

DELAWARE VALLEY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
REGIONAL COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FORUM HIGHLIGHTS
January 21, 2010

A meeting of DVRPC's Regional Community and Economic Development Forum (RCEDF) was held on January 21, 2010, beginning at 10 a.m. Barry Seymour opened the meeting by introducing Ken Klothen, Director of Economic Development for Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Mr. Klothen described the activities of the Economic Development Task Force formed by Montgomery County, comprised of county and local officials, academia, and representatives of the business community. This Task Force was charged with identifying challenges and opportunities and to define a strategy to support economic development, including specific actions that could be taken by the County Commissioners.

The Task Force's final report noted that the county's primary challenge is to find pockets where economic development has lagged and devise strategies to revitalize those communities. Specifically, the Task Force proposed a seven-year economic development plan that calls for spending \$105 million (including \$20 million in the first year) on new programs in four priority areas: revitalization of older communities; redevelopment of obsolete commercial and industrial properties; workforce development; and more simplified government regulations. In response, the County created its Renaissance Fund (which provides dedicated funding for revitalization efforts in Pottstown and Norristown) as well as a parallel program for smaller boroughs. A planning program is also available that provides technical assistance to support high impact economic development projects (such as overlay zones and transportation plans).

The Task Force also identified as a challenge a lack of capacity to undertake economic development in many local municipalities, where obsolete ordinances sometimes impede business development. The County plans to implement a program to address this need, although the current economic climate has hindered these efforts. While the Task Force identified transportation as a critical issue impacting economic development, it noted that the issue was large and complex enough to warrant separate consideration. In response to questions, Mr. Klothen noted that the County is committed to revitalizing developed communities and preserving greenfields and that the linkage between economic development and transportation has not been ignored, with the County supporting transit-oriented development and improved public transit.

Mr. Seymour next introduced Lynn Bush, the Executive Director of the Bucks County Planning Commission. Ms. Bush discussed the activities and recommendations of the county's Economic Development Advisory Board (EDAB), formed by the county commissioner's in 2009 and charged with reviewing economic development in the county. Specifically, the EDAB was asked to review the county's current approach to economic development; set goals for improving the economic development structure in the future; and define the action steps necessary to reach these goals. Initially, the Board undertook a fact-finding mission, reaching out to a multitude of stakeholders including businesses and educational groups. Existing county, regional, and statewide economic development efforts were reviewed, and case studies of the Pennsylvania Biotech Center and AE Polysilicon were undertaken. A business survey was also conducted, which concluded that the most important issues that attract businesses to the County are quality of life, relative location, and government cooperation.

The EDAB's final report, adopted by the County Commissioners on January 20, 2010, sets six economic development goals: maintaining economic diversity; maintaining a high quality of life; creating a good business climate; creating and retaining a skilled workforce; revitalizing older downtowns and main streets; and reusing obsolete industrial and commercial sites. The report identified a future vision and established six action steps to achieve that vision, including centralizing the county's economic development function; adopting guiding principles for

economic development; better utilizing existing organizations and resources; helping existing businesses; engaging municipal partners; and supporting workforce investment. Ms. Bush concluded by noting that the EDAB now has 60 days in which to develop an Implementation Plan.

The meeting's next speaker was Saundra Ross Johnson, Director of the City of Camden's Department of Development and Planning and Executive Director of the Camden Redevelopment Agency. Ms. Johnson provided an overview of Camden and then discussed the City's priority economic development projects. The City faces significant challenges, with 41% of its population under age 25, 49% of its residents over age 25 with no high school diploma, and 35% of its households living below poverty. Camden has a strong existing transportation and transit infrastructure, however, and there is renewed optimism with a newly-elected mayor.

The City's priorities include jobs; business and economic development; residential development; and building and maintaining a strong infrastructure. Priority projects include mixed-use transit villages, improved industrial corridors, and waterfront and open space projects. Ms. Johnson described several specific projects, including the Gateway Office Park and Ferry Avenue transit villages; redevelopment of the North Camden Waterfront (including demolition of the old Riverfront State Prison); and development of the Roosevelt Plaza Park and Transit Hub. She also discussed ongoing citywide activities such as the Neighborhood Stabilization Plan, Energy Efficient Block Grant program, and the City's approach to weatherization and green jobs.

The final speaker was Andrew Carten, Director of Planning for the City of Trenton. Mr. Carten first provided an overview of the City's demographics and history, and then discussed the City's economic development efforts. The City's primary economic development goal is to re-establish Trenton's economic stature within the Mercer County region. Market strengths include their close proximity to both New York and Philadelphia; their existing water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure; their position as the State's capital; the availability of affordable industrial and commercial properties; and the potential for waterfront development. Challenges include actual and perceived crime; a lack of support services; disinvestment in certain areas; the overall cost of doing business in New Jersey; and the quality of the public school system.

Mr. Carten noted that in order to capitalize on their strengths and address the challenges, the City must understand current market conditions, increase staff capacity, and work closely with appropriate agencies to secure available funding. He described the 2008 Downtown Master Plan and the 2009 Train Station Market Study as two efforts designed to help understand the market. He next discussed the Route 29 project, noting that the goals of the project are to improve waterfront access; improve safety; promote redevelopment; and provide environmental enhancements. The entire project is projected to cost \$150 million and will occur in phases, with the Capital City Redevelopment Corporation (CCRC) as the lead agency. A TIGER grant application is being prepared and the City is currently working with federal, state, and county agencies to identify and secure additional funding and project approvals.

Finally, Mr. Carten discussed the proposed Vista Center, a 25-story LEED platinum building proposed at the Trenton Train Station (the 6th busiest station on the Northeast corridor and serviced by both Amtrak and NJ Transit). The Center's Class A office space located at a transit center will be attractive to tenants looking for sustainable "green" office space and will also offer close proximity to the Trenton highway network. Another market advantage is the NJ Stimulus Bill/Urban Hub Tax Credit, which will allow tenants to deduct the cost of capital improvements for ten years. Mr. Carten noted that in addition to these two "homerun" projects (which if realized will transform Trenton's physical and economic image) the City's strategy is to continue working with existing and new businesses and to remediate and redevelop brownfields sites.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m. The next RCEDF meeting is tentatively scheduled for May 20, 2010.