

CHANGES IN PHOENIXVILLE



DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT & CHANGE

By Barry Cassidy

I had left Phoenixville in 2012 after working for two years for Manny DeMutis and returned this past February and found that there had been a lot of changes that had taken place in my absence. I had been in Pittsburgh for a couple of years, working on a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) project, and coming home on weekends did not afford me a whole lot of time to do anything. Plus, I have been spending a lot of time in Europe, as I expanded my practice, which further restricted my availability.

Upon coming back to Phoenixville, I noticed there was an acute increase in the number of people on the street. I believe this was directly attributable to the number of apartments that have been built in Phoenixville. When I was there, people talked about apartments, but it was only a discussion concerning housing. It was not a done deal.

There were people who wanted more commercial space rather than housing. There was discussion concerning gridlock and fairness to the school system. I remember at the time the School District had done a study that did not consider housing going on the Phoenix Steel Site. I always thought that the more housing down there the better. When I look at it now, I realize that I had been correct in seeing housing as a compatible and catalytic use.

The new developments put people on the street most of the day, and it gives the town more of a city feel than a small town in suburbia. People on the street are a great driver for retail and commercial. When you are recruiting businesses for the downtown, one of the key items people look at is what the foot traffic is like on the sidewalk. When I got there, we decided to use a twilight strategy, that being bringing people there during the time right after work. This was because people did not want to keep their businesses open later in the evening.

I remember our first draw, so to speak, was the parents bringing their kids to music lessons at Jaworski's music. At the time, we were told they used to wait around until the lesson was over. We thought that if we could capture some of those people, that we would bring a couple more sales in to help the downtown merchants. We soon found that the strategy was not that great, as we were dealing with a finite number of people. So, one Thursday I sat in my car and watched the people as they showed up at Jaworski's and none of the people driving their kids got out of the car, and it was all drop off for the lesson and pick up afterward.

Soon we decided to do Friday night as the night. We secured music sponsors and had people open on Friday. We had some success with First Fridays, but we were not sure if the people would show up every Friday. The first time we did it we hired Beatlemania to recreate the Beatles Rooftop concert and we pulled 500 people, which was pretty good because we were only getting 750 for a First Friday. But we immediately ran into opposition. I remember Mike Romondo of the cheese store told me we were bringing in the wrong crowd, and we should not do it again. I thought long and hard about that, as the wrong crowd was already there, and they did not necessarily come for the music, but to participate in the outdoor sales or narcotics on the corner. It did appear that they were not the only ones on the street, and they kind of blended with the others that were there.

Things progressed a little further after August and we started getting good crowds on Friday night. Saturday was kind of weak, but Fridays were good. I was there last Friday for the Blobfest, running out of the theater, and I was having some beers and appetizers on Molly Maguire's patio with co-owner Conor Cummins and we started to discuss the crowd.

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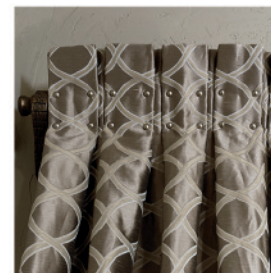


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Conor said that Saturday was now the better day, and although Fridays were good, it appeared that Saturday was better.

I attribute that to all of the new people living in the downtown. There are like 600 more apartments and 300 townhomes set to be developed in the downtown, and that could only bring more crowds to the downtown.

It does appear that the town could use more retail establishments, and it is kind of dominated by the food and beverage industry. That is a cluster, and it appears to be what people want, and it is always good to cluster popular establishments if there are enough people to go around. It appears that there are enough people living there to keep most of them, if not all of them busy.

Another thing that was really impressive is the amount of people that the Colonial Theatre draws to the town. The recent expansion to create more space for movies has resulted in them having a little multiplex theater. The expansion has made a world of difference concerning the number of people coming to the town with the movie theater as a destination.

These two factors have made a large change in the fabric of the town, and they have created a little bit of a different feel than when I was there. I tried to keep out the bong shops and the tattoo parlors, because of my experience on South Street when I had issues with those kinds of establishments because of the clientele that they drew. I fought it but was not successful, and now they appear to blend in a little bit and offer a little variety in choices.

In the early days, a bong shop would have been the equivalent to a methadone clinic, which I was successful in stopping. That was because of the clientele being mostly street people, and people looking to score drugs or sex. Although I have to admit the sex trade was a little bit more daylight oriented as many of the people tried to stay away when it got dark.

I was happy to see the changes in Phoenixville, and how the flows of foot traffic have made Bridge Street a three-block street rather than a one block street (200 block). It looks good too. People should come down and check it out.

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.