

Lester E. Taylor, III - Montclair State University, '97



Lester E. Taylor, III, mayor of East Orange, New Jersey, since January 2014, has lofty visions. His dreams, however, are rooted in mundane quality of life desires -- such as being able to have an ice cold beer, a freshly brewed cup of coffee, and a mouth-watering hoagie -- in a safe, clean, attractive environment.

"I will consider my efforts to redevelop and re-energize East Orange a success, if, at the end of my tenure, the people working, living and visiting East Orange can stroll through the town and enjoy a beer, cup of coffee and a sandwich," said Mayor Taylor, an alumnus of Montclair State University, class of 1997. His vision for East Orange can be compared to a vision for a thriving university campus: educational excellence, fiscal stability, cleanliness, safety -- and of course, good food. He credits his alma mater with giving him not just the academic skills, but just as importantly the "experiential" opportunities that played such an important role in molding his vision and making it a reality.

The work of transforming East Orange, a city of approximately 65,000 residents, is complex, challenging, and filled with conundrums. But the 41-year-old Taylor, who is the second youngest mayor of East Orange, seizes on these "C" words with an energetic and determined commitment. He and his wife and three children love living in East Orange, known for: its musical legacy with such superstars as Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, Queen Latifah and Dionne Warwick. However, it has other attributes upon which the mayor hopes to build: affordably priced apartments and homes; beautiful, historic residential architecture; excellent transportation infrastructure (a downtown train station offering commuter trains to NYC, and an exit right off the Garden State Parkway and Route 280); close to all the employment, cultural, recreational, and shopping resources of New York City, Newark and Short Hills; its own water utility; and a luxurious golf course.

"We have no palm trees or ocean, but we do have location, location, location," he said.

However, the four-square mile city also suffers from the perception of high crime, urban blight, low-performing schools, and fiscal instability. At the beginning of Mayor Taylor's term, East Orange had a \$10 million structural deficit; a golf course that was losing \$400,000 per year; and a water utility that was a huge drain on the municipality with a three million dollar deficit.

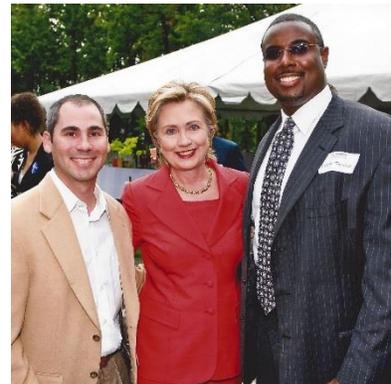
In the less than two years he has been mayor, the changes in the community have been palpable. Violent crime and shootings are down, educational opportunities and quality of education for the city's youth are significantly improved. The city has partnered with a world renowned water management company to transform the utility into a revenue generating entity. And then there is the golf course that just merited a several page article by reporter Dan Barry in the August 2, 2015 Sunday edition of **The New York Times**.

The East Orange Golf Course, owned by East Orange, but located in Short Hills just a few miles from the city's border, represented a major municipal conundrum when Lester Taylor came to office. Renowned for its quality and beauty, the golf course was established nearly a century ago. East Orange officials, during the town's prosperous

upper-middle class era, bought 2,000 acres of farmland to provide its residents a source of water, as well as a golf course to serve as a classy outdoor recreational escape from the city.

When Mayor Taylor came on the scene, the golf course had a several hundred thousand dollar budget deficit, usage was plummeting, and "you couldn't even get a cold beer or something to eat," he noted, again focusing on the most basic of user needs. As with the water utility, Mayor Taylor acted swiftly, decisively and collaboratively. With six million dollars in state authorized bond financing, East Orange embarked upon a golf course makeover, led by well-known golf course architect Stephen Kay. The golf course, a business asset with "tremendous potential," said the Mayor, was able to re-open for business in the spring of 2015, with the total project completion date scheduled for spring of 2016.

Reflecting on the course his life has taken, Mayor Taylor noted how Montclair State University gave him the "excellent education" (political science major) he needed to get accepted and to graduate from law school at Howard University, as well as the "real life opportunities and lessons" that have proven invaluable, said Mayor Taylor who is a managing partner in the Rochelle Park-based law firm, Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt & Fader. He served as an "Admissions Ambassador" at Montclair, giving tours and informational presentations to prospective students. But most significantly, he received an internship with the Washington Center - the Minority Leadership Fellowship Program - an initiative with which "Montclair had the wisdom to partner." This internship included daylong seminars featuring political leaders, working for a law firm in Washington, DC, and clerking for a judge in Washington, DC. He also attended the 1996 Democratic National Convention held in Chicago.



The fellowship led to important connections for Mayor Taylor in his professional career and gave him one particular lesson he never has forgotten: "Partnership and collaborations are key to getting a job done - creating an environment that allows and encourages people and other organizations to do what they can do best."

Even though East Orange has a special character with a "City" form of government (the mayor is essentially a CEO with veto power supported by a 10-member council), the mayor continually refers to "the team" which is going to turn around East Orange, make it a destination city, and the best of urban and suburban worlds. In the case of the water company and the golf course, he was a master at creating economic partnerships to accomplish his goals. In addition to the partnership principle, Mayor Taylor's college internship opportunity provided a programmatic model that was the basis for several new education and youth support programs preparing teens for college and careers.

He implemented the Fatherhood Initiative, the East Orange College and Career Readiness Network, the Career Training Program, the Mentor Summit and most recently the LT3 (Lesley Taylor III) Civil Leadership Academy for East Orange students. "The whole idea is to forge ties with key partners to create new job opportunities for residents, including exposure to alternative and successful options for continuing education beyond high school."

For all that he has accomplished and about to accomplish, Mayor Taylor thanks his family, his co-workers, his friends - and a special shout-out to Montclair State University.