The Campaign for Isles

Back to the roots. Isles at 45: why we are restructuring, what we are protecting, and how you can help

The short version

In 2020, after 40 years, founder Marty Johnson handed leadership of Isles to a new team. Over the next five years, the work succeeded so well that governors, senators, county executives, and mayors asked Isles to do more: take its lead-safe homes work statewide, expand GoTrenton, and grow the Street Team. Isles said yes too often. The work delivered, but the money to build the organization behind it did not keep up, and this year some of it was cut. On October 5, Charles Hill became chief executive, with the founder back as an advisor. Isles is now doing what it has done at every turning point in 45 years: shrinking to what it does best, handing proven work to partners who can carry it, and rebuilding the balance of public and private support that kept it independent for four decades.

To get there, Isles needs $5 million in private support over two years, in four funds: $2.8 million by December 31, 2026, and $2.2 million more through 2027. As of October 19, 2026, fifteen households have committed or given $832,000, along with a gift of real estate expected to bring at least $100,000.

What your gift protects

The Bridge Fund: $3.2 million. Government cuts opened a gap. This fund carries Isles across it, starting with promises already made:

- Lead-safe homes for Trenton families who lost federal funding mid-project.
- Downtown Trenton projects already underway: small business support, a community center renovation, and affordable housing.
- The Isles Youth Institute through June 2027, where 85% and 89% of students earned diplomas in the past two years.
- A rebuilt financial foundation: new controls, stronger board oversight, and a full-cost review of every major grant.
- Operating costs in 2027 while government's share falls and private support grows. The fund ends at break-even, expected in early 2028.

Three funds for the long haul: $1.8 million. They keep this from happening again:

- An Operating Reserve for late government payments and sudden gaps, repaid after each use.
- An Innovation Fund, housed in the Johnson Center, to test and share better ways to work.
- A rebuilt endowment to support Isles for decades. Legacy gifts are especially welcome.

What Isles built

Isles started in 1981 with a community garden on Carroll Street and a theory: build family self-reliance and community health rather than treat symptoms, partner with the people you serve and then get out of their way, and measure returns in benefits to families, communities, and taxpayers. Innovate solutions to basic human and environmental needs by combining the wisdom of grassroots communities with innovative technologies, test them in Trenton, and share what works with others, including policymakers. Everything starts in Trenton, and Trenton families benefit first. Then others learn how it works, which multiplies the impact far beyond Trenton. For example:

- **Urban agriculture.** Families adopt vacant lots and grow fresh food at low cost, lower their food bills, improve their family and neighborhood health, beautify blocks, and improve their soil. Neighbors called the first garden a crazy idea in 1981. Isles' community garden network now includes 50 gardens across Trenton, and in 2025, 250 gardeners grew thousands of pounds of produce.
- **Lead-safe homes.** Isles tested about 2,000 Trenton homes and found harmful lead dust in more than 60 percent. The source was dust, not water, and a home can be made lead-safe for about $17,000. NIH-published research finds every dollar spent controlling lead hazards returns $17 to $221 in savings. New Jersey rewrote its approach around the Isles model, committed $180 million, and hired Isles to train other agencies. Fifty-five of them have now made 5,000 homes safe.
- **GoTrenton.** Mobility is key to family self-reliance and community health. Without a car, reaching a job, a doctor, or a supermarket becomes a daily struggle, and about 30% of Trenton adults lack access to one. Isles built the country's first electric ride service run by a community development organization: 16 vehicles and 10,000 exhaust-free rides a month across Trenton and parts of Ewing and Hamilton, with Trenton residents at the wheel. Pregnant women now ride free to prenatal care, and a local doula reports, “They're not missing appointments anymore.”
- **Trenton Community Street Team.** Trained residents, not police, are on the streets at the right times and places. The number of shooting victims fell 31% from 2024 to 2025, according to the NJ Attorney General. Homicides fell from 40 in 2020, the city's worst year on record, to 16 in 2025, and stand at 8 as of September 2026.
- **Isles Youth Institute.** A high-expectations, high-support dropout-to-diploma pathway offers academic, life skills, and construction training. Doug Moreland arrived at 16, a truant with five high school credits. He left with a diploma and national certifications in carpentry and electrical work, then served in the U.S. Air Force repairing helicopters.
- **Isles Center for Energy and Environmental Training (CEET).** Blending technical training with life skills, CEET builds careers in energy efficiency, environmental remediation, and the building trades: hands-on work a low-carbon economy needs and AI cannot easily replace. Since 2009, CEET has trained more than 2,000 people and issued more than 1,000 national certifications.
- **Financial capability and wealth creation.** Financial literacy alone rarely changes financial decisions, especially under stress. Isles learned low-cost ways to help families build the habits that do, weaving savings and credit-building into housing and job training so families can save, buy homes, and build wealth. In 2025, 297 families received counseling.
- **The Social Profit Center at Mill One.** Social impact organizations too often lack affordable, quality space and work in isolation, though they learn best from peers. Isles turned an abandoned 75,000-square-foot factory into a home for 24 such organizations, most of them nonprofits, with an event space for more than 200 people, a solar roof, and a rain garden. It covers its own operating costs.

What is changing, and who it protects

The cuts fall on statewide expansion and on housing. The Trenton-facing work continues.

- Isles has reduced staff by a third and it will be roughly half its 2025 size by the end of 2027. The 2027 budget is $10.5 million, down from $16.6 million.
- Statewide lead work is being scaled back to what funding supports, and Isles will finish every commitment to the families already waiting. Affordable housing outside Trenton is being reduced, and Isles is transferring its Trenton rental properties to partners better placed to run them.

- Over the coming months, services that have proven themselves and have their own funding may be handed to trusted partners rooted in the community they serve. That is not a cut. It is how Isles has always worked: build what no one else will, prove it, and let it stand on its own.

Isles has done this before. Over 45 years it has founded or co-founded more than a dozen programs and organizations, then spun them off, handed them over, or retired them when better ways emerged. The NJ Community Loan Fund, now New Jersey Community Capital, started in Isles' offices. So did the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey. This is the largest such correction in Isles' history, and it follows the same rule.

What we got wrong

Growth outpaced our financial controls. When funding for a program failed to arrive, we kept the program running, and private fundraising stayed flat while the organization doubled. The board has since strengthened its oversight, with monthly cash-flow reports to the finance committee, board review of total costs before partial grants are accepted, and a target ceiling on the government share of revenue. A new chief financial officer will be accountable to both the CEO and the board. Charles Hill now leads the turnaround. He first joined Isles in 2002 as Vice President of Community Planning, then ran economic development for Mercer County, built his own development consulting firm, and led business development at Year Up.

Isles can meet this challenge

For its first 40 years, Isles was funded roughly half by government and half by private sources. That balance let it stay independent and take on problems others would not. From 42% government in 2019, the balance tipped to 85% by 2025. The 2027 plan starts it back toward 70/30, and the mini-campaigns that built Isles' base of more than 800 donors are being revived to keep it moving. Every year, Isles saves taxpayers far more than its budget.

Isles has raised money at this scale before: just under $4 million in the first Campaign for Isles in the 1990s, $10 million for the organization and Mill One between 2010 and 2012, and $2 million more in a campaign led by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker. Each time, the community answered. Please help it answer again.

How to give

- **Online:** isles.org/support-us/ways-to-give. Please note that your gift is for the Campaign for Isles.
- **By check:** payable to Isles, Inc., memo “Campaign for Isles,” 10 Wood Street, Trenton NJ 08618, Attn: Resource Development.
- **From stock, an IRA, or a donor-advised fund:** Isles, Inc., EIN 22-2350832, at the address above. Contact Randi Orlow for stock transfer instructions.
- **Questions or pledges:** Randi Orlow, Director of Resource Development, 856.625.2082, rorlow@isles.org. Two-year pledges, with a first payment in 2026, fit the campaign’s two-year timeline. Gifts go to the greatest need unless you designate one of the four funds.

Isles, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1981 in Trenton, New Jersey. Adrienne King, Board Chair; Charles Hill, Chief Executive Officer (from October 5, 2026); Marty Johnson, Founder and Advisor.