

We are inspiring Trenton's revitalization together | Opinion



A file photo of Trenton Mayor Eric Jackson. (Martin Griff | For NJ.com) `<div class="inline-sidebar" style="border: 1px solid rgb(205, 200, 177); padding: 10px; line-height: 16px; width: 350 px; font-family: Verdana, Arial, sans-serif; margin-bottom: 10px; float: none; margin-left: 0px; font-size: 12px; "><big>To purchase prints of this photo, visit TimesofTrenton.zenfolio.com</big></div>`



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By Eric E. Jackson

On October 22, 2015, I delivered my State of the City address at City Hall to an audience of residents, community leaders and stakeholders from business, education, government, nonprofit and faith.

I talked about how my administration is meeting the challenge of leading our city by establishing new collaborations and supporting thoughtful and effective solutions for its revitalization.

Although Trenton is 50 miles from New York City and 30 miles from Philadelphia, two other important metropolitan hubs, Trenton is not The Big Apple and not the City of Brotherly Love. Trenton is New Jersey's capital city.

And yet, Trenton is very much in the center of it all. Like our urban neighbors, we have helped influence the American experience and have been at the forefront of industrial and manufacturing innovation.

Although times have changed, Trenton is in a better place now to capture new opportunity and investment than it has been in many years. Under my leadership, and with the capable, guiding hands of my administration and support from City Council, community leaders, like-minded stakeholders from business, education, government and faith, we can realize the goals that we set out to achieve.

To catalyze Trenton's revival, we must leverage its competitive strengths, take advantage of new economic trends—such as the millennials' boom, a renewed interest in urban living and the rise of the creative class—if we want to become a stronger community that is capable of forging its own destiny.

We've begun this work.

My administration is executing a governance strategy that is supported by eight pillars: restoration, collaboration, communications, accountability, benchmarking, measuring results, transparency and innovation.

We've had a turnaround year in which we've focused our efforts on restoring our municipal government, getting its finances in order, addressing critical personnel needs and tackling the myriad tasks our employees must accomplish everyday in a professional manner.

We prepared a \$188-million budget encompassing 11 separate departments. With the help of City Council, that budget was passed.

We've strengthened our policies on the way we buy goods and services; hired more than 200 new, qualified employees into much-needed positions; overhauled the management of grants; entered into new contracts with the city's collective bargaining units; improved our benefits administration; and devised a way to strengthen risk management and the city's exposure to claims, such as worker's compensation.

We are repairing and upgrading our city infrastructure, resurfacing roadways in all four wards, and improving our maintenance efforts on more than 50 city facilities. For example, we have replaced roofs and heating systems, all work that was long overdue.

We will soon begin a \$4-million roadway construction and a \$3-million park and playground construction and improvement project. In addition, we are advancing capital improvements to our historic buildings, including the Mill Hill Playhouse and the William Trent House.

Strengthening our public-safety infrastructure is a critical part of my administration's plan to advance our city's revival.

Here is a compelling statistic: Since July 1, 2014, our Trenton Police Department has received more than 100,000 calls for service. It is critical that we have the personnel to address this demand.

We hired 22 more police officers and worked with members of the New Jersey Senate and Congressional delegations to successfully secure a \$1.5-million federal COPS grant to hire a dozen more officers, bringing the total of new police officers hired under my watch to 34.

We made sure that the police unions are no longer operating without contracts. A feature of the new contracts is the elimination of the four-on-four-off schedule, increasing the number of annual work hours from 1,856 to 2,184. As a result of this agreement, the department has increased manpower patrolling our streets by 22 percent and improved the effectiveness of the department's proactive units, without breaking the bank.

Increased police force deployment is helping to bring the city's crime rate to an all-time low. Violent crime is down 30 percent. Shootings are down 39 percent. Homicides are down 41 percent. Crimes against property are down 17 percent. Overall crime is down 21 percent.

At our all-hazards Fire and Emergency Services Department, we continue to ensure that we are prepared for any emergency that threatens our community or those that surround us.

We hired and trained 12 new firefighters, and we regularly provide advanced training to all of our firefighters for homeland terror response, hazmat and other rescue operations.

We have ordered three new fire trucks to replace equipment that will soon become outdated and are completing a \$4-million upgrade of the department's multichannel radio system to facilitate better communication. New fire trucks mean better technology, expanded water-pumping power, greater efficiency, and more lives saved.

I said that we would engage key stakeholders and seek ideas from accomplished business leaders to activate economic development, inform and refine our economic-development strategy, and integrate community input into the process.

We are doing just that, and in the last 15 months, we've achieved noteworthy results.

Most recently, at the start of Trenton Business Week, which we've revamped, I announced a new public/private partnership called Greater Trenton that will work to attract private investment and renewed energy into our downtown business district with the help of our partners NJM Insurance Group, Capital Health, Thomas Edison State College, Investors Bank, Princeton University, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Wells Fargo, and PSE&G. These member organizations have committed nearly \$2 million to fund the initiative over the next five years.

We are rebuilding our market-rate housing development pipeline with more than 600 housing units coming online in the next 18 to 24 months, in addition to 50,000 square feet of retail and office space.

Market-rate housing development is fundamental to growing Trenton's economy. We must position the city to take advantage of the millennials' boom and the reality that homebuyers can't afford housing prices in nearby urban markets.

We selected Ajax Management to redevelop the downtown Bell Telephone Building, which has been dormant for 35 years, into 80 market-rate residential units and 12,000 square feet of retail space.

The residents of Trenton directed us to deal with blight—specifically the more than 3,500 vacant properties and lots.

We partnered with Isles, which conducted a sweeping survey of our city's vacant properties last year, and leveraged those results to inform our strategy and establish an innovative vacant-property initiative.

You have asked us to increase home ownership, particularly in city-based homes.

We launched a homesteading initiative that first identified livable housing and then connected eligible participants with lenders to potentially get mortgage financing. We are eager to get those properties back on the tax rolls.

We have successfully auctioned off city-owned property that was unproductive on the city's balance sheet.

We are translating negative value into future revenue and leveraging existing assets to establish new resources.

The work of transforming Trenton is progressing. A once-tepid climate is now heating up with renewed energy, ideas, new resources and meaningful collaborations. We are building an intentional and successful economic turnaround.

Eric E. Jackson is the 55th mayor of Trenton. A full text of the Mayor's State of the City address is available at trentonnj.org.