

NEW JERSEY MUNICIPALITIES

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Master Planning

A Master Planning Process that Pays Off



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Every municipality, no matter how large or small, can benefit from having a master plan—a vision of how the area will grow into the future. Usually when master planning is discussed at the municipal level, there is an air of formality, of developing ordinances and laws, strict guidelines that will dictate what sort of development will be welcomed and where it will be allowed.

In the small township of Lyndhurst, which covers only about two square miles, big plans are being made in a much more relaxed environment, thanks in part to the township's leadership, a cooperative agreement with DMR Architects and a shared vision of how the township can use existing space in new ways. Lyndhurst has been able to take a big-picture approach to community development, creating public properties that enrich the lives of school students and elderly residents, are useful to the township as a whole and ultimately end up saving taxpayers money.

The arrangement in Lyndhurst might not work for every town or city, but in a close-knit community, where the public has the ear of elected officials, a more relaxed approach to redevelopment has proven to be successful.

MANY MUNICIPALITIES COULD SEE THE SAME BENEFITS AS LYNDHURST WITH A MORE FORMAL APPROACH TO FUTURE GROWTH, IDENTIFYING WITH PUBLIC INPUT THE AREAS THAT ARE IN NEED OF THE MOST ATTENTION.

The driving force behind this arrangement is Mayor DiLascio's vision for his town—of turning unutilized, tax-exempt properties into either tax ratables or money saving ventures. The township acquired the former Knights of Columbus building on New York Avenue with the intention of leasing it out to the school district for kindergarten, first grade and second grade classes. They set into motion a series of opportunities that resulted in new amenities at little or no cost to the taxpayers.

The three classrooms at the Jefferson School that were vacated by the move will now be used to educate special needs classes for up to 20 students, which will result in a savings of thousands of dollars to Lyndhurst taxpayers. The district is using those savings to build a 25-yard, 6-lane competitive indoor swimming pool at the high school, which will be used by students, seniors, handicapped therapy groups, and youth leagues.

One of the challenges that Lyndhurst faces is a lack of room for new development—every open lot is at a premium. So to keep costs down, an emphasis has been placed on renovating older buildings, combining functions and departments to optimize the building space of what is already in the township.

While many of Lyndhurst's projects hinge on a working relationship between the township and school district, shared services have helped to save money across the board and make the most of small spaces. The

underlying approach to redevelopment can be used almost anywhere. The township identified areas that were in need of upgrades, like 100-year-old school buildings that can use revamping and an overall lack of recreational space. Lyndhurst officials dedicated themselves to looking for facilities that could fulfill the needs of both these initiatives.

Township officials did have some help along the way. DMR Architects served as a consultant to the township, offering guidance on how buildings could be redesigned and providing technical details that would ultimately determine if the projects were feasible. DMR Architects also helped negotiate with developers, seek grants and bypass the common hurdles of development and redevelopment projects and funding.

The end result is an informal approach to master planning that was fueled by a significant investment into public facilities. But it did not happen overnight and it did not happen accidentally.

Many municipalities could see the same benefits as Lyndhurst with a more formal approach to future growth, identifying with public input the areas that are in need of the most attention. A partnership with an architectural firm or urban planner can also help to create a more visual document than has been used in previous master plans.

A visual plan can easily show redevelopment opportunities and literally create a vision for the future of a town through development and redevelopment efforts. Many municipalities want to create a well-planned future, with clearly defined visions and goals, but most don't know how to take the first step.

While Mayor DiLascio's strong vision and keen planning sense have served Lyndhurst well, other municipalities would benefit from the same process with a consultant's input. When done correctly, townships can plan for future growth and address the issues that are most pressing to their residents. ▲