

REVITALIZING DOWNTOWNS WITH DOWNTOWN INFILL



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

When most traditional downtowns were planned, normally there was a residential component to maximize the income of the buildings, and for practical purposes, enable additional rentable space for the owner. Now, with the movement of people back to smaller towns, the modern-day adaption is not quite like it was in the days when these downtowns were originally designed.

New infill seeks to maximize residential tenant space, with the commercial component being more of an adjunct in the funding scenario. As downtowns continue to develop, apartment complexes in the downtown become more common. I am writing this article from one of the more successful of Phoenixville's infill developments, the Phoenix Village complex at 131 Bridge Street.

I worked on that project from the time that it was 400 linear feet of contaminated vacant industrial space in the downtown. Anyone who has dealt with the Phoenix Steel Site will tell you that nothing goes easy when it comes to the redevelopment. The Phoenix Village project has brought people to the downtown, as well as providing additional retail to fill the street spacing gap on the 100 block of Bridge Street.

I believe one of the biggest contributions of the project is not the residents that offer a "captured market" for the downtown, but the commercial establishments that have flourished on the ground floor. They have done for the 100 block of Bridge Street what Iron Hill Brewery brought to the block when they opened in a previous infill project.

In 2003, when I was hired to lead the revitalization, there was only the 200 block as a viable district. The three infill projects brought the 100 block back. The higher end rentals in the buildings changed the dynamic of the downtown. Sedona Tap House being located across the street from Iron Hill Brewery is a very powerful retail anchor for the 100 block. The block also boasts the development of the Customers Bank Building, which was also a part of the Phoenix Steel Site.

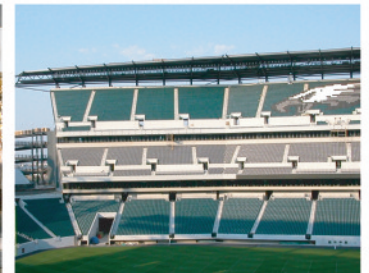
Meanwhile, on the 300 block of Bridge Street, the district court and the borough building anchor the renewed development. Unlike the 100 block, there were not a lot of vacant lots available to build infill construction. It is not until you get to the 500 block in Phoenixville where there is there significant property to have another infill development.

The structures from Hall Street to Wheatland Street soon will be demolished, and another infill development is going to be built. This development will add 375 apartments, as well as about 40,000 square feet of commercial space.

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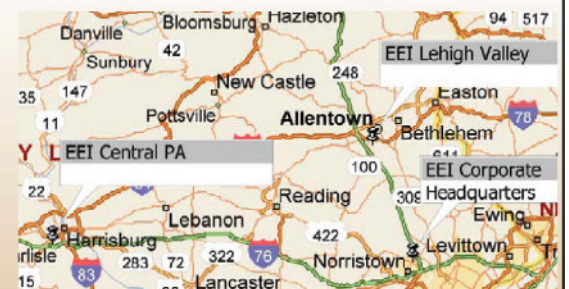
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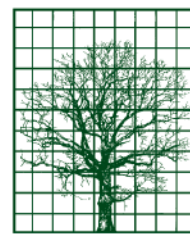
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This development will basically bridge the street spacing gap to create continuous retail (within reason) for six total blocks.

The expansion of the retail is not just a function of the development projects but represents more of an interest to build and invest in Phoenixville. Another Phoenix Steel site apartment development has already been built on the other side of the French Creek behind the Customers Bank Complex.

In addition, there is another Phoenix Steel site townhouse and apartment project that was just given an extension by the borough council to continue to work through the approval process. The project features 311 townhomes and 245 apartments. Neither of those developments feature retail space.

These investments represent about 1,000 more units in the downtown in the near future. These numbers bode well for the existing retail on Bridge Street, as well as the planned additional 40,000 square feet. Even though there will be more people, it is the continuous nature of the downtown that will be the most important thing.

When I managed the South Street District in the city of Philadelphia, we used to call it the South Street Stroll, where people would walk up and down both sides of the street to make a loop. Ideally that is what should be attempted in Phoenixville to make the walk interesting enough that everyone gets foot traffic on the commercial strip.

It is interesting that each side of town had available vacant/underutilized ground that enabled large amounts of people to be domiciled. I guess the next question is, will there be enough demand for the space? I had no further to go but to the other end of the lobby that I work

in to chat with Phoenix Village sales representative Joe Sheldrick.

Sheldrick, a native of England, works the sales desk most days and reports that the business is steady, and vacancies are minimal. "We had six applications last week, and normally, of those, we rent four or five apartments per week. We keep very busy, as there is a great demand to live in downtown Phoenixville." He said. I watch them come through to talk with Joe or his fellow sales representative Rita Mora every week, as I sit in the lobby working on my train project. Working in the lobby enables me to chat with people and stay current.

The influx of people has created the retail demand for entertainment, and the restaurant scene is bolstered by the expansion of the Colonial Theatre in the center of town. The acquisition of the old bank building next to the theater enabled the facility to offer any number of movies in a day.

The blend of the amenities and the well-designed wayfinding system make it easy for people to move around and have their retail, entertainment and dining needs met. Being in an existing downtown, the road has curves and it is not laid out like a mall. This provides for the quaintness and makes the journey to get to the end of each street and see what lies beyond intriguing.

In many cases, every downtown is a series of 100-foot intervals for street traffic, and a town needs to have a continuous flow for the retail in order to draw the interest. Phoenixville has had its share of gaps in the building flow, but the infill with many new residents is enabling the downtown to expand linearly without creating a loss in interest.

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