

# **Willingboro, New Jersey—Willingboro Town Center**

## **Key Players**

Willingboro Township  
ReNEWal, Willingboro, LLC (project developer)  
New Jersey Department of Transportation  
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

## **Background**

The Willingboro Town Center is a 56-acre former commercial shopping mall, known as Willingboro Plaza, located along Route 130 Corridor. This corridor includes portions of 12 municipalities covering 59 square miles. Its 1990 population of 130,000 represented about one-third of Burlington County's total population. The corridor's population density of 2,188 persons per square mile is significantly higher than the 482 persons per square mile found in the county as a whole.

Along with the rest of the Route 130 commercial corridor, the center began its decline with the construction of Interstate 295, which attracted the development of larger regional malls away from older commercial areas. The property was in foreclosure proceedings by the 1980s and completely vacant by 1990. The site was also plagued by the presence of 17 underground storage tanks, soil contamination, and a massive asbestos management issue.

The Willingboro Town Center development plan contains a mix of retail and commercial establishments, adult housing, and community-oriented institutions. The project has also an emphasis on public transportation and walking.

## **Project Features**

Willingboro Township is using its authority under the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law (LRHL), in conjunction with Burlington County's regional planning effort, to redevelop the site using the smart growth planning strategies emphasized by the State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP). The plan provides for a mixed-use environment, combining commercial, industrial, office, government, and residential uses, as well as the creation of parks and pedestrian linkages throughout the property and into the neighboring community.

Phase one of the project included the demolition of 10 buildings while preserving the parcel's existing water, sewer, and electric infrastructure. Site activities included removal of the underground storage tanks, environmental cleanup, removal of asbestos from abandoned buildings, and demolition of buildings that were structurally unsound and did not logistically fit into the new redevelopment concept. A component of the fast-track remediation effort was the collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Township of Willingboro, which allowed the remedial measure to proceed "at risk," contemporaneously with other demolition and site improvement activities.

ReNEWal successfully completed the site remediation and received a no further action letter (NFA) from the state for a portion of the site. It is awaiting an NFA for the rest of the site.



## Financing

To encourage the Merck-Medco mail service pharmacy to relocate to Willingboro, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority approved a Business Employment Incentive Grant with an estimated value of nearly \$3 million over 10 years, based on the new jobs to be created. Merck-Medco operates 12 other mail service pharmacies across the country and is the nation's leading pharmacy benefits manager. In 2002, Medco Health managed more than 537 million prescriptions through its 12 home delivery pharmacies and nationwide network of more than 58,000 retail pharmacies.

The project also obtained grants of \$76,751 from the state's Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund, and a Transportation Enhancement Grant of \$507,500 from the New Jersey Department of Transportation. DEP's Division of Parks and Forestry's Community Forestry Program also provided a Tree Planting Grant.

## Impact

Perhaps the biggest strength of Willingboro's redevelopment plan is its foundation in a larger, county-wide strategic planning effort. The county engaged in the multi-jurisdictional planning process to address the physical and economic decline of the

communities along the Route 130 and Delaware River Corridors, with an emphasis on redevelopment.

The developer's concept, as approved by the Planning Board, is consistent with the adopted redevelopment plan and the smart growth strategy chosen by the township. It features national retailers, multistory residential construction, a new public library, and an extension of the Burlington County College campus. A fountain and public amphitheater will provide additional civic and public open spaces within the development. Also consistent with the county's regional plan, bus routes and light rail connections will link the new community center with the surrounding region. The innovative development, and Willingboro's use of redevelopment to make it happen, earned the project and the developer a smart growth award from New Jersey Future in May 2002.

A 62,000-square-foot library serving the five towns adjacent to the site and a community college occupy a former Sears building at the center of the project. There is also an automated home delivery pharmacy facility by Merck-Medco operating on the site since 2001. It's a new \$ 85 million, 280,000 square feet pharmacy an 17 acres of the site. Merck-Medco is billing the new facility as the "world's largest and most technically advanced pharmacy" and it employees approximately 800 people.

In addition to that there is a new satellite facility for the Burlington County College. The new residential component will be made up of duplex townhouses designed for young couples and older households.

### **Contact:**

Robert B. Stang  
Managing Member  
ReNEWal Realty L.L.C.  
P.O. Box 2429  
Willinboro, NJ 08046  
(609) 880-0555  
E-mail: livearth1@aol.com

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