVID-19, and there have been more than 1,400 confirmed deaths in the County due to COVID-19. These numbers are again rising steadily as New Jersey grapples with a new wave of transmission. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted county residents and businesses. Destination 2040 seeks to help families and businesses cope with and recover from the on-going impacts of the COVID-19, as well as prepare for future health emergencies. Destination 2040 also seeks to take advantage of opportunities that have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Address Climate Change. Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing people, communities, and governments worldwide. The gradual warming of the planet is causing climate change. We know from scientists that human activities involving transportation, energy, land development, agriculture, and manufacturing emit greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. Climate change may have many potential impacts on human health, agriculture, natural systems, wildlife habitats, infrastructure systems, and economic activity in Middlesex County. Destination 2040 seeks reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the County and as well as to help residents, businesses and communities prepare for and adapt to changing climate conditions, more frequent extreme weather events, and related public health emergencies in the future.

Embrace Smart Governance. The concept of a "smart city" emerged over the past decade and has been adopted by many local government jurisdictions worldwide. The smart cities movement imagines creating the communities of the future that harness the power of technology and data analytics to improve systems like transportation and the delivery of government programs in a way that is more efficient, saves money, and provides better service to residents and businesses. Destination 2040 seeks to adapt and expand the smart cities concept in order to: 1) improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness of county programs, services, and infrastructure through technology adoption and data-informed decision-making; 2) help the County and Middlesex County municipalities improve outcomes and save money through shared services; and 3) make governance in the county more collaborative, transparent, and participatory.

CHAPTER GOALS

1. Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of land use and infrastructure investment decisions.
2. Promote the development of inclusive, vibrant communities and neighborhoods.
3. Encourage sustainable and resilient land use and development.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

#	Initiative Name	Key Components	Related Chapter Goals
1.	Develop a Strategic Investment Framework to guide infrastructure and preservation decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement a Middlesex County Investment Framework that identifies areas of the County suitable for accommodating growth and areas targeted for preservation. • Use the investment framework as the basis for petitioning the State Office of Planning Advocacy for Plan Endorsement. • Develop a County development committee to coordinate and support work across departments to implement the investment framework. • Create a municipal coordinating forum to encourage municipal land use and development decisions consistent with the investment framework and other related plans and processes. • Ensure the investment framework includes sustainability and resilience considerations and criteria related to road, public transit, wastewater, stormwater, open space and farmland preservation, underutilized sites, and other infrastructure and facility investment. 	1, 2, and 3
2.	Expand the use of partnerships to support infrastructure investment and ongoing services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an infrastructure needs assessment to identify near-term and future investment needs related to wastewater, drinking water, transportation, telecommunications, underutilized lands, energy, and other systems. • Work with appropriate consultants and partners to pilot and evaluate infrastructure financing projects that include shared responsibilities and risks between public sector jurisdictions and/or public-private partnerships. • Investigate the market for and feasibility of shared or joint funding of ongoing County services and launch a comprehensive program to expand existing and implement new shared service arrangements with private and public sector partners. 	1, 2, and 3
3.	Make development application processes easier and more efficient.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in technology to create a user-friendly, electronic County development application and streamline the application management process. • Implement a pilot project that expands electronic County development applications online to incorporate municipal development applications. • Improve County and municipal coordination of development review processes. • Use electronic submissions to create a centralized database of applications, zoning and planning approvals, building permits, and certificates of occupancy. 	1

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and implement ways to coordinate County and municipal development review processes with state agency (e.g., NJDEP and NJDOT) processes. 	
4.	Align County functional plans, resolutions, guidelines, and processes with Destination 2040.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the County's Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan, Open Space and Recreation Plan, Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, subdivision and land development resolutions, right-of-way plan, and roadway design guidelines. Develop an integrated Landscape and Ecosystems Services Plan. 	1, 2, and 3
5.	Enhance the capacity of municipalities to advance sustainable and resilient land use and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement a technical assistance and capacity-building program consistent with municipal needs and priorities. Areas for assistance may include complete streets planning and implementation, advancing equitable redevelopment, revitalization and transit-oriented development (TOD), brownfield redevelopment, storm water management, economic development, and encouraging housing affordability, and other expert technical services. Create a forum to improve inter-jurisdictional coordination related to County planning functions, municipal land use planning, regulatory functions, projects of regional significance, regional planning efforts, and other topics/issues as needed. 	1, 2, and 3
6.	Encourage growth in areas served by public transit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make transit access an important investment framework criterion when identifying places to encourage growth and development. Include equitable TOD in the suite of topics addressed in the MCOP municipal technical assistance and capacity-building program. Focus efforts on station areas where TOD is appropriate but has not been pursued or has stalled, and areas targeted in state or regional efforts, such as the current effort to retrofit Metropark. Use information from local tax assessors and NJ TRANSIT real estate data to identify strategic TOD opportunities and work with municipalities and developers to advance development in these locations. Improve and enhance bicycle and pedestrian access, and complete ADA-compliant access to transit stations and stops. Expand public transit (bus, bus rapid transit, and ferry service) and transfer opportunities in strategic locations. Launch a coordinated, Countywide planning effort with NJ TRANSIT, municipalities, and other stakeholders to identify and prioritize key bus corridors and bus stop amenities, including along County roads. Highlight existing and potential TOD communities in County marketing efforts continuously. 	2 and 3
7.	Advance local redevelopment and neighborhood revitalization efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify opportunities to locate and incorporate County facilities and operations in multi-purpose redevelopment projects. Include equitable redevelopment and revitalization in the suite of topics addressed in the MCOP municipal technical assistance and capacity-building program. Include redevelopment of stranded commercial real estate assets, underutilized parking lots, brownfields, small-parcel contaminated 	2 and 3

		<p>properties, and neighborhoods in need of stabilization or revitalization in the County investment framework. Prioritize a shortlist of collaborative, less high-profile projects to advance with municipalities and other entities. Examples include small neighborhood, small commercial corridor, underutilized strip mall, and small-parcel contaminated site.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and pilot a comprehensive shared service agreement program that utilizes County talent and resources to assist municipalities and the private sector in advancing redevelopment projects. The goal should be to promote efficient redevelopment processes that are well-managed, predictable, and consistent across municipalities. • Identify state and private funding and financing to support and advance redevelopment pre-construction activities and proactively connect municipalities and developers with needed resources. • Develop and pilot a pooled funding (County, municipal, state and federal grants, private sector) model to support pre-construction activities in areas targeted for redevelopment. 	
8.	Increase the supply of affordable, accessible housing options County-wide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a housing needs analysis that includes an inventory of existing housing stock and fair share housing obligations and an assessment of present and future housing needs for asset-limited income-constrained, employed (ALICE) and very-low-income households, people with disabilities, and older adults. • Review local master plans and zoning ordinances and recommend changes to meet established housing needs. • Develop and implement a sustained program to encourage middle-density housing, including accessory dwelling units, commercial property conversions, and single-to-multi-family conversions that respect and complement existing neighborhood character. • Work with municipalities and the private sector to advance middle-density housing, housing conversions, and accessory dwelling units. • Promote the use of universal design standards in residential construction and rehabilitation. • Develop and pilot a capital seed grant/loan program to catalyze housing projects for targeted populations. The program's goal should be to package and leverage other funding sources such as HOME, CDBG, and MCIA financing with state and federal funding and financing programs. 	2
9.	Increase access to opportunity and lower the combined cost of housing and transportation for lower-income residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas of high-opportunity in the County which have good access to high-performing schools, needed services, well-paying jobs, frequent transit service, and other amenities. Identify low-income areas without these services and access. • Make information on affordable housing options and locations available to the public using GIS maps and data. • Assess the suitability and potential of these areas to accommodate additional housing that is affordable for people of various income levels and work with municipalities to modify zoning and subdivision regulations to encourage new housing options such as accessory dwelling units and others. 	2

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make housing navigation services available to assist low-income housing voucher recipients in locating housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods and conduct outreach to landlords to encourage acceptance of vouchers. • Work with local Public Housing Authorities to apply for future rounds of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Housing Choice Voucher Mobility Demonstration funding. • Identify opportunities to provide convenient and affordable transportation connections between lower-income housing and high-opportunity areas via micro-mobility options, on-demand shuttles. • Work with employers to identify and implement employer-supported commuter shuttles for lower-income employees. • Provide information on discounted transit fare programs to recipients of the Department of Community Services programs. 	
10.	Promote innovative housing construction, renovation, financing, and ownership models.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with University researchers, developers, and other stakeholders to develop and implement a demonstration project program designed to showcase: a) innovative construction technologies and techniques; b) alternative ownership models such as cooperative housing, land trusts, lease-to-own sweat equity, accessory dwelling units, and others; and c) financing models such as employer- or union-sponsored homeownership assistance programs that have the potential to lower the cost of housing. • Inventory existing homeownership financing and assistance programs and make the information broadly available to municipalities, non-profits, and the public. 	2
11.	Prevent housing displacement due to evictions and foreclosures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide counseling and mediation services and raise awareness of existing services for owners of residential properties in foreclosure, including landlords of multi-family properties. • Monitor residential eviction and foreclosure trends on an ongoing basis to identify trends before they become a crisis. • Establish a temporary assistance fund for County residents to prevent evictions and foreclosures. • Work with banks and municipalities to enable live-in owners of foreclosed single-family homes to convert properties to multi-family housing. • Work with banks, municipalities, and non-profits to acquire foreclosed properties and deed-restrict them as affordable for purchase or rental units. • Work with municipalities to assess and prioritize properties in neighborhood clusters for intervention and stabilization. 	2