

10 steps to a better York region

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Jan 21, 2007 — **Editor's note:** *Urban expert David Rusk recently spoke to a packed house of community leaders at the York Expo Center about steps he thinks need to be taken to rejuvenate York City and prevent the decline of its suburbs. Following is his summary of those proposals:*

- Secure special legislation from the General Assembly to endow the York County Board of Commissioners with the authority to designate Central York municipalities as a "community of common interest." (Such a bill might be proposed as a state pilot project as a model for inter-governmental collaboration.)
- As part of this "community of common interest," have the county board of commissioners designate York City's historic neighborhoods as a "regional asset district" for which a regional tax base sharing program would be developed to share the increase in property tax revenues as the neighborhoods would be redeveloped. (York City would be allocated a sufficient share to cover the costs of providing basic municipal services.)
- In order to allow for the orderly relocation of many current low-income residents, have the county and all participating municipalities implement a regional "fair share" workforce housing plan. Thinning the concentration of low-income families will accelerate private market interest in redeveloping historic properties for new, higher-income residents. It will also allow city families to move into suburban areas where a) retail and service jobs are growing, and b) where high-performance, low-poverty schools are.
- Through both public and private funds, increase the financial capabilities of the Crispus Attucks Community Development Corporation to buy and renovate homes for current residents who desire to stay; this will assure continued racial and economic diversity within successfully re-gentrifying neighborhoods (a claim which Georgetown or Old Town Alexandria, for example, cannot make).
- Have the York County Chamber of Commerce or other business organization launch two marketing campaigns - a regional campaign to attract Timonium-Hunt Valley professionals to Old York City and a national campaign to promote Old York City as an emerging center of the design professions.
- In order to attract child-rearing professional families to Old York City, organize a regional elementary school with an enriched curriculum and full work-day schedule (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.). Set the enrollment policy as 1) no more than half the pupils to be enrolled from the historic neighborhoods, and 2) at least half the pupils to be children of downtown York office workers or employees of other major York City employers, such as York Hospital and York College *regardless of where they live in other municipalities in Central York*. Such a school will likely be very attractive to workers who otherwise face "latchkey" problems with their young children. This will create a city-based elementary school with a much more economically balanced enrollment that will be attractive to new families considering buying renovated historic homes.
- Extend the regional school program by allowing graduates of the school to attend any middle school or high school in Central York.
- Secure special state funds as part of the pilot project legislation to cover the special costs of the regional school program.
- Implement the overall program through binding inter-governmental agreements between the county and municipalities, or
- If many municipalities decline to participate voluntarily (which is likely), the special state law should empower the county government to hold a special election to approve or reject the plan. All voters living in the "community of common interest" would vote as a single box; the voters of a given municipality could not just opt out. If the plan is approved by a majority of voters of the "community of common interest," the plan would go into effect in all covered municipalities.

Would such a program win the support of a majority of voters in Central York? I don't know. But at least, for once, the people of Central York would have an opportunity to put aside the parochial interests of their "little boxes," have a debate over what is best for the region as a whole, and act as regional citizens.

None of the elements of this proposal is untried and untested. Indeed, "Big Box" communities implicitly undertake such comprehensive redevelopment activities all the time. Pennsylvania's "little boxes" governmental structure blocks the kinds of initiatives that are standard operating procedure in the South and West.

I understand that an informal guideline for Metro York is "that if it's easy to do, it probably isn't worth doing."

What I propose is certainly not easy to do. It is, however, certainly worth doing. It is vital for the survival and prosperity of York City, of Central York, and, most importantly, for all of our children's futures.

Orfield to speak Jan. 24

Urban expert Myron Orfield will be part of a community dialogue to discuss potential solutions to problems gripping the greater York area. He will speak at 7 p.m. Jan. 24 at Recital Hall at York College.