

Can a Face Lift Offer a New Identity?



Danielle Austen for The New York Times

BUSY TRAIN STATION A revitalized pedestrian-oriented downtown Rahway will be centered on its railroad station, transformed in a \$16 million renovation.

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By ANTOINETTE MARTIN
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RAHWAY

WHAT is the first thing that comes to mind when this city's name is mentioned? For many outsiders it may be the Rahway State Prison.

"It's so unjustified," lamented Glen Fishman, who grew up near here and is now a developer working on a comprehensive redevelopment of Rahway's downtown. "That prison isn't even in Rahway."

The prison is actually in adjacent Woodbridge, and its name was changed eight years ago, at the request of Rahway officials, to East Jersey State Prison. But unsavory associations are not so easy to erase, and the prison continues to be commonly known as Rahway.

The city of 27,000 was named after a tribal leader of the Lenape Indians, who made their home here. Now Mayor James J. Kennedy aims to endow it with a new identity. Using a newly renovated train station as its centerpiece, the mayor's huge project includes more than 1,500 rental and condominium homes to be built over the next three years, and rows of restaurants and shops, some already springing up on streets newly lighted with Victorian lamps.

The new Rahway will be a pedestrian-oriented, distinctly upscale commuter mecca, sort of the [Hoboken](#) of Union County, according to the plans.

Mr. Kennedy, who has been in office for 16 years, cooked up his vision some 20 years ago, when merchants were discovering that the city's already deteriorating downtown could not compete in an increasingly affluent suburban marketplace.

The heir to a family jewelry store, Mr. Kennedy recalls being an up and comer in the local Chamber of Commerce when he sat down with another young politician, [Jim McGreevey](#) of Woodbridge, and mapping out ideas for reviving tattered urban enclaves like their own.

Mr. McGreevey, of course, went on to become governor and a leading advocate for "smart growth" planning for cities, including the Transit Village program now being implemented in Rahway and many other cities around the state. Communities that receive the Transit Village designation from the state agree to redevelop areas around busy train stations, creating neighborhoods with both commercial and residential activity.

"We sensed the train stations were the key," the mayor said of his long-ago brainstorming sessions with Mr. McGreevey (who resigned the governorship in November 2004).

Rahway's train station, transformed after a \$16 million renovation, is in the heart of its compact downtown, offering commuters a direct trip to Penn Station in [Manhattan](#), about 15 miles northeast of here, or to Penn Station in Newark or to Trenton.

The city's designation as a Transit Village four years ago made it eligible for state planning assistance and various public and private financing options. Officials then selected six developers to work on projects within a half mile of the station.

Like other cities with these projects, Rahway is building some market-rate housing, with most two-bedroom units expected to sell in the \$400,000 range, and some to be more expensive, according to Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Fishman, the developer, whose firm is called Dornoch Rahway.

Another 86 town house condos have already been built by another developer, Diversified Communities, on Essex Street along the Rahway River, in what had been the most blighted section of downtown. Apartments at the complex, called the Riverwalk, are selling rapidly for prices above \$500,000, the mayor reported.

Work is also beginning on three large projects — two of them residential buildings with street-level stores, to be put up by Dornoch Rahway, and the other a mixed-use building with a hotel, to be built by the Silcon Group, based in Elizabeth.

Mr. Fishman recently moved his office from Lakewood to Main Street here, setting up shop in a building that will be renovated and expanded.

Dornoch Rahway's first project is the Savoy, a four-story structure to be built where two smaller ones and a parking lot used to stand, just up the block from the company's new office. It will house 36 two-bedroom, two-bath units, ranging in size from 1,150 square feet to about 2,000 square feet, with retail space at street level. Mr. Fishman said the apartments should be ready for occupancy by next June.

Dornoch will also build the Westbury, directly across Main Street from the Savoy site, replacing 11 two- and three-story buildings that now take up most of a city block.

The company bought three of the buildings at a time when "you almost couldn't give property away around here," Mr. Fishman said. It has now reached agreements to buy the

rest, avoiding any use of the city's condemnation powers in a redevelopment zone.

The Westbury is planned as a "high end" seven-story structure with 152 two-bedroom units and 20,400 square feet of retail space fronting Main Street, Mr. Fishman said. It will also include a three-story parking garage to serve residents as well as shoppers.

The project is also to have a rooftop recreation area, an exercise room, conference space and a community kitchen, he said.

Mr. Kennedy noted that although the city's redevelopment authority had previously approved two other developers to work on these projects, neither had come up with suitable plans. "This plan is just right, though," he said. "This is the way we want to build the future of Rahway."

The Silcon Project is paying tribute to the city's past by naming a 380,000-square-foot, 15-story tower rising opposite the train station Carriage City Plaza. The name stems from the days when Rahway was the Detroit of the horse-and-buggy world, manufacturing carriages used all over the country.

The building will house 209 one- and two-bedroom condos, 102 hotel suites and studios, 20,000 square feet of retail space, a 7,000-square-foot restaurant, a fitness center and a spa, said its principal, Carlos J. Silva.

"It's a configuration that is popular in New York and will work really well here, too, with the young and lively population coming in," Mr. Silva said.

Dornoch is also the approved developer for two other projects downtown, for which it hopes to break ground this year: the Cherry Street Lofts, five buildings that will offer large condominium spaces and a new office for Coldwell Banker as well as a cafe, and a project in the Rahway Arts District planned for the area just south of downtown.

Dornoch proposes building a theater, galleries, artists' live-work lofts and a condo complex in the arts district. Mr. Fishman said negotiations were under way with two arts groups with [New Jersey](#) roots, as well as the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, to elicit input in designing the theater/studio complex, as well as a commitment to use it.

The comedian Joe Piscopo, who met Mr. Kennedy at a fund-raiser last year and heard his pitch for the arts district, has meanwhile joined with the Parsippany-based Woodmont Properties to work on plans for a comedy club in the district.

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