Partners in Change
Award Winners are transforming New Jersey’s municipalities

Hackensack Mayor John Labrosse (holding award) accepts NAIOP NJ’s Public Partner Award at the President’s Awards & Hall of Fame Dinner. Also pictured (from left): Fran Reiner (DMR Architects); City Manager David Troast; Councilman David Sims; Mayor Labrosse; Deputy Mayor Kathleen Canestrino; NAIOP NJ Past President Michael Seeve (Mountain Development); and NAIOP NJ President Clark Machemer (The Rockefeller Group). Projects involved in the efforts included Alcova Companies at 150 Main Street, Heritage Capital at 210 Main Street, and Meridia Metro at 240 Main Street.

In the words of Nobel Prize-winning playwright George Bernard Shaw, “progress is impossible without change.” New Jersey’s most enterprising municipal leaders are embracing change not simply as a necessity for moving forward, but rather as a tool to propel their communities into a bright future. And their achievements are being celebrated.

NAIOP NJ, the commercial real estate development association, recently presented its Public Partner Awards to the City of Hackensack and the Borough of Florham Park, recognizing their economic development successes stemming from innovative land use planning.

We have seen many towns struggle with lost ratables and high office vacancy rates due to the migration of businesses toward urban centers or the loss of major corporate tenants. Today, a new story is emerging: Communities are expanding local economies by rethinking approaches to attracting and maintaining jobs, and enhancing quality of life.

The most forward-thinking municipalities are rezoning and creating live-work-play environments where Millennials and Generation Z can afford and want to live. Employers chase talent. These towns get it: they are taking the initiative to

**Hackensack: Downtown Revitalization** The City of Hackensack Rehabilitation Plan for the Main Street Area was adopted in June 2012 with the goal of transforming the downtown into a walkable, livable, and sustainable urban environment, while enhancing existing assets.

Encompassing 163 acres on 39 city blocks and 389 individual properties, the plan provides opportunities for new mixed-use development, including retail, restaurants, offices, commercial spaces, civic areas, and entertainment options, as well as diverse housing.

“Because Hackensack is an urban municipality with little open space, infill redevelopment is our only logical path for progress,” noted Mayor John P. Labrosse, Jr. “Trends show that members of the younger generation want to live where they can walk out their doors for shopping, dining, and entertainment. We are eager to accommodate that.”

The Plan’s objective is to create a series of interconnected neighborhoods with improved infrastructure, parks, plazas, and open spaces that tie into two existing NJ Transit Rail Stations and the NJ Transit Regional Bus Station. The result will balance vehicular, pedestrian, and mass transit options to promote connectivity and minimize traffic.

Through a collaborative process, the city and the Upper Main Street Alliance, a Special Improvement District, developed the plan in a way that will preserve the history of the city while implementing cutting-edge redevelopment strategies. The plan changes zoning for the downtown area and provides a vision
for revitalization through increased development flexibility and density that promotes the permitted uses throughout the downtown area.

Hackensack has invested its own resources to encourage development. Early in the process, the city conducted a Developers Symposium with over 100 local, regional, and national developers. Steering Committee meetings, public workshops and meetings, and the creation of a project website provided for continual input to and from the public.

“We have focused a lot of effort on making it easy for real estate companies to get involved here,” Labrosse said. “With the Rehabilitation Plan, zoning is already in place. We also instituted a pre-application methodology, where interested parties can meet informally with local officials to present their ideas. That way projects are already vetted before they launch into the formal process.”

The city continues to meet weekly with interested property owners and real estate professionals to discuss potential projects and opportunities and identify potential underlying issues to be addressed. “It has been a pleasure to work through the system of redevelopment in Hackensack,” Labrosse noted. “It has been a true partnership.”

Today, Hackensack has at least six major projects in the works, three of which have shovels in the ground. “Five years from now, I fully expect to see Hackensack recapture its former grandeur—but in a different form,” Labrosse concluded. “We have a beautiful, one-mile stretch of downtown that will welcome 1,500 to 2,000 residents in multi-family properties with ground-level retail and dining; and serve as home to a thriving arts district highlighted by our new cultural center. The pieces are all coming together.”

**FLORHAM PARK: CAMPUS TRANSFORMATION** NAIOP NJ also honored the Borough of Florham Park for its efforts resulting in The Green at Florham Park becoming one of New Jersey’s most prestigious and successful mixed-use developments. Upon the announcement that ExxonMobil was closing its local operations in 2002, the borough undertook a rezoning of the 268 acres from single-tenant use to provide multiple, mixed options, including residential, hotel, office, and medical.

“It is incumbent upon towns impacted by large vacancies to rethink and redevelop these sites for new uses,” said Florham Park Mayor Mark Taylor. “In our case, we were not looking to increase the 830,000-square-foot building envelope that Exxon left, but rather redevelop it into the multiple and diverse envelopes that businesses of today want to occupy and be near.”

This was the first step in what would become a successful partnership between Florham Park and the property’s owner/redeveloper—a partnership of
The Rockefeller Group and The Gale Company. “Rockefeller Group and Gale came to the table looking to collaborate,” Taylor said. “Our team—from local officials to traffic experts and emergency respondents—and theirs shared a common goal from the outset: to do the very best things we could do for this property, and for the economies of Florham Park and Morris County.”

The New York Jets moved its headquarters and training facility from Hempstead, N.Y., to The Green, and BASF consolidated its operations and moved there. In 2015, Summit Medical opened a new facility there, bringing a needed amenity to Morris County, while The Rockefeller Group and Korman Communities broke ground on the AVE corporate suites. In 2016, Archer Hotel will break ground at The Green.

“These buildings are coming in and bringing employment with them,” Taylor said. “That’s a big key, especially in this area where residential properties are so expensive. It has changed the face our town and is helping to keep our economy moving forward on both the residential side and the commercial side.”

The borough has also benefited from other real estate partnerships. KBS’s Park Avenue at Morris County has attracted law firms, pharmaceutical companies, and financial advisors. Bergman Realty Corporation, which recently purchased Florham Park Corporate Center, is closing in on a securing a large single tenant for the former AT&T property.

Florham Park’s focus on commercial real estate has enabled the replacement of vacating tenants with new ones, strengthened its economy and contributed to its selection by NJ Monthly as the Number-One place to live in the State of New Jersey. “This further emphasizes the fact that we have done and continue to do the right thing to strengthen our town and to keep our employment growing here,” Taylor concluded.

NAIOP NJ: ENGAGING PARTNERSHIP

Hackensack and Florham Park have set benchmarks for working collaboratively with community and business leaders to support responsible development and economic growth. Their willingness to be flexible, determination to drive new business and ability to gauge market conditions provided the ultimate keys to success.

NAIOP NJ is committed to fostering productive relationships with community leaders as they partner with developers to address local challenges and attract jobs and ratables. We are working hard to engage local officials and recognize those who are taking bold steps to enhance economic development. Our Public Partner award speaks to that.

@NAIOP NJ invites local officials to attend its annual Public Policy Symposium in March and to visit the Local Officials Resources page at naiopnj.org.