

CAMDEN CHURCHES ORGANIZED FOR PEOPLE

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January 30, 2007

TO: Assemblyman Jerry Green, Chair
Members of the Assembly Housing and Local Government Committee
Senator Ronald Rice, Chair
Members of the Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee

FR: Rev. Willie Anderson, Chair
Msgr. Robert McDermott, Vice-Chair
Camden Churches Organized for People

RE: Testimony on the MRERA Legislation

Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP) is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and ecumenical federation of 30 faith-based organizations that has been active in the city of Camden for 22 years. Our mission is to improve conditions and outcomes for families in Camden, especially our children, by identifying and working to address a wide range of community concerns including housing, public education, public safety, employment and economic development, and youth services.

In 2000, our member-institutions confronted a growing challenge as we advocated for change in Camden's neighborhoods: in our many meetings with City officials we were being told that the City lacked both the financial and human resources needed to address the range of urgent issues most important to our communities.

That led our membership to press for an increased commitment of state resources to build the capacity of our municipal government to deliver basic, essential services to our neighborhoods. In March 2002, CCOP helped to organize a community meeting in which more than 1,500 city residents urged then-Governor James McGreevey to support an historic intervention by the state to put Camden on the road to recovery. Ultimately, it led CCOP member-congregations to support passage of the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act.

As a result of our involvement in building support for the recovery legislation, we feel a great responsibility to help it succeed. Through our network of faith-based institutions and allied civic organizations, we also have the capacity to help the recovery effort succeed by supporting community participation in developing priorities and then working with public and private partners to identify and implement effective strategies that can move Camden forward.

Four years into the recovery period, CCOP would like to share the following assessment of the initiative to date:

- 1) **There has been some significant progress in developing higher education and health care facilities in the city, primarily in the downtown area.**
- 2) **Community residents report a lack of tangible benefits experienced at the neighborhood-level, with few bricks-and-mortar projects and, most importantly, a lack of progress toward improving essential neighborhood services.** In 2005, CCOP worked with CAMConnect to survey nearly 800 residents on the progress of the recovery effort. Nearly two-thirds indicated that neighborhood conditions had remained static or declined.
- 3) **There has been a failure to engage community stakeholders in a vibrant community-based planning process to create consensus and harness community assets around community development priorities.** Instead, projects and programs have too often been developed behind closed doors and then presented to the community as a done deal. This has fed suspicion and resentment among residents, resulting in lawsuits, unnecessary expense, delays, and gridlock - rather than channeling community energy, imagination and support into concrete change.
- 4) **There has been a preoccupation with chasing large-scale redevelopment projects rather than more modest, smaller-scale efforts that can build on the progress being made by local, non-profit developers in many neighborhoods.** In response, CCOP has worked with state and city officials for the past 18 months to create the \$8 million Camden Home Improvement Program, which will provide rehab funds up to \$20,000 to approximately 300 homeowners across the city over the next 2 years.
- 5) **Building local government capacity to deliver basic services has been overshadowed by the pursuit of large-scale redevelopment.** The recovery leadership has yet to focus the necessary human and financial resources on restructuring the Camden Police Department and the Camden School District in ways that will lead to improved outcomes for children and families.
- 6) **The resignation of Camden's Chief Operating Officer (COO) has created an opportunity and challenge for Governor Corzine to identify a highly-qualified, politically independent successor to lead the recovery effort.** CCOP has three church-community leaders serving on the search committee appointed by the Governor.

Looking ahead, CCOP member-congregations would offer the following priorities and recommendations to the Governor, legislature and local officials:

- 1) **Focus on building the City's capacity to deliver basic, essential services.** If reforms lead to improved policing and public education, those changes will improve conditions for current residents as well as support efforts to attract additional middle-income families to the city. Most urgently, implement institutional changes within the Camden Police Department to support the entire Department's transition to Problem-Solving Community Policing.
- 2) **Create a community-based planning process that harnesses community energy and imagination and builds civic capacity in the city.** The incoming COO must help create and lead a vehicle for community stakeholders to identify and problem-solve around community plans and priorities, so that the recovery period creates greater civic capacity in a sometimes-divided city.
- 3) **Focus on smaller-scale redevelopment projects that support the ongoing work of Camden's non-profit, neighborhood-based developers.**

We realize that Camden can't achieve "recovery" within the next year or even within the next 6 years. But we do believe that new systems can be put into place that create a new dynamic and momentum that will nurture the city's long-term revival. As we've said, we believe the first priority has to be building capacity to deliver public safety, public education and other services, since reliable neighborhood services create a foundation for family and community well-being.

We realize that we are at an important crossroads within the recovery effort and the history of our city. We want to assure the legislature that our faith-based community organization is prepared and determined to work with you and the Governor, the new COO, and our local officials to realize the full promise of the MRERA legislation.