

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

County is Pottstown's best friend

First of two articles

Pottstown Borough will be eligible to receive millions of dollars in economic development loans and grants from Montgomery County this year and the following six years.

The funding will come from a sweeping \$105 million county program to revitalize Pottstown, Norristown, and other older boroughs. Pottstown and Norristown alone will be eligible for \$14 million this year.

The ambitious plan is the latest in a long series of county initiatives, stretching back more than 20 years, to improve the quality of life in older Montgomery County boroughs that lost their industrial base in the 1970s and 1980s. Pottstown has been a particular beneficiary of county efforts.

In 1987, the county awarded Pottstown nearly \$1 million to install new sidewalks, street trees, period lamps and other streetscape improvements on High Street between Hanover and Charlotte streets. The county later paid to extend those improvements to Evans Street.

That same year, Montgomery County rescued Pottsgrove Manor from years of neglect by the state Historical and Museum Commission. The county signed a 99-year lease with the state to manage the historic site and spent \$750,000 to restore John Potts' 1752 home, making it one of the gems of the county park system.

In 1989, the county commissioners decided to build a satellite campus of the Montgomery County Community College, located in Blue Bell, in the western end of the county. Responding to a concerted campaign by Pottstown civic leaders, 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 on High Street in 2006, connected by a passageway for pedestrians and bicyclists under the Norfolk Southern Railroad tracks, which was also largely funded by the county.

In 1998, the county acquired a vacant four-acre tract near High and Hanover streets which it donated to the borough for Pottstown's new borough hall and downtown park.

The new borough hall opened two years later, and the adjacent park, Smith Family Plaza, opened in 2002.

Next, the county helped Pottstown acquire about 30 acres from PECO for what is now Riverfront Park and an old PECO maintenance building that is now the Schuylkill River Heritage Center. In addition, the county paid for the engineering needed to construct Keystone Boulevard, opening up the Keystone Opportunity Zone in 2003.

The county's efforts to help older towns were formalized in 2000 with the creation of a special \$5 million annual fund for older boroughs. A Revitalization Board was appointed by the county commissioners to recommend worthy projects.

In the years since, the county has invested millions of dollars in Pottstown for such projects as:

- High Street back-in angle parking, adding 95 new spaces, and bike lanes.
- The renovation of the Fidelity Bank building as offices and a restaurant.
- The conversion of the former Jefferson School into senior apartments.
- Subsidies for first-time home buyers and de-conversion of rental units.
- Acquisition of land and construction funds for a carousel building and a new parks department headquarters.
- Reconstruction and new amenities at Memorial Park and smaller parks.
- Acquisition and renovations to the former Newberry building as the Tri-County Performing Arts Center.

As much as Montgomery County has done for Pottstown, however, it can't solve all our problems.

Both Pottstown Borough and the Pottstown School District must make much better use of their existing resources. We will discuss Pottstown's strengths — and most significant challenge — in Thursday's Mercury.

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Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Summary

- **During the last 20 years, Montgomery County has invested millions of dollars toward the revitalization of Pottstown and other struggling boroughs. But the county can't do it all for us. We must make better use of our existing resources.**