



I. Overview

- Nomination category: Great Downtown
- Nominated place: The downtown of Freehold, Freehold Borough, Monmouth County, NJ
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County of Monmouth, Division of Planning
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- Municipal contact: Joe Bellina, Borough Administrator
Borough of Freehold, 51 West Main Street, Freehold, NJ 07728
- SID contact: A. Richard Gatto, Chief Executive Officer
Freehold Center Management Corporation DBA, Downtown Freehold
10 East Main Street, Suite 4A, Freehold, NJ 07728
- Place description: location, boundaries, facilities/amenities/activities that support everyday life

The downtown of Freehold, Borough of Freehold, Monmouth County, NJ

The downtown area of Freehold is the heart of the Borough, which is located centrally in Monmouth County. Like many towns of its time, it is the historic village center for much of the surrounding population. The Borough is home to a vibrant downtown full of churches, entertainment venues, restaurants, shops, and personal and professional services. Freehold Borough is also the County seat and therefore is home to many county services and offices including the County Clerk in the Market Yard and County Superior Courthouse located between Court and Monument Streets and the Board of Chosen Freeholders in the Hall of Records. The Hall of Records is the historic site of the original Monmouth County Courthouse that, during the Revolutionary War served as a field hospital throughout the Battle of Monmouth. The center of downtown is part of the larger Special Improvement District (SID) which is operated by the Freehold Center Management Corporation DBA, Downtown Freehold (herein: [Downtown Freehold](#)) in collaboration with the Borough of Freehold. The Borough is supported by its own municipal government consisting of a six member council and mayor, police, fire and first aid departments.

II. What makes a Great Place? What makes this place special and worthy of designation as a Great Place in NJ? (3 pages maximum)

1. Functions as the centerpiece in the everyday life of the community

- *Offers an array of places where people come to conduct business and meet daily needs as well as go shopping, meet friends and relax*

The downtown of Freehold Borough is home to many of the county services residents of Monmouth County may need to utilize, but that is not the only reason to come into town. Residents and visitors alike may want take advantage of the many restaurants, banking facilities or professional services. It is a testament to the last twenty years of revitalization that a growing number of retail establishments have been making their way back to Main Street. This speaks volumes about the downtown area considering that not too far away sits Freehold Raceway Mall, a strong competitor for retail establishments, and the commercial corridor of State Route 9. Overall the town's businesses are owner-operated keeping a small town local feel close to the heart of the community.

- *Able to attract visitors from a distance that reflects its physical size*

The downtown area makes up less than a tenth of a square mile of all of Freehold Borough, but attracts visitors from around town and miles away. Many residents of Freehold Township and the other western townships in the County consider the downtown a hub for daily activities. The scale of the downtown allows people to experience a walkable community not found in the surrounding sprawling suburbs. If visitors from further away are looking to spend an extended period of time in downtown, the reopening of the American Hotel provides a location to stay right inside the heart. The building was originally built in 1827 as a stagecoach stop and now operates as a 20-room hotel with restaurant and ballroom/banquet/ meeting facilities.

2. Possesses a tremendous vitality with lots of people not just during the day but also in the evening and on weekends

The downtown of Freehold is active from morning to night; the community, business owners and civic leaders have worked tirelessly to make the town a *'round the clock* destination. Even after normal business hours the downtown is still alive with activity. Restaurants offer happy hours and special dinner menus and throughout the year there are events and activities being held in the evening and on weekends. The restaurants are also a good stop before and after a trip to the movie theater a mile and a half away in Freehold Township or other nearby attractions.

3. Offers special events and attractions throughout the year

Entertainment is abundant in Freehold Borough all throughout the year. Many businesses help to sponsor events staged by Downtown Freehold, including the *Flavor of Freehold* restaurant open house, *Irish Week*, *Freehold Idol*, the summer *Thursday Concert Series*, *Independence Day Concert and Fireworks*, *Farmer's Market*, the *Fall Concert Series* and other autumn-inspired events; and the *Happy*

Holidays event series of wintertime activities. An annual St. Patrick's Day Parade began two years ago and is boasted as one of the shortest one in the country, a *staggering* 1/10th of a mile long. The [Freehold Borough Arts Council](#), [Center Players Theater Company](#) and [St. Peter's Episcopal Church](#) also present a variety of events like *Sunday Nite Jazz & Blues*, dramatic and comedic theatrical shows and play-readings and the [Downtown Concert Series](#) throughout the year. Businesses like the [Metz Bicycle Museum](#) and [Grape Beginnings](#) Wine School all offer unique activities and experiences. For the betting kind, just down the road is the [Freehold Raceway](#) which runs live horse races and simulcasts daily throughout the year at the nation's oldest harness racing track.

4. *Provides accessible parking*

All roads in western Monmouth seem to converge in downtown Freehold. The Borough is very accessible for those looking to spend some time here. There is plenty of public parking located around the Hall of Records, Market Yard, and the McGackin Triangle parking lot, as well as free parallel parking available on most streets including Main Street and South Street at the center of town. All parking is free to visitors. The downtown is also accessible by NJ Transit with a depot located near the corner of West Main Street and Throckmorton Street. From this location visitors can take any number of bus lines to arrive to and depart from downtown.

5. *Receives support from the community to attract, retain and grow businesses. (i.e. Buy Local campaigns, façade improvement programs)*

As stated before, the downtown area of Freehold Borough is a Special Improvement District (SID) managed by the Freehold Center Management Corporation DBA Downtown Freehold (herein: Downtown Freehold) which works in collaboration with the municipality, the community's business owners and residents to encourage downtown renewal. Downtown Freehold works to achieve three main goals:

- Foster the downtown's economic development
- Encourage the downtown's revitalization
- Preserve the downtown's historic past

Downtown Freehold works one on one with business looking to relocate/ or start a new business in the downtown including locating and connecting landlords with potential tenants; outreaching to quality tenants for available space; assisting business in securing loans from community banks; and assisting new business with permit and zoning applications. Recent activities include working with the Monmouth County Economic Development, to assist a beer microbrewery to secure approvals in a vacant building in the Market Yard; helping an upscale optical lens store to the downtown from Staten Island and attracting the 11th District Legislative offices to Main Street.

Activities throughout the year foster buy local campaigns. The Flavor of Freehold event encourages patronage of local eating establishments and produce and other artisanal products are sold at the Farmers Market giving surrounding area farms the opportunity to sell their local harvest and merchandise to people who want to support the farm to table experience and their community

neighbors. Business owners and community members alike benefit from these homegrown happenings.

For businesses already established in the downtown, Downtown Freehold works one on one to create customized program to enhance their facades and external features. The current process streamlines the formal façade program with a dedicated yearly budget and provides assistance to business owners to smoothly transition through the submission and approval process. Once through the approval process, Downtown Freehold provides technical and professional assistance in planning and execution of external enhancements such as, window treatments, external signage and awnings and sidewalk aesthetics including year round flower planting-weekly sidewalk cleaning and maintenance program. Streets, public spaces, and constituent neighborhood satisfy the characteristics listed for those Great Place categories.

There are a number of outstanding places to experience all of what the downtown has to offer commercially, residentially, architecturally and recreationally. Many of the commercial building that line Main Street have been around since the mid to late 19th century. Some of the best examples of buildings built in a commercial Italianate style can be found in the center of town on Main Street and many of the commercial buildings on that house office space in town are converted residences along Main Street, South Street and Broad Street. Many of the restaurants in the downtown offer sidewalk dining options when the weather is favorable, where patrons can enjoy a delicious meal and the sights and sounds of a bustling small town including outdoor concerts, street artisans and the Freehold Idol competition. A unique feature on Main Street can be found tucked amongst the commercial buildings. Located at 28 ½ Main Street, one of New Jersey's 36 Carnegie libraries still functions as a free public library operating independently from the countywide library system and serving the Borough's 12,000 residents with over 26,000 volumes in circulation.

A stroll along the well-manicured Main Street and surrounding residential areas, one will find pocket parks and memorials like that of the World War II memorial at the intersection of Routes 79 and 537, the Hall of Records Courtyard in front of the main entrance of the Monmouth County offices, and the Columbia Triumphant Park. This park is home to the granite carving of Columbia Triumphant which was placed atop the Monmouth Battle Monument on Court Street. The carving had been damage by a lightning strike in 1894 and removed from its original location, however in 1999 it was recovered by the Board of Chosen Freeholders and installed in the park on Main Street. A dedication ceremony took place on June 27, 2003, on the eve of the 225th anniversary of the Battle of Monmouth. The monument's original location, Monument Park on Court Street in front of the Monmouth vicinage Superior Courthouse, commemorates the start of the Battle of Monmouth, a pivotal battle during the Revolutionary War where General George Washington attacked the British Army under the command of General Henry Clinton, as the British troops left Monmouth Courthouse (modern Freehold Borough) for Sandy Hook and eventually New York City.

Tucked in all and around the area surrounding Monument Park and just outside the downtown Freehold Special Improvement District (SID) are some of the most charming examples of residential neighborhoods, with tree-lined sidewalks, well-maintained properties and within walking distance to

downtown. Broad, Court, and Schanck Streets are the setting beautiful examples of Victorian era residential architecture. Many homes have maintained their residential status but many homes closer to the downtown have also been retrofitted into office buildings, but on the whole they all have preserved their architectural character. Many homes were built throughout the 1800s and early 1900s and illustrate some wonderful examples of archetypical “small town America” historic architecture styles including Queen Anne, Italianate, Shingle Style, Georgian Revival, Greek Revival to name a few. There are examples of less elaborate but equally historically important residential styles including non-descript homes built in the late 19th century for factory workers and the more modern Sears and Roebuck pre-built homes purchased popularly through catalogs in the early 20th century.

III. How the Place Became “Great”:

Although incorporated in 1869, its settlement history dates back nearly two centuries earlier with the first Dutch and Scottish settlers arriving in the 1680s and establishing a village along Burlington Path (modern day Route 537/Main Street) at the site of the Hall of Records. Freehold Borough’s rich history is dotted with its importance in the beginning of the country’s establishment. During the Revolutionary War the town was the site of a British encampment and where the first shots of the Battle of Monmouth were fired, signaling the beginning of the largest land battle of the Revolution. The Covenhoven house located at 150 W. Main Street, which is not only the oldest house in the Borough but also historically significant as the location of British General Clinton’s headquarters during the battle.

During the next century Freehold Borough became a trading center for agrarian, farmers from far and wide came to Freehold to sell their goods and purchase those which they did not grow. A rail line shortly followed allowing for goods to be shipped out of the area and helped to bring in goods not found in the area. Agrarian culture and industry meet in the horse racing business. Historically horses have been bred in the Monmouth County area and 1853 the Monmouth County Agricultural Society formed to hold an annual fair and thus created the nation’s oldest harness racing facility.

The construction of the railroad acted as a basis for more industries to set up shop. Freehold’s history as a commerce center was reflected in many trades. The A & M Karagheusian rug mill (once the town’s largest employer), the Zimmerman Bicycle Company and other trades set up manufacturing operations in the Borough. Investments like these illustrate the commerce industry’s interest in settling their businesses in the Borough. Modern day Freehold Borough has many privately owner-operated small businesses filling the storefronts of the town.

From very early settlement, Freehold Borough has been a center for public life, so it is no wonder the downtown has begun to flourish again. Location and industry created a prosperous town which expanded in to a residential suburb that still today is a hub of activity for western Monmouth County. In order to maintain that presence the Borough of Freehold had a plan prepared to address redevelopment. The “Visioning and Revitalization Plan for the Freehold Center Core Redevelopment Plan Area” (2008) addresses goals and objectives focused on revitalizing the central downtown commercial district of Freehold Borough. The plan is based on the principles of revitalizing the commercial district, strengthening neighborhoods, providing economic development opportunities,

providing housing opportunities, providing a mixture of land uses, providing a pedestrian oriented environment and utilizing form-based requirements and high quality design standards. The Borough is continuously reshaping its ordinances and development regulations to reflect these principles to reach the goals and objectives of the revitalization plan.

Through Downtown Freehold, more than \$2 million of invested improvements, the community partners have created a sidewalk landscape complete with brick paths, flowering planters, holiday decorations, enhanced façade and lighting features, quaint pocket parks and benches to create gathering and performance spaces and other aesthetically pleasing features.

IV. Images and Mapping (Separate files in Zip file)

- Included in this packet are 2 maps delineating the place’s location within the County and a general location map with community highlights; and a series high quality images that demonstrate the qualities or characteristics of the downtown of Freehold Borough highlighted in this narrative.

V. Supplemental Information

- *Awards, special recognition by other organizations or entities, historic designations etc.*
- The Borough of Freehold has had the distinction of being a “Tree City” for the last 16 years through the Tree City USA program sponsored by The Arbor Foundation.
 - The Borough is home to many historic properties and a few that have been listed on the State and National Historic Registers. All properties listed below have earned State and National Historic recognition:
 - Court Street School
 - General Clinton’s Headquarters (Covenhoven House)
 - St. Peter’s Episcopal Church
 - George Taylor House
- The Freehold Center Management Corporation DBA Downtown Freehold is also a member of Downtown New Jersey