

The Importance of Being Unique

Triad Associates

New Jersey is a diverse state, and this diversity is actively promoted through the actions of its government, private sector and non-profit organizations to protect natural areas, historic districts, small towns and villages, farmlands and other characteristics that have long been important features of the Garden State.

Yet there are many areas of the State that look like too many other areas. One commercial strip runs into the next. One shopping plaza provides the same mix of goods and services offered by other shopping centers just a few miles away.

In the chase for rateables and new jobs, communities sometimes lose sight of the need to develop or retain a uniqueness that distinguishes them from other areas. This is important for several reasons: being unique provides a community with the ability to be a destination – a place where people might travel some distance to visit, and being unique sets a community apart from its competitors and gives it a commercial edge in the marketplace.

These factors contribute to an area's ability to sustain its economy and retain a "sense of place." In the long run, this sense of being special is what will define successful communities, and it will help to solidify them as places where people want to live and work.

What can be done to help set your community apart? And how can local officials help to foster this goal? There are many ways this can be accomplished.

One way is to encourage original design and development guidelines to give your community the look and feel of a special place. People like to go to places that are different. Good design helps to establish that difference and provide a spirit of excitement to what might otherwise be a routine experience.

Retaining the assets that are important to your community is also critical. Every municipality should have an inventory of its assets and a plan in place to protect or enhance them. Whether they are historic buildings, unique natural areas, a waterfront or a special vista or landscape, these are the things that will define your community in the future and separate your town from all the others.

Enhancing accessibility and the range of services provided is another way to distinguish your community. Providing your downtown or shopping district with special transit, public safety improvements, better walk-ability, parking, signage and access can all enhance your ability to compete in an increasingly difficult market.

Fostering this unique character and sense of place is not easy. It requires a visionary approach to development, patience and a willingness to forego some development projects for those that contribute to your vision and long range plans.

There are several programs in New Jersey that can help promote or retain your community's unique characteristics. The Office of Smart Growth offers annual Smart Future Grants, grants that help communities to address the various aspects of community design and development that can promote that special "sense of place." The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs also provides program such as Community Development Block grants (CDBG) and Small Cities that foster new design, streetscape improvements and other projects that encourage new investment in downtowns and other community assets. The Departments of Environmental Protection and Agriculture provide funding to protect open spaces, farmland, historic assets and natural resources. Foundations and non-profit conservation groups also provide funding for a range of conservation and preservation needs. And this list goes on.

Explore your options. Make sure that you have a strategy in place that protects or promotes your community's unique assets. Talk to your professional team about new plans and designs that encourage innovative development. Discuss funding options with your grants team and lay out a game plan for investing in projects and program priorities that will enhance your community's sustainable growth and development.

Remember: it's your community. It's already a special place. It's where you live and work. Our responsibility as municipal officials is to encourage the types of new investments that will make our communities better places – and leave future generations with cities, towns and neighborhoods they will be proud to call home.

Triad Associates is currently the League's Grant Consulting Firm. Their firm, which is known for its expertise in community and economic development, including strategic planning, redevelopment, acquisition, relocation and funding, has brought diverse plans and projects to life by generating more than \$580,000,000 for over 120 public, private and nonprofit clients throughout the Northeast region since 1978. Every member of the Triad team is personally committed and dedicated to the success of its clients and the projects that benefit communities.