

DESTINATION 2040

MIDDLESEX COUNTY ♦ NJ
MASTER PLAN



Destination 2040 Phase 2 Outreach March-April 2019

Summary of Outreach to Veterans, Individuals with Disabilities, and Seniors

AARP New Jersey State Office
East Brunswick Senior Center
Residence at Roosevelt
New Brunswick Senior Citizen Resource Center
JFK Vocational Rehabilitation Center
Alliance Center for Independence

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Introduction

Rutgers Public Outreach and Engagement Team (POET) at the Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) has prepared a public involvement plan for Destination 2040, which is the initiative from Middlesex County to update the Master Plan with thoughtful strategies by not just looking into short-range plans, but also at the long-term future. Destination 2040 will ensure those who work, live and study in Middlesex County have a voice in creating the vision to guide the County for the next 20+ years.

Phase 1 of the Public Engagement Plan for Destination 2040 included general outreach to the public at events, feedback boxes at libraries throughout Middlesex County and online asking what they like and what they would change about the County. Phase 2 outreach involves more detailed feedback on twelve specific elements or topics of the Master Plan (arts & culture, economic opportunity, environment, historic preservation, housing, land use & development, parks & open spaces, public health, public safety, public services & facilities, technology & innovation, and transportation).

Rutgers POET initially implemented *Set the Table!* outreach which involves recruiting hosts to hold a dinner gathering where conversation about various topics can be discussed along with identifying ideas and suggestions for North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA)'s Plan 2045, their long-range transportation plan. After the success of *Set the Table!* for NJTPA, Middlesex County was interested in doing a large scale of *Set the Table!* for Destination 2040.

People who live, work or study in Middlesex County were encouraged to sign up for *Set the Table!* with the goal of recruiting up to 100 hosts. As part of the public engagement plan for Destination 2040, Rutgers POET suggested targeted outreach to gain input and feedback from specific groups (older adults, people with disabilities, veterans, limited English learners and high school students) to complement the community-based volunteer-led dinners. Facilitated meetings followed the host guidelines of *Set the Table!* using "Chew on This" question cards from the kit to prompt discussions, so that findings and input could be synthesized with the broader community results, as well as viewed discretely. This report summarizes feedback from the six sessions that targeted people with disabilities, seniors and veterans. There were 85 participants across the six sessions, which are outlined in the table below.

Date	Host Organization	Point of Contact	Location	Participants	Topics Selected
03/07/19	Aging and Disabled Advisory Council	Laila Caune	East Brunswick Senior Center	6	Economic Opportunity, Housing, Public Services & Facilities, and Transportation
03/29/19	Residence at Roosevelt	Brittany Walsh	Edison	8	Arts & Culture, Housing, Public Health, and Transportation
04/09/19	AARP of New Jersey	Christine Newman	New Brunswick	14	Arts & Culture, Parks & Open Spaces, Public Health, Public Safety, and Transportation
04/16/19	New Brunswick Senior Resource Center	Melanie Ford	New Brunswick	15	Housing, Public Health, Public Services & Facilities, and Technology & Innovation
04/17/19	JFK Vocational Rehabilitation Center	Grazyna Janczuk, Maureen King, Andrea Evgeiou	Edison	16	Arts & Culture, Public Safety, and Technology & Innovation
04/18/19	Alliance Center for Independence	Carol Tonks	Edison	26	Housing, Public Health, Public Services & Facilities, and Transportation
Total:	6 events			85 participants	

Format for Discussions

Using existing connections from both Middlesex County and Rutgers POET, various organizations (senior housing, advisory committees, volunteers, vocational rehabilitation centers, center for independent living, etc.) were identified and contacted to host discussions with their members and constituents at their locations. Participants were asked to fill out general geographic data (no names were taken) along with releases to take photos of the event. Rutgers POET staff facilitated the discussions by asking participants to select 3-5 topics out of a possible 12 topics. By a show of hands and majority vote, topics were selected and “Chew on This” question cards from *Set the Table!* guided each topic discussion. “Food for Thought” cards with facts and figures about Middlesex County helped guide the discussion. Feedback on respective topics from the participants were written on large post it boards, and ideas and suggestions were discussed along with any challenges. Targeted outreach events lasted up to 90 minutes in length, and participants were prompted to answer questions and probed for details when needed by the facilitator. Light refreshments and snacks were served during the event.

Lessons Learned

Outreach events for targeted groups was adapted using *Set the Table!* Rutgers POET facilitators had a passive role during the events, where the facilitator was a conduit of refining and expanding thoughts and ideas rather than controlling the conversation. The “Food for Thought” fact cards about Middlesex County were used as idea generators for topics of discussion and also provided transitions from topic to topic. However, topics are inter-related, with some comments reaching across a broad range of themes.

Participants who share a common experience (e.g. housing, senior center participation, volunteerism in an organization) had connections and input that were more personal than those who participated on a professional basis (e.g. an advisory committee). After the outreach events, many participants were enthusiastic about the county’s master plan update process and asked to be included on communications and information regarding Destination 2040 efforts.

One key takeaway that participants reiterated was the need for representation. Participants were pleased that people with disabilities, older adults and veterans are part of the planning process, and would like to continue having a seat at the table. Participants expressed interest in reviewing the final product.

Summary of Topics Discussed

Of the twelve possible *Set the Table!* discussion topics, each of the six groups selected between 3-5 topics for group discussion. This report discusses the topics that were chosen through a majority vote based on a show of hands at the beginning of each event, and are listed below by frequency. Three topics were not discussed at any of the six targeted outreach sessions: Historic Preservation, the Environment, and Land Use and Development.

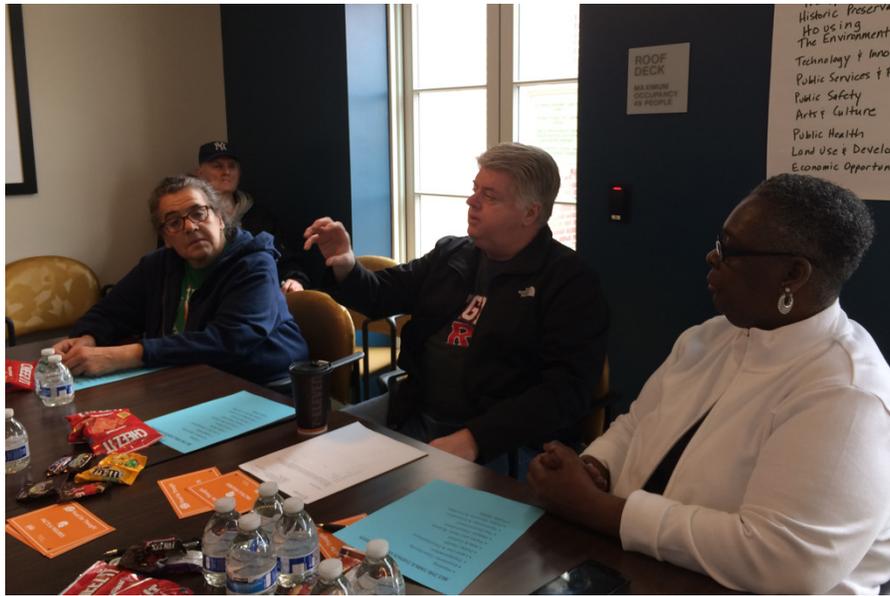
The following section presents each topic in descending order of frequency, with the questions that were posed for that topic, and the key themes discussed by all groups.

Selected Topics by Frequency

Topic	Frequency of Selection
1. Housing	4
2. Public Health	4
3. Transportation	4
4. Arts and Culture	3
5. Public Services & Facilities	3
6. Public Safety	2
7. Technology & Innovation	2
8. Economic Opportunity	1
9. Parks and Open Spaces	1

Housing *What is the most important factor for you when choosing a place to live? Do you plan to stay in Middlesex County for the foreseeable future? Why or why not?*

Housing was a selected topic at four out of the six sessions. In response to the questions, these were differences noted among groups based on the participants' current housing situations (e.g. in senior housing, with their family, or by themselves, etc.) However, common themes from all discussions about housing included the importance of affordability, neighborhood safety, and maintaining roots or social supports built over many years of living in Middlesex County. For example, some of the participants from the Residence at Roosevelt had worked in the facility when it was a hospital. Another key factor in selecting a place to live, both for people with disabilities and for seniors staying in Middlesex County, was the location's connectivity and accessibility to services, with walkability being noted as important. Among people with disabilities, frequent comments included that the infrastructure and the area surrounding housing sites should be accessible to everyone.



Health is also an important factor for staying in the county; some participants felt that they were “too old” to move to a new place, and others remarked that as long as they are healthy, they will continue to live in Middlesex County. Access to high quality medical services (at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, St. Peter’s University Hospital, etc.) was a major reason to continue living in Middlesex County. A few commented that if their conditions or health changed or worsened, they might move south where property taxes are lower than in Middlesex County and New Jersey. One notable suggestion raised during these discussions was integrating a one-stop center/community center/health clinic with medical services and supports into housing sites with known concentrations of older adults.

Public Health *Do you think that Middlesex County is a good place for seniors to live? Why or why not? Do you feel it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle in Middlesex County? What would make it easier?*

Public health was a selected topic at four out of the six sessions. Many participants indicated that they felt it is an individual’s personal responsibility to lead a healthy lifestyle. However, there was acknowledgment of County responsibility for health-based issues such as air quality and water safety – e.g. the need to update pipes in affordable housing complexes.

Some aspects of a healthy community are not universally available such as accessible indoor and outdoor pools and gym facilities (public or private) with appropriately trained staff. Participants also connected healthy lifestyle choices to community gardens and the availability of affordable healthy food. Disseminating information is important, and there are many health-promoting programs available, but many people do not know about them. Participants noted that communities with a large concentration of older adults should have strategically placed initiatives, located within senior housing communities, to offer key health services such as medical, dental, screenings and eye care appointments.

Transportation *What works well for you as far as getting around the area? What's most difficult about getting to the places you want to go?*

Transportation was a selected topic at four out of the six sessions. Connectivity, in general, was a major topic of discussion—people in downtown areas (New Brunswick) were generally happy, and understood the benefit of the access they enjoy, remarking that it should be like that everywhere. Participants who drive advocated for reducing traffic, improving road maintenance and better highway infrastructure (suggesting new roads to go across the County), noting that congestion is an “all the time” thing.

Participants had both suggestions and praise for the transportation services available in their area. Many people praised County MCAT (Middlesex County Area Transit) service and municipal transportation (e.g. Edison Dial a Ride). However, there was criticism of NJ TRANSIT Access Link service. Specific concerns for reservation-based door-to-door services included the need for better scheduling, less wait time, more connectivity and improved communication.

Public transit systems that are easy to understand and use, with safe and accessible paths of travel to bus stops, and rail stations with working elevators, are important. There was interest in alternative modes including walking and bicycling as transportation modes; some older participants expressed interest in accessing the Middlesex Greenway, and wondered about its elder-friendliness (e.g. shade, benches, off road paths). Many people wanted services to be protected (e.g. Edison municipal transportation, maintaining the NJ TRANSIT 811 bus that serves the New Brunswick Senior Center, and reinstating a NJ TRANSIT 810 bus stop to serve the Residence at Roosevelt). They would also like bus services with greater frequency (e.g. nights and weekend transportation service).

Arts & Culture *What arts or cultural programming would you like to see in the County? What is your favorite thing to do in your area on the weekend?*

Many people noted the cultural diversity of Middlesex County as a significant asset. For older adults, art centers, plays and parks encourage people to enjoy the outdoors, local culture and scenery. Religious services are a desired destination on the weekends, as well. With better transportation, more participants could connect to these cultural and community-based opportunities, which are frequently offered at night or on weekends. Within those communities that do not have a “main street” or downtown area, accessing local cultural offerings is more difficult.

The majority of the younger people with disabilities identified leisure activities that were indoors and often technology-based. Some participants who are not part of a “group” (e.g. retired, married, without children, no religious or ethnic affiliation) found joining social and cultural activities more difficult. Creating a County-based community center to foster intergenerational relationships, create community and combat isolation was one suggestion that emerged from one of the discussions.

Public Services & Facilities *How prepared do you feel for another natural disaster? What could the County do to make you feel more prepared?*

The majority of participants did not feel prepared for a natural disaster. Emergency medical services and emergency shelter providers would benefit from sensitivity training and broader education when it comes to interacting with people with disabilities in dangerous situations caused by natural disasters. While many older participants indicated that they are part of specific programs (e.g. Register Ready) so that local officials can be better informed of where vulnerable populations are located in times of emergency, younger people with disabilities were not as aware.

Providing information on emergency preparedness procedures in a variety of languages is incredibly important. One person remarked that, "I don't know what I don't know." In addition to disseminating information electronically, physical copies of emergency preparedness materials and guides need to be readily available through community sites and centers, as members will turn to these locations in times of need and crisis. Connectivity to emergency resources cannot be only available via the internet or telephone.



Public Safety *Do you feel safe in your community? What would make you feel safer?*

Many people felt safer in Middlesex County than they did in previous places they have lived in (e.g. Jersey City, New York City). An increased presence of police was noted as a positive factor for the older adult participants. Many participants indicated that they appreciate efforts like Neighborhood Watch and the Next Door website; they indicated that they would trade off some privacy for increased safety in their neighborhood.

Infrastructure is extremely important when it comes to safety, especially maintaining areas that are well-lit, safe to use, and familiar. Pedestrian safety is a big concern; streets should be easy to cross and walkability and connectivity should be priorities. Some people remarked that police visibility should not just be via patrolling in cars, but also with officers walking and bicycling throughout the community, and being accessible and friendly with the people they are protecting.

Technology & Innovation *What new technologies are you most excited about?*

Among older participants, the Technology and Innovation discussion focused on electronic and medical innovations. Many participants believe that medical procedures are heading into a safer direction with robotic surgery and less recovery time both being noted as positive developments. This also correlates with people continuing to live in an area known as a medical hub; Robert Wood Johnson is accessible and innovative when it comes to robotic surgery, making it a reason why people stay. There was also interest in technology to improve livability for older adults – using Skype to communicate with family members, and in making simple tasks easier, such as opening windows. Among younger participants, there was enthusiasm about the possibility of virtual reality and artificial intelligence.

Economic Opportunity *How can we better prepare students and jobseekers for the workplace? How could the County better communicate how it uses your tax dollars? How would you most like to see your tax dollars spent?*

The economic opportunity discussion primarily focused on opportunities for younger people. Older participants felt that education, human services, and efforts addressing homelessness should benefit from tax revenues; and, efficiency, accountability and transparency are important in spending those resources well. Communicating effectively with the public regarding those investments was significant, too. Older participants commented that they were worried about the younger generations, noting that they did not save their money, or had limited opportunity to save, especially for those young adults with student loans. There was interest in younger workers possibly pursuing careers focused on trades, through additional County investment in vocational education.

Parks & Open Spaces *What is your favorite park, greenway, or trail in the County? Why?*

Many participants expressed strong support for the beautification of parks. Many older adults want to use outdoor spaces, but the infrastructure needs to include appropriate amenities and physical activity options that are elder-friendly (e.g. adult playgrounds, walking areas with benches, and par courses). Intergenerational activities such as petting zoos and children's parks could promote a better interconnectivity between generations, and can counter social isolation. Safety considerations, including police presence, accessibility, and an adequate number of benches/seats, can support older adults and people with disabilities in using parks more frequently and comfortably. Ensuring park access through “green” alternative transportation modes, including bicycling and walking, can make them more available to more people.

Reports

The six, targeted outreach events to people with disabilities, seniors and veterans conducted throughout March and April 2019 are each summarized in the following reports, which contain the verbatim feedback that Rutgers POET staff collected.

AARP NEW JERSEY STATE OFFICE

Date: Thursday, March 7, 2019

Location: Alliance Center for Independence, 629 Amboy Ave, Edison, NJ

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

Held at the AARP-NJ State Office, volunteers came for a Set the Table! that engaged them in a 90-minute conversation of various topics of the county master plan. All of the volunteers who participated in the event were either residents of Middlesex County or work within the county. The event included 14 participants.



Topics of Interest

The facilitator asked the group to choose five topics (out of possible twelve) they were most interested in discussing. By a count of hands and majority vote, the five topics chosen were: transportation, parks and open spaces, arts and culture, public health, and public safety. The facilitator then asked questions from the *Set the Table!* deck of cards (Chew on This...) to help guide the group discussion.

Comments Summary

TRANSPORTATION (29 COMMENTS)

The majority of the conversation centered around access to public transit, traffic congestion, and the difficulties of both in some areas within Middlesex County. Many of the participants are both car drivers and advocates for public transit. The group had suggestions of new pathways that did not rely necessarily on roadways to get around but also offer more “green” access (e.g. walking, biking). The group discussed traveling through certain parts of New Jersey can be difficult and infrastructure is in great need of updating and repairs.

Question *What works well for you as far as getting around the area? What's most difficult about getting to the places you want to go?*

- Beautify train stations
- Jitney services should be more universally available to alleviate traffic
- Too much traffic makes getting around difficult
- Bus and train services to NYC and Philly via transit is good
- Getting to northern New Jersey via 1-95 is very good
- Getting to a destination in the north or south is easy, but moving east to west is difficult
- Carpooling helps with getting around, and with making social connections
- Parking in Middlesex can be difficult
- Reduced fare is offered to seniors, people with disabilities and veterans on NJ TRANSIT
- Improving awareness of the shuttle services to public transit—they exist, but people don't know they exist
- Public transit is hard to use when commutes are already long
- Infrastructure needs to be fixed, especially potholes
- Construction on roads is not done at smart times (e.g. Route 287 with active construction during peak hours for commuters)
- First mile/last mile connections are difficult and can disengage people from using transit
- Lack of public transit information for transit/transportation systems that aren't NYC-centric
- "Good at moving people out of the state." Services are oriented to NYC and Philly.
- Both inter-county and intra-county transportation within NJ is difficult/doesn't exist
- Uber/Lyft is an interesting opportunity that can make getting around easier, especially with its availability in Middlesex County.
- Moving between counties is very difficult/not an option
- Restructuring regarding county boundaries to allow better transit initiatives
- No alternatives to cars for many people
- Congestion is difficult in a very dense state
- Bottlenecks are a consistent transportation problem
- Infrastructure is not keeping up with the modernization of transportation
- Middlesex County can build a road across Route 130 to alleviate traffic
- Thinking of new roads and connections (especially ones that are not car-centric)

- Facilities are not up to expectations—there is room for improvement regarding the lack of amenities and accessibility
- Thoughtful road development is necessary
- Philosophies regarding planning have changed since last Master Plan, so this planning effort is overdue!

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE (22 COMMENTS)

Many participants advocated for more physical activities in local parks and open spaces. However, many also wished to see parks that host plays and cultural events, which can connect communities to one another. Participants also wanted more educational programs highlighting the various cultures in Middlesex County. Interestingly, those involved in the conversation also brought up intergenerational connectivity.

Question *What activities would you like offered through the County parks system?*

- A variety of gardens: organic, sensory and herbal
- Environmental clean-up
- Walking trails
- Summertime and springtime park plays with cultural events to celebrate diversity and come together
- Parkway connectivity
- Greenspace linkage
- Biking and walking
- Exercise equipment
- Par courses in parks for more exercise
- A wall for handball, wall ball, tennis like Bicentennial Park
- Meditative interventions (laughing, breathing, yoga)
- A petting zoo (promotes intergenerational connectivity)
- Children's park like Veterans Park
- Musical instruments that could promote music/sound therapy
- Thoughtful intergenerational design, incorporating universal design and programs featuring local organizations
- Embed stricter safety features
- "Can't go to the park. I don't feel safe."
- Antidote to isolation with public spaces/parks

- Public facilities/bathrooms and basic amenities need to be incorporated
- Body of water allows for activities like fishing—capitalize on waterfront areas
- Gazebos built in the parks to provide shade, areas to sit down in (e.g. Pine Tree Park)
- No decent parking available— offer “green” access ways to the parks, and between parks to connect them to one another

ARTS AND CULTURE (22 COMMENTS)

While the conversation revolved around lower impact activities such as gardening, physical activities and family engagement were important. However, some people advocated that activities should not be centered around religious affiliation or cultural events, but should provide connections for people who are alone and want to meet new people. One member suggested a Middlesex County Community Center open six days a week that promotes activities for all age groups.

Question *What is your favorite thing to do in your area on the weekend?*

- Stay at home
- Garden
- Ride bikes/walk
- Go to the park
- Play handball
- Winery tours
- Spend time with grandchildren
- Go to the beach
- Go to the city—see a play, fine dining
- Nothing to do in home development
- No connection with neighbors to build relationships for weekend activities
- Connectivity in Metuchen via walkability and proximity
- Middlesex has many strip malls that people go to the weekends for shopping and recreational activities
- Towns that don't have a “main street” can make community building difficult
- Getting to events/activities is difficult, but it shouldn't be
- Activities for people who are families/family-oriented
- Activities that foster community so you can go alone and fight isolation
- People are leaving communities

- Monroe Township is the Mecca for Older Adult club houses where beautiful senior centers are open on Saturday
- Middlesex County should have a community center open 6 days a week especially since not all older people cannot go to Monroe township
- A community center will foster intergenerational relationships
- “How do you get the greater community involved?”

PUBLIC HEALTH (18 COMMENTS)

There was a mixed reaction of whether or not Middlesex County is a good place to live. If one can afford it, Middlesex County is a wonderfully connected and diverse place to live. However, winter months can be difficult if someone is snowed in, which can lead to social isolation. Middlesex County is a cultural hub for art and theater, especially given the proximity to Rutgers University.

Question *Do you think Middlesex County is a good place for seniors to live? Why or why not?*

- Mixed reactions of yes and no
- Too expensive to live in Middlesex County
- If you can afford it, it is a good place to live because it is safe, accessibility with driving
- No connections between residents to one another
- Cliques exist (e.g. AARP volunteers are a group of people that know each other and are comfortable with each other)
- No integration of groups
- Living in places that can be quiet/not as connected (e.g. Sayreville)—a blue collar community full of roots, can be hard to enter into
- Sense of familial consistency, roots are built here
- A lot of diversity in the population
- People moving south due to affordability
- Health system in Middlesex County is one of the best with Robert Wood Johnson, St. Peter's hospitals
- Winter can be difficult for older adults, especially when snow removal is not done well and they are kept inside of their homes
- Middlesex is convenient
- A hub of art & theater (State Theater, Zimmerli Art Museum)
- There is something going on every weekend, but you have to get there in some way, and know about it.
- Want activities full of like-minded people, rather than a specific cultural/religious event

- “I want to do things for me.”
- Those with family have structures to connect to others, but those who are without families/don't want families find it harder to find people to engage with.

PUBLIC SAFETY (17 COMMENTS):

There was a mixed reaction of people feeling safe and not safe. Many would prefer a stronger police presence (e.g. community policing), even if it is just police walking around the streets. However, home rule can make this difficult. With Next Door, an app that alerts users about safety concerns, community connectivity can be strengthened in a modern way. Integration of the police into everyday life can enhance all-around safety for the community.

Question *Do you feel safe in your community? Why or why not?*

- Mixed reactions of yes and no
- Some people feel safe, others don't
- More police presence
- “Big Brother watching” is OK if I feel safer.
- More lighting, specifically street lighting for driving in the dark
- More afterschool activities that keep kids occupied/engaged
- Sidewalk upkeep/sidewalks in general
- Better street crossings/street crossing upkeep
- Community communication is important to promote local safety
- Next Door is a website that helps communicating within localities about safety akin to Neighborhood Watch
- Properly maintained buildings attract certain activities (abandoned buildings, with no upkeep attracts other kinds of activities)
- Perth Amboy is an example of a community that has positive community policing
- Visibility of cops will help people feel safer (beat cops)
- Local control/home rule makes police presence difficult because not as many police officers can be out
- Police don't walk around, only drive
- Bike patrol can also help people acquaint themselves with the police presence
- Suggestion of block parties that invite the police to be part of the community

Demographic Summary

There were 14 people in total for the conversation: four men and ten women. Three of the 14 people were Asian, four were Indian, two were black and five were white.

EAST BRUNSWICK SENIOR CENTER

Date: Thursday, March 7, 2019

Location: East Brunswick Senior Center at 3 Civic Center Drive, East Brunswick, NJ

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

A facilitated event using Set the Table! materials was held during an already scheduled Aging and Disabled Advisory Council meeting in Middlesex County. The event was held during the advisory meeting to attract connected residents who are based in Middlesex County either as their residence or place of work. Rutgers POET Staff engaged with six Council members and one staff member based on participants' information cards and photo release forms. Rutgers Public Outreach and Engagement (POET) staff Karen Alexander and Elizabeth Parker facilitated the discussion.



Topics of Interest

Facilitators from Rutgers POET asked the group to choose four (out of possible twelve) topics to discuss. By a vote of hands and majority count, the four topics chosen for discussion were: transportation, housing, economic opportunity, and public services. The facilitator then asked questions from the *Set the Table!* deck of cards (Chew on This...) that were most relevant to the group to guide the conversation.

Comments Summary

HOUSING (17 COMMENTS)

The conversation primarily centered around affordable housing for the aging population. Participants commented that many people they know are choosing not to stay in Middlesex County due to high taxes. Accessibility is important to participants in terms of connecting them with the community and reducing social isolation. Comments revolved around financial preparedness for those who are retired or anticipating retirement. One particular comment noted that Middlesex County is an attractive county to live in, with lower tax rates than much of northern New Jersey. Many people choose to stay because of their familial roots in Middlesex County -- to be close to their families.

Question #1: *What is the most important factor for you when choosing a place to live?*

- Safety
- Affordable/affordability in an expensive county
- Well-serviced with transportation (Example: Spotswood—located in the hub of transportation. Senior centers: Woodmeer, Crescent Park.)
- Accessibility to central hubs of the community (diners, senior centers, etc.)
- Walkability/pedestrian safety

Question #2: *Do you plan to stay in Middlesex County for the foreseeable future? Why or why not?*

- Leaving the state after retiring
- 80+ age group will increase by 40% in 30 years
- Money can go further in other states (e.g. housing) than New Jersey
- Taxes are too high
- Families in pre-retirement already plan to move out of the state
- Many people in New Jersey move to southern states (VA, NC) — affordable tax-wise, yet still drivable to families
- Having the ability to leave (whether they can or cannot will determine if they stay)
- Uprooting children from their school system makes people reluctant to leave
- Roots are built, making some reluctant to leave
- Adventurous, intrigued to conquer the unknown, intrigued by possibility of starting over
- Available services, health providers
- Middlesex County is in a healthcare hub, offers access to specialized hospitals

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY (24 COMMENTS)

Conversation centered around the topics of job preparedness for the younger generations and taxes. Participants noted that schools should market trade/vocations as viable employment opportunities. Financial preparedness was also an important topic. The conversation about taxes was somewhat truncated, however participants emphasized that they wanted tax revenues to be spent more wisely; they also advocated for more education and information about how taxes are spent.

Question #1: *How can we better prepare students and job seekers for the workplace?*

- Education (opportunities, varied outlets via college, trade school)
- Teach the value of a dollar by promoting jobs in high school
- Lack of job opportunities are a reason why students may not be able to leave home easily
- Opportunities for students to be in growth industries
- Military and trades as viable options
- Need positive encouragement for trades
- Achievement of higher degrees is important now to have a job
- Education strategies to get a job set up (work outcomes after education)
- Non-college employment being introduced during high school education

Question #2: *How could the County better communicate how it uses your tax dollars? How would you most like to see your tax dollars spent?*

- Spending less on county government and higher-ups of Boards of Education or BOE (e.g. duplicate superintendents – cost savings would be realized in instances of combining two small town school districts together)
- Tax money is being spent more wisely on education, human services, public safety, and combating homelessness.
- Enhancing education offerings
- The County should offer better education on where to get information on how tax revenues are being spent, such as:
 - Surveys
 - Websites/Applications
 - Public displays for those not connected
 - A computer center that helps teach the aging population how to use the internet
- Availability/help in navigating/generating more interest in education
- Billboards can be utilized for little tax facts/tidbits
- Public opinion on how to spend tax revenues

- Money from taxes can be allotted for caregivers to help ease barriers
- Teen centers to promote safety for youths and teens and deter from gang activity
- Better education about why affordable housing and other human services are necessary and why tax money goes to them
- People don't save for the long run

TRANSPORTATION (16 COMMENTS)

Participants noted that transportation availability varies in Middlesex County, from well-served areas to those with little service. Traffic and congestion were brought up as major issues that Middlesex County faces. Transportation was a major topic of interest due to availability and accessibility; if accessible services are available to seniors, it can mitigate adverse conditions such as social isolation.

Question: *What works well for you as far as getting around the area? What is most difficult about getting to the places you want to go?*

- Seniors to get out of the house more regularly
 - Build networks/community
 - 4 buses in Piscataway township
- People (older adults) don't drive anymore
- Long waiting times to be picked up from Medical appointments (specifically Access Link)
 - Drop off to appointments is good
- Access/education to and about services is difficult, specifically Access Link and MCAT (Middlesex County Area Transit)
- Positives about Access Link/MCAT: Door-to-door drop off, good customer service
- Hard for non-Medicaid, under 50 years Middlesex County residents to find transportation
- Congestion issues
- Volunteers for transportation services refuse to go to certain towns because of traffic and congestion
- Medical Offices offer incentives (money) for trips to/from their offices
- Lack of awareness regarding transportation-providing organizations
- The aging population doesn't want complicated systems to engage with transportation
 - Anxiety about using it

- A good thing about the transportation services is that they take people to wellness centers

PUBLIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES (7 COMMENTS)

Participants weren't sure about how to answer this question. Many noted that while New Jersey has faced some natural disasters, it is not as dire as other places (e.g. California). Participants thought it was important to educate seniors about generators and the proper way to use them, as well as provide information about the various levels of state of emergencies. Information dissemination was important, noting that municipalities should have automated messages about disasters and the proper way to evacuate, materials and supplies to get and general safety. It was noted that the Governor seems to be aware of safety.

Question: *How prepared do you feel for another natural disaster? What could the County do to make you feel more prepared?*

- Generators—how to use them safely
- Ensure developers have required generators in specialized housing (low income, senior)
- Knowledge/information/education about preparedness (gaps in information)
- Municipalities should have automated calls about things to have and where to go
- Governor seems prepared
- Levels of service available in various "State of Emergency" situations
- "I don't know what I don't know"

Demographic Summary

There were six people in total for the conversation: three men and three women. Four of the six participants were age 65+; the remaining two participants were between 45-64 years old. Four of six participants identified as White, the other two identified as African American, not Hispanic.

RESIDENCE AT ROOSEVELT

Date: Friday, March 29, 2019

Location: Residence at Roosevelt, One Roosevelt Drive, Edison, NJ 08837

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

The Set the Table! event was held at the Residence at Roosevelt, an independent living senior housing development for older adults 62+ years. The Residence at Roosevelt is affordable housing with 80+ units, and all units are currently occupied. Rutgers POET staff engaged with eight people based on participation information cards and photo release forms.



Topics of Interest

After a warm welcome from Freeholder Charles Kenny, the Rutgers POET Facilitator asked the group to choose the four topics that they were most interested in discussing. By a vote of hands and majority, the four topics chosen were: transportation, housing, arts & culture, and public health. The facilitator then asked questions selected prior to the event to help lead the conversation.

Comments Summary

TRANSPORTATION (21 COMMENTS)

The majority of the one-hour conversation centered around transportation, even as the facilitator was engaging in other topics. Transportation was noted by some as good, but by others as inaccessible. The conversation revolved around county-wide transportation (MCAT and Edison, specifically) rather

than NJ TRANSIT. Many of those involved in the conversation utilize Dial-A-Ride public transit and offered possible suggestions to remedy transportation issues.

Question: *What works well for you as far as getting around the area? What is most difficult about getting to the places you want to go?*

- Edison [transportation] will only take you around Edison
- Middlesex County transportation is countywide
- MCAT does not come to the Residence at Roosevelt
- Accessibility (some buses used for transporting seniors are not accessible for wheelchair users)
- Limited transportation with regards to veteran transportation
- Veterans can either go to East Orange OR Lyons for services, but not both
- Out of county transportation is not viable— it is inaccessible.
- Access Link issues
- Dial-a-Ride works very well (Edison-centric)
- Not too many buses around Edison
- Physical incapacibilities (no lifts, no kneeling, inaccessible vehicles)
- Equipment is inaccessible/or accessible service is not available
- The bookmobile is inaccessible (narrow, high from the ground)—later revealed to be canceled; service no longer provided.
- Talk of a new bookmobile to be purchased
- For Access Link services, people with no disabilities may go as a guide for someone with a disability to take advantage of trips (positive)
- Community—good pedestrian access, sidewalks are intact and crosswalks are readable
- People use their cellphones and that hinders pedestrian safety, as they are distracted walkers
- The Middlesex Greenway built on the old Lehigh Valley railroad track bed does not have benches or many access points or openings, which can be difficult for older adults who want to use it.
- Walkway from Residence to Target (on Parsonage Road) is not maintained but should be

ARTS AND CULTURE (13 COMMENTS)

When participants were asked what they enjoy doing during the weekend, residents brought up that the lack of weekend transportation makes weekend activities not available to them. Much of the conversation revolved around outside activities (walking around the park, the mall, going to the store). Many wished to go into NYC and enjoy Broadway shows. The conversation turned from what to enjoy toward a “how to get there” conversation.

Question: *What is your favorite thing to do in your area on the weekend?*

- Not much around here
- Most residents engage in physical activities (e.g. walking)
- Roosevelt park should be utilized better
- Can take the 810 to Woodbridge Center on the weekend
- Religious services are a social connection and important, consistent weekend activity
- Would like to go to Broadway shows, but no access
- Edison Services + MCAT are only available on the weekdays
- Lack of transportation is a barrier to participating in activities and using services that happen on the weekends
- Walking and public safety are important but taken less into consideration
- NJT 810 bus used to stop on the corner of the Residence—suggested bringing the route back to a stop in front of the residence now that it is converted into a 24/7 living residence
- Better crosswalks (readability and maintenance of crosswalks)
- Flashing pedestrian sign put in place to help mandate safer walking
- TricBikes can be used for older adults specifically to engage in a healthier way of life

PUBLIC HEALTH (19 COMMENTS)

The majority of the participants agreed that they enjoyed Middlesex County and thought it was a good place for an older adult to grow old. They noted that Middlesex is home to many hospitals and has good access to transportation. They remarked on the availability of restaurants, shopping, and the Edison Senior Center. Flexibility was another positive. When asked about health, the consensus was that it was more up to an individual's willingness to participate in a healthy lifestyle than accessibility.

Question #1 *Do you think that Middlesex County is a good place for seniors to live? Why or why not?*

- Hospitals in the area
- Decent transportation
- Parks (Roosevelt, Merrill park in Woodbridge)
- food stores/food shopping is available
- The flexibility of the bus MCAT service
- Lots of restaurants
- Carpooling/routing can be done better so time is not an issue (e.g. to and from the Edison Senior Center)

- No flexible program schedules
- Technology usage for transportation services is inefficient (no warning call/reminder call)

Question #2 *Do you feel it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle in Middlesex County? What would make it easier?*

- Health depends on the person (go-getters vs. introverts)
- More transportation opportunities will make things better and easier to get to
- Edison Senior Center offers connectivity, lunch and other nutritional services
 - Travel can be tricky on the Edison Senior Bus
 - Edison Senior Center will pick you up and take you to activities and back to your home
 - Transportation scheduling is not well-aligned around program times. For example, by the time participants got picked up and taken to the Senior Center for lunch, they had to eat very fast to be “on time” for the bus to take them home. There was no time for socializing, which is an important aspect of the congregate meal program!

HOUSING (14 COMMENTS)

If there was one thing that all of the residents of Roosevelt were looking for in a place to live, it was convenience. Convenience for the residents was primarily defined as the availability of doctor offices, churches, and shopping centers. Second in importance was personal and physical safety. They were grateful for the affordability of living in the Residence at Roosevelt, but some amenities were expensive, such as electricity bills. There is a difference in affordability in terms of the price of rent and the cost of living in the building, e.g. electrical bills, etc. Comments revealed that the residents have a strong sense of community and camaraderie with one another and believe that they are safe and protected with each other. One resident shared the idea of a community for older adults that could involve a “one-stop” center where medical, dental and other services are an integrated part of the living community.

Question *What is the most important factor for you when choosing a place to live?*

- Convenience (shopping, churches, doctors, parks)
- Safety (physical, personal)
- Environment/mentality of the social culture of Edison
- “Not everyone wants to attack you”
- Takes time to adjust to suburbia vs city living
- Affordability (living) is the price of vs living in the affordable housing
 - Electric is now used because it is safer than gas, but leads to high bills and hinders affordability
- Socialization (groups of people and events)
- People are nice to each other

- Look out for each other emotionally and in terms of safety
- Cleanliness
- Animals are allowed
- Accessibility (elevators put in when the hospital was renovated into a living facility)
- Suggestion for a one-stop center/community centered around medical services and supports.

Demographic Summary

There were 8 people in total for the conversation: 6 men and 2 women. About half of the group was African American, one person was Asian, and the rest were white.

NEW BRUNSWICK SENIOR CITIZEN RESOURCE CENTER

Date: Tuesday, April 16, 2019

Location: New Brunswick Senior Citizen Resource Center, 81 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

This targeted *Set the Table!* event was held at the New Brunswick Senior Citizen Resource Center in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Members of the Senior Citizen Resource Center came to the event and engaged in the *Set The Table!* event for an hour-long conversation regarding living, working or studying in Middlesex County, New Jersey.



Topics of Interest

The Rutgers POET facilitator asked the group to choose the four topics that they felt the most interested in discussing. The four topics chosen were: housing, technology, public health and public safety. The facilitator then asked questions previously selected from the *Set The Table!* deck of cards (*Chew on This...*) to guide the conversation.

Comments Summary

HOUSING (29 COMMENTS)

Many participants indicated that they plan to stay in Middlesex County for the foreseeable future. They cited that affordability, connectivity and accessibility to events and services are major reasons to stay in the County. However, some said that they would leave Middlesex County because their

kids do not live nearby – this was especially true for those who thought their health might decline in the future. Having established roots, being “settled in” and living the majority of their lives in Middlesex County were also major reasons for staying in the county.

Question *Do you plan to stay in Middlesex County for the foreseeable future? Why or why not?*

- Yes
- Very reasonable rent-wise compared to NY/NYC
- childhood and lifelong roots are here
- Services are around and available
- Stay as long (living alone/without children) as you're healthy
- The environment of New Brunswick, housing and availability of medical and educational resources makes people stay
- Half of the group have grown up in Middlesex County
- Availability of transportation
- Comment on support for maintaining the NJ TRANSIT 811 Bus Route, considered an artery line for those in the Senior Center
- Age is a staying factor, people consider themselves too old to move away and start anew
- They considered themselves “settled in”
- Convenience of services (medical)
- Everyone in the group drives, but walkability is a big factor for convenience
- Weather conditions in New Jersey (temperament/mild weather) is ideal for the group
- A vibrant, diverse cultural scene
- A lot of theaters and schools
- Good value for places to live
- Children are close by
- Raised their kids here
- Familiarity with the landscape
- Volunteering
- Senior Center is a positive community center, and a good place to visit consistently.
- One member noted that they are afraid to go back to the South due to a personal experience
- Experience a small town and big city mentality in one town (New Brunswick)

- Many people would leave (eventually) because their family has moved away from the area, and is not close by
- Tax increases
- Kids happen to be in another state
- Someone noted that they don't know if they can stay due to future health concerns and needing to be around children to be supported through potentially failing health.
- College students live close by— and can be disrespectful to older residents of New Brunswick
- Housing restrictions with subsidized housing (limiting where you can live, how can you afford to move).

PUBLIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES (22 COMMENTS)

The general consensus was that many did not feel prepared for a natural disaster. They praised the Senior Citizen Resource Center for taking initiative in bringing classes on emergency preparedness and the Register Ready program to register with local law enforcement. However, many believe that older adults should be one of the first priorities after a natural disaster.

Question *How prepared do you feel for another natural disaster? What could the County do to make you feel more prepared?*

- (I feel) Not at all prepared
- The Senior Center offers an EMS Program where older adults sign up
- Have a relationship with the police department so they're aware of the population and vital information
- Register Ready Program
- Open the Senior Center as place of respite during disasters
- Natural disasters and disaster preparedness is not taken seriously enough
- Procedures and drills are not explained well enough in housing
- Having EMS/Responders going to residential houses (senior housing) for disaster preparedness
- Offering the Senior Center as a cooling center during heat waves
- Senior Housing Management should be more responsible for disaster preparedness
- Prioritize places where there are concentrations of seniors living, for after-disaster check up and check in
- Have resources in multiple languages (Spanish, English), distributed at key places (e.g. town hall, library)
- Enhance communication and coordination between key organizations of disaster preparedness
- No basements anymore in case of nuclear disasters

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION (22 COMMENTS)

Conversation centered around medical innovations regarding technology. Surgeries have become easier; diagnoses have become faster, and recovery time has shortened. Health implications regarding healthy food and health information should be better communicated and more accessible to the general public.

Question *What new technologies are you most excited about?*

- Robotics in the medical field performing surgery, participants indicated they feel safer.
- Man is learning more and more
- Recovery time for surgery is less with robotic surgeries
- They are able to find things faster for quicker diagnosis
- No stitches which means getting back on your feet
- Find solutions to sicknesses that were not easily treated before
- Robert Wood Johnson is a leader of robotic medical surgery
- Replacing a heart valve has become a noninvasive surgery
- Skype—talking/seeing grandchildren
- More connectivity that wasn't there before
- Science about healthy food/health technology
- "Big Brother" approach is positive due to better safety
- Restoration technology is available (e.g. rebuilding Notre Dame)
- Need technology to do simple tasks (e.g. open windows), focusing on simple tasks and not just big tasks
- DNA advances/solve medical mysteries
- Health implications

PUBLIC HEALTH (18 COMMENTS)

Many believe that it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle, mainly because of the connectivity and availability of services in the downtown New Brunswick area. However, the participants advocated for cleaner water, better infrastructure and adequate assistance for the homeless in the New Brunswick area.

Question *Do you feel it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle in Middlesex County? What would make it easier?*

- Yes
- Up to the individual to lead a healthy lifestyle

- Environment makes it possible (availability, affordability)
- Health fairs are available, mobile health fairs should be available
- Mobile health services should be more available (e.g. eye exams)
- Senior Resource Center offers exercise classes, a par course and a park—positive
- Make sure that water is up to the right standards
- Keep the city clean/safe to use it
- Help the homeless population in New Brunswick
- Limit the pollution/help keep rivers clean
- Education and information from RWJ/St. Peter's about health—available, but not widely known
- Environmental water safety
- Replacing aged pipes/infrastructure
- Senior Center is available
- Not that much traffic in the area
- Transportation gives availability and access
- MCAAT doesn't take wheeler carts/shopping carts
- Good working relationship with the City
- Land laid out in New Brunswick strategically
- Middlesex County good at serving older adults
- More/better handicap accessibility (e.g. transit stations)
- More accessible features for buildings
- Students are not respectful to older adults
- Intergenerational co-existence
- Senior Buildings should just be for seniors
- Senior Communities could be located on the 1st floor of non-senior housing
- Afraid to go out at night due to safety
- Enforcement of population in specialized housing; be sure the people “living” in a building are truly eligible to be there.

Demographic Summary

There were 15 people in total for the conversation: one man and 14 women. Seven participants were African-American, five were white, and one each were Asian, Indian, and Hispanic.

One participant was under age 65, eight participants were between age 65-75, and six participants were age 76-95.

JFK VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION CENTER

Date: Wednesday, April 17, 2019

Location: JFK Vocational Rehabilitation Center, 65 James Street, Edison, NJ

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

Rutgers POET staff met with a group of adults and students in JFK's Vocational Rehabilitation program to discuss various topics in Middlesex County, New Jersey. The Set the Table! event also included staff of the JFK Vocational Rehabilitation program and lasted 45 minutes.



Topics of Interest

The Rutgers POET facilitator asked the group to choose the three topics that they felt the most interested in discussing. By a show of hands and majority vote, the three topics chosen were: technology and innovation, arts and culture and public safety. The facilitator then asked questions from the *Set the Table!* kit selected prior to the event to help guide the conversation.

Comments Summary

ARTS AND CULTURE (18 COMMENTS)

Many of the participants commented on physical activities and connecting with friends on the weekend. However, some commented on enjoying solitary activities such as watching Netflix, listening to music and relaxing. Some included leisure activities such as horseback riding, camping and walking along the Middlesex Greenway.

Question *What is your favorite thing to do in your area on the weekend?*

- Go to the movies (e.g. Avengers movie)
- Go shopping at malls near the area (e.g. Menlo)
- Stay at home
- Drawing, gaming, animation—artistic activities
- YouTube and Netflix
- Listen to music—whether privately or going to a concert.
- Workout (YMCA)
- Buy clothes (Woodbridge Mall)
- Play basketball at a local park
- Computer
- Hang out with friends (physical activities like basketball)
- Gaming/playing card games (Japanese card games like Yugioh)
- Convenience of parks/outside facilities around them
- Ride horses at Watchung Stables
- Relaxing/sleeping
- Camping/picnicking at Cheesequake park
- Public trails—Middlesex Greenway
- Weekend gaming hangouts to make social connections

PUBLIC SAFETY (15 COMMENTS)

Gun safety was the biggest concern, especially since many of those involved know people who go to high school where gun violence has occurred on a high level. Some suggestions involved higher security in schools. They noted people taking pictures of car information via smartphones made them feel unsafe in their neighborhoods. A positive note was that those who moved to Middlesex County feel safer than how they felt where they used to live, prior to moving into the County.

Question *Do you feel safe in your community? What would make it safer?*

- Neighborhood Watch—improves safety in neighborhood, reduces perceived threat of strangers
- Taking pictures of license plates/information makes people feel unsafe
- Neighborhood Watch makes people feel safer because they know people are looking out for them
- Shootings are a common thing

- Don't go outside due to outside safety
- Middlesex/place of living is safer than places they've moved from
- Burglaries in surrounding towns makes people nervous
- Lack of pedestrian safety/walkability
- School shootings
- Gun safety (stricter regulations)
- Streetlights—if there aren't many around, people don't feel safe
- Darkness makes things unsafe, lit places make people feel safer
- Familiarity of surroundings make people feel safer
- Metal detectors in school can ease anxiety
- Better enforcement of banning weapons in school

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION (10 COMMENTS)

Conversation revolved around Artificial Intelligence, robots and virtual reality. Staff noted accessible technology, such as text-to-talk technology, blocking robot spam calls, and improved camera quality on phones.

Question *What new technologies are you most excited about?*

- Video games
- Playstation 5
- Virtual Reality
- Foldable phones for convenience
- Artificial Intelligence
- Robots, androids
- Text-to-talk—highlight literature and read it out loud
- Talk-to-text
- Iphone camera quality
- Blocking Robotic/Spam calls

Demographic Summary

There were 16 people in total for the conversation: 13 men and three women. Nine were white, six were African-American, two were Hispanic. Eleven participants were age 24 or under, four were age 25-49, and two were age 65 or over.

ALLIANCE CENTER FOR INDEPENDENCE

Date: Thursday, April 18, 2019

Location: Alliance Center for Independence, 629 Amboy Ave, Edison, NJ

Rutgers POET Staff: Karen Alexander, Elizabeth Parker

Event Summary

Held at the Alliance Center of Independent Living in Edison, New Jersey. This *Set the Table!* event had the largest turn out among the six targeted events for vulnerable populations. The Rutgers POET team (Karen Alexander and Elizabeth Parker) discussed various topics about life in Middlesex County, New Jersey with participants, staff and parents/guardians of the participants from the Alliance Center for Independence.



Topics of Interest

The facilitator asked the group to choose the four topics that they felt the most interested in speaking. By a show of hands and majority vote, the four topics chosen were: transportation, housing, public health, and public services and facilities. The facilitator then asked questions from the *Set the Table!* deck of cards (*Chew on This...*) that had been pre-selected prior to the event to guide the conversation.

Comments Summary

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation was the most popular topic. Many participants commented on the congestion in Middlesex County, especially during rush hour. Access Link was a major topic of contention in the room, with many people remarking on the difficulty of using Access Link when scheduling a trip. MCAT (Middlesex County Area Transit) was also noted to only be useful for medical trips. One

attendee remarked on the difficulty and confusion they feel when trying to use public transit, however, many in the room were public transit users/advocates.

Question *What works well for you as far as getting around the area? What's most difficult about getting to the places you want to go?*

- Driving can get people anywhere in this area
- Public transportation is limited off Route 130
- Middlesex County is crowded and not dealt with in a smart way
- A lot of population in a small amount of land
- Traffic congestion
- Paratransit (e.g. Access Link) you have to make it work to get around, rather than it working to get you around
- First mile/last mile difficulty
- Sparse services for certain train lines and bus routes
- Road maintenance is necessary—due to potholes, etc. many shared stories of flat tires and expensive repairs
- Rush hour traffic
- Access Link can be late—getting a hold of them is difficult, however new technology launched by Access Link has made it easier
- No call from Access Link if they are running late or nearby
- MCAT is now only for medical trips (restriction of services)
- Figuring out how to get from Point A to Point B is confusing – lack of information for planning trips
- Train stations/elevators are inaccessible/difficult to use
- Snow removal on streets, sidewalks, accessible parking spots and curb cuts is inadequate and makes getting around difficult
- Too few handicapped spaces—not enough spots for the growing population
- Better infrastructure for alternate modes (e.g. walking, biking)
- Indecent acts (urinating) in publicly used elevators should be fined and rules enforced
- Bus won't stop for individuals in mobile devices
- In Perth Amboy, no ferry usage; no elevator, inaccessible sidewalk usage
- Middlesex County should be more bike-friendly, implement more bike paths
- Not everyone drives
- Extend the times/hours for Access Link

HOUSING

The housing discussion focused on convenience of location, affordability and general accessibility for people who use mobile devices, specifically centered around physical locations such as around the outside of buildings and moving effectively inside a building. Commutes being manageable and the ease of getting to work were highlighted responses.

Question *What is the most important factor for you when choosing a place to live?*

- Running water
- Cost (rent is affordable)
- Location (convenience to stores)
- Accessibility with wheelchairs, physical, areas around buildings
- Personal safety without worry of being harassed
- Friendly neighbors, neighborhood connectivity
- Mortgage (affordability)
- You should be able to pay taxes
- Short commutes, living close to where you work
- Being close to a highway, connected to a major roadway for convenience

PUBLIC HEALTH

Some participants believe that it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle, while some believe it is not so easy. Affordability, a general topic throughout the conversation, became a concern when mentioning the affordability of unhealthy food (e.g. fast food is cheaper), and how healthy food is generally not affordable. Infrastructure needs to be fixed to promote alternate modes of travel, e.g. walking and biking. Gyms need better training to service the population of people with disabilities, and gyms should have accessible equipment available. Also, freeholders and elected officials should have better communication and ongoing visibility in the community, particularly with people with disabilities.

Question *Do you feel it is easy to lead a healthy lifestyle in Middlesex County? What would make it easier?*

- Not easy in general
- Cut back on general consumption
- Community gardens
- Exercising
- Group homes are generally inaccessible to facilities; that hinders physical activity
- Affordability of healthier foods

- Affordable unhealthy food, unaffordability of healthy food especially for people with restricted incomes
- PR- lack of awareness for health facilities in the area
- People with disabilities are not seen as consumers, not included in marketing
- No accessible equipment in gyms
- Trainers are not given proper training for training people with disabilities
- County should have an accessible community pool
- Fees are not realistic for people with fixed incomes
- Have accessibility to elected officials/freeholders
- Elected officials rarely respond after elections/campaigns
- Elected officials need to be more visible in the community
- More readily accessible information on medical professionals on better serving the specific needs of people with disabilities
- Medicaid should be offering fitness incentives, like other insurance programs do.

PUBLIC SERVICES AND FACILITIES

Most felt that they are not prepared for a disaster. Better training should be given to emergency and first responders on how to deal with people with disabilities. General shelters need to be accessible, and shelter workers need to be available and sympathetic to those who are disabled and seeking refuge during disaster relief. A safe space, such as a library, would help connect those to technology if they are without it after an emergency event.

Question *How prepared do you feel for another natural disaster? What could the County do to make you feel more prepared?*

- Broader training of first/emergency responders in how to deal with situations regarding people with disabilities
- Traumatizing experiences has people hesitant to use EMS
- General shelters need to be accessible to people with disabilities
- Access Link won't go off routes during evacuations for people using mobility devices
- Conversations need to be had with advocates
- Recommendations to civilians about disaster preparedness
- Reliance on technology to communicate leaves out people without internet connectivity
- People don't know about disabilities registry— need more education/information about this registry

- Identify and advertise that there are accessible safe places after an event (e.g. library); There is no library down Route 130 – in that area.
- Access to technological services in the community
- Shelter workers need better education re: serving and sheltering people with disabilities during disaster relief

Demographic Summary

There were 17 participants and from those who provided demographic data, nine attendees are female and one is male. Three participants were age 24 or under, eight were age 25-49, four were age 50-64, and two were age 65 or above.