

01 | Community Engagement

Community engagement plays an essential role in any planning study. To support the technical elements, the WalkBikeHike study used a community-based planning process to engage Somerset County's diverse residents, decision makers, and stakeholders to:

- *Explore and understand community vision, goals, and priorities*
- *Seek feedback on draft work products and findings at key points in the planning process*
- *Comment on the candidate improvements and policy recommendations*
- *Identify desired routes and destinations, existing deficiencies and constraints, and potential opportunities for improvement*



Introduction

Community engagement is a continuous and collaborative process and the WalkBikeHike planning process provided numerous opportunities and methods for discussion, assessment, brainstorming, and comment. These efforts included the following:

- Study Advisory Committee
- Focus Group Discussions
- Community Pop-Up Events
- English as Second Language (ESL) Conversation Groups
- Public Meetings
- Online Survey and WikiMapping

Many Somerset County departments and divisions actively participated in the study, including Planning, Engineering, Office of Aging & Disability Services, Health & Wellness Committee, Cultural and Heritage Commission, and the Parks Commission.

The community engagement process culminated in the formulation of the consensus Vision Statement and Goals to guide the development and implementation of the Framework Strategy of multimodal improvement concepts and policies.



1.1 Study Advisory Committee

Effective Study Advisory Committee (SAC) engagement is the foundation of the community-based planning process. The role of the SAC is to ensure that the study is based on a thorough understanding of local context and needs, and the study team adequately understands and addresses local vision, goals, and priorities.

Members of the SAC included:

- Somerset County Planning
- Somerset County Engineering
- Somerset County Business Partnership
- North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA)
- New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT)
- NJ TRANSIT
- RideWise Transportation Management Association (TMA)
- Healthier Somerset
- Duke Farms Foundation
- New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center
- Greater Mercer TMA

Three SAC meetings were held to guide the planning process from goal setting and assessment of existing conditions, to development and assembly of the potential network improvements, and finally to review of the Framework Strategy.

SAC Meeting 1: June 6, 2018

Introduced committee members to the study, provided an overview of the workplan, and included an interactive discussion to inform development of the vision statement and goals.

SAC Meeting 2: October 15, 2018

Presentation of findings from the community engagement and technical assessment tasks and served as a preview of the first public meeting.

SAC Meeting 3: March 3, 2019

Presentation of the draft Framework Strategy, including countywide network and focus areas, and an overview of the Design Book.

General themes of committee comments and questions included:

- Provide access to a variety of facilities and destinations, both local and regional
- Make decisions and set priorities based on equity considerations: all users, trip purposes, ages, and abilities
- Look beyond just recreation travel, making bike, walk, transit access part of local and regional mobility and transportation networks
- Explore opportunities to link to other regional systems i.e. Patriots Path, Lawrence Hopewell Trail, RPA's Somerset to Shore Connector
- Create linkages between historic and cultural resources similar to the Indianapolis Cultural Trail System.
- Identify pilot projects to win over skeptics and build support for study goals and conceptual improvements





Public Meeting at the Somerset County Administration Building on April 11, 2019



1.2 Focus Group Discussions

Discussion groups engage and empower stakeholders, social service providers, business community representatives, and the public to take a meaningful role in the overall study.

Small round table discussions also provided important opportunities for residents to explore motivations for walking, bicycling, and trail use to travel in an unfiltered, informal setting.

Participants shared their current walking, bicycling and trail experiences, and their desires for improved access, connectivity and specific amenities. Such discussions are especially valuable since participants bring firsthand local knowledge of their communities' assets and land use patterns, living everyday with the existing mobility opportunities and shortcomings.

A series of small group discussion meetings were held, including:

- Business and tourism
- Social services, health & education
- Trail, bike, and environmental advocates
- Senior center groups
- Somerset County Youth Leadership

The WalkBikeHike Study was discussed at Planning Partners Forums, hosted by the Somerset County Planning Board, on November 28, 2018, March 27, 2019 and May 22, 2019. Discussion included the WalkBikeHike Framework Strategy and opportunities for collaborative initiatives to develop and implement multimodal improvements and policies.

Business, Tourism, and Service Economy. Group included representatives from business and economic development groups, tourism, and *the* local and regional business community.

General discussion themes included:

- Consider needs of County residents who do not own a car, which may limit their access to recreation, services, and employment opportunities
- Many County facilities are only accessible by car
- Work with municipalities to identify needs and develop recommendations
- Improvements to the County's bicycle and pedestrian network would bolster existing hospital wellness and walking programs
- Prioritize connections to community facilities (i.e. schools, libraries, social services, train stations), major employment centers, and other destinations such as Duke Farms and Mountain View Park in Hillsborough



Social Services, Health and Wellness, and Education. Group included representatives from social service, health care, transit, and education.

General discussion themes included:

- Infrastructure improvements should be prioritized to better allow people to choose their preferred travel modes
- Provide greater awareness of the existing bike network through technology and public outreach to improve public access, use, and enjoyment
- Infrastructure for bikes, including bike lanes, secure parking, and bike share programs needs to be expanded, improved, and better maintained
- Recommendations should improve connectivity and lighting, enhance safety and all age access, improve maintenance snow removal, and implement Americans with Disabilities ACT of 1990 (ADA) compliance upgrades

non-profit, active transportation, historic preservation, and conservation.

General discussion themes included:

- Bicycle infrastructure, including trails, bike parking and wayfinding signage should be constructed and further developed to improve the user experience
- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements should be prioritized in growing, more affordable, and higher density communities where people are more likely to bike, walk and use transit for a wide range of trip types and purposes
- Numerous challenges impede bicycle and pedestrian mobility including maintenance, fragmented jurisdictions (local, county and state roads), low density development patterns, and wide, high-speed and high volume thoroughfares
- Somerset County should improve multimodal access to its natural, cultural, historical, and tourism assets



Public Meeting at the Somerset County Administration Building on November 29, 2018

Group included representatives from



WalkBikeHike - Somerset County

Senior Center Discussion Groups.

Participants included groups of seniors with varying personal mobility, economic status, and disability conditions attended two separate discussion events at senior centers, one in Warrenbrook, and a second in Bridgewater.

General discussion themes included:

- Walking and hiking in parks and open space areas are desired by many seniors, for the health benefits of physical exertion, peace of mind from being among nature and wildlife, and as opportunities for social interaction
- Smooth trail surfaces, although not necessarily ADA compliant, are preferred by many seniors
- Numerous challenges impede bike and pedestrian travel for seniors including poor maintenance, lack of amenities, and exposure to high vehicle speeds and heavy traffic
- Seniors prefer access to amenities such as adequate and accessible parking, rest areas and benches, lighting, and drinking water and restroom facilities

Somerset County Youth Leadership Retreat.

The goal of the Youth Leadership Somerset program is to build an active, educated, and involved network of young people who are empowered to guide the future of Somerset County.ⁱ

More than 40 high school students participated in a retreat gathering of the Youth Leadership Somerset program at Lord Stirling Park in Basking Ridge on October 20, 2018.

Study team members led a wide-ranging discussion, encouraging participants to think critically about their communities and everyday travel needs.

General discussion themes included:

- Concerns and observations about safety and mobility, travel mode alternatives, and limited access to school and other desired destinations
- Quality of life compromises and limitations for those without access to an automobile
- Thoughts about where they want to live in the future and whether Somerset County affords a lifestyle consistent with their vision for where they want to live and work after college
- Somerset County must look to the future and consider how to attract and retain young workers, families, and entrepreneurs in order to remain a competitive and vibrant place to live and work



1.3 Community Pop-up Events

Community Pop-up events are an innovative and efficient way to involve those who live, work, visit, and do business in the study area to ensure they are engaged in the planning process by going to an existing event rather than holding a traditional public meeting.

Pop-up events enable team members to meet with and engage community members as they go about their daily routines, providing the opportunity for discussion and debate of critical issues, in a friendly and interactive setting.

Study team members and County staff attended the following events using the Pop-up approach in 2018:

- Bound Brook Food Truck Festival & Bedminster Farmers Market, July 14
- Bike Tour of Regional Center Trails & Duke Farms Market, July 29
- County 4-H Fair, August 8-10
- Franklin Township Farmers Market, August 11
- Montgomery Farmers Market, August 18th
- Bridgewater Farmers Market, August 18th
- Full Moon Bike Ride, Lawrence Hopewell Trail, August 26

Through these events, the team engaged numerous participants from across Somerset County and beyond who shared a broad range of opinions, concerns, and goals for walking, biking, and hiking opportunities, including the following:

- Support for a wide range of improvements and facilities
- Improvements should support development of more complete and integrated networks of on-street facilities and trails systems to better connect people to destinations
- Facilities should accommodate a variety of trail uses and users
- Many admired trails available to neighboring communities – *Can we a trail like that in our community?*
- Many indicated a desire to move beyond having to drive to access trails, and would like to be able to bike directly to local parks and trails
- Some asked if there are local groups that organize group hikes and bike rides, to combine recreation with opportunities for social interaction



1.4 English as Second Language (ESL) Conversation Groups

A challenge for planning efforts is to conduct outreach activities and collect meaningful input from residents of Environmental Justice (EJ) communities, including minority, low-income, and/or low English proficiency populations and groups. The intent is, “to address the interests and concerns of low-income and minority populations in transportation planning and project developmentⁱⁱ,” and identify and address, “disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of ... programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Direct engagement of EJ communities at ESL classes is recognized as a best practice approach for communicating with disadvantaged, under-represented, and potentially impacted groups.

Meetings were held with ESL conversation groups at the Bound Brook and North Plainfield public libraries, in September, 2018. A diverse cross section of English language learners participated in these groups, including immigrants from Korea, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Venezuela, and Peru.

This approach generated mutual benefits for both the project team and the conversation groups:

- Participants gained exposure to the vocabulary of walking and biking, and general mobility and safety issues, and had the opportunity to think critically about their communities and their travel needs
- The team engaged an audience not typically represented at traditional public meetings and gathered meaningful and useful comments beneficial to the planning process

General discussion themes included:

- A desire for improved pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly network connectivity
- Participants would also like to walk or bicycle to specific destinations, notably schools, parks, and shopping centers and felt that special attention should be paid to increase safety for those who already walk or bicycle to such community facilities
- About one-half of attendees owned a bike and enjoy biking or walking as recreational activities.
- No one walked or biked to the class and there was an expressed preference for driving, due to convenience, safety and comfort
- Exposure to heavy traffic and poor lighting conditions were identified as a common deterrent to walking or bicycling





Public Meeting at the Somerset County Administration Building, November 29, 2018



1.5 Public Meetings

Numerous residents, advocates, planning and engineering professionals, and municipal and agency representatives attended the two public meetings, which were held on November 29, 2018 and April 11, 2019.

The County emphasized the importance of public participation to develop a program of strategies, improvement concepts, and policies that truly reflect and meet local vision, needs, and priorities.

The meeting formats were structured to encourage open discussion on a wide range of topics that helped guide and inform the planning and development of the countywide network of trails, shared-use paths, and on-road facilities.

Both meetings featured a formal presentation, question & answer sessions, and ample opportunity for informal discussion and review of work products and potential improvement concepts. Display stations, comments cards, surveys, study facts, and large-format display maps were available for attendees to review, mark up, and provide comment. Staff from the project team and Somerset County were on hand to answer questions and discuss the purpose of the study. About 80 members of the public attended each meeting.

Public Meeting 1 - November 29th, 2018

The first public meeting for this project was held at the Somerset County Administration Building in Somerville, NJ, on November 29, 2018 from 6 to 8 p.m. The meeting was held to introduce the study to the public and encourage all to participate and provide comments. The meeting was extremely well attended by residents from various parts of the county and included an extensive question and answer session.

General themes of public comments and questions included:

- Develop better connections between towns destinations
- Improve access and connectivity to regional facilities, parks, and amenities such as the D&R Canal Towpath and East Coast Greenway
- Consider abandoned railways as potential trails
- Provide appropriate and consistent standards for wayfinding and facility design
- Develop and maintain user-friendly marketing, maps, and online resources for public use and information
- Prioritize busy and challenging intersection and crossings for improvement



Public Meeting 2 - April 11, 2019

The second public meeting was held at the Somerset County Administration Building in Somerville, NJ, on April 11, 2019, from 6 to 8 p.m., to provide a public forum for review and comment on the draft Framework Strategy, countywide network, and Design Book.

Residents of all ages and interests from across Somerset County attended, asked questions, and carefully reviewed and commented on the display boards and maps.

General themes of public comments and questions included:

- Recommended improvements should support general and utilitarian mobility needs, not just recreation and tourism
- When will the Final Report, maps, and Design Book be available for public review and use?
- Will the recommendations address maintenance on existing and new facilities?
- Some attendee requested details on specific Somerset County routes, destinations, and areas of concern



1.6 Online Survey and WikiMapping

Online Survey

The WalkBikeHike Somerset County public survey was launched in early July, 2018, and remained open until September 1, 2018. The survey was designed with input from SAC members, Somerset County staff, and the NJTPA. Social media was used to promote both the survey and the WikiMap.

Survey questions covered travel needs and choices of County residents, employees and visitors for a variety of trip types, as well as current perceptions and recent experience with biking, walking and trail use. The survey also provided important feedback on the types of biking, walking and trail improvements that could expand these modes and improve the user experience.

A total of 958 people responded to the survey, with nearly all respondents (95percent) residing within Somerset County. Forty-seven percent also work in Somerset County, and 6 percent go to school within the region. A total of 80 respondents (9 percent) own or operate businesses in the County.

Principal findings from the survey included:

- Traffic stress was a common concern and deterrent to biking and walking
- Many respondents noted that Somerset County roadways are not accommodating for the typical pedestrian or cyclist
- Health and recreation were the most common reasons cited for walking and bicycling

Consistent support was noted for the following:

- Dedicated facilities for walking and biking
- Interconnected, county-wide network of biking and walking trails and on-road improvements
- Better trail information and wayfinding
- Amenities, including benches, rest rooms, and parking



WikiMapping

An interactive online WikiMap web page was launched in June 2018 to seek comments about walking, biking, and hiking in Somerset County. The WikiMap application was open to all members of the public.

WikiMap participants were instructed to identify corridors and spot locations that are challenging or problematic due to specific conditions, gaps in facilities, or other concerns. The WikiMap can be used to identify specific locations which could be referenced as desirable examples to address safety and mobility needs.

The WikiMap also provided an opportunity for users to identify desired routes and destinations, new trails or on-street facilities, bicycle parking and other amenities, and favorite trails and locations. The desire lines, shown in Figure 1-1, are derived from user responses on desired bicycle and pedestrian routes and destinations.

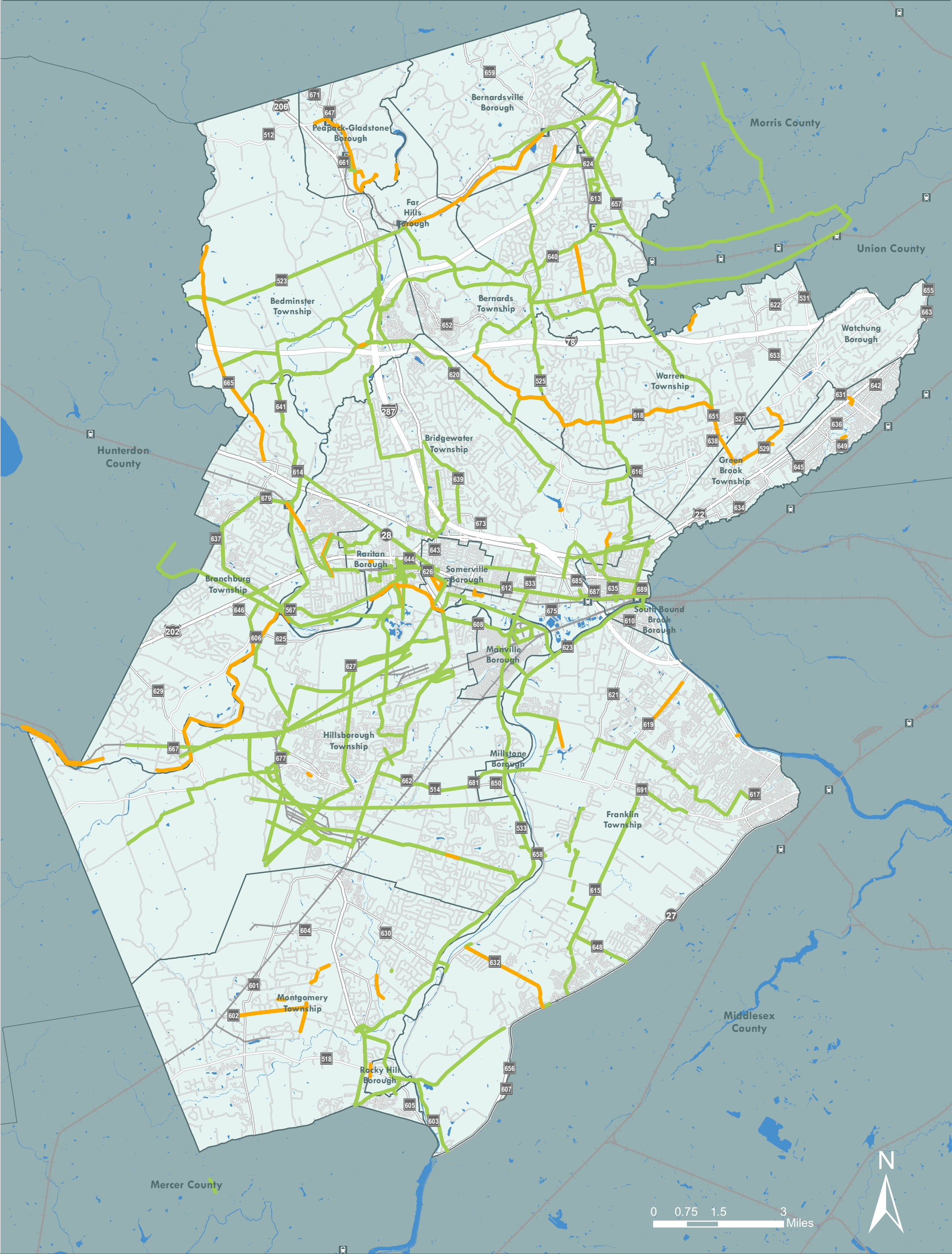
More than 625 WikiMap responses were received. The frequency of responses is shown in Figure 1-2.

General themes of WikiMap comments and annotations included:

- Busy and challenging intersections and crossings were identified and noted for improvement
- Specific concerns included the need for traffic calming, safety concerns, and exposure to heavy traffic and high vehicle speeds
- Roads and intersections across Somerset County were cited, including facilities under state, county, and municipal jurisdiction
- In some cases, specific roadway design improvements were requested, including roundabouts to replace traditional intersection designs
- New and improved facilities were proposed for walking and biking, including improved crossings, sidewalks, and bicycle facilities



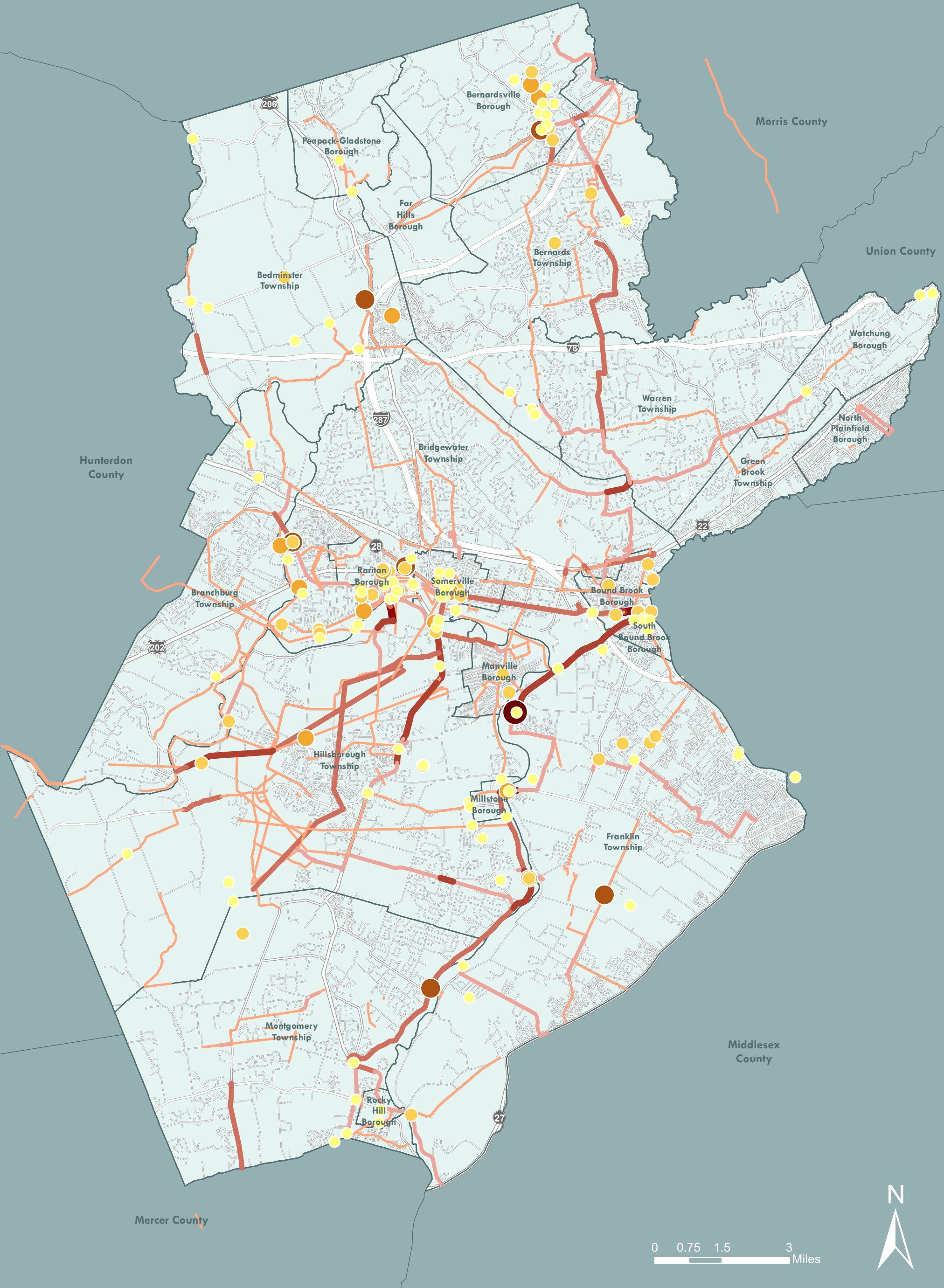
Figure 1-1: Public Outreach - Wikimap Desire Lines



Desire Lines

- Desired Pedestrian Route
- Desired Bike Route

Figure 1-2: Public Outreach - Wikimap Comment Frequency



Point Comments

- 1
- 1-3
- 4-7
- 8-11
- 12-17

Line Comments

- 1-2
- 3-5
- 6-8
- 9-11
- 12-14

0 0.75 1.5 3 Miles



Vision Statement and Goals

The community engagement process culminated in the formulation of a consensus vision to guide the development and implementation of the Framework Strategy.

The WalkBikeHike Vision Statement and Goals reflect the current state of

planning practice, changing demographics and lifestyles, and the emerging priorities of Somerset County's approach to planning, preservation, infrastructure, access to opportunity, and quality of life.

WALKBIKEHIKE - VISION STATEMENT

Somerset County supports cycling and walking as essential forms of transportation and recreation for residents, workers and visitors alike. Implementation of the countywide *WalkBikeHike* network over time will enable people of all ages and ability levels to comfortably travel to both local and regional destinations. Working toward this vision in partnership with other County and local initiatives will result in a more livable, vibrant, healthy and sustainable region where people are inspired to walk and bicycle for fun, recreation, and daily transportation needs.



WalkBikeHike Goals (not in priority order)

- **Mobility** | Encourage bicycling and walking for short trips to help reduce roadway congestion and parking impacts.
- **Safety** | Improve safety for all roadway users and prioritize bicycle and pedestrian safety for those with limited transportation options, including low-income and elderly residents and other communities of concern.
- **Access and Comfort** | Create a low stress bicycle, trail, and pedestrian network that is accessible to walkers, cyclists and hikers of all ages and ability levels and that enhances travel options.
- **Connectivity and Convenience** | Develop a core bicycle and pedestrian network with seamless and convenient connections throughout the region, including access to schools, senior centers, transit, libraries, parks and open space amenities, local shopping, cultural/heritage sites and nearby residential areas. As part of network connectivity, provide clear wayfinding information on network access points, destinations, parking, and other amenities.
- **Health** | Encourage and promote cycling and walking as active and environmentally sustainable forms of transportation that enhance community health and wellness.
- **Equity** | Recognize cycling as an essential transportation mode, especially for those who cannot afford to own cars, and as an integral part of maintaining the region's social diversity and workforce.
- **Implementation** | Advance and support implementation of Somerset County's Complete Streets Policy and Master Planning initiatives. Leverage opportunities for synergy among various County initiatives, including the Somerset County Investment Framework and Somerset County Preservation Plan.
- **Accountability** | Establish a clear process and milestones to actively track and report on progress.



WalkBikeHike - Somerset County

References

i
<https://www.co.somerset.nj.us/government/administrator-s-office/leadership-programs/youth-program>, accessed March 6, 2019

ii NJDOT webpage on Environmental Justice:
<https://www.state.nj.us/transportation/business/civilrights/ej.shtm>

iii Executive Order 12898 (February 11, 1994):
<https://www.archives.gov/files/federal-register/executive-orders/pdf/12898.pdf>



