

The Borough of Runnemede, established in 1926, is a small community comprised of 8,300 residents with an average age of 37. Based on a 2010 census, the town’s demographics consist of 85% Caucasian and 15% Latina/African American/Asian. Runnemede is located at interchange Exit 3 of the New Jersey Turnpike and in close proximity to the North-South Freeway (Route 42) – the major thoroughfare between Philadelphia and New Jersey shore points -- and easy access to Route 295 North-South, the route between North Jersey and Delaware. The “main” street in Runnemede is the Black Horse Pike, “The Pike” (Route 168), which runs a two-mile stretch north and south and divides the town in half. Businesses, large and small, freestanding and connected in row align the Pike, including the town’s Borough Hall and public parking lot. The Black Horse Pike is the front door, or first impression, to over 20,000 travelers per day. Runnemede boasts a community park, a stocked natural spring fed lake, a few popular restaurants, a dog park, a handful of specialty stores, and vibrant youth athletics.

William Leap’s book, *The History of Runnemede New Jersey* tells about our origin, starting with a “strong Native American Presence”. According to the book, the [Native Americans] then deeded land to colonists, which greatly diminished their hunting grounds, and so most then migrated north and west. In 1683, Irish Quakers moved in and settled a farm community along what was then called the Gloucester River and is now known as Big Timber Creek. The Creek became instrumental for moving lumber and other products during the Revolutionary War. The area was previously dominated with a, “strong Native American presence.” During the Revolutionary War, the Hessian troops traveled from Red Bank (National Park) to Haddonfield by route of Clements Bridge Road through Runnemede. Hessian soldiers who succumbed to their battle wounds during their travel through this area are buried in Ashbrook’s Burial Ground, Camden County’s oldest known public burial ground, located on Station Avenue (which borders Runnemede with Glendora/Gloucester Township). John Ashbrook is recorded as the first settler in Runnemede, New Jersey. His will is dated October 9, 1727. By the end of the 1950’s, the Borough’s last farm had been sold for development. According to a Master Plan Reexamination completed by the Borough in 2017, Runnemede is characterized as “suburban” and nearly all of the unconstrained privately owned land is already developed and there is limited opportunities for in-fill development scattered throughout the community.

The Runnemede Youth Athletic Association has over 300 participants involved in soccer, baseball, and basketball. Our Girls Softball Association has approximately 100 adults and children involved. Our Senior Citizens club offers socialization, trips, and activities for its 100 members. The Girl Scout and Boy Scout Troops of Runnemede conduct their meetings and activities in their own Scout Building. We have two elementary schools and one middle school with approximately 900 students attending, as well as a regional high school with an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students. We have a VFW Club Post 3324 with a Women's Auxiliary and a clubhouse for 200 members. Runnemede’s faith community attends the following places of

worship: Trinity Lutheran, Holy Child Parish (St. Teresa's and St. Maria Goretti), and Mt. Calvary Union. Our JFK Democrat Club has approximately fifty members.

One of our biggest assets in Runnemede is Beaver Branch Park. This hidden gem provides access to soccer fields, nature/jogging trails, tennis, basketball and pickle ball courts, children's playground, a large covered gazebo, and modern restroom facilities. Another important asset to the community is the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) who have been active in town for seventy years, supporting many community activities, engaging the convening partner (Reimagine Runnemede) and is a strong advocate for bringing Community Heart and Soul to Runnemede. Of particular benefit to young families, the town provides free, half-day and full-day preschool for three and four-year-old children. The town has received a Bronze Award for sustainability from Sustainable New Jersey, which is a combined effort of the community, Borough, Public Works, and Green Team. We also have a successful wellness and addiction recovery club called New Beginnings with 22 weekly meetings.

For decades, Runnemede has been a top-down governing body with minimal community involvement. An art-based, non-profit group called Reimagine Runnemede was recently formed and has inspired a grass roots initiative to generate community involvement. Reimagine Runnemede is a diverse, non-partisan, citizen-based network mobilized to promote revitalization of our community by learning and building upon the best practices of other successful community models. We hope to inspire fellow residents, local businesses and our elected officials by partnering with them to creatively seek new solutions through Arts-Based Community Development and Creative Placemaking. The group was founded by J. Kenneth Leap, a third generation community leader in Runnemede, whose father authored a book titled *The History of Runnemede New Jersey*. The group has grown from three members to a volunteer list of over one hundred members. Reimagine Runnemede has engaged Triton Regional High School, Triton Student Arts Committee, Green Team, the GFWC Woman's Club, Mayor and Council, Police Department, Fire Department, Runnemede-Bellmawr-Glendora Rotary Club, and the Planning and Zoning Board. Reimagine Runnemede has collaborated with these organizations, such as the South Jersey Cultural Arts Alliance and the FAF Coalition. These groups will promote, provide financial support, attend and volunteer at our events. The residents of Runnemede are looking for the guidance and partnership to engage our community and to implement some initiatives that align with what matters most to our residents. The Community Heart and Soul model is a success story for community engagement, and it is designed to help communities find the missing voices and under-represented. A partnership with Community Heart and Soul is exactly what Runnemede needs.

The Borough of Runnemede has recently created a Redevelopment Zone as a tool to encourage revitalization of the business district along the Black Horse Pike. This one-mile long economic corridor bisects the heart of our community and is traveled by 20,000 vehicles daily.



Despite this exposure, nearly 30% of the businesses are currently vacant. A united intervention by all sectors of our community is needed if we are to reverse this trend.

Our community wants change! In 2026, the Borough of Runnemede will celebrate our Centennial. We are using this anniversary as a target date to celebrate our change. We want a community that is economically and aesthetically vibrant. We want to give the next generation a reason to stay here! Prior to the Community Heart and Soul readiness meetings, the long-standing civic groups were unaware of each others' existence. We hope to better engage our community and rekindle that small town feeling where neighbors are connected to each other. We can measure our successes through attendance at community functions and increased civic membership. As community involvement increases, vacant buildings will become viable, the younger generation will grow into leaders, and we will build relationships with under-represented community members.

The convening partner is Reimagine Runnemede, organized in December 2018, which achieved non-profit status by May 2019. Within a year, artistic efforts yielded three murals, sidewalk art, and participation in the spring and fall festivals, all of which yielded our growing volunteer base. After attending Transform South Jersey's workshop, a core group of Reimagine Runnemede recognized that the Community Heart and Soul model offered the perfect opportunity to advance our vision. Reimagine Runnemede's Community Vision meetings are open to the public and held in an attractive, new business on "Main Street." Within the core group of Reimagine Runnemede are members of town council, planning board, educators, local artists, and community volunteers. Reimagine Runnemede applied for, and successfully received two grants (\$1,000/each) using visual arts. Reimagine Runnemede creates enthusiasm and the excitement that comes with favorable change. These markers of success are the reason this convening partner will be a strong influence and leader.

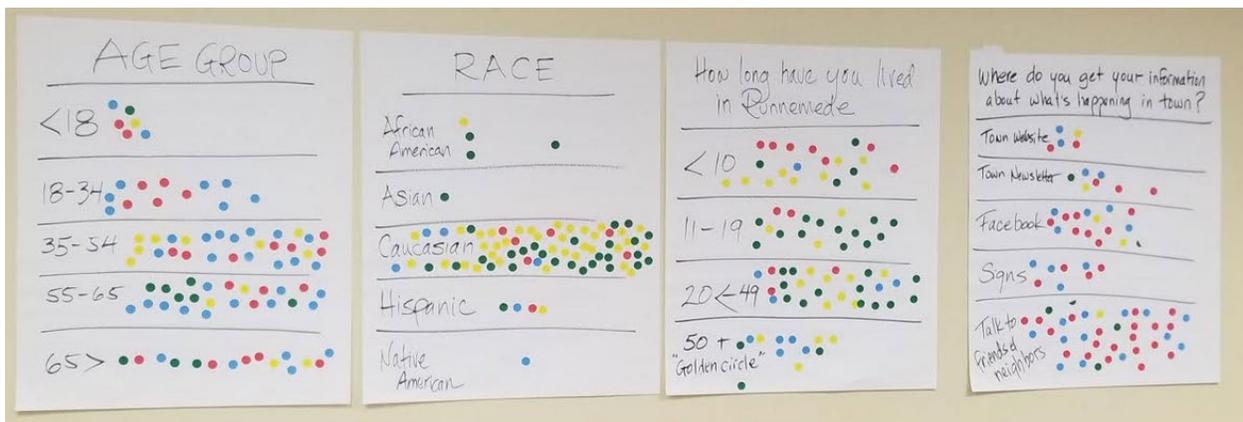
Reimagine Runnemede is proud of our community partners. Runnemede's Green Team achieved "Bronze Star" status, attesting to our use of methods for sustainability through recycling, use of non-toxic repellants and pesticides, composting, etc. Triton Regional High School students brought a fresh perspective by painting a public mural at the spring Festival. Thirty-eight students were recent recipients of the N.J. State Seal of Bi-literacy, a sign of our local growing diversity. Our municipality has a mayor and directors of public safety, public works, parks and recreation, public events, engineering, finance and zoning. Police and Fire round out the safety provision. Caucus workshops, planning board meetings and town council meetings are held at regular intervals, open to the public; however, attendance is reportedly fair to poor. More insight is necessary to discover how we can encourage more community engagement in these arenas.

We spoke about the individuals who started Runnemedede, but we were very anxious to learn about who currently lives, works and plays in our community. Our first readiness activity session (the self-assessment) was conducted with our core Reimagine Runnemedede group. The environment created a “safe space” for people to voice their opinions on the state of our community and to identify weaknesses that need attention. We learned that there are differences of opinion, however a tolerant attitude prevailed and problem areas were exposed and discussed. The group’s assessment revealed that several opportunities exist and that we were ready to propose a vision for change to our community.

The Community Readiness Self-Assessment Activity was conducted with 51 attendees. The participants were comprised of members from civic groups and businesses, as well as several residents. The represented organizations included Reimagine Runnemedede, Public Library, Town Council, Police Association, Police Department, Fire Department, VFW, Rotary Club, Women’s Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Senior’s Club. After analyzing the data, the top three elements identified by participants were:

- Trusted, responsive, and accessible leadership
- Civic organizations exist in my community
- Different types of groups come together, coordinating between organizations, and giving everyone an opportunity to connect.

Attendees agreed that we can elicit ideas from the community by using the Community Heart and Soul model for community engagement. The civic organizations are not interconnected. Our next step would be to unite civic organizations through a universal calendar. Communications between these groups is what’s needed most.



The community brainstorming session was attended by 85 residents. Demographic data was collected at the onset to engage attendees (see chart above). Great ideas were generated with an open mic format. Residents built on each others’ contributions and common themes

arose. These themes included: inadequate channels of communication from the municipality to the residents, the need to modernize modes of communication, and increase the frequency of communiques. One of our “ah-ha” moments occurred when the PTA, and a faith-based organization offered to send mass texts with Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and place messages on a dashboard. Others suggested designing a local newsletter, monthly or quarterly, to be placed in all local businesses. A suggestion for an “International Day” won favor, and will help us better achieve diversity and inclusion. More culture and arts events were requested. Ways of combating residential apathy or disengagement were discussed. The importance of including all residents was voiced. Finding common goals between “long time” and “newer” residents was brought up. It was suggested that one way to capture new residents is to send a “welcome packet,” listing local businesses and professionals. Senior attendees recommended mailings, and posting flyers on public bulletin boards (library, grocery stores, borough hall) to reach those not on social media. Communication and marketing dominated the arena of need, and would be the first on our agenda. Residents must have a sense of belonging and being heard. Another focus is to target young families. Without youthful participation, new leaders will not emerge, and sustainable efforts cannot promise a better future. Also missing from this session were our firefighters, young families, African and Asian Americans, new residents, and our business community. We learned from our sessions, that long-time residents were the most engaged and motivated to help the community change (another ah-ha moment). Our hope is to have Community Heart and Soul, Reimagine Runnemede, the business district, the municipality, and residents form a long lasting partnership.

The Borough of Runnemede has provided \$10,000 in its budget for Runnemede’s arts and other programs. These funds will be provided to the Community Heart and Soul Program as part of the fundraising needed. The Borough has also approved an Ordinance in support of Community Heart and Soul at the November Council meeting.

We welcome further guidance from Community Heart and Soul to assist us in community fundraising. We can anticipate the support of our local businesses in helping with the fundraising needed for the program. The civic leaders of the various organizations represented at the meetings are committed to supporting Community Heart and Soul in its fundraising efforts and use the model as a means to get more involved in community-based projects instead of only remaining within their own groups. As a result of the meetings, the following as items either need to be addressed now or should be addressed as the program moves forward:

- We have no experience with fundraising
- We don’t know how to engage our business community
- Why are the 20,000 cars not stopping?
- We want the community to thrive
- We have trouble communicating within the town

- We want to attract new business
- The business community is disconnected

We are excited about the opportunity to affect change. We got a small taste of the Community Heart and Soul model with the three initiatives, and we are energized as a community to continue this momentum. The timing of Community Heart and Soul could not be better to enable our town's future vision.

