

Proposed Hightstown Borough Master Plan Amendment Visioning for Downtown and Lakeside Improvements

The Borough has long sought to improve the downtown. In 1997 the Borough was awarded Center Designation and was recognized as a Town Center, committed to redeveloping the business district, defining and establishing its historic image and capitalizing on its open space connections.

The 1998 Master Plan focused primarily on economic redevelopment *“in hopes of jump starting the local economy and stimulating positive and prolonged change in Hightstown.”* (p.63 of 72) It included proposals for rezoning the downtown, re-establishing pedestrian priorities, and again emphasizing historic design qualities. Route 133 had just been completed and there was wide spread optimism that trucks and through traffic would no longer encumber the downtown.

In the early 2000’s Hightstown streetscape improvement project created a new traffic pattern through town and improved the pedestrian experience with wider sidewalks, enhanced crosswalks and new streetscape furniture. The 2014 Master Plan Amendment and Re-Examination Report refined the Borough’s planning policy by establishing the concept of Hightstown as a destination.

“The policy regarding downtown has been that businesses in general hold the key to economic vitality in Hightstown. The Planning Board now believes this policy is insufficient. The Hightstown community alone cannot support the business district. Instead the Borough should work to attract people from outside the community into the downtown. Hightstown must become a destination; a place that visitors come to because is a great place to spend the day, evening or a weekend. The uses in downtown should complement this objective – eateries, specialty retail, and uses that generate night life. The Borough should plan for and help coordinate community activities to draw people to the area. When people come, they will want spaces to gather, sit and talk. Pedestrian spaces, plazas and sidewalk cafes for outdoor dining and art displays should be encouraged. The Borough should construct plazas where it can, but business owners should also work together to develop gathering spaces on private property. The Borough should incorporate a streetscape vocabulary section into the Downtown Design Guidelines developed by Downtown Hightstown and adopt them so that everyone can use it to coordinate their efforts.” (2014 Re-Examination Report, p. 28)

The 2014 Master Plan Amendment described in considerable detail a new vision for Hightstown which included the following goals for the core of downtown in the area of Peddie Lake:

“Preserve, protect and enhance Peddie Lake, its environs and open space corridors as valuable natural resources within the central downtown business district. Ultimately removing the parking lot from Memorial Park would be an improvement to Peddie Lake and the downtown as a whole. Businesses that abut the lake and take advantage of the wonderful view should help maintain an enjoyable environment along the lake edge for the public at large; it’s in their best interest that this area remain desirable.” (2014 Re-Examination Report, p. 13)

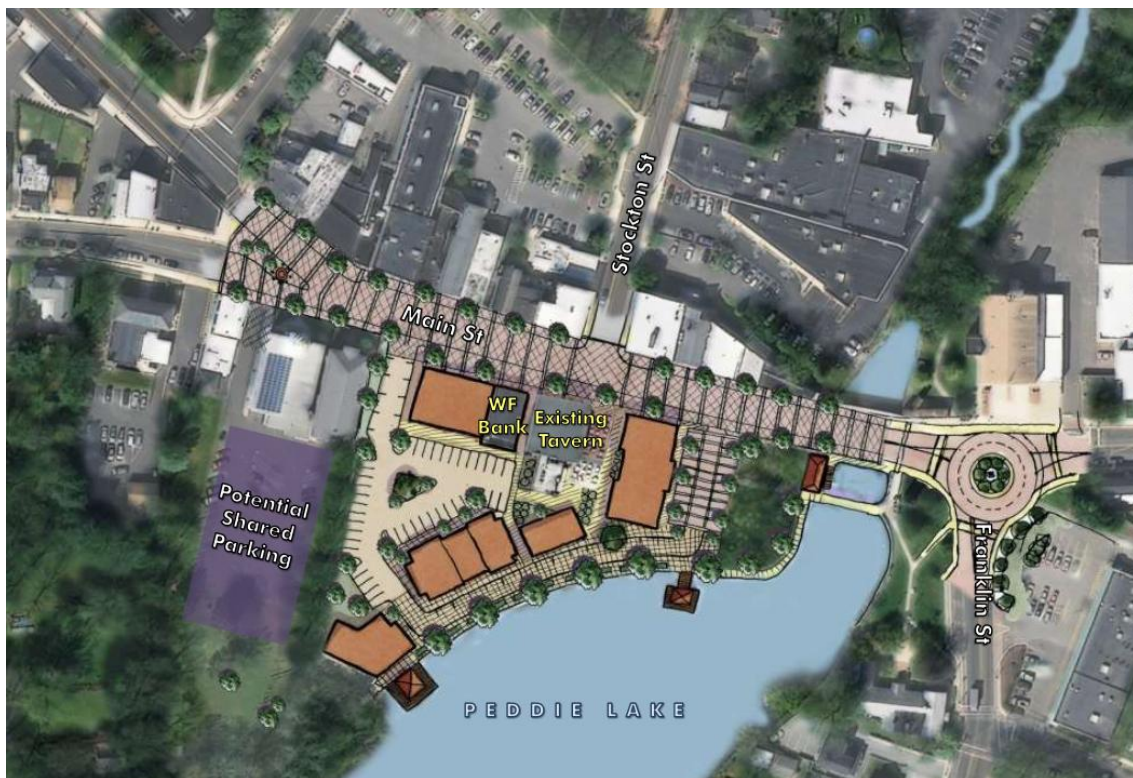
and

“...while public space along the lake front is desirable and an important attraction for the downtown, the parking lot at Peddie Lake is an unproductive space that should be developed with vibrant shops and restaurants, leaving the lake’s edge open for public access. The parking could be relocated, either to the Baptist Church through a formalize agreement of shared parking with the church or to the rear of the Post Office site, if the Post Office ever down-sizes or vacates the property.” (2014 Re-Examination Report, p. 19)

To expand upon these objectives, an outreach project and visioning study was conducted in 2015. As a result, the “Vision Plan for Downtown and Lakeside Improvements” dated September 30, 2015 was developed. It strives to make the downtown more vibrant, capitalize on the waterfront experience, take advantage of the Borough’s rich history and provide a catalyst for future reinvestment.

The Vision Plan includes a couple of different scenarios, but they all have a few common design elements.

- Commercial buildings along the lakefront that take advantage of the views
- Pedestrian space that celebrates the lake as a local attraction including a waterfront promenade, waterfront dining, and piers that extend into the lake
- Sufficient room for public gatherings, visual and performing arts and other community events such as food truck events, street festivals, and family movie night
- Ample parking that is easily accessible but does not compromise the pedestrian experience
- Streetscapes, hardscapes and even building facades that are softens with new landscaping.
- Incorporate elements of the Borough’s history into the design of the public spaces, including grist mill features and railroad/train artifacts.



One of the visioning plans would transform a vast majority of the existing parking and vehicular space between Peddie Lake and Main Street into a bustling commercial center with multistory buildings overlooking a lakefront promenade and public plaza. There's also an option to add a small hotel to the mix. A more ambitious plan illustrates the possibility for completely separating pedestrians and vehicles by decking over grade level parking and constructing all the commercial and pedestrian amenities on the deck, overlooking the lake.

All of the options included in the Vision Plan build on the planning policies that have evolved in the Borough over the years. It's been an ongoing effort, starting in the late 90's when Hightstown first articulated the importance of revitalizing the downtown to more recently, in the latest Re-Examination Report when the Borough refined its planning policies to identify Hightstown as a destination. Developing a plan consistent with the concepts created by the visioning study would go a long way toward implementing the Borough's downtown planning goals. For this reason the Hightstown Planning Board is updating and formally amending the Borough's Master Plan to endorse and adopt the Vision Plan for Downtown and Lakeside Improvements and the conceptual plans developed within it.

Accordingly, future ordinances should be crafted to help implement these design concepts. Future zoning should effectuate the uses proposed for both buildings and public spaces. And future redevelopment plans should reflect the character of the plans envisioned for lakefront improvements and the downtown.