

# County Says ‘Third Way’ Transformation Helped It Thrive Despite Great Recession

By [Michael Grass](#) | October 20, 2014



*Burlington County is a major mid-Atlantic trucking hub located along the New Jersey Turnpike. Flickr user Doug Kerr via CC BY-SA 2.0*

**BURLINGTON COUNTY, N.J.** — Like other local leaders around the United States during the Great Recession, County Administrator Paul Drayton Jr. and his colleagues in this expansive South Jersey jurisdiction confronted a downturn in property tax revenue that helps fund county services.

Between 2009 and 2014, Burlington County, which spans a large swath of New Jersey from the Delaware River nearly to Atlantic City, saw its property values decrease by \$6.4 billion—a 14 percent reduction. That translated to a \$50 million decrease in revenue for the county.

That’s a daunting number.

But instead of making sweeping and harmful cuts to offset the decline, Burlington officials say they’re thriving after consolidating operations, maintaining programs, upgrading infrastructure and finding savings. Now they’re delivering county services at the lowest cost per resident in the state.

For many government organizations, when it comes to dealing with revenue reductions, “it’s either one way or the other,” Drayton said in an interview with *GovExec State & Local*. “We were able to find what I’m referring to as a ‘third way.’ That’s been very, very successful and something that we feel very proud of.”

Since 2009, Burlington County decreased its combined tax levy by 12.7 percent (\$24.7 million) and cut overall spending by 17.2 percent (\$39.3 million). When it compares itself to other New Jersey counties, Burlington maintains the lowest cost per resident: \$339.

The state average is \$552 per resident, according to a recent county presentation. Cape May County in the state’s southern tip is the highest at \$1,010 per resident.

“The things that we’re doing in terms of shared services and consolidation are unique, they really, really are,” Drayton said, adding that Burlington “can serve as a model” for other county governments.

“A lot of it has to do with strategic vision, but part of it is political willpower, and we’ve had the strength and support from our [county Board of] Freeholders to take what’s really a common-sense approach,” said Drayton, who was appointed to his position in 2010.

Burlington decreased spending by 19.2 percent (\$43.7 million) from 2008 to 2013. During the same time period, New Jersey counties on average increased spending by \$15.3 million.

## **A Great Recession Strategy**

While it might not be totally fair to compare Burlington County, with a population of roughly 450,000 people, to some of its more densely populated peers in North Jersey, the county’s budget strategy playbook contains lessons for any local government official.

Like other local governments dealing with dismal Great Recession budgeting realities, Burlington County had to institute a hiring freeze. It reduced the number of county workers primarily through retirements and attrition. The county has 650 fewer employees on the payroll than when the recession began.

“We’ve been able to do it strategically,” Drayton said, stressing the importance of a strategy looking out three to five years. “We did not want to have to say to our employees at the worst possible time: ‘You’re going to have to look for a new job.’”

A combination of hiring freezes and attrition was a strategy Drayton and the county’s chief financial officer, Marc Krassen, used previously when they worked together at the [Delaware River Port Authority of Pennsylvania and New Jersey](#).

The two told *GovExec State & Local* that successfully managing budgeting challenges like the ones the recession created is not a short-term effort. It requires financial discipline over many years, strategic thinking and implementation of best practices.

Drayton said that in local government, it’s always important to challenge your ideas and see what’s working outside your boundaries: “What new ideas are out there that we can grab onto and see if that works for Burlington County?”



*The Burlington-Bristol Bridge links Burlington County, New Jersey with Pennsylvania. (Photo by [Flickr user Jim D via CC by 2.0](#))*

## Technology Upgrades

For Drayton and his county colleagues, embracing technology and adapting operations has been an important part of what's worked.

For instance, five years ago, the county's old timekeeping system required about 40 timekeepers for data-entry and related information management. The new system only needs five timekeepers.

Drayton credits the county's IT transformation as a major piece of its cost-savings strategy. Burlington has found hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings through IT upgrades that have eliminated obsolete technology and expanded its digital infrastructure.

"We really have embraced that philosophy of finding ways to use technology to do more with less," Drayton said. "There are examples like that throughout our county government where we've been able to embrace technology and wind up plugging that gap where we lost a third of our workforce."

The county has installed 70 miles of fiber optic cable along major highways, which serves as the backbone for its traffic signal system, its CCTV camera network and the county's operations. The result was improved Internet connectivity at a savings of \$100,000. Burlington also scrapped its old phone system for a VOIP system, saving \$200,000 annually.

The county has also evaluated its facilities and office space, consolidated agencies and reduced personnel overtime. Burlington is saving \$5.2 million a year on corrections after consolidating jail facilities and rearranging work schedules—all while enhancing security, Drayton said.

He said the strategic budgetary and operations actions the county took during the Great Recession have made it an attractive place to live and do business.

Burlington County is an important hub for not just South Jersey but for the entire mid-Atlantic and East Coast. It's a trucking and distribution center, sitting strategically in the Interstate 95 corridor along the New Jersey Turnpike and its connection to the Pennsylvania Turnpike, partway between Philadelphia and North Jersey's densely populated counties near New York City.

County leaders are proud to point the various new warehouse projects, including a 580,000-square-foot warehouse expansion for [Burlington Coat Factory](#), headquartered, naturally, in Burlington Township.

"We want this to be a place where businesses and individuals look to move to relocate to because it has an extremely well-run government and the cost of living in that county is lower than it is in any other county in southeastern Pennsylvania or southern New Jersey," Drayton said.

[http://www.govexec.com/state-local/2014/10/burlington-county-new-jersey/96953/?oref=state\\_and\\_local\\_nl](http://www.govexec.com/state-local/2014/10/burlington-county-new-jersey/96953/?oref=state_and_local_nl)