

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## What we can control

Recently, we reported the total number of employees in Pottstown last year dropped to about 8,500 from 10,000 in recent years.

However, the employee list we received from the borough failed to include Pottstown's largest employer, Pottstown Hospital, which had more than 1,000 employees before the pandemic.

That obviously undermines the credibility of the whole list — *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*.

Back in 1950, Pottstown's heyday, it had the same population it has today — about 22,000 residents. Borough business and industry employed more than 12,000 people.

So we have a lot fewer employees in the borough now, but there's also far more mobility. The Montgomery County Planning Commission estimates more than 70 percent of employed Pottstown residents have jobs outside the borough.

Likewise, it's safe to assume that most people who work in the borough don't actually live here. For example, about 85 percent of the Pottstown School District's professional staff lives outside of Pottstown.

Therefore, the impact of how many jobs we have in Pottstown isn't as important as it once was. It's the people who actually live here who have the most influence on our quality of life, and the ones local government should be most interested in serving.

For example, Pennsylvania workers pay a 1 percent earned income tax, split between the worker's school district and local municipality.

The income tax for a Pottstown teacher who lives in North Coventry will be split between the township and the Owen J. Roberts School District.

The income tax of an Owen J. Roberts teacher who lives in Pottstown will come to the borough and Pottstown School District.

But the major source of funding for the school district and borough is not the income tax but the property tax. Assessments are based on the value of a property, not how many people work there.

Half of Pottstown's top ten employers — the hospital, school district, the Hill School, the borough, and

Creative Health Services — are exempt from real estate taxes.

Other properties, like the gargantuan former Bethlehem Steel complex, actually employ relatively few people in comparison to their size.

Last week, we discussed the financial woes of Tower Health, which owns Pottstown Hospital. If the local hospital ever closed, it would be a terrific blow to the borough's quality of life.

But like the earlier "body-blow" closures of the Bethlehem Steel and Firestone plants, that decision would be out of our hands locally. Bethlehem Steel and Firestone closed because of national trends of automation and outsourcing jobs to foreign countries, not something we could control in Pottstown.

At a recent Zoom meeting sponsored by Pottstown Area Industrial Development Inc. (PAID), various initiatives to encourage economic development in Pottstown were discussed.

PAID director Peggy Lee Clark pointed out that \$2.5 million in state grant funding has recently been awarded to borough businesses: renovating the former Mercury building into a boutique hotel; repurposing the third floor of the BB&T building for a Y3 Life Sciences Incubator; and helping construct a biomass gasification facility along Keystone Boulevard.

While these initiatives are important, the day to day quality of life for people who live in the borough has more to do with its appearance.

When people see trash scattered in yards, sidewalks and streets; when they see poorly maintained and blighted buildings; when they see cars and trucks parked in yards or junked vehicles in driveways and parking lots, it tells them Pottstown is not a desirable place to live.

Code enforcement, which is something Pottstown does control, can be a force for good or for ill.

When code enforcement is used to throw up barriers to property owners trying to renovate structures, it can decrease, not increase, the viability of Pottstown.

When it is used to eliminate blight and eyesores, it can improve everyone's quality of life.

The most important code question is, will the proposed work, big or small, make things better or worse?



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton