

John A. Lynch, Jr.



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

John A. Lynch Jr., mayor of New Brunswick for twelve years (1979–1991), has deep roots in the city. In the first half of the nineteenth century his family immigrated to New Brunswick from Ireland; his great-grandfather was involved in building the very sewers that later would be replaced during his tenure as mayor. [4] His father, John Lynch, Sr., also served as the mayor of New Brunswick (1951–1954) and in 1955 was elected to the New Jersey Senate, a position he held for seven terms. Despite his father’s

advice—“You should stay away from local politics” (Lynch Jr. recalled him saying in the mid-1970s), Lynch, Jr. helped Richard Mulligan run his successful campaign for mayor. [4] Mulligan resigned and abruptly moved to Jackson Hole in 1978. That year, Lynch ran for mayor against George Hendricks and won; in 1979 he began serving as the mayor of New Brunswick. [5]

His campaign was set during a time in the history of New Brunswick when “stores were empty and crime was rampant.” [5] Lynch recalled his campaign themes:

How do you rehabilitate the public schools? How do you get the resources to redo your infrastructure? How do you create some positiveness and hope and, then, ultimately how do you meld together the communities that were willing to work, namely the corporate community, the government community, and the academic community with Rutgers, and then the citizenry as a whole? [5]

He elaborated on how the politics of corporate America, academia, and government each functioned so differently. “Trying to understand each other’s problems and being able to make decisions and make commitments, I think, was critical to the process,” Lynch said. [5-6] He added that in every redevelopment-related action, as the mayor, he had “to sell the public every day about what’s in it for them.” [6]

Speaking about the role of Johnson & Johnson, Lynch said that it was more “critical to the redevelopment of New Brunswick from the standpoint of the human resource,”

dismissing the popular notion that the company was just a “deep pocket.” [6-7] He noted that Richard Sellars, Johnson & Johnson’s chief executive, “had the vision to see that you could do something and convince people that there was a goal that could be achieved here.” [7] He credits Sellars with the idea that redevelopment would be “a good marketing piece for J&J to demonstrate their commitment à la General Johnson’s Credo.” [7]

Regarding the relationship between Rutgers and the administration, Lynch said that a “first step” in working together was in the mid-1970s when part of the Mason Gross School of the Arts was moved downtown. [10] A “second step” was moving the college bookstore into the Ferren Deck when it was built. [11] He spoke about how Middlesex County government was relatively uninvolved early on [11-12] and the evolution of Middlesex Hospital into the more prestigious Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital following the appointment of Harvey Holzberg to CEO. As the institution progressed, it allowed New Brunswick to become a credible “healthcare city.” [12] This change was “critical to the city in terms of its appeal, its job base, and the quality of life generally, but just as importantly, the perception of it changes the New Brunswick vision from afar,” Lynch said. [13] He observed how the hospital gave a reason for visitors to come to New Brunswick and “created an aura of excellence that was very much involved in the rebirth of the city from the standpoint of not only actuality but perception, which is always critical.” [13] Lynch stressed how important the Parking Authority has been in the redevelopment process. [15-16]

The Hyatt Regency Hotel received an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG)—the second highest on a per capita basis in America—to help finance its construction. Lynch said that his administration and Johnson & Johnson were partners in the process and that “we had to kick doors down politically and otherwise.” [18]

Several facets of the redevelopment process were the result of creative thinking; one problem Lynch described was that the state would not fund infrastructure for arts-related projects. His administration got around this by suggesting that “We could do a bond issue for Green Acres, historic preservation, and the arts with our aging arts infrastructure as an alternative to funding this in the operating budget, which [the governor] wouldn’t do, and [the governor] agreed immediately.” [20] This led to millions of dollars of funding for the State Theatre, which then prompted Middlesex County to contribute funding. The rebirth of the State Theatre—from “a triple X theatre” to a venue that attracted patrons from surrounding communities—“opened up the city,” Lynch said. [20]

As to how the Route 18 expansion came to be built, Lynch noted that in the 1960s the construction of the Route 18 bridge across the Raritan River had been “blocked repeatedly by people who had concerns about the impact on the river, etc.” [21] Part of

the reason the bridge *was* built was because the jurisdiction of the Delaware & Raritan Canal Commission ended just before reaching downtown New Brunswick. If the commission had that authority, Lynch said, “it would have made the redevelopment very, very difficult because it would have had jurisdiction throughout the whole central business district, and too many cooks spoil the broth—you can’t have a hodgepodge of planning going on to make things come out correctly.” [21]

Regarding historic preservation, Lynch expressed his “mixed emotions” in that he “always respected the opinions of the people who wanted to preserve [the Hiram District]” but that preservation would have required “an enormous amount of money, and there wasn’t a lot to restore.” [23] As for the Rutgers dormitory project—University Center—on Easton Avenue, he noted how in recent times private residential projects have been sustained by the student demand for housing. With the Easton Avenue project, Lynch looked to bring students into the center of New Brunswick, but there was “trouble with housing spillovers” into middle-class neighborhoods. [24]

Lynch offered an account of the interplay of state politics with regard to the building for the Mason Gross School of the Arts and the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. In the early 1990s, Governor Florio announced the availability of funding through the Port Authority with the dual purpose, he observed, “to try to get New Jersey moving again, and at the same time to try to get Governor Florio reelected.” [26] Upon learning about the availability of funding, Lynch said, “we went to Trenton immediately with hat in hand and said ‘We have a plan. And we can move this ahead quickly. You can have ground breakings, announcements, all the right things at the right time . . . it’s part of the process. Timing is important. Politics are important, and you have to be aware of that; you can’t be oblivious to what’s going on and how to take advantage of that.’” [26]

Lynch spoke of the role of PILOTs (payments in lieu of taxes) and financing nuances related to tax abatements. [27-30] As for the use of eminent domain in New Brunswick, he said that property owners deserve fair compensation and that “they usually got somewhere between 150 and 250 percent of fair market value in the process; in many cases it was much higher.” [30-33] He expressed his frustration with the media; much attention was paid to the property owners’ initial predicament but not how they fared afterward, “because they all walked away smiling, and they all did very well, and they all wound up in much better circumstances.” [32] Lynch maintained that critics of eminent domain were unaware of the positive aspects of, and the “need” for, the redevelopment tool. [33]

Regarding the Memorial Homes public housing, Lynch explained that the projects were part of a national postwar trend to “build high-rise, low-income housing and build it in the center city—and in many cases build it on your prime land.” [34] The main problem with the Homes was poor management, he said, which beset other problems. “They

became a haven for the drug culture,” Lynch said. “They became a haven for police problems.” [35] Similar to the reactions to eminent domain, Lynch believed that the media created “a *cause célèbre* over absolutely nothing,” after the *Home News* published a front-page article about the Memorial Homes being torn down. [35] “The Housing Authority culture is awful,” Lynch noted. [36]

With regard to the transferability of the redevelopment process, Lynch stated that it can work elsewhere if there is community support and if community leadership is supported. [36] Critical to the success of the process is political stability, Lynch said, though he noted this is not transferable. He added that “Having some visionaries in the front end like a Dick Sellars, for example, is critical—not necessarily transferable.” [37] Other aspects, however, like proper use of the Parking Authority and reinvesting revenue into schools and infrastructure, can be transferred, he said. [37] “Changing the image of the city, not unlike what we went through,” Lynch said, “is critical to the process because—it’s the perception that probably is as important as any other factor in the whole process. If you can’t change that perception, you’re not bringing the people in that you need.” [38]

When asked what he would have done differently if given the chance, Lynch responded that there was not “enough emphasis on neighborhood housing.” Another regret concerned not pushing more for the proposed integration of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital with Saint Peter’s University Hospital: “In their case, two and two is 22.” Integration could have meant that “The level of expertise would have risen. The specialization would have risen,” Lynch said. “It was a really missed opportunity for the City of New Brunswick, and for the Central Jersey area, because health care is so critical.” [40]

Asked if he thought whether “more of the city’s existing buildings could have been preserved,” Lynch responded that the architecture of New Brunswick buildings lacked character and that the importance in Hiram Market was more rooted in history than architectural significance: “A lot of it, from the standpoint of structure, wasn’t there.” [41] With this in mind, Lynch remarked that he thought the study of Hiram Market by Tony Nelessen was “skewed.” [42]

Lynch spoke about past proposals for a downtown New Brunswick sports arena. The structure would have stood over Route 18, solving a persistent New Brunswick problem: being disconnected to the Raritan River. “It would connect the city to the water,” Lynch said. “You would have a direct nexus between the downtown and the canal, and the river.” [45]

He ended with an interesting comment about the importance of public perception. “We really had some serious disagreements and arguments. Nobody ever went public

because,” he said, “again, the perception is so important.” Lynch concluded by saying, “A lot of people say it was a closed shop, it was a back room, it was this, or it was that, and there was a lot of disagreement, and a lot of contentiousness—but never out in the public domain.” [53]

KEY QUOTATIONS

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

The Arts

The arts have been a huge part of the change in the dynamic of the central business district and the perception of New Brunswick, and the ability to reach out to this central Jersey community—you can't measure the amount, the credibility that has flowed from the Cultural Center. [44]

The perception that the arts could succeed in New Brunswick was generated in no small measure by Eric [Krebs], and what he did at a time when there was nothing . . . back in the old Acme supermarket. [50]

Consensus Building and Public Satisfaction with Redevelopment Outcomes

It was about the beginnings of the notion that you could make a difference in New Brunswick, that you could see real redevelopment. We had an aging infrastructure and we had a tax base that had totally eroded. The central business district had gone from being the biggest ratable base in the town to nothing. Stores were empty and crime was rampant. New Brunswick had all the symptoms of an aging urban. And the question always was “Can you really do anything? How do you rehabilitate the public schools? How do you get the resources to redo your infrastructure? How do you create some positiveness and hope and then, ultimately, how do you meld together the communities that were willing to work—the corporate, government, and academic community (Rutgers), and then the citizenry as a whole?” One of the more challenging tasks as we moved down the road was that the politics of corporate America and the politics of academia and the politics of government are so different. Trying to understand each other's problems and being able to make decisions and make commitments, I think, was critical to the process.

You have to sell the public everyday about what's in it for them. And each project, each acquisition, each eminent domain, each new infrastructure investment—you have to try hard to convince the community as a whole as to why it works for them. So ultimately, when we started putting in major investments into the central business district, to ratable base, as well as the payments in lieu of taxes, we were able to demonstrate that most of the improvements in the schools—particularly in the ability to spend money on schools, rehabilitating schools, and upgrading staffs and so forth—and most of the money that was utilized to rebuild the infrastructure (with an aging water system and sewer system, and roads, etc.), as well as improvements in the neighborhoods—were directly the result of the improved ratable base. Then, of course, you go beyond that to demonstrate that all the

things that were happening in downtown New Brunswick, whether it was the arts or planning or the basic community activities, enhanced the whole community, and the arts became open and accessible to all segments of the community in one fashion or another. [5-6]

Eminent Domain (and the Media)

Every day there was a story about somebody who was being displaced, and in the first four or five projects that we did major eminent domain, we tried to get the media. And we said we would do the leg work, we'll help you do it, to track everybody whether they be a tenant, residential tenant, a property owner, commercial tenant, commercial property owner, track them on what happened to them and how did they fare, because we did a lot of that in many, many cases just to be sure what was going on. And we didn't do them all, but I dare say that 99.9 percent of them did very, very well. You can't blame the property owner or the tenant, be they commercial or residential, from using the process and using the media to their advantage to stir up a hornet's nest, and to attract attention, because that's almost part of the bargaining. So they do that, the media plays into it, and you get all this fanfare, but nobody ever goes back at the end of the day and says, "How did these people fare?" Because they all walked away smiling, they all did very well, and they all wound up in much better circumstances. They wound up, if they were a residential tenant, in an occupancy that met code (which didn't meet before), and were in a much better circumstance, and they usually had money in their pocket besides. And the same thing, when it came to retailers and commercial occupiers, tenants—they all did extremely well. [31-32]

Future of New Brunswick

We're big by day. I see New Brunswick ultimately putting another 25,000 people or more in the city. It's still a regional center. More so than it ever was. [37]

New Brunswick is going to flourish: The central business district just gets better and better and better, and there will be many more significant residential projects, which will enhance the potential for retail and restaurants, and certainly the arts. The jury is out on what you can do to enhance the neighborhoods. [44]

Hiram District and Historic Preservation

I have mixed emotions about Hiram Market. I always respected the opinions of the people who wanted to preserve it. None of the planners that I dealt with indicated that you could make a viable community out of Hiram Market; it would require an enormous amount of money, and there wasn't a lot to restore. We had two restaurants there. A lot of people thought I was opposed to them because they were very active in the preservation of the Hiram Market, and while we ultimately went forward with redevelopment, everybody suspected we were taking them out—but there was no way. They had made significant investment; they were both productive. As a matter of fact, the City people were surprised—City officials were surprised—that we just didn't want to do that. It made no sense. And the residential community that is there was critical to the city and its future.

We didn't have a lot of the character in our buildings other than you had a history in Hiram Market. But a lot of it, from the standpoint of structure, wasn't there. It was like when we had the Lock Tender House issue that Mack Babcock and others analyzed for us—he said, "There's nothing here." I mean, yes—it's old—but it's been redone so many times and patched up. You had a lot of the same dynamic in Hiram Market, and there weren't a lot of other areas where we had real historic issues other than Hiram Market. The Hiram Market structures had all been redone in one fashion or another; the study that Nelessen gave was skewed, I thought. There wasn't a lot to get your arms around. [41-42]

John Heldrich

I think Dick [Sellars] saw John [Heldrich]—because of his background in workforce issues, but also on the soft side—that he would be a perfect fit for New Brunswick Tomorrow with the community, the neighborhoods, the education parts, healthcare, and the like. Indeed, that was the role that John played the most positive part in throughout, up until today, I suspect. He wasn't involved heavily in the hardware, but he also became, de facto, the liaison between the city and J&J. [8-9]

Parking

If you don't have a parking problem you're not doing good things, as I see it. You always need more parking, hopefully. [20]

Parking Authority and Its Role in Redevelopment

The least publicized part of the redevelopment process throughout has been the ability to utilize the Parking Authority from day one, because it had enormous power under the law. [14] Under the Parking Authority law in New Jersey, the Parking Authority has a broad base of power that actually is broader than redevelopment powers. They can buy and sell. They could acquire in futuro by saying "It's going for parking." They can create good revenue streams. Some people look at them as a typical authority that gets out of control. Well, that can be unless you have quality members who are acting in consort with a redevelopment process. So if you look at any project that's happened in New Brunswick in the last 25 years, the Parking Authority has played an integral role. And, indeed, in many cases it could not have happened without the Parking Authority. You'll see projects being talked about today, whether it's Easton Avenue/Somerset or Joyce Kilmer/Paterson—the Parking Authority is deeply engaged in [those projects].

Acquisitions that they can make can be made through the redevelopment law—leveraging parking, which is critical. You can't build projects without parking, and you don't have the money in these projects that are thin to start with to provide parking, so they'll have an ownership and/or financing arrangement. In every one of these projects, you'll see the Parking Authority: the hospital projects; the Rutgers housing that we did on Easton Avenue hill—that we had to fight for, that became the number one attractive spot for students on their pecking order—could not have happened without the Parking Authority. We got Harvey Holzberg to lease a lot of spaces, but he needed the parking. And

we've always had to force the hospital to build more and more parking, but the Parking Authority is in it every step of the way.

So if you look at, if you analyze any project that's been done in the modern history of New Brunswick, you'll find a major role for the Parking Authority. We understood that early on. It had a wide berth of power, number one; number two, you could leverage it. So that is probably the best kept secret in this whole process in terms of a redevelopment tool. If you look at all the urban stories in New Jersey, I think one of the singular reasons that New Brunswick will stand out is because of how we use the Parking Authority as opposed to so many of the urban centers that have continued to do surface parking and not do the decks, and not make the Parking Authority a part of every process. [15-16]

Public Perception

One of the biggest problems you have going in is that people are doubting Thomases; people were as totally negative about cities in that era as they are today about a lot of the cities, the old cities in New Jersey. So you couldn't get people from East Brunswick to come to New Brunswick, and the word always was, "It will never happen. They're not secure. You can't park. You can't do this. And how are you ever going to make this thing work?" The hospitals, in particular, and particularly Robert Wood Johnson and the medical school, brought a lot of people into the community who otherwise would not have been there—created an aura of excellence that was very much involved in the rebirth of the city from the standpoint of not only actuality but perception, which is always critical. [13]

Redevelopment Process

This was a mosaic, and all the parts had to come together; it would be a long process that really never ends, as we know. [8]

Residential Uses

The housing nodes that have been implemented, including the most recent high-rise—I'm sure we'll see a lot more of that in the days to come. Because I think the future of the city is there in terms of the housing. [22-23]

Rutgers University

You have a mixed bag with Rutgers in not having enough student housing, but the student housing—the off-campus housing that's done through the private sector—has also been a stabilizer in the city in many, many ways, and the properties are kept up. People are making a lot of money off the investments; I don't know how strong the city code enforcement is today, but most of them are pretty good. It's one thing the university will try to get them to do: There's a forthcoming body of law, I think, that maybe says the university is going to have to oversee the non-University-owned off-campus housing to make sure that its students are housed in a safe environment that meets code—fire codes and everything else. But in the meantime, I have no doubt that the university will start building a lot more housing and rehabilitating the housing that it has because there is so

much private-sector initiative to do those things today for the universities, where universities can make money, have a better product, and the like. So it's a mixed bag from the City's standpoint. You would like to see a lot of that closer to the central business district, but it has been a real property stabilizer. Some of the old-line residents don't like the students around, but, it has been very beneficial over the long term. And that's not just in the Sixth Ward or the Fifth Ward, but it's now in the Fourth Ward, the Second Ward, and throughout the city you have that happening. [43-44]

Transferability

It is understanding that you have to have total—real—community support, and have the support of your community leadership, be it the residential leadership or the corporate leadership, or in this case the academic leadership and the hospital community, and that it has to be worked on every step of the way—that is transferable. And you can never lose sight of that. Having political stability is critical. That's not necessarily transferable. Having some visionaries in the front end like a Dick Sellars is critical, not necessarily transferable. But that being said, I think most of the principles that are involved are transferable, whether it's the proper use of the Parking Authority, the redevelopment process, the leveraging of the community, the pushing of your resources back into the people to have them understand that this was about the community as a whole, where the monies all generated go to the school and infrastructure, trees, and so on. We were always very proud of being in tree city USA for years and years, and we brought in some people just to do that, you know, to jump-start it because it's amazing what it does to a neighborhood.

Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs)

We had some brawls with it [securing UDAG monies for the Hyatt Hotel], and we took a lot of heat for it with the keeper of the register on historic places because of the Hiram Market issues and things like that. [18]