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### Burlington County, New Jersey had the “original” Government Stimulus Program

**C**ounty6 Loan Fund Has Spurred More Than \$2 Billion in New

Investment and Helped Create 3,000 New Jobs Along Former Route 130 Corridor

It was the “granddaddy” of Economic Stimulus Programs. Maybe even the “original.”

And it started right here in South Jersey more than a decade ago.

In fact, long before “shovel-ready” became the watchword for government investment, what is now called the Burlington County River Route was taking shape. It was fueled by a \$5 million dollar revolving loan fund created by Burlington County to attract new business and create new jobs in the 12 towns that make up the River Route.

And it worked.

Since its inception, the River Route has spawned 179 projects in the dozen communities along its 17-mile corridor, including 4,400 new housing units - both market-rate and affordable.

In addition, River Route projects have added more than 18 million square feet of new commercial, industrial, and retail space in the 52-square mile area defined by the Delaware River on the west and Route 130 on the east.

The corridor is bisected by New Jersey Transit’s light rail RiverLINE, which stops in most of the 12 towns on its way from Camden to Trenton and has made the River Route a hotbed of transit oriented

development (TOD).

But “what makes the 13-year effort that transformed the corridor a national model for the right way to do suburban redevelopment is the fact that all 12 towns banded together to work regionally,” says Dan Caldwell, a principal in Stout & Caldwell Engineering and the latest chair of the River Route Advisory Committee.

In fact, it was Caldwell who pointed out at a recent meeting of the Advisory Committee that the River Route was “the original Economic Stimulus Program.”

“We were using the concept of government loans to stimulate private investment and help create jobs years before anybody in Washington even dreamed about funding “shovel ready” projects.

“And we’ve proven that it can work. We’ve used \$5 million - over and over again because it’s a revolving loan program - to help generate more than \$2 billion in new investment. That’s a 40-fold return on investment,” Caldwell points out.

County freehold director Joe Donnelly echoes Caldwell’s assessment. “For the River Route, the good news gets better. From an economic development standpoint, we are looking at a work in progress. Even in the current fiscal environment, developers and redevelopers continue to show an interest in the River Route communities. And as the economy improves, their

interest will result in serious investment, new business and residential growth, and jobs.

“For that matter, if you listen to what housing experts have to say, communities that have ready access to light rail are poised to grow and prosper in the coming decades. You can count on more empty nesters and young professionals gravitating to towns like those in the River Route, because of their convenience to transportation, work, shopping, and other services,” said Donnelly.

The Advisory Committee, which Caldwell chairs, comprises representatives from each of the River Route communities. And it is this group that has been the lynchpin in keeping the 13-year effort on track.

“For decades, the area was known simply the Route 130 Corridor. And for much of that time it was increasingly synonymous with empty big box retail sites, decaying strip malls, cheap motels, empty parking lots, and other forms of suburban blight,” said Mark Remsa, Burlington County’s senior planner and economic development coordinator.

But, today, it has been rechristened, hailed as the County’s “Gateway to Opportunity,” and recognized by everyone from professional planning organizations to regional business publications as a model for the “right way” to do suburban redevelopment.

The proof of the River Route model’s success is in the numbers. More than 200 major businesses have invested more than \$2 billion in new projects up and down this corridor.

And the big winners have been the cooperating mu-

nicipalities, which include Beverly, Burlington Township, Cinnaminson, City of Burlington, Delanco, Delran, Edgewater Park, Florence, Palmyra, Riverside, Riverton, and Willingboro.

Some are as small as one-half square mile while others command up to 15 square miles. Populations range from fewer than 3,000 to more than 33,000.

Some are almost exclusively residential. Others have dominant commercial and industrial components. Some are traditionally Republican, others Democratic, and still others staunchly “nonpartisan.”

After completing a Strategic Plan that spelled out needed actions at the local, county, state, and federal levels in 1998, the Freeholders and the 12 corridor municipalities formally adopted what they called the “Route 130 Corridor Plan.”

A year later, the New Jersey State Planning Commission formally endorsed the Plan - an important step because it gave the 12 municipalities priority for receiving state resources and funds through 2012.

That investment has spawned more than 3,000 new jobs, according to Remsa. And it has been characterized by trendy transit-oriented development up and down the \$2 billion RiverLINE.

“The regional planning approach taken by the Delaware River corridor communities in Burlington County is a shining example of the benefits of proactive progressive action to guide development and economic growth,” said Ben Spinelli, the executive director of New Jersey’s Office of Smart

Growth and caretaker of the state’s Master Plan.

The foresight and impact of this regional model has been consistently recognized over the past decade with awards from the PlanSmart New Jersey, New Jersey Chapter of the American Planning Association, New Jersey Planning Officials, the Southern New Jersey Development Council, the Walt Whitman Preservation Forum, and SNJ Business People, which cited the River Route more than a year ago for “its pivotal role in the growth of the region.”

In an effort to continue economic development along the River Route, the County has launched a new web site that highlights growth opportunities along the corridor from Palmyra to Florence.

The web site ([www.burlingtoncountyriverroute.com](http://www.burlingtoncountyriverroute.com)) offers interactive links to both the County’s database of available sites and related property information, plus interactive access to Google maps (without exiting the River Route or County sites). The site also offers separate links to each River Route community’s independent municipal site.

The actual execution of the River Route plan (subsequent to the three-year planning effort), celebrated its 10th anniversary on January 27th.

“So, even after a decade of unarguable success, the project continues to be a work in progress,” said Caldwell. “But it is also recognized as a preeminently successful model for regional planning,” he said.

**Mike Willmann is chairman & CEO of WMSH Marketing Communications. ■**