

## **NJ SPOTLIGHT**

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# **A Grownup's Christmas Wishlist for New Jersey (from a land-use perspective)**

**By Chris Sturm**

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The turkey leftovers are gone and all of a sudden the winter holidays are upon us. I'm making my lists of gifts for family and friends, but as I thought about what I might like to see under the tree for myself, I decided to make a different kind of list – a list of gifts for everyone in the state of New Jersey. This list doesn't rely on Santa Claus or his elves, but rather can be provided by the good folks under the capitol dome in Trenton. With some help from my colleagues at New Jersey Future, I offer a wish list of presents I'd like to see our state government give the Garden State – things that would enhance our communities and make the season bright this year, and for years to come.

1. **Adequate funding for our roads, bridges and transit systems.** It's hard to get to work on time when the transportation system is crumbling, unreliable, unsafe, and inadequate. Unfortunately, starting next summer the state will have no money – zero – for maintenance and upgrades. It's time for the governor and the Legislature to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund, to keep our transportation system (and the economy which depends upon it) humming and to strengthen the state's deteriorated credit rating by avoiding an over-reliance on debt that our kids and grandkids can ill afford to repay.
2. **Homes that are affordable, near jobs, good schools and transit.** Recent events in the news remind us that racism and racial tension continue to threaten our society. New Jersey is blessed with a diverse population, but we have one of the most segregated school systems in the country. Municipal residential zoning policies help keep it this way, through such restrictions as allowing for only single-family homes on large lots and making it difficult for market-rate housing developments to include more affordable options. This racial and economic segregation is bad for business in the Garden State and threatens our economic recovery. Meanwhile, the governor's office has aggressively opposed the state program intended to ensure the production of homes that are affordable in all New Jersey communities. New Jersey needs the governor to provide an honest affordable-housing policy that complies with the mandates of the State Supreme Court's Mount Laurel decisions.
3. **An updated Statewide Water Supply Plan.** In a 2011 poll, residents ranked protection of the state's water supply as their most important concern, ahead

of even job creation and property-tax reduction. Back in 1996, New Jersey adopted a Statewide Water Supply Plan that studied watersheds across the state, identified where supplies were threatened by overuse or inadequate infrastructure, and recommended solutions. Since then, the Department of Environmental Protection has updated the plan, but it has not been released, and may now be out of date. We'd like to see it!

4. **A new tunnel under the Hudson River.** More than ever, New Jersey needs to be well connected to New York City, a global economic powerhouse. But Amtrak tells us that the two existing cross-Hudson tunnels are so old that they will need to be shut within the next 20 years. The proposed ARC Tunnel would have remedied this situation, but Gov. Christie killed the project in 2010. Now we are waiting for a replacement plan (the proposed Amtrak Gateway tunnel seems to be the furthest along). New Jersey leaders need to work with their counterparts in New York City and in Washington, D.C., to figure out how to finance and build this critical project expeditiously.
5. **Protection from future storms and sea-level rise.** Hurricane Sandy was a frightening wake-up call. We learned that it's cold and dark when the power goes out and that many coastal areas are damage-prone. They've flooded repeatedly and, as sea levels rise, that flooding will occur more frequently. The protections we are putting in place today – sand dunes, sea walls, and home elevations – will buy us some time, but we are fooling ourselves if we think they are permanent solutions. We need the state of New Jersey to adopt official projections of sea-level rise, and then provide municipalities with tools to identify risky areas and adopt model laws to help with fortification and retreat.
6. **A shiny new State Development and Redevelopment Plan.** New Jersey's State Plan has provided a blueprint for the state's economic development, steering growth into cities and towns and away from farms and forests. The plan works by providing a vision that municipalities can implement, and by guiding state capital investments. This past year, the plan helped direct more than \$1.1 billion in state economic incentives to smart-growth locations and away from undeveloped lands. But it was last updated in 2001, and it is woefully out of date. The Christie administration rejected an update crafted during the Corzine administration and came up with its own version, the State Strategic Plan, which it was poised to adopt in December 2012. That update was postponed in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. New Jersey is still waiting.

While we don't want to be greedy, there are more issues that the state could address proactively in 2015 so they don't have to be on next year's Christmas list. These include working with cities and towns to address their antiquated and inefficient water infrastructure; encouraging towns to provide more opportunities for residents to live in active, walkable places as they age; and supporting towns and cities as they work to accommodate growth and build lively places by redeveloping their main streets and downtowns.

New Jersey residents have stood up to hurricanes, floods, terrorism, delayed trains, concentrated poverty, and a long and deep recession that has kept many unemployed or underemployed. We deserve some pleasant surprises from our elected leaders during this holiday season – gifts that will help ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for all.