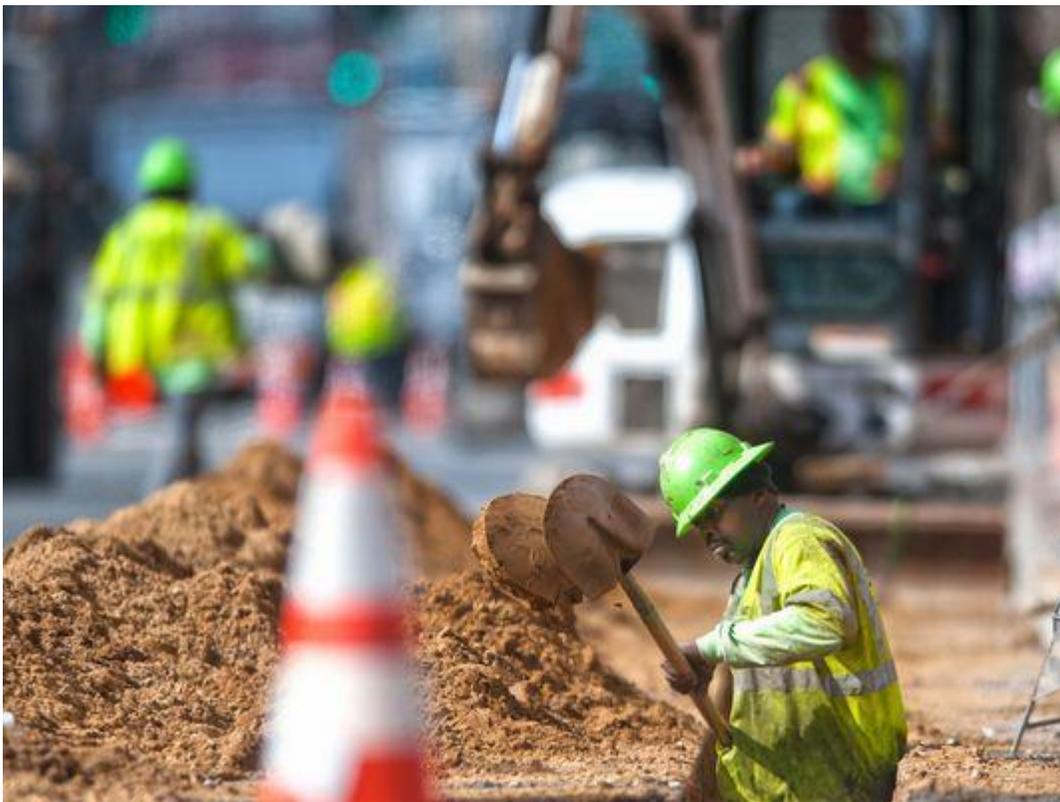


# Developer: Bringing Camden back will happen 'brick by brick'

[Phaedra Trethan](#), @CP\_Phaedra 11:44 a.m. ET March 1, 2017



American Water Company headquarters across from the Victor Building on the Camden waterfront. Video by Jose F. Moreno/Gannett



Construction crews work at the Liberty Property Trust site on the Camden Waterfront. The developer has an agreement in place to use Camden-based laborers and vendors on the project.(Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

PHILADELPHIA — John Gattuso sat in a conference room at his office on John F. Kennedy Boulevard, a wall of windows offering a view of one of Liberty Property Trust's biggest projects, the mammoth Comcast Tower in Center City Philadelphia.

But it was Camden, not Philadelphia, that was on his mind, and had been since his father and grandfather worked at the RCA factory as cabinetmakers.

"He would come home every night and the narrative at our dinner table was one of decline," Gattuso said of his father. "It's getting dangerous. It's getting bad. They tore down another building..."

It's a narrative Gattuso, Liberty's senior vice president and regional director, says the company is hoping to help change, "brick by brick."

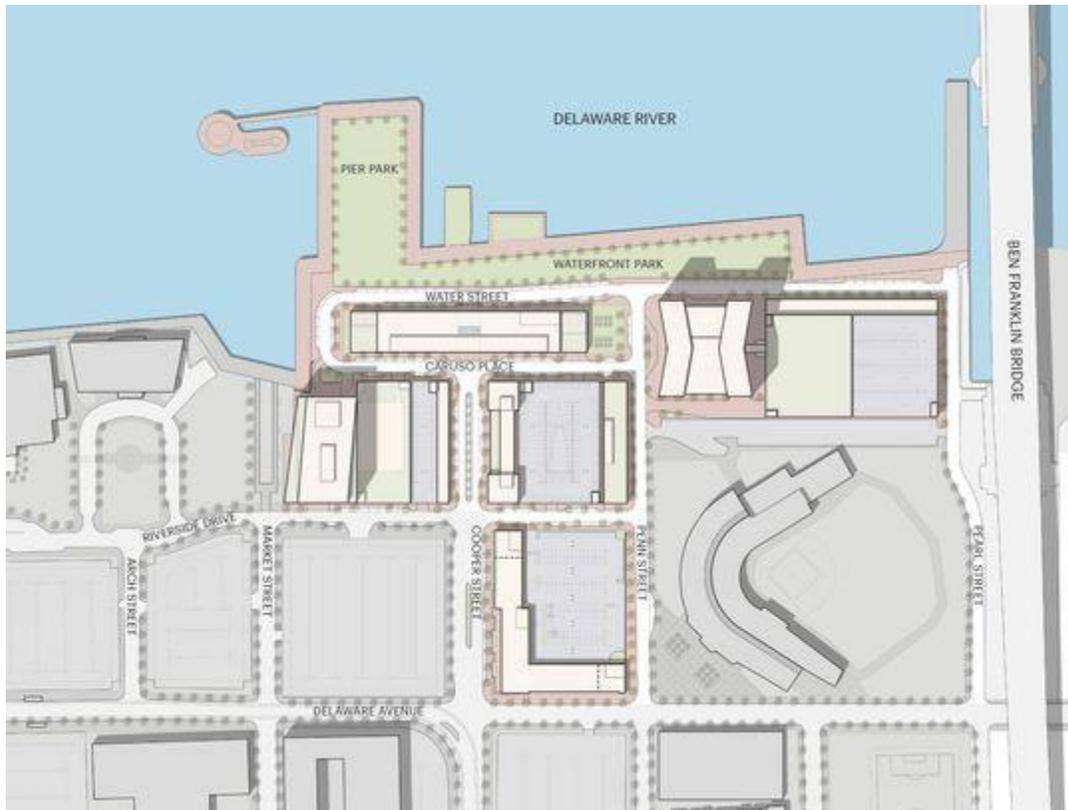
The phrase takes both literal and figurative meanings as Gattuso talked not only about the mixed-use development in its infancy on the Camden Waterfront: Building residential, office and hotel space on the site with an eye toward creating "an active, thriving, living neighborhood that doesn't shut down at the end of the workday," but also putting city residents to work so they have a stake in their city's revitalization.

The development is one of many projects underway in Camden, as companies including Holtec, Subaru, the Philadelphia 76ers and Brandywine Realty Trust have built or are building in the the city. The biggest question, though, is how approximately \$2 billion in recent investments in Camden will impact the lives of people who live there.

### **Connecting residents with jobs**

Liberty has an agreement in place with the city to ensure 10 to 20 percent of the construction workers on the site are Camden residents, and has offered \$90,000 toward training those residents through the Union Organization for Social Service (UOSS) in construction trades. Its contractors, Joseph Jingoli & Son and LF Driscoll Inc., teamed with the union-backed agency to funnel potential laborers, electricians, bricklayers, painters and carpenters through 10-week training sessions. The program aims to train a total of 100 people receiving not only vocational training but also "soft skills" instruction in financial literacy, work site safety and computer literacy. After successfully completing the program, eligible graduates are matched with pre-apprenticeships in a particular trade.

The company meets biweekly with its contractors and subcontractors and has hired an independent auditor, Urban Affairs Coalition, to ensure its goals are being met. The company will offer a paid internship to one Camden public school student every six months for the duration of the project. And each month, a committee consisting of a community member, a city official, and representatives from American Water (the first company to build at the site), Liberty Property Trust, Driscoll and Jingoli meets to discuss ways to benefit Camden and its residents.



A site plan provided by Liberty Property Trust shows the developer's vision for the complex on the Camden Waterfront. (Photo: Liberty Property Trust)

Mike Johnson worked as a security guard before receiving training through the UOSS, but was unhappy with the nighttime hours the job required.

"I have a life now," he laughed. "I used to go to work when everyone was coming home." The Fairview resident found out about UOSS's program and said his life now is "totally different."

"It was very challenging, to work at night and learn during the day," he said. On the job for about a month now, he loves working as a laborer for AP Construction, a subcontractor on the project. "The guys I'm working with are great, they're helping me learn and deal with the transition (to daytime work)."

The 38-year-old said construction work will help him provide for his family, particularly his teenage daughter, who lives with her mother in South Carolina. "I can see myself being able to do more for her now, to be a better provider," he said. "She's talking about going to college now, and with this job, I can make sure she can do that."

He's hoping to work his way up, from being a laborer to perhaps a foreman someday. "It's not easy," he said. "No one will give it to you but if you work hard and sacrifice, you can do it."

### **'Create some momentum'**

Gattuso acknowledged that the need is great in Camden, and developers like Liberty Property Trust and Brandywine Realty Trust, which has another large-scale, mixed-use development planned around Subaru's new headquarters, will not solve its longstanding economic woes.

"The loss of jobs and the collapse of manufacturing in Camden is a similar story to what we've seen in so many other urban areas in the U.S. and particularly in the Northeast," he said. "But it's been more profound in Camden because of the size of the city and the degree to which the manufacturing base comprised the city. Once that collapsed, there was really very little left in the way of private sector jobs."

Camden, though, is a natural geographic fit for companies in one of the country's largest metro areas — "It's why it exists in the first place," he said — and projects like Liberty's can help turn the tide.

"Our project is not going to solve 30 or 40 years of problems, but what it can do is start to move things, to create some momentum, push things in the direction of the beginning of a new private sector economy here."



A rendering shows a Philadelphia view of the Liberty Property Trust project along the Camden Waterfront. (Photo: Liberty Property Trust)

Creating opportunity for city residents is about more than a construction job with a finite start and end, he said.

"Getting people into the construction trades has always been, historically, a way of getting people at the lower end of the economic threshold to matriculate up in the economy," he noted. "That was true of the Irish, it was true of the Italians, and it's true of African Americans and Hispanics. As a trade, construction skills can be redeployed in a number of jobs; the Philadelphia region today has a shortage of qualified construction workers, so there's a fairly significant opportunity for people."

Of the 42 workers onsite at the waterfront as the project is getting underway, 12 are Camden residents — about 28 percent — Gattuso said. But construction is just the first step.

### **Suppliers in demand**

In addition to hiring local laborers, Liberty has committed to using Camden-based and minority-owned subcontractors, suppliers and other vendors.

"So many people have made money in the city and then left the city," said Jeffrey Johnson, CEO of Ion Electrical Construction Services. The company, with offices on Admiral Wilson Boulevard, is installing power feeds to construction trailers at the Liberty site.

"This benefits me and it benefits the city," Johnson added. "With a project this size, even after it's finished, there's electrical maintenance and we want to get that business. Electrical maintenance on one building could mean full-time employment for three or four people."

Johnson's wife's family is from the city and his business partner, Josh Cooper, is originally from East Camden. Locating in Camden was a matter of convenience, he said, since Ion's biggest clients include malls and shopping centers in Philadelphia, Plymouth Meeting, and South Jersey.

A member of the [Camden Business and Contractors Association](#) for three years, Johnson said he's seen a difference in the latest efforts at revitalization in the city.

"This is the first time I've really seen (officials) being true to their word that money coming into Camden should stay in Camden," he said. The proof will be in what happens after the building is complete and what opportunities remain for city residents, he added. "Construction is good, but eventually, it will be finished. I hope the city stays focused on making sure companies hire people who live here."

Cathedral Kitchen, a Camden-based nonprofit that trains residents for careers in food service, has provided catering services for some groundbreaking and grand opening events. It's among the city-based vendors working with Liberty, which has also held lunch meetings at its cafe on Federal Street.

"The catering business is a way for us to generate income for our programs," said executive director Karen Talerico. "This work has helped us employ more people; we're up to 41 employees now. We've grown a tremendous amount."



A loader truck scoops dirt and gravel at the Liberty Property Trust site on the Camden Waterfront. (Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

For its part, Liberty is trying to work with smaller subcontractors and suppliers to make sure they stay viable.

"Sometimes we'll encounter a small business whose owner, for example, is using a personal credit card to buy supplies, so they're low on capital. So here in Philadelphia, we've had to create ways to support them — maybe we pay them every two weeks instead of monthly so they have a quicker cash flow. We'll pair them with mentors to help them manage their business operations. Or see what we can do to help them secure lines of credit."

It's not strictly altruism, either, he said.

"We think it's the right thing to do, of course, but it's also self-interest: We need people on both sides of the river, and we need an increase in the pool of subcontractors and suppliers" as the economy of the region continues to grow.

### **Long term outlook**

The development's permanent fixtures will offer jobs as well, and not just office jobs for those who'll commute into Camden, Gattuso said.

A planned 180-room hotel will include a full-service restaurant and banquet facility, with entry-level food service and custodial jobs. The anticipated 7,000 to 8,000 office workers will spur more restaurants, cafes and other businesses that will cater to their needs, Gattuso believes. Twenty percent of the 186 residential units will be designated for affordable housing, and [a public park](#) will offer access to the Delaware River.

"We hope we'll start to see a filling-in with population, so there's activity after 5 o'clock, and the restaurants that come in will be successful," he said. "You can't say to a retailer at this point to move a business here; they wouldn't have any interest. So it's important to get that sense of an active, living, thriving neighborhood that doesn't shut down at the end of the day. Retail is usually the last piece of that puzzle."

The end goal is a sense of place, of community, Gattuso said.

"It's about putting back in place the pieces that make up an intact community," he said. "There is no magic formula; it's just building things up, brick by brick. That's the impetus."

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