

# TOWNS STRUGGLE WITH POST-PANDEMIC ADJUSTMENTS



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

Many cities throughout the United States are struggling with the post-pandemic world. Much of the problem was self-induced when we all went into hiding and started working from home. Only a little was happening in the downtowns, and most was happening took place outside.

As I toured the country, I saw how the restaurants were allowed to promote more outdoor dining. On a country-wide basis, my theory, the little umbrella theory, was implemented. I always thought outdoor dining was the answer to creating an atmosphere downtown. Cities like San Diego had great restaurant districts, and I always liked visiting there. Milan had some great outdoor dining; I always thought it brought the extra nickel to the retail.

Now, we no longer fear the virus. We continue to practice some of the outdoor dining protocols.

Closing the streets down for days is not a good idea. It was a good idea when restaurants fought for their lives with COVID protocols. It is no longer necessary, and if and when the time comes, we are faced with another national emergency, I would support the closure action.

Yet two of my former communities, South Street and Phoenixville, continue to do extended street closures. I always liked outdoor dining and tried to promote it as much as possible in Phoenixville as I did on South Street. It is the personal interaction that the restaurant consumer establishes with the street and creates a sense of place.

Things always needed to be more challenging on South Street regarding outdoor dining. The L&I regulations were

really off the hook. It is difficult to get permits in the city; you have to be a good form filler, avoid making any mistakes on the application, and be sure to provide the required documents.

At the beginning of outdoor dining in Phoenixville, before the porches at Molly Maguires, Iron Hill, and Sedona Brewhouse, there was an establishment of the first standard used to create sidewalk space and outdoor dining. That is why there are some bump outs on the street, and in particular, you could look at the bump out in front of the bike store as, at the time, a restaurant was suggested for the site.

The bump out to create the midblock crossing was controversial as it eliminated parking in favor of pedestrian access. The block has enough improvements to create a walkable space for people to both dine and stroll.

When approached by Smart Growth America concerning the money they wanted to give to Phoenixville because we were working with them on train service, I secured \$40,000 to install retracting bollards. These kinds of bollards could be used to lessen the need for public works to move barriers. The barriers were a design the borough supplied me and were a top-notch configuration.

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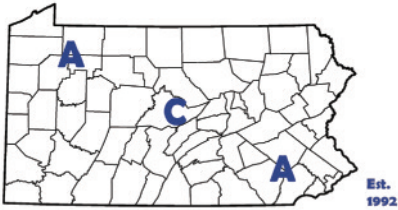
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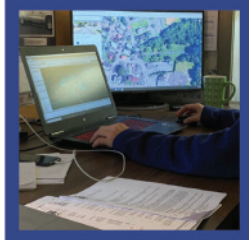


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Another aspect of this is that I am probably one of the only revitalization professionals in this area to have a shooting in each of the entertainment districts I managed. South Street and Phoenixville. It is my contention from my experience that the closing off of streets for an extended period destroys the group's congeniality and promotes crowd issues.

The whole street closure thing reminds me of the time when I was much younger and, while traveling, stopped in Winchester, VA. It was a great community bustling and full of activity. I remember saying to my cohorts that I thought the downtown was one of the best I had ever visited.

Fast forward a few years later, and I visited only to find a downtown mall. It was a ghost town. I talked to a few people, and they told me it was a disaster.

I also had an experience when I interviewed for a job in Wilmington when I was looking for a job in the early '90s. They had created a downtown mall. I told them that the shootings and the violence would have to be addressed. I may have been too pointed for them as I did not get the job. It was similar, streets shut down for long periods of time, morphing the street protocols to be a little more tolerant of aberrant behavior.

A town is designed normally to allow traffic to pass and have the people on sidewalks backing up to the store windows. It is incumbent upon the store owner to make it attractive and inviting. The further you keep the people away from the storefronts, the worse it is for retailers.

I have had a few occasions where we had to close off the streets because of too many people. Once, we did a sidewalk sale in Lock Haven, put a full-page ad (for \$25) in the student newspaper, and brought half the student population down with the people normally coming to the sidewalk sale. It was the biggest win of my career, as it took a lot to get praise in Lock Haven.

It happened once or twice in Phoenixville, where even merchants complained that there were too many people in their stores, but it was. Nothing compared to Lock Haven. At the Kiwanis Lunch, I got a round of applause for my efforts.

Officials need to learn how to react quickly in changing times like this, and unfortunately, people incur hardships and maybe go out of business. Today's business climate is so unpredictable you have to be nimble.

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