

# **Civic Engagement in Camden, New Jersey**

## **A Baseline Portrait**

**The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project**

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## Preface

Perhaps more than most cities, Camden, New Jersey, has suffered from the declining fortunes of urban centers in the United States in the past half-century. The steady exodus of middle-income residents and businesses that started in the postwar years has left the city with concentrated poverty, falling property values, a dwindling tax base, and inadequate resources to cover the city's basic costs and services. Recently, however, Camden has been at the center of private and public redevelopment activities and reforms that seek to transform the city's landscape, create local and regional housing and employment opportunities for its residents, and position Camden to be an important participant in the region's economic development activities. In addition to millions of dollars in private investment in the waterfront area, the State of New Jersey has appointed a receivership executive over Camden who has been charged with reorganizing the municipal government and allocating millions of dollars in state aid to underwrite infrastructure improvements and other development projects.

The enormity of problems faced by Camden suggests the need for work on many levels, both within the city and within the region of which it is an interdependent part. The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project, a Ford Foundation-funded initiative that encourages closely coordinated local and suburban redevelopment strategies so that opportunity is more equitably distributed in South Jersey, offers an opportunity to examine the assumptions, contending visions, and implementation challenges at the center of a growing debate on rebuilding urban cores.

MDRC, in partnership with the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University, is conducting a multiyear study of the origins, implementation, achievements, and challenges of redevelopment strategies, some of which are unfolding in the city of Camden and others evolving in the suburbs of South Jersey. This report from the project, written by our partners at Rutgers University, focuses on the city of Camden and takes a look at the difficult challenge of fostering meaningful and effective civic engagement in a complex, state-mandated redevelopment initiative. It describes how the redevelopment initiative has been stymied by a legacy of municipal mismanagement, a resulting mistrust of officials by residents, conflict among the various players in the city, and the political pressure of a very short timeline for redevelopment. At the same time, Camden and its citizens can point to a few examples of positive civic engagement in the revitalization process, which may offer a framework for future progress.

For the broader field of urban development, Camden's experiences illustrate why effective civic engagement should be an important component of revitalization plans, and how ineffective or insufficient civic engagement can undermine even the best-intentioned redevelopment effort. Given the current state of debate over eminent domain, this report documents the controversy that can arise over its use and the political limbo that results when projects become the subject of lawsuits. In Camden, the tensions inherent in any redevelopment effort have been magnified by the State of New Jersey's takeover of government activity, a process that, however necessary, ef-

fectively disenfranchised local citizens. Without elected representation, citizen involvement in decision-making takes on added urgency. This report underscores both the importance and the challenges of citizen engagement in the redevelopment process, engagement that may be critical to ensuring the legitimacy of redevelopment decisions.

The report also documents how conflict around the scale of intervention remains a vital theme for urban planning and development. During the period described in the report, civic engagement dynamics in Camden have sometimes set locally-based, community development goals against City officials' visions of larger-scale redevelopment. Despite some efforts to engage the community by the City, such differences proved impossible to overcome because many citizens felt they weren't being heard in the decision-making process. At the time of publication, events in Camden highlight how difficult it remains to accomplish initiatives of large magnitude. The court-ordered stoppage of the three main redevelopment projects in Camden as a result of citizen-initiated lawsuits, as well as the resignations of the two top officials overseeing the initiative, underscore the challenges that continue to plague the redevelopment effort and the uncertainty that characterizes revitalization in cities like Camden. The Camden Redevelopment Agency and community residents have recently embarked on re-planning in targeted neighborhoods with these challenges in mind.

We hope that the lessons about civic engagement and municipal capacity described in this report will prove useful to the newly appointed leaders of the Camden Redevelopment Agency as they move forward. As the authors conclude, the issue is not *whether* civic engagement is necessary or possible, but rather how, when, and under what terms it occurs. Future reports on Camden from MDRC will revisit issues of citizen involvement as well as tackle broader issues concerning the revitalization effort, including efforts to fit Camden into a regional redevelopment strategy.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President

## Acknowledgments

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Robert Lake and Kathe Newman



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

After 50 years of continuous and accelerating job loss, population flight, property-market decline, plummeting municipal revenues, and civic collapse, Camden has embarked on a land-redevelopment process of unprecedented proportions, initiated by a state takeover of the city's municipal functions in 2002. Ambitious plans are under way or in the pipeline for office and waterfront development, commercial revitalization, market-rate and affordable housing, golf courses and entertainment complexes — developments that, if implemented, will radically alter both the landscape and the population of Camden. Underlying this multibillion-dollar effort is the hope and expectation that physical redevelopment will transform Camden into a viable city that is attractive to middle-class residents, economically and fiscally self-sustaining, and free of its dependence on the state revenue transfers that currently are needed to overcome the city's long-running structural deficit.

More than 80,000 people currently call the city their home. Whether from choice or necessity, these residents have remained in Camden during the city's bleakest period, when jobs were scarce and city services were sporadic at best. Now, at least some believe that they should benefit from the anticipated turnaround and that they should play a role in decisions that are setting the course for Camden's future.

Despite such expectations, the state's takeover of Camden — which the *New York Times* predicted would be “the biggest city takeover since the Great Depression” (Peterson, 2000) — created a situation that was not conducive to civic engagement and represented a serious diminution of citizen control over municipal governance. The takeover signaled the need for a streamlined and efficient government that placed a premium on action rather than deliberation. Indeed, many citizens of Camden supported the takeover, frustrated by the long history of municipal mismanagement and fiscal crisis and believing that they would be better served by a new system. As discussed below, the terms of the takeover legislation — including the short, five-year timeline and little formal role for citizen participation — provided little incentive for municipal leaders to fully engage the community.

Now, well into the takeover period, many residents — new immigrants and long-term residents alike — express the fear that there will be no place for them in the Camden depicted in the project descriptions and artists' renderings of proposed redevelopment. Expectations of displacement are widespread in many neighborhoods, stoked in part by public statements by local officials asserting a priority for market-rate housing that is attractive to the middle class. Some longtime residents remember previous rounds of urban renewal that failed to deliver on their

promise, destroyed neighborhoods, imposed noxious facilities on residential areas, and left vast sections of the city uninhabited.

Such experiences — coupled with the chronic inadequacy of basic municipal services and a history of mismanagement and corruption — have produced a legacy of distrust of government that overshadows current redevelopment efforts. Residents look to redevelopment with a combination of anticipation for better days and apprehension over dislocation and displacement, the uprooting of community ties, and uncertainty about the future. The question “Whose Camden?” underlies debates over the purpose, form, and process of redevelopment.

At the same time, public officials who are charged with overseeing Camden’s redevelopment process are caught between two powerful and contradictory pressures. On the one hand, the brief five-year time window envisioned in the state takeover statute placed a premium on moving redevelopment forward quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, the ability to move forward depends on public support, and organized public opposition has the potential to delay or derail the process as it has been pursued to date by public officials. Camden’s existing population constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity for the city’s massive redevelopment effort now under way. The challenge is that the broad range of perspectives and interests of existing residents may conflict with redevelopment priorities currently proposed by city officials and developers. The opportunity is that the existing population represents a source of knowledge, energy, and commitment that can be tapped to further the goal of Camden’s revitalization.

Focusing on events unfolding during calendar years 2005 and 2006, this report examines the following questions:

1. What are the mechanisms for community participation in Camden’s redevelopment?
2. How have city officials, residents, and other stakeholders engaged in planning and implementing Camden’s redevelopment?
3. How do various constituencies assess the opportunities for engagement that have been available in the city’s redevelopment process to date?

## **What Is Civic Engagement and Why Study It Now?**

For purposes of this report, the term “civic engagement” refers to participation by Camden residents in planning, deliberation, and decision-making with respect to ongoing processes of urban redevelopment in the city of Camden. Civic engagement can take many forms, including information dissemination, community visioning exercises, preference surveys, and varieties of participation in decision-making, among others. Engagement may be pursued directly —

through electoral participation, protest, or litigation, for example — or indirectly through the mediating activities of advocacy or community-based organizations.

The case for analysis of civic engagement in Camden’s redevelopment rests on three basic premises. First, in the context of the state’s takeover of Camden’s municipal government in 2002 under the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA; discussed below), the usual mechanisms of electoral oversight are not available to city residents. It is particularly important under these circumstances that those in positions of authority direct careful attention to civic engagement as a mechanism to help ensure the legitimacy of decisions (Young, 2000).

Second, the scale and scope of Camden’s proposed redevelopment and its widespread effects on existing residents have made it inevitable that residents will become involved — one way or another — in decisions for which they believe their homes, their neighborhoods, and (in some cases) their lives are at stake. The question is not *whether* residents will seek engagement but rather how, under what terms, and with what effect.

Third, civic engagement provides a means to apply the wealth of local knowledge to the process of redevelopment (Fisher and Kling, 1993; Healey, 2006; Williamson, Imbroscio, and Apperovitz, 2002). Through civic engagement, decisions regarding both the process and the form of redevelopment can be informed by local needs. Local resources of human, social, and institutional capital can be brought to bear in the neighborhood revitalization process. Residents’ experiences with previous failed policy interventions can identify past mistakes to be avoided. While informing redevelopment in all these ways, the practice of civic engagement, in turn, strengthens institutions and builds neighborhood vitality (Mansbridge, 2006; Skocpol, 2003; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999; Van Til, 2000).

This is a particularly salient moment for consideration of civic engagement in Camden. As headlined in the *Courier-Post*, a “Dramatic Era of Rebirth Energizes Hope-Filled City” (*CP*, April 25, 2004; quoted in Gillette, 2005, p. xiii).<sup>1</sup> The state’s MRERA legislation in 2002 provided both an institutional structure and the fiscal resources to prime the city’s redevelopment but also established an exceedingly brief timeline within which ambitious plans are to be implemented. An unprecedented scale of private and foundation resources has been earmarked for Camden’s recovery. Given these circumstances, civic engagement represents a critical element of successful redevelopment.

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout, “CP” refers to *Courier-Post*, and “PI” refers to *Philadelphia Inquirer*; see newspaper articles listed after the References.

## **Historical Framework: Government- and Citizen-Sponsored Participation**

The current understanding of civic engagement and public participation is informed largely by the experiences of the 1960s urban social movements in U.S. cities struggling against the onslaught of urban renewal, for local control of schools and antipoverty programs, and for an expanded voice in municipal affairs. By destroying many urban neighborhoods and displacing large numbers of the poor without any consultation with residents, 1960s-style urban renewal constituted what Piven and Cloward characterized as one of those “extraordinary disturbances in the larger society [that] are required to transform the poor...from quiescence to indignation” (1977: 14). Over time, inner-city populations became mobilized in opposition, and urban renewal, along with subsequent demands for community control, may be credited primarily with entrenching the politics of protest in the larger politics of urban change.

While sharing many of these characteristics of urban renewal, particularly in the scope of clearance and scale of interventions proposed in some parts of the city, the structural context for Camden today is in many ways different. Since the 1970s, new regulatory, political, and legal hurdles to large-scale development have been put into place, sometimes with the result that opponents have greater leverage to challenge large projects. And Camden’s current fiscal and political capacities greatly differ from many cities known for enacting renewal during the earlier periods. However, influencing the context for Camden’s redevelopment, the experiences of past urban renewal sparked interest within urban planning processes to involve residents to a greater extent — even though the nature and form of that involvement often differed. Over time, engagement has taken many forms, including (among others) information dissemination, community visioning exercises, attitude and preference assessment, and varieties of participation in decision-making. It has been pursued by different actors, including direct engagement by individual residents and indirect engagement through organizations. And it has served different functions, from legitimating government for citizens, to integrating citizens into decision-making, to diminishing potential or actual political conflict (see Table 1.1).

In describing civic engagement around redevelopment, one important distinction is between government-initiated and citizen-initiated forms and forums of participation. In the government-initiated category, Langton (1978) identifies such activities as public hearings, advisory committee formation, and public information surveys, and notes the dominant presence of the administering government agency in structuring and implementing such activities. Participatory activities mandated by legislative statute (for example, public hearings) fall into this category, and implementation of these mandates is typically left to agency discretion. What can be said about government-initiated engagement is that public participation as stipulated in government programs usually constitutes a highly circumscribed sphere of activity, limited to certain

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**Table 1.1**

**The Functions of Civic Engagement**

<b>Actions That Support or Maintain the Status Quo</b>	<b>Actions That Influence or Change the Status Quo</b>
<b><u>Legitimation — Civic engagement as a means of legitimating government for citizens, by:</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establishing credibility of government</li> <li>• mobilizing consent for government policy</li> <li>• developing the public’s support for government</li> <li>• manipulating public opinion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• forcing accountability on the part of government</li> <li>• monitoring and reforming government institutions</li> <li>• redistributing power and authority</li> </ul>
<b><u>Integration — Civic engagement as a means of integrating citizens into decision-making, by:</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• incorporating citizens into the existing political and social structure</li> <li>• socializing and educating citizens to system values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• expanding decision-making processes to include those affected</li> <li>• protecting minority interests and marginalized or underrepresented groups</li> </ul>
<b><u>Conflict avoidance — Civic engagement as a means of diminishing political conflict, by:</u></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• channeling conflict onto less salient issues or into nonconfrontational modes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• responding to conflict by meeting protest demands, whether substantive or procedural</li> </ul>

powers (such as review, public comment, or acclamation) with regard to a preselected issue within an already-designated procedure.

Citizen-initiated activity or citizen action, on the other hand, can take any of a variety of organized or spontaneous forms. Citizen action may entail activities of individuals, as in contacting a local representative or public official, or the actions of groups and associations ranging from grassroots organizations and block associations to national coalitions. Modes of operation vary from cooperation within government-designated programs and procedures through public mobilization, litigation, and protest.

In actual application, the distinction between citizen- and government-initiated participation is far from clear-cut. Rather than constituting discrete categories, of greater significance is their complex interaction and interrelationships. Government-initiated procedures (and their shortcomings), for example, may themselves be the catalyst for citizen protest. From the other

direction, citizen-initiated action often exploits openings provided by government-established mechanisms, such as public hearings and mandated representation on advisory boards. The influence exerted by citizen groups, as Gittell observed, “can be in partnership with government, supportive of it; or it can be an alternative..., opposing the government, questioning policies and/or preventing action” (1980: 20). Government-sponsored participation procedures, on the other hand, can be responsive to citizen demands or can seek to co-opt or undermine them. Government can invite and facilitate inclusion of citizen groups, attempt to silence or subvert them, or constitute the impetus for their formation.

The distinction between citizen-initiated and government-initiated forms of participation affirms that the impulse for engagement can originate from both directions. At issue in the establishment of civic engagement is less whether government- or citizen-initiated forms predominate but rather how these interact in practice in specific situations. Overt political conflict tends to focus less on the establishment of explicit categories of citizen- or government-initiated practices but, more significantly, arises at their interface, where conflict surfaces in the process of establishing the objectives of participation and specifying the roles of various constituents within the decision-making process.

## The Scope of This Report

This report provides a baseline portrait of civic engagement in Camden during 2005 and early 2006, the first phase of the five-year redevelopment period established by the state legislature. As already noted, the dynamics of engagement can vary widely, depending on its purpose, form, and timing within the redevelopment process. A baseline understanding of today’s landscape of civic engagement is useful in its own right, provides an opportunity for midcourse correction, and establishes a foundation for understanding future developments.

As a cross-sectional view, the picture presented here applies to a specific point in time, and the subsequent unfolding of the city’s continuing redevelopment will no doubt alter this picture over time. Later analyses will identify and assess the nature of these changes. Those subsequent changes will be motivated by new and yet-unanticipated circumstances, but they will also, in part, be responses and reactions to current conditions. At this report’s publication in 2007, the first round of proposed redevelopment projects has stalled, with the three main projects stopped by court order and the top leaders having recently resigned.

Following this Introduction, the discussion proceeds through five additional chapters:

- **Chapter 2** summarizes the context of redevelopment in terms of two principal elements that pose significant challenges to the practice of civic engagement: the long-running structural deficit and the city’s political culture.

- **Chapter 3** examines the role of government in engaging Camden residents in the city's redevelopment. The chapter focuses primarily on state legislative enactments and actions of the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) that establish the purpose, scope, and process of government-initiated civic engagement in Camden.
- **Chapter 4** presents an overview of resident-initiated civic engagement. It discusses the variety of community-based organizations and their activities, and it describes the uses of protest, negotiation, and litigation as strategies of engagement.
- **Chapter 5** presents two redevelopment case studies that illustrate how the dynamics of civic engagement have played out to date in two Camden neighborhoods: Cramer Hill and Lanning Square. The case studies illustrate the fluid, complex, and shifting interplay of citizen and government actions that constitute the landscape of civic engagement and that, in turn, define the practice of redevelopment in Camden.
- **Chapter 6** presents concluding observations and identifies directions for continuing research.

Information for this report was obtained from multiple sources. (See the Appendix for a discussion of the project's methodology.) These include extensive interviews with representatives of nonprofit community organizations, analysis of newspaper and other published accounts for the period, review of relevant legislative and judicial enactments, interviews with selected city officials, and attendance at meetings of public bodies and community organizations during the study period. Quotations from interviews and public statements are used in this report to illustrate or exemplify a larger point or observation. In all cases, observations and conclusions are not based solely on the illustrative quotation but reflect views that were expressed by numerous respondents or articulated in a variety of information sources. The triangulation of information sources guards against reporting nonrepresentative findings or idiosyncratic conclusions. However, the question of representativeness is ever present, and interpretations of meaning and/or intent are always subject to alternative readings. A future update of this report will document ongoing developments but will also revisit initial conclusions to determine whether the analysis presented here should change in light of new information.



## Chapter 2

# The Context of Civic Engagement in Camden

Camden's redevelopment is situated in a larger economic and political context that poses severe challenges to expanding the scope of civic engagement. The following discussion examines two elements — the city's persistent structural deficit and a political culture derived from longstanding government actions — that complicate attempts to forge a constructive partnership between government and residents in Camden. These elements work from opposite directions to limit the expansion of civic engagement: The structural deficit constrains the latitude of government, while Camden's political culture serves to undermine public trust.

### Structural Deficit

Camden's intractable structural deficit — the inability to collect sufficient revenues to cover the cost of municipal operations — constitutes a formidable barrier to robust civic engagement. At more than \$35 million annually, the deficit has grown to dominate the political agenda and to occupy a preeminent position in the debate over Camden's redevelopment strategy. The tenacity of the fiscal problem has greatly magnified the pressure for large-scale, market-rate development designed to increase the tax base and augment municipal revenues. Conversely, neighborhood advocacy groups are easily challenged on the grounds that smaller projects responding to neighborhood needs for affordable housing do not adequately address the city's fiscal deficit. The overall effect is to characterize neighborhood-based, small-scale development as inadequate to the task.

The structural deficit built up over many years. For much of the past two decades, Camden has met its annual financial obligations by relying on state aid in the form of Supplemental Municipal Property Tax Relief Aid (SMPTRA). State aid payments during the 1990s increased at a rate of 8.7 percent a year, reaching \$35.5 million by the time of the state takeover in 2002 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001: 14).<sup>2</sup> Because SMPTRA payments are allocated at the end of the fiscal year, Camden does not know how much aid it will receive, and, for the past three years, the city's budgets have not been approved until the last day of the fiscal year — proposing a budget after the money has been spent.

This dire financial situation reflects a long period of deindustrialization, private sector disinvestment, declining tax collections, growing municipal expenditures, mounting tax rates,

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<sup>2</sup>As discussed in Chapter 3, the New Jersey legislature moved to establish state oversight of Camden's municipal operations under the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA) of 2002.

and falling tax revenues. The economic fate of Camden is not much different than that of many other American industrial cities, except perhaps in degree. In 1917, Camden was home to 365 industrial establishments employing 51,000 workers (Cowie, 1999). The Great Depression in the 1930s caused stagnation in Camden as elsewhere. During that decade, RCA began a long and divisive battle with union organizers that led eventually to its abandonment of Camden in search of cheaper, nonunion labor (Gillette, 2003). Job loss was widespread in the years following World War II:

Meanwhile, it was not just RCA that was in decline; nearly every major industry in Camden had shut down or relocated by the late postwar period. In the 1950s, Highland Mills, Armstrong Cork, Howland Croft, Allied Kid, Quaker Shipyard, and the C. Howard Hunt Pen Company had all abandoned or announced plans to relocate out of the city. The New York Shipyard permanently shut down in 1967, partly as a result of “labor-management bitterness” and, between automation and a new plant in California, Local 80-A of the Packinghouse Workers at Campbell Soup lost 1,500 members between 1957 and 1962. (Cowie, 1999: 38-39)

Camden lost 157,000 jobs between 1950 and 2001 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001). The city’s population peaked at 124,555 in 1950 and has been in decline ever since (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census).

The massive private disinvestment had a direct effect on Camden’s municipal tax revenues. In 1962, Mayor Al Pierce proposed a massive urban renewal project, including an air-conditioned downtown shopping mall, in a failed attempt to retain the tax base and protect revenues. After lowering tax rates in his first two years in office, Pierce was forced to sell the municipal radio station and raised the tax rate to well above the rate of his predecessor (Gillette, 2003: 144). Raising tax rates for Camden’s dwindling population became a requirement for each of the city’s successive mayors at least once in their tenure. Mayor Joseph Nardi endured the loss of most of the city’s major retailers to the suburbs. Nardi’s successor, Angelo Errichetti, was forced to accept a municipal waste treatment plant in return for \$11.5 million over four years (Gillette, 2005). Camden’s mayor throughout the 1980s, Melvin “Randy” Primas, inherited a city lacking both financial and political capital. In 1981, to cover a \$13 million structural deficit, the state required Primas to raise taxes 88 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001: 15). Even this was not sufficient to ensure solvency, and Primas later accepted the state’s offer of \$3.4 million for prime waterfront land on which to construct a state prison. A report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation notes that some decisions by the state to “optimize their finances and operations often came at Camden’s expense” (2001: 14).

The extent of concern in some quarters about the resulting structural deficit tends to limit the debate to a single option. Some proponents of large-scale clearance and redevelopment

claim that these methods are essential to achieve fiscal solvency, and, in this climate, small-scale redevelopment strategies are discredited as being less able to contribute to deficit reduction. The apparent intractability of the structural deficit forces all proposals to be evaluated primarily on their effect on the deficit and undermines incentives to search for compromise solutions that contribute to the tax base while minimizing neighborhood dislocation.

## **Camden's Political Culture**

Decades of experience with failed urban renewal, municipal mismanagement, and official corruption have left a legacy of distrust of government that dominates Camden's political culture. Residents distrust city government, elected officials, and often one another, creating suspicion of City Hall and a tendency for neighborhoods to view each other as competitors for scarce municipal resources rather than collaborators with a common purpose. The pervasive atmosphere of distrust creates a barrier to expanded civic engagement.

Residents recite statistics and experiences on the failure of government to perform such basic functions as trash collection, street lighting, street cleaning, and policing. In the vacuum left by public inaction, some neighborhood and block associations have formed around the volunteer provision of basic services. Influential community advocacy groups supported the state takeover of Camden's municipal functions with the expectation that it would bring much-needed improvements in municipal functioning, despite the loss of democratic accountability. Now, in retrospect, some residents see a connection between the state takeover, the erosion of democratic process within the city, and the threat of displacement associated with redevelopment. As one resident observed:

The big thing the last four years has been: "You've taken my right to vote; now you want to take my house." There's this psychological thing going on in the city where people are saying, "Why should I vote? Why should I care, since you've taken my vote? Now my house! What more do you want? What's next?" (Interview, neighborhood resident, 2005)

Some longtime residents find it difficult to overlook experiences with past urban renewal initiatives that scarred their neighborhoods with acres of vacant land and dwindling populations instead of the promised revitalization. In the 1960s, 1,700 families lost their homes to urban renewal, but nothing was built on the cleared land (Kirp, Dwyer, and Rosenthal, 1995: 29). Construction of Interstate 676 demolished nearly 2,000 housing units (Catlin 1999; Gillette, 2005). Some residents wonder how the current redevelopment process will differ from their past experiences, since, in some cases, the same public officials are still in office (Interview, neighborhood resident, 2005).

Personal experiences with past redevelopment efforts and with City Hall are so painful that it may be difficult for any institution or organization to build trust in some neighborhoods. A community leader described the situation in one neighborhood in stark terms:

I'm saying these three residents you see here are in such a state of mistrust that it would have to be Jesus Christ himself saying this will work. That's how much they have been abused and told lies to. And that's the issue. You've been lied to. (Interview, community leader, 2005)

The public's perception of a lack of truthfulness on the part of city officials is frequently repeated in interviews, media reports, and in public statements. A resident involved in the Lanning Square redevelopment process used a June 2005 Town Hall meeting on "Responsible Relocation" to publicly express his feelings:

I don't feel that the residents in my community have been respected. . . . It seems like we've been lied to. . . . We were working on a redevelopment plan in our neighborhood, and after we submitted our redevelopment plan, the city said, "We're gonna take 200 of your houses." We're very disbelieving of the city. Eminent domain means the city has the power to take your land for what they want. They say it's for redevelopment, but we know for a fact that, around Camden, they say they are going to do things and it's still vacant, and they're pushing you out for whoever they're going to put in.

In sum, Camden's continuing financial insolvency and a political culture of public distrust pose significant barriers to the expansion of civic engagement. Expanding the scope of civic engagement in this context will require exceptional methods to overcome the legacy of distrust.

## Chapter 3

# **Government-Initiated Civic Engagement: State and City Efforts to Engage Residents in Camden’s Redevelopment**

To have an honest discussion, we have to set the context of the city. There are enormous challenges. The private sector all but abandoned the city. There are great institutions, but they are nonprofit institutions. Poor people, institutions, don’t have all the resources the private sector has. . . . And there’s a new piece of legislation with a new governance structure, and it creates the position I now hold and a timeline of five years to try to get things done. It’s an enormous challenge to try to put this all together. (Melvin “Randy” Primas, Responsible Relocation Workshop, Camden, May 11, 2005)

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To understand the dynamics of civic engagement in Camden, it helps to consider the broader context that shapes the city’s story. Initiatives and actions at the municipal level are pursued within the framework of possibilities established by state policy and legislation. State laws, in turn, reflect larger political dynamics and long-standing economic trends. This chapter examines government-initiated forms of civic engagement in Camden within this larger context. It reviews two key state statutes governing the process of urban redevelopment in New Jersey and, specifically, in the city of Camden; examines municipal initiatives to engage residents in Camden’s redevelopment process; and considers some of the challenges to government-initiated engagement that are posed by broader economic and political contexts.

## **Statutory/Legal Requirements**

Two principal state statutes delineate the urban redevelopment process in New Jersey and the city of Camden. The Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA) of 2002 established comprehensive state oversight and control of Camden’s municipal functions, including urban redevelopment. The Local Housing and Redevelopment Law (LHRL) of 1992 established urban redevelopment procedures for all New Jersey municipalities, including Camden. These statutes contain minimal provisions for public participation and engagement, and they assign considerable power and authority to public officials charged with overseeing the local redevelopment process.

## **The Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act of 2002 (MRERA)**

Camden's long history of economic decline, municipal mismanagement, and fiscal crisis prompted numerous attempts by the State of New Jersey to rationalize the city's municipal government. These attempts date at least to the 1990s and accelerated under the administration of Governor Christine Todd Whitman (Gillette, 2005). Following decades of economic and political turmoil, during which the state was required to provide annual stopgap payments to balance the city's budget, the New Jersey legislature moved in 2002 to establish state oversight of Camden's municipal operations. The new law, the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act, is often referred to as the "state takeover" or "state receivership." MRERA imposed a five-year exception in the structure of Camden's municipal governance, in which the budgetary and redevelopment powers of local elected officials are subordinated to a state-appointed chief operating officer.

Among MRERA's principal provisions are

- The appointment of a chief operating officer (COO) and the specification of that officer's qualifications, responsibilities, term of office, and relationship to municipal elected officials, including the mayor and City Council
- The five-year term of the law, allowing for possible extension if "the chief operating officer anticipates that the rehabilitation term will be insufficient to achieve rehabilitation goals" (C.52.27.BBB-8)
- Appointment of an arbitrator to settle disputes between the COO and other municipal officials "or any other impasse resulting from any action or failure to act on the part of the mayor, the governing body or any other officer or appointee of the municipality" (C.52.27BBB-5)
- Reformation of an Economic Recovery Board (ERB) with authority to distribute a \$175 million state fund for the purpose of facilitating Camden's redevelopment<sup>3</sup>
- Designation of the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) with authority to oversee the process of urban and neighborhood redevelopment in Camden
- Allowing the use of eminent domain, provided that "the authority in connection with any project shall not take by exercise of the power of eminent do-

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<sup>3</sup>The ERB had existed in Camden in the late 1980s but had ceased to function until it was reformulated under MRERA.

main any real property except upon consent thereto given by resolution of the governing body of the municipality in which such real property is located” (C.52.27BBB-19)

MRERA provides little in the way of a formal community or public role in the redevelopment process. The act’s specific provisions for civic participation are limited and advisory in nature, consistent with the centralization of decision-making authority in the state-appointed COO and the emphasis on speed and efficiency exemplified in the five-year time frame for completing the city’s “rehabilitation.” The principal institutional structures of civic engagement contained in the act include the appointment of “public” members to the ERB and the establishment of the Community Advisory Committee (discussed below).

### Economic Recovery Board (ERB)

MRERA designates seven public appointees on the fifteen-member ERB. The seven public members are political appointees, rather than being elected or chosen in a public process, and only three must be Camden residents. Table 3.1 lists the members of the ERB in June 2006. The ERB consists of:

one public member chosen by the Senate President and one public member chosen by the Assembly Speaker; and five public members to be appointed by the Governor, to include one representative of organized labor and one representing the business community. Of the public members appointed by the Governor, at least three shall be municipal residents. (C.52.27BBB-36)

The nominal nature of public representation on the ERB may have contributed, in part, to widely voiced dissatisfaction by residents during 2005 with the board’s distribution of the \$175 million fund appropriated under MRERA. A total of \$104 million had been allocated by the ERB as of July 2005, with an overwhelming proportion of those funds supporting the downtown expansion of large educational and health care institutions. Major allocations include grants of \$12 million to Cooper Health Systems, \$4.5 million to Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center, \$11 million to Rutgers University-Camden, and \$25 million to a private corporation to transform the state aquarium into a tourist entertainment destination (ERB Fund Approvals spreadsheet, July 12, 2005). Alarmed that MRERA funds would soon be exhausted without benefiting neighborhood renewal, Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP), a citywide advocacy group, organized an action on July 18, 2005, to demand a reexamination of funding priorities. Using results from a survey of Camden residents showing respondent dissatisfaction with the redevelopment process thus far, CCOP confronted State Treasurer and then-ERB Chair John McCormac with the need to better reconcile the competing visions driving funding decisions. Between August 2005 and May 2006, the ERB allocated an additional \$17.2 million in

**The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project**

**Table 3.1**

**Members of the Economic Recovery Board (ERB) for Camden,  
June 2006**

Susan Bass Levin	Commissioner, NJ Dept of Community Affairs	Ex officio member
Louis Cappelli, Jr.	Camden County Freeholder	Ex officio member
Melvin (Randy) Primas	Chief Operating Officer, City of Camden	Ex officio member
Gwendolyn Faison	Mayor, City of Camden	Ex officio member
Angel Fuentes	City Council President, City of Camden	Ex officio member
Wayne R. Bryant	State Senator, 5th Legislative District	Legislative member
Joseph J. Roberts, Jr.	State Assemblyman, District 5	Legislative member
M. James Maley, Jr.	Mayor, Borough of Collingswood	Public member
Robert Milner	Business owner, Collingswood, NJ	Public member
William Hosey	President, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 351, Folsom, NJ	Public member
Rodney Sadler	Chair, Camden City Planning Board	Public member
The Reverend J. C. Jones, Interim Chair	President, Concerned Black Clergy of Camden	Public member
Rosa Ramirez	Former Chair, Camden Churches Organized for People (1990-1996)	Public member
Vacant		
Vacant		

SOURCE: Adapted from Web site: [www.CamdenERB.com](http://www.CamdenERB.com).

grants to public, nonprofit, and private sector recipients for a variety of housing, economic, and community development activities.<sup>4</sup>

**Community Advisory Committee**

MRERA provides additional public access by mandating formation of the Community Advisory Committee to facilitate citizen input to Camden’s economic recovery process (C.52.27BBB-30):

The mayor. . . and chief operating officer shall establish a community advisory committee in order to provide an efficient means of eliciting citizen input in the rehabilitation and economic recovery and community development of that

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<sup>4</sup>“ERB Assisted Projects — May 2006.” Web site: [www.camdenerb.com/approvedprojects\\_report.asp](http://www.camdenerb.com/approvedprojects_report.asp).

municipality. . . . The community advisory committee shall consist of 13 members as follows: three to be appointed by the Commissioner of Community Affairs; three by the governing body; and three by the chief operating officer. The mayor shall serve as an ex officio member. . . and shall appoint three additional members. . . . [T]he committee shall include representatives of the municipality's neighborhood, business, labor, faith-based, civic, and public interest organizations [and] no fewer than three members. . . shall represent private businesses situated within the. . . municipality. The committee shall meet not less than twice a year, at the pleasure of the chief operating officer. . . .

The committee's "advisory" function indicates the limited nature of its role, and, in practice, Camden's Community Advisory Committee has been largely ineffective to date. The committee met its minimally required two times in 2004 with the mayor as chair, but there is no evidence of meetings during 2005 or the first half of 2006, and neither the city's nor CRA's Web site contains a link to the Community Advisory Committee.

#### Chief Operating Officer (COO)

The COO is appointed by the governor through the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. The position is not directly accountable to the local electorate, and MRERA contains no formal requirement for citizen oversight of the COO's actions and decisions.

As a result of this statutory vacuum, the amount, frequency, and nature of civic engagement and public participation regarding the COO's actions depend on the individual initiative, judgment, and discretion of the incumbent. MRERA likewise contains no formal restriction or prohibition preventing the COO from proactively initiating or instituting a program of civic engagement. As a practical matter, the COO depends, at least to some extent, on public support and approval for legitimacy, maneuverability, and political leverage. This de facto dependence on public support could motivate an attempt at substantive partnership, or it might encourage public relations and other "manipulative" (Arnstein, 1969) forms of engagement. How this works in practice remains an open question that is likely to change in response to particular circumstances, over time, and at the discretion of the individual occupying the position.

#### Summary of MRERA Provisions

The state takeover of Camden's municipal operations and redevelopment accomplished by MRERA in 2002 was supported by an unusual coalition of political bedfellows. Nonprofit advocacy groups led by CCOP saw state oversight as a preferred alternative to chronic municipal mismanagement and corruption (Interview, community organizer, 2005). Critics have argued that the powerful South Jersey political machine viewed MRERA as an opportunity to

gain control of the rich revenue streams flowing through and out of Camden's daily operations and future redevelopment and which, in turn, fed the power of the machine (*CP*, February 16 and 17, 2003; *CP*, March 9, 2005; Gillette, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Legislators elsewhere in the state supported MRERA, albeit somewhat grudgingly, as a means to end the city's structural dependence on large annual infusions of state revenues that other, largely suburban, municipalities were increasingly unwilling to provide.

While this convergence of interests facilitated the adoption of MRERA, the divergence of visions and goals that it encompassed made it unlikely that all these objectives would be realized in the statute's design and implementation. The statute itself contains only token provisions for civic engagement. Some community leaders who had hoped that state oversight would contribute administrative resources of rationality and competence to replace chronic municipal mismanagement saw, instead, that many of Camden's previous leaders were appointed to new positions that now carried unprecedented levels of power and authority with reduced levels of electoral accountability. Their expectation that MRERA would provide sorely needed financial resources to improve neighborhoods for existing residents was disappointed by the higher priority placed on the expansion of downtown hospitals and universities and on developer-driven redevelopment marketed to the middle class. Ratables to be generated by waterfront tourism, spinoffs from downtown institutional expansion, and new market-rate and luxury housing for an anticipated influx of the middle class have thus far taken precedence over neighborhood revitalization for existing residents. Under these conditions, civic engagement of the sort pursued by advocacy organizations at the citywide scale to help win passage of the MRERA legislation became much more difficult to sustain after the statute's adoption and implementation.

### **The Local Housing and Redevelopment Law (LHRL) of 1992**

While MRERA targeted Camden for receivership and rehabilitation, the process of redevelopment everywhere in the state is governed by the Local Housing and Redevelopment Law (LHRL) of 1992. The New Jersey legislature passed LHRL to streamline the redevelopment process in the state by combining multiple existing statutes (the Long-Term Tax Exemption Law, the Five-Year Exemption and Abatement Law, and others) under one piece of legislation. LHRL changed the terminology used in describing a place from one which is "blighted" to an area "in need of redevelopment," and it established the process by which a place may be so designated. Like MRERA, however, this statute is largely silent on procedures for civic engagement.

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<sup>5</sup>Throughout, "CP" refers to *Courier-Post*, and "PI" refers to *Philadelphia Inquirer*; see newspaper articles listed after the References.

Under LHRL, in order to designate an area as in need of redevelopment, a needs determination study must be performed to locate properties that meet any one of seven eligibility criteria (see below). Once the needs determination study is performed, it is submitted to the municipal Planning Board for review and public response. The law stipulates that the public must be informed of the location and time of the Planning Board review and that notices shall be sent to the owners of properties in areas being considered “in need” no later than 10 days prior to the meeting (P.L. 1992, c.79, §6).

Following the public hearing, if an area is designated “in need,” the Planning Board prepares a redevelopment plan for the area, which must then be debated and approved in a public meeting of the City Council. The law subsequently outlines (P.L. 1992, c.79, §7) the legal requirements to which the redevelopment plan must adhere, including “adequate provision for temporary and permanent relocation,” notification of the project’s relationship to contiguous municipalities and the municipality’s surrounding county, and adherence to the Fair Housing Act of 1985 (P.L. 1985, c.222).

A pamphlet prepared by CAMConnect<sup>6</sup> outlines the seven steps making up the “statutorily defined” procedure that the law requires a municipality to follow, as applied to Camden (CAMConnect, 2005: 4):

1. **Needs Determination Report:** A preliminary investigation conducted by the Planning Board to determine whether or not an area is in need of redevelopment;
2. **Public Hearing:** A public hearing held by the Planning Board on the proposed redevelopment area designation;
3. **Designation:** Based on the Planning Board’s recommendation, City Council may designate all or a portion of the area as an area in need of redevelopment;
4. **Redevelopment Plan:** Planning Board is directed to prepare a redevelopment plan for the area;
5. **Adoption:** City Council adopts the redevelopment plan;

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<sup>6</sup>CAMConnect is a nonprofit information clearinghouse, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, whose purpose is “to expand and democratize access to information for residents and organizations that live and work in the City of Camden” (Web site: [www.camconnect.org](http://www.camconnect.org)).

6. **Redevelopment Entity:** Camden Redevelopment Agency, the City’s designated redevelopment entity, oversees the implementation of the redevelopment plan;
7. **Redeveloper:** Camden Redevelopment Agency selects a developer to undertake the redevelopment project or projects that implement the plan.

The statute further specifies powers available to municipalities for the “effectuation” of the redevelopment plan. Among these are the acquisition and clearing of property, including by condemnation consistent with the Eminent Domain Act of 1971 (P.L. 1971, c.361); entering into contracts with public or private companies to carry out the work; entrance to buildings in order to survey; arrangement for the relocation of citizens; power to lease or convey property without public bidding; and “all things necessary or convenient to carry out its powers” (P.L. 1992, c.79, §8). The statute authorizes a municipality, county, or housing authority to, among other powers, use eminent domain, acquire property, issue bonds, and offer subsidies to attract developers (P.L. 1992, c.79, §16). LHRL allows municipalities to utilize incentives, tax-exempt bonds, and payments-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOTs) to encourage developers to commit to projects. PILOTs serve to attract private development by limiting the risk assumed in developing the property and through negotiating a fixed rate that the developer will pay the municipality for an agreed-upon period of time, at a rate usually considerably lower than the tax rate that would otherwise apply.

LHRL eased the path toward redevelopment by broadening the language used to declare an area “in need of redevelopment.” Under the statute, an area may be designated in need of redevelopment if it meets *any one* of the following seven criteria (quoting in full) (PL 1992, c.79, §5):

- a. The generality of buildings are substandard, unsafe, unsanitary, dilapidated, or obsolescent, or conducive to unwholesome living or working conditions.
- b. The discontinuance of the use, abandonment, or great disrepair of buildings previously used for commercial, manufacturing, or industrial purposes.
- c. Land that is owned by the municipality, the county, a local housing authority, redevelopment agency or redevelopment entity, or unimproved vacant land that has remained so for a period of ten years prior to adoption of the resolution that is not likely to be developed through the instrumentality of private capital.
- d. Areas with buildings or improvements which, by reason of dilapidation, obsolescence, overcrowding . . . or any combination of these or other factors, are detrimental to the safety, health, morals, or welfare of the community.

- e. A growing lack or total lack of proper utilization of areas caused by the condition of the title, diverse ownership of the real property therein or other conditions, resulting in a stagnant or not fully productive condition of land potentially useful and valuable for contributing to and serving the public health, safety and welfare.
- f. Areas, in excess of five contiguous acres, whereon buildings or improvements have been destroyed, consumed by fire, demolished . . . or other casualty in such a way that the aggregate assessed value of the area has been materially depreciated.
- g. An area of a municipality in which an enterprise zone has been designated pursuant to the New Jersey Urban Enterprise Zones Act, P.L. 1983, c.303 (C.52:27H-60 et seq.) where the New Jersey Urban Enterprise Zone Authority has adopted a redevelopment plan ordinance including the area in the enterprise zone.

### Summary of LHRL Provisions

LHRL provides few specific avenues for civic engagement in the redevelopment process. Indeed, public participation or input is limited to two specific moments: “when the redevelopment area designation and plan come before the Planning Board and again when the documents come before the City Council at public hearings. No community input is legally required before then, during the preparation of the Needs Determination Study or the Redevelopment Plan” (CAMConnect, 2005: 6).

The redevelopment process specified under LHRL has the effect of providing significant leeway for municipal officials (for example, granting “all things necessary or convenient to carry out its powers”) while effectively limiting opportunities for residents’ input and participation. Because the law appears to mandate certain actions and procedures, citizens seeking to participate in decision-making discover that important decisions, both substantive and procedural, have been prespecified in the statute and appear to be off the table for discussion. Because the wording of the statute allows for considerable ambiguity and interpretation (“not likely to be developed,” “not fully productive condition of land,” “potentially useful and valuable”), public officials also have considerable latitude in their application of the law. As is discussed below, many of the legal challenges to redevelopment address the former matter, charging that specified procedures have not properly been followed. Much of the public protest, in contrast, derives from the latter ambiguity of the statute, charging that the city’s interpretations (for example, of deteriorated housing, unproductive uses, areas “in need” of redevelopment) are arbitrary or selective or privilege developers’ over residents’ interests.

LHRL is seen by some observers as a roadblock for community residents who seek broader participation in redevelopment decisions. Legally mandated participation requirements, such as the Public Hearing of the Planning Board, are viewed as too limited and coming too late to be able to affect the outcome of the process. In this view, “the criteria to qualify for designation as a redevelopment zone are so broad and subjective that virtually any neighborhood can be declared a redevelopment zone,” and the law “essentially opened up this Pandora’s box by exempting municipal officials from a whole series of laws intended to promote public participation” (*CP*, January 9, 2005). Perceived shortcomings of LHRL have prompted a flurry of attempts to rectify it in the legislature (*CP*, June 20 and 21, 2006; *PI*, June 20 and 23, 2006; *Philadelphia Business Journal*, June 23, 2006).

## **Government-Initiated Engagement in Practice**

Public officials who are charged with overseeing Camden’s redevelopment process are caught between two powerful and contradictory pressures. On the one hand, the brief five-year time window opened by the MRERA statute places a premium on moving redevelopment forward quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, public opposition to redevelopment as it is currently being pursued has the potential to delay or derail the process beyond the available window of opportunity. Beyond the specifics of statutory requirements, the city’s approach<sup>7</sup> to civic engagement in practice appears to be in part an attempt to balance or reconcile these competing pressures. This section examines the city’s approach to civic engagement in terms of (1) information dissemination and community outreach, (2) negotiating changes in redevelopment plans, and (3) municipal capacity. The section also reports on the city’s practice of civic engagement from the perspective of other constituencies, including developers and the nonprofit sector.

### **Information Dissemination and Community Outreach**

Given the speed and magnitude of the redevelopment being proposed for Camden, there is considerable public confusion about the factual, substantive content of what is being proposed as well as about the nature of the process through which redevelopment is occurring. In this context, information dissemination and community outreach constitute the city’s principal forms of civic engagement.

CRA’s Web site contains a “Community Outreach” page devoted to information dissemination. The page lists a telephone number with the instruction, “For questions and/or com-

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<sup>7</sup>References to “the city” and “the city’s approach” collectively refer to the public sector at the municipal level in Camden, including city offices, the office of the chief operating officer (COO), and the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) — recognizing that the last two were both established by state statute and are formally independent of Camden’s municipal government.

ments, please contact the planning and redevelopment hotline,” and it provides a link to view and download the *Citizens Guide to Relocation*, in English or Spanish.<sup>8</sup>

As shown in Table 3.2, the CRA Web site also describes the information dissemination process regarding neighborhood redevelopment, consisting of five “meetings” held over a thirteen-week period. This process is oriented to disseminating information to the public regarding completed plans and actions. CAMConnect notes in its overview of the meeting process that “the ‘determination of needs’ study [designating the neighborhood as in need of redevelopment] has already been written” prior to Meeting 1 (CAMConnect, 2005: 6). Meeting 2, listed on the CRA Web site as a discussion of “developer solicitation,” is described by CAMConnect as the community’s opportunity to “meet the developer[s]” after their selection by CRA and to hear a “presentation of [the developers’] proposed redevelopment plan.” By CRA’s calendar, a period of only two weeks separates the introduction of the redevelopment process in Meeting 1 and the presentation of a developer and the developer’s redevelopment plan in Meeting 2.

Meeting 3 consists of a PowerPoint presentation by CRA of the “Completed Study,” which CAMConnect describes as “the findings of the neighborhood designation study and the draft redevelopment plan.” Meetings 2 and 3 provide an opportunity for “Community Feedback” on the redevelopment plan prepared by the developer. What CRA lists as Meeting 4 is apparently not a meeting but an opportunity for the public to inspect the designation study and redevelopment plan at the City Clerk’s office in City Hall. As described by CRA, Meeting 5 is another “informational meeting,” held one week prior to the Planning Board’s approval of the designation study and redevelopment plan.

CRA stepped up its community outreach efforts during 2005 in response to growing and, at times, angry demands for information expressed at public meetings on redevelopment. The agency hired a bilingual staff member responsible for community outreach and added a public relations officer to its staff in early 2006, although the latter resigned before the end of the year. CRA advertises meetings on a “redevelopment calendar” on the city’s Web site, which is updated irregularly. For a period during 2005, CRA held monthly community meetings in English and Spanish in the Cramer Hill neighborhood, with separate dates and agendas for residents and business owners, although these meetings were poorly attended and were rarely reported in the media.

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<sup>8</sup>Web site: [www.camdenredevelopment.com](http://www.camdenredevelopment.com).

## The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project

**Table 3.2**

### **Community Meeting Process for Redevelopment Plans**

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Meeting 1 (Week 1)	Intro to the Redevelopment Planning Process/Projects Identify Redevelopment Goals Solicitation of Development Proposals Presentation of map of existing neighborhood
Meeting 2 (Week 3 & 4)	Developer Solicitation Discussion of Proposed Projects Community Feedback
Meeting 3 (Week 7 & 8)	Presentation of Completed Study Power Point presentation of Draft Study and Redevelopment Plan Community Feedback
Meeting 4 (Week 9 & 10)	Redevelopment Plan and reports are available for public inspection at Camden City Hall's Municipal Clerk's Office
Meeting 5 (Week 12 & 13)	Informational meeting for the community residents, businesses, institutions, and other stakeholders about the Redevelopment Plan

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SOURCE: Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) Web site: [www.camdenredevelopment.com](http://www.camdenredevelopment.com).

### **Negotiated Changes in Redevelopment Plans**

In interviews, city officials noted two cases during 2005 in which community input produced changes in proposed redevelopment plans. One such example occurred in Bergen Square, where the developer's proposal included a wide boulevard diagonally bisecting the street grid of the neighborhood. Some 80 community residents appeared at a Planning Board meeting on December 6, 2004, to argue that creation of the boulevard would divide their neighborhood, displace many more residents than was necessary, and transform the largely residential area into a high-speed connector between the highway and the nearby Tweeter Center — inviting a loud, late-night, heavy-drinking crowd into the center of their community (CP, December 7, 2004; February 1, 2005). The Planning Board voted to approve the plan but noted the community's objections and asked the developer to reconsider the Bergen Boulevard component of the proposal. The developer subsequently reduced the width of the boulevard to an avenue, lessening the number of relocations required and reducing the projected speed and volume of neighborhood traffic.

In a second instance, an early draft of the redevelopment plan that was proposed for the Cramer Hill neighborhood was changed after community residents and business owners disputed the ratings of building quality on which the plan was based (see Chapter 5 for a case study on Cramer Hill). When examination of the draft proposal by residents familiar with the neighborhood revealed that many buildings in good condition were improperly classified as “fair” or “poor,” several properties that initially were designated as “to be acquired” were dropped from the acquisition list.

By the second half of 2005, the increasing public opposition being voiced over the scale of property acquisition and relocation in Cramer Hill had prompted CRA officials to adopt a more conciliatory tone and to stipulate positions that had not previously been publicly stated. In response to insistent questions regarding replacement housing for residents displaced by redevelopment in Cramer Hill, COO Primas publicly guaranteed the availability of a replacement house at no additional cost (over existing housing costs) for residents who owe less than \$20,000 in unpaid property taxes, and he suggested the availability of short-term property tax abatements for displaced homeowners (CRA, 2004). Doubts have subsequently been raised, however, as to whether the funds will be found to make good on these promises (*CP*, January 7, 2005).

These examples of negotiated changes pertain to details within the scope of proposed redevelopment plans, rather than to the structure of the redevelopment planning process. That is, some changes have been made to particular specifications within proposed plans but not to the underlying approach, which entails large-scale redevelopment and significant displacement.

### **Capacity Limitations on Civic Engagement**

External conditions as well as internal choices impose constraints that limit CRA’s capacity to pursue civic engagement. CRA is especially cognizant of the time pressure imposed by the five-year period allowed by MRERA to accomplish Camden’s redevelopment. While the five-year “economic recovery term” is an exceedingly unrealistic timetable in which to reverse decades of economic and political decline, it reflects the impatience of state legislators unwilling to further subsidize the city’s fiscal deficit. As a result, CRA staff report a sense of urgency that discourages a lengthy process of civic engagement. A CRA staff member noted: “The way we feel is that we have a short window of time; we need to hire people who know how to plan and look at planning strategies and do x, y, and z. . . . We’re always a step behind with civic engagement because of the pace of development” (Interview, CRA staff member, 2005).

Internal decisions within CRA have also constrained the agency’s capacity to undertake an active process of civic engagement. These include the rapid pace of agency staffing and the decision to adopt a large-scale model of redevelopment.

CRA had three people on staff at the time of MRERA's signing in 2002. As COO, former Camden mayor Randy Primas appointed himself CRA Chair and named Arijit De, a former CRA and city staff member, as CRA Director. De quickly hired staff from other city agencies and community organizations, increasing the CRA staff to 21 by March 2005 (Interview, CRA staff member, 2005). The pressure to produce results within the very tight constraints of MRERA's time line — and a preference for staff who were already knowledgeable about local conditions — prompted the hiring of staff who were locally known and available instead of conducting a potentially time-consuming national search for the most qualified individuals. Many of these hires came from the same municipal offices whose subpar performance constituted part of the rationale for MRERA's adoption in the first place. The rapid expansion of CRA's staff and mission taxed the agency's ability to pursue a considered and deliberate process of civic engagement.

Additional constraints on civic engagement result from the scope and scale of the redevelopment pursued by CRA. The agency's strategy entails simultaneously pursuing redevelopment planning in multiple neighborhoods that account, in aggregate, for a substantial portion of the city's population and developable land area. The city's Web site lists redevelopment plans for nine separate neighborhoods and notes that large-scale plans for two additional neighborhoods (Cramer Hill and Lanning Square) are currently being updated.<sup>9</sup> Many of the neighborhood plans call for transformation at the scale of entire communities and several census tracts. This attempt to pursue redevelopment on multiple fronts has overwhelmed the agency's capacity to work closely with residents and community leaders in individual neighborhoods. CRA's redevelopment process invites private developers to propose redevelopment plans in response to a request for proposals (RFP), and developers have defined the scope, scale, and content of redevelopment plans.

As Chief Operating Officer until his resignation in 2006, Randy Primas expressed a commitment to civic engagement within the limited terms provided by MRERA. His *Progress Report* submitted to the governor and the legislature after his resignation contains a section on "Progress in Promoting Civic Engagement," which itemizes CRA's efforts (Primas, 2006). According to Primas's report, primary responsibility for encouraging citizen participation in redevelopment planning is held by staff of the city's Department of Development and Planning, while CRA staff "plays a supporting role." As the substance of such efforts, Primas listed CRA's information dissemination activities, including newsletter distribution, email alerts, the *Citizen's Guide to Relocation*, and the "sequence of community-oriented meetings" described above. In Primas's view, CRA's efforts at civic engagement have been hampered because "many citizens do not have an in-depth understanding of the redevelopment process" (Primas,

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<sup>9</sup>Web site: [www.ci.camden.nj.us/departments/redev\\_plans.html](http://www.ci.camden.nj.us/departments/redev_plans.html).

2006, 58). The *Progress Report* also states Primas's (and CRA's) assumptions regarding the scale and process of redevelopment, which may create an additional barrier to civic engagement. Under the heading "COO Perspective on Revitalization Approach," Primas listed as one of his basic assumptions "that a fundamental issue (is) land assembly, and that eminent domain powers...need to be used strategically on an on-going basis, particularly in order to complete site assemblage associated with large-scale development" (Primas, 2006, 4). Taking these assumptions as given substantively limits the agenda for citizen input to redevelopment planning.

### **Community Perspective on Government-Initiated Civic Engagement**

The inadequacy of civic engagement and CRA's capacity constraints were strong and recurrent themes voiced in extensive interviews conducted with private developers, leaders of nonprofit organizations, and community residents in 2005 and early 2006.

Developers and representatives of their associations repeatedly voiced dissatisfaction with Camden's municipal bureaucracy. Although CRA and its COO are responsible, under MRERA, for improving the capacity and operations of city government, critics charge that CRA has simply created an additional level of bureaucracy and complexity. Two of the sharpest criticisms are that simple functions are not completed in a timely manner and that City Hall and CRA are sometimes nonresponsive. A downtown developer, claiming that some potential or proposed projects have been withdrawn, expressed frustration with city processes:

It would help tremendously if they just knew how to do the specific job: Getting permits, getting things through zoning, putting things on the agenda for the planning board — and not having it take years. (Interview, developer, 2005)

A second developer echoed these frustrations:

There are some real fundamentals: You get a telephone call; you answer the phone call. . . . It's almost a paperless trail of unresponsiveness that's like a disease. (Interview, developer, 2005)

Similar complaints have been voiced by leaders of nonprofit community organizations. One executive director described CRA as a parallel bureaucracy that complicates rather than eases the process of working with the city:

It's like a shadow government: "You have to go through the city to do all this, but keep me apprised." If you e-mail to someone at the city, you have to copy these people at CRA, so they know what's going on. It's gotten to the point we don't know who's in charge. CRA will represent that there are 12 steps you need to walk through to do "whatever" at the city. We have a fairly good track record.

I know who to talk to. But now I have to talk to *you*, and I have to copy *you*, and . . . (Interview, nonprofit executive director, 2005)

Such complaints about the difficulty of working with City Hall are magnified in light of the desire among community-based nonprofits to continue to play a major role in Camden's redevelopment. Speaking at the *2005 Invest in Camden Day*, Liza Nolan, director of the Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations — a consortium of 14 community-based organizations — made the case for engaging community development corporations (CDCs) in the redevelopment process:

From Parkside to East Camden to North Camden, the CDCs I work with want to be able to continue to be involved in this excitement. They want to continue development and have access to blighted properties and other lots that they have been able to acquire through the city and CRA and provide the housing and do the work of representing the community. . . . We need to involve them and continue to have their investment play a big part in Camden in the plans that call for the billion-dollar projects. CDCs want to make sure the neighborhoods — from services to housing — continue to be able to happen so that residents can become first-time home buyers, job opportunities can be assured, and community investment can reach all the levels.

A representative of one community-based organization expressed the opinion that the potential of engaging CDCs in the redevelopment process is not being realized and that community nonprofits are not viewed by CRA as valued partners in the redevelopment process:

I think that [COO] Primas and [CRA Director] Arijit De are not doing redevelopment the way you're supposed to do it. You're supposed to work with the community. You're supposed to engage them in a process so that they have ownership. They're not doing any of that. (Interview, nonprofit executive director, 2005)

Beyond the perceived lack of partnership, some CDC leaders believe that their organizations are increasingly being pushed to the sidelines under a redevelopment approach in which private developers play the dominant role. This perception is confirmed by Jeremy Nowak of The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a Philadelphia-based nonprofit focused on neighborhood revitalization financing in the Mid-Atlantic region:

The increasing demand by the private sector and the fact that the [Camden] Redevelopment Authority is now a valued institution has shifted roles and expectations vis-à-vis the City and nonprofits. Nonprofit development capacity and strategy may have less importance in the coming years than in the past. (Nowak, 2004: 10)

A city official closely involved with the redevelopment process acknowledged the “paradigm shift” that is changing the role of CDCs such that “any future housing you do will be in service of a redevelopment plan” (Interview, city official, 2005). For CDCs, this involves a change in mission as well as constituency, from working on behalf of community-identified needs for affordable housing to providing replacement housing for displaced families under the city’s developer-driven approach to redevelopment.

As one result of recent shifts in the city’s approach to nonprofits, some CDC leaders report a growing difficulty in pursuing their long-standing core missions. Prior to the current round of large-scale redevelopment, CDCs could easily access land for housing and community development at no or very low cost. Now they must pay CRA, legal, and other fees that substantially escalate the cost of affordable housing development. Those willing to pay find it difficult to access land that might be on hold for a private developer or a future redevelopment project. Although, from CRA’s perspective, the small-scale, fine-grained approach to community development that is pursued by CDCs is inadequate to the need for large-scale redevelopment, it is possible that the continued marginalization of nonprofits will undermine their long-term viability. Should the present redevelopment efforts fail, the result could leave the city worse off than before, lacking both the benefits of redevelopment and a vibrantly functioning nonprofit sector.

## **Summary**

Statutorily required procedures for public participation establish a minimal framework but lack substantive opportunities for constructive engagement. To implement the required provisions is simply to abide by the letter of the law. Without further initiative on the part of implementing officials or agencies, the state redevelopment statutes inhibit civic engagement by prespecifying approaches and procedures that remove fundamental decisions regarding the goals and practices of redevelopment from public discussion. As reported by residents and community groups as well as CRA’s description of its community meetings, government-initiated approaches to civic engagement have been largely limited to one-way dissemination of information from the city to residents. While information dissemination is a demonstrably necessary element of successful neighborhood renewal, it may not be a sufficient form of civic engagement.

The massive scope and scale of redevelopment, and the condensed time for its accomplishment, present substantial challenges to the expansion of civic engagement. The decision to pursue redevelopment simultaneously in multiple neighborhoods has taxed the capacity of CRA and the implementing city agencies, leaving little room for civic engagement. Likewise, the pace and scale of proposed redevelopment limits opportunities for debate on the priorities, scope, and design of redevelopment.



## Chapter 4

# Community-Initiated Civic Engagement: The Organizational Landscape and Forms of Engagement

The city is an extreme place. The effect of it has been that people have stopped participating in civic life. I think people have withdrawn from public life. . . . A lot of cities have civic booster organizations. Camden lacks that. (Interview, community activist, 2005)

In terms of talent, creativity, and dedication, Camden's community organizers stood among the nation's very best for their ability to address huge problems and to make a difference in people's lives. (Gillette, 2005: 145)

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Camden is often described as a city with low civic participation, part of the popular image of disorganization and disaffection that serves as conventional wisdom. The city's low electoral turnout — only 19 percent of residents voted in the 2005 mayoral election (CAMConnect, 2005) — would seem to support this assertion. But voter turnout is only one measure of civic engagement, and the number and activism of advocacy coalitions and community organizations suggest that Camden supports a vibrant, active, and diverse civic sector. This chapter describes the civic landscape in terms of some of its basic components: community development organizations, grassroots advocacy groups, citywide associations, and religious institutions.<sup>10</sup> The chapter then reviews the forms of community-initiated civic engagement pursued in Camden to date, including neighborhood planning, political protest, negotiation, and litigation.

## The Organizational Landscape

Community-initiated civic engagement in Camden has been pursued through and by a variety of organizations, including, among others, community development organizations, grassroots advocacy groups, citywide associations, and churches.

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<sup>10</sup>This inventory by no means exhausts the variety of civic groups in Camden. The subset of organizations discussed here includes only those related to community advocacy and urban development. The Appendix describes the methodology used to compile the Inventory of Civic Associations.

## **Community Development Organizations (CDOs)**

Table 4.1 shows that at least 27 community development organizations (CDOs) currently operate in Camden, including traditional community development corporations (CDCs) as well as nonprofit development groups. The category of CDOs is not homogeneous and includes considerable political, fiscal, and organizational variety. Some, like St. Joseph's Carpenter Society and Camden Lutheran Housing, are high-capacity organizations with long and effective track records and significant accomplishments. Others are newly formed organizations that are just beginning to be active in development and advocacy.

The number and variety of CDOs in Camden reflect the level of need in the city, the longstanding inability of local government to meet those needs, and the desire of residents and community leaders to take an active role in rebuilding their neighborhoods. These organizations offer direct services, develop affordable housing, provide job training, engage people in the political system, act as intermediaries between residents and public offices, and bring financial and other resources into some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Camden's CDOs act as information intermediaries, brokers, and community representatives. They help to improve the two-way flow of information between residents and governmental decision-makers, and they provide a means for neighborhood residents to gain access to decision-making processes.

The role of CDOs in the civic life of Camden can be suggested by brief descriptions of three organizations: St Joseph's Carpenter Society, Camden Lutheran Housing, and Heart of Camden.

### **St. Joseph's Carpenter Society (SJCS)**

St. Joseph's Carpenter Society<sup>11</sup> was founded in 1985 with a mission to create homeownership opportunities for low- and moderate-income families in the East Camden neighborhood. The organization pursues its housing development mission through new construction of homeownership, rental, and senior rental housing; in-fill development; rehabilitation of vacant structures; and development of replacement units for public housing demolished under the federal Hope VI program. Since its inception, SJCS has sold more than 500 homes through an \$83 million investment in East Camden. The organization provides homeownership preparation and counseling in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Working with community residents, SJCS completed the East Camden Strategic Investment Plan in 2003, providing a blueprint to guide the organization's future activities.

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<sup>11</sup>Web site: [www.sjcs Camden.org](http://www.sjcs Camden.org).

**The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project**

**Table 4.1**

**The Landscape of Civic Engagement in Camden (Partial List)**

<b>Citywide Organizing</b>	<b>Community Development Organizations (CDOs)</b>	<b>Grassroots Advocacy Organizations</b>	<b>Social Service Providers</b>
Alliance for the Revitalization of Camden City (ARCC)	Camden Lutheran Housing	Ablett Village Tenants Association	BPUM Economic Development Corporation
Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations (CCDA)	Camden Neighborhood Renaissance	Association of Bona Fide Residents and Businesses of Cramer Hill	Camden County Council on Economic Opportunity
Camden Environmental Justice Coalition	Cherry Street Neighborhood Development Corporation	Bergen Lanning Citizens in Action	Catholic Charities
Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP)	Cooperative Business Assistance Corporation	Camden Neighborhood Revitalization Corporation	Homeless Network Planning Committee of Camden County
Concerned Black Clergy	Cooper's Ferry Development Association	Camden United	Hope Works N Camden
Hispanic Clergy	Cramer Hill Community Development Corporation	Camden Urban Union	Jewish Camden Partnership
	Fair Share Housing Development	Camdentown Civic Association	Jersey Counseling and Housing Development
	Fairview Historic Society	Centennial Village Tenants Association	New Visions Community Services
	Fairview Main Street	Concerned Citizens of North Camden	Puerto Rican Unity for Progress
	Greater Camden Partnership	Cooper Grant Neighborhood Association	RESPOND
	Heart of Camden	Cooper Lanning Civic Association	Community Planning and Advocacy Council
	Latin American Economic Development Association	Cramer Hill Residents Association	Camden Greenways
	Metropolitan Camden Habitat for Humanity	Cramer Hill Business Association	
	Neighborhood Housing Services of Camden	Crestbury Residents Coalition	
	New Covenant Fellowship Community Development	Dayton, Browning and Sayres Streets Partnership	
	Next Level Camden	Eastside Civic Association	
	North Camden Community Builders	Lanning Square West Neighborhood Association	
	North Camden Community Land Trust	Leavenhouse	
	North Camden Exchange	Liberty Park Neighborhood Association	

(continued)

**Table 4.1 (continued)**

<b>Citywide Organizing</b>	<b>Community Development Organizations (CDOs)</b>	<b>Grassroots Advocacy Organizations</b>	<b>Social Service Providers</b>
	Nueva Esperanza Housing and Economic Development	Northgate One Residents Association	
	Oasis Community Development Corporation	Royden Street Residents for Community Action	
	Parkside Business and Community in Partnership	Save Our Waterfront	
	St. John Community Development Corporation	South Camden Citizens in Action	
	St. Joseph's Carpenter Society	United Neighbors of Whitman Park	
	State Street Housing	Waterfront Alliance	
	West Jersey Renew		
	Woodland Community Development Corporation		

NOTE: The Appendix describes the methodology used to compile the Inventory of Civic Associations.

#### Camden Lutheran Housing, Inc. (CLHI)

Camden Lutheran Housing, Inc.,<sup>12</sup> has addressed the lack of affordable housing in North Camden since 1986. Recent construction projects include Cooper Waterfront Homes, with 65 units of new construction, and 16 rental units in Riverview Homes. The 18 homeownership townhouses in Grace Homes I & II, according to the organization's Web site, are "the first newly constructed homes for homeownership in North Camden since the turn of the last century." CLHI works within the community guidelines established in the North Camden Plan, a 15-year comprehensive plan that was developed by residents, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and churches; it was adopted by the City Council in 1993 as an amendment to Camden's Master Plan.

#### Heart of Camden

Heart of Camden,<sup>13</sup> the community-development offshoot of Sacred Heart Church, works to "restore the dignity and quality of life of the community through programs for housing restoration, economic expansion and human development" in the Waterfront South neighborhood. The organization restores vacant housing in Waterfront South for purchase by qualified low-income families, provides community services through the Hynes Family Resource Center, and has planted more than 200 trees in the neighborhood. As part of the Waterfront South Restoration Project,

<sup>12</sup>Web site: [www.clhi.org](http://www.clhi.org).

<sup>13</sup>Web site: [www.heartofcamden.org](http://www.heartofcamden.org).

Heart of Camden worked with environmental consultants and volunteers to develop the Environmental Mitigation and Landscape Master Plan for the Waterfront South neighborhood, and it received \$1,150,000 from the Economic Recovery Board (ERB) in early 2006 to implement the plan.

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The map in Figure 4.1 shows that CDOs are unevenly distributed across the city. Some Camden neighborhoods are home to multiple strong and effective organizations, while other neighborhoods lack formal organizations to represent them and advocate on their behalf. Neighborhoods without strong CDOs are at a relative political and material disadvantage, given the important roles that these organizations play in relaying information, engaging residents, and representing residents' interests in the political process.

### **Grassroots Groups and Neighborhood Associations**

Grassroots groups are advocacy organizations that represent the interests of a single block, an entire neighborhood, or, in a few cases, the entire city. The inventory of civic engagement identified at least 25 grassroots organizations in Camden (Table 4.1). For residents who lack trust in the political system, despair at the city's inability to provide basic services, and/or are frustrated by a perceived lack of governmental responsiveness, neighborhood associations provide an alternative point of access to the political system or an alternative structure in which to work communally to provide necessary neighborhood services.

Some neighborhood associations were created specifically to oppose announced redevelopment efforts. Perceiving a lack of access to formal planning processes and with many decisions seemingly made without their participation, community residents have created new organizations through which to voice their opinions, represent their interests, and work to alter redevelopment processes and outcomes. In some cases, as in Camden's Cramer Hill neighborhood, residents who felt that existing CDOs did not adequately represent their interests created new neighborhood organizations to express a differing point of view about the redevelopment processes. While the proliferation of grassroots organizations sometimes produces a fragmenting of neighborhood effectiveness, it also provides opportunities for the expression of multiple and sometimes competing points of view.

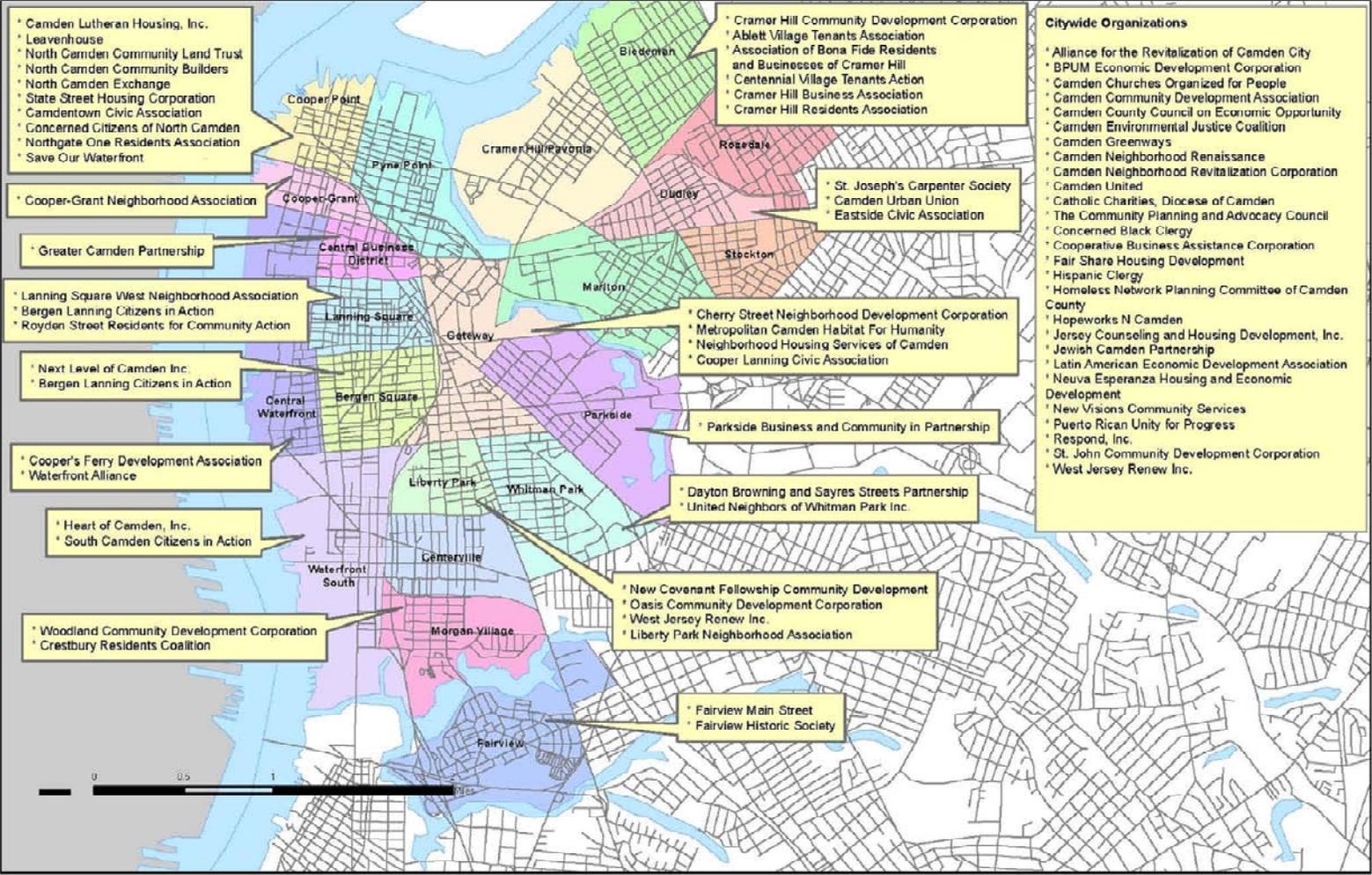
#### **The Royden Street Association**

The Royden Street Association (Royden Street Residents for Community Action) is an example of a grassroots neighborhood association that covers one block of Royden Street, in the Lanning Square neighborhood, not far from downtown. Residents formed the Royden Street Association in an attempt to improve their block. Within a few short years, they built social capital; accessed resources; secured funding for street trees, trash receptacles, and window boxes; and transformed their once-desolate block into an appealing and welcoming community.

# The Camden Regional Equity Demonstration Project

## Figure 4.1

### The Inventory of Civic Associations in Camden, by Neighborhood



Stepping in for the city's failure to provide basic services, Royden Street residents clean their street and sidewalks, collect trash, and secure boarded-up and vacant buildings. They maintain the areas outside their homes, tend flower beds and benches, and decorate their street's trees for each holiday season. Royden Street residents seek to improve the quality of their lives by taking pride in their homes and neighborhood and by filling in where the city has fallen short in terms of basic municipal services. Even more important, by caring for their block, residents seek to demonstrate to Camden's municipal leadership that they are responsible citizens and, as citizens, deserve a government that is responsive to their needs. Through such actions, grassroots neighborhood associations improve their neighborhoods while providing residents with visibility and standing in the political process.

### **Citywide Organizations**

Several citywide organizations have been active in Camden, among them Camden Churches Organized for People, the Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations, and the Association for the Revitalization of Camden City.

#### **Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP)**

CCOP, the oldest functioning citywide advocacy organization, was formed in 1985 as a federation of religious congregations and two CDCs: St. Joseph's Carpenter Society and Heart of Camden (described above). CCOP is a community-organizing group affiliated with the national PICO organizing network.<sup>14</sup> CCOP engages residents through its decentralized structure, with roots in congregations throughout the city. The structure facilitates community engagement, builds civic skills among its members, facilitates information sharing, and enables the organization to turn out hundreds of residents for meetings and political events — an often effective tool for getting the attention of public officials. CCOP organizes highly scripted “actions” in which residents present problems and requests directly to elected representatives and staff of government agencies, making officials accountable and responsible for identifying solutions.

Beginning in 2001, CCOP's leaders faced a growing realization that, despite their success in turning out residents and confronting municipal officials, these actions were ineffective because city government lacked the financial and technical capacity to respond to their requests. The organization adopted a new strategy, shifting the scale of activism from local to state government. CCOP invited then-governor James McGreevy to an event at Antioch Baptist Church and turned out 1,200 residents who provided the governor with firsthand accounts of life in Camden. Deciding that Camden could not address its problems at the municipal level, CCOP

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<sup>14</sup>Web site: <http://www.piconetwork.org>.

strongly supported the state’s takeover of city government (see Chapter 3) and worked closely with state officials to secure the financial resources needed to support redevelopment. More recently, however, the organization has become increasingly critical of the path of redevelopment, and CCOP organized a community action in July 2005 to confront state officials with the need to allocate financial resources to neighborhood needs.

### Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations (CCDA)

Several of Camden’s CDCs had been working together since the 1990s in a loose coalition to address property tax issues and to seek a transformation of community development from a narrow focus on housing development to a more comprehensive approach to community building. A group of 14 organizations decided to formalize this relationship in the early 2000s, secured funding to hire staff, and incorporated as the Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations (CCDA). The organization now focuses on the impact of the state takeover, the neighborhood distribution of state redevelopment funding, access to land for development, the bureaucratic complexity created by the expansion of the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA; see Chapter 3), and the future of neighborhood planning.

### Association for the Revitalization of Camden City (ARCC)

Seeking to establish a citywide structure to enhance civic engagement, ARCC formed in 2003 as an initiative of the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In November 2000, the Camden Development Collaborative<sup>15</sup> invited James O. Gibson — founder of DC Agenda, a civic organization to increase governmental responsiveness and accountability in Washington, DC — to present DC Agenda as a possible model for Camden (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000). With support from CCOP, Concerned Black Clergy, and the Greater Camden Partnership (a downtown civic group) and with funding from the Annie E. Casey and Ford Foundations, ARCC emerged in 2003 as a consortium of grassroots organizations, CDCs, and major downtown institutions.

ARCC described itself as an organization that “helps to shape and strengthen community agendas by promoting broad-based civic involvement, collaborative problem solving, balanced information sharing, constructive advocacy and leadership development” (ARCC presentation, Rutgers University, 2005). Jeff Brenner, chairman of ARCC, described the organization as a “big tent” with room for advocacy organizations, developers, and citizens to collaborate in Camden’s revitalization:

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<sup>15</sup>The Camden Development Collaborative is a funding intermediary comprising a consortium of corporate and foundation funders with a mission of building a sustainable civic infrastructure and supporting comprehensive community-based development in the city of Camden (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000).

In Camden, we're good at opposing things but not good at solving citywide problems and improving city government. The infrastructure doesn't allow new people to come through. We need a civic commons, a broad middle ground. ARCC was formed to help create new forms of robust civic engagement in the city, to bring people together who have been on far and opposite sides and find out what we agree on. . . . So we created a broad-based civic organization to do collaborative consensus-based problem solving, identify best practices from other cities, and support leadership development. (Jeff Brenner, Responsible Relocation Workshop, May 11, 2005)

While ARCC identified substantive areas for discussion (especially public safety and housing relocation), its primary goal was establishing a process and forum for civic engagement in Camden. An ARCC leader described the organization's efforts in terms of developing a "sustainable habit of civic engagement": "All these habits we build into our life — church, family — civic engagement should be a sustainable habit, a commitment that you make, a good venue that you make for that. . . . Civic engagement when it's done well is addictive. . . . It makes me feel better about the city."

ARCC hosted three major events during 2005, including a forum for municipal candidates, a leadership workshop (including community leaders) on "responsible relocation," and a Town Hall meeting on the same topic. But the organization disbanded in early 2006, due in part to internal divisions and disagreements over its direction and methods. Despite the promise of citywide collaboration, at the time of its demise, ARCC was viewed by some local organizations and leaders as splintered by competing agendas, struggles over organizational control, and the divergent priorities of funders and local participants (Interviews, local organization representatives, 2005, 2006).

### **Religious Institutions**

Religious institutions and leaders play prominent roles in many economically declining urban areas, and Camden is no exception. Churches are often the most enduring neighborhood institutions and play an important role in stabilizing neighborhoods, providing direct services, and obtaining (and distributing) financial resources in distressed communities. Many of Camden's CDOs, community organizing initiatives, and social service programs are organized by, or in partnership with, religious institutions within and outside the city. Two of Camden's largest CDCs — St. Joseph's Carpenter Society and Camden Lutheran Housing, Inc. (discussed above) — are faith-based organizations. These are complemented by CDCs like Heart of Camden and by smaller and newer organizations like New Covenant Fellowship Community Development and Oasis Community Development Corporation. The major religious service organizations are

active in Camden. Catholic Charities, the Jewish Camden Partnership, and Jersey Counseling and Housing Development Corporation are among the major social service providers in the city.

Religious institutions provide the base as well as the leadership for many of the city's community organizing and advocacy efforts. Sacred Heart Church has advocated forcefully and effectively for the Waterfront South neighborhood for decades. Strong religious leaders head CCOP and Concerned Black Clergy. To a considerable extent, the power of these organizations comes from the large number of individuals, both residents and nonresidents of Camden, who participate in the organizations' activities and who turn out, through church networks, for organizing events and actions. Many Camden organizations have built partnerships with suburban churches, which bring resources to the city in the form of people, money, and goods.

## **Forms of Community-Initiated Engagement**

With few official opportunities to participate collaboratively in redevelopment planning, Camden residents and organizations have sought out and adopted a variety of strategies through which to voice their concerns, articulate their interests and priorities, and respond to city actions. Because community-initiated forms of engagement often surface in response to actions taken or announced by the city, they often appear to be largely reactionary and negative statements about what should *not* occur. At other times, as in the case of Cramer Hill's neighborhood planning initiative, CCOP "actions," or the ARCC Town Meeting on "Responsible Relocation," community-initiated participation represents an attempt at constructive and proactive engagement in Camden's civic life. In Camden, citizen-initiated participation has included neighborhood planning, political protest, negotiation and mediation, and litigation through the courts, among other mechanisms.

### **Neighborhood Planning**

Neighborhood planning is a form of civic engagement in which residents collaboratively develop a plan for neighborhood revitalization, often under the auspices of a sponsoring community-based organization.<sup>16</sup> Neighborhood planning typically involves a sometimes-prolonged process of meetings and discussions in which residents articulate a neighborhood vision, establish redevelopment priorities, design projects, and develop an implementation strategy. Proponents of neighborhood planning claim that the process leads to the physical improvement of communities while also developing habits of participation, responsibility, and en-

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<sup>16</sup>Innovative examples of participatory neighborhood planning include the Lower Broadway Community Plan in Newark ([www.lacasanwk.org](http://www.lacasanwk.org)); the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston ([www.dsni.org](http://www.dsni.org)); and examples identified by the Community Planning Collaborative in Orange County, Florida (<http://www.orangecountyfl.net/cms/DEPT/growth/planning/innovationway.htm>).

agement on the part of residents (Jones, 1990; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Peterman, 2000; Wates, 2000).

Examples of participatory neighborhood planning in Camden include North Camden, Parkside, and Cramer Hill. In North Camden and Parkside, the neighborhood planning effort was initiated by strong organizations with deep community roots, while Cramer Hill mobilized a coalition of diverse actors who engaged community residents in neighborhood planning. In addition, the city's redesign of the Master Plan in 2000 employed a participatory planning process that could serve as a template for enhanced civic engagement.

### North Camden

North Camden is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, but it is also home to effective community-based organizations and to community activists who believe strongly in participatory neighborhood planning. Beginning in March 1992, community leaders engaged residents, local business owners, community-based organizations, and government representatives and worked collaboratively to create one of the first neighborhood plans in the state. As noted in the North Camden Plan, "the people who have been most involved in developing this plan are long-time residents and businesses — people who have remained committed to the neighborhood through its worst years of decline and neglect."

Based on a year and a half of study, meetings, and discussions, the North Camden Plan presents an \$85 million investment program covering seven planning elements: housing, open space and recreation, economic development, neighborhood facilities, human development, urban design, and streets and circulation. The North Camden Plan was adopted as an amendment to the city's Master Plan in 1993. This important accomplishment provided a blueprint for neighborhood redevelopment while establishing legitimacy for the neighborhood planning process and for the sponsoring organizations.

### Parkside

As in North Camden, community leaders in Parkside are committed to participatory neighborhood planning. Parkside Business and Community in Partnership (PBCIP), a membership-based neighborhood CDC, is the local organization that initiated the planning process in Parkside. Most PBCIP staff are neighborhood residents, and the organization strongly supports democratic process and participatory decision-making in all its efforts. Interview respondents throughout the city described PBCIP's redevelopment planning process as different and effective because of its democratic structure and the organization's close relationship to the community. According to one respondent: "The strongest neighborhood right now doing the redevelopment process where they are is Parkside, and the group Parkside Business and Community in Partnership." As another explained: "They had the right structure, a very representative struc-

ture. It's hard work to maintain a grassroots group and make sure that all the different interests in the neighborhood are represented, and they've had the money and the staff; but it's the leadership, too, and they have some great leaders."

Like other organizations in Camden, PBCIP recognized that change was coming to the city and launched a two-year participatory neighborhood planning process with funding from Wachovia and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). PBCIP held a leadership conference in 2002, hired consultants and created a committee structure in July 2002, held a planning kickoff in 2003, and completed the Parkside Neighborhood Plan in 2004. The plan identifies four main goals addressing quality of life, housing, commercial development, and neighborhood amenities.

PBCIP cites widespread community involvement as making the difference in its planning process: "That's the difference; we generated, we were the catalyst of redeveloping this community. People didn't feel like it was 'them, those guys.' They knew it was us. They get our newsletters bimonthly, know what is going on, see how they fit in." PBCIP staff attribute the success of their neighborhood plan to democratic process. As described by a staff member:

It wasn't something brought into the community from the outside. We, the organization, realized and asked community folk what they would like to see: issues, concerns. We grew from that to a whole neighborhood planning process. While we were creating the structure and format, we knew we needed to have a redevelopment plan in place — legal development — to acquire vacant parcels through the city. But we thought that after having necessary conversations with residents: What would you like to see happen in those key areas? . . . For us, the driver of the process was not just the organization — it was the 110-member membership who are all Parkside residents; the board consists of all Parkside residents and one business owner from Haddon Avenue. (Interview, community organizer, 2005)

For PBCIP, civic engagement means that the community has participated widely, is knowledgeable about the plan, and knows and trusts the organization, and that this smoothes the way for future development. They point out that successful redevelopment is challenging enough without fighting community residents.

### Cramer Hill

Community residents, religious congregations, schools, and community organizations in the Cramer Hill neighborhood began meeting in 1997 to discuss neighborhood issues, such as vacant lots, run-down housing, open space, and truck traffic. Concerned that development was "in the air" (as they put it), participants organized as the Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC) and laid the groundwork for a participatory neighborhood planning process. Volunteers

fleshed out issues in subgroups and hosted public meetings in 1998 and 1999 to encourage broader community participation (City of Camden, 2000: 31). After gathering information from the community, meeting with city planning staff, and identifying solutions, the group published a neighborhood plan, titled *Cramer Hill Tomorrow*, in 2002. The plan creates a vision for the neighborhood that is focused on improving the quality of life for existing residents:

*Cramer Hill Tomorrow* is the view of Cramer Hill, a neighborhood in northeast Camden, from scores of residents, community leaders, community workers, businesses, and public officials. It is the consolidation of several years of discussing ideas and reviewing plans. It is a plan that translates their work today into dreams for the future. . . . *Cramer Hill Tomorrow* draws a picture of a neighborhood that works to control its destiny by planning for change — changes in housing, economic development, waterfront, recreation, open space, schools, transportation and circulation, and community organization. (City of Camden, 2000: 12)

The City Planning Board approved the Cramer Hill neighborhood plan in April 2003, and the Camden City Council adopted the plan as an amendment to the city's Master Plan in September 2004 (see Chapter 5 for a case study on Cramer Hill).

### Camden Master Plan

Two years before the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA) of 2002 designated the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) as the lead redevelopment agency for Camden (see Chapter 3), the city used a participatory planning process to create Camden's first Master Plan since 1977. The process was designed to engage community residents and build trust in the planning effort. An individual involved in the exercise described the rationale for the participatory process: "Trust, to me, is the most important part, the most important first step that we have to really embark on as urban planners. Because of the history of broken promises in the city that has been experienced by the citizens. . . ."

The Master Plan process has been lauded as an example of a process that worked by using the existing institutional framework to engage people and organizations within their neighborhoods. The process was proposed at a 2005 public meeting as a model for redevelopment planning:

The vision for a successful process of redevelopment would be to take a lesson from the process that was initiated when the administration put out the call for community and civic participation in the Master Plan. The process was to do outreach throughout the city of Camden and bring in and identify leaders and indi-

viduals in individual communities who could help assist with reaching into the community, to disseminate information concerning the Master Plan.

With relocation and redevelopment, we need to revisit that method. It did work. Information was shared on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood level, by educating the contacts within the community. Community experts educated the residents, equipped them with the information needed to go back into the community to hold meetings in the community at a community level and disseminate the information that needed to be disseminated. Also, the administration provided tools, easels, equipment needed to disseminate that and sent a representative to participate in the meetings, and the outreach that was done to provide different communities with the information to go forward with the Master Plan. I think we need to revisit that process on the neighborhood level. (Sheila Roberts, Town Hall Meeting on “Responsible Relocation,” June 21, 2005)

## **Protest**

Lacking adequate mechanisms for participation, Camden residents have often resorted to political protest as a means to express their views about redevelopment planning and decision-making. Protest has been most pronounced over redevelopment proposed for the Cramer Hill neighborhood, where the projected displacement and relocation of more than 1,000 residents have fueled an angry public response both within the neighborhood and elsewhere in the city. (Chapter 5 presents a detailed account of redevelopment in Cramer Hill.)

Residents of Cramer Hill have attended public meetings in large numbers, marched to City Hall, massed outside City Hall before and during Planning Board and City Council meetings, and protested at city events seemingly unrelated to neighborhood redevelopment, such as the inauguration of the CAMCare building, that provided a visible forum for public expression. Five hundred residents attended a Town Hall Meeting on March 16, 2004, to review the draft Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan (*PI*, March 17, 2004).<sup>17</sup> Fifty residents marched to City Hall on May 11, 2004, and joined 300 others already there to protest the plan (*CP*, May 11, 2004). Eight hundred people turned out to the May 18, 2004, Planning Board hearing the night the board approved the plan (*PI*, May 19, 2004).

Both the Planning Board and the City Council approved the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan despite the large resident turnout and evidence of massive public opposition. A community leader described the residents’ reaction:

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<sup>17</sup>Throughout, “PI” refers to *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and “CP” refers to *Courier-Post*; see newspaper articles listed after the References.

We had close to 1,000 people turn out twice for Planning Board hearings for Cramer Hill. People were unanimous in speaking out against the plan. Since then, there has been lots of propaganda, networking, promises done to diffuse some of that opposition. In that early stage, it was overwhelming: “We don’t want Cherokee [Investment Partners’ plan]. No golf course. We don’t want to lose our homes.” The way you get people out like that twice, you think it would get our elected officials to scratch their heads. Instead, it got completely, totally ignored, a unanimous vote of approval. (Interview, community organizer, 2005)

Approval of the redevelopment plan quieted protest in some areas but fueled it in others. Some Cramer Hill residents expressed frustration at the lack of effectiveness of their protests, as indicated in the quote above. For others, the turn of events spurred their activism and motivated the creation of new and more militant neighborhood associations, such as the Cramer Hill Residents Association, which strongly opposes the redevelopment process and the use of eminent domain, and Camden United, which has connected activists across the city who oppose top-down redevelopment planning.

Public protest over Camden’s redevelopment process has not been confined to Cramer Hill, although the scale of redevelopment and displacement proposed for that neighborhood has made it a central focus of concern. Residents of Lanning Square turned out in large numbers before the Planning Board in June 2005 to testify against designation of that neighborhood as in need of redevelopment. Protest venues have also expanded, with residents convening on Camden’s streets, outside the New Jersey State House in Trenton, and in Washington, DC, during U.S. Supreme Court testimony in the prominent New London eminent domain case (*Kelo v. New London*), inserting Camden into the national debate over redevelopment and property rights.<sup>18</sup>

### **Negotiation and Mediation**

While some residents and organizations have opposed Camden’s redevelopment process through direct confrontation and protest, others have pursued a more conciliatory route, seeking to modify plans and establish a process for “responsible relocation.”

The Cramer Hill Community Development Corporation (CHCDC), Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP), and the Association for the Revitalization of Camden City (ARCC), among others, have worked with residents, community leaders, and local officials to identify concerns and negotiate solutions. Among issues under discussion have been redevelop-

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<sup>18</sup>In *Kelo v. New London*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the right of local governments to employ eminent domain to condemn private property and then transfer it to another private concern for the purpose of commercial development.

opment timelines, relocation options and procedures, replacement and affordable housing, back taxes, tax abatements, and provision of community services.

Some organizations, such as CCOP, have protested and organized large-scale “actions” while also pursuing the avenue of negotiation. CCOP, for example, worked to engage community residents in the redevelopment process by holding 400 meetings with residents in private homes in Cramer Hill. The meetings mobilized residents to become involved, while also gathering information from residents for use in an action with CRA’s director, Arijit De. CCOP surveyed 900 Camden residents during the summer of 2005 to assess their opinions of the redevelopment process, and it used the survey results as the basis for conversations with redevelopment officials in the state and the city regarding the distribution of state funds through the Economic Recovery Board (ERB).

ARCC pursued a similar goal of bringing parties together to negotiate solutions. Preferring to avoid confrontation, ARCC sought to identify issues of common concern as the basis for discussion. Their vision entailed encouraging habits of civic engagement as the other half of community development, complementing physical renewal. As one leader explained: “We, as an organization, want to relay information out to the citizenry of Camden, to prepare them to view Camden in five, ten, fifteen years and allow them to think on their own and decide where are they going to be, on their own, and will they fit in there” (Interview, community leader, 2005).

The strategy of negotiation and conciliation has produced sharp divisions among advocates and organizations representing differing views within the community. Some see it as accommodationist, or unable to accomplish real change; others see it as one strategy in an arsenal of strategies; and some proponents present conciliation as realistically necessary if Camden’s revitalization is to succeed. In Cramer Hill, attempts by the CHCDC to garner resident support for redevelopment have prompted charges of complicity with the city and CRA — charges that are denied by CHCDC’s leadership (Cramer Hill community information meetings, 2006). Attempts by funders to steer ARCC away from confrontational politics produced rifts within that organization that ultimately led to its demise, according to some participants and observers close to the organization (Interviews, 2006).

## **Litigation**

Litigation remains the principal option for those who oppose the city’s redevelopment road map and feel that they have no other access to the decision-making process. Three lawsuits filed by South Jersey Legal Services (SJLS) in 2004 on behalf of residents and community organizations in Cramer Hill, Bergen Square, and Waterfront South, along with lawsuits filed by four business owners in Cramer Hill, have been making their way through the courts.

As of this report's publication, these three redevelopment plans have been stopped by the courts.

After the Camden City Planning Board and the City Council approved the designation study and the redevelopment plan for Cramer Hill, SJLS filed suit on July 29, 2004, on behalf of three community organizations and 211 residents, naming Randy Primas, the Camden City Planning Board, the Camden City Council, the Camden Redevelopment Authority, the Economic Recovery Board, and the State of New Jersey as defendants. The suit challenged the city's actions on several grounds. It argued that the city violated the state redevelopment law<sup>19</sup> by characterizing properties as blighted in order to designate two entire census tracts as an area in need of redevelopment, identified procedural violations under MRERA, and held that displacing more than 1,000 mostly poor people from the neighborhood violates the state and federal constitutions and civil rights law and is not in the city's interest.

In response to the suit, Judge Francis Orlando halted implementation of the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan. On January 7, 2005, Judge Orlando denied the defendants' requests to dismiss the lawsuit, citing four issues raised by the complaint: potential conflict of interest by City Council President Fuentes, who owned property in Cramer Hill; the City Council's failure to consider the Planning Board's suggested modifications of the redevelopment plan; the absence of an adequate relocation plan for residents who would be displaced; and whether the Cramer Hill plan is "consistent with other development plans in Camden County" (*CP*, January 8, 2005).

On April 8, 2005, SJLS petitioned the court for an injunction to prevent the city from starting the first phase of redevelopment in Cramer Hill. The city argued that this particular redevelopment project was separate from the Cramer Hill redevelopment plan, while SJLS held that the proposed development — which would result in 72 property takings, including 43 occupied homes — was merely the first phase that would enable the Cramer Hill project to move forward (*PI*, April 9, 2005). At this point, SJLS began to emphasize the issue of displacement and relocation involved in implementing the redevelopment plan. Judge Orlando issued a temporary restraining order prohibiting the city from using eminent domain in Cramer Hill, again effectively halting redevelopment while the lawsuits were in progress. On May 3, 2005, Orlando required the City Council to go through the process of adopting the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan a third time, because the city had not provided enough notice of a public hearing.

In addition to the SJLS lawsuit on behalf of residents in Cramer Hill, four Cramer Hill businesses — W. Hargrove Recycling, Inc.; Express Marine, Inc.; Tucker Towing, Inc.; and Riverfront Recycling and Aggregate LLC — sued the city of Camden, the Camden City Council,

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<sup>19</sup>The Local Housing and Redevelopment Law (LHRL) of 1992; see Chapter 3.

cil, and the Camden City Planning Board on July 20, 2004, arguing that businesses and residents were given an inadequate amount of time to respond to the proposed Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan and that public comments were limited to two minutes per person or business. The lawsuit also charged that, in violation of the state redevelopment law (LHRL), there was no relocation plan for the 1,000 families and 40 businesses that would be displaced (*CP*, July 31, 2004).

In parallel with the Cramer Hill case, SJLS also filed suit on behalf of 14 residents of the Waterfront South neighborhood and South Camden Citizens in Action. The Waterfront South case took a slightly different track, however. Unlike in Cramer Hill, the City Council did not initially approve the redevelopment plan for Waterfront South, despite the request of the chief operating officer (COO). Under MRERA, disputes between the City Council and the state-appointed COO, Randy Primas, are decided by Judge Orlando, and he overturned the council's decision and approved the redevelopment plan. SJLS sued, arguing that implementation of MRERA is depriving residents of their democratic right to representation and also charging procedural violations similar to those in the Cramer Hill suit. SJLS also alleged that the plan was unreasonable and unlawful because it further exacerbated the environmental degradation of that neighborhood and failed to eliminate blight.

Finally, SJLS filed suit on behalf of 65 residents and a community group in the Bergen Square neighborhood. As in the other suits, SJLS argued that the city was abusing its powers of eminent domain and was contributing to the affordable housing problem by demolishing so many existing affordable housing units and that — because the neighborhood's residents are predominantly poor and minority — the plan violates their constitutional and civil rights (*CP*, March 19, 2005).

In January 2006, Superior Court Judge Michael Kassel, now presiding over the combined cases, once again ruled the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan invalid, this time because witnesses had not been sworn before giving testimony to the Planning Board. The same technicality was sufficient to invalidate the Bergen Square plan as well and to force the city to redo a plan for the Lanning Square neighborhood that had already been approved by the Planning Board. The consequences of these legal challenges is that the major redevelopment plans in these three Camden neighborhoods are currently on hold, and CRA has announced its intention to negotiate new plans with neighborhood residents (*CP*, May 26, 2006).

## **Summary**

Contradicting the city's popular image of civic disorder and citizen apathy, the landscape of community-initiated civic engagement in Camden is populated by multiple organizations engaged in a wide variety of activities from physical revitalization to neighborhood advo-

cacy. During the long period of municipal paralysis over the past several decades, a well-developed nonprofit sector made up of community-based development organizations, grassroots groups, citywide coalitions, and faith-based organizations constituted the de facto institutions of governance in Camden.

Despite limited resources and difficult circumstances, this network of organizations has provided direct services to residents, promoted housing development and commercial revitalization, and represented neighborhood interests in political and decision-making processes. In several cases, neighborhood organizations have sponsored participatory neighborhood planning to guide community improvement and civic engagement. Along with federal funding for upgrading public housing, CDC production in some neighborhoods has represented the only significant game in town in terms of additions to the affordable housing stock (Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2006). Given the city's economic and political challenges over many decades, it is likely the case that Camden residents would have been left in even worse circumstances but for the efforts of community-based organizations to promote neighborhood development, intercede between residents and the city, and advocate on behalf of neighborhood interests. While these efforts could not reasonably be expected to overcome the city's larger economic and political problems on their own, Camden's neighborhood and citywide organizations represent a rich institutional resource on which public officials and funders might draw to facilitate civic engagement and redevelopment.

Camden residents and community organizations have employed various modes of engagement in attempts to alter both the process and the substance of redevelopment, when they believed that these were contrary to their interests. Because both the process of redevelopment and the substance of individual neighborhood projects have been formulated largely without community participation, community groups and residents are forced into a predominantly reactive mode, responding to decisions and actions in which they had little or no opportunity to participate.

Protest and litigation are the predominant modes of reactive engagement, and they have been effective in slowing and even stopping the implementation of some redevelopment proposals being enacted by CRA and private developers. Large-scale redevelopment in Cramer Hill, Bergen Square, Lanning Square, and Waterfront South have been halted by litigation, and their ultimate disposition is unclear at the time of this report. Although CRA has announced its intention to discuss the terms of redevelopment planning with residents in at least two neighborhoods — Cramer Hill and Lanning Square — it is too early to tell how this will be accomplished in practice (*CP*, May 26, 2006).



## Chapter 5

# Case Studies in Civic Engagement: The Process in Action

Two case studies illustrate the way redevelopment has unfolded to date in the Camden neighborhoods of Cramer Hill and Lanning Square. Both of these case studies involve the interaction between government- and citizen-initiated civic engagement in the ongoing attempt to delineate the goals, methods, and outcomes of redevelopment in these two neighborhoods.

### Case Study 1: Cramer Hill

Given its stable but declining housing stock, the high incidence of vacant properties and the isolation of neighborhood residents from the waterfront, Cramer Hill is ripe for redevelopment. (Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2004: 4)

This is a signature project for Camden and it could set the tone for what happens in other sections of town. (Randy Primas, Chief Operating Officer; Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2005)

It could have been done in many ways that would have been better, that wouldn't have been so alienating to the community. (Interview, community activist, June 2005)

Cramer Hill is a neighborhood in the northeast of Camden, stretching along a bend in the Delaware. To its west is North Camden (also called Pyne Point); to its east is the neighboring town of Pennsauken. Cramer Hill is largely Latino; approximately 65 percent of its 10,000 residents are Hispanic, compared with 38 percent for the rest of Camden. Although there is a large Puerto Rican community in Cramer Hill, there are also many families of Mexican, Dominican, and Nicaraguan heritage. A community with many single-family homes, homeownership rates were about 47 percent in 2000, according to the census. Cramer Hill's residential vacancy rate of about 9 percent is well below the 15 percent vacancy rate in neighboring North Camden and the 19 percent in the city as a whole.

Shortly after residents and community leaders in Cramer Hill released their revised neighborhood plan, *Cramer Hill Tomorrow*, in 2002 and the Cramer Hill Community Development Corporation (CHCDC) was formed to implement the plan, Camden officials began a process of identifying private developers to redevelop the neighborhood. The City Council

passed a resolution in June 2003 enabling the city to conduct a study declaring Cramer Hill to be an area in need of redevelopment (*CP*, June 12, 2003),<sup>20</sup> and the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) issued an RFQ/P (“Request for Qualifications and Proposals for Cramer Hill Project Area”) in August 2003 to solicit developer interest in the Cramer Hill neighborhood. Despite the release of the neighborhood plan, CRA’s redevelopment model assumed that a private developer would drive the process and craft an entirely new redevelopment plan for the area. In late September and early October 2003, CRA organized a series of meetings with the newly incorporated CHCDC and the Cramer Hill Business Association to describe CRA’s role in neighborhood redevelopment and explain its RFQ/P and developer-selection processes for Cramer Hill.

Responses to CRA’s solicitation of developer interest were due October 1, 2003. CRA and the participants on the RFQ/P committee were staggered by the unexpected response. They received seven proposals for the Cramer Hill neighborhood, one of which was submitted by Cherokee Investment Partners LLC, a major land developer with extensive New Jersey and national experience. As one participant described the reaction: “The Cramer Hill thing was an off-the-charts response. I’ve never seen anything like that. These guys came back with a billion-dollar plan for the neighborhood that stunned everybody. Everyone was shocked. Robert A. M. Stern doing architecture, and Cherokee. These are world-class people” (Interview, CDC executive director, 2005).

Cherokee’s proposal was indeed ambitious. It called for remediation of a contaminated landfill; construction of an 18-hole golf course on the remediated site; a marina; 5,000 housing units, including luxury waterfront housing and 1,000 units of affordable housing; 500,000 square feet of commercial development; and other upscale amenities. Cherokee Investment Partners is an established expert in environmental remediation and describes itself as a “horizontal developer,” meaning the company “acquires the land and permits, decontaminates it, adds the requisite infrastructure, such as roads, water, sewer and utilities, navigates the project through local planning and zoning boards, then sells off parcels to ‘vertical developers’” who “build the homes, schools and shopping centers” (*CP*, December 18, 2003a). As master developer, Cherokee would oversee the management of specific development projects within the Cramer Hill neighborhood.

At the time, the Coopers Ferry Development Association (CFDA), a downtown redevelopment corporation focused on the waterfront, was deeply involved in establishing the CHCDC as the primary Cramer Hill neighborhood development entity. CRA invited both organizations (CFDA and CHCDC) to review the proposals from the two developer finalists —

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<sup>20</sup>Throughout, “CP” refers to *Courier-Post*, and “PI” refers to *Philadelphia Inquirer*; see newspaper articles listed after the References.

OKKs Development and Cherokee Investment Partners — but asked them not to disclose information about the process. It is unclear how or even whether the views of the two organizations affected CRA's choice, but CRA selected Cherokee as the developer on the announced basis that Cherokee's plan more closely matched the neighborhood plan in *Cramer Hill Tomorrow*. On December 17, 2003, with Governor James McGreevey presiding over a press conference at City Hall, Chief Operating Officer (COO) Randy Primas announced Cherokee as the “conditional master redevelopers” of the Cramer Hill neighborhood (*CP*, December 18, 2003a; December 18, 2003b).

Public announcement of the Cherokee proposal left many questions unanswered for residents most directly affected by its large-scale objectives. With only a proposal and no approved redevelopment plan, the time table for neighborhood projects — including a new Washington Elementary School and long-awaited recreational facilities — was put on hold. The proposal prompted rumors of large-scale relocation of existing residents but no indication of who would be moved, when, or on what legal grounds this would be accomplished. The golf course, marina, and waterfront housing proved a stunning prospect for working-class and poor residents who wondered how these amenities would translate into “their” neighborhood renaissance. Quite the opposite was likely; they felt that they were being pushed out. The Cherokee announcement left Cramer Hill in a state of unrest.

The selection of Cherokee also produced organizational confusion, since CHCDC had hired Hillier, an architecture and planning firm, to draft a redevelopment plan. CRA viewed CHCDC as opposing its efforts and, in January 2004, created the Cramer Hill Steering Committee as an alternative institutional mechanism. According to a city official:

We decided we were going to use Cherokee. The [Cramer Hill] CDC already had a firm on board [to prepare a redevelopment plan] and was beginning. We said, “Hold on — we need to bring the developer we're going to be using into the fold, because we can't be using a plan that ignores what we're proposing, that has what the City has evaluated, endorsed, and accepted as what we want seen in Cramer Hill.” (Interview, city official, 2005)

The Steering Committee established by CRA was composed of residents, community groups, and representatives of Cherokee, the Camden Housing Authority, and county and state government agencies, including the Department of Transportation and the Department of Environmental Protection.

In February 2004, the CHCDC held its quarterly meeting, one of the first neighborhood events following the Cherokee announcement (*CP*, February 16, 2004). With COO Primas present at the meeting, neighborhood residents and CHCDC leadership challenged the merits and approaches of the Cherokee proposal. Contradicting the characterization of Cramer Hill as a

blighted neighborhood, speakers adamantly defended the community's vitality and described improvements that had already been made. But the opposition to Cherokee became increasingly divided. CHCDC's role as both a neighborhood civic organization and a participant in the RFQ/P selection process left it in a precarious position with both city officials and residents. Several residents claimed that CHCDC was not representative of the neighborhood. Differences of substance and legitimacy divided the community further over the following months, leading some neighborhood leaders to leave the CDC to form alternative organizations opposed to redevelopment both locally (for example, Bonafide Businesses and Residents of Cramer Hill) and at the citywide scale (Camden United).

CHCDC hosted a Town Hall meeting at Veterans Memorial Middle School in Cramer Hill on March 16, 2004, at which Randy Primas and the Department of Development and Planning introduced a draft of the designation study and Cherokee's development proposal (*CP*, March 17, 2004). An estimated 500 residents attended the event (*PI*, March 17, 2004). Primas responded to questions from the audience regarding housing relocation, affordable replacement housing, and a legally binding agreement to follow through on his and the city's promises. CRA announced that Cherokee's redevelopment plan would be sent to the Camden City Planning Board for approval on April 20, noting that resident input could be brought before the Planning Board at its public hearing as well as at the subsequent meeting of the City Council to vote on adoption of the redevelopment plan. Also at the March 16 meeting, however, CHCDC presented a list of demands to the COO, the Department of Planning, and the CRA regarding Cherokee's redevelopment plan. CHCDC specifically focused on the need for construction of affordable replacement housing in the neighborhood prior to relocation, public access to the golf course, and a ban on gated residential communities on the waterfront. CRA staff presented a list of public meetings that they would convene in the neighborhood during the following months to address residents' concerns. John Fuentes, a bilingual staff member, was hired by CRA specifically to work in the Cramer Hill neighborhood and conduct these meetings. The Town Hall meeting concluded with promises by Primas to work in the interests of the residents and business owners of Cramer Hill and the announcement of CRA-sponsored meetings on March 23 and 24, 2004, to be conducted in English and Spanish, respectively.

In mid-April 2004, the *Courier-Post* reported that Cramer Hill residents and business owners were concerned about the rapid speed of the planning process, the paucity of information about business and residential relocation, the need for affordable housing, the logic of the study designating Cramer Hill as in need of redevelopment, and the apparent lack of benefits from redevelopment for current community residents (*CP*, April 16, 2004). On April 15, another public meeting was held in Cramer Hill, with 74 attendees, to hear a presentation by Planning Director Charles Lyons on the updated draft of the redevelopment plan. Lyons responded to questions from the group, including questions about why a relocation plan had not yet been written. He responded that the purpose of the meeting was to collect public input and that the

relocation plan and the allocation of funds for relocation would come only after City Council adopted the redevelopment plan.

On April 28, 2004, CRA and Cherokee Investment Partners hosted a meeting to release a revised acquisition map for Cramer Hill properties (*CP*, April 28, 2004). The changes made to the buyout map primarily involved Cramer Hill Apartments and businesses lining River Avenue. The apartment complex and the businesses had negotiated themselves off the “to be acquired” list by showing that the properties were not blighted, as originally classified in the plan. An estimated 50 residents at the meeting called for the landfill remediation to be changed from a golf course to a public recreational facility. Residents also demanded a full list of properties “to be acquired” under the current redevelopment plan, but they were directed to the plan itself for review.

The Planning Board hearing to approve the Cramer Hill designation study and the redevelopment plan was scheduled for May 11, 2004 (*CP*, May 11, 2004). Leading up to the board meeting, an unidentified group plastered River Avenue and adjacent streets and businesses with “No Cherokee” signs (*PI*, May 7, 2004). Residents of the Ablett Village and Centennial Village public housing complexes claimed that they would fight against the demolition of their apartments until they had firm assurance that they would receive affordable replacement housing within the neighborhood.

By the day of the Planning Board hearing, it became clear that two or more camps had emerged within the community in response to the proposed Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan. CHCDC and its executive director, Byron Woodson, took a less adversarial approach to the proposed plan, demanding that replacement housing be built in Cramer Hill prior to the inevitable relocations (*CP*, May 11, 2004). Thomas Holmes, then co-chair of the CHCDC, suggested that the Planning Board postpone the hearing for a few more weeks to gather more input from residents (*CP*, May 12, 2004). Displaying a more adversarial approach, Bonafide Businesses and Residents of Cramer Hill mobilized 40 residents to march to City Hall, where they joined 300 others already assembled to protest the proposed plan, which they claimed had been written without community input. After waiting for several hours outside City Hall — having been barred entry until the hearing of the plan began — 150 people were allowed into City Council chambers to voice their concerns, while 200 people remained outside chanting in opposition (*CP*, May 12, 2004).

At the hearing, South Jersey Legal Services (SJLS) delivered a statement to the Planning Board on behalf of tenants’ groups at Ablett Village and Centennial Village, whose apartments were slated for demolition under the proposed plan. An SJLS representative asserted that copies of the proposal were available only one day before the Planning Board hearing, leaving insufficient time for residents to digest the information and respond to the proposal. After much

deliberation, the Planning Board voted to table a decision and convened another meeting to be held the following week at Veterans Memorial Middle School in Cramer Hill. The neighborhood groups opposing the plan claimed a victory in their fight to slow down the process, obtain more information and better communication for residents and businesses, and force other changes in the plan.

Leading up to the second Planning Board hearing scheduled for May 18, 2004, confusion ensued among residents who received letters indicating that their properties would be acquired by the city as part of the redevelopment project. The letters stated that property owners had 14 days to accept the city's offer or "we will assume that settlement by agreement cannot be reached and condemnation proceedings will, as a matter of necessity, be instituted" (*CP*, May 19, 2004; *PI*, May 19, 2004). A reported 800 people came out to the special hearing of the Planning Board, filling the 650-seat auditorium and leaving nearly 200 people waiting outside. A majority of those attending testified against the proposed plan in a meeting that lasted more than five hours. In the end, however, the Planning Board approved the designation of Cramer Hill as an area in need of redevelopment and approved the redevelopment plan.

Prior to introducing the Cramer Hill Needs Designation and Redevelopment Plan to City Council on June 15, 2004, Council President Angel Fuentes asked the CRA to address a list of concerns raised by City Council members and residents of Cramer Hill. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* quotes Fuentes, who stated: "The lack of clear information available to residents at that time should have caused the planning board to pause and genuinely inquire into and address the constituents' concerns prior to moving . . . forward" (*PI*, May 26, 2004). The City Council did not slow down the process, however, claiming that the CRA had acted subsequently to respond to residents' concerns.

The City Council unanimously approved the Cramer Hill Needs Designation and Redevelopment Plan on first reading, on June 15, 2004, while 40 protesters rallied outside City Hall (*CP*, June 16, 2004; *PI*, June 16, 2004). Camden United, a citywide organization opposed to the redevelopment process as it was being implemented, presented criticism of the plan and of the state takeover, which it claimed had "disenfranchised" Camden's residents. At the second reading of the study and plan, on the afternoon of June 30, 2004, at Rutgers University-Camden (a time and location criticized by many city activists as being inaccessible to many in the community), the City Council again approved the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan under threat of litigation by residents and businesses and the testimony of 32 individuals opposing the Cherokee project (*CP*, July 1, 2004). Tenants of Ablett Village submitted a petition with more than 200 signatures in opposition to the plan. Among the concerns raised by those who testified were that the data on blighted parcels were suspect and that the rationale for the needs determination and the guarantee of affordable housing for relocation within the neighborhood all remained un-

specified. The plan passed regardless of this opposition, enabling CRA to begin the implementation process with the approval of the City Council.

A new player emerged in the redevelopment arena in July 2004: the Cramer Hill Residents Association (CHRA) (*CP*, July 20, 2004). CHRA held a protest at the State Capitol on July 29, 2004, to challenge CRA's decision to choose a private developer, Cherokee Investment Partners, to oversee redevelopment in Cramer Hill (*CP*, July 30, 2004). The following day, a civil suit was filed by SJLS that charged the Planning Board, City Council, mayor, and COO with violating redevelopment law in New Jersey and the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA), the law that instituted the state takeover of Camden's municipal government (*PI*, July 30, 2004). The next day, three area businesses filed a separate lawsuit against the same defendants (*CP*, July 31, 2004).

At this juncture, Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP) conducted a survey of 400 Cramer Hill residents through four neighborhood churches to assess residents' attitudes regarding the redevelopment process. Based on survey results suggesting a high degree of concern about the future, the churches decided to focus on urging the city to provide a relocation plan early in the process. Representatives of CCOP traveled to East Baltimore to learn how that city had handled relocation. They learned that East Baltimore had a relocation plan in place before it initiated redevelopment, which enabled the planners to estimate the costs of relocation and identify funding sources to meet those costs. They also assigned a social worker to help people through the process, and they paid owners a reasonable amount for their homes.

CCOP held a protest (or "action") with CRA Director Arijit De in October 2004 to request that CRA develop a fair relocation plan with a workable time line and a clear step-by-step process (*CP*, October 6, 2004). The use of Baltimore as an example of "responsible relocation" was echoed throughout the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005 by both CCOP and the Association for the Revitalization of Camden City (ARCC). In response, COO Primas subsequently made a series of pledges regarding relocation, including the promise of "a house for a house" for displaced homeowners who had tax liens under \$20,000 (Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2004). On October 6, 2004, CRA released a relocation plan for 987 households in Cramer Hill, including 300 homeowners and 687 renters (*PI*, October 7, 2004).

The four pending lawsuits introduced by SJLS and four Cramer Hill businesses were allowed to advance under a ruling delivered by Superior Court Judge Francis J. Orlando, Jr., on January 7, 2005 (*CP*, January 8, 2005). Under the ruling, Judge Orlando agreed to explore four allegations, including a possible conflict of interest on the part of City Council president Angel Fuentes, who owned property in Cramer Hill; the failure by the City Council to consider six recommendations made by the Planning Board on adopting the redevelopment plan; the lack of

an adequate relocation plan; and whether the Cramer Hill plan was consistent with proposed developments in Camden County.

The City Council approved the reintroduction of the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan on February 3, 2005, and reapproved the needs determination (*CP*, February 3, 2005). At the same meeting, the council tabled a decision on an ordinance approving the acquisition of 72 properties (43 occupied) in Cramer Hill using eminent domain. Again, on February 16, 2005, the City Council affirmed its prior approval of the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan by reapproving it for a second time (*CP*, February 17, 2005). With the vote scheduled for noontime, only one Cramer Hill resident attended the meeting.

In order to halt the city's acquisition of the 72 properties in Cramer Hill, SJLS filed an injunction for a restraining order in Superior Court on March 18, 2005, arguing that condemning the properties was premature, given that no redevelopment plan had been properly adopted and that the State of New Jersey was acting without authority in Camden (*CP*, March 19, 2005; *PI*, March 19, 2005). On April 8, 2005, Superior Court Judge Orlando barred the city from taking houses in Cramer Hill.

Divisions within the neighborhood continued to be apparent, reflecting substantial differences of strategy and opinion within the Cramer Hill community (*CP*, September 28, 2005). Beginning in September 2005, CHCDC sponsored a series of meetings between community residents and representatives of Cherokee and CRA to negotiate a "community benefits agreement" to be adopted as a provision of the redevelopment plan. Several other community-based organizations, including the Cramer Hill Residents Association, announced their refusal to participate, arguing that negotiating over "benefits" implied the legitimacy of the redevelopment plan and the process by which it was being advanced.

Subsequently, a *Courier-Post* article reported that Cherokee had paid \$250,000 for staff salaries at CRA — the agency charged with reviewing and approving redevelopment contracts with developers. While COO Primas was quoted saying that such payments are normal in "any city in the nation that does a redevelopment plan" (*CP*, November 8, 2005), CRA Director Arijit De's statement to the effect that his mistake was in *admitting* that the funds were used for salaries further fueled concerns about whose interests were being served by the Cramer Hill redevelopment plan.

In April 2006, Superior Court Judge Michael Kassel unexpectedly ruled on the combined legal challenges filed by SJLS and the Cramer Hill businesses by declaring the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan invalid because witnesses testifying before the Planning Board had not been legally sworn. The ruling, which also applied to redevelopment plans in the Lanning Square and Bergen Square neighborhoods, effectively put the redevelopment process on hold while under appeal. A month later, on May 26, 2006, the *Courier-Post* reported that CRA had

“scrapped” the Cramer Hill Redevelopment Plan and “will go back to the beginning, holding neighborhood meetings to ask residents what they want, and taking as few homes as possible.” COO Primas is quoted as saying: “We are not deaf. We have listened to our residents.” At the same time, however, according to the article, Primas stated that Cherokee would continue to be involved in the redevelopment, and CRA has subsequently proceeded to acquire property for replacement housing in anticipation of the demolition of Ablett Village and Centennial Village public housing projects in Cramer Hill (CRA Board meeting, June 7, 2006).

## **Case Study 2: Lanning Square**

Lanning Square is a neighborhood of nearly 4,000 residents, south of City Hall and the central business district. Directly west is some of Camden’s highly touted waterfront development, including the Adventure Aquarium, and to its east is Cooper Hospital. Although Lanning Square is predominantly African-American (about 60 percent), it has increasing numbers of Latino families (now at about 38 percent), with non-Latino whites at around 2 percent. Its poverty rate in 2000 was 42 percent, slightly higher than Camden’s 36 percent. With large areas of vacant land (its residential vacancy was at 24 percent in the 2000 census), it nonetheless had more than a 50 percent homeownership rate and five-year mobility rate significantly lower than Camden as a whole.

Shortly before the Cherokee Investment Partner’s redevelopment plan for Cramer Hill was unveiled, the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) also began to officially pursue the redevelopment of Lanning Square. The conflict and litigation that developed in Cramer Hill dominated media coverage of the city’s redevelopment efforts and propelled into public debate questions about relocation, eminent domain, and the decision-making process. As the pace of redevelopment began to pick up in Lanning Square, many hoped that this case offered an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the troubled effort in Cramer Hill, and some touted Lanning Square as an “alternative model” of redevelopment (Interview, nonprofit staff member, 2005).

In a resolution dated June 26, 2003, the Camden City Council “requested that the Planning Board determine if the Lanning Square area, as defined in the City of Camden’s Master Plan, is in need of redevelopment, and if so, that they prepare a Redevelopment Plan for it” (Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2003: 2). This marked the formal beginning of the most recent attempt at redevelopment in Lanning Square, a neighborhood scarred by failed attempts at urban renewal in previous decades. A week later, CRA issued a combined “Request for Qualifications and Request for Proposals (RFQ/RFP) to select a qualified Developer(s) to redevelop and improve the housing stock and associated areas in the Lanning Square and Bergen Square neighborhoods” (Camden Redevelopment Agency, 2003: 2). The RFQ/P referred to the City Council’s authorization to embark on a study that would determine whether Lanning Square met the criteria of state redevelopment law for designating the area as in need of redevelopment.

Completion of the needs determination study, originally scheduled for September 2003, was rescheduled for November 30, 2004 — more than a year later and almost a month after an article titled “Redevelopment Has Residents, Firms in Limbo” appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 5, 2004). In November 2004, the city provisionally named as developers for the Lanning Square neighborhood a partnership consisting of three for-profit developers: Westrum and K. Hovnanian, market-rate-housing developers; Pennrose Properties, an affordable-housing developer; and St. Joseph’s Carpenter Society, a well-established CDC that planned on doing small in-fill projects and rehabilitation (*PI*, November 5, 2004). At that time, however, the Lanning Square “Determination of Need Study” and the “Presentation of Redevelopment Plan” had not yet been completed. Nor had they been seen by the public, which was not to attend a hearing on these matters for almost another year after that, or almost two years after the official launch of the project by CRA.

The lead-up to the November 30, 2004, Planning Board meeting — originally called to approve the Lanning Square needs determination and redevelopment plan — was not without public opposition. An article in the *Courier-Post* on November 17, 2004, described a November 16 meeting of developers and business owners to prereview the plans that was also attended by angry residents of the Lanning Square and Cooper Plaza neighborhoods. According to the news article, residents stated at the meeting that they felt they “had no say in the acquisition of their properties for the development of their neighborhood. . . . ‘This is a shame that we are being put out,’ said Pino Rodriguez, a Royden Street resident, who blames the city for leaving people out of the decision-making process” (*CP*, November 17, 2004). Residents also claimed that waterfront development located only two blocks away was not doing enough to benefit the community. The chief of planning, Charles Lyons, told residents at the preview meeting that they would have a chance to express their discontent at the Planning Board hearing scheduled for November 30.

More than 400 city residents attended the November 30 meeting, but the needs designation and redevelopment plans for Lanning Square and Cooper Plaza were not considered as scheduled. Consideration of the Lanning Square plan was canceled at the last minute, with the city offering the explanation that the plans were not yet back from the printer.

In a significant departure from earlier practice, CRA then asked The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), the housing finance intermediary focused on neighborhood revitalization, to work with Lanning Square residents on a planning process. For its part, TRF saw the area as one of the most promising in the city, for a number of reasons: The neighborhood is a reasonable size, is directly adjacent to the waterfront and downtown, and has manageable infrastructure needs. In addition, several large institutions, including Cooper Hospital and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, had expressed their intention to invest in the neighborhood (Interview, TRF staff member, 2005).

TRF identified existing community organizations — including the Lanning Square West Community Organization, religious institutions, block groups, and community leaders — and engaged them in the planning effort. With Ford Foundation funding, TRF launched a neighborhood planning process in which community residents surveyed property conditions, developed a local planning capacity, and considered the future of the neighborhood. According to one resident involved in the process: “We started meeting with TRF Saturdays, and then on Wednesdays, too. We would meet two or three times a week, and then met every Wednesday. That took place over a two-month period. During that period, we were trained in assessing housing [quality and conditions] and went about and assessed all the houses. At some point, the community bought into it” (Interview, neighborhood resident, 2005).

As in other neighborhoods, residents of Lanning Square were primarily concerned about the substantial property takings proposed in the city’s redevelopment plan. The original city-sponsored plan included 217 occupied properties (166 residential and 51 nonresidential) on its “to be acquired” list and 32 additional occupied properties as “may be acquired.” Thus, more than 200 occupied properties, of just over 700 total properties in the neighborhood, would be acquired in the city-sponsored plan, in a neighborhood with a vacancy rate of 24 percent. In response, TRF and the community developed a plan centered on voluntary acquisition that reduced residential relocations from 166 households to 48. Recognizing the community’s negative experiences with prior redevelopment efforts, and hoping to avoid the mistakes made in Cramer Hill, TRF and the developers understood the importance of providing replacement housing before taking any homes. The TRF/community plan identified sites in the neighborhood for 161 homes to be available for existing residents, who could stay within the neighborhood with a supportive relocation package worked out by TRF and the foundations.

A few days before the Planning Board hearing on the Lanning Square needs study and redevelopment plan — now rescheduled for June 28, 2005 (the same week that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Kelo v. New London*, the controversial eminent domain case mentioned in Chapter 4) — CRA decided to reject the alternative plan brokered by TRF and revert to its original redevelopment plan, with its multiple relocations. As one staff person put it, “acquisition was a reality” (Interview, city official, 2005), prompting a neighborhood resident to observe: “The City’s idea of civic engagement is to ask: ‘When would you like your house torn down? Would you like it [to be] torn down this month or next month?’” (Interview, neighborhood resident, 2005). The city’s decision to reinstate the original plan was based on the beliefs that voluntary relocations would not work, that the city would need to go down the same path again in a year or two to continue the redevelopment, and that the alternative planning effort would not prevent the inevitable lawsuits (Interview, nonprofit staff member, 2005).

The five-hour hearing before the Planning Board on June 28, 2005, was the first public opportunity for neighborhood residents to comment on the redevelopment plan for Lanning

Square since the City Council's authorization of the designation study and redevelopment plan fully two years earlier, on June 26, 2003. Residents expressed their dissatisfaction over the magnitude of relocation, the lack of replacement housing, incompatibility with the city's Master Plan, methods used to assess housing conditions in the designation study, and other issues. One neighborhood resident testified before the Planning Board, "A city government that has to resort to mandatory relocation to improve the quality of life is a city government that is out of touch with the residents of the community." Nonetheless, the Planning Board voted to approve both the designation of Lanning Square as an area "in need of redevelopment" and the city's redevelopment plan, and it forwarded both decisions to the City Council for final approval.

## Summary

Redevelopment is a work in progress in Cramer Hill and Lanning Square. Final outcomes, if any, may well be many years in the future. In the contentious process leading to those outcomes, however, both case studies illustrate the interplay between government-initiated and citizen-initiated engagement. To date, government-initiated engagement has largely entailed information dissemination regarding completed decisions but very limited pro forma opportunities, such as public hearings, for residents to express their interests and opinions. These opportunities have generally come at a point where such expressions appear to have little or no effect on decision outcomes.

Notwithstanding the limited nature of government-initiated opportunities for public participation, residents, community groups, and citywide organizations are expanding the palette of civic engagement by finding ways to express their views and interests. In Cramer Hill and Lanning Square, residents have employed protest and litigation as modes of engagement to force consideration of their points of view. Protest has erupted when residents have appropriated government-initiated mechanisms, such as mandated public hearings, to express their positions. Protest has also occurred in venues organized by residents and advocates, such as neighborhood meetings, CCOP-style citizen "actions," and public forums held in churches, schools, and meeting halls called to discuss critical elements of the redevelopment process. Litigation has slowed implementation of redevelopment and relocation planning, possibly forcing consideration of alternatives that impose fewer costs on neighborhood residents.

The current state of civic engagement that is illustrated by these case studies can be characterized as adversarial. Displacement and relocation have emerged as major points of contention in neighborhoods targeted for large-scale redevelopment. As a practical matter, the scale of proposed displacement that is entailed in redevelopment plans for Cramer Hill and Lanning Square and the city's failure to develop, finance, and communicate a plan for relocation in a timely manner provide a target for criticism of the city's redevelopment process in these two neighborhoods. Symbolically, these failures are cited by opponents as indications of the city's

disregard for residents and the privileging of developers' priorities over residents' needs. The case studies illustrate that the forms of government-initiated civic engagement employed to date have been insufficient to address these concerns before they rise to the level of overt conflict and opposition. In this vacuum, community-initiated engagement constitutes a search for mechanisms through which to incorporate neighborhood concerns into the decision-making process.



## Chapter 6

# Conclusions

There is very much a sense in the city and state government that we need to produce. We invested this money, and we want to see something. They want to see a restaurant or a new housing project. Residents see it as a tidal wave. Everyone wanted state receivership. They want police, garbage picked up on time. When it snows, I expect it to be plowed. When we heard the state was coming in, taking away our right to vote, people didn't fight it. No one communicated that this meant people were going to have to move, and on a large scale. It's about me and my children. Am I going to get pushed someplace else? (Interview, community organizer, 2005)

What government has forgotten is how important it is to engage community in the process. There's been a flip. Now government has surfaced as a player, but rather than being a partner, they've become a partner that tells everyone when and how to do it. But they should remember that these communities can mobilize when they choose to. They can't be the quarterback of a venture; they've got to be a partner. They are too much a quarterback about when and how things get done, rather than a partner. (Interview, nonprofit executive director, 2005)

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Civic engagement in Camden's redevelopment contends with the two distinct but closely related issues of ends and means. On the one hand are debates and disagreements over the end-products, or *outcomes*, of redevelopment. These debates address such issues as the size and scale of redevelopment projects, the magnitude of required relocation, the respective roles for nonprofit and private developers, the relative shares of market-rate and affordable housing, the resulting mix of land uses, and the like. On the other hand, and equally in contention, are debates and disagreements over the *process* through which these substantive decisions should be made. How should residents, community organizations, developers, and public officials interact in defining goals, setting priorities, delineating options, and selecting projects for implementation? What process can best help to reconcile differences both within and between these disparate constituencies?

The challenge moving forward is to devise a process of civic engagement that improves the chances for agreement on these questions of means and ends, based on recognition of mutual needs and the possibility of mutual gains. Few, if any, who are concerned with Camden's

future oppose redevelopment per se, and most recognize that redevelopment is unlikely to succeed without at least the tacit support of contending constituencies.

The question at stake is thus not whether civic engagement is necessary or possible but rather how, when, and under what terms it occurs. Civic engagement is already a reality. Government mandates it by statute and needs it, as a practical matter, for legitimacy. Citizens engage themselves through protest, litigation, and other means available to them. The question of civic engagement is not *if* but *how* — not whether but for what purpose, through what mechanisms, and to what effect.

The necessity to address these questions openly and directly is particularly acute in Camden today. Substantial resources are lined up behind the city's recovery. These include institutional and financial resources attendant on the state's takeover of municipal operations (discussed in Chapter 3), the unprecedented scale of proposed private investment, and significant support offered by private foundations. But the effort has faltered without the requisite public support. As a means to reconcile contending visions, civic engagement can spell the critical difference between success and failure.

Despite the magnitude of the stakes and the ramifications of failure, civic engagement in Camden can best be characterized as adversarial rather than collaborative. In neighborhoods like Cramer Hill and Lanning Square (see Chapter 5), disputes between the Camden Redevelopment Agency (CRA) and community advocates have brought redevelopment to a standstill. This is certainly not the case in all neighborhoods, but it has happened when there has been insufficient engagement with residents in redevelopment planning.

From the standpoint of government-initiated civic engagement, existing statutory requirements are minimally useful. Opportunities for public participation are extremely limited and come too late in the decision process to directly affect outcomes. By adopting the rhetoric but not the substance of participation, the statutory requirements may actually preempt opportunities for effective engagement. By prespecifying procedures, the statutes remove important procedural decisions from the arena of public debate while leaving substantial room for interpretation on the part of the implementing agencies.

In neighborhoods where redevelopment has become controversial, information dissemination constitutes the city's principal mode of civic engagement. In this "informing" mode of participation (Arnstein, 1969), information flows *from* decision-makers *to* residents. Residents are recipients of information regarding completed decisions rather than a source of information used to guide decisions. When efforts to disseminate information have been adopted, they have been hampered by capacity constraints of city agencies, the speed and magnitude of proposed redevelopment, rhetorical reliance on the city's structural deficit to justify actions, and a legacy of distrust of municipal government.

From the standpoint of citizen-initiated civic engagement, protest, litigation, and other forms of activism have proved effective in placing (and keeping) residents' concerns on the public agenda. Widespread concerns over involuntary displacement and relocation, among other issues, have slowed or stopped the implementation of redevelopment proposals in several neighborhoods and may have forced a reconsideration of the scale of displacement. On the other hand, engagement in the form of protest and litigation limits the community's role to one of reactive response in the absence of proactive opportunities to shape redevelopment to community needs.

Recent experience offers several examples of constructive alternatives for civic engagement in Camden. Several neighborhoods — including North Camden, Cramer Hill, Parkside, and Waterfront South — have produced neighborhood plans based on extensive discussion, deliberation, and mutual learning among residents, business owners, and other stakeholders. The contrast between Parkside, where the city has broadly supported and facilitated the neighborhood planning effort, and Cramer Hill, where CRA set aside the neighborhood plan in favor of Cherokee Investment Partners' proposal, may be instructive for forging a citywide strategy for civic engagement. Neighborhood-based redevelopment is proceeding in Parkside, guided by the collaborative planning effort, while Cherokee's plan for Cramer Hill is mired in litigation and protest and may have been "scrapped" (*CP*, May 26, 2006).<sup>21</sup> The city's recent Master Plan process may offer a similarly useful template for constructive civic engagement.

Nurturing a flourishing civic sector in Camden is itself an important goal of (as well as a tool for) accomplishing urban and neighborhood revitalization. The city's rich network of neighborhood-based community development and advocacy organizations is a valuable resource to be nourished and supported as an institutional base for expanded civic engagement.

Recent developments following the court's invalidation of redevelopment plans in several Camden neighborhoods suggest the possibility that alternative strategies may be open for consideration. According to the *Courier-Post* report, "Camden will go back to the beginning, holding neighborhood meetings to ask residents what they want, and taking as few homes as possible. 'We are not deaf,' [former Chief Operating Officer] Primas said. 'We have listened to our residents'" (*CP*, May 26, 2006).

A follow-up report will document how these processes unfold in practice and will examine the following developments, among others:

- Debates over the extension of the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act (MRERA) beyond the original five-year recovery period and,

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<sup>21</sup>Throughout, "CP" refers to *Courier-Post*, and "PI" refers to *Philadelphia Inquirer*; see newspaper articles listed after the References.

particularly, whether extension proposals contain a reconsideration of civic engagement provisions

- Changes in CRA's strategy of civic engagement, including expansion beyond information dissemination and uses of collaborative problem-solving
- Descriptions of civic engagement practices across Camden neighborhoods that are differentiated by the role of nonprofits, variations in developers' interests, the scale of redevelopment, and modes of public intervention
- The expansion of civic engagement to the regional scale

Appendix

**Project Methodology:  
Inventory of Civic Associations**

## **Introduction**

To construct a baseline of existing civic institutions and forms of civic engagement, the Rutgers team developed an Inventory of Civic Associations comprising more than 70 selected nonprofit organizations in Camden. The inventory includes only organizations whose primary focus is community development, housing, land use, and/or closely related issues. It excludes organizations primarily involved in social service delivery, social clubs, fraternal organizations, or substantive areas not included in the above categories (such as education, public health, safety, and criminal justice).

The inventory identifies organizations by name, address, primary contact, type of organization, and a brief description of involvement in the redevelopment process. Included organizations vary widely in size, type, neighborhood or citywide focus, substantive activities, and forms of engagement. The inventory was used to map the landscape of civic engagement in Camden and to identify organizations for intensive follow-up interviews.

## **Data Collection**

The inventory was compiled with overlapping information from three main sources: charitable organizations, press accounts, and key informants.

### **Charitable Organizations**

The first step was to compile a master list of charitable organizations currently active in the city of Camden. Charitable organizations are those recognized under Section 501(c)(3) of the federal Internal Revenue Code as having a primary purpose of serving the public interest. The primary source for this information was online databases kept by the Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute in Washington, DC, and at the Foundation Center in New York. Organizations with primary or secondary purposes other than community development, housing, land use, and/or closely related issues were filtered out.

The Rutgers team then reviewed selected Information Returns (IRS Form 990) to identify contact information, program activity, and relationships to other Camden-area nonprofit organizations.

### **Press Accounts**

A second step in compiling the inventory was a comprehensive review of local media accounts of the redevelopment process, focusing on profiling the civic sector at two levels:

- A broad scan of all organizations, public agencies, and community leaders identified in the redevelopment-related press since late 2003
- A focused review of targeted neighborhoods and selected redevelopment plans, to create organizational landscapes dating back to the mid-1990s or earlier

This produced a short-list of organizations and players active in the redevelopment process and singled out by local media either for comment or for other newsworthy behavior (for example, filing a brief, organizing a petition drive, launching a lawsuit). This list also included organizations that had once been active around issues of public capacity or urban redevelopment, but which were either defunct or had changed programmatic focus.

Rutgers staff then used a Web-search methodology to add contact information, details about program activities or geographic focus, and any other relevant information about their engagement in the redevelopment process.

### **Key Informants**

As a final step, the Rutgers team interviewed local informants and asked them to identify key local organizations or associations. Informants included community development collaboratives, intermediaries, and other organizations with a broad view of the civic sector in Camden, such as the Camden Coalition of Community Development Associations (CCDA), The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), and the Department of Urban Studies at Rutgers-Camden.

## **Inventorying and Mapping**

The information collected was compiled into three formats that together comprise the Inventory of Civic Associations:

- The first is a master inventory of Camden civic associations, providing details on each organization's program activities, geographic focus, and the time period of activity.
- The second format is a map of Camden's neighborhoods showing the localization of organizations. This is meant to provide an initial analysis of the geographic distribution of Camden's civic sector.
- The third format is more specific organizational landscapes for neighborhoods undergoing redevelopment planning, including Cramer Hill, Bergen Square, Lanning Square, and Central Waterfront.



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## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.