

# Bringing Commerce Back to the Downtown Business District

By: Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr., City of Orange

At a time when the economies of many downtown corridors are sagging, the City of Orange is implementing a plan to attract shoppers back into its business districts and to help local businesses survive and grow. That plan is part of a long-term economic development strategy that includes revitalizing the downtown commercial corridors.

Upon entering office last year, I knew that economic development and downtown revitalization needed to be our top priority and I was committed to moving forward with those efforts. Little did I realize that the economic recession would soon leave many of our local businesses struggling for survival.

Our initial downtown strategy revolved around ensuring that the Main Street commercial corridor would remain vibrant and busy. We planned to enhance the appearance to make the area more attractive in the hopes that our local merchants would be able to capture a larger share of retail spending in the region.

We aggressively pursued becoming a Main Street New Jersey community in order to take advantage of the training, technical support and resources they offer. Valerie Jackson, our director of Planning and Economic Development Department, attended several programs sponsored by Main Street New Jersey. It was there that Jackson became aware of the JGSC Group, a New Jersey company that specializes in downtown revitalization.

The City retained the JGSC Group to conduct its Community Insights<sup>SM</sup> market and retail analysis of the commercial corridors and to develop strategies for revitalization. Unfortunately, as the analysis was being conducted, the economy faltered and we had to expand our focus to ensure that our businesses would be able to weather the recession.

In a collaborative effort between Valerie Jackson, her staff, the JGSC Group and others, we developed a comprehensive plan that included long-term strategies for evolving our commercial corridors into viable retail markets, as well as short-term strategies for supporting our retailers through the recession. We found that many of the

strategies compliment each other and help to create synergies for economic growth.

Using the findings of the market and retail analysis, our plan focused on five key areas: helping existing businesses to weather the recession; making the downtown business corridors more safe, more attractive, and more appealing to shoppers; making it easier for visitors to find stores and parking; actively recruiting sustainable new businesses into the corridor; and enticing shoppers to visit downtown stores more often.

As part of the overall plan, we are taking advantage of the many tools in our toolkit and utilizing a myriad of programs to enhance our commercial corridors. For example, City Council authorized five-

iPod players, a laptop computer and more to shoppers that enter at participating retailers. Because the program is funded through the UEZ, participating merchants must be enrolled in that program, which has driven significant new enrollments.

We are working together with the Orange Main Street organization to support the campaign with a series of downtown events, festivities, lighting, decorations and more. A new consumer-friendly website ([www.ShopOrange.org](http://www.ShopOrange.org)) has been launched to provide details about shopping, events and sweepstakes, and we're assisting local merchants to become e-marketing capable so they can communicate more quickly and inexpensively with consumers.

**Eldridge Hawkins, Jr.** was sworn in as Mayor of Orange in July of 2008. He ran on an ambitious agenda of plans to make Orange safer, stabilize property taxes, improve education for people of all ages, and assure the honesty and integrity of government. Since taking office, he has jump-started the city's stalled redevelopment plans, stepped up enforcement of health, safety and housing laws, and created a private/public partnership to bring medical services directly into senior citizen housing.



year tax abatements for improvements to commercial properties to encourage investment, and we are currently working on revising our zoning code, to make the town more shopping friendly. The proposed revisions would allow sidewalk café dining, permit once-prohibited projecting signs, establish a design standard for the appearance of downtown establishments, and define a set of permitted business uses.

As part of our effort to help businesses survive the recession, we're providing increased marketing and promotions support for our businesses—in particular, a dynamic sweepstakes campaign called Home for the Holidays—to help them connect with shoppers at a time when many stores do not have funds for marketing. The campaign, which is designed to encourage shoppers to patronize local restaurants and stores, offers exciting prizes such as a home theater system,

Moreover, our proactive approach to business retention helped us locate and provide support to six at-risk businesses with a wide range of services including marketing, financing, capital improvements and more. While I doubt we'll be able to save all of these businesses, we are encouraged by the progress they have achieved so far.

The lesson of all of this is that municipal government does have a role to assist local merchants in the management of their downtown as a shopping destination, rather than allowing them struggle as a random unconnected collection of stores/restaurants. We believe our proactive, fact-based approach will continue to play an instrumental role in bringing commerce back to our downtown business districts, so that as the economy improves our businesses and residents will be among the first to enjoy the benefits. ♣