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PHOENIXVILLE REVITALIZATION — INTERVIEW WITH MANNY DEMUTIS

(The following is an interview Barry Cassidy conducted with Phoenixville developer Manny Demutis in Cape May, New Jersey on September 8, 2024.)



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

Q. Why are you spending a lot of time in Cape May?

We own the Inn of Cape May, an ideal summer setting. I have a house close to the hotel and provide oversight when needed. I try to blend as much work time as I can into days at the beach.

Q. Saw the live band out in front of the Inn last night. It seems like you drew a nice-sized crowd out there.

Yeah, we took a page from Phoenixville's strategy of live music, which definitely brings people to the Inn. There is something about creating a sense of place, distinguishing yourself from the other hotel offerings, and still maintaining the hotel's context as part of the whole within the historic district.

Q. I understand that you are going to go solar on the Inn. What made you think of doing something like that, and how does it affect the historic nature of the Inn?

We are working now to assess the applicability of solar shingles on the Inn. Solar products are now available to meet the needs of historic buildings by manufacturing compatible shingle panels. We are looking into the Inn, Phoenix Village, and the new Steelworks development for solar projects.

Q. I noticed the boards up on the properties along Bridge Street. It looks like you are getting ready to tear them down for the Steelworks.

This kind of deal takes time, lending parameters change, permits have to be

secured, and it has taken longer than I would have liked, but it is moving forward. Adding a solar component to the mix will be good for the town. We will also work in downtown Phoenixville and Cape May electric car charging units. Suppose we are generating solar electricity and using that source as the source for the solar car charging units. In that case, we will embrace an opportunity to lessen the demands on the electric grid.

Q. I recently saw a picture of you wearing white pants after Labor Day. Is this proper?

While some may consider this a fashion faux pas, we don't live in the Gilded Age anymore. You can wear white after Labor Day. Coco Chanel wore white year-round as a permanent part of her wardrobe. Some traditions and so-called "rules" may or may not apply in the twenty-first century. Cultural values and traditions can be a good thing or could eventually run their course, like white pants after Labor Day.

Q. Why are you selective in renting Phoenixville stores and not to anyone wanting to open a business?

You have to look at the downtown as a whole, the business mix, and the long-term merchants who have survived the street changes. Some people have invested in the downtown by having a business and buying a building. You must respect their investment in the town and try to complement their efforts. Listen, we live in a community, and we need to all work together. I am fortunate enough to own more than one storefront, which is not just a condition. It is a responsibility to the community.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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I view myself as a servant leader and understand that I am responsible to myself and the entire community. When we started the revitalization, you asked me to be the board chair of the Main Street organization I asked the simple question, "What do I have to do?" and you told me, "Nothing different." Those words held as I continued to be myself, whether the town was thriving or not. We have always been inclusive in Phoenixville, and we have always had outstanding leadership by the combined citizenry. Although I was the tip of the spear for the revitalization, it was a combined effort from all that turned the town around.

I remember how we brought \$5000 grants to people on the North Side to help the residents deal with issues relating to older housing. That was one of the most important things that we did. That was a community initiative, and even though the borough administration tried to kill the project, people in the community knew the importance of helping the less fortunate and those elderly on a fixed income. Fairness, equity, and inclusion are terms used today to describe what we did 15 years ago: including everyone in

the revitalization, listening to the people, and following the voices.

Q. Do you remember the issues about the environmental impact on the beavers if the steel site was developed?

How could I forget? I don't think anyone wanted to impact the beavers, but the issue related to the greater good of the community. We could not let the Steel site sit as a memorial of the past. Instead, we needed to move toward redevelopment to forge a new era in Phoenixville. The beaver issue was found to be an artificial constraint as there was no real impact on the beavers.

However, it shows the level of concern in the community when the issue is raised in a public meeting. The beaver issue was different from what we were told, and the fact that it was reported that one of the restaurants on Bridge Street had beavers on the menu was the turning point, as it was over-the-top rhetoric. I was glad to put that issue in the rearview mirror.

Q. What other issue sticks out in your mind regarding the revitalization of Phoenixville?

The long-term effort to restore train

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service to Phoenixville. As I understand it now, we will be getting AMTRAK service in a few years. We tried to connect to Paoli early but settled on the Norfolk Southern line. These rail lines are legacies of the past that served the community and are frankly... underutilized. By connecting these underutilized networks of transportation, we are reviving past splendor and helping to further reposition the town in the regional marketplace.

Q. So, it seems that you are embracing change in Phoenixville as the town evolves into a vital entertainment district in the region.

It is sort of like wearing white after Labor Day. Some of the things of the past remain relevant, while other issues stand

tall as reflections of who we are as a community. I'm not giving up on the train line and going solar downtown are all for the betterment of the community. Serving the less fortunate and protecting the interests of the town are paramount. Honestly, although I don't have any statistics, I believe there are just as many beavers in Phoenixville now as there were before the steel site was developed. The issues in downtown revitalization are complex, and you need to be open to new ideas as tastes change in what is acceptable. The trick is to do the necessary work to ensure the path you take is the correct one.

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

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