

Draft

Highland Park 2020; A Sustainable Community

The First Five Years

sus·tain·able

Pronunciation: s&s-'stA-n&-b&l

Function: *adjective*

Date: circa 1727

1 : capable of being [sustained](#)

2 a : of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged <*sustainable* techniques> <*sustainable* agriculture> **b** : of or relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods <*sustainable* society>

(updated March 29th)

Highland Park 2020: A Sustainable Community

When we think of sustainability we often think of progressive energy initiatives. We think of windmills and solar energy panels. Sustainability is often associated with a vast clean unspoiled landscape in Vermont or Arizona or on a remote island in Denmark, but if sustainability is to have any real value in more urban states like New Jersey it must have urban applications and it must be cost effective and it must promote an improved quality of life.

Highland Park is about to embark on an initiative which will test the common assumptions about sustainability and bring its value to an urban setting by tying it into conservation, economic revitalization, and quality of life initiatives, employing all the principles of smart growth. We are a community that “gets it”. We understand that the costs of unbridled growth to our Borough’s economy, the environment and to the community are too high.

We are seeking to develop a model for the proper redevelopment of our older towns, which focuses on an ability to *sustain* our environment and our local economy, and which offers *sustenance* to our diverse and changing population.

Our proposal, Highland Park 2020 A Sustainable Community, has been divided into three discreet components:

- I. Environmentally Sustainable – A Green Community;
- II. Economically Sustainable – An Affordable Community;
- III. Socially Sustainable – A Livable Community.

I. Environmentally Sustainable:

A Green Community

We are proposing a pilot program that would be based upon the green certification for buildings, but extended to cover an entire town. Highland Park provides the perfect setting for a Pilot Green Community Program. The tiny borough contains all the problems and the advantages of our both urban centers and our suburbs. With its tremendously diverse population, wide range of income levels, Highland Park is in many ways a microcosm of NJ. We believe that if we are successful, its principles can be applied throughout the state and beyond.

Highland Park will attempt to create this concept of a *Green Community* by borrowing the point system of the Green Building program. We will address renew ability in an expansive and precedent-setting manner focusing initially on the following areas:

- 1) Conservation – convert public buildings such as Borough Hall, Senior/Recreation. Center, Police and Fire Departments and Library, (schools and interested houses of worship - Phase II) for energy and water efficiency, using alternatives where possible. Retrofit lighting, solar power with Photovoltaic Roof Tile Systems, etc;
- 2) Require green certification of all major new construction projects;
- 3) Streetscape projects and *MainStreet Highland Park* projects use of recyclable materials for benches, trash receptacles, LED lighting on changing signals and high efficiency lighting on street lamps;
- 4) Plant trees, and other plant life in downtown areas as example of smart urban landscaping on Route 27, with 25,000 cars per day, to provide the environmental benefits (as converters of carbon dioxide), the conservation and health benefits of shade, and screening for basic aesthetics;
- 5) *Taking Back Paradise: Take Back a Parking Lot*, in conjunction with the tree planting program, the Borough proposes a program to showcase clever pervious coverings and tree and shrub planting, as an alternative to concrete in parking lots throughout the Borough;
- 6) Complete *River Road Environmental Center* with solar powered building and solar powered cross signals (\$149,000 commitment from DOT) to educate the public and to serve as a focus point for the Green Community Initiative (\$500,000 commitment from County);

- 7) Extend *River Road Environmental Center* to satellites throughout town with examples of urban conservation and boardwalks to observe wildlife in the both municipal open space and county parks. In essence, the entire town will be an environmental center;
- 8) The Borough has already initiated *Walk Safe Highland Park* to promote a major bicycling and walking program for conservation and to ease traffic congestion by assuring safe passage on Raritan Ave, Woodbridge Ave (5x's the pedestrian and bike accidents of similar roadways) and residential streets. Urgent need for with proper lighting, curbing and sidewalks, curb cuts, crosswalks, mid block crosswalks, and traffic calming devices;
- 9) Alt Energy Shuttle service – promote use of alt. energy shuttle to New Brunswick for conservation and to ease congestion of 25,000 cars/day on Raritan Ave: (\$10,000 commitment from Keep Middlesex Moving to conduct resident surveys and provide report on possible usage of shuttle as part of *Walk Safe Highland Park*);
 - i) Commuters – to train station;
 - ii) RU students, faculty and staff (approx. 1200 in HP) to campuses;
 - iii) Senior citizens – to train, theatres, hospitals, restaurants, and shopping;
 - iv) Kids – to the Movie theatre on Rt. 1, (weekends).
- 10) Education of residents, borough officials and personnel (inspectors) and school children on water and fuel conservation, recycling, and green space planting;
- 11) Develop a partnership with PSE&G and the BPU to expand utility incentive programs, such as Comfort Partners, in Highland Park. The Borough will market energy efficiency programs for several classes of customers, such as low-income residents (with special programs for the NPP) and apartment owners and dwellers (HP is 60% rental). Program will include the direct installation of cost-effective energy efficiency measures in the home (determined on a home-specific basis) which can include: efficient lighting products; hot water conservation measures (water heater insulation, water heater pipe insulation and energy-saving showerheads and aerators); replacement of inefficient refrigerators; thermostats; insulation upgrades (attic, wall, etc.); blower-door guided air sealing; duct sealing and repair; heating/cooling equipment maintenance and other dwelling-specific measures;
- 12) Acquisition of open space - reclaim open-spaces for recreation or simple gathering in urban areas and last remaining parcels on the outskirts of town including Buck Woods, the last open space parcel in Highland Park.

II. Economically Sustainable:

An Affordable Community

Last month the Star Ledger named Highland Park one of the state's "most traumatized" communities as a result of the present local property tax system. We are a community that is a model of smart growth. We have an urban center. We are intensifying the uses downtown and attempting to preserve open space on the outskirts of town. We promote use of mass transit. Our commuters use the train, shuttles and bicycle. Our children walk to school. We have attempted to keep the character of this community despite the ever-present ratable chase...the need for dollars to balance our small and efficient borough government. We are a textbook example of smart growth, yet we are struggling to stay solvent.

We come to the state year after year for assistance, and we are thankful for what we receive, but we know that in the long run we must have a borough, which is *economically sustainable*.

In order to overcome our disastrous property tax burden and assure that our community is able to survive and thrive into the year 2020, we have prepared a plan based on the recommendations of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee on the Municipal Budget 2001. The major factors affecting our high tax rates are

- 1) Local property tax system and school finance formula;
- 2) Large proportion of non-taxable property;
- 3) Ratio of commercial to residential ratable;

We have initiated an aggressive revitalization campaign in our downtown and on our one industrial street to increase commercial ratables from 10% of the total to 20% after 5 years.

- 4) Pursue redevelopment of commercial and industrial sectors to employing all the principles of smart growth (\$20,000 DCA Smart Growth Grant to study redevelopment area and to fund initial downtown design workshop, \$68,000 Middlesex County for streetscape improvements on Woodbridge Ave, approx \$60,000 CDBG in facade improvements committed)

- i) *MainStreet Highland Park* redevelopment projects; streetscape, downtown retail/residential and build up projects;

- ii) *Woodbridge Ave Business District;*
 - iii) Development of the Y property;
 - iv) Development of Cleveland Avenue;
 - v) Bio-tech lab project.
- 4) Establishment of redevelopment agency to drive revitalization efforts of areas in need of redevelopment
- 5) Continued re-evaluation of Borough Programs and services to assess viability, effectiveness and possible efficiencies.
- i. Consolidation of Recreation and Department of Aging under a new Department of Community Services;
 - ii. Re-organization of Police Department;
 - iii. Consolidation of Construction, Fire Prevention, Zoning and Health under a new Department of Enforcement;
 - iv. Study of other possible efficiencies.

III. Socially Sustainable:

A Livable Community

Highland Park is a unique community, which is made up of a population that is diverse ethnically, racially and economically. It is the home of several large ethnic populations. It is estimated that approximately 30 – 40 % of residents are Jewish, 20 % are Asian, 8% are African American and 8 % are of Hispanic origin. Economically, Highland Park is diverse as well with its handful of multi-millionaires and at the opposite end, with a significant proportion of school children receiving lunch assistance (30%). It has been estimated that nearly 10% of the residents of Highland Park are connected to Rutgers University as students, faculty or staff.

The diversity of the community poses many challenges to established New Jersey communities, and Highland Park is no exception. Balancing the needs of residents is a difficult task, but if this community is to provide a model for others it will have to address many of the issues that plague every community in this state and in the nation.

Too often quality of life initiatives focus exclusively on changes in noise ordinances or on new and innovative recreation programs. Highland Park is different. This final component of a sustainable community will focus on our residents as our most valuable sustainable resource, and in order to reap the full benefits of their gifts and talents we must create a community which is welcoming, understanding and accessible for all our residents.

It may sound trite, but the goal of our Social Sustainability; Livable Community program is to give sustenance to our residents, to do what we can as a Borough to assure a peaceful and safe community, one which prides itself on ethnic and racial harmony, on its programs which bridge race, religion, and age, which promote good health and accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

1.) *Living Together -*

- i.) *HP Community Study Circles* – diverse groups assembled with a trained volunteer facilitator to discuss issues of race and ethnicity, modeled after programs set up by the Study Circles Resource Center;
- ii.) *Back on Track* – a program set up through the HP Community Affairs Department which is working to keep at risk kids out of the juvenile justice system, through community service, counseling and mentoring programs;
- iii.) Improved recreational opportunities to provide positive, healthful experiences for youth, adults and seniors of all backgrounds;
- iv.) Promoting the arts in Highland Park through the programs of a new and invigorated Arts Council, showcasing works of resident artists, including the folk art of our diverse population, community murals, new Highland Park Mexican American Dance Troup, Step Dancing and a new program funded through the NJ Department of Community Affairs which will provide arts programming for children with Disabilities;

2.) *Access to the Livable Community*

- i.) Alliance for the Disabled Pilot Program in Highland Park which is in the process of creating an inventory of areas in need of improved accessibility Borough-wide. The initiative will be partnered with our downtown redevelopment for possible inclusion in *Main Street NJ* Program;

- ii.) Grant program offered through our Department of Economic Development which provides 100% (up to \$1,500) CDBG grants to businesses to encourage improvements which will provide universal accessibility;
- iii.) New accessible entrance of Borough Hall (\$110,000 -- \$90,000 CDBG grant); fully accessible Council Chamber;
- iv.) Installation of curb cuts and repaired sidewalks as part of our Walk Safe Highland Park program.

2.) *Safe Living* -

- v.) Emergency Preparedness - Assuring that our emergency service personnel have the equipment necessary to respond to an emergency, residents guide to emergencies, expanded public communication capabilities, Community Response Team, Office of Emergency Management;
- vi.) Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety – Implementation of recommendations of Mayor’s Task Force on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety and our new *Walk Safe Highland Park* program:
 - Phase I – Raritan and Woodbridge Avenues – upgraded signage, sidewalks, crosswalks, midblock crosswalks, curb cuts, lighting, etc;
 - Phase II – Residential Streets – upgraded signage, speed humps, road markings to provide better clearance and slow cars down.
- vii.) Improving Police/Community Relations – Getting the police into the community as a trusted, accessible resource through a real commitment to the principles of community policing, increased outreach, community meetings, and with a proposed Police Athletic League (PAL) program, our Jr. Cadet Program, Bicycle Rodeo, etc.

3.) *Healthful Living* –

- i.) *Walk Safe Highland Park* program's initiatives to encourage kids, adults and seniors to walk to work, to school, to shopping and to improve their health, with a possible *Urban Cardio Trail* with stations through our downtown.
- ii.) Senior Center's Breakfast Program was recently initiated to assure that Highland Park senior citizen's have access to a healthy meal and companionship;
- iii.) Board of Health Programs that promote healthful living.

This Highland Park 2020 plan is intended to create a model for a living urban community which is economically strong, and able to care for its environment and its people. It is an ambitious plan, and it will require an aggressive and creative implementation.