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## **Trenton, a Capital In Search of a City; Education and Income Lag, and Getting Coffee Is Hard, but It's Trying**

By LAURA MANSNERUS

THE Governor's official residence is in Princeton. The New Jersey Legislative Correspondents' Club holds its annual banquet in East Brunswick. The Trenton Thunder baseball team puts up visiting teams at the McIntosh Inn in Lawrenceville.

These are tough facts for a city trying to behave like a state capital. They are tough for a city merely trying to behave like a city. And as Trenton begins to peek out from the scaffolding that has scarred its capital district over years of state renovation projects, it is trying not to hope too hard.

After all, in personal income levels, Trenton ranks between Newark and Elizabeth. The S.A.T. scores at Trenton High place it in the bottom tenth of New Jersey schools. Trenton has no big corporate cheerleader, especially since the state has more workers here than the next 50 employers combined. The only downtown coffee house closes at 4 P.M., and the last bookstore left town more than a year ago.

But Trenton is being tantalized by the prospect of what it fears is too much to ask: a real hotel, the city's first since 1985, with a convention center attached, that is supposed to rise behind the State House. The financing of the \$45 million project is expected to be in place before the end of the year. And with this lined up, the city can perhaps start living in its dreamed-of future as a center of tourism and entertainment.

Already, some goodies are in hand, like the lavishly restored Trenton War Memorial building, home of the Greater Trenton Symphony, scheduled to reopen next month, and the baseball park, successful beyond all expectations, which opened in 1994. And others, like a hockey and basketball arena on the old Roebling steel yards, are under construction.

The building spree is a big pitch forward for a city that has learned to live without a movie theater or a department store. Trenton's most ardent promoters are keeping their optimism to modest levels.

"It closes at 6 o'clock," Mayor Douglas H. Palmer volunteered within seconds of sitting down for an interview. "There's no other capital city in America that doesn't have a hotel. I would like to see us be a capital like other state capitals."

Many acknowledge that Trenton is struggling against relentless suburbanization in what many think is a state suburb and exurb beyond reason.

"We're not going to displace suburbia as a center of retail and office space," said Alan Mallach, director of the city's Department of Housing and Development. "We're not going to become a working-class bedroom community for Route 1. This is not just a collection of affordable housing units. It's a small city. The question is, what are we here for?"

If Trenton is here to serve as a showcase of the state's history and government, said Sally Lane, director of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, it could use a great deal of help. Ms. Lane greets many tourists in the bureau's stone building behind the State House -- which has no visitors center -- and when they compare Trenton with other state capitals, she said, "most of them are not very flattering."

"You cannot project an image until you have a self-image," she continued, "and New Jersey is way behind on that. It's partly a matter of state pride, and then of marketing. More action in the Revolution took place in New Jersey than in Virginia. But people don't know that."

Still, while allowing that hers is the only convention and visitors bureau she knows of that has no hotel to offer, Ms. Lane, like the city's political leaders, talks confidently about Trenton as a potential center for heritage tourism, cultural events and entertainment.

And she sees markets everywhere -- in the 275,000 people a year who visit the State Museum, the 400,000 who attend Trenton Thunder games, even the suburbanites who come here for jury duty. ("Between the state and Federal and county courts, that's a serious audience," she said.)

Suburbanites are already subsidizing Trenton, which gets much of its revenue from the state. And the suburbs are where the money is: while Trenton's median household income is \$25,719, Ewing Township's is \$43,191, Lawrence Township's \$51,035 and Hopewell's

\$65,522.

Robert D. Prunetti, the Mercer County Executive who is from Trenton's Chambersburg section -- he now lives in Ewing Township -- said he was constantly trying to convince suburbanites that they could expect dividends from every dollar of capital put into Trenton.

Mr. Prunetti's own favorite generator of revenue is sports. When a group of local investors secured a minor league baseball franchise in the early 1990's and looked for a publicly financed stadium, the city could not offer one. The county could, though, by justifying the use of public funds for redevelopment of the Delaware River waterfront -- and the Mercer County Waterfront Park, home of the Trenton Thunder, was built.

"Even people who thought that baseball was a good idea thought I was absolutely crazy to put a stadium in the city of Trenton," Mr. Prunetti said. "But within 30 minutes of Trenton there are 3 million people. We had never looked at Trenton as being the center of a huge market area. People will come, obviously."

The new \$45 million arena, rising half a mile away in a complex of reclaimed industrial buildings, is also a county project. And the county plans a riverfront park fanning out from the baseball stadium.

But it is the third point of what Mr. Prunetti calls "the triangle" that promises to relieve Trenton of its main embarrassment. And that point is the hotel, at the moment just a blueprint for an asphalt parking lot next to the War Memorial.

Since a downtown Holiday Inn closed 13 years ago, Trenton has been the only state capital in the nation without a hotel. In the states next door, Harrisburg has 16, Dover 11 and Albany about 30.

The hotel project has been a sometimes-tortured partnership involving the city, the state, Marriott hotels, a developer in Michigan and bondholders to be announced.

David G. Ong, president of the development company, Acquest Realty Advisors, said he comes to Trenton at least once a week. "If anyone is an expert on the need for hotel space in Trenton, I am," said Mr. Ong.

"When you're through at the Mayor's office at 5 o'clock," he lamented, "it's a long ride to your first cocktail."

Despite the city's insistence that the hotel is real, and Mr. Ong's best estimate that ground will be broken in April, Trenton still doubts it. "I don't know if it's an inferiority complex or a state of clinical urban depression," Mr. Mallach said, "but people in the city say, 'Is this really going to happen?'"

One of them is Jeffrey Laurenti, a former Congressional candidate who has lived all his life, minus four years at Harvard, in Trenton.

"I think of the 88,000 people in Trenton, 87,000 are skeptical about the hotel package," Mr. Laurenti said. "I think we're not quite there for it to take off. What would assure its success would be the revitalization of the State House historic district so that those become sites where people might stroll in the evening. I think right now there'd still be a sense among visitors that they were in a DMZ."

And Jamie Griswold, owner of the Cafι Ole! Downtown, shrugged at the latest timetable. "When I see them kick out all the state workers' cars and fence off the lot, then it's time for jumping for joy."

Trenton is different from all other New Jersey cities, of course, as the state's host and its captive. It is also different from other state capitals. It's a small state; people can drive home at the end of the day. And to make matters worse for the hotel business, the Legislature meets Mondays and Thursdays, leading no one to stay overnight.

Trenton is also different from other state capitals, according to a 1992 study by researchers at Thomas Edison State College. In comparing Trenton to other capital cities, the study ranked Trenton 49th in per capita income, 49th in differential between city residents' income and statewide income, and dead last in residents' education levels.

John P. Thurber, the report's main author and now the college's vice president for public affairs, said the state had since made "dramatic changes" to downtown Trenton's face. But, when asked if Trenton had seen revitalization as an urban center, Mr. Thurber paused. "On open space and recreation there's been progress," he offered.

MAYOR PALMER, a Democrat, has struck a cordial relationship with the Whitman administration, but he complains openly about the state's "payment in lieu of taxes," which is supposed to offset the loss of revenue from state-owned property.

"If the Statehouse were I.B.M. and the Justice complex were AT&T -- those are choice properties -- we would get \$60 million in property taxes," Mr. Palmer said. "Instead, we get about \$10 million from the state."

The state did agree to contribute \$7.5 million to the hotel project. (The city is providing about \$4.5 million, in addition to forgoing property taxes, and the rest is to be financed by tax-exempt bonds.) And over three years it has put \$170 million into redevelopment, including \$34 million for the War Memorial, \$6.5 million for the Old Barracks, the colonial-era military barracks, which is to reopen

next month, and \$12 million to restore the State House dome.

The state also created the Capital City Redevelopment Corporation, which for 11 years has worked to lure business to downtown Trenton.

With its price advantage -- the redevelopment corporation estimates that downtown office space costs 20 percent to 25 percent less than comparable space in the suburbs -- Trenton's downtown has at least managed to stay mostly occupied.

The city has also had some small injections of manufacturing activity. The steel industry left long ago, as did most of the pottery manufacturers (everything from fine china to toilets), making a local joke of the illuminated sign on the bridge, "Trenton Makes, The World Takes." But Mr. Mallach estimated that in the last several years the city had seen 600,000 square feet of vacant industrial space put to use.

The toughest job has been propping up a retail district for, at the very least, the 25,000 state employees and approximately 5,000 other workers in downtown. On the Trenton Commons, a 1970's-style pedestrian mall on State Street, the gleaming Capital Center has plenty of office tenants, but the ground floor has a vast empty storefront vacated by Encore Books last year; the remaining tenants including a discount shoe store, an Eckerd drugstore and a shop that sells beads. If State Street has an anchor store, it's the Valu-Plus (holiday placemats \$1, men's thermal underwear \$2.99).

Only a sprinkling of restaurants stay open for dinner; if anyone stays in Trenton for dinner, it's most likely in Chambersburg, the city's Little Italy, which draws many suburbanites. Even at Maxine's, the biggest and most ambitious of the restaurants downtown, "the evening trade is not state workers," Mr. Thurber noted.

Mr. Mallach, the housing and development director, said: "State workers are highly overrated as a market. People go out because they've got to buy nail scissors at the Eckerd. That's good for scissors manufacturers, but it doesn't support a retail market."

But many maintain that the retail potential is "underutilized," as Cheryl Hargrove, a consultant to the Convention and Visitors Bureau, put it, diplomatically. City Councilman Gino A. Melone rolled his eyes when asked what downtown had to offer. "I have nothing against the Valu-Plus," he said, "but the caliber of people you're bringing in during the day are not interesting in shopping at the Valu-Plus."

Still, it's not that Trenton is not trying. When Mr. Griswold wanted to open a coffee house, he scoured Mercer County and finally called the Trenton Downtown Association. He did not really know Trenton. While living in Plainsboro, 12 miles up Route 1, he had been in Trenton once; a fan of brew pubs, he had driven to Joe's Mill Hill Saloon, had a beer and left.

Bea Scala-Fischler, the association's director of programs, noted the opportunity: "Not a Starbucks in sight," she said. She then drove Mr. Griswold and his wife, Karen, around the city, pointing out available retail spaces. When he chose one, Mr. Griswold said, he received \$8,500 in grants from the redevelopment corporation and the downtown association.

Not by accident, Mr. Griswold settled into a space on South Warren Street that is waving distance from the site of the hotel, which he calls "Trenton's holy grail." And while the surrounding streetscape is dotted with "space available" signs and boarded-up windows, Mr. Griswold attributes it to the strong whiff of speculation in the neighborhood.

Referring to a property up the street, an old row home now housing a dry cleaner's, Mr. Griswold said, "The guy wanted \$300,000 for that, and if I blow on it it'll fall over."

But it is the row-house charm of streets like South Warren that Trenton is counting on.

"Trenton's future is going to be history and hipness," Mr. Laurenti said. "It can trade on its history, which none of the burbs around us have, and if in the process it can be hip in some way you can see a transformation. Or it can be a residential area for poor and working-class people."

The city's promoters, well aware of what a higher hipness quotient could do, are even sinking money into a search for artists. With a state grant, the Downtown Association and Isles Inc., a community development group, plan to renovate and subsidize housing and performance space.

For most middle-class people, subsidies are not really necessary. Ms. Scala-Fischler offers her own house, which she and her husband bought in 1984, as an example: a 14-room Georgian brick colonial facing Cadwalader Park in the city's leafy west ward, it has four baths, five bedrooms, a kidney-shaped pool and an outdoor stone wet bar under a cedar canopy. They paid \$82,000.

The neighborhood most likely to incubate a hipper Trenton is probably Mill Hill at downtown's fringes, where an agonizingly slow renaissance has proceeded for two decades. John Hatch, an architect and a partner in a small development company that restores and sells houses there, said the group's first four-bedroom townhouse sold about three years ago for \$103,000; a practically identical house just brought more than \$140,000.

Still, talk of young professionals moving here takes on wistful tones. Mr. Thurber, who lives in Chambersburg, said that when he arrived 10 years ago, "there were neighbors organizing against gentrification."

"If only," he quickly added. "Then I realized that I was part of this gentrification movement. There were two of us."

"Trenton has had middle-income neighborhoods that continue to attract middle-income people," he said.

"At least we haven't been like Camden."