

Chapter 1

Mobility & Community Form: An Introduction



The pattern of roadways and land uses in a community can facilitate or discourage many kinds of activities. Source: Ian Lockwood

Transportation is intimately connected to the quality of life in New Jersey's cities and towns, villages and hamlets, and sprawling suburbs. Facilities such as streets and parking help knit places together, while others form barriers. Frequently, transportation occupies a large portion of the community's land. Some travel ways are easy to navigate, attractive, and safe; others are oppressive or confusing. Although we take it for granted – as an unchangeable fact of life – transportation is really a series of choices that shape many of the habits of daily life, often in subtle ways. It occupies significant amounts of people's time – time that could be enjoyable, but is often dull, frustrating or anxiety-producing instead.





This publication is about preparing a master plan that:

- Maximizes mobility for all people,
- Balances the amount, location and type of transportation facilities with the community's land development patterns,
- Specifically links transportation facilities with adjoining developments and the broader community,
- Helps make the travel experience enjoyable,
- Engages citizens in the planning process, and
- Meets the expectations for Plan Endorsement.

The MLUL gives little guidance on preparing the master plan circulation element. In fact, in many master plans, the circulation element is little more than a roadway inventory and some engineering designs. Frequently, there is little recognition of the different functions of roadways or of the land uses that adjoin them.

The most effective local transportation plans look beyond the street system and recognize the many linkages between transportation and community life in its varied forms. This means considering not only travel needs, but the specific ways in which transportation tends to structure activities and spaces throughout a municipality and the region beyond. It means considering how development decisions made today will affect community mobility and people's daily experiences for decades into the future.

The New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) seeks to promote a people-centered approach to local transportation planning, one that places community life and the quality of the human experience at the center of the planning process. Fundamental to this approach is the importance of recurring patterns of activity that promote personal interaction, walking, and civic life. This guide provides ideas for improving local mobility while working toward the municipality's broader vision for community life. The guide can be used during the development of the municipal Master Plan, or simply as a tool for visualizing and implementing desired changes.

“A building or town is given its character, essentially, by those events which keep on happening there most often.” –Christopher Alexander

Activities Make Places

What makes some of the places we encounter delightful and satisfying to spend time in, while others are discouraging to the senses, difficult to navigate on foot or by car, or simply forgettable? What do we remember when we think of the best places we have visited, lived, and worked in? Often, it is the presence of people gathered together. People, more than buildings or streetscapes, imbue communities with life. Planners have an opportunity to establish a more vibrant community life by encouraging those activity patterns and places that support interaction. And focusing on *activities of people* as the locus of discussion inherently links transportation and land use and shifts the discussion away from movement of vehicles.



A lively community is one in which people are encouraged to gather, linger, and talk as they go about their daily routines. Opportunities for chance meetings are balanced with the security of knowing how to move safely from place to place. A vibrant community—whether large or small—is also one in which people enjoy walking. Automobile and truck traffic are accommodated in ways that do not jeopardize pedestrian mobility. Public transit is a core ingredient in the transportation mix.

These considerations can be brought into the process of developing a Circulation Element, or used in evaluating development proposals. When considering local goals and mobility needs, citizens and local leaders should pay particular attention to the use of public space, the quality of civic life, and the degree of social interaction in the community. Where do people like to gather, and what places do they avoid? Do neighbors have easy opportunities to meet one another? Are shopping areas inviting? Can some daily needs be met by walking? Can residents bicycle to open spaces or waterfronts? Which routine activities contribute to the community’s desired way of life, and which detract from it? Local governments and citizens are encouraged to pose these types of questions during the assessment and visioning process for the Circulation Element (see Chapter 2).

Patterns of Form and Activity

Communities are given form and character not just by their buildings and public spaces, but also by the recurring events that take place there. Individual events are important, but so are the patterns of events and the context of patterns. Consider, for example, the event of walking. Walking is a much different experience on a footpath than it is in a busy shopping district or along a high speed highway. Where community design actively encourages walking events, a pattern of walking develops, which in turn shapes the community by accommodating related patterns of social interaction, economic activity, and a reduced need for automobile travel. The relationships between these patterns and the physical community form establish the context in which the community functions (or fails to function).



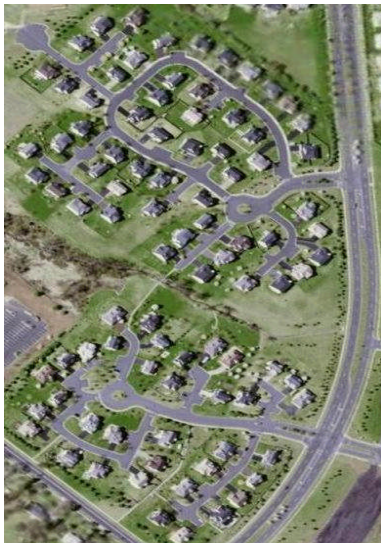
Clearly, the design of public spaces (streets, plazas, junctions, footpaths, resting spaces, etc.) and the intended functions of these spaces (high speed auto traffic, goods movement, walking and biking, shopping, resting) must be considered together to establish desirable community form. A network for goods movement, for example, would rarely mesh with a network intended for walking or sitting. Both are necessary to create a vibrant community, but neither can be pulled from a single design template.

Preparing the elements of a municipal Master Plan provides a chance to think anew about how well a community *works*: how recurring events create patterns and how these patterns influence the experiences of residents, workers, and visitors to a community. This document is intended to help local officials understand and apply this integrated approach to mobility and

community form. It describes basic principles, resources, and examples of successful plans and projects from New Jersey and elsewhere.

What is Community Form?

Community form refers to the physical shape and patterns of development that make up a built environment. The basic ingredients of community form are much like a set of building blocks arranged on a game board. Housing, offices, shops, schools, public buildings, parks, plazas, industry, warehouses, hospitals—all are located, or will need to be located, in spaces largely defined by the municipal street system. These building blocks, as well as other transportation features such as sidewalks and paths, intersections, parking areas, and transit facilities, can be arranged in strikingly different ways. Community form also includes details, such as street trees, building heights and setbacks, which help interpret larger spaces and structures.



In some communities, land uses are combined in distinctive, readily identified neighborhoods or nodes, and these focal points serve as gathering places for community life, recreation and commerce. In other towns, uses are strictly segregated, common public space is scarce or nonexistent, and few trips can be accomplished without driving. Many towns present a mix of these tendencies – with traditional walkable centers surrounded by auto-oriented environments that can jeopardize the character of the original community.



Of course in reality, most New Jersey communities are heavily settled—existing buildings are already “glued” to the game board. The planning process is necessarily an incremental one in which new land uses, new transportation features and new activity spaces need to be placed upon or carved out of the existing urban fabric. However, it is still helpful to think “from scratch” about community form. An effort to investigate the relationship of the street network to other public and private spaces, and their patterns of use, will help identify possibilities for positive change and make for a more meaningful master plan.

Thinking “from scratch” also makes us aware that communities evolve. Some elements, such as hastily erected strip malls, may become obsolete in just a few years. But other elements, such as a memorial plaza, can become beloved places that endure for

hundreds of years. As communities evolve, it is important to identify those elements of community character that we want to preserve and to ensure that their context – the community around them – remains supportive.

Using This Guide

This guide provides a framework for improving local mobility and creating more satisfying patterns of community life. It can be used during the development of the Circulation Element of the municipal Master Plan, as a tool for visualizing changes in a particular site or corridor, or as a basis for creating design guidelines for new development.

This chapter has outlined the concept of Mobility and Community Form and the benefits of this approach to local transportation planning. Chapter 2 presents methods for assessing current community forms and activity patterns and envisioning desired changes. Chapter 3 presents seven patterns for achieving a more balanced community form, along with principles, techniques, examples and resources for achieving them. Chapter 4 shows how to use the seven patterns to create and implement a community vision for linking mobility and community form. Chapter 5 steps back to consider the larger regional context and the opportunity for municipalities to work with their neighbors and with state agencies to solve transportation problems that transcend municipal borders. This final chapter also introduces several topics that a circulation element should address in order to meet NJDOT's expectations for the Plan Endorsement process of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

