

VISION AND DEVELOPMENT



DOWNTOWN MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

I was in Phoenixville the other day and found that the new downtown development is being constructed that will soon transform downtown Phoenixville.

The project has been in the works since 2010. My working the project through the initial approval process was my first consulting job after the Main Street CDC in Phoenixville.

Under construction now are 275 apartments, 20,000 square feet of retail, 30,000 square feet of office space and 600 new parking spaces. The fifty-four million dollar project will have a positive impact on the local economy when it is complete. According to Borough Manager E. Jean Krack, the borough will see the housing stock increase by about 2000 units before long.

A solid product created in the downtown has drawn people to want to live in Phoenixville. The Theater, retail, restaurants and bars all will see enhanced spending when the project is complete. It will be local people doing things locally as the micro-cultural ecosystem of Phoenixville expands.

In many cases, one must just imagine what kind of impact an infill development like this would have on their town. Downingtown saw this kind of development when the O'Brien Machinery was torn down and replaced by housing. A 160-townhouse development changed the course of the downtown there as it added customers conveniently located next to the retail.

Other downtowns seem to attract minimal investment, and when the investment does happen, many times it is senior housing or some other subsidized housing. Towns thrive when there is a market rate

housing investment and they seem to stagnate with non-market rate.

I remember being the main street manager in DuBois, Pa and having a senior high rise located at in the center of town. The high rise effectively cut the town in half because a church and funeral home were located on the other side of the street. I called it the tombstone on the downtown.

Phoenixville is a little different because of the solid leadership of people like Robb Frees and Manny DeMutis. Strong business leadership is a key. The problem arises when towns do not have strong and knowledgeable people on the council. If you are in some of the more populated suburbs there is a high caliber of individual attracted to the political positions. I have worked in places that were so parochial that I wondered if they would ever get anything done.

Under the leadership of John Messina in the early years of the Phoenixville steel site development, there was a limit of 39 units per acre created. That eventually translated to 275 apartments for Manny DeMutis to develop in Phoenixville. Some may say that 39 units per acre is excessive, but it was Messina's vision and now it is working to the benefit of Phoenixville.

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The one common element that each town needs is people. Someone has to use the downtown as his or her center of commerce. In Phoenixville, the residents feel safe to go to the downtown shop and the visitors there for the restaurants and bars are just the icing on the cake. The increase of 275 apartments will be a huge impact in the town, adding about 500 people located onsite.

These projects do not happen overnight. If your town is not planning a similar project now, it is not too late to put your plan together to bring more people into your downtown. There could be a John Messina in every town with the vision and political will to get these projects planned and make them possible. The naysayers cannot rule the day when innovative ideas are presented.

In Downingtown when we were getting ready to demolish the abandoned O'Brien Machine Factory, a

Superfund Site, there were those that said they would rather look at an abandoned factory than townhomes. It appeared that the loss of off-street parking for the homes on Green Street would rule the day. Again, this time a Downingtown visionary, Peter Duca, led the way for the development, making sure that the planning and zoning were properly handled, and the resulting development proved to be an asset for the community.

Vision and leadership by local officials pave the way for members of the business community to make inroads with development that will aid the town. It is not always the developer himself that is responsible for making things happen, but more of an open mind toward development by the local officials. Does it take exceptional leadership... a visionary? It helps, but it can happen if everyone keeps an open mind and just says "YES." ■

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