

How Einstein's Alley May Spur Development

By Shankar P.

A sweeping proposal aims to attract high-tech companies and the jobs they would bring

Last year was no sizzler for the Princeton-area real estate market, which stretches along the Route 1 corridor from Trenton to North Brunswick. "Leasing activity was anemic, rents were flat and vacancies were up," says Aubrey Haines, president of Mercer Oak Realty in Mount Laurel, which does substantial business in the area.

But Haines sees the market for Class A space set for a turnaround this year. Vacancy rates have begun to fall and rents have shown signs of rising. Beyond that, what most excites him

about the area's future prospects is a program called "Einstein's Alley" that Democratic Congressman Rush Holt has been promoting. It focuses on an area that extends from Lawrence in the south to Metuchen in the north and from Plainsboro in the east to Bridgewater in the west.

As outlined by Holt at a summit that drew 300 representatives of business, government and nonprofit groups to East Brunswick last December, Einstein's Alley would rival such technology hubs as Silicon Valley, the Route 128 corridor in Massachusetts and Research Triangle in North Carolina. The summit was supported by big-name employers like Aventis, Johnson & Johnson, Lucent and Pfizer, all of which have stakes in strengthening the appeal of the Princeton area.

The area's job market "is not as strong as it should be," says Holt, a physicist by training who had been assistant director of the Princeton Plasma

Physics Laboratories at Princeton University, "Some research-based industries have considered New Jersey and then someplace else, and we don't want that to happen again."

To remedy the situation, Holt called for a unified vision for central New Jersey that would pull together factors such as transportation, workforce development and land-use planning. The area is already home to high-tech startups, Princeton University and a major research center in West Windsor's Sarnoff. According to Haines, roughly half the area's space is occupied by life-sciences companies.

A key player in developing Einstein's Alley will be the new Municipal Land Use Center, which was formed in January at The College of New Jersey. Initial funding comes from a \$1.9 million, three-year grant from the Federal Highway Administration that was secured through Holt's office.

Martin Bierbaum, executive director of the center, has a six-part program that includes environmental management and transportation infrastructure. He will work with municipalities in Mercer, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Monmouth and Somerset counties.

Bierbaum comes to the post from the office of Governor James E. Mc-



Holt wants central New Jersey to rival such technology hubs as Silicon Valley.

Greevey, where he was a deputy policy director. He previously headed environmental planning in the Department of Environmental Protection under Governor Christie Whitman.

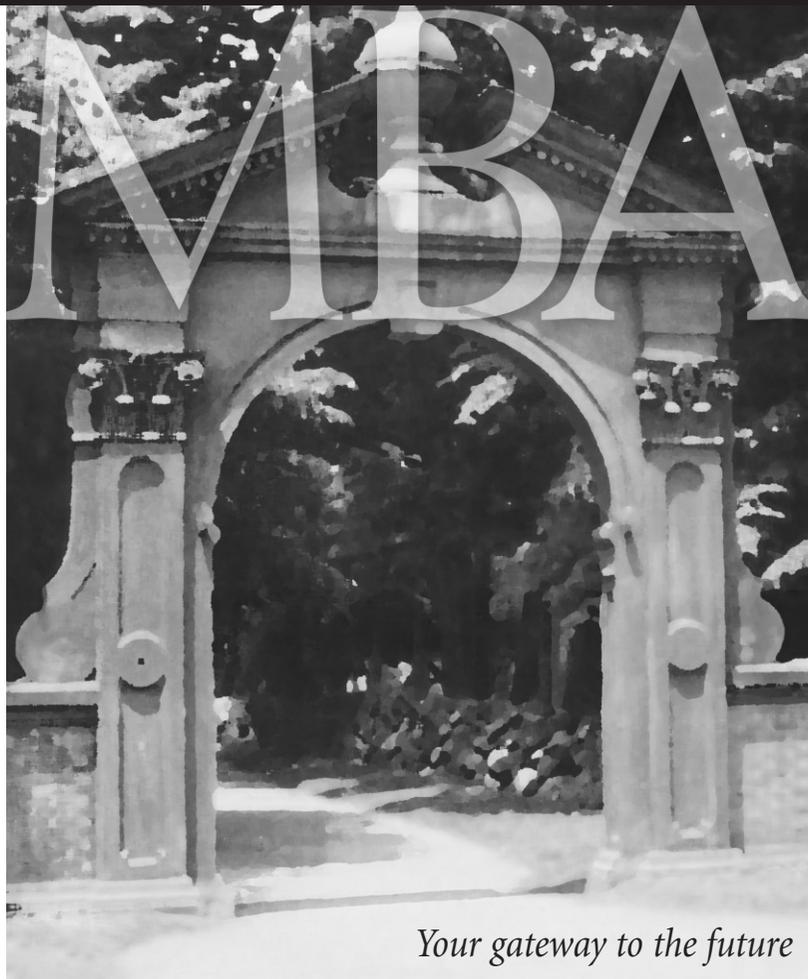
Bierbaum's focus is on sustainable smart growth. He plans to integrate the center's work with recommendations that are to be put forth by panels formed at the Einstein's Alley summit. Among them are groups studying workforce development and entrepreneurship.

Bierbaum wants to create a training academy for planning officials in

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the five-county region, using facilities at Rutgers and Princeton universities, county colleges and municipal buildings. He is working on case studies and a set of best practices in municipal planning and expects to roll out the first courses in September.

The center will help local officials comply with state land-use laws and regulations. Bierbaum wants to bring together the Office of Smart Growth and municipal leaders to implement the state development plan. In the area of environmental management, the center will offer technical assistance to communities that must cope with strictures like a new set of storm-water rules that took effect last month. The center will

in the state, as well as historic buildings and scenic vistas.

Will Einstein's Alley become just another ambitious plan that gathers more dust than real support? "It's picked up a lot; it could work," says attorney Richard Woodbridge, who was mayor of Princeton Township in 1991 and 1992 and had earlier put forth an effort to promote what he called the Princeton-Rutgers Research Corridor.

Woodbridge calls himself a "major booster" of the Einstein's Alley concept. He wants McGreevey to refer to the area by that name in speeches and other communications. And he wants Trenton to create a commission to promote tax incentives, zoning flexibility and traffic improvements in the area. In addition, "We would like to see the state set up a small office on Route 1 with a sign saying that if you are a

high-tech company, you should consider Einstein's Alley."

Meanwhile, Holt has convened several followups to the December summit to work on specific proposals. He says the Einstein's Alley project has an overriding goal. "However promising the start is," the congressman says, "we can't call it a success unless it creates jobs." ■

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Rush Holt
U.S. Congressman

also help municipalities construct energy-efficient buildings and plan the management of septic systems.

When it comes to transportation, the center has been identifying Einstein's Alley thoroughfares that are heavily congested. A so-called congestion-buster task force will focus on areas like the industrial space markets around exits 8 and 8A of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Bierbaum is currently working with the state Department of Transportation and NJ Transit on ways to stimulate mass transit-oriented development. In addition, the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers in New Brunswick wants the center to identify opportunities for walking and biking, and to work with municipalities to encourage pedestrian-friendly communities.

Other parts of Bierbaum's agenda include promoting tourism by talking up historical and cultural attractions and bed-and-breakfast inns on farmland. Such efforts could get a boost from a bill cosponsored two years ago by Holt and Republican Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen that would protect important Revolutionary War sites



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