

# AMENDMENT TO THE MASTER PLAN

Borough of Metuchen

Middlesex County

New Jersey

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BOROUGH OF METUCHEN  
**MASTER PLAN AMENDMENT**

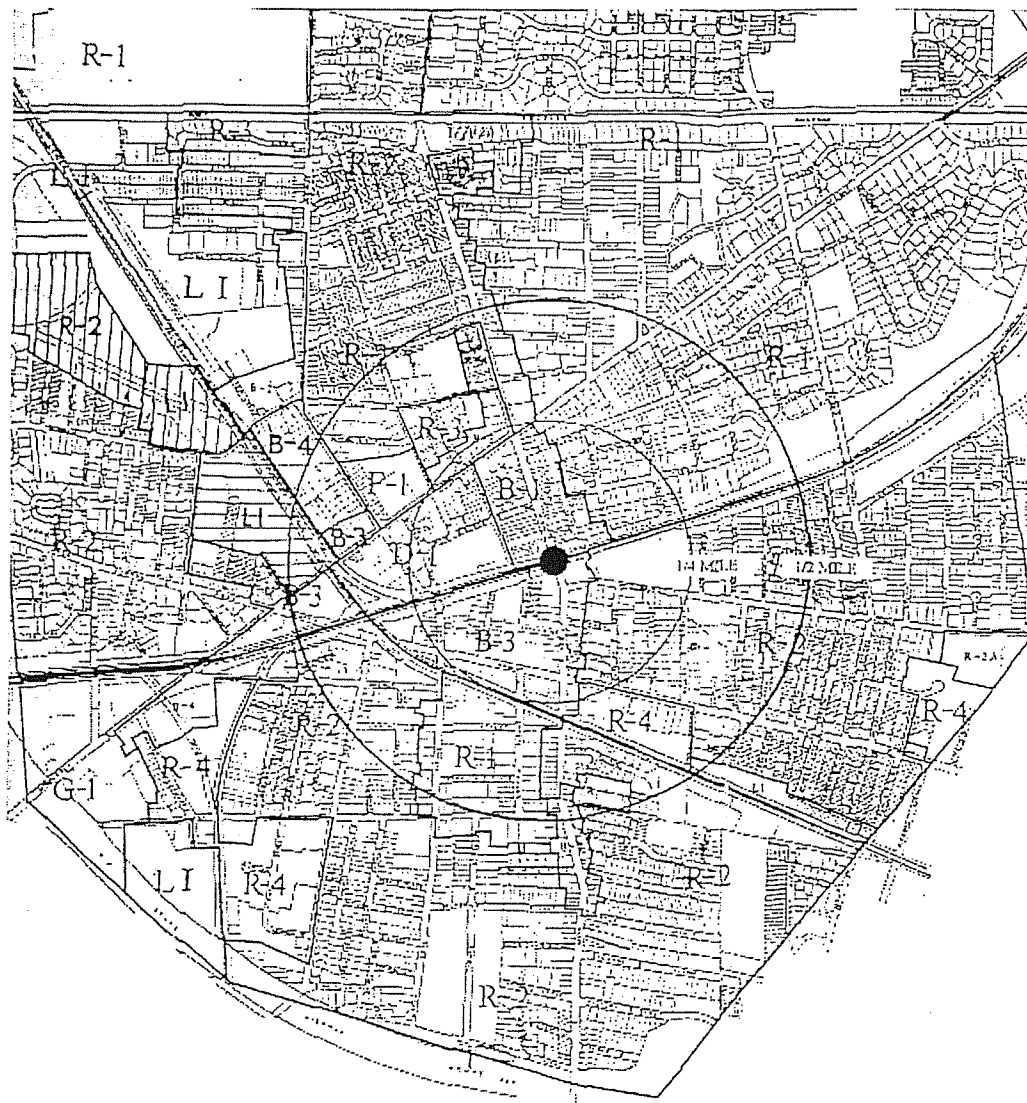
Development and Redevelopment in the Downtown Core Area  
and Utility Infrastructure

The New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law, NJSA 40:44D-28, provides for a municipal planning board to prepare, and after public hearing, to adopt or amend a Master Plan, or component parts thereof, to guide the use of lands within the municipality in a manner which protects public health and safety and promotes the general welfare. The Borough of Metuchen Master Plan was last fully re-examined in July 1994. This amendment to the Master Plan amends the Master Plan in all its component elements, including Land Use Plan, Transportation Plan and/or Utility Plan elements.

One of the most important purposes of the Master Plan of the Borough of Metuchen, is to preserve, maintain, enhance and protect the character and functioning of the public streets of the Borough, as well as to guide the design of new streets in ways that are compatible with the character of existing streets. This is essential to the well-being, safety and continued economic viability of the Borough. Appropriate streets, that accommodate the functional requirements and provide the necessary visual character, are integral to achieving the goals of the Master Plan.

By the term "street", is meant not just pavement, but, rather, all of the elements that comprise a properly-functioning street, namely: curbs and pavement, sidewalks, a planting area between curb and sidewalk sized to accommodate shade trees, street lighting, and utility infrastructure. Some streets, given their location and function, will include all of these elements; other streets, given their location and function, will include some of these elements.

The designation of the Borough as a Town Center, pursuant to the State Development and Redevelopment Plan, underscores the long-term form and function of the Borough as a Center for the surrounding region. The State Plan is predicated on the importance of creating and maintaining public spaces of appropriate character, and foremost among public spaces are public streets. In particular, the State Plan promotes the elimination of visual clutter, such as overhead power lines.



BOROUGH  
of  
METUCHEN  
Middlesex County, New Jersey  
ZONING MAP

Note: Not an official copy of the municipal Zoning Map.

R-1	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-2	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-2A	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-3	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-4	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-4A	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-4B	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
R-4C	RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
B-1	CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT
B-2	NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESS DISTRICT
B-3	OFFICE BUSINESS DISTRICT
B-4	RESTAURANT BUSINESS DISTRICT
D-1	DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT
F-1	FAMILY DEVELOPMENT
G-1	GARDEN DEVELOPMENT
LI	LIMIT INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT
+	TRANSIT STATION DISTRICT
○	BOUNDARY OF TOWN CORAL

Metuchen's compact, mixed-use Downtown Core is primarily located within a half mile radius, or a ten minute walking distance, from the center of the Borough.

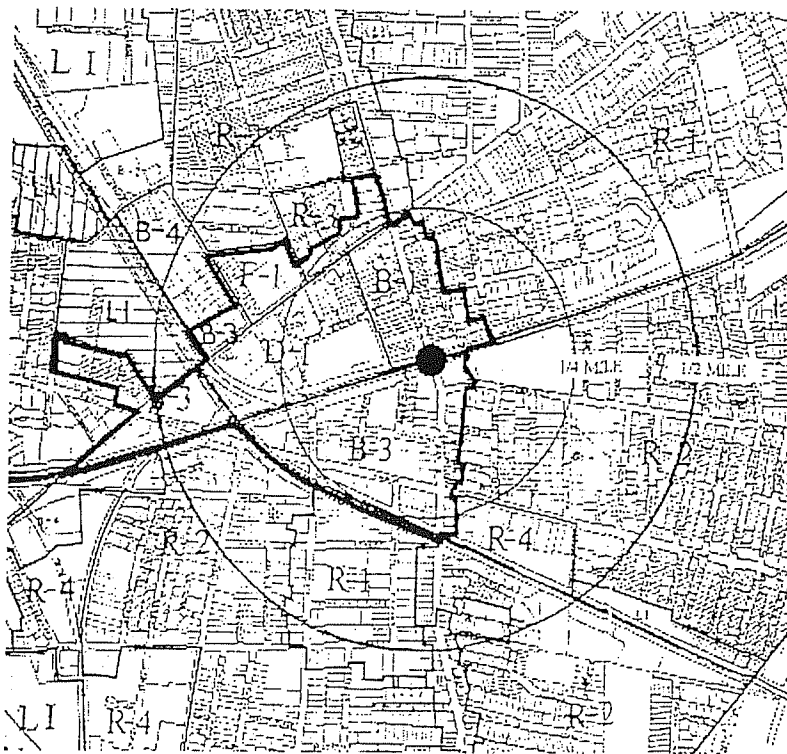
It also emphasizes the importance of public streets as high quality public spaces, and not merely means of conveyance. For both the continuing prosperity of the Borough and the surrounding region, which relies upon the Borough as a center for goods, services, and transportation, it is necessary to preserve the function and character of Metuchen's compact, mixed-use Downtown Core as hereinafter defined. Moreover, it has been the long-standing goal of the Borough to focus development, redevelopment, and growth within and adjacent to the Downtown Core. Precisely because there is such a mix of activities and uses in this Downtown Core, the Borough has historically adopted and continually updated policies to promote its continued vitality. These long-standing urban design policies and standards have promoted a desirable development pattern within the Downtown Core.



The character of Metuchen's Main Street includes on-street parking, human-scaled lampposts, street trees, and the absence of overhead wires and utility poles. All of these streetscape elements combine to make the street safer for both pedestrians and autos.

It is important to note that the subject of the design standards is the character and functioning of the Town Center itself. Many of the regulated elements, such as automobile parking, utility infrastructure, street lighting requirements and shade tree plantings, are integrally interrelated in their impacts. For example, on-street parking facilitates commercial activities; it also calms traffic, and helps to make streets safer for both pedestrians and vehicular traffic.

Similarly, shade tree plantings, properly installed and maintained, not only enhance the visual character of the street, but also enhance pedestrian safety by mediating between the sidewalk and the curb; in addition, shade tree plantings have positive and desirable environmental effects. It is important to recognize that all of these elements which promote healthy, safe, active and prosperous streets are interdependent, and working in concert, promote safe, efficient, and well-functioning streets. Well-designed streets are truly essential to the economic health and quality of life of the Borough.



This Amendment to the Master Plan shall govern and apply in the following Zoning Districts: the B-1 Central Business District, the B-3 Office Business District, the D-1 Downtown Development District, and the F-1 Franklin Development District. Collectively, these four (4) zoning districts shall comprise the Downtown Core Area. This Amendment to the Master Plan shall apply to any development or redevelopment within the Downtown Core Area, whether new construction or redevelopment of existing buildings and facilities, provided that the scale of the project: a) involves an area of 5 acres or greater; or, b) involves the development or redevelopment of 50,000 square feet or more of commercial and/or retail space; or, c) involves the development or redevelopment of 50 or more residential units; or, d)

involves development or redevelopment of existing street frontage of 500 feet or more; or, e) involves the widening of existing streets; or, f) involves the narrowing of existing streets; or, g) involves the reconstruction of existing streets or sidewalks. This Amendment to the Master Plan is intended to require that, in certain designated areas of the Borough and, in certain designated circumstances, (as listed and enumerated herein) all existing and proposed utility lines shall be located or relocated underground.

For many years, utility infrastructure has been routinely located underground in situations where new streets were being built. Promulgation of criteria for utility infrastructure involving development and redevelopment along existing streets are long overdue. As a mature community with little available vacant land, most new growth in Metuchen takes the form of redevelopment, infill and adaptive re-use. It is essential to the continuing health, vitality and welfare of the Borough that utility infrastructure be located underground.

It is clear that as a town continues to grow and evolve, conditions which were acceptable in an earlier era and in the context of a less-dense form of land use, are not acceptable as the intensity of land use increases—concomitant with all that implies: increased density of people and uses, increased pedestrian activity, and increased vehicular movements. All towns and cities were once hamlets with unpaved streets. Turn-of-the-century photographs document how the main streets of American towns and cities were once lined with utility poles bearing overhead power and telephone lines. As times changed, it became the legitimate public interest for such infrastructure to be relocated underground.

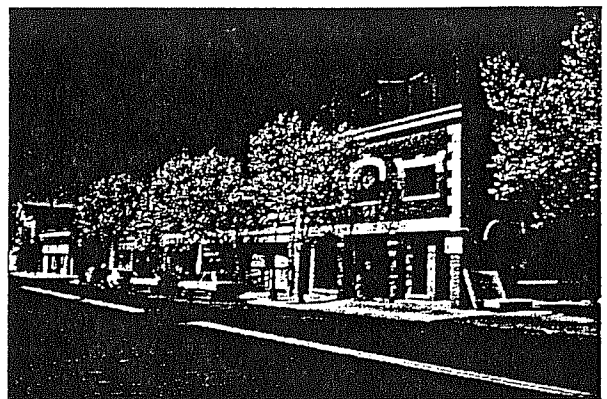
Among the other goals and objectives of the Master Plan are requirements to address traffic and parking concerns that exist in Metuchen, so that any development or redevelopment in the Downtown Core Area does not intensify traffic problems and is undertaken in conjunction with adequate parking provisions.

In order to address traffic safety and parking issues, on-street parking should be encouraged and facilitated. The re-introduction of on-street parking in conjunction with development or redevelopment often requires the widening of public right-of-ways and streets. Since such widenings are often complicated or compromised by the location of existing and/or proposed utility poles and other utility lines, the public good of promoting traffic safety, pedestrian safety, and adequate parking is hampered by overhead utilities.

This situation is particularly acute in the Downtown Core Area. Requiring the placement of utility lines underground in this area will be a benefit and a convenience to the public by promoting public safety, reducing conflicts inherent between on-street parking and utility poles and other utility lines, and facilitating on-street parking in the downtown area and its environs, which, in turn, has a traffic-calming effect. This will also serve to prevent the interruption of essential service during accidents and inclement weather, since underground lines are protected and overhead utility lines are not.

Since 1980, the Borough has planned and implemented the improvement of its public streets in the Downtown Core Area. These street improvements have included the placement of overhead utilities underground. Most notably, all utility lines were placed underground along Main Street in 1984. Typical, tall "cobra-head" type street lights have been replaced with pedestrian-scale cast iron decorative street lamps along Main Street and elsewhere throughout the Downtown Core Area. Metuchen's downtown street lamps have become known as the "Main Street style street lamps" and serve as a symbol of the community. These streetscape improvements have been partially re-

All utility lines were relocated underground along Metuchen's Main Street in 1984. This streetscape improvement has helped spur downtown revitalization efforts.



sponsible for downtown revitalization efforts which have yielded millions of dollars in rehabilitation and reinvestment in adjacent properties. The special character of the Borough's downtown has been widely recognized—not only by designation as a Town Center, by the New Jersey State Planning Commission, pursuant to the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan—but also by both the residents of the Borough and the surrounding communities in the region.

These downtown streetscape improvements have been extended beyond Main Street to numerous other sites on an incremental basis since 1984. Main Street style lamps are required by ordinance along the right-of-way of downtown properties. However, due to the separate nature of each incremental development, the streetscape improvements have often only included new street lamps, without the complementary improvement of placing overhead utilities underground. This has created a situation where substantial portions of the downtown area have attractive street lamps in front of specific properties, but the overall streetscape is still impeded, functionally and visually, by overhead utility lines, and still burdened by the safety concerns caused by utility poles and utility lines in a congested downtown district.

The Downtown Core Area serves both the residents of Metuchen and also the residents of the greater region by providing a business and cultural center. Driving and walking to theaters, restaurants, coffeehouses, shopping, offices, and of course, the train station, are among the many public attractions of the Downtown Core Area of the Borough. The elimination of above ground utility poles and overhead utilities enhances the public's experience by eliminating on-street parking conflicts with such poles and by enhancing the character of the streetscape. From a safety perspective, the tall overhead poles and wires that are characteristic of highways, do not act as visual cues to passing motorists that they are driving through a low-speed pedestrian-oriented Downtown Core Area. This increases the likelihood of greater vehicular speeds and impeded perception of pedestrians, thus reducing overall safety.

A further public benefit would be the protection, and enhancement, and in many cases, restoration of shade tree plantings—a key characteristic of the Borough. One of the most important elements in well-designed and safe streets is the proper placement of shade trees between sidewalk and curb. Ironically, in Metuchen, which is virtually synonymous with “tree-lined streets,” the shade trees in the downtown area have gradually, but inexorably, been forced to yield to the overhead power lines. The reason is simple: the trees grow, but the power lines remain in place, and so, the trees are cut back continuously. In addition, public areas, such as parks and public sitting areas in the Downtown Core Area, would be far more user-friendly with the removal of overhead utility lines, thereby leading to increased use of these areas.

As part of the Utility Plan, the Land Use Plan, and the Transportation Plan elements of the Master Plan, the Borough has identified a need to plan for the underground placement of all overhead utility lines in the Downtown Core Area. While aerial facilities were once compatible with the downtown in an earlier era, the increased level of development in the Downtown Core Area demands that utility installations be more consistent with a vibrant Town Center. Utility companies were granted the privilege of erecting poles not unconditionally, but, rather, subject to the potential for relocation as public needs changed, and they accepted this privilege with the understanding that future conditions would inevitably result in change. The future in this sense has clearly arrived for the Borough, and the shift from overhead to underground utilities in the Downtown Core Area is the policy of the Master Plan.