

Title: Waterfront Redevelopment is Key to Revitalizing Downtown Trenton
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Have you ever visited the Baltimore Inner Harbor?

Or how about the Riverfront in Wilmington?

Dilapidated warehouses and vacant buildings have been replaced with housing, restaurants, shops and commercial offices. Inaccessible shorelines once strewn with litter and debris are now clean, inviting and alive with pedestrians. Crumbling parking lots have been converted into parkland and spacious gathering areas for concerts, festivals, and community celebrations. The Inner Harbor is home to some of Baltimore's top attractions, including the National Aquarium, amazing shopping and restaurants, and the Maryland Science Center. And the Riverfront in Wilmington is now home to companies like Barclays and ING.

In *The New Waterfront: A Worldwide Urban Success Story*, Ann Breen of the Waterfront Center said, "urban waterfronts are important, special assets and that, when redeveloped, they often contribute to healthy traditional communities. Waterfronts can serve as a unifying force in a city or town and can be, and often are, a force for community enrichment. Further, vibrant communities are essential for environmental, economic and social advancement."

The conversion of Route 29, the reclamation of Trenton's Waterfront and the opening up of adjacent parking lots for redevelopment is essential to the successful revitalization of Downtown Trenton and will produce significant economic and quality of life benefits for the residents of the city, the county and region.

As it stands today, Route 29 is a barrier between the City of Trenton and the Delaware River. The freeway obstructs views of the river, prevents access to the waterfront and the off ramps inhibit easy connections to state government and regional entertainment venues. Route 29 runs in a north-south direction along the eastern bank of the Delaware River and virtually cuts off access to the riverfront from the downtown in this area. Prior to construction of Route 29, this area was the southern and western extension of Stacy Park and the area between Route 29 and West State Street and South Warren Street was once a vibrant residential community. However, the neighborhood was demolished as part of an urban renewal strategy in the city and several State office buildings were erected in its place. Today, a sea of surface parking lots surrounds those buildings, the planned urban renewal did not manifest and now the State plans to demolish two of the buildings.



Route 29 in its current form was designed to meet mid-20th century ideals of fast automobile traffic in city centers. It functions as a high-speed “short-cut” between interstate highways north and south of the city. It serves as an effective physical and visual barrier between the riverfront and the downtown and adjacent neighborhoods. It does not function well for local traffic movements. Although it does provide good access to some downtown locations, that access could be provided just as well by a very different type of roadway. In short, the design of Route 29 does not fit the needs or the context of the 21st century.

Route 29 has now been re-envisioned to be a very different facility – one that will fit into its context and better serve both the transportation needs and social and economic goals of the community. It will be designed as an urban boulevard that will move traffic efficiently, but at lower, safer speeds. It will provide physical and visual connections to the river. It will form the spine of a waterfront redevelopment area in the downtown, which in turn will encourage the development of a vibrant, mixed-use community adjacent to the waterfront and serve as a magnet for private investment in the capital city.

The Route 29 Boulevard Realignment Project (“The Route 29 Project”) involves the conversion of Route 29 from a limited access, high-speed urban freeway to an urban boulevard with a lower speed limit and improved intersections. It also involves opening additional street access to the downtown area and providing for crosswalks and improved pedestrian/bicycle circulation to the waterfront and downtown area. The goal of the project is to promote sustainable mixed-use urban redevelopment, improve vehicular accessibility and circulation, stimulate economic development, improve traffic safety and connections to the downtown street network, create opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian transportation, promote improved air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, reduce flooding, provide increased open space and improve access to the Delaware River.



“Starting a half century ago, highways in North America were built to loop around and slice through downtowns. Today, momentum is building in a growing number of cities to tear down portions of these downtown freeways and replace them with aesthetically pleasing boulevards or parks. Cities such as Milwaukee, San Francisco and Portland, Oregon have already completed freeway removal projects, with notable redevelopment results.”¹

The concept of waterfront redevelopment sharing downtown-oriented goals and revitalizing communities has taken shape in cities throughout the nation. We can point to the dramatic change in the Wilmington, Delaware riverfront that has received more than \$850 million of investment from public and private sources and has become an economic engine for job growth. Or the redevelopment of the Baltimore Inner Harbor which has catalyzed reinvestment in Baltimore -- supporting more than 50,000 new jobs, generating \$60 million in new tax revenue, and generating a \$4 billion tourism industry that was previously non-existent. The harbor now stands as the model for post-industrial waterfront redevelopment around the world. Moreover, in Portland, Oregon the conversion of

¹ Jeffrey Spivak, *Downtown Freeway Removals*, Urban Land, June 2009, at 75.

Portland Harbor Drive into a park and the reconnection to the river, led to the development of housing and two decades later, property values in and around the area have tripled.

The successes in Wilmington, Baltimore, Portland, San Francisco, etc. are only a few examples of how freeway removal projects have had a catalytic effect on economic development in urban areas. According to the Seattle Department of Transportation, "...the impacts of freeway removal tend to be felt over a broad area. Surrounding property values increase, neighborhoods become more attractive to investors and visitors, and crime can be reduced through increased foot traffic and the elimination of shadowy hiding places."²

The City of Trenton, while located in one of the most affluent counties in New Jersey and subsequently the United States, has not been able to boast of a strong economic position. In the early 1900's Trenton was one of the nation's leading industrial cities and the center of business, retail and cultural activity in the region. In the 1900, the city housed 77 percent of Mercer County's population. After World War II, Trenton suffered a loss in its industrial base as manufacturing companies closed, moved to the suburbs or relocated to other regions of the country. With the advent of suburban shopping malls, the city's retail sector declined. During the 1960's, Trenton experienced an exodus of middle-income residents and its housing stock deteriorated.

While the 1980's brought some rejuvenation to the city, the decline from previous years is still present, as the city remains one of the state's economically distressed cities and the poorest municipality in the county. This is evidenced by data reported from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census. The city has experienced high dropout rates, high unemployment (surpassing the state average and national average) and low per capita income and high poverty rates.

During the past ten years the city has experienced a steady increase in unemployment. And, the recent economic down turn has resulted in an unemployment rate that is nearly double the national average at 18.4 percent. Median income in Trenton increased by 21 percent in the 1990s, but this increase was significantly lower than the county and the state. Also, the percentage of persons below the poverty level increased during the 1990s, and at 21.1 percent in 1999 Trenton's poverty rate is much higher than that of the Mercer County (8.2 percent) or the State of New Jersey (8.7 percent). Moreover, between 1990 and 2000, the city's population continued to decline, decreasing 4%, while the county and the state had population increase.

Trenton, like many economically distressed cities across the state and the nation, is facing significant challenges that threaten the quality of life for its residents and businesses. And those challenges were at play far before the recent economic downturn. However, the Route 29 Project can have the same catalyzing impact in the City of Trenton as riverfront development has had in cities like Wilmington and Baltimore.

Nearly \$2.25 billion in financial benefits are projected to occur as a result of Trenton's Route 29 project over 20 years.³ In a City with an unemployment rate approaching 20 percent, a median income of \$31,074 and more than 50 percent of the current taxable property exempt, the contribution of this project to the long-term growth in employment, production and other high value economic activity is beyond significant.

The Route 29 Project will generate nearly \$2.25 billion in net new direct private sector economic growth – approximately \$1.14 billion in direct wages and salaries stemming from highway and building construction activities and an estimated \$707 million in private investment in new buildings and land value. Moreover, the project will be a catalyst for the creation of 26,980 temporary and permanent jobs – 7,164 direct jobs and 5,989 indirect and induced jobs throughout the regional economy. In addition, an estimated 4,853 direct construction jobs and 8,974 indirect and induced jobs throughout the regional economy. These construction jobs will be needed to construct the more than \$901 million in highway and building projects.

² Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle Urban Mobility Plan (January 2008), available at <http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/docs/ump/06%20SEATTLE%20Case%20studies%20in%20urban%20freeway%20removal.pdf>.

³ RKG Associates, *Route 29 Net Present Value & Cost Benefit Analysis* for Route 29 TIGER Grant Application, September 2009.

And in an effort to ensure that local residents and business owners directly benefit from the Route 29 Project, the project partners have committed to work with local community-based organizations and programs to put a process in place to ensure that the project will promote the hiring of local residents, particularly low-income residents, and the utilization of local, small and minority businesses.

Opponents of the Route 29 Project argue that the conversion of the highway to an urban boulevard will increase traffic congestion. In fact, as Jeffrey Spivak noted in his article, *Downtown Freeway Removals*, “while [conversion projects] have government and downtown civic backing, freeway removal plans typically come under fire for their potential to worsen traffic congestion because a highway can handle more vehicles per hour than a surface arterial with traffic signals.” Peter Samuel, editor of the transportation website *TollroadsNews.Com* contends that a ten lane boulevard would be needed to replace a four lane expressway and “these proposals come mainly from urban planners and designers who seem to have almost zero concern about increasing delays, worsening travel times, and compounding congestion.”

And as Spivak goes on to say, “...experiences of a few cities have shown that fears of worsening congestion are not always borne out and that the benefits of removing even short freeway spurs can far outweigh the drawbacks.” For example, in San Francisco fear of increased congestion actually waylaid the initial attempt to demolish the Central Freeway. However, when a portion of the freeway was removed – first a portion and then the entire roadway – the San Francisco Department of Parking and Traffic found that “Central Freeways flow of vehicles 93,100 vehicles had fallen by more than 50 percent to 44,900 on the boulevard. In addition, none of the alternative routes analyzed experience more than a 10 percent increase in traffic.”

Moreover, Spivak notes that “The same was the case in Portland and Milwaukee – the first and the latest cities, respectively, to demolish freeways.”

It is important to note that one of the benefits of the Route 29 Project is that “it will improv[e] the flow of vehicular traffic by reducing the number of vehicles exiting the freeway at two major interchanges; adding additional streets and intersections to share the traffic load.⁴ In addition, studies have shown that concerns about significant increases in congestion are unwarranted. A study by the New Jersey Department of Transportation of the initial plan for the proposed realignment and new grid network found that “traffic models show that if the projects were implemented, travel times for motorists would remain comparable to current travel times. Travel times on some segments of Route 29 would decrease due to expanded capacity in the overall street network and the opportunities for traffic distribution that this allowed. Corridorwide, average peak-hour travel times would increase by approximately 90 seconds.”⁵

The concept of waterfront redevelopment as a tool for revitalizing urban downtown cores has taken shape in cities throughout the nation and has proven to be extremely successful. And it is clear that the economic benefits of projects like Route 29 far outweigh the potential drawbacks.

The Route 29 Project will bring \$2.25 billion in long-term economic benefits to a city that is facing a near 20 percent unemployment rate and a State that experienced a decline of 85,700 jobs in 2008.⁶ This growth represents billions of dollars in net new economic activity in the City of Trenton, the County of Mercer and the State of New Jersey.

⁴ Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle Urban Mobility Plan (January 2008), available at <http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/docs/ump/06%20SEATTLE%20Case%20studies%20in%20urban%20freeway%20removal.pdf>.

⁵ “Route 29 Boulevard Study – Phase 1 Conceptual Development Memorandum.” City of Trenton. Prepared for the New Jersey Department of Transportation. June 2005.

⁶ Star Ledger, March 4, 2009

This impact of the Route 29 Project is far-reaching. Trenton residents will realize multiple economic benefits including increased earning potential from new jobs and increased property values and improved quality of life from new communities that provide multi-modal transportation options and waterfront access. The City of Trenton and Mercer County will realize an expanded property tax base from new development and increased real estate values. And the State of New Jersey can expect increased tax revenues (e.g., income, employment, etc.) and decrease in the provision of aid to the City of Trenton as it becomes more self-reliant.

The Route 29 Project is not the panacea. It is a long-term project that must be included as part of a larger, more comprehensive economic development strategy that includes short-, mid- and long-term initiatives. However, the conversion of Route 29, the reclamation of Trenton's Waterfront and the opening up of adjacent parking lots for redevelopment is essential to the successful revitalization of Downtown Trenton and has the greatest potential to produce significant economic and quality of life benefits for the residents of the city, the county and region.

Can you imagine what it would be like for Trenton to have its own Inner Harbor? Can you envision a new, energized waterfront accessible to Trentonians and the surrounding area that offers an attractive mixture of recreational, residential, and commercial uses while capitalizing on one of the city's greatest natural assets – the Delaware River?

Can you imagine a thriving Trenton waterfront? I can.