

MAKING CONNECTIONS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 2011



Executive Summary

The Making Connections Plan is designed to improve mobility and safety across Somerset County, New Jersey. The Plan guides the transportation planning process, identifies and promotes policies that help support and reinforce the Plan's recommended improvements, and provides a framework for selecting and prioritizing among proposed programs, plans, and projects.



Background

First settled during the latter part of the seventeenth century, Somerset is one of America's oldest counties. Throughout much of its history, Somerset County was predominantly rural, and farming was at the center of its economy.

Proximity to State and Interstate highways and access to regional passenger and freight transportation systems have shaped much of the region's more recent history. These improvements in access have resulted in significant population growth and have changed the breadth and nature of commercial activity. The region has transitioned from its early farm-based origins, to a focal point first for industry and goods movement, and more recently as the home to leading telecommunications and pharmaceutical firms. And although it has become more suburban than rural in character, it is still largely a collection of bedroom communities and small urban centers.

These changes, gradual over Somerset's first 300 years, and then more rapidly over the last half century, are reflected in Somerset's demographics. The County's population, which first topped 100,000 in the early 1950s after nearly 300 years of settlement, currently stands at 323,444.

Regional Significance

The Making Connections Plan builds upon and reinforces many of the goals and objectives of the

North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority's Plan 2035 by proposing strategies that maximize mobility options in all districts and by improving accessibility, reliability, sustainability, inter-modality, highway, transit, pedestrian and freight mobility across the County transportation network and the region as well. By promoting enhanced interconnections between the various modes of travel and increasing the opportunities for public transit, residents and employees who live and work within the County or the surrounding region will benefit from improved mobility and less congestion on the region's highway network.

Community-Based Planning Process

Making Connections utilized a community-based planning process to prepare a circulation plan that is reflective of Somerset County's diverse community of stakeholders. An inclusive process was essential to identifying the many varied issues, interests, needs, and concerns of those who live, work, govern, and do business in Somerset County.

Outreach

The community-based planning process created a plan that truly represents local and regional priorities. To accomplish this, an extensive outreach program was developed and implemented to solicit input and feedback from a wide variety of Somerset County stakeholders – the general public, business community, agency representatives, decision makers, and advocacy groups. The effort included a series of steering committee meetings, focus groups, public meetings, a meeting with municipal planning board chairs, and an on-line survey to solicit feedback and priorities for the Plan's goals and policies.

The project team also researched and coordinated the Making Connections Plan with various local, Somerset County, NJTPA, and statewide policies, plans, and studies, representing a broad range of actions and issues, including:

- NJTPA Regional Transportation Plan 2035
- I-287 Mobility Plan
- Advancing Intermodal Freight Opportunities
- NJDOT Truck Origin/Destination Survey
- Millstone Valley Scenic Byway Corridor Plan
- TOD Opportunities in Somerset County
- Somerset County Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Somerset County Circulation Plan Update 2003
- Regional Center Pedestrian, Bike & Greenways Plan

Goals and Policies

The Making Connections Plan makes the case for a series of policies, programs, and projects that address Somerset County's transportation, mobility, and safety needs. Evaluation, selection, and prioritization of these improvements are guided by a series of Goals and Policies, adopted as part of this Plan.

The nine Goals and Policies that create the framework of the Making Connections Plan were developed as part of the comprehensive outreach program and therefore represent the values and priorities of the County's many stakeholders, advocates, and decision makers. These goals, shown on page five, also reflect the current state of the practice in planning, including smart growth, livability, and sustainability.



Vision Statement

Five principal themes emerged from the planning, analysis, and outreach process and reflect the Goals and Policies; these combine to form the Vision Statement:

The Making Connections Plan

- Creates a robust multi-modal transportation network
- Maintains and improves the existing highway system
- Expands the regional transit system
- Enhances traffic safety for all travelers and modes, and
- Promotes sustainability

Scenario Planning

Scenario planning enabled the project team to evaluate a range of potential outcomes, visions, and investment scenarios by testing a mix of infrastructure, demographic, and land use and policy changes. The Making Connections scenarios were tested using the North Jersey Regional Transportation Model-

Enhanced (NJRTM-E), the travel demand model for northern New Jersey. The NJRTM-E includes an enhanced transit component and allows for the testing of various projects, land use decisions, and economic variables. Population and employment totals are the same for each scenario.

Four alternative scenarios were tested:

1. Somerset County Baseline
2. Highway Rich
3. Transit Rich
4. Blend Scenario

The scenario planning exercise indicates that mobility will degrade over the next 20 years with an increasing level of traffic congestion; travel under congested conditions is projected to increase by 25%. In the future, congestion can be mitigated but not resolved; each alternative "buys back" about one-half of the degraded travel performance, but none restores conditions to current levels.

Demographic shifts, such as the planned Hillsborough Towne Center and Somerville redevelopment, boost transit ridership by creating supportive densities, and help to mitigate overall congestion along traffic-choked U.S. Route 206. Scenarios tested without these shifts result in comparatively worse levels of congestion and degraded travel speeds.

This congestion impacts County and local streets disproportionately. Congestion on the State and Interstate highways spreads to the County and local streets which will carry a greater proportion of overall travel than experienced today, impacting local mobility and safety.

Performance measures and the scenario planning exercise indicate that a Blend Scenario - mixing land use solutions with highway and transit improvements, demand management, and supporting policies - offers the greatest potential to meet the study Goals and Policies and achieve the Vision for Somerset County.

Conclusions - Making Connections

Making Connections recommends a comprehensive and coordinated series of multi-modal infrastructure and policy initiatives for Somerset County, including highway and transit improvements, supportive policy measures, integrating land use and transportation planning, bicycle and pedestrian circulation, freight and goods movement, scenic corridors and greenways, traffic safety, mitigation of greenhouse gases and adaptation to climate change impacts.

Making Connections safely connects people with opportunity through transportation.