

86 The Blawenburg Bypass

When I moved to Blawenburg 50 years ago (January 3, 1973), it was still a rural community with some 150-year-old houses and working farms. Evelyn and I were the new folks in the village, so the old timers felt obligated to give us advice. For example, one person told us to watch what we say because everyone was related. We followed that advice, and it took us years to figure out how the Terhunes, Skillmans, Hoaglands, and others were interconnected.

My next-door neighbor, Ken Dorey, also provided information that surprised me and made me question whether I had made a good choice to move to this seemingly rural village. He told me the 1971 Montgomery Township Master Plan proposed a bypass around the village to reduce the anticipated increased traffic on Route 518 (Georgetown-Franklin Turnpike). He said it would go through the woods behind my house. My initial reaction was astonishment as I envisioned my house on an island between two roads. There was light traffic in front of my house at “rush hour,” but there were times during the day when there was no traffic at all. What was all this increase in traffic about?

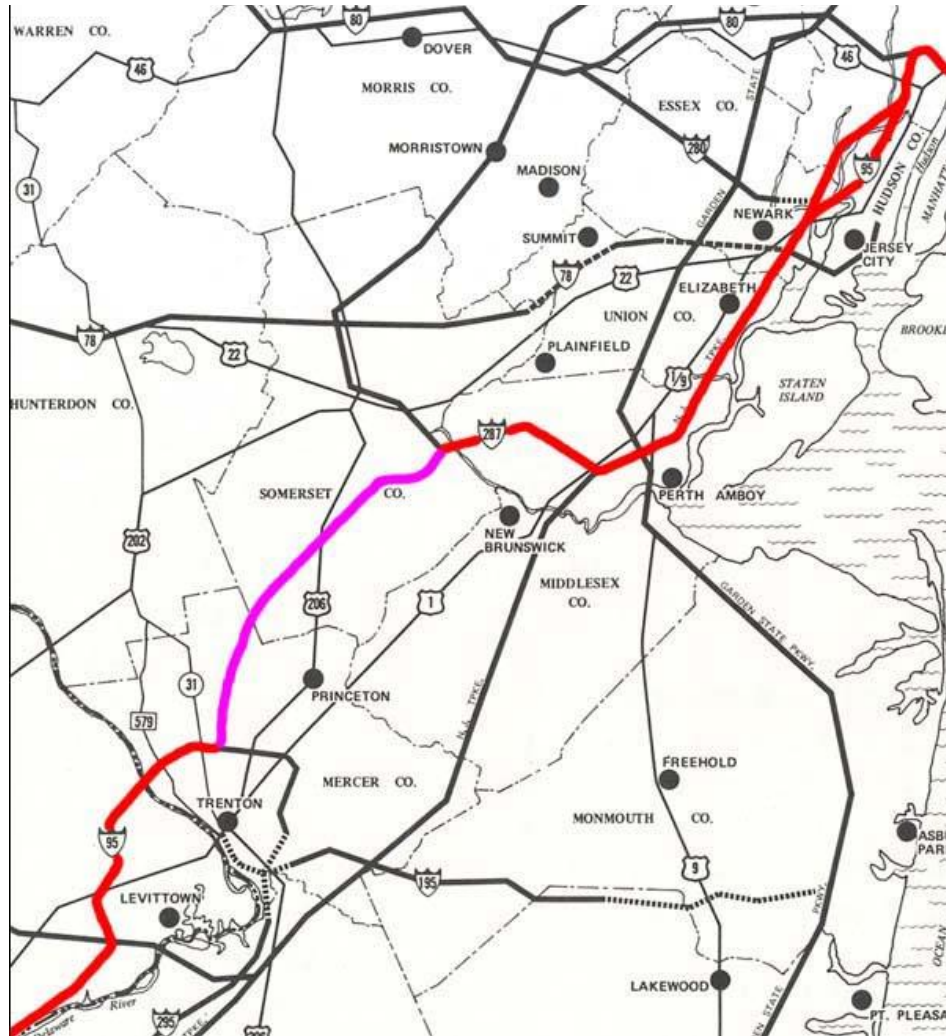
Montgomery’s population was 6,353 in 1970, and maybe the fact that the population almost doubled from the 1960 count of 3,851 made the town leaders think there would be a huge increase in traffic. But the township didn’t look like it would be having so much traffic that a bypass would be required to save the small village from road congestion. The Master Plan revealed that in 1970, 56% of the land was vacant or in farmland. There was actually an increase in woodlands compared to a report from 1967, and the number of residential acres had decreased! This hardly builds a case to show the need for a new highway.

With a bit of investigation and some discussion with my new neighbor, I soon learned that the bypass was put in the master plan in anticipation of an increase in traffic that would come with the building of Interstate 95.



An Unpopular Freeway

I-95 was proposed as early as 1954, and most of the proposed routes came through Somerset County. Early proposals showed a separate pathway through Central New Jersey. That is, the Interstate did not involve any other roads. These plans referred to its path through the county as the Somerset Expressway (also called Somerset Freeway). Later iterations of the plan linked into the New Jersey Turnpike, an existing road.



The proposed path of I-95 (Somerset Expressway) through Somerset County (in magenta)

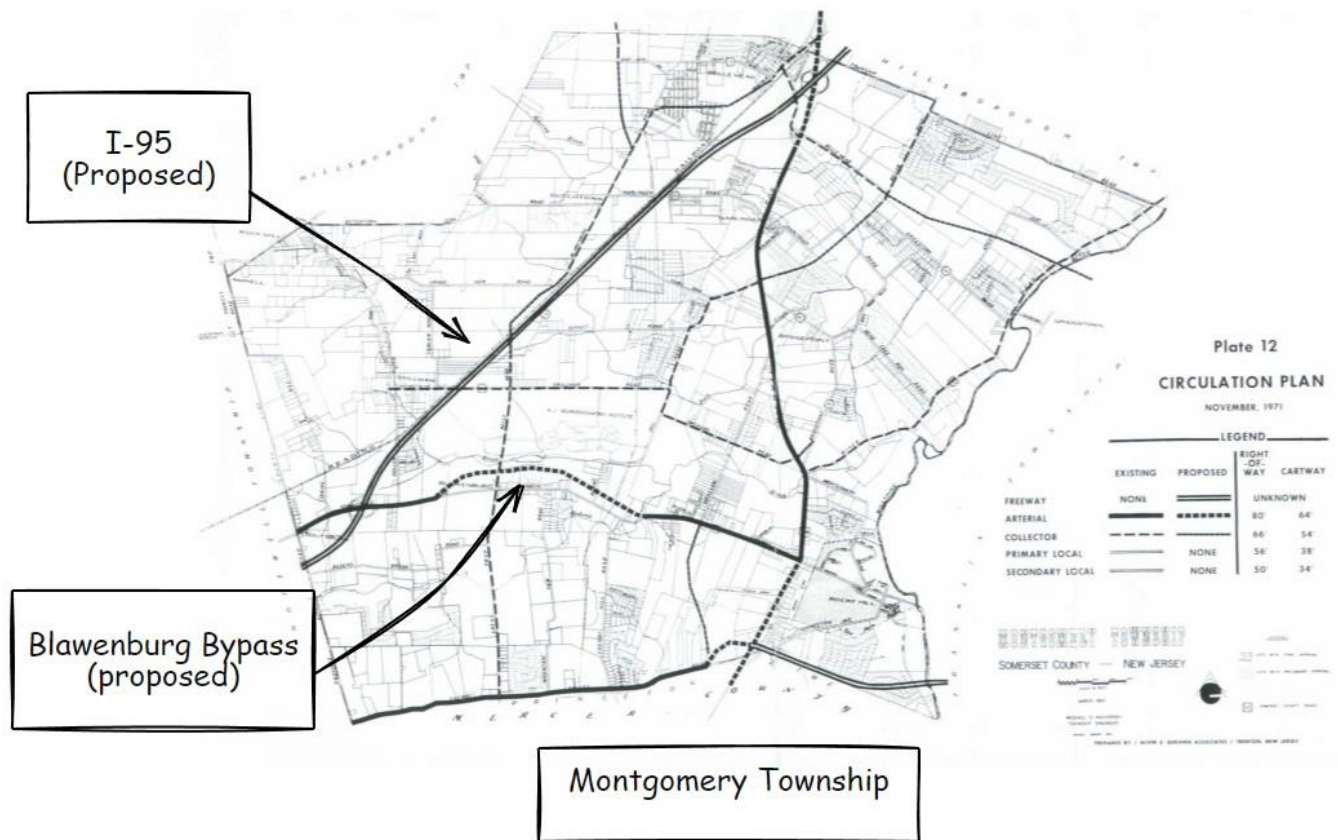
But I-95 was not popular wherever it was proposed to go. According to Raymond C. Martin, Jr., who has chronicled the history of the highway, “The ‘Somerset Freeway’ ... became a target for heavy protest from the local residents of Hopewell, Princeton, and Montgomery Townships in the southern section of its proposed alignment. Residents believed that the freeway would bring unprecedented development to what was then still a rural farming area, thereby destroying the rural character of the region. Additionally, it was feared that a large amount of traffic would use the freeway to bypass the tolled New Jersey Turnpike.”

I-95 was approved to cross the Delaware River at Scudders Falls in Ewing Township. The plan beyond that was to go northeast into Hopewell Township and connect with Route 518 west of Blawenburg near Springhill Road. It was planned to run through the James Van Zandt Farm and the area where Montgomery High School is today. It would parallel the Reading rail line into Hillsborough and continue northeast into Piscataway and other communities.

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The authors of the Montgomery Township Master Plan had good intentions. Wanting to be proactive, they said, “The bypass is considered essential to preserve the character of the village. (The) intersection of Routes 1-95/518 will undoubtedly increase traffic flow on Route 518. Continued growth of the township even without Route 1-95 will continue to create additional traffic on Route 518. The recent traffic counts have already shown this trend is under way. Constant traffic increases with the relentless pounding of traffic through this colonial village will create an untenable situation where Route 518 will ultimately need widening. The widening within the village would place the traffic physically closer to the homes and small stores than even exists today and would accelerate their deterioration.”

There were two proposed paths for the Blawenburg Bypass, a northern and southern route. They both would have started in the area of Bedens Brook at Route 518 near Washington Well Farm. The southern alignment would pass through fairly flat land, but it would be disruptive to the houses and farms it would go through. The northern alignment was ultimately proposed because it went through more vacant land just south of Rock Brook close to the Princeton North Development Center. While the topography of this alignment would have been more challenging, it required fewer access points, thus allowing traffic to flow more freely.



Opposition

While the northern alignment was the favored route, it never materialized because there was huge opposition to I-95 in virtually all the communities it would pass through. There were emotional pleas from all fronts not to bring such a large volume of traffic through the communities. People worried about their local roads being clogged with traffic entering and exiting the Interstate. Others projected large developments being built since getting to the metropolitan areas of New York and Philadelphia would be easier. Some felt that crime would be on the rise, while others imagined a much larger school system and higher taxes. There were few people who were pro-I-95.

The opposition won, and I-95 was never built.

Preserving the Village

At the time of the I-95 debate, the population of the township was one quarter of what it is today. The school system was just opening its first high school, which was a 7th-12th grade school. There was a lot of open space and very few if any townhouses or apartments. A shopping center had been around for less than a decade, and there was no traffic light in downtown Blawenburg. It was just beginning to transition into a suburban community.

The bypass was eventually taken off the master plan, and housing sits today on land that would have had a roadway filled with cars. While the township population has grown, Blawenburg today looks much like it did for years. The traffic has increased without I-95, but thanks to several people, the roadway through the village has improved.

In the 1980s, the late Ursula Brecknell teamed up with photographer/artist and Blawenburg resident, Clem Fiori, to apply to place the village on the State and National Register of Historic Places. They figured that being on the Register would help protect the village from future roadway plans. They identified all the original properties that were in the village and described their architectural structure as well as their historical importance to the village. In 1988, the considerable effort it took to apply to be on the Register paid off, and the village was awarded the honorable spot on the Register.

Shortly afterward, Grace Terhune, who chaired the Landmarks Commission in Montgomery, successfully applied for the Blawenburg Church and its adjacent school to be placed on the Register. These acts helped the village avoid having its road widened, which would have threatened the character of the homes and village. One of the realities of early homes was that they were often placed close to the road. Gasoline and diesel engines and the noise of cars and trucks make building back from the road a wiser choice today.

By 2006, Somerset County wanted to widen and rebuild Route 518 to remove the drainage ditches in front of the houses. They had one plan, but the local folks led by Grace and Clem wanted a greater preservation of the properties and improvements for pedestrians. They met with the county and state transportation departments and made proposals to them. When they presented their case, they were granted virtually everything they asked for. Being on the State and National Registers was a strong selling point. As a result of their efforts, brick sidewalks were built on the north side of the road throughout the village. Bike paths were put in, and trees were planted. The only road widening was to accommodate the bike paths.

The idea for a major highway and a bypass came and went with little result. Some like to look back today with 2020 hindsight wondering if I-95 would have been a better option than our current traffic issues, but that's a moot point today. Our leaders listened to the people, and decisions were made with good reason at the time. Despite our traffic woes, we don't have a major Interstate going through the Township and, selfishly, I'm happy my house isn't sitting on an island. My thanks go out to Ursula, Clem, Grace, and others who worked hard over the many years to help keep Blawenburg Village looking much the same as it did in the early to mid-1800s.

Facts

1. I-95, the Scudders Falls Expressway, was ultimately connected with I-295, the Camden Expressway. It then was connected to I-195, the Central Jersey Expressway, east of Trenton, and ultimately to the New Jersey Turnpike. It's a circuitous route that is longer than the original planned route.

2. Another thing that happened after I-95 was taken off the books has helped Montgomery retain its rural character. Led by Clem Fiori, an Open Space Committee was formed years ago. To date over 5,000 acres have been preserved from development. Thanks Clem and the many others who have helped to preserve open space over the years.

3. Almost all of the original houses of Blawenburg are still standing. The only one missing is the Green Flash Inn that used to be at Route 518 and Mountain View Road. It burned down during Prohibition.

4. Between 1954 and 1982 there were at least six variations of pathways for I-95 and all but the final map included the Somerset Expressway.

Sources

Information

Montgomery Master Plan, 1971

http://www.raymondcmartinjr.com/njfreeways/Interstate_95_Gap_Map0.html#:~:text=I%2D95%20entered%20New%20Jersey,north%20to%20the%20Bergen%2DPassaic

Graphics

I-95 sign – Wikimedia Commons

Township map – Montgomery Master Plan, 1971

I-95 maps – New Jersey Department of Transportation

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