

## **Chapter 1 – Land Use Element**

**Goal:** Promote the fully productive utilization of land, allowing for appropriate concentrations of well-designed and aesthetically pleasing residential, commercial, industrial and recreational uses.

### **1.1 Background**

The Land Use Element is the broadest element in the Comprehensive Plan. It draws upon the recommendations of the other elements to create a set of cohesive development policies. The Land Use Element is based on Somerville's physical layout and makes recommendations that will impact the Borough's zoning ordinance. The implementation strategies set forth in this element will help decide the type, location and intensity of future development. This element will also discuss the existing layout, built conditions, and land uses, as well as Somerville's zoning ordinance.

Settled in colonial times mostly by British colonists, Somerville was originally a sleepy farming village until the completion of the railroad in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The railroad brought much manufacturing to the Borough and as a result residential growth as well. Early industry included brick making due to the shale and clay occurring naturally throughout the area. The Borough was incorporated from a portion of Bridgewater Township in 1909 and became the Somerset County seat soon after. Today the old manufacturing plants have given way to office buildings, municipal services and a regional medical center.

While Somerville has few locations remaining for development, a plan is underway for the reclamation and redevelopment of the Somerville Landfill located along US Highway 206. The Downtown Somerville Shopping Center is poised for redevelopment as well with a mixed-use facility consisting of ground floor retail and residential uses planned for the upper floors. The aim is to create an anchor for the Main Street Central Business District.

Overall, however, the possibilities for future development will depend mostly upon in-fill of scattered small vacant parcels and adaptive reuse of existing buildings. An example of this type of adaptive reuse can be seen through the Borough's designation of East Main Street as a redevelopment area. The intent is to spur mixed-use facilities within existing structures housing office, residential and some public/semi-public spaces.

## **1.2 Objectives**

**Objective:** Evaluate the continued viability of existing zoning within the Borough

### **Existing Conditions**

*R-1 Single-Family Residential* – In this district, single-family detached housing units are permitted by right. This is the least dense of all the residential zoning districts in the Borough.

*R-2 Single-Family Residential* – This zone provides for moderate density residential uses. Still only allowing single-family detached units, this district permits smaller lot sizes, a greater floor to area ratio and more improvement coverage than the R-1 district.

*R-3 Single-Family Residential* – This district was created to allow for the creation of Planned Residential Developments in the area from Hamilton St. to Haynes St. & the railroad tracks to Main Street. These developments must be at least 3 acres in size with a variety of housing types and a maximum density of 12 units per acre. Aside from the PRDs, this zone allows for single- & two-family homes as well.

*G Garden Apartment* – With four different sites scattered throughout the Borough, this zone permits single- & two-family homes as well as Garden Apartments, 20% of which must be affordable.

*SC Senior Citizen Housing* – A portion of the block bounded by Somerset Street, Mountain Avenue, West End Avenue and Middaugh Street falls under this zoning classification which only permits apartment buildings of varying densities for the creation of senior citizen housing.

*B-1 Central Business* – Located along Main Street, this zoning district allows for various retail and office uses with no parking requirement.

*B-2 Central Business* – This district allows for personal and commercial services along the Main Street corridor and is characterized by larger parcels than those in the B-1 Central Business District because this zone requires off street parking based on the size and type of business.

*B-3 Business Services* – Just south of the CG Zone, the B-3 Business Zoning District focuses strictly on business services and office related uses. Retail uses are not permitted within this zone.

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*B-4 Neighborhood Business/Residential* – Somerville has applied this zone to two corridors within the Borough – Gaston Avenue between Cliff Street & Union Avenue and Somerset Street between Cornell Boulevard and the railroad tracks – to provide for retail and neighborhood services such as drycleaners and auto repair services.

*B-5 Highway Business* – This zone is designed for commercial businesses along well-traveled highways. Located sporadically along the major highways that encircle Somerville including Routes 202 and 206, they allow for the most intensive commercial uses in the Borough.

*B-6 Shopping Center* – Encompassing the Somerville Landfill site, the original intent was to provide a zoning classification that fit with the overall redevelopment plan for the area. Since the adoption of this zone, the plan for the Somerville Landfill has changed, and it may be in the best interest of the Borough to create a new zoning classification that better reflects the aims of the current redevelopment plan.

*PO-R Professional Office/Residential* – Acting as a buffer between the residential areas of Somerville and the Central Business District, this zone allows for either full or partial conversions of residential structures to commercial use, meaning mixed use.

*I-1 Industrial* – Made up solely of the area south of the landfill site and west of Bridge Avenue, this zone allows for...

*I-2 Industrial* – This zone is made up of two tracts along the southern edge of the Borough: at the intersection of Adamsville Road and the rail road tracks, and between Peter's Brook and S. Bridge Avenue and below

*CG County Government* – A two block area from Bridge to Mechanic & Main to High, the CG County Government Zoning District houses most of the county offices with some spillover into the adjacent PO-R District.

*H Hospital* – The area surrounding the Somerset Medical Center is classified in the H Hospital Zoning District. This district has seen expansion over the past 15 years, putting pressure on the surrounding neighborhood and creating tension between the two uses.

By having zoning ordinances reflect the existing built conditions, an area can remain true to its origins. This is particularly desirable in historic and residential areas, yet zoning ordinances can also be powerful tools for redirecting and guiding future development in areas that are experiencing new development or need modification to reflect the community's changing needs.

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Generally, the existing zoning districts overlay their corresponding land use patterns well. However, in areas where high levels of commercial and industrial vacancy are an issue, rezoning could promote revitalization by permitting different uses that have a higher market demand.

In addition to comparing the zoning map to the land use map, analysis of the Zoning Board decisions can show areas where the ordinance should be improved [List of granted Variances needed & analysis forthcoming]

Despite Somerville's built-out character, some areas remain where the existing zoning can be refined and redefined to reflect the future needs of the community and satisfy its current concerns.

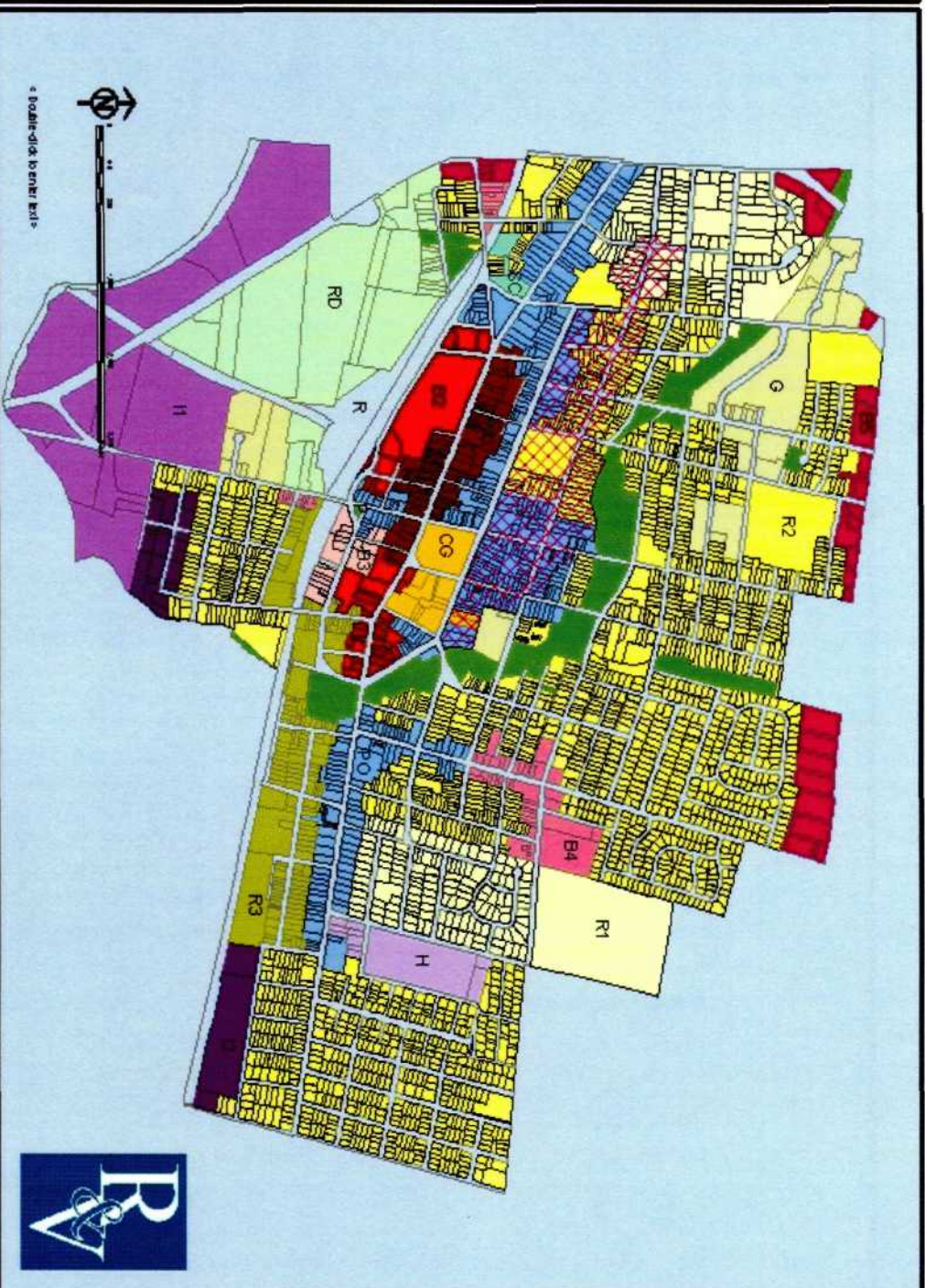
The largest of these areas is of course the Somerville Landfill. Currently in the redevelopment planning stages, this area was previously slated for a regional shopping mall and was zoned accordingly as B-6, Shopping Center District. While no decision has yet been finalized as to the type of development that will occur throughout this parcel, and even though under the redevelopment statute the zoning throughout the redevelopment area is not binding, the Borough should consider rezoning these parcels as it is the only area within the Borough with the B-6 District distinction. This plan recommends the rezoning of the B-6 Shopping Center District to RD Redevelopment Zone District with bulk and area requirements to mirror those set forth in the redevelopment plan. In addition, several changes have been made to the Zoning Map to better reflect current land use patterns. Two parcels in Block 71 have been changed from PO-R Professional Office – Residential District to CG County Government District as they house certain Somerset County Governmental Offices.

The plan also calls for the implementation of an Historic District Overlay Zone along West Cliff Street between Peter's Brook and Mountain Avenue to preserve and enhance the historic character of this neighborhood. Architectural standards and other implementation strategies are discussed in greater detail in the Historic Preservation Element of this Re-Examination. Map 1.1 illustrates these zoning changes and ensures greater land use compatibility with current land uses, illustrated in Map 1.2.



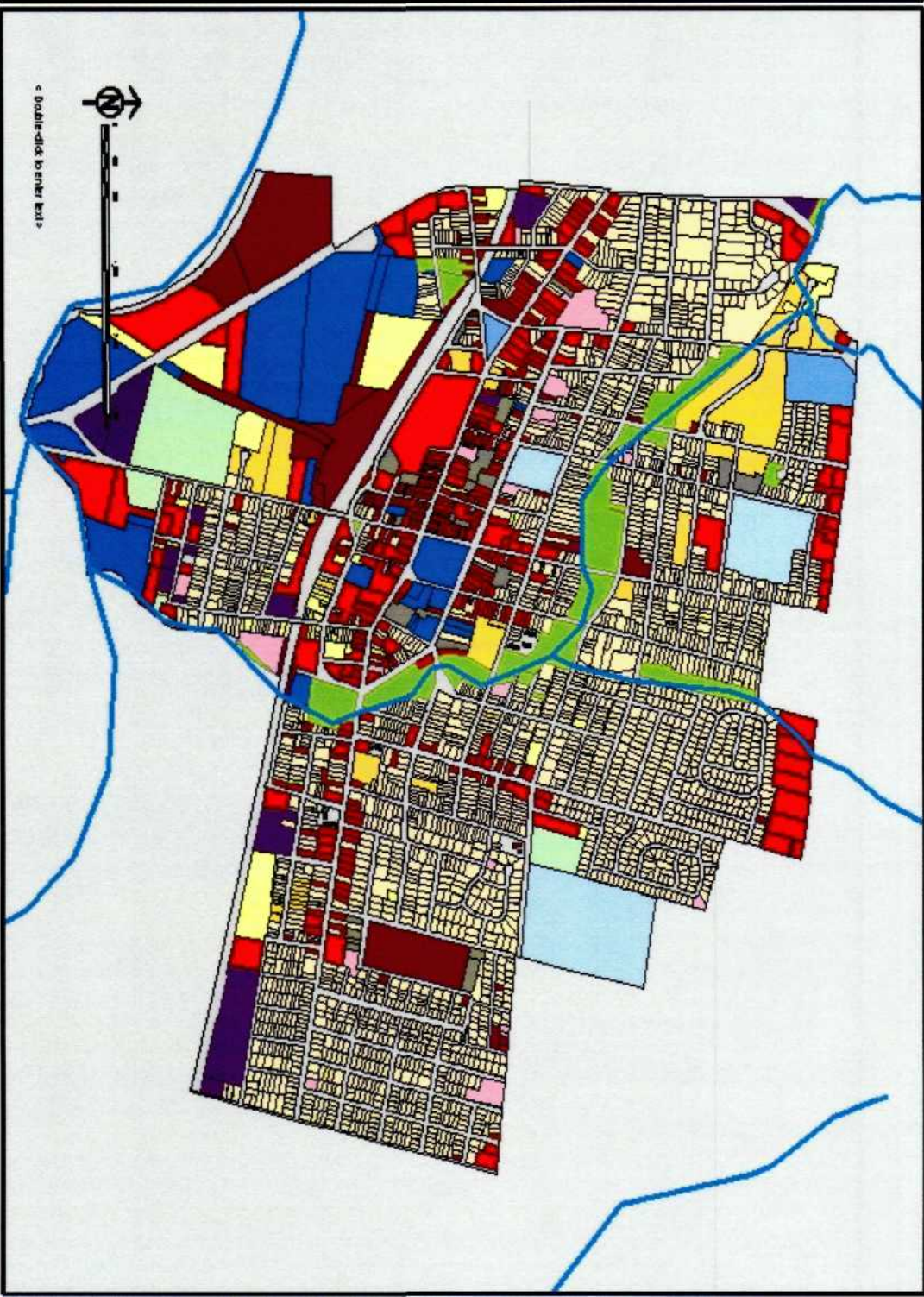
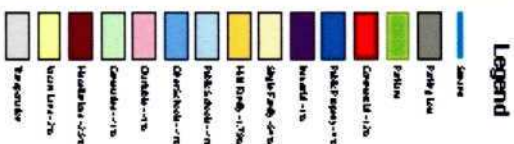
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# Somerville Borough Somerset County, NJ Zoning Map





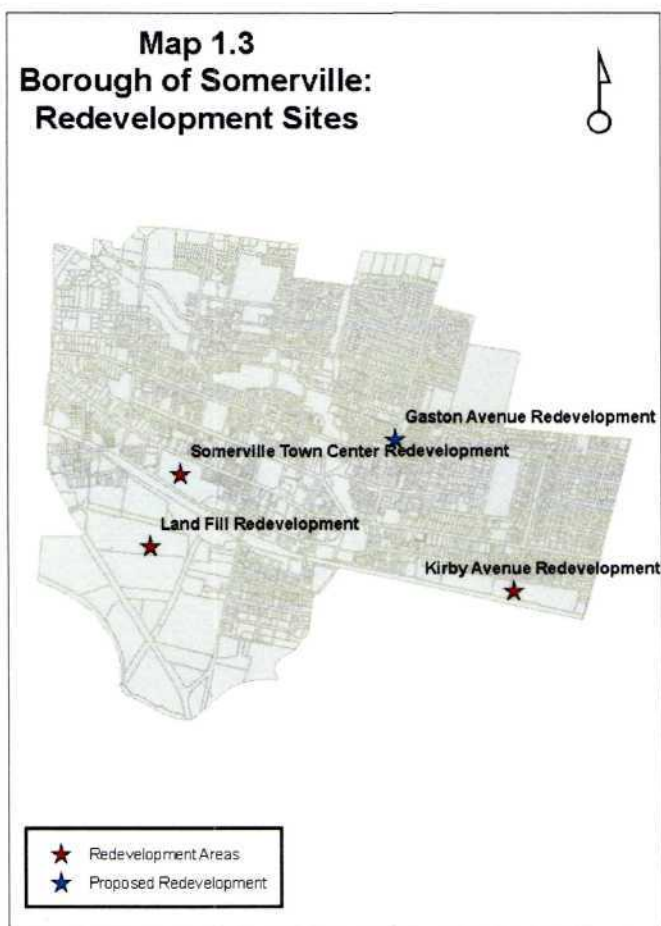
# **Somerville Borough Somerset County, NJ Land Use Map**



## Existing Conditions

The existing zoning districts provide not only for current land uses, but also for the majority of future land uses that do not currently exist in the Borough. However, the Borough may wish to consider additional districts that reflect state programs, increased residential density and changing land uses.

The bulk of these changing land uses will come in the form of redevelopment site, of which the Borough currently has 3: Land Fill Redevelopment, Kirby Avenue Redevelopment, and Somerville Town Center Redevelopment. Below each is described and likely redevelopment scenarios are given to their subsequent redevelopment. Map 1.3 pinpoints each redevelopment area in relation to the overall Borough. The Planning Board should consider creating an overall redevelopment plan that addresses each of these areas in addition to the proposed redevelopment area on Gaston Avenue put forth in greater detail in the Economic Development Element of this Re-Examination. [Information on any other Redevelopment Areas needed]





### **Land Fill Redevelopment**

Somerville, as described previously in this element, has a number of redevelopment areas. While the declaration of the need for redevelopment is an important step in the process, the Borough must make the next step and prepare and approve plans for their redevelopment. The Land Fill Redevelopment Area has sat vacant since it was first designated a Redevelopment Area prior to the Borough's 1989 Master Plan. In that plan, the Borough called for the creation of a Regional Shopping Center and zoned the parcel to conform to the plan. That plan ultimately fell through and the parcel still sits vacant in need of redevelopment. The Land Fill Site is an unimproved 115 acre site that sits adjacent to the Main Street Central Business District and is located between downtown and the Raritan Greenbelt.

Recommendations for the area include the following:

- A mixed-use transit oriented development should be considered including commercial and residential uses.
- Connections should be made between the downtown area along Main Street, the Somerville Train Station, and the Raritan and Peter's Brook Greenbelts.
- Create an overall transportation network within the redevelopment area taking into consideration and providing for various modes of transportation including vehicular traffic, cyclists, and pedestrians through the use of traffic calming techniques, the extension of the existing grid pattern used throughout the Borough, and streetscape enhancements.
- Selection of a redevelopment plan with architecture that is sustainable in nature and that relates to its urban environment through the use of architectural criteria placed into the redevelopment plan.
- This element also endorses all recommendations made through the Regional Center Plan Element concerning the Land Fill Redevelopment Site.

And while the original redevelopment plans never came to fruition for the Land Fill Redevelopment, it turned out to be a blessing for the Borough. For as the popularity of Indoor Shopping Centers has declined in recent years, the Borough stands poised to embrace the future of mixed use traditional downtown development through the Somerville Town Center and Land Fill Redevelopment Area.

### **Kirby Avenue Redevelopment**

In March of 2006 a Preliminary Investigation was submitted to the Borough detailing the condition of the Kirby Avenue Corridor. The area was determined to

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nave exhibited several of the criteria needed to be declared an Area in Need of Redevelopment including: Dilapidated improvements (building deterioration, severe surface course deterioration of parking lots and dilapidated fencing), faulty design (ill-defined circulation within parking lots, parking in the front yard, excessive land coverage, inadequate screening), and deleterious land use (contamination, fencing with barbed wire, accumulation of trash and debris, unscreened refuse storage areas, haphazardly parked cars).

Residential redevelopment seems the most likely form this area will take and could spur other private redevelopment activities throughout this neighborhood. Any redevelopment plan that is approved, however, should make concessions for open space and public recreation as this area of the Borough is vastly underserved by such facilities.

### **Somerville Town Center Redevelopment**

The final redevelopment currently designated by the Borough is the parcel that will have the greatest immediate impact, and change the face of downtown Somerville, the Somerville Town Center Redevelopment Area. Currently the site of an outdated strip mall, plans call for a pedestrian oriented, mixed use development with a mix of 70,000 square feet of office space, 130,000 square feet of retail and 265 residential units that will fit with the overall character of the Central Business District and relate to the surrounding environment more so than the existing commercial structure. With the ample amount of both office and retail within the complex, this project is slated to make a major impact on the Borough in terms of economic development and the overall business climate. [\[More Information & Plans of Town Center\]](#)

### **East Main Street Redevelopment Area**

[\[Location, History, & Plan\]](#)

**Objective:** Endorse Regional planning initiatives with regard to the Regional Center Master Plan.

### **Existing Conditions**

The Regional Center Master Plan is a coordinated effort between the Boroughs of Somerville, Raritan, and Bridgewater Township. The Center received designation from the New Jersey State Planning Commission in 1996 and was the first multi-jurisdictional center approved by the state. Its purpose is to provide a coordinated planning effort between the municipalities in order to stimulate growth and improve the quality of life over the entire region. Within the Regional Center, Somerville plays a key, central role in both geography and purpose. It is literally the heart of the regional center as the seat of Somerset County and home to a Regional Medical Center. Yet, at the same time it is the smallest in

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area of the three municipalities and has truly retained its small town character and charm.

In June 2002, the Somerville Planning Board adopted the Regional Center Plan Element as an amendment to its Master Plan. The element considered the various other sections of the Master Plan through a regional planning lens. As such, various goals and objectives were put forth and some stand to be reiterated in this Land Use Element Amendment.

- Continue the revitalization of the Central Business District as a mixed-use destination and support other commercial districts through selective redevelopment, compatible in-fill development, infrastructure improvements, updated zoning, public-private partnerships and increased regional cooperation.
- Encourage appropriate redevelopment in focus areas that will return underutilized land to productive use, improve quality of life, enhance community character, create new employment opportunities and strengthen the municipal tax base.
- Reinforce historic gateway into the downtown area as part of the overall visual experience of entering a special place.

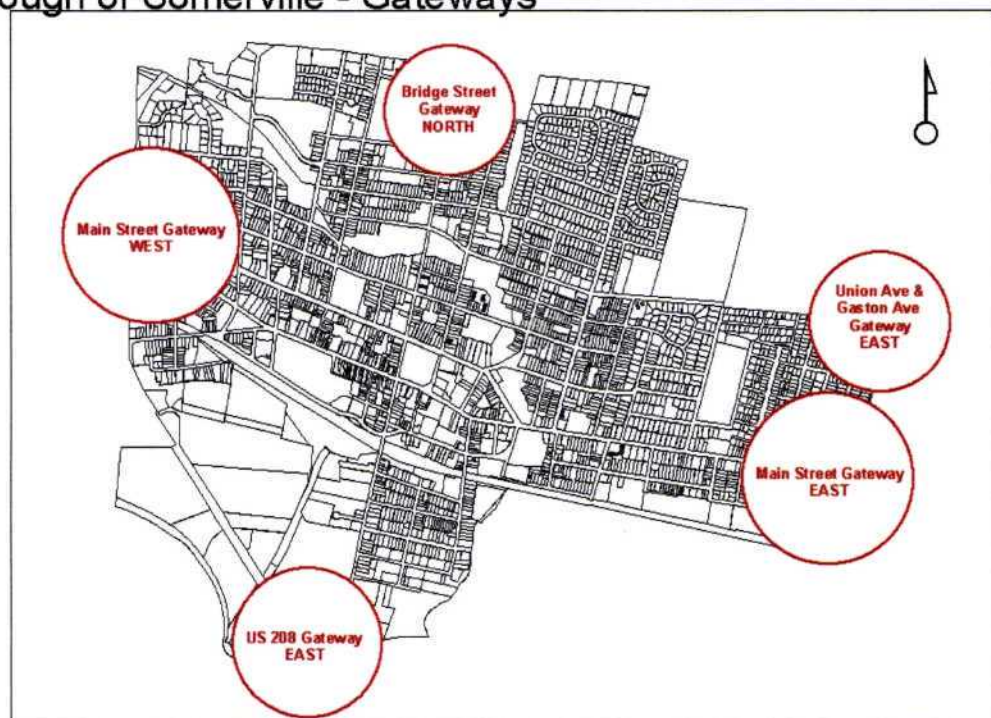
## **Gateways**

As shown below on Map 1.4, there are five primary gateways into the Borough of Somerville. Although all are in essence gateways, some serve a different purpose than others and should be treated as such. The gateways along Main Street welcome residents and visitors to the primary commercial corridor in the Borough whereas the Bridge Street & Union Avenue gateways remind residents and demonstrate to visitors the quaint small town feel of the Borough.

The Borough should preserve and enhance the gateways, especially the Union Avenue gateway which leads to the proposed Gaston Avenue Redevelopment Area. The Regional Center Element has listed gateways as a method to improve the overall visual experience for both residents and visitors and development standards should be revised to take these important routes into account. [Design Standards for Gateways]



## Map 1.4 Borough of Somerville - Gateways



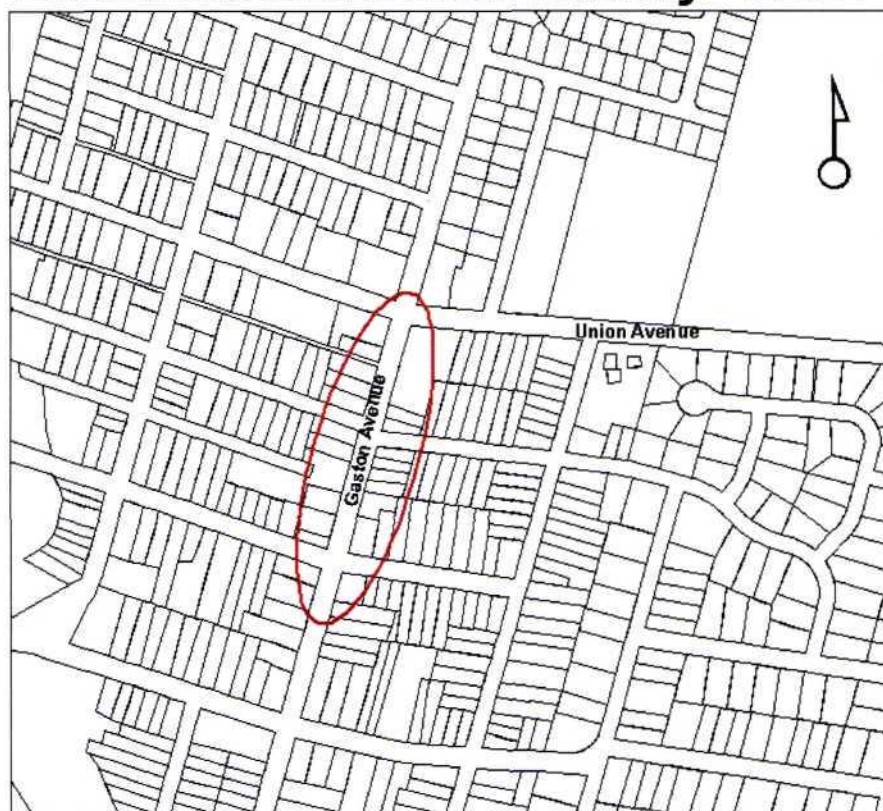
### Gaston Avenue Corridor

Mentioned both in the 1998 Re-Examination and Regional Center Element, the Gaston Avenue Corridor is in dire need of redevelopment. Based on the condition of the site, the amount of vacant structures throughout the study area, and the poor aesthetic value of the area, the redevelopment statute could be applied in this case in order for the formation of plan to move this area forward.

A future vision of the corridor would be one where nearby residents can walk or bike to convenient neighborhood services and businesses along the corridor that is nicely landscaped with unique façades that illustrate the history of the buildings and their past. It is a thriving business community filled with restaurants, local services such as dry cleaners, corner convenience stores, a coffee shop, a pharmacy, and other services catering to the needs of the local residents.

This re-examination report recommends the Borough undertake a preliminary investigation for determination of an area in need of redevelopment for the neighborhood commercial parcels along or adjacent to of the Gaston Avenue Corridor. Specifically, the Planning Board should study the gateway area (as shown below on Map 1.5).

# Map 1.5 Union/Gaston Avenue Gateway - EAST



[Redevelopment Plan Recommendations for Use]