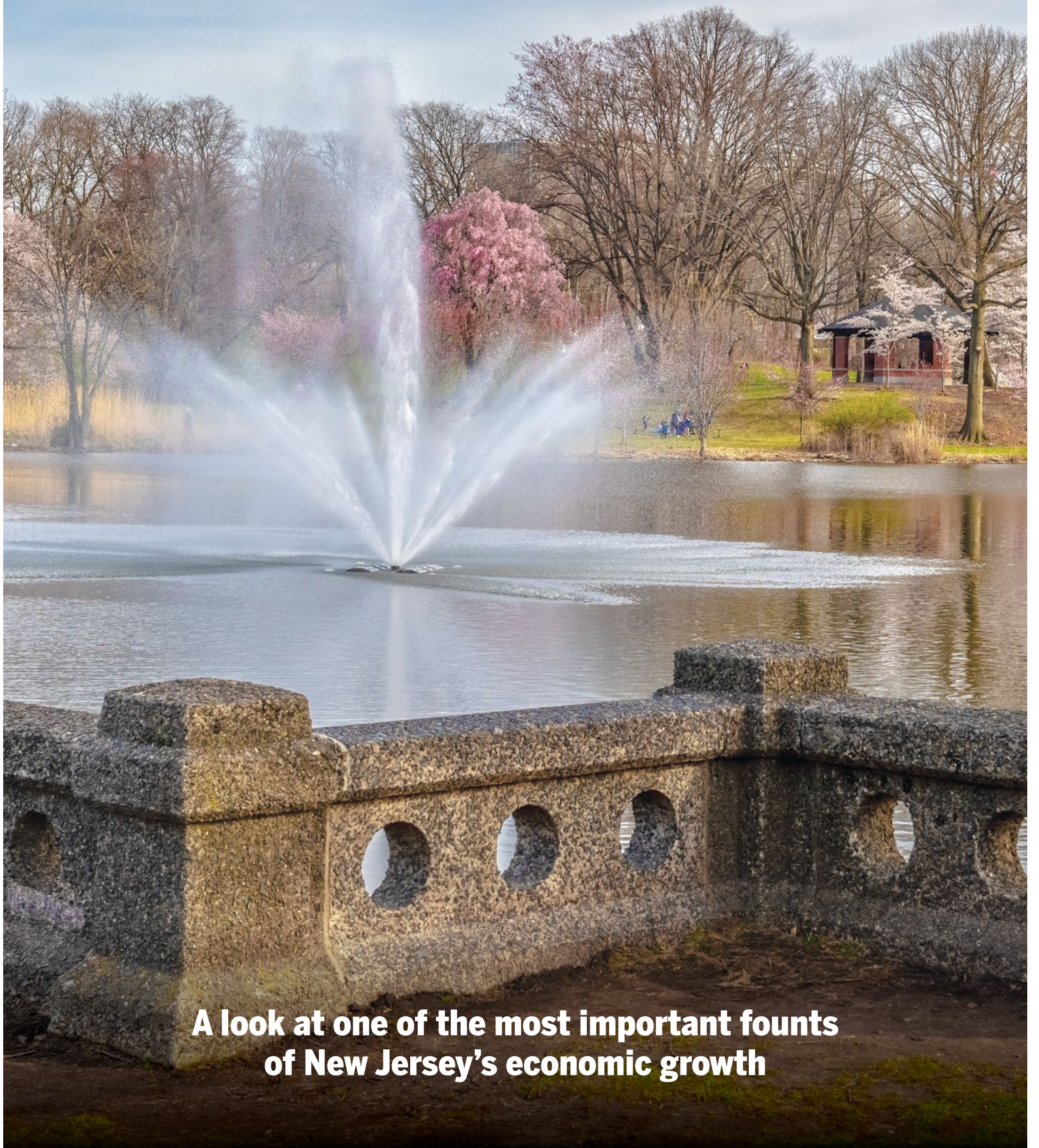


ESSEX COUNTY FOCUS



**A look at one of the most important founts
of New Jersey's economic growth**

From Edison to AI

The county's innovation ecosystem enters a new era



BY MATTHEW FAZELPOOR

Innovation has long been woven into the fabric of Essex County. From Thomas Edison's laboratories in West Orange to Newark's manufacturing strength and engineering tradition, the region has helped shape the technologies that transformed modern life.

Today, that tradition is evolving into something new. Across Essex County, universities, startups, global technology companies and public-private partnerships are forging an innovation ecosystem that stretches from research labs to AI infrastructure, from entrepreneurs launching new ventures to established companies investing in the communities where they operate. Together, they are creating the talent, ideas and institutions that will shape New Jersey's next economy.

One of the clearest examples came in April 2024, when HAX Newark officially opened as New Jersey's first Strategic Innovation Center, giving hard-tech founders access to engineering support, investors and lab space in the heart of downtown Newark.

Since then, the program has become one of the state's most productive startup engines. According to SOSV Partner and HAX Chief Science Officer Susan Schofer, approximately 25 companies now occupy the space day-to-day, while roughly 65 startups have come through the program since its earliest days.

More important, those businesses are beginning to stay.

"It takes a bit of time for these companies to grow, but what we're really seeing now is we have got a mini ecosystem here," Duncan Turner, general partner at SOSV and global managing director of HAX, re-

cently told NJBIZ. "We have founders that are staying here, choosing to stay here. They're building their companies here. We've got companies that, for the first time, are outgrowing the space here and have now found places in Jersey. That's what we wanted to make happen, and that is happening."

That momentum is now expanding beyond Newark. SOSV, along with Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, recently announced the upcoming HAX Plasma Forge at the historic SRI campus in Princeton, while startups graduating from Newark continue to find homes throughout the region. Still Bright, for instance, recently announced it will establish an HQ at NEST in Kenilworth, illustrating how innovations seeded in Essex County are helping grow a broader statewide ecosystem.

Just blocks away from HAX, New Jersey Institute of Technology is helping supply the next generation of ideas – and companies. Last May, NJIT and the NJEDA launched the NJII Venture Studio, the state's 10th Strategic Innovation Center and the second in Newark (after HAX). Designed to help researchers turn discoveries into companies, the Venture Studio aims to launch 10 startups over five years, with each eligible for up to \$1 million in support.

"We solve real-world problems — and the Venture Studio will be a critical addition to our efforts to turn R&D into products and services that can improve people's lives," said NJIT President Teik Lim at the time.

New Jersey Innovation Institute, an NJIT corporation, President Michael Johnson said, "We look forward to fostering in-

novation through our NJII Venture Studio initiative."

The Venture Studio builds on NJIT's broader role as one of New Jersey's leading technology universities. The institution conducts more than \$170 million in annual research while expanding programs that move innovation beyond the classroom. Earlier this year, NJIT and Verizon announced an expanded workforce initiative offering AI, cybersecurity and IT training, including a new AI Literacy micro credential and Cybersecurity Community of Practice designed to prepare New Jersey residents for careers in emerging technologies.

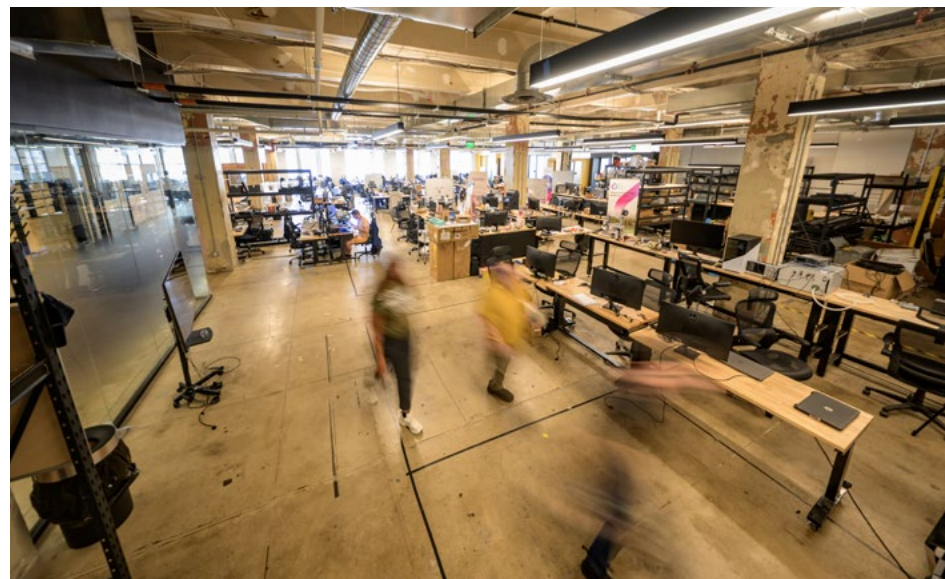
The university also demonstrated how those capabilities can be applied beyond campus during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Students and faculty developed transportation planning tools with the New Jersey Department of Transportation, created an AI-powered fan sentiment platform that evolved into the public-facing NJ Fan Go Guide in partnership with CGI, and designed community-focused fan zones

through the Hillier College of Architecture and Design. NJIT paired those projects with one of the region's most visible World Cup campaigns, showcasing the university across transit systems and fan destinations as global attention turned to New Jersey.

As Aryeh Ganz, investment manager of the NJII Venture Studio, recently wrote for NJBIZ, "The next chapter of its innovation economy will depend less on whether the state can generate discoveries and more on whether we continue building the culture and infrastructure that consistently turns those discoveries into enduring companies. The institutions doing that work have arrived, and they are just getting started."

Innovation in Essex County is also measured by the companies choosing to invest in the communities where they are headquartered. For nearly two decades, Audible has made Newark more than its global headquarters, positioning the city as a laboratory for urban innovation and entrepreneurship.

In October 2025, the company opened



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The bar’s best

Looking for a good lawyer in the region? Start with this list

BY KIMBERLY REDMOND

The Essex County Bar Association is recognizing lawyers whose work, leadership and service extend far beyond the courthouse doors. As part of the ECBA’s annual Installation & Awards Reception held this past spring at Mountain Ridge Country Club in West Caldwell, the organization spotlighted 10 attorneys across a range of categories, including general practice, transactions, public service and community engagement.

For more than four decades, the ECBA has handed out Achievement Awards each year as a way to highlight outstanding accomplishments of attorneys who have ties to Essex County.

Founded in 1879, the ECBA is one of the oldest and largest county bar associations in New Jersey. It represents 1,500 members through education, networking, referral services and programs aimed at improving access to justice.

Membership is open to those who live, have an office or practice in Essex County, which has enabled the organization to have a large base, according to ECBA Executive Director Heather Jenquine.

After soliciting nominations from its membership, the association’s event planning committee selects annual Achievement Award winners.

As home to some of the state’s most influential law firms and attorneys, Essex County has long been a powerhouse for New Jersey’s legal industry. And, over the years, that’s given the ECBA a deep bench of accomplished lawyers to recognize.

- Past honorees have included:
- Former U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey Craig Carpenito
 - Essex County Prosecutor Theodore Stephens II
 - Lowenstein Sandler LLP partner and former New Jersey Attorney General Christopher Porrino
 - Arnold & Porter partner and retired federal judge Joseph Greenaway Jr.

Newly installed 129th president of the Essex County Bar Association Mauro Tucci Jr. said, “Our 2026 honorees reflect an extraordinary cross-section of talent, leadership, professionalism, and service that represents the very best of the Essex County Bar Association.”

The Roseland-based Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC (CSG Law) litigation group member told NJBIZ, “The quality of our membership makes it difficult to choose just a handful for recognition at our awards reception every spring, but we were especially proud of this year’s slate.”

2026 WINNERS

Samuel S. Saiber Professional Achievement Award – **Thomas Scrivo of O’Toole Scrivo in Cedar Grove**

After co-founding a mid-sized litigation and government practice in 2017 with Kevin O’Toole, Scrivo serves as managing partner. An accomplished trial lawyer, he is a former president of the Essex County Bar Association and served as chief counsel to Gov. Chris Christie from 2015 to 2017. He is a fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and a New Jersey Supreme Court-certified Civil Trial Attorney, advising businesses, government entities and individuals on complex legal matters.

Civil Practice Award – **Kathleen Barnett Einhorn of PEM Law LLP in West Orange**

A longtime commercial litigator, Einhorn has extensive experience handling high-stakes litigation, employment matters, trials, appeals, arbitrations, and mediations in state and federal courts. After co-founding PEM Law in 2024, she is the firm’s managing partner.

Criminal Practice Award – **Vincent Scoca of the Law Offices of Vincent C. Scoca in Bloomfield**

An Essex County-based solo practitioner, Scoca has nearly four decades of experience as a criminal defense attorney. Prior to his criminal defense work, he served as an assistant Essex County Prosecutor for two years.

Family Practice Award – **LaDonna Cousins of Williams Law Group in Short Hills**

A partner at Williams Law Group, Cousins is a trained family law mediator who focuses on all aspects of family law. In 2025, she was recognized by Women World Magazine as one of the 10 Most Powerful Women in Law Making an Impact.

Federal Practice Award – **Victor Afanador of Lite DePalma Greenberg & Afanador LLC in Newark**

A member of Lite DePalma Greenberg & Afanador, Afanador is a seasoned trial attorney, commercial litigator and negotiator. Recognized as a leading federal practitioner, he has argued before the Third Circuit, litigated before the U.S. Supreme Court and served as president of the Association of the Federal Bar of New Jersey in 2023.

General Practice Award – **Reginald Jenkins Jr. of Trenk Isabel Siddiqi & Shahdanian PC in Livingston**

A partner at Trenk Isabel Siddiqi & Shahdanian, Jenkins focuses on redevelopment, real estate, land use and zoning matters for government, corporate and private clients. He also serves on several community boards, including the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris, and is a member of The National Black Lawyers Top 100.

Bernard A. Kuttner Pro Bono Service Award – **Penelope Taylor of McCarter & English LLP in Newark**

A partner at McCarter & English, Taylor has extensive experience in complex commercial litigation involving financial services, securities, insurance and business disputes. She has also devoted more than a decade to pro bono

Essex County by the numbers	
Population:	896,379
Aged 65+:	14.5%
Total employers:	19,392
Total retail sales:	\$17.7 billion
Per capita income:	\$49,449
Median household income:	\$80,789
Households with broadband:	90.4%
HS grad or higher:	86.7%
Bachelor’s degree or higher:	39.1%
Mean commuting time:	33.6 minutes
Source: U.S. Census Bureau	

work through Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, where she aims to help individuals facing housing and debt challenges.

Dealmaker of the Year Award – **Nicholas Racioppi Jr. of Riker Danzig LLP in Madison**

The chair of Riker Danzig’s real estate group, Racioppi has considerable commercial real estate experience – particularly in acquisitions, development, zoning and transactions. He has played a role in some of the most significant economic development and real estate deals in New Jersey, including the new Netflix studios in Fort Monmouth and the sale of Anheuser-Busch’s longtime factory in Newark. His background also includes being named as a fellow of the American College of Real Estate Lawyers in 2019 and serving as pro-bono counsel to the Housing Partnership, which provides resources to prospective homebuyers.

Maureen McCully Significant Bar Reporter Award – **Harriet Farber Klein of Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Diker LLP in Madison**

After 15 years as a superior court judge in Essex County and an additional two years on recall, Klein joined Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Diker in 2015 as of counsel, focusing on arbitration and meditation. While on the bench, Klein was a faculty member for the training of new judges and law clerks. Prior to her judgeship, she was in private practice as a commercial and employment litigator with two New Jersey-based firms for a combined total of 25 years. Klein continues to support the legal communities with leadership roles with the ECBA and New Jersey State Bar Association.

Walter Lucas Special Merit Award – **Matthew Schultz of Schindler Elevator Corp. in Morristown**

A former litigator, Schultz is now vice president and general counsel at Schindler Elevator Corp.. The one-time ECBA president was also instrumental in founding one of the association’s premier educational events – the annual Corporate Counsel Symposium for in-house counsel, general counsel and transactional attorneys.

Additionally, the ECBA revealed that Barry Mandelbaum of Roseland-headquartered Mandelbaum Barrett PC will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award during a dinner this

fall. The association will also recognize about a dozen members who were admitted to the bar 50 years ago, according to Tucci.

Mandelbaum was selected for the honor this past winter alongside the 10 Achievement Award winners, Tucci said.

A founding member and chairman of Mandelbaum Barrett, he has more than six decades of legal experience. The 2019 NJBIZ Icon Award winner’s accomplishments include serving as a member of the Governor’s Corporate and Business Law Commission and the board of directors of Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield. He was a past director of two NASDAQ-traded firms, Warwick Insurance Managers Inc. and Growth Bank Inc., as well as privately held companies.

He’s also active in several charitable organizations, as well as involved with the real estate division of New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the Codey Foundation for Mental Health and the Rubenstein Foundation.

THE VERDICT IS IN

According to Tucci, this year marked the first time that the ECBA handed out a Dealmaker of the Year award to a transactional attorney. The newly established honor spotlights attorneys and legal professionals who have demonstrated excellence in transactional law or played a leadership role in a significant deal involving mergers, acquisitions, financings, real estate transactions or other complex matters with ties to Essex County.

Tucci said, “Non-litigators have not always been a focus of the Bar, and we are making a concerted effort to recognize the members of the Essex legal community who make corporate and real estate deals happen.”

Besides Netflix and Anheuser-Busch, another deal Racioppi was involved with was his firm’s move from its longtime headquarters at HQ Plaza in Morristown to 7 Giralda Farms in Madison. He led lease negotiations alongside partner Joshua Greenfield.

Racioppi also led Riker Danzig’s real estate team in representing the New York Red Bulls in the 2021 acquisition of the former Honeywell site and adjoining land in Morris Township for

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COMPANIES LEADING THE WAY

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The Empowering Women awards shine a light on companies and organizations that have shown a strong commitment to supporting and elevating women in New Jersey. Empowering Women is designed to showcase tangible and innovative efforts by companies, law firms, nonprofits and other organizations to advance women in the workplace and community.

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Nomination Deadline: August 23, 2026

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LAWYERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

the professional soccer team’s state-of-the-art \$112 million training facility.

Riker Danzig gave a shout out to Racioppi for being named as the ECBA’s inaugural Dealmaker of the Year, saying its real estate practice head’s “combination of impressive deals, sterling reputation and commanding mastery of all areas related to commercial real estate set him apart.”

Tucci added, “On a personal note, Tom Scrivo was the perfect recipient for this year’s Saiber Award, which is our highest honor. There’s no one who represents the Essex County Bar better than Tom.”

Named for the late Samuel Saiber – a prominent New Jersey attorney, former legislator and co-founder of the firm now known as Saiber LLC – the award recognizes distinguished achievement and leadership within the legal profession.

Leading up to the April 27 awards ceremony, several law firms took to social media to congratulate colleagues being honored.

Trenk Isabel Siddiqi & Shahdanian said it was “particularly delighted to celebrate our partner, Reginald Jenkins Jr., as he receives the prestigious General Practice Award, an honor that reflects his dedication, leadership, and outstanding service to the legal community.”

The Williams Law Group expressed how proud it was of Cousins for receiving the Family Practice Award.

The firm said, “This recognition is a true reflection of her dedication, leadership, and the care she brings to every client and case. Congratulations, LaDonna — we’re proud to celebrate this well-deserved achievement.”

Meanwhile, McCarter & English pro bono partner Michelle Pallak described Taylor’s work as “inspiring.” The honor is reserved for individual attorneys, law firms, law schools, government attorney offices, corporate law departments and other legal

institutions “that have enhanced the human dignity of others by improving or delivering volunteer legal services to the Essex County community.”

“She treats every client with care and compassion, guiding them through their options and toward the decision that’s right for them. Her blend of creativity, practical problem-solving, and genuine empathy make even the toughest challenges more manageable for those she represents. Penny also trains and mentors junior attorneys, expanding the corps of attorneys ready to assist our neighbors in need. Her steady commitment, collaborative spirit, and leadership strengthen pro bono efforts across the firm and beyond,” Pallak said.

PEM Law praised Einhorn for the “well-deserved honor,” saying, “Awards like this underscore the core values that drive the practice every single day. The recognition of the firm’s managing partner on such a prominent stage is a source of immense pride and her continued leadership by example remains certain.”

Einhorn said she was “deeply honored” to receive the civil practice award. The accolade is given to professionals who make exceptional contributions in civil litigation, arbitration and mediation.

“This recognition is a testament to the hard work of our entire team at PEM Law, and I look forward to continuing our mission of providing exceptional advocacy for our clients,” she said.

Lite DePalma Greenberg & Afanador cheered Afanador for “his well-deserved recognition by the Essex County Bar Association.”

“Victor brings not only exceptional skill and dedication to his practice, but also humor, mentorship, and an energy that invigorates everyone around him. Seeing him honored among colleagues and friends was truly special and a reminder of the impact he has both in and out of the courtroom. We’re incredibly proud to call him our partner!” the firm shared on LinkedIn.

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TECH

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The Pillars, a 15,000-square-foot retail and community hub in Newark’s Arts & Education District that CEO Bob Carrigan described as Audible’s “most ambitious investment yet in Newark’s future.” Designed as an anchor for local entrepreneurs and community gathering, the space combines locally owned retail, wellness programming, public listening booths and flexible event space while reinforcing the district as a destination for residents and visitors alike. The project reflects Audible’s broader commitment to strengthening downtown Newark – not simply as the place where it is headquartered, but as a community where entrepreneurs, creators and residents can thrive together.

“When we invest in Newark’s success, we create a more vibrant environment that attracts talent, enriches our company culture, inspires innovation. So, it’s about building a stronger city that benefits everyone,” Carrigan said at the opening.

The Pillars complements Audible’s Business Attraction Program, launched in 2023 to help businesses expand or relocate to Newark through grants, mentorship, networking and relocation assistance. By 2026, the initiative had supported more than 30 businesses, invested \$4.1 million, activated more than 95,000 square feet of commercial and retail space, and created or sustained 174 jobs across downtown Newark.

This spring, the program welcomed HealHaus, Newark Culture Club and Legacy 27, continuing Audible’s effort to strengthen the city’s entrepreneurial ecosystem while building on earlier investments such as Sweet Jeans Kitchen & Espresso Bar and other locally owned businesses.

“Every business that opens its doors in Newark through our Business Attraction Program is a testament to the entrepreneurial spirit of the city,” said Aisha Glover,

Audible’s global head of urban innovation. “With HealHaus, Newark Culture Club and Legacy 27 joining our growing community of supported founders, we’re proud to continue building an ecosystem where diverse entrepreneurs can thrive, create jobs and strengthen the fabric of our city.”

Elsewhere in Essex County, Montclair State University is expanding its role in New Jersey’s innovation economy by growing both its research enterprise and its position as one of the state’s leading communications and media institutions.

Just last week, the university broke ground on a \$120 million, 110,000-square-foot Interdisciplinary Science Building that will triple laboratory capacity, expand interdisciplinary research and create dedicated space for corporate and community partners. The facility will include state-of-the-art teaching and research laboratories, technology-driven classrooms, collaborative workspaces and an innovation-focused “Imaginarium,” while reserving space for an industry partner to locate research activities on campus.

“At Montclair, we strive to offer an academic experience that is both accessible and excellent. The Interdisciplinary Science Building is part of that commitment,” President Jonathan Koppell said at the July 22 groundbreaking. “Fulfilling our mission requires constant innovation and investment to ensure we provide the best experience possible for our students. By creating modern laboratories, collaborative spaces and research opportunities, we ensure our students receive an education worthy of their investment while preparing them to shape the future of New Jersey.”

Beyond research, Montclair continues to leverage its nationally recognized College of Communication and Media as a statewide asset. The university was selected this year to operate NJ PBS, returning New Jersey’s public television network to an in-state operator while creating new opportunities

for journalism, public affairs programming and workforce development.

During the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Montclair State operated a Global Media Center and Content Creation Hub for credentialed journalists, broadcasters and digital creators covering the tournament. The facility offered professional production studios, podcast and live broadcast capabilities, and collaborative workspaces just minutes from MetLife Stadium (dubbed New York New Jersey Stadium during the tournament), while giving students hands-on experience supporting one of the world’s largest sporting events alongside industry professionals.

Few companies better illustrate the success of New Jersey’s – and Essex County’s – growing innovation ecosystem than CoreWeave.

The AI infrastructure company began in a garage in Roseland, growing and evolving from a crypto mining startup into one of the world’s leading providers of cloud infrastructure for artificial intelligence. Since then, the Essex County-born company, which is now based in Livingston, has followed precisely the trajectory that innovation ecosystem leaders hope can be emulated by other startups: building locally, scaling globally and continuing to invest at home.

CoreWeave’s growth has accelerated since its 2025 initial public offering, with the company joining the Nasdaq 100, expanding its Livingston headquarters and developing a major AI data center at the NEST campus in Kenilworth

This year alone, the company announced major long-term agreements with Nvidia, Meta, Anthropic and Jane Street, among others. CoreWeave is also among the founding partners of the New Jersey AI Hub, alongside institutions including Princeton University, NJIT and the state government, helping anchor a broader AI strategy.

As CEO Michael Intrator wrote in his April shareholder letter: “There are moments in history when a new technology

stops being a curiosity and becomes the foundation for everything that follows, when even the fiercest skeptics become believers. We are in one of those moments. Artificial intelligence is no longer a bet on the future; it is the present.”

He also reflected on the company’s New Jersey roots. “Our story began in a New Jersey garage before AI became inevitable,” Intrator wrote.

That journey – from a garage in Essex County to powering many of the world’s leading AI model developers – has become one of New Jersey’s most notable recent innovation success stories and an example of exactly the kind of company the state’s growing innovation ecosystem seeks to produce.

Taken together, these milestones tell a larger story. Essex County’s innovation economy is not being built around a single company, institution, neighborhood, or municipality. It is growing through a network of universities, entrepreneurs, investors, global employers, public partners, and key stakeholders that reinforce one another.

The organizations and milestones highlighted here represent only a portion of that broader ecosystem. Across Essex County, established companies are investing in their communities, universities are expanding research and workforce development, entrepreneurs are launching new ventures, and public-private partnerships are creating new pathways for innovation. Collectively, those efforts are strengthening the region’s position as one of New Jersey’s leading centers for technology, entrepreneurship and economic growth.

Innovation has always been part of Essex County’s story. Through the efforts highlighted here – and countless others across the region – it continues to prove that innovation is one of its defining strengths, not simply part of its history, but the foundation of its future.

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Dispatch from academia

A look at how Rutgers University-Newark helps power the regional economy

BY TONYA SMITH-JACKSON

What drew me to Rutgers University-Newark was the extraordinary possibilities that emerge when a strong public research university and a thriving city and county grow together.

There is a shared flourishing, an understanding that the success of Rutgers-Newark is tied to the success of Newark and Essex County. The prosperity of our region is strengthened by the 80-year presence of Rutgers in education, research, creativity and community engagement. We are in a powerful cycle of mutual growth.

The questions that matter most to society are not distant from us — they are all around us. They inspire our scholarship, inform our teaching, and create opportunities for our students to learn through real-world engagement.

At the same time, the co-discoveries generated by our faculty, staff, students and community experts — those with lived experience — contribute new ideas, new solutions, new businesses and new possibilities. And these are extended across America and the world.

Few schools are as deeply embedded in their communities while maintaining the kind of academic excellence that returns on the investment for students and alumni. We are recognized as a Carnegie Community-Engaged institution because we integrate teaching, research, and service with community partnerships.

Rutgers-Newark is also nationally recognized as a Carnegie Opportunity University because we excel at creating pathways to success for students from many different backgrounds. We're ranked No. 5 nationally for Social Mobility (No. 1 in New Jersey), No. 75 among National Universities, No. 36 among Top Public Universities, and No. 45 among Best Colleges for Veterans, according to U.S. News and World Report.

Newark Mayor Ras Baraka said it best when he congratulated Rutgers-Newark on its 80th anniversary this year.

"Our partnership with RU-N extends way beyond enrolling and graduating generations of Newark students, many of them first-generation, and creating clear pathways to careers," he said. "It fosters critical public health initiatives, small business development, youth mentorship and scholarships, and millions of dollars of research investment into our neighborhoods, advancing solutions in housing, criminal justice reform, and environmental justice.

"RU-N truly represents the best in academic institutions that rise up from deep roots in their community and yield fruit that truly is sustenance for the people of our



city and beyond," added the mayor.

Our community of 11,667 students, more than 2,000 faculty and staff and 136,000 alumni worldwide has left an indelible mark on Essex County.

We bolster the local economy as patrons, researchers, residents, volunteers, entrepreneurs, corporate employees, artists and leaders in local government. Our alumni own 339 businesses in Essex County, including 41 in Newark. Our faculty influence state and local policies, benefiting residents throughout New Jersey.

What makes our work so powerful is that we collaborate with community members not as research subjects but as partners, grounding scientific inquiry in the lives and experiences of residents, rather than taking a more traditional academic approach, which is often impersonal and detached.

The Newark Public Safety Collaborative, a School of Criminal Justice initiative, maps and analyzes crime and community data in partnership with community members and city government to collectively develop crime prevention responses.

It has contributed to Newark's lowest crime rates in decades: a 65% reduction in homicides, a 34% decrease in robberies, and more than a 35% reduction in thefts from autos.

The Center on Law, Inequality and Metropolitan Equity (CLiME) publishes research addressing rent burdens, environmental justice and housing inequality. CLiME also identifies ways in which elected officials can expand access to fair and affordable housing.

The Institute for Data, Research and

Innovation Science (IDRIS) focuses on improving healthcare, education, public safety, and community well-being through the ethical use of AI and data science.

Programs at Rutgers Business School have a strong legacy of helping thousands of local entrepreneurs launch and develop their careers and businesses.

The Center for Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CUEED) integrates scholarship with private industry, government and nonprofits to spur entrepreneurial and economic growth. It has assisted more than 1,000 small business owners, including 40% based in Newark.

The Entrepreneurial Pioneers initiative, which helps first-generation business owners develop their fledgling companies, has supported 370 entrepreneurs in New Jersey, including 108 who have businesses in Essex County and 49 with businesses in Newark.

Newark is home to the largest container port on the U.S. East Coast and serves as a global gateway. So, it's fitting that Rutgers-Newark has the strongest, most prolific supply chain researchers worldwide, including the Supply Chain Analytics Institute, which has been using AI-enabled supply chain advancement and risk management for more than 10 years.

But our greatest contributions to Newark and Essex County are RU-N graduates — and the opportunities we create for students, over 50% of whom are first-generation and 56% of whom are Pell-eligible.

RU-N graduates earn \$20,752 above the median for graduates of four-year colleges and universities nationally, according to data from the Department of Education.

Ninety-two percent were working full-time or continuing their post-secondary education within six months of graduation.

Making higher education accessible to Essex County's working- and middle-class students has been Rutgers-Newark's North Star from the beginning. Established in 1908 as a small constellation of schools, they eventually consolidated to become the University of Newark before merging with Rutgers University in 1946.

The move expanded Rutgers' statewide mission to include the children of immigrant laborers in the state's largest industrial center — and those who were laborers themselves.

Just like RU-N students today, many were bright, ambitious Essex County residents, determined to work hard and attain a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Like many of them, RU-N is rooted in Newark, and its trajectory is limitless.

I will end with a tribute to both my new home in Essex County and my 85-year-old mother, who lives and works on our family farm in North Carolina. When I speak of the miracle that is Rutgers-Newark, I often end by saying, "There is really no better place to be than this city and this university."

A deeply spiritual woman and believer in righteous and truthful speech, she typically adds, "Except heaven."

Tonya Smith-Jackson is chancellor of Rutgers University-Newark and a resident of Newark. An industrial and systems engineer with extensive leadership experience in higher education, she has also held positions in industry and government, including the National Science Foundation.