



## **Bernardsville tackles parking woes head-on**

### **Borough considers widening spaces in lots to fit SUVs**

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Bernardsville has always been forward-thinking when addressing trends that threaten the bucolic borough nestled in the hills of Somerset County.

It was the first municipality to curb the size of McMansions on small lots. The first to deal with gargantuan jungle gyms sprouting in back yards by regulating their size and location.

How could Bernardsville have known that shrinking the size of parking spaces in the early 1990s would be such a Hummer-sized mistake down the road?

"At the time, the trend seemed to go for smaller cars," said planning board Chairman Donald Knudsen. "Who would have guessed sport utility vehicles would become so popular?"

In keeping with their record for being ahead of the curve, experts said, Bernardsville may well be the first to address the SUV-glutted lots where its 7,345 residents park when it votes Monday on an ordinance to widen parking spaces to their previous sizes.

"The big problem, of course, is the SUVs," said Mayor Jay Parsons. "It's difficult to park them and have people get in and out safely because the width of the spaces isn't really adequate."

In fact, one in six New Jersey motorists owned a sport utility vehicle in 2002, good enough for sixth place in state-by-state rankings of SUVs on the nation's roads, according to recently released data by the U.S. Census Bureau. Only five years ago, the Garden State ranked 21st in the country with one in 10 drivers owning an SUV.

The ordinance would require an additional half foot for general parking spaces, boosting their width to 9 feet across, while spaces in lots where stores provide shopping carts would need to be 10 feet across instead of the 9-foot width now required.

Aisles that vehicles drive down also are being widened under the proposal, which only affects newly constructed buildings or those that undergo major renovations, Knudsen said. For lots where vehicles park at a 90-degree angle, aisles would need to be 24 feet wide instead of 20 feet as set forth under existing off-street parking requirements.

**Martin Robins of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University said it was only a matter of time before municipalities were forced to address the growing size of vehicles.**

**"I've been expecting it," Robins said. "There are real problems in parking lots that have occurred as a result of the proliferation of SUVs."**

Bernardsville resident Jerry Sisbarro sees one of the problems every time he looks at the side of

his Chevrolet Trailblazer -- dings and dents from other motorists who have to park too close.

"The doors on the cars are bigger, and when people open them ... they're hitting the other guy's door," Sisbarro said. "I've had my doors hit many times."

While the outward benefits of wider spaces would be evident for motorists, Robins said the ordinance could have unintended consequences for the community.

"One possibility is that you're going to lose spaces because it exaggerates the cost per space of building parking lots," he said.

Commercial buildings might also be build smaller because contractors won't have enough land to accommodate the number of spaces required by the borough, Robins said. Bernardsville sets the number of parking spaces a property needs based on the square footage of the building.

"It certainly could make it difficult for developers to build the kinds of buildings people want because they will have to snip space for the parking lot," Robins said.

Sandi Lowich, chair of the Raritan Valley Group of the Sierra Club, said she wasn't surprised by the ordinance change.

"We already have sprawl with houses, and now we're looking at sprawl with parking SUVs," Lowich said. "We need to look at other alternatives like public buses, more rail transit and more hybrid cars. This is more about accommodating an overconsumption lifestyle that we lead."