So much yet to fix

Urban expert says gains not enough

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Jan 4, 2007 — Passing by large, expensive homes dotting the foothills of Wyndham Hills, David Rusk says he understands why Indian Rock Elementary School is one of the top performing schools in York County.

The homes are typically occupied by higher wage-earning, two-parent families who support their children's efforts in the classroom.

As an urban expert who has reviewed the condition of 332 urban centers, Rusk says he knows poverty and family status are the keys to a child's education.

Statistics show Indian Rock in the York Suburban School District has little poverty, less than 7 percent of the student population. The result: More than 97 percent of the students have passing test scores.

Less than three miles away at Jackson Elementary School, Rusk sees a divergent picture of poverty and failing schools. The city's population, income levels, jobs base and school test scores - indicators of the community's health - are alarming. Overall, the picture in York remains troubled, as it was 10 years ago.

Rusk points out a proliferation of low-income, public housing that spans the city, including the Cable House, Village of York, Parkway Homes and the Housing Authority of York.

In between, he sees older homes, many abandoned by families who left for the suburbs. Most of the homes were bought by speculators and investors. Today, they are largely occupied by renters, single mothers and the poorest of the poor.

By Rusk's count, more than 80 percent of students inside Jackson Elementary are poor. More than 60 percent of the students have failing test results. The storyline is repeated in York's five other elementary schools.

"Status of family and poverty is the number one predictor of performance, not student-teacher ratios or the amount spent on education," Rusk said.

If one student could be moved from a failing inner city school to a thriving suburban counterpart, Rusk predicts, the student's test results would jump by 15 percent.

"There is no other reason than the peer group and support structure," Rusk said.

No fundamental change

Rusk is one of the best at diagnosing urban problems. He listed York as a dying city because of chronic population loss, depressed property values and high concentrations of poverty and minorities. The problems were detailed in "Renewing Our Community: The Rusk Report on the Future of Greater York," issued in 1996, after Better York, a group of civic and business leaders, hired him as a consultant.

Outside of a stronger recognition of problems by community leaders, he said, little progress has been made since the report he produced 10 years ago.

Since he issued the Rusk Report - a critical analysis of York's health - statistics indicate the city is worse off. York continues to be one of the poorest and most racially segregated cities in the country - a finding that shouts out in Rusk's recent travels around the greater York area.

"I haven't seen any fundamental changes," Rusk said.

Progress vs. stagnation

The city's strongest asset is its historic homes and neighborhoods. Amid a swatch of vacant and blighted homes, Rusk sees signs of stable middle-class city neighborhoods in the Avenues, Springdale, Fireside, Newton Square and Locust Street. The downtown is starting to see millions of dollars in investment in housing and business.

Still, the road to York's recovery has many turns and hills. More than 70 percent of the city's residents are poor. The few residents attracted to older, historic homes have become weary of the sound of gunfire, crime and too few police while shouldering the highest tax rate in the county.

Parents who can help improve the schools move when their children become school age. Those who can get out, do, says Rusk, a cycle repeated in virtually every failing city.

Their destination is the healthier suburbs with stronger schools, less crime and low poverty. But suburbia is starting to feel the sting from pressure on open spaces, higher taxes, increasing cost of services and crime.

Like most cities, York is stuck in a cycle of malaise. Not much will change without a new wave of middle-class homeowners. But homeowners are reluctant to invest.

Neighborhoods deteriorate, property values fall, tax money dwindles and the city continues to slide.

"For a middle-class professional family with children, a commitment to city schools is just not a rational choice," Rusk said.

Example of hope

Walking along East Locust Street, Rusk sees beautiful brick townhouses reminiscent of San Francisco. The block is a prime example of urban hope, winning back neighborhoods and winning back the middle class.

"This block in no way is an image of poverty as so many other blocks in the city are," Rusk said.

Locust Street was part of an urban renewal project in the 1980s. City leaders sparked revitalization in the once prosperous southeast neighborhood near South Queen Street, left crippled in the aftermath of the 1969 city race riots.

Locust Street is known as an island of prosperity. Most people are unaware of its beauty, lost because of nearby decay, trash-strewn streets and abandoned homes.

Still, Locust Street is showing what could be signs of trouble. Rusk points to newly placed for-sale signs and wonders if people have lost hope and are getting out.

The city's depressed property values indicates lost confidence. The 2,144-square-foot Victorian home for sale on Locust Street would easily get $700,000 in Old Town Alexandria; $500,000 in a gentrified area of Baltimore. Here in York, the owner wants $119,000. Some real-estate agents say the owner will be lucky to get $100,000.

Homes 'locked' in poverty

As he approaches Queen and Princess streets, Rusk sees efforts to reverse the city's decline. There are new roads, streetlights and plans for a park behind the Spanish American Center as part of the nearly $8 million Olde Towne East Renaissance project.

Seven recently built townhomes near Locust Street have new owners. The homes sold for $70,000 each, about half what they would get in the suburbs. While the price is attractive, marketing surveys in Olde Towne East show prospective buyers worry about crime, quality schools and high taxes.

Traveling throughout the city, Rusk repeatedly points out well-built, large, turn-of-the-20th-century homes with enormous potential. If only, he says.

"The value (of historic homes) is locked up in a concentration of poverty. It is the concentration that is so intense."

Signs of life

Rusk heard from an old friend that the downtown is alive when the Strand-Capitol Performing Arts Center has a show. The friend hopes to see the same energy when the $32 million Sovereign Bank Stadium opens and an anticipated 4,000 fans come to town.

The projects hope to attract people from the suburbs to invest, eat and shop in once-vacant buildings and storefronts.

Rusk said he feels the momentum and believes it will last. Only time will tell if the lure of downtown attractions helps people overcome their image of a city with muggings, drug dealers, street gangs and prostitution sweeps, he said.

Rusk also wonders if the "boutique" development on high-profile city streets is penetrating into the neighborhoods.

Partnerships

Around the block from the stadium, Rusk tours an old industrial wasteland between the Maryland-Pennsylvania Railroad tracks and the Codorus

Creek. There, construction of the nearly $50 million Northwest Triangle - the city's largest redevelopment project in history - is expected to begin this spring.

The Northwest Triangle is the latest public-private partnership to try to rebuild a city. The partnerships have long shown results in improving recreation, education, economic development and quality of life. The Northwest Triangle hopes to attract up to 200 new homeowners into $225,000 townhouses, up to 500 jobs, more shops and businesses, and taxes when tax incentives expire.

Doubters of the Northwest Triangle, Rusk said, should look at the Susquehanna Commerce Towers, a $35 million upscale office complex built on a vacant, non-tax producing lot. Today, the towers house 1,000 jobs that could have easily left the city.

As a former politician, Rusk said he knows the projects are controversial and perceived by average residents as giveaways to rich businesses.

Without incentives, businesses will invest elsewhere, leaving cash-strapped cities, like York, without the prospect of a future payoff. Rusk saw it in Albuquerque, N.M., where he was mayor.

Revenue beyond the city

Waiting in traffic, Rusk points to the shopping center, malls and commercial development dotting U.S. Route 30 in West Manchester Township. If only there weren't these invisible municipal boundaries, he says, and the city was allowed to annex land and increase its tax base beyond its narrow 5.1-square-mile border.

The city would reap the taxes from places such as the York Galleria and West Manchester Mall, he says.

What hurts the suburbs

As he heads down George Street toward Interstate 83, Rusk sees the damage of urban flight: open spaces are swallowed up by new developments.

A fragmented government system that Rusk calls "little boxes" compounds the problem. There is no regional planning. Schools and governments work autonomously, creating a costly duplication of services.

Residents in suburbia are starting to feel the city's pain. Tax bills are rising from the building of new schools, roads and from hiring more police, fire and public employees.

The city's problems are spreading to older boroughs and inner-ring townships in the York area, Rusk said. The suburbs will eventually run out of land to use to increase the tax base and will have to contend with aging infrastructure, blight and crime, he said.

Municipalities surrounding York are already showing wear, Rusk said.

Rusk fears for the city

Unless the city and its suburban neighbors unite in a "big box strategy," Rusk fears not much will improve. Change won't come easy. Suburbia likes the way things are. They don't want to share the responsibility for the city's problems. They are not interested in a costly bailout.

There needs to be a meaningful dialogue on issues such as mandatory inclusionary housing, school consolidation, municipal mergers, revenue sharing and tax reform, Rusk said. School consolidation was broached at a community summit in November but nothing concrete has happened. Tax reform has been elusive for decades. Other suggestions are lost in a lack of political will.

The talks won't be embraced, particularly controversial concepts such as mandatory housing, where the suburbs would be asked to dedicate one-third of new development to low-income housing. Rusk has pitched inclusionary housing to nearly 100 cities. Only one, Baltimore City, is interested. His critics call the idea social engineering.

"It (the solutions) is not simple at all. It takes a tremendous amount of time and takes developing a tremendous amount of grassroots power to do," he said.

If nothing changes, Rusk fears the city will be dead in his next 10-year update, and a few surrounding communities will make his watch list.

"For a lot of York's residents, there is not a bright future to be made for them," Rusk said.

Problems on agenda for discussion

Metro-York brings experts to talk with the community

Urban experts David Rusk and Myron Orfield will be part of a community dialogue to discuss potential solutions gripping the greater York area in an event sponsored by Metro-York, a project of YorkCounts.

The dialogues, scheduled for Wednesday and Jan. 24, will be an opportunity for public participation around YorkCounts' Metro-York project.

These national experts will engage the public on topics that confront the region.

Rusk will lead the first dialogue 7 p.m. Wednesday at York College's Recital Hall. He is a leading American regionalist who combines scholarship with practical political experience. He has been a state legislator in New Mexico and mayor of Albuquerque, the nation's 36th largest city.

Rusk wrote three books and numerous pieces that appeared in papers published nationwide. In 1996, Rusk wrote "Renewing Our Community: The Rusk Report on the Future of Greater York," a 24-page supplement published by the York Daily Record. Conclusions from the report were the catalyst for YorkCounts' Indicators Report, which was released in 2001, and the YorkCounts Action Plan, released in 2004.

Rusk has published three books: "Cities without Suburbs," "Baltimore Unbound: A Strategy for Regional Renewal" and "Inside Game/Outside Game: Winning Strategies for Saving Urban America."

Myron Orfield will lead the second community dialogue at 7 p.m. Jan. 24 at York College's Recital Hall. Orfield is the executive director of the Institute of Race and Poverty and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. He is also an associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Law.

Orfield served as the Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota in 2005-06. He is an authority on civil rights, state and local government, state and local finance, land use, regional governance and the legislative process.

He wrote two books: "Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability" and "American Metropolitics: The New Suburban Reality."

The goal of Metro-York is to recommend plans to provide a short-term help for financially distressed municipalities and school districts; set the stage for self-sustaining future models for the metropolitan York region and achieve overall positive trends in educational attainment for students.

To learn more about Metro-York or YorkCounts, visit http://www.yorkcounts.org or call 815-6430.