



## **Comments on the Proposed Revision of the Master Plan for the Meadowlands**

### **I. PURPOSE**

Because of its significance to the future development and redevelopment of the Meadowlands, the Meadowlands Regional Chamber of Commerce (“Chamber”) has convened a committee to study the 2004 New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (“NJMC”) Master Plan on behalf of its membership, and review the “state” of the Meadowlands District. This document is a summary of the Chamber's comments and recommendations regarding the Plan and its proposed revisions.

The Chamber appreciates the NJMC’s invitation to participate in the Master Plan review and update and looks forward to continuing cooperation and collaboration, and a productive exchange of ideas.

### **II. VISION**

By their nature, plans should be based on a vision of the future. More than any other policy document, the Plan has the ability to shape the physical Meadowlands. Prepared properly and enforced consistently, the Plan can determine where people will live, work and play. It can dictate the size of the population, how easy – or difficult – it will be for those people to travel to, as well as in and around, the district and the number and nature of the jobs that will be available. The Plan can - and should - also accomplish even more in terms of the region's economy.

To do those things well, however, a plan must start with an image of the Meadowlands not as it is, but rather an image of how it might or should be. As many regional and national factors have changed since the adoption of the last Master Plan in January 2004, the current process represents a unique opportunity for the Meadowlands community to forecast its future and to lay the foundation for major investment and improvement in the years ahead.

The original vision for the District was innovative and unique for its time. This Master Plan reexamination is an opportunity to revisit and revitalize that initial vision. More specifically, that vision expressed balance, assuming the mantle of environmental protection as well as

orderly, comprehensive development of a range of uses. The Master Plan must, once again, clearly and firmly advocate that a balance be established between environmental and economic concerns. The language of the Master Plan sends a message. While no responsible stakeholder would want to abandon the environmental improvements and conservation efforts of recent years, the current recession has reminded us that a reasonable balance that enables and promotes opportunities for physical and economic development, along with jobs creation, is also critical for the region's quality of life. At the outset of our comments, we recognize that a perception is prevalent, i.e., that the Meadowlands is closed to or discourages businesses. This perception is wrong, and, therefore, both the perception and the reality must clearly prove that business can and must be done in the District.

Opportunities abound in the District for economic vitality:

- The new Giants/Jets Stadium
- Xanadu
- The new rail spur and transit station
- An educated, skilled, trained workforce
- Redevelopment opportunities
- A truly unique metropolitan location with access to the nation's largest market area
- A growing and improving transportation network, including access to all Northeast Corridor rail service and 10 NJT rail lines, strong highway connections, and ties to Port Newark and Newark Liberty International Airport; with new opportunities afforded by the ARC project
- An improving natural environment and Hackensack River
- A growing status as a tourist site

These attributes combine to create a destination for entertainment, recreation, ecotourism and business. They have been enhanced in recent years with the investment of nearly \$1 billion in public funds in the construction of the Frank R. Lautenberg Rail Station at Secaucus Junction, Interchange 15X and related circulation improvements along Seaview Drive Extension and New County Road. The newly opened rail spur to the Sports Complex provides another essential link in opening the District to the region and the world. In developing a vision for the future, policy makers and planners can leverage these assets to catapult the Meadowlands into the forefront of environmentally sensitive transit-oriented development and redevelopment, which will, in turn, spawn the jobs creation that will bring the economic energy of this region to a full-throttle roar.

Capitalizing on these opportunities requires that we overcome a number of significant challenges. These challenges are:

- The lack of a full spectrum of housing, that includes workforce and affordable housing, , allowing employees to live in proximity to Meadowlands jobs
- Congestion, and the perception of congestion
- Regulatory inconsistencies, and the difficulties and costs in establishing and expanding businesses and developing properties.
- Difficulties in interagency communication and coordination

### **III. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The 2004 Plan identifies a series of goals as a framework. These are general statements that address environmental preservation, suitable land uses and transportation choices. It is suggested that additional or restated goals should articulate a renewed purpose of balance in the District that more specifically addresses the need for desirable economic development. Examples include the following:

- Maintaining a balance between necessary environmental conservation and the improvement, retention, and attraction of economic development and jobs
- Creating jobs that sustain the economy and enhance the quality of life, yet contribute to the fiscal health of constituent municipalities
- Facilitating the development of work force housing which is reasonably affordable so that residents may live in proximity to opportunities for employment and transportation

More broadly, the integration of economic and environmental systems should be set out as a guiding principle for the Master Plan. The development envisioned and enabled by the Master Plan should be viewed in the context of the Commission's roster of programs that provide municipal assistance, land acquisition and preservation, and pollution control. These environmental improvement efforts are part of the comprehensive balance of regional planning.

Housing, transportation and economic development should be parts of the system view. For example, if one of the objectives within the Plan is to make the area a center for "green" technology jobs, the Plan will need to not only identify where the manufacturing and assembly facilities might be best located, it must also identify where those workers will live and how they will get from their homes to their jobs. It would hardly be appropriate in such a situation for the jobs to be located in places that did not afford the employees the opportunity to reach their jobs in environmentally sensitive or affordable ways.

The Master Plan should recognize this system view and advocate a pattern of uses that is internally consistent. The residential sector of Meadowlands should be planned to provide housing primarily for those who will work in the Meadowlands, but just as importantly, for those who work in the region accessed by mass transportation. The retail, entertainment and recreation uses should be planned to strongly appeal to those who live here and/or work here. Plans should provide for the highest densities in areas that have the greatest access to transportation facilities capable of supporting that density.

## **IV. SYSTEMS PLANS**

### **A. Economic Development**

This System dominates the Chamber's concerns. The Economic Development System Strategies in the current Master Plan focus on the following: (1) Cultivating a unique sense of place, (2) Realizing the opportunities of brownfield and grayfield sites, (3) Strengthening economic partnerships with other entities to encourage a variety of uses, (4) Promoting innovative technology, and (5) Continuing to make the development review process more efficient, effective and predictable.

These are all worthy strategies. However, in order to achieve the goal of a diverse economic base, the Commission must combat the perception, and the reality, that the regulatory system governing development here is costly, complicated, and provides limited opportunities for growth and expansion. A major concern expressed by members of the Chamber's Economic Roundtable, now called the Meadowlands 2040 Council, was a burdensome, multi-agency review process with multiple fees. While all of these concerns cannot be left at NJMC's door, there must be a recognition of the problem and how investment in this part of New Jersey is perceived. Strategies that should be added to this System Plan include:

- Further one-stop permitting by pursuing technical as well as administrative review of NJDEP permits by the NMJC
- Carefully review economic impacts of proposed regulatory controls
- Facilitate the maintenance and upgrading of the distribution sector in the District
- Facilitate the development of infill and economically significant sites by creative and flexible wetland mitigation strategies
- Establish mitigation banking that serves the private development as well as public sector, recognizing varying qualities of wetlands in the region
- Identify incentives that have nurtured successful and desirable development in our region, such as in Manhattan or Jersey City.
- Analyze the use of zoning controls and incentives that will optimize and attract development in areas targeted as desirable nodes or clusters of activity – align zoning policies and development objectives
- Pursue development of eco-tourism as a valuable economic development tool

### **B. Transportation**

Overall, the strategies must build a reasonable level of predictability or certainty, and at the same time encourage entrepreneurship and innovation. The existing Transportation strategies focus on coordination of planning efforts, strengthening land use – transportation connections, and encouraging the use of mass transit, among others. The following are possible additions or articulations to those set of strategies:

- Create a comprehensive study of the region's transportation networks, identifying existing and missing links important to enhance the appropriate level of connectivity

among land uses within the Meadowlands. The strategy must also address transportation needs from outside the region and into the region

- Continue to identify and support shuttle routes to connect missing links
- Develop a plan to protect existing, inactive or underutilized rights of way for future use and explore future utilization
- Work with NJDOT and New Jersey Transit to identify and support Park and Ride locations that have the greatest benefit for Meadowlands residents and employees
- Coordinate land use and transportation objectives in zoning regulations, by encouraging densities and appropriate uses at transit and highway interchange hubs
- In coordination with NJDOT the Port Authority and New Jersey Transit, plan for the impact of the ARC project on the capacity of transit stations and their surrounding land uses
- Explore how NJMC and other organizations, such as the Chamber, can work together to take advantage of state incentives for transit-centered economic development

### **C. Housing**

While housing concerns may appear to be secondary to the Chamber's economic development focus, our organization has long recognized the interrelationship between the ability to retain and attract investment and the availability of housing for that accompanying workforce. The ability to fill jobs in the District will be tied directly to the supply of affordable and workforce housing choices. Most municipalities are opposed to significant housing for fear of additional burdens on community services and school systems. However, the ability to grow population and accommodate families will maintain community vitality, as well as support for local business districts. A regional approach to providing affordable and work force housing is not only necessary, but essential.

The Housing System strategies acknowledge the need to spur the production of affordable housing. The strategies need further refinement in light of court decisions and COAH actions in recent years. In addition, some areas of the District are evolving and should be examined, and re-examined, in the context of the zoning regulations so as to identify new residential and mixed-use opportunities.

- Build on current efforts to identify sites for new affordable and market housing opportunities in proximity to jobs and transportation
- Review the housing densities in the zoning regulations for economic incentives to provide needed housing
- Explore incentives and cost-reduction measures with respect to hard or soft costs to encourage private development of affordable housing, such as reduced fees, property acquisition assistance, flexibility in wetlands use and mitigation, or similar measures

## **V. AREA PLANS**

At the time of the last Master Plan update we were living in an entirely different world. Not only has the economy of the world changed, but the focus on the parts of quality of life has

changed. The focus in 2004 was on wetland preservation, with the anticipated economic development coming from a few locations: primarily Encap (Resort Recreation Community in the existing Master Plan), the Sports Authority (Xanadu), to a lesser extent from the Paterson Plank Road and Transit Village redevelopments. The projections for development and jobs made at that time will have to be adjusted. The failure and collapse of Encap represents a major void that will now have to be re-planned.

Additionally, the Encap experience is also a caution about putting too many economic eggs in one basket. The Master Plan process should examine how economic development may be spread more widely around the district at a variety of scales. There are large-scale investments, but there are also many smaller-scale potential economic development projects that could - and should - be facilitated.

The following are recommendations regarding the Area Plans:

- Identify goals for the various portions of the former Encap site. Redevelopment should incorporate a diversity of economic development that will capitalize on the locational advantages of the Meadowlands District as outlined above.
- Undertake a planning effort focusing on enhancing the Teterboro Airport area as an economic development hub.
- Reexamine the Employment Centers identified in the current Land Use Plan to identify where mixed use would be desirable. In particular, the Employment Center at the junction of Routes 3 and 17 is evolving, as the Avalon residential project has proved successful, and Bergen Community College is establishing its southern branch. This indicates a move away from the historic single-use office function of this area toward more contemporary mixed uses and a potential role for retail and residential. The zoning regulations should expand permitted uses to encourage this transition, through an overlay zone or new a zone district designation.
- Distribution uses have long been the backbone of the District's economic development. The Plan should explore policies that encourage the modernization and accessibility of older distribution areas.
- The Waterfront Development Area Plan should capitalize on burgeoning ecotourism and provide opportunities for waterfront access and appropriate commercial and residential development.
- Articulate goals and planning processes for the former Allied Junction site incorporating densities and mixed uses suitable for a mass transit center

## **VI. PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

In order to judge its effectiveness, there must be a clear understanding of the quantifiable objectives that the Plan intends to accomplish, and measures for evaluating the performance of the Master Plan over time. Our comments here focus on the economic development aspects of the Plan. The 2006 Action Plan provided a framework for tracking certain measures of performance. These should first be reviewed and a summary presented of accomplishments since the 2004 benchmarks. The benchmarks themselves should also be

evaluated. With respect to economic development, many of these measures dealt with marketing the region and collaborating with NJEDA and other entities to promote jobs. While these are worthwhile endeavors, they can be obstructed by the negative perceptions affecting the District as a place to do business. Performance measures should go further to address what actually happens in the District, such as:

- Businesses created
- New jobs created, retained and lost
- Building areas created or eliminated
- Development applications processed
- Housing units and affordable housing units developed
- Costs for development applications and construction

The Master Plan could go as far as identifying quantified goals for these factors, as well as for environmental aspects, such as acres preserved, enhanced or opened for public use. Overall, however, the planning must provide enough flexibility, as well as certainty of development, to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation.

## **VII. IMPLEMENTATION**

In addition to revising the Plan to incorporate the principles outlined above, the Meadowlands Commission should also consider how to best maximize the potential of the Plan becoming reality. While there are a myriad of individual actions that the Commission should take to accomplish this, there several basic ideas that seem most important.

### **A. Renew the Regional Focus**

NJMC was created in order to overcome the difficulties of seeking consensus among a disparate set of communities and officials. While respecting the concerns of those already within the region, the Plan needs to rise above parochial issues and propose that which will be best for the district and the state. This will be critical to achieve goals in economic development as well as affordable housing.

In order to maintain a regional perspective, it may be necessary to address the composition and operation of the NJMC to assure that the Commission reclaim its mission as a regional planning entity with broader goals than any one municipality, and develop of tools and tax structures that allow the impacts and benefits of sound land use decisions to be equitably distributed among all those affected.

The regional authority of the NJMC should be recognized by the NJDEP to authorize the Commission to provide “one-stop shopping” for the permits and approvals necessary to implement the Plan. This should go beyond the administrative review powers recently delegated to the NJMC by the NJDEP to include technical review. The Chamber will support the Commission in this regard and actively advocate for this delegation of authority.

## **B. Utilize NJMC and Other State Property in Accordance with the Plan:**

The state of New Jersey and its related agencies (NJMC, NJT, NJSEA, etc.) control substantial amounts of real estate. That property should be designated for uses that are consistent with the Plan. The NJMC and its professional staff should work in partnership and collaboration with the NJSEA in planning for the future of the Sports Complex sites.

## **C. Adopt Incentives for Compliance**

If the NJMC wants to facilitate the conversion of the Plan into reality, it should configure its policies to provide incentives for actions consistent with the Plan. For example, incentives can be provided through zoning, by expansion of permitted uses or density in areas where nodes of activity are envisioned by the Plan.

The Chamber has found that business attraction has been impeded by the perception, and perhaps the reality, that the review process is cumbersome and expensive. Key concerns expressed by the business community include:

- Predictability
- Fees
- Approval time

It must be recognized that there are significant costs involved in implementing development projects in the Meadowlands. The New York metropolitan area is a costly region for business compared to other States. The proliferation of fees exacerbates the situation and has begun to discourage investment, particularly in current economic circumstances. While the goals of fees related to the Transportation Planning District and, as proposed earlier, the provision of Affordable Housing are laudable, the fees cannot be so excessive as to discourage the development required to make the Master Plan a reality. The TPD formula should be reviewed so that it produces fees that are in scale with the projects charged.

An important objective in the 2006 Comprehensive Action Plan is to “Improve the business environment in the District”. One of the strategies in support of that objective is to “Continue to make the District’s development review process more efficient”. It is suggested that the NJMC examine how that has been accomplished in terms of application review and results. The Chamber is eager to work with the NJMC to address this issue.

#### **D. Find Innovative Solutions to Environmental Issues**

While no one supports a return to the days of unregulated destruction of our environment, in a densely populated place like New Jersey, we need to find creative ways that balance environmental concerns with the economic needs of the region.

- The plan should facilitate the ability for property owners to develop, particularly in existing subdivisions or infill areas, even though some wetlands may be involved, beyond the current limitations.
- Consider creation of a new Mitigation Land Bank that could be used to facilitate the development of key parcels, while expanding the amount of high quality wetlands in the region. Such a mitigation bank should go beyond the provision of mitigation credits to public transportation entities, to provide, as well, credits for private development in appropriate locations, recognizing the significance of economic development and affordable housing in fulfilling the Master Plan. The availability of such a Bank could also relieve hardship on smaller property owners in the District who are more vulnerable to costs and regulatory complexities. Further, where wetland areas are environmentally compromised to the extent that mitigation uses are not supported by the relevant environmental agencies, the NJMC should work with those agencies to open the door to development opportunities.
- Reexamine the concept of balance between environmental and economic interests, and recognize that not all wetlands areas possess the same value. There can be trade-offs of development and mitigation that provide a benefit for both aspects. For this to be effective, the NJMC must resist external pressures that decry mitigation as useless. There are successful examples in the District. The NJMC must take the lead with other agencies in advocating for a balanced view of mitigation.
- Explore the feasibility of a program for the transfer of density rights (development) from marginal locations or wetlands to priority sites, creating incentives for efficient, high density building designs.
- Consider zoning changes that would grant density bonuses in exchange for various on-site and off-site environmental features, such as LEED Certification, energy efficiency, water conservation, promotion of transit use and the like.