

January 30, 2007

Testimony

Liza Nolan, Camden Community Development Association  
To Joint Assembly Housing and Local Government  
And Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committees

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I am Liza Nolan, the Executive Director of the Camden Community Development Association. CCDA is a nonprofit member organization. Our members include 17 nonprofit community development corporations and faith based organizations that work in Camden on a variety of housing, economic development and community programs throughout Camden's neighborhoods. CCDA is a convener of CDCs in Camden and advocates for positive community development.

I am pleased to speak before the Joint Assembly Housing and Local Government and Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committees and to have this opportunity to provide comments on the Camden report issued pursuant to the Municipal Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery Act. Today I will make several comments on a number of topics that were mentioned in COO Randy Primas' Report to the Legislature.

The promise and opportunities created by the Recovery Act and the \$175 million investment in the City of Camden still remain. The window of opportunity is wide open. Noone believed the recovery or revitalization of Camden would occur within the first 4 years nor even the first 10 years of the Act's enactment. But the Act and the related \$175 million appropriation, did provide a good start and recovery needs to continue. There is still much left to be one.

- o As Randy Primas stated in his report however, there were certain limitations in the Act. For instance, the Act did not substantially address a very key issue --- the issue of workforce development. In fact, CCDA would argue that most of the Recovery focus should be on economic and workforce development. One cannot hope to redevelop the City of Camden without more emphasis being placed on creating a better economic base, bringing in jobs to the city, providing jobs for city residents, and fostering business and industry development. The main impetus for the MRERA legislation was to build the tax base and this needs to be supported and strengthened.
  
- o Another key issue to address is planning and citizen participation. As we move forward into the next phase of Camden's "recovery", there must be meaningful

citizen involvement in the planning process. What is needed now more than ever is transparency and coordination. There needs to be true dialogue and a "give and take" in the preparation of redevelopment plans. Even with the revised 4 Meeting format being implemented by the City, there is no real mechanism for community response to proposed development projects. For example, if developers come to Meeting 2 to present their proposed projects but they have not met with the community first then how can the projects be responsive to community needs and goals?

- Additionally, there needs to be a clear connection and coordination between and among the various plans and the various agencies in the city. For instance, the connection of the city's Master Plan, the Strategic Revitalization Plan, a specific neighborhood plan, and a redevelopment plan for a specific neighborhood needs to be clear. Also, schools construction needs to be integrated into the neighborhood and redevelopment planning process. For Camden's neighborhoods to improve, state of the art school buildings along with improved quality educational content are needed. The development of new school buildings in several Camden neighborhoods would serve as a huge engine towards revitalization of the city. We cannot have good planning, without good connections, and without strategic implementation based in the plans.
- Developers (both for profit and not for profit) have too often found it difficult to undertake needed development projects in Camden. Additional duplicative layers of bureaucracy have been added to the development process and no clear and standard procedures have been created and implemented. What was set up within the framework of city operations was in many ways a parallel government. This often causes confusion and did not streamline services nor promote efficiency. This dual government system with too many overlaps between the City and the CRA has not worked well. We need a system to keep things transparent and to have a keen understanding of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and procedures.
- Once a professional streamlined management structure is established within the City and dramatic staffing changes have occurred, work can begin to regain the citizen's trust. Then perhaps a more focused and realistic revitalization effort that recognizes the need for large redevelopment projects and yet doesn't ignore the critical needs of residents and neighborhoods can begin. There should be a blending of (1) bringing the middle class into Camden via new waterfront or other housing developments with (2) bringing Camden's current residents up via neighborhood based housing redevelopment and creation of job opportunities.

- Of key interest to CCDA is COO Primas' recommendation that the Tax Lien Financing Corporation meet since this has delayed the acquisition of properties. CCDA, with the strong support of DCA Commissioner Susan Bass Levin, was able to structure a pilot program that would allow non-profits to acquire and redevelop abandoned and vacant buildings and lots throughout the City of Camden. CCDA has reached agreement and will work collaboratively on this program with the City, CRA, DCA, and HMFA. It is anticipated that CCDA members will initially purchase 163 TLFC properties following foreclosure in a streamlined acquisition process working in conjunction with our government partners. CCDA members will then rehabilitate the properties or construct new housing. The vast majority of the properties will then be sold as either affordable or emerging market homeownership units and will be returned to Camden's tax base. We want to implement this program as soon as possible and we also look forward to utilizing the full potential of this program – to acquire and rehabilitate approximately 300 properties.
  
- CCDA also supports reconstituting the Regional Impact Council as a functional entity engaged in the overall Recovery effort. CCDA recognizes the need for expanded opportunities (in particular housing and jobs) throughout the Camden region and not just within the City. The revitalization of Camden has to include a viable connection to the County/South Jersey region.

In closing ---- Although CCDA recognizes that many residents feel disenfranchised, we do see opportunity and benefits to extending the recovery period for an additional five years. Camden, like so many older cities, is a city of neighborhoods. Recovery has to be for all of Camden – not just the downtown and waterfront. Any Recovery Legislation extension should only occur with a new professional streamlined management structure, new approaches to redevelopment planning and implementation, and with meaningful involvement of residents.