

FOCUS ON PHOENIXVILLE

A Conversation with Phoenixville Developer Manny DeMutis

Q. How are things going in Phoenixville considering all the changes in shopping habits?

A. We are moving forward with a lot of projects. The Steelworks project is ready to go to construction soon, and that will add 375 apartments and 40,000 new square feet of retail to the downtown. In addition, there is a 310-townhouse development on the Phoenix Steel site that will add more customers for the downtown.

Q. It sounds like a lot is going on in terms of the Borough of Phoenixville increasing density and making additional commercial space in the downtown?

A. We have created a walkable community through all of the physical improvement down to the downtown. We tried to pay attention to design detail when we were planning the improvements. We also tried to be authentic concerning selecting materials. For example, the brick sidewalks were "molded brick" versus the wire cut brick to present a more "authentic look" and feel than a modern interpretation. Of course, the new lighting, murals, and use of iron and

steel pay homage to our steel heritage while presenting a crisp and functional design.

We also paid attention to the buildings that were left by the Steel Company when they closed plant operations in 1984. One of our projects was restoring the Superintendent's Building, where I currently have my office. The Hankin Group did a great job restoring the Phoenixville Foundry, so we did have a good basis for restoring buildings and creating a sense of place. All in all, I believe that the revitalization that occurred starting in 2003 and continuing today set the stage through the unique setting established.

Q. How are things going with the planned Train Project to provide rail access to Phoenixville?

A. I don't know if you have enough room to go through the iterations we have gone through with the project. We are moving forward with the Reading/Phoenixville/Philadelphia Transportation Equity Initiative. Still, there is a lot of planning and negotiations necessary for us to complete before taking the train to the Eagles game. It is a slow process since it takes a long time to do

things on a regional level. When you do housing and commercial/development on a local level, you know there is a path that you follow. This project is not like that, as the path is murky sometimes.

Q. What is the basis of your effort? Who do you represent to ask for a train to come to your town?

A. We are a grassroots effort. We are the community that has come together under the leadership of our Phoenixville Mayor, Peter Urscheler. It is a grassroots effort that then spread to Berks County through the Berks County Alliance. We each did a study to determine what direction the project would move in. They had an AMTRAK analysis, and we had a SEPTA analysis. We submitted our plans to PENN DOT, and in December, PENN DOT produced an analysis. We have adopted the PENN DOT plan as a group, and we are moving forward.

Q. What is the scope of the plan?

A. It is still evolving, but the PENN DOT plan has stations in Reading, Birdsboro, Pottstown, Royersford, Phoenixville, and King of Prussia.

Q. Are you going to the King of Prussia Mall?

A. No, that is another project. Our project will use existing rail that has been improved over the years. The effort is a version of the project that failed twice... the Schuylkill Valley Metro, then the R-6 extension.

Q. What makes your project different from those that have failed before you?

A. We are going to follow the PENN DOT plan, which features a "value capture" strategy. To a great extent, it follows the plan that Phoenixville came up with, originally utilizing the Commonwealth Transportation Revitalization Investment District (TRID). Unfortunately, there is a maze of acronyms out there.

Q. What do you see as the benefit of the rail line?

A. SEPTA did a study that stated the value of increase for houses with proximate access to a rail line is worth approximately 19 percent more. A place like Thorndale, which had rail service introduced, saw the housing near the station appreciate \$46,600 per house.



The Schuylkill River Heritage Center

The Schuylkill River Heritage Center (SRHC) is a unique museum and place of welcome located in Phoenixville's historic Foundry Building, which is close to the French Creek and the entrance to the Schuylkill River Trail, in Phoenixville's Downtown Historic District.



While much of the 1882 restored building's space hosts special events, the area occupied by the SRHC provides an exciting, interactive and visual experience for visitors, students, seniors, and area residents to explore. Our three interactive exhibits give everyone the opportunity to learn about the Schuylkill River's Industrial Legacy, the Schuylkill River Trail and the many cultural and historic resources in Chester County.

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Here is the Foundry and the Symbols of Steel Sculpture Garden outside of the Schuylkill River Heritage Center building.

A new addition to the Chester County interactive tells the story of the Underground Railroad in the county. The *Path to Freedom Trail* offers photos and descriptions of the many people and places throughout the county that protected and helped escaped slaves on their dangerous journey to freedom.

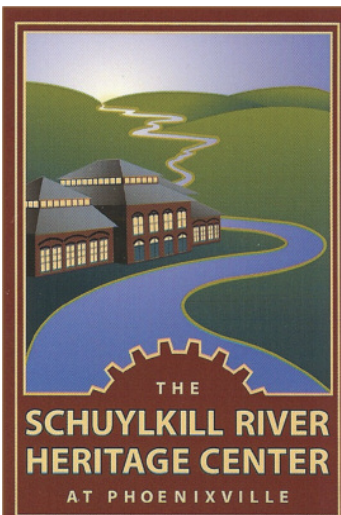
Looking through a glass wall that leads to the event space, visitors can see the restored wooden crane. It is the oldest one still in place in the U.S.! The SRHC space also has large murals, archival artifacts, photos and paintings on display that beautifully illustrate the history of the former Phoenix Iron & Steel Company. Along with these features, visitors can sit and relax while watching a video about Phoenixville and its place along the Schuylkill River. **The museum is open every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM and admission is free.** Our web site: www.phoenixvillefoundry.org gives everyone an opportunity to learn about Phoenixville's history too.

The Phoenixville Mural and Renaissance Park are owned by the SRHC.



This is a view of the Phoenix bridge sculpture; located in the park adjacent to the Phoenixville Mural.

The mural images and the Phoenix Column bridge sculpture are interpreted on signs located in the park. This gives the people passing by the opportunity to be educated and enlightened about the town's history in an aesthetic, green, urban environment.



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Learn about the Schuylkill River's Industrial Legacy, the Schuylkill River Trail and the many cultural and historic resources in Chester County.

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www.phoenixvillefoundry.org

Hope

Orion offers hope for individuals and families experiencing hardship due to poverty, disability, or illness by building bridges that lead to self-reliance.

ORION 
Communities

NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS

Orion believes that every person deserves shelter, food, clothing, transportation, access to healthcare and respectful human interaction.

Orion listens at the street level and responds to the unmet needs of our most vulnerable neighbors with creativity, compassion & collaboration.



To volunteer, donate or refer someone in need, go to:

OrionCommunities.org or call **610.415.1140.**

Orion Communities Together We Are Creating a Better Community

For 44 years, a local nonprofit, Orion Communities has addressed the unmet needs of our most vulnerable neighbors through direct aid, resources, and innovative programming. Orion's staff and volunteers work with community leaders and businesses to creatively address the needs of folks who are struggling and might fall through gaps in the social service safety net. When asked about Orion, Mayor Peter Urscheler said, "Here in the Phoenixville community, we are so very fortunate to have incredible partners like Orion who really ensure everybody in our community is able to live with dignity and that Phoenixville continues to be a place where everyone is safe, loved and celebrated.

Terry Brett, owner of Kimberton Whole Foods, elaborated on the importance of non-profit/business partnership, "I have been a champion of Orion for many, many years. It is critical for us to come together during these challenging times, so I encourage any and all of you, businesses, and individuals, to be generous and support Orion so they can continue to meet the needs of community members."



Working together to make our community a better place for all our neighbors - Terry Brett - owner Kimberton Whole Foods, Peter Urscheler - Phoenixville Mayor, Kris Keller - Executive Director Orion Communities, Keith Burress - President Orion's Board of Directors.

Orion believes every person deserves access to basic needs, such as shelter, food, transportation, etc. Never receiving government funding, Orion relies on community support from foundations, businesses and private donors who have a strong desire to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most. In 2020, Orion worked with over 1,400 local households (4,000+ unique individuals) providing help with basic needs from bus tokens to rent assistance. Their emergency fund distribution increased from pre-pandemic levels of \$7,500/month to \$15,000/month to help stabilize our neighbors! Orion continues to work at the street level and updates community leaders of ongoing needs for vulnerable residents.

To learn more, please visit www.orioncommunities.org.