

'Foundation pieces': Camden chips away at the next phase of its economic growth

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Camden's waterfront continues to take shape. A new Hilton Garden Inn, the city's first new hotel in five decades, is seen at far left.

A month after being appointed mayor of Camden, [Victor Carstarphen](#) was sitting in an office at One Port Center detailing some of the finer points of his 100-day plan for the beleaguered South Jersey city.

Economic development, parks, infrastructure, education and blight are among the priorities. Along the way of describing some of the efforts that are and will be undertaken, Carstarphen took a detour to relay a moment from a recent Little League Baseball game. Camden was playing Bellmawr and the bases were loaded.

A player from Camden, whom the mayor described as a bit timid, came up to bat. A collective sense of nervousness pervaded those watching. They were well aware of the pressure the young player was under. The pitch was thrown and the boy swung. He got a hit that cleared the bases, Carstarphen said, still excited for the player's unexpected success.

As the new mayor, Carstarphen is swinging for the fences himself.

The former city councilman came to the top job in Camden following the sudden and unexpected resignation of Mayor Frank Moran, who was elected in 2017 and still had eight months remaining in his term. Moran departed at the end of April. In mid-May, Carstarphen, a Camden native, took the helm at a time when the city's economic revitalization seems to be in a lull.

The pandemic didn't help.

In the six years leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic, Camden had experienced an infusion of hundreds of millions of dollars by way of a controversial tax credit program called Grow New Jersey. Those funds went toward a Philadelphia 76ers training facility as well as a series of new headquarters for [Holtec International](#), American Water Co., Subaru North America, [NFI Corp.](#), Conner Strong & Buckelew, Michaels Organization and facilities for Lockheed Martin Corp.

The influx of those companies and the addition of a Hilton Garden Inn — the first new hotel in the city in five decades — that opened late last year along with a new \$48 million, 156-unit apartment building built by Michaels Organization were part of a strategy to create a critical mass and bring hundreds of jobs to Camden.

The idea was that those jobs would then help stimulate other parts of the city including retail and restaurants to cater to workers who would want to venture out for lunch or Happy Hour and those who wanted to live within walking distance of their office. However, little of that has yet to materialize. That progress has been stunted by the pandemic, and it remains to be seen how the hybrid work model that many companies are now adopting might eventually affect that aspect of Camden's revitalization.

There are other obstacles to that strategy that stemmed its progress. The 76ers facility is mainly for practices, so players pop in for their workout and then leave. Employees at the other relocated companies likewise tend not to stay in Camden beyond regular business hours. These companies and most of their workers were already based in South Jersey and already paying taxes in the state. Economic activity essentially shifted from one South Jersey community to another and, aside from the 76ers, Grow New Jersey failed to attract out-of-state companies to the city.

When the Grow New Jersey funds dried up and the program ceased nearly two years ago, two of Camden's biggest developers left after completing a fraction of proposed master plans that were hoped to be transformative for the city.

Liberty Property Trust envisioned in 2015 a \$1 billion Camden waterfront campus with 1.7 million square feet of office space in four to five buildings, four parking garages, a hotel with 120 to 140 rooms, and 325 apartments. The company, which was sold in 2020, completed the headquarters for American Water and wrote down a \$26 million loss on its development there.

[Brandywine Realty Trust](#) was named master developer of 13 acres Campbell Soup Co. owns and came up with a grand plan to create a new gateway for Camden in a mixed-use community called Knights Crossing. That involved developing 1.52 million to 1.95 million square feet of space including a 150-room hotel. The company completed a 250,000-square-foot headquarters and 107,000-square-foot training facility for Subaru and moved on from Camden.

"The waterfront was the first phase," said [Kris Kolluri](#), CEO of Cooper's Ferry Partnership, an economic development organization spearheading efforts to revitalize Camden. "This has been a good pause to take a look at what the second phase will look like."

Building community wealth

Camden has a population of roughly 75,000 and a poverty rate of 36.4%, according to U.S. Census data from 2019. Elected officials bemoan the city's continued suffering from five decades of neglect and disinvestment and acknowledge that can't be turned around in just a few years. Even a Federal Opportunity Zone designation hasn't had the effect many had hoped for in Camden.

When it comes to revitalizing weak market cities such as Camden, there is no magic bullet but there are strategies to try, said Colin Higgins, a senior research fellow at Drexel University's Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation. While Higgins couldn't directly speak to Camden, he has done extensive work and research with similar cities.

Many of these downtrodden communities had not recovered from the Great Recession when Covid-19 hit, compounding problems and furthering setbacks. Higgins said these cities can focus on three areas to help turn their fortunes: Grow small businesses within the community, focus on historically disinvested commercial corridors to help spur more economic activity, and leverage the vast amount of money being funneled from the federal government through the American Rescue Plan.

The goal is to build up the assets of a community and establish a framework for community wealth development, Higgins said. The amount of federal money being sent to states and cities is on par with the spending for Great Society programs and can have significant impact on a community.

“We have been helping cities on designating a recovery czar who focuses not only public funds but the private community. A point of contact who can scope the field,” he said. “The question is how do we coordinate this so the money is the most transformative?”

Corporate accountability

[Nyeema C. Watson](#) has lived in Camden all of her life and is vice chancellor for diversity, inclusion, and civic engagement at [Rutgers University-Camden](#) and oversees the university’s civic engagement initiatives. She is frequently in contact with the city’s corporate and community partners.

“There was a lot of focus and some controversy with the economic development program that brought the Subaru, Holtecs, American Water to the city and I think the issue was that residents and municipal leaders wanted to see this economic development but, in exchange, they wanted the corporations to be good corporate citizens in the city of Camden,” Watson said.

That meant providing jobs, training, programs and other tangible efforts beyond writing a check to support a charitable endeavor.

“I think that took some time to understand what that would mean for them. They were taking their time to understand the dynamics of the community,” Watson said. “I feel the companies were just getting their footing and understanding how they would have a significant impact when Covid hit.”

Watson, who is hopeful some of those corporate efforts will begin to pick back up as the pandemic eases, said even Rutgers-Camden has its own responsibility to be a good citizen in the city. It has worked with the community to find out their needs and began to form ways to address them. Examples of that include bolstering after school and summer programs as well as college access.

“It took us a while to get our footing but we built up the structures to do those,” she said. “Yes, it’s about money but you also want it to be thoughtful, you want it to be sustainable, and you want to be able to point to positive outcomes. We wanted the community to hold us accountable, and I think the companies need to be held accountable.”

Camden has had some wins. The city celebrated this spring a 50-year low in crime, an achievement few cities can come close to matching amid a rise in murders and other crime across the country.

There's also a sense of a unity among city, county and other officials when it comes to Camden. Reversing its fortunes and focusing on housing, parks, roads and other community anchors is the next phase in that, Kolluri said.

"These are foundation pieces," he said. "If you chip away at the foundational pieces, then economic development will follow."

The city, armed with \$15 million from the state, began in June to demolish 300 abandoned properties and remove abandoned vehicles. Another \$22 million will be spent on road improvements throughout the city.

Plans for a \$1.8 million renovation of Whitman Park are moving ahead and part of a bigger redevelopment of the neighborhood. In all, about \$80 million has been spent over the last five years, culminating at the end of this year, on enhancing a total of 100 acres of park space throughout the city and county.

"The parks in Camden should look as good as the parks in Cherry Hill, Haddonfield and Voorhees," said [Jeff Nash](#), Camden County commissioner.

More affordable housing is in the works and 75 new units are planned for Cranmer Hill. In 2017, the city of Camden was selected to receive \$30 million in from the U.S. Department of Education over five years for what is called a "Promise Neighborhood." The ambitious birth-to-college program will concentrate on five Camden neighborhoods and seek to improve outcomes for the children who live there.

Investments in roads, parks and education are part of a bigger plan "to improve the quality of life for our residents," Carstarphen said.

Public education is key to the city's efforts and inroads have been made in K-12 education reform, which have improved retention and graduation rates. A new \$130 million Camden High School, scheduled to open this fall, "is going to be a game changer," he said. "There will be other places that will be jealous of us."

Among other projects in the works:

- A \$65 million, 100,000-square-foot expansion of the Joint Health Sciences Center, helping to boost the city's growth in eds and meds;
- A \$250 million redevelopment of the Walter Rand Transportation Center;
- A \$20 million, 145,390-square-foot warehouse built by Matrix Development Group along Admiral Wilson Boulevard.

In addition to the overhaul of Walter Rand, other transportation projects are in the works that are expected to have an impact. Among those is a \$2 billion Glassboro-Camden Line. The 18-mile light rail project has reached several planning milestones including an environmental study and preliminary engineering work. Bids will next be sought for project management.

“It does signal that the project is moving forward,” Nash said. “The first riders will be on the train within five years.”

Nash also predicted pockets of transit-oriented development will begin to happen in and around the rail stations and trigger additional economic activity.

Many observers say that, though the Grow New Jersey incentives were abundant, a form of them is needed over a longer, more sustained period — 10 to 20 years — to make a real difference. It would also help to change the stigma of Camden as a place to avoid, especially if companies from outside of South Jersey moved there.

Those funds may come soon. Gov. [Phil Murphy](#) has signed onto an economic development program that provides more than \$14 billion in tax subsidies for development projects and to attract and retain companies in the state.

That along with the boots-on-the-ground work Carstarphen, other officials and nonprofits are undertaking may eventually lead to a home run or two for Camden.

“I think we are hitting our stride,” Carstarphen said.

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