

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Housing patterns isolate the poor

It's like something from a tabloid:

**CHURCH VS. STATE**

**Borough cites High Street churches for feeding the needy**

This headline from a July 3 *Sunday Mercury* article was followed up by a WHYY on-line article:

**Two Pottstown churches cited for violating the zoning code's definition of 'church,' by offering free meals and other services**

Other similar articles appeared online.

This flood of bad press was precipitated by letters sent to Christ Episcopal Church, 316 High St., and Mission First (former First United Methodist Church), 414 High St.,



Commentary by Tom Hylton

informing them they were in violation of Pottstown's zoning ordinance because their primary use had changed from being a place of worship to being a social service provider, which is prohibited in the downtown business district.

Whatever the legal merits of this zoning determination, the optics are certainly not good.

The controversy comes because of two different missions: The borough is trying to revitalize its downtown, and the churches are trying to serve the poor.

As one longtime observer noted, "downtown merchants and property owners don't want the churches serving poor people on the sidewalk, because that scares customers and investors away.

"On the other hand, the churches believe adamantly that serving the poor is their mission, and they want their work to be as visible as possible. Besides, most of the poor they serve live downtown."

This conflict is just one facet of a much larger issue.

Changing housing patterns have created two distinct classes of municipalities, one for the middle class and affluent, and one for the working class and the poor.

When the High Street churches were built in the mid 1880s, Pottstown was the economic, social, and residential hub of the region.

For the next century, until the 1960s, Pottstown thrived as a manu-

facturing center with a vibrant commercial downtown and residential neighborhoods with people of all incomes.

However, with the proliferation of cars and new housing on large lots, the middle class and the affluent started moving out of Pottstown. Stores migrated from High Street to new malls, and businesses moved to spacious campuses with ample parking. Those who couldn't afford cars and new housing were increasingly isolated in Pottstown.

Today, Pottstown is the poorest municipality between Reading and Norristown, with the highest percentage of low income residents in the region.

Besides the lowest housing prices in the region, and a bus system that enables people without a car to get around, Pottstown has an abundance of social service agencies that attract even more poor people.

Most of these agencies are subsidized by Pottstown taxpayers, because their non-profit properties are exempt from real estate taxes. Pottstown's tax base is shrinking, and the number of tax exempt properties is growing.

If there were no tax-exempt properties in Pottstown, borough real estate tax revenues would increase more than \$2 million annually.

Unlike the Pottstown School District, which receives state subsidies based in part on local poverty and tax effort, the borough receives nothing from the state.

Comfortable suburban municipalities are happy with this arrangement. Let someone else deal with the poor.

Pottstown's Tax Base	
Year	Total assessed valuation
1998	\$816,841,351
2022	\$760,866,089

Tax exempt properties	
2011	305
2021	345
Annual taxes lost: \$2 million	

Municipal tax rate 2022	
Pottstown	13.95
Lower Pottsgrove	4.12
Upper Pottsgrove	4.0
West Pottsgrove	3.0