

Public Information Meeting
Preliminary SDRP
Somerset County – Thursday, February 20, 2025 – 6:00 PM

START: 6:02 PM

PREPARED REMARKS:

Shanel Y. Robinson, Commissioner Director

- Welcome.
- Somerset County has adopted a resolution designating itself the Negotiating Entity.
- Somerset County is committed to harmonizing its plans with the new State Plan.
- Somerset County has been engaged with its municipalities, and has implemented numerous outreach strategies, including social media posts, dedicated webpages, and online mapping.
- There is also a dedicated email address for comments on the new State Plan.
- Somerset County's objectives include cohesive and sustainable planning as well as economic development.
- Examples of Somerset County's planning initiatives are the 1997 county master plan, the 2014 County Investment Framework (CIF), and the 2017 housing element.

Lisa Avichal, Senior Planner, OPA

- The Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA) is tasked by the NJ State Planning Act to implement the goals of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP).
- In addition to providing administrative support to the State Planning Commission, OPA is organized within the NJ Department of State's NJ Business Action Center (BAC). The broader purpose of the BAC is to facilitate economic growth in New Jersey through technical assistance and guidance provided to businesses and local governments.
- OPA is currently in the process of updating the SDRP.
- As per the NJ State Planning Act, the SDRP intends to establish an optimal balance of economic development and environmental conservation through sound planning practices.
- The SDRP is not a regulatory document, but a guidance document. It does not overrule, negate, or interfere with local plans or regulations. Instead, its aim is to foster greater coordination and consistency between planning objectives at all levels of government.
- In December of 2024, OPA disseminated the Preliminary State Development and Redevelopment Plan, which is a draft version of the new SDRP. This began a process called Cross Acceptance, in which all New Jersey residents and local and regional entities are free to offer comments, thereby contributing to the final version of the SDRP.
- Because stakeholder engagement is critical to the Cross Acceptance process, OPA commenced its outreach to municipalities, counties, and regional entities well in advance of the release of the Preliminary SDRP.
- At present, OPA is conducting public meetings such as this in all 21 counties and at the Highlands Council. Later this year, OPA will conduct six public hearings on the outcome of the Cross Acceptance process.
- Concurrently, OPA is working with a team of academics to prepare an Infrastructure Needs Assessment, which will project the public investments necessary to implement the new SDRP. An Impact Assessment, investigating societal and economic impacts of the new SDRP, is also

underway. Furthermore, OPA is soliciting comments on the State Plan Policy Map and its underlying mapping protocols.

- The current SDRP, adopted in 2001, contains eight goals. The Preliminary SDRP contains ten goals. These goals pertain to economic development, housing, infrastructure, urban revitalization, climate change, water and natural resources, environmental protection, historic and scenic resources, equity, and comprehensive planning.
- The State Plan Policy Map, required by the State Planning Rules, serves as the geographic application of the SDRP's goals, strategies, and policies. Although planning area amendments will occur during Cross Acceptance, the addition of new centers and nodes will be addressed outside of Cross Acceptance, through the Plan Endorsement process.
- The Smart Growth Explorer is an online mapping tool developed by OPA's partners at Rowan University. It can be used to identify areas suitable for development and areas suitable for conservation. It can serve as a resource to stakeholders when considering requests to amend the State Plan Policy Map.
- OPA will complete its public meetings by mid-April. The Cross Acceptance process will then proceed to the Comparison Phase, in which County Cross Acceptance Reports are developed and submitted to OPA. Next is the Negotiation Phase, in which OPA and the counties will discuss points of agreement and disagreement in the Preliminary SDRP. Ultimately, we hope to adopt the Final SDRP, along with the Infrastructure Needs Assessment and the Impact Assessment, before the end of the year.
- QR codes are available to access the Preliminary SDRP, the Citizen's Guide to the Preliminary SDRP, and an online portal to submit comments on the Preliminary SDRP.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD:

Summary of **Questions** and *OPA Responses*

Is the State Plan intended to be a guide for municipalities?

Yes, the State Plan can be applied when updating municipal master plans, for example.

What is the County's role?

Somerset County is the Negotiating Entity for the county in the Cross Acceptance process.

How does the State Plan relate to the Plan Endorsement process?

Plan Endorsement is a separate process. The process is voluntary. OPA will work with individual municipalities to review mapping change proposals and will set achievement goals consistent with the State Plan.

For municipalities that have already gone through the Plan Endorsement process and currently have a Planning and Implementation Agreement, is the Cross Acceptance process duplicative?

To avoid duplication of efforts, municipalities in that position can skip the first step of the Cross Acceptance Response Template. Also, any mapping changes that were made during Plan Endorsement will be grandfathered into the new State Plan Policy Map.

What will be the role of the County after Cross Acceptance is completed and the new State Plan is adopted? How will this affect the County's policies and investments?

After the completion of the Cross Acceptance process, the new State Plan will be implemented. Its purpose is to serve as a policy guidance document for all jurisdictions. For the counties, this includes preparation of the Wastewater Management Plan, for example.

[Erika Phillips, Supervising Planner, Somerset County]: At this time, Somerset County's policy objectives and investment priorities are largely aligned with the goals of the new State Plan. Once the State Plan is adopted, it will be used as a guidance document whenever issues may arise in the future. The County intends to remain engaged with its municipalities.

For municipalities such as Bernards Township, which is located in the Highlands region, which entity is acting as the Negotiating Entity, the County or the Highlands Council?

The State Planning Commission has entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Highlands Council. As a Special Resource District, the Highlands Council's mapping supersedes that of the SPC. If a municipality is located in the Highlands region, it can choose whether it will use the County or the Highlands Council as their Negotiating Entity.

[Erika Phillips, Supervising Planner, Somerset County]: In the case of Bernards Township, they are using Somerset County as the Negotiating Entity.

Why are the seven Areas of Critical Concern, including the Sourlands, not identified as such in the new State Plan?

The State Planning Commission is in receipt of the Sourland Conservancy's request for recognition, and is currently considering that request. If the Sourland Conservancy's request is approved by the end of the year, it will be incorporated into the final State Plan. This is an option for the other six Areas of Critical Concern.

Why does the new State Plan not recognize the Delaware-Raritan Canal as a critical water resource?

OPA will follow up.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Cliff Wilson, President, Sourland Conservancy Board of Trustees

- The Sourland Conservancy expresses its thanks to the State Planning Commission for its consideration of our request.
- The Sourlands is a vital natural resource. It provides critical habitat, is a source of drinking water, and is an effective carbon sink.
- Over one million lost trees.
- The Sourlands also holds African American history.
- We are asking for what we feel is appropriate recognition.

Susan Bristol, Municipal Policy Specialist, The Watershed Institute

- Our organization appreciates the new State Plan's acknowledgement of the importance of watersheds and natural resources.
- We feel that the Plan fails to acknowledge the full impact of climate change.

- There is a need for a new growth model. A policy of “restoration and repair” should be incorporated into the new State Plan. This would include a restriction on greenfield development, as well as other appropriate methods to reverse the deleterious impacts of previous shortcomings in statewide planning.
- New Jersey is currently shrinking; some parts of the state are literally sinking into the ocean. Municipalities like Hillsborough and Rocky Hill are turning into islands. As such, the amount of developable land is also being reduced. This should be considered.
- Counties should be responsible for producing mapping that reflects recent flooding impacts.
- Mapping should focus on a local scale. Not even federal maps focus on a local scale.
- Design is vital for watersheds and other land issues due to upcoming climate change events. Worked with NJIT students and Millville in 2010 by rendering a site. The students understood the design is vital at a watershed for potential redevelopment. More planners should understand design or have an architect on their team.
- A goal of the State Plan should be the restoration of natural systems through redevelopment.

CLOSING REMARKS:

Shanel Y. Robinson, Commissioner Director

- I would like to recognize the staff of the Office of Planning, Policy, & Economic Development who are present here tonight. These are the individuals who will be working collaboratively with our municipalities as this process unfolds.
- Thank you, all, for attending.

END: 6:57 PM