

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Building on strengths, not panaceas

For more than a year, the financial news has been grim both nationally and locally. In October, the national unemployment rate topped 10 percent, the highest in 26 years. Economists warn America may face its worst joblessness since the Great Depression.

Here in Pottstown, the borough government is beginning its 2010 budget process with a \$1.2 million shortfall between revenues and expenses. The school district, which depends on the same tax base as the borough, will also likely face a large revenue gap next year.

The borough's tax base is declining, and according to a financial consultant, it is expected to decline for at least five more years.

Wishful thinking won't help

Unfortunately, instead of downsizing, the borough has wasted precious years in wishful thinking — hoping some big outside developers will materialize and boost our tax base to allow continued spending.

Between 2000 and 2008, the borough employed two economic development directors at a total cost to the taxpayers of more than \$800,000. There is no evidence the borough gained any jobs or development as a result.

In fact, the number one impediment to economic development is high taxes, and both the borough and the school district have among the highest real estate taxes in the state.

But if we can get spending under control, there is hope for the future, because Pottstown is perfectly designed and located to capture the development of the future — “smart growth.”

The future is smart growth

Smart growth is the name given to development that conserves land by using smaller lot sizes and placing houses, stores and workplaces in close proximity. It promotes walking, bicycling and mass transit.

Both the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Montgomery County have officially endorsed smart growth. Builders' organizations like the Urban Land Institute also endorse smart growth as the sustainable development pattern of the future.

During the last 15 years, hundreds of

“smart growth communities” have sprung up across the nation, many of them as “infill” projects that recycle previously developed land in our cities and towns.

Forest City Stapleton

The nation's largest such development covers the site of the former Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was replaced by a new airport in 1995. At 7 square miles, Stapleton is larger in land area than such Pennsylvania cities as Lancaster, Harrisburg, Lebanon, and York.

Forest City Stapleton, the master developer of the site, is recreating Pottstown on a larger scale — building a pedestrian-oriented community for 30,000 residents and workplaces for 35,000 people.

Neighborhood schools

A key element to Stapleton's design is walkable neighborhood schools. According to Jon Ratner, one of the developers, “An essential part of our efforts to attract families to the community is the placement of small schools in walkable neighborhoods, which helps foster healthier residents and a stronger sense of community.” Stapleton has six schools thus far, he says, “and as the community grows, new elementary schools are planned, all designed to be within walking distance of our homes.”

Building on our strengths

Pottstown already enjoys walkable neighborhood schools. We have other unique assets, such as historic architecture, tree-lined streets, a traditional downtown, and an interconnected network of streets that links homes, stores, offices and parks like our greenway on the river.

There are 1 million middle class households living within a 35-mile radius of Pottstown. Over the next decade, Pottstown only needs to entice about 3,000 households to move into our historic homes, and a few newly constructed houses, to vastly improve our town.

In these troubled economic times, a growing number of people are seeking a more cost-effective lifestyle.

To attract these people, we need to build on our assets, not wait for some outside developer to come rescue us.

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