Impact Assessment of the 2024 New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The assessment of the 2024 preliminary draft of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP2024) utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis analyzed more than three decades of geospatial data to establish the pronounced, positive impact of state planning upon the development and redevelopment of New Jersey. This same data included indicators that predicted the expected positive impact of the SDRP2024. The qualitative analysis involved a detailed evaluation of the goals and policies of the plan in light of an extensive review of contemporary planning literature. This analysis similarly found that the SDRP2024 is consistent with contemporary planning principles and will yield positive impacts on New Jersey and its residents in the future. In short, the implementation of SDRP2024 will lead to prosperity, improved quality of life and environmental preservation that will benefit all New Jerseyans.

Quantitative Findings

We have assessed the potential impact of the 2024 preliminary draft of the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP2024) by examining historical and projected land use patterns. The analysis provides a window into the SDRP's potential impact on growth trends, redevelopment, infrastructure, and environmental indicators across New Jersey. The quantitative findings support the SDRP2024 state planning approach that responds to past trends, anticipates future challenges, and uses data-driven, equity-oriented policies to shape a more sustainable and inclusive New Jersey by 2050.

The eight geospatial indicators utilized for monitoring growth as PLAN-ALIGNED versus PLAN-ADVERSE are as follows:

1. Growth in Smart Growth Planning Areas (PA1–PA3)
This indicator measures the share of development occurring in Planning Areas 1 through 3 (Metropolitan, Suburban, and Fringe), which are prioritized for growth under the SDRP2024. These areas already have infrastructure and capacity to support development efficiently. A higher proportion of growth in these areas signals alignment with smart growth principles, while growth in PA4–PA5 suggests sprawl and environmental risk.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Consistent with smart growth principles
- Leverages existing infrastructure
- Revitalization and enhancement of existing communities

2. Growth in Designated Centers
This indicator evaluates whether growth is concentrated in officially designated centers such as cities, towns, and villages. These compact, mixed-use, and walkable areas are essential to the State Plan's vision of place-based development. Development in centers supports efficient infrastructure use and equitable access to housing and services, while dispersed growth leads to sprawl and higher costs.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Compact, mixed-use and transit-accessible
- Walkable, livable communities with job accessibility
- Helps reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT)

3. Growth as Redevelopment and Renewal

This indicator measures the extent to which growth occurs through redevelopment of previously developed lands—including brownfields and areas in need of revitalization—rather than expansion into undeveloped lands. Prioritizing redevelopment preserves open space, utilizes existing infrastructure, and revitalizes underused urban areas. It also supports equity by reinvesting in communities that have historically experienced disinvestment.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Redevelopment and revitalization of blighted areas, brownfields and redevelopment zones
- Existing infrastructure such as roads, transit, water and sewer.
- Environmentally sustainable
- Economic opportunities and housing options

4. Compact, Mixed-Use Development

This indicator assesses the ratio of high- and medium-density residential development compared to low-density and exurban growth. Compact growth encourages walkability, reduces land consumption, and fosters vibrant, interconnected neighborhoods. It also limits vehicle dependency and promotes sustainability, in line with smart growth goals.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Fosters community neighborhoods and walkability
- Mix of housing types, commercial uses and public amenities
- Increasing transportation options and reducing auto VMT's

5. Wastewater Infrastructure-Connected Growth

This tracks the proportion of new development occurring within sewer service areas versus outside them. Development in sewered areas is more efficient, cost-effective, and environmentally sound, while growth in unsewered areas often indicates sprawl and increased environmental risks. This indicator reflects the alignment between land use planning and infrastructure capacity.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Efficient, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible
- Maximizes return on public investments and reduces the fiscal burden
- Minimizes environmental disruption

6. Environmentally Low-Impact Development

This metric evaluates how well new development avoids critical land resources such as prime farmland, wetlands, core forests, and wildlife habitat, and how it minimizes impervious surface. Avoiding these resources protects ecosystem services, prevents flooding, and sustains biodiversity. The indicator reflects environmental responsibility and long-term land stewardship.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Avoids the development of prime farmland, forest, and wetlands
- Ensures environmental integrity, resilience, and long-term sustainability
- Provides vital ecosystem services such as food production, flood mitigation, water filtration, biodiversity

7. Climate Resilient Development

This indicator measures the extent of development occurring in flood-prone areas, including zones at risk from sea level rise, storm surges, and stream flooding. Resilient development avoids or is properly designed for these risks, reducing future property damage and infrastructure costs. It is a key metric for aligning land use with climate adaptation strategies.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Avoids flood hazard from sea level rise, storm surges, and/or inland stream flooding.
- Minimizes property damage, infrastructure failures, and the displacement of residents
- Safer, more predictable development that lessens the burden on emergency services

8. Protection of Open Space and Natural Resources

This evaluates how much open space and natural resource land is preserved from development. High preservation levels indicate successful implementation of the State Plan's conservation goals and support ecological health, recreation, and climate mitigation. This indicator helps track the progress toward the "50x50" goal of protecting half of New Jersey's critical remaining lands by 2050.

Plan-Aligned Impacts

- Prudent land conservation is synergistically coordinated with development.
- Protection of significant natural resources, sensitive landscapes and prime farmlands
- Preserves biodiversity, and supports ecosystem services
- Long-term environmental sustainability, food security & resilience

Since its inception in 1992, the SDRP has aimed to counteract sprawling development and promote smart growth. Using high-resolution GIS land use/land cover (LU/LC) datasets from 1986 to 2020, the quantitative analysis evaluated whether growth over time has been PLAN-ALIGNED (consistent with the SDRP goals) or PLAN-ADVERSE (contradicting those goals). Between 1986 and 2020, New Jersey saw over 445,000 acres of new development, largely at the expense of farmland, forests, and wetlands. While approximately 63% of development occurred in Smart Growth areas (PA1-PA3), over 37% still occurred in rural and environmentally sensitive zones (PA4, PA4B and PA5), undermining the goals of compact, infrastructure-supported growth.

The quantitative analysis identified key trends: a post-2007 slowdown in land consumption; a shift toward higher-density housing; a decline in exurban sprawl; and the rise of warehouse and logistics development. Redevelopment has become an increasingly important growth strategy, especially as many northern municipalities reach buildout. For example, high-density residential

development rose from 7.6% to 19.6% of total statewide growth from 1995 to 2020, while rural low-density development fell significantly in acres of land consumption.

Development within designated centers absorbed about 5% of total acres developed between 1986–2020—highlighting the need to reinvigorate the centers-based framework of the SDRP. Likewise, infrastructure alignment is uneven: while over 94% of high-density development occurred within sewered areas, about 80% of rural single-unit development occurred in non-sewered areas. The SDRP promotes growth in sewered, compact, and previously developed areas to reduce sprawl, costs, and environmental damage.

Newly constructed compact mixed use development projects that have been created over the past decades such as the Robbinsville Town Center (Mercer County) as well as successful smart growth redevelopment projects such as downtown New Brunswick, (Middlesex County) are examples where policies of the State Plan are being demonstrably achieved as PLAN-ALIGNED. In contrast, many examples of development growth that occurred over the past three decades can be characterized as PLAN-ADVERSE sprawl, with many thousands of acres of natural resource lands such as farmland, forests and wetlands in Planning Areas PA4, PA5 and PA5b lost. A look at the data helps to bring a nuanced understanding to how these development patterns reflect the successes and inadequacies of the SDRP in its outcomes

A substantial amount of development and redevelopment, especially post 2007 up through 2020 (the date of the most recent Land Use GIS data), are trending to be PLAN-ALIGNED and more consistent with the SDRP and its vision statement. Many cities and towns such as Jersey City, New Brunswick and Glassboro have been redeveloped and revitalized at significantly higher densities, which takes growth pressure off of rural fringe areas. As evidence, rates of rural land consumption have dropped significantly over the last two decades (Lathrop & Hasse 2025). A strong case can be made from the data that NJ's 2020 landscape would have been significantly more sprawling if the SDRP had not been in existence to help guide development with a regional perspective.

This impact assessment integrates climate resilience as a central planning concern, reflecting a new goal within the SDRP itself. More than 54,000 acres of development since 1986 lie within flood-prone zones newly delineated by FEMA and Rutgers flood vulnerability mapping. Climate impacts are projected to worsen, reinforcing the urgency for future growth to avoid high-risk areas.

Lastly, New Jersey has preserved over 1.6 million acres of land through programs like Green Acres and the State Agriculture Development Committee's (SADC) farmland preservation. However, with buildout anticipated by 2050, the SDRP2024 emphasizes redevelopment, infill, and equitable center-based growth as the foundation for sustainable development coordinated with vigorous conservation of the most valuable remaining natural resources.

Qualitative Findings

We have also assessed the SDRP2024 qualitatively, considering the cutting-edge planning literature published in widely respected disciplinary journals, including *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Journal of Planning Education Research*, *Urban Studies*, *Urban Affairs Review*, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, and *Urban Geography*. The assessment procedure utilized an adapted form of Health Impact Assessment methodology that involved logic models (hypothesized descriptions of the chain of causes and effects leading to outcomes of interest) linked to the SDRP policies and strategies, relevant indicators and assessment mechanisms derived from the literature, a review of benefits and disadvantages of adoption of the policies, ways to mitigate the disadvantages, and a discussion of what is likely to happen if the revised SDRP is not adopted in 2025. This review allowed the SDRP policies and strategies to be assessed considering contemporary national planning concepts, trends, and best practices.

Summaries of the six policy / strategy areas of the SDRP that were qualitatively reviewed and determined to have strong evidence vis-a-vis expected impact are as follows:

1. Economy

Enacting adaptive reuse policies will promote infill and rehabilitation projects of vacant buildings to meet current needs. Designating buildings and/or neighborhoods can help preserve regional identity and guide the development in a manner suitable for local needs. Buildings and properties designated as historic generally appreciate in value more than similar properties in non-historic areas. Reducing housing costs can have profound effects on communities by allowing money to be spent on other goods and services. Diversifying housing types can help prevent displacement and offer upward mobility to low-income families and individuals by providing them access to more and better services. Establishing high-quality transit service (both bus and rail) can be a powerful tool for improving the lives of low-wage workers who are more likely to rely on public transit. Increasing transit availability and reliability can enable more people to forgo car ownership and the high costs associated with owning and maintaining it. Connecting more New Jersey municipalities to each other via transit could enable more New Jerseyans to replace commuting trips and other car trips.

Key Takeaways

- Adaptive reuse policies will promote infill and rehabilitation.
- Reducing housing costs frees up money to spend on goods and services.
- Diversifying housing types prevents displacement and facilitates upward mobility.
- Investments in transit reduce car trips and costs, and makes commuting easier by providing additional options.

2. Land Use and Environment

At the heart of the SDRP is a primary goal of encouraging center-based, compact, and mixed-use development, while also allowing for a range of other environments within the framework of articulated planning areas. Center-based, compact, and mixed-use developments are widely documented in the planning literature as core strategies towards achieving a range of environmental benefits and outcomes, including reduction in air pollution due to reduced vehicle miles traveled, less sprawl and inefficient use of infrastructure, and more inclusive communities, especially across income ranges. There

are many benefits that occur with increased development in centers, including reductions in vehicle miles traveled, lower-carbon travel patterns among residents, enhanced ability to transition to sustainable energy systems, increased perceptions of security, reduction in food deserts, and greater satisfaction with one's neighborhood. Compact development prevents sprawl, which is well documented in the planning literature to consume land and damage animal habitats. In addition, sprawl leads to greater use of automobiles and thus air pollution, creates more impervious surfaces that cause harmful runoff, and contributes more light pollution which disturbs nocturnal habitats.

Key Takeaways

- The SDRP encourages less sprawl and inefficient use of infrastructure.
- Compact neighborhoods limit sprawl and impervious surfaces.
- Reductions in air pollution will occur with less need to drive.
- Development of and reinvestment in centers increases residents' satisfaction with the communities and perceptions of security.

3. Infrastructure

The strategies proposed in the SDRP support investment in New Jersey's infrastructure across a variety of contexts, including transportation, housing, wastewater and stormwater management, energy, and green building. By investing in active transportation infrastructure and implementing transit-oriented development, New Jersey can improve the safety and accessibility of walking, bicycling, and transit while reducing travel costs. At the same time, prioritizing adaptive reuse and infill development can support efforts to provide both market rate and low-income housing. Retrofitting and replacing aging infrastructure can also help mitigate the negative health, economic, and environmental impacts of combined sewer overflow (CSO) and stormwater flooding. Green infrastructure and blue-green infrastructure can effectively reduce CSO volume, enhance water quality, reduce flood risk, and improve quality of life. By adopting a holistic, context-driven approach that prioritizes the most vulnerable communities, policymakers and planners can ensure that blue and green infrastructure's numerous benefits, ranging from improved stormwater management to enhanced social equity, are realized by all.

Key Takeaways

- Transportation infrastructure investments will improve safety and accessibility of walking, bicycling, and transit.
- Retrofitting and replacing aging infrastructure will limit sewer overflow and stormwater flooding.
- Investments in green and blue infrastructure (water bodies and wetland areas) can reduce sewer overflow, flood risk, and will improve quality of life.

4. Climate and Resilience

If fully implemented, the strategies outlined in New Jersey's State Development and Redevelopment Plan could significantly strengthen the state's climate resilience. The Plan will also continue to improve the state's housing stability, environmental quality, and long-term community sustainability. The SDRP's focus on compact, mixed-use development in designated growth areas aligns with research evidence and literature, showing that coordinated land use and transportation planning reduces sprawl, lowers vehicle emissions, and preserves critical farmland and ecological systems, ultimately contributing to the state's climate resilience. Climate resilience will be further reinforced by

infrastructure modernization and nature-based investments. Eliminating combined sewer overflows, remediating brownfields, and expanding green infrastructure will reduce flood vulnerability, manage stormwater more effectively, and protect communities from climate-driven hazards. Urban tree planting, stormwater improvements, and expanded blue-green spaces will help manage extreme heat and rainfall, strengthen natural buffers, and increase the adaptive capacity of urban areas. Overall, the SDRP presents a sound and integrated framework for advancing climate resilience across ecological, infrastructural, and community dimensions.

Key Takeaways

- The SDRP will enhance New Jersey's climate resilience.
- Coordinated land use and transportation planning reduces sprawl, lowers vehicle emissions, and preserves critical farmland and ecological systems.
- Expanding green and blue infrastructure (foliage, and lakes, ponds, and streams) will reduce effects from extreme heat and rainfall, as well as strengthen natural buffers to storm surge and other climate impacts.

5. Equity

The strategies outlined in the SDRP aim to increase equity by addressing long-standing disparities in housing, transportation, infrastructure, and environmental quality, particularly in historically underserved communities. Revitalizing underutilized spaces, such as vacant lots and brownfield sites, will stimulate economic activity and improve living conditions. Similarly, diversifying housing options and placing affordable units in areas with more developed and diversified local economies can dismantle patterns of segregation and increase access to essential services like education and healthcare. These efforts, when thoughtfully implemented, foster inclusive development and support upward mobility. By integrating land use and transportation planning, the plan promotes efficient, affordable, and accessible living environments.

Key Takeaways

- Addressing disparities in housing, transportation, and environmental quality in underserved communities will increase equity.
- Developing vacant lots and revitalizing brownfields will stimulate economic activity and improve living conditions in these places.
- Diversifying housing options and placing them in areas with more developed and diversified local economies will reduce segregation and increase access to essential services.

6. Health

If implemented, the strategies advanced by the State Plan will have net positive impacts on the public health of New Jersey residents. Several of the Plan's strategies support the reduction of emissions and greenhouse gases from both the transportation and energy sectors, which in turn mitigates the negative health impacts from air pollution and particulate matter. Efforts to promote increased walking, biking, micromobility, and transit use will not only reduce vehicle emissions, but increase opportunities for physical activity which benefits both physical and mental health. Environmentally focused strategies to expand the use of green infrastructure, mitigate flooding, and remediate brownfields, coupled with the elimination of lead pipes and combined sewer overflows, will limit exposure to toxins and the spread of disease. In addition, the protection of New Jersey's

forest resources will improve air quality and support cognitive and immune function. Diversifying the state's housing stock and reducing housing cost burden will reduce the stress associated with housing insecurity, as well as the health risks posed by poor quality housing.

Key Takeaways

- Mitigation of health impacts from air pollution.
- Investments in transportation infrastructure to support physical activity, such as walking and biking, will improve residents' physical and mental health.
- Elimination of harmful building materials, such as lead pipes, will reduce exposure to harmful toxins.
- Diversifying housing options and reducing housing costs will reduce housing insecurity and well as health risks from poor quality housing.