

Mayor Leads DOT to Cost-Effective Innovative Design Solution Route 206 Bypass in Montgomery, NJ

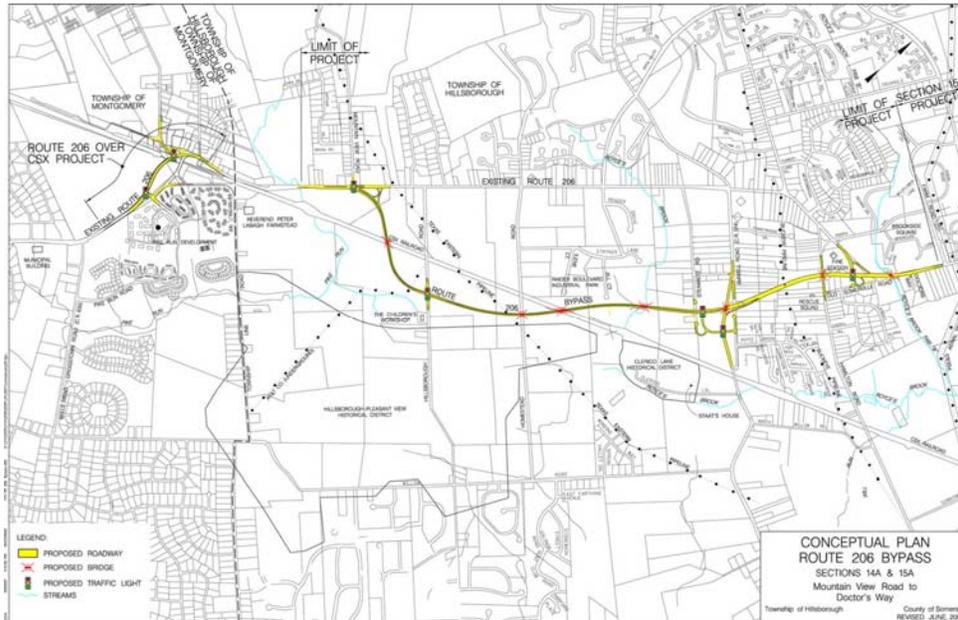
The Route 206 Bypass is part of a state highway which runs north-south for the entire length of the state. Locally, Route 206 serves as a connection between I-287 and the New Jersey Turnpike in central New Jersey. It has been included in long-range transportation plans for decades, using an alignment determined in the 1980s. When NJDOT began preparations to build the roadway in 2000, the land development and traffic patterns in the area had changed, as had conventional wisdom and state policies related to “smart growth,” but the proposed alignment remained the same.

The Mayor of Montgomery Township, NJ, Louise Wilson, was very concerned about the proposed alignment’s impact on her town, largely because the bypass design was a wide, high-speed roadway that ended in the town, spilling major traffic onto the town’s rural and residential two-lane roads. During 2002-2003, Mayor Wilson began to attend every meeting about the project, persistently raising questions and objections formally and informally, developing relationships with staff at NJDOT, and working with other stakeholders, particularly a citizens’ Transportation Advisory Committee and other residents who would suffer particularly adverse effects from the project.

With advice and support from professionals and some citizens, Mayor Wilson and the rest of Montgomery’s governing body, the Township Committee, adopted a two-pronged approach to solving the problem of the bypass: (1) to be as constructive as possible, they invested time and resources in scoping out design alternatives that would mitigate the impact of the Bypass on Montgomery while also serving DOT and statewide objectives related to traffic management, functionality, cost containment and smart growth, and (2) to make the Township’s firm resolve clear, they retained special counsel to prepare for litigation, should it become necessary, and to make the township’s intentions clear at the highest levels within NJDOT and the Executive Branch.

During this period, Context Sensitive Design (CSD) was beginning to gain acceptance at NJDOT. Mayor Wilson met key NJDOT staff with interest and expertise in CSD, and asked them to work with Montgomery to revisit the project’s alignment, using the principles of CSD. Staff suggested some ways to reduce the impact of the project - dropping the design speed of the roadway and reducing the number of lanes from four to two. But it was Mayor Wilson who proposed the most significant change – to re-route the southern terminus of the project to reduce traffic impact on the town. The new alignment - which resulted from a study of design alternatives paid for by Montgomery and conducted by a respected engineering firm that used methodology familiar to NJDOT engineers – eliminated two bridges and a cloverleaf interchange, avoided bisecting a neighborhood in a manner that isolated affordable housing, reduced the impact on the environment and local farmland, and obviated the need for NJDOT to purchase additional right-of-way. The result was a project that was less expensive, with less impact on local traffic, neighborhoods, habitat and farmland. Mayor Wilson persisted in presenting this design alternative to DOT staff and leadership at every opportunity. Recognizing the value of a design that achieved the goal of a more cost effective solution that served policy objectives better, NJDOT’s Bureau of Value Engineering in collaboration with the Division of Project Planning and Development initiated and coordinated a “Smart Solutions” process that culminated in an intensive workshop that drew elected officials, planning board leaders and engineers from

Montgomery Township, Hillsborough Township, Somerset County, and NJDOT. A key member of the New Jersey State Assembly who represented both Montgomery and Hillsborough also participated. NJDOT staff presented the original and alternative designs and, with support from Somerset County planners, worked to forge a consensus around support for the new design. The project is now moving forward with state funding and construction is scheduled to commence in 2010.



Several key lessons can be gleaned from this success story:

- 1. Mayor Wilson developed a good working relationship with NJDOT staff.** She was careful to keep her interactions positive, constructive, and always very persistent. Being viewed as more reasonable than some former Montgomery officials, who were deeply hostile toward NJDOT and critical of Mayor Wilson's approach, made staff prefer to deal with her. By offering alternative solutions, she made it clear to DOT staff that she preferred to work *with* them instead of *against* them.
- 2. Mayor Wilson did her homework** – on the DOT process, on the project itself, and on Context Sensitive Design. She sought guidance from DOT staff on how to work within the existing procedures of the DOT to effect change. She attended conferences and policy education forums related to CSD. The Town paid their own engineers to study the design. In addition, the Town hired an attorney with notable success in stopping major transportation projects, who made it clear to the DOT that Montgomery was fully prepared to take them to court to stop the project on the old alignment, and had a strong case based on documented negative environmental, farmland, social and traffic impacts of that alignment.
- 3. Citizens need insider expertise and assistance.** Without having DOT staff to assist her efforts and help her navigate the DOT process, it would have been virtually impossible for Mayor Wilson to succeed. Having people in the DOT who were already championing CSD as a different

paradigm in transportation problem solving was essential to the success of a citizen seeking to find a workable solution to a transportation problem.

4. It pays for the DOT to have an open mind and allow facts revealed through a fair and objective process to dictate the solution. Without consensus around an alternative, the Rt. 206 Bypass would have been tied up in litigation indefinitely. The ultimate solution came not out of pre-conceived ideas of needs determined decades ago, but rather a rigorous process of considering every possible design alternative in light of current context, public policy objectives, fiscal realities and community needs.