

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

ULI sparks Pottstown's 'town center'

Few people remember, but Pottstown's borough hall and Smith Family Plaza on High Street were first conceived in 1989 by a panel for ULI — the Urban Land Institute.

Founded in 1936 and based in Washington, ULI is considered the nation's premier research institution for urban planning and development.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

A panel of experts from ULI first came to town in 1976 after Bethlehem Steel closed its Pottstown fabricating plant, eliminating more than 1,000 jobs. The ULI panel helped Pottstown establish a strategy

to attract new industry.

ULI's recommendations were so useful that 13 years later, another ULI panel was invited back to the borough by Pottstown Area Industrial Development Inc. (PAID) to update its study. Nine panelists spent a week visiting Pottstown and conducted about 90 confidential interviews with civic and business leaders.

The 1989 report contained several key recommendations that were diligently pursued by the community in the years that followed.

Borough Hall and Town Center

For more than 20 years, Pottstown Council had recognized the need for a new or expanded borough hall. Several plans had been drawn up, but nothing had been done.

Meanwhile, in the mid 1970s the borough had acquired and demolished the Shuler House Hotel and other properties on High Street in front of the former Reading Railroad passenger station. Numerous ideas had been suggested for the use of this prime downtown property, but none had been carried out. The parcels sat vacant for 20 years — a downtown eyesore and testament to the borough's inability to get anything done.

ULI suggested the parcels should be used for a new town center and borough hall.

"While Pottstown is the likely candidate for the region's urban center — its urban focal point — it lacks a strong town center," the ULI panel wrote.

Nine years later, a coalition of civic and business

leaders persuaded the county and Borough Council to build a new borough hall and town park at the location recommended by ULI — the most dramatic downtown revitalization project in decades.

Community College

The 1989 ULI report made another key recommendation: persuading the Montgomery County Commissioners to build a satellite campus of the Montgomery County Community College in central Pottstown.

Today, it is easy to forget the county was considering the construction of numerous small satellite campuses — not just one — and that other municipalities were competing for them.

The ULI report galvanized the Pottstown community — borough council, the school district, the Hill School, PAID, and the Tri-County Chamber of Commerce — to identify a Pottstown site for the community college and then lobby the county and the state Department of Education to build a major campus there.

Thanks to the most concerted local effort in decades, the county agreed to build a \$15 million campus for 1,000 students on six acres of land acquired from PECO Energy on what is now College Drive. The West Campus, which opened in 1996, expanded into the former Vaughn Knitting Mills factory building on High Street in 2006, connected by a new pedestrian underpass.

New ULI panel

This week, a panel of experts from ULI is visiting Pottstown, sponsored by the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation, to build on previous studies.

The panel will report its findings and make recommendations from 8 to 11 a.m. Friday at the Steel River Playhouse on High Street.

The panelists represent urban areas including Washington, Charlotte, Nashville, Indianapolis and San Francisco. We look forward to their perspectives and ideas.

