



DOWNTOWN RARITAN VISION PLAN

An Element of the Downtown Raritan Sustainable Economic Development Plan



July 1, 2021



BOROUGH OF RARITAN





BOROUGH OF RARITAN



This report has been prepared as part of the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) Planning for Emerging Centers Program with financing by the Federal Transit Administration and the Federal Highway Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation. This document is disseminated under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Transportation in the interest of information exchange. The NJTPA is solely responsible for its contents.

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INTRODUCTION

This Sustainable Economic Development Plan provides a 10-year economic, land-use, and multi-modal vision for Downtown Raritan (see ***Community-Driven Vision*** on page 3). This Vision document includes companion resources for anyone interested in how they can help implement the vision:

- ***Making the Vision a Reality: An Implementation Toolbox*** provides a detailed implementation framework that should guide the Borough and its partners. The document also includes specific recommendations for action. Finally, there are several “focus on” sections that provide detailed information on several recommendations. The Implementation Toolbox should be used as a reference guide after the top level summary has been reviewed.
- The ***Downtown Raritan Redevelopment Plan*** which provides the regulatory framework necessary to implement many of this plan’s recommendations.
- This plan is the result of an intensive community engagement process. A detailed discussion of the outreach efforts and how they shaped the recommendations can be found in the companion document: ***Community Engagement Summary***.
- This document includes a top-level summary of how the community shaped the recommendation, starting on ***page 15*** and titled, ***Who Created this Vision***.

Finally, ***the Existing Conditions Report (2020)*** and the ***Economic and Market Assessment (2020)*** provide the detailed technical foundation on which the recommendations in this plan were built. The ***Existing Conditions Summary*** on page 18 provides an overview of both of these documents.

Who is “the Borough” and “the Raritan community”?

Making the vision identified in this plan a reality will require a sustained effort by residents, business owners, and local and regional stakeholders. In instances where the municipality should take official action, this plan uses “the Borough.” When referring to the community of dedicated volunteers, elected officials, and professionals, this document utilizes “the Raritan community,” the “community,” and simply “Raritan.”

Project Background

The Borough of Raritan applied to the **North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority's (NJTPA) Planning for Emerging Centers Program** for technical assistance to develop this plan.

The NJTPA is the federally-funded Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the northern New Jersey region, home to 6.7 million people and covering over one-half of the State's land area. The NJTPA Board includes 15 local elected officials representing 13 counties—Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris, Ocean, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, Union and Warren—and the cities of Newark and Jersey City. The Board also includes a Governor's Representative, the Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT), the Executive Director of NJ TRANSIT, the Chairman of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey and a Citizen's Representative appointed by the Governor.

The NJTPA conducts comprehensive long-range transportation planning and annually oversees over \$2 billion in transportation investments, for one of the most dynamic and complex transportation systems in the nation. The NJTPA sponsors and conducts studies, assists member planning agencies (known as NJTPA "subregions"), and provides a forum for inter-agency cooperation and public input into funding decisions.

Consultant Team

The NJTPA hired FHI Studio and Phillips Preiss Grygiel Leheny Hughes LLC ("Project Team") to support the Borough in the preparation of the plan.

The project is led by **FHI Studio**, a firm that includes experts in land use planning. FHI's land-use professionals support communities by provide comprehensive planning, redevelopment, zoning, placemaking, and transit-oriented development (TOD) planning services.

Phillips Preiss Grygiel Leheny Hughes LLC (PPGLH) provided market assessment expertise and complement FHI's economic development skill set. PPGLH specializes in identifying and creatively solving land use and development-related problems for private, non-profit and governmental clients throughout the northeast United States. Not only does PPGLH have excellent real-estate consulting qualifications, but PPGLH staff have previously worked in Raritan on a major redevelopment project that is under construction as of the publication of this report.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN VISION

By 2031, Raritan will have public spaces that make it a destination for residents and visitors looking to connect with nature and enjoy the outdoors. The riverfront and Nevius Street, which has been transformed to prioritize pedestrians over vehicles, will be a popular place for people from across the region to visit.

Business and residential growth will be driven by continued investment in public spaces that appeal to Raritan's diverse population, as well as improved multi-modal connections to destinations in the region.

High-quality rail and shuttles will connect residents to regional employers. Infrastructure improvements will make it easier for people to walk and bike to locations throughout the Borough. These multimodal connections will not only help residents, they will also attract visitors who can easily travel from a regional asset, like Duke Farms, to Somerset Street's restaurants, shops and other attractions. Better connecting these assets to the Downtown will help boost local businesses.

The Downtown's neighborhoods will be active and continue to support a diverse population comprised of existing and new home-owners and renters, families and non-family households.

PEOPLE-ORIENTED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Borough will take a people-centered approach to economic development, with the goal of advancing projects that support both existing and new residents. Public spaces will be designed to be inclusive to ensure that people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds feel welcome and safe.

New development will respect the character of the community.

Construction projects and renovations will reinforce the development patterns that residents cherish: dense, affordable, and varied housing options that are consistent with existing neighborhoods; high-quality front yards and semi-public spaces; mixed-used development in commercial corridors; and quality pedestrian and bicycle accommodations.

The Borough's business support services will continue to build on the strong interpersonal relationships that make Raritan special. This will help to strengthen the Borough's connection to existing businesses and foster a welcoming environment for new startups and entrepreneurs. This personal focus will lead to more sustainable growth that is consistent with Raritan's values. A key component of these efforts will be establishing strong relationships with the Borough's growing immigrant business community and ensuring they have the support needed to thrive.

THE RIVERFRONT

The riverfront will be the defining element that distinguishes Downtown from other communities. The area will provide high-quality space for recreation and water-related activities for residents of all ages. It will also be an area where people can *come together and gather, whether just to spend time together or for a special occasion*. Efforts over the next 10 years will include:

- Completion of the Raritan River Greenway section within Raritan.
- Transforming Borough-owned open space along the riverfront into a park that could include a boat launch, fishing pier, or similar activities that allow people to directly connect with the water.
- Transforming the foot of the Nevius Street bridge into a Welcome Plaza and gateway between Duke Farms and the Downtown (as illustrated on the following two pages). The gateway will incorporate currently planned residential development, the adaptive reuse of the historic Duke Farms pump house buildings, and the construction of a new plaza to create a regional draw.





SEATING AREA



PICNIC AREAS

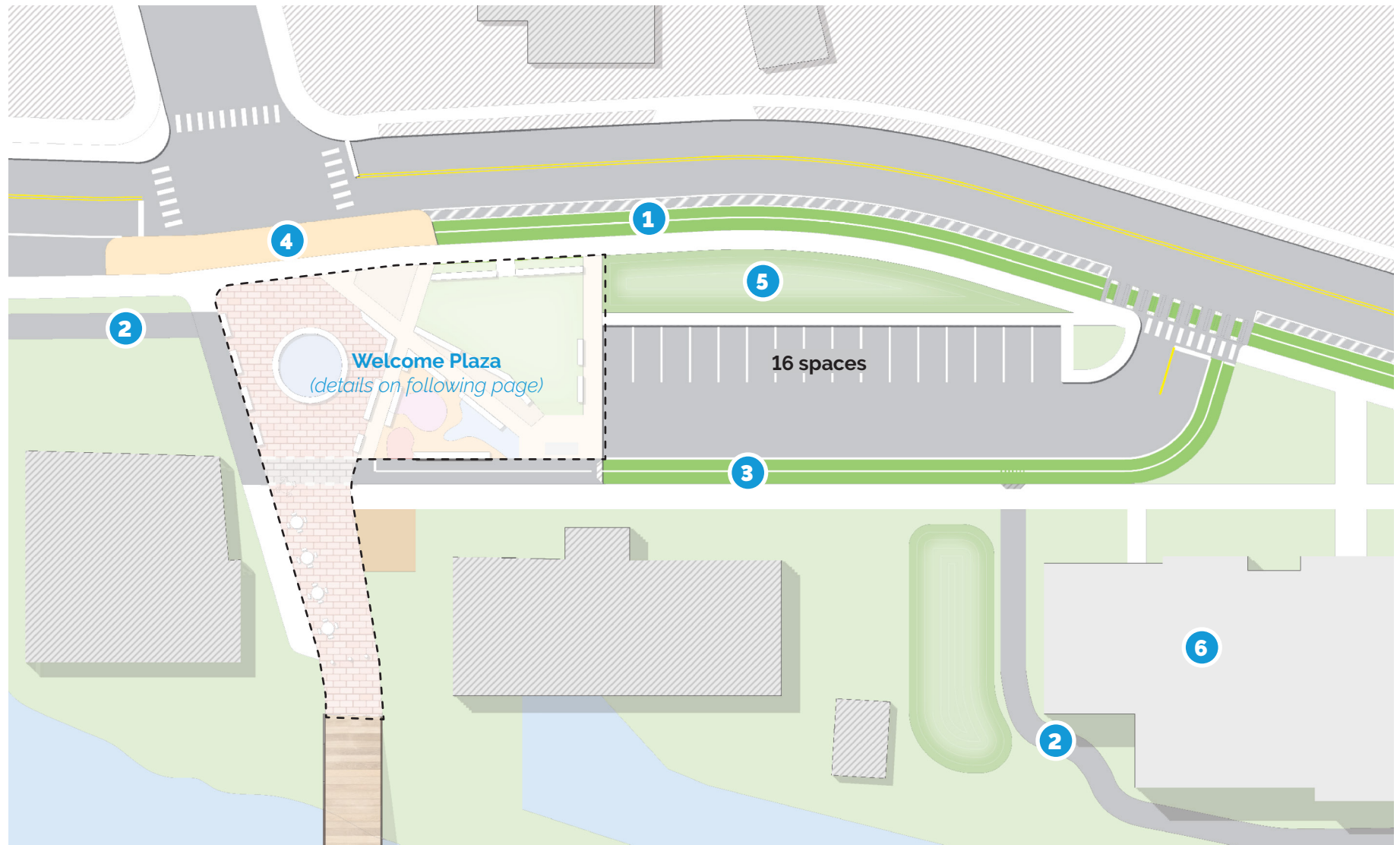


**PLAY FIELDS &
FLEX SPACE**



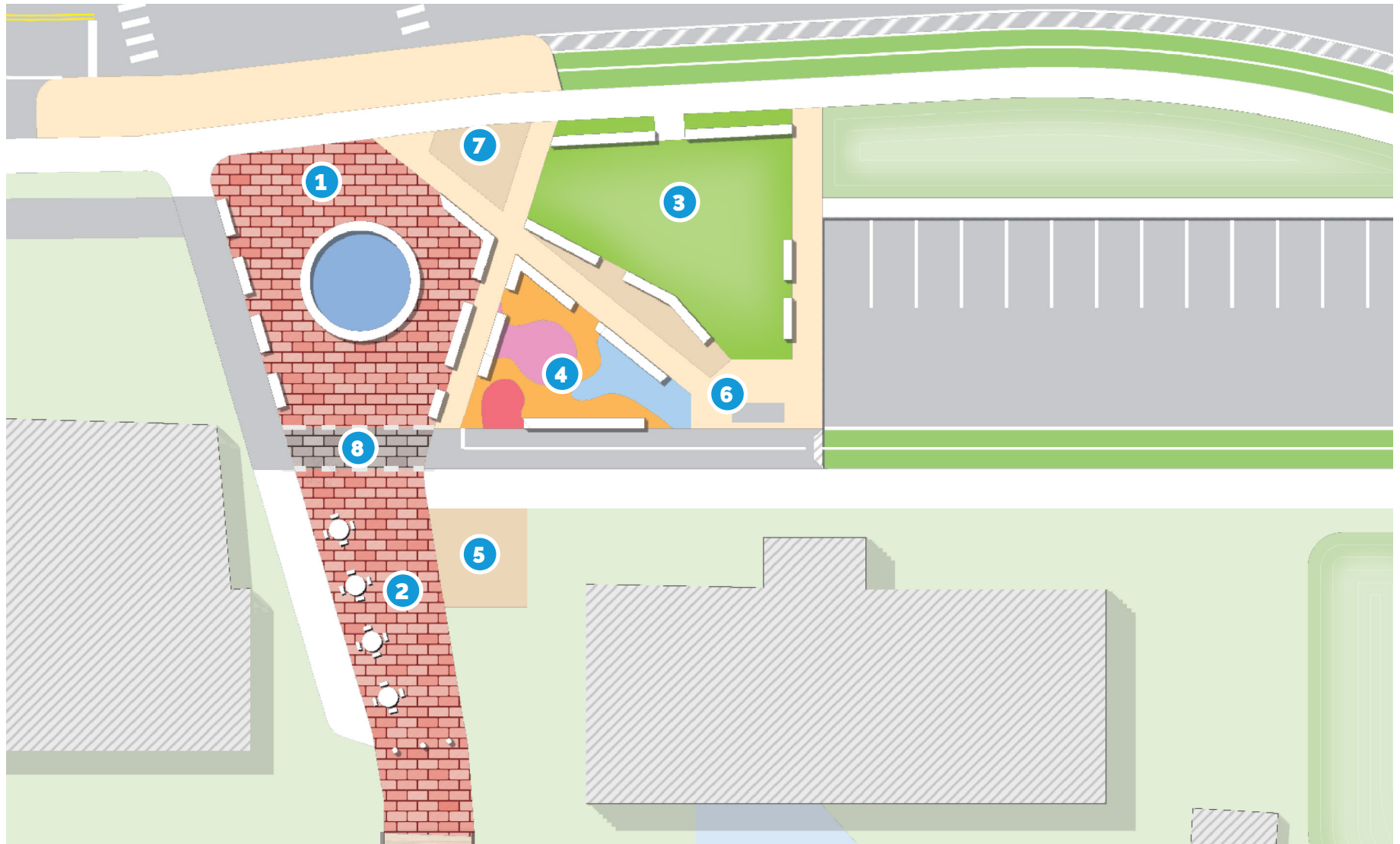
**RARITAN RIVER
GREENWAY**

RARITAN GREENWAY TRAIL NEAR NEVIUS STREET BRIDGE



- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 On-Street Raritan Greenway | 3 Trail Connection | 5 Rain Garden |
| 2 Off-Street Raritan Greenway | 4 Curb Bump Out | 6 Approved Apartments |

WELCOME PLAZA



1 Plaza with water feature

3 Small Park

5 Vendor / Food Truck Space

7 Wayfinding & Event Information

2 Outdoor cafe seating

4 Playground

6 Bike Parking

8 Trail Crossing

RIVERFRONT CONNECTIVITY

Nevius Street will be transformed — through public and private investments — into a shared street with distinct high-quality pavement. This will connect the Nevius Street Bridge and riverfront amenities to the businesses on Somerset Street.

Walking and biking will be prioritized over cars and high-quality pedestrian amenities will be installed. The street will frequently be closed to vehicles so that it can host community events such as farmers markets, fairs, concerts, and similar community events. As a result of these investments and changes in zoning, the street will become a key location for new business and small-scale multi-family residential development in the Downtown.

The Borough's burgeoning bicycle network will connect the residential neighborhoods to the riverfront, which in turn will connect regional destinations along the Raritan River Greenway, centered around Downtown Raritan. The Borough's conversion of Thompson and Anderson Street into one-way pairs will have created high-quality safe bicycle connections to Somerset Street which could be further reinforced by a potential pedestrian bridge to link either Thompson or Anderson to the neighborhood on the north side of Route 202.

These connections will continue south of Somerset Street along Thompson and up Loomis Street to the riverfront, completing the connection between the neighborhoods and the river. This will encourage cyclists visiting the greenway and riverfront to also patronize Downtown businesses.





SOMERSET STREET

Streetscape

Somerset Street will be the element that unites all of Downtown. Through steady investment in the public realm, the Borough and County will work together to make Somerset Street a **safe and enjoyable place for walking**. Under-utilized spaces on the street will be transformed, creating opportunities for landscaping as well as public amenities such as benches, trash and recycling, public art, and outdoor dining spaces.

Safety improvements on either side of the commercial center will make the area enjoyable for residents of all ages; parents will feel comfortable with their children taking a trip down to Somerset Street for an ice cream cone in the summer. Visitors enjoy the walk from parking to their destination, since they like to spend time milling about the district when they come to town. As a result, **Somerset Street will become a destination in and of itself, with attractive places for the community to gather and connect.**

Private investment will make substantial contributions to the improvement of Somerset Street as well. As property and business owners develop confidence in the vision for the Downtown, **façades along the street will see steady improvements**, guided and supported by municipal programs. Moreover, business will contribute to the greening of Somerset Street by maintaining private planters and window boxes. Combined, these efforts enhance the historic, walkable quality of the Downtown that so many residents cherish.

Businesses and Development

Somerset Street will reflect the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of residents. The small footprint of retail spaces will become leveraged to attract new business startups and Raritan will be known regionally as a place where businesses can get the support they need to thrive.

Existing business will continue to provide high-quality daily amenities and services to residents. Over time, the Borough's investment in placemaking and mobility will attract more boutique retail and restaurants that serve as regional draws.





A key driver of new retail will be the growing Hispanic and Filipino populations. To support this, the Borough will have updated its policies and trained its staff to support these populations as they integrate into the business community.

Although the Downtown will become substantially more active and vibrant, new development will enhance the existing community fabric. New development will pay homage to the Borough's historic building stock but imitation or faux historicism will be strictly discouraged. Instead, new development will leverage design tools to ensure that new construction blends into the community with architectural styles that are compatible with surrounding properties.

RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

The Borough will continue to attract a diverse group of residents to its neighborhoods, from recent immigrants to millennials, families, and empty nesters. The Borough's ability to do so will be grounded in efforts to maintain and cultivate a variety of housing options including single-family homes, accessory dwelling units, small two-to-four family homes, and mid-scale multi-family development.

As buildings are improved and new investments are made in the neighborhoods, key architectural elements will unite neighborhoods. This will include porches, high-quality landscaped front yards, gabled roofs, and the use of context appropriate materials, among other elements. As a result, new projects will blend into the existing architecture of the area, reinforcing the existing character rather than re-inventing it.

A MULTI-MODAL CONNECTED DOWNTOWN

A high-quality pedestrian and bicycle network will internally connect Downtown Raritan. Many residents and visitors will be able to move around the area without needing a car. New bike lanes and improved sidewalks will contribute to enhanced street activity and provide more opportunities for causal encounters amongst friends.

Residents and visitors will find a variety of transportation options in the revitalized Downtown including an improved train station area, the Raritan River Greenway, and available parking in new municipal lots. Strong non-automotive connections to the region will encourage continued growth in the Downtown without being stifled by limited parking options.

Residents will also have strong access to regional employment opportunities. The Raritan Valley Line connects the Borough to major urban centers, while improved shuttle services will provide access to regional employment hubs.

COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION

The success of Downtown Raritan will be attributed to successful coordination between business owners, residents, regional stakeholders, and local and county government. This plan, and subsequent efforts, will be coordinated through a working group that has broad representation from a diverse set of community members, including new and established residents as well as members from the Hispanic and Filipino communities.

GATEWAYS

As the public realm transforms and underutilized spaces begin to revitalize, there will be opportunities for new development that can provide residential and commercial spaces currently not provided in the Downtown. Redevelopment at two key locations on the east and west edges of the Downtown have the opportunity to establish important gateways in the Borough.

Gateway West

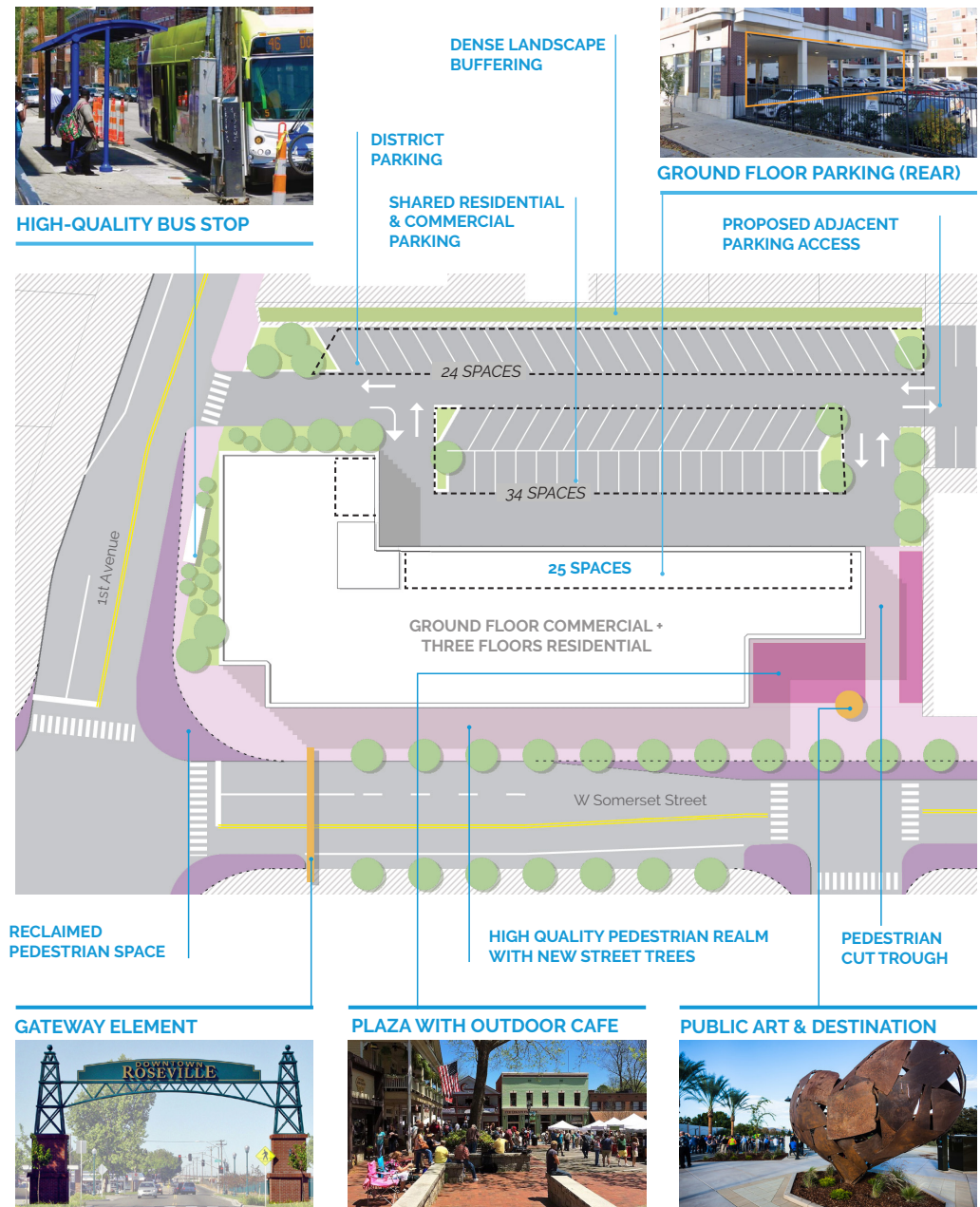
The Gateway West Project, located on the northeastern corner of Somerset and 1st Avenue, will accommodate a **new four-story mixed-use development** that will substantially transform the area.

Ground floor commercial spaces may include **new restaurants and modern retail spaces** that contribute to the mix of downtown businesses and do not compete with them. Approximately 40 new residential units will provide a **mix of bedroom types** to ensure Downtown Raritan continues to support a diverse resident population.

On-site uses (residents, employees, and visitors) will have access to surface parking as well as spaces located under the rear of the building. In addition, the site includes **24 district parking spaces** that will be open for public use and connected to Somerset Street through a **well lit pedestrian cut-through**. This parking services all businesses in the downtown, making a substantial contribution to supporting continued economic growth.

A creative and locally-focused **public art** installation and **public plaza** draws visitors from the Riverfront and Nevius Street into the Downtown. The plaza space will be flexible and serve multiple purposes. At times, it will be a community gathering space and location for small concerts, farmers markets, or the like. It will also support adjacent commercial spaces and provide space for outdoor dining and/or merchandise display.

Gateway West Vision Plan



Private realm improvements will support, and will be supported by, a high-quality public realm. Through close coordination with Somerset County, **sidewalks will be expanded near intersections** which calm traffic and making the crossings safer for pedestrians.

A major **gateway element** will welcome people into the Downtown and emphasize that they have arrived at a special place in the region. Likewise, a **covered bus stop** will provide users with a comfortable place to wait on their way to access jobs and services in the region.

Gateway East

On the eastern edge of the Downtown, two new residential buildings will signal that you have arrived. The project will add approximately **35 new residential units** in a **mix of bedroom types**, helping to ensure Downtown Raritan continues to support a diverse resident population. A small commercial space will provide an opportunity for one to two retail establishment servicing residents of the building, the Lena, and the surrounding residential community.

Buildings will be **setback** from Somerset Street to match properties on adjacent blocks. The front yard will include **high-quality landscaping**, including dense foundation plantings. This context-sensitive approach reinforces the residential character of the area and ensures that residential units are adequately buffered off of Somerset Street.

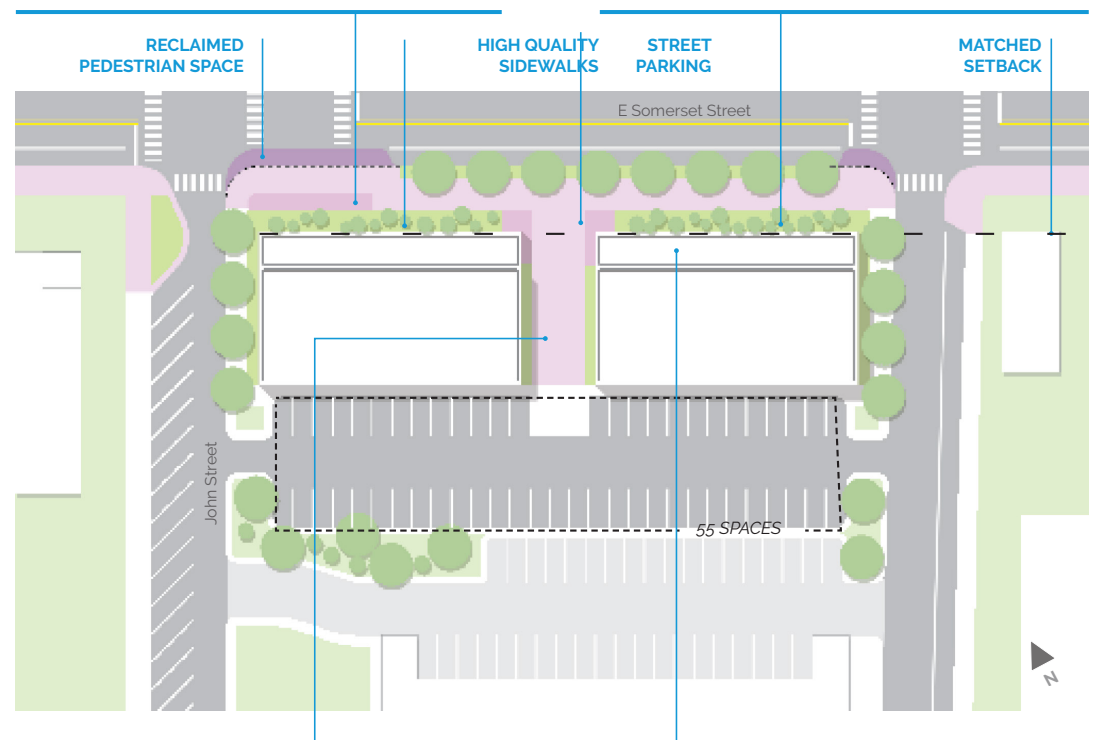
Gateway East Vision Plan



AMENITY AREA



HIGH-QUALITY LANDSCAPING



PEDESTRIAN CUT-THROUGH



UPPER-FLOOR SETBACK



WHO CREATED THIS VISION?

INTRODUCTION

A diverse group of resident's and stakeholder's thoughtful input shaped the vision articulated in this plan. The project began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, all engagement occurred online to protect both participants and the project team. Despite the challenges this created, more than 150 people shared their vision for how to make Downtown Raritan an economically vibrant and sustainable place. To collaborate with residents and stakeholders, the Project Team:

- Created a website, DowntownRaritan.com, that included all relevant project information.
- Conducted a series of **meetings with Raritan stakeholders** who were identified by Borough staff.
- Released two **online surveys**, a regional and a local survey. These were promoted on the Borough's Facebook page, on its website, and through local media. **A total of 68 people participated in these surveys.**
- Published an **online workshop** on DowntownRaritan.com, in both English and Spanish, that allowed participation in seven activities that directly shaped the recommendations. Activities included strength, weakness, and opportunity mapping; vision sharing; and visual preference surveys; among others. Participants could also register for online meetings with Project Staff. **Eighty-five people participated in the workshop, submitting over 700 responses.**
- Met regularly with a **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)** made up

of more than a dozen residents, business owners, stakeholders, and elected officials.

Appendix A: Public Involvement provides a detailed discussion of resident and stakeholder input, including specific results from each workshop activity. The following section briefly summarizes those findings so that readers can track participant ideas through the plan.

VISION

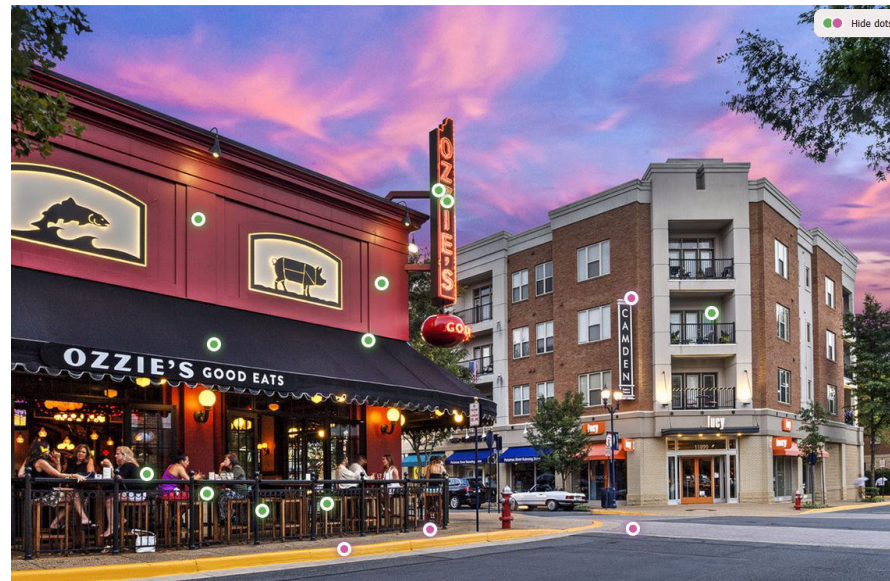
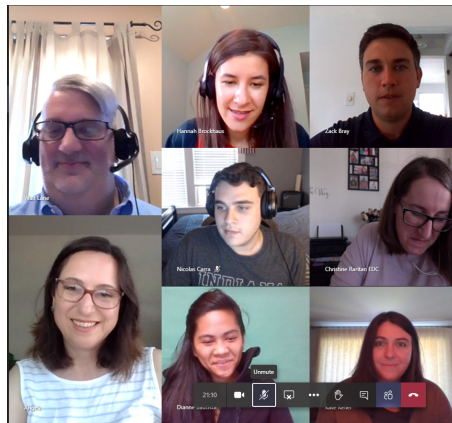
Participants wanted **an active and attractive downtown**, a fact that was identified early in the planning process. For many, this meant a **downtown connected to major assets and with a good atmosphere and high-quality community spaces**. There was a desire to see more commercial activity, including shops and dining. Participants were clear that this new retail should be **diverse and pedestrian-oriented**. To that end, there is a clear preference for the **highest quality multi-modal options**.

Across all activities, there was strong support for **efforts that would make Downtown "greener"** with an **enhanced riverfront** and **better connection between the river and Somerset Street**.

In stakeholder interviews and in the workshop, there was also support for efforts that would create a more **family-friendly** environment, and promote the Borough's growing **multi-ethnic communities**. The workshop highlighted the fact that there was broad support for all of these efforts, and that disagreement focuses mostly on which of these three approaches should take priority, rather than on the specific merits of the approach.

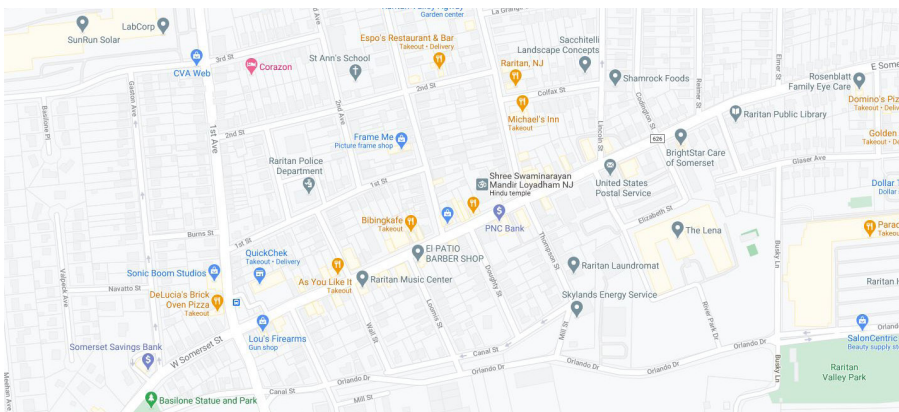
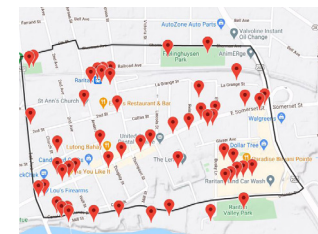
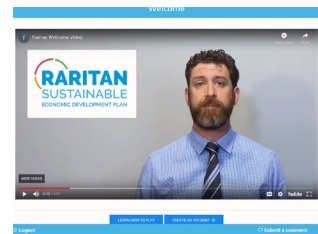
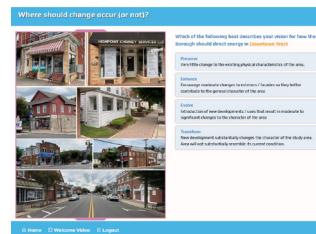
Figure 1. Online Public Engagement Activities

A plethora of online engagement activities allowed the Project Team to work cooperatively with residents and stakeholders to create a bold yet viable vision for the Downtown. Virtual dot exercises, virtual meetings, virtual presentations, surveys, online mapping, and virtual sticky note activities were just some of the approaches used to get input on the plan.



<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Like the mix of materials in the buildings - coordinated but not identical
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Outdoor seating is a must
<input type="checkbox"/>	Would like to see more trees, plantings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	This is a neon sign done right. More of this would be cool
<input type="checkbox"/>	Where will people park?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Glad to have outdoor seating.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Glad to have different colors.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Too modern for the town.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	More restaurants and retail
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Cute building
<input type="checkbox"/>	Parking is needed.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Outdoor dining is great
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A mix of residential and retail would be best

CHOOSE ANOTHER IMAGE



Raritan Community Survey

Ver en Español

2. Please select a few adjectives that describe the look and feel of Downtown Raritan before the outbreak of COVID (select all that apply)

Active	Attractive	Beautiful	Boring	Bustling	Busy	Calm	Charming	Cheap	Cheerful
Clean	Colorful	Comfortable	Congested	Contemporary	Cosmopolitan	Crowded	Cultured		
Deserted	Dirty	Diverse	Dull	Eclectic	Empty	Evolving	Exciting	Expensive	Friendly
Fun	Genuine	Gritty	Hectic	Historic	Lively	Modern	Noisy	Peaceful	Pleasant
Predictable	Pretentious	Quiet	Refined	Remarkable	Rural	Safe	Sensible	Small	
Spacious	Stale	Stressful	Suburban	Surprising	Traditional	Tranquil	Ugly		
Uncomfortable	Unique	Unsafe	Urban	Varied	Welcoming	Other			

PREVIOUS NEXT

Home Welcome Video Logout Submit a comment Ask an Expert

WHERE SHOULD CHANGE OCCUR

Workshop activities asked participants to identify where, if anywhere, change should occur.

- Participants wanted to see the most change along the riverfront and the Raritan Mall.
- Commercial areas were identified as places where the Borough should take a mixture of encouraging moderate change, focused mostly on enhancing the existing character while allowing some areas to evolve.
- Participants felt the character of residential areas should remain substantially similar to its current condition and that the Borough should focus mostly on preservation and enhancement.

SUB-AREA VISIONS

Commercial Areas

Participants said efforts in the commercial areas should focus on promoting high-quality façades and the “historic look” of the area. Awnings, signs, and façade details should be coordinated along the street. This should be complemented with high-quality public amenities such as benches, trash cans, recycling, and flowers/landscaping. Public and private investment should focus on pedestrian and bicycle amenities and creating an environment that is safe and inviting for these users. Once progress is made on those efforts, participants wanted to see more outdoor seating options, more diversity of restaurants and retail, and a mixture of residential and retail development.

Riverfront

Participants wanted to see the riverfront transform into a public amenity that served as both a local and regional destination. Participants suggested that amenities could include elements such as a park, boat launch, children’s play area, picnic areas, gazebos, and walking paths, among others amenities.

Neighborhoods

Participants responded positively to architecture that mirrored styles already present in Raritan. Efforts should be made to ensure that new development is consistent with the form and character of the neighborhoods.

Somerset Street

There was strong preference for substantial improvements to Somerset Street that would make it more pedestrian friendly while allowing for more on-street activity. Participants expressed a desire to see more bicycle parking; landscaping, especially in curb extension areas; outdoor dining opportunities; and public art; among other recommendations.

BUSINESS SUPPORT

Participants said the Borough could best help existing business by undertaking the following six efforts:

- **Support services:** work more closely with businesses to understand their needs and help them attract new customers.
- **Beautification:** invest in public streetscaping and façade improvements.
- **Connectivity:** promote multi-modal connectivity in the Downtown.
- **Leveraging assets:** improving and connecting to assets, especially the riverfront and Duke Farms.
- **Connecting to new residents:** look for ways to better integrate the new residents, especially immigrants, into the community.
- **Parking:** create more parking options and better manage existing parking assets would help support existing and new businesses.

EXISTING CONDITIONS SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

To facilitate the development of the Sustainable Economic Development Plan and lay the foundation for future recommendations, the project team prepared a detailed *Existing Conditions Report* that included:

- A review of the regional context and overview of the Priority Growth Investment Area.
- A review of the previous plans that will impact the Study Area.
- A demographic analysis identifying relevant population and housing trends that might inform future changes in land use or transportation.
- An inventory of existing transit and circulation, including pedestrian and bike infrastructure.
- A review of the current environmental conditions that will impact economic development in the Study Area
- An analysis of the land uses and public realm in the Study Area.
- An examination of the regulatory environment, especially with regards to land use and zoning, in the Study Area.
- An overview of the capacity the Borough has to implement the plan.

In addition, the project team prepared an *Economic and Market Assessment* that examined commercial, residential, and industrial use demand in the Downtown. This section provides a top-level summary of those two works. Unless otherwise noted, statistics mentioned in this plan are from

the US Census Bureau and detailed citations can be found in the *Existing Conditions Report*.

KEY FINDINGS

Planning

The Borough has several recent “wins” already

The Borough has had several efforts come to fruition recently that it is already moving in the right direction:

- The recently formed **Economic Development Committee** has successfully held business support events and promoted beautification along Somerset Street.
- The **Nevius Street Bridge** opened, creating an important, and attractive, gateway into the Borough from Duke Farms.
- The Borough secured funding for the conversion of Thompson and Anderson Streets into one-way facilities and the construction of protected bike lanes on both.

Combined these efforts demonstrate continued efforts to revitalize Downtown and builds momentum for the recommendations in this plan.

Demographics

The Downtown is one of the most diverse areas in the region.

The Downtown stands out amongst its neighbors in a number of critical ways. **First, it has a larger share of renters than many surrounding areas.** This indicates that the housing stock allows for more opportunities to find housing that meets a variety of different needs. The availability of rental housing is particularly important, as it permits people to enter into the Borough, develop an attachment to it, and then move on to home-ownership when their circumstances permit.

Second, the area has **a larger proportion of non-family households.** This is generally considered an asset in a downtown area: increasingly lifestyle preferences of younger generations have shifted and there is demand for housing located near amenities. Housing for non-family residents indicates the availability of diverse housing, which allows for a competitive and resilient area.

Third, **nearly 1 in 3 residents were not born in the United States.** There are also **more non-white residents** relative to the County and the State. Comprised mostly of Hispanic and Filipino residents, this growing community lives, works, and operates businesses in Downtown. Going forward, this diversity will continue to be one of Raritan's strengths: as these communities continue to grow and prosper, they will bring increased vibrancy and activity to the Downtown.

Median household income lags behind the region

Residents of both the Borough and the Study Area have household incomes that are below that of their counterparts in the region. This highlights the need for sustainable and equitable economic development that focuses on both business development but also increasing economic opportunities for residents.

Mobility

Inadequate regional shuttle services access

NJ TRANSIT and Somerset County buses are available in nearby Somerville, which is less than a mile from most of the borough. However,

there are limited options to get to Somerville Station without a car. Moreover, many of the routes by-pass Raritan. These shuttle services provide important connections to regional employment centers. **Without adequate bus connections, Downtown residents have fewer job opportunities.**

Cut-through traffic restricts Downtown pedestrian activity

Somerset Street is a walkable district. However, people expressed concern about safety along the street, specifically for families nervous about traffic speeds and the proximity of vehicles to sidewalks. As one of the only connections between Routes 206 and 202, **some regional traffic drives down the county road to avoid congestion on highways.** The speed limit on Somerset Street is 25 miles per hour, however, the average speed is 35 miles per hour. Vehicles frequently pulling into and out of parking spaces creates additional conflicts and safety concerns.

Parking is limited and not well managed

Parking concerns have been noted as an impediment to revitalization of Raritan's Downtown in planning studies going back to the 2005 Parking assessment of Downtown. **The dense pattern of development within the commercial district means that existing lots are small, and space is at a premium.**

These physical issues are exacerbated by poor parking management.

Stakeholders complained that business owners and residents will park on Somerset Street, taking up valuable spaces needed for customers. Similarly, residents use municipal lots meant for patron parking. The lack of wayfinding signage makes finding off-street parking difficult.

Environment

The river provides a major asset

The riverfront is one of the key assets that distinguishes Raritan from the other communities in Somerset's Priority Growth Investment Areas and the larger region. **No downtown has the proximity and unobstructed riverfront frontage that Raritan has.** The only community with the same level of proximity, Bound Brook, is separated from the river by the railroad

and a large levee. Equally important, **the Borough and County control considerable amounts of the land in this area** and private land uses do not have a vested interest in waterfront access.

Proximity to unique regional environmental assets distinguish Downtown Raritan from its competitors

Raritan has a wealth of environmental assets in the Borough and nearby. This includes the **Raritan River, Duke Farms, and Finderne Wetlands** which offer passive and active recreation areas and opportunities for many different types of activities. The completion of the **Raritan River Greenway** will make it even easier for residents to access all of these outdoor destinations either on foot, bike, or however else they would like. In nearby Somerville, a former landfill is being transformed into a Transit Village, with housing, retail, a community center and the “Green Seam,” a passive recreation space. This project could complement Raritan’s economic development efforts.

Riverfront usage is limited by flooding

Much of the riverfront is either in the floodway or a flood zone. Not only does this place restrictions on private development in the area, it also limits the type of open space improvements that the Borough can make. This is especially important for the large, municipally-owned property at the end of Mill Street. This parcel has considerable potential but will need to be designed to accommodate flooding. Likewise, **the Raritan River Greenway will need to be designed in accordance with regulations governing improvements in the floodway.**

Commercial District

Previous investments have built a strong base

The Borough has made investments in Somerset Street such as lighting, pavers, gateway signage, benches, and trash cans. **These improvements have helped to define the Downtown and demonstrate that the Borough is committed to economic revitalization.**

Likewise, the County and the Borough have already identified areas where parking is not permitted, stripping them in diagonal white lines. This has

paved the way for non-automotive improvements in these areas, such as parklets, outdoor dining, planters, and other beautification efforts.

Signage and façades are of inconsistent quality

Signage and façade quality along Somerset are inconsistent and this detracts from the overall attractiveness of the district. Some property owners have made improvements such as adding attractive signage, awnings, and opening up their storefront windows. Others have cluttered windows, unattractive signage, and have made no effort to improve the façade.

Commercial zoning is out-of-date

The B-1 Central Business District zone only permits the retail and personal service uses that are specifically listed in the ordinance. Anything outside of this list would require a use variance, which can be an expensive deterrent to doing business. This approach to regulating uses is inconsistent with a community that is interested in attracting a wide variety of uses and which needs to lower barriers to entry to attract those uses.

Commercial district is not connected to key assets

As previously mentioned, some of the Borough’s greatest assets include the riverfront, the Nevius Street Bridge, and nearby Duke Farms. However, there are poor visual, pedestrian, and bicycle connections to these sites. This prevents Downtown business owners from capitalizing on the visitors these locations attract.

Lot depth limits development

The relatively shallow lots along Somerset Street pose a major obstacle to redevelopment. Many of the lots are between 110 and 120 feet deep. A standard modern residential or mixed use building is 70 feet in depth and a standard double loaded parking lot measures 60 feet in width. The resulting building would require 130 feet in lot depth, without any buffers. **This lack of depth is one of the reasons why property owners struggle to provide sufficient parking to their customers.**

Commercial Market

The Downtown not likely to fill regional retail gaps

The categories of retail with the largest retail gaps (or market potential) in the region tended to be those that require large footprints, like car dealerships. Because these retailers need larger parcels, they will not locate in Downtown Raritan, and so will not be strong foundation for commercial growth in the Downtown.

Growth depends on strong connections to assets

Growth does not need to come from providing goods and services that are in demand regionally but not currently being supplied. There are plenty of businesses that are successful because they are in the right place: they are close to a major amenity or located in an areas where lots of people come and go. For the Borough, **short- and mid-term growth opportunities are tied more closely to capturing growth attractions like Duke Farms and the Raritan River Greenway.**

Residential areas

There are a diversity of housing options

The Downtown is not only home to a diverse population, but **it is also home to a variety of housing options.** The area has more historic properties and multi-family housing units than any community in the region: only 1 in 3 of homes in the Downtown are traditional single family detached or attached homes. **Nearly 1 in 4 of housing units are in two- to four-unit buildings and nearly a quarter of units are in buildings with 20 or more units.** This diversity of housing types provides ample opportunity for the Borough's diverse resident population to find housing options that meet their needs.

Common architectural elements unify housing

Full-façade length porches are a unifying architectural element that can be found across the study area. At times, the porches have ornate Victorian architectural elements, while other times they are simpler, more paired down, features. The distance that the porches sit from the sidewalk is particularly important. Although it varies across the study area, the front of the porch is often no more than 10 or 15 feet away from the sidewalk,

and often is less than a few feet. This changes the nature of the porch: by being more proximate to the sidewalk, there are more opportunities for casual social interaction. Where they are found in surrounding communities, such as Somerville, they tend to be setback closer to 25 feet from the road, which is too far away to have a conversation without entering onto the property. Moreover, porches in surrounding communities are substantially less ubiquitous.

Other important architectural elements include tight spacing between buildings, hipped roofs, landscaped front yards, chimneys, and side yard parking.

Rear yard garages are an opportunity for accessory housing units and offices

Many homes in the Downtown neighborhoods have side-yard parking and rear garages. Many of these garages are between 300 and 600 square feet and a top-level survey suggest that they are overall well-kept and in good condition. Over time, as the Borough works to enhance non-motorized mobility, property owners may find that they are no longer in need of these garages. This presents an opportunity for them to be converted into accessory dwelling units or offices.

There may be a market for “missing middle” housing

There is likely to be an influx of housing units coming on the market in the region over the next 5 to 10 years, most of which will be luxury multi-family units. This, combined with the limited number of spaces where multi-family development could occur in the Downtown, make it unlikely that there will be high demand for new, large, multi-family developments in the Borough.

However, there is a notable lack of “missing middle” development in the region. This housing, defined as buildings with two to four units, is consistent with the development patterns the Downtown neighborhoods. Promotion of these housing types could be attractive to residents who want access to transit and downtown amenities, to live in neighborhoods with a stronger “single-family” aesthetic, and are looking for housing outside the luxury market.

