

Route 1 Regional Growth Strategy

Vision for a Prosperous and Sustainable Future



NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

The U.S. Route 1 corridor in central New Jersey (including the centers of Trenton, Princeton, and New Brunswick) faces both a great challenge and a great opportunity. The corridor is a major employment center, and economic analysis indicates that it has substantial future economic development potential. The region's economic prospects, however, are constrained by existing development patterns and current land use policy. The region is on a path that is leading to increasing congestion and pollution and limited employment and housing opportunities. These conditions pose a threat to the continued economic prosperity and good quality of life that the region enjoys.

This study evolved from previous studies that have sought to address issues related to increasing development and increasing congestion along the Route 1 corridor. The New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) initiated the Route 1 Regional Growth Strategy (R1RGS) project in September 2004. This project aimed to formulate a consensus vision for mixed-use, center-based development, which would complement a new bus rapid transit (BRT) system and thus provide a different path for future development in the corridor. The study area for this project included the entirety of 15 towns located along or close to Route 1. These towns are Trenton, Ewing, Hamilton, Lawrence, West Windsor, Princeton Borough, Princeton Township, Cranbury, Jamesburg, Monroe, New Brunswick, North Brunswick, Plainsboro, South Brunswick, and Franklin (see Figure 1).

The R1RGS establishes principles and desired outcomes relating to employment, housing, transportation, and the environment. The main element of the strategy is a vision for the region's future built environment. This vision is for most future development to occur in mixed-use centers served by a robust multi-modal transportation network, highlighted by a new BRT system. The strategy also includes an implementation agenda, which identifies the necessary actions by different stakeholders. In sum, the R1RGS provides a vision that, if implemented, would enable the region to realize its potential as a major economic generator, while maintaining mobility and access, preserving the environment, and enhancing the quality of life. This vision can serve as a "Magnetic North" for stakeholders on all levels to use to guide their decision-making, in order to shape the region to provide a prosperous and sustainable future.



Figure 1: R1RGS Study Area

PRINCIPLES / OUTCOMES

One of the early steps in the study was to work with regional stakeholders (including local officials, state agency staff, and private sector representatives) establish consensus on principles and desired outcomes for the region's future built environment. Principles represent general overarching objectives, while outcomes reflect somewhat more specific measures of attaining these objectives. Based upon the study's outreach work, the following are the consensus principles:

- Pursue balanced and sustainable economic development
- Build upon the region's existing and emerging centers
- Expand transportation choices and improve overall travel conditions
- Complement centered growth by providing high quality network of parks and open space
- Ensure positive planning results

The following are the consensus outcomes:

- More businesses with good jobs and strong futures
- A diversity of housing near employment
- Efficient and effective transportation
- Travel choices
- Reduced demand for automobile travel

- Redevelopment of abandoned/underutilized properties
- Enhanced environment
- An even higher quality of life
- Fiscal balance and equity

These outcomes led to identifying specific indicators to use in evaluating the effects of different views of the future. This scenario planning approach, utilizing analysis by a regional transportation model, provided the ability to compare the outcomes of alternative future development scenarios. The following sections describe this analysis in more detail.

BASELINE CONDITIONS

Economy -- Economic growth in the region has slowed in recent years, but an economic analysis identified substantial opportunities for future economic growth because of the region's location within the global and national economies.

Land Use -- Continuing development and environmental factors are limiting the amount of land available for development in the region. About ½ of the land in the region is developed, and about ¼ is constrained by environmental features such as wetlands and open space, leaving about ¼ available for development. This remaining available land provides both a challenge and an opportunity to shape future development patterns. It suggests the need to consider infill opportunities as one means of accommodating future growth while minimizing its impacts.

Demographics -- Between 1980 and 2000, the region gained nearly 100,000 jobs (1.8% annual increase), while the number of housing units increased by about 40,000 (1.2% annual increase). As a result, the jobs-to-housing ratio increased from 1.6 to 1.8. Since 2000, employment growth has slowed to about .5% annually, while residential growth has been about .8% per year. However, housing and jobs are dispersed at relatively low densities across the region. The biggest concentrations of development are in and near the urban centers of Trenton and New Brunswick, the Princeton area, and the Exit 8A area.

Transportation System -- In addition to Route 1, the main roads serving the region include the New Jersey Turnpike, I-95, I-195, I-295, US 130, and US 206. The region also has various public transit services, including commuter rail, light rail, and local bus and shuttle / paratransit service. The main commuter rail service is NJ TRANSIT's Northeast Corridor line – other services include the Princeton Branch (Dinky) and SEPTA's R-3 and R-7 services. The one current light rail service is the RiverLINE, which terminates in Trenton. The primary local bus services are the 600 and 800 series routes that NJ TRANSIT operates. Other operators of local bus and shuttle services include Rutgers University, Princeton University, the counties, private operators, and Greater Mercer TMA.

Transportation System Performance -- The regional transportation model found that under baseline conditions, 13% of roadways are congested during the peak period, and another 23% are nearing congestion. Observations and experiences with current peak hour traffic along Route 1 provide some indication of the impacts of congestion, including increased travel time and lost productivity.

Summary of Key Issues

- The region has limited land available for new development. This condition suggests the need to promote more compact forms of development, including redevelopment to sustain continued regional growth and prosperity.
- Low-density development covers much of the region, which decreases the feasibility of providing cost-effective public transit service.
- The increasing jobs-to-housing imbalance highlights the region's dependence on "imported" labor and shows the need to provide more workforce housing. It is also a factor in increasing levels of traffic on the regional roadway network.
- While traffic congestion is not at epidemic proportions region-wide, peak hour traffic along Route 1 provides an indicator of the future threat of congestion to the region.

2025 TREND PROJECTIONS

One view of the future is that new development will occur according to demographic trend projections that the region's two metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) and the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), generate. These trend projections show that the region will continue to experience moderate increases in employment (.7% annually) and housing (1% annually) through 2025. The location of this projected new development shows that it would occur generally following the same patterns (suburban, low-density) as current development.

Analysis by the regional transportation model, assuming that limited transportation system investment would occur, found that under the Trend scenario, the percentage of regional roadways that experience peak period congestion would increase from 13% to 36%.

EXISTING ZONING BUILD-OUT

An important point to recognize is that zoning-based build-out, or existing zoning build-out, reflects each town's current plan for its future long-term development. Zoning-based build-out analysis calculates the maximum amount and type of new development that would occur in a town if development occurred on all developable land according to existing zoning. Based upon this zoning, the build-out would produce far more jobs than housing. The analysis calculated an increase of over 480,000 new jobs, compared to an increase of only 37,000 new housing units, which would occur over the long-term.

This level of new development, occurring mostly in outlying areas, would exacerbate the current jobs-to-housing imbalance. The modeling analysis, again assuming limited transportation system improvements, found that under this scenario, nearly all roads (93%) would experience congestion during the peak period, essentially placing the region's roadway network in "gridlock."

An important point to recognize is the build-out projections represent a theoretical maximum, contingent upon various factors including developer interest. In reality, because of the ever-increasing congestion, it is unlikely that the region would ever reach the projected level of development under existing zoning build-out. Thus, it may be more useful to interpret existing zoning build-out as showing not an end state, but rather a long-term development path that the region is on.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURE SCENARIO – THE VISION

Is there a long-term alternative to build-out? Over recent years, the concepts of growth management and smart growth have been gaining increasing attention nationwide. In simple terms, smart growth concentrates future development into mixed-use centers, typically in already-developed locations, which accommodate a similar amount of development as under sprawl but with fewer impacts upon infrastructure and environment. A second major tenet of smart growth is coordinating land use policy and decision-making with that for infrastructure, particularly transportation, and more particularly, enhanced multi-modal travel options.

New Jersey has various initiatives for promoting smart growth, including redevelopment assistance, the NJDOT Transit Village program, and the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP). The State Planning Commission and Office of Smart Growth administer the SDRP process, which incorporates the principles of smart growth, especially through its Center typology. Four main types of centers, varying in scale, are urban, transit, town, and village. In addition, "nodes" represent current concentrations of non-residential development that likely will remain such.

The R1RGS process identified over 40 potential centers and nodes in the region. These centers and nodes are generally consistent with economic "opportunity zones" that the economic analysis identified, and they largely reflect various initiatives that are already underway. At a 2005 workshop, regional stakeholders provided input into these and other proposed centers. Based upon this input, the project team prepared a list of centers and nodes and used them to formulate an alternative land use vision for the region (see Figure 2).

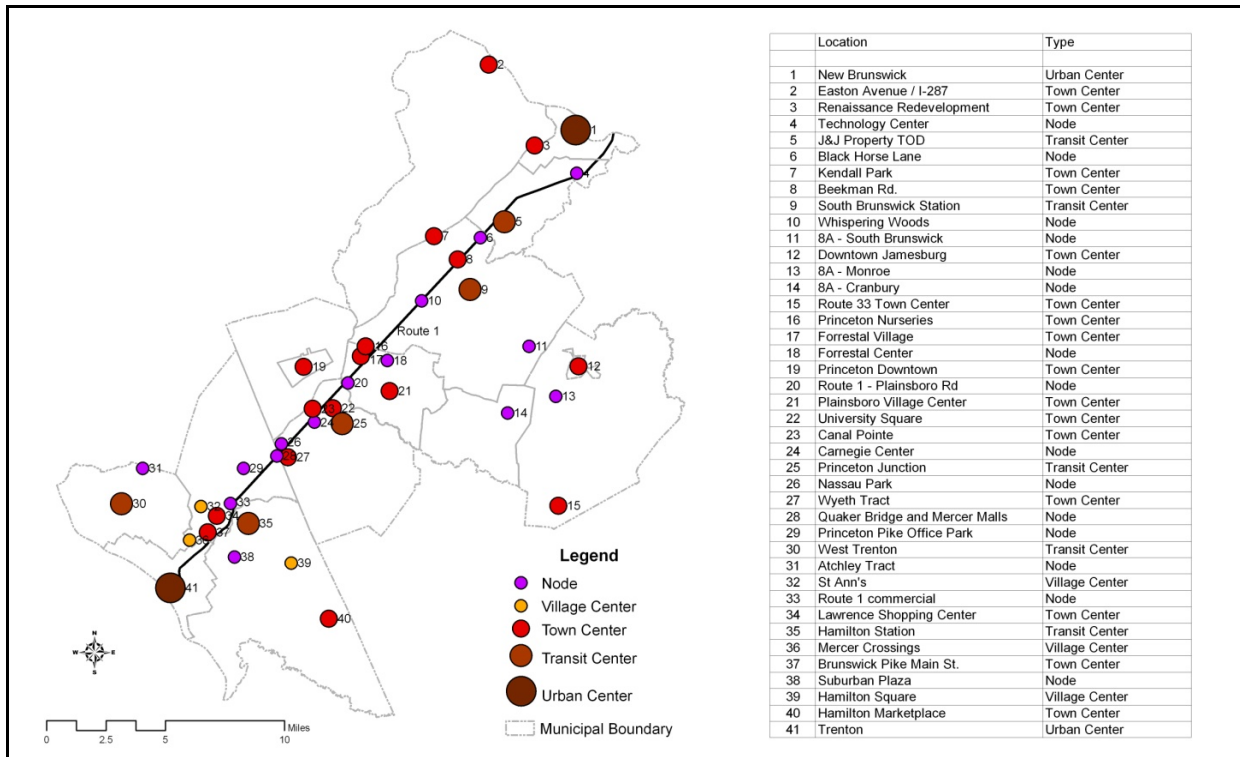


Figure 2: Land Use Vision

Under this Vision scenario, nearly all future employment and most new housing would be located in centers. Total new housing would be somewhat higher than under existing zoning build-out and total new employment would be somewhat less. The increased concentration of development complements the second main component of the Vision scenario: a diverse program of proposed transportation improvements, featuring a greatly-enhanced transit system (see Figure 3).

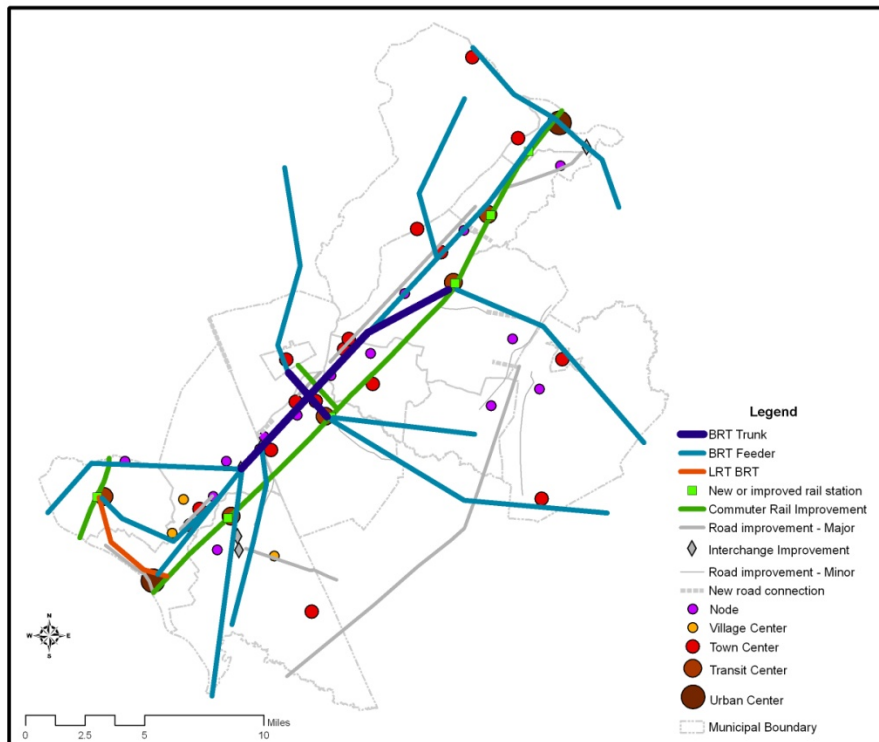


Figure 3: Proposed Transportation Improvements (Vision)

The regional transportation model found that the Vision scenario would provide a different path forward with more favorable outcomes. Under this scenario, only 48% of roads would experience peak period congestion, compared to 93% under existing zoning build-out (see Figure 4). As with build-out, development under the Vision is not a prediction or estimate, but it represents the potential development that the region could accommodate based upon the location and type of centers and the presence of several key transportation system investments. The main message is that the land use and transportation elements of the Vision scenario would enable the region to accommodate nearly as much future development as under existing zoning build-out but with considerably more favorable outcomes, including the following:

- The mixed-use centers will facilitate a greater diversity of housing types at different income levels. Such workforce housing is crucial to maintaining and attracting businesses.
- The more concentrated pattern of development provides towns with greater potential to preserve open space, along with mitigating water quality and air quality impacts.
- The greater concentration of development will complement and be complemented by increased levels of public transit service, especially the new BRT system.

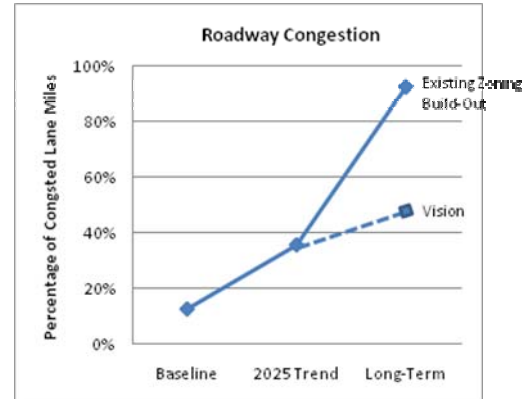


Figure 4: Congestion Levels for Scenarios

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the land use and transportation vision will require the efforts and actions of several parties (including local officials, state agencies, business leaders, and the general public) over different time frames, and the implementation agenda provides the framework for initiating necessary actions. The proposed implementation agenda comprises the following four main categories:

Planning, Zoning, and Economic Development -- Municipalities must undertake work to revise their planning documents, particularly their master plan and zoning ordinance, to allow and promote mixed-use centers.

Transportation Project Development and Investment -- Public agencies, particularly on the state level, need to procure funding to design and construct the proposed transportation investments.

Public Engagement, Education, and Influence -- There is a need to engage and educate stakeholders and citizens about the benefits of the vision.

Coordinated Decision-Making -- Local and state agencies should strive to attain coordinated and consistent decision-making in support of regional planning efforts such as the R1RGS.

At the final stakeholders' workshop in December 2009, the participants reviewed the draft implementation agenda and its proposed action items. The stakeholder input resulted in identifying the following four "high priority" action items and related details for initial action planning.

- **Establish a Regional Entity to "Own" the R1RGS** -- The Central Jersey Transportation Forum (CJTF) provides an existing regional entity, but it does not have administrative authority, and its membership is not coterminous with the R1RGS study area. Other options include creating some type of inter-agency partnership or creating an entirely new entity with true regional "ownership."
- **Identify New Sources of Funding for Transportation and Other Investments** -- Various options may be available for targeting new funding sources. Options include those relating to re-authorizing the Transportation Trust Fund, using Urban Hub Tax Credit funding, revising funding formulae to provide increased funding in support of increased residential development and school costs, and providing funding to preserve targeted open space.
- **Construct the BRT Core System** -- The focus of this action is to secure priority funding or new funding for an early action plan, which would involve design and funding for Phase I of the BRT system. Possibilities include obtaining project earmarks or innovative funding, such as through public-private partnerships.
- **Provide "Carrots and Sticks"** -- This item revolves around the concept of improving interagency coordination and focusing coordinated decision-making on attaining desired outcomes. Among the possible actions are streamlining planning and regulatory approvals for center-based development that meet established criteria and utilizing an incentive system to encourage agreements.