

Atlantic County Master Plan, Farmland Preservation Plan,  
and Open Space and Recreation Plan  
Executive Summary

May 2017

Prepared by Heyer Gruel and Associates



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## Introduction

The 2017 Atlantic County Master Plan, Farmland Preservation Plan, and Open Space and Recreation Plan are updates to documents that are more than a decade old. As part of the State's post-Sandy recovery effort, the County received a grant for planning work to prepare a Strategic Recovery Planning Report (SRPR). The SRPR was prepared by Heyer Gruel and Associates and submitted to the County in January 2015. One of the main recommendations in the report is to update the County Master Plan and other planning documents. In order to carry out this recommendation, the County received a second Post-Sandy Planning Assistance Grant. A team comprising Heyer Gruel and Associates and Michael Baker International was selected to prepare the new Plans.

## Process

As part of the development of the County Master Plan, Farmland Preservation Plan, and Open Space and Recreation Plan, several meetings were conducted to obtain input from stakeholders and County residents.

Shortly after the inception of the plan development process, a meeting was held on the morning of March 24, 2016 at the Anthony Canale Training Center in Egg Harbor Township. County Planning Staff, municipal planners and planning consultants, and representatives from the ACUA, ACIA, CRDA, and other agencies were invited and in attendance. This meeting offered the consultant team the opportunity to present the scope of the project and background information. A lively and productive question and comment session provided a strong base from which to build the planning documents.

A second meeting was conducted at the Anthony Canale Training Center on the evening of July 14, 2016 to present draft information, field questions, and take comments from members of the public. This meeting was advertised digitally and in print by the County, and was well attended. Several elected officials, County Staff, and a number of residents were on hand to participate. Recommendations and comments presented by attendees at the meeting were incorporated into the drafting of the plan goals, objectives, and strategies.

On January 18, 2017, a working draft of all three plan documents was provided to the County for circulation, review, and comment. The plan was sent to representatives of each constituent municipality, relevant state and regional planning entities including the State Agriculture Development Board, The Pinelands Commission, and the Department of Community Affairs. Comments were solicited and accepted until February 15, 2017. A number of constructive comments were submitted to the consultant team and subsequently incorporated into the final versions of the plan documents.

The final plans were submitted to the County and the State Department of Community Affairs Local Planning Services on May 4, 2017.

## Context

Since 2000, when the current County Master Plan was adopted, the County's demographics have changed, the economic climate has changed, and the principles of sustainability and resiliency have moved to the forefront of the planning field. Superstorm Sandy served as the impetus to undertake this planning work, but there have been other weather events including Tropical Storm

Irene, the Derechos of 2012, nor'easters and snow storms, and nuisance flooding that have forced the County to confront these issues.

The County's economic base, which has long depended on tourism and Atlantic City casinos has been eroded by the national housing crisis and worldwide economic recession and by increased competition for casino gaming dollars in surrounding states. The County's unemployment rate and economic recovery have lagged behind the rest of the state, and the latest trends show that the size of the workforce has diminished. One of the main challenges moving forward is to explore new industry sectors that can boost the County's economy and provide new high quality jobs.

Several demographic trends highlight changes in the County since the last Master Plan. The average age of the county increased by nearly three years between 2000 and 2010. An aging population presents different needs and new set of challenges. In addition, the County's population has shifted geographically. The population of the Barrier Island communities has declined and the more suburban mainland portions of the County have grown. There appears to be an increasing trend toward more second / vacation homes on the Barrier Islands with a decline in permanent population and an even more pronounced shift in seasonal population.

The Housing section of the Plan contains a substantial amount of demographic data, information on housing costs and affordability, and an inventory of affordable housing units within the County that are controlled through a variety of mechanisms. Housing costs in Atlantic County tend to be lower than the state average, but incomes are also lower. A significant portion of the County's population is considered cost burdened by their housing expenses.

#### Land Use

The Land Use section of the Plan describes the existing regulations that influence land use and development within the County. The Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) covers a large portion of the County. The CMP mandates development densities and land uses and requires municipal zoning to conform to its standards. With the exception of a small section in the western part of the County, the area not controlled by the Pinelands is subject to Coastal Area Facilities Review Act (CAFRA) jurisdiction. CAFRA controls development densities and the amount of impervious cover permitted within certain distances of the coast.

The plan contains a number of maps depicting existing conditions, changes since the 2000 Master Plan, and an overview of how state level policies, including the Pinelands and CAFRA, affect the County's development.

#### Land Use Goals and Objectives:

- Influence State and Regional master plans to support the land use goals of Atlantic County, particularly with regard to the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan.
- Promote quality growth and development in areas where capital facilities are available
- Support efforts to revitalize neighborhoods and rehabilitate older housing stock
- Discourage growth in areas that require unplanned extension of capital facilities
- Promote lands for a diversity of economic development opportunities within the communities of Atlantic County
- Encourage the repurposing of existing infrastructure and a redefinition of economic activity in Atlantic City and the surrounding communities.

- Promote a mix of housing types to support the demands of a changing population

#### Overall Planning Goals

- Incorporate principles of sustainability and resiliency into all aspects of County planning and policy development.
- Acknowledge the risks associated with climate change, sea level rise, and severe weather events, by applying lessons learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, the Derecho of 2012, and Super Storm Sandy.
- Promote targeted growth and development in areas served by existing infrastructure outside flood prone areas, and encourage redevelopment of under-utilized urban, suburban, and rural sites.
- Coordinate County planning efforts with other entities including municipalities, improvement authorities, economic development agencies, and state agencies.
- **Encourage the diversification of the County's economy and job creation by supporting business attraction and development initiatives.**
- Promote the location of research and development businesses for mutual benefit of industry; job searchers and the colleges in Atlantic County.
- Capitalize on the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) William J. Hughes Technical Center and its continued expansion as an asset for industry and job attraction.
- **Support the County's status as a tourist destination with a wide array of natural amenities and communities of interest.**
- Promote safe and efficient transportation systems for access to the County and within the County, including air, rail and motor vehicle systems.
- Preserve and make more efficient use of existing roadway capacities by encouraging sound land use planning and highway access control.
- Promote sustainable design, management, and education related to the use of potable water and the treatment of wastewater.
- Preserve and enhance the quality of the natural resources of the County.
- Preserve selected critical natural areas supporting endangered species and wildlife habitat.
- Protect farmland within the County and promote the continued economic viability of farming.
- Preserve the historic and cultural resources in the County.
- Advocate for the preservation and protection of important natural resources while working to reevaluate the capacity of growth areas and the scope of permitted uses and activities within the Pinelands.
- Collaborate with constituent municipalities and outside jurisdictional entities to streamline the development process to make the County a more attractive place for investment.
- Continue to expand the County Park System and the recreation opportunities and facilities available to County residents and visitors.

#### Transportation

The transportation section of the plan provides an inventory and analysis of the County's existing transportation network. It identifies County Roads, public transit facilities, bicycle facilities, and



infrastructure that is vulnerable to natural hazards. The plan also contains information about proposed capital improvements identified in the South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization (SJTPO) capital improvement plan. The SJTPO long range plan presents the following goals:

1. Maintain and improve a circulation system that provides for the safe and efficient movement of traffic.
2. Provide an energy-efficient transportation system that minimizes the negative effects of vehicular emissions on air quality.
3. Protect natural and manmade resources from the negative effects of traffic and road improvements.
4. Provide transportation choices for work, recreation and other trips for County residents and visitors.
5. Promote economic development and tourism in the transportation planning process.

The transportation element proposes the following policy recommendations:

- Encourage the creation of a second track on NJ Transit's Atlantic City Line to provide improved freight rail and passenger rail service between Atlantic City and Hammonton and points between Atlantic County and Philadelphia.
- Encourage municipalities in Atlantic County with existing bus stations and/or rail terminals to apply for NJ Transit's Transit Village designation.
- Encourage the development of Transit Villages along the Atlantic City Line.
- Seek feasibility of additional public transit routes and more frequent service in areas of need.
- Continue to partner with Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association on shuttle services and any other technical and marketing support this organization can provide.
- Encourage and promote the usage of Atlantic City International Airport for passengers traveling to and from Philadelphia and the surrounding area.
- Explore possibilities for more frequent and convenient north-south transit connections along the coast.
- Adopt a county-wide Complete Streets Policy to provide safe access for all users by designing and operating a comprehensive, integrated, connected multi-modal network of transportation options.
- Encourage all municipalities in Atlantic County to adopt Complete Streets policies to provide safe access for all users by designing and operating a comprehensive, integrated, connected multi-modal network of transportation options.
- Continue to strengthen policies that create on and off-street pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in line with the County's goal of promoting its natural environment.
- Encourage preservation of active rail facilities, historic rail facilities and other rail facility right-of-way for future rail and/or non-rail use.
- Encourage the preparation of a Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan for Atlantic County.



## Infrastructure

The infrastructure element of the plan contains information and statistics about the County's solid waste management, water supply, and wastewater management.

The Solid Waste section discusses the background and development of the County's Solid Waste Management Plan, which was originally adopted in 1980 and has been updated a number of times, most recently in 2012. The Atlantic County Utilities Authority (ACUA) operates the only active landfill and transfer station in the County, and operates the only Class A recycling facility. There are a number of Class B recycling facilities, compost facilities, and convenience centers distributed throughout the County.

The Wastewater Management section discusses the statutory requirements of the New Jersey Water Quality Planning Act and Section 208 of the Federal Clean Water Act. The County is in compliance with these standards and has a Wastewater Management Plan (WMP) that conforms to NJ DEP's Water Quality Rules. The ACUA City Island Sewage Treatment Plant is the largest such facility in the County and will be undergoing upgrades to enhance resiliency. These include the installation of sumps, the acquisition of portable flood barriers, and the construction of a seawall around low lying portions of the Plant.

The Water Supply section of the plan describes the regional divisions and aquifers from which the County draws its water. There are some long-term concerns about potential salt water intrusion in the coastal area, and declines in the Atlantic City 800-foot Sand Aquifer and Piney Point aquifer have been noted. Finally, this section inventories areas of ground water concern known as Currently Known Extents (CKEs), which are areas where the local ground water has concentrations of contaminants beyond a safe threshold, and Classification Exception Areas (CEAs), which are areas where water quality standards are not met, and where uses such as wells are not permitted without certain safeguards.

## Sustainability and Resiliency

In 2011 and 2012, the back-to-back impacts of Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy exposed the vulnerability of communities throughout the northeast. Since those landmark storms, additional weather events, particularly Winter Storm Jonas in early 2016, have impacted communities in coastal New Jersey. In the wake of these storms, it became apparent that there is a dramatic need to focus planning and investment efforts on resiliency and sustainability measures.

Atlantic County sustained a substantial amount of damage during Sandy, particularly in its barrier island communities. This event, spurred a great deal of investment in planning and developing a more resilient and sustainable vision for the future. Through the development of this plan element, Atlantic County has an opportunity to promote and support the implementation of a variety of actions to boost the resiliency and sustainability of the County.

Resiliency has become a focus of planning as the effects of climate change and the impacts associated with severe weather events have become more costly and profound. In the broadest sense, a resilient community is able to absorb shocks of outside events (such as storms and natural disasters) in a way that accrues minimal impact to its built environment and social fabric.

Sustainability entails making decisions and taking actions in the present that do not negatively impact a community or population's future ability to thrive. Sustainability encompasses a range of environmental, economic, and social factors that contribute to making high quality places to live, work, and invest.

The county is faced with a number of vulnerabilities:

- Flooding, Severe Storm, Wave Action, and Coastal Erosion
- Population and Infrastructure is densely concentrated on Barrier Islands
- There is a high percentage of “second” homes in flood prone areas
- Important community facilities and assets are in hazard areas

The SRPR identified a number of issues that are also included here to show areas of focus for the development of local and County plans.

- Ensuring that officials are knowledgeable and well trained
- Dissemination of public information in an efficient manner
- Accessibility of evacuation routes and location of refuge areas outside hazard areas
- Issues with utility and cell phone service
- Uneven and inconsistent bulkhead locations
- Cost of insurance as a burden to housing affordability
- Outdated or undersized storm water management infrastructure
- Dune construction and property rights debates
- Neighborhood character with elevated homes
- Storm debris removal
- Maintenance of high hazard dams, particularly Lake Lenape Dam.
- Wildfires
- Drought

There are a number of sustainability and resiliency initiatives underway in Atlantic County. The ACUA has taken the lead on many of these measures, and several municipalities are doing a significant amount of work as well. The ACUA upgrades include improvements to the City Island Treatment Plant, upgraded pump stations, and other efforts to improve resiliency. The ACUA has also pursued energy efficiency and renewable energy installations to make its facilities more sustainable. These include the 7.5 megawatt wind farm and solar panel arrays at the City Island Treatment Plant, as well as the landfill gas to electric facility at the ACUA landfill.

The plan recommends a host of strategies that the County can pursue on its own or in partnership with its constituent municipalities or other entities. These strategies seek to make the County a more resilient place in the face of sea level rise, climate change, and increased intensity and frequency of hazardous weather events. The sustainability strategies consider the economic, environmental, and social aspects of planning and development in the County. Lastly, there is an implementation section with suggestions for steps that the County can take to bring the vision of the plan

## Open Space and Recreation Plan

Parks and recreation facilities play an important role in making desirable places to live and visit. Public recreation facilities and open space provide opportunities for exercise, social events, conservation and preservation of important natural resources, and help balance the pressures of growth in developing municipalities. Atlantic County contains over 108,000 acres of publicly owned open space. Approximately 74,765 acres are preserved by the State, 19,400 acres consist of a Federal wildlife refuge, 7,435 acres are owned and managed by the County, and 6,475 acres are preserved by municipal governments. In total, these preserved open spaces account for approximately 27% of the County's total land area.

The last County Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) was adopted in 2000. Since that time, development and demographic trends in the County have changed. The purpose of this OSRP is to consider the current state of the County and to establish a guiding document that Atlantic County can use to continue its mission to provide open space and recreation facilities to meet the needs of its residents.

**At this time, the County faces several challenges. Since the last OSRP, the County's demographics have significantly changed. Not only have the coastal communities experienced a significant decline in their population, but the County's population as a whole is aging. Existing parks should be retrofitted to provide proper amenities for the aging populace. Revenues from the County Open Space tax have declined significantly over the past few years due to the economic downturn. The County is facing a variety of other emerging issues. These include promoting resiliency against future storms and climate change, dealing with challenges associated with the increasingly widespread use of unmanned aerial vehicles (also known as drones), and ensuring that the County's changing population is adequately served by existing facilities.**

State planning documents also play a critical role in the development of Atlantic County. The 2001 State Development and Redevelopment Plan provides a vision for the future that serves to preserve and enhance the quality of life for all residents. The Pinelands Protection Act and the Coastal Area Facilities Review Act govern the County's (and its municipalities') land uses and the intensity of these uses. While these regulatory agencies provide environmental protection of the County's more sensitive environments such as wetlands, streams, and lakes, they do little to protect upland regions prone to development.

A Geographic Service Area Standard for Recreational Facilities is included as a part of this Plan. **The County's park system in conjunction with municipal park systems give most of the County's residents adequate access to open space. Areas lacking facilities in close proximity include most of Egg Harbor City, the north-western portion of Galloway Township, and the south-western half of Weymouth.**

Finally, the Plan includes recommendations and strategies for Open Space and Recreation planning, and an implementation matrix for taking action moving forward.

## Farmland Preservation Plan

In the western portions of the County, the effects of increased residential and commercial development are evident. However, the rural character of this area has remained relatively intact.

Here, Atlantic County's agriculture industry plays an integral role in the local economy as area farms serve a worldwide market.

The Plan provides a comprehensive study of agriculture in Atlantic County, in an effort to explore ways in which to preserve and enhance this important industry. This Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan will explore the history of agriculture in Atlantic County, its role in the area's economy, and how today's actions will ensure its future viability.

This Plan is prepared in accordance with requirements set forth by the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC). Its format is based on the SADC's "Guidelines for Developing County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plans", dated December 14, 2006.