

Reading Eagle

Berks County gets blueprint for 21st century success

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- Berks County has two choices:

To flourish by developing several walkable urban neighborhoods.

Or, become an economic backwater with an aged population whose children grew up and left for more exciting places.

That was the blunt assessment presented Tuesday to more than 200 people at an economic development forum in the Sheraton Reading Hotel, Wyomissing.

"If you don't do it, you'll put yourself out of position for the 21st century knowledge-based economy," said Christopher B. Leinberger, a real estate developer and a visiting fellow at The Brookings Institution, a nonpartisan public-policy Washington think tank. "If you don't do it, your economic survival is in question."

Leinberger and local civic leaders identified four projects that are vital components of greater Reading's blueprint for the future:

- Developing the Penn Corridor of shops, restaurants and entertainment venues along Penn Street and Penn Avenue in Reading, West Reading and Wyomissing.
- Developing apartments and retail space, such as the Wyomissing Square project now under construction.
- Connecting those areas with a trolley or rail line.
- Connecting Reading to Philadelphia via commuter rail.

At the forum organized by the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Leinberger said the focus for the Penn Corridor should be on managing and improving the existing buildings because there will be little new construction during the current financial crisis.

But developing walkable urban neighborhoods should remain a priority because people want to live in them, he said.

"If they don't get it here, they'll go elsewhere," Leinberger said.

Cities gain new appeal

For its size, Reading should have about four walkable urban neighborhoods, Leinberger said.

So far, there are three emerging along the Penn Corridor: downtown Reading, West Reading and central Wyomissing, he said.

About half of Americans would prefer this type of urban living over suburban lifestyles, Leinberger said. That would be a shift from the 1950s flight from cities to the suburbs.

Now people want to move back to urban centers featured on shows from "Seinfeld" to "Sex in the City," he added.

Hollywood developed those shows because they reflected trends that were revealed to TV executives by research, Leinberger said.

"This is not Hollywood leading us by the nose," he said. "This is a reflection of what we want."

The urban centers in Reading, West Reading and Wyomissing should be managed by one entity, he said.

"You can't afford to manage them separately," he said. "You're not big enough. This is definitely in the category of 'work together or hang separately.' "

Richard A. Ehst, regional Berks County president of Sovereign Bank, is working on the potential management of the corridor project.

For instance, Ehst said, the Sovereign Center's management, SMG Management Inc., could run all entertainment events in the corridor.

Ehst told the forum that the keys to developing the corridor include partnering with the Downtown Improvement District to improve safety and cleanliness in Reading, and further developing West Reading's parking and housing, particularly for Reading Hospital employees.

Focal points

Leinberger said priorities for revitalizing urban centers are usually realized in order:

- Arts and entertainment venues. In the Reading area that has already been realized through the Sovereign Center, the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts and R/C Reading Movies 11 & IMAX.
- An increase in occupied rental housing.
- An increase in occupied owner-occupied homes.
- An increase in retail and grocery stores.
- An increase in office employment.

One focal point of the corridor that includes some of those aspects is Wyomissing

Square, a retail, residential and hotel complex being built near Park Road behind Viva Euro-Fusion Bistro, which is closed during construction of the project.

The \$75 million project includes 248 apartments and town houses, a 135-room Courtyard by Marriott hotel and 32,000 square feet of retail space.

Rebirth of trolleys, rails

A transit rail system should run from Wyomissing to downtown because one of the main perks of living in a walkable urban neighborhood is for each household to be able get rid of at least one vehicle and put that money into an appreciating asset, such as a house, Leinberger said.

A rail system is superior to a bus system because the middle class simply won't ride buses, which are seen as transportation for the poor, he said.

"There's still the romance of rail," Leinberger said.

A first draft of a feasibility study for a trolley system has been completed and is being reviewed, said Eric Burkey, president of Burkey Construction Co. Inc., Reading.

Funding and operating costs remain major issues, he said.

"But it's important for bringing younger people to the area," Burkey said.

Ideally, a streetcar system would also be supplemented by a light-rail line to Philadelphia's nearest suburbs, Leinberger said.

Not having such a rail line would be like not building the freeways of the 1950s, he said.

In October, the plan moved a step closer to reality when \$1.225 million in federal funding was announced to rehabilitate the Franklin Street Station in Reading as a commuter rail station.

The \$2.5 million project has so far gained more than \$2 million in funding.

Establishing passenger train service from Wyomissing to the Philadelphia suburbs would cost \$400 million to \$600 million, said Leo D. Bagley, assistant director of the Montgomery County Planning Commission.

The service would provide seven round trips a day.

The proposal is a trimmed-down version of the Schuylkill Valley Metro, a failed effort to create passenger rail service from Wyomissing to Philadelphia. At an estimated cost of \$2 billion, the metro project never got off the drawing board after a decade.

The metro called for hourly service between Reading and Philadelphia, which made it more costly.

Financing details of the new plan will be released in early 2009, Bagley said.

"Financing will be a big challenge," he added.

During a question-and-answer period after the forum, Paul J. "Skip" Moyer, vice president of the local landlords Real Estate Investors Association of Berks County Inc., pointed out that Leinberger and many Brookings Institution fellows emphasize fostering urban density, but Reading's government has been focusing on dismantling multiunit apartment operations.

Leinberger said city councils around the country often micromanage issues they don't understand.

Ehst said community leaders are working to find candidates for City Council posts.

"We will be recruiting an enlightened team to run for election in 2009," Ehst said.