

# Western/Southern Cumberland Region Strategic Plan

## **Western/Southern Cumberland Region Strategic Plan: Potentials for Economic Development Market Feasibility Study Executive Summary**

**April 2003**

The Market Feasibility Study was carried out in two phases. Phase I involved a review of recent studies and reports that address Cumberland County's economic base, as well as research into the demographics and economic base of the region as a whole and the demographics of the 11 municipalities in particular. The research was undertaken to develop an in-depth knowledge of local economic conditions and trends. Also included in Phase I was the collection of data on the commercial real estate market in and around Cumberland County. Concentrations of industrial and commercial space were identified and researched to determine land costs, occupancy, and absorption of new product.

Phase II involved interviews with key stakeholders and participants in economic development efforts. Interviewees were asked for their suggestions for encouraging agribusiness and eco-tourism in the area, and their responses to particular issues. These issues included the identification of "seed" industries that have potential to spin-off other industries, and the potential for the use of Cumberland County's unique historic and natural assets to foster "eco-tourism". This task served in part as a "reality check" on the review and analysis of secondary data that had been collected in Phase I.

The region has experienced slow growth to date. Its unemployment rate has been consistently higher than the State's, and residents' educational levels and incomes have been consistently lower.

However, the Western/Southern Cumberland Region has proved a successful location for industrial parks, especially in areas with high accessibility, like those near Route 55. In part, this is because there are seed industries in the County that generate additional spin-off industries. The availability of such economic incentives as those found in the Federal Empowerment Zone, the Urban Enterprise Zones, the Cumberland County Improvement Authority, and various other Federal and State programs have also played an important role in these successes.

There are currently a total of 1,220 acres of industrial park land in the study area. They include:

- Vineland Parks North and South: 500 acres
- Vineland Airport Commerce Center: 200 acres
- Millville Airport: 150 acres
- Bridgeton and Florida: 70 acres
- South Millville, Gorton, and Eden Road: 300 acres

Three major additions to the industrial park inventory are proposed. They are:

- Millville Airport expansion, Phase I: 150 acres
- Millville Airport expansion, Phase II: 350 to 850 acres
- Cumberland County Intermunicipal Park, Deerfield Township: 530 acres

Recent absorption of industrial park acreage has been less than 50 acres per year. At the current rate of absorption, the current supply should last for another 20 to 30 years.

In addition to the potential for traditional economic development, including warehousing, back office, and light manufacturing, there is a market for the study area's natural assets and resources in eco-tourism. Cumberland County lies within a two-hour drive of the Philadelphia region, as well as all of southern New Jersey. The population of this market area increased by 4.1% to a year 2000 total of 5,602,247 people. The median household incomes of metropolitan areas in this market range from \$41,000 to \$47,000.

The nursery business has thrived in Cumberland County because of its proximity to this market area and its location on the East Coast. There has been a 40% increase in the County's acreage devoted to the nursery business between 1997 and 2000. Thirty-two percent of the State's nursery acreage is in Cumberland County. Spin-offs from the landscape industry include manufacturers of pots, tools, fertilizer, boxes, burlap, twine, plastics, and machinery. Trucking has also been a beneficiary of this industry.

Produce has not fared as well. There was little increase in the production of traditional New Jersey farm products between 1995 and 2000. In addition to a shorter growing season than its Florida and California competitors, a major issue that the industry faces is a distribution system that makes it difficult for farmers to earn a decent living. Destinations in this distribution system include food processing companies, distributors, and resellers (usually restaurants, farmers' markets, and stores).

In order to support the production of fruits and vegetables in the study area, it will be necessary to address distribution issues. There are several approaches, none of them mutually exclusive. They are:

- Bring the product directly to its destination
  - Target additional food processors to establish plants in the study area
  - Encourage the development of a mechanism for direct delivery of produce to food stores and restaurants in population centers
- Bring the end user to the product
  - Establish farmers' markets in places that already attract tourists
  - Establish farmers' markets at new locations as part of a tourism development strategy

Because of the study area's natural assets, and its location within a two-hour drive of 5,602,247 people, there is also an opportunity to build eco-tourism as an economic base. The proposed bicycle trail from the Delaware River to the East Point Lighthouse offers an interesting framework for a tourism development strategy. There are many historic villages and scenic views along its way, and its natural assets include many miles of waterfront and the recreational opportunities. Villages and hamlets already offer antiquing, crabbing, fishing, and boating to visitors.

Next steps in developing a regional tourism strategy around the proposed bicycle system would include:

- Inventory of potential attractions on all proposed bicycle routes
- Establish visioning process with involved communities
- Identify market and establish market niches within participating communities
- Formulate strategy