Mission

PlanSmart NJ is an independent, non-profit planning and research organization committed to improving the quality of community life through the advancement of sound land use planning and regional cooperation. With over four decades of experience shaping land use policy in the state, PlanSmart NJ balances expertise and real-world contexts in framing issues to find constructive solutions, create innovative tools, and strategies to better inform land-use decision making in NJ.

Our Vision

PlanSmart NJ aims to revitalize New Jersey’s landscape so that our state’s citizens benefit from a sustainable economy and environment, based on resource efficiency and social equity.

What We Believe

PlanSmart NJ believes that thoughtful land use planning can strengthen our economy and environment to make New Jersey a better place to live, work, and play for all. We work with state, county and local officials who are struggling with land use decisions and how best to optimize the use of New Jersey’s scarce resources.

We help refocus the debate away from whether New Jersey should grow, to how best we can grow. We believe growth must balance both the environmental and economic needs of the state.

Become a Member Today

By becoming a member, you will support PlanSmart NJ’s work to reform New Jersey’s land use regulations to stimulate the economy and encourage vibrant communities with a variety of housing types and access to transportation options, open space, and opportunities. Your membership will give you access to information and discounts on PlanSmart NJ’s Regional Planning Summit and Policy Briefings.

Visit our website at www.plansmartnj.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @PlanSmartNJ to become a member and learn about our projects and events.
# Table of Contents

A Guide to the Future Overview .................................................................................. 1
Summit Overview ......................................................................................................... 2

## Sessions

The Stranded Asset Problem; How Big is It? ......................................................... 3
Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies: Connecting the Dots ......... 4
It is All About Financing ............................................................................................. 5
Repurposing Through Proactive Leadership ......................................................... 6
Keynote Address: A Future for Suburbs ................................................................. 7
Achieving Multiple Goals Through Innovation ....................................................... 8
Supporting Vibrant Communities Throughout the State ........................................ 9

PlanSmart NJ 2016 Board of Directors .................................................................. 10
Attendees received a digital copy of *A Guide to the Future*, which provides a statewide analysis of vacancies and offers ideas as well as a toolkit that guides readers to the best solution for their stranded asset. The full guide is available at www.PlanSmartNJ.org and is just the beginning of the Repurposing Stranded Assets project. The next phase will include taking this data on the road to inspire local officials and communities to see the potential stranded assets represent. These properties do not have to remain white elephants—draining ratables and employment opportunities—as they represent a real opportunity for revitalization and community pride.

The project was guided by a steering committee of policy makers, business leaders, and local decision makers which grounded the work in reality. The project would not have been possible without their commitment.


If you would like to know more about the project and learn about opportunities to participate, please contact:

**Ann Brady** at abrady@plansmartnj.org or by phone 609-393-9434
PlanSmart NJ’s 5th Annual Regional Planning Summit on June 7, 2016 at the War Memorial in Trenton witnessed the release of *A Guide to the Future*. The guide analyzes New Jersey’s vacancy problem and provides solutions for leaders at the local and state level. The guide concludes with a toolkit and checklist for success that walks readers through the process of reusing a site to meet a multitude of goals.

More than 100 stakeholders from an array of fields such as planning, real estate, community development, transportation and non-profits gathered to hear PlanSmart NJ’s positive spin on the current vacancy problem in New Jersey. The day was not burdened with negative statistics as speakers highlighted the great potential and varied solutions for addressing stranded assets.

Speakers highlighted solutions across disciplines, accentuating the importance of collaborative work in achieving vibrant communities. Attendees heard from landscape architects, alternative energy specialists, attorneys, developers and much more, as they discussed the effects and possibilities stranded assets have on their particular sector. Stranded assets present a systemic problem, but as the Summit speakers pointed out, the right solutions can translate to broad, diverse and positive changes throughout the state.
The Stranded Asset Problem; How Big is It?

Sam Brookham, Planner, PlanSmart NJ

Stranded assets are a systemic problem affecting one in five large retail and office parks and reside in one out of three municipalities in New Jersey. Additionally, one in ten stranded assets are completely vacant. The existing land-use pattern for commercial and residential development is outdated as residents increasingly demand less auto-dependent lifestyles. The economic impacts of this mismatch are witnessed in ratable losses, job loss and lower spending in communities that no longer support the large populations of workers and shoppers that once visited these sites.

The outlook is not entirely grim for stranded assets, however, as they house enormous potential. Sitting on more than 7,100 acres of land with more than 21 million vacant square feet, many of these properties can be utilized to meet the growing demands for walkability and access to parks and trails. This process will require leadership, trust, creativity and acceptance that developers, municipal leaders and residents all want the same thing: a vibrant livable community. More information related to PlanSmart NJ’s stranded asset analysis, findings and recommendations can be found in A Guide to the Future: Repurposing Stranded Assets & Revitalizing New Jersey’s Suburbs.
New Jersey’s suburbs face a number of challenges. The growing preference for walkable mixed-use downtown living is one challenge that will require rural bedroom communities to change their thinking. It is clear from New Jersey’s aging population that it is becoming increasingly difficult to live, retire or die in New Jersey. In the 1970’s Hunterdon County’s average age was 32, but today it stands at 44; A 44-year-old is not buying large-lot houses or sending kids to schools. As schools shut down, retirees struggle to find buyers for their “McMansions” and ratables fall, it is increasingly imperative to consider development patterns that create livable communities and attract younger populations. Reuse of vacant properties is one way to achieve this.

Creating livable communities requires planning regionally, changing zoning, ensuring connectivity via various modes of transportation, and creating a sense of place. Competition between neighboring municipalities hurts the region as a whole rather than bolstering it. Zoning changes are needed, but we must look for comprehensive plans that think beyond a single building or site. Community Economic Development Strategies (CEDS), can be a useful tool as they help to define a pathway to economic development. None of this, however, can occur without the support of local officials and the community. Educating policymakers and the community at large is an essential element in the successful revitalization of any region.
There are two distinct financial incentives available for redevelopment projects: tax exemptions/PILOTs and bond financing. Both have their merits, and bond financing is generally less well known than PILOTs, particularly in the development sector. However, the benefits are not limited to the developer’s bottom line and, when utilized in conjunction with broad planning efforts, can be felt throughout the community.

PILOTs translate to a number of broad improvements, as exemplified in Carteret where a portion of bond proceeds were pledged for brownfield remediation for redevelopment. Unpledged funds were utilized to foster further redevelopment throughout the municipality. The program has boosted employment in the municipality as 500 jobs have been created at the former brownfield site with an additional 1,000 expected. Additionally, an abandoned glass manufacturing facility was redeveloped into a fully functioning plant which anticipates 300 jobs. The PILOT associated with the redevelopment of a shopping center plagued with vacancy into a mixed-use housing and shopping center provided funding for improved access to the municipality’s waterfront and recreational facilitates. Fostering redevelopment has translated to a number of goals having been achieved in Carteret including inspiring plans for a new arts district to revitalize the downtown.
Proactive leadership that promotes a regionally complimentary vision is an essential element for successful repurposing projects, which is apparent in the redevelopment of the former Sanofi site in Somerset County. At the time of Advance Realty’s purchase of the Sanofi site, Somerset County had already identified the property as a priority investment site in the county’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. The county’s vision for the property was enticing for Advance Realty as it provided reassurance that Advance would be working with a supportive municipality. Still, Advance took two years to meet with stakeholders to ensure local officials and the community understood the project’s many benefits and minimize claims against the project.

The leadership’s success became apparent when Nestle signed a contract to relocate its headquarters to the NJ Center of Excellence. The panel highlighted a number of factors that enticed Nestle despite the suburban location. Firstly, not all millennials want urban life, they simply want amenities and walkable communities, which can be achieved in the suburbs. Nestle was also attracted by the site’s proximity to higher education institutions, hospitals and other key partners. Lastly, the importance of municipal leaders treating large businesses in a community like real estate tenants is an important factor that all municipalities must realize in order to retain large employers long after the initial bargaining.
Greg Lindsay, Senior Fellow, *The New Cities Foundation*

Conventional monoculture farming shares many characteristics with the single-use land development pattern currently on display in the suburbs. Both tend to have high yields but are more vulnerable to stressors like disease and weather, and when one component (plant or building) dies it spreads like wildfire. Mixed-use properties can therefore be equated to biodiverse farming, which have lower yields but much higher quality products, and are more resilient, inherently sustainable and self-sufficient.

The current migratory and preferential trends show cities to be the new activity hubs of innovation. This is true, but does not depict the whole story. Cities simply have the one thing that suburbs generally do not: walkability. The demand for walkability is so pronounced that many have equated it to the organic food movement over the last few decades. As technology develops at unprecedented rates, there are countless opportunities for the stranded assets of the suburbs to reinvent themselves. Greg Lindsay argues that these spaces must embrace such trends and can be activated through four major sectors: transportation, housing, work and public space. Spaces are being activated in exciting new ways throughout the country, and technology continues to provide the link between all four sectors. As long as walkability is prioritized and the mixed-use development pattern is adopted, New Jersey’s suburbs will soon see an exciting and optimistic future.
Stranded assets present opportunities to address and achieve a number of goals across a multitude of sectors that will improve quality of life for New Jersey’s residents. For example, ecologists, soil scientists and landscape architects should be included from the starting phases of a reuse project to help alleviate flooding, decrease pollution and increase a site’s aesthetic appeal. Planning for active transportation (i.e. walking and biking) can also achieve a number of goals by providing a powerful marketing tool and alleviating car traffic not just for trips to work but also for trips related to shopping, school and recreation. By providing safe pedestrian and bike paths, suburban communities can flourish as they provide the active transportation demanded by large segments of the population.

It is also important to highlight that the competition is not between urban and suburban communities, but is rather one in which the place with the best amenities wins. Providing walkability, quality public space, and safe alternatives to driving can translate to vibrant suburban communities with healthy residents, ecosystems and real estate markets.
Supporting Vibrant Communities Throughout the State

Moderator: Lori Grifa, Esq., Archer Greiner, P.C. | Tim Touhey, Investors Bank | Michele Siekerka, NJ Business and Industry Association | Joel Bergstein, Lincoln Equities Group, LLC | Morris Davis, Ph.D., Rutgers Center for Real Estate

Repurposing stranded assets should be only one part of a larger plan that seeks to attract residents and businesses for the long-term. This will require state level changes that address both New Jersey’s strengths and its weaknesses. Throughout the day it was noted that the state is aging and the population is growing more slowly than the rest of the nation, but New Jersey is highly educated and sits in between two flourishing metropolitan centers.

Meeting the demands of residents and business owners will require workforce development and a focus on retaining the students and families who have been educated in the state’s public schools at a cost of $19,000 per student annually. It will also require neighboring municipalities and counties to work together rather than in competition. Additionally, with the state’s 565 municipalities, the survival of any given town will require collaborative and open working relationships with developers who are increasingly deciding against fighting with unwelcoming municipalities. These municipalities who fail to accept new realities and changing demands will witness decline as developers seek friendlier municipalities to work with.
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