

“Three local municipal leaders included in White House forum on older suburbs,” Burlington County Times

**By Jeannie O’Sullivan**

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Three municipal leaders from Burlington County traveled to Washington, D.C., this week for a forum on revitalizing the nation’s older suburbs.

Among the nearly 150 municipal, business, nonprofit and civic leaders who attended the “Forum on First Suburbs, Inclusion, Sustainability and Economic Growth” on Monday at the White House were Gail Cook, mayor of Beverly and a Democratic candidate for the 7th District Senate; Willingboro Deputy Mayor Jacqueline Jennings; and Pemberton Township Councilwoman Diane Stinney.

“It was inspiring,” said Cook, who was invited to attend the forum by a representative from the Collingswood-based New Jersey Regional Coalition.

“This started out as a grass-roots effort, but now we’re really working toward doing something about these issues,” she said.

The participants arrived Sunday at the L’Enfant Plaza Hotel for a reception and on Monday took part in a half-day forum featuring national experts, including John Powell, executive director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University; Ray LaHood, secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation; David Rusk, author of “Cities Without Suburbs”; and Myron Orfield, executive director of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Race and Poverty and a fellow at the Brookings Institute in Washington.

The forum focused on rejuvenating “first suburbs,” which are older, developed communities grappling with issues associated with urban disinvestment. Panel topics included immigration, local government, race, schools, business, jobs and the environment, and local leaders discussed what they are doing to build coalitions to advance sustainability and economic growth.

Willingboro and Beverly were among the “first suburbs” that Orfield mentioned in his presentation, which struck a chord with both Jennings and Cook.

Jennings said that while things like unemployment are beyond her control, the township has tried to handle challenges through foreclosure workshops, individual counseling, neighborhood stabilization efforts and home rehabilitation programs.

“We’re doing so many things to make sure that, through bad economic times, Willingboro continues to grow,” she said.

State cutbacks are straining the quality of life and making budgets a “yearly struggle” for small cities such as Beverly, according to Cook.

She said the city has had to “do more with less” and has cut spending to maintain critical services for residents.