

REPOSITIONING IN THE REGIONAL MARKETPLACE



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

I recently saw a newspaper article about the Municipality of Norristown proposing repositioning the municipality in the regional marketplace. It was refreshing to hear someone take a serious approach to improving the town.

Norristown has witnessed a hyper-segregation of low-income people in one area. The hyper-segregation of low-income people resulted from well-meaning people seeking to provide housing for that population. Unfortunately, clustering this type of development over the years has a cumulative effect.

I have been involved in several repositioning efforts where the town sought more market penetration in the region. Most customers to a downtown come from within a 10 to 15-mile radius, and these overlap with other towns in the region.

When I started in the commercial revitalization field, I worked in Lock

Haven, PA and successfully organized sales promotions and events. In DuBois, I had limited success, but I did make one-way streets two ways to improve flow. In both of these cities, I helped the retail climate, but not to the extent that it was a great success.

My first big repositioning effort came when I took the South Street Headhouse District job in Philadelphia after the Mardi Gras Riots. In 1964, girls from my Fords, New Jersey school would go down to the American Bandstand shows in Philadelphia. They would come back and talk about going to South Street and how cool it was.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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I visited the first time in the late '60s and was dazzled by the activity and just the sheer hip city-ness of the street. I felt like I wanted to be there.

By the time I worked there, the sexual assaults were completely out of hand, and the ridicule of those looking different was paramount in some of the visitors' minds. A lot had changed in 30 years since my first visit. The repositioning effort included 50,000 flyers handed out over the summer on the street corner. It was a notice of what the rules were for the street. These are simple rules and guidelines for equity, diversity, and equal access.

Next, we worked with the TV stations to have our PSA run to alert people about proper conduct when partying. Then, we took out a pretty extensive radio ad campaign on B 101, which appealed more to the mainstream than the fringe. Finally, we started a music program to bring back the roots of South Street.

Rents skyrocketed, and we were so successful that Zipperhead could no longer afford the rent and moved to a side street. Things were so good we sold out the WAWA next to the Headhouse

when we raised Jerry Garcia from the dead on the Day of the Dead.

At the same time, sexual assault pretty much ended by the time we installed the red street poles. But, being successful, we repositioned more to a mainstream destination and, in a way, lost a portion of the edge of the street.

I then worked on the repositioning of Phoenixville. The problem there was disinvestment after the Phoenix Steel plant closed. Drug and sex workers dominated the activity downtown in those days, and an interesting array of people resettled from Pennhurst State School and Hospital. The hospital was once described as "1,700 human beings stored away in crumbling warehouses, the urine stench of decades soaked so deeply into the walls and floors that it can never be washed out." The dim street lighting added to the uncertain ambiance of the street.

Phoenixville, like South Street, shows that people want to come to a place that is "edgy," not dangerous. A certain amount of dysfunctionality as it relates to accepted norms of society is healthy for any public environment as long as it is part of the scene and not the scene itself.

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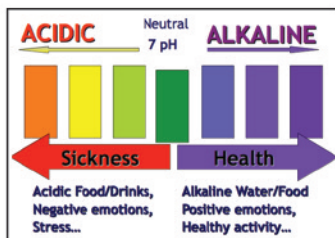
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Phoenixville had an entire new streetscape installed, making it look like it was there forever, unlike some of the squeaky-clean streetscape designs you see in towns. The idea is to make it usable and aesthetically pleasing in a single effort, not to create a replica of Disneyland. I thought the red-light poles were appropriate for South Street, but sought to be more demure with the blue light poles in Phoenixville. RAL-1007 (Daffodil Yellow) would be perfect for the Norristown 68 acres of lighting poles.

We used the South Street formula of music to create the vibe. The first concert we did was to have Beatlemania

play on the rooftop of one of the buildings recreating the famous Beatles Rooftop concert ... we drew 500 people. Merchants screamed that we were bringing in the "wrong crowd" ... I'm like, "Yo, my man, are the drug and sex workers the right crowd?"

Norristown is slightly different from these two examples since they seek to use 68 acres of the former Norristown Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The property has been given to them by the Commonwealth and offers them an opportunity to break from the past.

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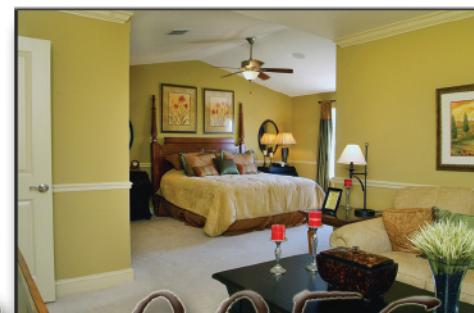


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The repositioning will not be easy, as there are two converging issues: the hyper-segregation of low-income households in the municipality and the notoriety of the whole criminally insane stuff. So, it is a pretty daunting situation with visions of Jack Nicholson saying, "Here's Johnny!"

I do not think a single large employer building on the 68-acre area could achieve a repositioning. I would contend that if some companies want to use the site as a single source for high-income paying jobs, it would not be relevant to the repositioning effort and blend in a manner to make the 68 acres more part of the suburbs around the site. One must consider the population and the practicality of helping the low-income population get high-paying jobs, offering a training program for jobs that may only materialize for a few.

In Phoenixville, people did not want a Phoenixville mailing address and used to get Post Office Box at the Valley Forge Post Office. That perception has changed and it will also have to change in Norristown. In repositioning, there will need to be a wider effort to tie the

downtown and the community to the 68-acre site.

I think they have had their share of low-income subsidized housing, and any more would only result in reinforcing the image rather than breaking from it. In a repositioning effort, you are changing the opinion of the neighbors in the region. Whatever is created on the 68 acres must tie into the community and complement the downtown business district. The new Montgomery County government offices should help with the downtown portion of the project.

What will be needed is a concept and a theme that builds on the town's strengths and is accessible to the population of Norristown without regard to any education or income qualification for participation in whatever becomes of the site. But, like Phoenixville, it eventually will all blend.

The first part is already done — The acknowledgment that there is a need to reposition Norristown in the Regional Marketplace.

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