Interview with Roy Epps

Epps: What I can, I should say I am also in the process of documenting my experiences with this process

Listokin: Okay.

Epps: I have a plan, so which is a different kind of perspective, an African American . . .

Listokin: And of course, anything we do is available to you, I mean . .

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: Right.

Listokin: Just on personal background, I started at Rutgers in the seventies, so I have seen you know a bunch of this stuff. You know, first as a student and then as a faculty member.

Berkhout: I didn’t want to just get the back of your head, David.

Listokin: So we also have . . . We’ve gone to Rutgers Archives to see what they have.

Epps: Uh hum.

Listokin: You know, they have various master plan reports for New Brunswick you know for 1956 and 1960, etc. We also have some, it’s not complete, but they have some Home News clippings you know, over time. And again, the New Brunswick library has various materials, so that’s where we have been going for additional materials.

And as we speak to people, we also ask you know do you have some files we can look at and also who do you recommend we speak to, so it’s almost like a chain of discussions.

Epps: Uh hum.
Listokin: This is. . . If we can ask you if you could sign this, it’s just we have asked everyone to sign that, it just. . . I guess it’s a release form on. . .

Epps: It’s a release form.

Berkhout: Yeah, just for the recording. Now Roy, well we’re going to ask a bit of background. But Roy is a graduate of the planning program.

Epps: Excuse me?

Berkhout: You’re a graduate of the planning program?

Epps: Seventy, yes.

Berkhout: Right, so that was the year you came? Okay.

Listokin: Okay. So this had been sent, it’s just a rough guide. I think this had been e-mailed to you?

Berkhout: Right.

Listokin: Actually if we can start before the Why, can you tell us something about yourself, you just some personal background? Because we’re finding that’s important you know, where people were coming from and how they became involved with New Brunswick.

Epps: It’s in my bio, but basically I’m from the South Bronx, I went to the same high school Colin Powell went to, he is just a little older than me.

Berkhout: Oh, okay. (Laughter)

Epps: Morris High, so leaving Morris High, I went to Wilburforce University in Ohio and got my B.A. and played basketball on scholarship. And then got, came back and actually did a small period with J&J as their first Negro researcher at Personal Products.

Berkhout: Hum.

Epps: Then was drafted into the Army. I was stationed at Fort Dix and ended up
at the first Army Medical Lab on Church Street [New York City], so I spent all of my time in New York in the Army. [I got married in New York]. I came back to New Brunswick in the Food Science Department at Rutgers for a master’s program. At the same time, we had a child and so we had babysitting problems and so I dropped out.

Listokin: And this was a master’s in planning?

Epps: No, a master’s in food science.

Berkhout: In food science.

Epps: And then I went to work for Colgate [-Palmolive Research Center in Piscataway] for about two years in research and then with the, I guess with the disturbances and rebellions in 1967. . .

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: I decided to change my career [in 1967] and came to the. . .

Listokin: And where were you living at this time?

Epps: I was living in Piscataway.

Listokin: Piscataway, okay.

Epps: And decided to change my career and came to work at the then Urban League as a community social worker. And in 1970, I became the President and Chief Executive Officer.

Listokin: And tell us a little bit about the Urban League, I mean just. . .

Epps: Oh the Urban League. . .

Listokin: I mean I know generally, but it would be good to get . . .

Epps: Well the Urban League when I came here was primarily in the area of employment. We began to get more into social action when I became a part of the staff. I
worked with welfare rights and parent organizing and things like that when I was first involved with the League. And as I became President, I got more involved in the planning because I got my master’s at the same time and I became the Chief Executive.

And then we got involved with some very controversial issues, the George Street renewal project, which was very involved. . .

Listokin: If you can tell us, you know again, this is all. . .

Epps: It was a kind of dormant urban renewal project which was on Commercial Avenue, at the end of Commercial, it’s 33 Commercial Avenue. We put together a team of, development team of architects and everything and went before the Housing Authority, [they] [. . .] were the redevelopment agency. And there was a lot of controversy because public statements were made that we had the best plan, but all of a sudden they pick someone else, and as a result we had a lot of community activity at City Hall, brought in people from HUD and it got very, very testy. I guess that’s the best word.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: Calling for investigations and things like that, and so that was 1970, I mean 1971 and 1972. All of this is documented in the Home News. In ’73 we actually filed, or ’74 we filed suit against twenty-three municipalities, which was one thing, at the same time we were involved with some other things around community and neighborhood development. So a lot of what the League was involved with prior to this whole New Brunswick Tomorrow process kind of set the stage for people coming together, particularly as things kind of elevated to not only City Hall, but who was on this council and who was President of the council, the mayor of the council at that time, and that’s two employees of J&J. So J&J became embroiled in this process.
And it was at that time that there was a meeting with Phil Hoffman and Dick Sellers. By the way, are you talking with Dick Sellers?

Berkhout: I understand his health is not good, we had hoped to talk to him.

Epps: Sorry to hear that.

Berkhout: But apparently... Yeah, John Heldrich told us he didn’t think we were going to be able to.

Epps: Yeah, but Dick was a key person.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: Dick was...

Listokin: Can you talk a little about that, especially since we can’t speak directly with Dick Sellers?

Epps: Well, it actually was Dick Sellers who at the ’72, yeah, 1972 Urban League convention that agreed that we should meet, he and I should meet and talk about how we could resolve some of the issues between basically J&J and some of the things that we’ve raised, “we” being the Urban League at that time. And we met here...

Listokin: And those issues were around what?

Epps: Well, issues were the involvement of J&J personnel and some of the controversies that were going on around, particularly around low-income housing.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: And I think we met January 21, here at my office and at that point we had a discussion about how we could work together. And one of the things I committed to was to look at models for revitalizing New Brunswick at that time; you know we still had boarded-up stores on George Street.
And you know, thanks to my colleagues, my Urban League colleagues; I was able to go to Baltimore to look at the Blue Print Neighborhood Project. I was able to go to Boston to look at Copley Place and I also went to Hartford, Connecticut, where I observed the Hartford Process. And later I went back up and met with a large number of people from the Hartford Process.

Now the Hartford Process had a group which was an incorporated group, basically. . . Well, basically, what is now New Brunswick Tomorrow, which is made up of community people from various agencies and basically the software part of the process. And they had a Devco, which was the Hartford Development Corporation. And so later that year. . .

Listokin: And I guess the people involved in Hartford were like the insurance and other major corporations?

Epps: They were basically all white male, primarily from the insurance companies, on Devco.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: The Hartford Process, you had your Latino’s, you had your blacks and you had other whites and social service agencies. And what I recommended to Dick at that time is that we use that model, but with some modifications. One, that Devco had to have a presence of minorities and females on this board and that there needed to be a cross-fertilization between the two groups. And as the American Cities Corporation report recommends, that there were three representatives, one from the public sector, one from the private profit sector and one from the private non-profit sector and that representation was John Heldrich, Richard Mulligan – then the mayor – and Epps.

Berkhout: Who was Richard Mulligan?
Epps: He was the mayor.

Berkhout: Oh, okay. Right.

Epps: He’s out, I think, in Jackson Hole [, Wyoming].

Berkhout: Right.

Listokin: And those there would serve on the New Brunswick Tomorrow and . . .

Epps: And Devco.

Listokin: And the Devco?

Epps: Right.

Listokin: And that would also help link those two entities better together?

Epps: Yeah and that was one of the problems in Hartford, there was no lines of communication between the two bodies.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Listokin: Between the development unit and the soft side?

Epps: Right, that’s correct.

Listokin: Were things being done in Hartford that sort of attracted your eye as far as. . . ?

Epps: Well I was more concerned with the structure, the Copley Place structure was really a situation where the developer was looking for community input but didn’t have a structure to monitor it.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: The Blue Print in Baltimore was really more of a neighborhood development [program]. It wasn’t really a city-[wide]-driven project. It wasn’t that much community involvement. I looked at something in Springfield, which was really a one-block
development; it wasn’t really an area-wide project.

The Hartford Process which was, which took in all of Hartford, you know Hartford is at least two or three times as big as New Brunswick, so it had a different kind of flavor to it. I think one of the things, it became unmanageable. Where New Brunswick was manageable. I mean we have a very small . . .

Listokin: Because of just the size difference?

Epps: Size, right. And you didn’t have as many actors. And when you get into large cities, you have a lot of actors. The more acreage you have, the more possibility you have and different stakeholders. And so New Brunswick became a prime, I guess a prime suspect for what was happening in Hartford.

Listokin: I can imagine what the motivations were, but if you want to . . . But like J&J’s motivation, in your perception was. . ?

Epps: Well my motivation was to protect the community, that’s always been my motivation. My role in NBT right now is based upon what are you doing for the students, what are you doing in healthcare and that’s the role of this organization. So it’s a different perspective that’s taken to the table in the board meeting. Devco, you know was one of those organizations that is very unique and I will write on that, because development is entirely different than sitting around the table talking about social issues.

Berkhout: Right. And how about J&J’s motivation, do you have a sense of their. . ?

Epps: I thought J&J besides their own self-interests of protecting their company and making things better for their company and I think that those that I was involved with you know had a real sense of their credo, that they really want to do something.

Berkhout: Uh hum.
Epps: Others, you know who didn’t have any real connection, you know kind of went along with the program because they thought it would enhance J&J for their own corporate image of having the town improve. You know, John Heldrich and Dick Sellers were committed to this program and that commitment was manifested in the board deciding to stay in New Brunswick.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: Because they had other options, they didn’t have to stay here in New Brunswick and that decision was probably the one, critical decision that allowed for New Brunswick to in fact grow to where it is right now.

Listokin: The University, Rutgers in all of this process?

Epps: Well, I kind of covered all the way from Mason Gross all the way up to where we are right now with Dick, so it’s on and off. I guess some of my best experiences with Rutgers were with the faculty and students. I have not had that kind of commitment that I see, and this is me. I mean I have been here long enough, forty-three years, so. . . Rutgers has been isolated, has been isolated for years and it wasn’t until we were able to get a bookstore, French Street, that’s coming across that trestle, you know.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: Did we see Rutgers really kind of move. Then we got the Bloustein School and then other things started happening and we got the dorms downtown. But that period of getting them to move, just to put a bookstore in the Ferren Deck, that was a trying experience.

Listokin: Uh hum, so they were kind of in New Brunswick but not. . .

Epps: They have always been in New Brunswick.

Listokin: But they are not very integrated.
Epps: They are not Princeton; there has never been a Princeton environment here. It’s been one side of the track and the other side of the track. And that was the reality up until actually the bookstore and more significantly when we brought the Bloustein School in.

Berkhout: Were there any Presidents who were more actively involved than others?

Epps: Oh yeah, Mason Goss. Mason Gross was on our non-profit development program. I mean the civic; I mean the Urban League’s program.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: You know back in the sixties and seventies, you know Mason was always there.

Listokin: And . . .

Epps: And Dick McCormick . . .

Listokin: And Bloustein, was Bloustein?

Epps: Well Ed, yeah, Ed was a major partner. Ed served on New Brunswick Tomorrow and was always trying. He made the bookstore happen; there was a lot of resistance.

Berkhout: Was that Ed or was that Kenneth Wheeler?

Epps: Well Ken played a role, but Ed was the President.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: (Laughter)

Berkhout: Well some people said he really didn’t have involvement and Kenneth did, so did people have different perceptions of how active Ed was?

Epps: Ed was on NBT’s boards, so he was . . .

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: Ken was not, so Ed was confronted with this. Ed was brought to Devco
from time to time, Ken was not.

   Berkhout:    Uh hum.

   Epps:       So you know people can call it whatever they want. Ken might have been
               the implementer.

   Berkhout:    Right.

   Epps:       But from a policy point of view, as a policymaker, that’s who I saw as
               being. . .

   Listokin:   Since you mentioned the bookstore, I can image what some of the issues
               were. But can you just talk about that a minute. I remember where the old
               bookstore was, it was right in the middle of the campus.

   Epps:        Uh hum.

   Listokin:   Okay, and just if you can just take us from there?

   Epps:        Well, there was – when we were putting together the Ferren Deck, you
               know the question was raised you know about students being involved and
               the economic engine. My position is that students spend money. There were
               people on the boards who thought that students don’t spend that much money
               and wasn’t a major mover and so there was some conflict you know on how
               people could see students.

               Then we had Rafferty’s up on the hill and the thought of having a Rafferty’s
               come over, you know that was another kind of, I call it coup, because it was
               the fact that they needed to expand and that we were able to get them on
               Albany Street, that was I thought probably one of the best retail kind of
               activities that moved this process.

   Listokin:   Trying to keep somewhat to the outline, so we’re in the whos now. So
               you know we have J&J, we have New Brunswick, we have the Urban League,
               etc. Was the
county at all in the. . ?

Epps: Oh yeah, the county played, I thought, played a significant role. Dave Crabiel and Steve Capestio who was here at that time were ardent supporters; I mean they were always there. Of course they signed off on a lot of bonds, economic development agencies and things like that, and were key in getting the state involved in financing a number of projects.

Listokin: The hospital then wasn’t the hospital now, but were they on. . ?

Epps: Well the hospitals came on later; I mean we had our problems initially with Middlesex Hospital, which is now Robert Wood Johnson Hospital.

Listokin: What problem?

Epps: Well, they had financial issues, like hospitals do. And I think with the [Robert Wood Johnson] Foundation getting involved, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to help save it, for a better word. And developing the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital process went a long ways in getting them involved. And, of course, St. Peters began to come on board, and so the hospitals became the second-line development process, I think. You know first was you know getting I.M. Pei in and doing the 317 George Street. . .

Listokin: Well actually if we can talk about that, you know like now that we have, we have mentioned some of the actors, you know what were now some of some of these initial steps and what. . ?

Epps: The initial step was, I think, was to bring I.M. Pei in to talk about. . . Because J&J wanted to use I.M. Pei for their new headquarters once they made that decision. And so once I.M. Pei came in and did the 317 George Street, then we started working on the Hyatt and got this grant, this UDAG grant.

Listokin: Right, the $6 million.
Epps: $6 million to kind of pump it up. Of course there were issues around the Hyram Street development down there because you are putting the hotel down by Hyram Street and so those some historic issues that begin to . . .

Listokin: The Hiram Street Market?

Epps: Market, right, Hiram Street Market area. But two historical churches though bordering it, a lot of the structures were in disrepair because of the landlords, owners just kind of basically walked away from it. But out of that came Crossroads, when we were able to help Crossroads, we being the Civic League, or Urban League at the time, could get Crossroads established and you know took over King Block building and started to do some plays down there. So that became a blessing and a curse in a way because they had to move them so that they could take over the area. So [Crossroads] [ . . .] kind of moved into, the Livingston Avenue [property] [ . . .].

Listokin: If we can maybe spend a moment or two on the Hiram Market?

Epps: Oh, the Hiram Market had some significant, historical significance, I thought. I was probably in the minority because other people saw it differently. There were some elements down there, there was still a sense of small community in that area and people felt that they were being pushed out.

Listokin: Are you talking residents and. . ?

Epps: Residents and some of the, you know we were just talking about one of the restaurants, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson that were down there, that were requested to leave. You know, people had a sense of that neighborhood. When J&J did their structures, there was the Washington Street and some other streets, that some of us maybe, I’m not as old as some others that really enjoyed that area. That was an area where it was part of the black community at one
point and as people moved, you know they moved away from the river and other folks filled in the river area, it became prime land. Once it was determined that that was prime land, things were at risk. You know, people were at risk down there.

Listokin: Looking at iyram Street from the historic, you know it was an historic resource, then something could have been done differently or what is...?

Epps: Oh, I think it would have taken more money, of course. All this comes down to money. You know, what is economically feasible. Even the King Block building could have been kind of factored in if we really wanted to do it, but that wasn’t what the majority of the people wanted to do.

Listokin: Alright, so you have spoken about how you went out and looked at other models and then Hartford then influencing the NBT and the Devco model.

Epps: Uh hum.

Listokin: And then some of the early projects, the hotel being an important one. Do you want to talk about some other, you know, what were other projects and steps at this getting started and that you think were important?

Epps: Yeah, we got involved with neighborhoods, we did some neighborhood projects. We picked up the inventory of HUD [properties], which was... when I say inventory, I’m talking about the abandoned housing units which we felt were still salvageable.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: And we did some rehab there and people had to stay and had home ownership. In fact, after a year with one being... I actually took one and rehabbed it and stayed in it for twenty years on Seaman Street.

Listokin: And this was in which areas of New Brunswick?
Epps: This is all over New Brunswick, but primarily they were in central New Brunswick off Livingston. There were some off Remson Avenue . . . There were about maybe ten or twelve units and Devco would do some of it and then the owners would have to do sweat equity in doing the rest. We put some units up on Commercial Avenue. We did a number of units up on Commercial Avenue. I was also chairman of the Housing Committee for Devco, so a lot of the housing that was done during that period was done with the assistance of Paul Abdalla [President of Devco]..

Paul was probably one of the best presidents that we had; he was very community-minded. And that, of course, was one of the issues that we always had to deal with, you know neighborhood versus downtown. The philosophy on the board was that you needed to do downtown so that you could have the resources to do the neighborhood. And my position is that the neighborhood is the one that gives you the tax abatements, because I lived in New Brunswick since, on and off. I came here in 1960 with my mom, but I moved back. . . I moved to Piscataway and then back to New Brunswick from 1969 on, so I have been in New Brunswick since that time.

Berkhout: Hum.

Epps: I’m one of the few people who live in New Brunswick, pay taxes in New Brunswick, and served on the board.

Listokin: On the board.

Berkhout: I understand

Epps: And was the only one, you know when I was on Devco.

Listokin: You started to mention something about the tax abatements?

Epps: Right.
Listokin: Those are tax abatements for the commercial development?

Epps: Uh hum.

Listokin: And you wanted. . ?

Epps: Well the tax abatements were part of the engine, that’s the one thing that the public sector could offer, you know the developers in coming in. You know we’ll give you a twenty-year tax abatement and this is all you have to pay and we won’t raise. Then the issue came up, “Well what are we getting for that?” We were able to make arrangements that some of that abatement went to the development of the Paul Robison Community School.

Listokin: So there was what, dedicated money for some of the payment in lieu of taxes would go. . .

Epps: Right.

Listokin: Went to the school?

Epps: That’s correct.

Listokin: Okay.

Epps: And then there was other projects, I think it really was the issue of reminding people that this is not your money, I pay taxes. You’ll come in and make decisions on money and land that you’re not paying anything on. People said “Well our corporation paid.” Well you are not personally paying it; you know you are not putting the time in. You know you are not living here, you are not laying your head down [here] , so that’s always been one of my pet peeves.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: But hey, I’m one person.

Listokin: So you were mentioning again this process moving along of some actions
being taken. Any other sort of like milestone efforts that. . ?

Epps: I think we, actually looking at the CBD, Central Business District and making very definitive projections about what we’d like to see. I think a lot of that if you go back to the old plan, a lot of that has come to fruition.

Listokin: And what you wanted, I can imagine what some of the things were, but what you wanted to see in the CBD?

Epps: Oh the CBD, yeah, we wanted the cultural center, we kind of moved towards that and we got some of the elements and now we’re talking about doing something even larger and more grander. You know, we want a good, a significant presence of the governmental center and so we’ve got the two buildings, three buildings down there. We’ve got the Court House. So it was. . .

If you look at the original plan, we’re pretty close it. Pretty close to it. The challenge becomes going beyond the CBD, you know what do you do when you cross, you know. . ?

Listokin: Back into the neighborhoods?

Epps: Yeah, you cross – that’s crossing into – crossing New Street, you know where you have the senior housing and you have. . .

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: Eric B. Chandler and then you know how do you work that? Or going the other way, how do you go up Easton Avenue? You know, when you begin to look at the [transportation] spines. . . I call them spines or spokes coming into the wheel, you know what do you do along those corridors and how do you negotiate residential with retail and commercial? How do you make them coexist? How do you maintain a sense of neighborhood, you know, that’s the challenge?
Listokin: So that we don’t lose it, clearly the cultural center has been an important element.

Epps: Oh, absolutely.

Listokin: Can you speak about that some?

Epps: Well, the cultural center brought people in, which helped generate the kind of resources for the restaurants to bloom. You know when you look back on it when we first started, people didn’t stay downtown. People came in, went to work and left. Now it’s hardly a night that you can’t go down Livingston Avenue that the street is not blocked off or you know they have the valets out there taking cars. People when they go before or after a performance, they end up going to eat and if they are going to eat, they are going to drink, you know, if they are here earlier, they are going to shop. I think we moved away from it being a shopping center, you know with the development of the malls in the area and people having access to transportation to being more of a cultural and entertainment center, which is where we are right now.

Listokin: If there aren’t like some other projects – with 20/20 hindsight, you know, are there things that should have been done differently?

Epps: Oh well – well, I would like to say if it were – so, this is an exercise. I don’t know. I try not to do that.

Listokin: You try .

Epps: It’s a waste of energy; I’d rather look forward than – I look back only for a frame of reference. I say, “I wish I could have” when I didn’t, you know it’s a waste. I have always used that.

Berkhout: I guess one question I have because you represented the community in
many ways and John Heldrich made a point of talking about the success of this redevelopment was based, part of it was based on involving the community. So I’m wondering if you can explain . . ? He talked about meetings that were held and discussions and all of that, could you explain maybe a little bit more how, in addition to yourself, other members of the community were involved in the planning of the. . ?

Epps: Yeah.

Berkhout: The redevelopment?

Epps: Dave Nesbit, which was the first President of Devco, . . .

Berkhout: Okay.

Epps: . . . and I set up meetings in various areas, talking about subject areas or issue areas. We had over at the Labor Center and we organized people around economic development, we organized them around housing and we organized them around. . . People came out around those particular things.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: And you know we came up with strategies in areas that we should move on those were presented to NBT, but it all came back to money. And it was a frustrating process because people keep looking at me saying, “How did we get here, Roy? And why aren’t some of these things taken care of?” And some of them were beyond the control because we don’t control the state and federal government.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: You know, yes you want lower and moderate-income housing, but who is going to subsidize it? Yes you want better healthcare, but who is going to subsidize it? You know have we improved in health? Yes, I think there is a significant improvement in access, I
would think. Although people still feel that they don’t have access. So there is a perception and there is a reality. So yes, we did do a lot of organizing. Yes, I put a lot of time in. Yes, I put a lot of my capital on the line.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: But then I said, “Well what’s your alternative?” When everything is said and done, what do you want. . ? What can you do? And that seemed to kind of, just, . . you know, I guess put people at ease. The other thing is that people are gone, you’re talking about thirty-five years, I’m talking about forty-three years.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: So I have watched people come and go, born and died. So you know, people have a different perspective. People are now coming to New Brunswick and saying, “Wow, this is really good”, have no idea what we went through to get it where it is today. But you know, I think what you are doing is admirable. I think it’s necessary because people really don’t know what was here.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: And the few people that do know are leaving us quickly.

Listokin: One of the unique things that New Brunswick Tomorrow was doing was an annual survey; can you tell us how that came about and your perspective on that survey?

Epps: Well, the annual survey was something that John, John and Andy Baglivo and others felt was a way of kind of testing the pulse of the community. I thought it went quite well, we had some problems initially. I think there is always a question of whether you are hitting the right people in the middle of the day. You know and I think the population has changed and you know people are not using landline phones now. I don’t know if it is as
significant as it was, you know, back when we started.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: I think you see if you look at the last three or four, maybe five surveys is that we’re kind of consistently in the seventies, that they know in New Brunswick that they agree that everything is fine. So it was a good and it still is to some extent a good barometer.

Listokin: Would that then be used to, almost like a marketing tool saying, “Well we should do more here and a little less there.” Or, “This is a concern that we should spend more resources on”?

Epps: Well, we have attempted to do that with New Brunswick Tomorrow, you know we basically know what the issues are. We know that there are gangs and we know that there are immigration problems. We know that there is housing problems and we know that education needs to be improved. We know that access to health needs to be improved. I mean those are issues which are, I guess, common to most urban areas.

New Brunswick is not isolated; you know. we’re just a microcosm.

Listokin: So, I guess, what does the survey then give you?

Epps: Gives me or gives others? I think to me, you know, I live this. I mean I’m one of the few people on these boards that actually live it daily, so it doesn’t tell me anything. Now I think it missed the mark in relation to young people, because young people are not going to do the survey like older folks sitting at home, you know. . .

Listokin: But maybe it communicates to other people involved in this about who are not so familiar with the issues, is that. . .?

Epps: I think it serves to educate in this process at many levels. So the survey serves a purpose for a certain group of people, others it makes no difference to them. Maybe a
pre and post-test on academic achievement or self-awareness or self-esteem with youngsters may serve a better purpose for me than that survey. Whether they learn something being in our program, you know, is more of a barometer for me. So I think you know individuals come to the table with different needs, so the survey serves a need.

Listokin: How transferable is what has been done in New Brunswick to other urban places? Like you mentioned size, but I mean just maybe you can opine on that?

Epps: Yeah, well it depends on what you’re talking about. We had a very interesting program where we had executives from various companies, including J&J, Merrill Lynch, Bris – not Bristol Myers, but AT&T come in and work half a day in the schools. It had a tremendous effect on the schools. I mean they came in and they worked as teacher assistants, they helped the teacher, they were role models.

Listokin: And is that done through NBT?

Epps: No, that was the Civic League program. We did that in the ‘90’s. We had over 550 volunteers come in over that ten year period ending in 2000. In the middle, I was asked to see whether or not I could transfer it to another community. It really came down to whether or not there was someone that had really the passion to make it happen and have the resources to make it happen. So a lot of this depends on individuals, a lot of it depends on structure. I don’t think that program, you know, even though it was modeled after something that was happening in Washington, D.C., was transferable because I was looking at corporate personnel to get involved. And at that time, in the ‘90’s, the corporations were a little freer with their staff and in fact were more open to those kinds of programs.

When we hit 2000 and you know we had the crisis, the financial crisis, everybody was not only doing their job but other folks’ job and so that program had to end. So it was a program
at the right time and at the right place and it operated. If it had been expanded, it would have
died someplace else, too.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: So it depends on what you want to transfer.

Listokin: But I guess the dual entities of New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco, the,
you know trying to realize you have to go beyond just the physical revitalization and you have to
have the social and the “soft side.”

Epps: I think it’s all doable, you know it depends on the people who are sitting
around the table. We were very fortunate to have people that really wanted to make it work.
And other things were that there very little egos involved. You know, it was very cooperative as
people begin to get their things. When people started getting what they were in there for, then
you know a second line of people came in. And then it wasn’t as strong because a lot of the
actors who had the influence were not at the table. We don’t have [the people at the NBT] table
[ . . .] that we had at the table when we first started.

Listokin: That was like the principals from different organizations?

Epps: Right, right. We had, on Devco, we had like three or four banks sitting
around the table.

Epps: Where we could kind of just say, “Well we have this project. Can you put
up? Can you put up?” I don’t know if Devco has that right now. They also had people who
were committed to New Brunswick, you know, bankers who established banks and who were
committed here to New Brunswick. Now we have regional banks, that’s. . . New Brunswick is
one of the marketplaces.

Listokin: The community size, a plus? You know you are a city of 40,000 rather
Epps: Oh, I think it is. I think it is. I think you know we, my colleagues and I have looked at modeling a little bit and you know what would Jersey City look like and looked at Trenton. You know and each of them have some inhibiting factors. Trenton, of course, is . . . that’s a governmental center and it doesn’t have the kind of corporate base that is necessary.

Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: Elizabeth is much larger. When you start getting to the smaller community, Bergen County, Morristown, and then there is a whole different element that you have to deal with. So New Brunswick is very unique, I mean it has a . . . It’s, one, a university town, it’s a county seat, and it has a major consumer product company.

Listokin: Yeah.

Epps: Who has fingers into other things, like a big foundation which helps support a lot of what we do here.

Listokin: And if I can ask, and it’s related to some other work that I’m doing, we’re trying to look. – what are some good models to build schools, you know, especially in urban areas, you know the tremendous need, very expensive; the existing monies are not there. I know New Brunswick has attempted and you see the facts on the ground, can you speak a little bit on that, the efforts made to build, you know, some of the new schools in New Brunswick and what we can learn from that?

Epps: Well we have, if you go on Livingston Avenue, there is a big, vacant lot.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: Which is called the site of the Redmond – I mean, excuse me, the Redshaw Elementary School. One of the issues in relation to the Department of Education. . .
I’m not part of the Department of Education . . . is that they can’t make up their mind how they want to deal with the Abbott versus Burke or Burke versus Abbott or whatever. The Abbott . . .

Berkhout: Right, the Abbott districts.

Epps: And you know the most recent, of cost decision that there is no Abbott program but they are Abbott kids basically, you know the money follows the Abbott kids wherever they go. Well that has hampered – to some extent – a lot of the planning for education in New Brunswick. The Paul Robison School was closed because we [were only to] get an addition. We closed it; they stayed closed for two years until the Board made a decision to take [students/teachers] [. . .]back because they weren’t getting any play out of the state.

At the same time, when that decision was made, as they were tearing down the Redshaw School, they realized, “We don’t have enough money to build a school,” but they tore down a perfectly good school.

Berkhout: Hum.

Epps: Which then exacerbated sending those 900 kids to other schools. So when you start talking about school, you know we work in the schools. You know, we’re involved in at least three, four schools, the high school, the middle school and two elementary schools at one level. And then at another level, we’re in all of the schools in reference to the seventh and eighth grade.

So, you know, my frustration – and I was on the Board of Education for nine year – my frustration is watching what we have to do each year in trying to put youngsters into a safe, educational environment. Yes, we’re getting ready to open that building over there as our new high school, that is costing us, of course, and the taxpayers.

Berkhout: That’s what this is.
Epps: That’s what it is.
Berkhout: Okay, we’re trying to figure. – and where is that located?
Epps: That’s located right off of 27.
Berkhout: Oh okay, near Jersey Avenue?
Epps: It’s on Jersey Avenue; yeah it’s on 27, Jersey Avenue. We were trying to get it connected to Jersey Avenue just for access, but we weren’t able to do that. That’s going to cost $183 million dollars, it’s going to be a start-of-the-art building. My concern is “Are the kids prepared for the state-of-the-art building?”
Berkhout: Uh hum.
Epps: And . .
Listokin: And who is building. . ? Is that. . ?
Epps: That’s our new high school.
Listokin: Right, but is Devco involved in that?
Epps: It’s built by the state. Yeah, Devco is building it.
Listokin: Is building it, okay.
Epps: We’re very fortunate to have Devco. One of the things that Devco does is come in on time. The school across the street up here, the Lord Sterling School was built by Devco.
Berkhout: Right.
Epps: We’re trying to get the state to consider Devco as a developer of the schools as we move forward because they operate in a way in which they expedite things and things come in on time.
Listokin: As opposed to what, the school just bidding it out to. . ?
Epps: Right, that’s correct.

Listokin: The school system, bidding it out.

Epps: Right, that’s how the last two schools were done. I was on the Board when we did Paul Robison, and that was a challenge. That was done by the state, but that was twenty years ago.

Berkhout: Uh hum.

Epps: Going on thirty years ago.

Berkhout: Ironically it turns out my grandfather whom I never met, he died before I was born, was an architect. He lived right outside of Paterson and built then. . . Well he designed model school buildings which were then replicated.

Epps: Uh hum.

Berkhout: You know, you didn’t have each district doing their own thing. If a school was good in Passaic, it was good in Paterson and elsewhere. There is still, I think, an elementary school that he designed in Passaic. But now districts, because I was on the school board for several years, each. – you know, it’s a lengthy and expensive process. You bid out, you get all of these architects coming in with umpteen plans and everybody picks their own thing.

You know, why do we all have to have different-looking buildings if you could do the same thing several times and it works well? It seems to me it would save some funds.

Epps: Well, you would have an architectural model that you can. . .

Berkhout: Yes.

Epps: Then you would have a footprint to do that.

Berkhout: Sure.

Epps: But the curriculum changes.
Berkhout: Yes, definitely. I understand that.

Epps: So what your uncle did is, when you are talking about small community.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: . . . Programs, that’s why that looks the way it does.

Berkhout: Sure.

Epps: And that was designed three, four or five years ago. You know, and it has changed.

Berkhout: Right. Yeah, I realize like science labs and all of that change.

Epps: Absolutely.

Berkhout: And technology.

Listokin: Alright, so if I can just take us back to transferability, you know you have mentioned some of the both common and unique factors. You know, county seat, presence of a major corporation, presence of a major university, any other factors in terms of. . . ? You know we spoke about size.

Epps: Well size, like I said, is the – I think we all plan this, we know that there is a planning cycle. You have to be completely down-and-out for you to say, “We’ve got to do something.” You do something and you get to the point where everybody is satisfied and then you kind of go back down again.

I’m pleased to say we have not reached that point where we are going down again, but it’s our challenge to keep the enthusiasm up. And, I think, part of that is looking at new ways to expand what we’ve already done. To replicate, I think, depends on who and how desperate a community is. If everything is fine, no one comes to the table. They only come to the table when there is a common interest.
Listokin: Uh hum.

Epps: And then it gets to the point where a plant closes down and everybody says, “Wow, we’re losing everything. We need to really do something different. We can’t have a peanut-shelling factory. We need to do something else. We’re not growing peanuts anymore.”

Berkhout: Right.

Listokin: Any further thoughts on sort of the future of the process now in New Brunswick? I guess you mentioned keeping the enthusiasm and energy up.

Epps: Well, there is also looking for new opportunities and we’ve basically redone the downtown, except for we’re probably. . . I think my thinking is that they ought to do something to the Ferren Deck and they are going to do a few other things. I don’t know what’s in the plan for George Street itself, I don’t know whether it was always too expensive to do something there. But, you know, to look at the spines; you know what happens along George going out to Douglass?

With the new gateway program, what will that do in relation to College Avenue? You know, what do we do with Easton Avenue going out? We can’t do anything with Hamilton Street, you know, with J&J being there. You know, as you begin to look at spines, you know what do you do and how do you negotiate with the neighborhoods to in fact be partners as you do that development? These are the people who pay the taxes in this town; you’ve got to remind people.

Listokin: If I can just be an annoying professor, I’m wearing like a preservation hat.

Epps: Okay.

Listokin: I guess one of things you observe in New Brunswick’s redevelopment has been overwhelmingly new construction.
Epps: Uh hum.

Listokin: The existing fabric was you know largely demolished. You know, could that have been, was that just inevitable or that was just the model at the time or . . . ?

Epps: I always think of that, you see it . . . I forgot the commercial where the steam roller rolls over the world. It’s all about interests; my interest has always been to preserve people, the incumbents who were here. If you don’t live here, you don’t have the same empathy that I have. And that’s sort of bad, people operate in their interest. And I think that one of the things that we always have to remind people of is that there are people here and sooner or later, people are going to rise up and they are not going to take this [but] so much. So that’s why you need to negotiate and bring them into the process.

Listokin: And is that being done as far as . . . ?

Epps: I think it depends on what issue, you know no one is going to wake up a lion or a sleeping bear, or whatever. But I think as each issue comes up, it needs to be negotiated no matter what you do.

Listokin: Information for further research, we’ve mentioned some of the people we’re talking to. Are there some you can suggest, say you really need to talk to X, Y and Z?

Epps: Yeah, talk to Dave Harris.

Berkhout: Yeah, we have him on the list.

Epps: Okay. Now Dave was here from the beginning. Dave has been a critic and supporter. But Dave is one; I’m trying to think who’s been around.

Berkhout: You mentioned a previous Devco President, Abdalla, was that Devco?

Paul . . .

Epps: Oh, Paul Abdalla.
Berkhout: Abdalla, yeah.


Berkhout: Okay.

Epps: Yeah, Paul was a good partner. He did a lot of neighborhood things when we did the parks, we did the basketball courts. You know he and Dick, Dick Mulligan were major pushers in relation to the schools, McKinley School, you know.

Berkhout: Is Mulligan still. . .?

Epps: Mulligan left here and went out to Jackson Hole.

Berkhout: Oh, you mentioned that.

Epps: Wyoming, very suddenly.

Listokin: Some neighborhood people or entities, you know pastors of churches? You know people who. . .?

Epps: Who have been around?

Listokin: We’d like to get a broader lens of people we’re talking to and. . .

Epps: Pastors that have been around, most of them are dead to be quite honest.

Hildebrand – most of these folks have been here the last ten years. Bill Riddick has been here long; he’s been here [over] twenty years. I’m trying to think who was on the board. Do you have Jim Scott down there?

Berkhout: Jim Scott?

Epps: Jim Scott is on the board of NBT.

Berkhout: Okay.

Epps: Jim is a lifetime resident, graduated from schools, his kids are [here] [. . .] and he is still a resident here in New Brunswick. Because he and I are the only. . . Well Jim was
also Executive Director of the Housing Authority.

  Berkhout: Oh, okay.
  Epps: So he was here back when a lot of the turmoil was going on.
  Berkhout: Uh hum.
  Epps: People. . .
  Berkhout: What about the – isn’t there a Hispanic minister in one of the historic churches?
  Epps: That hasn’t been here for. . ?
  Berkhout: The Reform Church or whatever, no?
  Epps: He hasn’t been here a long time.
  Berkhout: Okay.
  Epps: Talking about the Suydam Church?
  Berkhout: Yeah.
  Epps: Yeah, he’s. . .

Listokin: How about documents, I mentioned that we have gone to the New Brunswick Library; we have gone to the Rutgers Archives.

  Berkhout: John Heldrich, once he goes through them again, may give us some papers that he has in his office.
  Epps: Yeah. I have, I will be honest. I have a lot of papers; I have a lot of clippings and everything.
  Berkhout: Really?
  Epps: Yeah, I’m using them myself.
  Berkhout: Right.
Epps: In fact, I’ve got to find them. They are downstairs in the basement and I’m the only one allowed in the basement. No one wants to go there. (Laughter) A lot of it’s – did you ever go into the archives of the Home News?

Listokin: We have not.

Epps: Yeah, I think you need to do that, because that’s a lot of what I have. I don’t know.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: Some of the stuff I pick up probably falls apart.

Berkhout: The New Brunswick Library, the public library has them, too. Yeah. I guess NBT must have files.

Epps: NBT, you’re going to deal with Jeffrey should have. . .

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: They had a clipping service.

Berkhout: Oh, okay.

Epps: Talk to Andy Baglivo.

Berkhout: Right, Andy has some things, he said.

Epps: Yeah. The person that was here before Andy was Bob Andrews, but Bob was with J&J. Bob is – but Andy probably has what Bob. . .

Berkhout: Bob Andrews worked at J&J?

Epps: Yeah.

Berkhout: In marketing or PR or. . ?

Epps: He was a PR person.

Berkhout: Okay.
Epps: He used to be on my board.

Berkhout: Okay.

Epps: And – I’m trying to think, who is left. You know, this is. . .

Listokin: Well you could always get back to us. You know it’s not. . .

Berkhout: Was Dick Nurse involved in any way from the university?

Epps: No.

Berkhout: No, he was on the Crossroads Board, I think, at some time.

Epps: Yeah, I know Dick from the Crossroads Board and he has come to my EOD luncheons, but – now, back then, even some of the community people are gone. Arthur Higgins. Yeah, Dave, get Dave.

Berkhout: David Harris, okay.

Epps: A lot of people have come and gone.

Berkhout: Yeah.

Listokin: That’s why we’re doing it.

Epps: I mean people have moved in, did something, and moved out and moved on.

Berkhout: Right. We have, well we’re trying to meet with Leo Molinaro, who was. .

Epps: Oh Leo, yeah.

Berkhout: He’s in a retirement community in Philadelphia.

Epps: Oh, he moved to Philadelphia.

Berkhout: Right. And we have an interview, we have to set the date, but with Harry Cobb, who was the partner of I.M. Pei, who I guess did a lot of the work. I.M. Pei is apparently not able to do interviews anymore. So. . .
Epps: Yeah, I’m trying to think even in the medical area. Some of the deans, they moved on.

Listokin: Well again, if anything comes to . . . Could the community have been involved more or basically given the nature of who was at that table? And you brought in a lot of the community element, I mean.

Epps: Yeah, we had people that came on the board of NBT, but I don’t know if frustration or lack of interest, kind of just moved on. Fortunately or unfortunately I’m the only one that stayed on for the duration.

Listokin: You’re talking about community people now or just people on the board in general?

Epps: No, I’m talking about some of the community people who were on the board because some of the ministers were on the board. We had ministers on the board, they just moved on.

Listokin: Okay. Well, thank you.

Epps: Okay.

Berkhout: And if you want copies of any of these things, we’re going to have them available, so . . .

Epps: Okay.

Listokin: We’ll send you the transcript of our discussion.

Berkhout: Right.

Epps: Right.

Listokin: But as a larger resource, it’s available to you.

Berkhout: Yeah.
Listokin: All of these discussions.

Berkhout: Yeah, any of the other interviews that we do, at some point. – we haven’t – we’re not moving too quickly on the, you know trans – we have them transcribed technically, but we have to edit them and all of that.

[end of recording]