

Introduction

Downtown Cranford is the heart of our community with benefits that extend to every resident in town. Our downtown provides amenity, serves as a local and regional destination, is the location of our municipal government and various services, and is the place where a growing residential population calls home. Much of Downtown also reflects Cranford’s architectural heritage, with buildings dating to our early commercial development and bearing the names of some of Cranford’s historical figures such as Sperry, Jahn, and Shapiro. Indeed, Downtown Cranford provides a true sense of place that helps to define our town. Its success is inextricably related to Cranford’s overall economic well-being.

Downtown Cranford is home to New Jersey’s oldest Special Improvement District (SID). According to the state’s Department of Community Affairs, SIDs are defined areas typically located within a central business district and authorized by state law and local ordinance to collect a special assessment on the commercial properties, businesses, and residents of the area. The assessment is granted to a District Management Corporation (DMC) which is a non-profit organization governed by a Board.

Cranford’s DMC is committed to maximizing the potential of our downtown and building on its competitive advantages, including convenient access to New York City, historic character, transportation assets, mixed uses, and community interest and engagement from surrounding residents. To that end, the 11-member DMC Board felt it was necessary to create a new strategic plan for Downtown Cranford to create a vision for our community – businesses, property owners and residents – and set direction for the next five years. The plan was produced through the dedicated and volunteer efforts of DMC Board members and concerned citizens, with support from the DMC professional staff, between November 2016 and November 2017.

[INSERT MAP OF SID]

Vision

Foster an active, self-sustaining and compact Downtown community of residents and businesses

- **Active** implies a walkable place with engaged and invested residents, recurring visitors, a healthy and bustling business environment, and inviting public spaces.
- **Self-sustaining** implies having a balanced mix of residents and businesses that can support and service each other to insulate our Downtown from economic downturns and reduce business reliance on out-of-town customers.
- **Compact** implies a mix of traditional downtown land uses and compatible development patterns that are walkable, with a critical density of businesses that support each other due to proximity.
- **Community** implies a true neighborhood where people support each other.
- **Residents and businesses** are the lifeblood of thriving communities. The DMC recognizes that you can’t have one without the other.

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Policies critical to realizing the vision

Polices represent basic, overarching principles that are intended to guide decision making. Having a defined set of policies in place will help to ensure alignment among all municipal stakeholders and aid in plan implementation.

Governance

- Develop proactive approaches rather than reactive responses.
- Foster and maintain open lines of communication among all municipal departments, boards and organizations.
- Prioritize public safety, property maintenance, and adherence to ordinances.
- Establish an organizational structure in which the Township Administrator can manage this plan's implementation.
- Leverage the existing Vision Plan which is well-established and embraced on all levels of municipal government.
- Commit to efficient and streamlined review and approval processes.
- Include DMC professional staff and Board in all application reviews for large commercial and residential projects that may impact the SID.
- Maximize public-private partnerships when possible.

Managing our Built Environment

- Promote traditional downtown development patterns with compact, street-facing buildings and limited curb cuts on side streets only.
- Mitigate flooding where necessary through infrastructure upgrades implemented through new development projects and/or public improvements.
- Decrease or, at the very least, maintain the net amount of impervious surfaces in our downtown to mitigate flooding concerns.
- Maintain a balance of mixed uses: retail, restaurants, offices, services, and residential.
- Encourage new development in the SID to target investment in our downtown and limit impacts to residential neighborhoods throughout the Township.
- Prioritize residential development downtown, including opportunities to age in place, while ensuring that COAH requirements are met. Downtown residences will help to stabilize our tax base while increasing the local customer base for our businesses.
- Utilize rehabilitation and/or redevelopment designations, particularly at vacant or underutilized properties, to proactively plan for and encourage downtown development.
- Differentiate Downtown Cranford from other downtowns by revitalizing historic building facades.
- Ensure that all public spaces downtown – sidewalks, plazas, planters, landscaping, etc. – are well maintained.
- Incorporate public art into new/improved public spaces.
- Invest in regular sidewalk maintenance and upgrades to public circulation spaces to create a more walkable and accessible downtown for all ages and abilities.
- Maintain sidewalk and streetlight consistency and continuity throughout the SID.
- Enhance the ability to travel to/from downtown on bike.
- Manage parking supply to respond to current and future trends.
- Ensure compatibility and alignment with Cranford's Master Plan.

Challenges

As a first step, members of DMC's Strategic Planning committee discussed and identified a number of challenges as they relate to Downtown Cranford. These challenges, while not exhaustive, represent defensible areas of concern articulated through previous planning efforts or by DMC Board members and local stakeholders. The challenges have been grouped into the following categories.

- **Governance**

- Code adherence can be erratic due in part to unclear ordinances and inconsistent code enforcement.
- A lack of clear, defined design standards for buildings and signs can create unnecessary confusion among developers, architects, businesses and Township officials.
- Cranford lacks professional planning services to proactively guide long-term thinking and planning and advocate for Downtown interests.
- The Township lacks a parking management entity to continually evaluate supply and demand and proactively plan for future needs and maintenance
- The Township lacks mechanisms to attract funding for planning and/or physical improvements.
- Regular, open communication among government departments could be improved.

- **Development**

- Downtown features a number of underutilized properties/parcels, such as one-story buildings, vacant properties, detached buildings, and surface parking.
- Certain development patterns and land uses – e.g., strip malls, gas stations, auto body shops, etc. – don't align with Downtown's traditional nature.
- Cranford faces increased competition from towns in our region.
- Redevelopment/rehabilitation designations are not used to their full potential. In fact, the formal rehabilitation designation that had been applied in 2006 to North Ave (from Centennial Avenue to Alden Street) was rescinded in 2008.
- Increasing the number of downtown businesses without increasing the downtown residential population puts businesses at risk of saturation.
- E-commerce and chain retailers further put some brick-and-mortar businesses at risk.
- There appears to be a lack of cohesive development vision for Downtown among Cranford stakeholders and little alignment with the vision established in Cranford's Master Plan.
- Meeting the new Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) requirements presents a challenge that the Township must proactively navigate to avoid builders' remedies or other legal disputes that otherwise compromise our ability to plan for the future.

- **Mobility**

- Extremely long crossings make streets intimidating to cross at many intersections.
- Suburban drivers are generally unaccustomed to sharing the road with other users, particularly pedestrians.
- Street and intersection designs allow and invite speeding.
- Sidewalks in many locations are too narrow for sidewalk activities such as al fresco dining or basic two-way pedestrian flows.
- Downtown has limited bike parking and no on-street bicycle facilities/markings.

- No alternative means of transportation, such as shuttles, exist connecting key activity generators such as Union County College with Downtown.
- No gateway experience exists at the edges of our Downtown to literally or emblematically welcome people and announce arrival.
- Lack of a one-seat ride negatively impacts Cranford's desirability to New York commuters and potentially limits increases in property value.
- **Parking**
 - Parking supply is fragmented.
 - The Township lacks centralized/organized parking management systems.
 - Parking wayfinding is extremely limited which can increase the amount of time drivers spend in their vehicles searching for parking.
 - Parking demand can be difficult to manage during defined peak periods.
- **Maintenance**
 - There is a general lack of public gathering spaces or areas of engagement downtown.
 - The downtown streetscape is outdated and falling into disrepair.
 - Public spaces are not regularly maintained.
 - Many buildings and facades are in disrepair.
 - Understaffing at the Department of Public Works (DPW) can divert resources from Downtown, particularly during the busy fall and winter seasons when leaf collection and snow removal are priorities.

Goals and Objectives

A clear set of goals and objectives is required that responds to the challenges listed above.

Goals are overarching, aspirational statements that guide the planning process and subsequent decision making. The four goals that have been developed for this plan are positive, forward-thinking statements that our community can get behind.

Objectives are the specific, measurable steps that are taken to meet an associated goal. The objectives articulated in this plan were developed based on input from the DMC Board, professional staff, and elected officials and are grounded in best practice.

Under each goal, the objectives have been organized into three implementation timeframes:

- **Short: Within 2 years.** These objectives comprise more turnkey efforts or “low-hanging fruit” that are either currently underway or readily implementable within 12 months of plan adoption.
- **Mid: 3-5 years.** These efforts are more complex but reasonably implementable within this plan’s 5-year time horizon.
- **Long: Beyond 5 years.** These objectives have an implementation timeframe that may extend beyond the time horizon of this plan; however, actions necessary to advance implementation should be taken within the next 5 years.

For all strategies, the **Township Committee** and **Township Administrator** must play key roles. The intention is for the former to lead and make critical decisions to facilitate strategy implementation while empowering the latter to manage the execution of each strategy by working with specific municipal departments, boards, and entities; those have been associated with each objective in the following tables.

Goal: Promote a vibrant downtown environment

Objective	Responsible Parties
SHORT-TERM	
Engage a design firm to re-envision Post Office Plaza, and identify and dedicate funds to fully renovate the space.	DMC, Engineering
Install at least one temporary public “parklet” with support/sponsorship from at least one downtown business.	DMC, Local businesses
Gauge interest in converting the land in front of Municipal Building into an open plaza with seating, a water feature, monuments, table and chairs, and other activating elements that can encourage use.	DMC, Public Works
Create a Downtown Cultural Arts Committee to champion public art installation and cultural events programming in Downtown Cranford.	DMC, Local businesses
Amend the Land Development Ordinance to prohibit auto-oriented land uses including those with drive-through uses.	DMC, Planning Board, Zoning Board, Zoning Office
Create a list of desired improvements at the NJ Transit station, particularly at street level, and Lobby NJ Transit for future station improvements.	DMC, NJ Transit, Historic Preservation Advisory Board
Permit pop-up businesses in vacant spaces and actively promote their availability.	DMC, Planning Board, Zoning Board, Zoning Office
MID-TERM	
Upgrade the landscaping of at least one downtown public space and at municipal properties.	DMC, Public Works, Environmental Commission
Identify land to create new open spaces for seating, a small playground and/or a dog run.	DMC, Planning Board, Zoning Office
Allocate at least one Public Works employee to support downtown maintenance.	Public Works, DMC
Lobby County and Municipality for enhancements to McConnell and Sperry Parks, located within 1.5 blocks from downtown	DMC, Environmental Commission, Historic Preservation Advisory Board, Union County
Create a business attraction plan that could be used to actively solicit new downtown businesses.	DMC
Create a ‘development handbook’ that clearly outlines the steps to proposing a new development or increased density of buildings and sites in the downtown.	DMC, Planning Board, Zoning Board, Zoning Office
LONG-TERM	
Enhance and emphasize gateways to the business district through a combination of gateway treatments, including but not limited to welcome signage, sculptural elements, landscaping, pedestrian safety interventions (i.e., neckdowns), lighting, or sidewalk materiality change.	Engineering, DMC, Public Works, CPD
Pursue development of a downtown hotel that could bring additional visitors downtown and further diversify our tax base.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, Zoning Office, DMC

Goal: Prioritize safe and accessible active mobility

Objective	Responsible Parties
SHORT-TERM	
Establish a campaign to educate all road users about the rules of the road and safe behaviors.	DMC, CPD
Engage Cranford residents and municipal entities about the importance and benefits of pedestrian safety and access.	DMC, CPD, Pedestrian Safety Committee
Ensure all downtown crosswalks are clearly and consistently marked in a “ladder” pattern with reflective thermoplastic	
Investigate locations where it may be feasible to expand sidewalk space, including on a temporary/seasonal basis.	DMC, Engineering, Pedestrian Safety Committee, Local businesses
Amend Land Development Ordinance to require minimum of 15’ sidewalks for all new development in the SID.	Zoning Office, Zoning Board, Planning Board, DMC
Work with county to evaluate conditions and investigate pedestrian safety pilot projects at least two intersections in the SID.	Union County, DMC, Pedestrian Safety Committee, CFD, First Aid Squad
Identify locations for new bike racks, purchase and installed.	DMC, Public Works, Local businesses
MID-TERM	
Hire a planning consultant to conduct a comprehensive, multimodal transportation study with a particular focus on improving conditions for walking and cycling.	DMC, Zoning Office, Engineering, CPD
Implement at least two local pedestrian improvement pilot projects that reconfigure an intersection, shorten a crosswalk, or otherwise highlight the potential of permanent access interventions.	Union Country, DMC, Pedestrian Safety Committee, CFD, First Aid Squad
LONG-TERM	
Require installation of bike sharrows (shared lane markings) on future reconstruction or repaving of the following roads within the SID: North Union Ave, South Union Ave, Alden St, Miln St, Springfield Ave, High St, Walnut Ave.	Public Works, Engineering, CPD, DMC

Goal: Provide parking that meets the needs of existing and future uses

Objective	Responsible Parties
SHORT-TERM	
Initiate discussions with NJ Transit on potential of purchasing Parking Lot 4 on the south side of the train station.	NJ Transit, DMC, Zoning Office
Evaluate trends in parking demand and alternate parking options.	DMC, Parking Committee
MID-TERM	
Hire a planning firm with parking experience to conduct a parking study to: a) assess parking supply versus demand and utilization, b) evaluate the merits of constructing a new municipal parking garage, and c) reexamine parking requirements for infill residential development.	DMC, Zoning Office, Parking Committee
Reevaluate pricing for both on-street and permit parking to manage demand. For the former, investigate feasibility of variable meter rates to manage demand during peak periods (e.g., lunch, Friday evening).	DMC, Parking Committee
Consider eliminating free parking during December holiday period and dedicating parking revenue collected during that period to specific downtown improvements, agreed to in advance.	DMC, Parking Committee
Examine pros/cons of creating a dedicated municipal parking utility.	DMC, Parking Committee
LONG-TERM	
Better manage existing parking supply through wayfinding, technology, and/or digital parking guidance signs with real-time information on the quantity of available parking spaces.	DMC, Parking Committee
Investigate the creation of a Parking Benefit District or Payment In Lieu of Parking strategies where some parking revenue collected in the SID is reinvested back into the SID for strategic improvements.	DMC, Parking Committee
Replace and augment parking in at least one surface lot (e.g., Lot 1, Lot 7) with structured parking as part of a more comprehensive development project.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, Zoning Office, DMC

Goal: Empower government to proactively plan for the future, make investment decisions, pursue funding, and implement projects

Objective	Responsible Parties
SHORT-TERM	
Hire or contract with a professional grant writer to proactively pursue funding and financing opportunities for various Township initiatives including studies or capital projects.	DMC
Identify and document underutilized properties – vacant properties, one-story buildings and surface parking lots – which could be developed or improved.	DMC
Actively and regularly enforce all codes pertaining to façade maintenance, signage, snow clearance, and other downtown maintenance matters.	DMC, Zoning Office, Property Maintenance
MID-TERM	
Engage the DMC Board and staff in the municipal Master Plan update process.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, DMC, Historic Preservation Advisory Board
Engage planning professionals for visioning, land use, and parking planning as direct hires or consultants.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, DMC
Establish clear and understandable building design standards incorporating best practices for historic areas/districts.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, DMC, Historic Preservation Advisory Board
Utilize redevelopment and/or rehabilitation designations to encourage development on underutilized and/or contaminated properties including, but not limited to, vacant parcels and surface parking lots.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, DMC
LONG-TERM	
Pursue Form-Based Coding as a way to visually clarify regulatory intent and encourage building forms that fit the historic and traditional character of our downtown.	Planning Board, Zoning Board, DMC, Historic Preservation Advisory Board
Evaluate and rank current construction and zoning permit fee structure to ensure competitive alignment with neighboring municipalities. Adjust permit fees as necessary to encourage investment.	DMC

Outreach Plan

Communicating this plan to various local stakeholders will be critical to gaining buy-in of ideas and support for future implementation and the maximization of our Downtown's potential. The following parties have been identified as those with which the DMC would like to connect to convey this plan's content.

- Members of the general public, including downtown residents
- SID businesses and property owners
- Planning Board
- Zoning Board
- Various government departments, including but not limited to Public Works, Zoning and the Police Department

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- Planning Board
- Zoning Board of Adjustment
- Historic Preservation Advisory Board

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