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Eastampton A Land Preservation Success Story

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Smart Growth is often misunderstood by local leaders as solely a state or regional initiative to create growth boundaries, encourage mass transit and preserve open space. This is unfortunate because at its core smart growth is about making better civic design decisions at all levels of government.

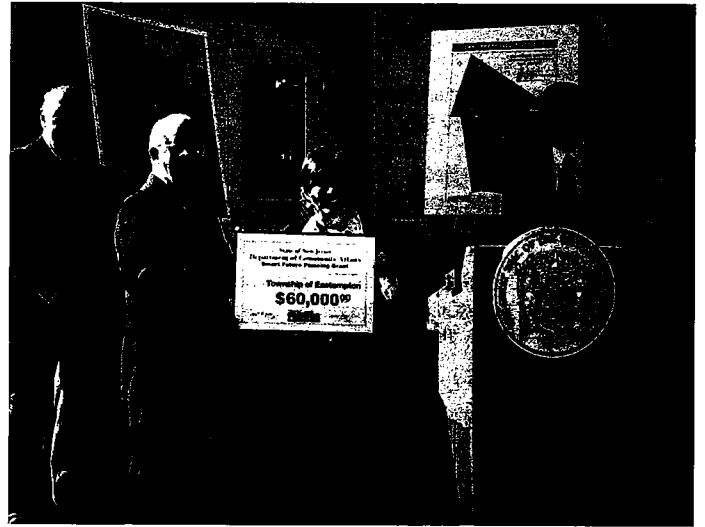
State and regional goals have the best chance of being achieved when the principles of smart growth are first understood and applied within a local context to the personal and economic benefit of our residents.

Less than ten years ago Eastampton was on the verge of becoming a poster child for ruinous sprawl. Today, the township council can say that dynamic planning, incorporating the tenets of smart growth, has averted this fate. The open space plan has been fully accomplished, historic buildings preserved, design standards adopted and implemented, and a new mixed-use village center project is under design. Most importantly, these achievements have created a smart growth framework that will be reinforced as new opportunities present themselves – and they will.

In a period of four years, permanently preserved land moved from 8 percent of land area to approximately 30 percent.

Background Eastampton is a predominantly middle class community of 6,200 residents situated in the heart of Burlington County. The land area is a scenic 5.86 square miles featuring beautiful vistas of farmland, wetlands, forest and a major branch of the Rancocas Creek.

The township's commercial base is one of the weakest in the county with only 5 percent of tax revenue being generated from non-residential properties. Over the past 15 years developers of single family subdivisions have consistently targeted the township's open spaces for more residential growth.



Department of Community Affairs Commissioner Susan Bass Levin presents Eastampton with a \$60,000 Smart Futures Grant.

Strategic Planning Sets Smart Growth Priorities Strategic planning, which was used to identify the township's smart growth priorities, starts with an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). Lack of commercial highway space and reliance on single family residences to fund government were Eastampton's chief weaknesses. The greatest economic threat came from shortsighted developers who would expand this misbalance of land uses.

In considering economic improvement opportunities, the council recognized the importance of open space preservation, the creation of a vibrant commercial district that would contribute to a greater sense of community, and strengthening existing neighborhoods. Fortunately, New Jersey's Green Acres and Smart Grant programs, and the Burlington County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Program, were ready to respond to our smart growth agenda.

The township council understood that only the residents could define what a great town would include and what the government's role would be to facilitate that process. Thus, the insight and support of township residents proved to be the township's greatest strength.

Saving Open Space After a thorough public discussion, removing the threat of inappropriate development was established as the most pressing priority. Accordingly, a well-informed public by a 3-1 margin approved the open space tax, perhaps the highest in New Jersey. The township council was authorized to increase the tax from 3 to 23-cents per \$100 of assessed value to get the job done. Ultimately, the tax was set at 19-cents to fund the township's open space bonds.

The township now had the resources and support of the public to strongly confront developers who had no regard for our historic, natural and agricultural resources, or the limited supply of land for positive ratable growth. The result was a successful and aggressive open space program. In a period of four years, permanently preserved land moved from 8 percent of land area to approximately 30 percent.

The Open Space Plan established a 1,000-acre envelope of farms, reclaimed wetlands and passive and active open space around a developed core. Further, it prevented the development of many sprawling residential units. Eventually, defense of the Open Space Plan contributed to case law that can assist municipal governments throughout the state (*Eastampton Center, LLC v. The Planning Board of Eastampton*, 354 N.J. Super. 171, 805 A.2d 456 (App. Div. 202); August 20, 2002).

Through the Open Space Plan, not only did the Township remove the cost of servicing "revenue negative" developments, the new open space will encourage positive investment and strengthen property values, particularly in our oldest neighborhoods.¹ Further, each year more of the cost of these lands and associated benefits is borne through grants. Twenty-five percent of the cost is being funded through a grant from the Burlington County Open Space Program and 50 percent is expected from the New Jersey Green Acres Program, which has been making steady payments to achieve its share. In November of 2003, the Green Acres Program informed the township that it would

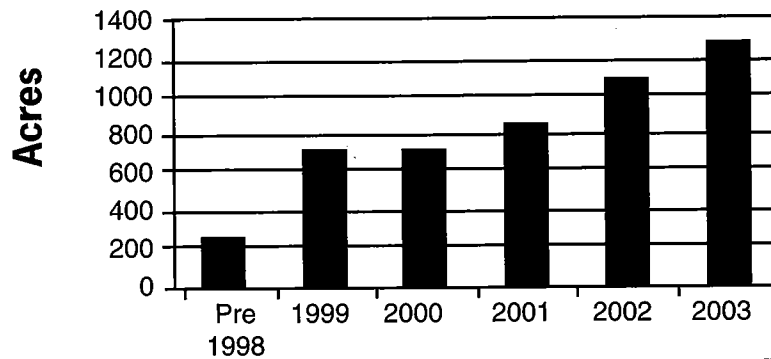
recommend a third \$400,000 grant installment in the 2004 budget, facilitating an open space tax reduction in the near future.

Creating an "Eastampton Village"

In 2003, the township council again looked to the residents for their

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Eastampton Area in Open Space & Farmland Preservation



New Jersey Future Recognizes Eastampton

Eastampton will be saluted for advancing smarter growth on May 5, when it receives a Smart Growth Award at New Jersey Future's 2004 Smart Growth Awards Celebration.

The township was selected "for embracing smart growth design principles as a blueprint for its future," by a professional panel of architects, planners, developers and civic leaders. The awards are presented annually by New Jersey Future, a nonprofit nonpartisan research and advocacy organization, and the state's oldest and largest smart growth organization.

"We were impressed with Eastampton's desire to link its existing suburban residential developments and create a single, vibrant community center with an emphasis on parks, pathways and public spaces that draw people together," said Barbara L. Lawrence, executive director of New Jersey Future.

Eastampton is one of four municipalities to be honored for its smart growth accomplishments at this year's Awards Celebration. The other municipal winners are: Harrison

(Hudson County), for its plan to transform 250 acres along the lower Passaic River into a mixed-use and transit-oriented development; Metuchen (Middlesex County) for 20 years of commitment to the health and vitality of its town center; and Salem (Salem County) for reclaiming a neighborhood from abandonment and creating a vibrant and eco-friendly residential community.

Four other municipalities will be saluted as supporting partners to the Camden County Division of Planning for a collaborative initiative using transit to bolster redevelopment along the Haddon Avenue corridor. Those municipalities are Collingswood, Haddonfield, the City of Camden and Haddon.

The 2004 Smart Growth Awards Celebration will be held from 5:30-8 p.m. May 5 at the Newark Club, Newark. Tickets are \$100; advertising opportunities are available. Proceeds benefit New Jersey Future, a nonprofit public policy and research organization working for smarter growth. For additional information, call 609/393-0008 ext. 101 or visit www.njfuture.org. ▲



Eighth graders from Eastampton Middle School work on a concept plan for the new Eastampton Village.

guidance to accomplish the economic growth component of smart growth. A series of workshops were organized to focus the community's attention on updating the antiquated commercial district and creating concepts for an adjacent 35-acre parcel owned by the township. Approximately 200 residents contributed a total of 600 hours of input on the character and extent of future development.

A portion of a \$60,000 Smart Futures grant funded the

workshops. Through these meetings, the residents expressed their preference for a classic mixed-use village center. Preliminary analysis indicates that stable taxes, employment, and cultural/recreational opportunities are important priorities along with diversified but limited housing to support commercial growth, particularly for returning college graduates, young professionals and older residents wishing to stay in the community. Further, being able to walk and bike safely to a village center characterized by well designed human scale buildings and public spaces was determined to be a highly desirable community goal.

In short, the residents told us they want a classic American town where people are not completely reliant on their cars and they can conveniently get together with family and friends in a safe and attractive environment.

As a result of initial meetings with business owners early in 2003, the old commercial district received updated design guidelines that reflected the village theme and the Land Use Planning Board approved the township's first mixed-use building in October 2003. Construction is expected to start in the spring of 2004.

The large volume of information from all the workshops will form the basis of a new concept plan for the expanded Village Center District. A follow-up meeting to present participants with a synthesis of their input is the final step before adopting it as the community's plan.

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In the middle of a residential neighborhood, the Manor House serves as the municipal building and backup for public events.

Strengthening Neighborhoods
Historic Preservation Communities tend to have a better sense of place when there are historic and functioning structures to serve as neighborhood anchors. Further, these buildings guide future construction.

The Manor House, as it is known in Eastampton, is a farmhouse built in the mid-1800's that was restored in 1996 to serve as the main municipal building. The structure is unique because it sits in the middle of the Eastampton Farms residential subdivision. Interestingly, it is unlikely the structure would have been saved had it not been for this development. The Manor House faces a six-acre green surrounded by homes and includes a path to the Eastampton Middle School.

This modest mixing of residential, educational and municipal uses, an extraordinarily bold step in 1996, has been validated many times over. The building is a focal point for celebrations such as weddings, a learning center for nearby students, and a place for the community to gather, as it does every Memorial Day.

Civic Improvements The smart growth movement has provided a renewed emphasis on physical planning. Not since the reform movement of the 1920s and 30s has so much been written to help guide public officials in the organization of communities. A useful resource in this area is the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), which focuses on restoring the

art of community building (www.cnu.org).

Principles of good community design can be scaled for any project. A pocket park improvement project completed last year in the heart of our Village Center District provides an example of how classic community design principles are being applied throughout the community as opportunities arise. Hollyville Park contained three items; a small playground, a tennis court and benches. Referencing recent materials, the playground and benches were repositioned to form a small green in front of the tennis court. The result is a safer, more inviting and useful public space.

A recent affordable housing development in the Village Center, built by Pennrose Properties, was the first to use new street design requirements that called for street trees. This simple street guide accomplishes a number of goals. First, pedestrians feel safer when separated from traffic by trees. Second, a tree canopy creates an enclosure that slows down traffic. Third, it provides a unified method of planting street trees resulting in a harmonious and classic pattern throughout the Village Center District. Fourth, it reduces complaints about snowplows throwing snow back onto shoveled walkways.

Conclusion For Eastampton, smart growth is about building where appropriate, preserving where required and developing a sense of community everywhere. Smart growth is a comprehensive and well thought out plan unique to each municipality that achieves these goals. Although issues surrounding the "Big Map" have taken center stage and influenced the smart growth conversation in our state, all communities can use the resources the smart growth movement has developed. ▲

Endnote: 1 ERE Yarmouth and Real Estate Research Corporation, "Defining New Limits: Emerging Trends in Real Estate," (New York, NY: ERE Yarmouth and RERC, 1998). For a compilation of research documenting rise in property values associated with proximity to green belts and open space see www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/tpl/sec3.htm (June 10, 2003).