

# The Public/Private Partnership as a “Catalyst” to Community Renewal

*By: Eric Ascalon, Vice President of Development, Catalyst Experiential*

I grew up in Cherry Hill, a one-time agricultural community that helped supply the nearby Campbell’s Soup Company in Camden with produce. As a kid in the 1970s, my suburban township boasted ten family farms, the wonderful “Cherry Blossom Parade” each spring, and a true sense of community year-round. Today, only one farm remains, the parade is no more, and it is difficult to discern where the Township ends and its neighboring municipalities begin.

As suburbs in America have rapidly expanded over the past half-century, it is easy to get lost in a “sea of sameness”. Lines between our towns have blurred, and commercial corridors from coast-to-coast feature a virtually identical litany of chain retailers and restaurants. Perhaps this phenomenon is no more evident than in New Jersey, the nation’s most densely populated state. Though our state provides an excellent quality of life and boundless opportunities, I believe the citizens of our 565 municipalities are longing for a renewed sense of local community. While many of our cities and towns have done a phenomenal job towards achieving this through Main Street and neighborhood revitalizations and redevelopment, there remains much work to do.

As local elected officials in the Garden State work towards rehabilitating a sense of community identity, there are also ever-greater demands to rehabilitate and expand infrastructure, and to enhance recreational and cultural opportunities for constituents. People are demanding more from local government, but there is no tolerance for tax increases to cover the costs—especially in the midst of an unprecedented property tax crisis. How does a New Jersey township official serve the community in such a complex environment?

Creative, outside-the-box thinking is a necessity to succeed in local governance today. A new breed of innovative public/private partnerships is emerging to assist

in the fulfillment of needs and fill budget gaps. Catalyst Experiential is a pioneer in this realm.

Our process starts with understanding the need of a particular municipality, and then collaborating with public officials to customize a solution to meet the distinct needs of the community as well as ensure that completed designs reflect the local aesthetic. And, Catalyst installations cost municipalities and their taxpayers nothing. The entire cost of each Catalyst project is underwritten through advertising revenue generated from an integrated digital communications platform. Cities and towns also benefit from the shared use of the communications platform, which enables them to notify constituents about local events and activities, or to keep them up-to-date in the event of emergencies.

We develop three unique types of projects:

**Landmarks:** Help communities to recapture their sense of place through architecturally meaningful community gateways

**Infrastructure:** Enable communities to better serve a growing population through police, fire, and EMS stations

**Experiences:** Enhance the life of citizens through art centers, amphitheaters, dog-parks, and other gathering places



**Eric Ascalon** is the Vice President of Development for Catalyst Experiential. Eric works collaboratively with municipal officials and stakeholders to establish public/private partnerships that fulfill community needs at no cost to taxpayers.

The Catalyst vision began over a decade ago. CEO Thaddeus Bartkowski—who developed the largest network of digital out of home in the Philadelphia region—explains, “We were talking with a suburban township about a digital installation, and they suggested that if we could get rid of an abandoned gas station, and transform that blight into something of value, they would be very interested. We replaced

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the gas station with our first Monument, an architecturally relevant gateway with dry-stacked stone, landscaping that would make an arboretum jealous, and 40 giant arborvitae. It was a hit with the community, and we haven't looked back since." Catalyst began to fundamentally rethink the concept of the sign, and endeavored to explore deeper intrinsic needs within communities so that the sign itself becomes a secondary use. Today, aesthetics and community purpose drive all Catalyst projects.

After a long stint away for my hometown, I returned to Cherry Hill when it came

time to start a family. Lured back by its proximity to recreational and cultural opportunities, and the quality of the schools that I once attended, for me it was a logical choice. Though the Township has changed considerably, at its core, it still feels like home. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise three children within its borders. For Cherry Hill – as with many of New Jersey's suburbs – though the farms are nearly gone; and the parades are few and far between; the desire to renew the hometown spirit persists. That desire led me to Catalyst, where I take pride that we can help spark that renewal.

We at Catalyst look forward to being the newest member of the New Jersey Conference of Mayor's Business Council. Learn more about Catalyst at [www.CatalystEX.com](http://www.CatalystEX.com). I encourage you to reach out to me should you wish to explore the possibility of bringing a Catalyst project to your community. You can contact me at 856-220-0522, or email me at [eric@CatalystEX.com](mailto:eric@CatalystEX.com). 📧

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Continuing our efforts to address the divide among Americans with disabilities, Comcast launched customer service support in American Sign Language in December. In partnership with Connect Direct, a subsidiary of Communication Service for the Deaf; the service is a first for the cable industry.

The success of Internet Essentials relies on partnerships with school districts, libraries, elected officials and nonprofit community partners, as well as hundreds of employee Ambassadors. In New Jersey, we're proud of long-standing partnerships with school

districts throughout the state including Jersey City, Camden and Trenton; numerous Boys and Girls Clubs', the New Jersey State Library, and organizations like the United Way and Center for Family Services, to name a few. Our partners understand how critical a broadband connection is and share the same mission to level the playing field for the underserved.

Anyone can play a role in helping to close the digital divide simply by helping to spread awareness. I invite you to learn more about Internet Essentials, and even sign up to order posters, pamphlets and

other literature completely free of charge, by visiting: [www.internetessentials.com](http://www.internetessentials.com).

I'm personally proud of the impact Internet Essentials has had on so many families across the region, and I'm thrilled that we're now extending that opportunity to so many more low-income Americans in our service area. 📧

For up to date information and events concerning NJCM, visit our website at

[www.njcm.org](http://www.njcm.org)

