

HARRISON TOWNSHIP

MASTER PLAN

COMMUNITY DESIGN ELEMENT

PUBLIC HEARING: JUNE 18, 1998

COMMUNITY DESIGN ELEMENT

A community's Quality of Life is defined by the appearance of its neighborhoods, commercial areas, and industrial districts. It is also shaped by its natural features and landscapes. One of Harrison Township's strongest visual images is its open fields, woodlands, and gently rolling landscape. The open and rural nature of the township is a legacy of its agricultural heritage of farms, fields, and orchards. Open spaces face the greatest pressure from future development because these flat and cleared areas are relatively easier to build upon. These farm fields, especially those around Richwood and west of Mullica Hill, are also situated next to major interstate highways where development pressure is the greatest.

Many towns have preserved and enhanced their local character by: restoring their historic landmarks; rehabilitating their historic districts; revitalizing the visual appearance of their downtowns and main streets; improving landscaping, lighting, and signage throughout their town; and upgrading their parks and recreational areas. Harrison Township is regionally recognized for its efforts in preserving its rural heritage in the midst of suburban sprawl. Much of this success is due to the historic downtown image of Main Street in Mullica Hill. However, sound planning and land use controls outside the Mullica Hill Historic District are just as critical to the achievement of this goal in other parts of the Township.

Community character is a key ingredient in the quality of life of towns. It is also critical to the social and economic vitality of a municipality. The purpose of this element of the Mater Plan is to:

- identify those elements of the natural and built environment that give Harrison Township its special identity;
- identify measures taken by the Township to protect its community identity;
- indicate the community design issues that may need to be addressed in the future;
- recommend actions the Township can take to resolve those concerns.

Community Design Goals and Objectives

Goal: Preserve and enhance the traditional design and small town quality of life in Harrison Township by ensuring that proposed development is compatible with those landscapes, architectural elements, and patterns of development that give the Township its unique rural character.

Objectives:

1. Encourage appropriate and complimentary development patterns throughout the Township.
 2. Support historic preservation review programs in the Historic District of Mullica Hill and promote public awareness of the Township's other historic resources and traditional landscapes.
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3. Encourage variety in the type and design of buildings and landscapes through the use of compatible building materials, building design, and vegetation.
4. Promote the creation of pedestrian-scaled development in residential and non-residential development and the preservation and enhancement of natural areas.

Synopsis of 1989 Master Plan Community Design Issues

The 1989 Master Plan included several quality of life and development goals for the Township. One of the listed goals was the preservation and enhancement of the community image and visual character. The plan noted that the Township had an “opportunity to build upon the historic character of its visually attractive historic village areas and to mold a landscape virtually unspoiled by typical suburban development.” In essence, the plan recognized that Harrison is a unique community on the edge of suburbanization and that preservation of that rural quality of life was a critical issue for the Township.

The plan included five specific objectives relating to community image and attractiveness:

1. Developing landscaped entrances (gateways) to the Township along principal roadways;
2. Requiring underground utilities and encouraging removal of existing unsightly above-ground utility poles;
3. Promoting attractiveness in new residential neighborhoods, maintaining existing neighborhoods, and adopting a street tree planting program;
4. Adopting sign regulations to prevent clutter in the commercial areas and to increase the visual quality of village centers; and
5. Encouraging new development in existing villages to be compatible to the style and scale of buildings.

More information about the last of these five objectives was included in the Master Plan’s Historic Preservation element. This element provided background information on the history of the Township and its village centers, and prescribed a series of recommendations to encourage the private sector preservation of historic resources. The recommendations included identifying historic resources, educating the general public about their value to the community, and regulating changes to the architectural character of certain building in established historic districts.

Developments Since the 1989 Master Plan

Even though the 1989 Master Plan did not indicate specific action steps for the bulk of the community design issues, the Township undertook substantial efforts in order to address these

issues. Harrison Township's major response to the 1989 plan was the adoption of a local historic district for the Mullica Hill area. This area, which was later listed on the state and national register of historic places, has made a remarkable turn-around and re-invigorated the "main street" character and identity for the Township. A historic preservation commission was also created to review exterior changes and improvements to property in the district in order to maintain and enhance the historic character.

In addition to the Township's historic preservation initiatives, Harrison also adopted screening and landscaping provisions for non-residential and non-agricultural uses, as well as right to farm standards in order to protect farmers from adverse development impacts. The screening and buffering standards included specifications for tree and shrub planting, berming, and landscaping of parking lots. Property and sidewalk maintenance codes were also adopted by the Township as part of its commitment to improving the image of Harrison Township. The ordinance has also been amended to require the placement of utilities underground. Signage controls were adopted for the Township as part of a revised signage ordinance. Underground utilities are now required for all new developments.

Some planning concerns noted in the 1989 Mater Plan have not yet been fully addressed. These included:

- Enacting community design measures to encourage compatibility of new development outside Mullica Hill with the Township's rural character.

This concern is the chief focus of this Mater Plan element.

Existing Conditions and Recommendations

An identification of the key ingredients or features of a municipality is an important part of the community design process. The various other elements of the 1989 Mater Plan, such as Natural Features, Land Use Plan, Circulation Element, and Historic Preservation Element, provide a wealth of data about the natural and built environment in the Township. This element incorporates the information combined for these other elements as background information and explores the following specific community design issues:

Township Entrances (Gateways)

Quite often travelers through Harrison Township see it as an "in-between" area, only slowing down for traffic in Mullica Hill or the other villages. Residents and business people, whether they lie or work in the town center or elsewhere in the Township, see Harrison Township as their hometown. The image of Harrison Township as a "destination" is important to the community pride and quality of life. One way to accomplish this destination theme is through the use of visual landmarks that remind travelers that they are entering a special place.

The development of a “welcome signage” program at key positions along the main entrances into the Township, i.e. at the Township limits on U.S. 322, NJ 77, and NJ 45 and is now being worked on. Signs identifying the name of the Township with an official logo, motto, or seal should be posted, similar to those that have been placed at the entrances into neighboring municipalities. Other entrance signs for village areas or neighboring developments could re-enforce a sense of place for Mullica Hill, Richwood, and Ewan. Signage should be developed with a combination of seasonal and evergreen landscaping in recognition of the Township’s rural character. Standardized lettering, coloring, and graphic images for these signs is also important.

Utilities

The proliferation of telephone poles, utility lines, and communications antennae in the environment has had a substantial negative effect on the perception of the rural character of the Township. Above ground utility infrastructure should be minimized whenever possible, and the Township’s Land Development regulations have been sufficient amended to provide for the burying of all new utility lines.

Although new developments will be constructed with underground utilities, overhead lines will most likely continue along rural roadways. If they must remain, utility companies should be encouraged to share poles, wherever possible, and to have the lines extending along only one side of the road. Any future improvements to Main Street In Mullica Hill, Richwood or Jefferson should incorporate burying of all infrastructure. Underground utility placement enhances both motor and pedestrian safety by removing potential roadside hazards and increasing the amount of sidewalk areas, which is a serious concern in Mullica Hill.

Another issue that will become an increasing problem in the future is the propagation of cellular radio antennae for mobile telephones, pagers, and other communication devices. The existing technology for these low frequency radios requires that a network of antennae be planted throughout the region with at least one antenna for each “cell” or geographic service area per license provided. The number of antennae in any one particular area is dependent upon the number of customers in an area, the design of the facility, e.g. height, position, etc., and the number of competing providers. The Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 has restricted most municipal land use controls towards these personal communications facilities, i.e. they can no longer be prohibited because they are inherently beneficial uses. Local control, however, can still be exercised towards the design and location of the antennae to ensure that they do not adversely affect the purposes of the master plan and the zoning ordinance. The Township should consider enactment of a special ordinance amendment for cellular towers.

Landscape Design

The Land Development Ordinance currently provides a number of important landscape preservation and enhancement features that should be implemented when new developments are proposed. For example, Section 502.18 requires the preservation of natural features, including trees, brooks, hilltops, and views, while other sections prescribe buffer areas, compensatory plantings, street tree planting and spacing, landscaping in parking lots, and the protection of steep

slopes, floodplains, and farmlands. The Ordinance appears to sufficiently provide for all of the landscape items that are typically required in the development review process.

Residents in rural communities, however, often take their open space for granted and assume the large farmfields, vistas, and woodlands that first attracted them will remain forever. Many municipalities try to encourage protection of open space through large lot zoning. Harrison's current Zoning Plan provides for primarily one acre residential zoning outside sewer service areas and for two acre zoning in the Ewan Village area. This zoning plan minimizes adverse impacts on the aquifer.

Since the Master Plan was adopted, a considerable amount of effort has gone into a downtown streetscape improvement program in Mullica Hill. This included improvement of curbing and sidewalks and landscaping. Additional changes to increase the quality of pedestrian movement in this Main Street area have been recommended in the revised Circulation Plan. The Richwood area is continuing to feel increased pressure for automobile-oriented commercial development. A major change to this village environment was the construction of a convenience store with a large setback, front parking, and drainage basin that were noticeably out of character with the rest of the adjacent development. Additional street tree plantings, buffering, and other landscape design control measures could stem the tide of adverse development in this fragile village. The Township should explore a streetscape improvement plan for Richwood and the adoption of additional standards for the orientation of basins, buildings, and parking that would encourage development to be complimentary to the Township's existing rural character. Due to the lack of development pressures in Ewan, no further recommendations are warranted for that village, other than those orientation standards mentioned for Richwood.

Building Design

Perhaps the greatest progress towards the enhancement of architectural design in Harrison Township has been the implementation of historic district zoning for Mullica Hill, as prescribed in the Historic Preservation Element of the Master Plan. The district, which encompasses much of Main Street in Mullica Hill, requires design review of building alterations and new construction to ensure that improvements within the district maintain the traditional character of the town center. The Historic Preservation Element also indicates that the number of historic and/or architecturally significant buildings in Richwood, Ewan, or Jefferson is not sufficient to warrant the establishment of a historic district with similar controls. The quality of the design of new construction, especially non-residential buildings, however, is as important in these villages and nearby commercial and industrial zones. Without adequate design controls or guidance, new construction in these areas has the potential to mimic the strip stores and big box stores of other suburban communities and erase the hometown character of rural Harrison Township.

The Township's traditional design forms relate to Harrison Township's rural past. In addition to old farmhouses, the landscape is filled with other agricultural building such as tenant houses, barns, stables, silos, cribs, packing houses, and warehouses. The larger buildings in the Township tend to be the churches, barns, and packing houses which are mostly rectangular, simple in design and decoration, and built on a human scale, i.e. about two stores in height. The architectural style

of buildings in Harrison Township ranges from colonial to colonial revival, but most of them are vernacular, i.e. traditional variations of Victorian and 20th century designs. Buildings also tend to be located close to the roads, as opposed to being set back in the fields. Often several individual buildings with similar designs and materials are grouped together to form a small complex of development. All this was done to maximize open spaces for fields, pastures, orchards, or woodlots behind the buildings. Ironically, these are the same issues the Township faces today.

The greatest threat to Harrison Township's rural character in terms of architectural design are in the commercial and industrial districts outside the historic district; particularly in the Richwood Route 55 interchange area, the New Jersey Turnpike interchange area, and along North Main Street and Bridgeton Pike. The Land Development Ordinances currently require the submission of building elevations and architectural details, as well as architectural sketches, but it does not include any criteria in which to evaluate them. In order to minimize the continuing ebbing effects of non-traditional and suburban design in Harrison Township, it is recommended that general architectural design principles be applied to the development review process for non-residential development and for major site plans and subdivision for residential development. These design guidelines, which are similar to the intent of those in the historic district, should not specify any particular style or design. Instead, the guidelines should be crafted to ensure that new construction continues the aesthetic design principles of Harrison Township's rural heritage and small town character.

These standards, which are included in the Appendix, should be applied during the subdivision/site plan review process for non-residential development, as well as for major residential development applications. The proposed evaluation standards provide for buildings designed at a pedestrian (walking) scale and using traditional building materials and forms. They also state that architectural designs and details should be compatible with others found in the Township and that all buildings should be treated with complementary architectural details. Another important consideration is the preservation of open and natural spaces and prominent streetscape and landscape views. Other provisions stress that larger buildings should follow traditional village streetscape proportions and screen or ;buffer obtrusive equipment and service areas. Finally, the guidelines state that contemporary design should not be discouraged as long as it does not destroy the aesthetic architectural and landscape character of the general area.

Signage

The Township signage regulations were significantly amended in 1998. The amendments included generally accepted signage control measures and include standards for other significant community design issues, such as:

- prohibition of billboards;
 - conditional use of changeable copy and marquee signs;
 - canopy and awning signs;
 - directory and season signs; and
 - typical residential and business signs.
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The ordinance now includes special restrictions for signs in the C-1H Historic Commercial district, C-3 Shopping Center district, and Industrial zoning district.

Summary

Harrison Township is a special and unique place comprised of streetscapes and landscapes that have evolved over the past 300 years. Existing designs and patterns of buildings and open spaces when viewed together create a small town, rural character within the Township. These community design features are in contrast to those in adjacent suburbanizing communities where sprawl and standardized modern construction design has destroyed the visual quality of the environment. The physical appearance of a community's buildings and landscapes is critical to its quality of life. Without consideration of Harrison Township's traditional community design elements and methods to preserve and enhance them, the Township's rural character may be overwhelmed by the pressures of modern commercial and industrial development and major residential subdivisions.

This element evaluated the steps Harrison Township has taken since 1989 to address the community design concerns indicated in the last Master Plan. The plan then evaluated the existing conditions of community design in Harrison Township, as it related to gateways, utilities, landscape and open space, building design, and signage. After exploring these issues, recommendations were made to:

- continue to develop a Township entrance (gateway) signage program;
 - review the design impact of public utilities on the landscape;
 - implement landscape/streetscape improvement standards for Harrison Township;
 - implement architectural design guidelines for non-residential development; and
 - prohibit backlit signage.
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Appendix

Architectural Design Guidelines

The following design guidelines are applicable for all new construction, additions, or alterations for non-residential development and major residential development:

- A. Construction shall be designed in a pedestrian (walking) scale environment of a traditional Rural village in southwestern New Jersey and include pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks, alleys, lighting, street furniture, walls, hedges, fences, flower beds, and other landscaping to visually tie the buildings and improvements together;
 - B. Exterior surfaces shall be constructed in wood and/or brick materials, however artificial siding may be substituted to imitate these traditional rural building materials. Roofing shall have pitches and surfaces compatible with existing traditionally-scaled adjacent development;
 - C. All sides of buildings, not just the main or front facades, shall be treated with architectural finishes that are compatible with each other in material, size, color, and texture. Street facades within public view shall be treated with greater emphasis. The rear of buildings on reverse fronting lots or developments should be designed so as to present a compatible elevation to the street or be sufficiently buffered with a mix of evergreen and deciduous landscape materials;
 - D. Architectural details and elements, such as siding, roofing, doors, windows, cornices, porches, Awnings, moldings, trim boards, brackets, etc., shall be compatible with the various traditional architectural styles represented in the Township;
 - E. Buildings shall be designed to aesthetically relate with the architectural character of existing Neighboring development and of the predominant landscape and natural features in the vicinity, such as woodlands, hills, and farmlands. Disruption of streetscape and landscape views shall be avoided. Lighting shall be used to visually accent building features and signs. Box and awning backlit signs shall not be permitted due to their disruption of the traditional streetscape design pattern;
 - F. Buildings shall be designed to visually relate to the following traditional rural village streetscape proportions: ratio of building height to width; size, location, and rhythm of windows and doors; setbacks; height above ground; porches; gable locations; etc. Larger-scale commercial and industrial buildings shall be visually broken up into smaller components to achieve this effect;
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- G. Exterior and roof-mounted mechanical, electrical, and utility equipment, storage areas, service areas, trash receptacles, etc. within the public view shall be architecturally screen or buffered with plantings or relocated away from public view. Roof mounted equipment shall be painted the same color as the roof or roof screen. Berms with landscaping shall be used to visually buffer industrial and other visually obtrusive uses;
- H. Buildings shall be recognized as elements of their own time. Although reproduction of Traditional designs is encourage, contemporary design shall not be discouraged when it does not destroy the aesthetic architectural or landscape character of the exiting surroundings and is compatible with the size, scale, materials, and character of the property, neighborhood or environment.
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