



Complete Streets Case Study

Somerville, New Jersey



About

This report was written by Charles Brown, MPA, James Sinclair, and Lisa Cintron, of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

The Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) is a national leader in the research and development of innovative transportation policy. Located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, VTC has the full array of resources from a major research university on transportation issues of regional and national significance.

The New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center (BPRC) assists public officials, transportation and health professionals, and the public in creating a safer and more accessible walking and bicycling environment through primary research, education and dissemination of information about best practices in policy and design. The Center is supported by the New Jersey Department of Transportation through funds provided by the Federal Highway Administration.

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Figure 1. Main Street, Somerville New Jersey

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Figure 2. Downtown Somerville



Figure 3. The historical Somerset County courthouse in Somerville

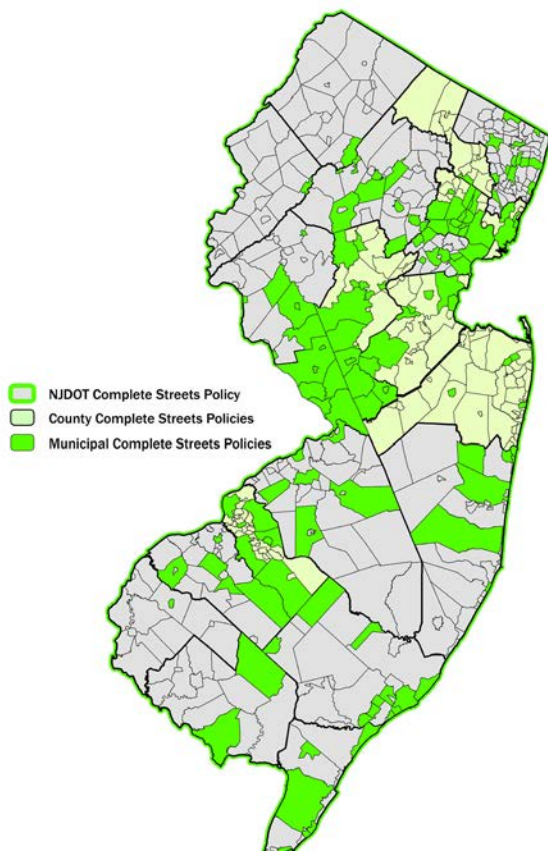
Introduction

In 2009, the New Jersey Department of Transportation adopted a Complete Streets policy which defined a Complete Street as one designed to provide safe access for all users by implementing a comprehensive integrated multi-modal network of transportation options. The benefits include increased safety for all users, connections between origins and destinations, and the promotion of healthier and more livable communities. Since the policy's adoption, Complete Streets has built momentum throughout the state.

The Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center, part of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, has developed a series of case studies intended to highlight Complete Streets leaders in New Jersey. The purpose of this report, funded by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, is to highlight the Borough of Somerville's Complete Streets policy and implementation history. The report is based on findings provided in interviews with Colin Driver, the Somerville Director of Economic Development; Somerville Councilman Kenneth Utter; Mike Kerwin, President of the Somerset County Business Partnership; Linda Rapacki, Marketing Manager for the Ridewise TMA; and Andras Holzmann, Senior Planner at Somerset County.

For the Borough of Somerville, action came before policy. Although the borough did not pass a Complete Streets policy until September of 2015 – being the 119th municipality in New Jersey to do so – they already had a decade of accomplishments to point to. These accomplishments have included a highly successful pedestrianized street, a road diet, and a revitalized downtown that has encouraged living, working, shopping and recreating in a compact walkable environment. Somerville understands that safe walking and bicycling are key to economic development, and Complete Streets are one way for the municipality to grow and prosper in the future.

The report begins with a summary of key findings followed by background information on historical, demographic and land use data collected from Census documents. This information is essential in understanding the context of Complete Streets in Somerville. The report then explores the history of the municipal Complete Streets policy, including how the policy was developed. Successes and challenges are then highlighted for the benefit of other communities looking to implement Complete Streets and a number of next steps provide readers with insight into the policy's future. This report will serve as a valuable tool for engineers, planners, elected officials, and advocates who want to move forward with Complete Streets in their communities.



Complete Streets in New Jersey

New Jersey is a national leader in the campaign to complete the streets. According to the National Complete Streets Coalition, New Jersey ranked 1st nationally in terms of local policy adoption in addition to NJDOT's award-winning internal policy.

- 1 statewide award-winning policy
- 8 out of 21 counties have a policy
- 134 out of 565 municipalities have a policy
- 40% of New Jersey residents are covered by a municipal Complete Streets policy
- 52% of New Jersey residents are covered by a county Complete Streets policy

As of February 15, 2017

Figure 4. Map of New Jersey showing location of Complete Streets policies

Background Data, 2016

Somerville Borough Somerset County



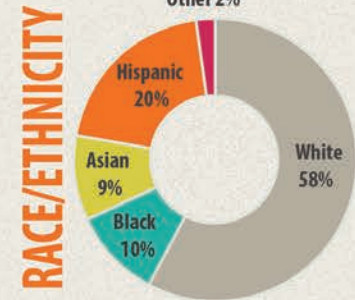
Population

12,175
RESIDENTS

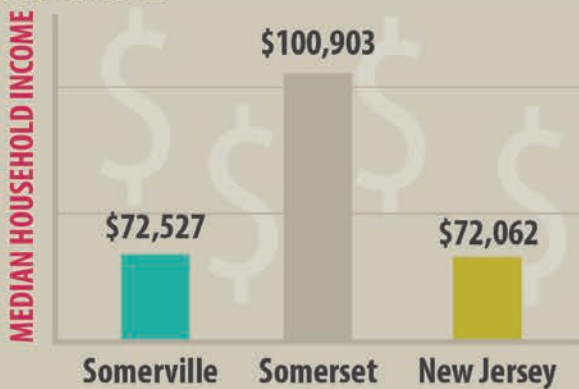


MEDIAN AGE
36.5 Yrs

That is 4 years younger than the county and 3 years below the state average.

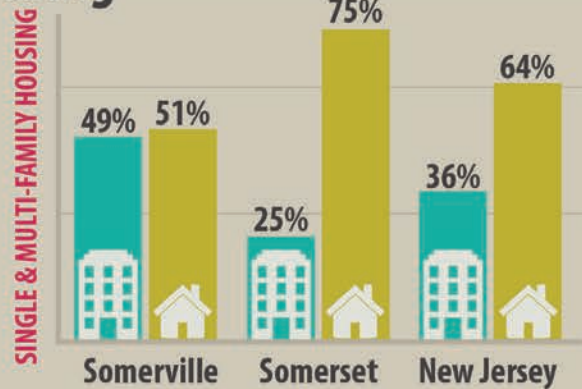


Economics

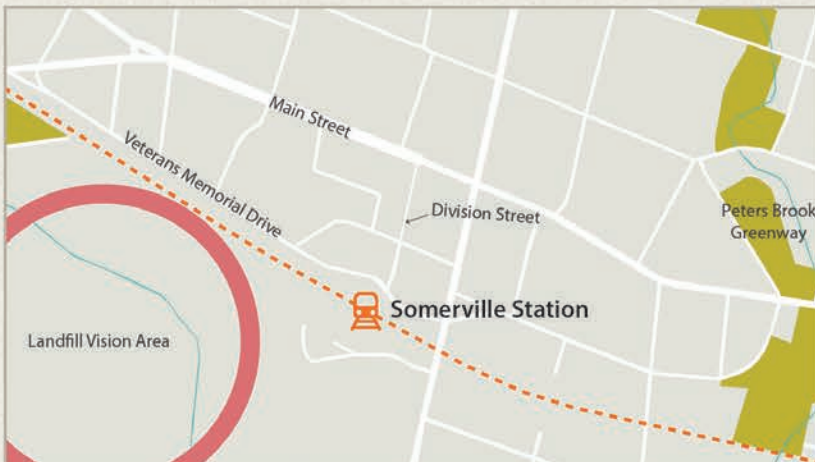


\$25,631 **RETAIL SALES PER PERSON**
which is nearly twice the state average

Housing



Nearly twice as many people rent in Somerville as in Somerset County.



Commute Mode



Nearly 3 out of 4 residents commute alone in a car

Somerville
22 minutes



The proportion of walking commutes is **4X HIGHER** Than Somerset

Somerset
32 minutes



Key Findings

Economic Development

Making Somerville a destination for new residents and businesses shapes local policy. Complete Streets are being used to encourage new growth by appealing to millennials and boomers looking for a safe, walkable community.

Small Town Structure

Complete Streets aren't just for big cities. With just over 12,000 residents and a land mass of 2.3 square miles, Somerville is a typical New Jersey small town. Complete Streets strengthen the small town character by allowing residents to walk to stores and restaurants.

Strong Partnerships

Somerville relies on strong relationships with Somerset County, the Somerset County Business Partnership, Ridewise TMA, NJ Transit, and NJTPA.

Successes

- The Transit Village designation has allowed Somerville to apply for grants to build sidewalks and calm traffic on Veterans Memorial Drive while encouraging growth.
- Division Street, a new pedestrian mall, has brought back retailers into the downtown area and created a regional gathering space.
- Redevelopment projects have brought life to the sidewalks through new retailers and provided new wallets through apartment complexes located within walking distance of the commercial core.
- Regional connections are being strengthened to allow car-free commutes to jobs located in adjacent communities.

Challenges

The municipality has faced a number of challenges, including tight funding and residents skeptical of the many changes coming to the municipality.

Next steps

Somerville intends to continue promoting redevelopment projects that support Complete Streets by cementing the municipality as a safe place to walk and bicycle. Education and enforcement, including participation in North Jersey Planning Authority's (NJTPA) Street Smart Campaign, are the next steps to support the existing project. Additionally, as the new infrastructure ages, maintenance is an issue that will require attention in the future.



Figure 5. New Jersey Transit train station in Somerville

Background

The history of Somerville parallels that of many smaller New Jersey municipalities. Proximity to a railroad and river allowed the municipality to grow from an agricultural outpost into an economic center, with local shops, services, and nightlife. Established as the county seat in 1799, the Borough split off from Bridgewater in 1909 to develop its own identity as an independent municipality. A century later, access to transit is still key to the economy of the municipality; and, although the river has been ignored for decades, plans are currently underway to enhance this area so that residents can enjoy it once more.

Like many New Jersey boroughs centered on transit, the municipality has retained its original roadway grid. This has allowed for a walkable and bikeable environment, even when local governments shifted funding towards automobiles. Somerville shows that high density is not a requirement for a municipality to be friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists; 47% of homes are single-family detached structures, with well-manicured front and rear lawns, and only 13% of units in the municipality are located in apartments holding more than 20 units. Sidewalks and greenways bring the town together, and even neighborhoods built up in the 1960's retained the small-town character.

In the 1970's, Somerville reached its peak population of 13,652. The next few decades saw the town population decline and then stagnate. Concern about future growth is what caused elected officials to look to change. How could Somerville attract new residents and jobs, and with them, new taxes? The solution came by looking towards the past. Transit accessibility and an attractive small-town structure is what had made Somerville successful, and the research conducted by the Somerset County Business Partnership was showing that those same features could be leveraged to grow Somerville in the future. With boomers retiring, and many looking to downsize into walkable neighborhoods, and millennials searching for reasonably priced housing that could allow for a car-free commute, Somerville was poised for success. Thus, Somerville looked towards Complete Streets as one tool in an economic development package.

Location

The Borough of Somerville is the seat of Somerset County, and occupies 2.3 square miles. Though small, Somerville holds just over 12,000 residents (see Table 1), making it the 202nd most populated municipality in the state. To accommodate such a population, just over half of Somerville's housing units are multi-family compared to only one in four in the county; although only 13% of units are in large apartment buildings. This tight structure contributes to a borough that is characterized as "Very Walkable" by Walk Score. Combine this walkability with a high rate of rentals—double the county rate—and it is no wonder the community's median age is far below the county average (see Table 2) and retail sales per person are nearly double the state numbers. In fact, Somerville was named by New Jersey Monthly magazine as a top downtown in New Jersey because of its eclectic mix of restaurants, shops, and activities that mix historic with modern.

Table 1. Comparison of housing in Somerville, Somerset County, and New Jersey

Metric	Somerville	Somerset County	New Jersey
Population per square mile	5,190.0	1,071.7	1,195.5
Owner-Occupied Housing	57%	77.5%	65%
Median Home Value	\$290,000	\$396,500	\$319,900
Median Rent	\$1,000+	\$1,000+	\$972
Housing Type: Single-family	51%	75%	64%
Housing Type: Multi-family	49%	25%	36%
Retail sales per capita	\$25,631	\$17,117	\$15,079



Figure 6. Somerville transportation map



Figure 7. Somerville train station

Demographics

Somerville houses about 4% of Somerset County’s population. As shown in Table 2, two out of three residents identify as White, while approximately one in three identify as Black, Asian or multiracial. The community is relatively young, with a median age of 36.5 years compared to the county’s median age of 40.2 years. Somerville’s average income (\$72,527) while on par with the state, is only a fraction of the county’s average of more than \$100,000. Somerville has a slightly higher rate of poverty than the county, but both are still far below the New Jersey rate.

Table 2. Comparison of population demographics in Somerville, Somerset County, and New Jersey

Category	Somerville	Somerset County	New Jersey
Total Population	12,175	333,654	8,958,013
Race: White	58%	60.3%	57.8%
Black or African American	10.2%	8.7%	12.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Asian	9.8%	15.2%	8.7%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is-lander	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Two or More races	1.5%	1.8%	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino	20.1%	13.7%	18.6%
Under 65 with disability	5.4%	4.2%	6.5%
Median Age	36.5	40.2	39.6
Median Household Income	\$72,527	\$100,903	\$72,062
Persons below poverty line	6.1%	5.0%	10.8%

Transportation

Somerville’s compact size and relatively dense development allows for a significantly higher number of on-foot commuters than the state average. In fact, as shown in Table 3, the percentage of Somerville residents who walk to work (7%) is more than double the state percentage (3%) and nearly six times that of Somerset County (1.6%). However, this increase in walking does not affect the number of residents who drive alone to work, as both the state and borough see nearly 3 out of 4 residents utilizing this mode of transportation. While Somerville has a train station offering service to Newark and Midtown Manhattan, only 3.3% of residents use public transit to commute to work. Somerville is looking to change that by reorienting development around the station. Somerville is also served by NJ Transit bus routes 65, 66, 114, and 117, along with additional local bus service provided by the county. Currently, 12% of Somerville households do not have access to a car, compared to 2.4% in the County.

For motorists, Somerville has Interstate Highway 287 along its northern border, along with State Routes 22 and 202. In the center of the three highways lies Bridgewater Commons, an enclosed mall anchored by Macy’s. State Route 206 runs on the southern side of the borough, separating the municipality from the Raritan River. In downtown Somerville, State Route 28 runs along Main Street, North Gaston Avenue, and Union Avenue.

Table 3. Comparison of commute modes in Somerville, Somerset County, and New Jersey

Category	Somerville	Somerset County	New Jersey
Drove alone	71%	78.7%	71.9%
Carpooled	12%	8.1%	8.3%
Public Transit	3.3%	4.9%	10.9%
Bicycle	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%
Walked	7%	1.6%	3%
Worked at Home	5%	5.4%	3.9%
Average Commute to Work (min)	22	31.7	30.70
Average Walk Score	73; Car-Dependent	--	--

The Complete Streets Story

When it comes to Complete Streets policy adoption, Somerville was a latecomer. The municipality did not pass a policy until September of 2015, six years after the State and first New Jersey municipality. Yet only a year later, Somerville is quickly becoming a leader in Complete Streets implementation. Adopting a policy reaffirmed the municipality's commitment to Complete Streets, and serves as another reminder to developers, engineers, planners, and consultants that any project in Somerville must consider the needs of all road users.

Passing a Policy

According to Linda Rapacki, the Marketing Manager for the Ridewise TMA, persuading a municipality or county to pass a Complete Streets policy requires two essential ingredients: a local champion who is willing and able to promote the policy, and a support structure that allows the champion to back their argument with data, photos, and expert opinions. For Somerville, the champion came in the form of a former councilperson and the major support came from the Ridewise TMA. Working together, the benefits of passing a policy were presented at various council meetings and buoyed by an effective social media campaign. Using Facebook and Twitter, the Complete Street advocates were able to share success stories in the form of pictures and developed relationships by using “shares” and “retweets.”

In other municipalities, the champion can be a local resident, the mayor, a green team, or a police officer – anyone with a passion for safer and more accessible streets. What is required is the time and patience to bring the governing body essential information backed up with New Jersey data, and to do so while being cognizant of local priorities. Ms. Rapacki suggests that champions can be identified by the interest displayed at public meetings, or efforts made on existing projects. In Somerville, a police officer who was known for providing pedestrian and bicycle safety presentations at elementary schools was a natural fit in promoting Complete Streets.

Passing the policy yielded an immediate benefit in the form of a \$2,000 grant from Shaping NJ to install bicycle racks. The following are examples of larger Complete Street projects, some of which were developed before the policy was passed, and others that have been aided by having a policy.

Transit Village

In New Jersey, a designated Transit Village is one who has demonstrated a commitment to revitalizing and redeveloping the area around their transit facilities into compact, mixed-use neighborhoods with a strong residential component (New Jersey Transit, 2016). A series of criteria must be met before the designation is achieved, and thirty-two municipalities have completed the process. The benefits include technical assistance, priority funding, grant eligibility from NJDOT, and improved coordination in planning. Somerville entered the program as the 22nd municipality in 2010 and has received many of the benefits. Complete Streets are an important component to Transit Village programs because improved bicycle and pedestrian access is needed to connect the residents of the mixed-use buildings to the transit station.

Indeed, as soon as Somerville received their designation, they applied for \$1.75 million in grants from the State Department of Transportation to improve pedestrian access to the train station. The targets were Division Street and Veterans Memorial Drive.

New Jersey Transit Village Program

The Transit Village Initiative, created by the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) and NJ TRANSIT, creates incentives for municipalities to redevelop or revitalize areas around transit stations using transit-oriented development (TOD) principals.

- 32 designated municipalities
- Transit Village district is a half-mile radius around the transit station
- Priority funding from some state agencies
- Technical assistance from some state agencies
- \$1 million annual funding pool

As of February 15, 2017

Division Street

How does a municipality accidentally create a successful pedestrian mall? Some ideas just have to be seen to be believed.

Running in a general east-to-west alignment, Somerville's Main Street is appropriately named as such. Home to retail, new and old residential developments, and both county and municipal buildings, Main Street is the true economic, cultural, and entertainment spine of Somerville. The train station sits isolated two blocks south, on Veteran's Memorial Drive, which acts as a bypass to the downtown core. It has fallen to lowly Division Street to create a bridge between the train station and Main Street. Running north-to-south for just two short blocks, Division Street terminates at the train station on one end, and Main Street at the other.

In 2010, the Borough used their "Transit Village" designation to apply for a \$100,000 grant intended to upgrade Division Street as a means to better connect Main Street to the train station. The grant called for a reduction of traffic lanes in order to expand sidewalks, and an introduction of various amenities intended to encourage pedestrian activities and act as a "gateway." The initial goal was to increase the sidewalk widths from 4 to 10 feet wide. Aside from providing a safer walk, the Downtown Somerville Alliance stated that the project would create additional foot traffic on Division Street for the businesses, shops, restaurants and services.

During the design process, an innovative idea emerged, inspired by a proven design from Europe. What if Division Street could act both as a transportation corridor and also as a central gathering place? After all, Somerville lacked a true central space appropriate for municipal events, such as tree-lighting ceremonies, farmers markets, or other community festivities intended to bring residents together.

Rather than a typical street lined with curbs, Division Street was reimagined as one flat concrete expanse, with pedestrian "sidewalks" marked by bollards and a change in texture. This way, Division Street could act as a regular (but traffic-calmed) roadway most days, and be easily transformed into a central event space when needed. By simply moving the bollards for events, Division Street could be closed to traffic at no additional expense, and the lack of curbs would facilitate the use of the space as a place for people to gather. Division Street would be transformed from a transportation corridor into a people corridor.



Figure 8. Division Street is now home to seasonal community events

Construction finished successfully in May 2012, with one caveat: it would take an additional 60 days for the concrete to properly cure. That is, the street was ready to accept people, but could not bear the weight of vehicles. Suddenly, Somerville had a beautiful new pedestrian mall, just in time for summer. Local workers had a place to sit together during lunch, families were able to let their children walk freely, and couples had a place to stroll and chat in the evenings. After two months of enjoying the space, the local residents were reluctant to open Division Street to vehicles, and an official trial was created to measure the impact of the pedestrian mall for one year. A year later, officials conducted surveys of both residents and businesses and found consensus to keep Division Street open only to pedestrians. **Retail vacancies had dropped from 50% to zero**, and the various community events held throughout the year were a success. Additionally, business owners invested \$1.7 million in property upgrades.

By transforming an average street to a pedestrian mall, Somerville was able to accomplish multiple goals. Access to transit improved, as pedestrians now have a safer and more comfortable walk between Main Street and the train station. Businesses have benefited because pedestrians tend to spend more money than cars, and Somerville’s reputation as a fun destination has developed, as they now have a fantastic space to host all kinds of events which attract visitors from neighboring communities.

Division Street serves as an example of how successful a demonstration can be. Had Division Street been initially planned and presented as a pedestrian mall, it is likely that the concept would have been voted down. After all, such a concept is risky to businesses, and there are few examples of successful pedestrian malls in small municipalities such as Somerville. However, because the design was so flexible, it was easy to promote a trial with the understanding that real-world experience would be used to dictate the best course of action. Half a decade later, Division Street remains fully occupied by businesses, and popular among pedestrians in the evening. It would take only a few minutes to allow vehicles onto Division Street, but at this point, that idea seems quaint.



Figure 9. Division Street as seen in 2016



Figure 10. 11. 12. Local small businesses, such as a music shop, draw visitors to Division Street. Center photo source: Downtown Somerville Alliance

Veterans Memorial Drive Road Diet

The Somerville Train Station fronts Veteran's Memorial Drive, and shortly after receiving the Transit Village designation, the municipality applied for two grants to improve the roadway by making it a Complete Street.

For the section between Main Street and Bridge Street, the municipality applied for a \$425,000 grant to reconfigure the roadway. The proposal called for making the roadway one lane in each direction, adding center islands and turning lanes, and reconstructing the south sidewalk. A second grant of \$325,000 was requested for the other section of the roadway, from Bridge Street to Somerset Street. The plan there was for a bicycle path to link the train station to the hospital.

Unfortunately, Somerville's appetite for upgrades exceeded the grant award. As such, a few features had to be cut from the initial plans. While the roadway was limited to one lane in each direction, it was done by striping a median with paint, rather than setting it with concrete. Additionally, the new sidewalk faced the obstacle of utility poles. Rather than undertaking the costly endeavor of moving the poles, the municipality carved a sidewalk around them instead. The end result has been a roadway that allows for safer bicycling and walking, while still accommodating driving access to the train station. Somerville also intends to continue to make improvements as additional funding becomes available. In December 2016, they were recommended to receive a \$670,000 Safe Routes to School grant that would allow for additional sidewalk upgrades and a new traffic signal on Veterans Memorial Drive.



Figure 13. Crosswalks, medians, and narrowed lanes on Veterans Memorial Drive



Figure 14. New supermarket adjacent to Veterans Memorial Drive



Figure 15. Bicyclist using Veterans Memorial Drive

Redevelopment

It is impossible to discuss Complete Streets in Somerville without talking about economic development. For the past decade, Somerville has looked towards major multi-use redevelopment projects as the key to elevate the municipal status as a destination for millennials. Michael Kerwin, President of the Somerset County Business Partnership, concedes that a college graduate is more likely to be attracted to Hoboken than to Somerville. However, his target are those a few years out of college; young adults who would like to settle down somewhere quieter than Hoboken or Jersey City, but not feel exiled from the region's business and entertainment centers. In that regard, Somerville is an optimal destination. The municipality already had a competitive advantage by being host to numerous bars and restaurants; what was missing were additional services and housing opportunities. This market analysis was confirmed in 2014 by a report titled "Somerset County Development Opportunities: A Millennial Perspective," which looked to see how Somerset County and Somerville could appeal to millennials and retiring boomers.

Long-term planning, according to Colin Driver, the Director of Economic Development at Somerville, has been key to ensure that the investments have materialized, even with swings in the national economy. Mr. Driver pointed out that every plan developed by the municipality, the county, and the regional partnership has been synergistic, with agreement on the need for bicycle and pedestrian connections. For example, in 2005 the "Somerville Visioning Project" was completed with funding from NJ Transit, Somerset County, and the Office of Smart Growth. In turn, this has meant that when the developers propose their plans, they know they have to address things such as bicycle parking within their buildings. It has resulted in 12 active redevelopment projects in 2016, all of which strengthen Somerville's commitment to Complete Streets.

Mr. Kerwin points out that Somerville went decades without seeing any major development, and without proper planning and direction, the east end of town could have redeveloped as a suburb. Instead, the first redevelopment project was built in the "main street" style, and since then other developers have noticed its success and followed suit with dense projects which promote walkability.

One recent success has been the redevelopment of the "Downtown Somerville Shopping Center," a 1970's strip mall anchored by a Pathmark supermarket. Now, half the parcel is a mixed use complex featuring a new Shoprite and hundreds of new apartments. Called "The Edge" and located on West Main Street, the new development reactivated the sidewalk by bringing in nationally recognized retailers while providing housing just a short block from the rail station. A second phase has been planned.



Figure 16. The Edge, as seen from the rear parking area

On Main and Warren, a new four-story building called “Somerville Commons” is being built that will contain 14 apartments, ground floor retail, and office space (Deak, 2015). Just a block away, a 4-story building called “The Cobalt” is adding 117 units, and the same developer has begun work on “The Davenport,” a 5-story building with 60 units nearby. The residents of these new units will be able to shop for groceries, eat out, and socialize without the need to drive – the developer, Robert Weiss, has referred to his future tenants as “walking wallets.”

Additionally, work has begun on the “Station and Landfill Redevelopment Area,” an area of 140 acres primarily made up of an abandoned landfill. The heart of the redevelopment project is the “Green Seam,” a \$16 million project which City Councilman Kenneth Utter identifies as a gem in the vein of New York’s Central Park. Under development for at least a decade, the plan is to turn most of the former Somerville Landfill into a regional recreation destination, within walking distance of downtown Somerville. Walking and bicycling trails will bisect the parcel, and provide access to passive and active recreation hubs, along with views of newly protected wetlands. The remainder of the area is becoming developed as transit oriented development with over 700 residential units. New roadways and trails will allow the new residents to walk to the train station or continue onto Main Street via the pedestrianized Division Street.

The municipality expects that by 2022, the borough will see an added \$36.5 million in property taxes, and in addition the new residents will generate \$31 million in spending, much of it locally.



Figure 17. Somerville Commons, seen under construction on Main Street



Figure 18. Across town, a lot ready for development

Green Seam Park Project

One of the largest rehabilitation projects in Central Jersey, the Green Seam broke ground in June 2016, after a decade of planning. Previously a landfill, the site had been abandoned for almost 30 years.

- Cost: \$16.1 million
- Primary Funding: \$12.2 million from NJ Department of Environmental Protection
- Additional Funding: Local contribution secured through low interest loans from DEP



Figure 19. Before construction began, the landfill consisted of acres of green but inaccessible public space

Regional Connections

Many years before Somerville passed a Complete Streets policy or became a Transit Village, the importance of regional walking and bicycling connections had been identified as a necessity by the Bridgewater-Raritan-Somerville Regional Center Partnership. A Regional Center has been defined by the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan as: “the focal point for the economic, social and cultural activities of an economic region, often serving as a county seat, with a compact, mixed-use core and neighborhoods offering a wide variety of housing types.” Designated as an official Regional Center in 1996, the 14.2 square mile district was created as a focal point for enhanced planning and expedited public review. The Partnership was then organized to ensure successful implementation of the goals and objectives. The Partnership immediately recognized that improved walking and bicycling connections were needed to promote both economic strength and a healthy population, and also to address concerns about traffic and congestion.

In 2009, the Regional Center Partnership identified the importance of establishing a regional trail system which would allow people to walk and bicycle between the municipalities safely. The plan, called the “Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Greenways Systems Connection Plan” identified important green corridors, such as along the Raritan River, and from Duke Farms to Bridgewater Commons Mall. That process saw concrete results, and in 2012, Somerset County inaugurated a new pedestrian bridge over Route 22 providing a walking and bicycling route to the Bridgewater Commons mall from Somerville. The \$3.6 million project was funded through federal and state grants (Paik, 2012). Additional connections between the municipalities are on the drawing board.



Figure 20. The Peters Brook Greenway, an existing bicycle and pedestrian trail traversing Somerville.

Safety

Complete Streets work properly through a combination of engineering, education, and enforcement. For over a decade, Somerville has been home to a “walking school bus,” in which volunteer parents gather dozens of kids to assist them in walking safely to school. This type of community effort educates children about pedestrian safety, and promotes walking as a fun mode of transportation. Additionally, Somerville understands the importance of enforcing safe driving. The municipality has installed speed-feedback signs, which remind motorists of the speed limit, and is looking to take part in training programs for police officers which demonstrate how to best enforce crosswalk laws.



Figure 23. Speed humps combined with crosswalks work to calm traffic and increase pedestrian safety at some residential intersections



Figure 21. Speed feedback signage



Figure 22. Marked crosswalks in a residential neighborhood



Figure 24. Somerville is Somerset County's civic center.

Challenges

Roadway Jurisdiction

In New Jersey, a local street might fall under the jurisdiction of the local municipality, the county, or the state, each with different visions on how the corridor should function. One stakeholder might prefer traffic be slowed to a crawl, so motorists have a chance to browse the many local retail offerings. Another entity might be more concerned about getting vehicles across the county as quickly as possible. For Somerville, picturesque Main Street also serves as New Jersey Route 28, meaning the municipality has no control over its design.

Fortunately for Somerville, the county and state both have policies advocating for Complete Streets, and Main Street is certainly a very enjoyable place to stroll. High visibility crosswalks exist every few meters, including some crossings located midblock. However, signal timing has been identified as a challenge. Because the state highway has priority, getting a light to cross Main Street can be frustrating. Promoting open dialogue between Trenton and the local municipality could help ensure that the transportation goals are in sync – after all, the constituents being served are the same.

Funding

“We never get everything we want,” recalled Colin Driver, when reviewing the various grants that the municipality had applied to. Undoubtedly, every municipality and agency in New Jersey has had a similar experience. Fortunately, Complete Streets do not require unlimited funding, and some traffic calming techniques can be substituted for lower cost methods if the funding does not materialize. For Somerville, that meant eschewing concrete and working with paint on Veterans Memorial Drive to create a median. For other municipalities, it has meant using plastic bollards to create sidewalk extensions. However, the municipality does wish there was more transparency when a grant is denied or only awarded in part, so that the planners can learn from the process. That being said, Somerville continues to apply for grants, including a request for \$670,000 in Safe Routes to School funding for a new traffic signal and sidewalks on veterans Memorial Drive East.

Partners

Somerville has been highly successful in taking advantage of as many resources as possible, including partners at Somerset County, the New Jersey Department of Transportation, and within the private sector. Colin Driver specifically praised the “culture of collaboration” in Somerset County as a key asset. However, some partners have proven easier to work with than others, even within the same organization. For example, while Somerville has been very happy with the benefits obtained from the Transit Village program, they noted that the application process was difficult, and required over 300 pages to be submitted. For a smaller municipality with less resources, such a process may not be possible. In a similar vein, while the Local Aid program offers much needed funding, obtaining the funding can be an insurmountable obstacle due to the time and effort required to complete the paperwork.

Regional Connections

Although regional connections have been identified as a success, the lack of connectivity for pedestrians and bicyclists among various other corridors also presents a challenge. Somerville’s small size has allowed walking and bicycling to flourish within the municipality, but being surrounded by highways has limited access to larger employers and retailers for Somerville residents. These employers include major corporations such as Nestle, who have located their offices alongside the regional highway. While these highways allow for vehicle access from great distances, they provide an immediate barrier to pedestrian access, and remediation, in the form of pedestrian overpasses, is highly expensive. Fortunately for Somerville, both the state and the county agree that these connections are important, and while some of the more suburban-minded neighbors may not be interested in promoting walking and bicycling, they are interested in preserving jobs.

Selling the Vision

Obtaining unanimous approval for a project can be more difficult than securing unlimited funding. While no town resident wants to see their municipality decline, or wants to deal with dangerous streets, sometimes the proposed solutions can prove contentious. Somerville discovered this when planning was underway for the landfill redevelopment project. Planners originally felt that remediating contaminated soil, preserving wetlands, and developing passive and active recreational areas along with revenue producing transit-oriented-developments would be a slam-dunk, especially with funding coming from the state. Surprisingly, city hall received complaints that the project would remove the existing invasive vegetation.

Another concern raised by residents has been about the effect of the new housing developments on local schools. Every project has been met with calls to decrease the size of the proposal because existing residents believe the incoming families will bring too many children. However, a 2011 study by the Voorhees Transportation Center found that 94% of households in TODs did not have children in public schools. Additionally, the initial new developments in Somerville have confirmed the study findings.

Even the wildly successful Division Street project was met with resistance. When the 2010 circulation study suggested limiting the roadway to one direction so that wider sidewalks could be added, a business owner objected to the plan arguing that there was no need to widen sidewalks.

To move past these barriers, Somerville planners suggest that it is of paramount importance to listen to the planning process, which includes public workshops, and move forward in the agreed upon direction. Having a series of complementary plans is key to persuading the voting body that it is worth acknowledging but not yielding to last-minute opposition because no plan will ever receive 100% agreement, and sometimes a small minority can make the loudest noise.

Next Steps

Somerville is happy with how new development and Complete Streets have progressed over the last decade, and have no intentions to change course. In December 2016, they plan on completing a redevelopment update, which will assist in receiving grant funding. Additionally, they see the change from a car culture to a Complete Streets culture as a paradigm shift where the pedestrians rule the transportation planning process. However, the municipality acknowledged that maintenance of walking paths and bridges has lagged and increased funding is needed in the future. The municipality is also looking at ways to promote education and enforcement of Complete Streets in the community, and will take part in NJTPA's Street Smart Campaign in 2017.

Conclusion

Somerville is making the necessary changes to become a regional destination. For the first time in decades, hundreds of housing units are being developed and the retail scene is thriving with both local and national retailers. Somerville planners studied market trends, developed a series of plans, and now are overseeing major changes.

Complete Streets has been part of the process since before the term became well-known. Having a walkable and bikeable community has been a large part of the municipality's appeal, and recent investments have served to strengthen the network. An innovative pedestrian mall anchors the center of the municipality and serves as a regional gathering place, while a nearby road diet calms traffic and enhances access to the train station. Additional plans are underway to extend trails and better connect Somerville to its neighbors, and planners are aware of the need to continue to promote education and enforcement. Somerville is a testament that even a small municipality can implement Complete Streets projects and enjoy the rewards.



Figure 25. Downtown Somerville is full of pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers



Figure 26. Borough Hall

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