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Developers Beware - Climate Change's Impact on Municipal Master Plans

All municipalities in the state of New Jersey are required to have a master plan, which is a document that guides future growth and development within the community. An effective master plan takes inventory of the municipality's resources and physical features, analyzes socioeconomic data, population growth, and identifies emerging trends within the municipality. Armed with all this knowledge, the master planner will assess how future growth will impact the fabric of the community, impact the natural and manmade resources, and tax the existing infrastructure.

Recognizing the current conditions and the impact of future growth, the master planner will create a master plan that lays out the future development for the community. Master plans have been received positively and have aided municipalities in balancing the need for development with the need to conserve natural and man-made resources.

An element, however, that has been missing in guiding future growth in New Jersey is the environmental

impact of that growth and how it contributes more generally to climate change – until now.

In late July 2020, the Senate Environment Committee released Bill Number 2607 with amendments. If passed, which seems likely, the bill will require that the land use element of a master plan include “a climate change-related hazard vulnerability assessment.” The hazard vulnerability assessment will require, among other things, an analysis of the current and future threats to the municipality posed by climate change-related hazards, a build-out analysis of future development and an assessment of the threats and vulnerabilities to the development as a result of climate change, and provide recommendations to reduce the risks associated with natural hazards.

Now that the New Jersey legislature has spoken, all municipalities will have the monumental task of updating their master plans to address the requirements set forth in the legislation. And, once the master plans are adopted, all land developers will

(continued on page 17)

Developer's Beware - Climate Change's Impact on Municipal Master

(continued from page 8)



need to re-think their growth strategies to minimize the impact on the natural and man-made resources, which will lead to innovative design and growth.

Robert Melvin a professional planner with The Group Melvin Division of Pennoni, believes the new requirement is a positive and welcomed change, but noted that it did not come as a surprise. In fact, Melvin said that the effect of climate change on land use planning was discussed as early as 1989 when he was in college.

Melvin believes that while we are still in the philosophical stage, the legislation will require that the municipalities take bold steps in guiding future growth. According to Melvin, the legislation will, "change where we build and how we build." In doing so, municipalities will need to assess current land uses and decide whether to retreat from certain areas and not allow development or allow development in sensitive areas that is resilient to climate change.

While it remains uncertain how each municipality will implement the changes, it is comforting to know that New Jersey has shown strong initiative in addressing the effect of climate change.



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