

## **Destination Downtown Somerville**

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Nestled in the heart of Somerset County, New Jersey, Somerville sets itself apart with its blend of small-town charm and urban vibrancy. Historic architecture combined with a thriving arts scene creates the perfect backdrop for its many diverse dining options and a community that values both tradition and innovation. The destination management organization (DMO), the Downtown Somerville Alliance, promotes and enhances the town's bustling commercial and social gathering spaces for residents and guests of Central New Jersey (The Downtown Somerville Alliance, 2024). Due to Somerville's lively and welcoming nature, the town has earned a reputation as a hub for history, strong community ties, and vibrant downtown life.

Somerville offers much to both residents and short-term visitors alike. Not only do the restaurants appeal to a variety of palates with diverse offerings from different cultures, but the streets are also welcoming and walkable, featuring a pedestrian-only section filled with boutique shops and year-round events, including live music, movies, and more (The Downtown Somerville Alliance, 2024). Like many destination management organizations, Somerville's DMO aims to engage the local population while also increasing traffic to small businesses in the area. This essay reviews the status of the Downtown Somerville Alliance and discusses its current structure, services, funding, and key operational challenges.

Somerville, New Jersey, boasts a tight-knit community, and this explains the personable nature of the town's DMO. The Downtown Somerville Alliance's team consists of a nine-member Board of Trustees and a Downtown Office team of three (The Downtown Somerville Alliance, 2024). The Board of Trustees operates on a volunteer basis, while the Downtown Office team consists of full-time Executive Director, Olivia Manning, and two

part-time employees: Assistant Manager, Stacy Stanley, and Marketing Coordinator, Rebecca Pollard. Olivia Manning's experience as a restaurant owner and manager, senior resort and spa manager, and Vice President of Marketing for an audiovisual company provides her with the skills needed to serve as a successful executive officer. She is responsible for leading the team's efforts through strategic planning, fundraising, and marketing oversight. Stacy Stanley, who holds a bachelor's degree in Communication and Media Studies from Rutgers University, previously worked as a Public Relations Assistant for Somerset County, equipping her to handle administrative and operational tasks for the DMO (Stanley, n.d.). Rebecca Pollard graduated from Stockton University with a bachelor's degree in Communication and Media Studies and has experience as a Social Media Manager and Marketing Assistant for Kristin Simmons Art. This background allows her to manage content creation, campaign coordination, and partnership development for the Downtown Somerville Alliance (Pollard, n.d.). Overall, the DMO is divided into three key areas: Recruitment and Retention, Marketing, and Events, all working together to sustain the vibrancy of downtown Somerville.

There are many aspects of community engagement that a DMO generally oversees. The Downtown Somerville Alliance manages projects such as community infrastructure, marketing, and events. Community infrastructure includes landscaping and seasonal lighting, ensuring that residents and visitors can enjoy the town's beauty in comfort. Marketing involves corporate partnerships with local businesses, sponsorships, and media campaigns, while events focus on creating social gatherings in the heart of Somerville to nurture community engagement. All of these projects support the local tourism industry and maintain community satisfaction (Harrill, 2005).

The initiatives carried out by the Downtown Somerville Alliance are funded by residents of the downtown area. A Special Improvement District (SID) tax is paid by those living in the designated area, and this revenue is used for infrastructure improvements, marketing, business recruitment, and events aimed at boosting commerce in downtown Somerville. The allocation of these funds is discussed with local government, residents, nonprofits, and businesses to ensure corporate social responsibility, though the exact figures are not publicly available (The Downtown Somerville Alliance, 2024). In terms of financial structure, the Downtown Somerville Alliance most likely handles both private and government accounts, relying on public funding from SID taxes to keep the DMO's operations sustainable. However, as Gillespie (2023) points out, special improvement districts often create inequities by distributing costs and benefits unevenly, which may raise challenges for the long-term sustainability of such funding models.

It is essential for the Downtown Somerville Alliance to ensure its initiatives have proper backing, both financially and managerially. One of the major challenges the Alliance faces is funding, as it is largely dependent on taxpayer dollars. While corporate partnerships can help sponsor events and beautification efforts, economic downturns and changes in property values can lead to fluctuations in SID tax revenue. Additionally, other organizations in the area often compete for the same funding that the Downtown Somerville Alliance depends on to maintain its programs. The small size of the team also poses challenges, as employees may need to take on tasks outside their areas of expertise, leading to potential delays (Pike, 2016). Despite the organization's successes, these challenges affect the team's ability to execute the most critical priorities for downtown Somerville, making it essential to seek broader community support.

In conclusion, the Downtown Somerville Alliance plays a crucial role in fostering a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere in Somerville, New Jersey, through its efforts in marketing,

community engagement, and infrastructure improvements. Despite its small, dedicated team and success in creating a lively downtown space, the organization faces challenges such as fluctuating funding and limited resources. As the town continues to grow and evolve, it will be essential for the Alliance to seek broader community support and sustainable financial solutions to maintain and enhance the thriving environment that makes Somerville a standout destination in Central New Jersey.

### References

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