

A chat with Derek Armstead—the Mayor of Linden

by [Alexis Collins](#)

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We took time to chat with Derek Armstead, the first African American Mayor of Linden. In an exclusive and frank discussion with NJ Urban news writer Alexis Collins, Armstead shares a lot – including his highs and lows as head of the city.

NJ Urban News: “*What are some of your accomplishments as Mayor (legislative bills passed, improvements made throughout the city and community, etc.)?*”

Mayor Derek Armstead: “The biggest one is we’ve managed not to raise property taxes in six years. We’ve managed to do so without reducing services. We have a large police department, a large fire department, [and] a large city employee workforce of over 600 employees. We haven’t had any layoffs. When Covid-19 hit, we didn’t wait for anybody to give us any money; we established our own food bank through donations and money we raised. I got involved in our Board of Education elections and started running candidates. We gave out fifteen \$500 scholarships this year. We’ve established a Linden First Program, where we bring people in and train them on how to apply for jobs, prepare a resume, [and] how to conduct themselves in an interview. And we did it at no cost to taxpayers; instead, we got volunteers...Every Monday morning, we’d open a spot in City Hall and let people come in who are interested in work. They would sign up for training, and they did very well. We didn’t limit it to just Linden residents; we knew full well that some employers in other towns had difficulty filling positions...I tend to think of myself as a fiscally conservative person. I understand government, and I’m going to guarantee that as long as I’m in charge, we’re not going to have tax

hikes in my town. [Linden is a] beautiful town. I've seen what happens to towns that raise taxes and do things the old way; they wind up in a not-so-good state. We've made sure that the people in this community are employed, and we don't fall under that threshold to where we're being called an urban city. We're committed not to tax people out of their homes and making sure that Linden continues to be a nice place to live. You could raise your children here. It's a diverse city. I'm the first African American Mayor in what we refer to as the nontraditional African American city. When you start thinking of African American mayors, you think urban – you think about Newark – you think about all these different cities where we're housed in large numbers, but in Linden, when I won my first primary in 2010, Blacks were only 23 percent of the population, we've since grown to about 30 percent of the population."

NJ Urban News: *"What made you want to run for office? Did you always know you wanted to be in politics? Did you always want to serve in this capacity as Mayor or as a publicly elected official?"*

Mayor Armstead: "In 2009, probably one of the most interesting political stories in Union County was unfolding. I was pretty much fed up with politics because you somehow don't seem to be able to accomplish all the things you try to accomplish. You try to forward an agenda that's beneficial to everybody. Then everybody's playing politics trying to take care of their friends and family, nothing's really getting done. Taxes were going up, and I felt like I spent so much time trying to get elected and trying to make changes in my community. I was denying my family an opportunity for success as well as myself. I was going to throw in the towel. At the time, an independent had defeated iconic figure, Mayor John Gregorio. Everybody felt like the next democrat who ran against the independent was going to win, so I was approached by the top democrat in town, his name was [Councilman] Robert Bunk, and he asked me if I was going to support him for Mayor in 2010. My response to him was, 'I really don't even know who's running.' I was noncommittal, so he took it upon himself at the next council meeting, which was a reorganization meeting in

2010, to punish me and not give me a position as Council President Pro Temp...I guess he was going to show me that he wouldn't give it to me because I wouldn't commit to saying I would support him in the run for Mayor."

NJ Urban News: "There have been cases of aggressive behavior between the City Council and the Mayor's Office in various cities in NJ —especially in Trenton. In some instances, city council members, the public, and the Mayor's staff have had physical and verbal confrontations that have been negative, bitter, and outright hostile. You have also experienced physical assault allegations firsthand. Can you please explain why the relationship between the parties is often contentious and acrimonious?"

Mayor Armstead: "They didn't want me here. They condescendingly told me I should wait my turn. They might as well have just called me out of my name. And the sad reality is that some African Americans who are in power in other cities by the democratic organizations of Union County had the nerve to be the ones who are spewing that. I said wait a minute, they made you a mayor when you were 20 and gave you a state assembly seat when you were 23, and I got to wait for my entire turn, and at the time, I was in my 50s? It was terrible. I tell everybody I made history two times. I'm the first African American Mayor [and] the first-ever elected official to be suspended from a county job. They were sending me a message."

In part 2, the mayor will discuss the strained relationship between the City Council and his office and his plans for the future. This is the final installment of a two-part feature profile about Derek Armstead, the first African American Mayor of Linden.

NJ Urban News: "Mayor, you stated that you are the first African American Mayor in what most people call a nontraditional African American city. You said when

people think of African American mayors, they think about urban communities like Newark. Do you think being Mayor of a nontraditional Black City (Linden) is easier or more difficult than being Mayor of a traditional Black City (Newark, Trenton, Camden, Paterson)? Why or why not?"

Mayor Armstead: "I think it was more difficult in the beginning because, despite the fact that I had votes from all three major ethnic groups in town, there was significant pushback from those who just weren't ready for an African American mayor in Linden.

Unfortunately, people get set in their ways and, for some ungodly reason, feel that we shouldn't lead or are incapable of leading. Don't get me wrong. I think it's difficult to be a mayor anywhere because you're being pulled in every direction. Still, had I been in an all-African American town like Newark, I think the road would've been a little easier getting there. The other thing is that I ran against the party. I think that may have increased the anti-Armstead movement in town because I had known many people who worked against me for years. It was fine as long as I was a councilman voting for their children and themselves to give them promotions and raises – I was a good old guy. But the moment I decided to be something other than a council member, it became a problem because, again, in this business, political bosses like to pick and choose who runs the town and the candidates. The political bosses were not African American. The problem is that I lived half my life before realizing it's a do-it-yourself job. I could've been a council member for the rest of my life, but I'm more capable and able to lead this city."

NJ Urban News: "Do you think that if you were running for Mayor in a traditional African American city, like Newark or Trenton, you would've received more support?"

Mayor Armstead: "You have to look at the context of my run. I've run against the machine. Anytime you get into politics, you automatically accumulate enemies because you're going against the other guy. I think it's more difficult as an African American running in a town that

wasn't African American than [being African American campaigning in] a town that African Americans have typically run. That can be my personal opinion. It was an uphill battle. I'll be the first to say that I had some damn good white friends who were working to help me get here. We don't want to discount those who were not minorities who helped me get here. Many good white people in town knew my family and were with me 100 percent. The selfish ones, the ones who only cared about their jobs and their promotions and what the political apparatus could do for them, were my primary opposition. To a certain extent, that could happen in an all-Black town. The people who ran the political organization here were all Caucasian. [In] Linden, for the most part, we got along very well. It's a blue-collar town, and whites and Blacks have worked together for years. Linden is a town that has plenty of industry. On the political side, it has always been dominated by one group, and again when you have an outsider coming in, nudging saying, 'Listen, I'm at the table too or I want to be at the table,' there's that resistance. My family carved a path for me to be accepted by more white people than what traditionally happens in politics."

NJ Urban News: "What would you consider to be your shortfalls? What do you think you could've handled better?"

Mayor Armstead: "My biggest regret sometimes is that I don't think I put enough time into trying to fix the city early on as a public servant. I regret that I didn't take on this machine sooner. I wish I had made my break from this team in Linden, who unfortunately didn't have the best interests of the people in the town at heart. They were more concerned with themselves and do for family members. I did well. I tried to help as many people as possible, but I think I should've done more. I could've done more. Too often, if we're going to be in these positions of authority and power, there has to be a greater level of commitment. I turn the TV on, I see all the craziness in our community, and I feel like maybe I could've been that leader who did more for our people. The argument is that people can get away with anything they want to in the world, and they can run any town they

want to in the ground, just not Linden, not as long as I'm here. I feel like I have done a good job."

NJ Urban News: "Based on everything we've discussed, what are your plans for the future? What legislation, initiatives, or proposals do you hope to implement? What's the agenda?"

Mayor Armstead: "We have several areas in government here that need to be addressed. The waste mismanagement has been off the chart. We are here with a determination to straighten that out. We have a company called RNG (Renewable Natural Gas) Energy, and they will be processing food waste to produce a natural gas byproduct. Then we'll be producing a compost agricultural product as well. We will ensure that the workforce is representative of the community. We want people to know that when they come to Linden, they're coming to a safe town where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. We have a number of housing projects with over another 1,000 units coming. We have tenants already waiting to get in. That would be [on] our old TAF and DuPont site, once contaminated land. We're at the cutting edge of development, and I think we will be the largest warehousing town in the northeast. We will continue building the town and ensuring we maintain a stable tax base. We believe that when everybody shares the town's prosperity, we all win, and that's my goal."