

Secaucus Transit Village Secaucus, New Jersey

Evaluation of a Proposed Transit Village Concept and Plan

February 8–10, 2004
An Advisory Services Program Report

ULI—the Urban Land Institute
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About ULI—the Urban Land Institute

ULI—the Urban Land Institute is a non-profit research and education organization that promotes responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

The Institute maintains a membership representing a broad spectrum of interests and sponsors a wide variety of educational programs and forums to encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experience. ULI initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues and proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 20,000 members and associates from 70 countries, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines. Professionals represented include developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys,

engineers, financiers, academics, students, and librarians. ULI relies heavily on the experience of its members. It is through member involvement and information resources that ULI has been able to set standards of excellence in development practice. The Institute has long been recognized as one of America's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

This Advisory Services program report is intended to further the objectives of the Institute and to make authoritative information generally available to those seeking knowledge in the field of urban land use.

Richard M. Rosan
President

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About ULI Advisory Services

The goal of ULI's Advisory Services Program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 1947, this program has assembled well over 400 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as downtown redevelopment, land management strategies, evaluation of development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, provision of low-cost and affordable housing, and asset management strategies, among other matters. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's Advisory Services.

Each panel team is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI. They are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and screened to ensure their objectivity. ULI panel teams are interdisciplinary and are developed based on the specific scope of the assignment. ULI teams provide a holistic look at development problems.

Because the sponsoring entities are responsible for significant preparation before the panel's visit, including sending extensive briefing materials to each member and arranging for the panel to meet with key local community members and stakeholders in the project under consideration, participants in ULI's panel assignments are able to make accurate assessments of a sponsor's issues and to provide recommendations in a compressed amount of time.

A major strength of the program is ULI's unique ability to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its members, including land developers and owners, public officials, academicians, representatives of financial institutions, and others. In fulfillment of the mission of the Urban Land Institute, this Advisory Services program report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

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Sharon Mascaro, and Sara Sundell from the commission staff; Ken Snapp and Rob Edwards from New Jersey Transit; and John Keller from the Turnpike Authority played key roles by organizing the panel and providing the materials needed for ULI to do its work.

Contents

ULI Panel and Project Staff	6
Foreword: The Panel's Assignment	7
Overall Goals	8
Current Conditions	9
Recommendations	11
Next Steps	14
Conclusion	15
About the Panel	16

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Foreword: The Panel's Assignment

In 2003, New Jersey Transit (NJ Transit) opened the Frank R. Lautenberg Station at Secaucus Junction, a state-of-the-art transfer station facility that links ten of 11 major commuter rail lines in New Jersey and provides direct access to New York City. The facility—referred to as Secaucus Junction—is within the jurisdiction of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC), which has designated the land adjacent to the station as a redevelopment area, allowing it to have a redevelopment plan that supersedes zoning. The commission investigated the potential of the area as a transit village, taking advantage of its proximity to the NJ Transit facility. As it works to create a redevelopment plan, NJMC asked ULI to offer advice on how to redevelop the area as a viable transit-oriented, mixed-use development that will entice a future developer or developers. The commission staff wanted to make sure that the initial visioning document prepared for the area was realistic and that the proposed redevelopment plan would be comprehensive and realistic.

The panel approached this assignment with the following priorities in mind:

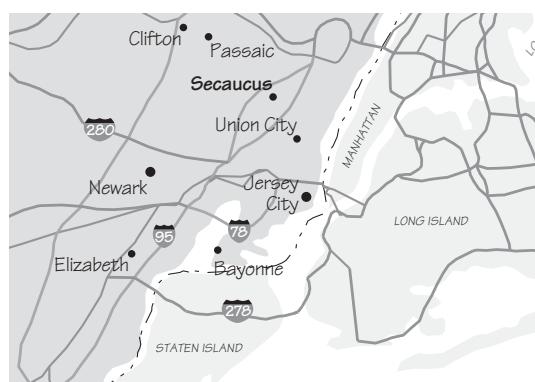
- *Focus on the proposed transit village and evaluate the potential of the area as such.*
- *Review the visioning plan and development concept drafted by consultants for NJMC.*
- *Provide a reality check on the possibilities and limitations of this area as a transit village.*
- *Set development strategies for moving forward.*

ULI Process

Before visiting the Meadowlands, the ULI panel reviewed briefing materials prepared by the NJMC staff that gave the history of the site, provided some demographic and market information, and



Location map.



Secaucus, New Jersey, is strategically located near New York City.

outlined the commission's expectations of ULI. The team spent about two days in Secaucus meeting with commission staff, touring the area, and meeting with representatives of NJ Transit and the New Jersey Turnpike Authority. It then shared its findings and observations with the NJMC and NJ Transit staffs. The following is a summary of the team's findings and observations.

Overall Goals

After meeting with the commission and other interested parties, the panel developed the following five goals for this project:

- *Create a better place.* There is an opportunity with this project to create a place where people want to be. This can be like no other project within the Meadowlands District and perhaps all of northern New Jersey.
- *Raise the quality of development.* The commission should not settle for mediocre development on this site. To achieve the vision NJMC has for the site and to help it reach its development potential, there should be high expectations for new development.
- *Channel change into a desirable master plan.* The area is going to change over time as land-owners strive to attain the highest and best use of their land. NJMC needs to make sure that it

gets in front of the development trends and ensures that its master redevelopment plan is consistent with them. The plan needs to set the framework for redevelopment.

- *Serve the greater Meadowlands area.* The panel believes that this development should be developed in such a way as to serve the whole area, not just the people who live in the development itself. The potential exists for this project to create a regional destination.
- *Capitalize on all the area's assets.* The train station is not the only asset for the project. The natural environment, access to the New Jersey Turnpike, and proximity to New York City and to redeveloping communities such as Hoboken and Jersey City are all assets that can be used to market the project.

Current Conditions

The panel started its deliberations with an evaluation of the current conditions based on a review of the briefing materials, meetings with agency representatives, and a tour of the study area. The following conditions will affect development of this site:

- the movement of land now used for warehouses to higher and better uses;
- a strong market for residential development; and
- the presence of large landowners.

Given these conditions, the panel believes that major changes will occur in the area over the next 20 years as landowners strive to achieve the highest and best uses of their properties.

Assets for the Development

The panel believes many factors exist that are assets for the area and the development options. These include:

- *the authority and powers of NJMC*, such as eminent domain, zoning, and provision of infrastructure;
- *strong agency relationships* between NJMC and other government entities such as NJ Transit, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, Secaucus, and Hudson County;
- *a seasoned transit agency* in NJ Transit;
- *great development potential for the site*;
- *a “ripe” market*, especially for housing; and
- *NJMC’s long-term vision* for the site.

Current Market Conditions

The panel evaluated the uses that are being proposed for the area in the context of its understand-

ing of current local market conditions. The following are the panel's observations on the market:

- *Housing is a hot market.* This is a national trend, and the panel was told that there is interest in the site for residential development. Residential is probably the most obvious first use for the site, and such development can occur in the near future.
- *Station Square needs commercial development.* Town center and commercial development will be needed to enhance the proposed residential development. However, this should be developed with the intent to have commercial space that serves the greater Meadowlands area. It is conceivable that there could be 300,000 square feet of retail and commercial space in the Station Square area; however, it is important to start at a neighborhood scale that relates to the residential development.
- *Develop a hotel later.* Once the area becomes more established, development of a hotel may be appropriate. A hotel will generate activity for the town center and benefit from the access to transit to New York City.
- *Now is not the time for office development.* This recommendation is based on national weakness in the office market. The situation may change in the future, and the commission should not totally dismiss the possibility of future office development, but now is not the time.

Things to Remember

Given all the assets the site possesses, the panel believes there are some things that NJMC needs to keep in mind as it undertakes this redevelopment effort. They include:

- This project will take time; it will not happen overnight.

- NJMC needs to capitalize on the natural assets and amenities surrounding the site, especially as environmentally friendly development becomes more common.
- The transit facility is an amenity, but not the driver for the project.
- The community needs to be created first, *then* connected to the transit. “A train station does not a transit facility make” is a common saying among those involved in transit-oriented development.
- NJMC needs to lead by taking an active role in redevelopment of this site—not just leave it to the developer or developers.

Proposed Vision Plan

All panel members agreed that the proposed vision is sound. There is a market for residential space in the area, and commercial development will be needed to support the residential. Office development is probably a longer-term goal.

Challenges for the Proposed Plan

While the panel believes that the proposed plan is feasible, it is not without challenges. The panel identified the following challenges:

- *Connection to transit.* While the site is near transit, it is not really connected to transit. The New Jersey Turnpike is a significant barrier between the site and the transit facility.
- *An unfriendly pedestrian realm.* Because of the turnpike and other barriers, such as the existing and proposed roads and streets, the site is not very pedestrian friendly. This should be addressed during planning for the redevelopment area.

• *Antigrowth sentiment.* The panel was told that there has been “no growth” sentiment in Secaucus. Because this project may be viewed as a threat to the current way of life, there is a need to educate the public regarding what a transit village is and to communicate the benefits of such development.

• *Truck traffic.* The site’s proximity to the turnpike and existing industrial uses means there is a significant amount of truck traffic on project-area roads, and the proposed turnpike interchange will not ease the situation. This traffic will need to be mitigated through the design of a variety of road types and signs directing trucks to the most suitable routes in the redevelopment area.

• *Internal circulation.* This needs to be better defined in the proposed plan.

• *Parking strategy.* Parking for the site needs to be addressed. Currently, there are fewer than 20 spaces at the transit facility. Parking will be needed if the transit facility is expected to be more than just a transfer facility but actually a point of origin for transit trips. Parking will also be needed for the commercial and residential development.

• *Turnpike Authority plans for an interchange and surface roads.* The Turnpike Authority plans to construct a toll plaza and on/off ramps in the vicinity of the site, which will involve new roadways in the immediate area. It is important that the locations of these new roads be compatible with the proposed development.

Recommendations

The panel agreed on six recommendations on how to address the issues discussed and to help move the project forward. Those recommendations are:

- create and sell the vision;
- create the place;
- build community;
- improve connections;
- provide parking; and
- create design guidelines and standards.

A discussion of each follows.

Create and Sell the Vision

The panel understands—and agrees with—NJMC's desire to transform this redevelopment area into an urban/mixed-use development, and believes the site is compatible with this vision. However, for this to happen, dense development will need to be concentrated at the site, which is not always popular with nearby residents.

It is important for the commission to continue to sell the vision to the community through public outreach efforts, visioning charrettes, and similar activities. Sale of the vision allows increases in density because people then can see that increased density does not always mean high-rise apartment buildings. It also is important for the community to understand that over time, the existing industrial uses will move out and be replaced. An opportunity exists to make this a new kind of place. If the community has input as to what may replace the industrial uses, it will be more likely to accept the development.

Create the Place

The commission has an opportunity to “create a place” with this redevelopment project. In order

for that to occur, the following should be components of the development:

- a pedestrian realm in which people can walk comfortably and safely among the different uses—including the train station;
- a civic use that can act as a community gathering place—a library, a seniors' center, a community theater, a “neighborhood jewel.” This facility can be an anchor for the development. The panel recommends that the commission work with the town to identify a use that it can support and work with the developer to create a special place;
- a mix of uses, including residential, destination and community-serving retail, and small offices, such as for doctors and dentists;
- “park once” opportunities with centrally located parking facilities and retail businesses that are close enough together to allow shoppers to walk from one store to the next;
- wide sidewalks and narrow streets to make the area more pedestrian friendly;
- bike paths around the development and leading to the train station;
- bike racks—in the community *and* at the station—to promote bike riding;
- benches that allow people to walk and stop if needed, to wait for a bus, etc.;
- lighting that allows people to feel safe walking in the evening;
- landscaping that makes walking from place to place comfortable and enjoyable;
- streetfront retail that makes the pedestrian experience more interesting and friendly;

- reduced/shared parking that allows people to park as needed but that does not dominate the site; and
- many food venues to make the area attractive to residents and to serve as destinations for people who do not live in the redevelopment area.

Build Community

The panel believes there is an opportunity to build a neighborhood in the redevelopment area, not just a project. To achieve this, the panel recommends the following:

- Develop a master-planned residential development that maximizes density and creates cohesion. If the commission allows development of smaller residential projects in the area that are not part of the master plan, it will run the risk of not achieving this sense of community. Ideally, the residential development will be constructed by one developer.
- Create residential-scale guidelines that will promote a feeling of community. An important aspect of this is developing the area using smaller blocks—perhaps 200 feet by 400 feet—and avoiding superblocks. This is especially important in the areas that will remain in industrial use in the short term.
- Promote walking among all the uses and within the neighborhood so that people are more likely to use the neighborhood retail and can get to know their neighbors.
- Strategize to increase density over time in order to make it more acceptable to the community. When people see that a higher-density project can be attractive in one location, they are more likely to accept increases in density on other parts of the site.

Improve Connections

As discussed earlier, connections among the uses and to the train station will be important to the success of the development. An internal and external shuttle system for the residents of the redevelopment area, as well as for residents in the rest

of Secaucus, can help achieve this. It may be beneficial to expand the shuttle system to neighboring towns. The shuttle system also will provide the benefit of bringing passengers to the concourse level. The connections need to be provided from the beginning of the project, and not be the last thing added to the area.

With respect to connections to the train station, overhead pedestrian connections are more desirable than underground connections: they are perceived as safer because they do not require people to walk into a tunnel. While overhead connections are more expensive, they are worth the investment if they provide connections that people will use. NJMC should negotiate with the developer, the Turnpike Authority, and NJ Transit for funding for a pedestrian bridge.

The new alignment the panel saw for New County Road needs to be further evaluated to provide components that are compatible with the pedestrian nature of a transit village. The commission needs to discuss the plans with the Turnpike Authority.

Provide Parking

Parking needs to be addressed at the site. It is needed internally for the residential development and the Station Square commercial area. The commission should consider shared parking for these uses that is publicly owned and operated. This can serve as a revenue generator for the commission or the town. In addition, parking can be provided on the streets, which can help to calm traffic. Where parking garages are built, they should be wrapped with first-floor retail or small commercial uses to avoid creation of blank walls along the streets.

Create Design Guidelines and Standards

To ensure high-quality development and create the neighborhood that the commission desires, design guidelines and standards should be created for each area. Those issues that are “not negotiable” should be set as standards; the rest should be guidelines. The guidelines and standards—which should cover such elements as building facades,

sidewalk widths, lighting, signage, landscaping, etc.—should be detailed to promote realization of the detailed plan and vision for the area. Several relevant examples from around the country can be reviewed for ideas and suggestions, including Orenco Station in Portland, Oregon; Lindberg Station in Atlanta; and Clarendon Commons in Arlington, Virginia. The goals of the guidelines

are to promote design excellence, create a sense of place, and give clear design intent.

To help emphasize the pedestrian realm, the design guidelines should cover landscaping, lighting, connectivity, the street “face,” wayfinding, and street width.

Next Steps

The panel outlined the following next steps NJMC should take with regard to the redevelopment area. These were developed to help the commission move the project forward.

- Prepare a detailed plan that articulates the commission's vision for the site. As discussed earlier, the concept the panel reviewed seemed appropriate and should be developed more fully.
- Develop detailed design guidelines and standards for the site that achieve the vision.
- Review prevailing land use regulations for compatibility with the vision and make changes as needed. It may be beneficial to make some existing uses "nonconforming" so that as properties change ownership, they cannot continue in industrial uses. The commission also needs to determine if there are some properties with "by right" zoning for uses it does not want in the area.
- Conduct a bidders and owners conference/workshop to educate potential development partners on the commission's vision for the site and solicit interest in the project. It is important that NJMC hear from the development community what it expects from the commission. It is also important for the development community to understand the vision for the site so that it can be achieved.
- Conduct a citizens' summit to share the vision with the residents and business owners in Seacaucus and rally support for the plan.
- Determine what the first phase of the project will be and how to provide incentives to the developer or developers of the project. The first phase must set the tone for the entire development and be a signature project.
- Understand that this is a long-term commitment and be patient. Successful mixed-use projects such as this take time and are not built overnight.

Conclusion

The panel was encouraged by the commitment of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission and New Jersey Transit to capitalizing on the redevelopment opportunity provided with the completion of the transit facility. However, it also believes that the mixed-use project could stand on its own merits and does not need to rely on the facility. In other words, the transit station is just one of the amenities of the

site. Residential development appears to be the natural first step for the site, and the commercial development will support this use. The commission needs to take advantage of *all* the assets of the area in order to turn this redevelopment area into the successful mixed-use development the panel believes it can be.

About the Panel

Rosalyn P. Doggett

Washington, D.C.

As principal of the Doggett Group, Rosalyn P. Doggett is an independent consultant who has provided planning, housing, and real estate development services for clients such as the British Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Doggett currently is chair of the District of Columbia Housing Finance Agency as well as a member of the senior development staff of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

Robert Dunphy

Washington, D.C.

Robert Dunphy is senior resident fellow, transportation, at the Urban Land Institute. He created ULI's program of transportation research and has been responsible for the Institute's research, books, conferences, public policy, and public outreach on transportation and land use, transit, and parking. In his previous role, he directed studies of seven large regions recognized for their efforts at implementing consistent regional transportation and development policies, reported in his book *Moving Beyond Gridlock: Traffic and Development*.

He is the author/project director of numerous books including *Residential Streets*, *Dimensions of Parking*, *Parking Requirements of Shopping Centers*, and *Transportation Management through Partnerships*, as well as a forthcoming book on transit-oriented development and the transportation chapters in *Implementing Smart Growth at the Local Level* and *Transforming Suburban Business Districts*. He created *Myths and Facts about Transportation and Growth*, a popular brochure presenting hard facts on often-soft issues, which became the first in a series.

Dunphy has collaborated on a number of studies of national interest. For the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), he directed, in partnership with the Texas Transportation Institute, the development of land use criteria for new transit systems, which are now being used as part of the federal approval process. Also for FTA, he teamed with the University of California for a series of workshops on the development of real estate adjacent to transit facilities.

He has directed ULI outreach efforts in Atlanta and Charlotte, North Carolina, intended to engage the development community in a dialogue on strategies for implementing transit-oriented development. He directed the ULI forum on balancing land use and transportation, which brought together a wide range of leaders active in local real estate, traffic, transit, and parking concerns from across the United States. He organized ULI's first conference on technology and real estate and has directed national and regional seminars on transportation and growth, joint development, and landfill siting.

Dunphy is active in national committees of the Institute of Transportation Engineers and the Transportation Research Board, for which he chairs the Transportation and Land Development Committee. He is a member of Lambda Alpha International, an honorary land economics society.

Dunphy is a frequent speaker on issues of transportation and smart growth, transit-related development, and parking to national and local groups including ULI district councils, business and leadership organizations, transit associations, and government agencies. He also served as a member of Maryland's Transportation Solutions Group, organized by Governor Parris N. Glendening to advise on a controversial suburban highway proposal.

Maureen McAvey

Washington, D.C.

Maureen McAvey, senior resident fellow for urban development at the Urban Land Institute, has more than 25 years of experience in real estate development, consulting, and creation of public/private financial structures.

She was director, business development, for Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), a New York Stock Exchange–traded owner and manager of retail developments and mixed-use developments. In that capacity, she assisted in the establishment of public/private financial structure of a mixed-use retail/housing development in Arlington County, Virginia, and completed a similar public/private partnership with the city of San Antonio to further FRIT's Houston Street mixed-use project there. As part of the San Antonio project, tax increment financing, urban development action grant funds, and an Economic Development Administration grant assisted in the funding of necessary public improvements.

McAvey was director of development for St. Louis, a cabinet-level position to the mayor. In that capacity, she was also executive director of the St. Louis Development Corporation, leading seven development-related boards and commissions. Major accomplishments included construction of a new neighborhood commercial center, anchored by a 60,000-square-foot-plus, 24-hour grocery; a privately financed \$1 million master plan for revitalization of the downtown area; negotiation of development agreements to secure a new 1,000-room convention headquarters hotel; and a neighborhood planning effort.

McAvey also led the real estate consulting practices in Boston for Deloitte & Touche, and for Coopers & Lybrand, directing the due diligence efforts for more than \$12 billion in securitization projects for major banking and financial institutions. Her clients included institutional developers, major corporations, utilities, colleges, and universities, with consulting efforts running the gamut from new financings, restructuring, troubled projects, and strategic planning to mergers and acquisitions. As a private developer, McAvey directed the West Coast operations of a national development firm, where she served as project manager for a \$40 million rehabilitation of a national historic landmark hotel with office and retail components. She also directed the master planning effort for a 70-acre, 1 million-square-foot university-related research park, including the architectural, legal, and organizational components of development.

McAvey holds master's degrees from the University of Minnesota, and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She has done extensive course work at Harvard Business School in commercial lending, investment management, finance, and real estate development.

McAvey was a member of the board of trustees for Urban Land Institute from 1995 to 2001. She chaired the regionalism forum for two years, exploring issues of smart growth, multijurisdictional boundaries and planning efforts, and shared revenue/fiscal disparities alternatives. She is a frequent guest lecturer at major universities and a frequent national speaker.

