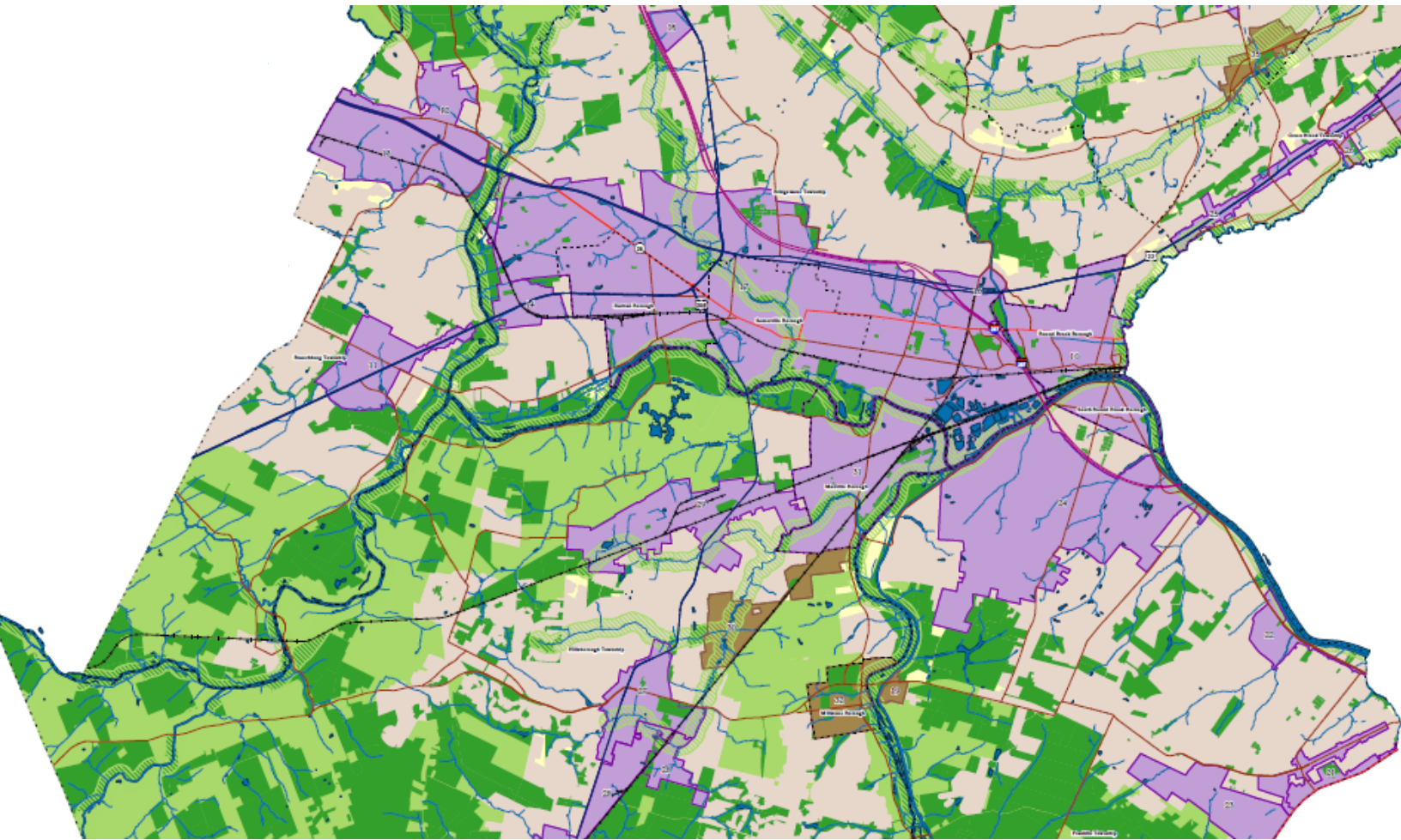


SOMERSET COUNTY MAP TO DRIVE GROWTH AND PRESERVATION INVESTMENTS

Pilots State Strategic Plan Investment Criteria



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for
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Planning in New Jersey is mainly a local exercise, with most development decisions being made at the municipal level. The state can influence planning and growth, though, most notably through its “purse strings” and regulations governing land use and development. For example, the state has some discretion over spending on infrastructure, land preservation and economic development incentives that it can direct to certain locations.

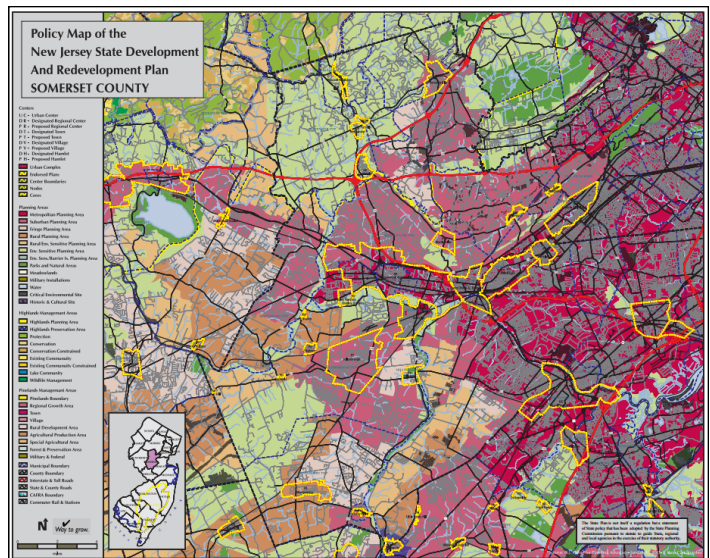
In 2012, the state proposed to align its investments to the goals and priorities outlined in the State Strategic Plan (once that plan is adopted) using a new approach. Rather than including a map to designate areas for growth and preservation, as in previous state plans, the State Strategic Plan proposes a “criteria system” to identify these locations more dynamically. This alternative to a traditional State Plan map has generated both great interest and grave concern, given its novelty and uncertainty about how it will work.

In the meantime, the Somerset County Planning Board has worked behind the scenes to test the criteria system within their borders. The resulting “Somerset County Investment Framework” – a locally supported map with areas for growth and preservation - demonstrates that the system can work, if refined properly. It provides important insight into how state guidelines should be finalized. Going forward, the map and its framework are useful tools that Somerset County will apply to advance its own economic development and planning initiatives, and the outcomes of those efforts can advise other jurisdictions interested in refining state plan areas for growth and preservation.

State Strategic Plan proposes to guide growth through state investments

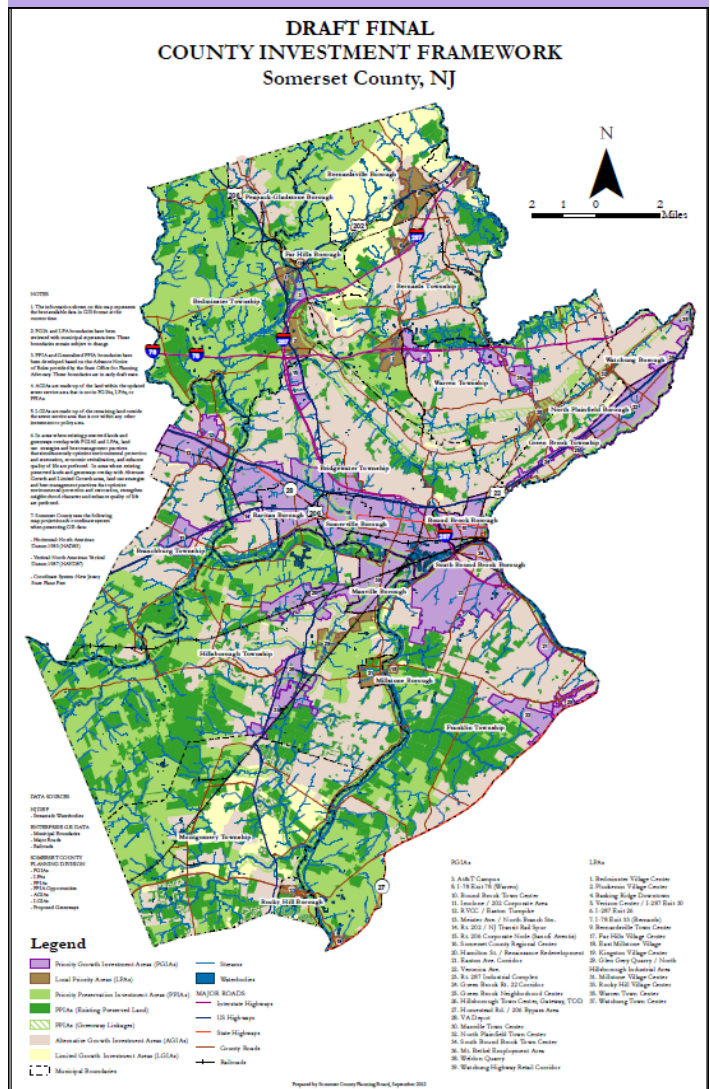
Somerset County’s Investment Framework derives from the [2012 State Strategic Plan](#) (the Plan), which has been proposed¹ as New Jersey’s revised State Development and Redevelopment Plan, required under the 1985 State Planning Act. The Plan is intended to guide future growth by balancing development and conservation objectives. It establishes “Garden State Values” and mapping criteria to drive future discretionary state-level spending and regulations. The Garden State Values describe the types of growth that the state wishes to

¹ Adoption was postponed in November of 2012 in order to consider how the Plan might address the impacts of Hurricane Sandy.



Somerset County Map OLD (above) & NEW (below)

In the complex 2001 State Plan Policy Map, Somerset County is divided into seven different planning areas, plus several different environmental areas and designated center boundaries. The new County Investment Framework Map simplifies these planning areas into five different investment areas, to help coordinate and guide future growth.



promote and echo many smart-growth values, such as concentrating development and redevelopment in areas with existing infrastructure, promoting mixed-use development, providing greater transportation choices near jobs and housing, diversifying housing opportunities, protecting and enhancing the environment to provide for healthy communities, and creating high-quality, livable places.

The [State Planning Act](#) includes a requirement to “identify areas for growth, limited growth, agriculture, open space conservation, and other appropriate designations.” Instead of a static [State Plan Policy Map](#), the proposed 2012 State Strategic Plan offers criteria-based identification of areas for investment.

The Plan creates four designations for different kinds of investment areas; all land in the state will eventually be designated as one of these four types of investment areas by counties, regional entities, or municipalities and these designations will be approved by the State Planning Commission. The [State Planning Rules](#) will be amended² to establish criteria and a process for identifying these areas:

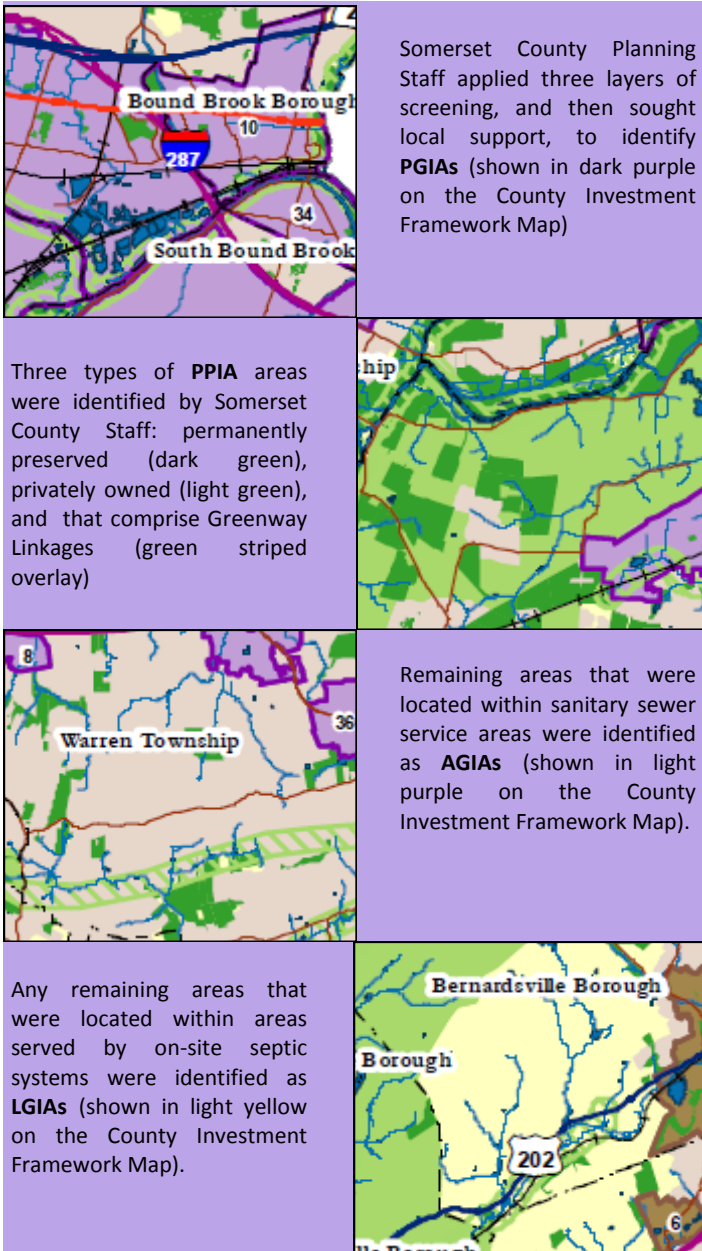
- **Priority Growth Investment Areas (PGIA)** – “An area where more significant development and redevelopment is preferred and where public and private investment to support such development and redevelopment will be prioritized.”
- **Priority Preservation Investment Areas (PPIA)** – “An area where land preservation, agricultural development and retention, historic preservation, environmental protection and stewardship is preferred and where investment to support land preservation, agricultural development and retention, historic preservation, environmental protection and stewardship is encouraged.”
- **Alternate Growth Investment Areas (AGIA)** – “An area that has existing or planned infrastructure that will lead to development and redevelopment opportunities. State investments related to the efficient development and redevelopment of previously developed sites and optimization of existing settlement patterns should be encouraged but as a lesser priority than PGIA’s.”

² The Draft State Strategic Plan [Advance Notice Rules \(ANR\): Priority Investment Area Criteria](#) already takes a stab at this. The ANR includes new definitions, revised definitions, and conditions for the designation by a “regional entity” of additional land.

- **Limited Growth Investment Areas (LGIA)** – “An area that does not have existing or planned infrastructure that will lead to a significant degree of additional new development, development and redevelopment opportunities. Large scale investments that may lead to additional development should not be prioritized in these areas.”

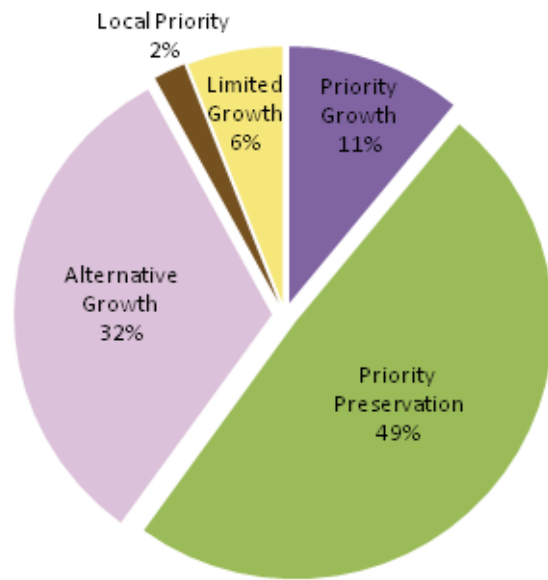
AGIA and LGIA designations are essentially “default” categories. AGIAs and LGIAs comprise lands not included in PGIA’s or PPIA’s, are located within sewer service areas or served by on-site septic respectively, and are predominantly residential in nature.

This new criteria-based system for identifying growth and preservation areas is intended to provide the framework within which state, county and local governments coordinate regulations, plans, programs,



Investment Areas

Percentage of Somerset County Lands



and public investments. However, it begs the questions:

How will the process of identifying and designating these investment areas work? What will be the roles of counties and local governments in the process? Will there be a map that can be used for planning purposes?

Somerset County identifies investment areas with new model

Somerset County presents a model for the application of the Plan's criteria-based approach to identifying investment areas. In 2009 Somerset County began the process of updating its [County Strategic Plan](#). Through that work and in coordination with the state Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA) it developed the [Somerset County Investment Framework](#) (the framework). The framework refers to both the County Investment Framework map and the formal process (data collection, asset mapping, and stakeholder feedback) used to create it. The Somerset County Investment Framework has received significant support from the county's municipalities throughout the process, and is nearing completion.

Beyond meeting the requirements of the State Strategic Plan, the County Investment Framework will be used by the county to provide geographic guidelines for the Somerset County Business Partnership's [Comprehensive](#)

[Economic Development Strategy](#) (CEDS) for Somerset County; as the geographic screening tool for the [Somerset County pilot development projects](#) associated with the [Together North Jersey](#) HUD-funded Regional Plan for Sustainable Development for the North Jersey region; and as a basis for selecting six sites for which access and mobility assessments will be provided as part of the county's 2012-2013 North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) [Technical Study](#); as well as for other county planning and economic development efforts.

Somerset County's stakeholder-driven process delivers local support

The [Somerset County Investment Framework](#) builds on the core criteria presented in the State Strategic Plan for the four designated investment area types. In addition Somerset County developed "essential" and "supplemental" criteria for identifying additional PGIAs and PPIAs. These [criteria were developed](#) by the county planning staff with [feedback](#) from the county's municipal officials and planners, OPA officials, and representatives from various stakeholder groups. The asset maps were subject to multiple rounds of comment by municipal officials, planners, and stakeholder groups at various meetings, including several meetings where representatives from north, central, and south Somerset County municipalities met to present feedback using a slightly more regional focus.

Based on this feedback, a [County Investment Framework map](#) was created by compiling all the asset maps. The map has:

- **24 Priority Growth Investment Areas** totaling 22,595 acres and comprising **11% of the county**
- **Priority Preservation Investment Areas** totaling 94,757 acres across three sub-categories and **49% of the county**
- **Alternate Growth Investment Areas³** totaling 61,479 acres and **32% of the county**
- **15 Local Priority Areas (LPAs)** totaling 3,687 acres and comprising **2% of the county**
- **Limited Growth Investment Areas⁴** totaling 12,606 acres and comprising **6% of the county**

³ AGIAs are neither PGIAs nor PPIAs, are located within Sanitary Sewer Service areas, and predominantly comprise existing residential neighborhoods.

⁴ LGIAs are within areas designated to be served by individual on-site septic systems, and predominantly comprise existing low-density residential neighborhoods.

Somerset adds detail to reflect local priorities

Through the County Investment Framework [process](#) Somerset County found that the four investment area designations provided in the State Strategic Plan did not always meet the needs of the county. To reflect more accurately the character of its communities Somerset County developed several sub-designations, including Local Priority Areas and several subcategories of Priority Preservation Investment Areas.

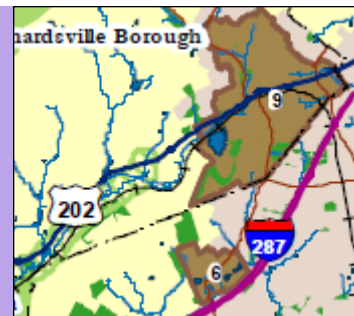
Local Priority Areas (LPAs) are a sub-designation of Alternate Growth Investment Areas. Officials felt that the designation of a number of small historic and traditional villages and towns and other business centers in the county as Priority Growth Investment Areas was inconsistent with municipal planning priorities in these areas. The PGIA designation prioritizes private and public investment for *significant* development and redevelopment, which often conflicts with the community's vision for maintaining a vibrant, but locally focused downtown. For these areas, which could support some level of investment, Somerset County has created the Local Priority Area (LPA) designation, which is "intended to attract and retain businesses that primarily serve the local community, and are places where the protection of community character and quality of life are high priorities."

For example, downtown Bernardsville Borough is a State Planning Commission-approved "center," a core PGIA criterion, and thus automatically a designated PGIA. Through Somerset County's process, downtown Bernardsville has instead been designated a Local Priority Area, which prioritizes public and private investments more than other alternate growth investment areas but not as the same level as PGIAs.

There are **three types of Priority Preservation Investment Areas** shown on the county Investment Framework map. Already permanently preserved PPIAs are noted, and distinguished from PPIAs that are privately owned and have the potential for permanent preservation, and where voluntary environmental stewardship best practices are encouraged. Also noted on an overlay are PPIAs that comprise greenway linkages. These are located along major streams and ridgelines where the implementation of the county's Greenway Plan is actively being pursued through acquisition, waterfront restoration, trail development and other strategies.

The distinction among the different types of PPIAs will

Not all areas eligible for PGIA designation were supported at the local level. Somerset County developed an alternative designation for these areas: **LGAs** (shown in brown on the County Investment Framework Map).



help guide the county and its municipalities on the type and level of investment that should be pursued for each preservation area.

County effort offers lessons for implementation elsewhere

The process of creating the Somerset County Investment Framework provides some valuable guidance to the upcoming amendments to the State Planning Rules and to other counties that may be considering a county investment framework of their own.

- **Leverage resources.** While the prospect of creating criteria and compiling data sets to create GIS maps may seem daunting, many communities may be surprised at what resources they already have at their fingertips, including:
 - **GIS Data:** The parcel-based zoning data necessary for the required county wastewater management plan⁵ was a valuable tool in Somerset County's efforts. Many of the other data sets the county used came from other projects or departments.
 - **Staff and Interns:** Somerset County made its County Investment Framework a priority. Its current efforts are the result of two years' work by two staff members who devoted approximately half of one person's time and an eighth of the other's; along with an intern with GIS skills who worked three days a week.
- **Fit the criteria to local needs.** Counties must design their supplemental criteria with care so that they reflect the character of their communities. Criteria that work in Somerset County may not work in Ocean County. For, example, criteria should recognize different types of growth, some of which

⁵ Required as part of the Water Quality Management Planning Rule (N.J.A.C. 7:15)

don't require the major investment that is a defining feature of PGIA's. The core criteria that are presented in the State Strategic Plan offer a good starting point, but there must be a process to allow communities to opt out of or into certain designations in order to reflect more appropriately their local goals and current land use patterns.

- **Ensure the process is bottom-up and transparent.** Somerset County recognized the importance of working with its municipalities throughout the process. Municipal officials and planners provided invaluable insight into the character of their communities, and were tapped at every stage of the process to provide feedback. This constant communication meant the process was as transparent as possible and created essential buy-in from the municipalities.
- **Integrate with other planning efforts.** Somerset County found it important to view its efforts not exclusively as an outgrowth of the State Strategic Plan but as a tool that could be used in a wide variety of its other planning efforts, such as the [Somerset County Business Partnership's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy](#). The data sets used to create the asset maps are also useful in the day-to-day work of the planning office, and the investment framework map is intended to be used as a basis for future economic development implementation efforts.
- **Develop a process for re-examination and amendment.** The County Investment Framework map is intended to be a living document, able to be updated as conditions in the county change. It is very important for counties to develop a process for future re-examination and amendment of their investment maps. Somerset County intends to have a review of the map with its municipalities annually to address changes in local conditions, and also has in place a process for municipalities to request changes to the map at any time.
- **Keep data up to date.** Somerset County has made a commitment to maintaining its GIS data sets as part of its ongoing work. County officials feel that maintaining the data through yearly updates will cost less in the long run than creating new data sets every few years when they are required for other planning efforts. The county also plans to make its data sets downloadable in order to enhance local planning efforts further.

Investment framework helps Somerset focus economic development projects

Somerset County is proceeding with a last few tweaks to their County Investment Framework map and hopes to adopt the County Strategic Plan shortly, regardless of the status of the State Strategic Plan. In the meantime, Somerset County is working with the Office of Planning Advocacy to adopt some "interim designations" for the lag time between the adoption of the County Strategic Plan (and the county investment map) and the amendment of the State Planning Rules following the adoption of the Plan. The interim designations should allow for quick acceptance of the county's investment area designations following the adoption of the Plan, and place Somerset County in a strategic position to take advantage of any new state investments for growth areas.

With what it considers the "easier" mile-high overview part of the process almost complete, the Somerset County Planning Office is ready to begin the next phase: promoting economic growth in the identified PGIA's, starting with an assessment of each area's assets, conditions, and capacity. This will help the county take action to make each PGIA more competitive economically.

The creation of the County Investment Framework map and the beginning of the next phase of assessing each PGIA complement and support other planning and economic development efforts taking place in Somerset County. The Somerset County Business Partnership's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is engaging the public and private sectors to produce a set of economic strategies and to identify projects of regional significance that will foster job creation and private-sector economic investment. As part of the CEDS, the framework will help direct economic development investments to the appropriate locations.

The framework will also:

- Serve as a geographic screening tool for locating Together North Jersey's pilot development projects in Somerset County and the county's federally funded transportation studies;
- Function as a reference for updating wastewater management plans and the locations for sewer service;

¹ Adoption was postponed in November of 2012 in order to consider how the Plan might address the impacts of Hurricane Sandy.

- Guide the development of the county's [capital transportation improvement program](#) to link land use and transportation decisions;
- Coordinate the re-examination and updating of other county plans such as the Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan and Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan, to target preservation funding;
- Inform the siting of affordable housing and special-needs group homes.
- As a regional map, the framework represents a shared vision of the county, and helps communities work together to increase economic opportunities and preserve valuable natural resources. Continued maintenance of the County Investment Framework map will allow it to serve as a planning resource for the municipalities of Somerset County.

Somerset County's successful efforts to create a locally supported Investment Framework, that incorporates the State Plan's criteria-based approach, demonstrates that the system works, and provides important insight into how state guidelines should be finalized.

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