

Somerset County Regional Center Strategic Plan

July 2018



THE
REGIONAL
CENTER

BRIDGEWATER ♦ RARITAN ♦ SOMERVILLE

A partnership for a better tomorrow

*Adopted by the Regional Center Partnership of Somerset County
July 18, 2018*

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I. PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF THE REGIONAL CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN



The purpose of the 2018 Regional Center Strategic Plan (the Strategic Plan) is to inform and guide the Regional Center Partnership regarding where to focus resources to implement top priority projects in the Regional Center over the next five years. The Strategic Plan is also designed to be used by the three Regional Center municipalities to help advance their master plan goals in relation to the Regional Center. The preparation of the Strategic Plan was informed and guided by the information and goals outlined in the Background Report. The Strategic Plan consists of three main components: a concise Vision statement for the Regional Center, a description of the four themes that characterize the entire Background Report, and a list of selected top priorities for the Regional Center for possible implementation in the next five years.

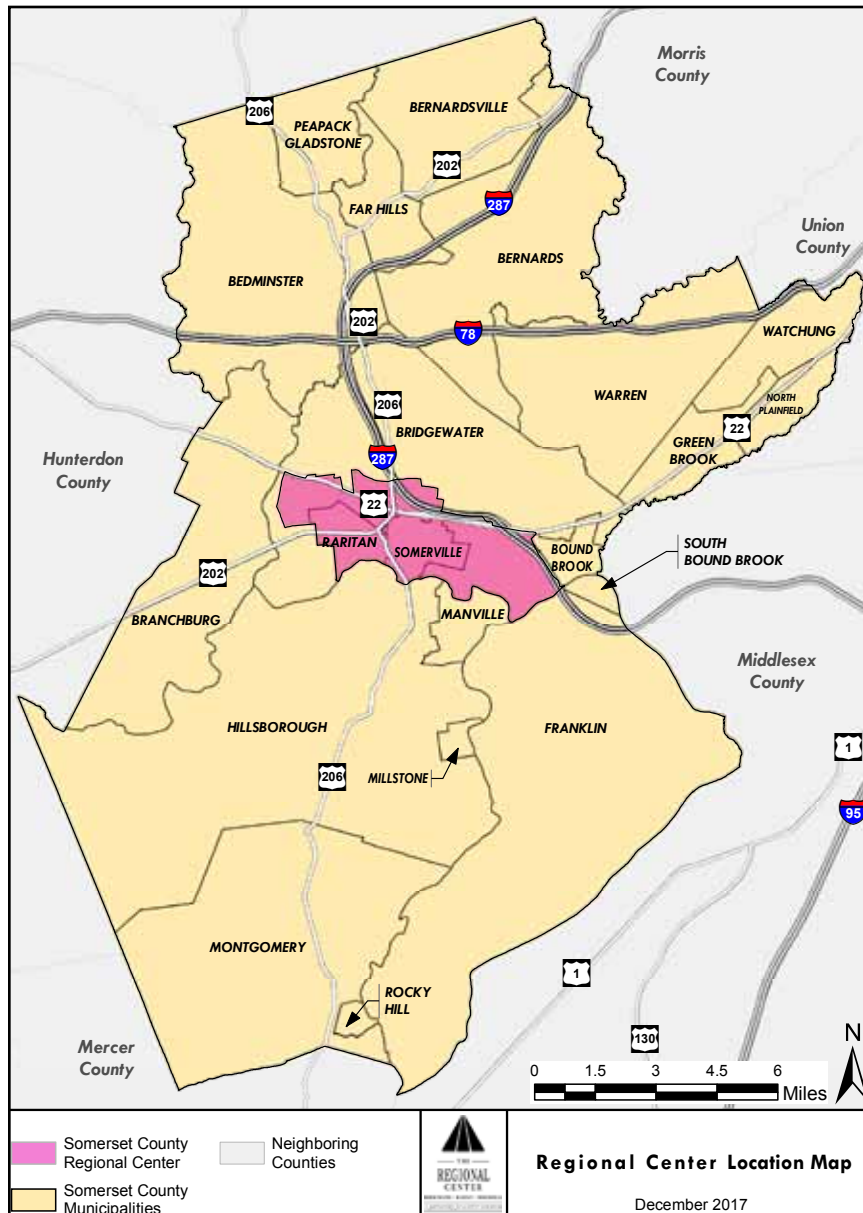


Figure 1 – Regional Center Location Map

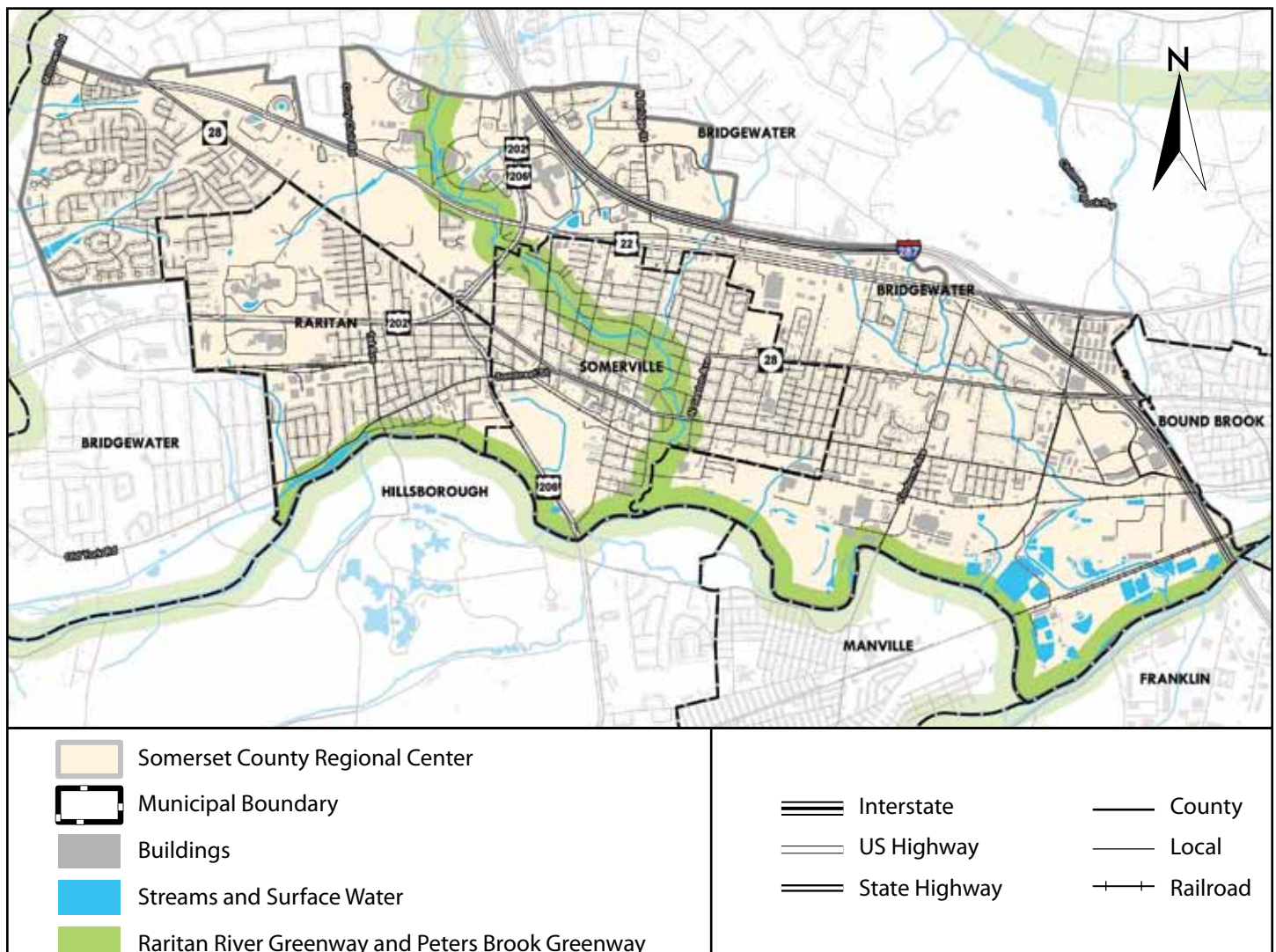
II. THE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL CENTER



The vision for the Regional Center depicts the inspiration that drives our collaboration to fulfill the vibrant connections mission of Somerset County. The paragraphs that follow describe the framework of where we want to go and what we want to become as guided by the goals set by the Regional Center. If the four themes are implemented, the Strategic Plan describes what can be achieved by building on the Regional Center's past record of success. This implementation will help achieve the needs outlined in this Vision statement.

The Regional Center is the heart of Somerset County consisting of distinctly interconnected vibrant communities offering a unique blend of quality of life amenities which sets the Somerset County Regional Center apart from other regional areas in New Jersey. The Regional Center is a highly desirable location to live, work, play, visit and learn offering an abundance of health and wellness opportunities and resources.

Figure 2 – Regional Center Base Map



II. THE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL CENTER



Raritan River Greenway

Supporting efforts to encourage increased pedestrian movement and bicycle usage can contribute toward better physical and emotional health and help abate diabetes and obesity. Providing greater opportunities to walk and bike to reach train stations can help enhance health and lessen traffic congestion in nearby neighborhoods. Strategies to help achieve this include constructing sidewalk and bicycle path connections, implementing complete street policies, and providing strategically located bicycle storage facilities near the Regional Center's rail stations. Supporting a shared bicycle program would also allow residents and visitors to reach parks, cultural events, mass transit, and restaurant and business districts using a sustainable and low-impact form of transportation. Making designated pedestrian safety enhancement

improvements can help reduce pedestrian and bicycle accidents. Implementing these improvements will contribute toward promoting the Regional Center as the bicycle-friendly destination of Somerset County.

Among the most critical priorities for the Regional Center is supporting efforts to strengthen Regional Center resiliency and sustainability. Supporting intermunicipal cooperation between the Regional Center towns and the County Office of Emergency Management to develop and implement disaster response and recovery plans will significantly enhance the Regional Center's ability to sustain itself during disasters. Providing municipal input to the County will help ensure Bridgewater, Raritan, and Somerville's chapters in the County Hazard Mitigation Plan remain current. Supporting efforts to provide adequate infrastructure capacity will further strengthen the Regional Center's ability to sustain itself during a natural or manmade disaster. Economically, these efforts will help communicate to private investors that the Regional Center is well positioned to rebound more quickly in the face of disasters.



Bridgewater Commons Mall

II. THE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL CENTER



John Basilone Memorial Bridge

One of the Regional Center's crowning jewels is the Raritan River which offers so much opportunity in the Regional Center. Continuing to support the completion of the Raritan River Greenway will increase opportunities for recreation and physical fitness including jogging, biking, walking, watercraft recreation, and wildlife observation. Implementing Raritan Borough's wayfinding system will help direct visitors from the Raritan train station to downtown Raritan and the Raritan River. Visitors en route to the Raritan River will have the opportunity to patronize local restaurants and businesses in downtown Raritan and enjoy Raritan's historic attractions. Supporting the planned Raritan River Greenway extension to Duke Farms will add tremendous value to the Regional Center as a major destination for biking and passive

recreation. Partnering with Rutgers Sustainable Raritan River Initiative, Somerset County Park Commission, the New Jersey Water Supply Authority, and Duke Farms will greatly enhance efforts to protect the Raritan River and help raise public awareness about the importance of the Raritan River for drinking water, wildlife, and recreation.

The Regional Center is an integral part of Somerset County's vibrant economy and helps make Somerset County a driving force in New Jersey's economy. Pursuing the recommendations that emerged from the Supporting Priority Investment in Somerset County studies and the recommendations in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) that pertain to the Regional Center will help expand the region's economic development opportunities as a Priority Growth Investment Area within the Somerset County Investment Framework. Supporting Somerset County's and the Somerset County Business Partnership's strategic marketing efforts of the Regional Center and Somerset County will increase the ability to help attract major companies investing in 5G technology to prioritize that investment in Somerset County and bolster the region as a "smart city" using this technology. Supporting this effort will also effectively communicate to major life sciences companies that the Regional Center is the ideal location with the right concentration of resources to capitalize on opportunities to network with major medical institutions, Raritan Valley Community College, and Rutgers and Princeton Universities.

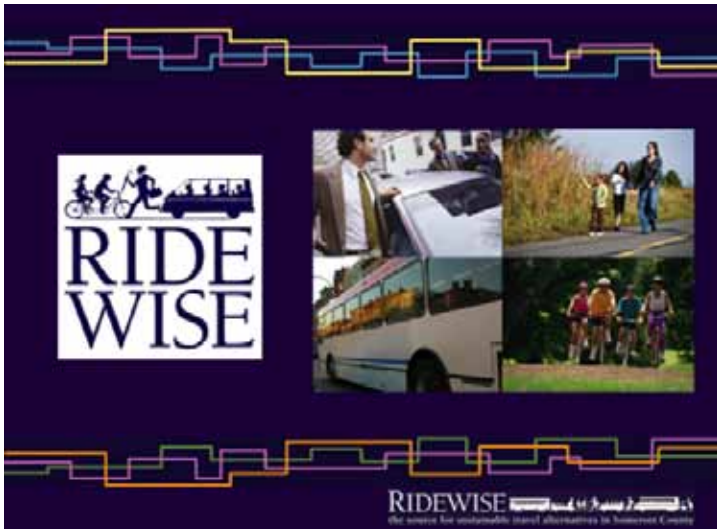


Somerville Town Center

II. THE VISION FOR THE REGIONAL CENTER



Supporting RideWise's work to help improve commuting in Somerset County will help move the Regional Center closer toward resolving commuting needs such as the last mile that has hindered the Regional Center's ability to compete on par with other regions in the state. Partnering with RideWise and the Raritan Valley Rail Coalition will also help identify potential impacts and vulnerability of the Regional Center's commuting options in the face of a major disruption in mass transit service or highway access.



RWJ University Hospital Somerset



There are four themes which govern the entire Plan: Health and Wellness, Resiliency, Embracing the Raritan River, and Job Growth and Private Sector Investment. These four themes are interrelated and complementary to each other; e.g., Embracing the Raritan River includes increasing access to the Raritan River Greenway to expand opportunities for healthier lifestyles, active recreation, and complementing efforts to draw more visitors to our downtown and Main Street districts.

Health and Wellness

Research indicates that an increasing number of Americans suffer from obesity, asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions that can be influenced by the way we live. These trends are compelling planners nationwide to increasingly look at the relationship between public health and urban planning. The Regional Center has many opportunities to promote healthier lifestyles through low-cost strategies that are relatively easy to implement and that help capitalize on existing health and wellness-related assets and resources within the Regional Center. Pursuant to this, the Health and Wellness theme is extensive throughout the entire Background Report and embraces a variety of strategies and objectives to foster the health and well-being of all who live and work in the Regional Center. These strategies include ways to promote an active lifestyle by providing opportunities for physical activity for residents of all ages; increasing pedestrian and bicyclist safety; increasing access to the Raritan River Greenway with enhanced pedestrian connections to downtown districts; and working with the Somerset County Park Commission, the three municipal recreation departments, Healthier Somerset, and RWJBarnabas Health to encourage healthier lifestyles.



Providing opportunities for biking is a major health and wellness goal of the Regional Center (image courtesy of Healthier Somerset)

Supporting initiatives such as RWJBarnabas Health and Healthier Somerset's community needs assessment to create a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) will help achieve many of the health and wellness goals and recommendations described in the Background Report. A complementary goal of the Regional Center is to counter social isolation by making vibrant connections between our residents and Regional Center amenities which can help address stress, psychosis, and depression.

Some of the many health and wellness goals and objectives made in the Background Report include creating a Healthy Community website that identifies programs and locations such as farmers' markets, community gardens, bike paths, athletic facilities, etc. Research has shown that a healthier population contributes to a stronger community by providing opportunities for social interaction and improving the social capital. A healthier population also contributes to a stronger economy by increasing overall physical well-being resulting in less absenteeism, improved productivity, and improved academic performance. A healthier population can also benefit from improved overall emotional and mental health.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



Peters Brook Greenway

The Background Report provides an abundance of examples of how health and wellness can be promoted through such methods as building design techniques; outdoor fitness equipment designed for seniors; restaurant menus featuring locally-grown healthy foods; and raising public awareness about local health and fitness resources. One of the most far-reaching health and wellness initiative discussed in the Background Report is establishment of a health and wellness “district” to attract and accommodate health and wellness-related services, facilities and businesses that also foster workforce training in the medical and life sciences industries. The Regional Center can be the ideal location with the right concentration of resources to foster opportunities where medical and life sciences companies can network with nearby

regional medical institutions, Raritan Valley Community College, Rutgers and Princeton Universities, and other colleges and universities to train students pursuing the medical and life sciences fields who contribute to a highly skilled workforce seeking opportunities to live and work in the Regional Center.

The Background Report also provides an appendix of Healthy Community websites featuring towns utilizing strategies like pop-up cafes and café guidelines (Town of Westport, CT); a successful health and wellness district (Vita Health and Wellness District, Stamford, CT); and a Healthy Plan Making Report published by the American Planning Association.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



Resiliency

Resiliency ranks high in the list of top priority objectives for the Regional Center. The Background Report discusses resiliency to enhance municipal and county coordination in pre-disaster preparedness and post-disaster response. The Background Report also encourages business continuity planning. Key recommendations include encouraging the three Regional Center towns to prepare contingency plans for major incidents or disasters and coordinating with Somerset County's Hazard Mitigation Plan. The multi-jurisdictional coordination efforts demonstrate that the Regional Center is more prepared and capable of "bouncing back" from a disaster and reinforcing the message to the business community that the Regional Center is a better place to invest.



Emergency Prep Checklist



John Basilone Memorial and Veterans Park, Raritan

Some of these include an adequate transportation system for the efficient movement of goods and people, and a supply of workforce housing in a variety of price ranges demonstrating to major employers that the Regional Center has the ability to accommodate and attract a diverse workforce for business retention purposes.

Taking steps to fortify the region's economic resiliency can include efforts to diversify and strengthen the local and regional economy which in turn can increase the region's ability to remain resilient against changing economic trends. Instead of responding to economic downturns or sudden disasters, Regional Center communities need to embrace the Regional Center's assets and opportunities to provide the level of economic and community soundness against global issues affecting the New York and Northern New Jersey economy; e.g., the loss of a trans-Hudson tunnel into Manhattan and its impact on Regional Center commuting patterns.

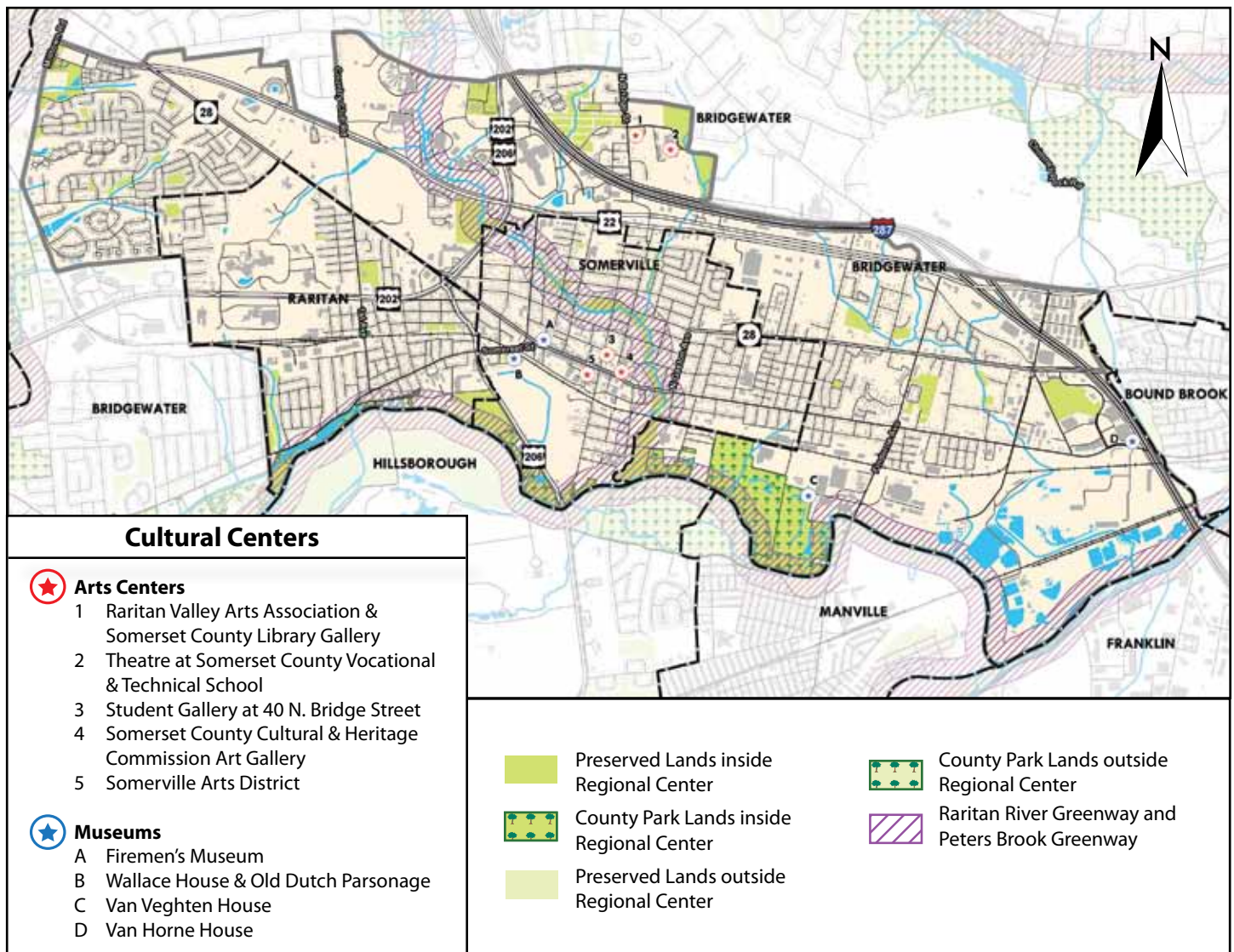
The Background Report discusses some key elements that are fundamental to a healthy and robust economy.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



Resiliency also requires ensuring there is adequate capacity in the region's infrastructure system for water supply, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, power and energy, and a circulation system that can accommodate transportation needs not only during a robust economy but also in the wake of a disaster or major disruption in service. The Background Report describes some major infrastructure projects contributing to the overall sustainability of the Regional Center. Examples include replenishing groundwater reserves, resolving wastewater collection issues, and improving traffic congestion and safety along major highway corridors such as Route 22 at Chimney Rock Road. Integrating into municipal master plans sustainability measures such as planning for electric vehicle charging station installations will help with sustainability with respect to energy supply, flood-prone areas, and environmental infrastructure.

Figure 3 – Regional Center Open Space/Recreation Map





Embracing the Raritan River

A keystone of the Regional Center is the Raritan River. Embracing the Raritan River as a theme embodies so much of what characterizes the Regional Center in terms of quality-of-life amenities and the opportunities to create vibrancy and interconnectedness. The Raritan River serves as a natural connection linking all three Regional Center communities and further connecting the Regional Center with adjacent communities and beyond. The presence of the Raritan River also gives the Regional Center an identifying landmark and ready access to unique natural environments.



Raritan River in Autumn

The Raritan River Greenway affords tremendous opportunity to embrace health and wellness. Supporting the completion of the Raritan River Greenway will expand Regional Center opportunities for fitness, recreational biking, walking, and overall enjoyment of the river's natural beauty. This will also complement the Regional Center's work with the Rutgers Sustainable Raritan River Initiative to promote public access to the river for trail use, fishing, and watercraft recreation. The proximity of Duke Farms to the Raritan River Greenway further enhances opportunities for bicycling, walking, fishing, and other forms of recreation and tourism. Continuing to work with the Rutgers Sustainable Raritan River Initiative to promote public access to the river for trail use, fishing, and watercraft recreation is also recommended.

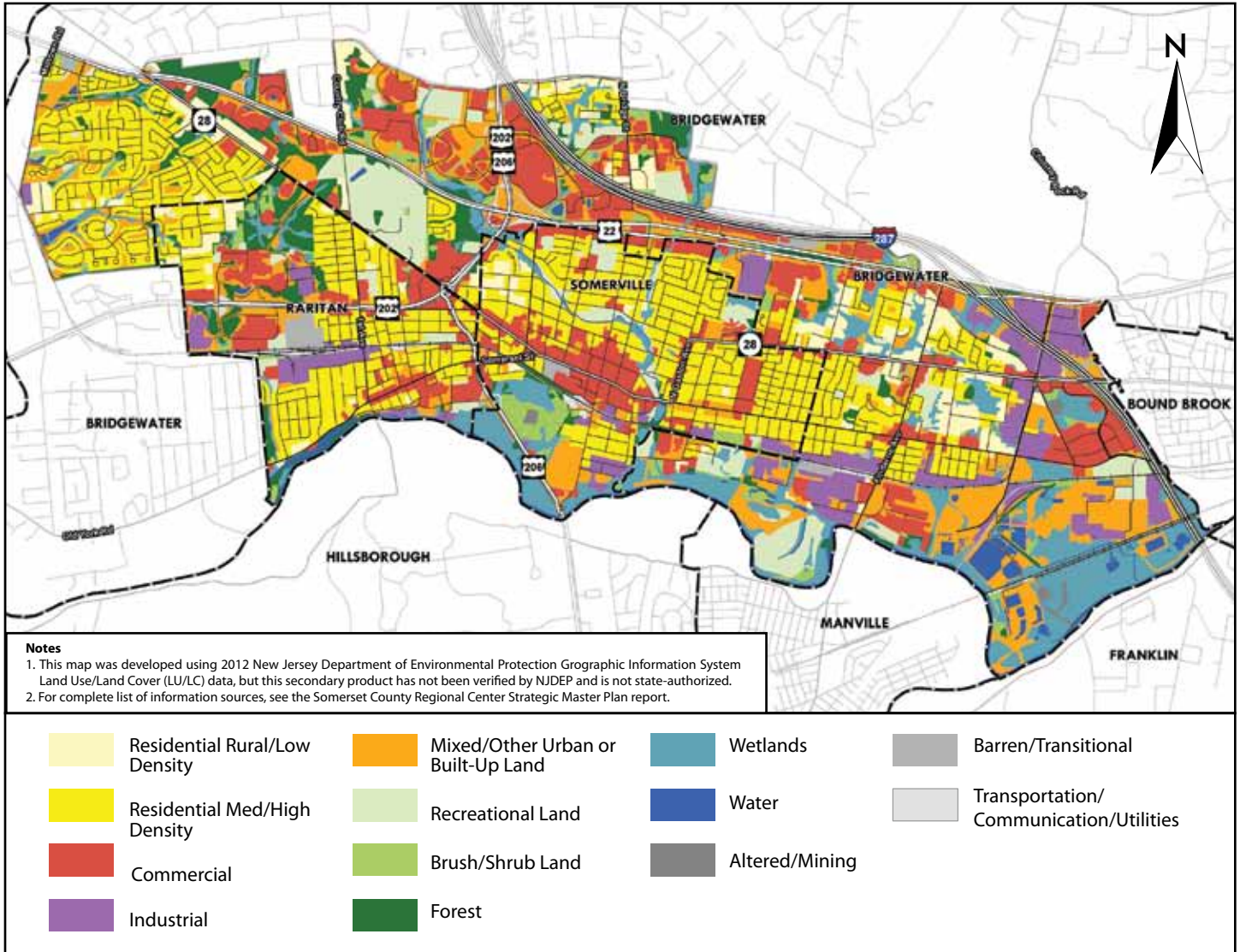
Key to capitalizing on these opportunities is increasing overall access to the Raritan River Greenway. The river's close proximity to the downtown areas provides an opportunity to attract more people through promotional efforts to increase public awareness of the river and its recreational opportunities. Increased access to the River coupled with the extension of the Greenway path to Duke Farms has the potential to significantly add value to nearby neighborhoods and downtown Raritan Borough as tourists patronize local businesses and restaurants and Duke Farms from the Raritan Train Station. This gives added importance to support the design and construction of the Raritan River Greenway connection to Duke Farms.

To enhance these efforts, the Background Report provides recommendations such as coordinating park and recreational opportunities among the Regional Center communities and with Somerset County, and revising as needed the 2009 Regional Center Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Greenways System Connection Plan to address critical gaps remaining in the Regional Center's existing pedestrian and bicycle pathway system.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



Figure 4 – Regional Center Land Use & Land Cover Map



Job Growth and Private Sector Investment

The Job Growth and Private Sector Investment theme embraces what the Background Report refers to as “focus areas” including:

- Redevelopment Areas, Economic Development, and Community Design;
- Train Station Areas;
- Neighborhoods and Housing;
- Circulation;
- Recreation, Open Space and Greenways; and
- Shared Services, Community Facilities, and Historic and Cultural Resources.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



These all relate to and impact the Regional Center's economic vitality. Strategies that support job growth and private sector investment include marketing the Raritan River as a major tourism amenity with easy access from our downtown districts; addressing circulation issues to increase access to goods and services; increasing housing opportunities including workforce housing whose residents will likely spend their money on local businesses; and creative placemaking strategies to help draw more people to our downtowns. Advancing the recommendations of the Supporting Priority Investment in Somerset County Initiative and the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy are critical to advance the economic development goals of the Regional Center.



Stone Bridge at Raritan Residential Development

The Background Report provides land use strategies to address multiple issues relating to economic development. An illustration of this is the inclusion of a residential component in the re-use and redevelopment plans of vacant, underutilized office, industrial and commercial space. The residential component of a mixed-use project can be a catalyst to help stimulate economic revitalization and for restoring existing degraded environmental assets. Redevelopment and re-use of these properties serves as a mechanism for accommodating residential and economic growth, is consistent with smart growth and community sustainability principals, and supports implementation of the County Investment Framework. Additional recommendations include improving multi-modal linkages between employment and housing areas, implementing land use strategies such as the co-location of residential and employment opportunities, and reducing commuting costs with increased walking and biking.

The Background Report also recognizes the region as a life sciences hub for research and development and technical education. Fundamental to the region's economic vitality is the promotion of the resources available in the Regional Center to assist major employers. An example is the Small Business Development Center located at Raritan Valley Community College which has successfully helped major employers meet workforce training needs.

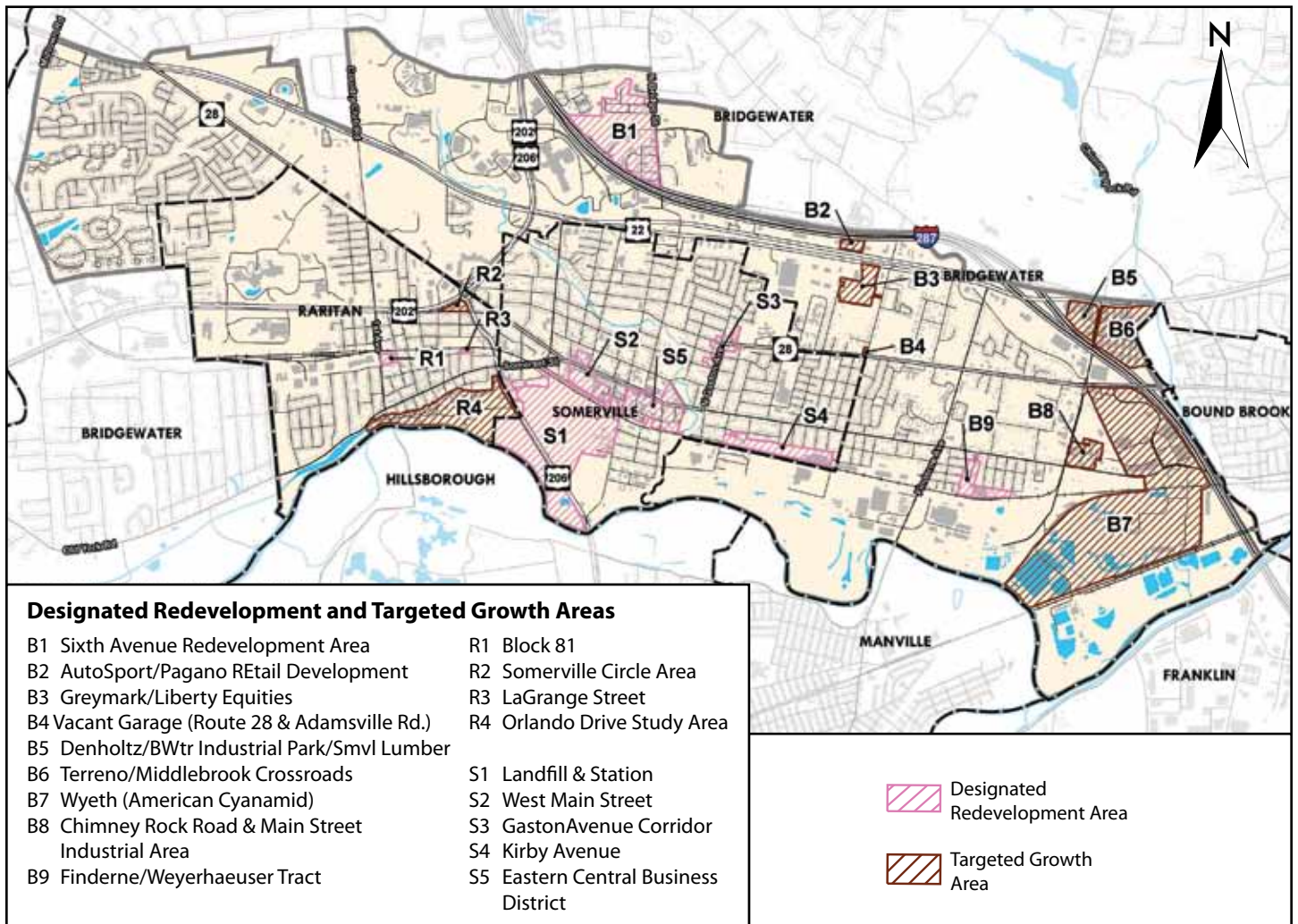
Reliable train and bus service is also critical to the region's economic competitiveness by being able to connect commuters with major employment centers both in New York and around the Regional Center. One-seat ride service along the Raritan Valley Line is one of the hallmark achievements for Somerset County and helps boost the attractiveness of the Regional Center's accessibility. Train stations have become focal points for transit-oriented redevelopment that can help reduce the Regional Center's reliance on automobiles and provide alternative living options. Finding innovative and reliable ways to address first- and last-mile commuting needs remains a critical issue to the region's traffic needs.

The Regional Center is at the heart of a hub of major roadways in New Jersey. The junction of two major freight railroad lines in the Regional Center and the region's active trucking industry underscores the importance of having an efficient and well-maintained transportation system for the movement of goods to reach both local markets and abroad.

III. THE FOUR THEMES



Figure 5 – Redevelopment and Targeted Growth Areas



Circulation in the Regional Center cannot be complete without adequate bicycling accommodations to provide a transportation option that is both healthy and environmentally compatible. The Background Report discusses how the needs of bicyclists can be addressed through a combination of bicycle compatible roadways including complete street policies and designated bikeways. Dedicated bicycle facilities allow a broader range of people to make local trips without being forced to use a car.

The Regional Center municipalities have long prided themselves on entering into shared-services agreements to reduce costs and provide higher levels of service. Many of the Regional Center’s community facilities present opportunities to promote increased shared services. The Background Report recommends the communities continue to preserve important historic resources and increase public awareness and understanding of these resources. The communities should cooperate with federal, state, county and non-profit organizations to preserve and promote these historic sites.

IV. SELECTED PRIORITIES FOR EACH THEME



IV. SELECTED TOP PRIORITIES FOR EACH THEME

The Background Report lists approximately 100 priority projects and initiatives for the Regional Center which are broadly categorized as “high priority” or “medium and low priority.” A selection of those ranked in the Background Report as “high priority” is listed below. It is not the intention to achieve all of the projects listed below over the next five years. Rather, they represent a list from which the RCP may want to select in a given year to provide the flexibility to respond as resources become available. The list is subject to refinement as new opportunities or issues emerge in the third or fourth year of the Strategic Plan.

Health and Wellness:

1. Endorse and support RWJBarnabas Health’s Community Health Needs Assessment and Implementation Plans and Healthier Somerset’s Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). This can help address some of the mental health issues which in some respects may be attributable or exacerbated by social isolation. A goal of the Regional Center is to break down social isolation by making vibrant connections between our residents and the amenities that the Regional Center offers.
2. Explore options to implement a bike sharing program.
3. Support the creation of more public plazas or pop-up parks where the public may enjoy fresh air, physical activity, and social interaction to help abate health issues such as rising rates of chronic disease and an increased prevalence of sedentary lifestyles.
4. Actively support the availability of farmer’s markets and farm-to-table /local food sourced opportunities.
5. Continue to support the continued implementation of Complete Street policies in all three Regional Center towns.
6. Ensure that all routes to schools are pedestrian friendly and have enhanced crosswalks and signs.
7. Identify all truck routes in the Regional Center to avoid schools and other high pedestrian areas.

IV. SELECTED PRIORITIES FOR EACH THEME



Resiliency:

1. Support countywide efforts by the County OEM to develop disaster response and recovery plans.
2. Provide updates to the County Hazard Mitigation Plan.
3. Provide resources to encourage local businesses to develop continuity plans (because of economic downturn or after natural disasters).
4. Support implementation of strategies as now required in the Municipal Land Use Law per recently adopted legislation requiring municipal master plans to include strategies concerning smart growth, including potential locations for the installation of electric vehicle charging stations; storm resiliency with respect to energy supply, flood-prone areas, and environmental infrastructure; and environmental sustainability.
5. Develop a list of “green” infrastructure strategies to be used in physical improvements such as storm water management techniques.

Embracing the Raritan River:

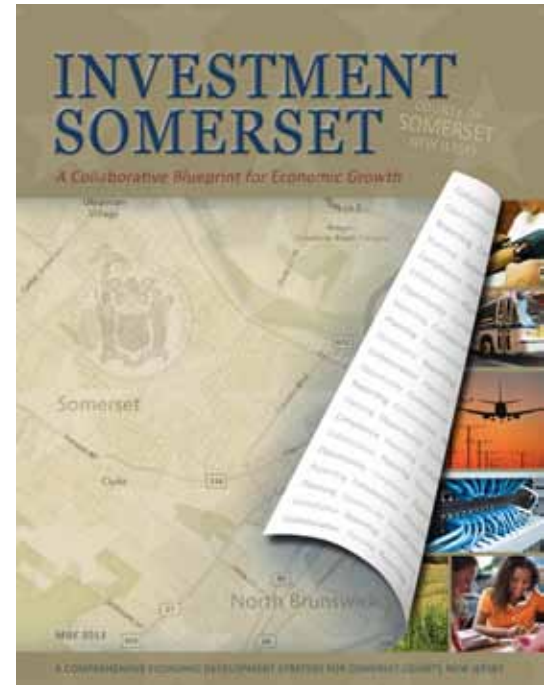
1. Revise and update the Regional Center Pedestrian, Bicycle, and Greenways System Connection Plan
2. Continue to support completion of the Raritan River Greenway.
3. Design and build the Raritan River Greenway connection to Duke Farms.
4. Continue to work in conjunction with the Rutgers Sustainable Raritan River Initiative to promote public access to the river for trail use, fishing, and watercraft recreation.
5. Support coordinating park and recreational opportunities among the three Regional Center municipalities and with Somerset County as a whole.
6. Encourage green infrastructure planning in municipal, county, and privately owned parklands.

IV. SELECTED PRIORITIES FOR EACH THEME



Job Growth and Private Sector Investment:

1. Support implementation of priority recommendations from the CEDS.
2. Identify opportunities for outdoor seating at downtown restaurants through wider sidewalks, curb bump-outs, and pop-up seating.
3. Support creative placemaking efforts such as community-supported public art projects to attract visitors who will want to return and further patronize local businesses.
4. Support and assist an economic development entity to focus on economic vitality in downtown Raritan.
5. Support efforts to enable bus and rail riders to download or receive current “real time” train and bus arrival time to make service more user friendly.
6. Communicate to the Regional Center communities the importance of new TransHudson rail capacity.
7. Support efforts to provide Last Mile connections to nearby employment centers.
8. Support efforts to accommodate more bicycle commuting to train stations such as the implementation of a bike depot.
9. Support efforts to address better traffic flow along Route 202; e.g., adjust Route 202/Ortho Drive signal timing; support intersection improvements at Route 202/First Avenue.



Somerset County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

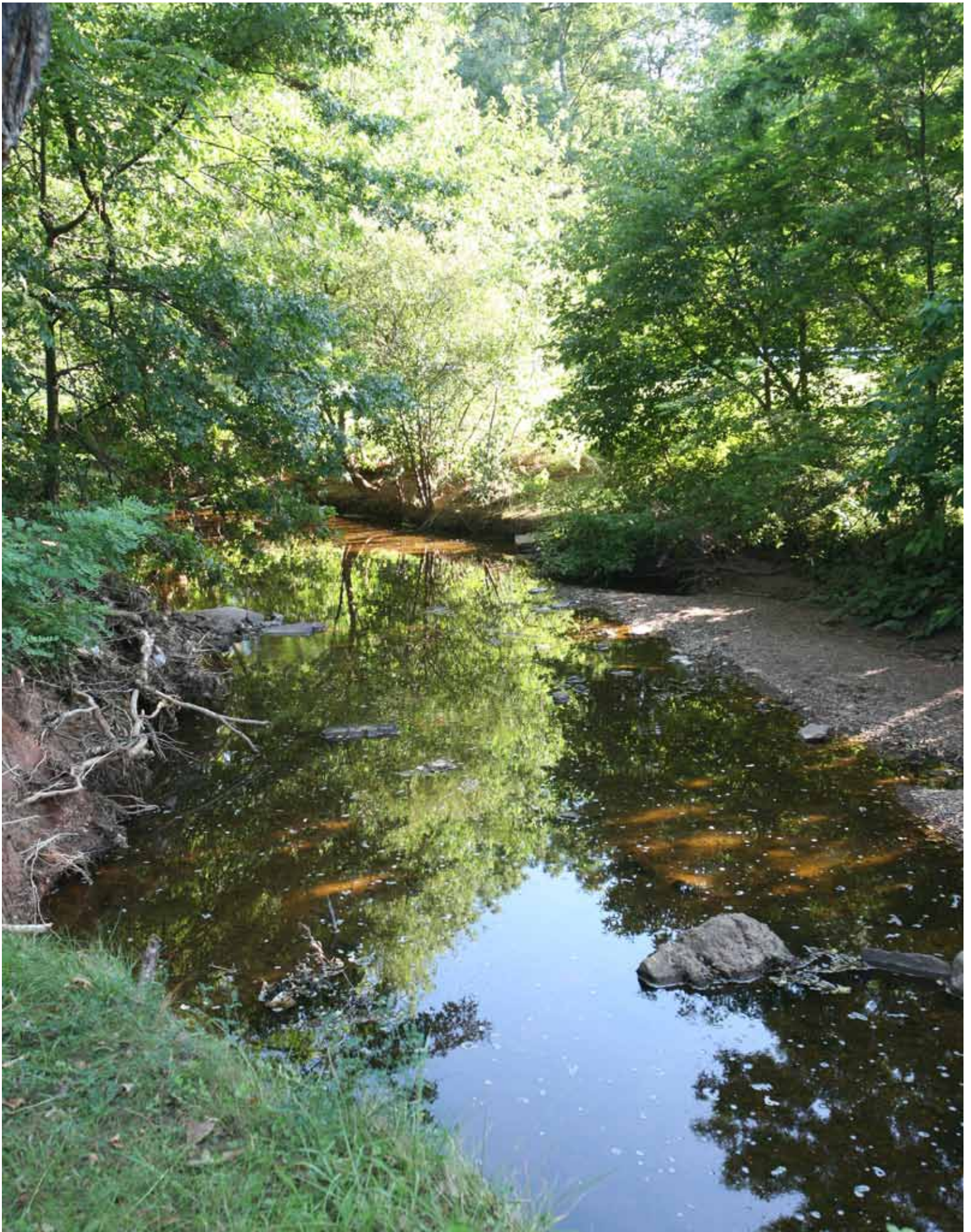


Raritan Valley Community College Workforce Training Center

V. CONCLUSION



Support of the goals and selected top priority projects as outlined in this Strategic Plan will help fulfill the vision for the Regional Center over the next five years as a region distinct from any other region in the state that continues to be a highly desirable, vibrant and resilient place to live, work, shop, play and learn.



Peters Brook

Regional Center Partnership of Somerset County

2018 Officers

Troy Fischer, Chair
Jason Dameo, Vice-Chair
Freeholder Director Patrick Scaglione, Treasurer
James Ruggieri, Secretary (non-voting position)

At-large Private/Institutional Sector Representatives

Troy Fischer, Chair, Senior General Manager, Bridgewater Commons
Jason Dameo, Vice-Chair, Dameo Trucking, Inc.
Victoria Allen, Vice President, Strategic Marketing, Southern Region,
RWJBarnabas Health
Anthony Tufaro, Site Facilities Manager-Ethicon Somerville

Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders

Patrick Scaglione, Freeholder Director
(Freeholder Patricia Walsh, Alternate)

Somerset County Planning Board

Bernie Navatto, Chair, Somerset County Planning Board
Walter Lane, Director of Planning, Somerset County Planning Division

Bridgewater Township

Mayor Daniel J. Hayes, Jr.
Filipe Pedroso, Council
Scarlett Doyle, Township Planner
James Franco, local private/institutional sector representative

Raritan Borough

Mayor Charles McMullin
Don Tozzi, Council
Nicolas Carra, Council
Angela Knowles, Borough Planner

Somerville Borough

Mayor Ellen Brain
Dennis Sullivan, Council
Lisa Werner, Vice-Chair, Somerville Planning Board
Rick St. Pierre, local private/institutional sector representative

Somerset County Business Partnership

Michael Kerwin, President & CEO
(John Maddocks, Alternate)

Somerset County Park Commission

Geoffrey Soriano, Interim Secretary-Director
(Cynthia Sullivan, Alternate)



— THE —
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