

# SOUTH STREET'S REDEFINED MARKET POSITION



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

I visited South Street in Philadelphia this week to have lunch with a long-time friend. It was the day after there was a news article that had people questioning the closure of the side streets during the Made in America concert weekend. It appeared to me that the police were trying to limit access to the commercial area because they were afraid of violence.

During my visit the street looked like a war zone. There were barricades on the street blocking parking on the 200 block. The 200 block, which was once a thriving area, had experienced setbacks when Chef's market closed in 2009. The closure left a gap on the north side of the block which was a hard space to fill after George left. Now most of the stores on the 200 block are closed. It does not get much better as you move up to the 300 block.

Jim's Steaks and the Eyes Gallery are closed because of the fire that took a toll on both buildings and forced the businesses to be interrupted until restoration efforts can be addressed. It was hard for me to walk the street any further than 4th and I went back to Bridget Foy's to meet my friend and discuss his new book.

I reviewed the photos that I took for my Last Days of Lockdown project, and it appeared that there were more vacancies now than there were during the 2021 lockdown. The street is in a downward spiral.

I don't think that you can blame the police, the merchants or political administrations that govern the area, although I am sure that the people in Society Hill and Queens Village wish that some of the actions relating to public urination and the like were still being enforced. The

"quality of life" issues mean something to the neighbors who live close to the street.

There was a time, back in the day, when the threat of construction of the Crosstown Expressway made real estate values tumble, and the artists and culture stores moved in and made South Street the "hippest street in town." It almost appears that the street has "crashed" again, but I am not sure if the rents are going to crash too. I believe that many of the buildings will sit vacant for some time.

I was hired there after the Mardi Gras riots to reposition the street after all the bad publicity concerning sexual assaults during the Greek Picnic and general lawlessness. Much of the lawlessness was related to the quality of life issues that are currently being ignored. I did what I could, but it was hard because merchants, residents, well positioned residents, and politicians all had different interpretations of what was wrong and how to fix it.

I enjoyed my time there, as I like the atmosphere of the street, and the fact that I knew about the street even before I moved to Philly. My previous street in Philly was Kensington Avenue from Front to Lehigh, and being in charge of South Street was a step up in terms of quality of stores and nature of the district.

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## Environmental Law is all I do.

My work includes stormwater permitting and disputes, underground tank issues, and government enforcement action resolution generally. I also frequently advise and represent businesses on issues of liability for potential site contamination caused by historic operations — invisible under buildings and pavement, **but threatening to devalue business property which you currently own.**

Whatever the issues, my goal is always to open a path to resolution, via "**mindful advocacy**" as an alternative to the substantial time and cost of an administrative hearing process or a civil lawsuit.

Similar issues arise in negotiating purchase and sale agreements for properties having history of industrial use, or even harmless-seeming neighborhood businesses such as dry cleaning or auto repair.

Sometimes I am contacted immediately after receiving a Notice of Violation or notice of an environmental claim; or early in the environmental due diligence period for a property sale; or even early enough to work with real estate counsel to negotiate a favorable allocation of environmental liabilities and a reasonable due diligence process. Sometimes it is a bit later in the game and some initial triage may be needed before "mindful advocacy" can succeed.

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## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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I have some good Kensington Avenue stories.

Every day I used to take the SEPTA flyer into Market East and walk along 10th and make a left on South and survey the district. I had on my headphones and had the playlist timed so that right about the time I got to 10th and South, the Orlons' song "South Street" started playing. I would look for signs of distress or neglect and address those issues as a first order of business. It was timed in a manner that I got to say "Hi" to DA Lynn Abraham every morning as she emerged from Starbucks with a coffee to go. She was on the street every morning to get her coffee and had a pretty good idea of what flies and what dies on the street.

One of the items I initiated was the hosing down of the street every morning. Garbage trucks were leaking smelly juice. Through environmental enforcement efforts and the city exemption given to me to hook up to the fire hydrant and hose down the streets in the morning, that smell disappeared. During my latest visit to the street, I recognized that familiar smell had returned.

I am not a big "close down the street" person as I believe that car traffic is good for a street. It pushes people to the storefronts and leaves less room for confrontation. Keeping the streets open is also good for masking the number of police that need to be on the street at any one time. Police are important and the appearance and staging are important elements to the success of the street.

I am not sure if there is any quick shift plausible for South Street to return to the days of glory. Maybe there is a need for it to crash in order to make a rebirth. After all, hippies like me are dying off and maybe that iteration cannot live forever. I would hope not, but it sure

looks bad down there and there is something needed.

I am going to go out on a limb and make some suggestions. The first is to stop closing down the street. I understand the outdoor dining during the pandemic, but it is not in the best interests of the street to have the closure. Never shut down the street and the cross streets at the same time, that constitutes merchant death.

Finally, involve the residents in the community policing as they are a large stakeholder in the process. It has to be hard on them to not to be able to enjoy the street many of them moved there to be close to.

The advent of gun violence in cities across America and the remote working environment, which got a boost by the pandemic, have the commercial districts in cities changing nationwide. As the Twenties in 20th century America were Roaring, the Twenties of the 21st century have yet to be defined, but certainly will leave an impact on society and the way that we live. Attacks on free speech and icons of our past will lead the way to a totalitarian society. Eliminating or redefining the ideas of what constitutes entertainment and protections concerning quality of life enjoyed in the past will have a profound effect on the nature of life as the century moves forward.

As I sit here in my suburban townhome in Downingtown, a one-hour SEPTA ride removed from my old stomping grounds, I fear for what will happen on South Street. I can only hope that the next iteration will be better. My visit there gave me an empty feeling in my stomach, although I do highly recommend the Crispy Chicken sandwich at Bridget Foy's.

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