

James M. Cahill



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

James M. (“Jim”) Cahill was born in New Brunswick in 1952 and has lived in the city since. Cahill was elected mayor of New Brunswick in 1991 and, as of 2012, is now serving his sixth term. He attended St. Peter’s High School in New Brunswick and then studied at Middlesex County College and Glassboro University. He earned a master’s degree in criminal justice from Rutgers

University and a law degree from Seton Hall University. [4] In 1980 he became an assistant City Attorney in New Brunswick, appointed by then Mayor John A. Lynch, Jr. After working for five years at the law practice of Bill Hamilton, James Cahill started his own private practice that later became Cahill, Branciforte and Hoebich. [5] Cahill said that his connection to the redevelopment of New Brunswick began when he became the assistant City Attorney, two years after buying a house in the city. He decided that New Brunswick was “where I was going to keep my roots,” and he was interested in becoming involved. [5] In his position as assistant City Attorney, Cahill explained that he was “not only very much involved in the day-to-day operations of the City of New Brunswick from a legal perspective and working in all of the different departments” but was “very much engaged in the revitalization component of it.” [6]

Some of the early projects in which Cahill was involved—the Ferren Parking Deck, for example—illustrate how modest the goals of New Brunswick were. “The whole idea at that point in time was to get people to park here next to the train station and hopefully buy a cup of coffee, and we’d catch them on their way to someplace else,” Cahill said. “Now the theory behind it is ‘We are the destination.’” [6] When asked “Why implement redevelopment projects?” Cahill responded that a city has two choices: “You can choose to be what you are and do nothing about it, or you can choose to become something different.” [7] The risks of doing nothing is that the city could slide “in the wrong direction,” Cahill said, whereas focusing on growth—“growth in a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of a place to be”—promotes positive change. [7] Cahill spoke about the helpfulness of the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program and how “alternate sources of revenues are always helpful,” as development in cities can be more

difficult due to demolition costs and environmental concerns, among other things. [7] Why New Brunswick achieved success in redevelopment is linked to the presence of a public and private partnership. “It was really the vision of those first involved in the revitalization mode,” Cahill said, “that recognized that the private sector could not do it alone, that the government sector couldn’t do it alone, and the civic area couldn’t do it alone.” [8] This created what Cahill called “a commonality of vision and thought.” [8]

On the topic of Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow, Cahill spoke about how the two “go hand-in-hand” in revitalizing the physical and social aspects of the city. He explained that the “purpose is to provide for the gap that exists between what the government can and is doing and what the private sector can and is doing.” [9] When a private developer might be hesitant to build, for example, an office building, Devco—a nonprofit real estate development company—“can serve in any capacity that helps to move the project down the field and across the goal line,” Cahill said. [9] This is facilitated by Devco’s familiarity with the development process in New Brunswick, including understanding available funding mechanisms and its ability to “package projects and programs that make them more attractive to private-sector investment.” [10] Cahill explained that the goals of the private sector and the government are often at odds; for example, the developer wants to pay the least amount of taxes while the government wants to receive the highest amount. Devco is a useful intermediary in such situations because it is “familiar with both sides of the equations,” Cahill said, and is thus able to “eliminate a lot of the back and forth that takes place.” [10]

Cahill spoke about how New Brunswick, as an urban center, is “progressive” in providing social services and that in such a role the city attracts more people. [10] However, as a municipality, capabilities are limited: “We need to reach out, talk to others, to have people guide us in how we can better deliver our services,” Cahill said. Whereas Devco works between the government and the private-development sector, New Brunswick Tomorrow works with the government, social service providers, and residents. [11]

Johnson & Johnson “was the grandfather of revitalization in New Brunswick,” according to Cahill. He explained that the company was a “key component not only in its decision to build and maintain its corporate headquarters here, but also the commitment that it provided through human resources to serve on a variety of different boards.” [12] Cahill added that the presence of J&J “adds to a lot of the dynamic that we have in town and the development of our healthcare industry.” [12] Hospitals were “more comfortable” investing in New Brunswick knowing that Johnson & Johnson “had been through the process,” Cahill thought. [12]

Cahill spoke about the relationship between New Brunswick and Rutgers University. He said that he and Rutgers' President Richard McCormick agreed that "You can't have a world-class university without a world-class city," and vice versa. [12] The relationship between the administration and the university is characteristic of the greater trend in New Brunswick of mutually beneficial partnerships. "The city is dotted with joint ventures with the university," Cahill said, adding, "It's that type of synergy that is vital to New Brunswick." [13]

Talk of Rutgers led to comments about "payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs)." PILOTs are important in the finances of New Brunswick because a considerable portion of land is occupied by uses that are exempt from paying property taxes—educational institutions, places of religious worship, hospitals, and cemeteries, for example. Cahill used the healthcare industry to illustrate how PILOTs are sometimes controversial: Many municipalities "didn't foster an environment that the healthcare industries or hospitals particularly would find to be receptive," he said, because from the administration's perspective that if a hospital expands it reduces the amount of taxable land, thus reducing tax revenue. [13] However, Cahill argued that the amount of lost tax revenue is a reasonable trade-off for the number of jobs the hospitals generate. [14] If the administration thinks that a new property will generate a lot of jobs, "we either forgo a PILOT or we negotiate a minimal one," Cahill said. Otherwise, if the administration envisions that such property will "be high on the service side for the city, a PILOT will be negotiated and it will be on the higher side." [14]

James Cahill spoke briefly about the downtown arena proposals. Cahill noted that since he has been mayor he has looked at proposals but there is a funding gap, of which he insisted: "It's not going to be filled by the City of New Brunswick." [16]

About the role of the Middlesex County government, Cahill mentioned its investment in the State Theater and contribution to recreational programs, traffic infrastructure, and the new marina at Boyd Park, among other things. [19]

Regarding redevelopment projects, Cahill said, "Every redevelopment project or revitalization in New Brunswick benefits our neighborhoods directly or indirectly regardless of where it is." [21] To prove this point, Cahill noted that prior to the economic recession of the late 2000s, the New Brunswick unemployment rate was lower than its suburban counterparts, something he considered "virtually unheard of." He concluded: "So the redevelopment process—it's not just creating jobs for somebody else, it is proof-positive that it's creating jobs for New Brunswick residents." [21] He dismissed the notion of a lack of community input in New Brunswick's redevelopment projects by explaining how redevelopment plans have numerous public hearings and how that input is incorporated into the thought process. [21-23]

When Cahill stated his perspective on how the arts figured in redevelopment in New Brunswick, he mentioned the intangible—“It creates the heart and the soul of the city”—and the tangible—“It’s also practical in a business sense.” [23]

Cahill was asked about the transferability of what happened in New Brunswick. To him, the essence of success in redevelopment is “the idea of putting people around a table who share a common vision.” [25] About what he would have done differently in hindsight, Cahill responded: “Nothing,” adding, “I don’t say that because everything is perfect. But one thing I make sure we do as an administration is gather all of the best information we possibly can.” [27] He used the Ferren Deck as an example of this: When built, the modest structure was considered “the best the city could hope for to get that glimmer of hope of that one person coming by to have a sandwich at the corner store or grab a cup of coffee as they were getting on the train.” Cahill said that “Now, that site is really underutilized.” [28]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

The Arts and Redevelopment

Critically important. I mean first and foremost, it creates the heart and the soul of the city. You know, it creates a vibrant city, it creates a forum of expression, it’s a place for people to gather and socialize. It just adds to what a city is all about. So from that perspective, it’s critically important.

But economically, it’s also a practical business sense. You know, most people who go to the theater are going to spend some time in the city. They are going to go to a restaurant, they are going to shop, or they are going to go do something in addition to going to the theater. They are going to create an activity in the immediate area that people say, “Wow, there are things happening there. We need to go there and see what’s going on.” It creates a vibrant hub for activity and business. And, of course, the theaters employ people, the restaurants that people go to employ people, and they are job-creators.

For every ticket price or dollar that somebody spends for a ticket, the compounding factor of that in investment elsewhere in the community is severalfold. So investment in the arts is a good investment. [23]

Consensus Building and Public Participation (in Redevelopment Process)

It’s the idea of putting people around a table who share a common vision, not necessarily on individual subject matters, but as an overall goal and a willingness to try and play a role in any project that can advance it, so long as it serves a purpose for their prospective constituencies. That has been the success of New Brunswick. [25]

So the public has all the time, not less than six to ten opportunities, to weigh in at all of these different intervals. In addition to that, notice is given to property owners and tenants within the area to encourage the public input. Not only do we look to solicit public input, we are required by law to do it. And I really think it helps us to address concerns, to make the best plan possible. [22]

I would suggest it was more difficult in the years before me because it was new, but I think we've established a credibility that we do what we say. We are not a gentrification type of program, we're not kicking people out, we're not looking to move people or businesses out of the city, and we're all in this together. And as a result of that, I think the citizenry of New Brunswick become more supportive and actually look forward to the advancement of new projects, new ideas, new housing, etc., and sometimes demand it. [27]

Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow

It was a great idea then and it continues to be a great idea now. The two not-for-profit entities have a very different focus—New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT) on the social-service side of the revitalization efforts and New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco) on the bricks-and-mortar side. And while the Devco side gets a lot more of the headlines and attention because of the large-scale development that people see, equally important is the revitalization side from a social-service perspective. Because really, what is done from the bricks-and-mortar side is intended to revitalize the people, the quality of life of the people in New Brunswick, so they go hand-in-hand—and it's why we do what we do. [9]

Think about it for a second: It's the old commercial—you have seen it on TV going back a number of years—knock on the door, "Hi, we're the government, and we're here to help." Oftentimes, the private sector and the government side are not necessarily always on the same page because the private sector says, "I want to build this building but I want to pay the least amount of taxes." And the government side says, "But you have to pay the most amount of taxes because that's beneficial to us. We want the building to look like this." The private sector then says, "Well, we think the building should look like that." Well, it doesn't have to be adversarial; there are different perspectives that necessarily have to come into play as a project unfolds. By having somebody who is familiar with both sides of the equation, but who has the mission that it has to be in the best interests of the city, you eliminate a lot of the back and forth that takes place. They are not necessarily in negotiations, but in effect it becomes that, just because there are different points of view. [10]

Hiram District and Historic Preservation

As a kid growing up, most of the properties I remember in the Hiram District were junk, and it was an area that, quite frankly, I wouldn't be anxious to visit on a frequent basis all the time, particularly as it became the late 1960s and early 1970s. [28]

Using the Hiram Square area as an example—if it was that important and the private sector was desirous of maintaining it, efforts should have been taken over the decades before that to do something about it. And if we become concerned about historical buildings only when somebody is going to take them away, then how really interested are we? [29]

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson obviously was the grandfather of revitalization in New Brunswick. It was a key component not only in its decision to build and maintain its corporate headquarters here, but also the commitment that it provided through human resources to serve on a variety of different boards that were available—not only the NBTs and Devcos but also the cultural center, the different regional theaters that we have in town—that it was involved in the very fabric of what was going on in the city. That continues today, although it is not building new buildings—but there is a regular dialog that happens with NBT and with J&J, and it is obviously a critically important corporate resident in New Brunswick. [12]

Public/Private Partnership

It was really the vision of those first involved in the revitalization mode that recognized that the private sector could not do it alone, that the government sector couldn't do it alone, and the civic area couldn't do it alone. So the pooling of energies and resources creating, as best you can, a commonality of vision and thought, and establishment of goals of where we need to get to, was critically important to the city then, and quite frankly is critically important to us today. And I think that's one of the reasons why we perhaps have been more successful than most in getting things done. [8]

Redevelopment Evolution and Goals

The earliest of them include the Ferren Deck; to show you the struggles that a municipality might be going through, the whole idea at that point in time was to get people to park here next to the train station and hopefully buy a cup of coffee, and we'd catch them on their way to someplace else. Now the theory behind it is "WE are the destination." [6]

A city has, I guess, a couple of choices. You can choose to be what you are and do nothing about it, or you can choose to become something different. And if you do nothing, one thing you'll definitely guarantee is that you'll slide in the wrong direction. The city is ever changing, particularly a city like New Brunswick, and so growth becomes critically important. And it doesn't necessarily mean growth in numbers of people or growth in size of structures, but growth in a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of a place to be—a place where people are proud to be and comfortable to be, where they either live or work or have leisure-time activities. [7]

Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs)

New Brunswick was among the leaders in taking advantage of the Urban Development Action Grants, a great program. You first get money from the federal government (it's a loan). The developer actually gets it; the developer is then required to repay the loan to the municipality and then, in turn, the municipality is required to reinvest that money into other items that help the economic wherewithal in the development of the city, so you get to recycle the dollars twice. Quite frankly, it doesn't get much better than that. [7]