

THE TOWNSHIP MASTER PLAN

OVERVIEW

The Township's Master Plan articulates a definitive vision for growth and conservation to set the foundation for the Township's land use policies. The Master Planning process has enabled the Township to carefully consider a range of land use related issues and to engage the public at town hall meetings, planning board work sessions and at the public hearings. The Master Plan sets forth the township's values –such as the protection of natural resources, the preservation of farmland and support for agricultural production, the implementation of design standards that reflect the community's ideals, and the encouragement of economic development opportunities in appropriate locations –so that policies and regulations can be measured against those values. It has been recognized for many years that development pressures were converging on the Township, leading to serious concern that if development is unrestrained, the desirability of residing in this still rural area may ultimately result in the complete loss of the characteristics that make it so. The new Master Plan sets forth South Harrison Township's plan to do its part to avoid the fate of being completely covered by sprawl.

While the end result may not please everyone, the Township decided to take deliberate action to protect its rural character and to adopt land use policies more consistent with the New Jersey State Plan and Gloucester County's Farmland Preservation Plan. South Harrison's role in the State and in the region is rural and agricultural, so residential development must fit into the evolving fabric of the community, not unravel it. A build-out analysis has shown that if the development patterns that have been set in the recent past are perpetuated, the Township may be built out with an estimated 2,500 (+/-) additional single family homes sprawling out over the remaining 4,013 (+/-) undeveloped and unreserved acres in the Township. This is in addition to the 450 homes that have been approved in accordance with the prior AR zoning standards, but not yet built. The Township hopes to alter the course away from the "worst case" scenario through support of the Farmland Preservation Program and through land use regulations that reduce the allowable residential density and require a conservation subdivision approach to site design. The overall intent is to provide for land development planning in South Harrison that responds to the natural environment, the needs of the citizens, as well as market demands, while maintaining a human scale and a connection between built and natural environments.

MASTER PLAN BASICS

All New Jersey municipalities are required to have a Master Plan if they wish to enact and enforce zoning regulations. The Master Plan is adopted and maintained by the Planning Board, but the implementing ordinances such as zoning standards are adopted by the Township Committee. Master Plans must be prepared and re-examined at least once every six years. The re-examination must consider a number of specific questions related to the goals and objectives and changes that have taken place since the last re-examination. At this juncture it was decided that South Harrison needed a new Master Plan.

POLICIES AND OBJECTIVES

- Subvert the unplanned transition from a rural land use pattern toward one that is more suburban, through a more planned approach. The Township can not control the decisions of individual property owners, but the town can provide guidance so that each parcel fits into the larger picture.

- Agricultural lands are an irreplaceable natural resource and a vital element of the Township's rural character. Many farmers want to continue farming and many are coming up with innovative ways to sustain their business in today's economy. Many have or would like to enter the farmland preservation program, i.e. selling their development rights (which are then permanently retired) but retaining their land for agricultural use. However, there are some lands that are fallow and will sooner or later be developed and some farms that will be sold to opportunistic developers. The master plan and ordinance changes will guide development of these lands to create layouts that retain environmental features, connect open space to existing greenway corridors if they exist near by, and add value to the residential homes.
- Beyond the desire to slow the conversion of farmland to rooftops, there are many other reasons to reconsider the sprawling land use pattern. As sprawl reaches further from the cities into the hinterland, commutes grow longer and municipal services become more expensive.
- Acknowledge that there will be growth, but establish a plan that will provide confidence that the growth that does occur will be at a level that the Township can assimilate and will be in harmony with natural systems, will respect remaining agricultural operations, and will become part of the fabric of the community. In this way the Township can embrace new residents instead of resisting them.
- The Master Plan and new ordinances set a base density of .25 units per acre with a minimum lot size of 3 acres in the Agricultural residential (AR) zone. For minor subdivisions, applicants can use lot size averaging so that lots may range from 1.5 acres+ as long as the average is 3 acres or more. For major subdivisions, conservation design techniques will be employed to connect and protect environmental resources, potentially preserve farmland, and retain rural vistas. Existing single family lots one acre or greater that were filed with the County Clerk at the time the new ordinance was adopted will be grandfathered.
- A new Professional Office Residential zone has been adopted to provide opportunities for professional offices at targeted locations. Most of the lots in the PO/R zone contain single family homes that are on relatively busy County or State roads and could be converted for office use once a site plan is approved (providing for adequate parking, lighting, buffering, landscaping, etc). Design standards are in place to guide neighborhood development that is architecturally appealing and compatible with the Township's character so that each structure and site appears to be part of the cohesive whole instead of constructed in isolation.
- The permitted uses in the LI light industrial zone were expanded to provide more flexibility for development in those areas.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- At the time of the 2000 census the Twp population was 2,417. By July 2006 it was estimated to be 2,956 an increase of 22%. This is much less than the growth in Woolwich, and somewhat less than the rate of growth in Harrison, but greater than the growth in the Salem County towns to the south.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

- To date 2,769 acres of farmland have been preserved in South Harrison – over 25% of the Twp's land area
- Gloucester County Agricultural development board has had a new County wide Farmland Preservation Plan prepared over the last year. This plan is supportive of farmland preservation efforts and the business of agriculture and seeks to retain both in a sustainable manner.
- The Township understands that changes to zoning and land use requirements cannot themselves entirely prevent the loss of farmland. It also acknowledges that zoning density is one factor that is considered in determining a farmer's land equity. While a change in zoning may initially change the appraisal equation somewhat, a reduction in potential residential lot yield does not strip a farm

of economically viable alternative uses.

- The Township has determined that the sprawl that can result from the prior zoning program is not an acceptable outcome. While Township officials certainly want to minimize the negative impacts of a zoning change on property owners, it is also important to have a plan that will result in an acceptable long term pattern of growth within the Township. Not acting would allow more consumptive development that deteriorates the land base.
- The preparation of a municipal Farmland Preservation Plan, with the assistance of a Smart Future Grant from the Office of Smart Growth, will allow the Township to establish an Agricultural Advisory Committee, inventory agricultural lands, consider what may be done to further support agricultural production, prioritize lands for preservation, and ultimately increase the inventory of preserved farms.
- Most farmers, agricultural economists, planners and others agree that in order to retain farms and farmers, the region needs to have a critical mass of farmland and farm related services readily available. One of the objectives of the Master Plan is to reduce fragmentation of the land base. Our Farmland Preservation plan will allow us to plan and discuss options with various land owners.
- Here's an example of how the new zoning scheme COULD result in farmland preservation. –If a farm is 200 acres, the density would permit the construction of 50 homes. If the developer, farmer and Township could work together to design the site so that the 50 homes are located on a 75 acre section of the tract with the roads and basins, etc, then a deed restriction could be placed upon the remaining 125 acres and the farmer could continue to farm or sell that farm to another farmer as a permanently preserved farm. This could be an alternative for some farmers.