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New Jersey State League of Municipalities • [www.njslom.com](http://www.njslom.com) • November 2008

GLASSBORO

Creating the  
Quintessential  
College Town

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**L**ike many municipalities, Glassboro has been in need of renewal. We figured if we were going to do something, it was worth spending extra time in planning to be sure that we get it right.



By Leo McCabe  
Mayor, Borough of Glassboro

This didn't mean belaboring the process—which seems to be a favorite gripe of the electorate everywhere—but deliberately pursuing growth by choice, not by chance. This meant soliciting input from our residents and businesses so that the strategies and plan were community-driven, and conducting a professional analysis so that the size and scope of the revitalization would be factually based. We're very glad we did.

Now, eight years later, we're beginning to reap the rewards of a vision first born between the late Mayor Alvin Shpeen, to whom we owe a great deal of thanks, and Don Farish, president of Rowan University. These two leaders initiated the discussion, exploring ways to link Glassboro's downtown with the university's main campus, which is about four blocks to the north. In hindsight, some may wonder why this wasn't done long ago. The fact of the matter is that there was an entrenched belief that neither our downtown business district nor the university favored the idea, but no one bothered to ask. Alvin and Don raised the idea, quickly realizing how completely wrong—and counterproductive—this assumption had been.

**A Town and Gown Alliance** The concept was based on the premise that revitalizing the downtown into a "college town" could have a positive impact on enrollments, and that the college students' spending power could benefit downtown businesses. In 2002, the borough and university began working with Greg Filipek, who today is a partner with Tom Fore in Sora Holdings, the designated master redeveloper of the entire downtown redevelopment effort. The initial proposal was a \$137 million plan to build a new roadway through an older neighborhood, complete with student housing, a hotel/conference

center, multi-tier parking garage and 90,000 square feet of retail space. Rowan University provided a \$1 million grant (\$100,000 per year for 10 years) to help launch the effort, which became known as Rowan Boulevard, encompassing an area of approximately eight acres, stretching from Route 322/Mullica Hill Road, at the foot of the campus, to High and Main streets downtown.

Wisely, that's where we paused. We wanted to be absolutely certain that the proposed development reflected the desires and needs of our residential community, and the best, sustainable interests of the university and Glassboro's business community. Rather than simply leaping forward with a preconceived size and scale for the development, we decided to retain the JGSC Group, of Merchantville, to conduct their comprehensive Community Insights™ study of Glassboro's downtown to analyze the market and determine specific, viable strategies for revitalizing our older retail districts and stimulating economic growth.

**The Study** The study included a survey of more than 3,300 residents, shoppers and students to gain insights on their preferences and opinions about the revitalization effort, including customized surveys developed for the students, faculty and staff at Rowan to pinpoint their needs. The survey information was combined with interviews conducted with local businesses, organizations and public officials, and with economic data on the area to measure the demand for retail stores and restaurants, as well as desire for public amenities, events and activities. Several public outreach meetings were held to receive input and report on progress, and individual presentations were scheduled with the Greater Glassboro Chamber of Commerce, Main Street Glassboro, and other leading organizations.

Glassboro

Creating the



(L to R) Dr. Don Farish, President of Rowan University and Glassboro Mayor Leo McCabe break ground on a redevelopment project that will benefit both the town and the university.  
Photo credit: Randi Wolf

The project is expected to generate \$1.2 million in new annual property taxes and create 400 new jobs.

# Quintessential College Town

The Community Insights™ analysis determined that the proposed redevelopment was too small to meet the needs of the marketplace. More importantly, the survey provided a consensus for action by the community, and the study's findings formed the basis of a strategic plan that is both driven and supported by the community, and reflects the realities of the economic environment.

**Consensus Building** Reaching consensus was pivotal. Even in difficult times, the persistence and perseverance by the borough's council, administrator, planning board, economic development and construction offices, university officials, Sora Holdings, the JGSC Group, and others, helped advance the Rowan Boulevard project. It stands as a testimony to what can be accomplished with true cooperation and hard work.

The vision is to create the quintessential college town, and in doing so, proactively revitalize the entire downtown area rather than redeveloping just one section and waiting to see what happens next. We're making things happen.

We are utilizing "smart growth" and "new urbanism" principles for retrofitting our older downtown areas into a vibrant, compact corridor which encourages foot traffic and offers the desired mix of retail, residential, office and entertainment. The original 8-acre proposal has expanded into an 81-acre tract encompassing most of the central business district, arts district, entertainment district and a neighborhood retail district. Zoning was revamped for each district addressing permitted uses and standards, being sure to promote browsing between stores and restaurants throughout the area. Care and attention also was taken to integrate green building guidelines conforming to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards issued by the U.S. Green Building Council.

By enhancing existing neighborhoods with a mix of uses in distinct, walkable areas, we are creating a very desirable live/work/play environment. We've minimized vehicular traffic and encouraged mutual use of the space by office workers, shoppers, residents, students and visitors to shop, dine, recreate and socialize with friends and neighbors.

The new Rowan Boulevard is a 100-foot-wide corridor that stretches a third of a mile from Rowan University to the heart of downtown, offering broad sidewalks, attractive streetscape furniture

and dozens of stores, restaurants, mixed use buildings, a hotel-conference center and a town square. Current estimates for the Rowan Boulevard construction projects exceed \$300 million in private investment. The project is expected to generate \$1.2 million in new annual property taxes and create 400 new jobs.

**A Fact-based Collaboration** Key to the Rowan Boulevard project is the fact that it is a collaborative effort. Every facet of the plan has been strategically developed and based upon facts. We solicited input from everyone involved, and are fulfilling the desires and needs of the community in a fact-based, economically sustainable manner. The local economy will receive a boost from the students, who will occupy new downtown housing. Discretionary spending of the students was measured to be \$18.3 million annually, of which until now only 18 percent has been captured by downtown. In addition to student spending, we found that within Glassboro's immediate downtown area, consumer demand exceeds retail supply by more than \$260 million annually, a figure that grows by about 7 percent per year. We project that Rowan Boulevard will attract as many as 125 new retail stores and that the local economy will grow by more than \$225 million annually.

**Project Highlights** Highlights of the plan include a 107-room Holiday Inn Express & Suites and conference center which will offer banquet facilities for 300 guests and may be used for culinary arts training by the university. A 5,000-square-foot restaurant will be located adjacent to the hotel. The study also found substantial demand for a bookstore, so Barnes & Noble was recruited, becoming one of the downtown anchors with a 36,000 square foot facility, complete with a 6,000 square foot Starbucks Café, serving both the university and public.

Behind the hotel, four-story, apartment-style housing is being constructed for 884 students, with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and common kitchen, living and recreation areas in each unit, and which provide immediate access to both downtown and Rowan's campus. Sora Holdings is building and will own the student housing, making it taxable property, and it will be managed by Rowan under a lease agreement.

To the immediate south of Rowan Boulevard, Glassboro's West High Street

is being transformed into a neighborhood retail district where residents can shop for everyday goods and services. Recruitment efforts are targeting a grocery store, bakery and similar stores, and a local pharmacy and coffee shop have announced plans to locate there.

In addition, more than a dozen restaurants are expected to locate along the boulevard and throughout downtown, answering the consumer demand revealed by the study which calls for ethnic restaurants, seafood, a steakhouse, sandwich shops, pubs and taverns. Plans also call for the construction of 340 residential units, mostly condominiums above retail stores, along with about 45 upscale townhouses that will be set along side streets bordering the retail stores.

At the foot of Rowan Boulevard, extending along College Street and East High Street, is the arts district, which will host studios, galleries and arts and crafts retail. A new public library also is planned, for which a feasibility study has been completed and a RFP issued for the architect. In addition, a little used street, Centre Street, will be closed and converted into an 18,000 square foot public piazza.

Further along East High Street, near the intersection of Rt. 47/Delsea Drive, is the entertainment district, which will cater to both residents and college students and feature a cluster of mixed use buildings with entertainment related retail at grade and office uses on the upper floors. The borough has formed a committee, including university representatives, to explore the feasibility of building a performing arts center with a movie theatre and meeting spaces in this area.

To connect the various neighborhoods and promote pedestrian circulation, a feasibility study, funded by a \$70,000 grant from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, is investigating establishing a trolley system that would loop throughout downtown and link with parking areas and the university.

Complementing the myriad of revitalization details, we also wanted to establish a "heart" to Glassboro. So in the center of downtown, at the intersection of High and Main streets, underutilized buildings and a closed gas station will be transformed into a town square that covers nearly 1.5 acres, providing a setting for public events and activities. Now, when you come into Glassboro, you'll know that you have "arrived." ▲