



Borough of Pennington, NJ Master Plan 2025

Element 1. Introduction, Vision, Assumptions, Guiding Principles and Plan Elements

Endorsed by the Planning Board, March 13, 2024, as a guide for Element writing teams.

Contents

- A. Introduction to the Master Plan
- B. Legal Basis of the Master Plan
- C. The 2025 Master Plan
- D. Vision Statement
- E. Assumptions
- F. Guiding Principles
- G. Elements of the Master Plan
- H. Implementation

A. Introduction

The municipal Master Plan, adopted by the Planning Board, sets forth the Borough's land use policies and is the principal document that addresses the way development, redevelopment, conservation and/or preservation should occur within the municipality. It is intended to guide the decisions made by public officials and those of private interests involving the use of land. Further, the Master Plan, and more specifically its goals and objectives, are critical to the Planning Board when deciding upon development applications where variance relief is requested. Through its various Elements, the Master Plan sets forth a vision for the community in the coming years.

The Master Plan forms the legal foundation for the zoning ordinance and zoning map. New Jersey, among a handful of other states, specifically ties the planning of a community as embodied in the Master Plan to the zoning ordinance and zoning map, which are adopted by the Borough Council and constitute the primary law governing the use of land at the local level. Under New Jersey's Municipal Land Use Law N.J.S.A. 40:55D-1 et seq., (hereinafter "MLUL") a zoning ordinance must be substantially consistent with the Land Use Plan.

a. Definition of the Master Plan

Municipal planning is a process: one of the primary objectives of that process is adoption of the Master Plan. The Master Plan itself is generally defined as a comprehensive guide for the future development of a community in terms of its physical, environmental, social, economic and aesthetic needs. The key aspect in defining a Master Plan is its comprehensive approach. The Master Plan considers all factors having an impact on community life and their potential for change. Each of the many aspects to be examined are considered with respect to the whole, and in forming final proposals, all planning considerations are adjusted to each other.

The Municipal Land Use Law, Chapter 219 of the Laws of New Jersey in (40:55D-5) defines a Master Plan as “a composite of one or more written or graphic proposals for the development of the municipality as set forth in and adopted pursuant to Section 19 (40:55D-28) of this act.” That section contains a listing of the mandatory and optional components of a Master Plan.

b. Purposes of a Master Plan

According to the Municipal Land Use Law, the purpose of a Master Plan is to “guide the use of lands within the municipality in a manner which protects public health and safety and promotes the general welfare.” (40:55D-28)

As noted earlier, planning is a process and one of the primary objectives of that process is the Master Plan. The purpose of the Master Plan is to present for all to see and comment on:

1. Fundamental statements of policy in the form of principles and objectives regarding future development of the community
2. Plan text and maps relating the policy statements to a physical design; and
3. General considerations of the ways and means by which Plan proposals can be achieved.

c. The Use of a Master Plan

The preparation and maintenance (updated as required) of a Master Plan can be an expensive, time-consuming process. The Master Plan is worthless, however, unless it is used. What are the uses of a Master Plan?

1. It provides the basis for zoning. Under the Municipal Land Use Law, a community wishing to control land use by means of a zoning ordinance must first adopt the Land Use Plan Element of its Master Plan.
2. It provides the local governing body, agencies, and citizens with the necessary information needed to make intelligent decisions relating to land use and community development, particularly for applications where variances are requested.
3. It is often required for a community to be eligible for certain state (e.g., Green Acres) and Federal funding programs.
4. It serves as a check for citizens against any arbitrary action of their elected officials. Action by such officials involving the expenditure of public funds for a capital project must be referred to the Planning Board for project review and recommendation in conjunction with the adopted Master Plan.
5. It often provides a wealth of general information about the community for interested citizens and, with imaginative proposals, can stimulate public interest in, and support for, community improvement.

B. Legal Requirements for Planning

a. Plan Preparation and Adoption

The responsibility for the preparation of a Master Plan rests with the Planning Board. The Master Plan is adopted (or amended) only by the Planning Board and only after a public hearing. In accordance with the Municipal Land Use Law, the Master Plan must be reexamined at least once every ten years and amended if necessary. The local development regulations must be consistent with the Land Use Element and the Housing Plan Element of the Plan.

b. Plan Content

The Master Plan must include a statement of objectives upon which the Plan is based, a Land Use Plan and additional Plan Elements as deemed appropriate for the municipality, and a specific policy statement indicating the relationship of Plan proposals to the Plans of neighboring communities, the County, and other appropriate jurisdictions.

c. Plan Impact on Future Development

The Master Plan, after adoption by the Planning Board, gives the community the legal basis for control over future development. The major means of control are as follows:

1. The official map of the community, adopted by local ordinance, must be consistent with the appropriate provisions of the Master Plan.
2. The official map is deemed conclusive with respect to the location and width of streets and public drainage ways and the location and extent of flood control basins and public areas. (40:55D-32)
3. The location and design of new streets created through the process of land subdivision or site plan approval may be required to conform to the provisions of the Mobility Plan Element of the Master Plan. (40:55D-38b(2))
4. Where the Master Plan provides for the reservation of designated streets, public drainage ways, flood control basins, or public areas, the Planning Board may require that such facilities be shown and reserved in subdivisions and site plans in locations and sizes suitable for their intended use. The reservation powers are effective for a period of one year after approval of a final plan. The municipality must compensate the owner for such an action. (40:55D-44)
5. Whenever the governing body or other public agency proposes to spend public funds, incidental to the location, character or extent of a capital project, such proposal must be referred to the Planning Board for review and recommendation. No action shall be taken without such recommendation or until 45 days have elapsed after such reference. (40:55D-31).
6. All the provisions of a zoning ordinance, or any amendment or revision thereto shall either be substantially consistent with the Land Use Element and the Housing Plan Element of the Master Plan or designed to effectuate such Plan Elements. (40:55D-62)

C. The 2025 Master Plan

The Borough of Pennington has many assets, including its location, charming downtown, established neighborhoods, and historic character. It has also benefitted from previous planning efforts, which have shaped the Borough and maintained a high quality of life for its residents. With little land available for development, the Borough population has remained stable since the last Master Plan of 1998, with 2655 residents in 2000 and 2784 in 2022. The last large area of undeveloped land in the Borough, the 16 acres previously owned by Capital Health, was rezoned for mixed residences and is now an 80-home development known as the Heritage at Pennington. Few sites remain for development.

However, there are new challenges facing the Borough, including the adverse effects of climate change, housing affordability, diversity, protecting natural resources, and traffic congestion. The Pennington Borough Master Plan Reexamination Report, adopted at a public meeting of the Planning Board on May 10, 2023, recommended that the Borough's 1998 Master Plan needed to be updated. There were three general areas where it was deemed to be deficient:

1. It made no mention of several important current issues, including conservation, renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, climate change hazard vulnerability and mitigation, green buildings, and environmental sustainability. Nor does it include an Economic Development Plan.
2. Updates are needed to the data and assumptions in the seven Elements that were in the 1998 Master Plan: land use, housing, circulation, utilities, historic preservation, community facilities, and regional planning.
3. The 1998 Master Plan and its 2005 and 2013 reexaminations, and 2014 amendment exist only as PDFs on the Borough website. Thus, it is difficult to get a coherent picture of the current Master Plan as revised by recommendations in the reexamination reports. The reexamination reports were generally aimed at specific zoning issues relevant at the time and did not represent a comprehensive review of the Borough's planning policies and objectives.

To address the first and second issues, the Planning Board recommended that the Borough embark on an update of the Master Plan, creating a process that will allow existing Elements to be fully updated and new Elements to be written by 2025. To address the third issue, the 2025 Master Plan will be a living document on the Borough website. Each Element will have its own webpage, links to which will be placed in the overall Master Plan website. Some Elements may need to be revised more frequently and when an Element is revised and publicly adopted by the Planning Board, it will replace the outdated version on the website. In this way, anyone accessing the Master Plan will be directed to the current version of all Elements.

The Municipal Land Use Law (MLUL) mandates two Elements in a Master Plan, an overview of the vision, assumptions, and guidelines upon which the proposals for the physical, economic, and social development of the municipality are based, and a Land Use Plan Element. In addition, the MLUL suggests fifteen optional Elements. Of these, ten have been deemed to be meaningful for inclusion in the Pennington Borough Master Plan along with the overview and the Land Use Plan. The twelve Plan Elements in the 2025 Pennington Borough Master Plan are:

1. Introduction, Vision, Assumptions, Guiding Principles and Plan Elements
2. Land Use Plan Element
3. Housing Plan Element
4. Mobility Plan Element
5. Public Works Services Plan Element
6. Community Facilities and Services Plan Element
7. Open Space and Recreation Plan Element
8. Conservation of Natural Resources Plan Element
9. Economic Development Plan Element
10. Historic Preservation Plan Element
11. Green Buildings and Environmental Sustainability Plan Element
12. Relation to Other Plans Element

D. Vision Statement

We envision Pennington as a welcoming community with friendly, supportive neighborhoods, a diverse downtown that is inviting to residents and visitors of all ages and interests. Historic preservation remains key to the town's character and pride. We foresee open spaces and parks that offer both passive and interactive recreational resources for all. The Borough of Pennington responsibly supports affordable housing, while balancing development and preservation opportunities that enhance the quality of life for those of all ages who live, work, and play in our community. Pennington strives to be a sustainable, climate-resilient community.

E. Assumptions

1. Given a lack of vacant land, much of the Borough's future growth will be in the form of redevelopment.
2. Traffic volumes in the Borough will continue to increase as new development is constructed in surrounding Hopewell Township.
3. At the global, national, state, and local level, there will be a growing focus on mitigation and adaptation to the effects of climate change.
4. The Borough will need to comply with federal, state and county mandates regarding climate change, environmental sustainability, and green building.
5. The Borough will continue its efforts to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) in its operations to zero by 2035 and will encourage borough residents and businesses to seek ways to reduce their GHG emissions.
6. Local installation of renewable energy generation facilities and the ability to choose from a variety of emissions-free electricity suppliers will be necessary to help meet emissions reduction goals.
7. Reducing transportation GHG emissions will require zero-emissions electric, or hydrogen powered vehicles, which in turn will require charging and fueling infrastructure.

8. Funding will be needed for infrastructure improvements to reduce flooding from heavy rain, minimize damage from strong winds, and cope with temperature extremes.
9. The Borough will need to continue to provide its fair share of the region's housing that is affordable to low- and moderate-income households.
10. The trend to expand the safe use of rights-of-way to pedestrians, bicyclists and other personal vehicles will continue, with support at the state and county level.
11. Wireless communication technology will continue to improve, and the Borough will need to monitor the installation of new infrastructure.
12. Borough support for the preservation of its historic and iconic buildings will continue.
13. Support for the purchase of open space and its use for recreation will remain a focus.
14. The Borough is proud of being a Tree City and will continue to maintain its shade trees.

F. Guiding Principles

Guiding principles reflect the values of community residents and stakeholders expressed through the Master Plan outreach process, and by analysis of existing conditions, trends and best practices. They provide clarity for achieving the vision, and the community should look to these guiding principles when making planning and land use decisions.

Pennington recognizes the importance of:

1. Being a welcoming, inclusive, and accessible community for people who are diverse in age, race and ethnicity, gender identity, religion, abilities, and socioeconomic status.
2. Equitable access to housing, transportation, civic participation, parks, services, and other amenities.
3. Being a close-knit neighborhood that is also engaged in our wider communities of greater Pennington (08534 Zip code), Hopewell Township and Mercer County.
4. Maintaining attractive and caring residential neighborhoods while recognizing the need for more housing at lower price points.
5. Providing first class public services, and safe water and sanitary systems.
6. Supporting physical and mental wellness for its residents by recognizing the important health and equity implications of land use policy and planning decisions.
7. Pursuing age-friendly policies and programs so that residents can age in place and retain social connections, health, and well-being.
8. Having both a thriving town center that brings together residents, small businesses and Borough government operations, and a vibrant commercial sector along Route 31.
9. Becoming more sustainable and resilient to climate change-induced hazards and a model for energy efficiency and energy choices with a goal of becoming carbon neutral.
10. Observing best practices for designing parks, streets, public spaces, and open spaces to provide opportunities for social connectedness and a sense of community.
11. Having roads and sidewalks that safely accommodate walking, bicycling, and personal micromobility vehicles, while accommodating cars and commercial vehicles.
12. Preserving, honoring, and understanding its history, while embracing possibilities for new ways of living, working, communicating, and enjoying life.
13. Creating meaningful opportunities for social connections, culture, learning, and leisure, by engagement with public and commercial facilities in the community.

G. Elements of the Master Plan

Detailed goals and objectives will be found in the remaining eleven Elements of the Master Plan in addition to this overview. The following is a guide to what will be found in these Elements.

2. Land Use Plan Element

This is the Master Plan Element most closely related to the Borough's zoning and potential redevelopment areas. As stated in the Municipal Land Use Law, it is required to;

- (a) take into account and state its relationship to other Master Plan Elements and natural conditions;
- (b) show the existing and proposed location, extent, and intensity of development of land to be used in the future for varying types of residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, recreational, open space, educational and other public and private purposes or combination of purposes including any provisions for cluster development; and state the relationship of these to the existing and any proposed zone plan and zoning ordinance;
- (c) include a statement of the standards of population density and development intensity recommended for the Borough.

This Element uses an analysis of the Borough's population, employment, historic development, and housing forecasts, together with a community participation program to provide recommendations for how the Borough's land use and zoning districts and standards currently function and whether they need to be amended to better reflect the Borough's vision. Additionally, the Land Use Plan Element recommendations are coordinated with those of the other Plan Elements to ensure consistency throughout the Master Plan and Borough policies.

The Land Use Plan Element includes the climate change vulnerability assessment required by the Municipal Land Use Law. This covers the following:

1. An analysis of current and future threats and vulnerabilities associated with climate change-related natural hazards, including, but not limited to increased temperatures, drought, flooding, and hurricanes;
2. Build-out analysis of future residential, commercial, industrial, and other development, and an assessment of the threats and vulnerabilities to that development;
3. Identification of critical facilities, utilities, roadways, and other public infrastructure that are necessary for evacuation and sustaining quality of life during a natural disaster, and which must be maintained in an operational state;
4. An analysis of the potential impact of natural hazards on other Elements of the Master Plan;
5. Identification of strategies and design standards that may be implemented to reduce or avoid risks associated with natural hazards;
6. A specific policy statement on the consistency, coordination, and integration of the climate-change related hazard vulnerability assessment with any existing or proposed natural hazard mitigation plan, floodplain management plan, comprehensive emergency

management plan, emergency response plan, post-disaster recovery plan, or capital improvement plan.

In addition to the analysis and recommendations described herein, the Land Use Plan Element includes the existing land use map, existing zoning map, and maps depicting proposed changes to zoning boundaries if any. The latter constitutes the proposed Land Use Plan.

3. Housing Plan Element

The Housing Plan Element meets all the requirements related to affordable housing typically applied during Court review of such plans in conjunction with a Declaratory Judgment action. The Element includes required demographic analysis in the form of tables detailing the latest Census data available and includes projections of population and employment growth. It also summarizes existing affordable housing within the Borough.

4. Mobility Plan Element

This Master Plan Element, previously referred to as the Circulation Plan Element, depicts the location and types of facilities for all modes of transportation required for the efficient movement of people and goods into, about, and through the Borough - bus, rail, vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians – and does so for all users. It identifies the most common destinations within the Borough (schools, shopping, housing, etc.) and determines if modified circulation infrastructure is needed to improve existing and future resident access and mobility to each. It considers the functional highway classification system of the Federal Highway Administration and the types, locations, conditions, and availability of existing and proposed transportation facilities, including air, water, road and rail.

5. Public Works Services Plan

This Plan Element, previously referred to as the Utilities Plan Element, analyzes the need for, and shows the future general location of water supply and distribution facilities, drainage and flood control facilities, sewerage and waste treatment, solid waste disposal and provision for other related utilities and storm water management facilities. This Element is helpful to the Borough as it considers likely future development and to what extent it will be served by water, sewer, flood, solid waste, and stormwater infrastructure and what, if any, upgrades are necessary to ensure adequate service. The Element is prepared in coordination with the Borough Engineer. The Element also covers the other important services provided by the Public Works Department, borough tree maintenance, leaf collection, snow plowing and road repairs.

6. Community Facilities and Services Plan Element

This Element includes a list and brief description of the existing and proposed location of municipal buildings, churches, schools, parks and playgrounds, daycare centers, cultural facilities, historic sites, libraries, medical facilities, firehouse, police station and other related facilities. It includes all private and public facilities in the Borough that have full or limited access for residents and the purposes they serve and services they offer.

7. Open Space and Recreation Plan Element

The Borough adopted an Open Space and Recreation Plan Element in 2015, and the current Element is an update. It includes mapping of the open spaces within the Borough and nearby in Hopewell Township to aid in identification of important resources outside Pennington that Borough residents can access. Bike and pedestrian routes to and within the open spaces are linked to the Mobility Element. The 2015 Plan did not identify specific acquisition targets, but rather identified the need to work with partners in the Hopewell Valley area to consider beneficial acquisitions. This approach should be assessed based on the likelihood of additional properties within the Borough becoming available for acquisition.

8. Conservation of Natural Resources Plan Element

This Plan Element addresses the preservation, conservation, and utilization of natural resources, including energy, open space, water supply, forests, soil, marshes, wetlands, rivers, and other waters, endangered or threatened species wildlife and other resources. This Element helps to understand the environmental features in the Borough and how they relate to zoning and other policies. This Element references three documents that cover the topics of conservation of natural resources; the Environmental Resources Inventory owned by the Environmental Commission, the Community Forestry Management Plan owned by the Shade Tree Committee and the proposed Community Energy Plan to be developed by the Environmental Commission. Each will have its own website with a link from this Element.

9. Economic Development Plan Element

This Element considers all aspects of economic development and sustained economic vitality in the Borough. This can be achieved through analysis of existing and projected business and employment data. It also includes discussion on the stability and diversity of economic conditions in the Borough. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on the State's economy and how its residents and business operate and interact with one another. Economic impacts on Borough businesses, such as the work-from-home trend, outdoor dining, and drop-off/pickup business are explored for business opportunities. Parts of the Borough designated as areas in need of redevelopment could provide an opportunity and incentive for new residential, commercial, or mixed-use development. The closed landfill is an example. The Element also considers how Borough businesses can better serve "Greater Pennington" as defined by Zip code 08534. The Borough is the focal point of this community of about 15,000 people.

10. Historic Preservation Plan Element

The Historic Preservation Plan Element indicates the location and significance of historic sites and historic districts, identifies the standards used to assess worthiness for historic site or district identification, and analyzes the impact of each component and Element of the Master Plan on the preservation of historic sites and districts.

11. Green Buildings and Environmental Sustainability Plan Element

This Green Building and Environmental Sustainability Plan Element (GBESE) is intended to ensure that future planning and development in Pennington Borough enhances the sustainability and resilience of the community and minimizes its environmental footprint. Specifically, its purpose is to guide and serve as a basis for Borough land use decisions, ordinances, and policies that are related to sustainability. This Element will address climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy and energy conservation, green building and design, and sustainability issues in land use and mobility, town water, and waste management.

12. Relation to Other Plans

This section of the Master Plan addresses how the policies expressed in the various Elements relate to the policies in adjacent municipalities as expressed in their zoning ordinances and Master Plans, the County as expressed in County Master Plan documents, and the State as expressed in the State Development and Redevelopment Plan. This section will also relate the Borough's policies to regional organizations.

H. Implementation

Within the individual Elements, goals range from near-term, inexpensive quick fixes to longer range ones that may require substantial funding from internal or external sources. Some goals may involve the development of new ordinances, or revisions to existing ones. Although the Planning Board creates the Master Plan in consultation with the residents, implementation is the responsibility of Borough Council. The community will benefit when the Planning Board and the Council work together on implementation. At the completion of the Plan, an Implementation Plan will be developed by the Council with the assistance of the Planning Board.