



Roy Epps

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Roy Epps grew up in the South Bronx and attended Wilberforce University, a historically black university in Ohio, on an athletic scholarship for basketball. He worked shortly for Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick as its “first Negro researcher at Personal Products” and then was drafted into the Army. [2] He returned to New Brunswick, where he began a master’s degree at the Food Science department at Rutgers. When he and his wife had a child, he dropped out of the program. [3] Epps then worked for the Colgate-Palmolive Research Center in Piscataway. After the “disturbances and rebellions in 1967,” Epps undertook a career change. He worked for the Urban League as a community social worker and in 1970 became its president and chief executive officer. [3] When Epps joined the Urban League, the organization was involved with employment issues, welfare rights, and parent organizing. Later it became more involved with social action. Part of the focus on social action dealt with planning issues, the field in which Epps had earned his master’s degree while working for the Urban League. [4]

The attention to planning led to involvement with “some very controversial issues.” Such an issue was the George Street renewal project: The Urban League arranged a “development team” that went before the Housing Authority, then the redevelopment agency, to propose a plan. “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,” Epps said. [4] As a result, there was community activity at City Hall with the public calling for investigations. “At the same time,” Epps said, “we were involved with some other things around community and neighborhood development.” [4] He noted that much of the Urban League’s work “set the stage for people coming together” before New Brunswick Tomorrow did so. [4]

Epps observed that two members of the New Brunswick city council were Johnson & Johnson employees, and so the company “became embroiled in this process.” [4] Epps had personal contact with Richard Sellars, former Johnson & Johnson chairman and chief executive, who at the 1972 Urban League convention “agreed that we should meet and

discuss how we could resolve some of the issues between basically J&J and some of the things that we've raised." [5] Some of these issues were "the involvement of J&J personnel and some of the controversies around low-income housing." [5] The two met in January, and Epps committed to looking "at models for revitalizing New Brunswick." [5] He traveled to observe different models in Baltimore (Blue Print Neighborhood Project), Boston (Copley Place), and Hartford, Connecticut (Hartford Process). [6] Epps recommended that Sellars use the Hartford Process model "but with some modifications." [6] These were that Devco include minorities and females on the board and that "there needed to be a cross-fertilization" between Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow. [6] This was a response to what Epps perceived as a problem in Hartford: "There was no line of communication between the two bodies." [7] He explained that in Hartford—more than twice as large as New Brunswick—the process "became unmanageable." He explained: "When you get into cities, you have a lot of actors. The more acreage you have, the more possibility you have for different stakeholders." [8]

Epps was motivated to become involved in the redevelopment process "to protect the community." [8] As for the motivation of Johnson & Johnson: "Self-interests of protecting their company and making things better for their company," as well as dedication to the J&J Credo. [8] He said that Johnson & Johnson "didn't have to stay here in New Brunswick, and that decision was probably the one critical decision that allowed for New Brunswick, in fact, to grow to where it is right now." [9]

"Rutgers has been isolated," Epps said of the state university. He noted that moving the university bookstore to Albany Street was Rutgers' first entry into downtown New Brunswick, followed by the later downtown location of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy and dormitories. "But," Epps added, "that period of getting [Rutgers] to move, just to put a bookstore in the Ferren Deck—that was a trying experience." [9] He spoke positively of former Rutgers President Mason Gross (1959–1971), who was involved with the Urban League: "Back in the 1960s and 1970s, Mason was always there." [10] Edward J. Bloustein, the successor to Gross, "was a major partner," served on New Brunswick Tomorrow, and "made the bookstore happen," Epps said. [10]

Epps thought that the Middlesex County government "played a significant role," naming David Crabel and Steve Capestro as supporters. 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." [12]

He spoke about issues surrounding development in the Hiram Market neighborhood. "A lot of the structures were in disrepair because of the landlords—owners just basically

walked away from it,” Epps said. [13] He believed that the area was historically significant, a view that he thought put him in the minority “because other people saw it differently.” [13] He said that “there was still a sense of small community, and people felt that they were being pushed out.” [13] When asked whether the historic elements of the area could have been preserved, Epps responded: “Oh, I think it would have taken more money, of course. All this comes down to money.” [14]

Epps mentioned his involvement with residential projects primarily in central New Brunswick and his role as chairman of the Housing Committee at Devco. Paul Abdalla, a former Devco president, “was probably one of the best presidents that we had; he was very community-minded.” [15] This touched on the development conflict of neighborhood and community 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,” Epps said. However, he believed that development in neighborhoods could provide tax abatements to the City and that money could be used for the community, such as when abatement money contributed to the development of the Paul Robeson Community School. [16] There was “the issue of reminding people that ‘This is not your money— I pay taxes.’” [16] By this, Epps alluded to people from corporations making decisions: “You’ll come in and make decisions on money and land that you’re not paying anything on. People said, ‘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.” [16]

Despite this, Epps thought that a lot of what was desired in original plans has “come to fruition.” [17] This includes the cultural center and “a significant presence of the governmental center.” [17] “If you look at the original plan, we’re pretty close to it,” Epps said. “The challenge becomes going beyond the CBD,” he added. [17]

Epps explained how the Cultural Center attracted people to New Brunswick, which in turn allowed a restaurant scene to develop. This was different from an earlier time when visitors and employees “didn’t stay downtown.” [18] Though downtown New Brunswick has shifted away from being a shopping center, the growth of the Cultural Center helped the area embrace a different identity, including culture and entertainment. [18]

He expressed the difficulty of financing desired initiatives. With David Nesbitt, the first president of Devco, he organized people concerning economic development, housing, and other particular issues. [19] “We came up with strategies in areas,” he said, “but it all came back to money.” [19] “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?” Epps asked. [19]

Epps spoke about the New Brunswick Tomorrow annual survey. He conveyed the idea that the survey is less relevant today than when it began in the 1970s, partly because the surveys are conducted on landline telephones, which fewer people are using. [21] On a personal level, Epps said that he is “one of the few people on these boards who actually lived it daily, so [the survey] doesn’t tell me anything.” [21] Another problem is that it fails to capture the opinion of younger people because of, again, how the survey is administered.

Transferability of the development process depends “on the people who are sitting around the table,” Epps said. [23] He said that those involved were committed, cooperative, and that there were “very few egos involved.” [23] Having local bankers sitting at the table helped, too: “We could kind of just say, ‘Well, we have this project. Can you put up?’” Epps recalled. [23] This is not necessarily the case any longer as regional banks have supplanted local ones. He also spoke about the uniqueness of New Brunswick—home to a state university, a county seat, and a supportive “major consumer product company”—and how that relates to transferability. [24] Another precondition for transferability is the state of the city: “You have to be completely down-and-out for you to say, ‘We’ve got to do something.’ To replicate, I think, depends on who and how desperate a community is. If everything is fine, no one comes to the table. They come to the table only when there is a common interest.” [28]

Epps closed with thoughts about preserving the “existing fabric.” His interests are to preserve for local residents, but he said, “If you don’t live here, you don’t have the same empathy that I have.” [30] He stressed that “One of that 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. This is why they must be negotiated with and involved with the process.” [30]

KEY QUOTATIONS

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

Cultural Center

The cultural center brought people in, which helped generate the kind of resources for the restaurants to bloom. 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 go down Livingston Avenue that the street is not blocked off, or you know they have the valets out there taking cars. People, before or after a performance, end up going to eat—and if they are going to eat, they are going to drink; if they are here earlier, they are going to shop. I think we

moved away from it being a shopping center, 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. [18] People who now are 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. [20]

Decision Making by “Outsiders”

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, “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. [16]

Devco and School Construction

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. [26]

Future [of Redevelopment Process in New Brunswick]

To look at spines . . . What happens to George Street going out to Douglass? 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 [of that]. [29]

Hiram Market

A lot of the structures were in disrepair because of the landlords; owners just kind of basically walked away from it. [13] It had some significant, historical significance, I thought. Two historical churches bordered it. 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. [13] It would have taken more money, of course [to preserve the historic structures of Hiram Market]. 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. [14]

Johnson & Johnson

I thought J&J—besides their own self-interests of protecting the company and making things better for the company—I think that those I was involved with had a real sense of their Credo, that they really want to do something. [8] J&J had other options; it didn’t have to stay here in New Brunswick, and that decision was probably the one critical decision that allowed for New Brunswick to grow to where it is right now. [9]

Preservation

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—they are not going to take this [but] so much. So that's why you need to negotiate and bring them into the process. [30]

Rutgers University

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) 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 [Rutgers] to move, just to put a bookstore in the Ferren Deck, that was a trying experience. [9]

Transferability

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 come to the table only when there is a common interest. [28]