

Transit Village Monitoring Research

Municipal Annual Report Form: Results of Pilot Study

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Background

In early 2005, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) worked with the Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers University to prepare an Annual Municipal Reporting Form for the Transit Village Initiative Program (Exhibit A). The purpose of the form is two-fold: to gauge development activities in the Transit Village area and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each municipality in finding and reporting development data.

The form was created electronically as a Portable Document Format (pdf) file. It was embedded with blank form fields so that preparers can enter responses directly onto the electronic form. This makes the reporting process entirely paperless: the document is not only sent electronically, but each preparer is able to send back his or her responses electronically.

The form itself has four major sections: *Construction Activity*, *Grants & Incentive Programs*, *Other Transit Village Activity* and *Additional Comments and Suggestions*. Each section contains a set of questions relating to its heading, and preparers were asked to respond as completely and honestly as possible to all questions. The questions dealt predominantly with construction and development activity in the Transit Village area (the half-mile circle around the train station).

Pilot Study

NJDOT chose to perform a pilot study of the Annual Municipal Reporting Form. This “trial run” would allow us to determine how successfully municipalities were able to complete the form, and would also demonstrate the general level of coordination and integration within each Transit Village area. Each participant in the pilot study was asked to relate any comments or concerns in filling out the form, and there was frequent contact with each representative to ensure that any questions they had were answered.

For the pilot study, the form was sent to three Transit Villages: Rahway, Cranford and Pleasantville. The Transit Village representative in each municipality was contacted ahead of time by NJDOT or VTC to request their participation. The form was sent to municipalities during the first week of May 2005. The results of the pilot study are detailed below.

City of Rahway (Union County)

The form was sent to Lenore Slothower on May 1, 2005 and was completed and returned by May 11, 2005. Rahway was the most successful of the three pilot Villages in completing the form in a timely manner. They were also able to answer all the questions very precisely, as well as provide several valuable comments and suggestions. The following comments are transcribed from the last section of the form:

- “Some of the activities are on-going, such as the remedial activities. It is difficult to separate out the dollar amount spent just in a particular year, since our financial records deal with the project in a more comprehensive way.”

- “It’s confusing that the questions ask for ‘units created.’ I answered this based on the number of units that are under construction at this time. Do you mean how many ‘c.o.’s have been issued? This would be a better indicator of units occupied.”
- “Page 3 in the questionnaire has a mixed signal in the computer program. Answers are being mechanically copied from other questions. I manually typed the answers on a revised page 3.”
- “Question 9 needs to be re-worded.”
- “I think the word ‘honestly’ could be left out of the first paragraph. It can be assumed that the government’s answers will be honest.”

Cranford Township (Union County)

The Cranford Municipal Reporting Form was returned on August 22, 2005 by Kathleen Miller Prunty. The form was nearly completely filled out, although a few fields were left blank. It was unclear whether these fields were just skipped or were left blank to signify an answer of “0”. The Cranford form was especially successful in listing transportation, infrastructure and streetscape improvements occurring in the Transit Village area (Section D). No comments or suggestions were communicated, so we assume that the representative had no difficulty in understanding the questions or retrieving the requested information.

City of Pleasantville (Atlantic County)

Roger Tees, the Urban Enterprise Zone coordinator in Pleasantville, was responsible for completing the form. Mr. Tees was in contact several times throughout the process, and he frequently related his difficulty in obtaining the requested information on development activities in the Transit Village area. He noted that because several municipal offices were not exactly sure of the actual Transit Village boundaries, it was nearly impossible to obtain information on certain activities in the area. It took nearly five months for the form to be returned to VTC, during which time several discussions took place regarding the progress of the document. In the end, though, the preparer was able to complete nearly every question; for those questions on which it was impossible to obtain information, he wrote “cannot determine” or words to that effect. The following are some of the helpful comments and suggestions from the Pleasantville form:

- “The primary difficulty in completing this form was the lack of an integrated database at the city level.”
- “The tax assessor, construction official, city engineer and Urban Enterprise Zone office are not able to swap data on Transit Village properties, there is difficulty in sorting requests, and without a coordinated Geographic Information System (and its various data layers) such information cannot be tracked and reported.”
- “In Section B-1, there needs to be a definition of rehabilitation. A construction permit would be required if the rehab was more than 25% of the total area.”

It is clear that very different levels of reporting ability existed in each of the pilot Villages. The following section summarizes some of the more significant recommendations for future implementation of the form to all 16 Transit Villages.

Recommendations

- Make necessary changes to the form based on comments from pilot Villages.
- Maintain a spreadsheet to track activity within each Transit Village. The spreadsheet will catalog quantitative statistics each year, illustrating the change in each indicator over time. This will allow NJDOT and the municipality to determine the particular areas in which they are excelling and those that might need improvement. A sample spreadsheet (Table 1) has been created to catalog responses.
- Create a guide that takes the preparer step-by-step through each question. This manual will give detailed instructions on the exact meaning of each question and will inform the preparer where he or she could potentially find the requested information. The document should be sent electronically as an attachment to the Annual Municipal Reporting Form, and should also be posted online on the NJDOT Transit Village webpage for continued reference.
- Before sending the form each Transit Village coordinator should be contacted and notified that the form and guide will be sent electronically.
- When sending the form, set a firm deadline for its return. It is advised that since municipalities will have varying levels of success in completing the form, six months is an appropriate amount of time. Setting a standard deadline for all 16 municipalities will help determine which Transit Village representatives are more or less coordinated with their other municipal offices. This provides strategic information about which municipalities might need assistance on this exercise as well as more general Transit Village activities.
- If necessary, conduct a face-to-face meeting with the Transit Village coordinator (or preparer) to discuss progress on the form.

The Annual Municipal Reporting Form is an important tool for monitoring activity in the Transit Village area. It is also a means of obtaining vital information about the level of coordination within each municipality. The focus of prospective implementation of the form should be on providing assistance to each municipality to make future self-reporting a simpler and more straightforward process.

Table 1 NEW JERSEY TRANSIT VILLAGE ANNUAL MUNICIPAL REPORTING FORM RESULTS FOR 2004																	
	Belmar	Bloomfield	Bound Brook	Collingswood	Cranford	Journal Sq.	Pleasantville	Morristown	Metuchen	Matawan	New Brunswick	Rahway	Riverside	Rutherford	South Amboy	South Orange	Total all TVs
SECTION B Construction Activity																	
Question 1																	
# of new/rehab <i>sale</i> residential units created					in construction		0					20					
# of new/rehab <i>rental</i> residential units created					0		0					310					
# of new/rehab residential <i>projects</i> - 10+ units					2		0					3					
Question 2																	
# of <i>subsidized</i> new/rehab residential sale units					0		0					0					
# of <i>subsidized</i> new/rehab residential rental units					0		0					150					
Question 3																	
# of new/rehab commercial units created					0		2					1					
Question 4																	
# of mixed-use projects created					2		0					1					
SECTION C Grants and Incentive Programs																	
Question 1																	
Total county funds received (\$)					\$ -		\$ -					\$ 275,600					
Question 2																	
Total state funds received (\$)					\$ 12,000		\$ 449,613					\$ 5,325,000					
Question 3																	
Total federal funds received (\$)					\$ -		\$ -					\$ 1,185,000					
Question 4																	
Breaks/grants/incentives from town (\$)					\$ -		N/A					2 PILOTs					
Question 5																	
Private funding for projects (\$)					\$ 12,000		\$ -					\$ -					
SECTION D Other Village Activity																	
Question 1																	
# total businesses in Transit Village area					210		N/A					188					
Total property value of these businesses (\$)					\$ 81,284,100		N/A					\$ 52,734,900					
Question 2																	
change in total # of auto-dependent businesses					(-1)		0					0					
Question 3																	
Have any pedestrian counts been conducted?					no		no					no					
Question 4a																	
# of "brownfield sites" remediated?					0		0					2					
Question 4b																	
# of "brownfield sites" gotten remed. plan approved?					0		0					1					
Question 5																	
Any zoning changes in TV?					yes		yes					yes					
Question 6																	
Any parking requirement changes?					yes		no					yes					
Question 7																	
Any transportation or infrastructure improvements?					yes		yes					yes					
Question 8																	
Any streetscape improvements?					yes		no					yes					
Question 9																	
Any active or passive recreational facilities?					yes		no					yes					