

Downe Township breaks ground on \$33 million wastewater treatment facility

[John O'Connor](#) on Aug 9, 2024 – The Press of Atlantic City



DOWNE TOWNSHIP — After Superstorm Sandy ravaged coastal communities nearly 12 years ago, it exposed the need to replace old septic systems with a modern sewer system, said Jane Asselta, the state’s director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development program.

“Septic systems have a shelf life and tend to fail,” Asselta said. “But when Sandy hit, the issue went from a problem to a crisis, so that made us want to get involved and replace them. We don’t abandon rural communities, we invest in them.”

The township is one community going out with the old and in with the new as representatives of the USDA; U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, and other officials gathered Friday at the Charlesworth Hotel and Restaurant to break ground on a \$33 million wastewater treatment facility.

Attendees heard remarks from a few speakers before taking a short walk over to the construction site to put on hard hats and stick shovels in the ground.

“This sewer system is going to change people’s lives because it brings the infrastructure that is needed,” said Mayor Mike Rothman. “We will not become a Seabreeze, and this community will not disappear.”

Seabreeze was a resort community in Fairfield Township that over the decades was wiped away by fire, flooding and a state property buyback.

Downe's new wastewater treatment facility was designed by engineering firm Mott MacDonald and will be built on a plot of land off Pennsylvania Avenue. Work is expected to begin in the coming weeks and will take about 18 months to complete.

Once finished, the township's 1,600 residents, most of whom live in the Fortescue and Gandys Beach communities, will be hooked up to a townshipwide system.

"This wasn't just about putting a sewer system in, this was about saving a community," Van Drew said. "We're allowing the people who have lived here for generations to continue to live here and enjoy their lives, their profession, their business and their community. This is a really big deal, and although I have strong feelings for government and politics, there are no Republicans or Democrats when it comes to these things. This is proof government can work."

The USDA Rural Development program provided \$21 million for the project, while Booker and Van Drew secured \$4 million in congressional spending.

The project started as an idea that former Mayor and current township Committeeman Robert Campbell had over a decade ago, and the process of getting to this point was challenging, Asselta said.



Jane Asselta, USDA Director, talks to the crowd at the Charlesworth Hotel and Restaurant to hear the announcement of a \$33 million wastewater treatment facility in Downe Township on Friday, Aug. 9, 2024. (Photo by Matthew Strabuk)

"This project is about perseverance and partnership," Asselta said. "We moved this project forward inch by inch, starting with the feasibility studies and the preliminary designs. We had delays because of COVID-19, and then we had to work through the bidding, permitting and planning process. There were a lot of moving parts in this process, and the residents of Downe Township should be proud of all those that came together to make this project a reality."

Booker has been involved in the project since arriving in the Senate and said he was grateful to see it come to fruition.

"It was great to work on a project for over 10 years through multiple presidents and USDA officials," Booker said. "There are great local leaders here who navigated several layers of government and multiple agencies to get something quite incredible done. When this community was devastated, we realized there was a lot of commonality with our southern

counties. So, we wanted to create a deeper connection to access the resources that communities like this deserve.

“Sewer systems aren’t sexy, but they are testimonies to communities that take care of business.”



Downe Township Mayor Mike Rothman, Senator Cory Booker, USDA Director Jane Asselta, Congressman Jeff Van Drew and other local officials break ground after announcing a \$33 million wastewater treatment facility project in Downe Township on Friday, Aug. 9, 2024. (Photo by Matthew Strabuk)