

# **From Sprawl to Smart Growth: New Jerseyans Face the Future**

**Analysis of a Statewide Survey  
of New Jersey Voters**

**for**

**New Jersey Future**

**by**

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## Introduction

A little more than a generation ago, New Jersey was known as an asphalt jungle connecting hundreds of suburban towns which provided homes with back yards for workers commuting to New York City and Philadelphia. License plates with the words The Garden State told the rest of the country that New Jersey also had an abundance of productive farmland. Although it contained three substantial cities, Newark, Trenton, and Camden, New Jersey was considered a state of highways, suburbs, and farms.

Today, the asphalt remains, but the jungle of lonely highways has turned into population centers across the state. Development's pace has been so rapid that New Jersey has become a focal point for jobs as corporations have moved their operations across the Hudson and into Essex, Morris, Middlesex, Monmouth, and counties farther west and South. Commercial expansion has redefined New Jersey.

In many ways, what has happened in New Jersey best defines the national phenomenon of traffic, over-development of the countryside, abandonment of older towns, high property taxes, and the loss of open space. In a phrase, it defines suburban sprawl. The result is that New Jersey is currently feeling the conflicting pressures to develop and to preserve what land is left.

It is in this context that New Jersey Future, an independent, non-profit organization, that works to bring about sustainable development, has asked Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) to conduct this public opinion study. Our goal is to learn the opinions of policy-makers and the electorate across New Jersey on development, sprawl, and an agenda for land use in the state.

BRS began by conducting qualitative interviews with 36 key decision-makers on land use in New Jersey. The interviews among planning board chairs, mayors, and county executives across the state identified their views on sprawl, the problems they face when making land use decisions, and their vision for the future of land use in the state. Our analysis of these interviews is reported in a separate confidential paper to New Jersey Future. \*

The BRS statewide survey among 1,201 registered voters in New Jersey, from April 28 to May 14, 2000, was designed to inform New Jersey Future's public education strategy on land use issues.

The universe for this study is all registered voters in New Jersey who are living in telephone-equipped households. The sample was selected in two stages. In the first stage, the sampling frame was a list of randomly created phone numbers (a technique known as random digit dial or RDD) for telephone exchanges in New Jersey.

The second stage of sampling was selection at the household level. In residences where working telephones were reached, the survey respondents were selected using a random probability method, *i.e.*, interviewers requested to speak with the adult 18 years or older in the household who had the most recent birthday.

The survey consists of a total of 1,201 completed telephone interviews. All sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population under study were interviewed. The margin of sampling error for the entire survey is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. This means that in 95 out of 100 cases of this size the results obtained in the sample would fall within a range of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points of what would have been obtained if every individual with a working telephone in the state had been interviewed. Other non-sampling error may also contribute to total survey error.

The demographic characteristics of the sample were matched to voter registration data and Census population estimates for the state. The data were weighted statistically to bring race into its proper proportion.

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\* "Making Tough Choices: Land Use in New Jersey", BRS for New Jersey Future, March 2000.

## Executive Summary

At the start of a new century, New Jersey voters believe their state is in too much of a hurry to develop what land remains in the Garden State. The 1998 bond referendum to protect open space did not satisfy the public's urge to preserve land, but perhaps stimulated even more concern over protection of farmland and open space. Throughout the survey, voters express strong support for policies that will restrict development and protect farmland and open space.

The New Jersey Future survey, conducted by BRS in May 2000, reveals an electorate that is self-aware and unafraid to make forward-looking land use decisions. Seven in 10 voters report driving to suburban shopping malls regularly. However, they see the negative impact of too many malls on traffic and the environment. Eight in 10 voters across the state agree that New Jersey should stop building so many shopping malls.

Voters' concerns about the impact of development generally echo those of the planning board chairs, mayors, and county executives that BRS interviewed separately prior to the state-wide survey. However, voters are more eager than the public officials we interviewed to embrace a number of land use policies that fall under the heading of smart growth. These views are widespread but not monolithic. Some in the state - particularly black voters and those living in cities - worry more about creating jobs than throttling sprawl, while white voters place a very high priority on saving open space. The one constant is the desire for choice - a value that motivates both sides of the sprawl debate.

A number of points emerge from the data to clarify what voters know and what will drive the dialogue on sprawl in the months ahead.

**Priorities focus on impacts of land use decisions.** When setting priorities for the state, voters focus on development's impacts - reducing traffic, preserving farmland and open space, improving cities, reducing property taxes, preserving property rights - rather than on the more general idea of slowing development.

**Sprawl is a label that evokes mixed sentiments.** New Jersey voters are twice as likely to see sprawl as bad than good, but most see both sides when the word is not defined. When sprawl is defined, its negatives rise to four to one. These generally negative perspectives run stronger in New Jersey than nationally.

**Broad recognition and a desire to control sprawl.** Almost eight in 10 voters believe sprawl exists in New Jersey, and the same large proportion expresses a desire to control sprawl. However, this is not a concept that a majority has fully understood to the point of enthusiasm -- only a third feel strongly about it. These sprawl busters are more likely to be over age 30, rural residents and those living outside the Northeast region of the state.

**Value of freedom, expressed as choice, motivates both sides.** The value of freedom to choose how one wants to live and to have more quality choices dominates arguments for both sides of the sprawl debate. The reasons to control sprawl hold broader appeal than the reasons to allow it to continue. The top reasons for both sides reflect a desire to protect quality choices, but a message focusing on smart growth providing quality choices is the strongest message for either side of the debate.

### **Reasons to control sprawl**

The survey presented a mixture of positive messages on smart growth and more critical statements about the dangers of sprawl.

- The top messages reflect the values of choice and responsibility to self, family, and community by asserting:
  - *Smart growth policies that control sprawl will protect our quality of life and give us more freedom to live in a healthy pleasing environment/community.*
  - *Smart growth policies that control sprawl will give New Jersey residents more quality choices about where to live, and*
  - *Smart growth policies focus on improving our communities rather than encouraging people to abandon them.*

The survey analysis indicates that the messages about improving our communities and smart growth offering more freedom to live in pleasing communities/environment are highly related to how voters will decide whether or not to favor controlling sprawl.

- The second tier of very good reasons to control sprawl are threats that *sprawl will take away farmland and open space*, as well as positive statements about *smart growth policies increasing convenience and greater sense of community*.
- The third and last tier of messages for controlling sprawl assert that *sprawl will create more traffic congestion, impose higher taxes to pay for new services, and hurt cities and suburbs by encouraging abandonment*. All of these topics are important to NJ voters – reducing traffic, keeping taxes low, and saving the cities. However, voters have a more difficult time making the connection between these problems and sprawl than they do for environmental threats.

### Reasons to allow sprawl to continue

- Giving people *greater choices of where to live and enabling people to have homes with backyards on safe streets* are the most potent messages for the pro-sprawl side. The choice message is more closely related to a person's decision on controlling sprawl than the message on backyards.
- A second tier of pro-sprawl messages focuses on how it *provides low cost housing for young families, enables people to escape the problems of cities, and allows families to get closer to nature*.
- The weakest arguments in favor of sprawl assert that *sprawl alleviates traffic and controlling sprawl will require too much government interference*.

**Very popular policies: Protect farmland. Improve where we live now. Provide housing.** New Jersey voters strongly support a number of policies on land use that would control sprawl, even though these policies are presented in the survey without mention of sprawl. Voters believe these are excellent ideas for their own sake.

Large majorities favor proposals:

- To give state government funding priority to maintain services in established communities rather than to encourage new development in the countryside.
- To limit the amount of farmland that can be developed for housing or commercial buildings. In a related question, when voters are given a choice of two options for protecting open space, they show a preference for letting state

government restrict development on private land, rather than having the state buy the land outright.

- To require that 15% of all new housing be kept for low and moderate income families.

**Cities matter.** The survey reveals an appreciation for and a commitment to New Jersey's cities by a majority of voters. Six in ten support the idea of a one billion dollar bond for rehabilitating large and small cities. More than seven in ten reject the suggestion that New Jersey cities are deteriorating and beyond improvement. Although the connection between sprawl and abandonment of cities is less clear and urgent than the loss of farmland or even traffic congestion, still a majority worries that sprawl is damaging the cities and older suburbs.

**Support for public transportation.** The survey reveals widespread recognition for the need to place more emphasis on public transportation than roads. Nearly six in 10 voters would prefer that their state tax money be used to improve public transportation, such as trains and buses, while almost four in 10 prefer to spend it on building new roads. The voters are divided in their opinions of whether improving public transportation will solve air pollution and traffic problems, but they believe better public transportation is needed more than new roads.

**Reform has limits.** A majority of voters support the idea of letting all towns impacted by construction of a new mall or office building share in the tax revenues from the new project. However, there are limits to New Jersey's zeal for land use reforms. Voters are divided over whether they want to give up home rule for better coordinated growth. At several levels, we see broad skepticism about the value of statewide solutions. Voters reject proposals to lower local property taxes in exchange for higher statewide sales or income taxes.

**More likely to look to local than state government for answers.** New Jersey voters want state government to have some role in coordinating and managing growth across the state – but perhaps not a major role. Keeping decisions close to home is the common sentiment. Voters have little confidence in government at any level when it comes to land use decisions, but they have more trust in local than state government. They have practically no trust in private developers to make the best land use decisions.

**Targets.** The survey analysis identifies some key groups to keep in mind for communications. Those who are more troubled than others by the rate of development in the state are productive targets for building broader support for smart growth among the public. Regression analysis of the data indicates the most decisive characteristics that point to enthusiasm for slowing the rate of development are if the person is:

- a woman,
- a suburbanite, small town or rural resident,
- living in Central or Northwest New Jersey,
- over age 30, and
- is highly educated (post-college graduate work) or college educated.

**Conclusions:** New Jersey voters are ready to tackle sprawl. They see it in the farmland and open space that is being lost, they feel it when they are sitting in traffic. The word itself needs definition to them, but the concept is clearly something they want to avoid.

In keeping with their desires, voters across the state are willing to support many smart growth policies, including spending more state money for public transport than for new roads. They are particularly drawn to smart growth initiatives that discourage government funding to new sprawl developments, placing farmland off limits to development, and spending more money to revitalize New Jersey cities.

Like the planning board chairs in our pre-survey interviews, the electorate as a whole is less sanguine about entrusting land use decisions to the state government than in keeping those decisions closer to their homes. Their wariness of state government does not, however, prevent the voters from backing reforms. They show a willingness to take some significant actions to plan for a better future and promote smart growth and better land use across the state.