

# CHANGE IN THE SMALL TOWN



## CHANGE

By Barry Cassidy

As we are moving to the ¼ mark of the new century, some of the downtown real estate has taken on a new dimension. In many cases, the return to the small town has been an “in” thing to do. Some towns have embraced the efforts to become the renewed center of commerce, while some towns have not been able to make that transition. The difference in towns affects the real estate values in the political subdivision, and in turn the income from taxes.

People say location is a primary factor in determining value, but I feel that also a big factor is the town’s curb appeal. The little things make a big difference, like sidewalk conditions, public place maintenance and condition of housing stock. In many cases, it is the worst things in a community that can be a difference maker for a town.

It is what the town fathers do to address the major impediments to development which retard the so called “move back to the small towns.” People can talk about incentives and the like, but the first step is recognizing that there is an impediment. The vacant factory, the large tract of land that has been vacant forever tends to be overlooked. Those kinds of projects can end up being transformative and drive a revitalization.

I look at two projects that I worked on in Chester County. The Main Street Village project in Downingtown created 165 townhomes in the downtown, and it changed the dynamic of the community. In Phoenixville, Manny DeMutis put together the Phoenix Village Apartments with 250+ apartments and filled 400 linear feet of vacant ground on Bridge Street with commercial space.

In many cases, these kinds of development lead to a change in the downtown. It is a complete about face from the 1980s, when the vogue was to put senior housing prominently in the downtown. Market rate housing units are better for the competitive retail market in the downtown, versus the older fixed income folks that may or may not go out of the building every day.

It is not easy to do these kinds of projects. There are flood issues, contamination issues and the like. There normally is a reason these kinds of properties are vacant or underutilized. Much of the time, there are rumors and talk about the reason for the building’s underutilized status that many times is more myth than fact. The successful communities are the ones that recognize there is the potential for growth and act upon it.

Usually the first step is to do a vacant and underutilized study, to determine which properties and ground can be assessed. This normally includes the assessment information and maybe an update on the property’s position in the marketplace. The assessment should deal with all of the potential rumors about the property.

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Then you find developers and do all the feasibility studies. Now here is where it all falls apart. This not only takes money to do, which may or may not be well spent when all the information is correct. More importantly it takes time. Time which many people in local office may not be able to provide. As a result, many of these inventories end up on a shelf somewhere for one reason or another. Almost every town that I was in has had an inventory of vacant and underutilized survey from eight or nine years before.

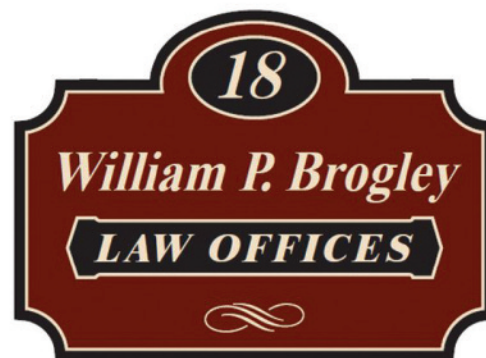
In Downingtown, there was the burned-out factory building at the corner Pennsylvania Avenue and Wallace Avenue and the O'Brien Machinery factory which were both contaminated. These two buildings were torn down and one is the current site of a Rite Aid and the other the main street village housing development.

In Phoenixville, it was the Polychem building and the Phoenix Steel site. The Polychem site became Franklin Commons, and the Phoenix Steel site is now on its way to developing into an apartment community.

All of these projects took a lot of time. I like to call it "going wide" with the scope of your work. You check every opportunity and try to renew interest in every project that had been in the past. Sometimes with a new cast of characters in elected office, they may or may not have interest in doing the project. There is always the possibility that someone has been blocking a project on the council and they have renewed interest to stop the project. I had a council person in Downingtown the quoted John Locke quite often and was against grants in general.

On one of my current projects I have an elected official who continues to repeat false information about a project. I feel that there is only so many times you can correct something like that without seeming argumentative. It is also a characteristic of borough council members to hear something once and keep repeating it no matter how many times they are proved wrong.

It is this human dynamic and the length of time that it takes to complete projects like this that doom some towns to never being able to be revitalized. It is almost a timing thing. The more complex, the more unlikely it is that the project will get done.



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