

Public Information Meeting  
Preliminary SDRP  
Middlesex County – Monday, March 24, 2025 – 6:00 PM

START: 6:05 PM

PREPARED REMARKS:

Vijayant Rajvanshi, Interim Planning Director

- Thank you to all in attendance, especially the leadership of the County Department of Transportation.
- I would also like to acknowledge members of my own staff, including Mirah Becker and Ryan Rapp.

Khalid Anjum, Department Head of Transportation

- I would like to acknowledge the Department of Transportation and the Office of Planning, for spearheading Middlesex County's work with the State Planning Commission to develop the new State Plan.
- The County is participating in this process to ensure that the new State Plan's policies align with the County's own vision.
- This includes support for education and families, protecting the environment, building more housing, and mitigating the effects of climate change.

Walter C. Lane, Acting Executive Director, 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 from Rutgers and Rowan Universities 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*

**There is a separation of transportation planning between north and south in NJ. How are agencies that handle transit integrated into the Plan?**

*The NJ Department of Transportation and the three MPOs are also updating their plans. Project prioritization criteria give additional points for centers, Planning Area 1, and Planning Area 2. The draft plan calls for coordination of the land use projects and transportation projects.*

**Can you give actual examples of transit-orientated development? How do we engage in those projects? We want to reactivate passenger rail service, however, it is not in the county plan and NJ Transit is not helpful.**

*OPA can facilitate collaboration and coordination with other state agencies—we direct their activities. We can provide technical assistance regarding TOD through the Plan Endorsement process. We also encourage you to include these concerns in your Cross Acceptance Response.*

**Our municipality is 98% developed with no open space. We cannot build affordable housing. How does the State Plan apply to our municipality?**

*In regards to affordable housing, the new State Plan does not implement fourth round obligations—these housing obligations are based upon the methodology in the new affordable housing legislation adopted last year. The State Plan does prescribe policies that can facilitate the creation of more affordable housing. Even if your municipality is “built out,” there are incentives for going through the Plan Endorsement process.*

**The Plan has a time horizon of 2050, but considering climate change and the NJPACT rules, we have an obligation to look further than that. Shouldn't the Plan reflect these other regulations to have a consistent vision?**

*The new State Plan is consistent with the planning horizons in the State Planning Act, and it does make certain long-term considerations. We do not disagree with the premise of your question, but the new State Plan primarily functions to inform decision-making and actions that are taken by various state agencies. And, we do not intend to wait another twenty years to adopt the next iteration.*

**There should be a way for the State Plan to better inform municipalities' long-term visioning. When looking at municipalities' master plans, very few look at the future. Can you comment?**

*The State Plan is meant to guide municipal planning, and some of its recommendations pertain to long-term visioning. If you think this can be strengthened in the final version of the new State Plan, we welcome your feedback.*

**What resources and guidance documents are available to municipalities during Cross Acceptance?**

*OPA has made available the Cross Acceptance Manual, as well as the Cross Acceptance Response Template, or CART. The County can also assist the municipalities in drafting their responses, and Office of Planning Advocacy can provide additional technical assistance.*

**Is it essential for municipalities to align their Cross Acceptance Response to that of the county? Is there a way for municipalities to dissent from the county response?**

*All towns have the opportunity to provide dissenting reports if they are not in agreement with aspects of the county response. Though, the county is merely combining all municipal responses into one report.*

#### GENERAL COMMENTS:

**The state has too many developments and is losing too much farmland. One piece of legislation that is under consideration would allow the County or State Agricultural Development Committees to make the first bid on any farmland that could potentially be sold for development. I suggest that there should be a 30-day period for these committees to confer with the property owners. Farmland should be the last land that is developed. Local food sources are important, as was seen during the pandemic.**

**Designating and expanding open space is a good initiative, but there needs to be balance. Green Acres outpaces the agriculture board. Agricultural preservation is outpaced by all sectors; there are too many housing and warehousing developments. There needs to be more outreach when it comes to farmland; there needs to be a way to aggressively preserve these spaces, such as financial incentives to keep farmland. The house in which people live needs to have grant funding, so it can be financially feasible to live there. Rutgers has been involved in good planning in farmland areas. The County's 2040 plan needs to be more aggressive for agriculture. There is a need for local food production throughout the state, especially when we have another pandemic or natural disaster. There is insufficient support for agricultural infrastructure; I have to go out of state to find parts, machinery, and even fertilizer. It is a burden to farmers.**

**The county has the largest farmer training program in the nation, but new generations are not getting in line to take over family businesses. The county has an incubator for becoming a farmer, and starting a business that can rekindle this economy.**

**It is good that watersheds are highlighted in the new State Plan, but there are not enough tools for watershed protection. It is difficult to bring counties and towns together for watershed planning. The State Plan also identifies issues affecting watersheds, but does not go far enough in calling for their restoration.**

CLOSING REMARKS:

Walter C. Lane, Acting Executive Director, OPA

- The new State Plan will serve to foster collaborative planning efforts.
- In regards to the concerns raised about agriculture, our office can relay these to the proper individuals within DEP and the SADC.
- Please also consider submitting written comments.

Vijayant Rajvanshi, Interim Planning Director

- Thank you all for attending.

END: 7:04