

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY: A BASELINE PORTRAIT 2005 – 2007

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I want to thank Derrick Ziegler and CAMConnect for the great work that you're doing and for inviting me to be here today. I've been teaching urban planning at Rutgers for thirty-five years. I believe in cities and have been a city dweller all my life. I've been tracking redevelopment in Camden for many years and, for the last three years, I've been working with a team of Rutgers faculty and grad students to study the practice of **civic engagement** in Camden's redevelopment since the state's takeover of Camden's municipal government in 2002. We issued our first report from that study a few months ago and I'd like to give you an overview of what we found.

WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement is participation by Camden residents in planning, deliberation, and decision-making in the ongoing process of Camden's redevelopment. The idea behind civic engagement is really quite simple. Civic engagement is the idea that people should be directly involved in decisions that affect them.

This is not rocket science. When people's lives are at stake; when people are at risk of losing their homes and being displaced from their community; and — on the upside — when Camden faces the potential of being rebuilt anew, people should have a say. People who are effected should be engaged and involved in making those decisions. It's that simple.

Why study civic engagement? And why study civic engagement in Camden today? I want to give you three reasons that motivated our study.

First, we need to study civic engagement because it's NECESSARY.

In the context of the state's takeover of municipal government, there's even less opportunity than usual for citizens to be engaged in governance. With an appointed COO not responsible to the electorate, it's especially important that those in positions of authority direct careful attention to civic engagement to help ensure the legitimacy of their decisions.

Second, civic engagement is INEVITABLE.

With every neighborhood in Camden targeted for redevelopment, it's inevitable that residents will become involved. Residents want to know what's going on, and residents *will* play a role in decisions that affect them. It's not a matter of if, but how. The question is not *if* residents will be engaged but, rather, *how*, under what terms, and with what results.

The third reason to think about civic engagement is that IT WORKS.

Civic engagement is a means to apply the wealth of knowledge that already exists in the community to inform decisions on redevelopment. Who knows Camden better than its residents — the people who experience

Camden every day? The people who know Camden brick by brick and block by block? The people who have witnessed years, even decades, of failed attempts at redevelopment and know from that experience what works and what doesn't work? Civic engagement is a means to benefit from this wealth of knowledge to inform decisions about redevelopment.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

For all these reasons, we set out to study civic engagement in Camden over the last three years — 2005, 2006, and the first part of 2007 — to document the process of redevelopment during this first phase of the state's take-over period.

We set out to answer three questions:

1. First, what are the *existing mechanisms* of civic engagement? What does the law require? What does the law say *should* happen?
2. Second, what is the *actual practice*? What are the existing procedures for civic engagement set up by the city and the Camden Redevelopment Authority (we call this government-initiated civic engagement)? How do residents and community groups actually participate (we call this community-initiated civic engagement)?
3. Third, how do participants *evaluate* the opportunities and mechanisms for civic engagement to date? This is not the research team's evaluation of civic engagement. Instead, the question we asked was: How do participants in the process evaluate the practice of civic engagement to date?

STUDY METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, we spent a lot of time in Camden. And we used three principal methods to obtain information.

Document review. We read everything we could find about redevelopment in Camden: the relevant laws and statutes; official reports; redevelopment plans; newspaper archives; histories of Camden; scholarly reports and academic studies.

Community inventory. We created an inventory of community organizations to get a picture of civil society in Camden.

Interviews. We conducted dozens of interviews with individuals knowledgeable about Camden's redevelopment process. We interviewed city officials, institutional representatives, people in the public and private sectors, leaders of nonprofits and community organizations, and neighborhood residents. We interviewed some people several times. Many of you in this room participated in interviews — you know who you are. We could not have done this study without your willingness to talk to us and we are extremely grateful for your time and insights.

STUDY FINDINGS

The full set of study findings appears in our 80-page report titled *Civic Engagement in Camden, New Jersey: A Baseline Portrait*, available at www.mdrc.org/publications/460/full.pdf. But in the time available today, let me summarize just three basic findings that come out of the report.

1. Civic engagement requires leadership.

Legally required civic engagement is practically non-existent. State redevelopment law mandates a public hearing but only at the end of the planning process. The Economic Recovery Board (ERB) includes a few “public” representatives but they are appointed to the position and not accountable to the public. The state takeover statute established a Community Advisory Committee but, to my knowledge, that body has not met in the last three years.

In short, New Jersey law says practically nothing about civic engagement. If someone says they’re doing everything the law requires, you can conclude they’re not doing very much.

A commitment to effective, constructive civic engagement is not simply about following the law because the law is largely silent on this topic.

Civic engagement is about leadership. It’s about taking the initiative to make civic engagement a priority. It requires a proactive commitment to provide the opportunities and institutions needed to make civic engagement a reality.

Civic engagement will not happen in a positive and constructive manner unless leaders in positions of authority recognize its value and make it happen.

2. Civic engagement requires vision.

There are two visions of Camden, two visions of redevelopment, and two visions of civic engagement.

In one vision, Camden is real estate. In this view, Camden is a land resource comprising acres of vacant and developable land. Redevelopment, in this vision of Camden, is a process for using real estate to produce profits for developers and tax revenues for government.

In another vision, Camden is its people. Here, redevelopment is a process for improving the lives of the people who live here—the people who have lived here through the tough times of no jobs and not much functioning municipal government.

These two visions involve very different understandings of civic engagement.

In the first scenario — where redevelopment is about developing real estate — residents are a barrier to redevelopment. Residents are a problem when they're occupying land that somebody else wants to develop. Residents are a problem when their race or income or some other characteristic makes the neighborhoods they're occupying difficult to market to the middle class.

In this scenario, where people are the problem, people need to be removed to make the city attractive to development, and civic engagement is

government's way of handling the problem that erupts when people object to being displaced.

Illogical as it may seem, civic engagement in this scenario is about convincing people to accept displacement as somehow in their own best interest, or something they have to accept for the broader public good. Civic engagement then takes the form of explaining to residents the decisions that have already been made regarding how redevelopment will occur, how real estate will be developed, how many people will be displaced, and why they should “buy in” to those decisions.

In the second scenario — where Camden is its people and redevelopment is about improving Camden for its residents — civic engagement has a different purpose and therefore takes a very different form.

In this scenario, and within this vision of redevelopment for people, civic engagement is about building the institutions and creating the forums through which residents can play a direct role in planning the city's future.

So civic engagement looks very different depending on the governing vision behind the logic of redevelopment.

Our baseline analysis found that, in the first phase of redevelopment under the state's takeover, the first scenario — of redevelopment as real estate development — has been the predominant, prevailing vision. Civic engagement, as a result, has been limited in form, content, and effect.

Civic engagement as actually practiced in Camden has been a one-way dissemination of information *from* government *to* residents, about redevelopment plans already completed and decisions already made. The belief informing this practice is that redevelopment is a complex, technical process best pursued by the experts, that the experts all work at City Hall, and that residents need to be informed of the experts' decisions.

Our third finding directly follows from the other two, and is that
3. Civic engagement requires putting people first.

If the first scenario I just talked about sees residents as the problem, the second scenario understands that residents present an opportunity. Recognizing residents as an opportunity means seeing residents as an asset whose knowledge and experience can inform and improve the process and outcomes of redevelopment.

In the conventional wisdom, Camden is a disaster, a city in ruins. Mention Camden and what images do you see? Crime...abandonment...poverty...social disorganization...municipal corruption...administrative disorganization...economic collapse. These are all the conventional images of Camden—and at best they're maybe half true.

The other half of the picture rarely makes it into the media and the speeches and the images you see on television. But our inventory of civic associations and nonprofit organizations and block associations shows a very different picture of civil society.

We identified more than fifty nonprofit community-development organizations in Camden. And that number does not include the hundreds of organizations that are primarily social service providers.

This is an extraordinary resource that contradicts the prevailing image of Camden as disorganized, helpless, unengaged, and apathetic.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the experts are not all in City Hall. There is an extraordinary wealth of expertise distributed throughout the city of Camden. There are informed, dedicated, committed residents in every neighborhood in this city.

I've attended dozens of neighborhood meetings on redevelopment, and over and over again I've seen dozens—sometimes hundreds—of people turn out for meetings to make their voices heard. And this after decades of involvement and meetings and protests and discussion where people have tried to make their voices heard and have routinely been ignored. And yet they still turn out, they still care, they still believe that the purpose of government is to make life better for people, to protect people from harm, and that their voices can make a difference.

Civic engagement is about putting people first. It's recognizing that people are the experts. They know Camden. They know every street and every house and every vacant lot. They already have the data needed to inform redevelopment, and that expertise is essential to guide redevelopment forward.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me conclude with some strategies for civic engagement and a few words about the kinds of data needed to support vibrant civic engagement in Camden.

First, some strategies for civic engagement:

- 1. Stop seeing residents as the problem and start seeing them as part of the solution.* Recognize residents as a powerful resource to inform the process of redevelopment.
- 2. Create neighborhood opportunities for residents to make the plans,* rather than simply informing residents of decisions already made by the planners and developers.

There could be a redevelopment planning office in every neighborhood in Camden. Under current practice, there are meetings every day in City Hall, and at the end of those meetings there's another meeting to tell people in the community what City Hall decided. All those meetings, and all that deliberation and discussion, could take place in the community, followed by a meeting to tell City Hall what the residents decided.

We don't need to look far to find successful models of neighborhood-based planning. Camden neighborhoods from Cramer Hill to Parkside to North Camden have already engaged in participatory, democratic, neighborhood planning where residents met, deliberated, and formed a consensus around neighborhood priorities and identified strategies to make

those priorities a reality. We know that planning can succeed in the neighborhoods because Camden's neighborhoods have already engaged in the process and done it well.

3. Adopt a policy of zero displacement.

Some of you are old enough to remember the 1960s slogan about how war is not healthy for children and other living things. Well, displacement is not conducive to civic engagement. People who are displaced cannot be engaged. It is illogical and probably immoral to use public resources to move people out to make room for redevelopment from which they are unable to benefit.

Finally, a few words about data to support healthy and positive civic engagement:

The two visions of Camden I spoke of earlier suggest two different ways that data can be used to support those visions.

When Camden is its real estate, and residents are a barrier to its development, data can document all the ways that people are a problem. Crime statistics, for example, can paint a dehumanizing picture of Camden as dysfunctional, disorganized, and deviant, as if crime defines Camden's residents instead of naming what residents experience in their everyday lives. When used in this way, data can appear to justify the need for "tough choices," including displacement, in order to turn the city around. It's easy

to find data to support the belief that poor people are the cause of Camden's problems, with displacement of the poor the obvious and necessary solution.

The vision of Camden as its people calls for a different kind of data and uses data in a different way.

When Camden is its residents, data can tell stories about people's lives. Data can illuminate how people make their lives in Camden, and data can describe what Camden means in the lives of its residents.

Putting people first means letting people speak instead of speaking about people.

Putting people first means helping people create data about themselves rather than reducing people to statistics. It sometimes seems that the more data we have, the harder it is to remember that these data are about real people and their everyday lives. We often have to remind ourselves that the people are real and the data are the abstraction.

Putting people first means producing data that highlight people's lives. We need people to tell their stories, so we can remember that the goal of redevelopment is to help ensure that those stories have positive endings. Focusing on Camden's residents, we need to know:

- Who are they?
- How long have they lived here?
- Where did they come from?
- Why did they move here?

- How well do they know their neighbors?
- How many relatives also live here?
- What are their lives like?
- What are their dreams?
- What are their expectations?

We need data that reaffirm people's humanity rather than reducing them to "human capital" — mere inputs to someone else's production process.

These data may be hard to come by but, ultimately, they document what Camden really is, and they point to what Camden can become.

Copies of *Civic Engagement in Camden, New Jersey: A Baseline Portrait* are available at www.mdrc.org/publications/460/full.pdf or from CAMConnect at <http://www.camconnect.org/resources/redevelopment.html>