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Helping Economically Challenged Communities Survive and Thrive

Experts Offer Solutions at Local Presentation

By [Linda Telesco](#) | [Email the author](#) | February 17, 2012

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Communities, like the people who live in them, suffered from the recent economic crisis, dealing with budget cuts, layoffs, and reduced services.

“This may be the worst of times,” said Rhoda Schermer of the North Jersey Public Policy Network, sponsor of “Creating Thriving Communities in Challenging Times,” a special presentation Thursday at [Bergen Community College](#) where a panel of experts proposed solutions to help towns recover and thrive.

Residents of various Bergen County communities as well as Sen. Bob Gordon, Freeholder Maura DiNicola, and public officials from Park Ridge and Little Ferry turned out to hear the proposals, which urged citizens and local governments to work cooperatively on projects that could save money and improve quality of life through better land use, more efficient transportation patterns, environmentally sound practices, and streamlined municipal administrations.

“We have to restructure New Jersey,” said Gina Genovese, founder and director of Courage to Connect NJ, an organization that helps communities consolidate and share costly services such as fire, police, and sanitation departments. “The state cannot sustain its 566 municipalities.”

Genovese was the mayor of Long Hill Township where a small population struggled to finance municipal services. She praised the 2011 consolidation of Princeton Boro and Princeton Township into a single municipality, a move expected to save Princeton \$3.2 million a year.

"Preserving quality of life is at the core of Sustainable New Jersey," said Randall Solomon, director of the organization that offers a certification program for municipalities that want to go green.

Sustainable NJ helps towns to identify and implement actions that can save energy and money while improving quality of life. These include tracking emissions, upgrading buildings, establishing municipal gardens, and minimizing water consumption

"More than 351 NJ municipalities have joined the program and 97 implemented enough actions to get certified," said Solomon..

"Redevelopment will be the most prominent form of development in New Jersey," predicted Phil Abramson, project manager for Jonathan Rose Companies. The real estate, civic development, and investment firm works with metro regions to limit sprawl and find land use solutions that enhance lifestyle, function, and prosperity.

"We recommend transparency...bringing the people of a community into a project when it is in the planning stages," said Abramson who criticized what he called "the old way of doing things," where local officials and developers worked together privately and kept the public in the dark about projects that would affect them.

Using illustrations and diagrams, Abramson described a re-development project his company completed for Morristown where the citizens had a say in what they felt was important to town.

"Walkability, open spaces, and beautiful architecture were some of their principles," Abramson said, showing a re-designed town center that seemed to meet those goals.

New Jersey's high property taxes and fragmented local governments were main topics for Tim Evans, research director at NJ Future, an organization that mobilizes citizens to promote responsible land use policies that can revitalize communities and result in safe neighborhoods with affordable housing.

"We zone out kids," said Evans. He described how budget-strapped towns, burdened by school taxes and hungry for ratables, favor development that attracts wealthy residents and businesses at the expense of economically diverse families.

Evans proposed regionalized school districts as a solution that would enable communities to share school costs and cut administrative expenses, opening the way for more diverse development. He compared Bergen County with its 70 municipalities and 75 school districts to his Pennsylvania home county. Though similar in population to Bergen, Evans said, North Penn has only seven municipalities and a single school district.

Albert Dobin, an editor at The Record newspaper served as moderator for the Q&A portion of the program.

"Is New Jersey's problem a lack of vision?" he asked the panel.

Abramson didn't think so. He commended Bergen Vision, a process launched by the County in 2010 to address the kind of issues raised by the panel.

"A lot of good research was done," he said.

One drawback, he said, is that "NJ doesn't have a true urban center like Philadelphia or Manhattan" and lacks the "critical mass" of public support needed to push projects forward. Genovese agreed that the people of the state need to "step up and be a driving force."

Among Bergen communities, Westwood was commended for its regional school district with Washington-Township and for maintaining a thriving downtown, despite many malls nearby. According to Solomon, the community also fuels its municipal vehicles with biodiesel made from the used cooking oil of local restaurants.

Some audience members expressed concerns that proposals might result in job losses among municipal workers or increased busing and larger class sizes for merged school districts.

Panelists acknowledged these concerns but generally felt that what would be gained by the efforts could lead to a prosperity that would create new jobs and that NJ was long overdue for a new approach to challenges that were holding the state back.

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