

Downtown Infill

Many times when doing downtown economic revitalization you encounter “holes” in the streetscape. These are lots in the downtown that for one reason or another do not have buildings on them. The lack of continuous buildings creates problems with foot traffic flow.

People like to walk in a circle. That is how the carnivals do it...any time you look at set up of a carnival you will see that they have everyone walking in a big circle. I remember my time with the Baltimore County Executive’s office when I was in charge of the Baltimore County Fair. We booked a carnival to go along with the fair. We had the county engineering department give us a layout for the fair. The first time we met with the carnival people they alerted us that our lot layout was lacking. They went on to explain the circle routine and I was converted.

When I started working in downtowns I quickly adopted the pedestrian circle strategy... see a YouTube video: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmxj7fdJLgI>). There are things you can do with the vacant storefronts or parking lots but there is not much you can do with a vacant lot other than build upon it.

One of the first real steps in the revitalization of Phoenixville was development of what later became the Iron Hill parcel. There was a huge hole in the streetscape where a vacant lot took up about 1/5th of the block and was bordered with vacant buildings on the 100 block of Bridge Street. The building of the 4 story building, and the location of Iron Hill in that building brought new life to the 100 block of Bridge Street, and made the stores around it more desirable. In addition to that lot we also built a building on a lot that was a little 100 feet up the street and in the general location of the Iron Hill complex. These two new buildings added life to the streetscape and made for a more exciting downtown.

One of the problems with that development occurred when the other side of the street had 400 linear feet of vacant lot. This crippled the walk in a circle theory of crowd movement. The 400 feet was part of the Phoenix Steel Site and had been through many planning and development efforts but could not seem to get developed.

Considering that I left my job as the main street director in Phoenixville I decided to take a job revitalizing the steel site. The 400 feet was now my domain again. I was happy to have that as my project because it was something in which I was familiar. Developing those 400 linear feet of streetscape will complete the 100 block of Bridge Street and make the streetscape “whole” without a “hole”.

Doing a project where there has been controversy in the past will always have issues associated with them which makes it difficult to develop. The steel property is no different...but after a number of weeks, the property changed hands and now the process of developing the site begins.

The property is much more than the 400 linear feet that lines Bridge Street but I will concentrate my comments to those 400 feet. The idea for the 400 feet, which extends from 101 Bridge Street to the Bike Shop, is to resemble the rest of the town. The

architecture of the Iron Hill building and the other infill building we did matched the streetscape and kept the look of the downtown. The steel site will be no different. The buildings will be mixed use and resemble what is downtown, not to look like it came down from Mars and was planted there to grow. We will seek to resemble the streetscape as it would have been in the past. Buildings that are similar in size to those around them and resemble the architectural character of the town.

I do not believe it is hard to resemble the buildings in the downtown but invariably some of the architects and engineers working on projects like this do not see the utility of keeping things looking the same. After all, if you are designing a building and it is “your baby” you want to build it in the image that you desire. Some developers want to make the buildings stand out and think that making them look different is a help. It is not a help, it is a hindrance to revitalization.

If you meld the 4 points of the main street program together...and it is the only way that it works, you will have to have design point be a big part of the program. Design is not just making the building “look nice”, as my mom used to say, but also make it fit into the surroundings. If the buildings in the downtown are housing over retail that resemble Italianate architecture you should strongly consider building the same style and use. If it is necessary to build something else you should keep the architectural style and character.

So when planning the project we went with some apartments over retail and are about go to the planning commission in February. Since we are going to sell all of the apartments to an apartment operator we will be leasing the retail. We will try to keep the leasing as it is in the downtown, local and regional retail operators. Nothing can kill the rent structure of a downtown like a couple of nationals paying above market rent.

When this project is complete it will offer Phoenixville the potential for people to walk in a circle and see all that is Phoenixville. Although the revitalization of the town will not be complete, the 100 block of Bridge Street will finally be completed. It is not easy to do everything at once and this project has taken my close to eight years to finish. It is a matter of sticking with the 4 points of the Main Street program and having a plan for what things are going to look like and what function they are going to perform.

Leasing the retail will be fun. Although I have referred people to the owner this will be the first time that I represented the properties for lease. It will be a new experience for me...but at least I know that we are doing the right thing with the development and the town will be made better for it.