

Perth Amboy making new push for planning, redevelopment around key city properties

 re-nj.com/perth-amboy-making-new-push-for-planning-redevelopment-around-key-city-properties/

Perth Amboy's commercial district and train station are among the areas that city officials are prioritizing as part of a renewed push for planning and economic development. — Photos by Aaron Houston for Real Estate NJ

By Patricia Alex

With new leadership in place, officials in Perth Amboy say redevelopment of both the city's waterfront and its commercial district will be a priority, following years of fits and starts that have hindered large-scale progress in the community.

Namely, there will be a renewed focus on development around the train station, at a former municipal dump and at the so-called Gateway — a 54-acre former industrial site at the foot of the Victory Bridge, which is now slated for mixed-use development.

“The city is in a pivotal time for redevelopment,” said Tashilee Vazquez, who was named executive director of the Perth Amboy Redevelopment Agency, or PARA, in March. She added that the municipality's leaders, including Mayor Helmin Caba, the city council and the redevelopment board, were “eager to see things happen.”

Redevelopment here and the other gritty towns at the mouth of the Raritan River has proceeded unevenly over the past generation, complicated by the prospect of sometimes protracted cleanups of former industrial sites and the tangle of local politics.

Across from Perth Amboy, developers in Sayreville promise progress at the massive Riverton residential and commercial project, while luxury apartments are rising and dredging has begun for a new ferry service in South Amboy. But “Coming Soon” seems to be the perennial promise of this region, where some new plans are iterations of others that have been on the drawing board since the 1990s.

In Perth Amboy, officials say they are anxious for progress but don't want to rush. Vasquez said planners are awaiting a new city master plan, which also is in development.

“It's important to visualize what you want,” she said. “You have to strategically be ready for redevelopment. The city is in the business of providing the best quality of life for our residents — homes, jobs created. Then you can forge true partnership with developers when you understand the city's needs.”



From left: Joel Rosa, chairman of the Perth Amboy Redevelopment Agency; Tashilee Vazquez, the agency's executive director, and Mayor Helmin Caba are part of the team that hopes to attract new investment to the city's waterfront and commercial district.

There is no shortage of need in the historic city of 55,000 residents that for decades has suffered from post-war deindustrialization. Many of the developable sites in town are so-called brownfields, contaminated from long-shuttered industries.

The Bay City is one of the oldest settlements in New Jersey, founded in the 1600s and prized for its location, bordered by the Raritan and the Arthur Kill, which separates it from Staten Island. Some of the waterfront has been redeveloped with housing and walkways that take advantage of its wide vistas. Other portions remain industrial. Perth Amboy is crisscrossed by highways and very near the New Jersey Turnpike, which has made it more attractive to warehouse development in the last decade.

Some big public investments are underway in the city, including \$45.5 million in NJ Transit funds for the train station upgrades, and construction of a new state-funded \$284 million Perth Amboy High School on Convery Boulevard, slated to open next year on the site previously home to public housing.

Planners are hoping to promote mixed-use residential development that can continue the revival of the city’s expansive waterfront, which, after some success, largely stalled at the economic downturn in 2008.

“How do we rebuild our waterfront? How do we make it more of an attraction? Moving away from industrial projects would really be ideal,” said Joel Rosa, PARA’s chairman, who said care is being taken to make sure plans are “equitable and affordable” to existing residents.

Vasquez added: “We need to expand public access to the waterfront and, most importantly, to redefine our waterfront as a regional destination.” She said the city is in talks about reviving ferry service, which was discontinued in the 1960s, and an announcement is expected this year.



Large public investments are underway in Perth Amboy, including \$45.5 million in NJ Transit funds for the train station upgrades. The Perth Amboy Redevelopment Agency will soon ask city planners to prepare a study needed to participate in state programs that provide tax incentives for transit districts.

Other PARA priorities this year include:

Redevelopment around the Perth Amboy train station, including area bounded by Market Street, New Brunswick and Maple avenues and the tracks: PARA says the redevelopment will “spur more entertainment and culture into the downtown mix.” The agency will soon ask city planners to prepare a study needed to participate in state programs

that provide tax incentives for transit districts. Vasquez said zoning changes will also be considered with an eye toward converting underused office space downtown to residential use.

Mixed-use redevelopment of a brownfield that is the former site of a municipal landfill, which closed in 1974: The 20-acre parcel at 599 Fayette St. is envisioned as a place for office space, homes and commercial and retail opportunities. Private developers would be required to cap the landfill, manage any soil gas and comply with all other state environmental regulations. A city trash transfer station still operates on the site.

Redevelopment of Gateway, the 54-acre waterfront site at the Route 35 bridge over the Raritan Bay: The property requires significant environmental remediation, but its location is considered prime. Next to the Cornucopia Cruise Line, it's a 10-minute walk to the NJ Transit station and the Smith Street retail corridor. Gateway is also just steps from the planned Borinqueneer Park and extension of a riverfront walkway. Vasquez said there should be news about the project in the coming months.

“Perth Amboy is eager to move forward with a number of smart growth redevelopment projects, connecting more people to the Raritan Bay, to our historic downtown and to our vibrant neighborhoods,” said Caba, the city’s mayor. “Through our redevelopment agency, we have aggressive plans to promote shovel-ready projects that will begin to maximize a number of real estate opportunities that have been discussed for years and are now ready to go.”

Victor Tavarez, program director for the Gateway Neighborhood Collaborative, said affordable housing should be part of any revitalization plan. “We’re looking to better the neighborhood, to help the residents, we want resident-driven plans.”

Meanwhile, two sizeable new luxury apartment developments have been approved pending environmental review and permitting. A \$31.75 million project at 585 West Sayre Ave. will add 117 rental units. And the \$160 million Riverwalk Crossing is planned for 578 units. Both received payment in lieu of taxes agreements from the city, providing a 25-year exemption from property taxes in exchange for cash payment to the municipality.

And Vasquez said an update to the master plan may include two new development areas: the 2nd Street corridor and the former Buckeye Site on Hughes Street.

“We’re making sure we’re working collaboratively that we’re moving forward,” said Vasquez, whose family has lived in Perth Amboy for three generations. “The future belongs to those who can visualize it.”

A former newspaper reporter and editor, Patricia Alex writes about development and other issues in New Jersey.