

The Pottstown Mercury (pottsmmerc.com), Serving Pottstown, PA

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News

## 'Fix it first' mantra is urged for roads, pipes

Friday, July 23, 2010

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*Fifth in a series on the Building One Pennsylvania summit*

LANCASTER — When your car needs spark plugs, do you buy a new car rather than pay for the parts?

When your house needs a paint job, do you move to a new house rather than pay the painter?

Of course not.

But often enough, when given the choice between paying for repairs to existing roads or sewer pipes in older towns or funding a brand new sewer line that will open up a farm field to subdivisions, the state or federal government picks the latter.

As a result, the existing town with the dwindling tax base, stressed budget and older infrastructure is left patching rather than replacing the 100-year-old sewer main.

If Pennsylvania is to become a competitive state — a state that businesses, jobs and people flock to rather than flee — that mindset has to change. That was the message among the 600 people and hundreds of organizations that attended the Building One Pennsylvania summit meeting in Lancaster on July 16.

"Fix it first," has become the mantra of those who feel state and federal policies are favoring the abandonment of infrastructure in favor of new infrastructure which hurts established towns.

The mother of all these incentives was the federal government's funding of an interstate highway system that not only spent the money which could have been invested in urban trolley and train lines, but also made it convenient for the middle class to pursue a quarter-acre patch of paradise in the suburbs, David Troutt, a Harvard-educated professor at Rutgers University, told the summit, held at the Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.

The new communities, and the middle class, "followed the new infrastructure. It follows the new sewer lines," said Myron Orfield, the executive director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota and a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C.-based thinktank.

Along with the growth of subdivisions named after the natural features they have most likely destroyed came an equal amount of political subdividing, what Troutt calls "political fragmentation."

The harsh irony of that fragmentation is that, according to Brookings, one-fifth of the nation's population now lives in what could be described as a First Suburb, but their representation in government is fragmented far below what their overall population and areas of common interest would suggest.

Seeking unity

An absence of cohesive political clout has resulted in a lack of cohesive policy and competition rather than cooperation among neighbors for limited public resources.

The Southeast Pennsylvania First Suburbs Project, one of the sponsors of the Building One Pennsylvania summit, is an attempt to recapture some of the political clout by joining these "first ring suburbs" into a united advocacy group.

They are not alone.

"Also-urbs" is another name for those established towns like Pottstown, Norristown and Coatesville. It was offered up by David Miller, a professor and associate dean with the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. "We're not a city, but we're not a suburb," he explained.

He is associated with a group called the Congress of Neighboring Communities which comprises 36 municipalities surrounding and including Pittsburgh which is making an attempt to craft a united voice from those with common concerns.

In York County, the group is called YorkCounts and its chairman, Loren Kroh, who is also chairman of the York County Economic Development Corporation, joked that "York County only has 72 governments to deal with."

He complained that countywide efforts are "hamstrung by the Legislature" because state law permits county planning agencies to be "advisory only" and not able to implement regional solutions.

Todd A. Vonderheid, a former Luzerne County commissioner and now president and CEO of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry, agreed.

"We have a very nice two-county comprehensive plan up where I come from that we've been working on for years. I have some very nice maps, and the consultants got paid, but it is not worth the paper it's written on because everything in that plan is nothing more than recommendations," Vonderheid said.

None of this should surprise people who have been watching these issues.

Vonderheid was involved with a 2004 joint study called "Committing to Prosperity," authored by Brookings, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Economy League and Penn State that predicted further economic declines unless the state permits towns to act more like regions.

"If we don't empower our local government to work more effectively, if the state doesn't give them the tools they need to collaborate, then we're doomed to see a steady decline in the fiscal health of our communities as we can't seem to outgrow these structural problems," Vonderheid said in 2007.

In 2010, that prediction seems perilously close to coming true.

Too much government

Dan Onorato, Allegheny County executive and Democratic candidate for governor, said his experience is a microcosm of what's going on across the Commonwealth and shows that it can be done.

(His Republican opponent, Attorney General Tom Corbett, was also invited to the summit but did not attend.)

Pennsylvania has more than 2,500 municipalities and 500 school districts.

In Allegheny County, "we have 130 municipalities and 43 school districts," Onorato told the summit. "I think we can all agree that's a little too much government. The good news is, we can fix it, we can change it around."

He said using state money as incentives can often convince public officials in local government to give up their turf and embrace regionalization.

"How do you convince the municipal official to give up their job? Well here's the beauty of incentivizing," he said. "I've watched it over and over again, an elected official, if he can avoid raising taxes on a shrinking tax base, they're going to go with the consolidation and do the efficiency move. It's the right thing to do, if you incentivize it."

It's also the right thing to do to focus public dollars on existing infrastructure.

Rather than build new highways, new sewers and new water systems, the nation and the Commonwealth should focus its limited public dollars on fixing and improving what it already has, he said.

The towns represented at the summit "have proximity to urban areas; many of them are along existing rail lines, we need to be smart with the limited public dollars we have and target that money when we use it so we can get the biggest bang for the buck," Onorato said.

"It's a lot cheaper to take advantage of infrastructure we already have," said Onorato.

"We have 2,500 municipalities in the state and you can't plan and organize 2,500 municipalities to implement new ideas. We need smart, sustainable development and we can't keep re-shuffling the deck and building new communities when we're not taking care of the ones we have now," he added.

#### Promoting public transit

One way to do that is to encourage things like "transit-oriented design" in which new development or redevelopment is targeted to take advantage of existing or proposed public transit, cutting down on car traffic, improving air quality and focusing public dollars on redeveloping existing towns, he said.

"A lot of times, it's just a matter of cleaning up the environmental mess" from a former industrial site, said Onorato, adding "that's what we did, we cleaned up 1,500 acres of brownfield in my county."

That is exactly the approach that the U.S. Department of Transportation wants to take under the new administration, John D. Porcari, deputy secretary of the agency, told the summit meeting.

As an example, he pointed to a project his department helped to fund in Dubuque, Iowa.

IBM was looking for a location for a new facility, and the Department of Transportation provided funding for a facility that is "close to existing transit, locating a business close to housing, that allows the kids to walk to school and we helped give an old river town a new beginning," Porcari said.

"This is not your father's DOT," he joked.

He said the department is issuing "broader criteria" for funding transit projects.

Previously, projects were "evaluated only on the basis of cost-effectiveness and how well they moved people from the suburbs

to the center as quickly as possible, with as few stops as possible. The result was that the less we served your communities, the more likely a project was to get federal funding," Porcari said.

The new criteria will look at "environmental benefits, land use considerations and economic development," he said noting that his agency wants to "make transit integral to redevelopment efforts. I put that in the category of extraordinary opportunity."

Common sense

The agency will also require that companies that bid on these jobs "be U.S. manufacturers that build every component in America. All those jobs will be right here in America," he said.

He noted he was recently in Berks County where funding from his agency was helping a Berks firm, East Penn Manufacturing, develop a facility to produce batteries for hybrid cars, a facility which will have a solar-powered loading dock and which will add 200 jobs as a result.

"I don't put this under the banner of rocket science, this is common sense writ large," Porcari said.

While it might seem like common sense to reduce the number of governments and focus public money on existing infrastructure in need of repair, it has yet to be implemented on large scale in Pennsylvania.

"You know, this is so doable, it's the right thing to do and it's the economic thing to do," Onorato said.

Not only is it economic for the state at large, but for the First Suburbs communities as well, most of which cannot afford to fix the aging infrastructure they have on their own.

Orfield showed maps that measured the "tax capacity" of the entire Philadelphia metropolitan area which showed that those areas with the most infrastructure have the least ability to pay for it — or for much else for that matter.

In those communities, "no matter how smart you are or how much you cut your budget, your taxes will go up and your services will go down. It's hard for older places to win that game," Orfield said.

You don't have to explain any of this philosophy to Doug Yerger, Pottstown's director of public works.

New state rules, driven by Clean Water Act guidelines implemented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, have towns across the Commonwealth facing massive increases in costs to deal with stormwater.

Anyone who lives in the first block of Walnut Street can tell you what happens when the 100-year-old stormwater arches under the town collapse, as one did in Pottstown in 2004, leaving not only a hole in the street but a \$400,000 hole in Pottstown's budget..

Tuesday, Yerger explained to the Pottstown Borough Authority that although Pottstown received a \$500,000 grant from the EPA to shore up the arches in town, a match was required, a match that was not made available more than two years later through a different program.

"It's hard and it takes time to put these funding sources together," Yerger said.

Sometimes, it's even hard for state legislators who want to act regionally.

State Sen. Ted Erickson, R-26th Dist., whose district includes parts of Chester and Delaware counties and who served for nine years as executive director of Delaware County, sees the stormwater issue as a problem that can only be handled regionally.

Noting that stormwater does not flow according to political boundaries, Erickson told the summit audience "this is not a political situation, it's a regional situation."

And so he has sponsored a bill "to establish planning districts for stormwater management, but I can't get it passed."

"You know we're facing a \$5 billion deficit in our state budget, and this is an opportunity to cooperate and save money, but I can't get my colleagues to move on it," Erickson said. "We need to cooperate on this if we're going to help solve that problem but I'm not sure we know how."

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