

Rusk: Ten years later

Our community has done too little to stem the city's decline.

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Jan 7, 2007 — It's hard to believe, but it's been 10 years since noted urban expert David Rusk came to York, performed an exhaustive demographic analysis of our community, and put forth suggestions on how the city at the core of our county might have a bright future.

Or even, frankly, a future at all.

Five years later, Mr. Rusk came back and updated his assessment, finding we'd done almost nothing to stem the city's decline. In fact, he said then that York might have already passed the point of no return.

Well, he's back. In the fall, he spoke about segregation in our county at an event sponsored by the York City Human Relations Commission.

And he'll be in town Wednesday to talk to a gathering sponsored by YorkCounts.

It's good to see he hasn't completely given up on us. He says York, with the wonderful architecture in its old rowhomes, is one of his favorite communities.

But it's sad that we keep disappointing him by failing to do much to resuscitate the city and stem the spread of decline to its nearby suburbs.

More importantly, it's sad that we keep disappointing ourselves. It's tragic that so many fail to see the importance of what Mr. Rusk has been trying to tell us for a decade.

The city has become a center of segregated poverty.

Without outside intervention - regional cooperation - it will be virtually impossible for it to "pull itself up by its bootstraps." There's little room for new construction. The tax base is dwindling - leaving the city unable to pay for the increasingly expensive services (police, etc.) that a poverty-stricken populace requires.

It all becomes a cycle of failure - in fact, a cyclone, as these same problems engulf inner-ring suburbs that have themselves become landlocked.

And we're just sitting by watching it happen.

Well, many are. Some, hoping it's not too late the reverse the decline, are doing something.

The YorkCounts group completed its own statistical analysis of our community - and has spawned efforts to make improvements.

The county's first education summit was held in the fall - and one of the things discussed was the possibility of consolidating school districts, which might help equalize the amount spent per pupil and dilute the concentration of poverty in the city district.

YorkCounts has also created a Metro-York subgroup focused specifically on the regionalization issues raised in the Rusk Reports. The group's task is to study and propose specific action items that would spur regional cooperation.

That proposal is due this summer - and we eagerly await the agenda.

Meanwhile, let's open our minds to what Mr. Rusk has to say.

Join him and Myron Orfield - an authority on local government, state and local finance, land use, regional governance and the legislative process with the Brookings Institution - at two community dialogue forums slated this month.

We can't afford to wait another decade to get started renewing our community.