

Date: May 28, 2024

To: Township of Edison Planning Board

From: Susan Favate, AICP, PP, Principal; Emily Tolbert, AICP, Planner

Subject: Planning Analysis for Amboy Avenue Redevelopment Plan

Introduction and Context

We have been asked by the Planning Board to review the Amboy Avenue Redevelopment Plan, in order to determine the appropriateness of allowing up to four stories in building height along the corridor, and which locations, if any, would be viable for such height. This request reflects direction given to the board by the Township Council, in response to community concerns on the currently allowable height, in the context of the pending draft Master Plan.

As the board is aware, the 2016 Amboy Avenue Redevelopment Plan created an overlay zoning district to encompass the existing AAR Amboy Avenue Revitalization district, to facilitate mixed-use development and revitalization. Within this overlay, developers could choose to apply either the zoning standards of the underlying AAR district or according to a set of form-based standards that regulate the massing and architecture of the buildings. The form-based standards established four building types 1) Mixed Use-Retail/Office, 2) Mixed Use-Retail/Residential, 3) Residential, and 4) Office. Of these building types, only the mixed-use options are permitted to front on Amboy Avenue. The mixed-use and residential building types are permitted to have a maximum height of four stories/45 feet, while the office building type is limited to three stories/40 feet. Where mixed-use buildings are four stories, the fourth story is required to be set back from the rest of the building façade by at least 10 feet. The Redevelopment Plan also proposed a set of design standards to govern future development and outlined several approaches to the provision of off-street parking, as well as streetscape improvements and potential new open space. It is not clear whether these other provisions were enacted.

Since adoption of the Redevelopment Plan several developments have been proposed and/or completed:

- *1037 Amboy Avenue*: four-story mixed-use building, with parking/medical offices on the first floor and three stories of residential units above. Note that the fourth story of the building is not set back as required by the Redevelopment Plan; the Planning Board granted a variance from this requirement, together with a design waiver on the width of the parking aisle.
- *979 Amboy Avenue*: In 2019, the Planning Board approved a four-story mixed-use (commercial and residential) building on the site of an auto service station. In its approval, the board granted a design waiver on the width of the garage driveway access. This project has not been constructed.
- *1039 Amboy Avenue*: The developer of 1037 Amboy Avenue sought approval in 2023 for a three-story mixed-use (commercial and residential) building. This property shares parking with the adjacent 1037 Amboy Avenue, as part of that prior approval. The recent proposal would have required a variance to provide two (2) fewer parking spaces than required. The application was denied by the Planning Board.

The current draft Master Plan addresses the allowable height along Amboy Avenue, in response to community concerns that four stories is not appropriate for the corridor given the scale of the adjacent neighborhood. The

draft recommends that the Township consider reducing the allowable height along Amboy Avenue to three stories, “except that a fourth story could be allowed in order to provide for underground or under-building parking on the site or on selected key sites.” The Stewart’s and Jade Palace properties are both identified as such sites, as they are large, underutilized sites with significant paved areas. Permitting a fourth story was noted as appropriate to incentivize new development on these properties. Their size and depth also provide flexibility in design to set back the fourth story from both Amboy Avenue and adjacent residential properties, as well as to provide rear parking.

Analysis

To better understand the potential for four-story buildings to be developed along Amboy Avenue, we first assessed the area and bulk provisions of the Commercial Corridor Overlay District and how they differ from the underlying AAR district. The primary difference is in building height, as the Commercial Corridor Overlay District permits four stories/45 feet for the mixed-use and residential building types, compared with the maximum permitted AAR height of three stories/40 feet. In addition, the overlay district require a lot width of at least 35 feet, versus the AAR minimum requirement of 50 feet. Also, the overlay district does not require a minimum lot area, except for residential buildings, which must have a lot area of at least 5,000 square feet for multifamily buildings or 2,500 square feet per unit for townhomes. The required minimum lot area under the AAR regulations is 5,000 square feet. The overlay district is slightly more restrictive on maximum lot coverage (90% compared with 95% under the AAR regulations) but offers flexibility on some setbacks. Generally, these differences promote greater development potential on smaller lots, recognizing the condition of existing properties along the corridor.

Despite these provisions to incentivize development on Amboy Avenue, very little mixed-use development has occurred. As noted above, only three developments have been proposed, one of which has actually been constructed. The three lots share some commonalities. Each has an area of about a quarter acre or more; 1037 Amboy Avenue is the smallest, at 0.23 acre, while 979 Amboy Avenue is 0.55 acre. Also, each is a corner lot, although 979 Amboy borders Liddle Avenue, a private street under separate ownership, and was thus not permitted in its Planning Board approval to create access from this street.

Understanding the characteristics of the lots where new mixed-use development has been proposed helps to identify other properties along the corridor that could also see demand for such development. To determine this potential, BFJ created a full map of the Amboy Avenue corridor using the latest parcel data (from Middlesex County, updated as of May 8, 2024) and other GIS layers from NJOGIS and NJDEC (e.g. building footprints, roads, protected open space). We evaluated each property by noting its land use and existing observations from Google Maps and Nearmap imagery. Generally, except as noted below, the analysis assumed that parcels with existing single-family residences, protected open space, utilities, or institutional (public/nonprofit) uses would not be developed; these were removed from further analysis.

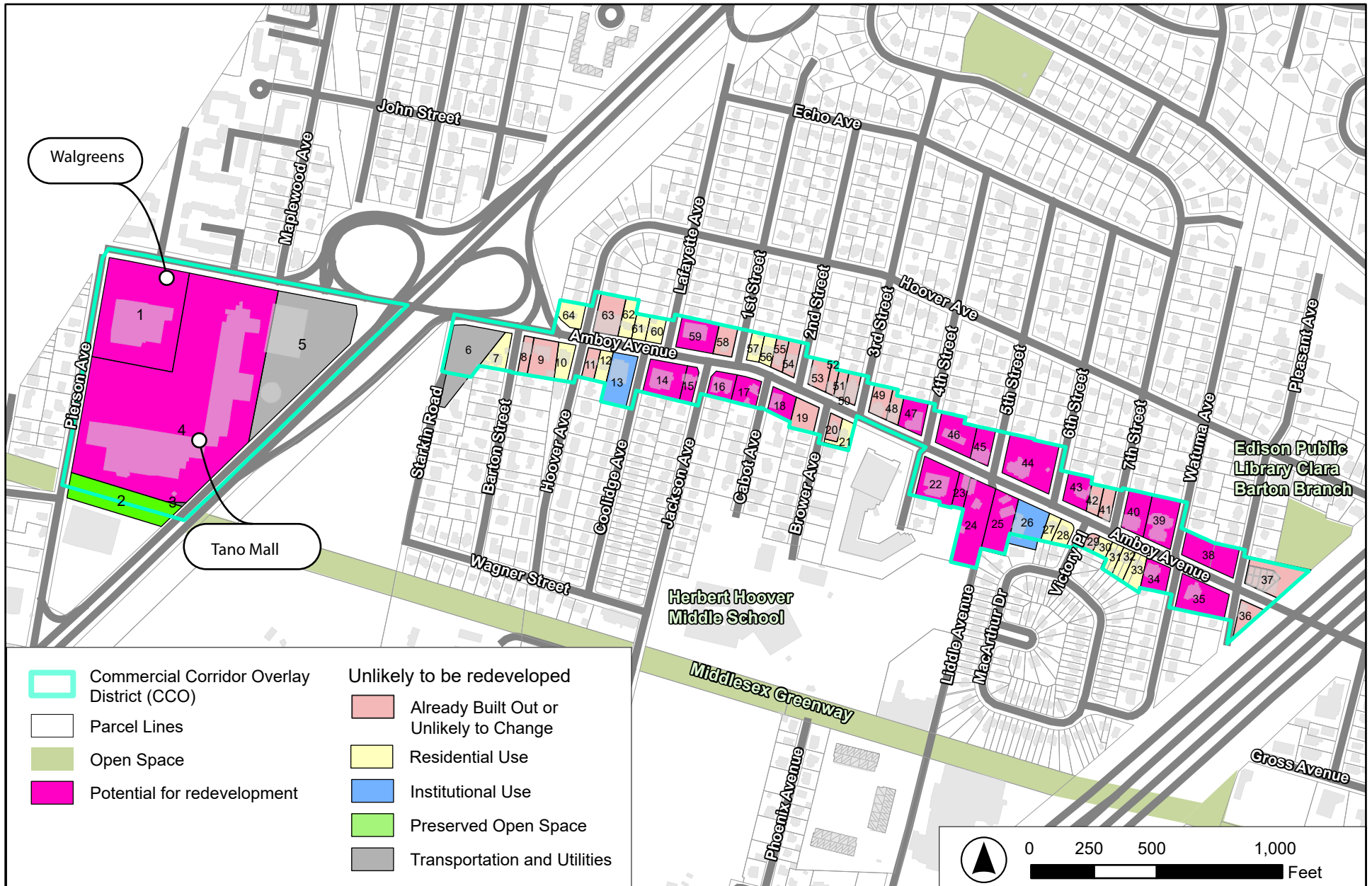
For the remaining properties, we identified those parcels that have further development potential based on having the following characteristics:

- Land use (vacant, commercial, or mixed-use properties)
- Non-conforming uses (automotive, fast food, gas station)
- Ownership (adjoining lots with a single owner considered as a combined property)
- Size (at least 35 feet wide)

- Corner lots with street access on more than one side
- Underutilized lots (properties with small building footprints relative to the lot area, single-story buildings)
- Older buildings that may be ripe for replacement
- Properties that were identified in the 2016 Amboy Avenue Revitalization study as potentially redevelopable.

Based on this analysis, a number of properties were identified as having potential for new development under the Commercial Corridor Overlay District regulations, as shown in the table and figures below.

Map ID	Existing Conditions	Street Address	Block	Lot	Parcel Area (ac)
1	Walgreens, identified in 2016 study	1197 Amboy Ave	722	37	2.99
4	Tano Mall, identified in 2016 study	1199 Amboy Ave	722	36	10.27
14	Auto shop, identified in 2016 study combined with neighboring lot. Use is nonconforming.	1065 Amboy Ave	725.06	4.13	0.49
15	Ferraro 1061 Italian Eatery, identified in 2016 study combined with neighboring lot.	1061 Amboy Ave	725.06	25	0.17
16	Nursery School	1059 Amboy Ave	726	2.01	0.24
17	House under same owner as nursery school	1045 Amboy Ave	726	7.01	0.25
18	Hair Salon and Medical Offices	1039 Amboy Ave	727	1.03	0.23
22	Shopping Center - D'Amico's Food Store, NJ Dance, Amboy Bagel	999 Amboy Ave	730	1.18	0.52
23	New Jersey Guitar Center	995 Amboy Ave	730	1.07	0.15
24	Dudash Hookah Lounge, and multifamily, identified in 2016 study	989 Amboy Ave	730	1.13	0.83
25	Proposed for development; application was denied	979 Amboy Ave	730.07	28.01	0.55
34	Coffee House Café and salon	931 Amboy Ave	730.05	1.01	0.27
35	Jade Dynasty, also identified in the 2016 study	925 Amboy Ave	730.04	5.01	0.56
38	Stewart's, vacant, two lots with the same owner	936 Amboy Ave	694.15	35.02	0.28
		922 Amboy Ave	694.15	1.01	0.25
39	Offices and The Ice Cream House	940 Amboy Ave	694.20	1.02	0.50
40	Bank	946 Amboy Ave	694.20	22.01	0.36
43	Pretzel Factory, identified in 2016 plan combined with neighboring lots.	960 Amboy Ave	694.01	5.01	0.29
44	Provident Bank, underutilized, large corner lot, one owner	84 Fifth St	694.02	1.02	0.83
45	Barber Shop, Martial Arts Studio	984 Amboy Ave	694.03	1.01	0.24
46	Gas Station, nonconforming use	994 Amboy Ave	694.03	42	0.46
47	Medical Office	1004 Amboy Ave	694.04	1.01	0.29
59	Food and Liquor Store, Cleaners, identified in 2016 Study combined with neighboring lot.	1058 Amboy Ave	694.07	4.01	0.42



**Figure 1: Potential of Properties for Redevelopment
Amboy Avenue, Commercial Corridor Overlay District
Edison Township, NJ**

Sources: NJOGIS, Edison Township, Google Maps, NJ Map Project, BFJ Planning

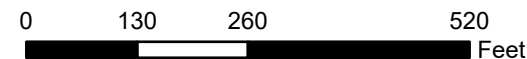
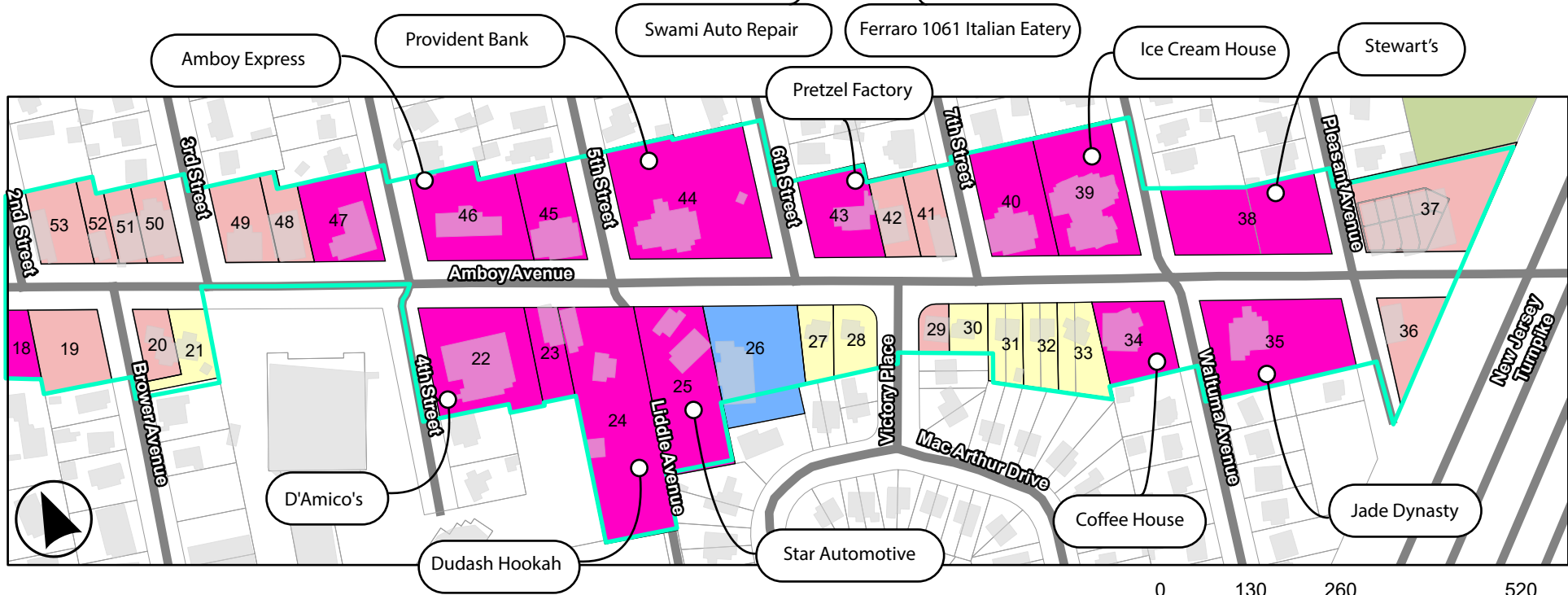
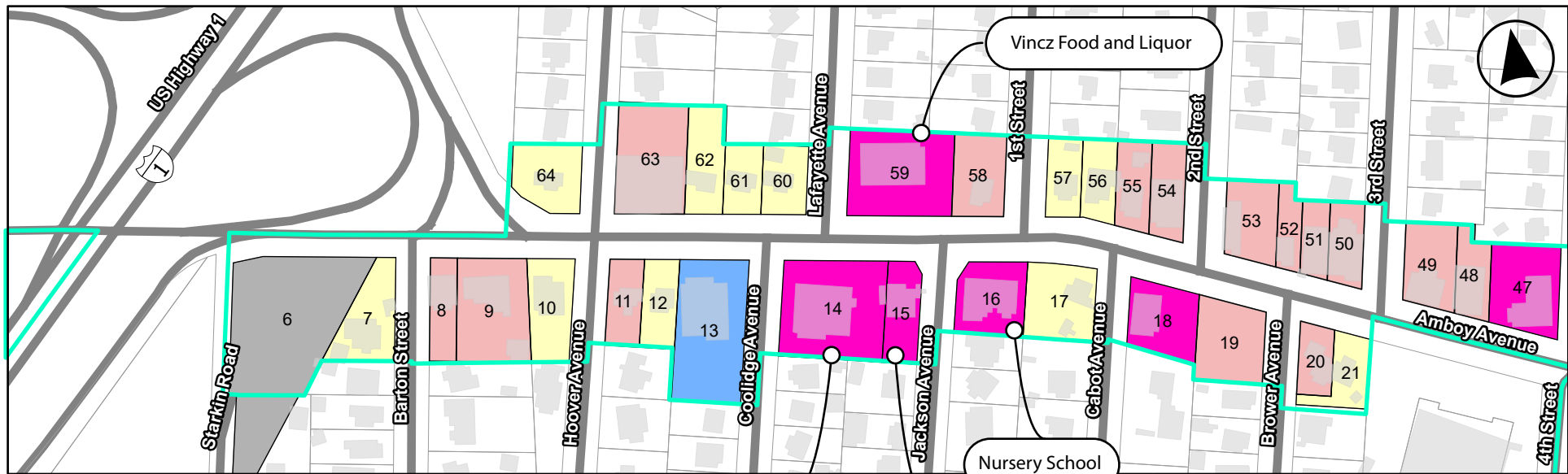


Figure 2: Potential of Properties for Redevelopment, Zoom-Ins of Amboy Avenue, Commercial Corridor Overlay District Edison Township, NJ

Sources: NJGIS, Edison Township, Google Maps, NJ Map Project, BFJ Planning

In considering these potentially developable properties, it is important to keep in mind that whether a property is actually developed is dependent on a range of factors, including the overall economy, unique site conditions (e.g., environmental contamination), and ownership issues. Most of the properties in the above table and figures have active users, and lease arrangements and other factors would greatly affect the ability of the property owner to propose new development. Because most of the lots along Amboy Avenue are small and shallow, property assembly may be needed to create more viable development sites. Of note, the 2016 Amboy Avenue Revitalization Study identified some properties as potential redevelopment sites that are not included in this memo, because they would require assembling multiple lots. Generally, we assumed that needing to consolidate more than two properties would make a site far less likely to develop.

Another significant limiting factor is parking. Although the redevelopment plan suggested several options to address parking efficiently, it does not appear that new parking regulations for the overlay district were finalized. Therefore, mixed-use properties would need to supply parking for both residential and non-residential uses. On small lots, this is quite difficult and expensive, particularly when adding units with a fourth story. It is telling that, of the three properties with actual mixed-use development proposals since 2016, all of them required some relief from parking standards, whether a design waiver or variance.

Given these factors, we believe full development of the above properties under the overlay district provisions is highly unlikely. Only two proposals for four-story buildings have been proposed since 2016, and only one has been constructed. This context indicates how difficult the Amboy Avenue development environment is, and why incentives are likely needed to facilitate the revitalization that has long been supported in Edison's planning documents.

For this reason, we continue to recommend reducing the allowable height along the corridor to three stories, but permitting four-story mixed-use development on the few sites that have sufficient lot area, width, and depth to accommodate viable buildings and parking. The Township may consider imposing minimum standards for sites where four-story development would be allowed, such as minimum lot area, width, depth, and requiring access on two street frontages. This would limit potential impacts on adjacent residential areas.

To accomplish this change, we recommend first adopting the appropriate language in the Master Plan. Then, the Township should prepare a new redevelopment plan to supersede the existing document. While much of the 2016 plan remains valid, the height provisions (including the illustrative building elevations and cross-sections) would need to be revised. These revisions to the redevelopment plan would also be necessary if the Township wished to eliminate four-story buildings along the entire corridor.

cc: Henry D. Bignell, Sr., PP, Consultant Planner