



Clockwise from far left:
Cranberry harvest, Whitesbog;
Jersey Fresh farmers market;
Atlantic City dining.



Applying Best Practices

South Jersey counties work together to bolster the region's economy, made strong by a diverse range of industries.

by **Whitney McKnight**

A few years ago, New Jersey sponsored a contest for a new tourism slogan. Entries included, "New Jersey: Things Are as Bad as They Seem," and "New Jersey: You Got a Problem With That?" The state settled on "Great Destinations in Any Direction."

Despite a wealth of natural beauty, myriad resources, and cultural diversity, intractable issues loom large. Recent U.S. Census data shows the state's resi-

dents are the second highest paid in the nation. Yet in 2008, the state deficit hovered near \$1 billion. As New Jersey officials seek to bridge the financial divide, they might do well to look for solutions from one of the state's great destinations: South Jersey.

A loosely held republic of seven counties that operate independently, the region functions as one. By forming partnerships, South Jersey counties have succeeded in balancing budgets,

cutting costs, and attracting business. Stephen Sweeney, Gloucester County's legislative director, says, "We understand that working together as a region is a benefit to all of our residents. County lines are not important when it comes to [prosperity]."

When Jevic Trucking abruptly went out of business in the spring of 2008, it left roughly 1,500 people jobless. Authorities from the Workforce Investment Boards in Burlington, Camden,

and Gloucester counties quickly staged a job fair for the furloughed workers. As a result, Mark Remsa, Burlington County economic development and regional planning director, says most of those unemployed now have been "absorbed back into the local workforce."

The U.S. Department of Defense's creation of Joint Base New Jersey has also prompted Remsa's county to partner with neighboring Ocean County to mitigate the megabase's projected effect on each county's infrastructure. The Joint Base will combine Burlington County's Ft. Dix Army Base and McGuire Air Force Base with Ocean County's Naval Air Engineering Station Lakehurst in a

contiguous 65-square-mile tri-base complex, including Marine and Coast Guard assets.

Remsa emphasizes collaboration is the key, not geographical orientation. "Working together is the intelligent way of growing with this project," he says, especially because the number of people employed by the current bases — 17,000 — and their \$2 billion economic impact are expected to dramatically increase.

Economist Oliver Cooke, editor of the *South Jersey Economic Review*, says defense is just one of the region's primary industries. Healthcare, hospitality and tourism, agriculture and food processing, warehousing and distribution,

and various small businesses are the others. Mitchell Koza, dean of the Rutgers School of Business—Camden, says this overlap of different sectors across the entire region helps stabilize South Jersey's economy. "If one sector gets hit, the others help hold the region steady."

While Atlantic City has been seeing monthly revenues drop in the last two years, Cooke points to the region's healthcare industry as one buffer. Jeffrey Vasser, president of the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority, says the slump is caused in part by increased gambling competition from neighboring states. In response, his city has focused on diversification. "The restaurant boom has been

SOUTH JERSEY'S TOP 15 EMPLOYERS

1. Virtua Health
2. Lockheed Martin
3. Cooper University Hospital
4. Commerce Bank
5. Lourdes Health System
6. Campbell Soup
7. Harrah's Entertainment – Atlantic City
8. Borgata Hotel Casino and Spa
9. Trump Entertainment
10. Tropicana Casino and Resort
11. Atlantic City Hilton
12. Resorts Atlantic City
13. Rowan University
14. The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey
15. Sony DADC

Source: Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey

phenomenal,” Vasser says. Luxury spas, world-class shopping, and dining are attracting a younger and more upscale crowd to the region, he adds.

Even with its knack for self-help, South Jersey does rely on state aid. The New Jersey Economic Development Authority has invested in Camden, where in 2000, deteriorated economic conditions necessitated a \$175 million state-funded investment. Caren Franzini, the authority's chief, says that building upon collaborative efforts already underway are “turning Camden back into a hub of economic activity in southern New Jersey.”

Louis Capelli, Camden County's legislative director, believes, “in the long run, Camden's challenges will be met.” Since 2004, local leaders have sought ways to create growth in Camden County, by applying business fundamentals to controlling costs. Among their wins



Ready for action: Atlantic City's famed casinos

are two straight years of reduced local taxes and a \$10 million reduction in personnel costs without a single lay-off. “We're not aware of any other local government in the state doing it this way,” he says. “We're modeling a certain mindset that makes it easier to attract investors to Camden County.”

Kathy Davis, executive vice president and COO of the Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey, says state government has grown more receptive to suggestions from her organization about how to keep costs and revenues in balance, particularly since the Chamber demonstrated its own commitment to best practices in customer service and administration by becoming the nation's only ISO 9000 certified Chamber. “In the past, there was a belief that government was too different from business to be run the same way, but the issues are similar: fleet management, real estate management, personnel, IT, and procurement.” To help persuade state legislators, the Chamber began offering state elected officials guidance from its Board Council on Responsible Government Spending. Davis says since the Council began in 2005, its reports have “generated a lot of attention. There's more of a mindset that Trenton can and must change.”

Perhaps one day the state slogan will promise, “New Jersey: We've Got a Solution for That.”

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CAMPBELL SOUP: A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Doug Conant says Campbell Soup Company was stuck in a “circle of doom” when he arrived in 2001 as CEO. To effect change, he promised employees that Campbell would value them; in return, he hoped they'd value Campbell. This two-way engagement helped restore the company from worst to first in its industry, beating projections for six consecutive years.

Now Conant is talking turn-around on the streets of Camden. Based in Camden since 1869, Campbell broke ground in the fall on a \$90 million headquarters expansion project that includes a 100-acre office park. The state, county, and city have pledged

\$23 million in infrastructure improvements near the construction, and Campbell spokesperson Anthony Sanzio says the Fortune 500 company will use its “standing in the business community to attract tenants.”

Theodore Davis, Camden's COO, says an “ecstatic and grateful” Camden loves Campbell back. “Good things often don't come easy,” Davis says, but New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine says Campbell's leadership has been vital to revitalizing the city. For Conant, the commitment is practical. “Campbell's expansion in Camden is good for employees, good for our business, and good for our community.” — *WM*



Artist's rendering of proposed expansion