

# **NJ's Warehouse Proliferation: Risks & Solutions**

*A White Paper by  
Skylands Preservation Alliance*



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# The Issue

New Jersey, which is already the most population-dense, traffic-congested state in the country, is facing an unprecedented explosion of proposed and newly built warehouses, distribution, and logistics centers throughout the state. This trend has been spurred, in large part, by a growing consumer shift toward online shopping. Though the underlying demand is understandable, this burgeoning development poses critical environmental, health, safety, and quality of life concerns while also threatening the state's future economic resilience. The solutions are attainable but require legislative intervention.

## Risks

**Farmland Destruction** - Food insecurity is a growing issue in the U.S. as farmland continues to shrink, and yet many current warehouse proposals in NJ continue to target what little remains of the state's prime farmland because it is cheaper to build on undeveloped land instead of rehabilitating brownfield sites. This is happening despite the fact that NJ was named the 3<sup>rd</sup> most threatened state (of the lower 48 states) on this issue by the [American Farmland Trust](#), and despite the state's laudable prior efforts to preserve farmland. Some studies have shown farmland to be the best rateable of all – no children in school, no buildings to protect from crime or fire, and little to no impact on our roadways. For developers, however, farmland represents more profit.

**Air Pollution** - According to the [EPA](#), diesel fuel exhaust contains several pollutants that cause heart disease, lung disease, and other health effects. Similarly, the World Health Organization's cancer arm, the [International Agency for Research on Cancer](#), classified diesel exhaust as a carcinogen in 2012. NJ is already a major transportation hub with a poor history of air quality, which is already being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. Additional warehousing and distribution sites, which are already heavily reliant on diesel vehicles, would only exacerbate those problems, increasing illnesses, healthcare costs, and deaths.

**Water Pollution** – In NJ, within the environmentally sensitive Delaware Watershed Area *alone*, [Delaware Currents](#) revealed that more than 88 million square feet of warehouse development is currently proposed or was recently developed (*see Image 1, Page #5*). The resulting increase in impervious surface coverage, subsequent oil leaks onto those surfaces, heated run-off in warmer months into local waterways, and potential fish kills... all these factors could combine over time to seriously degrade this critical watershed which provides drinking water to millions of downstream residents in NJ, NY, PA and DE. Other watersheds in the state, as well as local communities which utilize private well water, face their own unique yet similar risks from these large-scale warehousing projects from issues like water safety, water allocation, in-land flooding, and more.

**Traffic Safety** - Large trucks pose unique safety concerns on our roadways due to simple physics. According to the [Insurance Institute for Highway Statistics](#), they are 20-30 times heavier than passenger vehicles and thus have more crushing power. They require 20-40 times more braking distance when loaded. Their higher ground clearance means that cars will “underride” (or get wedged underneath) a truck, often resulting in passenger car fatalities. Truck driver fatigue is another long-recognized problem. Trucks parked along our highways due to a state-wide truck parking shortage create additional serious hazards.

Because truck drivers often rely on the same free or inexpensive GPS apps as we do (e.g., Google Maps, Waze), they are also prone to getting stuck on local bridges, on sharp, steep turns, and under low overpasses, creating safety hazards on secondary and tertiary routes as well, and causing both public and private property damage. Most recently, as noted in the [Bloomsbury NJ Community Bulletin Board](#) (a Facebook page), on/about July 29, 2023, a tractor trailer – *travelling where it never should have been* – smashed into the one-lane County Route

579 bridge in Bloomsbury, NJ (Hunterdon County), causing damage so extensive that the bridge was shifted off of its foundation and will be closed indefinitely. This has resulted in truck traffic now pouring over an even less substantial bridge nearby and then onto narrow, quiet residential streets where children regularly play. Another concern, of course, is any potential interference related to the swift response of emergency vehicles to 911 calls (*see Images 2 & 3, Page #6*). In fact, local community Facebook pages in Hunterdon and Warren counties chronicle a *seemingly endless* list of similar costly mishaps – far too many to list in this white paper. Inadequate GPS systems, perhaps coupled with poor driver training, appear to be the main contributors to these ongoing and egregious driver errors.

**Loss of Wildlife Habitat & Related Recreation** - Many of these projects are proposed on land currently used by NJ’s cadre of enthusiastic outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen. Although our state is small in geography, hunting, fishing, and ecotourism generate billions annually for the state’s economy. Many of those proceeds serve to protect our environment for future generations, while also improving residents’ personal health and quality of life in the here and now. Loss of habitat will decrease that income and degrade the other benefits mentioned.

**Decentralized, Oppositional Planning** - Currently, a common practice at local planning boards is to assign industrial zones to the outer edges of their own communities, thus *pushing* heavy traffic and other problems onto neighboring communities in a hasty, self-serving “ratables chase.” Because they often lack the funding to hire their own special experts (traffic/other engineers, biologists, etc.) and lack practical expertise in areas like zoning, township leaders are frequently forced to rely too heavily on the inherently biased advice of developers and *their* hired experts. Although the Highlands Act was a fine attempt at creating a more cogent regional planning approach, it lacks enforcement power. The laws as written favor developers, making it difficult for communities to reject inappropriate projects. Most townships fear becoming involved in protracted and expensive legal battles that they are unlikely to win because of this bias towards developers.

Warehouses are a necessary reality for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and there are developers whose livelihoods depend upon building them. However, this type of development presents very specific problems for residential, agricultural, and commercial neighborhoods. Warehouse development makes little sense in these areas except for those doing the building. For everyone else, the costs are just too high. The citizens of New Jersey need our elected officials to understand the very real harm to our quality of life, the safety and well-being of our families, and the health of our farms, waterways, wildlife, and more that unchecked warehouse development represents.

## Solutions

The NJ State Legislature has the power to make substantive and far-reaching changes to the way we do business. With the very real and increasingly devastating impacts of warehouse proliferation being felt by all New Jerseyans, **the time to act is now!**

- Make **participation in the Highlands Act mandatory**. Do not allow municipalities to opt out.
- Codify the **permanent exemption of farmland from NJ’s redevelopment law** and its payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) incentives. Use that tool to redevelop brownfield sites.
- Provide **additional funding to NJ’s land preservation organizations** to make their offers to landowners more competitive with those of private developers.
- **Add an enforcement component** to the recently released [Warehouse Siting Guidance](#) document.

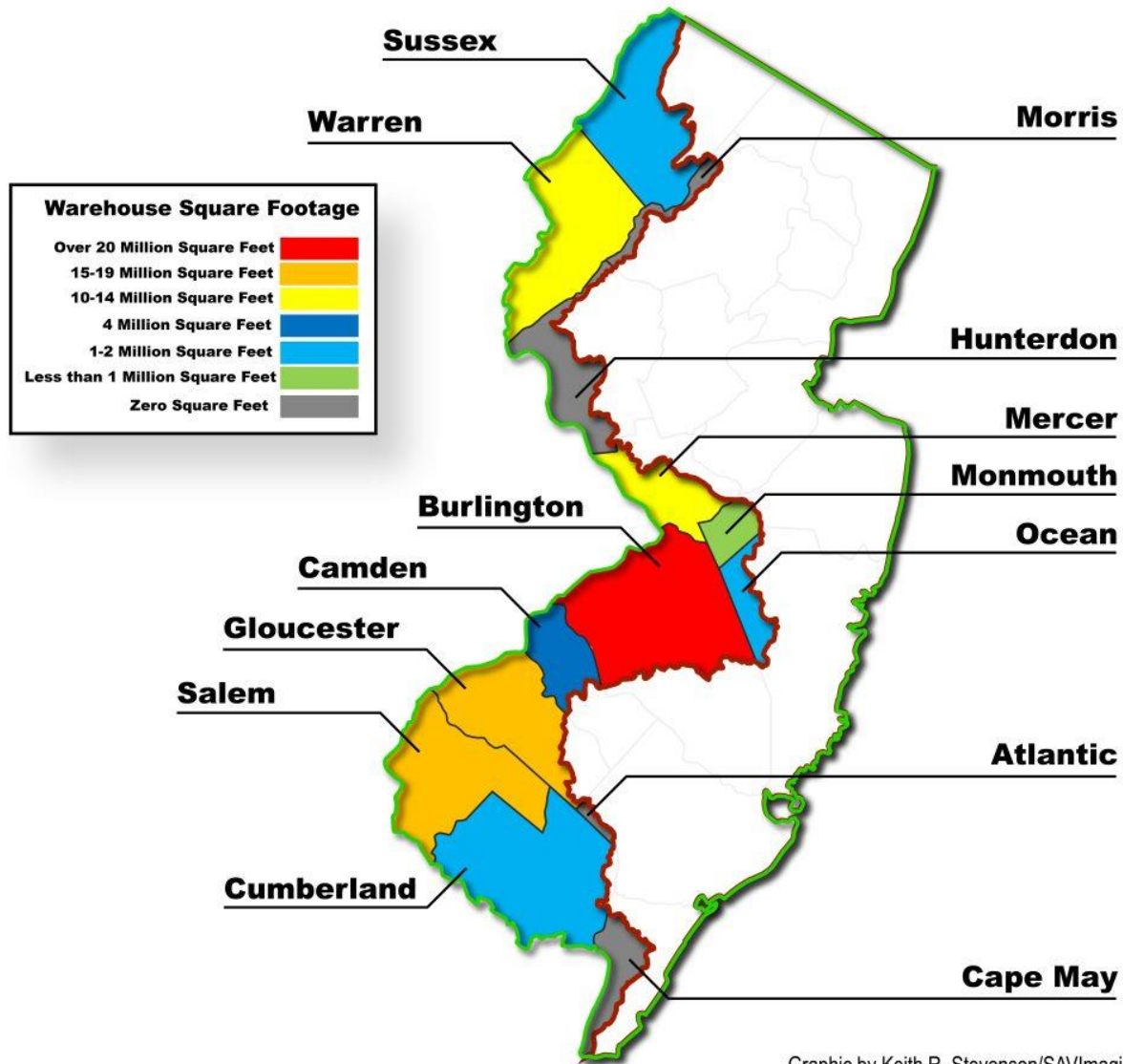
- Re-visit and re-invigorate [NJ's Freight Rail Strategic Plan](#) and, likewise, press for the robust implementation of [Transportation Choices 2030](#). Both strategic plans, developed by transportation experts and paid for by NJ's taxpayers, clearly recommend a **much greater emphasis on rail freight** to improve both air quality and energy efficiency while decreasing congestion on our roadways.
- Related to the point above, propose and pass legislation that would **require all new large-scale warehouse/distribution/logistics centers to have direct access** to an existing freight rail line.
- Place a **state-wide moratorium on warehouse development** until 1) all currently vacant industrial sites in need of redevelopment have been exhausted, and/or 2) better regional planning processes have been established.
- **Pass the bi-partisan legislation co-sponsored by former Senate President Sweeney and Senator Singleton (S3688)** that would “provide for regional economic and land use impact reports and establishes review processes related to development of certain large warehouses; requires related real property reassessments.”
- Pass legislation that makes it **mandatory for municipalities to collaborate, negotiate and win buy-in from neighboring municipalities** (who will also bear the brunt of a project’s negative aspects).
- Require municipalities whose development projects negatively impact their neighbors to **provide compensation for the harm done** (i.e., damage to roads because of truck traffic, greater need for law enforcement/firefighters because of accidents, etc.).
- Pass legislation, such as bipartisan bill [A975](#), that would require **truck drivers to utilize commercial GPS systems** to gain greater insights on local roadway hazards and thus avoid foreseeable mishaps.
- Convene a high-level expert panel to **strategize, recommend and implement solutions to the state’s existing truck parking shortage** which creates hazards for truck and passenger vehicle drivers alike.
- **Consider the creation of truck only corridors**, minimizing the traffic risks to other commuters.
- **Increase enforcement and penalties for bad actors** who pollute, cut corners, and are noncompliant with New Jersey building and environmental regulations.

We ask members of the legislature to carefully, thoughtfully, and seriously consider how to curb warehouse development in inappropriate spaces, without fear or favor, for the benefit of all New Jerseyans.

**REFERENCED IMAGES:**

**Image 1:** Map from [Delaware Currents](#) revealing the warehouse development pressure being brought to bear on the fragile Delaware River watershed.

**Proposed/recently built warehouse space in the Delaware River watershed in New Jersey**



Graphic by Keith R. Stevenson/SAVImaging.com

**Images 2 & 3:** Photos posted to the [Bloomsbury NJ Community Bulletin Board](#) (Facebook) revealing the recent damage wrought by a tractor trailer on/about July 29, 2023 – leaving a well-travelled, one-lane bridge on CR-579 badly disabled and closed indefinitely. A commercial GPS system would have warned the driver away from this narrow bridge as well as the steep, hairpin turn immediately behind it (*repeatedly* the site of stuck/jack-knifed trucks).



## **About Skylands Preservation Alliance:**

We are a grassroots 501(c)3 nonprofit in New Jersey made up of community residents who want to preserve the rural nature of Warren and Hunterdon Counties.

Current areas of focus include:

- Identifying ecologically sensitive areas within the Skylands region
- Raising awareness about potential impacts of development
- Promoting sustainable development projects
- Championing Open Space and Land Preservation

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