Focus: Planning

From Byway to Destination
Keys for revitalizing a rural downtown

By Marc Pasquini, Mayor, Oxford Township

Interest in the Future

We were extremely interested. Oxford is a small township (our population is just under 2,500, and it's beginning to shrink now after relatively fast growth between 1990 and 2010), located on state Route 31 in rural Warren County just southeast of Route 31's intersection with Route 46.

Although we do have a small downtown, almost three-quarters of the area of our town is occupied by wetlands, forest, or agricultural lands. The municipality is located within the Highlands Water Protection Area, which means any development must comply with the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

In 2011, we petitioned successfully for recognition as a Highlands designated center, with the intent to pursue sustainable economic development in our downtown while still preserving critical environmental resources. We knew we had an opportunity to grow, but how best to start?

Getting Started

Enter the partnership with New Jersey Future and the Counselors of Real Estate. We secured a grant from the CRE Foundation that allowed us to retain New Jersey Future and a CRE Consulting Corps team to identify opportunities on which Oxford could build its downtown revitalization. It was a unique arrangement that didn't cost the township anything, and made available to us nationally known experts in various aspects of local revitalization.

We hammered out a detailed scope of work for the project, signed an agreement with the volunteer team from CRE, and got to work.

First up: The team wanted some research and a profile of the township–its land, its key physical features, its zoning, its demographics, its housing stock. This information was compiled by New Jersey Future into a briefing book for the CRE team, available at njfuture.org/oxfordprofile.

Next: We then assembled a hand-picked group of the township's influencers and thought leaders, and brought them together for a project kickoff meeting in early February 2016.

They spent the week interviewing anyone with a stake in downtown Oxford's success–residents, local businesses, the

In the latter part of 2015, George Vallone of Hoboken Brownstone, a real-estate development company, came to the Township of Oxford with a proposal. It wasn't a development proposal, although his firm was planning the redevelopment of a site in town, but a proposal to partner with New Jersey Future, a statewide land-use policy organization, and with the national Counselors of Real Estate (CRE) to bring in specialized expertise to help Oxford revitalize its downtown. Would we be interested?

From Byway to Destination

Residents and visitors alike enjoy the charm and history of Oxford.

state, county, Highlands Commission, private developers, and, of course, those of us in Town Hall.

They walked the downtown and visited our redevelopment sites. They identified key issues, needs, and opportunities. During that week they participated in a well-attended SWOT exercise (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) led by representatives from New Jersey Future. Based on all the intelligence they gathered, they went back and prepared their report.

Now and the Future

Fortunately, there are plenty of tasks we can begin working on immediately that won't cost much, that can enhance Oxford's brand and reputation as a destination. (You can read the final report at njfuture.org/oxfordreport.) Many of these ideas are transferable to any municipality, including: installing gateway, wayfinding, and cultural signs; preparing for redevelopment; upgrading our website; engaging the town; presenting public events; and linking assets together.

Over the longer term, we will ask the reconstituted Economic Development Committee to pursue business opportunities, develop a brand and marketing strategy, and devise a recruitment strategy to attract businesses that can stay and thrive in Oxford.

Perhaps the most important thing we learned from this process was how much the town wanted to engage with itself: We have residents and business owners in Oxford who love it here and are eager to get involved in these efforts. With their enthusiasm we truly feel that Oxford is on the cusp of transforming "from byway to destination." ♪

Route 31 Upgrade

We told the project team that we were working with the state Department of Transportation on the reconstruction of the Route 31-Wall Street bridge. Representatives from New Jersey Future saw this as an important opportunity. They were able to reach key transportation agencies involved in the project, and work with them to ensure that reconstruction would include traffic-calming measures, and cycling and pedestrian amenities—things we may never have been able to secure.

@ New Jersey Future has used Oxford's process to develop a pilot program that can provide technical assistance to help downtowns identify assets and prioritize opportunities. Contact David Kutner, New Jersey Future's planning manager, at dkutner@njfuture.org or 609-393-0008, Ext. 105.

Local Lessons

We learned a lot. We learned that people love Oxford, and that it has significant natural and historic assets on which we can build, so we will be putting plans and people together in order to make the most of those assets. But we also learned some other things:

• **We have room to grow.** Our schools and our water and sewer infrastructure have excess capacity, and we should look at judicious development in order to help defray public costs over a broader tax base.

• **However, our demographic trends don't point to growth.** The two key age categories of our population that are not growing are adults ages 25 to 44, and children between the ages of 5 and 14. We will need to develop a plan to draw and keep families with school-age children, if Oxford is to be revitalized.

• **We need a brand!** While people who live here love it, Oxford's outside identity is not well defined, its wayfinding signage is insufficient, and reasons to visit are not clearly articulated.