

## PLANNING FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES: CASE VIGNETTE

LINKING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CHILD CARE RESEARCH PROJECT

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# City of Trenton, New Jersey

*Trenton, NJ is not often thought of as being “family-friendly.” Its diverse population has a median income that is slightly under 70% of the national median. The City has struggled with public safety and economic development, resulting in low public perception. Yet it is within this challenging context that some of the most intriguing youth and parental initiatives in the nation have been born. The mayor’s efforts to engage youth led to Trenton being named America’s “Most Livable City” in 2005 by the US Conference of Mayors. The City also sponsors dozens of initiatives to engage, protect, and educate youth, while active non-profits such as CitySmiles continually advocate for families. Trenton offers affordable housing, proximity to other metros, and noted “walkability.” Trenton may not be your stereotypical “family friendly” community, but its efforts help to redefine the very term.*

## THE CITY

The American Community Survey estimates that in 2007 80,000 people called Trenton their home. Only 64.8% of the city’s population holds a high school degree (compared to 84% nationally), and over two thirds of its population is non-white. Trenton households also have a median household income of \$34,321, compared to the US median of \$50,007.

It is within this diverse, economically-challenging context that Trenton has attempted to reinvent itself. Through the efforts of the city’s government and the non-profit CitySmiles, Trenton has demonstrated innovative thinking related to family-friendly planning.

## TRENTON AND FAMILIES

Sixty-two percent of Trenton’s households are families. Even with such a large constituency, Trish Long, Senior Planner of Housing and Economic Development in Trenton notes, it is easy for planners to leave significant portions of this population out of the planning process.

“We have a high percentage of low-income families [in Trenton],” Long says, “and what that does is, unfortunately, steer most all kinds of community service type activity towards that group.” While providing social services to lower-income families is important, Long says, communities like Trenton can get so focused on this that they forget “the needs of

moderate income families.” The result is the further erosion of the economically- and socially-valuable middle and upper-class households.

Long credits groups like CitySmiles with reminding city planners of the needs of all families, regardless of income. The “biggest challenge [for planners] is that family-friendliness is not even considered. People don’t think about things in that way, unfortunately. [This is why] CitySmiles and advocacy groups are incredibly important.”

## CITYSMILES

Founded in 2002 by Lisa Kasabach, a mother who did not want to leave Trenton after her children were born, this non-profit strives to represent the needs of children and parents within the city. “We needed to take it into our own hands to promote what is good here,” Kasabach says, “We want to keep families here.”

CitySmiles pursues this mission by both serving as a distributor of family-related educational and recreational activities, sending out weekly emails containing listings of inexpensive, engaging local events to over 3,000 individuals, and by being an advocate for families. “We want the city to pay attention to parks and sidewalks, to maintenance, to libraries [and to green spaces]... We want the city to be more welcoming to children.” To accomplish this,

Compiled by: Kevin Casey McAvey

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CitySmiles works to help parents get their voices heard.



*Photo courtesy of CitySmiles.org*

Evenings, when public hearings are usually held, are a busy time for parents and meetings are hard to get to. CitySmiles tries to reduce this barrier by providing baby-sitting during such times. The group also believes that “information needs to be shared with families to allow them to participate.” In their weekly emails, CitySmiles also shares less-publicized family information – from city budget cuts to changes in library schedules. “We are advocates,” Kasabach says, “and want other families to be advocates as well.”

### **TRENTON'S FAMILY-FRIENDLY ASSETS**

Affordable housing is one of Trenton's many family-friendly assets. The median value for a home in Trenton is only \$120,000 (the national average is nearly 50% higher). In fact, the City of Trenton is fostering homeownership through programs like the “Live Where You Work” initiative, which provides low-interest rate mortgages to homebuyers purchasing homes close to their place of employment. Of the 26,488 occupied housing units in the City, only 44% are owner-occupied (67% nationwide). The City believes that not only would the program reduce inbound traffic congestion and provide an easily accessible workforce, it will “build stronger communities” by fostering individual investment.

Trenton also has a strong transportation system, says Long, with accessible buses, and strong connections via Interstates and Amtrak to New York and Philadelphia. The City also hosts historic landmarks and has built up a pedestrian-friendly center.

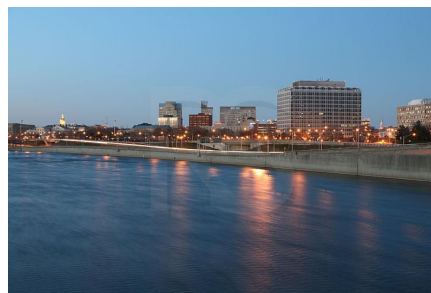
In its comprehensive plan, the City strives to be even more family-friendly. It wants to establish its downtown area as a “residential community of choice” by renovating existing housing stock and constructing newer, mixed-density buildings, while integrating this new housing with Trenton's historic character. The City is striving to “enhance the character of [its] streets and open spaces.” It will be investing in streetscape improvement projects for each downtown subdistrict,

while also working to link these neighborhoods with green areas along the river and canal.

### **TRENTON AND YOUTH**

Trenton is host to a number of youth programs. In 2005, Trenton won first place honors in the nationwide “City Livability Awards Program” based upon its mayor's development of the Youth Advocacy Cabinet. This Cabinet identifies and addresses the most severe challenges faced by youth and their families. It has improved access and equity of youth enrichment programs, helped to reduce youth violence, and increased gang prevention methods.

Additionally, during the academic year, Trenton hosts nine recreation centers for youth. These centers provide a safe place for kids to engage in educational, recreational, and cultural activities after school. The City also sponsors a program called SCOOP for children aged 6 to 18 after school and on Saturdays. SCOOP offers sports, crafts, tutoring, mentoring, and other programs in a safe, supervised environment. Free bus service is provided.



*Photo courtesy of nj.gov*

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Trenton, NJ is a city that is both culturally diverse and economically challenged. Yet, even within this context, it has pushed forward with an agenda that engages youth and actively considers the needs of parents. It has focused on its existing assets and working with advocacy groups such as CitySmiles to become a more “family-friendly” community.

### **FURTHER RESOURCES:**

Trenton's youth-focused programs: [www.trentonnj.org/Cit-e-Access/webpage.cfm?TID=55&TPID=6821](http://www.trentonnj.org/Cit-e-Access/webpage.cfm?TID=55&TPID=6821)

Live Where You Work Mortgage Program: [www.trentonnj.org/cit-e-access/webpage.cfm?TID=55&TPID=8138](http://www.trentonnj.org/cit-e-access/webpage.cfm?TID=55&TPID=8138)

CitySmiles: [www.citysmiles.org](http://www.citysmiles.org)

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