Glenn Patterson

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Glenn Patterson is director of Planning, Community, and Economic Development for New Brunswick (1991 to present). [2] He grew up in Point Pleasant Beach, where his father was chairman of the zoning board, and his uncle served as mayor and freeholder. Patterson said that he was "always interested in land use issues." He studied political science at American University and there took an interest in urban affairs courses. He then "tried law school for a while, and said the world has enough second-rate lawyers, so let's try planning." [2] In 1983, he enrolled in the master's planning program at Rutgers. Patterson spent some time working for Asbury Park. Eventually, Christiana Foglio—a New Brunswick city planner, and later president of the New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco)—asked Patterson to be her assistant in the Planning Department. [2] He has worked for the Planning Department since then.

Patterson is quick to point out that he "wasn't in the city when the redevelopment first got started," so his knowledge of the process is not necessarily from firsthand experience. [3] He describes the context of redevelopment: "J&J back in the 1970s was considering moving out of town, and everyone thought that that would really be a death blow to the city—and the city was not in good shape back then." [3] He described how community leaders, politicians, and businessmen came together, developed plans for the future, and notably, reinvested in the city: "I think New Brunswick was lucky in that its major institutions never picked up and left," Patterson said. [3] He contrasted this with his experience in Asbury Park, where the major institutions "pretty much picked up and left" by the mid-1980s. [3] The institutions that remained in New Brunswick supported a "good daytime population base." Patterson reflected, "It wasn't a completely dysfunctional city. It was a city that was definitely frayed at the edges to say the least, but there was still something to work with. There was still an economic reason for New Brunswick to exist." [3-4] He added that the city has a "great location" off a turnpike exit and has a downtown train station. "We always had a lot of advantages that maybe some other cities in the state didn't have when they were trying to do redevelopment," Patterson said. [4]

Bracketed numbers refer to transcribed text of original interviews, available at http://

When Patterson joined the Planning Department, the Hyatt Hotel had already opened, but other big downtown projects were "just coming on line or had just come on line . . . it was just really getting started." He recalled that "downtown was still fairly sad looking—a lot of vacancies." [4] Some of his first projects dealt with local neighborhoods. There was a Regional Contribution Agreement with Warren Township that helped to build affordable housing in New Brunswick. Warren Township gave New Brunswick $26,500 for each accepted unit. [6] With those funds, existing housing units were rehabilitated and new affordable housing was built. [6] This was part of Mayor Lynch's vision to have balanced housing: "some upscale stuff in town so you could have people living in town who had disposable income, support the retail" with middle-class and affordable housing. [5]

One such housing program—Renaissance Station—was featured in an ABC Nightly News segment because it was rather innovative. As Patterson explains it: "People could put a thousand dollars down, live in the house for, I think 18 months or two years, and the trick with the program was that the banks would credit the equity increase in the house from when you first moved in there to when you actually were going to close on it, and count that toward your down payment, so you could get into the house for just a thousand dollars down." [6] This harks back to a time when home ownership was harder to attain because of "high down payment costs, high closing costs." [6] Using this method, plus housing funds from the Department of Community Affairs, a $125,000 home could be sold to a moderate-income family for $70,000: "We were being really, really innovative, and really aggressive in trying to get affordable housing dollars into town," Patterson said. [7]

When speaking about the planning process, Patterson noted: "The saying is, 'Planners don't plan, bankers plan.' [7] The process is less about planning reports and more about "the opportunities that are available to you, what the economics are at the current time." [7] The Planning Department became experienced in talking to developers and figuring out how to combine multiple subsidies to make projects financially feasible. [8]

With something like affordable housing, Devco helped develop the project in a joint venture with a private developer. Devco "would help put the project together, help work the way through the funding and political maze to get something so you could get it approved, get the community support for the project, help work with the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, the Department of Community Affairs, and so forth in getting the project funding done," Patterson explained. [8] He said that Devco was "critical to the process" because, in the 1980s, developers were less experienced with such projects. Devco was also critical during that time because developers were skeptical that "someone with money was going to put it down to spend, back then, $125,000 or more to buy a house in downtown New Brunswick or in the downtown of any urban area." [9] The role of Devco has shifted away from development today because there are developers who specialize in affordable housing and navigating City bureaucracy. The Devco of days past "worked very, very closely together" with the City government, Patterson said. Frank Nero, the former president of Devco, and Mayor John A. Lynch, Jr. "worked closely together, and both were very focused on getting it done," Patterson noted, and "not getting hung up on trying to be perfect." [9]

Patterson mentioned the American Cities Corporation report. While it was "never officially adopted as anything," it produced a planning vision for the city that "is still very important," Patterson said. [10] Part of this was the vision that New Brunswick "could be a very successful urban area," which included office development, a rejuvenated downtown corridor, middle-class and affordable housing, and revitalization of the neighborhoods. [10-11] "What guides us is that we want to have a balanced town where there is something for everybody here," Patterson noted. [11]

He said that the most important project involved Johnson & Johnson's decision to stay in New Brunswick. This "sent a really strong message that New Brunswick was serious and was a place where you can invest private dollars." [11] While the I. M. Pei–designed headquarters may seem "a little remote from the rest of downtown," it is a "good icon for the city" and showed that "world players were investing in New Brunswick." [11] Patterson thought that the adjacent Hyatt Hotel project was "a big risk" but was helped by the Johnson & Johnson business.

Patterson illustrated, by example of the Heldrich Center, how the development climate has changed in recent years. This project was financed without the backing of Johnson & Johnson or any other large institution, and was allowed to "sink or swim on the market." The Heldrich Center has not sunk, attesting to the private sector's willingness to invest in New Brunswick, which was certainly not the case when the Hyatt was under construction. [12] The Heldrich Center, five blocks away from the main downtown intersection of Albany and George Streets, also illustrates how significant development has materialized in other parts of the city. [12] Indeed, the Heldrich helped to transform the character of its area.

Patterson said, "Rutgers has participated in a number of projects" but "a lot of times they've had to be dragged to the table." [13] Still, the projects "have worked out really well for them," especially the University Center dormitory on Easton Avenue. He noted that Rutgers was "skeptical" about the project, but today it is one of the most popular residences. [13]

"A lot of ideas get thrown into the pot," Patterson said, trying to explain who is responsible for different projects. "Different people have different contributions to make, and then eventually the project comes out of it." [14] This deviates from redevelopment early on, when "J&J was involved very heavily" in building its headquarters and the Hyatt Hotel. More recently, Johnson & Johnson provides operational funding to New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco but is not pushing projects. Devco has more or less assumed this role, with the help of the City. [15] The Planning Department works on redevelopment plans that allow zoning for certain projects, including the power to acquire property and provide tax incentives. Devco then actually develops the project with a private developer. [15]

The hospitals have experienced "tremendous growth," Patterson said, in terms of both physical expansion and employment. He said that a decade ago the hospitals employed 1,000 to 1,500 people; today he thinks the number is about 5,000. [15] The institutional strength of the hospitals "drives other business into town" and "gets people familiar with New Brunswick." [15-16] This is especially important for an urban center such as New Brunswick, where outsiders may feel uncomfortable simply because they are unfamiliar with the city.

Patterson envisions a bright future for New Brunswick. "I joke with people, saying that the best thing that could happen to New Brunswick is seven-dollar-a-gallon gasoline," he said, "because you can work here, live here." [19] He thinks that New Brunswick will attract new investment in the future as an urban center, when commuting long distances to work will be less feasible. The redevelopment process might not be as useful, Patterson said, because of a "push back on it" and because the "low-hanging fruit has already been picked." [20] Most areas that were in poor condition have already been fixed up or built upon, so acquisition becomes more difficult. [20]

Still, there are areas that the City could do better to address, such as student housing. An increased enrollment in Rutgers without corresponding growth in on-campus housing has led to a demand for off-campus housing. Patterson has observed "developers coming in and privately acquiring properties, tearing them down, and wanting to put up, let's say, multifamily buildings with one-bedroom, two-bedroom apartments." [21] This demand for housing has transformed the fifth and sixth wards, which "used to be our sort of middle-class, ethnic enclave up there with the homeowners." However, Patterson explained that the homeowners "can't compete with the price that students can pay," and so investors buy these houses and then convert them to rentals. [22] Because the students' demand for housing is so great, the City has difficulty encouraging home ownership.

When asked about what could have been done differently, Patterson said that more focus should be paid to quality-of-life issues, such as noise, graffiti, and reckless drivers. [23] Another issue is the "very transient rental population," including students and the immigrant population. [23] With people moving around frequently, "you don't get a sense of community as much, and we'd like to get more homeowners," Patterson said. [24] Still, he acknowledges that as a homeowner, "you don't want to deal necessarily with all of the hassles of living in an urban environment with permit parking, alternate side of the street parking, potentially graffiti, noise, things like that." [24]

Referring to the Gateway Project, Patterson explained that the historic significance of the buildings that were razed—with a "couple of interesting architectural features"—did not outweigh the future benefit of the new building. [25] The Gateway Project, wedged in between Rutgers University, the train station, Johnson & Johnson, and Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, occupies "a really prime piece of real estate that should be something that's really contributing to New Brunswick," Patterson said. Before development, the site included a dirt parking lot and "other properties that were really pretty dilapidated." [26] He expressed his feelings that historic preservation is important, but in instances such as the Gateway Project, economically viable redevelopment projects help to contribute to New Brunswick.

Patterson then reflected on the transferability of what happened in New Brunswick. For one, the political stability of two mayors for the last thirty years creates a business climate where "people feel comfortable investing here." [27] Additionally, "everybody has pretty much gone in the same direction" in sharing a common vision. [27] While this may not be transferable, setting up a New Brunswick Tomorrow or Devco type of organization is a realistic possibility that would encourage redevelopment and growth. [28]

He closed his interview by speaking about the Memorial Homes public housing, "a negative symbol for the city." [33] These projects were demolished in 2001, and HOPE VI replacement housing was built on the site as part of a roughly 15-year process. Patterson said this was "transformative for downtown," creating a "tremendously better environment." The area is not prone to the former problems with drugs and crime. Remarkably, Patterson said that he receives calls from people interested in buying the houses that have replaced the Memorial Homes: "I have to tell them, 'Look, no—that's our affordable housing downtown, and yuppies don't qualify.'" [33]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Collaboration (between Devco and the City)

> *The City and Devco, particularly back in those days, worked very, very closely together. Paul Abdalla was originally over at Devco. He was a little bit before my time, but when I came here, Frank Nero was over there. He and John worked closely together, and both were very focused on getting it done—not getting hung up on trying to be perfect. [9]*

Johnson & Johnson (J&J)

> *J&J back in the 1970s was considering moving out of town, and everyone thought that that would really be a death blow to the city; the city was not in good shape back then. [3]*

New Brunswick Prior to Redevelopment (late 1980s)

> *The downtown was still fairly sad looking. A lot of vacancies. A lot of stores that weren't selling the best-quality merchandise and things like that. [4]*

New Brunswick's Advantages

> *I think New Brunswick was lucky in that its major institutions never picked up and left. I used to work for Asbury Park, and all of its major institutions, by the time I was working there in*

the mid-1980s, had pretty much picked up and left. So there was really nothing left to work with, whereas, I think New Brunswick has had an advantage that a lot of the urban areas haven't had in that we've had a J&J, a Rutgers, Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, St. Peter's Hospital, County of Middlesex still in town, so there was always a good daytime population base to work with here—it wasn't a completely dysfunctional city. It was a city that was definitely frayed at the edges to say the least, but there was still something to work with. There was still an economic reason for New Brunswick to exist. And it has a great location in the middle of the state. A turnpike exit. The train station is here so it's an easy place for a lot of people to meet. People are still familiar with it and had a lot of good feelings about New Brunswick if they'd gone to Rutgers or something like that, so I think we always had a lot of advantages that maybe some other cities in the state didn't have when they were trying to do redevelopment. [3]

Political Stability in New Brunswick

New Brunswick has been lucky. I know there may be some critics out there who wouldn't see it that way, but we've had two mayors for the last 30-something years. That provides a lot of political stability so that people feel comfortable investing here, that they're not going to get in the middle of the project and get cut off at the knees. [27]

Redevelopment Vision for New Brunswick

I think Lynch had [a vision] that New Brunswick could be a very successful urban area. We still had major anchors downtown. We could build upon them. We could build things such as the Hyatt Hotel downtown, and people would go to it. That we could build upscale housing in downtown, and it would be attractive. That offices would come here. That we could rejuvenate the George Street corridor downtown, and that we could revitalize the neighborhoods through combinations of housing rehabilitation and developing both middle-class, lease-purchase type housing, and affordable housing in town. And I think still, 30 years later, that's still what we're working on. I think we've had a fair amount of success with it, but that's still kind of what guides us—that we want to have a balanced town where there is something for everybody here. [10-11]

Rutgers University Role in Redevelopment

Rutgers has participated in a number of projects. Frankly, a lot of times they've had to be dragged to the table—even for this project, where we are now, down here with Bloustein. I mean, Rutgers has done a lot. They've had to be pushed to get them involved, but I think all the projects have worked out really well for them. With the University Center up on Easton Avenue, the Rutgers apartment dormitory project, I think they were skeptical as to whether that would work—but I think it's still the number one requested dormitory in the system. It's been a great project there. [13-14]