

Example Delaware Planning Projects:

Improving Health by Planning the Built Environment

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The Plan4Health effort has been invaluable in identifying the major health principles to include in comprehensive plans. However, Delaware planners and the communities they serve have been planning for improved public health in comprehensive plans and elsewhere for decades. They just did not always firmly link the plans or their recommendations to positive health outcomes, nor fully consider the plans from a health perspective. These past efforts include things like: planning for safer roads, new parks, economic revitalization, planning for those with disabilities, and reducing vehicle emissions.

In this article, we will examine three plans across Delaware that positively impacted public health, pre- Plan4Health. Beginning in Sussex County, we will show how Milford's Southeast Neighborhood Master Plan helped preserve agriculture and guide the development of what would become a new hospital in a walkable, mixed-use setting. In Dover, we will examine how a new mass transit center helped to spark efforts to plan for neighborhood revitalization. And, outside of Wilmington, we will learn about how public health considerations recently helped drive the master plan for the Route 9 corridor, an area fraught with health and social equity challenges.

Sussex County: Milford Southeast Neighborhood Master Plan

A master planning process in the City of Milford provided a unique opportunity to envision the future of a large area that is now home to Delaware's newest hospital facility. The unique collaboration between the City and various State agencies led to a plan that will enable the creation of a healthy community in a rapidly growing part of northern Sussex County.

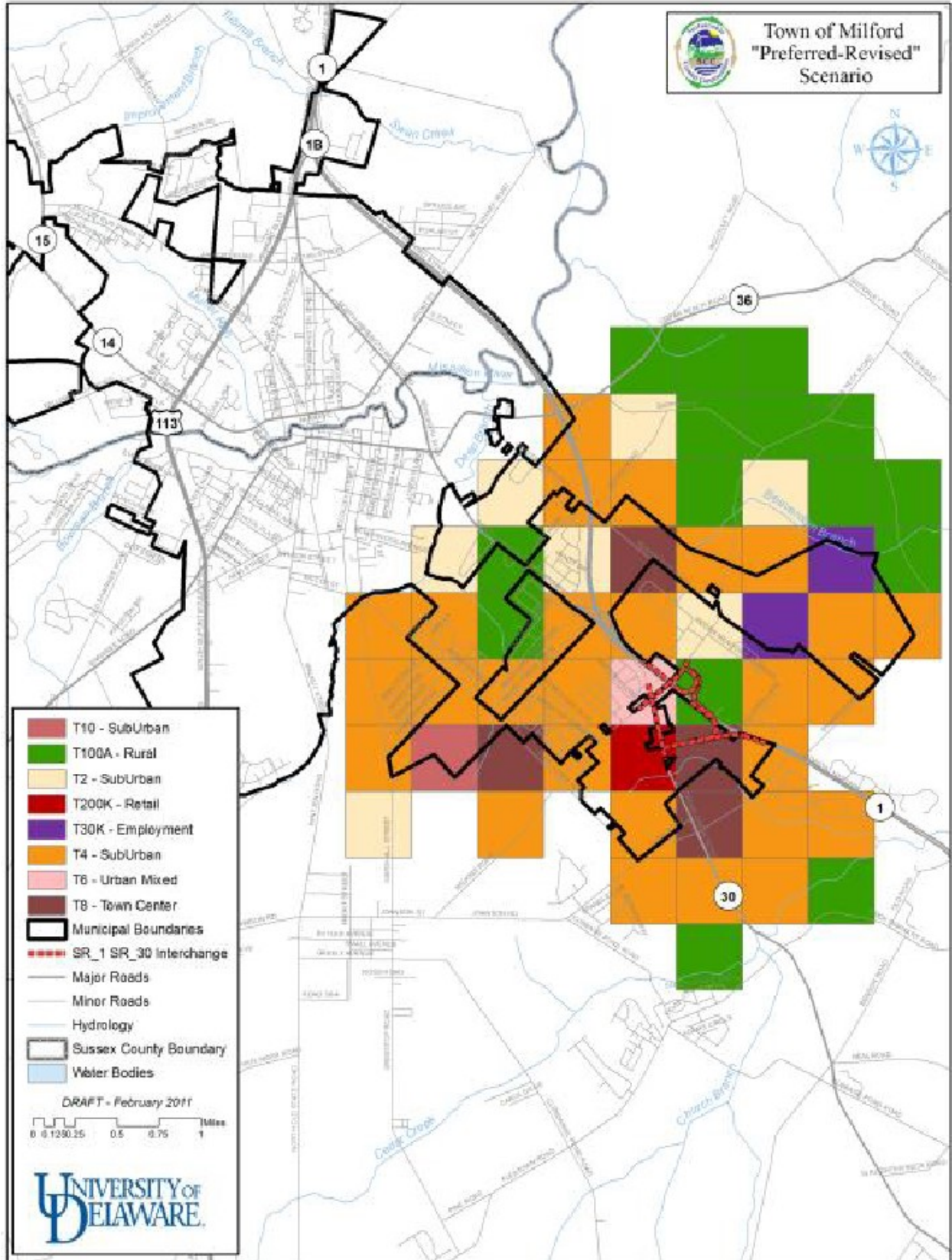
During the housing boom of the early 2000s, a great deal of residential development activity occurred in the southern part of Milford, in Sussex County. The City annexed some large parcels in this area and development consisted of single-family homes, attached housing, and condominiums. In 2005, a developer proposed a 600-home residential development in Sussex County, just east of State Route 1 near the southernmost City limits. The City became concerned that if this subdivision were constructed, the City would be the de facto provider of services (police, fire, library, parks, and eventually even sewer and water) without the benefit of a tax base to support those services. The City reached out to the developer and to the State to discuss annexation. At the time, the area was considered a rural area by the city, county and state plans.

The developer was interested in annexing into the city, but the annexation raised significant concerns from various state agencies. These concerns included agricultural preservation, environmental protection, coordination with transportation improvements, and preventing sprawl into a rural area of Sussex County.

The City, the Office of State Planning Coordination (OSPC), Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement to solidify all parties' commitments to work together on a master plan for the area in 2009. The master plan was a means to thoughtfully meet the developer's objectives, account for the City's concerns over growth and services, and ensure that the State's environmental and agricultural resources were protected. It also allowed all parties to anticipate the impact of a new grade separated intersection (e.g. overpass) on land use and the rest of the transportation network.

The planning process included a series of public workshops, held with assistance from the University of Delaware, to help residents and business owners envision the future of this area. As a result of these workshops, a consensus plan was developed that concentrated development around the Route 1 and Route 30 grade separated intersection, with a variety of housing densities (see Figure 1). A transfer of development rights program was envisioned to protect agricultural lands surrounding this area, and a future road network was planned to serve the developed areas as they built out. The plan was adopted in July of 2011.

Figure 1. Milford Area Development Plan



The Southeast Neighborhood has continued to grow in accordance with the master plan. As of

2017 DeIDOT has completed construction of the grade-separated intersection, and the City has completed sewer and water system installation, including a new water tower.

As this was occurring, Bayhealth was searching for a new site to build a health campus to replace the aging Milford Memorial Hospital. They reviewed site options throughout the Milford area and settled on a parcel in the Southeast Neighborhood Master Plan due to its superior access and utility availability. This new campus, a more than \$300 million project, is currently under construction and is anticipated to open in 2019 (see Figure 2). The construction of the hospital is driving interest for a variety of other office, commercial, and residential projects that are now in the planning phases in this section of Milford.

Figure 2. Construction of New Bayhealth Health Campus



The idea of incorporating public health into master plans was not common back in 2009 when this planning process began. Even so, this plan provides a good framework for the creation of a healthy community in Southeast Milford. The transportation plan is a good example. Although there is a great deal of new development activity in this part of Milford, it is still somewhat remote from the historic downtown area. In addition, the roads are currently designed for rural traffic and, for the most part, do not contain sidewalks or bike paths. As the area grows, the master plan envisions an interconnected road network that meets the principles of “complete streets.” Complete streets is a policy, adopted by DeIDOT, that strives to include all modes of transportation in new road design. As such, all future road improvements will include sidewalks and bicycle paths as appropriate. A transit loop was also envisioned to link this neighborhood with the historic downtown. Once these improvements are made, future residents will be able to use active transportation (walking and biking) to move around the neighborhood and throughout the city.

This future transportation network would not work very well if development occurred in a spread out, low density pattern. The distances would be too great between the various homes, businesses

and institutions for people to choose to walk. The land use plan for the Southeast Neighborhood addresses that concern by creating a pattern of development that will support a healthy community by encouraging walking and biking. Development is concentrated in the vicinity of the new grade separated intersection. What was originally envisioned as a shopping district is now the site of the new Bayhealth hospital campus. New offices, commercial uses and homes are also envisioned near the campus. Areas further away from this district have lower densities, and agricultural preservation is planned for the lands farthest away.

Since we are talking about creating healthy communities, it should be mentioned that a new hospital or other medical facility was always envisioned as an anchor institution in this neighborhood. The Bayhealth project will provide numerous healthcare services to those who live in this neighborhood and throughout Milford and Sussex County.

Although many features of this master plan support the creation of a healthy community, there are some aspects missing from the plan. Most notable is the lack of a parks and recreation plan in the master plan. At the time (2009 – 2011) the City and the various state agencies were very concerned with preserving open space and agricultural lands and protecting environmental features.

These are important components of any plan, but it is also important to plan for parks or a park system to provide places for “active recreation” near residential areas where they can be easily accessed.

The Milford Southeast Neighborhood Master Plan is guiding the growth of this neighborhood as a healthy community. It will have a diverse mix of uses (including first class medical facilities) designed in a way that will make it possible to walk or bike to take care of many daily needs. Although more planning for parks and recreational facilities are probably needed, the City will undoubtedly be adjusting the plan in the future as the area grows.

Kent County: Dover Transit Center

As early as 2004, the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and its transit provider, the Delaware Transit Corporation (DTC), began discussions on developing a transit center for central Delaware. DelDOT planners began discussing the potential elements of the transit center with the Dover/Kent County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the community, and amongst themselves.

The MPO envisioned a compact, and vibrant mixed-use development pattern around the new transit center, with good walking and bicycling opportunities and discussed this concept with the team. Known in planning jargon as Transit Oriented Development (TOD) – or its antecedent Transit Ready Development (TRD) – the idea is to create a compact and vibrant development pattern which takes advantage of the proximity to a transit hub. The Downtown Dover Partnership (DDP), a group promoting reinvestment in Dover’s downtown, became involved, and supported the concept of using the new transit center to support redeveloping the surrounding area. Together, both the MPO and the DDP helped drive what would become the Dover Transit Center Neighborhood Plan and Design Book.

In 2010, the MPO and DDP formally began the planning effort by hosting a five-day design charrette. Charettes serve as an open and often exciting public design process where issues are discussed, ideas are identified, and solutions are created collectively. Dover’s charrette brought

together local and national design teams to study the strengths and opportunities around the transit center. More than 100 people participated, including Dover City Council members; city, county and state agency staff; Dover downtown partnership representatives; community leaders; developers and business owners; and residents.

Next, a plan was created which cataloged work done prior to and during the charrette in a written and visual format. The purpose of this document was to serve as a roadmap for downtown development and implementation of the vision plan as well as to serve as a marketing tool to highlight the development potential of downtown Dover to private and public stakeholders. The plan illustrated a redevelopment vision based on a 25-year buildout.

The proposed plan documents the benefits of density with welcoming street frontages to create a walkable neighborhood, cornerstone tenets of a healthier built environment. It suggested street network improvements including alternative street design cross-sections. It identified street parking in proposed opportunities for more efficient surface parking and even parking structures for the future. The plan incorporated areas of open space including a civic plaza and parks.

The plan identified opportunities for new and infill development to occur around the transit center, sensitive to the existing context, scale, and materials of existing buildings and seek to create a harmonious mixture between old and new.

Building design principles identified in the plan included elements of Traditional Neighborhood Design, including

- Buildings should be oriented to the street, human scaled and encourage pedestrian activity
- Create attractive buildings based on traditional urban architecture. Ensure buildings work together to reinforce the character of a downtown -- a vital and lively place with an abundant diversity of commercial, retail and residential uses
- Enrich the quality of the pedestrian experience as street-level buildings by using lighting, signage, and storefront design
- Mixed-use buildings are strongly encouraged

In the years since the plan, the bus facilities were constructed and are today in operation. Hundreds of riders each day, of both regional service and city buses, pass through the new Dover Transit Center. The other portions the plan that have been implemented already influence pedestrian activity in this part of downtown Dover. The DDP has used this plan to guide their activities in improving this neighborhood. For example, at least two blocks of North Street were rebuilt, a vacant lot was rebuilt to create Loockerman Way (a public plaza, an important community gathering place and home to the DDP's farmers market), and the multiple owner and segregated parking lots on North Street were combined to create a single lot with restricted access and other improvements. Plans for redevelopment of a key DDP site (former ACME site/Kunkles Auto Parts and Kent County Community Action Program day care facility) on the 100 block of South Governors Avenue have been created and were approved by the Dover Planning Commission. Despite the fact that there have been few new buildings constructed by private investors there is an increasing interest in revitalizing older structures and opening new businesses in long dormant storefronts. Continued future improvements depend on the city and private property owners supporting the plan's vision and dedicating improvements that represent its goals. Readers who would like to learn more about this effort, or to read the Dover Transit

Center Neighborhood Plan and Design Book should visit:

<https://www.downtowndoverpartnership.com/FinalPlanBookwithDDPAppendixV2.pdf>

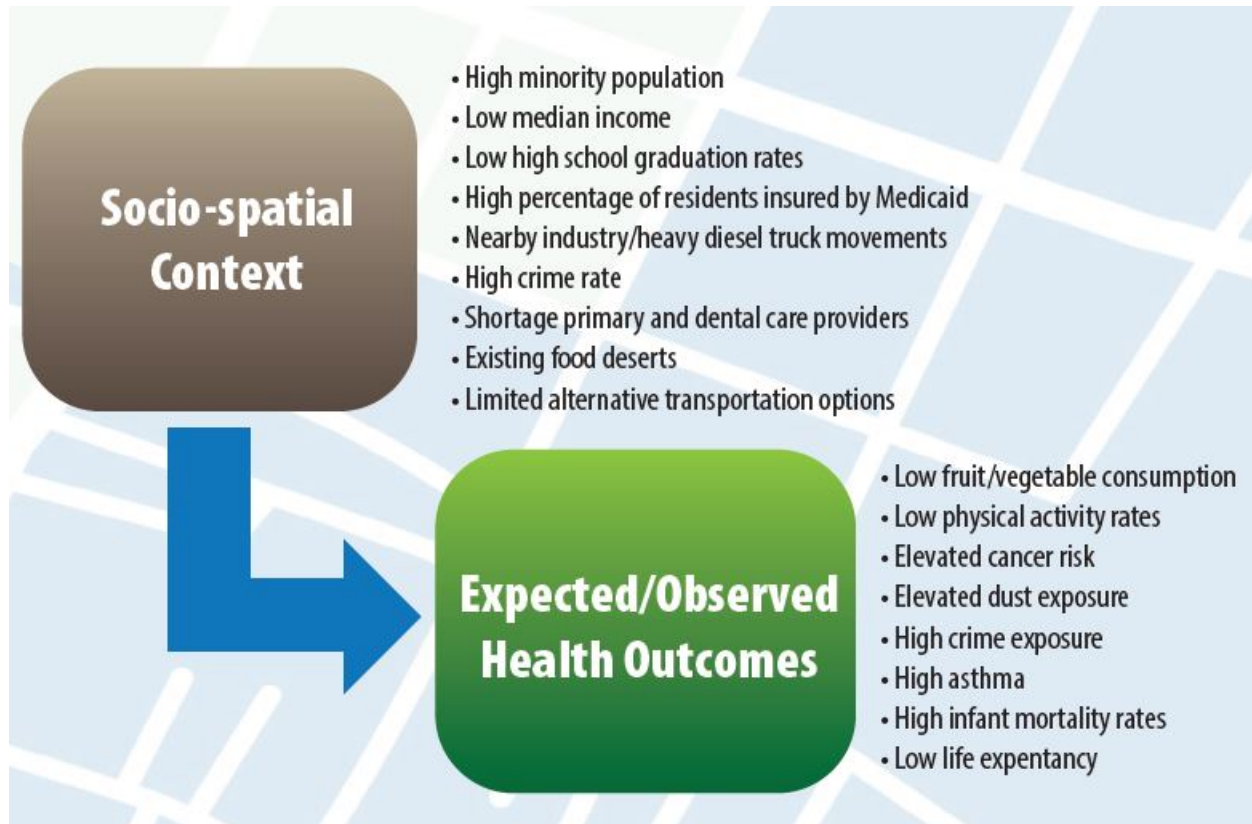
New Castle County - Route 9 Corridor Master Plan

Twentieth-century development along the Route 9 corridor near Wilmington occurred in a haphazard way. Industries and homes were built too closely to one another; streets and sidewalks did not always link together neighborhoods; major roads were overbuilt; commercial activity was not centralized; and busy raised expressways--I-495 and I-295 divided local communities. Policies which led to concentrated pockets of joblessness and poverty have encouraged a high crime rate – the number one community concern – to become entrenched.

The Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO), Wilmington’s Metropolitan Planning Organization, recently completed a 20-year master plan for the Route 9 corridor which aims to reverse decades of inattentive planning. Study and area boundaries stretched north/south from the City of Wilmington line to the City of New Castle line, and west/east from US 13 to the Delaware River. More than 16,500 people live within this area today. The initiative, which came at the request of New Castle County, makes a series of land use and transportation recommendations aimed at sparking economic revitalization and improving the health and quality of life for area residents. It was guided by a steering committee comprised of local civic leaders, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. This group met regularly to provide feedback on the study, and to help spread the word about it.

Public health connections feature strongly into the plan. Closely working with Nemours Health and Prevention Services and DNREC (both members of the plan’s steering committee), WILMAPCO combed through available data to show the correlation between the corridor’s socio-spatial context and expected and observed health outcomes (see Figure 3). The corridor’s underlying demographics, limited preventative health care and healthy food availability (most neighborhoods are “food deserts,” home to low income residents some distance from food markets), high crime statistics, and car-centric development pattern all place it squarely in the realm of being a public health concern. Further, recent air testing by DNREC indicates high levels of total suspended dust in communities near the port, in violation of a state welfare standard but below levels that would be medically dangerous on their own. Still, DNREC and others have shown that cancer and respiratory illness risk in communities along this corridor have been shown to be slightly elevated, with causation not yet established.

Figure 3. Correlation Between the Route 9 Corridor Socio-Spatial Context and Expected and Observed Health Outcomes



Strong, innovative public engagement occurred throughout the planning process, with several hundred area residents contributing their vision for the future (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). Special attention was also given to collecting feedback from area children, which is unique with planning studies. Residents young and old who contributed to the plan at either one of the two big public workshops, online, at a basketball game or community festival, or simply on the street, were asked to identify their neighborhood. These locations were mapped. Later, WILMAPCO identified neighborhoods along the corridor with limited resident responses. These limited response areas were then specifically targeted for additional outreach. In the end, WILMAPCO achieved feedback from residents in each of the neighborhoods—important given the area’s racial and class diversity.

Figure 4. Key Rezoning Proposals: Route 9 Master Plan

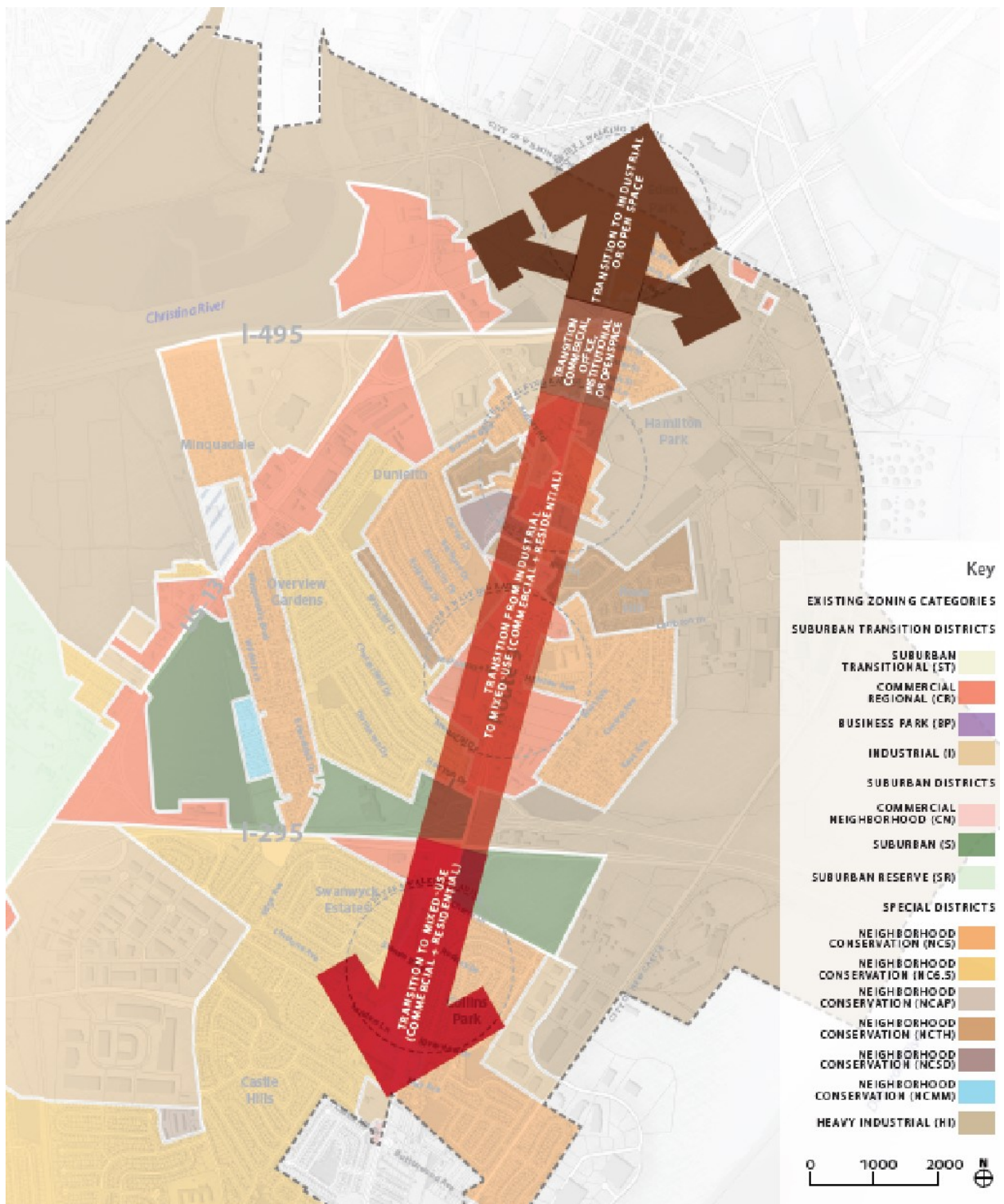


Figure 5. Mobile Outreach During the Route 9 Master Plan



Taking the existing conditions research -- including public health considerations -- a detailed

market assessment (potential growth through 2036), and feedback from key stakeholders and the public into consideration, the Route 9 Master Plan makes a series of sweeping land use and transportation recommendations to spark revitalization and better protect quality of life:

- Changing the underlying zoning of land to properly space industrial from residential uses. This will involve relocating residents in two neighborhoods – Hamilton Park and Eden Park Gardens – away from industry and, in other parts of the corridor, rezoning land out of industry and into residential/commercial.
- Along with the previous recommendation, new strategically-placed truck routes to keep big trucks out of existing and future neighborhoods (a key community concern) while simultaneously improving freight movement efficiency.
- Zoning adjustments to allow compact, walkable mixed- use development (residential/commercial/office) to grow within several identified “suburban centers.”
- The first center proposed for this healthier, complete development style is around the new Route 9 Library and Innovation Center. There, new rental and for-sale housing (mostly market rate, but with a percentage of affordable units), along with new office and retail and park space are proposed. In the 20-year timeframe, this intensive cluster should encourage the redevelopment of nearby underused commercial properties.
- Both Route 9 and Memorial Drive, a key west/east link, should be placed on “road diets” – that is they should have what are now (and will be in the future according to demographic and traffic projections) functionally-excessive motor lanes removed. Instead, more space for buses and people walking and bicycling should be provided. Key intersections will have to be rebuilt (some as roundabouts) to keep traffic moving. Both road diets and roundabouts have been shown to reduce dangerous vehicle crashes and improve pedestrian safety and connectivity.

The Route 9 Master Plan was finalized in May 2017. A project monitoring committee, comprised largely of members of the original steering committee, has been established to guide its implementation. And, indeed, implementation is already underway:

- DelDOT has proposed \$1.2 million in spending to begin engineering the major transportation recommendations. The monitoring committee is prioritizing these recommendations, and exploring ways to involve local labor in their construction.
- “Safe Routes to School” Programs were begun at two local schools in response to the Master Plan. These initiatives will make it more feasible and safer for kids to walk and bike to school. DelDOT and local elected officials have committed \$125,000 for each school to improve surrounding sidewalks and road crossings and signage, with a further \$10,000 commitment from Nemours to support one of the programs.
- New Castle County has engaged the University of Delaware to survey residents of Hamilton Park and Eden Park Gardens about their feelings of potentially being relocated.

Readers who would like to learn more about the Route 9 Master Plan, or stay abreast of the work, should visit: www.wilmapco.org/route9.

Conclusion

As shown by the three examples in this article, planners have been long helping to plan for changes to the built environment that, if implemented, will help achieve positive health outcomes. Protecting agricultural resources, promoting infill and redevelopment in a walkable setting, better spacing residential neighborhoods from industry, planning for more parks, and rethinking the way that our streets function to reduce crashes and promote alternative transportation are key recommendations from the three plans highlighted here. As new plans are initiated in the coming years, better and more fully incorporating public health considerations will not be difficult. A solid foundational history of doing so is already built.

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