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## Staying on Track

### *Camden's resurgence won't be slowed by the pandemic.*

"We have not skipped a beat in the city of Camden." Those words from Mayor Frank Moran exemplify the upward trajectory of the community, despite the pandemic's continuing impact on the economy at large.

In 2019, Camden saw another batch of projects come to fruition. The Joint Health Sciences Center, a \$70 million collaborative research facility comprised of Rowan University, Rutgers University-Camden, Camden County College and Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, opened last October. Other notable projects included the Camden Tower and 11 Cooper, the first market-rate luxury apartment complex in Camden in 50 years.

Although this has proved to be a unique year, 2020 is further ushering in the city's rebirth with more development activity. West Berlin's ResinTech will soon relocate to Federal Street with an expectation to employ more than 300 people, many of whom will be Camden residents, and Bristol, Pennsylvania's ActionPak is opening inside a 175,000-square-foot building on River Road. Construction has kept pace on these projects, as well as on the Hilton Garden Inn, Camden's first hotel in a half century.

"This hotel says a lot," Camden County Freeholder Director Louis Cappelli Jr. says. "To have a Hilton investment in our city reflects the transformation that is taking place here, and shows there are even better days ahead."



Moran concurs, adding that Camden's BBB+ rating from S&P—awarded prior to the pandemic—shows the city's finances continue to be in good standing and the state recognizes that. "These projects show there is confidence—confidence in the local economy, confidence in safety and confidence in the future stability of Camden," he says. "Where there was once an exodus, now we're seeing a turnaround, and jobs are readily available even during the pandemic."

In fact, Camden was seeing record low unemployment before March, and although it has spiked temporarily while folks wait to return to work normally, Moran is confident those numbers will return.

Infrastructure improvements are underway for roads, sewer lines and lighting, and a grant from the Department of Transportation will provide a much-needed shot in the arm, says Moran.

Officials in Camden continue to lobby for people to move to the city. More than 1,000 new homes have been built in the last year or so, including market-rate housing, and the Branch Village affordable housing site is entering the next phase of the application process. Other attractive developments, both of which are expected to open in fall 2021, include the new \$133 million Camden High School, which will feature state-of-the-art media centers, science labs, auditoriums and more, and Cramer Hill Waterfront Park, a regional park with views of the Philadelphia skyline and Petty's Island with recreation opportunities and wildlife.

To prepare for the coming influx of employees and residents, a revamp of the Walter Rand Transportation Center (WRTC) couldn't come at a better time. Cappelli says the freeholders accepted a \$7 million grant from NJ Transit to finance a pedestrian bridge spanning Martin Luther King Boulevard, connecting businesses on

one side with the transit building on the other. WRTC handles approximately 10,000 people daily, and numbers are only expected to rise as development continues in Camden.

“The WRTC as it is now is obsolete and in need of redevelopment to make it a modern, state-of-the-art transportation center, and we envision offices and possibly residential space as well,” Cappelli says. “It’s a big, exciting project that we hope comes to fruition shortly.”

### **Honoring Longstanding Businesses**

While a majority of the headlines prop up the new companies coming to Camden, credit is due to the businesses that have called it home for decades. Like Bell Pharmacy for instance. The oldest pharmacy in Camden, located in the Parkside neighborhood, is owned by brother and sister Anthony Minniti and Marian Morton. In an era when pharmacies are migrating to chains such as CVS and Walgreens, Bell maintains its independence and focuses on serving the needs of the immediate community.

“We see a big expansion in the home health care market where people are choosing to stay home for treatment instead of going into nursing homes and care facilities,” says Minniti. “In many cases these patients and caregivers don’t know how to navigate the overall marketplace of health care. We purchased and integrated Amstar Medical Transportation, an ambulance/medical transportation company into our model to serve as a complete service solution for the growing home health care population. Now, instead of finding a separate pharmacy and transportation, those needs are taken care of by one entity.”

As witness to the successful redevelopment in Camden’s downtown, Bell Pharmacy set out to be an example to its community. Minniti, who was once mayor of Cinnaminson and oversaw redevelopment along Route 130, says the success of any redevelopment depends on the small business community. “We wanted to put our best foot forward,” he says, so the pharmacy, which previously operated behind boarded-up windows and partitions, was returned to its former glory with a more welcoming facade and a nod to its history inside where unique artifacts are displayed.

“We’re on a prominent corner of Haddon Avenue and Kaighn Avenue, and it deserved to come up to the level of importance, especially being in a direct midpoint between Virtua and Cooper hospitals,” he says. “We hope other businesses see what we have done and follow our lead.”

Another organization that has called Camden home since 1953 is Coriell Institute for Medical Research. This world-class medical research facility conducts research in biobanking, personalized medicine and stem cell biology, as well as generates biomaterials.

In the “Eds and Meds” sector of Camden’s economy, Coriell plays a unique role, and “bolsters the city’s global reputation for basic science and ability to draw research dollars from the National Institutes of Health (NIH),” says President and CEO Jean-Pierre Issa, MD. “NIH funding is a known driver of economic growth across the United States, and Coriell receives more NIH funding than any other institution in Southern Jersey.”

The institute continues to stay on the cutting edge of research, and just last September joined the Human Pangenome Project, which will work to fill in the gaps of the first human genome sequence. With collaboration from other organizations, Coriell will coordinate with the sample collection and assist with cell line creation, quality assessment, storage and distribution, among others.

It has also renewed several major contracts, which solidify Coriell’s main business for years to come, and its place in Camden. “The city and state have been good to Coriell in its nearly 70 years of existence. Through a grant-in-aid, the state supports Coriell each year which allows it to make significant investments in its

infrastructure and our colleagues in Camden make exciting collaborations possible. Camden is an ideal location for the Coriell Institute,” says Issa.

### **The Pandemic's Impact**

If this experience has proven anything about Camden, it's the ongoing commitment to the community from all levels, including local and state governments and businesses.

Camden's medical institutions have played a critical role in testing and caring for those with COVID-19, and were among the top talent called upon by Gov. Phil Murphy for managing the outbreak. That includes Coriell's Issa, who was tapped for the governor's Restart and Recovery Council.

“A pandemic such as this is an all-hands-on-deck moment for those in the life sciences,” Issa says. “The state reached out to many research organizations including Coriell to help out in the testing shortage it experienced early on. We were able to confirm that saliva is an appropriate source for detecting COVID-19, and we provided testing kits and solutions to local sites such as Cooper. ... Navigating the state through this pandemic is an enormous challenge and groups like Coriell have made New Jersey one of the most equipped states in the country in designing its response.”

In the face of sudden unemployment and business closures, major corporations took immediate action to assist. Moran says the Cooper Foundation purchased \$175,000 worth of face masks and distributed them in the city. For high school students, remote learning was made just a bit easier with a donation of \$400,000 from Campbell Soup, the Cooper Foundation, Cooper's Ferry Partnership, Townsend Press and the Camden Education Fund toward the purchase of laptops.

Campbell Soup Company, which itself just celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2019, has made giving back a part of the fabric of the company, says Mark Clouse, president and CEO. He says the organization knew food insecurity would be a major issue of the pandemic and to date has donated more than \$5.8 million to support towns in North America where it has operations. In Camden, it delivered the equivalent of nearly 125,000 meals through food and financial support.

“While the need was great, we also found that there was a strong will among the business community to help. For example, when our Camden neighbors, NFI, learned about our plans to donate food, they immediately offered to help deliver our product donations in harder-to-reach areas,” Clouse says. “We quickly partnered with NFI to distribute product donations from our distribution centers to food banks in Florida and Utah.”

For a company that produces pantry staples, Campbell also saw a huge increase in demand as a result of the pandemic, says Clouse. “We have literally been working around the clock to ensure the stores and communities have the food they need. ... We've recognized the extraordinary efforts of our teams by providing premium pay for our front-line employees.”

The South Jersey Port Corporation (SJPC), which consists of several major marine terminals, has remained fully operational during the pandemic. Executive Director Andrew Saporito says the ports handle bulk materials that have been essential in this pandemic, down to the steel and aluminum coils needed for disinfectant aerosol cans.

Yet Saporito feels the ports have been overlooked when it comes to relief funding. “We support about 40 businesses and 3,400 jobs at our terminals in Camden,” he says. “Seaports and their employees nationwide are essential, and due to shutdowns, we're operating at lower cargo levels. While SJPC has continued to generate revenue, other ports have seen business levels drop and have a hard time covering expenses.”



Saporito and fellow port leaders are calling on legislators to provide an opportunity for ports to apply for and receive grants to offset the expenses of operating during a pandemic, which has included buying partitions for employees, and expenses related to rigorous cleaning.

Relief will soon be available for small businesses thanks to a \$20 million grant Camden County received from the CARES Act. Small businesses will be eligible for up to \$10,000 if they meet certain criteria.


“Our mom and pop businesses are the backbone of the city and they have seen tough times throughout the years,” says Moran. “Our food establishments have been able to remain open with takeout, but salons, barber shops, clothing retailers had to close outright. ... We’ve done what we can on a local level, using HUD-related resources to provide small grants to help them pay their rent or their employees.”

The county grants will be a lifeline for small businesses, says Cappelli. “Our intent is to get this money to those small businesses that have not received federal or state financial assistance yet—those companies are a priority.”


Moran says he is slowly seeing the community adapt to the new normal. “We see residents and visitors respecting the rules of wearing masks, but more importantly they are out and about, patronizing local businesses,” he says. “The city is safer than it’s ever been in 50 years, and that should tell folks— not just locals, but outsiders too— that it’s OK to come in and sit outside at Donkey’s Place, or grab some soul food. Come in and see what we’re doing and we’ll continue to tell the story of Camden rising.”

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