

Mayor's Article on Redevelopment as published in the New Jersey Conference of Mayor's Magazine

Growing up in a small town really awakens your sense of community. I am fortunate enough to have been born and raised in my hometown of Neptune City and I am extremely proud of my community. Often, it is said that people who are born and raised in Neptune City, ultimately buy a home here and raise their families here. As a lifelong resident I have seen many changes in the community and these changes have been quite positive. As a resident I have the opportunity to identify areas in need of change and as Mayor I have the opportunity to initiate change.

There is an area of town that was especially in need of change, and our governing body determined that a section of town was an Area in Need of Redevelopment and eventually became a Redevelopment Area. The Redevelopment Area was located in the eastern portion of town and it consists of an area that contains properties that are inconsistent and incompatible with each other; Commercial and Industrial properties are scattered within a Residential neighborhood. The Redevelopment process was not a quick process for the town, but the Borough was fortunate in receiving a \$60,000 Smart Growth grant which offset many of the costs associated with redevelopment including developing an Assessment and the Redevelopment Plan. After approximately five years, Developers were selected and contracts were signed; there was one lawsuit pending, but it was determined that it would be beneficial to remove this property from the area if it became necessary. As the area became very close to improvement, the lawsuit went from pending to decided, and not in favor of the town. The court invalidated the entire Redevelopment Area. The standards and the criteria had changed and become more stringent since the endeavor began, and the court did not feel that the evidence was strong enough to support a Redevelopment Area.

Obviously, this was an unexpected and unforeseen decision and it was a major disappointment. There were properties in the former Redevelopment Area that were desperately in need of rehabilitation or demolition. One particular property of concern in the area is a large ice house that was known to be one of the largest ice houses on the east coast in its day. As times changed, the large brick and concrete building became abandoned; the owner shut the door and left one day and this property has remained this way for the past seventeen (17) years. Each day this property brought a new concern, the roof was falling in, the brick and concrete were crumbling. Taxes were uncollected and the property acquired a third party lien and in 1996 the lien holder discontinued paying the taxes when the Department of Environmental Protection and the Health Department cleaned up the property and removed various chemicals that were left behind. The property at this point acquired a Municipal Tax Lien. The idea of Redevelopment pleased a lot of the residents and business owners in this area, because the building was unsightly and perhaps hazardous.

In preparation for the proposed Redevelopment, the Borough began to lay the groundwork to make this former ice house property desirable to a Developer. In conjunction with PMK Engineering, the Borough obtained a \$5000.00 grant from the DEP's Hazardous Site Remediation Fund and a Preliminary Assessment Report was prepared. The report identified areas of concern on the former ice house and a site investigation was conducted. A \$66,380 grant was obtained in order to make this investigation possible. Based on this investigation, some ground water and soil impacts were found and a \$53,000 grant was approved by the Department of Environmental Protection to do a remedial investigation. As these studies were occurring, it became apparent that the conditions of the building made certain areas of the property inaccessible and unsafe and that the demolition of the building had to be considered in order for additional studies and remediation to take place. Our local Building Official also condemned the property and found it to be an Imminent Hazard. I petitioned the State of New Jersey DEP Hazardous Site Remediation Fund and successfully applied for and received a \$519,000.00 grant award for the demolition of this building. Thankfully, the agency has been extremely cognizant of the concerns that properties like this can cause. Without these types of funding, a municipality must continue to put projects on the backburner and allow abandoned properties to litter their towns. Although, the municipality does not own the property and it has been abandoned for quite a long time, the Municipal Tax Liens showed the large interest the Borough has in the property. Happily, the building has since been demolished and the residents are very pleased.

This property is one small parcel in the former Redevelopment Area but through persistence, the dilapidated and unsafe building that once stood on the lot is gone. Remediation and investigation are planned and the property is currently located in the Borough's new proposed Redevelopment Area. It is important to remember to not give up on a vision and I look forward to instituting change in an area that needs it.