

housing component, which will be reflected in proposals to include second story apartments over businesses (see Land Use Plan Element Section 3.2).

4. Also as part of the Land Use Plan Element update, the Township's business center will also include a substantial area for mixed-use developments with affordable housing components at the east end of the business area (see section 3.2).

While there are other potentially developable parcels within the Township, none of these are considered appropriate for inclusion as part of the Township's Fair Share Housing Plan. Included among them are United Water Resources holdings, and the northern two golf courses. These parcels currently support viable and regionally valuable land uses, but could potentially be proposed as candidates for residential redevelopment. Additionally, several scattered and undeveloped parcels remain within the SFAH Zone in the Township's southwest corner. While these might appear to be candidate sites for affordable housing, they are all either encumbered by regulated natural resources, or they are deed restricted against future development. Since more appropriate affordable housing opportunities are available as described above, none of these other parcels will be incorporated into the Township's next Fair Share Housing Plan.

Given the established land use pattern in the Township, its future population and job growth will be limited due to (a) the desire to assure that development infill is in scale with current development patterns, (b) the limited availability of developable vacant residential acreage, and (c) the limited opportunities for more non-residential growth. Once the Township determines its new Third Round Fair Housing obligation quantity, it will be clear how many new affordable housing units will be required as part of the Township's future residential development.

More detailed analysis of the Township's specific housing objective will be included in the Township's future 2005 Fair Share Housing Plan.

## 6. COMMUNITY DESIGN ELEMENT

### 6.1 BACKGROUND

When the desire emerges in a local community to encourage good site, landscape architectural and/or architectural design in both new development and redevelopment, a municipality may choose to prepare an optional Community Design Element that addresses any combination, or all, of these features.

The Township of River Vale has never before had a Community Design Element. Rather, River Vale has attempted to influence and positively affect design in the built environment through a few disconnected ordinance provisions. Among others, these include:

- a. Site design standards for communications facilities on municipal property;
- b. Off-street parking and loading design standards;
- c. Design of drives, parking and circulation;
- d. Building design and layout, including site arrangements, visual relationships, lighting, buffering, landscaping, and signs, among others;
- e. General site plan design review;
- f. General subdivision design review;

- g. Architectural review within very limited parameters;
- h. Landscaping standards and requirements;
- i. Tree preservation and removal ordinance;
- j. Concept plan reviews; and
- k. Fence design

In addition to these ordinances, more recently River Vale has worked with NJIT School of Architecture students and the Regional Plan Association to develop conceptual designs for two major community facility areas. The first is the Four Corners, where design concepts have been developed to revitalize the central business district's public rights-of-way. The second is for a new Community Center/Public Safety Complex that could be constructed on the site of the now obsolete existing community center and North Firehouse. Neither of these projects has progressed beyond concepts.

Beyond these specific provisions, River Vale desires to establish policies and take actions to improve the built environment within the Township. These should include many of the sub-topics discussed below, both in and adjacent to the public rights-of-way.

## **6.2 PROPOSED COMMUNITY DESIGN PLAN**

The Township desires to establish standards for elements of design, primarily within its non-residential landscape but also to a lesser degree within residential neighborhoods. To this end, this Community Design Element was prepared in accordance with the guidelines of MLUL. The Township's desire is to encourage good site, landscape architectural and architectural design in both new developments and redevelopments. This desire is consistent with the revised recommendations contained in the N.J. State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP). It is envisioned that this objective can be accomplished by introducing certain Township-wide unifying elements into site design, in an attempt to establish a River Vale design vernacular of the highest quality. At the same time, it is not the desire of the Township to inhibit individualism or stifle creativity. Rather, the goal of this effort is to create a thread of continuity of design elements throughout the Township.

This Element should form the basis for the subsequent development of design standards in the municipal land development ordinances, with the objective being to promote a built environment that is both visually pleasing and well planned. Its objectives include the creation of a sense of place from both functional and visual standpoints, for both private and community facility development. Its intent is to emphasize and promote harmony of new design with its surroundings. Physical items for consideration include street lighting, signage, sidewalks, public area landscaping, and architectural treatments, among others.

In some communities, the Community Design Element also addresses the design and practical aspects of creating an integrated Town Center, thereby tying community facilities together in a pleasing, convenient and safe manner. In the case of River Vale, until such time as a satisfactory site is identified that is situated in a setting dominated by community facilities, and that the community is committed to, there will be too many variables to seriously consider specific design features. At this point in time, the most logical location would be the government center that includes Town Hall, the Library, park and recreation facilities, the community monuments, and the future amphitheater. The downside to this location is that it is separate from the police, ambulance and fire departments, and the commercial district.

The most important accomplishment of a community design plan within the context of a municipal master plan is the establishment of criteria that is considered important in such a program. The specific regulations and guidelines can then be developed from these criteria.

### **6.2.1 Concept Plan Reviews**

River Vale would be well served to expand its sketch plat submission provisions for subdivisions to include conceptual site plan submissions. Such a requirement would permit and promote interaction, discussion and alternatives exploration between the review board and the applicant, prior to the expenditure of significant resources for the preparation of detailed design plans. In this manner, solutions that serve the interests of the applicants, the Township, and the general health, safety and welfare of the public can be addressed schematically prior to the making of any serious commitments or soft cost investments.

### **6.2.2 Establishment of a Community Design Vernacular**

The establishment of a community-wide design vernacular can help to create or emphasize the unique character of a community as compared to its neighboring communities. Its objectives should include the creation of a sense of place from both functional and visual standpoints, for both private and community facility development, emphasizing harmony of new design with its surroundings. This process began with the attempt to recognize any such themes or any municipal-wide unifying element that may already have been established, and to identify the most significant visual elements. We searched in an effort to establish the best examples as community standards of the highest quality. In River Vale, no prevailing design standards other than in the Four Corners district were discovered to exist at the present time, either as positive or negative stimuli. The only community-wide standards we observed included bituminous concrete roadway pavements, concrete curbs, absence of street lighting on residential streets, and the presence of sidewalks only on major roadways. All other public right-of-way features were random. As a result, such standards or guidelines should be established and introduced. This Element could then form the basis for design standards in the municipal land development ordinances, with the objective being to promote a built environment that is both visually pleasing and well planned. The sub-elements below all contribute to these standards. In the case of the Four Corners, the Township has embarked on establishing central business district design standards that have been supported by the Planning Board.

### **6.2.3 Preservation of Existing Site Features**

The objective of this item is to attempt to seamlessly blend new and redevelopments into the fabrics of the existing neighborhoods, thereby avoiding the starkness, vivid newness and contrast that is often found to be objectionable in new developments. One of the most effective means of accomplishing this is to identify and locate the most valuable existing site features, including vegetation, topography, and water features among others, and incorporate them into finished site and subdivision plan proposals. This represents planning and design that works with the land and is sympathetic to its character, as opposed to imposing new development on sites without regard for their existing features. This is particularly important when those features are recognizable elements of the streetscape.

River Vale has at least two provisions in its zoning code that address this goal. Both provisions are qualitative, however, and as such are difficult to enforce. Beyond that, since they are qualitative, it is equally as difficult to determine when and if variances are required for specific development proposals. To be effective, these proposals would benefit from having standards that are more easily measurable. Contrary to convention, however, they do not have to be as quantitative as traditional zoning provisions that spell out dimensional limitations. Regulations based on performance standards work equally as well if they exhibit clear enough objectives for the understanding of both applicants and reviewing agents. One overriding such objective should be to maintain and enhance site features that are valued and recognizable from the public right-of-way.

### **6.2.4 Streetscapes**

Streetscapes are important in both residential and commercial areas. They are most controllable in the latter, however. In residential neighborhoods, appropriate streetscapes include those with mature street trees and few tree vacancies, sidewalks where pedestrian safety is an issue, attractive front yard landscaping, tasteful architectural facades, and neat appearances that are free of utilitarian functions, clutter and debris.

In commercial neighborhoods, desirable streetscapes can vary from traditional pedestrian-oriented downtown configurations to more suburban vehicular-oriented configurations. A classic example of the former is the central business district of neighboring Westwood Borough. This desirable type of streetscape includes on-street parking, decorative and pedestrian scale lighting, sidewalks adjacent to curbs and leading directly into building entries, concealed off-street parking, controlled-size street trees within the sidewalks, and trash receptacles. They often also include other amenities such as benches, tables, public art, vest pocket sitting areas, banners and flags. In these settings, visitors generally arrive by vehicle and tend to all of their activities on foot, without the need to use transit from one stop to the next. In traditional pedestrian-oriented downtowns, building facades are also important. Considerations include materials, window displays, canopies, signage, lighting, and color schemes. An organization known as “Downtown New Jersey” assists communities in establishing design vernacular for central business districts. They can also assist in finding low interest loan programs for building owners within these districts to improve their storefronts. The Land Use Plan Element of this Master Plan also discusses the virtues of permitting residences and offices on floors above the first floor retail businesses. Mixed uses within downtowns add life, livelihood and vibrancy to downtowns. They also add more customers to patronize the retail businesses, thereby improving the health of the downtown. These mixed uses also enjoy symbiotic relationships, since they each benefit the others.

In more typical suburban environments, acceptable vehicular-oriented commercial streetscapes can include decorated front yard parking lots, sidewalks separated from streets and curbs by grass verges and tree lawns, higher elevation yet decorative lighting, larger street trees, and trash receptacles. They can also include other amenities such as benches, tables, public art, sitting areas of various sizes, banners and flags. In these settings, visitors generally arrive by vehicle and tend to their activities by driving from one stop to the next. If distances are limited, pedestrian circulation can also be common.

River Vale is best set up to enhance the pedestrian-oriented configurations along Westwood Avenue from Rivervale Road east to Peter’s Place; and along Rivervale Road from Westwood Avenue south to Caruso Lane. River Vale’s commercial streetscape is best set up to enhance the suburban vehicular-oriented configurations throughout its remaining area. This includes Westwood Avenue from Rivervale Road west to Doretta Street, and Rivervale Road from Westwood Avenue north to Montview Place.

One program that has assisted N.J. municipalities in preserving, enhancing and establishing the street tree presence in all districts is the Community Forestry Management Plan. This Plan inventories trees within the public rights-of-way. It identifies tree species, locations, sizes, health and vacancies, and creates a plan that manages their maintenance, replacements, and new plantings. It can also be extended to other publicly owned properties that are not within rights-of-ways. Many communities take on a project such as this over several years. One reason is its cost, which communities wish to amortize. But as importantly, this is an effort whose costs can be reduced by volunteer efforts, provided the volunteers are properly trained. Since volunteers aren’t generally plentiful, and since River Vale has many streets to inventory, a plan that divides the Township into districts and addresses them systematically can be feasible and cost effective.

### **6.2.5 Infill Development in Residential Neighborhoods**

Infill development within residential neighborhoods is inevitable, given the increasingly high values of residential properties. These values will spur teardowns of smaller houses on larger lots, and the

redevelopment of those lots with new larger homes. They will also spur subdivisions of oversized lots into two or more lots, and the construction of new large homes. If improperly conceived and/or executed, these activities can generate detrimental impacts on established neighborhoods. Controls need to contain dimensional limitations as well as character requirements. Character controls can be much like the performance controls described in 6.2.3 above, and also include a requirement to mimic existing neighborhood architectural styles. The dimensional limitations, or bulk standards, should include controls that mimic the prevailing development patterns of each existing and unique neighborhood. Such controls can include floor area ratio, impervious surface lot coverage, building footprint coverage, building height, height-to-setback ratios, etc. Collectively, these controls should effectively limit over-building and inappropriate redevelopment while still permitting reasonable building proposals.

### **6.2.6 Off-Street Parking Lots**

Off-street parking lots should be designed to be attractive, functional, and with easily understood circulation patterns. The parked vehicles and pavement surfaces should be de-emphasized. Vegetative screening should be required around their periphery, especially when adjacent to incompatible land uses and the public right-of-way. In locations with front yard parking lots where the facades of buildings need to be seen from the street, low hedges that screen the vehicles and higher canopy trees can be utilized, the former to screen the lower views of the vehicles and the latter to soften views of the higher building elevations. This treatment permits mid-level views to be directed to the building in the background. In addition, planted islands with trees, shrubs and groundcovers should be required at the ends of all rows of parking stalls, to improve aesthetics and to protect vehicles. Care should be taken to maintain sight lines. In larger parking lots, mid-lot planted parking islands should also be required to interrupt large expanses of unattractive pavement.

### **6.2.7 Signage**

In general, signage needs to be tasteful. Most signage occurs in commercial districts. Signage requirements are also needed for multifamily residential districts, because River Vale currently does not have such regulations. In vehicular-oriented commercial districts, primary signage should be freestanding structures nearby (but not within) the public rights-of-way. They should be low rise, wider than high, use materials that are sympathetic to the building designs that it advertises, simply and subtly colored, with subtle graphics and simply understood information. Lighting should be external, and the light source should be concealed. They should be limited to one sign per primary site entry point. Any building mounted signage should be secondary to the freestanding signage, and should only be permitted in cases where further information beyond that provided by the entry signage is required (e.g. more than one business shares a building). On-site directional signage should be small, freestanding, and adjacent to site drives.

In pedestrian-oriented downtown districts, signage should have a uniformity that ties neighboring signage together with a common design theme. Threads of continuity are the operative principles, and are not meant to limit creativity or individuality. Signs should be mounted on building frontages at consistent and easily readable heights above grade. Only one sign per establishment should be permitted. Temporary “specials” signage may be permissible under certain conditions and within prescribed time limits. Consistency in sign style, color palette, lettering fonts, and method of illumination is desirable. Once again, external and concealed lighting sources are preferable to internal or neon signage.

### **6.2.8 Circulation Systems**

To the extent practicable, vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle circulation systems should be separate from one another. Unfortunately, this goal cannot be readily accomplished within the confines of near fully developed communities. River Vale’s roadway system is logical and follows generally accepted guidelines for street hierarchies (see Circulation Plan Element). The great majority of River Vale’s residential access streets are

not used as shortcuts to bypass the traffic controls and/or congestion of major collector roads. This leads to better safety within residential neighborhoods and higher quality of living standards. The Township's major streets are in need of streetscape improvements as described in 6.2.4 above. Many of the street trees of the Township's streets are in need of attention. Many need horticultural care, many need replacement, and many other streets are in need of supplemental plantings. This can be accomplished by either following the guidelines of the Arbor Day Foundation's "Tree City USA" guidelines, or even more desirably by applying for municipal Tree City status from the Foundation.

Pedestrian walks are generally limited to major streets within the Township. Much of Rivervale Road and Westwood Avenue have sidewalks, as do a few of the other collector roads. A sidewalk is being added along Poplar Road. Still other collector roads are in need of sidewalks, and it would benefit the Township to promote their construction. To the extent possible, there should be some level of physical separation between sidewalks and streets, except within traditional pedestrian-oriented downtown districts. With the lone exception of a walkway to Woodside School from the west, there do not appear to be any publicly accessible off road pedestrian ways. These can be particularly valuable in and around public schools, to connect residential neighborhoods that are characterized by numerous culs-de-sac, and within and through passive recreation areas. While sidewalks along streets are most desirably constructed of hard surface pavements such as decorative concrete paving stones or poured concrete, off road walks can be of lower impact construction that is more consistent with their residential or natural surroundings.

Bicycle paths are scarcely available in River Vale. A bicycle route along several public streets traverses the township from northern neighborhoods to southern neighborhoods with a few short sections of dedicated paths. Given the absence of opportunity within River Vale for dedicated bicycle paths, it would be desirable for the bicycle routes that share the road with vehicles to be enhanced. This can be accomplished by expanding their network into residential neighborhoods and to the borders of adjacent municipalities, thereby promoting their usage and utility. This can also be accomplished by means of better markings, e.g. dedicated painted lanes, share the road signage, parking facilities, etc.

### **6.2.9 Site Plan Standards**

River Vale's site plan standards can be improved in a number of areas. Aesthetic improvements and site development features and configurations for pedestrian comfort could be emphasized, and would be justified by the value added to both the site owners and community as a whole. Parking facilities and utilitarian functions should be better concealed. Site lighting should be decorative, and sensitive to neighboring properties. The preservation of natural features, including areas of topographic interest, should be encouraged. Landscaping should be tasteful and plentiful, and ornamental landscaping and other site ornamentation should not be garish or overly exotic. Site signage and circulation systems should place an emphasis on organization and understated appearance. Creative grading and earthwork should be encouraged. Finally, paved surfaces should be minimized to include only those pavements that are required for proper and safe site function.

### **6.2.10 Lighting Standards**

As previously mentioned, site lighting should be decorative and sensitive to neighboring properties in terms of light spillage. Lighting should be set at the minimum levels necessary to permit the site to function safely and efficiently. The most desirable light sources should be decided upon, and they should become the municipal standard. Different light sources cast different shades of light, from white to yellow to amber to blue. Acceptable light pole heights should be considered. While light poles up to 25 or more feet in height might be appropriate for commercial parking lots, poles of up to only about 15 feet in height provide the pedestrian scale necessary for more intimate spaces. Glare should be minimized, particularly at property

lines. Headlight directionality should be considered in site planning so that adverse impacts upon neighboring properties can be minimized.

The decorative nature of lighting fixtures should be considered as well. While there is nothing objectionable about having different light fixtures adorning different sites and public thoroughfares, areas that can and should carry out a consistent public design theme should use consistent styles and colors. Also in this regard, since the conventional cobra head fixture is so commonly associated with transportation facilities, they should be prohibited in this suburban setting. River Vale maintains street lighting along its major roadways. The Township has consistently eschewed street lighting on minor residential streets. The Township should revisit this policy to determine if low lighting levels would be preferable to no lighting for the purpose of public safety.

### **6.2.11 Landscaping Standards**

As previously discussed, to the extent practicable natural features (including areas of topographic interest, geological features, valuable vegetation) should be preserved and incorporated into the finished site landscape design. Once again, landscaping should be tasteful and plentiful, and ornamental landscaping and other site ornamentation should not be garish or overly exotic. Existing trees, especially mature trees, should be preserved to help create a sense of place and to project an appearance of longer term establishment. Natural (or native) vegetation should be utilized wherever the opportunity presents itself. This is particularly important on site fringes that abut natural areas. Finally, the use of intrusively exotic plants and invasive species as identified by the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection in planting plans should be either banned or strongly discouraged.

Plant materials and arrangements for planting designs should accomplish multiple objectives. Among others, such objectives should include aesthetic enhancement, environmental control, natural resource protection, screening, buffering, climate control, energy efficiency, circulation control and definition, and spatial enclosure.

## **7. CIRCULATION PLAN ELEMENT**

### **7.1 BACKGROUND**

The Township's development has been, and will continue to be, influenced by the internal and regional transportation system. Access is an important factor in determining land use type and intensity.

In addition to safety and convenience, traffic planning takes into account the need to preserve the character of the community, particularly a predominantly residential Township like River Vale. The street system should be designed to meet the needs of both through and local traffic in such a way as to enhance the attractive character of the community. New roads or extensions should be designed to be sensitive to topography, natural resources and open spaces. Transportation planning must strike a balance between the regional and local aspects of the system if it is to be successful.

As part of a metropolitan region, a substantial amount of traffic to and from neighboring communities can be expected and needs to be accommodated. However, the major transportation corridors in the region, including the Garden State Parkway, the Palisades Interstate Parkway and the commuter Railroad, all by-pass the Township. River Vale's relationship to the region is shown on Figure 2. The major routes of public transportation within River Vale are shown on Figure 5.