

**An Overview of
Somerset County Government
Programs & Services**



HISTORY

- New Jersey is the only state where **elected county officials** are called “freeholders” (most other states elect a county commission or county council).
- The term “freeholder” is a carryover from **colonial days**, when only property owners -- then known as freeholders -- were entitled to vote.
- Originally, one freeholder represented each municipality. As counties grew, this became too unwieldy. Today, Somerset County has five freeholders **elected at-large** for **three-year terms**. Each freeholder represents the entire county. Somerset County currently has about **323,552** residents.

WHAT DOES A FREEHOLDER DO?

- Freeholders elect from among themselves a **freeholder director** (Rick Fontana-2009) who conducts their meetings and serves as spokesperson for the board. In Somerset County, the position of freeholder director is rotated each year.
- Each freeholder in Somerset County chairs a **standing committee**:
 - Human Services (Patricia L. Walsh-2009),
 - Finance & Administrative Services (Peter S. Palmer-2009),
 - Public Works I (Jack M. Ciattarelli-2009), and
 - Public Works II (Robert Zaborowski-2009).

The freeholder director and county administrator serve as ex-officio members of each committee.

- The Board of Freeholders is the **policy-making body** of county government. They ensure compliance with state mandates, such as recycling and the provision of facilities for the courts and the county jail.
- They also fund many **human and social services programs**, such as Senior Wellness Centers, Meals on Wheels, a community Mental Health Center and the Office of Veterans Services, among others.

- **Somerset County Business Partnership** (founded in January 2001) to enhance the county's attraction and retention of business
- **Regional Center Partnership** to focus on revitalizing the Somerville-Raritan-Bridgewater area (a state-designated Regional Center as of 1996)
- **Economic Development Incentive Program Grant** to help older boroughs with development and redevelopment (\$9.55 million in grants has been awarded since the program's inception in 1998)
- **TD Bank Ballpark** has drawn visitors to central Somerset County for the ballgames and for shopping, restaurants, etc. The ballpark also is a good example of appropriate redevelopment of a brownfields site (the former American Cyanamid property)
- An **energy-conservation initiative** which includes an 11-member Somerset County Energy Council (www.co.somerset.nj.us/program/energycouncil.html). The Freeholders also have endorsed a High-Performance Green Buildings Design Program sponsored by the Somerset County Business Partnership (www.greenbuildingtoolkit.com/)
- **Energy Audit Grants** to assist municipalities and schools reduce energy costs by conducting comprehensive energy audits of facilities
- **Recreational Grants** open to towns or school districts to fund local playing field upgrades that enable smaller towns to benefit from open space funding

COUNTY DEPARTMENTS & DIVISIONS

Somerset County Government has three main "umbrella" departments that oversee a number of divisions:

- **Finance & Administrative Services**
Adjuster, Consumer Protection/Weights & Measures, Finance, Human Resources, MIS, Purchasing, Records Management and Telephone Services
- **Human Services**
Office on Aging, Community Development, Office for the Disabled, Human Services, Juvenile Institutional Services, Mental Health Center, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Veterans Services, Volunteer Services and Youth Services

- **Public Works**
Bridges, Emergency Management, Emergency Services Training Academy, Engineering, Soil Conservation, Facilities & Services, Fleet Management, Health Department, 911 Communications, Recycling, Roads, Traffic Safety, Planning, Cultural & Heritage Commission, Transportation, Vehicle & Equipment Maintenance and Solid Waste Management

Public Information and Grants report to the **County Administrator**.

The **County Administrator, Clerk of the Board** and **County Counsel** report directly to the Board of Freeholders.

There also are a number of **affiliated agencies** that receive support from the Freeholders but have their own boards: Library, Vocational & Technical Schools, Raritan Valley Community College, Board of Elections, Park Commission, Superintendent of Schools and Board of Social Services.

CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICERS

Somerset County has three elected constitutional officers who provide their own specialized services to residents:

COUNTY CLERK - records property records, takes passport applications, issues county ID cards, handles absentee ballots

SHERIFF - operates the county jail, serves warrants and summonses, provides security for the county courthouse and complex, assists municipal police departments

SURROGATE - probates wills, handles adoptions and trusts for minors

SHARED SERVICES

The County has joined with various municipalities to provide **shared services** that **save tax dollars**. Examples include:

- the **911** emergency communications system
- regional land use **planning**, provided through the County Planning Board
- cooperative **purchasing**
- **engineering** services
- **fuel** and **vehicle repairs**

- **traffic signal** maintenance and road striping
- **computer services** to various municipalities
- **records management** assistance for all 21 municipalities under the Public Archives and Records Infrastructure Support (PARIS) Grants Program
- employee **training** programs
- **Youth Services** Commissions and Municipal Alliances
- Facility **maintenance** and **repairs**, infrastructure maintenance & repairs
- **Health Department** for Bedminster, Far Hills and North Plainfield
- **Improvement Authority** provides a mechanism to municipalities and school districts to access financing for specific projects or equipment at the lowest possible cost

CENSUS FACTS

- According to the 2000 Census, **Somerset County** was the **fastest-growing county** in New Jersey from 1990 to 2000, with a population **growth rate of 23.8 percent**. We gained **57,211 new residents** during that period. The population growth rate from 2000-2007 was 8.77 percent. The county gained 26,062 new residents from 2000-2007.
- **Seniors** age 65 and older now account for about **11.6 percent** of our population. This number is expected to increase dramatically in the years to come, as baby boomers begin to retire and move into their senior years.
- The **projected population** for Somerset County in **2014** is **343,600**, or a 15.5 percent increase from 2000.
- The recent and projected population increases translate to **increased demand for governmental facilities and services**, many of which Somerset County already provides.

SOMERSET COUNTY IS ...

- **One of only 42 counties** (less than 2 percent) nationwide, out of more than 3,000, that hold a **triple-A bond rating**. This ensures we get the best possible interest rates on money we borrow for major projects that benefit all county citizens.
- Somerset County is **one of the wealthiest counties** in the state and nation with income levels exceeding the states' high medians by more than 35 percent.
- Ranked **10th** out of 21 counties in **New Jersey** in terms of both **population** and **land** area in 2007.
- Consistently among counties with the **highest employment rate** in the State (96.9 percent as of 2007). Somerset County had the third lowest unemployment rate in New Jersey of 3.1 percent.
- **First** nationwide with the **most scientists per capita**, and **seventh** nationally in the number of biological scientists in the workforce.
- Ranked **fourth most affluent** county in the **United States**. The median household income was \$97,658 in 2007.
- Ranked **second highest** county median household income in New Jersey in 2007 according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
- **Ranks among the highest** of New Jersey's 21 counties with an equalized value per capita of \$194,937.

2009 Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders

Rick Fontana, Freeholder Director
Jack M. Ciattarelli, Freeholder Deputy Director
Peter S. Palmer • Robert Zaborowski • Patricia L. Walsh



Learn more by visiting the Somerset County Web Site:
www.co.somerset.nj.us

"An Overview of Somerset County Government Programs & Services"
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Updated March 2009