



# The Times

## Trenton seeks grants for massive makeover

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TRENTON -- The city's plans for massive makeovers of neighborhoods north of the train station, and of a swath of land from the waterfront to downtown, are at critical junctures.

Before the city and state agencies can start tearing down old buildings and constructing new streets, they must succeed in winning highly competitive federal grants worth tens of millions of dollars in federal money.

By February, the city will learn whether the Trenton Housing Authority has won a \$20 million Department of Housing and Urban Development grant that will go toward demolishing the vacant Miller Homes complex and building hundreds of new public housing units.

At about the same time, the federal Department of Transportation will notify the city and the Capital City Redevelopment Corp., the CCRC, whether they will receive \$63 million to reroute Route 29 away from the Delaware River and create new parkland.

The project would also involve taking down two state office buildings and turning sprawling state parking lots into a new neighborhood.

"This money is intended for mid-sized cities like Trenton," Mayor Douglas Palmer said of the transportation grant. "In a larger city, it would be almost a drop in the bucket. In Trenton, you will be able to actually change the entire economic tax base of a capital city. That's what we need.

"If we are successful, this will jump-start the revitalization of the capital city now and for generations to come. That's how important this is," he said.

The housing authority is in the process of writing an application for the HUD HOPE VI grant, which is due Nov. 17. The city and the CCRC, a state agency, submitted an application for the huge TIGER or Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grant earlier this month.

If the Route 29 project had been ready to be launched two years ago, it probably would have depended more on private funding, but the investment climate has changed drastically since then, CCRC Board Chair Ingrid Reed said.

"Now that we're in this recession and the stimulus money is available, and criteria for the TIGER grant fit so tightly with this project, it made an awful lot of sense to say this would be a good public sector investment, to partner with the private sector," she said.

Plans to turn Route 29 from a highway into a boulevard with traffic lights were hatched years ago, but the project got a tremendous potential shot in the arm in May, when federal transportation officials designated \$1.5 billion in federal stimulus money for TIGER grants.

Just two months earlier, the state DOT released an exhaustive study of Route 29 that recommended moving the road inland just north of Route 1, which would open up land for recreation and development along the river. About 1.8 miles of Route 29 would be affected.

The new, two-lane boulevard would become the spine of a new grid of homes and businesses built on land used by state office buildings and parking lots. Heading north, it would curve left past the War Memorial and rejoin the road's current path.

The CCRC also commissioned a market feasibility study to see what kind of development the project could actually attract. The study was due out this month, but when the TIGER grant became available, the consultants were diverted to help complete the grant application, which was due in mid-September.

In the TIGER application, the CCRC estimates that the Route 29 project will cost a total of \$194 million, including the grant money. It would generate \$2.25 billion in private sector economic growth, and directly or indirectly create 27,000 jobs, including both temporary construction jobs and permanent positions, the CCRC said.

"The contribution of this project to the long-term growth in employment, production and other high value economic activity is beyond significant," the application said.

The related market study is still being reviewed and hasn't been released, but CCRC Executive Director Monique King-Viehl said it will include specific findings on how to make the new district appeal to developers. For example, it will recommend making Market Street into a retail corridor that is physically aligned with the waterfront.

"This study really got into the nitty-gritty of the numbers, and what kind of subsidy and what else we'll need to get this going," she said.

Palmer said the study found that Trenton must overcome negative perceptions of the city, but that there is also demand for development in the area, particularly with its close access to multiple transportation options.

Likewise, the city also expects developers will be interested in rehabilitating and building housing in areas around the Miller Homes, which are plagued with blight and abandoned buildings.

While the HUD funding would go toward subsidized housing, the Trenton Housing Authority would also encourage private development on city-owned parcels -- for example, by providing downpayment assistance to buyers of the new homes.

Both grant applications, for the housing and the transportation projects, face difficult odds.

The Department of Transportation said yesterday it had received 1,400 applications from all 50 states. A housing authority consultant said HUD could receive more than 40 HOPE VI applications, but would likely give out just a handful of grants.

But Palmer said the federal government is making the money available to satisfy just the kinds of needs Trenton has, and the city must do its best to win the grants if it wants to eradicate blight and poverty, beautify its streets, and boost business development and job opportunities.

"To the naysayers, I say, you need to get behind this, because we won't have too many bites at the apple," he said. "We need to push forward, and this is an excellent time to do it."

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