



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS FRONT STREET GARAGE REDEVELOPMENT TRENTON, NJ

For: The Trenton Parking Authority

From: New Jersey Future



October 2023

Front Street Garage Redevelopment Community Engagement Recommendations

The Community Engagement process was designed to inform and educate people in the area about the upcoming project and to answer the following six questions to inform the Front Street Garage redevelopment process and the planned Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI).

1. What information would stakeholders like to share that might be helpful in planning the redevelopment of the site?
2. What are some features, uses or design attributes that stakeholders would like to see in a future project?
3. What attributes would stakeholders like to see in a future redeveloper of the site?
4. What concerns do stakeholders have about the site, future development, and the future redeveloper?
5. How would stakeholders like to be kept informed of progress, key milestones for involvement, and opportunities to affect development decision-making?
6. What elements should be considered for a future Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)?

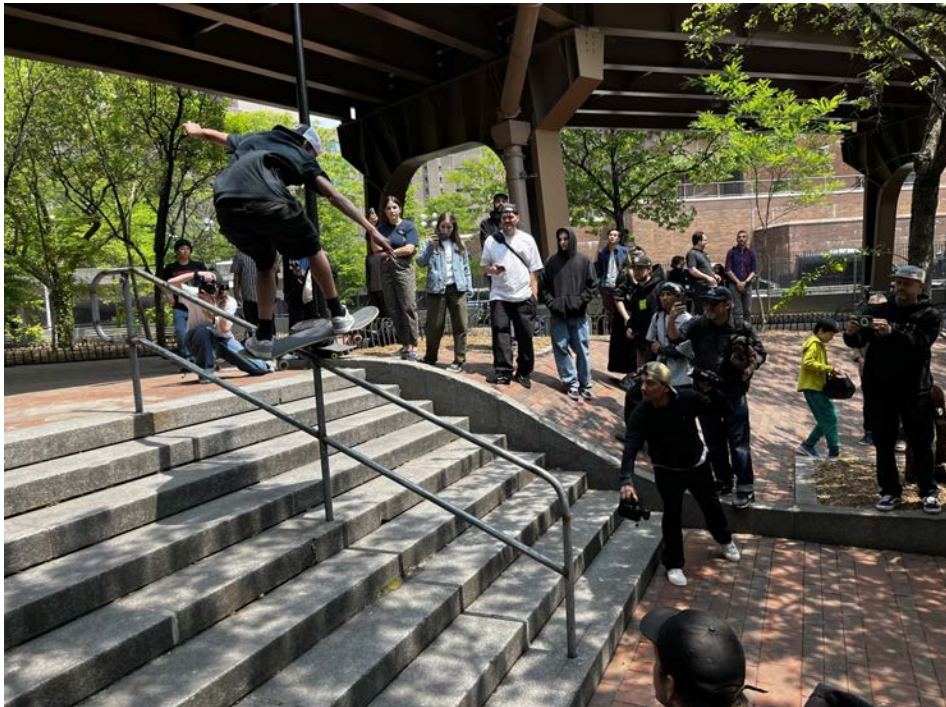
Based on the information gathered and analyzed and on New Jersey Future's own knowledge and experience, the following recommendations are presented for moving forward with the redevelopment project. Following these six sets of question-related recommendations will be specific recommendations for the RFEI and a conclusion.

1. What information would stakeholders like to share that might be helpful in planning the redevelopment of the site?

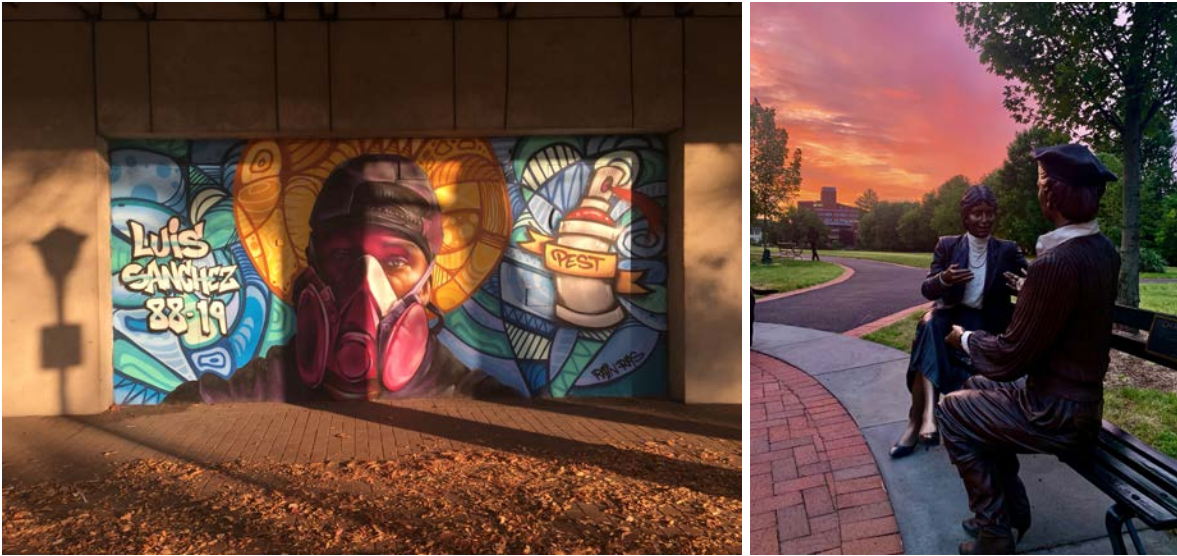
This is a very important downtown redevelopment site. Many people feel that it could be catalytic for downtown revitalization. The site has a long and storied history dating back to the Revolutionary War, long before it was occupied by a parking garage. The South Broad Street frontage is a regionally known, and well-used (unsanctioned) skateboarding site, especially the brick angled wall known as the "banks". Since being closed, the first floor of the garage has housed well-done, community murals. The sidewalk area around the building on South Broad Street and East Front Street are fairly wide and have been important parts of the public realm. The garage sits across the street from Mill Hill Park. This is both a historic park (site of the Battle of Trenton) and a well-used open space amenity in the downtown area.

Recommendations:

- Mill Hill Park is a huge asset for this site. Make a strong connection to the park, including improving and enhancing the park to ensure that it is a visual and active amenity.
- This is a highly pedestrian trafficked area and could be even more so. Plan the site so that it is connected (pedestrian) to its surroundings and enhances the look and feel of this important corner location. Design the streetscape so that it is very pedestrian friendly and can serve as a welcoming space and a gateway to the park.
- The site occupies an important corner in the downtown. Ensure ground floor uses are designed in a way that will enhance the downtown experience and can “absorb economic impact” from the park.
- The site has developed a reputation with artists and as a site for local murals. Look for ways to incorporate local art and artists into the use of the site, including a place for rotating murals.
- The “Banks” are an important and iconic landmark and attraction for skateboarders. Explore if there is any feasible or practical way to allow skateboarding in the area or the preservation of the Banks. If not, determine if they can be recreated at the new skate park in East Trenton and if something can be done at the South Broad Street site to honor the important role the Banks have played. Brooklyn Banks at Arches Park under the Brooklyn Bridge is an imperfect example, since it is not private property or an active mixed-use site, but may provide some ideas.



Brooklyn Banks as part of refurbished Arches Park. Photo Credit: [Timeout](#)



Mural on East Front Street side of the garage. Mill Hill Park. Photo Credit: Peter Kasabach

2. What are some features, uses or design attributes that stakeholders would like to see in a future project?

This is an iconic location that will have a large impact on how the downtown looks, feels and functions for generations to come. It is also an important backdrop to Mill Hill Park, the City's premiere downtown park. The park ensures that the site will not have development across Front Street from it, which provides a sunny, airy feel that is unique to this part of downtown. The buildings immediately around the site range from one to ten stories, with the five to ten story buildings establishing a good base height. Because of the great variety of buildings in the vicinity, there is a virtual blank slate regarding the building design aesthetic. The visual preference exercise allowed certain features and design attributes to be explored and highlighted. The categories are listed below along with recommendations based on feedback and experience.

Recommendations:

- **Mixture of uses.** Develop a mixed-use building with an active and pedestrian-friendly ground floor, possibly including public uses. Upper floors should likely include housing, but could also include commercial space. If housing, consider mixed-income housing such as 80% market and 20% affordable.
- **Building height.** A minimum of six stories is recommended. An eight story building or a three story podium with eight stories above would fit the site well, but the final determination will depend on design and density considerations.

- **Sidewalk spaces.** Sidewalks should be wider than adjacent sites to accommodate street furniture, trees, welcoming pedestrian travel, possibly outdoor dining, and a visual and physical connection to Mill Hill Park.
- **Ground floor activity.** This does not need to be exclusively retail, but should look visually different and create activity. Suggestions of a fitness club, museum, entertainment venue, grocer, and restaurants would all work. The important thing is to design the site to accommodate these uses on both South Broad and Front Streets, with South Broad Street being the more obvious choice for retail. The building should have an outward facing character and not one that feels fortress-like or insular.
- **On-site parking.** The Trenton Parking Authority will be able to address varied parking scenarios as the mixture and intensity of uses become clear, including possibly using their nearby parking garages to support the development of this site. If considerable on-site parking is required it should be accommodated behind the S. Broad Street and Front Street facades and most likely in a parking structure.
- **Density and scale.** The development has the opportunity to use the entire site, including the adjacent parking lot on South Broad Street. With the caveats about sidewalk widths, the building should use the whole site, up to the sidewalks.
- **Facade and Corner.** This is an important site and corner in Trenton. The corner should be distinctive and active. The facade should have high quality materials and significant articulation and interest (not flat). The Front Street side is particularly important since it will form the backdrop to the park and will help frame the park as “a community room”.
- **Balconies and projections.** Projections should be considered to add interest to the facade and to possibly provide protection for pedestrians. Balconies on the Front Street side should be considered to take into account the view of the park and to add activity to the street. Balconies are an urban amenity that should be reintroduced in Trenton.
- **Green.** The building should be environmentally friendly including the ways it manages stormwater, heat island effects, and indoor air quality. Visually exhibiting green features such as green roofs and plantings would be beneficial. Consider using the roof spaces for greening and passive recreation space, especially considering the views.

3. What attributes would stakeholders like to see in a future redeveloper of the site?

The Trenton Parking Authority will select a redeveloper for the site. The redeveloper will need to work with community stakeholders and the City of Trenton to create an inspiring, appropriate, and feasible plan for the site. They will then need the skills, capacity, and experience to finance and implement the plan. Aside from the standard

requirements for a capable redeveloper, including honesty and transparency, the community engagement process elevated the following other recommendations.

Recommendations:

- Elevate the importance of regular community engagement in the process including during the conceptualizing and design phases.
- Create the expectation that the redeveloper will enter into a Community Benefits Agreement with the City and community stakeholders.
- Prioritize local and minority involvement in the construction and operations of the project. Hiring a local or minority owned development firm that meets the strict qualification standards would be ideal.
- Stress the importance of bringing an open-minded and creative team to the process.

4. What concerns do stakeholders have about the site, future development, and the future redeveloper?

The redevelopment of the Front Street Garage is an important initiative for the many stakeholders in Trenton. The concerns among these stakeholders that New Jersey Future shares are summarized here. Many of these concerns are being voiced in terms of the opposite of what people would like to see and expect to see. Some of this wariness comes from a sense of years of inappropriate or less than optimal developments taking place in Trenton with little control or input by local residents or business owners. New Jersey Future recommends that the Trenton Parking Authority take these concerns into account when designing the Request for Expressions of Interest, selecting the redeveloper, and negotiating any development agreements. Concerns are that:

- The Request for Expressions of Interest won't be able to identify qualified, creative redevelopers, which may delay the project.
- A redeveloper may be selected because of political connections, the perception of political connections, or reasons other than track record and capacity to meet all of the necessary requirements.
- The redeveloper selected won't have the proper track record, experience, and qualifications to be able to create, plan, and execute a high quality project on time and within budget without lowering the bar on quality or design.
- The redeveloper won't understand State subsidy programs or have a track record of success using them.
- The selected redeveloper won't genuinely be committed to the community engagement process and negotiating a Community Benefits Agreement.
- The project won't be planned and designed to be an integral part of the downtown, but rather a standalone, insular building.

- The State won't be at the table providing streamlined, financial subsidies and support to make a high quality project happen.
- The development will have a majority of income-restricted low-income housing units.
- The development process will get bogged down and not move forward because of too many bureaucratic hoops at the local and state levels.
- The development trade offs will invariably benefit the developer at the expense of the community.
- Local and minority groups and firms will be left out of the process.
- An important skateboarding site will be lost.
- The final project won't enhance the downtown experience and the lives of those in the area, even if it is a success for the immediate users.
- High density if done poorly, will be a negative.

5. How would stakeholders like to be kept informed of progress, key milestones for involvement, and opportunities to affect development decision-making?

The Trenton Parking Authority has an opportunity to set an example for how public entities engage the community in a redevelopment project. Informing the community and gathering initial concerns and feedback was an important first step. Stakeholders expressed a strong desire to stay informed and engaged especially through email and public meetings. New Jersey Future recommends that the Trenton Parking Authority set-aside funds to ensure that community engagement occurs straight through to the ribbon-cutting of the eventual project. Below are examples of key milestones for engagement and a process that can be followed.

Key Milestones for Engagement

- Review of the Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI)
- Review of responses to the RFEI
- Selection of the redeveloper
- Development of initial site concept
- Exploration of public and building art components
- Recognition of historic skating site and honoring it
- Negotiation of the Community Benefits Agreement
- Review of preliminary site plan
- Planning Board hearing and approval
- Local hiring outreach
- Demolition of the garage
- Solicitation of users
- Groundbreaking for new development
- Pre-completion tour
- Ribbon cutting

Engagement Process

A core group of “grasstops” stakeholders was identified and organized for the first phase of the community engagement process. Consider keeping this group together with the goal of guiding future community engagement efforts and conducting outreach.

Use the initial meeting participant email lists created by this process to keep this larger group of stakeholders informed of progress at least quarterly, but as much as monthly if things are moving quickly. Look for ways to continue to grow this list. Use the milestones above as organizing points for bringing people together, getting feedback, making course corrections, and building support. This can be done with surveys, emails, public meetings, or creating ad hoc work groups. Enlist local media to help chronicle the process and get the word out.

At every step you must be transparent and genuine. If you ask for opinions then you must demonstrate that you listened, assessed the suggestions, and looked for ways to incorporate those ideas that could be reasonably incorporated. Keep expectations realistic. Don't over promise. Don't say that people will be part of a decision-making process if they won't. Don't promise amenities or features in the new development if you can't deliver.

The survey responses indicated demand from community stakeholders to learn more about PILOT agreements, the Trenton real estate market, development project feasibility, public subsidies, and design options for new buildings. These represent opportunities to work with the City to conduct educational workshops and interactive sessions on these topics.

6. What elements should be considered for a future Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)?

A CBA is a newer tool, especially in NJ, used to negotiate outcomes of development projects. Once established, a CBA is a legally enforceable contract between a coalition of community-based organizations or local government and the developer of a proposed project. If a CBA is with a municipality it is important to keep the community involved and ensure their feedback is included in the agreement. Currently, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority ASPIRE program requires a developer to enter into a CBA with the municipality. The Trenton Parking Authority should seek to facilitate and be a party to this agreement, in part to help ensure that stakeholders who have been engaged throughout the process have a voice and a seat at the table. The following is a list of possible items that could be included in a future CBA. It will be important to develop a new and unique list based on the project, the redeveloper, relevant local issues, and contemporary community feedback. As a CBA is formulated, it

might be useful to divide elements into those things that can be incorporated directly into the development and those that will impact adjacent areas. It will also be important to balance community desires with the ability to develop a feasible project in a challenging downtown real estate market.

- **Mill Hill Park.** Pay for improvements and/or maintenance and upkeep.
- **Public spaces.** Public sitting areas, meeting spaces, bike/scooter parking, package delivery rooms, rooftop garden/plaza, public restrooms.
- **Support for local artists.** Gallery space, mural space, paying for and displaying public art, contributing to a local arts organization.
- **Support for local businesses.** Buying local, contributing to the Trenton Downtown Association.
- **Support for youth.** Space for congregating, link to local schools or daycares.
- **Local/minority hiring.** Hiring contractors and individuals during construction and operations.
- **Green building.** Energy efficient, no fossil fuels, electric vehicle charging stations, green stormwater management.
- **Affordable housing.** Incorporating some housing that is affordable to lower income residents and consider giving locals preference.
- **Homage to Trenton History.** Revolutionary, industrial, skateboarding

7. Recommendations for the Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI)

The Trenton Parking Authority plans to issue an RFEI this November. The RFEI is a useful tool to pitch the site to potential redevelopers. It will be important to structure the RFEI so that it gives potential redevelopers the confidence that the Trenton Parking Authority understands the potential for the site and the risks associated with the project - and is capable and committed to to mitigate those risks and smooth the process with the redeveloper.

It is not necessary or advisable to share all of the information in this recommendation report in the RFEI. However, New Jersey Future does recommend the following be included in some manner:

- Make it clear that community engagement is an important part of this project and that the Trenton Parking Authority has already started this work and will work with the redeveloper to continue it. Consider sharing the Community Engagement Report (the report with the survey results).
- Create the expectation that the redeveloper will enter into a Community Benefits Agreement. You can note that this is a requirement of some state funding programs and a preference for the Trenton Parking Authority.
- Highlight that local and minority involvement in the construction and operations of the project will be important.

- Note Mill Hill Park and its importance.
- Emphasize the importance of this site and the need for it to contribute to a walkable, vibrant downtown.
- Describe the connection to the arts and that there are opportunities to expand on these.
- Consider including the recommended features from question #2 above. You can characterize the list as something that came out of the community engagement process, but is not binding.
- Demonstrate political and financial support from the City and State.
- Include some history of the site, including the “Banks” skateboarding history.
- Stress the importance of bringing an open-minded and creative team to the process.

8. Conclusion

The above recommendations are intended to inform the Trenton Parking Authority as it moves forward with this very important project. They also highlight the importance of keeping the community stakeholders engaged throughout the process. The community stakeholders can be the biggest supporters and advocates for a project if they are authentically included in the process, or they can become the most vocal detractors if they are not. The Trenton Parking Authority has opened the door to authentic community engagement. Below is a Ladder of Citizen Participation. Organizations looking to share power with the local community will strive to move up the ladder, at each step ceding a little more ownership of the process to the community stakeholders. It is uncommon to reach the top two tiers, but moving up from the bottom rung is a major accomplishment. The Trenton Parking Authority should continue to engage the community and seek to move up the ladder.



Image Credit: [CitizenLab](#)

The State of New Jersey can and should be an important participant in the redevelopment of the garage. The Trenton Parking Authority can leverage the capacity, resources, and skill sets of the State, especially the New Jersey Economic Development Authority and the Capital City Redevelopment Corporation, without giving up control of the project or needing to compromise on community engagement. New Jersey Future strongly encourages this approach and is willing to assist.

The Trenton Parking Authority has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redevelop the garage site into a project that can catalyze the transformation of the city’s downtown. It will be important to keep the community engaged, find the right redeveloper, and keep the process moving.