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Op-Ed

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As two New Jerseyans willing to stick our necks out for the betterment of life in the Garden State, we'd like to respond to "Promotional plan shows signs of trouble" published in the Courier News on Wednesday, December 12, 2007. In the three and a half years since Celebrate NJ!'s inception, our non-profit organization has sought to promote the positive aspects of our state through educational programs and promotional initiatives. We have coordinated the "365 Reasons to Celebrate NJ!" campaign and have successfully engaged over 15,000 students in our NJ Studies program for 4th Grade. Earlier this year, we were asked by a coalition of historic groups to spearhead an initiative that would create consensus for a statewide Wayfinding system in New Jersey. We have taken on this effort because we are committed to showcasing what's right with New Jersey and because we believe New Jersey (we) deserves better than the current system we have in place.

Little is understood about "wayfinding" as a concept and as a system. According to Lance Wyman, world-renowned designer, "A Wayfinding system incorporates branding, signs, maps and directional devices that tell us where we are, where we want to go, and how to get there. Symbols...can contribute simplicity, clarity and personality to a wayfinding system." When signage works, it helps us move with confidence in unfamiliar locations. Because state, county and local authorities do not coordinate signage in New Jersey, it's often easy to lose the trail when trying to find a particular point of interest. The exception may be hospitals—the big, blue "H" is universally understood as the "wayfinding" symbol for a hospital, and in most cases these signs lead you right to the Emergency Room door. A successful Wayfinding program has the potential for making all our important points of interest as easy to find as a hospital without creating unnecessary and confusing sign clutter.

Why is Wayfinding important to New Jersey? For one, it makes economic sense. Tourism is a \$37.6 billion industry in New Jersey. In a state of 8.7 million residents in-state tourism is big business, representing more than a third of all travel dollars. Visitors from New York and Pennsylvania represent another 43%. According to the 2006 Tourism Economic Impact Study prepared for the NJ Office of Travel and Tourism, “each New Jersey visitor/traveler generates \$375 of Gross State Product” and “\$100 in tax receipts, \$56 of which goes to state and local authorities”. In short, the financial benefits of tourism affect all of us.

Second, New Jersey is a treasure trove of great and interesting experiences. Our deep history, legacy of invention, rich arts culture and diverse recreational geography make us a day-tripper’s paradise. Nearly every one of our 566 municipalities boasts of unique museums, galleries, trails, farms and the like—little gems worth exploring and experiencing—if you can find them. How many of us have been frustrated on the highway by someone who is lost and trying to find their way... or have been that person? A successful wayfinding system can ultimately save us all time and frustration.

In addition, there are several other important benefits of a first-class, tiered Wayfinding program: enhanced safety due to a reduction of sign proliferation, communication across a variety of cultures and languages, and the ability to interface with GPS and wireless technology.

The next 12 months are a prime window of opportunity that won't come again for another 10 years. In August, 2008, NJ DOT will begin accepting proposals to enhance or replace the existing program. A comprehensive, statewide Wayfinding signage program is sorely missing, as anyone who travels New Jersey's roadways can attest. Our neighboring states have already begun to enhance Wayfinding to support their own tourism. New Jersey needs to keep pace and be competitive.

That being said, New Jersey has some unique challenges. Since Colonial times, we have been the most densely populated and culturally diverse state in the nation with a tradition of Home Rule. Many of New Jersey's recreational areas, cultural sites, historic venues, and other attractions are not directly accessible from major highways. The current state directional signage program is a template used in 17 other states and is limited to only state highways. A successful Wayfinding program in New Jersey would involve not just sites within a short distance of state highway crossroads, but "tiered" signage that directs a person from federal, state, county or local roads to a destination.

If we are to influence the process for a new state signage program we must provide NJDOT with input by May, 2008. Celebrate NJ! proposes to accelerate the process by facilitating the involvement

of a wide spectrum of stakeholders, encouraging public/private collaboration, coordinating meetings to develop a process of consensus building, and forging a common vision. It's not an impossible challenge but an opportunity for creativity, imagination, and commitment. We began the process with months of meetings with NJ DOT, followed by the first meeting of stakeholders on December 7th in Trenton. So far stakeholders in the process include: NJDOT, the NJ Heritage Tourism Task Force, NJ DEP, New Jersey History Advocates, the NJ State Chamber of Commerce, Crossroads of the American Revolution Association, The Advance Realty Foundation, ArtPride, the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Municipal Land Use Center, the NJ Office of Travel & Tourism, NJ Audubon, the Community Foundation of New Jersey and dozens of others representing non-profit, business and government organizations. Several additional public meetings are planned early next year and an Advisory Board is being formulated to shepherd the process through the myriad challenges ahead. We invite interested community members to contribute their time, talent and expertise to the process.

As for "signs of trouble" we're hopeful this undertaking will be seen as an opportunity to create something that benefits all New Jerseyans. We trust that we'll find our way.

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